



MARKED  
BLOOD

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ALEXA H. MICHAELS

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# Dedication

Once upon a time, I was team Edward. That was years ago.

I've since come to realize heroes would sacrifice you for the greater good, even as their hearts break to do it.

Villains, on the other hand, aren't driven by such notions. When you become the obsession of a morally grey soul...Fate help you, you lucky person!

Like so many, I've outgrown the sparkles and gone to the dark side.

Will you join me?





## Author's Note

Dear reader,

This is a dark, paranormal romance. The male main character is a villain, and the female main character isn't above unaliving monsters. In fact, that is what she has been trained to do. If you're looking for a safe read with traditional heroics, I caution you. It's not to be found here.

*Marked Blood* contains mature and graphic content that is not suitable for all audiences. **Reader discretion is advised.** Vampires and hunters don't mix well—not to mention the other creepy crawlies in the world. Don't even get me started what humans are capable of.

Now! If you're like me, and love a bad boy & a kick-ass girl, flip the page and let the action begin.

Xoxo,

Alexa



# Chapter 1 – Lennox

“When you’re done cleaning up your supper, you can mop the floor in the basement,” Captain said, not even looking up from his newspaper.

My molars threatened to crack from the pressure of keeping my mouth shut.

“There’s blood *everywhere*,” Gage added with forced dramatization, “but you’ll probably want to sweep what you can first before getting the mop out. We took some chunks out of it.”

*How much longer is this hazing going to last?* I took some deep breaths. An explosion would be a red mark on my official record, and Fate knew I couldn’t afford any more of those. As the new member to their team, some teasing or ribbing was expected, but this misogynistic, macho bullshit? I hadn’t been here long and it was already getting old. These three pricks sitting around the plastic folding table deserved a little ass kicking.

“Permission to go on a hunt tonight, sir,” I clipped out, addressing the leader of this backcountry squad.

Captain didn’t even flick a glance in my direction. “We’re not hunting tonight, newbie. We caught a critter last night. Wasn’t too hard, either.”

“It’s like they’re getting lazier and lazier,” Fox snorted. “This one damn near walked into our arms.”

Something about that sentiment prickled. And not just because I’d been excluded last night as well. Any of the field work I’d done at the academy, any of the material I read, said monsters didn’t come to us. Ever. Hunters were feared by the supernaturals. A proud tradition I was more than ready to carry.

“It was a vampire, right?” I asked carefully.

“Fangs and everything, baby.” Fox leaned his elbows on the table. “Don’t worry, it’s tied up real tight. We can’t let an

abomination take a bite outta your sweet flesh.”

There were sixty-two ways I could kill Fox in this moment. Ten more if I was armed with a gun instead of blades.

“Respectfully, sir, protocol states that a prisoner should be guarded at all times—”

“Candy,” Captain snapped and laid his newspaper down. “What you learned at the academy and how the Guild operates in the real world are two completely different things. The sooner you get that through that pretty little head of yours, the better.”

I swallowed and gave him a tight nod. There was no point correcting the absurd nickname the others had given me. My assigned name for the time being was Candace. That was what these Neanderthals should have been calling me.

“Good.” Captain pushed to his feet and picked up his plate. At least he was going to bring the dishes to the sink. He stopped before passing me. “Look, you’re not missing much. As soon as we get the monster to give us its name, run it through the database at HQ to ensure it’s not some monster they’re interested in—which it won’t be, they never are—then we kill the vamp and move on. It’s not glamorous. This is war, Candy. We scrape by every day against the forces of darkness.”

That was the most my superior officer had spoken to me since I arrived in New Orleans.

“Understood,” I said. The lie felt like sandpaper in my mouth.

I would never understand how outposts like this were allowed to operate. It was eye-opening to say the least. When my penance was done and I was allowed to return to the Manhattan hub, fondly known as HQ, I would make a point of bringing this to the attention of the higher ups in the Guild. Small groups of hunters like this, stationed far away from HQ, were a weakness the Guild of Hunters couldn’t afford.

*Maybe being falsely accused has a silver lining.* I slammed down on that thought and grabbed the rest of the disposable plates off the table. Nothing was worth that red mark on my record. There was no easy way to scrub it, either. Not without sweat and blood equity, which was exactly what I planned to do here.

But it was hard to gain a fearsome reputation as a hunter when the inbred idiots looked at me as their personal maid. I'd overseen setting up the temporary safe house here. They'd been more interested in making it comfortable instead of making it secure and efficient for hunting. I should have put pests in their sleeper cots, but I wouldn't want the infestation to move to my small room.

Fox and Gage sauntered from the room, and their voices were cut off with the banging of the front door. Captain was already upstairs, doing whatever it was he did in his downtime. From the smell of him, it had a lot to do with cheap gin.

Looking around the foreclosed home, I let out a long breath. Stay here, do my job well enough to earn recognition, and then get the hell out. It was simple. And yet so damn hard.

Ten minutes later, the kitchen looked as though we'd never been here. I jogged down to the *basement*, which in New Orleans meant the ground floor for this style of house. Most dwellings didn't have proper basements, unless the owners were in touch with the supernatural community and enchanted them against flooding. This level was sun-proofed—all my handy work from 3 a.m. when the hunters told me we'd have a transport coming in. Of course, I wasn't invited to participate in any of the real work since they backed the van up to the backdoor of the cinderblock basement right before dawn.

As the stairs creaked under my weight, I peered past the aperture. There was one flood light that cast a disjointed illumination over the open space. The cage was right where I'd constructed it. Chained to the thick pole in the center was a massive figure.

This vampire didn't look distinctly different from others I'd seen as a trainee. This was a big one, tall and broad. I considered the brute for a moment. Whatever idea had flickered in my mind, it fizzled out just as quickly. What was I hoping? That I could be the one to get the creature to talk?

*Hey! That's not a bad idea....* So long as these backwoods pricks didn't claim the success as their own. I ground my teeth.

There were spots of dried mud from the hunters' boots. Grabbing the push broom, I began to sweep the mess. The ground around the cage was still sticky with coagulating blood and water. It pooled at the central drain, stagnant and gross.

"Great, the pipe's blocked," I muttered. Filling a bucket with bleach and tepid water, I set about mopping the floor. Whatever clothing the monster had been wearing was already in the trash bags heaped against the far wall. At least these lazy hunters were efficient in their clean up protocol.

All the while, I flicked side glances at the cage. There was no movement. The vampire stood there, straight and tall. But those eyes, they were trained on a spot in the floor. No show of emotion clued me in to any thoughts in that head. The creature was probably too stupid to realize what was happening, because the statuesque countenance looked...bored. It wasn't fair that nature gave such artistically beautiful lines to a feral creature such as this. Hell, the humans deified these, sculpting them in marble to immortalize their supposed virtues. Other than the soft rise and fall of the vampire's chest, this one could have been a piece of warmed marble.

Once the floor was as sterilized as it was going to get with the blocked floor drain, I emptied the mop bucket into the sink. Soaking up the moisture on the floor and pouring it down the utility sink's drain wasn't efficient, but I didn't plan to fix the floor drain unless directly ordered to. Apparently, my groveling during this time of penance had its limits after all. With a sigh, I pulled the cleaning supplies to the far corner.

A shower called my name. On my way to the stairs, I paused by one of the two plastic tables. My fingers ran over

the implements of torture of their own accord, a realization dawning. I picked up a twisted razor and twirled it between my fingers.

Still no movement.

*I see how it is.* This beast of a specimen didn't fear these. No, to crack this one, the tormentor would have to get inside that thick skull and mess the vamp up on a psychological level. That was something I could do.

Turning, I moved within a few feet of the cage. Feet spread, I slipped my hands into the pockets of my black fighting pants.

“What's your name?” I asked, tone casual.

Nothing. Not even a shiver of movement in the tiny facial muscles.

This was...strange. Most vampires fought against their bindings. Like animals, they could sense their impending doom and struggled to continue their grotesque existence. Maybe there was something wrong with the vamp?

“Come on, I won't bite,” I offered, laughing inwardly at my own joke. “I can fix everything if you just tell me your name—or names, if you've used multiple over the years.”

The seconds ticked by, turning into minutes.

I studied the creature openly. *Fate!* The height and build of this one. But it was more than stature. The combination of an olive complexion that wasn't even paling from blood loss and muscles that could only be shaped by time in the weight room—dangerously handsome. This one could easily deceive anyone into thinking he was a delectable hunk of muscle. Nothing worse than a one-night fling turning into getting drained like a juice box.

Absently thinking of some better way to phrase what I wanted to say, I ran my tongue over my lips. I didn't even know I was doing it until there was a flash of movement. Those dark eyes lifted and focused on my mouth. Tongue back behind closed lips, I froze.



The beast was awake—conscious and alive after all.

A familiar buzz shivered through every fiber of my being. The warrior in me roared to the challenge.

Slowly, the vampire drug his gaze upward. Until it met mine.

Deep eyes, the color of whiskey in a barrel, stared back. A predator, ready for battle. The expressionless void was all a façade. There was a wild energy pulsing dangerously in those depths. A statue come to life—a tempest contained behind that seemingly cool, marble-like exterior.

I didn't tremble with *fear*. I was a hunter.

Something else slithered through me. Some strange and unfamiliar energy, similar to the desire to fight, but different somehow.

Before I could identify the flickering buzz, the door to the kitchen opened. Heavy, booted footfall clattered down the steps. The vampire held my gaze for a heartbeat longer before dropping its focus back to the spot on the ground, the cool mask of indifference slamming back over his features.

I cursed softly and spun on my heel to meet the intruder. *I had it!* Just a few more minutes and I could have had a godsdamned name!

“Captain,” I clipped out. “The floor pipe is clogged, and the pool of filth won't drain.”

Letting out a gruff bark of displeasure, the captain approached. “I'll have Fox and Gage run a snake down it first thing in the morning. If we can't get it cleared, we'll have to figure something out.”

“There's plenty of bleach to destroy the creature's blood,” I said, thinking aloud.

“Yes, yes, good work.” The captain scrubbed a hand over his face. “Why don't you get up to bed, Candy. We're not going to do anymore work today.”

The protest was on the tip of my tongue, but the captain shot me a level look. “That's an order, newbie. Vampires are

creatures of the night. The dawn will bring grogginess, and we can work him over then.”

I swept a glance over the beast. “I don’t mind staying up, sir.”

“Laudable. But stupid. This one’s already healed. After the number Gage did, the monster should be struggling to heal the scars. And look, the chains aren’t affecting it at all. No—time is our friend, Candy.”

“Wear it out,” I surmised.

“Exactly.” Captain ushered his hand for me to return upstairs.

There was nothing else to do but obey.

~\*~

I sat up in bed with a sharp gasp. The air filled my lungs but did nothing to calm my racing pulse. A chill prickled my skin. I tuned my senses into the surroundings. The soft noises of the house and the creeks and groans from the wind beyond the walls didn’t reveal too ghastly of secrets. Old houses talked, and I knew how to listen. There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary or even threatening.

Still, I couldn’t shake the icy feeling twisting my guts. My hearing was better than a human’s and my sight keener, the web of spells inked into my skin over the years to mold me into the hunter I was. Technically, I kept my humanity through the transformative years, but I was honed into a force of nature, shaped strong enough to go toe-to-toe with supernatural beings.

“Quit being silly,” I whispered. The unseen glyphs inked into my skin were quiet. No, if there was danger, they would have screamed in a way that couldn’t be ignored.

I rose from the bed, and in the pale shaft of moonlight, grabbed my flask of water to look over the front drive and street. It was easier to pretend I was unshakeable when I wasn’t alone.

Nothing raised an alarm. This was a quiet neighborhood of lower middle-class homes all built mid twentieth century. The streetlights that worked were on, the houses dark with sleep. I took a long drink of water. With a sigh, I swiped the back of my hand over my upper lip. Known as the Crescent City to the locals, New Orleans lay out there, a famous and historic city, waiting for me to explore.

“With all this spare time on my hands,” I said bitterly. If I wasn’t going to do the one thing I was trained—that I was *bred*—to do, then screw it, I might as well be a regular human!

My short laugh died on my lips. A flutter of air brushed against my back. The fine baby hairs along my bare shoulders raised.

Something was there.

I spun about and met the dark room. The *empty* room.

Snatching the knife off the broken, antique chair next to my portable cot, I stalked to the closet. The door didn’t latch, so I ripped it open in one smooth move. Nothing, save the backpack of supplies I kept packed at all times, ready for immediate evacuation should this safe house be compromised.

A creeping, haunted feeling had me turning slowly to face the camping cot. My back had been to the room! I peered at it, squatting to see under the cot. As with light, there were bends and bows to the way of darkness, but no solid shape shifted to catch my attention. Only the book I’d been reading before passing out. It must have fallen off the chair I used in place of a nightstand.

“Oh, whatever,” I muttered, flinging my closed flask over to the cot. I moved to the door and reached for the knob.

It wasn’t locked.

I frowned. I could have sworn I locked it before lying down.

Of course, I’d been fuming over this whole shitty situation, so I could have slipped up and not locked myself in for the night. Thankfully, the other two intoxicated hunters had

bumbled to their beds and not tried to force their way in here. Captain was already long passed out.

I hurried into the hall and shut myself in the dingy little bathroom. The tile was cold and slimy against my bare feet. Cringing, I squatted over the porcelain and took care of business. After swiping the seat, I washed my hands, lathering the soap longer than necessary. Most of the drops were from the male hunters, but I wouldn't be accused of making a mess. There were enough problems being the only girl in this misogynistic hell without adding more.

The door creaked open as I exited but before I stepped back to my room, I looked down the hall, peering into the gloom far longer than I should have. There was no movement on this level or the main floor. With the distance, it was hard to hear noises beyond that.

The vampire was down there.

I could go to the basement. The others would never know.

After weighing the risk and rewards, I was about to do it when I heard Gage lumber from his cot. Scuttling away, I fled to my room instead of rushing downstairs, which would have meant passing the door he was opening.

He was wasted enough not to notice my door was cracked open and I was spying through the aperture.

*What a useless bunch of drunks.* I closed the door and pressed my forehead against the wood. I'd been with them a week and the truth was glaringly obvious. This place was my own personal hell. Why—why did I have to do stupid things? And get caught. Right before graduation!

The head instructor of the academy for hunters wasn't a female to be trifled with. And I was going to pay dearly. Meanwhile, the best of my classmates were all in New York, the epicenter for our struggle with the vampires. Even the B students were stationed better than me.

“Fuck my life,” I muttered and turned back to bed. I would fix this. I would rise from this swampy pit of degeneration that I'd been banished to and return to triumph in the real glory.



## Chapter 2 – Lennox

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you, miss,” the woman behind the counter said. “We sell the paperbacks unboxed from the supplier. If there was a mark in your book, it was either there before we got it or it happened at your place.”

I chewed on what she was saying. The convenience store had the basic supplies, and only a few aisles. The woman was the same that had been behind the counter yesterday and the day before. She claimed to watch the store and that it wasn’t possible someone had underlined sentences in my book without her noticing.

“Is it possible someone at your residence messed with the book?” she pressed, tapping her fingers against the scuffed, albeit clean counter.

Since I’d only gotten the book yesterday on the food run, and the guys didn’t know it was hiding up in my room, the likelihood that one of my fellow hunters had defaced my spicy, guilty pleasure was next to impossible. I’d read late into the night and none of the pages to that point had been marked. The good stuff was only beginning to happen as I’d reluctantly closed my eyes. Come this morning, as I read with a cup of coffee on the front porch, the smuttiest descriptions were underlined with black ink.

My arms prickled with the ghostly memory of the spectral presence in my room late last night.

With a shake of my head, I forced down silly thoughts, but I moved wrong and my left side pulsed painfully. The sparring session with the other hunters had ended with me thrown into a doorframe. The rib wasn’t broken, but that didn’t mean I could draw a full breath.

“It must have come from the supplier this way,” I muttered, tossing the book into my basket.

The woman gave me a thin smile and pulled at the buttons on her dress. The collar was high, and barely any of her caramel skin was showing, while not a whisp of the dark

brown hair was out of the tight bun. It was easy to assume she didn't approve of the book I was going to finish reading, but I pushed the unkind thought away. Modesty didn't equate closemindedness.

I wandered down the aisle, reaching automatically for a boxed pasta abomination that had the gall to claim Italian authenticity. Since we were on a hideout and keeping a tight radius of activity, I couldn't wander far to fetch real ingredients at a market or grocery. When we were done with the safe house, I could go into the city for a proper Italian meal. Delight shivered down my spine. It was so good to be out of the academy. I could really see myself thriving here even with a tight leash.

The call to freedom wasn't strong enough to risk messing up while we had a prisoner. *But the guys can go drink at a dive bar.* I rolled my eyes. Well, it wouldn't be said that I didn't follow protocol to the letter.

The door chimed.

I placed the frozen meat in my basket and stepped behind an endcap to observe the newcomers. A pair of tough looking street dwellers entered. They seemed human, but their stench mixed with the tingle from my glyph told me they weren't. I flexed my fingers and waited. There was nothing to mark them as supernatural because these were form changers. Unlike glamoured beings, their true forms couldn't be seen until they changed shape. If they'd simply cast a concealment glamour, the spells I wore would have allowed me to see through it.

A regular human, however, would only see the squat, gummy-featured males. Even if a human had the Sight, there was no way for them to distinguish a form-changed being from any other humanoid. Most humans, unfortunately, were blind to the supernatural world around them. A genetic disadvantage; they could look right at a siv in its true form and never know an amphibian monster was sizing them up for a meal. Unlike the majority of my fellow hunters in the Guild, I was all for humans having the Sight. They deserved to know what they were up against.

“There’s a chick in the back,” the taller of the two hissed.

I fidgeted with the cooler door, letting them think I wasn’t listening.

“Alright, we’ll make this quick,” the other muttered to the shopkeeper. “We have a message from your boy. He says he’s messed up big—and he has.”

“How much does he owe this time?” the woman whispered, panic lacing her voice.

“Forty large.”

The woman gasped. “I’ll have to mortgage my store.”

“That’s not our problem—”

“What about those pearls you own?” the taller thug asked.

“They’re not for sale,” she ground out.

“Well, boss doesn’t care how you get the money, only that you do.”

“But her pearls are from a kraken’s hoard. The little twit Anton said so himself,” the taller insisted.

“My son ought not to be speaking of such things,” she said quickly. “I’ll have the money by tomorrow at close.”

“See that you do. We wouldn’t want to cause any... unpleasantness.”

The brutes shuffled out of the store.

The poor shopkeeper. To be harassed by such ilk! This was what I loved about being a hunter, we protected humans like her from monsters like them. I didn’t risk a glance over my shoulder but closed the freezer door and wandered down another aisle. I threw in a bag of corn chips, which I would eat on the way back. If Fox could order an energy drink, then I could spend his money on treats for myself and claim the price went up on the sugary beverage.

Ignoring the twinge over my ribs, I lifted and set the basket on the counter and met the woman’s gaze.



“The second book in the series is about the warrior Rhage, who’s possessed by a beast,” the woman said, pointing at the shelf. Her finger didn’t tremble, but there was a forced quality to her speech. “Why don’t you take it with you, to make up for the damaged first book.”

The kind gesture settled a decision I was weighing. Being a hunter was an act of deception. Unless I revealed myself, there was no reason to suspect I wasn’t just one of the blind, ignorant mass of humans I’d been born into, but never allowed to grow up as. I chose not to appear blind now.

“I’ll buy it; you need every cent you can muster,” I said quietly.

“You heard that? From across the store?”

Nodding, I retreated a few steps and grabbed the novel. The truth was, I was dying to read anything and everything out here beyond the walls of the academy, where possessing one of these was punishable by a severe lashing.

Coming back to the wide-eyed woman, I gave her a tight smile. “They were siv, weren’t they? You can smell the bog no matter how strong a perfume the swamp vermin wear.”

“But...you’re human.” The woman looked me up and down. “Have you been gifted the Sight?”

“Something like that.” It was safer for her if she thought I was a mere mortal with the ability to see the supernatural world rather than the truth—a magically altered human, built to fight supernaturals. “Either way, what I can and can’t see isn’t the problem. Your son’s gambling is.”

She pulled her spine up straight. “I’ll deal with it. This isn’t the first time the Rotten Leaf Clan has lured my son into their gambling dens.”

I laid the bills on the counter, with exact coinage to make the total. “There are those of us who can help.”

“There’s no helping us,” she sighed.

Protests bubbled inside. I needed to make her see that she was wrong about that. Not being an eloquent speaker, I

debated how best to tell her there was hope while keeping the presence of the Guild in this city a secret. “We humans have to stick together. Only then can we stand a chance against the vile monsters preying on us.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Idealistic, aren’t you.”

“I think if we—”

“No, there’s no *we*. I’ll deal with this on my own. The best thing you can do is forget what you saw and heard here today.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the woman held up her hand. Sensing the growing irritation of the shopkeeper, I huffed. “Fine, I just wanted to help.”

“Perhaps you should worry about your own haunting, if you’ve some involvement in the supernatural world,” she said without much kindness as she tapped the marked first book. “Books don’t mark themselves, dearie.”

On that morose note, she scooped my items into two paper sacks. Without another word, I left the shop. The situation didn’t sit well with me, but right now, I couldn’t see a good course of action.



## Chapter 3 – Lennox

If I wasn't going to be allowed to question the monster or go out hunting, I wanted to explore. Brought up in the academy and only exposed to Guild families, the outside world had only been alive in my mind. No matter how vivid the descriptions, it wasn't the same as to experience it firsthand. The sounds, smells, and tastes of New Orleans beckoned.

And the mop in my hand was sopping with the endless task of scooping sludge and foul water to wring in the bucket before collecting more. The bucket, once full, gurgled and threatened to clog the utility sink, so Captain told me to pitch it out the back door. With my luck, a nosey neighbor would stop over, even though it was well after ten and pitch black without the presence of the new moon.

I paused to change the song on my phone, which rested on the worktable. The new song filtered through my wireless headphones. The vampire was stoney, gaze locked on the floor. I snuck a methodical glance as I passed his cage. The color of his skin looked less healthy, the glow of the olive complexion all but gone. With the ventilation Captain and Gage had rigged, the chemical smell of the bleach mingling with the vampire's blood wasn't too overpowering. But there was a lot more blood staining the floor.

If the creature would talk, we could find out if he was of interest to the Guild. Their special team would collect the monster and more sophisticated methods of information extraction would be employed.

I still wasn't resigned to be useless. I'd even gone as far as to acquire a vial of chicken blood, an easy item to find at the local occult shop, which was a few houses down, in fact. The garage had been converted to a semi legal business to attract human tourists.

But I wasn't sure about using it. Such an act of disobedience wouldn't fare well if I was caught. The scenario played out in my mind and there were too many variables. Unless I was sure I could control the situation, the blood was a

bad idea. Again, there'd been no movement from the vampire, so I mopped and plotted. The songs shuffled again as I pushed the lever to squeeze the mop. Whoever the genius was who put Sean Paul and Shaggy together needed one of those awards at a red-carpet event.

Careful of my damaged side, which was bruising beautifully under my tight-fitting combat shirt, I rolled my hips to the beat. At the academy, we'd found contraband devices to watch dance videos, my friend and I. In a secret room, hidden by the forgetful memories of the academy staff, we memorized routines. Dancing was as close to my heart as breathing. No amount of bodily soreness was going to stop me.

I loved it.

Shooting a quick glance at the vampire, who wasn't watching anyhow, I rocked and swayed my body to the beat. Smiling at his back, I wondered what he'd do if he noticed. The animal probably couldn't tell dancing apart from more bestial movements like walking, mating, or eating. Something like a waltz would *really* confuse the poor monster.

The song finished all too quickly, and I dropped the mop to tug the bucket to the back. Now my side hurt in earnest. If I let the bucket get heavier, I wouldn't be able to heft it through the back door. No sense spilling and having more of a mess to clean. As I came around the side, I watched the vampire. Those predatory eyes were still closed. What I was looking for was hard to say. Any secret the monster possessed was secure behind the stoney exterior. The sharp profile and strong jaw could easily deceive someone less careful. No doubt the wicked maw would happily clamp around my throat and drain me.

*I bet his victims died happy.* That random thought accompanied a pulse that shot like an arrow of heat straight through me.

In a flash, the brute opened those eyes and pinned me with a look. "Don't stop on my account."

The light steps I'd been taking in time with the music faltered. Two days, and the vampire hadn't spoken a word. Resignation to the torment we caused it.

I stilled, meeting the challenge head on. Memory didn't do the visage justice. This monster was *terrible*.

But now something twitched in the corners of his mouth. "You know, you could dance for me."

Heat flashed through me, settling deep in my belly. It was automatic. *What the hell? Did I just—* Anger flared quickly at the traitorous reaction.

"Pig," I snapped, taking the bait before thinking better of it.

*Get it together!* The vampire was talking. And I was acting like a flirty little girl!

Pulling my shoulders back, I stepped forward, dragging the broom. "So...you're capable of speech after all," I pressed.

"Aren't you supposed to interrogate me with a fellow hunter?" The vampire tipped his head to the side. "The almighty protocol developed from the even more celestial code?"

I stepped right to his cage to show him who was in charge. The protocol be damned for a moment. If the lazy shits at this outpost wouldn't abide by it, neither would I for a moment.

"What's your name?" I demanded.

"Oh, no, little one, that's not how we're going to play this game." Something flashed deep in those dark eyes. Something forbidden, and perhaps a touch cruel.

"Come on, it won't hurt to tell me."

"You think this is my first encounter with the mighty Guild of Livian Hunters?" The vampire snorted. "You think you're the first female hunter sent to entice secrets from a vampire, *bella donna?*"

*Beautiful woman.* I bristled.

Recognizing the trigger, I took some deep breaths to keep a clear head. “Color me impressed that you have knowledge about the Guild.”

The vampire snorted. “Your thorough indoctrination is a credit to your excellent training.”

“Excuse me?”

“The Guild taught you that I am a monster—brutal and savage. That I’m not capable of basic intelligence, and even conversations are hard,” the vampire patiently explained.

Biting my tongue, I swallowed the sharp words. In the pause, there was space to think how I wanted to play that accusation. “Aren’t you proving their point with your surly attitude?”

“Surly?” he laughed. “You mean my non-compliance to the unoriginal interrogation methods?”

“Yes,” I ground out through clenched teeth. How this fool was getting under my skin, I couldn’t fathom. *I am better than this!* Not letting boys bait me was one thing I prided myself on.

As my runaway gaze took in his bound form, a little she-devil in my mind chirped that this wasn’t a boy and hadn’t been for a very long time.

“I was waiting for us to be left alone,” he said simply with a shrug. “The others aren’t worth my time.”

“And I am?”

“Yes.”

I blinked. What was I supposed to do with that?

“You’re who I came here for, Lennox.”

My name.

Had the others been careless enough to drop it? There was a reason we used nicknames! Either way, this vampire knew. The implications prickled my skin, and an honest-to-Fate shiver dropped like ice down the length of my spine.

“But you’re the one behind the bars,” I said, grateful my voice didn’t betray me.

“Oh, sweet thing, you’re fierce. I find that...intoxicating.”

I reacted without thinking. Snatching a blade off the table, I threw it expertly between the bars of the cage. It stuck in the flesh between shoulder and collar, just above the pectoral muscle.

“If you were aiming for my heart—”

“I wasn’t,” I bit out, already regretting my action. “I wouldn’t have missed.”

Something sparked in his eyes, making the kaleidoscope of browns, golds, and ambers darken to a rich melody of color. A wave of some strange emotion washed through me in response. I couldn’t define it, but whatever it was created warmth through my entire body. He didn’t say anything, only considered me for a long pause.

I wracked my brain for a way to get the knife back. Captain would see it, unless I retrieved it. But opening the cage and approaching the prisoner was a huge no-no. Not only would I be reamed, but they would question why I was talking to the monster. I didn’t want to answer those questions. Which was the lesser of two evils, it was hard to say.

“Well then, aren’t you going to come and get it?” he murmured, that voice soft like a caress.

Entering the cage’s space was forbidden. There was only so much we could do to secure brutes, especially the more ferocious kind like vampires. If he fed, there was a chance he could break free.

“That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it.” I wasn’t asking.

He shrugged. “I don’t need your blood to escape this flimsy construction.”

A bolt of shock passed through me like a ghost. But I refused to show it. “Big talk from a chained animal.”

“Animal? May I remind you that hunters are humans merged with magic. That makes you part monster too, little



huntress.” The calm veneer was slipping. There was a tangible bite under his words.

“We’re created to maintain balance in the world. Our cause justifies the means, and we have a code to keep order.”

“Don’t sound so superior. The hunters tell a good story, but their origins are far darker and much of the twisted deeds of your precious Guild have been erased from your textbooks.”

Not wanting him to know his words held any power, I rolled my eyes, already walking to collect the broom from where it rested against the wall. I lifted it and found I could easily manage the weight. Without meeting his eye, I focused on maneuvering the tip against the knife. By pushing up and down, I wiggled the blade free of his flesh. When it clattered to the floor, I let out a breath. *Thank the stars I didn’t hit bone!*

It took all of a few seconds to drag the knife over the floor and through the bars of the cage. When it was in my hands, I bent carefully to pick it up.

“Lick it.”

I startled back. “Excuse me?”

The smile on his face was damn near impish. “The knife. Lick it.”

“And ingest your filth? No thank you,” I moved to the bleach and towel on the worktable.

“It will heal your side.”

Because my back was to him, I let the surprise flash over my face. “You’re just a sick fucker; there’s nothing remotely healing about a vampire’s blood.”

“Such a good little schoolgirl. Very well, bleach it as you were taught—but ask yourself why. Why does any implement of torture or experimentation get sterilized after it’s touched a vampire and not other monsters?”

“There are other monsters we sterilize from,” I bit back.

He only chuckled softly, the sound low and velvety.

Curiosity burned deep in my mind, but my need for information conflicted with the strict protocol hunters were supposed to follow.

*He's tempting you.* The creature of darkness wasn't to be trusted.

I swiped the blade with the bleach rag before turning. "This conversation is done."

With that, I moved away from his cage and finished the work. Although I felt his gaze the entire time, he didn't speak to me again.



## Chapter 4 – The Predator

It was a pleasant surprise when the little huntress sauntered into the holding area a third night in a row. I caught the scent of her approach, and carnal fire sparked in my veins. I kept my gaze trained to the floor, focusing on the little details I could smell and hear. There was the scent of the restaurant Lennox had visited, but underneath was the distinct brightness of coffee. The clean aroma of her soap lingered on the skin, but I could hear the labored breathing. Her side was worse today. She'd probably worked out or even sparred, irritating the bruises. I clenched my jaw. It would be so easy to break free and force her to ingest my blood.

But not yet. I could wait a little longer before the huntress found out I wasn't being kept here against my will. The past two nights, I'd failed to discover if the information we'd been given was true. Unlike the male hunters, she slept lightly and didn't drink herself into oblivion before bedtime. It was a miracle she hadn't caught me yet. Her senses were uncanny.

Lennox was a challenge—I fucking loved it. Nothing worth having came easily.

My protégée didn't approve. Kelda muttered under her breath each time she put me back in the chains.

*"I shall corrupt the huntress,"* I'd told the exasperated vampiress. My protégée didn't agree with me as to the importance of winning the huntress to my cause. I would not have a live wire like Lennox during the second stage of my plots. The huntress was the kind of individual who could make a formidable enemy. That was a risk I needed to eliminate and to do that, I needed to pull the wool from her eyes and show her how vile her precious Guild actually was. Only then did I stand a chance at having her accept a role in my plans. It would have been far simpler to kidnap her, prick her skin, and reach a conclusion. But there was no fun in that. I was here to play games, and letting the little huntress think she was in control was the perfect setup to a longer game if she was what I needed.

Slipping easily past the wards of the sleeping hunters, Kelda brought a blood bag last night. I'd refused. Fasting like this kept up the appearance of a subdued monster, and it made the lazy pieces of shit far more lax. Their disregard for procedure frustrated Lennox to no end. She fought them with the upmost respect and tact. It was laudable.

Last night it'd been easy to resist the sustenance. But sometime in the late afternoon, the hunger pains started. Tonight, I might have to take a sip. Right now, before Lennox finished cleaning the filth the assholes upstairs had left, I needed to devise a way to make her bleed. It was either that or hope she received a cut or earned an abrasion during the combat practice. Until she bled, I couldn't be certain she was what I was looking for. I could wait a few more days.

Lennox bent sideways to push the bucket's handle and paused in the hunched position. Try as she might to hide it, I caught the wince of pain.

"If your side still bothers you, you can always come in here and fix it," I coaxed.

Lennox blew out an exasperated breath.

I lifted my eyes and found her purposely focused on wringing the mop. *I see how we're going to play tonight.*

Challenge accepted. If she wanted to ignore me, refuse to speak, I would push until she broke. Her precious Guild might be a sworn enemy to many supernatural species, but this feisty graduate was putty in my capable hands.

Two musical notes sounded in the back of my mind. They were unbearably soft, but unlike previous nights I was able to make them out. An A and a D. They were there and gone, and nothing more came to me. Irritated at the elusive distraction, I shoved the idea of them from my mind, hard.

"How about a story, then? Could help pass the time," I offered, keeping a neutral tone.

"Chatty tonight," she muttered under her breath.

"Today marks the anniversary of the Trinity Massacre of 1592, something you should be familiar with since the mighty

hunter Thomas of Kent lost his life.” There was a telltale flicker of the muscles under her eyes. Lennox was listening while pretending not to. “What you no doubt learned sometime as a young trainee, was that Sergio the Red was responsible. He had a daylight ring, after all, and had been blamed for the slaughter of all the congregation of Protestants.”

She rolled her eyes, but quickly turned her head away in a failed attempt to hide the action.

“Thomas, however, was assassinated by his fellow hunters, who instead of saving the parishioners, killed their best warrior.” I let the revelation drop as though it was a piece of minor shoptalk gossip.

“And why in the hell would they do that?” Lennox snapped.

I smirked inwardly. It was too easy to bait her. Except she was like playing with fireworks. All I had to do was light the fuse, and she was set to explode.

“Because Thomas was working with me to *prevent* Sergio killing the pastor.”

The huntress slammed her mop violently into the pool and gave me an even dirtier side glare. “Lies,” she hissed.

I shrugged. “Fine. Don’t believe it. But know that we failed because your precious Guild couldn’t accept Thomas’s truce to work with a vampire for the greater good.”

“While we aren’t above working with or using supernaturals if the occasion arises, we would never—*ever*—partner with a vampire.” With a look of disgust, Lennox returned to her cleaning. I could see she wanted to argue but was trying to avoid engaging with me further.

“If you don’t believe me, perhaps you’d like to read an account for yourself.” I shifted my weight. This wasn’t the longest I’d stood in one place, but it was chasing rank in the top five.

The motion had her casting a cautious side glance in my direction.

“There *is* an account by a hunter of high regard,” I said, dropping yet another tantalizing bit.

*Come on, take a bite, bella.*

“Who?”

I smiled inwardly. “G. A. Henty.”

She snorted, trying ever so hard to feign disinterest. From the way her pulse picked up, I knew the truth. This enticed her. I smiled, knowing I was the one to do that.

“If you don’t believe me, Books & Brews on Frenchman Street has a *forbidden* section.”

Lennox fought back a shiver at the word. She was hooked, even as she refused to admit it.

“But access isn’t granted to just anyone,” I added before shutting my lips tight.

She continued to work. Continued to ignore me. But her eyes kept flicking in my direction.

Unlike this still-green hunter, I could wait for my prey.

When she finally finished, Lennox didn’t hurry back upstairs. Wandering to the table, she set about organizing the already tidy array of torture implements. This was it. I timed my strike with lasered focus. As her fingers ran over the scalpels, I took my shot.

“Do you always read such raunchy novels at night?”

Surprise made her jerk, flesh nicking on the blade’s keen edge. Her sweet blood perfumed the air. I didn’t have to taste it to know there was sunlight in her veins. The scent of summer and life filled my nose, and my mouth watered. *She’s the real deal.*

I found her.

She was mine. And while she didn’t know it yet, she would soon enough.

“Still not talking?” I pressed as she worked through the protocol of sterilizing the scalpel and bandaging herself from

the First Aid kit nestled next to the implements of destruction. From the tight set of her jaw, her molars would be ground to stubs if she continued to fight the inclination to speak.

“Very well,” I said with an exaggerated sigh. “When Vivian works the night shift at the bookstore, tell her the Conqueror of the Tiber sends his regards and begs her to tell you the number of leaves on her thyme. That will grant you access to the hidden chamber, a speakeasy from the days where witches hid their most prized tomes.”

“Leaves on her time? Departures and arrivals with a clock? Or *hands*, not leaves on a clock? You don’t make sense,” Lennox snapped.

“It does when thyme is an herb,” I responded dryly. “But Viv is a temperamental witch, so you’ll want to be on your best behavior and not take that tone with her.”

The huntress gave me a withering look.

Fucking hells, but she was extraordinary.

I knew it before I smelled her blood, but now—Fate! I held her stare. The next move was hers. My suspicions were confirmed. Lennox was exactly what I’d been looking for, spent ages patiently waiting for. I could wait a few more hours before making her mine.

It would be a simple thing to break free, snatch the beauty, and rush into the dark. It would have even been simpler to grab her from that cot instead of watching from the shadows. But the goal wasn’t simply to have the huntress. No, I wanted her to *believe* me. To choose me. Only then would I truly have conquered her. Sliding a quick glance over her figure, I steeled my spine. Doing this right would take time. Time, and a strong resistance to this temptation. She was sinfully beautiful. That body was made to be worshipped, but that was a complication I couldn’t afford.

A second pair of footfalls sounded in the stairwell leading to this level. With a muted snarl, I cursed the fool interrupting us.



It took a moment before Lennox caught the sound with her more human hearing. She snapped her gaze to the door and took off to play with the mop and bucket.

“Wait!” she hissed, rounding on me. “How do you know what I was reading?”

“The men talked about it as they cut me to shreds. Apparently, they snooped through your room,” I lied.

She considered me, but I could see relief sliding through her features. I wasn’t about to tell her the truth—and not because she would try to kill me. I had my secrets and kept them close to my heart. Knowing that she indulged in naughty, albeit tantalizing novels was another piece of the puzzle and fuel for my part in this game. The more I learned about my prize, the more I craved to unravel the rest.

“Vivian keeps the shop open till midnight,” I murmured, unable to resist casting the final stone.

The huntress cut me a look, and we stayed locked in a moment. The metal doorhandle jiggled. I reluctantly broke the contact and dropped my gaze to the floor.

“There you are, terminator,” the one called Fox crooned.

Only I heard the soft groan from Lennox. She disliked all the name-calling but wouldn’t let them know. While it was protocol for the hunters to take code names, the constant changing of degrading terms was out of line. No matter how strong she attempted to appear, refusing to give into the male hunters’ ribbing would only make them try harder. Lennox was, after all, worth the chase.

“You’re back early.” She moved toward the exit.

Fox sprinted forward, intercepting her.

I flinched. It took everything in my power not to look up.

“Captain had to go out. That means I’m in charge. So how’s about me and you spend some time together, babe,” Fox said in a low, seductive voice. “Let’s get to know each other a little better, huh?”

He reached out and the muted scrape of his hairy knuckle moving against her shirt grated on my resolve. I took slow and measured breaths to keep from springing on the fool and ripping his fingers off one by one. If I wasn't already going to slaughter the male hunters after this was over, I could decimate them now—starting with the sleezy, stunted grease bag.

“I'm leaving,” Lennox stated.

“What's the rush?” the dead man insisted.

“I have somewhere to be before midnight.”

The small victory sent a flash of elation through my chest. My little huntress couldn't resist.

“Where?” The hunter wasn't stopping.

“None of your business,” Lennox ground out. She made to move, but there was the sound of him stopping her. Touching her.

This bastard was dead, if only for breathing in her space. The rest was just adding to how much I would make his death hurt.

Those strong hands of hers pushed at the mass of hunter. “Get back,” the huntress warned.

“Alright, sugar, you run along. But maybe we could catch up for breakfast,” he insisted.

“I'm helping Captain tomorrow.”

“With torturing the mute?”

“He's not—” Lennox stopped talking. She blew out a breath. “I think we can make him squeal.”

“Oh, what's the point? I don't know why we can't just kill him.”

“Because the procedure is to ensure he's not a person of interest to the Guild,” the well-schooled huntress parroted.

*Oh, bella, it was a rhetorical question.*

“Yeah, yeah,” Fox dismissed her. “You and me can go get a cup of joe in the afternoon tomorrow.”

“Not going to happen, Fox.” She took a step away. “Good night.”

The hunter wisely didn't follow her.



## Chapter 5 – Lennox

Against my better judgement, I found myself outside Books & Brews. The argument I'd made was that I wanted to explore the city, and a speakeasy bookstore was exactly the kind of haunt I was interested in. The moment I came around the corner, my heart leapt, pattering faster and faster. This place was beyond charming. It was as if all the aesthetic vibes of cozy, dreamy library and rainy nights were splattered on a storefront and beckoned into the cozy interior. It looked like a castle library plucked from cinema and placed between two normal, drab businesses. Could humans even see all the detail? Or were there spells in place to detract them from this gem?

I stood on the street opposite, childish delight ebbing and flowing through my veins.

There was only one reason that gave me pause.

A deadly monster had given me the suggestion in an almost sinful exchange. Not that I was in danger of falling for his charm. I would never trust a creature of darkness, especially a vampire. That adage was fused into the fiber of my being. But it was either a lucky guess that this store was what I craved, or he somehow read me a little too well.

Examining the situation from every angle, it was easy to conclude there was no harm in following his lead. I wouldn't be so naïve as to fall for some twisted trap. My magic hummed softly; there were several supernatural beings around. But that could happen walking down any old street. As a hunter, creatures of the night feared *me*.

Not that they knew I was coming. The element of surprise was a beautiful thing.

I stepped forward with determination and pushed into the shop. The time might be a quarter to eleven, but the shop was bustling. The front area was devoted to an eclectic mixture of tables and wooden chairs for the café. Two baristas worked the beverage counter. Savory and sweet pastries overflowed from the glass display case. Glass jars of tea mixtures were shelved

on the back wall, and there were vats of roasted coffee beans too. My mouth watered.

To the right and farther back, where the worn wood floor ended and rough carpet began, so did the stacks of books. Far in the back corner was another seating area—this one next to a roaring fire—consisting of armchairs with side tables. The whole space seemed endless, yet contained. An enchantment to be sure! The interior was larger than the exterior. However, there didn't seem a good space for a secret passage.

And yet with magic, there could be a thousand hidden areas and no one the wiser unless the entrances were revealed.

I walked to the counter and smiled at the cheery blond man who would put Thor out of business. He sauntered forward and tipped his chin up. "What can we getcha?" he drawled.

A quick glance at the menu and I knew instantly. "I'll have a berry tea, iced with Stevia sweetener, please."

"Which berry tea, doll?" the all-American quarterback asked, pointing at the section on the tea menu. There were nine choices that were herbal and caffeine free alone.

"Wild berry and rhubarb, please," I requested. Rhubarb wasn't native to the warmer climates, but back in upstate New York it could be found and enjoyed.

"Good choice." The barista rang me up, but he paused when I held out a ten in USD cash.

Before I could blink, he reached out and grasped my wrist. He bent and inhaled.

And then licked the skin over my pulse.

The fight instinct welled inside, but he released my arm and took the ten before I could punch him. This male *wasn't* human! My pulse raced as my brain scrambled to reconcile what he was with the fact that my glyphs were silent. There'd been no warning he was an other.

"Human, mutated with magic," he said as he made change. "I wondered whatcha truly are? Could be one of three or four reasons. You're a mystery, aren't you, doll?"

I took a deep, cleansing breath. “The kind that bites back,” I said with venom. “Are you always in the habit of sampling your customers?”

The barista snorted. “No—just the cute ones.”

I wanted to be mad at this supernatural. He just acted so... normal. Like other flirty men I knew, he spelled trouble.

“And what, pray tell, are you?” I demanded, the guesses shifting with each clue.

He flashed a row of pearly teeth. “A damned soul. We’ll get your tea started. Takes a few minutes for the bag to steep.”

*Well, that’s vague as shit.* It wasn’t polite to press if someone wouldn’t give up their secrets. Not that it’d stopped him from ferreting out mine. I gave the blond a curt nod and walked down the length of the stone topped counter. Pretending to be interested in the various displays of goods, I watched the room.

And mentally drooled over the bookstacks. The other portion of this surprisingly large space was filled with freestanding shelves at least twelve feet tall. Thoughts of all the secrets contained in their pages sent excitement skittering through me. Just because I was the unrecognized top of our class didn’t mean I only loved books for their academic value. I spent time with sheets of tree corpses, scrolls made from the skeletons of river reeds, and even the far more terrible manuscripts written on mammal skin because they allowed me to escape.

*I’m free of the academy.* There was a city to explore and no micromanaging superiors to monitor my every move. I didn’t need the escape books offered as I once had. Still...my fondness of books was impossible to squash. They would never fail me. The tantalizing idea of exploring the shelves was too thrilling to resist. It would sadly have to wait for another time. Finding the speakeasy with rare, supernatural books was what needed to be done.

Tinkering with the napkin holder at the pickup end, I examined the other barista. I was unsure if I would attempt

access to the speakeasy tonight or simply take in the atmosphere and come back another time. It would depend on if this was Vivian or not. The purple highlights in her long hair were something I could get behind, only on me it would stand out, and that wasn't something a hunter could afford. Plain hair, minimal makeup, and clothes that blended in unless hunting—that was my life.

“If you're open to the supernatural community, why close at midnight?” I asked the barista as she poured hot water over the swirling herbs.

She shrugged. “Nothing good happens after two.”

“Isn't that the truth,” I laughed softly.

“New to town?” she asked, shooting me a side glance.

“Fairly.”

“Going to settle here or just passing through?”

“I'd rather not stay long, but only Fate can tell,” I said with a small smile.

“Yeah, that's what I thought once too. A half century later and I'm still here.” The barista paused, leaning a hip against the counter. “I'm Ilene and that is Robert. If you need anything, just holler.”

“And if we can't help, we'll know someone who can,” Robert the arm-licker added.

“Thanks,” I said cautiously, taking the biodegradable cup and straw of iced goodness.

“Don't mention it. Vivian created this place to be a haven for the supernatural community.” Ilene threw me a smile.

I didn't know if it was the understanding nature of these two that they got lots of closed off individuals, or if it was the atmosphere, but the words tumbled out of my mouth without me having made the conscious decision to share. “Look, I'll level with you, I was supposed to come here and tell Vivian that someone who calls himself the Conqueror of the Tiber sends his regards. And then ask about the leaves on her thyme



—but the plant, not time-time.” I leaned farther across the counter as I spoke. It was as if I was pulled to Ilene.

The barista only smiled. I blinked at her.

It was almost as though the purple haired woman had compelled me. But the invisible ink on my skin didn't burn where the protection spell was stamped.

“The *Conqueror*? How is he?” a cheery voice chirped behind me.

I spun around. An honest-to-Fate ghost stood behind me. A real, live ghost. *Incredible!* Blinking rapidly, I took in the blurry yet transparent form. Hunters didn't encounter these monsters often, and it would take a special equipment to destroy her spectral essence. If she were a target, that is.

Shaking myself, I reminded myself to act casual. It would be beyond stupid to let these supernatural beings see weakness. Without fail, they would prey on a human if offered the chance.

“He is...detained,” I explained. “I'm not sure he's comfortable, but he doesn't complain.”

“Some conqueror,” Robert snorted.

“Well, if a hunter has him, he's probably extremely uncomfortable,” the specter laughed. I gaped, but the ghost only smiled. “I'm Vivian, and I know things. Including what you are, huntress. What I don't know is why the Conqueror is suffering that when he could easily escape—” The ghost stopped short with a shrug.

*Ha, he can't escape, though.*

That was what I chose to fixate on? They'd figured out what I was. My cover was blown—blown! These vile creatures had me at a terrible disadvantage. How did they figure out who I was? The magic imbued by the glyphs should be protecting me from this kind of scrutiny!

“It doesn't bode well to force someone's secrets,” I warned, forcing myself to stay calm.

“No use making threats, doll. Only the three of us can hear you, and we’re harmless so long as you don’t harm our patrons.” Robert braced his grip against the counter and grinned at me. “Unlike your brotherhood, we don’t have an instant distrust or visceral reaction to anyone from the Livian Guild of Hunters.”

“You figured out who I am, and I’m not supposed to feel threatened by your kind?” I ground out.

“Not all supernatural beings are the same, hun,” Ilene said with a flip of her purple hair.

“If you want to earn passage into the secret bookstack the Conqueror told you about, you’ll play by our rules. Do you understand?” The ghost crossed one insubstantial arm to grip the opposite elbow while lifting the other hand to hold her chin in consideration.

“I think I’ll take my tea to go tonight. The history books can wait.” I took a step toward the exit.

“Welcome to the Crescent City, huntress.” The ghost smiled, like a cat playing with its food. “We look forward to seeing you again.”

I pushed into the night, mind reeling. What madness was this? There was protocol I should enact now that my cover was blown. But what then? Go to some new hellhole or worse, be sequestered by the Guild? *What am I going to do?*

My selfish desires rose to war against the training ingrained in my being. There had been nothing improper about tonight. Leads needed to be followed! I hurried down the street and took a left. My only mistake, and it was a small one in the grand scheme of things, was that I hadn’t communicated my team regarding the information. They didn’t need to know where I heard it, just that I had. Hunters guarded their sources, and that practice was respected. This unit, however, would never work as a proper group of hunters should.

Even with the heavy cloud cover, the streets were bright with the yellow glow of the lamps. A steady breeze cooled my face, but it did nothing to help the humidity which clung as a

second skin. After living at the academy in upstate New York, I didn't mind one bit. Every few yards, a new scent melded into the heavy air. There were spices from cooking, the sweet perfume of flowers, and even the tang of the nearby wetlands.

The sidewalk was cracked. Weeds grew in the sparse patches between the road, curb, and walkway. Despite the moisture in the air, the ground was parched. Just because the area was rundown, didn't mean the architecture wasn't vastly different. Unless the front lights were on, the cobblestone paths and wrought-iron balconies were shrouded in shadows. More were illuminated than not, however. People sprawled on the porches or lawns. Their chatter and laughter was a welcome distraction from the heavy decisions weighing my mind. I couldn't help smiling when the rhythm of music spilled from a home adjacent to the intersection I hurried across. Drawn to the smokey, sultry beats of the song, I paused to listen.

Humans were marvelous beings. They might not be able to see the supernaturals prowling around them, but their resilience and ability to thrive amongst monsters was something to be admired. And where their genetic flaws put them at a disadvantage, that was where I came in. *To protect them.*

Grounded with renewed purpose, I continued my journey to the safehouse. The houses stopped suddenly to give way to a far from smooth parking lot. Passing the convenience store, I saw a dull glow inside. As if a flashlight or camping lantern were on, which was never a good sign. Even with my own worries, instinct drove me to the window.

After a quick check to ensure my surroundings were safe, I peered inside. A long skirt, covering to socked ankles, was the only thing visible in the eerie glow.

*Crap.* I knew that skirt.

Keeping aware of the street, I sidled up to the door. The security bar wasn't thrown, and the lock was not secured. I pulled the door open, a little chime sounding overhead. The legs twitched at the sound.

“Hello?” I called out. But my eyes were on the back corner and the door labeled Employees Only.

“Book girl? Is that you?” a tired voice called out.

I hurried to the fallen shopkeeper. “Yes, I was passing by and saw your light. I thought it might be a break-in.”

“You missed that,” she muttered dryly.

She was pressing her knitted shall to her skull as I squatted next to her.

“Are there any monsters here right now?” I murmured softly.

“We’re alone.”

I wanted to confirm that, but my immediate attention was needed to stop the bleeding on her skull. “Do you have a first aid box?”

“Behind the counter,” she croaked.

Once I had the box and made a sweep of the building to ensure we were alone, I fastened the door so that we couldn’t be surprised. Bringing a cold bottle of water, I set to work on the nasty gash. Popping open the white and red box, I paused. There were potions in here. What was the woman doing with those? Humans used potions if they knew about them. Something shifted through the back of my mind, and my guard immediately went up. I’d assumed the shopkeeper was human. This was the only indication she might not be. It was inconclusive, but I’d been duped once already tonight.

I shook myself. So what if the shop keeper wasn’t human? She needed my help. If she was something other, I couldn’t be damned for offering her a small ounce of compassion. Besides, no one had to know. Deciding to help her no matter her species, I uncorked the antiseptic brew.

“Who did this to you, shopkeeper?” I asked.

“Bethany. My name is Bethany,” she wheezed. “And it was the same friendly amphibian couple you ran into earlier.”

“I see.”

She let out a short laugh. “No, no you don’t. You’re a stranger to these parts. You don’t know anything about the underworld here.”

“I know extortion when I see it, and that’s not subjective to location.” I set the cleaner down and opened the bottle of black sand to clot the still bleeding, gnarly cut.

“You went to Books & Brew?” Bethany asked quietly, pointing at the cup of half empty tea.

“I did.”

“How did that go? Did they pry secrets from you?”

Surprise jolted through me. Bethany held my gaze as I wrestled with her question.

“Hold still, this will hurt,” I said instead of answering.

Bethany braced herself, squeezing those dark eyes closed tight. She didn’t wince as the black sand sizzled and the healing properties staunched the blood flow.

“Don’t mind Vivian. She’s invasive, but that’s her job. How much do you know about the supernatural underworld here in the Crescent City?”

“Crescent City? Not much,” I muttered, hating my ignorance.

Bethany hummed. “Supernaturals called it the Crescent City long before humans settled here. The term has leaked into their vocabulary, so don’t be surprised if you hear them refer to New Orleans as such.” She paused to take several deep breaths.

I didn’t like her color, she was growing rather pale.

“There are five peacekeepers in New Orleans. A sort of street boss style government. Vivian is one of the five. This is her turf, and it butts up against Mr. Okada’s. They’re fair people, despite being damned nosey. There are worse districts to live in here in New Orleans.”

“I don’t appreciate my secrets being forced.”

“Vivian won’t share if you play nice with her. Bring her a potted house plant, and she’ll be pacified.”

The thought of being friendly with a supernatural being was utterly ridiculous. I swallowed my laughter and hid my smile as I sat back to look over my handiwork. “I’m more of a shoot ‘em up type of gal.”

“Won’t work with her. Bullets go straight through and then you’ll have an enraged ghost on your hands.” Bethany slowly pushed herself up, leaning heavily on the nearest solid surface. She only managed to sit, before she stopped, panting hard. “Her two right hands are nearly as bad. Ilene isn’t what she seems, and her hair is always changing. And the Ken Doll, he’s a charmer until he’s not.”

“Thanks,” I said, not knowing how to respond to this deluge of information.

“You’re a loner, like me.”

“Drink this.” I held the bottle of water to her. “Now... where did the meatheads go?”

“Back to their swampy fortress,” Bethany sighed. “They’ll be back.”

“Shouldn’t Vivian protect you, if you’re in her neighborhood?” I asked, because I didn’t want to go.

“Not with something like this. My son put our family into trouble, and it’s on my head to rescue him.”

Her words rolled around my head like dice. I was a hunter after all. This was what we were supposed to protect against. And yet, I didn’t see how I could help without my team getting involved. We were supposed to lay low while we had a monster caged for interrogation. I shouldn’t be involving myself with other supernatural problems.

“Do you have somewhere safe to go for the night?” I asked quietly.

“They won’t bother me till tomorrow. I’ll go to my rooms and sleep it off.” Bethany stood on shaky legs. While what

little color was in her cheeks drained, she managed to stay right side up without falling over.

“I’ll come check back with you then. We’ll figure something out,” I promised, knowing it was perilously close to being out of my control to do so.

Bethany knew it too. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, honey.”





## Chapter 6 – Lennox

Captain stumbled into the kitchen. The haze of dehydration post heavy drinking could be a real bitch.

“Good morning,” I said, pulling myself up straight and gesturing to the coffee. “Fresh pot, sir.”

“How come you’re in here and not doing yoga on the front porch for the others to ogle at you?” he muttered, walking to the pot.

Taking a deep breath, I ignored his jab and plunged ahead. “Sir, there is a woman in need of our help. Her name is Bethany, and she’s being targeted by a group of thuggish siv. They’re known as the Rotten Leaf Clan, and are the largest, most aggressive group of amphibian monsters in the area. There have been several times in recent history where they’ve preyed on humans inside the city boarder, not to mention the country folks.”

“Is that so?” The captain yawned before taking a sip of the roasting hot java. “Hell, Candy! You make strong joe, girl.”

I pursed my lips. “If we don’t step in and help her, they vermin *will* kill her.”

“And how are we supposed to do that? Hmm?” Captain leaned against the counter.

“We eradicate the swamp of the siv.” I gripped my own mug tightly.

“Siv?” Gage called from the hall.

I groaned inwardly. I’d wanted this dealt with before the others came. The chance of our superior officer listening flew out the damn crack in the windowpane.

“We’re under cover right now as we have a prisoner.” Captain waved a dismissive hand. “Even if this was something we could step into under normal circumstances—which it’s not—protocol is that we keep a tight radius until this matter with the prisoner is dealt with.”

“Yeah, Candy, don’t you know that?” Gage laughed, grabbing the mug of coffee I’d made for myself.

My insides boiled. *So now they choose to follow protocol.*

Assholes. The lot of them.

Before, I’d been trying to respect the leader, but not after this. Captain drank himself to sleep every night and didn’t go out of his way to do anything else.

“Hey, cleaning lady, there are some spots downstairs you missed,” Gage croaked as he went to the fridge for the carton of eggs and packet of breakfast meat.

“It was clean when I left,” I ground out.

A loud clap of broken wind sounded from the stairs. With the closed design of the house along with the more natural building materials used at the turn of the century, no one should have been able to hear that flatulence. *Seven Hells, these assholes are foul.*

Fox, grinning proudly, sauntered into the kitchen. The short sleeve tee showed off the orange and black animal tattoo. Unlike his invisible hunter tats, this foxy image was just for fun. Time and the change of his muscle mass distorted the ink making the faded image hard to discern. If it hadn’t been one of the first things he showed me, I would still be wondering what kind of animal it was. “That one could kill a pixie. Fuck, I’m ripe this morning.”

I stirred my coffee, hiding my gag of revulsion. If they saw their disgusting ways bothered me, it would only give them reason to make it worse.

“Well, it’s not clean now,” Gage responded to me with a bite of annoyance.

“What’s not clean?” Fox asked as he jumped to perch on the island. The structural integrity of the cabinets beneath him came into question as they groaned in protest.

“Don’t fart near my breakfast,” Captain snarled, rubbing his temples. “Candy, if the basement isn’t clean—”

“Oh, yeah, I made a fucking mess last night. The vamp bled *everywhere*.”

It might have been his tone or the whole situation, but I winced inwardly at Fox’s brag. The hunter wasn’t the kind to torment strategically. Whatever he’d done to the vampire stemmed from nothing but boredom and twisted pleasure.

Sickening. Absolutely sickening.

“Then shouldn’t Fox clean up *his* mess?” I snapped, bringing the coffee mug to my lips.

“Not how this works, grunt.” Fox lifted his leg and the juicy sounds from his rear earned him a scathing look from Captain and a gut punch from Gage.

“Go over to the table and don’t shit near the food,” was all the lead hunter said.

I wanted to kill them. All three. This was utterly disgraceful.

So as not to blow up, I pushed away from the table and moved to the door.

“Where you going, Candy Cane?” Fox called after me.

“To clean up your mess,” I snapped. “Since it’s the only thing I’m allowed to do!”

I slammed the door behind me.

Mercifully, no one followed.

I leaned against the wall, scrubbing my hands over my face. *How did it come to this?*

The answer was a pair of mischievous hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair. The bastard—all males were bastards! I’d been nothing but stupid to believe the Headmistress’s son. To get involved with him? That had been lust and spite. A toxic combination that blew up in my face.

Clattering down the stairs, I reeled back at the mess. It was as if Fox had taken a can of spray paint and spewed crimson over the cinderblock walls. I blew out a harsh breath and went for the mop.

“He did a number on you, didn’t he?” I muttered to the slumped figure. If it wasn’t for the chains, he would probably be on the floor.

It didn’t seem the vampire heard me. Those dark eyes were hidden and features slack.

“Vamp,” I whispered, going up to the cage. At the last moment, I dropped my hands to my side and didn’t touch the bars.

“Is that pity I hear in your voice, little huntress?” the vampire rasped.

I snorted. “That would be against my nature.”

“You were trained well, if that’s any consolation to you.” Those lips, drained of color, moved roughly against one another.

“Thank you.” I waited a moment longer, wrestling with the bevy of emotions in my chest. If I began to humanize this monster, I would be a danger to myself, the other hunters, and society. However, it was easy to prefer even a brute like this vampire to the pieces of filth upstairs.

Knowing this fiend of the night had preyed on the weak, using humans and other supernaturals as juice boxes, meant that I could never take real pity on it. Hell, not even that. The language we’d been taught was that such brutes—especially fiends like vampires, warlocks, and fae—were no better than inanimate objects. We might occasionally partner with other species of supernaturals, but it was only when the common end goal was to protect humans. Vampires and fae didn’t see our kind as anything more than something to prey on, whereas warlocks were twisted, demented beings. This vampire would forever be an *other* to my kind. What a good student I was.

I moved away from the cage and began the tedious task of scrubbing the dried blood. We hunters were so proud, catching beasts like this vampire. But when individuals like Bethany needed help, we used the protocol of the Guild as shields to ignore their plights.

“Your human is in grave danger if siv want her.”

The thought broke through my mental seething. *So...he can hear us upstairs.* “She is.”

“And there’s not a damn thing you can do,” the vampire summarized. “How frustrated that makes you, huntress.”

“It fucking sucks,” I admitted.

There was a long pause as I scrubbed at a particularly large stain on the wall. It was higher than I was, and I had to work my shoulder to get into the grooves. At least the soreness from the training had subsided into stiffness. I didn’t want to think about it, but the only logical explanation for the rapid healing was the iced tea I’d drunk last night from the bookstore.

“There’s a werewolf who could help you.”

I stopped, dropping the mop to the floor. “Look, you’re my prisoner. I can’t go listening to you. And why would I want to work with a werewolf?”

“If you want to help this shopkeeper, Svetovit, alpha of the Blackwater Pack, is your best option. He’s noble—something you appreciate. And what’s more, the werewolves have a quarrel over some land with this clan of siv. This would just be fuel to his cause.”

A growl of exasperation rattled through my teeth. I couldn’t consider this! Werewolves were no better than domesticated dogs. “How do you even know all this? Are you an expert on swamp politics?”

It sounded stupid the moment I said it. Of course it was probable the monster knew about the creatures in this place.

“I know things. Many, many things.” His tongue lingered over those words.

My belly did a small flip. I slammed those traitorous urges down. “You need to shut up. I can’t be talking to you.”

“They will kill the woman. If not today, tomorrow. The siv won’t suffer her son’s debt much longer. And no one else is going to get involved with a personal matter like this.”

“Be quiet,” I hissed, a mental warning flaring red. I’d never mentioned the son’s gambling debts to the warriors

upstairs. My gut tightened, and I tried to act normal. “You’re a fucking snake, quit tempting me!”

“It’s not temptation, since I stand to gain nothing,” the vampire retorted icily.

“You’re trying to find common ground with me. Make yourself favorable in my eyes,” I snapped.

“Perhaps,” he scoffed, “but you want to help the shopkeeper, and I’m telling you the only way. Your precious hunters who break every other code when it’s convenient won’t rise to the occasion. The street bosses won’t get involved. So what are you going to do, little hunter? Stand by and let the mother be butchered?”

How did he know this? There was something missing, some link or reason. Pulse beating hard, I stared at the vampire. Mysteries were dangerous. If we operated as a squad of hunters should, there would be no room for error. Clearly, something had been overlooked.

As if he could hear the wheels in my mind racing, the vampire smiled. It was a slow, sinful curve of his lips carving across his face until it reached his eyes. They blazed with an emotion I didn’t want to name. The flecks of gold brightened the whiskey color of those irises until they damn near shone.

The kitchen door cracked open.

My heart jumped in its chest cavity. Surprise rippled down my spine. Feelings that I’d been doing something forbidden shivered over my skin.

“Candy, that’s enough cleaning,” Captain barked.

“It’s a mess down here, sir,” I called up, hoping he couldn’t hear the slight tremor in my voice. We’d been speaking quietly. Worry still flickered through my gut that our hushed conversation had been heard.

“I’m just coming down to make more of a mess. You’re dismissed, grunt.” With that, Captain slammed the door.

I let out a short laugh. “Thanks for the fucking consideration, sir.”

A dark, silky chuckle sounded from the cage. I shot a side look and caught the vampire's piercing stare.

"What?" I snapped.

That captivating smile faded until there was the smallest of smirks in one corner. "Why haven't you told on me, little huntress?"

"And let those pricks suck up my glory?" I walked away, pushing the bucket and mop to the corner. "I have my pride, vamp."

"Are you sure that's the reason, Lennox?" he pressed, that rich, deep voice a veritable purr.

Instead of answering, I snapped, "That's too beautiful a name for a monster to use."

The soft laughter from the vampire grated. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Kill you."

"Try it," he baited.

I crossed my arms. "I think I'll let our squad leader take a pound of flesh first."

"Why don't you?"

Arching a brow, I took a step back. My fingers slid over the deadly sharp flay knife. "You don't think I'll do it?"

"You're not heartless, Nox. No matter how much you pretend to be."

Every muscle in my body froze. The automatic rebuttal was on the tip of my tongue. For some reason, it died there.

"You see, little one, I know you better than you think."

"That's not true," I gasped. Anger! Where was my anger? He didn't know anything about me. I was the top of my class. The notches marking the number of monsters I'd killed tallied closer and closer to four digits.

Why couldn't I lash out at him, tell him how wrong he was?

The door banged open. “Candy Cane?” Fox shouted.

“Coming!” I said sharply. It took three more heartbeats before I could tear my gaze away from the vampire. The moment the contact ended, a deep breath sucked painfully into my lungs. What the hell was wrong with me!

Without another word, I fled up the stairs. Not stopping to speak to the others, who were shoving their gobs with food, I went straight to the front porch. The blast of humid, summer air smacked me, but I rushed into it and closed the front door carefully. Gulping down the morning air, I rubbed my arms.

How did I keep doing this? Winding up in the midst of shit when the path of my life was so straightforward. As a hunter, I’d entered the academy and was taught exactly what to do. My mind and body were cultivated. Now I was ready to step up to the tasks of my first assignment. And instead, I was in some backwater hell because of a series of stupid mistakes.

“And it looks like I haven’t learned my lesson yet,” I muttered.

The straightforward path was to let Bethany go. Hunters weren’t police. We tracked monsters, caught them, and ended them. It was simple. To that end, the correct thing to do would be march my ass back inside and tell Captain about the vampire. We would call Headquarters and run the vampire’s title through the data base.

*Why isn’t that the easy thing to do?* That bothered me.

“Because it would let Captain take the glory.” I lifted my head and glared at the rotting boards of the porch’s roof. Selfish to the core, that was always my problem. Since I was assigned to this hell, I’d vowed to do everything in my power to right my name and get back to greener pastures. “And why shouldn’t I? I freaking earned a top post with the best hunting squads.”

Anger fueled the internal wrestling, but several things became clear.

The vampire was secure. He wasn’t going anywhere. He would probably die since he wouldn’t speak to the others.



“I shouldn’t spare him a second thought. I have enough other problems,” I muttered to myself. The logic seemed solid.

And then, the memory of his words played through my mind. He’d admitted he’d come here for me. I couldn’t stop the chill that suddenly sapped out the glorious heat of the day. “Fate help me.”



## Chapter 7 – Lennox

There was no other choice. I chanted those words over and over as the car rolled through the trees. Werewolves weren't a species we typically hunted since they kept to themselves and didn't eat humans. I pushed aside the ethical qualms about using supernatural help, stole a car, and drove into the swamp. The engine whined at higher speeds, slowing my progress. If anyone missed this gem, they needed to have their head checked. The internal workings of cars didn't normally fall out of the bottom, but with all this rust and how poorly it ran, this might be a rare exception.

About a mile back, the invisible ink on my skin began to itch. It was what should have happened last night. Now that I'd had time to give thought to it, I was convinced the wet lick from Robert had paralyzed my magic. Without Captain's permission, contacting Headquarters and consulting the archives wasn't possible. But dammit, I was curious what kind of being could do that. At least the mysterious numbing wore off, and now my magic was working as it should.

I could feel lupine eyes on me from the trees. An honor guard of sorts was escorting me secretly to the heart of the pack.

Driving from the north, the trees thinned, and the werewolves' village sprawled before me. Many homes were half constructed. Charred material filled dumpsters. Pallets of building materials sat ready for the repairs and new construction. Some misfortune had visited this pack. Pushing the rust bucket, I pattered down the main street of this self-supporting community.

As if on cue, several large specimen emerged from between houses and moved toward my vehicle. I slowed but didn't brake. This was just the welcome crew. *Damn mutts come to sniff around.*

One bulky female sauntered to my window and tapped. Her smile was deadly, not friendly.

The window creaked and stuck only part way down. “I’m here to see Svetovit Rugia. I would stop but I don’t trust this rust bucket to keep going afterward,” I called out, creeping along the dirt road.

“You’d best come to my garage, and I’ll have a look at that engine before it explodes,” she responded. It wasn’t a question. Jerking her thumb to the left, she added, “This way, stranger.”

The formidable woman jogged over to the others, and I caught the word *human* tossed in hushed tones to the others. Her dark hair was tightly braided across her skull, making an X in the back and coming into two long ropes down her back.

She beckoned me up a side street. Since I wanted an audience with the alpha, there was no choice but to follow. The homes along this street were intact. Magnificent trees towered in yards. Frothy moss hung from the branches. The scene was nothing short of enchanting. Try as I might, it was hard not to be distracted by the shades of green that painted a picture so beautiful that it called to my very soul.

Three drives down, the werewolf stopped and swept her hands to a house with a sprawling garage behind. Taking a deep breath, I turned. There wasn’t much to fear. I was just a human who’d come to speak to the alpha. They would assume I was harmless. That never failed to work in my favor. I crept forward, wincing at the whine of the dying engine. The great door of the outbuilding was thrown open to reveal a mechanic’s dream inside. My limited knowledge of cars included the fact that there was specialty equipment in there.

“Hey, thanks for the offer, but I don’t want to make an investment in this vehicle,” I said, stepping out of the now parked car. The engine’s shrill cry changed pitch in the park gear. There was a choked splutter and something visible whispered from the exhaust.

“You won’t make it a mile out of here before the engine seizes and the whole thing dies.” She flashed her teeth. “I’m Alexia, by the way.”

“Candace,” I lied with an equally friendly grin. “Thanks for this.”

“Sure thing, hun. We’re a close-knit community down here, but we don’t bite.”

*Only during a full moon.* I laughed inwardly at my own joke, even if it wasn’t true. Werewolves could shift form anytime, on any whim. They were powerful and brutal, even in their humanoid form, and far more so with a muzzle full of razor-sharp teeth and claws.

“Well, that’s very kind of you,” I said, struggling to fall into the rhythm of small talk. Social interactions always had ulterior motives for a hunter. I didn’t enjoy the slow dance they required.

“How do you know Svet?” Alexia asked, dragging a lift with her. “Cut the engine, hun. I need it to cool enough to work on.”

That could take a while. I swallowed hard. “Alright,” I said, not letting my nerves show. “I don’t. But a source told me he would be able to help.”

“A source?” Alexia popped the hood and winced.

I took a deep breath and plunged ahead with my plan. “I’ve got a problem with your neighbors. The siv.”

“Ah, so you’re a human who *knows* knows. I wondered,” Alexia mused, cranking on some bolts with her wrench. “Well, Sergei went to wake...the alpha.”

The werewolf mechanic shot me a side look as if to ask if I knew what Svetovit was.

“I hope I’m not disturbing anyone, but I really need someone to step in who wouldn’t mind this kind of confrontation,” I pressed, not answering her unspoken query.

“Desperate, huh. Well, we’re not in our finest form this morning. It was a *riotously* late night last night.”

“Running the woods?” I smiled.

Alexia barked a laugh. “Not quite, although some did. Our prince got married—it’s a long story, but it was cause for much celebration.”

“Your prince? The alpha?” I narrowed my eyes. A newly mated male wasn’t likely to drop everything and help.

“His brother.”

“What about my brother?” boomed a deep, sparkling voice. It was how I imagined starlight sounded on a black night.

I turned and a completely feminine reaction flickered through me. This alpha was gorgeous. His dark, almost black, hair fell to his shoulders and keen jet eyes missed nothing. The white tee contrasted beautifully with his rich bronze skin that looked more than tan from summer’s light.

For a moment, it was easy to see him as a man and forget he could change into a beast.

“Congratulations seem in order,” I managed to say. “Your brother married?”

Svet looked past me, seeming to see a whole tale unfold in the landscape beyond. That faraway look was laced with pain and great happiness. “His true mate found him after all these years. We celebrated their love yesterday, and for weeks before in fact. But thank you,” Svet turned those sharp eyes back to me, “we’re all very happy for Miro and Addi.”

All I could do was smile. And it was genuine. The joy this werewolf felt was infectious.

“So, little lady, what brings you to my neck of the woods?” Svet prowled around the stolen beater and peered down into the hood’s well. He winced then pointed to Alexia, who snorted in return. “A real treasure you have here.”

“Don’t I know it,” I muttered. “I have an acquaintance who’s being plagued by the siv. Someone told me you might be interested in such matters.”

As I spoke, Svetovit stilled. It was a subtle movement, and if I wasn’t used to individuals who ate the world for breakfast,

I wouldn't have caught the shift. But he was a predator, and this was his game.

"Who told you about me?" The alpha reached for a tool I couldn't name and handed it to Alexia.

I wet my lips. "If it's all the same, that's my secret."

"Hmm, I see." Svetovit held a clamp and Alexia cranked on something. The part cracked loose, and the mechanic cursed. The alpha stood, brushing his hands together. "You won't be leaving here in this. If it can be fixed, Lexi will manage."

The female shot him a dirty look. The alpha flashed her a smirk but then came over to me. In front of me, he was even taller than I'd realized.

"You have vampire blood under your nails and your skin stinks of bleach." Svetovit leaned into me, bringing our faces almost level. "What are you, little lady? Hmm?"

"Not someone to be trifled with, pup," I said low, letting menace drip into my voice. "And the car's stolen. I don't need it and can't pay for repairs."

"A thief as well as a mystery," the alpha murmured. "Alright, you come to my house, have a glass of sweet tea or a beer, and tell me about your acquaintance—you will tell me about this individual, if not your source, yes?"

I nodded. "Bethany, shopkeeper at the Grab-and-Go on Durante Avenue." The earnestness in my voice couldn't be faked.

"Well, come on then." He beckoned.

"Time really is of the essence, Svetovit," I said, jogging behind, but I didn't hurry to catch up with his long strides because I was busy picking at my fingernails. They needed clipping so as not to catch filth like this and trap scents I didn't want on me.

"It's Svet...or *sir*."

I blanched at how warm I suddenly felt. This couldn't be happening. Before I could respond, he spoke again.

“And there’s no problem so big that a beer can’t be had first.” With that, the alpha stopped short on the lawn of a ranch style house.

~\*~

Beer cracked and half drunk, I wandered through the kitchen and living room of the open concept living space. A bachelor pad, the few treasures the alpha displayed on the wall and shelves created a strange itch in my chest. Even in my dorm, I didn’t have anything to claim the space as mine. I had favorite weapons and reading material, but it was all expendable. While the alpha lived simply, these items clearly defined the space as his. Why he kept a conch shell on the same floating shelf as a signed baseball was just as much a mystery as the woven basket of pinecones between a few dustless tomes on the ladder bookshelf. Without knowing the history, everything felt special.

“So, little lady, you have some explaining to do,” Svet said pleasantly, leaning against the blue-grey wall.

*He’s a monster!* I reminded my hormones. They didn’t seem to care it was normally my job to muzzle such brutes.

I pushed away the distracting and useless feelings and got down to business. “Bethany’s son is in debt to the siv. They’ll kill her today or tomorrow if she doesn’t give them money she doesn’t have. And she won’t relinquish her jewels,” I added.

“All that is very well and good, but it’s not what I’m interested in.” The alpha tipped his bottle back and drained the hoppy substance.

A chill shivered down my spine in warning. “And *what* are you interested in, sir?”

Svet set the empty bottle down and took a purposeful step forward. “You...*Candace*.”

My name was a gods-damned purr on his lips. “I’m not very interesting,” I said lightly, shifting my hold on the bottle, which I wouldn’t hesitate to use as a weapon if needed.

“Oh, now that’s not quite true, is it?” Svet stopped in front of me, crowding me with his presence.



I'd taken down creatures twice his size. But none of them looked at me like that. Those dark eyes were alight with a strange hunger, and I wasn't sure I wanted to feel its burn.

“What are you?”

“Human.”

“Hmm,” Svet murmured, and then he reached for me.

I blocked his hand and raised the bottle. He batted it away as if it was a fly while catching my elbow. It happened so fast. A gods-damned blur of motion.

Twisting left, I moved around, and struck out again. The alpha caught my fist.

And my throat.

Before I could blink, he had me pinned against the wall.

“Scream all you want, little lady, but this house is soundproof to protect against our excellent lupine hearing.” Svet bent and inhaled deeply the skin next to my neck.

Warmth fired my cheeks. The sheer primal force of this brute sparked something I'd vowed not to feel again. Acting on sexual impulse was what got me in this banishment mess in the first place.

“I'm not interested in full moon frolics, pup,” I ground out.

Svet growled. “You'll watch that tone.”

I cocked a brow. “Why? Because your dick is pressed against my thigh?”

A rough laugh fluttered around me. “You're hot, babe, but you're not my type. Too fragile.”

That was my cue. I kneed him, hard.

The alpha grunted and shifted his pelvis. “That fucking hurt. Do you *want* me to make an exception and take you for a test drive?”

“As much as I would love a good fuck, and I think you could manage to give me a release, I don't have the time,” I

said through clenched teeth. Not to mention it was beyond forbidden. Hunters did not mate with monsters. Ever.

“Then tell me what you are, and we can get on with this situation,” the alpha responded. The pleasantness of his voice was a dark deception.

I pursed my lips. “This breaks all my rules.”

“Good.” Svet smirked. “That’s my specialty.”

It was laughable. I didn’t have another choice but to ask a werewolf, a shape changing beast, for help.

“What promise can you give me that you’ll keep my secret?” I insisted, voice dropping to almost a whisper.

“I’m the top dog here, I’ll see if it’s worth it.”

I shook my head. “This is life or death for me, and so far, you’re not worth earning my life.”

“But you’re not the kind of girl to chase death. You want to live, Candace.”

I did. “I’m a hunter—a fully sworn member of the Livian Guild.”

Surprise flared through the alpha’s dark and dangerous features. It was a small victory.

“Weren’t expecting that, were you?” I sassed, unable to help myself.

“No, I wasn’t.” The alpha loosened his hold on my throat but didn’t release me from the wall. “And this woman—with the delinquent son—who is she to you?”

I shrugged. “We’re sworn to protect humans against monstrous, totalitarian forces.”

“But you fight alone? Where’s your...team?”

“Squad,” I corrected. “They’re less than useless. And I can’t move against the siv all on my own, as much as my ego would wish it were otherwise.”

“All this, for one woman?”

“I hate injustice,” I spat. Anger flared bright, a mixture of a red and orange inferno in my soul. It roared, demanding to consume me.

I jerked against the alpha’s hold.

Watching me with those onyx eyes, Svet waited a moment longer before releasing me. “Whoever screwed you over had best watch out.”

Not wanting to talk about my own problems, I demanded, “You’ll help?”

“I will. It’s high time those froggies were taught a lesson. But—we’ve had troubles here too. The internal kind. Now that the marriage is sealed, and my brother is off on his global trek with his bride, I need a new project. A fight with our neighbors will bring the pack together,” he mused, more to himself than me.

“Will you let me fight by your side?” I tipped my chin up. This was a non-negotiable for me. Since I was the designated cleaning lady with the other hunters, I needed this.

“Your team leader—*squad* leader will let you?” The werewolf smirked at me.

*Hell, he’s deceptively boyish.* It was merely a façade. There was a raging darkness in this alpha, and I didn’t want to tempt it out.

“Since you don’t see him here, caring about the malicious attacks from the slimy, greedy frog people, does it matter if he’ll let me?”

Svet barked a laugh. “I like you, hunter-chick. We’ll be done and have you back by supper.”

My cheeks warmed, but I refused to stray off topic. “We fight now?”

“Wasn’t time of the essence?”

“It is.”

“Well, then....” Svet shrugged.

This was better than I could have hoped. Still, there was one more item I needed clearing up. “So long as there isn’t vicious gossip spread like wildfire through the Crescent City about hunters having an outpost here, you and I won’t have a quarrel.”

“Never hunt my pack, and your secret will remain with me.”

The alpha stuck out his hand. I slapped my palm into his.

“Don’t give me a reason to hunt them.”

Svet gripped my fingers in a bruising hold. Yanking me to him, he bent down. “If there’s ever a problem with one of my members, you come to *me*. They’re my responsibility. And I’m not above punishing them—even drawing blood—for stepping out of line.”

“I believe you.” And I did.

Just like that, I made an ally. It was a strange occurrence, and I would have much to think over, but that had to wait till later. Right now, a hunt loomed in my future.



## Chapter 8 – Lennox

Stepping into the sunshine, Svet threw back his head and *howled*. The deep, commanding tone set every fiber of my being on edge. There was power in that sound, strong and unbreakable. Like the beast of a male before me.

He wasn't my type, either. But damn...that body was made for sex.

I tore my hormone-fueled gaze away from him and watched the horde of wolves bound to their alpha's call. The pack was clearly hungover. The purple and blue bags under their eyes spoke of the late-night partying, but at their alpha's call, they came running.

"We go to war," Svet shouted, hands planted on his hips. "Today, the Rotten Leaf Clan feel the wrath of the Blackwater Pack."

A gasp of surprise rushed through the group. It was quickly stomped out as the wolves threw back their heads and let their support be known in a chorus of keen howls.

The sound was euphoric. More potent than a shot of caffeine, I rose to the occasion with these lupine beasts.

"Cats and guns. Fifty warriors, the rest take defensive positions here. We're extracting a male prisoner, and taking any of them down with us," Svet boomed.

The wolves took off, following their protocol. Alexia, however, and another wolf stepped closer to Svet. The alpha gave them a look of consideration.

"Respectfully, sir, what's this about?" the male asked.

Alexia watched me, but I didn't meet her eyes. It would only be a challenge.

"The goblin assassin is dead, Astasia is dead, and her traitor daughter banished. My brother is free of his curse. It's time other matters were dealt with," Svet explained carefully.

“Alexia, remain here and fix Candace’s car. If it’s not ready, I’ll drive her back to the city tonight.”

“Yes, sir.” Alexia let out a short breath. She might have appeared friendly at first, but now any good grace was gone.

“What my sister is too respectful to ask, is why she isn’t saddling as your second, alpha,” the male clipped out.

“Because my brother is free—completely free. That’s his rightful place,” Svet growled, his happy-go-lucky veneer dropping.

“He’s not here.”

“No, but Candace is. I’m going to test her fighting abilities today, see if she’s worthy to be allied to the Blackwater Pack.”

I inhaled sharply. A hunter aligned with a werewolf pack? Had such a thing ever been done? We didn’t work with monsters! Meeting the werewolf’s eye, I stared at him. In pack hierarchies, this was not only an honor, but a strategy. What was his game? How deep did I want to play into this hand?

*It doesn’t matter.* I needed to help Bethany, and then I could cut connections with the pack. Fighting supernaturals and exercising my skills was an added bonus. This was what I was trained for. Battle raged in my veins, and I didn’t care if it was a secret test. I craved bloodshed. Craved it like the fucking air to breathe! I wasn’t above using the tools available to get the job done.

“I accept the privilege of being the alpha’s second,” I said evenly.

Svet nodded, something dangerous flickering through his eyes, but then it was gone, and that happy façade fell back into place. “Good. Let’s roll out.”

~\*~

The winding paths could only be traversed by foot. Even these sleek Artic Cat ATVs had trouble at times maneuvering the trees. It was noon, and the heat was oppressive in tactical gear, but this was high grade shit. It was like sliding into my favorite pair of pajamas. I loved the feel of my limbs wrapped

tight, the heavy feel of the vest, the weapons strapped at my side.

It was hard to enjoy the scenic trek. Part of me ached to stroll these paths, to soak in the lush colors. The natural palette was a vibrant mixture of greens, browns, and the occasional pop of a flower's bright bloom. While there was a stagnant funk to the air, there was also a fresh burst of flora that penetrated the heat and humidity of the day. Wildlife conducted a veritable symphony in the background that was audible only when the motorized vehicles idled. Cicadas buzzed in the chorus section, fowl shrilled in the brass, while other creatures rounded out the other notes. This place had a richness that was all its own.

I rode a single ATV and followed close on Svet's heels. After forty minutes of hard riding, the alpha raised a fist and knocked it side to side three times. The wolves broke out in a fan two deep. I kept my course, fingers itching over the semiautomatic rifle. One flick of the safety, and it would unleash hell.

Although if I was being truthful, I hoped for hand-to-hand combat at some point.

With a shout, loud even with the visored helmets, the wolves broke out of the trees. The ground here was wet, perfect land for mud-loving monsters. There were six sitting around, squatting on the damp ground. They jumped to their hind legs in surprise. They were in their true forms. Unlike the brutes who'd paid the shop keeper a visit, they weren't disguising themselves as humanoids. The pukey, yellow-green pallor shone with sticky mucus. Their limbs were lanky and distorted. And not only did their eyeballs bulge, but their mouths were cut in a long, gaping line.

I raised my gun, putting a froggy in my sights. Svet leapt from his ride and smacked two with the butt of his gun. Shots rang out around us as the wolves moved in. Chaos reigned. Deep throated calls sang out into the swamp. Siv hopped away, rushing for safety. Others turned to engage their attackers.



“Where’s the gambler?” I shouted, catching an amphibian being scurrying for its hole. Their multifamily dwellings were all underground. Hopefully we wouldn’t have to crawl through the dirty hovels.

The foul creature blinked.

I brandished my weapon. “I asked you a question,” I snarled.

The siv in front of me belched, and I dove to the side as a spew of venomous mucus hurled through the air at me.

Absolutely gross. This was the thing that made these foul brutes utterly deadly. They didn’t need modern weaponry, when they were able to spray this acidic bodily fluid with accuracy over great distances. It was toxic enough to burn through flesh and char the bone. Their natural weapons weren’t the only things to avoid. Their home was littered in traps. Concealed pits of mucus blended in with the ground. One wrong step, and an attacker would writhe in a shallow vat of siv slime until they melted. Likewise, the monsters employed nets to trap a victim while a bucket of the vile mucus dumped down. The nets would disintegrate, but by that time, the trapped person would have no muscle left to move, if they were unfortunate enough not to immediately die.

Sensing danger, I dodged one such trip wire. It was a fight in earnest. All around me, wolves avoided traps and gobs of flying slime. Shots rang out in thunderous staccatos.

“Hey, you!” I bellowed, taking aim. The triple plinks of my gun sounded. Three siv dropped.

Dead monsters. Less filth to prey on humans. I took off, feet pounding across the soft ground. A smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. This was hunting. It didn’t get much better.

It sucked to admit the werewolf alpha made a better partner than any of the other students at the academy. He was a force to be reckoned with. It became obnoxious when I couldn’t shoot the next two amphibian brutes because they dropped at the hands of the alpha.

Right when I was about to shoot another, Svet stopped short. A quick glance showed what I'd missed. An ambush. We'd walked right into the middle of a defensible rut. Automatically, I took a step back. The only option was to retreat. Outnumbered, we needed to take the section more strategically.

I shot a look to Svet, expecting him to also be moving into a retreat. The gods-damned werewolf was smiling!

There was a pause.

Claws replaced the hands and fingers of the alpha. He flung his rifle to the side, becoming a weapon himself.

In a rush, Svet swept forward. How he maneuvered their poisoned spears, it was impossible to tell. The only werewolf I'd seen had been in a full change of form. With only his hands changed, Svet eviscerated the siv behind the walls of rotten logs and sunbaked mud. Not to be outdone, I charged forward, blasting holes in the earthen embankments and popping the brains out of the siv who poked their heads over to fight back.

What had seemed an impossible situation was ultimately a glorious battle.

Caught up in the fray, I missed the siv sneaking around to flank us. By the time I caught the movement from my peripheral, an amphibian pulled his head back, ready to spit, while the other two rushed Svet from behind. A shout stuck in my throat. There was no time for a warning!

Instead of shooting the spitter, I whirled around and shot. Two pops. The siv attacking Svet fell.

A rush of air whispered against my ear. The fine hairs not pulled into a ponytail flickered in the wind caused by the projectile. The ball of mucus hurtled passed, well into the distance.

Svet roared. More lupine features morphed with the human. He rushed the spitter, and in a matter of heartbeats shredded the marsh scum with those razor claws.

"Thanks," I panted.

The snarling muzzle dipped in acknowledgement.

As we pressed forward into the swamp, Siv ran across the waterlogged ground, disappearing to the open water far back. It no doubt led to their citadel, kept safe by the pools of moisture anyone else would have to wade through.

I pull up my visor and took a defensive position beside Svet. The battle was essentially over. The siv nesting here were now dead or had fled.

“The gambler isn’t here,” I said angrily.

“No, but this is pack land we’ve just cleared and reclaimed,” the alpha growled. Those rough words had the feel of granite as they came from that werewolf form.

My chest tightened and a retort was on the tip of my tongue. Looking around, I realized there were too many listeners. Challenging an alpha in front of his pack would never work. As much as I hated it, I swallowed my response.

Svet shook his head. The hair and elongated muzzle were receding. A glance at his hands showed the paws and claws were gone. Right now wasn’t the time to admit how fascinating the scholar in me found his transformation.

“Sir, two of ours wounded!” a humanoid pack member shouted, jogging to us.

I was already moving. A siv, crouching low in the muck, prepared to spew in our direction. I popped off two rounds. The monster fell over, ribbiting in pain. The high-pitched croaks were grating. I moved forward, ready to demand where the man I’d come for was, but Svet’s hand came down hard on my shoulder. A werewolf jogged forward, brought the stock of its gun down on the froggy’s face, and demanded where they kept their prisoners.

A webbed hand pointed south, where the siv were fleeing across open water. *Deeper in the swamp.*

“I owe you, Candace,” Svet rasped. “We’ll find the prisoner—and what’s more, we’ll offer his mother sanctuary in the pack lands until it’s safe for her to return to the Crescent City.”

I looked into the alpha's eyes and nodded. "Thank you."

"You fought well, almost as well as a wolf." Svet smirked.

I rolled my eyes and laughed harshly.

The alpha turned to the others. "Take the wounded back to Bogdana. We'll send terms by this piece of pusillanimous filth. Meanwhile, I'll need two trucks of warriors to head back into the city, stat."

"Yes, alpha," the wolves responded eagerly.

This was beautiful. How a military operation should be run. Even though these warriors fought in a more primal way, today had brought me more joy than I'd experienced in a while. *Since before graduation.*

"This was nice," I admitted as we stomped toward the twitching, trilling siv.

"Do I know how to woo the ladies or what?" Svet joked. "But seriously, if you ever want a career change, you'd be welcome here."

The immediate refusal was on my lips, but I paused. "The way things are going, it might actually happen. But I won't cut ties with my own over a disagreement of procedure."

"Wise." Svet took a branch and poked at the siv. "I have a message for your dirt lord."

As Svet poked at the siv repeatedly, ensuring the message was clear and terms understood, my mind wandered. All this was the palate cleanser I'd needed, but it wouldn't last. The vampire chained in the basement and the worthless hunters I was assigned to waited for me. So long as the alpha kept his word, there wouldn't be any major fall outs with the squad.

*But why the hell can't this be my life?* Hunting. It was what I was meant to do.

A strange thought smacked into me with such force that I took a physical step back. Our prisoner had sent me here. While I'd considered the vampire might have an ulterior motive, that detail had been lost in the heat of the chase.

Now I needed to ensure it wasn't going to come back to haunt me.

As the siv struggled away with the alpha's terms, I crouched beside Svet. "A moment, alpha."

Svet cut me a look then glanced over my shoulder to the warriors working around us. "Be quick."

"I was sent to you by a man who titles himself as the Conqueror of the Tiber."

Svet's eyes crinkled in question. "Okay?"

"Is he a friend of yours? I don't want this working relationship with your pack to have a short expiration date because of the trouble this...male has found himself in."

"Who is he?" the alpha asked, tone genuine.

I started. "You don't know him?"

Svet shook his head. "No, the name's not familiar."

"Perhaps it's a code," I muttered. It would make sense if he sent me to the bookstore. Perhaps I'd unwittingly sent a message.

"Like Candace?" Svet all but whispered, the silken tone of his voice teasing me.

I gave him a flat look. "You know why for that one."

"I do."

"The male is a creature of interest."

"Genus and species of this creature?" Svet's brows drew together.

"Vampire," I mouthed.

"Ah, I see. Well, I don't make a habit of associating with those parasitic fucks, so no, it's not likely I know this Conqueror, even if it is a false title."

"So we," I gestured between us, "won't have a problem due to the nature of my work with the bloodsucker?"

"Nope—my concerns lie with the pack."

“Good,” I sighed, rising.

Svet stood too, but he stepped in front of me as I made to move back to the ATV. “Why would you take a vamp’s suggestion to seek me out?”

That was the real question, and I wouldn’t stop asking myself for a long time. “A broken clock is right twice a day.”

The alpha threw back his head and rich, deep laughter filled the air. “Fucking hell, little lady, I hope we see more of one another.”

“You’re not my type, either,” I shot back, giving him a long, full body glance.

“We could make exceptions?”

I shook my head. “Not likely.”

“Ah, you’re probably right. Humans don’t...don’t do it for me. But if one could stand a chance, it would be you, Candace.”

Something about his resignation struck me. I almost wanted to pursue it, but I wasn’t here to get into bed. It always led to more trouble than it was worth. And Svet just wasn’t worth it.



## Chapter 9 – Lennox

“And leave my store?” Bethany looked over the convenience store. Her eyes widened, moisture glistening in the corners. She pressed her lips tight to keep them from trembling.

I wanted to tell her it wasn't worth her life, but who was I to make that claim. I didn't know her story, the worry and work she'd put into owning this place. Whatever her past was? It was clear from her tone the store meant a lot to her.

Mercifully, Svet had more tact. He clasped her hands. “While this could be lost, we will help you forge a new path, ponia.”

An old language's term of respect? The word had me cocking my head curiously, but the alpha wasn't paying me attention.

Bethany's lips pressed into a thin line. Whatever debate was in her mind was decided a moment later when she nodded to Svet. “My son's not to be trusted. He has troubles and will drink and swindle you out of treasure quicker than you can blink.”

“We know how to manage an unruly soul. He won't be the first—or the worst,” the alpha assured her. There was laughter in his eyes. “Take whatever you want or need. We have space in three trucks.”

“My dwelling is above the shop. You—and the girl—come up with me?” Bethany gestured to me.

I glanced at the late afternoon sun and nodded. “Alright.”

I trailed after the spry woman, Svet taking up the rear. There wasn't much truly crone-ish about her, other than the frumpy way she dressed. With the absence of wrinkles and not a whisper of grey hair, it was impossible to place her true age. Hell, she appeared to be in her early thirties.

We pushed into the tight quarters above. Knickknacks decorated the walls. Little boxes with secrets sat on shelves, all in neat rows. Other trinkets and do-dads were displayed



around the room. There was no one style to the items. Some were easy to place in time and location. The rest could have come from different worlds.

*Is she...human?* Unease shifted through me. I'd partnered with monsters, using the werewolves as a means to an end. Chewing on the repercussions, I clung to my earlier resolve. I acted with good intentions. If I helped Bethany to live, a victim to vile supernaturals, it didn't matter what she was. I did the right thing and had nothing to be ashamed of, and I could only pray no one at the Guild found out. It wasn't likely at this point. I wouldn't lose any sleep worrying about it.

In a daze, I took in the extent of this treasure. It wasn't the number of precious metals and gemstones, there were hardly any of those. The first clue was the orderly way things were placed, the care taken to keep them free of dust and accessible. The second was the way my glyphs sang that showed how much the naked eye could miss. There was a great deal of power in this place. That clued me in on just what kind of trove we'd stumbled upon.

"This is the sum of my existence," the shopkeeper said sadly. "There's no time to pack it all."

"There's time, and I have soldiers with boxes and bubble wrap ready to begin as soon as I give the command," Svet said firmly.

"Thank you—thank you both for this kindness," Bethany croaked.

Svet nodded and then jogged back down the narrow, steep stairway. If he didn't duck, his head would have grazed against the uneven ceiling.

"I want to give you a token of my thanks, since only Fate knows if we'll see one another again."

I looked back at the woman. "You don't need to."

Bethany held up her hand. "I insist."

Curiosity had me stepping forward. I held out my palm and Bethany slipped a locket into it. "Protection, from the night."

Biting my tongue, I kept back the laugh.

“Don’t mock this locket, girl. You might have all the protection in the world, but an extra piece is never enough.”

“You’re right, and I don’t mock you. I’m just...not sure how useful it would be for me. You might need it more.”

“It won’t save you if push comes to shove, but it will make the monsters think twice.” Her fingers brushed against mine as she curled them over my palm. Energy shivered through me. The spells inked into my skin prickled as the glyphs failed to decipher the source.

*What is she?* Not a witch. Something...more.

Bethany shook her head. “I have an intuition about these things. This locket’s time with me is done and our parting will be your gain.”

“Thank you,” I said, clasping it around my throat and sliding the burnished gold into my shirt.

~\*~

Pushing into the house, the last light of day trailed in behind me. There was so much to think about, and I didn’t know where to start. A cup of tea on the porch would be just the ticket. But first, I needed to check in with Captain.

I wandered into the kitchen. On the fridge was a hastily scrawled note.

**F and G are out. I’ve gone to bed for the night with a headache. Clean up downstairs and then turn in, grunt.**

Under it was added in a different hand:

**Unless you come out and party with us, Candy Cane. The Watering Hole on Durante Ave. Wear something sexy, first round’s on me ;)**

I groaned. “Assholes. All of you!”

They couldn’t hold a candle to the wolves—and those were supernatural monsters! The Guild had hunted werewolves in the past if the conditions were right and the

wolves were plaguing humans. But after this, it was easy to feel favorable toward the hairy, howling mutts.

There was no use going upstairs to shower the filth of the day off. Not until the basement was cleaned. *First thing in the morning, I'm demanding Captain take notice of me.* This was unacceptable! Today had reminded me how powerful I was, a valuable hunter if taken seriously. The way this sorry excuse for a squad treated me was ridiculous.

Part of it was my own fault.

That realization had me stopping on the top steps to the basement. It was true, as screwed up as it was. After my disgraceful blow up at the Academy and the fall out with my superiors, I'd lain back and taken the unjust punishment they'd thrown at me. The head instructor had always hated me—for some ungodly reason. I chalked up my mistakes to that.

*But I went down without a fight.*

I fisted my hands. This outpost was not a reasonable punishment. I should contact one of the primes at Headquarters and plead my case. I was done taking it lying down.

The temptation to go upstairs, wash, and read into the night called me. Screw cleaning their mess!

“Lennox.”

I froze at the eerie, bone-chilling call.

Only for a moment.

As if pulled by strings, I crept down the steps. Once clear of the aperture, I crouched to face the vampire.

“Let me see you,” he asked, voice a harsh rasp. His head was turned, but he couldn't see this far up the steps.

There was so much blood on the ground. Pieces of skin and muscle littered the top like grotesque sprinkles. Lacerations carved his skin, large chunks having been flayed open. The others had no doubt resorted to using potions to prevent healing. If the vampire drank, it would take time to work the poisoning brews from his system. But we'd had him

for days, and it showed. His body hung lack against the restraints. The rich olive complexion of his skin was gone. There was a hitch to his breathing.

My own heart beat more rapidly to see it. As I crept forward, I refused to admit the sight didn't sit well. I was a hunter. He was a monster. There should be no disgust at what had been done to him, yet my steps were slow and hesitant as I approached his cage.

Our gaze locked and my breath caught in my throat. A horrid gash still leaked down the right side of his skull. One long, jagged cut zigzagged across his forehead. But no matter the physical damage, those whiskey eyes were bright.

*He'll never surrender.*

I cleared my throat. "How did you know Svet would help? He says he doesn't know a conqueror of the Roman river. Is that not your title?"

"So many questions—" he wheezed. "Come here and let me see you. Maybe then I will feel like answering some of them."

My arms crossed over my chest. "Oh, and if you don't feel like it?"

"Perhaps you can convince me, bella donna."

"You refer to me as a poison. What makes you think I would like that?" I glared at him.

"Bella donna, beautiful woman. Belladonna nightshade is spelled differently. If you don't like that, there is always the other: little huntress."

It was if I was physically caught in his spell. My heart skipped and hammered in my chest. A strange warmth flowed through me. Unlike the raw, purely lust-filled arousal with the werewolf, which was struck as fast as a match and extinguished as quickly despite his flirting, there was something far more dangerous with this beast.

It would be a lie if I told myself that wasn't why I'd come down here in the first place. While my mind wasn't ready for

the truth, it had no say in my body's eagerness to be pulled forward.

“Well?” I breathed.

The vampire's gaze heated.



## Chapter 10 – The Predator

The telltale pinch of her lips showed her growing irritation. “Why did you come here?” she demanded.

*For you, bella.* “The Crescent City is full of treasures,” I said, evading while still answering her.

My indirectness set a scowl on her enchanting face. Oh, how I longed to capture her in my arms, trace each line of that anger. She would battle me...at first. The lines of a long dead poet babbled through my mind. *Let amorous kisses dwell, On our lips, begin and tell, A Thousand, and a Hundred, score, A Hundred, and a Thousand more—*

Fuck, I was delirious. Lennox wasn't a prize to be won. She was a tool, a priceless solution that would give me untold power. While her decadent body tempted the beast in me to devour her, I needed her for something far greater.

“Today went well?” I asked, even though I could smell amphibian blood, brackish water, and stink of wolf on her. The rough laugh escaping her lips came from a body healed. I would have to thank the staff at the bookstore for slipping healing herbs into her drink last night.

And somewhere along the hunt, she'd found a protection charm. The glint of the deceptively simple gold chain peeped from the crew neck of her fitted black tee. The outline of the locket showed it nested between her breasts. *Where did you get that, little one? Hmm?*

“You did go monster hunting, didn't you?” I pressed, keeping the smile back from my voice.

Lennox's forest green eyes shifted back and forth, echoing whatever debate was in her mind. “I did,” she finally clipped.

“Good.” I craned my head in her direction. “Very good.”

It hurt to draw enough air for those few words. The lengths I'd gone to build trust between us might seem extreme, but I gambled that they were worth the price. I couldn't have

Lennox hating me enough to ally with one of my enemies. No...I needed her firmly at my side.

“So you just happen to know about some werewolf alpha out in the backwaters? And he knows nothing about you?” She popped her hip to the side, accentuating the long lines of her muscled leg. No doubt an unintentional move. I wasn’t complaining. It was easy to envision pushing those strong legs apart and settling between them.

What little blood I had left was fast running south. There was no denying how attractive she was. My arousal to her was automatic, even if I never acted on it. “I make it a habit to know all about the power players in a given area.”

She huffed. The breathy sound stirred the bruised appendage between my legs.

It was dangerous being around her. I needed to stay on topic. “Did you find the history book?”

I already knew she hadn’t. She’d been reading a steamy paranormal romance, and Kelda told me Vivian hadn’t allowed her to enter the secret passage. In fact, the witch-turned-ghost had choice words for my protégée.

“I don’t believe that a historian of human events, who told tales to evoke national pride in young boys with the historical fictions, wrote about such an obscene event as a hunter and vampire teaming up.”

“Ah, you of little faith and narrow mind,” I quipped. “Go find the book, huntress. Then we can debate who is right.”

A retort was on the tip of her tongue when the door banged open.

*Dammit to the seven hells.* I hadn’t heard the commotion of the other hunter drunkenly entering the house through the kitchen door. It showed how weakened my senses were.

Lennox shot a glare full of disgust and perhaps flavored with hatred at where her fellow hunter was clumsily thudding down the steps. Her reaction caught my attention. *Interesting, bella. What’s changed this evening?*



There was a fight in her veins. I could damn near taste it, the flavor vivid to my senses.

“What are you doing back so soon from the bar, Fox?” Lennox snapped, shifting her weight to face the newcomer.

“Lennox Aelius, your time is done.” The words were spoken in a monotone. There was no slur garbling the cadence.

The hollow tone soured in my gut. Something wasn’t right. I inhaled deeply, ignoring the pinch and tightness of my bruised, beaten ribs. No alcohol.

“What in the hell, you’re drunk!” Lennox hissed. “Candace! Candace is my code name. Use it!”

The hunter lumbered forward with purpose. The shuffle sounded unnatural.

“Lennox Aelius, your time is done.”

That repetition was the final clue. I couldn’t see his face, but I would bet his eyes were clouded, if not literally, then metaphorically. It wasn’t alcohol, and he didn’t have the stench of possession, either. Dark entities stank of determination and stone. He’d been cursed—spelled to do something dreadful. This hunter had an herbal musk hidden by a profuse amount of sweat which was likely his body trying to get rid of the toxin.

A warning was on the tip of my tongue, but Lennox didn’t need it. She stepped into a defensive stance, arms loose at her side.

“Nox,” I whispered. “He’s not himself.”

“No shit, genius,” she snapped, moving strategically to the table with torture implements on it.

“Lennox Aelius, your time is done.”

“Fox! Don’t do this,” Lennox warned.

*Or do. I would love to rip your throat open!* It was a reckless thought. The asshole had been asking for death since I’d purposefully wandered into their grasp. I shifted under the burning weight of my chains. If I broke free, this round of the

game would be up. As it was, it was nearly finished, but there was still ground I wanted to cover with her.

Lennox kept retreating, now armed with a hammer and fillet knife. My flesh bore the marks of those implements. Their touch haunted my senses. But in her hands, they were gods-damned gorgeous weapons.

The hunter rounded my line of sight, and the visual confirmation showed him too far gone. A pity—his blood was no doubt tainted.

“Who were you with, at the bar?” Lennox demanded.

I could hazard a guess as to the answer. Even if she’d heard me, she wouldn’t have believed it.

“Lennox Aelius, your time is done.”

Lennox let out an exasperated breath. Bordering on the animalistic, the sound was feral. Erotic. The coil of heat burning deep inside roared with the demand to go to her.

*Screw it.* I’d seen all there was to see. My work with the huntress could continue without the chains. And...it would be far more pleasurable not to have them.

Lennox lunged for the stairs without turning her back to the cursed hunter, but he was a quick bastard and her caution slowed her down too much.

They engaged in a blur of limbs.

I craned my neck to the side to see. She was the best student the Guild’s academy had produced in years, and even though that made her well-versed in combat it didn’t make it easier to watch the fight. This brute had sixty pounds of hard muscle on her. Whatever curse was blinding him blocked any inhibitions or conscience. Fox did not go easy on her.

Lennox grunted as the hunter slammed into her. They dropped, rolling into the putrid mess of liquid on the floor. Lennox didn’t stand a chance because she was unwilling to strike and end a fellow hunter. It was a mistake to attempt to subdue the one called Fox. Yet it was understandable why she made that decision.

My fingers slid to the weakened link of chain. The burn of the metal was nothing new at this point. I squeezed the link, biting hard enough to break my back molars. This was harder than it should have been. Days of this torture had weakened me.

There was a sickening crunch behind me, and Lennox let out a soft cry of pain.

That did it. I snapped the link. The mass of chains around my torso slackened. It was enough give that I should have been able to cast the entire lot off. Kelda hadn't rechained me any tighter the last time she visited. Drawing a deep breath, I shuddered violently at the rush of pain.

There was no strength left. *Seven hells, how did I let it get this bad?*

I tried again to break free of the mass. My legs, stiff and numb from lack of circulation, were no help. Clenching my jaw, I pushed against the sun-imbued metal. Burns sizzled on fresh patches of skin.

Just as my body went slack, a cough and wheeze sounded behind me. In the midst of my own struggle, I'd lost focus on the death match behind me. That sound could only mean one thing.

The bastard had his hands on her. *On my beautiful tempest!*

With a silent roar, I threw my body against the chains. I had to reach her in time. She was the key to everything! Strength and determination to reach her fueled my muscles. The mass of metal drooped and sagged. Lennox's ragged breaths, each shakier than the last, drove me.

On her last breath, a strangled cry tore at my chest!

The chains gave.

I was free.

Stumbling in the cage, I heaved one purposeful, strategic kick, and the exit we'd devised opened.

I rushed at the hunter. Gripping Fox by the shoulder, I pulled him off Lennox. Stunned and coughing, she blinked at

me. Clouds of crowding unconsciousness darkened those green eyes.

There wasn't even a note of concern in the hunter's features. He struggled, but only to get down and reach Lennox. I shook him like a rag for good measure, fury racing through every fiber of my being.

"You've had this coming, Yaeson," I snarled, using his true name as I slammed the hunter into the wall.

With that, I ripped the prick's head from his body. Both pieces fell. Looking at the twitching mass on the floor, I could smell the curse. It was potent, deadly strong. The foul blood coated my fingers. *Looks like I had more energy than I thought.* But I could feel the last dregs fast leaving my system.

My body swayed. Blood. I needed blood! I squeezed my eyes closed so as not to fall. Only for a moment.

Because then...I turned to my prey. "Alone at last, Nox."

The huntress struggled to her feet. Leaning against the wall for support, she glared at me. Bedraggled, not a stitch of her clothing clean, and clearly hurting from the assault, she'd never looked more powerful.

"How did you get free?" she demanded, a slight tremor lacing her words.

I took a purposeful step forward and closed the distance. Crowding her against the wall, I drew a deep breath. The flicker of the fillet knife hidden at her side wasn't lost on me. It stank of the dead hunter's blood.

"When you want something badly enough, you move heaven and earth to get to it," I murmured.

"And you wanted me?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. I told you that from the start." The answer was simple. "No cage is keeping me from you, Nox."

"You ripped Fox's head off," she snarled. Even now, facing death manifest, she battled down the instinctual fear.

*Fate, she is something.* “Fox was my kill. ‘Vengeance makes one hell of a roommate.’”

The indirect quote didn’t register with her at first. Too many wheels were churning in her mind.

“What now?” she snapped.

I lifted a careless shoulder. Reaching out, I planted a hand above her head. I hadn’t touched her yet, unable to do so without her catching me. Which was why it had taken such manipulation to prick her flesh and scent her blood. I’d had to content myself with watching from the shadows as she slept. Now the rush of waiting for that initial contact was heady enough to delay the real thing.

Lennox didn’t flinch, but her body shifted, ready for the attack that would biologically be her doom. It was impossible for her to win a fight against me.

Not that she knew there was no reason to worry. She had no fucking idea how precious she was, how death would stamp out that which made her different.

“You can stab me with that blade. We both know it won’t do any real damage to me, but you’re welcome to try. If honor must be satisfied, I’m happy to give you the fight you crave, bella. However—” I drug a long, undisguised look over her. That full chest heaved as she struggled to breathe properly after her last fight. The adrenaline coursing through her was the only thing blocking what would be an ugly bruise in a day or two.

“However, what?” she ground out.

I spoke, even knowing that she wouldn’t believe me. “*However*, you’re safe with me.”

The laugh she threw in my face was rich and intoxicating.

“Isn’t it proof enough that I saved you? Fox—Yaeson—was instructed to end you. Cursed and bound to the act. You felt it, your glyphs warned you. But you still fought to spare him. He would have killed you, Nox, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

Lennox knew everything I said was true. It was written on her face. It didn't mean she wanted to hear it. Defiance shifted through those lush green eyes. "Who would want me dead?"

"Who did you piss off in the Guild to be sent here?" I countered, not giving her the real answer, but hinting at where she should start looking to see the rot and corruption.

"If the Guild wanted me dead, they wouldn't send an assassin!"

I laughed softly. "Not officially."

Her nostrils flared. The spark of rage pulsed a second before she stabbed. The long, thin blade bent as it penetrated. It was a good stab, right through my ribs.

"Ouch," I said through clenched teeth.

Lennox tugged the blade, but I stepped back. Wiggling it down and then to the side, I managed to free it. Hilt pointed at her, I handed it back. "Remove the head and burn the body, little huntress. It doesn't kill the soul of a vampire but damns them to an eternity of misery. Stab them in the heart with wood, even a gods-damned toothpick, and they fall to ash at your feet. Or have you forgotten *all* your lessons since graduation?"

"You're forgetting sunlight." Lennox snatched the blade.

Her fingers were a feather's brush from mine. The air between us thickened, as did a certain part of my body. It was unavoidable, a purely physical reaction to something so tempting. So forbidden.

But I was the master of control. There was a plan, and sleeping with her wasn't part of that. Besides, if I took her now, hard and hot against this cinderblock wall, it would damn my cause. The illusions she'd been indoctrinated with needed banishing. Otherwise, I was simply the monster of her nightmares, and the future I planned for us depended on her seeing me in a more trusting light.

Clearing my throat didn't eliminate the gravel when I spoke. "Sunlight burns, and yes—we could in theory ignite. But it takes time."

“I know.” She pushed at the blade, trying and failing to straighten it. “We’ve seen it as a course of our education.”

“I’m sure you have.”

Giving up with the blade, she dropped her hands and pinned me with a look. “What now?”

Before I could answer, she raked an assessing gaze over me. The faintest scent of her arousal pushed through the mucked stench of the situation. The craving that shuddered through me nearly sent me to my knees! *Fate!* I wanted to taste that sweet place between her legs more than I wanted her blood. I clenched my teeth, forcing myself to remain immovable. She didn’t acknowledge her physical reaction, however, when she goaded me.

“You must be hungry. Why aren’t you draining me?”

“Oh, Nox, that would be such a waste. Besides—” I reached out, lifted the chain of the locket she wore “—I can’t force it from you. Not while you wear this.”

Her gasp was nothing short of erotic. My cock strained against the scraps of my trousers.

“Yes, little huntress, you’re safe from bloodsuckers.” I dropped the necklace and took another step back before I lost the tentative grasp I had on my instincts. “This has been enchanted to repel my kind, specifically. I can’t remove it without great physical pain.”

“You can’t take it?” She arched a brow in challenge.

“I could, but I won’t.”

“Why? You said you wanted me.” As she spoke, she flipped the blade up. The keen edge pressed against her fair flesh.

With a muted roar, I surged forward and batted the knife from her fingers. “Don’t you dare slit your flesh, bella!”

Breathing hard, she met my furious gaze without flinching. “You said you wanted me and broke through heavy daylight chains and a cage spelled with sunlight. Your body is badly

burned and you're weak. Yet you won't touch my blood. Why?"

"It's not mine—yet."

That was when I realized my mistake. The shock flashing through her eyes told me she'd just successfully played me, stolen a secret from my soul.





## Chapter 11 – Lennox

Not his...yet.

The words ricocheted through my mind.

The controlled, hard visage flared bright. I recognized the emotion. Anger. The vampire was pissed off. It wasn't the same terrible wrath that had removed Fox's head from his body. That had been almost beautiful in its righteousness. This was a thread that had been pulled, words spoken without thinking. This ancient being who stood before me clearly didn't like being without control.

"So do you know who cursed Fox?" I asked quietly. Where the wisdom came to change the subject, I wasn't certain. But it worked.

A cool look of boredom fell into place. As if the vampire pulled a mask to hide his thoughts, and I couldn't read him. That terrible anger was successfully contained, however. "I have a guess."

My molars ground violently. "Are you going to tell me?"

"No."

I could have screamed! My chest kept tightening, and my muscles started to shake with anger. "Go to the hell realms!"

It had been obvious while battling Fox that something was wrong, but one thing the vampire had stated earlier was that my glyphs should have warned me. He was right. They should have. But they didn't. There was no alcohol driving my fellow hunter, only madness. I'd fought to keep him alive—to find answers. Answers this bloodsucking monster in front of me claimed to have! Now there was a dead body to deal with.

The edge of my vision darkened, and I struggled to draw oxygen fast enough. I was screwed. Screwed!

"Take a deep breath—"

"Damn you, monster!" I launched myself at him. The deadly arc of my fist should have made contact—if I was

fighting a human.

The vampire easily shifted out of reach. His arms wrapped around me, caging me in a wall of iron. “Lennox,” he said sharply. “We don’t have time for this. Unless you want your squad leader coming down here and seeing the state of things, you’re going to listen to me.”

I thrashed, struggling to grapple him down. The vampire whipped me around and crushed my back to his front. I knocked my head back but only hit his chest.

“Such a feisty little thing,” he murmured roughly. Hot breath brushed the shell of my ear. “Why can’t you just listen to reason? After getting banished, do you think they’ll believe you were innocent?”

I didn’t want to admit that he made too much sense.

Except for one thing.

“How the hell do you know any of this?” I hissed, angling my head back to glare at him. “My banishment? My name?”

That smirk pulled at the corners of his mouth. It was distracting. I clenched my jaw and refused to look.

“What fun would it be revealing all my secrets, Nox?”

“You know what, keep your filthy little secrets.” I kicked his shin. He didn’t even flinch.

The vampire shrugged and released me. “Fine. Fight me. Draw the other hunters here to discover Fox’s corpse and my empty cage. See how long it takes before you’re thrown in the Pitchhole. Or perhaps they won’t imprison you with the other creepy crawlies. Maybe they’ll simply put a bullet between your eyes.”

The Pitchhole. *Marissa*.

I battled down the nausea and aversion to that place. It took seconds, but I locked those terrible memories back tightly in the recesses of my mind. Time only numbed the fact that I lost my best friend to that hell. And yet the almost nonchalant reminder slashed through me, bringing back a fresh wave of black despair and vivid pain.

Damn him for bringing up that place.

And damn him again for being right about my fate. There was undoubtably something off about this whole situation. Fox hadn't been himself. I'd fought to spare him until I realized it was too late. Whatever nefarious plays were going on behind the scenes, I needed to tread carefully.

"I can handle myself," I growled, rolling my shoulders back. But one quick glance around the shitshow that was the basement told me I was in deep trouble.

The kind they executed hunters for.

"Cute," he laughed condescendingly. "Now that you've had your fun pretending you're in charge, here's what going to happen. You're going to scoot your ass upstairs and take a pull of the vodka in the freezer while I dispose of the corpse."

Stumbling back into the cinder block wall, I choked on my breath. "You're just going to dump the body?" I coughed.

The vampire grinned. It was like he could feel me cave. "He was no better than gator food."

"True," I breathed. Was he really offering me a way out of this mess? Could I take it?

Could I afford not to?

"Time's wasting, Nox. I need to dispose of the body then come clean my blood and the chunks of my flesh, which you were supposed to clean before bed. It needs to look like Fox screwed up after you did your chores, and you were already asleep when it happened."

I looked at the mess closer to the cage. There was so much vampire blood staining the floor. Clearly, he'd thought of everything and didn't want me in trouble. I chewed on the choices before me. Either fight this vampire, have the others find us, and hope they believed me. Or go along with whatever twisted, villainous plan this monster had in store.

I finally drew in a long breath. When the options were laid out, there was really no contest. The hunters wouldn't take my

word. Even if they did, the Guild would put this on my record in big, red letters.

“I’ll be back in less than ten minutes,” the vampire added, a shit-eating grin curling that delicious mouth upward.

I snapped my gaze to his. “You’re coming back?”

He cant his head. “You, a huntress, were just going to let me go into the night?”

“No— Well— How could I— What?” I finally managed to spit out.

“Go take a drink, the alcohol will steady you. And then drink some tepid water to hydrate yourself after the day in the swamp,” he added with firm resolve. “I’ll take care of this and then we can talk.”

“Are all vampires this bossy?” I grumbled.

He flashed me a feral smile. “No, that’s all me.”

To my complete and utter astonishment, the vampire snatched a black trash bag. I stood, numb with shock and watched as he collected the pieces of the fallen hunter. It was all too surreal.

The monster’s movements were slow. His jaw clenched tight as he bent and lifted. The cuts and gashes in his skin bled. Flaps of skin dangled grotesquely.

And still my body found the ability to warm inappropriately. There was a definite tingle between my legs.

Anger pushed through the trance of watching him and I sneered, “You’re really coming back. Willingly?”

“On my word of honor.” The vampire flashed me a calculative grin. It didn’t reach his eyes, which were pinched—pinched in pain. Hefting the sack on his shoulder, he dipped his head. And then, he was gone.

~\*~

The short walk up the basement stairs to the kitchen was robotic. My body moved to the vampire’s instructions as my

mind struggled to sift through the mess of events and trace the ramifications.

A vampire helped me, a Livian Hunter.

That thought pulsed over and over in my mind. He admitted to having an ulterior motive. Vampires didn't help hunters and especially hunters who'd imprisoned and tortured them. What did I have that he wanted? I swallowed hard. No earthly possessions. Was it my fighting skills and prowess as a hunter? How could that be useful to a powerful supernatural?

Yanking the freezer open, my fingers curled around the frosted glass of the vodka bottle. It wasn't cheap, but for someone unaccustomed to drinking, it burned. Hissing, I took one more pull before slamming the cork back.

*What am I doing?* Some little voice of self-preservation screamed from the back of my mind.

This disgusting substance was only going to dull my already frazzled wits. I had a vampire to recapture. Shoving the bottle back into the freezer, I reached into a kitchen drawer for a stake.

If the beast came back—but it seemed improbable that a ruthless entity would have any honor in the first place—then I would have to kill it. The vampire had already broken from the cage once. Even if I could manage to trap it, that wouldn't help my case. I needed the kill on my record if I stood a shot of surviving the fallout with the Guild.

The Guild.

The vampire had as good as accused them of being the ones to mess with Fox and set him on me.

I shook my head. Already a soft fuzz was playing in the back of my mind. I knew what being drunk was like—hell, as the rebel student, I'd indulged more than once. That was before Marissa was executed. A shuddering breath grated my lungs. Thoughts of my bosom friend flickered through my mind. I hadn't thought of her in years, always keeping that mental shield in place. One word about the Pitchhole, and the trauma came rushing back.

*Oh, Marissa.* I would never make the same mistake she did.

Reaching for the tap, I turned it on warmer. Cold water was only going to wreak more havoc on my interior. My eyes rolled so hard, they nearly dropped from my skull. The vampire had said as much. As the faucet spluttered and gurgled, I reached for a cup.

My hand *shook*.

“Shit,” I hissed.

Post an adrenaline spike was a bitch. I slapped the water off and braced myself on the counter. This was a gods-damned disaster. The first order of business was to end the vamp. Then I’d figure out who attacked me via Fox.

Eliminate the impossible and whatever was left, no matter how improbable, was my answer. It was simple logic. Fox wasn’t cursed by the Blackwater Pack—my relationship with them was too new. Besides, there was something about the alpha that made him trustworthy, despite my untrusting nature. No, it was highly unlikely to be them. The siv? They were smarting from their losses, and if an attack came from that quarter, it would be more direct.

Using Fox was a sneaky ploy.

I flexed my fingers, the memory of beating his flesh still coating me like a second skin. There’d been a few desperate seconds, right before the end, where I thought he would succeed. Whatever madness had possessed him, it made him unfeeling. The perfect fighting machine. He might have been a disgusting piece of shit, but there was a bond between fellow hunters, no matter how vulgar. I could have beat him if there was even a hair’s breadth of hesitation on his part.

There hadn’t been.

“You need to eat something, Nox.”

Heart in my throat, I spun around. Framed in the doorway, looking fresh and healthy, stood the vampire. He’d fed. The effect was...breathtaking.

I blinked, willing him away. Instead, the beast ran a hand over his black hair. Water dropped to his muscled shoulders. The longer pieces of jet hair on the top pulled back and to the right. The shorter hair on the side of the fade cut showed a skull that was healed. He wore jeans, slung low on his hips. Those feet were bare. The first night I'd seen him, I thought him statuesque, like a Greek god immortalized in marble.

There was nothing cold and stoney about him now. The flush of his olive skin spoke of Mediterranean origin—if he was even of this world. There was no doubt that if ancient man saw him, they would fall down and call him a god. Probably Hades. Or his brother Poseidon. I couldn't recollect how many of the others were said to have dark hair. They were all personifications of ideas that supernaturals used as ploys to manipulate humans. But this monster, Fate! He was real. He was powerful. And he had eyes for only me.

“Did you shower?” I breathed, all sense completely fleeing my mind. *Stupid!* What the hell was I thinking? My fingers crept toward the stake.

His gaze shifted, not missing the weapon. “No, just a dip in the fountain.”

*What fountain—* That wasn't important. “You came back.”

Those glittering amber eyes lifted to meet my gaze. “I said I would.”

“Color me surprised.”

“You'll learn in time, Nox. I always keep my word.” There was a heartbeat longer where he held me captive in that hungry look. He moved through the door, and I backed up instinctively. The stake was right there. I would have one chance to pierce his ribcage and nick the heart.

The vampire walked to the fridge and pulled out the bread, package of lunchmeat, and cheese. He reached correctly for the spicy, brown mustard, and then shut the door. Moving to the counter, he stretched to grab a...paper towel.

The stake lay between us, but he didn't even spare it a look. Setting the sheet of puckered paper on the counter, he



turned to face me and leaned a hip casually against the counter. “Could you step aside so I might wash my hands?”

“Excuse me?” I gaped.

“You can hold the stake if it makes you feel better, little huntress.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. A feather could have knocked me down. Snatching the stake, I stumbled away. The vampire proceeded to wash and dry his hands. And then he did the most domestic thing imaginable. He began to make a sandwich.

This was a creature of the night! Right here, in the rundown kitchen, making something to eat. Maybe I was sleeping. This couldn’t possibly be real.

“If you don’t stop pinching that pretty flesh, I’m going to come over there and tie your hands up,” the vampire growled.

I jumped. Looking down, I saw the angry red marks I’d unknowingly given myself.

“I’m going to talk, and you’re going to pay very good attention,” he said quietly as he placed the bread on the skillet to toast. “There’s a reason you were sent to the outskirts of the Guild’s control. An entity wanted to dispose of you without arousing suspicion.”

As quickly as those statements were spoken, I filed them away for future contemplation. Right now, I needed to collect as much information as possible. “Are you going to tell me who it is? This *entity*?”

“No.”

“Why?”

He removed the toast, squirted a healthy layer of mustard on one half, and then began to layer the sandwich. “It’s not important.”

The rough laugh scraped my throat. “That makes absolutely no sense. Why would you keep it a secret?”

The counter argument came quickly. “To keep you from doing something stupid.”

I went to say something, stopped, the words dying on my tongue, and gulped.

“Eat.” The vampire held out the sandwich.

“I resent being fed like livestock.” I gave him my best withering look, arms crossed over my chest.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Tonight is just the beginning, Nox. I need you to keep your strength up.”

“So I’m a plump, ripe juice box?”

He squeezed his eyes closed and took a long breath. “Just eat the damn sandwich.”

My stomach chose that moment to growl. Muttering curses, I snatched the food from the monster. After one large bite, the hunger in me took over. I barely swallowed the first bite before I ripped another.

“And they say we’re savages,” he laughed, but there was no humor in his voice. He took a second pair of bread slices and plopped them in the pan.

“You are.”

Kicking one leg in front of the other, the vampire leaned against the counter and crossed those muscled arms over his chest. That heavy gaze fixated on me. If I didn’t know what he was—

No. *No!* I would not humanize this vile creature. He *ate* my kind, for Fate’s sake! He was not hot, and I was not even remotely attracted to him.

A certain part of my body pulsed in contradiction.

“Okay, so does this mean we can put you back in your chains now that you’ve helped me?” I kept my voice light, giving him a sunny smile.

He let out a short laugh. “You’re so soft, so lovely, little human. You think you can get me back in that cage?”

“It seems a fine move for whatever twisted game you’re playing. Come on, let’s get you back in those chains.”

“Oh, no, pet, you misunderstood. I’m not going back in that thing.”

“Then what is this?” I let the sugary sunshine drop like it burned.

“This is me ensuring you make it to the next round of our games.”

“Games?”

“You’re a hunter, I’m a predator. We’ve been introduced, now it’s time to have a game of chase. This city is our playground. The other entity, they’re just making it more of a challenge, wouldn’t you agree?”

“What happens when I catch you?” I drawled, sarcasm thick as syrup.

His eyes glitter with a dark promise, “Who says I won’t catch you?”

“I should stake you right here and now!”

“You’re most welcome to try, Nox.”

I hissed in disgust, but he held a finger to his lips and added, “But that kind of violence will wake the pathetic excuse for the squad leader from his drunken sleep. You’re lucky that, apart from the cryptic message, Fox was hexed to silence when he was told to end you.”

“And how could you possibly know those details without seeing the curse?” I spat and plopped the last bite of food in my mouth. I eyed him skeptically as he began to build the second sandwich. Not having eaten today, my stomach pinched greedily at the thought of more.

“It was in his blood,” the vampire answered. “And no, I didn’t taste it. Blood tells a tale if you only know how to read it.”

I pushed my fingers into my scalp and rubbed in frustration. This beast was impossible. At every turn, he was a

contradiction of information. He changed the topic time and again. And what was worse, my fascination with him was addicting. *How am I going to get him back in his cage?*

The answer was painfully obvious. I couldn't. Not without a fight that would wake the dead. They might not realize what happened to Fox, but they would blame the vampire's escape on me. No...as much as it grated, the vampire was going to get his way.

This time.

But I would hunt him until I ended his dark reign.

The vampire gathered the ingredients, returning them to the fridge. "Alright, here you go, the rest of your supper. I'm truly sorry it wasn't something more exciting, but there's not time. Go upstairs, eat this, wash the swamp off your skin, and sleep. You'll need the strength to face tomorrow."

I shook my head. "Excuse me?"

The vampire sighed, sliding his hands casually into his pockets. "When they see I've escaped, what is the protocol?" he asked as if he was speaking patiently with a child.

We would destroy this location we were squatting at and leave the radius. We would bunker in our safe house. Either we would receive backup from the Guild, or we would have to hunt on our own until the threat was eliminated. There would be no more caging this vampire. It would be shoot to kill.

"You can't trust the others. If Fox was corrupted and turned, then Captain or Gage could be next. Be on your guard—at all times. Do you understand?"

"No," I shot back, but it was a partial lie. I knew how to protect myself.

"What part do you need explained?" he demanded tightly.

Good. I was under his skin. Giving him a taste of his own medicine.

"Why would my squad come after me? Why would the Guild or some individuals in the Guild want me dead?"

“We don’t have time for that tonight. Later, when the cards are ready to be dealt, you’ll know more.” Tightness threaded his voice. Clearly, he wasn’t used to being challenged.

And I wasn’t used to taking orders from the creatures I hunted! I shook my head, anger bubbling inside me. “And until then, we’re playing some sick, twisted game of cat and mouse around the city?”

“Exactly,” he drawled.

“You’ll never make me prey,” I hissed, stepping forward.

“Oh, but I already have.” Something caught his attention, because he looked to the basement. Letting out a whistle, one long burst and two short, he sighed. “It’s time we part for the night. The basement is clean, there’s no reason for them to suspect anything.”

“How?” I howled in a whisper.

“Not important.”

*I can’t believe this is happening.* How many times had I said that? Too many this year alone!

“Nox! Do you understand?”

I gave him a nasty look. “Yes.”

“Good.” He held out the second sandwich.

I crossed my arms over my chest.

Two eyelids blinked slowly, shielding those whiskey eyes from view. His body held tight, the live current moving through his frame. He’d been pushed further than was safe. Still...I couldn’t find it in myself to regret being difficult. The bastard deserved it.

“Lennox, I won’t have you languishing or incurring more bodily harm from lack of care. My plans for you are too important.” His hand cut through the air and those eyes pinned me with a raw fury. “Eat. Drink more water. Take a fucking shower, and then get that smart ass of yours into bed. Do you understand?”

I did, but he'd just showed me a card in his hand. No matter how badly I irritated him, he wasn't going to hurt me. Not yet. So I poked the beast once more. Voice dripping with a fake, sugary sweetness, I said seductively, "Ah, so the gesture of making me a sandwich wasn't kindness. Do you know why?"

His jaw worked back and forth, fists clenched tight at his sides.

I answered for him. "Because a fucking bloodsucker like you could *never* be kind!"

The insult missed its mark. He gave me a cruel smile. "I do nothing without purpose."

There wasn't anything else to say. I turned on my heel, intending to march upstairs.

In a blur of motion, the vampire caught me. I threw up my fists, but he was too quick for me. Capturing my body against his, he rounded me and bent me over the L of the counter. The breath left my lungs in a whoosh. Every inch of me was covered with his hard body.

"You *will* take the food and eat every gods-damned crumb. Or so help me, I will force it down your fucking throat, Lennox. And we don't have time for that humiliation. Not tonight, at least."

"Monster!" I hissed, breathing hard as my cheek threatened to dent the vinal countertop.

The vampire shifted his grip. Watching from the corner of my eye, I caught the movement. He brushed the back of a knuckle across my face, pushing back the wisps of hair that were freed from the braid.

"Don't ever forget it, little huntress."

I jerked, growling.

"Remember, every last crumb, or you'll be sorry." In a rush of air, he sped away, disappearing into the basement.

Part of me wanted to throw the sandwich after him. My stomach convinced me to act differently.



## Chapter 12 – Lennox

I didn't think I could sleep. The boiling anger was the only thing holding back the wells of panic. With wet hair, I'd laid my head down, prepared for a long, sleepless night.

And woke hours later to shouts.

I pushed up in bed, swiping sleep from my eyes and combing my fingers through the rat's nest on my head. Captain was hollering, and Gage was shouting back from his room.

Moving to join them, to start letting this horror play out, something out of place blasted through my attention. On my makeshift nightstand, a small white shell had been placed on a folded piece of brown paper.

Chills wracked my body as I stretched out a tentative hand. The protective glyphs inked into my skin didn't buzz in warning. Unless some intricate danger was threaded through the grooves of the seashell or stained into the fibers of the paper, it was safe to touch. Curiosity bade me risk it. The shell was the kind humans ignorantly said mermaids wore on their boobs. I couldn't remember the name, but I pushed it onto the rickety chair, and my fingers pinched the brown corner. Absently, as I unwrapped the paper, my mind recognized how perfectly the shell was formed. If I'd been walking the beach, I would have picked it up. Something about it called to me.

**A humble token of my attention. I look forward to the chase.**

My fingers trembled as I finished unrolling the scrap of aged paper.

**P.S. Don't trust any of them.**

“As if I trust you!” I hissed.

The door banged open, the flimsy lock not holding against Gage's bullish form. There was only enough time to push the shell under my rough blanket as I leapt from the bed.



“What the hell?” I gasped, slapping my hand over my chest while the other snuck under the covers.

“The vampire’s gone and so is Fox,” Gage clipped out.

But the roar of my pulse made his words seem far away. My palm pressed against my concealed gold locket on my chest. A flash of horror shot through me at how close the creature of darkness had come last night! Was it the charm that kept him from draining me in my sleep or his own twisted mind?

“Candace!”

I gave Gage my best look of astonishment. “What happened?” I stammered, pushing back those terrible thoughts for later.

“I don’t know, but we have to evacuate,” he said before turning to bump and stumble back to his room.

My habit of sleeping in tactical gear meant I only needed to grab my prepacked bag. Slipping out of bed, I scooped my backpack out of my closet and was about to rush downstairs. *The damn shell and note.* Pursing my lips, I turned back to the bed. The cot and blanket would be destroyed in the conflagration, but I couldn’t risk the forbidden communication being discovered by one of the others dousing the room with flammable substances.

I ripped back the blanket and snatched the evidence of my treasonous actions. These I would personally ensure were destroyed later. Tearing my backpack open, I shoved them to the bottom. The book, the one that was marked, stared back at me, where it lay at the top. Something the vampire said last night scratched at my memory.

Adrenaline spiking in my veins, I thumbed through the pages. The way my fingers shook, it took twice as long. The underlining and notes only started part way through!

I gasped.

That line.

*‘Vengeance was one hell of a roommate.’*

The vampire was stalking me.

“Hunting me,” I whispered. He’d been doing it since the day he so easily fell into the incompetent hands of the buffoons downstairs. This was all part of his plan.

Time ticked by at a crawl. Pieces of the situation fell into place in my mind. The vampire was manipulating me, and I was only now grasping how much. But he wasn’t the only one.

“I’m no one’s quarry,” I growled, hoisting the backpack on my shoulder. Once free of this house, I would move heaven and earth to bring the fiends out of the shadows to show them the extent of my wrath.



## Chapter 13 – Lennox

Captain's shout boomed through the house. Leaving the room to my door open, I took off sprinting. Gage was already in the utility room fiddling with the main line of gas and the pilot flame. I passed him without a word. He should be soaking the upper level in flammable material first, but who was I to tell him what to do.

“What happened?” I demanded as I burst into the kitchen, where Captain was already disconnecting the gas from the stove.

“Fox came back drunk and got too close to the vamp.” Captain clipped out.

“They're both gone?” I said carefully, inflecting it as a question.

“Yes.”

“How do we know they're related occurrences?” I pressed, even though my mind screamed at me to shut the hell up.

“See for yourself,” the captain bit out. He grabbed his backpack and led the way down the basement steps.

As I clattered down to the basement, Gage barreled into the kitchen. Going for the fridge, he grabbed the vodka and then thundered after us, shoving it in his backpack. Disgusted at his useless action, it took a moment before my senses focused. Gasoline. The worktable was drenched in it. At least they got this lower level. In the explosion, this would burn to an unrecognizable mess.

It was the cleaned floor that stole my attention first. I remembered the vampire's remark, but I'd been too worked up to question him. *He had help down here to clean this.* It looked as if I'd done it before going to bed, exactly as the vampire suggested. Everyone would assume I was long asleep just like Gage and Captain when the vampire escaped. There was the briefest of moments where I felt a twinge of thanks to the monster responsible.

That was until I saw his other message. In big, unmistakable letters filling the wall where we'd spoken was a bloody mess that spelled a threat.

### **I got Fox. Who's next?**

The words twisted inside. A poison—fear. It snaked and vined up my spine, spreading through my body into the myriad of nerves. Such a toxic emotion should have numbed me. Instead, the terror threatened to suffocate.

“Is that—?” I couldn't finish the question.

Gage spat in disgust. “Yep.”

“Come on, you two. The house will blow in minutes, and we need to be long gone,” Captain called from the doorway.

I knew the captain was right. And I would hurry after him into the backyard, where I would run into the back streets until we found a car to lift, but first, pulled by disgusted fascination, I crept to the wall. The gruesome image stared back at me from a sickening canvas. The ink showed the distorted animal that Fox was so proud of and associated with his code name. Cut from his body was the patch of skin with the orange fox tattoo.

Bile rose to the back of my throat.

*Don't trust anyone.* Not even the vampire.

The scent of rotten egg wafted through the mess. It was time to go. Tearing myself away from the gruesome message, I tried to feel anger about the death of a fellow hunter. I couldn't muster the proper sorrow for Fox's demise. He'd been nothing but a lecherous swine to me the entire time.

Dashing into the street, I dug my heels into the ground and *bolted*. The others were already jogging around the alley. There were faint sounds from two of the houses we passed. Humans rising for their blue-collar jobs. No one called to us, a small mercy.

The captain cut between two houses. The broken windows above showed yet another abandoned dwelling. Gage disappeared next, and I sprinted forward, hot on their heels.

Just as I cleared the base, a boom rent the air. The explosion hailed the destruction of our squat.

“Fuck! Fuck, he’s gone,” Gage panted, scrubbing his palms into his eye sockets.

I blinked at the hunter, a moment of confusion flickering through me.

Captain moved toward him, slapping him across the back and squeezing his meaty shoulders. “We’ve gotta keep moving, man. We’ll mourn and celebrate Fox later.”

“Yaeson. We can say his name now,” Gage hissed.

“Yes, and we’ll honor him as the fallen hero he was.” There was a catch in the squad leader’s voice.

These men grieved. Whereas I was battling down the delight that came from thinking just desserts were served and avoiding grappling with the larger problem of my implication in the vampire’s escape, these two were hurting. Badly.

“We’ll catch the brute responsible,” I murmured, trying to let commiseration drip into my voice. It was damn near impossible because.... I sighed.

*I’m glad Fox is dead.* There. I admitted it.

“Yes,” Captain responded fervently.

But what my superior officer didn’t realize was that it had to be me. They couldn’t ever learn it was basically my fault the monster was free and definitely my fault their comrade was dead. Although...I didn’t break the chains. That was all the monster. *It likely would have gotten free even if I wasn’t the catalyst.*

He’d probably been sneaking out of them all along. How else would he have come up to deface my book?

Those thoughts didn’t reassure me. There was no denying the monster wanted me—Lennox.

“Let’s get to a safehouse, make the report to HQ, and plan our next move,” I said, phrasing it like a suggestion instead of marching orders.

Gage was shaking, breathing roughly through his grief, but Captain looked up at me. It was as if he were really looking at me for the first time. With a slow nod, he swept his hand.

“Get us a car, Candy.”

The world seemed to shift. That one display of trust and authority showed a small change in power. The captain was treating me like a fully-fledged hunter. How long this change in consideration would last, it was hard to say. But I wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

My heart soared as I bounded forward, crossing the street into the opposite alley. Sirens weren't yet wailing, showing the lack of concern for crisis in this poor neighborhood. I spied a house with blinds still down. There was a tiny beater sitting in the short driveway. I walked by and tried the door. It wasn't locked. I slipped inside and knocked off the plastic plate under the steering wheel. The wires were crossed seconds later, and the engine kicked over. If I'd had more time, I would have found a stick shift, like the one I'd driven out to the swamp—

“Shit.” I bit my lip. We were going underground, but the alpha was going to be looking for me to return my ride.

There was a little twinge of sadness that I wouldn't be seeing him anytime soon. It passed quickly. The powerful individual was attractive, but he didn't get my motor running more than a physical jump start. Not like the whiskey-eyed fiend—

No! Just no.

I was not going there. Now or ever.

I drove the stolen ride to the street, and then slipped the strap of my backpack off. Before I could toss the bag into the back, I froze. The shell! I needed to get rid of it. Cruising down the next alley, I fumbled with the zipper.

Something jabbed under my nail. Bringing my smarting digit to my lips, I sucked on the blood. *Stupid shell*. I threw the car into park and jumped out. The seashell and note were in my hand. But as I stared at the ocean treasure, a pair of bright amber eyes sprang to my memory.

My damn insides clenched.

Traitorous! I clenched my teeth hard and ripped the note. That was easy to dump into the stinking metal can. As the shell moved to join the same fate, I paused. It was so beautiful. Two steamy novels and a seashell—that was all I had to my name. People like Bethany had a whole treasure trove collected and curated to their lives.

If nothing else, the growth of calcium would serve as an object of my revenge.

And if the others found it, they wouldn't suspect a vampire had given it to me. That was too insane. Not fighting the bad logic, I dropped back into the car, pushed the once animal home into the bag, and floored the car.

Speeding down the road, I forced myself to ease off the gas. Acting like a fool in a stolen ride would only get me caught. We needed to get underground quickly so I could work off this pent-up energy, and once my body was rid of it, I could focus on a plan. Somewhere out there, the vampire waited for nightfall.

Well...he wouldn't find me.

“But how the hell am I going to find him?”

As I drove the car to the alley's mouth where Gage was full on weeping, I slid my gaze greedily to his backpack. Just a few sips, and I could slide into oblivion. Right now, I needed that, an escape from this twisted hell consuming an otherwise beautiful late summer morning.





## Chapter 14 – The Predator

It was all too cute. The predictability of the Guild would be their eventual downfall. Not that I was one of the zealots who craved their destruction. In fact, I saw the use of a humanesque organization to protect their kind. It was their damn fascination with experimentation that I personally couldn't stomach. Supernaturals treated like lab rats. Repulsive! Ever since the Age of Enlightenment, as they called it, their obsession with science blinded them. The root of the word Enlightenment might come from the idea *to know*, but they only wanted to bring light to limited truths and even sought to disregard truth itself.

Idiots.

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, the Creole Townhouse was a beautiful example of decoration in the Italianate Transition Style. I hadn't been to New Orleans since the decades after the American Civil War, but the flavors of jazz, culture, and style spread easily into the rest of the country. Its charm was even known to the world, always beckoning me back to partake in the sensual decadence of the Crescent City.

Well, now I was happy for an excuse to be here.

And what an excuse.

I drew in a deep breath. The aches and pain from my short captivity were nearly gone. So long as I didn't dwell on the experience, the ghost of the torture couldn't haunt me.

It was time to play with the little huntress in earnest. The memory of her blood called to me. Like any gentleman, I wouldn't take it until she offered.

She would offer.

One detail perplexed me. Kelda's report was that no backup had come from their central hub. As I watched the pseudo fortress, I considered the ramifications. The small contingent of hunters stationed here couldn't handle the dire

situation of a loose and vengeful vampire. It had to have some relation to Fox's demise. There was another force at work, and until I found them, my beauty wasn't actually safe.

Pulling a hand-rolled stick of decadent goodness from the silver case, I lit my slim cigar. The gritty flavor filled my mouth with the rich drug I couldn't get enough of. It was deliciously sweet not to have to worry about disease associated with these death sticks. No...if the eternal slumber came for me, it would be from a well-placed shaft of wood.

*She could do it.*

I let out a short laugh. Damn, but Lennox was something. I would have to be extremely careful with that one. And not because her physical prowess was anywhere close to mine. It was my own ego that would risk harm with her. If I wasn't careful, I would think myself finally secure with her. My guard would drop. And she would take her shot.

It'd happened before.

*Not with this one.* No, this one would want to live. She would fight me, but she wouldn't do what it took to beat me.

And if she did get any wild hairs, I would squash them quickly and thoroughly.

The side door cracked, and I puffed smoke into the night.

"Well, I'll be damned," I whispered to no one.

These hunters were going on patrol. They might be the sloppiest bunch of SOBs I'd ever heard of, but they were fierce. It was almost admirable. If the stench of alcohol didn't carry across the street and into the shadows, I would have been genuinely impressed. This lot was acting rashly. Brave, in that they thought they could patrol the night and seek revenge for their fallen comrade. But foolish in the same span.

So be it. If they wanted a hunt, I would play along. I knew how to keep to the shadows. The dwindling light of early evening might blister my exposed skin, but there were salves that helped. *Soon that problem won't be an issue.* If I was a shade more psychotic, I would have cackled at that thought.

I made to step into the street, follow where the blithering duet of idiots led, when my protégée dropped into the shadows. I flicked a glance to the rooftop she'd come from. "Dramatic much?"

Kelda held out her hand. The stone on her daylight ring caught the shaft of waning sunlight. I might be a black souled fiend, but never had the idea to pay the price for such a ring tempted me. All villains had some morals. Mine stopped at ritualistic child sacrifice. But I knew my companion. Whatever had scarred her past, she didn't willingly slaughter a child of her body in the dark ritual to create that ring. I'd never asked her, and she'd never spoken about the ring's origin. There was more to the story than a coldblooded ruthlessness for personal gain.

I passed the cigar to her impatiently waiting hand. Kelda took a long drag, pulling the smoke into her lungs.

"You have to *taste* it," I grunted. "How many times have I told you?"

Kelda blew out the smoke with a defiant toss of her head. "And I don't give a shit."

"Why are you here?" I demanded, watching the curtains of the top floor flutter. My beauty was looking into the encroaching night. Could she feel me? Did she sense my presence? She knew I was coming for her.

"The boy-who-would-be-king requests an audience." Kelda took another drag, holding it like a damn marijuana roll.

I huffed. Of the five Crescent City bosses, Yves was the most eccentric. We might mock his opulence and showmanship, but it was clear to anyone looking beneath the glitz and dazzle that he wanted to be more than a supernatural mobster.

"Did his majesty give a time?" I took the cigar back and enjoyed one more puff. The decadence of the vice didn't hit quite the same with this newest mosquito's would-be summons.

"Midnight. His whole crew will be there."

I wanted to roll my eyes at the cliché. A public showdown—what an ass wipe.

“We knew this was coming,” Kelda drawled. Crossing her arms, she leaned against the brick wall of the opposite building. A shaft of light hit her face, the warmth caressing her fair skin.

My days of envying her were counting down, but only if I played my cards right.

And one of those moves was to see Ives.

“Is the gift prepared?” I asked, knowing there wasn’t really a need to question my protégée’s attention to detail.

“Waiting in your rented rooms.” Kelda flicked a sideways glance to me. “Oh, and Viv is pissed.”

I arched a brow.

“Apparently someone was burnt in that covering-tracks-explosion.”

A growl of annoyance scratched my throat. “How bad?”

“Nothing a salve won’t heal. The witch’s lackeys have already paid a visit to the hospital and the male will be released in a few days good as new and none the wiser.”

*Good. That’s good.* If the male had died....

But I wouldn’t waste thought on that. “I’ll have to ensure reparations are made and Viv doesn’t shut the door in Lennox’s face.”

“Or worse.”

“Always the optimist,” I shot back.

Kelda smiled at my dripping sarcasm.

I dropped the half-finished cigar and stamped it with the toe of my boot. “And have you an idea of how we appease the sleeping beauty?”

“Release the witch’s body from the tomb?” Kelda offered, knowing damn well she wasn’t being helpful.

“Kelda,” I snarled.

She straightened. “We’ve got until midnight, surely we can fix it so it doesn’t spoil our plans for after the vampiric summons.”

I pulled a letter from my pocket and slapped it against my open palm.

“Don’t tell me we have to waste more time toying with this hunter girl,” Kelda muttered dryly. She knew damn well this wasn’t a snatch and grab. We’d been over that in many heated discussions.

“There’s still more work to be done before she agrees to my terms.”

Kelda scoffed, but I was firm. Lennox didn’t have to like me. She just had to work with me and not stab me in the back.

There was another brush of movement in the upper window. I could make out the profile of my little prize. My heart fucking skipped.

I frowned. That wasn’t the reaction of a predator catching sight of his prey. No...that was something else. Some strange thread of emotion I couldn’t place and couldn’t recollect ever having felt in the centuries I’d roamed the night.

Shoving the letter back in my pocket, I turned to creep down the swath of shadow. “Not tonight,” was my only explanation.

Kelda accepted it and followed. What I didn’t want to explain to my protégée was that Lennox had earned a night’s respite. And upon further consideration, if the huntress felt safe for one night, she might start to dig into this spot. If I left her a missive, letting her know I was already on her trail, she might do something desperate. And we couldn’t have that unpredictability thrown into my careful calculations.

*Sleep well, little huntress. For tomorrow, we play in earnest.*



## Chapter 15 – The Predator

As the doorbell chimed inside, I ran a hand down the front of my designer suit. It was fitting attire for the top dog vampire, but I could remember when Yves was just a lad, living through the Hundred Years War with his small land-owning father and noble yet impoverished mother.

Still, he was strong to have survived and thrived. Even if he was just an alpha in a backwater town like New Orleans. The kingpins in New York City or Los Angeles would eat him for sport. The heads of the Paris or the Roman court would simply squash him without a second thought.

I didn't need trouble, and so the velvet lined box under my arm and the bottle of scotch in my hand were more than enough to appease this male who was no better than a mob boss.

The door was opened by a butler, who bowed deeply. "Good evening, sir."

"Yves is expecting me."

"Mr. Menocchio?"

"Yes," I said, stepping across the threshold.

"Very good, sir. Right this way." The butler led me through the great foyer as the front door fell shut with a deafening thud.

This early 1800s mansion was like something out of a PBS period piece film. The staff were clad in classic black and white, and moved without acknowledgement in the background. Ivory and gold wallpaper was broken up by bursts of jewel tones. The heavy brocade curtains were merely decorative; these windows were sealed at sunrise for protection. A particularly ugly porcelain vase sat on the white and grey marble table to the left, one of the plunders of Europe in the last several centuries. This home felt like the original Versailles with the contradiction of servants dressed like they hailed from Edwardian England. It twisted my stomach.



“Di Menocchio! You old dog, good to see you,” boomed a voice.

The grating, nasally voice of this Great Lakes tycoon had me drawing a sharp breath in a failing attempt to keep calm.

“Johnson, how are you?” I extended my right hand.

“Oh, come here, you!” Peter Johnson slung an arm around me in a friendly hug.

The inclination to pull his beating heart from its cage of bone and flesh flashed through my veins, but I battled it down. Bloodshed in Yves’s house would be bad form. Slaughtering a guest would be unforgiveable without just cause. Unfortunately, a hug didn’t qualify as a valid excuse.

“Get off me,” I warned, pushing away.

Johnson narrowed his eyes, but then stepped back with a hearty, Scandinavian laugh.

*Damn Midwesterners.*

“Menocchio.” There it was. The regal summons from the next room over.

Flashing Johnson a dark look, I pushed past him. The gad fly had rumped my suit. Someday I would give him the ass kicking he’d been asking for. With a quick tug to my suit, I stepped into the parlor. The door pressed shut behind me in silence.

Enthroned on a pale brocade armchair, Yves pinned me with a look.

Born a vampire from a turned mother and a natural father, Yves carried the stigma of his parents. As a youth, he’d spoiled for fights whenever anyone brought up his mother’s lack of original blood. The combative nature forged him into the man he needed to be to survive the turbulence in France. How he survived when his entire family perished in the Reign of Terror was a story for another time. A jolt of something akin to fondness shifted through me to see the lad all grown up. The scruff on his cheeks was a shade lighter than his dark

brown hair, and those eyes. Light blue, just like his lady mother.

I inclined my head but didn't drop anymore of my body in deference.

There was a snort from his royal highness. "Straighten up, you fool, you look ridiculous."

Being alone with him meant we could speak more freely. I flashed him a genuine grin. That ancient dialect was music to my ears. "I always liked you, Yvee."

"Watch it," he snapped. "I'm not the boy from Gascony you knew."

"No, but you're the man whose tales of conquest have reached even the Roman Court." *Your father would be proud.*

That fluffy piece of flattery did its intended job.

"Sit." Yves pointed at a deep armchair.

I set my tribute on the side table next to the antique armchair, and then took my seat, slipping the button of my suit jacket loose. "You look good, Yves."

"As do you. You'd better have a good reason for coming to the city and taking a week before coming and greeting me."

"I was apprehended," I said smoothly.

"By the notorious Guild. We heard."

He meant that Kelda had told him. I would be having words with my protégée later. "It was a most uncomfortable occurrence, which mercifully came to a quick and speedy resolution."

"Riddle me this: You're ancient and powerful. How did they catch you?" Yves leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He was shrewd, as Kelda had reported. Which made sense. He'd lived a long life and not under the protection of a formal court.

I shrugged. "Ego. It gets me into trouble."

The half-truth fell easily from my lips.

Yves grunted, not catching the subtle reference to his parents' demise.

“What were your original intentions in the Crescent City?” Yves folded his hands and rested his chin on them.

“A long-needed holiday.”

“Hmm,” Yves murmured and pushed back into his seat. “Not much more forthcoming than your lackey. An admirable quality in a loyal follower.”

There was no missing the way his eyes sparked with greed as he spoke of Kelda. I stiffened.

“Where is the darling beauty?” Yves added, not caring that he was treading on dangerous ground.

I counted to three before answering. “My protégée is her own woman. She doesn't like royal summons, and since I am the only one she lets speak *for* her, I represent us both tonight with the recognition of your authority here and the presentation of our gift of goodwill.”

Yves considered me for a long moment. Bright, full laughter split his face and he clapped his hands. The reaction was so like his father that I had to clench my jaw and battle back the sudden swell of nostalgia. “Well said. But...that's to be expected from a Lord of the Roman Court.”

I winced at the title. While it was a truth, it was easier not to flaunt my power and position. A lesson Yves had yet to learn.

“May I?” he gestured to the box.

I gave him a small nod. “It is yours. Do with it as you will.”

With a flourish, Yves slid the satin ribbon, which he let fall to the floor. The top of the box pulled off with a muted pop, which was quickly followed by the street boss's sharp inhale.

“C'est pas vrai!”

A victorious grin curled my lips. “I thought it would please you.”

Yves took the chalice out of the container. “It can’t be,” he breathed.

“It is,” I assured him.

“What powers of heaven and earth did you move to find my father’s drinking chalice?” He held the metal cup tenderly.

“It was nothing, so long as you accept my good will, and should Kelda and I need a safe haven, while we rest and recover, we may beg your hospitality.”

Yves spared me a glance and dipped his head in reverence. “My home is yours and my connections in this city are at your disposal.”

“Most magnanimous of you,” I said, keeping the laughter from my voice, hard as it was. This fool really did see himself as a king with a court, instead of a supernatural with a section of the city to govern. If any of the actual rulers of our kind found out—

*Oh, the little shit’s in over his head.*

Yves pushed a button on his watch. The butler promptly appeared in the space.

“My foot soldiers may join,” the street boss said.

The mafia-like entourage flowed into the space. There were many non-vampires in the throng. The supernatural beings were no doubt residents of the section he ruled. But it was the five humans that settled toward the back of the room that drew my focus. I smelled nothing distinct from their scent. Since none of the vampires circled them, it was possible they weren’t snacks. The list of their purposes narrowed.

“Menocchio,” Yves intoned.

I shifted my focus back to him. “Yes?”

“If we may be of service to you during your time here, let us know,” Yves said sincerely. This repeat of his earlier declaration was for his street crew’s benefit.

It was as if I’d scripted the words into his mouth. My intention for this interview having gone exactly as planned, I

leaned back into my seat. A text from Kelda reported Vivian was temporarily appeased. Tomorrow would start the work to endear myself to Lennox. Not much could be done before I went underground for the day. There was no reason to hurry away from the jovial activities here.

“Since you find yourself on the continent and in my city, I would be honored if you would dine with me once a week,” Yves said casually, but there wasn’t an option for me to refuse.

A small flex of his muscles. I was mildly impressed.

“It would be my pleasure,” I lied. I would rather slit my wrists.

“Then let’s have a bite now.” Yves shot a pointed look at his butler, who nodded.

The refusal was on the tip of my tongue when a harem of blooded individuals of all shapes, sizes, and species glided into the room.

Yves curled two fingers at a stunning female with porcelain skin and flaming red hair. I looked over the selection. As honored guest, it was my turn to select next. There were mortals, several high fae, a few other fae beings, and a sorceress.

She was exotic. Damn near divine.

Black hair braided in dainty rows to the side hung long and was full of gold and precious jewels. The flowing outfit of bright cerulean secured at the throat and wrists with a gold bands only served to draw attention to the glow of her dark skin.

It was the challenge in her eyes that caught me.

“May I?” I opened my palm, inviting her forward.

Her ruby lips curled to a smile that didn’t reach her dark brown eyes. Quick as thought, I shot across the room and took a cushion from the open-back settee. The vampire there hissed, but I was already back to the armchair.

Tossing the red silk pillow on the ground, I held out my hand to the woman.

Rolling her eyes, the sorceress came. “Such a showman. I swear, suave elegance must be ingrained in the essence of all vampires.”

“Nonsense, my mother and grandmother simply taught me good manners, while my father taught me respect for my betters, especially females.” I took her hand. She made to sit on the cushion, but I pushed her gently into the armchair.

I folded onto the red seat on the ground.

The sorceress let out a huff of surprise. “My compliments to your family.”

With a devious grin, I pulled aside the fabric of her skirt.

“If we do this,” she added, “I get a vial of *your* blood, vampire.”

Leaning down, I pressed a kiss against the inside of her thigh. “Such a high price.”

The firm muscle tensed under my lips. “I know my worth,” she breathed.

“Oriana is worth the cost,” Yves piped up. Twin pricks let crimson spill down the throat of his chosen snack.

The name sparked in the files of my memory. *It can't be.*

Why would they drop her name? To see if I knew it?

Did Yves know? I shot him a small glance. The way he watched without looking tipped me off.

“I don't know if I can trust her,” I said, leaning down to run my tongue across the luxurious skin, eliciting a gasp from the beauty. “She tastes of deceit.”

“And you have a wonderfully developed palate,” the sorceress countered. As I sucked on her skin, she tossed her head back with a moan. “You seem well versed in the art of seduction. Perhaps you would be a decent lover.”

“I promise, I would be.” I moved back and covered her legs again. “Another time, perhaps.”

“Such a smart male. While it is very refreshing to see a vampire with boundaries, it’s admittedly disappointing not to make an exchange. I’ve heard your reputation, and it’s described as damn near euphoric.”

“And you, O most glorious sorceress, stories of your power are legendary.”

“Exactly. They remain a thing of legend.” And just like that, the space over her body shimmered. Before me sat a crone in a full body dress, shawl, and veil. Although her black hair was streaked with grey, her wrinkled skin still held a dark and terrible luster. “Perhaps next time, young man, I’ll find your resolve crumbling.”

“What if there is no next time?”

“There will be.” With that the sorceress rose.

I couldn’t resist. There were rumors that she lived, but to find the ancient Oriana here was nothing short of miraculous. “Confident, O temptress?”

She only smiled. “My children are off limits, vampire. If I hear so much as a whisper that you touched one of them, you will find yourself entombed in agony for all eternity.”

*Ah, and here stands the true ruler of New Orleans.* All these street bosses, playing with their tiny districts held not a candle to her. “Understood, ma’am. I’ll know them by their scent.”

With a small incline of her head, the sorceress disappeared.

“Why haven’t you chosen yet? You got the damn pillow, what are you waiting for?” Johnson called out. “You’ve just been standing there like a damn statue.”

I shared a look with Yves. The others—they hadn’t seen the exchange with the sorceress. Surprise flickered through me. The little prince was smarter than I gave him credit for. He’d befriended an Arget Sorceress. If humans thought supernaturals were deities, then the practitioners of this sorcery were gods to the supernaturals. The sorceress had made it so that no one saw her or bore witness to our conversation. She’d brought me and Yves out of time while

keeping us in this space. It was one of those rare tricks of brilliance that mere beings like me considered extraordinary.

“To teach you a lesson in virtue,” I called out, to which the prick Johnson laughed.

“Enough games.” Yves snapped his fingers and a brown-haired mortal girl who could have been a gypsy queen dropped into the armchair.

A huff of annoyance escaped my lungs. I dropped to my knees and tore the floor length chiffon skirt indecently high. The human did a poor job hiding her squeak at my rough attention. Pushing her legs apart, I sank my teeth into the gypsy’s femoral.

She cried out at the bite of pain, since I wasn’t bothering with seduction. Making it feel good wasn’t something I was interested in right now. I was done with politics for the night. A flicker of envy for Kelda avoiding this shot through me as I sucked the rich, earthy blood of this human. Of course, that was the fate of a protector. When Kelda stumbled into my life, battered and near death, I’d sworn to keep her safe. It hadn’t taken long to prove her loyalty and save me in return. Although we chose to use alternate labels, she was the child I never had while I was a better father-figure than the one she’d run from.





## Chapter 16 – Lennox

“You stink of sweat,” Sean grumbled.

I looked at the wee fae perched on the bar stool. “Oh yeah? And you reek of cheap beer. It’s only nine in the morning.”

The leprechaun flashed me a tight smile that might have been menacing in a more fearsome creature.

“Look, I know we’ve exchanged goods and services,” I started to say, but Sean held up a hand. I forced myself not to look at the too long fingernails he kept filed in points for his acoustic guitar. There was more filth trapped under the sharp tips than a gardener who forgot their gloves.

“I told ye the last time that I don’t want to do business with yer ilk, lass.”

I pursed my lips. I didn’t want to resort to this right away, but I was desperate. I pulled a gold coin out of my sports bra and set it pointedly on the counter. It hadn’t been easy to steal that from a fountain guarded by aquatic monsters.

The leprechaun stilled. His rough, thick tongue darted out to run across his lips. A little shiver ran through his stout frame, but he jumped eagerly on his stool, fingers dancing over an invisible instrument. That short arm darted out a second later to grab for the coin.

I slapped my palm over the piece. “Uh, uh.”

A string of violent Gaelic curses fluttered from his dry, cracking lips. Sean snatched his beer, raising the soap-stained mug to his lips and draining it in seconds. He might be unpleasant at the best of times and downright verbally abusive at the worst, but this filthy little bugger was a gem when it came to information on the market of less savory items. To the supernatural world, there was no such thing as “dark arts”. There was only magic and power. Some of that was further on the evil scale of practiced ethics than others. This wee fae knew where the more twisted souls of this city bought and sold supplies. The first course of action when I was assigned to

New Orleans was to find a supernatural contact. In my opinion leprechauns were easier than others to tempt. I'd met with him only a couple times, fueling his drinking habit and keeping a thumb on the more discrete events in New Orleans.

Today, I needed to crack down on anything that would lead me to an escaped vampire, who was on a war campaign. This was the first time I'd been able to meet with my piss-drinking contact since the others had captured the vampire.

“Alright, lass. What do ye want to know?”

“Do you have the address of any vampire nests?” I asked boldly, skipping the usual song and dance. There wasn't time to get Sean stinking drunk to loosen his tongue.

The sallow color of his face drained. “Even if I did—which I don't!—telling ye would be signing my damnation warrant.”

Not death. Oh, no, wee Sean McMurrey was a wise fool. A vengeful vampire wouldn't kill a squealer quickly.

But I needed a gods-damned lead.

“Where do they lurk during the day, Seany? Hmm? What areas of this city are havens for their kind? Which street bosses would look favorably on a bloodsucker taking refuge in their neighborhoods when the sun is out?”

“Candace.” Sean flattened his hand on the bar, those grubby nails perilously close to touching me. “Ye're a clever woman, even if ye ain't vera smart. Vamps hide in tombs, in crypts—of which this city has *many*. They take to ground, they snooze in mansions. Anywhere ye look coulda be a lair. So! Dinna be askin' me where the fiends sleep!”

The jukebox spluttered the end of a song. A tired patron dropped from her chair and stumbled across the chipped linoleum tiles. The stupor that hung heavy in the air wasn't chased away by the blues coming from the old music player.

“Ye know what? It's not worth it.” Sean dropped out of his chair and waddled away.

*Dammit!* I bit my bottom lip, pulling it between my teeth before calling out, “Sean! Wait.”

The leprechaun stopped.

“One more thing.” I moved away from the bar, dragging the coin into my hand as I went. “Who sells the seashells in the city?”

Sean doubled over in laughter.

I didn’t see the humor in my question. Seashells were sold to tourists, or so had been my experience. *Limited though it may be....*

Hooting turned into a desperate wailing giggle. Sean slapped his thighs and swiped at his eyes. “Fate, lass. Ye’re gonna be the death o’me.”

I crouched, twisting my wrist dramatically as I produced the coin.

Red-faced, the greedy fae looked at my fingers and then me.

“Well?” I demanded.

“Shells? Really?”

“Really.”

“There are *hundreds* of suppliers. Big box stores ‘ave them in the craft supplies. Tourist joints ‘ave them in trinkets. Oh! And don’ch ye be forgettin’ the *VOODOO* traders.” Sean snatched the coin. I let him with a grimace. “Lake Pontchartrain is saltwater. A merfolk coulda brought one from the sea. Best start interogatin’ them!”

It was my own fault. I had nothing specific. But still, he was a bastard.

“See you soon,” I promised.

“Oh, Fate! I hope not, lass. Ye’re trouble.” Sean scurried away, finding an empty table and pulling out an iPad.

Pushing to stand straight, I sighed. Dead ends. And I’d shown my hand, tipping Sean to what I was really after only to

come up short. *Great job, Lennox. Way to show your skill.* I shoved the self-deprecating little voice back into the box where I tried to keep it locked. Sauntering to the bar, I flagged down the very bored bartender.

“Club soda, no ice. Please and thank you.” I smiled as I put my order in.

The washed-up nymph rolled her eyes but fixed the beverage.

We only had freeze dried meals and flat jars of water at the safe house. Shopping wasn’t allowed until the situation was assessed. If Captain had made a report to HQ, it was hard to say. He and Gage had gone out hunting—without me.

So I’d snuck out this morning.

If history was any indication, I would have until noon before they woke up. Their drunken carousing lasted until six in the freaking morning. They would sleep all day and only a thunderous attack would rouse them.

The nymph slammed my carbonated water down and moved to another patron who was hollering about all the money she’d won in an ogre’s poker tournament. The force with which the drink was set before me meant it sloshed, some hitting my hand.

I coughed a burst of exasperation. Just because this was a slummy watering-hole where the less than choice individuals of the underworld frequented didn’t mean the service had to suck.

I reached over the bar to the dub station and snatched a cocktail napkin that might have once been cream colored but was now questionable. Mopping at my hand, something bunched between the folds of paper. I forgot to take a breath. I didn’t need to pull apart the napkin, the purple and green already showed through. The muscles of my chest constricted.

A sprig of foxglove fell on the bar top. Around the stem was fastened a sliver of paper with my name on it.

I inhaled shakily, but my mind was already struggling to gain control of the situation. The vampire had been here—or

still was. I could count every patron in here as well as the bartender, and there wasn't anyone unaccounted for. No one was hiding in the crawl space above the water-stained corkboard panels of the ceiling.

*How did he know I came here?* And that I'd be here now. In bright daylight. Secret sewage passages, intricate and damning magics, it could be any number of possibilities. But the most immediate question was where the hell he was now.

I threw a few bucks on the bar and pocketed the flower.

"Going so soon?" One of the companions of the poker winner sauntered up to my side. There was nothing remotely charming about this individual. What might have been dark blond hair was slicked back into a low pony. The muscles were all for show; a gym bro, not a warrior. His pale skin was splotchy and stank of canned body spray. Thick gold hoops hung from his pointed ears.

"Time to get to work," I evaded the truth with a half-lie.

"I saw you talking to McMurrey, and I want your opinion before you leave," the stranger said, flashing a smile full of crowned and filled teeth.

Since Sean used a powerful silencing stone when we spoke so there was no way anyone outside the stone's magic circle could have heard.

"I doubt my opinion is worth anything to you but go ahead. Shoot." I folded my arms over my chest.

True to form, the party animal dropped his gaze to my breasts which showed beautifully through the workout tank.

"Does his Brogue sound fake to you?"

Not sure what I was expecting this guy to say, it was enough that I actually let out a short laugh.

Emboldened, the player took a step closer, grinning victoriously. "I mean, come on," the greasy dude said. "Could ye not be any *mooor* fake, lass?"

Not wanting anyone to catch me laughing at Sean's expense, I bit my lips, turning my head. I thought I saw a

flicker of movement, but there was no lighting in the supply room. It was probably a trick of the shadows from the door opening at the front of the bar.

As my mind rationalized it, the sprig of flowers seemed to *pulse* in my pocket. I wanted to go investigate.

But the bro put his arm around my waist. “I’m Jay.”

“And since you have your opinion, I’m leaving.” I pushed him.

Jay didn’t move. “Come on, the night’s not over.”

“It’s close to 9:30 and broad daylight outside,” I drawled.

“I know a place where it’s always dark, sugar.”

“I do too. It’s called a tomb.”

Not that I was allowed to kill civilians without just cause. Right now, I didn’t need the paperwork.

“You’re feisty. I like that.” Jay’s fingers trailed up my spine, and I leaned into his embrace. He moved to stand in front of me, to cage me.

My fist shot out, connecting beautifully with his throat. Jay stumbled back, coughing violently. Those wandering hands grasped at me, but I pushed them away.

As I stepped around the violently gasping asshole, I slid another glance to the back. There wasn’t anyone there that I could sense. But just because I was trained to sense vampires didn’t mean I always caught them. This specimen had already proved he was clever enough and familiar with hunters. It stood to reason he had methods to block against a hunter’s senses.

I marched up to Sean, who was flicking through the screens on his tablet, fresh beer in his hand. Pulling the foxglove from my pocket I held it up. “This. What’s the significance?”

Sean looked up from under his bushy strawberry blond brows. “Ask a florist.”

Jay was in the process of peeling himself off the ground. The gut feeling that something was in the backroom didn't outweigh the need to leave. I worked my jaw back and forth in frustration. *Screw it, I need to leave.* Decided, I gave Sean a saccharine smile.

"Talk soon, bud," I murmured, before hightailing it to the door.

A cloud passed over the sun. The breeze shivered over my skin as I clenched the stem of purple flowers, refusing to run.

I forced myself to walk calmly back to the safe house, traversing the three-mile distance in under an hour. Even though it was impossible, the feeling of being watched didn't leave. But as I slid into the upper bedroom through the unlocked window, I told myself repeatedly it was only in my head. There was no one out there. Least of all, the vampire.





## Chapter 17 – The Predator

I washed my hands in the chipped sink. Little rivulets of red pinkened in the water. The melody of a long-forgotten song played through my head.

“Time for a break, Jay-bird.” I slapped the faucet off and dried my hands. “I have a pressing engagement, but we’ll continue this fruitful discussion when I return.”

The wanna-be tough guy whimpered. His profanities to the tune of F me were long gone. And elves thought they were so tough. This species of fae looked humanoid except for the ears. Some wielded magic, but most were just like their human look-a-likes with speed and enchanting features. The fact that this elf had been smacked with the ugly stick was comical.

My phone buzzed with the quarter of the hour update. As with each proceeding update, a bolt of anticipation shot through my chest.

### **Kelda: lights still off**

I was used to her penchant for changing with the times, in this case the lack of complete grammatical structure in her communications.

“Hang in there, Jay-bird.” I slapped his thigh, one of the few patches that wasn’t bloody. He winced and rolled away from me, but with the ropes on his wrists nailed to the floor and the same at his ankles, there wasn’t far he could flee. “While I’m gone, have a good, long think about touching what doesn’t belong to you.”

I shut the bedroom door before rushing from the abandoned house on foot. Unlike the foreclosure in which I’d been caged this was a truly dilapidated wreck of a dwelling. My protégée knew me well to have found such a place when she scoped out the city.

Of course, I hadn’t planned to use the excellent hideout on some random fae mutt, but the bastard had touched something he should have left alone. While Lennox could take care of

herself, I wasn't going to let the insult slide. Besides, someone needed to alleviate the energy pent-up inside me. At any moment, those who felt threatened by Lennox could strike again. That knowledge simmered inside until the bar elf made it pop. A blind rage came over me as I watched the sleezy elf. This level of anger made me unbearably cruel. Thankfully, I worked it out of my system and was back in control of my emotions.

There was much ground to be covered tonight. Enough prime hunters in positions of power knew about Lennox that they'd leaked the information. If it happened once, it could happen again. The fact that I had a contact with access to the inside to catch and stop the leak was sheer luck. The little huntress needed to see me as friend, not foe.

"Bout time you showed up," Kelda muttered, twenty minutes later when I came to a stop beside my protégée.

"I was detained."

"Just eat him and be done with it."

I grimaced. "Not happening."

"Food is food." Kelda looked at her fresh manicure.

I knew her well enough, but still I wasn't taking any chances. "You did that here, right?"

"Of course," she snapped, tapping the drawstring bag on the ground with the toe of her designer boot. "I was instructed to watch over the huntress during the day. Not let a hair of her head be harmed by her enemies. I wouldn't dream of sneaking off to a spa."

"You can now," I offered. "I'll connect with you before dawn."

Kelda narrowed her eyes. "You have a meeting with Viv at three."

A sour taste filled my mouth. "Right."

"Good thing one of us needs to have eyes on the huntress at all times," Kelda smiled. "I'm not in the mood to play nice with a semi-dead bitch."

“We need the ghost,” I warned.

Kelda gave me a sardonic look before taking off into the night. The lucky brat got to stay out of yet another tedious night of networking and kissing ass.

Taking a deep breath, I faced the Crescent City command post for the Livian Hunters. It was a wonder they hadn't been discovered and slaughtered by the locals. As far as protection, this place had next to none.

Crossing the street, I uncorked a bottle and spilled the first potion over the property line. Dandelions sprang up over the earth. I stepped in their center and crossed into the yard. At the edge of the house, I looked up to the third story. Apparently, Lennox loved to sit there and read. I could see it now, the sunlight glittering down on her deep brown hair. *We'll find you a safer place to read during the day, little huntress.*

A place where I could join her.

The contents of the second bottle sprinkled over the ground. Vines snaked up the metal pillar to the second level's balcony. They continued to race to the balcony on the third level until the eager beauties covered the façade. Not bad for a hasty concoction. I jumped, fingers gripping the ledge. After pulling myself up, I jumped to the next balcony.

Crouched, I crept to the pane. There she was, flopped on her stomach and fast asleep. Her full lips were partially opened, but she wasn't snoring. Exhaustion written over her face, she looked younger than she was.

The vines were already covering the windowsill. I pushed. *Do you feel so secure in your wards that you don't lock the window?* What a silly little huntress.

Dropping through the open window, a gust of wind chased after me. I closed it quickly, but Lennox stirred. There wasn't time to make it to the closet. I slipped under her bed, something I could manage here, unlike the tiny cot she'd slept on at the safehouse.

Anticipation thundering in my veins, I held my breath.

Lennox stayed asleep.

I trailed my finger reverently over the underside of the box spring. Although cheap, this was an actual bed on a metal frame. A silent laugh ghosted from my throat. Such a flimsy thing to separate me from my prize. She was right there. I could take her, and she'd never see it coming. But I wanted her willing, offering herself to me.

I wanted to break every damn wall the hunters had tried to erect in her mind.

Until then, this state where I denied myself her blood was the sweetest kind of agony.

Lennox moaned.

My blood ran south, and my dick jerked in response. I fisted my hands, knuckles pressed against the underside of the mattress. Lennox might be my obsession, taking up a vast amount of real estate in my mind, but having her body? No. *No!* It had never been part of the plan.

Except now, I was starting to question why that was a good idea.

First one, and then a second soft pant sounded from above.

*I should leave.*

And then a sensual groan filtered from her lungs.

*Oh, Fate.* There was a reason I'd determined at the onset that business and pleasure could never be mixed. And here she was, sound asleep and tempting my resolve.

Lennox writhed against her blanket.

A realization solidified in my mind. Horror washed through me a moment later. I couldn't stand the thought of her being with another. Even if she swore to be an exclusive source for me, if I could trust her not to betray me, I didn't want another male's hand on her.

*Is that why the elf flipped a switch?* a dark little voice taunted.

As much as I hated that inner tempter, it was right. After days of denial, I was finally able to admit it.

“Who are you dreaming of, huntress?” Jealousy spiked its green poison through my veins.

There could be any number of lovers she’d found herself in the arms of. The Guild was notorious for frowning on the pleasures of life, which only drove the hunters deep into their vices. Case in point, the bastards down the hall who were snoring loudly, their blood well saturated in booze.

Lennox gasped and sat up.

I didn’t move a muscle. The excitement was unparalleled. She could so easily discover me if I wasn’t wearing dried herbs, spelled and braided around my wrist. They only kept her glyphs from working properly. Her hearing still worked as did her uncanny instinct.

“Oh, fucking hell, why—” Lennox let out a growl of annoyance on the end of that statement. “Why, of all people to fantasize about, why him?”

*Who is he?* I would rip his tongue from his throat and feed it to him with a straw.

With a groan of pure vexation, Lennox flung herself back onto the mattress.

The minutes ticked by, and my rage only simmered. The pent-up sexual frustration wafted through the air, choking all the other scents like her soap and sweat.

I sucked it in like a drug. If there were any lingering doubts that I wasn’t drawn to her, this banished them.

The things I could do to her— Fuck! She was meant to be touched, to be tasted, and not just her blood.

The sheets shifted.

Such a subtle motion, and I still caught it. Closing my eyes, I let the sounds paint an image of what was happening above me.

Tight, athletic pants pushed down muscular thighs. Fingers brushed against heated flesh, prickling against the cooler temperature of the room.

A needy touch slid between slick folds. Lennox exhaled.

*Are your eyes open or closed, bella donna?*

It was downright painful not to reach down and stroke my own bulge. I might be a sick bastard, but when I took a female, she would only be thinking about me. This might be a sensual instance I was witnessing, but I wasn't the star. I wouldn't jerk off while another was in the moment.

From the sound of it, she was circling her clit. The motion had her tightening her body, hips moving against the mattress.

A cry fell from her lips as she slid a finger inside.

The scent of her arousal had me nearly coming right then and there.

“You monster.”

I froze.

Lennox moaned. “Yes, right there.”

My heart exploded back to life.

“You filthy vampire, why don't you show me what you've got? Huh?” Lennox gasped, body bucking in pleasure. “You escape your chains just to fall before me. How does it feel on your knees? In front of a Livian Hunter?”

Two fingers worked in and out. Their speed quickened. She was so damn wet.

“You like that taste? Hmm? Not my blood for you—vampire.”

As my brain processed what was happening, Lennox was already reaching climax.

The illicit fantasy was about...me.

She cried out, biting her lip to stifle the sound. That gorgeous, strong body contorted, stiffening against the sheets. Legs clapped around her hands. Pushing her mouth into a pillow as she twisted, Lennox gasped into it, muffling her voice.

*She wants me.*

My pulse roared in my ears, and my body trembled with need. The ache in my dick was worse than any torture, the sack tight with untouched desire. The little huntress dreamt and then touched herself with my image branded in her mind.

Lennox let out a growl of frustration and ripped her pants up over her hips. Flinging the covers back, she got out of bed and stomped to her attached bathroom.

There was a split second, a very brief delusion, where I saw myself stalking after her, pinning her against the wall, and burying myself in her.

Instead, I used the time to flee out the window.

Jumping over the banister, I dropped to the ground. The height was nothing. I uncorked the third glass bottle and shook its contents over the place where the vines rooted into the soil. The whole lot tensed, turned black, and then fell to the ground in a burst of grey ash.

Marching to the dandelions, I repeated the slaughter of the flowers.

When I looked back to the window, the light of her bathroom flashed before it blinked out. I took off to the shadows. Although my balls ached with need, I waited. I wouldn't beat off here, in the alley like some hobo. No...I would go to the large, secluded house I rented, to the place I was going to bring her before our international flight. And there, I would indulge in a moment of fantasy myself. But not until tonight's work was done.





## Chapter 18 – Lennox

*I can't believe I did that.*

In the dark of night, it seemed safe to indulge. And really, the dream hadn't been that bad. I had captured the vampire, but before staking him, I'd made him kneel and service me in penance for making me chase him over the city. My fingers threaded through the longer strands of jet hair, I made the beast lick and suck my pussy. Waking up, my body had pulsed with a raw heat. I needed to satisfy it.

So I'd taken care of my own pleasure, an otherwise harmless pastime.

Sitting on my balcony, I looked to the sky, hoping for rain. The pollution today was bad. There was a fine coating of filth that I had to sweep off before sitting down with my burner phone and cheap laptop. Looking over the wrought iron rails, I could see the same ash dusting parts of the lawn. Perhaps the wind had blown something from Lake Pontchartrain into the city? Would it really have reached this far inland...I shook my head. I was seeing apparitions everywhere I looked.

The next number, already dialed, stared back at me, waiting for me to push the call button. It didn't taunt me as loudly as the two sprigs of now dried flowers. I nearly died when the barista at Starbucks handed me the sprigs with my coffee and pastry after my morning run. She gushed and told me someone very handsome was thinking of me. The flowers had been sitting in a cup of water all morning, waiting for a dark-haired Candace to collect them.

Salvia.

The red salvia was known for romance and *forever mine*.

The blue from yesterday meant *thinking of you*.

I had a sick fascination that this was the vampire's intention. He wasn't the kind to leave minor details to chance. This meant something!

“An assumption!” I growled to myself. I didn’t know him. Thinking he was the kind of male to control everything was making causation from coincidence and theory.

*He’s the kind who likes control.*

“Not in my fantasies,” I snapped back to the taunting inner voice. The commentator only laughed.

I punched the button for the florist.

“Beauchamp Flowers and Gifts, this is Bobbie. How may I help you?”

“Hi, Bobbie. Do you sell salvia? I’m looking for some sprigs to add to a bouquet.” I pinched my eyes between my fingers and rubbed them. I could almost predict the answer before she said it.

“Why, yes, we sure do! We’ve got purple, red, blue, and pink, with some Texas Sage and Mealycup Sage available to us as well if we need to put in a special order.”

“Oh, that’s just perfect! Do you get many customers asking for it?” Not that a vampire would have to ask. They notoriously took what they wanted.

There was a pause. “Yes, for arrangements. If that’s what you’re askin’?”

It wasn’t. “Wonderful. Well, I’ll be in later to grab some.”

“Can we set some aside for you?” the florist asked.

“No, I’ll just bring the bouquet I’m working on and see what works.”

“Alright, good talkin’ to you, and have a blessed day.”

“You too,” I chirped and ended the call. Letting out a long breath, I dropped my head to my knees. It was a common enough filler for bigger florists who had variety. Added to that, it wasn’t a hard flower to grow, especially in a hot house. Trying to find where the vampire had gotten it and search for him from that radius wasn’t possible. Not right now. I tucked the strategy away in my mind. A new lead could always make it viable again.

*He knows the Starbucks I stop at when I do my ten miles.* I shivered, despite the bright sunlight caressing me.

The bedroom door banged open, and I peered into my room. Gage lumbered to the window and pushed it open. “We have a *return to status quo* order and a lead on a pack of undead.”

I blinked, the other hunter’s words stunning me into a momentary silence.

“Captain says you’re up, time to see how you bat.” Gage slid a long look over me. There was no disguising the intent behind the look. But unlike his dead buddy, Gage only looked.

“He’s actually going to let me go out hunting?”

“Yeah, I don’t get it, either.” Gage pushed away, with a sound of disgust running through his throat.

*Prick.* I scrambled back into the room, throwing my laptop on the bed.

Gage hadn’t bothered to shut the door as he’d gone through. I slammed it behind him and threw the flimsy lock. Changing into full tactical gear and grabbing my gadgets and weapons, I paused as I threw the rest of my belongings into my backpack.

Undead could mean several species of beings. It didn’t matter, though. I was finally going out hunting!

Like a dash of cold water, I slowed to a stop. The vampire’s warning played through my mind. Why were they letting me come? They hadn’t let me go out on patrols, even after Fox’s demise.

I shook my head, trying to clear the conflicting advice. I could trust them about as far as I could throw them, but their sudden inclusivity didn’t equate nefarious intent. Captain and Gage could simply need another body to help with the undead situation, and I was the only thing available to them.

*Hasn’t stopped them leaving without me before.*

But that was for patrols or other light work. This was a hunt. Squads usually worked in groups of four. Three was

better than not going hunting at all. That had to be the reason they'd finally asked me along. Still, the back of my neck prickled.

I jogged downstairs, running away from the bad feelings.

"Captain." I skidded to a halt, body straight and fingers itching to salute. They'd made it clear when I arrived that any formality would receive extreme ridicule.

"My superior at HQ responded with orders. Given the situation, they don't believe hunkering down is necessary. We are to begin hunting as usual." Captain pulled the zipper on his duffle bag closed.

"Understood," I said, even though it was a lie. I didn't understand. Headquarters should have sent backup. There was a vampire on the loose. One who'd made threats. Unless.... How much detail had Captain put in his report?

The prickle at the nape of my neck was damn near electric.

"What are you so confused about, Candy?" Gage shot me a look as he entered the room.

Captain lifted his head and looked between us. "Is something confusing you, Candace? Are you not up to the task of hunting—"

"Sir, no, sir." I planted my hands on my hips. "Respectfully, might I ask if we are receiving a fourth member for this squad?"

Captain barked a laugh. "None are currently available for reassignment here."

"No one ever is. Not until you," Gage drawled, his leer sweeping over me, before he turned to grab the keys.

"We roll out in two," Captain clipped.



## Chapter 19 – Lennox

Not only were we down a gunman, but we were attempting a maneuver that generally was used with eight to ten pairs of hunters. Fanning through the underbrush was designed to use numbers and create a moveable wall of force. To even consider the strategy with only three people was laughable. But neither Captain nor Gage was laughing.

I was on the left flank, and after thirty minutes walking, it was becoming increasingly hard to see Captain in the center. It was going on eight in the evening, the sun having long disappeared.

We'd not spent the day in preparations or learning the terrain. Gage had driven us to a water access, where we'd stopped for several hours to have some local cuisine. No matter how delicious the Cajun food was, it didn't calm the thunder in my heart that this was such a wasted day.

Thoroughly fed and whistles very wet, we'd entered the bayou via airboat sometime after two in the afternoon. If they hadn't bumbled their directions, we could have hit the spot in forty-five minutes. It was only after twice getting the shallow bottom boat stuck, one detour to shoot an alligator for pointless sport, and muddling the way out of being hopelessly lost that we made it to the peninsula deep in the wilderness that Captain's contact told him had been used for the ritualistic sacrifice of humans. I didn't know who Captain's contact was, since that was the kind of treasured secret hunters kept to themselves. Whoever it was, how they knew about this tragic event made a person wonder, and did they know about the reanimation symbols? Captain never mentioned anything about that. As usual, this was half-assed work.

Arriving at the peninsula a little after four, we did a piss poor job of searching the area. The campsite was abandoned, but the bloodstains and charred symbols in the earth spoke of a vile and heinous act—slaughtering innocent humans and raising them with some kind of reanimation. Necromancy wasn't a specialty of monster hunting I was familiar with.

Instead of cataloging the evidence sounding the campgrounds and sending the information immediately to HQ with any kind of urgency, Captain wanted to traipse through the wetlands.

We'd been walking for hours, tracking the horde of undead. Stupid—utterly stupid.

With the fall of dark, we switched to night vision glasses. What we would do if we came upon the horde of undead, I wasn't sure. Fight them? From the handful of campers, we were easily outnumbered. And yet we advanced to comb through nature like we were just going to attack. When the werewolves fanned out to attack the siv, the tactic made sense. This...did not.

I flicked a glance to my right. Captain was definitely a few yards farther away than five minutes ago. His faint blue outline shimmered as the technology struggled to pick it up with the combination of distance and trees.

*Sonofabitch.* I shook my head. He would likely hear the gunshots if I engaged with an enemy.

If his orders hadn't been to use a silencer.

Whoever was the puppet master behind this uprising of undead didn't cause Captain or Gage any amount of worry. If this was my mission, I would have been combing the underworld of New Orleans for a sorcerer or mage with that kind of power and twisted inclination. I would have waited for the special teams from HQ to arrive, the ones who dealt with this kind of monstrous appearance. I would most certainly not have gone after a large group of undead, especially since we hadn't a damn clue where the necromancer controlling them was!

I stopped, rubbing the back of my hand over my forehead. It was impossible to deny this whole thing was strange. But how strange and what to do about it was hard to say. I didn't know what to believe, and my unwillingness to put stock in anything the vampire said might just have gotten me into trouble. Again. *I'll have to look into my assignment orders.*

If I survived tonight. A chill rushed over my skin.



Looking around, the path became increasingly softer straight ahead. I would have to keep west, which put me farther from the others. It wasn't that I was scared to fight a mass of reanimated humans. I wasn't scared of anything. The biggest problem with this shitshow was that yet again the methods and training we'd all received at that Guild's academy had been thrown aside. Now we were in a no-win situation that was likely to get us killed.

One more look to the right showed that Captain was gone. Pursing my lips, I began carefully picking my way across the squishy earth. Any step could puncture the grass and roots, sinking my foot into the soft muck underneath.

Another half hour walking, and it was safe to say I was very separated from our group. Even though it took me farther away, there was a copse of trees sitting on the edge of what could be an island of solid ground. *I'll go there and send a message to the others.*

To reach the expanse of solid ground, I had to push forward until the water lapped at my thighs. Because my glyphs didn't scream in warning, the slithering, slimy feeling must have been my overactive imagination. There was nothing in the water to hurt me—

But there was on the land.

Lifting my gun to settle into my shoulder, I aimed at the tree line. The string of glyphs down my side tingled that something vile and malicious moved ahead.

It took several minutes for the goggles to pick up the monster's form. The outline showed as red, alerting me that the being was supernatural, aggressive, and something I had the authority to end without question. These were an older model of night glasses, however. They didn't tell me the type of being or even if it was a mindless creature or sentient. From its disjointed lumbering, I reasoned it must be my target, one of the undead.

*Where are the rest of them?*

Before crawling up the squishy, muddy bank, I flipped my watch to tap out a message, only to find that the frequency was down. I couldn't contact the others.

Pursing my lips, I considered my two options: retreat or advance.

Before I could decide, the creature caught wind of me. A demented gurgle sounded through the trees. I held my breath. The others had to hear this, right? The wet coughing continued, increasing in intensity. Like a fowl summoning the flock, the echo of that guttural call sounded. *Here they come.* Their squelching noises rang through the trees as the first monster moved forward, a sick warning of what was coming. Gun still at my shoulder, I shot.

In the whispered echo of the silencer, a choppy, broken scream sounded through the bayou. The horde of undead were all aware of an attack and would be advancing toward the noise.

Shit. *Shit!* I took a step back. Water sloshed over my ass. High ground. I needed to get to higher ground! A tree was my best bet, but as I flicked a glance to the side, the number of monsters increased.

They were coming at me from all sides. The murky water not stopping them, they waded toward me.

My bullets only slowed them.

I dropped the ammunition clip, reached into my pouch, and felt the notches on the other clips. Four notches—fire bullets. I lost no time loading them, something I should have done the moment I spotted the first undead corpse.

Now these bullets would be extremely effective. They ignited on contact, fire consuming the dead flesh.

What was with me tonight? It was an afterthought to change the clips! My head wasn't right in the heat of battle. I was trapped in bad terrain, unable to inform my squad, and there were at least two dozen monsters, which was twice as many as we'd figured. More poured out of the tree line; they just kept coming.

*What is this?!*

The night glasses only showed the sharper lines of the creatures. As if they were illustrations, not tangible masses. All the ugliness and warped features of their rotting flesh was concealed. The stench, on the other hand, was not.

Some of these undead had been reanimated for a long time.

Yet another thing that didn't make sense. Why go through the trouble to reanimate so many and then leave them in the forest?

I took a step to the side, swinging the gun to open fire and clear out the advancing numbers to the right. Their lumbering forms burned until there was no more rotten flesh for the flames to consume. Blazing torches, they dropped quickly enough. My foot *sank* and water rose to the underside of my boobs. I struggled, but I couldn't move backward. My boot was suctioned too deep in the mud.

The unburnt monsters kept advancing.

With a growl, I dropped my gun, held my breath, and went under. Fingers on the boot, I pulled myself free of the sludge. Not risking entrapment, I kicked and swam through the filthy water instead of walking across the squishy bottom. When the incline of a tuft of ground met me, I climbed out, surging onto the narrow clot of dirt.

Shaking and slapping my gun, I took aim. There were too many undead, all funneling toward me. I opened fire. The first wave dropped, and I reloaded. The hollow jacketed shells ensured the combustible material was protected from the environment, including water.

The other hunters needed to come. Now! I peppered the next batch of undead, careful to only hit the targets and not waste bullets. My pulse raced. This was the heat of battle. This was what I was trained for! I reached into my pouch for another clip. Shit.... I was going to run out of ammo. The flash of no signal showed on my smart watch. More undead came out of the trees. *How are there this many!* If I lived to see

tomorrow, we had a powerful necromancer to hunt. I swallowed hard.

A shadow rushed out of the dark.

The rush of motion registered in my night glasses. This was another burst of red, something I could kill on sight. It was moving differently than the undead! Hating that these weren't the newer model that could instantly identify the kind of monster, I ripped the night vision goggles off.

Vampire.

It had to be. The speed at which the mass darted about was incredible, yet it wasn't in some other bodily form like a shifter. *It has to be a vampire.* So why didn't my glyphs warn me of its approach?

Knots weighed down my stomach, but I kept shooting. The newcomer evaded my bullets, not that they would have stopped him. Unlike the reanimated corpses who had toxicity buildup in their rotting flesh, vampires didn't have naturally flammable skin. They burned at the same rate a humanoid being did—much too slowly. It seemed as though the blood sucker was on my side. He was dropping the monsters left and right, lobbing their heads off with a saber.

There was only one brute that would do that. My vampire.

*No! Not mine.*

*Never that.*

I didn't know for sure it was him, but my gut feeling strongly suggested it was. A sliver of moonlight fell on the swampy mess. Black hair cut in a fade, fine aristocratic features cut of living marble—it was him. I knew it, even with the shadows shrouding his more distinguishable features.

“Ah, dammit!” I hissed under my breath.

Split second decision made, I swung my gun around and began shooting on the opposite end from where the vampire was attacking. The undead seemed to realize there was something else out there. Through their slow, sluggish mush for instinct, they turned en masse on the vampire.

*He isn't my ally!*

In fact, since he seemed to have control of the situation with the undead, it was time to prepare for the second waves of this battle. I moved away from the fight cautiously. There wasn't far to escape, this lone island of dirt was home to a single corpse of a tree. A forsaken spot to make a final stand against my stalker. I swallowed hard at the morose thought.

Using the lull in their attack on me, I switched my bullets. The pouch where the gun clips were stored was dry, not that it mattered if the wooden bullets were wet when they pierced the vampire's heart. The clip clicked into place just as the final gurgle was silenced.

"I know it's you," I called out, shouldering my weapon. Thick clouds, blown by the softest of breezes, glided over the moon. Nature herself was against me tonight. There wasn't time to fumble for my night glasses.

"Good evening to you too, my dear Nox."

I turned to the left, pointing into the looming night blanketing the field of battle. Black on black, it took my well-developed eyes a second to gauge the difference. During those precious few moments, the vampire didn't advance.

Confusion twisted through me. "What are you doing here, vamp?"

There was a rough, chilling laugh. "You're welcome. Those zombies were seconds away from tearing you to shreds."

"The term zombie isn't a technical classification of undead."

"Thanks for the supernatural biology lesson."

I could hear the smirk in his voice. "I didn't need your help," I snapped.

"While that's true, I don't allow anyone to mess with you."

"Why?" I wouldn't shoot. Not yet. There was an unspoken situation full of missing details. This vampire had a lot to explain. I needed, and would have, answers.

“You’re mine,” he responded with cool detachment. As though I was a trinket, not a living person.

*He thinks I’m his juice box!* My blood boiled, finger tightening over the trigger. “I’m not yours! You’re a predator!”

“And you’re my prey, little hunter. If anyone is going to devour that sweet flesh, it’s me.” The vampire moved through the water with the feline grace of a big cat stalking through the night. Not even the mud and uneven filth of the swampy terrain could hamper his elegance.

I hated that I noticed.

But the clouds were moving onward, letting the sliver of moonlight trickle over the foul water once more. Even in the gloom, it was hard not to see the muscles showing from under the V-neck tee that conformed to every line and indent. He’d been soaked during the battle.

“What are you going to do with that hole poker full of wooden barbs?” His voice was velvety.

I refused to be seduced by his charm. “Shoot you.”

“You won’t shoot me, Nox.”

“Why does everyone keep underestimating me?” I seethed.

And pulled the trigger.

The vampire grunted, but in a blur, he was on me. I fought back with everything I had. Hands were everywhere. While I hit hard, he...only blocked me. Never once did he strike out. Still, this deceptively chivalrous act won him no mercy! My fists were relentless.

Stepping into his space, I threw out a kick. He blocked it, moving to wrap his thick thigh around me. The grip on my gun faltered as I struggled for balance. There was a tug, and the weapon was wrenched away.

I let out a scream of outrage.

“Ah, so you *are* a screamer, little one.” His hot breath brushed against my ear.

“You—monster!”

He slammed me hard against the skeletal tree.

“Stating the obvious, aren’t you?” he drawled.

“Alright,” I panted, trying to work through the panic that I was out of moves. “Just end it already.”

The vampire pulled back and in the dim light, a frown was clear on his face. “I am not a creature of waste. I refuse to butcher you and let the ground soak up your blood.”

I glared at him. The locket. The locket! He couldn’t drain me, but could he kill me? I really needed to learn what the specifications of the locket were.

“Let’s see, you’re most likely doing an analysis in your mind right now. Let me summarize. There is no escape and you’re weaponless against a fiend far older and stronger. The situation appears...hopeless.” The vampire tapped on his chin. “Does this mean I win?”

“Never,” I seethed.

“Hmm, pity. I do so want to claim my prize.”

A dark shiver of delight crawled down my spine only to unleash something sharp and delicious deep in my stomach. I couldn’t help it. I dropped my gaze to his lips.

“You want it, don’t you,” he coaxed.

I shut my eyes and whipped my head back and forth.

His hand glided up my arm to my shoulder. I flinched, but there was no room to pull away from him. That touch moved over my throat, fingers pushing my head to the side. The pressure from his thumb popped a vertebra that was tense. Relief flooded through me, but it was washed away a moment later as his fingers splayed into my hair.

Time slowed. His grip tightened painfully in my hair. I refused to cry out.

“You *are* mine, little huntress. And I need a taste,” he snarled.

A protest was on my lips, but he bent down and captured it with his mouth. Even if I wanted to retort, he stole the air from

my lungs. I was so surprised that my body reacted without instructions from my brain. He kissed me—and I kissed him back.

His mouth was hard and demanding against mine. Instead of melting into the caress, I pushed back, electricity buzzing through me. The drive to fight channeled through my veins and shifted to this strange new form of battle.

The vampire pulled back with a hiss. “Damn, you’re divine.”

My lips tingled with the strange fire. There was part of me that begged for more! But my mind came back online, and I wanted to die inside.

This was wrong on so many levels.

“That turned you on, didn’t it?” The vampire released his touch and trailed a finger down my throat, resting on my hammering pulse.

“No,” I hissed, not trusting myself to speak above a normal level.

“*Please*, you’re soaked for me.” He stated it with such assuredness, smug satisfaction radiating from every fiber of his being.

“Asshole!” I jerked in his arms. “Just prowling around the night, taking what you want by force!”

“Don’t lie to yourself. You want me just as badly.” Ever so casually, he stepped away from me. The space did nothing for the heavy energy lingering between us.

Denial of his accusation raging through my mind, I didn’t waste time with talking but scrambled away. There was no distance I could between the monster and my traitorous body.

“Your squad will be here in a moment, Nox.” The vampire crossed his arms over his chest. I ignored the way the muscles flexed on his arms. “Let me ask you this, why did they send you out here? With such poor planning and barely any support?”

“It was our orders,” I shot back.



“And you didn’t question them?” He tipped his head to the side, a frown pulling the corners of that decadent mouth down.

“There was no reason to.” As I said it, that sick feeling that started this afternoon with unease came back full force. I knew deep in my gut that nothing about tonight had been right.

But I would be damned before I let the vampire know we were having similar thoughts.

The vampire wasn’t letting it go—the persistent bastard.

“Come on, Nox. You must see it! Even now? With the mounting evidence that they *wanted* you to be slain by zombies?”

I brushed off my pants. “Why the hell do you even care?”

“I want you to start seeing the Guild for what it is.”

“I still wouldn’t pick the side of monsters like you—you who prey on weak humans,” I spat. “I don’t even know your name!”

“It’s Cato.” The answer came out so easily. Days of torture—and nothing! Not a peep. A battle with the undead and a stolen kiss, and he caved.

“Cato,” I breathed. “Cato...what?”

He shook his head, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. That sinful, decadent mouth. “You’re not picking my side.” He threw my words back in my face. “You’re staying alive. Your first line of defense is yourself. You are far from weak, and you’re absolutely not stupid. Don’t let them make you either of those.”

I opened my mouth and shut it. Never had another male made me feel overwhelmed this easily.

Cato reached out, brushed the tip of a finger against my cheek, and whispered, “So beautiful.”

Before I could flinch, he was gone.

And I’d forgotten for a moment that he was my mortal enemy—a monster.



## Chapter 20 – Lennox

A piping hot coffee in one hand and tasty tray of sugar-coated pastries in the other, I walked down the main thoroughfare. This was the epicenter of tourism in the Crescent City. Amongst all the humans walked the supernatural. Humans were tragically flawed. They had no idea they stood side-by-side with other beings. For instance, I watched a middled aged pair wrangle their children, ignoring not only the beauty of this historically rich street, but also oblivious to the fact that a nymph was trying to pass them on the sidewalk. The water being wasn't likely a threat, but I kept my eye on her just the same.

The sour-faced female wasn't my only concern, either. Across the street, something else was watching the crowd of late afternoon tourists. I ignored the furball and prayed he would go away. Shoving another bite of food in my mouth, I ducked behind a potted plant. The light wasn't going to change in time, so I made to run for it.

“Candace!”

No such luck.

I turned and arched a brow in challenge. *Well then, come here, lil' pup.*

A towering form continued to lean casually against the wall, one leg bent so his foot pressed against the brick. I'd been aware of his presence ever since the line in the café, when my glyphs buzzed in warning that a werewolf had entered the fifty-yard radius around me. He wasn't wearing any kind of concealment to hide from me. In fact, the way he watched me gave me a delicious shiver.

A silver BMW cruised by, and then I darted out behind it to dash across the street opposite of the direction of escape.

“Are you stalking me?” I teased, but as I spoke a different blast of cold shot through me.

The terrible chill seeped into my bones. Some long dead survival instinct screamed a predator was near. I spun around, piercing my surroundings with a hard glare. Nothing. What was more, the protection magic inked into my skin was silent. It had to be my overactive imagination. While there were few creatures able to conceal themselves with extreme spells, it was far more likely I was losing my mind.

And no wonder after the night I'd had. *I'm not going to think about that.* Something I'd been telling myself all damn day.

“Candace?”

I cleared my throat. “What? Oh, yeah, right! Hi there, puppy dog.”

“Are you alright? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“Ghosts really aren't that scary,” I quipped.

Svet frowned.

But I was too busy pushing away the lingering feeling. I looked to the sun's position. It was a good two hours before the official set. *Nothing is out there.* Vampires couldn't walk in daylight. Unless— No, Cato hadn't had an accursed ring. He wasn't a day-walker.

Right? I frowned. Come to think of it, I didn't actually know if he had a day-walking ring.

*My glyphs would warn me if there was a vampire.*

The mental peptalk fell flat. I couldn't shake the fact that I was being watched.

Last night's encounter, something I'd lain awake and replayed every single detail over, was buried in the 'deal with later' pile of problems in my mind. *I should have reported it.*

And then what?

I sighed.

“Why the frown, cutie? Not happy to see me?” Svet uncrossed an arm and chucked me under the chin before swiping a pastry out of my paper tray.

“Hey!” I shouted, lunging forward.

He already had it in his mouth, powdered sugar smile flashing deviously back at me.

Turning my body away, I shielded my precious pillows of sweet dough.

“Mmm, thanks, sugar bee. I haven’t had a fresh beignet in—ages.”

“I didn’t offer,” I said, but couldn’t pack the appropriate heat in my tone. “So get your own. I’ve never had them and was looking forward to pigging out on a whole tray full!”

“Never had a beignet?” Svet jerked back in surprise. “How have you not lived before this!”

I shrugged. “Didn’t get out much.”

“Well,” he drawled, letting the full breath of his lungs weigh down that single word. “You couldn’t have picked a better café. Mama Jean sure knows how to make ‘em.”

I let out a short laugh. I couldn’t help myself. Svet was... easy. Easy to be around, easy to talk with. If I wasn’t careful, probably easy to be with because that body was easy on the eyes—

*Oh, my gods, what is wrong with me!* Here I was, acting like a stupid little girl, and really there were bigger problems to deal with. Besides, while it would be abhorrent to sleep with certain supernaturals, it wouldn’t do me any favors to be intimate with others.

“Nice to see you, but I have to get going.” I spun around, took a bad step back, and nearly tumbled off the curb.

A strong hand gripped me, yanking me forward. “Whoa there, sweet potato, don’t go falling into oncoming traffic. I’m not that bad, I swear!”

I shot the wolf man a glare. “Sweet potato? Really? Couldn’t top sugar bee?”

“I can’t seem to find a name that fits. You’re such an odd personality,” Svet teased, cocking his head.

“Thanks.” I yanked free, careful not to spill my coffee. He held fast for a minute before releasing me.

*Watch it, doggo. If I wasn't ravenously hungry, I would show you who's top dog!*

“Bethany is fine, in case you were wondering,” he said quietly.

I was, and that was good to hear. “Oh, I’m glad. And her son?”

“Still a negotiating point, but I’m confident we can rescue his sorry ass.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re not keeping him with the siv on purpose, are you? Letting them teach a much-needed lesson? Because they wouldn’t dare kill him and risk your wrath.”

The corners of Svet’s mouth twitched.

With a dramatic eyeroll, I began to move away. “Well, it was good to see you—”

“Wait!” Svet jogged forward, blocking my path. “Aren’t you going to ask why I’m here?”

“Why would I care?” I lifted my shoulders. “Officially, we don’t know one another.”

Svet shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out a clip of metal. Keys jangled. Unclipping it, he withdrew a metal ring that had a single key and a...

“Is that a duck call?” I frowned at the camo tube swaying from the ring.

“Surprised you know what that is?” Svet tossed the lone key.

“I’m up to date on several worldly things,” I evaded. There was no point letting the werewolf know that part of our training was to learn to use human hunting and camping equipment in case of an emergency.

Svet grunted. “Your wheels are repaired.”

A wave of horror slapped me. “My what?”

“Your little blue beater? The ’03 Honda Civic you showed up driving to the pack lands?”

Oh, shit. The car I’d stolen. That was now working. *It would be charmingly altruistic if I returned it fixed.* Stockpiling the karma stores for a rainy day was never a bad idea.

“Thanks,” I said after clearing my throat.

Svet stepped into me. “Hey look, I know we said we weren’t interested in one another—”

“And that hasn’t changed,” I stated firmly. No matter how cute his backside looked in those well-cut denim jeans.

The alpha held up his hands. “Same, but...I’m taking the night off. I’ve been consumed with the pack’s wellbeing and family drama. I’m here in town for a night of revelry and carousing. Would you like to join me? As a friend.”

I gaped.

“Or are you...busy tonight with your ducks?” Translation: Was I hunting tonight?

I wasn’t.

But that didn’t mean I was going to spend my precious hours of freedom with a hulking brute that could shift forms into a monstrous being on a whim.

I had big problems: a loose vampire who was playing games with me, and the accusation that someone wanted me dead. I was supposed to be spending the day finding a safe place that was all my own and considering my best options.

“Come on, crossbow Candace. I can see the debate in your eyes. Let me settle it by offering to make up for the pilfered beignet tenfold.”

Maybe it was the corny nicknames. Maybe it was the offer of more fluffy pastries.

Either way, I gave him the answer he wanted. “I’m off tonight as well.”

“You don’t sound too sure.” He gave me a sly look, but his grin was infectious.

“We caught a lot of ducks last night, and no more duck related crises have come up. I could use a night off too.”

The truth was, the hunters couldn’t believe the field of carnage when they arrived. Big macho guys stunned speechless at the supposed prowess of a slim, albeit strong, female. Twenty-six zombie corpses had floated in the water. The vampire hadn’t left any bites or indication that he’d been there, and saber cuts looked like machete cuts in the dark of night to the naked eye. I took the credit, keeping the truth a secret.

During the hike and drive back into town, the quiet awe of the hunters had the vampire’s warning ringing out in my mind. Could I trust them? Had they simply been sloppy in their patrol of the swampy area? Or was that patrol a deliberate order from the big wigs at headquarters, who were secretly plotting my death? This didn’t make sense because I’d seen the tribunal condemn a hunter and throw her into the Pitchhole firsthand. So whoever orchestrated last night wasn’t operating under official execution orders.

The worst option of all was wondering if Captain and Gage knew I was marked for death and were in on it. My only hesitation with that theory was why they didn’t attack me themselves, especially when I was asleep. Ergo, the need to find my own space to hunker down. Furthermore, Fox’s haunted eyes, full of delusional magic, reminded me that he at least needed to be coerced into attacking me. Technically, I didn’t have to stay at the fortress with the others. It was just customary to keep strength in numbers.

“Do you have a curfew?” Svet asked, pulling me out of my head.

“What? Oh, that—no, no! I most certainly do not.” I clasped my hands behind my back and looked him up and down. “Revelry and carousing?”

“Only the best fun to be had in a city so full of music.” His brows darted up and down in quick, jerking motions.



It was tempting, I would give him that. “I don’t drink. I don’t party.”

“That’s because you haven’t been with a werewolf before.”

“No,” I stated firmly. “That’s because it gets me into trouble, and that’s not something I can afford right now.”

I didn’t know whether it was my voice or some look I unknowingly gave him, but the mirth was wiped off his face and his tone lacked its usual teasing lilt.

“I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to, Candace.”

“Thank you.” I let out a big breath. “Show me the town?”

The smile he gave me was genuine.

~\*~

*What the hell does the vamp want?* I stirred the paper straw in my lime-infused soda water. That plaguing question was ruining this otherwise lovely evening. I shook my head, trying desperately to fling the thought across the room, but it stuck, hanging on by a thread.

Other than the merry-go-round of thoughts, the night was everything a sheltered trainee at the academy could have wished for. Dinner was an endless onslaught of flavors, textures, and scents. I doubted there was better cooking than Creole food. The band was on fire, and many people were dancing or at least moving to the flow. Svet was loud and friendly. Several times, I caught heated looks as a gorgeous female walked by, but the werewolf was always quick to turn away.

*What is he after?* I shook my head. The alpha’s inclinations were not my problem.

But it was easier to think of that than the vampire.

The vampire who could have killed me twice. The monster who *helped* me, first with Fox and then with the undead.

I sucked down the carbonated water, relishing the rough caress of the bubbles sliding down my throat. *Cato wants*

*something*. Was it a tangible thing or just some twisted game? It wasn't like I had anything special to give. Someone as powerful as he was could be into playing with his food—or sexual conquests. The thought of this being a long, drawn-out version of foreplay was repellant!

My insides clenched, and a little shiver skittered across my skin.

I ignored my traitorous body's reaction. It just needed to get laid. Too bad things with this alpha would probably never work out.

Sliding a side glance, I watched my strange companion. I'd hunted werewolves before.

“Have you ever killed my kind?” I asked in a low voice.

Svet's finger stopped its repetitive path around the rim of his untouched tumbler of bourbon. “In the 1800s, yes. They caused trouble for the pack.”

I nodded.

“What about you? You've killed mine?” Svet leaned down.

My tight smile said it all. The werewolf nodded once.

Lifting my glass, I saluted him. “From enemies to an unprecedented truce. No matter how strange, may it be long and prosperous.”

“And if this truce comes to an end, may we end each other quickly.” Svet chinked his glass into mine.

The alpha put the glass to his mouth, the liquid sloshed over those lips, but he didn't drink it down.

“It's bad luck if you don't swallow,” I teased.

“A little went down.” Svet set his glass back on the table and resumed the repetitive, slow and deliberate circles. “I'm just tasting tonight.”

That sounded dark and rich—exactly how I imagined the bourbon tasting.

“So tell me, mystery woman, what’s taking up space in your head?”

I gaped at the werewolf. Those sharp black eyes were pinned on me. Swallowing the lump of panic in my throat, I lightly said, “Who says something is taking up my head? Maybe I’m just a deep, complex specimen?”

Svet shook his head. “No, that’s not it. Something is on your mind—or someone.”

With a short laugh, I took a long sip of my water. “Very perceptive.”

“Thank you, but you’re evasive.” Svet crooked his elbow on the table. “I’m a great listener, and I’m your friend now.”

That had me laughing. An honest-to-Fate real laugh.

“Why’s that so funny?” Svet didn’t look hurt, but something shifted deep in the inky blackness of his eyes.

In the spirit of friendship, I gave him the simplest of explanations. “The one person I thought was my friend was executed for treason. Ever since, I make it a point not to have them. I wouldn’t make a very good friend, even if I could wrap my mind around the concept.”

“Ah, then I’ll teach you.” Svet began ticking things off his fingers. “We agree to be there for one another on matters of support. We don’t steal each other’s significant others—but enjoying a stranger together is completely cool. We don’t bad mouth one another. And we share.”

I was laughing so hard that tears prickled in my eyes.

“So...share. What troubles weigh you down?” Svet double tapped his finger on the table.

I grinned. “Oh, I don’t know. This sounds like a trap. You coax me into talking so when it’s your turn, you can unload all the cares, toils, and hardships of alphahood on me.”

Svet shifted back and forth as he considered. “Maybe, but I’ve got a pretty good handle on my pack now.”

What was the harm of telling him? It might be...nice. To get that off my chest and have another perspective. Hell, maybe this werewolf could help me hunt down the vampire!

“The vamp, the one I asked if you knew, he’s trouble,” I began cautiously.

Svet stilled. A more serious side of him began to push through the easy-going, humor-filled guy. “How much trouble?”

I coughed. “I can’t figure out what he wants.”

Bracing his elbows on the table, Svet leaned down. “Are you, a huntress, *blushing* over a vampire?”

I pursed my lips. “This one is obnoxious, that’s all.”

Svet let out a knowing *ahh*, before pushing himself back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. “Want to give me specifics?”

“I don’t trust you to keep my secrets.”

“We’re friends, that’s what we do.”

The inability to trust slithered down my spine.

“What did the bloodsucker do?” Svet enunciated each word carefully.

I took a deep breath. “I think he’s playing games.”

“Why?” The responding question was immediate.

“I think he wants something from me,” I whispered.

“Are you safe?”

My chest lifted, and I frowned severely at the alpha. “I was top of my class and would have graduated with honors. Yes, I am physically safe.”

Svet held up his hands. “No matter how many things they teach, no matter the hours logged in the field—real life isn’t the same thing, little hunter.”

That answer stunned me. He was so right, it wasn’t even funny.

As my head spun round and round, a waitress came over. There were two drinks on her tray. Gliding up to our table, she popped her hip and grinned at Svet.

My eyes were glued on the soda water she set in front of me. There were two black flowers in the drink.

“What is this?” I asked, trying to fight back the tremor in my voice.

The waitress rolled her eyes and gave me a dumb look. “This round was sent by a gentleman at the bar before he left. It’s a soda water, same as you was drinkin’.”

My eyes cut to the bar. “Who?!”

“He left,” the waitress repeated as if I were dumb.

“The flowers.” I cleared my throat. “What’s up with the flowers?”

“I don’t know,” she dismissed me. “And for you, sugar, we have a Dead Man’s Kiss. Don’t let the color fool you, it’s just black vodka, coffee liqueur, and Frangelico.”

“Thank you kindly,” Svet said with a sickly-sweet voice. “We’ll enjoy these, won’t we, sweetheart?”

He slid an arm around me.

I was about to push him away when I realized how chilly I was and how toasty the werewolf was.

The waitress frowned and disappeared.

“What’s with the flowers, Candace?” Svet growled, looking around the entertainment space.

I swallowed hard. “I keep getting them.”

“From him?”

I nodded. “And when I looked them up, I realized flowers have meanings.”

“They do?” Svet sounded surprised.

“Yeah, but the problem is there is no general consensus over time, culture, or species.” I reached out to touch the

velvety black petals as if they would bite me. “I don’t know what these are.”

“Well, I got a Dead Man’s Kiss, so my guess is the vamp is pissed. Didn’t you sense him?” Svet glared at the bar.

“No,” I admitted. My glyphs didn’t work with this monster! This was damning confirmation that there was a weak point in my armor. *How doesn’t he signal his presence?*

*How often is he around and I don’t know it?* That was when my fingers started to shake in earnest. I shoved them in my lap to hide the embarrassing tell.

“Hey—hey there, Candace. It’s alright,” Svet murmured gruffly, pulling me tighter into his side.

“This friendship shit is weird,” I laughed, but it sounded half crazed.

Svet murmured in agreement. “Yeah, I haven’t actually done this before.”

Forcing my breathing to calm, I reached into my pocket for my burner phone. I pulled up an internet browser and searched the flower as a reverse image.

A black petunia.

Svet read over my shoulder, ““Black petunias can be interpreted as a sign of death or feelings of gloom, but some say they represent strength and uniqueness. The meaning depends on the relationship between the giver and the recipient.””

I blinked at the flower.

“So....” Svet drummed his fingers into the tabletop. “What’s the relationship between your giver and you? That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is,” I whispered.



## Chapter 21 – The Predator

The table could easily seat thirty. Spread with an iridescent ivory cloth and set with the finest of bone China, it was a thing of delicate, sumptuous beauty. The crystal goblets alone were priceless. Or so I assumed. Nothing in Yves's home was store-bought. How out of place we must look. Yves wore a burgundy shirt, open at the neck and sleeves rolled up over his thick forearms. Likewise rid of my suit jacket, I wore black on black. Our bulk clashed with the ethereal spread.

“Did you know you have a necromancer in town?” I casually dropped a bomb on Yves's lap. Not that I cared what happened here if it didn't affect my plans, but I wanted to see what the ambitious soul did.

“Really?” he raised his brows.

I nodded, leaning against the chair's high back. “I happened upon the bloody remains of her ritual during an early evening jog.”

“And I know there's more behind that. One doesn't simply *stumble* upon a necromancer's handiwork.” Yves tapped a finger thoughtfully against his lip. “For someone who says he's only here for relaxation, you seem to keep yourself busy.”

I hummed under my breath. “I haven't stayed alive this long by being careless.”

Yves cant his head toward me. “Okay, I'll bite. Where is the necromancer?”

“Kelda is working that out as we speak. When we know more, would you like to pay the individual a call with me?” I asked with a low chuckle.

Yves shook his head vehemently. “No thank you. I'll offer the privilege of beheading the fiend to one of the other bosses. Vampires and necromancy don't mix well. That can be someone else's problem.”

A frown reflected the unease in my chest. As a street boss, this was Yves duty to protect his district, and therefore the



greater area. If there was a threat as vile as a necromancer, it should be dealt with. End of story. *If I wasn't so busy with the Guild....* That was a poor excuse. I might just have to make the time for ending this scourge before I left town.

“How are things in Rome?” Yves asked, catching me off guard and shaking me from my inner broodings.

The casual question had the potential to open a can of worms I didn't want to deal with. “His royal highness, Bruno, is well.”

“Oh, come now, Menocchio. Give me something more than that.”

*Sing for my supper.* I lifted the goblet of selkie blood and took a long sip. “There is a string of never-ending drama. All nonsense. But it's the plots and treachery that makes the Roman Court far more dangerous than any of the others.”

My mind wandered to my secret weapon. Who I should be watching over, interacting with. *And not kissing....*

While I was stuck at this obligatory dinner, Kelda was at the restaurant. According to her last message, Lennox was still at dinner with the swamp dog. Right where I left them with a fresh round of drinks. Sending the threat had nothing to do with jealousy. That was the narrative I was sticking with. I told myself repeatedly that I didn't care about the huntress's affections. I'd had my taste. Now that the kiss was done, I could put the madness behind me and focus on entwining our futures.

The scrape of Yves's fork grated.

“Has anyone dared make a move against Bruno since the 1940s?” Although Yves dropped his gaze to his blackened sea bass, pushing the asparagus around with his fork, it wasn't quick enough to hide the glint in his eye.

“It would be very foolish to attempt a coup in one of the oldest vampire courts in history. King Bruno has reigned for three hundred years.” My observation sounded politically correct and completely loyal.

“Let me ask you something.” Yves took a bite of his fish, chewed, and washed it down with a gulp of selkie blood. “Have you ever thought of leaving the protection of the court?”

*No, the exact opposite.* I made a face of consideration and blew out a short breath. “Unsworn vampires have a certain freedom, I’ll grant you that.”

“They do—but.” Yves licked his lips. “The established courts have been in power so long, everyone has forgotten their origin.”

“Oh, I remember the origin of the New York Court,” I laughed roughly. “Those mercenaries were volatile.”

“Extremely. It took the Livian Guild establishing their base of operations in Manhattan for the vampire rulers to establish some semblance of decorum,” Yves murmured thoughtfully, his eyes getting a faraway look.

“Rumor has it you’re attempting to establish your own court, Yves.” I sat back in my chair, goblet cradled against my chest.

Those words snapped the vampire mobster into the present. He reached for a tiny silver bell and rang it violently.

The butler came to change our course for the beef tenderloin. A fresh goblet of robust fae blood was uncorked and poured. I kept my half-finished glass of selkie, intending to finish both. After my imprisonment, these expertly vinted bloods were a delightful change of palate.

When the door was once more closed, Yves placed his elbows on the table and steepled his hands. “I can do it.”

My gaze raked down his body. Lifting it back to his eyes, I nodded slowly. “If anyone can, it would be you.”

I thought he would say more. Make me an offer. I felt it, like a pulsing, living thing. But Yves showed wisdom beyond his years by letting such a turbulent subject drop. He didn’t yet trust me, no matter the love I had for his parents. And why should he? I was sworn to Bruno and Rome.

“The beef is locally grown. A human farm, north of the city.” He slid an old dagger through the cut.

A soft smile flickered on his lips. It was there and gone.

Since I wore a charm to protect against poison, I didn’t fear eating anything he offered. Besides, that smile had been... fondness. Not something I needed to concern myself with.

Draining my goblet, I followed suit. It wasn’t that it was forbidden to start another court, but the established entities wouldn’t take kindly to a rival. There could be war if one of them decided to march down here and eradicate the perceived threat.

Since I had no interest in making Bruno’s life easier, my lips were sealed on the subject. My liege lord could choke on a stake for all I cared. There was no way Yves could know that, however. Playing the part of loyalist was imperative until my own plots were set, and I was ready to make some dangerous plays for power.

It all hinged on one little huntress.

The memory of breathless pants filled my ears.

Unable to resist any longer, I dabbed my lips with my napkin. I had to see if Lennox finished her meal with the werewolf and was safely home by now. “I beg your pardon, but I must check to see if Kelda has responded.”

Yves narrowed his eyes. “Tonight’s invitation included your companion.”

I snorted. “She’s a loner, Yves. She won’t do a damn thing unless she wants to.”

“A pity.” Yves cut another strip of rare beef.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I swiped the screen, tapped the pin, and just about lost my meal. For such a prickly exterior, Kelda texts read like an entirely different personality. However, it wasn’t the choppy style or misspelled words that sent my pulse into overdrive.

**Kelda: dis fun. food done. party time.**

**Kelda: ooh! she's dancing with a human**

**Kelda: how is this not porn**

The next text was a bunch of red faced, panting emojis.

“Is something amiss, Menocchio?” There was laughter in Yves voice.

I growled. “I have to leave.”

“How unfortunate. I wonder what your breathtaking right hand has gotten herself into that makes you leave so hastily.” Yves took his last bite of beef.

“It’s private.” I pushed myself off the chair. My vision was tinged with green.

“You’re allowed to have secrets, but I’m allowed to ferret them out,” Yves promised, eyes twinkling. That was the crafty sonofabitch who’d risen from destruction against all odds. Few vampires were able to carve out their own courts. They were only surpassed in strength by those able to wrestle control of an existing court.

“I don’t want trouble, Yves. Let that be the lesson from tonight’s dinner.”

“Oh, I think a great deal more was accomplished.” He rose and extended a hand. “I think you and I could benefit one another. Let’s talk again...soon.”

Clasping his hand, elation should have been coursing through my veins. This was the beginning of a powerful alliance. Instead of forging that, my mind was elsewhere and drowning in a mixture of emotions the other vampire would have seen as weakness.

~\*~

Lies. The past twenty-four hours had all been bloody lies. Just one taste. A simple kiss. It was supposed to sate the beast inside, bring focus to my mind. Eliminate the unwanted complication to my conquest.

The club door nearly flew off its hinges, and the rhythm of bright jazz blasted across the space. The hostess gave me one

look and backed away. Smart human. I stalked into the cocktail area. A sweep of the room showed Kelda perched at a high-top bistro table. We shared a look, and I could have sworn there was a hint of laughter in her eyes. Kelda *never* laughed. Life had burned it out of her. Lazily, she cant her head to the side.

I followed her direction with a twist of my own. Sweaty bodies were packed in the cleared area before the raised stage. Although they weren't as elegant as their predecessors when it came to the art of dance, that didn't stop the throng from movin' and groovin'. My molars were in danger of turning into dust. The jawbone threatened to crack.

*Where the hell is she—*

Our gazes collided. The oxygen left my lungs. The music faded. The moving bodies slowed, blurred, and seemed to vanish. The anger in my chest lessened.

Those blazing green eyes narrowed. A scowl slid over Lennox's features. And then, the vixen looped her arms around the human she danced with, never once taking her eyes off me.

She should be disengaging from the dance, readying herself for a fight! Instead, the little huntress was showing me just how she felt about my interruption. Unthreatened.

Well, we were just going to have to change that.

Stalking forward, I pushed through the crowd, careless for those who tipped or swayed into my path. There were a few grunts, one or two cries of pain. But the music and the noise of the crowd hid it all.

Grabbing the silken shirt of the male stupid enough to interact with someone who didn't belong to him, I lifted the human off his feet. Lennox scrambled to keep her hold.

Dropping my mouth to the man's ear, I growled, "Run."

With a violent shake, I tossed him aside. He stumbled to find his feet and lost no time disappearing.

Lennox, backing away now that her pathetic shield was gone, glared menacingly at me. Something brown and sharp

showed against the inside of her arm. Approval sparked in the back of my mind, but it wasn't enough to wash away the rage at seeing her in the arms of another.

Speeding forward, I caught her wrists. The stake pressed hard against her forearm. Not slowing for a moment, I drug her toward the exit. There wasn't a soul that noticed, except for my protégée.

"I hate you," Lennox seethed, unable to struggle because of the momentum.

"The feeling just might be mutual, bella," I growled, louder so she could hear over the noise.

When I slowed to catch the latch, Lennox bucked. My hold tightened enough to bruise her flesh. The catch in her breath told me it hurt.

"Knock it off," I snapped, giving her a rough shake.

"Never."

I tugged the thrashing huntress into the alley and let the door slam closed. Without pause, I moved us a few yards away. When the staccato of the jazz lessened, I whipped the huntress around.

Slammed her body against the wall of the opposite building.

Pinned her kicking, writhing mass with my body.

"I'm tired of fighting this," I bit out and crushed my lips to hers.

Wanting her was a poor description. There were no words for the need in my veins. It wasn't her blood that called to me, although that dazzling crimson liquid pulsed wildly in her veins. Lennox was a dangerous obsession. One I was powerless to resist.

Fire licked my veins, my groin. I fucked her mouth—hard.

All the desire and promise of what I would do to her poured into the kiss.

A whimper clawed from her. The sound was a bolt of lust that shot straight to my cock. My balls ached, tight and full. The temptation to take this further assaulted my resolve. I threaded my right hand through her hair, holding her in place. The hell realms would thaw before I let her pull back.

Three notes of music played in the back of my mind. Instead of shoving them away, as I was want to do, I tried to reach for them. But I wasn't in the right mental state to heed their call and compose their meaning.

"You taste like sunshine, Lennox," I moaned into her mouth.

A jolt of panic sliced through me as I realized what I'd said. But the near slip was lost to the huntress. There was submission in her limbs. If only for a moment, she allowed her mouth to be mine.

So I consumed her. Our tongues twined together. The beast inside rose, swelling with satisfaction. Pulling her gathered wrists to the side, I ground my pelvis against her. It was as far as we could go. Any more would do irreparable damage.

Breathing hard, I broke the kiss. Later, when there was more blood in my brain, I would consider enticing her to my cause by use of this raw, tempestuous heat between us. I'd been opposed to having an amorous relationship with this huntress, because I wanted her to be my willing source. Now I couldn't fathom my stupidity for ignoring this fire as a viable option. Feeding this fire and having a physical relationship might just be the edge to win her to my side!

I leaned in to absorb her rushing exhale. A battle raged in her eyes. She didn't want to feel the way her body responded to me. Lust warred with the hatred she felt for my kind—no! That was a special kind of wrath, reserved for me alone.

It made my heart fucking soar to see it.

The beast inside got off on her anger.

Pulling her hair roughly to tip her head to the side, I watched shock widen her eyes. Panic fled across her features.

“Don’t worry, I can’t bite you.” I leaned forward. “Not unless you remove that locket, since I don’t want to do it.”

Her body jerked as she tried to escape. “Get away, monster!”

I tsked. “You’re a little hypocrite, Nox.”

She let out a low scream of frustration.

“Does it destroy you that you crave my touch?” I growled, trailing bruising kisses along her jaw. At the pulse point, I lathed my tongue over the skin of her throat.

“I’m going to kill you, Cato,” she hissed.

“You can kill me, bella donna, but you can’t quelch that feeling burning inside.” Catching her earlobe between my teeth, I bit ever so gently and was rewarded with a soft gasp. Her hips rocked against me. I smiled. “No one has ever tasted this good.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yes, please,” I purred. “Now...run along, like a good girl. Run back to your lair, little huntress. The night grows dangerous with each passing hour.”

Although it hurt as though my body was burning in sunlight, I moved away. The space between us sizzled with the electricity of our connection. Never taking her eyes off me, Lennox ran her hands down her clothes. She swiped the back of her hand over those flushed, swollen lips before spitting on the ground.

About to launch myself at her and do something filthy like stroke every corner of her mouth with my tongue, I froze.

The scent of wet dog filled the alley.

“Svet! Look out,” Lennox warned, sensing the killing rage inside of me.

“Candace!” The mutt barreled forward. “Get out of here!”

I tore my focus from the huntress and rounded on the werewolf. Poised with indecision, Lennox watched. The noise



of ripping leather told me she'd taken her concealed stake from her boot.

"Huntress, leave now, and I swear no harm shall befall the dog." It was the only warning I would offer.

She paused mid-step.

"I give you my word. But I'm not telling you again," I ground out.

"I can handle him," the alpha menaced.

Cute. The puppy could bark.

Lennox let out a long breath. "No harm, vamp."

I inclined my head.

The sound of retreating footfall bounced off the pavement behind me.

A blur of muscle shot forward. I easily stepped out of the path of the yapping projectile.

The werewolf was pissed. "Look, pointy, if she doesn't want anything to do with you, I'm not going to let your presence darken her doorstep."

*Brave words, fool.* "I knew I was right sending her to you. This protective streak was something I counted on, but—"

I burst forward, wrapping my hand around the werewolf's throat. The alpha's back smacked into the wall.

Claws slashed, and pain erupted in my arms, in my torso. I managed to keep my face away from him.

"Don't you *ever* make the mistake of standing between her and me. The huntress is mine. You got that, pup?"

The alpha was going full-blown wolf on me. It took both hands around his throat to keep a hold. But the corded muscles expanded, sinew thick. The fur was dark and sprouted against my touch.

The worst was the muzzle elongating.

That terrible, gnashing jaw. One bite, and I would be sick from the saliva penetrating my blood stream. Perhaps in

hindsight it wasn't smart to piss him off enough to wolf out. Needing to make my point and keeping my mind clear were two different things.

“If you value the lives of your pack, you'll keep your paws off her.” I flashed him my fangs. Waiting a moment for the cold-blooded warning to sink in, I took off.

The werewolf's roar thundered through the night.



## Chapter 22 – Lennox

After catching up to me, Svet took me to his three-bedroom apartment. It was either that or he was walking me home. Since it would be unforgiveable to show a supernatural where the hunters nested, I had no choice but to go home with the werewolf. Apparently, the alpha stayed here whenever he had business in the city. The place was gorgeous. Sleek and modern. The color palette was a stunning combination of blacks, deep greys, and stainless steel. The interior decorator he'd hired had gone for business billionaire bachelor pad. It wasn't my style, but I loved it nonetheless. Not because it screamed power and wealth, but because it *fit*. There was personality captured here. A place where the alpha could be alone, free from pack matters.

In a borrowed shirt that hung to my thighs, I climbed freshly washed into the bed. There was no reason to check in with the squad. They wouldn't even notice I was gone, even though it was well after three in the morning. The wall across from me was one long line of windows. While the light from the city flickered into the space, I couldn't bear to shut the blinds. This was how people outside the Guild lived.

*What if life was different?* I laughed roughly and closed my eyes. This was all I'd ever known. This was who I was.

“And look at Svet. Sure, he has an apartment and gets away, but he's bound to duty.” *Would you look at that? A thread of common ground with a monstrous being.* I laughed again. Never in a thousand years would I have thought that was possible that two beings as different as us could be friends.

But it made sense. Werewolves didn't eat humans, didn't prey on them. They weren't high on our priority to hunt, one of the reasons it'd been so easy to go to him for help, when the hunters refused to step up and I had no other options. *Look how that simple action had snowballed into me being here.*

A shiver rolled through my body. Only...it wasn't from fear. It was delicious.

I pulled the blanket over my shoulders to block out the misguided feelings. Yet they couldn't be blocked out by something as flimsy and tangible as a blanket. They burned inside, sizzling through my veins. It was a fantasy so deep, it only ever came to me in dreams. But ever since the vampire came into my life, they'd taken shape, manifesting in my consciousness. A fantasy so forbidden, it becoming reality would lead to immediate execution.

Sex with a vampire. Only now...the vampire had a name. A face. A mouth.

Damn me, but he could kiss. And my traitorous body? Wanted *more*.

~\*~

Just after dawn a soft slam woke me. Hurrying to the open concept kitchen and living space, I discovered the werewolf's note.

### **BRB. On a pastry run.**

Heartrate slowing, I tried to go back to sleep. I couldn't. Back in the same, sweat-stained clothes from yesterday, I curled on the wicker patio chair. The cotton blanket was becoming less and less necessary with each passing tick of the clock. The sun climbed higher, and the city below stirred.

I needed to kill the vampire. He was taking up too much of my mental space. *I barely slept*. And when I did, he was there to haunt my dreams with his touch, his taste.

A shiver rolled through me.

*Focus, Lennox*. How had he found me last night? I frowned, watching the streets below. The question danced through my mind.

Already alerted to his presence, I wasn't startled when Svet opened the sliding door.

"You have such a nice place," I said, not taking my eyes off the view.

The werewolf cleared his throat. Reluctantly, I turned in my seat. The deeply tanned skin on his cheeks glowed with a

pink tinge. *What the hell?*

“Here.” He held out a coffee, the rich scent curling around me in a tantalizing fashion. But my eagerness to get the dark liquid inside me was overshadowed by the burst of yellow.

A yellow *rose*.

“I figured you were getting flowers from that creep, so you might as well get a nice one.”

Time slowed as I reached for the flower. “That’s not— This doesn’t mean—”

Now it was my turn for blood to warm my cheeks.

“Yellow roses are for *friendship*,” he rushed to say. “It was there next to the bakery, and when I looked it up, it felt like a good idea.”

I pushed the rose to my nose, inhaling deeply. “I don’t mind.”

“It was stupid now that I’ve said it out loud. I’m sorry.” He made to reach for the flower.

“Don’t you dare take my rose!” I turned my body to hide it from him. “My friend gave it to me.”

A smile curved over his mouth. “Alright. I owe you some pastries.”

He reached into the canvas sack hanging from the crook of his arm and pulled out a paper box.

We began to eat. Or at least, I did. Svet held his between his fingers, gaze fixed on it.

I swallowed the piece of sugary goodness. “It’s not poisoned, is it?”

“You’re not a trusting person.”

“It’s safer that way.”

Svet hummed in agreement. “Maybe someday we can trust one another, but I think that’s what I like most about you.”

“My mistrust?” I spoke around the bite I was about to take.

“Your honesty. We both say what we mean and there are no illusions.” Svet nibbled his breakfast.

And just like that, I saw this for what it was. A nice gesture. *Friendship*. “Someday, you’re going to make someone very happy.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious!” Chewed pastry garbled the words.

“You’re fucking hilarious, candy corn Candace.”

“It’s Lennox.”

The word was out of my mouth before I could think better of it.

Svet stilled, realizing what those words signified.

And then he held out a great big hand. “Nice to meet you, Lennox.”

The sugary dough suddenly stuck in my throat. Blinking rapidly, I fought back stars in my vision. “Obviously this isn’t something that can be known—”

“Peace, little menace, this is how we’ll build trust. Even if we end up shooting at one another, I won’t use this against you.”

Fate help me, I believed him.

“Does the pointy-fanged bastard know your name?” Svet picked at his pastry.

“Unfortunately. But I never told him,” I rushed to add as I looked greedily at the box which had grease stains marking the brown material.

“He’s obsessed with you.”

“I know.” And then an idea struck me. “Would you want to help me set a trap for him?” I blurted out.

Svet frowned. “Isn’t that something your squad should help you with?”

I barked a laugh. “You’d think so, right? The vamp escaped. He could have killed me, but didn’t. I can only figure

that he wants something from me.”

“Well, I’ve not been trained by the Guild.” Mischief twinkled in Svet’s black eyes. It was as if a thousand stars danced across the midnight irises.

“You are a hunter,” I said, liking this idea more and more.

“I am.” Svet flashed me a downright lupine smile. “Are you able to accept advice from an outsider, even if it’s against your training?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely!” I lifted a second pastry and held it out to him. “Cheers?”

The alpha finally grabbed his and lifted it to chink against mine. “Cheers, little menace.”





## Chapter 23 – Lennox

Svet asked for the day to speak to his shaman—who was out vacationing with a shade. Of all the monsters to take a trip with! While shades were beings able to wield shadow magic—and all that entailed—they also created nightwalkers. Not on purpose. If the individual trying to merge with the shadows was strong-willed and maliciously inclined, they became an unnatural being, an abomination. I only saw one during a field trip. Imprisoned and used for selective missions by the mercenaries, the shade who kept the beast whipped it into a frenzy for us to observe.

The brotherhood of shades and the Livian Guild had amicable understandings so long as we didn't end up on the wrong side of a battle line. The main difference: the Guild was determined to protect humanity—we were humans once. Now we simply had magic protecting and enhancing us. We couldn't wield any power. Shades, they could be any type of being before they merged with the shadows. The very shadows that were at their command, and they didn't always prioritize protecting humanity.

Although it would take effort contacting her, Svet was certain the shaman to the Blackwater Pack could suggest a way to trap the vampire.

If we could lure him out.

Svet thought we could. He'd said that obsession was a funny thing.

"Funny when you're not the one being obsessed over," I muttered, pushing into our fortress.

The light was on in the boardroom—which would have been a living space if this was a family's house instead of a hunter's hideout. Voices, muted by the thickness of the door, were engaged in an animated conversation. A knot of unease formed in my gut. It was too early in the morning for Captain and Gage to be awake.

Something must have happened.

I knocked on the door, painting a pleasant yet neutral expression on my face. They didn't have to know I'd been out. And if they asked, I would say I'd been out to meet with a contact.

"Ah, Miss Aelius, come in," a clean-cut male with a no nonsense look on his face said, pulling the door wide and sweeping his hand for me to enter the boardroom.

Captain and Gage were slumped in the wheely office chairs, both sporting dark circles under their eyes and two days' worth of scruff. The newcomer might be in a polo and khakis, but he carried himself with a marked care and precision. Although the Guild didn't have formal uniforms like the human military, this man was made to wear sharp uniforms.

As was I.

"Sir." I pulled myself to attention, gaze straight ahead.

"At ease, Lennox, at ease." The male walked past me. "Sit down, please. My name is Captain Blake, FH."

FH—Field Handler. *Ah, shit.*

Captain had made a report, which I'd snuck a peek at just yesterday morning. It glossed over most details about the actual events concerning Fox and the vampire. Nothing should have warranted an official visit.

"As I explained to the gentlemen, I am here on a surprise inspection. It has been two years since we conducted one at this outpost, as I am sure you are aware."

"No, sir. I didn't know it had been so long." I sat, folding my hands in my lap.

Blake stood at the head of the table. "Ah, well, that is something they should have made known to you."

I could *feel* Captain's glare. *Double shit.* I'd just unwittingly rattled him out.

"Recent events have brought your inspection to the front of my tour list. We are rather overwhelmed in the Field Offices."

“I know, sir. I applied to become an associate in that department. My aptitudes all were strongly leaning to that path.” I threw myself a bone, so sue me. Maybe this captain could get me out of here.

“Your record is stunning indeed,” Blake remarked, scrolling through the tablet in his hand. “Which is why it is so interesting that you were sent so far from Headquarters. Why here, Miss Aelius?”

I swallowed hard. “Those were my orders, sir.”

“Well said.” Blake flicked through the tablet but shot a glance at me. “Relax, please, ma’am. I shall not be using truth serum this trip.”

From the smile and cadence of his speech, the overly formal officer had attempted a joke. But it only served to make me far more nervous.

“I see the request to work in the NYC Field Offices, or to be sent to the Manhattan Squad. You worked with Captain Miller during your internships. Yet many classmates who did not have personal letters of recommendation from the captain or even interned with him were sent there. Why is that?”

Blake was fishing. *Fucking hell!*

If I was in a sweater, I would have been drenched. As it was, a cold sweat broke across my back.

“I forget the official language of this assignment, but the gist was that they wanted to observe me on a different level and see how I handled myself.” Which was the tactful way of saying I was getting the shit end of the shovel.

And I knew why.

But to save face, no one else did. The headmistress was crafty like that.

“Your training is indeed impressive.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“That is not a compliment, so much as a question.” Blake pressed the button on the side of his tablet, set it down, and

then pinned me with a stern look. “How did the vampire escape, Miss Aelius?”

He needed the correct answer and quick.

“It appeared to us that Fox came back and was too close to the cage. How the bloodsucker reached him, it’s hard to say. But either way, the fiend escaped.”

“And left you all to sleep?” Blake countered.

In this interrogation, it was speed that mattered. Thankful that I’d read the report, I could muddle my way through the mess.

“I can’t explain that, sir, but the kitchen door leading from the basement slash garage was warded.” I caught Captain and Gage shifting in their seats. They’d been silent so far. Had they each been questioned already or was I the first?

Did it matter?

“You returned before Fox. Was there anything strange in the house when you arrived?” Blake folded his arms over his chest.

“My instructions for the evening, as they had been every evening since we inhabited the foreclose, was to ensure the floor was bleached and the filthy water emptied. The drain was prone to clogging,” I explained.

“Why not unclog the drain?” Blake tipped his head to the side.

*I’m not a fucking plumber.* “Although it’s a poor reason, I don’t believe any of us thought the vampire would last as long as h—it did.” I caught myself in time.

I hoped to all the seven hell realms that no one caught the near slip! My heart hammered in my veins. They would hear the lack of objectifying as suspicious.

“I have heard a lot of poor reasons this morning, Miss Aelius.” Blake slid a look to the others.

They visibly shifted in their chairs. The wheels creaked.

I wanted to groan. Way to be obvious!

It answered a question though. Blake had been here for a while.

“Did you leave anything within reach of the vampire?” There it was, the meat of his interrogation.

“No, sir.”

“As we said, it’s not provable, but it would sure s’plain a lot if she did,” Gage mumbled.

*Asshole!* Okay, if he was going to point fingers instead of sticking to facts, then I could dish. “Sir, permission to speak openly,” I clipped out to the Field Handler.

“Granted.” Blake was still watching the males.

It was pathetic, really. He was the same rank as our captain, but he was far more composed and professional than the squad leader here.

“When I arrived at this outpost, I found a squad disorganized and lacking many resources made available to other outposts. Worse than that, another problem quickly became obvious. This squad rarely follows protocol. Procedures are conducted with minimal effort by lazy hunters. When this was repeatedly brought to my commander’s attention, they mocked me. Perhaps, this is part of the reason Fox was in that basement alone, interacting with the vampire.”

“Why were you down there alone? Cleaning?” Blake cut back, having caught the flaw in my outburst.

“It was a direct order, sir.” I tipped my chin up.

“And you made no formal report of this behavior? Instead...participated?” The Field Handler wasn’t playing favorites.

But I wasn’t burning for this. “It is in the drafts of my email. I was waiting until the vampire was turned over, and then the evidence would be sent.”

There was a long pause. Betrayal hung thick in the air, but I had no loyalty to these two remaining hunters, who had been nothing but trouble since I arrived, if not guilty of sexual harassment.

“And where have you been all night?” Gage demanded. Why he was speaking for Captain, I couldn’t quite fathom.

These hunters had never been with me. They’d tolerated my presence, but clearly had been left to their own devices for far too long. I was only here to replace one of their fallen comrades. Otherwise, the Guild would have let them continue to slide.

They fucked up, and they knew it.

*Don’t trust them.* Funny, my own thought echoed the vampire’s warning.

“I was planning to establish my own residence in the city, and although it is not customary, it isn’t against the rules. You and Fox had your den of iniquity above the Jewel. I thought that was how this squad operated,” I responded with venom.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Miss Aelius.” Blake flicked a glance at me and tapped on his tablet. “While it was the unofficial policy to allow for personal space, a formal policy was ratified at the last council meeting and voted into practice. Hunters in the field must live with their squads. If you’d like to see the paper backing the claim that it fosters brotherhood, I’d be happy to email you a copy.”

“Understood,” I breathed.

As the silence continued, and all the bad feelings festered in the space, I ignored the negative energy and turned my thoughts inward. I didn’t trust these hunters because of their selfish, lazy ways. But the vampire seemed to think there was something...more. Some reason they wanted me dead.

Was he simply trying to have me chase ghosts in the shadows? Or—

*Is this Field Handler here to figure out why I’m still alive?*

The thought was brutal. It was impossible to know what to believe. I couldn’t stay here, and the Guild might not be the safest place for me right now. Now, finding my own place was no longer an option.

“I have heard enough. I shall take the spare room here and forward my findings to my superiors. You are all dismissed until further notice.” Blake motioned with a flick of his fingers while reaching for his tablet with the other hand.

I shot out of chair and jogged to the front door. I needed clean clothes and a toothbrush.

I could buy those things instead. I had enough cash and would make a withdrawal today just to be safe. The Guild always ensured we had adequate stipends. It was better if I stayed away at night. As I started making the necessary lists in my mind, Captain hissed my name.

I didn't stop.

Heavy footfall stomped behind me.

I wasn't giving them a chance to confront me. I fled. Even when the front door slammed behind me, I didn't stop. I ran, sprinting down the street.

The sound of the door smashing open shot a bolt of fear through me.

“Candy Cane, get your sweet ass back here!” Captain roared. “We have shit that needs straightening out.”

From the way his words slurred slightly, I realized he was still drunk. Probably why Gage had been doing most of the speaking inside.

I turned, tearing through a yard. There were trees behind to offer some cover, this neighborhood being an upper middle class with landscaping. There might be wild animals here, but I didn't fear them nearly as much as I did the wrath of my fellow hunters.

*I didn't mean to be a snitch.* I hated it. But...the hunters had it coming. When it was my skin or theirs, I refused to hang for them.

~\*~

This was a dead zone. How there was one less than five miles from the hunter's fortress, I couldn't fathom. This was a festering sore, the type of place humans didn't know existed



but instinctually avoided. Supernatural beings, however, thrived there. But only the worst kinds. From the markings on the walls, this was exactly the kind of supernatural problem the squad should have cleared out.

*I was right to make my report.* I pinched my fingers between my eyes for a second. It was a dumb thing to do in a dead zone. I quickly dropped my hand and cast wary glances to the buildings on either side of me.

If the buildings weren't water damaged and if the street was dirt instead of asphalt, this would have looked like a scene of out some Hollywood wild-wild-west movie. The empty buildings on either side protected all manner of creepy crawlies, waiting for night to come out and wreak havoc on anything stupid enough to wander through their territory.

There wasn't too much to fear. I was a hunter, and I was armed.

When I caught the first trap, I all but smiled. Clever little monsters, hoping an unsuspecting human would wander this way. While it was hard for cognizant adults to see a dead zone due to their lack of belief in the supernatural, children or senile elderly could see it for what it really was. Even drunks and drug addled humans, could turn down the street and waltz into this place.

And that red circle on the ground would keep them prisoner until dark. Using a flash of Armedia iron, I marred the line. Saltwater or carrot juice would also disintegrate it, purifying the whole area.

There was a deafening shriek from deep inside a building. I rose and glared at the space. It was easy to be bold with the warm noon sun beating down on me.

Too bad I couldn't go back to the hunters' fortress, make a report, and trust that Captain would call a strategizing meeting.

The hideous sound was echoed by other cackles and howls. The whole street was suddenly alive and aggressive. *Time to go.* While they couldn't reach me in daylight, there

was no telling what other nasty tricks the nightmares of the underworld had up their sleeves.

I didn't run down the street, but my deliberate walk was chased by various noises from the dark doorways and broken windows. Head held high, I tripped lightly onto the battered concrete of the sidewalk. This was a commerce area, but not the kind money or tourism visited. The dilapidated grocery store was next to a poorly kept daycare. I shook my head. Humans, living so close to a dead zone.

With one final glare over my shoulder, I moved away. I couldn't say how or when, but I fully intended to go back to that area and purge the yuck living in those rundown buildings.

My stomach growled, settling the decision of what to do next. There was bound to be something in the grocery store that was preserved in plastic and edible. Perhaps a can of tuna or even a decent deli sandwich, but risking food poisoning wasn't something I could afford right now. Protein bar it was.

The door chimed as I wandered inside. The two cashiers were chatting across their stalls. Neither looked at me. Exactly as it should be. A hunter didn't wear clothing to attract attention. I flicked a glance at their painted faces and exotic manicures. A flicker of envy fizzled through me for five seconds before I turned away. It would be only too amazing to doll myself up like that.

Before I could think better of it, my feet led me to the cosmetic section. The pretty packaging, the tantalizing promises of the marketing language, and the idea of looking feminine distracted me for less than a minute. In theory, I knew how to use some of this goop. What if I looked fabulous all the time? Like the dark-haired beauty modeling the glamorous eye paint. Was being a normal human even fun?

I turned away with a groan of disgust. How could I be tempted by the idea of being a regular, average human? I was a *hunter*. Choosing the rules and strict lifestyle was far better than blindly going through life thinking anything supernatural was strictly fiction.

Grumbling under my breath, I marched down the aisle and to the canned food. At the corner, I almost ran into a teenager. The young one had eyeliner thickly caking her eyes.

“This is for you,” she stated, blinking hard and flashing purple powder over her eyelids.

It took half a second to notice the slip of folded paper in her fingers. The teen jerked her arm impatiently for me to take it. A quick glance around the bustling store showed nothing suspicious.

“Lady! I want my twenty bucks, so like take the fucking piece of paper already,” the teen snipped.

I tsked at her. “Hold your horses, brat.”

But I took the paper. The teen slipped back down an aisle. I stepped forward but didn’t see which way she went.

*So odd....*

The opened piece of paper lay in my hand, the words making a stone drop my gut.

**You’re off your game today, Nox.**

I took off after the teen, but it was no use. She was already gone. Some shoppers were looking at me like I was crazy. Maybe I was.

“Or maybe, my gods-damned stalker is a piece of shit,” I growled under my breath.

I marched down an aisle, ripped the fake brownie health bar off the shelf, and was about to go pay and get the hell out of here. The paper seemed to pulse in my hand. I unwrinkled it and reread the words.

Off my game. *I* was off my game. What the hell did he know?

“Yeah well, you know what, bloodsucker? Fuck you!” I bit out. Of all the things to say to me—

“If you insist,” a cool voice murmured behind me.

A chill shivered down my spine.

I turned slowly. It wasn't a dream. The bastard was really here. Here, in the middle of the day. No cloak and hood. Dark hair, longer at the top and fading to stubble, wasn't covered with a wide brimmed hat. The way it was combed to the side, it hadn't been recently concealed, either. The vampire wore dark jeans and a black tee that hugged his lethal frame. I blinked rapidly. There were not sunburn marks on his skin.

He smiled slowly, clearly knowing he perplexed me.

"Shouldn't you be in your coffin?" The snide comment slipped off my tongue.

"How cliché of you, little huntress." The vampire slid his hands into his pockets. "Besides, my sarcophagus is rather lonely. Perhaps you'd like to come back with me and warm it?"

I blanched. "What the hell is your fascination with me?"

I meant to shout the whole sentence at him. But after the word *hell*, the vampire was on me, one hand securing my back and the other clamped over my mouth.

"Let's not draw too much attention to this conversation, if it's all the same to you," he growled.

"I want to know what you want with me," I demanded around his firm palm.

Those cool, calculating eyes ran over me. The amber rings surrounding the midnight black of the iris were complex. And they weren't emotionless. Only deep, concealing what he truly felt in the far reaches. A place completely inaccessible to me.

Lost in the wandering trance of his look, I missed what he said.

"Huh?" I mumbled, lifting my brows in question.

The vampire took a step back, breaking the physical contact with me. "I can't tell you any of that right now, you infuriating woman."

"But you would tell me?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes." That response was so...simple.

“Why?” I demanded.

A slow smile pulled his mouth upward. I drew in a deep breath, it was dazzling.

The look of a predator.

“Because it is all part of your game,” I surmised.

He only nodded once.

“Alright, I’ll play.” I crossed my arms over my chest.  
“Meet me for a coffee. Tonight.”

“Time?”

“Nine sharp.”

“I very much look forward to it, Lennox.” The vampire moved forward once more, like a breath of wind he closed the distance. He brushed the back of his finger over my shoulder.

And then he was gone with that vampire speed.

In his wake, he left goose flesh bursting over my skin. I bit my bottom lip hard, and curses whispered out on my exhale.



## Chapter 24 – The Predator

The scene was set exactly as I intended. There were no other customers out on the patio, even though the night was breathtakingly peaceful. At the intimate table right next to the pillared trellis, the huntress sat with a look of pure annoyance covering her face. Otherwise, Lennox was the picture of beauty. It was the lethal poise of her body, barely concealed in the nondescript front she put on. She wore a white cotton tee and slacks that looked like trousers but really were made of some special blend of military grade material. Her hair was braided back, the only acceptable style for a female hunter for combat purposes. Most shaved it like the males. I was glad she'd kept hers. For a moment, I indulged in the fantasy of touching it.

The feel of those dark strands running through my fingers....

I clenched my jaw tighter. The struggle to resist her was one I was in danger of repeatedly losing. When capable of rational thought, I berated myself for the two lapses. Standing here, a burst of fresh desire rushing through my veins, it was obvious why my iron control failed. Lennox was destined for intimacy, but there were other, far more valuable things I wanted from her. I was greedy enough to think I could have both. The sight of those fine legs stretching out under the table—damn. My dick wanted to know what it would be like to have them wrapped around my back as I buried myself deep inside her.

Such a distraction—and she didn't even know it.

Lennox looked impatiently at her watch. I had twenty-three seconds to spare, but to her watch, no doubt, I appeared late. *I'm coming for you, little one.*

I closed the distance and dropped into the opposite seat in precisely three seconds.

“Good evening, Nox.” I smiled, and her momentary look of shock was too sweet.

“I can’t believe you came.”

“Why is that so hard to believe?” I swallowed the smile. She had no idea how intoxicating she was.

She blinked at me. “Because I think you’re screwing with me. This is all some big joke or game to you.”

“And you don’t know the rules,” I added.

The waitress came to take our order. “Well, hi there. How are y’all doin’ this evening?”

“Fine, thank you,” I said, speaking over the huntress. “A glass of the ’76 Willamette pinot noir for the lady, a Château du Val d’Or cab for myself, and your dessert sampler.”

The waitress nodded and spun away.

“I don’t drink,” Lennox stated.

“A pinot noir is meant to be sipped, not chugged.” I folded my hands in my lap and waited.

“You said coffee,” she snarked, glaring daggers at me.

“If I remember correctly, you were the one who suggested coffee. Besides, you’ll like this better.”

Lennox shifted, temper barely contained, as she looked around. She hated my bossy liberties. Too bad I enjoyed making her squirm. Her beautiful pink lips worked back and forth, but no words came out.

“The ball is in your court, my dear huntress.” I leaned forward. “Ask me.”

Her gaze snapped to mine. There was the fire, making her eyes a raging emerald. “Why haven’t you killed me?”

“You’re too special to be killed.” A full body spasm ran through her muscles. My non-answer frustrated her.

“Me? There’s nothing special about me. You’re twisting words.”

“How could you know if there was something special if you’ve never been told,” I countered.

“I don’t even know what that means.” Her tone held a bite.



I wanted to reach out. My fingers actually *itched* to snag her braid, unwrap the twisted strands. The challenge that she presented was something I very much wanted to play with.

“Of course you don’t, Lennox. How could you know, when you don’t even know anything about your family.” I dropped the minuscule hint.

She stilled, catching the clue instantly.

“Yes, little huntress, there are secrets that have been kept from you.”

“And you’re just the hapless bastard capitalizing on them?” she snapped.

“Guilty as charged.” I lifted my hands. “However, I’m the one willing to work *with* you. Only you have to get over yourself and make a pact with—” I gasped for dramatic effect “—a vampire.”

“That’s not happening.” Lennox shot from her chair, her hand reaching for the syringe she thought so cleverly concealed in her pocket.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” I warned.

“Do what?” Something shifted in her eyes.

“Sit down and try the wine. Have a dessert, because I know you haven’t eaten enough calories in the last few days,” I commanded, my hard tone taking no mercy. “Or use that potion vial now that I’m trapped in the enchanted snare, and my protégée will shoot your new lupine friend.”

Lennox stumbled.

It took a lot to unsettle this huntress. Even a horde of undead couldn’t. So the flash of pride that shifted through my chest was warranted.

The sound of her pulse hammering through those veins was an erotic prelude to the symphony I desperately wanted to evoke from her body.

“How did you know?” she finally managed to choke out.

The waitress's timing was perfect. She set the carafes of wine, the glasses, and the dessert platter down on our table. Her expression was friendly, a professional mask. She obviously noticed the tension raging between us but had been paid well enough to keep other patrons away and not comment on my female companion's distress.

When the waitress left with a flourish, I reached out and poured the wine into Lennox's glass. "As you already established, I'm playing a game. It is a very long campaign, which I am far too invested in to let something as obnoxious as a red-blooded werewolf screw up."

"I don't understand, you sent me to him," the huntress ground out between clenched teeth.

I nodded. "You had a problem, and I was too occupied bleeding on your floor to help. So I gave you the next best option—which I'm starting to very much regret."

Although she would hate that I noticed, Lennox slid a quick glance at the double chocolate, flourless torte. She wasn't going to take it. The stubborn thing. I waited only a beat before I lifted, plated, and served a slice of pure decadence to her. A growl of discontent sounded at the back of her throat, but otherwise she didn't protest.

"Eat and drink, or I'll stop talking," I warned, selecting a bite of the wild strawberry and basil swirl cheesecake for myself.

"Are you actually going to tell me the secrets?" Lennox lifted her fork and carved a dainty bite of the torte.

The mad desire to swat the fork away and pin her arms seized me. To lift the torte, feed it to her...and then kiss her for a taste of it on her lips. The idea stole the very breath from my lungs. I had to set my own utensil down and clench my fingers.

Lennox shot me a strange look, as if she could sense my feelings for her.

I *wanted* her to know how this desire to have her interfered with my original plans and that I was trying like a drowning

man to adjust and accommodate.

But it wasn't the time.

"Well?" she demanded, taking the tiniest of sips of her wine.

"I could tell you everything. Lay it all out," I agreed, taking my stemless wine glass and inhaling. The dark red aroma was nothing short of perfection. *If only I'd brought a cigar....*

"That would take all the cards from your hands. And whatever I did with the information would be unpredictable," Lennox mumbled. Despite herself, she was chowing down on the torte.

"Exactly. See, you're figuring the game out." I took a steadying breath and lifted my own fork again.

"So this is a waste of my time?"

"No," I countered. "This is us getting to know one another."

"You seem to know a great deal about me, and I know nothing about you." She set her fork down on her empty plate.

I waited for her to look down at the platter. When she didn't, I said, "What would you like to know about me?"

Something shifted in her gaze. "How old are you?"

"Very."

A little huff blew from her lips. It was cute.

"I met Queen Elizabeth the First—she was not a virgin."

"She wasn't even human," Lennox drawled, but I caught the spark of interest before she at last looked down at the platter of dessert.

Lemon custard shell.

It was on her plate a half breath later.

"Do you read minds, too?" she snipped. A large bite of tarte vanished, and a soft, sensual moan escaped her lips.

Although I didn't think she was serious, I answered anyway. "No, that's not a vampiric ability. Neither is compulsion."

If she rolled those forest green eyes any harder, they would have fallen from her head. "I know that."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Reluctantly, I reached to silence it. Our time was up.

Lennox glared at me. "What's that?" she demanded.

"That was a reminder it's time for my next appointment."

"You're not going anywhere." Lennox pushed back her chair.

I gestured to the translucent line on the ground. "As we've already established, your fluffy friend is in duress. So here's what's going to happen. You will release me in two minutes, or wolfman takes a bullet."

As she looked away, Lennox sucked in her cheeks, probably worrying the inner flesh.

"But don't worry, I'll order a Weller's Antique 107 bourbon, and you and the pup can finish off the desserts. Hell, order a whole cake if you'd like; it'll be on my tab." I leaned forward. "But you have ninety seconds to decide if it's dinner with a furball or explaining to the Blackwater Pack why their alpha is dead."

Lennox whipped a dagger from her back waistband. She pointed the tip at me, breathing hard.

"Seventy-five seconds, darling."

Narrowing her eyes, she dropped to the ground, and scored at the translucent line she'd spilled around my chair to capture me.

"Thank you, kindly," I murmured, before launching myself at her.

She wasn't prepared for the spring but recovered quickly. The dagger plunged into my side. I grunted, but it didn't stop

me from pinning her against the pillar. The flowering vines brushed against her hair, a tender caress.

Fingers splayed around her beautiful throat, I pushed her head to the side. For all her struggling and fighting, I was stronger. She bent for me, against her will. It was either that or break her vertebrae.

Time slowed as I leaned over her skin. I inhaled. The pounding blood, right under the surface, beckoned me.

*Not yet*, I promised.

Yet I couldn't resist a teeny, tiny taste. I brushed my lips across her skin.

Her body convulsed, but the scent coming off her wasn't fear. Hells no. It was arousal.

"Are you going to kiss me or bite me?" she snapped, venom packed powerfully in her voice.

"Have you ever wondered about your name, huntress?" I rasped instead of answering.

She huffed. "It's always riddles and games with you."

"Hmm," I murmured against her neck. "Make sure you ask the visiting Field Handler about your extended family—or better yet, look in your record."

My phone buzzed a second time, the snooze informing me that time was up.

I pulled back. "No, I won't be kissing you tonight. The next time I do, I want to take my time. Make it a memory to last the ages."

She fucking *shivered*.

I let her go, rushing into the night.



## Chapter 25 – Lennox

“We’ll have a bottle of your most expensive champagne.” Svet strolled to the chair the vampire had been warming not five minutes ago.

I gave him what I hoped was a withering look. “Champagne? Really? After that disaster?”

“Oh, and a club soda for my friend,” he added, not answering my snark. “Two ribeye, rare and medium. One of each appetizer, and another one of those chocolate cakes.”

“We have San Pellegrino, sir.”

“Yes, perfect!” The alpha dropped into the seat.

The waitress left, and the werewolf stretched out, rubbing his triceps as he flexed them behind his back.

“That *was* a disaster,” he groaned.

I didn’t want to talk about it.

I didn’t want to talk at all.

Svet continued to shake himself out, first rolling his muscles and then shifting in his seat. “I haven’t fought that hard in a hand-to-hand situation since...forever. Damn vampiress. Never saw her coming until it was too late.”

We’d both been blindsided. I wanted to scream. Not that it would do any good.

The service was speedy, and soon steak dinners, a plethora of sides and small bites, a whole cake, and several bottles of wine were delivered to our table. There were so many choices that they brought a second table over, butting it up to ours.

“I really should go,” I murmured. The bistro felt...haunted. No, it wasn’t that. It was *me*. Reality haunted me. The past sang of my failures. The present tormented me with impossible choices. And the future? She was one bleak bitch.

Svet chewed his massive bite of beef and swallowed it before speaking. Something I already very much appreciated

about him.

“You need to go out dancing.”

“Excuse me?” I blurted out, tearing my eyes away from the green glass bottle of bubbly water that I hadn’t touched yet because I was too pissed off to do anything but fume.

Svet shrugged. “You need to find a release for all that tension. You were finally enjoying yourself last night when shit hit the fan. And now you’re more tense than ever before. I can’t do anything about it—and I don’t trust you to take care of it yourself.”

“Gross!” I shouted before thinking better of it.

“Come dancing with me.”

“Don’t you have pack duties?” I complained.

Svet only grinned.

“I really can’t.” As I said it, a place inside my chest cracked. The lonesome feelings spread, inky tendrils clawing and biting. Marissa’s face flashed before me. I hadn’t thought so much about my dead friend in years. We’d had plans after graduation. Plans to join the same squad, but also to have a lifestyle that was full of fun when we weren’t hunting.

“I can see your mind working toward the inevitable conclusion, Lennox. Just say yes already,” he coaxed.

“I’ve got to say no this time. There are...things I have to do back at the fortress.” Just thinking about going back made me want to change my mind.

“Oh, alright. Will I see you tomorrow?” Svet popped the cork on the champagne by sliding his open palm forcefully across the neck. Bottle to his lips, he chugged.

I arched a brow. That was a lot of carbonation. “You’re a persistent little shit.”

“No, what I am is invested. The vampires made it personal tonight.” The twinkle in his eye flashed like black onyx.

“Yeah,” I hmphed.



“We’re going to get them, sugar pie.”

I snorted.

“What? Are you changing your tune? What did the vampire say?” Svet leaned forward, setting the empty champagne bottle on the ground.

My fingers drilled into the table. “There are more pieces than just the vampire.”

“Tell me.”

*Oh, what the hell.* Grabbing a piece of soft brown bread, I launched into the twisted events since my arrival to New Orleans.

A load fell from my chest. So much so, that by the time I was done, I sliced into my steak. It wasn’t that trusting someone, especially an outsider, was the smart move. Because it wasn’t. But I needed someone to listen, or I was bound to go crazy.

Svet let out a low whistle. “Damn, sugar bee. You really think the vampire is right?”

“That my Guild is more dangerous right now than a bloodsucking monster? Gee, I hope not! But...there’s only one way to find out.” We fell into silence as I gobbled the best food I’d had in years.

~\*~

Slipping through the backdoor of the compound, I paused to listen. It was eerily quiet. I doubted the others had gone on patrol, or they would have summoned me for it since a handler was observing the squad. There were no missed communications on my phone. Therefore, it was probable they were here.

*Just waiting to chat.* I grimaced.

The soft cadence of speech rumbled down the hall. There were a thousand things I should have done differently. Not talk to a vampire prisoner. Report those conversations. *Not sleep with the head mistress’s only son.* I shook my head. It looked like I was destined to make another mistake.

Creeping forward, I ghosted to the boardroom door. It was partially open. Captain and Blake sat across the table from one another. There was nothing on it. No liquor, no water, no tablet, or papers. The beauty of a hunter's command post was that it was warded against external threats. That meant our glyphs didn't work in here unless the wards went down. It conserved physical strength, allowing a hunter to recharge when not needing to constantly be alert.

The two I was spying on would have no way of knowing I was here. The only sound was muttering. I strained to listen. Something about a report. *Which report?* Why couldn't the speaker be more clear?

Blake's voice was a whip, cracking as he laid into Captain. I winced. I didn't want to be him to save my life.

"Yeah, well we aren't the only outpost that's falling behind!" Captain shouted.

"Your command is coming to an end. Unless you do exactly as I say," Blake remarked flatly.

"I won't take that, Rodger. I kicked your scrawny ass in school!"

"Our days at the academy are ancient history. And I technically outrank you as a Field Handler," Blake said, the chill in his voice able to instantly freeze water.

"An FH just means ass wipe. Try being in the trenches, you wouldn't last a fucking day!" Captain shot back.

I'd heard enough. Getting caught would only heap burning coals on my already burnt head. And there was no telling where Gage was. I scurried upstairs. Throwing the lock over my door, I sank against it.

Was I next? Would they retire me? Burn me for the sins of this squad? I fisted my hands. The bastards would deserve it if I unleashed hell on them. I stomped across my room but pulled up short.

My file.

The vampire's directive flared to life in my mind. Blake's files. I hadn't seen the precious tablet the Field Handler was attached to. What if it was accessible? Before I could talk myself out of it, I snatched my pick set, ripped the door open, and sprinted to the guest room. Taking deep breaths, I undid the lock. It wasn't like these rooms were hard to break into, and there was no magic warding it. Using the hem of my shirt not to leave a trace, I opened the door and slipped inside the Field Handler's room.

My heart raced. This, if nothing else, would get me in huge trouble with the Guild. But I was beyond caring.

A quick look showed the tablet on the nightstand under a local newspaper. It was here!

I scurried up to it. Tissues, I needed tissues! I pushed into the ensuite and grabbed a face napkin. Going back to the tablet, I was able to turn it on. It was in sleep mode and not password protected. *Either he wants to catch one of us snooping or the Field Handler sees us as no threat.* Whichever it was, I wasn't sticking around to be caught. I tapped into my file and scanned the words in my active field work. There was nothing negative in here. A wash of relief went through me. There was no complain against my actions.

Thus far.

My eyes rolled. It wasn't like Headmistress Owens would lodge a formal citation because I slept with her son and then helped him do a few idiotic things which only he was caught doing. When he blamed me, his precious mommy listened. But there'd been no evidence I helped the delinquent. Her ensuring I ended up here in this shithole of an outpost was all due to personal favors and untraceable hints.

Clicking into my records and history, I scanned the file. It showed my parents, and my young age when they dropped me at the academy. That was the only reference. Since they were hunters and went back to their squads post coupling, it wasn't like we had a relationship. What secrets were buried in the past? If the vampire was to be believed—

**Bekah Jane (di Helios) Robertson.**

The female's name was listed as distant relative. That one word, what looked like the woman's maiden name.... My brain fluttered through the various languages I knew. *The Greek word for sun? Of the sun.*

Every fiber in my being screamed it was long past time to go. That was when I caught the heavy footfall in the hallway. I clicked out of my file and turned the tablet into sleep mode. Each breath came and left faster than the last. Going to the door, I listened. If Blake came in, could I fake a reason for my being here? A twinge of disgust whispered through me. Only if it came to that...otherwise I didn't think I could stomach letting the clean-cut stooge touch me.

The steps moved away, and then a door shut. Either Gage or Captain. A long exhale blew out of my lungs. I wasn't staying here to find out. Hands shaking, I remembered to use the tee shirt to conceal prints. I checked the hall, let myself out, and rushed back to my room.

Only once I was safe did my erratic heartbeat start to steady.

I knew two things now. First, I could still survive this clusterfuck that was New Orleans. Nothing was messed up too badly. There was no stain on my record regarding the Fox incident. And second, the vampire had a lot of explaining to do—before I ended his miserable existence.

Crawling out onto my balcony, I sat and leaned my back against the wall. The night wasn't cool by any means, but the gusts of wind playing with my hair were enough to ground me.



## Chapter 26 – The Predator

She was supposed to be a prize. Something to be captured and used as an edge over the others. In the court I'd been sworn to for the last hundred years, she would make me invincible. Her blood was the key—the real deal. Yet as I watched her laugh and tease, her arms waving high above her head, a foreign emotion seized my chest. It had nothing to do with the crazed wolf munching on an ice cream next to her.

Fate, he looked like a fool! *Who ate a cone like that?* Bottom first. What an idiot!

“Are we really repeating the other night?” Kelda grumbled, as we watched them walk down the street to a club.

The werewolf wanted to take her dancing, again. How unoriginal. I hated seeing the spark in the huntress's eyes when he suggested the outing. It was as though she was powerless to resist the call of music—something we had in common.

My heart pulsed as I watched her hurry toward the beckoning pop beat. But then as she turned, the neon lights painting her face in a blue and purple glow, something else happened. The world became silent. An underlying melody rippled through my mind. The present faded away and there was only the mixture of keening notes that seemed to come alive and dance around the huntress's lithe figure. The smile on her face mirrored the trill of ivory keys. The desperate feeling to grab a pen and paper, to capture the feelings and to give the music form—Fate it was almost too strong!

“She's right there. I don't see why we don't take her,” Kelda snapped, interrupting the composition.

“I need her to trust me,” I growled, letting my annoyance fall on the vampiress for spoiling the moment.

“That makes no sense,” Kelda said before she entered the club.

It didn't make sense to me, either. The timing wasn't right, and I couldn't explain why. The pulsating beat seemed to

vibrate through the huntress's veins, even before she stepped inside the room. The moment she tripped onto the dance floor, the last traces of resignation fell away. Lennox was alive with the dance music.

It was the furthest thing from the music I heard when I saw her. But I could appreciate the way the sounds flowed through her as she listened to the erotic rhythm of the bass-boosted thunder.

"I need her to trust me," I insisted, as we folded into the shadows of the club's interior.

"You're a legend. You have a record that stretches over the centuries and countries," Kelda hissed under her breath, only loud enough for me to hear her. "Take her, take her blood—problems all solved!"

My fist clenched. That had been my plan. But then...I'd seen her. Something, in that strange place in my chest, had surged to life. The need to have her *offer* herself pulsed through me. I liked to think it was more of a challenge that way. It wasn't enough to capture her, to use her blood without consent.

"You're growing a conscience for a Livian hunter," Kelda scoffed. "That's fucking cute, Cato."

A snarl ripped from my throat, and I flashed my fangs in warning at my protégée.

She flicked a glance at me, not even flinching.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kelda challenged.

I huffed. "You know I'm not into that touchy, feely shit."

"So that's why you won't take her? Growing soft?"

"No," I snapped. "This gives me an edge. She'll be loyal to me—never bartering with another vampire in exchange for my death."

Kelda's mouth twitched in consideration. "That kind of loyalty is rare."

"Precisely."

Without another word on the subject, I trudged onto the dance floor. The writhing bodies pushed into me. It wasn't enough that they perfumed the air with their sweat and bad breath. I gagged, not being gentle as I shoved them away.

Nothing would stop me from reaching my mark.

The alpha glared at me from over her head.

I flipped him the bird.

Sliding behind Lennox a moment later, my hands circled her waist. "You're a sensual dream, Nox."

She stiffened, the evening light bathing her features in soft glow.

I laughed against her ear, my hips moving against hers. "You think I'd let you come out on the town all alone, little one?"

"I was having a delightful time, and now it's ruined." Her body was a board, hard and unyielding.

I moved my hands up her sides and down over her hips, my touch lightening as they trailed back up the hardened planes of her abs.

Mine—this would all be mine.

"Relax," I coaxed. "I'm just here for a dance."

"Do you want me to gut him?" Svet didn't step closer, but underestimating his physical ability would be a mistake.

I crooked my finger, inviting the puppy forward.





## Chapter 27 – Lennox

The blows were going to start any minute. These two wanted to kill one another. A battle of that magnitude would bring a lot of attention from the supernatural community, including the interest of the hunters. I couldn't have the Guild finding out that I was part of this. There were too many witnesses, not that they knew what I was, but ears heard and eyes saw a vampire and a werewolf bickering over a seemingly human female.

I had to separate them.

“Svet, I'm going outside to catch a breath of fresh air.” The fact that we just walked through a park with our ice cream wasn't lost on me. I took a step toward him; my shadow moved in behind me. The werewolf wasn't looking at me. He glared over my head at the vampire. “Vampy, come with me. I need to speak to you about the goose hunt you sent me on.”

That stole both their attentions.

“I'll come back for you, Svet,” I promised.

“Okay?” He pressed his lips into a tight line. Those black eyes slid passed me and into the shadows. A slow, almost mischievous smile curled them.

“I'll be fine and you can walk me home, and we'll talk about the plans for tomorrow,” I added, just to rub it into the vampire's ugly face.

*Hideous. Just like Adonis.* I could kill the she-bitch in my head.

“Be safe,” the werewolf said, although I was certain someone else had stolen his attention.

“I can handle a bloodsucker,” I assured him.

Decision made and declaration given, I left the building and hurried into the shadows of the night. The urge to keep dancing turned into something...more. There was no way I was letting the werewolf catch hint of this unwelcome desire. Once across the street, I began to jog back toward the park.

The muggy night did little to dry the sweat clinging to my body. Under the draping Spanish moss, the raw allure of the Southern summer night would have been perfect. I damn near fled into its embrace.

From all appearances, it seemed like I was alone. But I knew that wasn't true. Even if the protection spells inked into my skin didn't alert me for whatever reason, I knew the vampire was stalking me through the thickening darkness. It was a gut feeling, as instinctual as breathing.

Woldenburg Park was a riverfront park. There was no quintessential gothic charm here, too groomed for my taste. There were little copses of trees and manicured shrubbery. The walk along the river was littered with statues, odes to humanity's trials and accomplishments.

Something the supernaturals mocked them for.

Moving to the river's edge, I leaned against the railing and gazed over the steadily racing current. This water could have traveled all through the country on its migration south. It was incredible, even if there were funny smells coming from the murky depths.

"What has you so deep in thought, Nox?"

I rested my chin on my fist, leaving my back to him. To a vampire. Fate, what had become of me in just a few short days! This was so unlike everything I had stood for—been trained to do.

Like watching it happen, unable and partially unwilling to stop myself, I spoke. "There are humans. There are others. Most humans go through their lives never knowing magic actually exists. Sure, they *want* it. Might think it would be cool to have. But they don't look, they don't see it right in front of them."

As I spoke, a silky presence slid up alongside me. Cato. I'd never realized that vampires could move like pieces of cloth cut from the very night itself. Hell, I'd never been around them other than in the heat of battle or a classroom exercise.

“And then, there are the supernaturals,” I continued, as some desperate part of me really wanted to get this word vomit out. “The categorical types of beings are too numerous to count. That doesn’t include the crossbreeding between species—or even the non-sentient creatures.”

“How very scientific of you,” the monster murmured, the observation wrapped in velvet.

I rolled my eyes. “What I’m trying to say is that they all have their places. Hunters—we’re in the middle. Once human, we’ve been enhanced. Yet we’re not supernatural. Not really.”

Turning my head to the side, I gazed at a family carved from stone. They represented the immigrants who found themselves on the banks of the mighty Mississippi River. They were a part of history, solid and rooted into existence.

I was a ghost compared to them.

Even if I were to retire from hunting, to be cast out of work, I wouldn’t belong in their company.

“There is more.” The vampire wasn’t asking. It was a demand in that imperious way of his.

Lured by the calming rush of water, I focused back on the river to speak the last. I’d said too much already, so I might as well bare the last part of my thoughts.

“There is hinted evidence that I might not even fit in with the hunters. That I’m something...different.” I looked up, piercing him with a stare.

That face was a carved mask. What secrets hid there? I wanted to reach up and claw the perfection away. Peel back the veneer and see what the hell lay behind. I was trained to see him as a monster, but there was a level of control I desperately wanted to take.

*What would it be like? To have an alliance with this... fiend?*

“What did your record show?” he asked quietly.

“How do you know I even looked?” I countered with a bite.

The faintest outline of a smile spread over his mouth. It wasn't comforting. "Because since we last spoke, your priorities are beginning to change."

"You're an asshole," I snapped, giving him a withering look.

He didn't even flinch at the name calling. "What did you find out about your family?"

I considered not telling him. I really did. There was the smallest possibility I could figure this out on my own. If there was something more in my past, then I could find it. There was the one word in my chart. It was a starting point.

But according to this monster, someone was out to get me.

And if Fox's crazy aggression hadn't been indication enough—

"There was the word: Helios." I planted my hands on my hips and glared at the vampire.

Was he always this tall? This close, he towered over me. It wasn't like I was small.

"Do you know what it means?" he asked, voice still carefully neutral, verging on bored.

Although it took a valiant effort, I dropped my hands and forced my body to relax, folding closer into his space. There was no winning a fly with vinegar. "Literally it means sun in Greek, and historically humans called the sun deity by that name. What it *means*, I haven't the faintest idea. Do you?"

He only smiled.

"You do! You bastard," I seethed, striking out and smacking my fist against his chest.

"You can put that stake you have tucked in your boot into my heart, bella. I would accept that. Do what you came here to do."

I froze at his challenge. Had I lured him out here to end it? The idea had crossed my mind as I dressed. The vision of conquering the bastard was far too tempting.

As I remained standing there, the vampire closed the space between us. A thousand sparks ignited where our bodies made contact. The breath left my lungs in a rush, and something unfurled in my stomach.

The vampire took a lock of my hair. Lifting it to his nose, he inhaled deeply.

My core clenched. Such a minimal gesture, but my body was greedy for more.

He rubbed the strands against his cheek, dark eyes hooded. And then he dropped them and bent.

I blinked. He was on his knees, yet his head was well above my navel. Those sure fingers blazed a trail down my legs. Where the hem of the skirt ended, they seemed to burn against my flesh.

The touch didn't end, but his right hand fished into my boot. The material sagged the moment the stake was removed.

In a flash, his hand captured mine. The warmed wood of the stake felt foreign in my palm.

I was clay in his hands. He moved the tip of the stake to rest against his chest, and then his touch fell away. "Alright, enhanced human, you've been made strong enough to push wood through this hollow cage of bone."

I could physically do it. We both knew I could.

But the bastard was playing with me. As he had been from the beginning.

"It would serve you right," I whispered, hating the constant turn of events.

"It would," he agreed. "I've been told multiple times that I'm an idiot for stringing you along."

"Who would dare tell *you* such a thing?"

This smile was soft. Almost fond. "My protégée, Kelda."

The one who helped him when he was caged in our basement. It had to be. "Smart female."

“She is.” The vampire took in a deep breath. “What’s it going to be? Temporary glory by slaying me. Or...a trip deeper down the rabbit’s hole.”

“In this case, Alice is being blackmailed by the knave,” I grumbled.

The vampire gave me a quizzical look. The next moment, a rich, deep laugh bubbled from his throat. “You have a thing for the classics?”

“Oh, shut up,” I snapped, pricking him with the stake’s tip.

He winced, but it didn’t wipe the smile from his face.

“Give me one good reason not to kill you. And it had better be good,” I added. “Because your life depends on it!”

“If you kill me, it won’t solve the bigger picture, beautiful.” He licked his lips. The small motion snagged my immediate gaze. “If you kill me, Alice, you’ll be at the mercy of the Red Queen.”

“I have a werewolf in a temporary alliance.”

“The Mad Hatter? Yeah,” he barked a harsh laugh, “good luck with that.”

“Why should I trust you?” I demanded. “It goes against everything I am.”

“But you already said, you don’t know what you are.”

“And you do, so just tell me already.”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “What are you doing to do to earn the information?”

Without thinking, I threaded the fingers of my right hand through the longer hair at the top of his head. I pulled the black strands hard, hoping it hurt.

Leaning over, I kissed him. Damn me to the seven hells, I kissed a monster! But I couldn’t bring myself to care. The hard feel of his lips was a fire against mine. I moved my mouth against his, demanding more. Before I could gulp down another breath, his hands were on me. They pushed my skirt aside, digging into my muscle.

An honest-to-Fate whimper escaped me.

There wasn't time to be embarrassed by it. He backed me into the rail, pushing under my clothes. The stake moved away from his heart, but by some miracle, I managed to keep a hold on it. Fabric bunched around his hand as he bared me. The warm night wind whispered against my burning skin, making me shiver involuntarily.

The vampire fell to his knees.

That breath-stealing kiss worked against my panties, his mouth worrying the area. All I wanted was for him to shred the material, rip it away! I groaned in frustration, roughly tugging at his hair.

A garbled string of words floated up to me. "Beg. Say fucking please, bellissima, or I will stop."

I clapped both hands on the sides of his head. "Urgh!" I screamed into the heavens above.

The river behind me only giggled in response.

"It's very simple, Nox," he coaxed, pulling back to look at up at me. "We both want me to take a taste. No matter how forbidden."

Pulse beating in my ears, I glared at him.

Seconds passed.

He made to move—

"Fine!" I gasped.

The vampire flashed me a feral grin. "I'm waiting."

"Please," I said hoarsely.

He cocked his head to the side. Brow arched.

I growled again. "Please, Mr. Vampy. Please eat me."

"We don't consume flesh. But for you, bella donna, I'll make an exception and turn you into a fucking feast."

He surged forward. My plain cotton panties, soaked during the torturous wait, were torn away, and then his mouth covered my pussy.



I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming when he licked me. His tongue lathed against my clit. I lost my ever-loving mind when he sucked.

Pleasure, unlike anything I'd ever experienced, washed through me.

Screw the consequences, he could have me any way he wanted as long as there was more of this involved.

Somewhere in the far reaches of my mind, the rational Lennox cackled. She knew that once the devious vixen was sated, there was no way in hell I would let him.

But so long as she let me have my fix right now, I would pay the piper any price.

The vampire pushed my legs wide, lifting my right to wrap around his neck. I was a suppliant in his hands. I obeyed willingly. The build of pleasure pulsed in my core, and then he forced his fingers against my entrance.

“Do it!” I hissed.

The vampire growled, sliding his touch deep inside. The combination was euphoric.

The noises that came from his chest were those of a wild animal, feral and violent. I squeezed his head between my fingers, working my fierce touch into his scalp. If only I could crush it when we were done. Fantasizing about ending my enemy pushed me to the edge. I threw my head back, panting as the orgasm came on strong. The rhythm of his tongue against my clit, the force of his fingers stroking inside me—

It was like he needed me to come just as badly as I needed it.

“Do it, bella,” he demanded against my core.

Using my own words against me did it. I *shattered*.

My screams burst into the night.

The vampire shot to his feet, pressing his mouth against mine to silence me. Those fingers never stopped, thumb rubbing my clit and fingers massaging deep inside.

I tasted myself on him, something I'd never tried. It was heady, the perfect ending to this forbidden encounter.

When my core finally stopped pulsing, I stopped kissing him.

We stood there, bodies pressed together. Our lips remained close, and his touch lingered against my sex. Neither of us seemed ready to move.

It could have been hours; time lost all meaning. But eventually he smiled.

“What now?” I murmured against his mouth.

“You try to stay alive long enough to find the answers.”

*The motherfucking bastard.*



## Chapter 28 – The Predator

Kelda had strict instructions to direct the floral delivery whenever Lennox emerged and began to move around outside the compound. The florist would essentially chase her down, appearing out of nowhere. Not only was it fun to keep the little huntress on her toes, but I wasn't ready to let her know the secret dwelling of the squad was compromised.

I wished I could deliver her flowers myself. Steal more kisses from that smart mouth.

With a sigh, I looked to the still dark eastern sky. Dawn was coming. I could feel it like a bad infection in the bones. Soon, soon I would be invincible. Not all the pieces were in place yet. Vampires attracted strength, only the most powerful were able to lead the rest. The courts who existed these days had been around for centuries, if not millennia, gaining power with each year.

*What if I broke away? What if I made one of my own?* The thought danced through my mind. It was not an easy task—simple, but not easy. The idea of dealing with pandering idiots, surrounded by petty, greedy grabbers wasn't appealing. Loners and opportunists would come at first. Drama, drama, drama. Eventually, a ruler could beckon loyalist away from other courts, craft something solid that would last.

Either way, ruling a court would be a lesson in patience. One I thought I was ready for.

The thing about New Orleans, however, was that the for the first time, I felt that I could *breathe*. I rarely felt that way at my own villa, tucked away from the world, its problems, and the damn mindlessness of the Roman Court.

*With Lennox at my side....* Maybe Kelda was right. Maybe I should just capture the huntress, steal her away to safety.

I could earn her trust. That was all that was important to me.

*Liar.* Not Lennox. She would wait, biding her time for vengeance.

I sighed. She would never trust me that way. I intended to spend many decades with her by my side. I didn't want to find her driving a stake in my heart at the command of another vampire a hundred years from now.

There was movement at the back door. The male hunters were coming back. The dark circles under their eyes were deep, purple and painful looking.

I could smell the alcohol coming from their pores all the way over here.

They stopped for Gage to light up a cigarette. Their lips moved as they engaged in conversation. The soft mutterings and broken cadence came in waves as the wind blew toward them, not helping me hear. I should have been on the other side of the house so the wind brought their voices *to* me. This shadowed eave of the neighboring house was better for watching undetected, however.

I managed to catch the gist of what was being said. The conversation was clearly a rehash of something they'd previously talked about. It revolved around their dislike of Lennox. They'd taken to calling her goodie-two-shoes instead of the more terrible nickname of Candy.

"We've got to alter that report," Gage insisted, before taking a long drag on his stick.

Captain muttered something, to which Gage exploded: "It's our hide if we don't try."

I ground my molars. How dare they set her up! She was the model Livian child. It was the two of them who were the screwups.

Lennox needed to see this.

She needed to know that not only were there forces in the Guild who were coming for her, but this petty shit was going to get her *accidentally* shot by friendly fire. At least her heritage wasn't commonly known. Someone would shoot her for that on a self-righteous principle.

What if—if Lennox leaked her secret while she was searching for answers I wouldn't give....

“Fucking hell.” I scrubbed my hands over my face. I couldn't protect her from that.

I needed to discover who in the Guild was working against her. The person who'd initially contacted me with the tip about Lennox had been next to mute about the situation. He'd told me his suspicions of Lennox being the special soul I wanted. He warned me to protect her, since the only reason he knew was because someone from inside the Guild leaked the information. He closed that leak, but it was all too easy for another to spring open.

The aspect that didn't make sense was why the unknown enemy in the Guild wanted to *kill* Lennox. If they were interested in her for the same reasons as me—and I knew how their science department loved to poke and prod—why spell the other hunter to kill her? While there were several possibilities, the theory that had me most worried was that there was more than one party in the Guild who had an interest in Lennox.

It all boiled down to the fact that others wanted what was mine and time was running short.

These invisible challengers needed faces. The forces in the Guild likely wanted her for the same thing I wanted, but they viewed her as a lab rat or a threat to be eliminated. That was the difference that she needed to see! I wanted to make her powerful. In exchange, she would be loyal to me.

*A dream.* Such a dream. Did men like me really get the beauty in the end? Or was the beast doomed to be shot, because he couldn't transform into a prince?

“Now I'm waxing poetic, bella donna.” I tore my gaze from the drunk swine in the yard and longingly watched her window.

The man from Headquarters pushed out of the backdoor. His sudden appearance made the others jump. Their exchange was short, but the heavy look of disapproval communicated

more than any words. Even up here in the shadows, I could feel his wrath.

I didn't like the Field Handler. Whereas Lennox followed the rules out of a sense of duty, a true believer in her cause, this man was hiding behind the standard of justice, when his real nature was that of a serial killer.

The sooner I killed him, the better.





## Chapter 29 – Lennox

It was protocol not to revisit an area surrounding a chop shop. I'd been avoiding Books & Brews since the first visit, telling myself it was because of the gods-forsaken radius. But some inward itch told me that there would be an answer there. I couldn't explain it. Other than the coincidence that the vampire had mentioned it in one of our first conversations, and that I hadn't gained access to the speakeasy library, I had no good reason to go.

Short of asking Blake if he knew what Helios meant in relation to my records or demanding the same from another contact in the Guild, I had to find it out on my own. I had to!

So in the early afternoon, I pushed into the shop. Ignoring the desire to go to the bookshelves and start browsing, I moved toward the café portion of the store. Head snapping in my direction, the easy-going barista shot me a friendly smile. I walked right up to him as he finished making a drink.

“Hey, cutie, long time no see.” The barista glittered gold and charm like the football captain he probably once had been.

“Robert, what did you do to me?” I held up my right arm, pointing to the spot he'd licked that first night.

He laughed, a deep belly jiggling guffaw. “I *tasted* you.”

The way he said it sounded...naughty.

“What does that mean?” I insisted. A chilling whisper brushed over my skin.

“It means, my dear, that Robert is skilled in detecting what can't be seen. Case in point, that you're a huntress.” The sing-song cadence drifted around me.

I turned and smiled icily at Vivian. “Good to see you again, ma'am.”

“Y'all caused quite the ruckus in these here parts.” Vivian swirled around me. Her shimmering presence casted strange shadows where her nearly translucent body blocked the light.

“We only did our job.”

“No,” Vivian barked, suddenly in my face. “Your team was sloppy. Someone was hurt, and that is inexcusable.”

She’d dropped the faux drawl, her otherworldly accent shimmering through.

“Vivian,” Roberts warned. “Reparations were already made to the individual and the family. We agreed to drop it.”

I followed the conversation, catching the drift but not the meaning. Questions were on the tip of my tongue when Vivian sighed. “You’re right. Just!—” she rounded on me “—just be careful, huntress. I won’t stand for any innocents to be caught in the crossfire. Not in my territory.”

“We don’t set out with that intention, either,” I said evenly, proud of my own efforts to keep the snark out of my voice.

Vivian rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say.”

I gasped for breath. I wanted to yell at the mass of insubstantial energy. How dare she accuse me of that when she wouldn’t help the shopkeeper living a few blocks away? Bethany had said the street boss wouldn’t step in and help!

“So what brought you here?” Robert asked, breaking the tension. “Can I fix you a tea? You have a certain nervous energy swirling about your aura today, my dearest.”

“Um, yeah sure,” I breathed hard, squeezing my eyes closed, I commanded myself to focus. *I didn’t come here to pick fights.*

“Lovely weather we’re having,” the barista whistled.

“Beautiful.” I clasped my hands in front of my body and rose to the tips of my toes. As I came back down, I looked around. “So these stacks on stacks of books. Do any of them perchance hold records?”

Vivian, floating away as if a breeze carried her, shot back to the café bar. “What kind of records?”

“Family trees?” It was a long shot, but certain applications of magic could make damn near anything possible.

She tapped her lip thoughtfully.

We were interrupted by a florist. “Delivery for Miss Nox Belladonna.”

If mortification could have killed, I would have been dead on the floor. At least it would be a way out of my misery!

“Two dozen long-stemmed roses,” Robert chirped.

“Lucky guess, young man,” the florist said, tacking on the cheer at the end as if he realized it was his job to be lighthearted.

“Who’s the sender?” I demanded.

“Dunno, but it was called in this morning and my delivery instructions were turned out half an hour ago.”

I looked around the coffee shop. Cato had to be here. If not physically, then he was somehow orchestrating events from his hiding spot.

“Miss?” the florist demanded, clearly impatient to be going.

I took the box, dropped it quickly on the café counter as if it would bite me, signed for the damn thing, thanked the florist, and watched him go. None of the five or six patrons even glanced in our direction.

“There’s a card.” Vivian pointed at the area, her finger dipping through the solid material.

I reached for it.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, child, it’s not going to bite!” The ghost buzzed, and the electrical lights crackled in response.

Robert tsked under his breath. “Watch it, pretty mama.”

Mama? I looked between the two. Now was not the time to ask. Not with the thick envelope shaking like a leaf in a hurricane between my fingers.

Sliding it open, the same beautiful cursive that had been on the envelope stared back at me. I swore I could *feel* the vampire’s grip on the ink pen as he scrawled out the words.

“What does it say? What does it say?!” Vivian cried.

It was high time I gave her an eyeroll. “It’s my note,” I deadpanned.

“Oh fine, be that way.” With that, Vivian puffed out of existence.

“She’s going to read it over your shoulder,” Robert drawled.

“Is my tea steeped?” I retorted.

He only laughed.

My gaze ran over the lines of writing once more.

**Lennox,**

**As I am sure you are well aware, red roses symbolize passion. After last night, I felt they were finally appropriate to deliver.**

**I must confess this token of my affection comes with a minor string attached.**

The vampire deserved an eyeroll for that as well. I would have smacked him if he was here. Vivian’s excited cackle burst from the space in front of me. Ignoring the see-through busybody, I continued to read.

**In a few nights, there is a masquerade ball. Would you allow me the honor to escort you? I promise...it will be worth your while.**

**Give me your answer tonight.**

**With ardent affection, C. M.**

What interested me wasn’t the name, but the royal crest. Each vampire clan or family had one. They called them courts, but that word didn’t make sense to the data we’d gathered on such places. Now I could see Cato’s. But I didn’t need a reference book for this one.

SPQR—one of the most powerful in the world. Only rivaled by two other houses.

I groaned. No wonder he was good. He was one of *them*. The elites.

What the fuck was he doing in New Orleans, and what in the hell did he want with me? I crumpled the note and shoved it in my pocket.

“Throw the roses out,” I ordered Robert.

He slapped his hand over his heart. “Nooo—have mercy!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I nearly shouted, but turned it into a hiss at the last possible second. “I don’t want them.”

Each word came out as a drop of venom.

“Then put them in vases around the café and give one to each of the patrons in a glass of water,” Vivian instructed.

I glared at her.

“I won’t have such beautiful things wasted,” she shot back with every bit as much strength of resolve as I had.

“The book?” Robert asked.

“Oh, right,” Vivian breathed. With a flick of her fingers, a tome came hurtling off the shelf.

I caught it, if only to prevent it from impaling me! Still... there would be a bruise from the impact.

“This is what your heart desires.” Vivian faded away.

“Wait!” I called out. “What about the speakeasy?”

Robert crinkled his lips, hand outstretched with a to-go tea. “You haven’t earned that privilege yet, cutie. And not even your boyfriend can circumvent the rules on your behalf. Vivian’s laws are final regarding her books. Speaking of which, that is a loaner, not something available for purchase. You have to read it here. I suggest *not* spilling anything on it. There might be a charm to prevent damage by liquids, but Viv won’t take kindly to it either way.”

I pulled a large bill from my pocket. “Keep the change.”

Snatching the hot cup, I took off with my tea and book, Robert’s plaintive thanks cheering me on from behind. Sitting

down, I opened the book. Instead of beginning to read, I looked around the room once. Just to be sure. None of the patrons looked up at me. The female with the long braid and half buzzed head was engrossed in her computer. I could see she was doing some shopping on Etsy. The others were reading books, with one other female scrolling through her phone and looking utterly bored as her male companion paged through an ancient tome.

Turning my full attention to my book, I began to flip the pages. The text was Koine Greek, or common tongue Greek from the ancient days. The challenge of translation beckoned me, and I began to decipher the context.

Moments later I sat back forcefully in my chair. It was a collection of ancient myths. What the humans who had written these stories never realized was how many of them were based in truth.

Immediately I began to scan the pages, not reading, but searching. There was one word I needed to—

There it was. Helios.

The stories surrounding his birth, his family, and most famously, his son's death. It was all right there. He was some supernatural being who likely had surviving descendants. Or was even alive himself, who could say!

And yet, on the other hand, this could all be made up to explain coincidences caused by other supernatural beings.

What was obvious was there was nothing more here that could help me.



## Chapter 30 – Lennox

When I was thoroughly satisfied that nothing else in the manuscript was relevant, I returned to the book to Robert.

“Whooa, dudette!” he sang out, snapping the towel over his broad shoulder. “Your energy is all over the map, cutie.”

“Guess your tea didn’t work,” I muttered, secretly glad in a pessimistic way.

“You didn’t even sip it once,” he said flatly. Shaking his long, golden locks which only increased his messy hairstyle, he sighed. “Sorry you don’t trust me after last time. I hope you know I was just doing my job.”

I looked at the cup. The little biodegradable plug was still in the cutout to block accidental sloshing.

“Wouldn’t you like to look at another book?” Robert clasped his hands. “Ilene will be here soon. She’ll make a better tea—just don’t tell her I said that!”

I laughed. “It seems to me that you don’t want me to leave.”

There might have been something sliding through his eyes. “I *want* you to come back.”

Popping a hip, I leaned against the counter. “Why’s that?”

“Things are interesting when you’re here. You make me laugh, and you don’t whip me with a towel for cracking jokes.”

“Maybe I haven’t had the chance to whip you,” I teased, arching a brow at him.

The smile he flashed me was all toothy. Feline. Before I could think better of it, I said, “Alright then, I’ll catch ya later, alley cat.”

Robert lit up like a damn Christmas tree. “After a while, girl with style!”



Shaking my head, I left the café. He might be strange, but I didn't mind him.

As I walked down the street, something itched at the base of my spine. I stopped by a window, pretending to look at the display of fashionable clothing items. Really, I was checking behind me without giving away that I'd noticed.

Nothing seemed off. A few humans moved around the street. Cars passed by, pausing their trips only for red lights.

I started walking again, and the feeling only increased. Something was trailing me. My glyphs recognized the presence but didn't give me a clue as to the species.

I could either continue down the sidewalk or lure the being away behind the small strip mall. Pausing at a trash receptacle, I threw my cup away and took in the parking lot. There wasn't anything suspicious.

Shifting my shoulders, I considered the lateness of the hour. I could still flee to safety before the sun set. But that meant whatever was near me wasn't affected by the time of day. So it couldn't be that bad...right?

*It might feel good to kick something's ass.*

That settled it. Everything was a mess right now.

"And who knows," I laughed under my breath. "Maybe this will be the kill I need to boost my career in the eyes of the Guild."

I jogged around the back of the long building. Several bays of parking were full of employee vehicles. The bank of dumpsters was gated but not locked. It wasn't the most ideal place. At any moment, a human could come.

There was a movie theater behind the strip mall. The overgrown grass and plants poking through the cracked concrete told the tale of abandonment. As I moved closer, it was clear that the theater was closed. Who knew what lived in there. I shuddered. If humans only knew what creepy crawlies made dens in such empty buildings, they would raze them to the ground so fast it wouldn't even be a question.

I took off at a good clip to the building. At the edge, I turned. Whoever was there would have to cross the expanse.

Like something out of an old-time movie, the bad guys emerged from between the cars at the outlet mall. They didn't stop but moved over the concrete.

It wasn't fear that tightened in my gut. No...this feeling was far worse.

Betrayal.

The hunters hadn't even spoken, but the intent was written all over their faces. I could only guess at how this ended, and it probably wouldn't be good.

They moved apart, stopping with wide stances and arms hanging loosely at their sides.

I could take my gun and shoot at least one before the other shot me. Running wasn't an option. I would be damned before I turned from a confrontation.

Taking a few steps forward, I called out, "Hi, you two. What's up?"

Gage pulled a cigarette from the case in his chest and lit it. The stink of the tar stick, packed with additives and artificial fruit flavor, was instantly nauseating.

It was Captain who spoke. "We've been watching you, Candy."

"Oh, yeah? How come?" I demanded.

Gage spit a wad of saliva on the concrete in front of him. "Because we know you helped kill Fox. Used the vamp as your cover story."

"I would never—"

"Did you spread your legs for it?" Captain looked me up and down. "Is that why it didn't kill you?"

I planted my hands on my hips. Captain was a dead man. I would have shot him on principle if I wouldn't get Gage's bullet in return.

“Look,” I seethed. “If I wanted Fox dead, I wouldn’t need a vampire to help me. I would have ended him on my own. And it would have served him right! You’re all leeches. Lazy fucking leeches.”

Gage shouted, stepping forward. Captain turned to him, hands out to stop him.

That was my moment. I grabbed my gun from the waist of my pants.

The metal in my hand, I pulled the trigger. No hesitation. I rounded on Gage, not sparing the second it took to put a second bullet in Captain’s skull.

But before I could shoot him, the other hunter was knocking my hand away.

The pain exploding behind my eyes warned me I was seriously hurt.

*How did he move so fast?*

Really? That was what I was thinking about now? That should have been the least of my worries. I looked up—

Up?

When did I go down?

“You never went down on us, Candy. And that’s your biggest problem.” Gage was above me.

My arms and legs didn’t seem to work. If only I could find them, but I couldn’t figure out where they were.

I curled what little of my body I still had control of, trying to push him off.

Gage shifted, and suddenly I couldn’t breathe with his weight on my chest. Maybe it was his hands around my throat. Either way, the oxygen wouldn’t come.

The world started to grey. The end would be here faster than I wanted it.

*I don’t want to die.*

My hands lifted, short nails biting into Gage’s forearms.

“That’s right, kitten. Scratch me. I fucking *love* the feel of your claws.” Gage was...drooling.

Gross!

Before unconsciousness claimed me, I lifted my legs to kick.

Or tried to.

Gage pulled his hand back. I gasped for oxygen in the momentary reprieve. From the corner of my vision, I saw the hand descend.

It was as if I watched the scene from above. The female with blood spilling from her skull, the brute crushing her lowering his hand—this was the end for her.

Right before his fist cracked into my face, a roar broke from the parking lot.

That was the voice of death, and I met his advance with a smile. He’d come for my soul at last.



## Chapter 31 – The Predator

“I believe this is the kind of thing you wanted to be informed of,” Kelda said dryly, which only made her voice crackle over the cellular void.

Damn her, could she not muster any emotion other than pissed off? “Where are you?” I demanded.

“Following them on the street. She just stopped to look in a window.”

“So she knows something is after her,” I surmised. Thank Fate for that rigorous hunting training.

“I doubt she can see them. They might be pigs, but these two are *good*.” That was admiration in her voice. Or as close to it as someone as broken and jaded as Kelda could show.

“What street, Kelda?” I snapped.

“Washington.”

“Keep me posted—and keep her safe.”

My protégée grunted before disconnecting the call.

I tossed the phone back on the rickety nightstand and dropped onto the narrow mattress. This place was far from the luxury I normally surrounded myself with. What few knew was that I was raised a soldier. The discomforts of a campaign were nothing to the sweet victory of winning. The warriors of the Roman Court were renowned.

Thinking about my past, the old buzz fired through my veins. The warrior in me begged to be unleashed on those who deserved it.

The phone vibrated with a text.

**Kelda: She’s taking a defensive position. Movie theater behind the outlet shopping center on Washington and 10<sup>th</sup>. Do I engage?**

My fingers flew over the screen. The moment my order flew into the void, I dropped the device. Barefoot, I took off.

The climb from the basement was far from easy. With each step, the daylight streaming from above made my eyes ache.

Setting my jaw, I ran at my top speed. The door banged open in my wake, and I was already outside before the shouts of my allies could reach me.

The skin on my arms began to redden immediately. I had a quarter of an hour at most to be in direct sunlight. But right now was about speed, not shade.

Some knot formed in my gut. As I ran, I realized it was worry, and as it tightened, it made me sick. It wasn't for me.

*But of course the bastards would choose to make their move in daylight.*

Lennox could easily take on one. Two would be a challenge, but I had faith in my little huntress. What caused the nauseating sensation in my gut was the fact that Kelda didn't know if the hunters were possessed.

They could simply be having a little showdown, the toxic buildup of pressure between powerful fighters that finally had reached the explosion point. But the alternative was that the mysterious force working behind the scenes in the Guild had made their move and was using the hunters.

I wasn't taking any risks. Not where Lennox was concerned.

"She's mine," I snarled, pulling up to the outlet mall.

Kelda was behind the building, and I pushed through the pain of my bare feet touching the hot asphalt to reach her. As I rounded the structure, a sharp, decadent scent perfumed the air.

Blood.

Bright and shimmering with possibility.

Hers. They'd spilled *her* blood.

I stopped short next to the irritated Kelda.

"You didn't need to come!" she hissed. "If you hadn't ordered me to hold my position, I could have taken care of—"

But I didn't stay to hear the rest. The bastard sitting on—no, crushing my beauty! He had his hand pulled back. Blood leaked from her skull. Her head couldn't take the force of that blow.

I roared. The power behind my threat was enough to break the glass on the cars behind us.

It did nothing to faze the hunter.

His fist collided with Lennox's face. Her head snapped back, hands dropping from her attacker's arms.

I was there a split second later, hauling the hunter off her. I met his gaze, which was clear of possession.

"Is that how you like it?" I raged. "I can do that too."

Hand pulled back, I struck. The hunter's neck was broken an instant later. But I didn't stop there. I laced my hands around his face and pushed his chest with my foot. The head came clean off.

And then I just stood there, breathing hard. My enemy's head in my hands brought me no delight. It was easier to focus on his pudgy face rather than look down. I didn't want to see what lay at my feet, to see the destruction he'd caused.

Kelda, already at my side, kept a better head. She bent over Lennox.

"There's a heartbeat," my protégée breathed, reaching for the knife in her back pocket.

The hunter's head dropped to the ground. I reached for the knife. "No—no, it's my job."

Kelda pulled the knife away and looked at me for a moment.

"Kelda! You will not disobey me—"

"The sunlight, you fool," she hissed, jerking her finger upward. "You need all the strength you can until we find you shelter to heal!"

"We don't have time for this. It will be *my* blood that the huntress takes. End of discussion."



Kelda slapped the open knife into my palm. The keen edge nicked the pad under my thumb. I huffed in annoyance. It was short lived. Someone far more important stole my attention. Pulling Lennox into my arms, I cradled her to my chest. A flick of the knife, and I slit a vein in my wrist for her.

“Drink, bella. Come on now,” I coaxed softly as if talking to something small and precious. In this moment, that was exactly how the huntress seemed.

“Her throat might be too bruised and swollen to take any,” Kelda warned, inching closer to inspect.

A harsh, feral sound growled from somewhere inside me.

Kelda shot back. Wide-eyed, she gaped. “It can’t be,” she stuttered in a whisper.

Not bothering to ask, I busied myself with opening Lennox’s mouth. The blood trickled down her throat. Worry consumed me, until it became the only thing to vie with my rational capacity. Seconds raced into minutes, and still she didn’t swallow. My blood was there, working its way through her system.

So why was her heartbeat slowing?

I swore I couldn’t hear it.

*Please, little one.* The plea came straight from the tight place inside my chest.

And then her throat convulsed. There might not be breath in her lungs, but the muscle spasm only helped my blood infiltrate her body.

“That’s it,” I murmured. “Come on now, take a deep breath and drink!”

There was an erratic skip of her heart muscle. Only the one.

I needed her. *I don’t want you to die.*

As she struggled on the precipice of life and death, it occurred to me that they were two distinct feelings, each mutually exclusive to one another. The not wanting her to die

was...new. It came from the same place the memories of her dwelled in my mind. And it had little to do with my plans for her, for us.

Lennox swallowed.

Already my self-inflicted wound was clotting. With a huff of frustration, I motioned to the knife on the ground.

“Slit my other wrist,” I commanded.

“Cato! The sunlight!”

I pierced Kelda with a look. She might be sworn to me, as much my daughter as a friend, but dammit if she didn't stop this defiance—

“I'm only looking out for you, you stupid ass!” Kelda shouted, but already the blade was in her hand. She slid it across my outstretched arm.

The arm that was blistering from the sunlight. A bad sunburn would ignite from the friction caused by the rays on my skin.

I pushed my fresh wound against Lennox's lips.

Lips that moved weakly over the source of life!

“Come on, beautiful. Drink up,” I whispered. But I had to brace my other hand against the burning asphalt, trying to keep myself from falling over.

“Cato!” Kelda moved but stopped herself, lips pressed together.

“It's alright,” I muttered. “She's drinking now.”

Just like that, the worry fractured. Its vise fell away, and as the minutes fled by, they carried the remnants of that terrible, suffocating feeling away.

I was worried over my little huntress. And not just because she was a means to an end. *What the hell is happening?*

Lennox pulled back, sitting up suddenly. She clutched the back of her head. Touched the crimson stained lips.

“Slowly,” I warned, breathing heavily.

“What did you do to me, you monster!” she shrieked. But her voice was still raw, so it was more of a croak.

“Give the blood a minute to work,” I insisted. “You’ll feel better soon—”

“Do you know what this means,” Lennox seethed, stumbling to her feet.

I waved my hands. “You were dying. You’re welcome.”

Lennox blinked, the words frozen on her tongue. She turned, taking in the scene of carnage.

“Oh, my word. OH, MY WORD!” Her heart exploded, racing at a furious pace.

Since only a few minutes ago it wasn’t working, the allegro was sweet to my ears. Like the lead violin that was coming in for its final movement.

“We have to get you away,” Kelda insisted.

Lennox shot her a look. “You!”

I shifted my weight. Any longer, and I would fry out here.

The huntress looked at me. Really looked. “You’re burning up. And she’s— Oh my gods, she has a daylight ring.”

The horror in Lennox’s whisper was like a slap. It wasn’t my story to tell, and the bits I knew were relayed in the strictest confidence.

Kelda, true to her sadistic form, held up her left hand and waved the blood-soaked ruby. “I sure do, poppet.”

“Look, we can hash this all out later,” I bit out. “But I didn’t plan to save you just so I can die.”

Lennox backed away, eyes darting wildly around.

I frowned.

“She’s going into shock,” Kelda spoke slowly, for my ears only.

*Oh, fuck me.* I couldn’t make her unconscious after just bringing her out of it.

“What do you suggest?” I snapped at my protégée. The forearm of my right arm ached. A quick glance showed the skin was blackening.

“I have a powder.” There was a cruel smile on Kelda’s lips. “But I don’t *dare* use it without your permission, O Mighty Possessive One.”

I gave her a withering look. “Gods-dammit, Kelda. Use it and get her the fuck out of here!”

“With pleasure,” my protégée sneered.

Fate, but she had an attitude problem.

I pushed myself off the ground. My movements were stiff.

I glared at the abandoned movie theater. Lennox’s screams of protest drew my momentary attention, but already she was falling asleep into Kelda’s arms. Safe and sound, the sleep of dreamless nights.

How I envied her the escape.

“Take her to the *paper* lair, lock her in, and instruct our hostess that if anyone goes to her, there will be my wrath to pay,” I called out.

Kelda snorted. “Wrath of a smitten male.”

“What was that?” I barked, pulling a board off the door. The action caused the skin on my fingertips to slide off.

*Ah, shit.* I needed to get inside.

“Nothing,” Kelda called out.

“And bring my phone!” I ordered, pulling the next board off. Something dark fell across my vision. I wiped at my face, my blackened skin falling into my eyes.

Suddenly at my side, my protégée ripped all the boards off and then with a firm tug on the locked door, broke the lock and opened it.

“I’ll be back in ten, fifteen minutes,” she said quietly.

“Go!”

She gave me an impudent smirk, and then raced off to take Lennox away. Before I went into the abandoned theater, I watched the closest thing I had to a sister carefully, almost reverently take the woman who I was obsessed with into her arms.

*Sleep well, little darling.*



## Chapter 32 – The Predator

The shade was like a freezing balm. The direct burn stopped. The plywood lay splintered on the ground where I'd pushed through the boarded entrance. Flexing my palms, I cursed. The pain crackled over the damaged nerve endings. I was fried. The lingering aches would need something more substantial, like a spell or salve. Unless I just wanted to wait out the healing process.

This shell of a building was rank. I inhaled. And coughed. There was moisture, which explained the rot. But there was something...more. Something festering. A pulse of existence scampered under and through and above the decay.

Guard up, I peered into the interior. Directly in front would be the ticket counter. Twin halls split off on either side, and double concession areas flanked on each wall. There was still a torn poster, hanging limp off the wall above. Some superhero franchise humans obsessed over. The lack of sound and the confusion of smell put me at a disadvantage. My senses were useless, but my instinct urged me to investigate, sure that I felt the presence of another.

I couldn't begin to guess what manner of creature inhabited this filth. Since I was trapped here for some time, I might as well look around. Bare feet that touched all manner of grossness meant that I moved slowly. Picking my way over the mess of a broken, condemned building, I winced at the amount of rat droppings among the refuse. There was likely nothing here besides that foul colony. About to turn around and wait by the door, a sharp whisper sounded. Rats didn't make that noise.

Determination steeled me. This gut instinct had been true before. The hall was pitch. As a creature of night, I could pluck my way as easily as in the glow of a candle or the garish burst of electricity. The direction of the noise was in theater 12. The metal door lay askew on the floor. Knowing how to keep my body silent, I waited.

Rapid breaths. Probably far in the opposite end of the theater. It was something other than the vermin, who I caught running along the back lengths of the hall.

A wish that I had a weapon, at the very least a short blade, crossed my mind. I dismissed it and stepped into the theater. The entrance ran alongside the stadium seating. My approach set off a chain of gasps. The other being's panic was palpable. A slow grin curled my lips.

Poised to spring, I crept forward just one more step.

And felt the walls of the spell seal behind me. Around me. It was a variation of the trap Lennox had thought herself so clever as to use. Only this time, I hadn't seen the marks.

*Fucking hells.* I grit my teeth. There was no need to resort to panic. Kelda would be back...eventually.

"Alright, you have me. You can come out now," I snapped.

The breaths, although still quick, were much steadier. There was a creak as a seat rest shifted. I peered into the top row. Whatever my attacker was, it crept along the ground. The shuffle of four limbs confirmed this.

A garish bulb peeked around the end of the uppermost row. Knotted dreads dangled off what appeared to be the oil-drenched head. The gaunt features stared at me, terror darting across those sunken eyes.

It took far too long to recognize my own kind, because this vampire hadn't had a proper, nutritious feeding in...years? Decades?

The being was rotting but unable to die.

"Well, good afternoon," I said tightly, remembering my manners. "I apologize for intruding in your sanctum, but I was in need of sanctuary."

A hiss escaped those thin, chewed raw lips.

This wasn't bloodlust. I wracked my brains for another type of illness. But no.... A madman wouldn't set a trap. There was some spark of clarity in that mind, if only to prevent himself from wandering into his own spelled circles.



“What’s your name?” I coaxed. Crossing my arms over my chest, I kicked up my heel and crossed it over the opposite. Ever so casually, I leaned against the railing that ran along the staircase.

The vampire closed his eyelids. The hiss turned into a guttural sound. Coughing followed. It was as if the being had forgotten how to speak. After a long and painful fit of throat clearing, one word came out very chopped.

“Rene?” I repeated.

“Yes,” the monstrosity hissed.

“I’m Silvian.” I gave the vampire one of my many used aliases.

“How do you taste, Silvain?” Attempting a longer sentence made him hack violently.

“I’m quite well, thank you for asking.” I could take him. There was nothing to fear.

A flurry of four-toed paws descended on the opposite wall.

The vampire hissed. Three short bursts. A long one. A pause, and then three more shorts.

*It’s communicating with them.* Disgust slithered through me, squashing any remaining curiosity. This was a house of horrors.

“Friends of yours?” I kept my voice bored. No reason to spook the vampire.

“My children.”

Delightful. “What a proud papa you must be to have such a brood.”

This time the cough was a rough bark. Laughter? I gagged.

“My children...hunger.” The vampire crept further. “I...hunger.”

*I bet.* Grinding my teeth, I forced myself to remain calm. The colony of vermin remained at the base of the far wall.

While they snapped at one another and used each other for furniture, they didn't advance.

Coming into full view, the distorted male showed his grotesque posture. Naked, with not a stitch of material to resemble clothing. Those knobbed knees bent by his ribs, fingers curled so that he walked on all fours.

The rat king.

And he was armed. The crossbow on his back was a fine example of goblin manufacturing. It was loaded with a stake of elm.

"How did you get those scabs?" I asked roughly, trying to keep the monstrosity talking.

The vampire paused. Looking down, he cocked his head in wonder. "How else do I feed my children?"

"And they feed you?" I already knew the answer. Sliding a glance at the rats, I realized how plump and healthy they were. Vampire blood. Which in turn made them nutritious enough for the gnarled male to survive on, but not thrive.

"How long have you been here, Rene?" It was a stupid question. Time no doubt lost all meaning to this abomination.

"I've been in hiding for 80, 746 days at sundown."

The lucidity of the answer floored me. Through the surprise, another revelation became instantly clear. That meant the year was early 1800s. While I couldn't do the math exactly, that was when Yves rose to dominance. There was a story I'd heard tidbits of once that he'd slaughtered a dominant family here. It was before Yves became a street boss, since this was still a backwater town and the locals hadn't established the five territories. But extinguishing that bloodline set Yves on a course to become a power player in this area.

"Rene St Just?" I breathed.

The crossbow pointed at me a second later, confirming my hunch. The vampire's malnourished, crooked finger trembled against the trigger. He struggled to hold the formidable weapon.

A rat squeaked in the distance.

“Who else is here?” the vampire demanded. His panic garbled the words terribly.

There was a rush of air as the drywall was punctured four times. A figure whispered through the air in a breathless pause. Like an avenging angel, Kelda landed behind the decrepit vampire, poised on the back of a chair.

“Your doom if you don’t let me near my protector,” Kelda snapped.

Unlike the description in human’s myths, we vampires couldn’t fly or climb walls. We could, however, with our strength, speed, and agility, use daggers to scale vertical challenges and jump over crouching, monstrous forms.

“Beautiful,” the vampire gurgled.

I convulsed in horror. Kelda was too livid to notice.

“Mother, my children, mother is here.”

“Watch it,” I muttered, averting my eyes from the repulsive sight of the vampire’s aroused form. “Kamara’s bite *is* worse than her bark.”

Using that alias let her know which of mine we were using. There was a nearly imperceptible jerk of her muscles that let me know she understood.

“And if you don’t drop the weapon, I will feed you piece by piece to the horde.” Kelda gave him her most demented smile.

His terror was putrid. Through the stench of this place, it wafted around us. His colony of mutated rodents took up a shrill cry and dispersed. It was each beast for itself, completely abandoning their foul ruler.

Kelda took a confident step.

“Kamara—” I warned.

The deranged male, who was shaking like a leaf, had slid his finger over the trigger. There was a high likelihood he would impale me before my protégée could reach him.

“What could we offer you? If we were friends,” I encouraged.

“Protection.” The answer was automatic.

Kelda frowned. “From *whom*?”

The male licked his lips. Beady eyes rolled around his sockets. “I want to be able to walk the streets, drink blood from a mammal bigger than my fist, and know that I won’t be hunted down and slaughtered.”

The whole string of sounds formed into half words. I caught the gist of his terms.

I pursed my lips. A being of his mental stability would only be a threat to anything living out there. “If I offer you my protection, you’ll let my protégée disarm you?”

“Make an unbreakable vow.”

“A blood oath? You’ve got to be joking,” Kelda snorted.

“No, I mean forge the blood oath in vellum. It has to be *unbreakable*.” The vamp was dancing up and down, which only looked like violent twitching.

“How about I don’t run out of here and tell the powerful, well-connected Yves where you are?” Kelda responded.

*You clever girl.*

“I’ll shoot you both!” His finger curled around the trigger.

“You won’t hit us both. Kamara, you have my permission.” I took a deep breath. This was one of those tense situations where we had to trust dumb luck to escape. I’d been in many, but this was one of the rare times I didn’t feel certain about the outcome swinging in my favor.

*And Lennox is in my bed.*

Well, if that wasn’t a distracting fucking thought. Fitting that it should be one of my last. A tease that she was within my grasp—finally! It would be beyond cruel not to make it out of here.

“It was nice knowing you, kid,” I said.

Kelda huffed. “Goodbye, slugger.”

“Okay, okay!” The vampire lifted the crossbow and motioned vigorously with his hand. “Take care of him. Just don’t—don’t tell the vampire king!”

“He isn’t a king,” I mused.

“Yet,” the petrified skeleton yelped. He swung the crossbow in my direction.

Kelda snatched the weapon, slamming her body to knock the vampire on his ass while simultaneously shooting the wooden barb to break the circle of enchantment. All it took was a strike from the outside.

“I ought to gut you,” I hissed, shaking out my burnt limbs.

The vamp jumped, whimpering as he retreated behind the row of seats.

“What if we feed him instead?” Kelda gave me a devious look.

Silently I watched her, while keeping the unpredictable one in my peripheral. The unspoken communication between us was something we’d forged from our decades together.

There was benefit to keeping this brute alive, and as a prisoner in his own fear.

“We will protect you, but on our terms,” I agreed.

The vampire’s eye bulged. They were in danger of falling out of his skull.

“We’ll be back with a blood bag,” I said. “Is the sun set, Kamara?”

She jerked her head. “Just about. It’s under the horizon, but still bright enough.”

I looked at my blistered skin. “I’ll manage. Better than stay in this booby-trapped hell.”



## Chapter 33 – The Predator

The sleep of the dead, they called it. On her, it looked almost peaceful. If the cloud of recent events didn't hang stagnant and waiting for the pause to be lifted, it would be a beautiful thing.

I let out a long breath, humming a three-note trill. *A, D, E*. It was haunting, somber. Breathtaking. It was the music I saw when I looked at Lennox. The sounds sang out the very first night of my captivity, when I snuck out of the hunter's cage with my protégée's help and went to watch my prize. Now the notes started to take shape, their keen call something that eluded me but called to me all the same.

Conscious of the time, I pushed myself off the wall. "What draws me to you, little one? I can't help myself around you."

It was dangerous. If she ever found out my control broke near her, she would use it against me.

It would forever be our nature to fight. Thus the desperate need to channel her desire into something more...fruitful.

"You could be the best or the worst lover," I mused, bending over her. My still healing arm braced on the wall, I reached with the other.

Her body was propped on the side, a more natural sleeping position. I slipped the elastic binder from the tip of her braid. Working gently, I unwove the strands of deep brown hair.

"So soft," I murmured, threading my clean hands through it. They were the only thing clean about me.

Not that there'd been time to bathe, but if I had, I wouldn't hesitate from pulling the sleeping female into my arms, combing my fingers through her rich, decadent hair as I considered what this strange obsession meant.

As I rubbed strands between my fingers, those soft lips parted. Lennox let out the softest of whispers.

My heart fucking jumped.

I dropped to my knees beside the cot. Carefully, so as not to put any of the filth covering my body on her clothing, I cupped her face between my hands.

And covered her mouth with mine.

The kiss was like a shot of straight lunashine. Heady and potent, the energy it sent through my veins left me reeling like a drunkard.

Even though she didn't kiss back, I worshiped her mouth with mine.

My dick ached to participate, but this wasn't his scene. This was an act of pure reverence. An acknowledgment of what this woman had become to me.

I pulled back, gasping for air. *Well, shit.*

Rocking back on my heels, I carefully laid her head back on the pillow, fragile neck adequately supported.

Lennox was mine, and I would claim her in every way that mattered soon enough. Praying that it wasn't a mistake to mix business with the pleasure that couldn't be resisted.

With a reluctant sigh, I pushed to my feet. Leaving the subterranean chamber, I closed and carefully locked the space. There was only one other being with the key to this room. While my hostess might have chewed me out for tonight twice already, and I was sure she waited upstairs to rage against me on my way out the door, she would keep Lennox safe. I trusted no one save myself and Kelda to do that. It was nice to have a third party interested and incentivized to keep my secret.

Pausing on the stairs, the same I'd rushed up hours ago, I pulled out my phone. It was after midnight. I needed to hurry if I was going to meet Yves by a quarter to one.

There was a knock on the door. "I know you're lingering there, Cato," my hostess grumped. "I'm not done talking to you."

*That's because you have nothing else to do except read and talk.* I pushed the door open, greeting her sour face. "You truly look radiant after midnight, my dear."



Vivian pouted. “Cut that charm bullshit right now. I won’t have you keeping prisoners here. This is a place of *business*.”

“And I am paying a hefty sum to operate my business here,” I responded, already walking through the space. Patrons looked up, and I could hear their quiet grunts or murmurs of derision as the stinking vampire walked by. The truth was, I did stink, but their repulsion ran deeper than that.

“Cato!”

I rounded on the ghostly witch. “We’ll talk when I get back. Promise.” I clapped my hands together and rubbed them. “Now, may I bring you back a platter of beignets? Perhaps some chicken feet or an infant’s still beating heart?”

“Asshole!” she screamed, the sound reminiscent of a banshee’s bloody call. “Get out—get the hell out!”

Chuckling under my breath, I left Books & Brews.

“Is that wise?” Kelda murmured, unfolding herself from the shadows.

“What? Taunting the floating mass of cosmic energy? Why not? I said nothing untrue.” I chuckled to myself.

“You’re fucking jolly tonight.” Kelda glared at me.

I slid my hands into my pockets—which were stuck together with dried blood. I had to peel apart the layers of fabric. *So much for my hands being clean.*

“What’s the reason?” Kelda demanded.

*A, D, E.* The three notes played over again. “I’ve begun a new song.”

I spoke quietly, but from my protégée’s reaction, I might as well have struck her.

“Adelfós—”

I stopped short. She’d only called me that name a handful of times in our ages together.

“—you haven’t composed in over a century.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“And now,” she stammered.

“Let’s not talk about it, if it’s all the same to you.” I continued walking, letting the notes do what they did best: live. Someday, maybe, if Fate willed it, they would be birthed into the world as part of a masterpiece. But for now, they could simply strum with a steady heartbeat inside me. Like all great art, it was another entity. If most people felt the entity’s pull, they ignored it. I allowed the muse to inhabit me, possess me. When she was ready, she would present herself as something glorious.

“Did you apply more balm?” Kelda fell into step beside me. We had fifteen minutes to cross several miles. No need for motorized wheels when a vampire could go faster. The air was laced with a faint scent of damp asphalt and the distant aroma of late-night food trucks. Residential walls loomed like silent sentinels, their vibrant colors now muted in the darkness, while the flickering neon signs of nearby storefronts cast eerie, warning glows that barely penetrated the shadows, creating an atmosphere of mystery and unease.

As I picked up the pace, I muttered a response. “No, and don’t chide.”

Kelda growled at the back of her throat.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I insisted.

“Oh, well, forgive me, *sir*, for *daring* to care about your ass. Maybe *next time* I should let you suffer.”

I really was in a good mood because her sass was cute tonight. “I’ll apply more when we stop. But it amplifies with the smoky scent.”

Kelda snorted in derision. “That smoke will linger for days. Starfire is strong shit, dude.”

“Dude?” I mocked shooting her a quick look.

*Did her cheeks just...turn pink?* Interesting. Very interesting.

Wisely, I dropped it. For now, at least. It wasn’t worth prying secrets from my protégée. If I couldn’t find them on my

own, they wouldn't be found.

We slowed and stopped at the street corner. The smoldering remains of the squad's outpost were visible from here. Such a pity that the classic structure had to be destroyed as a result of the hunters' idiocy. After killing Captain Blake, F.H. and dragging the bodies of the other two hunters into the fortress, we'd lit a fire that would burn human bone. Starfire could easily turn into an unmanageable conflagration that consumed everything in its path. The smoke from the fire was soaked into every fiber of my clothing and clung to me like a second skin. It was a small price to pay for the ashen tomb that buried this threat. I would pay a thousand times over to protect Lennox.

She was safe.

"Good evening, Menocchio—oh, and Miss Kelda is here. Hello, my darling. You look ravishing as always." Warmth flooded Yves's voice, as he offered Kelda an elaborate bow.

Kelda, no doubt boiling on the inside, kept it all behind her stony mask of indifference.

"Good evening, Yves." I folded my hands behind my back. There were a half dozen of his street crew lurking at various distances. At least it was a testament to our thriving friendship that Yves didn't have them directly on our heels.

"Alright, don't leave me in suspense. What did you drag me out to the middle of hipster humanville to see?" Although he was trying to play it off as boredom, the mob boss was curious.

I smiled amiably. "I hope this pleases you."

"Fate! That stench," Yves boomed as he followed me. "What have you been up to, young man?"

I could *feel* Kelda's eye roll. We were both older than him by half a millennium. "Burning."

"Not the starfire. The baume de saule. Did you have a little accident with the sunlight?" There was a deceptive twinkle in the fucker's voice.

But I couldn't skip over the part where he already knew about the starfire. That detail sent a cold dash of water over my joy. While it was a potent flame, its scent wasn't distinct. I smelled like burned building, a mixture of charred plaster and wood. How did he know what we did? This wasn't his territory; it was technically no-man's-land.

"Something like that," I said, hurrying to the spot across the street.

"The official report was a gas leak." Yves stopped behind me, rubbing his chin in his fist and thumb. "But I heard it was starfire—and only one person is wealthy enough to pay the fae in gold for that substance."

*Several inhabitants of this city are actually that wealthy.* There was no point stating what we both already knew. "First, we didn't hire the fae. I'm quite capable of using their prized propellent—"

Surprise illuminated Yves face.

"—and second, do you know what manner of creature lived here before they were slain, and the structure burned with their bodies?"

"Enlighten me."

"Guess," I countered.

Yves guffawed. "Something you very much wanted dead."

"Exactly." I spread my arms wide. "Boss of the Crescent City fifth district, I give you the destroyed fortress of the local chapter of hunters, the sworn enemies of our kind."

My declaration had the intended effect. Yves shut the hell up.

"The Livian Guild?" he finally managed to say.

I nodded. "Two male hunters, one female, and one visiting field handler."

"All dead?" Yves clipped out. "Don't they normally have pairs? Where's the fourth local bastard?"

“I took care of him several nights ago. His body is in the swamp, and no one will be the wiser. I believe his disappearance was what brought the FH here,” I added.

Yves pursed his lips. “You’ve known all this time.”

“I had personal business with them, yes. Now I gift you their corpses.” I dropped my hands to my side. I would throw my age and strength into this if I had to. But my hope had been that le petit prince would accept the action after a good fuss, and we could all move on.

“Do you realize this could bring the wrath of the Guild down on us?” Yves dripped plenty of bite into his tone.

“Thus I gift you these.” Kelda held out a canvas bag. “Two tablets, one belonging to the captain here and the other to the FH.”

There was a glimmer in his eyes that ought to have been downright terrifying. “Access to Guild data. Well, that’s some gift, isn’t it?”

“It is.” I stepped close. “I came here with good will, don’t let this matter cloud that.”

Yves met my stare. Time passed. Although the lamp above our head was conveniently out, the dim streetlights farther down cast long shadows that seemed to stretch and twist across the pavement. The distant hum of traffic echoed through the stillness, accompanied by the occasional echoing footsteps of a lone passerby.

“I accept your gift with the caveat that I’ll be watching you, Cato di Menocchio.” With a regal gesture, the vampire boss swept out his hand.

“I would expect nothing less,” I intoned, and Kelda handed the bag over. “Have a pleasant night, Yves.”

With a nod, we turned away.

His steps whispered in the opposite direction. But they stopped suddenly. “Cato.”

I looked over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“A female hunter, you say. And she died with the others?” Yves eyes narrowed at me.

My heart stopped. “Yes,” I managed to say with indifference.

“Pity.” Yves shook his head. “A huntress would have made a nice addition to my harem. Remember that next time you raze a fortress to the ground, okay?”

It was meant to be a joke. A good masculine shit-shooter.

But as he’d spoken, the world went red.

Kelda slid to my side and discretely pressed her fingertips against my spine. The physical contact no doubt caused her discomfort, but...it saved me.

“She squealed,” Kelda mocked. “Not the kind to be tamed in a vampire’s bed.”

“How obnoxious,” Yves snorted and then disappeared with his bag of treasure.

My muscles sagged. “Thank you,” I gasped.

“Mmm,” Kelda snatched her hand back. “We need to talk.”

*Oh, what now!* Taking a deep breath, prepared to listen. I owed her. “Not here.”

We slipped into the night. It took thirty minutes at a good clip to reach my country lair. There were several points along our progress where we paused or doubled back. It was our way of ensuring we weren’t followed. Only when we were sure it was safe, we stepped over the threshold of the house.

“Things are getting out of hand.” Kelda was quick and to the point.

“Oh, Fate,” I snapped, not even pretending to be ignorant of her meaning. Stalking over to the liquor cabinet, I went straight for the scotch. The smoky flavor would complete my night. I was burning on the outside and inside as the amber liquid slid down my throat.

“No, I’m going to speak and you’re going to listen.” Kelda placed her fists on her hips.

I waved my glass at her. “Alright. But make it quick. I need a shower, and it’s got to be hot and long to get the stench off my skin.”

Kelda nodded. “You lied to Yves—”

“Something we agreed on,” I muttered.

My protégée huffed. “Yes, but—Lennox isn’t ready. Your grand plan to woo her to your side by disclosing the true nature of the Guild fell short.”

“And?” I drawled, before throwing back another drink.

“And your blood is in her system.” Kelda reached into her boot and produced—

“You’ve got to be shitting me.” I glared at the ritualistic dagger. “One moment you tell me to kidnap her and force her services, and now this?”

“You have to protect her, even if she never forgives you. You have to protect her from Yves now too. You heard him.”

“And you just walk around with one of those in your boot?” I muttered dryly.

“Not the point,” Kelda shouted. The razors in her voice made me still. “Lennox is in danger and your blood is already in her system. Do it before she wakes.”

I opened my mouth and shut it. The idea was...appealing. *She would be mine.*

“She’ll never agree to it conscious. Not in this century, anyhow.” Kelda tapped the sheathed blade against her open palm. “And the way you turned feral outside the cinema? You already see her as yours. Make sure others see it too.”

The knife might as well have been a snake. The promise it held disguised a potent venom. “That’s not necessary. I can protect her from the ambitions of the street boss without doing this to her.”

“You can’t if Yves claims her, and you know it.” Kelda held out the blade. “Consider it your stag gift.”

I dropped my gaze to the scotch. I was going to need a hell of a lot more liquor if I was going to do this. I poured a healthy amount and slung it back. “She’ll never forgive me,” I gasped into the empty cup.

Kelda sighed. “That’s a probability. But, if she has any sense, she’ll realize it’s also the best thing to protect herself. That makes a slim chance in the hell realms that she’ll come to accept what you’re going to do.”

Scrubbing my face with my hand—my still dirty face—I groaned. “Alright. It makes sense.”

“Thank you.”

“But we do this on one condition, Kelda.”

My protégée inclined her head.

“We keep it a secret as long as possible.”

Nodding her head up and down, Kelda admitted, “Good idea.”

“Okay, I really do need to shower now. I won’t be mated looking like a half-baked ham.”

“Better hurry, no telling when your bride will wake. And I don’t have enough potion to douse her again.”

I snorted. “You should stock up on that. I have a feeling we might need it often with Lennox.”

“Especially when she finds out she’s essentially Mrs. Menochchio.”

Mrs. Menochchio. It had a nice ring to it. *Alright, sweet poison. Time to make you mine.*





## Chapter 34 – Lennox

The fog in my head was unreal. It felt like I'd been awake for quite some time, but I couldn't push my consciousness into the forefront. My body, floating somewhere on a feathered cloud, didn't respond to my command.

Memories danced in the shadows, not showing their true form. I knew my name and that was it. Succumbing to the pull, I fell back into my body and let the waves of sleep wash over me.

Darkness enveloped the landscape, its intangible fingers stretching out to touch every corner of my vision. The air was thick with an unsettling stillness, broken only by the distant rustle of leaves and the echoes of my own breath. A sense of urgency pulsed within me, driven by an unshakable knowledge that there were forces out there, unseen and ominous, longing to capture me. But I was swift, each step propelling me through the thick fog that clung to the ground like a ghostly veil.

The blackness lessened, and images took shape. A swamp stretched out before me, a labyrinth of murky waters and gnarled trees that seemed to writhe with a life of their own. The mist hung like ethereal tendrils, obscuring my path and creating an otherworldly atmosphere. My heart raced as I sprinted through the eerie landscape, driven by an indomitable will to outpace the pursuers that haunted my every step.

Amid the twisting maze of trees and fog, I spotted the figure. Instinctively I knew him. Terror, not of him but for him, welled inside my chest. I longed to save him.

From what?

I couldn't say. But they were there, just out of sight.

Desperation welled up within me as I pushed myself harder, determined to bridge the gap that separated us. But despite my efforts, the distance remained, a cruel reminder of the impossible nature of my goal.

As I ran, the tension between urgency and futility twisted within me, a potent mixture of hope and despair. The dream seemed to mirror the complexity of my emotions, the haunting beauty of the swampy landscape juxtaposed against the haunting ache of being unable to reach the one I sought to protect. And yet, with every pounding heartbeat, I refused to surrender to the darkness that threatened to close in around me.

A sense of purpose drove me onward. Each step was a declaration of defiance, a testament to the strength that resided within me. And as the dream continued to weave its spectral tapestry, I found solace in the knowledge that he wanted me to save him.

Even if I would never make it in time.

~\*~

I shot up.

The connection of mind to body that I'd been fighting for clicked into place with a suddenness that left me gasping. A revival from the grave of damning dreams. Why did my mind choose to fixate on the vampire when I closed my eyes? If it wasn't erotic pleasure, it was this desperate need to protect him—a monster! Pushing the unwanted images from my mind, I ordered myself to focus on the present and its unfamiliar surroundings.

There was a light on through a cracked open door, contrasting with an otherwise pitch space. No windows, no light coming from under the second door. There was no warning as to what to expect; my glyphs were silent.

Working my jaw back and forth in consideration, I realized how cottony my mouth felt. Water—I needed water!

Pushing myself forward, I realized I had indeed been sleeping on a bed. Moving the warm, pillowy duvet, I froze. That scent. I ripped the duvet up and inhaled. Masculine, pure and rich. The scent registered before the name.

I whipped my gaze around. This was a...bedroom. *His?* My heart beat at triple speed. Movements robotic, I stood. The

rough carpet was industrial under my bare feet. I padded to the light and pushed the door open, fists raised in case of attack.

An empty bathroom stared back at me.

Two things popped into my mind at the same time. One, there was no shower, ergo the vampire probably didn't live here all the time. And two, I desperately had to void my bladder.

Shutting the door, which didn't lock, I took care of my business quickly. As I washed my hands in front of a scratched mirror, I risked a glance.

“Sshhhiittt,” I breathed. I looked *healthy*.

I damn near glowed.

For some reason, I reached my still wet hand to my throat. There should have been a bruise there—

Why was there supposed to be a bruise? Big and ugly and life-sucking. Eyes closed, I focused on the rush of water from the faucet and tried to remember.

Nothing.

With a grunt of frustration, I bent to suck water from my cupped hands. The water I splashed on my face helped elevate the feeling that I'd slept for a thousand years.

I scrubbed some through my limp hair, which desperately needed shampoo, but the warm water was better than nothing.

There were no supplies, I realized suddenly. The space was empty, with no cabinet or compartment, just toilet tissue. *Not even hand soap*. If Cato spent much time here, he would have had things like a toothbrush. Vampires rarely neglected their oral hygiene.

Clearly, this was a haunt for him. A sunless cave, where he could keep from burning—

Burning.

With a groan, I stumbled back as the images assaulted my mind. The memories I'd been desperately trying to grasp were all springing to life and vying for dominance. There was

Captain and Gage attacking me. I shot Captain. A macabre gurgle bubbled up my throat as I thought of the bastard dead. It was quickly stanching as I remembered Gage trying and almost succeeding to choke me. Which was why there should be bruises across my neck and swollen chords on the inside.

Trailing my fingers over my skin, I shook my head. Cato. He showed up! In the daylight. His arms and beautiful face had been blistering. His blood revived me. My shouts had been silenced by the female vampire.

When the onslaught of memories settled, I sank to the floor. Working like bellows, my lungs gulped air, my chest straining to take in enough breath.

*I took his blood.* It was forbidden.

I brought my fingers to my lips. A completely foreign feeling shifted through me. It took only a moment to identify it. Panic. It was trying to suffocate me.

“First, you’re going to stand up,” I ordered myself, forcing the peptalk to keep my wits about myself. “Then, you’ll go try the other door. If it’s locked, we find a weapon. Wait—first we find a weapon and *then* try the door.”

One small step at a time, I forced myself to keep going. I pushed to my feet. Reached for the doorknob. Opened the bathroom door. Scanned the tiny room and walked forward, one foot before the other.

A thorough search revealed no weapon. I found my shoes, though. After slipping into those, I continued to look. Besides the bed, there was only a nightstand with a single shelf beneath. There was no lamp. Only a change of male clothes, big enough to fit someone of Cato’s frame. The damning evidence that confirmed without a doubt that it was the vampire’s room were the personal items sitting on the shelf part of the nightstand. My two paranormal romance novels and the seashell lay right there.

My heart nearly stopped. I made myself reach out and touch them, praying this was a dream. They were solid under the pads of my finger.

When the organ responsible for the oxidization of my blood finally returned to a semi-normal cadence, I rose and tried the door. Expecting it to be locked, surprise fluttered through me. I crept out, hands fisted at the ready for anything lurking in the dark.

There wasn't.

At least, not until I crashed into the stairs that I couldn't see because the light from the bathroom didn't come this far. The steps bit into my calves and forearms. Because I'd had my arms extended, they took the impact and not my face. Groaning, I peeled myself off the steps and carefully picked my way upward. There hadn't been another direction to go, so I surmised the chamber was at the end of a hall with these stairs on the other end.

Another door waited for me, and I would have smashed my face into it if I hadn't felt for it. The knob turned. A breath left my lungs.

*Why wouldn't he lock me up?* I pushed the knot of worry back and proceeded in my exploration.

Books. So many shelves of books. In fact, as I turned back to the clicking of the door, I realized it was a false shelf that led to the lair. There was only one place that had this many books.

Had he been here the whole time? Right under my nose! Oh, the rat bastard. This was typical vampire bullshit. Sneaky, manipulative monsters. When my stake plunged into his heart, we'd see who was so clever—

“Nox, darling, I trust you slept well?”

I froze. He was behind me. He was *behind* me!

“Come, would you like to join me for a cup of tea?” he drawled, a hint of amusement that the forced boredom couldn't hide.

At the gentle, warm tone, I turned and moved around the end of the long row of books. Two armchairs sat in an alcove with a potted palm between the four bay windows. A tea service sat on an antique table to finish the picture. The

vampire had a perfect view of the hidden door when it opened, but I'd been too focused on the multitude of books that I'd missed him lurking in the shadows.

Squaring my shoulders, I faced him down. "Tea? Really? So I taste better when you eat me?"

The vampire tsked. "I'm not biting you...yet."

"Not happening." I gave him a dirty look. The urge to wave my locket at him was strong. It wasn't coming off. Ever. I crossed my arms.

"You'll beg me, my little huntress. It might not be tonight, but you will."

That kind of overblown confidence wasn't worthy of a response. Pursing my lips tight, I looked away.

Something caught my eye. Above the alcove, the ceiling soared. The muscles in my face relaxed and a long breath escaped my lungs. A balcony with polished cherrywood rails ran along the space as far as I could see. But there was room above that. The vaulted ceiling had to be twenty stories. Another ledge and balcony ran around the topmost part. *There's no way.* This place was a typical rectangular, boxy two-story shop from the outside.

A motion from the monster in front of me snapped my attention back to the present. The vampire pulled his ankle to rest on the opposite knee. He was barefoot and wearing black sweatpants and a simple black tee. I refused to notice how they clung to him. Behind him, out the bay window, the sky was a lovely palette of pinks and purples.

My breath caught in my throat. "Is it dusk or dawn?"

"The latter." He poured a cup of steaming goodness and plated a hard, decorative biscuit. "Please, join me. I can hear the questions bouncing in your brain. You'll explode if I don't answer them."

It was the food that drew me forward. Reaching for the cup and plucking the food off the plate, I took a careful step back. I wasn't sitting across from him. This display of civility was all a big joke. I popped a biscuit in my mouth, and when it was

mushed, swallowed it with tea. My tongue was still too dehydrated to properly consume the food.

“How long have I slept?” I asked between sips. The tea spread warmth through my chest and out into my limbs.

“Over thirty-six hours,” he said dryly. “My protégée doused you a little too thoroughly.”

If Gage survived the attack—but no, he wouldn’t have. This creature showed up to save me and there was no way the hunter escaped. What was the field handler going to think? Was I reported dead, or worse, suspected as the culprit? I couldn’t think of that now. There were too many unknowns. The only certainty was that I was royally fucked. “And you didn’t think to revive me?”

“No, I chose to spend yesterday sleeping by your side and tonight was...busy.”

I froze, delicate porcelain teacup halfway to my lips. “You *slept* next to me.”

It wasn’t a question.

But he nodded, those whiskey eyes twinkling with a golden tint. “I wasn’t going to take the floor.”

Wrath sizzled through me. I clutched the teacup and, in a blink, launched at it his smug face. Reflexes impossibly fast, he caught it.

“There’s no need to lash out,” he drawled. “I kept my hands off you. It was all most appropriate.”

“That’s not the point! You crossed a line—”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from the grunt who cleaned up my blood, when she’d rather be poking and slicing me like the other hunter,” he snapped, knuckles turning white as he clenched his fists.

The crackling of porcelain announced the fate of the teacup. The vampire cursed and shook his hand violently. Droplets of crimson rained over the pulverized cup.



“Serves you right,” I bit out, enjoying his misery with a twisted glee. He’d ruined everything.

The vampire leapt to his feet, stalking forward.

I didn’t back up.

I didn’t move a muscle.

When his face was a hair’s breadth from mine, he menaced, “And if I wasn’t interested in the bigger picture, I would force you to your knees and shove my cock into your mouth until you choked.”

My breath hitched. The muscles deep in my core spasmed. Spasmed! As if they wanted him to brutalize me! “Aren’t you scared I’d bite?” I hissed.

“With how hard I’d hold your hair, you wouldn’t dare disobey the warning.” His dark, feral gaze dropped to my lips. He wasn’t touching me. There wasn’t a single point of contact. And somehow, my skin burned from the idea alone.

I *hated* my body’s reaction. Clenching my jaw, I wanted so badly to hurt him. “So you’re my enemy and I’m yours. And all is fair in war, is that it?”

“The saying goes ‘All is fair in love and war,’” he said, voice becoming silky with seduction. He caught my glare and his eyes heated to a molten gold.

I swallowed hard. Moisture pooled between my legs. He knew. The monster no doubt smelled the arousal. I couldn’t bring myself to be embarrassed.

A cough broke through the tension. “Good morning, Lennox. Here are the complimentary supplies offered by your hostess. We hope they make your stay more pleasant and don’t hesitate to ask if we can fetch you anything else.”

While Robert spoke, I took three hurried steps. My back slammed into the corner of a shelf, and I cursed softly. The vampire only straightened. When I was sure he wasn’t going to spring on me, I turned my focus to the all-American quarterback holding a wicker basket. A large, mint green bow

was tied on the handle, with matching shredded paper spilling out the side.

“I’m not staying,” I said past the lump in my throat.

Something like pity shifted through the blond’s great big eyes. “Books & Brews is happy to offer you sanctuary. Please abide by the house rules, and we’ll have no quarrel.”

“I don’t need sanctuary,” I ground out. Or did I? Whatever had happened out there was unknowable.

“Thank you, Rob,” the vampire snapped. He snatched the basket from the barista. The contents swayed precariously, threatening to spill out.

Robert slid his hands into his pocket, clearly not put out by the monster’s bark. It raised the eternal question: What was the barista that he didn’t need to fear the temper of a creature such as the vampire? “I put my favorite brand of moisturizer in there. It makes your skin feel like it’s been washed in the blood of infants to steal their youth, but it’s vegan! No animals or humans harmed in the making.”

It dawned on me that he was attempting to put me at ease. I wasn’t used to this level of consideration. Civility didn’t exist where I came from. We were a guild of cutthroats, having to always be tougher than the monsters we battled.

I cracked a smile. It felt wrong. Too forced. “Thank you, Robert.”

He tipped his head. “Have a pleasant and restful day.”

As the barista disappeared, the protest on my lips was cut off by Cato. “No, you may not leave, little one. You’ll remain with me for the foreseeable future.”

An outburst of rage bellowed from me. “How dare you!”

The vampire shrugged. It was a smooth, elegant movement that made his powerful build fluid with grace.

“Is that it? You’re getting even?” I shouted. “Am I your prisoner?”

“I wouldn’t call it *that*.”

The dangerous inflection of his voice sent a delicious chill down my spine.

Another vein of argument wound up. I wouldn't go down without a fight!

As if he could see it in my face, the vampire sighed, shook his head, and muttered, "You're making this harder than it has to be. It's time to go downstairs."

"No." I stamped a foot. "Absolutely not!"

"Nox, you can't seriously be this obstinate."

"Oh, I can!"

Pinching his brow, he said tightly, "Look, we can continue this conversation later. But customers are already coming in the front and—"

I took off. The door couldn't be that far. Following the way the barista disappeared, I quickly lost the trail of mint paper filler. It didn't matter. Breathing hard, I set my heels into it and ran for all I was worth, keeping my direction true. But I underestimated the perception-altering magic of the bookstore. The farther I ran, the more the rows of shelves multiplied. The space stretched on and on. A magical bookstore should have been a dream come true. Instead, it was a hideous nightmare.

Strolling leisurely out from a row, the vampire intercepted me. His strong arm shot out, capturing my waist as I tried a hairpin turn for escape.

I yelled, kicking, fists flying! I made contact, pummeling him with everything I had.

It was no use. That body might as well be made of iron. There would be bruises on the edges of my hands. There was no way to reach a sensitive area or damaging place. This armor of muscle wasn't going to let me win.

It didn't stop me.

He threw me effortlessly over his shoulder like a sack, but I bucked and struck at his lower back, ass, and thighs. I kicked and wriggled. Even though it went against my sense of

balance, I tried to roll over. The warm, rich scent of male was all around me. It teased my senses and distracted me.

“Enough!” he growled. And then with a resounding *thwack* his open palm slapped my bottom.

I gasped. “Did you just...spank me!” My voice could have raised the dead.

“Oh, I did, Nox. I did. And you know?” he hissed. “It felt damn good. I think that’s what you need. A good fucking spanking. Maybe then you’ll realize how much better it feels to be a *good* girl instead of this hellion.”

“You like the hellion too much,” I bit back before thinking better of it.

He only chuckled darkly.

I didn’t stop thrashing and striking his backside.

None of it fazed him. He walked gracefully as ever. Stopping by the alcove, he snatched the gift basket off the floor before proceeding to go to the bookshelf. I craned my neck to look at which book opened the secret door.

He bounced me.

The door opened without me catching the secret placement of the latch.

“Damn you,” I hissed.

He laughed again. I hated how much I liked the sound.

We trailed downstairs. I formulated a plan. As soon as he was asleep, I would make a break for it.

The vampire dropped me unceremoniously on the bed. I shot off, wrapping my arms protectively around myself. He didn’t give me a second look. With that freakish speed of his, he shut the door and slid his thumb horizontally across the top jamb. There was just enough light from the bathroom to see the thin line of blood coating both door and frame.

“A sealing spell?” I said, but there was a lump in my throat, not making the words as strong as I wanted.

The vampire didn't comment on that. "You're my guest from this point forward."

"Prisoner," I interrupted with vehemence.

He sighed. "That's the difference between us, Nox. I will do everything in my power to prevent harm from befalling you."

He moved to the bathroom and shut the door.

"Only for your own personal, sickening gains," I corrected him.

I could have sworn I heard a sigh. The faucet blasted from the pipes a second later. My body shook with anger. This vile being expected me to stay here. All night! The sound of spitting sounded in the bathroom. *Where was his toothbrush hiding?* I shook my head. Leave it to my random brain to think of the most useless things in a crisis.

Desperate for a weapon, even the smallest of shivs, I crouched and pawed through the gift basket. There was nothing remotely useful. At least the face wash and moisturizer along with my own oral hygiene supplies would be a welcome change.

The vampire came out of the bathroom abruptly. He stopped in the doorway and heat flared in those amber eyes. They darkened, the flecks of gold being swallowed by brown.

"What?" I snapped, not liking how I noticed all the small details about him.

He smirked. "You look good in my bedroom."

I let out a disgusted huff.

With a careless lift of his shoulder, the vampire proceeded to remove his shirt. The sight killed my scathing retort. That body was sinful. Decadent. My gaze dropped to the temping V of carved muscle and the peppering of trimmed black hair that disappeared behind the sweatpants.

"The sight still pleases you," he murmured, voice husky and rough.

“I was simply choosing how I would kill you while you slept,” I sassed, forcing my gaze back to his. “Because I will attempt it.”

His shoulder lifted casually. “What’s life without a little risk?”

I needed to escape. If only to put a flimsy door between us! Already a familiar ache pulsed between my legs. I moved with purpose, and he stepped to the side to let me into the bathroom.

I slammed the door.

And drowned his laughter with the running water. *Cold* water. It wasn’t enough. I needed to submerge myself in it to get this flare of libido under control.

Fuming, I grabbed the supplies to brush my teeth. Something caught the back of my mind, and I stared at the tube. It took a couple of seconds for my sex addled brain to realize that it was my favorite brand of paste. *He knows me*. It should have been creepy—downright terrifying! It wasn’t. At this point, all the little surprises only proved what an obsession I was to him.

*Why?* What was it he wanted? That was my leverage. And until I could kill him, I should be spending every waking minute trying to figure it out.

As I brushed, I created a mental list. It wasn’t my connections at the Guild. He seemed to know enough about the inner workings without my spying for him. It wasn’t my blood. He was in no hurry to trick the locket off or break the magic it contained. Was it...me? I looked at the even greasier hair roots, the defeated look in my eyes. I wasn’t stunning, my body was average for a human and that didn’t even begin to compare against other creatures.

I slammed the faucet off, ripped the door open, and yelped!

The vampire was there, casually leaning an arm against the doorframe. This close to him, I couldn’t deal. I tried to move, my body wanting nothing more than to move closer. He caught

me around the throat, fingers sliding to the back of my neck. I wasn't able to escape. Or that was what I told myself as his lips brushed against mine.

I couldn't breathe. Any oxygen left in my body was stolen by this beast of a male. The kiss was almost tender, but there was no mistaking the force behind it. The vampire was holding it back with his iron control. That irritated me to no end. I wanted him to snap. If only because then I could finally throw him off his game.

*Yeah, that's the reason.* That body was made for sex. My poor deprived body begged for respite. Just one little taste. Here in the dark, who would know? A shudder ran down my spine.

With a sigh, the vampire stepped back. "I told myself I wouldn't, but I can't help it. Goodnight, little huntress."

He was already moving away, slipping out of his black shoes. Maybe it was the sight of his bare feet or maybe it was remembering them bloody and broken. Reality slammed cruelly back into me.

"You can't seriously mean to share that twin mattress?" I gasped, unable to speak properly and hating myself for that.

"Be thankful I paid my hostess an exorbitant amount to acquire a real mattress, since I'd been sleeping on a camping cot until you came." He flopped down, pulling the duvet over his shoulders.

Could I do this? *I have to do this.* The alternative was the concrete floor and the thin layer of unpadded, industrial carpet. At least he didn't sleep in the nude. I took a step forward. Those black sweats were a damn tease, telling me something was hiding there, and now I had to sleep next to it and not find out. That was what I was scared of. It wasn't that I didn't trust the vampire. He'd never given me a reason to think he'd force himself on me.

It was me. I didn't trust myself around this monster.

Scowling at his back, I crossed the distance, slipped out of my shoes, and gingerly lay down beside him. Our backs

touched in multiple places. He was *ssooo* warm.

“Really, Nox?” he growled. The bed dipped, his presence vanished, and then...the light went out. Before I could protest, he was back in the bed and pressed even closer to my back. I took a shaky breath. I was alone, in a bed, with a vampire.





## Chapter 35 – Lennox

I didn't feel sleepy, I swore to myself I wouldn't fall into an unconscious state and put myself in a vulnerable position. It was a lie. No sooner did my pulse calm and the initial roar of anger subside than the dark carried me away on a gentle current.

I drifted off.

It was hard to say how long I slept. Consciousness didn't return suddenly. Rather, it swam upward, reaching toward a delicious warmth that was saturating my body and concentrating deep in my core.

Something sinful ran along my side. The feathering touch dipped below my navel, grazing against the smooth skin on my lower belly.

"I love feeling you," a dark, dangerous voice murmured. I knew that voice. I was supposed to hate that voice—and on some level, I always would. For the life of me, I couldn't pinpoint why.

That coaxing touch slid back to my side and up my ribs.

I shivered, unable to push him away. I should have. I knew it with every fiber of my being. But I would be lying to myself if I said I didn't want it.

Oh, Fate, help me, I wanted it.

I wanted a vampire.

No, not just any vampire. This one. This monstrous male who trailed his skilled fingers down the planes of my belly and the across the curve of my hips. Damn me, but I arched my back up, inviting him. I needed him to explore lower.

He did.

Not even hesitating, he dipped his touch under the waistband of my pants. That purposeful touch teased along the edge of my panties.

"Open for me," he commanded.

The hunter in me screamed, the voice blasting through my consciousness. This was forbidden! This was so...wrong. So...right.

“Spread those pretty little legs, Nox.”

Damn me, but I did. I bent a knee.

“What a good girl. Let me show you how I reward such obedience,” he purred, voice like velvet in the inky darkness. Those sure fingers slid through my sex, teasing and rubbing exactly where I needed them to. The vampire moaned. “Fuck, bella, you’re wet.”

I gasped, fisting the blanket still covering me.

He stilled, fingers resting on my flesh. “Who are you this wet for?”

“What?” I stuttered.

That hard mouth came down to kiss my shoulder. No doubt it would have burned my skin if not for the soft cotton tee. “I said, *who* did this to you? Who turned you on and made your pussy this wet?”

*Is this a trick question?* “Tom Cruise,” I snipped, not sure I liked where this was going.

The vampire growled. All the tiny hairs on my flesh stood on end, and instinct buzzed in warning at the predator’s violent outburst.

“Wrong answer, Lennox.”

I rolled to my back, crooking an arm behind my head. “Does your ego need such a confidence boost that you need to hear me say you’re the one turning me on?” I asked, voice high in a sneer.

He was on me, one hand around my throat, firm but not crushing. The other lifted, wiping dampness against my pursed lips.

“No, bella. *I* don’t need to hear it. I already know. But I also know that you mentally refer to me as ‘monster’ or ‘vampire’. I want you to use my name when I’m fucking you.

There will be no mistake whose dick makes you shatter. Just look at what I've already done." He forced a finger past my lips, and I tasted myself. "Do you like the way your arousal tastes? Hmm?" He didn't wait for an answer, knowing I wouldn't give it truthfully.

I bit down on his finger, not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to make him hiss.

The vampire tightened the grip on my throat ever so slightly. "I asked you that question because *you* need to hear it with your own ears, admit it with your own mouth. What you deny in the light of day isn't true down here in the dark. You want me—the monster who turns you on. And it's not a simple arousal, is it, Lennox? I light a fire in your veins unlike any other before."

I hated him. Black rage pulsed through me. Even though my mind battled every thought, I knew with unmistakable surety that he was right. My lust fueled the anger, making a heady, irresistible concoction.

He snatched his finger from between my teeth and slid it forcefully along my sex. He didn't stop at the opening but pushed it deep inside me.

I moaned despite myself.

"Who made you this wet, Lennox?"

I glared at him. It was hard to say if he could see me in the pitch black of the room. Vampires had excellent night vision, but this? This space was an abyss.

*And right now, I'm lost in it with him.* No one would ever know what transpired here.

I gave in.

"You made me wet," I ground out.

"What's my name?" he rasped.

The word came out as the barest of whispers. "Cato."

At my response, those sure fingers began to work in and out. The muscles in my core clenched tight, finally—*finally*—

getting relief.

“Correct,” he murmured. “And is it the first time I’ve aroused you?”

*He’s got to be joking.* The press of his fingers on my neck begged to differ.

“No,” I rasped.

The touch on my neck loosened. He moved his hand up and buried his fingers into my hair. Ruthlessly tangling in the strands, he made it hurt.

I hissed.

The pleasure between my legs balanced the pain of his touch.

“One more,” he murmured, hot breath right against my cheek. “Have you ever taken care of that problem I seem to create? Have you ever...touched your pussy and thought of me?”

I stilled.

“Answer truthfully, little one. Or else you won’t like the consequences.”

“How would you even know if was telling the truth?” I demanded, even though the words came out as a whisper.

The vampire chuckled darkly. “Let’s call it intuition, based in deduction. Your body responds so well, so obediently to me. It’s your mind I’m at war with.”

He pressed his lips against my jaw, sucking and teasing as he worked his way to the crook of my neck just under my ear.

“I’m waiting, Lennox.”

*Oh, what the hell.* “Yes—I’ve touched myself with thoughts of you in my mind.”

The vampire growled in approval. “Such a good girl.” He nuzzled against the vein he would not be tasting. “Tell me to go away. Tell me to leave you alone, and I’ll drop to the floor and sleep in a heartbeat.”

“Go upstairs,” I bit out, hating myself for what I was about to do.

“Ah, my little beautiful, furious woman, the sun is still out. Not even for you will I burn.”

A rough laugh escaped my throat. “You already have.”

He stilled, that dangerous mouth pressed against me. Whatever trail of thought raced through his brain, the vampire didn't reveal it. Even though it was strong enough to make him take several long, steady breaths.

And then the hold on my hair was gone. The mattress shifted as he moved to cover my sex with his mouth.

He licked and sucked.

I reached down, pressing my fingers into his head. While we'd been here before, in the park, there was part of me that couldn't relax. Here, without the threat of discovery, I let go of all my inhibitions.

The orgasm built, and I threw my head back, letting my screams fill the room. Somewhere in the middle of the mindless cries, a string of words ripped from me, released from the deepest, most secret place in my mind.

The vampire stopped. His touch left me. My sex wept at the abandonment.

He rose and prowled over me.

“What did you say?” he panted. From the sound of his voice, he was as equally affected by this as I was.

I swallowed. He'd heard me. We both had. Now that the words were out there, there was no pretending.

*The dark will keep my secret.* “I said,” I gasped for air, “fuck me like you hate me—it shouldn't be too difficult.”

“As you wish.”

I kicked the pants all the way off as he nestled between my thighs. Reaching up, I meant to brace myself on his ribs.

“No,” he barked, catching my hands and pulling them above my head.

I wriggled but sensed that only pleased him. I could *feel* his smile, like a living thing right above me.

And then that other seemingly living thing pressed against my entrance. His body shook as he slowly, methodically pushed into me. Fate, he was large. My pussy stretched to accommodate that dick.

“Seven hells, huntress, you’re so tight,” he groaned. “You’re going to make me come, and I haven’t even started.”

Wrapping my legs around the backs of his thighs, I urged him to move. “Come on dammit, you’ve gone this far. Don’t quit on me now, monster.”

He clicked his tongue, pulled back and—

I bowed off the bed when he joined us.

“Yeeaasss,” I moaned wantonly. It was so forbidden, but felt so good.

“You’re going to take a pregnancy tonic tomorrow,” he ground out. “Because there’s no way in hell I’m pulling out.”

A fucking shiver rolled through me. “Shouldn’t you ask?” I rasped.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Asshole.”

He paused. “Well? This is how I imagined taking you. Every damn hour spent chained to the pole in that basement. It didn’t matter this was never supposed to be part of the plan. You did that to me, Lennox. You changed my plans. If you can’t handle it, if you want something different, I’ll respect that and decline. Because...this is how *I* want it.”

Words froze on my lips.

“And I think,” he rasped, bending to flick his tongue over my breast, “I think you want it too.”

“Fuck you.”

He laughed roughly. “Well, that’s settled now.”

The weight of him was incredible. He wasn’t terrible bulky, not like other vampires or even other supernaturals. But as he began to pound into me, holding my hands captive and body pressing against mine, I was quite certain he could crush me. Easily. Some voice in the back of my mind sneered that he would smother me when we were done. That this was all he was after from the beginning.

Honestly, he could end me, and I would die happy at this exact moment.

Every muscle was tensed in pleasure. This was primal on some level I could never have previously imagined.

*The vampire’s captive.* Completely at his mercy. And I loved every fucking second of it.

It was in my nature, my training to fight him. In this act, I was struggling for everything. I met each thrust, measure for measure. While he sought to penetrate deeper with each stroke, I intended to bury him.

My skin was on fire. Sweat trickled in rivulets down my front. My breasts, sensitive and begging for attention, brushed with each sweep against him. But I refused to ask.

His head remained turned away, breaths coming short and fast.

His shoulder was right there. I craned forward, sinking my teeth into his flesh.

He grunted. The splayed fingers of his other hand dug into my ribs. As if warning me. *That’s cute.*

I chewed. Gnawed. Bit without mercy.

From the sharp changes in the cadence of his breathing, he wasn’t hating it.

“Harder,” he growled.

That single command shot straight to my bones. I bit into him, worrying the skin and muscle as my insides convulsed.



“Ah, what a good girl. I’m going to give you every. Last. Drop.” He pulled his shoulder away sharply, moving out of my reach. “Ask me for it, Lennox. Ask *me*—the man who’s going to give you the best orgasm of your life.”

I screamed in outrage.

The vampire tsked his tongue. “Eloquent, but not my name.”

“No, I’d rather starve,” I ground out. My pussy clenched in protest, sobbing at my declaration.

With a purely animalistic roar, the vampire pulled back. Empty—I was empty! He braced a fist on either side of my neck. Pleasure, it was right there! I panted, glaring daggers at him. Was this it? Was this how I died? Of orgasm denial.

“Is it so hard?” he snarled. That hot breath skated over me. “Are you really going to prolong this torment?”

Against every fiber of my being, I did the one thing I couldn’t do with anyone else. I submitted. “Cato, give it back.”

The words were a match. Cato thrust forward and buried himself deep inside, an explosion of carnality. He was rough, fucking me straight back to an orgasm. “I want to hear your screams. Come, bellissima. Scream for me. Scream!”

That was all it took. An internal chain reaction fired. The muscles clenched rhythmically as the delicious pleasure pulsed from my core. It spread like wildfire as the orgasm consumed me—body and soul.

Head thrown back, I screamed my release into the blackness.

With a violent thrust, Cato jerked and pushed deeper than before. There he stopped, body taut above me. The hardened muscles of his frame were clenched tight.

Thunderous rumbles broke from his chest. The predator, taking the kill.

The moment stretched on and on. I clung to him. It didn’t matter in this moment what we were. He was the rock, and I

couldn't let go. Some distant part of me realized that it might just be the same for him.

In the wake of pleasure, I didn't allow my brain to come back online. It would eventually. But I didn't want this spoiled. Basking in the glow, perfect clarity struck. I wanted more. More Cato. Not because he was a vampire. Because he was the only male who could ever make my body feel this way. I'd known it for a long time. Now that I'd stopped fighting it, it was all clear.

*Oh, shit....*



## Chapter 36 – The Predator

Sex with Lennox was a drug. Not a comparison; it was the real thing, and I was an addict. One hit, that was all it took.

This whole time, I'd resisted this pull, the only thing that would cross a line. I'd not kissed her mouth. In the midst of the high that was fucking her senseless, I didn't want to lose myself. A kiss could be dominant, as the ones I'd shared with her already proved. But a kiss could also be damnation. With the chaos swirling through me, I couldn't risk the latter.

Coming down from the high, I remained nestled in her. That tight little cunt of hers pulsed rhythmically around my dick. Each convulsion was a vise that felt like ecstasy. And although they were slowing, I wasn't ready to be done.

Neither was my dick.

I leaned down and brushed a kiss across her forehead, hoping it would be enough to quiet the temptation for more. "I think I like you being my guest, *meus parvus nox*."

Lennox huffed in frustration, jerking her body. "Playing with Latin won't win you brownie points."

"I don't need them." I let her pull away, let her think she was in charge. That sweet spike of victory would flood her veins.

The next second, I rolled her over.

"Get off me!" she shouted.

I squished her to the mattress, my damp cock lying heavy between our bodies, nestled against her ass. It twitched eagerly of its own accord. "No."

She bucked and jerked.

Moving my weight to the side, I let her think she was winning. One day, she would learn. *She's never getting away.*

I grabbed the zip ties, already linked together, from between the mattress and the frame. Obviously, she hadn't searched the room thoroughly before she came upstairs—

hours ago. It was short work to tug her arms under her bosom and zip them together.

Her sharp inhale was music to my ears.

“You’re mine, beautiful. Don’t ever forget that.” I bent down, brushing the hair off her cheek. Drawing a deep breath, I let her scent wash over me. She smelled *ssooo* good.

“You monster,” she seethed, head pressed firmly against the mattress.

“That’s exactly what you asked for. You didn’t want a gentle, timid prince. You wanted the one who goes bump in the night.”

“And I had my fun,” she interrupted. “Now get off me.”

“Oh, but Lennox, we’re not even close to finished.” To emphasize my words, I rocked my hips. The motion rubbed my stiff cock against her flesh. “No, I won’t. First, because neither of us wants that. And second, you need to learn some manners, *bella donna*.”

“How the hell are you still hard?” she gasped, much of the bite disappearing from her voice.

I chuckled. “Because, little huntress, I’ve caught you, and I’m not done fucking you.”

“Well, that’s very nice. But I’m done,” she said with all the dignity she could muster.

“Lies, Lennox, those are lies.” I rose, skating my hands along her sides.

The huntress made to move, but I clamped my fingers around her hips, dragging her into me.

“Do I need to put those behind your back?” I threatened. “I offered you the consideration of bracing yourself. Don’t throw my generosity back into my face.”

Her cry of outrage was fucking decadent. “You brute!”

I rubbed myself along her ass, reaching one hand under to stroke her pussy. She was slick with moisture. If she was

behaving herself, I would have licked it reverently. Oh, to taste the intoxication that was our lust. “You expected different?”

“No, not really,” she seethed.

“Hmm,” I murmured. “It’s a good thing I’m not some gentleman. And if you quiet down, I’ll show you exactly why.”

I could *sense* the war raging internally. She wanted to refuse me. Fighting was her nature—as was mine. Like called to like.

When I was certain she wasn’t going to continue the argument, I bent down to press a kiss against the smooth flesh of her ass. All the while my fingers had been rubbing gently the sensitive bundle of nerves. I took my time, marking her body. Claiming it as mine. As I pulled back, I brought my hand away as well.

Lennox whimpered.

I grinned, vicious and victorious. Not that she could see. I aligned myself with her opening, and in one powerful thrust, sank into her sweet cunt. Her moan was the most beautiful of symphonies. I caught the exact notes, memorizing their cadence and pitch. A sweet crescendo to the melody already playing in the back of my mind.

“Such a good girl, taking every inch of my cock.” Both hands planted on her hips, I pulled back and snapped my own hips into her.

Stars danced in the dark.

It was as if this huntress was made for me. We fit together perfectly. That realization had other implications, ones I wasn’t ready to face. Not with the details of our situation still hanging precariously in the balance.

Not with what I’d done while she slept and the ritual blade.

A ruthless bubble welled inside me. Lennox was mine, in every way that mattered now. There was just the one minor detail that she didn’t know anything about yet.

“I hate you,” she hissed, flexing her pelvis. “I hate what you’re doing to me.”

“No,” I corrected, quickening the pace. “You hate how much you like it.”

Lennox snarled. Just because the sound was in a feminine tone didn’t make it any less menacing. More so, in fact. She wasn’t a being to be trifled with. Her wildness and ferocity could rend a man from limb to limb, all while he lost himself to the worship of her body.

I kneaded the flesh of her ass under my hand, pinching and pushing. When she finally let out a moan of pleasure, I continued. Sliding my finger up and down her crack, I made her stiffen. The spicy scent of fear wafted from her. I drank it in.

“Has anyone touched you here before, little huntress?”

“No,” she rasped. “And if you do, I’ll geld you in your sleep.”

Curious, I asked, “Just how do you plan to accomplish that?”

“I’ll bite.”

“Tear it clean off?”

“Yes,” she hissed.

Sliding my slick cock from her until just the tip remained, I rubbed some her wetness up the back. “I won’t—because I believe you. But I swear to you, one of these days, you’re going to beg for it.”

“Never!”

I only laughed. Even to my ears it sounded like a villain’s cackle.

I buried myself to the hilt, still rubbing my thumb against her ass. But I was true to my promise. I didn’t pop that cherry. Not tonight. Instead, after a few minutes, I grabbed her hips again, and fucked her mercilessly into the abyss.





## Chapter 37 – Lennox

Every muscle in my body was deliciously sore. I woke with a start but lay still to assess every detail. The space beside me was cold. It seemed I was alone in the subterranean room. The bathroom light filtered through the crack, but there was no movement in there. After minutes of waiting, I finally stumbled from the bed to fix my screaming bladder.

I confirmed that I was alone and sat quickly to take care of business. Groaning, I realized how desperately I needed a shower. Taking the hand towel, I wet the edge and did my best to clean between my legs. It was better than nothing. The ache might be the good kind, the fully sated kind, but equally strong was the fierce embarrassment.

The moment I left this space, my nocturnal tryst would haunt me.

*Technically, it was daylight when he blew your mind.*

My forehead dropped against the porcelain counter. I wanted to bitch slap the little freak in my head.

The one drop of solace was that the vampire didn't seem the boastful type. Not that I actually had any evidence to support that theory. Just because he'd been silent and stoic while under our knives, didn't mean he wasn't a loudmouth amongst his own kind.

I snapped my head up and looked at myself in the mirror. Other than needing a shower, the woman staring back at me was powerful and put together. The kind of woman who could use this chance with the vampire to discover his secrets—and the secrets of the New Orleans vampires.

A shiver of delight raced through me.

This vampire thought he was keeping me alive for some purpose. Well, it would come back to bite him in the ass. *I will be your doom, Cato.*

Smiling uncontrollably, I scrubbed my fingers through my limp hair and splashed water on my face. The key would be to

act pissed off. If I was too upbeat, it would only give it away. As I did a crappy job of trying to clean myself with the few supplies in the canvas bag, I got all the smiles out of my system and clamped down on the smug, victorious thoughts. They would never see me coming.

The fresh clothes felt good. Or would have, if it wasn't for my grungy skin.

"I need a shower," I hissed at my reflection. The test worked. I sounded convincing to my own ears.

Leaving the bathroom, I tried the door. Unlocked. It was such a taunt. I was free to move about, but it only served to show the vampire's agenda.

Upstairs, the café was busy. I gulped, running a hand self-consciously through my hair. The deodorant-antiperspirant helped, but any supernatural with a highly developed sense of smell would detect the grimy scents coming off my skin.

The walk to the front of the café seemed shorter this time. Whatever magic contracted and expanded the bookstore was something I'd never read about. But yesterday, the dining area hadn't been visible as I emerged from the lair. Today, it was right there, two shelves down. The ceiling—I flicked a glance up. Still impossibly vaulted, albeit incredibly narrow.

No one sat at the long bar top that overlooked the barista's domain. I pulled out a rotating stool and sat gingerly on it.

"Morning, sunshine," Robert chirped.

"Morning," I said with a wince. "Don't you mean...." I looked around for a time but couldn't find one. It was dark out, however. "What time is it? Doesn't the shop close at 2 a.m.?"

"It's 12:03, so yes, good morning." Robert lifted a platter from the back counter and brought it to the bar top. "If you start to cause a scene, Viv will have no choice but to remove you to the basement. Now then, unpleasantries out of the way, do you want a coffee or tea this morning?"

"I would rather have answers," I said, sugary sweet.

Robert propped his elbows on the counter and leaned onto his hands. “I might have some of those, cutie. But only for you.”

“What are you?” I started.

“Gorgeous.”

I rolled my eyes. “Should have known.”

He grinned. It was positively feline.

A shifter maybe? “Did you drug my tea yesterday so I’d sleep?”

“Drug? Such an ugly word,” he frowned. “I gave you a relaxing brew with herbs that coax the state of sleep.” He shrugged carelessly. “It’s one of our most requested teas.”

“I didn’t request it,” I snapped in the friendliest of tones.

“Mr. Pointy-Teeth did.” That was most definitely the smile described as being used by the Cheshire Cat. “Now, if there’s nothing else, pick something to eat. Another order from your fanged friend.”

“Not my friend.” But I was already busy looking at the beautiful spread in the glass case beside the cash register. There were delicate pastries, flakey with baked sugar granules. On the other side was a charcuterie dream. It could have been breakfast food. Or it could have been something fit for a princess. I didn’t even have to order it. In a tawny flurry, Robert plucked it from the case. The barista set a linen napkin and wooden utensils down beside the platter. It was just another way this business was ecofriendly.

“I don’t have money to pay,” I murmured.

Robert shook his head, long dark blond hair going wild. “It goes on pointy’s account. He requested that only the finest foods be available, so we racked up the tab.”

“So you’re in on this kidnap—”

Robert held up a finger of warning. “Careful what you say. The walls have ears here, and that kind of language will get you thrown out. Or...under.”

I wanted to fuss. It was so damn tempting.

But this food on the other hand....

“Well, if we’re racking up a tab, I’ll take a cappuccino, please.”

“You got it,” the barista said with a nod.

“He could at least have sequestered me to a place that had a shower,” I grumbled as I selected a pillow-soft, miniature croissant with chocolate melting out the sides from the platter.

Robert gaped. “You’re not in a shower suite?”

“No.” I pinned him with a look, pastry not quite to my lips. “How many suites are there here?”

His eyes twinkled. “Books & Brews has many, many secrets, little human. They’re not all for knowing.”

“Clearly.” I bit into the croissant. Pure heaven filled my mouth. When I ate the bite, I denied myself more because there were a few questions I still needed answers to. “I guess I’m here for the foreseeable future?”

“Mhmm,” Robert murmured. “Vivian did say you could go upstairs and sit on the back balcony overlooking the gardens.”

“There’s an upstairs?” I breathed.

He pointed. Craning my neck around, I saw the impossibly high ceiling and the first balcony past all the towering rows of shelves. From this angle, I couldn’t see an upper one.

“How big is this place?” I gaped. It hadn’t been that high before, right?

“Big enough,” Robert chuckled. “But go up the stairs, and any of the cases will lead to the balcony. Then head to the teal door. Not the blue or cerulean. Those you’ll find locked. But the teal one will lead to an outer balcony that you’ve been granted access to use. Not without considerable bargaining between pointy and Viv, mind you.” He added the last with emphasis.

“So don’t try anything stupid.”

“Exactly! Now, let me make you that cappuccino.”

“Thanks,” I beamed and took a large bite from my pastry.

“Excuse me, have you seen my friend?” a rough, masculine voice barked behind me. “She hasn’t been answering my calls, and I’m getting kind of worried about her.”

My heart jumped.

Spinning around on the stool, I grinned at the werewolf. Hand raised to cover my full mouth, I garbled out, “Hi, there!”

Only...his smile dropped. Those black eyes raked up and down.

I swallowed the suddenly lumpy food, horror welling up inside. “What?”

“You smell like him,” Svet said flatly.

Any attempt to hide what I was thinking failed spectacularly. “That’s what happens when one gets captured and is forced to share a studio apartment for the day. You end up smelling like your captor.”

Svet narrowed his eyes. “Sharing an apartment?”

My cheeks heated. He knew. He had to! Not only was he an ancient werewolf, but he was a male. They all *knew* things. The evidence was damning, and it would be easy to surmise exactly what we’d been doing all day long.

What I didn’t count on was his chivalry. Svet wrestled down the emotions on his face. He didn’t tease me or do any of the crass friend things like asking how the sex was. Instead, he stepped forward with a marked intention.

“Do you want to leave, friend?” he asked, the name free of teasing.

Robert set down the half-frothed milk and rushed over. “Bra, that lingo doesn’t fly here. I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

Svet shot him a look without turning another muscle. The glare was frightening. A little shiver of anticipation raced

down my spine. This friendship thing might not be that bad.

“Dude,” Svet drawled. “This isn’t a surfer town. Quit being a fucking poser, you twat.”

“This isn’t an act,” Robert snarled. “But if you can’t play nice, get out.”

Svet marched right up to the bar and gripped the edge of the refurbished top. “Want to dance, pretty boy?”

In light of my dire situation, there was nothing to do but laugh at their pissing contest. It was like some schoolyard brawl. I chuckled and finished my croissant while they shot insults back and forth. The laughter died a moment later as the scary female vampire pushed into the bookstore.

She was the same female I’d seen in here a few days ago. The same who’d come to my rescue as I laid dying in the abandoned parking lot. The vampiress with a daylight ring.

A mother who’d killed her own infant to be granted the ability to walk under the light of the sun.

Like many supernatural species, conception wasn’t easy for vampires. Most weren’t monstrous enough to consider infanticide. It was a minor redeeming quality that they viewed their young as sacred. But because they were vile by nature, sucking blood to live, individuals like this female chose to slaughter an innocent babe for personal gain rather than cherish the tiny life she’d been given. In order to create the ring, it had to be a babe, born and living for a full turn of the sun. The mother or father had to plucked the still beating heart from the chest cavity for a practitioner of magic to imbue a ring with daylight. Vile magics like that—magics that distorted the laws of nature—had costs associated with them. Some apparently made the payment.

My hatred for this vampiress was only beaten by my disgust.

If the energy in the room was any indication, I wasn’t the only one who felt that way. The monster’s presence sucked the very warmth out of the space. If I blew out a breath, I would have put money that the frozen condensation would be visible.

Everyone, including Robert, changed their attitude, suddenly en garde. They busied themselves with anything and everything except looking at her. That is, everyone but the alpha standing next to me. Whatever strange sensation was coming off him was enough to catch my attention. I shot him a sideways look.

Svet's eyes blazed.

He leaned back, elbows and spine braced against the bar top, and then...smiled. Smiled at the monster! The woman who'd killed her own child to walk in the daylight.

"I still don't know what your name is, O beauty of the night, but that's okay—I've decided to call you mine." Svet smirked and jerked his chin in greeting.

A damn feather could have knocked me off my seat. How could he look at *her* and be stupid enough to think she was worth having!

The vampiress bared her teeth and an honest-to-Fate snarl ripped from her mouth.

"Where's your master?" I taunted. "Or did he send you to do his dirty work?"

"You'd better watch your mouth, human," she sneered. "I won't hesitate to hit you. The consequences would be worth it."

"Likewise," I retorted with as much venom as I could pack into that single word.

My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. All that sleep and no food. I was starving.

The vampiress wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Humans."

"At least I don't force blood from my victims for sustenance," I snapped back.

She was on me in a flash. Snarling form right in my face, she grabbed my hair and pulled it back to expose my neck.

But the bamboo fork from my breakfast setting was pressed to her chest in warning.

It wasn't like bamboo was the best wood to choose from, but we both knew it could be effective if wielded properly. I would only have one shot to plunge it through the material of her shirt and penetrate the flesh between the ribs. I sent up a prayer to the gods that it didn't shatter first.

"I take what I want, when I want it. That's what I am, you uppity bitch." She smelled fresh.

I hated her more for it.

"What you are is a monster," I spat back, pressing the tines purposely in the sheer fabric of her blouse.

"Now, now, ladies," Svet crooned. "We don't need this. There's enough of me for both of you," he added with a wink, which I caught from the corner of my eyes.

The vampiress shot him a look, her glare raking up and down his formidable frame. "I don't share."

An impressed look passed over Svet's too handsome face. "Good to know."

"Basta!" The harsh order snapped across the café. That voice held command, expected obedience. Which I'd been only too happy to deny him last night.

*Until he made you beg....*

Memory was a callous bitch.

A knot of uncertainty balled in my stomach, and I took my time looking to the front door of the bookstore. How was he going to play this? So long as I kept up a believable façade, it was all that mattered. He couldn't know what I was plotting.

"Adesso!" the vampire barked.

The vampiress snorted. "I bet you taste like shit, anyway."

She pushed me and took a healthy step back.

"I can assure you, she does not," the vampire murmured quietly. A smug grin curled on his lips.

Svet exploded from his seat. "Did he bite you without permission?"



“He can’t!” My words made no difference.

“She *begged* me.” The vampire prowled closer.

Svet gaped, while I shouted, “Did not!”

“What? Because a huntress can’t crave a vampire lord?” Cato scoffed. “Get over yourself, pup.”

“Can y’all discuss compromising details *any* louder?” Vivian exploded into the space. “I don’t have a silencing charm here, and while my customers are fine individuals, they do have their own agendas.”

This was all too much. The supernaturals were creating a semi-circle around me, bickering and arguing. I was the hunter, the being trained to end them. Yet they didn’t bat an eye at me. I needed to get away before I exploded. This situation hadn’t been covered in the academy, but all my combined training told me it would be a bloodbath. Without backup, the best course of action was to extract myself. I snatched the platter of food, slid the wooden knife discretely under it, and slipped away.

Or tried to.

Svet called after me as I bolted past him. The sound of his jogging echoed behind me even on the industrial carpeted floor that divided the bookstore from the café’s hardwood flooring. There was no way to outrun a werewolf, especially with a platter of food in my hand.

But it was the vampire who stepped out from between a cross section of the shelves to stop in front of my path. I pulled up short with a curse. Whereas my pulse beat wildly in my veins, this monster had the gall to look cool and collected.

And showered.

“Where are you going, Nox?” he coaxed, voice velvety with seduction.

White hot hatred flared to life. How dare he! What had passed between us was a forbidden fantasy in the dark. Nothing more. And yet, he’d thrown it in my face with the comment about my blood—which he’d not tasted!

*I will kill you.* I took a deep breath, burying the vow deep inside where it couldn't be blurted out. "Upstairs, where Vivian said I could sit on her balcony. Not that it's any of your damn business!"

A warm, yet terrible presence closed in behind me. "I'm serious, friend," Svet said quietly. "If you want out, I'll fight him. My pack is your sanctuary."

The vampire flashed fang, a crimson hue bleeding into the whiskey of his irises.

*Oh, fucking hells.* "Thanks, furball friend, but I'm going to take this fight myself."

"I can respect that." Svet's tone was still serious. "But I'm here if you need me."

"For that, I thank you," I said, snatching a bagel and then threw the platter of food into the vampire's ridiculously handsome face. The mess splattered everywhere. I sprinted backward, passing Svet as I raced away.

Vivian's shrill scream could have broken the windows.

*Oops.* Desecrating books was one of the few unpardonable sins. But, then again, I'd slept with a bloodsucker, so why not add another?

I ran through the bookstacks. The vampire wasn't chasing, perhaps unable to pass the fierce wall of wolf. Either way, I took advantage of the chaos to dash up the first staircase I found. Its appearance was sudden, right between a wall of books where I wouldn't have expected to find it. As I climbed, I heard a lupine roar echoed by the thunder of death. Above it all was the shrill commands of the ghost. While it would be a bloody and gruesome deathmatch between the vampire and werewolf, right now my money was on the ghost. This was her domain.

A veritable wonderland.

Proof that this place was ever-changing in size and scope, I glanced below and then as I looked back to where the tangerine door should be, I saw the teal one just beyond. It hadn't been there a moment ago. Whatever magic pulsed here,

I was curious to learn more. But also, if I was being honest, a protective instinct flared bright at the thought of spilling the secrets. I frowned as I crashed into the teal door. The need to protect this place didn't make sense.

Now was not the time to analyze it. Not with everything else happening.

The ornate brass knob turned under my touch, and the door cracked. I slipped through, shutting it tight. The cool whisper of the night wind brushed against my skin. One look beyond and all the breath left my body in a gasp.

This place was enchanting.

There was no other word for it. Basins of Greek fire blazed. Crushed stone scattered in sharp lines cut paths through the greenery. The sharp contrast between the fire's blaze and the dark shrouding the plants disguised the beauty of the individual flowers and bushes. Long grass billowed in the light breeze, and in the center stood a statue carved of marble. Two lovers, embracing with their sightless stare locked forever on their love.

Faced with the overwhelming beauty, I moved forward to brace myself on the balcony's stone rail. A tall wall built from a myriad of stones surrounded the space and towering cypress trees stood guard at intervals, peeping over the wall to the world beyond. The world I couldn't see.

*Oh, Fate.* The drop to the garden's path was a mere five feet, if even. But inside, the balcony had towered thirty feet above the books. This was more of that strange magic.

Forcing my brain to turn away from wondering about the awe-inspiring beauty before me, I clicked through the aspects of my reality. I ticked them off on my fingers.

I was a prisoner to a vampire.

I had a werewolf ready to go into battle for me.

The Guild likely thought I was dead. So if I simply reappeared, there would be no end of questions.

Especially since I'd killed my fellow hunters—who deserved it.

*I really need to bag a prize.*

Something flickered in my chest. It was more than discomfort. It was actual pain. I squinted at the garden. Why would the thought of bringing Cato and the other vampires to their knees make me feel this way? The creatures disgusted me. Look at the psychotic protégée! She wanted to eviscerate me, and if she was capable of murdering her own child in a ritualistic sacrifice, there was nothing sacred to her.

No, maybe it was the bastard who'd fucked my brains out. Cheeks flaming, I dropped my head into my hands.

*Oh, there's a bagel.* But even though the yeasty smell made my mouth water, I couldn't focus on it right now. I despised the vampire; he'd ruined my life. I wanted to bury a stake in his chest. But the thought of turning him over, that was silencing me. It had to be. Because the alternative was that I didn't want him to die, and *that* wasn't right. He was a monster. I killed monsters. Ergo, I couldn't let him live.

*He needs to be my kill.*

That was what upset me—the thought of another stealing my kill. I tore a bite off the bagel, repeating the conclusion to myself until I believed it.

Only, as I ran my tongue over my lips, the memory of his running down my throat sent a dark rush of pleasure through me. Holy shit, I'd slept with a vampire.

It was admittedly the best sex I'd ever had. The bagel stuck in my throat, and I coughed to clear the piece. Fate help me, what did I do! Never had the fantasy struck about being with a monster. I wasn't stupid like Marissa. Dear, sweet Marissa. To be caught in a secret relationship with a supernatural. It had never been something I wanted. Not until I met this vampire. And it wasn't even because he was a vampire! No...it was because he was the spitting image of the dark lover I'd always craved.

The one I'd dreamed about.

Until Cato began to star in the dreams. The faceless lover became a monster and turned the fantasy into a nightmare.

Why did he have to be a vampire? He couldn't have been an elite hunter? All suave, arrogant...and human?

I scrubbed my hands over my face. No one could ever know. Svet was a gentleman, and as he'd proven downstairs, he could protect my secret.

A knock sounded on the door behind me. The sound was pure dominance. I hoped it wasn't but knew it was *him* before I pulled it open. The vampire looked down at me, something fierce shifting through and darkening his amber eyes. He was twisting a signet ring on his left middle finger. It was solid gold, an emerald set in the stone. He hadn't been wearing it before.

"New daylight ring?" I sneered, while my brain told me it wasn't a blood ruby.

A shudder ran through his frame. "I would never do that."

I didn't want to believe him.

"How did you know I wouldn't run?" I asked, turning away so I didn't have to look at the monster.

The monster who my body burned for, even as the determination to kill him chanted through my mind.

"You wouldn't have gone far." He slid beside me. "The wards end at the back of the garden."

In that moment, the hatred grappled the lust. *The asshole!* I would kill him.



## Chapter 38 – The Predator

“Ooh, so I can be let out for fresh air. How considerate of you!” She was pissed.

I sighed. This was not how I’d imagined today would go. My appointment with Yves ran longer than it should have. He was all in a tizzy about the ball and wanted my opinion. Or so he’d said when he requested the audience. When I arrived, I quickly sensed the real reason. He’d hinted about an offer he was going to make me. In true courtly splendor, he planned to offer me a portion of the kingdom he longed to build if I broke with the Roman Court and pledged to him.

*More like help him secure his crown.* Carving out a new court came at high cost. My research showed that if anyone could do it, Yves had the resources. While I had no intentions of an alliance with him, I couldn’t help but be impressed.

My answer was due tomorrow at the ball. I had to think of a cunning way to avoid giving it or a gracious way to decline if it came to that.

And here Lennox was. Boiling mad and waiting for my answer.

I decided to show mercy. “None of this was what I planned. But my intentions have never changed. I want you to see this is for your own protection, Nox. I pray in time you do.”

“Whatever deity you make supplications to had better be powerful,” she huffed before tearing off another chunk of bagel.

Clever little thing. So quick with that tongue of hers. Perhaps testing it, despite the sharp cut, would be worth it. Perhaps my dick would dull its razor edges. The risk was tempting.

“The Guild will come down on you hard,” she added after swallowing the bite of food.

How much to tell her was always a careful balance. “Your tracking glyphs have been disabled.”

The bagel hung suspended from her mouth, fingers barely touching it as the shock from my words slammed into her.

“Robert is talented, as is his coworker, Ilene. No one is coming for you, for that reason...and for others.” I paused, the strong arguments shooting through my mind.

“What did you do?” she demanded, each word enunciated slowly as she lowered the remainder of her breakfast.

“Why don’t you finish that, and then we’ll talk properly.”

She threw the bagel over the rail. It fell into the garden, and I flinched inwardly. Vivian was going to flay me in my sleep.

“Finished. Talk.” Lennox fisted her hands.

“I saved you.”

“Unlikely.”

“There is at least one other force within the Guild who is after you, Lennox. While Captain and Gage’s attack wasn’t part of that, Blake’s presence was. It was only a matter of time before your enemy struck again.”

“Who are they?” she interrupted.

I let out a short breath. “I still don’t know. And believe me, I’m doing everything in my power to find out.”

“Why?”

*Because...you’re mine.* The place deep in my chest that I couldn’t define pulsed at the admission. In the distance, an ethereal symphony began to play. The haunting strain wove in and out of hearing, but I knew it began and ended with Lennox. What transpired the other night was sacred. The act of consummating it during the day solidified the bond. That place in my chest held a thread that led directly to this huntress. I found that I didn’t loath the course of events, no matter how unplanned.



I answered her. “Shouldn’t you be asking instead *how* I’ve gone about protecting you?”

“I’ll get to that,” she said with fierce intention.

“Hmm, well, my reasons are my own, and you haven’t earned them.” I crossed my arms over my chest, bracing myself against her outburst. “What you need to know is that as far as the Guild is concerned, you’re dead. The fortress here was destroyed as were the bodies of all the hunters. Besides Vivian, there was only one other street boss who knew you existed, and now he also thinks you’re dead. So, when we attend his ball tomorrow night, it behooves us both to keep your identity a secret. Part of the reason Vivian was so upset was that we were carelessly throwing out details that could show that she’s hiding a fugitive from one of the other street bosses. Our host is a vampire, so he’ll see you as something to take. I won’t let that happen,” I added with a wry laugh.

“Oh, and what are we telling the boss I am?” Lennox asked imperiously.

*My blood mate.* Instead, I said, “My blood slave.”

The word was vile on my tongue. It didn’t fit. A filthy title at best, but to give it to my huntress, even as a lie, was despicable. Especially when the tempestuous beauty was so much more.

“Never. You might as well kill me now!” Lennox exploded. Closing the distance, she shoved on my chest. It was like a sparrow trying to topple a rooted oak.

*I hate it too, little huntress.* “We’re late for the spa package I booked for you.”

Another thing Vivian had torn me a new one for, letting Lennox get so gross. But I hadn’t booked a larger, more luxurious suite here, because it had never been my intention to use such a space. Our contract stated I was in a studio that had an attached bathroom. It was all I’d needed in the beginning. I was hesitant to break with the ghostly proprietress, because there was no guarantee she would sign a new contract,

especially given the chaos we'd caused. And we couldn't sign something new until the first was dissolved.

No, better to keep the hovel and find somewhere else to pamper my prize.

"I'm not going." Lennox turned and put her back to me.

I pursed my lips. "We're going to get you cleaned up, find a gown at the fae boutique, and then I would like very much to have a dinner with you before the sun comes up."

She rounded on me. "And how do you expect to accomplish that? I'll scream and betray you."

The last card pulsed in my hand. I hated to play it. It would only drive yet another wedge between us. But it couldn't be helped.

"Because the food Robert prepared for you will hold your tongue and make it unable to speak of what's transpired here. The magic is tricky, but he's an expert potions master." I stepped close, towering over her. "And if you don't get your sexy little ass downstairs and out the front door right this minute, I'll have him dose you with another potion. One that will make you a pliable doll to do with what I please."

Lennox blazed.

It would have been beautiful if it wasn't directed at me.

Fuck it—it was beautiful regardless of the target.

"Careful, vamp. Us slaves have a way of rebelling and slaughtering our masters—if you don't believe me, read up on what happened in Rome. You were alive to see it, weren't you?" She shouldered past me and pushed into the interior of the bookstore.

I glared at the heavens. "Give me patience."



## Chapter 39 – Lennox

The list of treatments the director confirmed with my vampire captor was extraordinary.

“Um, no thank you,” I interjected. “I don’t want any sugar or wax or sheers near my vag.”

The human spa manager kept a professional veneer. The aestheticians, a female with fae blood and a male who was some kind of dual nature, hid their smirks.

The vampire gave me a cold look. Which I met with a fierce defiance. He might get to order me around, screw up my entire life, and keep me prisoner. All that served to fuel a higher purpose for me. Not a big deal. But sculpting my body? I drew the line at that.

“That will be all,” the vampire clipped out. He turned toward the exit, not even acknowledging my outburst.

I wanted to run after him and hit him hard right between the shoulder blades.

But the director was already extending her arm for me to proceed in the opposite direction. The attendants rushed to spread the double doors open. With an exasperated huff, I moved.

Once through the doors, a mad desire to turn seized me. I did. And met that molten amber gaze. The vampire stared at me over his shoulder, and I froze in place.

What was that shifting through his eyes? Concern. Did I need to be concerned? No, that wasn’t it. As I struggled to read it, he tore his gaze away and left.

Once through those doors, I was stripped. Clothing, hair, skin, nails—it all came off in one shape or form. Some of the treatments hurt like a bitch. The laser on my dark circles was the worst. I bolted off their table. It was deceiving as hell. Curl under the warm blankets, have my hands massaged, and then *zap!* The laser pierced on my face.

I refused to lie back down until they took the machine out of the room.

When it came to the body hair removal, I gave in after a promise from the fae girl that it wasn't too bad. She was right. And the silky feel of my underarms was actually worth the fuss. I would find another way to get back at the vampire for his domineering attitude.

Sipping an infused water that had shimmering flakes of moonlight floating in the glass, my feet soaked in a hot pool of water while the electric chair worked the kinks out of my shoulders.

"This was dropped off for you, miss," the male attendant said, bringing in a cardboard box with elegant gilt details.

The domineering prick had the gall to send me flowers? Unbelievable!

Pissed off energy bubbled through me. Through gritted teeth, I managed to thank the attendant and then dismiss him.

He paused at the door. "I wouldn't have brought it to you, the director wouldn't approve. Except, when the alpha of the Blackwater Pack asks a favor, it's always a good idea to comply."

"The alpha?" *Svet!*

"Yeah," the man said, sheepishly pulling at the back of his neck. "He's hard to say no to."

"Very true—hey, this might be rude, but are you a wolf?"

His eyes widened but he shook his head. "No, ma'am. I'm an avian shifter."

"Ah, I see."

"And you're human?" he fished.

I grinned. "Yep, and enslaved to a powerful vampire."

That was enough to send the skittish fellow out the room.

I snatched the small box off the table. Lifting the lid revealed the most delicate yellow rose. *Friendship*. I smiled. It

might not be what I ever thought I wanted, but it was good to have friends.

I pulled the flower out, intending to lift it to my nose and inhale. But as my fingers touched it, the petals fell, the stem opened, and the whole flower turned into a sheet of paper.

The first line stilled my hand.

**Friend, don't touch!**

**Your touch will turn this message into ash.**

**I'm writing this way, thanks to the skill of the newest pack member. Bethany has pledged to the pack and will—**

**Oh, but that's a tale for another time. I have limited space to tell you, but Bethany has heard that you'll attend the vampire king's ball. It's a secure event, but if you want to be rescued, we'll do it there. Everything will be ready. Meet Bethany in the attic after midnight and you'll make your escape. I trust a huntress as clever as you can manage to slip away to the attic without drawing attention. But if Mr. Bitey follows, she'll have a potion handy to ensure your escape.**

**See you soon, I hope.**

**Your friend, S.**

I touched the paper, and the note turned to dust. Setting the lid back on, I put the box on the side table and resumed sipping my water.

This was better than I could have hoped. Discover the identity of the top local vampire, find a popular lair, and then bring the information to the Guild to set them on the hunt. A hunt that would culminate with my stake in Cato's monstrous heart.

It was good to have friends, indeed.

The director chose that moment to come in. Her gaze snapped to the box. "What is that?"

“A box of garbage that was delivered as a practical joke. Please see that it is removed,” I instructed.

Her brow furrowed, but she obeyed with an apology. The others came in to begin the extravagant mani-pedi combo. Black nails, sharpened to points, at my request. When they were done, I secretly adored the glamor of my hands and feet.





## Chapter 40 – The Predator

With a growl, I punched the cell phone's screen with my thumb while I turned the steering wheel in an elegant arc. I pulled the luxury sedan to the front of the boutique. The stylist, a feline shifter, part panther and part tiger, slid away from the window. We'd told her the time, and she had reserved the entire studio at great cost. What she didn't know was that I would have paid double.

Exiting from the backseat, Kelda moved to the front door and pushed into the studio. When she reappeared a moment later with a curt nod, I unbuckled Lennox. She gaped at me. I swallowed the smirk. Unsettling her was fun. Too bad she had a way of making it crumble.

Moving around the car at my top speed, I still wasn't quick enough to catch the door. I grunted, flinging the door open harder than I should have. Lennox purposefully ignored my outburst. She pulled herself out of the car, not looking at my offered hand. *Enough of this!* I snatched her wrist, digging my fingers into her flesh in a bruising grip.

A soft whimper of surprise escaped her lips, but she tugged. Always fighting—fuck, this woman was something else.

I snapped my arm and pulled her into my side. “Do you want to play rough, little one?”

Her breath caught in her throat. The noise was so soft, it was hard to say if anyone else would hear it. She tipped her head up and refused to meet my eye.

“Fine, play silent. I'll only draw the screams out of you later,” I chuckled, pulling her along into the fashion studio.

“Bully,” she hissed. “Does it make you feel good pushing people around? Especially women?”

With a flick of my wrist, I pushed her against the glass window. The frame groaned under my touch, the microscopic sound a red warning that I was close to the destructive edge. It

was easy work to pin her body, capture her wrists, and transfer them to one hand. I slid my grip around her throat, dragging the tip of my finger against her pulse.

“Like this?” I growled. “Is this all you think me capable of, Nox?”

“Yes!” she seethed.

“Very well, if we’re pulling back the veil, then brutal honesty is called for.” I drug my fingers back into her scalp, pulling her hair tight and tipping her head to expose her throat.

Fangs extended, I bent over her.

Lennox gasped and struggled. It was the final death struggle, something I was very familiar with.

“You want honesty, I’ll give it to you.” I pressed my pelvis against her thigh. My erection ground against her muscled flesh. “You at my mercy turns me on so fucking much.”

I lathed my tongue over her skin, the oil soaked into her skin flavoring her in a deceptive manner. I didn’t like it.

“Monster—this is all you’ll ever be!”

“Yes, bella, I’m a monster.” I sucked the delicate skin between my lips, pulling hard. The prick of my fangs grazed her skin but didn’t break it. The damn locket made my canines pulse with unbearable pain. “But you’re a dirty little liar. You put on this mask that you don’t want to venture into the dark. That you don’t fucking *crave* to be dominated and destroyed.”

“I don’t.”

Letting go of her scalp and gripped her chin hard, forcing her to face me. “Look at me,” I menaced. Not a coward, she did. “I’m here to reveal all your lies. You’ve been so thoroughly brainwashed that it makes you reek of bullshit. Beneath that holier-than-thought-art mask, you’re nothing but a filthy little monster as well.”

“I hate you.”

“Good, you’ll fuck me better because of it,” I snapped, releasing my hold on her and stepping back.

“Never again.”

“Don’t make promises you won’t keep.” I gestured to the door. “Get your ass inside.”

I was fuming. This woman knew how to push every button. I should have realized it sooner, but around her, I lost control. That wasn’t okay.

Lennox moved inside. I remained breathing hard on the sidewalk for ten breaths. And then I followed. Racks of dresses and women’s clothing lined the space. Artful displays were meant to catch attention.

The designer burst out of her room at my entrance. Like a gods-damned bird, all plumed out for a grand entrance. *Disgusting.*

“Lilly, this is Lennox, my guest.” I waved my hands over the garments. “I need her to look like a gods damned queen tomorrow night. Formal attire only.”

The spa had done an incredible job styling her hair, but they hadn’t changed the color or length as I’d instructed. I wouldn’t have them ruin my favorite thing to touch.

Lily swept a gesture. “This way please, ma’am.”

I pushed back through the door. “I’ll be back in ten.”

This time, I didn’t look back at the huntress. The place in my chest ached, the thread that bound us pulsed miserably. Fighting with Lennox was inevitable, but perhaps this time had been too far.

Once outside, walking the sidewalk in no particular direction, I pushed the call button and Yves picked up seconds later. “What the hell? Screening my call?” the would-be king teased. The bite, however, wasn’t disguised.

“I was driving,” I ground out.

“It’s called Bluetooth, dumbass.”

I let out a breath. This upstart new how to push my buttons too. I liked the youngling; his brass and bold outlook reminded

me very much of myself. But I'd grown cautious with age, and he hadn't yet.

"Is this how you treat your subjects?" I hedged the inevitable.

Yves snorted. "Do I demand you drop everything at my beck and call? Sure, why not. The great Cato di Menocchio, scourge of the Apennine."

"Is there something you needed?" I forced my voice to a sickly-sweet tone.

"There is," he responded in kind.

The night was dark and the streets empty. I kept my senses open as I continued to walk at a quick pace. I huffed. Time ticked by. The soft glow of streetlamps illuminated the pavement, casting elongated shadows that stretched across the deserted sidewalks. Weaving between the pools of light, I grew tired of this political game and ground out, "Any day now, Yves."

"A stunning creature by the name of Miranda arrived in town. She paid me a call and somehow got herself invited to the ball."

I stopped short. My heart thundered in my chest, the pain pulses like a boxer's punches. The distant hum of a passing car echoed faintly through the stillness, punctuated by the repetitive chirp of a hidden cricket. Otherwise, the night was silent save for my rapid pulse.

"This isn't going to be a problem for you, is it?" Yves asked coolly. "I can send her away, you know. Prevent her from interfering with my esteemed vassal's life here in the Crescent City Court."

"Tempting," I breathed. The only problem was, he hadn't carved out a court yet.

"I'm serious, Menocchio. I won't tolerate the Roman Court interfering here."

Her presence might just force my hand to join with the Creole King. I refused to be backed into a corner, however.

Not when I could still make moves.

“Thank you for telling me. We’ll chat tomorrow night.”

Yves snorted again. “Alright, have a good rest of your night.”

I disconnected the call. A warning shouted loud and keen through my mind. I looked around reflectively. But...Miranda wasn't here. It wasn't her style. Surprising me at a ball, attempting to seduce me, and yammering about the bargain our parents struck back in 1073 A.D. That was her style. I rolled my eyes. For a thousand years we'd danced this waltz.

I was fucking tired of it.

With a snarl, I rounded and marched back down the street to the designer's studio. The air carried a subtle blend of coolness and the lingering warmth of the day, intermingling with the delicate scent of blooming flowers from the nearby park. It should have been a perfect, southern summer night. But the tranquility of the main street was lost.

With a bang, I barreled inside the boutique. Kelda's head snapped in my direction. Her fingers dropped a swath of fabric.

I stopped in my tracks, gaping at her. “Were you just looking at that—that dress?”

Kelda wrinkled her face. “You know I would never be caught dead in a gown.”

“Which is why I find the fact that you were caressing one odd.”

“Drop it, okay!” Kelda threw her arms in the air and stomped back to her post at the door.

I moved to the dress, pulling it from the single hook where it dominated the room. It was black with embroidered silver details on the empire waist, and the sleeves were off the shoulder. The skirts fell to the ground, higher in the front to show off the legs and long in the back. All that material would flow in the night. The perfect dress of an avenging angel—my protégée.

I walked past the dress, intending to have Lilly box it up. Kelda would only wear something like that for herself. She wasn't the kind to dress up for another. But...who'd brought out the long-buried femme fatale in her? *I'll have to watch her carefully.*

When I pushed into the private viewing room, I caught the designer and Lennox animatedly talking about the cut of a dress. Apparently, it was not to my beauty's liking.

Our eyes met in the mirror.

Something electric passed between our gazes.

The fight was high in the huntress. I might be a monster, prowling the shadows, but she was equally as powerful in her own way. It was enchanting to witness.

"I agree, that corseted bodice will never do," I said without breaking contact.

Lennox's eyes narrowed, but she didn't comment.

"Let's try another," Lilly insisted.

Finally tearing her gaze away, Lennox left to the curtained dressing space. I sat in the cushioned armchair. Legs sprawled out, I mused over the newest turn of events. Lilly pulling the next gown off the rack caught my attention. I scanned the selections. There was a discard pile in through the back door. Beyond it, several poles hung heavy with selections. Scanning the array, I saw something on a mannequin, shooting to my feet to grab it.

Silver. Made for a goddess.

I strode back in and caught Lilly. "This one."

Her eyes lit up. "That was for a—"

"No. You'll make another for them." I ran my fingers over the sparkling material. "This is ours."

She took it, and I heard the sharp inhale from Lennox through the curtain. I smirked.

"Kelda, come in here, please," I called out toward the far end of the studio.

My protégée came. “We’re going to have trouble,” I told her and sank back into the armchair. “Di Primavera came to town.”

A sickening shade of green spread over Kelda’s fair complexion. She looked positively awful. “That bitch never gives up.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Let me stake her.”

I snorted, the idea tempting. “It would be unwise. Someday you may, but I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for now.”

Kelda groaned.

“We’re fine here,” I added. “Go into the city and *find* me that duchess. I need to know everything.”

“Don’t you mean uppity whore?” Kelda mocked. But we shared a look. “How perfect the timing seems to work that the moment Yves wants to pledge she arrives?”

The realization jolted me. “I didn’t think of that.”

Kelda cut a look over my shoulder. “You’ve been otherwise engaged.”

I turned. Time stopped, and for a fleeting moment, the world ceased its motion to accommodate the huntress’s entrance. Her presence radiated a captivating aura, demanding the attention of everyone in the room, yet for me, it was as if Lennox was the only figure in existence. The gown, a cascade of liquid silver, flowed gracefully with each step, trailing behind her like a comet’s tail. Every movement she made was a delicate dance, an ethereal symphony that would command the gaze of all who beheld her. There was no way to predict she was as deadly as she was beautiful.

My eyes were locked on her, unable to tear away from the spellbinding sight before me. Her rich, brown hair cascaded in gentle waves down her back, catching the light and casting a halo around her. Her eyes, a shade of deep and captivating emerald, held a magnetic energy that seemed to draw me closer, inviting me into their depths.

Every detail, from the sensual curve of her lips to the inviting way she approached, etched into my memory. Here was the true predator. It was as though the huntress had cast a spell upon me, and I was powerless to resist. She could sink a stake in me, and I would be unable to fight her off.

“This dress,” I said, voice husky and gravel to my own ears.

Lennox smirked. “Yes, sir. Whatever you say. Your blood slave obeys.”

It was a shot, straight and true, directly striking my heart. “It’s an act,” I rasped.

There was no way anyone with eyes could mistake Lennox for my human juice box. Her presence was like a force of nature, a blend of elegance and confidence that radiated from her very soul. With each step she took, the air seemed to stir around her, carrying with it an energy that was both intoxicating and magnetic. I was captivated by her, not the other way around. How could I not be?

And that was very dangerous.

Lennox was a masterpiece, a work of art that transcended time and space. Her very essence was a symphony of grace and allure, and the universe had conspired to create this singular, transformative connection. Between *us*. Our fates were entwined in the most primal of ways. And that was all despite my original purpose. This huntress had no idea what I’d found. She was extraordinary. The dress only accentuated that. Like pointing a neon sign toward something that held the power to reshape the very fabric of a vampire’s world.

Lennox, chin held high and fearsome gaze trained on me, halted just past my grasp. A breath of moonlight, shimmering in the dark. *My last hope.*

Kelda bumped my arm. “Did you hear what I said?”

“He’s too busy drooling over his next meal,” Lennox said in that disgustingly sweet yet false way of hers.

“Yes, Kelda?” I ground out, hating that the world beckoned beyond the scope of this moment.



“I said,” the irritable Kelda repeated, “Rome might have spies here. We’ll have to be vigilant. He’s one the most powerful vampires in the world.”

Her words rocketed me back into reality. It wasn’t true. Kelda’s ex was far more powerful than even she realized. But we didn’t speak the devil’s name.

“You have some big decisions to make, Cato.” Kelda moved to leave.

“I do indeed.” I rose and began to circle my prey. “Well, Nox, is it time to dine?”

Finger looped in the golden locket, Lennox considered me. A lioness, toying with her prey. “I’ve told you, that’s never happening.”

I’d felt her emotions through the emerald ring I now wore. The sweet spike of elation was heady, lush. If she wanted this on her terms, I was only too happy to oblige. *We’ll see, little one.*



## Chapter 41 – Lennox

They deposited me at the bookstore a little after 3 a.m. The vampire stopped the car, let it idle. Without a word, I emerged from the vehicle. The streets were empty. *I could run.*

The idea was laughable. It would take seconds for him to unbuckle, to chase—to capture.

There was no escaping him. No, it wasn't the time.

I'd pushed into the inky quiet of the bookstore. A cordless lamp shown dully on the bar top. I went to collect it, deciding I would explore before my jailer came back.

Beside the lamp was a book.

The third book in the paranormal romance series I'd started to read. *Why couldn't Cato be like one of these brothers with the black daggers?* I sighed. They weren't any less intimidating. But they had a moral compass. I rolled my eyes. Cato was real, not fiction. He was a damn monster.

I took the book to a leather armchair in the café portion of the establishment, the irrational worry suddenly consuming me that if I ventured into the shelves, I might not come out again.

The words stared back at me, telling the sorrowful tale of brothers separated by malice. Now that was one bad bitch, abusing the brother like that—she was more in line with the monsters I knew.

The hours drug on, and the story shattered me in the best way.

Nearing the end, I groaned at a plot twist. “Nnooo! Z!”

There wasn't a sound per se, but I stiffened. As if something—someone—responded. I snapped the book closed and looked up. Rosy fingered dawn was caressing the windowpanes with her dewy kiss.

I scanned the expanse. Without my glyphs, I was blind in the most frightening way. There was nothing here—

“Took you long enough, little huntress.”

I swallowed a squeak. So humiliating! “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Hmm.” The vampire didn’t seem amused. “While I think it’s adorable how engrossed you become with those steamy novels, it’s dangerous.”

I gave him a defiant look. “And how long have you been watching?” I demanded.

At that, the corner of his mouth twitched. “Since right before they consummated their love in blinding passion.”

I gaped at him.

“If you stare any harder, your eyes will roll out of your head,” he muttered dryly.

“How did you know I was reading that part?” I demanded.

“For starters, your breathing changed.” The vampire took a purposefully step forward. And then another. “You claw at your throat, chest heaving as they dance around the issue. When they finally succumb, your body heats. Your sex pulses greedily. And—” he leaned over me, pulling my hand to his lips “—you bite your thumb. Like this.”

He closed his teeth around the finger.

All I could do was stare at where my finger was captured in his mouth. Pressing his lips down, he sucked—hard. With a pop, he pulled it free.

“Come,” he commanded, tugging on my hand. “It’s time we were underground for the day.”

“I’m bringing the book,” I grumbled.

The vampire shrugged and let me free. “If that takes care of your needs, so be it.”

A taunt was on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it. Robotically, I followed him. There was no point fighting it. Let the monster think he was wearing me down. Meanwhile, I would conserve my strength.

Once downstairs, he shut the door, ran his finger over the frame and door.

And then he proceeded to kick out of his shiny shoes. Those sure fingers undid the buttons of his shirt and pulled it over his head. It wasn't until he undid the belt that I blinked. Lost in the seductive grace of his body, I'd not realized that those weren't the same clothes he'd left the boutique wearing.

*Who cares where he's been.* I huffed, flopping down on the mattress. Pulling the book back open, I tried to lose myself to the story. It was pointless. The water from the faucet was obnoxiously loud. The drone of the electricity irritatingly soft. I wet my lips.

The vampire emerged from the bathroom and crawled beside me. His hands stayed to himself.

But I found myself rereading passages.

I might have been lamenting Cato's feral qualities compared to the fictional warriors, but right now he was real. Warm. In the bed. The fresh, masculine scent was tinged with a woody quality. It wasn't cologne. Too natural. Had he been in the forest? I closed my eyes. The image of him removing that dress shirt sprang from my memory. *Dammit!* I forced the traitorous lids back open and attempted to read.

Still, it was a good forty-five minutes before I gave in. Noting the page number, I set the book down and flicked the wall lamp off. Darkness rushed to engulf me. Lacing my fingers over my chest, I focused on measured breaths. All the ways to tempt sleep failed.

Meanwhile, the vampire's rhythmic breathing didn't change. Maybe he was asleep.

The memory of that bulge in those tight boxer briefs played across the dark. Those sculpted shoulders were inches from my face. His golden skin begged to be licked. It didn't matter that my eyes were wide open. The mental snapshots were there. My mouth fucking watered. Whoever thought sharing a bed was a good idea was a bloody idiot!

A long growl of frustration huffed from my chest.

*What's the harm?* the little she-devil on my shoulder reasoned. We'd already done it once.

I squeezed my eyes closed. As if that would block out her voice! This was wrong. I should roll over, count my nonexistent sheep, and go to sleep.

*You do want him to believe you're subdued, don't you?*

Damn her, bad Lennox was one hell of a manipulative bitch. Swearing it was all to throw off suspicion about tomorrow, I did a half crunch, grabbed the hem of my tee—and ripped it off my head. My bra and pants followed. The ache between my legs screamed at me to do something, but I froze. Maybe I could....

I slid my fingers into my panties. They were soaked. The desperate touch was a sweet relief. I could just get off and go to sleep. That way, the situation would be a win-win. Besides, he wasn't awake anyhow to know.

Fast, eager circles. It was just the thing. There was no need for lubrication. As was the case whenever this vampire was involved, my body responded heatedly. I stroked my sensitive clit, and then moved to push my fingers deep inside.

“Stop.”

The single word made me squeak. “Fate, you scared me!”

“I will not have you taking care of yourself in *my* bed. Not unless it's the game I decide we play.” Rolling onto his back, the vampire laced his fingers together and placed them behind his head. “Well?” he said after a long pause. “Are you going to do something about this? Or are you happy to suffer all night knowing that it's nearly as brutal for me?”

With an exasperated huff, I shed my panties. And then I reached through the dark for his.

As my fingers met his skin, the muscles in his abdomen tensed. It was a small motion, and I wouldn't have noticed if I wasn't pawing at him like a starved beast. The mental comparison must have affected me, because the next moment I bent down and ran my tongue over his Apollo's belt.

“Fuck—bella!” he rasped, jackknifing off the bed.

A jolt of glee shot straight through me. I pulled his pants down without hesitation and released that beautiful erection. I clutched his shaft, giving it a long, lingering stroke. There was a bead of precum at the tip, and so help me, the she-devil screamed for a taste.

I gave in.

My tongue circled the perfectly formed, insanely smooth head.

I looked up, his dick in my mouth. Arching a brow, I silently challenged him.

“It’s your move, huntress,” he panted, practically confirming he could see me. “I’m tired of your accusations.”

With a pop, I released the tip. “As if ten minutes of passion is going to paint over all your sins.”

“If you think I’ll be done with you in ten minutes—” He snapped his mouth closed and gave his head a vicious shake. “No, no! I’m not giving in. Not until you *beg*.”

I lifted a shoulder in a carless shrug. “Fine by me.”

He laughed roughly. Such a sinfully sexy, self-assured sound. My palm was on his balls, cradling and squeezing, immediately producing a sharp inhale.

I rose over him, lining up the shaft and pushing myself down on his length. It was my turn to gasp. I knew he was huge. Hell, I’d felt it twice yesterday. But to have him impale me at this angle? I was stretched full.

Tentatively, I rocked my hips.

“That’s it, show me how you ride,” he said roughly.

It would have served him right if I slid off. But damn me, I was incapable of resisting. Tonight had gone too far. Lifting and lowering myself, I used his chest to brace the movements of my lower body.

Blinding, impossible pleasure consumed me all too quickly. Unable to raise completely, I simply began rolling my

hips. This was the only male who could make me simultaneously angry and horny.

His hands came around my waist. Catching me, he held me in place.

And shoved into me from below. I swore stars exploded in the blackness of the room. A moan clawed from my throat.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he growled.

*And you stretch me perfectly.* Talking, telling him how I felt, it was too intimate. Even in the delirious haze of lust, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Instead, I let my traitorous body speak for me.

Cato continued to thrust his hips. I took everything. My cries echoed off the walls.

He stilled, body one tight line beneath me. I felt him pour himself into me. A little surprised at the intensity of his climax, I lost the edge to my own.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he snarled. Reaching between us, he pinched my clit.

I cried out, trying to swat him away. “Too much.”

“No, it’s not.” He moved his thumb and forefinger. The bastard, he was right. It was perfect.

I shattered, coming so hard that he moaned as my pussy vised around his dick.

“That’s it, huntress. Look at you coming on my dick,” he whispered, voice the texture of gravel.

I collapsed on his hard mass, unable to roll off. My ragged breaths fanned the soft smattering of hair on his chest. *Again. Again!* each breath seemed to sing out.

His soft laughter caused his chest to rumble under my cheek. “Only if you beg me nicely, little huntress.”

The gall of this male! “Screw you.”

He shrugged. “If you insist.”



With one powerful move, he flipped me onto my back, not ready to be done with me. Nor I with him.



## Chapter 42 – Lennox

With Kelda flanking me, I left the town car. Cato was already here. Somewhere. It helped me focus on the task at hand. First, the trip to the spa for fluffing and makeup, and now here. The time had cooled the heat raging between my legs.

And seven hells, did I look the part.

The slits in the dress made it possible to walk without tripping. Admittedly, this was the first time I'd dressed up. The heels weren't foreign, because in preparation for covert missions, we'd practiced disguising ourselves as desirable morsels that monsters would want to munch. Since I was a better fighter, I wasn't trained in the art of seduction. This was the first party I'd been to, the first time I'd dressed up for a social event. Hunters weren't social.

*I am hunting tonight*, I reminded myself.

After a day spent in delirious, animalistic fashion, I worked it out of my system. I could keep my head cool tonight.

Kelda was in tight, shimmering black pants with a loose chiffon blouse that was blood red and cinched around her waist by a black corset. It was some cross between a vampiric businesswoman and the angel of death. As we walked into the front parlor of the mansion, I quickly noticed that she stood out on purpose. Every other female was glamorous and sensual. Kelda reeked of power and strength, cutting down any look of desire shot her way.

Despite myself, I wondered what her story was. Just as quickly, I flicked a glance to her daylight ring to remind myself what manner of monster she was, and that I didn't give a damn about knowing her in any other way than to kill her.

The guards in the parlor checked us, and while they were efficient with Kelda, their touch lingered on my flesh.

“Is that a human?” a dark-haired beauty with luxurious green satin draped over her rich brown skin asked.

Kelda stepped between us, and I shot daggers into her spine with my glare. “This blood slave belongs to Lord di Menocchio. Don’t look at her, don’t speak to her, and especially don’t *touch* her.”

“Most unusual for a vampire to bring his snack to a ball,” the female groused.

“Like I said, it’s none of your business.” Kelda stood firm, daring the other woman to cross her.

Sliding glances between us, the female in forest green huffed before turning on her heel to rejoin a flock of equally brightly dressed vampiresses.

“I can fight my own battles,” I hissed under my breath.

The muscles in Kelda’s shoulders flinched ever so slightly, but she didn’t engage with my statement.

This mansion was the classic architecture of the early 1800s. The ceilings were high, but the rooms were partitioned into designated spaces. Billiards were being played in the first room to the right. Moans and other sensual noises came from the front parlor to the left. A quick glance at the partially opened door showed vampires being vampiric. My stomach soured at the sight. But I hurried after Kelda into the rest of the space.

The ballroom was large for the era, but thronged with people as it was now, it was cramped. *Vampires—not people*. I frowned at the lot. This was rather an ingenious way to infiltrate a court. Before I could wonder why hunters didn’t disguise themselves as blood slaves to go into such gatherings, the crowd parted. Even Kelda stepped to the side.

Prowling forward, his dangerous energy forcing everyone to step back, Cato approached. My heart leapt to my throat. The look that dominated his face was dark and carnal. Unsure of how, I detected something raw and unholy underneath. This was not a male to be crossed. And yet, I stepped into his path, steeling my spine against the tongues of fear that slithered down it. There was something about this one. Almost as if I were drawn to his presence. That made little sense.

But it didn't have to. Soon, my stake would rest securely in his chest.

A sharp stab echoed in my own. I frowned.

"Come, the Yves is waiting for us." The vampire held out his hand.

Fate help me, I reached out and slid mine into his. The tightening in my frame eased. I couldn't explain these physical reactions. They weren't based in lust. They weren't the result of disgust. What else could drive me? I pushed the question out of my mind. I couldn't afford distractions. Not tonight. It was too important.



## Chapter 43 – The Predator

The deep burgundy of his suit looked far darker framed in the light of the moon. Yves painted a dramatic picture. There was only the slightest tense of the muscles in his shoulder as we entered, and I shut the door. He'd summoned me into this private space to propose I join his cause. By bringing a human, I threw him off. "What have you brought me, Menocchio?"

Yves didn't turn around, but I caught his stare in the reflection of the glass panes. The manicured garden was visible beyond the French doors. It wasn't as grand as Vivian's—not that many gardens were.

"The answer to your proposal," I countered, unintentionally tightening my grip on Lennox.

She jerked her fingers, but I didn't let her go.

"The proposal I haven't made? Aren't you supposed to hear it first?" Yves tone sharpened.

I shrugged. "It doesn't take a genius to know your dreams, Yves. You want to build something that few attempt. You're offering me a seat at the table."

The other male hmphed. "And this delicacy on your arm?" Yves wet his lips.

"Ezkontidea odolez," I responded coolly.

Yves rounded on me, the language of his family's enemies a sore spot on his ears.

Lennox looked up at me, beautiful green eyes narrowed. She had the good sense to remain quiet, for which I was grateful.

"A human?" he responded in the language of his father's lands.

"Mine." I slid behind Lennox, crossing my arm proactively over her body while keeping a hold of her hand.

Something dark and calculating slid through Yves's eyes. "Is she the real reason you came to the Crescent City?"

I nodded. “I never came for your throne, my friend.”

“Feral wolves like you have no friends.” As he spoke the darkness slipped from his eyes, but the twinkle was far more deadly.

“But isn’t that why you wished me to join this court you’re building? Because of this long-standing amity between us?” I grinned.

Yves wagged his finger. “Rome will not let you go so easily, Cato.”

“No, already her claws have come to drag me back to the mouth of hell.” I carefully watched Yves’s face.

“I forbade her from coming here tonight.” Yves gestured to the door. “Dance, be merry. At midnight, I look for your answer.”

I inclined my head. “As you wish...sire.”

Greed lit in his eyes. “Is that a prelude to what is coming?”

I only smirked and left.

Not a moment too soon. Through this exchange, I felt Lennox’s gaze roving around. The hunt had never left her veins. She was memorizing this place and the second most powerful vampire in New Orleans. I wanted to groan in exasperation. It was going to take a long time before I could trust the huntress with my kind. Not until the full depravity of her own sank in.

*And when she learns she’s only part human—if human at all.*

Robert couldn’t be sure without tasting her blood, and I would be damned if I would share. Whenever she took off the locket, it was all mine.

Out here, free of the silencing spells, the auditory overload crashed down the hall, painting a vibrant tapestry of sound. I scanned it, trying to discern any threat. Laughter and animated conversation flowed like cheap booze. The swill was only covered by the rustle of elegant gowns that would never be worn again and the swish of ostentatious suits.



If it wasn't absolutely necessary that they know Lennox was mine, I wouldn't have brought her into this den of snakes.

We met Kelda in the bend of the hall. One look at my face, and she pushed off the wall and into my space. "What did you tell him?"

"I haven't changed my mind," I murmured. The plan was the same as always. We would be leaving on the private jet and flying to Italy. It would take some planning, but the coup would be put in motion and by the end of the month, I would have my kingdom. Rome was the only prize worth having. Swear to another male when I could be the lord of all? I didn't think so. Still, I wanted allies, and Yves would make a powerful one. I intended to give him the envelope with Rene St Just's location as a parting gift. It would be delivered by the time the wheels were lifted on the jet.

But first...a dance.

Moving past the congestion of bodies, I took Lennox in my arms and began to lead her through the motions of the song.

"I don't know how to dance," she said quietly, a small bite in her voice.

"*'720 in the Books'* is not a waltz." I swayed her to the swing music. The strings and big band sound had me twirling her. Breathlessly she came back into my arms, and we stepped together. "This is Jan Savitt and his orchestra from the late 30's. I had the absolute pleasure to hear it live. There is nothing like the energy that comes from this kind of jive, kitten."

"Kitten?" she spat, face glowing with shock.

I pushed her arms with mine and pulled her back, while twisting her body to come hard against mine. A bright flush suffused her cheeks. The smallest of smiles pulled at her lips. Lennox hadn't *lived*. It wasn't possible in the strict place she'd come from. Little by little, I was peeling back the damage of the academy. We swayed to the beat, and then we were moving apart again. A push and pull. She was pliable in my

strong arms, confused but not fighting my lead. I dipped her, her fast breath brushing against my lips.

The song shifted, and I straightened. The next song was slower, a vampiress trying to replicate Maxine Sullivan in St. Louis Blues. I cupped a hand around Lennox's back.

"You have the slower steps down like a natural," I murmured.

Lennox slid her eyes back to meet mine. Heat flared in those green depths, making them blaze. "They're staring at the vampire dancing with his blood slave."

I growled. "Let them. They have no right to question us."

"Do I?" she demanded with an arch of her brow.

I inclined my head. "I don't have to answer."

"Hmm," she wet her lips, making me instantly harden to painful, "You didn't use the word slave when you talked to the vampire street boss. Not in the first language, and not in the second."

Cold water washed through me, and it nearly quenched my libido. "You never learned Basque."

"It's true, though how you know so many details about my education is surprising." Lennox looked away. I clutched her hand and spun her out, twirling her body in a graceful arch, before tugging her back under the protective grip of my hands. She let out a breathless laugh.

"How did you know?" I demanded.

"It doesn't matter." Lennox dropped her gaze to my chest, eyes narrowing in concentration. "All I know is that it wasn't slave. It was something...more."

"Because you're far more precious than an object," I growled.

Slowly, torturously, she dragged her gaze upward. "What am I?"

*Everything.* The answer stunned me. It shouldn't have. It had been right there, dancing in front of me all along. "You're

more than you know.”

The huff and eye roll were expected. I pulled her close, losing myself to the melodic strains of the band. Their poignant notes wove a metaphorical spell of enchantment. It resonated with the rhythmic beats of the other vampires’ hearts.

Tuning out the hushed murmur of their tactless observations, I held Lennox in my arms, and we danced under the glow of hundreds of candles. In the old days, there was no electricity for humans. While we had magic to light our ways, there was something breathtakingly simple about the flame devouring the wick without mercy.

Tonight, they would know Lennox was mine. It would help cement the tale of the dead hunters. Of all the pairs of eyes looking at us, I felt one that I didn’t trust. As I spun Lennox to the music, I raked a glare over the crowd. Kelda had reported that Miranda wasn’t here. Yves had claimed to disinvite her. But that didn’t mean she hadn’t snuck in.

“I need to use the facilities,” Lennox said abruptly.

I nodded and escorted her out of the room. Bodies crowded close. One accidental swipe, and they would touch what wasn’t theirs. I sent a glare around the space. Not looking my direction, Lennox pulled away, intending to climb the stairs.

“There is a powder room down here,” I said, caution seeping into my voice.

“I’m not taking care of business with a thin wall between me and many vampires.” Her cheeks pinkened. The blush lent to the innocence of the request. I relented.

“Upstairs is off limits save for special guests. No one will touch you. Come straight down,” I added.

“You’re not dogging my footsteps?” she asked, genuine surprise in her voice.

Leaning down, I brushed my lips over the shell of her ear. The shiver that skated over her skin set my blood thundering. “The last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable, bella donna.”

“How considerate of you,” she muttered dryly. Skirts hiked, she hurried away, leaving me to frown after her.



## Chapter 44 – Lennox

I splashed water on my face in the upstairs bathroom. The majority of the makeup resisted, an impressive feat. That didn't matter, though. I wasn't going back downstairs. This was it. I had the location, and the identity of the top New Orleans vampire.

It was time to make my escape and bring the masses of the hunters down here.

*"Blood spouse."* Cato's words rang through my head. I pounded the hand towel against my flaming cheeks. What the hell did that mean? I let out a long huff. Just another vampiric game.

*Liar—it's something more.*

I bitch slapped that voice away.

Thank goodness for the special glyphs I'd paid exorbitant fees to obtain. They were my best kept secret. The enchantment had cost a ghastly sum, but the spellcaster who worked for the Guild had been only too happy to accept my offer. Very few hunters bothered with language magic. That was for the scholars and instructors at the Guild. Even they didn't value it. Why master dead or rare languages when the creatures who spoke them would only end up at the end of a spike? Well, I valuable knowledge. An enemy speaking something I couldn't understand? How could any hunter in their right mind put themselves at that kind of risk! I would not die over ignorance.

Well, it proved useful now. I didn't know the two languages the vampires had spoken, but they had been beautiful. Why first the one and then the second, I couldn't fathom. The second had been close enough to the archaic French I actually spoke. But the first, the one Cato had used for those short words, it was purely foreign. The glyphs translated it for me, giving me instant understanding.

Blood spouse. *Blood* spouse. *Blood spouse*. I grit my teeth. I couldn't decipher the meaning. I'd never heard of such a

thing. Added with the tone Cato used, there was something far more sacred than simply a slave that he drank from.

Not that he'd pierced my veins. "And he won't," I whispered to the mirror.

Bending, I found the supplies under the sink as my lupine friend had promised. A scrap of paper read: **Third story west bedroom. Potion in nightstand if you need.** I slid the slim stake down my cleavage, unfortunately the only place that had enough support to hold such a weapon.

Whatever happened next, I was ready. I opened the door.

And came face to face with a mass of pure wrath. The vampire was twisting that ring he now wore all the time.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I pressed my hand on my throat. "Fate, you scared me, Cato."

It was the truth, even though I predicted he'd follow me.

"Time to go," he snapped.

I glared at him. "Excuse me? What happened to the chivalrous gentleman I left downstairs?"

"Gone." He gripped my upper arm and yanked me into his side.

I grunted against his hardened body. "Is there a reason in particular?" I snapped.

Spinning me around, he slammed me against the wall. "You got a little too excited to come up here—where there's a silencing rune etched into the banister."

My pulse leapt. *Play it cool!* "Oh, and I had time and supplies to cast those enchantments? Sure, that makes sense. Not the thousands of freaky things you bloodsuckers like to do up here."

"There's no one else up here," he murmured coolly. "What are you planning, Lennox?"

I shrugged. "Nothing."

“See, that’s not quite true.” He bent forward, inhaling deeply. “Your body tells a different story.”

Enough! “I’ve had all I can take of you,” I growled, shoving him hard.

It was like trying to make a wall move.

So I threw a punch. I clipped him in the jaw, ducking out from under his arm. Kicking out, I meant to break his knee backward. He stumbled out of my reach.

Catching the hem of my skirt, he pulled.

The material tore, and my heart pulsed painfully. The dress was a work of art. Like wearing woven starlight.

I sprinted away, kicking out of my shoes on the second landing.

Cato stood straight, taking purposeful steps as he climbed. I sprang for the third story landing. The vampire rushed past me, a gust of hot air, and stood at the top to glare down at me.

He grabbed me in his arms. There was no violence here. Only reverence. For the briefest of moments, I melted. This would feel so good, to belong to someone who clearly cherished me.

*It’s a lie*, I promised myself.

As I tried to pull away, he trailed a touch over my jaw and down my neck. “I’m not letting anyone hurt you. Do you believe me?”

I let out a harsh breath. “I don’t believe in promises that can’t be kept.”

“I’m serious, Lennox. I faked your death to protect you, I claimed you in front of my kind. It’s going to be alright, little one.” Predictably, he twisted his emerald ring.

I tore my gaze away and reached down into my bodice. “I’ll never belong to a vampire,” I swore, right before stabbing him in the chest.

My heart stopped, breath pinching painfully. I cut my gaze back to his, which went wide with shock.



This was it—my moment of triumph! *I—I killed him.* He would disintegrate to ash. Any minute. Black, powdery vampire at my feet.

Sticky heat coated my fingers. Blood. That was blood! The muscles in my arm trembled. Why was I trembling?

No. *No!* This wasn't victory.

*Cato....* This was wrong, all wrong! Confused, I made to tear the stake away.

A gentle, yet firm touch covered mine. Unable to look away, I held his gaze as pain flashed through those amber depths. It took a moment to realize he was twisting the stake deeper.

I jerked away. He held me in place, forced me to drive the wood deeper. This was the torment I craved to inflict. I swallowed the whimper that bubbled up my throat. The vampire wouldn't let go! He made me inflict the pain.

“You missed, bella,” Cato groaned.

I missed.

*How could I miss? How!*

The vampire pulled me to his side and pushed me across the narrow area enclosed by the banister. Blood coated my palms. It dripped down the front of his shirt. A room opened and I sprang into, wiping my palms on the glittering skirt. I whipped my gaze around the space. Too late, I realized the monster had me cornered. Ripping the stake from his chest, he deftly spun it and presented it to me.

The wound leaked in earnest.

“Go again, Lennox.”

There was no tremor as I grabbed the weapon. Pacing around the monster, I became the beast I was born to be. *I can do this!*

The vampire mirrored my movements, arms open wide at his side. He wouldn't let me stab him from behind. Fine by me! A roar ripped from every fiber of my being as I lunged.

The stake arced through the air. Pierced flesh, carved between bone.

The rough, masculine grunt bounced off the walls. “Missed. Again.”

Hand falling away as if the contact burned, I stared hard at the slippery, crimson stain. Drops splattered my gown. They did nothing to shadow the luster.

“My turn.” He stepped into my space and reached for me. His touch brushed across my collar bone, trailing down to the soft flesh of my breasts. I should have pulled away, fought him. I stood frozen, staring at my hands. At his blood.

His thumb flicked over the hardened pebble of my breast. Some lust-crazed she-devil sprang to command center of my mind. In the presence of the beast, my eyes fluttered closed. Head tipped to the side. A sigh whispered from my lips. *Bite me—end it.*

The vampire walked into me, capturing my thigh and hooking it around his waist. I growled and pushed. This wasn't how it was supposed to go! My resistance, only made him walk me back more firmly into the wall. As usual, he wasn't playing by the rules. That thick erection ground against my pussy. A gasp escaped my lungs before I could stop it.

*No! I'm not playing this game.* Not again. Never again.

Cato's grin was damn near feral. “You're mine, Lennox. I put my claim on you.”

Something about that should have had me braking hard. Instead, I put a hand around his throat and pushed on his windpipe. He choked, and as he coughed, I stole the blade I knew he concealed at the small of his back.

Snatching the stake from his chest, I slipped from his grasp, but it was like he wanted me to escape.

I sliced at him.

He blocked.

Heart beating wildly, I stepped back, preparing a stance to engage in hand-to-hand combat. I might not know the steps to

a dance, but I'd be damned if I didn't waltz circles around him now.

"Is this all you've got?" I taunted, throwing the blade into his shoulder.

A bestial growl tore from the vampire. He rushed forward. As our bodies collided in the heat of combat, a rush of adrenaline surged through my veins, sharpening my senses and heightening my awareness. The impact of our movements reverberated through my bones, each strike resonating with a mix of intensity and controlled force. The scent of sweat hung heavy in the air, mingling with the metallic tang of exertion.

This was a blend of fluidity and precision as we gauged each other's moves and responded in kind. Every strike, every dodge, was a calculated response, a dance of bodies in motion, guided by instinct and training.

With each cut and slash, the tension in the air thickened. I was the only one landing blows; Cato wasn't using his blade. I egged him on, baiting him to strike. Those whiskey eyes were ringed with crimson, a sure sign I'd forced the intensity of the fight to the next level.

The room's walls seemed to close in, and the floor beneath our feet became an arena where our fates were decided with every punch and counter. The muscles in my arms and legs burned with exertion, the strain of the fight driving me to push harder, to dig deeper. The scent of sweat grew stronger, mingling with the acrid tang of determination as our bodies strained against each other, locked in a contest.

The sensation of impact as my knuckles connected with the vampire's flesh sent a jolt of feedback through my hand. It was a mix of satisfaction and power, a tangible reminder of the battle's realness. Even as he refused to do more than circle me and occasionally block me! And as we continued to exchange blows, I became acutely aware of the interplay between our bodies, the give and take of combat that described the ebb and flow of a deadly tide.

Finally, he snapped. A primal focus took over. Cato threw me against the wall. The air left my body, and I gasped with

empty lungs for the next breath. Pain radiated down my spine.

Cato sprang after me, fangs extended. He pressed his blade against my throat, eyes shimmering with bloodlust.

My stake was properly aimed over his heart.

“Take a good look, Lennox. This is the real Cato,” he growled.

This encounter was only a strategy, one I would likely survive. But this moment, I needed this more than I needed a proper breath. This was a reminder of who and what he was.

Panting, we gazed at one another.

“Do it!” I dared, pushing the spike through his shirt and pricking his flesh.

Darkness shifted through his eyes, swallowing any bright flecks of red. Cato lifted his hands.

“Do it,” I insisted. “After all this, you’re going down without a fight?”

He blew out a harsh breath. “I won’t hurt you, Lennox. Not even with all your goading.”

The blade hung in the air before it clattered to the ground.

“Fine. If you won’t, then I will!” I pressed the stake in, pushing it slowly between his ribs. The strength of my enhanced humanity made such a strike possible.

“Do it,” he mimicked.

It was stupid. I knew it even before I looked up at him. But I couldn’t stop. I felt the draw of his gaze. This pulse between us. It screamed at me that this wasn’t someone I could ever truly hurt, couldn’t destroy. I didn’t understand it. Part of the fever of the battle had been to resist its plaintive cry!

The moment I met his stare, everything else faded. *I can’t do this.*

“You’re mine, Lennox,” he growled, golden heat pooling in his eyes. And then, he kissed me.

I clutched for the stake, ready to finish what I started. It was gone. Gone! He captured my wrist, pinning my arm against my chest, and crowding me down to the ground.

“I’m never going to be your blood slave!” I snarled against his mouth.

“Never that—but you are mine.”

“Oh, I’ll never be your blood spouse, either! Whatever the fuck that twisted status is,” I seethed, struggling.

He gripped my ass, squeezing hard. “Too late. I’ve already made you mine in every way that matters.”

“Asshole!” I threw a punch with my free hand into his side. What did he mean? What did he mean!

He rocked his hips into me, and damn me, my pussy clenched with need.

And damn him, he knew it.



## Chapter 45 – The Predator

I laid her down on the bed, smirking against the wild patter of her pulse. The wooden blades of the fan above us cut through the stale air with a steady whomp-whomp. Shaped like palm fronds, they were the percussion to the music coming alive in my head.

Pushing up the tattered remains of her skirt, I hissed as my fist met bare flesh. “Where are your undergarments?”

A harsh laugh escaped her lips. “Never put any on.”

I found her mouth and kissed her breathless. Those sure fingers, ready to kill me seconds ago, found my head. They pushed down against my neck, encouraging the ravenous kiss before kneading into the muscles of my shoulder. When they tugged at the material of my dress shirt, I smiled against her kiss.

“What do you need?” I teased. The playfulness, however, wasn’t genuine. That fight had been real. I was still shaken that she’d driven me to the edge. It was a relief to know that I couldn’t do it, couldn’t consume her even with the claws of bloodlust. “Do you need this off?”

“All the better to stab you,” she retorted.

“Your wish is my command.” Buttons popped and a seam ripped, but the starched white dress shirt came over my head.

Although she tried to hide her reaction, that gorgeous body sang for me on its own accord. The short inhale, the clench of her thighs, the flash of appreciation in her dark emerald gaze—all of it added up. I treasured each fucking piece.

“You ready for me, Nox? Is that tight little pussy slick and heated for me?” I purred, the pride running through my veins fueling my ego.

Lennox rolled her eyes. “I’m not in the mood to play games.”

I smiled down at her. “Oh, really? And what do you call that round of foreplay?”

“Doing my damn job,” she snapped.

Before I could needle her further, she slid her hand into my dress pants.

Desire burned hot and desperate in my veins. Those deadly hands grasped the hard flesh of my cock, stroking and caressing. Bracing an elbow beside her, I reached down to undo the belt and then the fastening of the dress pants.

Together, we shoved the pants down. My cock sprang free. It was full and aching. Lennox rubbed the tip, smearing a bead of moisture over the too sensitive head. Eyes rolling back, I moaned.

“If this is what a battle to the death against you is like, I’ll die a happy man in your arms,” I whispered.

Lennox grunted. “I refuse to turn tricks to do my job.”

“If this isn’t seduction to kill me, what is it?” I cracked my eye lids to gaze down at her.

Those tantalizing lips were pursed in consideration. “This is me stealing a moment of fun. This is me taking what I want before reality slams back into the present.”

Curious, I bent down and pulled at her bottom lip as I mulled over her words. “And what reality do you fear, bella donna?” *Beautiful woman or the poisonous flower.* She was the gods-damned beautiful poison. She had nothing to fear.

As she considered my question, and I wondered if she would answer, I closed my mouth over her nipple. Whatever she was going to say was cut short with a sensual gasp as I sucked and licked. Driving her body crazy was my new forte and I fucking loved it. An instrument, meant to be played.

“Answer me,” I demanded, speaking around the taut nipple I grazed my teeth over. “What reality do you fear?”

“The one where a monster has put a claim on me, and I don’t understand why.”



I pushed her knees apart, ready to show her just what it meant to lay a claim on her. As I rose over her, she let go of my cock and ran her hands over the cut muscles of my torso. That heated look of lust flared in her eyes.

“Like what you see, bella?” I purred.

She rolled her eyes. “I would have to be dumb not to.”

I kissed her hard as I lined myself up with her entrance. Her tongue battled mine, fighting to dominate the kiss. But she didn’t stand a chance. The moment I pushed into her, the victory was clear. I swallowed her needy whimper and pulled my hips back only to snap them into her. I repeated the slow, torturous process.

Breaking the kiss, I cradled her into my arms and let the hunter that had been building throughout the fight take over. There was no mercy. I let lust consume me, instinct driving my body into hers.

Angling her head, I dropped my lips on her pulse. That long, beautiful neck—such a gods-damned tease! I drug my tongue over the length of it, picturing sinking my fangs into her. A throaty moan escaped her as I found a particularly sweet spot and sucked the tender flesh.

“Do you want me to bite you?” I whispered darkly.

There was a moment’s pause, and then she breathed, “I shouldn’t.”

I laughed harshly. “Don’t worry. It’s not happening tonight.”

She threaded her hands through my hair, pushing my head up. When our gazes met, she demanded, “What are you waiting for? You told the others you had, and yet you’ve kept your fangs out of me.”

I pumped into her, grinding against her outside as well as working deep strokes into her core. “The time isn’t right.”

“Why?” she panted, clearly distracted with what was happening between us.

*Soon, bella donna. Soon, I'll take that from you as well, and then...I'll be invincible.*

“Hush now, Lennox,” I growled, thrusting into her with a savagery that I’d held back.

Her body responded beautifully. Those strong thighs wrapped around my waist, pelvis tipping to take me deeper. I lowered my mouth to her shoulder, intending to leave a raw bruise there as I worried the flesh. Taking her hard and fast was damn near overwhelming.

One hand gripped her hip, the other was buried in her hair. The huntress responded in kind, digging her nails into my flesh and scoring the skin until it broke open. The sharp pain only made me thrust harder, deeper. I drove into her faster and faster.

Rearing over me suddenly, she sank her teeth into *my* shoulder. The blunt edges didn’t draw blood, but they gnawed into me with a brutality I didn’t know I craved until now.

I threw back my head and roared, thankful to whatever fiend had soundproofed this space.

I brought her closer yet, forcing her legs to tip back even more. This angle allowed me the deepest access yet. The mouthful of flesh she bit down on stifled her cries. She was close, so fucking close.

Reaching between us, I roughly pinched her nipple, changing her cries into gasps. Her pussy clenched in response to the pain.

“Harder,” she gasped.

“You like it rough, don’t you?” I coaxed roughly. I was only too happy to oblige. I stretched my touch between us, rubbing hard circles against her clit.

Lennox threw back her head, screaming my name as she shattered.

I held on only long enough to feel her orgasm tighten like a vise. And then my body jerked hard, and with one deep

thrust I buried my cock still thick and hard inside her. I spilled everything I had.

As our bodies radiated with the climax, we found each other's gaze, drawn like magnets. Words failed me as I watched her, lying there panting in my arms, pulsing with pleasure that I'd given her.

Yes, she was mine. And if she didn't know it yet, her body sure as hell was learning to whom it belonged.

And yet, I was under some kind of spell because all I could do was watch her.

A slow, sensual smile spread over her face. I marveled at it, lost in the beauty.

My tongue finally loosened, and I managed to whisper a confession. "You have no idea how special you are."

"Don't get all sappy on me. It's not like we've even gone on a date, all we've done is fuck."

"Would you like to go on a date with me?"

A laugh barked out of her throat, irritating the already raw tissue. She paused to consider and then laughed again. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Why?" I demanded, the idea rooting in my mind and taking shape.

Shaking her head, Lennox reached over, leaning her body over the side of the bed. I caught something out of the corner of my eye. A flash—smoke.

I inhaled before thinking better of it.

The world darkened in my peripheral. The last thing I saw was Lennox plugging her nose and mouth pressed tight.

No. *No!* But I couldn't form the words.

Everything faded.



## Chapter 46 – Lennox

Scooting off the bed, I rushed to the en suite bathroom to scrub my face. Whatever that cloud of smoke was, I'd never encountered that kind of potion before. They generally just poured over the victim. Not exploded in a poof of gaseous substance that...sparkled? No, I was probably seeing things. Once I could be sure the potion wasn't going to be inhaled, I took a shuddering breath. *What have I done?*

"Think about it later," I commanded myself. Although it was quite possibly one of the hardest things I'd done, I pulled myself together.

Upon opening the bathroom door, I found Bethany hurrying into the bedroom. "About time you two finished."

Mortified. That simple word couldn't even begin to describe what I was feeling. I wanted to slink away and die.

Instead, I faced her. Here she was, some powerful being that just came in with magic to subdue a monstrous vampire. Instead of asking her what she was, my scholarly mind was still squashed by the sex—the mind-altering sex.

Nothing remained of my dress, so I moved to the closet in hopes of finding something to wear.

"Thought you might need these," Bethany said, handing out a canvas shopping bag I hadn't noticed her carrying. "Svet is waiting for you at 8<sup>th</sup> Ave SW and B Street."

"Oh, my gods, thank you!" I took it, grateful, and moved over to the en suite bathroom and closed the door.

"You're going to want to hurry. His protégée could be up here any minute," Bethany added.

"She won't be very pleasant to deal with," I muttered. There was no liking the vampiress.

I wet a cloth and wiped the mess between my legs. It should have been gross, monster seed leaking out of me like this. But perhaps my mind was so consumed with other

matters that I didn't really mind the feel of him. I dressed quickly in the jean shorts and a tank top—no bra, no underwear. But there were socks and athletic shoes.

I pushed back into the bedroom, where Bethany was stationed at the door.

“Out the window,” was the only thing she said.

I moved over the scene of our wild romp and cast a final, victorious look over the vampire. Except, I felt anything but elation. There was a dark kernel of something in my chest. It pulsed in memory of the orgasm he'd given me. No, that wasn't right. I frowned.

There wasn't time.

Not wanting to stop and assess the strange feeling, I tore my gaze away and followed Bethany out of the window.

“I owe you for your help,” I said sincerely.

“What the hell took you so long to douse him?” she drawled.

The sweet night air fluttered around me. Hot and sultry, it was the perfect evening. Somewhere in the distance, a bird sang out. It received no response. I dropped my gaze, focusing on crawling over the eaves and peaks of the house. Maybe if I jumped, missed, and fell to break my neck, I could avoid answering.

“Sometimes shit just happens,” I bit out a little too harshly.

Bethany chuckled. “You seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

She wasn't wrong, and I hated that.

“Alright, follow where I step.” The strange woman barely pulled up her long, thick skirts. The first jump barely made the blue calico kerchief on her head flutter.

It was a flurry of climbing, jumping, and running, but we reached the front spire of the gingerbread, Victorian house. The strange mood that possessed me wasn't easy to ignore as I balanced on the roof. Somehow, Fate only knew, I managed to scale the peak.

“Ready?” Bethany asked, as she pulled two leather belt straps from the shadows of the gutters.

A thin wire hung from a spike higher up. This was something out of the cinema. For the first time on this desperate escape, my heart leapt to my throat. I couldn’t do this!

I had to.

Gritting my teeth, I looped the strap over the wire and jumped. Wind cut at me as I descended, riding the length of wire. I bounced once, my heart leaping to my throat! That was Bethany following me, her weight making it jump.

The night air seemed less inviting, hurtling at an incline to the ground. There was a menace chilling the temperature. No matter how silly it seemed, it didn’t feel imaginary.

A handful of terrible seconds later, the metal streetlamp the wire was attached to came into view. It was drop or crash and be impaled.

I dropped, grunting at the impact. My body mercifully rolled.

I turned just in time to watch Bethany drop. Except—she seemed to float to the earth, landing with an ethereal grace on her feet.

“What are you?” I breathed.

She grinned. “Time to move. Go down this street two blocks, and Svet will be waiting.”

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

“To make sure his bloodthirsty companion doesn’t catch your trail.”

With that, the mystery woman disappeared into the night.

“I guess this makes us even,” I mumbled, pulling myself to my feet.

I stumbled away, ready to find Svet. Mercifully, a numbness sank bone deep. All strings of thought died as a new emotion took precedence. Foreign, I could only label it as

some kind of fear. Dread, perhaps. The world around me didn't help to lessen its terrible pull. The dark shrouded the world in its velvety embrace. My enhanced sight was the only thing that kept me from tripping through the night. There was no celestial twinkling or ambiance to light the road. In fact, there were no streetlights, either.

The breeze raked across my skin. It might be warm, but I longed for a sweatshirt to keep the gloom away. Hushed leaves cackled after me. Cicadas droned in a haunting chorus. It wasn't like me to be this spooked.

A dark figure, cut from night and blood, stepped into my path and sent an explosion through my pulse. "You treacherous little bitch," Kelda sneered.

I shifted my shoulders, my neck cracking under the movement. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Yeah, it won't be so pleasant when he wakes up." That thought didn't seem to make her as gleeful as it should have.

Heart racing, I weighed my options. The werewolf had to be close enough by now. If I howled, he would come. Leaping backward, I arched my back.

As if sensing what I was going to do, Kelda stepped closer. "You're making a mistake. Choose Cato."

I blinked at her. "You don't like me. Why would you want a hunter anywhere near your mentor?"

Disgust shifted over her features. She opened her mouth to reply when something else shifted in the night. My glyphs flared to life, a warning I'd not been paying attention to in the presence of this enemy.

"Hunters," I hissed. "They're closing in on us. Run, Kelda!"

I didn't know where the impulse came from. It was there, nonetheless. The world seemed to slow down. Every fiber of my instinct had screamed to run, and I was only now translating its plea.

"I can take them—"



“There are a dozen, maybe more,” I snapped. “I can feel them like a cold breeze. Go!”

“You’re saving...me?” Kelda glared down her nose.

“When I stake you, it’s because you’ll have a fighting chance,” I bit out.

“Touche.” The vampiress left.

I stepped into the pool of light from the next streetlamp and waited. The rustle of leaves, the steady thud of boots—I knew the sounds of a team moving in for the kill.

Holding up my hands, I waited.

“Hello, Miss Aelius,” an official sounding voice called out from the dark. If memory served, that had been one of the instructors who’d passed through the academy about ten years ago. Unable to see his face, I couldn’t be sure.

“You’re just in time,” I called back. “There’s a nest of vampires in the old Victorian in the next block over. The leader of the New Orleans—”

“Don’t trust a word that comes out of the whore’s mouth.” The sharp feminine voice unleashed a nest of unease in my belly. It was Headmistress Owens. The woman who’d ruined my life.

“If you want to wipe out a nest in one blow, this is the time to do it,” I insisted.

Owens stepped out of the bushes. Whereas she wore the military garb all hunters wore, seeing her in full tactical ensemble was unfortunately impressive. “She’s got vampire leaking out of her crotch and was just bargaining with a monster. She can’t be trusted.”

“We’ve apprehended the traitor,” the officer who’d first spoken said into a smartwatch. “Prepare for extraction.”

As I stammered and tried to make them see reason, vans drew up. They loaded me into the back, and I caught sight of a terrible form, all covered in fur, teeth gnashing in his elongated muzzle.

*Svet, no!* I shook my head, willing him to stay in the shadows.

His lip curled back in a soundless snarl, but he didn't move.

The door of the van shut on me with force, and I thanked Fate for the small mercy in this clusterfuck. I didn't want any harm to come to my friend.



## Chapter 47 – The Predator

Reality swarmed just beyond my grasp. *Where am I?* I inhaled deeply. The stink of ghost infiltrated my conscious. That wasn't right. Where was my huntress? The scent of sunlight, the promise of freedom, and the warmth of her glow. Those were...gone.

I reared up, a snarl cutting through the chatter around me. "Where is she?"

Robert had the good sense to back away. Vivian floated over me, just out of reach.

It was Kelda who answered. "They took her."

"Who?" I ground out the single word. Even though I knew. Like a sickness coming on strong, I fucking knew who'd taken her.

"The Guild. They're here in force." Kelda slid her hands into her pockets. Her posture was cowed, although she still met my gaze.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. I miscalculated. I knew the hunters would come sniffing around. I just didn't think she'd escape and run back to them.

"She had help," I muttered. "There was someone there—in the bedroom."

"Whoever it was, I doubt it was the hunters," Vivian murmured, voice heated.

I cocked a brow at her. "What makes you say that?"

She jerked a thumb at Robert, who blocked the talented Ilene from view. I looked at the hipster, pinning him with my most lethal glare. "Care to add something, punk?"

He swallowed hard. "You fell asleep because of an enchantment, not a potion."

The flicker of light, the brush of long grasses. A wand. It wasn't the powder Lennox threw. It was the other individual

hiding in the shadows! “Do you know any practitioners of that magic here?”

Vivian chewed on that for a second and then shook her head.

“That woman on Bleaker Street,” Ilene chimed in. “Didn’t we suspect she was something of that variety?”

It snapped into place. The woman Lennox had helped, who’d gone to the Blackwater Pack for protection.

“I’m going to pay our furry friends a visit,” I growled.

Kelda shifted uneasily. “I ran into the alpha; he was there. He almost rushed into the battalion of hunters, but with one shake of Lennox’s head, he retreated.”

Several things came to life right then and there.

“The werewolf?” The question was liquid ice.

My protégée shivered.

But the more distracting thought was that if Lennox was going to the werewolves, perhaps she hadn’t meant to be taken by the Guild.

“Tell me everything,” I demanded.

“Lennox was jogging down the street. I stopped to confront her. Before I could make a move to apprehend her, we realized there were hunters closing in. She—she—” Kelda stopped to take a deep breath. “She let me go.”

The last came out as a whisper.

“She sent me back to get you out of the house.” Kelda dropped her gaze, reaching one hand over to rub the opposite arm. “I should have snatched her and gone back for you, but—but I panicked.”

I let out a low growl.

Kelda flinched. “The moment I had you out and into the alley, I came back. Svet was wolfed out, ready to rush into the throng of vans and hunters. I heard Lennox trying to convince the others that there was a nest of vampires, but they—they

wouldn't believe her. I got Svet to back off, and then I brought you here."

A severe miscalculation on my part, but the real mystery remained. *Why didn't you want to go back to your kind, little huntress?*

It was my mistake. I thought I had her cornered, and I was prepared to show her I was her only option in the days ahead in Italy. Now...she'd slipped through my fingers. Right into her enemies'.

Would they end her? Or were they going to use her as a lab rat for their horrid experiments? They couldn't very well try her publicly and risk the others learning their dreadful secrets.

I stroked the signet ring, the one I'd imbued with our bond. Opening myself to the magic, I tried to sense what my blood mate felt.

She was scared. The fear slammed into me with a sheer brutality. She was struggling to fight it, her ire nearly as sharp. Whatever was going on, wherever those filthy hunters had her, it wasn't good.

"Do you know where they've taken her?" I snarled, rising from the...floor. I realized with a sudden caress of cold that I was naked.

"No," Kelda murmured.

"And it will be dawn in several hours." Vivian floated over, trying to peek at the area of skin the blanket didn't cover.

I bared my teeth at her, but she only arched a brow. "You're my guest, Cato. If I want to watch, it's the least you can do."

"Oh, top of the steep price of your hospitality?" I bit out, walking to the window.

Vivian only chuckled.

"Alright, Kelda, go and find where they are keeping her. I want results by noon."

My protégée disappeared into the waning night.

Meanwhile, I had to stagger to my lair. I threw myself on the bed, covering my eyes with my arm. “Oh, little huntress, what did you do?”





## Chapter 48 – Lennox

A picture of the vampire and me lay on the table.

The florescent lights sizzled above my head, their high-pitched whine grating. I blinked at the photograph and then at the inquisitor. There was little evidence of our relationship, but I would have to be careful how much I explained in case there was more where this picture came from.

“Care to explain, Lennox?” the man asked, his dull blue eyes watching me closely.

“Only if you explain why there are notes and redacted info on my family.” It was a far stretch, but I was done with games.

The inquisitor clicked off the monitor. Standing, he straightened his tie and snatched the picture off the metal table. “Oh, Miss Aelius. What lies have those creatures been telling you?”

“Some very interesting ones.” I hoped my friendly smile improved my chances.

It didn’t. The inquisitor nodded to the guard at the door. “Send in the H-7 team. It seems, Lennox, that we’re going to have to work on altering your opinion of us.”

The stark white walls seemed to close in. I swallowed hard. “I told the officer earlier, in my official report. I infiltrated a nest of vampires. I spent time with them under the guise of being a human, to find their hive.”

The inquisitor wasn’t even listening. He’d snapped on blue latex gloves. “Have you ever heard of conditioned responses? Yes? Excellent.”

Oh, shit. Oh, fricking shit! I leapt to my feet, ready to engage.

The guards rushed me. The struggle was over before it began. Plastic zip ties bound me to the chair. I didn’t see the H-7 team come through the door. Through my struggling, the

only sound that came through was the squeak of a rusted wheel.

I fought harder.

I fought for my life.

The first zap of electricity left me gasping.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Remember that scene where Lennox and her werewolf friend tried to trap the vampire?

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Step into my spooky, seashore villa.

Welcome to Alexa's manor. There are many rooms here, plenty of space for another soul. The only light come from the glow of a candle or the whisp of moonlight through the vaulted windows. These looming, stone walls hold many secrets. Find the hidden passages that lead to the treasure vaults.

Join the virtual fun...if you dare.

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[Reader Group](#) – a place where Alexa lets down her golden tresses, kicks back with her favorite sweet treat & glass of wine. You're encouraged to post, share pictures of how you picture your favorite characters, your reaction to her stories, or even what you're [sweet treat of the week](#) under the weekly thread. This is a casual, low key space. Somewhat like the poolside of the seashore villa.

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Patreon is filled with possibilities. Only those who want it all dare to take up one of these treasures.

The Gardens – [The Front Garden](#), [The Vegetable Garden](#), and [The Maze Garden](#) – Three places you can follow and like! I attempt to post daily, but with so many villains to wrangle as they attempt to find their other halves, posting on the socials can be an added craziness. So forgive me if I'm not always tending the flowers. Besides, sometimes it's better to let a garden grow a little wild so that there's something to bask in when you return.

**A note from Alexa:**

Thank you for indulging me as I painted a metaphor, comparing my digital presence to a haunted seaside villa. I've written the back matter in books for years, and this time, I would rather be clever and compare each place to a room instead of simply saying "Hey! I'm over here, oh, and I'm also over here." This expression of creativity soothes my soul and my hope is that it entices you to come over and stay a spell. So let's have a glass of ice tea on the front porch and get to know one another better!

Xoxo,

Alexa





# About The Author

Writing Day Dreams!

When Alexa isn't writing, she can be found with a book in her lap and a mug of coffee or glass of red wine within reach.

A native of the North Woods, Alexa is an avid lake-jumper, beach lounge, and sunshine lover. Alexa is living a happily ever after with her own steamy hero.

Summer 2023, Alexa and her husband moved to the Southern Coast, changing from the court of winter and ice and pledging their allegiance to the court of sun and sea.

Alexa loves any type of love story. So you can find her writing both contemporary romance and fantasy novels. Instead of making a separate pen name, Alexa just adds her middle initial to her fantasy genre books!

Alexa H. Michaels

“Monsters deserve love, too.”

She would love to hear from you.

Connect with her at: [www.alexamichaels.com](http://www.alexamichaels.com)