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ELEGY
OF
TWILIGHT

A TOWER KNIGHTS TALE

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LUCIA



Beads of cool water kissed my skin as Wilcox tied my hands behind my back. Coarse rope wove around my waist, binding me securely to the rough wood of the birch tree.

“Not too tight,” called Captain Elroy, hand on his blade as he scanned the glade once more.

Weeping willows grew alongside the pool, and a waterfall cascaded from above like a giant pouring out a basin of water. Flowers grew along the bank like a cluster of ladies-in-waiting, blush and lavender blossoms uplifted as if in worship to honor the sky and water.

“It is done,” said Wilcox as he finished tying me up. He squeezed my shoulder. “We won’t let any harm come to you, milady.”

He was one of the younger knights, shy and good-natured but a bit overzealous when it came to knots. I bobbed my head, not trusting my voice. I hadn’t exactly agreed to this, but I’d had little choice in the matter.

“Let’s take our places,” Captain Elroy instructed, his deep voice stern. His dark eyes held mine. “Be brave, Lucia. We’ll attack as soon as he appears.”

Rising to my full height, as best I could while tied to the tree, I lifted my chin.

The two knights disappeared into the surrounding wood, and I was seemingly alone. But I knew the truth. The Knights of Veilix—vampire hunters—were determined to catch their

latest prey: the vampire king himself. I was the bait. Once he appeared to taste my blood, the knights would attack and free the village from the bloodthirsty tyrant.

I'd be lying to myself if I claimed I wasn't afraid. Because I was.

The sun set.

An itch settled just under my ears, and I craned my head, unable to give myself relief. Before the evening meal, Lord Elroy had approached me with a demand and a secret. I was to be the bait, but I couldn't tell anyone, especially not the Head Priestess, for she would never agree to put the life of one of her wards in danger.

But I wanted to help, and I knew why I'd been chosen. I'd been abandoned, left on the steps of the abbey when I was a baby. The Head Priestess never said why, but I guessed it was because of the strange silver runes on my skin. Like a birthmark, they were blemishes on my skin that embarrassed me. I wore long sleeves to keep them hidden, but the runes on my face and neck were not easy to hide.

I waited, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, wishing my arms weren't tied behind my back. Captain Elroy said it had to look real, as though I were a sacrifice to the vampires, a symbol of goodwill to ask them to leave the village in peace.

The light faded from the sky in hues of azure, blush, and peach. A numbness spread through my bones as a light breeze picked up, ruffling the ends of my dress and stirring the fabric against my legs. If I'd known I'd be spending my evening on the mountainside, I would have worn something warmer.

Goosebumps prickled on my arms, the thin material of my sleeves doing nothing to keep me warm. The neck of my dress was open, on purpose, because I was a sacrifice to tempt *him*.

Darkness came, every blade of grass sharp like horns, the trees creepy shapes that might emerge into the monster I waited for. And then came a sound like the rush of wind blowing over strings.

It came again, a haunting melody gaining volume as the player strummed with boldness. It wove around me like fingers, and a warmth filled my body as it grew louder. Every inch of me tingled with anticipation, and my breath went shallow. I expected him to appear at any moment, but I didn't recall any tales of music being associated with monsters.

My eyes adjusted to the gloom as a shape walked into the glade. It was tall, limber, walking on two legs like a man, and as it approached me, ice-cold fear made me shrink away as best I could.

He was here. The vampire king. He'd fallen for the trap. He'd come to devour me.

Slowly, methodically, he approached as though he had all the time in the world to spare. I waited for arrows to fly, distracting him, while the hunters sprang out of their hiding places to capture him.

But nothing happened.

The vampire crept closer, and my limbs trembled.

I pressed my lips together, terrible thoughts twirling through my mind. What if it wasn't a trap, but I truly was a sacrifice? Had Captain Elroy lied to me?

Panic came over me, and I yanked at the rope, but it was too tight and too late. The vampire stood before me. I forced myself to think. The vampires that haunted the land were vicious and violent, murderers who ripped their prey apart. But perhaps I could talk to this one and convince him to let me go free.

I faced him and a chill swept through me, for he appeared like nothing I'd imagined.

He stood a head taller than me, with piercing blue eyes that coolly assessed me. Rumpled black hair curled around his neck and ears, as though he'd recently run his fingers through it. A shadow of a beard crossed his powerful jaw, and his lips curved back in an amused smirk at what he beheld.

His open shirt revealed a smooth chest, and hooked across his back was a stringed instrument, likely the same one I'd

heard earlier. Leaning closer, he sniffed, and when he spoke, his low tones sent a blend of ice and fire through my veins. “Hello, little feast.”

I screamed.

The sound ripped out of my throat as I thrashed, banging my head against the tree trunk in order to escape him. Eyes squeezed tight, I waited for teeth to close around my throat, but the pain never came.

Chest heaving, I waited a bit longer, then peeked one eye open, then both.

The vampire still stood there, staring at me. “Are you quite done?” he asked.

“Please don’t eat me,” I begged.

A cruel laugh came from his lips. “Why not? You were left here to be a sacrifice to me. Were you not?”

“I...” I broke off, unsure what to say, and determined not to give away the hunters. *Where were they?*

His eyes practically glowed as he placed one hand on the tree beside my head. “But you have a dirty secret, don’t you? You’re not truly here to be a sacrifice but to lay a trap...for me.”

How did he know?

“You don’t have to worry about the hunters. I sent them to sleep with my lute. It’s just you and me.”

My heart stopped. “What are you going to do with me?”

He cocked his head. “I’m not sure yet. Depends.”

“On?”

“How entertaining you are.”

I bit my lip, but a whimper exploded from my throat anyway. I’d grown up sheltered in the abbey, but even so, I had a faint idea of what kind of entertainment I might provide as both a meal and... something else.

He narrowed his gaze, studying me. “My words distress you.”

Leaning closer, he placed two fingers on my neck and trailed them along the silver runes glistening there. The muscles of my neck constricted, but there was nowhere to go.

Rough fingers caressed my skin as though I were a stringed instrument and just the faintest touch would coax the sweetest tunes. A shuddering breath came and then another when he did not drop his head and bite me. Tonight, I’d have to play his game, and when the sun rose, I’d escape. Except sunrise was so far away.

“Your runes are beautiful,” he purred. “Have you always had them?”

Beautiful. He was the first to call my runes beautiful, but of course, a demented vampire king would think so. Curiosity glittered on his face, and sensing no danger in the question, I gathered my courage and answered, “I have. I was born with them.”

He fidgeted with his belt and pulled out a knife, the glint of it clear in the reflection of light the pool gave off.

My throat went tight. I wanted to look elsewhere, to stare at the cascading waterfall or the ripples in the pool, but my gaze would not be torn from that knife.

“Please,” I begged. “Whatever you’re going to do, do it quickly.”

Befuddled amusement crossed his face. “I’m beginning to think you have the wrong idea about me, lady of the moon.”

The knife disappeared as he pressed his body against mine. I felt the hard lines of his body, solid chest, a deep, masculine scent, and the heat of his breath. The rope fell away from my waist, although my arms were still tied.

He was still too near, and he bent his dark head, lips brushing my ear as he whispered, “We are going somewhere quiet where we can talk, so no more screams, or I’ll have to gag that pretty mouth of yours.”

A silk cloth blinded my vision. I stumbled, but strong arms caught me, then hauled me over his shoulder like a log. My face bumped against his back, but it was impossible to steady myself with my hands tied. To show him my displeasure, I grunted. In response, he patted my bottom.

Blood rushed to my head as he carried me semi-upside down. The roar of the waterfall became louder rather than more distant. My other senses sharpened without my vision, and I smelled a combination of leather and wood, the sweet musk of closed-in air, the earthy scent of fungi, and the humidity of a closed-in place that had lots of moisture.

The vampire swung me off his back, and I landed on something spongy. I struggled to sit upright as the hiss of a flint striking stone came, and then he was back. His warmth surrounded me as he untied the blindfold, and I realized what disarmed me. He was warm, alive, with a heartbeat like mine. Not cold and dead like vampires were rumored to be. Who was he?

Free to see, I blinked slowly, allowing my vision to adjust to the low light. Concave walls of a cavern arched over me, revealed by pale torchlight. I sat upon a ruined bed while directly in front of me, he perched on the flat top of a rock, which might be used as a table. In one hand, he held a golden goblet and poured something dark and red into it. It might be wine, it might be blood. I shivered.

“This is your home?” I asked.

He grimaced. “It’s a hideout, nothing more.”

The steady drip of water confirmed my assumption that I was in a cavern somewhere beyond the waterfalls. Veilix was a lush countryside of hills and mountains hiding deep canyons and yawning caves. As a child, I’d explored many of them, but now they were forbidden. For the hollow caves were where vampires lurked in the shadows, ready to pounce, to kill, to drink.

The man before me did not look like a vampire, but what did I know? I’d never actually seen one. Still, his fingers were just that, fingers not claws. His eyes, instead of red, were the

color of bright blue water graced by flecks of sunlight. The way his rumpled hair curled was disarming. If I'd seen him in the village, I would have greeted him kindly, offered him a meal, and thought him handsome. In the shadows of the musty cavern, an intoxicating danger emanated from him.

He held out the goblet, but I shook my head. I'd be a fool to take a drink from a stranger. With a shrug, he downed the rest of the contents and picked up his lute. It reminded me of a guitar, although much smaller, with a rounded body and twelve strings instead of six. When he strummed a few notes, a hum echoed, and my heart rate slowed.

“Will you untie my arms?” I dared to ask.

“Why should I free one who so willingly offered herself to be tied up?”

“It's getting uncomfortable,” I admitted.

He strummed a few more notes, studying me intently. “If I do, will you hurl the goblet at me and run into the cavern, searching for escape?”

“I'd very much like for you to let me go, but I don't know my way home from here, and I'd hate to run into more vampires.”

His lips curled back in a smile, and then he stood, leaning over me. His cheek grazed mine, the stubble rough against my smooth skin. The scent of sweet berries left me feeling heady. I held my breath as he ran his fingers down my arms in the most sensual manner. As I tipped forward to allow him access to my hands, my head pressed against one of his broad shoulders. Again came the quick pitter patter of his heart, as though he were doing something thrilling, arousing.

At last, he pulled back with the rope in his hands. I rolled my aching shoulders and rubbed my wrists.

“Thank you,” I whispered, not daring to look at him until he'd resettled on the rock across from me.

“Tell me, oh lady of the moon, do you have a name?”

I weighed giving him the information, and then gave in. Conversation was better than being eaten. “Lucia, and you?”

He wagged his finger. “I’m not sure you’ve gained the honor of my name.”

“But I’ve given you mine,” I protested.

“True, but I haven’t decided whether you’re trustworthy.”

“I made a choice to trust you with my name, the least you can do—”

“You also made yourself a willing sacrifice for me,” he interrupted with a smug grin. “I think I control the information here.”

I glowered at him, the remark stinging. “I only did it to protect Veilix.”

“So you came willingly? You weren’t forced?”

“No, I took vows to serve and protect those around me with what skills I’ve been given.”

“A vow,” the man teased. “Oh, how special you must be, a member of the Order?”

“No, I’m a priestess.”

“Ah, you’ve taken a vow to abstain from worldly pleasures. Shame, I could show you many things you’re missing.”

Aware that I was alone in varying shades of gray and gloom with him, I drew a sharp breath, searching to change the dangerous trajectory of the conversation. “I’d like to extract a vow from you instead. You will leave Veilix alone and go elsewhere to hunt for blood.”

“You’re asking me to leave and terrorize another village? Doesn’t that strictly go against your vows?”

It did, but the vampire king was sitting right in front of me. I had to make a deal with him so my sacrifice would not be in vain.

“I will make a bargain with you if you leave Veilix and all villages in peace. No more nights of terror.”

“A bargain, you say. It assumes you have something I want.”

“Name it. I work closely with the priestesses and the Knights of Veilix, the hunters. If I explain your request and your promise, we can come to a solution.”

A barking laugh exploded out of his mouth. When he looked at me, his azure eyes were dark blue like the night, and his mouth set in a grim line. “If only, my dear Lucia, it were that easy.”

My heart thrilled at the sound of my name on his lips. But I ignored the sensation.

“It can be that easy,” I protested, my words trailing off as he fixed me with those transcendent eyes.

Standing, he held out his hand. I reluctantly placed mine in his, an unspoken question hovering on my lips. He tugged me to my feet but did not let go, reminding me how fully I was in his power. I had no recourse but to bend to his will.

“Tonight of all nights, I expected to be tricked and trapped and lied to. But I did not expect an honest priestess whose runes shine like the moon and make me want to be a better person. You’re young, innocent, and sheltered from the world behind the walls of your abbey. It makes me want you all the more.”

My heart quailed, but my stomach fluttered as he drew me into the circle of his arms.

“We can make a deal,” I said because it was the only thing I could think to say that might save me from the terrible fate he had in store for me.

His fingertips danced up my spine, stroked my neck, traced my runes, and my body betrayed me because it felt exquisite. It wasn’t supposed to feel good, the touch of my sworn enemy, the depths of his eyes like a bottomless pool. I felt a tug on my soul as though I were being pulled in, falling into a place I wasn’t meant to go.

Backing me against the wall, he lowered his head, inch by inch, until his lips hovered over mine. “I don’t ask for forgiveness. Hate me if you must, but give me this one kiss, and then I will take you home.”

Home. The word broke through me like a beacon of hope. I opened my mouth to respond, just as he crushed his lips against mine. He was warm and rough and yet tasted like sweet wine, heady and intoxicating. I succumbed as his teeth raked against my lower lip, nipping, but not hard enough to draw blood.

Despite everything he was doing, the worst realization came as I found myself feverishly kissing him back. This nameless man, this vampire king, somehow he’d broken through my defenses and seduced me. My hands, which had initially come up to push him away, were holding onto him, keeping him tethered to me.

I felt his shuddering breath when he wrenched himself free from me.

Without speaking a word, he took my hand and led me into darkness.

I trotted along, sometimes beside him, sometimes behind him, but he never let go of my hand. The roar of the waterfall ebbed and flowed, but all I could think about was his mouth and how disgraceful it was to kiss him. Not simply because of my vows but because he was the source of pain and frustration and death in Veilix.

At last we emerged from the caverns onto a familiar strip of land. The man guided me with ease to the walls of the abbey. “Here is where I leave you, my moon goddess,” he whispered, finally letting go of my hand. “If I find you in that glade again, you leave me with no recourse but to punish you.”

I shivered. “Will you leave the village in peace then?”

“I make no promises.”

I took a step toward the abbey, then glanced back, searching for a last visage of him. But he’d faded into the

darkness as though he was nothing more than a figment of my imagination.

TITUS



Pipe smoke drifted to my nose as I snuck into the ancient ruins of Aycuz.

The mountainous range had once belonged to a race of giants the people mistakenly called gods. They were long dead and gone, but zealous humans had taken over the lush mountain range. They built abbeys and garrisons, cultivated the land, and produced the tastiest vegetables and the richest wines.

Their wealth and success enticed many to make their homes there, but the mortals had forgotten what overcame the giants and drove them to their deaths. They forgot what lurked in the mountains, hidden under shadow and stone. The undying.

I licked my lips, still tasting the priestess Lucia. She was forbidden, off limits, and I'd kissed her anyway before taking her back to the abbey. She'd be safer there and, with luck, she wouldn't venture out of the walls at night again.

"That you Titus?" a lazy voice rang out.

I rounded the corner, taking in the flickering torches and smoke-filled cavern. Waving my arms, I walked through the haze. "Sylvester, are you painting again?"

"What else would I be doing, little brother?" Sylvester said impatiently.

I stepped out from his barrier of torches and took in the immense wall. He was perched on a ledge, a bucket of paint

beside him, along with a series of brushes, a bottle of wine, two glasses, matches, and tobacco.

“You’re drunk painting again,” I accused him.

Sylvester took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed it at me. “Tsk. So judgmental, as if you were doing anything more productive. Let me guess, you were out there, playing your lute, trying to charm the stars? No, wait, I saw you with a woman.”

Sylvester’s voice went hard at the end. He picked up a wine bottle and hurled it against the wall.

Shards rained down, and red wine stained the wall like blood. I stepped back. *He saw me? Damn.* I hadn’t been fast enough, and I’d underestimated his snooping.

“What have I told you, Titus, about showing your face to mortals? Are you a fool? We’re in hiding for a reason. We are lords of the night, damned, cursed, and no one can save us, no matter how hard you try. You endanger the family when you toy with mortals. Currently, the knights in the garrison don’t know we exist, and when they find out, they’ll hunt us down.”

“Sylvester, they are already hunting us. I went out tonight because the knights laid a trap. Would you know anything about that?”

Sylvester scoffed. “Tell me you walked away. It’s only a trap if you take action.”

I crossed my arms, voice cold. “I took action. They left a woman, a priestess, tied up in the wood. The vampires—”

Sylvester cut me off with a bitter laugh. “Oh, so you saved her out of some self-righteous quest to protect her from the damned vampires when we are no better than them? Especially not *you*. Does it matter *when* you drink her blood? Now, later, or when you’ve convinced her to fall in love with you? It always ends the same, Titus. You woo them, they succumb, and then you feast.”

I stepped back, anger rising, but it would do no good to argue with Sylvester. He’d seen me at my worst, and he was right. How would this time be any different from the past?

Except I had felt a shift. A contented satisfaction hummed in my bones, and I hadn't tasted her blood. Why?

I wasn't sure, but an inkling told me it was because of her two-toned skin, shadow and light blending together, shining. When I'd kissed her, I hadn't felt that urge to sink my teeth into her skin and devour her. I was curious, but Sylvester was correct. How many times had I had good intentions only to lose self-control?

"What would you have me do, Sylvester, hide here with you? Paint and drink while the vampires ravish our food source? If they destroy this village, the lavish lifestyle you're accustomed to will disappear. The trade routes will close, the gardens will run wild, and you won't be able to filch paint and other supplies from the abbey."

"You're being melodramatic. I have a plan. Don't forget I always take care of you, little brother. Despite your sins." Leaning forward, he squinted at me. "Did you bring more candlesticks, as I requested?"

"Find your own candlesticks!" I snapped and left the room, the sound of Sylvester's harsh laugh following me.

LUCIA



I spent a fitful night tossing and turning, my mind racing with possibilities and questions. Where had the mysterious man—I couldn't bring myself to call him a vampire—gone after he disappeared? What had happened to Captain Elroy and the knights? Were they searching for me?

Finally, I fell into a deep sleep, only for the bell to ring, announcing the dawn. In the blush glow of morning, last night seemed naught but a dream. But as I washed my face, a quick glance in the mirror made me pause for a closer inspection. I leaned over the glass, touching my fingers to my lips, bruised and unnaturally pink from the man's urgent kisses. Would anyone notice?

I made my way under the arched ceiling of the abbey, my silver runes winking in the low light. Today I could feel them as though they were alive, a separate part of my skin. They weren't painful, simply uncomfortable, like a phantom limb.

The abbey was quiet as it always was pre-dawn. Each day was the same. We rose at dawn, came together for morning meditation, breakfast, and finally to the day's work. Most of the priestesses would be making their way to the kitchens where we dined, but my footsteps took me in a different direction.

I passed bright murals on the walls and took the steps from the hall of sleeping rooms down to the main floor. Within a few hours, it would be full of children who made the journey from the village and up the hill to the abbey for school. The

garrison, connected to the abbey by a simple walkway, guarded by blooming flowers, was the safest place in the village.

Many might find it a conflict of interest for the abbey and garrison to exist together, and occasionally, I found some of the younger priestesses leaning out the window, watching while half-dressed men practiced with swords. It was then I closed the curtains and reminded them of their vows, even though I'd wavered more than once, drawn by the sight of corded muscles and sweaty skin glistening in the sunlight.

A moment of weakness overtook me as I reached the walkway, and I leaned against the wall, reminded of the way that man had kissed me as though he'd very much like to devour me. Oh heavens, how I'd given in—and so quickly. I needed to confess my grievances, but part of me was tempted to keep it a secret.

Vows were taken seriously in the abbey and those who broke them were forced to leave. The idea of being alone, friendless and destitute, forced to leave the only home I knew, gave me pause.

A step came, and a shadow fell over me. No more than a few feet away stood Captain Elroy. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Lucia, thank the gods."

He did not come any closer, and I scanned the area, painfully aware of how exposed we were and hoping it was too early for anyone to overhear.

"I'll call my men back," Captain Elroy continued. "We were fools and underestimated this enemy. I'm sorry."

I swallowed hard, knowing it took a lot for him to come to the point of apologizing. To me, Captain Elroy was like a father figure. He'd been a youth when I was growing up in the abbey and had often entertained me with stories, brought me flowers to put in my hair, and, as he still did, taught many of the children self-defense. Now he was in charge of the garrison, responsible for training knights, ensuring the trade routes were secure, and most importantly, protecting the

village. Last night had been a failure, but I was quick to give my forgiveness.

“Nothing bad happened,” I said. “If you need me again, I will be ready.”

He shook his head, already turning away. “I was wrong to ask of you. It won’t happen again.”

Alone again, I leaned against the wall, staring up at the frolicking cherubs painted on the ceiling. They were carefree and naked with rosy cheeks, dancing in a garden of red blossoms and pink petals. I pinched myself. Why had I allowed myself to be bullied into being a decoy? Why had I volunteered yet again?

It clearly hadn’t worked, but some part of me wanted to see him again. The nameless man who’d kissed me as if he meant it.

I gave myself a shake. I had to forget him. He was a scoundrel, the vampire king, after all, and it was likely he greeted all his meals with such passion.

The idea of him kissing another vexed me. Crossing my arms, I headed toward the kitchens.

The pattering of feet came from behind me, and then a sing-song voice belted out, “Lucia!”

I spun around, and a grin split my face. “Edith, you’re back.”

Edith had a moon-round face, hazel eyes, and thick brown hair she always wore in a braid. A spray of freckles still covered her light brown skin. While I’d lived at the abbey my entire life, Edith had arrived when she was five, grumpy and furious at being left an orphan. Eventually, her anger at her fate faded, and we became fast friends, growing up together as mischievous children before taking the vow to become priestesses.

While I enjoyed cultivating the gardens, Edith was a midwife and had spent the past week in the village, assisting with a birth and staying with the family a few days afterward to help while the new mother regained her strength.

We embraced, and I squeezed her tight, as though a week had been a month.

“Where were you last night?” Edith looped her arm in mine and guided us toward the kitchen. “I stopped by your room after I got back, but you must have been out.”

“Oh.” I gave a nervous laugh, fumbling for some kind of half-truth. “I went for a walk.”

“In the gardens, I hope.” Edith shook her head. “I know there have been no attacks on the village in the past week, but it’s too bold to hope the vampires are gone. They’ll strike when we least expect it.”

“I hope not,” I murmured, wishing we weren’t having this particular conversation. “We could do with some peace. Do you ever wonder if maybe, maybe...if we met their leader, he might be reasonable and make a deal with us?”

Edith went quiet, which was one thing I liked about her. She was slow to speak, often thinking over words before interjecting with her wisdom. It was quite a contrast from some of the younger priestesses who said whatever came to mind first.

“It would be ideal if we could come to some kind of agreement,” she said at last. “But I don’t see how. Vampires want blood, *our* blood, and I can’t think of anything else they’d want more.”

“But bargains are all about compromise,” I suggested.

Edith frowned. “Yes, but making a vampire compromise by giving up human blood would be like telling the soldiers that instead of meat, we’d only feed them vegetables for the rest of their lives.”

I nudged her. “Vegetables are good for you.”

Edith grinned. “A man who fights for a living will always want meat.”

“Fine.” I sighed. She had a point. “Tell me about the village and the family. How was the birth?”

“I’m always grateful when it’s over and the baby is healthy and strong. That little girl had a pair of lungs on her. She hollered so loud we thought she’d wake the dead.” Edith giggled before sobering. “To be honest, I held my breath the entire time. I know vampires can’t cross a threshold without being invited, but the village homes aren’t as strong as the abbey. Sometimes, when the wind blows, I have nightmares about the house falling over or the roof caving in, and then a vampire will be right there, waiting to feast. I know we’re not supposed to live in fear, but...I just wish there was something more I could do to stop them.”

I squeezed her arm. “Me too, Edith, me too.”

We were the last two to enter the kitchens, and all the priestesses were seated with bowls of steaming oatmeal and fresh fruit in front of them. The Head Priestess, Merci, nodded to us as we took our seats and folded our hands.

“Sisters,” she began, her voice strong and steady. “Before we begin our morning meditation, I have grave news.”

Pressing my lips, I stared at my oatmeal, wondering if the news related to me.

“There’s been another robbery.”

My head jerked up, questions already forming on my lips. Low murmurs swept through the hall, but Merci held up her hand for silence.

“I have asked the knights to investigate,” she continued. “We’ve posted guards and installed new locks, to no avail. Somehow, the thief keeps sneaking in, and several items from the cellar are gone. Our stocks of food, wine, candles, and even some scrolls from the library are missing. It’s difficult to believe that someone would steal from us, but there we have it. I would ask that each of you be vigilant. If you heard or saw anything out of the ordinary last night, please report it to me. If we all work together, we can stop this from happening again.”

Voices rang out. “Who would steal from us?”

“Who has access?”

“What if it was one of the knights?”

Edith squeezed my hand under the table, eyebrows raised, which meant she had an idea and wanted us to investigate this ourselves. It wasn't our place to catch thieves. We had other duties, but like her, I found myself curious.

“Ladies, it is not our place to give in to wild speculations and fear. While it is disconcerting to know that someone snuck in and stole from this place of safety, I know we will find whoever is responsible, and they will be dealt with. Now, let us clear our minds and focus on the day at hand. Everything will fall into place, as it should.”

Edith and I exchanged glances before folding our hands and closing our eyes. Doubt poked at my mind, doubt that didn't belong in the mind of a priestess. Last night, I'd been with a man, the vampire king himself. Vampires could not cross a threshold without being invited, and I hadn't invited him inside.

LUCIA



As the days passed, I tried to forget about the mysterious man who'd kidnapped and kissed me. The work required of me in the abbey kept me busy from sunup to sundown. Travelers came for prayers, to seek rest, or to bathe in the healing pools that surrounded Veilix.

Each day when I worked in the garden, I tried to keep my focus on the Creator who blessed us with gifts of nature. My life's work was to deny worldly pleasures and focus on sacrifice, the giving of myself, and my time to serve others.

Midweek, the young women in the village came to my garden to learn how to use herbs for healing. It was a class that Edith and I taught together. I focused on how to forage for herbs, plant and tend them, and tell each one apart, while Edith focused on the healing properties and how to ground, mix, and dry them, then activate them.

Seeing those young women, some single, others married, and some beginning their own families, made me feel fiercely protective of them. They were my family, the village was my home, and it was my duty as a priestess to do whatever was in my power to protect Veilix and those who dwelled there.

The gate burst open, and Sabine ran in, hair tumbling out of her braid. "There's been an attack!"

A slow sludge of fear weighed me down, and my gaze flickered to Edith. She shook her head slightly, but it was already too late. One of the women screamed, and they gathered around us like a flock of panicked hens.

“Who was it?”

“What happened?”

“When did you find out?”

“Are they coming for us?”

Sabine bent over, catching her breath before joining us, her green eyes wide. “It wasn’t one of us but a traveler. Word is he was on his way here when the vampires caught him early this morning. The knights found him on the roadside, bite marks on his neck, drained of blood. It was the vampires.”

More shrieks and hysterics followed, and Edith spun on Sabine. “That’s enough,” she said sternly. “Ladies, this has happened before, and we know what to do. When twilight comes, go inside, lock your doors, and stay inside until day breaks. If you are too concerned to go home, there is always a place for you here. We cannot thrive on fear. Keep the faith. The knights are investigating, and the Creator will provide a way.”

For the rest of the day, Edith’s words danced through my mind. She was right. We should not feel powerless, locked up in the formidable walls of the abbey while terrors ruled the night. If we had the opportunity, we should act, and I’d been provided a way to act. The knowledge burned within because I, of all people, had the power to take action.

After everyone retired for the night, I dressed cautiously, a giddiness rising within as I pulled on my boots and selected a warm cloak. Finally, I took up my knife, recalling what I’d learned about self-defense from Caption Elroy and his men. Vampires were fast, but I’d faced the vampire king before. Perhaps tonight, he’d be reasonable and less inclined to kiss me.

I tiptoed down the silent halls, boots in hand, the stone cold beneath my feet. All the sisters were behind closed doors, reading, meditating, or sleeping. Still, it wasn’t until I slipped into the garden that I breathed a sigh of relief and tugged on my boots. Unlocking the gate, I let myself out into the night.

The air was still as I walked downhill, headed toward the wood where the knights had taken me to trap the vampire king. Blackness crept in around me, and even though I'd brought a lantern, I hesitated to light it and draw attention to myself.

Once I slipped beneath the leafy boughs, the gravity of my situation overwhelmed me. Freezing behind a tree, I attempted to gather the courage I'd had while in the abbey. What if I couldn't find the vampire king but one of his minions instead? I'd be the next body that was found drained of blood.

Spinning around, I had every intention of fleeing back to the safe walls of the abbey.

Until I heard the music.

A somber tune pierced the night like a lonesome call, a song of the heart. A tug came from within, and my pulse quickened. Silver beams of moonlight filtered through the trees, encouraging me to take action. Moving with confidence, I made my way toward the pool in the glade where everything had happened.

As the trees thinned, I paused and set down my lantern, reminding myself to be calm and level-headed. I came with a purpose, and it might not be him.

But it was.

There, by the pool of midnight blue water, he lounged on a boulder, playing his lute, the low notes blending with the thunder of the waterfall yet somehow echoing back. My lips tingled, and my body ached at the reminder of what he'd done to me, but I hadn't come for pleasure. This was strictly business.

I marched into the clearing, aware I knew nothing about him. Not even a name.

When he saw me, he sat up straighter and angled his body toward me. Light shone on his face, displaying his curiosity as he leaned his lute against the rock and approached me.

"My lady of the moon, I did not expect to see you again. Why are you here?"

“I had to come,” I said, trying not to be disarmed by the way he stole close to me, as though I were a wild beast that would spook and run if he moved too quickly.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he said, circling me. “Alone in the night, without your guards. Don’t you know it’s unsafe for a woman like you—”

“I weighed the costs, and I understand the risks,” I spoke quickly, cutting him off. He’d better let me speak before I lost my nerve. “I’m here because of what happened this morning. A man was found on the road leading south with his throat torn out. You or your minions are at work again, and it has to stop. I came to ask you once and for all.”

His lip curled, and he paused in front of me. Dark pools of sapphire glittered as his gaze raked over me. His bold stare left me flustered. This was an idiotic idea.

“Why do you believe I have the power to stop the rising madness?”

“You’re the vampire king, aren’t you? You should control your dominion.”

His nose twitched, and he glanced away, rubbing his jaw as if deep in thought. “How perceptive of you,” he said, finally. “What if I told you I’ll control my domain, but only if you make a deal with me?”

A bloom of warmth spread across my chest. *Hope*. “I’m listening.”

He took another step closer, rough fingers sliding under my chin to lift my face to his. I willed every inch of my body into obedient stillness. I would not let him know what his touch, his closeness, did to me. He didn’t need to know how he made me feel weak and long for things that went against my vows.

“I will promise to use more control if you will come to me one night a week.”

A lump swelled in my throat, and I blinked twice, trying to maintain my sanity. I should have known this would be a

requirement, and my heart should not have leaped in anticipation.

But it did.

If this is what I must do to protect Veilix, then so be it. However, it was a risk. If I was discovered, my actions might be viewed as unforgivable and I shuddered to imagine my fate.

The High Priestess encouraged the priestesses to live a life of sacrifice and to think of others first in the name of selfless love. She believed that if we set the example for the villagers, others would follow in our footsteps. She was convinced that as long as we stood firm in our convictions, ignoring those who scorned us but showing love and mercy to all, we would display a great strength that others would come to respect.

At the moment, I couldn't help but think of her words, and I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that what I was doing was not her intention. But did I have a choice?

I was choosing between death and life, and he only claimed one night, which meant that instead of becoming his victim, I would continue to carry out my daily duties. No one would be the wiser as long as I kept my secret.

But he was dangerous, and my lips burned at the memory of his kiss. What would time spent with him do to my soul?

"We have a deal," I heard myself saying, voice strong, without wavering.

He released me suddenly and stepped back, confusion making his features tighten. "Just like that, we have a deal? You care so much about the welfare of others that you would put yourself in danger?"

"I would," I replied, speaking with a confidence I did not quite feel.

"Why?"

"Because it is what is right. Everyone deserves a chance to live without their lives being cut off by monsters."

"Everyone that is, except for you? Because you've chosen to be the sacrifice, to stand in the gap and protect these people

with your life.”

I fought to keep my panic from rising. “Does that mean you intend to kill me?”

“No, my moon goddess, I intend to keep you safe, which is why I must do this.”

His lips closed around the column of my neck, and his teeth sank into my skin. I thrust my hands against his chest to shove him away, but he responded by wrapping his arms around me, holding me tightly to him. He was strong, much stronger than I expected, and in his embrace, I couldn't move.

A low moan left my lips as I gasped for air, and he sucked hard. Had he bitten me hard enough to make me bleed, and now he was drinking my blood? I could think of no other logic as to why he was holding me so tightly and sucking my neck.

My heart skipped. He was feeding on me.

Perhaps that was why he'd asked my permission to make a deal so that he could move forward without regret. He was a vampire, which made him a liar and a scoundrel. I should not have trusted his word, nor should I have made a deal with him because of a kiss. A passionate kiss I should not have found pleasure in.

Just as suddenly, his lips released my neck.

I pushed hard, forcibly removing myself from him. My hand went to my neck as I stepped back, panting. “What was that for?”

He also stepped back, giving me space. “I gave you my mark for protection since you are keen to walking alone at night. Now, none of the creatures of the night will bother you without dire consequences.”

I pointed a finger at him, angry with myself for being stupid. What possible good could come from this? Edith was right. Telling a vampire not to drink blood was like telling a man to live without meat. It could only last for so long. Eventually, a bloody day would come.

“I need more than just your word. How do I know you’ll keep your promise?”

There it came, the glitter in his dark eyes, the curve of his mouth as he licked his lips. “You don’t get to know. You just have to trust me.”

“That’s not good enough,” I protested.

“It will have to be.”

Something like menace flashed across his face. Despite the warning in my soul, I spun on my heel and ran. I’d made a mistake. The word of a vampire was not to be trusted. I should confess to Captain Elroy and work with the knights to spring another trap, capture this monster, and end his reign of terror once and for all.

Instead, I’d snuck out in the night, besotted by some dream. Wasn’t that what vampires did? They were tricksters, playing on the idea of intimate pleasures and bewitching their targets.

Silence came from behind me, only hastening my speed. There was no guarantee that he wasn’t right behind me. My hand went to my knife, recalling my training in self-defense. I hadn’t practiced in a while, but now I needed to fight for my life or reach the walls of the abbey before the vampire king caught me. What if all this was for naught? Not only had I sacrificed myself, but I’d sacrificed the villagers.

A weight hit me, and I went sprawling. My chest hit the ground, knocking the breath out of me. My lungs burned as I gasped for air, and then he flipped me over. Hands encircled my wrists, pinning them above my head as he used his body to hold me down. It was darker in the trees, but I could see his face clearly, lit up with silver light. There was no darkness, no anger in that gaze, only a calm amusement, reminding me of the cats in the cellar who caught the rats and played with them, ripping, biting instead of killing and eating.

My chest heaved as I sucked in deep breaths, wondering if I was only a game for him, entertainment until he grew bored.

He leaned over me, eye to eye, nose to nose, and whispered, “Perhaps I got this all wrong. How can I know if I can trust *you*? After all, you were the one who set a trap for me. How do I know this isn’t just another trap?”

I gritted my teeth, well aware of my disadvantage. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

“You have spunk, Lucia, which only quickens my blood, but it’s difficult to trust a woman with a knife in her hand.”

“It’s difficult to trust a vampire who just sucked my blood,” I retorted.

“I simply gave you a mark of protection. It’s just that the taste of you is delectable. I could not resist the taste of your skin or the shimmer of your silver runes. They are like moonlight.”

He traced a finger down my neck, over my collarbone, to the fabric of my dress. I stiffened, throat dry as his finger continued lower, tracing circles around the swell of one breast and then over my nipple, making it pucker and ache.

“I wonder,” he said, voice low and seductive. “Is your entire body covered in silver runes?”

Heat from his touch surged across my skin, and my lower belly went fluttery. I shifted beneath him. I needed to distract him before this went much further. “Who are you?” I demanded, struggling to make my voice sound controlled and confident again. “I’ve given you my name and a promise. You’ve given me nothing but twisted words, a mark, and shades of vagueness. Who are you?”

He paused and withdrew his searching finger. “My name is Titus, and I am cursed. Cursed to live in solitude and darkness while you, my moon goddess, are everything I am not. Light and goodness and purity, perhaps you can lend me a bit of your goodness and lessen the sting of my curse.”

“Titus,” I repeated. “Will you get off me?”

That bemused smirk came again, and he shifted, taking his weight off me. “If I let go of your hands, will you stab me?”

A retort rose and died in my throat because he'd spoken of his curse with a voice tinged with pain, and it made me want to help him. "No," I admitted. "I won't stab you."

Immediately he let go and stood, holding out a hand. I paused before I took it, and as his warm fingers closed around mine, I looked up at his face. "Are you the vampire king?"

His hand tightened around mine, and he pulled me closer. "Does it matter?"

A response did not come readily as I searched his face for answers.

With a shrug, he released me. "I was going to endeavor to be a gentleman tonight, Lucia, but you've awakened desires deep inside me. I will bid you goodnight before I do anything we'll both regret."

A fluttering sensation came again, and I leaned forward, my eyes dragged inexplicably to his lips.

His thumb brushed my chin, sending a shiver down my spine. "When you look at me with your soul in your eyes, it makes it difficult to resist."

"Yes," I said. "You should resist. I am a priestess, called to a higher purpose, and you should not tempt me with your lust and desire for physical pleasure."

"Was I the first to kiss you?"

"I don't have to answer that—"

"So I was, and it makes me want you all the more."

"You shouldn't have kissed me," I whispered.

"But you enjoyed it, didn't you? And you want more."

I dropped my head, words falling to the forest floor. "It's wrong."

"That's what the darkness is for, and who says it is wrong to indulge in pleasure?"

I crossed my arms, putting distance between us. "Easy for you to say when you're the epitome of what is wrong. I've

chosen to live a different kind of life, one that is not built on satisfying fleeting pleasures nor indulging in activities that lead to darkness.”

“Oh, wise one, teach me your ways.”

“Dare you mock me?”

“See, this is why I look forward to our nights together. But go away now. I am ravenous, but I’m determined not to ravish you tonight.”

“Nor any other night,” I tossed over my shoulder as I walked away.

I waited for the breath to be knocked out of me, to find myself sprawled on the ground again, but this time there was nothing, just silence.

Only when I reached the gate to the garden did I dare to turn around, but I was alone, as though he’d never been there at all.

LUCIA



The emerald green feathers of hummingbirds glittered in the sunshine as they flittered to the crimson blossoms in the flower garden. I walked the stone path, a basket in my arms, letting my bare skin drink in the heat of the summer sun.

Last night had almost been a dream, except for the spot on my neck where Titus had sucked my skin. While the skin wasn't broken, it had swelled up, and I'd wrapped a scarf around my neck to hide it.

Kneeling near a patch of vines, I picked ripe squash to take back to the kitchen. This morning, Faith, who managed the kitchen, had given me a list of herbs and vegetables she wanted from the garden.

Usually, she came with me, but today, she was baking and had no time to assist with the gathering. It was peaceful, though, alone with my thoughts, and occasionally, I stole a glance up the hillside, where the vineyard stretched toward the summit, pale grapes already glistening on the vines.

"Lucia."

I lifted my head, relieved to see Edith twirling down the garden path. She wore a loose linen dress, her hair in two braids, a hat on her head, and a basket tucked under her arms.

"Edith!" I dusted dirt off my hands. "Did you come to help?"

Edith pursed her lips together, then knelt on the ground beside me. Placing a hand on her head, she scanned the garden

and then lowered her voice. “There’s been news.”

I squeezed the handle of my basket and searched her face. Had Titus already broken his word? “More bad news? What happened? Tell me, Edith.”

“A runner arrived this morning. He went straight to Captain Elroy with a request for help.”

My heart squeezed. Runners traveled between villages, often on horseback, although originally, they used to run from one village to the next. Veilix was one of three villages set in the mountains, each with an abbey—some with priests, others with priestesses—and garrison. The closest one was a three-day ride away, while the furthest one was seven days on horseback.

The garrison used to travel from village to village, and we traded with each other. Veilix produced wine, and each year, we sent barrels down the hill to the mainland, where they were purchased and traded to larger villages and even cities. Ever since the vampires had started haunting the town, visits had dwindled for fear of being devoured once nightfall came. Even the knights took precautions.

I took Edith’s hand and squeezed it. “What news did the runner bring?”

“High Peak Abbey has succeeded in its defense against the vampires, but only at a significant cost to the village and the garrison. The runner came asking if any could be spared to assist them with rebuilding. I expect Captain Elroy will send a small group to assist, likely no more than ten or fifteen.”

“That is good news,” I breathed. “I wonder how they were successful against the horde of vampires.”

“I’m sure the runner shared in detail, and if the High Priestess deems it worthy news for our ears, she will allow it to be shared with us. I thought you’d want to know.”

“I do.” I nodded, wondering if my deal with Titus had been for naught. After all, if others could successfully rid their village of vampires, why couldn’t we? My eyes narrowed, and I glanced at Edith. “You don’t seem happy though.”

She shrugged, but lines of worry danced around her mouth. “I’m concerned. Especially because of what happened the other morning, now is not the time to send our knights away, especially when the vampires are closing in around us. Who knows what the defeat did to them? Perhaps they decided to resettle here, where we haven’t been able to put together a great defense. I know the knights patrol at night, but Captain Elroy talks of the vampire king in our midst, who is making it difficult for us to claim a similar victory over those dark creatures.”

I squeezed her hand. “We must not give up hope. We will find a way.”

“I’m not worried about finding a way. I know we will. I just hope we all survive this scourge. It’s testing my faith.”

“You know what the High Priestess says about faith.”

“That it is a test of our strength and courage, a test of our commitment to our vows. But I’m not worried about my commitment, my concern lies with the people of the village and their safety, their lives. I think of that brand-new baby I helped deliver. What kind of life will she have? What kind of life do we have now, afraid of twilight, fearful of the setting sun because with it comes the monsters who want to drink our blood and drive us from our homes? I don’t want to kneel here in the sunshine, pretending everything is okay. I want to act!”

My own idiotic plan rose to the forefront of my mind. Parting my lips, I took a deep breath, ready to spill my burning secret.

“What’s that look, Lucia? What are you up to?”

“I...I know what you mean. I want to act instead of sitting here, too, but we are doing well. We are providing for the children, giving them a safe place to stay. Besides, I’m sure Captain Elroy has a plan to catch the vampire king and put an end to all this.”

Edith plucked a ripe tomato off the vine, her eyes misting over for a moment. “I hope so. He hasn’t shared any of his plans with me.”

My brow creased. “But why would he?”

Edith cleared her throat and ducked her head. “No reason.” Turning, she busied herself picking vegetables before glancing over at me, a shy smile on her face. “Why are you wearing a scarf around your neck? It’s summer.”

Now it was my turn to move away. “You know how I feel about my runes.”

“Lu, we’ve talked about this. Don’t hide. Just because you have silver on your skin doesn’t make you any less of a person.”

“It’s hard being different, sometimes, and I know no one judges me for what my skin looks like. I just...sometimes I feel self-conscious even though there’s no need. They have started itching lately, though.”

“Talk to Faith. I’m sure she has some oils you can rub on them.”

“I will,” I promised.

Edith and I fell into easy conversation as we worked together, but one thought returned to my mind. My runes had never itched before, at least not until I’d met Titus.

LUCIA



A week passed without incident, and each morning, I woke with bated breath, waiting for word of another thief or a vampire attack. But it appeared that Titus had kept his word, which meant I had to keep mine.

When the sun set and the hour struck ten, the abbey fell silent. Most of the priestesses were in their rooms or walking the halls of the abbey. It would be safest to wait until midnight, but my eyes were already heavy from the day's work, and I feared I'd fall asleep if I waited a moment longer. It wasn't unusual to walk the halls of the abbey after nightfall, but I still felt guilty as I slipped out of my room and downstairs.

The candelabras were lit, friendly, warm candlelight flickering, casting shadows on the wall, which encouraged me onward. With a shaky breath, I moved toward the garden when an idea struck me. Tonight, the vampire king expected me, so I'd take him a gift as a token of appreciation for keeping his word. It would also serve as a signal to him that I meant what I said and intended to keep my word.

In the kitchen, I filled a basket with bread and a wedge of cheese and then took a fine bottle of wine from the cellar. Veilix Abbey was known for its fine wines, and even if he didn't appreciate the bread and cheese, surely his pallet would enjoy the dark and bold wine. Or at least persuade him not to view me as a meal.

As I crept down the hall toward the garden, low voices arrested my attention. Flattening myself against the wall, I tiptoed toward the source, surprised to hear the deep tones of a man. It was strictly forbidden for the knights to visit the abbey after nightfall unless there was an incident. Surely the High Priestess would alert us if something was wrong.

The candlelight wasn't bright enough to reveal who spoke in the shadows, but I made out the familiar shape of a knight and one of the priestesses, although I didn't think it was the High Priestess. She would never stand so near a man with her face tilted up as if inviting him to kiss her. I stepped back, mind racing. Was it possible that one of my sisters was breaking her vows and indulging in the affections of a man?

Surely no. We were dedicated to our vows? Weren't we?

But I wasn't so sure as I slipped out the gate and walked down the hill toward the forest, aware that what I was doing went against everything I believed in. I was conflicted because my actions saved lives, yet I had damned myself. Dare I look forward to what he'd do to me next? The way he made my body hum with life and ache for pleasure. I'd almost told Edith the truth, but how stupid would that have been? She wouldn't understand that I'd chosen to put myself in grave danger.

I wondered about the other vampires as I walked under the trees. The leaves rustled in the breeze, and the hoot of an owl came along with a squeal of terror, likely from a mouse being eaten. The knife I'd tucked into the sleeve of my dress only gave me momentary security. If the vampires wanted me, they would have me. Titus had shown me just how quick and fast he could be when he wanted something.

At last, the trees opened up to the glade, and hues of blue lit up the waterfall. The sky was quilted with stars, and the full moon perched in the middle like a queen in her court. Forcing one foot in front of the other, I continued my trajectory toward the pool, where Titus stood with his back to me, staring up at the waterfall, his lute on his back.

"Lucia." He ran his fingers through his hair and then faced me.

Oh, but in the light he was handsome, with disheveled hair, those deep-set eyes, and the way he stood, tall and powerful, his shirt open, displaying an expanse of chest. His sleeves were rolled up, and a scroll extended from one of his pockets.

I held out the basket. “You kept your word, and so I brought you a gift.”

His blue eyes flashed in surprise, and he took the basket with both hands. “Is it a beast that is going to leap out and devour me?”

I bit my tongue, but the words tumbled out anyway. “The cats in the cellar are impossible to catch, so no, no beasts in the basket.”

A laugh burst from his lips. “Did you just make a joke?”

Had I? Was I bold enough to tease the vampire king?

He opened up the basket, and when he spoke next, his voice was softer, as if he’d read my thoughts and knew I was conflicted. “I did not expect this from you. Thank you. What changed your mind?”

“You kept your word.”

“Then you trust me?”

“Not trust, but it’s a start.”

Titus pressed a hand to his heart. “Ah, my lady of the moon, you don’t know how that makes me feel. A start is all I ask for. Tonight, I want to take you somewhere.”

“Back to your cave?” I asked, a slight worry twisting within.

“No, to a mountain where we will be close to the lights of night. Where we can feast on this banquet you’ve brought for us.”

Shifting the basket, he held out his hand to me. I took it without hesitation, enjoying the feel of him. He was warm, alive, and he had a pulse. It was wishful thinking, but I desperately did not want him to be a vampire.

As he led me away from the pool, I let my thoughts run wild. What if he wasn't a vampire and I wasn't a priestess, and we were two souls who happened to meet each other, brought together by fate? What then?

Titus led me into a cavern, then down dark passageways until, eventually, he led me out and onto a path that sloped upward to a flat dome. My eyes went wide as we came to a stop, and he let go of my hand to slide an arm around my waist. I felt his eyes on me as I stared out at the lights of the abbey and the garrison in the distance and the cluster of the village from afar.

"It's beautiful," I breathed.

"I agree," he whispered, his mouth so close to my ear that I almost felt the kiss of his lips. "Have you always had these silver runes?"

I stilled, not trusting myself to look at him. Keeping my gaze focused on the starry night, I replied, "Always."

He traced a finger along my throat to my shoulder. "You shine, just like the moon and the stars. You're a goddess of the night, aren't you? Meant to bring your light to those in darkness."

His words had a romantic tilt, but I was no goddess. "I'm just a priestess, as I've told you. Yet you've asked me many questions about myself and shared none about you."

"Because my past is not worth sharing."

"What is it you want to do then, each night I come out to meet you? If not to share, to tell me something true."

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes, if that is what it takes to stop you and your horde of vampires. I heard the tale of a neighboring abbey and garrison who defeated the vampires. Have you heard that tale?"

He let go of me suddenly. Moving to the grass, he sat down, unpacked the basket, and opened the bottle of wine.

"I heard that tale," he admitted, fingers dancing over the neck of his lute before he poured two glasses of wine. "If more

vampires come here, it will only make the nights more dangerous for you and for me. Those who don't recognize my power will not obey, and then you'll turn on me, saying I did not keep my word when I was outmaneuvered."

I joined him on the grass, sitting crosslegged with the basket between us. "You are right. I would blame you for not keeping your word. What I don't understand is how this all began. I grew up in this abbey, and vampires, while rumored, did not attack nor rule the night until recently. What changed?"

Titus finished his first glass of wine in a few gulps, then faced me, a barely contained fury threading through his words. "Lucia, I did not bring you here to discuss vampires. I don't care for them, and I certainly don't want to spend my nights with you discussing them."

I closed my mouth and looked out at the lights, so friendly yet so far away. I shouldn't be here at all, but back in the abbey, safe in bed, surrounded by strong walls and armed knights. A place where creatures of the night could not haunt me.

We sat in silence for a while, and I sensed his brooding anger, his fury at something that had happened to him that was out of his control. It still wasn't known exactly how vampires replicated, because no one from the village had disappeared. But the High Priestess suspected it was from a bite, a transmission of the disease that kept the dead from truly dying. Instead, they were resurrected as dark creatures who thirsted for blood, haunting the night because they wished to be reborn, to be human again. But Titus was different.

"Tell me a story, any story," I whispered, hoping to soothe his anger.

"I brought you here to be my distraction during these long nights," Titus said, raking his fingers through his hair. "Tell me, Lucia, what do you do all day up in that abbey?"

He was asking for a distraction, a reason to get to know me, and for my story. Words formed on my tongue, slowly at first, then faster as my confidence surged. "As a baby, I was left on the doorstep of the abbey, and the High Priestess took

me in and raised me. I grew up with the children of the village because they come to the abbey for instructions. My sisters—fellow priestesses—and I teach them how to read, write, discern truth, and learn skills that will benefit Veilix. When they are grown, some travel to other villages, start their own families, or even take up vows and become priests or priestesses.

“My gifting is with nurturing. I am good at encouraging life and making plants grow. Thus, I work in the gardens. I enjoy the challenge of my task and seeing the fruits of my labor. I’m honored to plan the gardens each year, deciding what and how many crops to grow to ensure we have enough to trade, to eat during the winter months, and, most importantly, to be generous and give to those in need. Every successful harvest leaves me with the feeling that I’m doing something important that matters. Like now.”

“I can sense your passion and your faith from here. You believe in what you are doing, and that is intoxicating.”

I glanced at him, unsure what to think about his response. Was he genuine, or was he mocking me? “And you?”

He gave a bitter laugh and poured himself another glass. “I am damned already, and there’s no hope for me. I used to be a man, a knight, except I never would have reconciled myself to a garrison next to an abbey full of virgins.”

Heat suffused my face, and I turned away so he wouldn’t see my expression.

“No, I aspired for much more, for power and wealth and dominion, and all of it led to my downfall. Part of it was my fault, and part of it was poor luck, and now I’m here, balancing power. I got my wish in the worst way possible, and I’m paying for it.”

“Your words are so cryptic, I don’t know what you mean,” I admitted.

“Nor do I want to explain. One day, I hope to be free of these bonds and walk in the light again, and you, Lucia, you give me hope.”

Hope. Wasn't that my purpose? To lift up the downtrodden, to bring hope to the hopeless, and to help those in need?

"Tell me, my moon goddess, if you didn't live this life, what would you do?"

A dangerous question because it led to discontent and speculation. I lifted my chin. "I am satisfied with my life."

"Why? Because you have everything you desire?"

"I have friendships, a place to live, and a purpose. Is that not enough?"

"I would say yes, except that I felt the way you kissed me back."

"I..." Words failed me because he spoke the truth. I *had* kissed him back with a feverish passion. Of course he noticed, and I couldn't deny the craving within me.

A strange note tinged his voice, a blend of longing and regret. "Would it be so wrong to find pleasure in each other?"

"Yes," I croaked. "It would be wrong because it's against my vows."

"I wager you'll enjoy it," he teased.

"No," I gasped.

"One day, the word yes shall pass from your lips. Come, have another drink with me."

Titus reached to refill my glass and broke off a hunk of bread and cheese, passing a portion to me. As he did, a shadow appeared on the edge of the hill.

Titus stiffened, then reached for his lute as the shadow morphed into a being, and this time, as it reared on two legs, I saw for myself what a true vampire looked like. The light caught the shape of its body, standing tall like a man. Lines of darkness ran from his eyes, and his rags displayed his bone-thinness. The vampire lurched forward as though his bones would break.

Pausing, he licked his lips and spoke, his voice like death. “We are hungry. Release us.”

Ignoring the voice, Titus began to play. A rushed, impatient tune bolted from his lute and then swelled into the darkness like a balloon of power. I felt a wave of intensity coming from Titus as he called to me.

“Lucia, come, put your hand on my heart.”

It was an odd request, but I was in no position to refuse him, especially with a vampire stalking closer. I hastened toward him, but he jerked his chin. “Kneel behind me, touch me, skin to skin.”

I hesitated, but only a moment as more shadows crept up the ridge, surrounding us. Kneeling behind Titus, I dropped my arms around his neck, and he leaned back into my embrace. I felt the hard muscles of his back press against me as I slid my hands under his shirt, over his heart. It thudded there, quick as a drum while he played.

“Yes,” he rasped, voice hoarse. “Stay with me, just like this.”

The shadows crept closer.

I closed my eyes and focused on simply being, the breath flowing in and out of my body, my arms around Titus, the warmth of his skin, and the tingling flush that went up from my fingertips up my arms and flared from my runes.

Heat filled me like nothing I’d experienced before.

This time, it wasn’t the flush of embarrassment from being so near Titus, nor the conflict in my heart from breaking my vows, nor was it the warmth of the summer night. No, something strange was happening to me.

I opened my eyes and light filled my vision.

At first, I assumed it was moonlight, for the silver hues glistened so brightly that I saw every blade of grass in front of Titus, but that wasn’t it. I tilted my head, my cheek brushing against strands of Titus’ hair. He smelled woodsy and earthy, the kind of scent that reminded me of the garden and made me

want to lie in the dirt like one of the plants while the light beamed upon me, making me transform.

The surge of sensation inside felt like a transformation, and as I leaned over Titus's shoulder, I realized my runes were glowing. A knot of dread tightened in my stomach, and a fear wormed its way inside. The tempo of his song increased while my runes glittered like starlight. Ever since I'd met Titus, my runes had itched. It was easy to brush it off as a coincidence, but now I wasn't so sure.

I was shining.

Did he know something that I didn't? And why did he want me to touch him like this? Heat swelled within me like an inferno as the tempo reached a crescendo and Titus broke off. Hot and sweaty, I pulled away from him, eyes tearing across the dome, but we were alone. The shadows had gone.

I scooted away from him, reclaiming a patch of grass—close to him for safety but not within reach. “What was that? What did you do?” I demanded.

“Me?” He placed a hand on his heart as he lay down his lute. “You think I did something?”

“Yes,” I sputtered, grasping for answers. “It's your lute, isn't it? That night I met you in the glade, you used music to lure the knights to sleep. And again, just now, to frighten away the vampires. But why did my runes glow? What kind of power do you have?”

He ran a hand across the stubble on his jawline and stared up at the sky, avoiding my gaze. “You are smart, intelligent. I thought you would tell me what happened just now. I only met you a few weeks ago. I don't know why your runes glow. I just know when you touch me, skin to skin, I feel an intoxicating power like nothing I've felt before, and it comes from you. Why do you think I call you a moon goddess? You entice me, you draw me in, and I know you have power, but no one taught you how to use it, did they?”

My hands trembled, and I clenched them into fists. It wasn't true. I didn't have power. I didn't have anything except

an odd skin condition and a deal with a vampire. It was about time I found a way out of this madness. This situation could not continue.

Rising to my feet, I crossed my arms. "Has this night been enough? Will you take me home now?"

Titus neared, his eyes dark. "I will give you an excuse for tonight, but this is only the beginning. You fear what you have, but you shouldn't be afraid."

My body continued to tremble, and I focused on the lights in the distance, unwilling to look at him. "It's not what's within me that I'm afraid of. It's what you bring out of me."

The palm of his hand pressed against my cheek as he guided my face toward his. "You should not fear what you have; it is beautiful, but you are right to be wary of me. There are times when I'm impulsive and lose control of myself. More so when I'm with you, and while the idea of your power entices me, it's you, the purity and beauty of your soul that makes me want to stay right here."

I wasn't ready when he kissed me.

I whimpered under the assault of his lips, but my entire body throbbed with need. A burning desire swept through me, and I opened my mouth, inhaling him, tasting him as he dominated me. I felt the rough stubble of his unshaven chin, the power of his jaw, the scent of wine still on his tongue, and the way his hands cupped my face.

Titus groaned, the sound deep and sexy, sending a thrill through my body. I wanted to hear him make that sound again. But no, I shouldn't want it. I was losing myself, my sense of right and wrong, under the haze of desire.

When at last he broke the kiss, we were both breathing hard, and I knew my eyes were glassy. "See," he whispered. "You want me almost as badly as I want you."

I held my tongue because nothing else needed to be said. I was willingly letting the vampire king seduce me. I craved his lips, his touch, his voice, and this, this was wrong. It had to stop.

LUCIA



After Titus walked me home, I couldn't sleep. Instead, I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders and sat on the swing in the garden. By sunrise, I was pacing the patio, thoughts whirling through my mind. The situation with Titus was dangerous. It had to end because I was afraid of myself, afraid of what I'd do if I lost control and gave in to his pleasurable kisses. His touch made me long for carnal pleasures, to be stripped bare by him and dominated by his kisses. To feel the warmth of his hand against my skin, touching, exploring, making me squirm.

I bit down on my knuckle, trying to halt the surge of feelings, but when I closed my eyes, I felt those lips against mine and the possessive way he held me. It was all a dream, a ploy, and his endgame was me. This could not go on, and I needed the knights help to halt the vampire king's rule. I had to act now before my heart got twisted and involved. I'd thought I was so high and above worldly pleasures; all it took was *him* to bring my reasoning crashing down.

Would it be so bad if I kept him a secret? Continued to sneak out as long as the village was safe from attacks? But then there were my runes and how he'd made them glow with his music and his touch. Skin on skin. I had been afraid of what I might do, of what might be hidden inside me. With a sigh, I spun toward the abbey and burst through the doors, slamming into the High Priestess.

High Priestess Merci was like a mother to me. She was tall and broad-shouldered with a heart-shaped face, dark eyes, a

wide, flat nose, and thin lips that gave her a regal appearance. Her once-black hair had gone almost completely white, and she wore it in a simple braid that trailed over one shoulder. She was calm, every hair in place, every piece of clothing perfectly placed. Despite her hair, she appeared ageless, her green eyes clear and her skin free from the wrinkles that troubled others. Even though we weren't supposed to gossip, the priestess often said her relentless faith and passion for her work kept her young.

Now, she recoiled with an oomph, eyes wide, nostrils flared as she faced me. Her mouth pressed into a firm line, and she held out her arms, her dry voice tinged with concern. "Lucia, you look distraught." Taking my arm, she gestured me back outside. "Come into the garden, let's talk."

"I didn't sleep well," I admitted.

"I can tell. Your hair has come loose, your clothes are wrinkled, and your eyes are tired. Lucia, you're struggling with something. Whatever it is, the burden of your choice can be shared. You don't have to hold it all in and try to figure out your struggles alone."

Sudden moisture came to my eyes, and I blinked, but I had nothing to say. High Priestess Merci had served at the abbey my entire life. She would not understand the choice that lay before me. Had she ever been tempted by the arms of a man? Had she ever stood by the window, peeking at the half-dressed knights as they practiced in the courtyard? Had she ever wondered what it would feel like to have a man between her legs? Probably not. She was perfection in every way, a shining beacon of hope and an example of what a true priestess should become. She'd earned her place as High Priestess by her actions and her faith. I would not dream of shattering the vision she had of me.

High Priestess Merci patted my arm. "Perhaps a change would be good for you. Go down to the village with Edith today. Faith and Willow are going to pass out food, and a few of the knights will be accompanying them for safety. You should go, walk among the people, and gain a different perspective. Perhaps that will help you."

“I will go.” I bowed my head. “Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t thank me,” the High Priestess scolded. “I’m here to help, Lucia, not only the village but you personally. It is tough living here, and I sense the fear of going out at night, the worry about the work we are doing and if the vampires will come for us, once and for all. It is disturbing, but we shall face this challenge and overcome it.”

“I have been concerned about the vampires,” I admitted, skirting the truth. “But I also wonder about myself and where I come from. My runes have begun to itch, and sometimes they glow. I wish I knew why I have them and what they mean.”

“They glow?” The High Priestess paused, lost in thought for a moment. “That is surprising. Regardless, it is good to question and seek answers. I’ve often wondered why you have your runes and the knowledge that they glow changes my perception. Let me work on this for you. In the past, I’ve pulled some texts and scrolls that mention light, but I’ll see what the knights find in the abbey to the north. I tried to track down your parents and some answers to the history of your roots when you arrived, but to no avail. Still, I’ll show you what I’ve gathered. I hope it brings you some peace. Always remember, Lucia, despite your appearance, you matter. You have a good heart, a strong heart, and no matter what your runes mean, it doesn’t take away your power or who you are. Don’t let your past define you. You define yourself.”

I almost blurted out my conflicted thoughts. They danced on the tip of my tongue, begging to be said. But then the bell rang. I lifted my face, glancing at the mist settling over the mountain, making it a gloomy day. The bell tower rose high on one side of the abbey, on the side nearest the garrison, so that one of the knights might ring the morning bell. It was a peaceful sound, a reminder to go to prayers or meditate or take a moment to be thoughtful about the day ahead.

I took a deep breath as the birds called to each other in the distance, and the glistening dewdrops sparkled in the night. I’d almost acted on impulse instead of thinking through my actions. I’d still reach out to Captain Elroy because he had asked me to be the sacrifice, and he knew the vampire king

held some kind of power, but I'd have to weigh how to bring up the topic. I wondered if he guessed at the truth. That something had happened to me while the knights lay sleeping. He'd been so quick to dismiss the idea of trying again.

Back in my room, I brushed my hair, washed my face, and dressed for the day. Making myself look nice on the outside always made me feel better on the inside. On a whim, I braided my hair and weaved a string of silver and sapphire around my head. When I glanced at myself in the mirror, Titus's words came echoing back. *Goddess of the moon.*



The mist cleared as we left the abbey, a small procession with the knights leading the two horses. Faith and Willow sat on top of the open wagon while Edith and I sat in the back, bouncing as the wheels moved over the cobblestones and down the hill.

The abbey wasn't far from the village, and the path twisted downhill, only a two-mile walk, although it was a strenuous walk for the abbey and the garrison perched on the highlands. The bell tower served as a watchtower, giving a view of the valley below and roads that traveled in and out. Meanwhile, the village nestled in the valley where flat lands were ideal for growing crops and grazing farm animals.

Surrounding Veilix were forests and waterfalls, pools where I'd gone to play in the water or bathe on a hot summer day. Now, I couldn't imagine doing either activity. The vampires lurked in the shadows, and while they avoided the light, secret entrances to the tunnels in the mountains were near the waterfalls.

"You're quiet today," Edith said, "and you weren't at breakfast."

"I didn't sleep well, and this morning, I went for a walk in the garden with the High Priestess."

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. I think it will do your heart some good to visit the village.”



Three days passed before I got up the courage to visit Captain Elroy. After dinner, I strode across the walkway between the abbey and the garrison, feeling like a miscreant. Instead of going around the front, where the knights were posted as guards, I slipped through the side entrance, the quickest way for the knights to access the abbey. My mind flitted to the knight and the priestess I’d seen in the shadows the week before. The side entrance only encouraged us to sneak in and out of places we should not be.

Arched windows rose above me, letting in the breeze from outside. The day was waning, a hint of twilight coming. Soon, the sky would be streaked with lavender and pink, a sight I used to enjoy watching in the garden, a sight that now made my heart beat faster.

The sound of footsteps came. I flattened myself against the wall, fearful of being discovered by one of the knights. I’d been in the garrison a few times before, but always an authorized visit accompanied by the High Priestess or a few of the other priestesses. Entering the domain of the knights alone would lead to questions I didn’t care to answer. But the footsteps faded, and my shoulders relaxed as I continued down the hall to where Captain Elroy kept his offices.

It was a circular chamber at the end of the hall, and the door was ajar, giving me a view of a desk piled with papers, scrolls, and books. Pushing the door open, I stepped inside, his name on my lips, but my voice died in my throat. Captain Elroy’s office was empty.

I stared around it, for I’d never been inside before, taking in the weapons on the wall, a barrel of what might be wine, maps of the area, and the desk. Lamps were lit, glowing on his

desk, and I ventured closer, looking at an open letter with a blood-red symbol and hastily written words.

Before I could stop myself, the lines danced across my vision.

Send me a priestess, the one with the silver runes, and we shall come to a deal.

VK

My heart sank. I read the words again and ran my fingers over the insignia. VK. Initials that I assumed meant *vampire king*. I pressed a hand to my lips. So it hadn't been by chance. The vampire king wanted me specifically. I glanced at the letter again, looking for a date stamp, anything. When had it been sent? Why was he threatening the garrison? Anger rose, and I spun around, wishing Captain Elroy was available to explain.

That's when I saw the door to an adjoining room. His private chambers? It was cracked open as well, and I strode toward it, pausing as indistinct sounds came from the other side. Voices. Low and high, then the sound of heavy breathing, and through a gap in the cracked door, I could only see one person.

She was naked. I glimpsed her bare breasts, bouncing as she moved, and then her hair. She threw back her head, eyes closed, mouth open, but I'd seen enough.

Turning, I fled out of the office, shutting the door firmly behind me with shaking fingers. No one should see that. No one should know. I snuck back to my room, my mind reeling. What was Edith doing with Captain Elroy?

It stung knowing my best friend was keeping a secret from me. A secret like *that*. I went to her room, knocked on the door, and then let myself in just to confirm what I'd seen. As I'd suspected, her room was empty. I let myself out again and closed my eyes. What right did I have to judge her when I was also keeping a terrible secret?

High Priestess Merci had warned us against keeping secrets, especially ones that would expose something terrible

because they could be used against us.

A dark thought crawled into my mind. Secrets could also be used as blackmail, and now I had a dark truth to hold over Captain Elroy's head. If he didn't provide answers to my questions, I could tell the High Priestess what I'd discovered about him and Edith. He'd lose his place and Edith would be punished. It was wrong. All of this was wrong. I put my hands in my head, overcome and overwhelmed by the choices that lay before me.

"Lucia?"

I jerked upright as High Priestess Merci moved toward me. She held up a scroll. "I was looking for you. Here, it may not give you the answers you're looking for, but it is a start."

"Thank you," I said, fingers closing around the scroll, not sure if I wanted to read or if I wanted to know. "I'm going for a walk," I blurted out.

"I'd prefer you stay inside, especially after nightfall, but if you must, at least stay within the walls of the abbey."

I bade her goodnight, and then, scroll in my hand, I went in search of Titus.

LUCIA



Titus did not expect me to come to him tonight, and as I walked through the shadowed wood, I wondered if one of the other vampires would find and attack me. Titus claimed he'd put a mark on me for protection, but would it work? Did I dare trust his word when the words of those around me were unraveling in my mind?

Edith, of all people, had a terrible secret. She'd all but forsaken her vows for intimate and physical pleasure. What did she see in Captain Elroy that compelled her? A darker suspicion arrested my thoughts. Did she have a choice? Had he compelled her in some way? The image of the priestess and the knight speaking together in the hallway drifted across my memory.

Captain Elroy was much older than me. In fact, I saw him as a father figure. He was in his late forties, about twenty years older than me, which meant he was about twenty years older than Edith. Streaks of silver peppered his hair, and the lines of his face told of a man who was no longer a youth and had faced many trials.

Suddenly weary, I stumbled to the boulder that perched over the pool and stared down at my reflection in the dimming light. My runes reflected back at me, and my eyes were clouded with confusion. I wanted to confront Edith, but it would be better to let her come to me. No matter how terrible the secret she carried was, I was willing to listen openly, without judgment. There had to be a valid explanation. But her face. It didn't look like the face of one in pain or being forced

to do something they didn't want to do. The other consideration was that she was truly in love with Captain Elroy, and if so, why keep it a secret? The discovery would force her to leave the abbey in shame while the truth would give her a choice. Stay or leave. Perhaps Captain Elroy didn't want to resign his position and leave with her. The scandal alone would throw into question everything the abbey and garrison did.

Sitting up, I unrolled the scroll as the first hushed hum of a stringed instrument lit up the night. A voice sang out, coming from somewhere above me, and I froze, listening. This was the first time I'd heard Titus sing, and it was beautiful. His voice was deep and rich, and he sang in another tongue, the swells of his voice bringing me to tears as he held long notes.

Once I'd heard of a great opera house set in a city far away, a sinful town called High Tower that was situated on a lakeside, where the best voices in all the world could be heard, it was said, voices that were cultivated in the great city of Solynn.

Titus had spoken of a past, and I wondered where he'd come from. I'd been so focused on myself and the village that I hadn't asked him what he desired, what he wanted, and what his passion was. It was clear that music brought him some kind of joy, and, as if on cue, my runes began to shine.

Warmth flooded my body, making me want to run away from it, but I forced myself to sit still. Breathing deeply to calm my panic, I placed the scroll in my lap and held out my arms. Silver light glowed, taking on the azure hues of the pool of water and the diamond flicker of the waterfalls. How? My heart pounded, and blood roared in my ears. I moved one hand over the runes on my arms. Heat ebbed from it.

"Control it," The order came from *him*.

"I don't know how," I gasped.

"Close your eyes and focus. It comes from within you."

I closed my eyes, still working to steady my breath. I felt my feet, my toes curling in my shoes, the way my knees bent,

the chill of the damp rock against my bottom, and the heat flooding my entire body. It made me want to strip off my clothes and plunge into the cold water.

A cool hand brushed my cheek, and I opened my eyes to see Titus frowning down at me. Slowly but surely, the glimmer faded, and the heat went away. I waited, frozen in place, while my heartbeat returned to normal.

It was only then I was able to speak. “This only happens with you,” I sputtered. “And only when I hear the music. I heard you sing, and it was beautiful.”

“I didn’t know you were coming tonight,” Titus said, his eyes searching mine. “It’s dangerous.”

“You gave me your mark.”

“True, but you still shouldn’t have come without my knowledge.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “It’s not my fault the nights are dangerous.”

“Ah, there’s that fire within you. No, it’s not, but you of all people should act with wisdom.”

I sighed. “I was upset and…”

“And?” he prompted, placing a hand on his heart. “You were upset, and so you came to see me.”

I didn’t like the way that sounded, but it was true. I sought out Titus. Titus the vampire king. The enemy of the village. The one who’d written a demanding letter about me. Instead of staying in safety, I sought him out because I felt a tug, a yearning for him.

“Yes, I came for answers,” I whispered, facing the truth.

His impudent mouth crooked in a grin. “I am honored.”

A wave of exhaustion came over me, and I slid off the stone. But standing did not give me the confidence I’d hoped for. Crossing my arms, I attempted to explain. “In truth, I’ve figured out that you’re not from here. You have some kind of power that is embellished by your lute. It makes others fall

asleep or forces the vampires to obey you. You rule the night, and yet, last week, when you played and we were skin to skin, I felt a shift. You know something about my runes.”

“Go on,” he encouraged, his grin turning sly and sinister.

“I saw a letter in the garrison from the vampire king. You, I assume, demanding the priestess with silver runes. Was that you? Why do you want me?”

“Oh, Lucia, I don’t dare trust you with my secrets.”

I frowned and took a step away from him. “You’re making life difficult for me.”

“Sacrifice is never easy.”

“I’m not talking about sacrifice. I would willingly do this to save the village, but it’s more, isn’t it? My runes were quiet; they never flared to life until you and I think...I know you can explain this reaction.”

“Maybe you’re just attracted to me.”

I sighed and turned away from him, my words hard. “It was foolish of me to come to you, considering your words. You’re not taking this seriously. You’d rather turn this conversation into a joke.”

Turning around was a mistake because, in an instant, his hands were around my waist, and he pressed my back against his chest, holding me firmly as he whispered in my ear, “Stay. I’m flattered you sought me out. I, too, have the same questions, and I can’t explain it—yet. The combination of my music and your runes is potent. With you, my power over the vampires is complete, and I believe I’ve awoken something within you too. Magic that lay dormant until now. Waiting for the right moment. You’ve come to me for answers, but I’m just as lost as you are.”

I spun in his arms, my fingers squeezing his shoulders. “You believe I have magic?”

He nodded, a lock of black hair falling over his forehead.

“You have magic too, don’t you?” I asked, aware that he did, because whatever magic he had awoke my own. A thread

of discomfort passed through me, disliking the way we were linked together.

“I can teach you how to control it.”

“In exchange for?”

He lifted his eyebrows. “In exchange for nothing, you’re already coming to me one night a week. I only beg of you to give me a signal so that I’m aware when you’re searching for me.”

A rawness haunted the angles of his handsome face, and I stared at him, a realization dawning. “You’re not the vampire king, are you? You’re not a vampire at all, but some kind of wizard, a sorcerer who can control them, and my unknown magic is helping you.”

His lips brushed mine before he pulled back to respond. “You’re too close to the truth, but I cannot speak plainly without a noose tightening around my neck.”

I pressed my hand against his cheek, the prickle of his unshaven stubble tickling my palm. I could have sobbed with relief. He wasn’t a demon, a devil of the night, but someone else unknown and equally as mysterious. He might be a wicked scoundrel indeed, but he was trying to help me, wasn’t he?

I said, “I knew I sensed good in you.”

“It’s not good that you sense,” he murmured.

This time, when he pressed his lips against mine, I was both ready and not ready at all. I closed my eyes, fingers tightening on the rock-hard muscles of his arms. He pressed one hand against the small of my back, the other tangling in my hair as his tongue twisted around mine. Fingers inched the skirt of my dress upward before he scooped me into his arms.

“Not here,” he said, glancing at the sky as though the stars were watching, judging us. “Close your eyes,” he commanded.

Swallowing hard, I obeyed, and he carried me away, past the music of the waterfall, back into the musty caverns. “Stay with me tonight,” he whispered, laying me gently on a bed.

I opened my eyes, rising on my elbows. Titus walked across the room, lighting candles, which gave me a view of the hallowed place. Unlike the first place he'd taken me to, this was an actual bedroom. Shadows flickered, displaying the crimson sheets, sheer drapery surrounding the bed, carpets covering the floor, and on the furniture sat thick candles, giving the room a romantic glow.

Statues covered one wall; some were half-carved, and others completed. All were of nude creatures—half-human, half-creature figures in various stances. A series of antlers reared from one wall, and then a table was covered with rough-shaped wood, strings, and, oh, half-made lutes. By all appearances, he was an artist, a hunter, and a musician, a connoisseur of fine things.

“This is your home,” I said. What kind of man lived in a cave? A man with something to hide. An outlaw.

Titus stretched out beside me and rolled to his side, placing a hand on my belly so that I lay flat on my back, staring up at him.

“This is where I dwell,” he admitted. “For now.”

I tore my eyes away from the temptation of his lips and studied what the shadows revealed. Seeing his home was like seeing a piece of him and grasping the truth of his soul. He did have passions and work that brought him joy, but in the unfinished work lay a sort of desperation and frustration as though it wasn't good enough and then. . . resignation that it would never be complete as intended and thus lay unfinished.

My breath hitched as his fingers explored, tiptoeing up my chest, delving underneath the folds of my clothes. My heart hammered as Titus traced my runes, a worshipful expression on his face as he tugged my dress down, exposing one bare breast. I gasped at his boldness, but his hand palmed my breast, fingers gently stroking my erect nipple.

“Even your nipple is silver,” he said, awe and wonder in his tone.

Bending his dark head, his mouth closed around my nipple, and he sucked, teeth nipping me.

“Titus,” I moaned.

He released my breast, although his tongue flickered out to lick my nipple. “You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

I didn’t have to respond. He knew.

“I don’t want you to fall in love with me because—”

“I’m not going to fall in love with you. It’s against my vows.”

He squeezed my nipple, drawing another gasp from my lips. “Isn’t this against your vows? I don’t hear you begging me to stop.”

I closed my eyes. “I’m conflicted. I want you to stop, and I want you to keep going.”

“Because it is forbidden, and what is forbidden is delicious and decadent. It’s tempting, and you want to know because it is denied to you. I will give you a taste of pleasure and let you decide.”

His hand moved down my belly, resting on my thigh. “Trust me, you’re going to enjoy this.”

Trusting Titus was stupid and foolish, but I was already in his lair, and I’d succumbed to his kiss. Nothing within me wanted to leave, and I was aware I couldn’t without his blessing. I sensed if I asked, he’d yield to my request. I needed him to guide me home, but not right now. So I didn’t protest as he pressed his hot mouth against mine, and his fingers explored.

He leaned over me, fingers roaming up the sensitive spots of my inner thigh. Was it bliss, or was it torture? I couldn’t tell for a thousand sensations fired through me.

All sense of shame and embarrassment evaporated under one desperate need, but I didn’t know what it was for until he touched me there.

A bloom of pleasure creased over me, and I let out a sigh of relief as I soared into bliss.

I felt as though I'd run a thousand miles only to reach my destination with good news, the best news, but I gasped and gasped for breath, my chest heaving, Titus's fingers playing across my body as though I were his lute. Indeed, how he'd made me sing, what magic, what sorcery.

When I opened my eyes, his face hovered just above me, his eyes dark and his expression unreadable. He traced a finger down the curve of my cheek across my lips, pressing his thumb into my mouth.

"There, my moon goddess, you have ascended," he whispered.

LUCIA



Pale orbs of yellow streaked across the sky as Titus guided me out of the caverns. He paused at the entrance, standing in the shadows as his fingers threaded through mine, pulling me closer for one last kiss. I clutched him, inhaling his essence, enjoying his kiss. What we'd done last night... What I'd allowed him to do to me didn't feel real in the shadows of night. But as the light crept over the horizon, I knew I'd have to face reality. Last night hadn't been a dream at all, but a choice.

"I'm sorry I can't walk you home," he breathed, "but the sun rises. You'll be safe."

"I'll return one week from tonight," I promised.

"Meet me in the glade."

He stepped back into the shadows, and I was free.

The entrance to the cavern was hidden, shaded by thick trees and bushes. As I fought my way through the underbrush and into a knoll, I glanced back, but it was all but invisible. I waited for a shiver to come up my spine and for the realization of what I'd done to fill me with shame. Instead, a giddiness filled me. I felt young, wanted, desired, and with a purpose. Seven days was too long to wait to see him again.

I strode through the forest, collecting flowers as I went, and then, on a whim, decided to stroll through the village. A stroll during sunrise was a rare pleasure, and I hummed, my body still glowing with the after-effects of pleasure.

A footpath led out of the forested area and dipped into the village. The nearest home had been abandoned due to its proximity to the forest and the tunnels where the vampires dwelled. At least where we assumed the vampires to dwell. I hadn't seen nor heard any during my time with Titus, but the reminder of shadows roaming the night made goosebumps pebble on my skin.

I walked through the overgrown grass, the pasture lands, and the gardens that were being reclaimed by nature. Shame to see such a place go to waste, but I did not blame the family who had left. The garrison was trying their best but hadn't overcome the blight of the vampires.

On reaching the open street of the village, I made my way uphill, waving as doors opened and children spilled out. The scent of freshly baked goods floated to my nose. My stomach rumbled in hunger, and then I came to a stop as a family loaded up a wagon.

"Mistress Palmer," I called, waving to the lady who made cheese. "Where are you going?"

She poked her head over the side of the wagon and then waved at her husband. "I'll be right there."

As she neared, I saw her face was pale and peaked, and her eyes were dark. She took my arm, keeping her voice low. "We are getting out of here, and you should do the same. It's not safe, dwelling here where the creatures come in the night and attack. We can't live in fear that something will happen."

My heart squeezed, and I clenched her arm. "Did something happen last night? The vampires attacked, didn't they? Who did they take?"

Mistress Palmer pressed her lips together and shook her head, eyes swimming. "They slaughtered all of our animals, the cows, the pigs, the goats, the sheep. We were lucky they left the horses alone." She swiped at her eyes impatiently. "There's no reason to stay here. We'll take what we have left and start over."

“It’s almost mid-summer,” I protested. “Come to the abbey. We’ll take care of you.”

Mistress Palmer shook her head adamantly. “No offense to you and your vows, but trapped behind the walls of that abbey is no life for me and my husband. We’re going to the lowlands, and I know I’ll miss the eerie beauty of this place, but...I refuse to live in fear of what might happen next. You should do the same, flee this life. Some things are not worth fighting for.”

“Good luck then.” I embraced her. “I’m sorry to see you go. If you change your mind and return, there will be a place for you here.”

She nodded, her face tight as her husband slapped the reins. He tipped his hat to me as the horses broke into a trot, kicking up dust on the road as they headed south. They’d have to push the horses hard to reach the next village before nightfall, and if they were fortunate, the vampires would stay away.

I wondered, though, at what she’d said. The vampires had attacked after all, but they’d only killed farm animals. I’d have to speak with Titus again. I turned, half tempted to find my way back, but it would likely end up with me lost in the foothills while the priestesses wondered what had become of me.

Lifting my skirts, I hastened back to the abbey.

By the time I arrived, the bell had already rung, and morning meditation and breakfast were already over. A few of the sisters waved at me as I entered, no doubt not looking my best. I hastened to my room to wash and change, sure the scent of Titus still lingered on me.

After refreshing myself and changing, I opened the door only to find the High Priestess Merci in the hall, pacing. Worry lined her eyes. “There you are, Lucia. I wasn’t sure where you’d gone this morning.”

I had no answer for her, the truth was too damning, and I certainly did not want to lie to her. I let my eyes drift to the

floor.

“Do you have questions about what was written in the scroll?”

“I...” in truth, I’d forgotten about it, distracted by the idea of magic. “Not yet, I need...I need more time to think.”

High Priestess Merci nodded. “Come to me when you are ready. Know I will not pass judgment on you because you have questions. It is a natural process in life to have doubts, to voice your thoughts and to ask questions. Understanding helps to confirm your faith and make you secure in your choices.”

I nodded, not in the mood for one of her wise lectures. I pointed down the hall. “I missed breakfast, and I’d like to ask Faith if she has any requests.”

“Of course, grace be with you, Lucia.”

I hurried away, wondering if she could see the shame written on my face. Out there in the fresh morning air, surrounded by nature, I’d felt free, unafraid, and unashamed. But now, within the walls of the abbey, a heat curled around me, making me want to hunch my shoulders and hide my face. Was it possible to feel so conflicted, wanting another night with him yet knowing what it meant should I be found out? I’d be an outcast, a priestess who intentionally broke her vows, forsaking what was sacred for...lust.

The kitchen was quiet and seemingly empty. I stared about in dismay, looking at the clean table, the warmth of the stove, and the bowl of fruit placed on the counter. So peaceful and perfect. A cascade of thoughts overwhelmed me, and I sat down heavily, putting my head in my hands.

I’d grown up here and remembered running into the kitchen as a little girl, eager for a snack. Blackberries grew on the outside wall of the abbey, and each summer, I begged High Priestess Merci to take me to pick them. I’d eat them by the handful until my mouth and hands were stained, and it was all the High Priestess could do to save some for the other sisters.

She’d taught me the importance of sharing, but I’d taken it a bit too far, believing the cats that roamed the cellar would

enjoy the fruit as much as I did. I chased one until I caught it by the tail, and it scratched me so hard my arm bled.

I had other pleasant memories too, of making cookies with Edith, laughing so hard I cried. All the sisters were wonderful. They were family and celebrated each season with the villagers and the garrison. The vampires had robbed us of those joyous occasions. People were leaving or being stolen. I had to make a choice.

“Lucia, I didn’t expect you today.. .” Faith began and trailed off.

I put my hands down, brushing away tears.

Her voice softened, and she snatched up a kettle and moved to the stove. “Oh, Lucia. You look like you could use something to drink. I’ll make the tea of clarity while you talk.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I said, my voice between a laugh and a sob.

Faith pressed a handkerchief into my hand. “It’s no use getting snot on your clothes.”

“Thank you.” I blew my nose and wiped my eyes as she sat down and put a plate of blackberry scones in front of me. That tiny gesture brought a fresh wave of tears.

Faith was gifted with cooking, and she knew everyone’s favorite meals and exactly what kind of food would comfort them.

“Take your time, love. You know I’m just here to listen. It helps to get it off your chest, so to speak. Burdens are heavy when carried alone.”

She was right, and maybe there was a way to tell her without getting into the explicit details. I took a deep breath as the kettle whistled. Moments later, a cup of tea steeped in front of me, and I curled my fingers around it, the steam clearing my mind.

“Faith, I’m wavering between two choices.” I stared out the window, watching the bright flower blossoms blow in the wind as I gathered my thoughts. “One is wrong, sinful. It will

save many people but at the cost of my soul. The other choice, the right choice, would be to do nothing, to stay here and close my eyes against what is going on beyond these walls.” I faced her, looking her in the eye. “What should I do? I can’t be passive.”

Faith wrapped her fingers around her own mug of tea. Despite her work in the kitchen, her hands were beautiful, although one palm had a burn mark in the shape of a heart. I viewed it as a mark of her work, what she was willing to give, to sacrifice to bring others joy.

“No, we are not called to a life of passiveness,” Faith confirmed. “Living behind these walls, in this abbey, being priestesses means we are called to a higher purpose, and inaction is never the answer. Nor is tarnishing your soul. You feel stuck right now because you only see two choices and two paths, but you need to step back and take a deeper look. It sounds like you have arrived at a forked path between two paved roads, but often there’s a third way, a path that has been overgrown, a tunnel, a small window, a path often overlooked.”

I lifted the cup of tea to my lips, thinking of my journey only this morning. I’d walked out of the caverns and into the village, but I hadn’t taken a paved road. Instead, I’d forged my own path. Unfortunately, other decisions were less clear.

Faith leaned back, studying me. “You’re right in saying that you must take action because you must. But you cannot do anything that will damage your soul. Souls are eternal, and the body is not. Perhaps if you explained in greater detail, I might be able to help.”

I put down the cup of tea, an idea springing to my mind. “I believe you’ve helped already. I’m only hesitant. A third choice does lie before me, but I don’t want to put others in danger.”

Faith regarded me, anxiety behind her eyes. “Whatever troubles you, I hope you know you can always come and talk to me. Regardless, I hope you find the right answers.”

“I pray I do,” I said, rising. “Thank you, Faith.”

I turned to go, but at the last moment, I picked up a scone. Chewing a mouthful of sweet blackberries, I strode through the abbey with determination. I was going to see Captain Elroy, and this time, our plan would work.

I took a detour on my way to the garrison, for in the morning, they often practiced, and Captain Elroy would be with them instead of in his study. A thought had occurred to me, and my suspicions grew as I spoke with Faith. From all my encounters with Titus, I'd settled on one deep, unsettling fact. That he was not the vampire king but his lute gave him power over them. If not him, then who was the vampire king?

My thoughts flickered to the letter on Captain Elroy's desk, signed with the initials V.K. There had to be a vampire king and the knights believed he was the key to conquering the vampires.

Light filled my vision as I entered the upper level. The arched windows allowed daylight to stream in from each angle, and panes of glass in the domed rooftop gave even more light. Here was where the artists worked, transcribing scrolls, cataloging our history, and, more importantly, illustrating the books. It was beautiful work, and three of the sisters sat in front of the arched windows, heads bowed as they worked with paint.

At last, one looked up at me, put down her brush, and smiled. "Sister Lucia, what brings you here?"

"We don't have to be formal, Indie," I said, calling her by the abbreviation of her name, Indigo. "I'm actually a bit curious about the history of this region and vampires. Are there any pictures or illustrations depicting what they look like?"

Indie brightened. "Actually, yes, come with me to the inner room, and I'll show you while my work dries."

I followed Indie further into the room. The women worked in the outer room in the sunlight, but daylight would dry out the books and make the ink fade, so they were kept in the inner room without windows.

Indigo lit a gas lamp and hummed to herself as she moved through the neatly organized room. Most of the books were put away on shelves, but a wall of scrolls took up the back end of the room. Indigo finally selected a thick book from the shelves and laid it on the table. I moved beside her as she flipped through painted pages, tenderly handling the book as though it might disintegrate into pieces if mishandled.

“Here we go. I studied this topic extensively when the first attack came, I wanted to fully understand the history of this region. Rumor has it the giants who used to dwell in the land didn’t want to mix their blood with humans, which led to incest. Odd things happened: children were born disfigured, and rumors of them shifting into creatures spread. Honestly, I always thought the old tales were just legends, embellished until their true meaning was lost. Then the first attack of the lamia came five years ago, and that shifted my perspective.”

“Lamia?” I asked.

“The official term for vampires, or, in this case, any spirit that is supposed to be dead and yet isn’t.”

“The undying.”

“Exactly.” Indie flipped another page. “Ah look, here’s an example of the giants shifting into creatures. This one is called a werewolf.”

She tapped her paint-stained finger on a picture of a man standing on two furry legs. His arms were abnormally long with claws on the end. Instead of the head of a man, he had the head of a wolf. My runes itched, and I clenched my sleeves, trying to hide them should they decide to uncharacteristically shine, but Indie turned the page, and my itching ceased.

“Here’s the lamia, at least what we know of them. I don’t know who illustrated this book, but it stands to reason that the vampires of then and now would appear similar.”

I leaned over the table, scarcely daring to breathe as I took in the drawing. The creature appeared like a man, with arms and legs and long, unkempt hair but a body that was underfed, thin, and sunken, with gaunt features. And then there was the

face. It was pale, skeletal, and rotting, with blood-red eyes and a mouth that hung open, displaying curved fangs. Whoever had drawn the painting had taken the time to depict the spiral of blood and drool streaking the vampire's chin.

“This one doesn't have wings, but sometimes they are depicted with claws and wings. In all appearances, the vampires bear a resemblance to bats.”

“What if the bats were diseased and started all of this?” I asked. “Bats are creatures of the night, blind in daylight, hunting by sound in the night. I heard of rats bringing a plague to a city in the lowlands and wiping out the population. What if this is just some kind of plague?”

Indie stared at me. “Huh. I've never heard that speculation before. But it's not a plague. If it were, it would be spreading. That's the oddity of our situation. I assumed vampires would create more vampires with their bites, but they don't. No one has disappeared, they are just found dead, drained of blood. And the text don't mention a cure, nor a reason why vampires suddenly returned to haunt us.”

“How do we know it isn't spreading?” I asked. “Five years ago, there was just one incident, a single circumstance. What if it has spread to others, and they are the cause of the demise of our village? Just this morning, I saw another family pack up and leave. How much longer do we have to wait until everyone else either leaves or dies?”

Indie scratched her chin, then leaned over the book. “The library is here for seekers of knowledge. I'm going to hunt down more records and let you know what I find. Perhaps you can draw some conclusions I initially overlooked.”

I pressed my palms together. “Thank you.”

I worked with Indie a bit longer, reading through the passages and searching for more on the history of the strange occurrences that took place in Veilix. But no other answers came, and I left for the garrison, one thought ringing in my mind: Either Titus was not a vampire at all, or vampires had morphed to take on the appearance of humans.

But how? We buried our dead and they stayed dead. The knights killed vampires and they also stayed dead. Yet a group of them remained, almost as though they sprang out of nowhere. Perhaps that was why Captain Elroy was so focused on capturing the vampire king, after all, it made sense that the king of those undead creatures could create more.

LUCIA



“We have to try again,” I announced as I stood in Captain Elroy’s study.

This time, it was just him and me, and the door to his inner chamber was shut firmly. I tried to keep my eyes off it, but just being in the study made my skin crawl with the reminder of Edith’s bouncing breasts.

Captain Elroy sat, writing at his desk. “No,” he said harshly without looking at me.

I crossed my arms. “Why? We have to do something, and I saw the letter on your desk. The vampire king wants me.”

Putting his pen down, he frowned. “I don’t know what you think you saw, but it was my mistake. I won’t put your life in danger again.”

“If you don’t, I’ll go without you, and I’d feel much better if you and your knights were standing guard for my encounter.”

“There’s no point in you going alone. The vampires will take you.”

“Then come with me for protection.”

“You don’t understand, Lucia. We succumbed to the music.”

“Well, plug your ears with cloth.”

Captain Elroy stood, eyes narrowed. “Why is this so important to you?”

I bit my cheek and closed my eyes, summoning my courage. Allowing my voice to dip into a whisper, I said, “I know about you and Edith.”

Captain Elroy staggered back, a hand coming up to grasp his short beard. He shook his head, eyebrows knitting together. “How? She told you?”

I closed my eyes. “I...no. I came looking for you and...” I trailed off. It was enough.

“And what, exactly, is your proposal?” His voice was still rough, but this time he was listening.

“Use me as bait, a lure to expose the vampires, once and for all. People are leaving. They are afraid to live in this village, and if they all go, what will we have left?”

Captain Elroy pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m aware. The odd thing is, in the past month, only one person has been found dead. Something has made the vampires turn to animals instead of humans.”

I squeezed my hand into a fist. “Then let’s use it to our advantage.”

I dared to hope that this time, we’d catch the real vampire king. If Titus didn’t know I was coming, would he fall for another trap?



The forest was dark and gloomy as Captain Elroy, along with five of his most trusted knights, and I stole back to the glade. The scent of rain hung in the air, warning of a storm that would eventually break.

“I don’t like this,” Captain Elroy said as he led me to a tree close to the waterfall. “You never fully explained what happened the last time either.”

“Nor will I,” I told him. “Just give me a knife, and don’t tie up my arms.”

He did as instructed. Winding the rope around my waist, he tied me to the tree, then pressed a knife into my hands. He glanced at the cloudy sky. “This is what’s known as the glade of sacrifice. You’ve chosen to stand in place of the people, to offer yourself. That is admirable.”

“It’s what you were hoping for the first time,” I reminded him.

“It is.”

“Then we can only hope that fate is on our side.”

He nodded, hesitated, and then faded into the trees, shoving wool into his ears.

I waited, squeezing the knife, watching the shadows to see who or what would emerge. The waiting was the hardest part. My skin crawled, and every sound made me flinch. I had no idea how long I waited, but it felt much longer than last time. Finally, a shadow appeared, walking toward the pool—toward me. I swallowed hard. This time, there was no music. This time, there was no Titus.

The shadow moved quietly, silently, lingering in the edges of darkness, making me wonder if Captain Elroy could see this being creeping up on me. I shouldn’t be tied up. I needed to run. I moved the knife toward the rope but sawing it would make noise. My captor would know that I didn’t intend to be his prey. No, I needed to be silent, to wait until he was closer, then scream before he tore open my throat.

My eyes strained with the pain of watching. Then I blinked, and he was gone. I strained, listening for a step, a sound, anything.

“So, you’re his woman,” a low voice came.

I jerked my head to the left, to the right, and finally pinpointed the shadow leaning against a nearby tree, watching me. My heart raced, both elated and terrified. *This* must be the vampire king. He was around the same height as Titus with longer hair, the pale light only indicating it was dark. The scent of tobacco pipe wafted from him, along with an unwashed, sour scent. I wondered if he’d been feasting before

I drew his attention. Where were the knights? Were they coming?

“Who are you?” I whispered, hoping to engage him in conversation while I stealthily cut myself free.

A rough chuckle burst from his lips. “I find you tied up in a glade, and you’re more concerned about who I am? I came to set you free before he comes.”

“Who is this *he* that you speak of?”

“You’ve been tricked, besotted by a fool, so take my warning and run back to your abbey. The man you’ve been entertaining in the dark is not who you think he is. As soon as he has your trust, your love, he will ruin you. Run while you have the chance, and I’ll deal with him.”

My eyes darted back and forth, my breath turning shallow. Was it true? No, I couldn’t listen to his words. This must be the vampire king, a jealous creature, for his sacrifice had been stolen by another. Why else would he be here?

“Why should I trust you and your lies?”

“Why should you trust *him* and *his* lies?” he retorted.

True. I didn’t know Titus, but the times we’d spent together were like a taste of fine wine. Delectable, forbidden yet delicious at the same time, leaving me wanting more than just a taste.

The man stood tall, revealing more of his gaunt appearance. “When you lay in death, choking on your own blood, just remember, you were warned.”

He took a step, and I saw them. The knights had surrounded us and were silently creeping toward the man. I had to say something to keep him distracted.

“What do I owe you for this warning?”

His nostrils flared. “Perhaps you’ll save the village.”

An arrow shot past, and I watched it as if in slow motion. The man’s grinned, white teeth flashing before he took off, sprinting in the wood.

The knights chased after him, but Captain Elroy paused beside me. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, fine,” I said, holding up the frayed edges of the rope.

“I’ll escort you back to the abbey, you’ll be safe there.”

“No need,” I protested. “The wood is quiet. We didn’t see any vampires coming in, I imagine the vampire king is leading you toward them.”

Captain Elroy paused, fingers gripping his blade tighter as he glanced after his men. Itching for a fight.

“I’ve done this before,” I encouraged.

“Well done.” Captain Elroy relented, then chased after his knights.

I pressed a hand to my racing heart as warmth spread through me. The vampire king had fallen for our trap, and I hoped the knights would catch him tonight. Only the words the man had spoken about Titus were deeply unsettling.

Raindrops sprinkled my head as the gusts of wind picked up, bending the tops of the trees in half. The snap of a branch came, and then shrilled shrieks echoed around me. Owls? Bats? Vampires? I moved faster, weaving through the trees until a hand reached out and snatched me against a hard body.

I screamed, struggling to free my hand with the knife, but when I looked up, it was Titus who held me. Tight. He bent over me, studying me with an indescribable expression on his face. Lightning flashed, sending a surge of heated light over the glade, and icy blue eyes bored into mine.

“Lucia, why are you out here? I didn’t see a light in your window.”

A sliver of fear crawled up my spine. The hysterical side of my mind shouted that he’d been stalking me, while the reasonable side reminded me that we’d had this discussion. I was to put a candle in my window on nights when I sought him out.

“Let me go,” I said, the words of that strange man ringing in my mind. “I didn’t tell you because it was a trap, not for

you but for the other one, the vampire king.”

My words had the opposite effect. His grip tightened. “The other one? Did you speak to him?”

“I...I did, and the knights are chasing him now. They’ll catch him, and this will be over.” Would it be? I wasn’t sure, but my mind desperately wanted to believe something. Yet the more I thought about it, I couldn’t make sense of what was happening.

A strangled curse left his lips, and he let go of me so suddenly I almost fell. I backed against a tree, breathing hard as I watched him. He wiped a hand across his mouth, staring, no, *glaring* at me.

“What did he say to you? No, we can’t talk here.”

He made to grab for my wrist, but I jerked back. “What do you mean?”

Something was off; he was upset, and tension bit the air. I also noticed that he wasn’t carrying his lute. What was he doing out here? Sneaking around at night? Had he been the cause of death and devastation, and I’d been wrong all along? Who was the true vampire king, Titus? Or that other mysterious man?

It occurred to me that they looked similar, with dark wild hair, deep-set eyes, height, and build. Blood rushed to my head, and this time, I wasn’t quick enough as Titus lunged for me again. He caught me, a powerful arm sneaking around my waist as the heavens opened and rain thundered down.

Titus scooped me up as though I weighed nothing at all. I closed my eyes, reminding myself of my conversation with Faith. There’s always a choice. I didn’t know the truth about Titus, but I knew how he made me feel, as though I were falling into a pit of darkness I could not escape from. He would tarnish my soul, swallow me whole with his darkness, embed me in a land of sin and pleasure, and I’d be lost eternally.

Inaction was not a choice. I had to act. I lifted the knife and pressed it against the cords of his neck. A high, broken

sound came from his throat, sending a pang right through my soul.

“You, you of all people, my moon goddess, would turn on me too? You’re supposed to save me, not damn me to the hell I’m already living in.”

My hand trembled. He could knock the knife away as easily as it was a feather. I’d been trained in self-defense, but I hadn’t actually wounded another or drawn blood. Now that the moment had come, hurting another living being wasn’t in me. I couldn’t harm *him* because it would be like plunging a dagger into my own heart.

I dropped the knife. “Then you have to be honest with me. Tell me the truth. What is going on?”

“I promise I will speak with you. Just let me get you to safety.”

Safety, as though the creatures of the night would descend upon us at any moment. I squirmed. “I can walk.”

He set me down at the damp entrance of a cave and took my hand. I squeezed his wet hand and realized that given the choice between the abbey and being out here with him, in the storm, walking into the bleak darkness of the unknown, I’d chosen him instead of my warm, secure bed. And that thought worried me.

The tunnels were so dark I wasn’t sure how Titus knew the way, but eventually, we emerged outside, back into the rain, which had slowed to a steady downpour. Titus led me through the dark, uphill, I thought, until we burst inside a door, and he released me.

“Stay there,” he said.

I stood still, blinking raindrops off my eyelashes, attempting to see in the utter blackness. My dress was soaked to my skin, and despite the fact that it was mid-summer, I shivered. A scratching sound came, then a flame as Titus lit a fire. It started smoking, but it was enough to see.

We were in a tiny one-room cottage. Rich rugs covered the stone floor, a stove was tucked into a corner, and Titus moved

to it next, lighting it. A fireplace covered an entire wall with bright stones. Some had runes carved into them, and they glinted as the firelight grew brighter.

An odd sensation washed over me as I studied those runes, my gaze going from them to my arms, noting the similarities. I pivoted away, but the image of the runes burned into the back of my mind.

Plants grew out of the wall, and ivy framed the edges as though the wildlife sought to reclaim the hut. Dried plants hung from the rafters: florals and herbs, giving off a smokey, herby scent. A bed had been pushed into a corner, and a stack of papers and scrolls lay scattered on the floor beside it, traces of ink appearing in the low light.

I clenched and unclenched my fists, fighting my nerves. Folding my arms around my body, I bit my lip and glanced at Titus, who was half out of his clothes.

“Undress,” he said curtly.

My sodden dress was dripping on the carpet. This was not about seduction but warmth and not getting sick. I tugged the dress over my head and held it in front of me as I crossed the floor to the fireplace.

Titus was fully naked now; his clothes laid out on the stones to dry. He wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and took the dress from me, his eyes tracking downward before I had a chance to snatch the cloth around my bare flesh.

A rough chuckle left his lips. “Still shy after all we’ve done?”

He had a point, but I did not care to comment on it.

“Sit,” he said, gesturing to the rugs that surrounded the fireplace.

He sat down himself, a blanket over his shoulders, and he held out his hands to the dancing flames.

I sat down beside him. “What is this place? Why did you bring me here instead of your home in the mountainside?”

His jaw tightened. “You know the legend of vampires and how they cannot cross the threshold of a house unless invited?”

“Yes, that’s the only reason so many have stayed. They feel safe at night, knowing that none of the monsters can enter. Tell me, that legend is true, isn’t it?”

“It is, and it isn’t. There are loopholes associated with it. This home was forsaken by its owner, and now it’s mine. When I want to be alone, truly alone, I come here.”

“It’s lovely.”

His mouth crooked up, and he tilted his head at me. “Are you just saying that to appease me?”

“No.” I shook my head, and something within me relaxed. “It is lovely. I grew up in the abbey and have seldom had the opportunity to be invited into another’s home. The ones I have seen had floors made of wood or dirt with rushes atop them, while the wealthier ones had stones. Someone wealthy must have lived here. Or at least used it when they wanted some solitude up here.”

“It was once the home of a hunter. I found dried bear skins and antlers and arrows when I took it over and embellished with with my own decorations. This is where I come to write and for solitude.”

“Then the other place is?” I trailed off, hoping he would finish my sentence and satisfy my curiosity.

“It’s like I’m living a double life, the me that lives under the mountain and then the me that comes here to remember who I am outside of the curse.”

This was taking too long, although I was curious about the curse too. “Who was that other man?”

Titus frowned. “What did he say to you?”

“He was warning me about you, that you’re not who I think you are and that...”

Titus faced me. “He warned you that I’d kill you.”

Avoiding his gaze, I focused on the fire, my words sour before they left my tongue. “Yes.”

“And what do you believe about me?”

“I’m not sure, it’s...may I speak plainly with you?” I blurted out.

“I would accept nothing less.”

“The truth is, Titus, I don’t know who you are. You walk the night, your music controls the vampires, and you awaken desires within me I didn’t know I had. You can teach me how to use magic, but my soul warns against you and your ways. I don’t think you’re a good person, but I also doubt you are purely evil. When we first met, I believed you were the vampire king, but you were tight-lipped, withholding, and now I think the other man might be the vampire king. But if so, I don’t understand why he didn’t kill me.”

Titus scrubbed his face with his hand, sending water droplets from his wet hair dancing. I had to lean forward to hear his next words. “Because he’s not a killer, not like me.”

A cold fear bolted through me, and I glanced at the door, wondering how fast I’d be able to run before he caught me. Titus had just admitted to being a killer, and I believed him.

Agony crossed his face. “Now you know the truth, you fear me.”

I pressed my lips together. “The seeds of doubt have been planted, and it brings me to more questions. If you intended on killing me, why wait? Why not now? Or perhaps that’s why you brought me here, forced me to undress so I’d be naked and vulnerable with no choice but to accept—”

He lunged for me, knocking me backward. I screamed, losing the grip on the blanket, and it fell open. He trapped me with his thighs and leaned over me, hands circling my wrists, keeping me pinned to the floor while his eyes traveled every inch of my exposed skin.

His eyes were wide, almost feral, and he leaned close.

“Please don’t,” I begged as his lips touched mine.

LUCIA



Titus kissed me with lips still wet from the summer storm. His mouth was warm and insistent, his tongue thrusting in my mouth, devouring me, taking me. Teeth raked across my lips, then released, punishing, bruising. And I welcomed it.

My entire body ached with desire and my conflicting emotions faded, leaving me with an intense need to be close to him. He released one of my wrists and ran his hand down my side, his touch awakening exquisite sensations.

I moaned into his mouth, and he released my other wrist, cupping my face roughly with a hand and forcing me to look at him. “How could you think that after all this, I’d want to kill you?”

And the look on his face was like a dagger to the heart. He was right. How could I believe that he was so twisted and wicked he’d trick me into falling in love with him, only to kill me? His kisses were no lie, and the way he made my body sing was a sweet truth in itself. Only a blurry reminder told me that he hadn’t explained the other man. He’d admitted to being a killer, yet, heavens, the way he kissed me left me feeling like water in his hands. He could do whatever he wanted with me, and I’d still crave him.

My runes glittered to life, a soft glow as he kissed me again, twisting fingers through my wet hair while his other arm slid down my belly. I went rigid, suddenly frantic about the trajectory of his hands. In response, he paused, then took my hand and guided it to his chest where his heart drummed

fast with excitement. I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his back while he groaned into my mouth.

“Your touch is like heaven. I could thrive on this and this alone if only you touch me like this.”

“Titus,” I gasped, wanting to explain what I desired from him.

Instead, I let my fingers do the talking for me until at last he sat up, hovering over me.

“Look at you, my moon goddess,” he rasped. “Laid out like a sacrifice, your light shining just for me, to guide me back. I was so lost, and now I have a way to find myself, but I don’t want to consume your light with my darkness. I want you to shine, to burn bright like an inferno and purge me from this weight, this guilt, this curse I carry.”

I wanted to say something, but it was impossible for words to leave my lips. The feelings he aroused in me left me breathless.

He bent over me until our foreheads nearly touched. “This is your first time, isn’t it?”

I groaned as confusion muddled my thoughts.

“Yes,” I panted.

“Do you want me to continue?”

“Yes,” I said again.

Ever so gently, he eased into me, taking his time, repeating the same action again and again until I was comfortable.

When he paused, we were both panting, and this time a sheen of sweat covered his skin.

“Now you’re ready,” he said, his pupils wide and dark, eyes hazy as his gaze raked over me.

Lying on his back, he pulled me on top and gave me a wicked grin, those sharp white teeth glowing in the low light. But nothing about him made me fear him, if anything the heat between us left me wanting to be skin to skin, just as we had when our magic conjoined.

Titus cupped my cheek, fingers brushing my lips. “Look at me. I want to see your soul as I bring you to pleasure. This will be like nothing you’ve experienced before.”

So I kept my gaze on him as we made love, slowly, reverently, tenderly. Afterward, Titus pulled the blanket over my shoulders and held me tight, his mouth against my ear.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered, “truly beautiful.”

Those were the last words I heard as I slipped into a dreamless sleep.



Heat kissed my face, and I opened my eyes, taking in the dancing motes of light created by the fire as Titus added more wood to the flames. I still lay on the floor in a nest of rugs and blankets. A glow of warmth cocooned around me, and I blinked sleepily at him.

My thoughts flitted to Edith, and suddenly I understood why she and Captain Elroy did what they did. Perhaps it had been passion or friendship that had driven them into each other’s arms, and now, they couldn’t stay away. The act in and of itself was beautiful.

I watched Titus work, his hair mussed, the lines of his muscles softened by the flickering light. I waited for shame to grip me with regret. But it did not come. Instead, a halo of happiness pierced my soul, and I sat up, bringing my knees up to my chin. The blanket slipped off one shoulder, and my hair fell around me.

Hearing my movements, Titus glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyes lighting up. A smile, a real smile, not a smirk, covered his handsome face. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did. Is it morning?”

“No, slightly after midnight, but the storm has abated. It’s peaceful.”

“Do you ever sleep at all?” I asked.

His expression turned pensive, quiet. “Not at night, but I felt inclined to, with you. You’re soft and gentle, and I enjoy holding you while you sleep. Your runes glimmer in time with your breathing. It’s like watching starlight twinkle.”

My face flushed at the compliment. “Are you always this lyrical with your words?”

“Do you always ask this many questions?”

He poked the fire one last time before joining me in the nest of blankets. Sliding a hand around my bare waist, he pulled me closer to him, bent his head, and kissed my shoulder. “I was angry with you earlier, but now I’m glad you’re here.”

I waited, wanting him to tell me everything yet not wanting to push him, to destroy the purity of the moment. It was odd how I sensed no evil, no malice in him, only a strong desire, and it made me wonder.

High Priestess Merci spoke of second chances, of living with deeds that hung like a noose around our neck, but knowing, if we were truly repentant, there was another path, a second chance waiting for us. I sensed Titus needed that life-giving second chance. He wasn’t a vampire, yet he spoke of a curse. He held magic, and other than his adherence to the night, I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with him. What made him so different from myself?

As if reading my mind, Titus spoke. “I wasn’t always like this. I used to be normal, if it could be called that, like you.”

I straightened, deeply interested now that he was opening up to me. “Like me, what do you mean?”

“I’ve never been fully mortal, but I walked in the daylight, I ate actual food, and I didn’t have a lust for violence and blood.”

“What happened?”

He stiffened and his voice went hard. “*She* happened.”

She. I felt deflated. There was another woman.

“I swore to serve a sorceress as one of her knights, except I was unaware that she was dark and treacherous. A sorceress who was easily jealous and overly vicious with her punishments. Knights who displeased her or disobeyed her commanders were cursed and exiled to other realms. I’d never imagined that would be my fate, yet here I am.”

I listened, wide-eyed and anxious to hear more of his confession.

Titus blew out a breath and fixated on the fire. “I wasn’t blameless though. As a knight, I fought in her wars, and all that blood, death, and violence got in my head and made me mean and angry. Killing and brutality became a hobby, and I knew it was wrong. I knew I needed to change and escape her services. I plotted to run away, to find the entrance to the realm of the King of Hearts.”

The words he spoke were enthralling, like discovering a secret others had tried to bury. As I watched the lines of his face, the angles highlighted by flame and shadow, a low throb began in my heart. I wanted to fix him, to reach out and take away his pain with my hand. That was what he was asking for, wasn’t it? For me to heal him, to break his curse just by accepting him as he was.

Titus continued, “The sorceress discovered my treachery. She cursed me to life in darkness with a thirst for blood, and sentenced me into exile in the caves here.”

“How long ago was it?”

“Five, six years perhaps.” He shrugged. “Living in darkness takes its toll.”

I bit my lip, but the words burst out of my mouth anyway. “What of the other man? The one who spoke to me last night. Who is he to you?”

Titus scratched the back of his neck and gave me a sidelong glance. “He’s my half-brother. We have the same father but different mothers.”

I sat a moment, letting the words digest. Titus had a brother. They were family, so why the cryptic warning? “And

he is cursed too?”

A rough, dark laugh escaped from Titus’s throat.

“I’m trying to understand,” I explained.

He cupped my face, leaning close so that his breath kissed my lips. “Don’t ever try to understand the darkness. You are light and grace and beauty. I am drawn to you like a thirsty soul to water, but I fear my shadows will corrupt you. This conversation about myself and my cursed brother is not one I enjoy, but I will deal with him separately now that I know he has attempted to come between you and me. I want you to stay with me, awhile, Lucia. Will you?”

My eyes widened. He was asking a question, giving me a choice. “For how long?”

“Does it matter?” Titus asked, pushing the blanket off my shoulders.

“It does. The knights believe I’ve gone home. They will search for me if I’m not at the abbey. They’ll think I’ve been...” I trailed off, unable to say the words.

Gently, Titus placed two fingers above my heart and pushed me onto my back. I reached for the blanket, but he batted my hand away. “Let me look at you, my moon goddess.”

“One day,” I compromised as his fingers traced the runes on my legs, running from my hip to my ankle.

“One day and one night,” he countered. “I’ll take you to the abbey before sunrise.”

His breath feathered my leg, and then he kissed my ankle. I closed my eyes, a riot of sensation chasing through me.

“One day, one night,” I murmured.

“I’ll teach you how to use your magic,” he went on as if I needed any more convincing. “And perhaps it will be enough.”

Fingers crept up my thigh.

“Enough for what?” I shuddered.

Instead of answering he bent his dark head and kissed me.
“You’re marvelous,” he breathed.

TITUS



I made love to Lucia again and again, never growing tired of her breathy moans, the way her lips tasted, how her eyes glazed over when I touched her, and the way her body trembled with delight beneath my touch. But more than anything were her runes, the way they made me feel light, normal, almost free.

One day and one night was all I asked for, all she promised, yet I was certain that if she stayed forever, I'd break my curse. The darkness within my soul wouldn't stand a chance beside her light.

It was daylight when she finally pushed me away, her gaze roving over the house. "Tell me what you know about magic."

"Ah, now is the time for words," I said, wagging my finger at her.

She gave me a look, but a faint smile hovered on her lips. "You promised to teach me how to use it, and I'm curious as to why, if I have magic, it only revealed itself now."

Standing, I tugged on my now-dry pants and rifled through my papers. "How much do you already know about your runes?"

Lucia shrugged. "The High Priestess gave me a scroll with the research she'd done. But it didn't reveal much. If anything, it left me with more questions."

I recalled seeing the scroll in her hand. I knew what it was like to search for answers without finding them. "What did it

say?”

“Like I told you, I was found on the doorstep of the abbey as a baby, and the High Priestess believes I was left because of my runes. They frightened the woman who birthed me.”

I noticed she didn't say mother because being linked by blood was not enough. Lucia kept speaking quickly, but it was true that the abandonment still bothered it. I wondered if that was why she took up vows and became a priestess—because she felt she wasn't enough, and serving and sacrifice made her feel redeemed. I sat down on the floor, studying her. All this time, I'd been focused on the way she made me feel and what her magic did for me, but now I had a glimpse into her heart, into the way she felt about her life.

“Through her research, the High Priestess found that runes are often used with rituals, often arcane and pagan rituals. Most records of people with runes have them being sacrificed at one time or another, either as children or as adults. Sometimes, they were kidnapped and stolen away, but often, they gave themselves voluntarily because they believed their runes were given by some Divine power, and the sacrifice would activate them. It's actually disturbing to think about, but the High Priestess believed that my being abandoned likely saved my life.”

“Do you believe that?” I asked, watching the shift in her expression as she stared at the flames.

She straightened her shoulders, chin up as she met my gaze. “I do.”

Now was not the time to tease her about her convictions, so I pointed at the stones on the fireplace. “I supposed that what you say makes sense. There's a lot of fear and speculation when it comes to magic. You may have noticed the similarity between some of the runes on your skin and those carved into the fireplace. It's because they are a language, and some runes are meant for protection against evil.”

“Are you talking about the original inhabitants of this land, the giants? Those who became aware of the vampires and used runes to protect themselves against them?”

“Then you know the old tales. It is thought that many sought to protect themselves when the vampires first came, so they practiced odd magic, sacrificed humans, and committed all kinds of despicable acts. They wanted to appease the gods, but in the end, their actions only cursed themselves. What remained, though, were the runes and, in the tunnels, crumbling remains of an ancient civilization. But there are old scrolls and drawings on the walls depicting their history. While the people fell into darkness, there were a few who remained blameless. They used runes to channel the light, reflect it, and protect themselves from the darkness. Unfortunately, they were hunted down by the vampires and slain, likely because their magic had the potential to do the most damage. That’s why your runes call to me. You are light and purity, your runes reflect the light of the moon, and when you shine, darkness doesn’t stand a chance. Nothing can touch you.”

Lucia drew her knees up, and the blanket fell off her bare shoulders. But she was lost in thought as she stared at me. “My runes never glowed until I met you.”

“Magic seeks magic. The song of my lute is magic, and I have darkness within me. When I’m with you, I feel it burning away. Your runes are working because you finally have a reason for magic to awaken within you. I’d guess that in the abbey, there isn’t any darkness or lurking evil, so unless you were exposed to it, you’d never know that you have magic.”

“In theory, I supposed it makes sense.”

“Think about it like this: why does the sun shine? Why does the moon come out at night?”

“Because of the dark.”

“Aye, without the night, there’d be no need for light. Same with your magic, but now that you know it’s there, I’ll show you how to access it.”

Lucia brushed at her eyes. “Thank you, Titus.”

My name on her lips was a treasure. I wanted to hear her say my name again. Instead, I went to her and kissed her

gently. “Your runes have always been a priceless gift. Now it’s time for you to step into your power, my moon goddess. And I will protect you, with my music.”

LUCIA



Both body and soul were sore in the most delicious way as Titus guided me home. I let myself in through the garden gate, yet he lingered, unwilling to let me out of his sight. I'd felt the shift between us, a shared awakening and knowledge, and I'd begun to dream of a life that might differ from what I currently had. But how to achieve it was the problem, and as the shape of the abbey towered above me, the knowledge that I had broken my vows made my throat go dry.

Titus touched my arm. "May I come inside?"

"Yes," I agreed without thinking and led him into the garden.

"This is your garden?" he asked, surprise lacing his tone.

"It is. I'll have to weed it tomorrow. The plants will believe I've abandoned them."

"You enjoy seeing life spring up from mere seeds, don't you?"

"It's more than that," I explained. "It's what this garden represents: food for the priestess and the garrison and enough to share with the villagers. The vineyard brings forth the barrels of wine for trade, and with my work here, I can bless others both near and far. Food is a source of life, and I'm proud to be part of that life-giving act."

Titus let out a groan of admiration. "When you speak, your words pull me in deeper. I'm tempted to whisk you away with me."

He stopped as we approached the inner door to the abbey, and my heart pounded with awareness of his proximity. Gently, he leaned forward and kissed me, long and deep, as though we'd be apart much longer than a few days.

“Goodnight,” I whispered, stroking his jaw.

“I’ll see myself out,” he said, but instead of leaving, he embraced me.

I leaned into him, arms around his waist, my face in the hollow of his neck, breathing in his intoxicating scent. His pulse thudded against me like the beat of a song. As I held on, revelation swept through me. I cared about him. Not only his history but his future. What we'd done had bonded our fates together.

A sudden fear seized me as he released me, pressed another kiss to my lips, and left. Sagging against the door, I strained my eyes until his shadow all but disappeared. When I stepped across the threshold, I realized I had invited him inside, and even though he did not accept my offer, what if another vampire did?



I'd been asleep for maybe an hour or two when screams erupted across the abbey followed by a deep wail. I stumbled out of bed, hastily threw on a gown, then ran toward the sound. The wails continued, and my thoughts raced. What had happened? Was someone hurt, wounded...dead?

On the main floor, I fled toward the entrance of the abbey, where a crowd of my sisters sobbed around the doorway. I fought my way through, panicked disbelief attacking me as I stared at the pool of blood and the ripped-open throat.

Acid welled up in my belly, choking me as I stumbled back, tears filling my eyes. I scanned the faces and saw no blame there, only grief.

“What happened to Faith?” I begged, unable to look at her again. She lay on the doorstep half-naked, blood soaking her gown, her sightless eyes staring at the sky.

Only days ago, she’d helped me make a choice, and now she was dead, devoured by one of the vampires. No, not even devoured but ripped apart as if she’d been punished. Most bodies were found drained of blood, but she’d been mutilated as though someone was sending a message.

High Priestess Merci marched into the area. Then came her sharp intake of breath, and she pressed a hand to her heart. Her face went pale, and she leaned against the entryway as though seeking strength.

At last, she stood tall, her voice shaking as she spoke. “Find a blanket, cover her, and someone fetch Captain Elroy. Ladies, back to your rooms. The bell must be rung, and everyone must stay indoors until we have an answer for this plight.”

The wails continued as the sisters slipped away, but High Priestess Merci turned back to Faith. I dared myself to look, and there, in one of Faith’s hands, was a scroll. High Priestess Merci bent to pick it up and unfolded it with trembling hands. Her eyes went back and forth as she scanned the message. When she looked up, her gaze met mine.

Shame and embarrassment and horror buzzed within me, as though she could see my soul and knew that I’d broken my vow. I’d had an illicit tryst with a vampire and worst of all, I enjoyed it. What had it led to? This?

Edith ran up with Captain Elroy behind her, and I stepped back as a sheet was brought to cover the body. Captain Elroy barked out orders to his knights. While they flew into a frenzy of activity, I slipped away.

Blood rang in my ears, and I couldn’t help but think it was my fault. Why had I invited Titus in? He was the enemy, a cursed knight, a lord of darkness, full of blood and violence and anger. Why had I assumed from the time we spent together that he could change? He’d clearly toyed with my

affections only to gain access in order to do something terrible. It had to be him, hadn't it been?

Then again, did it matter? I had invited the vampires into the abbey and cursed us all.

I thought again of his half-brother and the warning. Sobs shook my body, and then Edith was there, embracing me, her tears mingling with mine.



Much later, High Priestess Merci had us gather in the kitchen. Huddled around a long table, we sat, holding mugs of steaming tea yet feeling bereft without Faith.

“We’ll hold a ceremony for her tomorrow,” High Priestess Merci began. “It appears that Faith went out, either at sundown or at sometime in the night, and was taken. After the vampires...abused her, they returned her here as a warning. They also left a note, a demand which I shall discuss with Captain Elroy. It is imperative, for your own safety, that the moment twilight comes, you stay indoors. No more walks in the garden.” Her gaze landed on me. “No more evening strolls. The knights are making an announcement in the village, and they have a plan. We will win this war, but I need you to do your part and stay vigilant.”

After her speech, we filed out of the kitchen, and I walked purposefully toward the library.

The High Priestess called my name, “Lucia.”

I turned back, my face heated. Did she know? Had she seen me in the garden with him last night? I hadn't considered that I'd need to be careful in the garden, but many parts of the abbey overlooked it, and someone who was up at night might have seen us.

“I'd like to request your presence in the garrison. There is something I'd like to discuss with you and Captain Elroy.”

My heart plummeted. Clasp my sweaty palms together, I nodded my head. "Of course, whatever I can do to help."

It took all of my willpower not to run away because I was frightened of what secrets would be revealed. I was sure she'd discovered the pact between Captain Elroy and me, and no one had mentioned my two-day disappearance.

By the time we reached his office, I'd broken out in a cold sweat.

"Shut the door," Captain Elroy said as we entered.

High Priestess Merci shut the door while Captain Elroy waved at us to take the seats in front of his desk. With a heavy sigh, he pulled out a stack of paper and then glanced at me. "Priestess Lucia, I thought it best we tell High Priestess Merci what has been going on, and the High Priestess and I thought we should tell you about the letters."

I went cold, for by his own admission, each of us had been keeping secrets. How many untruths swarmed around the abbey?

Captain Elroy pushed the letters toward me. "First, read these."

I picked up the first letter, took a deep breath, and read. At first, I thought I was reading for the High Priestess's benefit because Captain Elroy knew I was aware of the demand from VK. However, I wasn't aware there were so many. Aside from the demand for a priestess with silver runes was a list of items from the abbey: paints, paper, a barrel of wine, cheese, bread, and carving knives.

My brow furrowed at the odd list. I put down the first letter and read the second. It expressed some frustration with the items that were left, demanding an exact amount of the same items, more wine, some pipe tobacco, and, again, the priestess with the silver runes. The rest of the letters went on the same way, and my breath came short and fast, reading the demanding words, knowing that this vampire king wanted me as a ransom.

By the time I picked up the last one, my eyes were glazed over, and my breath was shallow. I unrolled the scroll, noting the bloodstains on it. The writer warned that this was the last letter because the demands had not been met, and there was a consequence. *Faith*. He demanded one last sacrifice and named a date and time. Three days from now, in the glade. I was to be sacrificed. Just like in the old days, eerily similar to the tales of death and sacrifice that Titus had shared with me.

I put down the letters, staring at High Priestess Merci. Her mouth was set in a firm line, but her eyes were sad.

“You knew of this,” I whispered. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since spring,” High Priestess Merci admitted. “I told Captain Elroy that we were not giving in to these demands, but as they continued, we paid the ransom of goods.”

Mouth dry, I glanced at Captain Elroy, suddenly understanding why he’d asked of me. I was the sacrifice. I’d *always* been the sacrifice.

“I gave in,” Captain Elroy admitted, addressing the High Priestess. “Lucia agreed to come with me, but both times, the vampire king eluded us.”

“*Both* times?” I asked in surprise. I’d assumed they’d captured the vampire king while I was with Titus. I hadn’t anticipated failure.

Eyes heavy, he nodded at me. “Yes. Two days ago, we were closer than we ever were before, but he escaped into a labyrinth under the mountains.”

“We are going to try again,” the High Priestess explained. She took my hand and squeezed it. “I will go in your place, Lucia. The knights will take the hounds, and we’ll cut off all escape. Once we have the vampire king, we’ll force him to lead us to their base, and then we will destroy them all.”

The plan felt like a fool’s hope, unlikely and impossible. “No,” I pleaded. “Let me go.”

High Priestess Merci shook her head. “You saw what happened to Faith. It’s too dangerous. I’m placing you under

the guard of the knights for your own protection. I've seen how you've changed, Lucia, and it's not for the better. Something is affecting you, and I believe it's the same sickness the vampires cast on their victims. No more. You are important, and your place is here. No more sneaking out, no more walking during the night. I want you to be safe. It is my sworn duty to protect the priestesses, to protect this village, and Captain Elroy and I will do so. Together."

I leaped to my feet and pointed at the letters. "Then why bring me here? Why tell me the truth if you're not going to let me help?"

"I was wrong," Captain Elroy explained. "I acted without the blessing of the High Priestess, and this situation has gone from bad to worse. If we are to win, we need to stop keeping secrets and act together."

My lips trembled. "The other night, we were so close."

Captain Elroy nodded. "We were, and this third time, we will catch him."

LUCIA



I paced in my room, alternating between sitting on the bed, knees bouncing until I frustrated myself and sprang up to pace while biting my knuckles. A trail of thoughts thrashed in my mind, torn between yearning and guilt and fear of discovery. Somehow, some way, I had to warn Titus that this time would be a trap, and he needed to stay away.

It would happen three nights from now, which gave me one day and one night to outsmart the knights who stood guard in the abbey. During my years as a priestess, knights had never been welcome to enter the abbey after nightfall. Understandable since the abbey was full of young, single women.

I tried to untangle my thoughts and understand the position of High Priestess Merci. It was possible that High Priestess Merci controlled the movements of the garrison and kept us in the dark, likely to keep us from panicking.

And then there were the letters.

I sat down on the edge of my bed and dropped my head into my hands. I'd spent one heavenly day and night with Titus, and if my heart spoke true, I wanted more of him. Not just his touch or his warm body pressing against mine, giving me euphoric pleasure, but his very soul, the essence of who he was, a broken man trying to claw his way back to truth and light. I admired him for his determination, his tenaciousness, and his self-control with me. He'd alluded to the fact that he

hadn't always been a creature of darkness, yet he'd never sucked my blood.

All the same, I'd let down my guard and invited him inside. It was one thing to put myself in danger and another to put the entire abbey in danger. The priestesses were my sisters, my family... I closed my eyes against the reminder of Faith's skin, torn and bloodied. My stomach roiled as I rocked back and forth. I was the one to blame, and I didn't know how to stop any of this.

A soft knock came at the door, and I leaped to my feet, anxious for a distraction.

Edith's worried face appeared, and she spoke before I had the chance. "Lucia, I came to check on you. You disappeared for two days and... well..." She twisted her fingers together, trailing off. "I thought you could use a friend to talk to."

A friend? A sudden slash of red-hot anger burned in my belly. On some level, I was aware that it was my own guilt and anger I was projecting on her, but ugly words hummed in my mind. *Who was Edith but a liar who broke her vows and spent time with Captain Elroy?*

Ashamed at my vicious thoughts, I locked my gaze on the hem of her dress as I shuffled back, holding the door open.

"Come in," I mumbled.

Edith paused, taking in my posture. Instead of embracing me, she strode into the room. Shutting the door, I leaned against it, still avoiding eye contact as I weighed what to say. But Edith went to the window and stared out at the darkness. "It's terrible what happened to Faith, I can't imagine what she went through, nor figure out why she was out there at all."

"Maybe she went to help..." I began.

Edith glanced at me before curling up on the bed like we had when we were young. She patted the side, inviting me to join her. The threads of a lifelong friendship tugged at me, and I went to her side, tucking my dress beneath my legs as I leaned against the pillows.

Edith propped herself up on an elbow, her vivid eyes roaming over my face. “Something’s wrong, I can tell.”

Instead of hiding, I held her gaze, feeling my anger burn away like the morning mist under the heat of sunshine. Words clogged my throat, unable to escape, but the truth lay on my tongue, so heavy I needed to spit it out.

Tears swam in my eyes, and I blinked, my question a half-sob. “How do you know?”

Edith hesitated, picking at the threads of the blanket. “I’ve seen you sneaking out of the garden after dark.”

I pressed a hand against my mouth, blinking harder. Despite my secrecy, my actions had been discovered. Who else aside from Edith had seen my transgression? Two nights ago, had she seen me kissing Titus in the shadows? If so, she must know how quickly I’d broken my vows and that I might be the cause of Faith’s death.

I bit my bottom lip and decided it was now or never. “I... Edith, this is a deeply personal question, but I’m struggling with an issue, and you might be able to help me. You see, I know about you and Captain Elroy.”

A small cry escaped from Edith’s lips.

I plunged onward. “How is it possible? Don’t you feel conflicted about forsaking your vows and sneaking around without the knowledge of the High Priestess?”

Edith’s lips trembled. Now it was her turn to look away. “How did you find out? I thought we’d been so careful.”

I paused to think. The first time I’d snuck out to see Titus, I’d seen male and female shadows so close they were almost kissing. They had to have been Edith and Captain Elroy. “I went to speak with Captain Elroy, and the door to his chambers wasn’t fully shut... I shouldn’t have trespassed, but I had an urgent need.”

Edith peered back at me, her eyes wide. “Of course,” she murmured half to herself. “You aren’t telling me this to blackmail me but because you’ve fallen in love, haven’t you?”

And those nights you've been away were when you snuck out to meet him. After nightfall, oh Lucia, how dangerous.”

I nodded, shaking a tear loose that slipped down one cheek. Using the back of my hand, I brushed it away, already relieved at admitting part of the truth. “I’m conflicted, Edith. My heart sings when I’m with him, but as soon as I return here, the weight of guilt threatens to crush me. When I’m with him, I feel so alive, and when we are apart, I can’t stop thinking about him. But he’s all wrong for me and dangerous. How do you handle the weight of guilt and the conflict, especially when he’s so close?”

Edith wrapped her fingers around mine and squeezed. “I’m sorry, Lucia, it doesn’t get any easier. At first, I felt conflicted, as if I were giving into lust. But love taught me many things. If what you have is true and right and pure, and if it is love, it will make you a better person. The High Priestess teaches us about love, what it is, and what it isn’t.

“Love isn’t selfish or intent on self-gain, and it is love that forced me to change for the better. Elroy...I mean, Captain Elroy and I each have personal wounds—you know about my fear of abandonment—but when we fell in love, we started to heal. Even though I took up vows to live a life focused on serving others, my heart was closed because of fear. I misunderstood the words of the High Priestess and believed that love would lead to temptation and death, but now my heart is open, and I can pour into the children who come here to learn and listen to those in pain who need my healing touch. Love has made me whole and complete. In fact, I wouldn’t be able to serve the way I do here without it.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt, but Edith held up a finger. “I know what you would say, that our vows require us to remain pure and celibate, giving up the aspects of this world that would distract us. Namely, physical pleasure. But the vows guide our actions and our focus, helping us become better people by serving this village, this slice of heaven on earth. I do my duty, and Elroy does his. We protect the abbey in different ways, he with the sword and I with my healing herbs. Yes, there are restrictions, and at times, I feel conflicted

about sneaking around. I doubt that will change, but the High Priestess, as kind and intentional as she is, wouldn't understand how deeply love can change us for the better. Know that you have a choice. You are loved here, and I didn't leave because everything I desire is right here. You will have to make the same choice. That doesn't mean you have to stay at the abbey. Despite making a vow, you choose to serve the people, and that vow is not a rule that binds you; that vow sets you free."

"Are you sure? You sound so confident and...free."

"Think about our vows and the words. We vowed to focus on faith, purity, upholding the truth, and serving others. To abstain from pleasure for the sake of pleasure. But love is not anything of those things. It is truth and faith and purity, and it makes us better people. That revelation is one you'll need to discover for yourself, but I have shared my truth. It's up to you to discover the rest for yourself."

I pressed my lips together, my mind spinning. "In your case, yes. Captain Elroy is upright and a good man. In my case, the man in my life...he's...dangerous."

Edith leaned closer, eyes bright with curiosity. "Who is this man?"

Shouts from outside disrupted our conversation. Edith and I glanced at the window, and the words trembled on my lips. I wanted to tell her, but I didn't want to be forced to make a choice. The abbey was my home. I wanted to stay right here with my sisters, and I wanted him, but he had no place among the living. It was impossible, and telling Edith would force my choice, and I didn't want that. Not yet.

The shouts came again, louder. Edith scooted off the bed and drew back the curtain. She gasped. "Looks like they've caught him."

"Caught who?" I asked, joining her.

It was dark outside, but the burning torches the knights carried lit the way. They dragged a captive toward the garrison, and even though they'd put a hood over his head and

bound his hands and feet, he still struggled, causing the uproar below.

My legs collapsed, and I sank onto the floor, my mind reeling. They'd lied to me to keep me safe, going to capture the vampire king tonight instead of in three days. And Edith, had she been sent here to throw me off the scent, to keep me blind to what was going on?

At last, the knights had captured the monster we all feared, but I didn't feel grateful. I wanted to drop my head into my hands and sob for Faith, for Titus, and for myself. None of this should be happening.

"You knew, didn't you?" I accused.

"What are you talking about, Lucia?" Edith sounded confused and concerned.

I studied her, reading the truth on her freckled face. "You didn't know they were going to capture him tonight, did you?"

Edith's brow furrowed as she glanced from me to the window. "That's the secret Elroy was keeping. It has to be, but I don't understand why..."

"Did he tell you about the letters? The demands from the Vampire King?"

"Lucia, what is all this about? You're frightening me."

Leaning my head against the wall, I closed my eyes. "Sit down, Edith. I'm going to tell you everything."

Edith listened wordlessly, her face paling at the vivid and dangerous tale I told, of love and lust and danger and...worst of all the letters. Demanding me. "But Edith, there's one more thing the knights don't know."

She gasped. "What is it?"

"Titus has a brother, so they might have captured him, or they might have captured his brother. One of them is the true Vampire King, and I don't know which is which."

Edith frowned and crossed her arms, pacing. "This is it, Lucia, the opportunity we've been waiting for. We have to go

to the dungeons and find out which brother they captured.”

“And then what?” I asked miserably, partly shocked that Edith was talking sense instead of yelling at me for keeping dark secrets.

“Then we end this, once and for all. Only a vampire would truly know how this ends.”

“What will you tell Captain Elroy?” I asked, wiping away the tears that wouldn’t cease.

She sighed. “He kept a dark secret from me. I had a feeling something was wrong, but he wouldn’t share his burden with me. I’ll think about the best way to confront him and convince him I can help. *We* can help. There’s nothing to do tonight, though. The dungeons will be heavily guarded, and they’ll be more interested in getting information out of their prisoner.”

Torture? The very idea made my stomach roil. The knights of the garrison were guards of the land and of blood. They guarded the trade routes and they fought and killed vampires. Did they torture them, too?

My heart ached at the idea, and I could only hope that Titus was still free and they had the wrong brother. I wanted to put a light in my window or storm the dungeons and rant and rage, but Edith and I had a plan. There was nothing to do but wait.

LUCIA



Waiting was hard. I tried to focus on anything else but my ignorance of which man was in the dungeons. But my mind strayed, even when I went upstairs to listen to Indie's findings on vampires, but I was too distracted to add my opinions. Besides, it was the same information I'd heard before.

The mornings spent in the garden, pulling weeds, clipping back the hedges, and gathering herbs only increased my anxiety.

During the two days, High Priestess Merci was missing, and my thoughts spiraled to the worst. Edith assured me she was spending time alone in her rooms. Why? I could only speculate and hoped she hadn't been attacked when she went out with the knights. But at last, nightfall came, and Edith and I snuck into the garrison.

Earlier, while the knights practiced in the yard, Edith had stolen the extra set of keys to the dungeons. I didn't want to think about the conversation that she and Captain Elroy would inevitably have, and I wondered how secure their love was if they were doubting each other's trust. Not that I was judging them—because I had no place to judge. It would have been better if I'd fallen in love with a knight instead of a vampire.

My runes itched as we descended, sneaking around the knights until we reached the dungeons. They hadn't been used in a while. Ever since the scourge of the vampires, the robbers and mischief makers had made their way south, leaving the

village in peace. But the knights still needed to protect us from what lurked in the dark. Except that Edith and I were headed directly toward horror.

He wasn't in the normal cells but in a hole in the ground, where he'd have to be lowered in by rope, making it impossible to escape. It was unguarded since the knights were certain he wouldn't find a way to climb up the sleek sides.

It took both of us to move the weighted grate. The entire time, I was afraid a knight would hear us and come running. There was a chain nearby, used to lower prisoners in and out, but I waited, blinking against the darkness, trying to see who was inside.

A low growl came, the inhuman sound sending goosebumps up my arms. Summoning my strength, I demanded, "Who are you?"

"Lucia? Is that you?" a hoarse voice rasped. "Did they send you here to seal my doom?"

My heart squeezed. "Titus, I came to rescue you."

Edith worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she reached for the lowering chain.

A low chuckle came. "Rescue? Sounds like a trap to me, but then I've never been good at avoiding them."

The chain snapped into place, the links stretching as though taking on a heavy weight.

"I didn't know about the trap," I told him. "I was going to warn you, but they tricked me, sprang it before I had the time. Titus..."

I stared into the hole, looking for signs of life. Two glowing orbs stared back at me. His eyes had changed, become luminous in the bleakness, and it stirred fear in my heart.

He shook the chain. "I'm too weak for this."

My stomach twisted. "They tortured you?"

"Not everyone asks for secrets nicely."

I glanced at Edith. “What should we do?”

“We can try to lift him out, but...” she trailed off.

“I’ll go down,” I said, the announcement halfway catching me by surprise.

Edith grabbed my elbow, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Lucia, are you certain he’s not...”

“I’m sure,” I whispered back, hoping my words were true. “He’s just a man.”

Edith frowned, shaking her head. “I don’t like it.”

I held out my hands. “Give me the bandages and herbs. I’ll see if I can help him.”

“I’m the healer. It should be me going down.”

“No, stand watch,” I protested, afraid of what Titus might do to her if she went down in my place. Besides, if one of the knights happened upon our ill-prepared plan, she could make up some kind of excuse.

I tucked the bundle under my arms and grabbed the chain. It bit into my fingers, and my arms burned as I lowered myself into the bleakness. Down there, in the hole in the ground, my runes itched more, and a faint glow emitted, enough to see the shape of Titus.

He moved away from me as I arrived, his voice rough. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“I came to help,” I said. “Let me.”

“Lucia. Tell me truly. Is this a trap?”

“You doubt my affection for you?”

He came closer, the glow in his eyes intensified, terrifying. “Because we are irrevocably split between light and dark, day and night. You come down here to help me heal, to give me strength, to bandage my wounds, but it’s not herbs and potions I need. It’s light and hope.”

“Whatever you need, I will give it to you.”

“You tempt me with words you know not.”

“You can help, Titus, help stop this madness. You told me so yourself, and now people are dying, and it might be at the hands of your brother. He’s the vampire king, isn’t he? How do we stop him? He’s written letters demanding my sacrifice, and you’ve told me of my magic and what it does. I want to try.”

“Do you?” But the question wasn’t a question, merely a note, a warning, and suddenly he was upon me. Arms enveloped me, and his head dropped, sinking to my bare neck, and then came pain. Sharp and instant, then swelling, growing as his teeth sank into my skin. This time he sucked, and I felt the blood leave my body to fill him.

Horror arrested me, but my arms were trapped under his, and my feet were laden. It was the shock of it that rendered me mute. All this time, I’d believed in him, trusted him, and now, at last, those haunted words spoken in the dark by his half-brother came true as Titus sucked my blood.

What a fool I’d been, falling for darkness and devastation. I’d once thought of myself as a sacrifice to save others. The bitter truth washed over me. I couldn’t even save myself.

TITUS

At last I'd fallen for the trap, and the knights of the garrison had attacked and captured me. When I'd seen the woman tied to the tree, a blind rage had come over me, and I hadn't slowed down to inspect my surroundings. I assumed it was her, and after the two days we spent together, making love and magic, I was furious that she'd attempted to betray me again.

Except it wasn't her, and when I sprang back for my lute, they came out of the woods and beat me down with heavy blows. My strength had sapped away under the onslaught, and blood dribbled out of my mouth as they bound my arms and legs, put a hood over my head, and dragged me away.

When they snatched the hood off, I sensed I was underground, and try as I might, I couldn't break free. I needed blood. I needed her.

The odd thing was that I sensed her, and it only added to my frustration. Was she behind the knights who tortured me, looking on from above while I drowned in pain? Was she aware of what was happening?

They flayed my flesh with blades, beat me with whips, and punched my face until my nose and jaw were bruised and broken. Then they threw me into a black hole where I let darkness surround me, seeking relief from the torment of the flesh and of my mind.

But there was none.

Then, she appeared. The strength in her voice frightened me, the determination as she came down, unaware of what had

happened, determined to save me. But the violence done against me had sent me reeling back to my savage days, and while I could stand, I wasn't healed enough to hoist myself up and wreak havoc on my tormentors.

So when she came down, claiming she could heal me, I reverted to the old version of myself. Self-destructive in my self-preservation. Stinking and wet and bloody and broken, I snatched her as though she were a meal and sank my teeth into her neck.

As soon as I started sucking her blood, I felt her stiffen against me, her body ripe with fear, and oh, it was delicious. The animalistic side of me took over, and I drank deeply.

As blood moved through my body, the pain ebbed away, the brokenness began to heal, and my reason returned. She was light and love, my moon goddess whose presence was like a healing balm, who drove out the darkness within and made me feel as though I didn't need to live as a cursed man.

But here I was, repeating the mistakes of the past and treating her like a sacrifice. I'd kill her with my feeding, and there would be no future except for the knowledge that my accusers had won.

Again.

They thought me vile, evil, the reason the vampires plagued the land. Little did they know that I was trying to get rid of them too.

Taking all my willpower, I forced myself to stop, lips still pressed against her neck. Slowly, I forced myself to release my hold on her, my mouth wet as I pulled back. She trembled in my arms, misery and fear plain on her face, though I didn't think she could see me as clearly in the darkness as I could see her.

My heart sank because I'd done the worst. I'd confirmed all her fears and wiped out the fragile trust between us with one action.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I...they broke me, and I needed blood to heal."

Her voice trembled, broken. “Why didn’t you ask?”

Shame enveloped me, and no words would come, even as my body knit together again as the blood took hold.

Lucia pushed on, a sob in her voice. “Titus, one of my friends was brutally murdered. They found her on the doorstep of the abbey, throat ripped open. It was bloody, it was terrible, and I want to believe you’re not capable of such an action. But right now, I’m afraid, and I don’t want to set you free only for it to be a terrible mistake.”

“Then leave me,” I whispered, anguish climbing into my soul. I didn’t deserve this life. I didn’t deserve her. “But if you do, my brother will win.”

“Is he the one responsible?”

“I was with you that night, Lucia. But after what I just did, you’ll believe me capable of anything. Remember our time together in the woods, the one day and one night we spent together. That was me. The true me. Who I could be without the darkness pressing in. I was a desperate fool just now, and yes, in the past, I used to take blood without asking, to help me live. But then you came along, and I no longer felt the need, the urge. Even now, standing in your presence, the need continues to recede. If there is any faith, any forgiveness left in your heart for me, set me free, and I will take the knights to the den of vampires. I will take them to the vampire king.”

“How can I trust your word? You just bit me? The one unforgivable action, the one thing that damned you to be a lord of the night.”

“I’m not asking you to trust me. All I’m asking is for you to have faith. What I did was wrong, so let me do one action that is right before I end my days. Let me save you, and I’ll sacrifice myself and leave you in peace. I’d hoped your light would be enough, but my darkness is a stain. It’s evil and corruption, and it creeps everywhere. My brother was right to warn you about me. I am the darkness that destroys all, and in time, I will destroy you, too. But I will hold off just a little longer. All I ask is that you give me one last chance.”

Tears streamed down Lucia's cheeks, mingling with the smear of blood I'd left on her neck. She lifted a hand to the chain and called. "Edith, we're coming up."

LUCIA



Edith had once said, love wasn't selfish or self-serving, and I felt the potent need in his words, the regret and hopelessness tinged with a deep and abiding pain. I knew this man as I knew my own soul, and in time I would forgive him, but that didn't mean that I trusted him.

As we climbed back up to Edith, I refused to think about the choice I'd have to make. I was a priestess of Veilix, one who walked in the light, one aware of magic now. This was but a moment in time that helped me fully, deeply understand the vows I'd taken. The future was hard enough to see, but I could focus on the here and now, the promise of defeating the vampires and restoring the land to the people. The night was beautiful, dark, and lovely, lit with starlight. It was not fair that with twilight came fear.

By the time I scrambled out of the hole, I was filthy, and the wretched stink of the pit clung to me like garden slugs. In the low light, I could see Titus clearly, and his appearance broke my heart. He'd claimed to need my blood for healing, and if it had done its work, I could not tell. Both his eyes were black and swollen, his nose crooked, his jaw puffy, and his clothes covered in patches of sticky blood. He bent over, catching his breath, and I wasn't sure how he was even on his feet. The fact that he'd bitten me seemed the least of our problems now that he was in the light.

I pivoted toward Edith, who was staring at him, horror on her face. "How could they do this?"

I imagined she and Captain Elroy would have words tonight. “Are the halls clear? I want to take him to my room.”

Edith turned her expression of horror to me now. She shook her head. “No, you need to take him to the sacred waters. Let him heal there.”

Now it was my turn to glare at her. “Only the High Priestess has access, and if she catches us, she will cast us out for defiling the waters.”

Edith squeezed my hand. “I wasn’t asking. We have cause to be in that place. If I had known it was this bad, I wouldn’t have suggested that we wait.”

I swallowed hard while Edith turned to Titus.

“I’m Edith. I hear you can help us get rid of the vampires.”

Titus straightened, pressing a hand to his ribs, and when he spoke, his voice was firm, “I will lead the knights there myself.”

“Good.” Edith dusted her hands as though the matter was settled. “We will take you to the healing waters, and I will talk with the captain of the guards.”

“Lean against me if you need to,” I told Titus, wondering if I should offer more of my blood.

He’d taken me by surprise in the pit, but now I understood. He was a man in despair, teetering on the edges of a cliff until I’d come, and he’d leaped in one desperate grasp for salvation.

The sacred waters were on the main level of the abbey, where a staircase led down to the pool. High windows were set at ground level even though the pool was recessed in the ground. I’d rarely come here, for there were many pools to bathe in throughout the region, and I preferred being in nature instead of the dark waters of the sacred pool.

Perhaps it was a childhood fear of the water. Some of the older priestesses had teased me, saying the water would find all impurities and burn them away, or if one with sin entered the waters, the monster of the deep would swallow them whole.

Those old fears resurfaced as Edith picked the lock and led us down. My heart throbbed in my throat, half expecting someone to be down there, waiting to pounce on us. But the pool was just an uncanny black pool.

Edith wasted no time in lighting the flickering torches and placing a bundle of towels and clothes near the pool's edge. "I'll leave you two," she said, clutching at her necklace. "I'm going to speak to Captain Elroy, and I have faith we will be able to resolve this peaceably. Bar the door, Lucia. If the knights come looking for you, the first place they'll go is your room and then the garden."

I followed Edith to the door. "Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

Edith grimaced. "I'm furious with the knights and the High Priestess. We know better than to act out of grief and try to resolve problems with violence. I'm angry with Captain Elroy for keeping secrets from me, of all people, and I'm sorry, so sorry, Lucia."

I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "I keep thinking of the words you spoke about love and about our vows. Love is many things, but it is also the tool you'll use to set things right. I have faith."

Edith's eyes narrowed. "I'm beginning to think this is a punishment for going against my vows and having my head in the clouds. I didn't see what was happening around me because I was focused on him."

"Forgive yourself," I encouraged. "If you stoop to the same level of violence and anger, then you are no better than them."

"Wise words, my friend, now bolt the door and don't open it unless it's me."

She left, and I was alone with Titus.

At least he'd had the decency to wait until she was gone before he started struggling out of his clothes. Grunting as he moved wounded limbs. I went to his side as he shrugged off

his shirt, his skin dark and mottled from bruising. I wanted to touch him, but I was afraid of hurting him.

“Do you need more blood?” I offered instead.

His eyes were no longer luminous when he looked at me. “No,” he answered shortly, sliding into the pool.

“What can I do to help?”

He waded further into the water until it came up to his waist. Letting out a deep sigh, he faced me and held out a hand. “Join me, my moon goddess.”

A glimmer of his old self was back, and his lips lifted, almost in teasing.

“Don’t watch me undress,” I scolded.

He paused, and I guessed what his retort would be, but all the same, he turned his back. I glanced at the waters, then dipped a bare toe into the warmth. Nothing snatched at my ankle. No monster came up to grab me. Ironic how I was frightened of the water but not of him.

Tossing off my dress, I slipped into the pool, walking deeper into the water until it surged around my shoulders. Only then did I dare to face Titus. He floated on his back, eyes closed, which only made me braver.

Still, the unsettling blackness of the water unnerved me despite the torches Edith had lit. Letting my arms sink into the water, I watched my runes, and ever so slowly, they began to glow. Silver light pulsed through the waters, scattering the darkness and showing me the smooth bottom of the pool. Tiny fish swam in it, darting away from the light until it was impossible to hide.

A warmth filled me, and I smiled, striding deeper in, moving toward Titus. Relief rolled off my shoulders in waves of heat, warming the pool. Another long sigh left Titus’s parted lips.

The water flowed off his body like feathers while the light from my runes shone like fingers, highlighting his bruises and making his skin whole. It was uncanny to watch because I

wasn't a healer, yet something in my blood sang to him. I wondered if it was because we were bound together with a vow not said by words but by physical action.

The memory of making love drew me to his side, and, as if sensing me near, he opened his eyes. They were bloodshot but no longer black. His nose had healed, and his jaw was only slightly puffy. His fingers curled around my wrist, and my skin tingled when his thumb brushed over the tiny bones there.

"Your light is healing me," he whispered, confirming my suspicions. "It's also making me hungry."

I blanched, and he hurried on, realizing his mistake. "Hungry for real food, not blood. Lucia, my moon goddess, you should know my taste for blood vanished on the day I met you."

"What are you saying?"

"I think you're breaking my curse."

My heart leaped with joy and hope so fraught and delectable, I tasted the essence on my lips. "What will you become when you are no longer cursed?"

"Free to walk in the light without fear or the lust for blood haunting my steps. Free to be normal, as any other man, to choose my destiny, where I go, where I dwell, who I love."

His eyes held mine.

Hope budded, then bloomed, and my runes glowed brighter.

"It's presumptuous of me," he said. "But that has been an attribute of our entire relationship, hasn't it?"

I nodded, my words lost to the thudding of my heart. It was odd to be looking down at him because usually, he was the one in control, towering above me. Tonight, our roles were reversed. I'd come to his aid, to protect him, to save him.

"Any future I can imagine centers on you, but I don't know what you want. I've never asked. So this is me asking, what do you want, my dear moon goddess?"

I tilted my head, studying the lines of his beautiful face, the strength in his body, and the way my light curled around him so gently, tenderly. “I’m not sure what the future holds, and I’m afraid to look into it because I’m not ready to choose. This is my home; it’s always been my home, but it’s not possible to be a priestess and also...” I trailed off.

“I’ve made you question everything, haven’t it?”

“It’s been difficult.”

Instead of his sly grin, he sobered. “It was not my intention. I was drawn to your light and goodness, and I’m aware it’s too great of an ask to draw you to my darkness.”

“But there is good within you,” I protested.

“Don’t flatter yourself. All my will and resistance is for you. I’d tear this abbey down and destroy every knight who ever laid so much as a finger on me. But I know you wouldn’t respect me for that. Instead, I will lead them to the den of darkness, and when this is over, I will respect whatever decision you make regarding your future.”

“You speak as though vanquishing the vampires will break your curse?”

Titus rose in the water, and his broad arms encircled my waist. He bent his head and reverently brushed his lips across mine, as light as the wings of a butterfly. “I saw your face, felt you stiffen with fear when I bit you. I was but a shell of myself, full of raw anger, and it was a natural reaction to take what I needed. It was wrong of me, and you had every right to leave me in that stinking pit. Yet you forgave me. I felt it zing through my soul, and it gave me hope and determination. I never want to lose control like that again.”

“I didn’t know what they’d done to you. You had every right—”

“Don’t excuse my sin.”

“It was your contriteness, your willingness to change, that told me to give you a chance, to trust you.”

His brows knitted together. “I have a question, though. When the knights were torturing me, they kept demanding I tell them why I wrote the letters. You’d even mentioned one to me, once, but I wasn’t interested at the time. Tell me, what do you know about letters?”

“Letters from the vampire king? The captain and the high priestess shared them with me, and I admit I was disturbed. But...they are all signed from VK, which I assumed meant the Vampire King. If you didn’t write them, then perhaps your brother did.”

Titus sagged back into the water, ducking under it and then resurfacing, a wounded look crossing his face. “Have I been a fool all this time, and my brother controlled the wheel of fate? Driving me to madness?”

“You didn’t know,” I confirmed.

“In these letters, were there demands for supplies?”

“There were.”

“Food, wine, paints, perhaps?”

“Yes, why?”

“My brother is an artist, and he’s aware of my weakness for blood.”

“The letters demanded me, specifically, not by name but by my runes. I thought...”

“You thought I might be duplicitous.”

“I wasn’t sure what to believe.”

An incredulous look swept over his face, and he ran his fingers through his wet hair. “Yet you still came for me. You are a miracle, my moon, my heart, and now I understand. I know what I must do.”

LUCIA



The waters glimmered with the silver light from my runes until we exited the pool, taking turns drying each other and dressing in the fresh robes Edith had left for us. Titus' stomach growled, and he winced as we went to the door. I unbarred it, and we slipped out, aware there wasn't a way to lock it behind us. I glanced at Titus as we moved into the shadows of the abbey. What had once felt like home seemed a place where I might be condemned should I be caught.

Fortunately, the lateness of the hour and the knowledge of what might be happening outside had drawn the sisters to hide behind closed doors, praying for the long night to end, hoping that no one else would fall prey to the claws of the vampires.

The kitchen was mildly chaotic now that Faith was gone, and the sisters who kept it had done their best. Still, it was easy to filch a flask of water, a wedge of cheese and bread, and a hunk of salted meat. I was about to suggest we go to my room, but Titus fell upon the food, ravenous. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen him eat before. Sitting in the kitchen with wet hair falling over his forehead, both elbows on the table as he chewed, he looked like nothing more than a man wrongly accused.

My heart squeezed, and a softness gathered around me, making my eyes tear up. I buried my nose in a cup of tea, unsure about my response to him and what it meant. Looking into the future was frightening because I couldn't imagine a road that would take me far from here, nor did I want to become one of the villagers. Although the idea of a cottage

and a garden overlooking the bluff, maybe a farm animal or two, did not sound terrible. Yet existing just to love him was woefully bereft of purpose, and that was what I desired as a priestess. A purpose.

Unlike Edith, I didn't believe I could live in the abbey and hide behind my so-called vows and still serve as an example for the people. Where, then, did it leave me?

“Are you weary?”

Titus's voice cut through my thoughts, and a wave of exhaustion came over me. “I am. Shall we retire?”

“Together? Won't the High Priestess damn us?”

“Don't use such words in the abbey,” I scolded. “I can't risk letting you out of my sight.”

He stood. “Indeed. I am tempted to leave now under the cover of darkness and never return. But I made you a promise, and should your friend find success with the knights, this will soon be over.”

“How will you handle your brother?” I asked faintly.

“When I am free, he will be just as free. I suspect we will go our separate ways.”

I stared at the lines of his face, the set of his jaw, still mesmerized by how quickly he healed. Further proof that he wasn't human. “What will you do?”

“Of that, I'm not sure. It depends.”

The quietness of the moment seeped through me, the question lingering on his lips. I strode to the door, and he followed in my footsteps as I led him upstairs to my room.

Our luck held. No one walked the halls, and we slipped inside unseen. I locked the door, and by the time I turned around, Titus had already tossed off his shirt and slipped into bed.

He held the covers to his nose and let out a soft groan. “It smells like you, all earthy and delicious.”

He held out his arms to me, and I joined him, pushing away thoughts of conflict and fear as he tucked my head against his chest. Moments of silence stretched, and his body relaxed around me. His breathing grew deep and I knew the nightmare, his nightmare, was over.

TITUS

A halo of golden light shone through the window, and I opened my eyes to warmth. Lucia's fingers were entangled in mine, her hair soft against my cheek, her breath feathering over my heart. Our bodies molded into each other, even in sleep. My thoughts lingered on the fact that she hadn't rejected me despite seeing the darkness of my heart. What the knights had done to me in their anger, in their desire for revenge, had been wrong. Yet deep inside, as my body reeled from their blows and bones broke beneath the assault, I was aware that I deserved it all.

I'd done much worse in my prime, when I was a gallant knight with a heart full of evil deeds in service to the sorceress. She twisted words, made my work sound meaningful, when all I did was harm those who looked to me for refuge and safety and salvation. Leaving to become the master of my own destiny and choose another path had been my goal, but darkness dragged me down regardless of what I did, and with me fell my brother.

Slowly, I untangled myself from the richness of Lucia. She did not wake, even when I pressed a kiss against her temple. Barefoot, I padded across the carpet. Her room was modest, plain, without a need for wealth or riches, as expected from one who had dedicated their life to the service of the people. It was a deep contrast to the caverns Sylvester and I had filled with the goods we'd stolen, traded, or bargained for, wealth we assumed would give us comfort while we rotted in the darkness, waiting for the day of salvation.

I'd assumed that Sylvester had given up the pursuit of light, that he was comfortable dwelling in the darkness, focused on his sculptures and paintings. I forgot he, too, carried his secrets, and why wouldn't he seek the answer right at our fingertips? Apparently, he had, and he'd forced my hand. All this time, I'd assumed he was focused on his selfish interests when he was trying to save us. For there was only one person who would write those letters, demanding goods in exchange for one soul.

V.K.

Lucia assumed it stood for Vampire King, and perhaps that had been his intent all along. I knew there was no such thing as a vampire king and the initials stood for Vester Kane. The name of our shared father. Sylvester was named for him, and when I was younger, I called him Vester, but he left that name behind when we entered our days of cursed darkness.

He was better than I, refusing to succumb to drinking fresh blood or trying to regain what was lost. Instead, he poured himself into his studies and artistic pursuits, finally having the time to do exactly what he wished.

And then there was the mine.

We'd tunneled deeper into the mountainside and had awakened the vampires. Or rather, freed them. They came for blood, they grew and morphed, and only my lute and sunlight kept them at bay. But that was not entirely true either.

I glanced at the curtains covering the window, the strip of sunlight bleeding through. Would it hurt if I stood within it? Would it reduce me to dust as I deserved, or had Lucia healed me and broken my curse?

I took another step toward it, willing myself to try. The vampires hadn't devoured Sylvester and me because we were gods to them, the ones who freed them from captivity.

What a mistake.

That sin had haunted me, and then I'd morphed, realizing how similar I was to those shadows that worshipped me, who mimicked my actions and trailed after me in the dark like a

dog seeking its master. It was only by chance I discovered my lute kept them at bay, and it led me to play more. I discovered that music also calmed my soul, made me clear-headed and less likely to act with impulse.

Sylvester hadn't been interested in the vampires nor in figuring out how to stop them from devouring the village. Now I wondered if he'd trailed me too, seen my habits, and knew my weakness. Knew I'd save the priestess with the glowing runes, guessed that I'd be unable to help myself, drawn to her light. Using her for her goodness, a welcome distraction, a lovely distraction. And then...only then, when I'd gotten to know her, had I fallen.

Ironic how I was the one trapped in an abbey while he was out there, the master of chaos, bringing wrath and ruin to all who tread in his path. I did not blame him, but for once, I saw from his perspective the unfairness of being cursed because of actions outside of his control, the calmness with which he hatched his plan, and his patience as he waited for the finale.

I'd played my part out of ignorance, and now, I'd choose. Choose to walk in the light, to save others, to save her because I was past redeeming, past saving. Hadn't I fought so hard for my freedom, only for it to come to naught?

Boldly, I stepped into the light. Closing my eyes, I opened my hands wide, letting heat inflame my skin.

It hurt.

After years spent in darkness, avoiding the light from the sun, living by the insignificant replication of light held by a multitude of candles, the heat of the sun was like a fire blazing over my skin.

Painful, but it did not consume me. I stepped more fully into the light, soaking it in, letting it take my darkness, erase it, and make me whole.

A soft gasp came from the bed. Lucia had awoken and seen me, bathed in the glory of daylight. My lips moved in reverent prayer, for I wasn't burning up or turning to dust.

Despite the agony with which the light held me, it slowly receded, bit by bit.

Tears streamed down my face, and I took deep breaths, chest heaving.

I was whole. I was clean. Healed. She had broken my curse.

LUCIA



I wasn't sure what startled me awake, my heart pounding in my chest as though I needed to flee. My gaze darted about the room and finally landed on Titus, standing in front of the open window in the light. His hands were lifted, head tilted back, and eyes closed. A cry of fear tore from my lips.

It was too late to leap out of bed and tackle him to the floor. He was fully immersed in sunlight. Even though light radiated through him, he wasn't screaming with pain or burning or melting or whatever happened to vampires when daylight touched their skin.

In fact, he was drinking it in as though the light was burning away all the darkness and impurities within him. Wasn't he cursed to walk in the darkness with a hunger for blood that would turn him into a monster? Had he overcome that sway toward evil and broken his curse?

Emotion overwhelmed me, and I could not say whether it was joy or sorrow or both. Joy that he was free, sorrow because it meant he would leave and I'd have to choose.

Yet before I had a chance to fully remark on it, to mull through my thoughts and reach out to him, the door burst open.

"I tried to stop them!" Edith shouted from somewhere in the back, but knights surged in, followed by Captain Elory and High Priestess Merci.

I leaped out of bed, but the knights froze, staring in astonishment at Titus. The incredulous look on their faces told

me they'd expected to burst into a salacious situation, perhaps me torn limb from limb while Titus crept through the abbey, searching for his next victim.

“Get out!” I ordered tightly, pointing at the door. “He didn't kill Faith. He's not responsible for these deaths. You're the ones picking the wrong victim to atone for these vile crimes.”

“It's okay,” Titus said, his voice gentle as he faced his accusers.

I fell back a step, bumping into the bed as I stared at him. His skin was practically translucent, and light radiated from him.

“You did what you felt you needed to do, but now I will lead you to the nest, where you can fight the vampires and trap them in their misery once again.”

I felt the eyes of the High Priestess on me, but I refused to look at her. She and Captain Elroy had tricked me and I'd kept a terrible secret from them. Now it had come to this.

I wasn't sure what I should say yet, but the High Priestess finally spoke. “Do as she says. We will wait for you outside.”

The knights exited hastily, and then it was Titus and me.

“I'm sorry—” I began, but he lifted his hand.

Kneeling in the halo of sunlight, he stretched out his hands to me and spoke, his voice tinged with awe, “Look what you have wrought, my moon goddess.”

“Me?” I whispered, moving closer to him.

“Look.” He turned his arm, showing me his skin. “This light within, it's not from me, nor is the light that shines in the day. Your runes glow. They glisten because this light came from you. Your goodness, your mercy, your faith, and your love not only healed me but also broke the curse that kept me chained to darkness and foul deeds. I can breathe again. I can stand in the light. I feel it. The past has been washed away. I am clean and whole again.”

I pressed my palm against his face, feeling the warmth there. “You’re crying.”

“So are you,” he replied, then pressed his face against my waist and held me.

I ran my fingers through his hair, soaking in his warmth. It was hard to believe I had done this, yet when I looked at him, really looked at him, all I saw was light.

It shone out of his eyes, his ears, and I felt it too, the connection to him and eternal longing. Despite the fact I wasn’t dressed and the knights stood outside my bedroom door, all of it felt far away. They could wait longer while I witnessed this miracle.

Kneeling in front of Titus, I took his head in my hands and kissed him. He tasted like tears, sweet and salty, full of hope. His arms wove around me, pulling me closer, holding me tightly as he kissed me back. I leaned into him, embracing his warmth, losing myself in the moment’s purity, for it felt new and right.

This wasn’t the stolen kiss of a vampire king seeking a lust-driven connection, nor was it the urgent kiss of an immortal with a magical lute that kept the shadows away.

Again, this wasn’t the kiss of Titus, who’d taken the hut of a hunter and turned it into a place to dwell alone.

This was the kiss of a man who had found salvation. It was long and gentle and sweet, so sweet my heart turned over again and again.

“I love you,” I whispered like a prayer, pressing my face against the hollow of his neck, not ready to let go, not ready for what came next because it would rip him away from me.

Fingers tangled through my hair, pressing me closer, holding me tight. “I felt your love, not in words, but in action. Last night...you saw me at my absolute worst and still gave me hope. What greater love is that?”

“What happens next?” I dared to ask.

He brushed his fingers over my lips, lifting my face so I could see his solemn expression. “I need my lute, and I need your light. Then we lead the knights to the den of vampires. I will play, and you will shine, just like we did on the hillock when the vampires grew curious.”

“Skin to skin.”

“Yes. Just like that.” His lips found mine again in a slow, seductive kiss. “When this is over, I’m taking you somewhere private, where we won’t be interrupted by knights and priestesses.”

I sighed. “I will dress. I’m sure they are anxious to begin.”



By the time we left the room, the knights had been dismissed. Captain Elroy waited, face pale, with Edith beside him, her eyes bright with exhaustion. High Priestess Merci stood apart, arms crossed, her face an expressionless mask. My heart twisted as I emerged with Titus behind me, but my gaze went to Edith because I’d stopped caring what the High Priestess and the Captain thought of me.

“Let’s go to my study,” Captain Elroy suggested.

Without waiting for an agreement, he turned his back and strode down the hall. Edith hesitated, her eyes finding mine before she followed him. The High Priestess stood back, waiting, watching. It felt wrong to touch Titus under her watchful eye, but all the same, I lifted my chin and took his hand. It wasn’t in defiance of her, not truly, but more of a stance to show her where I stood. At this rate, I wouldn’t have to make a choice. I’d get myself banned from the abbey just for my actions.

Inside the study, we stood around a map, the men sizing up each other. Edith had taken a detour to the kitchens and appeared with a platter of tea and honey buns. My stomach rumbled at the sight, and it was a relief to cradle a warm cup

of tea and have something else to focus on other than the awkwardness of the room.

It was High Priestess Merci who spoke first, “I think it’s time we cleared the air between us and came forward with the truth. Lucia, you are familiar with this...” She stumbled over the next word. “Man. Captain Elroy, you don’t seem surprised, and Edith, the fact that you were up all night in the garrison is concerning. Someone, please explain.”

Captain Elroy picked up a letter and passed it to Titus. “It started with the letters. Did you write them?”

Titus frowned over the words, even though he’d guessed the contents. Instead of answering the question, he placed the letter on the map and crossed his arms. “Did it ever occur to you that perhaps you shouldn’t answer the demands of a letter from an unknown source? Did you ever see this VK who demanded those goods and supplies?”

A spark of irritation crossed Captain Elroy’s face. “The goods were delivered. We never saw to whom. We left a wagon full as he requested.”

“It is in our nature to give,” the High Priestess interrupted. “If we have goods that those in need can use, why not be generous and share?”

Titus shook his head in disbelief. “Because once you give, more will be expected of you. The letters didn’t stop, did they? They only demanded more. They demanded her.”

All eyes turned to me, but I held the High Priestess’s gaze. “You taught me there is no greater sacrifice than giving up one’s self to save others. That’s why I volunteered to set the trap, to end the reign of darkness. But Titus isn’t the vampire king. He’s not even a vampire, as you saw this morning when he stood in the light. He was a cursed knight, searching for redemption.”

Captain Elroy steered us away from the dangerous topic. “If you didn’t write these, who did?”

“Is this naught but another interrogation?” Titus said. “Isn’t your goal to end the rule of vampires and set free this

village to enjoy the delights of both the day and night? If that is your goal, I will take you to the bowels of the mountains where the vampires hide. But we should go now, while they are asleep and set a trap, as you are so fond of doing.”

“It is, indeed, our goal, but how do we know we can trust you?”

Titus glanced at me. “Because Lucia stands before you, free and unharmed. You recall the first night you set a trap for me, how you and your knights fell asleep under the power of my music. Lucia and I tested it; with her magic and my magic combined, we can keep the vampires at bay.”

“He’s been teaching me how to use my runes,” I interrupted, desperate. “I understand them now, the power of magic I didn’t know I had. This can work. If we fill the caverns with music and light, the vampires will not be able to withstand it. They will flee while the knights cut them down.”

Captain Elroy frowned and picked up the letter. “I do not deny the sense of the plan, but I am concerned about the person who wrote this. If I were to guess, there is more than one of you.”

Titus’s face gave away nothing, but his eyes turned steely. “If there is another, he is my problem, not yours.”

Captain Elroy took a step forward, his jaw tight. “How will you ensure he will not manipulate us?”

“Because he wants the same thing we want. Freedom.”

“Did he kill Faith?” The High Priestess asked, her voice high and thick with worry.

Titus raked his fingers through his hair, and I recalled his words from days ago. *He’s not a killer like me.* If Titus’s brother didn’t do this, it had to be one of the vampires. They were known for their mindless attacks, but usually not so close to the abbey. Something must have compelled Faith to go outside. Did she, too, carry dark secrets like Edith and I?

“Does it matter who the killer is? Clearly, the vampires are responsible for brutal deaths in the night. If we are to destroy them, it is best we go now and reach their hiding place while

they are still sleeping. Or would you prefer to interrogate me further?”

Captain Elroy looked as though he wished to separate Titus’s head from his body. Instead, he crossed his arms. “I will rouse my men.”

We waited in the garden while Captain Elroy gathered his knights. Titus wandered among the plants, touching each one and picking pieces of fruit to eat before ever so often lifting his face to the sunlight. He acted like a man reborn, and my heart squeezed every time I looked at him.

The High Priestess had been called away to assist the sisters, but Edith sank onto a bench in the shade, her head in her hands. I sat down beside her and tugged her sleeve. “How did it go with Captain Elroy?”

“Oh, Elroy.” She snorted but lifted her head and faced me. “We talked a lot last night, and...I can’t go on like this. You were right, Lucia, to feel conflicted. I broke my vows and chose love, and while it did make me a better person, I also sank to a different level. I believed sneaking around and hiding the truth was good for everyone, but it just made Elroy and me keep secrets from each other. Secrets that didn’t need to be kept. I don’t want to hide anymore. I want to walk in the light even if it means I can’t be a priestess anymore. I will live in the village and just be a healer. It will allow me to serve the people without breaking my vows.”

“And what of Elroy?” I asked, my eyes drawn to Titus because I was thinking the same thing. What would happen when we vanquished the vampires and no longer needed each other?

“My heart will always belong to him, but we both agreed that we need to start over and do things right. No more hiding. No more secrets. Today is the start.”

I clasped her hand in my lap, my certainty somewhat shaken in the light of her admission. Originally, she’d sounded so confident in her love, in her choice to keep it a secret, and now she wanted to walk in the light and give up her calling. I did not know if I was brave enough to do the same.

“You’re going with him, aren’t you?”

Edith’s question broke me out of my thoughts.

I nodded. “Yes, I’ve finally discovered what the markings on my skin are. Magic. Light.”

“You really are a moon goddess, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel divine, just very human and prone to making mistakes.”

“Aren’t we all? Ironic how we can focus on doing something wrong in order to make something right happen when that’s no way to exist. We should focus on truth and purity and love. I lost sight of it.”

“I did too.”

“Ah, but you were meant to be a sacrifice, to give your life in exchange for others.”

“Instead, I fell prey to lust, then love.”

“I will not judge you because I did the same.”

I glanced back at the towering walls of the abbey. “It makes me wonder how many of us walk around with secrets, who think we are doing right when we are causing harm to ourselves and perhaps to others.”

Edith traced her fingers over my runes, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “It’s the light within us that empowers us to make better choices. We always have to remember to reach for it instead of giving into the grayness, to the darkness brought on by twilight.”

“You’re right, and I like the way you put it. It’s the light that broke his curse.”

“If you love him, you should take a chance on him,” Edith encouraged.

“I have to make a choice, but I’m not sure what it will be yet.”

The back door swung open, and the High Priestess stepped out. “It’s time.”

LUCIA



Titus led the way into the tunnels, my hand firmly in his. The caverns were cold, damp, and even darker in the daylight. Despite the armed knights behind us, the darkness was even more unnerving. The flicker of every shadow felt like the breath of a monster, rising out of the rock walls to strike down the knights.

Even as we led the way, I sensed the hesitation, the tenseness in their muscles as they spoiled for a fight. With that knowledge came the fear that Titus and I were vastly outnumbered. Once the vampires were dead, nothing I could do would stop the knights from running Titus through on the edge of their blades.

“I need my lute,” Titus announced, pausing in front of a doorway. “I’ll be right back.”

“No!” Captain Elroy’s raised voice echoed down the pathway. “We will not fall prey to your music again.”

Titus released my hand and sidestepped into the entrance anyway. “The music is not for you. This time, it will not harm you. All the same, close your ears if you must. This is how I fight the vampires, and when the time comes, you’ll be glad of my help.”

A minute stretched, and then he was back again. Cradling the lute in one arm, he took my hand and led us deeper. The torches the knights carried lit up the place, showing carvings on the walls, some murals, and great paintings of man and monster alike.

My runes tingled as we weaved further in until, at last, we stepped into a cavernous hall, a circular orb like a moon set in stone. Deep grooves covered the ground. As the knights walked around the cavern, I saw that it was a sort of design. Four deep grooves ran toward the middle of the cavern where a section of the floor was raised. The hairs on my arms stood up straight as I realized what it was—a place of arcane sacrifice. A place where the blood ran to be lapped up by the beasts who fed. This place hadn't been designed by mindless bloodsuckers, and again, I thought of the giants of old who used to live in the mountains. They'd given in to evil and darkness. Because of their sins, they'd become the undying.

“This is where we will fight,” Titus announced. “Pick your battle stations, and I will lure them out with my song.”

His fingertips touched the strings of the lute. A melodic sound echoed through the chamber.

A bead of sweat dripped down my brow because I had come to the place of battle. I wasn't ready, but this would be my sacrifice, the true demonstration of what I'd do to save the village, to lay down my life to save others and to help Titus.

Captain Elroy called out orders, and his knights spread around the chamber, swords and shields in hand. Occasionally, Captain Elroy fired a question at Titus, who responded with further guidance. My heart throbbed, my breath coming short and fast while they assembled. The enormity of the place overwhelmed me, and every shadow looked like an enemy. I recalled the way the vampires morphed and shifted as they climbed the hill, the pale orbs of their eyes shining in the darkness, wicked sharp teeth ready to sink into warm skin and drain all life away.

“Look at me,” Titus said, his voice a gentle command.

I ripped my gaze from the activity surrounding us and met his sky-blue gaze. His eyes shimmered like the deep pools the waterfalls created. Mesmerized, my fear faded.

His fingers tightened around my wrist. “Look only at me. Not at them, not at the chaos and carnage soon to come. You are pure, full of beauty and light and love. Don't let the

madness that is about to take place taint you. No matter what you hear, keep your eyes closed. Listen to the music and shine. Shine for me.”

“I will.” The promise easily left my lips.

Titus tipped his head upward. “We’re going to the ledge above. It is an ideal place for sound to carry and will keep you out of harm’s way.”

“I’m with you,” I whispered.

I kept my eyes on him as he led me up the slope to the ledge. Leaning his lute against the wall, he took off his shirt. The heat from his body surrounded me, and a flare twisted through my belly.

“Stand behind me,” he instructed, picking up the lute. “Put your arms around my waist and press yourself against me. Skin to skin.”

Loosening the top of my gown, I embraced him, my mouth against his shoulder, just for a moment. A sigh left his lips. “Close your eyes, my moon goddess, and shine for me. Wipe the blight of darkness away with your life. Just as your love broke my curse, so your light can break the curse on this mountain.”

Notes from the lute broke through the silence. A lure, a call, echoing through the cavern. The knights doused the torches and blended into the blackness, waiting for the opportune moment. There were two openings in the cavern, and the knights were clustered around both. They’d fight the interlopers, backing up together until they were arm to arm, fighting in a ring to protect each other from the vampires.

I kept my eyes open as Titus played, the anticipation biting me, twisting through my belly as we waited. His song grew louder, bolder, and then a rustling came, a scampering of feet and claws. Then the rustle of voices, hushed and inhuman. My heart kicked as the darkness grew thicker, and I wondered if the knights felt what I felt: the deep tension in the air, the oppression of darkness, and the fear. It was ripe and bold and there. Were they afraid as I was?

“Lucia,” Titus said. “I feel your heartbeat. Focus on me. Think of us. Close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes.

“Take a deep breath.” He went on, “Let your heart rate settle down. They are drawn to fear, and you are not fear. You are beyond that. Let the knights do their job. Let them fight as they know best. I will play as I know best, and you will let your magic loose.”

I took a deep breath and focused on what was within. The magic, the light, the music, and the man in my arms. Knowledge thrummed through me, for at last, I was where I was meant to be all along, with the man who was meant for me, in the very place, an arcane place where the fight for freedom would take place.

Music curled around me as though it were within my very soul, and my skin itched, then tingled as my runes began to glow. Even with my eyes shut, I felt the blaze of my light, the warmth of the heat as it connected. The elegy Titus played grew long and mournful, a cry, a lament of loss.

At first I wondered why he played for the vampires, for I heard the shouts of the knights, the swing of their swords, and the crash of their shields as they fought below me. I imagined they were using the fire from their torches to drive back the vampires, knocking them back with what frightened them, what burned them. Why would he play for them, an elegy of twilight, a lament for the darkness?

But as I listened, I understood the wordless song was not for them. It was for all the lost souls who the vampires used to be before they became the undead, the undying. And I realized that I knew all along what had happened to the giants of old who dwelled in the mountain.

They’d fallen prey to the darkness and dug deeply into the veins of the mountain. One bite and the virus spread the thirst for blood, driving them to do the unthinkable. They’d all given in to the lure of twilight, spending their days in the darkness and their nights feasting. Feasting on each other, feasting on what was left until they were all vampires, one with the

mountain and the darkness, diving deeper, seeking more blood until there was no one left.

I imagined from there, they had no recourse but to fall asleep, to wait out their undying days. Eventually, a new population had come, and a new village was founded, yet the scourge of the vampires was unknown. No one explored the depths of the mountain, the unknown tunnels and lengths of blackness.

Not until Titus and his brother. For hadn't the vampires resurfaced when they'd come? Was that the guilt that Titus held onto? That and the fact that he was cursed to be no better than them?

No, this was no elegy for the knights who faced blood and battle, but a song for the souls of the giants, those lost to twilight, cursed to only look upon the face of the moon and desire blood to live again.

That was their darkness, their curse, and the light I held spelled freedom for all. Holding him tighter, I pressed my lips against his neck and let out the magic. It whooshed out of me like the wind, and it was then, only then, that I opened my eyes and watched rays of white light shoot like fingers. A heavenly light filled the cavern as though the very moon had come down to glow in a brilliance of white luster.

A terrible screaming came, a shout as smoke flared into ash and the vampires burned. I heard the deep guttural screams, the cries of agony, the shouts of the knights, and yet they all seemed far away as Titus played, loud and long.

Then came a cry, a rumbling as the mountain trembled.

The victorious shouts of the knights turned to cries of panic, then encouragements to flee. And yet I stood there, shining while everything around me shook. Rocks tumbled down, the ledge cracked, and then Titus scooped me up. He was running while heat rushed around me. Something wet and warm splattered on my face, and a great wind came, roaring like a mighty beast.

The walls split, and beams of white light shone, but whether it was the magic that came from within me or the light from outside, I could not tell. A sinking feeling told me that this might be the end of us, and so I turned in Titus's arms, pressed my hand against his cheek, and said the one thing I'd knew was true.

“I love you.”

His eyes were deep pools as he kissed my fingertips and set me down. “Run, my love.”

And the mountain exploded.

I ran as rocks tumbled and the ground erupted around me. Someone caught my hand, pulling me through the chaos. At times, I stumbled on rubble, and the mountain continued to roar and shout and scream. I glanced back for Titus, but he was nowhere to be found, perhaps running like me, seeking to escape the madness.

At long last, we burst out of the mountainside, and I collapsed in the grass, panting, exhausted, my lungs burning, my heart beating as though it would explode.

Rasping, I spit blood into the grass, gasping for long moments before I allowed myself to stand and look up, look up at what we had wrought.

Ironic that it was twilight, the looming darkness a warning, but in the pale rays of pink, I saw what the light had done. All entrances and exits to the mountainside were destroyed, and the waterfall had grown to twice its normal size in the chaos, pouring down upon a quickly expanding pool.

I turned around, taking in the knights picking themselves up. I spun again, my heart thudding in my chest. But I knew, before the sob ripped out of my throat, Titus was gone.

LUCIA



“Lucia?”

I straightened my back and pivoted toward Edith, who sank down on the abbey steps beside me. It had been one night and one day since the mountain fell and Titus disappeared. No incidents had been reported thus far, but still I sat on the front steps, watching the twilight deepen into nightfall.

“How are you?” Edith asked, a hesitation in her tone.

I didn’t think words could describe how I felt, so I shrugged and kept weaving flower crowns. My fingers wouldn’t, couldn’t rest and my heart felt as though a great pressure would crush it. It was not knowing what had happened to him that left me feeling light-headed and panicky.

“The knights will keep searching,” Edith offered.

“It’s over.” I sighed. “I can feel it deep inside, in my very bones. It’s like I had a connection to him, and when the mountain fell, it snapped. Sometimes I wonder if it was all a dream, a way to liberate the village from the rule of the vampires.”

“But you lost in the end because your heart is broken.”

I pressed a fist to my chest and faced Edith. “I didn’t know it would feel like that. I loved him, I did, but I didn’t know how much until he disappeared.”

“You shouldn’t give up. You should look for him.”

“Look for him where? In the mountain? Deep in the pools? I believe my choice is clear, and my path is set. This is a chance to start over, to realize that we did what was necessary to cleanse the village of evil, and now we can walk in the light.”

“You’re right. It is a chance to start over. Tomorrow I leave for the village. You can come with me.”

I managed to smile at her. “You’re being given a second chance to do things right, Edith. Is Captain Elroy going with you?”

She gave a slight shake of her head, even though a smile curled around her lips. Picking up one of my discarded flower crowns, she put it on her head. “No, not until we are married this fall. The timing could not have been better because I think I’m pregnant.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said sincerely. “In that case, I will come to stay for a while before you are married. I have the sense that it will be difficult to adapt back to my old life. It’s funny, I never thought I’d leave this place, but now I long to know what else is out there.”

“Maybe you can go, but always return here as you search for him.”

How did she know? “It would be irresponsible to leave the gardens before harvest. Besides, if I were to search, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Then don’t worry about it yet. Will you sit here all night? Keeping vigil?”

I nodded. “I sense the shadows are gone, but I want to see for myself.”

Edith stood, a mischievous grin on her face. “Me too. I hoped you might be up for one more adventure. I took a sword from the garrison.”

“A sword?” I raised my eyes. “You know how to use one?”

“No, not one of the big swords the knights use, but a small one.” She held out the blade, just the length from my elbow to

my wrist. “As a precaution. I want to take a walk at night, breathe the fresh air, go see my new cottage, and ensure the shadows really are gone.”

I stood. “I’ll come with you then. It will help take my mind off things.”

TITUS



“You did it!” Sylvester’s wild laugh echoed through the meadow. “You idiot, you actually did it. Here I thought you were a fool, but at last, freedom!”

He threw back his head and collapsed in a field of clover. In the sunlight, his skin appeared pale, translucent with lack of sunshine. His matted, stringy hair hung down to his shoulders, and there was debris from the explosion tumbling onto the grass.

“What did you do?” I demanded, tossing down my broken lute.

Squinting, I took in our surroundings. Green meadows and rolling hills stretched as far as my eyes could see. Little dots in the distance were sheep or goats or other roaming herds.

“Where are we?” I added.

“You’re such a brooding mop, do you know that?” Sylvester said, enthusiasm marring the unkindness of his words. “I had to take a bet that you’d fall for the silver-runed priestess, that you might not slay her, and that she would, in fact, break the curse. And it worked! Not only that, but you also brought down the mountain, either trapping or killing the vampires. I care not. It was a magnificent sight to behold.”

“You devious devil,” I spit. Although I shouldn’t be angry at him, despite his duplicitous nature, his mysterious plan had worked. “So you wrote those letters too, demanding a sacrifice? Did you also rip out that priestess’ throat? They

were upset about that. I thought they'd break every bone after they captured me.”

Sylvester sat up, crossing his ankles and propping his elbows on his knees. “That bit couldn't be helped. Without your lute keeping them at bay, the vampires got free and went on a killing spree. Even my god-like demands would not make them retreat. You arrived in the nick of time, and then that light show... you really did gain the trust of that priestess. Why do you look like a lost puppy? Let me guess, you're in love with her, and you want to return.”

“Am I such an open book that you guess everything about me?”

Sylvester bounded to his feet. “Word to the wise, Titus. Don't wear your heart on your sleeves. Your weakness is obvious and makes it easy to take advantage of you. Thankfully, I had your best interests at heart. And my own, of course. You can go back to that cursed village if you wish. I will not stop you. In fact, it would be best if we parted ways for some years. I have no wish to be part of your dealings, your curses, your darkness anymore.”

Crossing my arms, I looked at my older brother, actually looked at him in the light. The curse had wreaked havoc on his appearance. He'd always been tall and thin, but in the light, he looked especially sallow and malnourished.

“Thank you,” I said.

A blush of red crept into Sylvester's face, and he waved his hand, shrugging off my gratitude. “No need, brother. It was as much for myself as it was for you. Now, we're further down the mountain. If you find the road, head north, and you'll find yourself back at the village again. As for me, I'm going south. I've heard much about the city of Solynn, but please don't visit me there. If you find yourself in trouble, don't write. Just be clever, clever as I am, and use the magic of your lute to escape your woes.”

Despite the weight of his words, I grinned at him and stuck out my hand. “It's a deal, Vester.”

Sylvester gave me a firm handshake. “Goodbye, Titus.”

“Bye then, Vester.”

We parted ways. He in one direction while I walked in the other direction, thinking of the light, of Lucia, how she'd broken my curse, healed my soul, set me and my brother free, and vanquished the vampires. I'd said that I'd leave her in peace, but my heart had no desire to leave her. Even though I was exhausted from the transfusion of magic that had drained from me in the caverns, my steps felt light as I thought about seeing her again.

But I did not hurry my journey. Instead, I lifted my face to the sunlight, breathing in the scent of fresh grass, flowers, and herbs, wishing she was by my side.

LUCIA



A week passed in relative calmness. Edith moved to the village, and I joined her some evenings, but the shadows had not made a reappearance. A cautious hope hung over the village, and slowly, the doors that were previously shut and locked at twilight were open, guarded, but open. The farm animals were allowed to roam after nightfall, and even though it was early, I hoped there would be no more cries of sorrow at night, wails in the morning, or others packing up to leave.

However, in my home, a sort of tension had sprung up between the abbey and the garrison. Captain Elroy had resigned, and a group of knights decided to leave and seek another place to live and work. The brokenness left me restless, for those I'd grown up with had tried to protect me by keeping secrets, and while I forgave them, I'd also learned that I possessed magic, and it made me curious.

Titus and I fit together with our magic. We made each other stronger, better. I wasn't sure what happened to him, but the time without him, the not knowing, helped me make up my mind. If I had to choose between the abbey, my home and the only life I'd ever known, and him, I'd choose him. I didn't know what that meant for my future and whether it meant a life of adventure or staying in one place. But if I had the opportunity. I'd choose him.

These were the thoughts I had as I kneeled in the garden, pulling weeds, the hot sun beating down on my back. I'd forgotten a hat, and soon it would be time to take a break and go inside for a cool berry drink. As if to assuage her guilt in

the matter, High Priestess Merci had taken to cooking more, running the kitchens, and making extra treats for the sisters. Recently, she'd taken wild blueberries and created a sweet drink out of them that was refreshing and cool after being outdoors.

I sat back on my heels as the outside door to the garden opened and closed.

Tucking a stray wisp of hair behind my ear, I turned in that direction, expecting to see one of the sisters.

Instead, there was Titus.

His blue eyes met mine, and he leaned against the gate, his gait relaxed, easy. Crossing his arms, he winked at me, then glanced around the garden to ensure we were alone. His shirt was torn and open. He'd lost his shoes, and his feet were bare, pants rolled up to his knees.

My heart lurched. With a small cry, I was up and running. He caught me in his arms, and I was laughing and crying all at once as I pelted his face with kisses.

"I was afraid I'd lost you," I admitted once I caught my breath, studying his face as if he might disappear again.

"Never, my heart is yours," he murmured, pressing another kiss on my lips. "I was concerned, though, about whether you had escaped the mountain caving in, but here you are, free and as beautiful as the day I met you. No, I take that back. Even more so. You are radiant in the light."

I giggled. "You flatter me."

"No, I honor you for what you've done. I came back because I couldn't stay away. I know I told you that I'd honor your wishes and leave you be, but my heart wants nothing more than to be by your side."

"Titus, I had time to think while you were away, and... I adore you. I'm proud to stand by your side and live a life with you, even if it means leaving this place."

Titus's eyes went wet, and he kissed me hard. When he spoke, his voice was gruff. "You are so good to me. I don't

deserve this, you, your love.”

I put my hand over his mouth. “Life isn’t about finding or getting what you deserve. It’s about living in gratitude because we are blessed. Out of all the people in the world, we found each other. I don’t deserve you either, so let’s make the most of it. Let’s live in the light with our gratitude and joy.”

“You are so wise. That is the priestess in you. Do you have a moment? I want to show you something.”

“I have all the time in the world.”

He laughed and opened the gate. Taking my hand, he led me not south to the village but north to where the waterfalls thundered. We walked at a sedentary pace even though we were headed uphill.

“What happened to your brother?” I asked.

Titus stroked his jaw, shaking his head. “I’m a bit ashamed to admit it, but he outplayed me. He was orchestrating all of this from the beginning. The letters, putting you and I together. I only wonder how he knew about your runes and that you were full of magic.”

“Had you never seen anything like it before? You seemed to know a fair bit about my magic.”

“I felt it when I touched you, but he, on the other hand, never came near you, not that I know of.”

“He warned me away from you.”

“Probably another tactic to make you doubt yourself and make your magic stronger. Or make me try harder. The curse could only be broken by true, unconditional love and light. Doubt makes one choose. Regardless, he’s cleverer than I would have given him credit for. He’s free now, free of the curse I dragged him into and asked that we part ways for good. I cannot deny him that. I’ve been the cause of so much suffering.”

“And now you’re the cause of so much goodness.”

“It’s kind of you to say so.”

“It’s the truth. The vampires are gone, and the heavy burden darkness used to bring has lifted from the village.”

Titus paused as the thunder of a waterfall grew louder. Taking my hand, he pulled me to him, his voice low and husky. “And what about you? What do you want?”

“You,” I whispered. “Your love and adventure and an opportunity to use magic again. We fit, you know, so perfectly together. Our magic balances us.”

“I noticed that too.”

We slipped through the meadow, down to where the waterfall cascaded into a river, and Titus took my hand. He led me into water that surged around my ankles, then up to my knees, soaking my dress. He glanced back at me, a mischievous smile playing across his lips, then led me up to the thunder.

I recalled the first time we’d met. When he took me beneath the waterfall into the caverns, and as we slipped under the flood, I expected to arrive into another labyrinth of tunnels. Instead, we walked into the shade of broad trees, where a matching waterfall ran and a meadow twisted away.

I spun around, soaking wet. “Where are we?”

“I’ve never seen another soul here,” Titus said, “but then, I’ve only come to this place in the dead of night. I’ve wanted to show it to you for a while but figured it would be better in daylight.”

“This is lovely. I’ve never seen the like.”

“Isn’t it? Even richer in daylight. I always came here at night and wondered, if I were ever free, perhaps this place would be a boon, a place of peace just waiting for us.”

I kissed him with a new urgency, and he slowly peeled off my wet dress. Examining me from every angle, he laid me down in the lush grass and made sweet love to me to the sound of the waterfall and the rainbows dancing in the light, spreading dewdrops of water like jewels. I closed my eyes, dwelling in the moment with a full heart and a happy soul, and

this time, when my runes tingled and began to glow, I knew it was because of the magic of love.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Elegy of Twilight*. It occurred to me, as I wrote, that Sylvester is a mysterious man. I gave you just enough to make you curious, and just enough to make myself curious, too. He'd be devious, manipulative and smart, and he's going to the city of Solynn, which means he deserves a story. So keep an eye out for the next Tower Knights tale coming in 2025.

If this is your first Tower Knights tale, and you're curious about the Sorcerer of Music, read *Music of the Night*.

If you want to know the story about the knight who called down a demon to haunt the King of Hearts, read *Song of the Dawn*.

If you loved Titus' attitude and want more of that vibe, read *Lured by the Dusk*.

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Angela J. Ford is a bestselling author who writes epic fantasy and steamy fantasy romance with vivid worlds, gray characters and endings you just can't guess. She has written and published over 30 books.

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If you happen to be in Nashville, you'll most likely find her enjoying a white chocolate mocha and daydreaming about her next book.

