CALLER OF CROWS

Silvana Falcon

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RUBYVILLE VAMPIRES

SILVANA FALCON

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Book Description

He was prepared to gamble his blood, not his heart…

Sven has one goal: to become a vampire. It's the only way he can save his mother from the disease that's threatening her life. That vampires have always terrified him doesn't matter anymore.

Determined, he seeks out the Caller of Crows, a way too handsome vampire lord by the name of Altair, and with his pulse pounding in his ears, he offers himself to the vampire and asks to be turned.

The problem is, Sven lives in a city that is ruled by the paranormal, and pure mortal blood has become exceedingly rare. A treat that every vampire lusts after—and Altair is no exception. He's not going to turn Sven and let his sweet, sweet blood go to waste. Instead, he locks Sven in his bedroom as a valuable prisoner, as his property.

In his desperation, Sven realizes what he must do to get what he wants from the vampire: he needs to make Altair fall for him, to make the bloodthirsty devil see him as something more than a hot meal. He needs to melt the ice around Altair's heart and make him want eternity with Sven… and he needs to do it without falling for the ruthless vampire in return.

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Chapter One

A chilling wind whipped through the street, biting into Sven's skin as he walked. Summer had passed in the blink of an eye. Only a few weeks ago, the buildings to the side of the road had been decorated in bright colors, flowers blooming in every window box as the city celebrated the passing of a rare comet in the sky. Life had seemed brighter then, but the warmth of the sun had faded, and with it, Sven's ability to lie to himself.

He looked up at the moon hanging heavy in the sky. It glowed almost orange tonight, but that was probably just a trick of the light, rather than some ominous sign that he was being an absolute idiot.

Not that Sven would have needed that truth spelled out to him. He was mortal, a completely ordinary person, in a world in which very few people were born without the blessing of magic. The houses he passed were inhabited by shifters and mages… and vampires.

That last part was the problem.

He lived in a city infested with vampires and he was out by himself past sundown, basically offering himself up on a platter to any vampire who might be passing by.

And there were a lot of vampires in this part of town.

Sven's heart pounded like mad as the Rubyville nightclub came into view. The thudding bass from within vibrated through the ground and flowed straight into Sven's bones.

The club was run by a vampire coven, and it was the leader of that coven Sven wanted to talk to. But if he just stepped into the club as he was… would the vampires even listen to a word he said before they sank their fangs into his throat?

He wanted to be turned, not eaten.

Just as he thought that, a sharp caw pierced through the music the nightclub emitted. Startled, Sven spun toward the sound, eyes landing on a dark and deserted park nearby. It didn't look inviting at this time of night, but more inviting than the club.

Sven's stomach flip-flopped as he heard the caw again. Purely out of instinct, his hand slid into his pocket, closing around the handle of the knife he'd brought just in case he found what he was looking for. Approaching the park, he spotted a crow sitting on a gnarled oak branch, beady eyes looking at him.

It wasn't alone either. A whole murder of crows gathered in the trees, watching him.

No, that was ridiculous.

The birds weren't watching him, even if it felt like it. What reason would they have?

It was just his nerves getting the better of him.

It wasn't him the crows were interested in. They were watching the only other person in the park. A tall figure with pale skin and black hair stood near a water fountain up ahead, a bird perched confidently on his shoulder.

The sight made Sven's throat constrict.

This was the vampire he'd been hoping to find. Altair. The Caller of Crows.

Now that he'd found him, though, Sven stood frozen in place, unable to tear his gaze away from the man before him, knowing that he might have just made the biggest mistake of his life.

The last mistake of his life.

Altair had only risen to the rank of coven leader a few years ago, but already, he was notorious for being one of the most

dangerous vampires in the city. He was said to be ruthless, with no qualms about taking out anyone who dared to cross him.

But he was also known for sticking to his deals, which made him exactly the kind of man Sven needed. No one but a coven leader would turn him, and out of all the coven leaders Sven had looked into, the Caller of Crows was the only one who seemed like he would not break a promise made to one of his underlings.

Still, all of Sven's instincts screamed at him to run, but he kept himself rooted to the spot through sheer determination. Or stupidity. One of the two.

The vampire turned to him, his sharp features illuminated only by the pale light of the street lamps, black hair decorated with glossy black feathers.

Sven had never said a kind word about a vampire, but he had to admit that they were beautiful, and Altair was no exception. Even dressed in a simple black shirt, the vampire seemed to radiate an otherworldly charisma that mesmerized Sven, and when Altair's gaze pierced him and the crow on his shoulder cawed, a chill ran down Sven's spine.

"Look what we have here," Altair mused. "A mortal, in my part of town, at my time of night."

Sven swallowed hard, realizing that it was his time to talk, but barely getting the words out. "I have a proposal for you."

Altair raised a questioning eyebrow at Sven as if he wasn't sure whether to take this mortal seriously or not. "You know who I am?"

Sven couldn't blame the vampire for being confused. What sane mortal would approach the Caller of Crows with a proposal? "I know who you are," Sven confirmed. "And I'm not scared."

Altair circled him, the motion predatory enough to set Sven's nerves alight with danger. The vampire chuckled. "Your heartbeat gives you away."

Sven narrowed his eyes at the vampire. "Don't toy with me."

Altair stopped and smiled. "You go out into the city at night to seek out a powerful vampire and make demands of him? I don't know if you've got balls of steel or if you're just plain foolish."

Sven took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. "I know your numbers are dwindling, vampire."

The vampire eyed him critically but did not speak, waiting instead for Sven to go on, which Sven did. At least Altair was hearing him out instead of killing him on the spot. That was something, right?

"You can't turn shifters, or mages, or fae folk," Sven said. "Your species is dying out."

"That's hardly a secret."

"You could turn me." Sven looked the vampire dead in the eyes.

Surprise flickered across the vampire's pale features. He stepped closer to Sven, who couldn't help but admire the way the moonlight accentuated the predator's cheekbones. "You're applying for a spot in my coven?"

The crow on Altair's shoulder cawed once more as if it was mocking Sven.

Before Sven could do or say anything, Altair moved in even closer, until his cold breath fell against Sven's neck and sent thrills of excitement down Sven's spine. "You don't want to be a vampire, little mortal. Run home before the smell of your blood makes me do something stupid," he warned, voice pitched low enough to make Sven's heart race.

"You can have my blood," Sven made himself say, trying his hardest not to move away from the vampire. "As much of it as you want if you'll make me one of yours in return."

Sven's breath caught at the graze of sharp teeth against his skin.

This was it. The moment Altair would bite him.

He braced himself for the pain, but it never came.

Altair pulled back with a dark glint in his eyes that spoke of the hunger he suppressed, though why he suppressed it, Sven did not know.

The vampire shook his head, the corners of his lips twisting into a sardonic grin. "As good as you smell, as good as I'm sure you taste, mortals are more trouble than they're worth in this city."

As Altair finished speaking, the birds around him squawked in agreement.

With a sigh, Altair began to withdraw from Sven, and panic gripped Sven's heart. If he didn't do something now, the vampire would vanish into the night, taking with him Sven's only chance to become immortal.

"Wait," Sven blurted out, desperation giving his voice an edge. "You really don't want my blood?"

Altair paused, his piercing gaze locked onto Sven once again. "You don't get to be as old as I am without learning how to resist temptation," he said, his voice cold and detached. "I suggest you hurry home. The same can't be said of every vampire in my coven."

Sven's hand tightened around his knife again. With a quick motion, before he could let himself think too much, he pulled it out of his pocket and unsheathed it.

Altair's eyes flashed as Sven procured a weapon, but Sven didn't mean to use it on the vampire; he slashed it across his own palm instead.

The smell of his blood filled the air, warm and coppery.

Sven smirked.

Let's see Altair resist *that!*

"Damn you," Altair hissed, his eyes darkening as he inhaled the scent of fresh mortal blood. Despite himself, the vampire was drawn closer, his nostrils flaring as he fought against his baser instincts.

"Take it," Sven whispered, unable to keep his voice from shaking entirely. "My blood for your gift."

Sven watched the vampire's expression flicker with an inner storm, the battle between desire and restraint raging within him. The space between them seemed to stretch on forever, each second ticking by like an eternity.

"Foolish mortal," Altair finally murmured, his voice strained, before pulling away from Sven again. But Sven was in too deep to let this opportunity slip through his fingers. He reached out, grasping the vampire's arm with a determination born of desperation. His blood-slicked hand left a crimson trail on Altair's skin as he smeared it across those perfect, pale lips.

"Take my deal," Sven whispered, heart pounding in his throat.

For a moment, Altair's eyes locked onto Sven's, an intense heat burning in his dark eyes. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, he licked the warm blood from his lips.

"I'll take more than your deal, little mortal," he responded, his voice smooth as ice.

Once again, Sven braced himself for pain, for the sinking of fangs into his flesh. But instead, the birds above them began to caw louder, their cries like a discordant symphony. They circled overhead, filling the night sky until the moon vanished behind a veil of black feathers as if they were casting a spell over him and their lord.

Looking up, Sven couldn't help but stare in awe—until cold fingers touched his skin and stole his breath away. Darkness encroached upon his vision, swallowing everything until there was nothing left, and as his consciousness slipped away, the last thing Sven heard was the mocking call of a crow.

Chapter Two

S ven woke to the sounds of hushed voices in the darkness. He kept his breathing even, feigning sleep while his senses came alive. The bed beneath him was soft, the sheets silken against his bare skin.

Bare skin.

An icy sensation trailed down his chest, and it took all his willpower not to flinch away. With a start, he realized three things: he was naked, chained to the bed by his wrists and ankles, and he was being examined by a vampire he did not know.

It wasn't Altair because his voice sounded different when he spoke. Brighter, somehow. "He seems to be in good health," the vampire said. "Though he could stand to gain a couple of pounds. He's a little low on iron too. We'll have to give him supplements before we take his blood."

Take his blood.

Sven's heart pounded, though he fought to control it. They would hear. They would know he was awake.

"His heart rate is increasing," the unfamiliar voice said.

It was Altair's smooth voice that replied. "He's having a dream, that's all."

"Possibly," the other vampire agreed. Though he did not sound convinced, he didn't sound like he wanted to argue with his boss either. "How did you find him?" he asked instead.

"He delivered himself to us," Altair said. "How could I refuse such a gift?"

"At just the right time too," the other vampire mused. "We can make a fortune with real mortal blood. Everyone's sick of the synthetic shit."

"Indeed." Altair's voice drew closer.

"He's handsome too," the other vampire said, running a finger down Sven's side in a way that made Sven want to recoil. "A lucky catch. A good meal always tastes better when it comes in a pretty package."

"That's enough," Altair said, and Sven swore he could feel the temperature in the room drop as the doctor stopped touching him at Altair's command. "Leave us."

The other vampire hesitated for only a moment. "As you wish," he said then. Footsteps retreated, a door whispering open and shut.

Altair's hand brushed Sven's cheek, then traced lower down his neck to his chest, coming to rest above his pounding heart. "You can stop pretending to be asleep now. I know you're awake."

Sven opened his eyes to find Altair gazing down at him, dark eyes gleaming. His inky black hair was loose, a single crow's feather tucked behind one ear, though there were no birds around him now.

"They don't like to be locked up down here," he said as if reading Sven's thoughts.

Wait, could he do that?

Altair's lips curled. "You're practically shouting your thoughts at me."

Sven swallowed hard. He hated that this vampire seemed to know everything while he himself knew nothing.

"Can every vampire read thoughts?"

Altair shook his head.

"And you can't read every thought," Sven added, regaining some confidence. "You had no idea what I was going to do in the park."

"I'll admit that I did not pay enough attention. You seemed like any other mortal… until you drew the knife."

"You speak as if you know a lot of mortals."

A distant look appeared in Altair's eyes. "You forget that all vampires were mortals once."

"I'm not forgetting anything," Sven argued. "I approached you because I want to be turned, remember?"

Altair's smile turned cruel. "Ah, yes. The foolish mortal who thinks he can handle immortality."

Sven gritted his teeth, anger rising within him. "I know what I'm getting myself into."

"Do you?" Altair leaned down, his breath cold against Sven's lips. "Do you know what it's like to never feel the sun on your skin again? To always thirst for blood? To watch everyone you've ever known grow old and die, while you remain forever young?"

"I don't care," Sven said, more than a little distracted by the vampire's sudden proximity.

"Don't care?" Altair leaned up and chuckled, the sound low and dangerous. "You should care, mortal. There's a reason it's called the eternal gift. There's no do-overs. No going back."

"I know all that," Sven ground out. What, did this vampire think he hadn't done his research? "It's not fair that some of us are stuck being mortal while you get to live forever." He said this as if he *wanted* to live forever, as if that was the reason he'd sought Altair out. He kept that thought at the forefront of his mind too, unwilling to let the vampire glimpse his real motivations.

The moment he was a vampire, he'd turn his mother and save her from the illness that was killing her.

He'd suffer any fate to make that happen.

"You're hiding something," Altair said, studying him, eyes roaming Sven's body in a way that made Sven acutely aware of his nakedness, that made heat creep into his skin in a way that he wanted to deny.

He was not attracted to vampires.

Not even stupidly beautiful ones.

Why had they undressed him anyway?

Was this a coven of perverts? Were all vampires perverts?

"We had to examine you," Altair said. "We can hardly sell blood when we can't vouch for its quality."

Those words sobered Sven right up. His fists clenched. "So how did I do? Am I a quality product ready for consumption?"

Altair tilted his head, observing Sven with a curious gleam in his dark eyes. "You tell me."

Sven's face flushed with anger. "You're toying with me," he accused the vampire. "I came here to bargain with you and you're not taking me seriously at all."

"Ah, yes, the 'deal' you wanted to strike with me," Altair remembered, unimpressed with Sven's tone. "You made a fatal mistake there."

Sven's stomach churned. "What mistake?"

Altair gestured at Sven, at the chains that bound him to the bed. "You had nothing to offer me that I could not simply take."

Sven's heart sank as he realized the truth in Altair's words. He had been desperate and stupid and now he was completely at the mercy of this vampire. "You can't keep me against my will," he tried weakly. "This city has laws. The dragons—"

"You knew who I was when you came to me," Altair cut him off.

"I did."

"And when you were looking me up," Altair prompted, "did anything you find say that I was a very lawful vampire?"

A sense of dread washed over Sven as he considered the question. He hadn't found anything like that. "No," he admitted.

Altair leaned in close again, speaking into Sven's ear. "Then you know what you're dealing with," he whispered. "And you know that you belong to me now."

"No," Sven protested, heart hammering in his chest. "I heard that you stick to your promises. To your deals. That you—"

"I do," Altair agreed. "But I do not recall promising you anything." He rested two fingers on top of the pulsing vein on the side of Sven's neck. "You want to be turned, but you're worth more to me as long as there's warm blood flowing through your veins."

Sven tried to swallow down the bile that rose in the back of his throat, tried not to let the vampire sense his panic. He'd let himself get trapped, and though he didn't know a way out, he'd always known that it could come to this.

At least, the vampire wasn't looking to kill him.

As long as he was alive, there was hope.

"You said I was more trouble than I was worth," he tried to reason with Altair. "You know there'll be people looking for me and it'll be tough for you to explain where you got the mortal blood you want to sell."

"It's true that I wasn't going to bother with you initially," Altair allowed. "But you made a compelling argument."

A compelling argument. Sven wanted to slap himself because he knew exactly what Altair was talking about. The moment he'd smeared his own blood on the vampire's lips. That was where Sven's gaze focused now. Altair's lips. Did they seem redder than they had in the park, or was that just Sven's imagination?

Surely, Altair could not still have traces of Sven's blood on his lips?

"Don't worry, mortal." Altair traced his fingers over Sven's jawline. "You're safe with me. I take care of my possessions."

"Is that why you put me in chains?" Sven asked sardonically. "Because you care about my safety?"

Altair smiled, baring his fangs. "In a way. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself again."

Sven glanced up at his hand. The cut he'd inflicted on himself had already healed somehow. Probably something that other vampire had done to him while 'examining' him. For some reason, Sven hated seeing his skin unmarred, as if nothing he'd done had any consequence. As if nothing he *could* do would have any consequence.

Glancing back at Altair peering down at him, he refused to be defeated that easily, to admit that he was powerless.

Keeping his gaze locked on the vampire's, he bit his lower lip, hard, until a drop of blood welled from the wound.

A sense of triumph sparked in Sven's heart as he saw the hunger in Altair's eye, the obvious desire. The vampire was a creature of instinct, after all. No more elevated than Sven was.

Sven's triumph was short-lived, though, when Altair leaned in to lick the blood off his lips. The sensation of Altair's tongue on his skin sent shivers down Sven's spine in the worst way. He tried to resist the feeling, but then the vampire sucked on his lip and Sven's head spun as his blood trickled into Altair's mouth.

Fuck, what was happening to him?

A low sound escaped him, and then Altair's tongue pushed into his mouth in a possessive kiss that robbed Sven of every thought as the vampire's hunger seemed to become his own. His cock twitched with need as his body betrayed him, and if his hands hadn't been bound, he wasn't sure what he would have done.

The vampire's lips tasted of Sven's blood.

When Altair pulled away, Sven's heart pounded painfully as he fought to catch his breath, his mind whirling with a mixture of fear and unwelcome desire.

"Careful, Sven," the vampire said, using his name for the first time. "Don't play games you can't win."

Sven was left alone for a while after Altair exited the room. At least he'd been given a thin blanket to hide under—and time to think. Maybe a little too much time, if he was being honest, because his situation wasn't good, and thinking about all the various ways it wasn't good didn't exactly make him feel better.

He assumed that he was somewhere underground. Probably beneath the club, judging by the faint thumping of bass he could still hear if he strained his ears.

Knowing where he was was good—if he could find a way to get that information to someone. In a few days, his friends would start to worry, but since he'd left a note behind stating that he was looking to buy some special medicine so he wouldn't be missed immediately. He'd even asked a friend to look after his mother for a few days since he'd had no way of knowing if things would go south.

God, he hoped things hadn't gone south already.

He needed to get rid of his chains.

How to do that?

Could he bargain with the vampires?

Trying to strike a deal with a vampire was exactly the thing that had gotten him into this mess, but he didn't know what else to do either.

So when an unknown vampire entered his room with a food tray, Sven decided he would pounce on his chance.

"Free me," he said, "and I'll let you bite me."

The vampire set down the food tray, turned to Sven, and shot him a surprised look. She was beautiful, with long silver hair and pale skin. Not Sven's type, but definitely attractive, like all these damned vampires were.

After a moment, she laughed. "You say that so casually. You're not scared of a bite?"

Sven looked aside. "I've been bitten before," he admitted. "So you wouldn't be my first."

This seemed to catch the vampire off guard. "You're joking," she said. "What vampire would bite a mortal and let him go?"

Sven grimaced because he did not have a response for that. He remembered the vampire who'd attacked him five years ago because the scene kept replaying in his dreams, but he could never figure out why, after everything, he'd woken up on the cold forest floor all by himself.

He'd been incredibly lucky somehow. "Maybe my blood doesn't taste all that good," he suggested, though he didn't believe that himself. Altair certainly hadn't acted like Sven's blood was disgusting.

The memory made Sven shudder. Altair looked way too fucking erotic with Sven's blood on his lips.

"I don't know about that," the vampire lady said, pulling Sven out of his reverie.

"You could find out," Sven tempted her. "Untie me, and then bite me."

"What's to stop me from biting you right now?"

"Altair wants to sell my blood," Sven said, working against the tightness in his throat. "I'm sure he wouldn't be pleased if you just helped yourself." He was making assumptions, and he wasn't sure if those assumptions were true, but Altair hadn't bitten him. He had to be thinking that Sven's blood was too valuable to be wasted.

The pretty vampire raised an eyebrow at him. "If you know my orders, why do you tempt me with treason? Do you truly believe I would betray my coven for a few drops of your blood?" She came closer to him.

"No one would have to know," Sven said. "I only want to be out of these chains for a little bit."

The vampire laughed again, then shook her head. "Your smell would cling to me, mortal, and besides, I wouldn't go against my lord's orders even if you offered me something a lot better than a snack. You won't find anyone in this coven who will, so you might as well stop trying."

Sven's brows furrowed. No one in this coven would betray Altair? "Is he that scary?"

The vampire's look turned scathing. "There's a difference between fear and loyalty, mortal. What, did you think we can't have morals just because we're dead?"

Sven's face heated. He had thought that. To be honest, he still thought that—and he didn't know if this vampire was the kind that could read thoughts or not, but she seemed to be able to tell what was going through his mind because she turned around and left the room. "Hope you enjoy your meal," she said on the way out, though she must have known that there was no way for Sven to reach the food tray in his current position.

He was still tied up, after all.

Well, fuck.

It seemed things never ended well for Sven when he tried to deal with vampires.

The food sure smelled good, too. He glanced over at the tray. A burger with fries. The meal had probably been prepared for him by the club's kitchen and it looked as if it had just the right amount of grease to be absolutely delicious.

He wasn't about to reach it, though.

Idly, he wondered if the vampire lady had looked at him the same way Sven looked at the burger now. A tasty snack out of reach.

As he lay there, lost in his thoughts, he heard a sound from outside the door. Footsteps, slow and deliberate. His heart pounded in his chest. Was it Altair? Was he coming to check on him? Sven braced himself for the worst, but to his surprise, the door opened and yet a different vampire walked in.

This one was a man, with sharp cheekbones, flaming red hair, and piercing blue eyes. He was dressed in all black and carried himself with an ease that made Sven think he was used to things going his way. This stranger wasn't the coven's leader, obviously, but he must be somewhere up in the higher ranks.

"So you're the mortal Alt dragged in," the vampire greeted Sven.

Sven swallowed hard. "Yeah, that's me."

The vampire walked closer, and Sven could see the glint of his fangs in the dim light. He tried not to flinch.

"My name's Keegan," the vampire said, reaching a hand out to Sven as if he wanted to shake. Then he withdrew it at the last moment, as if he'd only just noticed that Sven's hands were tied. "Sorry about that," he said. "Why don't I help you with that?" Without a second's hesitation, Keegan untied Sven's chains.

Sven rubbed his wrists, feeling the blood flow back into them.

"Thanks," he said, still wary of this unexpected ally.

Keegan shrugged. "Not like you can eat while your hands are tied, and we wouldn't want the burger to go to waste, now would we?"

Sven eyed the vampire suspiciously while Keegan placed the food tray down on the bed. "You just want me to eat so you can get more blood out of me."

"That's what you call a mutually beneficial arrangement." Keegan grinned. "Or do you enjoy being hungry?"

Sven hesitated, his eyes flickering between the vampire and the food tray. He knew he shouldn't trust Keegan, but he had nothing to gain from refusing a good meal. Finally, he gave in and grabbed the burger, taking a big bite out of it. He'd been right; it was just the perfect amount of greasy.

Keegan sat down on the edge of the bed, watching Sven eat. "So why do you want to be turned?" he asked. "If I believe Alt's story, you basically delivered yourself to us."

Sven stopped with a fry halfway to his mouth. "I didn't deliver myself to you," he said, his tone firm. "I offered your leader a deal and he decided he preferred to take what he wanted by force."

"Sounds like Alt," Keegan said with a chuckle. "He's not the most personable of vampires."

"But he's earned your loyalty," Sven said, hoping to learn more about the enigmatic vampire who held him captive. The more he knew, the better he could form a plan to get Altair to turn him after all.

Keegan leaned back, regarding Sven with a thoughtful expression. "Alt's my friend," he said after a moment. "More than that, he's my brother."

Sven shot the vampire a skeptical look before he could get his expression back under control. No point in pissing off the one person here who was trying to be friendly. "I didn't realize vampires lived in families."

Keegan's lips twitched. "Maybe not conventional families. Alt and I shared a sire, and the same goes for most of us here. Alt became the leader of our happy little fanged family when he took out our sire."

"So he goes and kills your dad and you celebrate him for it?" Sven wanted to be polite, but he couldn't wrap his head around that. "Doesn't sound like a happy family to me."

Keegan shrugged. "He must have had his reasons. Vampires don't kill their sires willy-nilly. Some of our siblings left after our sire's demise, of course. Alt never tried to stop them, although he could have. We're probably the smallest coven in this city, thanks to his misplaced leniency."

Sven took another bite of the burger, chewing thoughtfully. Try as he might, though, he couldn't picture Altair being lenient. He looked at Keegan again. "You don't agree with everything Altair does."

The vampire huffed a laugh. "I didn't realize I was required to."

"But why—"

Keegan stopped him with a raised hand. "I've answered enough of your questions while you haven't answered mine. Why do you want to be turned so badly?"

Sven hesitated, his eyes flickering down to the food tray. He had no intention of telling Keegan about his real motivation, so he answered with a question of his own. "Is it so hard to understand? Who wouldn't want to be immortal?"

Keegan raised an eyebrow. "Immortality has its drawbacks as well. It's not all sunshine and rainbows, you know. Actually, I guess that's the point. There's zero sunshine and rainbows."

Sven huffed. "I can live without sunshine and rainbows." Why were all vampires bringing up the same arguments? Sunshine wasn't that important, surely. "I'm prepared to make some sacrifices."

Keegan considered him quietly. "Alt's sworn never to create another vampire," he said eventually. "So don't get your hopes up too high."

Sven pushed down the dread those words inspired in him. "I'm not going to give up easily. You said it yourself. You're the smallest coven in the city, and mortals like me are the only way for you to grow."

"That may be true." Keegan shot him a smile. "But maybe we value quality over quantity."

"I can be quality," Sven asserted, feeling a spark of determination light within him. "I can be useful to you if you let me."

"Not my decision to make. I'm not the vampire you have to convince."

"But you're friends with Altair," Sven insisted. "You can put in a good word for me."

Keegan shook his head. "If Alt took my advice…" He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he turned to leave the room.

"Wait," Sven stopped him.

The vampire shot him a questioning look.

"I need a bathroom," Sven admitted, though he loathed to admit it. He was only mortal, though. Vampires might not need to empty their bladders, but Sven wasn't so lucky.

Keegan regarded him for a moment, and then he laughed. Sven half-expected him to suggest that Sven piss in a bottle, but then he opened the door and motioned for Sven to follow. "Come on, then. You're lucky there's a bathroom on this level if I remember correctly. We clean it every so often for visitors."

Sven wrapped his blanket around himself and followed. As they walked down the dimly lit hallway, Sven couldn't help but feel unsettled by the eerie silence that pervaded the place. It was as if all the vampires were sleeping or gone. Or partying in the nightclub above.

What time was it, anyway?

Had the sun already risen?

Down here, there was no way to tell how long Sven had been gone.

Keegan led him to a small bathroom, gesturing for him to go in. "I'll wait outside," he said.

Sven nodded and went inside, locking the door behind him. As he relieved himself, he tried to calm his racing thoughts.

How was he going to convince Altair to turn him? He didn't even know where to begin. Sven splashed some water on his face and stared at his reflection in the cracked mirror. He looked tired. Defeated, in a way.

Except that he wasn't. He *was* going to make this work.

He left the bathroom and found Keegan waiting for him outside.

"Feeling better?" the vampire asked.

Sven nodded.

"I'll talk to Alt and see if you can have a more accommodating room if you're staying with us long-term."

"Thanks," Sven said, though he couldn't help feeling suspicious. Why was this vampire being so kind to him? What did he stand to gain?

Sven didn't voice his questions, but he didn't let his guard down either. Not even when Keegan left him alone.

If he was going to survive his stay in this coven, he needed to be wary of everyone and everything.

Chapter Three

The dimly lit back room of the Rubyville nightclub pulsed with the faint echo of music, blending seamlessly with the distant chatter of patrons. A haze of smoke hung in the air, illuminated by flickering candles that cast eerie shadows on the walls. At a worn wooden table, Altair sat, flanked by his three closest confidants: Keegan, Mordyn, and Iskander. Their faces were tense, brows furrowed, as they discussed the most recent developments in the coven.

"Alt," Mordyn began, his green eyes flashing with concern, "Mortal blood has become too damn rare. We need to be super careful about who we sell to, and who catches wind of the fact that we have a live source."

"Agreed." Iskander tapped his fingers rhythmically on the edge of the table. He was the tallest of the four friends, and the most imposing. "If this information falls into the wrong hands, we're in trouble."

Altair considered his two enforcers, Iskander's stern features and dark hazel eyes, and Mordyn with his deceptively small stature. They were right, of course. He'd known that from the moment he decided to take the mortal in his possession. Hell, he'd known that before he'd made that decision.

Sven was too much trouble.

But he'd taken the mortal in now, so he'd find a way to deal with that trouble.

The taste of the mortal's blood still lingered on Altair's lips as he turned to Keegan. "You talked to him," Altair said. "Did he

say anything of note?"

Keegan shrugged. "He wants to be turned, of course. Thinks he can be useful to us."

"Useful?" Mordyn scoffed. "He's obviously more useful to us as he is."

"Honestly." Keegan leaned back in his chair and looked at Altair. "I think you should put him back where you found him."

Altair's gaze narrowed slightly. "No."

Even if Altair let the mortal go… he'd just waltz right into a different coven. Sven wasn't like any other mortal Altair had met. No one else had ever challenged him like that, smearing their own blood on his lips to get him to do what they wanted.

It was insanity.

But it had certainly gotten his attention.

Keegan gave his leader a wry smile. "I thought you'd say that. But I have a bad feeling about this."

"A bad feeling or a vision?" Altair asked.

Keegan stared into his half-empty glass of blood, his gaze distant. "I see…shadows. Darkness lurking on the fringes. Something is coming, Alt, and it's connected to that mortal."

"Your visions have been known to be…imprecise," Altair reminded his friend, though his eyes betrayed a flicker of concern.

Keegan blew out a breath. "I knew you wouldn't listen. If the mortal's staying, though, he needs a room with a loo in it. If you're going to adopt a pet, at least put it in a suitable cage."

"Perhaps we should discuss this at another time," Iskander suggested, "Something's going on." Clearly, he was picking up on trouble Altair hadn't noticed yet, too distracted by thoughts of the mortal.

The four vampires fell silent, their attention shifting from the discussion of Sven to the disturbance that now demanded their

focus. The sound of raised voices and shattering glass came from the club.

"Not this again," Mordyn muttered, a grim expression settling on his face as he glanced toward the door.

Altair's eyes narrowed, his hands clenched into fists beneath the table. No doubt, it was those damned east side vampires again. Every other week, a few of them decided to get drunk on spiked blood and cause trouble in the club. Not only were their antics annoying, they were a blatant display of disrespect for Altair and his coven.

"Come," Altair commanded, rising to his feet with an air of quiet authority. His friends followed suit, sharing a brief, wordless exchange before striding out of the room and into the fray.

As they entered the main area of the club, Altair's gaze settled on a rowdy group of vampires, clearly intoxicated, laughing and jeering as they tossed bottles and glasses at one another, openly displaying their disdain for Altair's coven.

"Enough!" Altair bellowed, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade.

The ruckus died down as every eye in the room turned to the imposing figure of the coven leader. The rowdy vampires sneered, unimpressed by his presence, but the cold fire burning in Altair's dark eyes was enough to give them pause.

"Explain yourselves," he demanded, his tone controlled, yet laced with an undercurrent of menace.

"Ah, if it isn't the great Altair," one of the drunken vampires slurred, swaying on his feet. "Come to lecture us, have you? We're just having a bit of fun."

"Your 'fun' is disrespectful and disruptive," Altair replied coolly, maintaining his composure despite the urge to tear the insolent vampire limb from limb. Sadly, he couldn't do that without possibly starting a clan war. These vampires belonged to a coven with a territory at least double the size of Altair's. Altair wouldn't risk killing them…

But that didn't mean he couldn't hurt them.

"You are not welcome here," he said, arming himself with a silver blade at the same time as Mordyn and Iskander stepped forward, their own weapons at the ready. "Leave now, or face the consequences."

The vampires hesitated, their bravado faltering in the face of Altair's threat. But then, one of them, a tall, muscular redhead with a crazed look in his eye, stepped forward, his fangs bared. "You can't tell us what to do," he snarled, lunging at Altair with a fierce growl.

Altair's instincts kicked in, his body moving with preternatural speed as he evaded the attack and plunged his blade into the vampire's chest. The redhead howled in pain, collapsing to the ground as the other vampires rushed forward in a rage.

What followed was a blur of motion and violence, a chaotic dance of fangs and blades as Altair and his friends fought off the attackers. Blood spattered the walls, mingling with the haze of smoke and the scent of fear and adrenaline.

Altair's senses were heightened, every sound and movement sharp and focused as he fought with a deadly grace. He dodged a swing from a passing bottle and spun around, slicing through flesh as he drove his blade into a vampire's gut. The vampire screamed and crumpled to the ground, writhing in agony as Altair moved on to the next target without sparing his victim another glance.

Mordyn and Iskander fought with equal ferocity, their movements fluid and precise, their weapons gleaming in the dim light.

The sound of breaking bones echoed through the club as Iskander delivered a crushing blow to the skull of a vampire who dared to attack him. Mordyn, meanwhile, was a blur of motion, his lithe frame darting in and out of the fray as he sliced and diced his way through the attackers.

The fight was over almost as soon as it had begun. The attackers lay scattered on the ground, groaning in pain or unconscious. Undead blood coated the floor and walls, the metallic smell thick in the air.

Altair took a deep breath, his heart racing with adrenaline as he surveyed the aftermath.

"Clean this up," he said, his voice hard and cold. "And take these pests outside."

Mordyn and Iskander stepped forward to escort the battered vampires out of the club while the rest of Altair's vampires started mopping the blood from the floor.

Predictably, almost all of the club's paying patrons had left during the fight. The violence had been necessary, though. It was the only language the east side vampires understood, and if Altair hadn't acted decisively, they would have been back the next night.

"Handled like a true leader," Keegan remarked, clapping Altair on the shoulder.

"They think we're weak."

"They're idiots," Mordyn said, coming back inside and dusting his hands. "We taught them a lesson."

Altair nodded, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He'd focused on the crows sitting in the trees outside the club, watching the enemy vampires as they took off. Through their eyes, he saw them lick their wounds. Through their ears, he heard them curse Altair's coven.

"Let's hope the lesson sticks," Iskander said.

Altair wanted to agree, but then Keegan voiced the question that was on his own mind as well. "What do you think they'll do when they find out we're keeping a mortal?"

The four vampires glanced at each other, expressions grim.

"Well, we're not gonna let them steal from us, that's for sure," Mordyn announced, one hand reaching for his blade as if their enemies might be back any second.

Iskander agreed with Mordyn, but Keegan kept his gaze trained on Altair, waiting for his response because it was the only one that mattered.

Altair's jaw clenched, knowing that he had to act in the best interest of the coven, not just his own self-interest.

Still, he wasn't going to hand his possessions over to another vampire.

Sven had come to him, and Altair would keep him.

"Let them try," he said, voice low and dangerous. "I won't let anyone take what's mine."

Chapter Four

Sven had trouble falling asleep that night — or was it already morning? In a room without windows, without a clock, and without his phone, it was impossible to tell. His eyes closed, but his brain would not shut up.

Had he made the right choice coming here?

He hadn't been able to think of any other way to save his mother. Every day, she got worse, and if Sven didn't do something, she would die.

And it would be his fault.

All because he hadn't listened…

If not for him, his mother would never have been attacked by that thornefang.

Sven drew a breath deep into his lungs.

He might not be able to change the past, but that only meant he had to do everything in his power to shape the future.

For now, that meant finding a way to convince the vampires of his value.

His eyes closed, and his mind showed him an image of the coven's leader. Altair. Leaning over him to lick the blood off Sven's lips.

Sven's breath hitched at the memory. What the hell had he been thinking daring the vampire in such a way?

All he'd wanted was to see Altair's aloof facade crumble.

Instead, he'd nearly crumbled himself when the vampire had kissed him — all to assert dominance, no doubt.

Sven groaned and turned around, pressing his face into the pillow. He wanted to jerk off, but if he did, there was no way for him to clean himself after, and he was sure the vampires would be able to smell it on him.

He wasn't going to grant Altair that kind of victory.

Taking another deep breath, he tried to relax once more, focused on emptying his mind.

Still, sleep didn't come easy.

And even when it did finally pull him under, he fell into a tangled web of dreams, a nightmare that had become all too familiar to him. He was alone in the woods at night, the moon casting an eerie glow over the path ahead. The forest was a symphony of whispers, rustling leaves, and unseen creatures stirring in the shadows.

An icy dread began to seep into his bones, an instinctual awareness that he was not alone. Out of the darkness, a figure emerged. His heart pounded in his chest as he recognized the figure for what it was — a vampire. Its eyes were cold and predatory, glowing with a merciless hunger that made Sven's blood run cold.

He was paralyzed, rooted to the spot as the vampire closed in on him. His mind screamed at him to move, but he couldn't. Next, he felt a sudden, piercing pain as the vampire sank its fangs into him. His vision blurred, a silent scream echoing in his throat as his world spun out of control.

And then… nothing. A merciful blanket of darkness enveloped him.

When he opened his eyes again, his attacker was gone, while the stinging sensation on his neck remained. His body felt heavy, and the woods around him were deathly quiet.

Then he saw it - a single crow's feather, black as the night itself, resting next to his head, a stark contrast against the dark green of the forest floor.

He woke with a start, his heart hammering in his chest. The cold dread of the nightmare still clung to him as he lay in the darkness of his room, the phantom sensation of the vampire's bite lingering.

This dream had haunted him for years, a ghost from the past that refused to be forgotten.

But the feather was new.

Had it really been there that night or was it just a detail his mind made up due to the stress of recent events?

"Finally awake?"

Sven nearly jumped at the realization that he wasn't alone in his room. In the darkness, he couldn't see who was there with him, but the low chuckle that followed the question let him know who he was dealing with. Altair.

Sven's chest tightened as he sat up, eyes adjusting to the lack of light. He could just make out the silhouette of the vampire leaning against the wall.

"What do you want?" Sven asked, trying to sound defiant instead of shaken.

"To talk," Altair replied easily, pushing himself off the wall and walking closer to the bed. "It's been brought to my attention that your accommodations are not suitable."

"How long have you been watching me?" Sven asked instead of responding to Altair's statement. He did want better accommodations, but that wasn't his primary concern right now.

His primary concern was that he'd been sleeping with a vampire lord staring at him while he didn't know. That was creepy.

"Let's say I've been here long enough to know that you've had a nightmare," Altair said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and making Sven shift away involuntarily. "Are you still scared, Sven?"

"My dream had nothing to do with you."

It was difficult to read Altair's expression, especially in the darkness that enveloped them, but Sven didn't think that he looked convinced.

"I don't understand why you came here," Altair said after a moment.

"You don't need to know my reasons."

"I don't? You suggest I make you part of my coven without knowing anything about you?"

Sven's jaw tightened. "I'm tired of being mortal. Isn't that enough reason?"

Altair considered this, then he rose from the bed. "No."

Sven glared at him, but he was sure that the effect of it was lost on the vampire.

"Get up," Altair commanded.

"Why?"

"I'm moving you to a different room." He paused. "Unless you'd prefer to stay here with a stack of adult diapers."

Sven scowled at that suggestion, but he still got up from the bed, covered himself with his blanket as best he could, and followed Altair out of the room.

The hallway was dimly lit, but brighter than his cell had been, allowing him to study the vampire lord as they walked. Altair moved with a predatory grace that Sven couldn't help but find captivating—and the black coat he wore only added to the effect.

He might be a bloodthirsty killer and a creep, but there was no denying that the vampire was handsome. A fact that Sven hated, because he found it difficult to tear his eyes away, and even more difficult not to think about how their last encounter had ended.

That damned kiss…

For a fraction of a second, the corner of Altair's lips twitched, as if he'd caught on to Sven's thoughts and Sven immediately looked away, heat creeping up his neck.

He really needed to get a better grip on his thoughts.

Finally, Altair stopped in front of a large wooden door and pushed it open. The room beyond was spacious and surprisingly well-lit, with a large four-poster bed dominating the center of the room.

"Here we are," Altair announced, gesturing for Sven to go inside.

Sven hesitated, but his curiosity got the better of him. He stepped inside, taking a closer look at the room.

It was decorated in dark colors with black and deep red dominating the scheme. The bed was covered in silk sheets, and there was a small seating area with two armchairs and a table nearby, flanked by a bookshelf. To the side, a door led to a small ensuite. There was a wardrobe too, and when Sven checked it, he found his old clothes. Naturally, the pockets of his pants had been emptied.

"We keep this room for special guests," Altair explained, closing the door behind himself.

"Special guests or special prisoners?" Sven shot back.

"You're not a prisoner." Altair moved so fast, Sven didn't even see him move, but from one moment to the next, the vampire was right next to him, fangs glinting. "You're a valuable blood source."

Sven's heart race accelerated as he felt Altair's breath on his neck. He tried to step away, but Altair gripped his arm to keep him in place.

"I heard that you tried to offer your blood to Marla," Altair said in a cold tone of voice. "Don't expect that you can get my own vampires to betray me, and especially don't expect that I won't learn."

Sven's heart was pounding in his chest, a mixture of excitement and adrenaline pumping through his veins as he tried to pull away from Altair's grip. He knew he had made a mistake, but he'd never even considered what Altair might do to him if he found out.

"I don't want your coven to betray you," Sven said through gritted teeth. "I just want to be turned."

Altair gave him a long hard stare. Then, he leaned in closer, his lips barely brushing against Sven's ear, voice pitched low as he spoke. "Don't ever offer your blood to another vampire."

Sven shivered at the sensation of Altair's lips on his ear, his body betraying him as a surge of desire shot through him. He tried to push the feeling down, but it was difficult when Altair was so close, exuding an aura of danger that should not have been as intoxicating as it was.

Fuck, what was wrong with him?

"Do you know," Altair leaned back only slightly to look at Sven's face, "what it is that makes mortal blood so special to vampires?"

Sven swallowed, trying to ignore the heat that was slowly spreading through his body. "No."

"We can drink from other creatures," Altair explained. "Mages, shifters, even Fae… but their blood has its own magic that rejects ours. We survive on their blood, but we never feel *alive*."

He paused, locking gazes with Sven. "You strive to give up your mortality," he continued, voice soft now, "while my kind is willing to pay ungodly sums to feel mortal again."

He brought up a hand to rest the back of his fingers against Sven's cheek. "Feel how cold I am?"

Sven nodded, unable to speak as he felt Altair's icy touch against his skin.

"That's the price of immortality," Altair said. "Eternal life, but at the cost of warmth, of humanity. Mortal blood, on the other hand, is like a blazing fire in our veins. It's like tasting life itself, It's addictive, Sven. More than any drug or alcohol you could ever imagine."

Sven shuddered at the intensity of Altair's words, at the intensity of the look he was giving Sven as if he wanted to consume him right then and there. He wanted to push the

vampire away, to deny the longing that was flooding his veins, but it was like his body had a will of its own.

Altair seemed to sense his struggle, because he pulled back, a satisfied smirk on his face that made Sven want to hit him.

He glared at the vampire again. "If my blood is so good, why don't you bite me?" he challenged.

Altair's eyes seemed to gleam with a dangerous light. "You really have no idea what you're asking for." Before Sven could react, Altair's hand shot out and grabbed him by the back of his neck, pulling him forward until their faces were inches apart. Sven could feel the coldness of Altair's breath against his lips, and he couldn't help the thrill that ran through him.

"You want me to bite you?" Altair asked. "What makes you think you can handle it?"

"I can handle it," Sven insisted because he was not going to show weakness. "I've been bitten before."

Altair recoiled as if Sven's skin had burned his fingers. He quickly schooled his expression, but it was obvious that something about Sven's words had upset him.

"What?" Sven asked. "Are you pissed that you wouldn't be my first?"

Altair's eyes narrowed. "Don't be ridiculous." He turned to leave. "I suggest you get some rest," he said on his way out the door. "You've got a strenuous day ahead of you."

Sven watched as Altair walked out of the room, the door locking behind him. He was left alone with his racing thoughts, his body still buzzing with the adrenaline of their encounter. He knew he had pushed the vampire too far, but he couldn't help feeling a sense of satisfaction at the reaction he had elicited.

As his nerves calmed, though, he was left with a sense of unease. He was playing with fire, and he knew it. Altair was a dangerous creature, and Sven was nothing more than a mortal without special powers.

He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, his head in his hands as he drew in a deep breath and released it again.

What the hell was he going to do?

Chapter Five

S ven was in the middle of reading one of the books he'd found on the bookshelf of his new room when the door opened and Keegan came in.

"Hope I'm not bothering you," the vampire said as if he was interrupting Sven in the middle of a very important activity.

Sven closed the book and set it aside in favor of shooting Keegan a wary look. "What do you want?"

"You've got a lot of unread messages on your phone."

Those words were so unexpected Sven didn't know how to respond except to stare at the vampire. "You looked at my phone?"

"It wasn't hard to unlock," the vampire said as if that was the issue Sven had with all of this, rather than the fact that Keegan had just casually invaded his privacy.

Sven stood up and walked over to Keegan, his fists clenched at his sides. "That's not the point," he said, trying to keep his voice level. "Why were you looking at my phone in the first place?"

Keegan shrugged like it was no big deal. "You wouldn't tell us anything, so I had to get information elsewhere. Plus, I thought you might want to know what's going on in the outside world."

Sven snorted. "Like I can do anything about it from here."

Sven's bravado was fake, though. He did want to know what was going on in the outside world. His mother hadn't been

well when he'd left, and thinking of her made his heart clench. He'd left home in order to offer her a future, but what if he wasn't fast enough?

What if he was just being an idiot?

There was a pretty high chance he was just being an idiot, wasn't there?

"What did you see on my phone?" Sven asked. "What did you find out about me?"

Keegan shrugged. "Well, for starters, I saw a lot of messages from a lot of different women. Seems you're quite the ladies' man."

Sven shook his head. "It's not like that." He had a lot of female friends, sure, but he didn't have the time or the energy to be dating any of them.

"Be that as it may," Keegan continued, his expression turning serious, "I also found out about your mother. I'm sorry to hear that she's not doing well."

Sven's throat felt too tight for him to swallow down the thickness forming in it. "Was there a message from her? Did she try to call?"

"There was a missed call and a voicemail," Keegan said, studying Sven's face as he talked. "I didn't listen to your voicemail."

Sven glared at the vampire. Was he supposed to feel grateful for that? "I need to have my phone back," he said.

"You can have it back," Keegan said, surprising Sven, but then, naturally, the vampire followed his offer up with a condition. "I'll give it back to you as soon as you leave this place."

Sven blinked at Keegan. "You want me to leave?"

"This coven is no place for a mortal."

Sven took a moment to process that, trying to figure out what game Keegan was playing. "Altair would not let me leave," he said slowly.

"I'm not Altair," the vampire shot back. "Honestly, we don't even look similar. Pay attention."

"That's not how I meant it." Sven blew out an exasperated breath. "You guys are all about being loyal to your coven, and suddenly you want me to believe you'd go against Altair's wishes?"

"I don't believe in keeping prisoners."

Sven gave Keegan a long look, but the vampire's expression remained unreadable. "You expect me to believe that you'd help me escape out of pity?" Sven challenged.

"Not out of pity," Keegan said firmly. "But because it's the right thing to do. You don't belong here, Sven. You've got a life outside of this coven, and it wouldn't be right to keep you from it."

Sven's gaze narrowed at Keegan. He still found it hard to believe the vampire would act out of altruistic motivations. "I've got my reasons to want to be here."

"Your mother?" Keegan guessed correctly.

Sven grimaced.

"Does she know of your plan? Do you think she'd approve?"

"That's none of your business."

"Fair enough," Keegan allowed. "I'm only here to offer you a way out if you need it."

Sven's brows furrowed. Could he afford not to take that offer?

Could he afford to place any sort of trust in Keegan?

Truth be told, he knew nothing about the vampire.

"I'll give you some time to think," Keegan said. "But don't wait too long. You're scheduled for your first blood donation in a few hours."

Sven swallowed hard at those words.

Even after Keegan had left, the words he said sat heavy in Sven's stomach. He'd known that he would be giving blood when he came here, and yet…

How did you mentally prepare yourself for something like that?

Sven didn't even know how much of his blood the vampires would take from him. Probably as much as he could give without dying.

Sven shuddered, sitting back down in one of the armchairs.

He scolded himself for being so scared. Only one night ago, he'd been ready to do whatever it took to save his dying mother.

Now he was thinking about escaping?

All because things weren't going exactly to plan?

Was he really that weak?

He bit his lower lip, feeling that spot Altair had sucked on last night. It was still a little sore, and the memory of the desire the vampire's kiss had sparked in him made him feel all sorts of conflicting ways. Guilty, most of all.

What was wrong with him that he enjoyed being touched by a vampire?

Wanting another kiss was beyond stupid.

Sven's body seemed to have a mind of its own, though.

Wasn't that the real reason Keegan's offer of an escape was so tempting?

Because it would mean he wouldn't have to face Altair again?

If he left this place, he could try again with a different coven. Go for a different sort of approach.

He pinched the bridge of his nose to ease a forming headache.

Altair's coven was his best shot. All his careful research had led him here. He'd made some miscalculations, yes, but did that mean it was time to throw in the towel?

His first plan had been to make a deal with Altair.

That hadn't worked, and now he had nothing to offer in a negotiation.

But that didn't mean he was out of options.

There were other ways to entice a vampire to turn you.

Sven glanced at the book he'd been reading before Keegan came in. A History of Vampires.

The text stated that vampires turned mortals for one of three reasons. For power, for companionship… or for love.

Sven didn't have much to offer in terms of power, but what if he could make the vampire fall in love with him?

It was a wild thought, a ridiculous plan that Sven wanted to dismiss the moment it formed in his head… And yet, he couldn't deny that there was something between him and Altair. Not love. Lust, maybe.

If Sven built on that… if he seduced Altair, maybe he could make him see Sven as something other than a blood source.

Sven's mind flashed back to his earlier encounter with Altair. How close the vampire had been to kissing him again, to drinking from him. His thoughts spun while heat built low in his belly.

If Sven pushed Altair just a little harder…

What would Altair do?

Behind closed eyes, Sven pictured the vampire pressing him against the wall, his hands roaming over Sven's body. He imagined the feel of Altair's lips on his neck, the sharp sting of his fangs piercing his skin.

Sven's breath hitched at the thought.

He couldn't lose himself in these fantasies, couldn't afford to lose sight of his ultimate goal. If he was going to seduce Altair, it had to be for a purpose.

He'd just have to be very, very careful to keep that purpose hidden from Altair.

Chapter Six

Sven was pacing in his room when Keegan walked in — without knocking this time.

"Have you thought more about my offer?" Keegan asked casually, looking at Sven as if he didn't care one way or the other.

Sven stopped pacing and took a deep breath. "Your escape plan?" he asked. "I think I'm fine without it." He didn't at all know if he was making the right call, but he wasn't going to run at the first sign of difficulty either.

He had a plan. He only needed to make it work.

Keegan shrugged, his expression unreadable. "Suit yourself. But you know where to find me if you change your mind. Alt should be around in a little bit."

With that, Keegan turned around and left the room, leaving Sven alone with his thoughts and his growing tension.

His fingers twitched with the need to take action, and he wished he could just walk out of the room and do… something. He wasn't sure what, though, or where to go.

Altair would be with him soon, and Sven had to prepare for that.

How did he go about actively seducing a vampire?

The truth was that he had no clue.

Maybe he was thinking too hard about this.

Maybe it would be better to let his instincts guide him.

Except if he let his instincts take over his mind… Involuntarily, Sven thought back to the feeling of Altair's lips on his, and the way his body had responded. If he let himself get carried away, would he even remember his mission?

When the door to his room opened again, he jerked back, surprised at the sudden entrance.

"You look agitated," Altair said, closing the door behind himself.

Sven's eyes narrowed at the stupidly handsome vampire. "I'm trapped in a vampire coven and you're about to steal my blood from me. How am I supposed to feel?" Sven snapped at Altair before he could stop himself.

So much for his plans to seduce the vampire.

He was off to a great start.

"I can hardly steal something I already own," Altair said as if he was stating a simple fact. He was so nonchalant about owning Sven that it made Sven's blood boil.

"I'm not your property," Sven spat back, his anger giving him a sudden burst of courage. "I'm a human being, not a source of food."

Altair raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. "You're in a vampire coven, Sven. What did you expect?"

"I expected to be treated with a little bit of respect," Sven said through gritted teeth. "But I guess that's too much to ask for."

Altair took a step closer, his eyes darkening. Sven held his ground, refusing to back down.

"You're mortal, Sven," Altair said, his voice low and dangerous. "You're food. Nothing more, nothing less."

Sven felt a shiver run down his spine at the intensity of Altair's gaze. He knew he was in over his head, but he refused to let himself be intimidated.

"Is that what you tell yourself to justify what you do?" Sven asked, his tone challenging. "That we're nothing more than juice boxes for you to sink your straw into?"

Altair's eyes narrowed, his fangs showing slightly. Sven could feel the energy in the room shifting, the tension rising to a dangerous level. But he refused to back down.

"I don't need to justify anything," Altair said, voice deceptively calm. "I am a vampire, and you are human. Our roles are clear. You exist to sustain us. That is the way of things. You knew that when you came here."

"I came here to negotiate with you," Sven corrected. "That doesn't mean I'm going to let you treat me like a piece of meat."

"Oh?" The vampire raised an eyebrow at him. "You won't let me?"

Sven squared his shoulders.

"No, I won't." His heart beat faster as Altair took another step towards him, their bodies almost touching. The scent of blood and sweat filled Sven's nostrils, making him dizzy with desire and adrenaline. Altair's eyes were fixed on him, a predatory glint in them that made Sven's knees weak.

"You're brave, Sven," Altair said, his voice like silk. "But you cannot stop me."

Sven swallowed hard. "How will you take my blood?"

"We've got a room set up for blood donations. I'll take you there."

"You'll draw my blood with a needle?"

"Scared of needles?"

Sven shook his head, his eyes never leaving Altair's. "No, I'm not scared. I just don't want to be treated like a lab rat. If you want my blood, take it like a real vampire."

Altair had kissed him after tasting his blood that first night. Maybe there was something about drinking that lowered his inhibitions, like liquor did for mortals. If so, Sven had to take full advantage of that.

He'd almost convinced the vampire to bite him last night.

If he pushed just a little more carefully…

"Use your teeth," Sven said. "Not needles."

Altair cocked an eyebrow at him. "And why would I follow your orders, mortal?"

Sven took a step closer to Altair, heart racing. "Because," he said, pitching his voice low, "you know you want to." He reached up and trailed a finger down the vampire's chest, feeling the firm muscles beneath the fabric of his shirt. "You want to taste me, don't you?"

Altair's eyes darkened with hunger, and Sven knew he had him. He leaned in, pressing his lips to the vampire's neck, feeling the pulse of his blood beneath the skin. "Take me," he whispered. "Take what you want."

Altair's fangs descended, and a thrill of fear and excitement ran through Sven. This was it. He tilted his head back, offering himself to the vampire, feeling the sharp sting as Altair sank his teeth into his neck.

The pain was sharp, but so was the lust it sparked in Sven. He moaned, his hands clenching at Altair's shirt as the vampire drank from him. A rush of heat flowed through him as the vampire's venom mingled with his blood, sending waves of pleasure through his body.

This was dangerous, reckless, and completely insane. But Sven didn't care. The only thing that mattered was the feel of Altair's lips on his neck.

It was over way too soon.

Sven felt lightheaded as Altair pulled away. Lightheaded and sluggish, as if he couldn't move. Vampire venom, he recalled idly.

There was some kind of venom in their bite.

"This is why you cannot stop me," Altair said, clearly picking up on what Sven was thinking as he gently picked Sven up and carried him like he weighed nothing.

Sven wanted to protest, but he felt like his brain was drugged. Funny, he'd thought he could drug Altair with his blood, but the opposite had happened.

His eyes went to Altair's lips where he could still see a hint of the vampire's fangs, stained red.

What was it about that sight that made his cock twitch?

"Everybody out," Altair said, and it was only then that Sven realized there were other vampires in the room Altair took him to.

They left without a question. Sven barely spared them a glance. His attention was still fixed on Altair and the hint of his fangs.

"It was different," he muttered before he even realized the meaning of his own words.

Altair set him down in a reclining chair, pretending like he didn't care what Sven was talking about, but Sven caught the questioning glint in his eyes before his expression smoothed over. It encouraged him to keep talking.

"The first time I was bitten, it was different," he said, thinking back to that day, to the dream he'd had just the night before. The first time a vampire had attacked him, there'd been nothing but pain.

Altair tensed, and Sven remembered that this was a topic the vampire didn't like. Too bad, because Sven wasn't going to stop talking. He needed to distract himself from the needle Altair was handling.

He couldn't look at it without getting nervous.

"You're a different kind of vampire," Sven said. "It's different when you drink from me."

"You don't know what you're saying." Altair looked at the needle instead of Sven. He wiped Sven's arm with an alcohol-soaked piece of cotton.

"Your hands are warm now," Sven noted.

"That's the effect of your blood," Altair reminded him.

"Do you feel warm?"

Altair didn't respond, and Sven's breath hitched when he saw Altair draw the needle near his arm. He couldn't take his eyes

away. "Just get it over with," he muttered.

Altair looked at him then, and for a brief moment, Sven thought the vampire was going to take his hand in his and promise that it wasn't going to hurt. But of course, Altair wasn't the type of man to make promises like that, and he didn't give Sven's hand a comforting squeeze either.

The needle went in smoothly.

Sven had been worried it would be painful, but it wasn't. Not really. It just felt strange. He looked away as he felt his blood leave his body and move into the tube attached to the needle.

"Why is your bite different from the other vampire?"

"Every vampire is different," Altair said in a way that sounded like he wasn't up for answering any more questions, but Sven wasn't in any mood to care about what the vampire wanted. He had questions and he wanted answers.

"Did you like the way I taste?" Sven asked, and when he looked at the vampire, Altair was giving him an appraising look, as if he was trying to figure out if Sven was being serious.

Sven wished he knew what was going on in Altair's head.

"You're going to give me a lot of trouble, aren't you?" Altair asked, and Sven nodded once—because yes. He wasn't sure what his future in the coven held in store for him, but trouble was definitely part of it.

It might have been a trick of the light, or the vampire venom making Sven see things that weren't there, but for a second, he could have sworn he saw Altair smile.

He never answered Sven's question, though. He only watched the blood flow from Sven's arm into the tube, and when it was done, he carefully pulled the needle out and applied a bandage over the wound.

"That should do it," he said, and his voice was softer than usual. Sven moved his arm, feeling lightheaded and weird. "Who are you going to sell my blood to?"

"That's not your concern," Altair said as he gathered up the used medical supplies and put them in a biohazard bag.

"Yeah, sure. It's only my blood." Sven sat up. Too quickly maybe, because spots danced before his eyes. "Oh shit."

Altair was at his side in an instant. "Easy there," he said, steadying Sven with one hand on his shoulder. His touch was surprisingly gentle. "Take it slow."

Sven looked at him, and their eyes locked, and for a second he thought he saw something in the vampire's gaze that he couldn't quite name. It was gone a moment later, and Altair stepped away as if he hadn't just been touching Sven like he was precious.

Or maybe it was only Sven's blood that was precious.

Sven blew out a breath.

"Lie back down," Altair instructed. "I will get you some food." Sven didn't have the strength to protest, so he did as he was told. He watched as Altair left the room, and though he had every intention of staying awake, he closed his eyes for a moment.

He was asleep before the vampire returned.

Chapter Seven

S ven dreamed again that night. Except this time he was not in the forest, and he wasn't being attacked. Well, he was kind of being attacked. He could feel the sharp edge of Altair's fangs on his neck, and the sensation made his cock stiffen and dig into the mattress under him.

Altair's hands moved across his body, teasing and exploring. His mouth followed his hands, and soon enough, he was tasting and licking every inch of Sven's skin.

Sven moaned and writhed under the vampire's touch, feeling pleasure he'd never been able to find before. His heart raced and his breathing grew ragged as Altair's lips moved down his body.

When Altair finally reached his groin, Sven gasped, his whole body trembling with anticipation. The vampire moved his lips in a slow, languid kiss, and Sven could only moan in pleasure as he felt the vampire's tongue swirl around his cock.

The pleasure was almost too much to bear, and when Altair's fangs sunk into the skin of his inner thigh, Sven couldn't help but cry out.

He woke with a jolt and a raging hard-on.

Fuck.

The aftereffects of the dream left his mind so addled, that for a solid minute, he had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten there. Even after a minute—and a good look around—he still struggled to piece together the finer parts of what the hell was going on.

For one, he wasn't in the blood donation room anymore, but he wasn't in his previous room either. This room was larger and more luxurious—as was the bed.

Sven couldn't remember how he got here, but what was even more mysterious than that was the fact that he was not alone in the room. He wasn't even alone in the bed.

Still, Sven had to admit that the sight of Altair sleeping was almost beautiful. He looked more at ease than Sven had ever seen him. He wondered if the vampire was dreaming, and for a second, he wanted to reach out and touch his cheek, just to know what it felt like. The thought that he absolutely *shouldn't* only made him want to do it more.

He didn't, of course.

His head was still swimming from the vivid dream, and he was not thinking straight. He was in a vampire coven, and he was having pervy thoughts about the vampire lying next to him.

Was Altair naked under the covers?

No, no, no.

Sven shook his head, trying to rid himself of the thought. He needed to stay focused and alert.

He looked down on himself. He didn't know about Altair's state of undress, but someone had stripped him down to his underwear while he was sleeping. His heart pounded in his ears at the thought of Altair doing that to him while he was unaware, defenseless.

Had the vampire touched him more than necessary?

Probably not.

Hoping to shake the thought, Sven took a deep breath and forced himself to turn away from Altair and look around the room. There were no windows, but two doors, which were probably locked. Not that Sven necessarily wanted to escape. If that had been his plan, he should have taken Keegan up on his offer.

Besides, he was being watched.

A single crow perched on a dresser on the other side of the room, its black eyes locked on Sven. It didn't make a sound, but it didn't have to. Its presence alone was enough to make Sven shiver.

Whatever he did, this crow would surely tell on him.

Looking away from the bird, Sven's gaze caught on a picture frame on the nightstand. A family of four.

He assumed the two adults were Altair's parents. The man's features were pinched, but the woman looked a lot like Altair. She smiled down at the two boys in front of her, one a little taller than the other, both with black hair.

The picture looked old but not centuries old, which made him wonder about Altair's age. He'd heard that the Caller of Crows was young to be leading a coven, but how young exactly?

Sven nearly jumped when the body next to him stirred.

The vampire was awake, dark eyes studying Sven from the side as if he was searching for something.

Sven cleared his throat. "Good morning," he said, since he had no idea what to make of the situation, and the need to say anything at all became too overwhelming to ignore.

Behind Sven, the crow cawed into the silence.

Altair glanced at the bird, then back to Sven. "Good morning," he said, his voice strangely neutral. He didn't move, but Sven could sense his tension.

Sven shifted. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A few hours." Altair's gaze roamed Sven's body. "You didn't take the blood loss well. I'm glad to see you've regained some color."

Sven stared at the vampire. Was that how he'd ended up in Altair's room? He'd fainted and then Altair had taken him here to… keep an eye on him?

Sven almost felt flattered until he remembered that his blood was a rare and valuable resource to the vampire. That was the only reason Altair cared about his health.

"You couldn't have asked someone else to watch over me?" Sven asked.

Altair shook his head. "Some tasks are too important to delegate." After he said that, he pushed the covers away and stood up. He was wearing nothing but a pair of boxers, and the sight of his strong body made something inside Sven's chest tighten.

"You need to eat," he said as if he wasn't aware of the heat in Sven's gaze. He stepped away from the bed and moved toward the desk.

Sven followed him with his eyes, his gaze fixed on the vampire's naked skin. He couldn't help but admire Altair's firm muscles, and he cursed himself for it.

What if the vampire picked up on his thoughts?

Sven swallowed hard.

Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing if Altair picked up on his thoughts. If there was still a chance to seduce him…

"That won't work," Altair said without facing him. "You were out of your mind yesterday. You could not keep a single thought to yourself."

Sven flushed.

Well.

That was fucking embarrassing.

Why did the vampire have to be a mind reader?

It wasn't fair.

Ignoring Sven, Altair picked up a small phone and made a call, asking for 'the mortal's food' to be brought to his room.

When the call ended, Altair put the phone back on the desk and turned around. "Breakfast will be here soon. And since I know you're wondering about your clothes, they're being washed. My recommendation would be for you to throw them away, however."

Sven's gaze narrowed at the vampire. "You want me to run around naked?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Altair huffed a laugh. "Your mind works in weird ways, mortal. I was merely suggesting you dress in nicer clothes rather than the rags you wore when you came here."

"Oh, are you going to give me money to pay for clothes?" Sven challenged. "Will you take me to a boutique so I can pick a fancy suit?"

"No," Altair said. "But we can order something for you."

"Why do you care what I'm wearing?" Sven grabbed the covers and drew them more tightly around himself.

"I thought you might feel more comfortable," the vampire said as if it wasn't weird for him to be taking Sven's feelings about anything into consideration. "It's not a necessity, of course."

Sven looked away and his jaw clenched.

He didn't want clothes from Altair.

He wanted to be turned.

Of course, Altair read that thought too. "I know about your mother." He said this almost casually as he turned to his dresser to pick out new clothes for himself. "She's sick, and you want to save her."

Sven's heart clenched.

He really was an open book to this vampire, wasn't he?

Altair put on a black shirt and buttoned it. "All mortals die," he said. "That's why we call you mortals."

Sven bristled. "You're not better than me. You used to be mortal once." On instinct, he grabbed the picture frame he'd looked at earlier. "I'm betting it wasn't even that long ago."

Altair's gaze snapped to the picture. He stared at it for a few seconds before reaching out and taking it from Sven. "These mortals are all dead now." He placed the picture back on the nightstand, then turned it over.

The crow flew from the dresser and landed on his shoulder as if wanting to be a comforting presence, and Sven got the distinct feeling that he'd pried into something he shouldn't have.

The very next moment, though, Sven's jaw tensed. What was he doing feeling sorry for his kidnapper?

"If you didn't want to lose your family, you should have turned them."

Altair's expression hardened. "Don't talk about things you don't understand."

Sven's mouth went dry at the icy tone. He'd hit a nerve.

But before he could say anything else, a knock sounded on the door.

"That will be your food," Altair said, much to Sven's relief.

The vampire moved to the door and opened it, revealing a woman in a black dress carrying a tray. She bowed her head to Altair before entering the room and setting the tray down on the bed. Then, she left as quickly as she had entered.

To Sven's surprise, his stomach rumbled at the smell of food.

He had been so caught up in his thoughts that he hadn't realized how hungry he was.

"You should eat," Altair said as he watched Sven's eyes linger on the tray. "You need to regain your strength."

Sven nodded and sat up, the covers falling away from his bare chest. He felt self-conscious under Altair's gaze, but he tried to ignore it as he picked up a piece of toast.

After a moment, Altair stopped paying attention to Sven to finish dressing while Sven ate in silence. The vampire put on his shoes and then checked himself over. There was no mirror in the room, but then, vampires didn't have reflections anyway.

"Do you even know what you look like anymore?" Sven asked as Altair adjusted his shirt and ran a hand through his hair, making Sven want to do the same.

"I can see myself in your thoughts," Altair said. "You think I'm beautiful."

Sven choked on his toast, coughing as he tried to clear his airway. When he finally regained his composure, he glared at Altair. "I never said that," he sputtered.

Altair just smirked. "You didn't have to."

Sven rolled his eyes, but he couldn't deny the truth in Altair's words. The vampire was undeniably attractive.

Still, Sven forced himself to focus on the food, to push aside his thoughts and the way his body reacted to Altair's presence. He needed to keep a clear head if he was going to find a way out of this situation.

But then, a thought occurred to him. What if he used it to his advantage? "You said you could see yourself in my mind?"

"Yes," Altair confirmed.

"Does that mean you can see anything I'm picturing?"

Altair raised an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

Sven shrugged nonchalantly. "Just curious."

The vampire shot him a long look. "What is it you want me to see?"

Sven hesitated. Then, his mind flashed back to the dream he'd had that night. He pulled up a strong memory of it. An image that had seared itself into his brain, an image of Altair kissing him, the vampire's hands roaming his body.

He could shove pictures like this at the vampire all day until Altair broke. Just because Altair knew what he was doing didn't have to mean Sven couldn't achieve his goal regardless.

He'd just have to be more relentless in his pursuit.

Shameless.

The vampire's eyes flashed. "This isn't going to work," he said, gaze narrowing.

Sven wasn't one to give up easily, though. After all, the vampire had given him enough reason to believe that Sven

wasn't the only one feeling the pull between them. He pulled up another memory, of the time Altair had sucked the blood from Sven's lips.

Altair's glare burned into him. "You're playing with fire, mortal," he warned.

A thrill of fear raced through Sven, but he didn't back down. "And you're the one who's been playing with me since the moment you kidnapped me."

Altair's expression darkened. "I will not be manipulated."

"Do you need to be manipulated?" Sven asked. When Altair only looked at him, Sven pressed on. "I know you want me. You bit me yesterday, and you pretended like you did that so you could carry me around more easily, but when you kidnapped me, you knocked me out without ever needing to bite me. You didn't have to bite me last night. You did it because you wanted to." Sven knew he was treading on thin ice, but there was something about the vampire that called to him, something primal and irresistible that made it impossible for him to stop.

Altair's gaze flicked to Sven's neck, where he'd bitten him the previous night. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

Sven refused to back down. "You can't deny that you want me."

Altair's eyes flicked back up to meet Sven's, and for a long moment, there was silence. Then, the vampire spoke. "I'm not denying anything."

Sven's heart leaped in his throat. He'd expected dismissal, or anger, or even violence. But he hadn't expected this.

"I may be a predator," Altair continued, "but that doesn't mean I'm going to let myself be ruled by base instincts." He took a step toward Sven and then another until he was standing right in front of him. Sven's breath caught in his throat as Altair leaned down, his lips hovering just inches away from Sven's. "You may be tempting, mortal, but I will not let myself fall prey to you."

Sven's heart was pounding so loudly in his chest he was sure Altair could hear it.

But then, Altair pulled away.

"You should finish your food," he said, his voice low and rough. "I have things to attend to."

And with that, he turned and left the room, leaving Sven alone with his racing thoughts and a tray of half-eaten food.

Chapter Eight

A ltair had always prided himself on his self-control, but Sven was making him struggle, his mere presence tempting Altair in ways he had never experienced before.

He paced the halls of his underground domain, trying to clear his mind. It was impossible to get rid of the images Sven had seared into his mind, though. The mortal was right; Altair did want him, but he couldn't let himself give in. There was nothing to be gained from falling for a mortal.

Especially not one who only wanted to be turned.

But then, his mind wandered back to the moment he had leaned in close to Sven, their lips almost touching. The mortal's scent had been intoxicating, his body so close that Altair could feel his warmth. The vampire's self-control was slipping, and he knew he needed to do something to regain it.

He climbed the stairs that led up to the club. The sun had only just set and there weren't a lot of patrons at the bar yet. Altair exchanged short greetings with his staff, wished them a pleasant night, and strode outside.

There, he inhaled the cool night air and closed his eyes.

He'd left his favorite crow down in his chambers with Sven. Through her eyes, he saw the mortal sitting at the edge of the bed, staring blankly into space.

A sense of possessiveness rose up within Altair, the desire to claim Sven as his own—not just his blood, but his soul.

Altair suppressed the urge.

Sven thought he knew what he wanted, but he didn't. He was acting out of desperation, not because he truly wanted to be a vampire.

In the end, he would resent Altair.

Altair took a deep breath and opened his eyes, gazing out at the quiet city before him.

In all his time as a vampire, he'd only ever turned one person, and he'd learned from that mistake. He walked to the park where he'd met Sven and was joined by his crows, talking softly to him, telling him about everything they'd spied in his territory that day.

Gently, he quieted them. It wasn't information he wanted tonight. It was liberation. His birds cawed at him, and then they took to the sky. He followed them, letting the cool night air wash away his thoughts as he soared above the city in a whirl of black feathers.

He caught the scent of blood on the wind, but it didn't excite him. There was no hunting in a city ruled by paranormal creatures. The only blood he got these days was consensually harvested.

Most of it, anyway.

Sven was a special case. A warm body he could drink from and still feel the thrill of what it meant to be a predator.

He landed on the rooftop of a nearby building, looking out at the streets below. The crows circled him, their caws echoing in the night. They loved flying with him, and they wanted him to keep moving. All of them except for one bird who landed on his shoulder and nuzzled his ear with her beak. She had a message for Altair.

She'd found the mortal's family.

Altair petted the bird's soft feathers, grateful for the intel.

He plucked an image of Sven's mother from the bird's mind. The crow had sat on her windowsill and the sickly woman had offered some bread crumbs to the curious bird. Altair could

see the pain etched on her face and the worry lines on her forehead.

People were going to start looking for Sven soon.

When Altair returned to the club a few hours later, his closest friends were gathered around a table to themselves in the back. Altair joined them and took the empty chair next to Keegan, sitting opposite Mordyn and Iskander.

"Quiet night?" he asked.

Mordyn shrugged. "Nothing too bad. Yesterday's rowdies didn't return, at least. They're probably still licking their wounds." He said this with a certain sense of pride.

Altair only nodded, though, his mind elsewhere.

"You look like you could use a drink or twenty," Mordyn commented. After he spoke, he nodded at a different group of people sitting two tables away from them. "We've got some incubi in the club tonight if you need to take your mind off things."

Altair gave the group a once-over. Most vampires looked good, but incubi were on a different level altogether. They had a way of seducing their prey that no other creature could match. Another night, Altair might have been tempted. Sex with incubi was rarely emotional for him but always fun.

Tonight, though, Altair wasn't in the mood for it. If he hopped into bed with an incubus now, he'd just wind up thinking of someone else, and that would quickly ruin the rest of the encounter for him.

"I'll pass," he said to Mordyn.

The other vampire raised an eyebrow at him. "Too bad. I'd hoped we could share the blonde. I bet she'd let us drink too. I'm hungry," he complained although he had a half-empty glass of blood in front of him.

Altair understood that his friend was talking about a different kind of hunger, though. Drinking from a glass or bottle could never fully sate the cravings of a vampire. It was the thrill of the hunt, the feel of warm blood pulsing beneath their lips that a real vampire needed to thrive.

Under the table, Altair's fists clenched as his thoughts turned to Sven once more. The way he'd tasted…

"Something bothering you?" Keegan asked, eyeing him from the side. "You've been out for a long time. Sheila's been looking for you. I think she wants to talk about some accounting issues."

Altair pinched the bridge of his nose. If there was one thing he hated more than dealing with his own emotions, it was dealing with mundane business matters. "I'll talk to her later."

"Don't let her wait too long," Keegan advised. "You know how she can get."

Altair waved his friend off. "I'm not scared of Sheila." He caught the eye of a waiter who walked by and ordered a serving of synthetic blood. Maybe if he drank his fill, he would be less susceptible to the manipulations of the mortal in his room.

"You're ordering synth?" Mordyn looked disgusted. "We just got a fresh shipment of real A-positive."

"Mage blood?" Altair asked with a wrinkle of his nose. "Too tangy."

Iskander and Mordyn exchanged a look, then Iskander said, "Never seen you choose synth over mage."

Altair shrugged and remained silent. He saw no reason to explain himself. The truth of the matter was, as fake as synthetic blood was, it still came closer to the taste of real mortal blood than mage blood, and tonight, that was what he wanted.

Mortal blood.

When the synthetic blood arrived, Altair sipped it slowly. A metallic taste lingered on his tongue, reminding him of the

iron-rich blood he'd tasted last night. This wasn't anywhere near as satisfying.

His lips curled in displeasure.

"You're thinking of our newcomer, aren't you?" Keegan asked.

Altair shot his friend a look that would have silenced any other vampire in the coven, but sadly Keegan was immune to his glare.

Altair set his glass down on the table. "What if I am?"

Keegan leaned forward, his expression serious. "I heard that you took him back to your chambers last night. He's still there, isn't he?"

Altair's eyes narrowed at Keegan's words. He didn't like how Keegan was prying into his affairs. "I took him to my chambers because he wasn't doing well. He's too valuable to us for me to surrender his care to someone else."

"Is he doing better now?" Keegan asked.

Altair nodded. Sven had looked better after he woke up and Altair had left instructions for him to be fed properly throughout his time here. "We'll have to be more careful about how much blood we take from him."

"I know I told you to give him a nicer room," Keegan said, "but I didn't mean for you to share your own room."

Mordyn grinned. "I think it's sweet," he said, dropping his voice to a hush. "Altair has a soft spot for mortals."

Altair scowled at Mordyn. "I don't have a soft spot for mortals."

Mordyn's smile never faltered. "It's all cool. Now I see why you're not interested in the incubi. You've already got someone warming your bed."

"No one's warming my bed," Altair dismissed Mordyn's claim. "And you'd do well to remember who you're talking to."

"So you're going to relocate him?" Keegan asked.

There was something pushy about the way he talked that Altair did not appreciate. "That's for me to decide," he reminded the other vampire. "People will be looking for him soon. No other room in the coven is as shielded as mine."

"That is true," Iskander acknowledged, and Altair felt grateful that at least one of his friends had some brain cells left. Iskander never spoke much, but at least he didn't waste the words he did speak on pointless banter. "We need to be careful about who learns about this. Have you found someone to sell his blood to?"

"We can't sell it in the city." Altair leaned in so he could speak quietly. "Not even on the black market. The risk would be too great."

"What about the covens in Belfar?" Mordyn suggested. "They'll buy anything without question as long as the taste is right."

Internally, Altair winced at the mention of Belfar, but he didn't make his displeasure known. "I'll trust you to talk to them. Tomorrow night. The faster we get this dealt with the better."

As Altair spoke, his mind was already planning his next move. He knew he had to be careful with the mortal. Sven was a valuable asset to their coven, but he was also a liability. If the wrong person found out about him, they could use him as leverage against them. Altair couldn't let that happen.

He finished his synth blood and stood up from the table.

"Business, right," Mordyn said with a smirk. "Don't keep your pet waiting too long, great leader of mine."

Altair ignored the jibe and strode out of the room.

Contrary to what Mordyn believed, he did not hurry straight back to his chambers.

Instead, he made his way to his office, where he closed the door behind him and locked it. As much as he hated doing paperwork, at least his fellow vampires hated it just as much. He wasn't likely to be disturbed as long as he was in here, even if all he did was sit at his desk and focus his mind's eye on what his crows were seeing.

Particularly, he focused on what the crow in his bedroom was seeing.

He wasn't going to go back to his room before the mortal was asleep.

Chapter Nine

A ltair hovered in the doorway, his gaze tracing the lines of Sven's sleeping form.

Chestnut hair spilled across the pillow, brown lashes fanned over pale cheeks. With his smart mouth closed, Sven looked deceptively innocent.

But Altair remembered the calculated gleam in Sven's eyes as he drew a knife across his palm, smearing his blood over Altair's lips. Sven knew exactly what he was doing. Temptation made flesh.

Truth be told, Altair had thought about sleeping in a different room today, but he didn't want to show weakness. Who was he to let a mortal dictate his actions?

From the first time he'd laid eyes on Sven, though, he'd known that Sven was different.

Special, somehow.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, torn between desire and restraint. His fingertips traced the curve of Sven's cheekbone, the warmth of his skin sending shivers up Altair's spine.

He'd felt that warm himself when the first drops of Sven's blood had touched his lips. He'd forgotten what it was like to feel alive until that moment.

Sven stirred slightly, his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks, but he did not wake. The sight of him lying there, so vulnerable and yet so tempting, tested Altair's resolve to its breaking point.

Before he knew what he was doing, against his better judgment, he leaned down to smell Sven's neck, feeling the steady thrum of his pulse beneath the skin. The scent of blood swelled around him, filling his nostrils and making his head spin.

His lips grazed Sven's skin, touching it ever so lightly, and at that moment, Sven made a small noise in his sleep.

"Can't resist, can you?" Sven murmured.

Altair's gaze snapped to Sven's face. The mortal's eyes were open now, studying Altair. Judging by the sleepy look in his eyes, he hadn't been awake for long, but his brain was quickly coming online, assessing the situation and trying to spin it to his advantage. He wasn't alert enough yet to guard his thoughts, and Altair could practically see the mortal's plan as it formed in his head.

Sven wanted to use this situation to try to seduce Altair once more.

No.

Altair reconsidered what he was seeing in Sven's mind. Images of him and Sven together, intertwined, naked, with Altair's fangs in Sven's neck and Sven's cock in Altair's hand.

Sven wasn't making that up because he wanted to tempt Altair. It was what he'd been dreaming of before Altair woke him.

That realization gave Altair pause.

"You dreamed of me."

The scent of adrenaline tinted the air between them, but Sven didn't look away. "Can I keep nothing private?"

"Were you trying?"

The mortal swallowed, and Altair felt his gaze drawn to the movement of his Adam's apple. It was clear that Sven was scared, somewhere deep down—as he should be. Sven continued to push past his fear, though. To help his mother? Or because he was just as drawn to Altair as Altair was to him?

Finally, Sven shook his head. "I wasn't trying."

"Your confidence will be your downfall," Altair warned, trying to regain control of the situation.

"Maybe," Sven said, voice growing fiercer. "But it's gotten me this far, hasn't it? You want me. I know you do."

"You think you can manipulate me."

Sven drew in a breath as if steeling himself for his next words. "I woke up with your lips on my neck. I don't think I need to manipulate you."

Altair couldn't deny the truth in that statement. Even now, he wanted to drink from Sven more than anything.

"Do it," Sven urged as if he could read Altair's thoughts the same way Altair read Sven's.

And Altair found himself utterly unwilling to resist the offer. He leaned in, his fangs grazing Sven's throat. Sven shivered, the scent of his fear mingling with the scent of his desire. Altair could feel the wild beating of his heart beneath his lips, and then his fangs broke skin.

The taste of Sven's blood was just as intoxicating as Altair remembered it, sparking a hunger deep inside that rose up to consume him as his body warmed and came alive, buzzing with lust and desire.

But it was Sven's sigh of satisfaction that truly made Altair want to devour him whole. It was such a small sound, and yet it spoke of such complete surrender that Altair couldn't resist but take everything the mortal offered to him.

In this moment, he owned Sven.

And he wasn't at all prepared for the need that sparked in him.

He drank deeper, his fangs sinking further into Sven's neck as the mortal tilted his head back to offer himself up to Altair.

Altair's hands slid under Sven's clothes, exploring every inch of naked skin he could reach. Sven moaned, pressing back against Altair, seeking more of the vampire's touch.

Altair lifted his head, releasing Sven's neck and leaving a trail of crimson in his wake. "Is this what you want?" he whispered

into Sven's ear, his voice husky with lust.

"Y-yes," Sven stammered, his breath hitching at Altair's touch.

He peppered little kisses along Sven's shoulder, each one accompanied by a sharp bite that barely drew blood. Sven shivered beneath him, body trembling with anticipation.

"Look at you," Altair murmured as his hand slipped past the waistband of Sven's pants. "So desperate for me." He couldn't help but smirk when he found Sven's cock, already hard and throbbing against the confines of his boxers.

"Tell me what you want, Sven," Altair demanded as he slowly closed his hand around Sven's cock, relishing the way Sven's hips bucked up into his touch.

"Your touch… your fangs… everything," Sven admitted, his brown eyes filled with a raw vulnerability that struck something deep within Altair. "Make me yours, completely."

Altair realized that it was the effects of his own venom that stripped Sven of his defenses, but still, Sven's words spoke to a part of him that Altair had long thought dormant.

He struggled with it, unwilling to give Sven too much power over him, but how could he resist the temptation of the mortal in his arms? How could he keep up his walls while Sven looked at him with such open desire?

"Please," Sven whispered, obviously high on vampire venom. His hips moved, seeking friction, and Altair gave it to him.

Altair moved his hand, stroking him in a slow rhythm that had Sven gasping and arching his back.

The sight of Sven completely under his control was enough to drive Altair wild. He wanted to draw this out, to make it last, but Sven's need was a tangible thing in the air between them, and he wanted nothing more than to fulfill it.

He slipped his hand out of Sven's pants, shifting to lay the mortal down on his back as he pulled the waistband of Sven's boxers down. Sven obediently lifted his hips, lifting his own shirt and exposing his body to Altair's gaze.

Even in the soft, barely-there light of the bedroom his sun-kissed skin, so unlike a vampire's, was a sight that made Altair's breath catch.

He ran his palm along the underside of Sven's cock, taking pleasure in the way the mortal gasped at the touch, and then lowered his head, running his tongue over Sven's balls before taking the head of his cock into his mouth. Sven moaned, bucking his hips again.

"You like that?" Altair asked, his voice dark. He pulled his head back.

Sven's eyes opened, staring down at him, and for a moment, he saw a flicker of hesitation, but then it was gone, and Sven nodded, breathing heavily.

"I want to hear you," Altair said, tracing the tip of his tongue along the length of Sven's shaft.

Sven flushed and looked at him. "Can't you read my thoughts?"

Altair met Sven's gaze and peered into his mind. The mortal's thoughts were completely unguarded, just as they had been after Altair's bite last night. Sven's desire and lust shone bright as a beacon in his mind, and he could practically hear Sven's thoughts.

Kiss me, fuck me, bite me.

It was an intoxicating combination, and Altair was tempted to do exactly what Sven was thinking, to keep going, to make the mortal beg, and then to sink his teeth into his neck and drink until Sven was nothing but a boneless heap beneath him.

"I want to hear you say it," Altair said, the words coming out a growl as he brought his hand to Sven's erection. He squeezed it and moved his hand slowly up and down its length.

Sven arched his back, his hips jerking up into Altair's grip as a moan escaped his lips. The sound spurred Altair on, and he was tempted to pin Sven down and take him right then and there. To claim ownership.

"Do you want more of this?" Altair whispered as he trailed a finger along the length of Sven's cock, following it with his tongue, teasing him.

"Y-yes," Sven groaned. "Please," he gasped. "More."

Altair lowered his head, his hand encircling Sven's cock once more as he took Sven into his mouth. This time, he didn't tease. He took the entirety of Sven's cock down his throat, tasting him. His grip on Sven tightened and his fangs grazed Sven's skin.

A moment later, Sven's grip on Altair's hair tightened.

"Fuck," he gasped, bucking his hips again. "Altair…"

"Look at me," Altair ordered, pulling back.

Sven's gaze locked with his. The sight of Sven staring at him like that, his pupils dilated and his breathing ragged with need sent a jolt of lust through Altair.

It took all his willpower to pull back and then slip off the bed to pull a bottle of lube from one of the drawers. He returned to the bed and looked at Sven.

"How many men have you been with?" he asked.

Sven shook his head, refusing to answer.

Just as well, Altair could take the information from his mind.

He leaned over and gripped Sven's chin, tilting his head back.

"Don't look away," Altair warned, his voice firm.

Sven's gaze darted to his, and for a moment, Altair felt the walls between them rise back up. Altair considered biting him again, but then Sven let out a slow breath, and his resistance crumbled once more.

"One," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper.

Altair quirked an eyebrow, surprised by the answer. "You seem awfully experienced," he said.

"I've watched a lot of porn," Sven muttered, looking away.

Altair was tempted to chuckle, but he stopped himself. "That's one way to get experience."

"You got plenty of practice, I'm sure," Sven said, his tone biting. "How old are you, grandpa?"

"Old enough to know what I'm doing," Altair said, meeting Sven's gaze while he pulled off his own clothes. Predictably, the mortal's eyes widened as he took in the sight of Altair's naked body.

Altair moved over him, running his tongue over Sven's lips and tasting them, his own cock hardening further as Sven opened his mouth to let him in. At the same time, Sven's fingers dug into his shoulder blades, his nails scraping Altair's skin and betraying his need.

Altair pressed closer, his erection against Sven's, and Sven groaned into the kiss. Altair let his hand slip down between them, pressing the head of his cock against Sven's hole.

Sven's breath hitched at the sensation.

"You're tense," Altair said, prodding Sven's entrance with his fingers.

"I don't… I haven't…"

"You said you'd been with a man before."

Sven shook his head. "We never got this far."

Altair picked up the lube and squeezed some into his hand. "It'll hurt," he warned.

"I don't care."

"It's not in my nature to be gentle."

Sven gave him a determined look. "I'm not asking you to be."

Altair studied the mortal but found no lie. Sven's mind might have been softened by the aftereffects of the bite, but he was lucid enough to know what he was getting himself into.

That was good enough for Altair. He pressed a finger into Sven's ass, slowly, breaching him. Sven moaned softly, but there was a hint of fear in his thoughts.

Altair moved his finger, feeling the way the muscles clamped down around it, and then slowly pushed in another finger.

Sven's muscles clamped down again, and this time, Altair felt a bit of pain mixed with the fear.

"Breathe," he murmured, and Sven did. "You're so tight."

Sven flushed and tried to turn his head away, but Altair caught his chin.

"Look at me," he ordered.

Sven nodded, and he watched Sven's expression as he kept moving his fingers, slowly, feeling the way Sven's muscles relaxed, opening up.

"Is it too much?"

"No," Sven whispered, closing his eyes and then opening them again to meet Altair's gaze. "Keep going."

Altair obeyed, curling his fingers and searching. A moment later, Sven moaned and arched his back, his muscles clenching down on Altair's fingers.

"There," Sven gasped, and then Altair moved his fingers once more. He wanted to take his time, but the scent of Sven's need was an almost physical thing, and Altair couldn't resist it. He needed to feel Sven beneath him, his ass around his cock, his moans in his ears.

He pulled his fingers free and spread Sven's legs, spreading the lube over his erection. He pressed the head of his cock against Sven's ass, feeling the resistance, and then

Sven gasped, and his mind was a flurry of thoughts—lust, need, fear, pleasure—all mixing together as they did when Altair fed on him. Sven's ass clamped down around him, and the sound he made was nearly enough to push Altair over the edge.

"More," Sven begged. "Please."

Altair slid his hands under Sven's knees, lifting his legs and pressing them against his chest as he leaned down, his gaze locked on Sven's face. The angle opened Sven up to him, and the sight of him lying beneath him, exposed, sent a jolt of arousal through him.

This mortal was his.

His to fuck, to claim, to drink from.

And he could do any of those things, whenever he wanted.

Altair shifted, pressing himself inside Sven more, and the mortal let out a little groan, his hips arching off the bed.

"You like that?" Altair growled, his voice harsh as he pushed himself deeper into Sven, feeling the way the muscles around his cock clenched and then relaxed.

"Yes," Sven groaned, meeting his gaze.

For the first time since they'd met, he looked completely unafraid.

It was an image that seared itself into Altair's mind, making him *want* this mortal like he had never wanted anything since becoming a vampire.

He pulled back and then thrust in once more, a growl escaping his lips as he felt the rush of pleasure and lust from Sven's mind. He picked up his pace, thrusting into him over and over, angling to hit his prostate every time, until Sven was crying out beneath him, his body trembling.

Sven's mind was a chaotic jumble of lust and desire, thoughts of Altair's cock, Altair's mouth, Altair's fangs, Altair's hands all spinning around each other until they were indistinguishable from one another.

"F-fuck…" Sven gasped, and Altair felt the muscles in his ass tighten around him as he came, spilling his seed over both their stomachs.

The sight of him, his orgasm, the feeling of Sven's muscles clamping down on his cock was too much for Altair, and he lost control of himself. He slammed into Sven, again and again, the sound of his skin hitting Sven's echoing in the room, punctuated by his own deep growls.

Finally, he pulled back, his cock sliding out of Sven with a wet sound, and his fangs bared themselves. He pulled Sven's head to the side, exposing his throat, and then he bit down.

Sven's blood flooded his mouth, and the taste of him made Altair's cock throb. He bit deeper, trying to drink as much as he could. He had a feeling that it wouldn't be enough, that this mortal's blood would haunt him until he'd taken everything he could get, but he didn't care. He needed to feel this mortal, taste him, possess him.

And when he was finally done, he pulled back and wrapped his hand around his own cock, pumping himself until his orgasm hit him. His seed sprayed across Sven's belly and chest, mixing with the cum that was already there.

"Fuck," Sven whispered, his voice barely audible.

Altair slumped to the side, pressing his lips against Sven's shoulder, his fangs retracting. His breath was ragged, his heart beating in his chest as if he were just as mortal as the man beside him.

He scanned Sven's mind once more, suddenly scared that he might have taken too much blood in his irresponsible frenzy, but the mortal seemed okay, if a little drowsy.

"Couldn't stop yourself, could you?" Sven murmured, his words slurred.

"No," Altair replied honestly. "You shouldn't have tempted me."

Sven turned his head slightly to look at him, and there was a hint of a smile on his face. "But then I wouldn't have gotten this," he said, running his fingertips along Altair's cheek as if Altair was not a dangerous vampire.

"Get what?"

"This moment with you. Seeing you vulnerable."

"I was not vulnerable at any point."

Sven laughed. "Sure, Grandpa."

Altair scowled at him. "You should not call me that."

"Or what?" Sven asked.

"I'll have to teach you some respect."

Sven's laugh was a short, breathless thing that sent a jolt through Altair. He propped himself up on one elbow and studied the mortal. Sven's eyelashes fluttered as his breathing slowed, his thoughts slowing with it.

He was falling asleep.

Altair shifted until he was spooning Sven from behind, his cock half-hard. He ran his lips over Sven's shoulder, tasting the blood that stained his skin.

"If I dream," Sven murmured, "I'm sure it will be of you."

A lump formed in Altair's throat, and he tightened his grip around Sven's chest. It wasn't until later, when he felt Sven's heartbeat slow and his breathing even out, that he allowed himself to do the same.

Chapter Ten

Sven felt disoriented when he woke up the next morning… if it was morning. His body ached in a way it never had before, and his mind was still fuzzy. His dreams had been strange, and erotic, filled with a certain vampire with a wicked mouth and a penchant for biting.

His fingers reached for the bite on his neck, but it wasn't there. The skin was tender to the touch, though, and memories of the night before came rushing back to him.

Sven sat up and looked around the room, expecting to see Altair lying beside him.

But he was alone.

His breath caught in his throat, and he scrambled out of the bed, hurriedly pulling on his clothes. The sheets were still damp and smelled like sex, and a wave of desire crashed over Sven again. He tried to will it away, but it was impossible.

He could try to blame the way he'd acted on the vampire's venom in his veins but didn't want to lie to himself. He'd loved every minute of it. The feel of Altair's fangs, Altair's lips, Altair's cock…

Sven shook his head.

He'd wanted the vampire the night before.

His fingers traced his neck once more, and for a moment, he remembered Altair's touch, how his cock had felt inside him, and the heat and pleasure he'd experienced when Altair's fangs had pierced his skin.

It was a heady feeling that made his cock twitch in his pants.

Fuck.

Now that he was alone with his thoughts, he didn't know what exactly he'd gotten himself into, but whatever it was, he was in too deep.

His plan had been to come here and get himself turned so he could help his mother, but he hadn't wasted a single thought on his ambitions last night. The vampire's touch had been all he could think about.

As if Altair was ever going to turn him just because he enjoyed fucking Sven.

The truth was that Altair didn't need Sven to be a vampire if sex was all he wanted. Sven's mortal body served just fine for that. What Sven needed was for Altair to see him as *more* than a fuck toy and/or midnight snack box.

But judging by the fact that Sven woke up alone…

Altair wasn't likely to ever see him as an option for romance.

Sven grimaced. Maybe if the vampire wasn't a mind reader, Sven might have stood a better chance, but how could he fool someone who could listen to his every thought?

Taking a deep breath, Sven looked around the room once more, trying to reevaluate his situation. He was alone except for one of Altair's crows that perched on the arm of the sofa, staring at him. Watching.

Sven dismissed the bird as he tried the door only to find it locked. That was no surprise. He was still a prisoner here, too 'valuable' for Altair to let him roam freely. Sven's stomach churned.

If he at least had his phone…

Keegan had found it somewhere. Did the vampire still have it? Was he still reading Sven's messages?

Would he still help Sven escape from here?

The bird squawked, interrupting Sven's thoughts.

Sven glared at the crow. "What do you want?"

At the same time, a knock sounded on the door, and then the door was unlocked. Sven recognized the vampire who came in with a tray of food. It was that same lady who'd refused to make a deal with him on his first day here.

She came in and put the tray down on the bed, ignoring him completely.

"If you're hungry, eat," she said, turning away from him. "There's some supplements too, to help you keep up your strength."

"So I don't faint again the next time I make a blood donation?" Sven didn't try to keep the snark out of his voice. He knew he was going to take the supplements either way. Keeping his strength up was in his own best interest too, no matter what he decided to do going forward.

"I don't care if you faint again if you enjoy it so much. I'm simply following my lord's instructions. Fortunately, I have not been instructed to force you to eat." With that, the vampire left the room.

Sven watched her go—and noticed that he didn't hear a key turning in the lock after she closed the door behind herself.

Had she forgotten to lock up?

Sven's heart beat in his throat as he approached the door, adrenaline mixing with hopeful excitement as he tried to turn the knob.

The door was unlocked.

Sven hesitated, listening for sounds from the hallway.

What if this was some sort of trap? He didn't know much about the vampire who'd brought him his food, but he knew that she valued loyalty to her coven, to Altair. Would she be stupid enough to let Altair's prisoner go?

Sven drew in a deep breath, then opened the door and looked out.

There was no one in the hallway.

Sven slipped out of the room, glancing back over his shoulder. The crow was looking his way, but it didn't follow him. Sven didn't look back again as he walked down the hall, toward the stairwell.

Music thumbed through the underground, no doubt coming from the club above. Sven hoped the baseline was loud enough to drown out the sound of his own racing heart as he inched forward.

Where was everyone?

At the club?

Was there any way out of this underground lair without passing through the club?

Sven didn't dare to risk going upstairs to check, so he turned his steps away from the stairwell and into a different hallway, one that seemed deserted and less… club-like.

His heart was hammering in his chest as he made his way toward a door. When he tried the handle, the door opened.

Sven peered through the doorway, but the room appeared to be some sort of supply room.

Not a way out.

He closed the door and turned back toward the other end of the hallway, but at the corner, he ran straight into someone.

It was a tall vampire, wearing a black leather jacket and a dark shirt, a pair of sunglasses covering his eyes.

"Hey there," the vampire drawled. "Aren't you supposed to be locked up?"

Sven's breath caught. "Uhm…"

"You're Altair's new chew toy, right?" the vampire asked, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Can't say I'm surprised. You do look like his type."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Sven lied, his mind racing. He had no idea how he could explain why he wasn't where he was supposed to be.

But the vampire wasn't deterred. "Oh, don't play coy with me. I can smell your blood." The vampire sniffed the air between them, then licked his lips. "You're not just a pretty face, are you?"

Sven stumbled back, but the vampire followed him.

"Don't touch me!" Sven warned.

"You smell delicious."

"I'm not on the menu."

The vampire laughed. "I wouldn't be so sure about that." He moved closer, grabbing Sven's arm and twisting it painfully.

Sven gasped as his knees buckled, and he found himself kneeling on the floor in front of the vampire.

The vampire leaned over him, his fangs bared.

"Don't worry, I'll make it quick," the vampire whispered, his lips close to Sven's ear.

"Fuck you."

The vampire's grip on his arm tightened, and Sven bit his lower lip to keep from crying out.

"That's the spirit." The vampire's lips curled into a smile. "Maybe you'll be more fun to play with than I thought."

He released Sven's arm and grabbed his hair instead, jerking his head back to expose his throat.

"I'll show you just how much fun I can be," Sven said, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"That's right. Give me a good show."

The vampire lowered his head, and Sven waited for the bite.

Instead, a hand appeared, grabbing the vampire's shoulder and wrenching him away from Sven.

The tall vampire snarled, and Sven saw his fangs glint in the light.

"Get your hands off my mortal," a familiar voice growled.

Sven's gaze darted toward the source of the voice and found Altair looming behind the tall vampire. Altair's eyes were dark with anger, his posture radiating danger.

"Your mortal?" the tall vampire repeated.

"That's right."

The tall vampire glanced at Sven and then smirked. "I think you should share with the rest of the coven."

Altair didn't reply. He just moved forward, his hand closing around the tall vampire's throat and pinning him against the wall.

The tall vampire coughed and choked, struggling futilely against Altair's grip.

"S-stop," the other vampire gasped. "L-let me go."

"No."

Altair's eyes glowed red, and Sven watched with a mixture of horror and fascination as he ripped the other vampire's throat out.

The tall vampire fell to the ground, clutching at his neck, and then he was still.

Altair knelt and wiped his hand clean on the dead vampire's shirt, then rose and turned his attention to Sven, his eyes returning to their usual color. "Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah."

"Let me see."

Sven winced when Altair tilted his head to the side, his gaze focused on Sven's neck.

"His fangs didn't touch you," the vampire observed, his tone relieved.

Sven's breath hitched as Altair's fingers traced his skin, sending shivers down his spine.

"Why are you here?" Altair asked.

"I…"

"Marla was supposed to bring you food." Altair narrowed his eyes. "Did she let you go?"

"No. She gave me the food. I don't know, she forgot to lock the door."

"And you took advantage of that fact."

It wasn't a question.

Sven met Altair's gaze, trying to read his expression. He didn't know whether he'd made a terrible mistake, but it was too late now for him to hide what he'd done. "Yes," Sven admitted.

Altair raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you have a death wish?"

"No."

"I struggle to believe that when you choose to sneak around a coven full of predators. As loyal as my vampires are, not all of them can resist the smell of mortal blood." Altair glanced at the bloody vampire at his feet, and Sven couldn't tell if he regretted hurting one of his own or not… or if he was blaming Sven for the actions he'd had to take.

It wasn't Sven's fault, though. He'd *had* to try the door. "You can't keep me locked up forever. I'm not your property."

"You are until I decide otherwise." Altair's tone was hard, but his gaze was searching.

Sven crossed his arms. "I'm a person. You can't treat me like this."

Altair moved closer. "You are mine. Or would you have preferred I let this other vampire take you?"

Sven swallowed, his heart pounding against his ribcage. Altair was standing too close. But Sven refused to be intimidated or to let the vampire win this argument. "Maybe *he* would have turned me." He gestured at the corpse, though if he was really dead or not, Sven wasn't sure. His head was still attached to his body, after all, even if his throat was not.

Altair looked at the vampire, then back at Sven. "*He* would not have turned you. Gav's never had any self-control. He would

have drained you and thrown your body away like a used condom."

Sven flinched, and then his own temper flared again. He opened his mouth to protest, but Altair didn't let him speak.

"You claim that you want me to turn you, yet you run from me the first chance you get. You're lucky I didn't leave you without surveillance."

Sven's stomach tightened. That fucking crow. He should have known. "You were watching me the entire time."

"Not the entire time. Don't flatter yourself. I do have other things to do."

Sven's fist clenched at his side, anger twisting through him. "Fuck you. What am I supposed to do, then? Sit in that fucking room and wait until you're done doing whatever you're doing? It's not like there's a TV. Can't you at least give me a book? Or a phone, so I could message my mother and tell her that the worst-case scenario has happened and I'll never see her again." Sven's voice broke and a wave of despair hit him. Fuck.

Altair sighed. "I cannot let you call anyone."

"Of course not. How could I forget? You don't trust me."

Altair met Sven's gaze, his expression unreadable. "You've certainly not given me any reason to trust you today."

Sven's jaw clenched. "Why would I? When you treat me like a prisoner."

"You misunderstand your position."

"Then explain it to me."

Altair regarded him silently for a moment, and then he stepped closer, cupping the back of Sven's head and pulling him into a kiss.

Sven was too shocked to resist.

Altair's lips were soft and warm, and when his fangs grazed Sven's lower lips, Sven felt a wave of heat rushing through him, followed by the sharp sting of a bite.

He gasped, his lips parting, and Altair took the invitation, his tongue slipping into Sven's mouth, tasting him.

Sven's hands found their way to Altair's chest, gripping the front of his shirt, clinging to him as the vampire kissed him until he could barely breathe.

Finally, Altair pulled back and studied him.

Sven could only imagine the picture he made. His heart was racing in his chest, his cheeks flushed, his lips kiss-swollen.

"You are my property. My responsibility." Altair's eyes were glowing red again, his gaze fixed on Sven's lips. "And you will not wander around this coven unattended. Do you understand?"

"But-"

"*Do you understand?*" Altair's gaze bore into him.

Sven stared at the vampire for a moment, torn between arguing and obeying. Finally, he nodded, his gaze dropping.

He didn't want to admit it, but Altair had a point. The tall vampire had been ready to kill him, and Sven was nowhere near strong enough to fight off a whole coven of vampires.

Altair studied him and then stepped back. "Come. You will return to your room."

He didn't touch Sven again, just waited for Sven to step in line with him, and together, they walked back toward the vampire's bedroom.

"Wait," Sven said when the vampire was about to leave him alone again.

Altair paused, regarding him.

"I need to know how my mother is doing. I know one of you has my phone. Keegan said so. I don't care if you give it back or not, but at least tell me if there's been any messages or calls. Hell, I don't care if you pretend to be me. Just send a text asking if everything is okay. I *have* to know."

Altair regarded him silently, and then his expression softened. "Very well. If you promise to behave."

"I'll behave," Sven agreed.

Altair's gaze studied him for a moment longer, and then he left.

When the door closed and was locked behind him, Sven sat down on the bed. He could still feel Altair's lips on his, his fingers on his neck, his fangs piercing his skin.

His heart stuttered and a lump formed in his throat.

He'd known it would be dangerous, messing with the Caller of Crows.

He'd just never expected how badly the man would mess with his head.

Chapter Eleven

A ltair did not go immediately back to his office. Instead, he ordered someone to clean up the mess in the hall, and then he stopped by Keegan's room. The vampire was sitting by his computer, studying something, and didn't look up when Altair entered.

"You've got some explaining to do," Altair said, letting his gaze travel the room. It was decorated with a certain flair. A tapestry with constellations hung on the wall, and his desk was covered with star charts and books. Altair was surprised not to see a crystal ball or a tarot deck anywhere, but then, Keegan had always been more practical than the average occultist.

"What do you mean?" Keegan asked, finally looking up from his computer.

"The mortal told me he brought a phone with him. I never saw it, but I realize now that you took it before I had a chance to."

"Ah. Yes, that." Keegan rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I figured it was best to go through his contact list to see who we were dealing with."

"And then you proceeded to tell me nothing about your investigations." Altair's eyes narrowed at the vampire he usually considered his friend. His brother, even.

Keegan grimaced. "You weren't taking my visions seriously."

"You didn't have anything concrete to offer," Altair reminded him. "Has that changed?"

"Yes and no."

"Explain."

Keegan pulled a face. "I still don't know exactly what is going to happen if we keep him, but I know it's bad."

"Would it be worse than letting him go free at this point?" Altair crossed his arms. "Imagine if he ran to the authorities and told them about his imprisonment here, however brief. You know that won't end well for anyone."

Keegan sighed. "Do you really think he would report us?"

Altair hesitated. He wasn't sure what the mortal would do if they let him go. It was possible that he'd never say a word about what happened here. Or that he would tell anyone who would listen.

But the latter possibility wasn't even Altair's worst fear.

What he really feared was that Sven might turn to another coven.

The mortal was certainly foolish enough to try. "We cannot let him go," he decided. "Whatever bad thing you think you foresaw, we'll simply have to deal with it."

Keegan sighed and stood up. "I saw the way you look at him, but I didn't realize you already cared that much."

Altair scowled. "I don't. He's valuable, and I won't have another coven steal him away from under our fangs."

"Right." Keegan didn't look convinced, but then, the other vampire had always had an annoying habit of seeing right through Altair. It was a good trait in a friend, but not right now. "Anyway, I was actually going through his texts right now. I'll hand the phone over if that's what you're here for."

"Thank you." Altair took the device and glanced at the screen. "Anything interesting?"

"Mostly his mom." Keegan shrugged. "No boyfriend, though, unless he has one and doesn't want his mother to know."

Altair's shoulders tensed. "Why would I care whether or not the mortal has a boyfriend?"

Keegan raised an eyebrow at him.

"Don't look at me like that," Altair grumbled.

"Like what? I'm just looking."

Altair scowled at Keegan and the other vampire held his hands up in surrender.

"Fine, fine, don't get upset." Keegan took a seat at his computer again. "You do what you think is wise, my lord."

Altair heard the mocking tone in Keegan's voice but chose not to comment or act on it. Instead, he turned his attention back to Sven's phone.

There were several notifications, a mix of app updates, and unanswered texts. Sven was popular, or at least, his friends were very talkative. Altair found himself a little intrigued, but he didn't open the conversations.

Instead, his gaze caught on the phone's background picture. A photograph of a beautiful sunrise above the city. It was breathtaking, the sky a canvas of oranges and pinks, the sun peeking over the horizon and casting a golden glow over the buildings below. The picture almost made Altair feel the warmth of the rising sun on his skin, a memory from a time long past.

Had Sven taken this picture himself?

Could someone who took pictures like that truly give up the sun?

Chapter Twelve

Something about Sven's words must have stuck with Altair because a few hours after the vampire left, other vampires of lower rank brought a TV into the room. And not just that, they also brought a whole lot of DVDs and books.

It was a nice gesture, even if the TV didn't have cable and the books were a mixture of trashy romances and thrillers. Still, Sven was surprised. He'd expected the vampire not to pay him any more attention now that he had his fill of mortal blood and mortal sex.

Sven flushed a deep crimson at that thought.

A vampire might have no trouble separating sex and feelings, but Sven wasn't as detached. He'd never had a casual hookup, never had sex just because.

Much less with a man. His community had been far too close-minded for that.

His fingers traced his lips, remembering the feeling of Altair's. He had no idea what the vampire thought of him. Altair was impossible to read. One minute, the vampire was threatening him, the next, kissing him.

Would he ever turn Sven, though?

Or was Altair simply toying with him?

Sven had no idea, and while having the TV helped, it wasn't enough.

He was used to being busy, taking care of his mom, preparing food, accepting all sorts of odd jobs to *afford* that food…

Doing nothing wasn't like him, and he was incredibly bored.

Worse, his thoughts kept straying back to Altair, to the way his fangs felt, the way he'd felt inside him.

Sven's cock stirred, and he groaned.

Fuck.

What was wrong with him?

He should be focusing on helping his mother, not lusting after a vampire.

His gaze settled on the crow who'd been his only companion for the last few hours. If Sven wasn't mistaken, that bird was keeping watch on him for Altair. Like a camera.

He couldn't help but wonder.

Was Altair watching him right now?

Maybe Sven could use that to his advantage; make Altair come back here. Settling in a chair, he opened his pants and pushed them down, exposing his cock to the air.

The bird squawked in disapproval.

"Don't watch, then," Sven murmured, taking his cock in hand.

He closed his eyes, leaning his head back as he stroked himself, thinking about Altair. The feeling of the vampire's fingers on his skin, his lips…

Sven groaned.

His cock was hardening under his touch, his mind full of images of the two of them. The way Altair had felt when he'd slid inside him, the way his fangs had pierced Sven's skin, the way his lips had felt when he'd claimed Sven's mouth…

Sven moaned Altair's name as he moved his hand faster, his grip tightening, his hips bucking up into his own touch.

Fuck.

Altair had fucked him so thoroughly, Sven had no doubt that he wouldn't be able to look at any other man again.

What was the vampire doing right now?

Was he watching Sven, his own cock hard and leaking precome?

Sven's body tensed.

He was so close, *so* close…

And then the door unlocked and swung open and Sven's hand moved off his cock in record time.

Fucking hell.

Altair's eyes glowed as he considered Sven, who scrambled to pull his pants back up, but it was too late. Altair knew exactly what he'd been up to, his gaze fixed on Sven's body.

"Enjoying yourself?" the vampire drawled.

Sven flushed. "I was bored."

"That much is obvious."

"What did you expect? That's a really shitty selection of books and movies."

Altair quirked an eyebrow and moved closer, his gaze lingering on Sven's crotch.

Fuck.

What had Sven been thinking?

"You called for me," Altair murmured.

"No. I didn't."

"You moaned my name."

Sven's blush darkened. How could he deny that?

Altair moved closer still. "I like it when you call my name."

"I didn't," Sven insisted, trying not to let the vampire see that he was getting under Sven's skin.

Altair laughed. "You're a stubborn one."

"You don't seem like the kind of guy who likes it easy," Sven replied before he could stop himself.

Altair's laugh was softer this time. "Maybe you're right."

Sven's heart skipped a beat, and his cock twitched with renewed interest. Fuck, why did this vampire have such an effect on him?

"Tell me," Altair murmured, his voice soft, "are you doing all this to convince me to turn you?"

"Would it work?"

Altair looked away. "I'm not easily played." He moved to sit on the armchair opposite Sven's, his eyes traveling over Sven's body. "But I suppose the effort is appreciated."

"That's not an answer," Sven pointed out.

Altair's gaze focused on Sven's, making him shiver. "I don't have an answer for you."

Sven's stomach tightened. Was Altair trying to make him give up or did he genuinely not know?

"I've got something else for you, though," Altair said, pulling a phone out of his pocket. Sven's phone.

Sven jumped up and tried to reach for it, but Altair pulled his hand out of the way.

"Did you think I would just give it to you?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Sven scowled at him. "You're an asshole, you know that?"

Altair's lips curled into a smile. "Many people have called me that, yes. Not all of them got away with their heads still attached to their necks."

Sven swallowed. Altair wasn't joking, was he?

"Here's the deal," the vampire said, holding out the phone. "You can write to your mother, but only if I can see exactly what you're writing."

Sven gave the vampire a long look. "What do you think I'd tell my mom? That you're holding me captive?"

"You've already tried to escape once today," Altair reminded him. "I should not grant you access to your phone at all, but I'm not a monster."

Sven scoffed. "The only reason you're being so generous is so my friends don't come looking for me."

Altair gave a slight shake of his head. "You realize if that was all I wanted, I could simply text in your name. But if you do not appreciate my generosity, I do not have to offer it."

Sven glared at him.

He hated the fact that Altair was right. He didn't *have* to allow him any contact.

"Okay, fine. I agree to your conditions," Sven relented.

"Good."

Sven expected Altair to hand the phone over, but the vampire wasn't doing that. Instead, he shifted in his armchair and then gestured for Sven to sit in his lap.

Sven hesitated. "Why?"

"Because I want you close," Altair said. "Where I can monitor what you're doing with your phone, and intervene if I need to."

Sven's breath caught at the thought of settling in Altair's lap, but he did as the vampire had ordered. At this point, what else could he do?

He moved over to the vampire, heart racing.

Altair wrapped an arm around his waist, holding him in place, and the feeling of Altair's closeness made Sven's pulse race even faster, his body remembering how close he'd been to release earlier, and how much he still wanted it.

"Go on," the vampire ordered, placing the phone in Sven's hand.

Sven unlocked the phone, his breath hitching as Altair moved his free hand to Sven's thigh, the tips of his fingers resting way too close to his groin.

It was distracting.

Almost impossible to ignore.

Sven tried not to shift, but Altair's hand was so close, his touch making it hard for Sven to focus.

"Answer your texts," the vampire commanded, his breath brushing the sensitive skin behind Sven's ear.

Sven took a deep breath and did as the vampire had asked, opening his chat with his mother.

There were several unanswered texts. All asking him if he was okay.

His fingers hovered over the letters on his screen, but his mind was blank. What was he supposed to write to her?

"I can't think when you're doing that," Sven muttered, his cock stirring again. He couldn't help it. Altair's proximity was affecting him in ways he couldn't control.

"What am I doing?" the vampire asked.

"Touching me."

"You like it."

Sven couldn't deny that, so he didn't reply.

Instead, he turned his focus back to his phone.

Mom, he typed, *everything is fine. I'm sorry, my phone's battery died, and I didn't notice, and I've been really busy.*

Altair's fingers trailed along his inner thigh, making Sven's pulse kick up a notch.

"If you don't stop that, I won't be able to type," he warned.

"You'll have to concentrate."

Sven grumbled under his breath. Asshole vampire.

"What was that?" Altair purred, his fingers creeping higher.

"N-nothing," Sven muttered, his heart hammering as the vampire's fingers traced the outline of his cock through his pants.

Fuck.

He was getting hard again.

Of course he was. He was so horny he could barely think straight.

Still, he made his fingers return to the phone. He needed to focus, to make sure that his mother was doing all right. "How are you doing?" he wrote, and because he didn't expect her to reply quickly—she was probably asleep—he tapped over to another message window while Altair was watching. He wanted to contact his neighbor, Cale, who would know what was going on with Sven's mom since Sven had asked him to keep an eye on her while he was gone.

Cale was online, which was a relief.

"Hey," Sven typed, "how are things going with my mom?"

The three dots appeared almost instantly.

"Who is this?" Altair asked, fingers lazily stroking the outline of Sven's half-hard cock.

"No one important," Sven muttered. It was difficult to be eloquent when half his blood had already left his brain…

And then Altair's hand slipped inside his pants, cupped his cock, and squeezed, and a moan escaped Sven's lips.

"Who are you talking to?" the vampire repeated.

"A neighbor," Sven admitted, gasping as Altair stroked him. Fuck, that felt so good. So much better than when he touched himself to the *fantasy* of Altair.

Shit, he was not going to get through many more messages if Altair kept that up.

"Tell me more about this neighbor," Altair said, though he clearly only enjoyed watching Sven struggle to keep his voice measured while Altair teased the head of his cock.

"He's worried," Sven made himself say, "because I was supposed to be back from my trip yesterday."

Altair's hand paused. "Your trip?"

"I told everyone I was looking for some experimental medication."

Altair resumed his leisurely caresses. "I see."

Sven tried not to squirm. This was torture. Sweet, delicious torture.

"Don't come," the vampire whispered, his lips brushing against Sven's ear.

Sven shuddered at the sensation. "What if I do?" he challenged.

"You wouldn't get what you really want."

Sven huffed, both in frustration and amusement. "What do you think I really want?"

Altair responded not with words, but with a motion of his hips, pressing his own erection against Sven's ass.

Sven bit his lip as his body reacted. Fuck, he wanted the vampire inside him, and he hated that Altair knew that. Like the arrogant asshole needed any more reason to be smug.

"You got a response," the vampire pointed out as the phone buzzed in Sven's hand.

He glanced down at it, grateful for the distraction. It was from Cale.

"There's no change," the message read. "But she liked the soup I brought her yesterday. A good appetite is a good sign, right?"

"Yes," Sven agreed, typing his reply. "Definitely. Thanks so much for watching her. You're a lifesaver."

"Good response?" Altair murmured, squeezing Sven's balls.

"Yes," Sven managed, barely biting back another moan.

Cale sent another text. "When are you coming home?"

Sven knew he should probably reply to that one, but he didn't know what to say—and Altair wasn't making it easier for him to think. The vampire's fingers were playing with the sensitive spot between his cock and his balls, driving him crazy.

Sven couldn't type. Couldn't even think.

"Answer him," Altair ordered, stilling his hand.

Sven groaned, looking at his phone again.

"Soon," he typed.

It was funny, really. He'd wanted his phone back so much, and now he wanted nothing more than to toss it aside so he could focus on getting what he needed from his vampire.

As soon as he hit *Send*, he decided that he'd had enough. Discarding his phone, he turned in the vampire's lap, his hands gripping the front of Altair's shirt as he crushed their lips together.

Altair groaned in surprise, but his lips parted, letting Sven kiss him.

Their tongues touched, and Sven's hands moved from the vampire's shirt to his pants, fumbling with the zipper.

Altair didn't stop him.

His hands rested on Sven's hips instead, fingers digging into his flesh.

Sven pulled the vampire's cock free and then broke their kiss, his eyes meeting Altair's.

"What are you waiting for?" the vampire asked.

Sven didn't respond with words. Instead, he lined their cocks up, the friction making him groan.

Altair pulled him into another kiss, and Sven's hips jerked, his cock sliding against the vampire's.

Fuck.

This wasn't enough.

He needed more.

Needed the vampire inside him.

But that wasn't an option.

The lube was still on the bedside table where they'd left it the night before, and Sven was unwilling to break their kiss or their embrace and walk across the room to retrieve it.

Altair seemed content with the way things were, though.

His mouth was hot and demanding, his fangs grazing Sven's tongue, his fingers digging into Sven's sides, his cock pressed against Sven's, precome smearing both their shirts.

Fuck, Sven wanted the vampire so bad.

"More," he gasped against Altair's mouth.

Altair bit his lip, and a burst of pain and pleasure shot through Sven, the bite combining with the friction of their cocks against each other, their mouths locked, their bodies touching, and Sven lost himself in a haze of sensation. His balls drew tight, his hips stuttered, and he gasped, moaning Altair's name.

He spilled his seed over their clothes.

Altair didn't let him relax, though.

His fingers curled around Sven's spent cock, his fingers moving, his grip rough and fast.

Sven gasped, pleasure and discomfort mixing as Altair brought him closer and closer to the edge of overstimulation.

"Please," he begged, his whole body tense.

Altair's fangs pierced his skin, and Sven cried out as pain and pleasure became one. His head spun. Everything was too much. He couldn't handle this.

But Altair didn't let him go.

"Break for me." Altair's dark voice filled his ears, his mind, his soul, like a drug, and Sven did as the vampire commanded, coming apart completely, his body shuddering, his senses overloading, his mind spinning.

Altair held him, murmuring warm praises into his ear that belied his usual cold persona, until finally, Sven came back down.

Panting, Sven slumped in the vampire's arms, exhausted.

Altair didn't move.

He simply held Sven, his face nuzzled against his shoulder.

Sven's stomach churned.

Should he really be cuddling with this vampire?

"Rest," Altair whispered.

Sven didn't protest, didn't reply.

He didn't think he could speak anyway.

Instead, he closed his eyes, letting the vampire's steady presence calm him, ground him.

Tomorrow, he'd figure out what was wrong with his brain.

For now, he was happy just to stay here, in Altair's arms.

Just for a little while longer.

Chapter Thirteen

A ltair held the mortal until his breathing evened out and his heartbeat slowed, a sign that his body had finally relaxed. Only then did Altair lift him and carry him to the bed, laying him down on the mattress and pulling the covers over him.

Sven looked so soft and peaceful like this, his features relaxed, his hair falling in his face. Altair was reluctant to leave. He wanted nothing more than to lie down next to the mortal and hold him, to press his lips against his skin and mark him, claim him.

But if he did that…

Altair shook his head at himself.

This mortal was turning out to be just as addictive as his blood.

Altair knew why, too.

Sven was brave and stubborn and beautiful.

He was perfect for Altair.

Tempting and challenging at the same time.

The problem was that Sven wanted to be something he was not. A vampire. A bloodthirsty creature who fed on the lives of others. It would destroy who Sven was, and Altair wasn't going to let that happen. He wasn't going to be manipulated into turning Sven, no matter how much the mortal begged or seduced him.

Altair knew better.

And he'd already sacrificed too much to keep this mortal safe from the horrors of his world.

Sighing, he extricated himself from Sven and went to pick up the phone the mortal had so carelessly discarded earlier. The device was blinking with a notification, a message from Sven's neighbor, Cale. Altair glanced at it. "I think you should come home. The doctor just came and I think we might be taking your mom to the hospital. Call me when you can."

Altair frowned.

Sven would hate it if his mother was taken to the hospital, especially now. If he found out Altair had kept this from him, there was no telling what he would do.

He considered waking the mortal and letting him read the message but discarded the idea. Sven would either want to go home or beg to be turned even harder, and Altair could not grant him either of those wishes.

He'd have to keep an eye on this situation himself.

Tapping on the phone, he texted back, pretending to be Sven. "Can't call right now. Which hospital are you taking her to?"

It didn't take long for the mortal on the other end of the conversation to respond. "Memorial."

Altair tucked the phone away in his jacket.

He would deal with this.

A crow appeared on his shoulder, its familiar presence reassuring.

Altair patted its head.

"Stay here," he ordered the bird. "Guard the mortal."

The bird cawed and ruffled its feathers, unhappy about the prospect. None of his crows enjoyed being underground for long. For that matter, neither did Altair, but it was safe down here, away from the sun.

"I'll relieve you of your duties before dawn," Altair promised.

The crow didn't look pleased, but it didn't protest.

Altair gave the mortal one last glance, then left the room, locking the door behind him.

Altair sent one of his crows to watch Sven's home, and a couple more to hang out at the Memorial Hospital. If the situation changed and became critical, he would be informed. Until then, he had other business to take care of. For one, Mordyn needed to talk to him about potential buyers for Sven's blood.

"Did you find a market for us?" Altair asked the other vampire when Mordyn sat in the chair across from Altair's desk.

"I've found interest, yes," Mordyn confirmed, reaching inside his coat and retrieving a small tablet. "But none of the buyers will commit without tasting a sample."

"That was to be expected." Pure mortal blood was rare, after all. No one would buy without making sure the supply they were getting was real first. "I'll provide you with some small samples to take with you on your next trip."

Mordyn gave a small nod, his eyes lingering on Altair.

"Something on your mind?" Altair inquired when his old friend didn't speak.

"Not really."

"You seem restless."

"Well…"

Altair tilted his head and regarded his friend. Mordyn was usually very vocal about his opinions, so his hesitation was unusual. "Out with it," Altair ordered.

"There's something else that's making people reluctant to buy from us," Mordyn admitted. "Someone else is offering pure mortal blood, and they're selling it at a ridiculously low price."

Altair's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"They're practically giving the blood away." Mordyn gave a frustrated sigh. "I didn't taste the blood myself, but apparently, it's amazing. People are saying it's the best blood they've ever had."

Altair scowled. "How do they get away with selling it so cheaply, then?"

"No idea. Maybe there's something wrong with it. Maybe it's synth, after all. Just really good synth."

Altair didn't believe that. Vampires could be just as dumb as anyone else, but not when it came to blood. Any vampire would know if the blood they were drinking was fake. "That's not it. They must have a mortal. Or several of them, if they can produce enough to sell on the cheap."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Do you have a name for these sellers?"

"No." Mordyn hesitated. "They're keeping their identities concealed because this shit is illegal as fuck if you don't remember."

Altair raised an eyebrow at his friend. "You couldn't get anyone to talk?" He found that hard to believe. Mordyn was excellent at charming people, at getting information out of them. He had a knack for making himself appear trustworthy and harmless, something Altair himself never bothered with.

Mordyn shrugged. "People are scared, I guess."

"There's something you're not telling me." And Altair could guess what that was too. There was only one vampire Mordyn didn't want to mention in Altair's presence. Nephariel. Altair's brother. The only vampire he'd ever sired.

His greatest regret.

"It's *him*, isn't it?" Altair's voice turned as cold as his heart.

Mordyn hesitated, still, but Altair didn't need him to speak.

"I'm running a club that acquires large quantities of all kinds of blood from all sorts of vendors in this city," Altair said. "Yet you're telling me there's someone out there selling cheap

mortal blood, and this someone has never approached our coven. That doesn't make sense unless this vampire has a good reason to avoid me."

"It might not be him," Mordyn offered.

"But you think it is."

"What are you going to do about it?" Mordyn countered.

Altair considered the question. There weren't many options for what he could do. His brother was too powerful, and his coven too entrenched in the city's crime scene. They'd taken over the Black Spades, the city's largest underground organization. Altair could try to fight them, but it would be an expensive venture, and his coven wasn't prepared for war.

Besides, a confrontation would do nothing to alleviate the tension between him and his brother.

No, the best course of action would be not to escalate this.

At least, not unless his brother forced his hand.

"Keep looking," Altair told Mordyn. "See if you can get anyone to talk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I don't want to provoke him without cause. Try to find a different buyer somewhere the Black Spades don't sell."

Mordyn nodded, looking relieved. "I'll do my best."

Altair sighed, sitting back in his chair.

"One more thing," Mordyn said. "How much blood are we expecting our mortal to produce? I need to know what quantities I'm selling here."

"That depends on how frequently we draw blood from him."

"And how often are we planning on doing that?"

"Not every night," Altair said, considering his options. If Sven was just any mortal they'd managed to catch, if Altair was the ruthless coven leader he was supposed to be, he should be milking Sven of every drop of his blood that he could sell. But Altair couldn't bring himself to do that.

It would break the mortal.

"Once a week should be enough," he said.

"That's hardly a profit," Mordyn observed.

"It's enough. We can always increase the frequency if we have to."

"As you wish, then." Mordyn rose to his feet, straightening his coat. "Is there anything else, my lord?" Mordyn's tone was light as he used the title as if he didn't really mean it. Altair didn't comment on it, though. Mordyn was always like that.

"Nothing else. You may leave."

Mordyn nodded and got up but stopped on his way to the door.

"What is it?" Altair asked.

"It's just…" Mordyn paused, and then he smiled at Altair. "It's odd to see you care for someone."

Altair scowled.

"You haven't done that since—"

"That's enough."

Mordyn fell silent, and his smile faltered.

"I apologize," the other vampire offered.

"Apology accepted."

"I'm still curious, though."

"Mordyn." Altair's tone sharpened, but Mordyn didn't take the hint.

"He means something to you."

Altair didn't reply.

"You know you have my support, no matter what happens," Mordyn said.

"I know."

"Good."

"Leave. Now."

"As my lord wishes." Mordyn did leave, the door falling shut behind him.

Alone, Altair rubbed his temple.

It was fine.

Mordyn didn't know what he was talking about.

Sven didn't know how long he'd been asleep. It must have been several hours, going by how he felt when he woke up. So when he opened his eyes to find Altair asleep by his side, he was more than a little surprised.

Had the vampire been here this entire time or had he come back recently?

Sven's gaze fell on an alarm clock on the bedside table that hadn't been there earlier. It was 8 AM now, just past sunrise. Altair must have come here not long ago.

Sven took this opportunity to study the vampire.

How odd that he'd now woken up next to the man twice—and he still didn't know how to handle the situation.

In sleep, Altair's expression was soft, his lips slightly parted, his eyelashes resting gently on his cheek.

He was beautiful. Deadly, but beautiful.

Sven reached out, brushing his fingers over the vampire's face, tracing his jaw.

Altair's eyes snapped open and locked onto him, and Sven froze, caught red-handed.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Altair regarded him silently, but he didn't push Sven's hand away.

"I thought vampires didn't wake during the day." Sven withdrew his hand and sat up.

"Only when disturbed." Altair sat up, too, regarding Sven.

"So sorry to disturb you," Sven said, falling back on his snarky tendencies because he didn't know how else to mask his nerves.

Altair just looked at him, his gaze steady and unreadable.

"What is it?" Sven asked, unable to take the vampire's silent scrutiny.

"If you weren't trying to save your mother, would you still want to become a vampire?" Altair asked.

Sven blinked in surprise.

"Why are you asking?"

"Just answer the question."

Sven hesitated. Why was Altair asking this now, all of a sudden? Was he trying to find more reasons to reject Sven's request? "I don't know," Sven said. "What does it matter?"

Altair didn't let the issue go, though. "Would you still consider becoming a vampire if your mother died?"

Sven's breath caught.

Fuck.

Was he implying…?

"Is she dead?"

"No."

"Then why…?" Sven trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"I'm merely trying to gauge the extent of your desire for immortality." Altair gave Sven a long look that made Sven feel thoroughly judged.

Who was Altair to say if his reasons were good enough? Who was Altair to rule over Sven's fate?

Sven's eyes narrowed at the vampire. "You're not going to turn me anyway."

Altair inclined his head, acknowledging his words. "No, I won't."

"Then why are you even asking me? It doesn't matter what I say, does it?"

Altair didn't reply.

"Screw you." Sven moved away from the vampire and climbed off the bed, his mind and heart racing. "You act like you know everything, but you don't understand anything."

Altair's calm gaze followed Sven as Sven paced the room. "What do I not understand?"

Sven stopped, shot the vampire a look, and then he resumed moving. "It's my fault that my mom's sick in the first place, so it's on me to fix it."

"Explain."

"I was a stupid kid." Sven blew out a breath because he hated having to retell this story, hated having to be reminded of how dumb he'd been. If he'd only listened to his mother… "I ran away from my mom while we were out on a stroll in the woods, and I got attacked by a thornefang. They're highly venomous. I didn't get bit, but only because my mom saved me. She got bit instead." Sven closed his eyes, remembering his mother's pale face, her clammy skin, her weak voice as she'd told him not to worry, that everything would be all right.

She'd always been the one worrying about him, but that time, it had been his turn.

His fists clenched. "Maybe if we'd had access to a hospital and real doctors back then, she could have been cured before the disease took hold, but we were still living in hiding at the time. All mortals were." With a grimace, he added, "Because of people like you."

"We had nothing to do with that decision," Altair pointed out. "Mortals made that choice themselves."

"You hunted us down for our blood!" Sven exclaimed. "You made our lives hell and killed thousands of us. Do you think we didn't know what would happen if we ever stepped foot outside the safe houses?"

Altair was silent for a long moment. Then, softly, he said, "I'm not responsible for that."

"You can't claim you're not like the vampires who drove my people into hiding while you're keeping me as your blood slave."

Altair rose from the bed, his expression darkening. "You came to me, mortal."

"To save my mother! It's not like I had another choice!"

Altair's face showed no sympathy. "You always have a choice."

Sven laughed, the sound bitter and sharp. "Oh yeah? What choices are available to the son of a woman who's dying from a thornefang bite?"

"You could have chosen acceptance."

"Acceptance?"

Altair was standing in front of him now. "Death is part of life. Your mother would not want you to sacrifice your future for her."

"You can't speak for her." Sven's voice grew hoarse, tears stinging at his eyes. He didn't want to cry in front of Altair. He wouldn't.

"No, but I know the truth."

"Fuck you." Sven turned away, but Altair grabbed his arm, holding him in place.

"Death is not something to be feared, Sven." The vampire's voice was low, his eyes dark and solemn. "Everyone dies. If the doctors can't help her, maybe this is the natural course of her fate."

Sven felt his chest tighten, his stomach churning. He pulled his arm free and took a step back. "Not everyone dies. You don't die."

"Yes," Altair agreed. "But that is because there is nothing natural about the life I lead."

"It's not fair," Sven breathed, shaking. "Why should you live when she cannot?"

"If your mother had a chance at eternal life, would she take it?" Altair asked, his voice softer this time. "Would she even want to become a vampire? Does she have any idea what you're doing here? What you're trying to achieve?" Altair's eyes bored into his. "You didn't tell her because you knew she would not approve."

Altair's words struck a chord, and Sven couldn't deny them.

Altair was right.

"I can't lose her," he murmured, his vision blurring. Fuck. He was crying, wasn't he? "She's the only family I have left."

The only one who'd always been there for him, no matter what. His mother had raised him alone, without ever once complaining. Without once blaming him for her misfortune. She'd given him everything she'd had.

"Please," Sven whispered, looking up at Altair.

The vampire's expression didn't change, his eyes dark and sad.

"I'll do whatever you want," Sven said, his vision swimming with unshed tears. "I'll let you feed on me whenever you want, and I won't fight you again." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, his cheeks burning with humiliation. Outside of sex, he'd never begged anyone for anything before, and it hurt, but his mother's life was worth more than his pride.

"I won't ask for anything else, just please, please turn me."

Altair reached up and brushed his fingers against Sven's face. His hand was cool against Sven's cheek, and Sven leaned into the touch, his eyes closing, even as the tears kept spilling.

"Please," he murmured again.

Altair remained silent, his fingers trailing over Sven's face, brushing his tears away. His touch was gentle, making Sven's heart race, and when Altair's thumb brushed over his lips, Sven's breathing hitched.

"Open your eyes," the vampire murmured.

Sven obeyed, his gaze meeting Altair's. "I'll be your mate," Sven promised. "Forever. I know you want me."

A second passed silently between them, and then another, the tension so heavy Sven thought he would suffocate. Altair's expression gave nothing away.

Finally, Altair spoke, his voice hard. "This is not the life you want to lead."

Anger flared in Sven's chest. "Don't tell me what I want."

"I'm not telling you anything." The vampire withdrew his hand. "I'm reminding myself."

The vampire turned away from him to throw on a long black coat, and then, after giving Sven one last look, he left the room, locking the door behind him.

Sven sank to his knees.

What had just happened here?

Was Altair ever going to turn him?

Or was his mother going to die before Sven could change the vampire's mind?

Chapter Fourteen

S ven resorted to the collection of shitty movies he'd been given. He couldn't focus, though. In fact, he barely saw the images flickering across the TV screen. All he could think about was the conversation he'd had with Altair, and how much he'd embarrassed himself while the vampire had not budged an inch. Altair wasn't going to help him because he thought Sven didn't really want to be a vampire.

The only thing Sven could do, then, was to convince him otherwise.

But how?

He mulled over his options for a while, but nothing came to him.

Frustrated, he jumped to his feet and started pacing, his thoughts straying from convincing Altair to thoughts of his mother. Even though Cale had said she was okay, his mind tortured him with worst-case scenarios. What if she'd been taken to the hospital while he was stuck here, useless and powerless?

He couldn't even check on her.

The TV didn't have internet access, and his phone was still in Altair's hands.

No doubt, the vampire wouldn't make it easy for Sven to use his phone again. He'd make Sven jump through hoops for it, the way he did, make Sven sit in his lap again or something equally humiliating.

Something equally arousing.

Sven swallowed the thought down and took a deep breath.

This was not the time to be thinking about how much pleasure Altair had given him. How much he'd wanted—*still* wanted—to submit to the vampire.

Fucking hell.

What was wrong with him?

A knock at the door startled him out of his spiraling thoughts.

"Who's there?" Sven called, his heart beating fast.

"I've got your breakfast," a familiar male voice said. Keegan. The vampire walked in with a tray of food.

"Thanks." Sven took the tray from him and set it down on the couch. His stomach was churning, and the smell of the food made him sick.

Keegan looked at him, concern showing in his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," Sven lied because he didn't trust the red-haired vampire enough to pour his heart out to him. The less anyone heard about how much of a fool Sven had made of himself with Altair, the better.

"You don't look fine."

"It's not your problem, anyway," Sven snapped because he didn't want to deal with Keegan's inquisitive stare.

Keegan looked around the room, almost as if he was searching for something. Sven didn't find anything when he followed the vampire's gaze, but he noticed the absence of something. There was no crow in the room with them. No one was watching them.

Sven wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. While he loved having a modicum of privacy… what if Keegan attacked him like that unknown vampire had tried out in the hall? Altair wouldn't be rushing in to save him this time.

Sven's fists clenched at his sides.

When had he started thinking of Altair as his savior?

He didn't need anyone to watch over him.

Keegan walked to one of the armchairs in the corner of the room and sat in it, and then he gestured for Sven to take the seat opposite him. Sven hesitated, but Keegan seemed relaxed and harmless, so he relented, taking the offered seat.

"You shouldn't let Altair get to you," Keegan said.

Sven's heart skipped a beat.

Did Keegan know what had happened?

"You can't win with him," the red-haired vampire continued. "Especially not if what you're trying to win is his heart."

Sven suppressed the urge to squirm under the vampire's gaze.

"I don't see why you'd care," he muttered. "If I was trying to do that, which I'm not."

"Alt is not the kind of person anyone should want." Keegan's voice was serious. Too serious for Sven's comfort. "He's cruel and cold, and uncaring."

Sven snorted. "Tell me something I don't know." Altair was all of that, and yet… Sven couldn't deny that the vampire had shown some softer sides, too. Altair had taken care of him when he'd fainted, and he'd killed that vampire who'd threatened Sven. All in the name of protecting his assets, maybe, but he'd also let Sven contact his mother when he'd stood nothing to gain from that—except for an opportunity to touch Sven inappropriately.

Altair had also given him those books and movies to keep him entertained. Sven glanced at the collection and couldn't help but feel like he was grasping at straws.

Why was he trying to make a case for Altair?

The vampire might have done some vaguely nice things, but he wasn't giving Sven what he really needed.

He looked back at Keegan, remembering their first conversation. "Aren't you supposed to be his friend? His family?"

Keegan sighed, a look of genuine sadness crossing his features. "Yes, but Alt has lost himself. He's not who he was."

Sven studied Keegan, trying to figure him out. Was the redhead manipulating him? "Let me guess," Sven said. "This has something to do with the fact that Altair killed your sire."

Keegan shook his head. "Maybe. Who can tell? He started changing before all of that."

"When did he turn into the villain you describe, then?" Sven challenged. Maybe this wasn't a conversation he should be having with Keegan, but right now, his curiosity wouldn't let him stop. The more he knew about Altair, the easier it would be for him to find a way to change the vampire's mind.

Keegan didn't respond immediately. Instead, he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his eyes boring into Sven's.

"Are you sure you want to know the answer to that?" Keegan asked. "Because I can show you."

"Show me?"

"A memory."

"You can do that?"

"Only if you let me."

Sven hesitated, not sure what Keegan was offering was a good idea.

But what did he have to lose, really?

Besides, if he could find a weakness, a way to convince Altair, any risk was worth taking.

"Okay," Sven agreed. "Do it."

"Take my hands."

Sven did as he'd been ordered, and the moment their skin made contact, visions appeared in front of his eyes. He saw a beautiful young woman with olive skin and curly hair, laughing as she danced with a dashing black-haired gentleman.

Altair.

"I didn't know you could dance," the woman said, laughing.

Altair gave her a lopsided smile, so different from the expression Sven usually saw on that face. "There are many things you don't know about me," he said.

"I want to know everything," the woman promised, her smile radiant.

The image shifted, and then Sven was looking at the same woman, her face paler, her expression serious, a set of fangs in her mouth. Sven recognized her as a fledgling, a newly born vampire.

Altair was behind her, his fingers running through her curls. "Don't worry," he whispered.

The image shifted once more, so fast it was giving Sven whiplash just to watch. Or maybe that was all the blood that he saw before him now. The woman lay on a bed, face pale and expressionless, the sheets stained red with her blood. A stake was lodged in her chest.

When Sven came back to himself, he had to fight the urge to throw up.

"W-what was that?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"The memory I promised," Keegan replied.

Sven looked into his eyes. "Who was she? What happened to her?"

"Her name was Isabella. She was Alt's mate, and Alt killed her."

Sven's brain came to a screeching halt.

Altair had killed his mate?

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. He never said."

"But it must have been something bad," Sven pointed out. If Altair had staked his own mate, the love of his life, it must have been terrible. But what could a fledgling have possibly

done that was bad enough to warrant such a reaction from the man who'd given her his blood?

The woman must have had a dark side, too, a side Altair had not cared to share with Keegan, a side Keegan was conveniently omitting from this version of the story.

"Why did you show me this?" Sven asked.

"To demonstrate the kind of man he is and the kind of danger you're in."

Sven's throat tightened. "I'm sure there's more to the story."

Keegan's eyes darkened. "All the stories in the world won't change that she is dead and that he killed her." He paused. "But I find it very interesting that your first reaction to this truth is to deny it. Why are you trying to defend the vampire who's taken you prisoner to sell your blood?"

"I'm not defending him," Sven protested, his heartbeat picking up.

"Really? Because it sounds like exactly what you're doing."

Sven averted his gaze. Fuck. Keegan was right. He shouldn't be making excuses for Altair.

"Alt is dangerous," Keegan insisted. "You shouldn't trust him."

"What would you have me do, then?" Sven challenged.

"Leave. Escape. Get the hell away from this place before Alt hurts you, too."

Sven didn't know how to respond. Was Keegan offering to help him escape again? Sven pinched the bridge of his nose. How could he trust the vampire?

"Don't say anything," Keegan relieved Sven of his duty to reply. "I know you're not ready to leave, but I want you to know that the option is there. I want you to think about it." He rose from his chair and gestured at the tray of food which Sven had completely forgotten about. "I'll leave you to enjoy your meal." With those words, the red-haired vampire was gone.

Sven was left in the bedroom by himself, his mind reeling with everything he'd just seen and everything Keegan had told him.

The vision of the woman's death was burned into his retinas, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop seeing her.

Would that be *his* fate as well?

Chapter Fifteen

A ltair did his best to stay busy after his conversation with Sven, after he'd turned down the mortal's request another time. Why could Sven not understand that this wasn't an issue Altair would budge on?

It was only because Sven had too little experience with these things, and because he wasn't thinking clearly. His concern for his mother overruled his rational mind and every self-preserving instinct he had, obviously.

Altair settled in one of the guest rooms to sleep for the day. Come nightfall, he went into his office and tackled the paperwork he'd been ignoring for the last little while. All because he'd been too obsessed with the mortal. Even now, his thoughts kept wandering, returning inevitably to Sven. The way he'd looked at him with tears shining in his eyes, so desperate for Altair to *help* him.

As if Altair could ever save anyone.

That wasn't who he was. He was a vampire.

A ruthless killer.

Everything Sven did not deserve.

When Mordyn walked in, Altair was glad for the distraction.

"You're awake already," the other vampire greeted him.

"Yes."

"Busy?"

"Always." Altair set his stack of paperwork aside, regardless. "Have you found a buyer?"

"Maybe," Mordyn hedged. "But the price isn't as high as we'd hoped."

Altair didn't like the sound of that. If he was going to sell Sven's blood, he at least wanted to be compensated fairly for it. If not, what was he doing all of this for?

Feeling a headache coming, he rubbed his temple.

"Sorry," Mordyn said, although he didn't look all that sorry. "Not what you want to hear, I know, but it's the best I could do with the situation as it is." He slid a piece of paper over to Altair. "That's the highest offer I received, and I had to dance for it, so you better appreciate it."

Altair stared at his friend with a blank expression. "You danced?"

Mordyn grinned.

"You're ridiculous," Altair muttered.

"Maybe, but I got you an offer, didn't I?"

Altair picked up the piece of paper and scanned the information. The price Mordyn had managed to haggle out wasn't anything spectacular, and Altair wondered if the buyers would even pay the full amount.

Still, the coven could use the money.

"Fine," he agreed. "Set up a meeting for tonight."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Nothing else," Altair said. "That will be all."

"Right." Mordyn turned to the door but didn't immediately leave.

Altair waited.

"I hear whispers," Mordyn said. "Several of our coven members have been wondering if they'll get to drink from the mortal we're keeping."

Altair's eyes narrowed as anger stirred in his chest. "Absolutely not." The mere thought of letting any other vampire taste Sven made Altair's hackles rise. The mortal was *his*.

Mordyn looked amused at Altair's reaction. "I figured."

"I won't tolerate anyone trying to get their fangs into him."

"Is that the example you tried to set with poor Gav?"

Altair's nose wrinkled as if the name was a bad smell. Gav was the vampire who'd tried to attack Sven in the hall, *clearly* disregarding Altair's order that the mortal was not to be approached without permission, and while Altair didn't usually resort to violence against his own coven, he didn't regret punishing Gav for this particular crime.

"Gav deserved everything he got," Altair said, his tone hard. "And whoever else tries anything similar will be punished accordingly."

Mordyn inclined his head. "I'll let everyone know. Just try not to kill anyone, hm? We're already the smallest coven in the city."

Altair said nothing.

Mordyn shrugged "I'll leave you to your paperwork. I need to go meet with the new dancers, anyway."

"New dancers?" Altair inquired.

"Oh, yes." Mordyn grinned. "For the club. We got some fresh blood in too. You should come and have a taste. It would do you good."

"I don't recall hiring anyone new. Or giving you the funds to do so."

"True, but since I got you that offer," Mordyn pointed at the slip of paper he'd shown Altair earlier, "I knew we had some money coming in soon, so I did what had to be done."

"What had to be done," Altair echoed tonelessly. If Mordyn wasn't one of his oldest friends…

"You know we need more entertainment, now that Mikael started that OnlyFangs stream and brought in all those new customers."

"You really need to take better care of your fledgling." Altair pinched the bridge of his nose.

"He's not a fledgling anymore."

"Well, he acts like one. Get him in line."

"C'mon," Mordyn said. "It's a good stream. You should watch it sometime."

"Get out of here," Altair waved him off.

Mordyn grinned and vanished through the door.

With a sigh, Altair put his head in his hands.

Vampires.

Trying to run a coven full of them was worse than wrangling cats. Mordyn especially. Altair appreciated his friend's free spirit, but sometimes, Mordyn took things a little too far. Hiring dancers without telling Altair was certainly a step beyond his usual antics.

Hopefully, the new employees would work out. Altair certainly didn't have the time to check on the new hires. He had his office work to finish, and then…

He'd have to schedule another blood donation for Sven, now that they'd found buyers.

Thinking of returning to Sven, though, made his headache intensify.

The moment Sven had promised him 'forever' with that look in his eyes… it had taken all of Altair's willpower not to cave. The mortal did something to him that Altair couldn't explain. Made him weak, when Altair couldn't afford to show any weaknesses.

He'd made the right choice, though, he knew that.

Sven wasn't ready to become a vampire.

Neither was Altair ready to sire him.

Or anyone.

Neglecting his paperwork, Altair pulled the mortal's phone out of his pocket to check on the situation with the mortal's mother. His crows hadn't reported anything noteworthy so far, but Sven's phone was blowing up with several people asking where he was and why he wasn't coming home.

Altair scrolled through them, wondering who these people were.

Obviously, Sven was popular in his community.

Altair supposed that made sense. Sven was attractive, spirited, and not easy to intimidate. Of course people liked him.

If he went home, even if his mother passed, he would not be alone. He would have a whole network of people to support him. In time, he would get over his grief and heal. He would lead a full life, the way he was meant to do.

If Altair let him go.

Altair returned his phone to his pocket and stared at his paperwork again. He couldn't afford to let himself be distracted by sentimentalities. Those were for mortals, for the living, and Altair wasn't one of them.

His heart might still be beating in his chest, but it had been dead for years.

Chapter Sixteen

S ven thought hard about what he wanted to do, and in fact, he had a lot of time to think about it. The vampires left him mostly to his own devices for the next two days. They brought him food, but no one bothered him beyond that. Not even Altair showed up. The vampire must have found another room to sleep in. Clearly, he was avoiding Sven, but Sven wasn't sure why.

Was it because of their last conversation?

Or had he somehow found out about the conversation Sven had had with Keegan?

Either way, Sven was slowly going crazy with nothing but his thoughts keeping him company.

He studied the crow who perched on the dresser, fairly sure that it was a different one each day. The first one had shown up shortly after his talk with Keegan, appearing out of thin air as if to dispel all of Sven's doubts about its nature. These birds were basically sentient cameras for Altair.

Sven looked into the crow's beady black eyes. "Are you punishing me?"

The crow cawed, ruffling its feathers.

Sven glared at the bird for a second but soon gave up. Even if Altair could watch him through the crow's eyes, hear him through its ears, there was no guarantee he was doing so right now. He was the leader of a coven, and as the last few days had demonstrated, he had other things to do than to obsess over Sven's every move.

Sighing, Sven sank down on the bed.

He'd never thought the day would come when he'd wish for a vampire's presence, but he did now.

He wished he could tell himself that he was simply bored, but although that was true, it wasn't only that. He wanted to see Altair, and he wanted answers.

He wanted Altair's arms around him again.

His fangs sinking into Sven's neck.

Fuck.

How had he become this desperate?

He'd never needed anyone.

His fingers curled in the covers.

He *wanted* Altair, and the realization made him feel dirty and cheap.

How could he want a man who was treating him like property? Who was selling his blood against his will, and who wouldn't even listen to his pleas, let alone act upon them.

He was an idiot.

Fuck.

He glared at the crow again. Altair could read Sven's mind when he was nearby, but could he do it when he was only looking at Sven through the eyes of his birds? Maybe he could and he knew exactly how conflicted Sven was and he was letting him stew in his thoughts to show him how dumb he was. "You really are punishing me."

The crow cawed, seemingly undaunted.

Sven threw his hands up in the air.

"What did I do to deserve this? Was it the begging? Did I make you uncomfortable?"

The crow peered down its beak at him as if wondering if Sven was stupid.

Funny, considering that Sven was wondering the same thing.

Maybe he and the crow weren't so different. In the end, they were both just pawns to Altair.

Sven was about to throw a pillow at the crow when the lock clicked and the door opened.

Altair strode in, looking as if the past days hadn't affected him in the slightest. His clothes were pristine and his expression was cool and collected, as always. Nothing at all like the happy man Sven had seen in Keegan's memory. Then again, maybe nothing he'd seen there had been real. After all, he'd only had Keegan's word for it, seeing as he hadn't had a chance to talk to Altair.

For days, he hadn't seen the vampire, and now Altair just stood there, with his stupidly handsome face, gazing at Sven with his stupidly intense dark eyes.

Heat crept into Sven's skin, part anger, part something that he didn't want to admit to.

He leaned into the anger.

Without thinking, he grabbed the pillow he'd been wanting to hurl at the crow and threw it at the vampire instead.

He expected Altair to catch the flying object with ease, so when the pillow collided with the vampire's face instead, Sven was shocked. He was not the only one. The crow let out a startled squawk as well.

Altair, for his part, stood in place, the pillow having fallen by his feet, his expression unreadable. "I was not expecting that."

Sven blinked at him, trying to find his tongue. "Neither was I," he admitted. He'd just acted out, without considering his actions.

Altair regarded him.

The silence between them stretched, and the longer it lasted, the more nervous Sven grew. What was the vampire thinking? Was he going to punish him for his insolence?

Sven's jaw clenched. Altair had no right to punish Sven for anything after the way he'd been treating him.

"You're angry," Altair observed.

"Stay out of my head," Sven snapped, tearing his gaze away from the vampire. If he broke eye contact, surely Altair would have a harder time reading him.

"I don't have to read your thoughts to know you're not pleased." Altair picked up the pillow and placed it back down on the bed. "People who are happy to see me rarely toss objects at me."

Sven met his gaze, his irritation flaring. "Why have you been avoiding me?"

"You don't think I have more important things to do?"

Sven's teeth ground together. "Things that keep you out of your own bedroom for two nights?"

Altair raised an eyebrow at him. "Missed me?"

Sven's heart did a little flip.

Fuck.

He was losing his mind.

"No," he spat, forcing a glare onto his face.

Altair's dark eyes bore into his, and Sven struggled not to look away. He refused to let Altair know just how much the vampire unsettled him.

"If that's what you wish me to believe…" Altair trailed off, still looking at Sven. "I came to get another blood donation from you."

Sven's heart sank.

Of course.

What else had he expected Altair to come here for?

"That's all I am to you, aren't I? A blood bag."

Altair's expression darkened. "You've known that from the moment you offered yourself to me."

"I thought—" Sven stopped himself.

What *had* he thought?

That Altair would magically develop feelings for him? That his half-baked plan to make the vampire fall for him would work and they would live happily ever after somehow? He *hadn't* thought that, not honestly, so why did Altair's words make him feel like he'd been punched in the stomach?

"It doesn't matter what I thought. I was wrong, wasn't I?" Sven fell silent, not trusting his voice anymore.

Altair gazed at him, and for a split-second, it felt like the vampire wanted to say something, like he wasn't indifferent, or uncaring, but then the moment was over, and the mask of cool indifference fell back into place.

"I'm here for your blood, nothing else."

Sven lowered his eyes. It was futile, wasn't it, trying to appeal to this man's softer side? Altair was a vampire, through and through.

He might not be like the other vampires who'd tormented Sven's people, and he might be a better man than Keegan claimed, but he was still a monster and he wasn't going to help Sven. "I don't know why I even tried to defend you."

Altair remained silent, his eyes sharpening.

"I know exactly what kind of person you are," Sven muttered. "A monster. A murderer." He lifted his gaze, meeting the vampire's eyes, refusing to shy away from them even though the intensity of the other's gaze was making him shiver. "My blood is the only thing you care about. You don't care that my mother is sick, and you don't care that she might die. You don't care that I'll be all alone. To you, I'm just a bag full of blood, and when I run out, you'll toss me aside, won't you?"

Altair didn't say anything, but his eyes flickered, a trace of emotion showing in their dark depths.

"Well, fuck you. My blood is not yours to take."

"And how are you going to stop me?" Altair asked, his voice soft, deadly.

Sven swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

He couldn't, could he?

He was alone in here. No matter how hard he tried, his stubbornness wouldn't change the fact that the vampire could force him to give his blood, and there was nothing Sven could do about it.

"Exactly," Altair murmured. "So let's not play games." His gaze fixed on Sven with a dangerous glint and Sven cursed himself. When the vampire looked at him like *that*, it was hard for him not to want him, no matter how messed up the entire situation was.

Sven glared at him. "Fine. Take my blood, then."

"Not here." Altair grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up from the bed. "We'll go to the donation room where I took you last time."

Sven didn't resist, letting Altair drag him along. Maybe a change of scenery would do him good. He and Altair had fucked in this bedroom, but the donation room was medical, sterile. It wouldn't remind him of the way Altair had touched him, the way he'd bared his soul for the vampire.

Altair brought him to the donation room and locked the door behind him, and then he guided Sven toward the reclining chair, his grip on Sven's arm firm.

Sven didn't put up a fight, letting himself be maneuvered until Altair had him exactly where he wanted.

"Sit."

"Yes, sir." Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

Altair glanced at the straps that hung loosely from the arms of the chair. "Do I need to use these?"

"No."

Altair arched a dark eyebrow at him.

"No, I won't try anything," Sven gritted out.

"Good."

Sven was shaking a little as he sat down, and not just because of his anger. He hated himself for how much his body responded to Altair's proximity, how much it anticipated the

vampire's touch. His heart was racing in his chest and the faintest touch of arousal was curling in his belly, even though this wasn't the time or place for it.

It seemed the change of scenery was not helping because the thing he was reacting to wasn't a location or a memory. It was this damn vampire and every little thing he did.

"Stretch out your arm," the vampire said.

Sven hesitated. Did he really want to make this easy for Altair?

The thing was, he didn't mind it when the vampire bit him, but this… having his blood drawn by a needle felt so much more degrading.

And what if he had a bad reaction again the way he had the first time? Would Altair care for him then? And would that confuse Sven even more?

"Sven." Altair's voice was quiet but insistent, and the way he looked at Sven, he knew exactly what Sven was thinking.

Damn it.

"You're reading my mind again," Sven accused.

Altair didn't try to deny it, but then, Sven hadn't expected him to. "I'm not doing this to punish you," the vampire said. "If you took a look at the other covens in the country, you'd find that most blood suppliers are treated much worse than you are."

Sven frowned. "What, am I supposed to be grateful now?"

"I'm simply stating a fact."

Sven met Altair's gaze. "Is it a fact that most vampire lords don't fuck the mortals they catch?"

Altair said nothing.

"I thought not." Sven extended his arm, exposing the inside of his elbow. "Just tell me one thing and I promise to behave in return."

"What do you want to know?"

"What happened to your mate?"

Altair froze, his expression darkening. His fingers, which had been reaching for Sven's arm, suddenly stopped. "Where did you hear about her?"

"Keegan told me."

Altair's eyes narrowed. He didn't say a single word, but the expression on his face was murderous.

"He showed me her," Sven pressed, even though he realized he was treading dangerous ground. He needed to know what had happened. "He showed me a memory of her."

Altair was still, his eyes glowing red now. For a moment, Sven thought the vampire was going to snap and break something, but then Altair took a deep breath, visibly calming himself.

"What did he show you exactly?" the vampire asked.

"Her death."

"Is that all?"

"I also saw you dance. You looked happy."

Altair's expression softened.

Sven swallowed.

If Altair had been as happy as he'd seen in that memory… if that was real… then why had he killed her? Or was that part something Keegan had fabricated?

Had Keegan fabricated *all* of it?

"Keegan said you killed her," he blurted out. "Was that a lie?" The question felt extremely personal, but Sven couldn't stop himself from asking. He needed to know—needed to know what kind of man he was dealing with.

"No," Altair admitted, his voice barely above a whisper.

Sven's throat closed up.

Fuck.

Fuck.

"But why?" he demanded. "What did she do?"

Altair didn't reply immediately, and as the seconds of silence between them dragged on, Sven began to think the vampire wouldn't respond at all—and why would he? What right did Sven have to Altair's history? But then, the vampire put the needle aside and let out a quiet sigh.

"She didn't do anything."

"She must have."

"She did not." Altair's eyes met his. There was a heavy sadness in his gaze. Such an unusual sight to see so much emotion in the vampire's expression. Sven didn't know how to deal with it.

"I don't understand," Sven said. "Why would you kill your mate if she didn't do anything?"

"I killed her because she asked me to."

Sven's eyes widened.

Altair looked down.

"Why would she want that?"

"Isabella never wanted to be a vampire," Altair explained. "She didn't want an eternity of darkness. She was afraid of what she would become. She asked me to release her from the bonds that tied her to this life."

"But why would you…?"

"Do as she asked?" Altair finished the question for him.

Sven nodded.

Altair didn't meet his eyes, his gaze distant, his expression sad. "Because she was the love of my life and I would never deny her anything she truly wanted."

Sven was stunned, his thoughts reeling.

He'd come into this conversation convinced that the woman's death was proof that Altair was cruel and irredeemable, but this…

He swallowed.

Why were his hands shaking?

Why was his heart hammering in his chest?

Altair gazed at him, his expression melancholic. "Does knowing this change anything? Do you still think I'm a monster?"

"No." Sven's cheeks burned.

"I am," Altair said.

"But—"

"I made the choice," the vampire continued, his tone harsh. "And it was the right one. She wouldn't have wanted an eternity of this." He gestured around the room. "She wanted happiness and sunshine and the freedom she used to have."

"But don't you miss her?"

Altair was silent, and Sven realized he'd crossed a line.

"Never mind," he murmured, lowering his gaze. "It's not my business anyway."

The vampire reached out, his cold hand cupping Sven's cheek.

Sven met the vampire's eyes.

Altair looked at him, his gaze piercing, his emotions laid bare. "You have no idea what I miss," the vampire whispered.

Sven's throat tightened.

The depth of longing in Altair's gaze made his knees weak.

He wanted this man, not only his body—but the *man*. The parts of him no one had access to. The parts Altair had buried so deeply.

If Sven hadn't already started falling for him, he was sure he was now.

Fuck.

This was not good.

He had to pull away.

Altair had already turned him down, had rejected his request to be turned.

There was no way Sven was going to get what he wanted.

No matter how hard he tried.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "For making you relive that."

Altair didn't say anything.

Instead, he reached for the needle, and before Sven could protest, the vampire had stuck it into his arm, taking his blood.

Sven sighed and sank back in his seat.

Nothing ever went the way he wanted with Altair.

Why had he thought this would be different?

He gazed at the vampire, trying to figure him out. Keegan's goal had obviously been to scare Sven away from Altair, but Sven found himself unable to hate the vampire or fear him.

He was sad for Altair.

"I get now why you don't want to turn me." He smiled bitterly. "You're afraid history will repeat itself, aren't you?"

Altair didn't deny it.

"But it wouldn't," Sven insisted.

"History always repeats itself," Altair said. "Eventually."

"Not this time."

Altair shook his head. There was a hint of regret in his expression as he withdrew the needle from Sven's arm and placed a bandage over the tiny puncture wound. He hadn't drawn anywhere near as much blood as last time, not enough to be worth anything. Sven couldn't help but think that Altair only wanted to be done with this session, and with Sven.

"You are an optimistic fool," the vampire murmured.

"And you're a pessimistic asshole," Sven shot back.

Altair met his eyes, and a faint smile lifted the corner of his lips. "At least you understand that much about me."

Sven's heart skipped a beat.

God, why did this man have this effect on him? Why did every smile feel so rare and precious? Why did Sven *want* him so badly?

Altair straightened, leaving the used equipment on the table. "I'll bring you back to your room."

Sven hesitated, but then he got up.

As they walked back, Altair remained silent, his face an impenetrable mask.

Sven couldn't help but feel like the conversation about his mate was over and Altair would not open up again.

Not on that topic, and maybe not on any topic.

Sven couldn't imagine the pain the vampire must have suffered, ending the life of the one he loved. That kind of experience would traumatize anyone, even the toughest vampire, and Sven wasn't convinced that Altair had been all that tough to begin with. He walked around like a wall of ice not because he didn't have feelings but because he needed to protect those feelings from the outside world.

What would it take for Altair to let Sven see those emotions again, those parts of himself he'd been hiding behind a mask of indifference? What would it take for Sven to crack his defenses and make the vampire see that what had happened once did not have to happen again?

When they were back in the bedroom, Sven turned to Altair, determined not to let him walk away so easily. "I meant it," he said. "I'm not Isabella. This wouldn't be the same."

Altair regarded him silently.

"I'm willing," Sven continued, not letting his nerves stop him. "Even if you never fall for me the way you did for her, I'm still willing."

Altair took a deep breath, his expression unreadable. He was going to turn Sven down again, Sven could tell. So Sven made his move before the vampire could say anything.

Lifting his chin, he stepped close, leaned in, and brushed his lips over Altair's.

The vampire stiffened, but he didn't move away.

Heart hammering, Sven kissed him a second time.

This time, Altair responded.

His tongue brushed against Sven's lower lip and then dipped into Sven's mouth, claiming him. Heat pooled in Sven's gut and his body hummed with a rush of arousal.

Fuck.

Altair's kiss was making him weak.

Before he could lose his nerve, he wrapped his arms around Altair's shoulders, pressing himself against the vampire.

"Thought I told you not to play games you can't win," Altair whispered against his lips.

Sven smiled and held firm. "Who says I'm playing?"

Chapter Seventeen

A ltair's words died on his tongue.

He wanted Sven, wanted him so damn bad his fangs were itching, but he was afraid, too.

He'd trusted Isabella, had given his heart to her, and that had ended in tragedy. It hadn't been her fault, hadn't even really been his, but the end result remained the same, and Altair didn't want anything like that to happen to this mortal.

When Sven's body pressed against him, though, Altair wanted to claim him.

Wanted, for the first time in years, to be with someone. Not just for a night, but forever. The way a vampire was supposed to love.

But could he really have that with the mortal?

Sven had no idea what being a vampire truly entailed.

"Please," Sven whispered, brushing his lips over Altair's.

Damn it.

What was it that made him so irresistible?

He'd been fighting his desires for Sven since the beginning, but now, in this moment, his resistance crumbled. He didn't care about anything else.

All that mattered was Sven.

Sven's taste, Sven's touch, the mortal's eager surrender.

Altair growled, grabbing Sven by the waist, crushing their mouths together. He wasn't usually this unrestrained, wasn't usually this rough.

Something about the mortal made him forget his usual reservations, and Altair couldn't find the strength within him to fight it.

Sven moaned and melted against him, his body perfectly pliant.

Mine, the voice at the back of his mind whispered.

Altair growled. Yes, that was exactly what the mortal was. *His.*

He claimed Sven's mouth, kissing him deeply, making him moan, making him tremble. His fangs scraped the mortal's lips, but Altair didn't bite. Not yet. He had other plans.

Picking Sven up, he carried him over to the bed.

Sven's hands clung to him, holding onto him, the mortal's body molded to his as Altair laid him down on the bed and climbed over him. His heartbeat was loud in Altair's ears, a pleasant drumming sound that called to something primal deep inside him.

The part of him that was a vampire, that *needed* the blood flowing through the mortal's veins.

"Alt," Sven gasped.

His pupils were dilated, his pulse racing.

Fuck.

He looked gorgeous.

Altair felt his hunger rise.

A wave of heat rushed through him, settling in his groin, making his cock twitch.

Sven whimpered, grinding his hips against Altair, the hard length of his erection poking into the vampire's stomach.

Altair licked his lips, hunger warring with desire.

"Fuck," he swore, and he captured the mortal's mouth again, giving them both what they craved.

They kissed, their tongues tangling, and their bodies moved together as if they were one.

More, Altair thought, an echo of the beast inside him.

"You want me," Sven breathed.

"Yes," Altair admitted, his fangs elongating. He didn't bother to hide them.

Sven's breathing hitched, but a smile curved his lips. "Then have me."

"I will."

Altair leaned down, nipping at Sven's throat.

Sven's heartbeat spiked, his blood calling to Altair like a siren song.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Altair couldn't hold himself back.

He pierced the mortal's skin, sinking his fangs into Sven's neck, drawing deeply from him.

Blood filled his mouth. Rich, sweet, addictive. Altair drank, closing his eyes, feeling himself come alive as Sven's warm blood flowed through his own veins.

Sven whimpered, clutching Altair's shoulders, and the sounds he made were pure lust.

He *liked* this.

He was getting off on the bite, and fuck, if that didn't do things to Altair that made him want to growl.

Altair lapped at the wound, enjoying the way Sven writhed underneath him.

"More," the mortal demanded, thrusting his hips upward.

Fuck, Sven was so desperate for it.

So ready for him.

Altair's hunger roared through him, but it wasn't blood he hungered for now. It was the mortal himself. His warmth, his surrender.

Altair's dick throbbed, aching to be buried in Sven.

"Alt," Sven pleaded, his voice high-pitched and breathy.

Altair groaned, kissing him, claiming the mortal's mouth the way his fangs had claimed his throat, and Sven yielded, opening up for him.

It wasn't enough. Altair's hands moved to remove Sven's shirt, then undid his pants. He tugged them off, along with his underwear, until he was touching bare skin. His hands slid down Sven's smooth stomach, his fingertips brushing over the mortal's straining erection.

"Alt!" Sven's voice was raw, needy, and the sound of his moans was driving Altair crazy.

Fuck, he wanted him so much.

He removed his own clothes and tossed them aside.

Sven gazed up at him, his eyes hooded, his lips swollen from Altair's kisses, blood drying on his neck.

Altair had never seen a more beautiful sight. From the first night he'd spotted Sven under the light of the moon, he'd known the mortal was special. That was why he'd tried to keep his distance, but what was he to do when Sven threw himself at him with such abandon?

Altair would have had to be a saint not to give in, and that was the very opposite of what he was.

He grabbed the bottle of lube he'd left on the nightstand and poured a generous amount of it into his hands.

Sven's eyes were wide, his gaze fixed on Altair's lubed-up fingers.

Altair leaned down to whisper into his ear. "Tell me how much you want it."

"*So much,*" Sven breathed.

"How much?"

Altair trailed his slick fingers down, circling the mortal's entrance.

Sven was panting now, his chest rising and falling.

"Alt, please, " he whimpered.

"Answer the question."

Sven's hips bucked. "I can't think when you do that."

"That's okay." Altair nibbled on the mortal's earlobe, licking the shell, nuzzling his neck. He sucked on the bite mark he'd left, and the taste of Sven's blood on his tongue made him even harder. "You don't have to think," the vampire murmured. "Just feel."

"Fuck, Alt."

"Spread your legs."

Sven obeyed, and when Altair's finger slipped inside him, the mortal moaned, his back arching up off the mattress.

Altair worked him open, slowly, leisurely, making sure the mortal was relaxed before he added a second digit. He pumped his fingers in and out of the mortal's tight hole, his own arousal intensifying. Soon, he added a third.

Sven groaned, pushing his ass against Altair's fingers, fucking himself on them.

God, the mortal was perfect.

So damn perfect.

Altair couldn't wait a moment longer. He withdrew his fingers, and before Sven could complain, positioned his dick at the mortal's entrance and pushed.

Sven cried out, his face flushed, his breathing ragged.

Altair sank into him until his balls rested against the mortal's ass. He paused, allowing himself a moment to enjoy the way the mortal's inner walls hugged his cock.

Sven moaned his name and he wrapped his legs around Altair's waist, locking his ankles behind the vampire's back.

Altair met his eyes, and the vulnerability and the need in the mortal's expression almost did him in.

He claimed Sven's mouth and rolled his hips, starting to thrust into him.

The mortal moaned again, and Altair swallowed the sound.

Fuck, it felt so good.

So right.

Mine, that possessive voice at the back of his mind declared.

Yes.

Sven was his, and Altair would never let him go.

Could not.

He began moving faster, finding a rhythm that had the mortal gasping.

"Harder," Sven begged. "Please."

Altair picked up the pace, thrusting deeper, harder until the bedframe was rattling and the mortal was crying out, the noises falling from his lips the most exquisite music to Altair's ears.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. "

Sven's nails dug into Altair's shoulders, but Altair didn't mind the pain, not when he was enjoying the mortal's pleasure so much.

He angled his thrusts, aiming for the spot that made Sven moan the loudest, and when the mortal shuddered and clenched around him, Altair knew he'd found it.

"Alt," Sven choked out.

"Come for me," the vampire ordered, his voice rough.

He sped up, and a moment later, the mortal came apart underneath him. His inner muscles clamped down on Altair's dick, and his entire body tensed. The mortal's release coated their stomachs, his face scrunched up in ecstasy.

Fuck.

Seeing Sven come undone was a sight to behold, and feeling him fall apart beneath him was the final straw. Altair's orgasm

crashed over him, his fangs elongating, his instincts roaring.

"Sven," he growled.

The mortal's gaze was glassy, his expression dazed, but when he heard his name, his eyes met Altair's.

"Bite me," the mortal whispered.

Altair did.

As his release pulsed out of him, he sank his fangs into Sven's throat, piercing his vein again.

Sven let out a moan as his blood filled Altair's mouth, his body shuddering, his inner walls still quivering with aftershocks.

Altair groaned, savoring Sven's taste on his tongue.

He had to stop, though. If he took any more blood… there'd be no going back.

Sven seemed to sense that too, because when Altair tried to withdraw, Sven tried to hold him in place. "Alt…"

"No," Altair said.

He was so damn close to giving Sven everything and *anything* he wanted. Except that Sven didn't know what he was asking for, and Altair had to remind himself of that, no matter how much his vampiric soul wanted to turn this mortal into his eternal companion.

His hand shook ever so slightly as he broke Sven's hold on him. As his fangs retracted from the mortal's skin.

Sven stared up at him, his expression hurt.

"Why won't you turn me?" the mortal asked.

"Sven…" Altair closed his eyes, trying to compose himself.

"Alt," Sven repeated.

The desperation in his voice was impossible to ignore.

Altair opened his eyes again, studying the mortal.

The vulnerability, the longing, on the human's face… it made his heart ache.

"Give me a chance," Sven whispered. "Please."

Altair gazed into his dark, expressive eyes, at his full, kiss-swollen lips. The bite marks on his throat were still fresh, and Altair couldn't help but think that the mortal was utterly, breathtakingly beautiful.

"Don't just use me," the mortal begged. "I can be more than that."

"Sven, I'm not—"

"*Please.*"

Fuck.

Altair couldn't take it anymore.

He rose from the bed and picked up his pants from the floor. When he pulled them on, though, something vibrated against his leg. Sven's phone. He'd almost forgotten he was still carrying that around with him.

He reached for the phone and checked the display if only to give himself something to look at that wasn't Sven because he didn't think his resolve could handle much more begging. He'd been so close to making a terrible mistake just now it made him angry with himself.

Sadly, checking the phone didn't make him feel any better. "Your mother has taken a turn for the worse," he admitted to Sven.

That news seemed to be enough to cut through the haze in Sven's mind. "What?" The mortal sat up, his expression a combination of horror and disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"She was admitted to the hospital," Altair read from the messages. "And the doctors aren't confident."

Sven scrambled out of bed and dressed himself in haste.

Altair watched him, not without sympathy, but without any idea what to say. His mother was the only real reason the mortal was here with him, after all.

"She can't die," Sven said, his voice shaky. "She just… she can't."

"I'm sorry."

"Take me to her," Sven demanded.

Altair hesitated. If Sven was seen with him in public, people would grow suspicious.

"I'll tell everyone that I'm with you because I want to be," Sven insisted. "That's not a crime."

Altair relented. He'd already denied the mortal one thing tonight, he couldn't deny him another.

Chapter Eighteen

S ven's heart pounded the entire journey.

Altair had driven him to his mother's hospital in a sleek black car, but Sven didn't even notice the vehicle's interior or the fact that it had probably cost a fortune. All he could think about was his mother and whether or not she was going to survive.

He couldn't lose her.

He couldn't.

She was the only family he had.

If she died, Sven would never forgive himself.

"You cannot blame yourself," Altair said softly.

"Stop reading my mind!"

Sven's temper flared, his anger directed at the only target he had available.

"I'm not reading your thoughts," Altair said. "I just know what it's like."

Sven huffed a laugh.

Yeah, right.

"You don't know anything about what I'm feeling."

"Believe me, I do."

"My mother isn't your mate."

"Perhaps not, but you love her."

Sven didn't have the energy or the will to fight the vampire, so he said nothing and turned his gaze toward the window. He watched the town pass by, his stomach churning.

He hated not knowing.

God.

When had things become so terrible? When had his life spiraled so far out of control?

Altair parked the car and accompanied him to the hospital, which made him uncomfortable, but the truth was, he didn't want to be alone. The vampire was the only person who truly understood what was happening, and no matter how messed up the circumstances between them were, having him around was better than being alone with his thoughts.

Inside the hospital, he walked right up to the reception desk. "I'm here for my mother, Katya Kjellberg. Where is her room?"

"You're here to visit the mortal woman?" one of the nurses asked, her eyes darting toward Altair. Obviously, she did not think it was a good idea to allow a vampire in. She herself had something distinctly fae-like about her. Not surprising, really. A lot of fae worked in the medical field.

"He's with me," Sven informed her.

"Sir—"

"Please."

"The vampire is not allowed inside."

"My *mother* is dying."

Clearly sensing Sven was going to cause a scene, Altair placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll wait outside."

"Alt—"

"It's fine," the vampire reassured him. "I'll wait for you."

Sven didn't have the time or the mental strength to argue.

Altair pulled him close and pressed something into Sven's hand. A black feather. "Keep this with you. If you need me in

there, hold this close to your heart and open a window."

"What?"

"I'll hear you."

Sven met the vampire's dark eyes, wanting to ask questions, but time was not on his side, so he clutched the feather and followed the nurse to his mother's room, his heart hammering.

When he stepped inside, his worst fears were confirmed. His mother was connected to numerous machines and her face was so pale it looked like she was dead.

"Mom?" he called out, his voice breaking.

The nurse led him over to the bed, but instead of staying, she left, closing the door behind her.

Sven sank into the chair next to his mother and reached out, grasping her cold hand, squeezing it gently. "Mom? Can you hear me?"

Katya stirred, her eyelids fluttering open. Her eyes were glassy, her gaze unfocused, but when she spotted him, a weak smile curved her lips. "Sven?"

"It's me," he said, forcing a smile onto his face.

"You came."

"Of course, Mom. I'd never leave you."

"Such a good boy." Her voice was so feeble, her breaths short and uneven.

Tears gathered in Sven's eyes, but he blinked them back.

No, he couldn't break down.

Not here, not now.

"I'm sorry," he forced out, struggling to keep his voice steady. "I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner."

Katya shook her head ever so slightly. "It's okay. You're here now." She gave him a fond smile. "What have you been doing?"

"I was…" Sven swallowed as thoughts of his time with the vampire coven clouded his mind. "I was looking for a way to save you."

"Oh, honey." Katya's expression became sad. "There is no saving me. You know that, don't you?"

Sven's breath caught.

Fuck, no.

"Mom, no, don't say that."

"Shhh." His mom squeezed his hand.

"I met this vampire. He could have helped. If I could make him turn me, if I could turn you…"

"Sven…"

"I'll ask him again." Sven rose from the chair and strode toward the window. "He'll understand. I know he will."

Katya's hand reached out to him before he could open the curtains. "No, Sven."

"Mom, you don't understand."

"No," his mother repeated, her voice firmer now. "You can't change my mind about this. I'm okay, Sven."

Sven whirled around to her. "You're not okay."

"Listen to me." Katya's dark brown eyes bore into his. "I *am* okay. Death is not the end."

"It's not the beginning either," Sven shot back, tears gathering in his eyes.

Katya was silent, her expression thoughtful, her hand still reaching for him. She waited until he returned to her side and then took his hand in both of hers, her grip weak.

"I can't live without you, Mom."

"You can," his mother said. "And you will."

Sven wiped at his face, struggling not to sob. He couldn't cry, though. He had to be strong for his mother, now more than

ever. Even if he didn't understand why she was making this choice. "You could have eternal life."

"As a vampire?" His mother shook her head again. "Not for me."

Sven squeezed his eyes shut.

Fuck, how could his mother do this to him?

"Everything is going to be alright," his mother murmured, her thumb stroking over the back of his hand. "You'll find your own way," Katya said. "That's what I want for you."

"Mom…"

"It's okay," Katya whispered. "I'm not afraid. I know what awaits me." She let out a quiet sigh. "I miss your father."

Sven felt a pang. His father had died many years ago—before Sven had even been born—but he'd heard so much about the man, he felt like he knew him anyway. "I wish he could be here."

"He is," Katya said. "He's watching over us. Just like I'll be watching over you."

Sven's chest ached. He wanted more than that. He would have done anything to keep his mother with him. *Anything.*

But he had to respect her wishes too, no matter how much they hurt him.

His mother deserved that much.

"Promise me something." Katya squeezed his hand.

"Anything."

"Don't blame yourself for this."

Sven tried for a smile, but the corners of his mouth didn't even move.

He was supposed to be the strong one, but it seemed his mother was the one keeping him together.

"Promise me," Katya urged.

"I promise," he whispered, even though he was aware of how empty the words were.

He couldn't help but feel guilty. If he hadn't taken so long, if he hadn't wasted his time trying to convince Altair to turn him, maybe his mother would still be alright.

Maybe he could have found another way to save her.

Katya didn't seem to believe that, though. She smiled up at him, her expression serene.

The only thing Sven could do for her now was stay, and that was what he did.

He stayed with her until the end.

Until her eyes closed and her breathing grew weaker, and eventually, stopped.

Only then did the tears spill from his eyes, and then they didn't stop. They kept flowing, and Sven did nothing to stem the tide.

Being denied entry into the hospital room had come as no surprise to Altair. People didn't trust vampires—and why would they?

Many vampires abused their powers, used them to get what they wanted, and there wasn't anything Altair could do about that. After all, it wasn't like he was innocent himself. He *had* captured Sven and taken him prisoner. The nurses had no way of knowing that, but that didn't make his crimes any less true.

It didn't make him any more repentant either.

Leaning against the hood of his car, he looked up at the hospital building.

Would the mortal be okay in there?

He wanted to think so, but Sven's emotions had been raw, his pain palpable. Altair was well aware of the fact that the mortal blamed himself. He didn't see his mother's passing as it was: a chain of unfortunate events outside his control.

He saw it as a personal failure, and that was tearing him apart. Altair didn't have to read the mortal's mind to know that.

Idly, he wondered if Sven would use the feather he'd been given and call him into the hospital room to plead with Altair once again. If Sven turned to him with tears in his eyes, begging him to solve his problems, Altair wasn't sure what he would do. It was a truth that disturbed him. He wasn't supposed to be this vulnerable, this susceptible to the whims of a mortal.

But here he was, waiting and hoping that Sven would reach out and terrified of what that would mean at the same time.

Foolish, a voice whispered at the back of his mind.

Altair knew his fascination with the mortal was unhealthy. He'd known it from the start, and yet, he couldn't stay away from Sven, couldn't help himself when the mortal was offering himself up on a silver platter.

Altair closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

He could still smell Sven's scent on his skin, taste his blood in his mouth. The memory of the mortal writhing underneath him made Altair's cock swell with lust.

Damn it.

He was a disaster.

A complete disaster.

This was exactly the kind of weakness he should avoid. He had not made it through Isabella's death only to learn nothing at all.

Who knew if the mortal would even return to him after all of this? If Sven's mother passed, he would have no reason to come back with Altair, and since Altair couldn't enter the hospital room, this would be a perfect opportunity for the mortal to escape.

The sun was going to be rising soon as well.

Altair looked up at the sky, which was still dark but wouldn't be for much longer. Soon enough, light would color the

horizon.

Maybe it would be best to let the mortal go. If the business with his mother was concluded, there was no danger that he would run and offer himself to another coven, at least.

They could each return to their separate lives and pretend they'd never met each other. The thought hurt, but Altair steeled his heart. He was not soft or sentimental. He was a vampire.

But when the doors opened and Sven emerged, eyes red and cheeks wet, Altair realized he didn't have it in him. The mortal didn't need to speak for Altair to know the loss he'd suffered.

His face spoke volumes. He looked exhausted. Tired. Desperate.

And then he walked over to Altair, straight into his arms as if he belonged there, as if Altair was not a cold-hearted predator of the night.

Sven clung to Altair as he buried his face in the vampire's chest, and something inside of Altair broke. His resolve. His hard-fought sanity.

What else could he do except wrap the mortal in his embrace and whisper reassuring nonsense against Sven's forehead as the man silently sobbed against him? There was something incredibly poignant about Sven's grief, something deeply moving that Altair recognized in his own heart. He knew the pain the mortal felt so very intimately.

And there was a small part of him that rejoiced at having the mortal in his arms, knowing that he was there for him to comfort him in his moment of need. That he was the one Sven turned to, despite it all.

"Take me home," the mortal whispered, his voice hoarse and broken.

Altair tightened his hold on him, feeling an intense possessiveness creep up in him.

This moment, Altair knew—he was never going to let this mortal go.

Not willingly.

Chapter Nineteen

S ven didn't want to be alone.

He knew he *should* be. His emotions were raw, his pain an open wound. After saying goodbye to his mother, he shouldn't be running back to the vampire he'd only approached to save her, but Altair's presence brought him comfort, and the truth was… Sven *needed* that right now.

Needed it so damn much.

As Altair held him, the last bit of Sven's strength seemed to disappear. He sagged against the vampire, leaning into him for support. He felt drained, so horribly drained.

But he also felt safe, tucked up against the vampire.

Altair made him feel secure, protected.

The way a vampire really should not make him feel.

He drew in a shaky breath, struggling against his emotions, and failed miserably. He couldn't help it. He *missed* her already.

"Take me home," he whispered.

He wanted to be wrapped up in darkness and silence and *Altair.*

The vampire seemed to understand that because he gave Sven exactly what he needed. He didn't ask questions or hesitate, merely held Sven close for a moment longer, and then opened the passenger door to his sleek black car.

Sven sat down, numb, allowing the vampire to buckle his seatbelt.

His mother was gone.

He'd never see her again, never laugh with her over dinner or take care of her the way he always had.

He'd spent most of his adult life seeing to it that she was comfortable, that her needs were taken care of. Now that she was gone, he wasn't sure what to do with himself. He had no idea how to function without his mother in his life.

After they began driving, Sven leaned against the window, staring out into the distance but unable to focus. Everything looked blurry. No, everything *was* blurry. His vision swam and his eyes burned. His body was still shaking, even if he wasn't actively crying. His muscles were tense, his nerves frayed. His stomach clenched painfully every so often as a fresh wave of pain washed over him.

His throat constricted whenever he tried to swallow, and his tongue felt thick, his mouth dry.

And in the middle of his chest, his heart ached, like someone was twisting a knife inside of him.

He wasn't okay, but what scared him the most was that he didn't think he'd be able to be okay again. Not like this. Not after losing his mother.

"You'll heal," the vampire said. "You'll never be quite the same, but you'll heal."

Sven glanced at the vampire, wondering if he really knew or if those were just platitudes meant to make him feel better.

"Your mother's passing is not your fault, Sven."

Sven shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't ready to hear that.

"Your mother—"

"Please stop," Sven said quietly. "I can't…"

He swallowed.

The vampire nodded, and the rest of the ride passed in silence.

Altair must have sensed what Sven truly wanted and needed because when they arrived back at the coven's base, the vampire reached out to take him by the hand. Sven let himself be led downstairs without a word.

Altair didn't say anything either as he climbed into bed with Sven, merely enveloping Sven within the circle of his arms and holding him.

Sven laid his head on Altair's shoulder and closed his eyes.

He did not cry anymore, but the tension and the sadness didn't leave him.

Instead, he just felt hollowed out. Empty. He didn't know whether or not he'd feel better once he rested, but he hoped, for his sake as much as Altair's, that sleep would claim him fast. He had no energy left in him for anything more than curling up with Altair.

Fortunately, the vampire did not complain. Instead, he ran his fingers through Sven's hair. His fingers weren't cold like they usually were either. Altair must still retain some of Sven's blood, flowing through him. To Sven, it seemed like it had been forever ago that Altair drank from him, but in reality, it had only been a couple of hours.

"Rest," the vampire murmured. "I'm here."

Despite all the heaviness in his heart, Sven found those simple words soothing. And so, eventually, exhaustion won out and he fell asleep in Altair's arms.

A few hours later, Sven opened his eyes slowly, disoriented and a little surprised that he had managed to fall asleep. He'd been so sure he would stare sleeplessly at the ceiling all night long, tormented by nightmares of his mother, but apparently, his mind had decided he needed more than that.

As he stirred, he registered another fact that he hadn't expected: there was no sign of Altair in bed with him.

He sat up, looking around, but he was, indeed, alone.

Forcing back the pang that accompanied that discovery, Sven stretched, grimacing. He felt horrible, physically as well as mentally. His body was stiff, his muscles sore from being curled up in the same position for too long.

Slowly, Sven got up. He brushed his teeth and combed his fingers through his hair.

It wasn't a surprise when he caught sight of himself in the mirror and saw that he looked terrible.

His face was pale and his eyes bloodshot. His shoulders drooped and there were deep circles underneath his eyes, like dark half-moons carved into his face.

There was nothing Sven could do about it, though. Nothing he could do about any of it.

He tried the door, but naturally, it was locked.

Taking a step back, he blew out a breath, surprised to find that he was disappointed. In a corner of his mind, he'd thought that the previous night might have changed things between him and Altair, but obviously, it had not.

Sven was still a prisoner here, and what was worse, he'd let himself be caught for a second time, willingly.

He'd been blinded by his grief.

But the vampire had seemed so different last night. So understanding, so caring. More man than monster.

Sven felt ridiculous for thinking that when rationally, he knew Altair had probably only done what he'd done because it was easier to keep Sven if Sven cooperated. The vampire was cunning and intelligent. Of course he would give Sven what he wanted when it was clear that getting it meant more compliance on Sven's end.

With a shake of his head, Sven made his way over to the couch and sat down with a sigh. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

He had to arrange a funeral for his mother, didn't he?

How was he going to do that if he was stuck here?

Altair had allowed him to go to the hospital. Would he allow Sven to attend his mother's funeral as well?

Sven's fingers dug into the leather of the couch.

He shouldn't need permission for these things.

The door to the room opened and Altair strode in. Sven's gaze snapped to him—and to the blood on his dark clothes. "Shit, are you hurt?" Sven blurted, jumping up from the couch.

Altair glanced down at himself, then shook his head. "This blood did not come from my veins." Even as he said that, though, he looked tired in a way that didn't fit Sven's image of him.

Sven stared at the splotches on the vampire's jacket, then met his eyes once again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Altair shrugged off his jacket, tossing it onto the back of one of the chairs at the table. "It's nothing for you to worry about. A minor altercation with another coven. I'd hoped the noise wouldn't wake you."

Sven hadn't heard any noise, at least not that he could recall. He might have been too distracted by his thoughts, though. It was difficult to say if he would have noticed fighting if it had gone on right beside him. All he'd been able to focus on was his mother's death… and Altair's absence.

"You had a reason to leave the room." He spoke the words as the realization came to him, and then he immediately felt stupid for saying anything at all.

Altair shook his head. "Someone saw us at the hospital."

Sven tensed, his hands curling into fists at his sides. "So?"

"A lot of vampires are very interested in taking what's mine and making it theirs." Altair's eyes flashed. "I can't have that." He paused, meeting Sven's gaze. "I won't."

Sven swallowed.

Something in the vampire's tone made the hair at the nape of his neck stand on end. There was danger in Altair's voice, but

this time, Sven knew it wasn't directed at him. This vampire wasn't dangerous to him but to anyone who tried to take Sven away from him.

Because Sven's blood was valuable, or because Altair viewed him as his property… or was there another reason?

"Does this mean I'll be stuck in this room for an eternity?" Sven asked softly, forcing himself to tear his eyes off the vampire. Whatever was happening, he couldn't let himself forget that Altair was treating him like a prisoner.

Altair took a step toward him. "Where else would you rather be?"

Sven glanced at the blood on Altair's clothes. He should want to be anywhere but here, really, if he was in his right mind. Altair's world was violent and dark, and while the vampire had helped him last night, he had not exactly treated Sven like an equal.

And yet.

Sven bit the inside of his cheek, trying to calm his mind.

There was something about the vampire that pulled him in, something Sven couldn't resist. As tempting as it was to think that Altair might be compelling him somehow, Sven knew the pull he felt was coming from inside of himself. Something deep within his core yearned for the vampire, ached for him, and no matter how much he fought against it, that yearning was always there, hovering just beneath the surface.

"I'm not saying that I want to leave you," Sven said, reaching for Altair's shirt and brushing his fingertips over a hole in the fabric, inches away from a blood stain. "I get that it's not safe for me to run around among vampires, but you're making me feel like your captive, and that's not what I want to be."

Altair said nothing, so Sven raised his eyes and met his.

"You were there for me when I needed you last night," Sven went on. Even though the events of last night blurred together in his mind, he clearly remembered the kindness Altair had displayed. "I know you can be better than you think you are, and together we could be—"

"What?" Altair interrupted him. "We could be what, Sven?"

Sven didn't blink. "Everything."

The word hung in the air between them, charged with possibility, heavy with unspoken meaning.

Altair's jaw tensed, and he reached out to grasp Sven's wrist, gently pulling it off his shirt. "You don't need me anymore," he reminded Sven quietly.

Sven's stomach twisted. It was true, wasn't it? His mother was dead, and so he no longer had any reason to stay with the vampire.

Sven turned away from Altair. His chest was aching again. His heart hurt. His eyes stung. He closed them for a moment, squeezing his eyelids shut until spots exploded behind his lids. He didn't want Altair to see him break down, but what the vampire said was true.

The only reason he'd wanted to become a vampire was to save his mother, and now his mother was dead.

"If I offered to turn you now," Altair said, "would you still want me to?"

Sven hesitated, and he hated himself for it, because he saw the moment his uncertainty registered with Altair. He watched the vampire pull back, the brief softening in his gaze becoming masked by indifference.

No, this wasn't how this was supposed to go.

Sven reached out for Altair again, grabbing his arm.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Why was he so torn?

No, he knew why.

Because his mother had told him to make his own way, but he had no idea where to go or what to do. All he'd known was that he had to save his mom. Now there was no saving. There was only him, and the emptiness inside him that felt so strangely suffocating that it was hard to breathe.

Altair touched Sven's hand on his arm.

When their skin connected, Sven found that the tension within him eased somewhat. When the vampire caressed the back of Sven's hand, he grew warm inside, and a feeling of safety crept over him, just like last night when the vampire had held him close.

He was fucked up, wasn't he?

Altair still hadn't promised him *anything*.

"Why couldn't you have made me that offer earlier?" he asked, hearing the way his own voice turned sharp. If Altair had turned him before last night, there might have been something Sven could have done for his mom. He might have found some way to convince her that immortality wasn't the cursed thing she made it out to be.

"Because it wasn't really what you wanted, then." Altair drew back. "Just like it isn't really what you want now."

Sven glared at the vampire, frustration clawing at his insides. "Stop telling me what I want," he snapped.

"I didn't tell you, I asked you, and your lack of enthusiastic response was answer enough."

"Only because you asked too late!" Sven insisted. "You don't get to act like none of this is your fault now. My mother didn't have to die."

"All mortals have to die."

"Yeah? And if it was me?" Sven demanded. "Would you let me die?"

For a fraction of a second, there was no mask over the vampire's face at all. No shield to cover his vulnerability. Sven could plainly read the emotions the question evoked, and they shocked him. Altair looked like Sven had slapped him across the face with a spiky club. The expression disappeared in an instant, replaced by coldness, but it was already etched into Sven's mind.

Altair didn't reply, and his silence was louder than words could have ever been.

Sven's heart beat faster. "Pretend all you want," he said, "But I don't need to be a mind reader to know you're full of shit."

Altair turned away from him and toward the door. "This conversation is over."

Sven's temper flared, hot and furious, but his anger didn't manage to overpower the fear growing inside of him. Fear, and the bitter taste of loss at the back of his tongue.

"Fuck that." He rushed after the vampire, catching up with him at the door. "Fuck that!" He shoved at the vampire's shoulder with all his might, which was not very mighty. Altair didn't stumble, barely moved, but there was something satisfying about seeing the emotion flare in his eyes anyway.

Good, Sven thought, feeling angry and out of control. Let Altair be upset. Let him realize he couldn't run from Sven's emotions—or his own.

"What are you doing?" Altair growled, glaring daggers, but Sven didn't budge.

Instead, he rose onto his tiptoes, grabbed two fistfuls of the vampire's shirt and pulled him closer, smashing their mouths together.

He didn't care how unreasonable this was. Didn't even care about the blood on the vampire's shirt between them. Right now, he just needed something—anything—to get him out of his head.

He needed release. He needed Altair because Altair was the only one who could make him feel anything even remotely pleasant these days, and if he let the vampire get away, he knew he'd regret it.

He *knew*.

And so he kissed Altair like he meant it, hungrily, fiercely, biting at the vampire's lower lip the way the vampire usually bit at *him*.

Surprisingly, it worked.

Altair grabbed him and whirled around with him so fast he got dizzy, slamming him into the wall by the door. The vampire

pressed up against him, and Sven could feel Altair's fangs against his lips when they kissed, sharp and dangerous and promising pleasure instead of pain. Sven groaned, winding his fingers into Altair's hair and keeping him close as the vampire claimed his mouth.

Yes.

There was no tenderness this time, but Sven didn't mind. He could sense Altair's hunger, his anger, his need for closeness and physical connection. Sven matched it. He wanted to erase all distance between them, to make them into one single entity.

Right now, nothing else mattered. Nothing. Just this, the push and pull of their mouths, the slide of Altair's tongue against his own. The scrape of his fanged teeth and the taste of iron in Sven's mouth. The possessive pressure of Altair's firm body pressed him against the wall as the vampire gripped him with his strong hands, trapping Sven in place.

Sven's heart thundered. Excitement flooded through him, chased by desire, leaving no room for any lingering sadness. He wrapped his legs around Altair's waist and gasped into the vampire's mouth as the movement made him fully aware of Altair's erection pushing up against his own hardness. Fuck, yes. That was what he wanted. He wanted Altair to pound into him, to make him forget himself, to send him spiraling over the edge and into ecstasy. He wanted to forget all the pain that made it so hard to breathe, and only remember the way the vampire's mouth moved against his own as he took what he wanted with no apology.

He wound his fingers into the collar of Altair's shirt, holding tight. He'd lost so much already, he wasn't going to let this slip through his fingers, too.

"Please," he whispered, pulling back, and licked the taste of his own blood off his lips. "*Please.*" He was breathing too fast, but he couldn't help it, he couldn't calm down, not when he felt so out of his mind. "Don't leave me alone, not right now."

Altair looked at him, his face flushed with lust, his eyes flashing as he met Sven's gaze. For a moment, Sven worried the vampire would deny him, and then what?

He didn't have to be concerned, though, because Altair grabbed him and dragged him back to the bed, tearing his clothing off in his haste. "Mine," he growled, and Sven nodded, too turned on to think of anything except how much he wanted the vampire.

Altair was on top of him in moments, pinning him down on the mattress, ravishing his mouth once more. He kissed along Sven's jaw, then down his throat, scraping his fangs over the fragile skin. Sven knew how easy it would be for Altair to tear into his neck and bleed him dry, and he shouldn't have been excited by that, but he was, fuck, he so was.

Altair flipped him onto his stomach effortlessly, shoving him into the mattress with a rough hand in between his shoulder blades, and Sven arched into the touch. He'd never realized how much he would like being pushed around and ordered about. Maybe it was just that it was Altair. Perhaps if any other vampire had captured him, he wouldn't be reacting like this.

Perhaps his obsession with Altair was entirely unique.

As the vampire pressed his tongue to his ass, licking him open, Sven groaned and rocked his hips down into the mattress, but Altair immediately lifted him higher and stopped him from touching his cock to anything. He bit at the globes of Sven's ass and the flesh of his inner thighs, making him gasp. Fuck, he wanted to touch himself so badly.

Altair did that for him, eventually, snaking a hand underneath him to grasp Sven's aching dick and stroke him. His grip was perfect. Too tight, too dry, but exactly what Sven needed to send sparks up and down his spine.

"Hurry up," Sven bit out, feeling like he might actually pass out if Altair kept on teasing him.

The vampire chuckled darkly and opened the lube. Sven buried his head in the sheets to muffle the cry of relief that escaped him as two wet fingers pushed into his ass. Altair's fingers were relentless, and it burned when the vampire opened him up, but the burn was a welcome distraction from the memories that threatened at the edge of his consciousness.

His body clenched instinctively as grief and anger bubbled up inside him.

No. Not those thoughts.

Not here.

He wasn't going to let those images spoil this moment with Altair.

Sven hissed when the head of the vampire's hard length breached him. The thrust of the vampire's cock entering him was relentless and painful. Still, it soothed the ache inside of Sven.

When the vampire sank into him fully, Sven let out a trembling breath and clutched the bedding, trying to calm his pounding heart.

Yes, *yes*, that was what he needed.

A firm presence inside of him that made everything else disappear.

He closed his eyes when Altair's strong hand grasped his thigh, holding him steady.

Then Altair began to move.

The first snap of his powerful hips sent a shockwave through Sven.

Pleasure rippled through him as the vampire pounded his prostate with each punishing thrust.

Sven moaned loudly, unable to hold his voice back. The pace the vampire set was intense. Fierce. Hot.

And Altair knew just how to angle his hips to make him feel amazing. He covered Sven's body with his own, reaching under him, stroking Sven's length, driving him crazy with pleasure. Sven pushed back, meeting Altair thrust for thrust as the vampire slid into him deep and hard, making his whole body hum with arousal.

Sven was overwhelmed. Overheated. Out of breath. Every nerve in his body tingling.

The pleasure coursing through him was intense. White-hot and exhilarating. His heart raced, his body quivered, and before he knew it, he was crying out, his release slamming into him with the force of a wrecking ball.

It stole his breath and blinded him to the world around them for endless seconds. His toes curled, his balls drawing up. His orgasm spread from the center of him outward, leaving a warm glow in its wake.

Altair followed quickly after, a few thrusts later, spilling his seed into Sven, filling him up with warmth. Sven grunted, burying his face in the pillow again, panting. Fuck, he wasn't gonna be able to walk after this at all.

Altair's weight disappeared from on top of him. He slipped out of Sven's abused hole and laid down next to him on the bed.

Sven stared at him, struggling to catch his breath.

They weren't touching, but they were so close, their faces inches apart. They just looked at each other. Sven didn't know what to say and the vampire remained silent as well, his beautiful dark eyes so very piercing, even though he had to have gotten his fill from Sven.

Sven swallowed, his throat parched.

Finally, he managed to ask a question. "The feather you gave me at the hospital… If I'd used it, would you have come to me? Would you have… helped?"

Altair stared back at him, motionless as stone. It took him long seconds to reply. "Yes."

"Because I'm valuable or because—"

"Because I care about you."

The words left Altair's lips without his conscious permission, and yet there was not one syllable he felt compelled to take back. It seemed that this mortal, with his warm brown eyes and his wilfulness, had turned him into a fool.

A willing fool, too. How embarrassing.

Still, that did not stop Altair from leaning forward and pressing a kiss to Sven's forehead, or from murmuring against his soft skin, "Please don't use that knowledge against me."

Sven blinked at him as Altair drew back and got out of bed.

The mortal still looked surprised as he watched Altair pick new clothes from his closet. Well, maybe Altair wasn't the only fool here. "You are right about some things," Altair allowed. "You came back here with me when you didn't have to, and that earns you a certain amount of trust."

Sven sat up. "What are you saying?"

"That I understand you may not want to spend all of your time locked up in this room." Altair picked up Sven's shirt from where it had landed on the floor and handed it to him. "Get dressed and come up to the club with me. You can eat there."

Sven's eyes widened and he snatched the shirt from Altair. "You mean it?"

Altair shrugged. "People already know you're here, and no one who enjoys breathing will bother you while I'm around."

"Thank you." A smile split Sven's face and Altair suppressed a sigh. The mortal's joy was infectious, and he shouldn't allow such displays of emotions to affect him as much as they did. But then Sven pulled his shirt over his head and looked up at Altair with bright eyes and Altair realized it was far too late to try to deny that he liked Sven's company.

He looked away, frowning at his own weakness. "Stop looking at me like that and get your pants on."

To his credit, Sven did as he was told. He put on his jeans and smoothed down his rumpled shirt. With an uncertain look toward the bathroom, he said, "I should probably wash myself. And actually, so should you."

Altair shot him a small smile. "Leave it for later. I quite enjoy the way my scent clings to you, and it'll detract other vampires."

Sven raised an eyebrow at that but made no comment. Instead, he just shrugged. "Let's get out of here."

Altair reached out to him and then paused. Was Sven comfortable with him taking his hand? In the past, Altair hadn't asked and simply taken what he wanted. Now he waited for the mortal to reach out as well, curling his fingers around Altair's hand, entwining their hands together.

The gesture, so small and innocent in nature, still made Altair pause and wonder at how drastically Sven had turned his world upside down. And so quickly too.

Shaking off the thoughts, he tugged Sven toward the door and led him upstairs.

The club wasn't as crowded as it usually was at this time of night. No wonder, considering the 'altercation' that had taken place here earlier. A few vampires from a different coven had announced that they 'knew that Altair was keeping a mortal in the basement.'

They'd demanded that he share.

They thought that because his coven was small, they could threaten him and take Sven.

They had been wrong.

And Altair hoped their defeat would send a message to the other covens. Sven was his, and Altair would kill anyone who tried to touch him.

A few of his coven members were still cleaning up around the club when he entered with Sven. Only Mordyn was sitting at the bar, sipping on a bloodred drink. He raised his glass in greeting. "Looks like somebody is out of the dungeon," he said lightly and grinned when his gaze flicked over Sven. "Nice to finally meet you."

Sven frowned and looked like he might say something, but then Mordyn laughed and shook his head.

"Ah, yes. Of course. Introductions. Mordyn," the vampire said and tapped himself on the chest with a flourish, "at your service, mortal."

Sven opened his mouth to reply, but Mordyn waved him off. "I already know who you are, don't worry about that," Mordyn added. He pulled out the chair beside him. "Come take a seat. Both of you."

Sven glanced at Altair, and sat down when Altair nodded at him.

When he did, Mordyn rubbed his hands together, grinning eagerly. "Now, tell me all the details! What's it like to be stuck in a room with Mr. Gloomy and Grumpy?"

"Mordyn…" Altair sighed. He would have said more if his friend hadn't been an invaluable asset during the fight earlier.

While Altair sat down beside Sven, Mordyn raised a hand and spoke. "Yes, yes, I know. I'm being nosy, but it's just so fascinating seeing you take a new partner."

"You'd do well to mind your own business," Altair said before Sven could react. He didn't need Mordyn running off telling everybody that Altair had claimed Sven as his mate.

The fact that it was almost true only made matters worse.

Altair might have already lost his battle with himself, but there was no need to announce his imminent defeat to the rest of the world.

Luckily, Mordyn merely looked at him thoughtfully before raising his eyebrows and letting out a whistle. "Fair enough. Don't worry, I'm not planning on sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. I just wish you'd open up a little, since, obviously, you're having some trouble figuring this all out for yourself."

While Mordyn was talking, and Altair controlled the urge to strangle his friend, Sven grabbed one of the menus and started browsing it. "Wow," he said after a moment, catching Altair's attention. "I never knew there were so many different types of blood."

Altair turned to him. "The majority is synthetic."

"But not all of it?"

Mordyn grinned. "Depends on who's asking."

Altair gave his friend a sharp look before addressing Sven again. "We use trustworthy sources for the drinks that aren't synthetic."

"Locally farmed?" Sven asked with a sardonic expression.

Mordyn laughed. "You could say that. People volunteer to give their blood. Well, I don't know if you can really call it volunteering when they're getting paid."

"So it is ethical then?" Sven said, glancing back down at the list of names on the menu.

"If you want to call it that." Altair glanced at Mordyn. "Mordyn is the one who vets our dealers."

Sven frowned at the menu. "You don't really care if this is all obtained ethically, do you? You weren't that concerned when it was my blood you wanted to sell."

Altair met Sven's gaze evenly. "You're right," he agreed. He was what he was, and he had made his choices a very long time ago. "I'm not going to pretend I'm anything I'm not, but for the club, it's best if the menu holds up to inspection."

Sven seemed to consider that for a moment. Then he nodded.

"But seriously, please order something," Mordyn put in, "we only serve quality stuff here."

"I don't drink blood," Sven reminded him.

Mordyn leaned toward him as if he was about to share a secret. "You'd be surprised. Not only vampires drink blood here. There's some drinks we serve… the cocktails…" He reached over to Sven and trailed his finger down the menu in Sven's hand. "They contain only a little bit of blood. You wouldn't *taste* it on your mortal tongue, but the things these drinks could *do* to you…" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Cut it," Altair said. "He's here for food, not to get high on pixie blood."

Mordyn shrugged. "Why not both?"

Sven looked uncomfortable for a moment. "I'd rather just have the food."

"If that's your desire." Mordyn jumped off his bar stool and slid around to the other side. "I'll get you something."

"I thought you were banned from the kitchens," Altair said.

"Vadis is busy cleaning up in the back. He'll never notice."

Mordyn disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Altair alone with Sven at last. Sven looked around the club, and Altair didn't miss the way the mortal's gaze lingered on the persistent blood stains on the wall. He'd have to get those painted over soon.

Sven frowned at him. "So what happened?" he asked. "Did you fight with another vampire coven? Because of me?"

"Not only because of you," Altair told him. "We've had a target painted on our back ever since I took over this coven."

"You killed your sire," Sven said, showing that he'd done his research.

"It would be an understatement to say that that sort of action is frowned upon among vampires," Altair admitted. "Quite a few vampires decided they didn't want to be associated with me after that."

"So why did you do it?"

Altair shook his head. "I didn't. No vampire can kill their sire."

"Then how…?"

"The crows did it for me."

Sven's brow furrowed and his mouth opened slightly as the information registered. He shuddered. "How?"

Altair held out his hand, palm up, and concentrated on summoning a crow. The bird appeared, black feathers gleaming and talons digging into Altair's pale skin. Its beady eye stared at him inquiringly, as if wondering what it was needed for. Altair stroked his free hand down the bird's head, and it closed its eyes.

"You don't have to put a stake through a vampire's heart," Altair said. "You can also tear it out and eat it." Memories rose in Altair's mind. Memories of that fateful night.

Bloodied talons sinking into his sire's heart. Sharp beaks tearing flesh. Black birds darting in, grabbing pieces of muscle and meat. Wings slapping against his arms, his face, as more crows filled the space between them until there was nothing but darkness and the sound of screeching, viciously fighting animals. Feathers floating through the forest air all around him.

"But why?" Sven asked, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Because he tried to take something that was mine."

They fell quiet for a moment. Then Sven shifted closer and placed his hand in Altair's unoccupied one. The gesture was small, but it grounded Altair, made it easy for him to push aside the memories of his sire's demise and concentrate on the man in front of him instead.

"Did this have something to do with your mate?" Sven asked.

Altair looked at him, considering the question. "Yes," he said eventually. "But I don't want to talk about this any further."

Sven nodded in understanding. "Fair enough."

Altair released the crow back to the shadows and squeezed Sven's hand. "In any case, it doesn't matter now. I killed my sire. His coven fell to me, but there were some who disagreed with my ascension. They rebelled and broke away from me and some of them joined my brother's coven."

Sven's eyebrows rose. "I didn't know you had a brother. Wait, is that who you fought with tonight?"

Altair shook his head. "He knows better than to show his face around here. We avoid each other wherever possible."

Mordyn chose that moment to reappear with a tray in his hands. "I'm back!" he announced cheerfully and set it down on the counter in front of Sven. "And I bring dinner."

Sven smiled and nodded at Mordyn in thanks, but the mortal looked uncomfortable once again as he studied the plate in front of him. The food Mordyn had brought out was fine; a perfectly normal hamburger with french fries on the side.

Mordyn looked at Altair. "Is this all okay? Or did I fuck up?"

"It's perfect. Thank you, Mordyn."

Mordyn shot Altair a doubtful look, but when neither Altair nor Sven said anything, Mordyn grabbed himself a drink and walked away to tend to other matters.

"Eat," Altair encouraged Sven. He gestured toward the untouched burger with an incline of his head.

Sven poked at it with his fork, inspecting the patty and the bun, but making no move to actually take a bite. He glanced at Altair again after a long moment and then asked, "There's no pixie blood in this, right? Or any other kind of blood?"

"We don't add blood to the food we serve."

"I don't know. Mordyn seemed pretty keen on getting me to try—"

"Mordyn says a lot of things," Altair interrupted. "He can be mischievous at times, but he doesn't cross certain lines." He paused. "I trust him. He won't mess with you because he won't mess with me."

Sven continued to poke at his food with an obvious lack of appetite. Considering all he'd been through over the past 24 hours, maybe that wasn't surprising at all. Sven looked up from his plate. "There's still something else I need to talk to you about.

Altair nodded for him to continue.

"My mom's funeral," Sven said. "I've got to arrange it somehow."

Altair considered that. He understood Sven's need to get this done, but he'd only *just* had to fight off a group of vampires who thought Sven would make an excellent meal. The idea of letting him walk around outside was ludicrous. "You can make whatever arrangements you see fit via phone."

Sven scowled at him. "I can't do it all over the phone. That's ridiculous. How do you expect me to organize my mom's burial over the goddamn telephone? Are you gonna expect me to attend via video call too?"

Altair didn't respond and the silence hung heavy between them.

Sven exhaled heavily and pushed the plate of food away from him. "You can't be serious."

Altair sighed. "I can't take the risk. Someone attacked us tonight because they want *you,* and you'll be an easy target out there."

Sven's expression darkened even further. "So I'm just supposed to hide from the world forever?"

Altair stared at him steadily. "You'll never be safe as long as you're mortal."

Sven looked at him for a long moment, and then he huffed an unamused laugh. "So you're telling me this is another one of those issues that would be solved if you just turned me."

Altair never took his eyes off Sven. "Do you want me to turn you right now?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer. The mortal's mind was torn on the issue. Altair understood that.

The problem was that *Sven* didn't.

And so the mortal glared angrily at his food.

And Altair couldn't help him.

Chapter Twenty

W hen had things become so complicated?

Sven had come to this coven with a simple goal: get himself turned, save his mom, worry about the rest later. He'd figured whatever the consequences of his actions might be, they could never be as bad as losing his mother, so he hadn't thought much farther ahead than saving her.

The issue was that his plan had failed, and now he sat here, at a vampire nightclub, unsure what to do with himself.

Altair had moved to another table to talk business with a brunette vampire Sven didn't recognize but who'd introduced herself as Sheila. Sven didn't mind that Altair was busy. At least that gave him room to organize his thoughts.

He looked around the club once more, trying to distract himself from the grief gnawing at his chest. It didn't really work. He was surrounded by the undead, creatures that lived on the blood of the living, who would never die the way his mother had. Who would never be able to truly understand what Sven was going through.

His gaze fell on the blood stain on the wall again, and he grimaced, looking away. Maybe he shouldn't judge the vampires so harshly. They didn't die naturally, but they could still die.

Like Altair's mate had died.

Sven's gaze found the vampire who'd become his whole world in such a short time, and wondered what exactly he felt for the

immortal, and if he even stood a chance of finding happiness with him.

He didn't understand how Altair could be the way he was, so cold and unfeeling, and then suddenly turn around and display compassion and warmth toward him. It confused Sven, and yet, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't stop thinking about the vampire, period.

"I care about you," Altair had said. The words echoed in Sven's mind, cutting through the fog of grief and confusion like a bright ray of hope. If those words were true…

"Whatcha doing?"

Sven flinched when Mordyn sat down next to him without warning. "Thinking," he replied, watching the other vampire warily.

"About?"

"None of your business."

Mordyn raised an eyebrow at him, and Sven immediately felt bad for his rude response. He didn't know Mordyn well, true, but that was no reason to be a jerk to the guy. "Sorry," he said. He sighed and looked down at his hands on the counter. "I just had a rough night."

"I can imagine," Mordyn said, sounding sincere. "I heard about your mom. Sorry about that."

"Yeah." Sven's throat constricted, making it hard to breathe. Tears stung his eyes but he forced himself not to think about his mom or about the way she would always make the most terrible jokes to cheer him up when he was upset.

Even though they both knew he only laughed at how dumb the jokes were and how bad she was at telling them.

It always worked.

"So," Mordyn said.

Sven glanced at him, blinking the tears from his vision. He noticed that the other vampires were still sitting at their table, seemingly engrossed in conversation, while Mordyn had come

over here. He appreciated the privacy. "So what?" he asked, forcing himself to focus on what Mordyn was saying.

Mordyn leaned back on his stool and regarded Sven. "I heard that Alt's being an asshole about letting you attend your mom's funeral."

That caught Sven off guard, and, funny enough, his first reaction was to defend Altair. "He's trying to protect me."

"By locking you inside the coven like Rapunzel in her high tower?" Mordyn snorted. "Listen, I love the man like a brother, but he doesn't know how to deal with emotions. And that makes him a bit of an idiot."

Sven couldn't argue with that. Altair certainly had his moments. "He does care," Sven insisted. "I just need to make him understand why this is important to me."

Mordyn shook his head, smiling wryly. "Oh, believe me, I know he cares about you. It's obvious to everyone in this place." The vampire paused. "He's set in his ways, though. Stubborn. He won't change his mind easily." He glanced over at the two vampires still sitting at the far table and then back to Sven. "If you want to go to this funeral, you'll have to do it without his knowledge."

Sven blinked at him, not sure what to say in response. "Are you offering your help?"

"Yes. Alt's my best friend, and I think you're good for him. I don't want to see you break up because he's too much of an idiot to let you get closure. So yeah, I'll help you. On one condition."

"What's that?" Sven asked suspiciously.

"Don't get yourself killed, or Alt's gonna kill me."

"Deal," Sven said after some hesitation because Mordyn was right; he did need closure.

Mordyn grinned, looking delighted, and Sven's lips nearly twitched as well. He didn't know how Mordyn managed, but his cheerfulness seemed almost contagious.

"You're not worried about another vampire coven snatching me up?" Sven asked.

"Nah." Mordyn waved him off. "You'll be the one organizing this little get-together, right? Just make sure the ceremony's early enough that you can get back to the club before sunset."

Sven thought about that. "There's no vampires who could attack me in daylight?"

Mordyn shot him a long look. "No vampire in this city can step into the sun without suffering injuries. You're worth quite a bit, but not that much."

Sven wasn't quite certain whether he felt insulted or not. "Right." He looked down at his plate, trying to sort through the thoughts in his head. When he glanced in Altair's direction, he noticed that the vampire was getting up.

"Let me know what you decide to do, and when," Mordyn said, slipping Sven a small bag that felt like it had bird seeds in it. "To distract the crows." He winked, and then he disappeared, just like that, leaving Sven to stare at the spot where he'd been.

A moment later, Sven looked at the small, black leather pouch in his hand and slipped it into his jeans pocket, just as Altair reached him. Altair glanced at the chair where Mordyn had sat just seconds ago and frowned. "Where's he off to?"

Sven shrugged, trying to look innocent so the vampire wouldn't try to read his mind. "I don't know. He just said he had some business to take care of."

"Hmm," Altair said and sat down in the seat Mordyn had vacated.

Sven studied Altair. "Did you manage to sort everything out?"

The vampire nodded. "For the most part," he agreed. "I'm still waiting on a few reports, but that will have to wait until tomorrow."

"You're tired?" Sven asked, studying him closely. The vampire looked worn out.

Altair shook his head at the question. "No," he replied softly. Then he sighed, his shoulders drooping ever so slightly. "Well, yes, maybe. It doesn't matter." He gestured at Sven's plate. "You still haven't finished your food."

"Maybe I'm tired too." Sven took another bite, though, because he didn't want to add another worry to *Altair's* plate. "I've thought about the funeral," he said. "You're dead-set against letting me out of here?"

Altair looked away and sighed again. "I wish you would understand."

"I do understand, I just don't agree with you. I have to do this. Please, Alt." Sven hated that he sounded like he was begging.

Altair's expression was pensive as they looked at each other and Sven waited for the rejection with a sinking heart. He should have known this was going to be a pointless discussion, but it had been worth a shot.

"I'd be back before sunset," Sven added. "No one's going to attack me while all the vampire world's asleep."

Altair studied him, and finally, he relented. "I'll think about it."

That wasn't a no, which was more than Sven had expected earlier. It wasn't much, but for now, he'd count it as a win.

His first victory of the night made him feel brave enough to ask for another. "I'll need my phone," he reminded Altair. "If I'm going to organize this funeral remotely."

Altair nodded. "I suppose you're right." The vampire pulled Sven's phone from his coat pocket and handed it over much more easily than Sven had expected.

Not that Sven was about to complain.

He turned his phone on and scrolled through his list of contacts, contemplating who to text first when he came across a name that made him pause. *Dynmor.* He didn't know anyone with that name.

Who…?

Realization hit him like a flash. Dynmor. Mordyn. Someone had added Mordyn's number to his phone.

It surely hadn't been Altair, so who…?

And how…?

Sven turned the phone off and put it away before anything showed on his face.

It wasn't important how the number had made it onto his phone. The important part was that Mordyn had been wrong and Sven wasn't going to need his help.

Hopefully.

Chapter Twenty-One

A fter the sun rose, Sven buried himself in the work that needed to be done to organize his mother's funeral from his phone.

He contacted his mom's best friend and a few other members of their community that his mother had been close to. That part was the hardest. Sharing the story of how his mother had passed away with other people who had also loved her, who had cared for her, hurt.

It felt surreal, and Sven wished he could wake up and realize it had all just been a dream, that he'd find his mom at home, watering her flowers or reading a book.

She'd been a voracious reader. She'd devoured romance novels and self-help books by the handful, and every time she'd found a new hobby, she'd thrown herself fully into learning it with an enthusiasm that had made Sven smile, even after her health had started to decline. She'd been stubborn that way, determined to see any endeavor through to the end.

Sven supposed he got his own tenacity from her.

Wiping an errant tear from his eyes, he stared down at his phone screen.

He missed her. Missed her smile, the way she always smelled of freshly baked bread because she'd never been able to give up baking, the silly jokes she always told to cheer him up.

Sven sniffled, wiping his sleeve over his face, and looked around. He was alone in the room, except for one of Altair's

crows who suddenly landed on his shoulder as if sensing his distress.

Startled by the unexpected weight, Sven flinched and nearly dropped his phone. "Hey," he whispered, reaching out tentatively to pet the crow gently.

The crow preened as if very happy with the touch.

Hard to imagine that this was one of the animals who'd killed Altair's sire. Hard to imagine that it could rip out a man's heart with its beak and talons.

Sven shuddered at the gruesome image his own mind provided him with and looked at his phone again.

Everything here seemed darker than it appeared at first glance… but also not. These crows, Altair, the life of a vampire… It was all so multi-layered that Sven didn't know what to think anymore as he fished the bird seed out of his pocket and offered the bird a small treat in gratitude for keeping him company.

The crow accepted the food with a caw.

Sven's lips twitched as he watched it eat.

Eventually, though, he had to return his attention to his phone, and his fingers hovered over the keys as he tried to figure out what else to write. He was probably going to need some help making all the arrangements necessary. Fortunately, his mom's best friend, Carol, was already offering to handle the bulk of the legwork for him.

Sven was grateful for that, except that she had *so many* questions for him.

Questions about where he was and how he was doing and when he was going to be coming home.

Sven's chest tightened as he evaded the questions over and over again with growing frustration.

He didn't want to lie, but what else could he do? How could he possibly tell Carol that he was currently locked up in a vampire's basement but only for his own safety?

Carol wouldn't understand.

Hell, Sven didn't think anyone would.

And it didn't matter anyway, as long as Altair let him attend the funeral, which surely he would… wouldn't he?

He would have to because if he didn't, Sven would have to take matters into his own hands.

Sighing, he looked at his phone again, at the background picture he'd set. A photograph of a beautiful sunrise. He wanted to see another sunrise before he made his decision never to see one again.

He deserved at least that much, didn't he?

He glanced at Altair's crow, which had hopped down onto the bed beside him, looking at him curiously. "He's going to come around," he said, and he really hoped that he was right because he didn't know what he was going to do otherwise.

His phone buzzed in his hand. An incoming call.

He thought it was going to be Carol, but was pleasantly surprised to hear his friend Cale's voice on the other end of the line instead. "I heard what happened to your mom. I'm so sorry."

Sven's throat tightened. "Thank you." He hadn't even had the opportunity to inform any of his friends that his mom had died yet. Carol must've taken care of that for him, which meant that she'd probably called the others too.

Sven felt awful for not calling them himself.

Cale was silent for a second. "So… how are you doing? Are you holding up okay?" There was genuine concern in his voice. Sven hadn't known Cale for long, but he knew the other man was one of the good ones. A good neighbor. A little odd, always talking to his flowers, but kind-hearted. He used to bring around homemade tea for Sven's mom.

Sven took a deep shuddering breath and closed his eyes for a moment as tears welled up behind his eyelids. "I'm fine," he said and realized it was true. "I mean… I'm gonna miss her like hell, you know? But I'll be okay eventually, I just have a

lot of stuff to deal with right now. I don't really have a lot of time to think about myself."

"Do you want me to come over and check in on you? I could bring food…" Cale trailed off. "I don't know, I just want to help you somehow."

Sven swallowed, feeling his throat constrict with emotion. "I'm not home."

"Yeah, I know. I knocked on your door earlier, but I figured you'd eventually come home. I mean, you left to get medicine for your mom and you obviously don't need that anymore. Oh, I shouldn't have said that. Sorry."

Sven sighed. "It's okay, I'm just not home right now. And I don't really know when I'll be coming back. I can't right now. It's just… I have to take care of things."

The silence on the other side of the line was so heavy Sven thought he could hear the gears turning in Cale's head. "Where are you?"

Sven hesitated. "Do you really want to know?"

More silence, but this time, he could hear the determination in his friend's words when Cale spoke again. "I do. I mean, we're friends, right? You can tell me things. Isn't that how that works?"

"Yes, that is how that works." Sven smiled weakly, and then he decided he might actually need help sorting his thoughts. And what better person to confide in than his Cale?

Cale was odd, but he was honest. True to himself in all the ways that mattered, with his own unique perspective on the world—and a fresh perspective might be just the thing Sven needed.

So he told Cale everything.

About how he'd approached Altair, how he'd tried to become a vampire, only for Altair to reject him and make him a prisoner. He also told Cale how he'd fallen for Altair in spite of all of that. He told him about the night at the hospital, how

he'd failed to save his mother, and how Altair didn't think it was safe for Sven to go to the funeral.

Cale listened attentively. When Sven finally fell silent and waited, the only response on the other side of the line for long minutes was Cale humming thoughtfully. Then, Cale spoke: "Well, he is right. You're in danger."

"I know that! But I need to attend this funeral. I owe it to my mother."

"That's not the kind of danger I meant. You're in danger from Altair."

"What do you mean?" Sven asked sharply, not liking the sound of that one bit.

"Your mother passed away, and you're not sure you can even go to the funeral. Let me say that more clearly, you're not sure if your *lover* will *let you go*. I don't know a lot about relationships, but I know that's not healthy."

"Altair's trying to protect me."

"He's clinging to you," Cale corrected. "How are you supposed to live your life if you can never go anywhere? Don't you think us mortals have spent enough of our lives in hiding?" Cale's tone grew sharper. "Don't let him put you back into that box."

Sven's chest clenched as a lump formed in his throat. "You don't understand. He's only like that because he took a mate before and he…" Sven licked his lips, unwilling to admit to the whole truth of what had happened between Altair and Isabella. Telling Cale that Altair had *killed* his last mate would not exactly paint a good picture. "He lost her."

"So now he's afraid to ever let you out of that basement? That's insane, Sven."

It didn't sound so great when you put it like that, and Sven couldn't even deny that he knew that. He'd thought about it himself, but… "The whole issue would be solved if I let him turn me."

"Would it?" Cale paused, and when he spoke again the anger in his voice was gone. "Do you even want to be a vampire?"

Sven opened his mouth, but he found himself at a loss for how to respond.

The crow beside him cawed as though it was answering for him.

"You don't know what you want, do you?" Cale sounded sad, but there was understanding in his voice. "I'm not telling you to break up or anything, but I'm worried about you. If this vampire really cared about you, he wouldn't force you to choose. My mate would never treat me like that."

Cale's words took the wind straight out of Sven's sails. He'd been there when Cale had first met his mate, a storm dragon shifter by the name of Kieran. They'd looked like an unlikely couple, and they were, but they were fated to be together. They complemented and understood each other on a level that went deeper than anything Sven could comprehend.

They were two halves of the same whole.

A team.

And Sven had to admit to himself that his relationship with Altair was *nothing* like theirs. He and his vampire were all passion and urgency and desperate lust. Heated glances and burning touches.

Irrational, insatiable need.

They were never on equal ground. Would they never be mates the same way Cale and his dragon were? Because Altair had taken a mate once before already and Sven wasn't her.

Could a vampire have more than one true mate throughout his life?

"You're quiet," Cale said. "I didn't want to upset you."

Sven shook his head, even though he knew Cale couldn't see him. "You didn't." He swallowed. "You just made me rethink something that's been bugging me for a while."

"I'm not saying that you should leave him, Sven, I just wanted you to think. I don't like the thought of you being stuck down there. I don't want to think you've got a cage instead of a partner."

"I'll be okay," Sven promised. "I'll figure this all out somehow."

"Just try to get out for at least a little bit before you make any life-altering decisions you can't take back." The line fell silent for a second. "And let me know if you need help."

Sven nodded. "I will. Thank you, Cale. I mean it, it's good to talk to a friend." He paused. "I'll definitely find a way to attend the funeral." He realized now, he did not owe that only to his mother but also to himself.

How else could he move forward?

If he was to choose this life with Altair of his own free will… he had to be free first.

Cale's reply came quickly. "Good. You deserve to say a proper goodbye to your mom." There was another long silence, then he cleared his throat. "And if you decide you need protection from vampires, I know a few dragons who can help."

Sven shook his head. "It won't come to that."

Cale hummed non-committally. "Just keep it in mind."

Sven agreed and ended the call. There were *a lot* of things he needed to keep in mind, though. He needed to figure out what he wanted.

Letting himself fall back on the bed, he stared up at the ceiling.

The crow on the pillow next to him cocked its head and studied him with its black eyes. It let out a caw, and Sven couldn't help but wonder if maybe it was trying to comfort him in the only way it could.

He smiled weakly and stroked his hand gently down its feathers, thinking about everything that was on his mind. "What would you choose?" he asked softly, and then he shook his head. Talking to birds.

Maybe he'd already spent too much time down here.

Forcing himself to focus back on his task, he took a deep, fortifying breath and picked up his phone again. There were still things he needed to arrange, so many things to think of.

It wasn't until noon that the door to the bedroom opened and Altair came in, looking exhausted, and no wonder. Sven had expected him to turn in hours ago. He'd seemed tired at the club earlier, and it was way past the vampire's bedtime now.

"Hungry?" Altair asked.

Sven shook his head, gesturing to the half-eaten plate of food that another vampire had brought by earlier. Sven had eaten some of it, more out of habit than actual hunger. "I ate already."

"Good." Altair sat down on the bed and glanced at the crow, who hopped onto his shoulder without prompting. He scratched its head absentmindedly. "Did you get everything done?"

Sven nodded. "As much as possible." He paused, hesitant to speak, but then decided that he'd rather take the plunge and get it over with. "The service will be at 2 pm at the cemetery near the church by my house."

Altair didn't react in any visible way.

Sven bit his lip. Fuck, why did he need permission to leave here? Cale was right and this was ridiculous. "I'm going there," he said.

Altair finally glanced at him and Sven's stomach turned at the frown on his face. "That's not safe."

"Alt, I have to do this." Sven steeled himself for the inevitable argument.

Altair didn't seem to be in the mood, though. The vampire merely sighed. "I told you I would think about it."

"Well, have you?" Sven asked impatiently. He understood that Altair was worried about his safety, but this was his mother's funeral and it was important. It wasn't up for discussion.

Altair looked at him, and Sven saw the weariness in his eyes, the tension in the vampire's shoulders. For a moment there, he felt as if he could read the vampire's thoughts as easily as Altair could read his. The look in the immortal's eyes spoke volumes of his pain and uncertainty… and the fear that he couldn't express out loud.

The vampire was *scared*, and that gave Sven pause.

How could this stubborn, determined, strong creature be afraid? What could possibly scare the Caller of Crows?

The idea of losing *him*?

Altair reached out slowly, hesitantly, brushing his fingertips against Sven's cheek as if he didn't know how his touch would be received. "I can't risk you."

Sven held himself very still, uncertain. Uncertainty seemed to have become his new normal in these recent days, and it irked him. He didn't want to feel unsure. About his future, about where he belonged.

He wanted to be free and to know he was making the right choice, but how could he when everything had grown so damn complicated?

"You mean too much to me," Altair added quietly.

Sven met his gaze and his breath stuttered. There was so much he didn't know about this man sitting in front of him.

And so much he desperately wanted to.

Sven put his phone away and placed his hand over Altair's larger one. "Let's not fight tonight," he suggested because his heart ached from everything he'd already been through, and he knew that having this conversation with Altair, too, would simply cause him more pain.

"It's not night." Altair smiled faintly. "You're getting used to a vampire's schedule."

"Yeah, I guess I am. Weird, huh?"

"No." The crow fluttered away as Altair slid his arm around Sven's waist and tugged him closer, and Sven went, craving

the closeness between them, the reassurance. "I think you were always meant to become mine," the vampire murmured, his voice a dark caress on Sven's ear. His breath stirred Sven's hair and sent goosebumps down Sven's spine as Altair added: "Mine alone."

Sven didn't know what to say to that. A part of him wanted to ask how Altair could be so sure of that when Sven wasn't even his first mate, but when he lifted his gaze to the vampire, he found Altair's eyes closed.

Had he fallen asleep?

Sven frowned as the vampire leaned even more heavily against him.

Fuck.

The bastard had.

Sven almost laughed as he studied the vampire. He'd known that Altair was tired, but he hadn't thought it was this bad. Then again, he didn't think Altair had slept since the day before yesterday at least, and considering how stressful the events of that night had been… Yeah, no wonder the poor guy had collapsed the minute he'd gotten comfortable.

"Goodnight," Sven muttered, smiling slightly as he regarded Altair's peaceful expression. "Or is it good day?" He brushed a stray strand of black hair off the vampire's pale face, admiring his handsome features.

In sleep, Altair looked almost gentle. Not the way he was during sex, though Sven definitely appreciated that version of the vampire too. But like this… So quiet and unguarded… It made Sven want to lie down beside him and stay until he woke up.

Which sounded like an excellent idea, actually.

Once more, he reached for his phone, muted it, and then he pulled the covers up over himself and Altair. Neither of them had even bothered to get out of their clothes, but Sven found he didn't care as he snuggled up close to the vampire's body.

He breathed in Altair's comforting scent and, despite the gloomy day, let his worries slide away.

He would deal with them after the funeral. After he'd said a proper goodbye to his mother. Right now, though, he deserved to get some sleep with the man he… loved?

With the man he loved.

The realization hit Sven with unexpected certainty. Drawing a deep breath, he pressed his face to the vampire's shirt.

He loved this man. This cold, powerful, emotionally withdrawn vampire who'd somehow made room for him in his heart.

A soft smile formed on Sven's lips.

He had to be an idiot to be in love with this man, but still… Amidst all the chaos in his mind, at least there was one thing he was certain about. It was a start. More than that, it was an anchor—and he was going to need one, in the days ahead.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The following evening, Altair wasn't surprised when a knock sounded on the door to his office while he was sorting through papers. He looked up to see Keegan standing in the doorway, waiting patiently to be acknowledged.

"Enter," Altair said, gesturing to the seat across from him. "Sit down."

Keegan did so. "I looked into the attack last night."

Altair regarded his friend with interest. "Did you look into it using your computer skills or your other skillset?" he asked, referring to the gift of sight the other vampire had been blessed—or cursed—with.

Keegan merely shrugged at him. "Some of both. The computer aspect was more helpful this time around, however. The security cameras around the city gave me a pretty good view of where the surviving vampires went after the attack."

Altair nodded. "What did you find out?"

"I am almost entirely certain they are connected to the Black Spades." Keegan paused as if trying to gauge Altair's response.

Altair kept his face carefully neutral. He'd already suspected that his brother's coven was behind the attack, to have it confirmed… "They don't like that we also have access to mortal blood."

"You're probably right." Keegan licked his lips. "They're not going to stop, you know. Not until they've reestablished their

monopoly.”

Altair scoffed at his friend. “Since when are you so scared of other vampires? We've beaten them back once, we can do it again.” They *would* do it again. As often as it took for everyone in this city to know that they could not touch Sven. The human belonged to Altair, and no vampire was going to challenge him on this.

He would kill every single one of them if he had to.

Keegan did not look convinced. “Alt, you're not thinking this through.”

“Enlighten me then,” Altair snapped at him, barely holding back the anger that rose in his chest.

Keegan was one of his most trusted vampires and one of his oldest friends, but sometimes Altair regretted allowing the other man to become his advisor. There were moments when he wished he could simply command Keegan to shut up and obey him without further protest.

There were moments when that was what he felt he needed to do.

“I've told you about the visions I've been having,” Keegan said. His blue eyes looked almost pleading as he spoke, and Altair couldn't help but sigh.

“We've discussed this. Your visions are not reliable. Things do not necessarily happen the way you see them in your dreams.”

“I have seen this scene many times in my dreams, Altair, and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to change the outcome.” Keegan held his gaze. “You cannot win against this coven. You may be strong, but you can't defeat your brother, and do you know why?”

Altair's gaze narrowed. “Why?”

“Because he would kill you without a second's hesitation, but you still see him as your brother.”

Altair's hands clenched into fists. After everything Nephariel had done, Altair was *not* going to show mercy toward him. “I'm his sire,” Altair said bitterly. “He can't simply kill me.”

"You killed your sire," Keegan reminded him.

"It wasn't simple."

"No," Keegan agreed. "But you managed, and he will manage to kill you because you will hesitate where he won't."

"I don't care what you saw in your visions." Altair glared at his friend. "You know what Nephariel did to me, to your *sister*. I will never forgive him." Rage rose inside him, and he did not bother to stop it. "I won't lose *anyone* to him ever again," he said through gritted teeth.

Keegan fell silent, which gave Altair a chance to vent his anger on him. "You're supposed to support me, Keegan, yet you seem to prefer spending your time throwing rocks in my path. You showed Sven what happened between me and Isabella. Why? To drive him away?"

"He has a right to know," Keegan said, unflinching. "If he's going to follow you into the darkness, he needs to know what he's getting into. Someone here had to meet him halfway."

Altair scoffed. "Don't pretend like you care about him."

"He's just like my sister." Keegan looked him dead in the eyes. "And she would hate the way you're treating him."

Altair froze. "How dare you speak about my mate to me like that?"

"Isabella wasn't a weakling, you know that as well as I do. She wouldn't have allowed you to lock her up in this basement. And she sure as fuck wouldn't have accepted the way you're controlling Sven."

Altair inhaled deeply, fighting down the urge to launch himself across the table and grab his friend by the throat. "Get out of my office."

"Fine," Keegan said. He stood and walked to the door, but turned to regard Altair once more before leaving. "Don't take your anger at yourself out on Sven," he said. "You think locking him up here is somehow better than letting him live his life the way he wants, but you're only keeping him here to satisfy your own fears."

Altair didn't answer him.

When Keegan walked out, Altair slammed his fist down on the desk with enough strength to send cracks running through the wood.

His fears were *not* irrational. If Nephariel got his hands on Sven… The vampire didn't have a conscience. He'd torture Sven, drain him, feed him to his lackeys, or worse, turn him.

Just like he'd done to Isabella.

Altair's throat closed. He remembered how different she'd been when he'd found her again. Broken. Changed. Nothing more than a husk of her former self. He'd been too late.

Too late to save her.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He was going to do *everything* in his power to keep Sven safe. Even if that meant that the mortal would hate him forever.

As long as he *lived*.

To hell with the rest of it.

Sven felt the tension in the vampire the moment the man entered the room. It seemed to hang heavy in the air around him when Altair walked up to him and pulled Sven into his arms, holding him tight as though he never wanted to let him go.

Sven returned the hug, concern growing in his chest. He couldn't remember Altair ever greeting him like this. Hell, the vampire hardly even said hello, usually. "Altair," he began, searching Altair's face for answers.

The vampire cut him off with a kiss. "Don't," he said. His voice sounded rough. Almost pained. "You have to understand that I'm just trying to protect you."

Sven stared up at him. "That's what this is about?" His throat grew dry. "You've made your decision?"

"You can't go." Altair cupped his face in his large hands and held his gaze, staring down at him with a seriousness that was almost intimidating. "I can't let anything happen to you. Do you understand?"

"Alt…" Sven's hands curled into fists at his side, though he forced himself to remain still, to hold back the rage boiling inside him. "You can't control everything. I need this. Can't you see that?"

"You have no idea how dangerous the outside world really is, how easy it is for other vampires to track you down if they want to. It only takes a tiny drop of your blood to mark you, and there are creatures out there who can smell it from a mile away." Altair paused, eyes flashing with irritation as his jaw tightened visibly. "I know it must be difficult for you to accept, but I'm not saying this to hurt you. I'm telling you this because I don't want to see you killed."

Sven shook his head. "I can't stay here forever. I have to get out someday. How can you expect me to agree to give up on attending my mom's funeral?"

"She's gone, Sven," Altair said softly. "There is nothing you can do for her now."

Sven flinched back at his words, looking up at Altair in disbelief. "This isn't about *her*, this is about *me*! Don't you understand that? This is about me needing to move forward after losing her!" Sven raised his hands, pushing Altair away when the vampire reached out for him. "Don't." He stepped back to get some space between them as his head spun and his heart beat rapidly in his chest.

Altair's expression tightened and Sven knew him well enough now to know exactly what was happening: The vampire was shutting down, pulling back the emotion he'd been letting through earlier.

That thought scared Sven more than he wanted to admit because when Altair got like that, he wouldn't listen to anything Sven had to say.

Altair would make all the decisions by himself.

Whether Sven liked it or not.

It was like a punch in the gut. The realization that he was so fucking powerless in this relationship.

Sven knew why Altair didn't want him to leave. The vampire cared about him, in his own way, and Sven had started to believe it was genuine. Still, his actions contradicted those feelings, and Sven found himself torn between anger, disappointment, and despair.

All the fight drained out of Sven the longer he watched Altair watch him, the vampire's gaze inscrutable. Finally, Sven broke eye contact.

"I've made up my mind," Altair said quietly. "You can't fight me on this."

Anger flared through Sven once more, a fire that burned brighter than before. He glared at the vampire. "What gives you the right to do this to me? This is *my* life."

"You're mine." Altair stepped toward him again and this time Sven didn't have anywhere left to go to escape the vampire's proximity. Altair grasped him by the shoulders, forcing him to stand still. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

Sven swallowed heavily, clenching his hands at his side to resist the urge to push Altair back. Instead of yelling at the other man like he wanted to, he met Altair's gaze evenly and asked in a voice far steadier than he'd expected it to come out. "Am I your property? Is that it?"

The vampire didn't even flinch at his question. "Of course you are."

Sven shook his head, feeling something inside him snap as anger gave way to defeat. "So that's it? I have no say in what happens to my own life? This isn't okay. You know it isn't."

The vampire's mouth flattened into a thin line. "You don't know the kind of vampires who are after you."

Sven's fingers dug into his palms, but the pain felt distant compared to the ache in his chest. "Yeah, that doesn't change the fact that I want to go."

Altair's eyes hardened, narrowing as he drew in a deep breath. "I can't let you risk your life. I won't. That's final. You're not leaving this building."

Sven glared back at the vampire, never one to throw in the towel. "We'll see about that," he hissed, then pushed Altair away and turned his back on him.

For a moment, he could feel the vampire's gaze bore into his back as if trying to penetrate his skin and force Sven to look at him.

Fat chance.

Sven knew if he turned to look at Altair, the vampire would read his mind and realize that Sven had a plan B for this situation.

"Sven," Altair tried, but Sven ignored him, keeping his back to the vampire. When he heard Altair step closer again, he threw up his hand. "Please, just leave me the fuck alone," he said sharply.

Behind him, Altair hesitated.

Good.

If the bastard felt even the slightest shred of guilt over what he was doing, then maybe he wasn't a complete monster after all. Sven's chest squeezed tight as anger mixed with longing, and he rubbed a hand over his face tiredly.

He didn't want to fight with Altair. The vampire was just trying to keep him alive. Deep down, Sven knew that. Still, Sven needed the funeral. It was the least he could do for his mother, to say his goodbyes properly and without fear. It was his last chance to honor her memory in a way she deserved, to celebrate her life, and to finally lay her to rest.

After everything she'd sacrificed for him, he owed her that much, at least.

Finally, he heard footsteps behind him, retreating.

As soon as the vampire was gone, Sven slumped against the wall beside the bed.

His throat felt dry. He swallowed past it and pulled his phone from his pocket to stare down at the screen. He found Mordyn's number and dialed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I t hadn't taken long for Mordyn to answer Sven's call, and just as he'd promised, the vampire had immediately agreed to help Sven get out from under Altair's thumb for a short while.

He hadn't shown up right away, claiming that he needed some time to set things into motion, but after a few hours, when the sun was almost set to rise, he'd opened the door to Sven's room.

First, he distracted the crow still hanging out in the bedroom with Sven so that it wouldn't immediately alert Altair. Next, he sprayed Sven with a strange mixture of herbs that smelled like damp forest earth and garlic.

"That's going to mask your scent," Mordyn explained.

"Will that work?"

The vampire shrugged. "Let's hope so. You don't smell like a meal to *me* right now, in any case."

"Everyone will wonder why I stink."

"Tell them you fell in the mud," Mordyn replied. "Either that or tell them it's a new diet."

"What do you know about human diets?"

"I know a little sugar makes your blood sweeter." Mordyn smirked and Sven shook himself, suddenly doubting if he should really trust this vampire. But what choice did he have?

"Cut the crap," he said.

"You asked," Mordyn said with a half-shrug before motioning for Sven to follow him out of the room.

They went up one set of stairs, through several corridors and doors. With each step, Sven's heart beat faster. What if they ran into Altair? Or anyone else?

"Don't worry," Mordyn said as if he too could read Sven's thoughts, or maybe Sven's fears were just that obvious. "Altair's in a meeting and almost everyone else is at the club. I had the new dancers perform a special show tonight. Drew quite a crowd."

"Don't we have to exit through the club?"

Mordyn grinned at him. "Nope. We're taking a little detour. Trust me, you don't want to walk into that room full of hungry vampires." He led the way upstairs once more, past the bar to another floor that Sven hadn't visited before. The top floor.

"This leads to the roof," Mordyn explained. "Come on, we don't have a lot of time until the sun rises."

Sven followed, heart beating so fast he was afraid it would burst from his chest. Mordyn guided them out onto the empty rooftop and from there, down a ladder that took them to the street.

It had gotten chilly. The wind swept through Sven's hair and for a moment, he stood there, staring up at the gray sky, and enjoyed the cold breeze caressing his cheeks. Its touch felt like freedom.

Like a forbidden thrill.

Altair would be *furious*.

He looked around himself and took stock of where they were, close to the park where he'd first met the Caller of Crows.

Sven brushed the thought away. He couldn't worry about Altair today. What he needed to do now was to get away from here as quickly as possible. Before the vampires noticed that he was gone.

He needed to say goodbye to his mother.

Taking a deep breath, he turned to Mordyn. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome." The vampire smiled at him and pointed across the street. "See that cab? Ask the driver to take you to a friend's place, or wherever you think is best. Maybe don't make it the first place Altair will check for you."

"Okay, that makes sense." Sven nodded. He glanced at the cab. Mordyn had really thought this through, probably more than Sven had. "I figured Altair wouldn't be able to come after me once the sun is up."

"He'll have his birds searching the city," Mordyn cautioned. "He may not be able to follow you himself, but he will figure out where you are before long."

"I don't mind that, as long as I get to attend the funeral."

Mordyn's expression softened. "So you do intend to come back."

Sven's eyebrows rose as he looked at the vampire. "You didn't think I would?"

Mordyn considered Sven's question thoughtfully. "No," he said finally. "I hoped you would, but I wasn't certain of it."

"Why did you help me then?"

"Because Alt is my best friend and I don't want him to pick a mate who will not stand by him when push comes to shove." The vampire fixed him with a knowing look.

"You're testing me," Sven surmised.

"Yes, among other things." Mordyn gestured for him to head to the cab. "You should go now," he said, glancing at the sky, which was starting to light up in the distance. "I've got to head back in."

Sven nodded again and stopped hesitating. He only had one shot at this, and he was taking it.

The morning was crisp and cold, but Cale's house was warm. His friend opened the door with a wide smile on his face. "Sven!" he exclaimed, pulling Sven into a hug. "I'm so glad you made it."

"Me too," Sven admitted as he followed the other man inside.

The truth was, he hadn't been entirely sure he could escape. He hadn't looked back once on his way from Altair's, but he'd known all along that Mordyn wasn't helping him out of the kindness of his heart.

The vampire was making a point. He was allowing Sven to prove that he really did want to become a vampire and Altair's mate. Mordyn's intervention didn't mean the guy was on Sven's side—it just meant that he believed Sven actually had a choice in this.

And that his choice mattered.

Shaking the thought from his head, Sven focused his attention on what Cale was telling him. "You made it just in time," his friend said. "Kieran's making breakfast."

Sven followed him to the kitchen where Cale's dragon-shifter mate was indeed cooking. There was bacon in a pan, two plates of scrambled eggs, toast, orange juice, coffee, and fresh fruit laid out on the table.

"Help yourself," Cale said, picking up one of the plates that was clearly meant for himself and offering it to Sven instead. "Kieran's cooking is so good I would have already gained like five pounds if he didn't help me work it off every night."

Kieran glanced over his shoulder. "Our guest doesn't need to know that, love." Then his gaze fell on Sven. "You *should* eat, though, and sit down while you're at it. No offense, but you look like you need it."

Sven's stomach growled loudly in response, reminding him he'd barely eaten a thing since his mother's death. He still lacked the appetite, but he knew he'd need to eat more eventually if he wanted to function, so he took the plate Cale offered him and sat down at the table.

"How have you been holding up?" Kieran asked him as he slid a cup of freshly brewed coffee Sven's way.

Sven took a sip of the beverage before answering. "I don't really know." It wasn't an adequate reply, but it was all Sven could find within himself to say.

Cale and Kieran exchanged a glance, then their eyes settled on Sven again, and Sven swallowed.

They clearly had 'well-meaning' questions. He appreciated it —he really did. The fact that his friends were so concerned about him was warming. But he also dreaded where those questions might lead…

Maybe it would be best to just get it over with and rip the bandaid off. "Go ahead, ask me," he said to them both.

"Are you okay?" Cale began.

"How did you get away?" Kieran continued.

And before Sven could utter a response, Cale added, "Is that vampire going to hunt you down? Do we need to call the guards? I've got garlic in the kitchen. Does garlic work? You kinda reek of it, so maybe not?"

Sven held his hand up to stop the barrage of words coming out of his friend's mouth. "One question at a time, please," he said and cleared his throat. "I'm… dealing. Someone helped me to get away from the coven for today so I can attend the funeral." A lump formed in Sven's throat as he spoke the words, reminding himself of the event that made all of this necessary in the first place.

"So your vampire didn't want to let you go," Cale said. His tone was disapproving, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Altair is complicated."

"He's controlling you," Kieran said softly, sitting down at the table with Sven like the diplomat he used to be. "That's not okay."

Sven shook his head, averting his gaze from Cale's glare because yeah, he knew that this situation was wrong, that it shouldn't have to be like this, and he couldn't deny it. But

there were things the two of them didn't understand. Altair wasn't *all* bad.

Sure, he was a pain in the ass sometimes, but… maybe that was part of what Sven *liked* about him, as stupid as that sounded.

He bit down hard on the inside of his lip. Fuck, he needed to focus. He couldn't go down that road now, couldn't let his thoughts drift back to last night and how he'd felt in Altair's arms, with Altair's voice in his ears, telling him that he was *his*. That Sven belonged to him.

It was a truth that Sven felt in his bones, in spite of every instinct telling him that he should stay away.

"He is who he is," Sven said, suppressing the thought. "It doesn't matter. We can discuss him later. After."

"After the funeral?" Cale asked. He gave Sven a worried look, his eyes tracing Sven's features intently.

Sven nodded tightly. "Yes."

Kieran watched Sven silently. The dragon-shifter had been a diplomat once, and he could probably read more from Sven's expression than Sven could put into words. "Of course," he said. "You don't have to explain anything to us before you're ready." His voice sounded soothing, calming. "But you know that if you need help, we'll be there for you."

"I know." Sven managed a weak smile. "Thank you."

Kieran smiled back at him. "You're welcome. Now eat something. You're practically wasting away. I can see your bones."

Sven scoffed but picked up the fork next to his plate obediently. "Fine." He ate some of the scrambled eggs to show that he meant it.

Cale smiled at him. "Great," he said. "And now you can tell us why you stink."

Kieran elbowed his mate gently. "That's not how you ask people why they smell, love," he admonished.

"It's okay," Sven said. "Apparently, the smell masks my natural scent, which is attractive to vampires." He shrugged. "You know how it is. To them, we're all just fast food."

"Oh." Cale scrunched up his nose. "I guess that makes sense. Do you think it'll work?"

"I think I'll be fine," Sven said because he didn't want to think about the alternative. He'd already come too far to turn back now, and there were too many other things on his mind for him to worry about his own safety. "Thank you for the food, for everything, really, but I'd like to spend some time at home."

Home was just next door, after all.

The place where he'd lived with his mother, only a few days ago. He wanted to see it before the funeral. Maybe when he saw that she wasn't waiting for him in her bed anymore, reality would finally begin to sink in.

Maybe he would know what to do.

It wasn't like Sven's mind was made up. The truth was, he had no fucking clue what was going to happen. Yesterday, when Altair had denied him permission to attend the funeral, Sven had known what he wanted: Freedom. He'd wanted to rebel against Altair's rule and assert his independence.

Today, his motives felt more complicated. His desires less clear.

He took a deep, bracing breath and steeled himself as he walked up the front porch toward the door. The sight of the place sent a pang to his chest. He and his mother had only lived here for a short while, but he remembered how happy his mother had been to have a real house, finally. A place where they didn't need to be afraid.

Her sanctuary.

Tears filled Sven's eyes when he realized that she wouldn't return to this place again.

Sven closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the front door, breathing heavily through the ache in his lungs.

He hadn't been able to save her the way he'd promised.

Swallowing heavily, he found his keys and unlocked the door.

A strange feeling of warmth washed over him when he entered his old home.

This place felt like home, still. It felt familiar. Comfortable. Yet nothing was right anymore.

Nothing ever would be.

A shudder worked its way through Sven's body at that thought. It didn't matter. Nothing fucking mattered.

A sound made him lift his head and look up. It had come from somewhere up the stairs, but there was no one there, yet somehow, he felt that he wasn't alone.

He stepped farther inside the house. Another faint noise echoed through the hallways. This time, Sven recognized it. The creak of a loose floorboard outside the bedroom.

His heartbeat sped up.

What if he wasn't alone? What if it was an intruder or something?

What if it was a vampire?

Sven shook his head at himself. He was imagining things, and he needed to calm the fuck down. If a vampire were waiting to ambush him here, it would have attacked already, right? Not bothered to play hide and seek in his mother's house.

Probably.

Before Sven could convince himself of his own logic, he walked across the hallway and pushed the bedroom door open.

The next thing he knew, something pricked the back of his neck and his vision began to blur.

Shit.

Just as he started to black out, he caught sight of something dark fluttering outside the window. Black feathers.

Fuck, what was happening?

His legs gave out beneath him and he fell to his knees, then the world tilted around him, and everything went dark.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Anger burned inside Altair's chest like a raging firestorm. He should have known Mordyn was up to something. He'd been blissfully unaware, though, until he'd returned to his room after his meeting, only to find that Sven was gone. The crow in his room had confirmed that the mortal had left with Mordyn's help, and Altair's entire world had collapsed around him.

He was going to kill his friend. Slowly. He would tear Mordyn into pieces and then stake those pieces. One by one.

He made his way straight to Mordyn's room and banged on the door. It took Mordyn several minutes to answer, and when he did, he looked anything but surprised.

The bastard wasn't even trying to look sorry. He opened the door wearing a cocky grin on his face and stood in the doorway blocking Altair from entering as he leaned casually against the frame. "Need something?"

"Where did you take him?" Altair asked between clenched teeth. He wasn't in the mood for games right now, and if Mordyn tried to stall him, he was going to lose the control he was keeping on his temper.

Mordyn sighed dramatically. "I didn't take him anywhere. I merely helped him get a cab."

Altair's jaw tightened. "Why would you do that?"

Mordyn pushed himself away from the door and spread out his arms as if the answer should be obvious. "Because you wouldn't."

Altair frowned at his friend, frustration welling in his chest. "I had my reasons."

"Do you think it's fair to him, Alt? Did you ask yourself what he wants?"

"I don't give a fuck about that," Altair snarled. "He's in danger out there." He stared down Mordyn. "If anything happens to him I swear to you—"

"Then why are you here and not out there looking for him?" Mordyn interrupted him calmly. "You want him safe so badly, so go and get him."

Altair ground his teeth. "The sun is already up."

"Wait." Mordyn cocked an eyebrow at him. "You mean to say he's outside during the day and you can't follow? Just like every other vampire in this city?"

"Fuck you." Altair glared at the other man. "Don't you dare try to make me look unreasonable when you're the one who betrayed my trust. What game are you playing?"

"You know what I think?" Mordyn kept his voice neutral. "I think you do care about keeping him safe from vampires, but what you're really scared of is that Sven won't come back to you if he reconnects with his community."

"That is ridiculous." Altair's hands curled into fists at his side as he fought back the urge to grab his friend by the throat. "You of all people should understand." He could hardly breathe around the lump in his throat. "He could die!"

Mordyn met his gaze unflinchingly. "You can't keep him locked up forever, Alt."

Altair forced himself to exhale, pushing back against the panic welling inside him. "That is not for you to decide."

"Relax," Mordyn said. "If it makes you feel any better, I talked to Keegan before I decided to help the mortal."

Altair narrowed his eyes at the other vampire. "What did he say?"

"He said Sven would be back. He's the one who told me it would be okay, that this was part of Sven's fate."

Altair's fists clenched. Why were his friends colluding behind his back? "Why would he tell you but not me?"

"He says you're so blinded by your desires you haven't been listening to a word he says."

Altair exhaled sharply. If he hadn't been listening to Keegan, that was only because Keegan kept saying that it was too dangerous for Altair to keep the mortal. He rubbed his face with the heel of his palm.

Fact was, knowing that it was Keegan who'd planted this idea in Mordyn's head did not make Altair feel better about *any* of this.

"It'll be okay," Mordyn said. "You'll see." He looked at Altair, and a strange sort of calm washed over Altair. The feeling was so foreign, though, so blatantly coming from *outside* of Altair, that Altair recoiled immediately.

"Don't fuck with me, Mord," he said, his voice dangerously low. Manipulating emotions was the other vampire's special skill, and he was using it now, the way he often did on clients to put them at ease. To soothe them into doing exactly what he wanted.

As if that would ever work on Altair.

Mordyn lifted his hands in mock surrender. "Only trying to help."

"Spare me your 'help'," Altair hissed as he toyed with the thought of finding a knife and stabbing it through his friend's chest. As tempting as that idea was, though, he had more important things to do. More *urgent* things.

His gaze bored into the other man. "I will deal with you later," he promised.

They'd known each other for so long that the other vampire was rarely scared of him, but for once, Mordyn actually blanched.

Good.

Forcing his anger down for the moment, Altair turned to leave. There'd be plenty of time to punish Mordyn once he had Sven safely back in his arms where he belonged.

For now, Sven came first.

Even if that meant letting the little shit get away with betraying Altair's trust. Even if that meant Altair had to defy the daylight.

Hell, Sven was worth it. Altair didn't care if he ended up as a pile of ash. He was getting his mortal back.

When Sven woke, he felt dizzy, like his head had gotten too heavy for his shoulders. Everything seemed foggy. Groggy. His mind moved slowly and even blinking his eyes open felt like it took too much effort.

"You're awake," a male voice observed. It wasn't a voice Sven had heard before, but it still sounded familiar somehow.

He blinked several times, rubbing his face against the surface he found himself leaning on, which was… smooth. Stone? It was cold against his cheek and smelled kind of dusty.

It smelled like dirt.

Confusion swirled in his mind.

Where was he?

He pushed himself up on shaking arms, wincing when they ached with strain.

God, he was so weak.

Fighting against the shivers running up his spine, he focused on the space around him, searching it with his eyes. He was in a small room, square-shaped, and… underground? The air felt cool on his skin. There were no windows, just stone walls surrounding him on every side. A single oil lamp sat on the floor to his right, and it seemed to be the only source of light in this place.

A dungeon, perhaps?

What the actual hell?

Finally, Sven looked at the man who'd spoken earlier. He was tall, pale, and black-haired, wearing a pair of blue jeans and a crisp white shirt. He didn't look threatening, exactly, but he did exude power from his lean frame. Power, and confidence. He looked a lot like Altair, except his features were softer somehow, less sharp.

Realization hit Sven like a rock.

"Are you…" His throat was so dry speaking became painful, but he forced himself to form the words anyway. "Are you Nephariel?"

The man gave him an appraising look. "So, you've heard of me." His gaze lit up with interest. "I didn't think my brother mentioned my name anymore."

Sven stared at him silently, suddenly feeling very afraid. He'd been scared the first time he'd met Altair, but this was different. There was no thrill of excitement coursing through him, no arousal. Only fear.

This wasn't a vampire he could negotiate with. The way Nephariel looked at Sven, he didn't see Sven as another person. He only saw Sven as a food source, and he was going to *eat*, unless Sven thought of a way out. He needed an escape route or a weapon or *something*.

He had no idea where he was, how he'd gotten there, or where to even start. But he had to do something. Fast.

Nephariel grinned at him then, showing off his perfectly white fangs. "I can hear your heart beating faster, you know. It makes the blood pulse under your skin." His tongue ran over his lips. "Pulsing blood smells so much sweeter."

Sven shuddered.

Oh God.

This wasn't good. It really, really wasn't.

Suddenly, Sven regretted everything. Escaping from the coven, leaving Altair's protection… thinking he'd be safe in the daylight. "How did you catch me?" he asked, more to keep the vampire talking than anything else. Maybe if he distracted the guy enough, he'd have time to think of a plan.

"It wasn't particularly hard," Nephariel answered. "All it took was hiring a little help. I may not be able to brave the sun, but I don't have to do everything by myself. Given enough money, people will do anything for you. And I've made a lot of money lately." He grinned. "You're going to help me make some more."

Sven's throat squeezed painfully. "What does that mean?" he whispered.

Nephariel took a step closer, and Sven struggled to get up, his body shivering with cold and panic both. He had to fight this guy off.

His legs still weren't cooperating, though, and he knew that even if he got up, he wouldn't be able to move fast. He was still drugged from the injection that had knocked him out.

"Please," Nephariel said with false sympathy. "There's no need to struggle. It's not like you can get away."

His words sent ice running through Sven's veins. Fuck. This guy was really going to bite him. Sven's eyes widened as he pressed his back flat against the cold wall behind him. "Altair is going to kill you," he warned.

Nephariel laughed. "What? You think I'm scared of him?" He inched closer. "I'll let you in on a little secret. The money you'll make me is one reason I wanted you, the other is that I *know* it'll piss my brother off to no end if I defile his property."

"You're a sick fuck," Sven spat, anger burning through the icy grip of fear.

The vampire chuckled and closed the distance between them at last, pinning Sven to the wall behind him with one hand pressed firmly on Sven's chest. He lowered his face until they were almost nose to nose, then trailed his tongue over Sven's

throat. Sven squirmed, struggling in vain to get free. It was like trying to move a solid block of steel.

He couldn't fight him, couldn't avoid him, couldn't defend himself, and nothing he said could make a difference. All he could do now was brace for the bite to come.

The second Nephariel pierced his throat with his fangs, Sven felt like dying. This wasn't anything like when Altair bit him. There was no arousal, no connection, only pain and fear as Nephariel held him and tore into his throat.

It was hell.

Nephariel drank deeply, moaning softly against Sven's skin.

Sven's breath caught in his throat. God. Every nerve in his body screamed, every muscle cramping as he hung from the vampire's hold. Nausea swirled in his stomach, rising up until it choked him. Then his limbs went numb.

Fuck.

Sven shivered, trying desperately to stay conscious. No matter how hard he tried, though, darkness seeped in around the edges of his vision and every attempt to fight it only made the shadows spread until he lost control completely and slipped into the nothingness.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Wake up."

Sven stirred, rolling over as the voice reached him, pushing through the haze of sleep. Something warm nudged his shoulder. Once, then again.

With a groan, he rolled onto his back and blinked his eyes open. Immediately, memories assaulted him.

Nephariel biting him.

Passing out.

Dirt and stone underneath his fingers.

Panic shot through him, making his breath stutter, and then he was scrambling backward across the ground, as far away from the looming figure above him as possible, hitting his back against the opposite wall. His heart thrummed, so loud he could barely hear anything else.

But the creature inside the room with him was not a vampire. It took his exhausted mind a few moments to come to that conclusion, but the young man beside him looked much too weak, far too skinny, and way too kind to be a vampire.

"Hey," the other captive said softly, raising his hands like he wanted to placate a wild animal. He looked about Sven's age. Brown hair, brown eyes, thin face. He was pale and clearly malnourished, but something about the earnestness of his expression gave Sven pause. "Relax," he said, taking a careful step closer to where Sven had his back pressed against the

wall. His voice sounded rough, like he didn't use it often. Or maybe like he'd been screaming…

Sven shuddered.

What was going on in this place?

"I'm Rhyme."

"Rhyme?" Sven asked, still trying to regain his bearings.

"Yeah." Rhyme smiled weakly. "My mother was Melody," he said as if he needed to explain himself.

Sven managed to nod. "Nice to meet you," he croaked.

Rhyme tilted his head, giving Sven a strange look. "Sorry they got you too," he said, pointing toward the closed metal door behind him.

Sven swallowed heavily. "Thank you," he said. "I'm Sven, by the way."

He studied Rhyme carefully. The other boy looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes, but otherwise unhurt. Except for the bruises around his wrist.

Something ugly and twisted squeezed Sven's insides at the realization. Those looked like rope marks.

Rhyme followed Sven's gaze, then covered his wrists by stuffing his hands into his pockets. He must have felt self-conscious.

God. This was fucked up.

He felt the strong need to comfort Rhyme, but Rhyme spoke before Sven could. "I'm guessing you didn't grow up in the system."

System? Sven wasn't sure what Rhyme was talking about.

As if reading Sven's confusion on his face, Rhyme went on. "Yeah, you're definitely an outsider." He looked down, an odd expression on his face that Sven couldn't quite place. "Terry used to say there were still free mortals out there. I never really believed him."

Sven's brows knit together. Rhyme didn't believe that mortals could be free. Did that mean…? A lump formed in Sven's throat. "You've always been a blood slave?"

Rhyme gave him a sad smile. "Born and raised."

A cold shiver worked its way up Sven's spine.

What the fuck? Born and raised? As in this was all Rhyme knew? "You've been here all your life?"

That was *insane.*

"Not here exactly." Rhyme looked around their small, mostly empty, room. "This coven bought me a few weeks ago. Before that, I was with my family in the north." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "They're still there, I guess."

"I'm sorry," Sven said because he didn't know what else to say. What *could* he say in response to such a story? He'd known there were awful vampires out there, but he'd never known there were covens who kept mortals like cattle.

"Don't worry about it." Rhyme shook his head, though he still looked troubled.

"You don't miss them?" Sven asked quietly.

Rhyme shrugged. "Some of them." He averted his gaze then, looking lost in thought. "They sold me because I refused to eat." He showed Sven a sardonic smile. "They can't get as much blood from me when I don't eat enough. Not without risk. So they decided I wasn't worth the trouble." He paused. "For a while, I thought I won."

Sven's stomach turned. He wrapped his arms around himself, pulled his knees close against his chest, and swallowed against the bile in his throat. "I'm sorry," Sven said again because he still didn't know what else to say, but it seemed like Rhyme understood.

Rhyme nodded solemnly. "At least I made them mad by refusing to play along," he said as if to cheer Sven up, but Sven's mouth only grew drier at the words.

"Do you still think you won?" he heard himself ask.

Rhyme hesitated. "I don't know," he said finally. "I got away from my masters, but the new masters are… Well, they want to make sure they get what they paid for."

The image of Nephariel drinking from him flashed before Sven's eyes. His fingers gravitated to his throat automatically. The memory wasn't a pleasant one, and the wound was still fresh enough that touching the skin stung. "I can see that," he said bitterly.

Rhyme's eyes traced the line of Sven's throat and concern etched itself onto the features of the boy's face. "You're not one of us," Rhyme murmured as if he was talking to himself. "But you'll get used to this life."

Sven shook his head. He had no plans to 'get used' to being a blood slave for a monster. He'd find a way to escape this. With or without Altair's help, he had to try. "What happens next?" Sven asked. His chest felt too tight, but he was done giving into despair.

He needed more information.

He needed to know what he'd be up against, whether he would be strong enough to run away, and where exactly he'd end up if he did manage to flee.

"If you're new to this, there are two ways your master can treat you," Rhyme said matter-of-factly. "Your best chance of survival is to be a favorite. I'm not saying it's easy, but it's better than being a secondhand servant, you know? If your master is happy with you, he might even let you sleep in his bed once in a while, keep you well-fed. The downside is that most masters prefer slaves who don't speak their minds, or who speak at all, really…" He trailed off, a far-away look in his eyes.

"Rhyme? Are you okay?"

Rhyme's eyes snapped back into focus, his gaze clearing. "It's okay," he said. "That's all in the past. Sivan used to muzzle me."

Sven shivered again. God. Rhyme had been treated like an animal. Worse than that, even. No wonder he couldn't imagine

humans living any other way. What a nightmare…

"Muzzled?" Sven repeated, needing to make sure he hadn't misunderstood. "Why did they…?"

Rhyme shrugged. "So I would stop yelling at them? So they wouldn't have to hear my voice?" He gave Sven an ironic grin. "Difficult to ask when you can't speak."

Sven frowned and pulled his knees closer against himself. This was so messed up. He just couldn't wrap his mind around it. He called Altair a monster once, and here he was learning what actual monsters looked like.

That didn't mean that he was going to *forgive* Altair for all of his missteps, but damn, he would have given a lot to have the vampire barge into this dungeon right now and rescue Sven, like the heroes in movies.

God, Sven *wanted* him to do that. Wanted Altair to get him away from this nightmare, hold him close, protect him…

Even if that was stupid, after the way Sven had left him yesterday.

His throat squeezed painfully.

Altair would be furious with him. Furious and hurt.

Had he gone looking for him already?

Would he bother looking for Sven, after what had happened?

Did he care at all?

He swallowed. He'd seen black feathers before he'd lost consciousness, hadn't he? Crow's wings… Maybe Altair was angry, and maybe he didn't understand, but he wouldn't turn his back on Sven now. He *would* come looking for him.

Sven only needed to hold out until he did.

———

Sven didn't remember falling asleep, but he dreamed again. Of that night in the forest, when he'd first been bitten by a

vampire. He felt the sting of teeth against his throat, smelled the moist earth beneath him. There was pain, panic, and then the strange fog in his mind. He struggled to get away, tried to shout, tried to run.

All to no avail.

He landed on the soft earth of the forest when the vampire finally let him go, a black feather beside him.

Why a feather?

Even in the dream, Sven didn't understand.

When he opened his eyes again, waking up, he was still resting on the floor. Not the forest floor, though. The ground was cold beneath him. The cell around him was completely silent except for the soft breaths coming from the other side of the room.

His gaze shifted toward where Rhyme was lying, and his eyes locked with Rhyme's wide-open ones. Rhyme blinked, then pressed one finger to his lips to tell Sven to be quiet. Then Rhyme's gaze drifted toward the door, and Sven froze, trying his hardest to listen for sounds as well.

Footsteps thumped outside their cell. Someone was walking up to their door. A few seconds later, the lock clicked, then the door creaked open.

Nephariel walked in.

He glanced down at Sven's body, grinning.

Then his gaze moved to where Rhyme lay against the opposite wall. "Hey, pet," he drawled, giving the other boy an amused smirk. "It's breakfast time. Come here and kneel before your Master."

Sven's heart beat wildly against his chest as he watched Rhyme slowly walk up to the vampire. Rhyme's gaze remained lowered, avoiding the vampire's stare, and the look on Nephariel's face hardened. "Look at me when I talk to you," the vampire demanded, and Rhyme obeyed immediately. Still, the vampire was displeased.

The moment Rhyme was within reach, Nephariel grabbed his jaw. His nails dug into the skin on the side of Rhyme's face, and his fangs dropped from his gums as he opened his mouth wider.

Rhyme shuddered, and Sven realized what was about to happen one split second before it did.

Shit!

Before Sven could make a move, however, Nephariel bit down hard into Rhyme's throat. Rhyme cried out, his body spasming with pain.

No…

Nausea gripped Sven's stomach and he nearly threw up. Watching Rhyme suffer like that was awful. "Stop," Sven yelled, even though he knew it wouldn't have an effect, but he just couldn't stand there doing nothing. "You're hurting him!"

Nephariel didn't pull away, just tightened his grip and drank more forcefully. Blood trickled out of Rhyme's neck, down the collar of his shirt, coating Nephariel's lips. Rhyme looked dizzy, barely standing, swaying on his feet while Nephariel sucked harder, his hand pressed painfully tight against Rhyme's waist to hold him in place.

Finally, Nephariel stopped and stepped away. He licked his lips with relish before licking the few stray drops from his fingertips. Then he shoved Rhyme out of the way. Rhyme fell hard to the ground. Nephariel turned his attention to Sven. His smile stretched from ear to ear.

Sven glared back.

How he wished he could wipe that smug grin from his face. How he wished he could stab his heart with a piece of wood or burn him alive or tear him to shreds… "Such hostility," Nephariel said, amusement in his voice.

Sven ignored him and focused on Rhyme instead. The boy had collapsed on the floor, panting, his skin turning even paler. Sven rushed to his side and knelt beside him, putting a gentle hand on his new friend's shoulder. "You alright?" he asked softly.

Rhyme met his gaze and gave him a slight nod, then he whispered, "It's okay… I'm used to this."

Sven gritted his teeth against the anger flooding him, and he knew he had to control the impulse to yell at Rhyme for saying something so completely unacceptable because it would only hurt him further. It wasn't Rhyme's fault that he believed this kind of treatment was normal.

Nephariel watched the exchange silently, but when Sven looked up at him, he was grinning widely. "You two are cute," he said. "Maybe we should arrange a private session where you can get better acquainted with each other. I'll feed you too, of course, as long as you both behave." He smirked. "Unless you enjoy starving yourself as much as he does," he added, tilting his head toward Rhyme.

"Screw you," Sven spat, unable to help himself.

Nephariel chuckled. "Don't fret, pet," he said with an insufferable wink. "Once I have you trained properly, I'm sure you'll learn I'm a far more powerful vampire than my useless brother."

Sven's gaze narrowed. "Altair is stronger than you could ever hope to be," he replied, lifting his chin to show the vampire defiance.

Nephariel glared at him in return. "If that's true, how come he hasn't killed me yet?"

He took another step closer to where Sven was still crouched near Rhyme.

"I don't know what happened between you two," Sven admitted. "I do know Altair wouldn't stoop to your level, though."

Nephariel laughed. "Is that what he tells you?" He ran his fingers through Sven's hair. "Oh, no, I bet he doesn't tell you anything at all. He probably just bites you, fucks you, and leaves you to rot in your little cage."

Sven glowered at him in return, not saying anything, but that was enough. The vampire leaned in closer. "That's what he

does, isn't it? But you still think he's some kind of saint?" He straightened and waved his hand dismissively. "Fool."

Sven balled his hands into fists. "You don't know anything."

Nephariel sighed dramatically. "The one who doesn't know anything is you." He looked down at Sven condescendingly. "Don't trust my brother, mortal. He's a selfish bastard and will always do whatever he has to make sure he wins in the end."

"Shut up," Sven hissed, trying to keep his temper in check and failing spectacularly.

The vampire snickered in delight. "Can't stand the truth?"

"Like you're any better than him." Sven glared up at the vampire hatefully. "You're nothing but a lowlife monster."

"Yes," Nephariel agreed. "But who turned me into this?" He lifted his chin at Sven and waited as if he expected an answer. "Altair, that's who. He made me into the man I am today. I never asked for this."

Sven scoffed. "Don't try to make yourself out to be a victim, you sick fuck." He rose to his feet as he spoke, facing the vampire eye to eye. He didn't care if his anger pushed the vampire too far—he wouldn't back down. "You *like* what you are."

"Enough." Nephariel clenched his fist. He grabbed Sven's arm hard, and the bones cracked loudly under his grasp. A cry left Sven's throat, pain exploding in his entire body. Nephariel held his arm tightly for a few seconds, long enough for Sven to feel as if he was about to pass out, then he released Sven. "I'd suggest you control your temper before speaking to me."

Sven stumbled backward, barely able to hold himself upright. Pain made him lightheaded, and bile rose in the back of his throat. Still he glared up at the vampire stubbornly. "Go to hell."

"Hah," Nephariel barked out a laugh, then grinned coldly. "Already there, mortal."

Sven fought the urge to spit in his face.

Nephariel stared Sven down with an expression that sent a chill running through Sven's veins. He reached up, cupping Sven's face gently with one palm. Sven shivered involuntarily. His touch was icy cold and terrifying.

"Altair destroyed me, and I will destroy everything he loves."

Sven jerked back. Fear gripped his insides, turning them to ice.

He tried to pull away but Nephariel wrapped his arms around Sven, pinning him in place against the vampire's chest with one hand firmly on the back of Sven's skull. His fingers dug painfully into Sven's scalp.

Then he pressed his cheek to Sven's, inhaling deeply against his skin. "I won't kill you, boy. I'll drain every drop of blood from your body instead," he promised in a whisper. His breath was cold on Sven's skin, making the hairs on the back of Sven's neck stand up. "And then I will keep you chained in the corner of this cell, where you can watch as I torture your friend over and over until the day your mind finally breaks."

"Let me go," Sven choked out.

Nephariel chuckled. "I'll rip him apart and make you watch. Will you be crying for him? Begging me to put him out of his misery? I won't, of course, his blood is still valuable. But maybe if you ask nicely, I'll rip out his vocal cords, so you don't have to hear his annoying little whimpers anymore."

He squeezed tighter until Sven screamed as another wave of blinding pain radiated from his crushed arm. Tears stung at the corners of his eyes, but he blinked them away. He wasn't going to cry.

He refused to give this monster any more satisfaction.

A loud bang made Nephariel's body jolt against him. Then there was shouting from somewhere outside their cell. Sven looked toward the door to see what was happening but Nephariel tightened his grip on Sven again, forcing him to remain still.

More shouts sounded from beyond their dungeon. Angry roars rang out from above them, and Sven caught several curses, though they were all too muffled for him to make sense of

them. Then footsteps rushed down the corridor, louder than any previous noises, getting closer with each second.

Sven's heartbeat increased. He swallowed heavily.

Please don't be more bad news, please don't be more bad news. He held his breath as the noise drew nearer, his nerves tingling with excitement, anticipation. *Hope*.

Someone burst into their room then, making Sven jump. A pale, dark-haired figure clad in dark leather stood framed in the doorway, his gaze burning with rage.

It was Altair.

Sven's throat constricted painfully. He'd never been happier to see someone in his life.

Except that he looked awful. His skin was blistered and bleeding, and he moved like he was in pain.

What was *wrong* with him?

With a sinking feeling, Sven realized that Altair was *sunburned*.

"Neph," Altair growled, the anger in his voice almost tangible. "Get your fucking hands off my mortal."

Nephariel bared his teeth, revealing his fangs. His hands tightened even more around Sven, to the point where it became painful again. Sven flinched and closed his eyes in reflex, and horror.

He was so fucking glad that Altair had come for him—and from the sounds of fighting going on above them—he hadn't come alone, but what chance did Altair have when he was clearly injured already?

Nephariel was going to tear him apart.

Sven couldn't bear that thought. Couldn't endure the idea that Altair would sacrifice himself to rescue him from the clutches of a sadistic asshole.

All because Sven couldn't stay put in the coven's base.

What if Altair got hurt? Or even killed?

God.

This was his mom saving him from the thornefang all over again.

And Sven would be responsible for the death of *another* person he loved.

His heart pounded madly inside his chest, his breath becoming labored. He needed to breathe. To calm down.

Altair couldn't die.

Could not.

In an act of desperation, Sven pressed the heel of his shoe into Nephariel's foot. Hard.

Nephariel jerked backward.

Sven didn't think twice—he reached up and rammed his elbow into the vampire's stomach.

That got a reaction.

With a growl, Nephariel grabbed Sven by the throat and shoved him up against the nearest wall. His fingers dug into Sven's windpipe, making Sven cough involuntarily as the air was blocked from his lungs. Then Nephariel was leaning down. The vampire's lips grazed Sven's skin, and Sven prepared himself for another bite, another rush of agony, but instead, something warm dripped onto him. He opened his eyes and saw that it was blood—Nephariel was bleeding. His chest was bleeding.

The next second, his body flew away, crashing against the opposite wall with a loud bang.

What the—

Altair was standing between Sven and the spot where Nephariel had landed, shielding him from harm. "Touch Sven again and you're dead," he snarled as he stalked toward the fallen vampire.

Nephariel jumped back up on his feet, wiping the blood from his chest. "You missed my heart." He flashed Altair a bloody grin, baring his teeth.

Altair growled. "I know exactly what I was aiming for," he said through clenched teeth. "It is a warning, nothing more. I won't miss next time."

"You've always been such an arrogant shithead." Nephariel smiled coldly. "Always underestimating others." He licked his lips, then ran one finger over the open wound where Altair's knife had hit. "This is gonna leave a scar…"

"Good." Altair stepped toward him. "Remember who gave it to you."

Nephariel shook his head. "You're the root of every bad thing in my life. Always you."

Sven watched them interact with apprehension. Despite their anger and fury, despite the hatred oozing from them in waves… the vampires didn't seem like they wanted to *kill* each other… If anything, there seemed to be a weird sort of respect between the two of them, despite all the horrible things Nephariel had just said to Altair. It made no sense.

Why was he willing to let *Nephariel* live?

God, Sven had *so many questions.*

He watched as Altair approached his brother cautiously, his hand still clutching his weapon. Nephariel didn't attack though. Instead, he tilted his head to one side. "Are you actually threatening me? That's precious." His voice held a trace of bitterness. "Did you really expect I wouldn't take action when you messed with my business? I find a mortal for my coven and of course you have to get one for yourself to try to ruin me again." He glared at Altair with a vicious snarl.

Altair shook his head like Nephariel's words were nonsense. "I don't care what you do, and I don't care about ruining you as long as you keep away from what's mine." Altair's eyes bore into Nephariel's. "Keep your pathetic hands off my mortal."

Nephariel rolled his eyes. "Come on, brother," he sneered, crossing his arms over his chest. "I only took a few sips."

The muscles in Altair's jaw clenched. "You drank from him?" His voice was low, dangerous.

Nephariel laughed. "Of course I drank from him," he said. "Do you think I'm stupid enough to let such an opportunity pass me by?" His lips curved into a menacing smile. "That boy tastes delicious."

Sven's stomach twisted painfully with the memory of those fangs sinking into his skin, and when Altair looked at him, he knew without a doubt that the vampire could see his thoughts. There was fury burning in Altair's gaze. His lips pressed together, a muscle ticking along his jaw. His chest heaved in deep, heavy breaths.

His body vibrated with tension.

He was going to fight with Nephariel.

Fuck.

Sven rushed forward before Altair could move, placing himself right in front of Altair with his palms flat against the other man's chest. He couldn't allow Altair to throw himself into danger for Sven. He wouldn't be able to stand it if anything happened to him. Altair needed to know that.

So he locked gazes with his vampire and gave him his most serious expression. "Stop," he whispered. "Please don't do this."

Altair blinked down at him, taken aback by Sven's words. "Sven," he whispered back. "Don't worry." He put a hand on Sven's shoulder. "I'm stronger than he is."

Sven shook his head. Under normal circumstances, perhaps Altair would have been right. These weren't normal circumstances, though. Altair's rage masked his exhaustion well, but the sunburn had weakened Altair tremendously, Sven knew. So he pushed closer against Altair's body and breathed in deeply before exhaling slowly. "No, listen to me, please. I need you alive, you idiot."

Altair stared down at Sven, his expression filled with surprise. His eyes softened and widened a fraction before he glanced back over to Nephariel, then back to Sven. After a moment, he nodded. He pressed his lips to Sven's forehead, and Sven relaxed against him.

They'd be okay.

Except that Nephariel was still in the room with them. "What a wholesome scene," he teased. "Isn't it nice to have a mortal?"

Both Sven and Altair turned toward Nephariel as he took several steps closer, then suddenly lunged.

Before they could react, he grabbed Rhyme, pulling him close, his sharp nails digging into Rhyme's neck. "Look, I've got one too. It's much better trained, as well."

Rhyme winced, but Nephariel didn't loosen his hold, only pressed harder as he smirked at them triumphantly.

Rhyme struggled to get free, but the vampire simply lifted him slightly so his feet no longer touched the ground. He looked like a trapped cat, kicking helplessly. "Not a sound," Nephariel ordered. "Or I'll slit your throat."

Rhyme stopped moving.

Sven swallowed heavily. He knew exactly what Nephariel wanted him to take away from this scene: Altair might manage to free one mortal tonight, but he wasn't leaving this place with both.

Sven couldn't leave Rhyme behind, though. Not now, not ever. The other mortal had done nothing wrong. He didn't deserve this. And Sven wouldn't trade Rhyme for himself. No way. Rhyme should be rescued too.

Nephariel smiled, watching them, taking in their reactions. Then his hand moved around Rhyme's neck. He could kill Rhyme so easily with a squeeze, Sven knew.

Shit.

"Don't worry," Altair said. "He's not going to kill the boy."

Sven shook his head. Nephariel might not *kill* Rhyme, but he would continue to hurt him, abuse him… Rhyme couldn't stay here with this monster.

Rhyme shouldn't be anyone's slave, dammit.

"I can't leave him behind," Sven protested, giving Altair a pleading stare. "I can't."

Altair met Sven's gaze, and Sven hoped with his whole heart that he hadn't been wrong about Altair, that Altair was better than his brother, that he would *understand* why Sven couldn't leave Rhyme here.

Finally, Altair turned to his brother. "Put him down," he told Nephariel.

Nephariel raised one eyebrow at that command. He tilted his head at Altair. "The boy is my possession. You can't tell me what to do with him."

"Put him down," Altair repeated, a sharp edge to his voice that hadn't been there before, a more commanding tone than Sven had ever heard him use. "I am your sire, Nephariel. You will obey me."

Nephariel froze. After a second or two, though, he snapped out of his stupor with murderous rage. "How dare you?" He glared at Altair. "How *fucking* dare you?" He spat on the ground, then placed his mouth against the skin on Rhyme's shoulder, biting down hard.

Rhyme cried out at the sudden pain and squirmed in Nephariel's grasp, struggling weakly to free himself from the vampire's grasp.

"Stop," Sven yelled. "Leave him alone!"

Nephariel didn't even glance in his direction as he continued sucking at the blood trickling from Rhyme's skin.

Altair growled, and then in a flash he was moving, his form blurring from the speed. He grabbed Nephariel by the throat, pulling him off Rhyme with brute force. They crashed together, hitting the stone floor hard as they wrestled for dominance. The next instant, they rolled, Altair getting on top of Nephariel and slamming him against the floor. Nephariel hissed in response, claws digging into the skin on Altair's shoulders, his feet kicking out, trying to knock Altair over. Altair grunted but held tight and used the momentary advantage to deliver a blow with the palm of his hand to the bridge of Nephariel's nose. There was a sickening crack as Nephariel's head snapped back and a roar escaped the younger

vampire's throat as blood streamed down his face. He glared furiously at Altair.

"You broke my damn nose," Nephariel snarled.

Altair gave him a cold smile. "You should have listened to your sire." He lifted his fist and punched Nephariel again, knocking his head to the side.

Nephariel was far from beaten, though. After all, he had only *just* strengthened himself with mortal blood. He wrapped his legs around Altair's waist and flipped them, pinning Altair beneath his weight. When Altair struggled, he grabbed a handful of hair at the back of Altair's head and slammed Altair's head against the stone floor. "Fuck you, bastard," Nephariel hissed down at him. "You're going to pay for this. You're going to pay for everything."

He leaned down over Altair, fangs elongated. He was going to bite, Sven knew he was. He also knew that Nephariel wasn't going to stop until he'd taken *all* of Altair's blood.

And Sven just stood there, watching. Useless.

No.

He had to do something.

His gaze fell on a glint of metal on the floor. Altair's knife. He must have dropped it while he was grappling with Nephariel on the floor.

Sven dove for the weapon and picked it up with a shaking hand. It felt cool against his fingers, heavier than he expected.

When he looked back at the vampires, Nephariel had shifted so that he was straddling Altair's torso, keeping him trapped. Nephariel bent forward and wrapped one hand around Altair's chin, holding him still. Altair struggled under his grasp but wasn't strong enough to break the other vampire's grip. Nephariel tightened his hold and yanked Altair's head sideways, baring the curve of his neck and making it vulnerable.

Sven didn't have any more time to think—his feet took action on their own, carrying him toward the fighting duo. Once he

reached them, he pointed the tip of the knife straight at Nephariel's heart, ready to strike. He had never stabbed anyone before, but…

He had to do this.

Before he could do anything, though, Nephariel turned and gave Sven a wicked grin. "You want me to let go of your lover? You gonna use that blade?"

"Let him go," Sven demanded. "I swear I'll kill you otherwise."

Nephariel laughed his cold, mocking laugh that sent shivers down Sven's spine. "Fine then, pet. Go ahead." He tightened his grip on Altair's neck, squeezing harder, making Altair gasp. Then he waited, staring up at Sven with cold, emotionless eyes, waiting for Sven to attack him.

But Sven had never hurt anyone.

And stabbing a man sounded much easier in theory than it was in reality.

"Can't do it, can you?" Nephariel laughed again. "Pathetic mortal."

Sven hesitated for one more second, and then he knew what he had to do. He gripped the knife firmly in his hand and then brought the blade down with one decisive move—slashing his own wrist.

Nephariel stared in confusion, but Sven paid him no mind. He pressed his bleeding wrist to Altair's lips, hoping to heal him, to give him strength.

Altair's mouth immediately latched onto Sven's pulse point. He sucked greedily at Sven's skin, swallowing great gulps of blood before Nephariel could stop him.

Then there was movement. Sven registered it a second too late, barely managing to pull his wrist back before Nephariel's hand swiped at him. Pain radiated through his chest, his lungs constricting painfully. He staggered backward, struggling to stay on his feet.

The next instant, Altair rose to full height. He grabbed Nephariel by the throat with both hands and pinned his brother to the ground. There was no more hesitation, no more holding back, no more 'next time's. Crows manifested around Altair like a dark storm of feathers and claws. Sven watched in horrified fascination as they swooped toward Nephariel with harsh caws that reverberated through the dungeon like the screams of the damned. They pecked and clawed at Nephariel ruthlessly, drawing blood as they tore into his flesh. Nephariel writhed in pain and fought against Altair's hold on him, but Altair held him fast and wouldn't release him, growling as he pulled his brother close and bit deeply into his exposed neck.

The smell of copper and iron filled the air. Nephariel struggled against Altair, kicking out wildly, scratching desperately at the stone underneath him, trying to drag himself away as Altair's fangs sank deeper. Blood stained Altair's mouth and teeth, turning his lips crimson. Red liquid gushed everywhere, coating everything in its path, soaking into Altair's clothes, pooling beneath their bodies, seeping into the cracks between the tiles.

A small part of Sven realized that he probably should have been terrified by the sight of someone being torn apart, but instead, he was just relieved that Altair wasn't on the losing side anymore.

When Nephariel stopped twitching, Altair ripped Nephariel's heart from his chest, crushing it in his hand and throwing it aside for his birds to feast on. His breath was ragged, his chest rising and falling rapidly. The veins beneath his pale skin bulged, dark blue lines stretching across the surface of his arms and neck. He looked so frightening. And so beautiful. Like an avenging angel.

Sven shivered.

Altair blinked down at the body beneath him, a blank expression on his face. Then he got up and walked toward Sven. When he reached him, Altair pulled Sven to his feet and examined him. His gaze traveled over every inch of Sven's skin, stopping on his chest where Nephariel had struck earlier, and on his slashed wrist, which was still bleeding. Wordlessly,

he lifted Sven's wrist to his lips once more, using some sort of vampire magic to seal the wound. It tingled but felt amazingly soothing. Sven watched in wonder, unable to look away. Altair then brushed his thumb over Sven's collarbone gently. He cupped Sven's cheek, caressing it tenderly before bringing their mouths together for a soft kiss. "It's done," he murmured softly against Sven's lips.

Sven relaxed into his embrace, his head spinning from relief and exhaustion both.

"What about Rhyme?" he asked. "Is Rhyme okay?"

Altair paused for a moment, glancing back at the boy behind him. "We'll take him with us."

Sven closed his eyes in gratitude. He hugged Altair tight against him and buried his face against the other man's neck.

It was finally over.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sven didn't remember much about their journey back to Rubyville, the part of the city where Altair's coven had its base. He'd been too tired after all he'd been through and low on blood as well. He vaguely recalled the touch of cool fingers against his, a comforting presence beside him. A solid arm holding him upright when he stumbled. A long car ride during which he dozed off.

And then they were back in the basement of the club and a doctor was checking him over. At least Sven assumed the person examining him was a doctor—he seemed competent enough. Sven's arm was broken, and he had bruises and cuts on various parts of his body, but overall, he was fine. "You've lost a lot of blood," the doctor said as he checked Sven's vital signs. And with a glance at Altair, he added, "You're not to drink from him any time soon."

"I understand," Altair replied, sounding as worn-out as Sven felt.

"Good," the doctor said. He put Sven's arm in a splint and gave him a shot. "Just a little something to make you heal faster and feel less pain. Sleep and don't strain yourself."

Sven nodded and thanked him politely. Altair walked the man out of the room, leaving Sven lying on the bed alone, surrounded by pillows. His eyelids grew heavy as soon as the doctor left the room, but his thoughts wouldn't rest, and every time he tried to close his eyes, his brain conjured up images from the day. The memories came fast, overwhelming him until he could no longer keep them contained in his skull.

When Altair returned, he lay down next to Sven on the huge mattress and wrapped one arm protectively around Sven's chest. Sven could sense Altair's concern, but he couldn't bring himself to open his mouth and talk to Altair yet. Instead, he pressed his face into the crook between Altair's shoulder and neck, breathing in the scent of his lover's skin. Altair smelled like blood and danger, but underneath that, Sven detected hints of spice and something else, something warm, and familiar. A scent he was starting to associate with comfort.

And comfort was what he needed right now. More than anything. Much as he tried to resist the urge to say anything, though, he eventually found himself asking, "What happens now?"

"You get some sleep." Altair kissed the top of Sven's head. "Everything else can wait."

"No," Sven said, pulling away slightly. He needed answers. Now. "Where's Rhyme? Is the other coven going to retaliate and attack us?"

Altair sighed. "Rhyme is in another room recuperating. The doctor is looking after him right now."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes," Altair replied. "Physically, anyway. He won't come to harm here."

Sven let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "No one's going to bite him here?"

"No." Altair's expression turned grim. "I assigned him a guard to make sure of that. We need Rhyme to testify against the Black Spades for us."

"You want to involve the authorities?"

"They're very pro-mortal in this city," Altair replied. "The Black Spades will be forced to change their territory and I'll finally be rid of them."

"You're not scared to come under scrutiny yourself?" Sven asked.

"Would you speak against me?"

Sven blinked at him, surprised at the question. "No," he said truthfully. "I wouldn't betray you."

"Interesting choice of words." Altair brushed the tips of his fingers along Sven's jawline. "You ran away from me last night."

Sven winced at the reminder of his stupidity, but he wasn't going to let that accusation stand, either. "I never meant to run away from you. I only wanted to attend my mom's funeral. If you hadn't been so stubborn about it—"

"I had good reason to be stubborn, didn't I?"

"I know that!" Sven snapped, frustration bubbling over. "But I wasn't thinking clearly. I just… I needed to be there for my mom… After everything…" His voice trailed off as grief threatened to overwhelm him.

Altair's hand covered Sven's, squeezing it lightly. "I don't blame you."

Sven studied the vampire by his side. Altair had risked so much to come and save him. In spite of his vampiric powers and the blood Sven had fed him, his skin was still not fully healed, showing patches of burned red that made Sven wince. His face chest and arms, which Sven could see, were scratched up too. He'd probably had to fight his way down to Sven's prison cell. God knew how many members of the Black Spade vampire coven had died tonight because of Sven's foolishness.

God knew how easily Altair could have died too.

Up until now, Sven hadn't had a quiet moment to properly appreciate the fact that Altair had come for him in spite of the danger his brother posed, in spite of the *sunlight*, even.

"Why did you come for me?" Sven found himself asking. "With the sun out…"

Altair cupped Sven's cheek and placed a gentle kiss on the tip of his nose. "There is nothing in the world that can stop me from protecting what belongs to me," he vowed, staring straight into Sven's eyes. "Nothing."

And oh God, those words made Sven melt. Because Altair was telling the truth; Sven could sense it deep within him.

In that moment, Sven was Altair's. Utterly and wholly.

And, more than anything, he wanted Altair to be his in return, to understand everything about him, to know him fully.

"Did you love him?" Sven blurted out. "Your brother? Or did you hate him?"

"Love is not a word I would use," Altair said softly. "There were other things between us, but not love." Emotion flickered behind Altair's eyes. For a second, Sven thought that the vampire wasn't going to say anything more, that he would shut himself off again, retreat to somewhere Sven could not reach him, but then he spoke once more, his voice softer than Sven had ever heard it. "My brother and I used to be very close as children, but things changed when I turned into a vampire. You see, mortals were already on the verge of dying out at that time and my family was furious that I'd switched sides. They were very anti-paranormals." His lips twitched, almost as if trying to form a bitter smile, but not quite making it there. "Neph was the only one who'd still talk to me at all. He didn't approve of my decision, but he didn't judge me for it." Altair paused.

"What happened?" Sven asked.

"I was young and stupid," Altair said. "As a new vampire, I thought I was invincible. I got injured, badly, and the only thing that could help me recover was feeding on mortal blood. My brother offered his assistance and I accepted, not realizing that the act would destroy his life."

Sven shook his head. "That doesn't make sense."

"Oh, believe me, it does. I drained so much of his blood, there was hardly any left for him to survive on." Altair's expression hardened. "I had to turn him so that he wouldn't die."

Sven gasped. "You turned him into a vampire?"

"There was no other choice." Altair ran one hand through his hair as his eyes fixed on something in the distance. "He hated me for it." He chuckled darkly, but his laughter faded quickly,

and sadness crept across his face. "He blamed me for everything. Our people considered him a traitor, same as me. His wife left him. He lost his job, of course." Altair swallowed heavily. "Even his kids became terrified of him."

"I'm sorry," Sven breathed, heart breaking for the pain in Altair's voice. "You didn't mean for that to happen."

"No." Altair turned to look at Sven once more. "But eventually he became the monster everyone thought he was."

Sven shivered involuntarily at hearing Altair talk about Nephariel that way. The vampire had been a cold-blooded bastard, there was no denying that, but it was clear that Altair hadn't wanted anything that happened tonight to happen.

"Do you regret killing him?" Sven inquired carefully.

Altair's fingers brushed over Sven's lips, trailing over his lower lip in a featherlight touch. "The truth is, I should have killed him much sooner. Years ago. When he became something other than himself. But I let him be, and he got his revenge on me by turning my mate against her will, the way I did to him." He closed his eyes as a pained expression crossed his face. "She never deserved to suffer for my sins. And neither do you."

Sven stared at Altair as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place inside of his head. All this time, he'd thought it had been Altair who'd turned Isabella, but it hadn't been. Nephariel did that. All to hurt his brother.

And when Nephariel had gotten his hands on Sven, Altair had done everything in his power to stop history from repeating itself. Including killing the monster he'd created.

A wave of affection hit Sven as realization washed over him. His own pain and fear faded, replaced by a yearning desire to comfort this man who'd gone through so much pain and loss. He shifted closer to Altair, pressing their bodies flush together, chest to chest. He traced his thumb over Altair's cheek and kissed him tenderly.

He never wanted to leave this man's side again.

This was where he belonged.

He smiled and wrapped his good arm around Altair's waist, keeping him as close as possible as his heart brimmed over with emotion. Then he whispered the three words he'd never spoken aloud to anyone, except his mother: "I love you."

For a split second, Altair went absolutely still. Even his eyes remained frozen, his expression blank.

Then he exhaled slowly, closing his eyes and kissing Sven deeply before moving back just enough to murmur against his mouth, "You deserve better than a vampire's life."

Sven's heart lurched, and he scowled at the vampire. "Can't you just repeat the words back to me, you stubborn asshole?"

Altair blinked at Sven's tone, then frowned. He was silent for several moments as if processing what Sven had said. Finally, he leaned in and pressed his lips to Sven's ear, nuzzling his earlobe lightly. "I love you," he whispered in a rough voice. "If you *really* needed to hear it."

Relief flooded Sven and he laughed. "That wasn't so difficult now, was it?" He brushed his fingers through Altair's hair lovingly.

"Yes," Altair groaned dramatically. "So difficult. Never again."

"Liar." Sven grinned and kissed Altair's throat.

"Not." Altair pressed his lips to Sven's forehead.

Sven shivered but held his ground. "Yes." He nibbled on Altair's skin, earning a sharp intake of breath. "Besides, you know you're gonna say it again at some point."

"Maybe," Altair conceded. "When you're old and senile, and forget you already heard it once."

"You're planning to keep me around that long?" Sven teased.

"Forever." Altair ran one finger down Sven's cheek, gazing intently at him, eyes dark and serious.

Sven's insides warmed at hearing the promise in Altair's voice.

"Sounds like we have a plan then," Sven murmured. "But first… Let's get some sleep, shall we?"

Altair nodded in agreement, pulling the covers around Sven securely and holding him tightly to his body. "Whatever you want."

"You," Sven whispered. "I want you."

"Always," Altair promised.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Altair noticed Sven's body relaxing as the mortal drifted off to sleep beside him, but sleep did not come as easily for him.

His mind was plagued with too many thoughts and too much emotion. He hated being weak and feeling this vulnerable. It made him want to crawl out of his own skin and run as far away as possible from the entire world and never stop running.

At the same time, though, he couldn't imagine ever letting go of the warmth radiating from the man lying next to him.

He couldn't believe Sven had almost slipped away from him. Couldn't comprehend how close he had come to losing him forever.

All because the vampires he considered his family had gone behind his back and aided Sven in his escape.

And he didn't understand why.

It wasn't like his friends to cross him like this, even if they didn't approve of what he was doing. That sort of treachery was completely unheard of for any of his inner circle—so what had changed?

There was only one way for Altair to find out. He needed to go see Keegan. As much as he did *not* want to see the other vampire right now. Keegan was the one who'd convinced Mordyn to go behind Altair's back.

Because of his visions?

Altair's jaw clenched. Up until this moment, he'd been so distracted by everything else going on that his anger about Keegan's betrayal had been put on the back burner. Now, however… Now Altair was pissed. He couldn't ignore it anymore.

Keegan had acted against him—in direct disobedience of Altair's wishes—and he had to answer for his crimes.

Carefully, Altair extricated himself from Sven's arms, hoping not to wake him. Luckily, Sven slept soundly, exhausted after the day he'd had. He looked peaceful when he was unconscious, less stressed than usual. Beautiful. It calmed Altair's nerves somewhat knowing that Sven was safe at last.

Once he reached the door to their chamber, Altair took one last look at Sven and summoned a crow to keep watch over the mortal while he was away. Then he turned around and strode down the hallway towards Keegan's bedroom.

When Altair arrived at the room in question, the door opened before he had time to knock. Keegan stood on the other side, clad in dark jeans and a gray T-shirt. He looked as if he'd expected Altair to show up sometime this evening.

Of course he had.

A low growl rose up in Altair's throat. "How dare you go behind my back?"

Keegan stepped aside to let him enter, not saying anything. His gaze trailed after Altair as Altair moved inside.

"Mordyn told me what happened," Altair accused the other vampire.

"I understand that you're angry," Keegan said, closing the door, probably so the rest of the coven wouldn't hear their conversation. Altair was beyond caring about that kind of thing, though.

"I'm *more* than angry," he hissed at his friend. "You betrayed me."

"I didn't," Keegan stated calmly.

"You fucking knew I wouldn't agree to Sven leaving the coven, and you still arranged for Mordyn to help him! How exactly is that not treason?"

Keegan shook his head. "This was the only way the two of you, the only way *all of us,* would come out of this okay. Sven had to leave."

"And risk him getting abducted? Getting him back safely was far from guaranteed, dammit." Altair narrowed his eyes at his best friend. He felt his temper rising dangerously high, threatening to spill over. "You would not be the first vampire I killed today. Make no mistake about that."

Keegan closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, visibly composing himself. Almost as if he was scared. Good. He should be.

Finally, though, he spoke. "You can't blame me for wanting to prevent your death."

"Death? Who said anything about—"

"I told you you could not win against Nephariel."

Altair stared at Keegan. "You were wrong. I *killed* Nephariel."

Keegan met Altair's gaze with unwavering intensity. "Only because I helped make sure Sven escaped."

"You're delusional," Altair snapped. "Are you claiming I would have lost the fight?" Altair shook his head. "If he hadn't kidnapped Sven, I wouldn't have had to get sunburned to reach his hideout. I would have been even stronger. There's no way I would have lost." How did Keegan not understand that? "You gave Nephariel an advantage by giving him Sven, and I still beat him."

"No," Keegan disagreed. "You only *won* because you had to protect Sven from harm. Without him, you would have hesitated, and that hesitation would have cost you your life." Keegan paused and the lines of his face hardened. "I've seen this scenario play out a million different ways, Alt, and I never saw another option. If Sven stayed in the coven, Nephariel would have ambushed you in the city or somewhere else and you would have ended up dead. I couldn't let that happen."

Altair's whole body froze at the conviction in Keegan's voice. This wasn't a man trying to save his own ass—this was someone who genuinely cared for Altair, wanted him alive and safe and sane. Someone who would do whatever it took to ensure Altair's survival. And there was no doubt that he truly believed everything he just said.

That didn't change the facts, though.

"Tell me one thing," Altair said. "Were you a hundred percent sure that your plan would not risk Sven's life?"

Keegan met Altair's gaze, holding it steadily. "No," he replied honestly. "I only knew for certain that you would do everything in your power to save him."

Altair's fist flew toward Keegan's jaw before he had fully finished his statement, hitting him square on. The impact made a dull crunching sound in the otherwise quiet room.

Keegan fell back onto the floor, stunned for a second.

"You are unbelievable," Altair snarled, towering above Keegan. "That was a stupid gamble!"

"Maybe," Keegan said, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "But the reward was worth it." He climbed back to his feet, his head held high. "I saved both of your lives."

Altair's gaze bore into Keegan's for what felt like ages. His knuckles ached from striking Keegan. He hoped Keegan's jaw hurt worse.

Keegan was looking at him warily, but he wasn't apologetic at all. Which made Altair more frustrated than he thought possible.

"You could have gotten Sven killed," he growled at his best friend. "Or worse."

Keegan met Altair's glare head-on. "I made a calculated decision. One that worked out. Now our coven's got two mortals, the Black Spades won't bother us anymore and Nephariel finally got what he deserved."

Altair scoffed, understanding dawning on him at last. "That's it then? Is that why you did this? You wanted revenge on my brother for what he did to your sister?"

Keegan clenched his jaw, eyes darkening as the emotion he'd kept hidden until now surfaced. His nostrils flared and he tilted his chin in defiance. "He had to pay."

Altair couldn't fault Keegan for that sentiment. Still… "The price I paid could have been *my mate*, Keegan!" Altair approached the other vampire and grabbed his collar, pulling him close so they were face to face. "Don't you ever gamble with my property again."

Keegan didn't flinch when Altair shoved him back, but he didn't argue either. Not that Altair had expected him to. He only looked at Altair and asked, "Your mate?"

Altair sighed. He had no intention of having this conversation now. But instead of denying his words, he flashed Keegan a sly smile. "Don't tell me you didn't see that coming."

To his satisfaction, Keegan looked confused for a second, then annoyed. "I can't know everything."

"You saw that I'd do anything to save him, yet you didn't realize what he was to me?"

Keegan crossed his arms in front of his chest. As always, he was hopelessly clueless in matters of the heart and unwilling to admit it. "I was concerned with other things."

"Like manipulating my actions." Altair shot the other vampire a sharp look. "I'm demoting you until I think that I can trust you again. You can clean up puke from the club floor for the next little bit of eternity."

Keegan huffed but didn't complain.

In another coven, he would have been beheaded for his crimes. They both knew that.

Altair was being extremely generous with his chosen punishment, and Keegan wasn't dumb enough to whine about his good luck.

They regarded each other for one more moment, but when Altair made to turn around and leave, Keegan's expression softened. "I am really glad he's not hurt," Keegan said softly. "And that you survived."

Altair nodded, and then turned around and headed back to his chamber without another word. He didn't need any more explanations about Keegan's motives right now. Right now he only wanted his bed, and his mate curled against his side.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

To Sven's relief, Altair did not require him to remain in a locked room all day the next day. After Sven had breakfast, Altair gave Sven a small tour of the coven's base. The place was larger than Sven had assumed from what he'd seen so far, containing several bedrooms, two separate dining rooms, a large storage area, a well-equipped rec room, a couple of different offices, as well as the small infirmary which also included the space where Altair had first drawn blood from him.

"We've got a few cells downstairs as well," Altair explained as they ended their tour in what seemed like a large living room. "We don't use them much anymore."

Sven nodded as he sat down on the black leather couch in the middle of the room. It was the most comfortable-looking piece of furniture Sven had yet laid eyes on in the vampire lair.

A second later, Altair sat down next to him, one arm draped possessively across Sven's shoulders as he pressed a kiss to the top of Sven's head.

"How's your arm?" Altair asked gently. "Does it hurt?"

Sven shook his head. "It's just a bit itchy. I can't wait to get rid of this." He motioned at the splint.

"You've only had it for a day."

Sven shrugged. "It's already been too long." His eyes traveled over the vampire's body. Altair had looked awful yesterday, but now, less than a day since Altair had battled with

Nephariel, his skin had healed considerably. He almost looked completely recovered. "Wish I had your healing powers."

"Those come at a price," Altair reminded him.

Sven blew out a breath. He shouldn't have said anything. Now Altair was going to wonder again if Sven wanted to be turned.

He *should* want to be turned, shouldn't he?

That way he could spend eternity with his vampire, have the 'forever' that Altair had promised him.

To Sven's surprise, though, Altair let the topic drop before it had really started. He stood from the couch and summoned one of his crows. "This is Lissa. She'll be staying with you today while I take care of coven business."

"Lissa?" Sven asked, eyeing the crow. "Your crows have names?"

"Why wouldn't they have names?"

"You never introduced them before!"

"Ah." Altair smiled. "Well, this one thinks it's rude when I don't introduce her. She's a very dignified bird."

The crow cawed at Altair, then settled herself on one of the wooden tables, ruffling her feathers and observing Sven closely.

"I see," Sven mumbled, eying Lissa skeptically. She did have rather intelligent-looking eyes. "So you'll be my guard dog today. Guard bird."

Lissa squawked indignantly.

Sven blinked at her. Had she just told him off?

"Guard crow?" he tried again.

She glared at him.

Apparently, he'd still not hit on the right word. "You know I can't read your thoughts the way Altair can, right?"

She cawed again, then hopped over and pecked at his leg.

Sven yelped and rubbed the spot. "Hey, what was that for?"

Lissa cocked her head, looking pleased with herself.

"She likes you," Altair interjected with a smirk. "You should count yourself lucky. She doesn't get along with everyone."

"Is that so?" Sven glanced sideways at the bird on the table.

"Also, she wants you to call her 'my lady' while you're at it." Altair kept his expression entirely serious as he spoke.

"Really?" Sven asked, not believing a word. "Do *you* call her that?"

"Obviously not," Altair replied smoothly. "But I trust her. She takes the tasks I assign her just as seriously as she takes herself, so you should get used to having her around. As long as she's with you, I see no reason to keep you confined to my bedroom."

"Really?" Sven asked. "I get to run around the base by myself?"

"That's why I gave you the tour," Altair explained. "I want you to feel at home here."

"Oh." Sven blinked at him. "Okay." He supposed he really shouldn't be surprised that Altair treated him like a part of his coven already, but for some reason, the reality of the situation hadn't quite set in yet. Maybe because Sven wasn't a vampire, and he didn't know if he ever *would* be a vampire.

And wasn't that selfish of him?

"I like you just the way you are," Altair said, reading Sven's mind again.

Before Sven had time to respond, the vampire kissed him deeply, and when their lips parted, Altair's lips caressed the side of Sven's neck. "I have to deal with the authorities tonight," he informed Sven. "I'll probably be busy for most of the night, but tomorrow, you'll have me all to yourself."

Sven swallowed thickly, nodding in understanding. "I'd like that."

Altair smiled. A warm smile that melted Sven's heart and made heat coil in the pit of his stomach. "Me too," he said, and

with that, he withdrew.

"Wait," Sven said before the vampire could leave him alone entirely. "Can I go and see Rhyme?"

Altair paused, appearing to consider the request. Then he nodded. "Lissa knows which room he's in."

"Is it locked?"

"No. Iskander is in there keeping watch."

"Iskander?" Sven's brow furrowed. He wasn't sure he'd heard that name before.

"One of my friends," Altair explained. "I trust him."

Sven did not point out that Altair had *also* trusted Keegan. Some things were better left unsaid, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to form his own opinion of Iskander.

"Good luck with your work then," Sven told Altair. "See you in the morning?"

"Of course," Altair said before he walked out.

Sven watched him leave and then sat for a few moments with Lissa perching next to him in silence. Then he turned to address the crow. "Are you ready to escort me to see a friend?" he asked, wondering if Lissa would actually behave as well as Altair had indicated.

She let out an offended sound. Apparently, she really did want Sven to address her properly.

"My lady," Sven corrected himself with a sigh. "Will you lead the way?"

She preened, then spread her wings and lifted herself into the air.

Sven followed behind her.

When Sven knocked on the door to Iskander's room, a tall vampire opened. He had short, raven-black hair, and when his

eyes fell on Sven, they flashed gold for the briefest of moments.

Sven stared at him blankly for a moment because he'd never seen anyone with eyes like that. And the rest of Iskander was pretty fine too. Tall and muscular, with broad shoulders and strong arms, a dark skin tone—for a vampire—and sharp, handsome features.

Sven was very much in love with a different vampire, but he appreciated good-looking men nonetheless, and this was definitely a gorgeous creature right here.

Then he remembered he probably shouldn't stare. He quickly schooled his expression and tried not to seem as if he'd been gaping like an idiot at Iskander.

The vampire—whom Sven was guessing was Iskander—took in his appearance slowly, appraisingly, before finally giving him a curt nod. "You must be Sven."

"Yes," Sven said, extending his good hand.

"Heard about you," Iskander said gruffly as they shook hands. Then, he motioned for Sven to step into the room. "Come in."

"Thanks."

As Sven entered, his gaze immediately fell onto Rhyme, who lay on his back on a single bed near one of the walls. He looked pale, still, and thinner than any man should. An IV was attached to his arm, dripping nutrients into his veins. His eyes were shut tight, lips slightly parted. He was clearly sleeping.

"He's still unconscious?" Sven asked Iskander, worried for his friend.

Iskander shook his head. "He's lost a lot of blood. But we're making sure his vitals stay stable, and that his injuries heal."

Sven licked his lips. "Thank you," he whispered. "For helping him."

"I'm following orders," Iskander said without wasting any more words on the matter.

Sven sighed quietly as he made his way over to the chair beside his friend's bed and sank down, careful to move quietly so as not to disturb his sleep.

When Sven reached out to brush a stray lock of hair back from Rhyme's forehead, he felt Iskander's eyes on him. "Who is he?" Iskander asked after a minute.

"Altair didn't tell you?"

"Only that he was Nephariel's captive."

"His name is Rhyme," Sven said. "To be honest, I don't know much more than that either. He grew up in a vampire coven, but they sold him to Nephariel when he didn't want to be a juice box anymore. When Altair came for me, I asked him to take Rhyme too because no one should have to live like that." He raised his gaze in defiance at Iskander, expecting the vampire to disagree. But the vampire only inclined his head, as if this explanation was acceptable to him.

Sven relaxed his shoulders and lowered his eyes once more, studying Rhyme. His friend's breathing was steady, at least. That had to be a good sign.

Sven hoped it was.

"Will he be all right here?" Sven asked, turning his attention back to Iskander. "He hates vampires, you know."

Iskander didn't answer for several seconds. Instead, he leaned back against the wall, watching Rhyme's unconscious form with an inscrutable expression on his face. Finally, however, he spoke. "No one will hurt him while he's under my protection." His words were calm, sincere, almost matter-of-fact.

"And you won't drink from him?" Sven challenged the vampire, stomach drawing tight. If Iskander felt offended by the question, it would be easy for him to snap Sven in half, but Sven needed to know that his friend was safe here.

"I'm not hungry."

"And if you were… Would you? Drink from him?"

Iskander's gaze focused on Rhyme. "Look at him. There is nothing there to drink."

Sven had to admit that the vampire had a point. Rhyme did look as thin and fragile as a skeleton. "Even so—"

"You have nothing to worry about, mortal," Iskander cut in, tone firm. "I don't prey on those weaker than myself." The look he gave Sven was deadly serious.

"All right," Sven agreed, holding Iskander's gaze. "I can see why Alt put you in charge here."

Iskander frowned slightly at hearing that but nodded. "Altair knows what he is doing."

"Most of the time," Sven conceded. They both fell silent for a moment, neither saying another word. The only sounds filling the air were Rhyme's breaths, coming in soft, slow exhales.

Sven glanced around the room again, taking stock of its sparse furnishing. Aside from the bed, the only objects in the room were a few chairs and one dresser. No mirrors hung on the walls, and there was no clock anywhere that Sven could see.

"Are you going to stay with Altair?" Iskander asked, breaking the silence.

Sven blinked, startled by the unexpected inquiry. "Uh… yes. As long as he wants me around."

Iskander regarded Sven with an unreadable expression. "Good," he said eventually. His eyes took on a far-away look. "Us vampires have a habit of getting stuck in the past, but if he's choosing you, he is choosing to move on."

"Moving on is good," Sven said. He didn't need Iskander to spell out exactly what he was talking about either. Altair had been through so much… But now Nephariel was dead, and while Sven could not replace the mate Altair had lost… maybe he could still soothe that ache in Altair's heart.

Iskander nodded, apparently content with that answer.

"You seem to care about Altair a lot," Sven observed, wondering if he was overstepping his bounds.

"I would give my life for him," Iskander replied calmly.

"Because he's your boss?"

"Because we're coven," Iskander said as if this explained everything. When Sven only looked at him, though, he added, "Mortal families are for a lifetime. Covens are forever."

Forever.

Wasn't that exactly what Altair wanted from Sven too?

And yet, Sven shuddered at the weight of the word. To have 'forever' with Altair, he'd have to become part of this coven too.

Was he ready for that?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Altair was in the middle of writing a statement about the Black Spades' crimes when he was interrupted. Mordyn didn't even bother knocking on his door before he burst into the room, looking ready to drag Altair off somewhere.

"Don't tell me you forgot," he said when Altair raised an eyebrow at his behavior.

Altair stared at his friend blankly. What the hell was Mordyn on about? "This isn't how you're going to get back into my good graces."

"Not that!" Mordyn waved off Altair's comment as if it meant nothing. "It's the second Monday of the month."

Altair blinked at his friend. "Second Monday of the…" Altair's voice trailed off when realization hit him. It was time for the monthly meeting. "You really think I'm up to that tonight?" Altair asked, grimacing as he pushed himself away from his desk, muscles stiff from hours of sitting.

Mordyn crossed his arms over his chest. "That's exactly why I came here. If you cancel now, everyone will think you're letting your duties slide because of the mortal. But you want the coven to accept Sven, don't you? In fact, I think you should bring him."

"This meeting isn't *that* important," Altair argued. "You can do it perfectly fine without me there."

"Probably," Mordyn conceded. "But don't you think Sven would *like* to participate? If he's going to be part of the family you can't keep him hidden away forever."

"I'm not hiding him. He's got free rein of the base." As he spoke the words, he tuned into Lissa to see what Sven was up to. He was exploring the bookshelves in the rec room. Altair didn't like to think that he was *spying* on his lover, so he hadn't checked in with his crow much, waiting instead for her to alert him of anything dangerous, but so soon after the incident with Nephariel, it was hard for Altair to shake his protective instincts entirely.

"If you're already letting him roam around the base, what's the harm in introducing him to Monday Madness?"

"He's *just* lost his mother, Mord, show a little sensitivity, will you?"

Mordyn held out his arms in surrender. "I know, I know. But you might still ask him. Don't you think he would appreciate feeling like he belongs here?"

"Damn you," Altair muttered, knowing full well that Mordyn had a point. If he wanted Sven to live here full-time, Sven had to feel welcomed, and while Altair wasn't in the mood to socialize after everything that had happened over the weekend, Sven had been locked in a cage for longer than he had any right to be. This might do him good. "Fine, I'll ask him, but only because I can't be bothered with trying to argue with you about this right now."

Mordyn looked way too pleased about getting his way. Altair chose to ignore that as he rose from his chair. "Did you need anything else or do you just enjoy bothering me?"

"I do greatly enjoy bothering you." Mordyn smiled. "But I also wanted to apologize." He cleared his throat as his face grew serious. "I'm sorry for my mistakes. It wasn't my intention to betray you. I only thought…"

"I get it," Altair cut him off. "So this is where you make your pitch to get out of janitor duties."

"You can't blame a vampire for trying." Mordyn groaned.

"If you don't like mopping floors, I've also got plenty of paperwork I could assign you."

Mordyn winced visibly at the suggestion, then nodded slowly. "I think I'm happier cleaning the floors."

Altair's lips curled at his friend's reply. "Get to it then. I'll relieve you of your duties when the floors are sparkly enough for me to see my reflection in them."

Mordyn huffed but made a fist over his heart as if taking an oath. "It shall be done, my liege."

Altair chuckled, then walked out of his office and made his way toward the rec room, wondering when Mordyn would remember that vampires didn't have reflections.

Sven wasn't at all sure what to expect when he and Altair arrived at the vampire meeting, which took place in the club's main space.

Some of the vampires gathered there, he'd met before, like Mordyn, Iskander, and Keegan, but many faces were new to him. They sat in small groups scattered around the tables and bar, drinking from bottles labeled 'bloodwine', chatting, and playing cards.

Sven guessed these were all members of the coven. Some of them, he vaguely remembered seeing while Altair had rescued him from Nephariel's clutches, but he'd been too out of it to really focus on anyone but Altair then. Now he eyed the vampires carefully, taking in their appearances one by one while Altair led him over to a table in the front where Mordyn and Iskander were already gathered.

"So glad you could make it." Mordyn smiled at Sven as he and Altair sat down.

Sven nodded and glanced at Iskander. "Who's watching Rhyme now?"

"Carmen," Iskander replied, even though that name meant nothing to Sven.

There were so many people he still had to get to know. "Has there been any change in his condition?"

Iskander shook his head. "Not yet. But he is looking better than he did."

Sven sighed. "Well, I guess that's something."

He glanced around the room once more and noticed that more and more eyes were drifting to him and Altair now that they had joined the group, obviously waiting for some sort of statement from their leader.

Altair stood and faced them.

The entire room fell quiet as the assembled vampires turned their attention to Altair.

"Before we begin this month's Monday Madness, let me make one thing clear." He paused dramatically, his deep voice resonating in the otherwise quiet room. "This is Sven. He is under my protection, so treat him accordingly." Altair glanced sideways at Sven, eyes intense, a hint of affection flashing across his face before his expression hardened once more as he addressed his vampires again. "Any one of you has a problem with my mate, you've got a problem with *me*, understand?"

Sven blinked at the term Altair used. Was Altair implying…

No, it was probably just a slip of the tongue…

But as Sven's mind spun, everyone in the crowd chorused in agreement with their leader, and Altair didn't bother to correct himself as his vampires raised their bottles to cheer for him.

Altair waited until the room was completely silent and everyone's attention was focused solely on him. Then he motioned with one hand towards Mordyn. "Go on then," he told the vampire. "You can take over this nonsense meeting."

With a grin, Mordyn jumped up from his seat and began to speak, but Sven was barely listening.

Altair had just announced to everyone within the coven that Sven was his *mate*. The weight of those words was not lost on Sven, nor was their meaning. Altair had publicly claimed him.

And suddenly Sven's throat tightened and his chest felt so full he couldn't breathe. Not because the prospect of being mated scared him—no, he was rather fond of Altair—but because this was the first time Altair had used a word to describe their relationship other than 'property'.

They had fucked before, hell, they'd even shared tender moments, but despite the passion and raw desire between them, Sven hadn't quite dared to believe that Altair really cared for him the same way Sven had come to care about Altair. He hadn't dared to believe that the vampire saw him as anything but his possession.

But the term 'mate' implied so much more, didn't it? It implied trust, commitment, and partnership.

And when Altair sat back down next to him, Sven couldn't stop himself from grabbing the collar of his jacket and pulling him into a bruising kiss. He could feel the surprise radiating off Altair as he kissed him, but it didn't take the vampire long to respond to Sven's needy attack. One strong arm came around Sven's waist as Altair's mouth opened beneath Sven's. The taste of iron flooded Sven's senses when Altair licked his way inside his mouth. Sven moaned, pressing himself against Altair, his cock already growing hard just from this single kiss.

Beside them, someone cleared their throat and Sven drew back, suddenly realizing that the whole coven was watching them. Even Mordyn had stopped speaking.

Several dozen pairs of eyes were fixed on him and Altair, varying degrees of awe, amusement and acceptance showing on their faces.

In response, Sven lifted his chin in challenge and allowed his lips to curl into a smirk. "What?" he said nonchalantly. "Never seen two people kissing before?"

Mordyn snickered as laughter spread among the vampires. "This is exactly what I've been talking about," he addressed the coven, and suddenly Sven found himself wishing he'd listened to Mordyn's prior announcements because he had no idea what the vampire was on about. Fortunately, Mordyn didn't leave him guessing for long. "Sven's got Altair wrapped

around his little finger," Mordyn said. "So I vote that he takes Altair's place in tonight's game."

"I never take part in the games," Altair cut in.

"We only banned you because you always win," Mordyn pointed out. "I think Sven playing for you is perfectly acceptable. What does everyone else think?"

Sven blinked at Mordyn and looked around the room, surprised to find that every vampire seemed to agree. "Really?"

"Of course," Mordyn said with a huge grin.

"Wait," Sven said. "What is this about? I thought this was a meeting."

"It is." Mordyn smiled. "But when you live as long as a vampire, you realize that life's too long for boring meetings, so we make ours more interesting. To keep the club going, we need to organize a special event to draw in patrons once a month. Nobody ever wants to be responsible for it, though, so that's where we came up with our Monday Madness Meetings. We play a little game, and the loser ends up having to arrange next month's special event."

"Sounds fun." Sven had to admit.

"Isn't it?" Mordyn grinned. "Since Altair doesn't play, he usually serves as the judge."

"They're all cheaters," Altair supplied.

Mordyn shrugged. "It's only cheating if you get caught. So the game's goal is not to get caught by Alt or his crows."

"That is not the goal of the game," Iskander spoke up. "And if we're playing with a mortal, it would be the honorable thing to do to ban all use of vampiric powers."

"Of course," Mordyn said. "We'll pick a mortal game and stick to mortal rules."

Murmurs came from the crowd and one vampire yelled, "Let's play Trivial Pursuit!"

"No," another called out, "Trivia Crack!"

"Or Cards Against Vampirekind."

Mordyn laughed at their suggestions, then turned to Sven. "Let me give you a piece of advice, never play trivia games with vampires. Fuckers just want to brag about how many historic events they've lived through, and once they start talking, well, they don't shut up." He made a face. "Ever."

Someone threw a bottle at Mordyn, which he ducked expertly. "Are you already drunk or is your aim always shit?" Mordyn teased the offending vampire.

Sven was starting to think he'd bitten off more than he could chew here. He looked at Altair questioningly.

Altair stroked his chin thoughtfully, as if considering the best option. "Monopoly," he said.

"No." A chorus of vampires groaned, and one of them actually threw their hands in the air in frustration. "You just want us to suffer."

"Suck it up," Altair commanded. "At least with Monopoly, I'll know your vampire powers won't give you an advantage over Sven." He gestured at the tables, and several vampires started dragging furniture around, setting up an open space for them all to sit around while Mordyn grabbed an old-looking board game from one of the shelves. "We'll be limited to eight players, so I'll draw names."

Only a few moments later, the players had been chosen, and Sven wasn't surprised to find himself among them, along with Keegan, Iskander, and five other vampires, one of them being the doctor who'd examined him the other day. Unsurprisingly, Mordyn managed not to have his name drawn, and Altair opted to continue serving as a judge for this particular game.

Sven hadn't played Monopoly very often. Growing up, they'd only had one set of the game to go around, and it had been missing a few pieces, but as the game unfolded, he enjoyed himself more than he thought he would. Under Altair's watchful eye, every rule was followed meticulously, and none of the vampires tried to cheat Sven, although they all delighted in taking his money when he landed on their properties.

"I don't think I'm going to win this," Sven mused a couple of rounds into the game after buying a hotel for one of his properties and promptly landing on a spot owned by a vampire called Cyril.

"It's not about winning," Altair said. "It's more about not losing." He motioned at Keegan, who was almost all out of money after being stuck in jail while all the good properties were bought up. "They're bleeding him dry."

"Guess this is a vampire's game after all," Keegan muttered when he rolled the dice again and failed to avoid paying another hefty rent.

Sven laughed; he couldn't help it. Of all things, he'd never thought he'd find himself playing Monopoly with a bunch of vampires. After being terrified of the creatures of the night for so long, it was surreal to see them acting like normal people, grumbling about unfair dice rolls.

"Having a good time?" Altair asked softly, resting one hand on Sven's thigh under the table.

"Yes," Sven admitted. "But I wouldn't mind leaving early if you had other plans in mind for the evening."

"The sooner you force Keegan into bankruptcy, the sooner we can leave here."

"I heard that," Keegan remarked from the opposite side of the table.

Altair merely gave him a sly smile and motioned to the board. "Less talking, more playing."

Keegan glared at Altair but complied.

"I hate you all," Keegan declared twenty minutes later to a round of laughter from the coven as he gave his last hundred dollars to Iskander. The big vampire took it wordlessly, counting out the bills while Keegan resigned. "This game is rigged," Keegan complained as he leaned back in his chair.

"You couldn't predict that?" one of the other players, a vampire by the name of Serena, teased. "Such a sore loser."

"Aww, come on," Mordyn consoled Keegan, clapping him on the back. "And I'm looking forward to seeing what you'll come up with for next month's event."

"I'll figure something out," Keegan replied. "How do you all feel about a masquerade?" he asked as if he'd already given this idea some thought, and Sven wondered if maybe he'd seen his loss coming after all.

"Will there be dancing?" another vampire asked. "I love dancing."

Keegan nodded. "Of course there will be. Anything you want." He paused a moment, looking around the room. "I predict that it's going to be a full success."

"Approved," Altair said easily. Though Sven got the impression that maybe he just wanted to get back down to the basement because he got up as soon as he'd finished speaking, pulling Sven up along with him. "Good game," he said, bidding farewell to his coven. "Remember that Keegan and Mordyn are on clean-up duty."

"We all know why you're in a hurry to get out of here," Mordyn noted as he packed up the game.

Altair smirked at the vampire but did not bother responding to him, choosing instead to turn and address the rest of the coven. "Sleep well and be ready to get to work at nightfall."

And without further delay, he swept out of the room, taking Sven with him.

Chapter Thirty

The minute the door to Altair's room closed behind them, Sven turned to look at Altair. His vampire's eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

"That was a fun night," he commented, slipping out of Altair's grip to walk backward to the bed, slowly undoing the buttons of his shirt. His movements were a little awkward because he still only had one hand to use, but he didn't let that stop him from trying to seduce the man who'd called him his 'mate' earlier.

Altair watched him like a hawk.

Or like a crow?

Speaking of crows, Lissa had vanished at some point without Sven's noticing. But that was probably for the best; he didn't need an audience for this.

When he reached the edge of the bed, he struggled to get his shirt off over the splint on his arm. In a second, though, Altair was by his side, helping him, his cool fingers trailing against Sven's skin, teasing. Sven tugged him forward by his collar and pulled him into a deep kiss. Their tongues slid together as Altair pressed his body against Sven, and Sven couldn't help but moan into the vampire's mouth. God, he loved the feel of Altair's strength against his own body. And the way Altair touched him, firm and possessive, his hands mapping the naked skin of Sven's torso before traveling lower to cup his ass and squeeze hard enough to send a shiver down his spine.

"I want to suck you," Sven muttered into Altair's ear. "Want to feel your dick throb in my mouth."

His pants grew tight and uncomfortable as his cock ached at the mere thought. Altair growled. The sound went straight to Sven's balls, and he quickly undid his belt. Altair watched him intently, eyes filled with desire.

"Clothes off. Now," Sven urged as he pushed his jeans down.

Without another word, Altair stepped away from Sven and tore off his clothes. It didn't take the vampire long to stand in front of Sven in nothing more than his boxer briefs, the outline of his erect shaft very obvious under the black fabric. Sven's gaze fixed on it, and he licked his lips. Damn, the vampire had a magnificent cock. "Get rid of the boxers too," he ordered.

Altair lifted an eyebrow. "Giving me orders now, Sven?"

Sven grinned, reaching out to stroke his fingers over the bulge in the vampire's shorts. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I?"

Altair's lips curled up into a dark smile. "You're hot when you're being demanding." He shoved down his boxers. "Is this what you wanted?" He cocked his hips toward Sven and wrapped one large hand around his thick shaft.

Sven sucked in a breath at the sight. "Fuck yeah."

He dropped onto his knees on the floor, leaning closer to the vampire's groin and inhaling the heavy scent of arousal surrounding them. Without wasting any more time, he moved forward and ran his tongue up Altair's shaft, tracing the veins on it, delighting in the low growl coming from Altair. He'd never had another man's cock in his mouth, but damn, he loved the taste of it. Especially Altair's. "You like that?" he murmured, darting his tongue against the sensitive slit.

The muscles in Altair's thighs tensed briefly under Sven's palms and Altair tangled one hand in Sven's hair.

Encouraged by the gesture, Sven licked along the length of Altair's erection once more before sucking it into his mouth, taking the head past his teeth and rolling his tongue around its ridge.

A low moan escaped Altair, and he fisted Sven's hair tighter. "Sven…" He gently rocked his hips forward, forcing his dick deeper into Sven's mouth. "More."

Sven would have liked to smile around the stiff flesh, but his lips were stretched wide by the girth of Altair's cock. He relaxed his throat as much as he could and then sucked harder, working his mouth over the velvety skin, moaning at the feel of it pushing into him, thrusting farther in.

When Altair's hand began to move in his hair, directing him to bob up and down, Sven gave himself over to the pleasure of the moment, closing his eyes and letting Altair fuck his mouth, giving him total control. A loud groan spilled from Altair's throat as he held Sven's head still and jerked his hips fast and shallow, careful not to trigger Sven's gag reflex as he pumped himself between his lips.

God, that felt good, having Altair holding him, fucking his mouth. Sven palmed his cock through the thin material of his boxers, unable to remain still.

"Getting hard from blowing me?" Altair purred, rubbing himself against Sven's lips before driving forward again. "You love my cock in your mouth, don't you?" He pushed Sven down until Sven's nose was buried in his pubic hair and the tip of his cock tickled the back of Sven's throat.

Sven swallowed convulsively around it and Altair groaned, pulling out slightly and pushing back inside the ring of his lips in slow, controlled motions. His fangs were visible now, the tips pressing into his lower lip as his gaze remained fixed on Sven, eyes half-lidded and flashing crimson. The sight sent a rush of heat to Sven's balls.

He squeezed himself and moaned as Altair resumed his previous rhythm. His cock slid between Sven's lips again and again as he rocked his hips, and when his fingers clenched tightly in Sven's hair and his movements grew jerkier and more desperate, Sven knew he was close. He cupped the vampire's sac with his good hand, gently running his thumb along Altair's balls.

"Sven!" Altair slowed down, almost holding himself entirely still for a moment before thrusting forward hard. Then he released a deep moan that sent shivers through Sven's body as he started shooting his cum down his throat.

Sven eagerly gulped down what he could, relishing the taste of his vampire, then sucked at the softening shaft until the last drops were drained from Altair. As soon as his breathing calmed down, Altair pushed Sven onto the bed and lowered himself to kneel between Sven's thighs.

"Now it's my turn," he whispered, and the sheer need in that one sentence had Sven's cock straining against the confines of his boxers.

Altair wasted no time before tugging Sven's underwear off him, revealing his dick, which stood proudly in the air, fully erect, precum leaking from its tip. With a smug smile, he wrapped his hand around Sven's shaft and stroked slowly.

"Alt…" Sven gasped at the feel of those strong fingers brushing up his length, circling the swollen head of his erection and then sliding back down. Every cell in his body burned, and his heart pounded loudly in his ears. He needed release.

"You really did love sucking my cock," Altair murmured huskily. He nuzzled Sven's neck, planting tiny kisses and licks against the tender flesh as his fingers worked their magic on Sven's erection. When he reached down to fondle Sven's balls with his other hand, Sven almost came right there.

"Please," he whispered, desperately bucking up into Altair's fist.

The vampire chuckled softly and scraped one elongated fang across Sven's neck. "Begging me? And here I thought you wanted to be in command tonight."

Sven couldn't manage a coherent response, but luckily, Altair didn't seem to expect one, because he gripped Sven's dick firmly and brought it up to his lips. "Hold very still," Altair warned, and Sven shuddered as his erection disappeared into the wet warmth of the vampire's mouth, the tight suction

almost too intense for him to handle. And when the blunt edges of Altair's fangs grazed his flesh ever so lightly, he gasped in a mixture of shock and arousal.

If Sven lost control of himself and bucked his hips unexpectedly… He'd probably get nicked. And while that thought should have put Sven off, the thrill of danger had the opposite effect on him. It went straight to Sven's aching balls, making his toes curl and his pulse race as he fought for self-control.

For long moments, Altair held him in his mouth, gently massaging his balls, but not moving at all. The lack of friction was killing Sven, and he barely bit back a whimper as Altair finally started licking him.

Sven's eyes fell shut, and his muscles strained to hold himself motionless as Altair's fangs teased along his dick. Fuck, that was incredible. So forbidden, so dangerous. It made everything else feel sharper and brighter. The coolness of Altair's breath, the gentle touch of his fingers, the wetness of his tongue. Pleasure built up inside Sven, white-hot and burning through him, threatening to consume him. "Alt, I need to…"

Altair hummed in acknowledgment and finally took Sven as deep as he could, the vibrations of the sound pulsating along his length and bringing him that much closer to the brink.

"God, yes," Sven gasped as Altair's throat constricted around the head of his dick, the feeling overwhelming.

When the vampire sucked him in earnest, his mind went blank, and he gave in to the waves of pleasure assaulting him.

"Come for me, Sven," Altair growled, and Sven cried out, all his control breaking.

His muscles snapped, his back arched, and his cock spasmed in Altair's mouth as his balls tightened. Cum spurted from him in a blinding rush of ecstasy as Sven's world erupted into bliss.

Sweaty and exhausted, he sank back, spent.

Altair crawled up beside him and kissed him, a deep and thorough exploration with tongue and lips that Sven relished

until Altair broke their kiss. "You taste delicious," he murmured. "Everywhere."

Sven forced his eyes open and saw Altair smiling at him, a hint of red still glinting in the depths of his irises. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, then Altair rolled them both onto their sides and pulled a blanket over their bodies, careful not to aggravate Sven's broken arm.

Sven settled in Altair's arms, enjoying the way they held him and how perfectly their bodies fit together. He snuggled against his lover's chest, finding the skin there cooler than he was used to because Altair had not drunk from him. "If you turned me," Sven whispered, "wouldn't you miss the taste of my blood?"

"You'd still bleed." Altair tucked a stray lock of hair behind Sven's ear.

"You know what I mean," Sven argued quietly. "It wouldn't be the same."

"Maybe not," Altair allowed. "But you'd still be you, and I'd still enjoy biting you just as much." His lips brushed over Sven's cheek before trailing along his throat, causing a fresh shiver to run down his spine. God, he wanted this, wanted *everything* this man was offering, no matter how crazy that might be.

Still, he had to confirm what he'd heard earlier. "You called me your mate…"

Altair paused his lazy exploration of Sven's neck for a second before nodding. "I did."

"Are you sure about that?"

Altair withdrew just a few inches to study him quietly. "There's something I've been keeping from you," he admitted.

Sven stared up at him. "What?"

"That night in the park wasn't the first time we met."

Sven blinked, his brain refusing to process the statement correctly. "Wait, what? But…"

"A vampire attacked you in the woods a few years ago."

"That wasn't you," Sven protested. "I know that wasn't you." Being bitten by *that* vampire had been horrible. Terrifying beyond compare. Nothing like the times Altair had sunk his teeth into Sven's flesh. Nothing even close to it.

"No," Altair agreed. "It wasn't." His voice grew soft, as if he was recalling a painful memory. "It was my sire."

Sven sucked in a breath. "What?" he asked, unable to comprehend what Altair was telling him.

Altair caressed his face with gentle fingers as he explained. "My sire was a vampire who enjoyed hunting a little too much. Usually, he'd find animals in the woods, but that night…" Altair's lips thinned. "We caught your scent on the wind, and my sire decided that he needed to have you. He was going to enslave you." He swallowed. "I couldn't allow that, so when he attacked you, I struck him down while he was distracted."

Sven looked at Altair in disbelief. "But why would you do that? You didn't even know me!"

Altair's hand stilled on his cheek. "It puzzled me too, back then. I didn't know you, but I couldn't let another vampire have you. Not even my sire." His gaze locked with Sven's. "Something about you spoke to me on a primal level I didn't understand but I couldn't ignore."

"And then you just left me there?" Sven asked, struggling to fit the pieces of the puzzle together in his head. At least the feathers in his dreams were finally starting to make sense. If Altair had been there that night…

"I wasn't fit to take another mate," Altair said softly. "Not after…" His voice trailed off, but Sven could hear the pain underlying it and didn't press the matter. "I figured your life would be better without me."

Sven swallowed, wanting to tell Altair otherwise, but knowing full well that he would not have been receptive to the idea of dating a vampire at that point in his life. It hadn't been the right time for either of them. "Why did you never tell me?"

Altair's finger traced over the line of Sven's jaw before dipping lower along his throat. "Would you have believed me?"

"I'd like to think I would have," Sven murmured.

Altair blew out a breath. "When you came to me in the park, when you smeared your blood on my lips…" He shook his head. "I told myself I took you captive so you wouldn't go to another vampire who would treat you worse, but in reality, I couldn't let you go once I'd had a taste of you."

Sven raised his hand to Altair's face, cupping it softly. "I'm glad," he murmured, watching as a million emotions flickered through the depths of Altair's dark eyes. "I can't believe you killed your sire for me."

"I'd kill anyone who dares to touch you," Altair whispered darkly. "And I'll never let another vampire feed from your vein."

Sven swallowed, his chest suddenly tight at the words, but to belong to Altair, wholly, completely, forever… The thought warmed him to the core. He placed his hand on Altair's shoulder. "Drink from me," he said softly.

"You're tired and still recovering." Altair's voice grew concerned, but Sven didn't miss the spark of desire flaring up in his eyes.

"That doesn't matter," Sven said. "If you don't stop drinking."

"Sven…"

Sven's heartbeat kicked up a notch, the thought of becoming a vampire doing strange things to his pulse. But he wanted this. He wanted it so badly that it almost hurt to wait. "Do it," he whispered. "Turn me."

Altair studied Sven for a long moment, and Sven stared back, laying himself bare before his vampire, leaving nothing hidden.

Slowly, Altair's eyes began to glow again and his fangs grew longer. "Are you sure?" he asked Sven. "Because this is not a decision you will ever get to change once done."

"Yes," Sven whispered. "I want to be yours, forever."

For several seconds, Altair seemed at war with himself. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and his lips kept moving, as if he was internally debating whether or not this was the right thing to do.

Sven reached for his hand and threaded their fingers together. "This *is* what I want," he emphasized.

Finally, Altair nodded and drew Sven against him. His lips brushed over Sven's pulse point, sending shivers down Sven's back as they lay tangled together, completely skin to skin. Then Altair sank his fangs into Sven's throat, piercing the flesh effortlessly and drawing a groan of need from Sven.

After that, time seemed to lose all meaning. The sensation of being fed from by Altair blurred Sven's vision and wiped every thought from his head. There was no room for fear or worries. Altair was here; Altair would keep him safe; Altair would make sure he would survive his transition to a vampire.

So Sven closed his eyes and gave in to the feel of Altair's mouth on his throat, the way Altair pulled Sven tightly against him, and how he drank long and deep from Sven's vein—and did not stop.

When blackness finally started to creep along the edges of Sven's consciousness, he surrendered willingly to the abyss that awaited him.

He would awaken as a new man. A creature of darkness, a vampire.

But more importantly, he'd wake in Altair's arms, as his mate.

Chapter Thirty-One

S ven's mind floated on a sea of warmth as myriad unfamiliar sounds and smells reached him. His whole body felt different, sharper, heavier. Every cell ached with exhaustion, yet there was an electric current of energy humming inside him. His skin tingled and the air felt harsh against it, too cold, too rough.

The only thing familiar to him was Altair's presence, strong and steady next to him. "Shh," the vampire murmured as he cradled Sven's body against him, gently stroking his fingers through Sven's hair. "You're doing great."

Sven opened his mouth to reply, but his voice failed him.

"Drink."

Something warm dripped on his lips, and he flicked out his tongue to lick up whatever was offered to him. The coppery tang of blood met his taste buds, and his entire focus was immediately drawn to it.

"That's right," Altair encouraged him. "Don't stop drinking until it's all gone."

The scent was intoxicating, the taste addictive, and Sven could not have stopped himself from gulping it down even if he'd wanted to.

By the time Altair withdrew, Sven was buzzing with life and some of the tension in his muscles was easing. His eyelids still refused to obey him, though, and his fingers didn't want to move either. His gums itched.

"Sleep now, love. Rest."

He wanted to argue. He wanted to say that he'd rested enough. But before he could find his tongue, something dragged him back to the nothingness of oblivion.

He dreamed of his mom and her smile. She held his hand and led him down the path in the forest, toward the small pond where they'd gone to cool off in the summers when he was small. Now it was late autumn and the leaves had mostly fallen, coloring the forest paths in bright shades of yellow and red.

These woods were so familiar to him, and yet, they seemed different somehow. Unreal in a way that he couldn't quite define. He couldn't even say why that bothered him because this was a dream, and everything seemed just a little unreal in a dream, but he couldn't shake the sensation.

The crunch of the leaves under his feet echoed in his ears, as loud as the beat of his own heart. Birdsong reached him from the distance, but aside from the wind rustling through the trees, nothing moved, no animal stirred. They were alone.

Just him and his mother.

And she looked at him as if she hadn't seen him in years, with that kind of proud smile that only a mother could offer a child. "You found someone," she commented, sounding happy for him. "Someone special."

"I did," Sven replied, not needing to ask how she knew. "He's a vampire. I…" he trailed off, not quite sure how to tell her that *he* was also in the process of becoming a vampire.

"I know, honey." Katya's smile grew bittersweet. "We could not talk like this if you were not between life and death."

His throat grew tight at those words and he stopped, blinking at her. "Mom?"

She stepped close to him and cupped his face, then placed a tender kiss on his forehead. "I don't have much time to speak with you," she whispered. "But you mustn't blame yourself for what happened. You did everything you could. I wish…" She shook her head, a single tear trickling down her face. "I am

happy for you," she choked out. "You've finally chosen your own path."

"I did," Sven admitted, swallowing against the lump forming in his throat. His chest felt ready to burst with joy and happiness at seeing her again, even knowing that their time here was limited. "I miss you so much."

Katya threw her arms around him, enveloping him in the warmest of hugs. "I never left," she whispered, burying her face in his neck. "We are always together in our hearts, remember that. Your father and I are so proud of you."

"You've met Dad again?"

She smiled at him again in a way that made everything seem right in the world. "Of course I have." Her fingers stroked his cheek once more. "But that's a story for another time." She released him and took a step back. "You have to go now, Sven. It's not your time to die."

"No!" Sven said reflexively. He didn't want to leave here yet. What if he never got to see her again, what if he forgot the way she smelled or how soft her touch was? What if he…

A low caw pierced his thoughts as something black fluttered above him. A crow.

One of Altair's?

His mother looked at it, then back at Sven. "You don't want to abandon your vampire, do you?"

Sven blinked at her, then shook his head firmly. He would never do that to Altair. Never.

"Go to him then." Katya stroked a hand through his hair. "Focus on your future now, not the past." She pressed a kiss to his cheek, and then she was gone, leaving him alone with the crow who fluttered around him and tugged at his shirt.

"Stop that," he scolded the bird.

In response, it made an unhappy noise and pecked at his sleeve, making it clear that it wanted him to follow it.

The crow took flight and landed on a tree stump farther down the path, watching him expectantly.

"You can wait a minute, can't you?" Sven asked as he raised his fingers to touch his cheek. He could still feel the lingering heat of where his mother had kissed him, but when he glanced around, he realized that the forest around him was quickly changing. The bright leaves of autumn shifted into a dull gray as the temperature dropped drastically, ice creeping up the sides of the tree trunks.

The bird squawked loudly at him, its pitch frantic, almost panicked. It hopped up and down in place, cawing again.

Sven stopped hesitating and hurried after the crow, ignoring how the frost pricked his skin.

Fortunately, Sven didn't have to go very far before he felt himself yanked out of the dream—if it had been a dream at all. One moment he was sprinting through the forest, and the next, his consciousness shifted gears and returned him to the waking world, where he came alert with a sudden start.

Eyes wide open, he stared into Altair's face. The vampire leaned over him, studying him carefully as Sven took a slow, deep breath, taking in everything at once—the warmth of the bed, the comforting smell of Altair, and the way his dark eyes shone with concern. "Hey," he said, surprised at how raspy his voice sounded.

Altair visibly relaxed. "Hey," he said in return. He helped Sven up into a sitting position, propping pillows against the headboard to support him.

"How long was I out?"

"All night," Altair murmured. "Longer than I expected." His features tightened briefly. "New vampires need to feed every few hours to get through the first night without risking death." He brought his wrist to his own mouth and bit into it, drawing blood. Then he lifted it to Sven's lips.

The scent hit Sven's nostrils, and before he knew what he was doing, his tongue was lapping up the liquid as it spilled from Altair's wound. He shuddered as his teeth elongated in

response. Without conscious thought, he clamped them around Altair's forearm, sealing them into the damaged flesh and swallowing greedily. He wasn't prepared for how incredible Altair tasted, for the burst of flavors that washed over his palate. And damn, he never wanted to stop drinking.

It took Altair placing his free hand on the side of Sven's neck and squeezing lightly to get Sven to withdraw his fangs from his flesh. He looked up at his lover in confusion, lips wet with blood as he tried to understand why Altair would make him stop.

"Easy," Altair whispered softly.

Sven nodded, licking his lips one last time to chase any errant drops of crimson, but despite his best intentions, his fangs stayed extended. "Fuck, how do you…?" He gestured at his teeth.

"Practice," Altair said. "Once you're accustomed to being a vampire, you can control that reaction most of the time." He brushed his thumb over Sven's cheek. "Speaking of reactions… How are you feeling?"

Sven assessed himself for a moment, taking stock of how his body felt. Everything seemed weird, not quite like before. His nose seemed more sensitive, his vision sharper and unbothered by the lack of light in the room. He heard his own heartbeat—and Altair's.

And… "My arm doesn't hurt."

Altair smiled. "Yes, I doubt you'll need the splint any longer. I'll have the doctor come in later to give you a full once-over."

"Can't wait." Sven glanced at Altair's wrist where his lover's self-inflicted wound was already closing. "I didn't know vampires could feed on each other."

"Not normally," Altair explained. "But a sire's blood can feed his newborn progeny for the first few days after their turning. After that… Well, we have enough blood in the club."

"I see." Sven licked his lips, where the taste of Altair's blood still lingered. "But I *can* still drink from you after, right? It's not like… harmful?"

Altair smirked and ran the tip of his tongue across his teeth in a gesture that made Sven shudder with anticipation. "As long as we both find it enjoyable, there is no issue."

Sven grinned. "Good."

Altair studied him intently for a moment, and then Sven felt his presence brush against his mind. It was the oddest sensation. Not unwelcome, but foreign and new. Still, it took Sven only about a second to understand what he was feeling. "You're trying to read my thoughts."

Altair paused and his presence retreated from Sven's mind, before it could go away entirely, though, Sven chased it. He wasn't exactly sure how he did that, he simply followed his instincts, and it worked, because he saw surprise flit across Altair's features before his presence pressed closer against Sven. Their minds touched and blended, and Sven picked up a rush of emotions from the vampire—love, affection, worry. All mixed together.

Altair reached for him, gently tracing his fingertips over Sven's face in a careful caress. "I didn't know you would be able to do that."

"Is it because you sired me?"

"No." Altair's expression turned thoughtful, and Sven felt like he could read the questions on the surface of Altair's mind even before he voiced them. "I did not have this kind of connection with my sire, or with Nephariel. So maybe it's…"

"Because I'm your mate?" Sven finished for him.

"It must be." Altair nodded slowly as Sven adjusted to the intensity of sensations running between them.

"This is…" Amazing? Awesome? Insane? Incredible? Whatever this was, it was strange and beautiful and intimate all at the same time, and Sven didn't have the words to describe it.

Luckily, Altair didn't need him to speak. He simply pressed a kiss to Sven's lips. A whisper-soft touch that sent shivers down Sven's spine, that made Sven reach for his vampire and deepen the contact between them, chasing the faint remnants

of blood flavor still clinging to Altair's mouth. It was easy, so easy, to lean against his lover, and to feel Altair's arousal pulse through their mental connection.

Before Sven knew it, they were wrapped up in each other's arms, Altair's fingers digging into his back as they clung to each other, exchanging soft kisses. Their legs entwined and their hips rocked together, erections grinding against one another in a delicious rhythm.

He felt everything Altair did: the soft texture of his own hair brushing against Altair's fingers, the drag of his nails along the pale skin of his lover's back, the hitch in his breath when Altair moved his lips lower, over the smooth line of his neck. He felt it when Altair's pulse kicked up, when his senses sharpened, and when desire sparked hotter as Altair nibbled at the spot where his shoulder met his neck. He felt Altair's fangs graze over his skin as Altair sucked at the skin there.

The promise of bliss was thick in the air, in the way their bodies slid together, in the way Altair's cock rubbed against his. It built and it rose, and every inch of him wanted, needed release. More. God, he needed so much more.

But instead of continuing to grind their groins together, Altair raised himself above Sven. He gazed into Sven's eyes, his own shining red as he whispered a single word, "Bite."

Sven froze for a millisecond, processing that request and then his fangs itched and lengthened instinctively as desire rushed through his body. When Altair tipped his head to the side, offering Sven his throat, Sven responded to the silent command immediately and sank his fangs into Altair's neck. The taste of blood spilled over his tongue, rich and sweet, and he moaned at the pleasure that ran through him.

He drank, pulling Altair closer to him with every swallow, as the world around them dissolved. Nothing else mattered now but the two of them. Sven could barely breathe. His entire world consisted of the beat of Altair's heart and the life pulsing just under his vampire's skin, flowing into his mouth. His whole body hummed with energy. His nerves danced and

crackled. His dick ached. But he couldn't tear his fangs from Altair's throat to make any kind of coherent plea.

Altair understood, though. His hand snaked between them, wrapping around both their lengths at once and giving them a firm stroke that almost made Sven's eyes roll back in his head. He groaned, sucking harder, his tongue pressing flat against Altair's throat as he forced more of the sweet red liquid down his own.

Altair moved his hand again, faster this time, and Sven's entire body was overwhelmed with a rush of sensation, ecstasy coiling inside his veins, threatening to undo him with its intensity. Another stroke and his hips jerked upward, the muscles of his thighs tensing as he thrust into Altair's grip.

Fuck! The friction and heat…

He cried out against Altair's throat when his orgasm washed over him. Stars exploded behind his eyes and his mind spun as pleasure flooded him. His whole body convulsed and shook as cum spurted from him, coating Altair's hand, and through their connection, he felt Altair's climax too, his lover's muscles stiffening as the vampire groaned in Sven's ear, calling out his name as they came together.

For long moments, they clung to each other, holding on to the high that had swept them both away.

When their breathing slowed and their pulses calmed, Altair rolled them onto their sides.

Sven closed his eyes, relishing the weight of his lover pressed against him. "That was…" he trailed off, unable to think of words that did justice to what he felt.

Altair chuckled against his neck, sending a pleasant shiver through him. "Yes."

Sven breathed in deeply, inhaling the combined scents of their arousal and of sex. A satisfied smile curved his lips as he snuggled into the vampire's embrace and closed his eyes. There was only one thing keeping him from slipping back into his dreams. "There was worry on your mind earlier," he said. "What are you worried about?"

Altair shifted against him and Sven opened his eyes to find him looking at him with concern. "I suppose I was wondering if you had any regrets."

Sven didn't even have to think about his response. "Not a single one."

For several seconds, Altair merely watched him. Then, he relaxed and settled in beside Sven once more.

Sven sighed contentedly, rubbing his cheek against Altair's chest and then tilting his head so that his ear rested over the vampire's heart. It was a sound he never wanted to stop hearing. It was home to him now. This was home—in Altair's arms, as the vampire stroked his hair and placed soft kisses on his shoulder.

"I could stay like this forever," Sven murmured, and then he smiled at his own words. He was a vampire now, and 'forever' was no longer an abstract concept. It was his reality, his future. Right here, with Altair.

Forever was theirs.

Chapter Thirty-Two

ONE WEEK LATER

T he cemetery was eerily quiet at night.

Kneeling next to the grave of his beloved mom, Sven traced his fingers over her name on the headstone before putting down flowers on her tombstone.

He was dressed all in black for the occasion. As were Cale and Kieran, who'd agreed to accompany him here tonight. Once he'd put his bouquet down, he turned around to them. "Thank you for coming," he said quietly.

"Of course," Kieran said. The dragon-shifter squeezed Sven's arm and gave him a small smile. "We were all worried about you after you disappeared."

"I was convinced some vampire had eaten you," Cale threw in. He cast a look around the cemetery as if he was expecting vampires to lurk behind the tombstones. Sven had come alone, though, needing to do this for himself, and wanting to talk to his friends in private.

"I'm sorry I worried you," he said. "Things didn't look good for a while, but I'm all right now."

Cale eyed him critically. "Did you really want to become a vampire?"

Sven looked from him to Kieran, finding only concern in both their eyes. They weren't judging; they were legitimately interested in his well-being. "Yes. Yes, I did," he told them. "No one pressured me to make this decision, I promise."

"Good," Kieran said with a nod.

Cale wasn't so easily satisfied, though. "I don't get it," he said. "You're really okay with never seeing the sun again?" He motioned at the sky overhead. "I'm sure your vampire's cock is great, but you didn't have to become a member of his cult to ride it."

Sven laughed despite the serious mood. God, he'd missed his friend. "Let me promise you, I didn't do it for his cock. Well,

not solely for his cock." He grinned wider. "I'm not gonna say it didn't play any part in my reasoning."

Cale tilted his head. "And what's the rest of your reasoning?"

"I love him," Sven said simply, "And when you find someone you want to be with for the rest of eternity…" He shrugged. "Eternity just seems like a good idea."

Cale's features softened. "So that's really it, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," Sven confirmed. "That's it."

Silence fell upon them after that as they contemplated Sven's declaration and Sven's gaze went back to his mother's tombstone. He'd expected that it would hurt to look at it, but he knew that she was with him, watching over him, happy for him. That was another gift Altair had given him unwittingly in the process of turning him. Sven never felt alone now, and he suspected he never would again.

"So what's it like being a vampire?" Cale asked. "Do you really drink people's blood every day? Does it give you special superpowers?"

Sven huffed a laugh. "I do enjoy blood, but it's all ethically sourced or synthetic. I do not have superpowers… at least not yet." A week after his turning, he was still a baby by vampire standards, and while he did have the ability to connect his mind with Altair's, that was probably more an extension of Altair's power than his own. And besides, Cale didn't have to know about that. "I enjoy life in the coven," he said to distract from the topic. "They're a weird bunch for sure, but they're starting to treat me like one of their own."

"I see," Kieran said with a small nod. "Let us know if anything ever goes wrong."

"Honestly," Sven said, "at this point, the thing I'm most worried about is losing next month's game night." Keegan had already made a comment about getting his revenge by making them all play Scrabble, and Sven was *not* good at Scrabble.

"Game night?" Cale questioned, lifting an eyebrow at Sven. "Really? You're dating a vampire now and your biggest problem is that you're gonna lose next month's game night?"

Sven shrugged, grinning. "Yeah."

Kieran chuckled. "Maybe we should try visiting that club sometime."

"Definitely," Sven said. "We have drinks and snacks for non-vampires too, and I can introduce you to everyone." He gave his friends another smile, and then he looked up at the sky. There was some time yet before the sun would rise, but Sven knew that Altair would worry if Sven wasn't back home well before that. Altair might be able to suffer the sun and get away with just his skin burned, but Sven was still young enough that the first rays of dawn might be deadly. "I need to get going." He hugged both of his friends in turn. "Thank you so much for coming. It means a lot to me."

"If you need our help," Cale said, "you'll call, right?"

"I will," Sven promised. "And I'll let you know when it's a good time to come by." He glanced at his mother's grave one last time and then said his goodbyes to his friends.

Altair pretended like he hadn't been worried at all when Sven got home, but Sven knew better, of course. Thanks to the connection between their minds, he picked up on Altair's concern for his safety, no matter how hard Altair tried to hide it.

Instead of commenting on it, though, he walked into the rec room with a bright smile on his face. "That was a good night."

"You enjoyed meeting your friends?"

"Yeah." Sven plopped down on the couch and snuggled against his mate. "I think they're gonna swing by the club sometime."

Altair slipped an arm around Sven's shoulders. "I'm glad they're so accepting."

"Yeah, me too."

Altair ran his hand along Sven's arm. "The nights are growing longer now. You'll have more time to run around soon."

"I'm not worried about that," Sven said, although, in all honesty, he did miss seeing the sunrise, sometimes. Especially now, in autumn, when the colors of the sky were at their most vibrant.

Altair looked at him silently, studying him. "Close your eyes," he whispered.

Sven frowned but did as his mate instructed. "Now what?" he asked after a few seconds.

"Be patient."

Then, Sven sensed it, a connection to Altair's mind, a thread he could follow, and when he did, he saw things through his lover's eyes. His vision was fuzzy at first, blurry at best, but after he took a few deep breaths, it steadied. He saw himself sitting next to Altair, his head leaning against the vampire's shoulder.

Weird.

He was about to open his mouth and say something, but Altair shushed him. "Focus."

Altair's eyes closed, and so Sven's vision went dark as well, but only for a moment, then, what he saw changed. He saw the sky.

He gasped when he realized that he wasn't seeing through Altair's eyes anymore. He was seeing what one of Altair's *crows* was seeing.

The bird sat on top of the club's roof, peering up at the sky for them, waiting for sunrise. The sky was still gray in the distance, but slowly, streaks of pink appeared above the horizon, illuminating the stillness of the night. Ever so gradually, the sky transformed into a radiant canvas, bursting into reds and oranges and even warmer colors that Sven couldn't even name. Colors that only birds could see, he realized. They were breathtakingly beautiful.

And so was the rising sun.

Sven had thought he'd never get to watch another sunrise, but now his mate allowed him to witness one in more detail than he ever had before.

"Thank you," he whispered without leaving the vision. "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

He heard Altair chuckle softly and then felt his lover's lips brush his own in the physical world. "I have."

Sven laughed, feeling light and happy and free, and as the crow on the roof jumped up and soared into the morning sky, he tore himself out of the vision and kissed his mate.

He hadn't lost anything by becoming a vampire. He'd only won.

A new home, a new family, and a whole new outlook on life.

Thank You

I appreciate you taking the time to read my story! This is the first novel in a spin-off series. If you'd like to read the 'original' series, which largely features dragon-shifters, you can find that here.

The next book in **this** series will likely release in January, subscribe to my mailing list to be notified when it goes live!

If you want to read more from me and you like dragon-shifters, there's a **free novella** you can get here: https://BookHip.com/NZFCNPK

Thank you!

Silvana

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