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MAY SAGE

MDWINTER NIGHT'S PRINCE



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Midwinter Night's Prince After Darkness Falls Book Six May Sage Cover by Clarissa Yeo Photography by Sara Eirew & Created with Vellum

THE GHOST

ife could suck hairy balls sometimes, but it was worth living so long as good street food existed.

Blair Lawson beamed gratefully at the elderly man who'd just fed her, handing him two thousand yen. She'd learned a fair few things about herself in the last six months. One of them was that she was considerably less grumpy when she had a full belly. She'd had to skip the occasional meal since the start of her journey. Blair grabbed her backpack and scampered when she felt the slightest hint of danger.

She hated it. Blair wasn't a runner at heart. Her natural inclination was to stay and fight.

Damn that man.

The man in question was frequently damned, in the safety of Blair's mind. Seth Stormhale had ruined her life, and one day she was going to enjoy making him pay for it.

She hated how often she thought of him in her rare moments of respite, but how could she help it? He was the reason behind everything she did these days. The reason why she saw foes behind every shadow, analyzing everything, everyone she encountered.

There was nothing dangerous about Gota Takana. The eighty-something Japanese elder pulled his cart of ramen around Kyoto at night, stopping when hailed by a client. Blair had already scanned his aura and peeked at the superficial layers of his mind. Blair had always enjoyed people watching. Humans were interesting to her. Before Seth, she would have simply wondered about the old man's story. Did he have a family? What did he feel about working so late in life? Was it a choice or something he had to do?

Now she knew. What you saw was what you got with Gota-san. He was a grandfather to three children he wished he saw more, and worked to pay off the debt left from the cost of their studies. The children wanted him to stop, accept money from them, but his pride wouldn't let him. Besides, he liked sharing his cooking with the world.

She'd asked none of that. Blair didn't speak to strangers. She couldn't afford to make herself memorable. She was no one. Nothing. Just a ghost.

But she knew all the same. She'd stolen a glimpse into the old man's mind.

Mind-reading was highly unethical. She'd taken enough classes in Oldcrest to know the entire world thought so. And yet, here she was...using warfare magic on old men.

She'd have to atone for that one day. If she survived the crappy situation Seth had thrust her into.

Blair couldn't resist a moan as she brought the first spoonful of broth to her lips. Gota-san's homemade ramen was the first thing she'd eaten since getting into town.

Delicious.

She was eating faster than she would have liked and entirely gracelessly. Blair would lick the bowl clean if she didn't fear that her mother would appear in front of her and blast her into oblivion for the affront.

Velvet grumbled his agreement on her lap as he munched his slice of *chashu*. Blair made sure she always had dry kibble for her cat, of course, but the tiny, spoiled feline much preferred fresh meat.

Gota-san stared at the two notes in his hand. "Sen-en!" he protested, handing her the second note.

When she shook her head, he lifted one finger, in case she didn't understand that he meant to give her the change back.

Blair was adamant. She had to count the money she spent, but the old man undeniably more than deserved twenty bucks for the mouthwatering hot meal.

She couldn't withdraw cash often, in case she was tracked digitally. To avoid taking risks, she got cash right before leaving a city. She'd just arrived in Kyoto that morning so she could afford a couple of days here before leaving the country, by her estimation.

Gota-san pocketed the money. Then, he cut another piece of pork for Velvet.

"Arigato," Blair said, no doubt butchering her thank you.

Blair was like most Americans: languages weren't her forte, because everyone around the world understood a degree of English. Still, she liked to learn a few words from the countries she travelled through. She'd picked up a bit of Japanese over the last month, some Tagalog in September. Before, she'd travelled through three South American countries; she'd made use of her rusty high school Spanish in Peru, but Portuguese had been challenging. In China, she'd learned to say hello, and that was about it. New Zealand had been the first English-speaking country she'd visited, and she hadn't stayed long. She guessed that those hunting her had a comprehensive list of her achievements. They'd studied her, assessing her strengths and weaknesses. That's what she would have done in their shoes. They must know she only spoke English fluently, so she'd avoided the easy, obvious destinations.

It was relatively amusing to think she'd visited so many places in such a short time. Seeing the world used to be one of her fantasies, something she'd envisioned happening in a distant future where she had all the time in the world, no classes or responsibilities. Maybe after retirement, she would have embarked on a privileged first-world soul-searching journey. This wasn't the way of her relatives. Blair's family had enough money for her to afford traveling. Each of her cousin had taken a gap year to see the five continents before college. But Blair didn't rely on the White fortune, the White name, or the White anything. She was a Lawson. Lawsons worked for what they had. She wanted to earn her right to discover the world.

She would never have thought that she'd travel with five fake passports, credit cards under someone else's name, and using a kind of magic she entirely despised on perfectly innocent strangers.

Yet here she was. Because life sucked.

Once Velvet was done with the last of his *chashu* bits, the cat expertly leaped on her shoulder, balancing himself with elegance. At six months old, Velvet was supposed to look like a youngster, not quite an adult cat, but he still had the demeanor, attitude, and size of a tiny weeks-old kitten, though thankfully he was finally litter trained. Keeping her stuff cat pee-free had been a bitch during the first few weeks of travel. Blair would have asked Alexius Helsing to look at Velvet had she still been in Oldcrest, in order to understand why he wasn't growing. In an effort to save the kitten months ago, he'd used plenty of science and magic—something must have hindered the cat's development. She needed to know if it was reversible. Velvet was healthy—she had him checked by many vets, over many months—but he wasn't growing.

She wasn't. In Oldcrest. She'd left her home in the summer, and she couldn't afford to contact any of her friends. Not if she wanted them safe. Safe from the man whose soul she carried.

She got up, thanking the old man again as guilt twisted her insides.

He waved off her pleasantries, turning his attention to the wooden bench he wanted to load on his cart again. With his focus on the task at hand, he didn't see the witch's eyes brighten, to match the silver of a bright moonlight. He didn't see her face twist in distaste as she focused on him, both of her hands rising in the air.

And seconds later, he forgot she was ever there.

Because Blair no longer existed.

DANCING WITH EVIL

The beauty of megalomaniacs was that they always believed they were the best, the cleverest, and that no one could possibly outwit them. Seth Stormhale understood that like almost no one else could. After all, he was deeply, passionately, unconditionally in love with himself. He didn't even pretend to make any apologies about it. Why wouldn't he adore the man in the mirror? If he didn't, no one else would. Prey weren't designed to love their predators.

Aveka Primerius loved herself, to an extent even Seth could have admired. They understood each other, he and she. Two lone wolves, detested and fears by those who should have cared for them. If Aveka had been less of a psychopath, they would have made quite the pair.

Her character served him well. She truly believed herself to be on top of the situation. And he liked her that way. Gullible. Malleable.

"Oh, right there," she begged as his thumb brushed the nub of her sensitive flesh, curving against his touch.

Seth rolled his eyes. She should know by now. Telling him what she needed was the best way to ensure she wouldn't get it.

He drew his hand away from her pussy, moving it to her slender waist.

Aveka was pleasing enough to look at. She was short and toned by her strict training regimen—as well as fucking the pretty boys she surrounded herself with, no doubt—but her curves were still generous, in a way that had gone out of fashion some centuries ago. He could objectively appreciate her beauty. He could even appreciate her wickedness. What he didn't appreciate was being forced to serve as her slave—in and out of the bedroom.

Seth considered himself positively ruthless. He had few boundaries, and all of them were flexible depending on the situation. Yet in his thirty-six years, he'd never forced himself on anyone, male or female. The entire notion repelled him. Seducing an enemy into his bed? Absolutely. He liked that kind of mind trick. But Seth would never have used his position of power to force someone into his bed. Aveka realized he had no desire to fuck her, but she demanded it. Well, he could technically have fought against her commends, but Seth liked to pick and choose his battles.

He might thrash against the confines of his bounds, fight tooth and nail to maintain a semblance of freedom, but in the end, he wasn't free. He was her creature. For now.

Seth had had to make himself useful; he fetched rare poisons, stole precious items and otherwise obeyed his master like a well-trained dog, because he didn't want her to decide to kill him. There was only one job he delayed and botched.

Fuck.

How the hell had he let that snake get a bite of him? Him! If his father ever heard of this, he'd be in deeper shit than he already was.

Gripping the bitch's waist tighter than she liked, he pressed her down on his semi-hard shaft, his mouth closing in on her neck. He had to give it to her: her blood tasted sickeningly delightful. Thick with magic, it was pure, unpolluted. She was born before the stench of industry, and he could tell. He felt himself grow stiff, aroused not only by her blood but also by the fact that he had her by the throat.

Too bad he couldn't rip it out and be done with this nonsense. Aveka had been shrewd enough to order him to never bring any harm to her. However he liked to play with her words, there was no possible interpretation that might have made biting through an artery sound like something harmless. Still, he frequently daydreamed about it.

Aveka tightened on top of him as his hips worked in and out of her. She moaned in pleasure, begging for more, harder, faster. He hated that she was enjoying this—enjoying him.

Seth closed his eyes, blocking out the fragrance of her sweat, the sound of her voice, and the feel of her body on top of his. He let himself think of someone else entirely. Another witch. Dark nails. Ridiculous, wavy hair colored at the tips. She was a strong, defiant woman who enjoyed nothing more than fighting him at every opportunity, but in his mind, she was on her knees, a gag of silk on her mouth, wearing cuffs around her wrists. At his mercy.

His.

A smirk curved on his lips as he came inside Aveka, fast. Shit, he hadn't even lasted a minute this time. Another man would have been embarrassed. He was proud of himself. Seth purposely sucked at fucking the bitch every time she demanded a tumble. Maybe she'd get the hint eventually.

Aveka laughed, her high pitch as cringeworthy as nails on a chalkboard. "You never last with me. I think you like being buried deep inside me," she purred, sultry as ever.

Seth sighed as he pushed up from the witch's silky bed. Of course, she took his purposeful lack of stamina as a compliment to her skills. There was no end to her egocentricity.

"Was there any other reason you requested my presence, *Your Highness*?" He pronounced the last two words with all the contempt he could infuse, treating her like the joke she was.

The Seven original vampiric families were considered royalty among their peers, but their titles were mostly honorific. They had no land to lord over. Some vampires pledged to their name in exchange for favor or protection, like the slayers at Seth's service, but they had no political authority.

One family had stood above all others and ruled—the Eirikrsons. But like every other dynasty, they fell centuries ago.

Around the world, vampirekind had founded several kingdoms, all ruled by elected monarchs who governed for a hundred years at a time—the true kings and queens of night. The European election was due in a few months.

Aveka didn't have *any* title, as far as the vampires were concerned. She hadn't been elected by the conclave, and while she was Eirikr Primerius's only child, he'd fathered her before being turned into a vampire, which meant that technically, she wasn't even an Eirikrson princess.

Aveka also had a mother, nigh on as notable as her illustrious father. Tatiana Vespian had been a powerful witch in the old days, and her clan was legendary. They were one of the thirteen primal witch clans. But Aveka wasn't the heir of that line. The Vespian Witch Queen title belonged to a pretty redhead closely protected within the borders of Oldcrest.

Aveka was queen of nothing.

That could change, however. With the right tools, and the right people behind her, she could claim what she wanted—a place on Night Hill, inside the Skyhall manor, with vampirekind at her feet.

She was so very close to her goal, no doubt she could almost taste it. She had an army, the support of many among the ancients who were terrified of the Eirikrsons, and she had spells that could bring those who fought against her to her side —such as the one she'd used on Seth.

The only thing she truly needed was him.

Aveka's expression contorted into a bitter sneer he well knew before she spat her answer. "The girl."

There was no need for him to ask which girl she referred to. There was only one girl who mattered in the entire world at the moment, both to him and to Aveka. "What girl?" he asked nonetheless, zipping up his dark jeans.

By the gods, he needed a fucking shower to scrub Aveka's floral miasma off his skin.

Aveka's jaw ticked. "How many girls have you tied your soul to recently?"

Seth shot Aveka a delighted smirk.

He wasn't the first fucker she'd captured in her web, bending them to her will until they were nothing but puppets. The process was old witchcraft, long since forbidden. No one taught that craft, because it was highly illegal. Over the years, huntsmen had disposed of many witches who dared twist the will of others for their own gains. Seth was, however, the first to have outwitted her.

Seth despised admitting it, but his escape had been sheer, dumb luck.

When the spell had worked its way through him, he'd thought of the havoc Aveka would have him cause to Oldcrest. His lightning could penetrate the defensive walls. Aveka would make him destroy everything in his path—including his sister.

Catharina was the only person who mattered to him in Oldcrest, but to his surprise, he also spared a thought for Blair. The young woman was so full of life and joy. She smiled and laughed openly—at least, when he wasn't in the immediate vicinity. Most mortals didn't register as individuals to Seth. They lived for a hot second and died without accomplishing much. But Blair? She'd stood out from the first moment he'd felt her soul, before he'd even caught a glimpse of her.

She felt strong. Not in a way he fully understood, but Seth never dismissed what his instincts told him. One thing was certain: he didn't want her to come to harm. She was a puzzle he hadn't yet put together, and Seth was quite fond of puzzles.

In a split second, he remembered he and Blair were linked. She'd been ballsy or foolish enough to enter his mind once, and he'd returned the favor. Then, he knew what he had to do, risky as it could be—for him.

For her.

He weighed potential dangers against the certainty of doom Aveka's control meant, and opted for the unknown.

The spell Aveka had started on him forced him to obey her will. Sending the core of his soul to Blair had allowed him to evade true subjugation. She couldn't take his mind, because it wasn't currently residing inside his body.

"Blair, then. Apologies," Seth said, unapologetic as ever. "You seem preoccupied with a number of girls in my acquaintance. Chloe, Greer, Claudia—to name a few."

Claudia was a new addition to the list of women Aveka wished to control or eliminate.

When weeks turned to months without any of Aveka's hunters catching Blair, she turned her efforts to Seth's youngest sister, hoping to control him through her. Not a terrible plan, but Claudia was impossible to get to.

In his absence, Claudia ruled the Stormhale clan. The duty might have gone to Catharina, the second-born, had she been in Italy, but she was in Scotland. Despite her young age, Claudia was more than competent to lead their clan.

She was protected by a number of devoted slayers, including Cendric, the most redoubtable of Seth's guards. And if Aveka's goons should get through all of their defenses, they'd have to deal with Claudia herself.

Seth grinned. Good luck to them.

Wisely, Aveka never attempted to ordered Seth to hunt his sister. She might have suspected that no good would come of bringing them together. Besides, he'd gladly take a long walk off a short pier rather than hurting a hair on Claudia's hair.

Aveka was wasting Seth's time ordering him to hunt Blair instead.

"Never mind the others, it's Blair I want." Aveka's nostrils flared. "She's evaded us for too long. Don't think I don't see what you're doing, either."

"Oh?" Seth didn't hide his amusement.

"You're stalling," she accused.

Seth wasn't sure how he managed to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. He was with Aveka because her spell forced him to be, no other reason. He had to be minimally helpful in order to placate her, but what could possibly possess Aveka to think that he'd serve her the means to his actual enslavement on a silver platter?

"You've ordered me to find Blair and bring her back to you. I'm endeavoring to do so."

He wasn't.

Well, he had to *look*, the spell ordered him to do no less. It didn't mean that he had to look in the right places.

"You need to try harder. Be faster about it. No more stalling. I command you!"

Seth tried not to laugh. It wasn't the first time she'd attempted to speed him along. *Faster* and *harder* were subjective notions, however, and as such, he could ignore them. He acted like a six-year-old told to put his shoes on before school. At his own leisure. "Fine. You might want to stop calling me back to Atlantis while I'm doing your bidding, then."

"You spent two weeks in New Zeeland, when there's no proof that she was ever there!" Aveka screeched.

"There's little proof Blair has been anywhere of late." Seth didn't conceal his admiration. He had to admit, he was impressed with his witch. She'd been craftier than expected.

He had naturally hoped that she was halfway competent when he'd charged her with guarding his soul, but she'd surprised him. He would have helped her along, erasing her trail, if he had to, but there had been no need. Blair had truly disappeared. He'd found footage of her entering various places —cafes, restaurants, hotels—and yet none of the employees remembered anyone fitting her description. He'd known that there was more to her than met the eye from the moment she touched his mind in his sleep. The way she so thoroughly evaded attention confirmed it. And a good thing, too. Seth and the thugs dispatched along with him weren't the only ones Aveka had sent after her, and the others weren't attempting to mess up the job.

"Then why New Zealand?"

"I followed her trail." It was not quite a lie, though it wasn't the entire truth either.

If Aveka was too stupid to realize that carrying his soul made Blair a part of him, and that he could sense her, he wasn't about to enlighten her.

"To the wrong place!"

Seth fired up his phone, scrolling through his gallery until he found the right video: a recording of an airport camera, showing a clear close-up of Blair's elfin face, moments before she lowered a hood and walked away.

Seth's jaw tightened like it had every time he'd watched that video. A dozen times at least.

Blair didn't look like herself. The flash of bright color at the tips of her hair had long faded. Her nails weren't painted black or green, like they had been any time he'd seen her. She wasn't wearing combat gear and heavy boots.

Blair looked ordinary. Useful, when she needed to blend in, but he disliked it all the same. She was meant to be a bright flame in this mundane world.

Seth turned the phone to face Aveka, who still lounged on top of the dark silk sheets.

The witch snatched the device up, her eyes bulging. "When was this taken?"

"Two days before I arrived. She might still have been in the country when you called me back." She hadn't been. "So, how about you get off my back, hm?"

And preferably off his cock, too.

STATUS QUO

The annoying thing with being human in a world filled with immortals was having to work harder than them. Particularly when said immortals were intent on murdering Blair.

She woke to nails on chalkboard—one of the few sounds guaranteed to instantly alert her. One of her traps had been set off by something, hopefully. If she wasn't lucky, by some*one*.

On a few occasions, a dog or a rat had been the culprit the gods knew there were plenty of pests in the kind of dumps she could afford to stay in—but she couldn't assume there was no threat.

"Sorry, buddy." The kitten sleeping against her breast didn't so much as budge as she cupped it in one hand and set him back down on the bed, though both of his yellow eyes were fixed on her, narrowed into slits. She wasn't entirely sure what he understood of the situation, but Velvet had never been difficult when they had to flee.

Sometimes, Blair felt selfish for having taken Velvet with her. Kittens were supposed to have a home, a territory they could lord over. Comfort and stability. She'd given him nothing but grief. Impossible races against creatures so much bigger than either of them. Taking Velvet with her had been an impulse, a thoughtless decision made in the moment. She couldn't bring herself to regret it, though. Blair was a social creature at heart. She couldn't have done this alone. Not for this long. The ball of fur held her sanity in his cute, razorsharp claws.

She threw on her jacket over the yoga pants and white Tshirt she slept in. Blair always had to be ready to go. Decadent negligees hadn't been part of her life back in the Institute, either, but she'd been one for tiny shorts. No longer. She slept in comfortable clothes no one would blink at if they saw her in the street. She'd also taken to wearing slip-on boots, because they were faster to slide into than anything else. Combat boots might have been more comfortable and practical in the past, but the seconds they required to put on and lace up could mean the difference between being safely out of the way and meeting an untimely death.

At least she'd met Death a few months back, and the guy was a hottie. Blair was infinitely comforted by the fact that there was eye candy in the underworld, but she would still prefer to survive five or so decades before drooling over Tanatos for the rest of time.

Her loaded backpack on her shoulders, she picked up Velvet, and slid him in the inner pocket of the checkered hunting jacket she favored—mostly because of the number of pockets. Then, Blair built shields upon shields, masking her presence as well as she could.

She'd purposely asked for a room on the ground floor, and she paid it night by night in order to be able to slip away unnoticed when it was required. Eyes on the door, she crept out of the window. She could hear approaching footsteps—at least two pairs, though her senses were far less acute than that of the creatures hunting her. Blair's craft wasn't that great. The only magic that came naturally to her was mind control—a discipline she'd never had to learn. It had come to her in her teens, along with her C cup breasts and a few pimples. She tensed. Maybe she'd messed up her shields, and they could already smell her. Sense her. Hear her.

A glance at her electronic wristwatch revealed it was four in the morning. It was possible the footsteps had belonged to a couple of young backpackers coming home late. Her traps were set to wake her up whenever someone entered her building as she slept. She could be overreacting. Maybe she could have slept another two or three hours—and by the gods, she really needed the extra sleep.

She'd never know.

Leaving the hostel without a backward glance, she decided to get out of Kyoto right away. She'd lingered two weeks that was pushing it. It was the end of October; maybe she could go to Canada? No one would think her stupid enough to submit herself to frostbite. Was she?

Blair frowned, glancing down at the bundle against her chest. She could handle the cold. Velvet, not so much.

Where to next?

She walked at a fast pace in the empty, foggy streets, eyes downcast under her brown hood, bringing no attention to herself.

How about some African country? A little heat would be nice during the coming weeks. Not to mention, like most western witches, Blair was fascinated by African craft. She could learn a thing or two if a clan took pity on her.

A nice fantasy, but of course, she realized she would never make her presence known to other witches. And if a clan did find her? She'd have to make them forget all about it, although messing with the minds of her fellow witches didn't sit well with her.

None of what she'd done sat well with her. Someday she'd make up for it. For now, there was only survival.

Her footfall heavier thanks to all her anger and frustration, she kept going, muttering a slew of curses carried by the wind, most addressed to an infuriating, selfish bastard of a vampiredemigod. Months later, she *still* couldn't believe Seth had put her in this situation. That he'd dared demand she uproot herself from everyone to save his skin. Why her, dammit?

"Fucking half-limp dickwit," were the last whispers out of her mouth when she felt the air change around her, grow colder, almost electric. "Now, now. That wasn't very nice, witch."

Witch.

He'd always called her that, from the very first time. Here he was, standing in the shadows, wrapped in the darkness of the fog, beautiful and terrible like the god he sort of was. He wore common, mundane clothes that looked like a disguise on him: chinos and a fitted light blue polo shirt. His shoulders were too broad, his frame, too large, and his eyes, too cruel for that kind of clothing.

After all this time, Seth had found her.

That could mean only one thing. Either he was under Aveka's control, and he'd come to kill her, or he'd managed to weasel his way out of the self-appointed queen's grasp. Either way, she was free.

"It took you long enough to get to me." Blair's voice sounded stronger than she felt. Almost teasing.

He shrugged. "To be fair, I was attempting to mess up the job."

Shit. He didn't intend to be here. This wasn't part of the plan. That meant he was still Aveka's puppet, at least partially.

"What now?" Her heart beat fast in her chest.

She'd imagined all the insults she'd spew at him when she saw him again. In her dreams, she screamed at him, threw chairs, daggers, or mugs full of steaming tea at his annoyingly perfect head. But the urgency robbed her of that fantasy. If he was still under Aveka's control, she needed to get out of there, fast.

He glanced behind her shoulder. "We have a minute, perhaps. How have you been?"

Was he fucking serious?

"How have I been? I've been on the run for six months because of you, asshole!" Well, she did get to scream something after all. His teeth flashed, showing bright fangs. "Lively as always, I see."

She was going to murder him someday. Just as she contemplated how, Seth produced a dagger. Blair wasn't a weapons specialist, though she knew her way around a blade, but she could tell at a glance this thing was a beauty. Marked with intricate symbols on the hilt, the silver blade seemed sharp, and yet the weapon looked ancient. Blair could just tell it was imbued with old magic.

"So, this is how it ends?" Her voice had dropped to a whisper.

In her nightmares, Blair imagined Seth grasping her throat, or with his fangs against the curve of her neck, but she'd never imagined him holding a knife against her. It was almost too civilized for this creature—this incomprehensibly powerful beast.

Seth winced. "Hopefully not. I intend to go in a much more spectacular fashion. My demise requires songs, fanfare, and the tears of a thousand souls." Before she had a chance to retort, he twirled the dagger between his fingers with a practiced ease. "I like to play with blades. I'm sometimes careless. You'll take this weapon from me, and then, I suggest you plant it in my flank. Preferably avoiding vital organs, if you please."

What game was he playing? "A blade isn't going to do anything to you."

"This one will, for a time."

She didn't get it—didn't get *him*. And why would she? She was just one of his pawns. Seth Stormhale didn't explain himself to pawns.

God, she *hated* him so much.

The blade turned around his hand gracefully and with speed, but Blair recognized the pattern after mere seconds. She moved to take it, grasping its hilt just as it hung in the air for a split second. He let her, she realized that. Had Seth Stormhale wanted to harm her, she would already be ashes on the pavement before she could blink.

With no small degree of satisfaction, Blair pushed against his chest with one hand, and held the blade to his throat, leaning in close.

She could feel the magic of the weapon speak to her, empowering her beyond measure.

She'd never been Seth's equal. No one was. But with this blade between them, it felt like he didn't hold all the power for once. She'd be damned if she let this opportunity pass. "Tell me your game." Blair inched closer yet. "What the hell are you planning?"

He chuckled, looking positively delighted with this turn of events. She'd surprised him.

"This isn't how it works, witch." Seth spoke low, softly. "If you want answers, you'll have to let me in."

Damn him.

She could hear footsteps coming.

Too fast. Too purposeful.

Vampires.

She'd wasted precious time.

Blair drew back the blade, aimed precisely, and plunged it right into his chest. And damn if it didn't feel awesome.

Seth grunted, lips curling over his fangs. Then he smiled. "Still here, witch? Are you concerned for my wellbeing?"

Right. "Maybe I'm just enjoying the show."

It wasn't blood running along his chest, marring his shirt. Not really.

The seven vampires initially made by Ariadne had blue blood. Their descendants' blood was black as night. The one exception Blair had known about was Chloe Eirikrson, whose blood was purple. The running theory was that Jack's father had changed something in her when he shared the nanotechnology in his cells to help her along during her change.

Seth was bleeding liquid gold.

What the hell was he?

"You might want to scamper—lest you'd rather feed a couple of eager foot soldiers."

Unfortunately, the asshole had a point.

With one last look behind her shoulder, she called to her power to grant her some preternatural speed for a moment.

She ran, the gold-stained dagger clasped in her fist like a lifeline.

Finally. *Finally*. She had a weapon against the predator hunting her.

A weapon said predator had given to her.

THE CALL

V elvet nestled against her chest, Blair tossed and turned on her uncomfortable seat. At the risk of seeming outrageously bourgeois, she'd never had to fly commercial before this year. As a kid, when she'd travelled with her mother on official business, they'd used the clan's private jet. Though their relationship was testy at best, Terra White had insisted on sending the jet on the occasions Blair had returned home. They were few and far between, and growing rarer. Blair used to endeavor to focus on her studies, and seldom travelled anywhere at all.

Before Seth, in any case.

She was stuck between a gross guy who'd glanced down her T-shirt and checked out the flight attendants' backsides and a teen girl listening to music with her headphones set far too loud. The middle-aged man was asleep now, but his snoring, deep enough to rival the thunder of a locomotive, certainly wasn't helping. Nor was the hardness of the dagger digging against her hip, but she wasn't about to let her weapon out of her sight. Not for one moment.

Getting it on the plane hadn't been easy—a temporary concealment charm might have been a piece of cake for the likes of her friend Greer Vespian, but Blair's transfiguration skills left a lot to be desired. She managed to make it look like a dildo, though it retained the cold shine of a metal. She used a similar charm to make Velvet appear like a plushie, because there was no way she'd make him travel in the hold. She didn't doubt there would be gossips about the girl traveling with a stuff cat and a dildo, later. Blair didn't bother to wipe the memory of airport staff; they met enough people every day for her to blend into the crowd.

The attendant checking her things barely batted an eyelash. Who knew, maybe kitty stuffed toys and iron sex toys were a thing now.

Though Blair wasn't quite convinced the blade was made of iron. The metal didn't feel familiar to her. It was too light, and not cold enough to the touch. Sometimes it seemed to shine in the dark, and in the light, could appear quite dull. She'd trained with a fair number of blades back at Oldcrest, and this dagger didn't feel like any of them.

She would have loved to study it in a lab, unravel each spell, understand what made it different. It *was* different, of that she was certain.

She'd seen Seth in battle in two instances. Both times, he'd taken pains to remain hidden from any of Aveka's supporters, save for those he'd intended to dispose of, but he hadn't concealed himself from her. Arrows had pierced his skin, blades had slashed him, and he'd laughed it off as the wound closed within the blink of an eye. An impossible rate, even for a vampire.

He was more.

How much more, she couldn't say. Blair knew Seth was the son of an Enlightened—a god—but that didn't explain why he felt so inhuman, so above mortals and immortals alike.

Jack Hunter was a demi-god. Blair may not have been close to him, but she'd seen him around for years. They'd only started to frequent the same circle recently. He could come off as cold, perhaps calculating at first, but once she got used to his ways, she grew comfortable with him. Jack *was* human, at least in some part. Seth? Not so much. He felt...too big for this world. Like an entity locked in a prison of flesh.

He felt like a monster.

What kind of a monster depended on who spawned him, of course. Jack's dad was a minor deity. Who was Seth's?

Blair had forbidden herself from indulging in her curiosity about the head of the Stormhales back in Oldcrest. Seth was dangerous. She lived surrounded by werewolves and vampires, and they were puppies compared to him different. Like a sup gone rogue, he didn't live by any rules. She'd wanted to stay far, far away from him, out of self-preservation.

Now, she didn't have much of a choice. He was going to continue hunting her as long as Aveka controlled him.

It was time to get to know the man who'd become both her ally and enemy, and the dagger against her flank was her only clue. Part of her itched to pull it out and inspect it. She was fairly certain the spell had disappeared by now. Though if they were paying attention to her, the passengers seated in the aisle and window might be just as freaked by her pulling out a knife as a dildo. She left it alone, conscious of its weight at every moment.

The flight to Toronto was scheduled to take half a day, and she'd spent the first few hours of it thinking about her knife, but she could hardly afford to waste the opportunity. She was safe here—if her pursuers had caught up with her, they would already have dragged her down to Atlantis—and she should take the opportunity to catch some uninterrupted sleep.

Yet the thought of wasting precious hours on rest when she had mysteries to unravel instead was entirely unappealing.

Unless...

Her very idea seemed ludicrous—and needlessly dangerous. But Blair wasn't one to sit idly when she could act.

Blair winced as she attempted to relax. The headboard hit at an odd angle. With a sigh, she closed her eyes, calling to her magic.

Join me in sleep.

The clear and simple silent order rang in her head, in a voice that didn't quite belong to her. It was softer, lower, like a caress.

Irresistible.

So, enthralled by her own spell, she slept.

DIFFICULT

e needed to sleep.

Seth wasn't one to crash more than a couple of hours here and there—less, when he was accompanied by buffoons such as the four men assigned to him. He trusted them as much as he trusted a starving dog to resist a juicy steak. They were no danger to him, but Seth wanted to spare himself the bother of explaining their demise to Aveka.

Every time he went against her, he ran the risk that she finally decided he wasn't worth keeping around. Seth preferred his risks calculated. The foursome wasn't worth the headache.

Burg was built like a tank, and nearly as tall as Seth, but his true skill laid in his mastery of knives and pincers that he bestowed upon unwilling subjects to loosen their tongues. None of his victims had been able to say a thing about Blair, no matter what he made them suffer, which confirmed that the minx was indeed a skilled psychic.

Seth could have told anyone as much. Over a year ago now, she'd managed to reach *his* mind, and from a distance. Not many could have gone through his shields, even as he slept.

Vince, a dark-skinned bald man, was perhaps the least irritating of his new companions, because he was entirely mute. Someone had cut his tongue out. According to Burg, Vince had already been turned into a vampire by the time he was amputated, so it would grow back eventually. Hopefully, not any time soon.

Gerald looked thoroughly ordinary; of average build and dull looks, he wasn't about to catch anyone's attention—which made him the perfect scout.

Adam was the only mortal among them—he wielded magic with some skill, Seth supposed, though he wasn't impressed. Strangely, Adam seemed to be the leader among the four.

The goons lounged around him, impatiently waiting for the dead of night. The five of them were too conspicuous during the day, too quickly spotted. And vampires naturally preferred to hunt in darkness, out of habit rather than true necessity. Sunlight could be mildly irritating to their sensitive eyes, but the vampires of old had waited for night in order to seek easier prey—the lost, the drunk, the foolish. Those no one would bother to miss.

The curtains of the apartment they were renting for the night were shut tight, so that no ray of light touched the large TV screen at the back of the sitting room. Vince kept changing the channel every other minute. Burg let out a growl of annoyance that had Seth wondering if the man was part troll. That would explain the smell.

"I liked that show!" the giant protested.

Adam snorted. "Synchronized swimming?"

"The girls are pretty."

Seth tuned out the nonsense, his attention commandeered entirely elsewhere. He needed to sleep. Right now. The knowledge tugged at the corner of his mind, making itself more and more intense as moments passed.

Unless he was very much mistaken, there was a spell of sorts at work, and Seth wasn't the kind of weakling who let second-rate sorcerers mess with his mind.

But...he needed to sleep.

Dammit.

Seth pushed to his feet, getting off the leather armchair he'd claimed, and announced, "I'm not to be disturbed."

It sounded like an order, and that was exactly what it was. Adam was the leader of the party, according to Aveka, but no one was fooled. Seth wasn't part of their little cult. He was here because he had no other choice, with Aveka's spell requiring him to follow her orders, though he'd bought himself some leeway. Unshackled, he could and would have wiped the floor with their faces.

He made his way to the owner's suite, each step heavier as slumber slid onto his skin like water. He fell on his back against the hard mattress and let sleep claim him.

Seth's eyes opened in a familiar room. White walls, deep blue curtains, velvet loveseats, and rich tapestries woven centuries ago. A room that had been reduced to ashes last summer. The Stormhale hall on Night Hill.

"Took you long enough."

A smile tugged at his lips as he turned to face Blair. His Blair, with pink tips in her hair. Well, almost. Instead of combat gear, she wore leggings and a leather jacket, with what appeared to be a tutu, the same pink as her hair.

He stared pointedly at the ridiculous skirt.

"Well, I don't question your fondness for brocade and tailcoats."

Seth lifted an imperious brow. "There's nothing wrong with my fashion taste."

She snorted. "There's nothing right with it either," she quipped easily.

Seth could only look at her, slightly lost and perhaps impressed. Blair wasn't sassy with him. Blair didn't speak to him at all if she could help it.

Except here, in the confines of her dream, where she was in control.

He found he liked her that way. Confident. Sure of her power, even facing him.

She'd been terrified the first time she'd encroached on his mind. The woman in front of him was an entirely different creature.

"How would you have me dress? In a black monkey suit, like the rest of the world?" Seth despised anything ordinary.

"Why would I want to dress you at all?"

He shrugged. "Well, it's your dream. If you'd prefer me naked, just say the word."

Blair rolled her eyes, reclining on what had been his favorite chaise longue. He wished Aveka had more regard for furniture. Finding both comfort and style in an antique piece was no easy feat.

"Tempting as that offer is, I'll pass." She pretended to grimace, and Seth could only chuckle.

He wasn't blind to his appeal to anyone attracted to his sex. Other than his blood relatives, he'd never met a person who wasn't impressed by what they saw. When they were attached and faithful, men and women looked away. But they saw him.

Blair was no exception. She was good at hiding it, but he saw the blood gathering under her skin, flooding her cheeks with heat. He heard the rhythm of her pulse when he looked into her eyes.

She might not like it, but she was attracted to him, as was any human. It was simply in her nature. The fact that she fought it amused him.

"What I want from you is answers." His blade appeared in her hand, materializing out of thin air. "What is this?"

Of course, she'd glean the importance of the weapon. Seth hid all discomfort behind his brightest smile. "A long knife, or short sword, I suppose."

Blair sighed. "You don't have to be difficult, Seth."

How wrong she was.

"What is it?" Blair repeated. "Why is it capable of hurting you when nothing else can?"

"Yes, witch, let me list my weaknesses for you alphabetically, so that you may catalog them." Surely she realized how ridiculous she was to demand this of him.

Blair's jaw tightened. "You're the one who gave it to me."

"Would you have rather I brought you to Atlantis and doomed us both?" he asked, conversational as ever. "Along with the rest of your friends and my family, of course."

The tension in the air was thick with her frustration, fueling his.

Seth could think of many ways to relax them both. He's start by ripping the leggings off, then her tight bodice. The tutu, she could keep. And the boots too.

He was surprised by the wave of desire hitting him unexpectedly. Surprised, and pleased.

Sex had always been a simple need to him, like food, blood, and air. He'd sated it as required, with whomever suited his fancy. Yet that need had completely disappeared months ago. He hadn't even felt the echo of it since the first time Aveka's skin had slithered against his.

And here it was. Lust, awakened in a dream.

Seth shouldn't have been surprised. He'd always noticed Blair's appeal. She hadn't been worth the bother, or the complications—she was a friend of Catarina's, after all. But he'd appreciated her lithe, supple frame, her scent, and the shape of her mouth. Quite delightful, with that plumper upper lip. Bitable, just like the curve of her neck.

"Fine, don't tell me about the knife," she relented, to his surprise. "I'm in this mess because of you, and you are hunting me. I can't stay blind, though. You owe me."

He was just human enough to agree with that. The problem was, he didn't care. "And what, pray, do you want from me?"

"Tell me who you are. Tell me what you are," she corrected.

"A born vampire," he replied smoothly, "with the blood of a god."

Her eyes narrowed. "Enough with the obvious. I'm supposed to be able to stay a step ahead of you. That requires understanding who I'm running from. If you're a water deity, I should stay away from islands. If you're an Egyptian demigod, as your ridiculously pompous name would suggest—"

Seth saw her point, but it was irrelevant. "You're not running from me. I know where you are—thousands of feet over the ocean at the moment. I always know where you are."

She blinked in surprise. "Then—"

"I gave you my soul because I want you to keep it safe. I'm not your enemy."

"But—"

"No buts. That's all you need to know. Don't ask questions you don't want answered."

So long as she was carrying part of him, Blair had to stay safe, and getting pulled into his world, into his legacy, was the opposite.

Aveka was child's play, compared to the enemies he'd inherited.

"Seth—"

He didn't let her say another word. Seth willed himself awake, abandoning the only peace he'd known in months.

RESPONSIBILITIES

There were many things that the old Chloe Miller could have imagined doing by the time she approached her twenty-seventh birthday. Working, of course—probably waiting tables. Studying for her master's, if she was lucky. Taking up the violin, maybe. Who knew?

Running after an evil, cackling goblin wouldn't have been anywhere on the list.

Chloe Eirikrson's life had taken many turns she could never have foreseen. She regretted none of them.

"Ruby! You need pants if you want to go outside!" Her daughter didn't agree with that statement. She was quite content to crawl on all fours, her diaper-covered bottom high in the air.

Chloe rushed down the lavish flight of stairs leading to the entryway of Skyhall, yet again wondering how that toddler managed to be so damn fast and sneaky. None of the newparent books she'd inhaled the last few months had prepared her to raise a little fledgling. They should have. Born vampires were mortal until they turned, like Chloe had been. Her baby shouldn't be any different from a human child.

Chloe snorted.

A minute ago, Ruby had been playing quietly in her playpen. Chloe took the opportunity to catch the shortest shower in the history of vampirekind. She didn't think she'd taken more than thirty-five seconds to undress, hop under the cold spray, wash, and wrap herself in a towel. By the time she returned to the master bedroom, Ruby was gone.

"Devious little thing," she grumbled.

Ruby was fast. Incredibly fast.

Chloe used the might of her supernatural speed to rush through the house, following her daughter's scent until she reached the front doors.

She arrived just as Alexius picked the little demon up, and threw her high over his head. The toddler laughed, delighted as ever. "Now where are we going, princess?"

Ruby had a reply at the ready—a steady stream of gibberish that she delivered with the confidence of a true orator.

"I see," Alexius replied with a sage nod. "You might just want to wear a jacket before going down to see Billivern. Or pants. It's quite chilly out."

"You did *not* understand what she was saying." Chloe rolled her eyes.

"Of course I did. She made herself perfectly clear. The question is, why didn't you?"

Chloe didn't grace that with an answer. The one person who could actually understand Ruby was Eirikr himself. In her first few weeks, Ruby had cried a fair bit. During one of her visits to Cosnoc, Eirikr had told Chloe exactly which of her daughter's teeth had hurt. Though she had no clear speech yet, he'd been able to interpret the feelings her mind projected to him.

Chloe had not hidden how insanely jealous of her ancestor she was, and the rest of her friends didn't miss an opportunity to mock her about it.

"You're early."

Alexius was babysitting tonight. He'd offered, in order to let Chloe attend her classes.

Never tearing his gaze from the child, the ancient shrugged. "Never too early to see my little princess." He finally glanced at Chloe. "You may go, if you'd like."

Just like that, she was dismissed. Chloe chuckled.

From the moment Ruby was born, the inhabitants of Night Hill had worshiped her. She had a dozen honorary aunts and uncles who'd die to protect her. The fact that they were some of the most powerful supernatural creatures in the entire world didn't hurt, either.

"I'll head to school. Be careful. She's getting faster, I think." Chloe wrinkled her nose. "Aren't newborns supposed to be like regular kids?"

Alexius was their resident doctor. He was well versed in most modern medicine, as well as spells and potions, to keep people alive. His schooling hadn't included the welfare of children, until now. He'd started his pediatrician training the moment Chloe had announced her pregnancy.

Armed with his dozens of PhDs and a thorough understanding of most living creatures, Alexius shrugged helplessly. "You're Eirikrsons. Your...diet made your line evolve differently from the rest of vampirekind."

If Chloe had still been mortal, she might have flushed. Now, she rolled her eyes. She drank vampire blood, not human blood. So what? "I wasn't running around faster than light at six months old."

"You also weren't fathered by an actual vampire."

Her father had never turned. Instead, he'd gone mad.

"Both you and Levi are immortals—and let's not forget those nanocytes running through your blood."

Chloe nodded. Jack's father had shared his blood with her in order to give her a chance when she was still human. The micro-computers designed to keep the Enlightened healthy were supposed to have faded by now, but the last blood tests Levi had run on her revealed they were still active. Could she have transmitted them to Ruby? The Enlightened gave them to their children, from what she understood. "I suppose we'll know if Levi analyzes Ruby's blood."

Chloe's lips curved over her extended fangs, and a low hiss escaped her lips.

Alexius laughed. "Joking. No one's poking needles into my princess. Now, go. You wouldn't want to be late."

She hesitated at the threshold. "Any news?"

Knowing what Chloe was asking, Alexius shook his head. "You'll have to check with Gwen or Greer, but to my knowledge, there's still radio silence from Blair. Which is excellent news."

Was it?

Oldcrest didn't feel right without the bubbly witch hanging out with them, and kicking some huntsmen's asses in the courtyard.

Blair had been Chloe's mentor through her first year. She'd also become her very first friend here. And now she was gone to protect them all.

Chloe hated the fact that Blair was alone somewhere. But more than anything, she hated the lack of control she had over the situation.

If Blair was caught, their borders were at risk. Aveka would have Seth destroy their shields and an army could storm Oldcrest.

Again.

She was tired of living in fear. It was time to end things, once and for all.

For Blair, for the Ruby who'd bled to death in Skyhall, and the one gurgling in Alexius's arms.

Which was why she wasn't going to class.

Tonight, and every night she was free of responsibility, Chloe went hunting.

INTO THE LIGHT

B lair would have given a lot for a long, hard session with a punching bag—or better yet, a tussle with decent sparring partner. Yet another thing she'd had to give up because of the asshole who didn't have the decency to answer her entirely reasonable questions.

Don't ask questions you don't want answered.

"Condescending prick!" Blair wasn't about to address the fact that she'd taken to speaking to herself, in the absence of fellow students.

Or maybe she was talking to Velvet, though the cat was thoroughly ignoring her, occupied with cleaning his hind legs.

She'd always been a social butterfly. She wasn't uncomfortable in her own company for a time, but Blair thrived in large groups. The last few months had been trying in more ways than one. One of the coping mechanisms she'd developed was holding one-sided conversations with her cat.

There were worse paths to insanity.

Seth was sorely mistaken if he believed she was letting the subject drop on his say-so. She wasn't curious for the sake of it; she needed answers for her survival. Besides, she couldn't think of one rational reason why the man was being so secretive about his origins. Most sups had the courtesy to announce what they were when they introduced themselves though some of them could sense, or at least smell each other's nature. She could only conclude that Seth was being willfully obtuse for the sake of it.

The bastard might have had a point to some extent; he didn't want to catch her, or see her come to harm. Her being found went directly against his self-interest. If she was taken to Aveka, the witch would be able to truly control him. That didn't change the fact that he *had* been dispatched to capture her. He might be able to wiggle out of most of his mistress's orders for now, but eventually, Aveka might manage to tighten her hold on him. If Blair was to survive, she needed defenses. More than the blade at her hip. What if it was taken from her? What if he caught her without it? She felt better now that she had something on her side, of course, but simply couldn't risk relying on one weapon. Not against *him*.

Blair picked up the dagger again, absentmindedly twirling it between her fingers like it was a pen. As far as weapons went, it was unique—elegantly carved, sturdy but also lighter than it looked, and well balanced. She paused her movement to inspect it again. Her eyes followed the length of the blade before focusing on the carved hilt.

So many symbols. A snake. A crown. A scythe. A horn? No, there was a sphere inside it. Perhaps a cornucopia filled with apples then. A tree of some variety. Was it the tree of life? A cross. Arrows. An acorn...

Blair endeavored to think critically, like she would have if Fin Varra had handed her this weapon and told her to write a paper on it. Inscriptions could be entirely decorative, especially nowadays, but this weapon was woven with ancient spells. She doubted any of the markings were random. Perhaps she already had the means to learn about his weaknesses. There must be a reason why this blade was capable of hurting Seth. Blair raised the blade to eye level, focusing on the shapes etched in the wood. She examined each inch, making a mental note of everything, and of what it evoked to her.

Death, by the look of the scythe; cunning, from the snake. Olive leaves made her think of friendship, peace. And the acorn? That stood for fertility, life, or even immortality, depending on the custom. Death and life, peace and violence, cunning and friendship.

She sighed, setting the weapon aside again.

"Useless," Blair muttered.

Velvet meowed his agreement.

If she'd known that Seth would be so difficult, she would have been sneakier in her probing. She could have asked about the metal. Iron hurt the folk, and silver, the beasts. What was this blade made of, and why did it slice Seth's flesh like a hot knife through butter?

Frustrated, she threw her head back against her hard, lumpy mattress. This was going nowhere.

Velvet wasted no time to get to his paws and leap on her tummy. He kneaded her flab appreciatively.

"I know. I need to get back to training, STAT." Gone was her hard-earned, smooth six pack. These days, she was softer and weaker, partially because she wasn't sparring daily, but also because of her diet. She ate what she could when she could, and it was rarely wholesome food.

This time, Blair interpreted her kitten's high-pitched response as a disagreement. He liked her soft and comfortable to sit on. Once she was tenderized to his satisfaction, he plopped down on her stomach, purring softly.

Knowing she couldn't hope to move for the foreseeable future, Blair seized the blade again to return to her observation. As it caught the dawning light through the small window above her bed, Blair thought she saw something, a slight change. She held it up again, eyes on the blade.

Right at its base, close to the hilt, a sign that hadn't been there moment ago could be seen, bright and red as blood.

She sat up, as much as Velvet's position on her tummy allowed, to look at it closer. There was no mistaking it: someone had carved an omega in *lightink*.

That specific sign was used widely, by so many clans. She knew many witches who considered it their signature. Omega meant the last, the ending.

"Ominous, much?"

She ran through possibilities. Shifters considered omegas the peacekeepers of their world. Alphas led, Betas cared, and the Omegas made sure everyone kept their shit together. But Seth wasn't a shifter. He was a demigod.

Did she know of any pantheons that used that symbol? Not off the top of her head, but she'd look into it. If only she could call Professor Varra; he'd have the answer at the ready. And probably give it to her in incomprehensible riddles, but that was beside the point.

Blair didn't like to use her prepaid phone more than necessary, but this was something important, she could tell. She fired up the internet browser, wincing at the time it took for the search engine to load.

"The Enlightened" was a broad term for many races of aliens who'd come to Earth long ago in various ships. Each of those transports had brought a different community, and they'd remained separate, founding the various myths and legends humans had worshipped over the centuries. Was there an omega ship? Where would she even start to research anything like it? The sups might have announced their existence to humanity a few decades ago, but the Enlightened still kept to themselves, barely even visiting Earth.

If she were in Oldcrest, she would have had access to books—and to immortal teachers.

She typed "omega symbol", just to start with something.

The first result read: "Omega (**uppercase** Ω , lowercase ω) is the 24th and last letter of the Greek alphabet."

She paused for a moment.

She'd focused on the history of the omega itself rather than its origin.

Omega was a Greek letter.

There was only one Greek pantheon. Possibly the most widely known pantheon in the world.

Changing tactics, this time Blair typed "Olympus symbol". Dozens of pictures showed up on her screen. Coins, vectors, and drawings. Every single one of them was an omega.

"Shit."

She examined the hilt of the blade again, seeing it in a new light. The snake. Kronos's emblem. The cornucopia. Rhea's. Zeus's oak tree. A horse for Poseidon, Hades's chariot. Every single one of the carvings on the weapon represented one of the seven major gods—or their notorious parents, the Titans.

This meant two things.

Firstly, Seth had given her a fyriron blade. A god killer, worth more than the GDP of an average country.

And secondly? He wasn't a just a demigod. He was an Olympian.

And she was screwed.

She breathed in and out, forcing herself to calm down. There were Olympians and Olympians, after all. Maybe Seth had been spawned by someone minor from the pantheon. Maybe he was the son of a nymph, like Achilles was.

Except Blair knew from Cat that they shared a mother, which meant that the divine gene came from his father.

A satyr?

Her heart beat hard against her chest, refusing to submit. She couldn't lie to herself. If she knew one thing, it was that Seth was too powerful for this world. He was...

With a start, Blair focused on one symbol—one she'd mistaken for three different signs. The cross and its arrows. XII. Twelve.

She swore out loud.

Olympians didn't make babies on Earth anymore. They just didn't. The entire pantheon had been locked out of here thousands of years ago.

Except...

She knew for a fact there was at least one Olympian scion raised on Earth: the Immortal Wolf, Knox, had talked about her just months ago. Tria, daughter of Hades. A girl who could raise the dead with a flick of her wrist.

So, so screwed.

It could have been worse, she told herself. The Olympians were child's play compared to their parents, the Titans.

What a load of bullshit. The Titans had either been killed by their children, left this part of the known universe, or grown bored with mortals long ago. The Olympians were, by definition, the very worst thing a witch could face.

None of the twelve Olympians were minor gods. The vampire race had been created by the mortal wife of Dionysus —arguably the least dangerous among the twelve—simply because they'd shared a little blood now and then. And Seth could have been directly fathered by one of them. A male.

Mechanically, Blair forced herself to run through the options. Hades was out, presumably. Unless he'd been really busy a couple of decades back. Then there were his more illustrious brothers, Zeus and Poseidon. The lesser, yet still entirely terrifying prospects were the children: Apollo, Ares, Hephaestus, Hermes, and of course, Dionysus.

The last one made an obscene sort of sense. Dionysus had indirectly fathered vampirekind in his image. Ariadne would be thoroughly pissed to hear he'd been fucking another vampire lady, so that could be why Seth kept the identity of his father under wraps.

Dionysus. Bacchus. Blair closed her eyes and pictured Seth seated on a throne of bone, wearing a mask made from the skull of a bull. Around him, hundreds of bodies danced and sang and fucked as blood poured like wine.

She could see it all too easily.

Fuckity fucking hell!

What had she gotten herself into?

She had no idea.

One thing was crystal clear, however.

If she was right about this chilling theory, there was only one place on Earth where she could get answers.

A COLD DISH

S eth contemplated the witch in front of him, not certain where to set his eyes first. She was a sight, for sure. Her thin thighs were covered in black fishnet, artfully ripped in places. The red leather shorts she wore left nothing to the imagination. She'd paired them with a crop top and a long woolen cardigan. Her plump lips were painted a red so dark it appeared almost black.

She was attractive, Seth supposed. Not his type, though.

He ignored the part of him that told him he would have gladly sampled the wares on display a few months back.

"What's this?" he asked Gerald, confused.

The scout had brought the girl to their compound at the end of his shift. Seth wasn't about to judge the boy for finding a companion for the night, but he couldn't begin to comprehend why Gerald was bothering to bring her in front of him. Was she supposed to be a present? Because he'd pass.

"This is Axia Lewis. She'll be joining us."

"I think not."

The girl narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms under her chest. Her tits practically spilled out of her tiny top's neckline. No doubt she won plenty of arguments with that trick. "Listen, girl—"

"I'm twenty-four, hardly a girl. And you need me."

Seth could only laugh.

"Her Majesty insists," Gerald said, making Seth sigh.

Great.

"Why the hell would Aveka want someone who'll only slow us down?" Seth didn't mind dragging his feet, but he would have bet Aveka was against it.

"I won't slow you down," the girl attested. "And unlike you, I know Blair pretty well."

Her declaration got his attention. Seth regarded the girl with more interest this time, scanning beyond her haggard, tawdry appearance. She was a witch. He wouldn't have thought so at first glance because her magic was entirely inconsequential, weaker than butterfly wings against the wind.

"You're a friend of Blair's, then?" He couldn't quite comprehend what she was doing here in that case. Had Aveka turned her mind, too?

The girl huffed. "Hardly. She had me almost killed, and thrown out of the Institute."

Ah. An enemy. Seth didn't think Blair would have amassed many of those, save for the few she'd adopted out of loyalty, such as Aveka. She was too amiable, vivacious, and perfectly civil for anyone to personally dislike her.

Indeed, the weakling might know Blair better than any friend if she hated her.

Seth tilted his head. "Well, come on in, then. It's getting cold."

Because they were in Canada, just like Blair. Only on the opposite coast.

He escorted the newcomer to the sitting room occupied by the rest of the merry band of idiots. Now that Gerald was back, Vince had left to scour the city.

They all seemed to doubt Blair's presence. After seeing her in Japan, they'd memorized her scent, and it hadn't hit their nostrils for days. Seth couldn't afford to keep them in Toronto for long. A shame. He liked the penthouse suite he'd borrowed from Knox. The sleek modern decor wasn't to his usual taste, but the vast black and white rooms beat the sort of hovels they normally stayed in.

Axia—what sort of a name was that? It made him think of deodorant—drew all the eyes to her as she stalked to a sofa, and she liked it. She sat, throwing her long legs on the soft leather. Seth winced as her heels marred the smooth white fabric.

"How did Blair get you kicked out?"

Axia frowned. She didn't like talking about it—no doubt the tale wasn't to her benefit. Watching her wet her lips, Seth prepared for a heavily edited account of the events.

"She was my mentor freshman year. She was only supposed to tell me about classes and teachers, but she kept spying on me and my friends. We met up for some spells—the kind of stuff the teachers don't want us to practice. Too advanced. Blair followed us, and tried to stop the spell while we were in the middle of it. It backfired on us. I was badly hurt. Then, she also snitched on us. We were all expelled."

In short, they'd been dabbling in dark, forbidden magic. Seth wasn't about to blame her—he'd done plenty of forbidden craft at the New York Academy of Magic. The difference was, he wasn't dumb enough to have been caught.

Seth smirked, adding one piece to the puzzle that was his little witch. Beyond the bright hair and combat boots, Blair was a goody two-shoes.

A smile tugged at his lips.

"So, what? She got you kicked out of school, and now you want your revenge?" He didn't hide his contempt. Seth was all for holding grudges, but he had to concede the witch in front of him was particularly pathetic.

"She ruined my life. When I got home, my mother sealed my powers. I can only use a tenth of the magic inside me, all because Ms. Perfect wanted attention." Axia sat up, folding her legs underneath her. "She deserves everything coming her way. And I want to be there when she gets it." Seth nodded slowly. "Fair enough. And what do you have to bring to the table, if you're magicless? Other than boobs and bitterness, that is."

Burg guffawed as though he'd never heard a better joke. Seth hadn't known the brute knew how to laugh. He supposed boobs helped him find his sense of humor.

"As I said, I know her. Blair was trying to be my friend. She told me things. The things she hides. I know, for example, that she never uses her core magic. The natural magic she has scares her."

"Why?" Seth frowned, displeased. He hadn't meant to ask the question. It had slipped out of his lips unbidden.

He didn't like to let anything slip.

"I'm not sure," Axia admitted.

Now he snorted. "Fat lot of help, you are."

"Well, what I do know is that the magic we learn is a lot more taxing that the magic we are naturally given. Trust me on this—my own natural magic's blocked, remember?" She smirked. "That's why she's obsessed with training in combat and fitness. She can't use her magic for long, and it exhausts her."

Seth had underestimated Axia's usefulness. What she said made sense, fitting another piece in the fascinating puzzle.

He sighed. "None of that's even remotely helpful." It was. He just couldn't let the others figure it out. "It doesn't tell us where she is."

"It tells you she'll need plenty of rest every time she has to use magic. And guess what?" She lifted a flask that seemed empty at first.

Focusing, Seth saw one single string of hair inside. A black thread fading to a pink wave.

"I took a few strands of her hair on my way out. I like to keep tabs on my enemies. I know a witch who can cast a location spell. We can corner her, then all we'll have to do is wait for her to use her magic and follow. She'll be down for the count shortly after."

Seth shouldn't have let the witch's appearance, or her lack of power, color his perception. What she lacked in power, she made up for in spite. "We'd have to be fairly close already for this to work. If you only have one hair—"

"I have a full hairbrush. We can get the general location, and once we're in position, do another spell to know exactly where she is."

Dammit.

They had Blair cornered.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

I n her years in Oldcrest, Blair had studied hundreds of tales that had started right here on this soil. Legends of heroes and monsters, dancing to the tunes of the gods of Olympus.

She would have thought the imposing peak would be taller, though she had to admit Mount Olympus was quite beautiful.

"What am I doing here?" she whispered to the wind.

Here was as good as anywhere else, she supposed. It wasn't likely that she'd find any answers, anything that could help her, but at least the weather wasn't nearly as cold in Greece as it was in most of Europe in late October.

She didn't always keep track of dates, but she'd flown in from Vancouver over the last couple of days—purposely taking the long way in, with several layovers. It was October twenty-eighth. Chloe's birthday was in a few days—on Halloween. No doubt the Hill was going to throw one hell of a party. A pang of anger and nostalgia pierced her, but she brushed it aside.

"Fancy a bit of hiking, Velvet?"

The kitten's meow was downright pathetic. That would be a no. She couldn't blame him. They'd left her hostel in the middle of the night because she'd been restless after her discovery about the dagger. And her theory. She didn't have enough evidence to take it as gospel. Besides, pretending it was only a guess was comforting, despite how right it felt to think of Seth as a son of Olympus.

He was the image of a Greek hero—a golden Hercules, ready to slay lions and walk into hell.

"Maybe we should make camp first. Sleep a little."

Now Velvet purred under her coat. She chuckled. "You understand every single thing I say, don't you?" she asked, smiling at the kitten, whose head popped out right between her breasts.

"Camp it is."

She hadn't slept much on the plane.

Blair had bought hiking equipment in Athens, following the instruction of a website advising on local treks. She'd picked up the lightest of tents, digging deep into her savings. It was strapped underneath her backpack.

She got all the pieces laid out neatly on the grass and stared at them in dismay, before redirecting her attention to the how-to guide. Two hours later, she was exhausted and had three pegs leftover she couldn't place at all, but the lime green tent looked more or less stable. Velvet merrily hopped inside and stretched as she unrolled her sleeping bag. It only fit after she set aside her beautiful, comfortable, expensive boots.

Seth was going to pay for this. *Literally*.

"Let's get something to eat."

She set some dry food out for Velvet and handed him a strip of chicken before pulling out an energy bar. She had some vacuum-packed sausages and soup ready to heat up, but she wasn't about to make a fire tonight.

Blair laid down on her hard makeshift bed and closed her eyes. She was still restless and stressed, though being here helped a little. She was running toward something, as opposed to running away, for the first time in months.

Suddenly, all apprehension faded into the background, becoming entirely irrelevant.

Sleep.

All that mattered right now was falling asleep.

And so, she did.

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"W hat the hell is wrong with you?"

Blair should have guessed that Seth would reach out to her tonight. She may be on his ancestral turf, so to speak. That was bound to ruffle his feathers.

"Nice to see you, too."

He'd pulled her into the same room he'd brought her to weeks ago—a dream of his old house on Night Hill. His version was more detailed than hers; each painting, each sculpture was delicate and true to life. His mind was dangerously sharp.

Seth thoroughly ignored her. "There's a portal to Atlantis in the Greek isles. You might as well have come knocking at Aveka's door!"

"Good thing I'm not anywhere near the sea, then."

He growled low, striding toward her. A strand of golden hair fell to his eye and he didn't bother to set it right, too focused on intimidating her.

That might have worked if he was in front of her, but this was just a dream. Blair couldn't smell his scent, or feel the heat of his body, almost flush against hers.

All right, it worked a little. She didn't have to show it, though.

Blair shrugged, pretending to be apathetic to his tantrum. "I told you I wanted to know about you. If you hadn't been so tight-lipped, I wouldn't be here."

It was a gamble, but outright asking him had gotten her nowhere. He could tell her Olympus had nothing to do with him. Blair waited, eager, desperate for that reassurance. He didn't give it.

"Ask what you want. I'll tell you. Then get the hell out of the country—better yet, the continent."

So she had been right. He was an Olympian. Or the son of one, at least.

There was a sort of relief in knowing for certain, horrifying as the prospect was. Not to mention, Blair didn't think she'd ever seen Seth angry before. It was rather entertaining. Used to indifference, he clearly didn't quite know what to do with his feelings. Mostly, he was grimacing and showing fangs.

How tempting. But if he was this desperate for her to go, then she must be close to discovering something he didn't want anyone to know. A weakness. A weapon.

"I think I'll pass. It's been a while since I had a chance to hike." Mostly because she hated hiking—and camping. No need to share that detail, though.

"Blair, there are worse things than Aveka who can reach you where you are." He spoke very slowly, enunciating each word clearly. "Things that do not travel anywhere else in the world. If they sense part of me inside you, they could take you, and make you beg for death for the rest of time. You understand?"

She felt only slightly less smug. "Things like the Greek gods?" She lifted an imperious brow. "They've all left Earth, everyone knows that."

Seth chuckled humorlessly. "Then how do you think I was born?"

Oh.

Well, he might have a point.

"There's a portal on Mount Olympus. Part of the territory doesn't quite belong to this world. You could get pulled into the immortal realm. And though the gods can't cross, some of their servants are able to endure the journey. I wouldn't recommend getting captured by one of those either. Get up and get off of that mountain right now." It sounded an awful lot like an order. Blair bristled and straightened her spine. "No."

A huff escaped Seth's mouth before he took one step, then one more to close the distance between them. "No?"

"No. Not until you give me answers. My being here is the only thing that seems to loosen your tongue. If you want me to leave, get talking. Who are you?"

She had him, she could feel it, almost taste it on her tongue.

"I am Seth Stormhale. Piacere, bella."

Blair had no answer. She blinked, for perhaps a minute or two after the words had crossed his lips.

Italian. He was speaking Italian, while looking deep into her eyes and smirking.

That wasn't fucking fair.

"Piace-what?"

"It means it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." His tongue rolled over the word "pleasure," caressing it.

"All of that in one word?"

He shrugged. "We're more efficient than you lot with our tongues."

"You can't seduce me into compliance, asshole." She pushed against his chest, and to her surprise, it felt solid under her palm. How? This was just a dream. "You're not that pretty."

He was. He so was.

"If I ever seduce you, you'll know it, *strega*. You're not getting anything from me until you're off this mountain." He paused. "And keep moving. There's been a change in our hunting party. We're getting closer. Don't use magic if you can help it."

He started to fade into mist.

Seriously? He couldn't leave her on that note. "Wait—"

"Get out of here now. We'll chat next time."

"You can't just—"

He was already gone.



WHISPERS

S he woke with a start what felt like moments after Seth had left her dream, but if the state of her muscles was anything to go by, she must have slept for a decent amount of time.

She winced as she sat up on the sleeping bag, her neck complaining at the slightest move. Maybe she hadn't slept that much; her stiffness could be courtesy of the uneven camping ground.

"I'm not made for this, Velvet," she grumbled with a yawn.

As no answer came by way of sound or shuffling, Blair frowned, looking around the dark tent in search of bright yellow eyes. Nothing.

Sleepiness faded from her bones, replaced by concern. Naturally, Velvet walked around whenever they settled for a while, but they weren't in a hotel room, and after Seth's ominous warnings, she wanted to make sure he was safe.

She zipped the tent up, and immediately let go of tension as her eyes zeroed in on the kitten. He wiggled his butt before leaping after a cicada. The bug jumped out of the way just in time, and Velvet growled his discontent.

Reassured, Blair brought both hands to the back of her hips and arched her back in a deep, satisfying stretch.

Night was giving way to dawn behind the white peaks shaped by eons of wind and rain. She'd taken a bus up to Litochoro yesterday, and walked as far away from the town as she could before exhaustion kicked in. It was easy enough to disappear in a city—in a small town, she didn't feel safe. Besides, she'd been eager to start the trek up the mountain. In hindsight, she was starting to regret that impulse, though the view was unbelievable.

She pulled out her phone, turned it on, and checked the battery. Eighty-five percent, although she hadn't used it at all since fully charging it on the plane. What a piece of crap.

She shot a picture of the green mountains stretching out as far as her eyes could see, shrouded by reddening clouds. She'd never had much talent with a camera, but the picture was particularly terrible compared to the sight before her.

A growl pulled her out of her observation. She sent Velvet a look over her shoulder, wondering what sort of prey had escaped his skills this time.

Velvet was low to the ground—at first, she thought him poised to pounce, but the cat slowly retreated, one step after the next, his eyes firmly fixed on a line of trees in the distance.

Blair followed his gaze through the woods. Her eyes weren't as sharp as any cat's. She felt uneasy; Velvet wasn't usually skittish, for a cat.

Her instinct was to call to her magic to sharpen her sight, but Seth's last words echoed in her mind.

Don't use magic if you can help it.

She had half a mind to ignore him out of spite, but Blair wasn't inclined to cut her nose off.

"Come here, baby. We have to pack."

Pack to get back down to town and head out of the country, or hike up? She hadn't quite decided yet. Velvet kept his eyes on the woods, his posture anxious.

Though the gods can't cross, some of their servants are able to endure the journey.

Slowly, she walked to Velvet and gathered the kitten in her arms.

Seth was the closest thing she had to an ally in this crazy situation. Whatever reason he had to hide his identity, he'd made himself quite clear about the dangers of Mount Olympus.

They had to go.

Now.

Again, Blair stopped herself from doing what came naturally to her. Magic. Funny, that she used to think herself a poorer witch when it came to the craft of hexes or enchantments. Now that she had to use her bare hands, she realized just how much she usually relied on magic. Instead of making a fire with a wave of her hand to heat up a breakfast, she ate another energy bar. Painstakingly folding the sleeping bag and tent back up seemed to take forever. Yesterday, she'd done it without relying on her magic for speed because she'd been tired, and in no rush. Now, she wanted nothing more than to get going and every one of her human gestures seemed so very slow.

Finally, she was ready. Velvet had remained tucked against her chest, never quite relaxing. She was glad of his size today.

Blair followed the path she'd taken the previous day to reach town, alarmed by every move, every sound. Birds chirped cheerfully, indifferent to her crisis. She was safe, she told herself. If anything of consequence had spotted her, she would have been dragged to hell by now. Somehow, the thought was almost comforting.

Velvet hissed softly, though his head was buried inside her coat. Moments ago, she would have thought him asleep. She looked, finding only trees and rocks, and a river running some paces away. There were birds nearby, but she couldn't spot them over the autumn foliage.

Blair's eyes narrowed as she discerned a shape that didn't quite blend in with the greenish scenery, verging on orange. At first, she believed it to be part of a branch, but paying attention, she could distinguish the shape of a large owl, cream, gray, and silver. It was quite beautiful.

Blair stared at it and the bird stared right back.

Velvet grumbled. Her cat was sensitive. Blair had wondered if all the magic inflicted upon him had fundamentally changed him—making him sensitive. To what, she couldn't tell.

"It's just a bird," she told Velvet soothingly. "Calm down."

She couldn't tell whether the later reassurance was meant for him or for herself.

They were just a couple of miles from town. She could see the outline of the white stone buildings crowned by orange roofs. She'd be there in minutes. Fifteen, twenty at most. Blair picked up the pace.

She was safe.

Are you?

The whisper in her ear morphed into laughter. Startled, she turned, expecting to face someone, something. That voice was entirely unfamiliar. But there was nothing behind her. Just the mountain, and the whisper of the wind.

Blair walked faster. She caught the outline of a shape running up the path and stiffened, but it was just a dog. A well-fed, boisterous brown thing with his tail high. She sighed. Clearly, he was a pet. That meant there were people around normal people who took care of their animals.

The hound barked happily at her chest, no doubt sensing Velvet's presence. While the cat had freaked just moments ago, it was now sleeping against her. Never mind about him being sensitive to anything.

"Hey, doggo. Did you get lost over there?"

Just as she spoke, a couple of older kids appeared from around a corner down the path, following after the dog. She smiled at them. "Are we close to town?" Hopefully they spoke English, because she didn't know a word of Greek. Latin, she could twist her tongue around many spells were written in Latin, for some reason. Greek? Not so much.

But the children kept walking, not even acknowledging her.

As though she didn't exist.



OUT OF TIME

S eth tuned out the chatter surrounding him, blocking out his companions' excitement. For months, they'd been frustrated, humiliated by the fact that a simple witch could evade them so.

Adam was supposed to be a decent tracker. Burg usually could loosen reluctant tongues. Vince's team had always been successful in their missions. Gerald was a competent scout— when there was anything for him to uncover. Blair had shown them all up, until Axia got involved.

Adam had managed to cast location spells using Blair's hair, and they could feel their quarry drawing closer.

He closed his eyes. The five morons around him meant nothing. They were no threat—to him or Blair. While Aveka had demanded that Seth remained with her chosen hunters, she hadn't had the foresight to demand he prevent from murdering the idiots. He'd rip out all of their throats before letting them anywhere close to his witch. Yet he couldn't calm down.

Blair was still there. He could feel it. She was still on Olympus, so very close to the portal that could pull her down to the immortal lands of his father.

He'd miscalculated, believing her somehow reasonable or at the very least, manageable. If he'd have guessed she'd go so far, he would have thrown her a bone when she was safe, on another fucking continent, assuaging at least part of her curiosity. She may never be safe again now; not here and not anywhere near a portal on Earth. Seth had been seven the first time he wandered close to a doorway to the other worlds. Almost three decades had passed, but he remembered it like it was yesterday. The strange sensation of being observed, followed. Then there had been a whisper melodious as a siren's song. He'd followed it. Of course he had; no one had cautioned him against the dangers. Seth tumbled down space and time at a harrowing speed, before hitting the ground so hard his nose had bled—red at the time.

He opened his eyes to a world so bright and beautiful he wondered if he'd died and ended up in heaven. He was soon relieved of his delusions. An entire month of torture at the hand of harpies and crones followed. They asked questions he didn't know the answer to and viciously cut him when he attempted a reply. When he remained silent, they did worse. If not for the magic in his veins, he would not have survived.

His fists clenched. Get out of there, Blair.

Millions of humans hiked on Mount Olympus and ventured near other portals every year. The demons of the other world rarely bothered to lure any of them to their side. But they would attempt to take Blair. His soul would whet their appetite.

Blair had no bargaining chip, no answer to offer, and no power that would be of any consequence against the monsters of Olympus.

"Can you drive faster?" His lips tightened.

They were driving rather than running because Axia couldn't catch up with them on foot. Gerald also preferred driving with their luggage, although when pressed, he could increase his physical speed with spells.

"I'm pushing one thirty," the witch retorted. "There's a one twenty speed limit."

Seth blinked, not quite taking in what he'd just heard. Gerald was...following the speed limit on a hunt?

Oh, for the sake of all that was holy!

"And I'm out of here." Seth opened the passenger door, and slid out of the moving car, landing in a crouch.

He had to lose the idiots at one point or another in any case.

He doubted it would take long for his companions to inform Aveka that he'd gone his own way—and there was a high chance she'd summon him.

Direct summons were one of the few of her orders he couldn't wiggle out of. She emitted a location signal and demanded he appear right that moment. Traveling along his lightning took a fraction of a second. There was no escaping it.

Unless...

Casually walking between cars flying on the motorway, Seth pulled out his phone and rang Aveka's number.

The call connected on the fourth ring. A gruff, low and slow drawl answered, "Yes?"

Vladrien—one of Aveka's most faithful companion. Seth wrinkled his nose in distaste. "We have the girl's location. The others are heading there via car—I'm taking another way around to pin her in. We should have her in a couple of hours. Can you inform Her Majesty?"

The ancient vampire said nothing for long second. Then a chuckle broke the silence. "Funny how you didn't manage to snare a little girl until we sent you help."

"Witches have their uses," Seth replied, indifferent to Vlad's intended insult. "Don't you make a habit of collecting them for that very reason?"

"Indeed, but I'm a humble born vampire, not the leader of the almighty Stormhales. I would have thought your kind superior. Apparently not."

Vlad was trying to bait him, and it might have worked if Seth valued his opinion. He was shit out of luck, though. The only opinion Seth cared for was his own.

"Apparently not," he echoed. "Tell Aveka she'll have her prize soon."

He hung up before the ancient could add another word.

He'd bought himself an hour.

The next moment, a bolt of lightning struck where Seth stood, streaked across the sky, and hit right at Blair's feet.

The girl ran right into his chest, and to his utter shock, passed through it as though she were entirely immaterial.

As though she were already dead.



THE WAY HOME

B lair screamed when Seth appeared out of nowhere in her path. She winced, prepared for an impact, but she passed through him. Inside him.

Her jaw fell open. What the hell was happening?

She'd walked around town for an hour, attempting to knock on doors, talk to people, all in vain. Her frustration was already at an all-time high, and now him?

"Can you hear me?" Seth asked.

Blair could have kissed him. "Oh my god, you can see me."

A frown marred the perfect smoothness of his forehead. "I see your mouth moving, but I can't hear you. This is a good development," he added.

Never mind kissing him. Her words being entirely useless right now, she did the next best thing: she shot him the finger.

His lips curved into a smirk. "Now, that's not very polite." He tilted his chin down the one road winding through the mountain town. "Aveka's hunters are on their way—they'll be here in an hour." He titled his head. "Make it two hours, given how Gerald drives."

"Gerald?" she asked.

Seth glanced around, taking in the picturesque town nestled at the base of the mountain. "Walk with me. We have a

moment to talk for once. And hey, it's going to be a monologue, apparently." His fangs flashed. "My favorite."

He set out uphill, traversing the path she'd taken into the city. "Aveka sent a few buffoons with me. She's not dumb enough to think I wouldn't aim to thwart her if I got to you first. I could kill you right now and save myself a headache."

Blair's eyes widened. Kill her? That didn't make any sense. If she was dead, then his soul...

Seth read her expression, and completed the thought for her. "The part of my soul inside you would die with you forever unattainable."

Shit.

She hadn't ever thought of that. If what he said was true, Seth was a greater threat than she'd believed.

"Of course, I'd probably become one hell of a psycho, but it's better than being a slave for the rest of my days."

In other words, he'd kill her if he had no other choice, but for now, he preferred her—and his soul fragment—in one piece.

"I've successfully led the idiots on a merry chase for months, but an old friend of yours joined us. Axia. Ring a bell?"

Blair's jaw dropped.

Axia? Axia was still around?

Axia had been her first mentee, a couple of years before Chloe. From the very start, the girl had been obsessed with increasing her powers at any cost. A great researcher, she'd unearthed obscure texts in Sumerian about ancient magic so dark it had been forbidden centuries ago, back when it was still entirely acceptable to sacrifice babies and virgins. The energy came from draining the light of the sun—or another star—never caring that doing so would shorten the star's lifespan by thousands of years. Unchecked, those witches could have effectively ended all life on Earth in an hour. Blair had stopped her, and yes, told on her. The practice wasn't acceptable.

Last she'd heard, Axia had been banished from her coven, stripped of all magic, and she'd disappeared in the human world.

Axia had plenty of reasons to want to hurt Blair. Blair had to admit, she'd felt relieved—albeit quite guilty—when she'd heard the witch had died trying to reclaim her powers.

"She had a hairbrush of yours. Her tracking spells are efficient. And she told us you crash after using magic, so we also know your weakness. What's happening to you right now might seem unfortunate, but it's a blessing in disguise. They can't find you here."

It didn't feel much like a blessing. Blair was confused and frightened. Mostly frightened. What was happening? And more importantly, how could she get back to normal?

She had to admit, Seth's casual demeanor was helping easing some of her panic. He seemed utterly relaxed and confident. Like there was nothing in the world he couldn't face. Maybe because he didn't care. Either way, his assurance was catching.

They'd left the town behind, approaching the location of Blair's night camp when Seth came to a halt. "Oh."

Oh? "Oh" didn't sound good. Seth didn't seem like the kind of man who said "oh" without cause. She caught up to him and stilled, eyes bulging right next to him.

"Oh," she echoed.

Because right in front of her, sprawled on the ground, was Blair Lawson.

Her body rested close to where she'd stood when she'd tried to make Velvet calm down about the bird he was staring at. The kitten was standing right against her chest, growling low as his eyes were fixed on Seth. Then he spotted her—looked right at her—and meowed. He leapt to his feet and ran straight to her, rubbing against her incorporeal feet.

To her surprise, she felt his heat. His touch.

"You have a good familiar here. He protected you from the otherworld."

The otherworld? And wait. Velvet was her familiar?

Part of Blair accepted it right away. Of course he was. She should have thought of it immediately. The only reason she hadn't was it was rare animals took to witches these days; it only happened to great, legendary witches, like her cousin Michelle White. Blair was far from powerful or consequential. She was just...Blair. Merely adequate at most spells. A future professor. How did the saying go again, "those who can't do, teach"?

And yet, Velvet chose her, and protected her even as she laid still on the ground.

"What happened to me?"

Seth's gaze snapped to hers, confused. Then his expression cleared up. "Ah—your familiar anchors you to this world. I can hear you now."

She sighed in relief. "Well? Any ideas?"

Seth was the epitome of a know-it-all. Surely he knew what was going on.

"The otherworld attempted to lure you in. Your friend here prevented it—but your mind was already ready to follow. It split your mind and body apart. Which isn't helpful to me. My soul is in your body."

Of course, he brought the matter back to the one subject he cared about: himself.

Blair shrugged. "Get it out, then. Take it back."

"You know I can't do that. Not while Aveka's spell is still working on me."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that you could ask for help undoing her spells, rather than condemning both of us to this stupid cycle? You chase me, catch me, and have to save me again and again." "You think you could undo the spell?" Seth tilted his head, looking unbearably smug.

"Not *me*. But there are plenty of excellent witches in Oldcrest. They can help us."

"They might potentially be able to help," he admitted, somewhat reluctantly. "And while we're there, Aveka could summon me, demand I destroy the border, and kill everyone inside."

Blair sucked her lip in. "You don't know my friends like I do. Greer—"

"I don't trust anyone—not with this. My sister is in Oldcrest. I'm not risking her life on a hunch."

"Well, you're trusting *me* to protect your selfish ass," Blair reminded him. "Trust me when I tell you my friends can help, if you let them."

Seth stared at her without speaking, but she could see he'd made his mind up.

Egocentric asshole.

"Cat could get out of Oldcrest. Ask her—"

"She won't abandon her friends when she believes they need help. Sentimental, I know, but not everyone is perfect."

"Just you, right?" Blair rolled her eyes.

"I'm glad we understand each other."

"I can't run forever. I'm going to break. Hell, look at me!" She pointed to the corpse-like figure that hadn't moved an inch.

Seth sighed. "Plenty of witches send their consciousness away from their physical forms from time to time. Lie back down on your body—you'll wake up."

He was telling her that *now*? Blair rushed to do as he instructed, feeling utterly awkward as she knelt next to herself. The moment she laid back on the soft grass, she took a deep breath. She felt cold. Freezing, in fact. Her body had been exposed to the elements for too long, never moving. Her jacket

was wet, too. Her muscles hurt as she sat up. But it didn't matter. None of that mattered even a tiny bit. She was back. She was whole again.

She wasn't dead.

"By the gods."

She didn't think she'd even been so terrified.

It was all Seth's fault. She directed her glare to his annoyingly gorgeous, smug frame as she got to her feet.

"Now perhaps you'll listen when I tell you a place isn't safe," he had the gall to say.

She was going to gut him like a fish. "You fucking ass—"

She didn't finish the stream of insults that had been ready to burst out of her mouth. Her body was yanked forward, pulled by an inexplicable force, so fast she could have vomited.

"Blair!"

What was going on?

Despite the violence of the torrent carrying her, she felt him, so, so close. Seth was chasing her, with all of his vampire speed, using the strength of his lightning to reach her.

And it wasn't enough.

She hit the ground hard, and pain shot through her foot, up her lower leg.

Shit.

Blair fell forward, and hurled the contents of her stomach on soft, bright pink grass.

Dizzy and still sick, she lifted her eyes, only to wince. The sun was too bright. Everything was too bright. Too beautiful. The air smelled so sickly sweet, she could barely take it in.

"That's all right, dear. You'll be fine in a moment. You poor mortals are too used to the filth of your industrial world. Welcome to Olympus, daughter of Eve."

Oh, no.

She dragged her eyes up a slender pair of golden legs, covered by soft, translucent raw silk. The creature was perfection, from her curved thighs to her sculpted breasts and the arch of her elegant shoulders.

Her face was too much. Too beautiful. Too cruel.

Her survival instincts kicked in. This wasn't the time to sass, to flee, to fight. Blair did the only thing a mortal could do.

She knelt to the goddess before her eyes.



THE CHOICE

S eth had seldom been given any reason to attempt to push his limits, to see just how far and how fast he could go. Fate saw fit to test him today. And he'd failed.

That meant one thing. The creature who'd pulled Blair was strong. Too strong.

She was gone. Blair had been inches away from him instants ago, and now, she'd completely disappeared down the portal at his feet.

To a simple mortal, the pathway between rocks might have appeared entirely ordinary, but it brimmed with potent, old magic. Not only the long-lost spells necessary to take flesh and consciousness through space and time, but also shields built in order to keep certain things away. No pure Enlightened could hope to pass through a portal such as this one, and the measure had protected mortals from the whims of the old gods for centuries. To a half breed such as Seth, using a portal was possible—though quite painful, as he remembered well from his childhood.

Nineteen years. It had been nineteen years since he'd been lured for the first and only time. Since then, after learning who he was, what he was, the forces beyond had constantly attempted to get him back to Olympus, tempting him with hexes, spells, and threats. The pain he'd suffered had ensured that none of their tricks had worked...until now.

Blair was bait dangling before his eyes. He knew what she'd suffer on the other side every second he hesitated to cross.

There were only two women for whom Seth might be tempted to face the gods. Blair wasn't one of them. He should wash his hands of the whole business. Over there, Blair was entirely safe from Aveka's reach. Hell, Seth should have thought of it himself and kicked her down the portal months ago.

She wasn't his problem. It wasn't his fault she hadn't listened to his warning. Seth had known the taste of his soul would attract his divine enemies.

You could have warned her in clearer terms. You could have told her the truth.

He might have, and then what? Blair would have used the knowledge to manipulate him, just like Aveka. He couldn't trust her. He couldn't trust anyone.

Then why give her your soul?

His jaw tightened.

It wasn't his problem, he repeated to himself.

Seth turned his back on the portal, determined to walk away. He could report to Aveka that Blair had fled to Olympus, beyond any of their reach. He'd spend the rest of his days under Aveka's boot—at least until the Eirikrson spawn grew powerful enough to be so kind as to rid him of the bitch. His soul would remain fractured, but what of it? He was hardly the first sup to lose part of it. Those who lost their mate lived with only half a soul, after all.

If they survived.

And he'd never see Blair again. Her pink-tipped hair. Her slender leather-clad limbs. The curve of her lips when she chuckled. She never laughed with him. Why should he care for smiles that weren't directed at him? Why should he care at all?

Seth forced one step, and another one, marching forward. Then, without so much as instructing his body to do so, he set off at a jog, putting more distance between the portal and himself, until he reached a line of trees. Seth turned back and ran faster and faster, building momentum, before jumping through the invisible barrier.

Anticipating the crushing pain, the burn in his golden blood, didn't lessen the suffering. His gut tightened as nausea hit him, churning his stomach. A scream clogged his throat, but he held it in. His presence was no doubt already expected on the other side. No need to announce it to every monster awaiting prey.

Seconds, minutes, or hours might have passed. He couldn't tell. Finally, Seth's feet hit soft forest loam, just as a scent sweeter than cotton candy, as sickening as vomit, and more enticing than blood hit his nostrils.

Seth rose from his crouch, eyes narrowed as he turned on his heels. He'd expected a welcome committee ready to flay his skin from his flesh, but he was alone in the enchanting woods. Blue leaves adorned everlasting oak trees, glistening over a starless sky.

The grass under his boots was of a darker pink, almost faded. It was winter, then, though cold never touched the enchanted forest.

The hoot of an owl in the distance cut through deafening silence. Seth's gaze turned toward the direction where the sound had come from. Nothing. He couldn't see one live animal, despite the acuity of his vampire eyes.

Never looking away, he set off at a jog in the opposite direction.

He needed to get out of these woods. Right now.

Seth knew enough of hunts to realize that he was the prey, and the creature on his trail felt like playing, like a cat with a mouse.

He'd been running through eternal oaks in the same direction for what felt like hours, when he stilled, stopping at a clearing. The shape of a boot on the grass. Seth's nostrils flared.

He could smell something beneath the sickening fragrance of the woods.

Himself.

Seth stepped on the track, unsurprised when he saw the shape perfectly matched his own footfall.

He'd been running in circles, though he'd never turned.

He was trapped.



SENSELESS

B lair had never thought herself the kind of girl capable of licking anyone's boots, but it turned out, her survival instincts trumped her pride.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she told the goddess quite honestly.

Old masters might have attempted to paint or sculpt the beauty of goddesses, but they'd all failed. The creature before her was so perfect Blair couldn't bear to look at her directly. Her eyes couldn't take it—it was like staring at the sun for too long; blinding.

She might have said some of that—or all of it—out loud, because the goddess laughed. The sound was a birdsong, soft, sweet, and enchanting.

"Aren't you sweet, child. Sweetness won't serve you well here." The goddess leaned in, as if to share a secret. "My kind likes to crush it."

Blair gulped, feeling as foolish as she was terrified.

Foolish because she'd put herself in this situation. She'd gone to Mount Olympus. Mount Olympus! And despite Seth's warning, she'd remained there. She could blame the man for everything else that had happened to her in the last few months, but this predicament? That was her own doing.

And terrified, because as beautiful as the goddess was, she also was something else. Something that could destroy her with a wave of her hand. She helped her to her feet—blessing her with the touch of her soft, golden hand. The moment their palms touched, she felt her entire life pass before her eyes, and expected death to claim her. But once she stood up, the goddess let go, and smiled at her. Blair's heart stopped. The goddess had two sets of fangs instead of canines, sharper than any vampire she'd ever seen. They only added to her addling beauty.

"Fear not, child. I'm not against you."

Blair was only partially reassured. She'd dealt with enough sups to read between the lines. The goddess wasn't saying she was on her side either.

"I was forced here. What happened?"

"You were called to my stepmother's domain. I've little power here. You exist at her sufferance. And suffer, you shall."

"That doesn't answer any of my questions," she replied before thinking better of it.

Blair's throat was too dry for her to swallow much saliva. She hadn't been courteous. If the goddess took offense...

But the creature seemed pleased; she laughed. "Perhaps you're not asking the right questions. I'm giving the answers you should seek."

Blair wet her dry lips. "Who's your stepmother? What does she want with me?"

The goddess chuckled another time, but humorlessly. "With you? Nothing. The companion following you here, however..."

Seth.

Her stepmother was after Seth.

"He's coming after me?" Blair whispered. She couldn't quite believe it. She would never have thought that Seth would leap into dangers such as these to get her. She certainly wouldn't have, in his shoes.

Then it came to her. He was after his soul, not her.

Except he'd told her that if she died, his soul would die with her. He hadn't seemed to care either way.

And yet, according to the goddess, he was here.

"How can I get back to Earth?" Blair asked, forcing herself to focus on the situation she found herself in. Seth or no Seth, she needed a way home. "Is there another portal?"

"Several. The boy can activate one, no doubt. You will not be able to."

Great. Just great.

"Where's Seth, then?"

The goddess tilted her chin toward the tree line. Blair turned to look in that direction.

"He's trapped inside the enchanted woods. It is a labyrinth one cannot escape unless they're willing to leave their strength behind. My stepmother will have him broken and on his knees, begging for death before the sun rises."

"Your stepmother doesn't know Seth very well."

Again, Blair regretted the impulse. Again, the goddess seemed to enjoy it.

"I hope as much. It wouldn't be interesting to watch, otherwise." The goddess offered a palm.

Blair wasn't sure she wanted to touch it again. Part of her craved the contact, the other feared it. There was no doubt in her mind that the goddess could have drained her of all life with nothing more than a touch. But if she'd wished to kill her, she could have already done so in a thousand different ways.

She took the extended hand. Instead of seeing her life pass, this time Blair felt coldness slither along her skin, like water. The goddess was working a spell.

Her grip wasn't tight. Blair felt that the choice to remain, to let her perform her magic, was entirely on her. She could let go if she wanted to. The goddess wouldn't force her.

Blair took the coldness without question—knowing the goddess wouldn't give her anything close to an answer.

She was testing her. Requiring of her what gods had required of humans since the beginning of time.

Faith.

Blair wasn't entirely certain this goddess was on her side. Something told her she wasn't working against her, and that was good enough.

The coldness reached her inside, settling in her chest. In her heart. Then the goddess smirked, letting go.

"Will you tell me what you just did to me?" Blair asked.

The goddess tilted her head. "When you find the boy, make him face his fears. There's no other way."

Again, she was talking in riddles, and most definitely not answering her. "Thought as much," she muttered.

Blair frowned as she saw a strange glint over her skin. She lifted her hand to the dimming light, and saw the glint formed moving shapes and shadows, animated markings along her hand and arm, and against her chest.

Would those ever go away?

At least the marks were pretty—elegant filigrees that reminded her of thorns.

"How do I find Seth?" she asked, hoping for at least one helpful answer.

No words came, and when Blair tore her gaze from her skin to look at the goddess, she was gone.

In her stead rested a snowy feather on the ground, marked with gray spots.

Not unlike the feathers of the owl she'd seen in the woods.

Blair stepped back, fear gripping her bones.

She wasn't about to ignore her instincts. Not here.

She turned to the woods, and started to run.



THE ENDLESS WOODS

S eth wasn't a screamer. Screaming was pointless, undignified, and rather failed to make a point. He much preferred whispering threats.

He screamed nonetheless, unleashing his power again and again, scorching tree after tree in his path.

The gods were uniquely qualified to make mortals go insane. The lot of them were various shades of mad, after spending too many centuries with only their own company.

He was trapped. Trapped whichever way he went. He might explore new parts of the woods and hope to finally spy a sliver of light in the distance, only to always end up back at the same spot.

Only the best of torturers realized there was no true despair without hope.

"I give up!" he yelled, sitting where he stood. What was the fucking point? His captor would let him go when they were good and ready to do so, and not a moment before.

"Well, that's not much like the Seth I know."

He leaped to his feet and spun around in the same move, eyes on the thing behind him.

It looked like Blair. All five foot five of her. Her clothes were torn and muddy, her lower lip, cut at a corner. It smelled like Blair. Iron, spice, and sweetness under layers of salty sweat. For all that, it was a good bet that the thing wasn't Blair at all. Seth could feel divine spells at word before his eyes.

She held her hands up in surrender. "It's me, I promise."

Seth laughed. "Right. Effortlessly reading my mind is a great way to prove that."

She rolled her eyes—the gesture so very Blair he almost let it convince him. "I'm not reading your mind—just your posture. You've never looked at me like I'm something to fear before." She considered it for a second. "I admit I like it."

Seth wasn't sold. "How did you get here? Who took you?"

"A beautiful goddess. Golden eyes and skin. Partial to riddles."

How thoroughly mortal. Seth's shoulders relaxed a little. "You're describing a thousand goddesses, at the very least. Are you hurt?"

Blair shook her head, and again, he narrowed his eyes.

Most of the things on Olympus would have hurt her, just for sport.

When he'd been pulled here, he'd faced nothing but torment.

Blair wasn't of any interest to Olympus, but they should have shattered her simply out of boredom. Unless there was a bigger plan at work.

"Convince me you're my witch, and I might let you live."

"Yours?" She sneered. "Presumptuous, much?"

His lifted a palm and gathered a streak of lightning.

"Fine." Blair shrugged. "Read me. I'll put my shields down."

His suspicion peaked. Blair's shields were faultless—he could only enter her mind when she allowed it. And she'd rarely allowed it. Not any time he'd wanted to pull her into a dream until the previous night. Now she was just fine with it?

Unable to resist the temptation, he did nudge her mind with his, and found the doors wide open.

He walked in, taking a good look at everything that made her who she was. The walls confining her soul. Her memory, her trauma, her fears and her hopes...

"You're not even capable of calling a drop of water?" a striking blonde with wavy hair and piercing green eyes snarled. "If I hadn't pushed you out myself, I would think you weren't mine, daughter."

"Your core magic is strong, but forbidden. Trust the gods to bless you with a useless gift. Learn your place in the world, child."

"You call yourself a witch?"

Terra White was cool precision, and in her quest to perfect her fiery, impulsive daughter, she'd broken her. Then when Blair failed to meet her expectations, she'd discarded her, training her cousin to take her place.

Away from toxicity, Blair thrived. Each time she heard her mother's voice calling her useless, she beat it back behind doors, and got up, determined to prove she was someone. Something. Blair Lawson.

Professor Lawson. He could almost taste her goal, her dream. She'd been hurt at every turn during her training and she strived to become the opposite of her mother. Always smiling and bubbly, soft and sweet.

Except with him.

Blair saw Seth as an immovable mountain. No one, nothing could touch his self-confidence, so she didn't need to play nice with him. She found it quite relaxing to simply not police what she said or how she acted around him.

Seth knew he was dealing with her now. He could close the door, let her retain some of her privacy.

He pushed through to the next room inside her mind—a dark place filled with filthiness, sensual dreams he would never have thought his proper, bubbly little witch capable of.

And beyond, there were other secrets locked up tight. The impulse to hurt herself, which she'd long stopped giving in to. Her mother had made her hate herself, and younger Blair used to cut at her flesh, desperate to crawl out of it. Now, she did push-up, punched a bag or a sparring partner.

"I'll kill your mother one day," he informed her casually.

Blair finally shut the doors. "She did what she thought was right."

"She saw your strength, and put you down before you could rise to take her place," he snapped. "The Whites can live hundreds of years. She knew you'd climb the ranks of the clan within a couple of decades. Her treatment of you ensured you left before you could challenge her."

Her eyes widened. She'd never even thought of that. Not his sweet, broken Blair. Even in her darkest days, she'd always assumed she was at fault, somehow deserving of her mother's treatment.

He was going to enjoy burning Terra's world down.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Seth snorted.

He'd been treated differently, revered his entire life because his matriarch had known there was no hope of controlling him, but Seth had seen Drusilla do the same to his own mother, and though he hadn't been there to witness it, to his sisters, too.

The men and women in power dealt with competition swiftly and lethally.

Blair wasn't ready to face it, and Seth didn't have the time to make her see the truth.

"Aphrodite marked you. She told you we're in her stepmother's domain, which means that Hera's pulling the strings." He cursed under his breath. "We're screwed."

"Aphrodite said—"

"Nothing useful. She may be beautiful, but she's as cunning as they come. She has to obey Hera's will, like all of Olympus, and openly, she does, but she's spent thousands of years using mortals to exert her dominance."

Blair lifted her chin. "Doesn't that mean that she's, by default, on our side?"

"Gods are only ever on their own sides, witch."

"Be that as it may, if Hera wants to keep you here, and Aphrodite wants to stick it to Hera, it stands to reason that she'll try to be helpful. Ish. She said to escape the labyrinth, we have to be willing to leave our strength behind. And she told me to help you face your fears. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing," he shot back.

"You seemed afraid of me when I turned up. Who did you think I was?"

Seth flashed his fangs. "Let it go, witch."

"Was it Hera? Why does she have something against you? Isn't she, like, a nice goddess? Of something like family and childbirth..."

Now, he scoffed.

"Unless..."

She opened her mouth, and then closed it.

He didn't need to enter her mind again to guess her conclusion.

"Don't say it. Don't even think it. Not here."

"You're a Stormhale," she said slowly. "I always assumed that was why you wielded lightning. Everyone did...but you're stronger than anyone else in your family."

"Blair." He didn't raise his voice, but she caught the warning nonetheless. "How much would you like to piss off our host?"

After a moment, she nodded. "Right. So, I'm guessing Hera wants you to stay here. Aphrodite has given you the means to escape."

"Aphrodite gave *you* the means to entertain her, nothing more."

"You're so jaded. Maybe your sister wanted to help you, ever think of that?"

Seth closed his eyes.

He didn't need a mirror to tell him they were filled with thunder when he opened them again. Slowly, he crossed the distance separating him from Blair. His words hissed between his teeth, each a threat whispered against her ear.

"If you want to stay alive, shut that mouth, witch."

"If you want to survive this place? Open yours, demigod."

Seth growled as his hand closed around her throat. The witch was downright infuriating. Why, oh, why hadn't he just let her rot here? There was no question that if he had failed to follow her, Aphrodite wouldn't have bothered with her. She would have been ripped apart by minor servants, like he had been so many years ago. Instead of thanking him, she was attempting to drive him to madness when this place had failed to.

He should end this. Cut her down where she stood to silence her and let him regain some peace. His fingers flexed as he stared into her defiant green eyes.

To his utter horror, Blair pushed to her feet and brought her lips to his.



HUNTER AND PREY

There were a fair few things Blair had imagined doing to Seth over their short acquaintance. Staking him through the heart, for example. There were only few ways to kill a vampire; piercing their heart was one of them. A sharp knife could do the job, but as a fan of classic vampire literature, Blair liked the romanticism of a good old stake. She'd seen herself creeping into an overly ornate bedroom with lush purple and gold furnishings, climbing onto his bed, and plunging a piece of wood right into his heart several times. But kissing him? Never. Could she plead insanity?

His touch certainly felt like madness. He ought to be cold; vampire skin generally ran colder than that of a human, and they were in the woods at night. At least Blair was dressed for hiking, with an insulated coat that had seen better days. Traveling by portal wasn't good for the wardrobe. Seth wore a white shirt under a burgundy velvet waistcoat and a black raincoat. Instead of being filthy like her cheap sport jacket, his clothes were pristine. He didn't have so much as a hair out of place.

And he was warm. So very warm. Her freezing hands couldn't get enough, traveling the length of his arm to settle on the back of his bare neck, intent on stealing all his fire.

His lips were another kind of lunacy. A crackling lance of electricity seem to run under his flesh, softly burning at her touch. He tasted like a sour candy. Painful and delicious. Seth didn't move—neither to push her away nor bring her closer. She hated him. She hated him so much she couldn't think straight, and he was entirely indifferent to her.

Fuck that.

She grabbed the lapel of his coat and pulled him closer, running her tongue along his infuriating mouth, parting his lips to lick the sharpness of the fangs Seth never retracted. Iron flooded her tastebuds as her tongue cut upon the contact.

Seth moved so freaking fast she couldn't see a thing. The next moment, her back hit the trunk of a tree.

The predator caged her in, his silver eyes burning with need.

"What the hell, Blair?" The words were labored.

She couldn't remember another time he'd called her by her name, not witch, not *strega*, just Blair. The novelty made her chuckle. Oh, she'd ruffled his feathers, all right. The cool, collected Seth Stormhale, bothered by a mere, mediocre witch.

She shrugged. "Whatever it takes to make you shut up for a minute."

Seth bared his fangs, releasing a low growl in clear warning. "You don't know what you're playing with. You're lucky you're alive after this."

At the back of her mind, Blair acknowledged the truth of his words. Seth was a young vampire. She didn't quite remember his age, but she knew he wasn't that much older than his sister Cat. He'd been turned a decade ago, at most. Newborn vampires didn't have a great hold on their thirst for blood. Yet, she was certain—entirely sure—that she was in no danger from him.

"You don't scare me, Stormhale. The only thing that scares me right now is your letting your pathetic daddy issues prevent you from doing what's necessary for us to get out of here."

Seth's hand flew to her throat. "I will drain you if that's what it takes for you to stop provoking me, witch."

She was back to witch, apparently. Blair decided she didn't like it. She grinned as she grabbed his coat at the neck for the second time, and pulled him down to her again.

This time, she expected the pain and the fire. She took all of it and sought out more, coaxing his mouth open, past his teeth.

"Fuck," Seth grunted, letting go of her throat. His hand moved to her shoulder, trembling. Then it pushed against it, pinning her hard to the tree.

Seth was deliberately slow as his body pressed flush against her. The hand still at the side of her face moved to cup her chin, and he took control.

There was nothing tentative about the kiss now. It was demanding, demeaning, and utterly depraved. Seth was fucking her mouth, his tongue seeking hers, plunging in and out, deeper, slower, at his leisure. She was ashamed to hear herself moan.

Seth only let go of her chin to run his hand along her curves, settling on her hip for one moment before taking her thigh and pulling it around his waist. Blair lifted her second leg and crossed her ankles around him. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* He was hard. So very hard. She felt it right at her core, and she wanted it—needed it—closer.

She tilted her hips to feel more of him when Seth's mouth moved from her lips to the curve of her neck. An unexpected sharp pain made her scream when he plunged his fangs through her skin and sucked.

Blair trembled, confused and utterly pissed, yet incapable of moving, of talking, of doing anything except taking every bit of pleasure and suffering.

Seth sucked, and sucked, and sucked. She moaned, wishing she could tell him to go to hell, to move away, but also to never, ever stop. His hard length pulsed against her core as he drained her, just like he'd promised he would.

Finally, he lifted his head away from her throat.

Blair was utterly spent, exhausted, and so vulnerable.

"Never forget what I am, witch." His mouth was filthy; filled with her blood.

She could feel herself clench against him.

Blair hadn't forgotten her schooling. She was aware that being drained by a vampire could be pleasurable if the vampire wanted it to be—it was one of the reasons why they could find so many willing victims. Yet there was a stark difference between knowing the effect his kind could have on hers and feeling it for herself. She felt so foolish now. She'd wanted a reaction from him, but she'd never thought she would be the one losing this particular game. Blair was supposed to be good at this. She didn't often play with guys, but when she did, she could wrap them around her little finger.

Seth chuckled, openly mocking her weakness, her humanity.

She found the strength to get to her feet and push against his chest. He didn't budge. "I hate you."

"You only hate the fact that you want me." His smirk made her want to hide in a hole—or better yet, bury him in one. "It's not your fault."

Blair expected him to launch into a soliloquy about being irresistible to any living thing. Instead, he lifted her arm. "Your so helpful Aphrodite poisoned you with lust. I could taste her spells in your blood. Quite delicious, I might add."

"What!" Blair remembered how the goddess had marked her.

The divine bitch was responsible for the most embarrassing moment in her life. Blair wanted nothing more than to kick her perfect ass.

"Why would she do that to me?" She'd been so certain that Aphrodite had been on her side. Now she wished she'd listened to Seth's warning.

"It appears you were correct," Seth said, shocking her. "She was trying to help after all."

"She can shove her help up her ass with a broomstick."

He finally moved a step back, laughing. "I needed blood and power. You carry both." Seth brought his own wrist to his lips, bit into it, and dabbed a finger at his blood.

Blair shrank back, but he got to her neck before she could move, pressing the golden liquid to the puncture marks he'd left behind. They burned like acid, but before she could open her mouth to scream, all pain disappeared. The two small holes were gone, her skin smooth and unmarred.

She slapped his hand away anyway. "Ever heard of asking?"

He didn't even need to think it through. "No."

Fucking asshole.

"What did Aphrodite tell you again, about this labyrinth?"

"Fuck her, and fuck you."

He winced. "Not all at once, I hope. I'm not much into incest."

Now that he'd fed—on her—his infuriating smart mouth was back. Gone was the uncertain man who feared the woods around them. Seth seemed utterly in control.

"You have a plan," Blair realized.

"I'm supposed to be willing to leave my strength behind, is that right?"

Blair forced herself to recall exactly what the goddess had told her.

It is a labyrinth one cannot escape unless they're willing the leave their strength behind. My stepmother will have him broken and on his knees, begging for death before the sun rises.

She repeated each word, as precisely as she could remember them.

Seth sighed. "Fine. Come here."

He took her hand in his, his fingers interlacing through hers and they walked to a path, away from the trees. His eyes went upward, to the starless sky.

Never letting go of her, he bent his imposing frame down, getting to his knees.

"Hades," he called out. Clouds gathered overhead in the sky. "Hades," Seth repeated.

A lightning bolt streaked the darkness, and Blair would have sworn Seth wasn't responsible for it. His magic felt different. Wilder, less focused. She bit her lip, not liking anything happening right now. "Seth—"

"Let go of my hand and you die." The warning came in one breath, a rushed whisper. His eyes returned to the sky. "Hades," he echoed. "We've never met, but I could use a hand, if you please? Your power goes beyond these lands. I know you can't reach Earth, but if you could get me out of here, I'd owe you one. Anything, anytime. You call it." The sky seemed to get closer, growing more threatening with every instant.

"Seth, this doesn't look good."

His gaze cut to hers. "My hand. Hold it hard. Please."

She nodded.

The clouds rolled through the woods, surrounding them both in darkness.

The next moment, they tumbled at the speed of light, making Blair close to vomiting her guts out.

And then they crashed on solid rock, falling hand in hand right on top of her old campsite.

Surrounded by a handful of vampires and witches who smirked.

Blair's eyes zeroed in on the only person who wasn't a stranger.

Axia.

Shit.

"Got you, bitch."



INTO A CORNER

S eth reluctantly let go of Blair's hand, though it felt quite good in there, if he was honest. At least when she was attached to him he could stop her from going off on her own and getting herself killed.

She was a handful, that witch. Infuriating, testing his boundaries, seeing just how far she could push him, not so different from her mischievous kitten.

He got to a crouch, slowly assessing the situation. Four vampires, two witches—one of them without much power. He knew what they were capable of, and that wasn't much. They weren't a threat to him. To Blair, however...

The blue kitten Blair had called Velvet hopped out of the shadows to join them, curling up against Blair despite the danger it couldn't have helped sensing.

Great. Two liabilities. At least the cat had the sense to cling to Blair. So long as they were together, they were easier to protect.

That was without counting the voice at the back of his head reminding him of his duty. He was supposed to take Blair and bring her to Aveka. It was an annoying buzz repeating the words again and again. *Later*, he snapped, fully aware that "later" meant "never."

Six targets. Ten seconds at most. Then the vamps would either attack Blair, or retreat to call Aveka—either way, they'd fuck him over before he had time to get Blair to safety. Blair started to get to her feet; before she'd straightened up, Axia lifted her high-heeled boot to stomp her.

Seth supposed she was volunteering to go first. Casually, Seth strolled to her, grabbed her neck and twisted it before her foot could collide with Blair's face.

"Wha—"

"Trait—"

"Set—"

His lightning struck five times, coming to him more naturally than ever before.

There was nothing more than burning humps of coal where the five others had stood moments ago.

"What the hell, Seth? She was a bitch, but she didn't deserve—"

"No time for this now. Aveka knows we've pinned you down. She'll summon me in moments. We have to get you somewhere safe—and away from me."

"Now, why would we want to do that, I wonder."

Seth froze. The voice had come from the shadows of the trees, though he could see and sense no one else.

Fuck.

Aveka appeared as she stepped outside of the area she'd shielded, followed by her usual four acolytes. Vlad, the ancient. Erys, the boy who should never have been turned that young, before his brain was completely developed. Now he thrived on pulling wings out of butterflies. Immortalizing the mind of teenagers never worked out. They forever had hormones wreaking havoc in their system. Aveka had taken advantage of that, redirecting all of his frustration into violence and chaos. Anika Beaufort was perhaps the worst of the four, because she'd joined them fully cognizant of what Aveka was. She just believed the alternative, Chloe Eirikrson, to be worse. Anika's family maintained a great deal of power in the current regime, and she wanted to keep it. Naturally, she could have thrown in her lot with Chloe and soon learned that the girl had no desire to rule over the vampires, unlike Aveka, but Anika—like many—was too terrified of the name Eirikrson to think clearly. Now, she knew she'd never be accepted back on Night Hill. That made her desperate.

The last, Seth had never directly spoken to, though he'd seen him in every battle, silently following Aveka's bidding, never getting involved until he was given a direct order. He was a tall, tanned ancient with raven hair and darker eyes, built like a fighter and moving like one, too. Seth didn't even know his name. He'd sometimes wondered if he was someone else Aveka had bespelled. A window into the future he could have —would have—if Blair fell into the ancient witch's hands. He took one step forward, casually placing himself right in front of Blair, close enough to touch her arm. Her hand immediately moved to take hold of his sleeve.

"Aw, aren't you two cute. You know, I did wonder why you sent such precious cargo to a mere mortal, for a while. Then I realized. It must be love." She drawled over her last word.

Blair snorted. "Or maybe being tied to just about anyone is better than dealing with you, you crazy bitch."

Seth usually liked her mouth, and what came out of it, but now wasn't the time for her specific brand of sass. He closed his right hand over her small fingers, and tightened them shortly, in warning.

"Look at this kitten." Aveka's high-pitched laugh was like nails on a blackboard. "Thinking she has claws."

The hunters and the witch earlier were nothing, no one, a slight amuse-bouche for Seth. Now, they were surrounded by lethal adversaries—or insane ones, in Erys's case. His magic wouldn't do a thing against ancients, who could withstand it or outrun it. Then, he'd have lost precious instants during which Blair could be snatched. They had to play this smart. Find a window for Blair to escape. The problem was that his magic would leave a trace—if he transported her by lightning, Aveka or Vlad were likely to find a way to follow.

Angering Aveka wasn't the way to go. They needed time to think and plan. They needed—

Blair swung her arms forward with a grunt, pure energy flying out of her palms. Fire.

"I guess that's that," he muttered to himself, calling to the storm.

Seth could choose to either surround a person with his power, coating them without harming them—as he did when he wanted someone else to travel with him—or let them feel the burn through their flesh. The former was harder, demanding more concentration. He hadn't been able to master the trick until after he'd turned. He remembered the jolt of uncertainty, sometimes fear, when he'd first attempted it on small rodents, after successfully transporting inanimate objects without burning them to a crisp.

Calling his magic on Blair and her stupidly endearing cat brought back some of that alarm, though he hadn't accidentally fried anyone in half a decade.

He needn't have bothered. His magic hit, cloaking her as it was intended to...and nothing. She remained right where she was, shrouded in a golden haze.

Her shield.

Shields she'd erected the gods knew when had stopped him. *Him*.

Aveka needed him because he was the only force she knew that could destroy Greer Vespian's shields around Oldcrest, the potent ancestral magic her foremothers had long ago set up. And Blair had casually deflected him.

The way she stared at him revealed she was just as confused as he was.

That left them one freaking terrible option. He had to kill her. He had to kill her right now or his freedom was going to disappear forever. It would be easy. As easy as it had been to destroy Axia's irrelevant mortal body. One snap, one bite. He could even be kind and come from behind so she never saw it coming.

Seth's hand peeled her fingers from his arm. One little twist one way or another. That's all he needed.

"Run."

She stared at him, eyes wild.

"As fast as you can, as far as you can. Get out of here, witch."



RIGHT AND WRONG

B lair hesitated. She didn't like running and she'd already done enough of it for a lifetime. Running was what prey did, and predators never failed to give chase. Running away from of four—make that five, given Seth's predicament —vampires didn't seem like the wisest course of action. Yet what other choice did she have, exactly?

Seth had tried to get her out of there, she could still feel the sting of his spell, but she'd stopped it. Something inside her had reacted, immediately protecting her, faster than she could ever think, let alone do anything of her own accord.

What was going on with her?

A problem for a different time.

"Blair." Seth's voice was tight, his square jaw ticking with tension.

"You can't take them all," she whispered back.

Powerful as he was, these were other ancients. Almost all of the demigods had fallen eventually, victim to their hamartia. Blair didn't need to scratch her head to know what Seth's was. Hubris. He believed he could get himself of any situation, despite the odds, and someday that was exactly how someone would shoot an arrow through his heel—or something equally ridiculous.

"So, what, we all take you instead?"

She didn't like this one bit.

Blair knew the limits of her power. She could keep up with vampire speed for a few minutes with the right magic, but it took time, minutes she didn't have to prepare the spells, and those guys would keep their speed up far longer than she ever could hope for. The only escape she could think of was the portal nearby—the portal they'd just come out of. That didn't exactly feel like a good idea after their little trip to Olympus. Portals could take people to any location they could think of, but it was wild, olden magic with a will of its own, often serving its maker.

In other words, too dangerous.

What other choice did she have?

"I'm not moving. We fight. You take the front; I cover your back." She wasn't blind to her position in this situation. The best she could do was to make sure his heel remained arrowless while he did most of the work, but it would be enough. They'd be enough.

Right?

Who was she kidding? She wasn't Chloe, who'd taken to a sup's life like fish to water. She wasn't Cat, the vampire princess, trained from birth to wield all forms of weapons, or Diana, the ancient fighter, or Avani, as lethal with her fangs and claws as she was with her bare hands. And she sure as fuck wasn't Greer Vespian. Her spells were weak. They never lasted long in a fight. She'd learned to throw a punch to make up for it, but throwing a punch wasn't going to help against these monsters.

She was out of her depth, out of her element, and out of time.

So her simple little self was all they had. And she would do the job. She didn't have a choice. For all her friends—the friends who'd taken care of her more than her family ever had —Seth had to stay free of Aveka's control. No one would be safe if his mind was taken.

"Blair, we won't last five minutes." Seth's matter-of-fact tone should have pissed her off, but it didn't. He was baldly stating the simple truth.

There was something else she could do. A simple solution to her predicament. She thought of the blade concealed against her chest for the last few days, nestled right next to Velvet. Its hilt marked with the twelve Olympian symbols. The one weapon that could hurt Seth. She remembered striking him, planting it right in his flank, golden blood flowing.

It wasn't fair. She thought she'd have more time with him. But for the greater good, she just didn't have a choice.

Blair didn't let herself think. She pulled out the weapon, grasping its hilt with shaking fingers, but firmly all the same.

Then she twisted the blade down, pointed at her target and shoved it in one smooth, fast blow—stabbing herself right under her ribcage.



AFTER THE STORM

S eth hadn't moved to evade the strike when he'd believed it aimed at him. The betrayal had stung, but he'd perfectly understood Blair's motivations, and because her actions were going to ensure the safety of his sisters, he'd let her. He'd let her approach to kill him, as Aveka and her brood rushed in to save him. Funny situation, really.

There was no fanfare, regrettably, but it wasn't the worst way to go.

But instead of feeling any pain, he found himself frozen with pure shock, watching her rotate the hilt to plunge it inside her.

It didn't make a lick of sense. Killing him was the logical move, and she had the means to do so. In her shoes, he would have done so.

Would he?

He'd had a chance to do just that. He'd had a chance to kill her to save himself—or parts of himself, at least.

Her harrowing scream pierced through his stunned stillness. Blair's face was twisted with pain, and her breathing, labored. Her blood poured like wine down a fountain, soaking her clothes under her jacket, dripping at her feet. The scent was sickeningly delectable and yet utterly repulsive, because it was coming out of her. Because Blair, his Blair, his witch, was dying. She leaned forward, weak on her feet. Her kitten hopped out from under her jacket, frantically yowling, and Seth had Blair in his arms before she hit the floor, but a yell of pain twisted from her when he caught her.

Her chest. He swore, handling her as gently as he was capable of.

"If—" She coughed. "If I'd known you could do that, I might have made another move." Her voice was all wrong, each word a visible struggle. She tried to laugh, but ended it in a cry that tore the very fabric of his being.

He glanced up just long enough to see himself surrounded by a circle of thunder, striking continuously everywhere around them, cutting off the rest of the world.

"Don't speak." He shook his head. "Just don't speak."

Mindful of keeping her as immobile as possible, he tore her jacket at the back and slowly removed it from around the blade.

Fuck.

Blood pooled over her clothes, dark and sick, clogging the air.

Heart's blood. No, he reasoned. If it'd pierced her heart, she'd already be dead. He held on to that idea, ignoring the voice that whispered she'd certainly pierced *something*.

"You're fine. Just fine."

She attempted another laugh that ended with a heartrending moan. "I'm not. It's okay."

Fuck. "Don't you dare give up. You just need a healer."

"Too bad we don't have one of those handy."

How the fuck could she manage to be so flippant at that moment? "Save your strength, don't speak."

Removing the blade was out. She'd bleed out in seconds. "You need to take some of my blood." He brought his wrist to his mouth and bit down before offering her his forearm. "Then what?" She shook her head. "Aveka's on the other side with her posse. We don't have a choice. It's you or me." She whimpered.

"Don't speak." Each pained whisper was hurting her.

"You can determine who wins this stupid fight. You can save so many of my friends. It has to be you."

He shook his head, refusing to hear to her nonsense. She had to live. She just had to.

"Drop your shield, Blair." The fact that she could manage to keep her energy shields up despite the gaping hole in her chest and her strength fading was astounding.

She seemed surprised to realize she was still protecting herself. A frown marred her forehead for an instant as she focused on letting go. The moment she had, Seth tightened his hold on her.

"Fleabag, come closer." Her kitten hissed in protest, but obeyed nonetheless. "Close your eyes. I'm getting you help."

He had to let go of his own shields circling around them, and the instant he did, they were both traveling with his lightning—though Seth knew they'd soon be followed. Vlad didn't even have to use any of his witches to attempt to locate them.

There was only one place where he could go.

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B lair thought she knew about pain. She'd broken her ankle as a kid after falling out of a tree. That had hurt like hell. And then there had been her first period. She'd used magic to ensure she'd never have to deal with that mess ever again. Blair had fought with enough huntsmen and vampires to have been kicked, punched, and sliced occasionally. Nothing compared to this. It wasn't the knife under her chest, though that certainly was a bitch, too. The pain had spread under her skin, searing her blood. She could feel herself fading. Seth wasn't taking it too well. She doubted he was used to not being in control.

Blair wanted to make him understand that she was okay with her choice, so he wouldn't carry guilt over it for the rest of his days, but fuck, talking hurt like hell.

She must have dozed off and started to dream—or maybe she was just dead—because there was a flash of bright light, and moments after, she was home. The only place she'd ever considered home. Oldcrest.

She was on top of Night Hell, right at Chloe's doorstep.

"Help!" The voice seemed far away, but she heard the echoes of it resonating around her.

She was home.



ALMOST HOME

They were surrounded in an instant, which was usually one of the things that Seth hated about Oldcrest. Everyone was in each other's business, practically living on top of each other. This time, he'd never been happier to see people turn up.

"Oh my god, is that Blair?" someone screamed out loud, before calling for Helsing.

Mere seconds later, the blond vampire hybrid rushed in on a burst of wind. He took in the situation in one sweeping glance and immediately knelt right next to Seth. "Hold her down," he ordered, glancing up from Avani to Diana. Both girls immediately jumped into action, pinning her hands and feet. To Seth, he said, "This thing is hurting her. The moment I pull it, you press on the wound, understood?"

That didn't sound like a good idea. "What if it slices something on the way out? What if the blade's pressure the only thing keeping her alive? Alexius..."

The ancient moved before Seth had a chance to fit in another word—he seized the hilt and pulled it out.

Blair, who'd seemed unconscious until then, screamed harder than she had so far, the sound ending in a wordless plea followed by soft cries. She writhed, but both vampire females were holding her quite firmly.

Shit.

Seth pressed both palms hard against her wound, dismayed when they were drenched in blood seconds later.

He looked away, wincing. "Oh god."

"Calm down, Stormhale, she's already healing."

What?

That didn't make any sense. All the blood! And mortals just didn't heal from wounds like these. She hadn't even taken his blood. Not that his blood could do much against an injury like this.

Well, it could. If Blair drank enough of it, she'd die anyway, but she'd wake again the next night at least.

"I should give her blood. Blair, can you hear me?" Her only reply was a low moan, drowning in the rest of her whimpers that grew weaker and weaker. "You need to drink. No bullshit this time."

"I don't believe that's necessary," Alexius replied.

The ancient was starting to piss him off.

"Her breathing's already deeper. There was something about this knife—something poisoning her."

Seth's gaze moved from his blood-coated hands to her chest. Indeed, it rose and fell far deeper than it had moments ago.

None of this made any sense at all to him. This blade was poison to him, but it shouldn't have affected her—not beyond being sharp and pointy, in any case. Made of fyriron, it had been crafted on Olympus to destroy Enlightened. Not humans.

"She's gonna be fine. Let's find her a bed and make her comfortable."

"I can't move my hands. If I do..."

"Seth?" That voice was one of the only things that could get his attention no matter the situation, but he didn't so much as glance away from Blair. His sister repeated his name softly. "Seth, Alexius wouldn't put Blair at risk. She's our friend. You can trust him." He couldn't bring himself to move, though. What if they were wrong? What if her guts spilled out when he stopped holding them together?

Cat's manicured hands joined his and softly clasped his wrists, before pulling them off Blair.

Through her destroyed clothing, he could see the wound, still smothered with her blood. It was clean but far too deep.

She should have died.

She should be dead.

Against all expectation, she wasn't. Blair had fallen asleep.

Focusing, his eyes caught movement within her flesh. Her tissue was coming together, fusing to heal much faster than it should. Faster than a vampire. As fast as his.

"How is she doing that?" Alexius's sister, Diana, asked her brother.

The ancient shrugged. "Not one clue. But she...she isn't the Blair who left a few months ago. Can't you smell it? She feels different. There's something else to her."

Seth took a deep breath in, letting her familiar sweetness hit his nostrils. No difference struck him at first. She still had the most delicate, irresistible scent he'd ever encountered.

But then there was one notable difference—one he should have noted hours ago. She no longer smelled like food to him.

Seth never suffered from bloodlust intense enough to be a danger to mortal, but Blair's scent had been a constant temptation whenever they'd run into each other. It wasn't that he couldn't imagine himself feeding on her—he'd leap at the chance. For pleasure. For fun. Not out of hunger. Never that.

With care, he gathered her in his arms. "Is the house ready yet?" he asked Catarina, who nodded.

"The painters finished a couple of weeks ago."

That was all he needed to know. In instants, he was flying down the hill until he reached his family's territory. Where the antique mess his matriarch had built once stood, there were now two homes of equal size, though the first was considerably better appointed. He kicked the door open and walked into the home he'd never entered before—though it felt familiar.

After hiring an architect and approving the plans, he'd left Cat in charge as she lived in Oldcrest. She seemed to have done a great job, as he knew she would. The entryway was painted a brushed silver, except for the marble columns and the white vaulted ceiling. He didn't pause to look at the paintings or sculptures his sister had chosen. Dashing to the back of the house, beyond his sitting room and formal ballroom, his office and guest bedrooms, Seth made his way to the owner's suite.

This entire house felt like a window into another life, a life where things were simple for him—a life where he had roots and plans, his family close by.

He'd wanted that here, planned this house so it felt like the home he'd never had.

His bed was large enough to fit half a dozen people comfortably, with a simple wooden frame and canopy cut out from a single oak. Diana had surpassed herself. He was relieved to find that his mattress had been delivered, and either the hill's cleaning crew or his sister had made it with silk sheets. Vampires weren't susceptible to cold.

He laid her down in the center of the bed, and rushed out to the closest guest bedroom. His house was one story, but he'd taken a care to ensure that any guest could rest as far away from him as possible—the owner's suite took up the greatest part of the north facade, and the guests were set up in the south east.

He took one thick duvet off the king-size bed and brought it right back to the owner's suite to tuck Blair in.

She seemed so small in his bed.

Once he was done, Seth stood, restless and helpless. He was off-kilter, still on high alert, the sheer panic of the last few

hours still running through him.

Sense caught up with him eventually. Seth realized he had something to do. Warn the others. Aveka knew where he and Blair were right now, and she'd be on their trail. Oldcrest needed all the notice it could get.

Yet Seth sat in his armchair, keeping his eyes on Blair's chest, attuned to each deep breath.

She was alive, somehow, and nothing else mattered.

Until it did.

Come to me. Come to me now. I summon you.

Fuck.



COMPANY

T he resonant command echoed in his mind over and over. Seth's claws sharpened over the arms of his seat, digging deep into the velvet cushion.

Later, he told himself. He could go to Aveka later.

His gazed snapped to his feet when he felt something move against him.

The stupid—and stupidly cute—cat. What was its name again?

Get here right now!

Seth groaned. He wasn't sure how Aveka's summonses worked so well when every other command she'd attempted to force him to do had been easier to push back against. Perhaps because of the simplicity of the order. He could feel her digging her claws around his resistance. He wouldn't last long now.

"Seth?"

The whisper drowned out the vestiges of Aveka's commands, pulling his focus to the girl in his bed.

She yawned, stretching out like a cat as her kitten leaped to join her, quick to abandon Seth as soon as his witch was awake.

"How are you feeling?" Seth rose and took one step, but she shook her head.

"Stay away, I stink!" she announced. Which was hilarious for someone who smelled as delightful as she. "What time is it?"

He had no clue. He'd been so fixated on remaining in control since Aveka had started to call him, time hadn't seemed to register. His heavy curtains were drawn, but through them, he could see hints of daylight pouring through.

"Not sure. You didn't tell me how you are."

"Alive, somehow." Blair sat up against his pillows and lifted the duvet to look at her wound. "I'm healed. How am I healed?"

The question of the day. Unfortunately, they didn't have time to discuss it.

"You can't stay. Aveka's calling me and she knows you're here. She'll have this place surrounded by now. She's already found her way into the territory more times than I care to count. We have to get you out."

"No!" She shook her head. "I'm tired of running. I'm tired of all of this."

"Blair, you don't seem to understand. Aveka's calling me. She wants me by her side when she manages to take my soul from you. And then, your friends are going to die, unless you get to safety."

"You said it yourself. Oldcrest is probably surrounded. If I run, they'll follow me. I had a head start last time. It'd be stupid."

She made a fair point.

Blair slid out of his bed, keeping the duvet tucked around her body as she started to remove her clothing underneath. "All of this is gross." She made a face. "Do you have any clothes around here?"

"Potentially, in one of the guest bedrooms. I can borrow some of Cat's otherwise."

Blair snorted. "Like any of Cat's clothes would fit around my ass."

There was nothing wrong with Blair's ass, but it was certainly different from his sister's. Catarina was all slender limbs, while Blair's frame was both stronger and softer all at once.

"When you say she's calling you..."

Seth noted that Aveka's voice seemed less potent and pressing now that Blair was awake. "She's summoning me to her. You might know the magic—witches use something like it in covens."

"So that the head of the coven can contact you at any time." Blair nodded, sitting back on top of his bed, her clothes pooling on his carpet. "It might be possible to break the spell, so she can't contact you at a distance. Then all we need to do is make sure you stay away from her in person."

Seth stared at Blair like she'd grown a second head. Why hadn't he thought of that?

He breathed out. A few words shouldn't have appeased him, but they'd worked. He trusted her. With the possibility of an out in the near future, keeping himself under control was somewhat easier.

He must have spoken that thought aloud because she replied. "When we focus hard on a problem for a long time, it's easy to overlook the obvious. I run shit by my friends all the time when I feel overwhelmed, and it always works."

"I don't have friends," Seth shot back, indifferent.

He had slayers and contacts. Some, he enjoyed the company of for a few rounds of drink, a game of poker, or a fuck every now and then, but that was about it. Other than his two sisters, there wasn't anyone he was close to.

"We're friends," Blair stated.

"We aren't even close to friends, witch."

Blair brought her hands to her heart and pouted. "I'm so hurt."

She shouldn't be allowed to ever use her lips like that.

"I've found you interesting from the get-go, and let you know. You avoided me," he reminded her. "Do you avoid your friends, Blair?"

She ignored him, focusing on petting her kitten.

"Go on, do tell. Why did you do your best to stay away from me for so long? Are you that afraid of me?"

She tipped her chin up and met his gaze. "You're not that scary, Stormhale."

He just laughed. He terrified her, and they both knew it. She might not have understood why before, but now, after their trip to Olympus, she knew what he was. Whose son he was. He hailed from a blowhard renowned for taking what he wanted, regardless of the wishes of the object of his attention. A selfish, terrible creature who'd fathered heroes, monsters, and everything in between.

"Come closer for a second, let me try something."

He was sitting on the side of his bed before she could blink, and Blair didn't seem to mind. Vampire speed could freak mortals out sometimes. Not her. Though Velvet didn't seem happy with the disturbance, hissing his feelings on the matter.

She shifted to her knees, bringing both of her hands to either side of his head, brows furrowed in concentration.

"Are you doing something?" She was. He could feel magic flow through him. "Or was that just an excuse to get me in bed with you?"

Flirting was second nature to him, especially when she was around.

"Shut up, and drop your shields while you're at it."

"I'm a tit for tat kind of guy. I'll drop mine if you drop yours."

She was cute when she was mad.

Cute.

Blair Lawson was cute as hell. Another piece to add to the puzzle. He hadn't noticed it at first, because she hid behind her sass and leather boots, but she was a sweetheart.

Seth didn't go for sweethearts, or cute women. Yet this one...

Come to me now!

Fuck.

"I felt that. She called you just now, didn't she?"

Seth's eyes returned to Blair. "There's a lot more than meets the eye under all the hair dye and attitude, isn't there?"

He'd always known that. How much more, he was only beginning to glimpse.

"Drop your shields and we'll find out," she dared him.

He might not like doing it, but Blair had done the same for him in the labyrinth. Seth let go of the mental shields he'd learned to put up as a teen. Each layer dropped one after the other, leaving him bare to her.

Then he felt her. The essence of her magic wrapped around him, enclosing him in a golden cage. It felt good in her prison. Safe.

Silent.

Gone were the pressing whispers, the need to obey them.

"There. It won't last for long, but I closed you up as much as I could."

"How did you—"

"My grandmother used a similar spell on me when I was a child. Other people's thoughts were driving me bonkers. She had to do it every night until I was old enough to learn how to control it. A stronger witch or a coven can find a more permanent solution later."

A stronger witch? She must be kidding. "Blair, you survived a hole in your chest that should have killed you."

"I have no idea how that happened, trust me. A papercut takes weeks to heal on me, normally. Aphrodite must have done something to me—I can't think of any other explanation."

He charged on, ignoring her. "You had magic since you were a kid—most witches don't develop powers until their teens."

"Magic I can't use."

She was impossible. "From the moment you touched my mind over a year ago, I knew there was something about you. You're more. More than a witch, more than mortal. More than you give yourself credit for."

She bit her lip, which drew his eyes to her plump, luscious mouth.

Blair shifted uncomfortably at what she saw in his gaze. Sheer hunger. He was fucking starving all over again.

She cleared her throat. "Do you mind checking if there are clothes somewhere, and pointing me in the direction of a bathroom?"

Seth remained where he sat for another second before moving next to his sofa. He pressed a hand to a wooden door. "En suite," he said, opening it himself. He whistled, happy with the green marble bathtub and the antique iron sink. "There are towels there already, and the toothbrush is new." Cat had gone above and beyond for him. Every shelf was filled with the kind of overpriced, personalized products he usually liked to use, including his favorite brands of shampoo and aftershave. He could already see some hairspray and aftershave he had meant to try.

Seth wasn't entirely sure how he felt about it. He was used to his home being taken care of by servants who did their job well because he paid them to do so. Cat wasn't an employee; she was his sister. She done this for him because she cared about him. His heart tightened in his chest. The issue was that he couldn't really recall doing much for her, and he wanted to. She was one of the two people who meant the most to him, and he wanted her to know that.

Seth wasn't raised in a household where affection was shown every day. His mother had seldom been present, and when she had, all she'd wanted was to check on his schooling. After confirming that he was still receiving straight As in every discipline, including combat and all forms of magic, she'd perfunctorily upped his allowance, and patted his head when he'd been lucky. He couldn't even remember her hugging him. If she had, he must have been under five. Caring was one thing—one thing he wasn't great at, but was starting to get the hang of. Showing it, though? He needed a fucking manual. He'd have to find a way to get better at it. Half the time when they met, Cat knelt in front of him like he was nothing but the head of her house, a superior. He'd always hated it, and it had to change.

He wasn't surprised the guest bedrooms were as well prepared as his own. In the silver and green bedroom where he had already taken the duvet, Seth found thick, fluffy bathrobes, slippers, as well as an array of simple T-shirts and yoga pants in various sizes. He grabbed a white top and gray pair of pants that looked like they might fit Blair's athletic frame. When he returned to the owner's suite, he could hear water running in the next room. Which meant that there was nothing but a wooden door separating him from a naked Blair.

He deliberately breathed out, shaking his head.

Seth left the clothes on his unmade bed and forced himself to walk out of the room, out of the house. Her scent was too potent in here.

He wasn't surprised to see a crowd assembled on his doorstep. Catarina stood in the doorway, as if to block the entrance. Most of the other inhabitants of Night Hill waited on his patio, visibly impatient. Levi DeVillier sat on a still wet bench—the beauty of Scotland in the winter—his slayers standing around him. The Helsings had opted for the steps of his entryway. "I see some notable absences," Seth remarked, after scanning each face. "And one equally notable new face." There was a child on Levi's lap, a girl dressed in a frilly white and red dress, with pouty lips and fat cheeks. She had thick blonde curls, although her roots were dark brown.

Seth remembered hearing that Chloe had been pregnant a while back, but he'd been out of the territory for most of it, quite forgotten until now. Seth grinned at the child without even trying. "Where is your mama, tiny fangs?"

Levi's jaw tightened. "I'm not sure. She was supposed to be in class, but—"

"No need to send out a search party," the cheerful American replied, appearing at the end of his paved yard before her mate could get another word in.

Chloe was wearing boots, jeans, and a half-ripped T-shirt, casually dragging along a beat-up weekend bag behind her. "Hey, Seth. Long time!" Something writhed and grunted in the bag. Chloe kicked it hard. "I have a little surprise for everyone."

She unzipped her bag, and Seth couldn't help but laugh. Erys was all tied up like a hog inside, his hands, mouth, wrists, legs, and feet wrapped in duct tape.

"How the hell did you get him?" Levi was practically screeching.

Seth had always been amused by how easily the ancient lost his composure whenever his newly turned mate put herself in danger. Which was every other week.

"So, I might have skipped a few classes here and there." Chloe winced. "Well, not Fin's, naturally. I'm not crazy."

Oh, she was plenty crazy. To have gotten to Erys, she had to have gotten very close to Aveka, all by herself.

"Don't look at me like that." Chloe pouted at Levi.

When Blair did it, Seth wanted to set the world on fire and bite into her lips. Chloe just looked like a brat to him. "She's always attacking us, coming at us from every angle. She almost killed plenty of our friends, and for others, well, there was no almost about it. They're dead because of her." The brat was rather endearing when she was bloodthirsty. "I've been trying to catch her closer acolytes. This guy was just outside the gates." Chloe tilted her chin to Seth. "I guess we have you to thank for the company."

He inclined his head. "They followed Blair and me here."

"Blair's here!" Chloe strolled to the house, fully expecting to be invited in.

Seth hesitated. He wasn't used to having people in his space. When the Stormhales threw galas or charity dos, they did it in the Rome mansion, never at his apartment. He was head of the house now, and technically that meant that the manor was his, but it didn't feel like it. The place was cold and cruel—a remnant of Drusilla's rule. This house on Night Hill felt more like his.

He fought against his instinct to tell the newborn to fuck off, and stepped aside to let Chloe in.

To the others, he said, "I'm not entirely certain what I may have in terms of refreshments, but you're all welcome to it. Blair is taking a shower. When she's done, we all need to talk."

He didn't want to start the conversation until Blair had joined them; it wasn't his story, it was theirs. Blair had answers he might not have, and he knew something they hadn't had a chance to share with her yet.

"Give me some credit, brother." Cat rolled her eyes. "You have a fully stocked bar."



THREE EVILS

B lair was never getting out of this bathtub. Ever. They were going to have to pry her out of here. Ablutions had lasted a matter of minutes in the last few months, as she'd always been in a rush, in order to escape her pursuers. Now she was melting in Seth's stupidly humongous tub. It was big enough for her to sprawl in, and no one was going to take this moment away from her.

Velvet happily slept on a thick mat by her side, seeming as content as her.

She closed her eyes just as someone knocked on the bathroom door.

Oh, hell no.

"Fuck off!" she yelled.

"I hardly think that's fair." There was a chuckle on the other side of the door. "Your friends are draining my reserves of blood and alcohol, and I'm not very good at playing nice."

Her friends?

"I'm coming!"

Nothing else he might have thought to say could have gotten her out of that piece of heaven faster. Her friends! A wave of homesickness seized her, soon washed away by thrill. Somehow, either because Seth's home was entirely new and foreign to her or because she had been exhausted after everything that happened the last few hours, she hadn't quite realized where she was. In Oldcrest. Seth had brought her back home. She'd been gone for so, so long.

She made quick work of drying herself and stormed out of the bathroom.

If she'd ever bothered to imagine Seth's bedroom, it would have been a complex affair with velvet and brocade, opulent but bordering on gaudy, like the clothing he preferred. This room was downright cozy—warm and relaxing in its comfortable simplicity. It probably wasn't to his taste. After every house on the hill been burned to a crisp by Aveka's men —except for Skyhall, the Eirikrson stronghold Aveka wished to claim—the six families had their home rebuilt. The Beauforts hired contractors to do the work, though they hadn't dared show their faces, as far as Blair knew. They sided with Aveka—at least, some of their most eminent members did, out of fear of what Chloe could become as an Eirikrson.

For different reasons, Seth hadn't had a chance to make himself at home here. He'd been spying on Aveka for them at first, and now, he was kept away as her unwilling puppet. But somehow, though she wouldn't have pictured it like this, this place...it felt like him. At least, who he truly was, beyond the swagger, the posturing, and the careless cruelty. She could picture him in here, lounging on his bed, on top of the covers, an old leather-bound book in his hand.

It was a ridiculously big bed, made to host a veritable orgy. Blair wrinkled her nose. Orgies were probably more like the Seth she knew than quiet reading time.

He'd laid out some clothes out for her—a yoga outfit on the boring side, but the fabric was so soft, she could see herself sleeping in the outfit. Blair got changed at the speed of light and burst through the elegant halls, rushing toward the sounds coming from the front sitting room.

She stopped in front of the open room and a sob caught in her throat.

"Oh my god!" Chloe was the first to reach her, engulfing her in her arms.

Cat joined right after, followed by Avani. They hugged her too hard, half jumping, half laughing and Blair was fairly certain she was crying. Mortals being slower, Gwen and Greer reached her seconds after the others.

"It's so good to have you back," Diana's voice said, though Blair couldn't see her, surrounded as she was.

She relished in the embraces, enjoying every moment of it. When her friends let go, Blair leaped right back into each of their arms for an individual hug.

"We missed you so freaking much."

"And you haven't even met your goddaughter yet!"

Blair pressed her hand over her open mouth. "My goddaughter?"

Levi approached with the most ridiculously perfect child she'd seen in his hands. The girl cooed happily, extending her arms to be held.

"Fuck, I've never held a baby. Help."

"It's easier than a kitten. You don't even have to worry about the head, she's old enough to hold it on her own now." Chloe smiled encouragingly. "Go on."

Blair didn't think she'd been this stressed even on Olympus. What if she dropped the baby? What if she hated her?

"What's her name?"

It turned out, once they were around the wiggling, soft, warm angel, she seemed to have a grasp of steel. Blair *knew*, she just knew she'd never let go. There was no way she'd drop her.

"Ruby." Chloe smiled sadly.

"Perfect. She's just perfect. Hi, princess. I'm so glad to meet you. I'm Auntie Blair."

Ruby's reply was a long unintelligible string of gibberish.

Agreeably, Blair replied, "Yes, I'd love to play with you."

"Not you too!" Chloe growled. "You didn't understand what she said. She's not speaking."

Blair knit her brows. "Really? She clearly just asked for some hide-and-seek."

"Maybe later," Seth said, leaning back against the farthest wall. "We have to talk."

She hated him a little for ruining the moment, but unfortunately, the asshole had a point.

In a move so natural she would have thought she'd done it before, she shifted Ruby to her hip and went to take a seat on one of the cream chesterfields.

Why was this house so reasonably furnished? Blair suspected Seth had little to do with the decor.

"We just escaped Aveka in Greece," Seth explained without preamble. "Blair was hurt, and if she didn't know I would have chosen to take her here, her pawn Vlad would have been able to track us. She can't move as fast as I do, but she has access to portals. They're probably already here."

He stared pointedly at Blair. "Our best bet is for you to leave. We can strike first, attack and facilitate your escape. I can take you away until we're sure you're not followed. You're excellent at hiding."

How she hated his guts right now. Mostly because he was right. How could she argue, with Ruby bouncing on her lap?

She'd do anything to protect this place, this family she'd found. Even leave it.

Blair bobbed her head, not trusting her voice.

"No way. You're not leaving." Chloe crowded up to Seth. "We're not sending my best friend running because you got sloppy."

"I messed up," Seth admitted readily. "But that doesn't change the facts. Blair's in danger here. Last time Aveka got us cornered, Blair drove nine inches of fyriron through her own chest, and I'm not taking that chance again." "You what?" Gwen shouted.

Chloe and Cat both flashed their fangs, as if ready to attack an invisible adversary.

"Oh, sweetie," Diana murmured. "That's how you got hurt?"

"Why the hell would you—"

"She did it to protect you," Seth stated, leaping to her defense.

"Maybe she should have stabbed you instead," Chloe shot back.

"A-fucking-men," Seth replied easily. "I would have let her. Though I'd quite enjoy keeping on breathing, the reality is that while I'm alive and Blair has my soul, Aveka has a chance to use me to destroy your borders at will. Each time you rebuild them again, she'll make me get rid of them. You're outnumbered. Some individuals among you might be more powerful than most, but ultimately, tens of thousands of foot soldiers will always win against a couple of hundred warriors. You know this. The only thing guaranteeing the safety of Oldcrest is your shield. So you either kill me, or she runs."

He was met with silence, because there was no arguing against the facts.

There was another solution, of course. The one he'd stopped earlier. If she were gone, with the fragment of his soul, they'd all be safe.

"You're missing another option, poser," Chloe replied.

Blair lowered her gaze. She agreed, but hearing Chloe say it was going to hurt anyway.

"We take the bitch out. Right now."



OUT OF PLACE

S he hadn't just said that. She'd better not have. Seth was going to rip the Eirikrson kid's throat out if she even suggested—

"I take it by *the bitch*, you mean Aveka, right?" Greer asked with a wince.

"Duh. Who else?"

Seth could breathe again. Right, naturally, Chloe wasn't going to suggest they kill the girl she'd just called her best friend.

"It's not that simple," Diana said regretfully. "For a psycho, she has a healthy sense of survival. Every time we came close, she slithered away like the snake she is."

Seth nodded. "It's a risk. And if we fail..."

"Leaving Blair alone is a failure. We can't do that to her." Gwen shook her head. "Not again."

"How about a compromise?" Levi suggested.

All eyes turned to the ancient.

"Aveka needs to be dealt with. If she's gracious enough to come to us, I say we kill the bitch."

Chloe grinned, getting to her tiptoes to kiss his cheek like the little bloodthirsty fledgling she was.

"In the meantime, we prepare for the worst. Some of us can stay with Blair to ensure her safety, and take her away if it looks like we might fail."

"I don't like this." Jack shook his head. "Blair's too important. That means our best fighters will need to stay back to guard her. The odds aren't on our side."

The nephilim apparently wasn't an idiot. Seth was all agreement.

"I'm *not* remaining safe here watching TV while you guys risk your lives to protect me." Blair shook her head. "Let alone while taking a few of our best fighters away from this mess. I can hold my own. By all means, if there's no other choice, take me away, but I *need* to be a part of this."

She must be fucking joking.

"Trust me, I know. I've seen you kick plenty of ass, Lawson," Mikar told her. "It doesn't change the fact that every one of Aveka's goons will have clear orders to seek you out and bring you to her."

"So maybe we let them," Blair said.

Whoa. "What the hell?"

"Did I miss the part where we completely took leave of our senses here?" Alexius casually asked, bringing a glass of wine to his lips.

Seth looked at the empty mug of synthetic blood in his hand and grimaced. He needed something much harder for this. Although he could follow Blair's reasoning before she said a word, her idea was still going to turn him gray.

"You said it yourself," she told Chloe. "She's a snake. She lets servants do her bidding until she's certain she can get her way, then she steps in. I say we take a page out of her book. We let them take me to her, then I summon you guys to me."

Everyone exchanged glances as they weighed the possibilities.

"You're fucking insane," Greer said with a hint of admiration. "I like it."

Blair grinned, visibly pleased with herself.

"It's a terrible plan," Seth said, to clarify his position. He hated to see her so smug about carelessly risking her neck. Again.

It was also the best they had for now.

He straightened up. "I'll come with you."

"Wait, if they get both of you, there's more chance..."

He snapped to Cat, "This isn't up for discussion."

Seth flinched as he watched his sister don her formal mask and lower her gaze.

Fuck.

He walked to her and lifted her chin so she met his gaze. "I value your opinion, Catarina. But I know the kind of idiotic brutes in Aveka's employ, drunk on blood and cruelty. They'd hurt Blair simply because they can. I'm the only one who can accompany her without arousing suspicions." He held her gaze until she nodded.

"I see. That seems logical. Sorry."

"No apologies. You're my sister." Her eyes brightened as she smiled at him.

There. He hadn't messed that interaction up as badly as he could have.

"Are you sure this is Seth?" Gwen whispered to Blair.

The other witch shrugged, visibly confused.

Seth only rolled his eyes.

"All right, preparations." Greer was all business. "We have to craft a summoning spell—and we're going to need extensive testing to ensure it's foolproof, no matter the distance."

Gwen nodded. "What do you need? We can put together a circle, and I'll do a supply run to the Academy."

"No way!" Blair handed the baby back to Chloe. "I'm doing the supply run. I'm dying to get my hands on decanters

and potions and even fucking dead spiders." She shot to her feet.

Another piece of the puzzle. She genuinely loved witchcraft. He hadn't been sure, given the emphasis she put on her physical abilities and her protests about her magical ones.

Or she just liked her school.

"No spiders needed for this. But yes, a circle could strengthen the signal. Blair, you can't represent fire, not if you're anchoring the spell. Aveka might sense it."

"I can ask Cece," Gwen offered.

Blair winced. "The freshman? Isn't she a bit green?"

"She's powerful," Greer replied, closing the discussion. "Cece for fire, Gwen for water. I'll do earth."

"I can handle air," Seth offered.

Greer shook her head. "Better not, a vampire's magic is different from a witch's. Discretion will be key—it's best if we stick to mortal craft. Gwen, you know Cathal?"

She groaned and Greer made a face. "I know, he's the worst."

"Who the hell is Cathal?"

"A transfer from the New York Institute. He's here for his second master's under Varra. Part fae. Great at air magic. He's pretty and he knows it—he's fucked half of the dormitory by now. But he's good at what he does."

"He's new?" Seth didn't like that. "What if he's one of Aveka's plants?"

"The fae can't lie. He might only have a quarter of folk blood, but that's enough; Fin confirmed it. His fae ancestry is too strong. We directly asked him if he was with Aveka, and he's replied no in a thousand different ways. Cathal has no allegiance. He despises the very thought of servitude."

That guy sounded worse and worse by the second.

"How pretty are we talking here?"

Greer mouthed, "Hot."

That was it. "We need someone whose loyalty we can't question. I'll handle it."

"The only thing you're loyal to is yourself, Stormhale," Levi shot back.

"I'm loyal to my house, my family, and my home—all of which are threatened by Aveka. You and I may never see eye to eye, but we don't need to, not on this. What we need is to protect what's ours."

Cat. Claudia.

And Blair, too, he finally admitted to himself.

She was his to protect, whether she liked it or not.

"Fine. Doesn't change the fact that Cathal is the best for the job," Greer argued. "Your magic is an atomic bomb—ours is a bullet. Spells need to be balanced."

"How about four bombs?" Cat proposed. "Levi could do water; Seth, air; Diana, fire; and Bash, earth."

"Where is Bash, by the way?" Blair pouted.

"Patrolling." Cat swore. "Shit, he doesn't know you're here. He's going to be pissed when he realizes I forgot to tell him." She started typing rapidly on her phone's screen. Moments later, her newly turned, ex-huntsman mate flew into the house, and squeezed Blair hard.

Seth watched them closely. He wasn't sure he liked seeing a newly turned vampire so close to Blair. Chloe was different —the girl would never be sated by human blood.

Long seconds later, he let go. "Good to have you back, Lawson."

Seth had to admit he felt quite awkward surrounded by so much affection and familiarity. He didn't know what to do with any of it.

He went to pour himself a stiff drink spiced with powdered blood, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and leaned back against the wall. Velvet strolled in, making a beeline for him, and stretched up his shin. "*Meow*."

Seth stared at the tiny feline, wondering why the hell it had approached him, rather than the witch he was bonded with.

"Whatever." He bent down, picked him up, and lifted him onto his shoulder. The kitten happily settled in, lying down and closing his eyes.



REMINISCENCE

B lair was fairly certain Seth Stormhale had never been accused of being adorable before, but right now, with a purring kitten on his shoulder, that was exactly what he was.

Did he realize it? Probably not, otherwise he would have chucked Velvet off him in seconds.

Chloe looked from Seth to her and gaped wordlessly, eyes full of questions. Blair shrugged helplessly. Yes, he'd changed, visibly so. He was more considerate, caring, and approachable. Except she had no idea how, why, or when any of that had happened. Maybe it had been progressive and she'd been blind to it. Who knew? She'd barely seen him in the last months.

"I have to run and get started on crafting that spell." Greer moved to hug Blair tight. "You and I have so much catching up to do, girlfriend," she whispered into her hair, her tone suggestive.

She snorted. Everyone in this room could hear them except maybe Gwen, but Blair was fairly certain Jack would enlighten her.

Blair winced. "Not really. I haven't done much."

"I'll help!" Gwen offered, getting up from the loveseat she'd occupied with Jack.

"I can help, too," Blair said.

"No, you had a hole the size of my dildo inside you. You rest. Then we catch up. You can do the supply run once we figure out what we need." With another kiss, the two witches left.

"How did you heal from that wound so fast, by the way?" Alexius, ever the scholar, asked.

Blair returned to the sofa she shared with Chloe and Levi, taking Ruby—her goddaughter—back on her lap.

Her *goddaughter*. Crazy. And to think she'd missed months because of the mess they were in.

Somewhere along the line, she'd stopped blaming Seth, redirecting all her rage where it belonged: toward Aveka. Sure, his decision to use her might have derailed her life for a bit, but it had saved her friends. Little Ruby.

There was something humbling to being chosen by someone like Seth. He seemed to be his own island, a universe unto himself. And he'd trusted her with the most precious thing he had. Himself. He'd never doubted she'd take care of it, though they'd been virtual strangers then.

Faith.

Seth had had faith in her.

"That's one long fucking story."

So she told them, cleverly curating the story to leave Seth's identity out of it. She watched him lift a brow at her—he'd noticed the omissions of the dagger and his paternity. According to this version, she'd ended up on Mount Olympus simply because it had sounded like a good idea at the time. The present company was made out of her closest friends, sure, but that didn't mean that she could divulge Seth's business to them without his consent.

Alexius drank her tale, making her repeat each of Aphrodite's words several times.

"I could be wrong, but I suspect you've experienced something similar to Chloe, when Jack's father transferred nanocytes to her. It helped her heal faster, strengthened her hold on the supernatural world, and facilitated her transformation." Alexius paused. "Of course, Enik is at the bottom of the food chain, and, well, Aphrodite is... Aphrodite."

"One of the Olympians." Chloe gawked.

"No wonder you healed that fast. It might have changed you significantly, beyond the healing rate. I'd like to take a sample of your blood, if you don't mind," the healer told her.

"Of course." That brought something else to mind. "Actually, I'd be grateful if you could check out Velvet, too. My kitten," she clarified. "You remember, he was messed up when Gwen and I found him last winter. And, well, he's still..."

"I see." Alexius tilted his head. "I'll do your blood first, as Velvet here seems healthy enough, but I'll check him out to the best of my abilities. Maybe you should take him to an actual vet, though."

"I don't know any vet with a hundred PhDs in all forms of medicine."

Alexius puffed his chest out. Flattery always worked with him. "I'll see what I can do."

Her friends had other questions about her journey—Diana had visited most of the places Blair had been to, though they traveled in spectacularly different fashions. Diana had rolled in tons of money since the day she was born. So had Blair, to a considerably smaller degree, but she'd never had to run without leaving any trace.

Blair didn't linger on her use of magic, and either out of courtesy or simply because they didn't think to, none of her friends asked.

"How about you?" Cat asked her brother. "How was your time with Aveka?"

Seth kept his gaze strictly on Velvet as he answered. "She's a needy bitch. Impulsive, cunning, self-obsessed. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing myself with tits." He turned to his sister and smiled. "But it was just fine." Lie.

She knew he was lying, without any doubt. How she was so certain, Blair couldn't say, but she would bet just about anything on it.

Suddenly she was ashamed of herself for never thinking about his ordeal, wrapped up as she'd been in her own. But he'd been the one dealing with the psycho. She opened her mouth just as he shot her one cold, dark look that shut her right up.

Cat was happy to take his cue to move on. "Did you learn anything valuable about her?"

"I believe she models herself after Ariadne. Like our maker, she has four followers with her at all times—Erys being one of them. If you manage to loosen his tongue, you might learn much about her."

"Erys?"

"Some kid turned and made into a vicious killer," Seth explained. "Chloe hunted him. Mikar tied him up and brought him to the Skyhall dungeons while you were getting out of the bath."

"There are dungeons in Skyhall?" she asked. The moment the question crossed her lips, she regretted it. "Of course there are."

It was the only ancestral home left. And naturally, they'd needed dungeons in the Middle Ages.

For a second or two, silence hung over the room, and that was when her stomach decided it was time to make its presence known. A deep rumble sounded, and seemed to reverberate in the room.

"How fucking embarrassing." She laughed. "I haven't eaten for, like, a day, and the last thing I had was an energy bar."

There was a gust of wind, and the next instant, she had Velvet on her lap. A second later, there was an apple next to her. "I'm cooking," Seth called from the kitchen. "Won't be long."

"He can cook?" she mused. She couldn't picture it. Hell, maybe she should sneak a peek in the kitchen.

Instead, she stroked her kitten and bit into the green apple, closing her eyes as the acid sweetness hit her tongue.

"There isn't much my brother can't do," Cat replied proudly. Then she thought on it for a second. "But I can't remember him cooking. For anyone. Ever." The blonde vampire grinned at her.

Oh.

They thought there was something between Seth and her.

She could see how one might make the leap, given that Seth barely acknowledged the existence of most people he wasn't related to, but they were sorely mistaken.

She'd made him look before he'd even seen her face. She'd managed to infiltrate his dreams, something no one else must have done before, so he noticed her existence, sure. But he wasn't interested in her. Nothing he'd said or done suggested he might be. She remembered him looking at her for a second too long every now and then. Her lips, mostly. And he'd flirted some, but it was harmless. She'd been the jumping at him in the labyrinth, and she was certain that if it hadn't been for his bloodlust, he wouldn't have returned her kiss. Seth wasn't the kind of guy who'd be subtle if he wanted a woman. He didn't want her—and hell, she didn't want him either. Right?

She'd never asked herself that question. Seth Stormhale was like his storm. Wild, beautiful, and unattainable. Was there any sense in wanting a storm? None.

And yet—

No. She wasn't going there. She wasn't that much of a masochist.

Right?



DISTANCE

h, for the gods' sakes," Seth growled. "Eat your damn food!"

Blair, Cat, Levi, Chloe, Mikar, Diana, Bash, and Avani were all staring at their plates openmouthed, as if in shock.

He grumbled under his breath. He should just have fed Blair—to hell with the rest of them. Let them starve. But it was as easy to make risotto for a dozen people as it was to make it for one, and he hadn't wanted to be rude.

Levi's slayer half left to guard their prisoner, Alexius, to analyze Blair's blood, and Jack had followed Gwen and Greer, but the rest of the hill's occupants were staring at his mushroom, truffle, and chive risotto.

"I had mushroom risotto in a five-star restaurant once," Diana said primly. "It didn't smell as good as this."

"Have you seen the plating?" Avani sniffed. "Is that grated truffle on top, with the parsley?"

Oh for heaven's sake. "I'm Italian," he reminded them. "This is the basics."

"I'm Italian," Cat put in. "I can't cook like this."

Seth sighed. "You haven't even tried it." To Blair, he said, "Weren't you hungry? Eat. Before it gets cold."

She dug in, to his relief, and the rest of the crowd followed suit.

Seth directed his attention to his own plate. It was okay. It could have used a pinch more lemon, but he wasn't going to complain; the contents of his pantry had been highly satisfactory for an unplanned visit.

"I died, didn't I?" Blair's voice broke. "I died, and I went to heaven. That's how I'm eating this, isn't it?"

"You hate me," Cat whimpered. "You hate me, or you would have cooked for me before."

"Hand up if you opt to name one Seth Stormhale as the official chef of Night Hill."

Every hand went up. Bash held up two, but only because he was chewing and didn't need a hand to hold a fork.

"I have another theory for your consideration," Seth said. "I died and went to hell."

"Where the hell did you learn to cook like this? Because that wasn't at home." Cat was downright offended.

The Stormhales had a strict regimen for their spawns, and it didn't include domestic training.

Seth shrugged. "I moved out when I was eighteen, remember? I talked Mother into letting me use one of the apartments—but it didn't come with staff. I had to hire a cleaner, and cooks. They weren't up to my standards, so I took classes."

It had seemed straightforward to him. He liked to eat well, didn't feel like going out every night, and didn't much like people in his space. His hands were agile, and his ability to glean new skills hadn't been lacking.

"But cooking?" Levi struggled to understand. "I would have thought you'd take business, finance, political science classes."

"I took those, too." He shrugged. "I have a healthy portfolio—though I suppose it doesn't matter much now that I'm head of the house." He had unlimited access to the Stormhale fortune. Of course, he could grow it for fun, but none of his descendants would ever want for anything.

"How old are you again?" Chloe asked.

He grimaced. "Rude."

"Come on. You're what, ten years my junior? And I feel like you've matured a hundred years in that decade."

Seth didn't much like the turn the conversation was taking. It was too personal.

He took another bite of his food.

Not bad, really.

"Seth always had to be perfect," Cat answered for him. "That's the way our family operates. Nothing else is acceptable. Unlike my sister and me, he wasn't physically punished when he failed to perform. Our matriarch was deeply sexist—girls and boys didn't get the same treatment, you see." She ate a bite, closed her eyes, and sighed. "Seth was ignored when he failed at something. It wasn't often, mind you, but I remember. You came second once in a stupid national competition. Math, wasn't it?"

Seth didn't see any reason to contribute.

"I must have been five or six, but I remember. No one was allowed to talk to him. I had to go to bed without dinner when I asked him how he was doing. I think it lasted weeks, though I didn't have the best sense of time, being so young."

"A month," Seth replied, apathetic. "No wonder I turned into such an attention whore."

No one laughed. Maybe his humor wasn't as grand as he'd supposed. Hanging out with people who weren't paid by him or terrified of him sucked.

"But yes, my upbringing facilitated my predilection for being excellent in whatever discipline I choose to partake in." Fuck, he would have punched a guy for sounding half as arrogant, but haughtiness was his primary refuge. "Oh, bullshit, Seth. Both of you were neglected and abused, and you ended up screwed up in different ways." Chloe caressed her daughter's hair, and the anger flashing in her eyes disappeared. "Great food, though."

Abused and neglected. He supposed the latter was accurate enough, although, by the grace of the sexism Cat had mentioned, he hadn't suffered much of the former.

But he was an attractive, powerful prince, head of his household, ruling over the Stormhale clan. He could have ended up much worse.

"You want more?" he asked when Blair finished polishing off her plate.

Her eyes lit up. "There's more?"

He grabbed her plate, served her a second portion, and placed it back in her still-open hands. "Eat."

"Thanks."

He returned to his wall, wondering why the hell he wasn't sitting. There were plenty of comfortable options in the bright, purple, green, and gold sitting room. An armchair quite to his liking, with a high back and large, deep arms, was left empty. There was enough room on the large sofa—right next to Blair.

But from this wall, they all remained at a distance. Sitting with them felt like a step he couldn't take. He was Seth Stormhale, and he needed no one.

Although the seats did look comfortable.



UNCERTAINTIES

B lair might have been hungry just half an hour ago, but she couldn't even remember what the sensation felt like.

She'd eaten so much they'd have to cart her out of this seat if she was required to go anywhere.

She yawned, fatigue suddenly hitting her without preamble.

"Oh, sweetie," Chloe fussed. "You have to get to bed. I bet it's been a while since you've had a chance to get your beauty sleep."

That was an understatement. Blair had never been one of those people capable of catching a couple hours of sleep and somehow functioning the next day, yet she'd had to do just that for months. Twenty-four hours of sleep wouldn't have gone amiss.

That said...

"We need to get ready for Aveka. Sleep can wait."

"The only thing you have to get ready for is some quality time with your pillow."

Blair started to object, but Levi carried on the argument. "Greer won't be done with her spell for hours. Your mission is to rest. You've been through so much, and soon, we'll be putting you in danger again. We need you at the best of your ability." Suitably chastised, Blair could only nod and stand up. "Well, I've missed my bed."

"It may not be the best idea for you to sleep in the dorms," Mikar put in. "Aveka already infiltrated them once. It's best if you stay on the hill tonight."

"You can come with us," Chloe was quick to offer.

"That may not be the best idea either," Levi admitted. When his mate glared, he pointed out, "Ruby wakes up through the night for food."

Blair had become a light sleeper given the recent events. She winced. "The dorm's just fine. I can stay in Gwen's room —there are fewer students in her wing of the manor."

Dangerous sups stayed separate from the rest of the boarders for obvious reasons.

"Stay with us," Cat said. "We have plenty of empty spare bedrooms."

"Blair will remain here." Seth's pronouncement was met with silence.

Finally, she narrowed her eyes. "Will I now?"

Who was he to speak for her?

"You're already here, you're exhausted, and wherever you're going, I'll guard you to ensure you remain safe." He shrugged. "You might as well stay."

"I missed the part where you invited me, and I accepted." She turned to Cat. "Why, I'd love to stay with you, Catherine, thank you." The blonde was trying to keep a straight face, and mostly failing.

Seth sighed. "Stay here, *please*," he spelled out. "I'd like to rest, too, and I'd be more comfortable in my house."

She relented, despite his annoying smugness. Blair had crashed at her friends often enough to know it was never conducive to a restful night. They were young, vampiric, and stupidly in love. Also, Cat was a screamer. "Okay, we'll let you rest then." Chloe came to stand in front of Seth, and to Blair's amusement, wrapped her arms around him. He stiffened, visibly uncomfortable until she let go. "Thank you for bringing Blair back. And for fighting with us. I know you're not exactly our biggest fan, but you're with us. I'll never forget it."

"Count on it, Eirikrson. I'll remind you you owe me for the next thousand years."

"He jokes!" Chloe beamed. "Why did no one tell me he jokes?"

"I wasn't aware," Cat replied dryly before hugging Blair, then her brother.

Everyone squeezed her in their arms before leaving, taking all of her energy with them.

Her next yawn stretched for long seconds. "All right, Sleeping Beauty. You know the way."

She knew the way to his bedroom. Blair wrinkled her nose. "Don't you have a guest bedroom I could use?"

He shrugged. "You already slept all over my sheets. Might as well stick with it."

"Where will you sleep?"

"I wouldn't be much of a guard if I did that, now, would I?"

There was something surreal about being guarded by the man who'd hunted her. Blair dragged her feet back to the end of the hall, until she'd reached the bedroom.

In addition to being gigantic, the bed was also high. She climbed on top, crawled under the covers, and crashed before her head hit the pillows.

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• eth had only had time to pour himself a mug of warm blood when Alexius's scent hit his nostrils. "It's open." The ancient joined him at his bar.

Cat hadn't been joking when she'd said it was well stocked. What surprised him was the fresh blood. She couldn't have known he was coming right now, which meant that she ordered and replaced it regularly. "What can I get you?"

"Risotto." The ancient glared. "My wife won't shut up about it. Apparently, it's better than my Sunday roast."

"Cat food is better than Sunday roast." Velvet, strutting on top of the bar, meowed in what Seth chose to interpret as agreement.

Alexius muttered, "Italians." Louder, he added, "Survive until Sunday, and I'll make you eat your words."

"My words? No problem. I'll pass on the dry, overcooked beef with burned sides, though."

No wonder he didn't have any friends, really. Seth always spoke his mind. Alexius didn't seem to care.

"I'm here for the cat. I'm done with Blair's blood for now. I'll need more later, to conduct further testing."

"Anything of note?" Seth asked.

The ancient nodded. "You could say that. We'll speak about it when she's awake—it's her business."

Seth understood Alexius's silence—it was doctor-patient privilege, so to speak. Still, he pushed. "Is she in danger?" He had to know that at least.

The alchemist held his gaze, then lifted a brow. "Well, I'll be damned. You care."

Seth slid a plate of food in front of Alexius. "The girl carries part of my soul."

"You were always curious about her—she got under your skin when she reached your dreams," Alexius said. "But let's be real, back then you would have happily crushed her under your feet and played with the remains. You care now."

Seth shrugged indifferently. "So, I care. What's the big deal?"

Alexius grinned wordlessly. Damn the smug asshole. He knew Seth better than most on the hill, because they were alike in many ways. They could each count on one hand the individuals they gave a damn about, for one. Seth had been raised to become a good leader to the Stormhales, and he'd see to the clan's welfare. But there was something missing in him —the general empathy he should feel for people was muted at the best of times, usually entirely nonexistent.

Blair mattered though, more every day. He didn't like it. Caring for anyone was always a gamble, but mortals were far too fragile to waste energy on.

He knew where those words came from. They weren't truly his, though he'd readily adopted them.

Drusilla had drilled this fact into him since infancy, treating any human as worthless. To the Stormhale founder, mortals were, at best, food. Seth hadn't been cruel or demeaning toward them. They simply hadn't existed in his mind. Until Blair. She was strong, loyal, beautiful. A bright soul that would shine for as long as there was breath in her lungs.

That was the rub. For all that, she'd grow old and die eventually. The magic in her veins would make the process slower than a regular human's decline, but she was declining all the same, while Seth could live until the end of time, and longer yet.

So, yeah, she mattered far too much for a butterfly doomed to die. He wasn't going to give her more space in his mind. Not if he could help it.

"She's human," Seth said. "I won't go there. I mean, she could be turned."

Seth ignored the churning in his chest when he thought of that option.

She *could* be turned. She could live forever.

He dismissed the thought as soon as it entered his mind. The vampires that were made were far weaker than born vampires. Even if she consented to becoming one of them, there could be no future where she stood by his side. She'd be a vulnerability his enemies would exploit to get to him.

Fuck.

How the hell had he taken the leap from thinking about her as a vamp to seeing her next to him?

Because you want her there.

He hated Alexius in that moment. He'd been blissfully content ignoring what his mind had told him for weeks, months. Maybe for over a year.

"Seth...you realize you could die tomorrow, right? All of us could."

That was true, but there was no denying that Blair was far more likely to die than him.

"Let me throw you a bone." Alexius typed away on his phone for a moment, before showing Seth the screen.

A video was playing. A white background with moving circles of dark purple.

"What am I looking at?"

"I filmed her blood under the microscope, so she could understand what's going on."

His mind drifted back to the biology courses he'd taken. He vaguely remembered seeing blood cells a lifetime ago, in high school. That looked about right.

Suddenly the screen was filled with inky black.

"What's going on?"

"That's just a drop of poison. Keep looking."

Seth did as he was told with no argument, for once.

His mouth felt open. The purple particles turned bright gold, pulsing, and the black background faded back to white.

"What's going on?"

"Whatever I do, her blood goes back to the exact state it was in to begin with."

Seth wished he'd paid more attention in biology. Although that might not have helped keeping up with the most educated healer in the entire world.

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Alexius shook his head in disgust. "She's immortal, you idiot." After a moment, he added, "Well, as I said, I'd need to conduct further tests. There's a chance the situation's temporary, I suppose—but Chloe still has nanocytes from Jack's father, and it's been almost two years. There are concerns; I see other changes..." he trailed off. "That I should discuss with Blair first, you understand."

Concerns. There were concerns. And Alexius wasn't telling him.

"I think I hate you."

The ancient laughed. "Dude, I'm your only friend, and you know it."

Seth flipped him the bird. "Eat your food, asshole."



MORTALLY DIVINE

F ive more minutes. She could stay in peace five more minutes, then she'd open her eyes. The prospect of reuniting with Seth's incredible bathtub and his array of scented bubble baths and salts made the thought of greeting the day a little less painful.

"You snore."

She groaned into her pillow before peeking over her covers.

Seth was lounging on the same armchair he'd claimed the previous day, his annoyingly fast fingers solving and scrambling a Rubik's cube faster than her eyes could discern. Show off. Velvet happily lounged at his feet, the traitor.

"What time is it?" She had no clue when they'd arrived the previous day—sometime in the morning, presumably. She'd gone to bed in the early evening, but she'd be hard-pressed to guess for how long she'd passed out. It could easily have been an hour or three days.

Closer to three days, if the smell in her mouth was to be believed.

He glanced at his watch. "Nine. Alexius analyzed Velvet yesterday. He's quite healthy, but it's unlikely he'll ever grow any bigger, at least without spells. If you want to alter his appearance, Greer might be your best bet to try to concoct something." Blair sat up and shook her head. "If he's healthy, that's all that matters." She stretched with a yawn. "What did I miss?"

"Greer ironed out the kinks of the spell she'll use to link us in the middle of the night—Alexius forced her to go to sleep before attempting to perform it. She said she'd text when she's up."

It made sense; performing magic while exhausted was a terrible idea. Blair was glad not to have missed it. "She doesn't have my new number." Blair frowned. "I need to see if I can reconnect my old phone."

The administrative problem felt incredibly mundane. She was looking forward to a time when all she had to worry about was her mobile phone subscription.

"She doesn't have mine, either." After a moment, he added, "Alexius wants to speak to you; he finished analyzing your blood, too."

Blair caught a change in Seth's voice; she zeroed in on him. "Anything bad?"

"He hasn't told me much; he wanted to respect your privacy. For now, your cells seem to regenerate like mine would. Aphrodite provided you with protection—potentially more. He didn't say anything else." Seth unfolded his legs and got up. "I'll run you a bath, shall I? We can make our way to Alexius's lab. Greer's most likely conducting her research there in any case. We can be there when she wakes up."

Blair finally dragged herself out of bed. "I can run the bath. Thanks, Seth."

He nodded and left the room, taking some of her peace with him.

Blair felt safer when he was close by. More comfortable. It had to have to do with the part of his soul inside her; it recognized him and mourned his absence.

She had no other reason to want him close. Seth had always unsettled her, and to an extent he still did. She'd gotten to know him a little better, but what she knew was intimidating. Seth was the son of Zeus. There, she'd allowed herself to spell it all out, if only in her mind. She'd seen him burn his way through half a dozen vampires in a fraction of a second. That sort of power was larger than life, incomprehensible, even after witnessing it. No one should be that strong. The thought of him at Aveka's service petrified her, and she was the one thing in the world who could prevent that fate. But then what? If all went well and Aveka was finally vanquished, Seth would still exist and represent a threat like no other to this world.

If Seth ever wanted to wipe out a country for fun, he could.

She lowered herself into the bathtub, her mind turning over all the way this vampire-demigod was a threat to life. What if he got high someday? What if he grew bored and went insane in a few centuries, like most immortals eventually did?

She bit her lip, thinking about the dagger on the bedside table. Maybe she should hold on to it. She wouldn't actually hurt him, but someone ought to be able to stop him.

Right. Like he'd simply give it to her for keeps.

Seth knocked on the door. "Breakfast."

She was entirely covered in thick bubbles and the water was bright pink, so she invited him in.

Seth was holding a platter with fresh fruits, a pot of yogurt, a bowl filled with granola, and several small plates with pancakes, bacon, and eggs. "I don't know what you want to eat."

Her stomach grumbled, harder than it had the previous day if possible. "All of that, please."

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S he was blooming. They were surrounded by dusty books and filthy flasks filled with dubious liquids, and Blair looked right at home. She took a red leather-bound volume from one of Alexius's shelves and brought it to a reading nook. "How many times I wished I had a copy of this during my travels!" she groaned. "Transfiguration charms are the pits. Alexius wrote this book when he was learning magic —it's like a guide for dummies."

"You're hardly a dummy." It drove him insane how she constantly put herself down when it came to her magic.

Seth didn't think he'd ever met any witch as versatile as Blair. She dabbled in several disciplines. She didn't excel in most of them, true, but knowing a bit of everything was just as valuable. And though it made her uncomfortable, her natural magic was potent.

"In transfiguration, I am. I tried to change your dagger into a pencil temporarily—it ended up being a dildo."

He chuckled with her. "I would have liked to see that."

"Where did you get it? The dagger. I thought we couldn't get them on Earth."

Seth shrugged. "My mother gave it to me once I was old enough to hold it. She said my father entrusted her with it for me. It makes sense. Usually, the only threat to a demigod is another demigod, so I suppose all of us scions are given fyriron, just in case."

"Do you know how your parents met?" she wondered.

A fair question. He'd asked his mother so many times, all in vain. It was Drusilla who finally told him when he was older. "My matriarch sent virgin offerings to Olympus—all the girls born in my family were left alone on the mountain overnight, for centuries. At sixteen, first—then at twenty-one, when Drusilla wondered if the gods preferred actual women, I suppose." His stare was ice. "I made her swear she wouldn't send my sisters. She laughed. I said if she did, I'd leave the clan." Drusilla had been terrified to lose her pet scion. "Claudia and Cat have never been to Greece."

"Was your mom the first to have been taken?"

He nodded. "Yep, in over a thousand years. I'm not certain why. She doesn't seem to have any animosity toward either her mother or Zeus, so one must conclude she wasn't forced." The notion of virgin sacrifices still disgusted him. "She was gone for a year and came back with me. I suppose I must have spent some months on Olympus as a baby. I don't remember any of it."

Alexius walked in moments later, bringing the trip down memory lane to a close. "You're in trouble," he told Blair.

Seth stiffened.

"Varra was in the professor's lounge earlier. He mentioned you were supposed to be his TA this year."

Blair sighed. "I'll stop by his lair and apologize."

"He lets you in his lair?" Alexius blinked. "You know where it is?"

She shrugged. "I was supposed to be his TA, remember?"

Alexius grinned. "Right. So, you're fucking."

Blair rolled her eyes. "Pot, kettle? You fucked your way through the student body before Avani." She opened the red book and started to page it casually. "Seth told me you had to talk to me about my blood tests."

Alexius nodded. "Let me grab the samples. One second."

"You're fucking your teacher?" Seth was proud to say he sounded perfectly indifferent.

"Gods, no. But Alexius is way too twisted to believe a single woman can be friends with an attractive man." She flashed him a grin. "I came to the Institute to avoid the New York Academy. I didn't really have a plan. Fin Varra took one look at me and told me I'd be a great teacher one day. I think it's the first time anyone told me I could be good at anything."

So, she had a touch of a hero worship for the fae. If anything, that was worse than fucking.

"And like a good girl, you decided to do his bidding?"

Blair closed the book, abandoning her effort to concentrate. "Hell, no. I thought he'd smoked too much nightherb, which he probably had. It was only after a couple of years that I wondered if he was right. I was helping out a

freshman girl who cried because she couldn't get some translations during the finals, and it felt right."

So many pieces for one little human. Seth neatly added the newest to his picture of Blair. She was a nurturer.

"Okay," Alexius said, walking back in with slides and a microscope. "I only took a few drops, so I can show you what I have so far." He glanced to Seth. "If you'd like privacy—"

Blair shrugged her shoulders. "It's fine, he can stay. He's the reason behind this anyway."

Alexius set his equipment up and encouraged Blair to take a look, patiently explaining what he'd told him the previous night. Seth didn't fail to note that Blair wasn't called an idiot when she failed to come to a conclusion.

"From what I see, your cells self-regenerate, just like most vampires, or Enlightened, for that matter. You're immortal not eternal, of course. It's still possible to kill you, by severing or burning vital organs, for example."

Blair was completely speechless.

"Don't pop the champagne just yet. I did notice that the healing rate was slowing down. At first, I wondered if it had to do with the foreign element I added to the blood, but the decline seemed gradual..."

"So, her condition is temporary." Seth swallowed the heavy disappointment.

Alexius shook his head. "Blair's genetic makeup has been changed forever, from what I can see. It's not entirely alarming. If I took some of my blood right now, you'd see the same phenomenon, though it'd take days for the rate to slow down noticeably. Could you guess why?"

Alexius was too much of a teacher, expecting answers from his pupils. Seth shrugged. His understanding of bodily functions was sorely lacking. Perhaps he should take a course or two eventually. He hated feeling stupid, and Alexius enjoyed making him feel that way far too much. "Blood," Blair guessed. "You need to feed, otherwise your strength declines—as does your healing rate."

"Correct."

She grimaced. "So, what, I'm a vampire now?" She brought both thumbs to her mouth and pressed against her blunt canines. "I don't feel like one."

"You're not a vampire." Seth rolled his eyes.

That didn't explain what she was though.

"Yes, I already tried. Adding blood doesn't get any form of reaction. You still need to feed on *something*." He pulled his phone and showed her the video Seth had seen the previous evening. "That's how fast your cells regenerated last night." He changed the slides on the microscope. "That's how fast it's happening now."

Seth let Blair take her time before checking the slide himself. Alexius added another drop of poison, and Seth watched it disappear much slower than it had.

He didn't like it one bit.

"It's hardly surprising. You used a lot of strength to heal from that wound."

"She ate this morning," Seth put in. "So human food doesn't do the trick."

"It'll feed her body, not her preternatural energy." He turned to Blair. "You'll need to pay attention to what your body demands in the next few days."

"Oh my god," Blair whispered. "I'm going to be sick."

Seth rushed to her side, holding on to her as she seemed unsteady and pale. He escorted her to the closest seat.

"You're all, right?"

She swallowed, nodding weakly. Helpless, Seth looked up to Alexius, who was staring at her.

hat's going on?" he asked, only met by stunned silence. "W "Alexius?"

"Blair knows what she needs. Apparently, it's a source of shock to her."

"I don't...know. it just stands to reason." She wet her dry lips. "You guys drink blood because Ariadne was infected by Dionysus's proclivities. We know some Enlightened feed on it. In any story I can think of, it's not blood Aphrodite feeds on."

Alexius clasped his hands. "Excellent use of deduction. We'd have to test, of course, but it's likely you'll feed on either emotions or sexual energy." He tilted his head. "Centuries ago, there were plenty of succubi and incubi who did just that, but they were hunted almost to extinction. I can do some research."

Seth's mind went back to the labyrinth, remembering how Blair had teased him, seductive energy rolling off her. He didn't need any research to confirm her theory, and from the look she gave him, she knew it too.

He had to admit he was relieved. Finally, an explanation that made sense. He didn't truly want her; she'd just been changed into a creature that naturally demanded his desire. She wasn't a weakness. He could live without her.

Why did it feel like he was attempting to sell himself a load of bullshit?

"Look on the bright side. I'm about to be served on a platter to Aveka, who's likely to chew me up and spit me out, so I don't have to worry about that specific mess for a while."

"That's the bright side?" Alexius asked.

He took some more blood samples, inviting them to wait for Greer if they wanted to. Then Alexius left, and they were alone.



TO DIE FOR

I t suddenly was too hot in the underground dungeons Alexius had converted into his lab. She should have listened to the ancient and kicked Seth out of here, to keep her humiliation to herself.

A succubus. She was a succubus, or something like it.

Thanks so fucking much, Aphrodite.

Never mind the fact that without the change, she would have been dead already.

"So that explains a thing or two, right?"

"Please don't. I already want the ground to open up and swallow me whole." She hid her face in her palms. "I hate your sister. The old one," she clarified.

"Because you're going to be forever young and irresistible? I see how that could be a burden."

She started again, suddenly horrified. "Oh, gods, you think she gave me pheromones or whatever to make people want me?" *Fucking hell!* "That's why you kissed me, isn't it?" She wanted to die on the spot. "I made you do it! Oh, fuck."

That was it. She was going to spend her life in a hut, on top of a secluded mountain, alone. She'd have a moat with crocodiles in it to make sure no one reached her.

Seth joined her, kneeling on the floor right in front of her to be at her level, and grabbed her wrists, drawing her hands away from her face. "I won't repeat this, so you'd better pay attention. I wanted you last year. I wanted you a month ago. I wanted you yesterday. The reason I kissed you back was because for once, you showed me you wanted me too." Seth shrugged.

"But if that's what I feed on..."

She didn't finish her sentence, because Seth's lips were on hers, swallowing what was left of her sanity. He caged both of her wrists in his left hand and wrapped the other around the back of her neck, supporting it as he kissed her deeply, demanding, his maddening tongue at the edge of her lower lip.

Blair abandoned all reason, all inhibition, unleashing the desire she'd wrapped up and shoved at the back of the closet. Who cared if he was dangerous, and cold, and emotionally unavailable? He tasted like sin and lust and heaven covered in abs.

She couldn't get enough of his tongue, of his scent, his heat. She needed more. So much more.

So she took it.

Blair twisted her wrist in his hand, expertly breaking his hold, and pushed back against his chest until he was lying down on Alexius's floor.

All right, so maybe he let her move him, but it felt good to pretend she was in charge.

She straddled him, before undoing the first button of his black silk shirt, then the second, and a third. She leaned over, kissing his neck, and lower—his collarbone.

"I certainly appreciate your dedication to research, but perhaps another venue?"

Oh, fuck.

Blair lifted her gaze to find Alexius smirking from his door, an openmouthed Greer just steps behind him.

Seth sat up, Blair still pressed against him, wrapping his arms around her. She could only hide against his chest. "Kill me now," she whispered. Seth just chuckled indifferently. "You're ready for the spell?" he asked Greer casually.

"Almost. I came to fetch you, Blair, as you said you wanted to do the supply run—but I can do it."

"No, no, I can do it." She pushed to her feet, feeling her entire face turn beet red. She couldn't bear to look at Seth, or Alexius, or Greer, for that matter, so her eyes remained on the floor.

Seth suffered no such reserve. He got up, lowered his mouth to her cheek, and kissed it. "Later, then," he whispered.

A terrifying promise.

She practically ran out of the room.

"Not so fast, missy, I need another blood sample!" Alexius called after her.

"Fuck off!"

The scholar was persistent enough to follow Blair and Greer up the stairs, to the large supply rooms next to the school's armory. Once her heart had stopped thundering in her chest and the shame had somewhat diminished, Blair let him draw another sample.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "Any different? Electrified, energized?"

"Doesn't everyone feel that way after making out with a hottie?" Greer put in. "Leave her alone. She's freaking out."

Alexius generally listened to Greer; he conceded both points. "Let me know if there's any difference." With this, the ancient finally made his exit.

He'd barely left the supply room before Greer glared at Blair. "Okay, now it's just us. Spill."

Blair didn't know where to start. There wasn't much to say, but she did her best to explain the mess with Aphrodite and Seth, guilt and self-disgust sipping back in.

"So, wait. He said wanted you before, and that he just hadn't made a move because he wasn't sure you were into him, right?"

"It's Seth we're talking about. Does he seem like the kind of guy who'd wait for a girl to make the first move?" Blair rolled her eyes. "He was just making me feel better."

"Does he seem like the kind of guy who'd bother to make anyone feel better?" Greer countered with a snort. "And he made it blatantly obvious he wanted to get to know you better for months, girlfriend," she added. "You're the one who kept running."

"Hey, I wasn't running!" she protested. "I just walked really fast in the opposite direction."

Greer stared incredulously before joining her in a fit of giggles.

She'd missed this so much. "I don't want to have to leave again," she admitted. "I know I'll have to, if we don't nail Aveka this time, but gods, Greer. I can't tell you what it's like to be utterly alone. I'm sure backpacking could be fun if you can video chat with your friends..." She sighed. "It got a little depressing, you know?"

More than a little, but she didn't want to dwell on it too much.

Part of the issue had been using her mind control powers on a daily basis. Taking away other people's free will was despicable.

The thought that she could also be controlling other people's desire for her was just too much. But Greer had a point. Seth had sniffed around her before. She'd just figured he was curious about how she'd managed to push past his defenses in his sleep.

Truth was, she wasn't entirely certain. Well, she knew the spells, of course, but after everything she'd discovered about Seth, she knew she shouldn't have been able to reach him.

Yet she had. Getting to him in his dreams was like walking through an open door for her.

"You won't be alone if you have to run this time," Greer promised, rubbing her arm. "The spell I'm working on means you can summon us to you. You're doing this for all of us, and this time, whatever happens, we're in this together."

Blair pulled her into a tight hug, blinking tears away.

"I love you, Greer."

"Right back at you, sweet."



THE ELDER

S eth hadn't often participated in a major spell; vampires could use elemental magic, but they were more inclined to cut to the chase and make use of their claws and fangs to sort problems out. As witches lacked their natural speed and strength, they'd naturally evolved beyond the magic of immortals—they'd spent more time honing their craft.

At the lakeside, right after sundown, he stood inside a salt circle, reading the instructions Greer had printed for them just a few short lines. As a support to the person casting the spell, his job was to lend his power, nothing more.

He rolled his eyes at the obvious instructions, such as "don't step outside the circle" and "hold your link to your element until the end of the spell." The important elements were the simplified chants he'd have to repeat a time or two. He memorized those and put the paper in his pocket, redirecting his attention to Blair.

She sat in front of the large bonfire they'd just lit, a checkered throw over her shoulders. She'd barely glanced at him since morning. He was half amused, half frustrated, and entirely eager to get back exactly where they'd been interrupted.

She was immortal, strong, and his. She just needed to get with the program. Arguably, they had other fish to fry right now, but they had time.

So long as Aveka was taken care of tonight.

Another reason to murder the bitch.

"Is Mikar still with the prisoner?" he asked Diana.

She nodded. "The kid has a will of iron. Mikar's not asking lightly, but Erys isn't saying anything. Just having him in the dungeon could help, regardless; that's one less close guard to think about, right?"

Seth nodded. Before he added anything further, Greer clapped her hand to command attention.

"All right, Blair, I need you inside the inner salt circle. Everyone who wants to be linked to Blair needs to be inside the outer water circle." Greer pointed to two lines marked on the grass.

Everyone moved to take their place in the outer circle. "Wait, we can't bind her to this many people. My spell's a lot stronger than the kind of trick heads of covens do to be able to summon their followers—it'll also pinpoint Blair's exact location. If we split it too many ways, the spell might unravel. I'd say we can do seven links at most."

"I'm staying," Chloe announced, her tone daring anyone to disagree.

"Same," Gwen put in.

Jack shook his head. "I think it's best if I do it, sweetheart. I can fly to her faster than you can get there."

Gwen didn't like it, but she relented.

"Wait, if I'm helping with the spell, does it mean I can't have a link to Blair?" he clarified.

Greer nodded. "It shouldn't matter much in your case. You're going with her, right?"

Seth didn't like any of it, but he nodded nonetheless.

Diana, Levi, Alexius, and Cat had taken their positions, and everyone left argued to take the last place, when a figure emerged from the forest. Fin Varra wore a long black skirt, floating around him, and strangely, nothing but a green scarf. He strolled to the outer circle without so much as a word to anyone else as they stared.

Seth had participated in most of the battles in Oldcrest, and he didn't think the Aos Si had ever so much as lifted a finger. And now he was here.

Maybe Alexius hadn't been so far off, after all. The fae could have a thing for Blair. He narrowed his eyes, irritated by just how ridiculously pretty his entire kind was.

"I'm surprised to see you," Levi finally ventured. "You made it clear you had to remain impartial when you came to Earth."

"I cannot weigh in on mortal affairs," Fin agreed with a shrug. "My understanding is this is no longer a mortal affair, is it?" he asked, his eyes scanning the crowd around him.

Greer lifted her hand. "I'm here. I'm mortal."

"Shush," Avani whispered. "Now's not the time for semantics. He could change his mind."

Even Seth had to admit, having an elder fae on their side wasn't something to take lightly.

"I see no reason I should; you're hardly mortal, little Greer, with all those souls screaming around your mind at every turn."

The witch's eyes widened in surprise, but Varra simply shrugged. "I will not fight. I just had a manicure. I might cast a spell or two if the need arises, though."

What a dick.

Chloe didn't seem offended in the least. "I've paid enough attention in class to know your kind doesn't take kindly to thank yous. Just know that your favor will not be forgotten and will be repaid in kind."

The fae lifted his chin. "I expect nothing less, fledgling."

Greer said, "When I step into the circle, the spell starts. Don't get out of it. You may sit if you're more comfortable." Fin Varra elegantly dropped to the ground and laid back, picking grass. Others followed suit. As he was wearing white pants, Seth opted for a low crouch instead. Then the tanned redhead advanced, palms held up and green eyes blazing. She looked as if she'd been crafted and carved in another time, for one moment. Seth saw the hint of red markings along her forehead, curving over her ear and plunging at the back of her neck, but when he focused to discern them, they disappeared.

He'd seen her perform magic before, and each time, it seemed foreign and beautiful. Her tongue formed sounds he couldn't even begin to grasp, though he spoke several languages himself. Old sounds, guttural and threatening.

Varra had a point. Greer might be the least mortal thing among them.

Seth focused on his chant, whispering it over and over as he called to air. Magic clogged the atmosphere, thick, tangible, and at times, visible.

Then, finally, it was over. They were done.

Greer cleared both circles with an imperious wave, and they stood in silence, knowing what was coming next.

Levi took Chloe's hand. "Let's go kiss our daughter. Then, we prepare for war."



ON THE EVE

F or hours, they tested the spell. Seth would carry Blair to the top of Cosnoc, to the spelled dungeons in the Institute, and those of Skyhall. They even tried it underwater, after coating her skin in many warming spells against the coldness of the lake. Each time, Diana, Alexius, or Cat answered the summon. Professor Varra remained at the bonfire, but he occasionally lifted a thumb up to let them know he'd felt the call. At long length, Greer was satisfied. "As testing outside of the borders isn't advisable right now, we've done our best."

"Do we go now?" Blair's heart thundered hard enough to feel its beat in her ears.

Greer looked around, uncertain.

"I say we rest," Alexius proposed. "We can't take too long, or Aveka'll have her move prepared, but there's no sense in going in half-cocked and tired."

"Yes, we should go in full-cocked," Finn retorted. "Few things in life are worse than a limp dick."

Blair groaned. "So, we move in the morning?"

"That's smart." Seth nodded. "Aveka, and most of her followers, think themselves the epitome of supernatural creatures, and as such, favor nocturnal schedules. They'll be weaker by day."

Daylight wasn't detrimental to vampires but their eyes were sensitive—the sun wasn't always pleasant. Here in Scotland, it was hardly ever bright enough to affect them, but their kind, as a whole, had adopted the habit of living through the night.

"I'll text Chloe," Gwen offered. "Eight o'clock at the armory?"

There were nods around the bonfire, and then a heavy silence settled around them, leaving only the sound of the wind over the quiet lake and the occasional hoot of an owl.

Every time Aveka came at them, they'd lost friends, family members. There was no telling who'd still be breathing the next sunset.

"Let's go to bed." Jack kissed the side of Gwen's cheek.

Just like that, the gathering started to scatter silently. Blair awkwardly looked to her right—the path to the dorms—then her left, toward the forest leading up Night Hill.

She remembered when Aveka had turned her huntsman spy into a zombie to get to Greer. Then there had been Anika Beaufort, a staple of the Institute, who'd nonetheless turned her back on Oldcrest. She wasn't safe in her old room—but being here after so long without even once walking into her own space felt strange.

Having made her mind up, she turned to Seth. "I need to pick up a few things from my room. You know, clothes, deodorant, that sort of thing. You don't have to follow me," she added Seth, tired of feeling like a burden. She could take care of herself, dammit. "I'll head back to yours after I'm done."

"I know I don't have to," he replied smoothly.

He didn't bother to add that he was coming either way.

Blair found herself growing self-conscious as they approached her room on the top floor. She wasn't the tidiest girl out there, and if she remembered well, her walls were currently bubblegum pink and blue. She'd changed them as often as she changed her hair.

"Do you have your keys?" Jack wondered at the door.

She shrugged. "I never locked my door here. I mean, there's a klepto fox, but he always gives back what he takes and he tends to leave girls' rooms alone, anyway."

Seth frowned as she turned the knob.

She was surprised and relieved to see the room had been aired and tidied up—gone were the couple of dirty mugs of coffee she knew she'd left on her desk, and the clothes on her small sofa were neatly folded.

Her walls were still pink and blue, but it could have been far worse.

Her friends must have asked Night Hill's caretaker to clean up for her. She was glad not to be greeted by dust and cobwebs.

"I won't be long. Make yourself at home."

"I will." Walking past the two-seater, Seth headed to her bed and flopped down on top of her covers.

"Hey! Shoes off."

He rolled his eyes, but obeyed nonetheless.

Blair closed her eyes and lifted her hands. When she opened them again, the walls were blue, with golden filigree running through like twisted vines.

She'd gotten the hang of this specific spell a few years ago, and she'd used it almost every month since, so it came naturally. Usually, it used up some of her strength. Wasteful to use it on decor when they had a confrontation with Aveka in the morning, but she knew she'd regain her energy overnight. To her surprise though, she felt no fatigue.

"Nice. Can you do sofas?" Seth asked. "Cat picked far too much beige for my liking."

"I knew you hadn't decorated that house!" She laughed. "It's far too tasteful."

Seth closed his eyes, folding his arms behind his head. "I had it designed and picked a thing or two, but I did ask my

sister to take care of the rest while I was otherwise engaged. I like the house. I don't like beige."

If Blair was honest, neither did she. She liked his stupidly ornate style. "I'll see what I can do."

She raided her wardrobe first, grinning at her neatly arranged pairs of boots. Pulling out a suitcase, she shoved them in there, before adding the gear she used to wear when she trained with the huntsmen—soft, reinforced fabric, made to move comfortably. Then, she opened a cabinet and pulled out a knife, a dagger, half a dozen throwing stars, and another knife.

"You know Aveka's going to have you searched, right?"

"My clothes have a lot of pockets. And my boots can hold knives, too. She might get most of them, but I'll keep one or two."

She placed them neatly on her clothes before making her way to the bathroom.

The reflection looking back at her in the mirror wasn't familiar.

Blair had changed. She hadn't realized how much until this very moment, but here, in her dorm, where she used to see her old self every day, each difference was obvious.

Her hair was longer, for one, and her cheeks, fuller. She'd known she'd lost muscle, but an irregular diet consisting mostly of cheap fast food had also given her curves. Those, she didn't dislike. Her skin was a little more tanned, which was no wonder, but it also was dry, her lips chapped. The months of rough living had left her nails broken.

She placed her fingertips on the mirror, unsure what she was up to herself, until waves of magic jolted out of her hand.

"Blair?"

Seth was at the door with a frown until she turned to him. Gone were the boring black locks—her hair was pink-tipped again, and her skin looked glossier, healthier.

"I was just playing with a spell."

A spell she hadn't known until then, had come to her effortlessly, and she'd executed without tapping her reserve of energy.

What was going on with her?

He tilted his head. "If you could change your hair with magic, why didn't you do that the last few months?"

Not wanting to explain she hadn't even known that spell until now, she shrugged. "I was trying to be invisible, remember? I can wipe irrelevant, surface memories from weaker minds without risking too much damage, but the stronger the memory, the harder it is to remove it. It was easier to try to blend in."

She looked at her nails, now painted black. They were still uneven, broken in places. Blair grabbed a cosmetic bag and shoved her necessities inside, along with clippers.

"How are you at cutting hair?"

Seth blinked twice.

"I'd do it myself, but it's longer than what I'm used to at the back."

"You cut your own hair?" He made it sound like a blasphemy.

"It grows back," she pointed out, then she snorted. "I bet you have a three-figure hairdresser on speed dial."

"Four figures, witch."

"Well, I don't, so you'll have to do." She handed him her scissors, then gathered her hair in a neat ponytail. "It's easy, just cut straight. I'll take care of the details later."

The way he stared at the scissors, they might as well have been a snake poised to bite.

She turned back to the mirror. "Come on, Seth. I trust you."

"A terrible idea, really." He cleared his throat, but stepped closer, and brought one hand to her hair.

He tightened his fist around the elastic band holding her hair up and placed the scissors between his fingers. After cringing, Seth cut, fast and straight.

"Thanks!"

She let her hair fall out of the useless band, hitting her chin in an adorable bob. There was just an inch of pink left. "Perfect. Couldn't have done it better myself."

His hand rested at the nap of her neck. "Perfect," he repeated.

Blair looked back over her shoulder just as he leaned down to kiss her, softly, sweetly, once, then a second time, right at the curve of her throat, and a third on her shoulder.

E very bit of her tingled with raw need. She had to have more.

Seth stepped back.

"Are you ready? We wouldn't want Velvet to feel alone, now, would we?"

While the cat had been glued to her side during their journey, now that they were in Oldcrest, he seemed quite content staying tucked in bed.

Blair managed a smile and nodded.

Oh, yes. She was fucking ready.



TRUTHS

S eth carried Blair's suitcase up the hill, content to walk beside her at her pace, her soft, small hand in his. She moved purposely slow, taking her time, and he knew exactly why.

When they reached his house, everything was going to change. They were going to change. He was tired of denying the sizzling attraction brewing under the surface, setting his blood on fire as soon as she was near, and so was she. He was going to take his time and devour every inch of her skin, worship her body like the goddess she was.

She bit her lip, her cheeks delightfully rosy as they closed in on his home. "Cat has some stuff for Velvet in her house. A litter box, a bed, food, you know."

"I ordered necessities to be delivered shortly. Velvet pisses out of doors, eats ribeye steak, and seems quite content to use just about any flat surface as a bed, but if you'd like us to pick up his things, by all means."

She was delaying the inevitable, and they both knew it. Seth wasn't about to rush her though.

"What if..." He could tell when she changed her mind, deciding to say something else entirely. "What if we texted Cat? Better than to disturb them uninvited. She can bring the supplies at her own leisure."

He paused on his doorstep, pulled out his phone, and sent her message. "Done. Now maybe you can tell me what you were thinking about first, before chickening out of it."

He was so in tune with her, understanding each of her expressions, now. He finally had all the pieces of the puzzle. The last one had come to him just moments ago when she'd said those few, simple words. *I trust you*. She did—she trusted him with far more than her hair, and Seth, who trusted no one, not even his own kin, realized he trusted her right back. Suddenly, everything that ever occurred between them made sense. The way she'd blasted past his defenses, though his shields should have held against any mortal witch, the way she'd stood out to him when no one else ever did. Even the reason why when he was about to lose everything, himself included, he'd thought of her—and been able to send part of himself where he'd known it would be safe, cared for. The distance hadn't mattered.

Because Blair was his.

It had taken him long enough to realize it; he could give her time to come to her own conclusion. For now. Maybe. He wasn't exactly known for his unending patience.

"I was thinking, we don't know what Aphrodite did to me. Maybe you're not thinking—just following her twisted agenda. You know, like how she made Paris lose his mind and steal the Atreidae queen."

"A fan of classic literature, are you?"

"It's possible."

"The Iliad is fiction, Blair."

"It's mythology," she countered. "If you think that way, your dad is fiction."

Seth ran his hand through his hair, brushing it back with a sigh. "All right. How about checking for yourself?" he offered. "Read my mind."

She shifted uncomfortably.

"Scared?" he challenged.

"Of course not," she shot back quickly—too quickly. "I just don't want to invade your privacy."

She was terrified. Scared to get hurt, scared of rejection, scared of letting herself descend this slippery slope and losing control.

Letting go of her hand, Seth brought both of her wrists along either side of his face. "No invasion necessary. You're welcome in here." As she didn't call to her magic, he grinned and whispered, "I dare you."

She wasn't one to renege a dare. Blair opened her mind to see into his, and he let her—mostly—only keeping his most recent discovery beyond walls she could have pushed through if she wanted to. He knew she wouldn't.

Seth purposely brought forth his first glimpse of her, then thought of the dream she'd invaded, intriguing him, luring him in. He'd answered his sister's call because he cared for Cat, of course, but he'd also been curious to meet her, and she hadn't disappointed. He remembered each time he watched her, wanting to get closer, unsure how to go past her defenses.

Lying in wait like the predator he was, silently waiting for a weakness, a sign. Anything. The only thing Olympus had changed was her.

She let go of her hold on him and lifted stunned eyes to him. She was so dumbfounded it could have been funny. Seth was too irritated to let amusement seep to the surface. Her mother really had trampled all over her self-esteem, making her feel like she couldn't possibly be enough, although Seth hadn't even seen anyone until her. She couldn't see it, so he spelled it out for her. "You're everything, *mia strega*."

Then he kissed her again, letting all of his desire fuel him, his hands roaming over her maddening curves. She leaped to his hips—Seth caught her midair and kept her flush against him, hands on her perfect thighs.

More.

Walking backward, he kicked the front door open. She chuckled when it hit the adjacent wall hard enough to leave a dent.

He had her caged in, her back to his bed, in the next second.

"Meow?"

"Fuck!"

Who thought it was a good idea to have a freaking cat?

Blair laughed again.

"Be right back." He grabbed the interfering kitten and ran to the kitchen.

Pulling out tuna steak, he set it on a plate. "You stay out of that room tonight, got it?"

Velvet seemed quite content with his bribe. Seth flew back to the room, closing the door behind him.

Blair had taken the moment he was otherwise occupied to remove her T-shirt and yoga pants. She wore the tiniest black boxer shorts and nothing else. Seth took in the sight with untamed hunger, not trusting himself to touch her right then. Immortal or not, she was still fragile compared to a vampire or a scion—let alone both.

"It appears we're on unequal footing," she noted, looking at him from head to toe and back, unashamedly.

"As my lady desires." He took his time, peeling his shirt and pants off, before joining her, crawling on top of his ridiculously large bed until he'd reached her foot. He kissed the tip of her toes, making her giggle. Then her ankle, her shin, right under her knee. She wasn't laughing when he trailed his lips and teeth along her inner thigh. When he licked her hipbone, she let out the softest little moan and his dick pulsed in his pants. *Not yet.* Very, very soon, he promised himself, continuing his slow, sensual exploration. Her navel was particularly adorable, and when he sucked right underneath it, she writhed and yelled.

Dammit. If he wasn't careful, he was going to come in his pants like a teenager. "You're so freaking responsive."

"You're trying to drive me mad," she countered, her voice hitching on the words.

"If I'm only trying, I'm doing something wrong."

Seth fucking loved her tits. They were just big enough to fit perfectly in his hands, and her dark pink nipples begged to be sucked. Who was he to deny her anything? He closed his mouth around one, and drew it in, all the while rubbing the other between two fingers.

"Oh, please, Seth, please!"

Shifting both of them, he moved to sit up and drew her on top of him, his mouth still sucking, kissing, and licking one, then the other tit. She straddled him and swayed her hips over his painfully hard length, pressing hard against his white boxers.

Hands not letting go of her perfect, sensitive breasts, he brought his mouth to hers, swallowing her moans.

Kissing her was quickly turning into an addiction he had no intention of kicking. He wanted to taste every part of her skin and flesh, but no amount of temptation could make his mouth move from hers. Seth would have been happy spending the rest of eternity right there, doing nothing else besides getting lost in her.

Her fingers tinkered with the waist of his boxers, pulling it down lower on his hips, at last freeing his iron-hard shaft, and her warm, soft hands curved around it, pumping it once, twice.

Seth inhaled between his teeth, his vision blurring from the effort it took to remain in control. "I can't take much of this, Blair."

"I don't care." She closed her mouth on his again, setting her panties aside, before lowering her drenched heat on his cock.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Hands hooked behind his neck, she lifted her hips up and down, up and down, tight and molten around him.

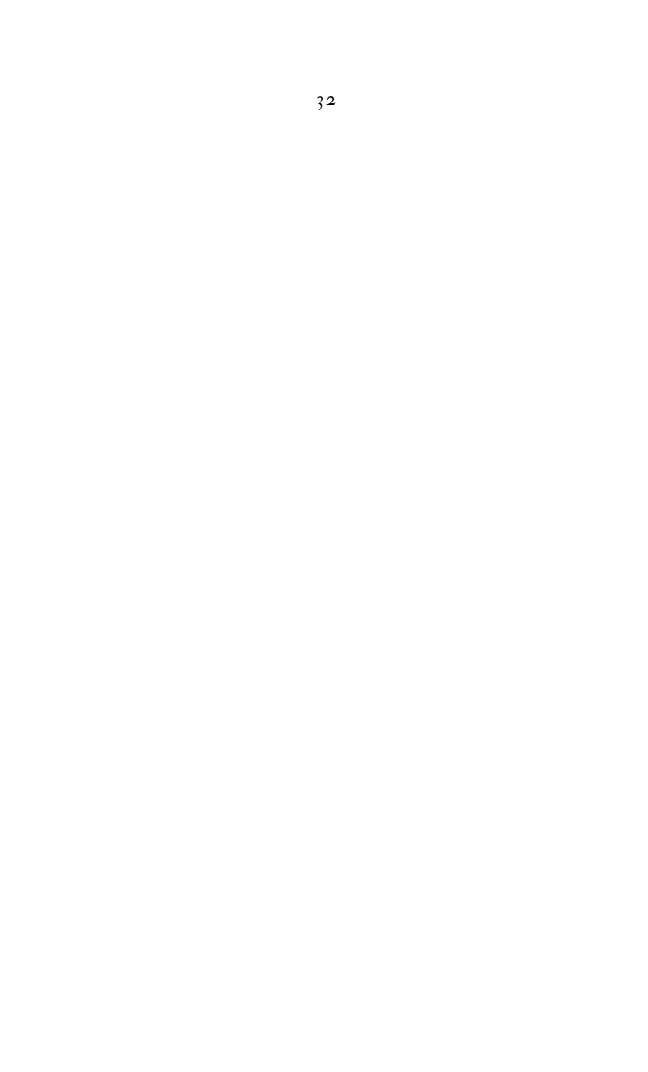
He couldn't move. If he moved, he'd blow right inside her. There was no other option. Eyes on him, Blair leisurely fucked herself with his shaft, throwing her head back and moaning.

"Fuck this." Seth wasn't going to last, whatever he did, in any case. He unhooked her arms and pinned her back on the bed, lifting her legs under her thighs and thrust in, hard.

Blair yelped in surprise, mouth opening. He brought his thumb to her lips, caressed it, and her tongue popped out to lick it. "I'll have this mouth, soon."

Seth dove back inside her, harder and faster, no longer in control. Her legs were pinned all the way back to her head, and he hovered over her, fucking her harder than any human could take, but Blair only screamed for more, lost in the same frenzy that had taken him. Her pussy spasmed, impossibly tight, then loosened as a flood of wet heat coated him. He couldn't help it; he came with her, but never stopped thrusting in and out of her, needing more. At first Blair was still under him, but seconds later her pussy was tighter again. "More."

More she wanted? More she'd have.



TAKEN

The world was brighter this morning. Not in a metaphorical way; she wasn't thinking that everything was more beautiful because she'd been fucked within an inch of her life for three hours straight.

She could genuinely see much better. Through the thick curtains of Seth's bedroom, she shouldn't have seen much light without changing her vision with spell, but it felt like the room was fully lit. She could see everything with precise accuracy. And she felt strong, rested, full of energy. Alexius was going to be ecstatic when she told him he'd been right. As much as she might have preferred to deny it, it appeared that she was a freaking succubus, or something close to it. She fed on sex.

There could be worse fates, if the sex was as explosive as it had been last night.

Seth slept next to her, his arm draped over her shoulders. He didn't move when she stirred, completely out for the count after their exploits. Blair grinned, proud to have exhausted him.

She attempted to stay as quiet as possible as she left the bed and headed to the kitchen. He might have fed her, but Seth hadn't drunk any of her blood the previous night, and with what they had coming today, she wanted to make sure he had plenty of blood when he woke up.

Sobering thought, that. They would face Aveka today, and Blair might have to go on the run again, if they couldn't corner the cowardly bitch.

"Hey, you!" Velvet was waiting in front of the bedroom door, running around in circle. He didn't seem like a happy kitty. He hadn't appreciated his first night away from Blair, she supposed.

"Yeah, well, maybe we can get you a kitty friend so you can spend the night with them," she told him.

The cat kept fussing, more troubled than she'd ever seen him.

"I'll get you some food, all right?" She started toward the kitchen.

All of a sudden, she was pushed against the wall, hitting her head hard. "Funny. Exactly what I was thinking."

Fangs tore into her throat and moments later, the world went black.

6269

W hen Blair came to, she was in locked in darkness, contorted to fit in a small space. The back of a car, if she were to guess.

She winced, pressing her hand against her painfully throbbing throat, but while there was some dried blood left, she could tell that the wound was already almost closed.

She remembered the vampire who'd attacked her—she'd only seen him once before, in Greece. One of Aveka's followers. He looked like a young boy, but if what had occurred was any indication, he didn't fight like one.

"Fuck!" The boy must have run away.

Fighting down her fear, Blair forced herself to think things through. She'd been taken by one of Aveka's followers. It was morning. That meant that her friends were going to wake up soon and check on her—if Seth wasn't already aware of her disappearance. And they had a functioning summoning spell sorted out. Come to think of it, this might even be better than their original plan. If Seth had brought her to Aveka, the queen bitch would have naturally been suspicious and on her guard. She wouldn't suspect the boy, who presumably followed her orders to the letter.

She just had to bide her time and summon her friends the moment she was with Aveka.

The car came to a stop, and Blair braced herself. Her instinct was to run and fight, but she had to play the role of a good captive for the sake of their plan.

The trunk opened in front of the boy, his mouth still filthy with her blood. He grabbed her by the throat before she had a chance to move.

Sheer panic seized her. He meant to kill her. This wasn't the plan. She wasn't supposed to die, not now, not right after finding Seth, her—her...

Hers.

Her Seth.

She thrashed, trying to scream, before she could even remember that she had magic. Then she attempted to call it to her.

The boy brought her close, still squeezing her throat. He liked this, she realized. He liked her fighting, and he liked seeing her slowly lose strength. He could have just snapped her neck, but he was enjoying himself too much.

"Why?" she croaked.

"The queen's obsessed with that asshole you're protecting. She doesn't need him. She has us! She has *me*." He snarled. "When you're gone, she'll see how useless he is and let me destroy him."

Oh, fuck.

With only seconds left, she tried her best, reaching out until finally her hands were around his arms. The vampire laughed, entirely delighted by her struggle. Sadistic fuck.

With as much strength as she could muster, Blair called to her core magic, blasting past his shields, until her mind had reached the very essence of him.

Gotcha.

The boy froze, expressionless, mindless, without a will of his own. Completely under her control.

She'd never even tried to go that deep—it was unethical, and so very wrong.

And right now, she gave exactly zero fucks. There wasn't much she wouldn't do in self-defense. She had to live. For herself, and for Seth.

"Let me go." Her voice came out steadier than she would have thought.

The boy's hand slackened, leaving her bruised, crushed throat.

"Now get into the truck."

The boy moved to do so, but before he could take one step, he was shoved on the ground, and a man stood over him, his knee on his throat.

She'd seen him before, too, with Aveka: the man was cold and inscrutable, loose, straight black hair flying to his inkblack eyes as he indifferently grabbed the boy's head and ripped it off of his shoulders.

Then he turned to Blair.

6/43

"C alm down. Erys escaping wasn't the plan, but he'll bring Blair to Aveka, and she'll summon us," Mikar said, his tone quite reasonable.

Still pacing the hall, Seth informed them, "Anyone else tells me to calm down one more time? I'll fucking kill you. Erys is a psycho. How can you not understand this?"

"Blair is fine," Chloe insisted. Softer, she added, "She has to be."

Seth had no time for anyone else's grief.

"I'm going."

"Wait." Greer held his sleeve. "You'd feel it if she'd been killed, wouldn't you? You'd be broken too."

In more ways than one.

"I think we'd better wait for a summons, Seth. And if she can't manage to get us there before Aveka does what she wants, well..." Greer didn't finish her sentence.

Seth glanced at Cat, his sister.

"We can lock you up until we have a counter spell."

"The moment Aveka gets my soul, she'll kill Blair. Stake me if that happens."

"Seth!" Cat yelped.

He continued his pacing, ignoring her.

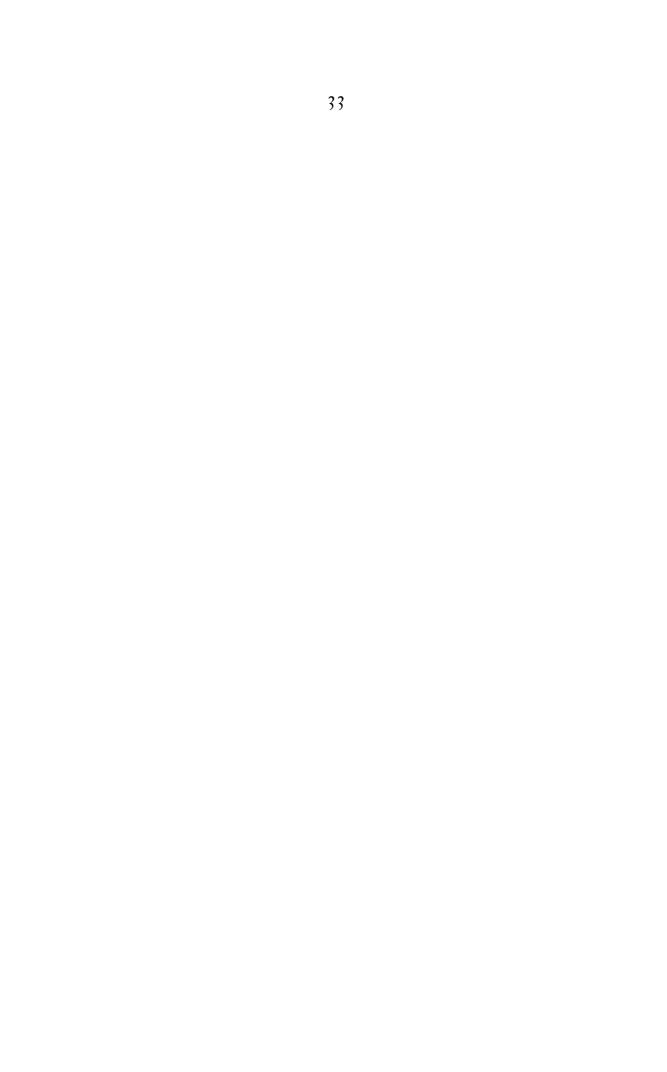
They were all dressed and armed, ready to jump to Blair's rescue. All they needed was a sign. There was a fairly high probability that Seth might grow mad before they received said sign, though.

"Seth," she repeated urgently. "I feel her. I feel Blair."

"Me too."

"It's time," said Chloe, handing Ruby to Greer. "Take care of my heart for me."

"I promise," Greer replied. "Go get the bitch."



THE WITCH

T he emotionless zombie vamp was hardly gentler than the crazy one, but at least he didn't seem interested in murdering her.

He carried her unceremoniously thrown over his broad shoulder, through green Highland plains in the rain. They reached the edge of an old castle in ruins Blair must have passed in front of a hundred times when they drove out of town. Walking in, the vampire threw her off his shoulder, to her knees.

Blair yelled as she hit the paved flooring, scraping her knees. The next instant, she summoned her friends, hoping against all hope that her call would work despite the distance, despite Oldcrest's wards.

She tried to get up, but the brute's hand immediately closed around her still-tender throat, and he pushed her back down to her knees.

"The witch, my queen."

"Well done, Andreas. I should have sent you much sooner. Bring her closer if you please."

He dragged her across the flooring, ignoring her pleas, her screams, impassive as her skin bled all over the ground. There was no feeling in him. The boy, at least, had enjoyed her suffering. This man? Nothing.

Tears streaked her face as she looked up to his cold gray eyes. He didn't even seem to be able to see her. Then she understood.

He was spelled to obey, nothing else.

Aveka had done to him what she was planning to do to Seth.

Over my dead body.

Andreas let go and moved away.

Blair lifted her head. She was surrounded. There must be a hundred vampires in the ruins of this hall, and lording over them all was Aveka, seated at what was left of an altar.

"Let me have a good look at you," the creature said, hopping off to stroll to her, balanced perfectly on top of her four-inch heels.

Blair recoiled at her approach, finally getting to her feet.

Aveka seemed to find it funny. "Not much to look at. Yet you've caused so many problems."

The bitch waved and two men grabbed Blair's arms, forcing her to advance toward Aveka.

No. *No*.

Spotting the hilt of a dagger at her captor's belt, she snatched the weapon, drew it, and aimed for her heart this time, taking no chances.

Before the blade could reach its destination, her hand was crushed in a steel grip.

Blair started to thrash against it, until a familiar voice said, "Don't you fucking dare. Not again."

Seth stood in front of her. Her Seth.

He was here. He'd come.

Her knees gave out. The two men at her side let go, or so she thought, before she saw both of them fall to the ground.

A casual Finn, still shirtless, held a sword sword wet with blood, and heads rolled along the stones. "Now, that was fun!" he announced.

And then there was chaos.

Her friends were too fast for her eyes, until Blair found the strength to build the usual spells she used while facing supernatural creatures: strength, protection, and celerity.

Part of her considered if her best option was leaving going on the run. Maybe she could get a head start, while Aveka and her goons were distracted.

No.

All her friends were fighting, and this was where she belonged.

The pain in her legs soon faded, either because of her accelerated healing rate or thanks to adrenaline. The short dagger she'd stolen wasn't much, but she made use of it, along with fire spells and punches when she could manage one.

"We can't let Aveka escape!" Seth screamed over the mayhem. A glance toward the dais revealed the bitch was already retreating, not liking the odds, though there must have been a hundred of her followers against a dozen of them.

Coward.

Chloe was doing her best to fight through the melee to get to her, but there were just too many of them in a small space.

An idea came to mind. "Where's Greer?" Blair asked Seth over her shoulder.

She was guarding his back to the best of her abilities.

"Skyhall," he shot back.

"We need her. She can build walls around this place so Aveka can't run."

Magic of that scale wasn't something Blair was capable of. She might have a habit of underrating herself in general, but she was also realistic. She couldn't do it. She didn't even know how to seal a space.

"Hang on!" Seth pushed back the three men and the woman charging at him, and turned on his heels, grabbing her by the waist. The next moment, they were hit by thunder. Blair closed her eyes out of habit. When she opened them, they stood in front of Skyhall.

"Greer!" she called, running in.

The witch appeared moments later, rushing to them. "You're all right!

Blair nodded, and wasted no time explaining, "We have Aveka. She's trying to run away. Can you close off the space, trap her in?"

Frowning, Greer bobbed her head. "I mean, I think so—it's not much different than the walls around Oldcrest—except it's about keeping people in, not out. But I'm taking care of Ruby. She's napping now."

"I'll stay," Blair offered.

Greer only took the time to squeeze Blair's hand before stepping outside to join Seth. In another rumble of thunder, they were gone.



FAREWELL

eth purposely landed a few steps away from the ruins.

"She's still there," he said, glancing through a partially fallen wall. "What do you need?"

"Time. As much as you can give me."

Nodding, he disappeared in another flash, materializing at the other end of the ruin, to close off Aveka's escape route.

"You can't hurt me," Aveka reminded him with a sneer.

"Who said anything about hurting you?" Seth smirked as a wall of lightning formed behind him, blocking the exits.

Anika Beaufort was fighting—and close to losing—against Chloe, on the dais.

With Chloe in front of Aveka and him behind, he wasn't leaving her much choice. She'd have to fight. There was a reason why she'd done her best to avoid it. She wasn't nearly as strong as she liked to think she was.

"Kill him!" Aveka ordered.

The vacant vampire moved to obey, almost fast enough to break Seth's focus, but he kept his storm raging through the onslaught.

The man was strong. Too strong. Each of his blows hurt like a motherfucker. Seth sent one lightning bolt straight to him, and the man stopped it with an open fist. What was he? Certainly not a normal vampire. Not that it mattered. He had one mission and he intended to complete it.

Give Greer time.

"I can help you break whatever spell she has you under," Seth told the man.

He showed fangs and growled low.

Or not.

Seth pulled two daggers—his and one of Blair's—and launched himself at the tool in earnest, parrying blows, stabbing him when he could. He wasn't given the opportunity more than twice, and each time, the man didn't so much as flinch, all his sense of self gone.

He was a shell.

A high-pitched scream resounded. Seth couldn't focus on anything other than the creature before him, but the man looked back.

Given an opening, Seth took it, wrapping his arms around the man's throat to immobilize him. He lifted his dagger high.

Then the man went limp, collapsing where he stood.

Confused, Seth let go.

It was only then that he noticed the silence. The stillness.

Chloe seemed to hold Aveka in a tender embrace, head buried against her throat as she sucked, and sucked, and sucked her blood.

Her heart had already stopped beating, but still, Chloe kept sucking.

Then, finally, she must have tired of it, because she ripped out Aveka's throat and let her fall at her feet.

Chloe's eyes shone with excitement as she casually wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Then she turned to face the hall.

There must have been twenty of Aveka's men left—the best of her army. The rest had already fallen.

They rushed out the doors, attempting to flee, but hit Greer's wall.

"Please!"

"Let us go!"

"We were...we were under a spell."

Finn snorted. "How I wish I could lie. It's fascinating."

Seth also doubted it. The only one who'd been controlled for sure was passed out cold.

Chloe turned to Levi, lifting one questioning brow.

Her husband extended his fangs. All these people had sided with Aveka because they were terrified of Chloe. They wanted her gone, and that wasn't even remotely tenable for Levi. None of them would last the night.

"Let us go, or we kill her!"

Seth's eyes widened.

One of the vampires had grabbed Greer by the neck. Two others pinned her hands.

"I feel magic brewing, and I snap your head, girl, you hear me?" the female holding her barked.

Greer nodded. "No magic. Don't lose your heads, now. You hurt me, you're never getting out of here alive."

"S hut up! Let us go," she demanded, hysteric.

"I'm going to have to do some magic to open the walls." Her voice was deceptively calm. "You let me go, and I can do that."

"Remove the spell, now!"

Seth walked to the front, each step slow. This wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. Greer hadn't taken the time to create any of her usual shields. She was so fucking fragile.

"You can leave," Chloe promised. "You understand? We won't chase. Just let go of Greer and—"

"Liars! Liar! You want to feed on us, destroy us like you destroyed the queen. You're a monster! You're—" Her wrist twisted.

Everyone heard the crack clearly in the stunned silence around the ruins.

The vampire stared in horror at the woman in her grasp, her neck hanging low. She let go, and Greer's body fell to the ground.

There wasn't a single move. A single sound.

Greer was dead.

At Seth's next heartbeat, a tall, blond man appeared in the entrance, right behind her murderer.

"Eirikr," Chloe breathed. "I didn't...I couldn't do anything."

The first vampire in the world gazed at his descendent with nothing but ice in the depths of his eyes.

His hand flashed and the woman who'd cracked Greer's neck screamed in agony. His fist was closing around her heart, but instead of ripping it out, he kept it there and squeezed.

The rest of Aveka's followers scattered. Greer's wall was gone.

Because she was dead.

No one made a move to chase them, not even Eirikr. Instead, he knelt next to Greer, pushing her red hair off her face.

"Helsing," he said.

No one replied.

"Helsing!"

"Diana's passed out," Alexius said.

Seth hadn't noticed, but the dark-haired woman was lying in Mikar's arms.

"Someone broke her neck."

That wasn't fatal to a vampire, but she'd take a few hours to recover.

Meanwhile, Greer was dead. For good.

"Where's the ice witch?"

"I'm here," Gwen said, rushing to his side. "It happened so fast. They had her, and we couldn't—"

"I don't care. Freeze her now."

Wisely, Gwen nodded, obeying the command without question. She entombed Greer's body in ice, covering every inch of her. "What now?"

Eirikr was silent, lifting the crystalline casket in his arms before disappearing.

Seth didn't know who was the first to cry. All he knew was that whatever they might have gained today, they'd lost this war.



THE WALLS

O ne year later

N o one celebrated Aveka's death, or the end of this senseless war. Not that day, not the next week. One year later, Blair still reeled each time she thought of everything they'd lost because of one power-hungry witch, and because of fear.

"Mrs. Eirikrson, please!"

Chloe smiled at the reporter holding his hand up. "Yes, Denis?"

Since the walls of Oldcrest had been destroyed, they'd replaced them with gates of silver and iron, but there had been other changes. Fear went hand in hand with ignorance. Chloe wasn't allowing the world to remain ignorant any longer.

She'd held her first press conference on the hill ten months ago. She told the entire world everything that had ever happened to her. Some vampires were still terrified of her, but to most, Chloe was a sweetheart. The vampire everyone wanted as their best friend.

Too bad for them. She was Blair's.

"You have to admit that the entrance requirements to the Institute are unfair to humans. What if a brilliant but regular mortal wanted in, and didn't have two supernatural acquaintances to vouch for him?"

"Well, my husband and I take no role in the selection process of the school, but that's a fair critique. I'll report it to the board. Anything else?"

"There are rumors of Eirikr being seen in Russia. Can you confirm?"

Pain flashed across her features. Chloe had lost most of her family members. Those she still had had deserted her for one reason or another.

"I'm afraid I have no idea. If he resurfaces, I'll be sure to call on all of you. I know many of you guys are salivating over his autobiography."

The reporters chuckled.

"We only have five more minutes before graduation starts," Blair whispered.

She was only standing next to Chloe because she looked good on video. Wholesome.

"One last question?" Chloe offered.

"With the European vampire election coming up, many wonder if you'll postulate for queen."

She chuckled. "Maybe in five hundred years or so. I don't have the experience, to be entirely honest with you."

"But you're one of the strongest vampires alive, right? What if the European clans don't respect the authority of the upcoming monarch?"

She shrugged. "Well, then, I suppose the monarch will have to deal with it. Now if you'll excuse me, I can't miss my own graduation."

The journalists took pictures as she got up and walked down the hill toward the Institute.

One year, to the day, and each time they passed Greer's memorial, both Blair and Chloe stopped, pressing their hands on the golden statue. Greer should have been here. She should have been in the crowd, clapping for them.

"You all right?"

Blair found herself smiling through the tears. Seth always appeared when she felt like shit.

She nodded. "It's just...some days are harder than others."

He kissed the side of her cheek. "Greer would have been proud of you."

Blair hugged her mate hard, wondering if the pain would ever stop.

They'd had losses, but Greer was the heart of Oldcrest. Part of this place she'd always loved had died with her.

"Let's go."

She tried to step away, but Seth's grip didn't loosen.

Immortal or not, Blair didn't have the strength to move him unless he permitted it.

"Seth?"

Looking up to him, she frowned, seeing him staring at something in the distance. She followed his gaze, and froze just like him.

Beyond outline of Night Hill, far over the lake, there a shining wave of magic pulsed. A magic she hadn't felt for a long time.

One entire year.

Oldcrest's shields had disappeared the moment Greer had drawn her last breath.

And they were back.

The End

UPCOMING

The Five Realms University is an open battlefield. After surviving three years of pranks, insults, and the occasional attempted murder, Alis thought she knew the rules of the game.

One encounter with Reiks, the golden prince everyone adores, shows her just how mistaken she was. He's decided she's his to torment for his last year at Five, and no one can save her from his clutches, until an actual war comes knocking at the doors.

Alis had her reasons for staying under the radar for so long, but to survive, she might have to embrace the devastating magic in her blood, at the risk of destroying the entire world.

B orn to take over a kingdom divided to its very core, Reiks has grown calculating and cruel, for the greater good.

He treats friends and foes as unwitting pawns on his board, until he comes to realize one piece might have been his enemy's queen in disguise. Alis could be his undoing.

Or his salvation.

