

CHLOE PETERSON



FANGED  
INTEREST

A VAMPIRE LESBIAN ROMANCE

# **Fanged Interest**

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CHLOE PETERSON

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About Chloe Peterson

# Chapter 1

## JORDAN

A trip to the hospital was the last thing I had planned for my day off but the disgruntled toddler in my arms couldn't have cared less. Stepping out into the waning evening light I couldn't help the hiss that escaped my lips as Hazel, my wailing bundle of joy, landed a perfectly placed kick to my abdomen.

My darling niece, whose vocal prowess could rival a heavy metal concert, had been less than thrilled about being poked and prodded by nurses all day, and she seemed hellbent on taking revenge now that we were homeward bound. In any other scenario that would have been fine by me, but Hazel was kicking up enough fuss to draw attention to herself, and that was dangerous.

To my immense relief, I spotted a familiar black sedan parked on the curb and a bored-looking woman eyeing me over the wheel. Flinging open the back door I hauled Hazel into her baby seat, nudging aside a rogue diaper left behind from a previous hospital-related endeavor. While Hazel and her sister donned the tell-tale fangs of our kind, their mixed blood made them two of the only vampires in existence capable of getting the flu.

The various smells of the hospital still lingered in my nostrils, adding to the nausea that had my stomach churning as I tried to wrangle Hazel into the contraption. Despite my best

efforts with the belts and buckles, Hazel evaded my attempts with a surprisingly effective escape artist routine, landing a blow to my nose with one chubby little fist.

Dylan turned in the driver's seat to watch me, painted black lips curving upwards into a smirk. "Smooth moves, Aunty Jordan. Olympic-level coordination right here."

"Don't test me today, I conquered a human hospital. I deserve some credit."

Hazel's cries reached new heights, harmonizing with the car alarms echoing in the parking lot.

Dylan shot me a wry smile and tossed her car keys onto Hazel's lap. "I don't know how you do it. All that blood, I can smell it from here." She wrinkled her nose, faint freckles visible under the piles of powder she puffed onto her cheeks every morning.

With Hazel momentarily distracted and chewing on a fluffy bat keychain, I managed to conquer the final buckle, declaring victory with a triumphant "Ta-da!" and earned a half-hearted attempt at applause from Dylan.

Hazel, finally secured in her throne, babbled happily and jiggled the car keys like she hadn't just beaten me black and blue.

I shimmied my way out of the back seat, standing upright and straightening out my suit jacket to maintain some semblance of dignity. "All right, that's enough mom duties for today. let's go home—"



My words lodged in my throat when a sudden, shrill sound reached my ears. A high-pitched scream echoed down the street, and along with it came a curious twinge in my chest.

I paused, fixated on the sounds of distress emanating from somewhere just out of sight.

The Manhattan streets were no stranger to sounds of distress. With so many humans piled on top of each other, chaos was a continuous occurrence. But this was different. Something about that sound set my heart thumping. A primal urge to protect swelled in my chest.

Dylan cocked her head at me through the window, brows knitting together. “What is it? You look paler than usual.”

“Did you hear that?” More importantly, did she feel the same tugging on her heartstrings at the sound of it?

My body screamed for me to run, every cell singing for me to follow that sound. I took a step away from the sedan, and then another. “Get Hazel home. I’ll catch up with you later.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, bolting down the street with my heart in my throat. I heard Dylan spew a string of profanities in my wake—no doubt aggrieved at her new role as babysitter. But my mind was elsewhere, the source of that sound the center of my attention.

Panic mingled with a kind of shivering excitement, egging me onward to whatever, whoever waited for me. Another blood curdling scream cut through the air and I picked up the

pace, moving inhumanly fast under the glowing streetlights and grateful that the streets around me were empty.

Evening had settled over New York in a purple haze, drifting clouds stained a burnt orange by the city lights beneath them. I passed an aging radio tower and tasted the air. A scent, overpoweringly sweet and enticing, nearly brought me to my knees.

I was eager to leave behind the intoxicating fragrance before I spilled unintentional blood, but a flicker of movement down the alleyway to my left halted my headlong dash.

In the shadows of the alley, near the overflowing dumpster, a small figure was cowering. It wasn't hard to deduce that this was the source of that tantalizing scent. The shaking figure, a woman I realized as I moved closer, crouched in front of the dumpster while her eyes flicked around wildly in search of escape.

While this individual was enough to pique my interest, it was the man towering over her that set the hair standing up on the back of my neck. In the deepening shadows of the alleyway he looked like a man, but his unnatural height and elongated jaw alluded to his true form.

The shifter hadn't bothered with a full transformation, but his putrid dog smell was evidence enough that I was certain of it. Werewolf.

They didn't often visit the city (apparently, the stench of vampire and lack of open spaces was repellant to them) but when shifters did visit, they were to abide by strict rules. No

supernatural being was to reveal themselves to humans, and no humans were to be harmed within the boundaries of the city.

These were rules set by my own coven, rules that were to be enforced by me—the new queen of said coven. Anger had my blood boiling and a vicious rage ignited in my chest, my actions surprising me.

“Hey! Leave her alone!” I shouted and barreled toward the two figures.

The shifter turned to face me, yellow eyes glinting in the sliver of moonlight that reached the shadows of the alleyway. From his expression he wasn't happy with my interference, and the way he bared his fangs told me he knew what I was, too.

The beast undulated in the half shadows, its face and back convulsing like an overflowing artery. This shifter didn't want to explain his actions. Its heaving lasted only for a moment, but from that mass of hide and muscle came a set of claws rushing toward my throat.

My heart thumped in my chest as I sidestepped the attack, my body moving on pure instinct. Adrenaline fueled my every move, granting me a fleeting grace as I dodged the creature's razoring claws.

My mind raced, desperate for a plan. I couldn't undertake a full transformation myself lest I reveal my true nature to the woman. I had no weapons, and no backup—just my wits and an unyielding determination to protect this woman whose blood was a siren call I couldn't ignore.

I dodged and weaved, my movements fueled by a creeping fear. Fear for her. I struck out with only my fists, each blow hitting home, but also further pissing off the beast. His teeth protruded from between his lips, shaggy jaw stretching wider as he began to look more wolf-like in the half-light of the street lamps.

The werewolf, fueled by primal fury, was undeterred by my kicks and punches, and lashed out with elongated limbs and claws much longer than I had anticipated. I felt a searing pain in my arm as the shifter slashed at me, tearing the sleeve of my jacket to ribbons and digging deep into soft flesh.

My shoulder now revealed a spattering of crimson and moonlit skin and the petrified woman gasped at the sight of it.

The mutt had me on the back foot.

Before I could lament the loss of my jacket, or cook up any sort of plan, a mass of teeth, claws and matted fur screamed toward me as the beast went for another attack. I jumped instinctively, kicking down into the werewolf's face, and thanking the stars that my brief yoga stint had left me with a little bit of grace and a lot of leg muscle.

I landed firmly on my feet, the splash of gravel behind me a reassurance that the shifter's face hit the dirt hard on the way down. I allowed myself a flash of pride and glanced at my personal damsel in distress. But her eyes were fixed on the groveling beast.

I had ruined a jacket and lost a little bit of blood, but I managed to put myself between the monster and the trembling

woman.

Seizing the opportunity, I rushed towards the trembling woman, pulling her to her feet. “Run! Go, get to safety!”

But she shook her head, a glint of burning determination in her eyes. Standing face to face, I realized this woman was slightly taller than me, a lanky, pale figure with cropped blonde hair and watercress eyes. Beautiful in a fleeting sense, and suddenly I couldn't look away.

She was still trembling beneath my fingers but she jutted out her jaw in a defiant display, determined to join the fight. The twinge in my heart happened again, like the plucking of a violin string, vibrating with a kind of trepidation.

The moment would have been painterly if not for both the woman and I being slammed to the ground by the suddenly upright bloodthirsty mongrel. Instinctively, I grabbed the screaming woman as we fell, shielding her from the snapping teeth above us with one bloodied arm.

With another violent kick, the mutt went flying, slamming into the nearby wall with enough force to chip the concrete. The woman tumbled from my arms and scrambled to her feet, her gaze ping-ponging from me and my shredded arm to the wolf and back again.

She looked a little green.

She raised her fists in a futile attempt to appear formidable, which would have been laughable were the situation not so dire. But she had caught the monster's attention. The werewolf

turned its yellow eyes on her, its growls reverberating through the alley. Sharp teeth glinted in the dim light, its claws lengthening as it stalked closer.

I followed her eyes to the rusty pipe lying in the shadows of the alley and couldn't stifle my shriek when she darted toward it, narrowly avoiding the shifter's claws. The makeshift weapon looked heavy and impossibly large in comparison to the slim woman, but she swung it through the air, seemingly to intimidate the werewolf and create a diversion.

To my surprise, the creature hesitated, a momentary pause in its aggression. It seemed taken aback by the display of boldness and the makeshift weapon she wielded. But primal instincts overcame practical ones, and it lunged at her with a guttural roar.

With what looked like all her strength, the woman swung the pipe at the werewolf, connecting with a resounding thud. The impact halted the creature and it staggered backward with a low growl, the bonk to the temple leaving it disoriented and momentarily dazed.

I saw my opening and took it, launching myself onto the shifter's back. My jaw opened wide, my pointed fangs finally making an appearance as I snarled, biting down into the shifter's thick, shaggy neck.

I could feel it, all of it. As I sunk my teeth into the man who was no longer a man I could feel the torrent as my fangs pierced his jugular. It ran down my chin and neck, my breathing nearly smothered by the stench of this creature's fur.

I felt its strength depleting, my initial bite met with an immediate shudder. A death rattle no doubt. I could feel it reaching for me desperately as I pinned it down, it almost felt like it wished to hold me.

With a triumphant roar, I tore the slathering shifter's head from his body, holding it up high like a gruesome trophy. Fresh blood trickled down my arm, my fangs sharp in my mouth as my eyes moved to meet the stricken stare of the woman standing before me.

She stood frozen like a deer caught in headlights, staring at me with an expression of pure terror.

Too late did I realize my mistake, realize just how monstrous I looked in that moment. To her, the shifter might have made better company after all.

I tried to retract my fangs but the smell of the woman's blood was overpowering and my damning canines stayed put. I stared back at her, red eyes burning bright in the shadows, scrambling for control over my senses and fighting the urge to take her in my arms or to bite her, or both.

Before I could move, she dropped the rusting piece of pipe and took off, sprinting past me like she had the devil on her heels. I tried to call out for her but my words died on my lips—nothing I could say would pause her step. She disappeared out of the alleyway and I listened to her retreating footsteps fade.

The ache of her departure confirmed my suspicions, and for once I was none too happy about being right.

After all this time I had found my mate. And she was terrified of me.



# Chapter 2

## SKY

I jumped at the sound of the screeching kettle, wrenched from an accidental slumber at my desk. Through blurry eyes I glimpsed my laptop screen, still open in front of me. I had dozed off somewhere in the middle of browsing Wikipedia articles, and now I stared sleepily at a pixelated image of Dracula.

It had been two days since the incident in the alleyway and I was still reeling at what I had seen. I knew moving to New York would be a culture shock, but monsters living amongst us was not what I had expected. I was ready for greasy dumpsters with their own thriving ecosystems, and maybe some larger than average rats. Not grizzly beasts. Not... vampires.

After two days holed up in my apartment desperately scrolling Reddit threads, I was beginning to wonder if I was going crazy. Maybe I had just imagined the whole thing? But the moment I began to doubt myself, the memories rolled in my head like a film reel.

Duncan, my pushy new coworker, morphing in front of my eyes. Growing teeth and fur and towering over me. And her. The fiery woman who came to my rescue plagued my mind.

The furry beast had terrified me, but it was my rescuer who unsettled me the most. Every time I closed my eyes I saw her face—emerald eyes and flaming red hair. Pointed teeth, sharp as nails, poking out from between luscious, full lips.

I stood abruptly and my chair screeched across the floor. Hurrying to the dingy little kitchen, I moved the squealing kettle off the stove top and poured a fresh cup of coffee. My third that night.

Warmed by the steaming liquid, I settled into my chair again and flicked through the few hundred tabs I had opened throughout the evening.

After I escaped that alleyway, leaving the beautiful woman in the dust, I headed straight for my apartment, locked the door behind me and furiously Googled “Vampires in Manhattan???” to disappointing results.

Only after a few deep breaths and a pinch on the shoulder was I calm enough to realize that I had misspelled ‘vampire’.

The internet couldn’t tell me much on the subject, but I did happen upon a few conspiracy forums regarding weird goings-on within the city. People disappearing here and there, run-ins with particularly hairy pedestrians under the full moon, and a swathe of barely cohesive ramblings about lizard people running the country.

When my unhinged research proved fruitless, I turned my attention to vampire lore and contemplated stocking up on wooden stakes and garlic. All I had lying around my apartment was a browning onion and a few frozen pizzas that had long since passed the expiry date.

Moving to Manhattan had been my idea. My mother had been ill most of her life, and consequently most of my life was spent taking care of her. When we caught wind of a specialist

in the city who might be able to manage her illness, we had no choice but to uproot our lives and make the move to New York.

While my mother was currently getting the best care she possibly could in her hospital suite, I was wasting away in a studio apartment wondering where we were going to find the money to pay for all of this.

Working odd jobs hadn't been a problem before, and I would happily weed gardens for the rest of my life if it meant my mother would have a shot at actually being able to enjoy hers. But New York, I came to learn, was an expensive place to be, and there weren't many gardens for me to weed in the concrete jungle.

Which is why I got the job at the radio station. I had been enjoying it too, at least until Duncan decided to corner me in the alleyway and show off his claws. I hadn't been back since. In fact, I wasn't sure I was willing to leave my apartment ever again.

If it wasn't for my mother, I would have happily lived as a shut-in for the rest of my life, nibbling on frozen pizza rolls and befriending the bedraggled pigeons that congregated on my window sill.

With a sigh deep enough to startle the pigeons I began closing tabs, pausing for a moment to stare at the cartoonishly evil illustration of Dracula again.

I was almost certain that woman had been a vampire of some kind. I had seen her teeth, watched her rip right into that

monster's jugular like it was nothing.

Afterward, she had held the severed head toward me like she'd won me a lucky prize at the carnival. Her eyes had been red then, like the monster's blood had seeped into her soul.

I shivered and snapped my laptop shut, running my fingers through my hair.

Whoever she was, she was gone now. She had made no move to follow me after I ran off, I checked over my shoulder over and over again to make sure. The strangest thing was, as I ran from the scene I wanted her to follow me.

I remembered how it felt watching the monster rip into her arm, the pain in my own chest at seeing her injured. Even when she told me to leave, to run, something about her kept me rooted in place.

Despite the terror that twisted my stomach into knots at the thought of the ethereal woman, I wanted to see her again.

I was contemplating checking myself into a psych ward after that last thought, when my intercom buzzed. The startling sound spooked the pigeons at the window and the blood in my veins ran cold. I wasn't sure how I knew it, but I was certain.

My heart did an odd little flip in my chest and I stiffened on the spot, staring at the window.

It had to be her, I could feel it in my bones. Somehow, the vampire woman had tracked me down, and now she was standing outside my building, buzzing my intercom like it was the most normal thing in the world.

With a curious blend of dread and giddy anticipation, I ignored the buzzing of the intercom and crept toward the window. Poking my head out between the roosting pigeons, I looked down at the street below.

Four stories down, on the ground floor, the woman stood on the sidewalk. I watched with my heart in my throat as she pressed the buzzer again. Right on cue, my intercom trilled and I gripped the windowsill with a grimace. It was definitely her.

She was wrapped in a large, black coat, but her hair was a dead giveaway—a shock of flaming red tresses cascading down her back.

Unsure of what exactly my plan was, I leaned further out of the open window, earning a disgruntled ‘coo’ from one of the pigeons. “Uh, hi!”

Her gaze snapped up to meet mine and my heart leapt into my throat at the intensity of her stare. She may have looked human enough, but there was something distinctly different about this woman. Her movements were a little too fluid, her brilliant green eyes distinguishable even from this distance.

I steeled my nerves and called down to her again, drawing on what little vampire knowledge I had managed to glean from the first page of Google. “If you are what I think you are, then you’re not allowed to come in until I welcome you. And, uh, you’re not welcome here!”

The woman continued to stare at me, her expression mildly inquisitive.

I shifted from one foot to the other, unsure of what to do next. “So... so, you can just leave now.”

As an afterthought, I added, “I’m not afraid of you!” although my shaky delivery was less than convincing.

I was about to step back from the window when the woman finally spoke, calling up to me with a touch of bemusement. “Are you sure? I can hear your heart beating from here. Sounds like you’re on the brink of a stroke.”

“I’m not—” I felt a flush of irritation at her derisive tone and glowered down at the woman, scaring off the last of the pigeons as I shouted, “Go away!”

That line felt a little too harsh, even if she was an uninvited, bothersome, maybe monster. “I mean, please. Go away. Please.”

I made a shooing motion with my hands and shut the window, leaning my forehead on the pane with a groan.

With my face flushing bright red, I counted to ten, and then opened the window again. The woman was walking away from the intercom. I allowed myself a sigh of relief and tottered into the kitchen on shaky legs.

With my last cup of coffee already cold on my desk, I poured cup number four and sank onto the dusty old sofa my mother had insisted on buying. I allowed myself to relax, mentally congratulating myself for rather maturely handling what had possibly been a life or death standoff with a blood-thirsty vampire.

I had just finished off my imaginary TED Talk, summarizing my heroic run-in with a vicious supernatural being, when a loud knock from my balcony had me shrieking in terror. Coffee number four went flying as I shot to my feet and peered through the grimy glass door of the balcony.

Another yelp spewed from my lips when I came face to face with a smug-looking supernatural figure and a familiar pair of emerald eyes. “How did you get up here?!”

The vampire woman was standing outside, on my minuscule balcony, smirking at me through the smudged glass.

A pang of genuine fear speared through me. The fact that she was on my balcony at all meant that she had to have scaled four stories of bare-brick wall—in a pencil skirt at that. This woman was far from human.

And yet, I found myself stepping closer, the two of us almost nose-to-nose with only the glass door between us. She smiled at me, the kind of triumphant grin that, on men, usually irritated me beyond belief.

I inspected her features, searching for any hint of those fangs I had seen the other night. But aside from the venomous green of her eyes, she showed no hint of any monstrous qualities. Her red hair trailed loose past her hips, shifting in the slight breeze like each tendril had a life of its own.

She was curvier than I was, something that was apparent despite the bulky coat she was wearing. I couldn't help but note that her button-up was buttoned *down*, revealing just enough skin to have me blushing and looking away again.



Noting my embarrassment and smiling even wider, the woman tapped a varnished nail on the glass. “Can I come in now?”

“No!” I folded my arms indignantly, scowling at a spot just above her head. Anywhere else and I’d blush all over again. “I haven’t invited you in and I don’t plan to. In fact, right now you’re trespassing. I should call the police.”

Her pointed silence only irritated me further and I threw my hands in the air in defeat. “This whole situation is insane. What do you want, anyway?”

The woman smoothed down her coat, flashing me a dazzling smile. “I have a proposition for you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I know better than to make bargains with fairytale creatures.” According to Google, that was a big no-no.

“This is an offer I don’t think you’ll want to refuse.” She cocked her head to the side. “Considering your mother’s medical bills.”

“How do you...” I trailed off and took a cautious step back.

“God, that was creepy, wasn’t it?” The vampire woman groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look, can I just come in? I promise this will be beneficial for you.”

I glimpsed something else under her sales pitch smile. Something pleading, and genuine.

Curiosity trumped skepticism and I hesitantly opened the door. “Tell me about this proposition.”

The woman seemed surprised that I obliged and she beamed at me. I took the brunt of her hundred watt smile, and my heart did another unexpected somersault in my chest.

“It’s simple,” she chirped, sweeping into the apartment while I struggled to recover from whatever spell she put on me.

She turned to face me, hands on her hips. “I’ll cover all of your debt, medical bills and whatever else I can throw money at. And in exchange, you move in with me and pretend to be my lover.”

I stared at her silently, my mouth hanging open like a startled codfish.

The woman’s smile faltered when the silence stretched on. She parted her lips to speak but I interrupted her, striding past her and into the kitchen. “Coffee.”

“Coffee?”

“Cup number five.”

# Chapter 3

## JORDAN

I followed the woman into her kitchen, which was little more than a distasteful cluster of cupboards and a fridge that looked like it belonged in a landfill. I wrinkled my nose when she opened it and pulled out a bottle of milk, an unpleasant aroma emanating from within.

“Whatever you have in there, it’s long past the expiry date.”

The woman gave an absentminded *hmm* in response and sloshed some water into a rusting kettle. We stood in silence while the water boiled on the stove, the woman keeping her eyes on the kettle, and me with my eyes on her.

Now I had a chance to properly study her features, no longer barred by the shadows of a dingy alleyway and a shifter hellbent on tearing me apart. She was even more beautiful than I remembered. Her blonde hair stopped just above her shoulders, dead-straight strands that fell like a curtain over her face as she looked away from me. A simple sailor-cut top revealed her sweeping neckline—graceful collarbones and pale, unblemished skin. Her Skechers were dirty and her mom-jeans ragged and faded with time, but she made it look intentional. Like a fashion trend.

After noting the rusted stain on her shirt I realized that these were the same clothes she had been wearing that night in the ally. It was my blood that stained her shirt. Considering the purple hue beneath her eyes, she clearly hadn’t gotten much

rest since then. No doubt she had been terrified at what she had seen. She probably still was.

The subject of my contemplation looked up abruptly and I quickly looked away, but not before she caught me ogling. From the look on her face she must have assumed I was sizing her up for lunch, because she promptly arranged her hair to hide her neckline, like she was afraid I'd be tempted to have a taste.

I supposed it was only to be expected, she had watched me tear into that shifter's jugular with no remorse, like something right out of a nature documentary.

Even so, it was sad to know she was afraid of me. I felt the same pull toward her as I had that night. It had taken every bit of self control not to go after her when she'd run out of the alleyway. I wanted to explain myself, to prove to her that I wasn't the monster she thought I was. But I knew that wouldn't have done any good. Instead, I had wallowed in the dark next to the decapitated shifter until Dylan arrived to pick me up.

Thankfully, my stoic comrade said nothing about my disheveled, bloodied appearance, merely looking me up and down with a raised eyebrow before stepping on the gas and taking me home. My coworkers at the office were not as tight-lipped about the ordeal as Dylan had been. Max and Hunter went out of their way to mock me for my embarrassing opening act, taunting me for spooking my mate before I even had the chance to introduce myself.

They upped the ante even more when I went out of my way to find out who she was. Between Max's swooning and Hunter's rolling eyes, I was lucky to have made it through my thorough investigation without a bruised ego. But I found her address, and I got her name. Sky.

“Do vampires drink coffee?”

The question snapped me out of my thoughts and I looked back at the woman. At Sky. “What?”

She shrugged without turning to face me and gestured over her shoulder. “You are a vampire, aren't you?”

I smiled wearily, overly conscious of the withdrawn fangs in my mouth. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“You scaled an apartment block in high heels, you tore out that monster's throat the other night. You're drop-dead gorgeous.” Still she refused to look at me, her teaspoon clinking around in the cup as she stirred her coffee.

I flushed slightly, my hand instinctively moving to smooth down my hair. “You think I'm pretty?”

She stiffened slightly before continuing her stirring. “So it's a 'no' to the coffee?”

“Actually, coffee is one of the few things vampires can drink.” I shifted my weight, uncomfortable at approaching the topic with this woman.

There were rules in this city that everyone, including me, had to stick to. We were never to reveal ourselves to any

human, not unless we planned to turn them. I wasn't sure I wanted to do that to this woman.

“So you are a vampire?” She seemed to tense as she spoke, like she was waiting—hoping—that I would deny it.

I inhaled deeply, and then immediately regretted it when her scent filled my nose. I had no preference when it came to human blood. But hers was different. That sweet scent enveloped me, driving me to near madness where I stood.

I coughed then, any excuse to cover my mouth and nose. I tried to focus on the rich scent of coffee instead.

“I'm... not entirely human.”

“Oh?” Her tone was uncomfortably even, like we were discussing the weather and not whether or not I was a nightmare incarnate.

“Not human at all, actually. Never have been.” I tugged at a strand of hair, desperately trying to gauge her feelings from the tension in her back. “In fact, it seems incredibly overrated.”

“I see.”

Only after she had carefully constructed a steaming cup of coffee with far too many helpings of sugar, did she look at me. She took a long sip of what had to have been scalding hot liquid and peered at me over her cup. “Okay. Explain yourself.”

“What?” My strangled voice came out a little higher than I had expected and I cringed at her placid expression.

Sky motioned with her hand, nursing her ‘cup number five’ with the other. “This bargain, proposition, whatever it is. Why do you need me to pretend to be your girlfriend?”

I blew out a breath and scratched the back of my neck. “So you’re considering it?”

My hopeful expression was met with a blank stare. Sky strode past me and settled herself on a beaten blue couch. “I want to know why you chose me. Why did you go out of your way to find me, and why do you think I would ever be able to pull off a ruse like that?”

With nowhere else to sit, I remained standing, wringing my hands while she looked me up and down. All of my previous confidence was gone. Now that I was out of the office and standing right in front of her, seeking out this woman and convincing her to date me sounded insane. The plan had seemed much better in my head.

When I first discovered her name back at the office with Hunter jeering over my shoulder, it felt like everything suddenly fell into place. Fate proved kind for once, and my mate couldn’t have arrived at a more perfect time. But now that I was here, all my worries made themselves apparent at once. I thought of every reason why this was a stupid idea. I considered every possible way this could all go wrong. And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to simply leave. Not yet. I wanted to know this woman, and I wanted her to know me.

“Okay.” I had chosen this path, now it was time to walk it. I flashed her a dazzling smile, one that quickly morphed into a



smirk when I saw the slight flush in her cheeks. Her blushing gave me a shred of confidence and I was ready to roll with it. “Okay. I’ll keep it simple.”

I would tell her the truth. Maybe not the *whole* truth, not yet at least, but as close as I could get without her assuming I was completely out of my mind.

“So yes, vampires exist and I’m one of them—a born vampire.” I tried to brush over that part quickly, but I noted her slight intake of breath. “Anyway, my coven, we rule Manhattan. Two years ago, my brother, the leader of this coven... died. It’s a long story.”

It was a long and painful story that I didn’t want to think about, let alone get into with a stranger.

“I stepped up to rule in his place as queen—you know, because we have those. But I don’t wear a crown or live in a castle or anything. It’s more of a title, and there’s this ritual that involves a snake and—”

“Is this the simple version?” Sky sounded exasperated, and I realized that her cool, calm demeanor was a facade. Her eyes had widened significantly and she looked like she might just drop her precious cup number five.

“Right, right. Simple, sorry.” I stumbled over my words, flashing her a sheepish grin as I struggled to organize my thoughts. “As I was saying, I rule this coven. But my cousin, another born vampire, and a huge asshole at that... never mind. He doesn’t like the idea of a woman ruling the coven, and he believes the title should have passed to him. He’s been

stirring up some chaos among the supernaturals in the city, trying to convince them I'm not fit to rule."

"Sexist, possibly homophobic cousin. Got it." Sky nodded like she was taking notes, and took another long swig of her coffee.

"Yes! Just an absolute ass of a man. Satan's anus, if you will."

Sky jumped slightly in her seat when I raised my voice and I was careful to lower it again before continuing, "So, you see, I need to find a mate to secure my rule. Once I'm bonded with someone, nobody will be able to question my position. It's all very political and convoluted but that's highborns for you."

My quip went straight over her head considering the poor woman had no idea what highborn vampires were. She hadn't known vampires existed until two days ago. I bit my lip as she stared at me blankly.

"Anyway, there are a lot of eligible bachelors, as my mother would say, all of whom are vying for my hand. They want to snatch a seat on the throne and think they can get it by marrying me. You following?"

Sky gulped her coffee, nodding between sips. "I'm following."

She had no idea what I was talking about.

"Well, this is where you come in." I shot her two finger guns and immediately regretted it. "I need you to pretend to be my

lover—my potential mate—to keep those eligible bachelors at bay while I secure my place on the throne.”

The potential mate part was bullshit. I knew she was my mate. Hell, her very presence was enough to get my head spinning and my knees weak. But I couldn't come on too strong during our first real interaction. Having her hang around would give us the chance to get to know each other. And then, maybe, I would know if she could feel it too.

“So, what do you say?” I tried my best to look non-threatening, and definitely not desperate, like I wasn't offering her my bleeding heart on a platter.

Sky narrowed her eyes, keenly suspicious of my story. “But why me, specifically? Surely there is someone else in this wretched city who would leap at the chance to play girlfriend to the vampire queen.”

She knew I was hiding something, that much was apparent. It was one of my biggest flaws, all my emotions sat right there on my face.

I scuffed my spiked heel on the floor. “I don't know. I saw you in that alleyway and I wanted to help. Then I got a good look at you and... I wanted to get to know you.”

“So you decided to turn up uninvited, break onto my balcony and blackmail me into being your make-believe girlfriend?”

I bit back my protest and grinned sheepishly. “Something like that, yes.”

Sky sat pensively for a moment, turning my words over in her head. After an agonizing minute of silence, she met my eyes. “If I do this, you’ll cover my mother’s medical bills? All of it?”

I folded my arms, trying to channel the same energy I managed to exude during office hours. “Every bill, every fee, every receipt. Even the boatload of debt you’ve been trying to pay off for God knows how long.”

“You really did your homework on me,” Sky quipped nervously. “How many strings did you have to pull to get that information?”

None, actually. Hunter was the best saleswoman on my team, she could charm just about anyone into doing her bidding, even without her unique vampiric ability.

“So, you’ll do it?” I asked again, avoiding bringing up my psychic partner in crime for the time being.

Sky leaned her elbows on her knees and laced her fingers together. She stared down at her feet before cocking her head to look at me. “I’ll have to move in with you?”

“I’m sure you won’t miss this cavernous hole too much.”

She shot me a glare. “I’ll still be able to see my mother?”

“Of course. You would be my fake girlfriend, not my prisoner,” I huffed, keeping my arms tightly folded before my trembling hands betrayed how nervous I was. I tried to act like I wasn’t hanging onto her every word, desperate for a simple ‘yes’.

“All right.” Sky’s voice was a whisper as she stared down at the floor. So quiet I thought I had imagined it.

“What was that?”

“All right,” she said, louder this time, and got to her feet. She stuck out her hand toward me, and jutted her chin the way she had the other night. “I’ll do it. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

---

I still couldn’t quite believe that this enigmatic woman had agreed to my offer. After an hour of talking, laying out rules and watching her eyes grow larger and larger with every nugget of supernatural information I shared, it was time for me to leave.

“Vampires sleep at night?” she asked as I made my way over to her balcony.

“Vampires who work nine-to-five do.” I hauled one leg over the edge of the balcony and turned back to face her. “I’ll send a cab to pick you up in the morning.”

She stepped closer, inches away from where I perched on the ledge. “I hope you know I’ll be taking the stairs and not your... creative route.”

“This way is more fun.” I hauled my other leg over the balcony and balanced with my toes on the small ledge, meeting her gaze.

Sky opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but then changed her mind and tugged at her hair. “I guess I’ll see

you tomorrow.”

Our eyes locked and I found myself leaning forward ever so slightly. I thought I saw Sky lean closer too, but it might just have been my imagination. She tried to speak again, but no words came. I mapped the shape of her face, her angular features and parted lips. I wanted to close that small distance between us.

But as I leaned forward, I saw a flash of fear in the woman’s eyes. I was a stranger to her. A stranger with sharp teeth and inhuman strength. Pulling back again, I gave her a lazy grin, the breeze catching my hair as I teetered off the balcony.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Sky Vincent,” I said, my words a whispered promise as I dropped off the edge.

# Chapter 4

## SKY

When the vampire woman—Jordan—told me she'd be sending a cab, I had expected a rusting yellow taxi like the ones that swathed the street in droves every morning. The car before me was far removed from the standard bucket of bolts I was used to catching. The sleek black vehicle was parked on the curb when I left my apartment that morning. At first, I hadn't even realized it was for me. I stood on the sidewalk, searching the streets for my promised ride.

I was about to walk back inside, somewhat disgruntled at being stood up, when the driver of the expensive ride slammed a fist on the horn. I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound of it and whirled around to see the window winding down.

A solemn face examined me from the driver's seat—a small woman, bleached blonde hair framing her apple face. The softness of her features and smattering of freckles over her cheeks gave the illusion of friendliness, but the dark eyeshadow and deep purple lipstick said otherwise. She examined me with a slight frown, like she was unimpressed with what she was seeing.

“Uh, can I help you?” I approached the car, nearly tripping over my own feet in the process.

The woman's mouth turned down at the corners as she eyed me. “Where are your bags?”



“My–my bags?” I glanced behind me at my non-existent bags. I felt like a child being scolded.

The woman was still looking at me with a blank stare. I noted a fleck of violet in those dark eyes of hers, her porcelain skin and uncanny stillness. And then it clicked.

“Oh! You’re a vamp–” I smothered the rest of my sentence, clamping a hand over my mouth. I wasn’t sure what the rules were when it came to supernatural beings but I assumed this woman would be less than pleased about me announcing her presence to the world. “Uh, are you a friend of Jordan’s?”

The woman opened her door abruptly and climbed out, rounding the car to stand before me. “No bags then? You’re moving in with the high lady, and you’re not even bringing a change of underwear?”

I was too busy wondering at her strange attire to pay much mind to the fact that Jordan was a ‘high lady’. This woman was on the shorter side, but she made up for it with alarmingly chunky boots, knee-high leather with dozens of chains and straps climbing up her legs.

When I didn’t respond, the woman rolled her eyes and opened the passenger door for me. “Forget it. I’ll have someone collect your belongings later.”

“Where are we going?” I slid into the passenger seat. The absurdity of getting into a car with a vampire goth girl was not lost on me.

The woman slammed the door shut behind me, ignoring my comment, and got back in the car. She revved the engine and the car zoomed forward at a speed that had to be illegal on those cramped city roads.

“I’m taking you to Jordan’s place. Apparently you were worth ditching work for.”

---

‘Jordan’s place’ was a gorgeous apartment on the top floor of a very expensive-looking building, all reflective glass and sharp corners, a far cry from my dinky little dwelling. My driver, Dylan, as I had come to learn during our minimal conversation, escorted me all the way to the top, standing still as a statue in the elevator.

While Jordan was unsettling enough, with her gleaming green eyes and intense energy, this woman was even more frightening. No matter how hard I tried, I could hear none of her movements—no swish of fabric, no clinking of chains, not even footsteps. Shadows seemed to cling to her where she stood in the elevator, and her violet eyes didn’t blink once.

I was more than a little relieved when the elevator dinged and the doors slid open, hurriedly sidling out of the cramped space and putting as much distance between me and the disconcerting vamp as possible.

Dylan made no move to follow me, pressing the first floor button and jutting out her chin toward the corridor on my left. “Third door on your right. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, I guess.” My gratitude was met with another curiously blank stare, before the doors closed again and I was alone in the hallway. The very fancy hallway.

Hesitantly, I tiptoed my way toward where Dylan gestured, rounding a corner to stand before a large, steel-gray door. I had not expected a woman like Jordan to take up residence in such a minimalistic building. Everything was a little too sanitary, all white and gray and far too fancy for my current attire.

I had barely raised my hand to the door before it flew open and the red-headed vampire herself beamed at me. “You’re here! I thought you’d chickened out.”

My pulse quickened at the sight of her, but it wasn’t fear that coursed through my veins. I was alarmed by the impact she had on me, the way her smile made my knees weak, bats fluttering in my stomach. I wondered if she used some kind of magic on me.

The internet alluded to vampires having all sorts of abilities, from shape shifting to mind control. Was this vampire toying with my mind, lulling me into some false sense of security and softening up her prey? It was possible. But then again, that smile...

Jordan paid no mind to my stunned expression. She moved behind me and placed two hands on my shoulders, propelling me into the apartment with a wicked cackle. “I told you she’d come!”

As it turned out, Jordan wasn’t alone. Another woman reclined at the granite island of her lavish kitchen. I wasn’t

sure what a vampire needed a kitchen for, but there was no time to inquire.

Before I could get a word in edgeways, the new woman came forward to clasp my hand, bobbing her knees in excitement. “Sky! It’s wonderful to meet you. Jordan has told us so much about you.”

“Jordan has known me for less than a day,” I responded dryly, shooting the redhead a suspicious glare.

Jordan herself merely shrugged and sauntered over to me. “That’s River, my right hand. She was just leaving.”

Jordan shot the other woman a pointed look and River rolled her eyes. “In a minute, I want to see if this plays out the way I think it will.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant but Jordan was already at my shoulder, turning me on the spot and gesturing to the apartment space—the open plan kitchen and wide glass windows with a sweeping view of the city below.

“So, what do you think? Do you like it?”

“I do.” My eyes flitted around the room, taking in the pristine white walls, modern furniture and black tiled floor. “It looks... expensive.”

My gaze snagged on the open bottle on the island. “Is that wine?”

The two women exchanged glances and Jordan gave me a wry smile. “Kind of. The vampire version, if you will.”

“Oh.” Blood. My morning coffee curdled in my stomach and I fought the bile rising in my throat. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“But we have drinks for you too!” Jordan hurried to the double fridge and hauled out a bottle of bright pink liquid. “I know you like your caffeine.”

She presented it to me like a waiter would present wine in a restaurant I couldn’t afford.

I leaned forward to read the label, uncomfortably aware of the two sets of eyes on me. I wrinkled my nose, raising a brow at Jordan. “This looks like an energy drink. There’s no blood in it, right?”

“None at all,” Jordan proclaimed proudly. “You’re looking at our number one money maker right here. High Stakes Super Juice, the energy drink with extra bite.”

It was then I realized where I’d seen a bottle like this before. Lining the grocery aisles all over Manhattan. This brand was popular, selling all kinds of health, beauty and fitness products across the country.

“You’re kidding.” I dropped my hands to my sides, wide-eyed and overwhelmed. “You own the High Stakes brand?”

Jordan’s smile widened, her chest puffing up with pride when she stated, “I started the brand, and our business is doing better than ever. You humans really like your energy drinks.”

I supposed that explained the expensive apartment, but even so. Any owner of such a successful brand had to be raking in

millions. I suspected there was more to the business than Jordan was letting on. Maybe there was a reason her products were so popular, beauty gurus and fitness freaks alike went out of their way to rave about how effective High Stakes could be.

Speaking of... “High Stakes?” I pursed my lips. “Isn’t that a bit on the nose?”

Jordan brushed my jab aside with a wave of her hand. “Stakes aren’t enough to kill us anyway. That’s just a stupid myth.”

I shifted from one foot to the other. “Am I supposed to know about this stuff? You know, vampire lore and all that?”

My words caused Jordan to pause and she put the clinking bottle down on the table. “Not exactly.”

It was River who spoke then, twirling a curling lock of caramel hair around her finger. “Usually, any human to discover the truth of our kind would have to have their mind wiped. The only exceptions include those tied to a vampire via the mating bond, or through a contract.”

I noticed Jordan in the corner of my eye, shaking her head and motioning for River to shut up. That only fueled my curiosity and I narrowed my eyes at the other woman. “What kind of contract?”

“Well, most vampires in Manhattan get their... sustenance, from discreet providers.” River seemed oblivious to Jordan’s unease, and poured herself a glass of the crimson liquid that looked like wine but was definitely not.

I tried not to stare when she put the glass to her lips, tried to avert my eyes when I saw the faintest flash of fangs as she took a sip.

“But some vampires prefer to drink straight from the source,” she continued. “So they enter into contracts with willing humans. The humans enjoy riches, gifts and other pleasures in exchange for their silence and willingness to share their resources.”

I blanched at her words, touching my fingers to my neck. “Human blood banks? What pleasures could possibly be worth letting someone drink your blood?”

“Hey, now, don’t blood-shame.” Jordan was at my elbow, her bottom lip snagging on her fangs while she surveyed me with hooded eyes. “The process is enjoyable for both parties. I’m told having one of our kind drink from a human is something akin to ecstasy.”

My throat closed when she leaned in closer, her lips at my ear. “Don’t dismiss the idea completely. You might just find yourself enjoying it.”

Her hand brushed my hip, leaving behind a scorching heat that settled between my legs. At that brief touch my heart ceased to beat, my lungs forgot to inhale and I stood frozen in place. Jordan too, seemed far more aroused than she had initially intended. Her coy teasing had garnered a surprising response. I inched closer and her hands closed firmly on my hips. I felt the possession in her touch.

My cheeks flushed, my body burning hot with no prior warning. I could barely hear my own thoughts over the crashing cacophony in my head. Jordan's eyes locked on mine, erotic intent in that glistening green. Her lips hovered inches from my own.

“Apologies for the interruption.”

A voice to our left had us both turning sharply to see a pale figure standing right next to us. Dylan's face was a blank mask, completely unbothered by our antics.

Jordan and I broke apart with a synchronous yelp, backtracking away from each other and the unexpected visitor.

River chuckled from her spot in the kitchen and tossed back the last dregs of her drink. “I knew sticking around would be worth it.”

“Dylan!” Jordan tried to sound assertive, but her voice came out a strangled squawk, her face just as rosy as mine. “You can't keep doing that!”

I spotted the ghost of a smile on Dylan's lips before they reverted back to a hard line. “I'm sorry for interrupting what was clearly a monumental moment, but we have a problem.”

Jordan's expression shifted in an instant, and suddenly she was just as cold and collected as the other woman. “Jeremy? You found him?”

I looked back and forth between the two, events moving so quickly my head was beginning to spin. “Who?”



Dylan ignored me, addressing Jordan with a solemn demeanor. “Jeremy has rallied more people to his side. He’s hired shifters from all corners of the country and he’s coming for you. He plans to get you out of the picture before the next Black Moon ceremony.”

Jordan shook her head, pressing her knuckles to her brow. “He wouldn’t dare. He knows the consequences.”

Dylan’s face remained unchanged. “He knows the consequences, and he’s going to try anyway. You need to watch your back, Jordan. He’s coming for you.”

# Chapter 5

## JORDAN

A den of vampires was no place for a human. And yet, I had no choice but to let Sky tag along to my next meeting with the highborn members of the Leyore coven. My cousin, Jeremy, was a looming threat and I needed to root out traitors in our midst before any more damage could be done. This was also the perfect opportunity to declare Sky my consort; the announcement alone would be enough to settle the discourse surrounding my solo claim to the throne.

At least for now.

But if I presented Sky to my people, they would eventually expect us to seal the bond, or sign a contract. I didn't want either of those things for Sky. If she chose to accept me as her mate, or sign her services to me, I wanted that to be her choice, not her duty.

I groaned loudly and slumped in the car seat. Beside me, Sky eyed me with concern, her brows knitting together as she watched me sink further down the seat. "You're really not looking forward to this, are you?"

"Oh, I'm thrilled," I prattled in an overly cheery tone. "Uncomfortable attire, pestering highborns and every set of eyes in the room watching my every movement. Who wouldn't be excited?"

Sky shrugged and turned her attention back to the open window, closing her eyes as the breeze whipped her hair.

It had been just shy of a week since Sky agreed to move in. All of her belongings had been carted to my apartment, a collection of assorted clothing and coffee cups that Sky couldn't bear to part with.

She had refused to share my bed at night, but when I offered to get her a bed of her own she had refused that too. Instead, she took up residence on my couch, despite my best efforts to get her something more comfortable. On the bright side, the time we spent together warmed the human woman to me. While neither of us really knew how to navigate conversation, the times we did speak were pleasant.

I worried that all progress would go to waste the moment she met the rest of the highborn vampires. While nobody was outright cruel to humans, at least not anymore, the highborn had a way of looking down on humans, thinking them inferior beings compared to creatures of the supernatural. And if her blood was as intoxicating to the others as it was to me... I hoped having both Dylan and River nearby would be enough to prevent any possible catastrophes.

I glanced at Sky from the corner of my eye. She wore a pale gray evening dress, spun from a delicate fabric that glistened when she moved, like liquid silver over her slender form. She had picked it out for herself during an extravagant shopping spree.

That trip to the mall had been the highlight of my day, watching her flit from one aisle to the next, frowning at every item of clothing until she found the perfect dress. I wanted more days like that. I wanted to share my life with her.

I had yet to tell her about the twins, about the circumstances that landed me on the throne in the first place. But I couldn't risk that just yet. There was too much to lose. I wanted to share my world with her, but I worried that it would scare her away entirely.

I considered confessing everything, right then and there. But the car jerked to a stop and the moment was over.

Sky gasped at the sight of the grandiose building, a towering structure in the heart of SoHo. The daunting air of aristocracy made my stomach turn. But I had a job to do. And if I could do it well, we may just make it out in one piece.

Dylan poked her head over the driver's seat. "I'll be watching from the shadows. Good luck in there."

---

The meeting with the highborn council was just as grueling and tiresome as I expected it would be. After Sky and I made an entrance, I was immediately whisked away by two swanky vampires in pinstripe suits. Over my shoulder, I watched Sky give me a small wave, and spotted the hazy shape of Dylan right behind her, blending into the shadows like she said she would.

I felt some semblance of relief knowing that Sky wouldn't be completely alone out there. Vampires were not nosy creatures, but a stray human in their midst was bound to draw their attention.

In the meeting room, the council members argued back and forth about what was to be done with Jeremy. That brought up the issue of locating him in the first place. Dylan had managed to track him down right here in Manhattan, but after she gleaned his plans, he disappeared again. Now he could be anywhere, and who knew how many supernaturals he had on his side.

I analyzed each member from my seat at the oval table. River sat at my right hand, an oddball in her red velvet suit and tasseled undershirt. An old-fashioned mad hatter of a royal adviser. But her icy blue eyes skirted from member to member, betraying the keen intelligence beneath.

“What do you think?” I mumbled under my breath, daring a glance in her direction.

“None of them seem particularly suspicious,” River replied, her lips barely moving as she whispered the words. “I don't think any of them would side with Jeremy. He's a loose cannon they can't control. But that doesn't mean they won't step back and let him mow you down.”

Unfortunately, she was right. Until I could secure my place on the throne, coming into my full power on the night of the Black Moon, these people would be more than happy to steal my position. Most of them hated Jeremy and the chaos he

sowed, but they would also be happy to let him cut me down if it meant swooping in afterward to take what was left in my wake.

I sighed quietly, smoothing out the apricot folds of my dress. My mother always told me that I left little to the imagination with what I chose to wear and this revealing dress was no different. The truth was, I simply couldn't stand the patchy fabrics and suffocating layers that were a staple of vampire highborn. To them, I was Princess Leia in her gold bikini, but at least I could sit down without popping a button. Besides, I had piled on enough gold chains and shimmering pearls to at least exude some sort of regality.

I caught River's eye, as the voices rose around us. "So we're on our own then?"

"Seems that way."

Typical. There's a reason my brother had ruled this coven instead of me. But Alberich was gone, and I had a duty to uphold. I owed him that much at least.

I felt River stiffen beside me, her nails digging into the table hard enough to splinter the mahogany. Her eyes blanked, jaw slackening as she viewed whatever terrible future awaited us.

I gripped her shoulder, shaking her violently. "River, talk to me. What do you see?"

The room fell silent as members began to notice my adviser's swaying figure. All eyes turned to me, waiting for

whatever glimpse of the future River had to offer. I shook her again, willing her back to the present.

“Sky.” River’s eyes cleared and she turned her stricken gaze on me. “She’s in danger.”

That was all I needed to know. Standing up abruptly, fast enough to tip my chair, I bolted out of the meeting room, already tracking my mate’s potent scent.

The hall outside was packed with vampires, all members of our coven who could make the trip. Meetings were a place for mingling, a chance to rub elbows with highborns, swap stories and talk bargains. Vampires frowned at me as I moved through the crowd, some of them looking on with clear distaste written on their faces. I ignored them, barreling past the well-dressed supernaturals with one goal in mind.

Sky’s scent permeated the air around me, the sweetness of her blood tangible on my tongue. I had to get to my mate. River’s clairvoyance was reliable at best and uncomfortably accurate at worst. And if she saw an immediate future where Sky was in danger, where Sky was *hurt*, it was only a matter of seconds before that future became reality.

I launched down a marble staircase, kicking off my heels and upping my speed tenfold. I didn’t care that I was disgracing myself before my coven members. This woman was too important. She was little more than a stranger to me, but my heart had known her all my life.

Her scent grew stronger as I rounded a sharp corner, darting down a narrow hallway lined with portraits. I heard the sounds



of a scuffle behind a door to my right and kicked it open, nearly tearing it right off its hinges as I burst into the office.

Before me, I saw three vampires—two men and a woman—who looked horrified by my sudden appearance. Between them, caught at the elbow by one of the men, was my mate.

I watched relief flood through her when she noticed my presence, and my heart strings thrummed in unison.

My eyes dropped to the clawed hand gripping her arm, and my tender feelings were immediately drowned out by an unyielding rage. I needed no explanation from any of them. Their protruding fangs told me everything I needed to know.

“Get your hands off my mate.” My tone was low and threatening, my simple words a promise of violence should they think to disobey me.

The vampire male released Sky immediately as I stalked toward the trio.

Holding the sickening supernatural’s gaze, I closed an arm around Sky’s shoulders and backed the both of us out of the room. “You drew no blood, so I have no jurisdiction to kill you.”

I flashed my fangs, pouring every drop of my anger into my words. “But know this: if you seek her out again, if you touch her, if you so much as look in her direction, I won’t hesitate to tear you limb from limb. I will take whatever consequences I must if it means staining the dirt with your blood.”

The vampires didn't follow us and we walked back to the gathering in silence. By the time we made it back to the main hall, Sky was teary-eyed and I was fuming.

"They said you were looking for me," Sky whispered, keeping her eyes to the ground. "I didn't believe them, but they got me to follow them anyway. It was like I wasn't in control of my own feet."

"That's persuasion," I replied, my tone devoid of emotion, "a gift some vampires possess."

When she didn't respond I added, "I'm sorry I didn't come earlier. They should never have approached you to begin with."

"It's not your fault."

I wasn't so sure about that. She wouldn't have had to deal with any of this if I'd just left her alone to begin with. I had put her in the path of danger, and now I needed to make amends. I would not let any of my coven members harm a single hair on her head.

All eyes were on us when we walked into the main hall. At least I wouldn't have to struggle to get everybody's attention. Once the murmuring had faded I addressed the crowd, my fury still simmering just under the surface.

"I'm sure you're all wondering about the human in our midst. Sky Vincent is not a contract worker, nor is she a plaything for you to toy with." I glanced at Sky and she held my gaze, nodding ever so slightly in silent reassurance.

With my eyes locked on hers, I continued, “I claim this human as my lover and consort. According to our laws, she is mine, and mine alone.”

Sky gave me a small smile and I wondered what those words meant to her.

Before I could dismiss the gathering, one of the highborn spoke up, an older vampire who frequently butted heads with my mother. “According to our laws, any human who remains aware of our presence is required to enter into a contract. Or mark her and seal the mating bond.” The woman folded her arms, a pompous sneer twisting her fine features. “Simply naming her your consort means nothing. You have to pick one or the other.”

I had expected this, been ready for it. I straightened my shoulders, looking down my nose at the woman. “It is a bold gesture, Agatha, commanding your queen like one would a child.”

Agatha hesitated, but the twittering crowd stoked her pride and she lifted her chin. “I command nothing of you, my lady. I am merely reminding you of the rules that you, yourself, have worked hard to enforce.”

Her cocky attitude irked me, but I didn’t let it show. I had been ready for this too. “The mating bond will be secured. But only when my partner is prepared to accept it. Until then, she remains my consort. Surely you would not have us consummate the bond right here on the floor of the grand hall?”

Agatha had no quick comeback for that comment and I used her hesitation to swiftly bring the meeting to a close. “I would like to thank all of you for coming tonight. I will see you again on the night of the Black Moon ceremony, with my mate at my side.”

Taking Sky’s hand in mine, I strode passed the bowing crowds, holding my head high until we were out the doors and away from prying eyes.

We had survived the gathering, more or less. But that was only the beginning of the problems to come. I feared my cousin’s influence had spread further than I could have anticipated, stirring our coven members to question my rule.

My hold on the throne was slipping, and I was running out of time.

# Chapter 6

## SKY

The sun had long since set by the time I awoke from what was supposed to have been a brief nap. Living with Jordan came with its perks. At twenty-nine years old, I couldn't recall the last time I had a moment to simply relax, and my body seemed determined to catch up on years' worth of lost sleep.

How I had learned to relax in the presence of a vampire was beyond me. I was still partially convinced Jordan had some kind of control over my mind. How else would one explain the quickening of my pulse whenever she was around? What was that invisible thread that bound us together?

I sat upright on the sofa, noting the blanket that hadn't been there when I lay down to rest. The apartment was silent save for the hum of Manhattan nightlife far below me. The floor was icy against my bare feet as I tiptoed around the space, looking for any sign of my vampire roommate.

Jordan's bed was empty, the pristine black sheets untouched. She hadn't been sleeping much these days.

Vampires, I came to learn, were very good at holding grudges. Jordan had been in a foul mood for days after the incident at the gathering. While she didn't expel her emotions outward, her temper simmered in a constant state of disgruntled anger, always on the brink of boiling over but never quite reaching that point.

I suspected she was holding it in for my sake. While I didn't understand half of what had happened at the vampire gathering, I could piece together enough to grasp the full picture.

Jordan seemed to be standing on a precipice, her worries about her cousin, members questioning her rule, running her business, and probably a plethora of other concerns all threatening to topple her over the edge.

I felt a pang of guilt thinking back to that night when the three vampires had cornered me. Dylan had been watching me like a hawk. I could just make out her figure in the shadows, tracing her shape in the dark as Jordan had taught me to do.

But I had slipped away from her watchful eyes on purpose, wanting to learn more about the vampiric creatures I mingled with. That led me to trouble, and Jordan had to swoop in and rescue me again. I despised feeling useless, but what could I do? I was an average human, caught up in a world about which I had no real understanding.

I padded around the swanky apartment, following the sound of running water to the bathroom, where a sliver of light sliced the hallway in two. Pushing the door open an inch further, I peeked inside, holding my breath.

“It's rude to spy.”

Jordan's words made me jump and I sheepishly swung the door open, staring at the floor. “I wasn't spying. I was just... worried about you.”

I heard the swish of water from inside and Jordan's lilting voice reached me over billows of steam. "You were worried about me?"

"I-" I risked a glance upward and immediately tore my gaze away again. Jordan floated in the impossibly large bathtub that sat in the corner of the room. From my brief glimpse, I had seen bare legs poking out of the water, damp tendrils of flaming hair draped over the sides of the tub. "Well yes, since the incident the other night you've been... tense."

I cursed my burning cheeks and fought to clear my head. I'd had brief entanglements with women before now, but never had I been quite so aroused at the smallest glimpse of glistening bare thigh. Stamping out my excitement, I met the vampire woman's eyes.

Jordan held my gaze for a moment before dipping her head back and wetting her hair. "You can enter if you want to, you're letting in the cold air dawdling in the doorway like that."

I watched her comb her fingers through her hair, water swirling around her as she sank deeper into the bath. I willed my legs to move, inching my way into the steaming room and closing the door quietly behind me.

My gaze snagged on her collarbone, lowering to the glistening skin of her breasts. Her milk white skin had taken on a rosy tint, whether from the hot water or my intrusion I wasn't sure.



“Let me help you.” I spoke before I could think better of it and settled on the edge of the tub at her back. “I’ve never seen so much hair in my life.”

Jordan stiffened when I scooped up her hair in one hand, fingers brushing her bare shoulders as I began to massage a dollop of some fancy-looking shampoo into the strands.

“I sincerely hope you are referring to the hair on my head.”

I resisted the urge to look down at the tender crease between her legs, clothed in colors as red as the hair in my hands.

A somewhat comfortable silence settled over us as I worked, and I felt Jordan slowly relax under my palms. She leaned back against the tub, resting her head in my hands and closing her eyes. I let myself be absorbed into the rhythmic motion—washing, rinsing, moving further up to her scalp.

Time stretched and contracted of its own accord and it could have been minutes or hours that passed before Jordan spoke again.

“I’m sorry I got you wrapped up in all of this. I put you in harm’s way which was selfish of me.”

I pondered her words carefully before replying. “I want to be here. It’s dangerous. But I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t do it all over again.”

It was true. I wasn’t sure when it had begun, maybe even the moment I laid eyes on her in the alleyway. Maybe this connection between us had existed long before we met. I felt drawn to this woman, something inside me calling to

something inside her. I was afraid, and out of my depth, but I wouldn't be walking away just yet.

When Jordan didn't respond I spoke again, all of my quiet contemplations floating to the surface. "Maybe I should sign a contract. It would take some of the heat off you if I did."

"No." Jordan's reply was quiet but firm. "It wouldn't be right. Besides, I want us to have the time to explore this... relationship. Without pressure from outside parties."

"This is a relationship?"

Jordan twisted in the soapy water, turning to meet my eyes. "Isn't it?"

I soaked in the sight of her. Naked, half-submerged and staring at me with those emerald eyes. The beckoning siren to my weary sailor. I had read those stories, I knew the watery fate that awaited me. But who was I to ignore her call?

My hand moved with a mind of its own, gliding over her damp hair to cup her face, thumb brushing over her lush bottom lip.

Jordan leaned into my touch, eyes unblinking as I moved closer. The previous thirst I had seen in her eyes was replaced with an expression of wonderment, an open infatuation and something deeper.

That first kiss was a delicate affair.

Jordan sat perfectly still as our lips touched, careful and curious, a moment that spiraled on into forever. And then she

brought her hands to my face, kissing me back with an unbridled passion that lit a fire between my legs.

My stomach full of butterflies, my heart hammered a thundering drumbeat in my chest. Water sloshed over the edge of the bath, soaking my jeans as I tumbled into her. Our teeth knocked together at the urgency of the kiss and my hands traced a burning line of fire over her soft, warm flesh. My thumb grazed over her pebbled nipple, coaxing a moan from the vampire's lips.

“Sky...” she murmured breathlessly against my mouth and I shuddered at the sound.

Never before had my name sounded so good on another's lips. Never before had I experienced a desire so consuming.

I caught her bottom lip in my teeth, my hands exploring the dip of her throat, the swell of her breasts, the soft curve of her stomach. Jordan twisted her fingers into my hair when I brought my lips to her neck, dragging my tongue over the skin that swooped down to her shoulder, my movements reckless and fueled with exhilaration.

Egged on by my enthusiasm, Jordan fisted a hand in my hair, her mouth finding mine again. Her tongue parted my lips, probing and demanding, and I was happy to accommodate.

When we finally pulled apart I was gasping for air. The furnace between my legs demanded more, yearning for some kind of relief that only the naked woman before me could provide. But I wasn't ready to go there yet. I wasn't ready for that kind of vulnerability.

Jordan was watching me intently, her hand closed around the nape of my neck.

I gave her a small smile as the fog slowly cleared from my mind, panting hot breath into the steamy air. Jordan didn't move as I got to my feet and pressed a kiss to her forehead, walking out of the bathroom and closing the door quietly behind me.

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After I had left Jordan to finish up in the bathroom, I walked to her bedroom to change out of my dripping clothes. I left watery footprints as I walked, my body shaking violently in the cool air. I had yet to come to terms with what just occurred, but I was aware that the two of us had crossed some sort of line. We had stepped into uncharted territory together, and started on a course neither of us could deviate from.

I should have been confused, concerned at the intensity of this unspoken bond between us. But it felt right. Holding Jordan in my arms had seemed the most obvious course of action. Kissing her had felt inevitable. Her lips molded perfectly against mine.

I cursed as I peeled my clothes off, stumbling around in the dark looking for my stack of underwear that was stuffed somewhere in one of my many suitcases. I had just managed to locate and shimmy into a skimpy silk piece when Jordan walked in.

She wore a towel wrapped around her body and tucked under her arm, her damp hair clinging to her neck and shoulders. I had to drag my eyes away from her bare legs.

To my surprise she seemed almost shy as she made her way over to the bed and perched on the end of it. “You know that’s my underwear, right?”

I looked down at the garment I was wearing. Realized I did not recognize the lacy design. “Oh, right. Fuck, sorry.”

Jordan’s laugh was a short, breathy one. “It’s all right. It looks good on you.”

The silence stretched on between us. Jordan watched me from her seat on the bed, her eyes tracing my body like she was committing every curve to memory. Only when her gaze lingered on my chest and I became aware of my hardened nipples, did I turn away.

“I’ll leave you to it then. Goodnight, Jordan.”

“Sky?” My name on her lips again. I froze in the doorway, my quivering body at her beck and call.

She hesitated, her voice dropping to nothing more than a whisper. “You can stay. If you want to.”

We settled under the covers together. I could feel Jordan’s naked body, warm and welcoming beside me. After a minute of silence, I rolled to face her, our noses nearly touching, and found the vampiress watching me.

“Creep.”

The ghost of a smile haunted her lips. “Says the one who spied on my bath time.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Fatigue tugged at my conscious mind, but I had one more question to ask. “Jordan, what did that vampire mean by *mark* me?”

Jordan bit her lip and winced, my earlier handiwork had left it swollen and pink. “It’s something that mates do—an act of consummation. It would bind them together for life.”

“I see.”

I drew her closer, curling an arm around her waist as Jordan tangled her legs with mine. My senses were heightened, I felt her damp hair seeping water over my shoulder. I felt her breath on my neck.

My own breath hitched when Jordan pressed her lips to my skin, right over the pulse in my throat. I went very still, my grip tightening on her thigh. For a brief moment, I thought she was going to bite me. I thought maybe I wanted her to.

But instead, she merely inhaled deeply, drawing in my scent, and sighed into my skin.

Sleep came quickly after that, finding us wrapped tightly in each other’s arms.

# Chapter 7

## JORDAN

Leaving a sleeping Sky in my bed the following morning was close to torture.

Upon my arrival at the High Stakes headquarters, Max, my rather nosy receptionist, pounced immediately.

“I take it things are going well with that new human of yours?” she purred, sliding out of her chair to trot after me when I made a break for the elevator. “Aw, come on, Jordan, give me the details. You know I love this kind of stuff!”

“Maxine, darling, I hired you to handle the front desk, not my dirty laundry.” I mashed the elevator button repeatedly, desperate to hide my burning face from the beaming vampire.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator finally arrived, only for it to turn into a groan when the doors slid open to reveal Hunter, my equally nosy sales assistant.

The dark-haired woman arched her brow, taking in Max’s cheery demeanor and my exasperated expression. “You had sex last night, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t!” I snapped, shoving past her into the elevator and sucking in a deep breath. “It wasn’t like that.”

Max elbowed past Hunter and squeezed in beside me, the elevator doors shutting again before I could change my mind. “But *something* happened. You practically floated into the building.”



I remained silent, avoiding the two pairs of expectant eyes as the elevator took us to the top floor. Max leaned closer and Hunter followed suit, both of them begging with their eyes for a drop of intel.

“I don’t pay you to pry into my personal affairs.”

Max pouted, turning her syrupy pleading up tenfold. Hunter simply blinked, her deadpan expression somehow coaxing the words off the tip of my tongue.

“Okay! Maybe we kissed—but nothing else happened!” I folded my arms with a frown and leaned back against the side of the cramped box. “All right? There’s nothing else to tell. Now will you please stop pestering your poor boss?”

They did not let it go for the rest of the day.

By the time 5 pm rolled around, I had holed up in my office, locking the door behind me to finally catch a break. The events of last night felt like a dream, the only proof that it actually happened being my bruised bottom lip and my freshly-washed hair.

Leaning back in my chair I ran a finger over my lips, recalling the memory through a blissful fog. I wasn’t sure how things between me and Sky had escalated so quickly. I had known from the start that I wanted her, but until recently it had not occurred to me that the feeling might be mutual. Although I had plenty of fleeting romances under my belt, nobody had ever kissed me like that.

I closed my eyes, contemplated letting my hand wander below the waistband of my suit pants.

I wasn't sure where we stood now. I wasn't sure of anything at all. But she had slept in my bed last night, her body tangled with my own. Whatever fire had kindled between us during our first meeting, it had grown into a roaring blaze.

“You were always prone to daydreaming. I see nothing has changed.”

A familiar voice, low and foreboding and far too close for comfort. My eyes flew open and I jolted forward in my chair, scowling at the handsome man who stood in the center of the room.

“Jeremy.”

My cousin chuckled, shoving his slender hands deep into his coat pockets. “Jordan. It's been a while.”

“What do you want?” I wasted no time with pleasantries, biting out the words as I got to my feet.

I had no familial love for this man. Jeremy had proven himself a monster time and time again. I would have been a fool to assume he was here with good intentions.

Jeremy pretended to look wounded, donning a pout as he spoke. “So abrasive, cousin. Do I not deserve a simple greeting? It's been two years, after all.”

“You deserve to have your head detached from your body,” I hissed, drawing myself up to my full height in an attempt to intimidate. “Why are you here?”

While Jeremy's presence in my office enraged me, far greater was the terror that sluiced through my heart. Jeremy was dangerous, unfeeling and uncaring. If he could get to me as effortlessly as he had, he could get to anyone I loved. He knew turning up here would unsettle me, and he did it despite the bounty on his head.

Jeremy cocked his head to the side, his charismatic smile accentuating the dimples in his cheeks. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. Deep purple bruises had formed beneath his eyes and his skin had taken on a papery quality. Greasy blond hair fell over his face and into the cavernous collar of his coat.

Despite his bedraggled appearance, the man was handsome, and all the more dangerous for it. Jeremy was a wolf in sheep's clothing, a predator always on the lookout for his next prey.

"Can I not simply pay a visit to my dear cousin?" Jeremy drawled, walking a lazy loop around my office as he inspected the space. "I just wanted to catch up, Jords. Have the Leyore vampires missed me?"

I balanced on the balls of my feet, ready to pounce if he so much as twitched a muscle in my direction. "You know damn well how they feel about you."

Jeremy tutted at my expression, feigning disappointment. "They can't still be mad about the debacle with the witches. I was simply exerting revenge for Alberich's sake."

"No one knows the truth of Alberich's death," I spat.

I knew he was baiting me, bringing up painful topics to stoke my fury. But I couldn't stop myself. The very sight of Jeremy disgusted me. "You had no right to take justice into your own hands."

Alberich's lover, we had come to learn, was a witch. When my brother was found dead in his home with traces of the woman imbued in his clothes, the obvious answer was that she had been the one to kill him—further feeding the age-old feud between witches and vampires.

I believed the story myself. Until we discovered his children—the twins—only a few hours new to the world and delivered to my doorstep in the dead of night. Not even Jeremy knew of their existence, and I intended to keep it that way.

After news of Alberich's death got out, Jeremy had decided to enact his own revenge. Dozens of witches had died that day, all innocent parties who'd done nothing to deserve it. I had never looked at Jeremy the same way after that.

And now he was vying for the throne. I shuddered to consider the kind of place the city would become with Jeremy calling the shots.

"Come on, Jordan," Jeremy said in a sing-song voice, leaning on the edge of my desk and toying with the digital clock that sat there. "The Leyore coven needs a real leader. You and I both know you were never cut out for the role."

My nails elongated as I flexed my fingers, fangs protruding from my mouth as I hissed at the unsettling older man.

Jeremy's eyes darkened at my defensiveness and he faced me head on, stamping his foot like a child throwing a tantrum. "You know why I'm here, Jordan. You know what I want."

He wanted me to step down, to pass the throne over to him instead.

I wanted him to go sit on a stake.

I told him as much, and felt a tinge of satisfaction when Jeremy bristled, anger twisting his beautiful face.

"This is the last time I will ask nicely, Jordan." Jeremy breathed deeply, flexing his fingers that had been balled into fists. "This is your last chance to go quietly."

I did not plan to go quietly. I would go down kicking and screaming before I let Jeremy take a smidgeon of my power.

He must have seen it in my face, because Jeremy narrowed his eyes at me, spitting out his words like venom. "You've doomed everyone, cousin. Your family, your coven..." His frown morphed into a wicked grin and my blood ran cold. "And that human pet you've been hiding from me."

I could not afford to break down in front of him. I couldn't show a shred of feeling at his words. If he knew about Sky, knew what she meant to me, he would be coming for her first.

I tried to organize my features into a sadistic expression that mirrored his own. "You mean my blood bag? The poor woman is terrified to sign a contract, but her blood is too sweet to ignore."

It must have been convincing because Jeremy's face broke out into a genuine smile. "You and I have always been similar in that way. It's a shame all of Alberich's preaching about rules and responsibilities went to your head."

I pretended to act disinterested, shrugging his words off as he continued, "I'm building a coven of my own, you see. You could have ruled alongside me."

"I already have a coven."

"A dismal collection of highborn airheads who will soon be under my thumb." Jeremy continued to monologue, pacing up and down the room as he stretched his arms out toward the window.

"I plan to bring about a new era of the supernatural. And your city is where it all starts. Vampires will no longer have to live in hiding, and we will rule over the humans as we were always meant to."

"That's a foolish plan." I growled at the smug vampire. "The humans would sooner obliterate this city than let vampires run rampant in the streets. You'd doom us all."

Jeremy ignored my warning, cocking his head to the side as he examined me. "You look different, Jords. Your aura is lighter than it's ever been." A smile played on his lips. "Could it be that you have found your mate?"

Before I could respond, Jeremy continued, tapping a gold-ringed finger to his cracked lips. "It would be a shame if something were to happen to them—"

I didn't let him finish, all my fury unleashed at his blatant threat. I lurched forward, claws ready to slash the cruel vampire to bloody ribbons.

But my fingers swiped empty air.

With a guttural cry of rage I whirled around, turning in circles in search of my target. But Jeremy was gone, and I was once again alone in my office—the door still locked as if he had not been there at all.

# Chapter 8



## SKY

“Remind me again why I need a babysitter?” I grumbled when Jordan swung open the car door and hauled me from the backseat.

She ignored my petulant frown, walking me away from the car toward the High Stakes headquarters. Her head swiveled around like she expected her cousin to appear at any moment. It seemed ludicrous to me that she deemed this place to be the safest option for me considering Jeremy’s presence in this very spot the day before, but Jordan was too high-strung to bother with explanations of any sort.

The vampiress had already filled me in on her cousin’s appearance in her office, albeit not willingly.

She had arrived home from work in a panic, nearly kicking the door right off its hinges and hollering for me at the top of her lungs. When I stumbled out of the bathroom with my jeans around my knees, the vampiress had wasted no time in sprinting over and examining me from head to toe. She ignored my questions, grilling me on whether I’d noticed a “strange presence” around the apartment that day.

It had taken hours of pestering on my part for her to finally crack and tell me what happened.

Now Jordan had decided that her coworkers would have to keep an eye on me while she went about hunting down this

Jeremy guy and preparing for the upcoming Black Moon festival.

Hanging out with Jordan and River while rooting-out monsters sounded infinitely more entertaining than sitting around an office all day, but my red-headed roommate was very insistent. And so, I let myself be dragged along as Jordan marched me up to the front desk and waved down the receptionist.

“Sky, meet Max—your new babysitter.” Jordan gestured to the mousy-haired woman behind the front desk. “I have to go, but Hunter should be here shortly. You can hide in her office when Maxine gets on your nerves.”

Max, a petite woman with dimpled cheeks and wide gray eyes, grabbed my hand over the counter, shaking it with enough enthusiasm to nearly tear my arm off. “It’s wonderful to meet you! I sincerely hope Jordan has been treating you better than her last human.”

“There were other humans?” I side-eyed Jordan, who ran a hand over her face with a sigh.

“That’s a topic for another day. Maxine, please refrain from embarrassing me while I’m gone.”

The smaller woman giggled, releasing my hand and rounding the desk to put her arm around my shoulders. Even in heels, she had to stand on her toes to manage it. “No promises. Sky deserves to know what she’s getting into, dating the likes of you.”

Jordan looked like she wanted to argue further, but the beeping of her watch had her settling for a pointed stare and a prodding finger instead. “If you mention the February work function, I’ll kill you. And if there is any trouble with Sky under your watch, I’ll kill you twice.”

With a final wave to me, Jordan took off, her hair a streak of red in the car window as she drove away.

Maxine blew a kiss on her departure before turning to me with her hands on her hips. “Well, now that the crone is gone, tell me about yourself, Sky Vincent.”

She had to tilt her chin up to meet my eyes and I fought the instinctual urge to crouch to her level when she addressed me.

I had barely opened my mouth to reply when Max’s attention was caught by someone behind me. “Hunter! Look, she’s here!”

Maxine barreled past me and I turned to find a new figure approaching us, this woman significantly more intimidating than the receptionist. Hunter, I presumed, was an athletic-looking woman in a black suit, with raven hair worthy of its own shampoo commercial. Her crisp attire had me rethinking my shabby jeans and T-shirt.

She barely glanced my way, her mouth turning down at the corners as she spoke over Maxine’s introduction. “Why is she here? Jeremy is hunting for any hint of weakness in Jordan, who’s to say he won’t be back?”

Max shrugged. “Jordan has reset the wards around the building. No supernatural will be able to pass in or out without her knowing about it. Besides, Sky is safer with us than alone in that apartment.”

She shot me a smile, taking my hand to guide me through the lobby. “We’re going to get some coffee. Jordan told me you’re a bit of a caffeine fiend.”

“I suppose that’s one way to put it.”

Hunter was looking at me like I was shit under her shoe, but she followed along behind us to the coffee station where Max charmed the barista into giving us a discount on three steaming cups of Joe.

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That night, I was already dozing in the queen-sized bed by the time Jordan got back to the apartment. We hadn’t discussed what had happened between us the other night, and I wasn’t even sure she wanted me in her bed again, but it seemed redundant to return to the couch now.

Jordan seemed pleasantly surprised to see me in her bed, trying and failing to mask her grin as she flicked the bedside lamp on and shimmied into an oversized T-shirt.

“Jeremy is nowhere to be found. But on the bright side, I found the perfect dress for you to wear to the festival.”

I blinked sleep from my eyes, groggily twisting under the covers to face her. “You went shopping? I thought you were

supposed to be doing important vampire things.”

“I was,” Jordan rebutted, kicking off her suit pants and climbing in beside me. “Part of my preparation for the Black Moon ceremony involves finding an outfit my mother will approve of. Very important stuff.”

“I can’t believe you ditched me at work to go shopping.”

The bedside lamp cast an orange glow over the room, turning Jordan’s hair to spun gold where it draped over the pillow. She remained at arm’s length under the covers, flashing me a tired smile. “I hear you got along swimmingly with my coworkers.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I don’t think Hunter likes me very much. Either that or she’s got a massive stick up her ass, in which case she should go see a doctor.”

“That’s just how she is. She’ll warm up in due time.” Jordan snickered quietly. “She’s probably just ticked off at all the admin I had her do to find you.”

“Maxine may have filled me in on the February work function incident.”

Jordan rolled onto her stomach and groaned loudly into the pillow. Her words were muffled and her face no doubt a flaming red when she answered. “In my defense, that table was old. It was going to break anyway, regardless of who may or may not have been dancing on it.”

“I’m sure you would have made a lovely show girl in a different life,” I muttered dryly.

The vampiress peeked under her arm at me, a smirk playing on her lips. “You’re awfully impudent today.”

I had been awfully impudent most days lately, having quickly discovered that Jordan was more often entertained than annoyed by it. That dynamic suited me just fine, considering my humor tended toward the sardonic in a way that drove most eligible partners to insanity.

Tonight, however, a new worry plagued my mind and I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to know the answers to my questions. From what I could pry from Maxine and Hunter, I was not the first human in Jordan’s life. But the other vampires had insisted I question Jordan myself, unwilling to spill the beans on the topic.

I wasn’t even sure why the prospect of Jordan having previous human partners bothered me so much. But it did, and that made me unsure of myself. And rather than feeling unsure of myself, I chose to be impudent.

“Jordan?”

“Hmm?” The vampiress’ eyes opened lazily and I had to turn my face away from that lustrous gaze. I had chosen to be irritable but the woman beside me was far too distracting to uphold that decision for long.

I kept my eyes to the ceiling, my hands folded over my stomach. “Maxine mentioned that you’ve had... relations with humans in the past.”

Jordan perked up at that and shimmied closer. I could feel her eyes on me but I refused to face her, organizing my features into a blank expression.

“Yes, that’s true.” Jordan walked two fingers up my thigh and over my hip, threatening to derail my train of thought. “Why do you ask?”

“Like friendship kind of relations or...” I trailed off, waiting for her to fill in the gaps and feeling like an idiot for my immaturity.

“You could say that.” Jordan chuckled, moving her hand to trail her index finger down my stomach. “I’ve entered into a few contracts in the past.”

“Contracts?” An idiotic kind of heat flared in my stomach and I spluttered out the words in surprise. “Like blood and sex and all that debauchery?”

Jordan’s brow hitched and she propped herself up on one elbow, tilting her head to the side. “Sky, are you jealous?”

“No!” My defensive tone did nothing to plead my case. “Definitely not jealous.”

I was indeed very, very, vehemently jealous.

Unwilling to admit my irrational emotions, I rolled over, turning my back to Jordan and pulling the covers up to my chin. “Anyway, goodnight.”

Jordan did not let me off that easily and I felt the press of her breasts against my back as she peeked over my shoulder.

“Would you feel better if I told you that there hasn’t been anyone else since I met you?”

It may have if there hadn’t been a hint of mockery in her tone. I pulled the sheets further and buried my face into the pillow. “It doesn’t bother me at all. G’night.”

“All right, if you say so.” Jordan’s voice took on a cheery tone and she petted my shoulder before rolling away. “Goodnight!”

After a few seconds of silence I risked a glance in her direction, only to find Jordan’s eyes closed and a serene smile on her lips.

I looked away again and then changed my mind, harrumphed, and rolled onto my back, scowling at the coy vampiress. “Okay, fine, maybe just a little.”

Jordan opened one eye, her smile morphing into a smirk. “A little... jealous?”

“So help me, I will go back to sleeping on the couch.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry for teasing.” Jordan nuzzled closer, her lips a hair’s breadth from mine, “But it’s true. I had contracts back in my early twenties. But there hasn’t been anyone else since then, since you.”

I had barely parted my lips when she kissed me, stealing my breath and whatever it was I was about to say. I had already forgotten, melting at her touch and molding my body to hers. What followed was a passionate clashing of bodies, teeth and tongues.



Jordan sat upright and tugged my vest over my head, discarding the scant fabric and moving on to my underwear before I could catch my breath. I lifted my hips, allowing her room to remove them and reached for her again. But Jordan paused, leaning over me with a primal hunger blazing behind her eyes.

Her gaze roamed over my exposed body, sprawled beneath her and quivering in anticipation. She leaned over to kiss me, gently, a pious show of self control. Jordan's lips trailed down my neck, hovering over my heaving chest before closing her mouth over one pebbled bud.

I tried to string together words of protest, overly conscious of my naked body, but her mouth was already pulling other sounds from my lips. Jordan rolled her tongue around my sensitive nipple, her other hand cupping my breast and squeezing lightly. She wedged a knee between my legs and my hips ground against her automatically, searching for any kind of salve to the burning sensation at my core.

I was vaguely aware of the sharp points of the vampiress' fangs lightly grazing my flesh. But rather than frighten me, the sensation produced an erotic charge that accentuated the effects of her tongue and wracked my body with spine-twisting shocks of all-encompassing pleasure.

Craving more of her, I tugged at the woman's hair, groaning incoherent pleas as I bucked against her knee. Jordan relinquished my aching nipple and dragged her tongue over my throat and jawline, pausing to hover over my lips.

With a desperate, breathy moan, I gripped the back of her neck, pulling myself upwards to mash my lips to hers in a forceful, claiming kiss.

That was all the encouragement the vampiress needed. Jordan's tongue wrestled with my own, before she broke away and pushed me backward onto the bed, gripping my hips and pulling me downwards. My knees bent and spread, wholly exposing myself to the intoxicating woman who lay between my legs.

A burning arrow streaked through me as Jordan's tongue slid along the soft folds at my center, flicking at the throbbing cluster of nerves at the peak. A small moan escaped me while the vampiress worked the sensitive bud, pushing and sucking at it as my body convulsed beneath her. When my hips began to buck of their own accord, Jordan wrapped both arms around my thighs, holding me in place as she explored my body with her mouth.

She nipped lightly at my inner thighs, playful bites that teetered on the delicate precipice between pleasure and pain. Propping myself up on my elbows, I watched her with hooded eyes, drinking in the erotic sight of her tongue darting out between her teeth to probe gently at my now-dripping entrance.

Directed by my demanding mewling, Jordan dragged her tongue along the pale flesh of my inner thigh, before returning to my center, brushing lightly over the swollen, sensitized nub at the apex. Her mouth was soon followed by two fingers,

slowly probing at my entrance as her tongue continuously lapped at the sensitive, swollen crest.

My back arched as she drove her fingers deeper, down to the knuckle with my inner walls constricting around them. I groaned at the stretching burn as she curved her fingers, coaxing my quivering body to a quickening climax.

My breath came in short gasps as I neared that screaming release my body so desperately craved and my hips rocked sporadically against the vampire's hand, fucking myself on her fingers.

Jordan returned her mouth to my swollen clit, gradually increasing the speed of her thrusts while her tongue pressed down on that aching nub, the contrasting sensations driving me to ecstasy and finally, over the edge.

I cried out loud, gripping the bed sheets beneath me as my body was overcome with wrenching spasms that left me damn-near delirious.

Jordan laid a hand beside my head, hovering over me and planting a kiss on my forehead while I rode out the last of my orgasm on her fingers.

When my body finally stilled, she rolled onto her back beside me and brought her fingers to her lips. "If this is what your pussy tastes like, your blood must be ambrosia."

"I'm flattered." My erratic breathing made it difficult to speak.

I lay splayed out across the bed, my head spinning. I had no clue how things had escalated so quickly, but that was a conversation best left for the morning. Spent and satiated, fatigue set in quickly and my eyes fluttered shut.

Jordan settled beside me, trailing a finger along my slicked inner thigh. “By the way, we’re having a party next week. Needless to say, you are invited.”

“What?”

# Chapter 9

## JORDAN

A raging party at Hunter's penthouse may not have been the smartest move considering the loose vampire who wanted me dead. But High Stakes had just reached its fifth birthday and Maxine had insisted that a celebration was in order. That is how over fifty vampires congregated for a rooftop party and cracked open far too many bottles of the finest flavored blood.

Upon arrival, Sky had immediately been whisked away by a blood-drunk Maxine who introduced her to a cluster of coworkers. I kept an eye on her from a safe distance, hanging around the indoor bar with Hunter at my elbow.

I trusted the High Stakes team more than most, but a human with a particularly enticing scent amongst a crowd of lively vampires was asking for trouble. The incident at the coven gathering had left me skittish, and I refused to take my eyes off the willowy blonde for more than a few seconds.

"You're usually the life of the party. Why so stoic tonight?" Hunter knocked her glass against mine, sloshing red liquid over the brim. "Does this mean my tables are safe?"

I sipped my drink and watched Max coax Sky into dancing, the pulsing strobe lights igniting her hair in a fluorescent green glow. "It's still early."

Hunter followed my gaze, chuckling at the sight of a drunken Maxine stumbling over her feet, only to be saved by

Sky before her face hit the floor.

“Early for you. One more drink and Max is going to be hurling her innards all over the dance floor.”

I grimaced at the mental picture. “It serves her right. She told me this would be a small gathering. She’s invited half of the vampire population.”

There were a few other humans present too, men and women who had entered into contracts with my various coworkers. Already, I had watched pairs and trios slink off to the pool or the bathroom to make good on those contracts. Some were even engaging openly, lounging on sofas and stairways while sipping from their ecstatic human partners.

Alcohol doesn’t have much effect on vampires, save for some bad stomach pain and a burning throat. Pure human blood does the trick, though. Back before the 20th century, vampires would get “drunk” by gorging themselves on whatever poor human they could get their hands on and drinking more than they needed to.

These days, animal blood works just fine—processed in factories, bottled, and even chemically altered to enhance the intoxicating effect. Much to the disgust of many highborn aristocrats.

Some vampires still prefer the old fashioned route, albeit consensually. The act of drinking blood is almost always erotic in nature and brings about a kind of daze that has a significant effect on both parties.

Watching those party goers interact as they did, fluttering eyes and lazy smiles, sharp teeth and soft touches, I wondered what it would feel like to do it with Sky. I wondered if she thought about it too.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Sky caught my eye across the room and waved sheepishly. I smiled in response, dropping my eyes to the drink in my hand when I caught Hunter eyeing me with a pained expression. Something about that look told me I was in for a lecture.

“So you really like this woman?” Hunter kept her tone flat, but her brow furrowed as she turned toward me. “She’s human. You know how this ends.”

I had to strain to hear her over the booming music.

“I don’t just *like* her, Hunter.” I gripped my glass in both hands, swirling the liquid around. “She’s my mate, I can feel it.”

“I know how that feels.” There was a touch of longing in Hunter’s words and her eyes focused on some faraway point. “And I know how it feels to lose that.”

Hunter sipped her drink, her mind replaying memories that I couldn’t see.

A moment later, she shook the glazed look from her eyes. “Just be careful, Jordan. She may act like she’s okay with all of this. But she’s still human. They fear us for a reason.”

I had no response to that. A small part of me was afraid she was right. I had been shamefully derelict in my duty to protect



Sky thus far, too busy falling in love to realize the danger snapping at our heels. How long until the supernatural world proved too much for her?

Sky caught my attention again, mouthing a cry for help as she struggled to keep Max upright. The drunken vampire lolled in Sky's arms, a blissful smile on her face as she wiggled her fingers in our direction.

"I think it's time to put Max to bed."

"No kidding." Hunter sighed, already setting down her drink. "Honestly, you'd think she would have learned after the first hundred times."

We slipped through the crowd together.

"Oh thank god," Sky mumbled when I appeared at her shoulder, thrusting Maxine into my arms. "She's heavier than she looks."

"Jordan!" Max giggled as she coiled her arms around my neck. "Yay! Come danzz with us."

"Maybe later." I grunted. Sky was right, for someone so tiny Max was a dead weight in my arms.

I handed Maxine over to Hunter who promptly swung the petite vampire over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Max didn't seem to mind, however, and she waved at us over Hunter's shoulder as she was carried away.

"Well, now that that's taken care of." I sidled closer to Sky and offered her my hand. "Care to dance?"

Blushing under the UV lights, Sky coyly took my hand and let me guide her across the floor. We paused under the glinting disco ball—a decoration that seemed far too out of date for such a fancy establishment, and got to grinding. Dancing led to kissing and brushing drenched tendrils of hair out of each other's eyes. I had to tilt my chin up to kiss her, my arms snaking around her waist and cupping her ass as I did so.

“You know,” Sky said, her voice a murmur in my ear, “I’m beginning to wonder if this ‘lover’ situation is still just an act.”

A shiver spiked down my spine, her breath hot on my neck. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Just a hunch.” She brushed her lips against mine again, sending jolts of electricity right down to my core.

Sky was taller than me, but her presence towered above the ceiling and pressed me into the varnished floor. Pressed me across the penthouse and into the first door that would open for us.

We didn't lock the door. It creaked on its hinges with every forceful mashing of mouths, loud enough to be heard over the blaring music. Her hand slid up my skirt, while I, in turn, lamented her choice of tight jeans and belt. There should be a definitive name for that blitzed tango.

Sky's fingers toyed at the lining of my underwear, the fabric already damp with my arousal.

“I do believe I owe you a debt,” Sky purred into my ear, nipping at the lobe as she drew my underwear to the side.

I could only moan in response, jutting out my jaw as she flattened my body against the door and slid one slender finger along my entrance.

Through heavy lidded eyes I could vaguely make out the room over her shoulder. A guest room by the looks of it, one wide window cracked open and a breeze billowing the cream curtains.

And a figure kneeling on the window sill, watching us.

I stifled a scream and tackled Sky to the floor as the shifter launched its mangy body towards us. The monstrous form crashed against the door, claws swiping and splintering the spot where my head had been seconds before.

I hauled Sky to her feet as the shifter careered towards us again, yellow eyes glowing like traffic lights in the dark room. The creature snarled, frothing at the mouth as it barreled towards us again.

Without warning, I lifted Sky in my arms and chucked her unceremoniously onto the nearby bed, sprinting forward to meet the shifter head-on.

I gripped both ends of its open jaw, narrowly avoiding the creature's slashing claws in the collision. Teeth pierced through my hands as I stared down the shifter's gullet. Rows upon rows of shaggy, needle-like teeth.

Somewhere behind me, Sky was screaming but I couldn't afford to look away. With every bit of my strength, I pushed back against the shifter, locking my elbows as I strained.

Finally, with a sickening crack, the shifter's bottom jaw slackened, hanging unnaturally as the creature slathered and howled.

I jumped out of the way as the monster rampaged, its broken jaw dragging on the ground. With the creature distracted, I wasted no time grabbing Sky's hand and rushing her out of the room.

Back in the hallway, Sky clung to me tightly as new screams erupted from the dance floor. "What the fuck is going on?!"

"A targeted attack." My voice shook slightly, but my head was clear. "This is Jeremy's doing."

My first objective was getting Sky to safety. Something that was easier said than done considering the scene we stepped into. Shifters and vampires grappled and brawled, turning the penthouse into a bloody warzone. I risked a glance at Sky who stared at the ensuing carnage with wide eyes.

Vampires were snagged in shaggy jaws, shifters were torn limb from limb.

Luckily for us, most of my coworkers were significantly blood-drunk, something that made them stronger and far more animalistic. The shifters may have had the element of surprise but the tides were already turning in our favor.

I glimpsed Hunter in the cluster of writhing bodies. Sky choked out a gasp as the vampiress leapt onto the back of a hulking shifter, piercing her speared fingers straight through the massive body. Her bloody hand exploded outwards from

its chest, clutching a still-beating heart, before yanking it backward again. A spray of blood coated the ceiling as the shifter fell, with Hunter riding it down to the ground—a bloody David atop a dying Goliath.

I tugged Sky away before she could see the vampiress bring the bloodied heart to her lips, crushing the organ like an overripe fruit and draining the crimson liquid into her mouth.

“We need to get you out of here.” I propelled Sky towards the exit, already tapping into my mental connection with Dylan who was hovering around somewhere outside.

“But what about the others?” Sky twisted in my grasp, digging her heels in protest. “We can’t just leave them!”

“I’ll be coming back,” I insisted, resorting to lifting her in my arms and carrying her instead. “But right now, you’re my top priority.”

“Jordan!” Sky wriggled in my grasp, watching the battle over my shoulder. “Put me down! We have to help them!”

A roar behind us had me picking up the pace, the shifter from earlier having finally joined the fight. His jaw may have been broken, but he could still do significant damage with those claws.

“He’s seen us.” Sky gasped, still hanging over my shoulder. “Jordan watch out—”

She didn’t get to finish her warning, her words cut short as something sharp and wickedly curved pierced my back.

We went down, Sky taking the brunt of the fall as the shifter barreled into us. I hunched over the woman, releasing a furious roar of my own as the shifter ripped its claws from my back, tearing the wound wider.

Sky paled beneath me as my fangs emerged, and my tongue lengthened in my mouth, becoming more serpent-like and forking at the tip. The last thing I wanted to do was demonstrate a full vampire transformation to the already-terrified woman, but the slice to my back left me little choice. I was losing blood fast and I had only minutes to take out this shifter before my body failed me.

Crouching over Sky, I hissed in agony as my bones cracked and contorted. My limbs stretched and lengthened, becoming sinewy and taut over rippling muscle. My nose flattened, morphing into two slits in my face and heightening my senses. My vision blurred, but I had scent and sound to guide me.

By the time the shifter lunged for another attack, I was ready for it. I lifted one elongated hand to close around the creature's arm, tearing it clean off with little effort. The shifter howled and backed away as I stood at my full height. The hall was now far too cramped for my form, and my head grazed the ceiling as I loped toward the cowering shifter. Folds of flesh flapped on my back, grotesque wings that ached to be unfolded.

Crouching in a predatory stance, gangly limbs poking out at odd angles, I focused my senses on the shifter and lunged. My fangs closed around its neck in an instant, but I didn't stop

there. I dragged the creature down the hall, my wings exploding open as I pushed through the mass of vampires and shifters. Once I reached the edge of the balcony I launched into the air, propelling my body upwards with the shifter in my jaws.

I could not fly for long with such a heavy burden, but I didn't need to. Once we were in the air and over the edge of the balcony, I released my hold on the shifter, dropping the howling creature from the top floor. I didn't stick around to watch his descent.

Back inside, the vampires had managed to take down most of the attackers. Hunter was making short work of the last few stragglers. Unable to hold my form for long, I shifted back and staggered through the apartment in search of Sky, leaving a trail of blood behind me.

I found her still crouched in the hallway, her eyes nearly popping out of her head. I hesitated then, Hunter's words ringing in my head as I stared at the frightened woman. I had morphed into a monster before her eyes, a real monster.

Swaying on my feet, I took a few steps back and hit the wall behind me. "I would never hurt you." My voice cracked as I struggled to get the words out, black dots clouding my vision. "I know you probably don't believe me but it's true."

Before I could topple over entirely, Sky leapt to her feet and caught me in her arms. I could hear her heart hammering in her chest as she cradled my head, lowering us both to the ground and wiping blood from my bottom lip.

“I know,” she murmured and I could have sworn I saw tears in her eyes. “I believe you.”

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The aftermath of the shifter attack was a bloody one. Many of my coworkers were teary and shaken, others invigorated by the carnage. After having my injury patched up—a painful process involving Vampire magic and a chunk bitten out of Hunter’s mattress, the dark haired vamp pulled me aside.

“This was Jeremy’s handiwork, right?” Hunter kept her voice low, her eyes flicking around the destroyed apartment.

“Most likely.” My eyes followed Sky who oversaw the shredded bodies with a placid stare. “Hunter, I’m really sorry about the mess, I’ll cover the damage—”

“That’s not the issue here.” Hunter cut me off, placing a steadying hand on my shoulder. “I’m just glad everyone is all right. But you have to know, we didn’t get them all. One shifter got away.”

My stomach dropped to the floor at the implications of a surviving shifter. “How?”

Hunter tilted her head toward the balcony. “Dylan has checked the grounds. The guy you chucked off the edge is gone.”

That shifter had seen me go out of my way to protect Sky. If he reported back to Jeremy, my cousin’s suspicions would be



proven true. If Jeremy suspected that it would shake me, he would go after Sky the first chance he got.

By protecting her as I had, I had inadvertently painted a blaring target on Sky's back.

# Chapter 10

## SKY

“When you said *modest* homestead, this is not what I pictured.”

I struggled to get a better view from the backseat, half of my body hanging out of the window as our car neared the countryside estate. “I knew you were rolling in it, Jordan, but this is insane.”

The vampiress beside me kept her eyes elsewhere, my words barely registering. Jordan had been distinctly quieter since the attack at the party. She and River had spent days hunting for Jeremy, knocking down on their mission to an unhealthy degree.

It had been her idea to ship out to her personal estate, far out of the bounds of the city. It seemed like a last resort, one last-ditch attempt to protect me from her world.

I had reiterated time and time again since then that I was already knee-deep in the supernatural. It was gory and terrifying at times, but I couldn't simply forget about it all and go back to my old life now. Leaving this world behind would mean leaving Jordan, and I wasn't ready to do that just yet.

Seeing Jordan transform had been disquieting and unexpected. But even when she was hunched over me and morphing in front of my eyes, it had not crossed my mind to be afraid of her. Seeing her hurt had been a truly terrifying

factor. Seeing her hesitate to approach me had been the final straw.

I glanced over at Jordan again. The vampiress chewed at her nails absently, her other hand fisting the fabric of her skirt. Maybe a holiday in the country would be good for her.

The estate was grandiose, sprawling acres of greenery and an old-money building nestled amongst the trees. Jordan's inherited home was something out of a fairytale, and a far cry from her minimalistic apartment in the city. Vines staked around the old French windows, drooping to the ground and mingling with the overgrown foliage below. Dylan's sleek, black vehicle felt out of place on the gravel road—two centuries too late to fit with the superannuated surroundings.

Jordan climbed out of the car and stomped to the back to haul our bags out of the trunk. A delusional part of me expected her to take my hand and kiss it while she bowed, leading me out of the modern carriage like her personal Cinderella.

But my vampire was in a grouchy mood and my request was met with a grunt. I hauled my ass out of the backseat before she carried me to the front door over her shoulder like she was doing with the luggage.

Jordan didn't bother knocking, toeing the door open with her boot and plodding inside like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. I hesitated on the threshold. Jordan had mentioned that her mother was around. She had also

mentioned that the woman would be none too pleased about having a human on her property.

I glanced over my shoulder at Dylan, pleading with my eyes for backup, but the other woman only shot me a sympathetic smile before hauling the car into reverse and speeding away.

“Unbelievable,” I muttered to myself. I dawdled for a few more minutes, hoping that Jordan would notice my absence and come fetch me. But the vampiress was clearly preoccupied and I had begun to feel rather silly standing out there.

The interior proved just as lavish as the exterior, cluttered with paintings and portraits and a plethora of other trinkets taking up every available space. The walkway was clothed in an expensive-looking rug, so breathtakingly ancient and unbelievably intricate that I felt guilty walking on it with my mundane 21st century shoes.

Jordan was nowhere to be seen, but I could hear her faint stomping echoing through the doorway to my right. I tiptoed after the sounds of her passage, taking care not to disturb a collection of hand-painted pots and vases along the way.

An eerie unease rippled over me as I walked, raising goosebumps up my arms. I couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling of being watched. But the hallway around me was empty.

When the thumping halted, I paused, hovering at another large doorway. The door stood slightly ajar and I gently pushed it open.

“Jordan?” I hissed, and risked a glance inside.

The red-headed vampire stood at the fireplace across from me. Only, her hair was shorter, her curls organized in an old-fashioned style around her shoulders. She was curvy, like Jordan, but clothed in a black evening dress with long, drooping sleeves and black corset clamped around her midsection.

Before I could backtrack, the woman turned, her piercing gaze rooting me to the spot. She looked like Jordan, if Jordan had been a 1950s movie star. Large luminous pearls glistened around her neck and two more dangled from her earlobes. Her skin was a milky white, emphasized by the striking red of her lipstick.

Sigrid. Jordan’s mother.

“Oh, uh. Hi.” I couldn’t help but glance down at my own attire, suddenly ashamed of my worn jeans and button-up—courtesy of urban outfitters. “I was just looking for Jordan. You must be Sigrid! It’s a pleasure to meet you, uh—ma’am?”

The woman stared back at me, a poised statue in the static environment. Her blank expression felt condemning in itself and I shrank away from her dark, piercing gaze.

“I’m Sky? I’m not sure if Jordan has mentioned me—”

“I know who you are,” the woman interrupted, her clipped voice echoing around the room. “I want to know why you’re here.”

I stood, stupefied in the presence of this commanding woman. “Jordan thought it would be safer here, so...”

I wasn't sure what kind of answer she expected from me. I wasn't even sure how much of the story Jordan had relayed to her mother, if anything.

The woman strode toward me in the blink of an eye and I flinched as she towered over me. “What do you want from my daughter?”

I paled at her accusatory tone, fumbling over my words as I searched my mind for a satisfying response. “Well, nothing I guess. I'm just kind of here for the ride—”

Suddenly my tongue was limp in my mouth, my body seizing up as if grasped by invisible hands. I tried to cry out in fright but no sound escaped me. Sigrid gripped my chin between her fingers, her black eyes piercing my very soul. I felt her probing into my mind, rooting around for any evidence of foul play against her daughter.

Images were pulled to the surface of my mind, memories of my childhood, my mother, my meeting with Jordan. I tried to struggle when more recent imagery was weaved from my subconscious, memories of Jordan and the things that happened in her bed. Those memories were quickly rifled through and cast aside and I felt the bite of shame in my chest.

The image of Jordan hunched over me came next, her face contorting into a grotesque mask as she shifted into a sinewy, bat-like creature. Her screaming wail as she attacked the shifter. Her pale, bloodless face as she collapsed in my arms.

I was powerless to stop the dark force that plunged through my mind. It enshrouded me, a sinister static in my head.

“I see.” Sigrid’s tone changed, a touch of acquiescence in her words. “So that’s how it is.”

“Mom!?” Jordan’s shrill cry caught us both by surprise. “Get out of her head!”

Sigrid released me, the dark presence leaving my body like a receding thundercloud and I collapsed to the floor in a heap.

“What the hell did you do to her?” Jordan’s arms curled around me and she hauled me onto her knees, examining my lolling head. “You had no right to pry into her mind!”

I had never heard her so furious, not even when her favorite coffee shop had closed early without warning.

“She’ll be fine,” Sigrid said plainly, striding away from us down the hall. “I had to make sure she won’t put us in danger. Humans are such fickle creatures.”

Jordan looked like she wanted to follow her mother but paused when I tugged at her shirt sleeve. “Will you help me up?”

She turned her angry eyes on me, but her fierce expression wavered when she saw my face. “I’m so sorry. Sigrid is a paranoid old hag at the best of times. I should never have left you alone with her.”

Jordan helped me to my feet and I leaned heavily on her while my body remembered itself.



“What are you talking about?” I spoke through gritted teeth, unable to slacken my taunt jaw. “She seems lovely.”

Jordan ignored my sarcasm, still bristling at the situation. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room.” She slung my arm over her shoulders and walked me towards another long hallway. “I have unfinished business with my mother to attend to.”

“My room?” I croaked as she dragged me along, mildly hurt at the idea of her wanting separate bedrooms. “Where are you going to sleep?”

“I thought you might want some space after everything that happened at the party.” Jordan’s words were barely audible and she refused to meet my eyes. “I mean I understand, you know. If you want some space.”

“But what about keeping up appearances? We’re supposed to be ‘dating’ right? I’ve gotten quite comfortable sharing a bed with you.” I struggled to get my feet to follow my bidding, staggering alongside her. “Contrary to what you may think, I *want* to be close to you.”

A tentative smile played on her lips. “Even after what just happened?”

“I want to be around *you*, not Sigrid. No offense, but your mother’s a bit of a bitch.”

---

After Jordan left me to recover in her bed, I could hear her raised voice echoing across the estate as she chewed her mother's ear off. By the time the sun began to set, the headache in my temple was subsiding and Jordan had returned, red-faced and breathless but ultimately victorious after the argument.

She showed me around the rest of the estate, including the overgrown greenhouse out back. Jordan was particularly impressed that I managed to name nearly every plant in the vicinity, thanks to my brief stint as a gardener back in the day.

By the time we got back inside, the first few stars had blinked alight and a chilling night breeze blew through the windows. Jordan had one last thing to show me, something she seemed incredibly skittish about.

I followed behind her down the winding hallway, checking over my shoulder in case Sigrid was around to pick my brain again.

Finally, Jordan paused at a new door and gripped the handle. "Okay, so there's one thing about me that I haven't mentioned yet."

I cocked my head to the side, curious at her obvious unease. "You have a secret crippling addition to My Little Pony merchandise?"

"If I did could you still stand to be around me?"

I shrugged. "I could get used to it."

“Well it’s not that.” Jordan tried to smile. “Just, see for yourself.”

She opened the door gently and I followed her into the room. Inside, illuminated by a glowing pink night light were two cribs. Cautiously, I peeked into the closest one, and found a curly-haired sleeping child wrapped up in a baby blanket.

“Kids?” I whispered to Jordan, baffled at the revelation. “Two of them? When did you—”

“Nieces.” Jordan corrected my assumption and ran a hand over her face. “My late brother’s children. And my best-kept secret.”

At my quizzical expression, Jordan explained how her twin nieces had arrived on her doorstep after her brother’s death, relaying precisely why she had kept them a secret from the rest of the world. With Jeremy still out there somewhere, these children would never be safe.

Jordan leaned over the edge of the crib, pecking a kiss to the toddler’s forehead. The delicate, loving display of affection made it clear how important these two were to her, and just how much she was set to lose if Jeremy were to have his way.

Watching Jordan with the twins, a creeping dread came over me. While I couldn’t explain it, something deep within me knew that things were about to get even more dangerous than before.

That eerie feeling of eyes on me returned and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. At that unsettling sensation

I turned abruptly, looking out of the far window.

There was nothing out there beyond the dark.

# Chapter 11

## JORDAN

Sky stood at my side as we looked over the gathering beneath us. “They’re even more well-dressed than they were the last time.”

I scowled, uncomfortable in the stiff dress that Sigrid had bullied me into. “That’s only because they know my mother is attending this meeting. Everyone wants to impress Sigrid.”

This coven meeting had been thrown together hastily, in light of Jeremy’s bold attacks. Apparently it wasn’t just my party he’d crashed with his werewolf friends. Jeremy had been targeting all the highborns. He was still after my head, that much was clear from what Dylan could find out. But he had his sights set on the rest of the coven too.

He wanted them to fear him.

“This place is much prettier, too.” Evidently, Sky had not picked up on my bad mood, leaning over the edge of the balcony in wonder. “We should go down there!”

The opulent hall was tall enough to accommodate giants if it needed to, far more grandiose than anything found in the city. No less stunning was the variety of living coven members populating the hall, clustering inside corridors and flowing through the open doors of the rooms, all of them fanged, smooth-skinned and painfully beautiful.

Sky was trying, with great difficulty, not to look too interested in any of the lustrous vampires who passed us. I had tried to convince her that she needn't accompany me to another meeting, especially after what happened at the last one, but Sky seemed more fascinated than fearful of the other guests.

This place was the Leyore Coven's best-kept secret, buried far underground and accessible from hidden doors all over the country. The great hall was a meeting place during times of peace, and a sanctuary in times of war. At the moment, we were somewhere in between, distrustful of outside forces and fighting between ourselves.

"Jordan?" Sky touched my arm gently, pulling me from my thoughts. "Are you nervous?"

"That's a terrible thing to ask a nervous person!" I didn't mean to snap, and immediately lowered my voice when Sky pulled her hand away. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little uneasy. They expect me to lead them to fix this. But I don't know if I can. I have no good news to offer them."

I had no power against Jeremy until my coronation at the Black Moon ceremony, an event that was still weeks away.

I inwardly cursed our vampiric ancestors who had chosen to base our gatherings on the fluctuations of the stars. The humans had the right idea, they simply slapped a crown on someone's head, waved a few flags and dubbed their ruler whenever they saw fit.

“My Lady.” We turned to see a smaller vampire, a girl no older than twelve or thirteen. She blushed shyly and bobbed a curtsy before addressing me again. “My Lady, they are ready for you.”

“Thank you, Celia, I’ll be down in a moment.” I felt sick to my stomach, climbing shakily to my feet as the young girl disappeared down the stairs. “Oh god, I can’t do this. They’re going to eat me alive.”

Sky’s face was right in front of mine as she helped me smooth down my dress. “I’ve heard it helps if you picture everyone in the crowd naked.”

“The only person I want to see naked is you.”

She blushed at that. “Later. Right now you have business to attend to, your Highness.”

“High Lady,” I corrected her as she walked me down the stairs. “I’m technically not royalty until after the ceremony. If we can make it that long.”

“Just focus on getting through this meeting first.” Sky squeezed my hip before leaving me at the bottom of the stairs and stepping to the side. Before me, the coven members began to quiet down, conversations flickering out until the room was silent.

With a sea of expectant faces before me, I felt a knot tightening in my stomach. I sucked in a breath, attempting to steady my nerves. Usually, this was a role I was able to step into easily enough, but with everything going on I had begun



to question my claim to the throne. Maybe this wasn't worth it. Maybe I didn't belong here.

“As you all know, Jeremy is now an enemy of the Leyore Coven.” I knew starting with bad news wasn't the smartest move, but someone had to address the elephant in the room. “He has headed multiple attacks on various members already, including myself.”

I ran my tongue over dry lips. “My spies tell me that he has moved to the next stage of his plan. Jeremy has built an army. Not just shifters, he has other vampires on his side, the nomadic kind who owe allegiance to no coven.”

A murmur swelled amongst the audience and I forced myself not to fidget. The frilled neck of my dress made me itch, suffocating me like a soft slipknot. “Jeremy has rallied wraiths and banshees, scores of unsavory supernaturals who all wish to see the downfall of our coven.”

At my side, Sky observed the tension in the air, her eyes darting over the many stony faces of my coven members.

“And what do you plan to do about it?” someone called from the crowd, egging on an eruption of questions and accusations. “You're not fit to rule this coven!”

“We have been tracking Jeremy for days. I assure you, we will find him...” My tongue betrayed me, tripping over phrases and losing its grasp on eloquence. “We need to band together to hold him off, until the Black Moon ceremony. I need—I mean, we can't afford to fight amongst ourselves.”

Each fumble only intensified my anxiety, threatening to swallow me whole. I could feel beads of perspiration forming on my forehead, my palms growing clammy, as I struggled to find my voice amidst the rumbling hall.

“If you could just *listen* for a moment...” my exasperated words were drowned out by the thrum of displeasure. “Please, I’m trying to help you—”

I stiffened when a gentle hand settled on my shoulder.

Turning at the touch, I met Sky’s gaze. I saw the same determination in her eyes that I had seen on the night we met—when she had readied herself to fight the beast alongside me.

“What are you doing?” I tried to pull my arm away, but Sky held on.

“Just trust me.” Her lips brushed my ear as she leaned into me, before releasing my arm and striding forward to address the crowd, her posture surprisingly commanding.

The grand hall resonated with an eerie stillness as Sky stood before the angry vampires. Despite her height, she looked far too fragile, too easily breakable in this cruel world I had thrust her into. Sigrid had chosen Sky’s attire for this event, dressing her like one of us. But her velvet dress, a sweeping cover of midnight blue, could do little to hide her human nature.

The coven members watched as Sky opened her arms outwards, their eyes gleaming with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the coven,” she began, her words cutting through the silence. “I understand your doubts about my partner’s claim to the throne. But let me assure you, her worthiness surpasses any expectations.”

A distinguished vampire with centuries of life etched into his features raised a skeptical brow. “And why, may I ask, should we believe your words?” he inquired, his tone laced with patronization. “You know nothing of our plight, mortal.”

Sky locked eyes with the older vampire, refusing to be dismissed. “Because I have had the privilege of witnessing her strength, her compassion, and her unwavering dedication to your kind,” she replied, her voice carrying the weight of conviction.

My mouth hung open as I watched her. This was a new side to the woman I had never seen before. She looked colder, poised like she had been born from royalty.

Sky continued, her words gaining momentum as they echoed around the hall. “This coven stands at a critical juncture, and the one who leads must possess not only the bloodline but also the qualities that define true leadership. Courage, intelligence, and an unwavering commitment to principles.”

She paused to glance at me, a small smile on her lips. “I assure you, my partner—my mate—possesses all of these qualities and more.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. They glanced at each other, considering her words and the implications they carried. The doubts that initially clouded their minds seemed to

dissipate, replaced by a glimmer of hope and curiosity. The fact that they were listening to her at all was astounding.

With a grace that seemed effortless, Sky gestured toward the crowd. “You are here right now as a collective, one coven united against a common enemy. Fighting amongst yourselves will only divide you, and that is exactly what Jeremy wants.”

Drawing courage from Sky’s words, I stepped forward once more, pushing past the tremor in my voice. “My esteemed coven members,” I began, my tone more resolute now, “I stand before you not as a perfect orator, but as someone who has spent countless hours preparing for this moment. I may not be the ruler you expected, I may not embody the same regality as my late brother and your treasured King, but my dedication to our coven is unwavering.”

My voice wavered slightly at the mention of my brother, the weight of responsibility heavy on my chest. Alberich had been their beloved ruler, and I was a sorry replacement for such a fine king. But it was a burden he had left behind, with no one else to carry it but me.

“I have immersed myself in our history, honing my skills, and learning from the triumphs and failures of those who came before me. I pledge to serve our kind with honor, to protect and advance our interests, and to guide us toward a prosperous future. We will face Jeremy and his monsters head on, and we will emerge victorious. But if we are to best my cousin, I am going to need your support.”

I looked into the eyes of each vampire present, attempting to convey my sincerity and passion, hoping that they would see beyond my initial stumble and recognize me, not as their ruler, but as their ally.

The change in the crowd was subtle, but it was there. While an air of trepidation still hung over the gathering, as the meeting went on, a small, slim seed of hope had begun to blossom.

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“Where did that come from?” I tailed Sky as she ran for the car.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied over her shoulder, feigning ignorance. “I was just helping you get started, that’s all.”

Our exit from the grand hall opened out into an empty field, lined with nodding sunflowers as far as the eye could see. Dylan had the car idling a few meters away, ready to pick us up.

Thankfully, Sigrid had decided not to join the coven meeting, so she stayed at home to watch over the twins. I was more than a little relieved that I wouldn’t be subjected to her berating on the long drive back to the estate. No doubt I would hear all about my shortcomings as a public speaker the moment I walked through the doors, though.

Sigrid had her own secretive ways of getting information, and news of my embarrassing speech and subsequent rescue

would no doubt have reached her already. On the bright side, I comforted myself internally, the whole ordeal may just melt the ice wall of resentment between her and Sky.

Sky climbed into the back of the car and I followed suit, noting Dylan's smirk at our ruffled, pompous attire. "I take it Sigrid had control of your wardrobe this time around?"

"Oh lay off," I grumbled, already unlacing the uncomfortable heeled boots my mother had thrust upon me.

Not to be distracted, I turned my attention back to Sky who was looking pointedly out of the opposite window. "Seriously. You stood up in front of a crowd of angry vampires and you didn't even break a sweat."

Dylan raised a brow in the rear view mirror. "She did?"

"She saved my ass."

Sky glanced over her shoulder. "It is such a lovely ass, after all."

Dylan cackled and I turned a luminous shade of pink.

Unable to get anything from Sky but sarcasm and clever quips, I dropped the subject for the time being. Inwardly, however, I wondered at her actions, both impressed and a little confused. I couldn't quite understand why she would go out of her way to help me, perhaps to simply ensure that I would hold up my end of our deal.

Sky caught me staring at her and flashed me a smile.

That tender chord that tied us together wound a little tighter,  
and my heart beat in perfect unison with hers.

# Chapter 12



## SKY

Babysitting the twins proved far easier than Jordan had described it. While the vampiress insisted that Hazel and Hilda were adorable demon-spawns capable of bringing armies to their knees, the two toddlers were actually quite sweet and perfectly docile with me.

The twins and I had just sat down for a tea party on the grass and both Hazel and Hilda were perfectly polite, pouring imaginary cups of tea for me and the teddy bears.

“You’re welcome to join us,” I called to Jordan who watched enviously from the front door.

“I’ll pass,” she muttered dryly, stomping inside again and grumbling to herself, “Traitors, both of them.”

“It would seem your aunt is in a foul mood,” I crooned, just loud enough for Jordan to hear me. A muffled harumph came from indoors and I snickered. “Anyway, more tea, Hazel?”

Hazel bounced up and down on the quilted cushion with the boundless energy that only a toddler could possess. She raised her plastic cup in one chubby fist and I graciously poured more invisible tea from the painted teapot.

Hilda, on the other hand, sat dutifully on the picnic blanket, her hands folded neatly in her lap. It was clear which of the twins took to mimicking Sigrid’s stiff poise and which of them had been born with their aunt’s enthusiasm.

It was an insurmountable relief that the twins were well-behaved after all. I had expected chaos, spills, and tantrums, but these two little souls seemed to possess an extraordinary level of decorum. Around me, at least.

Despite holding down plenty of odd jobs over the years, babysitting was one I had never expected to be any good at. But reclining on the overgrown lawn, eating jam biscuits with my little guests, I found I was rather enjoying myself.

I had been secretly pleased to hear that the twins were only part vampire. It was comforting to know I wasn't the only human hanging around, and it also meant there was a steady food supply in the household.

During my earlier weeks with Jordan, the vampire had completely forgotten that I didn't have a taste for blood, and I had to remind her more than once that regular human food was a necessity in the apartment.

She had subsequently forked out far too much money and set me loose in the grocery store to shop to my heart's content.

It was decided rather quickly that I would be the one doing the shopping every week, since the first time Jordan had tried her hand at it she had returned with a stack of donuts, some raw onions and three different brands of cereal.

Sitting with my face tilted toward the sun, I chuckled inwardly at the memory of Jordan watching me eat a cheeseburger, awed fascination on her face. Apparently even vampires were drawn to McDonalds' greasy golden arches.

I snapped out of my daydreaming to find Hilda offering me a daisy she had plucked from the ground. “Why thank you, angel. That’s very kind of you.”

I tucked the small flower behind my ear and clinked my teacup against hers.

Not to be outdone by her sister, Hazel leapt to her feet and proceeded to rip whole patches of plant-life from the ground, presenting her foraged goods with a proud grin.

“Oh, my. Thank you, Hazel.” I accepted the pile of plants graciously, checking over my shoulder to make sure Sigrid wasn’t lurking about. “But your grandmother might bite my head off if we dig up any more of her flower bed.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon making flower crowns, woven from Hazel’s collection.

By the time Jordan returned to call the twins in for dinner, I had constructed matching headbands for the both of us and Hazel had returned with more armfuls of her grandmother’s flowers.

Jordan raised her brow at the display, folding her arms while the twins strutted up and down in their woven crowns. “Are those Sigrid’s hydrangeas?”

“Hazel thought they looked better this way.”

“Blaming the kid.” Jordan tsked, shaking her head in mock disappointment. “I thought you were above that, Miss Vincent.”

“Shut up and put this crown on your head.”

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After finally convincing the twins to head inside, Jordan linked her arm with mine and insisted on an evening stroll. The sky was a hazy purple, washing the landscape with a pale, lavender hue. I let myself be led along the uneven pathway, our footsteps softened by a carpet of fallen leaves. The estate garden was enchanting, in a neglected sort of way, overgrown with vines and tangled foliage. The air was heavy with the scent of wildflowers and a slight breeze whispered through the drooping trees.

“You know, there are better ways to get revenge on Sigrid.” Jordan chuckled. Her flower crown sat crooked on her head and she grinned like a mischievous Peter Pan. “I don’t think convincing the twins to wage war on her hydrangeas is the best solution.”

I rolled my eyes, blowing air out of my cheeks. “For the last time, it was your unruly niece who decided to dig them up in the first place. I just made the most of the situation.”

We settled into a somewhat comfortable silence, meandering through the untamed foliage. Amidst the whimsical overgrowth of the secluded garden it was peaceful, but a score of emotions tumbled in my chest. Despite how close Jordan and I had become, there was something unspoken between us. If left unaddressed, I worried we would be forever entwined in a tender dance of uncertainty and longing.

A gentle breeze tousled my hair, causing the petals of my makeshift crown to rustle. I stole a sideways glance at Jordan, my heart pounding with a thousand unanswered questions. In the beginning, I had tried to convince myself that everything I was doing was for my own sake, to ensure that Jordan would continue to hold up her end of the deal.

While I didn't doubt Jordan's attraction to me, and god knows I couldn't deny my attraction to her, it was her heart I was unsure of. Her body, I believed, she would give happily if I asked her to. But I was beginning to suspect that I wanted more than that.

The gentle squeeze of Jordan's hand on my arm provided both solace and confusion. I dared not voice the depths of these feelings, not yet at least. I was still uncertain of how they would be received.

“Jordan, I—”

I wasn't even sure what I planned on saying, but Jordan paused her step, hushing me with a frown. “My mother is calling. Apparently the twins are wreaking havoc in the kitchen.”

“Is that telepathy or something?” I let go of her arm, my feelings stamped down for the time being.

Jordan tapped her ear with a smirk. “Nope, just these. Vampires have much better hearing than your kind.” Her face fell and she grimaced. “One of them just broke a plate. I'm sorry, I'll meet you back at the house.”

And just like that she was gone, leaving me with my heart still fisted in my hand.

Unwilling to return to the chaos just yet, I wandered deeper into the garden, guided only by the barely visible footpath. A part of me had wondered if moving to the mansion had been Jordan's way of opening her world to me. But the longer I spent there, the more it became clear that Jordan needed me for political reasons, wanted me for... other reasons.

But the problem with a charismatic vampire who wore her heart on her sleeve meant that I had no way of knowing if she was flirting with me for the hell of it or if there was something deeper between us.

I wanted to believe that she could feel the same unshakable connection that I did. Sometimes I thought she might, but other times my own feelings of inferiority got the best of me. But there was always a chance...

I felt foolish for entertaining these thoughts and took my frustration out on the sticks and stones beneath my feet.

Lost in my tumultuous thoughts, I turned a corner and nearly walked right into the lurking, decrepit figure amidst the unruly greenery.

Startled, I found myself face to face with an old man, his weathered face etched and creased like he too had just been dug up from the earth. He wore a threadbare hat, and his tattered clothes blended seamlessly with the faded beauty of the garden.

A suspicious glee flickered in his darting eyes as he straightened his stooped posture. “Ah, you must be Sky Vincent. We haven’t had another human on the premises in years.”

“Yeah, that’s me...” I regarded the strange man with a mix of curiosity and uncertainty. “Uh, who are you?”

“Resident gardener,” he stated proudly, folding his crooked arms and eyeing me from under the drooping brim of his hat. Try as I might, I couldn’t get a read on the guy, but something about him made me uncomfortable.

“I didn’t realize anyone tended to this garden.” I folded my arms in response, brushing my hands over the goosebumps that bloomed there. “It kinda looks like it’s been left to nature’s whims.”

A wry smile crept across the old man’s face and something foul curdled in my stomach.

“Ah, nature has her own way of tending to things, my dear.” His cryptic words did nothing to remedy my unease. “Sometimes, it’s best to let the wild things in.”

“Right.” I didn’t appreciate the way he was staring at me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention, every cell of my body screaming that something about this man was wrong.

“Well, anyway I should get going.” The last thing I wanted to do was turn my back on the unsettling man, but there was a

little voice in the back of my head telling me to get the hell out of there.

That voice had saved me countless times before, and I wasn't about to ignore it now.

I shuffled away a few steps, backing down the garden path. "Jordan is waiting for me. It was nice to meet you...?"

The man moved at impossible speed considering his frail body. In the blink of an eye he was right in front of me, grasping my hand between his own gnarled fingers. "Elijah. It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Vincent. I do hope to meet you again, very soon."

I all but snatched my hand away from him, manners be damned, and scooted away at a brisk pace. "Nice to meet you, Elijah. See you around."

Back at the estate, I questioned Jordan on the subject. The vampiress was covered from head to toe in scrambled eggs, courtesy of the twins' earlier temper tantrum.

"Oh, him?" Jordan shrugged, picking egg yolk from her hair. "Elijah has worked here for years, don't worry about it. He's always been a little odd."

Seeing Jordan so blasé about it, I began to feel a little guilty for judging the old man so quickly. Living out in the middle of nowhere with only an aloof vampiress for company would leave anyone a little touched.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something off about Elijah.



The memory of the man's beady eyes made my hair rise all over again and I clamped a hand over the back of my neck. Whatever it was about him, it clearly didn't concern Jordan, which meant it probably shouldn't concern me.

I shoved the thoughts to the back of my mind, shoveling the last of Hazel and Hilda's scrambled egg into my mouth and swallowing with a dry, painful gulp.

# Chapter 13

## JORDAN

“Ouch!” I shoved my singed finger into my mouth, glaring at the stovetop that flickered with blue flame like it held a personal vendetta against me.

The appliances in the estate kitchen were fairly new, installed after my mother and I had deduced that the twins did indeed have a taste for human food. Unfortunately, neither Sigrid nor I had any idea how to use any of it, having never needed such frivolous human technology before.

The recipe book I had dug from Sky’s suitcase lay open on the counter top, the frayed pages illuminating the human woman’s preferences. While I had absolutely zero penchant for culinary adventures, I had found myself attempting the impossible: broccoli stir fry.

Armed with super speed and vampiric strength, I was determined to impress Sky with my non-existent culinary skills, despite the challenges that came with being an otherworldly creature in the kitchen with no map or compass to guide me.

Still sucking on my burnt finger, I surveyed the countertop, which looked more like a battlefield than a cooking station. Chopped vegetables were scattered haphazardly, tofu bits stuck to the wall, and garlic cloves rolled away as if trying to escape the chaos. Despite the mess and the vengeful stove top, things were going rather well.

Undeterred by the kitchen's state of disarray, I pressed on, determined to create a masterpiece worthy of my human lover. Since arriving at the mansion, the crackling tension between Sky and me had increased tenfold.

While I was still unsure of her deeper feelings toward me, I couldn't deny the chemistry between us and I decided to do what I could to pry a clear answer from her. Broccoli stir fry would be my weapon of choice.

With a dramatic flourish, I seized the frying pan and plopped it on the stovetop like I had seen human chefs do on the internet. I cranked up the heat, warily eyeing the flames that roared to life in an effect reminiscent of a volcano eruption.

Unfortunately, my vampire senses didn't quite align with my cooking skills. While my nose was able to pick up the delicate aroma of ginger, the pungent smell of garlic had me heaving over the kitchen sink. Just touching the stuff was bad enough, but slicing those evil little cloves nearly got the best of me.

I resorted to pinching my nose closed with one hand and stirring the concoction with the other. This, too, proved difficult and many a stray vegetable was knocked to the ground in the process. In an invigorating display of culinary aerobics, I managed to catch a retreating hunk of broccoli before it hit the floor, knocking my head on the counter as I did so.

“Oh for the love of—”

Startled by an unexpected chuckle from behind me, I whirled around to find Sky sitting on the kitchen table, watching me.

“Well, there’s a sight you don’t see every day.”

“What are you doing in here?” I squawked, before rushing back to the stove at the sound of suspicious sizzling. “This was supposed to be a surprise.”

Sky hopped off the table and came to peek over my shoulder, sniffing the air. “Is that stir fry?”

“It was supposed to be.” Resigning in defeat, I sighed and handed her the spatula. “You take over, I’ve suffered a grave defeat to a stack of vegetables.”

Sky bumped her hip against mine, nudging me out of the way while she took the lead. “It’s salvageable. You’ve actually done a pretty good job—these onions are sliced to perfection.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.” I flopped dramatically onto the chair in the corner and watched Sky turn the chaotic cooking endeavor into a choreographed dance number.

“I mean it!” she said over her shoulder, working the spatula and frying pan like a professional. “Whatever made you decide to take up cooking, though? I wouldn’t expect it to be a common vampire hobby.”

“No reason,” I spluttered, grateful to have her back to me. “I just felt like giving it a shot.”

“So you snuck down to the kitchen in the dead of night and just happened to pick the recipe that I specifically bookmarked?” I could hear the grin in her tone and cringed inwardly.

“Yes, exactly that. No other reason whatsoever.”

“I’m sure.” With a precise flick of her wrist, Sky tossed the fried vegetables into the air, catching them in the pan again without a single spill. “This is done, by the way.”

She held the pan out for me to see. I glanced over the contents, everything glazed and salted to perfection, and nodded regally like I’d seen professional chefs do when they approved of a contestant’s dish.

She wriggled the pan under my nose. “So, what should I do with this?” Sky posed the question with a smirk, one hand propped on her hip.

“Well,” I fumbled for a response, avoiding her gaze, “it would be a shame to let it go to waste, and I can’t eat it, so...”

Sky was already dishing a large helping into a ceramic bowl. She spied a bottle of red liquid on the shelf and grabbed the neck of the bottle. “If I’m having a midnight snack, so are you.”

With no dining table to speak of, Sky seated herself at the small kitchen table, gesturing for me to settle across from her. “Do you have candles around here?”

“Uh, yes.” I was hesitant to fetch them, because then Sky would realize that I had already located, placed and prepared them for this exact scenario. “There might be some in the cupboard.”

While Sky rummaged for invisible candles, I slipped out of the kitchen. By the time Sky gave up, I had swiped the

decadent candles from the living room, set them alight on the table and sat back down as if I hadn't moved.

"I found them," I responded nonchalantly to her astonished expression.

Sky's features appeared sharper in the flickering candlelight, with deep shadows under her sweeping cheekbones and jaw. She sat down at the table and lifted the bottle.

"Wine, m'lady?"

"Why yes, good woman." I lifted my glass and Sky tilted the "wine" bottle, filling the crystal with crimson liquid.

I expected her to gag as she did so; I could hardly expect a human to stomach anything when their dining partner was sipping on human blood. But Sky seemed perfectly content and she lifted her fork to clink against my filled glass. "Here's to fine dining."

Sky speared a piece of broccoli and bit into it, complimenting the flavors with a quiet groan of pleasure. Across from her, I took a delicate sip from my glass.

The contrast between Sky's vibrant plate and my own dark beverage couldn't have been more striking. The air crackled with unspoken tension. It was as if both of us were cautiously navigating a fine line, somewhere between friendship and something more.

"I'm a little jealous that I don't get to try that dish," I lamented, looking longingly at a charred bit of carrot. "It's rather unfair you humans get so much variety."

Sky paused mid-bite, observing my peculiar drink choice. “If you don’t mind me asking, does blood taste... good?” she ventured, her fork suspended in the air. “I just mean...” Sky blushed at my incredulous expression. “Humans tend to get bored with the same old flavor after a while. Don’t vampires get bored with the same old drink?”

I forced down another sip, mentally cursing myself for bringing about such a delicate topic. “It’s true that our culinary options are a bit different from yours, but I wouldn’t say it gets boring. There’s still variation in the flavors if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Sky’s brow hitched, her curiosity piqued. “So some humans taste better than others?”

“This is animal blood!” I rebutted, nearly spilling my drink as I raised the glass.

A glint of mischief flickered in the other woman’s eyes. “My question still stands.”

I sighed and took another sip. “This stuff all tastes the same. Although some companies add their own artificial flavors to mix things up. But yes, some humans taste better than others.”

Sky toyed with her food, pushing a bit of broccoli around her plate. “So why don’t you stick to human blood then, surely there’s a flavor to your preference?”

I wasn’t sure what she was getting at, but something stirred in the depths of my body, a small fire creeping across my skin.



It was getting increasingly difficult to swallow and I cleared my throat loudly.

“Well, I could. If I found the right person.” I watched her from the corner of my eye. “And if that person was interested.”

Sky shoveled another bite of stir fry into her mouth and shrugged. “So what made you decide to cook me dinner tonight?”

My mouth dropped open before I could catch it. “I didn’t—”

My argument petered out at her knowing smile and I exhaled loudly. “I just thought it would be a nice gesture. You’ve been so patient and understanding with everything going on, I thought you deserved something nice.”

Sky was quiet for a moment, pinning me in place with a contemplative stare. “It was nice. Thank you.”

The room gradually fell into a comfortable silence, the clinking of utensils the only sound breaking the tranquility. The candles dropped hot wax onto the surface of the table and I stared at the cooling wax, willing myself to speak.

I had to understand the undercurrent of attraction between us. That ever-present connection just under the surface. I had to believe that she could feel it too. “You know,” I started hesitantly, freezing up when Sky lifted her eyes to mine. “Uh. Apparently broccoli is something women would give to their lovers... because Sappho once described herself and a lover wearing garlands of the stuff.”

Sky pointed her fork at me with a smirk. “You’ve been spending too much time on the internet. That was just a popular urban myth passed around the web. In fact, there are plenty of literary references to broccoli, but none from Sappho herself.”

I blanched. Never in my life had my attempts at seduction been shot down by a history nerd.

Sky set her fork down and reached for my hand, her voice softening. “It’s a nice thought, though.”

Throwing myself out the window was a nicer thought.

I had one last shot to rectify the situation, one last trump card to get Sky to open up before I had to.

I drained my glass and pushed my chair back. “Would you like to go for a walk? I have something I’d like to show you.”

# Chapter 14

## SKY

With my heart in my throat, I let Jordan guide me on what seemed to be a leisurely walk around the sprawling house. The moon cast a soft glow, illuminating our path as we ventured hand in hand.

Jordan led me through ornate hallways adorned with ancient paintings and hand-woven tapestries, each more gorgeous than the last. We didn't speak much, which was fine by me considering my brain had short circuited after what I assumed was a genuine attempt at seduction on her part.

Jordan had all but made her feelings clear, and while I had rerouted the conversation effectively, my mind was running amok at the revelation.

Unable to calm my pounding heart, I broke the silence with an unrelated question. "How long has your family owned this place? It must be ancient."

Jordan seemed mildly relieved to have the tension broken and her eyes drifted to a portrait on the wall. "This house goes back generations. It belongs to my mother now, and someday it will belong to me."

I examined the portrait above our heads, taking in the painted family who stared back sullenly from the golden frame. I could make out Sigrid, with her elaborate updo, and another gruff-looking man at her side. Two children stood in

front of them, a red-headed girl who looked uncomfortable in her pinafore dress, and a boy about the same age, smiling nervously.

“Is that Alberich?” I pointed. I had learned a little about Jordan’s brother from Maxine and Hunter, Jordan herself seemed unwilling to engage with the topic.

“Yes.” Jordan glanced over the subject and gestured to the long line of portraits stretching back into the dark. “These are my ancestors, generations of vampires who walked these halls long before I did. They were part of a coven that thrived in secrecy, protecting both the mortal and immortal realms.”

I struggled to comprehend that generational connection. My own family’s history was a murky one.

“That must be a lot of pressure,” I murmured, tightening my grip on Jordan’s hand. “Generations worth of expectation on your shoulders.”

“It’s not so bad.” Jordan chewed her bottom lip, refusing to meet my eyes. “It’s easier with you around. Also, we’re here.”

Jordan paused before a large wooden door. There were intricate carvings in the old varnished wood, adorned with a door handle far older than the modern renditions at the front of the house. Jordan hesitated for a beat before pushing the door open, enveloping us both in the rich scent of aging books and stirred dust.

“Oh my god.” My breath caught in my throat as I drank in the library—rows upon rows of leather bound books and

scrolls yellowed with age. “Why haven’t you brought me here before?”

Moonlight streamed through the open window, illuminating dust particles that floated lazily in the air. I ran a finger lightly over the spine of a nearby book, the ancient tomb beckoning to be opened. “These must be ancient.”

Jordan watched my reaction carefully, a tentative smile playing on her lips. “I thought you might like it.”

“I love it!” I exclaimed, turning to her with glistening eyes.

Before I knew it, my feet had carried me over to her, closing the distance between us. Jordan waited with bated breath while I struggled to gather up the courage to speak.

“Jordan, I need to tell you something...” My throat was suddenly dry, my tongue mere sawdust in my mouth. “Something I can’t explain. Not in so many words.”

Still Jordan didn’t speak, but her eyes glowed with a hopefulness that made my chest ache.

I yearned to pull my chest open, to let her examine my heart herself. That would be far less agonizing than standing before her, straining to find the right words to explain these overwhelming emotions.

“This something. It’s undeniable. It’s terrifying, and I don’t know where it will lead us. But...”

I reached out to her, my hand trembling as it brushed against the vampire’s cool skin. “Jordan, you have this inexplicable pull on me. I find myself yearning for your presence, your

touch. But I'm afraid of what it might cost me to speak it out loud."

Jordan covered my hand with hers, her voice barely a whisper. "If you want to walk away, I respect that. I'll still hold true to my end of the bargain. You've done more than enough for me."

But I couldn't walk away, not now. Not ever.

Unshed tears pricked my eyes, and my gaze darted around the library. Surely one of these books had the words that I needed? Surely it wasn't supposed to be this difficult—being vulnerable.

My gaze rested on a dusty violin case, illuminated in moonlight like an answer from the heavens.

With trembling hands, I released Jordan and approached the case. Opening it revealed the instrument's polished wood and shimmering strings, delicate spider threads, perfectly strung. I had always been drawn to the haunting beauty of music, and now it seemed like the perfect medium to express the emotions I struggled to put into words.

Tentatively, I plucked one of the taut strings, the sound sending chills up my spine as the thread vibrated beneath my fingers.

With a deep breath, I positioned the violin against my shoulder and gently drew the bow across the strings. The melody that emanated from the instrument seemed to speak

directly to my soul, like the violin itself was imbued with life, resonating with the unspoken feelings within me.

As the melodic music filled the library, Jordan's eyes widened in awe, completely captivated by the lilting notes. I poured my heart and soul into each delicate sweep of the bow. The haunting melody danced through the air, carrying with it a symphony of emotions that words alone could never convey.

Despite years of no practice and with only the faintest memory of my past lessons, my fingers slid effortlessly across the strings, my movements guided by the whirlpool of emotions that swelled within me. With my bow and strings alone, I wove a tapestry of longing, hope, and fragile vulnerability, baring my soul like I had never done before.

With the final note fading to nothingness, the final quivering string lying still, I met Jordan's gaze. I lowered the violin to my side, my breath coming in short gasps.

I searched the vampiress' face for any trace of uncertainty. What I found was an unwavering honesty and a longing mirrored in my own heart.

Without uttering a word, Jordan closed the distance between us, her hands rising to cup my face. I closed my eyes as our lips met in a tender, passionate kiss, sealing a connection that had been months in the making. At that moment, time stood still. Finally, together, we both surrendered to the undeniable truth of our bond.

After what felt like eons but could only have been seconds, I pulled away, breathless yet relieved with a newfound sense of



clarity.

“I love you.” I blurted the words out, frantic to speak them into being once and for all. “You know that, right? I love you.”

Jordan’s cracked smile was a sunbeam, tears pooling on her lashes as she kissed me again. “And I love you.”

Our confessions of love hung in the air, a fragile promise that tethered our hearts together. Jordan’s porcelain skin shimmered under the ethereal glow of the overhead chandelier, her crimson lips parted in anticipation.

I traced the delicate curve of her cheekbone with trembling fingers, my breath catching in my throat.

A hush fell over the vast expanse of knowledge that surrounded us, ancient tomes on the shelves standing as silent witnesses to the unfolding, tender passion between us.

The rain outside the bay windows began to pour anew and the rhythmic tapping against the glass served as a symphony, adding a sense of urgency to our intimate dance. Jordan, spurred on by a hunger not for blood but for love, pressed her lips against mine again, her kiss imbued with both the tender longing of eternity and the fierce urgency of the present moment.

Our bodies sank in unison onto the plush carpeted floor, the soft fibers cushioning the slow descent. Jordan’s cool touch sent shivers down my spine, igniting a primal desire within me. My fingers tangled in her cascading red hair, and I surrendered completely to the intoxicating pull of desire. Time

seemed to stand still as our lips molded together, the kiss deepening with a hunger that defied the constraints of mortal existence.

As the world around our embrace faded away, my dull senses heightened, my ear picking up the rhythmic thumping of the vampire's heart, the rush of blood through her veins. Jordan's lips trailed a path of heated kisses along my jawline, her fangs barely grazing the skin. The tantalizing dance between pain and pleasure electrified the air, an acknowledgment of the delicate balance between our two worlds.

My hands explored the contours of Jordan's body, reveling in the silkiness of her skin. The touch of fingers on my own cool flesh sent a jolt of desire coursing through my veins, an ache that only she could soothe. Our bodies intertwined, each movement a testament to the passion that blazed between us.

An unbreakable bond that had existed all along.

After an eternity, our lips reluctantly parted, foreheads resting against one another. I gazed into Jordan's gleaming green eyes, the windows to her immortal soul, and saw a reflection of my own passionate desire. This was a love, so fiercely ignited, that had the potential to reshape us both.

The ancient library watched in silent reverence as the two of us, in tandem, surrendered to that love.

Slowly, eye to eye and lips only inches apart, our hands moved with a purpose, seeking the clasps and buttons that held our various garments together.

Jordan's long, slender fingers worked their way down the front of her shirt, releasing each expensive button with gentle precision. As the fabric parted, revealing glimpses of her alabaster skin, a soft exhale escaped my lips. This was not the first time I had seen Jordan naked, but this was the first time I was able to focus all of my attention on the woman before me.

My eyes were fully fixed on her slowly revealed form, finally able to appreciate the sight of her with eyes unclouded by doubt or fear. The button-up slipped from her shoulders, leaving her bare from the waist up.

With my eyes fastened on the woman before me, I fumbled with the buttons of my shirt, my hands trembling with both desire and trepidation. With each button that came undone, the tension in the room seemed to grow, building an electric current that crackled between us.

Giving up on my buttons and unable to exude the same grace that Jordan did, I pulled my shirt clean over my head, feeling a surge of vulnerability blended with the blistering heat of desire.

Jordan's jeans and my skirt were the next items to go, followed by our underwear, finally leaving both of us bared to each other, illuminated only by the flickering candles overhead.

With a newfound boldness, I leaned forward, my hands cupping the vampire's face as I claimed her lips in a kiss that spoke of months of longing and complete devotion. We

pressed together, skin against skin, with an urgent need to be even closer.

Our bodies were akin to a blank canvas, needing only delicate touches to paint a masterpiece. Jordan's fingertips traced a path of fire along my collarbone, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. Her touch was a delicate dance, her hands exploring the terrain of my bare thigh with a reverence reserved for sacred scriptures.

With a gentle push, I guided Jordan onto her back, urging her to recline on the carpeted floor. Without pause, I straddled the vampire, my supernatural being of unearthly beauty, my eyes never leaving her as our bodies sought perfect alignment.

My lips trailed over Jordan's soft mounds, teeth grazing over delicate flesh. I reached between us and cupped a hand against the vampire's sex, my fingers tracing the slicked folds. My touch coaxed a moan from Jordan, and my own unbridled desire roared at my center. But this first true coupling was a slow, gentle thing. I wanted to explore every inch of her, and allow Jordan to do the same. We would map every contour and forge this bond anew.

# Chapter 15

## JORDAN

“This is so unfair,” I huffed, observing the scene before me.

The three culprits looked up from their book. Sky lay on her stomach with Hazel and Hilda wedged on either side of her. “What’s unfair about it? Do you want story time too?”

“No!” I sat down beside the treacherous trio and folded my arms. “It’s not fair that they’re so well behaved when you’re around. It’s like they’re doing it just to taunt me.”

Sky chuckled behind her book. “Maybe because you respond to their bad behavior. I’ve seen you turn as red as your hair when Hazel gets on your nerves. She probably thinks it’s funny to torment Aunty Jordan.”

“That’s just plain evil,” I muttered.

Sky shrugged. “You do the same thing to me. They had to have learnt it from someone.”

Lying back on the carpet I ran a hand over my eyes. “I’m not cut out to be a foster mom. Alberich is probably rolling in his grave right about now.”

Setting down the book, Sky shuffled along on her stomach to kiss my cheek. “You make a great foster mom. Sure, they’re little devils sometimes, but the twins love you.”

Hazel backed up this claim by bonking me on the head with the abandoned book.

“They have very strange ways of expressing it.”

Sky distracted the terrible twins by flicking on the television. Hazel and Hilda flocked to the screen like moths to a flame, cackling with glee at the cartoon elephant. I watched Sky’s expression as her gaze followed the two toddlers. What I saw there was pure love, something that made my heart ache in a pleasantly painful way.

With the twins momentarily subdued, Sky lay down beside me. “What happened to their real mother? You’ve never told me the full story.”

“It’s a complicated one.” I closed my eyes. I had not given thought to the topic for a good long while, and I was not thrilled about rehashing those memories now. Jeremy had already tried to use it to shake me, it had taken many a sleepless night beside Sky to pack them away neatly in the back of my mind.

But Sky’s curiosity was piqued and she propped herself up on one elbow and pried my eye open with two fingers. “Come on, you can’t avoid the subject forever. I’m practically raising these two alongside you. Don’t I deserve to know the truth?”

I opened my eyes to scowl at her. “I hate it when you make good, reasonable points.”

“Get used to it.” Sky leaned over to plant a kiss on my nose. “Tell me about your brother.”

Sighing deeply, I stared up at the ceiling. “Alberich ruled the Leyore coven before me. Everyone loved him and he was a

good king. His death was unexpected, it shook all of us...”

I glanced over at my prying companion. Sky was listening with rapt interest, her thumb massaging circles on my shoulder.

“It was me who found Alberich’s body. He was dead in his home, with no wounds or signs of a struggle whatsoever. At first I thought he was sleeping. The only evidence of any foul play was this lingering scent all over the house—a witch’s scent.”

It had been a terrifying night, a painful one. Alberich had been so still, his skin cold to the touch, his glassy eyes wide and unseeing.

Sky’s nose wrinkled. “So witches are real too? Like old crones with moles on their noses?”

“Witches are beautiful,” I murmured, eyeing the twins from the corner of my eye. “That’s what makes them so dangerous. They can blend in with mankind well enough, but they mess with dangerous magic far beyond human comprehension.”

When Sky didn’t respond I continued, “Anyway, I tried to track down the witch by her scent. Whoever she was, she was the last person to have seen Alberich alive. I followed her scent through the woods, but eventually it disappeared without a trace. What I did find though, was a patch of red earth, signs of profuse bleeding right before her scent cut off. I didn’t know what any of it meant.”



“Do you think she was whisked away by some kind of magic?” Sky speculated. “Is that even possible?”

“With witches, anything is possible.” I closed my eyes again, reliving the vivid memories that followed. “I reported what I had found to the Leyore coven, but looking back I wonder if I should have kept my findings to myself. At the news of Alberich’s death, and learning that a witch might be involved, Jeremy launched an attack on the witches in Manhattan.”

“He took revenge on the witches?” Sky’s surprise was mingled with disgust. “Even though there was no real proof that it was a witch who killed Alberich?”

“That’s right.” I cringed away from the gory memories, scenes of bloody violence burned into my retina forever. “We managed to arrest him and had him banished for his cruel actions. But we were too late to save any of the witches. Jeremy had attacked at night, during one of their gatherings in the park; they didn’t see him coming.”

The relationship between vampires and witches had always been tense, but most had overcome the deep hatred kindled by hundreds of wars waged in the past. Jeremy’s attack had refueled that anger, driving a wedge between vampires and witches all over again.

“That’s terrible,” Sky whispered, most likely recalling the attack at the apartment, realizing just how bad things could have gone. “But how does this tie back to the twins?”

I hesitated then, the truth of the twins’ birth something I had struggled to come to terms with for a long time. “Two days

after the attack, I got a knock on my door in the middle of the night. No one was there when I opened the door, not even a lingering scent. But at my feet there was a basket, with two newborns bundled up inside.”

Sky looked from me to the twins and back again. “The twins were dumped at your door?”

I nodded. “The moment I laid eyes on them I knew they were Alberich’s kids. They looked just like him, but their scent was strange. They smelled like vampires, and their eyes were red with newborn bloodlust. But they also expressed a different scent, one similar to the witch’s fragrance that I had picked up in Alberich’s home.”

The information took a moment to click, before Sky’s jaw dropped. “They’re half witch?”

The twins looked up at Sky’s exclamation, waving their meaty little fists in excitement.

“Yes.” I breathed deeply. “The witch I tracked was Alberich’s lover. The twins’ mother. Most likely the spilled blood had been hers, from going into labor in the middle of the woods.”

Sky’s hand flew to her mouth. “So what does it all mean? If the witch didn’t kill Alberich then who did? And where did she disappear to?”

“I don’t know.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. I had asked these same questions a thousand times over and still I had no answers. “Nobody knows. But with the hatred between

witches and vampires more intense than ever, I had no choice but to keep the twins' existence a secret. The Leyore coven would not accept them, nor would the remaining witches. The twins exist between the two worlds, they would be resented by both sides."

Sky sat upright, rubbing at her temple with the palm of her hand. "Well, that was way more complicated than I expected it to be."

I gave her a watery smile. "Haven't you learnt by now? Nothing that goes on in the supernatural world is ever simple."

"No kidding." Sky was dumbfounded, looking at the twins in a new light. "So you're telling me that one day those two are going to be able to use magic?"

"I'm not sure. I've never raised children before, let alone halfings like these two."

A new thought occurred to me and I sat up too. "Does this change things? I wouldn't want you to feel afraid of them—"

"Shush." Sky cut me off with a kiss. "I love them just as much as I did yesterday. I couldn't care less about the origin of their birth. It's how we raise them that counts."

I leaned into the kiss when she pulled away, bringing my hand up to cup her face. "What did I do to land someone as perfect as you?"

"You broke into my apartment and coerced me into 'fake dating' you."

“Trivial details.” I waved her accusation away, kissing her again. “In the grander scheme of things, my plan worked out rather well.”

I felt her smile against my lips. “Yes, yes. You’re a genius. Congratulations.”

My phone chimed in my pocket and I groaned. “That’s probably Max again. She still hasn’t forgiven me for leaving Hunter in charge.”

“In Max’s defense, Hunter’s rule over the office sounds rather tyrannical. All that power must have gone to her head.”

I put the phone to my ear, shooting Sky a wry smile at her comment. “Max, for the last time, I’m not coming back for another two weeks—”

“You need to get back here right now.” Hunter’s voice had me straightening up, the urgency of her tone setting off alarm bells in my head.

Sky watched me quizzically as I got to my feet and pressed the phone tightly to my ear. “What happened?”

Hunter’s voice was grave. “There’s been another attack. Jeremy targeted some of our staff. Twelve of them have been found dead.”

“How? Where?” my words were strangled, fear clogging my throat. “How many more are missing?”

“Too many.” There was an edge of desperation in Hunter’s words, a pleading note that alluded to just how dire the

situation had become. “People are afraid. We need you here, Jordan.”

“All right.” I lowered my phone, locking eyes with Sky who by then had picked up on my distress. “Sky, I have to go. They need me back there.”

Fear flashed in her eyes as she scrambled to her feet. “Now? But what about Jeremy? Who’s going to keep an eye on the twins while we’re gone?”

“*I’m* going back,” I emphasized, wrapping my arms around her waist. “But I can’t risk taking you with me. Jeremy has been killing vampires, my people. They need me there. But that doesn’t mean I should put you in harm’s way too.”

The manor, I knew, had strong wards around it. No unwelcome guest would be able to get close to the front door. And with Sigrid lurking on the property, nobody would want to, anyway. My mate would be far safer here in the middle of nowhere than she would be in Manhattan. Though it hurt me to leave her behind, it had to be done.

At Sky’s incredulous expression, I stood on my toes to peck a kiss to her forehead. “I know you want to be by my side for this. But you’ll be safer here—Sigrid will be able to keep watch until I get back.”

Sky looked like she wanted to argue further, but instead she shook her head and lifted my hand to her heart. “Okay. I’ll wait here. But promise me you’ll be careful out there? Promise me you’ll come back in one piece.”

“Of course I’ll come back.” I enveloped her in a tight embrace, and Sky clung to me like I was the only solid thing in a world of smoke. “I’ll always come back.”

In the depth of my heart, I hoped that I would be able to keep that promise.

# Chapter 16

## SKY

“Come on you stupid hunk of junk!” I kicked the rusty geyser with one foot, babbling a string of curses when white hot pain shot up my leg.

Jordan had been gone for only two days and already I was running into problems. I had grown so accustomed to the vampire’s presence that her sudden absence was painfully noticeable. Jordan had kept in contact as much as she could, but the anxious voice in my head continually reminded me that disaster could strike at any moment. Every dragging instant between phone calls was a tumultuous mess of uncertainty.

My fear and frustration had risen to a head when the rusting outdoor geyser started spitting out cold, dirty water. The twins needed their baby formula and I needed a hot bath, so I donned my dirtiest jeans and set out to try to fix the damned thing.

Sigrid had turned her nose up at the prospect of helping me and Jordan was too far away to offer any assistance in the matter. She didn’t even know where the geyser was, informing me over the phone to “fetch some water from the river like people did in the old days.”

Unsurprisingly, she didn’t know the location of said river either.

Which was why I found myself outside in the rain, knee-deep in mud and cursing at an inanimate object. I had



managed to scout out a wrench from somewhere in the attic of the fancy establishment, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to use it.

“Just – give – me – hot – water!” I went for another kick, missed, and landed on my ass in the mud.

I was just about to give up and head inside when a sudden prickling fear crawled across the back of my neck.

“Ahem.”

My head snapped around fast enough to give me whiplash and I squinted at the figure standing over me. “Oh, Elijah. Hey...”

The old man eyed me with a wicked grin. “It looks like you're having a bit of trouble, Miss Vincent.”

“Nope.” I climbed to my feet, wiping my muddy hands on my equally grimy jeans. “No trouble, just getting the geyser up and running again.”

I wasn't sure why the old man made me so uncomfortable, but I was hesitant to stand out in the rain with him around, especially with Jordan so far from home. “What are you doing here? It's late. I thought your shift ended at four?”

Elijah shrugged, his wizened features cracking as he smiled. “I did a bit of overtime today. Some hedges needed trimming.”

From what I had seen of the manor, the hedges looked like they hadn't been trimmed in months, so his story made sense. But even so, something told me to get back into the house as soon as possible.

“Oh, Okay. Well, I should be getting back...” I scuffed the waterlogged dirt, inching backward towards the front door.

“If you need help fixing that geyser, there are some spare parts down in the shed.” Elijah jerked his chin towards the back of the house. “I could show you where they are.”

“I don’t think—” I hesitated. On the one hand I didn’t want to spend more time with this guy than I had to. But fixing the geyser would have to happen eventually.

The weather outside was frosty, and my aching limbs yearned for a decent hot bath. The twins would also be waking from their nap right about then, and heaven help us all if they found their bottles empty.

“Uh, sure. That would be great.”

Elijah hiked up his dungarees. “Right, follow me. It’s just around the back.”

Tentatively, I followed after him, making a note to leave heavy footprints in the mud. I doubted Sigrid would notice nor care if I were to go missing, but I at least wanted to leave some trace for Jordan to follow if I happened to be overpowered by a little old man.

Elijah led me around the back of the house, gesturing to a crumbling old shed that stood a little way off, nearly hidden between the dense trees. Every horror movie I’d ever watched came back to me as we walked, and I eyed the discarded garden tools that lay strewn about the path.

As we walked, the still, dreary atmosphere transformed into one of impending danger. A chilling breeze whispered through the leaves, and my chest heaved with an inexplicable sense of unease.

I considered turning tail and running then and there, but Elijah paused, and turned to face me. “Before I forget, I found this locket out in the flower garden. I do believe it belongs to the lady of the house.”

He pulled a golden chain from his pocket, dangling it in front of my nose. “Would you mind returning it to darling Jordan for me?”

“Sure.” I was hesitant to touch the necklace, but Elijah dropped it into my open palm before I could retract my hand.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Jordan wear this,” I murmured, pocketing the necklace anyway. “Are you sure it’s hers?”

Elijah shrugged and carried on shuffling toward the cabin. “It could be Sigrid’s, who knows. It’s amazing the things you find out in that garden. You can tell a lot about the residents from what you find there.”

A brief image of Hazel rooting around in Sigrid’s plant bed came to mind, and my suspicion grew tenfold. “I’m sure you can.”

Elijah pressed on ahead like he hadn’t heard my cautious tone. “Anyway, where is Jordan these days? I haven’t seen her around lately.”

“She’s not—” I swallowed the truth and instead presented what I hoped was a believable lie. “She’s not feeling well. She’s back at the house trying to break a... fever.”

“I see.” Elijah nodded gravely. “Well, that’s too bad. You must be feeling pretty lonely with her being bedridden.”

“Uh-huh.” The canopy of trees cast a deep shadow over the path, like the forest beyond was a slumbering beast, the two of us wandering into its open maw. At least we weren’t getting rained on anymore.

“Here we are.” Elijah hauled open the door of the shed. It creaked on its hinges, squealing like it hadn’t been used in months.

The interior of the drooping building was dusty, and through the entrance I spotted a fine layer of grime and spiderwebs covering the equipment inside. I spotted a toolbox in the corner and sighed with relief. “That’ll be helpful. Thanks, Elijah.”

I was about to step past him into the shed when something occurred to me.

I backed up a few steps, dread curdling in my stomach like sour milk. My chest tightened as I took in the unused tools, hedge clippers, rakes and shovels. “These haven’t been touched in months...”

The quiet voice of caution in my head grew louder, a fog horn blaring an urgent warning. I narrowed my eyes at the old

man, who suddenly looked far stranger than he had a moment ago.

“You’re supposed to be the gardener.” I lifted a quivering hand to point at the hedge clippers inside, a shimmering spiderweb erected between the blades. “How did you trim the hedges without these?”

Elijah had stilled before me, his dark eyes hidden under furrowed brows. “How very perceptive of you. Humans are such simple, stupid creatures. But you’ve surprised me, Miss Vincent.”

Cold fear gripped my chest, stealing the breath from my lungs as I stood frozen in place.

“Who are you really?” I whispered the words, dreading the answer. An answer that deep down I already knew. I might have known all along, if I had only listened to that quiet voice of warning.

Elijah began to morph before my eyes, his decrepit form billowing outwards like a silkscreen, revealing the monster hidden beneath. His dark eyes took on a scarlet hue, his lips pulling back to reveal yellow pointed teeth. My mind struggled to comprehend the change taking place before my eyes. This transformation wasn’t the same as the shifter’s or Jordan’s. Those changes had been physical.

But this change was internal, happening in my own head like a switch had been flicked, and suddenly I was able to see what had been right in front of me all along. All this time, I had not

been conversing with Elijah, I had not been standing in the presence of a helpless old man.

I stood, trembling, my heart pounding in my chest as the man revealed his true nature.

My eyes had merely been tricked into thinking that I had, like a magician performing miracles while his assistant worked the real magic behind the curtain. My subconscious, however, had known that something was wrong, something didn't sit right about the picture that had been painted in my mind.

“Jeremy.”

The wicked man smiled at me, a cruel curve on cracked lips. His blond hair fell in stringy tendrils, framing a face twisted with malicious intent. “The mind is an easy thing to tamper with. You humans rely far too heavily on your pathetic, unrefined senses.”

My legs screamed for me to run, but I couldn't move at all. It was as if something invisible held me in place, similar to Sigrid's insidious ability. I recognized the sensation, realized that this, too, was only in my head.

“What are you doing here?” I spat, mentally scrambling for some sort of plan.

Jordan was miles away, Sigrid unreachable back at the house. Dylan and River had both accompanied Jordan on her mission. I was alone. Completely, utterly alone with the most dangerous man in Manhattan.

I couldn't run for the house. I couldn't risk endangering the twins. Licking my lips, I balled my fists, bracing for an attack I knew was coming.

My chances were slim, the odds of survival in the negatives even, but I had no choice but to fight.

"You are not welcome here." My voice shook as I spoke but my words were fierce nonetheless, "If you hurt me, Jordan will have your head."

Jeremy raised a brow, a look of sick amusement on his face. His stance was casual, his hands in his pockets, but his eyes were that of a predator, keenly aware of his prey. "Ah, you might be right." He grinned at me, a sly smile revealing rows of dirty teeth and pointed canines. "But Jordan is not here, is she?"

My last shred of confidence left me when he called my bluff, and the glee on his face told me he knew the truth. Nobody was coming to save me.

"Ah, so you are alone out here. How does it feel to be abandoned by the one you love?"

"She didn't abandon me," I hissed, bristling under his hungry gaze. "She's hunting you down as we speak. I would run while you still can."

Jeremy only snickered, waving my words away with a flick of his wrist. "Jordan is chasing empty trails. Your darling mate has played her part beautifully, leaving me alone with her most prized possession."

My heart sank at his words. We had played right into this evil man's hands.

“Unfortunately, you've messed with my plans,” Jeremy lamented, inspecting his lengthening claws. “I hadn't expected you to catch on so quickly. But now that the cat's out of the bag, I'm going to have to kill you.”

He moved before he'd even finished his sentence, his claws poised to strike.

In the split second before he could slash me into bloody ribbons, I dropped and rolled, narrowly avoiding those gleaming talons.

Jeremy seemed surprised at my dodge, most likely expecting his hold on my mind to have kept me in place. But he had made the mistake of revealing his power, and I understood exactly how it worked. It was my mind that he used against me, so long as I kept a strong hold of myself and tapped into my unconscious brain, he had no power over me.

Mental clarity would not be enough to save me though, Jeremy still had speed and strength on his side. Not to mention fangs and claws and a roaring bloodlust.

His eyes bored into my very soul, emanating a predatory hunger. My breath caught in my throat as I stumbled backward, my mind racing for a way to escape. But the vampire was swift, moving with inhuman speed. He lunged toward me again, teeth bared in malevolent fury.



Spurred on by a pulsing terror, I glanced around me for any kind of defense. In a desperate bid to end things quickly, I reached out and grasped the nearest object—a rusted garden rake leaning against the shed. With all my strength and my own unbridled fury, I swung it upward, the sharp spikes finding their mark in the vampire’s chest.

A guttural scream erupted from Jeremy’s throat, his unearthly features contorting with agony. Blood dripped from his wound, sizzling as it contacted the ground. He fastened his blood-red eyes on me, gripping the handle against his chest. “I’ll kill you, you bitch!”

His high-pitched shriek pierced my ears, setting my nerves on edge and igniting a primal fear in my chest.

A trickle of blood ebbed from the corner of the vampire’s mouth, his words ravaged with pain and anguish as he gasped, “I’ll kill you. Not here, not now. But soon. I’ll be coming for you, Sky Vincent.”

Before I could react further, he vanished into thin air. The rake hit the dirt with a thud, leaving behind a boiling pool of blood and the mangled gardening tool, the metal pole bent to the shape of the vampire’s fingers.

Breathless, and trembling, I climbed to my feet. To my utmost surprise, I had survived the encounter, albeit by a stroke of luck and quick thinking. The adrenaline gradually subsided, leaving my body feeling drained and my heart vulnerable. My gaze fell on the garden rake, the spikes stained

with the vampire's blood, a testament to my unexpected triumph over the supernatural threat.

But the danger was not completely eradicated. The encounter had shattered the illusion of safety I had once felt in the confines of the homestead. The intrusion of darkness had tainted this sanctuary, leaving an indelible mark on my psyche. None of us were safe, not me, not Jordan, and especially not the twins. Jeremy knew of their existence now, I was sure of it. I was unsure of the consequences of that fact, but I had no doubt they would be terrible.

I took a steadying breath and slowly backed away from the shed, eyes darting around wildly, searching for any sign of the vampire's return. Shadows seemed to dance and whisper in the corners of my eyes, and every rustle of leaves made my heart skip a beat. Steeling myself with a deep breath, I calmed my nerves. I had escaped death for the time being.

But there was still much to be done. I would not let that monster hurt the twins. I would not let him hurt me to get to Jordan. And I'd be damned if I ever let him hurt a hair on her head. I decided then and there, when it came to monsters like that man I would never let my guard down again.

Summoning what was left of my strength, I turned away from the shed, leaving the scene of the battle behind me. Seeing the discarded straw hat near the building I felt a pang of sadness in my chest. Whatever Jeremy had done to the real Elijah, it couldn't have been pleasant. We would have to track

him down when we had the chance. Whatever was left of him, at least.

The echoes of the vampire's screams still resonated in my mind, a chilling promise of death.

Stepping back into the dimly lit house, the once comfortable atmosphere seemed tainted. Danger had crept into our peaceful holding, and now the very walls felt unwelcoming and ominous. In the kitchen, the twins looked up from their dinner of scrambled eggs, erupting into giggles at the sight of my muddy appearance. My chest tightened at the sight of them. They were safe, for now.

Behind them, Sigrid straightened up, a flash of genuine concern in those dark eyes. "What happened? You carry a dangerous scent with you."

"I ran into an old friend of yours," I mumbled, too exhausted to bother with niceties. "Sit down, we need to talk."

While I filled the older vampiress in on what had just happened, I was forming my own resolutions in the back of my mind.

I wanted to learn the ways of the supernatural, to arm myself with knowledge and resources, and fight for the ones I loved. The new family that had once been my solace would now become a fortress, and I would defend it with every ounce of my being.

# Chapter 17

## JORDAN

I awoke to the clicking keys of Sky's laptop, motoring at such a velocity I was surprised her fingers didn't fly right off. Blinking in the lamplight, I sat upright in bed, the static causing my tousled hair to stand on end.

"Whatyoudoing?" Through bleary eyes I could just make out Sky's hunched figure, poring over her laptop at the end of the bed.

"Tracking down a potential ally." Sky readjusted her reading glasses, her eyes glued to the glowing screen. "We need all the help we can get if we want to stand a chance against Jeremy."

It had been days since Sky had called me back to the estate, but she hadn't let herself rest since.

I was horrified to learn that Sky was almost hurt, and furious with myself to have played right into Jeremy's hands. It was alarming to know just how close he had gotten to us.

After all of that, however, I still couldn't understand Jeremy's scheme. He had multiple chances to attack Sky, me, or the twins. The wards prevented him from entering the house, but it would have been easy enough to catch someone in the garden. From what Sky told me, Jeremy only decided to attack her after she deduced who he was.

This shape-shifting ability of his was also news to me. Sky had relayed the story in chilling detail, describing it as some

kind of mental misdirection on his part. This wasn't an ability he had previously. The disappearing act was another unexplainable phenomenon.

Jeremy's new powers might have meant that he was making deals with shadier beings, shadow creatures that not even the cruelest vampires would associate with. Which did not bode well for us.

Rubbing my eyes, I glanced at the alarm clock next to the bed. "It's two o'clock in the morning. Why are you still awake?"

"Because I found a lead." Sky turned the laptop screen my way. "Her name is Ursula Zippel."

I squinted at the image on the screen. "Okay... Who is Ursula Zippel? Because she looks like a teenage influencer."

Ursula was a small, dark-haired woman with a scowl on her face and far too many cats by the look of her Facebook page.

Sky nervously twisted the fabric of her pajamas. "She's a witch."

My eyes bulged in my head. "This is a bad idea and you know it. The witches of Manhattan hate vampires. I can't exactly knock on her door and ask her to fight for us, she'd sooner kill me on the spot."

"This one might be a little more inclined to help," Sky insisted, scrolling through the woman's Facebook page to point out another picture. The picture was posted three years

ago. The caption revealed that this was Ursula's older sister, paying a visit from her home in the country.

In this picture, the witchy woman stood beside another figure, a slight woman with a familiar heart-shaped face and smokey eyes the color of sage leaf. Beneath her dress, her belly bulged slightly, and the protective hand she held over it was evidence enough.

Sky zoomed in, pointing to a spot on the woman's neck. "Tell me you don't see it too."

I leaned over her knee, nearly pressing my nose to the screen. I wasn't sure what she was referring to at first—the picture was blurry and the color slightly off, but then something on her skin caught my eye. A gasp escaped me and I met Sky's eye in disbelief. "That's a bite mark. A vampire did that."

"Exactly." Sky tapped the screen. "This woman was Alberich's mate. This is the twins' mother."

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Three hours later, Sky and I were standing outside the door of Ursula Zippel's home.

The house was located in the heart of the city, with a drooping fruit tree out back that seemed out of place in the concrete jungle. My unease became apparent then, and I shifted from one foot to the other, tugging at my coat and generally fidgeting like I'd come down with a rash.

The lingering animosity between vampires and witches was something every supernatural Manhattan dweller was aware of. The witches stuck to our coven's rules, but only so long as we vampires stayed out of the way. Walking up to this stranger and demanding answers seemed like a recipe for disaster, but Sky had been determined to make the trip, insisting that we needed to get the witches on our side.

The way I saw it, we would have more luck coaxing the boogeyman to help us out with a promise of bad dreams and beds to hide under.

When I made no move to ring the doorbell, Sky took the liberty to do it for me. "You can't tell me you're afraid of some teenage crystal girl."

The door swung open almost immediately, like the witch had predicted our arrival.

"Oh!" Sky lowered her hand, donning her brightest smile as she greeted the unwelcoming stranger. "Hello. Are you Ursula?"

The girl who stood before us was no more than eighteen years old. Her wide-brimmed hat was a crimped black velvet, sitting atop shimmering purple hair. Her crystal necklace glinted in the dim light of the apartment. While she definitely matched the Facebook profile, she was far more intimidating in person, exuding the kind of cocky, bold cruelty that only teenagers could pull off.

Ursula folded her arms, scowling at me in particular. "I thought I smelled vamp. What are you doing on my doorstep,



bloodsucker?”

Her eyes moved from me to Sky, her voice dripping with disdain. “And who’s the fragile human you’ve brought along. I didn’t know vampires took their contractees for walks.”

Suppressing my immediate irritation, I forced a smile, struggling to maintain some sense of civility as I spoke. “Hi, I’m Jordan. This is Sky. If you don’t mind, we have some questions we want to ask you.”

“You have questions?” the witch drawled, blocking the entrance with both arms propped up on the doorway. “A vampire and her blood bag show up unannounced and you’re the one asking questions?”

Sky’s smile faltered, as the tension grew palpable. She spoke with a hint of nervousness, trying to defuse the situation. “Um, I’m not a contractee. I’m her girlfriend. We just wanted to talk for a minute, uh, could we come in?”

Ursula stared Sky down, dropping her arm to her sides. “A human dating a vampire. There’s something you don’t see every day. Aren’t you ever afraid she might get a little peckish?”

She looked us both up and down, toying with the idea of letting us in. Sky turned up the wattage of her smile, stamping her foot on top of mine, silently urging me to do the same. I tried my best to follow suit, but the way this woman had disrespected Sky made my blood boil and the best I could manage was a grimace.

“Fine, come in.” Ursula rolled her eyes, stepping back and beckoning Sky forward. “But I have a Pilates class in ten minutes so this better be quick.”

Sky slipped past the witch and I followed in after her. Right before my foot could cross the threshold though, Ursula stepped in front of me, drawing herself up to her full height—which wasn’t very high. “I don’t want any trouble from you. You vamps may run this city but in there is my turf.”

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, sizing me up with a steely glare. “I’m curious why a vampire would need my help, so I’ll humor you for the time being. But this doesn’t make us friends.”

“Noted.” I raised my palms in surrender. “No tricks up my sleeve. We’ll be out of your hair in a moment.”

We exchanged a searing glare that spoke volumes—doubt, skepticism, and a mutual understanding that this truce was a fragile one. Seemingly satisfied with what she saw in my eyes, Ursula stepped back and allowed me room to enter.

The inside of her small home was like something out of a Pinterest board. Drooping plants lined every shelf and tabletop, along with crystals, candles and smudge sticks. The air was thick with the aroma of incense, and a hazy cloud of fragrant smoke hung in the air.

Ursula settled onto the edge of a worn-out couch, her posture stiff and guarded.

I chose to stand, folding my arms and eyeing the witch suspiciously from my post near the door.

Sky settled on a footstool between the two of us, a tentative mediator. She narrowed eyes in my direction, mentally relaying her earlier warning; Be nice. Or else.

“So.” Ursula flicked a strand of shimmering lavender hair over her shoulder. “What was it you wanted to ask me?”

Sky and I exchanged glances. Neither of us had really expected the witch to let us through the door, and we hadn’t formulated any sort of plan barring breaking and entering to see what we could find.

“Well.” Sky rooted around in her purse and pulled out her phone. She flicked open her gallery and handed the phone to Ursula. “We wanted to ask you about this woman. This is your sister, right?”

Ursula took the phone from Sky, her expression melancholic. “Yes, this is Bryanna. You’re looking for her?”

“We were wondering if she might be able to help us with something.” Sky spoke tentatively.

Ursula’s eyes pricked with sudden tears and she met my gaze before looking away, dashing the tears away with the back of her hand. “You won’t have any luck there. Bryanna is dead.”

“Dead?” My sharp intake of breath had both of them looking my way. I shook my head, striding forward to stand over the woman. “How? You have to know something about what happened that night.”

“Jordan...” Sky touched my arm gently, her gaze flicking to the furious witch.

Ursula’s mouth settled into a thin line, a furious fire blazing behind her eyes. “What night are you referring to exactly? The night my sister was attacked by your kind?”

She rose to face me, her voice rising as she spoke. “I warned Bryanna not to get involved with your coven. I told her it was dangerous, but she didn’t listen, she thought she was in love. And look where it left her!”

I realized I’d hit a nerve with this witch, but her outburst further proved our suspicions. Bryanna had been involved with Alberich. Sometime three years ago she gave birth to the twins. And some time after that she had been killed by a vampire.

Spurred on by this newfound revelation, I pressed further, baring my fangs at the angry witch. “You know something about my brother’s death. And I’m not leaving here until you spill it.”

Ursula took the bait, heat flaring her face red as she roared at me. “Your brother got my sister killed! He filled her head with promises of marriage and a life away from your coven. He promised to shield her from the vampire world. But at the end of the day he couldn’t even protect her from his own family!”

I hesitated then, my anger petering out like a dying ember. “What did you say?”

Ursula collapsed back on the sofa, burying her head in her hands. “Bryanna and Alberich were lovers—that much I’m sure you already knew. I tried to warn her that mingling with vampires was a bad idea, but they were in love. There was no swaying my sister once she’d set her mind on something. They had plans to leave New York together. Alberich promised to step down from his role and leave someone else to rule in his place.”

Ursula looked up, tears puffing up her eyes. “You.” She spat the word out, an accusation as well as an explanation.

I stared at the other woman, shocked into silence.

“What?” My response was a spluttered exclamation and I stepped away from her. “No, that can’t be true. Alberich loved the Leyore clan more than anything, he would never pass his position over to someone like me.”

“It’s true,” Ursula whispered, staring at her feet. “He told Bryanna that you were the only person he could trust with the role.”

With all the wind stolen from my sails, I sat down next to Sky, reeling at the unexpected revelation.

Sky carried the conversation on for me, reminding me why we had come here to begin with.

“So what happened,” she pressed the witch gently, reaching over to take her hand. “What happened to your sister?”

Ursula sniffed and rubbed her nose on her sleeve. “They planned to leave before Bryanna gave birth. But the night

before they were set to depart, they were attacked. Bryanna apparated into my home in the middle of the night, covered in blood and holding her newborn children. She told me that a vampire had attacked Alberich, tearing his mind apart from within.”

A sudden sob shook the woman’s shoulders and she sucked in a deep breath. “Thanks to your brother’s quick response, Bryanna was able to escape. But she couldn’t save Alberich from that monster. She ran into the woods looking for somewhere to hide. But the stress of the encounter was too much on her body and she went into labor earlier than expected. Desperate to save her children, she used the last of her strength to winnow to my home.”

“Winnow?” Sky tilted her head to the side. “I don’t understand.”

“Witches are able to teleport at will,” Ursula explained between sobs. “But it takes a toll on your body, so it’s never a good idea unless it’s a real emergency. Bryanna gave her life to get her kids to safety—to me.”

Sky and I exchanged glances. That would explain perfectly why Bryanna’s scent had suddenly disappeared in the forest, and why I had been unable to track her.

“Did Bryanna say who the attacker was?” I tried to keep the bite of pressure out of my words, mimicking Sky’s soothing tone.

“All she said was that it was one of Alberich’s kin.” Ursula wiped her reddened eyes, slowly recollecting herself. “She

made me promise to look after the twins, and to get them to safety. It was her last request before she died.”

Suddenly all of the pieces clicked into place and I stared at the woman in disbelief. “It was you who left the twins at my apartment, wasn’t it?”

Ursula nodded, sighing as she sank back into the sofa. “Bryanna insisted that you were someone to be trusted. Alberich spoke so highly of you, I guess she thought you’d be a good candidate to care for her children.”

I was dumbstruck. All this time I had felt unworthy of my claim to the throne, of my role as an adopted mother to the twins. But Alberich and his wife had chosen me long ago. They had entrusted to me what was most precious to them, and I hadn’t even known, until now.

Her side of the story also shed light on another, far more disturbing side of the story. Bryanna had spoken of a vampire, someone of Alberich’s kin, who had the ability to mangle his mind. An ability like that was something not even Sigrid could master. Sky had come to the same conclusion, her set jaw and balled fists betraying her bristling anger.

“Jeremy killed Alberich.” Saying it out loud, I wondered how I had not seen it before. My cousin had wanted the throne all along. It wasn’t hard to imagine him resorting to murder to get what he wanted. I felt sick to my stomach, but it made perfect sense.

Jeremy didn’t go after the witches to avenge my brother. He wanted to silence them, because he knew Bryanna had

managed to escape. A secret lover was not a part of his plan.

Ursula's eyes narrowed, but there was no malice in her tone. She just sounded tired. "Your cousin slaughtered most of our coven. People that I cared for, deeply. I've been living in fear of him finding me ever since."

"Ursula, I'm so sorry." Sky got up to comfort the young woman, wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

Watching Ursula stiffen, before leaning into Sky's embrace, it hit me just how young this witch was, and how alone and helpless she must have felt all this time.

Seeing her cry, probably for the first time in a while, my heart softened towards the young witch. I hated to ask any more of her, but I realized then that Sky was right. If we were to truly hold our own against Jeremy, witches and vampires needed to stand together. And we needed Ursula to convince her remaining coven members that we were on the same side.

"Look." I straightened up, speaking sincerely for the first time since we arrived on her doorstep. "I have no right to ask anything of you, god knows you've been through enough. But we need your help. Jeremy is still a threat, and he always will be unless we stand together and take him down once and for all."

Ursula leaned her head on Sky's shoulder, watching me from under pale strands of bleached hair. "I know that this vampire guy needs to be stopped. But your word alone won't be enough to get the witches to join you. They won't listen to me,



either. Jeremy drove a wedge between our kind, it's a wound too deep to simply ignore."

"I know it's a long shot," I persisted, "but please, you have to try to convince them. For the twins' sake... I can't keep them hidden forever, and Jeremy might know of their existence already. He has to be stopped before more blood is shed. Please, Ursula."

Sky gave me an approving smile, but the witch shook her head, getting to her feet. "I'm sorry. But you have to leave, okay? You got what you came for, please just go."

"But—"

"Leave!" Ursula's eyes sparked a neon violet, and I retracted my reaching hand.

"All right." I dropped my hands to my sides in defeat. "We'll go. Just promise me you'll think about it, okay?"

Ursula didn't respond, already striding past us to open the front door.

Sky and I left without protest. The afternoon had borne multiple stunning revelations, but the meeting with the witch ended on a heavy note. Jeremy was still out there, and we still had no way of defeating him.

We were alone in this battle, facing an enemy far stronger than either of us could handle.

As the day drew to a close, my heart grew heavy. It had taken years to find the one true love of my life. How long would we have before fate ripped us apart once more?

# Chapter 18

## SKY

“Vampire Liqueur?” I reread the label on the bottle to make sure I wasn’t crazy. I glanced over my shoulder at Jordan, who lolled on the kitchen bench with another bottle of the dark liquid. “Are you drunk?”

“No.” Jordan hiccupped, rolling right off the bench and reaching for the bottle in my hand. “This is part of the planning process. In about three more bottles I’ll have formulated a cunning plan to defeat my bastard cousin.”

I lifted the bottle out of her reach, tilting it to read the description on the label. “Cherry flavored blood? It smells like battery acid. Jordan, how can you drink this?”

“It’s not so bad if you just swig it back without thinking about it.” Jordan took another swipe at the bottle and I staved her off with a palm to her face.

I slipped past her and sat down on the bench, patting the empty space beside me. “Now is not the time to be getting wasted, *high lady*, we need a plan.”

Instead of rejoining me on the bench, Jordan poured herself more liquor, drank it, repeated the process, then turned and paced up and down the kitchen with a distinct frown. “Why are you dressed like a cowboy?”

“What!?” I glanced down at my attire. The ankle length denim skirt, frilly shirt and patterned boots suddenly looked

less ‘cottage core’ and more ‘rootin tootin rodeo supreme’. “I thought you liked these boots?”

“You wear them well, partner.” The intoxicated woman chugged from the bottle, the unapproachable outlaw to my apparent sheriff.

I looked on silently, sensing that the vampiress needed a moment to ponder whatever it was that troubled her. It wasn’t hard to imagine what.

Jordan had been in a thunderous mood since we left the witch’s residence. No doubt she was beating herself up for having set us down this dark path. She blamed herself for not realizing Jeremy’s schemes sooner.

When she finally decided to quit pacing and sat down beside me, I risked opening my mouth.

“Can vampires even get drunk?” I quipped lightly, watching Jordan pour yet another cup of the crimson liquid. I had hoped that humor might alleviate some of the dourness of her mood, but her subsequent scoffing told me I’d failed.

“Jordan, what happened with the witches... it really wasn’t your fault.” I fell silent again when the vampire side-eyed me, the bottle practically glued to her lips. “Never mind then.”

Realizing quickly that I was getting nowhere with my pep talk, I gave up and hauled some actual alcohol from the kitchen cupboard. I had bought it when we were last in the city, saving it for dire situations just like this one.

Jordan looked on in surprise as I uncorked the wine, pouring myself a generous helping into a stray mug I found in the sink. Catching her eye, I downed a large swig, grimacing at the sulphury taste on my tongue.

Stupefied by my resolve, Jordan sat down again, watching me with wide eyes as I moved to her lap. I clinked my glass against her bottle, now sitting ignored in her hand. “Maybe we could both do with a break.”

Jordan said nothing more while I drained my glass and poured another. She simply wrapped her arms around my waist and held me there, staring out of the window.

I was still taller than Jordan, able to balance myself on her legs with my toes on the floor, but the tension in her posture made it difficult to relax comfortably. I resolved the issue by curling an arm around her neck, sitting princess style across her legs like the damsel in an action movie.

I took another sip of my wine, and then, feeling suddenly playful, lifted Jordan’s drink to her lips. I tilted the bottle back before she could protest, leaving her with no choice but to swallow, gulping down the liquid so as not to choke.

When I was done half-drowning my vampire lover, I touched a hand to her cheek.

“You spilled a little.” I eyed the trickle of dark liquid dripping from her bottom lip. Before Jordan could wipe it away I flicked out my tongue, trailing the tip up her neck and chin to catch the stray droplets.

The taste of blood burned hot on my tongue, but I didn't stop there. I grazed my tongue over her lips, stained cherry-red by her potent drink, and bit down gently.

When I pulled away again, my coy smile faltered. I had expected Jordan to respond to my playfulness with some teasing of her own, but the vampire was staring at me with a molten heat in her eyes, the kind of erotic gaze that ignited a fire at my core instantaneously.

Staring into the woman's lustrous eyes, I felt an irresistible urge to take my game a step further.

I leaned closer, reclining in Jordan's arms while her fingers traced delicate patterns down my thigh. My eyes flicked to the bowl of cherries I had brought home with me, my gaze sauntering back to Jordan when I was struck with a new idea. I reached for her bottle and poured a new glass of dark liquid, nudging the bowl of cherries toward her with my elbow.

A subtle smile played on the vampire's lips, acknowledging the unspoken rules of the game. Without taking her eyes off me, she reached for the ripened berries.

With a mischievous glint in her eye, Jordan plucked a singular cherry from the bowl and brought it to my lips, a tantalizing invitation. Without a word, I parted my lips, allowing her to gently feed the sweet treat onto my tongue. I bit down, and the berry popped in my mouth, the sensation sending an electric thrill down my spine.

Jordan's fingertips brushed my lips, before allowing me to mimic her actions. I continued the seductive game, lifting the

glass to Jordan's lips and allowing her to sip at it, watching her tongue flick out to catch the last drop.

As our reserve of blushed cherries and dark liquid dwindled, my confidence surged. I plucked the last cherry, delicately, a rush of anticipation coursing through my veins. Slowly, sensually, I brought the fruit to my own lips, a silent challenge to the vampire woman.

Jordan's eyes smoldered with a burning desire, her lustful gaze fixed on me as I savored the final fruit. Her fingers trailed up my throat and along the edge of my jaw, her thumb brushing over my cherry-stained lips.

"The kitchen is no place for such debauchery," she murmured. "I would hate to be caught in the act. Can you promise to be quiet?"

I nodded a little too enthusiastically, my attempts at seduction immediately forgotten in light of her hand gliding under my skirt. I could keep quiet. I could do whatever she wanted me to.

Jordan laughed at my eagerness, her fingers finding my underwear beneath the stiff fabric of my skirt. I clung on a little tighter when she dipped her fingers under the elastic, her fingers gliding between wet, welcoming folds. I stifled a moan and buried my face in her neck, breathing deeply as the vampire's fingers circled that tight bundle of nerves between my legs.

My thighs parted to allow her easier access, and I fastened my mouth to her neck, sucking on the sensitive skin there. My

hand that was not coiled in her hair rose to cup her breasts, rolling one erect nipple between my fingers through the soft fabric of her shirt.

Jordan groaned sharply, a vicious intake of breath at my soft touch. In one swift motion, she hiked my skirt up and tore my underwear down around my thighs. Already dripping with desire, I squirmed in her lap. Her fingers found my entrance and I rocked against her, eager to feel her fingers inside me.

“Is this what you wanted?” Her voice took on a sharp tone of command that sliced straight to my core. My hands explored her body, delving under her shirt to feel her skin hot against my palm.

“Yes,” I said breathlessly, brushing my lips against her and rolling my hips in anticipation. “Yes, this is exactly what I wanted.”

My head swam, unbridled arousal racked my nerves, and my words came involuntarily. “I want you.”

Satisfied with my answer, Jordan drove two fingers into me, stroking my inner walls as her thumb circled above. I threw my head back with a groan, the sound coming out muffled when Jordan closed her other hand over my mouth.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Her voice was a whisper in my ear, her tongue tracing my jawline as I moaned into her hand. “But you promised to be quiet, remember?”

With my inner warmth welcoming her intrusion so easily, she followed up the next thrust with three fingers, and then



took it further until I was stretched around four. My moans escalated and I glanced down to watch her fingers moving in and out of me, the sight somehow just as erotic as the act itself. I watched her fingers disappear into my drenched entrance, pooling nectar glistening on my inner thighs.

The pleading cries that I was forbidden from voicing only fed the growing pleasure, an erotic reminder of the intensely compromised position I was in. I bucked on Jordan's lap, my hips grinding heavily against her hand as I sought out a quick release. Jordan's hand over my mouth moved to grip my throat, holding me in place and forcing me to watch as she turned me into a convulsing, desperate mess.

Her kisses grew harsher and she suckled at the sensitive spot in the curve of my neck, her tongue soothing the throbbing of the bruise that blossomed there. Flames ate at my body from the inside, smoldering in my loins as I careered closer to the edge of sensation.

My thighs shook uncontrollably, as I tried to hold out on the earth-shattering orgasm that threatened to send me overboard. I tugged at Jordan's wrist, unwilling to let it end so quickly, greedy for hours more. "Wait. I'm going to—"

"I know," Jordan hissed against my throat, holding me in place with an iron grip. "Come for me."

That quiet command was all it took, and a guttural cry exploded from my lips as my body convulsed around her fingers. Each rippling wave stoked a whimper of pure pleasure

as I rode out the sudden climax, my shaking fingers clutching at her soft flesh with no rhyme or reason.

I went limp in her arms, leaning back against her shoulder as my senses returned to me. Jordan stroked stray hairs from my face, removing her fingers and skittering them across my thigh.

“We’re not done yet,” she murmured, sliding me off her lap and standing over me. She placed both hands on the table, trapping me between her outstretched arms. “That was the first of many.”

As I leaned back against the table, my elbow knocked the glass bottle and it wobbled off the edge. It shattered when it hit the floor, and both Jordan and I jolted upright at the sound.

“Oh god! I’m sorry.” Still disorientated and riding the high of an orgasm, I dropped to my knees to pick up the broken pieces, hastily scooping up the mess in my bare hands.

This proved to be a terrible idea when a sudden sharp pain slipped through my finger. “Fuck. I think I cut myself.”

I inspected the small wound, squeezing gently until small beads of blood emerged between the glass shards. Still on my knees, I wiped the blood away, struggling to pick out the small, sharp pieces embedded in my skin. “I think I need a Band-Aid—”

My words died on my lips as I looked up and saw fangs, staring into Jordan’s bright red eyes that gleamed with an entirely different kind of hunger.

# Chapter 19

## JORDAN

Before I could blink, I had moved. In the split second after the scent of Sky's spilled blood became apparent I had pinned her to the floor, hunching over her with my fangs bared.

Every fiber of my being screamed for a taste of this woman's blood, and I inched to sink my fangs into the soft skin of her neck. I could see her artery pulsing beneath the surface, quickening with her heartbeat. She stared up at me with wide, fearful eyes. My head was clouded, a haze of unquenchable hunger that demanded more and more. Through the fog that clouded my rational mind, I recognized the gluttonous urge for what it was; bloodlust.

My heart raced as I fought against the insatiable hunger, desperate to maintain control over primal instincts. Every vampire understood the overwhelming craving, borne from starvation, sexual encounters, or simply an overpoweringly enticing scent. But the object of my primal desire was no prey, she was the woman who I claimed to love. A woman I swore never to hurt.

Sky's breath was ragged, her mouth partially open as she stared back at me. "Jordan—"

"Don't speak!" I hissed the warning out, biting down on my bottom lip as I strained against the predator in my head. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead, pasting my hair to my face and neck.

The mounting bloodlust was building to a roar, blood rushing in my ears as Sky's sweet blood sang to me. The scent that enveloped me was intoxicating, a heady cocktail of pulsing vulnerability that threatened to break my wavering resolve.

Sky's eyes widened when I leaned closer, my fangs hovering inches above her throat. Her voice trembled with unease. "Jordan, you're not yourself right now. It can't happen like this."

"I don't... want to hurt you." I growled, fighting against the primal desire that clawed my insides like a beast restless to be unleashed. But the thought of hurting the woman I loved tore at my heart, filling it with anguish.

Sky's face softened, but her voice shook with barely concealed panic "I know you won't hurt me. I trust you, Jordan."

My bottom lip quivered, my iron grip on her wrists tightening involuntarily. "Say my name again."

"Jordan, my love." Sky's gaze was unwavering, her words firmer as she spoke my name again. "You don't want to do this."

Internally, I was engaged in a battle between my inherent nature and the love that had blossomed between us. It was Sky's voice that brought me back and staved off the raging beast in my chest.

Slowly, my grip on her wrists subsided, and Sky was able to wriggle one arm free. With a trembling hand, she reached up to cup my cheek, an unspoken plea in her pale green eyes. I leaned into her touch, a tether to reality that I so desperately needed.

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With the bloodlust subdued, and feeling exceptionally guilty at terrifying my mortal lover, I guided Sky to sit on the edge of the bench, my heart still racing from the recent struggle. I got to rummaging around for a first aid kit—something neither Sigrid nor I ever expected to use but purchased once we realized just how fragile human children can be. Sky watched me from her seat, one hand over her chest to calm her pounding heart.

“I guess we’re lucky it was just a small cut.” She tried to lighten the mood, offering a lopsided smile when I glanced at her. “How have you been able to hold off when I’m on my period?”

“Funny.” I gave her a withering glare, hauling the dusty box out from under the sink. “And I’m not usually drunk and aroused when you’re on your period so that might have something to do with it.”

Sky hissed in pain when I dabbed her finger, turning her palm to inspect the wound for any remaining shards. “Does my blood really smell that good to you?”

“Like something out of this world,” I admitted, focusing all of my attention on cleaning the wound. The chemical scent of the antiseptic helped to clog my nostrils, freeing me from the lingering draw of the woman’s blood. “I can’t believe I almost...”

Sky placed her hand on my arm.

“But you didn’t. And besides,” she tried to force a chuckle, “you wouldn’t have killed me, right? Vampires don’t kill their contractees.”

“Vampires with self control don’t murder their meals,” I retorted, angry with myself for losing control so easily. “I wasn’t thinking clearly. I don’t know what I would have done, Sky... doesn’t that scare you?”

The other woman caught my eye, her gaze open and steady. “I trust you. I know you would never hurt me.”

I couldn’t respond, guilt and gratitude forced my head down. I tore open a Band-Aid and wrapped it around her finger, taking great care not to look directly at the thin red line in her skin.

“You know,” Sky said, her voice light and teasing, “most couples have disagreements over trivial things like chores or what to watch on TV. But no, we have to deal with bloodlust. We’re a special kind of couple.”

“Something like that, sure.” With the bandage securely in place, I lifted Sky’s hand and pressed a gentle kiss to her

fingertip. It was a tense but tender moment, demonstrating the deepest love and purest intentions.

As it turned out, our bond was forged not in the thralls of passion, but in those quiet, simple moments that existed in between.

As if she read my mind, Sky reached out to me, grabbing me softly by the shoulders and pulling me into a deep kiss that caught me by surprise.

“What was that for?” I asked as she drew away, still holding onto my shoulders and looking at me with a kind of quiet reverie.

Sky shrugged, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Because you’re pretty and I love you and your lips are right there.”

“Well in that case...” I closed my hands on her waist, wedging myself between her legs to kiss her back.

Sky’s thighs parted for me, and her head tilted back as she deepened the kiss.

What started as a gentle, teasing touch became a fast and passionate affair, and my hands roamed up her back, sliding under her skirt as I dragged my nails across her skin.

Sky broke the kiss to lick, nip, and bite her way down my neck. Without prior warning, she lifted my shirt, lashing her tongue out over one hard nipple. I was grateful to not have worn a bra that day. I shuddered against her as she sucked one of the erect buds into her mouth. My hand came up to fist in



her hair, a moan escaping me when she grazed her teeth over the sensitive nub.

Beaming with pride at my response to her touches, she switched nipples and gave the other one the same treatment while pulling and twisting at the first one.

“It’s not fair,” she breathed against my skin, her free hand trailing down my spine to squeeze my ass. “Your tits are so much bigger than mine.”

“I like your boobs!” I gasped when her hand found the seam of my jeans and yanked them down to my knees. “They’re like the perfect handful.”

“Yeah, well, your hands are small.” Leaving my nipples for a moment, she pulled me down with a hand on the back of my neck, pressing her lips to mine again. Her tongue probed against mine, demanding room inside. “You taste like blood.”

“That would be the blood.” My sarcasm fell flat when her hand slid between my legs, cupping my sex through my underwear.

Smirking at my dwindling charisma, the seductive woman curled a finger under the seam of my underwear, pulling it down as she slid to her knees in front of me.

“What are you doing down there?” Automatically, my hand rested on her head, knotting in her hair while my other hand rose to cup my own breast.

“Shh.” Sky ran a finger along my dripping slit, probing inside in a motion that made my knees weak. “You’ve tasted

me twice already, it's my turn."

She pressed her lips to my stomach, her tongue slowly trailing a line of fire down to my entrance. Prolonging the torment, Sky nipped at my inner thigh, curling one finger inside me just slowly enough to keep me on edge.

With a whine that wasn't in character for me, I tried to roll my hips towards her, my hand in her hair clenching tighter. But Sky refused to oblige. Her tongue lapped at my thighs, my stomach, gliding over my entrance. She circled around my most sensitive area, enjoying my increasing desperation.

"God, this is cruel!" I whimpered, my arousal mounting at the continuous denial. "I don't torment you like this."

"Yes you do." Sky smiled up at me, playfully flicking out her tongue and delicately teasing at my entrance. "How does it feel to be on the receiving end of this torture?"

"Horrible. And wonderful, now please, for the love of god, let me off the hook."

With an evil giggle, Sky tugged my jeans down to my ankles, taking my underwear with them. I shimmied out of the garments, sucking in a breath when Sky parted my legs and pulled one over her shoulder. "I'm going to fall over like this."

"Hold onto the table if you have to." The wicked woman brushed my whining aside, gripping my thigh that rested on her shoulder.

She nipped at me again, coaxing another groan, before finally turning her attention to my aching core.

Holding me in place with one arm wrapped around my leg, Sky licked circles around my throbbing clit, making me squirm and very clearly taking pleasure in it. Her own moan reverberated through me, and my back arched involuntarily when she finally drove her tongue over that sensitive cluster of nerves.

I went ballistic under her grip, moaning, writhing and rolling my hips to feel more of her. Her tongue punched at the sensitive nub, suckling and licking and circling while I struggled to keep my balance as my body turned to putty.

Following her command, I leaned forward and slammed one hand on the table in front of me, while Sky's tongue delved into my entrance with surprising dexterity.

My breathing quickened and my groans grew more guttural as she began flicking her tongue over and over again with increasing force. A back-breaking release approached quickly, sent right over the edge when she slid two fingers deep into me, punching in rhythm with the motions of her tongue.

"Fuck!" I moaned into the open air as I came, clutching Sky's hair as my hips steamrolled against her welcoming mouth.

As my twitching muscles returned to their relaxed state, I lowered my leg from Sky's shoulder, leaning on both hands as I stared down at her. Sky looked back, a smile turning up the corner of her lips. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and pushed herself upwards to kiss me.

I could taste myself on her tongue, mingled with the metallic tint of blood and the sugary sweetness of cherries.

# Chapter 20

## SKY

I anxiously tapped my nails against the edge of the sleek, glass conference table as I glanced around the modern office space. Jordan was deep in conversation with a group of well-dressed vamps, Maxine and Hunter included. I felt out of place amongst the sleek business women, their stylish outfits and perfectly coiffed hair mirrored the high-end aesthetic of the office, while my chipped nail polish and fraying sweater fit better with the trash can in the corner.

Jordan had been confused as to why I had insisted on joining her for this business meeting. She assumed I was skittish about being left at home considering what had happened the last time, but I had a very different motive for accompanying her.

On the one hand, I planned to pay a visit to my mother, having not seen her for quite a few months by then. I was also eager to introduce her to Jordan. On top of that, however, I had business to attend to with another Manhattan dweller.

As Jordan and her vampire squad immersed themselves in animated discussions about the latest trends in fitness products, I discreetly slid my phone from my pocket and flicked open Google Maps. Ursula's place was only a few streets away, and I had a bone to pick with the young woman.

I wasn't exactly intending to keep my visit to the witch a secret from Jordan. But I was hesitant to mention the meeting, assuming it would prove unfruitful. There was no point

igniting her hopes if they were to be snuffed out all over again. I would talk with Ursula first, and, on the off chance that my mission was successful, then I would tell Jordan.

Satisfied with my rationing and having convinced myself that what I was doing was not a terrible idea, I set my grand escape into motion.

Edging my seat closer to Max, I nudged the other woman with my elbow. “Maxine, I heard Hunter telling Jordan that your hair looked frizzy today. She seemed to take great pleasure in relaying the information.”

Max’s hand immediately went to her hair, which was as smooth and silky as it always was. “That wench. She’s probably trying to turn Jordan against me. She knows I’ve been conspiring against her cruel rule over this office.”

I nodded stoically. “Yes, you’re probably right. You should call her out in this meeting, let everyone know that she’s been corrupted by power.”

I was beginning to master the art of sowing chaos among vampire kind. They were, after all, very dramatic creatures.

“Look at her,” Max mumbled, eyeing Hunter and Jordan from across the table. “She’s probably telling her about the time I spat in her coffee. But she’s going to leave out the part about it being self defense. She insulted my shoes that day. And those shoes were lovely!”

“How could she!” I crooned, shaking my head sympathetically. “Your shoes are always lovely. You’re the

best dressed person in this meeting room.”

“Thank you!” Maxine tossed her hair over her shoulder, squaring up to face her adversary, “Enough is enough. Hunter’s tyrannical rule ends here.”

“You have my sword.” I patted her shoulder and sat back to watch the drama unfold.

All heads turned our way when Max slammed her hands down on the table, her palms landing with a loud slap.

“Hunter McGuire!” she declared boldly, pointing at the other vampire with one manicured talon. “You will answer for your crimes against this office block!”

In the passionate argument that followed, all eyes and ears were geared toward Max and Hunter, giving me room to slip away unnoticed. I vowed to myself to apologize to the two vampires later, but I couldn’t help the swell of pride at my mischievous achievement.

Nobody barred me from exiting the building, and I hurried down the street with my head down. I tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible, considering there was still a deranged vampire somewhere out there thirsting for my blood.

By the time I made it to Ursula’s street, I was half convinced that every stranger who looked my way was Jeremy in disguise. I shifted from foot to foot at Ursula’s doorstep, so jittery I couldn’t stand still, and blew out a sigh of relief when she finally opened the door.



The witch was not happy to see me, and her lip curled up in a snarl. “What are you doing here? You nearly broke down my door with that knocking.”

“Can I come in?” I pleaded, glancing over my shoulder as another passerby got a little too close for comfort. “There’s kind of a bounty on my head right now so I’m not stoked about being out in the open.”

“Then you shouldn’t have come,” Ursula snapped, and began to close the door.

“Just for a minute!” I wedged my foot in the doorway, wincing when it rammed against my toes. “Please? Just hear what I have to say. And then I promise I’ll leave.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” Ursula hissed, pressing the door tightly against my poor aching foot. “And I don’t want to hear it. I already told you my answer.”

I was about to get to my knees and beg when a *meow* had us both looking down. A small, black, furry face peeked out from the doorway, wide eyes examining me with curiosity. Ursula yelped, and tried to close the door, but my foot was still in the way.

The small cat was out of the door and down the street before either of us could blink.

With a cry of dismay Ursula swung the door open, looking past me at the disappearing cat.

“Was that your familiar?” I asked sheepishly.

Ursula gave me a withering glare in response. She shut the door behind her, promptly pushing past me to go looking for her feline companion.

“Wait!” I stumbled off the doorstep, chasing after her. “Let me help you find him!”

“*Her* name is Brunhilda,” Ursula growled over her shoulder, moving surprisingly fast for someone so small. “And I can find her myself.”

I followed the witch out into the bustling city streets, cars honking when we cut through traffic and pedestrians glancing our way. A lanky exasperated woman and a disgruntled witchy teen with a scowl etched onto her face, both chasing down a sly black cat was probably an interesting sight.

“Ursula, please. We need the witches’ help if we plan to stand a chance against Jeremy,” I pleaded, trying my best to sound patient as I struggled to keep up with the stormy young woman.

Ursula shot me a venomous glare. “The witches want nothing more to do with vampires, and the same goes for me.”

“What do you think is going to happen when we lose to that monster?” We turned down an alleyway and I caught a glimpse of a small black tail disappearing behind a dumpster. “Jeremy will come after the witches next. He’ll come after anyone who has the potential to threaten his rule.”

Ursula scowled, folding her arms across her chest. “Look, I’m just trying to find my cat. Okay? So either help me or get

out of my way.”

I fought the urge to retort crudely. It would seem that while I had a knack for handling toddlers, I had far less success with teens. “Fine, fine. We’ll find your cat. But I didn’t come all this way to beg you to join us. I came here to ask if you’d like to meet the twins.”

Ursula looked stunned for a moment, and then her eyes narrowed, her voice dripping with disdain. “Is that how you plan to get me to fight for you? Manipulating me?”

“No.” I strode past her to bend behind the dumpster bin. “You’re their aunt. And you haven’t seen them since they were newborns.”

Ursula’s story had haunted me since our last visit. I hated Jeremy all the more knowing that he had left this young girl all alone in the world. While I wanted more than anything for her to agree to help us, I also wanted to help.

I had seen past the harsh front that Ursula hid behind and I wanted to offer her a lifeline, in the form of friendship. After all, I understood loneliness well.

I closed my hands around a squirming bundle of fur, pulling Brunhilda out from her hiding place. The cat had found a cozy nook behind the garbage piles and sat nibbling on a piece of stale pizza. Brunhilda was less than pleased at my interruption.

I lifted the wriggling cat in my arms and held her toward Ursula. “You’ve lost your family, I know that. You lost your

sister and most of your coven. But the twins are your family too. You have a right to see them if you want to.”

Ursula’s stern expression softened slightly and she took the angry cat in her arms. “I guess it would be nice to see them. From what I remember, they had their mother’s eyes.”

I offered a tired smile, shoving my hands in my pockets. “You can visit whenever you want. I’m sure the twins will be thrilled to see you.”

“They won’t remember me.” The witch snorted, but she reciprocated my smile. “But that sounds nice.”

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By the time I slunk back into the office, Hunter and Max had made up. Hunter sported a black eye and Max’s hair was more of a mess than it had been when I left, but the two of them looked pleased as punch, chatting over coffee.

With the meeting over, Jordan and her colleagues were discussing past contracts. The conversation died immediately when I entered, all sets of vampire eyes fixed on the only human in the room.

Jordan looked up when I sat down at the table, raising a suspicious brow. “And just where have you been, exactly?”

I played innocent, widening my eyes to the size of saucers. “I went to get some coffee. Nowhere else.”

“Oh really.” Jordan played along with my act, a smirk twitching the corner of her lips. “I don’t see any coffee.”

“That’s because I drank it,” I chirped, jutting out my chin and leaning back in my seat. “You know how much I like my coffee.”

“All right,” Jordan chided, her eyes flicking to my sweater and back again, “then explain the cat hair. Did you wander into a nursing home on your quest for coffee?”

“This is an old sweater.” I fumbled for an explanation, tugging at the threads that Brunhilda’s claws had pulled loose. “It’s always been like this. The stray hair gives it a rustic vibe.”

Unconvinced, Jordan rounded the table, ignoring the bemused expressions of her colleagues. She came to stand in front of me, folding her arms. “What are you up to, Sky?”

“Nothing.” I cracked a smile, my good mood betraying me. “I just made a new friend.”

# Chapter 21

## JORDAN

Sky's eyes fluttered open and she eyed me from under the covers.

The morning light shone through the window and cast a glow around the room, illuminating her hair with a golden hue. I rolled onto my side, settling with my head propped on my fist to soak in the beautiful woman before me.

“Good morning,” she said through a yawn, nestling in the crook of my arm. “Have you been watching me all night?”

“No.” I chuckled, taking her delicate chin in my hand and pulling our lips together. “Just for most of the morning.”

The kiss was soft and gentle, careful as if the woman in my arms was made of glass. Sky melted under my touch, resting a hand against my chest. Something had changed between us. The bond that had drawn us together had strengthened tenfold, wound and braided with complete trust and utter devotion.

I pulled back to examine my mate, holding her chin in my hand and gazing into her eyes. Sky drew in her breath quickly with a quiet whimper, registering the intention in my expression.

With a seductive smirk, I tilted her head back slowly, exposing the woman's neck. I pressed kisses down the delicate skin of her throat before gentleness gave way to hunger and my lips found hers again. Sky clumsily obliged as I pulled her

closer. She clung to me, lips locked like the air in my lungs belonged to her. She hungrily welcomed my tongue between her lips.

I reached my hand into her hair and pulled her out of the kiss. A little shining trail of spit connected us, and Sky watched me with half-lidded eyes, her lips parted slightly as she panted.

I placed my thumb on the woman's tongue and idly stroked it back and forth.

“Do you trust me?” I whispered the words, analyzing the desperate desire that burned in her eyes.

I watched the inhibition leave her as Sky relented to the need of her body, her rattled answer barely audible. “Completely.”

Slowly, she closed her lips around my thumb. Her tongue grazed over the appendage. Her eagerness caught me by surprise, and my body flushed hotter than before, spiking down my torso and lighting a fire between my legs.

“Good answer,” I whispered hoarsely, and traced my thumb around the woman's mouth. Sky closed her eyes and leaned her face against my hand.

With barely contained eagerness, I slid my hands beneath her shirt, pulling the fabric over her head. Her blonde hair spilled over her bare shoulders, pale strands on paler skin.

My hand moved to caress her by the small of her back and I closed my lips around one of her plush pink nipples, eliciting a whimpering moan from Sky. Smiling to myself, I teased the



sensitive bud with my tongue, pressing my body to hers as she squirmed.

Every moan of pleasure from the woman in my arms spread warmth between my thighs. Sky was unraveling before me, and every small surrender on her part spurred me on.

Pushing myself upright, I sat Sky against the headboard of the bed, pulling my own blouse before gently removing her underwear, drinking in the sight of her porcelain legs spread before me.

There was not a sharp edge to be found across her unblemished body. Between her legs rested a small spattering of downy blonde hair, barely concealing the sensitive skin below it.

Sky's cheeks burned a rosy pink and her nipples hardened while I observed her exposed figure. She lifted her arms, wrapping them around herself as she stared at the ceiling. "How come I'm naked and you're not."

"I'm getting there." I soothed her, uncurling her arms and moving her hand to the sensitive spot between her legs. "But for now, I want you to touch yourself."

"What?!" Sky's voice rose in alarm, but her hand didn't move from that warm, wet area.

"You heard me right the first time." I sat back and watched her expectantly.

Sky squirmed under my gaze and averted her eyes, but her slender fingers slid between her folds to press against her

engorged clit. Her hips jumped at the contact and a moan escaped her lips. When her eyes caught on mine, she held my gaze, her fingers tracing circles around her clitoris. She opened her legs wider, her breath coming in short gasps while I watched.

When I could no longer keep my hands to myself I crawled towards her, kneeling between her parted legs. Gripping each of her wrists without warning, I swept her arms up above her head, pinning them against the headboard. Sky's cry was muffled by my lips, mashing against her with bone-shattering force. With my lips against hers, I moved both wrists to one hand, wedging my knees against her dripping slit.

Closing a hand around Sky's ankle I yanked her onto her back. My own underwear was off in seconds and Sky gasped when I intertwined our thighs. Before she could protest, I gripped one of her legs against my abdomen, pinning her in place.

Positioning our middles in line with each other, I paused there for a moment, earning an urgent whine from Sky, who bucked her hips and tried to shimmy closer. When I still didn't move, Sky arched her back, nails digging into my thigh as she begged for contact.

"Please..." she whined indignantly, thrusting her hips and coating my inner thigh with that warm wetness.

With a dark chuckle, I eased our lower regions together. "I like it when you beg."

I released my grip on her thigh and began slowly grinding my hips back and forth against her, wiping Sky's indignant frown off of her face and replacing it with rolling eyes and parted lips.

Egged on by Sky's enthusiastic response I thrust harder, reveling in her desperation. Husky moans erupted from her throat as I increased my speed, leaning back on my knuckles to grind us closer.

Locked in the thrall of pleasure, Sky's body twitched and bucked against mine. Sweat glistened on her brow and she threw her head back, meeting my thrusts with her own and falling into a rapid rhythm that drove us both to the edge of ecstasy.

Sky cried out as her muscles tensed and her back arched, jerking against me as her features twisted in pleasure. Her body trembled and she gasped, her sounds of euphoria dragging me over the edge with her. We clung to each other, gasping until the final collapse.

We folded in on each other, a quivering, slippery heap, and my lips found Sky's damp forehead. As our sweat cooled on hot skin, Sky repositioned herself in my arms, sighing with blissful contentment.

The morning had only just begun, but I wasn't quite ready to leave the comfort of our perfect little piece of paradise. Sunlight streamed through the window, but we were nowhere close to finishing. Instead, I tugged the covers up over our

heads, breathing in the sweet scent of my lover as I touched my nose to hers. “Round two?”

Sky grinned in response, her hands already wandering over my damp body. “You’ll be the death of me.”

Back then, glazed together in glistening sunlight, I had no understanding of the heavy weight of truth behind those words.

# Chapter 22

## SKY

There was something incredibly uncomfortable about hanging around in Sigrid's room without my girlfriend to accompany me. While the haughty vampiress had been noticeably nicer to me since the incident with Jeremy, Sigrid still eyed me like a rat who had slunk into her quarters without an invitation.

We stood across from each other in the lavish bedroom room, adorned with opulent mirrors and elaborate tapestries. Between us, Hazel and Hilda squirmed in their elegant dresses, dolled up for the big reveal.

After weeks of preparations, the night of the Black Moon ceremony was finally afoot.

Jordan intended to reveal the twins to the rest of the coven after her coronation, securing their safety along with her rule. Unfortunately, that meant leaving me to hang out with Sigrid while Jordan rubbed elbows with all the guests downstairs.

Hazel and Hilda were not thrilled with their stiff, lacey dresses, and they were even less thrilled about hanging around in their grandmother's room all night. Their restless energy was palpable as they tugged at the frilly lace hems. I had tried all evening to keep their unruly hair flattened and their dresses unruffled, but the disquieted toddlers had done their level best to render my efforts futile.

Sigrid had watched my fussing with a pompous frown, most likely judging my attempts at controlling the twin tornadoes. However, as the night wore on the vampire herself seemed to be losing her patience.

“Now, my darlings, please try to behave,” she pleaded, attempting to straighten their dresses for the umpteenth time.

But the defiant glint in their eyes indicated that Hazel and Hilda had other plans in mind. No doubt they were plotting to unleash their chaotic antics on their stoic grandmother, a thought that brought a small smile to my lips.

Hazel, always up for a fight, couldn't resist the opportunity to challenge her grandmother's prim demeanor. With a sly smile, she yanked the flowing sleeve of Sigrid's gown, her tiny fingers fisting the fabric in an iron grip. Hilda, spurred on by her grandmother's hiss of irritation, joined in the mischief, reaching out to playfully pat Sigrid's perfectly coiffed hair.

I struggled to swallow my giggles when the vampire's composure faltered, her voice strained as she tried to maintain her dignity. “Hazel, Hilda, please behave yourselves,” she reprimanded, her words losing their authoritative edge.

“Ah-ha!” I butted in, unable to hold back the sarcasm. “Pleading. I haven't tried that one yet.”

Sigrid granted me a scathing glare in response.

But the mischievous twins were undeterred by her scolding, their antics escalating, much to my delight. Hilda began twirling in her dress, sending ripples through the pristine

fabric, while Hazel attempted an impromptu dance routine, complete with exaggerated gestures and wiggles.

Torn between amusement and a desire to save the children from their grandmother's wrath, I hesitated to step in and assist. "Girls, please, you don't want to give your grandma gray hair."

But my words fell on deaf ears as Hazel, with a burst of energy, decided it was the perfect time for a game of hide-and-seek. Darting behind furniture and popping out from unexpected places, she laughed at her grandmother's exasperated frown, relishing in her own cleverness.

Meanwhile, Hilda, eager to add to the chaos, found a tray of canapes and began offering them to Sigrid, who recoiled from the human food like her granddaughter had just offered her a platter of dirt.

"Well, it looks like you have everything under control here." I tried my best to keep the smug tone out of my voice, but I couldn't fight the smirk as I backed toward the door. "I should go join Jordan. I'll come fetch you when it's time to present them."

Sigrid's eyes bulged in her head while the twins continued their escapades and I felt a twinge of sympathy for the woman.

With a combination of persistence and a touch of bribery, I managed to corral the twins, their faces flushed with excitement. I straightened their dresses one last time.



“Now, my little troublemakers, it’s time to behave.” I demonstrated a firm, but affectionate tone, hoping to leave Sigrid with something useful. “Tonight is a very important event, and we must make your Aunty Jordan proud.”

I exited the room with a quick wave to Sigrid, leaving Hazel fiddling with her dress and Hilda picking her nose.

Downstairs, the grand hall of the manor shimmered with candlelight, the air charged with an ethereal energy that only supernatural beings could bring. The room buzzed with anticipation as the guests, all vampires of noble lineage, mingled and whispered amongst one another. In the middle of the crowded gathering and caught in conversation with an ancient-looking immortal, I found Jordan.

“Sky!” She looked relieved to see me, ditching the other vampire and clinging tightly to my arm, “There you are, I was looking for you. You needed my help with—that thing?”

“There was a thing?” I asked, and winced when Jordan’s grip on my arm tightened. “Oh yes! That thing. We need your help right away.”

Gratefully, Jordan gave me a peck on the cheek, apologizing to her confused companion and dragging me away before I could catch their name.

“Thank you,” she murmured, guiding me toward a quieter spot. “They’ve been going on for ages, I think I’ve lost thirty years of my life standing there.”

“Happy to help.” I nudged her shoulder. “Aren’t you meant to be getting this ceremony started now?”

“I’d love to.” Jordan rolled her eyes. “But first there are greetings to be made, drinks to be poured, music, entertainment and general highborn snobbery to slog through before we get to the actual ceremony.”

“Thrilling stuff, I’m sure.” I followed her to the front of the gathering, Jordan raising her hand to catch everyone’s attention.

Regal and poised, she wore a gown of golden silk that hugged her curvy frame. Her porcelain skin glowed under the soft radiance of the chandeliers, and her eyes, that mesmerizing shade of green, held a mix of anticipation and gratitude. She took my hand in hers, our fingers intertwining like a tether.

A hush fell over the crowd as Sigrid made an appearance, gliding down the stairs like a ghost in her waifish white gown. She addressed the assembly, her voice ringing out across the hall.

“Tonight, we gather to witness the ascension of a new ruler, a beacon of hope and strength,” she announced, her eyes alighting on Jordan who nodded regally.

I stuck to a small wave, which seemed to rub Sigrid the wrong way.

Her lip curled in my direction before she continued, “Our beloved Jordan, whose heart has bridged the divide between

our people, shall now assume her rightful place as the ruler of the Leyore Coven.”

Applause erupted, thunderous and reverberating through the hall. Jordan’s face glowed with a mixture of humility and determination. I stood by her side, awkward and uncomfortable at all of the attention on us. But I would have to get used to the attention, considering what I had planned next. Jordan caught my eye, and her brow raised in question at my sly smile.

Jordan stepped forward to add her own two cents, and I quietly slipped away to fetch something from down the hall—something I had stowed away before the ceremony began. By the time I got back, the crowd had broken out into applause again and Jordan stood proud before her people.

She cocked her head to the side when I emerged from the hall, hiding the sleek black case behind my back. She knew I was up to something, meaning it was far too late to back out now.

As the applause died down, I stamped out my anxiety and stepped forward. The crowd hushed as I made my way over to Jordan. By the time I made it to the foot of the stairs, staring up at her, my knees were quaking.

Slowly, displaying what I hoped was a mysterious grace, I removed the violin from its case and balanced it on my shoulder. With my eyes on Jordan, the rest of the world disappeared, and I was no longer standing before a crowd of highborn vampires.

I was standing before the woman I loved, and nothing else mattered anymore.

With a gentle sweep of the bow, I began to play. The notes, delicate and haunting, drifted around the otherwise silent hall. I had prepared a piece specifically for this moment, an ode to the woman I had come to care for so deeply.

To my surprise, the crowd was captivated, their eyes fixed on my nimble fingers as they danced across the strings. But I only had eyes for Jordan, and she held my gaze until the very last note.

As the final chords of the violin trembled in the air, the audience erupted into thunderous applause and Jordan, her face flushed with pride and adoration, stepped forward to take my hand.

“So that’s what you were planning,” she whispered, coiling her arms around my waist. “You have a terrible poker face.”

“It’s a little difficult to hide anything from you.” I lay my head on her shoulder, my adrenaline spent now that the show was over. “You’re far too nosy for your own good.”

“True, very true. But seriously, Sky.” Jordan touched her nose to mine. “Thank you. I’m not even queen yet, I don’t deserve half of what you’ve done for me.”

I smiled, touching my lips to hers in a soft kiss. “You are my queen, with or without the title.”

The applause began to subside, and the vampires went back to their mingling. But amidst the elegant atmosphere, chaos

was brewing in the form of two terrible twins.

“Oh god,” Jordan said over my shoulder, her eyes fixed on two small figures in the crowd. “They’ve escaped.”

“What?!” I twisted in her arms, spotting the telltale wild locks of Hazel and Hilda as the two disappeared back into the crowd. “Godammit. Sigrid was supposed to lock the door!”

The guests, caught off guard by the sudden addition of two excited children, watched in both amusement and apprehension as the twins weaved through their legs, their frilly dresses already ruffled and tattered. They seemed determined to make this grand ceremony their own playground.

“Jordan!” I pushed the vampiress toward the murmuring crowd. “Do something!”

Hazel, her eyes twinkling with a familiar glint of mischief, decided to make a game out of stealing the noble vampires’ prized possessions. With surprisingly nimble fingers, she snatched a jewel-encrusted brooch from the suit of a startled guest, only to hand it off to Hilda, who promptly hid it behind her back.

The guests, though momentarily taken aback, seemed to take a liking to them. Chuckles and smiles spread through the crowd as a few vampires played along, pretending to search for their lost treasures.

Meanwhile, Hazel and Hilda continued their escapades, expertly evading capture. They darted around tables, their

laughter ringing through the hall, leaving behind a trail of perplexed and amused highborn vampires. Even the most stoic of the noble attendees couldn't help but crack a smile at the sheer audacity.

“You taught them to steal,” I muttered as Jordan and I hurried after the two twin torpedoes. “This is what happens when you train children to pickpocket their own grandmother.”

“It was a one-time occurrence,” Jordan whined, nearly tripping over her gown as she made a grab at one of the twins. “We were bonding.”

Hazel dodged her aunt's flailing arms, disappearing under a table with a wicked cackle.

Behind us, Hilda managed to snatch a gentleman's pocket watch, causing him to splutter in disbelief.

The chaos escalated when Hazel discovered the dessert table, a fine display of decadent treats for the various human contractees who were present. With a devilish glint in her eyes she grabbed a cupcake, and in a daring move launched it toward the ceiling.

A cry of dismay could be heard from Sigrid somewhere to our left when it fell and landed on an expensive rug with a big ‘squelch’.

This spurred another bout of laughter and applause from the guests who seemed far more amused by the pandemonium than Jordan and Sigrid were.

“Got you!” I managed to scoop Hilda up in my arms before she could totter under another table, hauling her under my shoulder like a sack of potatoes while she squealed in delight.

Jordan nabbed Hazel before the toddler could launch another cupcake, this one aimed at a prestigious looking vampire who stood by, unaware of the sugary missile.

“Sorry about that, folks!” Jordan addressed the crowd, handing a squirming Hazel over to River who appeared at her shoulder. “The tyrants will be returning to their beds now.”

“I guess the secret’s out now.” River held the girl under her armpits, like Jordan had just handed her dirty laundry instead of a living child. “I’ll keep an eye on them until the ceremony is over.”

Tucking Hazel under one arm, and taking Hilda’s hand with the other, River led the children back to their bedroom.

“Does she have any experience with kids?” I asked Jordan, watching the woman struggle to keep her hold on a flailing Hazel.

“None at all.” Jordan chuckled. “And I slipped an extra cupcake into Hazel’s pocket.”

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Only hours later, I watched with my heart in my throat as Jordan stepped onto the podium in front of the crowd. The Grand Ceremony was almost at an end, the Black Moon perfectly in position to welcome a new queen.

The air crackled with anticipation as Sigrid, her voice resonating with power, began the sacred ritual that would seal Jordan's place on the throne, finally crowning her as the true leader of the Leyore clan.

As Sigrid chanted ancient incantations, a hushed silence descended upon the crowd. Jordan stood tall and stiff as a statue, her pale skin illuminated by candlelight as Sigrid approached. In her hands, the older vampire held a box, gnarled and twisted vines etched into the wooden surface. A strange hissing could be heard as Sigrid opened the box, a sound that grew louder when a black tongue flicked out from the shadows inside.

Gasps rippled through the assembled vampires as Jordan held out her hand toward the creature that was slowly emerging. A sinuous, emerald-green snake glided out of the confines of the box, testing the air with its tongue before sliding over Jordan's outstretched hand. I realized quickly that this was no ordinary snake, its eyes gleaming with an otherworldly intelligence.

The crowd watched in awe as the majestic serpent gracefully coiled around Jordan's arm, slithering up toward her shoulders. It seemed as if the very spirit of the vampire realm was embracing its new queen, acknowledging her with this mystical symbol of power and wisdom.

As I watched the esoteric ritual from the sideline, I felt my heart swell with pride. I had watched Jordan fight for this



moment, and to finally see her standing there, proud and bold before her people, I couldn't have been happier.

The magnificence of the moment, however, was interrupted by a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye. I felt a jolt of unease as I watched the swirling shadow that flowed through the masses. Dylan was moving in the darkness, making her way rapidly toward a figure in the crowd. It was her pace that piqued my curiosity, but it was her expression that sent my stomach plummeting to my shoes.

My gaze shifted from Jordan and the god-like serpent, toward a man standing amidst the crowd, his face shrouded in shadows.

Instinct prickled the hairs on the back of my neck, a whisper of danger. Something was amiss here, and it had to do with that man.

As I watched, he lifted his hood, revealing dirty blond hair. Something silver glinted under his cloak.

Without hesitation, I leapt forward with a cry of warning, pushing Jordan aside just as the man, Jeremy, lifted a gleaming silver crossbow—the bolt aimed directly at my vampire lover's heart.

Time seemed to slow as the sharp twang of the crossbow echoed through the hall.

But instead of piercing Jordan's heart, the bolt found its mark in the serpent coiled around her neck. A collective gasp erupted from the crowd as the mystical creature let out an

enraged hiss, before its limp body uncurled from Jordan's shoulders and thudded to the floor, glassy black eyes watching the unfurling chaos.

Pandemonium ensued as the serpent's body hit the floor. The crossbow's intended target was averted, but the consequences were far from over. An earth-shaking roar reverberated through the building, shattering the windows and sending guests to their knees as the ground shook beneath them.

The room erupted into chaos as hordes of werewolves, shape-shifters, and other monstrous creatures flooded into the hall, their growls and snarls and piercing screams filling the air.

Vampires scattered, their regal composure shattered in the face of the unexpected attack.

Somehow, the wards around the manor had failed. In the blink of an eye, the once-elegant hall became a battleground and my blood ran cold as I clung to Jordan, witnessing the onslaught of ferocious creatures straight out of my worst nightmares.

Jeremy's army had arrived.

# Chapter 23

## JORDAN

My heart pounded as I instinctively reached for the hidden dagger concealed beneath my gown. While I had talons and teeth on my side, it had felt necessary to stow some extra steel somewhere on my person for a situation just like this.

I surveyed the chaos, my mind racing to keep up with the sudden turn of events. Jeremy had brought his army to our doorstep, striking right before I had the chance to come into my full power. It was near impossible to comprehend.

Sky gripped my forearm, her nails biting into my skin as she hissed, “The necklace. I forgot about the necklace!”

“What necklace?” I cried, hauling her out of the way when a lumbering shifter stalked onto the podium. “Now is not the time to be worrying about your pearls!”

The shifter poised to strike, one large paw crushing the skull of the dead serpent at its feet. Black blood erupted at the sickening crunch, spraying the acrid liquid over both of us.

“Jeremy gave me a necklace! Before he attacked me by the shed.” Sky’s eyes were wide, the color draining from her lips. “I brought it inside. That’s how he got through the wards.”

There was no way any of the monstrous creatures before me should have managed to cross the threshold of the manor. Sigrid’s wards were powerful, and no unwanted visits would

have been permitted to pass through. Not unless someone else had broken the barrier for them.

“That sneaky bastard.” I yanked Sky aside, punching my fist upwards as the shifter lumbered toward us. My fist connected with its bottom jaw, punching its elongated teeth through its furred muzzle. “I’ll kill Jeremy with my bare hands if I have to.”

A sudden shriek from somewhere upstairs startled me, triggering that fierce protective urge.

In the midst of the fray, my eyes locked with Sky’s, a silent communication passing between us. She understood the gravity of the situation and the need to act swiftly. Before I could turn Jeremy into minced meat, we had to find the twins. We fought our way up the staircase, swiftly dispatching any adversary that dared to come too close. Beside me, Sky’s movements were graceful, a lethal dance as she dodged assailants, sending them swiftly to their deaths on my claws.

We darted through the chaos, my eyes scanning for an escape route amidst the surging mass of creatures. The twins were our beacon of hope, their safety the utmost priority.

By the time we reached the top of the stairs the grand hall was nothing more than a struggling mass of bodies, the pristine wood floors stained a sickening red. The vampires were giving their all, but for every monster they cut down, three more arrived to take its place.

It was a hopeless battle. We were far outnumbered by Jeremy’s forces. If we didn’t come up with a plan soon, we

wouldn't make it out alive. And even if we did, there would be no Leyore Clan to govern.

We reached Sigrid's bedroom and I threw the door open with Sky hot on my heels.

Sigrid's bedroom was still, the twins' pajamas neatly folded on the bed in preparation for their bedtime.

"They're not here!"

I whirled in circles, throwing open wardrobe doors and hauling furniture out of the way. But the room was empty. "They're not fucking here!"

I sent a chair flying, roaring as my fear and frustration bubbled over. It shattered against the mirror above the makeup desk, fracturing the glass and splitting my reflection into fragmented, jagged pieces.

"Jordan, wait!" Sky grabbed my arm as I lifted a fist, poised to take a swing at that disheveled reflection. "River must have seen this coming! She would have taken them to safety."

I felt a flicker of hope at her words and let my arm fall to my side. Sky was right, River would have foreseen this attack. She may not have had time to warn us, and considering her scent lingered around the room, she was most likely still hanging around, keeping the twins out of sight.

Guided by instinct, I spotted the wardrobe in the far corner and walked over to it. Behind me, Sky shut the door, bolting it shut and cutting out the sounds of battle that radiated from outside.

I examined the wardrobe, noting the slightly darker patch of paint on the wall on one side, as if the entire piece of furniture had been moved slightly to the right.

“One of Sigrid’s hidden passages,” I whispered, hope blossoming in my chest as I hauled the wardrobe aside. “She uses these to get around the manor when she doesn’t want company.”

Sky helped me move the bulky wardrobe, revealing a cramped, dark tunnel behind it. “Jordan, your mother is so creepy.”

“I know.” I sniffed the air, picking up River’s scent as well as the familiar fragrance of cupcakes. “They definitely went this way. This route should lead them to the back of the building.”

Clutching Sky’s hand, I led her into the cramped tunnel. Her human eyes couldn’t see much in the dark, but I could see well enough to guide the both of us.

“What about the rest of the coven?” Sky asked breathlessly, as she stumbled along beside me. “They won’t be able to hold out for long.”

“We’ll come back for them,” I reassured her, the lie bitter on my tongue. Only one of us would be going back out there. And it would not be my mate.

Inside the claustrophobic tunnel, the clamor of the battle outside became distant, replaced by a fleeting moment of

calm. It was a moment to breathe, to collect my thoughts, and to steel my resolve.

Sky fell silent as we navigated the labyrinthine passages, and I could hear her heart pounding a staccato beat in her chest. The sounds of battle echoed dimly in the background as we pressed on. Eventually the air grew heavy with the scent of blood and the eerie growls of advancing creatures.

The heckles on the back of my neck rose, as a new scent became apparent in the cramped tunnels. “Someone else has found an entrance,” I murmured, instinctively nudging Sky behind me as we pressed on. “Stay close. And be ready.”

Shadows flickered somewhere ahead, candlelight casting an otherworldly glow. My grip tightened on the dagger in my hand, all of my senses on high alert.

With each turn my unease intensified, guilt twisting in my gullet at what I had to do.

My attuned instincts led us to a small antechamber. River, her eyes filled with a fierce determination, stood guard at the entrance, fangs bared and muscles tense. She hissed at our approach, before catching my scent and bounding over to wrap her arms around me. “I thought we’d lost you for good! I was trying to get these two out of here by the time Jeremy arrived. There was no time to warn you.”

“You have the twins?” I gripped her shoulders, nearly shaking the poor woman in my desperation.



River tilted her head towards the small chamber. “They’re fine. I had them hide there when I heard your approach.”

Peering inside, I spotted a flicker of movement—Hazel and Hilda, huddled together in a corner, wide-eyed with fear. Relief washed over me as I leaned against River and Sky rushed to their side, pulling them into a tight embrace. “Thank god you’re okay!”

“We need to get them out of here.” I turned to my companion, ears pricking at the sounds of violence that echoed through the walls. “This path should take us straight to the courtyard out back.”

River nodded, helping Sky to her feet with the twins in tow. “Dylan is already waiting with the car. Sigrid made it out too.”

As the battle raged outside, we gathered the trembling toddlers, guiding them through hidden passages, seeking a path to safety. The twins clung to Sky, their tiny hands gripping her dress as we navigated the treacherous terrain.

The tunnels stretched on forever, the shadows growing darker and the descent steeper. The snarls of the monsters were closer and I felt Sky shiver beside me. My heart raced, but I refused to let fear consume me. Not yet. Not until everyone I loved was safe. I had faced adversity before and emerged stronger. And I would protect my family at all costs.

“Wait.” River halted, scooping Hazel up into her arms as she listened intently. “Something’s out there.”

In the darkness before us, a rumbling shadow was moving. What followed was a rancid smell of rotting flesh, the foul scent of decay that had my last drink rushing back up my throat.

The wraith, a haunting being on the precipice between life and death, emerged from the shadows, blocking our path. Its eyes glowed with a feral hunger, bared fangs dripping with putrid saliva.

I drew my talons out, ready to rip and tear at the gruesome creature, although I wasn't sure how much good that would do. Wraiths were demonic creatures, rotting flesh spurred on by vengeful spirits. Wounding their physical body alone would not be enough to kill them.

Before I could launch an attack, however, Sky stepped in front of me. The wraith screeched a war cry, a whistling scream that had the twins covering their ears and cowering in fear. But my human mate was undeterred. She reached into her purse, a dinky little silver clutch that I had teased her for clinging to throughout the evening. Sky retrieved a vial of silver powder, a concoction I had never seen before, and uncorked it.

The wraith stretched out a bony hand, gnarled fingers reaching for my lover. With a steady hand, Sky flung the powder toward the creature, the silver concoction burning its flesh upon contact. The creature howled in agony, temporarily stunned by the unexpected assault. Seizing the opportunity,

River and I unleashed a flurry of strikes, exploiting the beast's momentary vulnerability.

Our combined strength proved formidable, and together we overpowered the creature, driving it back into the darkness as the silver powder worked its magic. Whatever Sky had chucked at the monster packed a punch, melting the rotting body and turning blackened flesh into sludge.

“How did you do that?” I turned to Sky, the creature a puddle of goop at our feet. “Wraiths are nearly impossible to kill!”

Sky shrugged nonchalantly, but a smile played on her lips as she tucked the bottle back into her purse. “I’ve been doing my research. And the powder was a gift from Ursula.”

“I suppose the little witch proved helpful after all.”

Finally, we had a taste of victory, but I knew our respite would be brief. We had to keep moving.

River led the way, maneuvering our party through the labyrinth of passages. Our footsteps echoed through the silent corridors, the distant sounds of battle serving as a reminder of the peril we were leaving behind.

As we neared the exit, a deafening roar reverberated through the stone walls, followed by a bloodcurdling scream. Behind us, the attackers pushed down another hidden doorway, pouring into the tunnel with snapping teeth and slathering maws.

“Take the twins.” I loaded both Hazel and Hilda into Sky’s arms, urging her down the passages while River and I stood ready to face the wave of shifters. Sky’s stricken face was pale, but she did as I asked, turning tail and bolting into the dark with the twins gripped tightly in her arms.

Without hesitation, River and I launched ourselves at the monsters, my blade slicing through the air with deadly precision. The creatures, caught off guard by the sudden assault, fell beneath my blade and talons, going down one by one.

Together, River and I fought back-to-back, our movements seamless, determination unyielding. The cramped passages made it difficult for the hulking bodies of the shifters to move, lining them up perfectly to meet their deaths.

“I almost feel bad!” River called as another shifter met its end on the points of her talons. “You’d think they would realize by now that this attack isn’t going to plan.”

I threw my blade, the silver tip lodging in the head of another shifter before it could close its jaws over my friend’s throat. “Focus on fighting, please. I’d like us all to get out of this in one piece.”

River cackled, the brush with death barely registering as she hacked and slashed at the monsters before us.

As the last of the werewolves crumbled to the ground we stood amidst the carnage, breath ragged, bodies battered but unbroken.

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By the time River and I emerged into the moonlit courtyard, Hazel and Hilda had been safely stowed in the back of Dylan's car. Sigrid sat beside them, mildly consoling the crying children with a stiff, vacant expression.

"Finally!" Sky leapt into my arms, ignoring the blood that stained my skin and turned my dress into a shimmering mess of gold and crimson. "Let's go. Dylan will drive us to a safehouse. We can regroup and figure out a plan from there. Surely there are other vampires willing to help us out?"

I held her tightly, my words failing me as I met her eyes. "No one is coming to help, Sky. You need to get out of here while you still can."

"What are you saying?" Sky's expression morphed from confused to defiant as she came to understand what I intended to do. "No. No, I am not leaving here without you!"

"My people need me, I can't abandon them." My gaze softened, tears glistening in my eyes and blurring my vision. I cupped my lover's face in my hands. "I love you more than words can express, and I would give anything to keep you safe. You don't need to die here, this isn't your fight."

"No!" Sky broke the embrace, gripping my shoulders and shaking me. "I am not leaving you!"

Before I could argue further, a cacophony of growls and snarls echoed through the courtyard. More werewolves

emerged from the shadows, glowing yellow eyes floating like lanterns in the dark.

My expression tightened, my heart torn between my desire to protect my mate and my duty to protect my people. With a heavy sigh, I made a reluctant decision. “You stay close. You keep your head down and you run when I tell you to. Okay?”

Sky nodded, her eyes shining with unwavering determination. “I promise. We face this together, no matter what Jeremy throws at us.”

The tender moment was abruptly interrupted by the snarling creatures that quickly surrounded us. I handed Sky my dagger, turning to call to Dylan and River, “Get those three somewhere safe. We’ll meet up with you as soon as we can.”

Dylan’s expression was somber, her slow nod hesitant as she started up the car. River saluted from the passenger seat, her lopsided grin contrasting with the grief that shone plainly in her eyes. “Don’t take too long, My Lady. We’ll be waiting for you.”

The car sped away as the monsters descended upon us, our last chance at salvation disappearing in a cloud of dust. Sky brandished her dagger, her grip steady and resolute. I unsheathed my lethal claws, fangs elongating, ready to face the onslaught. “Don’t die, okay?”

“Same goes for you,” she muttered, lifting the blade as a rabid shifter lunged toward us.

We fought side by side, a seamless dance of power and grace. My supernatural strength tore through the enemies with precision, while Sky's agility and quick thinking allowed her to evade their strikes and retaliate with deadly accuracy. As it turned out, she had more potions hidden in her purse, courtesy of Ursula the teenage bitch, and our enemies were bubbled, boiled and burned alive all around us.

The courtyard became a battleground, the clash of metal and teeth and nails, and the roar of the shifters filling the night air. My heart raced, my senses honed as I fought with a ferocity fueled by love and loyalty. Beside me, Sky unleashed her potion prowess, her attacks fluid and devastating.

Amidst the frenzy, a shrill cry pierced the air, capturing my attention. I turned, my heart skipping a beat as I spotted a flash of familiar raven hair amid the chaos. "Hunter?"

With a burst of determination, I lunged forward, instincts propelling me through the melee with Sky at my back. Hunter turned at the sound of my voice, a gory string of shifter intestine clenched between her jaws. She spat the purplish mass and grinned at us, her mouth lined with blood. "Dylan called. She said you guys needed some help out here."

Another shriek caught our attention and I spotted Maxine, dressed in a frilly pink dress of all things, struggling against the grip of another werewolf, her tiny fists flailing in defiance. Sky stepped forward to assist, but there was no need. With a swift and precise strike, darling little Maxine drove her claws

into the creature's side, yanking out what looked like an appendix and tossing it at the face of another slathering shifter.

In the midst of the battle, my heightened senses alerted me to another threat. I sprang into action, vampiric speed enabling me to intercept a massive, snarling beast that lunged toward Sky from behind. With a powerful swipe of my claws I sent the creature crashing into a nearby pillar, momentarily incapacitating it.

Together we fought, our movements fluid and harmonizing with each strike. Sky tossed potions and swiped with my dagger, swiftly dispatching any creature that dared approach, while I guarded her flank, making the two of us an unyielding force.

But the battle raged on, and the odds seemed insurmountable. It felt as if wave after wave of monsters descended upon us, threatening to overwhelm our small group.

The werewolves kept coming, joined by all kinds of unspeakable monsters, their numbers seemingly endless. With each defeated foe, two more would take its place. We couldn't hold out forever.

I said as much to Sky, who managed to surprise me one last time. She grabbed my face between her hands and pulled me toward her neck. "Bite me."

"What!? Are you crazy?" I tried to pull away from her, but Sky was determined.



“Bite me and complete the mating bond!” She presented her neck, tugging at the collar of her dress to give me more room. “It’ll make you more powerful, right? That might be what we need to win this.”

“No, Sky.” I closed my hand over my mouth, my fangs already itching to be buried in the pale skin of her throat. “It can’t happen, not like this.”

Sky’s fierce expression softened and she pulled me into a rushed, breathless kiss. “I would die for you in an instant, Jordan. But I’d much rather live with you. I’m ready for this.”

The sincerity in her words was clear, and I heaved in a deep breath. “Okay. I trust you, let’s do this.”

I bundled Sky in my arms, pulling her close to me amidst the chaos and hovered my mouth over her throat. Sky leaned against me, presenting her neck and fisting her hands in the sleeve of my dress.

But before I could close my jaws on that pale slice of skin Sky was wrenched away from me, her grip tearing my sleeve clean off. With a cry of alarm I reached for her, taking in the pale, muscled arms that had closed around my beloved. Jeremy held Sky against his chest, one arm curled around her neck as she stared at me, terrified.

Jeremy smiled a cruel, vindictive grin, before disappearing into thin air, taking Sky with him.

# Chapter 24

## SKY

In the span of a few seconds the brutal battle outside the estate, the writhing, bloody bodies, and Jordan's stricken face, all disappeared. Suddenly we were somewhere else entirely, the roar of the battle replaced with a quiet lull, punctuated only by my own furious cries as I struggled against Jeremy.

The vampire threw me to the ground, my body hitting soft dirt as I rolled to my feet. Looking around me, I realized we had apparated to the greenhouse, recognizing the glass walls and mossy overgrowth that hung around us.

The moon cast an ethereal glow through the opaque ceiling, a sense of impending doom hanging heavy in the night air. Somewhere out there, a battle between good and evil raged on, each side locked in a desperate struggle for supremacy.

In here, I faced a monster.

Jeremy stood amongst the lush vegetation, glowering at me like I was the source of all of his suffering. "You almost ruined my plans, you insufferable little trouble maker."

He stalked towards me, flexing his claws like he was imagining them tearing through my flesh. "It's a good thing I spotted you when I did. I must admit, I had not expected my cousin to agree to biting her precious mate in the middle of battle, not even to win this war. You two must have been desperate."

My heart trilled in my chest, pulsing blood through my veins and setting my nerves on edge. I flexed my fists, ready to face off against this monster one last time. I had hurt him before, I could damn well do it again.

The scent of exotic flowers mixed with the metallic tang of spilled blood, creating a heady atmosphere that set my head spinning. The humid environment didn't help either, the very air felt slick and oily in my throat.

“Your plan must be pretty flimsy if everything could fall apart because of a little bite.”

Taunting him was probably not the best idea, but I needed to keep Jeremy talking long enough to formulate some kind of escape plan. There were no rakes in sight, and I backed up through the overgrown foliage, desperately seeking some alternative weapon.

“You can't escape me, Sky.” Jeremy sneered, his fangs gleaming in the dim light. “Your pathetic human existence will come to an end tonight. Jordan may be difficult to kill, but you—you're nothing, it's as easy as swatting a fly. Once you're gone, my cousin will crumble.”

“Need I remind you,” I said, nearly tripping over a snaking root, barely managing to catch myself as I backed further into the shadows. “You tried to kill me once before. And that didn't go very well for you.”

Jeremy's eyes flashed with anger, bristling at the dent to his ego. “A fluke victory won't save you a second time. Your death is long overdue.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that your pride might be your downfall?” I retorted, my back brushing against the cool glass of the back wall. “Keep up the cocky attitude and you’ll find another garden rake in your chest.”

“Shut up!” Jeremy snapped, a vehement snarl bursting from his lips. “Everything was going well until you came along. Alberich was dead at my hands, along with the witch who bedded him. Everything, *Everything* was falling into place. And then Jordan found you.”

As the battle raged on outside the greenhouse, the sound of clashing fangs and desperate cries reached our ears. A cruel smile broke out on Jeremy’s face. “Do you hear that? They’re all going to die tonight. And it’s all because of you.”

I was still processing the fact that we had been right about Jeremy’s involvement in Alberich’s death, I barely had time to process how the raging battle between vampires and evil creatures of unspeakable horror was my fault.

“My army will wipe them out, your precious mate along with them.” Jeremy hissed, that sly smile widening as he cornered me. “And when we’re done, I’ll have to go after those two little loose ends my cousin is so fiercely protective of.”

“You’re a monster.” I snarled, his threat fanning the flames of fury that burned in my chest.

“Yes,” Jeremy agreed, matter-of-factly. “And you’re my prey.”

The vampire lunged without warning, his movements a blur to my weaker human eyes. I dodged his attack with a grace born of pure desperation, but he easily regained his balance and pressed his advantage. With every move, his strength and speed surpassed mine, and my time was rapidly running out.

He managed to knock me off my feet, barreling into me with a force that knocked the wind from my chest. A spearing pain in my side signified a broken – something, and I fought back the bile that bubbled up in the back of my throat, clutching my side as I climbed to my feet.

Gloating with sadistic pleasure, Jeremy circled me as I staggered in place, reveling in my impending demise. “Do you know what the mating bond truly is, human?” he hissed, his voice dripping with malice.

“To lower oneself to bonding with a mere human—it is an abomination, a mockery of our kind. You think you can trifle with the power that has governed us for centuries? I will show you the consequences of your foolishness.”

His eyes glowed with malevolence as he intensified his assault, fueled by his desperation to overcome his human adversary before I could fling a few more insults and hit him where it hurt.

“You fight well for a human,” Jeremy snarled, his voice dripping with contempt. “But it is a futile endeavor. Once you’re gone, I will ensure Jordan suffers a fate worse than death. She will witness the destruction of everything she holds dear.”

I gritted my teeth, muscles aching from the strain of the battle. I could feel the weight of Jeremy's threats bearing down on my dwindling courage, but I refused to succumb to fear. With each parry and strike I defied his taunts, my resolve burning brighter than ever at the thought of my mate. Somewhere out there she was fighting, and I had to return to her.

The dance of combat intensified, each movement a calculated risk. Finally, I spotted a silver-tipped salvation nestled amongst the undergrowth. Jordan's dagger—I must have dropped it when Jeremy transported us to the greenhouse. With another roll that set my insides on fire, I made a grab for the dagger. Lifting it up I slashed through the air, narrowly missing Jeremy's throat.

I may have been swift, but he was cunning, countering attacks with a kick to my sensitive middle area. I wheezed as the sharp pain overcame me, black dots crawling across my vision as I swayed on my feet. But I wasn't down yet.

As we circled each other, a storm of emotions raged within me. Love for my mate fueled my determination, intertwining with my own intrinsically human survival instinct. I refused to let this monster's malevolence snuff out that flame.

My strikes grew bolder, my movements becoming an intricate dance of defense and offense. With each successful blow, a desperate hope surged through my veins, banishing the doubts that eroded my confidence. My body was at its limit,

beaten and broken, but I was still fighting. I would go down fighting to the very last breath.

This was the unyielding nature of human beings, something Jeremy could not have anticipated. Humans are irrational, passionate, sometimes violent creatures, and we have fought tooth and nail for centuries to hold our own against the forces that wish to extinguish us. I could see fear flicker in the vampire's eyes, a realization that his victory may be marred by the singular fury of a human woman scorned.

Jeremy's voice dripped with venom as he pressed closer, his voice barely a whisper as he tried to taunt me down from my determination to win. "I can taste your fear, Sky. Your precious mate will watch as I drain the life from your veins. Her anguish will be the final blow to her spirit, your empty, lifeless eyes will be the last thing she sees before she dies."

The words hung heavy in the air, and I screamed in an amalgamation of pain, anguish and unbridled rage. I threw the blade with all my strength, the glinting metal finding its mark and burying it to the hilt in Jeremy's left eye.

The vampire roared in agony, knocking me to the ground and pinning me in place with a hand around my neck. "This is where you die, human."

I fought the urge to close my eyes, choosing to watch my approaching demise as Jeremy's claws speared toward my heart.

That same heart hammered like a war drum in my chest as I writhed against Jeremy's incoming assault. My mind raced,



searching for a way to turn the tide. And then, as if in answer to my silent plea, a strange purple fog began to creep into the greenhouse, enveloping everything in its mysterious embrace.

Confusion clouded Jeremy's face as the fog thickened, obscuring his vision. He swiped at it, but the tendrils of mist grew stronger, restraining his movements. Panic tinged his voice as he struggled against the unseen force.

“What sorcery is this? What have you done, human?”

Gasping for breath, I stared in awe at the unfolding spectacle. The fog swirled around us, dancing with an otherworldly grace, as if guided by an unseen hand. Its enigmatic presence filled me with an inexplicable surge of strength like a salve to some deep, spiritual wound.

Jeremy cried out in outrage, and tried to land the finishing blow, his fingers tightening around my throat.

But in that moment the purple fog intensified, encasing my body in a protective shield of unknown origins. It whispered soothingly, imbuing my muscles with its mysterious energy, healing the fractures and cracks in my bones as Jeremy's fingers were pried from my neck.

Amidst the haze, figures emerged, silhouettes of beautiful women, all barefoot and ghost-like in appearance. Their billowing hair glinted in the waning moonlight, coal-black eyes fixed on the vampire that loomed over me.

Driven by a newfound courage, I pressed my advantage, rising to butt my forehead against Jeremy's and knocking him

off of me. With the knife still lodged in his eye, the vampire howled in a rage, swiping at me with one clawed hand, the other tugging at the bloody dagger. I dodged his talons, my movements growing fluid and purposeful. The fog seemed to guide me, wrapping around my limbs, enhancing my reflexes and amplifying my strength.

As I got to my feet, I met the gaze of the ethereal beings who stood before me, their opaque forms growing more solid and tangible before my eyes. Taking in the black dresses and yew branches clasped tightly in their hands, I realized with a rush of surprise that we were no longer alone in this battle.

The witches had joined the fight.

# Chapter 25

## JORDAN

The grand hall of the opulent estate was engulfed in chaos as vampires clashed with hideous creatures and savage shifters. The scent of blood and the clash of fangs filled the air, drowning out any semblance of the once refined atmosphere. And Sky was nowhere to be found.

I had ravaged a path through the shifters that had attacked us, searching for my cousin amongst the mass of contorted bodies. Jeremy would pay. Visceral, pulsing anger threatened to overcome me and my limbs stretched and elongated as I gave in to the all-consuming rage at the loss of my lover.

The once-elegant hall was now a war zone, the exquisite furnishings reduced to wreckage. Vampires and monstrous beings were locked in fierce combat, their supernatural strength and agility pushing the limits of mortal comprehension. I dodged an onslaught of claws, my reflexes honed through centuries of existence, but my thoughts were consumed by Sky and Sky alone.

As I sliced through the onslaught of adversaries, a chilling scream pierced the chaos. It could have been Sky, I had no way of knowing. My heart skipped a beat. Panic surged through my veins, my fangs bared in a feral snarl as I raged against the tide of enemies that threatened to separate me from my mate forever.

The battle seemed endless, a whirlwind of violence and desperation. The screams of the dying mingled with the roar of werewolves and the sinister laughter of the evil, wicked creatures that preyed on the stragglers. My mind swirled with conflicting emotions—rage, fear, and an overwhelming need to protect the one I loved.

Just as I neared the heart of the battle, I noticed a strange, shimmering purple fog had begun to creep along the marble floor, weaving its way through the chaos like it had a life of its own. The air crackled with magic, and my senses heightened, a twinge of dread at this new anomaly. I assumed this was another one of Jeremy's tricks, some trump card that would doom us for good.

But my suspicions were proved false when strange new beings emerged from the fog.

Out of the mist emerged hordes of beautiful women, their presence ethereal and commanding. Clad in flowing robes, they emanated an aura of ancient power. Some of them walked, cleaving a way through the monsters with a mere flick of the wrist. Others floated above the crowds, on twisted branches of yew, dropping leaves as they flitted across the hall.

My mouth dropped open when I spotted a familiar face, smirking down at me from where she hovered above my head. "Ursula?"

The little witch looked almost godlike in her current form, pastel hair floating around her shoulders, her skin emanating

an ethereal glow. But her snarky personality was fully intact, and she rolled her eyes at my stupefied expression.

“We are here to assist you immortal beings,” the leader of the cluster said, her voice carrying a weight of authority that matched her poised demeanor. “For too long vampires and witches have fought against one another. Now, we unite against a common enemy. We stand with you to protect the bonds that unite us all.”

My heart swelled with gratitude and I watched, astounded, as the witches’ coven demonstrated the true power of their kind. Almost instantaneously, the tides turned in our favor, with witches and vampires fighting side by side for the first time in centuries.

Ursula swooped down to my side, hopping off of her ‘broomstick’ to stand beside me. “I hope you know, you and that human of yours owe me big time for this.”

“How—why?” I sputtered out the words, hushed by Ursula who pressed a hand over my mouth.

“Where are the twins? Are they safe?”

“They’re safe,” I assured her, forcing her head down as a roaring shifter was flung into the air by a burst of magic. “They’re miles away from the battle by now.”

Ursula grimaced when a group of vampires descended on the being, ripping it to pieces before it could get to its feet.

“Your kind are very enthusiastic,” she muttered dryly, brushing a fleck of fur from her shoulder. “Anyway, come

with me. I know where your human is.”

“What?!” I gripped her shoulder. “Where? Is she alive?”

A group of witches formed a protective circle around us, their hands raised in unison. A soft chant filled the air, a melodic language both ancient and powerful. The purple fog coalesced, twisting and twirling, barring us from the chaos.

“Of course she’s alive,” Ursula snapped, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “No thanks to you. You should keep a better eye on that woman. She seems to have a talent for poking around in places she’s not supposed to. We found her fighting your cousin like she was Rambo himself.”

“She is in the Green House, protected by members of our clan,” one of the witches said. “Go swiftly, vampire, for time is of the essence. We shall ensure your path remains clear.”

With a nod of thanks, I turned on my heel and sprinted through the chaos, vampiric speed propelling me faster than ever. I maneuvered effortlessly, my senses sharpened by urgency. The cries of battle echoed around me as I tore through the wreckage of the once-pristine hallways. Somehow, Ursula managed to keep up, zipping alongside me on her branch and clearing a path through the carnage.

We fought through the throngs of enemies, my seething rage allowing me to dispatch adversaries with lethal efficiency. Ursula turned her nose up at my reckless behavior, and her hands glowed with a gentle, radiant energy.

With a wave of her hand, she conjured a protective shield around the both of us, deflecting the blows and providing a brief respite.

“This is to protect you from those guys and from yourself,” she muttered, somehow managing to fold her arms and look me up and down while flying sideways at a hundred miles an hour. “Honestly, you can’t expect to protect your woman if you wind up dead.”

“Yeah, well. Thank you.” I acknowledged the young witch’s assistance, too caught up in my mission to be offended by her prodding. Together, we surged forward, our combined strength carving a path through the horde of adversaries. The witch’s magic complemented my lethal skills surprisingly well, each strike met with a burst of mystic energy that disintegrated our foes on the spot.

“You have to teach me some of this magic,” I insisted, my eyes bulging when Ursula buckled a shifter with a simple clench of her fist. “How come you guys don’t use this stuff more often?”

“Because witches are peaceful creatures,” Ursula grumbled, but her rosy cheeks flushed with pride. “We only use this kind of magic when absolutely necessary. And it’s as draining as it is effective. I’m going to nap for days when all of this is over.”

The battles raged around us, a cacophony of violence and chaos. But our newfound allies were making quick work of the attackers. Somewhere in the back of my mind, it occurred to me that this was a monumental shift in the world, something



that could only have happened because of Sky's willingness to reach out a helping hand to a potential friend. My heart clenched in my chest at the thought of my mate, Ursula's words swimming back to the forefront of my mind. Sky had faced off against Jeremy and survived. Again.

"Focus!" Ursula yelled as we burst out of the building, making a beeline for the greenhouse. "You nearly ran right into a bush."

The witch's voice rose above the chaos, her incantations slicing through the air like a clarion call. Her magic shimmered and swirled, creating temporary barriers and illusions that diverted the attention of our pursuers. With each obstacle overcome, the path to Sky became clearer, the distance between us shrinking. The tether that tied us together wound tighter, drawing me toward her.

Outside, the greenhouse loomed before us, its splendor now marred by the surrounding destruction. My heart thundered as I burst through the open doors, eyes scanning frantically for my lover's familiar form amidst the shadows.

And there, amidst the foliage and bathed in moonlight, I spotted Sky. My human lover stood in the center of the building, surrounded by witches. Her eyes were wide with fear, her delicate frame trembling, but she stood with her dagger poised over the writhing body of another vampire. Jeremy, held in place by the witches' magic.

My heart surged with relief as I called out to her, my mortal lover who had fought battles that no human ever would.

“Sky!” My words cut through the stillness, reaching my lover’s ears like a lifeline.

Sky’s eyes locked with mine, a glimmer of hope igniting within them. She dropped the knife at her feet, tears spilling down her dirty cheeks as she staggered toward me, her voice quivering but resolute. “I’m alive! You’re alive! We’re unkillable!”

She leapt into my arms, nearly knocking me over. At last, we stood together, our bodies pressed close, seeking solace in each other’s embrace. My arms encircled my mate, holding her tight and the young witch stood guard, her magic swirling around us like a protective cocoon.

“I thought you were dead,” I whispered, grief cracking my voice as I brushed tears from her eyes. “I thought I’d lost you for good.”

Sky clung to me, her bottom lip quivering as she buried her face in my neck. “Do you happen to have any family members who don’t want me dead? Just wondering.”

“My great aunt, twice removed.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead, something I thought I would never get to do again. “You’ll meet her at our wedding, she’ll adore you.”

“There’s going to be a wedding?” Sky’s squeak was muffled against my neck and I chuckled. But my fury was not yet forgotten and my eyes narrowed over her shoulder.

My gaze shifted from the comforting embrace of my lover to the vampire who had stolen her away. A seething rage burned

within me, fueling a newfound strength and resolve. The taste of vengeance was sweet on my tongue as my eyes locked onto him, my fangs bared in a feral snarl.

“You dare lay a hand on what is mine?” My voice dripped with venom, my words laced with a primal fury that had even the witches looking nervous. My entire being was consumed by a singular purpose: to make him pay for the pain he had inflicted upon me and my mate and my people.

I stepped away from Sky, leaving her in the care of Ursula as I stalked toward the pitiful man.

Jeremy, his face contorted with a mixture of arrogance and fear, winced at my approach, realizing the full extent of my wrath. A silver dagger—my dagger—protruded from his left eye, lodged so deep in the socket that part of the hilt was hidden under congealing red fluid. I was surprised it hadn’t mangled his brain.

No doubt this was the work of my mate. That thought spurred a twinge of pride in my chest, but it was quickly overcome by anger at the fact that she had to defend herself in the first place.

Jeremy’s earlier confidence wavered as he struggled to maintain his composure.

“I underestimated you, Jordan,” he stammered, his voice quivering with a mixture of desperation and defiance. “But it does not matter. Your coven is no match for my army and your pitiful mate will die at my hands.”

My movements were slow and predatory as I closed the distance between us. My hands trembled with a glorious blend of anger and anticipation. I had tasted the darkness that resided within my own heart, awakened by the threat to my beloved. And now, I would unleash it upon her tormentor.

“No,” I hissed, my voice laced with deadly conviction. “You will never lay a hand on her again. I will rip you apart with my bare hands, and your existence will be nothing but a distant memory to my coven.”

As the air crackled with the tension of impending violence, those around us stood with bated breath, their attention drawn to the confrontation unfolding before them. Even amidst the chaos, a solemn silence descended.

With a primal roar, I launched myself at the vampire man, my movements a blur of supernatural speed and agility.

“This is for my brother.” My fist collided with his body, pulling back and preparing to strike again without a moment’s mercy. “This is for his lover.”

Each strike was fueled by an untamed ferocity that surpassed my usual restraint. “For my people.”

Blow after blow landed with bone-shattering force, my vengeance manifesting in each strike.

“For my mate.”

The vampire man, once smug and assured, now found himself in a fight for his very existence. He attempted to defend himself, but his efforts were feeble in the face of my

unrestrained wrath. The taste of victory fueled my relentless assault, and I pulled my fist back again. “For every witch who has suffered at your hand.”

The onlookers, vampires and witches alike, watched in fear and fascination as I pummeled my adversary. My eyes blazed with an intensity that surpassed the mere physicality of the fight. It was a battle of wills, of light and darkness, of the gray area between the two where love resided.

“This is for me.” With a final, devastating blow, I sent the vampire man crashing to the ground. He lay there, bloodied and broken, the spark of life fading from his eyes. A primal satisfaction washed over me as I stood above him, my chest heaving with exertion.

“You were no match for my mate,” I whispered, my voice carrying a weight of finality. “May the darkness claim you, and may your memory be forever erased.”

With a swift, decisive motion, I delivered the killing blow, severing the vampire man’s head from his body.

But Jeremy did not die.

# Chapter 26

## SKY

Just as Jordan turned away from the fallen vampire, a chill washed over me.

Jeremy was still moving.

The severed head of the vampire man lying on the ground began to emit an eerie, otherworldly glow. Although his bloodless lips didn't move, sinister laughter echoed through the air, growing louder and more menacing with each passing moment.

To my horror, the head of the dead vampire began to shift and contort, elongating into a grotesque, demonic form. The severed body convulsed, and in a horrifying display of dark magic, the vampire that once was Jeremy transformed into a nightmarish monstrosity. His once-human features distorted, his body twisting into a grotesque form adorned with wicked claws and serrated fangs.

The demonic being lunged with blinding speed, a rage-fueled onslaught that caught everyone off guard. Its claws sliced through the air, aiming to tear flesh and break bone. Jordan instinctively pushed me out of harm's way, her vampiric reflexes allowing her to deflect those needle-like talons.

The creature's eyes glowed with an unnatural crimson hue, brimming with malevolence. Whatever deals Jeremy had made

with shadow beings, it had granted him more power than any of us could have anticipated, turning the wicked man into a twisted abomination.

As the demonic vampire lunged toward us again, Jordan acted swiftly, yanking the silver dagger from where it was still lodged in Jeremy's contorted skull. With a flick of her wrist, she slashed at the creature's arm, slicing through flesh and bone. The demon howled in rage, but it seemed otherwise unaffected by the injury.

Jordan's own eyes were a furious blood red, her fangs elongated, and she unleashed a barrage of furious strikes, her fists connecting with the demon's grotesque form. But each blow seemed to fuel its rage, as the creature's wounds healed instantly, its malevolent aura growing stronger.

Luckily for us, we had witches on our side. They chanted in unison, their voices resonating with power. Ursula joined in, grabbing my hand and coaxing me to contribute to the spell.

Harnessing the witches' magic, Jordan fought back with newfound strength. The air crackled with energy as spells and supernatural forces clashed.

Beside me, Ursula lifted her hand, a furious vengeance burning in her eyes. She conjured a telekinetic force, shattering the glass walls of the greenhouse and hurling sharp shards and debris at the demon, momentarily stunning it.

Jordan, capitalizing on the momentary reprieve, launched herself at the creature. But the demon matched her blow for



blow, its twisted form proving unnaturally resilient. I could see her energy waning, her desperation growing.

The witches' chanting grew louder and they clustered together, pooling their collective magical abilities into a concentrated ball of energy. Screaming in unison, a haunting cry of anguish and guttural rage, they unleashed it on the demon. The energy collided with the creature, enveloping it in a blinding light. The demon shrieked in agony as its very essence began to disintegrate.

But the battle was not yet over. The demon's final act of defiance came in the form of an all-consuming explosion, engulfing the entire greenhouse in black, sulphuric smoke. Jordan and the rest of us were flung backward, bodies crashing against the cold, unforgiving ground.

As the dust settled I staggered to my feet, vision blurred. Ursula lay motionless beside me, her strength depleted by the battle. In front of me, Jordan had taken the brunt of the explosion and lay covered in a sheen of black ash, her hair singed at the tips.

Staggering on my feet, I walked toward the demon. Jeremy's body was nothing more than a gangly, blackened pile of flesh and bones, smoke billowing from his pores. But he was still moving, his demonic body reforming before my eyes. I lifted the dagger that had been flung from Jordan's hand and lifted it. As the demon raised its deformed head, I charged forward. With a wild, uncalculated strike, I thrust the dagger into the creature's heart.

A guttural scream echoed through the night as the demon convulsed, its grotesque form disintegrating into nothingness.

Silence settled over the scene, broken only by my labored breaths and the distant hum of the battle coming to an end outside. Moonlight glinted in the thousands of glass shards that littered the floor, refracting the silver beams all over the ruined greenhouse.

I sank to my knees, exhaustion washing over me. Beside me, Jordan stirred, her eyes fluttering open. Our gaze locked, and I closed the space between us. The battle was over. And we had won.

As the demonic entity dissolved the witches began to rise, dusting off their dresses and casting silvery powder over what remained of the monster's form. Jordan and I helped Ursula to her feet. The young witch's breath was ragged, her body trembling like a leaf.

"We did it," she murmured, tears pricking at her tired eyes. "We killed him."

"We did." Jordan touched a hand to the young witch's shoulder. "None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you, Ursula. From now on, the witches will always be recognized as friends."

She turned to face me, her eyes reflecting the depths of a love that I had come to understand deeply. "It's over," she whispered. "It's finally over."

The rest of the witches, having fulfilled their role in this battle, approached us. Their expressions held a mix of respect, admiration, and weary fatigue.

“The bonds of love and the strength of our alliance have prevailed,” the leader of the witches said, her voice carrying a sense of reverence. “We must join our sisters and end this war once and for all.”

With a nod of gratitude, Jordan thanked the witches for their aid. The tired woman climbed onto their branches, hovering in the air before flying back to the estate to finish the fight. From what we could see from our vantage point, the battle was all but over. Now it was just a matter of cleaning up the final stragglers.

Somewhere on the horizon, the sun was making an appearance, golden rays etching across the sky and dragging daybreak along with them.

Jordan and I leaned against each other, both of us disheveled and covered in scars, but alive. We watched the rising dawn peek through the shattered windows of the greenhouse. The warm glow of sunlight cast long shadows across the shimmering wreckage at our feet. It was a symbol of hope, a sign that the nightmarish ordeal was nearing its end.

But just as my heart swelled with the promise of a new day a growl reverberated from somewhere behind us. A lone shifter, caught halfway between a full transformation and fueled by a malevolent determination. His eyes burned with an unholy fire as he lunged toward us.

Without thinking, I pushed Jordan behind me, shielding her body with my own. The creature's claws swiped through the air, narrowly missing my face. But as I deflected the swift attack, a cold realization speared up my spine—the shifter had a large shard of glass clutched in his other hand.

Time seemed to slow as the monster's gnarled hand retracted, driving the shard forward with terrifying speed.

There was no time to move, no time to speak as the jagged weapon plunged into my chest, piercing my fluttering human heart.

# Chapter 27

## JORDAN

“No!” my scream of horror tore from my throat, a guttural cry of defiance against the sacrifice that I had not anticipated. “Sky, no!”

I reached out to catch my lover’s collapsing form, clutching her to my chest as her knees buckled beneath her.

Sky’s head lolled to the side, a spurt of blood bursting from her lips as she tried to speak.

“Jordan?” she choked out, her voice strained with the agony of her wound. She wanted to know what was happening to her. She wanted to know if she was going to die.

The shifter, grinning with sadistic satisfaction, ripped the glass shard from her chest, reveling in the finality of what was to be a very short-lived victory.

With a torrent of emotions consuming my being I lifted Sky in my arms, scrambling away from the monster while trying in vain to stem the steady flow of blood that pulsed from her wound.

As the shifter prepared to strike once more, a surge of energy erupted around us. The witches, having regrouped and drawn upon their last remaining powers, unleashed a wave of magic that swept through the building. The force of their combined spells obliterated the creature where he stood.

With the threat gone, I knelt to the ground with Sky in my arms. Weakly, hopelessly, I pressed my hand over the gash in her chest. Her dress was stained with blood, a blossoming red flower unfurling from her chest as her heart pumped the last of her life out between my fingers.

Tears streamed freely down my face as I cradled the woman's head with trembling hands. "You're going to be fine. Just hold on for a little longer, okay?"

Sky's rolling eyes focused on mine as she stilled in my arms. "I'm sorry. I would have liked to live a long life with you. Lifetimes even, if you'd have me."

"No, Sky," I sobbed, my voice wracked with anguish. "You're not going to die here. Okay? You made me a promise."

It was inconceivable—a life without the one woman I had come to care for more than anything. What good was a battle won if I didn't have my mate at my side? It was unthinkable, impossible. But it was happening, nonetheless. The universe had no concern for the suffering of those who occupied it.

Sky tried to smile, but her face contorted as she sobbed out her words. "I don't think I can keep that promise."

"No, no, Sky, please!" My voice quivered with despair. "You can't leave me. I won't let you go."

My bruised heart shattered as I cradled her fragile form in my arms. Blood soaked through my fingers, warm and crimson, as life ebbed away from my lover. Desperation

etched deep lines of anguish on Sky's face as she fought against the inevitability of her approaching death.

I raised my eyes to the witches who stood by, watching us. "Do something! You have magic, don't you? You have to help her!

"I'm sorry." Ursula wrung her hands at her sides, biting back her tears. "There is no magic that can turn back the clock."

Sky weakly lifted a hand, her fingers trembling as they brushed against my cheek. Her voice was a whisper, barely audible from her bloodless lips.

"I'm... so sorry, Jordan," Sky choked out, her breath shallow. "You're going to be a wonderful queen... I wish I could be there to see it."

My eyes blurred with tears as I pressed my lips against her forehead, a desperate gesture of love and longing. "Don't speak like that, my love. We'll find a way. It can't end like this... It just can't."

The scent of death hung heavy in the air. The long shadows cast by the mangled frame of the greenhouse seemed to reach for my lover, death's jagged hands grasping at her heels.

Somewhere deep inside of me, my vampiric instincts screamed to find sustenance, to drink the blood that would grant my strength. But my focus remained solely on Sky, unwilling to tear my eyes from hers.

As her life force waned, my mind raced for a solution. A way to reverse the damage. Something, anything. I would give



my own life if I had to.

And then it hit me—an audacious, desperate plan that held the potential to save my mate, to bind us together in a way that surpassed mortality.

I pressed my forehead against Sky's, closing my eyes as I breathed in her scent. "No matter what happens, know that I love you. That I will always love you."

Sky's breathing was labored, her words slurred as she embraced my touch. "I have loved you from the day I laid eyes on you. I have loved you all my life, and I have loved you long before my very existence."

"Then I need you to trust me now." I pressed my lips to the pale column of Sky's neck. My fangs elongated, piercing the delicate flesh, and I began to drink, drawing forth the lifeblood that pulsed within my lover's veins.

A mingling of emotions flooded my senses—love, fear, and an overwhelming desire to save the woman who meant the world to me.

Something new had been awakened inside me as my fangs sank into the woman's flesh. The mating bond, fully consummated.

Our past, present, and future mingled, braided together in an elaborate tapestry, binding us to one another in an unbreakable bond.

And with that forged bond came a new surge of power, the bone shattering power of a vampire queen coming into her

own.

Sky convulsed in my arms, a mix of pain and ecstasy contorting her features. I poured every ounce of my newfound power, all of my love, my devotion, my very essence, into the woman I loved unconditionally.

With each beat of my heart, I willed the transformation to take hold. The venom that flowed from my fangs mingled with the blood that now coursed through Sky's veins, a potent elixir of life and death. My grip tightened on Sky, her body trembling with the effort to infuse her with her own immortality.

Minutes stretched into an eternity as I kept my hold on my lover's throat. Sky's body writhed and convulsed, her pale skin flushed with newfound vitality. I held on tightly, praying that the bond we shared, forged through love and sacrifice, would be enough to bring her back from the brink.

And in my mind, I spoke to her, my twin flame, hoping that somehow, through the tie of our mating bond, she could hear me.

*Come back to me. It can't end like this.*

*Come back to me.*

# Chapter 28

## SKY

My consciousness danced in a realm of ethereal dreams, where shadows shifted and twisted, and the air was thick with strange energy. I found myself in a darkened labyrinth, my steps hesitant and unsure. Fear whispered through my veins as I called out for anyone, anything. Names I couldn't remember and faces I couldn't place, my voice swallowed by the vast emptiness.

But then, a flicker of light appeared in the distance, growing brighter with each passing moment. A figure emerged from the shadows, a woman with a familiar silhouette—a graceful stature that I remembered somehow. The dream woman moved with otherworldly grace, red hair billowing over her shoulders as she reached for me.

“Come back,” she stated plainly, although I wasn't sure what she meant. I had no idea where I was, I didn't know my own name.

“Come back,” the woman said again, her words echoing through the labyrinth. “Come home.”

The dream woman's hand reached out, her fingers brushing against my own. Warmth spread up my arm, pulsing through my body, an inexplicable connection forming between us. I felt a flicker of recognition at the woman's touch, but it was fleeting.

“Where is home?” I asked as the woman guided me through the labyrinth, her bare feet barely touching the ground as she moved. “Where are we going?”

With a sudden tug, the dream woman pulled me upwards. The labyrinth morphed before my eyes, twisting and curling into oblivion as I was pulled through an invisible barrier by the woman’s guiding hand.

Breaking through the darkness, my eyes flew open. I was lying on my back, my head propped up on something soft, warm, and familiar.

Confusion mingled with faint panic as I took in my surroundings. Brilliant sunlight beat down on my face, warming my unusually cold skin. My eyes focused on the face that hovered above me, red hair tumbling down on either side like a veil. Jordan’s features became clear, my mate, who watched me with tender concern.

Her voice, filled with both relief and trepidation, broke the silence. “You’re awake.”

My eyes widened, the memory of the dream already hazy. But the memory of what had happened before that—the battle, the werewolf, the shard of glass piercing my heart, all came rushing back. “What happened?” I struggled to sit upright, examining my chest for the terrible bloody wound. But the skin of my chest was smooth, visible through the gash in my stained red gown.

I glanced down at my hands, noticing the subtle changes—paler skin, veins beneath the surface pulsing with newfound

vitality. The realization dawned slowly. “I don’t understand... I was dying—I was dead.”

I touched my fingers to the side of my neck, feeling two small dents in the soft flesh beneath.

Tears welled in Jordan’s eyes as she closed her hand over mine, our skin now an identical shade of ivory.

“I did this... for us,” Jordan murmured, her voice trembling with raw emotion. “I couldn’t bear to lose you. I’m sorry. I know it was selfish of me but I couldn’t—”

I closed the distance between us, my heart swelling with gratitude, warmth and unconditional love as I pressed my lips to hers. The scent of my mate enveloped me, far more apparent with my heightened senses.

“Don’t ever apologize for this,” I whispered, my voice filled with a profound depth of emotion. “You’ve given me a gift more precious than gold. Now I can live by your side forever.”

Jordan’s arms tightened around me, relief coaxing tears from her eyes. Our lips met in a tender kiss, sealing the eternal bond that shimmered between us. The world around us fell away, leaving only an undying love and the promise of a future forever intertwined.

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“Watch it, you’re going to bite my finger off.” Jordan yanked her index out of my mouth, rolling away under the covers. “Dear god, I’ve created a monster!”

Giggling as I dove under the blankets after her, I flashed my baby fangs, playfully nipping at her shoulder. Jordan played along, grappling with me as we tumbled around the bed. I had only been a vampire for a few days by then, freshly turned, and still riding the high of the experience.

My eyes had remained a deep crimson since that day in the greenhouse when Jordan bit me. Apparently I was experiencing the euphoria of the turning, something that gave me increased strength, heightened senses and a crippling thirst. Luckily, Jordan had stocked up on plenty of vampire liquor and I had spent the first week after the battle in a drunken stupor.

We had holed up in Jordan's apartment while the estate was rebuilt. Sigrid and the twins were living with the witches until their home was ready for them, something Ursula had been incredibly pleased about and Sigrid had not.

I had just managed to pin Jordan beneath me, reveling in my new vampiric strength when a new urge took hold.

I shimmied my way down Jordan's stomach, heightened senses picking up on the steady thump of her heart and the tantalizing taste of her skin.

"Tell me how it feels." Jordan's breath caught in her throat when my hand slid up her calf. "I've been a vampire all my life. I've never experienced the switch from human to newborn bloodsucker."

"It's overwhelming," I murmured, leaning toward her to wrap my fingers around her leg and hold her still as my mouth

found her skin. “I can feel everything more intensely than before. Every taste, touch... It’s like waking up from a very long dream.”

My lips were cool against her skin and Jordan moaned softly as my tongue traced a short path up the soft flesh of her inner thigh.

I took care to be gentle as I moved closer to her center, my hand sliding up her thigh to cup her ass. Never before had I needed to worry about hurting my beloved. But now, I could feel new strength rippling in my muscles, and it took concentration to move gently, keeping my cool caresses light and teasing when I could quite literally snap her in half if I was of a mind to do so.

This was how Jordan must have felt with me, even more so considering my fragile human form which she had navigated so carefully, something which had never been so apparent since I had come into vampiric power of my own.

I had to wonder how I had once managed to put that aspect of vampires, the dangerous part of my lover, out of my mind for so long. Was it so easy to forget?

Maybe it was, and maybe that was love, I thought while my lips brushed down over her mound and my tongue flicked lightly at the exposed and apparently incredibly sensitive nub of flesh beneath. Jordan gasped and reached down to clasp the back of my head as I wrapped my arms around her thighs and pulled her closer.



Powered by an urge I had yet to learn to control, I wasted no more time with teasing and my mouth moved to cover her sex completely, my probing tongue dipping deep between the folds. Jordan let out a gasp and immediately tilted her hips to allow me better access.

Only when her hips were bucking beneath me and her body wracked in the thrall of an orgasm, did I tear my mouth away from her. “You taste better than before. Like wow, why didn’t you turn me sooner?”

Jordan laughed between gasps and I released her, moving to lie beside her twitching, satiated body. Gathering her up in my arms I brushed my lips against hers, losing myself in her tousled red hair.

The first rays of dawn illuminated our tangled embrace, the world outside awakened to a new day. My body felt strong, different, able to match Jordan and sometimes even surpass her.

But I wasn’t afraid of this change, I welcomed it.

In Jordan’s arms, I knew I would always find solace, passion, and a love that defied the boundaries of time.

# Chapter 29

# JORDAN

A year had gone by in what felt like days.

From the roof of my apartment, the fireworks show was a gorgeous affair. My eyes traced each burst of light and color, following pinwheels as they faded into the black of the night sky. Below, New York was celebrating the new year, and thumping music could be heard from all corners of the city.

So much had changed since that fateful night when I first found Sky. So much had been set into motion because of that brief but powerful encounter.

These days, since coming into my power, nobody dared question my rule. The Leyore Coven was more stable than ever, and slowly mending their bond with our witchy companions.

My throne was further solidified at the discovery of a letter.

As it turned out, Alberich had left something behind. A letter, written with the intention of setting things right after he and his lover planned to escape the city. Alberich had clearly stated that he intended for me to take over the throne, a revelation in writing that had brought tears to my eyes the first time I read those words.

In stark contrast to the events of the previous year, things could not have gone better. The High Stakes business was thriving more than ever, and both Maxine and Hunter would

not shut up about it. Unfortunately, their bickering in the office hadn't changed, and everyone knew to stay out of their way when those two butted heads.

We were also happy to hear that Sky's mother was doing better, meaning I would finally get a chance to meet the woman. While this was something to celebrate, we would have to work on some elaborate cover story to explain Sky's month-long absence during her transformation period.

Not to mention an explanation for the fact that the woman's daughter was now a fully-fledged vampire. But we would cross that bridge when we got to it.

I was pulled from my musing by two long arms wrapping around my shoulders. Sky, with her baby fangs, pretended to clamp down on the side of my neck. "Got you," she murmured, her words muffled against my skin.

"Oh no!" I leaned against her, tilting my head back as another burst of fireworks careered across the sky. "A bloodthirsty vampire! What big teeth you have."

"Not funny." Sky sulked, propping her chin on my shoulder to watch the light show.

For reasons neither of us could understand, Sky's fangs had remained tiny, barely competing with the emerging canines that the twins donned these days.

She could still bite just fine, the many puncture wounds on my body were a testament to that, but they remained little pin pricks in her mouth, only just visible from beneath her lips.

Needless to say, River and Dylan took great pleasure in teasing her for them.

“Maybe you’re a different kind of vampire?” I teased, tilting my head to kiss her cheek. “Maybe you’re a fruit-bat kind of vamp. Those baby teeth could suck the life right out of an unsuspecting apple.”

“Maybe I should toss you off this balcony.” Sky rolled her eyes, but her arms tightened around me and she turned her head to kiss me back. “You know, in all my years this was not where I saw myself ending up.”

“Are you complaining?” I watched her expression from the corner of my eye as the crowds below us began the new year countdown. “If you knew then what you know now, would you have done things differently?”

Sky leaned her cheek against mine, swaying our bodies in time with the warbling music that erupted from the windows of a nearby building. The countdown came to an end, ushering in a new year with another volley of fireworks that lit up the sky.

“I would do it all over again,” Sky murmured, her eyes fixed on the night sky and the flickering lights. “In fact, If I had to redo it, I would have set out to find you first.”

With a lump in my throat I leaned into her embrace, blinking back tears with a loud sniff. “Aren’t we supposed to kiss now? We missed the countdown!”

Sky needed no more coaxing, twisting me in her arms. “We’ll get it right next year. And the year after that, and the year after that.”

She pressed her lips to mine as the sky above us exploded with dazzling lights.

When we finally broke apart Sky held me close, her eyes reflecting the sparkling display of lights above us. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my very long life with you.”

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Not over Jordan and Sky? Want a glimpse into their future as they enjoy a family day with Ursula unsuspectingly roped into managing the twins? Pick up their bonus epilogue here: <https://geni.us/rce2lmO>

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# About Chloe Peterson

Chloe Peterson is the author of heartfelt women-loving women fiction. She loves writing stories that celebrate the diversity of the LGBT community. Chloe relaxes by watching home building shows and reading fan fiction.

To stay up to date with new releases, join her mailing list here: <https://geni.us/gmiXnp>