



VAMPIRE'S HEART

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HELEN SCOTT

VAMPIRE'S HEART

BLOOD VOW

BOOK 4

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Blood Vow Book Four

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ROOK

“Right this way,” I instructed, allowing Cordie to fit her tiny hand into mine. It no longer burned hotly against my own, instead it was a similar temperature. The thought made my heart swell with appreciation. She was truly mine.

The carriage had arrived, and I knew that we couldn’t keep the court waiting. Ever since we were summoned, I had tried to think of a reason to postpone our arrival. I knew there was no getting out of it. No excuse short of death—one of ours—would be acceptable, and even then, the rest of our group would be expected to make an appearance. Making the king and queen, and by extension the court, wait would be of no benefit to any of us.

Cordie eyed the black, horse-drawn carriage with confusion. “What the hell is going on, Rook?”

We had been in a whirlwind of activity since the summons arrived, and I hadn’t had the time to sit down and explain all of the details to her. I gave her an overview, sure, but we hadn’t got into the rest of it yet. So not only had she recently turned and was grieving not just the loss of her mortal life but the loss of her grandmother as well, now she had to prepare for arriving at court. I felt bad for her, but it wasn’t as if we had the luxury of time in this scenario.

“Come here.” I pulled Cordie close and breathed in the magnificent scent of her skin, while my eyes remained locked on the carriage and the gaping door that once closed, would

only open again when we were in vampire territory. “I’m sorry that you’re being thrown into all of this.”

“It’s okay, but you have to give me *some* details. Otherwise, I’m left completely in the dark.” Cordelia intertwined her fingers through those on my right hand and rubbed the scalded skin that had scabbed over.

“You’re absolutely right. Let’s start with the carriage, shall we?” I motioned to the horses and led her over as I spoke. “Things work differently in the vampire kingdom. Technology, for example, is frowned upon by most vampires. It’s not banned, by any means, but most choose not to use it because technology is what forced our species to reveal themselves to the public decades ago.” This was the court’s way of trying to claim back some of its power, power they felt they’d lost by having to reveal themselves.

“No technology?” Cordelia smirked. “That’s hard to imagine.”

“I know. It’s hard for me to wrap my head around it too after living outside the kingdom for so long, but that’s just the way it is.” I rubbed one of the horse’s sides, scratching along the length of its neck, causing it to sigh in satisfaction. I smiled at the soft nicker as the horse used its head to try to win another pet from me.

“Cars, automated processes, things like that don’t really exist in our world. It’s only at the palace that we can even really use cell phones or watch TV. If we do, it’s never talked about.” I held up the scroll we’d received. “Something like this is the ideal form of communication for most vampires.”

Confusion still knitted Cordie’s brows. “Some of my—I mean our—kind fought change the way we would fight an enemy. It’s the price we pay for such long lives. There are a few who have retreated from the palace and the main city because they allow the limited use of technology. Those are generally the eldest among us, though.”

Cordelia petted the same horse on the nose. “I hope they don’t expect me to go without all technology because I’m not sure I could pull that off.” She loved her cell phone, her tablet,

and her computer. She communicated by email and text message as much as she did by speaking in person. This would certainly be interesting to watch.

She thought the vampire community was crazy. I could see it in the quirked eyebrow and puckered lips on her face, though I knew she wouldn't say it out loud. Maybe our methods were a little abnormal, but we had survived for millennia just fine without the technological advances humans depended on so desperately.

"Listen, it's okay for you to question our practices when we're alone, but you can't enter the court with a face like that." I pointed to Cordelia's smirk.

"A face like what?" She smiled innocently and held her hands under her chin. "I'm not sure what you mean, Rook." And now she was doing an exaggerated Southern Belle accent and demure grin.

"You know exactly what I'm trying to say. If you start questioning our methods at court, some vampires will see it as you insulting them. And they'll take offense to it," I explained. In this regard, I didn't think it was only vampires who would take issue. I didn't say so, though, because right now, we would only be dealing with vampires.

Cordelia grinned. "I'd never do such a thing." There was still a mischievous spark in her eye that had me on edge though.

I grabbed her by the arm, my desperation to keep her safe overwhelming me. "Stop it, Cordie. I'm serious. You'll already be looked at with suspicion since you weren't born a vampire. You were turned, and that immediately puts a huge target on your back." These kinds of things hardly ever happened anymore. It wasn't her fault, obviously, but it was something she needed to be aware of.

Cordie's smile faded. "A target? You make it sound as if they'll be out to get me." Finally, I had her attention.

I wanted to take back what I said and see the smile return to her face, but I couldn't, not if I wanted her to be at least a

little prepared. “Not necessarily, but the fact that you’re a turned vampire will raise suspicions from the start. You don’t want to do or say anything that adds to their wariness of you.” I rubbed my temples as I wrestled with the question of whether or not the court would ever accept her, no matter how she acted in their presence.

Cordie had a mind of her own, and now that she was a vampire, her independence and fiery personality were only amplified. Of course, it only made me want her more but that didn’t mean it couldn’t still get us in trouble at court.

“Rook, I understand what you’re saying, but I don’t know if I can convince them that I’m not a threat to their court.” Cordelia’s voice was laced with worry. It made her quieter, her tone deeper.

But this wasn’t a choice. She had to do this. “You can, and you will.” I cupped her chin in my hand and stared into her mesmerizing, darkened crimson eyes. “I’ll be there with you every step of the way.”

“I promise I’ll take my cues from you, and I will try to keep my opinions to myself,” Cordie attempted to assure me. It might not matter, but I couldn’t tell her that. Instead, my only choice was to prepare her as best I could. She at least needed to know what to expect and what was expected of her.

“What if there’s a subject you’re unclear on? Maybe you don’t know where the vampires stand on a particular social issue. What then?” I cocked an eyebrow and stared at her while I quizzed her.

Cordie popped her knuckles. “I won’t say a word until I check with you or Cross about it.”

Oh, thank goodness. “Ding, ding, ding. That’s the correct answer. As your prize, you’ve won a passionate kiss from yours truly.” I pulled Cordelia close and pressed my mouth to her soft, full lips. She was warm, tasted of innocence and honey, and the combination was heady. Underneath it all was something ancient and powerful, something that had called to my own blood from the very beginning.

The pressure of being at court would be less stressful by having Cordie at my side. Maybe I wouldn't mess up the entire thing, but we were going to have to talk about those bedroom eyes of hers. All it took was one look from her and my whole body was rocked with desire.

Cordie pulled away and eyed the carriage where Cross and Ash stared expectantly, a mix of lust and annoyance on both of their faces. "I guess we better join them."

I took one of her hips in each of my hands and then hoisted her into the carriage before taking a seat at her side. "Remember, whether you like it or not, you're a princess now since you're bonded to me. When we get to court, there will be a steep learning curve to overcome."

I turned to Ash and Cross. "As soon as we arrive, I need you both to find tutors for Cordie."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Ash replied, arms crossed.

He was just as unhappy about this whole situation as I was. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that no one was happy about us having to go to court, probably not even the king. Bringing home someone he exiled had to rub him the wrong way.

"Not just any tutors," I continued, probably over-explaining, but these were matters of importance—of life and death, literally. "They need to be loyal to me. I can't trust just anyone to get Cordelia up to speed."

"Of course," Ash replied in a curt tone that I rarely heard him use outside of court, which I knew had to mean that I'd offended him.

I couldn't help it, though. One wrong step at court and it wouldn't just be me that was punished but Cordie as well. The king wasn't known to be lenient with his punishments. If she didn't get the right training, Cordie could very well wind up dead.

CORDELIA

I listened as Rook laid out the plans for me to receive tutoring once we arrived at court. It wouldn't hurt to get a crash course on the vampire community's rules, regulations, and general social expectations. I just hoped Rook didn't expect me to sit quietly like a good little schoolgirl all day while he did the important work. After all, we were bonded now.

From what I could tell, being bonded held some kind of weight in the vampire court. Our bond was probably the thing that would save my life if I did somehow mess this all up. I hoped so anyway. Either that or it would doom both of us.

The idea that I could have such an impact on Rook's life was more than a little unnerving, but he insisted on us being bonded before we went to court, even though he was worried about it as well. He hadn't said that explicitly, but I could sense it like wind whispering through trees. It left a chill in my bones.

There were things he wasn't telling me, which made sense. I didn't expect him to dump every bit of information I might need on me at once, especially not with my current state. But being left in the dark didn't exactly feel good either.

Looking around at the carriage, I suddenly felt a wave of grief hit me. I felt as if I was in a strange period drama where I was worried about a dowry or something, a drama that Gran would have loved.

The deep burgundy seats were made of velvet and were plush and comfortable, tufted with big matching velvet-covered buttons, but they also reminded me of the lining in a coffin. And the wooden accent pieces, which appeared to be hand carved into various gargoyles, did nothing to change my idea of the medieval-looking vehicle. It was masculine and somewhat fearsome.

“Will I be stuck at court forever, or will I be able to visit Gran’s grave from time to time?” I interrupted the conversation because I needed some answers, now. No one had explained to me how this all worked or how what was about to happen would affect my future. It was okay for Rook to keep some explanations close to his chest, for now. But the length of my stay at court was a critical detail that I expected to be told.

Gran’s funeral had been rushed, and it broke my heart to think that the services didn’t get the care and attention she deserved. And, because of my shifted state, everything happening with Rook, and the summons to court, I had to hire someone else to clean out the house. It was depressing to think about all of the family mementos and special knick-knacks that had been hauled off to a donation center without a second thought. So many memories and so much family history was gone now, without anyone pausing to recognize their significance.

I should’ve been the one to manage every detail. And, if I was being honest with myself—which I wasn’t unless I was in a maudlin mood, like now—I should’ve been the one to protect Gran in the first place. The thought of her being ruthlessly murdered by the vampire hunters hurt worse than the actual stab I received to the chest. I couldn’t bear the thought of the terror she must have felt as she faced them, as she tried to fight back.

Before I could get sucked too deeply into my grief, Rook shifted his body to face me. “Of course not. We won’t be at court forever. I promise you’ll be back before you know it.”

His words were comforting, and I found myself hoping that there wouldn’t be external factors that kept him from

sticking to that promise. I wasn't sure how this court was conducted, and I didn't trust it.

I needed something to think about that wasn't death and the somewhat imminent possibility of mine. "Ash, will you be driving this thing?" I gestured to the front of the carriage, expecting him to move up to the driver's seat.

Rook and Cross exchanged a look before Cross cleared his throat. "Cordie, it's probably best that you pretend you've never met Ash once we get to court."

I stared at him, bewildered. If this was another thing I had to remember, I needed to know the reason for it. "Why would I do that?"

"Ash was never supposed to be here helping us. He made the decision to put his neck on the line where the court's concerned." Cross leaned against the side of the carriage and peered out the window. Once a security guard, always a security guard. "If word gets out that he's been assisting Rook with his," Cross cleared his throat, "turned mate, things could go badly for him."

"What will happen to him?" I asked, suddenly worried for the man who had been nothing but helpful since we met, in more ways than one. I couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to him because he helped me and the wrong person didn't like such a thing.

"It depends on who finds out and how they react," Rook answered darkly, his voice deep and serious. "It's best if Ash isn't mentioned at all."

The thought made me uncomfortable. Ash had helped turn me into a vampire, he'd saved my life, and now I had to treat him like a stranger? It just felt wrong.

Suddenly, the carriage lurched forward and began rolling down the street. It was a smoother ride than I thought it would be, with wooden wheels and a distinct lack of shock absorbers, and I looked out the window for a moment.

"So who's driving, then?" I asked, glancing back and forth between the three men who were snickering as if I'd asked the

dumbest question ever. In my world, the question made sense.

“It’s magic,” Rook replied, grinning.

Cross snorted and waved his hand in the air. “Magic? I think we can give a better explanation than that.” He turned to me and continued, “The more logical explanation, which I’m sure you’d appreciate, is that the horses have been enchanted to only go to the vampire court when they have certain equipment on. So, that’s where they’re taking us.”

So technology was bad, but magic and enchantment was okay. There were a lot of vampire rules I didn’t understand.

“And,” Ash added, “it allows vampires to stay safely inside of the carriage without having to employ a human to drive...unless they’d prefer that.” I couldn’t imagine why anyone would prefer a human driver when they could simply use magic to get the job done. Humans were unpredictable. I would know.

My chest tightened at the thought of a human driver. A desire stirred deep within me, and I rubbed at the base of my throat, trying to ease a thirst I couldn’t slake. I caught the men giving me some side-eye, probably all aware of what was running through my mind. None of them reacted though, which I appreciated. Sometimes drawing attention to the problem was the worst thing to do.

“Oh,” I said, trying to wrap my head around the concept. “That’s...convenient.”

Their idea of travel was an odd process, but it somehow made me feel safe. I appreciated the detailed explanation Cross provided. It made sense to me, which was refreshing since everything else seemed so hush-hush and veiled.

Based on the fake pout on Rook’s face, I assumed he preferred the magical explanation as opposed to the more logical commentary. I couldn’t stifle a giggle when Rook crossed his arms and pretended to be upset.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder why he seemed to suddenly be making light of the situation. A few minutes ago, he sounded as if he thought the worst, expected it even, but

now it was almost as if he was trying to make the situation out to be less dire than it really was. After all, I saw the way Cross and Ash reacted when they saw the scroll. Based on their reaction alone, I knew that going to court wouldn't be a walk in the park. Plus, their warnings made the whole process seem very intense. Intense enough that I needed tutors to prepare me for it.

I glanced at Rook, who had given up the ruse of being upset over Cross' explanation. Staring into his eyes, I tried to read his expression. He seemed happy on the exterior, but inside, something was brewing. I couldn't shake the feeling that he was hiding something important from me.

CORDELIA

The journey in the carriage was long and uncomfortable. While it started smooth, each time the wheels rolled over a bump or hit a dip in the road, my whole body jolted, which wasn't exactly ideal. Somehow, the men were all asleep, or at least resting their eyes. For a while, I stared out the window, but then I looked at Rook.

I was relieved to see Rook resting and hoped it would aid in his healing. It was taking his body an especially long time to recover from being sprayed with holy water and set on fire. It worried me, to the point where I didn't like for him to leave my sight. Not that he would tell me if the effects were more intense than I assumed.

Anytime I asked him about his wounds, he shrugged the situation off and assured me that he'd heal in a few more days. But every time a few days would pass and his body had hardly changed in appearance, I grew increasingly concerned. It had been "a few days" a few times now.

My concern was mounting to the point that I was considering talking to Cross or Ash about my worries. The thing that stilled my tongue was that it felt like I would be betraying Rook to discuss his vulnerabilities with the men who had provided blood, and more, to me when he was unconscious in the next room. I wished he would be honest with me about it, but I doubted he would. Sometimes it was like he didn't trust me, like he thought if he was honest with

me I'd flip out or something. I tried to remind myself that he'd been unable to trust anyone for a long time, at least since he was exiled from court, so it would take time for him to learn to trust me.

I wanted to reach out to him and touch his skin, if not for his comfort than to reassure myself that this wasn't all a dream. It was as if my mind was playing tricks on me, and I struggled to determine if I was in a weird dream state, where Rook wasn't really there, or in the real world with him by my side. Touching him kept me grounded, helped me determine fact from fiction.

As I closed my eyes, attempting to rest, the memory of being stabbed in the chest flashed through my mind, jolting me into an upright position. The flashback was all too real, and I had to focus on my breathing to slow my racing heart. I glanced around at the men to see if they'd notice my sudden discomfort, but thankfully they were all still asleep.

Perhaps, the memory was the last hurrah of my dying human brain, some strange attempt for it to hold onto the memory of my death and tell me that I wasn't supposed to be here anymore. Either way, I wanted to relish it, even if the memory was painful beyond comprehension. It was still a part of me...or of the old me. I didn't want to lose those parts of myself that remained, which Rook said could happen.

My chest tightened, and I realized that I was hungry. No, not just hungry. I was *ravenous*. It was as if the memory of my death stirred a longing for my body to repair itself. And now that I had turned, there was only one thing that would energize every ounce of my being.

Blood.

I knew because Rook warned me that if I didn't feed soon, I'd become more animalistic. It had only happened once or twice since I turned, but each time was increasingly intense. I hadn't felt like myself during those heightened states of hunger.

The desire for blood had consumed me, and my instincts thrust me into a state of chaos. Nothing could've stood in my

way of feeding, and once I did receive the blood I longed for, my lustful instincts took over. My need for sex rose to the surface, and I had allowed myself any pleasure that presented itself to me.

The carriage continued on its straight path, and I stared out the window, attempting to distract myself from my hunger with each passing tree and cloud in the sky. I even tried counting the bumps that the carriage hit along the way, but no matter how much I tried to focus on my surroundings, the hunger inside me was mounting.

I could feel the base of my fangs begin to vibrate and knew that I was dangerously close to losing control. I had to get out of the carriage and hunt soon or risk turning into a mindless beast.

Before I allowed that to happen, I closed my eyes and forced my mind to focus on my arrival at court. Surely, we were getting closer, and I didn't feel prepared in the slightest. What had I actually learned about the vampire court up to this point? I racked my brain and could only come up with a handful of facts, which was terrifying.

Rook was a prince, but that wasn't new information. Even the feeders at The Nest had caught wind of his royal status, which only made him more desirable. It wasn't only women who wanted him either.

I'd also been told that he had been exiled for some reason, though I wasn't quite sure what had happened. It must have been something horrific for him to be cast out of court, left to depend on The Nest for sustenance. But no one had ever filled me in.

Cross was Rook's bodyguard, and it stood to reason that he was exiled at the same time. Or he'd chosen to leave with Rook. That made sense too. Rook was the kind of man who inspired loyalty. Either way, he had stuck by Rook's side, which was a testament to Rook's true character. And Ash was, what? A supporter of Rook's? It didn't really matter either way because I was supposed to pretend that I didn't know Ash existed. Probably better I didn't know that answer. The less I

knew about it, the less chance there was that I would let a detail I shouldn't know slip.

Before I could give it any more thought, a jolt of pain shot up from the tip of my toes to the top of my head, as if someone had sliced me with a knife right down the center of my body. I gasped, which woke Rook. He sat up and was by my side in an instant.

"It's okay, Cordie. Just breathe." He grasped my hands and stared into my eyes. "It's just the wards of the kingdom reacting to the fact that you've only recently turned. I promise it will get better with time, and eventually, you'll only notice a slight buzz running along the top of your skin as you approach the kingdom."

Over time? How much time? Regardless of Rook's explanation, the pain overwhelmed my senses. It was more than pain, though. The sensation infiltrated every part of my body, increasing my hunger even more.

CROSS

Carriage rides always lulled me to sleep, and this one was no different. When the carriage jerked roughly from a pothole in the middle of the road, I woke up and saw Cordelia grasping her chest with both hands. Her gaze darted wildly in all directions, and it was obvious that she needed to feed. I knew the beast all too well, and it was certainly stirring within Cordie.

Poor Rook was attempting to calm her down, murmuring sweet nothings and rubbing her back in soothing circular motions, but he wasn't having much success. He was still unwell and needed his rest. I was concerned about the lack of progress with his healing and didn't want him to get upset over anything.

"Rook, switch places with me." I stood, hunkered over in the small space, before he could protest. "Sit and rest," I instructed.

He didn't argue with me. I thought I caught a glimpse of relief written on his face as he plopped down next to Ash and leaned his head against the side of the carriage.

"Cordie, are you hungry?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

Cordelia eyed me as if I was a thick, juicy steak on a platter. "The pain from the wards is stirring my hunger. I don't think I'll be able to control it much longer." She flicked her fangs with the tip of her tongue.

“Feed on me,” I offered, rolling up my sleeve. The option to feed from one another had always existed for vampires, but it didn’t quite have the same effect as feeding from a human. Vampire blood didn’t sate the hunger in quite the same way.

Most of the vampire community was hopeful that the new synthetic stuff would eventually eliminate our dependency on humans, but I doubted that would ever happen. The real stuff was just too satisfying. Even thinking about it made my mouth water, and I wasn’t the one who needed to eat right now.

Cordie held her hand in front of her. “No, I’ll be fine. I just need to focus on something else.”

Knowing from personal experience that she was nearly at the point of no return, I retrieved a small blade from my pocket and sliced my wrist. Within seconds, the scent of the blood reached Cordie’s nostrils—I could see the exact moment because her lips parted, and she licked her lips—and she jumped on me like a lioness on a wildebeest.

Her warm mouth closed over the cut and her tongue thrust against the wound, trying to force more blood to the surface. When it didn’t seem to flow as freely as she would’ve liked, Cordie released my wrist and eyed my throat.

“Go ahead,” I encouraged her, turning my head to the side. “I can take it.”

She didn’t hesitate before latching onto my neck and beginning to feed. Her small body pressed against mine as she fed, and I couldn’t resist pulling her closer as she straddled my lap. Ever since we’d slept together, I hadn’t been able to get Cordelia out of my mind.

Cordelia sighed and began grinding against me. Her hips worked over mine, her body tight and hot. The pressure of her warm center left my cock no choice but to respond in kind.

A low growl from the opposite side of the carriage broke the silence, causing me to immediately freeze in place. Cordie, on the other hand, kept sucking and grinding as if her life depended on it, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Rook was awake and glaring at the two of us.

Rook snarled, showing his fangs. “I thought I made myself clear. I am to be present for any sexual interactions between the two of you,” he growled, and the threat was clear in his voice.

Cordelia released my neck and turned to face Rook, still straddling my lap. She wiped a few drops of blood on the back of her hand and smiled. Rook glared at her, his chest heaving up and down from anger.

The tension was thick, yet somehow Ash managed to continue to sleep through the entire ordeal. Rook’s anger was like an entire presence in the carriage.

Cordelia stood and made her way over to Rook as I crossed my legs, attempting to hide the evidence that I’d been equally turned on.

“I’m so hungry,” she said, pressing her body against Rook’s. Without a word, Rook turned his head toward Ash, offering Cordelia the opportunity to feed. She latched on, moaning with satisfaction. The sound was deep and husky, almost guttural as it vibrated through me. It made me *want*. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as she moved rhythmically against his side.

Rook didn’t take his eyes off me, glaring over Cordelia’s body. He was angry, enraged was probably a better word, as if he wanted to rip my throat out. Unfortunately, there was nowhere for me to escape his death stare.

Ever since Cordie turned, Rook had been more sensitive to the idea of sharing her. I understood that they were bonded now, but that hadn’t changed the way I felt about Cordie. Based on our most recent interaction, or even the last few minutes in this carriage, her desire for me hadn’t changed, either.

I could only hope that Cordelia adjusted to being a vampire quickly, which would give Rook the assurance he needed. Some of his anxiety probably stemmed from the fact that he wanted to make a good impression at court. Being exiled was stressful enough and now he had to return to court

with his tail between his legs. He'd turned Cordelia without permission, and that wasn't something the court took lightly.

I was hopeful that interactions at court would go smoothly, and he'd mellow out. Then, things could go back to the way they were.

If Cordelia struggled at court, though, Rook wouldn't loosen his reins. I couldn't help but worry about how he would react when other vampires developed an interest in Cordie.

And they would.

There was something about her that was irresistible, and I knew that Rook wouldn't take kindly to others lusting over her. Maybe he would stay strong and find a way to restrain himself from violence. Then again, it wasn't likely. After all, this was Rook.

Violence at court was both standard and frowned upon. I just hoped Rook didn't kill anyone important.

CORDELIA

I rocked down harder against Rook's cock, pulsing with need for him. He tasted so good, smelled so good, and felt so good. He would always be my first choice, and I would never get enough of him.

I danced my hands up into his hair, pulling his head to the side as I sucked more blood from his vein. Nothing had ever tasted as sweet and alluring as Rook. I loved it when I could have his blood coursing through my veins and his cum dripping down my leg. Every detail about him was the strongest aphrodisiac I had ever consumed.

Rook's hands slid up my legs, pushing the bottom of my dress to the side so he could cup my mound without interference. Panties were a long forgotten item when I had the likes of Rook and Cross around. I moaned into his neck as I slowly detached my fangs from the side and sat back. I held onto his shoulder and rocked against his length and his palm. Tingles spiked my core, heating me up for the main attraction.

He leaned forward and licked at my mouth. Catching any bit of blood that I had spilled. His eyes darkened and I'd never wanted a man as much as I did him. I never wanted anything in my life as much as I wanted him.

I pulled my hand up to my neck and undid the halter of my dress, and the material cascaded down and pooled around my waist leaving my breasts bared for his appreciation. I smiled at

the dilation I saw in his eyes. My nipples puckered, ready for any attention he might feel inclined to give.

Cross hissed behind me, and I turned my head and watched him, his gaze locked on my body. I smiled at him and bit my bottom lip.

I wished that he could be surrounding me too, kissing my neck and shoulder, worshiping the soft skin of my back. But Rook was adamant that I was not to smell like anybody else but him. Where we were going, he had to show that I was his. Which I didn't mind, and a little part of me delighted at the thought of one having me and the other wanting me. I could at least give Cross one hell of a show, letting him know what we could be doing at a later time.

Rook's finger twirled at my lower lips as I rocked against him. I shivered at his touch and swirled my fingers over my skin before holding the weight of my breasts. Bouncing them for the men, I pinched my nipples causing sparks to zap down to my core, which in turn, launched a moan out of my mouth.

I lifted my hips up and undid Rook's pants as quickly as I could. My fingers fumbled, though, and I had to refocus my efforts. I needed to be filled. The slick I'd built up made me ready to be plunged into. The foreplay this time didn't need to be elaborate. I was ready. I was *always* ready for him.

I snaked my hands inside his pants, wrapped my fingers around his girth, and stroked him fast and hard. I needed him to want me as desperately as I needed him.

Wanting Cross to have a better view, I slid from Rook's lap and turned myself around. I lined myself up with Rook and held him steady as I ran his crown along my slit and clit to coat him well. Slowly, I lowered myself down on him until he bottomed out. He hissed at the contact as I gasped.

Rook's hand pushed along my skin, around my back and up to my ribcage before cupping my breasts and tweaking my nipples harder than I did earlier. I gasped again and leaned back against him, arching my back to fill his hands with more of my chest. He grabbed my jaw and moved my face to kiss him. His tongue lashed at my lips until I opened for him, and

he took my mouth as one hand reached down under my dress and played with the bundle of nerves between my legs.

I squirmed and moaned and lifted my dress up so Cross could see everything. I didn't want to hide anything from him. His groan reverberated in the carriage, and it was clear from the sound and the bulge in his pants that he liked what he saw. If he was able, and if Rook wouldn't lose his mind, I knew he would be fucking my tits right now. Then when I was freed from my kiss, he would be fucking my mouth.

My pussy clenched around Rook's cock at the thought. Rook groaned and released my mouth. My gaze strayed to Cross once more, and I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Of course, we'd woken Ash. We weren't exactly being subtle or quiet about what we were doing, though he was doing a good job of pretending to still be asleep.

The strange thing was I didn't care. In fact, part of me enjoyed the fact that he was there as well. I wanted him watching, longing to touch me, just like Cross was.

I moved forward and balanced myself better so I could ride his dick, making my breasts bounce for Cross. I licked my lips for him and watched him as his cock twitched in his pants, though he did nothing about it.

Rook held my hips hard. I groaned at the fullness of his cock slamming up into me as I dropped myself down on him. He was owning my body, and I couldn't get enough of it. I wished the bruises would stay, but they would heal quickly and cease to exist.

I ground down harder on Rook. I wanted every inch of him touching every inch of me.

Eyeing Cross, I imagined his length in my mouth at the same time, and I clenched around Rook again.

"Fuck, yeah. Tighten that pussy for me." If I hadn't been in the dress, he would have spanked my ass, painting it red with his handprints.

I squeezed again.

Rook roared and his hands went up to my shoulders, holding me as he pounded harder into me. I bounced over his lap and my breasts were jumping all around.

Cross licked his lips. His hands clenched white. His pants showed me that he was harder than stone. I loved what we were doing to him, forcing him to hold on tight to his control while Rook was losing his inside of me.

He was smacking into my cervix, and the pleasure-pain felt too good.

“Don’t stop, right there,” I moaned.

The sensations were overtaking me. I shut my eyes—the pleasure was all-consuming. Rook pushed me onto my legs and shoved my arms against the seat in front of me, bending over.

I was closer to Cross, but still not touching, as Rook took me harder from behind. I grasped the seat and white knuckled it for the release that was building up to be a massive explosion...as they always were with Rook.

His balls smacked against my clit, and he rotated his hips so his cock would slam just right against me.

“Almost there. Almost there.”

“Come for me, Cordie. Come for your Blood Heart.”

He gave four more hard thrusts, and I was lost in the oblivion of the sensations of an orgasm like no other I’d had with him. Everything released, and I floated on a high.

Soon after, Rook splashed my inner walls with his cum, and I felt utterly satisfied.

He sat back in his seat but didn’t let me go, staying fully seated inside of me while we calmed down.

CORDELIA

Eventually, Rook released me and allowed me to get dressed once more, though from what I could tell, neither of us particularly wanted me to. I glanced at Ash, and either he slept like the dead or he was really good at faking it. Part of me was grateful for the fact that he seemed unaware of my carriage tryst, but another part of me was curious what he would think if he saw us.

It took a while for my heart rate to slow, but once it did, I looked up and realized we had entered the center of the kingdom. I was stunned.

How could something like this have existed for centuries without people knowing? And how did people not know about it now? There had to be some kind of glamor keeping it so well hidden.

The palace itself towered over the landscape, dark and gothic. It reminded me of something you'd see in an old school horror movie. The movie would be in black and white, of course, and everyone would be running around screaming as the vampires terrorized the land.

But this was real life. Maybe not my *old* life where things like vampires were just something that lurked in the shadows. This was scary and real. Besides, there wasn't any screaming, just the sound of horses' hooves on cobblestone with an ominous castle hovering in the background.

We rode the rest of the way to the front of the palace in silence. Now that I was closer, I could see that the structure was in excellent condition. And though it had seemed spooky from afar, it was actually gorgeous up close. The entire palace was made of black marble lined at the edges with gold.

The king and queen had certainly leaned in on the whole traditional and stereotypical vampire aesthetic. I stared in awe at the candles, rubies, and overall opulence that lined every window, doorframe, and walkway I could see. I strained my neck to see past the palace and realized that the extravagance was everywhere within sight, not just attached to the palace. I'd been so distracted by Rook and feeding that I must've missed a lot of detail as we first entered the kingdom.

Suddenly, the horses came to a stop, lurching us forward. The men were prepared for this sudden halt and braced themselves. I, however, fell gracefully onto the floor of the carriage.

"Damnit," I muttered as they tried to hide their amusement.

Rook helped me back into my seat just in time for me to see a large wall with an ornate, glass gate centered over the roadway looming ahead of us. It slowly opened from left to right by forces unseen, and as our carriage passed through, I felt another wave of magic passing through me. What, exactly, could they determine from these magical scans? Hopefully, the powers that be couldn't tell that Rook had just sent my body into orgasmic convulsions.

The horses came to their final stop, and I was ready that time, bracing myself against the plush, velvet carriage seat.

"We made it," Rook announced. Relief poured through me at his words. I knew that being at court wasn't going to be easy, but I didn't want Rook and Cross to get in trouble because of me, so just arriving was one hurdle that we'd already overcome.

I practically pressed my nose against the window and stared at the front of the palace, where a row of staff stood. They were dressed in black with white shirts and red

embellishments, and they were all perfectly still in a sharp line.

“Alright, Cordelia, this is it.” Rook had already exited the carriage and was holding his hand out, waiting for me to step out of the carriage behind him.

We walked, hand in hand, with Ash and Cross following closely behind us. Standing in front of the palace, I felt blatantly miniature in comparison to the monstrous castle.

The staff as a whole, and in concert with one another, welcomed Rook, recognizing his status. However, they didn’t make eye contact or welcome me in any way. Attempting to be polite, I smiled in their direction, but they turned away from me, acting as if I wasn’t there. I tried not to feel rejected by the first people to meet me as a vampire, outside of Rook, Cross, and Ash, but their indifference hurt.

Was this the way it would be the entire time? Vampires pretending that I didn’t exist? Maybe they didn’t think I belonged at court, and perhaps they were right.

Rook leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Follow my lead.”

He then straightened his posture and walked with purpose toward the main doors. The staff opened them without a word, and we entered the large, empty foyer.

In the distance to our right was a set of grand, curved stairs that led up to the second level. In front of us was a long hallway that I assumed led to different parts of the palace. To our left was an open door that revealed a large, empty room, from where a dark figure emerged.

“Rook, welcome.” The man stepped forward and glanced at me. “I’m Randolph, the court visor. If you would, please follow me. I’ll show you to your rooms,” he said with an open sneer. He was tall with the pale, ghostly skin of a man who no longer had good blood flow, and his hair was coal black. He looked almost translucent.

Rook tightened his grip on my hand and nodded. “Of course. Thank you, Randolph.”

Randolf led us down the hallway to the right and toward the stairs. They were covered in a deep, red velvet carpet and had ornate carvings on the banisters that I knew I would need to study to understand. As we walked, I took in as much of the palace as I could. It was just as decadent on the inside as it was on the outside, if not more so.

The walls were covered in richly colored tapestries and the floors were a shining, black marble, matching the exterior perfectly. Every few feet there was a decorative pillar or sculpture. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, dripping with crystals. It was unlike anything I'd ever witnessed, and I half expected Dracula himself to come swooping down at any moment, his cape crisp and billowing.

Once Randolf led us to our rooms, he opened the door and allowed us to step inside. "You have until dinner to rest and get cleaned up. You'll be presented to the king and the rest of the court at that time." Randolf turned to leave but stopped and glanced over his shoulder at me. "I hope you brought something appropriate to wear."

Panic sank in as I realized I had nothing to wear. As a matter of fact, I hadn't had time to pack much of anything. All I had were the basic items one needed when staying somewhere away from home. I certainly didn't have a dress, not to mention something that was elegant enough to meet the king of the vampires.

The harsh reality of everything that was happening truly hit home in that moment, and I was left with panic rising in my chest at the idea of meeting the vampire king in nothing but jeans and a t-shirt, unless I showed up in the dress I was wearing, but somehow that didn't seem like it was appropriate either. Why hadn't they warned me I'd need a dress or something?

CORDELIA

Pacing the floor, I took in the grandeur of the suite while simultaneously panicking over the lack of a formal gown in my suitcase. The room was massive, with an equally large four-poster bed in the middle of the far wall. A sitting area with a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table was situated in the center of the room. There was also a dressing room and an attached bathroom.

The whole suite was decorated in shades of crimson and black, with rich fabrics and furniture. It was also windowless, which wasn't really surprising, but still felt strange. That being said, it was fit for a king, which I supposed Rook might become one day, although he would likely not be sent to a room in what I assumed was the guest wing. I couldn't even imagine the opulence of the royal quarters, but the only word I could think of was *grandeur*. And this room certainly had grandeur in spades.

I glanced at Rook and tried to imagine him as king. I couldn't do it. I had no basis to compare my ideas to. I wished he would tell me more about his role at court and how his status might change now that he changed me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Rook and Cross in the middle of a deep conversation. My new vampire hearing was extremely sensitive, so I knew that whatever they were discussing in such hushed tones must've been private.

They weren't allowing me to hear any of it, which irritated me. *Secrets don't make friends, boys.* I was a part of this world now, and I deserved to know exactly what that entailed.

Watching the two of them interact, though, reminded me that they had decades of history together. Plus, they each had their own histories with the court itself. I couldn't expect to know or understand everything overnight. It would take time, but even knowing that, I could say that patience was not my strong suit.

I focused my attention back on the suite. The style of the room reminded me of the period pieces Gran and I used to watch together after dinner. The mere thought of her caused me to unexpectedly choke up. A choked sob escaped my throat, and Rook and Cross were at my side within seconds.

"Cordelia, what's wrong?" Rook asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

I shook my head and tried to compose myself. I wasn't sure why I was suddenly feeling so emotional. "Nothing, it's just...this whole situation is a lot to take in, and I miss Gran." I was here in the vampire capital, a place where the King and Queen were in charge, and they had all the say about what happened, how I was treated, whether or not I was able to walk out, whether I was even able to take a next breath.

Rook nodded in understanding and pulled me into a comforting embrace. "I know that it's a lot to process. But you're not alone, I'm here with you." There was comfort in that.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I know, thank you."

"Come, sit down," Cross said as he guided me to the couch where I sat between them.

"Your Gran was proud of you. I know that for a fact," Rook whispered softly. "You have to remember how much she loved you, Cordie."

"Yes, and just focus on all of the time you had with her," Cross added. "I know it doesn't take away the pain, but find comfort in knowing that you shared a special bond that can't

be broken by death.” He was right, of course, but that bond didn’t make losing her any less painful.

Their compassion for me only made me weep harder. Why did affection and kind words make a person feel even more vulnerable? I should’ve been able to get myself together by now and deal with my grief enough to move forward, but their words only served as a reminder of how much I’d lost.

“I know this is hard for you, love,” Rook said as he stroked my hair, “but you’re not alone. You have us.” He kissed the top of my head as he murmured into my hair.

Cross nodded in agreement and the three of us just sat there, holding one another in the midst of my grief. It was nice to know that I had them to lean on, especially since I was feeling so alone in this new world. I really only had them now.

A knock at the door interrupted their words of affirmation.

Without being invited in, a woman burst through the door. “Good evening. I was sent with supplies,” she explained. As she stepped to the side, a slew of men and women entered the room, each pushing enormous metal racks with a variety of clothing hanging on them.

“I’m sorry, we weren’t expecting anyone,” Rook said as he stepped away from me. The entrance of a stranger dried my tears. I knew I couldn’t look vulnerable in front of anyone except Rook and Cross right now.

The woman shrugged. “It’s no problem, my lord. We were told to come as soon as possible.”

“Thank you,” Cross said as he directed the staff where to put the racks of clothing.

The woman gestured to the long row of colorful fabrics and clothes, sashes and scarves, corsets and tuxedos. “These were sent by a friend to ensure you each have access to the court’s latest fashions. They are at your disposal. Please, feel free to peruse and try them on.”

My puffy eyes widened in disbelief. There were more clothes in that room than I had owned in all of the different phases of my entire life combined. The racks were lined up in

a row that stretched from one wall to the other. Most of the clothing appeared to be for me. Dresses of all colors and shapes hung on gold hangers, beckoning to me. This couldn't be real life.

“Thank you,” I managed to say, still in shock.

The woman bowed, then she and her staff left the room, closing the door behind them.

I walked over to the racks of clothing, running my fingers along the silky fabrics. I had never seen anything like it.

“Do you like them?” Rook asked as he came up behind me.

I nodded, still in awe of the beautiful clothing. Some had sequins, others were more traditional with wide ribbons and long skirts. There were silks and laces, satin and linen, opulence, and extravagance. “They're amazing. I've never seen anything like it.”

Rook grinned at my reaction. “You'll have to thank Ash later.”

Ash? For someone that I was supposed to pretend I'd never met, he sure was going out of his way to make me feel special. I should have known. A man like Ash paid attention to details, and he would know I would need things once I arrived.

“But for now,” Rook continued and motioned to the racks of clothing, “pick out whatever you'd like to wear to dinner. It'll be the dress you wear when you introduce yourself to the vampire world.”

I gulped and nodded. This was all so surreal. I never thought I'd be in a room full of designer clothes, let alone picking out an outfit to wear to a formal vampire dinner party.

This was the kind of place little girls dreamt of, but I never once thought I would land somewhere like this. There were so many things I'd never dreamed of that were now my reality. I was doing my best to roll with the changes, but there were too many to take in.

Rook came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Don’t worry, Cordie. I’ll be there with you every step of the way.”

I leaned back into him, relishing in his strength. “Thank you.” I wouldn’t make it through this without him.

And he was right. It wasn’t like I was being presented alone. Everyone knew that Rook had turned me and that I was with him. All I needed to focus on was keeping my cool and looking presentable.

No pressure.

ROOK

I watched in awe as Cordelia took in the sights and sounds of the place I'd spent most of my life. It was like seeing it all for the first time with a fresh set of eyes. Her eyes sparkled as she looked around, her emotions echoing down our bond. She was experiencing awe, wonder, and fear, all of which were completely appropriate for the vampire kingdom.

If I was seeing it all for the first time, there would certainly be an element of apprehension and uneasiness for me. The palace was designed to inspire such awe.

Vampires were known for eliciting those emotions in humans as well. Even though Cordie was officially one of us, I knew that her brain was still trying to comprehend the change. It would take time for her to acclimate to this new environment and, more importantly, the vampires that existed within it.

There was nothing I wanted more than for Cordelia to fall in love with the palace and for the court to welcome her. But based on the reactions from the staff alone, I knew that my aspirations were far-fetched and likely wouldn't come to fruition.

If she couldn't convince them to accept her, I worried about what that could mean for our bond. It was incredibly rare, but there was a time when the king had the ability to break blood bonds. That type of magic wasn't used anymore, but the fact that the possibility still existed scared the hell out

of me. I wasn't sure what I would do if Cordelia and I were no longer bound together.

I shook my head, pushing the dark thoughts away. There was no point in dwelling on something that may never happen. Even if it did, there were procedures the king would follow, arguments that I could make. Worrying about that right now would only serve to take time we might not have for something that might not happen. For now, we had to focus on the task at hand: winning over the court.

I watched as Cordelia combed through the racks of clothes, carefully inspecting each piece. She finally chose a dress and disappeared to the bathroom.

“Are you alright?” Cross asked. His concern was probably more for Cordelia than for me, but I appreciated the sentiment.

I turned to him, shaking my head. I could be honest with him. “No, I'm not. I'm fucking terrified, actually.”

“As you should be,” Cross said matter-of-factly. He was as well aware of the courts' sometimes sudden, and without explanation, actions. “This is a lot for anyone to take in, let alone someone who's new to all of this.” I wasn't the one he was talking about, but I nodded regardless.

“I just feel like I'm failing her,” I admitted, feeling the truth of the words in my gut. “I can't even get the staff to warm up to her, let alone the court.” I'd thought because of their loyalty to me that they would be more receptive to her. When they hadn't, the blow I felt was like I'd taken a punch to the gut.

“You're doing the best you can,” Cross said. “Don't underestimate her. Cordelia is a strong woman. She'll be able to handle whatever comes her way.”

He had faith in her, and I should've, too.

I smiled at Cross, hoping to reassure him that I'd be fine. Of course, since he knew better than almost anyone else, Cross could see right through me.

“There's no sense in worrying about the bond between you and Cordelia, because it's set and can't be broken by anyone.”

Cross gestured toward the hallway. “Not even the king.”

Maybe it wasn't possible anymore. Maybe that magic had been banned. I didn't know, but that it had ever existed and that the king could potentially bring it back was a worry that wouldn't fade until we were home, away from the court.

Cross and I had been through too much together, that's why he knew exactly what I was thinking at all times. Maybe it was because we drank from one another too often. Not to mention all the sex. Everything we'd done had deepened our bond, something that was obvious to everyone we encountered. It still surprised me, though, whenever Cross seemingly read my mind.

Cross slapped my shoulder. “You need to cheer the fuck up. You're the one who is officially bonded with Cordelia. You should be walking on cloud nine right now.” He was jealous and not bothering to hide it. I understood. Cordelia was quite a woman, so he had one hell of a reason to be jealous.

Before I could answer, before I could explain that this was a bit more complex than cheering up, I felt the mood shift. I sensed a sadness in Cross and eyed him. His face was heavy, and his eyes were affixed to the floor.

“What's wrong with you?” I asked, scratching my chin.

“You're not going to like what I have to say.” He glanced over my shoulder at the closed bathroom door and a sinking feeling took up residence in my gut. “I've never felt the way I do about Cordelia...with anyone. I doubt I ever will again.”

“I see,” I said, not knowing what he expected me to say. I wasn't angry. He couldn't help how he felt, but I expected him to follow the guidelines—fuck, they were rules—I'd set.

“Can you seriously consider making our sharing arrangement permanent?” Cross looked up at me, his eyes glazed over with emotion.

His request was unheard of. Especially at this stage, with Cordelia and I sharing a blood bond. My gut was screaming at me to say no, to hoard Cordie and keep her all to myself, but I was also the one that had let the cat out of the bag so to speak.

Cross' feelings for her were partly my fault, but dammit I'd expected him to react to her the way he reacted to most women. She should have been a quick fuck, a little fun for him, nothing else.

Cross filled the tense silence. "I think I might go crazy if you forbid us from being together again." He stared at me deep and hard.

Trying to ignore the urge to punch my best friend in the throat, I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. "I'll think about it." I would certainly think about whether or not I was going to let him be with Cordelia. Although, right now, I doubted he would like the outcome of such thoughts.

"Thank you." Cross' voice was barely above a whisper.

I nodded before turning my attention back to Cordelia. Cross and I still needed to change, so as I listened to her rustling around in the bathroom, I picked out a suit to wear from the single rack of options Ash had provided me with. Fortunately, Cross did the same after I'd made my choice.

The two of us stripped down and dressed back up in silence as I stewed over his request. When a jolt of nerves ran down my bond with Cordie, I knew that she would be emerging any second. I imagined her smooth skin as she undressed, and the mental image drove me wild with lust and, surprisingly, fury over Cross' request.

It was the bond talking, I knew that. I couldn't control my anger toward the situation. My best friend had the gall to ask for a sleeping arrangement with the vampire I was bound to by blood, as if I didn't have enough to worry about without adding his lust for Cordelia into the mix.

Remembering the way Cordie thrust her hips against Cross in the carriage made my blood boil. Did she feel the same way about him? My mind raced with the possibilities of what could happen if I said yes to his request. How would Cordelia react? And how would a permanent sexual agreement affect the dynamics between the three of us?

If this was how I reacted to my best friend, how would I ever control myself once Cordelia was in front of the others?

CORDELIA

The hot shower loosened my tense muscles, and I felt better prepared to face the court. Now, all I had to do was make myself look presentable, although I wasn't exactly sure what that looked like to a vampire court. I slipped the small, red dress on, and it fit like a glove. Ash was either a very good guesser or he'd checked my closet, because he seemed to know exactly what size I needed.

It was a halter dress with a deep V-neck that jutted downward, almost reaching my belly button. The skirt sat eight or nine inches above my knee and fit like a second skin. It was scandalous by my standards, but after searching through all seven racks, there was nothing I considered conservative. Even the long dresses were form-fitting with tall slits and low necklines. This small, red dress actually covered more of my body than any of the other dresses would have.

Was this how all female vampires dressed? Were there women wandering around the castle with just pasties and lace on? I wasn't sure, but the red dress spoke to me, so I went with it.

After lacing up the low corset back, I stepped into a pair of black heels and smoothed my hair back over my shoulders. I stared at myself in the mirror. The woman staring back at me was not Cordelia Brown. She looked like a seductress, ready to pounce on her prey.

I ran my hands over the dress, making sure that it was secure. I couldn't help but wonder if this is what Ash wanted me to look like. If so, then he would be pleasantly surprised when he saw me. I hoped so, anyway.

My hand hovered over the door handle for just a second as I prepared myself for the rest of the evening. I opened the door to find Rook and Cross engaged deeply in a conversation. The noise of the door moving had them both turning to look at me and the discussion they were having ceasing. As soon as Rook saw me, his eyes widened, and he let out a low whistle. They practically ate me up with their gazes, confirming what I already suspected. I looked good.

Rook stepped forward. "Damn, Cordie."

Cross sighed deeply. I could tell he was holding himself back from commenting, but his eyes slowly took in every inch of me. "You look...nice."

I raised my eyebrow. "Nice?"

"He means you look like a snack," Rook said, and though his voice was low and edged with sensuality that caused bolts of pleasure to shoot through my body, he shot Cross a territorial glare. "I have to say, I agree."

I blushed and glanced down at the ground, not knowing how to respond. I'd never been ogled like this—with such intensity and possessiveness—and it was a bit overwhelming.

"You clean up pretty good yourself," I said as I eyed Rook before letting my gaze drift over Cross appreciatively as well. They each wore suits that seemed to be tailored to their exact measurements, which wasn't surprising given how my dress fit. Ash was apparently a master of details.

"Well, shall we be off then?" Rook asked, motioning toward the door. "I'm sure the court is eager to meet you, so there's no time to waste. Plus the throne room is quite a hike."

I gulped and nodded, following Rook out into the hallway.

We moved through the castle like the wind, following one hallway after another. We took a left here, a right there, and I quickly forgot how to get back to the room—there were too

many twists and turns for me to keep up. Even with our enhanced speed, it took a few minutes to make our way to the throne room.

Once we arrived, the attendants at the door instructed us to wait until our names were called. I squeezed Rook's hand, and he smiled reassuringly, though there was nothing to calm my nerves at that point.

An older servant, possibly a human since his skin had rosy tones unlike the much more pale vampires, opened the heavy double doors and stepped aside. Then he announced Rook, followed by Cross, and finally me. Although, he didn't refer to me by my actual name and instead called me the *blood sworn*. I wondered if that was just the more formal title for Blood Heart or if it had other definitions as well.

The crowd that was gathered fell silent as Rook offered me his elbow, leading us into the room. I descended the stairs as gracefully as possible, trying not to trip over my heels. Cross followed just behind us.

As we made our way down the steps, I took in the scene. Not surprisingly, the other vampires were dressed as provocatively as possible, making my dress look like a frumpy frontier frock in comparison. The king, seated at the head of the room, had long, dark hair and an equally long beard. He wore leather pants and a silk shirt. I choked back laughter because, aside from the beard, the guy was a walking stereotype.

The queen, seated at the right hand of the king, wore a black corset dress with red roses embroidered on the skirt. They both watched closely as Rook and I approached them, and the queen's lips curled into a sneer. Clearly, she already wasn't a fan of mine, which sucked. I'd wanted this to go smoothly, but the tightness in my chest that had nothing to do with hunger told me it would be anything but smooth.

The crowd stood in rows on each side of the aisle that Rook, Cross, and I walked down. They were all dressed similarly in reds and blacks, some of the men with single lapel

roses and the woman bejeweled as if they were headed to an award show.

Once we were close enough to the thrones, Rook dropped into a low bow. I had no idea how to curtsy, so I did the same thing. The entire room burst into laughter, as if I was making a joke.

“What happened, Rook?” the king demanded. Before Rook could respond, the king proceeded, gesturing in my direction, “Why does she not know the simplest things, like how to greet her new king and queen?” The king glared, but at Rook, not at me. “You’re her sire, and you’ve not taught her?”

My stomach clenched as panic set in. I was doing everything wrong and now Rook had to somehow convince the king and queen that I was worthy of their acceptance.

I was screwed.

Rook, however, remained calm. “My apologies, Your Majesty,” Rook said quickly. “She is new to our world and has not had the chance to learn our customs. Please allow me to explain.”

He glanced up at the king who gave a nod, and we both straightened from the bowed position. “Cordelia and I met at The Nest, where she was a feeder. Our relationship quickly became more than a business proposition, though we never crossed the lines set forth by the vampire court.”

He made it sound so simple when I felt it was much more complex, but I didn’t interrupt. Something told me this was not the time to offer my input on the events.

Rook paused and glanced in my direction. “Cordelia was the unfortunate victim of kidnapping at the hands of Massimo and several human vampire hunters.”

As Rook continued his explanation, I watched the reaction of the crowd. Most of the faces were stern, with no emotion. They listened to Rook’s words, all of them judging me, likely trying to decide if I deserved to stay at court or not.

The king and queen, on the other hand, seemed overly interested. The queen even leaned forward in her seat, as if she

was hanging on Rook's every word. A hunger I was all too familiar with shimmered in her gaze as she looked at nothing but my mate, making a possessiveness I didn't even know I had bloom within me. I tried to rein it in, because if I knew one thing, it was that attacking the queen was not a good plan.

It was pretty damn tempting, though.

CORDELIA

“Cordelia unknowingly shared information with a classmate at the university named Milo, who worked closely with Massimo and his co-leader, Jonathon.” Rook took a deep breath. I wondered if he was stalling or simply trying to find the correct words. But my memory of the event was much more traumatic than his words led the court to believe. There was fear, terror rather, and I’d seen my own death.

“Eventually, this boy revealed his true colors and led the vampire hunters to Cordelia. Our connection was blocked, so by the time I pinpointed her location, they had stabbed her in the chest and left her body inside a burning house,” Rook continued, his voice subdued and devoid of emotion. It was as if he was trying to remain aloof.

My stomach turned at the mention of Milo and my chest ached where he’d stabbed me. I wanted nothing more than to forget that the whole thing had ever happened, not that I ever could since it was what was responsible for me being a vampire. And for Gran being gone. Not that I could afford to think about that right now. I took a calming breath and focused on what Rook was saying.

“The vampire hunters were relentless in their attempt to kill me once and for all. They rigged a device that sprayed holy water and flames on my body as I entered the house, thus my appearance today.” He gestured toward his still-healing skin.

Hopefully, the king and queen wouldn't put together the timeline and realize that Rook was struggling to heal as quickly as he should. I was pretty sure they would attribute it to his lack of feeding, but I couldn't be certain.

The king and queen remained silent as Rook finished his story. They stared at me with such intensity that I thought I could almost feel their eyes boring holes into my soul.

"And when you found the girl, she was already dead?" the king asked as he narrowed his eyes at Rook.

"That's correct. I had no choice but to turn her at that very moment. Otherwise, she would have been gone. Forever." Rook glanced in my direction with sad eyes and squeezed my hand.

Hearing it laid out like that made my stomach roll with nausea. How had my life been turned upside down like this? I never expected any of this when I first signed on at The Nest. Truly, I only wanted some extra cash to help Gran with her medications and to pay for my tuition.

Awkward encounters with vampires were a given, but everything else? Being kidnapped, attacked, and ultimately stabbed to death? Not so much. And no matter the outcome, it was traumatic. But the king's glare was equally so, not only was it obvious that he wished I didn't exist, but there was a sick kind of curiosity gleaming in his eyes as well.

His eyes flashed with rage as Rook explained my death and how he took it upon himself to turn me into a vampire.

"What do you think of all this?" The queen eyed me, gripping the arms of her throne until her knuckles were as white as bone.

I glanced at Rook, wondering if it was acceptable for me to speak on the matter. He gave me a slight nod.

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around it," I replied truthfully. "One minute I was at The Nest, doing my job, and the next I was being attacked by vampire hunters and turned into a vampire. It's a lot to take in." I paused and glanced at Rook, grateful to have him by my side. "I'm happy to be alive

and with Rook. Although, I do wish that Gran hadn't been murdered in the process."

Missing her was an almost constant ache in my belly.

I probably should've stopped there, but I was eager to gain the king and queen's favor. "I'm also excited to learn more about the vampire court and what my new life will entail now that I'm officially a vampire."

The king and queen shared a look before the king returned his gaze to me. "Do you think you're going to take the queen's place at court?"

"I-I—" What was I supposed to say? "No, sir. That's not what I meant at all."

My explanation didn't make a difference. The king and queen both looked at me with disgust. It was clear that they thought I was nothing more than an aberration, one that was definitely not worthy of being part of the vampire court, which I was thanks to my bond with Rook.

The king finally spoke. "Rook, this is unacceptable. You must prepare her for the full blood vow, which will allow her to become a member of court."

Rook stared silently, as he was being chastised, as the king shook his head and stared. I supposed the king didn't understand the time constraints we'd been working under. Rook was doing what he could in the short amount of time we'd had.

The king cleared his throat and continued, his voice rising with every few words. "You have until the next full moon to bring her up to speed. If she can't meet that goal, we'll have no choice but to consider her a threat to the court and put her down."

Put her down? So, what? After everything I'd been through, everything I'd lost, they'd kill me, just like that if they didn't find me satisfactory? I wasn't a slow learner, but I was willing to bet there were plenty of things I needed to understand. And the next full moon was in a month, if that. And *put her down* seemed like a very final solution.

Rook nodded in agreement, but the king wasn't finished. "When you present her, she must be fully prepared to pass the *Trial of Blood*."

My chest tightened. *Trial of Blood*? What in the world was that? Sounded like a Rambo movie to me, and it sure as hell didn't sound good. All it took was one look at Rook's face to confirm that whatever it was, he wasn't pleased about it.

ASH

As I stood amongst the crowd, watching as Rook and Cordelia presented their predicament to the king and queen, I couldn't help but wish I could speak up. After all, I was there when the turning ceremony occurred. Not that there was much about it that was ceremonial. There truly had been no other option than for Cordelia to be turned at that very moment. And, even then, none of us were sure that it would work.

I wanted to tell the king and queen that Cordelia was a good person, and despite the fact that what happened wasn't her fault, she handled it with the grace and courage of a natural-born vampire. Also, I wished I could say that she didn't deserve to be put through some sort of trial just because she'd been turned into a vampire.

But I couldn't say a damn thing. It wasn't my place. Not to mention the fact that we couldn't let on that Cordelia and I had interacted previously.

When Rook and Cross were exiled, the court had been told to act as though they were dead. My contact with them was strictly against the rules, but I didn't like the current king and queen and I knew I wasn't the only one who felt that way. It was that dissatisfaction that led me to working with Rook anyway, but since I did so in secret, the only thing I could do now was stand there and watch as Rook took the fall for everything. It wasn't fair, but there was nothing I could do to save him.

Rook and Cordelia's arrival at court went as I expected, but the announcement of a Trial of Blood was a complete shock that launched a tidal wave of whispers through the court. It took me by surprise, and I was sure I wasn't the only one. There hadn't been a trial in centuries, and certainly not during the current king's reign.

I wasn't even sure that the current king had the magical abilities required to pull off a Trial of Blood. The only reason he became king over Rook was because of his relationship with his true mate, his Blood Heart.

Now that Rook had his own Blood Heart and was back at court, that could all change. Or at least, the potential for revisions was there. It would all depend on Rook and Cordelia's next moves.

The king and queen finally dismissed Rook and Cordelia, though not before giving them a stern warning. They had until the next full moon to get Cordelia up to speed or she would be slaughtered since she was considered a threat to the court. It would destroy Rook in the process and guarantee the king's place as ruler. Something which I was sure everyone in the room was acutely aware of.

Once the audience dissipated, I homed in on two of my old friends, Leina and Tressa, who were gossiping with a few other couples near the grand staircase. They would be the perfect candidates to train Cordelia, getting her up to speed on everything related to the vampire court. They were darkness and light, the quintessential opposites attract couple.

"Hello, old friend," I shook Leina's hand. "It's been a while. How have you been?"

Leina smiled, her topaz gaze softening as she glanced at Tressa. "We've been well, can't really complain."

Tressa's dark eyes widened. "Can you believe that Rook turned a human without permission from the court? The whole thing is so dramatic." A wicked grin danced across her face, one that could've even been called bloodthirsty. Her thirst for knowledge as sharp as the cut of her dark hair, the bob ending

just below her jawline, exposing her long neck. "I can't wait to see how the whole thing turns out."

"Well." I cleared my throat and looked at each of them. "That's what I wanted to speak to you about. Rook asked me to find someone trustworthy, someone that he can depend on, to tutor Cordelia. You know, get her up to speed on all things court related." I watched as they eyed me with caution, eyebrows raised skeptically, no doubt wondering what was in it for them, and what the smallest fraction of work they could do to earn those rewards. Those who had lived within the court for any length of time knew that nothing was free and no one did anything out of the goodness of their heart.

"If you'd be willing to do this for Rook, he would most certainly remember you in the coming days and weeks as he reestablishes his presence at court." I could make such promises because I would be the one making sure he remembered them.

"Oh, well, we'd be honored to help Rook in that way." Leina took Tressa's hand and patted it meaningfully. "Wouldn't we?"

Tressa followed Leina's lead. "Yes. We will be at your service, and hers, when you'd like us to start."

I smiled at Tressa and the two of us ironed out the details of tutoring. After completing the typical pleasantries and required facetime with the citizens of the kingdom, I made my way back to Rook's suite and knocked gently on the ajar door.

"Come in, Ash. Oh, and before I forget, thank you for sending the clothes for Cordelia." Rook gave Cordelia a devilish grin, no doubt admiring the red dress she had chosen. I'd certainly been admiring it since I first pictured her wearing it.

"Ah, yes. Think nothing of it." I waved my hand in the air as if my act of kindness had been completely innocent. Internally, I admired the way Cordelia had not only handled herself immediately after being turned into a vampire, but also the way she was taking each twist and turn at court with stride. Her strength was as admirable as her beauty.

“How did things go with acquiring the tutors?” Rook asked.

“It went well. Leina and Tressa will help mentor Cordelia and can start immediately.” Simply because of the way she’d died and been turned, the king had put a time limit on her education about court matters and the Trial of Blood. There was no reason to be blasé about it or pretend it didn’t exist. “I think she’s going to need all the help she can get if she’s going to make it through the trial.”

I shook my head, still in disbelief that a Trial of Blood was even being considered. How long had it been since one of those had taken place? I couldn’t remember the last time, nor could I remember even having heard one being considered.

Rook bristled at the mention of the trial and began pacing the room. “How the fuck did they come up with a Trial of Blood? They sure pulled that one out of their asses, didn’t they?” His voice rose as he stomped across the floor of the prince’s suite.

“Rook, you have to calm down. You don’t want them to see, or hear, that you are frustrated. Don’t give them the satisfaction.” I reached for Rook’s shoulder, but he shrugged me off. He didn’t understand that being a member of the court wouldn’t protect him. Being prince meant nothing if he couldn’t figure out how to use the title to his advantage.

Cordelia, perfectly timed as always, walked over to Rook’s side and whispered to him while rubbing his back, soothing him. Her presence was a comfort, and Rook immediately calmed down. Even his stance relaxed as he leaned in toward Cordie.

Watching the two of them interact fascinated me. I had never seen Rook react to anyone in that manner before. Even before Rook was exiled from court, he never had more than a handful of lovers. And, even then, he never seemed to be emotionally attached to them. This was different, and I couldn’t help but be a little jealous of their connection. Rook had never had such an emotionally intimate relationship, and neither had I.

I glanced at Cross, who stood in the corner with his arms folded, watching Rook and Cordelia closely. The same jealousy I felt flashed in his eyes, which could only mean one thing.

We were in trouble.

CORDELIA

Focusing my eyes, I tried to concentrate on the explanation Rook was providing to me. He had already informed me that the Trial of Blood hadn't been enforced in centuries. "They're testing me. Of course they are. Why wouldn't they want their rival to fail miserably in front of the entire court?" Rook cracked his knuckles and leaned forward.

"They're going to try and make you look weak, Cordelia. They'll pull out all the stops to ensure that you don't pass the trial." His voice was laced with anger, and I knew he was struggling to keep his emotions in check. I didn't need his anger, though. I needed to know how to treat this thing, how to get through, and how to convince the court that I was... worthy.

So this was a big deal. I knew it didn't sound good when the king said it. "What exactly happens during this... Trial of Blood?" I asked, not really sure if I wanted to know the answer, but very sure I *needed* to know it.

"Cordelia," Rook began before taking a deep breath. "During the Trial of Blood, a vampire's true nature is revealed. It is said that the court can tell if a vampire is good or evil based on the way they handle themselves during the trial. We'll be separated and starved for a week."

"We can't eat for a week?" I asked, confused.

"Remember, you're a vampire now, so it won't kill you. You'll just be cranky as hell once the seven days are up,"

Rook explained, rubbing his temples.

I didn't understand how starving us would show my true nature, but I'd dieted as a human. I could fast as a vampire. Although remembering how surly I'd been when I gave up carbs made me rethink that conclusion. Letting Rook know I was nervous wasn't an option, though. I'd seen his reaction and knew I had to be strong for him otherwise he'd lose it.

"Okay, I think I can do that. It won't be that bad." Of course, I'd miss having Rook by my side for a whole week, and not eating would suck, but surely I could survive that. I'd survived worse.

"That's only the beginning." Rook leaned back into his chair, seeming exhausted by this trial already. "Once we've been starved, we'll be presented with different options of blood and have to resist before finally being presented with a final choice. If we choose each other's blood, as mates, then we pass. However, if we choose incorrectly, the bond will be called into question and further testing will be done to determine the validity of our bond."

Oh for goodness sake. What had I gotten myself into? I knew the bond between mates was special, but I had no idea it would be put to the test like this. How would I know which blood was his? I didn't know if there was a trick to it or if I could even be very discerning after not eating for a week. I would probably be so hungry that any blood would do.

"What kinds of tests?" I asked, hoping Rook would tell me everything. The more I knew, the better prepared I would be.

"I'd rather not discuss the details of the testing because they probably won't be necessary." Rook paused and glanced at me. "Trust me when I say that they're not pleasant."

If starving myself for a week was considered pleasant, then Rook was right. I didn't want to know the details. Still curiosity picked at my brain. "You have to give me something otherwise I'm going to imagine a worst case scenario."

"Whatever you imagine, it will be worse. They will use magic to flay our minds open and look into our memories and

emotions. *All* of them. Nothing will be off limits to them.” His meaning was clear, they’d titillate themselves on memories of us having sex. Not only that but it would probably expose my relations with Cross and possibly our connection to Ash as well.

Ash watched us silently from a corner the entire time we spoke. I could feel his gaze on me, assessing every inch of my body. I looked up and made eye contact, not backing down. How dare he just stand there, listening to our conversation as if he owned Rook?

But when I stared into Ash’s eyes, I was confused to see something other than ownership there. I saw lust—I saw him wanting me. I didn’t know what to do with that.

Turning to catch a glimpse of Cross, who was hunkered down on the opposite wall, I realized that he, too, was staring at me with lustful intentions. His lips were parted just enough to reveal his fangs and a jolt of desire shot through my body.

I wanted to say something to Rook but thought better of it. He was already too worked up—could probably have happily killed his friends—and I didn’t want to make him angrier.

What was going on with Ash? Why would he look at me like that? Cross I could understand, especially after our interaction in the carriage. I had never thought of Ash in that way, though.

After seeing him staring at me with longing in his eyes, I began to reassess his intentions slightly. Rook had been the one to suggest me being with Cross, so perhaps he would want to see me with Ash someday as well. Rook’s desire to observe my pleasure was one that I didn’t really understand but enjoyed nonetheless.

Just thinking about Cross and feeding from him in the carriage, his hard dick throbbing underneath me, made my blood boil. Rook must have sensed my longing. Without a moment’s hesitation, he turned to Ash and asked him to leave the room.

I didn't miss the confusion or disappointment that flickered over the court vampire's face before he obeyed his prince.

CORDELIA

For a moment, I was worried about Rook and what he was thinking. Did he suspect I went against his wishes after the carriage ride?

Instead of anger, though, Rook approached me with sympathy in his eyes. “Are you hungry, Cordie?” he asked gently.

“I am,” I admitted. “I want to feed from both of you.” I eyed Cross, who stood up straighter, uncrossing his arms.

Rook’s gaze shuttered as he sighed and turned from me, shoving his hands in his pockets. He wasn’t interested in hearing what I had to say, but I continued anyway.

“I love you, Rook, but I also care deeply for Cross.” I reached for Rook’s arm. “Remember, you’re the one who wanted Cross and I to be together.”

He moaned quietly but chose not to argue with me.

“I’m happy with the way things are, and I don’t want to change anything. If it’s the only way we can survive, then we can change our arrangement. But surely, in the privacy of our own suites, we can do what we want. Right?”

Rook thought for a moment. “You’re right. In public, you can only appear as my mate. No one else’s.”

I couldn’t believe he’d agreed to it so easily. I was the luckiest vampire in the castle. “I’m surprised by the stuffiness

of the court when everyone is dressed like they're on their way to an orgy."

Rook laughed. "I can't disagree with your assessment. The truth of the matter is that if I wasn't a royal, things would be different. I'm held to a higher standard. And you will be too."

"So are we safe to continue?" I asked, my desire growing heavier with each passing second. Need and want pooled in my belly, and I couldn't wait to start.

"Within our suites, you can be whoever you want to be. If you choose to be with Cross, so be it." Rook paused and shot Cross a glare. "I will want to watch." After a moment, his eyebrow raised as he smirked.

Rook was turned on at the idea of watching me feed from Cross. Good. We were on the same page.

"I understand." I pulled Rook close and kissed him softly on the lips before moving away from him with the intention of making up for what I couldn't do in the carriage.

I turned to Cross. His chest heaved, and his breaths came in heavy pants as I moved to the center of the room. I stopped an equal distance from both of them, where they would each be able to see me. I could smell Cross' lust from across the room.

My gaze was locked on Cross as I reached up and pulled at the top of the dress and untied the halter. I let the straps fall, baring my breasts to them. As gracefully as I could, I continued stripping myself in front of the men, getting a thrill from having them watch me.

After I sauntered to stand in front of Cross, I slowly undressed him. Feeding was synonymous with fucking in a vampire's eyes, that's why The Nest's rules were so strict. Now I was a vampire, I understood that doing both at the same time was instinctual.

I wanted his skin against mine, and after the restraint he'd held onto in the carriage, I didn't want anything to hold us back here. The more clothing he shed, the more I admired his body. He and Rook were similar in the fact that they may as

well have been Greek gods. They weren't ripped like bodybuilders, where I could see every vein, but they were each muscular and toned.

As I freed Cross' cock from the confines of his boxers, it smacked against his abs with how hard he had grown for me. I couldn't hold back, licking my lips as I imagined everywhere I could put that thing and what would provide both of us the most pleasure.

I apparently took too long appraising the fine specimen of a vampire before me because Cross reached down and kissed me. The force of the kiss bruised my lips. The carriage must have left a lasting impression on him, just as I hoped it would. He seemed as anxious as I was to start, and we couldn't wait any longer.

I pulled back from the kiss, laying my hands on his sculpted pecs, and pushed him back to the bed before settling him down. My fangs lengthened and ached as I positioned myself above him. Finally, I latched onto his neck, sucking every drop I could before it became too much. One thing about Cross and Rook was that they always made sure I had my fill.

Cross' hands stroked over my body, making me heat up and shiver at the same time. He grabbed my ass and squeezed, splitting my legs to straddle him. My soft core landed on his hard shaft, and my toes curled at the contact.

I was wet, stoking myself along his pulsating heat and coating him until he was ready to enter me. He twitched beneath me, causing me to move my hips faster. Even though it pulled my fangs against his neck, he didn't seem to care.

He curled one palm around the back of my neck and the other gripped my ass. I loved how close he held me to him, but I moved my hands to his and pushed them above his head, interlacing our fingers while I fed.

I released my teeth from his neck and licked the wound before kissing and licking all over his neck, taking in his taste. When he started to get restless underneath me, I rose up, keeping his hands pinned above his head. He could get out of my hold without any effort but was humoring me—we both

knew that. I lifted myself up, ready to feel him inside of me, but with our height difference, I had to move my core away from his cock. My breasts dangled in his face.

A little reminder of the carriage ride.

He growled before latching onto my right nipple and sucking hard on it. I threw my head back and reveled in the attention he gave me.

Behind me, Rook sat watching us, and I winked at him.

Cross dropped his head before latching onto my other breast, giving it the same treatment. I swirled my hips on his abs.

Each suck, nip, and lick made my toes curl, my core tingle, and my mind reel. I was too wound up from all the attention.

Cross' wet tip bumped against my ass, and my mouth watered to have my lips around his cock.

Within seconds, though, Cross' his hands gripped my ass. Before I really knew what was happening, I was sitting on his face. His tongue lunged up into me, and I moaned at the sudden invasion. I couldn't stop myself from bucking at the sudden intensity of the feeling.

With hazy eyes, I glanced over to Rook my hips bucking of their own accord when I registered the sight in front of me. He stroked his cock as he watched us. I whimpered, desperately wanting him to join us, but unsure if that was asking too much right now.

At my sound, he gripped himself harder and moved his hand faster. Cross dug his hands tighter on my ass and hips, thrusting his tongue faster.

“Yes, there yes.”

I didn't take my gaze from Rook's hand as I rode Cross' mouth.

“Almost there,” I panted, my body beginning to tighten with the oncoming storm of pleasure.

I moved faster and licked my lips. I leaned back and grabbed Cross' cock and started stroking him hard and fast, keeping pace with Rook's strokes. Cross started lifting his hips from the bed as he pumped into my hand.

All of the different sensations were too much. I released Cross' cock and exploded into his waiting mouth. He sucked and licked me clean, taking every bit of my essence.

I quaked over him, several jolts of pleasure exorcized out of me.

Just as I started to calm down, I was flipped onto my stomach. My head was at the foot of the bed, facing Rook and I saw that he still stroked himself. Cross threw a pillow under my hips before entering me. He pushed me down into the pillow and bed and thrust, having his way with me.

He gripped and stroked my ass as Rook stood and undressed. His hardness bobbing around made me salivate.

Cross leaned over me and pumped himself hard inside of me, pulling out to the tip then launching himself back inside. Skin slapped against skin, making a natural sort of music as it combined with our moans, grunts, and breaths.

Rook headed toward us, stroking himself the entire way over.

Cross moved his hand under my jaw and lifted it up.

“Open wide.” Cross demanded.

I did as I was told. Rook stood in front of me widening his stance and bending his knees, he guided the tip of his dripping cock over my lips, coating me in him. Then he slowly entered mouth.

“Suck the head. Hard,” he growled at me, sounding almost feral.

I hollowed my cheeks and sucked. His salty taste coated my tongue, and I groaned.

Cross spread my ass cheeks as he started to pick up the speed of his thrusts.

“Ready, Cordie? I’m gonna fuck that pretty mouth of yours.” Rook’s words made my stomach flip and my core clench.

Cross laughed. “Oh, yeah, she’s ready.”

Rook only let me get the tip of his cock in my mouth, while Cross teased me with just the tip of his in my pussy. They must have timed it because they both dove straight into me at the same time, and they didn’t quit. My eyes rolled back into my head as Rook’s dick hit the back of my throat and Cross’ cock jammed itself against that magical little g-spot inside of me. Over and over and over again.

“That’s it. Such a good girl,” Cross groaned. “Take it. You’re so tight. So wet.”

“What a wicked tongue you have, baby.” Rook thrust himself deeper into my throat.

Both of the sexiest men I had ever seen were pleasuring me, and I couldn’t get enough of it. I never knew I could feel so good.

Rook held me in place as my nose touched his abs before he pulled out and sank himself all the way in again. He did that several more times before he went back to fucking my mouth fast and hard.

Cross didn’t let up, his thrusts becoming sloppy. He lifted my hips up higher and sunk down into me hard and fast.

The intensity of both intrusions had me tightly coiled. The wave was building, and I was crashing down again.

I screamed around Rook’s cock, but the sound only came out as a muffle. My pussy clamped down on Cross’ dick, which in turn made him lose control and spill himself in my pussy while Rook exploded down my throat.

Cross slowly pulled out of me, and Rook pulled his cock out of my mouth. I couldn’t help but give them a dreamy smile as I softened, feeling sleepy.

“That was good.” I grinned as I basked in the afterglow of my orgasms, not wanting anything to disturb us for the rest of

time. If we could just stay like this, this content and happy and sated, then life would be good.

Life wasn't like that though, was it?

CROSS

Having sex with Cordie was unlike anything I'd ever imagined and certainly better than anything I'd ever experienced. Each time we were together, I felt the same. Her body molded to mine, responded beautifully to every touch, lick, and bite, and milked me when she came.

Being with her was like being with the sun. She was bright, beautiful, and warm, but she was also forbidden. I wanted every piece of her, but I knew her bond with Rook was unbreakable. The fact that I was quickly becoming addicted to her was a problem.

Cordie asking to be with me even though she knew it might upset Rook was like music to my ears. No one took chances like that for me. The way she wanted me just as much as I wanted her was intoxicating. And hearing her *say* she wanted me...I couldn't get enough.

Feeding from her was almost more than I could stand. Her blood was like manna from the gods, and I wanted more, but Rook watched us closely, and he had joined in. If I had my way, I would have kept Cordelia in my room at my disposal every night. That wasn't an option, though, so I refused to dwell on it.

Even hours after we were done, I could feel her blood roaming within me, making itself at home. It was as if she left a piece of herself with me with every sip of her blood that I took. I wasn't sure what it meant, but I liked it.

Cordelia was quickly becoming the only thing that mattered to me, and I knew that Rook felt the same. We both loved her, and we both wanted her. If sharing her was the only option that Rook agreed to, I would take it.

Worry crept into my mind as I considered what the others at court might detect. If I wasn't careful, they would smell Cordelia's blood on me, and that wouldn't end well for anyone. I'd have to feed from someone other than Cordie to make sure to keep any rumors at bay. But for now, I really didn't care.

Rook needed time with Cordelia, so I made my exit quietly. He would never admit it, but he was shaken by the demand for the Trial of Blood. It wasn't just that I could sense it through the bond I had with him, but the subtle body language changes as well, the amount of times he brushed his hair out of his face, even if it wasn't really in the way, or the way he flexed and straightened his left hand.

The last thing either of us wanted was to put Cordie at risk again. She'd already been through so much. Nevertheless, we definitely did *not* have the option of disobeying the king.

I caught up with Ash, who was speaking to the vampires that I assumed would be helping Cordelia meet the expectations of the court. When they saw me coming, the women gave me a once over. One of them blushed and stood up straight, pushing her breasts forward as if I hadn't already noticed them in the lace get-ups they each wore. The other couldn't seem to care less that I was approaching.

The vampires at court always treated me like some kind of celebrity. Being the security guard for the prince raised my status level, and the women threw themselves at me every chance they got. Men too, if they swung that way. To some, being with me was almost as good as being with the prince himself. Or maybe they were trying to be with me to get close to him, but it didn't matter. I wasn't complaining, but I had absolutely no interest in these people.

Ash read my face and quickly dismissed the women.

“What do you make of the debacle today?” Ash asked as he took a seat in a common area. There were several just like it strewn throughout the palace with stone floors, tufted velvet chairs, and marble tables. This one, though, was particularly nice because it had a stone fireplace. Vampires weren’t into fire, but we still liked the aesthetics of a safe, well-contained one.

“I think the whole situation is fucked up.” I joined Ash on the opposite side of the fireplace. “Honestly, the king’s making a power move. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

He rubbed his cheek. “I agree. But what do we do about it? Rook has to handle this one on his own.”

Ash was right. But that didn’t mean we couldn’t support Rook on the outside, away from the king’s prying eyes.

“Do you think Rook and Cordelia can pass the Trial of Blood?” Ash asked.

I looked around, making sure no one was hanging around, overhearing our conversation. “Rook has it in him. I wouldn’t count Cordie out, either. She’s stronger than the king and queen have anticipated.” But seven days without feeding was a long time, especially for a young vampire like Cordelia.

“Be that as it may,” Ash lowered his voice before continuing, “the Trial is brutal. And then, even if Rook and Cordie come out of it unscathed, the king might not be too happy. After all, he’s sitting on Rook’s throne.”

Shit. I looked around again just to be sure no one had walked up on our conversation. If Ash kept talking like this in public, we’d both be executed for treason.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “It’s enough to make me worry about a civil war if Rook tries to retake the throne.” There hadn’t been word yet that Rook planned to retake his throne, but he was only at court because they’d forced him, and he might consider his position.

Ash waved his hand in the air. “Yeah, death and destruction aren’t really my thing.” His thing or not, there might come a time where death and destruction, though sad,

were needed. He leaned forward and sniffed, making his curiosity clear since it wasn't like he needed to do that. I knew he could scent me well enough from where he was sitting, which made my stomach tense with worry. "Okay, so what's the deal with you three? I smell Cordie all over you."

If Ash wanted to know the truth, I'd tell him. It wasn't like we could keep it from him, anyway. "The three of us have an...agreement. Approved by Rook, of course. As long as he can watch or join in as he pleases, Cordelia can choose to feed from me whenever she pleases."

Ash looked intrigued. "Does that include other activities?"

"It usually evolves into more than just feeding." I rubbed my hands together, worried at what Ash's reaction might be. To my surprise, he leaned back in his chair with a dazed look on his face. That son of a bitch was probably imagining the entire interaction. Not that I could really blame him. Anything involving Cordelia was well worth trying to picture.

"Cordelia is something else, isn't she?" Ash asked as continued to stare off into the distance.

His response made me nervous. Once Ash set his mind to something, there was little that could stop him from accomplishing his goal. In this case, though, if Cordelia was his goal, he might destroy his friendship with Rook and me.

CORDELIA

Waking in Rook's arms was perfection. I slept well for the first time in weeks, which was odd considering I didn't normally sleep much at all in strange places. But with the rise and fall of Rook's chest, I'd found solace in his strong arms and snoozed like a baby. The orgasms and feeding probably didn't hurt either.

"Good morning, beautiful." Rook stretched and wrapped his arms around my waist. He nuzzled into the nape of my neck and gently kissed the tender skin where my shoulder and my throat met before he dragged his lips up to my jaw, along the lower part of my cheek and finally to my mouth for a kiss. "Did you sleep well?"

I giggled as his breath tickled my skin. "Actually, yes. I feel amazing. How about you? Ready to conquer the day?"

I wasn't exactly sure what needed to be conquered, but I imagined there would be plenty of activity as we prepared for the Trial. We were here, after all, in a place that felt moderately hostile.

Rook sat up and reached for his shirt. I admired the muscles in his back as he stretched the undershirt over his head. "I have several meetings to attend today. You won't be alone, though."

Right on cue, Cross entered the suite. I guessed no one knocked around here.

I pulled the blanket up to my chin before remembering that Cross had seen every part of me, from every possible angle, just the night before.

Our eyes met, and he quickly turned his attention to Rook. “If you’re ready, one of the tutors hired by Ash is here.”

“Oh, yes,” Rook said as he turned to me. “No time like the present, right?”

I nodded, not knowing exactly what I was in for in terms of tutoring. I didn’t know who would be providing my education, either, but the next thing I knew, a woman entered the suite carrying several books.

“Good morning.” She nodded in Rook’s direction.

He stood and invited her in as he headed to the bathroom. Her dark hair was pinned elegantly out of her face in a way that reminded me of hairstyles from the fifties. Her clothes were anything but. She wore a micromini skirt and a sheer top with an equally sheer bra underneath that left her breasts perfectly visible. I didn’t know where to look.

“I see you’re still in bed,” the woman observed. “Why don’t I give you a few moments to get ready for the day and then we’ll start. I’ll go ahead and set up at the table.”

Turning, she carried her load of books to the large, round table on the far side of the suite. Cross grinned at me, and I forced myself to not think about the night before. I didn’t need to get all worked up right before my first tutoring session.

Rook emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later and came over to kiss me. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

I nodded and watched as he left the room with Cross to shake hands and kiss babies...or whatever it was vampire royalty did all day. Once the door closed behind him, I jumped out of bed and hurried into the bathroom. The woman was seated at the table when I emerged.

“I’m Cordelia,” I said as I took a seat.

“Yes, I know.” The woman gestured to the books in front of her. “I’ve been instructed to begin your tutoring with this

book.” Clearly she was of the assumption that I either already knew her name or it wasn’t worth going over since it wasn’t like we were going to be besties or anything.

She pushed a black, leather-bound book in my direction. “We’ll start with the basic ordinances within the kingdom. Once you learn the rules and regulations that are expected of every citizen, it will be easier to fill in the gaps with history, proper manners, and general details of the kingdom.”

The vampire kingdom—which I assumed meant all vampires in the realm of this king—followed a specific set of rules, and I was expected to learn all of them by the next full moon.

No problem.

Except the book that contained the ordinances was daunting and probably weighed a good twenty pounds. Was it possible for me to learn everything before the Trial? This part of the whole ordeal reminded me of my cram sessions at the university. Perhaps my studying habits would come in handy, even as a vampire.

The day dragged on for hours, and I eventually met my other two tutors who explained what subjects they would focus on with me. I was a little worried about being left alone with these strangers, but if Ash and Rook approved of them, I knew they must be trustworthy.

Finally, Rook and Cross returned, with Ash following closely behind them. Focusing on my lessons was no longer an option. Seeing the three of them together made my blood heat instantly. Rook seemed to notice immediately and practically kicked the tutors out of the suite.

Once we were alone, Ash turned to Rook. “How about I feed Cordelia this time?”

Rook eyed him suspiciously. “Why?”

“The amount of blood she’s sharing with you and Cross is showing,” Ash explained, wrinkling his nose.

Remembering the way he stared at me with lust dripping from his fangs the day prior, I wasn’t sure I believed him.

“You’re right.” Rook looked at me sheepishly.

I was shocked to hear him agree with Ash. And the way he looked at me with a guilt tinged gaze and his lips pulled into a thin line let me to believe that he had been feeding me more blood than was necessary. I’d have to speak to him about that later.

Ash moved forward. “Follow me.” He made his way to the sofa and sat before patting the cushion next to him.

I hesitated for a moment, looking at Rook and waiting for a slight nod before joining Ash. I didn’t want to be rude, but his presence made me extremely uncomfortable.

“Relax.” Ash smiled as he leaned back against the sofa. “I’m happy to feed you. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

Ash held his wrist out, and I could practically hear the blood rushing through his veins. He had a delicious scent that made my mouth water. Hunger overcame my nerves, and I clamped down on the thin flesh. I sucked hard, drawing the rich, red liquid into my mouth. Ash moaned, and I felt his body tense as I took what I needed.

The taste of his blood was different than Rook’s or Cross’—sweeter like it had been infused with sugar—but just as intoxicating. How could anyone accidentally mix up the blood of their mate with someone else’s?

I could feel the power coursing through my body with each swallow. When I was finished, I swirled my tongue over the small wounds left by my fangs and met Ash’s gaze. His eyes smoldered with desire, and I could feel the heat emanating from his body.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I pulled away from him.

Ash nodded but said nothing. He simply stared at me with an intensity that made my heart race.

I was grateful when Rook finally intervened and ushered Ash out of the suite. I wasn’t sure what was going on between me and Ash, but I knew it was something I needed to be careful of.

Rook sat down next to me on the sofa and took my hand. “You do realize that you’ve been eating every day?” He stared at me and brushed my hair back with his free hand.

I wondered where he was going with this. And then it came to me. He was telling me that I needed to cut back. I needed to learn to do without.

“You don’t know what it’s like to crave blood as badly as you will when we go through the Trial.” Rook squeezed my hand before gently dropping it onto the sofa. He walked across the room and continued a previous conversation with Cross. His words were like a bucket of cold water being dumped over my head. He was right, I didn’t know, but they hadn’t given me a chance to find out either.

His words rang in my ears as I began to worry even more about what might happen during the Trial.

CORDELIA

My days at the palace were fairly predictable. Tutoring, then feeding, and usually sex or being called to the main hall for dinner. My patience was being tested with the banality of court life for a month leading up to the full moon.

Even though I spent many hours being tutored and quizzed by my tutors, I still didn't feel ready for the Trial. Rook and Cross seemed to think I was progressing well, but I wasn't so sure. My tutors assured me that I had learned as much as one could in such a short amount of time, but the fact that there was still more to learn left me with a nervous knot in my stomach. There were not only the ordinances, but procedures, history, and the rules of the hierarchy and the monarchy as well. It was all very complicated and confusing.

I tried to focus on my studies and not let my anxiety get the best of me, but it was difficult. Especially with the full moon only a few days away.

As the day of the Trial grew closer, I grew more anxious. I could feel the weight of everyone's expectations bearing down on me, and it was suffocating. Not to mention the tiny detail that if I didn't pass the Trial, I would be considered a threat to the entire vampire kingdom and put to death. That was weighty, too.

The night before the Trial, Rook and Cross offered themselves to me. I fed deeply from them both, hoping to stave off the inevitable for as long as possible. Rook fed just as

deeply from Ash, to the point that I was worried about the other man's survival.

Even with Rook by my side, I slept restlessly.

I woke up feeling like I had been hit by a truck. Every muscle in my body ached and my head throbbed. It was a hangover of the worst kind that left me wanting to curl up and stay in bed for the rest of the day. It didn't help that Rook was already up and getting dressed.

Two attendants entered the room and announced they were there to dress me for the ceremony. The ceremonial robe they presented me with was basically a white empire-waist dress. Sheer material covered my shoulders and arms, so the dress appeared strapless. A gold chain wrapped around the empire line but didn't connect.

"What's this for?" I asked as I fiddled with the chain and eyed one of the attendants.

"Oh," she replied softly. "The king will seal you into the gown with magic on the chain."

That didn't sound pleasant, but to fight it would be to condemn myself to death. I had to pass the Trial, and I couldn't pass it if I didn't take it. Besides, I had a feeling it would be a useless battle.

The other attendant was busy fixing my hair into an updo. It didn't look too bad, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to care.

The skirt on my dress had two layers. A top one that parted left a wide v shape open from my waist to my ankles while it covered my hips and butt, and the bottom one, which was pleated at the front and went straight to the floor. I wasn't allowed to wear underwear, shoes, a bra, jewelry, or anything that could be used to contaminate the Trial.

I stared at myself in the large, floor-to-ceiling mirror. I looked pale and scared. Even my eyes appeared brighter than usual because of the fear coursing through my body.

It was time. I turned to leave the suite, but the younger attendant stopped me. "If you get even one drop of blood belonging to anyone other than yourself on your dress, the

whole thing will immediately turn black for everyone to see that you failed the Trial.” I appreciated the information. I needed all the help I could get.

I left the suite in a daze and discovered Rook waiting for me in the hallway. He wore what looked like a loin cloth of a similar style to my dress, only the chain hung around his bare waist, awaiting the king’s magic to seal him in.

Rook rushed to my side and kissed me quickly. “I love you, Cordelia.”

I fought back the tears that were welling in my eyes. I didn’t know if we would be allowed to even speak during the trial, and I wanted him to know how much I loved him as well. “I love you, too.”

“Are you ready?” he asked, and I thought I heard hope in his tone, which made hope flutter in my own chest in response. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all?

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

We walked silently through the palace until we reached the main hall. It was empty except for Cross, who waited near the large double doors that led into the throne room.

Walking hand in hand, we descended into the throne room where the king, queen, and other members of the court awaited our arrival. There were more vampires there than I could count, which only made me more nervous. I didn’t need a bunch of on-lookers witnessing my body being pushed to the limits.

We approached the throne as the king arose. “Are you both entering the Trial willingly?”

Rook and I both nodded.

“Yes,” Rook responded, his voice low and deep.

The king continued, “Do you voluntarily wish to prove the strength of your bond?” I couldn’t say that I was joyous about having to prove it. Now that I knew that it would be important and forever establish our bond, I wasn’t as apprehensive about anything more than the process of it.

Rook and I answered in unison. “We do.”

The king nodded in agreement and slowly stepped down from his throne. He glanced over his shoulder at the queen, who snarled and nodded her head, encouraging him to continue the preparations. It almost made me wonder if the queen held more animosity toward me and Rook than the king himself did.

The king approached Rook and snatched the belt in both hands, calling the magic as he pulled the two sides of the chain together. He chanted in a language I couldn't understand. I didn't suppose it mattered, but I might've liked to have known what he was saying.

An attendant scurried to the center of the room carrying a small, white pillow. The king plucked a metal lock from the pillow and proceeded to hook it through the chain around Rook's waist.

When the lock snapped shut, a wave of magic rolled through the room. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I braced myself against the powerful surge.

Once the chain was properly locked around Rook's waist, the king moved to my side. He repeated the same procedure and locked the chain that ran just under my bust. Magic flowed around me, and the king's eyes flared wide as it rushed into me. It was so intense that even after the sensation subsided, I was left breathless, the chain securely locked around my body.

CORDELIA

I struggled to regain composure, feeling as if the wind had been knocked out of me. The king looked startled when I glanced up at him, as though something had happened that wasn't supposed to. Was the magic not supposed to affect me in that way? I didn't dare ask, though. Instead of explaining any of the process, he turned and walked away as the lock burned against my ribcage.

Just then, two large, metal cages were lowered from the ceiling. Surely they weren't meant for us. During my preparation, no one had mentioned cages.

"This wasn't agreed upon," Rook snarled.

The king smirked. "Calm down, Rook. No need to panic." He waved his arm in the air. "I am merely following the *truest form* of the trial."

Oh, this was a tricky king. There was something to be said about the words *truest form*... I assumed that strengthened the difficulty we were to go through.

Murmurs spread throughout the hall as Rook was escorted to one of the cages, where he was locked inside. I was left standing in the center of the room, feeling exposed and vulnerable. I glanced at the queen, who watched my reaction closely, a smirk plastered on her pale face, giving me a sinking feeling that this was only going to get worse before it got better. Something told me that she was as much a part of this decision as the king.

Once the attendants were satisfied that Rook's cage was closed and secure, I was led to the opposite cage. Knowing that it was probably only a temporary measure, I didn't resist the attendants who gripped my upper arms tightly.

Once I was locked inside, though, the burning of the lock against my bare skin only increased. Something wasn't right.

The pain overwhelmed my senses, so I took a seat on the cot in the far right corner of the cage. I tried to catch my breath and calm my racing heart, but it was too difficult. I panted like a dog in the heat of summer as I awaited whatever came next.

The king, acting as if he hadn't just locked us both in cages like wild animals, returned to his royal throne. Taking the queen's hand, he addressed the court, "Let the festivities begin."

The crowd cheered in response and quickly dispersed into various activities. Rook and I were left to stare at one another from cages on opposite sides of the room.

Rook had obviously been caught off guard when the cages were introduced. Why was the king going out of his way to humiliate us even further? I gave Rook a confused look and tried to ask him with my eyes what was going on.

He shook his head. His eyes were wide and he shoved a hand through his hair, making me realize that he was just as overwhelmed and confused as me.

As time slowly passed, I sat and watched as the court feasted. Blood was passed around in golden goblets. The members of the court toasted one another and laughed jovially, as if this was some sort of celebration. Did they not care about Rook at all? Or were we merely their entertainment?

Soon, they began wandering around the throne room. And, before long, they grew brave enough to circle our cages with their goblets filled to the brim. Some stared wide eyed, while others mocked me or tried to ask me questions about my past life.

As they carelessly sloshed their goblets from side to side, the attendant's words echoed in my mind. One drop of blood

that wasn't mine on my dress and it would turn black, announcing to the world that I was a failure.

I shuffled back and pulled my dress as tightly to my body as possible, drawing my knees to my chest as I scooted back on the cot. I wouldn't allow a careless vampire to drip their blood onto my dress. I refused to be taken away from Rook, not after everything we'd been through together.

CORDELIA

The night dragged on to the point that I was sick of watching the crowd having fun around me. It was, in its own way, a special form of torture. While members of the court drank and laughed together, Rook and I were stuck in our separate cages. Even though I was just sitting on my cot, every ounce of my energy was going toward keeping spilled blood from splashing onto my white dress.

I turned my body to face Rook and caught his attention by waving my hand in the air. He gave me a concerned look. I mouthed the words *why are we in cages*, and he just shook his head and pointed to his ear subtly. Okay, so he was worried about people overhearing us talking, I could understand that, but that didn't mean I had to like it. I sighed and leaned back against the wall of my cage, defeated. I wanted to talk to him so badly, but it was impossible.

I couldn't tell if he was just worried about being overheard or if he truly couldn't hear me over the crowd. Or, an even scarier thought, perhaps the king's magic was blocking us from interacting. Either way, no matter the cause, it sucked.

It didn't help that I could see Cross and Ash standing amongst the crowd. They were keeping their distance, but concern was visible on their faces. With no one to talk to, I settled in for a long night of people watching. In most social situations, it would be inappropriate to stare at others for hours

on end. Given my current situation, there was nothing else to do.

The vampires milled around, talking and laughing. They flirted with one another and some even fed from each other. The scene before me was both erotic and revolting all at the same time.

As I watched, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. I hated that they could touch one another so freely. I wanted nothing more than to be able to reach out and touch Rook, to feel his arms around me and his lips on mine.

The shriek of a female vampire caught my attention, and I watched as her boyfriend, or lover, groped her from behind. Apparently, wearing next to nothing wasn't the only thing that was readily acceptable in public. In the opposite corner of the room, a crowd of vampires had huddled around some type of dice game. It appeared that the winner got to choose another vampire to feed from. I got the sense that as the night went on and more blood was consumed, the crowd would give into their desires with even fewer inhibitions. It was almost like a fancy frat party. They were already in various stages of undress.

Eventually, after several hours passed, the party quieted down. The vampires were either heading to their beds or elsewhere in the castle. I noticed Cross leave, but Ash was still there, quietly keeping a close eye on Rook and me. It took everything in me to not at least wave at him, but I knew we weren't supposed to be interacting or pretending like we knew each other.

The room emptied until Rook and I were the only ones remaining, locked in our cages. He sat on his cot with his head in his hands, and I could see the exhaustion written all over his body. It physically hurt me to see him like that, but there was nothing I could do.

With no one left to watch, my eyes grew heavy, and I soon drifted off into a deep sleep. Within seconds, I was in a dream-like state. I looked down to see that I didn't have a body,

which was unusual for the dreams I'd had recently. Instead, it felt as if I was only energy, flowing through the castle.

I floated down different hallways and looked into random rooms, but there was no one around. Even though I knew I was dreaming, I could see every little detail of the various rooms in the castle, including rooms I'd never stepped foot in. The dream reminded me of the time I could see Gran searching for me in my old bedroom. A moment of grief stopped me in my tracks, but I urged myself to move forward, wondering what I might find in this state.

As I turned another corner, I glanced in a tall mirror that was mounted on the wall. I stopped and stared at my reflection. All I saw was just a purple mist, swirling in space. There was nothing more to me. I had no body, no face, and I didn't feel connected to my body in any way.

I chalked my appearance up to dream weirdness combined with the stress of the Trial and forced myself to move forward, away from the mirror.

Eventually, I found Cross in the prince's suite. I watched closely as he paced back and forth, likely trying to contain his anxiety. His stress was so overwhelming that I could sense it within me. Sure, I was worried about Rook and myself. We had been placed in a very dangerous position. But as I watched Cross and felt the concern emanating from his body, I realized that I was equally concerned for him.

The Trial would, no doubt, take a toll on all of us, and I didn't want to forget that Cross was going through his own form of suffering as well. Even if it was from a distance.

CROSS

Watching Cordie and Rook go through the Trial over the past week was absolute torture for me. Not only did I have to worry about them passing the Trial, but I was also concerned that Cordie might self-destruct. It had happened in the past, a vampire that couldn't control their urges ended up trying to feed on themselves and dying because of it. Once one of us went down that route there was no coming back.

Exhaustion had taken over my body since I had kept watch over them as much as I could. I still had some duties at court, but my main priority was Rook. Every chance I got, I made my way down to the throne room, where I'd watch them from afar. I didn't dare try to speak to or interact with them in any way for fear that the king would accuse me of interfering with the Trial.

Deep down, I knew the king would love to find any excuse to label the Trial as a failure and, ultimately, to kick Rook back out, to exile him from the vampire kingdom for good this time. He would be labeled a liar and never allowed to come back to court again. I couldn't let that happen on my watch.

Cordelia was fine the first few days. Though she was unable to converse with Rook, she still had that fire in her eyes that I had found attractive the first time I saw her. She was determined to pass the Trial, and that determination was written all over her face. Now and then, I would see her glancing in my direction, but I didn't even nod. She knew I

was there, watching over her, and I hoped that brought her some level of comfort. It didn't do much for me, but I wasn't the one immobile in a cage.

After a few days, though, she began to lose control. She paced her cage like a wild animal, her eyes darting from side to side as she scanned the room, her desire to feed consuming her senses. The hunger was so powerful that I could feel it myself, and it made my own stomach growl in response.

The trial was taking its toll on her, and I knew she wouldn't be able to make it much longer. She couldn't even look at Rook without keening or growling. The beast of her vampire side was making itself known in a way that she hadn't experienced before, and I was genuinely worried that she would never be the same again.

Part of the problem was that Cordelia hadn't experienced this type of deprivation as a vampire. She had always had a plentiful supply of blood at her disposal, and she never had to worry about going without. Now her body was betraying her.

She was being starved, and it was taking a toll on her mental state. I'd caught her talking to herself more than once in the last few days and I could see the hunger in her eyes, but there was also something else. A deep-seated anger at being separated from Rook.

When she wasn't losing herself to the beast within, she cried and screamed, clawing at the lock against her chest. After observing her for several days, I wasn't convinced that she would survive mentally. Even more frightening was the very real threat that she wouldn't be the same Cordelia once the doors to the cage were finally opened. The stress of the Trial could potentially strip her of everything I admired about her, leaving nothing but the beast of the vampire behind.

I couldn't hold my thoughts inside any longer. And with Rook locked inside a cage, I decided to turn to Ash for a venting session. I had seen him multiple times on the opposite side of the throne room, staring intently at the two cages. Here we were, the bodyguards for our best friend and his mate, yet we couldn't do anything to help them.

“Do you think they’ll make it out alive?” I asked as I slapped Ash on the back.

He looked at me with concerned eyes and scratched his face, which was surprisingly unshaven. Ash was always meticulous about his appearance so to not shave meant that he was suffering the same as I was. “I don’t know. I’m losing faith with each passing day. Cordelia doesn’t look too good.”

At least I wasn’t the only one who noticed. “No, she doesn’t,” I agreed. “I think the Trial is taking a toll on her mental state more than anything.” Worry rolled around like a ball in my stomach.

Ash glanced at Cordelia. “She’s way too young to be subjected to something like this.”

He was right. In her human lifetime, she was mature, strong, and hard-headed. But now that she’d become a vampire, she just hadn’t experienced enough of the instincts that were now taking control of her.

“Rook’s not doing much better,” Ash said, his eyes now on the other cage. “He looks like he’s about to snap.”

I recognized a nervous energy in Rook on the good days. This was not a good day. His energy was tenuous, like it could break him or break him out. I hoped he kept it contained.

I sighed. “I know. I’m worried that if this goes on for much longer, they’re both going to lose it.”

It was clear that the Trial was taking its toll on both of them. It was also clear that they were both fighting with everything they had. I just hoped that it would be enough. Cordelia had battled human adversity, but this was a whole other level.

I looked back at Cordelia and Ash did the same. We both stood in silence, lost in our own thoughts. Neither of us knew what the repercussions of the experience would be, but none of it mattered if Cordie and Rook didn’t pass the Trial.

On the final day of the Trial, the court gathered once more. I listened closely to the murmurs surrounding me. Everyone had their own thoughts on what would happen. There were

those who wanted Cordelia and Rook to fail. Some wanted them to succeed. Everyone had an opinion, and I wanted to tell them where to stick all the thoughts they should've kept to themselves. If something like this could happen to Rook—the prince—then what was to stop it from happening to them? I was a good boy, though, and kept my arms firmly crossed against my chest.

The general consensus was that Cordelia was in a terrible state. Her dress was still white, though, and so was Rook's loin cloth. It was obvious that they'd passed the primary part of the test.

Would the king accept that, though? Or would he come up with some excuse for them to have failed anyway?

CORDELIA

As more and more vampires gathered around my cage, I was vaguely aware of their presence. They had observed me the whole week, but something must have changed. Because now, there was a huge crowd circling me.

I repeated my mantra that had kept me focused the past several days: *don't let anyone near you and only feed on Rook's blood.*

As the days wore on, everything grew hazy, and I struggled with my perception of time. I could have been in the cage for two days or twenty days. Who knew? To make matters worse, every time I saw Rook across the hall, he looked as calm as a cucumber, which only pissed me off even more.

I was ready to snap. Anger bubbled in my belly, and I wasn't certain I would be able to contain myself once the door to my cage was opened. There was too much rage inside of me. Blood thirst. Hunger. Fury. Lust. It was all there.

The entire vampire clan could all go to hell, I thought angrily as I paced around the cage. I would show them. I would not be some mindless beast that they could keep locked up for their own amusement.

Sometimes, I couldn't stop myself from screaming out of frustration and the pain from the damn lock. The lock had seared itself to my skin. Since my body now had vampire healing capabilities, it had begun to try and absorb the lock,

my skin building a barrier around it and building it up along the sides, as though it was trying to wall the lock in. The only thing that might hurt worse was if the damn thing was fully absorbed into my skin. At least now it was only surrounded on three sides.

As more people gathered around my cage, I retreated to the cot and pulled my dress in close. I couldn't trust anyone at court, that much had been clear to me the whole time. I would not give any of them the satisfaction of breaking me. I was stronger than that.

As the minutes stretched into hours, and the hours into what felt like days, I began to doubt my resolve. I was so thirsty. Rook's blood had sustained me for a while, but it was no longer enough. The hunger was beginning to take over. All of the vampires circling my cage were starting to look good to me. I'd been told they would—that the hunger would take over and that I would be desperate by the end of the week. It wouldn't be a trial if it was easy, I supposed.

The strength of the hunger gnawing away at my sanity was something I never expected. It was only a matter of time before I snapped. I was ready to give up. I *wanted* to give up. But something inside of me kept pushing forward. I couldn't let myself break. Not here. Not now. Not in front of *them*.

I could see the people around me starting to look like food. Their warm blood running through their veins, their soft skin, their plump lips...I licked my own lips unconsciously as I watched a woman in the front row. She stared at me with an intensity that I found both unnerving and intriguing. It was her blood that called to me, her life force that sang to my very soul. I could feel my fangs lengthening in response to the hunger roaring to life inside of me. What I wouldn't have given for just a small taste.

Each time I drifted off to sleep, I tried to connect with Rook. It was impossible, as if he had been walled off from me. The dreams we'd shared in the past had been so realistic. We'd had sex, and I had even fed from him. I finally determined that the king must have blocked us from one another because we could cheat in our dream-like states.

The king was a bastard, but he was a smart one. I had to give him that.

I wasn't sure how much longer I could last. I was so thirsty, so hungry. The need for blood was becoming overwhelming. And the people around me were looking more and more tempting.

Suddenly, the crowd parted, and the king entered, flanked by his guards. His voice boomed across the hall, making me jump and almost scream. I swallowed the noise at the last second when I suddenly realized that he was talking to Rook and me. His words echoed around me, but I couldn't seem to make any sense of them. It was like he was speaking another language, like before when he summoned the magic around the chains and locks.

Suddenly, a woman in a long silver robe stepped forward, unlocked my cage, and opened the door. It was all I could do not to bolt from it like an animal from a trap. After all, wasn't that what I'd become? A wild animal.

The king continued to speak, and I could feel everyone's eyes on me. I couldn't focus on anything except the hunger. Rook's pleading eyes were the only thing that kept me in place.

The king slammed his fist on his throne. "Bring them forth for the final part of the Trial."

I doubled over with hunger as the scent of blood washed over me. I was surrounded by it yet had to somehow control my urges.

The king continued speaking, but I tuned him out as my focus zeroed in on the woman in the front row. She was still staring at me, and I could see the pulse in her neck throbbing. I wanted to lunge for her, to sink my teeth into her soft skin and drink my fill.

Straining for control, I snarled and snapped as I was led to the same area where Rook stood. I was glad Gran couldn't see me because I had become what she feared most in life. A terrifying vampire.

CORDELIA

“You’ve done well, better than expected.” The king addressed us as I tried to restrain myself from attacking Rook. “I hope you can pass the last part of the Trial.”

Even in my detached mental state, I could tell that the king was full of crap and lying through his teeth. He didn’t want us to succeed, that much was clear from his lies and the slight pout that was turning his lips down. The king wanted one of us to fail so he would have an excuse to kill me and ban Rook, or even kill both of us. I barely kept my temper in check—though it was a bit easier knowing what Rook and I stood to lose—and tried to get the attendants to let me go. The jerks wouldn’t even loosen their grips.

The hunger made it hard to think straight, but I knew I had to find a way to control myself. Rook was depending on me, and I couldn’t let him down.

Somehow, I managed to get a hold on myself, and I stood up straight. The king looked surprised, but he quickly recovered and continued speaking as he and the queen descended from their dais. “The final part of the Trial is simple. All you have to do is drink.” He gestured to an attendant who carried a tray of small glasses of blood over to where Rook stood. They’d taken the blood from both of us the day before and just the scent of it had been enough to almost push me over the edge and make me completely lose control.

The queen made her way over to Rook's side. "Pick your mate's blood from the line up." She licked her lips and blatantly flirted with him, reaching out and caressing his lips with her finger. It was obvious that she wanted to distract him, to make him choose the wrong glass. I didn't understand why no one said anything.

Finally, after a few minutes, Rook chose a glass and downed the contents, his eyes going red as his own animalistic side emerged to the forefront. He must have chosen correctly because there was no reaction from the king and queen, though the crowd seemed pleasantly surprised.

The king turned his attention to me. "You have a very special selection of blood, Cordelia." He took the tray from the attendant and waved the drinks under my nose. "Rook's is by far the least interesting of the bunch. I wouldn't blame you if you chose someone else's."

The king handed the tray back to the attendant, who held the selection in front of my face. The hunger was almost unbearable, but I managed to control myself long enough to make my way down the line of glasses. I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I stopped in front of Rook's glass. It would have been so easy to just drink it and be done with it, but something held me back. I sniffed each glass again until I scented the one that I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, belonged to Rook. I was nervous, though. Even with the beastly side of me snarling to just drink the damn blood, I glanced at my mate. Rook gave me a small nod of encouragement, so I picked up the glass and drank.

The sensation that sped through my veins was unreal, like fireworks going off inside of my body. The euphoria was short lived as the lock burned my skin even worse than before. I clenched my jaw hard against the pain so I wouldn't scream or do something to screw everything up at the very end.

The king's eyes narrowed as the queen came to stand next to him. "Well, that was certainly...unexpected," he said, looking taken aback, but quickly recovered. "You two have completed the final part of the Trial."

He hung his head, apparently disappointed that we had passed the Trial. The queen looked equally discouraged, avoiding eye contact with both Rook and me. Had we really passed the Trial? And, if so, why was I in so much pain?

The king and queen retreated back to their thrones as he chanted again. As he did, I could feel the magic fading from me, but it only made the hunger within me that much stronger given how close I stood to Rook.

The attendant moved forward to remove the lock from my chest. As he gripped it and pulled hard, I screamed in pain.

CORDELIA

My scream echoed throughout the throne room as the crowd went completely silent. The king and queen turned to see what happened. I dropped to my knees as the pain overwhelmed me. All I could envision was Rook's dagger as it penetrated my chest.

The attendant continued to try to remove the lock, but it was fused to my skin. It burned like fire, searing into my flesh. I gritted my teeth and tried to hold on, but eventually, a blackness overtook my peripheral vision as he continued to twist and pull before jerking and tugging. If he didn't stop soon, I was going to pass out from the pain.

"I don't know what to do. The lock is fused to her," the attendant explained to the king, his face a mask of confusion. I didn't know if this had ever happened before, but I sure as hell hoped they had a way to make it stop hurting.

"What?" The king stepped back down onto our level. "That's impossible. That type of reaction only happens to magic users."

The king squatted in front of me, peering at the lock that had embedded itself into my chest. "If she were a magic user, we would already have known. She was tested for magic. I would've used a different lock." He gave me a suspicious look, but then he wiped it away. "We would've known." It was like he had to keep telling himself.

“Then how do we get it off?” the queen asked, coming to stand next to her mate. There was a sense of urgency in her tone that I didn’t really appreciate since there was a foreseeable solution to a magical lock embedded into my body. Surely magic could just get it off, right?

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like this before,” the king admitted.

I held back a loud, “What!” and instead clamped my lips shut and blew a breath out my nose so that my nostrils flared.

The king stood and turned to the attendant, hell-bent on passing the blame to someone other than himself. “You inept idiot, look what you’ve done.”

A man standing in the front row spoke up. “How long has she been a vampire?” Those around him shook their heads in agreement, demanding to know the answer.

“She was turned only two weeks ago,” a booming voice from the far corner of the room replied. Cross stood, motionless, staring at me with brows that were creased with compassion and worry.

“Two weeks?” someone gasped.

The king paced in front of me, raking a hand through his long hair as he did. He *had* made a mistake. Not only that, he’d done it in front of the *entire* court.

Someone else, this time a woman, spoke up from the crowd. “There’s no way this test should have been performed on a vampire so young.” She glared at the king. “This is the magic punishing you.” How the lock searing into my skin was *his* punishment wasn’t immediately clear to me, and I looked at Rook. With his eyes being that deep red color it was obvious that he was suffering from blood lust, but his lock and chain had fallen away.

There was a general consensus among the court that agreed with her. The king and queen looked flustered as they tried to regain control of the situation.

Rook stepped toward the king. “May I have your permission to assist?”

The king stared at Rook for a moment, probably trying to think of an excuse to keep us apart even longer. “Granted.”

Rook nodded and rushed to my side. He squatted down so that we were eye level and placed his hand over the lock. I winced at the contact, but he was much gentler than the attendant.

Rook removed his hand, whispering softly to me as he stroked my hair. He stared helplessly at the lock, trying to make sense of the gory mass of skin and metal. I was the kind of disfigured that was only seen in scary movies.

All I could focus on was my yearning to feed, and I immediately latched onto his neck. I needed his blood, and I couldn’t wait any longer. He tensed at my sudden movement but quickly relaxed as I began to drink. The pain lessened with every swallow.

Rook’s voice and scent was all around me—in my head like a shroud that blocked the world out. The sensory overload of Rook made it hard for me to remember that we were in public. I pulled him closer to me and tried to wrap my legs around him. I needed him in every part of me.

As I continued to feed, I heard Rook address the king. “May we be excused so I can deal with this in private?” The heat from his hard dick pressed firmly against my hip.

I thrust harder against him as the white, sheer dress became saturated from my desire. If the king refused our dismissal from the throne room, the court was going to get a show that was probably a whole lot more than they bargained for.

The king nodded his head in agreement. “The two of you were boring me, anyway.”

If it hadn’t been for my desperate need for blood, I would have had some choice words for the king. With Rook’s blood flooding my mouth, though, I couldn’t bring myself to stop drinking for anything.

CORDELIA

Rook held me bridal style before he softly laid me on the bed. He leaned back and stripped before me. If I lived to be a thousand years old—and since I was a vampire now, there was a chance—I would never get tired of looking at him.

But even as I had the thought, a shard of pain rocked through me, and I curled into the fetal position.

“It’ll be better soon, Cordie. I’ll make it better.” His voice soothed me, but the pain was sharp and centered in my stomach, probably in whatever was left of my soul that the king hadn’t destroyed.

I groaned, and my body shook from the trials my body had been put through.

Rook’s solid hands softly caressed me as he removed my clothing. Everywhere his skin touched mine felt like a soothing balm, but pain quickly laced over where his touch faded.

Darkness was the only thing I could see—it hurt too much to have my eyes opened.

Leaning against the headboard, Rook lifted my back up off of the bed and pulled me over his chest, and I whimpered. He maneuvered me so I could feed.

Rook’s skin was just beneath my mouth, and I scented his blood. My fangs popped out, and I cried at the new and excruciating pain of that.

“Cordie, baby, feed. Feed now.”

He forced my head to his neck, and the sweet elixir of my mate’s blood dripped onto my lips. I snaked my tongue out and moaned at the rush that fueled me.

“That’s it, mate. Take what you need.”

I surrounded my mouth around his throat, my teeth bit down deep, and his lifeblood flowed into me, bringing me back from the brink of agony.

Mewling noises escaped my throat. I didn’t know where they were coming from, but every inch of my body felt like it was coming back to life.

My core tightened at the scent of Rook beneath my nose. It was the strongest mood enhancer and had me crawling into his lap. I could roll around in him and his scent and never tire of it.

I straddled his lap, and his erection grazed my slit. My hands tangled in his hair, and I pushed my body tightly to his. My nipples grazed his chest, shooting pleasure right to the core of me.

His blood rushed past my lips and down my throat as I sucked harder and swallowed more. I needed to finish feeding. I knew I shouldn’t take too much, but I was an addict. It didn’t help that Rook didn’t pace me. Instead, he roamed his hands over my body, gripping and grasping every inch of my flesh. Building my desire to the highest peak.

The emotions he brought out in me were so intense that words had no place, and action was the only language I could use to reciprocate. His grip tightened on my hips as his shaft thickened between our bodies, and I couldn’t wait longer to get him inside me.

I pulled back and licked his neck clean. Slowly, I rode his cock, not letting him enter me but coating him, drenching him so he could bury himself inside me in one hard thrust.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I sensed Cross and Ash entering the main part of our suite. I stuttered in

my movement, knowing that Ash was in the other room and could hear exactly what we were doing.

I gazed down at Rook. His eyes were ablaze with lust and his hair disheveled from my fingers. I needed him more in that moment than worrying about being overheard by somebody else.

My eyes never faltered from his gaze as I leaned down and nibbled on his bottom lip. I wanted to see all of him and have him see all of me.

After being locked away and parted from him, his connection was what I craved above anything else.

“You’re so beautiful.” His sex laden voice made me tremble.

“Rook?” I didn’t know what I was asking for or what I needed. I just hungered for him in every way possible.

“What do you need, Cordie? I’ll give it to you.”

I was speechless. I ached. I desired. I was so lost and trapped in every emotion possible I couldn’t tell up from down. I only knew that Rook was my north, and he could guide me to what was best for me.

He looked deep within my eyes. Leaning up, he held me tightly to him. “I’ve got you. I’ll take care of you. Always.”

Lunging for my lips, he devoured my mouth before flipping me onto my back and settling himself into the cradle of my hips.

Yes. His weight on me. I needed that.

He let go of my mouth and let his lips, tongue, and teeth graze down my skin. He cupped my breasts and pushed them to his mouth and engulfed one nipple, then the other.

I needed that.

He worked me into a frenzy, with jolts of stimulation shooting down to my clit and making it pulse. I swore it throbbed in sync with my heartbeat. He nipped a nipple then calmed it with a swirl of his soothing tongue.

I bit my bottom lip, wanting to close my thighs to relieve the ache between them, but Rook's body prevented me from doing that.

He lowered his lips and licked down my waist to my belly button, and I shivered when he dipped his tongue inside. Then he kissed his way around it.

“Rook?” More. There had to be more.

I felt him smile against my skin as he kissed across my hips and lifted his hands to cup my breasts. My back arched of its own accord from the touch.

Then with no warning, his mouth went straight to my center, and he blew over my core lightly. Goosebumps flushed my body.

His hands scaled down my body, and he pushed my thighs open wide. I was open to him completely, and I was too lust drunk to even think about being shy.

Rook swiped his lips with his tongue.

“So pink and wet.” I didn't believe that his eyes could've dilated any more, but they did. He was a true predator at the moment, and I was never so grateful to be his prey. “Do you need me here, Cordie?”

I nodded and squirmed for him.

“I'm sorry. I didn't hear you.”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “What do you need me to do?”

His breath was tantalizing over me.

I groaned.

“Do you need my mouth?” He kissed my inner thighs, and I quaked.

“My fingers?”

His thumb twirled over my pubic bone, centimeters away from where it actually needed to be. I stuttered.

“It’s too soon for my cock, isn’t it?” He opened me wider and spread my lips with his fingers.

I couldn’t answer, only moaned and rocked my hips.

“Okay, Cordie. I got you.”

Rook’s tongue lashed out and licked my whole slit from top to bottom. I let out a large breath and fell back against the bed. Then he scooped his thumb in between my lips, coated it, and pressed against the bundle of nerves where I needed his touch the most.

My hips thrust up from the bed, and Rook used his forearm to push me down and pin my hips to the mattress.

Then he lashed his tongue against my clit and inserted a finger inside of my channel. I flew into the heavens as pleasure consumed me from every cell, pore, and follicle.

I whimpered, “Dont. Stop.”

He growled and thrust his fingers faster inside of me and sucked my clit into his mouth harder.

Every bit of energy rolled back to my center, and I was going to combust.

“There. Almost there.”

Rook went harder and faster. Then everything snapped, and I was obliterated into a million pieces.

He licked and sucked every bit of my orgasm.

A smile broke out on my lips as I relaxed against the bed. Rook kissed up my body before lifting his weight from me. I worked to peek my eyes open, but I was drained. At the feeling of Rook’s wet tip stroking up and down my slit, I widened my legs.

“Please,” I whispered.

He thrust in one hard movement, all the way to the very base of him.

“Yes.”

I opened my eyes to see him staring down into mine. Our breaths mingled, and he slowly moved in and out of me.

“I love you.” I needed to say that. After everything we had been through, I needed the connection with words, body, and feeling.

He moved faster and harder. Stimulating me quicker than before. He slammed just right against my clit and his tip caressed my g-spot, like he did every time.

I was rising higher and knew the fall was going to be blissful.

“I love you, too.”

My heart burst as another orgasmic release erupted within me.

Rook’s fangs buried into my neck. He fucked me deep, prolonging my orgasm to unmeasurable length.

A growl left Rook as he sucked down my blood and pumped his seed deep within me. He filled me with everything he had as he calmed above me. Slowly laying his weight on top of me, he pulled away from my neck but stayed buried inside of me.

I laid prone beneath him, complete mush.

“That was amazing.” He kissed me.

“Mmmm,” I hummed with agreement.

He chuckled before he said, “We need to feed. Replenish.”

“Mmmm.” I agreed, practically drooling from the hunger that was still raging within me.

“Cross, Ash, get in here.”

The doors opened and the two men walked in.

“Ash, feed Cordie. Cross.”

I watched both men lift up their shirt sleeves and roll them up their forearms.

Rook wrapped around me as Ash sat close to me and offered his wrist. Cross did the same for Rook.

Hunger spiked within me, and I latched onto Ash's wrist. I looked around at the four of us, and I didn't quite know what to make of it all. But that was something to work out at another time.

ROOK

Cross knew that I'd been through a hell of a lot. I was exhausted and worried about what might come next, even though we'd technically passed the Trial. Cross didn't seem to care. He was agitated and decided to push the subject. "Why do you want Ash to feed Cordie and not me?"

"If I scent of you, it's less suspicious than if I scent of Ash," I explained, lowering my voice. "It's the same for Cordie scenting of Ash. People are already suspicious of how close you and Cordie are."

The suspicions were evident through the conversations I overheard while trapped in the cage. I had hours upon hours to sit back and listen to the court as they openly discussed my relationship with Cordie. Many stated that they suspected some type of relationship between Cordie and Cross, too. A few went as far as to say that they believed Cross was the one who turned Cordie.

Cross seemed to contemplate my words for a moment before sighing, his shoulders slumping and his gaze downcast, defeat written all over him. "I see your point."

"It's not that I don't trust you," I quickly added. "I just think it would be best if we waited until we're sure Cordie is safe before involving you any further."

Cross nodded his head before a look of defiance flashed in his eyes.

“Are you sure you’re worried about scenting?” Cross continued despite the warning glare I shot him. He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes at me. “Or is it because Cordie and I are getting closer, and you want her all to yourself?”

What had gotten into my best friend? His sudden shift in mood was mind boggling. Was he the one who had been locked away for a full week, isolated from everyone, including his mate? He didn’t have a leg to stand on.

Nevertheless, I chose to placate him instead of wasting what little energy I had arguing with him over *my* mate. “Alright, Cross, have it your way. You and Ash should both feed Cordie and then me, that way no one will be able to tell that either of us was with someone else.”

This seemed to satisfy Cross, at least for the moment.

Cordelia was much more subdued, but I could see that she needed more blood. Her body was going to need some time to rebound. “Cordie, please be careful of how much you take from both of them since I have to be fed, as well.” Cordie nodded her head and proceeded to feed from Cross’ neck.

No matter how much blood we took from Ash and Cross, it wouldn’t be enough to assuage the hunger inside of us. We had been starved for far too long, and it would take a while for either of us to feel satisfied again. Still, I was grateful for their assistance. They were helping us get back on our feet, and for that, I would be forever indebted to them.

Ash sat next to me and tilted his head to the left. I wasted no time in sinking my teeth into his veins. Surprisingly, I experienced an immediate jolt of power, which I wasn’t used to. I’d only fed from Cordie and Cross for the longest time. And, before that, from random feeders at The Nest. But Ash had...something about him that instilled me with a burst of energy and strength. And he was delicious, too.

My body was used to Cross’ magic and then Cordie’s, after she had turned. I hadn’t fed from Ash in a very long time. The sensation reaffirmed our bond. If Ash had any nefarious intentions, I would have been able to detect them through his blood.

Unfortunately, I could detect something else from Ash's blood. Lust. He longed for Cordelia, and that irritated me more than I expected it to. I hated to admit it, but I had become possessive and jealous. Not only did Cross want me to share, but Ash might as well?

Sure, I had allowed Cordie to be with Cross on a few occasions. Something had shifted, though. After everything that had happened over the past week, I realized that I didn't want to share her. The idea of her being with Ash didn't sit well with me.

I pulled away from Ash's neck and licked the blood that had seeped from the wound. He hissed in response, but I paid him no heed. My eyes were focused on Cordie as she fed from Cross. The two of them seemed to enjoy their time together, and jealousy twisted in my stomach, feeling like a rock was lodged inside me. I had to fight the urge to separate them.

The jealousy I felt was overwhelming, probably because we had just been through a Trial of Blood. I wanted to be the only one she looked at with love and adoration. I wanted to be the one she turned to when she needed someone.

Cordelia was my mate, and I loved her with every fiber of my being. I would do whatever it took to keep her safe. But more than that, I wanted her to be mine alone.

I resolved to have a discussion with Cordelia at some point when we weren't both weakened and in danger of fading from hunger like we currently were. Even though we had survived the Trial and proven that we were mates, there were still the tricky politics of court to navigate. It wouldn't be easy.

CORDELIA

After feeding from Rook, Cross, and Ash, I felt more normal, though I was still on edge. It was almost as if I'd had too much caffeine or something similar that made me jittery. My foot swung from side to side as I watched Rook. He had just finished feeding and now sat staring at the wall.

Obviously, I wasn't the only one who was a little off. Rook's mood had shifted quickly after we had sex and fed, and I wondered what happened. If anything, his disposition should've been lighter. But he was somber, quiet, and almost seemed angry. He sat with his knees drawn up and his arms stretched out so that his hands dangled over them.

"Rook," I began. He shot me a narrow-eyed glance that told me he wasn't in the mood to have a discussion. Whatever it was that was bothering him, he didn't want to talk about it.

"Do you think we'll be able to remove this lock?" I prodded gently at the inflamed skin surrounding the chunk of metal in my chest.

All three of the men stared at the lock with wide eyes, apparently shocked to still see it embedded in my skin.

"I can't believe it's still there. I hoped it would slowly work its way to the surface." Rook dropped his knees and bent down so he could observe the lock. "My main concern is that it's so deep in your skin." He ran his finger over the skin around it, still staring.

“Is that not normal?” I asked, not knowing what the protocol for an embedded lock in a vampire’s chest would be.

When no one responded, I looked up and saw them staring at me as if I were crazy. Apparently, it wasn’t normal.

“It’s only happened a handful of times.” Cross moved to the couch in the center of the suite and sat down. “Interestingly enough, it only occurred when individuals who were particularly powerful with magic found their mate. So, essentially, the Trial works as a secondary test of their control over their magic.”

I didn’t have magic, though, did I? I suddenly remembered the dream I had while locked inside of the cage. Purple smoke and flames replaced my body, as if I were a ball of energy, and I floated through the castle.

Could it have been real? Did I possess powers I was oblivious of?

“Cordelia?” Rook’s voice brought me back to the present. He was looking at me with concern, and I realized that I had been silent for too long.

“I’m just processing everything,” I lied. I didn’t know why I didn’t just tell them. It wasn’t like they were going to run to the king and tattle...and maybe there wasn’t even anything to tattle about. I had no idea. I didn’t remember any rules in the ordinances I’d been reading. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“What were you thinking about?” Rook pulled me over to a chair and sat me on his lap.

And now, I wasn’t going to lie. What good was a relationship where we weren’t honest with each other? “During the trial, I had a dream.” I hesitated, not wanting to sound like an idiot. The three of them stared quietly at me, waiting to hear what I had to say, so I continued, “I was floating through the castle and saw my reflection in a mirror. I looked...different. Actually, I didn’t look like myself at all. All I saw in the mirror was purple smoke that swirled and hovered in the air.”

Rook sighed. “You do have magic, Cordelia. I’ve seen it.”

A laugh escaped my throat, and I covered my mouth. My nerves still weren't quite back to normal from the week spent being watched and starved, and they were certainly getting the best of me right now. Surely Rook couldn't be serious.

"I'm serious, Cordie." Rook wasn't smiling. "Sometimes, when I saw you in our shared visions, you would have a magical aura around you. Remember? I told you I saw it. It was purple. I'd always assumed it was because you were destined to be turned, but now I think maybe it's something else."

Ash, who had quietly listened to our conversation from the corner, stepped forward. "Even if she does have magic, she'll be safe from persecution because she passed the Trial."

Well there was comfort in that. Until Rook spoke, at least.

"I'm not so sure." Rook rubbed my back as he seemed to contemplate his next words. "Vampires that have magical abilities outside of the norm are looked at with suspicion. At least, they have been as far back as I can remember."

Rook was nervous, I could feel it resonating through our bond, which made my stomach clench.

There I was, thinking that the worst was behind us. We'd passed the Trial, after all. Just like Ash pointed out, I should be safe. But now I had to worry about being hunted down for my magical abilities. What was this, the Salem witch trials?

"What do we do?" I asked, not really expecting an answer.

"For now, we wait and see." Rook's arms tightened around me. "In the meantime, don't tell anyone about your magic. We don't want to give anyone a reason to come after you."

I nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. The king and queen already shown us that we weren't safe here and they were way more than willing to kill one or both of us.

I had to keep my magic a secret, at least for now. But didn't they already suspect I was different because of the lock?

"I hate to leave in the middle of this conversation, but I have an appointment to attend." Ash waved and walked to the

door. “Congratulations on your nuptials.”

“Wait. What are you talking about?” I asked.

Ash looked confused and shot Rook an apologetic look.

I twisted my body around to face Rook. “What nuptials is he referring to?”

Surely Rook and I weren’t married. He would have told me if that’s what the Trial insinuated. Right? My cheeks were hot, and I glared at Rook, awaiting his explanation.

Cross and Ash made a hasty retreat, leaving Rook to deal with my anger.

CORDELIA

The next day, once I was good and awake, I tried to stand up and walk to the bathroom. My legs were shaky, and my overall weakness surprised me. It felt like I had the worst cold of my entire life, which was shocking because I had consumed a massive amount of blood the night prior. Shouldn't I have had more energy?

The way my body felt, weak and almost lifeless, reminded me of the time I had mono in high school and couldn't get out of bed for a week. Just getting dressed felt like a monumental task. Every joint in my body ached.

Rook wasn't in a much better condition. I could tell by his stiff movements as he made his way through the prince's suite that he felt similarly to me. Plus, he wasn't as formally dressed as he had been ever since we came to court.

As I massaged my sore leg muscles, I replayed the conversation Rook and I had the night before where I found out we were apparently married. Well, at least in the vampire world. And we had been for a while, even though Rook never consulted me about it.

He had explained that he felt he had no other choice once we were summoned to court. If we hadn't formed the bond, I wouldn't have stood a chance, given the fact that I was turned without the permission of the king and queen.

I understood Rook's reasoning. Truly. I was still irritated over the fact that he hid *that* important detail from me, as if I

couldn't handle the truth.

Rook finally looked up from the papers he was going over and met my eyes. "Good morning, my love."

"Morning," I grumbled, still not ready to let him off the hook just yet.

He crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, pulling me into his lap. "I'm sorry about not telling you about the bond. I was worried you would think less of me if you knew all the details of the blood bond."

"I don't think less of you." I didn't. I was just angry that he had kept something so important from me. "I just don't like being left in the dark."

"I know. I promise to never do it again." He kissed my forehead, and I melted into him, my anger dissipating.

"Now, how are you feeling?" he asked, his hand rubbing circles on my back.

"Like I got hit by a truck." I rubbed my forehead and wondered if the vampire kingdom had some kind of pain reliever I could take.

Rook chuckled. "Yeah, our bodies went through a lot of stress during the Trial. We'll probably be sore for a few days."

For a guy who was "sore" he was in a remarkably good mood.

"Is that why you look like death warmed over?" I teased, but really, he looked yummy and as perfect as always. Tasted so, too.

"Yeah, I believe so," he said with a groan. "I'll live."

"Good thing you're immortal," I joked, and he held me a little bit tighter.

His face softened, and he brushed his lips against mine. "Yes, good thing."

"So, what now?" I wondered what was expected of a married vampire couple.

“Now we force our sore bodies to walk down to the main hall. It’s important for us to make public appearances as often as possible. If we stay holed up in our quarters, it will lead to speculation and rumors. We want the court on our side, so they need to see us together in a more normal setting.”

By that, he meant one where we weren’t being caged and starved and stared at. Well, we would probably still be stared at. And then, like we shared one thought process, Rook smiled and said, “You know, not in cages.”

We walked through the castle and this time, I felt every step to the great hall. I felt them in my calves, my thighs, and every single muscle I owned. I was so sore, I didn’t even swing my arms, but held them at my side until Rook picked up my hand to twine our fingers together.

When we made it to the main hall, we were welcomed into the vampire world more warmly than I had anticipated. There were other couples and there were singles, too, but everyone mingled and chatted. Everyone smiled and made small talk with us. Several people patted Rook on the back and said they couldn’t wait for us to have children.

At first, I thought their comments were jokes. As more and more people shared the same sentiment while barely even acknowledging me, I became concerned.

Children weren’t part of the deal. Not now.

I interrupted Rook as he made small talk with a group of men. “Rook, I need you.” I pulled on his arm with a sultry look in my eyes, leaving the men to think that I needed to feed or have sex.

Pulling Rook over to a quiet corner, I jokingly punched him in the arm.

“Ouch. What was that for?” He grinned while rubbing his arm, which was more than likely sore from the leftover effects of the Trial.

“Why is everyone asking you when we’ll have children?” I asked, hands on my hips.

“Well,” Rook began, leaning against the wall, “vampires are supposed to reproduce as quickly as possible once they find their Blood Heart.”

The reality of his statement was shocking to me, the blood drained from my face leaving me lightheaded. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier, along with the fact that we are basically married?”

Rook opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The man was speechless. This wasn’t the time for him to not have words. This was the time to speak. We’d only just been married, and it seemed like we were already headed for counseling.

“Are you keeping any more secrets from me?” I pushed my hair behind my ears and crossed my arms.

He reached for my hand. “Let’s go talk about it in the suite, okay?”

His eyes were sincere, and I knew deep down that he didn’t want to hurt me or disappoint me. Surely, he could see that it wasn’t okay to keep details this astronomically big from me. If we truly were married, we should have been working together as a team. I certainly didn’t want to be in a marriage where Rook made all of the decisions, shutting me out, and leaving me without a say in important matters.

I nodded and took his hand. If he wanted to speak in private, that was fine with me. I just wanted answers.

As we were leaving, someone jumped out from behind a corner. A flare of dark fabric and the glint of a silver blade in the corner of my vision was all that I managed to see before Rook’s hand was ripped from mine as he fell to the floor. I turned just in time to see a dagger penetrate his back.

Panic gripped my throat as I remembered being wounded and dying in the abandoned farmhouse. My chest throbbed where I’d been stabbed.

I shifted from side to side, trying to stabilize myself, but my knees buckled as I fought the anxiety overtaking me and I

sank to the ground. The only think I knew was that if I passed out, I couldn't help Rook.

CORDELIA

I transferred my weight and leaned against the wall, then I forced myself to look at Rook's wound. It wasn't the same as mine and it shouldn't kill him. He was a vampire after all. Plus, the fact that he had pushed back to his feet and was fighting with his attacker made me hopeful, until I saw that his wound wasn't healing. Blood was pouring down his back and pooling on the ground below him.

I looked around, hoping that someone would step forward and help Rook. My hands clenched at my sides. I wanted to join in and help Rook, but I wasn't a trained fighter, or a fighter at all. Helping wouldn't be the best move. If I did, I'd probably cause more harm than good.

"Help him!" I shouted, not knowing what else to do. "He's going to die if you don't help him!" In that moment Rook's foot slipped on the blood and he fell backward with the attacker following him to the ground.

Rook grunted and tried to get up, but the attacker was stronger. The dagger wielding man pushed back to their feet and kicked Rook in the stomach, the man sent him sprawling backward.

There were so many vampires in this room and in this castle, but no one moved to help him. In fact, most people were standing back, apparently afraid of getting hurt. Within seconds, though, others joined the *attacker* and began to

violently beat Rook. He flailed and tried to block the blows, but he was only one man against many.

Tears blurred my vision, and I wiped them away with the back of my hand. I couldn't just stand there and watch as Rook was killed right in front of me.

Cross suddenly appeared out of nowhere and ripped his jacket off, ready to attack. "Get back, Cordelia!" he shouted.

I stepped back as Cross made his way to the center of the room.

"No!" Rook held up his hand, apparently willing to take the blows they were dishing out. "Protect Cordie."

Cross made his way to my side, clearly reluctant to leave Rook, and as more vampires joined in on the fight, he couldn't resist the instinct to protect the prince. After a second's hesitation Cross launched himself full tilt at the crowd around my mate. A terrifying roar left Cross' lips and his fists swung out faster than I could track, landing blows on whoever he was targeting. Some of them he even lifted by whatever clothing he could grab and threw them away from the fight.

From my vantage point, it seemed that Rook and Cross were outnumbered.

It was hard to keep track of Rook because there were so many vampires that it looked like one huge pile of people. The growling and screaming were so loud that I tried to block it out, covering my ears with my hands. Eventually, I realized I was the one screaming and forced myself to stop. The noise around me still sounded like thunder. I plastered myself against the wall and tried to stay out of the way.

Rook's attackers turned their attention to Cross as he fought them off. It was a bloody battle, with both men taking and dealing out punches.

I wanted to help, but I knew I couldn't. All I could do was watch and hope that Cross would be able to save Rook.

Soon, the scent of blood called to me. My body wanted to join the fight, to protect Rook, and to feed, but I resisted the urge.

One of the men who attacked Rook was slung out of the fighting ring in my direction. Without thinking, I grabbed him by his shirt collar. He looked at me with terror in his eyes as I tightened my grip on his neck. "Please," he begged. I was a young vampire with strength, and a powerful sensation took over. As I looked at the man who'd practically been gift-wrapped for me, I realized that I had somehow inflicted terror on a vampire who had just tried to kill my husband.

Power surged through me. I wasn't weak. I didn't need to be shielded. I was a vampire. Within seconds, I had ripped his throat out with my fangs. The blood was warm and as it gushed into my mouth. Once the man's dead body slumped to the ground, I looked at my hands in shock.

I'd never been in a fight before, or at least not one where I was powerful like I was as a vampire. I had definitely never killed someone before, and now I had a mouthful of the attacker's blood. It suddenly tasted sour to me, and I spit it out onto the floor. To my surprise, the blood was black, blending in with the marble tiles.

Did they somehow poison their blood in case Rook fed from them? If that was their plan, Rook would think he was hurting them when, in fact, they were killing him.

"Rook! They're poisoned!" I called out, hoping he could hear me over the ear piercing volume.

Just as he turned to face me, a vampire yelled, "Death to the Vanators!" That was Rook's family name.

Before I could warn him again, the man slashed at Rook, catching him off guard.

ASH

In the middle of my appointment with Cleo, the vampire seer, I heard shouting from down the hall. At first, I thought it was a group of rowdy men fooling around. As the shouts turned into screams of terror, though, I knew something wasn't right.

After excusing myself, I rushed out of the meeting, making my way to the great hall within a few seconds. When I arrived, I was met with a scene of utter chaos. Blood streaked the walls. Vampires lay dead, with their throats torn out. Cordelia had blood on her face and hands. And there were people running and screaming in every direction. It was hard to make sense of what was happening.

In the midst of the pandemonium, I saw Rook standing at the center of the crowd. He was surrounded by men who were punching and kicking him. As I ran toward the angry mob, trying to assess the seriousness of the situation, I caught a fresh glimpse of Cordelia standing against the wall. She was shouting at Rook, trying to tell him something.

Suddenly, he was attacked from behind and fell to the floor. Cordelia screamed in terror, the noise that left her was enough to have the crowd parting as she shoved them out of the way and ran to Rook's side where he lay motionless. A pool of blood that seeped from him now surrounded him. She covered him with her body, not allowing anyone near him. Her cries were gut wrenching, and I knew I had to help them. I

pushed my run into a sprint as I made my way toward the crowd and pushed my way through, trying to get to the two of them.

All I could focus on was Cordelia and the man I had served in secret for so many years. I was loyal to Rook because I believed in him. He was a man of integrity, and his beliefs and political views aligned nicely with mine. Over the years, we had become friends but kept our relationship hidden from the court. Now, the secrecy didn't matter. Nothing mattered if Rook died.

Thankfully, Cross appeared within seconds. He roared at the top of his lungs and slung the attackers away as they attempted to get to Cordelia. Whoever they were, they'd been sent to kill her. Apparently whatever orders the attackers were operating under demanded Cordie's death just as much as Rook's.

I grabbed the nearest weapon I could find, a chair, and began swinging it at anyone who blocked me from Cordelia and Rook. Everything else was all a blur after that. There was so much fighting and screaming that I couldn't focus on anything else.

The only thing that mattered to me was protecting them.

Just as I made my way to Rook and Cordie's side, magic suddenly exploded out of Cordelia. A giant wave of purple fire rushed through the hall, incinerating everyone except Cross, Rook, Cordelia, and me. There was no one else left.

I looked around in shock at the ash swirling in the air, resembling softly-falling snow, that was left over from her attack. There weren't any shoes, hats, clothes...nothing. Everyone had been completely obliterated in a split second.

What the hell had she done?

I turned back to Cordelia, dumbfounded by what I'd just witnessed. Her entire body was practically on fire as she stood up, a purple haze surrounding her. She looked at her arms and hands for a moment before shaking her head, confusion furrowing her brow, before she turned her attention back to

Rook. She seemed to realize that she couldn't focus on the magic now. All that mattered was her mate.

“Rook,” Cordelia called, kneeling next to his motionless body. “I command you to come back to me. You are my soulmate and without you, I am nothing.” She shoved her hands against his chest, and her eyes glowed with a purple light that was unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

The light transferred to Rook's body, and he jerked upright, sucking in a giant breath of air. The entire thing was odd because vampires haven't needed to breathe since the very first death and rebirth.

What the hell did she just do to him that made him react that way?

CORDELIA

The last thing I remembered was protecting Rook with my body. He had been attacked from behind, and it was my fault. I distracted him, so he didn't see the dagger coming. My carelessness had led to his death.

Or so I thought.

As I kneeled over his body, trying to help him, I was filled with sorrow and regret. I should have protected him better. I should have been more careful.

After that, I blacked out. And when I woke up, Rook was staring at me as if I were an alien. I opened my mouth to ask him why he was staring at me like I had horns growing out of my mouth. Before I could utter one word, a surge of vampires ran into the main hall.

"We felt magic," one claimed as they all rushed to Rook's side.

Based on the scorch marks on the floor, it was obvious that I was the one responsible for the surge of magic. The marks moved out from my position in all directions across the main hall. What happened? I was clueless.

Within seconds, the king entered the room, followed by the royal guards. "I demand to know what happened here." He spun around in a slow circle, taking in the scorch marks before his eyes finally landed on me. "Every vampire in the city probably felt that wave of magic, so I need answers. Now."

Rook stood to his feet, seemingly unharmed by the attacks. Relief bloomed through me like a sugar rush through a kid in a candy store. "We were attacked by several vampires. But... something happened. I have no idea what it was because I was unconscious at the time."

Rook glanced at me as I cleared my throat and took a step toward the king. "I had also completely blacked out."

Cross and Ash stared at each other for a moment. Finally, Cross spoke up. "I'm not sure what I saw." He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked down at the floor.

"I agree. No clue." Ash ran his hand through his hair and eyed me suspiciously.

The king let out a loud groan. "This is unacceptable." He flung his long hair over his shoulder and addressed his royal guards. "Escort all of them back to their suite and lock them up until we can figure out what happened."

The guards nodded and walked the four of us back to our rooms where we were shut in, the door closed and locked behind us. The whole time anxiety had been at war with joy within me. Rook was alive, but how?

I sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, defeated. This was not how I wanted to spend my eternity. Especially now that the Trial had confirmed what Rook and I already knew. He was my soulmate. For a moment there I thought I'd lost him, and the pain I'd felt was beyond anything I could comprehend, but I hadn't. He was here and he was alive... somehow.

"Alright." I turned to Rook. "What the fuck is going on?"

Rook shook his head before tapping on his ear and pointing toward the door. There must have been guards stationed outside the suite, listening for any information they could pass on to the king.

Rook waved the three of us to the back bedroom and shut the door. The four of us were huddled together on the bed, talking quietly enough so we knew there was no way the guards couldn't hear us.

“What happened before we arrived?” Cross asked, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“I was stabbed in the back...with this.” Rook pulled the dagger from his sleeve, apparently having hidden it at some point.

Ash and Cross were furious, both of them unable to stay sitting on the bed as they began pacing on either side of it and asking who might have formed a group of attackers to kill Rook. But before they could brainstorm any further, Rook interrupted them. “What happened when I was unconscious?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Cross began. “One second she was crying over your dead body, and the next second, an explosion of magic shot out from her.”

It was like Cross was talking about someone else. This couldn’t have been me. That would be outrageous.

“She has powerful magic,” Ash interjected, as if that wasn’t evident from Cross’ explanation.

We were back to the magic again? What had I missed?

“Honestly, Rook, I think she’s a soul spinner.” Cross glanced at Rook with a worried expression on his face. “Everyone in the room, except us, was incinerated.”

Rook paled, which made me even more nervous.

“You guys do remember that I’ve only been a vampire for a week or whatever, right?” I looked at them as I stood and crossed the room. “I don’t know what the hell a soul spinner is.”

Rook sighed. “It’s something very dangerous and powerful.” He paused and looked at Cross, not sure if he should continue or not. “And it’s a type of magic that people would kill to possess.”

CORDELIA

My pulse beat loudly in my ears. A soul spinner? Of all the things I'd ever heard of before, soul spinning didn't sound like a happy, positive ability. Why was it not enough for me to just be a regular, run-of-the-mill vampire? A little neck nibble, some blood sucking, some salivary repair. Easy peasy.

But no. I had to possess some strange, powerful magic that could incinerate a room full of vampires at a moment's notice.

"I demand that you tell me what a soul spinner is." It wasn't like I had to make such a forceful demand. Rook would tell me. Probably. Someone would, anyway. But I wanted to know now. "I'm the one with the abilities, so I suppose you don't want to make me mad."

I glared at Rook and his eyes went wide, lips parted. Undoubtedly, he knew I wasn't joking around.

Rook raised his hands in the air defensively and joined me on the side of the large four poster bed, sighing before finally relenting. "It's a type of magic that can create a soul within a vampire's body, making them more powerful than a regular vampire. It's an incredibly rare ability, and it's said that those who possess it are some of the most powerful vampires in existence."

It sounded like hokey to me.

"A soul?" My eyes widened as I pretended to imagine the implications of such a combination, though in truth I couldn't

really understand it. The idea of a soul was so abstract to me that I didn't really understand how that would affect them. "How is that possible?"

"Yes," Rook continued. "A soul allows a vampire to be out in the sun without any type of protection. They'd also be undetectable as a vampire by the methods that humans currently use." Rook paused and stared deeply into my eyes. "It would also allow them to have a child without having to protect it with magic throughout the pregnancy."

My breath caught somewhere between my lungs and my throat. I knew that the court wanted us to procreate as soon as possible since we were Blood Hearts. But I hadn't stopped to think about the ramifications of bringing a vampire infant into the world. How would that differ from a human pregnancy and birth? I didn't know, and also...why would a vampire fetus need magical protection?

Rook patted my leg and stood, stretching his back and neck. "It would mean that any vampire who got a soul could lead a more normal life. They could lead a more human life, in a sense, but without the weakness of being human." He smiled. "Or the mortality."

My brain couldn't process Rook's explanation. I was still trying to wrap my head around the idea of a vampire having a soul. "I don't understand," I admitted. "What exactly makes a soul, anyway?"

"You do." Rook just shook his head and stared at a painting on the wall. Perhaps he was more in the dark on soul spinners than I originally thought.

"Not really what I meant." And if I sounded frustrated, it was because I was.

"That's only something the soul spinners understand." Cross unfolded his arms and shoved his hands into his pockets. And that answer was no help whatsoever either. "But, as far as I know, until now, they have all been hunted to extinction."

His words sent a chill over my body, and the bedroom fell silent as the realization of exactly how much danger I truly

was in began to sink in.

After a few moments of contemplation, Ash spoke up. “Maybe there are resources in the royal library that would help explain exactly what a soul spinner is and what they are capable of doing with their magic.”

I chuckled darkly. “Yeah, that’s a great idea, Ash. Except you’re forgetting one small detail...we can’t leave our rooms.”

We were essentially prisoners.

“She’s right.” Rook moved to the front of the room and turned to face us. “We need to come up with a believable story to explain Cordie’s magic and what happened in the main hall.” Believable might’ve been a stretch since even I wasn’t sure I believed what happened. Had I not been the one responsible, I certainly wouldn’t have believed it.

We argued over what would be the best story to tell the king. I looked around at the three men I admired most—adored even—and saw that their faces wrought with stress and anxiety. There was more than that, though. There was a sort of tension between the four of us.

I felt caged in by everything. The room, the king, Rook... Nothing was going as it was supposed to, and now I was supposed to be this magical being. It was all too much for a freaking weekday.

“The whole thing sounds like a bunch of crap to me,” I muttered to myself. It wasn’t that I cared if they heard, but I wasn’t shouting it from the rooftop either. I just seemed to have forgotten how to keep my thoughts to myself. They stopped arguing and stared at me.

Cross folded his arms, an eyebrow cocked, though his face otherwise blank. The other two took similar stances. Apparently, I had offended them.

Ash frowned. “You may not believe any of it, Cordie, but that doesn’t make it any less true.” How my disbelief affected him, I didn’t know. And it didn’t matter.

“The soul spinners were hunted by those who didn’t understand their power or the importance of that power. By

vampires who did understand, they were revered and treated almost as holy beings,” Rook explained. “To this day, some still believe that soul spinners will be the ones who will save the vampire race.”

So now I was supposed to save the vampire race? I threw my hands in the air. “This is too much. Way too much. I can’t handle this.” Pacing the room, the ideas of soul spinners assaulted my mind. This certainly wasn’t what I imagined when I thought about my future. This wasn’t supposed to be how everything turned out.

Gran’s voice sounded in my mind, right on cue. *When life hands you lemons, grab the tequila, make a margarita and deal with it.*

Before I could argue with the men any further over my supposed soul spinner abilities, magic began to stir to life within me. It flared inside me, as though my thoughts and all the talk about it were calling to it, enticing it to come forth and make itself known and seen.

Burning the men alive with my magic was not on the day’s schedule, so I closed my eyes and tried to control it, pushing it back down deep, where it belonged. Rook’s voice had me opening my eyes once more. “Cordie, you’re glowing.” He said as he gestured in my direction with wide eyes.

I looked at my hands and arms. They were alight with a purple haze surrounding me.

No. I wouldn’t allow this to happen. I couldn’t.

I sank to the floor and breathed deeply, focusing on finding the magic and being in control of it. It took a few long seconds, but finally, the purple haze faded along with the tingling magical sensation that came along with. That was a close one, and I was going to have to work hard to get a hold of my abilities before I hurt anyone else. Even if they deserved it.

ROOK

The royal guards kept us locked inside the suite for a few hours. We took advantage of that time and explained as much about Cordelia's magic as we could to her.

Then, we discussed our options in terms of lying our way out of the jail we'd found ourselves in. After being trapped inside a cage for a full week, I had no desire to be trapped inside my own suite for a few hours, a few minutes, or even a few seconds. There was no reason for it. And I was sick and tired of being held like a prisoner, almost enough to open a can of trouble by trying to break the doors down. It wouldn't take much.

Instead, I looked at Cordie and Ash. "We need to find a way out of here." My hands clenched into fists as I paced back and forth. "I'm not going to be locked up like an animal."

My anxiety was bubbling inside of me, ready to burst out. I curled my hands into fists, as if I could contain the emotion within my hands somehow.

"Rook, we can't just leave," Ash protested. He shook his head and moved his body to stand between me and the door, like he knew I was suffering and considering acting. "The guards will know something is up the moment we step out of the door. And the last thing we want, or need, is more suspicion."

"We'll have to outsmart them," I conceded and turned away from the door. Maybe I wouldn't be so tempted to run if

I wasn't staring at the door. Just looking at the wood panels was making my mind race with questions I shouldn't be considering. What exactly was the amount of strength it would take to break the door down? Was it reinforced by steel? Could I shatter the wood or should I just break the hinges? "But how long are they going to leave us here?"

I wanted to punch something, anything, to release the frustration that was still boiling inside of me.

"I'm not sure." Ash ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He was by far the calmest of us all, and the most optimistic. "But I doubt it will be for very long. The king and queen need to keep up appearances. If they keep us in here too long, especially without explanation, even more rumors will fly around the court, and they'll look like they don't have things under control." He half-smiled. "That's in our favor. Also that they might not understand what happened either, and if they do, they can't speak of it."

Of course if they knew, Cordelia could end up more pawn than player in this whole thing.

"And we can't have that, either," Cross added. "The last thing we need is for the court to know how powerful Cordelia's magic really is. The king and queen will hide it. Although," he looked at Cordie, "it puts you at greater risk. We need to take precautions."

He was right, of course. The less people who knew about her magic, the better. But that didn't make me feel any better about being locked up like a common criminal.

Before I could give voice to my apprehension and frustration, the king burst through the doors. "I need to know everything. Tell me what happened. Every bit of it. Don't leave out any details." He took a seat in one of the wingback accent chairs and stared at each of us, one by one. He stared hardest at Cordie and I couldn't let him keep that focus, especially since she looked like a child caught sneaking a cookie. At least Ash and Cross appeared to have expected his arrival just like I had.

I reached into my pocket and removed the dagger that was used to stab me in my back. The king's eyes widened as I walked closer to him, throwing the dagger at his feet. "The next time you try to have me taken out, you should pick more capable assassins."

I didn't miss Cordie's wide eyes. None of us had explicitly stated that the dagger was the king's so she hadn't had warning about the accusation and I saw the fury that rose and swiftly dissipated on her face. Knowing her it would become a cold fire burning within her just waiting for the right moment to lash out.

The king stared at the hilt of his dagger for a moment, his own crest looking back up at him, the jewels on it signifying that it came from his collection, and then held up his hands defensively. "I had no knowledge of an assassination attempt. You have my word, I'll look into it and those responsible will be punished. Clearly someone is trying to frame me. I'm not stupid enough to use a weapon from my own house if I wanted to have you dispatched."

He kicked the knife with his foot, like he no longer wanted to see the weapon. One of his attendants rushed over and removed it, as if he was able to read the king's mind. At least, I hadn't seen him move to indicate that he wanted it gone.

I scoffed. He'd look into it? The son of a bitch was lying through his teeth. As for not being stupid enough to use a dagger from his collection? If it walks like a duck and quacks like one then it probably is. Unfortunately, I wasn't in a position to call him on any of my counter arguments.

"Now, I'm expecting a full explanation as to what happened with the magic." He eyed Cordelia and rubbed his chin.

Knowing that he probably wouldn't believe me, I sat down across from him, so we were at the same eye level. Standing over the king while blatantly lying wasn't a smart move. Of course, blatantly lying was enough to earn me a death sentence if he discovered and chose to have me killed—publicly, after a trial he would claim was fair. But standing over him while I

did so was an invitation to confrontation. And above all, we didn't need more confrontation.

“Cordelia reacted badly to the cage and the lock. The passive magic we discovered she possessed built up within her.” I paused and glanced at Cordelia, who was wringing her hands in the corner of the room. At some point, we were going to have to talk about her poker face. I wasn't deterred. “Her magic exploded out of her when she had a panic attack after I was stabbed.”

I watched as the king shifted in his seat, processing the bullshit I was feeding him.

“She was locked in a cage, starved, and watched. As a new vampire, it was...too much.” He opened his mouth, and I cut him off. I couldn't risk him asking a question I didn't have an answer for. “As long as she isn't locked up like that again, it won't be an issue.”

I sat back on the sofa and waited for his response. As much as I didn't believe his lie that he hadn't been involved in an assassination attempt, I could tell by the twist of his mouth and the quirk of one brow that he was equally unconvinced of my explanation of Cordelia's magic.

To his credit, the king nodded his head. “I'll take your word for it. For now.” He stood up and smoothed the front of his tunic. “Ash, Cross, you're both free to leave. However, Rook and Cordelia, you will stay in this suite until I can confirm she's no longer a threat. I can't have someone who can incinerate a room full of vampires at once wandering the halls of the castle.”

Ash immediately excused himself, not even making eye contact with the three of us. He'd never been a fan of confrontation, and I was sure he had a mental to-do list that stretched the length of the castle and into the city.

I was glad to see him go. After all, he was my eyes and ears at court, and he continued to work hard to gather support for me. And now, not only did he have to convince the court of Cordelia's strength as a leader but above all else, that she wasn't a threat.

Cross walked out soon after, leaving Cordelia and I in a stare down with the king and his royal guards.

For all the good it did us, we won, and the king stood and walked over to me. He squatted in front of me, his arms dangling over the bend of his knees as he stared into my eyes. “There’s something different about you.” He reached to curl his fingers into my cheeks and squeezed as he turned my head from side to side. “I don’t know what it is, yet, but I’ll figure it out. And when I do, I’ll expect an explanation.” He hadn’t spoken the words *high crimes*, but they were implied.

He released my face and stood up. “In the meantime, you’re both under strict orders not to leave this suite. If you do, or even attempt to step into the hallway, I’ll have you both killed.”

With that final threat, the king turned in a precise military pivot and exited the suite, followed by his security team. A loud thud followed by the twisting of a key in the bolt let us know that we had, indeed, been barricaded inside the suite. Again.

I turned to Cordelia, looking for comfort and affection. Instead, I faced my pissed off vampire mate. As an added bonus, I now knew she had some extreme magical abilities I needed to look out for, too.

CORDELIA

Rook is alive. I repeated it over and over again in my mind like a mantra. If I could convince myself that it was true and he was here with me, some of the anxiety inside me might fade. It was the thought anyway.

He hadn't died, but I'd certainly thought he was dead when one of the assassins attacked him from behind. I couldn't stop seeing the blood pooled around his body, his limbs motionless, and his eyes rolled back into his head every time I so much as blinked. It was going to take some time to get over this.

And no matter how many times I told myself that he was alive and I should be grateful, I couldn't shake the emotion of having almost lost him.

Hell, I should have been shouting from the rooftops that my soulmate and husband was alive and well because I sure as hell thought I'd lost him forever. On the other hand, here I was, stuck in another room with him, madder than a hornet who'd faced the hose, and ready to strike.

He lied to me, by omission, but he'd had a reason. He chose to keep details of our bond to himself, leaving me in the dark like some pitiful damsel in distress who couldn't handle the truth of the matter. Those details included the fact that we were actually married. And not only that, we were expected to have a kid as soon as possible. So, there were pluses and minus in his ledger of good and bad deeds.

But he could've told me about the expectations of a baby before he sprang it on me after it was too late to rethink. I'd known for a bit now, and I still couldn't wrap my mind around that one. Especially since Rook and I had never even discussed the idea of having children. We'd both been too busy fighting for our lives to think about starting a family. I always figured that talking about kids was something for down the road. But it turned out kids were part of the package that no one had mentioned was expected of us.

I paced back and forth in the living room of the suite while Rook leaned his shoulder against the wall with his ankles crossed, watching me. I wanted to confront him about all of this, to scream at him and fight with him, to demand to know everything he hadn't told me again, but I was afraid of the anger boiling inside me. I certainly didn't want to burn Rook to a crisp like I had the other vampires, but the emotions and feelings were there.

Instead, I looked down at my hands, and realized that I didn't even know who I was anymore. I would've liked to say that I didn't know how all of this started, but I did. I couldn't deny my part in it, either.

Rook and I started out as a simple agreement at The Nest, then we'd turned into fuck buddies. And it was glorious. Divine in ways I hadn't imagined it could be. But now, without warning, and as behind my back as anything in my life could've ever been, I was married and people were probably keeping track of my ovulation schedule in the hopes I would be shooting out some sort of vampiric offspring. I wasn't ready for any of it, especially since I hadn't even finished grieving Gran's death.

I didn't even know who I was other than the fact that I was no longer human and had turned into a vampire. On top of that, I had also been blessed, or more likely cursed depending on how this turned out, with special magical abilities.

How, with all that going on and me with absolutely no plan in place and no idea how to deal with one bit of it, could I be expected to raise someone? To be responsible for their care, well-being, and upbringing?

I glanced at Rook, who kept his mouth shut like he had a clamp on the damned thing. He didn't want to upset me further, I could feel that hesitation ringing through the bond we shared, so he either refused to break the silence or just didn't have anything worthwhile to say. But this was one time I needed to talk it out, needed some input, needed... something. I wished he'd just say...anything. The silence was deafening. It was killing me.

Finally, after we'd been standing in silence for a good five minutes, doing nothing more than staring at one another and waiting for the other to speak as I grew angrier and angrier, I couldn't hold my tongue any longer. "Tell me one thing, Rook, *husband*, is there any other way you'd like to control my life and neglect to tell me about it until it's too late for me to do anything about it?"

He looked like I slapped him, and hurt flickered across his face, darkening his eyes and slacking his jaw as he shook his head. "As soon as the king gives us permission to leave, we can go back to the way things were if that's what you prefer. Or," Rook paused and ran his fingers through his hair until it flopped over his forehead. He was in need of a cut, but now probably wasn't the time to tell him. "If you'd rather be with Cross or Ash, you could do that, too."

Now it was my turn to feel the hurt. How could he suggest that I'd rather be with one of them over him? I loved him. Surely, he knew that. Even though the thought of losing Cross made my guts ache and my head hurt.

"Do I really mean so little to you? That you'd suggest I be with someone else?" A tear slipped down my cheek, and I hated him for it. I hated him for making me feel weak and vulnerable. But I loved him for stomping across the room to my side and swiping it away.

He growled and his emotions—anger, sadness, hurt, love even—were written in the darkness of his eyes and the low, guttural tone of his voice. "You mean more to me than the stars in the sky, Cordie, but I want you to be happy. If it's not with me, we need to figure something else out."

All of my anger slowly faded, and I realized that Rook was just as trapped as I was by all of the insanity and drama we'd experienced.

He glanced at me, his face softer with a half-smile as he began to calm down, too. I could tell that his heart rate had lowered.

"I don't want to live without you." He snatched my hand and held it tightly, even gave it a short, but strong squeeze.

"I feel the same way, but I don't want to lie to you." For as angry as I'd been a few seconds ago that he thought I might like someone else more than him, I needed him to know the truth. "I have feelings for Cross, as well." I pulled Rook closer to me and stared into his eyes.

"I understand."

And I really hoped that he did.

Rook leaned down, rested his forehead against mine, and pecked a kiss on my nose. He leaned his head back and angled his head down, staring me straight in the eyes.

The energy between us grew charged, and I breathed heavier, anticipating what could come next.

His thumbs stroked my hands and lifted them to wrap around his neck, and I tangled my fingers in his hair. His hands went to my hips and gripped them tightly, pulling my body against his.

Rook's hardening length pushed against my stomach. My panties dampened even further.

The anger I held for him evaporated just as quickly as it appeared. How could I ever stay angry with him? He was my soulmate, and everything about me craved all of him.

"Rook." The need in my voice made his eyes dilate further, and his mouth attacked mine instantly. Passionately. No hesitations. We knew what the other liked and gave it to each other.

His kiss was overpowering and dominating, which I needed at that moment. With everything going on, knowing

that he desired me and craved me at this level made the shitty parts worth it.

I gripped my hands in his hair and tightened my hold. Rook growled in my mouth, and I smiled against his kiss, which was awkward as his tongue plundered my mouth as if he'd never get to share a kiss with me ever again.

Rook moved his hands from my hips and squeezed my ass cheeks tightly as he ground his erection into my stomach. I lifted myself onto my tiptoes to get even closer to him. I moaned, wanting his skin against mine.

Stepping back so I could relieve him of his shirt caused him to growl, tighten his hold, and lift me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist and he flew us across the room and pinned me to the wall.

“Umph.” I hit the wall and stopped the kiss. Rook had other plans.

He bent at his knees, aligned our cores, and started thrusting against that spot of pure delight between us.

I arched my back against the wall to get a better angle of where he was hitting.

My breasts started popping up from my top, and they ached for Rook's attention.

His hands stroked my body as his lower half kept me pinned to the wall. Rook's solid hands and long fingers cupped my breasts as if he knew what I needed, which he probably did.

Each breast throbbed and ached with each thrust against my clit, sending shock waves back and forth.

With no warning, Rook ripped my top down the middle. My heart pounded as my breasts heaved, almost falling out of the bra cups.

A surprised “eep” fell from my mouth, and Rook licked his lips.

Suddenly, the thrusting stopped. I was about to protest when he pulled the delicately hand-sewn, lace bra down and

stopped it under my breasts, shelving them for him.

Rook dropped his head, took one of my nipples into his mouth, and nipped it.

I hissed before he soothed the bite with his tongue.

He suckled my breast, and I held his head in place with one hand. I skirted my other down my body in between the both of us. I cupped him, squeezed, and rubbed. The action caused his hips to begin rocking against me again.

My other breast was nipped and laved like the one before. I hissed again, pulled my hand from him, and moved it to my core.

I snuck my hand in between my pants and slipped the panties aside. Instantly, I found the nub and twirled my fingers.

I threw my head back against the wall as Rook stimulated my breast and I encouraged my clit.

The touch was the final straw. I worked my fingers faster and held Rook's head tighter to my breast as a soothing heat flooded my system, causing me to crash against Rook's rock-hard body. The orgasm was sweet torture.

Rook pulled me from the wall before I fully came down from my high and had me stripped and bent over the sizable ottoman within seconds.

The unsnapping of his belt buckle caught my attention and a long purr sounded through the room as he unzipped his pants.

My stomach flopped and more of my juices leaked down my leg, crying for him to be inside me.

“Don't move a muscle, Cordie. Just enjoy. You move, I stop.” Rook didn't touch me as he hovered behind me. “You hear me?”

I nodded. “I hear you.”

“Good girl,” Rook growled.

I rested over the ottoman with my ass in the air, anticipating his next move. The seconds ticked by, and he hovered over me, breathing down my back. His fingers roamed a hair's breadth above my skin. I could sense him, but he never touched me, and my body wound up in response.

My skin puckered, my muscles tightened, and my mind tried to gauge when he would touch me. My pussy throbbed.

“Cordie, you’re so beautiful. I could gaze at you all day.” His whisper broke the silence in the air.

Then, he gently blew across the lower part of my body, teasing me. I clasped my hands on the ottoman, and my body tensed.

“You smell so good. I know you taste better than the sweetest nectar. I think I’m gonna have a sample. What do you think?” I could hear Rook lowering himself to the ground.

I whimpered.

“Yeah.” Rook’s voice shook. “I think so, too.”

His mouth ravaged my slit, and his tongue lashed my clit before plunging deep inside of me.

I held my body in place but moaned loudly at the exquisite invasion.

He sucked, licked, and nipped me ten ways to Sunday, and the slurping sounds were deafening in the room.

My soft whimpering slowly drowned out his sounds.

The warm, soft heat before was an inferno building to demolish me from the inside out.

His tongue did one last swipe and thrust deep, and I convulsed into oblivion, screaming at the top of my lungs. Rook’s cock slammed inside me to the hilt, pounded through my second orgasm of the night that then rolled into a third.

“Fuck, Cordie, you hold me so tight.” His thrust and clapping of our bodies made me imagine a standing ovation from an audience gazing down at us.

Rook lifted my ass and held me up while I came down. He gave a few more hard thrusts before releasing himself inside of me.

His loud roar made my body clench once again, even though I was boneless and immovable.

Once he finished, he couldn't hold me up any longer. We collapsed onto the ottoman while the mixture of our bond seeped out of me, though he stayed nestled in tight.

CROSS

As soon as the king released me, I shot out of that room like my ass was on fire and there was someone chasing me with a can of gasoline. There was no one I hated being around more than that son of a bitch. Some fucking king he was. Just the sound of his voice made my teeth grind, as did the constant whining of his wife.

During the years of his reign, they'd enacted policies that made this era of our history laughable. Their overbearing attitudes made us no allies, and the overall demeanor of the entire court was an absolute joke. They ruled the kingdom as if everyone in their domain were imbeciles who didn't know their heads from their assholes.

Of course, no one ever stood up to them. King Hugh ruled with an iron fist, which was evident in the horrible trial he put Rook and Cordelia through. He'd made a history of ruthlessness toward his own people. He put Cordie and Rook in cages, like the animals our enemies said we were. The guy was a lunatic. He killed or imprisoned anyone who didn't kiss his royal fucking slippers.

It occurred to me that maybe I hated him as much for his diamond footed slippers as I did for his egregious behavior. Didn't matter. Hate was hate.

Rook was supposed to be king, not Hugh. He took the position from Rook by luck, certainly not by brains or brawn. He simply found his mate first. That was it. And because

they'd proven they were Blood Hearts, Hugh was granted an immediate marriage and crowning. No questions asked. The ancient texts and bylaws of the vampire kingdom were clear. Blood Hearts would rule, overriding rightful heirs.

Now that I thought about it, if Rook had found Cordelia before Hugh found Fiona, he would have reigned this entire time and we wouldn't be in the horrible mess we were. Rook and I wouldn't have been exiled from the court. But, then again, Rook wouldn't have found Cordelia at The Nest otherwise. Things happened the way they were supposed to, but until Cordie, it had been hard to swallow.

I hoped there was still enough support for Rook's claim to the throne among the court to be able to swing the wheel of fortune back Rook's way. If there was, then Hugh would certainly not be as safe in his seat of power as he assumed. And the way it seemed from everyone I'd spoken to, there was some unhappiness among his courtiers. If he knew what was good for him, he'd stop focusing on treating Rook like a common criminal and put more energy into trying to please his dissatisfied court.

There was an obvious group of vampires loyal to this king who wanted Rook to be assassinated, though. No doubt, this group were minions of the king. Ash, though, had informed me that there were still many silently hoping that Rook would take his rightful place on the throne.

I pushed the thoughts of kingdom politics out of my mind as I followed Ash down several corridors until we reached the royal library. Two guards stood at the entrance. They crossed their lances and moved to block the doorway entirely. They eyed us with suspicion.

"Good afternoon," Ash began as amicably as he ever was. "Is the library open to the court today?"

One of the guards, a tall man with a long, hooked nose, stepped forward. "The library is closed to everyone except the king and queen. Be gone now."

The second guard, shorter and stockier than his companion, nodded his head in agreement.

“Damn. I don’t suppose there’s any way you could make an exception? It’s not very often I get to the castle or to the royal library, you know?” Ash asked, but neither guard looked directly at him, which was smart because Ash had some serious compelling skills. Instead, he continued, “I’d like to do some research on my family’s lineage.”

He sure pulled that one out of his ass. He was a liar extraordinaire, the kind of guy it was best to invite into a friendly game of poker. Not a high-stakes one, unless you wanted to lose your life savings. I was impressed at how quickly Ash could think of a lie that fit whatever narrative he was spinning and helped him get what he wanted. He certainly wasn’t one to buckle under pressure, and I had to respect that.

The guards glanced at one another and then turned back to Ash, still not meeting his gaze head on. But first one nodded, then the other, and they moved to the side, allowing us to enter the library. I gave a silent little whoop. Ash never ceased to amaze me.

The librarian cocked a suspicious eyebrow, but she didn’t move out from behind her big desk to stop us from entering the library. Thank the gods, too. I couldn’t deal with any more bullshit today. It wasn’t like we were going to steal some precious first edition. We just needed some answers.

Honestly, I’d never been in the library before. I wasn’t an especially big reader or appreciator of historical...anything. So, there’d never been a need. But I quickly understood why so many enjoyed passing their time in the stately room. There were rows and rows of ancient, leather-bound books, comfortable wingback chairs, and a large trickling fountain with a marble dolphin and mermaid in the center of the room. Probably not a Stephen King in the bunch, but it was really quite beautiful.

Ash didn’t waste any time, heading to the back of the room where a long table was piled high with dusty old titles. I followed him and began perusing the books myself. I flipped open a cover of one and a plume of dust came out with it. I sneezed and Ash looked over. “Really?”

“I’m allergic. What do you want me to do?” I picked up the offending book and pushed it to the side. “What are we looking for?” I asked him as he scanned the shelves of books.

“I’m not sure.” Ash looked back at me and shrugged his shoulders. “Anything that might help us understand more about soul spinners.”

“That’s a tall order.” I sighed. “These books look like they haven’t been touched in years.” And it certainly didn’t appear as if they’d been cataloged in any way. More so, it looked like they had been randomly shoved onto shelves and then ignored. For centuries.

“Well, we don’t have any other choice.” He pulled a book off the shelf and dusted it off before opening it up. The spine creaked like a rusty hinge.

I did the same and soon enough, we were both lost in our own research. The hours passed quickly as we went through the histories, searching for anything on the rare magic Cordelia possessed. After a while, I got bored. “Ash, are you attracted to Cordie?” Maybe I shouldn’t have asked, but I needed a little entertainment.

He was obviously taken aback by the bluntness of my question. “Uhh, I don’t think this is the time or the place to discuss this.”

I squinted in his direction. “I’ll take that as a yes.” What was it they said about a lack of answer?

Ash scowled. “Anyone in their right mind would be attracted to Cordelia.” He paused and scanned another dusty book. “She’s beautiful, but I don’t crave her the way you and Rook do. I care for her. But I assure you that I am not trying to push my way into your relationships. Or is it relationship, as in one relationship between all of you?”

Not trying to push his way in? That seemed to be exactly what he wanted, at least from my perspective. I’d been certain that Ash wanted nothing more than to be with Cordie. Then again, maybe he was playing me like the guards outside the library doors...saying what I wanted to hear to get what he

wanted. With Ash, there was no real way to tell. But I was certainly going to keep an eye on him. Whether Cordelia was involved or not.

CORDELIA

Rook and I cuddled on the couch for what seemed like hours. I would never grow tired of resting on his chiseled chest, the rise and fall lulling me to sleep. We had forgiven one another, and I hoped we could move forward without any more issue between us. There was too much stacked against us to not have one another's backs.

The wooden anchor that had been placed against the door was removed, and the king burst suddenly into the room. This time, another vampire followed him closely. I was more than a little thankful that we'd showered and redressed after our earlier escapades.

"This is Claudius, one of the ancients." The king motioned to the other vampire. A slew of guards followed closely behind them. They were dressed in long cloaks, some armed with swords and some with spears.

I eyed Claudius, my face blank, but I was wary all the way to my bones. This king had already proved he couldn't be trusted.

Claudius looked to be even older than the king, although vampires didn't really age like humans. He had a few crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, some smile lines which told me that he at least smiled, but it was his eyes that belied his age. They were dark, darker than the normal vampire black. It was the kind of darkness I couldn't quite place. It was almost as if he had witnessed too much pain and suffering in his lifetime.

That darkness gave voice to his age in a way his mostly unmarked skin didn't.

I glanced at Rook. His jaw was slack, his brow pinched, and his eyes wide. He appeared shocked to see Claudius in the suite. He stood and bowed low, even though he never bowed to the king. It was almost funny to me that Claudius inspired a reverence that the king did not.

I quickly stood, fumbled over my own feet and nearly tripped before I managed what I assumed might pass for a curtsy. When I straightened, my feet tangled in themselves, and once again, I tumbled almost forward. Rook caught me. I'd tripped over my own feet, and I realized that I looked like an awkward fawn, learning to walk for the first time.

Claudius smirked, probably at my failed attempt to honor his presence. At least he wasn't scowling at me, finding me unworthy, or cringing in fear.

He chuckled softly and then turned his attention back to the king, whose pompous voice rang through the deathly quiet. "I've brought Claudius here to examine Cordelia and determine whether or not her magic is a threat to the kingdom." He stepped back, and nodded to Claudius, as if giving the other man permission and opportunity to speak.

Claudius eyed me, raked his gaze over me. The weight of his stare was as potent as a physical touch. He smiled. "Cordelia isn't a threat. I can see that much."

He gestured for me to step closer to him, and I moved as he asked. I wasn't naïve enough to believe that the king would be swayed by what Claudius said. And I wanted to show that I was completely compliant with the king's request.

"So, tell me, child...When did you first suspect that you had magic?" He crossed his arms over his chest and stared deeply into my eyes.

I had no doubt that this wise, old man would be able to tell immediately whether or not I was speaking the truth.

I smiled because I wanted to look self-assured, but something about standing in the shadow of this man's gaze

ignited my nerves. “Well, to be honest,”—which of course I was—“I didn’t know I had magical abilities. This is all a surprise to me.”

I pushed my hair behind my ears and glanced at Rook, who nodded slightly, silently encouraging me to continue answering the ancient’s questions. This was too important to let the king make his own inferences.

“Ah, I see.” Claudius rubbed his chin. “Have you ever seen magic before?”

The image of the purple swirls from my dreams popped into my mind. Those had been dreams, though. And, when it first happened, I certainly hadn’t realized it was an indication of magic.

“No, sir. I haven’t.” I didn’t look down at my hands as I fiddled with my fingernails, but I hoped I had answered correctly.

“Would you be willing to allow me to taste one drop of your blood?” Claudius’s eyes moved to my wrist, and the darkness in his eyes became a hunger, fierce and stark, as vivid as his features.

My gaze shifted to Rook. This decision could only be strengthened by the knowledge of why this ancient old man needed to taste a drop of my blood. The confusion must have been written in the expression on my face. I couldn’t see myself, but I could feel the curve of my eyebrow, the pinch of my mouth. Rook smiled slightly and nodded his head.

“Yes,” I replied, hoping I hadn’t just agreed to some weird ritual.

Claudius moved forward, so quickly that I didn’t see it happen, until he was an inch or so from me. Then he snatched my right hand, pulled it close to his face, and held my gaze. My vein throbbed—they always did when another vampire was poised to take a nibble—and we both looked down at my wrist, at the vein in question.

After examining it for a moment, he lifted my hand to his mouth and pierced the pad of my index finger with his fang.

Then, just as quickly as he'd drawn blood, he licked the skin and sealed it. The whole thing happened so quickly I wasn't sure he'd actually drawn any blood at all. Had his eyes not glowed and his smile tilted up, I wouldn't have believed anything had happened.

Claudius held his finger up to the light so it illuminated the single drop of blood.

We all watched closely as he considered the blood, analyzing it from every angle, turning his finger to the light and away from it, as if it were a textbook or an experiment which needed to be studied.

After a few moments, he turned to the king. "Yes, it's true. She is a soul spinner."

Ash was right. He licked the blood from his finger and smiled. "And she is delicious."

The king's eyes went wide at the ancient's declaration. I wondered what it meant now that it was official and out in the open. We couldn't keep it a secret any longer. The jig was up. The cat was out of the bag. The little birdy had sang its song. Rook moved closer, almost imperceptibly, but I was glad.

The tension in the room suddenly shifted as the king made his way to my side. "Do you know how to use your powers?" He eyed me with a certain apprehension and put his hand up as if he could shield himself from these powers. I might not have known how to use them, but I knew their strength. And if I could hone it...But that wasn't something that needed to be mentioned right now.

"No." Of course, I didn't. As a matter of fact, I had killed a roomful of vampires without being aware of said powers or that it was even me who did it. "I didn't even know I had powers until you tried to assassinate Rook."

The king cocked his head and took a small step back. Probably, he wasn't used to such boldness. And maybe I shouldn't have accused him of trying to kill Rook, but now that I had a rare magical ability, I figured I had leverage over what the king wanted.

I didn't know a lot about being a soul spinner, but I knew that *he* didn't have that power and men always wanted what they didn't have. He would be salivating for my ability now that he knew it. There was no way he would dispose of me for one fiery comment. Or ten, for that matter.

But he eyed me, rage and determination shining in the dark depths of his eyes. I suddenly realized that I probably should have kept my mouth shut.

"I will say this one more time." The king glanced at Rook. "I had nothing to do with the assassination attempt."

Rook ignored the denial as the ancient stepped closer to me again. "I can show Cordelia how to use her magic, but you must be aware that the magic of a soul spinner is dangerous and sometimes finite. We'll have to be careful." Claudius smiled at me, and I was eternally grateful, though I didn't like the part where he issued a warning about my magic.

"Dangerous?" I asked.

"Well, yes." Claudius turned back to me. "You know very well the strength already, considering that you have already used some of your magic when you saved Rook." He eyed me again, the sharpness of his gaze daring me to deny it.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand." I picked at my fingernails again. It was a nervous habit leftover from when I was a scared child waiting for whatever punishment was coming. "What does it mean?"

The ancient thought for a moment, as if he wasn't sure how to answer my questions. "It means your magic may or may not be gifted in a finite amount. If it is and your magic runs out, you very well could die."

His words played over and over inside my head. I had powerful magic that I didn't know how to use. Somehow I'd already used it, had no idea how that happened, and didn't know if I could do it again. Furthermore, there was a possibility that if I ran out of said magic, I would die. Great. Just freaking great.

CORDELIA

Being new to the world of vampires, the idea of magic still shocked me. Seeing it in action left me in awe. It wasn't something that was as common as, say, a new technological advancement. I could wrap my mind around artificial intelligence and virtual reality because I could hold a book that explained it. I could study the science behind it.

Magic, on the other hand—the real kind anyway, not the sleight-of-hand kind—was still a mostly foreign concept to me. I'd seen it used, more so within the kingdom walls, but there was the possibility I had seen it outside and not known what it was, just chalked it up to coincidence. Either way, I didn't understand it. And I certainly didn't expect to have special abilities beyond the typical vampire capabilities.

Aside from everything else, the fact that I was no longer human was still hard for me to comprehend. And now I had to find a way to understand an ancient magic that was so powerful that I would die if it ran out. I had already used some of the potentially finite magic, even though I was unaware of it at the time. If I used much more, I could potentially cease to exist. That was unsettling. It also brought forth many questions. Like was the amount of power relative to the finite amount, or was it a certain amount of times I could use it? I didn't know. I'd only been told that it probably wasn't infinite. There were limits. I also didn't know if I was the only one with a limit to this magic or if such a thing was normal for soul spinners.

Claudius cleared his throat, interrupting my deep contemplation of magic and my potential life span. “I believe the first step is to figure out what you did when you saved Rook. We need to know what kind of magic you have before we can train you.”

I nodded. The logic made sense. If I didn’t know what my magic could do, it would be hard to teach me how to use it, harder to know how much I could expend before I put out my own light.

“Alright.” I took a deep breath and looked at Rook, who nodded in agreement. The magic itself was just as important as me figuring out how to harness and command it.

“I’ll be back tomorrow with information on your magic. But...you should feed on human blood as soon as you can to help build your strength.” Claudius nodded his head at the king and left the suite.

I didn’t want to feed on human blood, but I knew I had to in order to survive. I just wasn’t sure if I could bring myself to do it.

As soon as Claudius was gone, the king’s puffed chest deflated and he slouched almost comfortably. It made me wonder if he was intimidated by the ancient, if he thought that he had to look bigger, more confident to prove something to those comparing him to others in his court.

“I see you’re still a little jumpy around the ancient, huh?” Rook glanced at the king, as if our thoughts had merged.

The king stood upright and stomped his foot like a child. “I suppose I should’ve expected your insolence, but if you don’t want to end up terminated for it, you’ll need to show more respect.” He waved toward his royal guards and dismissed them.

Once we were alone, the king turned his attention back to Rook. “You can’t talk to me like that in front of people, otherwise I will have no choice but to make an example out of you.” The threat wasn’t the least bit vague, but Rook scoffed, shook his head, and laughed.

“Are things really that precarious at court that you would need to punish someone for teasing you?” he asked, the very definition of insolent from his smirk to his tone.

“You have no idea.” The king sighed and removed his crown with one hand, raked the fingers of the other through the long dark strands.

“What’s going on?” Rook asked, a general air of concern softening his tone, and I looked at him.

If he was worried, it wasn’t unreasonable for me to also be worried. Not so much for the king, but for the court in general. The king seemed so...stressed. I’d seen some of it, although it wasn’t necessarily outright and blatant, but there had been contention and strife brewing below the surface. To someone who was here all the time and responsible for keeping the peace, it was more visible. Likely a heavy burden to bear for a king who didn’t know how to solve the problems.

“It’s nothing.” The king waved his hand dismissively, but there was a look of worry in his eyes that made them darker.

He sighed and sat down heavily in one of the chairs, which seemed like an answer in and of itself to me. I felt like I shouldn’t have been there, given that the king of the entire vampire kingdom was about to have a conversation with the vampire prince. But I couldn’t bring myself to leave Rook alone with the king who’d done nothing to earn my trust. In fact, he had already tried to assassinate my Blood Heart once. I wasn’t going to leave and let him have a second go at it.

The king rested his elbow on the arm of the chair. “People are unhappy. Well, a lot of people are unhappy. Honestly, I don’t know how to fix it because I don’t understand it.” He paused and glanced in my direction. I lifted my chin and stared. I would die before I showed weakness in front of him. “Maybe Cordelia and her magic can help.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Rook eyed me. I was glad to see that I wasn’t the only one bewildered over how I could possibly make the court happier with the leadership of the king. Assuring the happiness of a hundred or so people I didn’t really know, for a king I didn’t really like, didn’t sound like

something I would be inclined to do. The fact that he thought I could was an interesting prospect.

“She’s special, and it means something. If she can give people hope with her abilities, that might help quell the rising unrest within the vampire kingdom.” The king crossed his arms and stared at the wall, either lost in thought or counting bricks to pass the time. But then he glanced at me, and there was no doubt he’d spent those seconds planning how he could use me and my magic to his advantage. I was his pawn. At least, he thought so.

His words startled me. I couldn’t help but wonder how much I could actually do if my power was truly finite. Perhaps the king wouldn’t think twice about having my magic at his disposal and, ultimately, draining me by forcing me to use it to his benefit.

“How can I help?” I rubbed my sweaty palms down the side seams of my black dress. “You heard the ancient. My magic is probably finite, and I’ve already used a large amount. The next release could kill me.” I didn’t have all the facts, and I wasn’t jumping in until I did.

And because I wasn’t sure if that was true, but it was a possibility, I shook my head with finality. If my magic truly was finite, then I had to be very careful with how I used it. And how much was used. I doubted it was bestowed upon me to straighten out the problems within the king’s court.

I glanced back and forth between the king and Rook. I didn’t know what it meant or why they wore the same expression, but they both just smiled at me.

CORDELIA

Rook held my hand and pulled me over to the couch, directly across from the king. “Cordie.” His voice was soft, and I wondered if he was about to try to compel me to his way of thinking. “Just because your magic might be finite doesn’t mean that there isn’t a lot of it.”

His words were somewhat comforting, but how could he know for certain? Those words also didn’t mean I was going to use my power in its totality to do the king’s bidding.

But when Rook continued, I watched him. “You saved my life, there’s no doubt about that. And you changed me in some way because I felt different afterward.” He smiled and I wanted to smile back at him, but I was reserving my opinion until I heard the rest. “If that was your first use of magic, then it’s likely that you have much more at your disposal than you might think. You’re imagining your magic as a bucket full of water whereas we think of it more as a tsunami.”

Even if that was so, I couldn’t make a decision in the spur of the moment and risk it. If there was one thing I’d realized since we came to the vampire kingdom it was that Rook truly cared for the people here. He would have made an amazing ruler.

The king nodded. “Rook’s right. As a king, I’ve had to study all the different types of powers that are available to the vampire race.” I didn’t like that he used the word study anymore than I liked that he thought I was available to the

vampire race. “Soul spinners, which are extremely rare, are immensely powerful and have a lot of magic at their disposal.”

But he didn't actually know that, and I didn't trust him to tell me the truth anyway.

The king leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “What I'm suggesting is that we use your magic to help improve morale at court.”

I frowned, not knowing how I could possibly make the vampires at court happier. So far, all we knew I could do for sure was set them ablaze. “I'm not sure how my magic can help improve the court. I don't even fully understand what my magic is.”

I had no idea if I could even trust what the king said and no reason to believe that I could. He was disappointed when Rook and I passed the Trial of Blood. Now, he was telling us his problems, having a normal conversation with us as if we were all lifelong best friends. To say it was confusing didn't do it justice.

The king stood up and began to pace. “The last soul spinner that was recorded in our history was also one of the most powerful vampires to exist. She saved thousands of lives in the last war of the vampire clans and helped unite their people.”

As I glanced back and forth between the king and Rook, I had no idea how to respond to the assumption that I was going to do amazing things with my magic. In addition, I knew nothing of vampire history to be able to verify that my power was the same as the previously recorded soul spinner. It was a lot of pressure. “I don't know if I can live up to that,” I admitted.

Claudius said he was going to find out more about my power and I didn't want to make any decisions until I knew more.

Things were increasingly awkward between Rook and the king as the king continued to encourage me. Rook stared at the king, one eyebrow cocked, mouth grim as if he wasn't quite of

the same opinion as the king, as if he knew I was being manipulated. But then he followed the company line as if he'd been programmed to say it.

“You can do more than you realize, Cordie. It's hard to imagine all of the things you'll do for the vampire community.”

The king smiled like he was busy making a mental list of the ways I could be of service to him. Once again I was just a tool for someone to use. It struck me in that moment that maybe the king and Jonathon weren't all that different. I refused to do anything I didn't want to though. I was a vampire now and that had to count for something.

Rook glanced at me, his expression softened by what could only have been pity in his eyes. Surely, he could tell, if from nothing else than our bond, that I needed more time to process everything. I'd barely had a moment to catch my breath since becoming a vampire. And now they wanted me to use magic I wasn't sure I was equipped to use to help the king put his court back in line.

If I could do it all over again, I'd make different decisions and handle everything in a different way. It's not that I objected to being a vampire. If I was meant to be one, then fine. I'd accept it and I'd be a good one, as good as I knew how to be, but this soul spinner thing was frightening.

Also, it had all come to me at a cost greater than I'd been willing to pay and that wasn't fair. I would give anything to be able to call Gran and get her opinion on all the changes that were being made. Almost before I could wrap my head around one, another came along and threw me for an entirely different loop. I closed my eyes and imagined what she might have said if there was a way for me to contact her. It would definitely be something fiery, a wake-up call that would knock away my self-pity and sharpen my focus on action instead of the current depressing thoughts running through my mind.

The king stopped pacing and looked at me with his head tilted and his eyes blank, as though he was shielding his expression so I wouldn't be able to infer a meaning behind his

words. “The hesitancy you feel is normal. That’s where Claudius comes in. I’ll keep track of your progress and training with the ancient. I expect great things.” He smiled now, and whatever his purpose, he seemed to be finished with me for now. He nodded his head and quickly left the suite.

Rook and I were left alone. I finally exhaled then took another deep breath and let it go. The king was gone. I could relax now.

“You okay?” Rook asked as he sat next to me on the couch.

I nodded but didn’t look at him. “I’m just trying to process everything that’s happened in the last few minutes.” I didn’t know which side of the argument for using my power to help the king that I should’ve been on.

Rook squeezed my hand. “You will be just fine. You and the ancient will get along really well, trust me.” He kissed my hand and smiled with excitement. “This is an incredible opportunity to learn from him. Most vampires don’t even get to meet Claudius, let alone have him as their teacher.”

There was so much information, and taking it all in made my head hurt. I rubbed my temples in small circles with the tips of my middle fingers. “I don’t want any of this, Rook. I just wanted to find stable footing in our relationship and with being a vampire. But now, I have to deal with all of this soul spinner crap, which is really confusing considering I didn’t mean to do what I did.” I shook my head, wishing I could go back to a simpler time. “Honestly, I don’t know how I am. I only know I just want to go home.”

As soon as the words tumbled out of my mouth, I remembered something with a clarity so vivid that I sucked in a sharp breath. I didn’t have a home to go to. The house Gran and I rented was probably already under lease to someone else. And all of my stuff was in storage. I didn’t have a job, or a car, or really anything else to my name. I had literally nothing.

The weight of my current reality came crashing down on me. My heart raced and a cold sweat broke out on my

forehead. The room spun, and even though I knew I didn't need oxygen, I was breathing heavily. Hyperventilating.

I was trapped. More now than ever.

ROOK

Terrified, I watched as my soulmate spiraled into what could only have been described as a full-blown panic attack. I had never seen her like this before, and I had no idea how to help her. But I damn sure knew I wasn't going to sit helpless. I had to do something.

I gathered her in my arms and held her close against my chest, stroking her hair and whispering words of comfort. They weren't even really words, just murmurs of soft sound.

Gradually, her breathing slowed and the panic subsided. She sagged against me, exhausted, probably as much from the emotional roller coaster she had just been on as the residual effects of the bonding ritual.

"It's going to be okay," I whispered. "I'm here for you. We'll get through this together."

I meant every word. No matter what she went through, I would be beside her. Even if it didn't help her to hear it, it made me feel better to say it. I hated what she was going through.

I tightened my arms around her and pulled as close as I could get her, wishing I could take away all of her pain. But I knew as well as I knew my own name that it wasn't possible. She had to figure out how to deal with everything that was happening in her life, just as I did.

The toll on her body from the use of her magic, coupled with the loss of blood from the attack, had zapped even more of her strength. And then there was the mental stress from the attack and the fact she'd been front and center to witness an assassination attempt on my life. She needed to rest, so I carried her to the bed and placed her in the center of the mattress. As I kissed her gently on the forehead, I realized that she was already asleep.

Swiping the phone from the coffee table, I sent a quick text to Cross.

When you come back to the suite, can you bring some human blood for Cordie?

Cross replied almost immediately.

Yes.

His short answer baffled me. Knowing Cross and the affinity he had for a job well done, he was probably busy with some sort of business at court that demanded someone of his expertise and intelligence handle it. Still, I couldn't help but think that maybe there was more to his short answer than a lack of time. I wondered if he was having as hard a time sharing Cordie as I currently was. I knew that the two of us would have to come to some sort of agreement, but it was hard for me to imagine any scenario where I would be comfortable or happy about allowing another man—any man—to be with her.

At least Ash hadn't asked to join in, yet, which I was thankful for. But I fully expected him to ask at some point. I saw the way Ash looked at Cordie. It was as if she was a warm pint of blood on a cold day. He wanted her just as much as Cross did, whether he'd admit it out loud or not. I suspected that at some point, he would.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. This whole situation was getting more complicated by the minute, and if we didn't figure out a way to slow down the surprises so Cordie had time to process, there was a chance it would overwhelm her in a way that she wouldn't come back from. I couldn't allow that.

With the kind of power she had, it would be dangerous to turn her loose if she was unhinged.

It was hard to believe that just a few short weeks ago Cordelia was still a human. Now, she had turned and we were married, at least in the eyes of the vampire kingdom. Her magical abilities had taken me by surprise but were probably the only reason I was still alive after the assassination attempt.

Cross finally made his way back to the suite with a container of human blood for Cordie and me. He stormed into the room and placed the containers on the table.

“I think Ash was right. About Cordie being a soul spinner,” Cross said as he sat down on the couch and crossed his legs. The scowl on his face said that the news didn’t make him any happier than it made me.

“The king brought the ancient Claudius by, and he confirmed the same thing.” I took one last lingering look at Cordie then joined Cross in the sitting area. “The ancient is going to help Cordie with her magic.”

I thought it was good news, but Cross frowned. He stared at me hard before he spoke, “Why didn’t you message me and tell me that? Ash and I have been reading every damn book in the library trying to find an answer for you.”

Cross stood up and paced from one corner of the room to the other and back. He was practically vibrating with energy, and I could feel the anger emanating from his body. It wasn’t as if he was trying to hide it. He wanted me to know he was pissed off about the fact I hadn’t shooed away the king so I could shoot him a text. I rolled my eyes.

“For hell’s sake, what are you so upset about, Cross?” I asked even though I knew damned well. I looked back at the bed, waiting for her to stir, but she remained still. Her hand was over her stomach, with her eyes closed and body at peace. I wanted to keep her that way. “And keep your voice down. Cordie’s exhausted.”

Cross stopped in his tracks and glared at me. “You are happy to do anything it takes to keep me away from Cordelia.”

This guy was a one string guitar plinking the same sour note over and over again. “Like sending me on a wild goose chase in the library when you already knew damned well that she was a soul spinner and didn’t have the decency to tell us.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” I stood and walked over to stand at Cross’ side. “First, I don’t owe you an explanation. I’m the one bonded to her, and I’m the one who just went through the Trial. For her. And second, what did you expect me to do? Kick the king out so I could text my friends who were in his private library, a library off limits to all but him and his people? Yeah. That would’ve gone over well.”

“You’re always so quick to remind us of your bond with Cordelia. But in case you haven’t noticed, she wants me just as badly as she wants you. Or maybe you’ve forgotten the way she screams my name, the way her hands slide over my skin, the way she can’t stop touching and kissing me.” Cross stared, daring me to take that last step, to put an end to his bragging.

“What the hell gives you the right to come into my suite and talk to me this way?” I pointed my finger at his face and left it there because I knew it killed him that he couldn’t tear it off, because then he wouldn’t have a prayer with her. If he hurt me, if he so much as looked cross-eyed at me, she would hate him. “I don’t give a fuck who you are, you’re not going to speak to me that way.”

“Oh, forgive me, Your Majesty.” Cross bowed, in jest, every bit the asshole I knew him to be. “I forgot that no one is allowed to have their own opinion around you. And certainly we’re all forbidden from speaking it if we do manage to get one past you.”

He was shouting, and I was ready to kill him. I was going to be king some day, and he would have to bow down and kiss my—

Cordie stepped into the living room area, rubbing her eyes. “What in the hell is going on in here? Why are you yelling at each other?”

And even if we denied it, the animosity was like another presence in the room. Certainly Cordie could see it, and she

probably knew that her sudden presence was the only thing keeping me from pounding Cross' smug face.

"I'm not going to put up with this anymore. I won't." Cordie wagged her finger back and forth between us. "You either need to figure out how to share, or I won't be with either of you."

To her it was so simple, but she was mine. Mine. My soulmate. My blood bond. My wife. I shook my head. She could say whatever she wanted, but her biology would make demands that her mind would have to deal with.

"Cordie, I don't think you understand what it means for me to be your mate. You will literally go crazy if you try to stay away from me or not feed from me." That was the truth of it. And I was glad.

"I don't give a fuck. Maybe going crazy from not being with you would be preferable to this ridiculous behavior."

And there was that.

I launched myself at Cordie, devouring her lips. We drove her crazy? I'd make her crazier. When all I could do was obsess over her and the idea of sharing my mate. I'd make her second guess the idea of ever leaving me.

"Rook," she sighed as I pressed kisses down her jaw, neck, and then over her bountiful mounds. Her body was unable to resist the desires of her mate, just like my body was to her.

I lifted her shirt off and dispatched her bra, watching her breasts bounce before me. I salivated, hungering to have them in my mouth.

A large growl reverberated throughout the room.

Cross flashed in behind Cordie and pulled her panties down, kissing her peachy cheeks while stroking her thighs.

I lifted her breasts in my palms and carried their weight, latching my mouth onto one of her nipples as I puckered her other nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

Cordie shook in our arms, and her soft mewling sounds punctuated the air as Cross inserted one finger into her.

Her juices perfumed the air, and my body responded to her, hard. Everywhere my clothes touched my skin irritated me. I wanted them torched, as it was torture not to have her satin touch caressing every inch of my body.

I spent more time on her opposite nipple, wanting to ensure that her body received equal treatment everywhere.

Loud sucking sounds invaded my ears, and I glimpsed down to see that Cross had his mouth at her nectar and consumed her like she was the apple gifted by Eve. I hungered for her in my mouth, to have her cream coat my lips and tongue, riding my face in her throes to an explosive release.

Stepping back from my treasure, I looked into her lusted eyes, pouty lips, and flushed cheeks. She was sexiness in its purest form.

Her mouth formed into an 'o' as I kept her gaze and slowly stripped myself for her pleasure. I moved my body in a dance that only our bodies knew.

As each piece of clothing fell, her teeth bit down harder on her lower lip.

Her stance widened as Cross fit his head further between her thighs. Cordie fought to keep her eyes on me. I smirked as I grabbed my hardened member and stroked myself for her.

Cordie lifted her hands to her tits and played with them, squeezing, tweaking, and pinching. I grasped myself tighter and stroked faster as her hips moved more quickly against Cross' mouth. She rode his face until the pinnacle point when she threw her head back, gazing at the ceiling as if she were praying to the almighty. Her body shook as her toes curled into the rug on the floor.

Cross' hands held her up at her thighs, and her head came down and gazed at me with a satiated smile. Her hands floated down her belly to Cross' grip on her, and she twined her fingers with his.

Her eyes caught mine again and she reached out for me.

Jumping toward her, I lifted her into my arms and carried her back to the bed, where she should've been resting.

My cock throbbed as I laid her on the bed. I turned her to face Cross, so she could watch him undress as I plunged myself into her well-lubricated hole and reminded her that I owned her body, mind, and soul. That's what mates do.

Shifting her thighs, I opened her wider and pinned her down as I jackhammered into her.

Cross stood by the bed close to her head, jerking himself as he watched her pussy get pummeled.

The slick heat of her was my undoing. The need for her took me over faster than ever.

Her breaths and elevating moans called down to my balls as they tightened.

I lifted her thighs, pulling her ass up a bit off of the bed. My balls smacked her ass, and a righteous scream tore from her lips as I slammed against that tiny spot of joy.

“Yes, oh god, yes,” Cordie screamed. “There, there, there!”

Cum shot out of me and rooted itself deep inside my mate as her walls trapped me, milking me until nothing was left.

I fell on top of her, holding myself up by my forearms, and kissed her senselessly.

Cordie moaned into my mouth, as if she tasted the most delicious treat.

Energy zapped from my body. I rolled over and fell to the side of her, our hands interlocked.

“Cross, you haven't been forgotten,” Cordie purred. I looked over and saw her stroking him in her other hand as she kept her eyes locked on his leaking head. She licked her lips as if she were hungry for him.

She slowly rolled over and maneuvered herself to put her ass in front of him. Leaning down, she kissed my lips and threw her head back as a clapping sound erupted in the room.

Cross was ferociously sinking into her body, holding her hips firmly.

My cock tingled at my mate's face as her eyes rolled back in her head and her breasts jiggled before my face. I moved and laid beneath her, pulling her upper body down to take one breast into my mouth as I bit down hard.

"Oh, fuck, yes," her soft, sweet voice yelled into the room.

She pushed her hips back against Cross' thrusts as she lifted her tits above me and shook them. Her coordination at pleasing us both at the same time was impressive.

"I'm so close," Cordie whispered. "So close."

Cross' thrusting came faster, Cordie's movements jerked as my dick twitched at the sight of her pleasure crashing over her.

Cordie's continuous screams of the night hadn't disappointed, and she let out another goal-worthy shout as she came hard again. Cross fucked her until she laid spent on top of me, then his roar shouted into the air.

The three of us lay piled on top of each other on the bed.

"Rook, really?" Cordie released the cutest giggling sigh.

I smirked and peeked at my growing hard-on.

"What?" I grinned. "He still wants to play with you."

Cross laughed. "Mine does, too."

Cordie looked at both of us. "I need rest."

We all laughed as we relaxed on the bed. We'd give her some time to recoup then she'd ride my face.

CORDELIA

The three of us made our way to the main hall for dinner with the king. After our time together, we were all starving. Ash sat at the table beside Rook and eyed us suspiciously. I wondered if he could smell the sex on us, but I supposed it didn't matter. It was our business.

When we walked into the hall, everyone stared in my direction and whispered, but the words soul spinner were clear enough. It was obvious that one of the guards spilled the beans about me, what I could do, and what I had done. No one stood close to me, and those who happened to be nearest backed away as we walked through the room, giving me a wide berth. I could've driven a car through the space they left for me.

When I looked at the people talking about me, they looked away quickly, as if they were afraid I'd burn them to a crisp. Maybe this was how they thought to not attract attention to themselves, but I glanced at everyone who turned from me, so I noticed. Therefore, their idea of anonymity failed miserably.

I twisted my head in the direction Rook and Cross were sitting. Lowering my voice to a whisper, I asked the question that was gnawing away at my mind. "Is being a soul spinner a curse and not a blessing, as you've claimed?" Knowing them, they would have lied to sell the idea to me to not make me freak out, not to be purposely deceitful.

"A soul spinner is rare and more powerful than most of the vampires in this room can comprehend." Ash gestured to the

groups of people, huddled around, discussing my magic. I could still hear the hiss of the words. “They would probably react the same way if the ancient himself walked into the main hall.”

Oh, yeah. The ancient. My new good friend Claudius.

The plan was for me to train with him the following day, and that terrified me. He was obviously an important person at court, and I didn’t feel worthy to speak to him, much less train underneath him. Plus, I didn’t know what course the training would take. It was likely more mental than physical, and I worried that my emotional capacity might not be enough. The entire idea of training and doing it with Claudius was extremely intimidating to me.

“I’m nervous to train tomorrow,” I admitted. “I don’t want to screw this up.”

Cross and Rook looked at one another. Whatever they meant to say to one another with that glance wasn’t meant for me, but I hoped it had something to do with reassurance.

“You can’t mess it up, Cordie.” Rook twined our fingers together and squeezed my hand. It was comforting in the moment.

“He’s right,” Cross added, his smile soft, one of consolation. “Claudius will guide you, but it’s your magic, so you can’t screw up.”

I appreciated their confidence, but this was me we were talking about. The sheer number of things I screwed up in a day was sometimes an embarrassing figure. I’d only been a vampire for a few weeks. There was no way in hell I wouldn’t make a fool out of myself in front of the ancient.

At that moment, the king stood at the head of the table, his booming voice commanding a silence in the din of murmured conversations. “Give me your attention, everyone. Please.” He made his way to the head of the room, raising his hands as if he were the piper or one of those televangelists blessing the flock.

“There have been many rumors surrounding Cordelia, Rook’s mate.” He stopped and pointed at me, which only increased my stress over the situation. Every head in the place turned toward me. It was all eyes on Cordelia, and skin flushed with heat.

The king continued, clapping his hands together and holding them at the side of his face as if he’d made some great achievement. “I want to confirm that the rumors are true. She is, in fact, a soul spinner.”

Dammit.

They were all staring at me now, and the weight of a thousand gazes was enough for me to shrink a few inches.

“With this confirmation, I expect that she will receive all the respect associated with her station.”

My station? Intriguing.

The king lowered his hands and sat down at the head of the banquet table, apparently finished and satisfied with his announcement.

I shielded the side of my face in my hands and tried not to look at anyone, but I could feel the glares of the other vampires on my neck.

Rook leaned down and whispered into my ear, “The rumors left the king no other choice but to confirm or deny what you are. And if he wants the people to trust him, he has to tell them the truth.”

I was certain my station meant I would be hated for what I was rather than admired for who I was.

I understood the king’s desire for his court to appreciate and respect him, his need for their love. And the only way to get it was to tell the truth, which was expected of a man in his position by the people who revered him. But he could’ve given me a head’s up, a shout out that this was his plan. I could’ve even taken a hint that he was going to shine the spotlight on me at dinner. On the other hand, maybe I should’ve guessed this was his plan. This whole place was nothing but one

surprise after another. Honestly, at this point, it was getting old.

Almost as soon as the food was set on the table, I ate as if I hadn't eaten in years. And it felt as if that was the case. I didn't even care that there were still plenty of people staring and whispering. They were bold, and it was almost shocking. I could see and hear them, but that did nothing to deter them from gossiping about me right in front of me.

Once I finished dinner, I turned to Rook. "Do I have to ask the king or can I just excuse myself?" I wasn't certain of the protocol, and I didn't want this to be the moment I faux passed. But I didn't want to stay here and be stared at like some sideshow either. "I can't handle much more of this."

"There's no need for permission. You've enjoyed the spoils of the kingdom and now you can adjourn without consent of any kind." He wiped his mouth with his cloth napkin and placed it on the table. "I'll come with you."

Cross and Ash looked at one another and pushed their plates back, as well. I appreciated the support.

The four of us made our way down the long corridor. Ash peeled off from us at a cross path between two hallways. He nodded to me and made a left. Being a man who always seemed to anticipate Rook's needs I hoped he was in search of more human blood. Cross, Rook, and I went on to the prince's suite.

It was only a few moments later when Ash arrived with a bag of O-neg, and I couldn't help but look at him with genuine relief and thankfulness. He didn't have to bring any back for me or the others, and no one had asked him to do it, so his act of kindness was touching. "Thank you, Ash."

Without waiting for permission, I snatched the bag from his hands and downed the blood in a matter of seconds. My craving was more powerful than expected.

Once I sucked the bag dry, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and looked up. Ash was still standing in the same position, staring at me. The longing and desire shining in

his eyes was stark but unmistakably bright. “Would it be okay if I fed on you, again?”

His question was followed by a thick silence as the awkwardness settled over the room. I eyed Rook, who clenched his jaw tightly, his hands curled into fists at his sides. Clearly, he didn’t want Ash to feed from me, wouldn’t be okay with it, and I was hard pressed to go against him. I also knew that he didn’t want to share me with Ash.

Yet, I felt a connection, a calling to Ash in the same way I did to Cross. And I had no idea why or what to do about it.

ASH

The words slipped out of my mouth before I even realized what I was asking. Both Rook and Cross stared at me. Audacity. False bravado. Stupidity. I couldn't say which was responsible for my request, but it was definitely in the same realm as one of those things.

One minute I was watching Cordie drink the bag of blood I'd rounded up for her. The next moment, I realized I was focused on the pulse in her neck, watching it throb and beat, seeing the blood as it moved through her veins.

Before I knew what was happening, I saw myself sinking my teeth into her smooth, ivory skin. I savored the thoughts because they were vivid and potent and stirred my desire like not much did these days. But this was Cordelia and, of course, I wanted much more. I desired her in a way I'd never experienced before. It was as if my longing had its own power, its own intensity outside of myself.

The words were out there, floating on the air in the prince's suite, making me ever more reviled. I couldn't take them back, but the look on Rook's face made me wish that I could rewind time and keep my damn mouth shut.

"Ash, I think you should go." Rook's voice was low and dangerous.

This was a guy who knew how to use his tone to convey hidden meaning without using words. Although this time, he used both words and tone. It was a skill he'd honed over his

lifespan. He had never spoken to me this way before, and I didn't like it one bit.

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to tell him that I could stay and that Cordie should decide for herself. I had no doubt she would be fine with it, but the way his eyes glowed with anger told me that now was not the time to stand my ground. This was a line-in-the-sand kind of moment. He'd drawn it, and I had to decide whether or not to step over. I had to keep the peace. There was no other choice.

Before I could turn to leave, Cross stepped forward, and I knew what was coming. He pointed his finger at me. "Ash, you're a fucking liar. What was that crap in the library? You were so defensive when I even mentioned wanting her."

Rook's head snapped around to face us, his glare intense and eyes flashing his anger. "What conversation in the library? Clarify." If his early tone conveyed danger, this one said it was imminent.

Cross' gaze didn't waver. He stared at me as he explained to Rook, and I found myself hoping he wouldn't fill in all the details. It would serve no purpose to incite Rook into a murderous rage. "While we were searching for more information on soul spinners, I asked Ash if he wanted to be with Cordie." Cross ran his hand through his hair. "He told me that he didn't want any part of this relationship. He acted insulted that I even suggested as much."

My cheeks heated with anger and embarrassment. He was exaggerating, and I wanted to sink into the floor and disappear. I should've known not to speak so frankly with Cross. He couldn't be trusted to keep anything from Rook. I was an idiot for choosing to ever open my mouth in the first place.

"Is this true, Ash?" Rook crossed his arms over his chest, tapping his foot while waiting for my answer.

The embarrassment was something I was going to have to deal with. My only choice was to try and explain myself. But wanting her, craving her wasn't much of an explanation since I knew the situation between them. "I'm sorry...I really am. I never would've asked if not for the desire to taste her, the

craving, the need.” My voice rasped. I was over-sharing, but truth was truth. Apparently, this was my truth. “Seeing her feeding stirred something inside of me.”

“Was it your cock?” Cross asked, and his crudeness didn’t go unnoticed. I cocked a brow at him, but he ignored it.

“You should calm down.” I shoved my hands into my pockets as an idea formed. My intent wasn’t purely innocent, but it was honest enough to convey my desire. And it had a chance of success. “If I can feed on Cordie and walk away, then I’ll know that what I said to you in the library was true.”

They wanted confirmation. This would give them that. One way or the other.

“But if I feed and want more, then that means there’s something there.” Possibly, I should’ve left that part off, but my mouth was faster than my brain.

Rook shook his head, staring hard. “Cordelia belongs to me. Is married to me. To me. ” There was poison in his voice, a dart of venom aimed at me. And it wasn’t like I was deaf. “Who the fuck cares if you want something more with her? I sure as hell don’t.”

Rook’s words were harsher than normal. Hurtful. I had been by Rook’s side longer than Cross, and I’d stayed at court on his behalf after he was exiled. I kept tabs on everyone and everything and kept Rook informed. I wasn’t a stranger coming for his woman. I was his friend, a man who’d gone above and beyond when he and Cross were exiled. I acted as Rook’s advocate, in secret. My only goal for the past several years had been to gather enough support so that he could return. And *this* was how he thanked me. I shook my head and scoffed.

I wondered how different things would be if I had gone with them and not stayed at court. I wouldn’t have reacted to Cross wanting the same thing. We would be equal, and I would have thrown a challenge at him for her.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. “Of course, I didn’t mean to disrespect you, Rook. I would never. I was

merely caught up in the moment.”

“Caught up in the moment?” His voice boomed through the suite, bounced off the walls, and came back at me. Or maybe Rook said the words again. It didn’t matter. This wasn’t going well. And it was my fault.

Cordelia waved her hands in the air. “Hello?” Her voice was sharp, a needlepoint that stabbed the silence of that second. “Would anyone like to know what I want?”

I couldn’t be certain if I wanted to know or not, but Rook turned to her, sighed, and backed down, lowering his eyes and slumping his shoulders. Ultimately, it was her decision. “Yes, of course. Please, tell us what you want, Cordelia.” But his gaze at me said he would have preferred if I disappeared and never returned and she didn’t answer at all.

Cordie sighed and gazed at Rook. “First, I think we should all calm down. There’s no need to fight over this.”

She had no idea. A man would be foolish not to fight for her.

Rook had gone from wanting to rip my head off to talking calmly and agreeing with Cordelia. Their relationship was extremely interesting, and I watched even the silent interactions between them, the eye contact, the smiles.

“The four of us obviously have a bond of some kind.” She shrugged and looked at each of us. I didn’t know what she saw, but it made her smile softly. “I’m not sure what it is, but I’ve sensed it for a while now.”

Cordie stepped closer to Rook’s side, laid her hand on his shoulder and when he looked at her, her soft smile broadened. It was this kind of interaction that made their relationship more than just sexual. Anyone who wasn’t blinded by lust for her could see it.

“I know that sharing is hard for you. But I agree with Ash that we should explore it.” Cordie paused and looked at me. “We’re going to need all the help we can get if, for some reason, I can’t get control of my magic. As much as I hate to say it, maybe I can’t. We don’t know.” She paused but only

looked at him. “Having more people that I trust and care for isn’t going to hurt those efforts.”

Rook lifted his gaze and stared at Cordelia. “Can you still love me the same way if you also care for Cross and Ash?” I wondered, as he asked, what would happen if she said no. She would still have him, but Cross’ future would be as uncertain as mine.

“Yes. I can, and I will.” Cordelia gently caressed Rook’s arm. “Love isn’t a finite emotion. The more love I give, the more I feel. Without Cross and Ash, I would already be dead. You know that as well as I do.”

I watched because there was nothing else I could do or say that would make a difference—this was between them. Rook turned to Cordelia, soaking in her words.

“There’s something there, whether it’s because the two of them helped turn me or if it’s something else entirely. I can’t say because I’m not sure.” Cordelia lowered her voice, but her determination was striking in the otherwise silent room. “Either way, I can’t deny Ash’s request.”

I had been so caught up in my desire for Cordie and listening to the arguments that I hadn’t even considered the fact that some of my blood was used during the turning ritual. At the time, I only wanted to help and was focused on the ritual itself.

I wondered if the confusion was my fault after all.

But Rook sighed and looked at Cordelia, then at Cross, and finally turned his gaze on me. He nodded at her. “It’s up to you, Cordie.”

Hope bloomed in my chest as my thoughts of the ritual faded into the background.

CORDELIA

Rook was angry with me. Even if I couldn't feel it in my soul, which I could, it would've been obvious. But I didn't want there to be any more lies, or things that weren't mentioned, or things left unsaid in our relationship. So I had to make it perfectly clear that I wanted to do this. It was my decision, after all. He just said as much.

"Cordelia, are you sure about this?" Cross' voice was hesitant. These were the men I needed in my life.

I nodded my head since I didn't trust myself to speak. I needed to do this. They all needed to be in my life. I couldn't deny that anymore. And I didn't want to.

"Okay." Cross sighed and ran his hand through his hair. The decision was mine. I didn't need his approval, but I was glad to have it. I smiled at him.

Rook was a much harder sell. He would go along, though, because it meant so much to me and he cared deeply about how I felt. But I wanted him to have the option, to be able to speak his feelings if he wished. I looked at Rook. "So?"

He sighed. "Go ahead." He took a seat on the couch, watching me as I made the final decision and made my way over to Ash.

"Okay, Ash."

I tilted my head to the side. He was a man whose desire was written with the smile on his face, the shine in his eyes.

He wanted this as much as I wanted him to have it, as much as I wanted to savor it. I was allowing him the opportunity to have what he desired, what we both desired if I was being honest. I was having my cake and eating it too.

He laid his hand on the back of my skull, used it to urge me closer. Before feeding, he sniffed my neck and sighed deeply. His breath against my skin sent a shock of trembles through me. “You smell so good, Cordie.” His voice was low, barely a whisper, but warmth moved through my stomach and spread outward.

“I do?” It wasn’t the first time I’d heard such a thing. Rook and Cross had both mentioned my scent, but there was something softer when Ash spoke. I was both apprehensive and intrigued by his words.

“Yes.” Ash’s voice was a low growl as he pulled me closer and our hips aligned. I could feel the length of him pressed against me. “You always have.”

I cradled his face in my hands and pulled him in. All this chit chat was unnecessary to the point of this, and I wanted to encourage him to move it along before Rook fell over the edge of his patience. He watched us from the opposite side of the room. The only thing we agreed to was feeding, nothing more, and if a line was crossed, he was here to make sure we uncrossed it. The intensity of his gaze was as physical as a touch.

Ash bit into my neck, and I gasped at the jolt of pain. But as his fangs sank deeper and my head fell back, the pain receded to a pleasure so intense I moaned.

Ash used his tongue to swipe over the skin as he drank, and a shiver ran through me. My body ached for more, for a release that I would need when he was finished drinking from me. I gasped again at the enjoyable pain. Cross and Rook had both fed from me. This was different than that but was also very similar. The sensations were wholly unique with each of them, although they manifested similarly.

He continued to suck, longingly, feeding himself on my blood. My body moved, breasts tingling, stomach

somersaulting, synapses rapid firing. My fingers plunged into his hair, curling in and out against his scalp, knotting the strands around my fingers. There was a sensuality to his touch that would become an addiction if I wasn't careful. A burst of pleasure rocketed through me. Every nerve in my body stood on end as Ash finished his meal, licking the wound with his tongue lingering as my hips ground into him. Feeding and letting someone feed was a sexual experience. For me anyway.

“Are you okay?” Ash's gaze was dark with desire, though his words were of concern.

I nodded, still dazed, still hyper-aware of him, and still shaking with need I'd suppressed for Rook's sake. “Yes, I'm fine.” But my voice was a full octave higher.

When he pulled away, my mind cleared, and I was able to make sense of what I was feeling. It was as if Ash feeding from me had helped me find my center, grounding me and enabling me to understand what it truly meant to be a vampire. And also what it meant to be with Rook, Cross, and now potentially Ash. The possibilities were endless, and I wanted that. I wanted that hope for what tomorrow could bring. For too long I'd lived under a shadow of today. Of every day before it.

I looked into Ash's eyes, they were still dark, still passionate. He was staring at me as if I hung the moon in the sky. Immediately, I knew that this had changed things irrevocably between us. I just wasn't sure what, exactly, those changes were. Nor did I know if I cared. I liked Ash. Period. The same as I liked Cross. Rook would always be my soul, but there was a spot for Cross and a spot for Ash, too.

“Cordie?” Rook stood and walked toward us. “Are you alright?” The devil glare he shot at Ash was as threatening as it was full of hate.

When Ash turned to face Rook, Rook stood still, his face losing its expression. He knew Ash well enough to see the answer written all over his face before Ash spoke a word. I didn't know Ash nearly so well, but I could see that he felt the same connection I did. Neither of us would be letting go.

My gaze shifted to Cross, who wore the same defeated expression as Rook. We were all intertwined somehow. No matter how any of them felt about it, there was no going back from this.

Cross and Ash both looked at Rook. We all had questions. We had to know how to make this work. I could speak my desires, but they wore theirs in their gazes. Rook wasn't ready yet. He shook his head, silently telling them that now wasn't the time.

Suddenly, he stormed to the bedroom and slammed the door. I couldn't let it be this way. I needed him to know, to understand and to be at peace.

I ran after him, leaving Cross and Ash to stare awkwardly at each other in the sitting area. I couldn't help them until I spoke to Rook, until he told me himself that he was okay.

I shut the door behind me and walked to Rook's side, laying a hand on his chest. He stood against the wall, arms crossed, refusing to make eye contact with me. "Please, Rook. Don't shut me out."

He sighed and turned his head the opposite direction. Still away from me.

"I'm sorry." I slid my hand up and around to the back of his neck. "But you have to understand, this was something I needed to do."

Obviously, he didn't have to understand. He didn't have to do anything but be with me. I couldn't let him decide to be anywhere else.

"I know." He finally turned his head and looked at me. The raw emotion in his eyes made my heart ache. "It's just that I can't help but feel like I'm losing you, that I will lose you a bit more every time I share you with one or both of them." He swallowed and his Adam's apple bobbed. Even that seemed subdued.

"I won't lose you. I'll give it all up before that. But I want this, Rook. I want them, and I want you. Just know I want you

more, and if this is going to destroy us, then we can figure out a way around it.”

I put my arms around his waist and laid my head on his chest. I needed the embrace, the connection of body to body with him. I lifted my head and held him, trying to get him to look at me. “I can’t live without you, Rook. You’re my number one priority. Not Cross. And not Ash.”

Maybe because I held him closer, or maybe because we both knew I wasn’t going to give up, he finally relented, wrapping his arms around me and breathing in deeply.

“I know this isn’t ideal for you. I understand. And it’s a lot to ask.”

Certainly, I wouldn’t be happy to share him. And what I was asking was unfair. Maybe even wrong. But I had to ask. “We could try it, right? The four of us could work together, I know it. It won’t be easy, but we can do it because it matters to us.”

I pushed him because this was so important to me, but if he absolutely said he couldn’t live with it, I would pull away from the others. I meant that.

He finally lifted his gaze, and I saw the desperation in his eyes. “I don’t know if I can do this, Cordie.” Even his voice shook with it.

“If you can’t...I’ll stop. But, please, Rook, just give it some time.” I tilted my head up and pulled his down before kissing him gently on the cheek and squeezing him tightly. “I promise things are going to work out.”

“How am I supposed to share you, Cordie? You are the one person that I would do anything for, but this is...excruciating.” He pulled my arms from around him and set me aside. He dropped his head to his hands and scrubbed his face with his palms before he looked at me again.

“If you would do anything, then why can’t you try to work this out with all of us?” I knew what I was asking of him. I also knew he had the strength to cope. “I love you and I’m married to you.”

“I don’t know. All I know for certain is that I need some time.” Rook walked to the bed and sat down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him.

In every aspect of my former life, needing time was code for ending a relationship. I couldn’t—wouldn’t—let that happen.

CORDELIA

Rook's words were as sharp as a dagger, piercing my heart like one, too. I understood that he didn't want to share me. He'd made it perfectly clear every single time the subject came up, but this was something I couldn't let go. The need was more than desire, more than lust, or want, or longing. It was as intense as a compulsion, as unmanageable as an addiction. Maybe it was best he didn't watch. Because for every step Rook and I took forward, when he saw me with Cross, we took one step backward.

Ash was a new curve in our relationship. But my feelings for him were more than impulse, more than a whim. They were instinctive, a yearning so strong I couldn't escape it, especially since he'd fed from me. But I couldn't explain it to Rook without hurting him. I needed his blind faith. His trust.

Rook finally looked at me, and the pain in his eyes was profound. "I just don't know if I can do this, Cordie. All I see is the thousand ways that this can go wrong for us, and then I see me losing you."

I crossed my arms and asked Rook the question that I couldn't hold inside any longer. "You're already planning to fail, to lose me?"

He twisted his body away from me before turning back to face me. "That is the absolute last thing I want. More than anything I've ever wanted in my life, I want our union to work, Cordelia. To be eternal."

I sighed and walked to the bed, sitting next to him. “Then we have to figure out how to make this work. We have to try harder.”

“Fuck, what do you want from me?” Rook threw his hands up, his frustration evident in everything from his stance to the way he glanced at me. “I’m trying.”

“I know,” I said, softer than before because I did know how taxing this was for him.

I sighed, holding back the tears. “I want the same thing you want. I want our relationship to be eternal. And if you really want it, and it means as much to you as I think it does, we can have kids earlier than I considered for myself.”

For him, I would have ten kids and we could start now. But there had to be compromise, and there had to be a promise that we would be eternal before we made a decision this big. “But only if I’m not going to be alone in raising them. I can’t do what Gran did, raising a child on her own.”

“I don’t want our children to be raised by a single parent, either.” He shook his head and sighed. “My parents were always too busy for me. And then, once I was older and could have intelligent conversations with them, they were assassinated.” The pain in his voice radiated through his being, his slumped shoulders bent his back. “I want to be a part of our children’s lives. I want to raise them to be better at understanding what it means to be a vampire who has to share the world with humans.”

Rook rubbed his eyes. I’d never heard him talk about his parents before, which was obviously a source of deep anguish for him. I never really knew my father, but the loss of my mother shaped and molded me into the person, or vampire, I was today. The painful experiences in our lives were meaningful, and I wanted to know every detail of Rook’s.

He continued, “I hate talking about my parents because I have such mixed feelings about them. I was raised by a nanny and had no concept of what it meant to be anything other than a prince until that was taken from me by Hugh.” He shrugged, as though the loss of his crown meant little to him. “I had

always expected to take the throne, but as the years passed and I didn't find a mate, people started whispering and spreading rumors that I was illegitimate."

I reached for Rook's hand because it had curled into a fist. "Why would they say that?"

"Who knows? It was their way of explaining away my ties to the throne. If I was illegitimate, it would mean that I wasn't the true heir, and the seat would be open to another claimant. And even if his claim wasn't as strong as mine, my illegitimacy washed away the promise of anarchy."

I wrapped my arm around Rook, not knowing what to say. He hated this part of his history, that much was obvious. But for whatever reason, he decided to open up to me, and I was afraid any interruptions would stop the flow of information.

I was intrigued to hear the rest, so I continued my line of questioning. If he could talk about this, put this kind of trust in me with details so obviously raw, then we could find a way around anything. The bond was strong. Present. Ours. "Can you tell me more about your parents?"

"They were strong, fair rulers. Their people loved them, and loved me in turn as a symbol of their union and success. I would tell you what they were like in private, but I don't know to be honest. They ruled the kingdom, devoted their lives to it, and I was just a byproduct that had to be taken care of. Once I came of age I'm sure they would have educated me appropriately themselves, but their deaths preempted that. It was shortly before their assassinations that Hugh discovered Fiona was his mate."

Rook continued. "Fi became pregnant shortly after they were crowned but lost the baby. Vampire pregnancies are dangerous, more so than anyone really knows." If it was a warning, I would heed it. But I didn't plan on having children anytime soon unless he made it clear that it was something that was important to him in the short term. Still, Rook's words sent a chill down my spine. If vampire pregnancies were that dangerous, maybe we shouldn't follow the court's advice to get pregnant quickly.

Rook ran a hand through his hair. “The higher ups in the court, the inner circle and the king and queen, have always kept the biology of it hidden because a mass panic could deplete our numbers. That could lead to the turning of humans again, anarchy of the rules, and mutiny of the masses of vampires left.”

“And it would be dangerous for everyone.” I nodded and sighed, imagining the uprising that would occur if the knowledge became public.

“But no matter how it’s happened, the vampire kingdom is shrinking. Not in land, but in population, and it’s partly because of the dangers of vampire pregnancy.” He really wasn’t selling me on this idea. “Soon, our species may have no choice but to turn more humans, voluntarily, of course, so we can keep the population numbers up.” Rook eyed me, his gaze surveying my reactions with a squint and a pinched brow

It was hard to explain how I felt, and he was probably as curious as I was as to what my reaction would be. Before either of us could find out, Ash stuck his head in the door. “I’m making my way to the main hall. Do either of you need anything?”

Rook shook his head and sighed. These were his friends, the people he trusted most in the world, and I was asking him to step outside of his comfort zone and share with them the one thing he treasured most—me. He glanced at Ash without animosity or the jealousy that had been there only a few moments ago. It was a good sign. Better even when he spoke. “Nope. All good here.”

Ash was considerably checking on his prince, a loyal servant to the man whose crown had been stolen from him.

And while his frustration had lessened, I could feel it still emanating from Rook. He didn’t like being interrupted, especially from someone who showed an interest in me, friend or not and it wasn’t going to change. Although he did look less murderous.

“Like I was saying,” Rook continued when Ash pulled the door shut, “the practice of turning humans has always been

looked down on. It is considered to muddy the blood lines. Plus, it could get even more dangerous since it's especially hard for turned vampires to carry to term."

I stared at my feet. Muddying the bloodline. The term was insulting no matter who used it. I was a turned vampire. And no one—not the court who thought we should start procreating with much haste or even Rook—seemed to be worried about my safety or that of the unborn children I was supposed to birth.

Rook shook his head at me. "I know what you're thinking Cordie, but that's never how I felt about you, of course." He stroked a thumb down my cheekbone then ran the tip across my lips. The touch was endearing and gentle, tender and sweet. "I just want you to be happy, Cordie. If you never want to try to have kids, we'll figure it out."

I tilted my head so my cheek rested in his palm. This was my soulmate. The man I would love until I died. Considering I was a vampire, it meant something to say that. "And if I hadn't been so certain that you were my true mate, I never would have turned you."

After listening closely to Rook's explanation of the vampire court, I realized that the needs and wants of the court were much more complicated than I ever imagined. And dangerous. That was something I couldn't let myself forget. No matter what happened.

CORDELIA

The next day, the ancient came to the prince's quarters. He was so important—to himself anyway—that he didn't even knock. Of course, he came with a small entourage of guards who escorted him through the palace and announced his arrival. "The ancient, Claudius." It was like The Ancient was his title rather than the mere designation it was.

When he entered the room, Rook stood. Cross and Ash, who had insisted on staying with me for moral support, also rose and then bowed. They not only wanted to support me, but they also craved a better understanding of what it meant to be a soul spinner. It was information we all wanted and needed so we knew not only what I could do, but what I should and shouldn't, as well.

"Good morning, Cordelia." Claudius entered the room so smoothly I assumed he was floating above the floor. I couldn't confirm this or deny it due to his long thick cloak that swept the floor, but I tucked the question into the back of my brain to ask later.

"Good morning." I bowed from my waist, not as deeply as I would for the king, but enough to show respect. The bow saved me from having to dare another curtsy.

"I see we have an audience today." Claudius gestured to the trio of men who were huddled together across the room. They were either attempting to look nonchalant and failing miserably or trying to hear every word and not caring who

knew it. Cross was too interested. Ash was too disinterested. Rook didn't bother to hide his stare. They would never be able to pull off covert.

“Umm, yes, sir.” I assumed normal respect would work, but I wasn't certain whether or not I was supposed to call him Ancient one. “They are here to help in any way that they can.” And to have my back.

“Hmm.” Claudius rubbed his chin. “I see. Well, let's get started, shall we?” He moved to the center of the room and motioned for me to follow. “I'd like to start off by explaining a little more about your magic.”

I was okay with that. Maybe he could explain it to the point that I would understand it better. Hopefully, there would be a point that the thought of using it didn't make me break out in hives.

“Oh, that's great. We're dying to hear the details, too.” When Cross spoke Claudius and I each turned to look at him. He was closer now since we'd moved, but they'd all agreed that they would be silent and not interject “help” or commentary while Claudius was in the room. Cross covered his mouth and stared down at the floor.

Claudius stepped in close to me and whispered. “Do you really want them here? They're a bit of a distraction, don't you agree?”

I chuckled because he'd spoken far more informally than I'd imagined he would, and he was right. “Yes, I agree. We could do without them.”

Claudius turned to the men. “Alright, gentlemen. You are released from the suite.” He held up his hand when Rook and Cross each opened their mouths, presumably to object. “Cordelia and I have a great deal of work to do, and we will get much more accomplished if I have the entirety of her attention and her focus isn't pulled in various directions.”

Cross and Ash looked at one another, and Rook shrugged. “Let me know if you need anything, Cordie.” His smile was tentative, but it was there and I appreciated it.

I nodded and smiled as they made their way out into the hallway, though I was surprised that they went without much of a fight.

When they were gone and the door shut behind them, Claudius sighed, smiled, and clapped his hands together. “Ahh. That’s much better. Now, where were we?”

He was much different one on one than I imagined he would be. I expected a formal, probably Shakespearean, kind of speech. “You were just about to explain my magic.”

He nodded and smiled like he was proud I’d paid attention. “Yes, that’s right. Here, come sit next to me.” He took a seat on the couch and patted the cushion next to him.

I sat beside him and turned my body so my knees were pointed in his direction and twisted my head to face him. I didn’t want to miss anything he had to say.

“Cordelia, your magic is very specific.” Now I was intrigued. Specific magic. “And what I mean by that is that you command the magic, but there are things you can and cannot do. When you command it, you must do it in a very specific way. You must dig deep within yourself and, once you find it, ask it to do your bidding.” Claudius paused, allowing me to digest the information. “You and the magic have to become one entity.”

“I don’t quite understand,” I admitted. It all sounded very complicated. And I had questions. Most of them started with how—how do I find it; how do I ask it to do my bidding; how do I know what I can and cannot do.

“No problem, child. There is much to learn, but nothing is outside of your grasp.” He smoothed his tunic. “You won’t be able to do random things like light a candle or manipulate the weather, but your magic has the ability to save a life.” He spoke solemnly, holding my gaze as if he wanted to make sure I respected the process.

I killed a room full of vampires using this power. I never imagined I’d be able to save a life, only take them. The knowledge was overwhelming, but I wondered if that was

what happened with Rook. It would explain why he was still alive after such a mortal injury. Had I saved his life?

Claudius cleared his throat. “If Rook is ever brave enough, he should try to see if he has a soul now, since it could be that as you were saving his life, you gave him one.” I didn’t know what being a soul spinner meant, exactly, but I I’d never doubted that Rook had a soul, even before my magic made itself known. Whether it meant the same to vampires or not, I wasn’t sure.

Could my magic have given him whatever vampires thought of as a soul? Maybe my idea of a soul—the essence of a person—wasn’t the meaning. It certainly wasn’t that he didn’t have emotions, because he did. Maybe it only meant that he didn’t feel those emotions in the same way as others did. But I wished he would be able to come and go as he pleased with no regard for the sun. He certainly didn’t prefer to travel by night.

“How would he test that theory?” I asked, crossing my legs and leaning in closer to the ancient.

“There are a few options. But I must warn you, it could be very dangerous for Rook.” Claudius stood and motioned for me to follow him back to the center of the room. The idea of putting Rook in danger was anathema to me. The last thing I wanted was for him to be hurt because of something I suspected might be true.

We practiced what was essentially meditation for hours. Finding our innermost self, treating them with respect, and asking them to join with us and share in our goals. It seemed kind of like the way some Buddhist monks believed that we were all already enlightened; we just had to get out of our own way. Or as they said in *The Matrix*, “Stop trying to hit me and hit me.”

After meditation, we focused on connecting with my magic and drawing it to the surface. The ancient respected my fear of my magic and didn’t push me too far too fast, which I appreciated. When he was satisfied with our progress for the

day, we would talk about the vampire kingdom, the court, and the history of both.

Our sessions continued in that manner for months. Every day, Claudius taught me more about the history of soul spinners and helped me hone my magical abilities. I could feel the power growing inside of me. It was exhilarating and emboldening.

During our training sessions, Rook, Cross, and Ash went off to do who knew what. Their days were their own and they didn't owe me an explanation, plus I had enough on my mind that I didn't think much about how they spent their time.

One day, I woke up feeling refreshed as if the night's sleep had really done its job. And I was confident I had finally reached a point in my training where I knew I was in control of my magic. I couldn't wait to show Rook my progress.

Cross came into the room without knocking, but we were past that at this point. He was wearing a pair of jeans that made his long legs appear longer and a shirt that stretched across his chest. One thing about vampire men was that they had bodies that were untouched by illness and weren't subject to metabolism or sugar. And the muscle tone...oh, the muscle tone. "Good morning."

"Hey, Cross. You're just in time. I was about to ask Rook an important question."

His eyes went wide. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." I rolled over in bed and ran my hand down the side of Rook's face, watching as he came awake in stages. A murmur. A silent plea to not let the world in just yet. A slight stir and turn of his head.

When he finally opened his eyes, I didn't give him a chance to say a word before I asked the question that had been on my mind for two months. I'd wanted to ask more than once. As soon as Claudius told me it was possible and how to find out, I'd been trying to find ways to broach the subject. But last night, I decided I would just ask the question. And there was no reason to beat around the bush.

“Would you be willing to see if you have any evidence of a soul?”

CROSS

I cocked my head at her. Cordelia's question wasn't just a little surprising; it was shocking. An impossibility, unless she knew something I didn't. And obviously, she thought she did.

She wanted him to see if Rook had a soul. A vampire with a soul was a danger to himself and everyone around him. Even a soul spinner wasn't safe. Vampires with souls were unpredictable. As his bodyguard for several years, every alarm and siren in my body sounded.

Rook knew the dangers. Surely he wouldn't agree to it... but even I wasn't sure of that. Rook always did whatever the hell he wanted and damned the consequences. It was part of his character, the upbringing of a prince.

Rook sat at the edge of the bed, pulled a shirt from the chair beside his table and yanked it over his head before laughing. He scrubbed his hands over his face and then into his hair before twisting to look at her. "Good morning to you, too."

"Rook, I don't think that's a good idea. Just saying." I held up my hands defensively as I eyed Cordelia, who shot me a glare. Clearly, she wasn't impressed with my commentary. I didn't care. This wouldn't affect just one person. It would touch us all. Rook without a soul was dangerous. With a soul, he would be whatever was worse than that.

"Thanks for the input, Cross." Rook turned to face me and rolled his eyes. He did not, in fact, appreciate my input. "But I

think it's an idea worth exploring.”

That wasn't a yes. I still had hope. “When Cordie used her magic on me, something changed. I could never put my finger on it, though.”

“Claudius imparted this information?” I questioned.

Cordie dipped her chin, giving me the barest of nods, and the only answer I knew I was going to get.

Of course he did. It wasn't the kind of thing one could find in a book or some ancient tome in the library. This was information that could have only come from someone who'd lived long enough to see it happen. “And what method does Claudius suggest you employ to determine if Rook's soul has been respun.” She was a spinner, and it was because of her that this was even a possibility.

Cordelia sat up in bed and adjusted the shoulder of her sleep shirt. It was short, but as she kicked off the blanket, her flannel pants flicked and flared around her ankles. “He said it's very dangerous, but the best way to determine if Rook has a soul is sun exposure.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. “He's been stabbed. Imprisoned. Starved. And now you want him to just take a stroll in the sunlight?” I shook my head. “No. Just...no.”

If I had to physically restrain him—of the two of us, I was the bodyguard—no way was he going anywhere near so much as an open window.

So I could've clubbed him into unconsciousness when he looked up at her and smiled. “Okay, let me get dressed.” The statement was overkill since he was already stuffing his legs into a pair of jeans. He pulled on his shoes and stood, clapping his hands together as Cordelia jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom.

“Rook, you can't be seriously considering this.” I stared at my friend, hoping he could see reason. A part of me was also hoping he wasn't going to come back to me in the form of a plastic baggie filled with ash.

“Cross, I appreciate your concern.” Rook walked around the bed to stand in front of me and put his hand on my shoulder. He pointed his gaze into mine, and I saw something there—something dangerous as he spoke. “But Cordelia has been training for two months with the most brilliant vampire to have ever existed. If he says we should do it, we’re doing it.”

I saw hope in his eyes then.

Cordie bounced out of the bathroom, hair in a ponytail, eyes bright with anticipation and even more...hope. It worried me.

She slapped her hands together and nodded toward the door. “Where should we go?” There were balconies and turrets, rooftop accesses. But he had to go somewhere where he could have a shadow to step into if he started to burn. A place he could quickly get help.

Rook went to the door and held it open. “I know just the place.” He led us down the corridor to a balcony on the east side of the palace.

An awning protected the entryway so that there was only a sliver of light that managed to come inside when he opened the door. He stood out of the way, which was almost amusing since he was the reason we were there at all.

As vampires, we had a natural fear of the sun, a preference to stay away from doors that opened to the east in the morning. But after a certain number of years, some vampires took more risks, drifted ever closer to the rays that managed to peek around black-out shutters and curtains.

I was not such a vampire. I abhorred the sun. Always had. Even when I was a human.

Rook was not so afflicted. He’d been blessed with olive skin that, even pale, still looked closer to human than I did. But this entire experiment was extremely risky, because he could lose a hand, or an arm, or whatever he decided to expose to the sun. And if we didn’t catch it fast enough, his whole

body could burn up completely. Not to mention, knowing he had a soul was dangerous information.

Visions of Rook completely engulfed, rolling around on the ground outside the old farmhouse until he was nothing more than a pile of ash and soot flashed through my mind. I'd been his bodyguard for so long that such thoughts scared the shit out of me. More than once, Rook said that he felt different, though, and I knew how badly my friend wanted to trust Cordelia and her magic. Maybe this would work.

Rook took his shirt off and, without a moment's hesitation, thrust his hand out into the direct rays of the sun. Nothing happened. Not so much as a hiss or a sizzle. I still didn't trust it.

I stood, fists clenched, waiting for the world to essentially end, but it continued spinning without regard to the fact that my friend, my prince, a vampire who was supposed to be allergic to the sun was wriggling his arm and fingers in a ray that streamed through the door where we were standing.

Instead of screaming in agony, Rook laughed. "I can actually feel the warmth of the sun on my skin." He glanced at me. "Oh, Cross, it's magnificent." And he laughed. "I never realized how much I missed it." We were born vampires, but the condition wasn't activated without our bodies until we reached maturity so most of us as kids had been allowed to play outside under the supervision of human nannies or babysitters of some kind.

Cordelia's eyes lit with excitement. "It worked!"

Rook grinned like it was Christmas, like he was a vampire who could step out into the bright sunlight.

"Cordie, I have a soul." He looked from me to Cordelia and back and forth again. Then he pulled his arm back inside, slid it around her waist and whirled her in a tight, small circle. "You have no idea how happy this makes me." Rook continued hugging her tightly. "Thank you." He pressed about ten small kisses to her cheeks and brow. "I felt the sun, Cordelia." And that was the emotional beginning of his having found his soul.

Cordelia shrugged, but her smile stretched from one side of her face to the other. “I wish I could say that I gave it to you intentionally. Maybe I did, subconsciously.” Cordelia ran her fingers around to the back of his neck and caressed his skin as she kissed him on the cheek. Lucky bastard.

Today, I saw something extraordinary. I saw a vampire who could walk into the sunlight unscathed. The fact that Cordie had given him a soul without even meaning to was impressive but also scary. It made me nervous on more than one account. Rook having a soul meant that he was subject to intense emotion with the same power he’d always had. The same speed, strength, and abilities combined with the fact a soul would exacerbate and amplify those emotions.

He’d only felt emotions as a tingle before, and now they would be an electric shock. It meant he was volatile on a whole other level. Plus, we had no idea what Cordelia’s powers would do for her at court and how the king’s edict of respect for her would last.

Once word got out that she had successfully given Rook a soul, people would be clamoring at her for their own. It was a lot of responsibility for one person. And it, too, put her in danger.

As much as I hated to admit it, I was one of those people. I was more than willing to be an experiment if there was a possibility I could have a soul.

“Cordie, would you like to try and give me a soul?” I cocked my head and watched her. Every expression meant something, and I needed to be aware. If she declined, if she said yes, I needed to know the decision was hers.

If she said yes, this time it would be an intentional use of her magic, so it would be a good test of her progress. And risk over reward, I really hoped she said yes.

CORDELIA

Cross' question surprised me. In the midst of celebrating the fact that I'd given Rook a soul, it hadn't occurred to me that I might want to try out my powers on someone else close to me. It was risky because I hadn't tried it before and I couldn't be certain I had a good grasp on my powers. As such, I wasn't sure I trusted myself, especially with Cross.

The ancient made it clear to me that the only way to really know if I could do it was to try. It was daunting to think of, and there was no telling the damage I might do if I lost even a split second of focus. The idea frightened me.

During one of our training sessions, Claudius mentioned that unlike most magic, mine had to be shaped and shifted. He said that if I couldn't learn how to produce a soul, I would never be able to bend my magic to my will for other things. We spent weeks practicing a few simple spells and incantations, but beyond that, my magic would be useless until I learned to produce a soul. But I hadn't had anyone available to practice on.

"Alright, Cross." For a moment, my mind fogged with doubt and what if's. My confidence began to shatter. But Claudius had trained me, shaped me, and built me into a woman who could do this...who could spin a soul for Cross.

His soul.

Although I wasn't sure what having a soul meant for him or for anyone else. The ramifications weren't clear. "We can

try.”

I walked to stand at his side. He stared down at me, half-smiling, and it felt as though he was trusting me with his life. In one sense, I supposed he was. “But I can’t make any promises. I don’t know if this will work or what will happen to you if it doesn’t. It could kill you.”

Cross smiled as if he had absolute faith in me, which was a comfort, but I didn’t share the confidence. “There is an age-old question about risk versus reward, Cordelia. And those who never take risks never know true reward.” Oh, wasn’t he quite the philosopher? But I smiled at him as he continued, “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t prepared to face the dangers, to accept the risk.”

We made our way back to the prince’s quarters. It was safe and quiet, shielded from sunlight in case I failed, and I was comfortable there. No one would enter without permission, and until we were sure I could control my magic and the process of giving someone a soul, we wouldn’t likely be giving permission.

When we entered, I took a deep breath. I would either kill him or give him a soul. And he knew the risk. Not that his acquiescence made me feel one bit better.

We moved to the center of the room, and I closed my eyes, calling on my magic, letting it build inside of me like a flickering flame in a soft wind. I needed it to be an inferno that could withstand a cyclone. It was hard to wrangle it and get it to do what I wanted, but I persisted, focused, and painted the images in my mind until, finally, I could see the light building within me. My skin glowed. My hands trembled, but the magic purred inside of me.

I took Cross’ hands in mine, faced him, and instructed the magic to enter his body. There was a surge, a twist inside of me, and it shifted through my hands and into his. I opened my eyes in time to see Cross’ go wide as he sucked in a sharp lungful of air. He staggered, but we were connected by my magic, and I held him upright until he found his footing again.

What seemed like hours passed as the energy transferred from me to Cross. I pushed as he pulled. I gripped his hands, and he curled his fingers around mine. And then it was finished. The magic was spent. It went as far as it needed to go, and it felt like a small cord was braided between us, connecting him to me. I felt a new part of him, like it was embedded inside of me.

I was hesitant to stop, though, because I didn't know if I would be able to pick up where I stopped if I interpreted the magic incorrectly.

Eventually, the sensation faded to nothingness, and I had to assume that the process was complete. The sensation Claudius described didn't exactly match what I just experienced, but I could see how he might have trouble describing something he'd never experienced himself. After all, he wasn't a soul spinner.

Without him in the room watching and guiding, I had no choice but to trust that I had followed Claudius' instructions correctly. If I did then I'd be able to give Cross a soul. One that I had spun from nothing other than my desire to do so, unlike with Rook where it had come from an unconscious will to save his life no matter what. If I had successfully given them both souls, then I knew I could give one to Ash. If he wanted one.

"It's done," I announced, releasing Cross' hands. As I pulled mine away, his hands dropped as though they were weighted. The motion snapped him from whatever trance he seemed to be under.

Before I could say another word, Cross bolted from the room. I didn't have to guess where he was going. He was off to try his hand under the sun. He returned in a matter of seconds, smiling like I'd just given him the golden ticket. "It worked, Cordie. You gave me a soul. You're absolutely brilliant."

"I don't know that I would say brilliant." But I was glad he'd said it.

Cross stepped closer and spread his arms to pull me against him in an attempt to hug me, but Rook moved to stand in his way. “Back off, Cross. Can’t you see she’s drained?”

Cross stepped back, nodded and looked away, contrite. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overwhelm you.”

But he hadn’t. Rook was over-protective, maybe a bit jealous.

“It’s okay.” I reassured him with a smile, partly because I was happy with what I’d accomplished and partly because I wanted him to feel better. “I’m just happy it worked.”

Although, I did feel a little lightheaded, so I decided to sit down on the couch and pretend I was fine. But I wasn’t. I was terrified. I was worried. I was about to be very in demand.

It worked, and once word got out, there would be no stopping the people who would want me to give them a soul. And my magic was finite. There wasn’t an endless amount, which was terrifying to think about. I mean, who knew why I’d run out and what that might do to me?

“We should probably keep this between the three of us.” Rook suggested, as if he’d read my mind. Maybe he did. “At least for now. If the court finds out that you can...grant souls...” He shook his head. “You won’t have a minute to think.”

I nodded my agreement and then yawned. Maybe soul spinning did take more of my energy than I thought. Whether that was the case or not, the last thing I needed was to be bombarded with requests to spin souls.

There had been much talk about my magic and how much of it I had. Claudius said it was finite but that it could be the size of a pond or the Caspian Sea. Either way, I would have to be selective about who I worked with since I knew I wouldn’t be able to help everyone who asked. As I fell asleep, the only question that invaded my thoughts was how on earth could I decide who was worthy of a soul?

CORDELIA

A soft snore in my left ear woke me. I turned my head left and then right. I wasn't on the sofa anymore. Someone had carried me into the bedroom and put me in bed. With the lack of windows, I couldn't tell how long I'd been asleep or whether it was day or night.

Cross and Rook were on either side of me, sleeping soundly. Rook had his arm across my belly and Cross was using his own arm as a pillow, as though he'd been watching me until he fell asleep. Their gentle, rhythmic breathing brought me comfort, so I closed my eyes, ready to fall back into the deep slumber I'd only just left.

As I was just about to topple into dreamland, a crumpling sound on the opposite side of the room caught my attention. I sat up and rubbed my eyes to bring into focus what I thought I saw—Ash, sitting in an accent chair, drinking from a bag of blood.

“I'm sorry, Cordie,” he whispered and leaned forward. “I didn't mean to wake you.”

I lifted Rook's arm and carefully wiggled out from underneath it before making my way to the sitting area. It wasn't often—maybe more so these days than before but still not so often—that anyone watched me sleep, but I still didn't mind. “You didn't wake me. No need to apologize.”

“Are you hungry?” Ash held out the half empty bag.

I moved to the edge of the seat and reached out, accepting the blood. As I drank it, I glanced at Ash. He seemed content, watching me from the chair opposite the couch, but he wasn't here just to drink blood and watch me sleep. When I finished, I patted the vacant cushion. "Come sit with me."

He tilted his head as if surprised by my request, but he slowly and quietly made his way to the couch.

I pulled my legs underneath me and turned to face him. "The palace is so quiet this time of evening." I assumed it was evening. But the truth was, I didn't know. I only knew it was early in the day when I fell asleep after giving Cross his soul.

He nodded and smiled. "It's my favorite time, quite honestly. Sitting and being able to hear yourself think is somewhat of a rarity around here. If you haven't noticed, vampires can be pretty loud and rowdy." He cocked his brow. He knew damned well he wasn't imparting new information.

"I think that's an understatement." I chuckled and scooted my body closer to Ash.

There wasn't a real reason, I just wanted to be close to him. He put his arm around me, and I leaned in, laying my head against his chest. It felt natural and comfortable. "Do you have a favorite spot in the palace? Surely you know all of the nooks and crannies where you can go to be alone or hide if you need to."

Ash sighed. "Yes, I have been here for a long time. Thanks for reminding me of my age."

He glanced down at me, and we both laughed.

"There's a little room off of the main corridor. Most people probably assume it's a closet, but it's tucked up underneath the stairs. Over the years, the royal children have played in it. Probably, and this is very hush hush..." He tilted his head down before continuing quietly, "It's their secret hideout."

Ash paused as he thought about the room. "When you first walk in, there's a huge, overstuffed armchair in the corner and there are strings of lights hanging from the ceiling."

“That sounds lovely.” I yawned and cuddled closer, as close as I could get without climbing into his skin with him.

“It really is. Whenever I can sneak away, I like to go in there and just sit. No distractions, no urgent palace matters to attend to.” Ash laid his cheek on the top of my head.

We sat like that for a while before he lifted his head and I moved back, smiling as he brushed my hair behind my ears. We spent some time chatting about life, our childhoods, and other random trivia about ourselves. I genuinely enjoyed his company.

He was witty and funny. And the man could tell a story. I particularly enjoyed the one where he’d been engaging in a night of debauchery—his word—at a local dancehall back in the days of gunfights and horse-drawn carriages. He’d met Miss Maggie—a Mae West type before Mae West was a sparkle in her Mama’s eyes—and he’d twirled her around the dancefloor then the bedroom. He didn’t realize he had to pay for such attention.

He was chased out by Miss Maggie and Miss Sophie, the owner of the establishment, who had a buck shot rifle. He took a bullet to the bottom and got caught in a barn where he had to hide from the sunlight, sharing a pen with a goat and a mule.

We stayed on the couch, cuddled more like lovers than friends. And, at some point, I must have fallen back asleep.

The first thing I noticed in my dream was a lovely smell. Cinnamon, maybe? It was warm and comfortable, and reminded me of Gran. Rook, Cross, and Ash were with me. The sound of children laughing and playing filled the room as I watched them run around us, carefree and joyful in ways only kids could be. It seemed like a big reunion of some kind. Magic swirled around us, and we all seemed extremely happy. Giddy, even.

I turned to my right at the sound of a voice I recognized. “Cordelia!” My best friend, Roni, was there, too, with Ghost by her side. Although, he looked different, more feral.

I smiled to myself, happy to have everyone together. But why? And what did it mean? I tried to make sense of it, to at least figure out where I was and why, but then I woke up, only remembering pieces of the dream.

I was back in bed with Rook and Cross, as though my midnight interlude with Ash had never happened. If I was honest with myself, I wasn't sure it did. It had been so easy and so comfortable with him that it made me wonder if it was all a dream. It could've been.

The only thing I was sure of was the fact that I needed to see Roni again. Soon. I missed my dear friend. Even though we weren't related by blood, she was like a sister to me and the only real family I had left.

I rolled over to face Rook and shook him gently awake. He yawned and opened his eyes just enough to see it was me and then he smiled. "Oh, you're awake."

I nodded. "Rook, listen. I need to see Roni." I spoke as if I couldn't get the words out fast enough. The silence was loud when I finished.

He sat up halfway, supporting his torso with his right elbow. "Roni? Your friend? Is everything okay? Why do you suddenly need to see her? What's wrong?"

I sighed because he was right. "Nothing is wrong, per se. I just miss her."

Rook stroked the line of my jaw with his thumb and brought it around to trace the line of my lips. I kissed the soft pad of his thumb, and he smiled. "If we can get the king to agree to it, I will take you to her."

I smiled and laid down, resting in the crook of his arm, my leg curled across his hip.

In my mind, getting the king's permission was just something to check off the list, so I wasn't worried about getting it. Rook probably planned to ask politely, but I knew I had leverage.

If the king said no, I would dangle the prospect of getting a soul in front of him. No way he'd turn down any request I

might have if he thought there was a chance he would get a soul out of it. I didn't verbalize my realization, though. Rook probably wouldn't agree to it anyway.

CORDELIA

I spent the rest of the night thinking about what I would say to the king if the opportunity presented itself. Roni was my priority, and now that I had the thought that I wanted to see her, I was almost desperate. I would do whatever it took to see her.

I couldn't help but wonder if she was panicking about where I'd disappeared to. I didn't even know if she was still working at The Nest. For all I knew, the vampire hunters might have come sniffing around, and I could only hope that she wasn't mixed up in any of that. After all, Rook was the one they wanted, and he had, as far as they knew, vanished.

Before I made a plea to the king, I wanted to see Ash and at least thank him for everything he'd done for me. I was no one to him, yet he had gone out of his way to help turn me and to save Rook's and my life. He had been a steady companion and supporter through all of our drama at court, and I wanted to give him a soul. If he wanted one.

Later that day, while I was practicing my meditations and Rook and Cross were out and about doing whatever it was they did, Ash walked into the suite. I pushed up from where I'd been sitting and walked closer, stopping him from coming any further in than where I was standing. "Hey, Ash."

He eyed me suspiciously. After all, it wasn't normal for me to make such an effort to speak to him as soon as he made an appearance. This wasn't including him in a conversation or

just to chit chat. This was more and he smiled at me as if he knew it, too. “Hi, Cordelia. How are you today? You look well.”

The small talk was odd, too. We didn’t do that either. “I feel fantastic.” I laid my hand on his arm. “Ash, you’ve been so good to me and you’ve been a loyal supporter of Rook for so many years. I have a way and would like to reward you for that.” I paused and stared deeply into his dark eyes.

He grinned the naughty-boy grin I loved so much on him and tilted his head. “A reward. I like the sound of that. Tell me more.”

I grinned because I felt the power inside of me, welling without much more than my single thought. “Turns out I’m a soul spinner.”

He nodded, his eyes twinkling as his lips struggled to contain the smile that wanted to spread across his face. “I’ve heard that rumor.” Obviously he knew it already, but I liked him so much when he was playful this way.

“Also turns out that the soul spinner magic is unique, shareable with others if I want it to be.” I was being purposely coy because he was being his purposely adorable self.

“You don’t say.” Some of the teasing was gone. The smile was frozen and his gaze suddenly serious.

“Oh, I do say.” I couldn’t wait to see his face, and I couldn’t wait another second to offer. “A soul spinner can give vampires a soul, and I want to give you one.” This time, I said the words all in a single breath, and then impatiently waited for his reply or his reaction. His anything.

Ash physically withdrew from my touch, shaking his head. “I-I, I’m not sure what to say. Yes, that would be the most amazing gift I could ever receive.” He paused and rubbed his forehead. “I’ve never seen the sun. Never felt it.” He looked away then back at me and shook his head again. “But, I can’t let you do that for me. I don’t want you wasting your energy on me. If something happened to you later because you used this magic on me now, I would never forgive myself.”

That was typical of Ash. He was the kind of man who put others before himself.

“Well, I want to do this. And I won’t take no for an answer, at least not for a reason like that. I’ll only accept it if you truly don’t want a soul.” I crossed my arms and leveled my gaze at him. I wanted him to understand just how serious I was about this. These were the men I cared about more than anyone else in the world. I would do anything for them.

He smiled in response. “I guess I don’t have much choice, then, do I?”

I shook my head and raised my eyebrows. Now was as good a time as any, and I didn’t want to keep having the same argument over and over again. I took his hand and pulled him over to the couch. “Alright, have a seat and put your hands in mine.”

I was already holding one and he slid the opposite palm against mine. The friction was delicious, but I ignored it. Ash looked up at me and as I sat beside him, he turned his body so his knees were facing mine. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes, beginning the process of summoning my magic. It was closer this time, in a place where I could see the sparkles much more quickly than when I’d spun a soul for Cross.

I hoped it was a sign that I was gaining more control over it. Just as the ancient had said it would, practice was making perfect. After a few minutes, the magic faded again and I slumped against the arm of the couch behind me. Even though I’d already had a full night’s rest, I was completely drained. But it was worth it because I’d been able to spin a soul for Ash. There were perks to being a soul spinner.

He stood and looked at his hands. A beatific smile spread across his face, making him even more handsome than he already was—and he had been blessed with a chiseled jawline, high cheekbones, and lashes that belonged in a mascara commercial from the beginning. “I feel different.”

I laughed quietly. “That’s because you have a soul.”

“How can I know for sure?” he asked, his eyes sparkling, his smile still wide and adorable.

“We can do the sunshine test. Let’s go outside. Help me up.” I reached for Ash, and he pulled me up so quickly that my chest thudded against his. He wrapped his arm around me. I was still off balance but leaning against his tall, athletic frame.

We made our way to the same balcony I’d walked to with Cross and Rook earlier. Ash was more cautious than Cross with the sunlight, and I didn’t blame him. But once he was in the sun and it was shining on his skin, he hugged me tightly.

“This is the most generous thing anyone has ever done for me, Cordie. Thank you.” He leaned down and kissed the top of my head and squeezed my shoulder.

“Well, well, well. Look who’s out in the sunlight.” Rook joined us and slapped Ash on the back. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t even have words to describe how amazing it feels.” Ash looked down at me again, and I hugged him tightly.

Rook leaned his head back and closed his eyes, allowing the sunlight to warm his face. “Wonder what it would be like to have sex in the sunlight?”

I gazed up at Ash and my Blood Heart. Rook frowned when he noticed that I was watching Ash as well. The act of giving them souls had brought all of us closer, but maybe not close enough yet for Rook.

To my surprise, Rook turned my body, moving me so I stood between them as his hands roamed around my hips and up my waist. One hand leaving me briefly to push the balcony door closed, giving us some privacy even though we were out in the open.

I gazed up at Ash as his eyes narrowed in on my lips. Licking my mouth, I hoped to entice him into kissing me. The action alone had him bending down and taking my lips in a kiss. Within seconds he nipped my bottom lip, causing me to gasp as he sank his tongue into my mouth.

Ash's hands framed my face as Rook lifted my hair from my neck and licked and grazed his teeth against my skin. Slowly raising my shirt, his hands stroked wherever he could touch skin, igniting the flame inside me.

My hands roamed over Ash's pecs, and I rolled my hips against Rook's enlarged bulge.

The sensations and Ash's taste had me moaning. I would never get enough of having all of the undivided attention of these men.

Rook's hands enveloped my breasts and pinched my nipples over the fabric of my bra, forcing me to gasp into Ash's mouth and making me lose all train of thought.

After Rook squeezed and played with my breasts, he rubbed his cock against my ass and lowered one hand to cup my mound over my jeans. His mouth rose to my ear, and he sucked on the lobe.

"We want you naked." His lust-filled voice made my insides squirm with the promise of what was to come.

Ash lifted his head, his brow quirking as his gaze dropped down to my puckered nipples. He licked his lips. Without answering, I raised my arms over my head. With my eyes, I dared Ash to strip me.

He answered in record time as he removed my shirt and unsnapped my bra in the front, allowing my breasts to fall before him. His pupils dilated as he knelt, wrapping his soft lips around my nipple and suckling softly.

Rook's hands lifted from their caresses he unclasped the button of my pants and lowered the zipper. He grabbed my jeans and panties in one fell swoop, and they fell at my feet. His lips trailed down my spine with gentle kisses.

The soft, gentle way the men tended to me made me believe I was cherished. My hunger for them grew, and blood wasn't the only thing on my mind.

Rook landed his lips at the small of my back and he licked, tasting my skin. Shivers ran up my spine and raced back down to converge at my core.

My readiness leaked and slid down my leg. I wanted to be taken.

Ash devoted his time to making my nipples rock hard, constantly rotating back and forth. His sweet caresses were boldening and building me higher.

Between the two men, all I could sense were multiple hands, licks, and kisses all over my skin. As the sun beamed down on our interaction, my head rose toward the sky.

Rook kissed down my ass cheeks and massaged them in his palms before he lowered his hands down my thighs to knees. He lifted one leg and then the other to completely dispose of the jeans.

As Rook rose, kissing his way back up my body, Ash started trailing his mouth down my front, stopping at my navel to lap my belly button. He then lowered himself further, placing his mouth and nose at the juncture of my thighs.

Rook's fingers traced through my hair as I moaned.

Ash inhaled deeply, "Mmmm."

Then, he was like a viper and struck, his tongue lunging inside my wet core. I let out a yelp at the sudden invasion. I shook, and if it weren't for Rook holding me up, I would have collapsed.

"That's it, Cordie. Does that feel good?" Rook's whisper in my ear had my body tingling. "Do you like having his tongue deep inside of you like that? Would you like it if we both ate you out simultaneously? Can you imagine that?"

I moaned and rolled my head against Rook's chest as he held me up.

Looping his arms around me and cupping my chest again, he lifted one hand and forced my chin to move closer to him, where he took an all-out war of a kiss from me—forcing his ownership over me.

Ash sucked and licked me, inserting one finger and then two, forcing me to groan into Rook's mouth.

“Hmmm,” Rook moaned. “Maybe we’ll have to try that sometime. Where you’re laid out in a nice comfy bed? Your legs opened wide to fit the both of us, and we’ll lavish you with only our tongues.”

My knees buckled. Ash’s hands reached for my hips and held them bruisingly tight, but he never stopped his tongue. My clit throbbed as jolts of pleasure zapped my womb.

Rook pulled me closer to him. “Don’t worry, mate, I’ll never let you fall.”

Rook gently laid me between his legs as Ash’s head left from between my thighs. He was on his knees, his mouth and chin glistening with my juices. I whimpered and pleaded with my eyes for him to finish.

Licking his fingers and lips, he smacked them and moaned his appreciation.

My eyes were hooded at the the way he was enjoying himself with me. His hands went down to his pants, and he pulled out his throbbing cock. He apparently enjoyed his taste of me.

I licked my lips.

“Cordie, do you want me as much as I want you right now?” Ash asked.

Rook tweaked my nipples, and I gasped. His bulge poked into my lower back as he nuzzled my ears and neck.

“Do you want me inside of you?” Ash asked.

I nodded enthusiastically.

Ash didn’t wait any longer as he guided his dick to my center. In one, hard thrust, he bumped against my cervix. I screamed out to the sun, but he didn’t relent. He pounded me into the balcony floor without mercy.

Rook held me in place as my nails dug into his jean-covered thighs, and he rubbed his erection against me.

My eyes stayed locked with Ash’s. He leaned down and licked my lips and the inside of my mouth, giving me a taste

of myself.

His long cock rubbed my clit, giving me the much-needed friction to get me to fall down the rabbit hole of bliss.

“Ash...so close...so, so close,” I whispered.

Ash fucked me faster. My mind couldn't keep up with his movements. My head spun. Every one of my senses was overloaded, and he slammed against my cervix more, causing an ache that felt so good.

With one last hard thrust, Rook's tight pinches and twists of my nipples, I shattered and broke into a million pieces.

My pussy choked and milked Ash as he let loose and pumped his seed inside of me.

I collapsed against Rook, who rocked me and gave me soft kisses wherever his mouth could reach. “That's it mate, good girl. Now it's my turn.”

Turned around, Ash caught me around the waist as his wet, spent cock rested against my lower back, one arm wrapped around my waist, and his other hand squeezing my breast.

Rook spread my legs wide. His engorged cock looked almost painful.

Leaving me no time to recoup, Rook slammed into my slick pussy, rotating his hips just right, like he knew how to do, thrusting against my clit and tapping my g-spot.

My next orgasm was building as my leading man owned my body just as he'd always done.

“Fuck, Cordie, you are so wet and tight. So fucking good.” Rook rasped and moaned into my mouth. I couldn't close it for the life of me.

Ash leaned down and sucked on my ear as he jiggled and played with my breasts. “You take what we give you so well, Cordie.”

Rook glanced down at my tits, and his fangs elongated.

My pussy clenched on his cock.

Ash moved his hands and Rook struck, puncturing his teeth into my fleshy breast. I roared as my orgasm ignited and sent me into oblivion with the release.

I couldn't believe how hard I came the second time.

Rook pounded away in my channel and sucked away at my breast for blood. Then, when he couldn't take it anymore, he released inside of me, fucking his release deep into the center of me.

He stopped thrusting when he was entirely inside me, resting there as he slowly pulled his fangs from me and licked my breast clean. "Good girl."

He kissed my breast and moved his neck submissively to me. "Feed, my love."

I lifted my mouth, let my fangs descend, and latched onto his offering.

"Fuck, seriously?" Cross yelled as he stood on the balcony next door. "Next time, the four of us are all going at it. I can't believe you all did that without me."

I smirked with Rook's throat in my mouth. His lifeblood was always the best remedy after a session like that.

ROOK

When Cordie asked if I could take her to her best friend, I wanted to say yes because it was so important to her. After everything Cordie had been through, there was no reason to deny her such a small, innocent request. She missed her Gran and was still trying to accept her role as a vampire, accept that her human life was dead and gone.

The only thing standing in our way was the king. He had to approve the comings and goings of the court, and since she was as much a part of it now as I was, the king would have to have his say. He claimed it was for safety reasons, but I'd always thought he insisted because he loved the control.

Still, we had to go through the proper channels. Decorum demanded it. Cordie and I made our way down one of the long corridors to the throne room. The king sat not in his throne, but at the head of a long table drowning himself in multiple goblets of human blood, drops seeping into his beard. The guy was a glutton, there was no other way to describe him. And he didn't care whose blood he consumed as long as there was plenty of it.

“Rook, Rook, Rook. What brings you here?” The king sat his goblet on a tray held by one of his royal servants, then he stood and moved to his throne. It was important that he be the one showing all the power now. I knew he would never grant a request if someone threatened his authority, and I wasn't about to risk Cordie's trip.

“We have a request.” I took Cordelia’s hand and gave her a little squeeze. “She would like to leave court for a few days. I promise we will return to continue Cordelia’s studies in just a few days, but she has some business to take care of in the human realm. She still has connections and ties to the human world where she lived. She still thinks about it. Often. And there are things she would like to clear up.”

He looked at Cordelia, and I tugged her a step closer. The king’s brow furrowed. “What kind of business?”

“I-I need to see my best friend.” Her voice was small and shy, her head slightly bowed. I hadn’t thought she would be so lonely with me, Cross, and Ash, but she needed something we couldn’t give her.

The king rubbed his chin. “Hmm, I don’t know. It seems like a lot of trouble for something so trivial.” There was nothing trivial about it.

“If I may, your highness. This is a small request, just a couple days.” I spoke with feigned reverence. The king smiled, eating my words like pie. He believed he’d made me heel to his commands, to his requests. I had learned a couple things in all of my years, one of which was how to make this king believe I was his subject and not his competition.

The king eyed us suspiciously, picking up another goblet from the tray the serving girl stood next to him holding. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to leave the court. Not at this time, anyway.”

Cordie shook free of my hand, cocked her head, and stepped forward. “If you approve our request, I can give you something in return.” Oh no. I couldn’t let her. I reached to stop her, but everything seemed to be happening in slow motion and warp speed at the same time. “I’ll give you a soul.”

The king’s eyes widened, and he stood, slamming the half-full goblet onto the tray, blood sloshing over its sides. “It’s a deal.”

It didn't escape notice that Cordelia didn't mention that she'd already given souls to Cross and Ash before offering a soul to the king. It was a wise move on her part. When I told her that there was no one at court she could trust, I most especially meant this king.

He cleared his throat and used the sleeve of the servant's shirt to wipe the blood from his mouth. The servant complied because it was the king. "There is one caveat. I would require a soul before you leave the palace."

Of course he would, so he could change his mind and keep her here and still have a soul.

Cordelia looked at me, and I gave a slight nod. She'd made the offer, and now it was the only way we were going to get out of there.

"Yes, I can do that, but I'll need a few days to prepare." Cordie glanced at me, and I could see the exhaustion in her eyes. In the slight curl of her shoulders, in the way she was moved a little slower. She had gifted Ash a soul earlier today, and it had completely drained her of all energy. There was no way she could do the same for the king so soon. She needed rest first.

"Yes, yes, yes. A couple days will be fine." The king sat back on his throne. He was a usurper and enjoyed the throne that should've been mine too much.

The king dismissed us with a flick of his wrist toward the door as he used his other hand to pick up the goblet from the tray. I guided her out with a hand at the small of her back, and we made our way back to the suite, where Cordelia crawled into the bed fully clothed and slept for hours. I stayed by her side, making sure she was comfortable and had everything she needed. She was everything to me, my soulmate, and her magic was draining her.

It took a few days—just as she'd said—before Cordelia was ready to give the king his soul.

"Are you sure, Cordie?" I hated seeing her so drained, so exhausted. If she did this, gave the king a soul, she would need

a few more days of sleep before she would be able to leave to see Roni.

“Yes. I’m fine, and if I don’t do this now, he’s never going to let us leave here.” I wasn’t sure he would ever let us anyway.

“And you feel well enough?” Her safety was all I cared about. She nodded but I wasn’t sure I was convinced. There was a strange desperation to her need to see her friend that I wasn’t used to and I was worried that she was pushing too hard just to satisfy that need. I didn’t want to restrict her, but at the same time I didn’t want her risking herself for a king who wouldn’t give two shits about her if he couldn’t get anything from her.

We walked hand in hand to the throne room, where the king sat waiting, ever the smug bastard wearing a smirk and a crown.

“I trust you are ready to fulfill your end of the bargain?” The king cocked his head and his eyebrow as he stared at Cordelia.

The king and queen were both present, wearing ceremonial robes and crowns. I’d sent word this morning that Cordie would be fulfilling her end of the bargain this evening, although I hadn’t been able to provide a time. She’d been awake for a few minutes this afternoon and told me she just needed a little more time before she could do what she had to do to get on the road.

“I wasn’t certain if you were still coming, Cordelia, or if you decided to remain at court.” The king stepped down from his throne and over to Cordelia’s side. It wasn’t as if he would let her remain at court in peace if she decided not to give him his soul. He would punish her, and then he would keep her prisoner until she agreed now that he knew she had the power.

Cordelia lifted her head and looked at him. I stood at her side, close enough that I could feel the tension emanating from her body. She spoke softly. “Yes, I apologize that the preparation took so long.” She smiled at the king. I knew it was just out of politeness, but I hated it. The man was pushing

her and I was just as guilty because I was letting it happen and letting her do this when I didn't think she had recovered enough. "I'm ready now."

It was likely a mistake to do this in the throne room with servants milling around and with the door unlocked so that anyone in the court could walk in. But without another word, Cordie took the king's hands and closed her eyes. It wasn't often that anyone touched the king without permission. It was likely that even the queen had to ask before she laid her hand on his, but Cordelia had done it.

The king's eyes widened as he stared down at Cordelia's hands in disbelief. Or maybe it was because he could feel her power surging through him. I'd certainly felt it. It was a tingle at first, then a warble, and then a burst that shook me enough that I felt as though I was going to lose my footing, even though I wasn't even trembling.

To the naked eye, nothing was happening, but I knew something was going on, anyone within a few feet would be able to sense the mounting magic in the air. Plus, I'd been through it, sort of, and I had spoken to Cross and Ash about their transformations. The king was experiencing a rush of magical energy, unlike anything he'd ever experienced or likely ever would again. There was no power in all the world like that of a soul spinner.

As she should have been finishing with the king, Cordelia's eyes snapped open, and she clutched the front of her shirt in her fist as she gasped for air. Then, her body folded, and she fell to the floor, unconscious.

I dropped to the floor beside her and shook her shoulders, called her name and tried to wake her. She didn't move, yet her breathing remained steady. Her arm was limp when I lifted it and let it fall again. I checked her pupils like I knew what I was doing, but the truth was, I had no idea. I'd only seen people do it on television. But I couldn't sit there and do nothing.

"What have you done to her?" I was still kneeling by Cordelia, but I glared up at the king. He stared back at me,

eyes wide and dark with what could've only been called terror.

“I-I don't know. I could feel it, her magic.” He looked down at his fingers, flexed them in and out a few times. “She was transferring energy into my body and then she just collapsed.” When he held them straight out, the king's hands were trembling, and he took three large steps back from Cordelia's prone form.

I glanced at him again as I pulled Cordelia's body onto my lap. He stood, bewildered, over Cordelia's body. Shaking my head, I held her hand and called her name over and over. She had to wake up. I'd never survive losing her. And neither would the king. Because if turning him killed her, I would kill him. That was a promise.

CORDELIA

“It’s been two weeks.”

I recognized the voice—deep, smooth, like a caress to my skin. It was Cross.

“I know, dammit. Don’t you think I know.” This was Rook—flustered and angry. His voice was more of a growl than a voice. “I can’t make her open her eyes.”

“What happened to her?” Cross’ voice hardened as Rook—I would’ve known his touch even if I was dead asleep—held my hand and stroked my finger with his thumb.

Rook sighed. “I don’t know. She was holding his hand, glowing, but something in the process got...tangled, I guess. And now...” He didn’t finish, but I waited. He sounded defeated as he explained, and my heart ached for him. And maybe for me because my eyes felt so heavy and even though I wanted to open them, I couldn’t.

But I continued trying. Pushing myself.

Finally, my eyes fluttered. I had control finally, and I pushed them open, trying to focus on the faces hovering above me. Eventually, Rook, Cross, and Ash came into view.

“Look!” Ash’s face was close to mine. He nudged Cross who nodded to Rook.

Rook took my face in his hands and turned me toward him. “Cordie. Can you hear me?” His voice was thick. I would’ve

described it as choked if anyone had asked.

My throat was dry and scratchy, leaving me unable to answer.

“Get her some water.” Rook looked over his shoulder at Ash who was standing just behind him. “Quick.”

Ash returned quickly and held the glass to my lips as Cross lifted me until I was half-sitting up against him.

“Drink, my love.” Rook stroked my face, and a batch of tears he probably would’ve rather died than let fall pooled in his eyes.

“What’s going on? What happened?” I asked, my throat still aching but better now that the water had soothed some of the dryness. I probably would have drunk a lot more, but they didn’t hand me the glass.

Before any of them could stop fawning over the fact that I was awake, and before I could form any more specific questions or try to remember anything prior to the blank space in my mind, Roni burst into the room like her usual cyclone self. She was a sight, one I’d missed so much more than I thought.

“Roni?” I tried to sit up on my own under my own power, but my body was too weak and I fell back against Cross’ chest.

This was the vampire realm and not a place she should’ve been. My mind knew it, but my mouth couldn’t form the words to ask a question.

But like he read my mind, Rook smoothed my hair back again and smiled down at me. “The king gave permission for her to come, so long as she was sponsored by another vampire not connected to you.” Rook glanced at Roni. “Her roommate gladly obliged.”

“Oh, my God! Cordie!” Roni had her arms around me already, hugging me tightly.

“Roni, I can’t breathe.” She was squeezing me tightly. I would’ve squeezed back, but I didn’t have the strength and she had my arms pinned against my sides.

She released me and stepped back. “Sorry, I just-I missed you so much,” Roni choked out with a shrug. “You’ve been gone for such a long time.”

“I missed you, too.” I said, tears streaming down my face. I had missed her, and I knew it, but I hadn’t realized how much until she was here with her arms around me and her face close enough I could see her pores.

“Can we have a minute?” When no one moved, Roni shoed them toward the door. “I need to speak to my best friend.”

Rook looked back at me, his smile soft and eyes dark. He was hesitant to leave my side. I nodded. “It’s okay.” I’d be in good hands. Roni wasn’t a vampire, but she was fierce and protective. The toughest vampire would be hard pressed to fight her and win.

As soon as the boys left the room, she sat next to me on the bed. “How are you feeling, Cordie?”

“I’m not sure.” I hadn’t been awake long enough to be able to tell. I leaned my head against the pillow. “I have all of this new power, but it exhausts me to use it. And I’ve been asleep for...?”

“A couple weeks.” When I cocked my disbelief brow, she nodded. “Oh yeah. You sure were.” Roni tucked her hair behind her ear then laid her hand on mine and squeezed hard. “You scared us all to death.”

I rolled over on my side and faced my best friend. “I guess I just didn’t have enough energy this time.” I explained the concept of finite magic and what happens when it runs out. “Maybe my magic is getting low.”

“Yeah. Rook already told me. We thought the same thing, but as soon as we found out about the baby, it made much more sense.” Roni paused but...baby? There was a baby?

Someone had some explaining to do. Now. “What baby?” I sat up in bed, and the room began to spin. I wobbled, and she reached to hold me by the shoulders.

“Slow it down, sister.” She gently pushed me back down into the bed. “We don’t need you passing out again. And, yes, you’re pregnant.” She was blunt on a good day. She was the type of person who blurted words and statements without preamble. Today was no different.

“What now?” My brow pinched and my nostrils flared enough that I could see them.

“Cordelia, you’re pregnant.” Roni nodded her head and squeezed my hand. “You’ve got a bun in your oven. You’re growing baby Dracula.” Okay, I got it, but she kept going. “You’re going to be a mom.”

“I know how it happened, but...” My voice trailed off as I considered what this meant for my life. “Oh.”

I closed my eyes, trying to comprehend the momentous news. My head spun. I sure as hell didn’t mean to get pregnant. At least not yet. And now that I was, I wasn’t sure how I felt.

“Rook figured as much, that’s why he sent for me. He knew you would need help and someone who’s on your side.” Roni twisted so we were facing the same direction and then she lifted her legs onto the bed and snuggled beside me. “While Rook is definitely a man who’s on your side and will do whatever he can to protect you, he thought you might need someone to help you adjust and wrap your head around the idea.”

It wasn’t like I had a choice. I was growing baby Dracula. But I was grateful that Rook thought of bringing Roni to me since I couldn’t get to her. He always had my best interests at heart.

“I’m glad he did.” I smiled and turned toward her. “Thank you for coming, Roni. It really means a lot.”

The danger to her didn’t go without saying. She was human and she was here. That put her in a kind of danger that I hoped she was aware of so she would take precautions and be careful here.

She smiled and laid her head on my shoulder. “Of course, sweetie. You know I’d do anything for you.” Roni yawned and rubbed her eyes.

I was having a baby and the thought was...overwhelming. A baby. A tiny little person.

Someone knocked, and I looked at the door because I didn’t have any words I could think or utter besides baby.

“Come in.” Roni lifted her head for all of one second, looked at the door, and then put her head on my shoulder again.

A vampire with long black hair and apple cheeks walked into the room and made her way to the bed.

“She’s the healer who has been taking care of you while you were unconscious,” Roni whispered.

“Oh, dear child,” the woman began as she laid her hand over my forehead like she was measuring by touch if I had a temperature or a headache. “It’s so good to see you awake.”

The woman held my wrist, checking my pulse. “We weren’t sure you would pull through. The magic took such a toll on your body.” She stared down at her watch for a few seconds, nodded then smiled at me. “I know that you’ve only just learned your magic, but I’m afraid I have to tell you to stop using it. That is, if you want to keep the baby.”

CORDELIA

This was a lot to digest. I had to stop using my magic if I wanted to keep my baby. My baby. I was still trying to wrap my head around the news. A baby. I was going to have a baby.

Rook hadn't stopped smiling, and he couldn't stop talking about all the things we needed to do to get ready. We needed a doctor who specialized in vampire pregnancy. And a crib. Baby clothes. Toys. Blankets. Names. He borrowed a book from the king's library.

I appreciated his excitement, but I still had so many doubts and reservations.

I couldn't raise a child. I had no idea how. My childhood had been far from ideal. As much as I loved Gran, and as much as she did the best she could, I certainly didn't want to subject my child to the same thing I went through.

When I spoke to Rook about it, he promised that he would do everything in his power—and I had no doubt of his ability—to make sure our child had a happy and safe life. He would be a good father, I knew that much.

But now, I was trapped inside the palace and had no way out. Once I learned how to use my magic, I had discovered a kind of freedom, an escape through the magic. It was special, something that no one could take from me. I felt powerful, confident, and independent.

But now, it had been stripped from me. Not only was I limited in what I could and couldn't do, where I could and couldn't go, I had to be careful about everything. Because now, I had a new life growing within me, someone helpless, someone defenseless that I would be responsible for protecting.

My emotions seemed to be askew and right at the surface all the time, and I had trouble concentrating on the simplest tasks.

Once I had showered and eaten, I decided to wander the hallways and garden of the palace to clear my mind. The night jasmine was in bloom, and I loved the scent of it just outside the library windows.

When I came back inside, I wandered, stopping every once in a while to stare at the art hanging on the walls, looking at portraits of those who had ruled before, admiring pictures of the other kingdoms and vampire realms. I was so lost in my own thoughts that I ended up in a corridor I couldn't recall having ever been in before.

I found a wing of bedrooms, another smaller library, and another, smaller throne room. This was the queen's wing. It was decorated in softer colors, with satins and silk tapestries where the king's wing was done in steel and glass, with rustic swords and shields as décor. The queen's wing didn't have the bustle and noise of the other side of the palace, and I wished for a few moments that I could stay here and absorb the serenity of this place.

By the time I found my way back, it was late, time for dinner already. When I walked into the great hall, the entire court stopped what they were doing. Conversations died and silence reigned. They all stared at me.

Roni was back in the suite with a ward of protection placed on the doors to keep her safe. Being a human in a castle full of vampires wasn't exactly the best place to be, especially when they were all gathered in one place and had food on their minds.

So often I wished she could be with me because there were so many things I needed to talk to her about. Now she was, and I was both elated and terrified. I'd spent a while with her telling her all the things I'd discovered since I was at court, and she'd helped me figure out how to navigate some of the king's politics. But now, I had a lot more to worry about. And I was ready—I hadn't been when I first woke up.

"Welcome, Cordelia. So nice to see you." The king stood at the head of the table and nodded in my direction. "I'm so pleased to see you out and about." His gaze drifted down to my stomach.

Apparently, he could sense that I was pregnant, or maybe someone had told me. His staring made me extremely uncomfortable and self-conscious, as though the baby's heartbeat was on a loudspeaker.

As I took my seat next to Rook, I looked around. There were at least two hundred pairs of eyes fixated on me. A feeling of impending doom settled in as I wondered what this new development would mean for me at court. What would the other vampires do when they found out that I not only had powerful magic that could give them souls, but that I was also pregnant?

It didn't help that the pregnancy absolutely terrified me. Rook was the one to warn me that it was even more dangerous for turned vampires to try and carry a baby to term, but now I was pregnant. I had to at least try to produce a healthy baby.

If I'd never become pregnant unknowingly, then I wasn't sure I would have ever had the courage to do so intentionally. For some reason, I thought that if the pregnancy itself was difficult, getting pregnant would be difficult as well. It was why I never bothered much about birth control since I'd become a vampire. Joke was on me with that one.

Whispers grew louder around the throne room. I watched as members of the court pointed at me, eyeing me suspiciously. There was no doubt in my mind that they all suspected I was with child, considering the king's lack of discretion earlier. I had no choice but to be extra careful from

that point forward if I wanted my baby to be safe. Which I did, more than anything.

It was odd how my priorities seemed to have shifted overnight, but I couldn't imagine not having the tiny life inside of me at that point. I would do anything to protect it.

ASH

A few people tried to approach Cordelia at dinner, but the three of us kept them away. Cordie was visibly shaken, and I hated to see her like that. She was so strong in many ways, but the pregnancy had revealed a new vulnerability in her that I'd never witnessed. It made me want to scoop her up and protect her from the world.

Cordelia tried to eat, but every few minutes, someone would come up and speak with her. Most probably had good intentions, but you never could be sure with vampires. When it became clear that we wouldn't have any peace in the main hall, we went back to our rooms.

Cross stood outside the door, listening to make sure no one was inside before giving the all clear.

"What's going on?" Cordelia asked as she walked into the room. "Why is everyone so interested in me all of a sudden?"

Rook shut and locked the door behind us. "It's because you're a soul spinner, and I'm sure some of the servants present that day you tried to give the king a soul blabbed about it."

Cordelia frowned. "But he'd already announced it?"

"Yes, but verbal confirmation versus seeing the process happen in person are two different things," I murmured. It was like reading that the ocean was vast versus standing on the shore.

Her frown deepened. “So will it be this way forever? I can’t even eat a meal without being stared at and gossiped about?”

“I’m not sure,” Rook said. “For now, you need to rest here in the suite, away from prying eyes.”

Cordelia put a hand over her abdomen self-consciously. “I can’t imagine how they’ll respond when they find out I’m pregnant.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about that right now. You don’t need the extra stress.”

Cordie sat on the couch, and I followed suit. “So, I’ve been doing a little research on your magic.”

She turned to face me. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I had a thought the other day. What if there was a way for you to keep using your magic, but in such a way that it didn’t drain you or harm the baby?” I stood and paced the floor as I spoke.

“I don’t see how that would be possible.” Cordie shook her head, watching me closely as I paced.

Although Cordelia was hesitant, I could tell she was intrigued by the idea of being able to use her magic without consequence. I had been thinking about this for days and was confident there was a way to make it work. “You wouldn’t use your magic in the same way you did before, like when you gave us souls. I believe there might be a way to make a potion to give people temporary effects of having a soul without you having to actually give up part of your life force,” I explained.

Cordie’s face lit up with excitement, and she uncrossed her arms. “That could work! But how would we create a potion without affecting the baby?”

I popped my knuckles as I considered the challenge. “The details still need to be worked out. But if we can figure it out, you would use your magic as much as you wanted without putting anyone, especially the baby, in danger. However, I do think it would be best to wait to try the potion until after the baby is born.”

Cordelia scowled. “Why is that?”

Cross stepped forward. “You have to understand that vampire pregnancies are extremely delicate. When we were originally cursed to live without souls, our population began to dwindle. And, ultimately, that’s what led to vampires mostly living in the vampire kingdom.”

“Cross is right.” I rubbed my chin, hoping Cordelia could understand the complexity of the situation. “If we could make the potion work, then it would help stabilize our population since it would make pregnancies easier on the mothers.”

I didn’t want to lay that responsibility at Cordelia’s feet. She needed to know that the choice was hers, I just wanted to help in any way possible. “You don’t have to agree to any of this, Cordie. Your health, and the health of the baby, are the top priority.”

“I understand.” Cordie sat down again and thought about the new information. After a few minutes, she looked up at me. “I want to help the other mothers within the kingdom. But not until our child is born.”

Cordie’s determination was admirable, and I knew that she would be an incredible mother. “I’ll start working out the details of the potion right away.”

“Thank you, Ash.” Cordelia smiled.

I nodded and left the room, giving her some time to rest. I had a feeling that the next few months were going to be challenging for all of us. But Cordelia was strong, and I knew she could handle anything that came her way.

CORDELIA

Just as I closed my eyes for a quick nap, the king burst into our suite. “Cordelia, sorry to interrupt.”

He didn’t seem sorry, walking into the room without even knocking. The nerve of that guy.

“Listen.” The king took a seat across from me. “I’d like to formally request that you give the queen a soul.”

I watched as the king fidgeted with his beard, obviously nervous. It was hard to believe that I had something he needed. It wasn’t that long ago that he hoped I would fail the Trial so he could execute me. How the tables had turned.

“No, I’m sorry. It’s not possible,” I replied, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“What do you mean it’s not possible?” The king sat back and crossed his arms, pouting like a child.

I leaned forward and rested my arms on my knees. “It’s not that I don’t want to help the queen, I just can’t. It’s the baby. The healer said that using my magic while pregnant could harm the baby. It would be too draining on me.”

The king shifted his eyes to the left side of the room, pondering my explanation. “You can always have another baby.”

Had I heard him correctly? He was fine with me sacrificing my unborn child just so his horrible wife could

have a soul? Outrage boiled within me, and it took everything I had to keep my cool. I didn't like the way he was pushing me, not taking no for an answer.

After a few minutes of silence, the king sat up straight. "Honestly, I want to have a child of my own but the queen wouldn't survive the pregnancy."

The king stood and paced the floor of the sitting area. "She was pregnant a few years ago, but it was horrible. She couldn't function, and the baby didn't develop as it should. It nearly killed her when she lost the baby. I can't see her go through that again. That is, if she even survived the pregnancy."

I looked down at my hands, not knowing how to respond to the king's vulnerability. The thought of losing my baby was heartbreaking, so I could only imagine what the queen had been through.

I cleared my throat. "There's another option. Ash presented an idea to create a potion that wouldn't drain my magic. It wouldn't produce a permanent soul, but the effects would last long enough to protect a mother and her baby while it's in her womb."

The king looked skeptical. "How would that work?"

"We're still working out the details," I explained. "But as soon as my child is born, I would be more than happy to give the potion to your wife so that you can have the child you've always wanted."

The king stood and nodded his head. "Thank you." With that, he turned and left just as quickly as he arrived.

Had my potion offer satisfied his request? Or had I just pissed him off?

Either way, I was alone for the first time in forever. I lifted my legs and stretched out on the couch, resting my head on an accent pillow. I closed my eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath. My hands instinctively moved to my lower stomach as I imagined a baby growing under the surface. I smiled at the idea of being a mother. It still scared the hell out of me, but each day, I grew a little more comfortable with the idea.

Just as I drifted off to sleep, Romi entered the suite. She hadn't burst into the room like the king, but the clicking of her shoes alerted me to her presence. I rolled over and looked at my friend. Her face was flushed.

"Roni? What's going on?" I asked, worried something had happened to her at court.

To my surprise, Roni collapsed into a fit of giggles. "It's Dorian. I have the biggest crush on him."

It took me a moment to remember who she was talking about. Dorian was her roommate, the vampire who agreed to escort her to the vampire kingdom.

"Oh, I see." I grinned and sat up. "Do tell."

Roni hugged herself and spun around in circles. I thought she might break into a Broadway musical number. Instead, she joined me on the couch. "Before, when we were just roommates, I never looked at him like that. He was just Dorian, my friend. He's always been there for me, but more like a brother than anything."

"Okay. So what's changed?" I asked.

"There's something about seeing him here at the palace. He's so confident and, yet, he looks at me as if I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Can you imagine? Him looking at me like that with all of these gorgeous vampires walking around in basically a piece of tape with a few strings?" Roni laughed and tucked her legs underneath her body. "He's all I can see now, and it's making me extremely awkward around him."

"Why don't you just talk to him about it? See if maybe he feels the same way?" I pulled my hair over my left shoulder and began braiding it. "You might be surprised by his response. After all, he did drop everything to bring you to the vampire kingdom."

I thought about the night I met Dorian and Cross for the first time. We'd all met at the vampire club and danced the night away. The whole time Dorian was completely focused on Roni. I was certain his feelings hadn't changed. There was

something there, but I wouldn't dare push them together. I believed people had to find their way to one another, which was why I was so thankful that I found my guys.

Roni eventually left the room, and I snuggled back down onto the couch. When I woke up, I was surprised to find myself still alone in the suite. Rook was supposed to be back by then for dinner, but he was nowhere to be seen. After him dying twice on me, his absence made me more than a little nervous. He made a point to let me know where he was at all times, knowing that I panicked when he wasn't on time or not in the location I expected.

I closed my eyes and searched inside for the bond I had with him and followed it. At first, everything was foggy, and I couldn't make out any details as I walked down a variety of hallways. The more I concentrated, and the closer I got, the easier it was for me to hear raised voices.

As my surroundings came into view, I could see Rook. But he wasn't alone. Standing next to him was none other than Massimo, the vampire who had orchestrated my kidnapping and eventual death at the hands of Jonathon and Milo.

Suddenly, Massimo turned to face me as I walked into the room. He gave me an evil smile and looked me up and down. "Well, well, well. If it isn't the little slut who thought she could get away from me."

I gasped, shocked that he would dare speak to me that way in front of Rook.

"What is going on?" I demanded.

Rook turned to me. "I can't kill Massimo without the king's permission."

So he had located Massimo, yet he couldn't seek revenge. His hands were tied politically, which was absolute bullshit.

"I'm impressed with the stir you've caused at court." Massimo licked his teeth, lingering over his left fang. "I never would have guessed that you were Rook's Blood Heart. Or that you were a soul spinner, for that matter."

I didn't realize that my hand was over my stomach, protecting our unborn child, until Massimo looked down at it. I knew he guessed what was going on from the light that flickered in his eyes.

Dread filled my body at the thought of what might come next.

CORDELIA

Rook moved to stand in front of me, blocking Massimo's gaze. There was no way Rook could avoid a stand off with him, and I knew he would need backup.

I called out to Cross through our bond, hoping he could help.

"I know what you're doing, Cordelia." Massimo stepped to the side and glared at me. "Cross and Ash are otherwise occupied right now. You may as well give up hope of ever seeing them again since Jonathon will be playing with them."

Jonathon? How could he be in the palace? He was a human.

"I see the wheels turning in your mind, Cordelia. Allow me to explain." Massimo rubbed his cheeks and grinned. "I had the opportunity to sneak Jonathon into the castle because the powers that be chose to lower some of the wards for your friend. Roni's her name, right?"

"Don't get too far ahead of yourself." I took a step toward Massimo, showing him that I wasn't scared of him. Not anymore. "You haven't won, yet. Cross and Ash are stronger than you think."

"Hmm." Massimo scratched his chin, pretending to think deeply. "Does that apply if they are attacked with holy water infused weapons?"

"They will fight no matter the weapon," I snarled.

Massimo laughed. “Oh, Cordelia. Ever the optimist, aren’t you? I’m afraid to say that your precious men won’t hold out against the hunters that are coming. And, when they fall, you will be mine to study like the abomination you are. Oh, and I couldn’t forget the child. If you actually do have the baby, I’ll study it, too.”

Dread filled me, and my stomach dropped. I suddenly realized that everything was my fault. If I hadn’t demanded to see Roni, the wards would have never been lowered. But I would be damned if I went down without a fight, especially when I had a child to protect. I’d rather us both die in the fight than to be subjected to whatever twisted experiments Massimo had in mind. I couldn’t even let myself think of what he’d do in the name of knowledge and power without a chill of terror running through me.

Before I could say anything, Rook was in my head, telling me to run. I didn’t question him, especially not in a situation like this one. I had too much to lose.

Running straight for the throne room, I hoped that the king would be willing to assist. If anyone could help, it would be him.

I pumped my arms and went at the fastest vampire speed possible, yet I could still hear Rook and Massimo behind me, quickly gaining ground. I had no idea what was going on, only that they were following me.

Stopping wasn’t an option, and I didn’t dare look over my shoulder for fear of falling. It wasn’t something that typically happened to vampires, but I didn’t want to risk tripping and harming the baby.

Running past the guards, I flung the doors to the throne room open wide and ran down the steps. The king was there, but so was Jonathon, along with a group of other humans. I assumed they were vampire hunters. Why else would a handful of humans be in the palace?

Everyone stopped to stare at me, and it didn’t take long for Rook and Massimo to enter the throne room behind me. As soon as they made their presence known, chaos erupted. The

king raised his hands into the air and demanded order, but it was too late.

The vampire hunters lost all control and lunged toward the king and queen. Rook and Massimo fought behind me, but I didn't take the time to stop and observe the insanity. Without thinking twice, I ran in the direction of the king. I knew that if I could just get to him, he'd have the ability to help protect us.

The king's eyes widened as I came into his view. I didn't care what the vampire hunters tried to do, I had to make it to the king.

Jonathon spotted me, and he started to make his way toward me. I tried to back away, but there was nowhere to go.

"Cordelia," Jonathon said, reaching for me. "I've missed you."

I shrank away as the king stepped forward, his hands outstretched. "Get behind me," he demanded.

A vicious snarl appeared on the king's face as I joined the queen, who was hunkered on the floor behind some decorative urns. We were unable to fight but also unable, or perhaps unwilling, to run as well.

The king took the brunt of Jonathon's fury. The younger man came at him with blades, hooks, and all manner of weapons switching out almost as fast as the king could counter his movements. They moved like dancers. With the right music, the scene could have almost been beautiful...if it wasn't for the terror and blood that surrounded us.

Jonathon's blades were clearly coated in something, because each time the king was struck with one, he doubled over in pain and left himself open for a second strike. It almost seemed like Jonathon was toying with him.

Each wound on the king bled profusely, to the point that it was distracting some of the vampires around him. He wasn't healing the way he was supposed to, even I knew that. It was clear that the blades weren't just coated in something that caused pain but in something that impeded healing as well.

It reminded me of Rook's burns from the holy water, and I knew that whatever the daggers and swords were coated with must have been something similar. I knew that without backup, the king wouldn't last much longer. His movements were starting to slow as either the pain, the blood loss, or both became too much. As much as I wanted to help him somehow, going near Jonathon was the last thing I'd do since it meant endangering my child.

With one last swipe of his blade, Jonathon ended it. The king tried to dodge, but didn't quite make it as the tip of the dagger sliced his throat. For good measure, Jonathon stabbed the other dagger into the king's heart as the shock of what happened registered for the other man.

Just seeing the wound made my own chest throb in response, the memory of my death surfacing once more. Now wasn't the time, though, so I pushed it down.

As the king slumped to the floor, the queen let out a wail the likes of which I never expected to come from her. They hadn't been the most loving couple when they were on display in court, but apparently looks could be deceiving. She was in motion before I could try to stop her.

My heart broke as the queen knelt over her husband's dead body. She fell on top of him, screaming at the top of her lungs. I'd never heard a sound so gut-wrenching in my whole life. Tears streamed down her face as she lifted her head, glaring at Jonathon.

"You will pay for this," she seethed.

She suddenly lost all control, her grief consuming her. Jumping to her feet, she moved faster than I'd ever seen any vampire, straight to Jonathon's side. Just as she was about to land her blow, Massimo was there, blocking her and only increasing her fury.

CORDELIA

The queen was in a rage, her husband's death fueling her anger. She and Massimo fought while Rook took on Jonathon. My chest was tight at the sight. I knew how vicious Jonathon could be, even though he was human. Plus, he'd already demonstrated during his fight with the king that he came to the palace well armed. Every chance he got, he sprayed holy water on the unsuspecting vampires.

The queen was too consumed by her anger to notice the small vials of holy water. Jonathon got a few drops on her, and she hissed in pain. The pain only made her fight harder.

The first time Rook was sprayed by Jonathon, he flinched as if it burned his skin. The second time, however, it was obvious that Rook wasn't actually hurt by it. I watched closely and wondered if Rook's soul made him immune to the effects of the holy water. That little bit of hope allowed me to breathe again as I watched my Blood Heart fight.

Other vampires made their way to the throne room, joining in on the fight against the vampire hunters. Whenever they were sprayed with holy water, they screamed and retreated, giving the hunters the upper hand in the battle.

The entire hall was a cacophony of screams and the sounds of fighting. All I could do was protect myself and the baby. I wanted to fight, to show the hunters what I was made of. They were the reason I had been turned, and now I wanted them to experience my wrath, especially Jonathon. But I didn't want to

put myself at risk, so I looked around for a different spot to hide since multiple vampire hunters had seen where I was kneeling until this point.

The king's ceremonial dagger caught my eye. It was the only weapon within reach, so I quickly ran and grabbed it from the king's belt. As I turned to retreat, Jonathon and Rook crashed against my body, knocking the air from my lungs.

Jonathon was momentarily stunned by Rook's attack. Not missing the opportunity to get my revenge, I impaled his chest with the king's dagger. Jonathon glared at me for a split second before the pain registered and his eyes went wide with shock. He grabbed at the dagger, trying to remove it as he fell, stunned, to the ground.

The scent of blood was heavy in the air, driving the vampires that were fighting to madness. The metallic smell turned my stomach. The scent of Jonathon's blood was even worse as it filled the air around me. I backed away, trying not to breathe it in, but it was too late. I gripped my stomach as I vomited all over Jonathon.

Wiping my mouth with my sleeve, I watched as Rook grabbed Jonathon by the neck and squeezed tightly. "You should have stayed on campus with the other little boys instead of crossing into vampire territory."

With one quick snap, Rook broke Jonathon's neck and dropped him to the ground. I was relieved that Jonathon was gone, but I knew there were many more that needed to be taken out.

Rook eyed me before turning and attacking the other vampire hunters. They were quickly dealt with as Rook's and the queen's rage drove them both to a new level of violence.

The tide quickly turned against the vampire hunters. They were outnumbered and outmatched. The vampires fought with a ferocity that I'd never seen before. It was as if they each had something to prove.

Within minutes, the vampire hunters had been killed, their bodies strewn across the floor of the throne room.

I struggled to get my nausea under control as the scent of death overtook my senses. Suddenly, Cross was by my side, putting his arm around my waist. “Come on, Cordie. Let’s get you out of here.”

I didn’t argue. I have the energy to do so, even if I wanted to. Cross rushed me from the room. “The vampire hunters doused themselves with poison in hopes that if a vampire bites them as a form of attack, they’ll get poisoned in the process,” Cross explained. “But it can also get in the air and impact vampires if enough blood is spilled.”

Within seconds, we were back in our suite, which didn’t seem possible. Had I blacked out along the way? Cross carried me over to the bed and gently sat me down, handing me a cloth to wipe my face and a trash can. “Are you alright?” he asked, worry etched into his features.

I nodded, still feeling queasy. “I’m fine,” I said, trying to hold back another round of vomit.

Ash arrived with the healer, who quickly made her way to my side. I couldn’t stop vomiting, and I overheard the healer whisper, “We have to put her to sleep or she won’t survive.”

In between heaving, I looked up at the three sets of eyes standing over me. “I guess I’m making up for all of the morning sickness I didn’t have.”

The healer smiled kindly while gently soothing me with magic, putting me to sleep.

CORDELIA

A few days had passed since the attack. Unfortunately, the queen didn't survive. Her death wasn't a result of the vampire hunters. Instead, she died from losing her mate, her Blood Heart.

The throne needed a new king and queen, and with Rook being what most of the people considered the rightful king, he took his place on the throne. Making me the new queen.

I was overwhelmed by the new position and not quite sure what to do with myself.

It was easy to slip back into a longing for the old human-version of myself. At times, I would close my eyes and imagine Gran's hugs or the smell of her homemade chocolate chip cookies. Hell, I even missed my time at the university, striving to earn credits and further myself in the professional world.

But I had to remind myself that this was my new reality. As much as I might miss being human, there was no going back now.

So there I was, Queen Cordelia, queen of the vampires. It sounded so surreal, and I still couldn't quite wrap my head around it.

Rook had been spending more time with me, trying to help me adjust to my new life. "I know it's a lot to take in," he said

one night as we sat in our suite, “but you’re doing great. Better than I could have imagined.”

His soothing tone of voice and his scent immediately calmed my fears. I realized that our positions at court didn’t change who we had become together. We were still Rook and Cordelia, just with a few more responsibilities.

Before I knew it, the day of the coronation ceremony was upon us. The palace, which was breathtakingly beautiful already, had been decorated from floor to ceiling with dark crimson roses. Each vampire wore their very best outfit, the women dripping in fine jewels.

As Rook and I made our way down the aisle, I couldn’t help but think back to that first day we met. It seemed like a lifetime ago. What started as a business proposition, a way for me to pay for Gran’s medication, turned into all of this.

As Rook and I took our seats on the throne, my heart swelled with pride as I realized how many obstacles we had overcome to get to this point.

The healer who had been by my side since I became pregnant stepped forward. “I am happy to crown you both king and queen of the vampire kingdom.” As she placed the golden crowns on our heads, I looked out into the crowd and spotted Cross and Ash standing in the front row. Cross gave me a heartwarming smile while Ash nodded his head and applauded in approval.

The entire court cheered, and I felt a sense of belonging for the first time since entering the vampire kingdom. This was my home, these were my people, and I would do anything to protect them.

After the ceremony, there was a large feast held in our honor. The tables were overflowing with food and drink, and the vampires danced and laughed well into the night.

Rook stayed by my side the entire evening, squeezing my hand or kissing my cheek for reassurance. It felt like we were ushering in a new era in the vampire court, one I hoped would

be healthy and help the vampires feel more fulfilled than ever before.

The crown felt heavy on my head, but it fit just right.

Maybe this was where I was meant to be all along.

My pregnancy went by quickly with no complications. Though it was tough in general, it was nothing like a typical vampire pregnancy, or so I'd been told. The night that my labor kicked in, I turned to Rook with wide eyes. He didn't have to ask what was wrong and had the healer in our room within minutes.

"It's time," she said after examining me. "You're going to have your baby tonight."

Rook wasted no time in scooping me up into his arms and carrying me to the bed.

The entire palace was on high alert, knowing that the heir to the throne was about to be born.

The moment my baby was placed in my arms, I knew that my destiny had come full circle. I would do anything for her and guarded her with the ferocity only a vampire mother could possess.

I smiled down at my baby and then up at Rook, who was standing by my side with tears in his eyes. "I'm just glad it's over and that she's safe." The unspoken *for now* lingered on my tongue with a bitterness that I didn't want to tarnish this perfect moment.

"As am I," he said, kissing me on the forehead. "You were amazing."

It had been a long and difficult road, but we were a family now.

After the long labor and delivery, the healer looked up at me with her kind eyes. She had been by my side through it all, providing magical tinctures and energy as I needed it along the way. "I wish all vampire pregnancies went this smoothly."

Her words resonated within me as I remembered the potion. Ash had been tasked with working out the kinks in the

potion in between his court duties. Now that I had given birth, my new priority was contributing to it, as well. I wanted to see if we could get something viable and someone willing to try it. A test subject, so to speak.

Roni had made many friends at court and having her support through my pregnancy was invaluable. Now, she spent most of her days helping me with the newborn, along with Rook, Cross, and Ash, of course. They made sure that I was never left alone.

During one of our conversations, Roni mentioned that she had met a woman, Silviya, who might be interested in the potion. She and her husband had tried for many years to have a child, and she was desperate for a baby of her own. I instructed Roni to bring her to our quarters.

The potion seemed ready, but there was only one way to find out. With the healer standing by to watch for any complications, the woman drank the potion. There were no immediate side effects from the potion, which was a good sign.

“Why don’t you try stepping into the sunlight,” I suggested. “But take it easy, maybe only one hand at first.”

The woman nodded and slowly stepped onto our balcony. Nothing happened.

It was a good sign.

“It worked. I can’t believe this.” The woman flung herself against me, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck. “I have to find Charles and tell him the good news.”

The woman ran out of the room, crying tears of joy.

Rook looked at me as if I had hung the moon and stars in the sky. “Well, my queen, you may have very well changed the entire face of the vampire kingdom.”

Rook’s words were like balm to my soul. After so many years of struggling to provide for myself and Gran, I finally felt like I had found my true calling in life. The vampires now had the opportunity to live more normal lives and to reproduce in a safe environment with pregnancies that weren’t high risk.

The healer stepped forward and placed her hand on my shoulder. “If Silviya doesn’t feel any consequences from the potion, you are welcome to keep making it. It would probably be safe for you to make the potion even while pregnant,” she added. “I would need to monitor you, of course.”

“Yes, I understand.” I looked down at my precious baby as she slept peacefully in my arms. “One is plenty, for now.”

Cross’ and Ash’s heated gazes from across the room stirred something within me, though. I knew in my heart that only having one child wouldn’t be enough. I wanted to have one with each of them. The dream I’d had before, of all of us being there with kids running around happily, flashed into my mind and I knew it was more than a dream. It was a premonition and that, at least for a while, our lives would be perfect.

The End

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Prisoners of Nightstone

(Cowritten with May Dawson)

Potions and Punishments

Incantations and Inmates

Curses and Convicts

Legends Unleashed

(Cowritten with Lacey Carter Andersen)

Don't Say My Name

Don't Cross My Path

Don't Touch My Men

Twisted Fae

(Cowritten with Lucinda Dark)

Court of Crimson

Court of Frost

Court of Midnight

The Hollow

(Cowritten with Ellabee Andrews)

Survival

Seduction

Surrender

Salsang Chronicles

(Cowritten with Serena Akeroyd)

Stained Egos

Stained Hearts

Stained Minds

Stained Bonds

Stained Souls

Salsang Chronicles Box Set

The Wild Hunt

Daughter of the Hunt

Challenger of the Hunt

Champion of the Hunt – Coming Soon

Cerberus

Daughter of Persephone

Daughter of Hades

Queen of the Underworld

Cerberus Series Box Set

Hera's Gift (A Cerberus Series Novella)

Wardens of Midnight

Woman of Midnight (A Wardens of Midnight Novella)

Sanctuary at Midnight

The Siren Legacy

The Oracle (A Siren Legacy Novella)

The Siren's Son

The Siren's Eyes

The Siren's Code

The Siren's Heart

The Banshee (A Siren Legacy Novella)

The Siren's Bride

Fury's Valentine (A Siren Legacy Novella)

Standalones, Shared Worlds, and Box Sets

The Sex Tape (Cowritten with Serena Akeroyd)

Spin My Gold (Cowritten with Lacey Carter Andersen)

Buttercup

Neve

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Helen Scott spends her time alternating between fantasy and reality. She likes to think she'd be sorted into Hufflepuff and would have been a Physical Kid from Brakebills. Her days are fueled by tea and cuddles from her four-legged kids and amazing husband in their home in the Chicago suburbs.

When not reading or writing, Helen can be found baking, enjoying a walk in the woods, crafting, or playing video games. She's a lover of sushi and K-Dramas and is convinced there is magic in the world if you know where to look.

Whether paranormal or contemporary, Helen loves writing sassy, kick-butt heroines and drool-worthy love interests. She's the author of the House of Wolves and Magic series, the Cerberus series, and the Of Demons and Dragons series.

Thank you for reading!

You can also come and hang out in my reader group, Helen's Hellraisers, where you can find out all about what I'm working on, sneak peeks, and even exclusive giveaways!

[Come and join the fun here!](#)

Don't want to join the group but want to know what's going on?

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Don't forget to [sign up for my newsletter](#) for new release alerts, giveaways, and other fun stuff!