

A VAMPIRE
M/M
ROMANCE

VOL
FIVE



EVERDARK

THE VAMPIRE KING'S GIFT

X. ARATARE

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THE VAMPIRE KING'S GIFT (VOLUME 5)

EVER DARK

BOOK FIVE



X. ARATARE

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INTRODUCTION

Every Vampire Bloodline has a gift. Eyros Vampires can read and control minds. Kaly Vampires can raise the dead and command your very soul. Wyvern Vampires can teleport from one reality to another. And on it goes.

But King Daemon has *all* of their gifts, plus *one* more. The Vampires call it Armageddon. No one knows what it is.

Until now...

GIFT OR CURSE



Julian felt guilty. He and Elizabeth were walking arm in arm in the garden while Sophia skipped ahead of them, cutting night blooms and putting them in a basket. She was singing a sweet song to herself and the very whirr of the insects seemed to join in as a chorus. Stars were spread across the night sky like diamonds cast by a careless, yet generous, hand. The moon was large and luminous.

Even if he hadn't had night vision he would have been able to see effortlessly. The air was cool and crisp, just right for a cozy fire—which they would be going back to after this walk—and the conversation was interesting and pleasant. But Julian was only half present. He was listening to the hum of Daemon's thoughts and tracking his Master within the house. So guilt pricked at him.

Elizabeth stopped in mid-sentence and asked with a smile, "What is wrong, Julian? Your mind is only half here and half... well, I'm not sure where." Her intelligent eyes then narrowed. "Perhaps with Daemon?"

A flush coated his cheeks. "I—I'm just aware of him because our minds are linked!"

Her eyebrows rose. "*Really?* That's all? Nothing to do with the fact that he's probably the handsomest man I've ever seen? Or because you're afraid of him leaving?" Her forehead furrowed. "You've never been very attached to your lovers before. I'm assuming he's your lover?"

Her raised eyebrows had him blushing again. But he had always been quite open with Elizabeth. He wondered sometimes if he told her too much, because Christian could say so little about his own relationships.

“It’s normal,” Sophia’s sing-song voice rose up from where she was kneeling by a set of huge white blooms she was cutting.

“What’s normal, pet?” Elizabeth asked as she went over to the child-sized Vampire and ran a hand through her golden locks.

Sophia let out a satisfied sound and turned her head into the touch, as if she was one of the flowers she adored and Elizabeth was the Sun.

“Wanting to be with one’s Master all the time. Julian is actually being quite independent compared to most fledglings. As is Christian,” Sophia explained. “Normally, Masters and fledglings hole up together for ages. Most Masters won’t let their fledglings out of their sight, let alone be around others, or even leave their houses.”

Julian gave out a snort. When both women looked up at him with questions in their eyes, he explained, “I was just imagining Daemon trying to keep me in the house.”

“Indeed.” Elizabeth laughed. “You and Christian excelled at escaping from our home every chance you got.”

“I didn’t think you knew we did that! We were so careful!” Julian gasped.

“The two of you might have been cat burglars with the way you would climb out the bathroom window, onto the garage roof and then shimmy down the drainpipe.” Elizabeth gave him a smile. “But I am a mother, which means I hear every single creak in my house and know what it is. Plus, I can always sense when the two of you were not in bed.”

Julian burst out into laughter. “So all that secrecy was unnecessary? We could have just gone out the front door?”

“Well, *no*. If you were going to disobey me, you were going to have to work for what you wanted. Besides, I figured

it was good for you to plan escapes considering the adventures I knew you and Christian would be having when you were older,” Elizabeth said with a mischievous smile.

Sophia giggled sweetly behind one hand. “So Christian and Julian were naughty boys?”

“Yes, oh, yes, both handfuls.” Elizabeth’s laughter trilled in the garden. She cupped Julian’s face. “Both so intelligent and curious and with enough energy to power a small city each.”

“That describes them now!” Sophia said knowingly.

“Exactly! That’s why Balthazar and Daemon don’t even try to do what normal Masters do and keep us hemmed in,” Julian said.

His eyes though drifted to a piece of sod which was exactly where Daemon was standing well beneath the earth. He could hear his Master’s heartbeat and the urge to lay his ear against that powerful chest, close his eyes, and just listen to the steady thump, thump, thump was almost overwhelming. He swallowed thickly and curled his fingers against his palms.

“No, neither of them will. Though they will always be near. So do not worry,” Sophia said knowingly.

Julian blushed for a third time that night, but this time he wasn’t sure exactly why. His emotions around Daemon were both incredibly clear and completely opaque to him at the same time. How could he feel so much for someone he had met such a short time ago? He’d spent his whole life keeping people at arms length. He used to think that he was the open one while Christian was closed off, but now that he was with Daemon, he realized that he had been even more shut away than his best friend had been.

I didn’t want anyone in my life that I could lose. Better not to care about them from the get go and I wouldn’t be risking anything when they went. But now Daemon means more than any of those people ever could, and he’s in danger from Kaly!

Sophia got up from her flower picking and proceeded ahead of them again, looking for more blooms to add to her

basket, and giving them the semblance of privacy. Julian knew that Sophia could hear every word they spoke, not to mention the whoosh of blood in Elizabeth's veins.

He was grateful to her though for giving them a moment together. Ever since his mother had died, he'd often turn to Elizabeth with questions that he could not answer by himself. But he was worried about telling her his feelings around Daemon. She already had such distrust of Vampires, though it seemed to have dimmed slightly since the dinner party that had gone wrong. He wondered if Balthazar would ever get over that. He'd tried so very hard. He'd heard Balthazar muttering about at least there being leftovers for the Thornes to eat.

"Something *is* bothering you, Julian. What is it?" Elizabeth prodded slightly.

"You know when you realize something about yourself, something that you had thought the exact opposite thing about, and how that can totally upend things for you?" Julian asked her.

She let out a small laugh. "Like finding out that Vampires are real?"

He let out a huff of laughter himself. "Not quite the same thing. Unless you defined yourself by believing that Vampires weren't real before."

"Curiously, I'm wondering if I did. Their very existence opens up questions that I had thought answered. At least for myself," she admitted, her expression going thoughtful.

Julian was drawn out of his own concerns and asked her, "What questions?"

"Ones about whether there's something after our deaths. Though I suppose, since Daemon isn't from this earth, he is more akin to an alien than a demon or an angel. Isn't he? Yet I am now thinking of God and the Devil!" She waved a hand through the air and gave a slightly self-conscious laugh. "I thought that was pure poppycock. I thought that once we died that was it. Now I can't quite believe that."

“Let me totally blow your mind. There *are* souls, Elizabeth,” he told her. “Daemon was going to bring someone back from the dead.”

Elizabeth’s forehead furrowed. “Yes, yes, Balthazar told me something about that last night.”

“There’s a whole Bloodline of Vampires whose gift involves using the dead and souls to power their magic. And, Daemon, has assured me that there is something after this.” He left out that he, too, might be able to raise the dead himself. That might be a step too far for her to contemplate.

As he spoke to her about this, he realized that he hadn’t quite thought of the implications of it all. Being a Vampire meant that he might actually be excluded from what came next.

Unless I am given my Second Death, which I hope not! But then maybe I’d join my parents. Or what if the afterlife is like our most primitive concepts of it? Are Vampires allowed in Heaven?

“It’s just that the world seemed so understandable before. Somewhat boring in a way, in the sense that it was predictable,” Elizabeth admitted with a soft laugh. “But that left more time for the studies of esoteric things. But now, my most basic understanding of the world is wrong. How can I study minutia when I don’t even understand the macro?”

She gestured to the night sky above them in the glorious gardens surrounding them and the little girl who was thousands of years old collecting flowers just a few feet away.

“All the years that Christian I looked for evidence of magic and monsters, I thought I’d be prepared for actually *finding* them. And I’m still... I don’t know.” Julian grinned. “I should be in shock.”

“You should be!” She shook her head and sighed. “But you’re not. You’re excited. I can tell.”

Julian couldn’t help but show his enthusiasm, “I can’t wait for this trouble to be over so that I can find out more! There are endless things to learn about. And endless years to do it.”

His voice drifted off. He was looking down at Elizabeth and, for a moment, he thought he could see her skull beneath her skin. He shivered. And Sophia looked back at him at that moment. Their eyes met and he could hear her thoughts. One thought really.

You have all the gifts, Julian. Including that of my Mistress.

Julian blanched.

The back of Elizabeth's hand was suddenly against his cheek and she was looking up at him gravely. "Julian, something else is wrong now? You can't hide these things from me."

He opened his mouth to answer her, to tell her it was nothing, but the words wouldn't come. Was he seeing that she would die? Did that mean that she wouldn't become a Vampire like they were? That she would reject the gift of immortality? Or maybe she wouldn't even be given the choice, that chance, because someone else would take it from her?

At that moment, he was spared from even trying to speak as Elena burst out of the back door, yelling at the top of her lungs, "You took my fledgling away from me! Why should you be allowed to have the happiness that I am now denied?"

Ridley was racing after her in sleep wear: a pair of flowy silk shorts and a crop top. "Mistress! Please stop! Please!"

Elena's gaze scoured the garden until it landed upon him. Her right hand shot out and pointed directly at him. He felt almost physically speared by it. He stopped walking and simply stared at her. Elena was thinner than before. Her face was gaunt in a way that reminded him of a living skeleton with skin pulled too tightly over the bones.

"Is that the woman who lost her fledgling?" Elizabeth asked, drawing near to him.

"Yes." Julian stepped in front of Elizabeth and called, "Sophia, protect Elizabeth, please,"

"Of course, but Masters are always near in times of trouble," Sophia said, but a quick glance behind him showed

that Sophia was directly by Elizabeth's side. She'd put down her basket of flowers so that both of her hands were free.

Julian turned back his attention fully onto the furious Vampire approaching him. She was so weak, she'd stumbled on the stone path. He could smell her blood when she skinned her knee. She shouldn't have been hurt and, even if she had been by such a minor fall, she should have healed immediately. But she hadn't. She was starving.

"You are the cause of my Heath's Second Death! You are—" Elena cried, spittle coating her lips.

"Mistress, stop!"

Ridley put her hands on her Mistress' upper arms and tried to hold her. But, with a sudden burst of unnatural strength, Elena burst away from her and towards Julian. He had faced many people in fights in darkened alleys, on rooftops and in questionable watering holes. So Julian wasn't afraid of fighting. But he didn't want to fight Elena. He didn't want to hurt her. She was starving and out of her mind.

"Mistress, no!" Ridley repeated. She'd fallen back, but quickly jumped to her feet and was grabbing at her Mistress again.

"Elena," Julian said. "Elena, you should go inside with Ridley. You're not well."

"Not well! Not well?" Elena let out a shrill laugh. "You—"

One of her hands flew towards him, but where there had been empty air before between them was suddenly filled. Daemon caught her wrist. Fiona took both of Elena's arms in hers and held her in place. Both of them had teleported together.

"Elena," Daemon's voice was low and seemingly calm, but Julian knew he wasn't. That deadly calm had settled on his Master and he already knew Daemon well enough to understand this was when he was most frightening.

Julian reached for Daemon's mind, but the Vampire King's thoughts were closed to him other than a wave of love and affection for him. But also a *firmness*.

“I wish you to go inside, Julian,” Daemon said. It wasn’t quite an order, but Julian felt the command in it. “Take Elizabeth and go inside.”

Julian swallowed and fought it. He stepped around so that Daemon could see him. “I’m fine, Daemon. She didn’t hurt me. She didn’t even touch me once. She’s just upset and hungry and tired.”

His Master’s red, glowing gaze did not, however, leave Elena. Julian reached for Daemon’s mind. A caress at a closed door. He felt another wave of love, but the door stayed *shut*.

He’s really angry. Beyond angry.

Ridley lowered herself to her knees on the grass. Her hands were clasped in front of her chest. “Please, King Daemon, I beg you not to take your vengeance against her! She’s not herself! She hasn’t eaten since Heath’s Second Death!”

“Vengeance?” Elizabeth’s voice rose up in shock. “What are you saying? That he’s going to—to harm her? But she’s clearly out of her head! What right does he have to harm her?”

To Julian’s shock, it was Fiona who answered, “The right of the King. But, even if Damon was not our ruler, Elena attacked Julian in full view of everyone. Daemon has the right to challenge her to a fight. Of course, her Second Death would be certain in such a match.”

“That can’t be right! Killing someone? That’s barbaric! She’s clearly not in her right mind!” Elizabeth cried.

Julian was inclined to agree with her. “I was never in any real danger from her, Daemon. You know that. She’s not thinking clearly.”

Elena hung in Fiona’s arms without moving. Her eyes were strangely empty. She was like one of those Raggedy Anne dolls whose sand was running out of her.

“Some cannot survive the destruction of their fledglings. Perhaps Elena is one of these,” Daemon finally spoke again and it almost calmed Julian. It was in silence that Daemon

seemed the most unreachable. “So it might be a blessing to give her the Second Death she seeks.”

“No!” That word was shouted from many mouths.

“She’s just deep in mourning. In time, she’ll get better. Maybe you’ll even be able to bring Heath back to her still,” Julian pleaded. “Killing her shouldn’t even be part of this discussion!”

Fiona again answered for Daemon, “You do not understand, Julian. If Daemon does not act against Elena, others may think that they are equally allowed to show you violence and disrespect him.”

“Only someone insane would do that,” Julian said tightly. “They all know what the result would be. Them with the Second Deaths and him not even sweating! And I’m pretty capable of taking care of myself. So if anyone wants to mess with me, they’ll figure out pretty damn quick that they shouldn’t.” Then Julian shook himself. “So no one is going to learn anything from this!”

“What’s going on here?” It was Balthazar’s voice that rose up from the house.

He and Christian were standing on the back step. They were only partially dressed. The buttons on Balthazar’s fine tailored shirts were only not completely done up. Christian had no shoes or socks on. They had evidently just been getting dressed when they heard the commotion. Balthazar slowly walked down the steps to them.

“Elena?” Balthazar asked, his eyes looked bleak. “What have you done?”

Christian rushed past him to Julian.

“Are you okay? What’s going on? We heard that Elena was threatening you,” Christian said in a rush.

“I don’t know what set her off, but—”

“Heath’s body... he destroyed it,” Elena whispered.

“What? Why?” Julian asked.

“It was already coming apart. Kaly has possession of Heath’s soul. That is causing anything I do on his behalf to unravel,” Daemon explained. “I did not want a corpse to float there.”

Julian’s heart sank. “Oh, no, that’s awful.”

“So was Elena seeking *Kaly* to punish? Or *you*, Julian?” Balthazar asked, his gaze still on Elena.

“She was confused and hurt and—”

“Julian, she attacked you, correct?” Balthazar asked.

“She... I...”

But it didn’t matter what Julian said. There was communication going on between Balthazar and Daemon. Like he and Daemon had, the two of them could speak without words. That bleakness increased. Balthazar’s lips firmed into a tight line.

“By rights, you have all rights to challenge Elena, but I would ask to do so in your stead, King Daemon,” Balthazar said. “This is my House. She attacked one that is a brother to my fledgling. I—”

“No, my lord!” Ridley jumped up and clutched at Balthazar. “Take me! Challenge me! I’ll take her punishment! I should have known that something was going on with Heath! It’s my fault for not protecting my little brother!”

Julian turned anxious eyes to Daemon. He reached out again, practically banging on the door between them.

Don’t do this. De-escalate this. Please!

“This is madness,” Elizabeth said. “Can’t you all see that this is madness? How can death be so cheap to those who are immortal?”

“Fear,” Sophia spoke and her word was like a bell that had rung. Daemon turned around to look at her. “Will you act out of fear, King Daemon? With a brush of your mind you could end her suffering. With the blow of your hand you could end her life. What kind of king will you be now when you have so much to lose?”

“Not a weak one,” Daemon told her.

“Weakness would be acting as if she had been some kind of threat to Julian!” Elizabeth cried as she gestured to the sagging Elena. “Weakness would be striking down someone who is mentally ill! As Julian’s *second* mother, I can tell you that if *anyone* were to hurt him I would rip their throat out. But this woman... There is no danger from her, surely.”

“Daemon, please don’t do this,” Julian pleaded. He saw that his Master’s eyes shifted to him for a moment. “I know you don’t want me to interfere in this. I can feel it even though your mind is shut to me right now. But I really couldn’t accept this kind of protection.”

Christian laced his fingers through Julian’s and held on tight. He, too, looked between Balthazar and Daemon as they conferred once more without words.

It was Balthazar who spoke, “King Daemon has granted Elena a dispensation for this vile act. But her mind will be altered.”

The words hung heavy in the air like frost on winter’s morning. Elizabeth let out a gasp. All this talk of magic and she couldn’t quite believe the power that these Vampires wielded. Balthazar turned towards her and gave her a soft, sad smile.

“Don’t worry, Elizabeth, she won’t remember a thing,” Balthazar told her with no uncertainty in his voice. “She’ll be happy again.”

“No mother can forget a child,” Elizabeth said hoarsely.

Again, that sad flickering smile crossed Balthazar’s handsome features. “She will only remember what I allow her to. That is my *gift*.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “That sounds more like a *curse*.”

Balthazar said nothing, but there was something in his eyes that said he felt that, too.

WALK ON THE BEACH



“On a scale of one to ten with ten being the most angry and one being the least, what are you feeling?” Julian asked as Daemon curled an arm around his shoulders.

The Vampire King considered this. Was Julian asking if he was angry at *him*? Or angry at *Elena*? Or angry in *general*? Probably all of them, with the true emphasis on himself.

“I am not angry with you,” Daemon answered. Julian let out a breath, but then tensed as Daemon continued, “I am *concerned*.”

“Concerned? That somehow sounds worse. Anger fades. Concern often grows?” Julian made that a question.

“You are so young. I forget this. You do not know our ways or what it is to lead predators,” Daemon explained.

Julian bit his lower lip and his head drooped like a flower on a stem. “I just couldn’t let you kill her. I just—”

“I know you couldn’t. I shouldn’t have allowed you to influence me,” Daemon said quietly.

He watched as Balthazar and Christian with Ridley’s help assisted Elena into the house. Her mind was too broken at the moment for Balthazar to do anything safely. She needed to feed—or be fed, if she wouldn’t take care of herself—and then Balthazar would be able to pluck her mind like a musical instrument.

Elizabeth’s presence neared them. With just a look at Sophia, the child Vampire took the older woman’s hand.

“Let’s go inside and find Henry,” Sophia suggested, but there was just the slightest thread of Vampire Seduction in it to overcome Elizabeth’s desire to stay with Julian.

She reluctantly allowed Sophia to lead her away.

Fiona turned to them and said with a slight bow, “I will go search out Arcius unless you need—”

“No, Fiona, we are well. Thank you for your assistance,” Daemon said.

And he was appreciative. Of course, he had not needed her assistance, but that she had acted to help him. It was the first step.

“I will see you both later then.” Another bow and she teleported away.

“That is such a cool power,” Julian breathed, looking longingly at where she had been.

“You will learn to do it just as easily,” he assured his fledgling. He would make it so.

“I don’t know!” Julian let out an uncertain laugh. “I keep imagining half of me appearing in one place and the other half staying where I was.”

“I will make sure that does not happen,” Daemon said. The image of that happening though was now in his head. He already had the image of Julian’s heart being ripped out by Elena. This was not adding to his mood. “I wish to walk.”

“Okay. Where?” Julian asked.

“Anywhere. Take me to some place you love.”

“Shouldn’t we stay here though? I think some of the Mirryr and Kaly Houses are coming to see you and—”

“Then I *definitely* need to walk. They will wait. They will benefit from my calmer mood.”

Julian nodded. “I think I have the perfect place. Do you like the water?”

“It has been some time since I was near the ocean. Is that where you wish to go?”

Julian nodded again, a smile breaking across his lips. “I want to take you to the beach.” He looked a little sad for a moment. “The beach is the one place where I think I might miss the sun, though it’s too cold for swimming.”

Daemon let a slow smile cross his face. “Not for Vampires.”

Julian’s eyes widened even as he turned his body so that he could latch onto Daemon’s waist. “Something tells me that you don’t wear a swimsuit.”

“What’s a swimsuit?”

Julian just shook his head and laughed. But then his fledgling was eagerly pulling him towards the front of the house. He laced one of his hands with Julian and the two of them jogged to the front of the house and then onto the sidewalk. It was much like their first walk to Julian’s house.

“I feel naughty doing this,” Julian admitted with a laugh. “Like we’re playing hooky.”

“Perhaps we are. But it is a good thing,”

As Julian led him down the sidewalk towards the direction of the ocean—Daemon could smell the lovely salt water—his fledgling cast a glance back at Ravenscroft Manor with a slightly worried expression.

Reading Julian’s thoughts, Daemon answered, “They will be safe. If an attack were to occur, I would know and teleport us there in moments.”

“Balthazar and Christian might worry where we are though, even if no one comes to attack them,” Julian pointed out, but he did turn back towards the direction they were going.

“Balthazar knows we are headed to the beach.” Daemon tapped his temple.

“Ah, yeah, of course, you and Balthazar can talk to each other telepathically. Like we can.” There was a pause and then

Julian, looking rather shame-faced admitted, “I’m sort of jealous that he can do that with you. I thought it would be only you and me.”

Daemon leaned down and kissed Julian’s nearest temple. “It is not the same. Nothing could ever be the same as what we share.”

Julian colored and then, looking chuffed, said, “Good. I’m not going to deny that I’m psyched that you feel that way.”

“It is the truth.”

Julian beamed again.

As they came into more populated areas, he light shielded Julian’s mind from all the minds around them. He increased that shielding as Julian pinched the top of his nose as if he had a headache coming on. His fledgling looked up at him gratefully.

“The voices are getting louder,” Julian explained.

Daemon nodded. “That makes sense. We are around Eyros himself. You would key into his powers first.”

“I really don’t want to read people’s minds.”

“I know you do not.”

“And you know why, too, don’t you?” Julian’s gaze was on him again.

“Of course.”

“So why? Tell me.”

“It is not a magician’s trick,” Daemon laughed, but then he felt how serious Julian was about knowing. “Ah, I see that you are not sure why yourself. Do you want to know the truth?”

Julian nodded. “I would say always, but... maybe not.”

“That is wise.” Daemon rubbed his thumb over the back of Julian’s hand. “But, in this case, you need not fear the truth. It is not out of some terrible motive. You don’t wish to read minds because you fear it will dim your good view of people. You would rather think the best of them.”

“Yeah, that’s likely true. Though it means I really *don’t* think people’s real selves are all that nice, doesn’t it?” Julian smiled wryly. “I just discovered about myself that I’ve been shut off from people for a long time. More shut off than Christian. Both of us have been in the bunker together.”

“It is understandable. You lost people in your life early. You do not want to experience that pain again,” Daemon guessed.

They were crossing a busy street when a car blew a red light and was about to careen into a group of young women ahead of them. Daemon *moved*. He brought the three women, himself and Julian to the opposite sidewalk and the car flew by without causing any damage. There were shouts and honks from many horns, but no one had gotten hurt.

“What the...” Julian looked shellshocked.

The young women were as well. One of them with dark hair and eyes, turned to Daemon and grasped his free hand in hers.

“Thank you! You saved us! How did you—”

But she got no farther. Nor did the man who had pulled over his car who had seen Daemon’s impossible save. Nor did the people on the opposite sidewalk who had seen it all happen. For Daemon sent a wave of power out that touched all of their minds. They now remembered him saving the girls, but it had been merely pushing them out of harm’s way, not teleporting them onto the sidewalk.

“You are most welcome. Go enjoy your evening and think no more about this,” he told the young woman with the dark hair and eyes.

She nodded, much like a person under hypnosis, and she and her friends went on their way. Within half a block, they were laughing and talking normally again. The man who had pulled over got back in his car, feeling kindly about strangers who risked their lives, but he, too, was back to thinking about his own situation before he had driven a block.

Julian watched him out of narrowed eyes. “Balthazar did something like that at the Blood Den. It’s amazing that the two of you can just make people remember something that isn’t true. I’m sort of wondering since Christian and I have lived in the same town as Balthazar for all our lives if that hasn’t happened to us once or twice. I *think* we just met him, but can I be sure?”

Daemon had a momentary rush of jealousy that Balthazar being near his Julian before him. “Knowing his penchant for pretty young men—and the two of you in particular—I have no doubt he has.”

“I’m going to ask him. Or, better yet, I’ll ask Arcius. Balthazar might try to lie a little,” Julian laughed.

“He will definitely lie.” Daemon sighed.

“I guess I should be glad that Balthazar is so good at affecting minds, considering...” Julian ducked his head. “Considering he’s going to do that to Elena.”

“Yes.” Daemon smiled.

“Will he make her forget that Heath ever existed? Or what?”

Balthazar likely wouldn’t erase Heath’s existence. That would cause too much cognitive dissonance, especially with an Eyros Bloodline Vampire as she would read the confusion in people’s minds immediately. And Balthazar was not yet capable of weaving memories for all Vampire minds at once. So it would likely just be a lessening of her grief. Perhaps, Balthazar would even make her angry with Heath for what he had done. Turning grief into rage was easier. He told Julian as much. Julian nodded, but he still was upset. His fledgling blamed himself for Elena’s reaction to him.

“Julian, what has happened with Elena is not your fault.”

“That’s not true. I asked you to protect Christian and me,” Julian said. “I knew that you’d have to hurt him, at least, if not kill him. So I *am* responsible.”

“They would have killed you and Christian without hesitation. I assure you that you are spending far more time

thinking and mourning Heath than he would have ever done for you.” Daemon ran a hand through Julian’s dark hair.

“Probably. I don’t know. I’ve just never been responsible for someone’s death before. Not even tangentially,” he admitted and stretched out his neck for more petting, which Daemon was happy to oblige.

“There will be many new things to you in this Second Life, Julian,” Daemon advised him. “Challenging things.”

Julian bit his lower lip as they crossed into a tree-lined that led to a set of wide stairs down to the beach. He could already see the silvered sand beach ahead of them and the water that looked velvety black. He took a deep breath. He felt better already. The buzz of fear about losing Julian was tamping down. But he felt his fledgling was still worried. Not about Elena though.

“I made you look weak, didn’t I? When I begged you not to kill her?” Julian’s shoulders slumped. “I didn’t think...”

“You reacted. Understandable. We are both new at this,” Daemon answered, squeezing Julian’s hand.

They had reached the stairs that led down to the beach. It was mostly empty. There was a couple however lying on a beach blanket, arms wrapped around each other, the smell of their love-making still staining the air. Daemon’s stomach grumbled. He would definitely have to feed more tonight. This couple would be a good start. His predator’s mind immediately started a plan of attack. But his fledgling was still upset. He would handle that first. The couple second.

“How should I have handled it? Taken you aside? Your mind was closed to me,” Julian said the last with a slightly anguished look.

Daemon grimaced. Julian *had* tried to reach him over their bond repeatedly, but he had been too filled with fear-based rage to respond. Even now, he kept Julian at a distance as scenarios of seeing him hurt or killed raced through Daemon’s mind like a squirrel chasing its own tail.

“I am sorry. I should not have done that, but my thoughts were jumbled. My emotions were out of control.” He stopped walking as they were now just above the reach of the waves. He cupped Julian’s face in his. “It would have hurt you to have our minds touch at that moment.”

Julian searched his face and his mind for a lie, but found none. Julian buried his face against Daemon’s chest. His hot breath gushed over Daemon’s skin. He kissed the top of Julian’s head again and again, smelling and tasting him with those kisses. Julian’s arms wrapped around him as if Daemon were a large teddy bear he wanted to squish against him for comfort. The Vampire King smiled and laughed softly to himself. He had never been anyone’s teddy. More kisses though had his stomach rumbling again.

Julian drew his head back to meet his gaze. A crooked smile was on his fledgling’s face. “You’re hungry.”

“Yes.”

Julian turned his head towards the couple who were giggling and talking softly to one another. “And I see you found some dinner.”

“I have. Would you like to help me?”

“Help you what?” Julian turned a confused expression towards him.

“Hunt them.”

Julian’s eyes widened. He opened his lips—likely to say “no” as his little hero did not like to attack the innocent—but then he firmed his resolve and nodded. He understood that he would have to learn how to do this eventually. Not for some time, but still. Eventually. Besides, it was fun to teach his clever fledgling.

“So how do we do this?” Julian rubbed his hands together.

Daemon cupped his chin. “First, we do not look like we’re hunting them.” He leaned down and kissed the young man full on the lips. His fledgling’s expression went from anxious to slightly dazed. “Follow my lead.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“You’ll find that hunting has a natural rhythm,” Daemon explained as he had them saunter down the beach towards the couple. They looked like a couple as well, but just out for a late night stroll. “Now, I know that you are concerned about hurting innocent people.”

“Yeah, a bit.”

Daemon let his lips linger on Julian’s cheek and dragged them over his jaw. Julian’s breathing quickened and his heart raced. The musky scent of arousal rose off of him in waves.

“Being fed from is pleasurable.”

“You’ve said that.”

“Very pleasurable.”

“I don’t know if I want you to give anyone else *that* much pleasure,” Julian said dryly.

Daemon tipped his head back and laughed loudly. The couple’s eyes were drawn to them. He knew the man felt annoyed that they were being interrupted, but this was a public place, though he was right that it was a very large beach and they could go elsewhere. The woman thought that they were an adorable couple.

“They know we’re here. The guy is not pleased,” Julian said worriedly though he kept a smile on his face.

“Remember what I did to the people on the street before?”

Julian nodded.

“Let me show you a subtler way of doing it,” Daemon suggested.

Now he could have simply made the couple fall asleep and stay asleep while he fed. That would have been a workmanlike way to go about it. He explained as much to Julian.

“Let me guess? That’s not a challenge?” Julian let out a small chuckle.

“Correct. Stalking prey is part of the experience,” Daemon said with relish.

“I don’t know. Feeding is all about sex and closeness for me. I can’t imagine wanting to do that with anybody but you,” Julian admitted.

That got Julian a reward of another full-mouthed kiss. At the same time, Daemon sent a wave of interest towards the couple. The woman was sitting halfway up on her elbows, lips parted, pink tongue showing as she stared at them with lust in her hooded gaze. The man, who had never given a thought to other men being beautiful, felt his cock stir as the kiss went on and on.

“Ask them to join us,” the woman asked the man breathlessly.

“Ah, yeah, definitely. Hey!” the man called to them as the kiss ended. “Do you want to join us? We’d be happy for you to.”

They were an attractive couple. The woman had long blonde hair that went to the middle of her back in waves, green eyes in a rather fox-like face with a trim, athletic form. The man had dark brown hair streaked with gold from the sun and hazel eyes with a body that showed he lifted weights extensively. Daemon had no interest in them sexually. In the past, he might have drunk from them and fucked them both simply to increase the feeding. But now Daemon only wanted to be with Julian.

“Uhm, yeah we want to join you,” Julian said, surprising him, as he knew his fledgling was highly territorial about him.

But Julian was even more intent on getting him fed evidently and showing him he could be a “grown up” Vampire, which Daemon had a hard time not laughing out loud about. But it would hurt Julian’s feelings so he bit his inner cheek. Julian tugged Daemon after him towards the couple’s blanket. Daemon could hear the twin beats of their hearts. The woman scooted over so that there would be room for him and Julian to sit with them. The cold fall air had caused gooseflesh to rise

on the humans' arms as the sweat from their frantic coupling cooled.

"You're so graceful!" the woman remarked with a startled laugh as he and Julian sank down onto the blanket in unconscious tandem.

We truly are as one.

"We were fated for one another," Julian told her with a smile.

Daemon felt his fledgling's mind reach for hers. It wasn't a perfect Vampire Seduction by far. Her eyes went unfocused as he'd used too much. But for one of his relative inexperience it was nicely done. And it was not because he was Daemon's fledgling—or not *just* because of that—but because he was good at reading people. The young man frowned. He was feeling left out. Daemon touched his mind so that the young man turned to him.

"Don't be jealous. We're here for both of you," Daemon assured him as his fangs came down.

He knew the moment that the young man saw them. His eyes widened. His lips opened to shout, but then with a wave of persuasion from Daemon's mind had him relaxing, even as he stared at those sharp, white fangs.

"You're... you're..." the young man tried to speak.

"Vampires," the woman breathed.

Julian's fangs were out as well. Daemon put a hand on his arm. Being around aroused humans was a recipe for some young Vampires to lose control, but he needn't have worried. Julian had no interest in feeding from her.

"Would you help us? My mate needs to eat. I feed from him. We won't hurt you. You won't even remember any of this in the morning," Julian remembered.

But her eyes were bright with desire. "But I *want* to remember!"

Julian and Daemon's gazes met.

I will mark her as a possible candidate to be an Acolyte for House Ravenscroft, Daemon said.

Or for our own, Julian said.

As the king and his consort, all Acolytes are ours, Daemon explained.

Oh, so best of all worlds. Julian grinned.

Exactly.

And he was glad that Julian was seeing some perks to being royal.

“I’ll tell you what. We’ll meet again, and, if you still feel this way, we’ll have an offer for you,” Julian told her, his eyes burning redly.

“Your eyes...” One of her hands lightly touched Julian’s cheek. “So beautiful.”

She’s a keeper, Julian chuckled.

And then he moved out of the way so that Daemon could feed. With a movement too fast for any of them to anticipate, he had the woman bent back. His fangs had sunk into her flesh and her blood was nourishing him in great gulps. The young man swayed there, unable to stop him and not wanting to at the same time. He wanted to take the young woman’s place. And soon, he did.

Daemon gently placed the young woman on the blanket. She was in a swoon, but she would recover, feeling well-rested and happy. Daemon then fastened his mouth on the young man’s neck. He gasped and dug his fingers into Daemon’s back. It was like a kitten’s grip to Daemon, not even that really, where it would have hurt a normal man. His heart was strong and beat powerfully, sending the blood nearly jetting into Daemon’s mouth and down his throat. The blood was hot and filling.

Julian put a hand on his back and drew it up and down his spine in a caress. Then his fledgling was curled over him, kissing his neck and head and back. Fingers carding through his hair and body pressed tightly against him.

A spike of arousal went through Daemon. He bit hard into the young man and had to force himself to stop. The urge to simply *devour* him and then take Julian on the sand was almost overwhelming. But his sensitive fledgling would be afraid and upset by such an act. He would have Julian, but not on top of the young man's corpse. So he pulled himself off and laid him down beside his girlfriend. The two of them were asleep and Daemon positioned them so that they were wrapped around one another.

"We shouldn't leave them here. Someone might hurt them," Julian said with a frown.

Daemon felt a wave of affection for his fledgling, but a little sadness, too. Julian would learn that they could not save everyone. But, for now, he would do his best not to break that to his impressionable beloved.

"We won't," Daemon assured him. "We'll watch over them while they sleep. Why don't we take that swim?"

Julian looked out at the velvety black water and a smile curled his lips. "Yeah. Definitely. Let's do that."

ENEMY MINE



*W*hat do you mean that you're going swimming? Balthazar sent to Daemon when he realized that neither the Vampire King nor his fledgling were in the house. *The Kaly are coming here to meet you tonight. And the Mirryr likely as well! What am I going to tell them?*

I'm sure you can handle it, Eyros. You are so good with people, Daemon responded with a lilt of laughter in his voice. *Besides, I am in no mood to entertain.*

Balthazar winced. He looked to where Ridley was closing Elena's door behind her. He felt a mixture of anger, pity and helplessness. He understood Elena's pain. If Christian was taken from him, he would have done far worse than Elena to the person who had caused his Second Death. He wouldn't have cared if they were a king or a commoner. He would have his revenge. But Heath's Second Death had been necessary and Daemon was going to bring him back, if he could. And Elena had tried to hurt *Julian*. She should have been given her Second Death. But Daemon had held back.

Maybe he shouldn't have, Balthazar thought but then sent to Daemon, *I understand. I'll hold them off until...*

For a moment, Balthazar could see through the Vampire King's eyes and he glimpsed a quite beautiful site. Julian—completely naked—running into the inky black sea, tossing a smile of challenge over his shoulder at Daemon. Balthazar pinched the top of his nose and shook his head. Daemon and Julian would not be back anytime soon.

...until you return, Balthazar finished dryly.

You will do wonderfully, I'm sure! The Kaly, after all, want to ally with your House as much as meet me, Daemon chuckled, but already Balthazar knew he had lost the Vampire King's full attention.

Go have fun, Balthazar said with a sigh and closed out their connection.

He didn't want to catch a glimpse of the frolicking. He wished he had grabbed Christian and headed for the beach before Daemon and Julian had. Then the Vampire King would have to have played host instead of him.

Speaking of Christian...

Balthazar glanced down the hallway. His fledgling had gone to speak with his mother. She was still upset about Elena. Unfortunately, Elizabeth was proving Daemon in some ways right about human and Vampire morality not mixing well. If only they could have *hid* some of that stuff from her.

Luckily, Henry had been with Arcius, discussing history. He was trying to calm his wife down. Not having seen what happened was making Henry more malleable in terms of thinking that it wasn't as big a deal as she was making it out to be. He wasn't altogether happy that they were using this blindness of Henry's to influence Elizabeth. Not that she was buying it. But he saw that Christian was in the hallway on his own.

He opened his mouth to call to his fledgling. But then he stopped himself as he saw that Christian was staring at something intently in one of the darkened, empty bedrooms. His fledgling was taut as a bow. His eyes were wide with fear. Balthazar flew to Christian's side and immediately placed himself between his fledgling.

"What's wrong? What do you see?" Balthazar demanded to know.

But before Christian answered, he headed into the room, switching on the light—even though his Vampiric vision didn't require it, but night often played tricks, even on those familiar

with it—and scanning the bedroom. There was no one there. He did not smell anything untoward either. But he checked the closet, bathroom and even under the bed. But no one and nothing was there. He turned around to see Christian standing on the threshold, arms crossed over his chest, still looking afraid.

“Christian.” Balthazar reached out to him and, to his surprise and pleasure, his fledgling rushed into his arms. He held Christian tightly against him and ran a hand up and down his spine. “It’s okay. It’s all right. You’re safe. Who was it?” And then, of course, he knew. “Was it David?”

“I must be imagining him,” Christian’s voice was muffled against his sweater.

“No, I do not think so,” Balthazar sighed. “It, undoubtedly, has to do with you being a Speaker to the Dead. Evidently, you can more than just *hear* them and talk to them, but see them as well.

“You can’t block that, can you?” Christian looked up at him hopefully.

Balthazar opened his mouth, but then shook his head. “Not without completely scrambling your brain.”

“That doesn’t sound like a solution.” Christian frowned.

“No. We need to talk to Daemon. Maybe he has experience with this. I’m sure that there’s something in the Ever Dark. I’m sure his city has a library,” Balthazar pointed out. “There’s actually supposed to be immense knowledge in Nightvallen. So don’t give up hope. We’ll find a solution.”

He squeezed Christian. His fledgling was still trembling slightly. Balthazar brushed his lips over Christian’s temple.

“Is he still here?” Balthazar asked.

“N-no,” Christian answered with a shake of his head.

“The moment you see him again, let me know. I will have *words* with him,” Balthazar murmured.

Christian laughed. “I do not think he’ll be afraid even of you. He’s dead. You can’t hurt him.”

“I’ll find a way,” Balthazar said grimly. “Or maybe I’ll sick one of our new Kaly friends on them.”

Christian’s eyebrows rose. “Maybe they could help. I mean they control the dead, right?”

Balthazar nodded slowly. “The leader of the House Trarion is coming here tonight. Her name is Lisette. From the grapevine, I’ve heard she’s very old. Perhaps alive before the War. If anyone would have experience with a Speaker, it might be her.”

“But? I hear a but in there.” Christian smiled at him.

“You read me too well.” Balthazar smiled back. “But two things. One, there’s always a cost to such help. Outside of one’s House, and *definitely* outside of one’s Bloodline, that cost is substantial. Not that I wouldn’t pay whatever it took to protect you, but the cost is not monetary. It would be—”

“Everyone knows how good you are at changing minds,” Christian interrupted. “They’d asked you to do something that you might not want to do.”

“Don’t worry about me. My morals are flexible.” He smiled with just a trace of wryness in it.

“You aren’t as bad as you paint yourself,” Christian objected.

“No, I am quite a bit worse. You just haven’t seen it yet. You see, when we first came here and had nothing, I did whatever I had to do. And truthfully, I would again. But things are good. So I can be more honorable,” Balthazar explained.

“I don’t want you to have to do something *dishonorable* for me.” Christian leaned against his chest, seeking comfort and Balthazar couldn’t help but feel a warmth at this.

Christian was not one to show he needed someone. But his fledgling needed him and was reaching for him.

“I would do anything for you, I’m afraid. That just can’t be helped. I’m a complete and hopeless romantic,” Balthazar said flippantly, even though it was true.

Christian turned and put a gentle hand on his lapel. “You really are. But, seriously, I don’t want you to compromise yourself. We’ll find another way.”

“Which brings me to my *second* reason for not wanting to involve anyone else other than Daemon. If people know you’re a Speaker...” Balthazar flattened his lips. “Speakers are so rare that I thought they were a myth. Lisette will see you as a *prize*.”

“Then we won’t tell her. I can deal with this. Deal with David.” Christian frowned, but shook himself. “I’m not a child any longer. And he’s a ghost. He can do nothing, but haunt me.”

But Balthazar hated that David could do even *that*. No matter what Christian said, it was clear that this man still could hurt his fledgling, dead or not. There was a knock on the door to the bedroom and Arcius was standing there in long black robes with silver trim, looking apologetic.

“House Trarion is here,” Arcius explained.

“New robes?” Balthazar tilted his head to the rather fancy attire the Confessor was wearing.

Arcius actually *blushed*. He smoothed a hand down the front of them. “I thought it was appropriate to create some new robes that honored King Daemon and were different and separate from those I wore before.”

“The urge to tease you is *huge*, but I understand the feeling,” Balthazar admitted.

“You are his best friend as well as closest advisor.” Arcius crossed his arms at the wrists behind his back. “I would hope you would approve.”

“I do. Though our beloved king is playing hooky. You and I have to entertain them until he returns. *If* he returns. We might have to provide rooms,” Balthazar said.

“Of course. Our king is allowed some time to himself, especially after...” Arcius didn’t finish the sentence. “If you would like me to handle Elena, I will—”

“Why should you do it?”

“Because, as the House’s Confessor, I should have known of her pain and intentions. I knew of one, but not the other.” Arcius lowered his head.

“Even being able to read minds, does not mean you can foretell the future,” Christian pointed out.

“No, but I can,” Sophia said from behind Arcius.

“Yes, you can! Sophia, why didn’t you warn us that this was going to happen?” Balthazar asked sternly, but he didn’t really expect her to provide them with a blow by blow of what was going to happen. Just the telling of it would change things.

“You understand why. Besides, I don’t see everything. Just the important things.” She did that little sway dance.

“So *that’s* why I’m uneasy seeing you now? An important thing is coming, isn’t it?” Balthazar asked grimly.

She grinned at him. “You’re doing so well, Balthazar! Don’t worry! You’re going to do even better!”

“Don’t swell his head,” Arcius cautioned her.

She just giggled, totally unrepentant, while Balthazar swelled his chest. Christian gave him an exasperated look and patted his chest.

“Let’s go greet House Trarion,” Christian said.

The four of them went to the front room where their guests were waiting for them. There were five Kaly Vampires present. Balthazar recognized all of them. *Vaguely*. The corpse powder spiked alcohol had made it all a little hazy. Yes, he had made all of them House Ravenscroft and Daemon’s allies, but the details were... hmmm, well, he didn’t remember much of that night.

Their leader was especially surprising. She was a young woman, really no more than a girl, in terms of looks. She had that same Kaly fairness that all of them had with white-blond hair and almost colorless eyelashes and eyebrows. She was pretty and doll-like, until you looked into her eyes and then realized that no one would want to play with her.

“Sophia,” Lisette’s voice was high and sweet, but still cutting. Her eyes narrowed. “Still looking for your forever home?”

Balthazar frowned. She made Sophia sound like some *pet* that needed a place to stay. It wasn’t Sophia’s fault that almost all of the Seeyr Vampires had been wiped out after the war. They were simply too dangerous.

Sophia’s eyes had narrowed and she had said, “Lisette, still looking for respect?”

Lisette’s pale skin flushed. The two of them glared at one another with undisguised hatred. But then the expression had washed off of Lisette’s face like it had never been, and she let out a soft, breathy laugh as she patted her pale blonde hair.

“When one has power and a House to wield, one has all the respect one needs,” she said to Sophia with a sharp as a razor blade smile. “But when one is alone, one must count on the kindness of strangers.”

“Sophia is not a stranger here,” Arcius had interjected, a frown so deep on his face that it looked like Grand Canyons had appeared rather than wrinkles. “She is an honored member of our house.”

Sophia beamed at Arcius. She laid her head against the Confessor’s broad chest. “You are the absolute best, Confessor! I am so glad to be a part of such a House with such a wonderful spiritual advisor!”

Arcius blushed for the second time that day. He patted Sophia’s arm. “You’re too kind, my dear.”

“I’m just speaking the truth, Confessor. You are the spiritual head of King Daemon’s church,” she said.

It was Arcius’ turn to look a little wide-eyed. She patted *his* arm this time.

Lisette’s silver eyes had widened as she watched and listened to this exchange. But she inclined her head and murmured, “My apologies. I am so used to her *sponging* off the kindness of others. I had no idea that she had been accepted into House Ravenscroft as a full member.”

In fact, they had not yet gone through the ceremony that would induct Sophia as one of their full-time members, but that was not because Balthazar was adverse to doing it. There simply had not been any time. But Lisette's acidic words to their newest member made it clear to him that he had to make the time sooner rather than later. Though Sophia was quite certain that her Mistress was alive and would be rescued, she seemed to still want to be part of his House. She was a useful addition, if nothing else.

Balthazar moved in to speak to the doll-like Lisette with a smile on his face; it was only slightly forced. "We are all friends here now. There is no need for apologies. But I'm sure you won't make the same mistake again with Sophia. I don't take kindly to people speaking to members of my House like that. As I'm sure you don't either."

Suddenly, Sophia was wrapping her arms around his chest and saying, "You are the best Lord ever, Balthazar! I am so glad to be serving you!"

He smiled and said, "Thank you, Sophia. But we must not keep our guests standing in the front hall. Please, won't you follow me? I believe the staff has made one of the sitting rooms comfortable for us to speak."

Lisette gave him a small smile and inclined her head once more. "You are gracious and charming as all have said of you, Lord Ravenscroft."

"Please call me Balthazar. And may I call you Lisette?" he asked, not exactly happy to lose the honorifics yet, but it seemed appropriate

"Of course," she told him with another of those smiles.

They lead the contingent of Kaly Vampires into one of the intimate sitting rooms. There were two couches facing one another with a fire crackling on the wall to their left. Blood-laced wine spiced with honey and herbs was set out along with glasses for everyone.

Lisette sat alone on the couch while her people stood behind her like five white marble statues. Christian and he

took the opposite couch while Sophia perched on the arm, and Arcius stood by the side of the fireplace, elbow resting on the mantle as he stroked his beard and watched everything.

The fire popped and crackled warmly. Lissette held her hands out towards it. They were small and pale like starfish in the deep ocean. Everything about her was delicate, almost fragile.

William, Sophia and now Lissette were some of the few true child Vampires that he had run across in his Second Life. Their lives were far more fraught now than in the past where children were considered simply small adults. Yet here Lissette was as Lady of her House. Still, he bet that this modern world tested her patience.

He could feel some of it wafting off of her even now. A sense of dissatisfaction. But perhaps that was just her lust for power. There was never enough for people like herself. Her childlike frame simply increased that frustration.

“We are honored to have you here, Lissette,” Balthazar began. “The friendship between our Houses is—”

“Something that you have contrived through that brilliant mind control gift of yours.” She waved a hand through the air.

Balthazar froze. She should have no memory of her mind being tampered with. He had given her a logical chain of reasoning to come to the conclusion that friendship between their Houses was wise and that Daemon was their true ruler. So *how* and *why* was she saying this?

“Do not worry, Balthazar. I assure you that the memories you implanted are brilliant!” she told him with another wave of that pale hand.

“So *brilliant* that you realize that they are there?” He decided not to lie about it.

Another wave. “You do not understand. Your work is completely logical. So perfect.” Her expression hardened. “But the Kaly do *not* have friends. Yet *you* are mine. I feel it. Down to my bones.”

He gave her a smile that was more of a grimace and shook a finger at her. “You’re right. I overdid it. But you were trying to kill us and Daemon sprung it on me that I was the one to handle things.”

“The fact that you could accomplish this at all shows that you are a worthy ally. Potentially, even a *friend*,” she said the last word as if it had a strange taste. Maybe it did. She was right. The Kaly did not have friends.

“It was a better choice than killing all of you.” He met her gaze and let the truth seep into his voice, “That *was* an option, you know.”

Lisette regarded him for long, long moments. Finally, she inclined her head. “Yes, I see it was. But why not kill us?”

“Because Daemon is the king of all Vampires. Not just the Eyros Vampires. All of us. You have been misled,” Arcius told her gravely.

“By the Order?” Her delicate eyebrows lifted.

“By everyone,” Sophia answered.

That seemed to displease her. Whether it was the fact that all had lied to them or that it was Sophia telling her this was unclear. But she said, “Tell me more. As we are allies, I can only assist you fully if I am fully informed.”

Balthazar and Arcius’ gazes met. He wished that Daemon was here. Should they tell her of Kaly being alive? It was better they did. He needed to read her mind as she discovered the Immortal of her Bloodline still existed. It would tell him much. He gave a nod to Arcius. He found that people automatically believed a Confessor, even if they were as jaded as jaded could be.

“Kaly is alive,” Arcius said.

Balthazar listened closely to her mind. At first, her mind was blank. It wasn’t a conscious blankness, but a shocked one. Then, to his surprise, anger filled Lisette with a touch of disdain. Not at them. But at *Kaly*.

“Is that to shock me?” she asked with a dismissive wave this time.

“It did,” Balthazar said as he leaned forward and started pouring the blood-laced wine into delicate crystal balloons.

Lisette picked up one of the wine glasses that was bigger than her hand and took a delicate sip. She nodded in approval. “Not as good as ours, but very acceptable.” Her gaze met his. “I heard you enjoyed our wine. I am having a case sent here.”

Balthazar couldn't help but touch his temple, where he felt the memory of the hangover the corpse powder infused alcohol had given him. “You are definitely the masters of that liquor. Thank you for the gift.”

She nodded and took another sip. “Why tell me about Kaly? You have no fear of the Immortals. You follow the greatest of them.”

“Kaly is a different matter. They are not happy that Daemon has returned,” Balthazar explained.

“No, I would imagine not. Daemon threatens the whole order of things.” Lisette drained her glass and stuck it out for more. Balthazar filled it again. “Well, you don't need to worry that we will have any loyalty to Kaly.”

“Why not?” Arcius asked, frowning.

She gave him one of those small smiles that Balthazar was beginning to understand a little of. “Because we aren't *sentimental*.”

“No, you aren't. And you don't want to be subjugated again,” Balthazar read from her mind.

“Indeed, we do not. King Daemon is not interested in us as the Immortal Kaly would be. He has other interests. Even now, Daemon plays in the water while we are here. Not interested in having us bow and scrape. Instead, he has us speak together. Making our own plans. That is good,” she said.

Christian leaned forward and asked, “I'm still unclear why you aren't angry about Balthazar changing your memories, making you like us.”

She laughed, but not unkindly. “A very good question. But you must understand that the very fact that Balthazar can do this means that he is a good ally to have. He does not want to subjugate us either. Not to say he could not be a fierce enemy if we were to go against him. But I sense...” She turned her ancient eyes on him again. “I sense he truly wants an alliance and I am happy to give it.”

“You would never have sought it on your own,” Sophia said, her voice neutral, but there must have been a dig in there that Balthazar couldn’t hear. A history perhaps.

Balthazar was annoyed at first as he saw anger flash across Lisette’s face. But then she laughed again.

“You are right, Sophia. I have gotten to the top on my own and had always thought to remain there on my own. But things have changed,” Lisette said.

Sophia nodded soberly. “They have.”

Balthazar noted then that Christian was looking anxiously into one of the dark corners. He looked and saw no one, of course. But Lisette turned and looked as well. She stiffened and then turned back to them.

“You can see him, can’t you, little bird?” Lisette asked Christian.

His fledgling’s eyes darted to her and then back to the corner. “Yes. As can you, evidently.”

“Of course, I am a Kaly Vampire. But *you* are not so... so how can you... oh!” Her silver eyes widened hugely. “It cannot be! But it *is*. Perhaps more than your mind control gift has led us to be friends, Balthazar.”

“Oh, how so?” Balthazar was stiff as a statue. David was in the goddamned room and he could not do anything about it. He couldn’t even see the bastard.

“Your fledgling is a Speaker to the Dead, is he not?” Lisette asked, and as soon as she said these words, the Kaly Vampires that had accompanied her, but remained still as stone, reacted by straightening. All their eyes went to Christian who shrank from their appraisal.

But then Christian straightened. He leaned towards her. “I am. Do you know something about my kind?”

She smiled. “Yes, I do. You are rarer than diamonds.”

“I do not see why the Kaly would care about a Speaker. You are able to speak to the dead any time you like,” Balthazar admitted.

But she shook her head. “We can speak to those souls that are newly dead. If we are there for their deaths, we can steal their souls for our own power. We can resurrect only the *bodies* of the longer dead. But a *Speaker* can summon any soul they want.”

Christian looked alarmed and then intrigued by this. “Any soul?”

“Even ones that have passed beyond the Veil,” she told him.

Christian laced the fingers of his nearest hand with Balthazar’s. “I’m only interested in stopping this spirit from *haunting* me.”

She nodded. But instead of saying anything more, she stood up and fished out the largest diamond he had ever seen outside of a museum or a royal’s horde. She walked over to the shadowy corner and extended her hand with the diamond laying in her palm. She whispered words that he *should* have been able to hear, but somehow couldn’t. The diamond began to glow all of the sudden and the shadows in the corner were reduced. Christian’s body grew less rigid all of the sudden. Lisette returned and held out the diamond to his fledgling.

“For you,” she said.

Christian though did not extend a hand to take it. “What is it?”

She smiled, looking beautiful and doll-like, and terrifying at the same time. “Your enemy.” She reached out and grasped Christian’s hand, transferring the diamond into it. “In the palm of your hand.”

PREDATORS OF THE DEEP



Julian looked over his shoulder to see if Daemon was following him into the night black water of the ocean. He saw the Vampire King wade into the sea to his waist before he dove into an oncoming wave and disappeared beneath the surface.

The bright moonlight reflecting on top of the water made it hard to track Daemon's powerful naked form as he streaked towards Julian like a torpedo. It was only when Julian caught sight of those hands reaching for his ankles that he realized his Master was playing shark. Julian twisted around and dove into the water himself just as he felt the brush of Daemon's fingertips along his skin. He kicked and rapidly swam into deeper water.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Daemon coming after him just by fluttering his feet. The Vampire King's arms were tucked tightly against his sides making him more streamlined. His black hair waved back from his beautiful face. His red eyes glowed like fire in the darkness of the water. He looked wholly beautiful and unearthly.

Julian's heart lurched with a mixture of desire and a touch of *fear*. There was something implacable about Daemon in this environment. Maybe because his Master had not yet chased him before.

A smile curled Daemon's lips, showing a snippet of sharp white teeth. Daemon's fangs were out and a full body shiver went through Julian. He wanted Daemon to feed from him again. The thought of those hot fangs sinking into his hotter

flesh in this cold water was beyond arousing and his cock jerked between his thighs. But though he really wanted Daemon to catch him, he had to play a little hard to catch so he increased his speed while the Vampire King cruised after him.

The bottom dropped out beneath them closer to shore than Julian anticipated. It went from ten feet to twenty then twenty-five then over thirty. Julian felt a slight chill, not from the cold of the water, but the thought of being so far out in the ocean at night, without clothes, without any idea of where he was going.

But he and Daemon were not alone in the deep. Unlike before when he had scuba dived, Julian could *feel* all the life around him. He looked to his left just as a school of fish appeared. There were warm sparks of life in the ocean's cold blackness. His eyes were drawn to the seaweed that waved down below. It gave him the impression of flying through the sky over a forest rather than swimming through water over kelp.

His keen hearing heard the thump of a heart and he snapped his head to the side. He thought he saw the shadow of something large swimming through that kelp. He narrowed his eyes, squinting them, and realized that it was a dark purple eel that was almost invisible in the gloom. He found himself studying its long body as it glided through the kelp.

And in this moment of inattention, hands curled around his waist. Julian jerked in surprise and then let out a watery laugh. Daemon had caught him easily. He pulled Julian's body against his bigger one. His hands possessively ran around to Julian's back and ran up and down his spine before dropping to cup his ass cheeks. Julian groaned as his cock throbbed. He eagerly opened his thighs for Daemon to slide one of his powerful legs between. Julian eagerly pressed down against that leg.

You are terrible prey, Daemon chastised him. *Easily distracted by shiny objects.*

I wanted to be caught.

Daemon's red eyes hooded as he squeezed Julian's ass appreciatively. *Did you? Did you want to be devoured?*

Julian wound his arms around Daemon's neck. His fingers trailing over that silky skin. *I was sort of hoping to do the devouring. At least part of it.*

Daemon tilted his head to the side, offering his throat to be fed from. Julian let out a hungry moan and opened his mouth to bite down. He tasted the saltwater on his tongue then and realized, with momentary shock, that he was breathing water. Or maybe he wasn't breathing, but just taking in and expelling the water, without any need for air.

Am I dead? It was the first time he had truly asked himself that and he was frozen in surprise.

You are very much alive. More alive than you have ever been. Daemon cradled the back of Julian's head as he said this.

Julian's eyes closed, comforted beyond measure, as he opened his mouth again, but this time bit down. Daemon's salty-sweet blood mixed with the saltwater and he pulled some of that blood inside of him. He quickly sealed his lips around Daemon's skin so that he wouldn't be drawing in water with every suction of that nourishing blood.

Daemon's lips were on his opposite shoulder as Julian nursed. The blood heated his entire body. His cock stirred and hardened, curving upwards against Daemon's belly. Julian rubbed against him eagerly. Trills of heat and arousal ran from the tip of his cock to the core of his body and then spread outwards. He took in more mouthfuls of Daemon's blood, swallowing it down eagerly. His fingers dug into his Master's firm flesh, but he held on tight as if Daemon would get away from him.

Daemon kissed all along his shoulder and neck as Julian fed. There was a sort of desperate desire in those kisses. The faint sting of Daemon's fangs had Julian moaning and urging the Vampire King to bite him back. But Daemon resisted his entreaties though he did drag the tips of those fangs along his skin. Julian shivered.

Daemon's hands opened his ass cheeks and clever fingers sank between them. Julian clenched them together, trapping those digits between them. He heard Daemon's chuckle in his mind. Those fangs pressed against his skin as one of Daemon's fingers circled his opening. Julian bit down harder in anticipation of that finger breaching him. Daemon growled low and that finger was pushing against Julian's opening.

Their bodies spun as Julian kicked unconsciously as the tip of Daemon's finger went inside. Julian wrapped his legs around Daemon's to keep himself from moving them in the water. It was strange and wonderful being weightless in this almost soothing darkness.

Julian's eyes shut as he curled tight against Daemon, taking another mouthful of hot, life-giving blood. The Vampire King's finger wiggled inside of him even without lubricant. Julian consciously forced himself to relax so that Daemon could sink that finger inside of him all the way to the knuckle. Julian's cock was bobbing between them, hot and heavy with blood. He rubbed frantically against those washboard abs. His balls were drawing tight to his body already as Daemon worked that finger in and out of him.

Feed, fledgling. Just feed and let me pleasure you, Daemon murmured, giving Julian a mental caress.

Julian shivered in delight at the touches both mental and physical. Daemon wasn't using that finger to stretch him but just to find his prostate and rub it. His hands slid down Daemon's powerful arms when Daemon solidly pressed on that spot inside of him that had his limbs feeling liquid and his cock wildly jerking between them. He bit harder and drank more which had Daemon letting out a hiss of pleasure through his mouth and bubbles brushed against Julian's skin.

The Vampire King massaged his prostate fully and Julian's fangs released from Daemon's flesh as he arched back with electric waves of pleasure. Julian could feel the beat of his heart within his cock. One bare brush of the tip of it against Daemon's stomach and Julian was cumming. His body continued to arch and jerk, electricity skating across his skin as

Daemon continued to rub his prostate and lightly mouth his throat.

As the last burst of cum left him, Julian hung there, weightless and limp, the water the only thing supporting him. He felt Daemon's finger leave his body as the Vampire King leaned in and kissed the hollow of his throat tenderly.

You are so beautiful like this. My lovely merman, Daemon murmured as he continued to kiss and touch Julian's form as if he was a treasure.

Are there mermen?

Maybe. Daemon grinned at him.

It was then that Julian scrambled up again. *I'm so selfish! I've left you hanging! I-*

He'd reached for Daemon's impressive cock, but Daemon gently caught his wrist and shook his head.

This was for you. Besides, though you do not feel the water's chill right now, you will. And there are other things I want you to see before we return to Ravenscroft's Manor.

Julian reluctantly nodded. He wanted to give his Master pleasure as well. Daemon swooped in and kissed him on the mouth. A press of lips and slip of tongue before drawing back.

I am fine, my one. Look around you. What do you see? What do you feel?

Julian blinked, but then allowed his senses to spread outwards again. *There's so much life. I can feel the city over there.* He pointed back in the direction they had come. The city seemed to glow with golden and red light. There were simply so many beating hearts there that it overwhelmed him. But the ocean did not have less, only that life was more spread out. *And I can feel... the life and death struggle out there. Big fish eating small fish. Bigger fish eating big fish... I can feel the cycle here stronger than the city.*

Yes. Daemon nodded. *There is less distraction down here. It will help you to focus on one thing and block everything else*

you do not need to know out. Though if you are too narrow, you will miss danger coming your way.

Julian's senses had him turning towards several schools of fish, their iridescent scales flashing in the moonlight that made it down beneath the waves. Not only were there eels, but there were other predators, too. Fish with powerful hinged jaws swam by them, wiggling powerful tails, ever looking for something to eat. He caught sight of a curl of a tentacle visible for just a moment below him and then it and a bright yellow fish were gone.

He turned to Daemon in amazement. The Vampire King was watching his face. There was nothing in the ocean that could hurt them like the land could. Except the sunlight.

We could always dive deeper than the sunlight could reach and be safe there, Daemon told him. I hear voices in the deep. Perhaps more and different beings to know.

They hung suspended in this strange silvery black place, a part of it and yet utterly separate. Julian's hands slid around Daemon's neck again, sheltering in his strength. The smile on his face was so broad that it almost hurt.

I thought I had seen things before I met you, Daemon, but now I realize that my experiences have not even scratched the surface of what's out there! And that's only here on Earth, but what about the Ever Dark? I can't wait to go back there and see everything there is in those vast forests and cities!

Daemon smiled, leaning in and pressing their foreheads together. *I will show you everything. It will all seem new to me as it is new to you. Sharing it with someone is so very different.*

Did you and the other Immortals do things together? Julian wondered. *You seem so free and easy with Balthazar. There doesn't seem to be a formality of you being king and him being... Well, he's a lord I guess. A loyal retainer?*

Eyros was always my friend first. I could be honest with him. I often went to him for his advice. His ability to read minds was greater than mine in some ways, because of his

understanding of people, Daemon explained. Eyros was fascinated with humanity so he immersed himself in all there was to know about them. He even pretended to be one of them for millennia at a time. He watched civilizations rise and fall, not from afar, but as part of them. I could never fully hide myself. Not even with the Mirryr ability. All felt in the end that I was not like them.

You are not like anyone else that's for sure. That's not a bad thing. But I imagine it's been sort of lonely being so set apart, Julian realized.

It is the burden of being who and what I am. But then he was smiling again hugely. But it is a light burden, especially now that I have you. I will never be alone again.

No, you won't. You're stuck with me. Julian grinned back and felt something in his heart lighten. I realized something about myself recently. I'm doing that alot.

You are young. You will learn many things.

Don't look so smug! Julian laughed. But then sobering, he said, It's just really been brought home to my attention how cut off I've been and haven't even known it. After I lost my parents, I didn't want to care about anyone else enough to miss them if they went, too.

I wish I could give them back to you, Julian. It makes me angry that I was sleeping when they were taken from you. I remember their minds. Daemon's expression grew distant as he remembered them and Julian caught glimpses of his parents through those memories.

He saw them climbing over the many broad marble steps of Nightvallen. He saw his mother standing in front of one of the many friezes, copying it into a journal, tapping her lower lip with her pencil as she pondered what it meant. There was an expression on her face telling Julian she was utterly engrossed. Her whole being was involved in trying to figure out what Nightvallen was, who had occupied it and what they were like.

Then he saw his father using his climbing equipment to get to one of the many stone balconies. He saw his father's muscles strain as he lifted himself over the top of the stone balustrade. But he was stymied by the balcony doors being closed there, too, just like they had been in the lower level. But these had frosted glass panels that he peered through. Julian knew his father was considering whether he would risk damaging the glass. But though his father was stymied, there was no look of frustration on his handsome, weathered face. Instead, he looked electrified. He *would* find a way in. He *would* understand everything about the inhabitants. Julian could feel that coming off of his father in waves.

They were so happy in Nightvallen, weren't they? Julian's mind voice was soft.

I remember noting their intelligence and joy as they discovered new things. Even though I was only barely aware of them, their minds were bright and their souls were adventurous, Daemon said. *Come, let us look around this world before the chill becomes too much for you.*

The two of them swam down into the kelp. Daemon would move some of the fronds so that Julian could see the teeming life all around them. Seaweed caressed their bare sides. Fish came up and stared at Julian's face. He wondered what they thought he and Daemon were. Humans? Other fish? They were not afraid. Curiosity drew them nearer and nearer.

Daemon linked their nearest hands together and urged Julian to swim simply by fluttering his feet. Soon they were cruising through the water like sleek fish themselves. Daemon took them out even further from shore. Julian could feel the water deepening below them. Soon not even his keen vampiric vision could catch any signs of the bottom.

Where are you taking me? Julian asked.

To see something that you've never seen before in real life. To see another predator. Don't you sense her? Daemon explained.

He slowed them both down and had them tread water. He pointed ahead of them and slightly to the right.

Julian realized what Daemon wanted him to see when that familiar yet frightening shape appeared at the edge of his vision. It was a large shark about eight feet long with a white tip on its topmost fin.

A Great White! Julian lurched backwards, but Daemon pressed a hand on the base of his spine to keep him still.

Watch, Daemon instructed. *We are not in danger.*

Julian's heart was thumping hard and his throat felt tight. As he looked on, the graceful yet deadly form of the shark moved through the water almost restlessly. He knew that they never stopped moving or they would die.

And then, coming out of the deep was a school of fish. There were larger than the ones that he had seen near the shore. Their sides were pure silver, reminding him of silver dollars. He watched in amazement as with a powerful thrust of her tail, the shark was upon the school.

The school of fish started to move in a column, almost like a fish tornado as the shark opened its jaws wide and swallowed several of them whole. The shark dove into the funnel of fish and took her fill over and over again until the school looked depleted. The stragglers streaked away from the sated predator.

At that moment the shark suddenly seemed aware of them and started to swim lazily towards them. Her black eyes looked soulless even though Julian knew that was not fair. Sharks were made as they were made. There was no morality here in what they did. They fed, they bred and they were masters of the ocean for the most part.

Julian drew nearer to Daemon's body, his back pressed tight against the Vampire King's front as the shark approached.

It's coming this way, Julian said with more than a trace of unease.

Yes, it is curious about us, but we are in no danger, Julian, Daemon assured him.

Julian would have been holding his breath if he had been breathing as the shark closed the distance between her snout

and his bare chest. Then, practically at the last moment, she veered to the right and glided past them within touching distance. In fact, Daemon reached out and ran his hand along the shark's side. Julian did so as well.

The flesh was both rough and rubbery. He could feel the sheer life in this huge predator. He realized that he could hear the shark's heart and the whoosh of blood through her veins. If he closed his eyes he could actually taste the blood of the fish she had killed in the water. Faint traces of that kill flowed into his nose and mouth. Hunger suddenly throbbed within him again.

He opened his eyes and said, *Balthazar said that we couldn't feed from other beings, just humans. Is that true? Or can you do something different?*

If I were limited to humans I would have died long ago. My existence predates our arrival on this planet, Daemon told him.

Now Julian's heart beat for a totally different reason. Daemon was revealing something about himself, which was so rare. *So I could feed from a different species and be okay?*

But Daemon was shaking his head sadly. *Other than myself and humans, you likely would not be able to gain sustenance from other creatures. Though I am basing this only on what I know of other fledglings, not my own, clearly. But it is not something that we should test anytime soon.*

I don't want to drink from anyone else other than you anyways. Like I told you on the beach, feeding and intimacy are wound together for me.

The Vampire King's eyes hooded at that moment. *We should go in now. I wish to be in bed with you.*

Julian grinned.

They swam back in companionable silence. But then Daemon stilled for a moment and a sense of surprise flowed through him.

What? What is it? Julian asked him, unable to feel anything strange at first.

But then he sensed a vampiric presence on the beach. Just ten feet from where they would exit from the waves.

There's a Vampire on the beach. I don't recognize them, Julian admitted.

The three of us have not met though we do know him. Or rather, know of him, Daemon replied. His voice was neutral.

Who is it?

Daemon's red eyes met him. *Caemorn Losus.*

SOUL IN STONE



The diamond sparkled in Christian's hand. It was so beautiful. It felt warm and slick against his fingers. And it held a *soul*. David's soul.

How is that even possible? A soul in a stone? Impossible. Yet it's true.

It was almost too much to contemplate. Christian had always turned to facts, to science, to provable things. He and Julian had looked all over the world for the unexplainable. Julian had done it to find proof that supernatural beings were real. Christian had done it in order to show that everything had a natural explanation.

But then Vampires turned out to be real and now I'm a Speaker to the Dead and David is in my hand.

The diamond flashed at him. He looked closer and thought he saw something moving within it. He jerked back and swallowed. David's soul was in there. Something he had scoffed at before. No souls. No Heaven. No Hell. No going on after the death of the body. Christian had honestly thought that there was nothing. And how ironic was that considering the gift he had?

"Is there a Hell?" Christian asked Lisette.

And where had that come from? But it was a logical question to ask of someone who could control souls and stick them in gems for seeming amusement. Balthazar stiffened beside him and Christian felt more than saw Balthazar turn his head to look at him.

My fledgling? Balthazar's mind caressed him with the question.

I just... I wondered...

Lisette did not act surprised that he would ask her such a question. Christian licked his lips as he glanced down at the glowing diamond in his hand. David's soul was in there. David's *soul*.

"You wonder why he lingers instead of moving on through the Veil?" she guessed at the meaning of her question.

He gave a brief nod. Was David afraid of the judgment that awaited him? If there was judgment. He studied Lisette's face and the Kalys beside her. What did they know? How much did they see? Were they so distant from even Vampires because of what they'd discovered?

"He did something terrible? Something so terrible he might fear Hell?" Lisette asked.

Christian rubbed his hands together, the diamond between them. "Some would say so. But would he?"

"He did and he's still running from it," Balthazar said without question.

Balthazar reached over and took Christian's hands in his. The diamond flashed between their fingers. He wondered if David objected to being so close to the man that Christian was opening his heart to. He wondered if David felt Balthazar touching him, or more like, touching Christian.

"Well, you could ask him. Or give him the punishment that Balthazar believes he deserves." Lisette smiled and she didn't look like a child at all.

"He should fear damnation for what he's done," Balthazar muttered. He was glaring at the diamond.

"Or perhaps Christian fears it *for* him. Strange that your fledgling is such a forgiving sort." Lisette settled back down on the sofa opposite them again, drinking the honey-spiced wine.

“I’m sure it’s nothing you could understand, Lisette. I doubt there has ever been someone who wronged you that you did not wish to destroy,” Sophia said.

“True.” She leaned forward and stared at Christian. “Do you want to destroy David? I can teach you how to do that too.

Balthazar’s hands tightened over his and then he was meeting Christian’s gaze. “You are *not* responsible for David, Christian. But we should discuss what to do about him later. When our *guests* have gone.”

Not in front of her. You don’t want her to know your secrets. Especially about David, Balthazar warned. *This is the hook.*

The hook for what?

For whatever she hopes to get out of you.

“But knowing is all a part of how I can help him, Balthazar. I need to understand. Just like I needed to understand about Kaly.” Lisette crossed her legs at the ankles. She was more like a doll than ever before.

Balthazar’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her. “No, you do *not*. You need to know nothing about this.”

“As you wish.” She shrugged. “Then I am limited in what I can do and Christian will... well...”

“What? Will what?” Christian asked.

“Speakers don’t last. Maybe it’s what they see. But mostly it’s because they aren’t trained properly,” she said with a shrug. “Balthazar, if you don’t want Christian to last then—”

“You don’t know that’s true! It’s all a rumor. Innuendo. Myths. *Lies*,” Balthazar growled. “We all thought Speakers were—were just stories! Like Daemon was a story! But it’s real and that means that none of us are experts!”

Christian stared at Balthazar. He knew why Balthazar did not want him to reveal any of himself to her. It made complete sense. They should be circumspect. He certainly wasn’t one to share himself with strangers, let alone dangerous strangers. Yet

he *wanted* to tell her. He wanted to understand how she could have no fear of the dead.

There's a price, Christian. Remember that. She is not here out of compassion. She wants something, Balthazar's voice reached him. *And I doubt she has anything to give you in return that's worth the price.*

“But to answer your earlier question, Christian, about Heaven and Hell,” Lisette turned to him, ignoring Balthazar. “The Kaly do not know the answer to that question. We take control of the souls of the newly dead *before* they've had a chance to cross through the Veil. So the Kaly do not know what is beyond there.” Her hands curled around the wine glass. “But you, as a Speaker to the Dead, can call any spirit to you from beyond the Veil. You would be able to get the answer to your question.”

Christian blinked. He could call spirits back from beyond the Veil. What might they know? Not just about life here, on Earth, but beyond?

“Now you are starting to understand why being a Speaker to the Dead makes you so rare and valuable,” Lisette nodded as she took in the understanding that must have crossed over Christian's face.

“I can call anyone?” he qualified.

“Well, some are said to be beyond reach. It is said that some are reborn, but we know nothing for certain as the last Speaker died in the War. So Balthazar wasn't wrong when he said that we know little, but we know some things,” she answered. “For example, there are said to be books in Nightvallen written by previous Speakers about what they discovered from their conversations with souls. But, those books are more for non-Speakers. You, after all, will be able to learn whatever you want on your own.”

Christian felt something in her mind then—a hunger really—for knowledge. But it wasn't general knowledge like what he had asked her, but *specific*. He thought she might want to speak to someone who went beyond.

“How can you teach me how to control my gift if the last Speaker died so long ago and all their knowledge is missing?” Christian pointed out.

“The knowledge of how to train a Speaker is kept with the Kaly Bloodline while the information on what the Speakers have seen was kept in the Eyros Bloodline,” she answered simply.

It sounded like the truth, but her mind was almost *slippery*. He wasn't good enough to truly read her thoughts.

Christian cut a glance at Balthazar. His Master was staring at her without blinking. He likely knew what she was thinking. He couldn't tell from Balthazar's expression what it was or what he felt about it.

Lisette leaned forward, elbows on knees, as she asked, “Wouldn't you like to know what lies beyond? Is there a god or gods? Is there meaning and purpose to life? Do souls continue? Are they actually reborn? You could know these things, Christian. You could truly know everything.”

Christian stared down into the diamond. Those questions she asked were amazing to contemplate. He would want to know those answers. But, weirdly, he wanted to have answers from David first.

Sophia stirred from her place on the arm of the soft and Christian looked over at her. Her silver eyes were full of sadness and a warning. A warning that she made audible when she said, “Lisette, you should tell him about the costs of knowledge. Or would you just encourage him to take the risks so that you could reap the rewards?” Sophia's silver eyes had turned to the other child Vampire and there was utter coldness in them. “But you might find that the answers you seek will leave you even emptier than you are now.”

Lisette's shoulders jerked. It was clearly an unconscious movement, one that she wished she had not made. Christian could feel that from her now. Yet her mind was smooth like a mirror. It reflected back at Christian and only for brief seconds could he sense anything of what she was feeling. And it was

that *hunger* again. It was so strong that she could not altogether reel it back into herself.

“What do you want to know about what’s beyond the Veil, Lisette?” he asked.

And, for a moment, Christian could see Lisette commanding one of the souls she controlled to go through a billowing blue-white Veil that glowed with stolen starlight and return with another spirit. But the moment that the soul touched the Veil she lost control of it. She screamed her frustration, sent bones and spell books flying off of tables as she raged, beat her hands bloody as she pounded her fists against the top of stone coffins. But then the smooth mirror-like image was back.

“You want to reach someone on the other side of the Veil,” Christian stated and did not ask.

“I do. Would you help me reach them?” Lisette asked.

“No, absolutely not!” Balthazar suddenly was standing between him and Lisette. “Christian did not *ask* you to trap David’s spirit! He owes you *nothing!*”

“I am only asking for a favor. I am not asking for payment. As you said, I did not make any conditions when I trapped David, did I?” Her faux innocence was marred by her smile.

“You call it a *favor*, because you know about Christian’s good heart,” Arcius rumbled. “You know by helping him, he will want to help you.”

“Is that such a bad thing? Is that not what friends do for one another? David was causing him distress. I stopped that distress. He sees I have a need. He wants to help satisfy that need.” Lisette looked between the two Vampires. “He does not have to.” She focused on him. “I am not asking anything of you, Christian.”

“Of course you are!” Balthazar snapped.

“If Christian wishes to help me in return out of his own free will then that is his business, isn’t it? Or are you more like Roan and believe you have the right to determine what your fledglings do and do not do?” Lisette asked.

“How dare you!” Arcius growled. He pushed off of the mantlepiece and practically quivered with indignation. “To compare Balthazar to Roan is—is—the utmost insult!”

Balthazar’s eyes were narrowed. “It seems that you really don’t know what *friendship* is, Lisette, if you would say these things to me.”

Christian saw that this potential alliance with the Kaly was going in the wrong direction. He glanced over at Sophia. She was looking at him with those wide, say doll-like eyes. He had to save things.

“Stop, both of you. Stop,” he found himself saying. “It’s my decision if I help her or not, Balthazar.”

“You are just a fledgling! You don’t know what you are saying!” Balthazar was in full Master-protective mode now.

“Of course, I know. And you do, too. You want to protect me. You would do anything to protect me,” Christian said.

Balthazar’s mouth opened and shut. “Christian...”

“I know. Sit. Sit down.”

Christian grasped Balthazar’s hand and drew him back down on the couch. Balthazar was shaking with suppressed rage... and fear. Christian stroked his arms.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Everything is okay,” Christian soothed.

“She has no right to ask anything of you! I won’t allow you to be hurt again! Do you understand, Christian?” Balthazar held his hands and the diamond felt like it was cutting into Christian’s palm. He opened their hands so that they could both see the diamond. “He won’t be allowed to hurt you any longer. I don’t want you going down that path.”

But this isn’t a choice. This is my path, Balthazar. I’m a Speaker to the Dead, right?

Their gazes met and their minds locked. Christian rested their foreheads together. Balthazar’s breathing evened out and he cupped Christian’s face before kissing him gently.

I don't like her! I don't trust her! This is a bad plan you have! Balthazar said.

I don't know what my plan exactly is. I want to hear what she has to say. But I think she's the right choice, Christian said.

How do you know that? We need to talk to Daemon and—

I don't know how, but I feel it's right. We'll ask Daemon, too, but this seems... meant.

You're getting to be like Sophia, Balthazar stated, raising an eyebrow.

Christian grinned. *Yeah, well, Sophia's been giving me the eye all night. She knows Lisette is here to stay. For a while anyways.*

I won't have this, Christian!

But both of them turned towards Sophia who was smiling at them.

“You're so sweet together,” Sophia said. “Aren't they, Lisette?”

“Oh, they are... something. I'd forgotten. New fledgling. New Master. Sensitive. I apologize,” Lisette said with a tight expression.

Christian met her gaze. “You push. You don't know any other way to be.”

Lisette went still for a moment, as if realizing she had somehow shown him far more of herself than she'd planned. Sophia made a soft humming under her breath. He thought it might be amusement. He wasn't sure.

Arcius had settled back against the mantelpiece, but he was still watchful. Balthazar though he was calmer, was still rigid. His eyes were locked on Christian's. Christian stroked his arms again. Balthazar shook his head but then sighed. He knew that Christian would do what he would do.

“Do you want to learn how to use your gift or not?” Lisette asked.

“Can you really teach me?” Christian challenged.

But Balthazar was shaking his head. “You’ve got David in the damn diamond, Christian. Let this be the end of it. You don’t have to worry about the dead anymore. He is the only one that’s bothering you and now he’s taken care of. You need to do nothing else.”

“You know that it doesn’t work that way, Balthazar,” Sophia said softly. “Our powers are as much a curse as a blessing. They never go away. They never leave us. They are us.”

“For you, perhaps, but I can keep Christian safe from this!” Balthazar’s hold tightened on him.

Arcius’ forehead furrowed. “We do not keep Vampires *safe* by not having them learn to control their gifts, Balthazar.”

“Read her mind, Arcius!” Balthazar pointed at Lisette’s chest. “I don’t need to see the future to know this is a really bad idea. I’m not letting Christian step into that darkness and—”

“She can teach me,” Christian said as he covered one of Balthazar’s hands with his own and squeezed it. “I need to learn how to control this.”

“You don’t need to learn to control it. I can control it for you. You can be safe now that David is—”

“I don’t think so,” Christian said. “I love that you want to protect me, but I can’t let you do that. It’s like my parents who wanted to stop me from ever dating anyone again for fear they would be like David. In their attempts to protect me, things didn’t go so well. I don’t want to be afraid of this gift. I want to understand it. I want to master it.” He looked out of the diamond again. “The fact that there was a way to trap him is fascinating, but I can’t keep him in here forever.”

“Oh, you can,” Lisette told him with a grin. “He’s stuck there forever if you want it. Or you can take him out and do whatever you like and put them back in again. I’ll show you how. He’s the one that’s chosen to remain here after all. What happens to him is, well, exactly what he deserves, isn’t it, Christian?”

“You sense something about him?” Christian asked her, curious.

“I don’t have to sense anything. All I had to do was look at his face. That wretched look of desire. Guilt and shame and lust. It was all there. Souls like this, that remain in order to hold onto another person that doesn’t want them back tells me that there’s something not quite right about them. You see true love let’s go, even common love let’s go. But obsession and insanity, they remain. And he’s got all of that inside of him. I’m curious about your story if you’d ever tell me—”

“Again, you’ve shown no reason you need to know the story to teach him how to let David in and out of the diamond!” Balthazar growled and his eyes glowed like fire. “There will be no psychological games, Lisette. Not with my fledgling. Not with my people.”

“No, psychological games are *your* forte, Balthazar.” She smiled, but there was no amusement there.

Christian leaned forward, the diamond between his fingers. “So... how do I let him out and how do I put him back?”

“A drop of your blood on the diamond will release him. Binding him back in the stone will require that plus your intention he be bound,” she said.

“Sounds easy enough.”

“It can be,” she said. “But you best try it while I am here for the first time.”

Christian let his fangs extend. He brought his thumb up to the right one, intent on puncturing his skin, and putting a drop of blood onto the shiny surface of the diamond. Balthazar grasped his wrist.

“Don’t, Christian. He’s in there. He doesn’t need to be let out,” Balthazar said.

“If it was Roan in here, what would you do?” Christian asked.

“If I had Roan in there...” Balthazar let out a sharp laugh. “I would kill him again. But you cannot kill a spirit. I do not

know how to torture spirits.”

“Oh, I do. And I can show Christian,” Lisette said brightly.

Christian shot her a look. “I do not want to torture him. I just want to talk to him. To understand and make him understand.”

“As you wish,” she said. “But I wouldn’t expect much the first few times you release him. Spirits who linger are devious.”

“Nothing compared to Eyros Bloodline Vampires,” Balthazar said tightly. “Perhaps you should let me deal with him in terms of the questioning, Christian.”

“Maybe I will.” Christian smiled at him. He didn’t know if he’d actually be able to speak to David.

“Though not now. Just let him out and stuff him back in again,” Balthazar suggested, again, not wanting to show anyone his secrets.

“Right. Of course. Will Balthazar be able to see David now?” Christian asked Lisette.

“Yes, now that he’s been trapped,” she answered.

He suddenly felt Sophia’s hand on his arm. “Sometimes the future is in the past.”

He nodded jerkily. He felt conspicuous. Everyone was watching him. The Kaly reminded him of snow birds on a line. Though he had no reason to believe that this was against Arcius’ religion, he definitely felt like this was sacreligious.

David is right here. Trapped like he trapped me.

He met Balthazar’s eyes. He let out a breath. He bit into his thumb, feeling the prick, and then he tasted the copper on his tongue. When he drew his thumb back there was a bright red bead of crimson. He turned his thumb to the side so that the pooling blood dripped off and landed on the center of the diamond. He expected it to sit there or something. But it didn’t. His blood disappeared in a flash of light and suddenly David was there.

Two feet away.

He was staring with such intentness at Christian that Christian actually pulled back against the couch. His breathing filled his ears so he couldn't hear anything else. He recognized the outfit David was wearing. The faded jeans and untucked button-down shirt with the mixture of red checks. The sleeves were rolled up to David's elbows showing off his muscular forearms with the dusting of dark hair. Christian's gaze followed them down to his hands. For an academic, David's hands had a well-used look to them. He had often wood-worked in his garage. His fingers showed the nicks, cuts and roughness. It had been erotic to have those hands on his untouched skin.

You thought his hands made him more adult. Different from yours, Balthazar's voice was suddenly in his head, holding him lightly, keeping him safe.

I did. They were an adult's hands.

Balthazar's hand was suddenly covering both of his. His hands were so different from David's. Not less mature. Just different. Better. Christian laced their fingers together as he stared up at David. He wanted David to see.

I've moved on past you. You need to move on past me...

But David stepped closer and Christian's breath began to frost the air.

"Interesting," Lisette said. "He's actually trying to take energy from you in order to more physically appear."

"The cold? That's what the cold is all about?" Balthazar asked.

"Yes, you best teach him not to do that, Christian. You're new as a Vampire and need your strength," Lisette said.

"How does he make it stop?" Balthazar frowned at the spirit who lingered just a foot away from them now.

Christian was glad that Balthazar had asked. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He couldn't look away from David's pleading eyes. Was that what he had looked like that

last day as he drove frantically around looking for Christian and couldn't find him?

"Whoa! Christian! Let's not—I guess we are standing," Balthazar said as he stood beside Christian.

"I can look you in the eyes now. I'm as tall as you, David," Christian found himself saying.

Cold caressed his skin as David tried to touch him.

"You should not let him do that either," Lisette protested, but softly as if she already knew that he wasn't listening to her and would do what he wanted.

"How does he stop David exactly?" Balthazar demanded.

"Why are you still here, David?" Christian demanded.

David opened his mouth but there were no words that he could hear.

"Why can't you leave me *alone*?" Christian's free hand that was clutching Balthazar's clenched into a fist.

David tried to touch him again. Christian lurched backwards.

"Why do you still think you have *any* right to be near me?" His voice rose. It never rose. But he was shouting.

David tried to cup his face..

And this time, instead of pulling away, Christian actually pushed David away with one hand flat against his chest. There was an electric zing the moment he touched David's body and the ghost flew backwards. There was a shocked hiss from the Kalys. Lisette's eyes were wide and her mouth went from an "O" to a grin.

"You can touch them. Actually touch them," she breathed. "Amazing. I cannot wait to see what other things you can do!"

"Demonstration is over," Balthazar growled. "Lisette, how does he put the genie back in the bottle?"

Christian was staring down at his hands. He could still *feel* David on his palms. He looked up. David was starting to back

away. He was going to hide so he wouldn't be imprisoned. There was still that pleading look on David's face.

But no explanation. No apologies. Just this insane need to be near me no matter what. Oh, David, I have tried not to hate you, but you are giving me very little choice...

"Lisette, he's getting away," Balthazar's voice was tight.

David was retreating to the corner of the room. He had started to disappear from view.

"Yes, yes, now, Christian, you need to take more blood and intend—"

"Too late. He's going," Christian said as he tried to cut his thumb again. The old wound had healed completely.

"Not too late. There are rules to this." Lisette waved one hand over her head in a circle and David was pulled back into full color and substantiation. "He will be kept here as long as it takes for you to learn to bind him, Christian." Her silvery eyes met him. "But I'm betting you're going to be a quick learner."

PAWN



Daemon and Julian emerged from the sea. Daemon kept Julian behind him, even as his brave and furious fledgling tried to get around him. Caemorn was the Vampire who had killed his parents. It was rather like keeping a wolf pup at bay.

“Is that him? Dammit, Daemon, let me see him! I’ve got to see him!” Julian cried.

“Fledgling.” He put no heat in that word. No censure either. It was a simple word of command. *You will accept my determination in this*, was what it meant.

Julian made a sound of angry distress, but allowed Daemon to stand between him and the tall, platinum haired, Kaly Vampire in the red and black armor with a spear slung over his back and the two werewolves that flanked him. Daemon gave a grunt as he recognized the spear as Borage. It was a weapon that he had forged himself. Bold to bring it to face him, but a scan of Caemorn’s mind told him that the Preceptor did not know who had created it or its true nature. Besides, it was sheathed and Caemorn made no move towards it.

The werewolves were of interest. They whined low in their throats and dipped their heads, afraid of him. They were not used to being afraid, but they sensed he was the greater predator. Daemon was impressed by Caemorn’s control over them.

Saying nothing, Daemon waded out of the water. Julian kept near to his back. He felt his fledgling straining to keep close. Julian's emotions were in a tumult, which was completely understandable.

Is he the one who killed my parents? Julian sent telepathically. Can you ask him, Daemon? Can you make him tell you? And are those... werewolves?! Holy crap! They ARE werewolves!

Julian's questions came with rapid-fire rapidity. Daemon was certain that his fledgling had not yet considered what the answers would mean to him, except about the werewolves. This was the same young man who had not wanted to punish the rapists in the alleyway. He had even grieved seeing Daemon killing those who deserved more than death to raise Heath. But he believed he wanted death for the person who had stolen his parents' lives.

They are indeed werewolves. Curious. As to the rest, let us see what he has to say first, Daemon told Julian telepathically.

You're worried about me. You don't want me to do or say something rash, because you'll think I'll regret it? Julian realized.

Am I wrong to worry?

No, I suppose not. Julian's eyes were more red than purple and his fangs were down. *But that means you think he is the killer. That he...* A full body shudder went through his fledgling.

I know nothing for certain yet. The fact that he has sought me out tells me he is not what I thought he was. Daemon's eyes narrowed as he took in the still figure who had not yet spoken. He was waiting for Daemon perhaps to make the first move, or he was too stunned to speak. A little bit of both from a scan of his mind. *He's heard tales of me. He's impressed... not hateful.*

Julian's warm breath puffed against his shoulder. *You're impressive. That's a fact. He's just standing there. Staring.*

He's waiting.

For you to kill him? Julian's eyes widened.

Perhaps. Or to talk most likely,

Then I'm getting our clothes. He's in armor and I don't really want to talk to him naked. Not to mention that I don't want him looking at you either, Julian said.

You and the others are so shy! You feel weak when just in your fleshly covering. I believe it shows my strength. Clothes hide many sins. Daemon lifted his chin.

Julian snorted and some of the tension in him bled out. *I suppose they do, but I know if I was in Caemorn's position, I would be staring at your cock the whole entire time.*

Good. He should. I am well-endowed.

Now Julian let out an audible laugh that had Caemorn flushing—that pale skin was hard to control—and the werewolves twitched. But, though Julian was keenly aware of the three of them, he started towards their clothing that was left on the beach, completely assured in Daemon's ability to protect them, not to mention his own fledgling strength.

Clothe yourself first, Daemon suggested.

Another laugh. *You just want to show off how big your cock is.*

Indeed.

You're incorrigible.

The instinct to keep Julian physically attached to his side raised its head, but that would show weakness in front of Caemorn. This clever Kaly could not harm Daemon, but he would rather not have violence anywhere near his fledgling. So he let Julian go to get their things that were in a little pile down the beach.

Caemorn observed all of this silently. His black and crimson cloak stirred in the wind. His head cocked to the side as Julian took Daemon up on his suggestion to dress first. He realized from a stray thought that Caemorn fully expected Julian to be *serving* Daemon first and in all things. Caemorn tensed as he expected Julian to be disciplined *harshly* for not

doing so. Daemon's lips flattened. Yet another Master who thought their fledgling a slave and not a treasure.

Hopping up and down to pull up his jeans on wet skin, Julian paused as he took in this information from Daemon's mind. He looked up at Daemon's face. The Vampire King thought now that it would have been better if he'd not passed this along. If Caemorn had killed Julian's parents, there would be a reckoning. He did not want his fledgling to be conflicted in any way about it.

After tugging on his shirt, Julian came over with Daemon's clothes, but he only shrugged the long wolf coat around his shoulders. Julian carefully folded the rest of his things and placed the pile on top of his boots. Now, attired, the two of them regarded their three visitors. Julian took in the elegant armor, the pale hair and silver eyes. He was impressive, handsome, with a cold, aristocratic look to him.

Ask him why he is here, Julian, please, Daemon requested.

"King Daemon wishes to know why you are here," Julian said. His voice was strong. He stared hard at Caemorn.

"Can he not..." Caemorn's cultured voice was lifted in confusion.

"Speak? Oh, he can, but why should he do that for you?" Julian's voice was firm. His emotions were roiling again.

What if he killed my parents? Julian was thinking. Did he care? Did he think that they were people or just humans that had gotten into the way? Why didn't he kill me? Why—

Daemon caressed Julian's cheek with his fingers, stopping the whirl of emotion.

"I am here because I heard that a Vampire calling himself Daemon had emerged on Earth," Caemorn began archly.

"*Calling himself?*" Julian's lips curled into an angry smile. "If I had a dollar for every Vampire seeking to harm Daemon who has said that... you all *know* he's the king!" Julian thrust a finger at Daemon's chest. "I haven't been a Vampire for long, but it is so damned obvious that he's not like us. Look at him and tell me you honestly think he's some con artist!"

Caemorn regarded Julian with an arched eyebrow. “You speak so freely in front of your superior?”

That was like a red flag to a bull. Julian *really* didn’t respect unearned authority. Daemon couldn’t help the flash of pride at his fledgling’s fierceness and nobility.

“You are not my superior,” Julian’s voice was low and his eyes were narrowed. They were blood red like Daemon’s at that moment. “Even *if* you hadn’t killed my parents, I am the fledgling of the *king*. I am second to none but him.”

Caemorn rocked back slightly, but it was the first reason and not the second that had a spike of guilt—*definitely guilt, oh no*—flashed through Caemorn’s mind. He should have known that Julian’s feelings would bubble up in speaking when his temper was up. Julian saw the reaction, too. He read the look, if not the Preceptor’s mind.

“You did it,” Julian’s voice was soft, almost disbelieving. “You killed my parents.”

“I did not kill you,” Caemorn murmured.

And then Daemon saw the future. It was so crisp and real that it felt like it had happened as he was seeing it. Julian would lunge for Caemorn’s throat, screaming about his parents. His eyes would burn crimson. Caemorn would reach for Borage, but Daemon would snatch it away from him and impale both werewolves.

Julian would have the Preceptor on the ground. Caemorn would rake his fingernails down Julian’s face. Those beautiful features would be marred terribly. Blood would rain down his cheeks and drip off of his chin. But the pain and blindness wouldn’t stop Julian from continuing to attack.

But it would give Caemorn the time to release several colored glass balls from his cloak. The spirits of the dead would slam into Julian’s chest and his fledgling would go gray at their touch. Daemon would whisper and the spirits would cease their attack, but because of Caemorn’s strength and Daemon’s current weakness was such that Daemon would not be able to command them further.

Julian would jump on Caemorn again. The Preceptor would let out a howl that called every dying spirit to him from the city. They would look like an aurora borealis over the city for a moment before all of that power came into Caemorn and he would use that to drain all of Julian's strength from him.

Until Daemon put himself between himself and this powerful Vampire. He would feel the pull on his strength as well. But he would end that by simply ripping Caemorn's throat open with his teeth and drinking it down. He would thrust his hand into Caemorn's chest and rip out his heart. He would turn and hold out the still beating heart to Julian.

And Julian would take it.

The moment his fledgling took that heart and bit into it, a terrible confluence of events would start. He would rule again, but it would be through sword and fire and ruin. His fledgling would agonize over what eating a heart had made of him. He would never truly be open to the joys of being a Vampire again. His soul would be stained.

Daemon would not have that.

So the moment that Julian was about to lunge he stepped between him and Caemorn, placing the palm of one hand on Julian's chest. His fledgling let out a cry of frustration.

"No! Let me—he killed them! He killed them!" The raw agony in Julian's voice would never leave him at that moment.

"I know," Daemon spoke aloud for the first time. "Draw Borage or call your werewolves or summon a spirit, and your Second Life is *over*, Caemorn."

He said the last without so much as turning his head. The Preceptor stopped moving.

"He killed them, Daemon!" Julian wailed.

And Daemon enfolded Julian in his arms, holding that shaking lithe body that was wracked with sobs of rage and grief so deep that it came from his soul. "I know, my beloved, my one, but this is not the way."

“Why? You would have killed him for far cheaper reasons!” Julian raged. His fingers dug into Daemon’s back as if he were holding himself back by holding onto the Vampire King.

“Yes, I would have no qualms, but you would. You... would.” Daemon’s voice dropped off.

Julian stiffened then, and before Daemon could stop him, Julian caught hold of the vision Daemon had experienced. He gasped as he got to the end and pulled back, ashen-faced, and horror-stricken. Daemon caressed his face, cupping it tenderly.

“It’s not the way,” Daemon said.

“N-no, but...” Bright tears filled Julian’s eyes. The red faded to purple and those tears fell down his cheeks. “He killed them. My parents. They were... they didn’t deserve that! They were—”

“I had no choice,” Caemorn interrupted.

“If you value your throat, be silent,” Daemon murmured.

“But you must understand why I am here! I have been misled and—”

Daemon whirled around and with a crook of his fingers, Caemorn was lifted from the sand. The Vampire King levitated the stunned Kaly Vampire to within a foot of him and then tilted Caemorn’s head so that only six inches separated their faces. Caemorn opened his mouth to shout for his werewolves to assist him but Daemon sent a compulsion to stop his lips from moving. Caemorn’s silver eyes bulged. He stiffened even more as Daemon reached over his shoulder. He expected an attack, but Daemon simply unsheathed the spear Borage.

“I forged this. The tip burns blue-white as you near your enemies,” Daemon explained to Julian as he showed him the spear.

He spun it easily. The metal flowed easily over his palm and then the back of his hand. It was perfectly balanced. He

switched it from hand to hand. He spun it so fast that it became a blur. Julian's tears dried and awe filled his face.

"You forged weapons?" Julian boggled.

"*Magical* weapons," Daemon clarified.

"You were the one who forged Borage? What about the other weapons in Solace's spire?" These words were allowed to escape as they did not seek to cause violence. Caemorn was such a fan of these weapons that he seemed to have forgotten he was being levitated.

"Yes, I forged many weapons in my time," Daemon answered curly.

"Why do they kill Vampires then? Just simply picking some of the weapons up causes them to give a Vampire their Second Death!" Caemorn cried.

Daemon caught the spinning spear and stuck the tip of it half an inch from one of those silver eyes. "Because they are *not* for use by those Vampires."

"Borage did not kill me," Caemorn sounded half-proud.

"You think that makes you *worthy* somehow?" Daemon sneered.

And, for a moment, Daemon saw within Caemorn the young Vampire, eagerly reading tales about him, imagining what it would be like to have the Vampire King as his Master and not the slender man-boy. The beautiful vampiric child that was his Master, but who was crueler and colder than anyone that even the Kaly Vampire had known.

Caemorn's Master had never nurtured him unless it was to make him do what his Master wanted. There was no tenderness. There was no care. There was certainly no treasuring. But whenever things got bad for Caemorn, he thought of *Daemon*. The Vampire King who had urged the Vampires to victory against their immortal oppressors. He thought of Daemon when he was alone, when he had an impossible task before him, when there was no one he could trust.

Do not put your dreams on me, Daemon thought.

What? Julian turned to look at him, overhearing the words.

Nothing, my one. You needn't worry. Just something unrelated to you.

If you're sure. Julian's brow was furrowed.

I am certain, my one.

"I have done what few have done before me," Caemorn told him with that arrogant tilt of his head, even when he knew who Daemon really was and wanted his favor. But he couldn't help himself.

Self-defense mechanism.

The tip of Borage drifted closer.

Caemorn drew in a sharp breath. He nearly went cross-eyed watching the tip of Borage. But then he let out that breath. "The tip isn't glowing."

"You think you are safe because of that?" Daemon's voice was silky smooth, but it was a clever observation.

"I'm *not* your prey. You don't intend to kill me. Otherwise it would be burning blue-white," Caemorn pointed out. More cleverness.

I should not be surprised. He did climb the ranks of Vampire politics. He did it very young. He is used to being in difficult situations.

"Don't be so sure!" Julian growled, hands fisted at his sides.

"I have watched you for nearly two decades of your life, Julian, you are not one to wish someone dead. Even someone deserving of it," Caemorn responded. He was even more relaxed. "And, strangely, I think King Daemon will honor your feelings in this."

"For now," Daemon's voice was silky smooth.

"You—you—why did you do it?" Julian stepped towards Caemorn. It was not a threatening movement, but one of utter

agony. “Why did you kill them and take them from me?”

“My Master ordered me to. There was no choice. The only thing I was able to do was to spare your life,” Caemorn answered, his silver eyes flickering for a moment between them. “If you truly have all the gifts, King Daemon, you can determine whether I am telling the truth or not.”

“Is he? He can’t be!” Julian shook his head.

Daemon looked into Caemorn’s mind. He and his Master, the beautiful boy, spoke in a graveyard shrouded in mist. And he heard the words they had spoken to one another...

“The Harrows have got to be eliminated, Caemorn,” the beautiful boy Vampire said. “Now. Tonight. No more waiting. We cannot take the chance they will reveal this to others.”

“What about...” Caemorn swallowed. He normally had little compunction about killing, but killing *children* always bothered him and Julian Harrow was twelve. “The boy? Their child?”

“Getting squeamish, Caemorn?” Caemorn’s Master sounded amused.

“I doubt he knows anything about this. No parent would tell their child—”

“Again with the *child!*” Caemorn’s Master tipped his head back towards the moon. He was smiling even as he seemed put out. “If Julian Harrow truly is unaware of his parents’ work then he can be spared. Otherwise *you* have to get rid of him *personally*.”

Daemon allowed Caemorn to fall to the ground. But the Kaly Vampire was as graceful as all their kind, and even though he was startled to be let go, he landed on his feet rather like a cat. He straightened and smoothed his hands down his front. His gaze locked on Borage, not because he thought it could protect him, but instead, just a longing for it. A longing for a thing of beauty that he had come to see as a connection to the very Immortals that he had been taught to despise and yet did not. Not all anyways. But Daemon kept it.

“He—he—bargained for my life?” Julian turned a disbelieving gaze onto Daemon. “What? Why?”

“He didn’t want to kill a child,” Daemon muttered.

The Preceptor brushed off his shoulders invisible dust. “You make it sound like a weakness. Forgive me for not wanting to kill someone completely unable to protect themselves!”

“The Harrows were the same as their son in that. All humans are prey. They are hardly worthy adversaries,” Daemon pointed out. “You did not want to kill them either. But you were only willing to challenge your Master on the child.”

A flash of temper crossed Caemorn’s face. “You say it like it’s so easy! But you don’t know—or maybe you do.” His eyes narrowed. “Maybe you *do*.”

“Who is your Master? Why did he want my parents killed?” Julian asked. He was still so fragile, but not killing Caemorn was actually *helping* him.

Even without the vision of the future, Daemon saw that his instinct was right. Julian was not a killer. Not in cold blood. To defend himself or someone else was one thing, but not to eat an enemy’s heart. If Caemorn—*when* Caemorn—had to be eliminated, Daemon would do it.

“Because of who he is and the fact that King Daemon is here.” Caemorn reached up to his neck as if he felt the memory of someone strangling him.

“Who is your Master?” Daemon asked, even as he already *knew*.

Caemorn met both their gazes. “The Immortal Kaly, and he wants to set me up to take the blame for his machinations against you. But I am *done* being his pawn.”

ALLY OR ENEMY?



Sweat coated Christian's upper lip as he tried to draw David into the diamond. But his former lover stayed in the corner no matter how much he willed David near him. David's eyes were filled with grief but also he was determined not to be imprisoned in the diamond. Lisette wasn't letting him leave altogether though. She sipped blood, ankles crossed, expression serene as she effortlessly kept David's soul in the room for Christian to practice on. Christian wiped a hand across his forehead.

"It isn't working or I'm not doing it right. I can feel him, but I can't move him," Christian said and his whole body slumped forward, shaking from the effort.

"*Yet.* It isn't working *yet.* I can feel you reaching towards him. You are powerful, Christian, but it is like a person trying to play a piano with a hammer," Lisette remarked. Her flawless forehead furrowed "Being a Speaker makes you different from a pure Kaly. There must be something in how you impose your will upon the dead that is vastly different than ours." She frowned slightly. "Keep trying. Perhaps I will see it as you continue your practice."

"He's had enough for now," Balthazar said and grasped Christian's wrist, tugging him to sit down.

Christian gratefully collapsed on the sofa beside him. One of Balthazar's strong arms encircled his shoulder. Christian closed his eyes and breathed. His eyes flew open right away as he recalled that David was in the room. His gaze immediately

went to the spirit. David continued to look upon him with utter longing. Christian gritted his teeth.

Did he want to know what David was truly thinking? Or maybe he could guess. He wanted to tell Christian he was sorry. But it wouldn't be *really* sorry. Because David would then turn it around so it was about him, like he always had. Christian somehow would end up being the bad guy for all that had happened, even though he had been a teenager and David the adult.

“You’re being quite good for a new Master, Balthazar. I fully expected you to jump up and insist this all stop ages ago,” Lisette chuckled.

Christian knew that Baltazar actually *had* been wanting to jump up and insist that he rest quite a while ago. But one look between them and his Master had backed off.

“Yes, well, I do believe that the quicker Christian learns to control this gift the safer he will be. And his safety and well-being are at the top of my list of priorities,” Balthazar answered with a thin smile.

Christian did not let his Master’s true feelings out of the bag. He knew enough about Lisette to guess that allowing her to see a weakness was a bad idea.

“Teaching a Speaker is a unique opportunity, and I assure you that I will do my absolute best to keep him safe and sound. But there are unknowns. I am working only on the rumors I have heard passed down through the centuries,” Lisette pointed out.

“So long as you remember, Lisette,” Sophia said coolly, “to treat Christian as if you would a treasure.”

“And not like my own fledgling?” Lisette challenged with a faint smile on her lips.

Sophia shook her blonde head, her curls bouncing lightly. “Come now, Lisette! We both know if a Kaly fledgling suffers injuries during the practice of their gift it is considered the fledgling’s failure and theirs alone. If they cannot survive the gift, they are not worthy of survival.”

Lisette inclined her head. “You may think it cruel and unfeeling, but I assure you that our ways ensure that the world stays safe for all.”

“What do you mean?” Christian asked.

He had dragged his gaze away from David. The urge to go over to the spirit and try to harm it was strong in his blood. It wasn't logical. It was sheer emotion. But he knew that physical violence would beget nothing.

Lisette set her cup on the coffee table and tapped her lower lip as she thought about it. “Being a Kaly is not like being any other type of Vampire, except perhaps being a Seeyr, but the danger they pose is only really to themselves.”

Christian glanced over at Sophia. She was usually so bright and cheerful that he often forgot about the burden she carried, which was to see the future. She was watching Lisette with large, silver eyes and sadness seemed to weigh her down at that moment as if Lisette's words held weight.

“Every Vampire believes their Bloodline is the best and most powerful,” Balthazar remarked dryly as he massaged the back of Christian's neck.

The tension bled out of him as those fingers worked and Christian gratefully leaned his head forward. Having David here was more stressful than he would have imagined.

Lisette's eyes narrowed. “Ah, yes, but that is simple arrogance, not truth. I am speaking of *facts*.”

“Really? How is being able to raise a bunch of bones more powerful than being able to change a person's mind?” Balthazar challenged. “You are *here*, a place you never thought you would be, because of that.”

She inclined her head again. “Yes, but other than yourself, Balthazar, how many Eyros could have done that? None, I'd wager.”

“A single Eyros could control every country on Earth,” Balthazar said. “Nuclear weapons could be in the palm of our hands. We could rule the world easily. Isn't *that* the ultimate power?”

“No,” she answered with a little smile on her lips.

“Then what is?” Christian asked.

“To replace faith with certainty,” she answered. “Every human being on this planet is ruled by their understanding of death. Whether they think it is the end or whether they believe it is the beginning. Whether there is God or gods. Whether there is a Heaven, a Hell, a Purgatory—”

“Catholics got rid of Purgatory a while back,” Arcius mused.

“Yes, well, it is irrelevant, because whatever they believe, it is all based upon *faith*,” she said. “But what happens when *faith* becomes *facts*? The Kaly *know* that there is something beyond this life. We touch it daily. Imagine if a simple, stupid, low-level Kaly were to expose that souls exist, that the body can be resurrected, that there is a place beyond? Imagine it.”

And Christian did. It would cause *chaos* if the reality of it spread. Religions would be upended. People might simply commit suicide or, even homicide, to get themselves and others through the Veil. Life would become much *cheaper*.

“So while an Eyros could *control* the world, the Kaly can send it into a chaos that not even you, Balthazar, could stop,” she answered.

Balthazar shrugged. “Well, it probably explains why none of us has been allowed to go so far.”

“The Eyros do influence people all over, do they not?” Lisette challenged.

His Master nodded. “Yes, but we are limited in how much we are allowed to do by the Council. And, as you so rightly pointed out, my gift’s strength is unique.”

“So, basically, if a Kaly fledgling uses their gift in such a way that causes harm to them or others you don’t help them?” Christian clarified.

“Not quite so harsh, but those who are unable to control their gift after reasonable instruction are not seen as viable Kaly,” she explained.

Viable? Christian thought. *I am glad she's not in charge of whether I'm seen as viable or not.*

Balthazar sensed his unease and drew him closer. "One would think the Master has failed to teach well enough, instead of the fledgling has failed to learn."

Lisette laughed delicately behind her hand. "We are not romantic about our fledglings, dear Balthazar. Only a few are expected to survive. We accept that from the get go."

Arcius shifted uncomfortably by the fireplace. "It is a hard thing you must do then."

She lifted her hands. "You should all be *thanking* us for our willingness to sacrifice for the common good."

"From a certain point of view, I can see that," Christian said softly. "But that means there can never be any true trust between Kaly, not even Master and fledgling."

"Quite correct," she answered without hesitation. "Perhaps we should continue your lesson? This spirit of yours is tugging at his leash. Not that he'll ever be able to escape me, but still."

Christian reluctantly rose to his feet. There was no real reason to stand rather than to sit, other than it helped prepare him mentally to fight with David. He turned towards the spirit once more and he felt that familiar stab of pain, regret and shame when he saw David. His emotions swirled inside him with the same intensity of the first time. David gazed back at him with anguish.

"You shouldn't have lingered around me, David," Christian muttered. "You should have stayed away. But you didn't. And now look where we are."

He extended a hand towards the spirit, even though he had no plan to *touch* David again as he had before. He felt rather ridiculous, as if he were trying to use the force or something. And maybe he was. He tried to imagine tugging David towards him and the diamond that he held in his right hand.

David did not move.

He frowned, furrowing his brow, tightening his muscles, imagining his will being imposed upon the insubstantial vapor that David was.

Nothing.

Christian shook his head. “This isn’t working. I feel like I’m not touching him at all.”

“You cannot *touch* him. He is a spirit. Do not think of him as a physical object. And you are not an Ashyr, so you cannot move him with your mind. You must command the spirit,” Lisette explained.

“But how?” Christian asked.

Balthazar was suddenly frowning. He put the pointer finger of his right hand to his temple, as he often did when communicating with Daemon telepathically. “King Daemon just informed me that we are going to have another visitor.”

“Who?” Arcius pushed off of the mantle, instantly alert.

Sophia jumped down from the sofa arm and chirruped. “Oh, good, we’re going to be able to get Seeyr!”

“What?” Balthazar stared at her, a little unnerved.

But before she could say more, the corner of the room nearest the fireplace blurred, and between one blink and the next, Daemon, Christian, another Vampire with the classic Kaly pale blonde hair, and what can only be described as two werewolves appeared.

Balthazar’s mouth dropped open. Arcius’ eyes went huge. Sophia clasped her hands together in seeming delight. Lisette and her silent minions all turned to stare. Their feelings were not readily apparent, but Christian knew they likely felt *something* as their expressions became as blank as dolls.

And then there was chaos.

Without saying a word, Balthazar was suddenly across the room and had the unknown Vampire pinned to the wall by the throat. He was snarling. Silver eyes blazing. Fangs out. The unknown Vampire let out a gasp and spittle flecked his lips,

but he did not try to fight, which was strange as it was clear that Balthazar *loathed* him.

The werewolves, evidently this Vampire's protectors, turned to lunge at Balthazar's back, but Arcius spun towards them. He kicked one in the head that he then pinned that head to the ground with one of his huge boots. He grabbed the other around the neck and put it in a sleeper hold. They both howled and thrashed, but Arcius handled them with surprising ease. It was the first time that Christian had seen Arcius be anything but utterly gentle.

The doorway to the room was suddenly filled with House Ravenscroft Vampires. William lightly jumped over the back of the sofa and went to help Arcius with the werewolves. He slammed a hand into the werewolf's stomach and it curled over onto itself. For a "child" he was strong as hell.

Isabel was suddenly grabbing Christian and pulling him away from the fight, using her own body to shield him from danger. He tried to fight her, but she easily caught his wrists and he felt a wave of calm flow from her to him. She was trying to get him to do as she asked. No, not as *she* asked, as Balthazar did. Christian realized that this had all been agreed beforehand, who was to do what in case of an emergency. Balthazar was sending out commands through his mind and everyone was moving accordingly. But Christian was not leaving his Master and best friend in this room with all this danger.

Then suddenly the word, *STOP*, flowed out from Daemon. His lips did not move. His expression was peaceful. But there was no getting away from the command. Christian didn't want to. His arms fell loosely to his sides as he stopped fighting Isabel and she stopped trying to remove him from the room.

And it wasn't just him, everyone stopped, even the werewolves ceased howling. They all looked like statues.

"So *this* is King Daemon," Lisette whispered. Her silver eyes flickered over him.

He was dressed—or not dressed really—in his long wolf coat and nothing else. Both his and Julian's hair was wet. So

they truly had been swimming in the ocean despite the fall's chill. Even just wearing the wolf coat with wet hair, Daemon looked as kingly as he always did. There was something about him that just *compelled*. Christian would normally have distrusted this. But he found he could not. But that only slightly bothered him because he knew Daemon, and knew he could be trusted.

“My king, you *do* know who this is?” Balthazar let out a strangled laugh.

“Caemorn Losus. Yeah, we know,” Julian answered for him. His best friend looked grim and not unhappy that Balthazar was throttling the Order's Preceptor. Christian wanted to go to him, but there was no way to do so. Too many people—and the werewolves—were in his way. He could only send his good thoughts to Julian. His best friend went on, “It turns out that his master is Kaly, and he wants to join our team.”

The news fell like a bomb on the group. Everyone had been still before, but now they seem to go rigid with surprise.

“Caemorn is a lily-livered piece of garbage,” Balthazar said between clenched teeth. “You think a normal Kaly Vampire can't be trusted? Caemorn brings the idea of betrayal to a whole new level.”

“I hold no love for you either, Balthazar,” Caemorn said crisply. He was remarkably calm for a Vampire being strangled. He seemed completely unafraid. Christian had to acknowledge that he was brave, if nothing else. “One thing you definitely know about me is that I do what is in my best interests. And serving King Daemon is definitely that. I have been betrayed and set up. I want my revenge.”

It was Arcius who spoke next, “It is true that you always do what is best for you, Caemorn, but what happens when you think serving King Daemon is *not* best for your purposes? You cannot be trusted, because you are incapable of being *loyal* to anyone or anything.”

Caemorn let out a laugh. “Oh, you would think that way, Arcius. You, who still supports the Order, despite the fact that

no one came to your defense. Not even Fiona.”

“To my shame, I did not,” it was Fiona who answered. She was in the doorway. Her eyes were fixed on Caemorn.

“So *this* is where you went,” Caemorn murmured, and Christian could almost see the calculation in the Preceptor’s eyes.

“Yes, are you really surprised? Blood Slaves in Solace? The requirement that fledglings be sent to become Confessors against their will? And, the biggest issue of all, knowing that our texts in the Order were a *lie*.” Fiona’s silver eyes glowed.

“You always wanted certainty, Fiona. Black and white. Fact and fiction. But religion is *never* that. You just wanted to believe it could be,” Caemorn sneered.

Balthazar slammed the back of his head against the wall. Caemorn bared his teeth and his hands curled into fists, but he released them and stood still.

“I cannot believe you let her in, Balthazar. It was your chance to turn her out into the cold. Why didn’t you?” Caemorn asked.

“Because he gives people who deserve it second chances,” Arcius said.

“No, I don’t think so. I think that did it to please you, Arcius. That and he’s never been very bloodthirsty,” Caemorn mocked.

“You should be glad of that,” Christian found himself saying. “It’s the only thing keeping you alive now.”

The Preceptor’s eyes went to Christian. He took in Christian’s form, saw the diamond that was slightly clenched in one hand and then he saw David. David who was still there.

“A *Speaker*,” he whistled.

Balthazar must have tightened his hold on Caemorn’s throat because he let out a wheeze. “Do not address or even *look* at my fledgling, Caemorn.”

“B-but I-I can h-help him,” Caemorn offered.

“I am helping him, Caemorn. We do not need your assistance,” Lisette said primly.

“C-can’t g-get h-him to go i-into the stone?” Caemorn addressed Christian again.

Christian hesitated then shook his head.

Caemorn smiled. “S-she’s b-been u-using K-Kaly techniques. You are an Eyros. Be one.”

The last was said clearly as a bell, and it suddenly made sense to Christian. He found himself turning towards David, and without hesitation, he held out the diamond. Then he reached for the spirit’s *mind*. It was something he had shied away from. He felt it like a moth flapping its powdery wings in a lightly clasped hand.

“*Come*,” he said using Compulsion.

And David was yanked across the room and disappeared into the stone. Christian let out a bark of unexpected laughter. He stared into the diamond.

“I did it. It worked,” Christian said.

He looked up. Caemorn was smiling. Lisette frowned deeply. But not at him. She was clearly displeased with her own performance. Christian slipped the diamond in his pocket. He was in control again.

Balthazar shoved Caemorn against the wall again. The shelves nearby wobbled. “That’s not going to save you, Caemorn. You should have never come here!”

“I came by invitation of the king,” Caemorn said with a strained smile.

Daemon, who had remained utterly silent, other than the single command, put a hand on Balthazar’s shoulder. “Eyros.”

Balthazar let out a growl, but released Caemorn with that simple request. “My king, he better give us something worthwhile—”

“He will!” It was Sophia who spoke.

She came up to the two of them and took one of Balthazar's hands in hers and Daemon's in the other. "We can get to Seeyr now. With Wyvern, Eyros and now Caemorn's assistance, we can get to her. She's in the Spire! A place only the Preceptor can go."

Caemorn had been smoothing out his cloak and hair, but he went still at her words and his eyes slid over to Daemon.

"You have Seeyr imprisoned in the Spire?" Arcius' voice was strangely inflectionless.

Christian could almost see Caemorn decide not to lie. He continued to straighten his clothing and not meet all the curious and bewildered gazes turned towards him.

"Is it true? Is Seeyr imprisoned in the Spire?" Arcius' voice rose.

One of the werewolves let out a whine as the Confessor must have squeezed its throat a little tighter.

"Yes," Caemorn finally answered with coolness. "Every Preceptor has kept her there and made her use her powers of prediction to help them in one simple goal."

His eyes flickered over to Daemon and away. Daemon's red eyes were fixed upon him. Christian couldn't read the Vampire King's feelings or thoughts from that look, but he still wouldn't have wanted Daemon looking at him like *that*.

"What goal is that?" Balthazar asked.

"To stop King Daemon from returning," Caemorn answered simply. "Clearly, she's been lying to us all along."

I AM... EYROS



“We need a House meeting,” Balthazar said as he stared into Caemorn’s face.

It was amazing how he still did—and oddly didn’t hate—this man. He hated what he’d done to Julian’s parents. He hated what he’d gotten Heath and Selene—and perhaps Timothy—into and the grief he’d caused Elena. He *used* to hate Caemorn for kicking him out of Vampire society. And, if he were honest, that had been where the greatest hatred had sprung from. But not anymore.

He had his own House. He had made his own way. He had the friendship of the goddamned Vampire *king*. Though he was very annoyed at that king at the moment. And finally, he knew who he really was. But Caemorn, though he deserved to get the shit kicked out of him and probably far worse, no longer could be blamed for what had happened to him.

And in that moment, he trusted his gift in a way he had never fully done before, not even when Daemon had shown him what could be done with it against the Kalys. He stepped back from Caemorn even as he swept his mind outwards and used his gift.

He caught hold of the werewolves and Caemorn’s minds. They were now far more bound than they had been physically before. Arcius and William stepped back from the werewolves, who Balthazar allowed to get to their feet, but no farther. Caemorn’s eyes were fixed upon him, that calculating intelligence just radiated from him. Yet the Kaly Vampire couldn’t move a millimeter.

“Your powers have always been extraordinary,” Caemorn said. Balthazar felt Caemorn push against the control he had, but Caemorn could not move a muscle. And if he tried to use his gift, Balthazar would drop him like a rock. “I thought when he called you *Eyros* that he simply meant your Bloodline, but... perhaps not.”

Christian was suddenly by his side, wrapping an arm around him. His fledgling’s silver eyes were huge. He could feel Christian’s alarm that his true identity had been outed. He kissed his fledgling’s head. He then glared at Daemon.

Cat out of the bag much, my king? And don’t pretend you don’t know that idiom! Calling me Eyros and calling Fiona Wyvern? Though I notice no one cares or notices about her! Balthazar sent.

It was time, Eyros. I thought you understood that, Daemon answered with a faint amount of amusement.

I realize, but I need to tell my people first.

Telling the people in House Ravenscroft is only a start. Your people are ALL the Eyros, Daemon reminded him.. *Remember that.*

Balthazar’s heart twisted with desire to have that kind of power and acceptance, but also nervousness. He had failed before at leading them as the Immortal Eyros. It had gotten him killed. Plus, he would have to be even more responsible if he took up the helm of *all* the Eyros.

You say the sweetest things. I never know whether to be nauseous or excited, Balthazar drawled.

I wish my friend would be at my side and not pretending to be who he is not, Daemon replied mildly. *What we do next is a step that is large. You must be yourself when we do this together.*

As if bringing Caemorn here and his fuzzy pets isn’t a large step?

This is nothing compared to what we do next, Daemon said with another one of those mild smiles.

What is Daemon saying to you? Caemorn looks like he's watching a tennis match, Christian asked.

Caemorn was frowning and his eyes had been ping-ponging between him and Daemon. He knew they were communicating telepathically, but, obviously, he couldn't tell what they were saying.

Daemon wants to get into more trouble. Like usual, Christian, Balthazar said.

And he wants his favorite ally in crime at his side, I take it? Christian shook his head, not needing confirmation to know it was true. *He likes to drag you with him into dangerous situations while leaving Julian and I behind.*

Yes, and I agree with him on the latter part. Balthazar stroked his fledgling's back, which only got him a raised eyebrow in response.

"If Kaly still exists and Daemon clearly exists then... why not Eyros?" Lisette murmured, breaking the silence that had fallen. "*Not* Eyros reborn, but Eyros himself."

Fiona went to Arcius' side then. Her gaze flickered around the room. She had heard, obviously, what Daemon had called her, but she clearly didn't believe it. Like Caemorn, she likely thought he had been calling her by her Bloodline. Yet now both Caemorn and Lisette were talking about Immortals and she looked a little shell shocked.

Without Balthazar confirming anything she murmured, "Are any of the Immortals actually dead, or did the Order lie about all of that too? Well, religion has always been a lie in and of itself. To comfort. Not to lead people towards the truth."

It was Arcius, but *not* Caemorn who looked guilt-stricken. But Arcius had always been a believer. It hurt to see. Balthazar was keenly aware now that William and Isabel had heard this news. Not to mention the Kaly Vampires, though, ironically, they were the *least* likely to tell anyone. Knowledge was power after all. But William, his beloved little William, leaked like a sieve. And with the wide-eyed look William was

giving him now, he knew the information would be everywhere.

“Do not feel badly, Arcius! You only ever believed the good parts anyways. And there are a lot more good parts that you’ll find out,” Sophia assured him.

“You are very kind, Sophia,” Arcius said with a weak smile.

Balthazar scrubbed his face. “Everything has turned upside down for all of us, my friend. Don’t sweat this.”

“I will feel much better after we rescue Seeyr from the Spire,” Arcius growled as he glared at Caemorn. “To think one of the Immortals was imprisoned... How blind everyone has been. When they know the truth—”

“How many people do you think really believe in what the Order says?” Caemorn scoffed. “The Order brings... well, *order*. Religion is familiar to every Vampire. Everyone and everything in its place.”

“With *you* at the top?” Balthazar made a disgusted noise. “You never believed in any of it. You and all those—except Arcius—used the Order as a *hammer*. And all of us were nails! The Council does nothing without your say.”

“Can’t we use that?” Fiona’s arms crossed over her chest. “Can’t we use him? Make him contact the Council? He’ll tell them that he believes that Daemon is our king and that he means us no harm—”

“What would the Council consider harm, Fiona?” Lisette laughed softly. “Them losing power, of course! They would definitely see Daemon as the threat he truly is to them no matter what Caemorn says. They’ll just assume our great Preceptor has thrown them under the bus so that he can retain power under Daemon’s leadership—which I’m sure is what’s going on here—or that Eyros here has scrambled his brains. Either way, they will find some reason not to accept him.”

“They are of no consequence,” Daemon said quietly.

Balthazar immediately wondered if this was the bit of trouble that Daemon wanted to get into, but immediately set

that to the side. Going after the Council? Until they had arranged their forces that would be insane.

“What about Kaly?” Fiona asked. “Can we not, at least, alert them to who Artemis Alucius really is? Kaly is no one’s favorite Immortal.”

“Is that a personal opinion of yours, *Wyvern*?” Caemorn asked, his eyes narrowed.

She started slightly and Arcius put a hand on her shoulder.

“You know my name, Caemorn. Use it,” she snapped.

“I believe I am,” Caemorn murmured. “I just do not think that they will be more alarmed by the existence of Kaly than of Daemon or Eyros.” His silver eyed gaze slid to him.

“I think you’re just jealous that you *aren’t* an Immortal, Caemorn,” Lisette chuckled. “You just get to be the direct fledgling of one, which will take your credibility with anyone who fears them down to negative numbers. Not that you were ever anyone’s favorite either.”

“So going to the Council is totally out?” Fiona shook her head as if she couldn’t believe that some form of authority couldn’t help them.

“There were never any true believers on it,” Arcius said.

“So what use is Caemorn to us?” Fiona’s nostrils flared. “What does he bring to the table? He came here, seeking asylum, but with nothing to add to our fight?”

“Very good questions, but I am certain my fellow Kaly has an answer to them,” Lisette said. “Even little Sophia said he would be useful.”

“Yes, Fiona will get us into Solace while Caemorn will be able to unlock my Mistress’ cell. He will have other uses beyond this, but these are the most important at this time,” Sophia said.

“You have foreseen this? Because I have not been promised anything for my participation,” Caemorn said.

“You are lucky to still have your Second Life,” Balthazar reminded him.

Julian, who had remained silently and tucked by Daemon’s side, said, “You’ll do it because you have no other choice.”

Caemorn’s expression did not change, but Balthazar sensed the truth of those words in the Preceptor’s thoughts.

Julian continued, “That’s why you came to King Daemon, because even though you knew you had likely earned a Second Death from him, you absolutely knew that Kaly was going to eliminate you.”

Caemorn still appeared unruffled even as his mind was whirling. “That maybe so, but I need some assurances that if I fully cooperate that—”

“You will serve,” Daemon said softly and ran his finger down Julian’s cheek.

Caemorn blinked and almost looked affronted. “I need assurances—”

“I am your king,” Daemon said that infuriating line that seemed to throw all of them into a state where they had no idea what to say to it. It was so implacable.

“Yes, of course, you are, and I did not mean to suggest that I was—”

“There will be no assurances, Caemorn. There will be nothing but service from you. And, at the end, we will see,” Daemon said without looking at him. “This is your test and trial. You’ve survived so many. Perhaps you will survive this one.”

Caemorn’s skin tone went paler than normal. Balthazar expected him to argue more, to press his case, but he surprisingly just inclined his head. Balthazar had allowed him to do that much.

“I know you probably want to go get your Mistress right now, Sophia,” Balthazar said. “But I need to get things settled here before we have another Immortal in the House.”

“We will take Solace back,” Daemon said suddenly. He was stroking Julian’s hair, completely unperturbed about everything.

“We’re... we’re *what* now?” Balthazar blinked at the Vampire King. He must have misunderstood.

“We will take Solace,” Daemon repeated.

“When you say *take*, what do you mean by that exactly?” Balthazar asked.

“It will be under my protection and care,” Daemon answered simply.

Fiona let out a small sound. “I believe... Forgive me, King Daemon, but Solace is *filled* with Confessors. Most highly trained, and those that are not... Well, they are high in number. And there are Blood Slaves. Not that you... I mean I do not know what you think about—”

“Do I approve of Blood Slaves? Each of you started as a human being. I value you. Every human has the potential to be one of you,” Daemon explained. “So *no*, Wyvern, I do not approve of Blood Slaves. None will be harmed.”

But everyone was exchanging looks in the room. They did not believe he was strong enough to stop the Confessors from harming them, even if his people would not.

“You are very certain,” Lisette said, her eyebrows rising.

“You think that I am arrogant and being quite overconfident in my powers,” Daemon actually laughed as he said this. “I forget that none of you truly knows me yet, even those that are my friends of old cannot remember. I assure you that I am not being overconfident. I am served more than just by my powers and my friends.” Daemon turned towards Caemorn. “The Ever Dark knows I have returned, does it not?”

Caemorn blanched as if those words had meaning to them, but he said, “You are just one Vampire. And no matter the power of your friends here, you do not have enough strength to take all of Solace.”

A faint smile crossed Daemon's lips. Balthazar fully expected him to say something about being king again, but he petted Julian instead.

"Will you use Armageddon? Does such a power exist?" Caemorn pressed.

Daemon said nothing to him. Instead, he spoke to Balthazar, "I suppose you will want me to put on pants for this House meeting you wish to have."

"If you wouldn't mind," Balthazar answered dryly.

"You're definitely putting on pants," Julian scolded but gently. Balthazar hadn't noticed he had a pair of leather pants and boots under one arm.

Caemorn did sort of take up all of my attention.

Balthazar gestured for William and Isabel to come to him. Both eagerly did. He was glad to see that neither of them seemed to regard him any differently. Their minds were whirling, but they still believed him their protector. Him being Eyros just meant that he might be able to do a better job of that. He hoped that would be the case with the rest of his House.

"William, Isabel, I need you to make sure that Christian's parents are taken care of and not allowed near the main hall," he explained. "After you do that, come yourselves. I will summon everyone."

Both nodded.

"You're nervous," Isabel noted with a nervous laugh.

"I've never been a very religious person so I only had a passing understanding of the uneasiness people had with Immortals..." Balthazar licked his lips. "Now, I'm not sure how people will react."

"You know you could make us react however you like," William reminded him softly.

And he could. He really could. He could tune every single one of their brains so that they would think it the best thing ever. And that would likely be a wise move. He needed

cohesiveness. They were going to retake Solace after all! He couldn't have anyone with less than 100 percent approval of him in the group. It would be foolish.

But he found himself saying, "I know, but I won't do that. Otherwise I would be Roan."

William smiled back broadly at him. "You just proved that you aren't and never could be. It will be all right, Balthazar. We left Vampire society for you. We're behind you in this, too."

He gave them a brief nod and both of them took off. Christian touched his hand. Those intelligent silver eyes looked up into his.

"They know who you are, Balthazar. It doesn't matter what your name is," Christian said.

Balthazar cupped his face and gently kissed his forehead. "Thank you."

"You don't believe me," Christian said, drawing back with a frown.

"Time will tell," Balthazar said. "I guess I don't think that I would take it well, so I really don't know how I can expect anyone else to. But let's get this over with."

Balthazar sent out a wave of command throughout the House. Everyone, excluding Elena, would be present when he made his announcement. He turned towards Daemon who was now, thankfully, dressed. Daemon's naked body was distracting to most everyone. His red eyes were fixed on Balthazar's face. He was smiling again in that faintly irritating way.

"You look pleased with yourself now that you've completely upset the apple cart," Balthazar told him.

"It's the beginning. All of it. When Seejr told me that I would have to win back everything, I never truly appreciated how exciting it would be," Daemon confessed.

"*Exciting?*" Julian's eyebrows rose up as he shook his head.

Daemon kissed Julian's nearest temple. "You find excitement in discovery. I find it in conquest. But you will see what it is like to see an empire fall and be retaken."

Casting his voice low, though really with a bunch of Vampires it was pointless, "Are we really just going to waltz into Solace and retake the place? Should I be telling my people to prepare for war?"

Daemon's forehead furrowed. "Why would we need their assistance, Eyros?"

While Balthazar was staring at him, Fiona and Arcius joined them. She looked as disbelieving as Balthazar imagined that he did. Arcius still appeared disturbed by what he had learned about Seeyr. Past them Caemorn was still fixed in place by the wall. Sophia was talking to him and petting the werewolves on the heads as if they were the kitties that she was demanding be brought to the House. Lisette and her group still sat on the couches like little birds on a line, but Balthazar was certain that they listened to every word.

"I'm going to ignore that you just suggested a suicide mission," Balthazar said to Daemon.

"Well, I do assume that beyond Sophia, Wyvern and Caemorn, that a few of the Vampires would like to accompany us," Daemon said. "Arcius?"

"Yes, I am coming. Perhaps I can reach some of the Confessors, and we can avoid some bloodshed," Arcius said, coming back from whatever dark place his mind had taken him.

"There will only be as much blood shed as there must be, and no more. Far less than either of you envision," Daemon assured them, but how could his assurances ring anything but hollow?

"I would like to go to Solace as well," Lisette's voice rose up.

"Why? You don't care about those in Solace," Fiona said flatly.

“I wish to see our king in action. My witnessing will have value,” she answered simply.

“Still wondering if you’re on the right side?” Sophia shook her head. She had come over from speaking to Caemorn.

“Not in the least! I am truly on your side. I am just still... well, I need to see some things with my own eyes.” Lisette smiled thinly.

“There will be much to see and report upon,” Daemon said with gentle equanimity.

You are not peeved by her disbelief? Balthazar asked.

Daemon clasped his shoulder. *It will be all the better when she does believe.*

I am certain she will be a convert, Balthazar responded dryly.

It is time for you to tell people who you are now, Eyros, Daemon said.

Balthazar had already heard the soft footfalls coming from every direction in the manor. His stomach did a flip. Christian held tightly onto his right hand. He felt his fledgling telling him that there was nothing to fear. Balthazar linked his hands with Christian’s.

He said to Caemorn and the werewolves, “Remain here. You will be allowed to move about this room, but no farther.”

“We will remain here with him, Balthazar or... *Eyros,*” Lisette said with a tilt of her head. “And you needn’t worry that any feelings I might have for a fellow Kaly will affect me in the least. You are my *friend*. Caemorn is... well, you need not worry.”

Balthazar knew she was telling the truth. She was going to question him. But she wasn’t going to do anything that would harm him or his. He would learn everything she got out of Caemorn in any event. Taking a deep breath, he merely inclined his head and turned towards the door out into the hallway. He gestured for Daemon to precede him at the last moment. Not that Daemon stood on ceremony but perhaps he

ought to in front of the others. Daemon smiled at him and headed out into the hallway first with Julian in two.

Arcius actually smiled broadly at him, the first genuine smile in some time. “You have come around, haven’t you?”

“If we are going to go to our Second Deaths for our king, might as well let him go first out of the door,” Balthazar said.

“And it allows you to avoid telling everyone you’re Eyros for a few minutes,” Fiona muttered.

“Oh, and you’ll be telling them that you’re Wyvern, Fiona.” Balthazar smiled acidly at her.

She blinked. Clutching onto Christian’s hand, he strode out of the room and to the main hall. He heard in his ears as well as his head, the excited murmurings from his House. They had no idea what he was going to say or do. Since Daemon had joined them, the possibilities were endless. Christian rubbed his thumb along the back of Balthazar’s hand comfortingly.

“I should be telling you that everything is going to be okay,” Balthazar said to Christian.

Christian merely shook his head. “We’re here for each other. Two way street.” He held up the diamond that contained David’s soul. “We need each other, and others, too. Even those we wish we didn’t. But I do believe that things will work out for the best.”

At that moment, they entered the hall. It was filled to nearly overflowing. The fireplace was roaring and Balthazar made his way there. He reluctantly let go of Christian’s hand and stepped up onto the thick stone base that jutted out from where the fire burned. The wood popped and cracked behind him remarkably loudly. All eyes were on him. They were like silver dollars glowing in the light. He clasped his hands together. He got welcoming looks and smiles. His House had no idea what he was going to say.

“Everyone, thank you for joining me here tonight.” He gripped his hands so tightly together that his knuckles were

white. “As you know, we’ve had a lot of things happen recently.”

There was a scattering of laughter.

He continued, “I know that some of you... perhaps *many* of you have been believers in the Order. This was not something I shared with you. I... I did not want to believe,” Balthazar paused and cleared his throat that was suddenly tight with emotion. “After what Roan did to us, I didn’t want to believe in either immortal monsters or gods.”

He smiled wanly at Daemon who nodded and gave him courage to go on. The room was shocked that he would mention Roan, but it felt *right* that he should do so. Roan was like a boil they needed to lance. And he was finally going to do it.

“That is why I am *terrified* to tell you something I’ve learned about myself,” Balthazar said and grinned, but all he got back were worried looks. “Daemon is not the only Immortal in our world.”

Eyes widened and breaths were held.

“I could tell you that what we know about the Immortals, other than Daemon here, is wrong and that they were brilliant people who didn’t deserve what happened to them. But I can’t,” Balthazar’s voice dropped off. He cleared his throat again. “I don’t actually know what happened back then. The Order doesn’t either. But I have learned some things that *are* true. The first, is that King Daemon, not only exists, but is worthy of being king.”

Daemon inclined his head and there was a scattering of applause and cries of encouragement.

“But you already are learning that on your own,” Balthazar said. “That’s not why I called this meeting. I...”

Words seemed to escape him. He couldn’t say what he needed to. Everyone was looking at him expectantly. William and Isabel had made their way up into the front of the room. Both of them looked at him with shining faces.

Feeling a bit like Robert Downey, Jr. at that moment, Balthazar abandoned any script he had. He stopped trying to speak and sent a single thought instead, not just to his House, but to all of their Bloodline: *I am Eyros. I have returned. Come join me.*

EYROS REBORN



The room erupted after Balthazar's "I am Iron Man" statement. Not only with the exclamations in the room over Balthazar's true nature, but the cell phones that started ringing and buzzing off the hook.

Julian watched as Vampires' faces were illuminated by the screens of their smartphones as they answered texts and voice calls from other Eyros Bloodline Vampires. Julian had *felt* the call go out farther than this room but as he saw the multiple calls and texts flooding the phones of those in House Ravenscroft, he realized how very many other Vampires had been contacted.

"Yes, you actually heard that. Balthazar is Eyros," one said.

"No, he is not insane," a few more said.

"Oh, by the way, King Daemon is real and staying in our House. He often doesn't wear pants. Yeah, things have been busy with us. No, *I'm* not crazy either," another said.

"You're coming?" Everyone asked.

"You're *not* coming? Don't be a fool! You have to come!" Others followed up with.

"You're having a breakdown?" A dozen or more asked.

"Yes, yes, we all understand," everyone told them. "It's a shock. But it's *true*. Come."

Julian glanced up at the lord of the House. Balthazar stood there in front of the fire, his lower lip caught by his teeth as he

looked at the chaos that had erupted in his own House, not to mention his own Bloodline, by his own hand. He appeared a bit like a little kid who had revealed that Santa Claus *did* actually exist to a group that had long thought they knew better. It was part mischievousness and part fear.

Daemon stepped closer to Balthazar and, though Julian couldn't hear what they were saying to one another, they were clearly talking about how things were being received from the expressions on both their faces. Balthazar let out a laugh that sounded slightly hysterical. Daemon patted his back.

They really are best friends.

They should have been the most unlikely of comrades, but somehow Balthazar and Daemon worked perfectly together. Balthazar would never worship Daemon. He would always speak his mind. And Daemon could get the truth from someone he could trust.

Speaking of best friends...

Julian shifted over to Christian who stood below Balthazar, looking rather overwhelmed and clearly wondering if this was what happened when Pandora's Box was opened. Julian touched the back of Christian's left hand to get his attention.

"Are you okay?" Julian asked.

Christian turned towards him with his eyebrows lifted. "You're asking *me* if I am okay? What about *you*? To have Caemorn here..."

"Yeeeeaaaahhhh."

Julian scrubbed the back of his neck as he remembered finding Caemorn on the beach and then realizing that he was the one who had killed his parents. The motivating factor of his life had been right before him. How many times had he imagined finding the person or persons responsible?

Well, he'd believed them Vampires so his initial thought was to expose them to the world. And then the idea had been that they'd be punished. Perhaps imprisoned. More likely, though he hadn't allowed himself to truly think this, be vivisected. He hadn't really realized what he would do if he

found the *exact* person responsible though. He had just wanted his parents' deaths to be acknowledged for what it was: murder. That they had been right about Vampires being real. That he had been right that their deaths hadn't been mere accidents.

"Julian." Christian clasped both of Julian's hands in his.

Julian lifted his head. There were tears burning behind his eyes. "I can't kill him. I can't... I should be strong enough to do that, but..."

"Strength? That wouldn't be strength!" Christian cried. When other Vampires started looking at them with interest, he lowered his voice, "He'll get what's coming to him, Julian. Daemon won't allow him to simply walk away from this. You heard what he said about there being no deals."

"And I know that he's got to be *king*, too. If keeping Caemorn around, as Preceptor even, is good politically, he might have to do it," Julian pointed out. And how did he feel about that? He didn't know.

Christian studied his face carefully. "Daemon chooses you above everything else. It's why he didn't kill Elena, even though he thought he should."

Julian swallowed. "I don't know what to hope for. That Caemorn's killed or allowed to live. It's crazy. I never really thought about what would happen when I got to this point. I mean he's right there, locked in a room, and I have no idea what I want."

"You don't have to decide right this moment." Christian rubbed his shoulders. "That's something that being a Vampire, and having forever, is teaching me. We have nothing, but time."

"True." Julian gave him a tight smile. Those words did help though. He didn't have to decide now. Or tomorrow. Or the day after that. Or the day after that.

He shook himself. He didn't have to decide anything about Caemorn at this moment, but Christian needed to deal

with Balthazar announcing himself now. He saw that William was rapidly texting a whole group.

“What’s the word about Balthazar?” Julian asked.

William looked up, still texting frantically, and said, “Half of the people think it’s a joke. Half of the people think that Balthazar has lost his mind. Half of the people think that it’s not a joke and that he’s not crazy, but just ridiculously arrogant.”

“That’s three halves,” Christian pointed out.

“Well, yes, but there’s overlap,” William explained.

“And what do you think about it, William?” Christian asked.

“Most of us aren’t surprised,” it was Isabel who answered. She was William’s near constant companion.

“Truly, once King Daemon was found to be real, we all started wondering about the others,” William explained. “There are no Eyros Vampires that are stronger than Balthazar, and considering he’s only 200 years old, that shouldn’t be possible. In fact, that’s why some think he was exiled.”

Julian tried to sense the thoughts of everyone in the room about Balthazar, but when he did, he got blasted by a cacophony of noise. Daemon simply reached over and dimmed it for him. Julian’s shoulders eased and he rubbed the back of his neck again as he shot the Vampire King a thankful look. Daemon’s mind caressed his even as he remained by the fireplace with Balthazar and Arcius.

William gave Julian a rather impish smile, sensing what he had tried to do. “We’re all too excited right now, Julian. You shouldn’t try to read this many minds yet under these conditions.”

Julian nodded. “Yeah, I just figured that out. I was hoping I could just get a sense from the room what’s going on in people’s heads”

“I am still confused why Balthazar would be exiled for being too strong.” Christian’s eyebrows drew together. “It

makes no sense! Surely, someone would have wanted to mentor or at least have him in their House as an ally!”

William gave him a rather sad smile. “His strength is the reason no one wanted him in their House. He’d already killed one Vampire lord so he’d sort of broken the seal against killing another one. And since Vampires normally follow one another because of strength...”

“They assumed he would take over their House?” Julian guessed.

Christian though still looked affronted. “He only killed Roan because of the abuse! He wouldn’t have been out there gunning for another Vampire!”

William let out a small laugh. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Balthazar—or I suppose we should call him Eyros now?—can be quite ruthless to protect those he cares about. And if he thought that his people would be best suited by him being the Lord of the House, he’d do it.”

“I wouldn’t have had to kill them though,” Balthazar said as he bounced over to them, overhearing what they were talking about. “I’d just convince them to hand over the keys of power to me without any bloodshed at all.” He put an arm around Christian’s shoulders and kissed his temple. “Killing is so gauche. If only I had known who I was when that stupid trial took place I could have convinced everyone to name me king instead of exiling me.”

“But when Daemon returned, he’d have had to oust you,” Christian pointed out dryly.

“Oh, no, I’d bow to him.” Balthazar shrugged.

“Would you be willing to give up the crown so easily?” Daemon asked as he, too, sauntered over and put an arm around Julian’s shoulders.

Julian curled against him, relishing that strength and warmth.

“After a taste of seeing what you can do? Yes, most definitely, yes. I am many things, but suicidal is not one of them. Besides, if I remembered who I was, I would have

remembered you as my best friend so I would have happily turned aside at ruling anything but the Eyros Bloodline,” Balthazar sounded almost peppy.

“You look strangely happy, Balthazar. You were terrified about telling the House, but you told everyone, didn’t you?” Christian questioned.

“I told the whole Eyros Bloodline.” Balthazar tipped his head to the side, looking thoughtful. “You know it was like standing on the edge of a cliff and just stepping off and finding one could fly.”

“You are definitely soaring, Eyros,” Daemon remarked with a smile.

Balthazar narrowed his eyes at Daemon. “I really should say it was like standing on the edge of a cliff until you *pushed* me off.”

“Yes, that is probably more accurate. I wonder when her time will come.” Daemon tilted his head towards Fiona, who was standing in Arcius’ shadow by the fireplace, staring with unease at all the excited, breathless and shocked Eyros Vampires celebrating that *their* lord was the strongest, and thereby, the best of the *best* Eyros.

Balthazar snorted. “Probably never. She had no contact with her old House after she joined the Order. She actively avoided other Wyvern during her time as a Confessor so no one would ever follow her even if they knew.”

“And your opinion is not based on your active dislike for her?” Christian tilted his head.

Balthazar grinned. “Maybe a little, but it is an accurate assessment.”

“Are you pleased with the reaction so far to who you really are?” Julian asked.

The room did seem jubilant. The Vampires were all talking at once. Their silver eyes were shining. They were texting and conversing on phones and to one another at the same time.

Balthazar's gaze swept across the room and there was a smile on his face. "I think so." He frowned slightly. "Some people are not surprised."

"Eyros Reborn really being Eyros Reborn is *not* a surprise," Isabel pointed out.

"Yes, well, I suppose," Balthazar said, but still seemed annoyed. "I was surprised."

"You had no idea who you were before?" William asked.

Balthazar shook his head. "I wasn't even sure that the Immortals had ever actually existed, let alone that I was one of them."

"I thought that perhaps that was a front." Isabel was frowning.

Balthazar blinked. "Really?"

"Not at the time!" she assured him. "But later! I mean *now* when it comes out that you're really one of the Immortals. I was thinking how clever that was to pretend you didn't believe in them at all. An excellent cover story."

"Oh," Balthazar paused, clearly wanting to be seen as clever, too. But he shook his head slowly. "Alas, I had no clue. I believed I was special because... well, I don't know why, other than being *me*. But that I was actually a reincarnated Immortal even though people teased that I was? Never truly entered my thinking."

"What does it mean about the Order?" Isabel asked suddenly, her expression taut. "We were taught that the Immortals were our oppressors. King Daemon was always our protector. That clearly isn't true. I mean the first part. So is the Order completely a lie?"

There were a few glances between Balthazar and Daemon. Balthazar drew in a breath, about to answer her, but then Arcius joined them and he eagerly turned to the Confessor, slapping him on the back.

"Arcius! Brilliant timing. Isabel has some religious questions that are completely in your bailiwick!" Balthazar

grinned at Arcius. The grin was a little *stiff* though.

Arcius nodded sagely, not surprised that a religious person like Isabel was having issues with this revelation and that Balthazar was bucking answering them. Arcius put his hands on Isabel's shoulders.

"I, too, am reeling from the revelations, Isabel," Arcius told her. His deep voice was soothing, even to Julian who had no connection to the faith. "I do not have answers other than these. We need to trust what we know about Balthazar and Daemon from our *own* experiences. They are our leaders. They are the ones we can trust. As to our past, we need to wait to find out the truth. The Order is *not* a history for us. Evidently."

As Arcius continued to talk and assure not just Isabel and William about the Order's future but others who clustered around him, Julian felt a deep well of sadness for them, especially Arcius, who was a good man and seemed to have truly believed in the best parts of the Order. Daemon's arm around him tightened.

You are right. He is a good man, and he will find a much better faith than the Order ever was or could be, Daemon said, reading his thoughts.

A new religion? With you as... uhm, well...

God? No, I think not. I am king. But the Immortals are their creators and I am the greatest among them. If they wish to worship me I would have them do so knowing me truly and not this fairytale the Order created, Daemon mused.

Yeah, I guess. It's just weird that Arcius is going to create a whole new faith with you and Balthazar and the other Immortals at the center of it. Julian shook his head in amazement.

And you, too. The reason I went to sleep and the reason I woke up is you, Julian. Daemon was gazing down upon him with burning, reverent eyes.

Oh, no, I'm not important like that! I mean... I mean... seriously? Julian couldn't quite contemplate that.

Yes, Julian. The story of your life, your parents' lives, and how we met will be crucial to the new faith, Daemon told him gently. Your parents will be remembered as the people who discovered my city when no one else could. And they will be remembered as the parents of the king's fledgling.

Julian swallowed. He ducked his head. *So they won't be forgotten by the Vampires?*

No, Julian. They will be venerated, Daemon said and pressed his lips to Julian's head, kissing him long and hard.

I think they'd like that. To be remembered for doing something good and amazing, Julian responded.

"So you told everyone in the Eyros Bloodline to join us?" Christian was suddenly saying to Balthazar, breaking Julian out of his private conversation with Daemon. "When are they arriving and where are you going to put all of them? Especially if we are going to Solace to rescue Seeyr?"

"*We?* What's this *we* business?" Balthazar carded his fingers through Christian's curls, which had his best friend catching his master's hand.

"We meaning Julian and myself included in whatever you have planned, of course," Christian answered simply.

"No," Balthazar said, making each word part of a command. "You are staying here."

"We are coming," Christian responded with just as much emphasis.

"We are," Julian agreed.

"No, my one," Daemon said.

"Yes," Julian contradicted.

"No!" Both Masters said.

Julian and Christian looked at each other. They were going no matter what.

"I want you to consider something," Julian began. "If you leave us here, you are putting us in greater danger than if you let us come."

Balthazar let out a coughing laugh. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, *really*, I believe I know where Julian is going with this,” Christian said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Kaly.”

“What about Kaly?” Balthazar asked.

“The moment you guys leave for Solace is the moment that Kaly comes here and attacks. He knows what you both care about. Your House members and your fledglings,” Julian explained. “Attacking us while you’re away is his best shot at taking us hostage.”

“It would make perfect sense to attack when you both are away,” Christian agreed with a nod. “That’s what I would do. He could use us as tools to negotiate, or if he’s truly hateful, simply to give Second Deaths to in order to hurt you both.”

Daemon’s red eyes burned like magma.

“Only if he’s suicidal.” Balthazar gave a cold smile.

“Kaly will just leave Artemis’ body and we won’t know who he is or she is,” Julian explained. “They’ll just be able to strike from the shadows later.”

Arcius was stroking his beard as he murmured, “That would seem like a Kaly thing to do.”

Daemon’s eyes were almost demonic.

“You want to keep me safe,” Julian said to him. “The safest place I can be is with you.”

“That is not the only consideration. You are...” Daemon rolled his lips.

“What? What am I?” Julian stood up straighter, believing he was going to be insulted in some way. Not intentionally. But still.

“Don’t do it, Daemon. Don’t do it. Just back away slowly from that statement,” Balthazar advised him.

But Daemon did not heed that advice, and maybe he couldn’t have. He definitely couldn’t have, because Julian wouldn’t have allowed it.

“You do not like death,” Daemon told him. “And there will be death.”

Julian swallowed, but shrugged. “I’m not sure that what I imagine won’t be worse than what actually happens. So I’m going.”

“Red alert, red alert,” Balthazar murmured. “Abort, abort, abort.”

Daemon though continued to ignore him. “I do not wish you to see me do what must be done.”

Julian blinked. That seemed to throw Balthazar too. He stared at Daemon.

“You believe I’ll think less of you? I couldn’t—”

“I believe you will be *afraid* of me,” Daemon answered.

That had silence falling amongst their little group. The Vampires around them were still loudly conversing with people that they hadn’t heard from in ages. Julian could feel them enjoying the sense of the shoe being on the other foot. They were now the ones on the *inside*, the ones with the *power*. Only a few realized the very important discussion going on here.

“I won’t.” Julian took Daemon’s hands in his. “I won’t. I —”

“You are a hero. You have a very strong sense of right and wrong. A sense of honor,” Daemon told him. “And justice in your understanding encompasses death, but only as the last resort.”

“And you don’t believe that? I mean... I know you don’t. You use death as a means to an end. If you think it is the best way then that is what you do. But you didn’t let me kill Caemorn!” Julian’s voice rose and the other voices around them quieted.

Daemon cupped his face. “Not because I cared if he lived or died. I would crush him underneath my heel without a second thought, Julian, for the harm he has done you. I would do so for far *less*.”

Julian felt absurdly treasured and a little alarmed. Daemon, of course, read his mind and understood his feelings. He had *guessed* what Julian's feelings would be.

"I do not want to take you to dark places. Solace is beautiful and I would have you see it that way without memories of anything else," Daemon said.

"You can't protect me from everything," Julian said. "And I definitely don't want you to think you have to protect me from yourself. We can't be like that, Daemon. We have to be in this together."

Daemon did not look happy about it.

"Will it be so terrible what you're going to do?" Julian found himself asking. And others were listening in.

"No, but you will see—everyone will see—why I am king," Daemon answered softly.

Julian couldn't completely hide the feeling of dread that pooled in his stomach. He looked into those fiery red eyes and thought of all he had known of Daemon so far. He was wondrous in so many ways. He was scary in others, but that was only if Julian forgot who he was and viewed him as some stranger.

"I won't be afraid," Julian promised him. "I could never be afraid of you. And maybe seeing what you do, I won't be afraid *for* you either."

Daemon smiled. "Yes, I suppose there is that benefit. And it will ensure that others who might think to do you harm, will remember why they should not."

Julian wondered if Daemon was speaking to anyone in this room, or perhaps to Kaly himself. Though how Kaly would hear them here, he didn't know.

Seeing everyone looking over at them, Balthazar let out a breathy laugh. "Oh, I forgot to tell you in all of the excitement about coming out as an Immortal that, ah, we, ah, King Daemon and I and a few others, have determined to overthrow Solace and the Order. Yes, it's a coup! Though since Daemon

is our king, maybe the Order is the coup? Anyways, we're going to storm Solace!"

Huge eyes were turned to him.

Balthazar clapped his hands. "So, if you'd like to come, let me know. We're going in—"

"Now, we should leave now," Daemon said.

Balthazar's grin got a little crazier. "We'll be leaving now."

RISK



“This is insane!” Caemorn hissed. He looked around at the other Vampires, trying to see reason in one of their eyes. He saw amusement. He saw slight approbation. But none of them seemed willing to contradict King Daemon. “Artemis has countless spies within Solace! It will be a miracle if I get through the Gate.”

“So your idea of helping our cause is to hide within the middle of our group and hope that no one notices?” Arcius asked with a frown. “You are the head of the Order. You need to use that for the common good for once.”

“Only you believe that the Order works for the common good!” Caemorn snapped at the Confessor.

Fiona was standing beside Arcius, her old mentor and, Caemorn believed, the one person in existence that she truly loved. Too bad it seemed that Arcius loved Balthazar more. Not that Fiona would do anything about it. She had existed at the edges of everything, absent passion, trying to pretend that she had no emotions. But she couldn't help staying within Arcius' orbit once she had a chance again. Was she a true believer in King Daemon? Or had she finally found a big enough reason to flee to Arcius' side once more.

“The people who believe in the faith believe in the Order. Whatever jaded view you have is not shared by the majority of vampires,” Arcius argued in that earnest way of his that had always annoyed Caemorn but had that same *majority* swooning. “I had plenty of parishioners come to me and—”

“You were a mere Confessor! I am the Preceptor! I can assure you that the masses are content to believe the pretty lies. None of them want to think too deeply. They only do as I say because of the power I wield... The power that I *wielded*,” Caemorn amended quickly with a grimace. Artemis had undoubtedly stripped him of that. “I am sure that everyone on the Council has been contacted by Artemis, and he has turned them against me. The word will have already filtered down to those in the head positions of the Order that I am not to be trusted.”

“And it’s not like your personality won you any followers,” Balthazar muttered from beside Daemon.

It seemed that Balthazar and Daemon were friends. They seemed so very easy together. It annoyed him to see it. Balthazar always made friends easily. He had hoped that Daemon would be more discerning and not fall under the Eyros’ sway.

But we are just getting to know one another. He will see my worth. I may not be charming. I may not be easy, but I am useful.

Yet Caemorn’s head still snapped towards his old nemesis. “And all you’ve ever done is run on your personality, Balthazar! Your charm. Wide as the ocean but deep as a puddle.”

Balthazar laughed. “That’s more than you’ll ever have, Caemorn!”

“I am *not* an Eyros, or *the* Eyros. I cannot charm people. I am what I am. Giving speeches, no matter how good the subject matter, is unlikely to move people. You should send Balthazar in to use his mind control magic on them,” Caemorn suggested. “That does make more sense.”

“Because the moment that Balthazar appears people will attack,” Arcius answered. “Even he cannot instantly take control of all their minds. Not by the Spire in any event. You know quite well how our powers are muted.”

“Yes, well, *some* ability is better than none,” Caemorn muttered.

“Indeed. My king, truthfully we would be better off if he wasn’t known to be on our side.” Balthazar spoke to Daemon who stood by the fireplace, one arm curled around Julian’s broad shoulders. “There are more people who hate him than even tolerate him. Him singing your praises is... well, he’s toxic.”

Christian, who Caemorn admitted that he rather liked, said gently, “Surely, there are some who hold respect for him. He must have skills to have risen to Preceptor. I do not believe that Kaly is behind everything he’s accomplished.” Christian looked down at the diamond that contained the soul that had evidently been stalking him. “He’s skilled. He could be useful.”

“Indeed, I do have skills, but I am telling you all that Artemis has seeded the entirety of the Order with people loyal to him,” Caemorn insisted. “Sending me inside, on my own, to try and argue your case will only lead to my Second Death. I will speak on your behalf once we all go into Solace together. I will support you utterly.”

Daemon had been stroking Julian’s cheek with his free hand, and had not even looked at him during his speech, simply murmured, “You are a strong Vampire, Caemorn. You will get a chance to prove it tonight.”

Caemorn’s lips flattened. “I think you are sending me to my Second Death. No matter how strong I am, I am one Vampire—”

“With two werewolves. You aren’t leaving these things here.” Balthazar flicked a finger at Farn and Tarun that were crouched by a tray of beef the staff had put together for them.

“Yes, well, even so, a mob against three is still a mob.” He looked Daemon boldly in the eye. “I am not a coward, and I am strong, but if you do not want my help, let me know now so that I might prepare myself.”

Daemon turned to look at him then. Those red eyes, the same as he had seen in the Night Hag and the other creatures in the Ever Dark, were fixed upon him, and he found himself going numb. The urge to drop to his knees and bow his head until his forehead touched the floor filled him. But he forced himself to remain upright, and there was an amused smile on the Vampire King's face.

“Admit what you are truly afraid of, Caemorn,” Daemon said simply. “That no one respects you. That no one truly sees you as Preceptor, but in name only. Strip that title away, and you are not the leader of the Order, or of anything. That what Arcius could do with simple words, you could not do with your two werewolves or your powerful weapons. That since there is the scent of blood in the water that none will come to your aid. Those are the things that scare you.”

Caemorn went rigid. He could not hide the hurt and defensiveness he felt. King Daemon was not saying these things unkindly, but as simple *facts*. And that made them devastating. “I did not rise through the ranks without making some enemies. Friendships are weaknesses. See what happened to Arcius because of his friendship with Balthazar. He is an exile!”

“I think you should look at Fiona. She ended up serving in the Order, but it wasn't at all what she thought it was. She came here, chose exile so that she would have some friends,” Julian pointed out with a scowl.

“You are a Boy Scout! You *would* think that. But the people you admire so much have been on the outside. Absent Daemon's appearance, they would *still* be on the outside.” Caemorn pointed out.

“Better that than on the inside like you and Kaly's marionette,” Balthazar said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Christian patted his shoulder, but then turned towards Caemorn. “You're here now too, Caemorn. I think that you're taking this assignment the wrong way.”

“Going back to Solace on my own through the Gate and asking people to follow the Vampire King?” Caemorn's

eyebrows rose. “Am I missing something?”

“Fiona told us that many of the people who are at Solace now have been impressed into the Order. They were forced to be part of it. They feel no great loyalty to it yet. They are doing what they must because they’ve been kicked out of their Houses, correct?” Christian asked.

Caemorn really did like Christian. Unlike his best friend, he looked at things logically and understood that reason topped emotion every day. “That is true.”

“They have no one and nothing. I imagine that they are seeking someplace to belong, something to define them. The Order hasn’t yet gotten their loyalty, as this is new, isn’t it? I imagine many of them are looking for solutions, and some place to truly belong,” Christian pointed out. “You don’t have to inspire them with pretty speeches. You just have to lay out the facts that appeal to you about joining Daemon. If they want to be on the right side of this, they need to join the king. Your Master’s betrayal is what brought you here. They’ve been betrayed by their Masters too. Their whole Houses abandoned them. Tell them that the only person they owe loyalty to is the one that wants them. King Daemon.”

Caemorn tapped his lower lip. “But I would be denigrating my own power. I am the Preceptor of the Order.”

Julian rolled his eyes. “Oh, please! You’re the ruler of *nothing*. Right now you’re a simple Vampire who has no friends, no Master, no House and you have a price on your head. You’re asking us for help. Do you really think that you’re going to remain Preceptor of the Order after this?”

Caemorn said nothing. He still had a few other things up his sleeve to bargain with. He wanted to actually be *more* than a Preceptor. He wanted a seat at the royal table. But it was too soon to ask for those things right now.

“It’s just that those who know me will have a hard time believing that I am urging them to serve another,” Caemorn partially lied.

Christian argued back, “That is why it is so compelling if this message is coming from you. I am betting that everyone knows that you look out for your best interest. If they see that you, of all people, are willing to serve Daemon then there must be something to it.”

There was logic in this. The only problem was that Caemorn was certain the moment he stepped through the gate that there would be plenty of knives going for his throat and every other tender spot.

“I will go with you,” Sophia said, suddenly getting down from her perch on the edge of the couch and walking over to him.

She had on a pretty powder blue, baby doll dress that made her look even more like a child. If there was *anyone* who would be less intimidating than Sophia, he couldn’t imagine it. He was truly going to die.

“While I welcome any assistance,” Caemorn said carefully, “you are not known to be a fighter, Sophia. Though I—”

He got nothing further out as Sophia had suddenly jumped up from the floor, grabbed the front of his coat and dragged him down to her eye level. He felt something terribly sharp against his carotid. She was smiling still. Farn and Tarun looked over at them, saw it was Sophia—she smiled and called them *good wolfies*—and simply turned back to their food. Leaving him at her mercy.

“Traitors,” he muttered under his breath, though he was sure with their werewolf hearing they heard him. The twitching ears confirmed it. They would regret taking Sophia’s side.

“Now you cannot be mad with the good wolfies. Though you have treated them badly, they know that I can keep you safe better than they can,” Sophia said. “When you can see what’s going to happen, you don’t have to be much of a fighter. You just have to be ready at the very right moment.”

“Sophia!” Balthazar chuckled. “Now that was badass.”

She turned her head and smiled at Balthazar winningly. “I’m sure that everything I do tonight will earn me the two kitties that you promised me.”

The smile left Balthazar’s face and he tugged at his collar. “We will discuss, in the future—a far future time—any pets that will—”

“Thank you so much for the kitties, Balthazar! I’ll name one Brown and the other Sugar.” She grinned so broadly that her eyes shut.

Caemorn guffawed behind one hand. Clearly, Balthazar had a thing about cats, and so did Sophia, but in diametrically opposite ways. And Balthazar was losing this battle.

Caemorn though swallowed when she drew up away from his throat a wicked looking diamond shaped blade. She slipped it somewhere in the folds of her dress and smiled at him again. “We will go together to Solace. And you will get Seeyr out of the dark place you are holding her.”

He grimaced. When they saw the state that Seeyr was in, when Seeyr told them about how she had been treated, things might go even worse for him. That was why he had kept things back. He needed bargaining chips before Daemon realized just how useful he could be.

“So it *really* is true?” Fiona asked almost faintly. “You really have Seeyr locked up somewhere in the Spire?”

Caemorn straightened up and smoothed the hands down the front of his jacket. “And I thought you were not as naïve as Arcius, but I rather think that you’re more so, Fiona. I wasn’t the one who put her there.”

“No, you are the one who *kept* her there,” Sophia said coldly.

“Of course I kept her there!” he snapped. “She is an *Immortal*. Those used to be considered *bad*, remember? She was to tell us when King Daemon came back. But it seems that she was playing us for fools all along. She was working the levers in order to thwart us the entire time.”

He said the last to Daemon, who responded, “Seeyr knew all along what was going to happen. Everything, from the War to my return, was planned. I wish she had told me. I did not know how badly she would suffer, how badly all of you would suffer without my presence.”

“Would your decision have changed if you would have known the consequences of going to sleep?” Caemorn asked, which got him a sharp look from Balthazar and Arcius. They wouldn’t dare talk to the king on his own level.

But, to his surprise and respect, Daemon answered, “Most likely not. I was heartsick, and in desperate need for my fledgling.” Daemon once more caressed Julian’s cheek with the back of his hand. “Many of you have fledglings, but even for those of you who don’t, I assure you that as time passes, the urge to take one is overwhelming. Once you’ve chosen someone, imagine that fledgling dying in your arms. Imagine that not happening one time, or ten, or a hundred, but close to a thousand...”

Daemon’s gaze went bleak and he pulled Julian closer to him. He felt a stab of something go through him. He could have been that fledgling. He should have been. He looked at Julian beneath his lashes. Julian was pretty and heroic and passionate. But he was a child. Hardly an appropriate consort for the king.

He is a fledgling. He does not have to be more than that. But I can be...

“If it will truly aid your majesty for me to... to risk myself, I will,” Caemorn said with a half bow. He figured if Sophia was going, then they had a good chance to survive. He doubted she would let herself be killed when she was so close to finding her Mistress. So best to be thought brave. “So the plan is that I go through the Gate here with Sophia, and gather people in the square to tell them of your good intentions. Fiona will teleport you, King Daemon, and certain others into Solace, out of sight. Hopefully, my words will assure the populace not to attack you on sight. In the meantime, we will have left the gate open for our—our *allies* to come in.”

“That sounds about like it,” Balthazar said dryly.

“Do not worry too much about the muting of your powers, Eyros, I am not affected in the same way. Besides, I have a plan beyond mind control,” Daemon said.

This must be the plan that Daemon was fearful about Julian knowing or seeing. Caemorn would not be turned off by whatever the Vampire King would do in order to secure his rule. Caemorn understood how ruthless one had to be. Julian was just a boy.

Lisette, who had been quiet up until this point, watching and listening to everything as always, stood up then and smiled at everyone as if she were going to give a recital. “We are going to my compound, yes? To use the Gate there to Solace?”

“Cars are waiting for us outside to take us there.” Balthazar gestured towards the front door.

Daemon, however, shook his head and said, “Fiona, you will teleport us. The others will get in the cars and travel that way.”

“Who constitutes *us*?” Balthazar asked.

“I know that I am part of that *us*,” Julian said with a meaningful look at the Vampire King.

“Of course, you are. As are Balthazar, Arcius, and Christian. The others will come through the gate.” Daemon smiled at them.

Fiona looked a little rattled. “You are so certain that I can phase through with so many to Solace? With the Gate closed and—”

Arcius put a hand on her shoulder, stopping the flood of uncertainty. “You can do this, Fiona. I have no doubt about it.”

Caemorn almost rolled his eyes. It was especially hard not to, especially, when she beamed up at the bearded face of the Confessor.

“If we’re ready to go?” Caemorn lifted an eyebrow.

“You were the one stalling,” Balthazar reminded him with a shake of his head.

“And now I’m not,” Caemorn remarked coolly.

“We will meet you in Solace then, King Daemon,” Lissette said with a bow of her head. “I look forward to seeing what the Vampire King can do.”

“And then you will wish to never see it again,” Daemon responded evenly.

Lissette looked at him carefully from under her dark lashes, but she bowed again and headed towards the front door and the cars. All of House Ravenscroft was going, as were all of the Kaly Vampires who allied with them, not to mention a bunch of Mirryr. It was a motley crew, but it was already a larger group than Caemorn had expected. King Daemon attracted people to him like moths to a flame. That attraction would only grow, especially if he took down Solace with this mysterious plan of his.

Caemorn smiled mirthlessly. For once, he would be on the opposite side of his Master, and it would be the side that would suit him best. He would be out from under Artemis’ thumb. He would be free. And he would be with the Vampire he had always felt should have been his Master. Everything was working out. He hoped it would continue to do so.

“Everyone, gather around, and hold hands.” Fiona stuck out her own hands to her sides, taking one of Arcius’ in her right hand and Julian’s in her left. The rest of them each formed a link until they were a giant circle. Even Tarn and Farun had to join the circle with people awkwardly touching their clawed paws. “Here we go.”

Caemorn hated teleporting. There was always this stomach sinking sensation as they moved from one point in space to another. But it was over in a moment, and they were now in the Kaly House Gate to Solace. Caemorn went up to the Gate and cut his thumb with a small blade. He used his blood to draw the ancient symbols that *should* unlock the Gate, and held his breath. Had his Master gotten ahead of him and barred

the way? But the red letters suddenly glowed then faded and the Gate appeared.

Sophia stepped up to his side, swinging her childlike body. She looked like she was going on an outing, rather than on an attempted coup. She grinned up at him and took his hand, which he found odd, but did not reject her. Tarn and Farun stepped up beside them.

Caemorn turned and looked back at King Daemon and said, "I will do all I can to prepare the people for your coming."

Daemon smiled back at him, his expression though was somehow unreadable. "Tonight, Caemorn, you will find out just how strong you are. And you will earn your place among us."

Caemorn frowned slightly, but he sensed no lie in the Vampire King's words. So he simply bowed once more and turned towards the Gate. As one, all four of them stepped through it. Like with the teleportation, there was this sense of movement, but it was more pleasant rather than sickening.

The Gate opened into the very square that he was to gather the people in and convince them of King Daemon's rightful place as their leader. If he had thought he would need to actually gather the people to meet him there, he was incorrect. The square was completely filled. Hundreds of silver eyes were turned upon him and Caemorn felt a sickening twist of dread.

A murmur became a shout which was, "Get him! Get the traitor! Death to Caemorn!"

NATURAL ORDER



“You’ve got to tell me what you’ve got in store for Caemorn!” Balthazar insisted to Daemon. He couldn’t help the wreath of smiles that danced across his lips. “You were practically using a voice that spelled his doom! Not to mention having him go in there with just Sophia! I mean we could have accessed Solace through the Gate with him! So what’s the plan?”

“You are practically rubbing your hands together in glee.” Christian shook his head. “Though he did kill Julian’s parents. So maybe I should be doing that as well. What *do* you have in plan for him, Daemon?”

Julian, who had been quite silent about Caemorn in Balthazar’s point of view, straightened up and met their king’s eyes. “I hope it’s something appropriate for what he’s done.”

Daemon cupped Julian’s cheek. “There is nothing that would be enough to make up for what he’s done. Not even a Second Death, but I sense...” Daemon’s red eyes blazed for a moment. “He has yet more to give in this. As to what is awaiting him beyond the Gate,” Daemon smiled almost malevolently at the now closed portal, “it is *exactly* what he has earned in regards to his role as Preceptor.”

“He has been a very bad Preceptor.” Arcius stroked his beard.

“Yes.” Daemon smiled broadly. “Yes, he has, and now that is coming home to roost.”

“He’s stained the ground at Solace with Blood Slaves.” Fiona’s lips curled in disgust. “By pressing people into the Order who have no faith, he’s completely undermined it.”

“Indeed, but the Order needs to be swept away and made anew.” Daemon reached over and put a hand on Arcius’ shoulder, causing the bearded Confessor to look shocked. “But I am certain that you are up for the job, Arcius.”

“You mean for me to lead the Order? To be Preceptor?” Arcius blinked.

“There would be no one better!” Fiona enthused.

In this, he and Fiona were in complete agreement. “You would be perfect in that role, Arcius.”

“I—I don’t know what to say. I am but a simple priest!” Arcius stammered out.

Daemon squeezed his shoulder. “On the contrary, you are so much more than that.”

“Maybe we should not count our chickens before they hatch.” It was Lissette who spoke as she, the rest of her House and Balthazar’s came down through the door into the basement.

Balthazar let out a sharp bark of laughter. “I thought like you did, Lissette. I actually worried about things like this. But when you see him in action... You won’t quite believe it.”

“But the Spire mutes our gifts. Won’t yours be muted, King Daemon?” she asked.

“No, I am king,” Daemon answered with his favorite line, but Balthazar was starting to understand how much power and meaning was truly in that statement.

“I admit I’m rather excited to see what you do!” Balthazar confessed.

Julian, who had been chewing on his inner cheek, and watching this interchange carefully, said, “So you could go in there and use the Eyros gift to simply turn everyone to your side, but you’re not going to, right?”

“No, my fledgling. While that is a useful gift, it is not impressive to those gazing on. Besides, I want their minds to change naturally. They will choose to serve me,” Daemon said as he stroked Julian’s fine skin.

What was left unsaid, but what Balthazar heard nonetheless was the threat: *And if they do not serve, they will get their Second Deaths.*

“Fiona, I wish you to teleport us to the swamp area about half a mile from the Spire,” Daemon told her.

She looked tense, but one encouraging look from Arcius had her nodding. “I can do that.”

Daemon turned back to Lissette and the other eager Vampires in the room, crowding the stairs and up into the house above. He did not open his mouth, but all heard his words, *My children, once the time is right, the Gate will open and you should come through. I would show you Solace as it should be and the Lady Seeyr will await to greet you.*

Balthazar felt the waves of amazement, fear, and some distrust from the listeners. They couldn’t believe that they were going to be on the winning side for once. They were waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under them and to be dumped back onto the street.

Balthazar understood their worries. Though he wanted to assure them that they were unfounded, if he did so after Daemon had spoken it would have undermined the king so he remained silent. They would see the truth of it when it happened.

“We need to hold hands again,” Fiona said, and extended her hands to the sides.

Once more they formed a circle, but this time it was smaller, and there were no reeking werewolves in the group.

Caemorn really should have them bathe.

That was the last thought that Balthazar got out before they were teleported to the Ever Dark. He was knee deep in slimy water and a bulbous tipped reed was banging against his lips. He let out a sound of displeasure.

“I thought you were Wyvern reborn!” Balthazar hissed. “Why are my Italian shoes and tailored pants destroyed?”

“I—I’ve never teleported here before from Earth!” Fiona protested, but she looked stricken.

Because he wasn’t the only one with water up to his knees. The top of Daemon’s boots stuck just an inch above the swamp’s surface. Balthazar guessed their king did not care, because it would likely give him an excuse to get naked and proudly greet all of the Vampires *sans* clothes.

“I am so sorry, King Daemon!” she cried.

But Daemon held up a hand and said, “It is perfect. This is exactly where I wished to be.”

“In the middle of a swamp?” Julian slapped his neck as one of the blood sucking insects decided the king’s fledgling was worthy to be fed on.

“In the midst of *life*.” Daemon grinned.

Balthazar could see the Spire and the lights of Solace at a distance. Fiona had gotten the distance about right. That she hadn’t landed them somewhere dry was probably too much to ask. Still, his shoes were filled with water and he felt things sliding against his calves. He was not dressed appropriately for a coup.

He frowned as he heard distantly the sound of many voices raised in... excitement? Jubilation? Bloodthirsty ire? He couldn’t tell. When he tried to reach his mind out to touch theirs lightly, it was like he was trying to figure out the shape of an object swathed in thick cotton. The Spire was doing its best to mute his power as always.

“I think Caemorn has gathered people in the square already,” Balthazar said with a frown. He had truly thought that Caemorn would fail at this or go hide in the Spire until they sorted everything. But it looked like he had been as good as his word.

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” Daemon said, and then he was turning away from the Spire, the people and the lights towards the darkness of the swamp.

Balthazar would have enjoyed the beauty of the Ever Dark—something that had been robbed from him for decades—but standing in black, cold water was really distracting. Julian and Christian though were looking up at the sky with its twin moons and impossible amount of stars, talking softly to one another of the majesty of the place, how the air smelled and even tasted different, and how they longed to not only see Solace, but Nighvallen again. They were already speaking about how they would explore once things with Kaly settled. Balthazar’s heart did a little dance in his chest as he considered how things would change for him once Daemon was installed as king.

As his eyes peered into the darkness of the swamp, he thought, *There will be nowhere that is barred from me. I will be able to go anywhere. I am Eyros and the king’s best friend.*

The thought of it was suddenly so intoxicating as he realized how near that might be. It wasn’t just a dream that he had never quite believed would be true. It wasn’t some revenge fantasy. They were about to take Solace. It was impossible, and yet it was true. He turned his attention back to Daemon.

Daemon had stepped apart from them, and there was this feeling coming from him that was similar to what he had felt when Daemon Communed with the earth at his house. Arcius stepped closer to Balthazar.

The Confessor whispered, “Do you feel it, Balthazar?”

Balthazar nodded, but asked, “What is it? There’s like a shiver in the air and water.”

Arcius said, “He’s connecting to this place. To the creatures here. I cannot explain it. It is like—”

“Hearing a call,” Balthazar murmured.

He could hear it himself now. It was like a low thrum that was building up in volume. It had started as a vibration in the air and water, but now it was a vibration in him, and not only him, but in everything and everyone. Daemon stood still.

He’s waiting. Waiting for who will answer his call.

He didn't have long to wait.

Balthazar let out a sharp hiss of breath as suddenly there were hundreds of red flaming eyes on all sides of them, except from the direction of the Spire. He instinctively prepared to fight. The Ever Dark's inhabitants that were not Vampires were highly predatory and would give as well as they got from Vampires in a fight. And the creatures that had answered Daemon's call were some of the most fierce, and most frightening.

There were Night Hags of every description. Most looked like wizened old peasant women that he would have recognized from Earth. But one look into their faces and the rapaciousness was evident. They came across as innocent old women until they were perched on one's chest and ripping out one's throat.

There were creatures similar to the Wendigo. Their bodies were practically skeletal. The shortest were seven feet tall with long, spindly arms ending in black-tipped claws.

There were more werewolves that put Tarn and Farun to shame in their size and savagery. There were amorphous jellies that if they touched one's skin they would dissolve it in seconds.

There were winged things with dragon-like snouts and leathery bodies. There were the skipping, hissing, loathsome creatures that looked to be made of melting clay that swarmed Vampires in packs before sucking them dry of all their juices.

Balthazar also saw the strange bog lights that led people to their dooms. There were lizards of enormous size and appetites. There were things that slithered and cawed and croaked and pranced.

He caught sight of beings made of fog who looked like beautiful women until they opened their mouths and their heads became skulls that screamed and sucked down souls. Then there were the trees that were not trees that walked. Beings of rock that ground their way forward followed them. And there were so many that Balthazar could not count them

and he had never seen their like before. He hoped never to see it again.

But one thing these monsters all had was Daemon's blazing red eyes. They reflected *his* light. They were his creatures.

He went to his fledgling and tugged both Christian and Julian into the center of their group. It took some doing, because the boys—far from being afraid—were fascinated and wanted to go closer to the monsters that surrounded them. He firmly brought them away from creatures and kept them between himself, Arcius and Fiona.

Fiona's eyes were practically bugging out of her head. Her gaze flickered from one creature to the next. He saw her itching for a weapon. But really, if the creatures all attacked, their only hope would be Daemon or her ability to teleport them away from here.

Arcius though was as amazed and in awe as the boys. His lips were parted and his eyes were wide with wonder and not fear. That was the problem with religious people in Balthazar's opinion. Their faith made them oblivious to fear.

"Amazing. Truly amazing. It is not just these beings that have answered his call, Balthazar," Arcius murmured. "Every single creature in the Ever Dark is aware he has returned. The king! The king! Can you not hear their voices raised in his glory?"

Of course, the monsters weren't speaking English or anything like that. But when Balthazar allowed himself to touch their minds, it was as Arcius had said. The sense of blessing they felt to be in Daemon's presence was so intense that he was nearly bowled over by it. These things that seemed to hate Vampires as a rule, did not hate Daemon. They loved him. They worshiped him.

Daemon slowly turned around. His eyes were filled with that red witch fire. He was smiling though and gestured for Julian to come to him. The young man did so without any trepidation, or so it seemed. When Christian started after him,

Balthazar put a firm grim on his waist. His fledgling raised an eyebrow.

“Monsters,” Balthazar said simply. “You are not to pet them, no matter how cute they look.”

“None of these are very cute,” Christian pointed out.

“Exactly, yet you seem to want to scratch them behind the ears,” Balthazar retorted.

That had Christian smiling faintly. Balthazar saw that his fledgling was continuously fingering the diamond that held David. He almost wished that Christian would drop the damned thing into the muck. That would be the end of that problem.

“Oh, look, Daemon’s having them approach Julian,” Christian murmured.

Balthazar’s gaze slid back to their king and his fledgling. Sure enough, one of the ugliest Night Hags he had ever seen—wearing only a tattered black cloak and white hair swathed around her dessicated form—approached them. She kept her head low as she tottered through the black water, making a wheezing sound in the back of her throat. Balthazar grimaced. But Julian smiled at the hideous thing and inclined his head. She let out this tittering laugh and then capered back into the crowd of creatures, pleased as punch, and bragging to the others of her being blessed by the Vampire King’s fledgling.

It was then that the other—leaders, he supposed—of the monsters lined up to meet Julian. There was a ten-foot tall werewolf that was half as wide, with muscles rippling under pure white fur. There was the Wendigo creature who lightly passed its claws over Julian’s head—not touching him, but close—which inspired Julian to circle around its withered form. Julian’s thoughts told him that he was trying to truly believe that a thing with more bone and leathery skin than flesh could truly be alive on some level.

The massive dragon-like creature flew in a circle and blew fire against the moons just for Julian’s delight. The diaphanous, ghost-like women, that glided two feet above the

water, simpered and smiled at the young man without showing the horrors beneath. And on the procession went.

“Do you not wish to greet them, Balthazar?” Daemon looked back at him with a grin.

You know very well that they all creep me out, my king! Balthazar sent over their mind-link while he said out loud, “They wish only you and your fledgling’s attention, King Daemon. I would not take that away from them with second-best.”

Arcius guffawed into one hand. “He is the only one you will admit you are second-best to with no sense of false pride.”

“I believe we are seeing more of a miracle in Balthazar than in this.” Fiona smirked, her fear receding slightly as the cavalcade continued with no sign of violence, she had started to relax.

He raised an eyebrow at her. She, surprisingly, stuck a tongue out at him. He blinked.

“Fiona being playful? Maybe the world really is coming to an end,” Balthazar murmured.

Christian gently elbowed him. It was his fledgling who asked, “What has he brought them here for? Just to greet him and Julian?”

“I highly doubt that,” Balthazar said.

There was a shout from the Spire. He turned around, frowning. He strained his eyes, but he could see very little of what was going on in the square. There seemed to be more people there. They were like a surging mass. Caemorn must have really gotten the crowd whipped up. They would make a grand entrance then. Balthazar’s lips flattened. He really had hoped that Caemorn would fail.

The Kaly Vampire was insufferable, in general, and this would make him only more so. Daemon might even be impressed with him and take him into the inner circle with himself and Arcius. That would be abhorrent. Well, maybe not that bad, but it was hardly his fantasy.

I should be content that so much more than I ever even imagined is coming true. Well, maybe I did imagine it, but still Caemorn killed Julian's parents. He is the cause of Heath and Selene's Second Deaths as well!

But he couldn't truly blame Caemorn for those. Even if Caemorn dangled something before Selene and Timothy, that was on them for betraying him and their House. Caemorn was just a creep.

Daemon was turning now. The procession was finally semi-over. Or maybe the time limit had run out. Daemon had an arm around Julian's shoulder and was kissing his fledgling on the temple as if to reward him for being good and brave. Which Julian had been.

Though Julian and Christian were both young, they were open in ways he had not been when first turned. Perhaps it was because of the life they had both lived with parents who were scholars and constantly sought knowledge. They were adventurers on their web series. They had never been fakes like so many were in that arena. So even now he wasn't surprised to see Christian and Julian's heads craning about them, trying to soak in everything, and not making a judgment about what they were seeing. They were like twin sponges.

Were all Vampire fledglings this way? He didn't think so. He knew that he was like a proud papa who believed his child was special and above the crowd. But he thought that might actually be true of both of them. Julian was, after all, Daemon's fledgling. The one who had survived his blood when thousands, evidently, had not.

No wonder he didn't believe that Julian would survive.

And he had turned Christian who was the first Speaker to the Dead in how long? Way long. He was Eyros, of course, so his fledgling would be special simply because of that. But Christian was sensitive and intelligent and courageous and...

"Why are you looking at me with that misty-eyed expression?" Christian's eyebrows were raised.

"What? I'm not looking at you in any way—"

“You have tears in your eyes.” Christian reached up and wiped one of these nonexistent tears away.

“I’m allergic to things here,” he lied.

Christian frowned. “Vampires aren’t allergic, are they?”

He thought about lying, but said, “No, they are not. You and your inquisitive mind. I cannot make up anything without you questioning it.”

“No, I suppose you cannot. You know that I value knowledge too much,” Christian said.

“And I value you,” Balthazar confessed softly.

Christian smiled so beautifully then. Arcius was beaming with unabashed tears in his eyes while Fiona looked on thoughtfully.

“Come, Eyros,” Daemon said as he drew even with them and started leading them towards Solace. “We can tell our fledglings we love them ever so much more out of the swamp.”

“Yes, I would like to dry out. I believe there is mud between my toes.” Balthazar picked up one foot and there was so much suction that he almost lost his shoe altogether. “I really did not dress appropriately.”

“Only hip waders would have helped,” Arcius said and patted Fiona’s shoulder to take the sting from his words.

“Uhm, why aren’t the monsters going back into the swamp?” Balthazar asked as he realized the creatures were keeping track with them, following after them towards the Spire.

“Because they are coming with us to show my children the natural order of things,” Daemon answered blithely.

“You don’t think they are going to cause a panic or anything like that, do you?” Balthazar’s eyebrows crawled up into his hairline.

“Oh, I imagine they will. But not until people actually realize that they are there. They have other things on their

minds.” Daemon tilted his head towards Solace.

Balthazar saw flames rising. Caemorn must have gotten them to build a bonfire to welcome the king. Of course, he would do something dramatic like that.

“Well, Caemorn’s ready to welcome us,” Balthazar said bitterly.

Daemon let out a delighted laugh. “Oh, Eyros, you do not understand what’s happening at all, do you? You are being jealous for no reason.”

Balthazar warmed slightly at the king’s conspiratorial tone. He was still the favorite then.

“It is just that Caemorn has gotten a bonfire ready for you and arranged a crowd. I thought he would fall flat on his face,” Balthazar admitted. “Maybe I hoped he would.”

“I thought so, too,” Fiona added with a rueful look. “I really believed that everyone hated him, and given half a reason they’d turn against him.”

Daemon looked between them with a smile on his lips. “That bonfire isn’t to welcome us. The crowd intends to roast Caemorn alive on it.”

MADNESS



Julian shouldn't have cared when Daemon told them that Caemorn's fate was to be burned alive in a bonfire. His stomach shouldn't have lurched. His heart should not have started banging against the inside of his chest like a drum. A mix of adrenaline and alarm shouldn't have flooded his mouth. But it did.

He killed my parents! He admitted it without a moment's hesitation! He acted as if not killing me was some kind of success story!

Julian knew that Vampires didn't see mortal lives the same way that he and Christian did. Most of them—like Caemorn who was 1000 years old—were too far distant from the humans they once were. And if Julian were honest, did he mourn when a cow died? Or a chicken? Or any other food animal if they weren't a pet? No.

He could make thousands of distinctions between humans and the animals they ate versus Vampires and the humans that they consumed, but those were distinctions that only those who had just lost their mortality would likely understand. In some ways, Vampires were no longer human beings. No matter that Vampires came from humans and could not exist without them. It was like a caterpillar and a butterfly. They were simply too different.

But whatever is happening to Caemorn is because of his own actions! Julian reminded himself. *I didn't sic these people on him. They're going against him because of the actions and words he took and said as Preceptor. And Daemon warned him*

that it would be dangerous. He even knew it would be dangerous. He's reaping what he sown.

And yet, Julian did not feel happy about this. In fact, he felt awful about it. He doubted his parents would be happy with him either. He wasn't like Caemorn. He didn't allow people within his orbit to be hurt if there was anything he could do about it. No matter who they were or what they had done. It wasn't for him to judge them forever.

He remembered clearly watching the first *Lord of the Rings* movie with his mother where Gandalf scolded Frodo for wishing Bilbo had killed Gollum when he'd had the chance so long ago. The wizard had made clear that everyone had a part to play, not to mention that it was far easier to say someone was deserving of death and making that happen, while it was almost impossible to bring back those that deserved life. His mother had been nodding along to that line. Julian had scoffed at it.

"You think it's bunk?" His mother had asked with a slight smile on her lips.

"Pretty much. I know that Gollum stops Frodo from keeping the ring in the end, but that was just... I don't know. A coincidence," he'd answered her with a shrug. "Or because the author determined that. It wasn't real life. Real life doesn't work that way."

"No, you're right that real life doesn't work that way. It can be quite a bit crueler. But the thing is," and here she'd paused for a moment, gathering her words, "life is precious, and when we think that it would be better to take it away from someone, we need to be very careful about that. Because it diminishes the entire world when we do so. It diminishes us."

Thinking of Caemorn now, he felt the same arguments within himself. How many people would Caemorn hurt if he were allowed to go on? Julian didn't know. It wasn't that he had killed Julian's parents out of bloodlust or anything like that. He'd broken with Kaly now so it wasn't like he was going to kill people again for that Immortal's benefit. So did he represent a clear and present danger? Julian could accept

his Second Death if that was the case. But it wasn't. It was more complicated than that.

Why couldn't he just let Caemorn's fate be decided by others? Why did he have this need to interfere? Dying would be the Preceptor's just desserts? Right? RIGHT?

But if he dies like this, I will never feel like there is true justice for my parents' deaths. He will be yet another victim that I won't be able to hate purely and completely.

He felt Daemon's eyes upon him, even as Julian's thoughts were like a squirrel chasing its own tail. The Vampire King knew what he was thinking.

Is it Caemorn's time to die? Julian asked him. Why did Sophia go with him if it was? And is she in danger?

A mob does not differentiate between the innocent and the guilty, Daemon responded even as one of his hands drifted up and down Julian's back.

Julian's eyes widened. *So both of them are going to die a Second Death unless we do something, right? I mean we can't let Sophia get hurt!*

If you think you must save Caemorn in order to save Sophia then that is what you must do, Daemon's voice was even and showed no indication what he wanted one way or the other.

Am I right about that? Julian looked over at Balthazar.

The Vampire Lord seemed as conflicted about Caemorn being killed as he was.

Sophia is very good at taking care of herself. She is too near her goal to fail now, Daemon answered finally.

Yeah, but I can't just... Julian's mind voice dropped off. What couldn't he just? Let Caemorn die? *I can't do it. I can't just leave him to be killed if I can stop it. Why can't I?*

Daemon gave him a small smile. *Because you value life. Even Caemorn's life.*

Will you save him? Julian asked.

In the end, this decision is yours.

Julian let out a huff of air. *You're going to make me choose?*

Would you really want me to take the choice from you?

No. No, of course not.

So it is yours.

“Caemorn, as a roasted charcoal briquet... part of me likes that, but another part is conflicted,” Balthazar mused. “Are we really going to let someone else torch him? He may deserve it, but shouldn't the people he's actually harmed decide his fate and give him his punishment?”

Fiona had her arms crossed over her chest. “Caemorn has made many enemies. But still, to watch him burn... I find no joy in it” She shuddered.

“We should not allow such *injustice*, King Daemon,” Arcius said gravely. “I am hardly a fan of his, but we cannot let the unthinking mob rule us.”

“Kaly wants him dead in this way. He doesn't get to choose.” Julian's eyes narrowed.

That was the answer. This was *Kaly's* attempt to silence Caemorn. It wasn't justice. Caemorn's death would do nothing to answer for his parents' deaths. He had to stop this.

Julian found himself striding quickly ahead, actually outpacing Daemon and the others. The creatures that inhabited the Ever Dark formed a horseshoe around their group and the ones at the outer tips actually drew near him so that they were walking beside him as he strode towards Solace and the Spire.

The bonfire's flames reached high into the night sky as if wanting to touch the stars and moons. Julian half expected Daemon to rush up beside him, put a hand on his shoulder and tell him to slow down, to stay back within the safety of the group like Balthazar was doing with Christian, who clearly wanted to join him. But the Vampire King did not do this.

When he chanced to glance over his shoulder, he saw Daemon walking calmly beside Balthazar and Arcius. He gave

Julian a smile of understanding, but his mind was blank. Or rather, Julian could not read his thoughts. Daemon was blocking him from them.

He wants me to do whatever I'm going to do on my own. It's completely up to me. He wasn't kidding that it's my choice. But how much leash do I have before he pulls me back?

Julian knew that he was a complete noob compared to the Vampires likely at Solace. He had managed to use his powers half a dozen times, but really he was in no way proficient. Everything he did was out of instinct. It had served him well so far, but he did know that there was a limit to how much he could do when he was so young and untrained. Yet Daemon allowed him to stride forward, to make a decision about Caemorn's fate.

He swung back around towards the city and its gleaming Spire. The Ever Dark was amazing. If they weren't here for a coup, he would have been grabbing Christian by the hand and dragging his best friend everywhere, to look at everything, to experience it all.

The creatures that followed after them and were near him were the stuff of nightmares, and yet there was a beauty to them that he could not deny. He felt as if he was a part of the same ecosystem and there was this connection between him and them that the Vampires in the Spire ignored, or maybe didn't even know about. They served Daemon and so did he.

They were about a hundred feet from the edge of the square. From what he could see, the square was located at the top of several staircases of that unique white stone. The Spire, also of that white stone that shone softly in the dark, jutted up from the ground behind it. There were other structures, graceful buildings, and soaring towers beyond the spire, as well as what looked like gardens. Solace, like Nightvallen, was an oasis of civilization within the wildness of the Ever Dark.

The crowd of Vampires was much more visible now. There were hundreds of them all dressed in robes similar to the ones that Arcius wore. Goth priests and priestesses packed

every available space. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he heard their voices raised in angry shouts and derisive taunts. Those were aimed at the two figures that stood on a platform in the square's center.

He immediately recognized Caemorn's upright form with the firelight limning his body. Beside him was a girlish figure which had to be Sophia. He heard howls and on the other side of the fire. Tarn and Farun were chained by the neck, wrists and ankles. His vampiric sense of smell wafted over to him not just the smell of burning wood, but blood. Werewolf blood and pain. Julian frowned deeply. This looked like a witch trial, which meant no kind of trial at all.

This was not a trial where there was a judge and a jury and lawyers to argue for and against Caemorn, but just sheer rage at the man who had held the reins of power. Everything that was wrong they blamed on him. Whatever they blamed Caemorn for, it was Kaly behind him pulling the strings all along. That wasn't to say that Caemorn was a good guy. Far from it. But this wasn't his vision of the Vampire world. This was Kaly's.

A woman with startlingly red hair was speaking. Her voice boomed and seemed to carry far farther than it should have been able to without a PA system. She was saying, "Caemorn is a traitor down to his bones! All these centuries he has told us one thing, but now we know the truth! That he believes none of it! And now he would have us throw away our faith and bow down before the Immortals once more!"

I thought they saw Daemon as the good guy. But maybe not. Not if he's the one that will upend Kaly's applecart.

Caemorn, who was standing stiff and tall, surveyed the crowd without any seeming fear, which Julian gave him quite a bit of credit for. It must have been terrifying to look out on a sea of faces who only wished one dead. His hands were bound behind his back. They must have grabbed him the moment he stepped foot into the Ever Dark. With the muting effect of the Spire, Julian wondered if he hadn't been able to bring the dead to life to serve him at all or if he'd just been taken off guard.

Julian glanced to the right and left. There were capering Night Hags, the desiccated Wendigo-like creatures, massive werewolves and other things that he could not put a name to, and might not want to, keeping pace with him. He had a feeling that all of these creatures would be dancing through his dreams for days and weeks or probably months to come. Yet they were on his side.

Thankfully.

As they approached the edge of the first set of steps, he saw that the ground was disturbed. One skeletal hand was thrust up through the earth and slowly flexing its bony fingers. So Caemorn was not completely without power, it was just taking him time to summon. From the looks of it with all the disturbed dirt and the shine of bone against the dark earth, it appeared that he was trying to summon an army of the dead. So while he stood there on that platform, looking unconcerned, the truth was his concentration must be on bringing up a bumper crop of skeletons.

Julian's eyes were drawn back to the platform toward Sophia, who was also bound, though like Caemorn, her attention seemed to be fixed anywhere but at the fire that would be her Second Death if they didn't do something about it.

The thought of them tossing a child into the flames, a child who had nothing to do with Caemorn other than that she had volunteered to accompany him, caused rage to boil up in Julian's chest. He would not let this mob destroy two of their own because they were being whipped up into a frenzy by a liar that served Kaly.

So far none of the Vampires had noticed their approach. All of them though were so riveted to the platform and the fire, that none of them cared what was coming up from the swamp. Julian knew the moment that Caemorn saw them though as the Preceptor stood up a little taller and his eyes widened. It was Sophia though that caused everyone else to know that they were there.

She jumped up and down, her hands still tied behind her back, and said “Julian! The king’s fledgling is here!”

“As is the king!” Julian called back.

He started up the stairs just as the Vampires turned as one to face them. The wave of shock then alarm then fear was practically palpable. Julian didn’t know if it was his Eyros ability to read minds that was telling him this, or if it was simply obvious from the Vampires’ shocked, white faces.

The nearest Night Hag let out a cackling laugh and her long sharp claws flexed at her sides. She saw prey. The werewolves beside him lifted their heads back and howled. Tarn and Farun added their voices to the group howl and it was the saddest music that caused goose flesh to raise on Julian’s arms, and quite a few others.

At that moment, Julian felt Daemon give him the reins of the creatures. They were his to use. He could command them to do anything. The Vampires nearest to him were so startled that they tried to walk backwards and get away from him and the rising horde, but they soon bumped into those behind them. There was hardly any room in the square to breathe let alone retreat.

Julian had made it up to the main square. He looked to the creatures on either side of him and said simply, “Clear a path for the king!”

They didn’t need to be told twice. The creatures surged forward. The Night Hags bounded into the fray. Wyvern Vampires were teleporting wildly out of the way while the others scrambled to get out of the lunge distance of sharpened claws.

The werewolves bared their teeth as they ran full bore into the Vampires who hissed and spat in response. But these werewolves were bigger than their prey, standing over seven feet tall with necks half as wide. While there were, undoubtedly, Vampires that could have taken these down, none would risk it when there were over a dozen surging through them. The Wendigo-like creatures let out shrill, ear-piercing

shrieks as they lumbered forward, swinging their long arms in front of them that no one wanted to touch.

Soon there was a broad avenue between where Julian stood at the top of the stairs and the platform. The fiery haired woman walked to the front of the platform, her face ashen, as Daemon stepped up beside Julian. As soon as Daemon's feet touched the square, light flared across the stones and ran to the Spire where it climbed the entire length and sent a beam of vivid red light streaming into the sky like a beacon. The creatures of the Ever Dark all let out a throaty call that echoed everywhere.

"Now *that* is awesome," Balthazar chuckled as he checked out the light.

"It's like the bat signal," Christian murmured.

"Go to Caemorn. Decide his fate, Julian," Daemon murmured.

"Is it a weakness that I can't... can't kill him?" Julian asked.

"No, you leave death to me," the Vampire King said and Julian felt a cold wind blow past him.

So far, nothing that Daemon had done had frightened or worried Julian, but the Vampire King had been specific that he feared Julian would see him differently after this coup. So that meant something else was going to happen. But what?

"Do not walk or run, Julian. Try teleporting to Caemorn," the Vampire King suggested.

"But what about the muting—"

"It does not affect us. Try." Daemon gently pushed him forward rather like a father would do to a baby bird to urge it to fly.

Julian's eyes narrowed at the platform. He remembered the sensation of moving without physically moving his legs when Fiona and Daemon had teleported him. He imagined stepping forward onto the platform. He also imagined him making a

fool of himself, which really didn't matter, but he didn't want Daemon to be shown up by his failure.

"You can do it, Julian. I feel it," Christian said. "Just... step forward."

He gave his best friend a grateful smile. He decided that he would run forward, and if he didn't teleport, no one would know. But if he *did* then it would be the best. He pushed off of his back foot and leaped...

He slammed into Caemorn's chest. The Preceptor luckily braced himself somehow and they didn't topple over. As it was, Caemorn let out an oomph and looked down at Julian who was several inches shorter than them. He raised an eyebrow.

"Practicing teleporting by the Spire? That was bold," Caemorn murmured.

"Hey! I'm here to save you. And Daemon told me to do it," Julian retorted.

"Would you jump off a cliff if he told you to?"

"Yes, wouldn't you?" Julian challenged.

And something flashed within Caemorn's silver eyes. He didn't say anything. Instead, he simply and gracefully lowered himself to his knees and pressed his forehead against the wooden platform. "The king comes!"

"Uhm, I'll kneel, too," Sophia said. "But I'd like my hands released first. I am not as flexible as Caemorn."

Julian saw that her dress and hair were mussed. There were smudges on her cheeks from where someone had backhanded her. Rage bubbled up inside of him.

"Sophia! Who did this to you?" Julian cried as he reached towards the almost delicate cuffs that enclosed her child-like wrists. He saw that her skin was bruised and bloody from wherever the metal had touched her.

"You will not release the prisoners!" It was one of the Vampire Confessors who had been on the stage with them. She lunged towards Julian.

But she didn't get very far. Julian had a chance to turn and bring up an arm to block her blow. But there was no blow. Julian's eyes went wide as he stared into hers. Her whole body had turned into *parts*. Little pieces, mere dots of her, suddenly started streaming down the avenue that the creatures had created towards Daemon. Julian watched as she was simply ripped apart and she watched him back. He tracked these remnants of her as they streamed towards Daemon and the Vampire King *absorbed* them. His red eyes glowed hotter as he simply drained her to nothing.

It was horrifying. But it was beautiful, too. And Julian's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. It was nothing a human being could ever do. For one moment, Julian imagined every single Vampire, but those loyal to Daemon being turned into that shimmery dust and Daemon drawing in that life.

There was silence and stillness in the crowd before the panic began. Then the shrill cries began. The people pushed and shoved each other to get away causing many to fall and be trampled beneath others' feet.

Julian heard Daemon murmur, "Stop."

And everyone ceased to move. They were frozen in mid-step. Their mouths gaping as cries were stuck in their throats. They couldn't even blink.

"Eyros?" Daemon simply said. "Handle this for me."

"Come to order!" Balthazar's voice rose up in the air, but Julian felt it more in his mind. Though Balthazar might be muted, it wasn't by much. "You will come to goddamned order!"

"Eyros?" the fiery haired woman murmured.

"Yeah, the report of the Immortals being dead and gone has been vastly overstated," Julian told her.

He didn't wait for her response, nor did he worry about her attacking him. She would be dusted just like the other woman had been if she even so much as looked at him funny. Was this what Daemon had been afraid of him seeing? Maybe.

He reached down to touch the chains that bound Sophia. He let out a hiss as the metal burned his skin. He shook his hand and breathed on it.

“Hold on, Sophia. I’m going to get these off,” he promised her. He turned to the woman with the fiery hair. “Key.”

“What?”

“Where’s the goddamned key?” he asked her and shoved his hand in her face. “Who has it?”

She regarded him with an almost hostile indifference.

Use the Eyros gift. They’ve seen you use one. Use another, he heard Daemon said.

“Give me the key,” Julian said, and he threaded a bit of command in it.

Her eyes went hazy and she reached into her pocket of her robes and withdrew a thin, silver key. He snatched it from her hands.

“Way to go, Julian! That was quite well done!” Balthazar called.

He and the others were slowly walking down the avenue. The Ever Dark creatures lined the open space even as the Vampires gazed at the being they had only heard tell of in tales. In his wolf coat, black leather pants and silk shirt with thigh high boots, Daemon looked like a gothic king. He moved with a sensual grace, a complete and utter disregard to all the beings surrounding him that would likely do him harm.

“Thanks,” Julian said with a nod as he quickly unlocked the cuffs for Sophia and Caemorn.

Caemorn remained on his knees. Sophia curtsied low and stayed there as Daemon had reached the platform. Julian tossed the terrible cuffs away and swung around to face Daemon. The fiery haired woman looked down upon him with utter contempt and hatred. Her lips writhed away from her fangs.

“You—you have come to enslave us! You have come to destroy us! We will not let you filthy Immortals rule us ever

again!” she shouted.

“You’ve got this all wrong, Vivica!” It was Fiona who spoke. Evidently, she knew this woman by name. “King Daemon is not our enemy. Even the faith teaches us this! Look at him, listen to him, let yourself be open to his words —”

“You brought him here! How did you do that when the Gates were closed?” Vivica snapped.

“Because...” Fiona opened and closed her mouth. Her gaze sought out certain Vampires in the crowd and Julian wondered if they were Wyvern. “Because I am...”

“C’mon, dear. Say it together with me,” Balthazar said as he put an arm around Fiona’s shoulders. “You are Wyvern.”

There was a gasp throughout the crowd.

“And you are Eyros?” Vivica asked.

“Yes, yes, I am.” Balthazar flashed her a smile. “C’mon, people, you all knew that!”

“Because you kill Vampires without thought?” Vivica sneered.

Balthazar gave her a toothy smile. “Only the ones that *deserve* it. You’d probably be on that list, you old zealot.”

“Confessor Vivica, you must stop this now. Bow to your king. End this, before there is unnecessary violence,” Arcius said.

“You are an exile and there are few here who have even heard of you, Arcius. They are the new blood of the Order. Your ways are not our ways!” Vivica snapped.

“I see that. Where are those who have served the Order faithfully through the millennia?” Arcius asked.

“They have been displaced,” Caemorn answered even as he kept his head down. “At Kaly’s request, they were sent to the far reaches of the Ever Dark. Most were stripped of power and even some of their immortal lives.”

Arcius' brow looked thunderous. "I do not know how you can ever be forgiven, Caemorn. Regardless of why you have done what you have done."

"I accept my role. But it is far beyond me now. It was for some time. None of these people have any allegiance to me even," Caemorn answered, his voice muted by the wood of the platform.

"The faith has been renewed. It is a new night for the Order!" Vivica's head raised towards the twin moons and there was a terrifying zeal in her expression.

Julian frowned. This was not good. She almost seemed insane to him. Balthazar frowned and he felt the powerful Vampire Lord's mind control magic reach out into the crowd. Whatever he found there, he frowned even more.

"King Daemon, I think we best—"

He didn't utter any further words. Julian felt his control of them snap. He felt the surge of violence. And then all of the Vampires were moving. Their mouths open. Fangs extended. With utter madness in their eyes.

ARMAGEDDON



Balthazar’s fangs were out. But though the desire to kill was high within him, he wanted to protect his fledgling more. He grabbed Christian around the waist, and was about to move the young man out of the line of fire when everything stopped.

He froze in place. Christian—who had been resisting his attempts to take him to a safe place both physically and orally—went quiet. Both of them looked around the square. Every Vampire on the other side stood like stiff soldiers on parade. Their skin was whiter than normal. They were rigid. They didn’t even blink. Their eyes went from showing the savage madness that Vivica had instilled in them to confusion, and then to fear.

Balthazar knew what this was. “Armageddon.”

“What? But I thought Armageddon was the dusting of that Vampire that went to hurt Julian,” Christian whispered back.

Neither of them, evidently, wanted to break this eerie silence.

“No, I was able to do that before. I had a vision. Anyways, that wasn’t it. Though it’s cool,” Balthazar agreed.

“So what is this?” Christian asked.

“Is this... is *this* Armageddon?” Balthazar confirmed with Daemon.

The Vampire King was standing just two feet from him, and though he had spoken in half a whisper, Balthazar’s voice

carried just like he had feared. In this silence, it was as if he had shouted from the rooftops.

“Yes,” Daemon answered simply.

Then the Vampire King’s arms rose from his sides, and something—a sheen of red silk, though it couldn’t have actually been silk—seemed to rise from each of the enemy Vampires. They let out this horrible wail like their very souls were being taken. That “red silk” drifted towards Daemon. He absorbed each and every one of them. His eyes were constantly glowing this hot ember red at the end. Finally, there were no more silks to absorb. His arms lowered. Silence fell again.

Balthazar’s eyes swept over the crowd, they were different. They were very different. He couldn’t quite place what was off about them. But they were lesser than they had been. They were *reduced*.

“What does Armageddon do, Daemon?” Christian asked, breaking that silence.

“We should not ask the king such things, Christian,” Arcius murmured, his gaze fixed on Daemon as if he simply couldn’t look away. He was in awe clearly.

“Oh, forget that! I want to know too! Daemon, spill! What dastardly thing does Armageddon do?” Balthazar cried. “What’s wrong with them? Something is clearly very wrong with them.”

“Smell them,” Daemon answered with a faint, almost sad smile on his face.

“*Smell...*” Balthazar repeated but then the scent of the nearest enemy Vampire reached his nose, and he understood. They didn’t smell like Vampires anymore. He let out an uncertain sound. “*Human?*”

“Yes,” Daemon answered. “They are all humans again. Mortal. Frail. *Prey*.”

“Oh, by the Faith, no wonder it is called Armageddon. For a Vampire to be turned mortal again... the horror of it,” Fiona murmured.

She looked at the faces of those former Vampires. They were no longer rigid. In fact, they were all curling in on themselves, making themselves as small as possible, hunching down, bringing their arms up over their heads to block blows that were not coming... at the moment. There were soft sounds of distress, low moans, and urgent wails as the reality struck them.

Balthazar let out a sharp, almost shrill laugh. “That really *is* Armageddon!” He grinned a rather wolfish grin. “What are we going to do with them?”

“That is the question,” Daemon agreed.

“We should let the others through the Gate,” Arcius said. “Everyone needs to see this.”

“Make it so,” Daemon told him.

“As you will it, my king.”

After bowing low, the Confessor strode through the monsters, who simply looked about them, content to wait for Daemons’ orders. It was a strange sight indeed to see Arcius threading his way past Night Hags, wendigo-like creatures, werewolves, and the countless other monsters of the Ever Dark who moved slightly out of his path. The Ever Dark had always been a dangerous place for Vampires even. But now, would they have to fear these creatures that served Daemon?

“Can you imagine the sheer panic when people realize what you can do, King Daemon?” Balthazar grinned.

From the slight smile on Daemon’s lips—though why wasn’t it larger? And why did he seem so muted?—it was clear that the Vampire King had been very aware of the effect this would have on all Vampire-kind.

Balthazar went over to one of the cowering former Vampires. It was a man dressed in the black leather robes of a Confessor. He grasped him by the neck, and simply lifted him into the air like a kitten. The former Vampire let out a gasp, and pathetically kicked his feet and scrabbled at Balthazar’s wrist. Balthazar twisted him this way and that for Christian to see how helpless he was.

“Yes, I can see that he is a frail human now, Balthazar. I remember being one myself not all that long ago,” Christian replied dryly.

Christian, too, felt thoughtful. He wasn't experiencing the joy of victory that Balthazar expected he should. Maybe because it was so very sad. His thoughts were shielded from Balthazar's, and Balthazar did not want to pry to get them out.

Maybe it's the fact that we didn't have to fight them at all. Though Christian is hardly bloodthirsty. But still...

“They're like little stuffed toys or something now.” Balthazar set the man down, who immediately curled away from him. “Most humans in the presence of Vampires run, yell or throw themselves at you. I suppose it's different because they know we're Vampires, and they once were themselves and... oh, the tumult of thoughts! How they are ruining the day they picked the wrong side! I mean, I could have gotten some Vampire pummeling in to make it a really good night, but this will do.” He grinned again.

“Daemon, are you okay?” Julian was leading Sophia by the hand through the cringing crowd.

She was fixing her hair, and scrubbing some dirt off of her cheek. Caemorn stood still in spite of his ripped clothing and bedraggled hair. He still appeared noble and that was irritating. He suddenly lunged out and grabbed Vivica. He dragged her behind him like a kite with no wind. She stumbled and pulled, trying to break free, but it was utterly impossible.

Daemon immediately reached for Julian, and the young man came into his arms eagerly as always. Balthazar heard Julian ask, “Hey what's wrong?”

Daemon said nothing out loud, and like with Christian, Balthazar would not pry into the Vampire King's private thoughts.

“Can we go get my Mistress? She is in the dark, and I so want to hug her, too!” Sophia cried.

“I would be happy to take her to Seeyr,” Caemorn offered as he tossed Vivica at Daemon's feet. When she sought to get

up, Caemorn shoved her down. “Stay.”

“What do you think, Caemorn? Frightened? Armageddon could be your fate, too.” Balthazar gave him a toothy smile.

“Of course, I am afraid. I do not want to become like them. I want to stay as I am or get more powerful.” The Kaly Vampire tossed his head back. “But I served the king before I knew of his true power. I hope that counts for something.” He looked down at Vivica. “Unlike others who thought they could stand against him.”

Daemon was still holding onto Julian like his life depended upon it. Which was so strange. His own fledgling though looked like he understood what was going on. Balthazar felt rather stupid with the whole thing.

What’s going on, Christian? What am I missing here?

Daemon turned Vampires back into human beings, Christian said gently.

Yes, yes, quite aware of that! Isn’t it wonderful? It’s like the absolute worst thing that could happen to them! Balthazar beamed.

Christian let out a soft dry cough. *That’s why you’re not thinking about it in the way that Daemon is. You’re not remembering how he was afraid of Julian and I knowing what he was going to do here.*

I don’t understand... But then he did. And all the joy fell away. This wasn’t a victory. It was a *disaster*. Balthazar whirled around on Daemon, who was already looking at him over Julian’s shoulder.

Why did you do it?! Balthazar shouted at his king. Why did you use Armageddon here? In front of our boys? We could have simply ripped them apart! We didn’t need you to do this!

Daemon looked at him with understanding. The Vampire King hadn’t wanted to do it. But he had to. Because *this*, of all things, would terrify every Vampire out there, just like Fiona had said. The “horror” of it. But there was more. More that made Balthazar want to pull his hair out, to scream, to wail even louder than these former Vampires were doing.

I had to, Daemon said. You understand why. Half of it. The other half...

You can't want them to leave us! You love Julian! You—

Lies are the fastest way to lose someone, Daemon interrupted. *You know this.*

We're going to lose them!

You do not know that, Daemon whispered.

Don't I? You've never been human. You were never turned. They were just turned! Now is the worst time to tell them they can go back. Because it's so much easier now to regret it! Balthazar nearly threw his arms up in the air and screamed into the sky.

Lying would have been a mistake, Daemon reiterated.

Why couldn't you just dust these traitors? That would have been plenty impressive! But no! You had to use Armageddon! Balthazar snarled. *The boys haven't drunk from anyone but us. They haven't tasted eternity. They're still so young that they think they're immortal anyways!*

If they wish this life—

Neither of us got them because they chose us, Daemon! Balthazar moaned. *Julian sacrificed himself for Christian! Christian chose to live because he feared for Julian! THEY DID NOT CHOOSE US! So now they know you can undo what was done to them!*

Daemon understood this, better than he did. Julian might be the only person in existence—*ever*—who could survive Daemon's blood. If Julian wanted to be *human*...

You will suffer more than me, but you chose for both of us! Balthazar shouted. *You should have told me!*

He turned away from the Vampire King. He felt Daemon gently touch his mind. He wanted to turn back and tell his best friend that all was well, but he pushed Daemon away. He couldn't lie convincingly right now.

Christian hadn't said that it didn't matter if Daemon could turn him human, because he wanted to be with Balthazar for eternity anyways! No, Christian hadn't said that. Christian's mind was *locked* to him as his fledgling did not want him to know his thoughts. The despair was suddenly crushing him, and all he wanted to do was leave.

Why did you do this? He asked Daemon again.

Because they had to know, Daemon responded.

Balthazar swallowed glass, or so it seemed. He looked down into Sophia's pleading face. At least one person should be with the Mistress they loved so much.

"I will go with Sophia and Caemorn to get Seeyr," Balthazar said gruffly.

"I wish to go as well," Christian said, one hand gently on his back.

Of course, you do. You want to see the Ever Dark one last time... He did not say this to his fledgling. He merely nodded tightly.

We must have faith, Daemon murmured.

Have you asked Julian what he wants? No? I didn't think so. When you find some faith, perhaps you can lend me some! Balthazar answered without turning around.

Eyros...

No, no, don't make me feel... I love you, Daemon, but I'm so angry with you right now, I can't... I just can't! Balthazar sent and shut his mind down.

Daemon would have to pry it open to reach him right now. Unless there was an emergency, he didn't want to talk.

"C'mon, pet, let's get your Mistress. Caemorn, keep ahead of me so I can see you at all times," Balthazar barked.

"Of course." Caemorn inclined his head. "But what of Vivica?"

He had an eager gleam in his eyes. He wanted payback for being shackled and put on display like that. The very fact that

any of these lowlife scum had touched him—had even *thought* to touch him—was too much for Caemorn. He did not show it on the outside, but his mind was screaming with rage.

“Do you really want to be doling out punishment for those that have done evil to an Immortal before King Daemon sees what you allowed Seeyr to become?” Sophia asked with those big eyes fixed on Caemorn’s face.

Caemorn’s thoughts and his body froze at once. “I did not cause her to be as she is. I merely—”

“Continued to torture her,” Sophia filled in for him helpfully.

Caemorn cleared his throat. “Yes, well, I will prove myself useful.”

“Let’s undo some of the harm you’ve done, shall we? I’m sure King Daemon can handle Vivica and everyone here.” Balthazar gestured for him to go first.

Sophia skipped after him with Balthazar and Christian bringing up the rear. He would have enjoyed seeing how these people who had roared for their blood not moments before were completely cowed. They hunkered down, arms over their heads, mewling.

He wanted to kick a few for good measure. But Christian wouldn’t like that. Christian was looked all around them, his eyes mostly going to the sky above their heads with the twin moons and the red beam of light that soared into the sky. His eyes were wide with wonder. He didn’t seem to notice or care about their enemies at all.

That doesn’t mean he isn’t thinking about turning human! Balthazar realized. *If his parents were to learn there is a way back, it will be completely over. All those times when I said that there was no way back Daemon never said, “Actually, Eyros, I can turn them human right now!”*

But he knew why Daemon hadn’t spoken. He hadn’t wanted Julian to go. He had lied because he knew that there was a real risk Julian could choose humanity then. But, once

they were here, Daemon must have realized that he had to use Armageddon and that would open up Pandora's Box.

Maybe he foresaw something. Speaking of foreseeing, why wasn't Sophia chirruping something good to him? Like, *Oh, Balthazar, once I get my kitties, you and Christian will be so happy to have them in your forever-home!* She should have been saying something like that. But she wasn't! She was skipping with rather dogged determination to get into the Spire. Her mind was completely on Seeyr, not him! She was another one who would leave him.

They passed by the bonfires that were to have given both her and Caemorn their second deaths. She ignored them while Caemorn scowled at the flames as if they were a personal affront. They rather were.

Just as they were entering the huge double arched doors of the Spire, Balthazar saw that Arcius had managed to open the Gate, and the Kaly Vampires and his own House were coming through. But it wasn't just their allies, and his own House that emerged into view.

Balthazar had a momentary shock as he realized his call to the other Eyros had been *answered*. They were simply pouring into the square. When they caught sight of all the Order members, their expressions changed from shock to confusion to amusement and then to hunger. So many sweet humans for them to feed from! So many old scores to settle! So many prey to chase!

Though Balthazar was still angry with Daemon—and he knew the Vampire King could do this himself—his own pride and friendship for the other Immortal had him sending a command through all their minds, *These are the prey of the king! Do not touch unless he gives you permission to! DO NOT SHAME YOURSELVES OR ME!*

Head snapped towards him. He felt dozens—no, hundreds of minds—reaching out to him. He embraced them back, but turned them to Arcius, giving the Confessor the ability to touch the minds, too. He hadn't realized he could quite do that until now.

I have a task. I will return. Let Arcius explain all that has occurred, he sent to them. *Arcius, he sent to his friend, Deal with them. Don't let them do anything stupid.*

I will assure that they are kept in line. Gently, the Confessor answered with a large smile that not even his bushy beard could hide.

Go to Arcius. All is well, Balthazar sent once more to all the eager Eyros minds, and he could sense that there were even more beyond these that wanted to be with him.

There were awed, almost tear-filled thoughts, in response. Those who had once called him “exile” with disdain were the most moved. They worried he would hate them, and that they wouldn’t be favored. How could they be when they had mocked him? But he had always known that those who did not see that he had done a good thing by giving Tithe Roan his Second Death were fools. Now they would see the error of their ways.

“They’re practically worshiping you,” Christian said with an amused grin.

“There’s no *practically* about it. I will make it real,” he said, a shadow of his old humor showing. “They’d get down on their knees before me if they thought it would get them in my good graces.”

How can I laugh and joke when I know that you are simply waiting to break the truth to me that you want to become human and leave my life, Christian? But while he thought this, he didn’t send it.

“Are we going inside? Or do you wish to bask?” Caemorn asked dryly.

“Considering no one even likes you, Caemorn, I’m sure you can’t comprehend being loved,” Balthazar retorted.

“They just want your favor, you know? They just want to make sure that they aren’t on the outside, looking in like you were,” Caemorn snapped.

“I was never on the outside. King Daemon made that clear to me. I have been, and always will be, the Immortal Eyros,

the king's confidante, and best friend," Balthazar said.

Caemorn looked at him through those almost white-blond lashes. Balthazar expected a lame comeback—or, if he were honest with himself, a witty, cutting one as were Caemorn's wont—but the Kaly Vampire merely inclined his head again, and led them into the Spire.

That response was... interesting, Christian murmured. *What do you suppose he is up to?*

Trying to gain favor with Daemon, of course. Probably has some idea that he could be chosen as the head of all Kaly, Balthazar answered.

His heart quivered every time that Christian spoke. He kept thinking that this might be one of the last times they would speak like this, confidentially, about Vampire politics. If things were different, he would have been so proud of Christian for pointing that out.

He won't get that though, will he? Christian's eyes were wide.

I am not certain, Balthazar admitted. *He has helped us. He came to King Daemon. He didn't have to be brought. He was misled by Kaly. It would look poorly upon Daemon to punish him.*

But he killed Julian's parents! Christian's silver eyes blazed.

That is why I am not certain. If Caemorn had done everything else but that, I think he would be given exactly what he wants. But he killed them and hurt Julian. And that... that is something that cannot be forgiven.

Balthazar pressed his lips together, and thought to himself, but did not share with Christian, *And if Julian leaves Daemon, I am pretty sure Daemon will rip Caemorn apart cell by cell.*

Caemorn took them down the long central hallway of the Spire to a surprisingly small, almost inconspicuous door at the far end. He cut his thumb and pressed it against a nearly imperceptible groove. There was a soft click and the door opened on its own, showing them a narrow, curving stone

staircase. The smell of wet stone and old meat wafted up to Balthazar. His nose wrinkled. Christian crowded against him. Sophia gave out a cry, and pushed past Caemorn to hurry down the dark staircase.

“MISTRESS! IT IS SOPHIA! I’M HERE!” the little girl Vampire cried.

And to Balthazar’s shock—as he didn’t want to imagine *anyone* down here, especially a fellow Immortal—he heard a call back, “Sophia! My darling, I knew it would be you! Let Caemorn down first, dearest. He will release the locks and traps.”

They found Sophia standing midway down the winding staircase, tapping her foot impatiently. Her sweetness dropped away as she saw Caemorn, and she wrenched him down the stairs. He nearly lost his footing. He looked back at her in shock.

“RELEASE HER!” Sophia hissed. “NOW! NOW! NOW!”

She no longer looked pretty and petite. She no longer seemed sweet and innocent. What they all saw was a very ancient Vampire who was *enraged*. Caemorn took a few steps away from her. Luckily, he moved down the stairs, or otherwise, Balthazar was pretty sure she would have ripped Caemorn’s throat out.

“Move quickly,” Christian urged Caemorn.

The Kaly Vampire did just that. He hustled down the stairs. There were light crystals intermittently stuck into the wall to give light, but it was a dim, grim dungeon. When they reached the bottom, the reeking scent of old meat was everywhere. And then he saw the line of bars, and the figure that came shambling towards them.

“She has no eyes,” Christian croaked.

“Do not be afraid, dear Christian. I know I am hideous right now, but I am not a monster,” the figure assured him.

Her voice was musical, and through the grime and horror of her face, Balthazar knew she had once been quite beautiful.

“I will be again, Eyros. You will compliment my beauty. Tease me endlessly. Your flirting! How I miss it. You are ever such a flirt, even though your heart is taken now,” Seeyr said with an almost girlish laugh.

Balthazar stepped towards the bars, and reached through them to her. “Forgive me, Seeyr, that I did not know you were here. That I did not come to your aid.”

“You did not know who you truly were until a few days ago. How could you remember me? We were all supposed to be dead. Truly dead,” she said, clasping his hands in her bony, grimy ones.

A shudder went through her. “You’re starving.”

“Yes, I am afraid so. I can scent the blood. So many humans. He used Armageddon, yes?” her voice was taut, and her fangs came down.

“Caemorn, unlock that door and then get her some of the humans to feed from. Now!” Balthazar snapped.

“Yes, yes,” Caemorn murmured, and the lock to the cell fell open.

He immediately darted towards the stairs and was racing up them. He was not a fool. He had kept her in there.

“Mistress!” Sophia opened the door for her, and immediately got on her knees, groveling. “I took too long! I took too long!”

Even without eyes, Seeyr found the small Vampire girl and embraced her. “No, no, no, Sophia. You came exactly in time.”

Seeyr rocked Sophia as the Vampire girl sobbed tears of joy and grief.

“We should get Seeyr out of this place,” Christian said.

“No, dear Christian, until I am fed enough not to fly into an insane frenzy, I must stay down here,” Seeyr said.

“How... how do you know my name?” Christian asked her.

“How could I not know the name of the best friend of the king’s fledgling? Let alone, Eyros’ beloved?” she asked.

Balthazar stiffened and a tidal wave of despair went through him. It was so great that he could not stop himself from saying, “He’s not... He’s just learned... Daemon used Armageddon and now we both know that he can become human again and—”

“Why would I want to become human again?” Christian’s eyebrows were drawn together.

“Why... why... Why indeed? You mean... you don’t? I thought you...” Balthazar ran out of words, as he felt his fledgling’s mind open to him.

“Oh, Balthazar... you thought... no! I was just worried about how I was going to explain to Mom and Dad that even though there *is* a way back that I don’t want it,” Christian began, but he got no farther.

For Balthazar was kissing him.

QUESTIONS YOU WILL NOT ASK



“*W*hat do you intend to do to us?” Vivica asked.

She scrambled to her feet once more soon, as Caemorn, Sophia, Balthazar and Christian disappeared into the crowd. Caemorn was no longer there to put a booted foot against her spine, and *keep* her down.

Daemon, however, could care less about her questions, her concerns, her fears, her wishes. He only cared about what *Julian* was thinking, and his fledgling’s feelings were beyond him at the moment. Though he could have simply pressed their minds together and know everything that Julian was thinking at that moment, he could not do it.

Balthazar was right. I have no faith. What right did I have to upend everything? Even if I had to...

“What is to be our fate?” Vivica pressed when he did not answer her first question.

Everyone had thought that Armageddon was this *destructive* power, like Dust, which allowed him and the other Immortals to turn Vampires into their pure essence and drain them, like he had done to the Vampire on the platform who dared move to touch his fledgling.

But it wasn’t.

It was the ultimate power to take away the gift of Vampirism that the Immortals had granted certain humans. “Armageddon” was not his or the other Immortals’ word for this power, but the Vampires’ own word. They had forgotten what it truly was, but they knew that it was utterly devastating.

Vivica shivered. Her arms wrapped around her frame. No longer was she immune to the cold. And it was slightly chilly in the Ever Dark, despite the bonfires blazing behind her.

“Why won’t you answer?” Vivica asked softly.

Because only Julian’s reaction to them becoming human mattered. Daemon could just *look* into Julian’s mind and know. Julian wasn’t blocking him. But it was impossible.

He was afraid.

He studied Julian’s outward reaction. His fledgling wasn’t backing away from him. Julian was still snuggly in his arms. He could not only feel Julian’s breath heating his skin, hear the steady thump of his heart in Daemon’s ears, but be tickled by the light brush of Julian’s eyelashes against his throat.

“How did you—you do this? How did you take away *everything*?” Vivica asked, her voice breaking for the first time.

She had chosen to become a Vampire. He riffled through her mind. She was 733 years old, 33 of those had been earned when she was mortal. She was now staring ahead at likely only 50 more years, and most of those would be spent infirm, if she did not catch a disease or have an accident before then. She was worrying about being on the streets in the sleet, shivering, thinking of all the cars that were whizzing by that could cut her down. She’d have no money. No friends. No family. At 33 with no history, how could she gain employment?

That is if she lives through this moment...

And she was thinking of her Mistress Kitty Yuen of the Helm Bloodline. Would Kitty take her in if she did survive? Could she be turned again into a Vampire again? But no, it wouldn’t matter even if she *could* be turned again. Who would go up against King Daemon? No one. Not when he could turn them all into helpless, hapless humans. Despair like a black cloud settled over her.

“What will happen to us?” she whispered.

Julian turned towards her. Daemon wanted to clutch him close, but he eased his hold so that Julian could turn in the circle of his arms. His hands slid up to Julian's shoulders. He tightened them, but did not *grab*.

“What do you think *should* happen to you?” Julian asked.

Daemon smiled in pride. Julian left her with no good way out. She had been ready to throw Daemon's associates into a bonfire. She had attempted to attack them. She had cursed his name. Her follower had thought to touch Julian. How did she think this was going to go? What did she think she deserved?

Her mouth opened and shut. What was she to say? If she continued to speak of him and the other Immortals as the ultimate evil, she was certain she would truly die. If she simply fell to her knees, then her own power—whatever shreds of it were left—would be gone altogether, and she would have nothing if she survived. So what to say?

But, again, it didn't matter. He was obsessing on her thoughts to avoid Julian's. His fledgling didn't seem upset. He wasn't asking to speak to Daemon in private. He wasn't demanding to be given an explanation for why Daemon hadn't used Armageddon on him in the beginning, while they both thought that Julian would die. Not that it would have worked. Armageddon was only available on full-fledged Vampires, something that none of his potential fledglings had survived through.

Until Julian. Now Armageddon could be used on him.

A tremor went through Daemon's whole being. He thought he might actually be sick. Things blurred for a moment. He held onto the fact that Julian still seemed the *same*. No signs of betrayal.

I could know for certain if I just looked or simply asked...

“It doesn't matter what I think,” Vivica finally said.

That is the most intelligent thing she has said.

“In some ways you're right,” Julian answered her. “What you think is irrelevant. Especially about Daemon. He is king, because he is king. I didn't understand that until now. It

doesn't matter if you believe in him. It doesn't matter if you kneel before him. It doesn't matter if he has a throne. Everything that makes a Vampire isn't from you or me. It's from *him*, And if he doesn't want us to be Vampires anymore, if he takes back that gift, then it's gone. Just gone. Because he rules all of us." Julian let out a soft huff of laughter. "He is king, because he is king."

A tear ran down Vivica's cheek, as she began to shake. "It's... gone. You're right. It's gone." She shuddered. "Is it ever coming back?"

Julian looked up at Daemon. His expression was unreadable. "That's really not up to me."

At that moment, the Gate opened, and through it poured their allies. An ever growing throng of them. Lisette was at the head of the pack, followed by her pale-haired House members. The raucous members of House Ravenscroft led by William and Isabel followed thereafter. Then there were Charlie and Darcie with a gaggle of Mirryr Vampires, who kept sliding from form to form, reflecting the Order fashions, though not their faces. He saw the change in their eyes as they realized that they faced no Order berserkers, but instead, mere *humans*.

Predators to prey in a moment.

Lisette was first to greet him. She curtsied before him. "I see we are hardly needed... unless it is to clean all this up." She gestured to the former Vampires with a hint of fang showing. "Armageddon is fearsome, my king. I thought it would be something destructive, but this is so much worse than that."

"Do not look at me with pity, you Kaly dog!" Vivica snapped.

Lisette let out a girlish laugh. "Are you going to let them live, my king, and age away? That might be a rather waste. I could do *much* with these many souls for you. I could perform many wonders."

“No! Daemon, *no*, don’t... that’s not...” Julian looked at her with horror.

“You’ve seen how the dead can trouble the living, Julian,” Lisette said without rancor. “None here are worth your defense. They would have slaughtered you, Christian, everyone. They would have feasted on the fountains of your blood. They should be punished.”

Julian went pale. “I... I just...”

Lisette smiled at him. “You have a good heart. I am glad our king can protect you from this darkness in others.”

“He doesn’t need to protect me—”

“I would not have your faith, and kindness, tainted in any bit,” Lisette continued.

“I’m not a child!” Julian looked affronted. “I’m not naive...” He glanced at Daemon. “I’m *not*! I just don’t want to take life unnecessarily, or have people’s souls used for terrible things!”

“That is reasonable to me,” Arcius murmured.

“People are very superstitious about the Kaly, and what we do. But I can assure you that our gift is no more objectionable than the ability to read and control minds.” She gave Arcius a smile that did not quite meet her eyes. “Though, now I am quite grateful to be on your side. It was Balthazar who *changed* my mind on the subject. How is that different from what I would do with a soul?”

“We can have a philosophical debate about that later,” Arcius said dryly.

“All Bloodlines have grace in my view,” Daemon replied to both of them.

Lisette curtseyed. “We are so used to prejudice.”

“As are *we*,” Arcius replied with narrowed eyes. “How many times have members of the Eyros Bloodline been exiled? Far more than Kaly.”

“And this should make you *allies*,” Daemon interrupted what was an old fight. “You have both been isolated from the other Bloodlines. You should take comfort in one another.”

Arcius crossed his arms over his chest. Lisette hummed a little under his breath.

“Christian should be a bridge between you guys,” Julian said. “A Speaker of the Dead in one House that can only be trained by another. You must be connected in some way.”

“Were Kaly and Eyros close?” Lisette asked.

“Eyros was able to read Kaly, know what they needed, but Eyros only did so when...”

“When it amused him, I’m sure,” Lisette guessed.

“You sound hurt by that. But you claim to not care at the same time,” Arcius murmured with a roll of his eyes.

“You can make people like you if you’re an Eyros. We cannot do the same.” She sniffed.

Julian’s head had been moving between them like he was watching a tennis match. His eyebrows rose with every word.

“Guys, we’re all allies. We have plenty of enemies out there without looking to make more between us,” Julian said. He then dipped his head towards Vivica. “We have them *here*.”

Lisette bared her fangs at Vivica. “Yes, you’re quite right. There are far more worthy foes here. You should make some of these people examples now, my king.”

Vivica’s chin lifted. “Are we to be hunted down like—”

“Like the pitiful creatures you are for challenging King Daemon?” Arcius finished for her. His expression was grave. “What can we do for you, King Daemon, with these people?”

Fiona stepped up. “There are Blood Slaves here, and cells. I would request, King Daemon, that those people be returned to their homes, and these here are placed within those cells until you determine what should be done with them.”

“Perhaps some will be salvageable,” Lisette said with a sniff. She yanked Vivica to her. “But most will not be.”

Daemon nodded. “Let it be done.”

“Come, Arcius, help me with—”

But Daemon shook his head. “I need him for something else. Have the other Houses help you. Lisette, follow Fiona’s lead. Charlie?”

“Yes, my king?” Charlie’s gaze snapped onto him. He had been looking at everything and everyone with a sense of amazement, but it was no greater than when Charlie faced him. He saw his own visage appear on Charlie’s face then meld into his usual foppish one.

“He’s talking to *you*, Charlie!” Darcie enthused.

Charlie gave her a dry look. “I am aware, Darcie. I can hear.”

“Yes, but...” Darcie clapped her hands. “Isn’t it wonderful?! That he’s speaking to *you*... of all people.”

Charlie scowled. “Of course, he’s speaking to me. I’m the head of my House, and friends with Balthazar!”

“Friends with *Eyros*!” Darcie corrected.

“Yes, well, yes, of course! But, King Daemon, what can I do?” Charlie asked.

“Help Fiona,” Daemon answered dryly.

“Of course! Do you want us to rough them up?” Charlie gestured towards the former Vampires.

“There is no need to lower ourselves, is there?” Daemon asked him.

“Oh, no, they are just...” He broke into a grin. “*Human* after all. They’ll break.” He sobered, and opened his mouth to say something, but then stopped.

“What is it?” Julian asked.

Daemon’s heart thudded heavily in his chest at the sound of Julian’s voice. How he loved hearing it. How he relished

Julian assisting him. His fledgling had a softer touch. He was still mortal in his thinking. Closer to his subjects than he was.

“I... there were people from my House that I had to send here. I know that if they... they were against you that they deserve their fate, but...” Charlie broke off, his forehead furrowing.

“You’re thinking of Jeremy,” Darcie said, the smile that had been dancing on her lips fell away.

Charlie nodded. “Is there any way... I mean... they are human now... I... Can they be turned again? Would you allow it?”

“It depends,” Daemon answered. “We shall see. Their minds will have to be scanned. Eyros will know those who can be saved and those... who we will have to deal with in other ways.”

“Oh, yes, Balthazar is so very good at that!” Charlie beamed.

“And there must be punishment for *all*,” Daemon said simply.

Charlie’s beam dimmed. Julian looked up at him with a frown. Daemon remained firm. He tightened his grip on Julian’s shoulder.

“They would have harmed you. They would have harmed our friends,” Daemon reminded his fledgling gently.

Still you ask nothing for yourself, Julian. No questions. No concerns.

“I understand,” Julian said, but still looked unhappy.

“It will be an individual process,” Daemon assured them both. “Now clear the square.”

“What of the creatures?” Arcius asked.

The creatures that he had summoned to support his reign moved languidly about the crowd. They sniffed the air. They looked up at the twin moons. They stared at the Spire and the light that shone from its tip.

“Leave them be. They will harm no one,” Daemon stated. “They will go back to their homes in time. Though many will remain near as long as I am here.”

“Of course.” Arcius bowed his head.

“You must make this place sacred once more, Arcius. It will be a beacon for those who wish to come see me,” Daemon explained.

Arcius nodded. “Yes, yes, I can... I must speak with Caemorn.” His lips pressed together. “He will know where the other, long term members of the Order went.”

“Will they want to know Daemon?” Julian asked, looking incredulous. After what he had seen here, why would he trust anyone in the Order. “Can they be trusted?”

“There will be those who doubt. But once they meet the king, their minds will be opened,” Arcius said.

Fiona smiled, almost sadly. “I can almost hear Balthazar snarking about how that is way too positive an attitude.”

“Balthazar’s extreme gift has meant that he has heard the darkness in people’s hearts far more than most,” Arcius said gently. “He forgets that as much as people can fall to the depths, they can rise to great heights.”

“I hope you are right,” Fiona said, and she seemed to mean it.

She then gathered Lisette, Charlie and Darcie. They all spread out, talking to the other Vampires. Everyone was handled *gingerly*, which he saw Julian appreciating.

“Come, Arcius, let us go to the Spire. I wish to show Julian the pinnacle and you can find Caemorn to ask him the questions you need answered,” Daemon said.

Arcius inclined his head and the three of them headed towards the Spire. Daemon wanted some time alone with his fledgling. He had to know what Julian was thinking, away from everyone. He had to know if Julian was even considering asking him to use Armageddon on him.

“You managed to end this with only one Second Death,” Arcius said, a touch of awe in his voice. “It is so much more—and, to be honest, very unexpected—than I ever thought.”

“You thought there would be a battle?” Daemon guessed.

Arcius nodded. “A great one. The Order are trained to be expert fighters. Not that these new Confessors would be anything like the ones of old, but still only the one life *rightfully* taken.”

“Yeah, I admit I thought you were worried about showing me some kind of violent side of yourself,” Julian agreed. “You were so intent on me not coming to this. But there was no danger at all!”

Daemon’s gaze jerked to his fledgling. His mouth was dry as dust. “No, there was not...”

Julian gave him a wry smile. “You aren’t totally overly protective, but I just thought you wouldn’t want me near a battle.”

“There was never any battle planned,” Daemon admitted. “There is no need to battle my people. You convinced me, Julian, that the king I wish to be is one that preserves as many of the Vampires as I can. They have been hurt and misled...”

At that moment, the doors to the Spire opened and Caemorn strode out. His expression was taut, which meant that he was deeply alarmed since he rarely showed any emotion. He stopped before Daemon, and bowed with remarkable grace, not to mention no hesitation. It was interesting, and it could be useful.

“My king, Seeyr is released, but she is in desperate need to feed,” Caemorn explained.

“We have plenty of options for her here,” Arcius responded.

“She will need many. And they might not survive it,” Caemorn said carefully.

“Why?” Julian’s eyes were huge.

“You starved her, did you not, Caemorn?” Daemon asked, his voice clipped.

“Yes, but not just me! She’s been without a full feeding for quite some time,” Caemorn said, not dodging the answer, which was one point in his favor even though there were a million against him. “She fears if she is exposed to so much blood, she will lose herself.”

“Yes, she will. Even one human in her presence may set her off.” Daemon grimaced. “None may be down there when she feeds.”

“Wait! You mean... you’ll pick someone—a bunch of someones—that she could... kill?” Julian was pale as milk.

He took hold of Julian’s biceps. “I will choose only those who cannot be reached. Those that would hurt our friends and allies. You trust me on this?”

“I trust you with everything,” Julian admitted. “I trust you completely. Whatever you need to do.”

Daemon’s mouth went dry again. “Julian...”

“Do what you need. I’ll be here,” Julian said.

Will you always be here? The question slipped out before he could help it.

Julian’s head tilted to the side. *Of course. Where else would I be?*

Daemon could not help but fear that Julian had not thought this through. That it had not yet occurred to him what Armageddon could do for him. Or he did know, and it meant nothing, because he wished to stay. But he could not bear to allow himself to know which it was.

“I will go get the others with her,” Caemorn said.

“No need.” Daemon’s mind connected with those in the room below the Spire.

Seeyr’s mind seized onto his. His eyelids closed as he held her close to him. The suffering she had experienced was

great. Too great. His fingernails cut into his own palms. He forced himself to release them.

It was the only way to ensure you could come back to us, my king, she said.

I should never have left, he answered her.

You could not stay. Your heart would have turned to dust, she answered. And what you will build now will be greater than anything before. Any amount of suffering is worth what will come.

You intrigue me, Seeyr. A smile crossed his lips.

That is the first true smile you've had since you came here. Not that I expect you to be joyous to find those arranged against you, but—ah! You and Eyros! Such a pair! She laughed.

What do you mean? He asked her.

Take your fledgling to the top of my Spire, and ask him the questions you dare not, she told him.

I do not know...

You are both lovesick fools. It is rather adorable. Now, please send me... send me those that you would have gone from this plane, she said.

It shall be done. You shall be restored, Seeyr. Send the others away. It would be disturbing for Christian, especially, to see your thirst, he said.

Of course. I would not have anyone see me like this in any event. I rule the thirst. The thirst does not rule me. Until it does, she answered faintly.

All will be well, he told her, and he hoped it was true. But he had seen Vampires who had been starved too long who could never control themselves again.

Daemon's mind swept outwards to all of the people in Solace. He identified five former Vampires that his gifts told him would never be on his side. They would actively work against him. They would try to hurt those he cared for and

cared for him. He touched their minds, and they became stiff. They all turned as one and headed towards the Spire. He sent a word to all the others to let them go.

“That’s them. The ones you’ve chosen. They’re moving like zombies,” Julian remarked as he took in the five figures that went to the Spire’s doors and passed through them without hesitation.

“Yes, they will feel and know nothing of what comes,” Daemon said.

“You are kinder to them than they would have been to any of us,” Caemorn remarked. Then his eyes narrowed as he took in Julian. “But I understand that you need not lean into our more predatory natures. Not now. Not when... well, I understand.”

You certainly wish me to believe you do, Daemon thought. But you also consider this Julian’s weakness.

“Come, Julian, let us go up to the top of the Spire.” Daemon put a hand on his fledgling’s lower back, and led him towards the stairs.

A MILLION LITTLE PIECES



The elevator in the Spire ran without electricity from what Julian could see. The glass car, silently and swiftly, soared upwards. Julian craned his neck so that he could see where they were going.

The Spire's interior reminded him of a seashell as it spiraled upwards. The pale white stone was similar to bone so it did seem like they were traveling through some strange beast's skeleton.

"How many rooms are in this place?" Julian asked.

"Over a thousand. I have not seen all of them. This was Seeyr's domain, and she kept many wonders here that she found in her explorations of the Ever Dark," Daemon answered.

"Really? Like what kind of things? Did the Immortals come from the Ever Dark? I mean is this your home planet?" Julian turned around to face the Vampire King.

Daemon was leaning against the far wall of the elevator. He had been quiet as Julian took in the world of Ever Dark. Julian occasionally felt flashes of pleasure and an almost indulgent fondness from the Vampire King, but Daemon's deeper feelings and thoughts were hidden from him. Yet there were flickers of almost a sense of *fear* coming from Daemon, and he'd never experienced true fear from the Vampire King.

He wanted to talk to the Daemon about it, but they'd been with people or crazy things had been happening. Now they

were alone, but he was finding it hard to begin this. It was easier to ask other questions.

“No, this is not our home planet. This is not even our home plane,” Daemon answered with an almost teasing smile on his lips. “This world’s more intelligent inhabitants were long gone when we got here. We built our cities, and then delved into theirs. Many magic things we found. Many dark things, too.”

“That sounds fascinating. I would love to go adventuring out there,” Julian admitted.

“We will. We will do all you desire.” Daemon’s gaze though was troubled.

Julian shifted from foot to foot.

Why is he blocking our bond, and not letting me know what he’s thinking? What’s displeasing him so much? He experienced a guilty start. Was it because I questioned him in front of others about the fates of his enemies? Our enemies, really. I want him to be happy. But I have my own mind. But he’s the king. I understand that better now.

He was about to open his mouth to say something—*anything*—but the elevator car slowed to a stop, and the crystalline doors silently opened to reveal a circular throne room. Julian’s eyebrows rose as he took in the beautiful marble floor inlaid with lapis lazuli and other precious stones. The walls of the room were sliding glass doors that curved in a perfect circle. There was a vast balcony outside of those doors, many of which were open. A cool breeze caused the white sheers to flutter in the wind. But it was the throne that amused Julian, and captured most of his attention.

He headed over to it, letting out a laugh. “Whoa, looks like Caemorn is into royal power too! He has a throne! Or is this one of yours that he stole and repurposed? Doesn’t look much like you though.”

The throne was high-backed, inset with more precious metals and stones, a massive seat, and broad arms. It reminded him very much of some Renaissance seat for a king.

It definitely wasn't Daemon's style, and it didn't fit with the room's rather simple interior.

Tacky and ostentatious. Caemorn didn't want anyone to forget that he was the head guy around here, Julian thought. I bet he sat in it and smiled in that satisfied, oily way of his. Yeah, he would definitely imagine how powerful he is in this thing.

He cast a look over his shoulder at Daemon, who had trailed much more slowly after him. Daemon had a faint smile on his lips, but he was clearly distracted. Caemorn's assumption of power seemed unimportant. That surprised Julian. He thought that Daemon would take joy in sending this monstrosity over the balcony railing.

He is really upset about something. I have to find out why and apologize if it is something I've done. Better to take the bull by the horns.

"Hey, what's going on? You've been acting funny since you defeated everybody." Julian straightened, and went over to Daemon. He put his hands on Daemon's broad shoulders, relishing the muscle beneath the soft, fur coat. "You should be celebrating, even though it was over before it began."

"Should I be celebrating?" Daemon asked back, his red eyes searching Julian's face, but there was no accompanying touch of his mind.

"Should you? Of course! You protected everybody. And now I guess you get to determine if any of them get to be Vampires again," Julian stated with a shrug. "I'm sure you'll have many of them begging to serve you and—"

"You think being a Vampire is worth begging for?" Daemon crossed his arms at the wrists behind his back.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure that they will—"

"Not *them*. *You*. Do *you* think being a Vampire is valuable?" Daemon pressed. He held himself so stiffly that he looked like he might break.

"Being a Vampire is... it's amazing." Julian shook his head in confusion.

“Even though you were brought into this dark world through violence, pain and betrayal?”

Daemon’s red eyes were fixed upon him. Though there were only a few feet between them, it felt like miles.

“It doesn’t matter how it all began. What matters is *now*. I love it now. I wouldn’t trade my life now for anything!” Julian assured him. “But seriously, what’s wrong? Why are you acting like you’re in mourning? Are you worried about Seeyr? Are you upset about those people almost attacking us?”

Daemon’s mouth opened, but no words came out for a half a minute. Finally, the Vampire King rasped out, “Do you want to become human again? Do you want to leave me?”

Julian was stunned into silence, which had Daemon going paler. He shook himself.

“What are you talking about? Why would I want to become human again?”

“Why... Why would you *want* to? I do not know. I just need to know if you do.” Daemon let out a bark of laughter that almost sounded like a sob. He looked away from Julian’s face, staring out one of the doors to see the night sky of the Ever Dark. His emotions and feelings were still partially hidden. But Julian could sense them. They were roiling, but whatever had been obsessing Daemon before was broken. The largest feeling the Vampire King had was *relief*. He’d never seen Daemon so *raw* before. It was unnerving, even though he was touched that Daemon allowed him to see it. “You were not even thinking about it. You were not even considering it. And here I was... afraid.”

“Armageddon... of course! You thought I wanted you to turn me human again? Ah, no. Not at all. Never.” Julian shook his head vociferously. “Why would I—oomph!”

Daemon crushed Julian to him, which caused all the air to be squeezed out of his lungs. The Vampire King eased his hold. But only a little. Julian wrapped his arms around Daemon, too, and rested his cheek against the Vampire King’s shoulder.

In amazement, Julian asked, “You really thought that I would want that? That I would want to leave you? Why? I’m *yours*.”

Daemon’s laughter, it was rich and deep but held a note of almost hysteria to it, interrupted his questions and that simple last statement. “You are mine? Mine... I thought... I do not know what I thought.”

Julian pulled back to regard that beautiful face. “You thought I would want to go back to my old life? Never.”

“Was your old life so bad? I thought you enjoyed it.” Daemon was squeezing him tightly.

“There were lots of things I loved about it. But I was driven by *loss*, Daemon. My only goal in life was revenge on Vampires.” Julian shook his head. “Revenge is not something you want to live for. Believe me. It’s empty and horrible in its own way. If not for Christian... I don’t think I would have made it.”

“Do not say such a thing!” Daemon’s hold tightened even more.

“Crushing me, Daemon. Crushing... ah, that’s better. Thank you.” Julian breathed deeply again. “And forget about what I said before. You thought I wouldn’t want to be with you for eternity? Are you crazy? Yes, you are crazy. I see that now.” He ran his hands through Daemon’s thick locks. The Vampire King turned his head into the caresses so that he could kiss Julian’s palms. “Yes, so crazy.”

“Some would say you are.” Daemon’s eyes hungrily roamed over his face as if wanted to imprint it upon himself. “You sacrificed your mortal life for your friend. Not for me. The two of you could undo the acts that made you Vampires. You could be free—”

“Of you? Of Balthazar? Of all our friends? Before it was just Christian and me. We were seeking connections. Answers. Now I have those answers. I also have completely different questions.” Julian grinned. “But now, I get to find out the answers to those with *you* and Christian and Balthazar and

everybody. Not to mention, I now have eternity to do it! I'm not going to ever lose what I have now to the ravages of age and illness. I'm going to just get *better*."

Daemon smiled, and his eyes, for a moment, looked bright, but with tears. He looked outside again until he recovered. "Yes, that is true. All true, and so much more."

"Basically, I get everything that was awesome about being human, and get to keep it forever. Plus there's *you*."

Julian let out an uncertain laugh. He had never cared to bring a lover into his life so completely before. But Daemon was the real mystery for him.

"Me? Hmmm, I see. I am a mystery for you to solve."

"I doubt I'll solve you. But I'm going to enjoy trying." Julian smiled brilliantly at him.

"There is darkness in this immortal life, you know? The things you have seen so far are *mild*." Daemon's expression was so serious.

"I know." Julian's head dipped down.

Daemon tipped it back up again so that they were eye to eye. "There are things I will have to do that will disturb and upset you."

Julian's lips parted, but no words came out. Not at first. "I... I know that."

"And there are things that I will need from you as well," Daemon's voice dropped towards a whisper. It was clear that he didn't want to say these things, but had to.

Just in case they'll change my mind about being a Vampire.

"I have to stop questioning you," Julian said.

"It is not the questioning. It is—"

"You have to be king." Julian smiled.

He pulled away and went over to the balcony. He stepped outside and the wind caught him. It was so strong up here he

thought that he might be lifted up and sent sailing away. He went to the railing and leaned on it. Daemon came up beside him. One hand slid along his back and rested on his spine. He was anchored. No matter how hard the wind blew, he would be safe here.

“You do not like killing,” Daemon said simply. “You think I treat life too cheaply.”

Julian reluctantly nodded. “You have all these powers that make death like so *unnecessary*.”

“Not completely. I am very powerful, yes. I can do miraculous things in your eyes, but even a small cut can bring down the mightiest person,” Daemon answered him. “I want you to consider this. I could have Eyros sweep through the minds of all those that would fight against me. He could tweak them just so.” Daemon made a movement with his hand, a slight adjustment as if he were turning a dial.

“Yeah, like he did with Lisette?”

“Except it would not have worked with Lisette long term unless she accepted the feelings he placed inside of her.”

Daemon turned towards him. The red and blue moons shone down on his preternaturally beautiful face, and the fact that he was not human was so very obvious at that moment.

“What would have happened to her if she hadn’t accepted the things Balthazar implanted?”

“She would have gone mad. His suggestions would have continued to tear at what she really felt,” he explained. “This cognitive dissonance would have eventually worn her sanity away.”

“But what about Elena? He’s going to take her memory of Heath and—”

“It is a punishment,” Daemon interrupted him. “If she becomes ill from it... well, that is what happens.”

Julian’s mouth went dry. “She deserves that because of me?”

“Because of the fact that she would harm you, not only because you have done nothing to her, but you are the fledgling of her king, *and* the friend of her lord. She broke all of that, all those friendships and all of that loyalty to hurt an *innocent*.” Daemon’s eyes blazed, and his tone was intense. “So *no*, it was not just because of you. She earned this punishment because of what it says about *her*.”

“But she is deeply in grief and—”

“She is, but there are lines, and they must not be crossed.”

“If it was you, though. What would you have done? If someone hurt me? If someone killed me?”

“Would I have killed innocents to avenge you?” Daemon’s expression was so strange. “I would destroy the whole world if someone took you from me.”

Julian gasped again. He couldn’t even move. He was treasured. And it was terrifying.

“You do not want me to care for you so much?” Daemon’s voice was thick with emotion.

“I do not know if I should be worth so much... death.”

“You are worth that and more.” Daemon blinked, and looked away. “But if I did to someone to another Vampire’s fledgling, I should expect them to attack me, to try and give me a Second Death. For I would have earned it.”

Julian curled against the much larger body of the Vampire King. The thought of anyone touching Daemon, trying to hurt Daemon, had his fangs coming out. “No, no one touches you. No one hurts you.”

Daemon chuckled as he hands carded through Julian’s hair. “Oh, my sweet. You have a little predator in you, too, I see.”

Julian twined his hands in Daemon’s shirt. He could feel the hot, hard muscles beneath it. “I don’t know what it is. I wanted to kill Caemorn, and you wouldn’t let me.”

“Because I saw that it would destroy you,” Daemon answered.

Julian gasped. “W-what? Destroy me? I know you said... I didn’t realize it was so dark.”

“Yes. I foresaw it. I could not let you be hurt by it. Better to let Caemorn keep his life, instead of you being harmed by his Second Death.” Daemon stroked him. “That is the only reason. Do you think I care for Caemorn? I think of him not at all. You are the only one that matters to me.”

“I think that is going to upset Caemorn. He looks at you a little dreamy-eyed.” Julian snorted.

“I am well aware of his regard. I will use that for what we need. But that is all. He has a Master. It is, sadly, one who does not value him.”

“Yet he’s been so successful. But Kaly doesn’t care?”

Julian could only imagine how hard the world of Vampires must be without a Master to care for one. He would not wish that on anyone. But both Caemorn and Balthazar had experienced just that.

“You feel pity for him!” Daemon chuckled indulgently. “Oh, my soft-hearted fledgling. You cannot even bear the thought of *Caemorn* without a loving Master.”

“I know how lucky I am because I have *you*.”

Daemon pressed his lips to Julian’s head. It felt so good. So loving. So tender. So safe. This was not the edge of the knife they sometimes walked when the desire burned bright between them. It was the other tender part that Julian had never really experienced before. Daemon hummed happily.

“You were really worried that I’d want to be human again?” Julian confirmed.

“Yes, you are making me feel foolish.” Daemon hummed happily again.

“You should! You’re the king! You can read my mind! But you were torturing yourself by thinking I didn’t want to stay with you?” Julian tutted.

Daemon let out a rumbly laugh. “When you say it like that, it sounds incredibly self-indulgent.”

“I should feel good that you want me with you so much that you were afraid to know if I didn’t want you, even if the odds were ridiculously low to like non-existent.” Julian grinned, and buried his face against Daemon’s chest. Daemon kissed and petted him. Happiness buzzed in the Vampire King’s mind. That had Julian realizing something. “Is that why Balthazar got so sour there? Is he afraid that Christian won’t want to be his fledgling either?”

Daemon paused, and he felt the Vampire King’s solidarity with Eyros.

“Oh, God, it totally is! You guys are hopeless romantics!” Julian groaned.

“I am quite logical and—”

“Not about this. You two are both ridiculous. And I love it.” Julian hugged him more fiercely.

“Well, then I do not mind.”

Julian sighed. “Not to get serious again, but I’ve never been around killing. Except for my parents, and that was devastating. I *know* what happens to those left behind. The pain of it. Even Caemorn... it would be one thing if I were to kill him to save myself or someone else. Like in self-defense, but—”

“What if you knew killing him would save many lives? Not at this moment, but down the years?” Daemon asked, easily sliding back into this philosophical conversation.

Julian’s mouth screwed up into a bitter smile. “That’s like the question: would you kill Baby Hitler. Oh, wait, you don’t know who that is. Let’s just say he was a monster. But let’s say I had him in front of me, I would try to change Hitler so he *wouldn’t* kill those other people.”

“You think people can be changed? Yes, I see you do. You think that the warp and weft of fate can be undone? I see you think that, too.” Daemon smiled at him.

“You think I’m being naive about this?” Julian lifted an eyebrow.

“Idealism and naivety are often confused. I will just say that I am very jaded.” He cupped Julian’s face. His powerful hands gentle as the caress of the wind.

“You’ve lived a long time. Seen so much more than me.” Julian left out a huff. “I should defer to you—”

“The day that happens I shall be very sad,” Daemon chuckled.

“What? You like me questioning you?”

“Yes, I do. You make me look at things in a new light, but...”

“Not in front of others?” Julian winced. “Yeah, I sort of got that afterwards down there. And before with Elena. And before that... Okay, I’ve got to be aware of myself.”

“You can question me over our connection if you can keep your face from showing it.” Daemon was grinning.

“Christian says that I cannot lie worth shit.” Julian shook his head, and laughed. “Crap, I’ve got so much to learn. And I’d be excited for it, except for the fact that you have to deal with all my mistakes.”

“It’s not a mistake for you to have empathy. And you can express it. You will be seen as the soft touch while I am the hammer. That works often in ruling,” Daemon told him.

“But I have to do it in a way that doesn’t undermine you.” Julian gritted his teeth. “I don’t mean to. You know that, right?”

Daemon caressed his cheeks. “Of course! And so do those close around us.”

“I’ll figure this out. I’ll be better. Daemon—”

“You are doing just fine.” Daemon gazed at him with that deep affection. “Better than fine. You are so amazing.”

“Uhm, would you still think I’m amazing if I asked you to do one thing? You know, something that only the fledgling of the Vampire King could suggest and not get in trouble?” Julian asked.

“What? Oh...” Daemon looked over at the ugly ass throne.

“Unless it is like some kind of heirloom and we shouldn’t do anything to it,” Julian said. “I might not want to kill Caemorn, and I don’t even want to make him unhappy... much. But that throne...”

Daemon grinned.

The people at the bottom of the Spire heard a mental command from the Vampire King to get out of the way, just before the Preceptor’s throne came crashing down and shattered into a million little pieces.

Story Continues in Book 6!

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