

AGE
OF
VAMPIRES
BOOK 1

Eternal reign

CAROLINE
PECKHAM

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Eternal
reign

CAROLINE
PECKHAM

SUSANNE
VALENTI

AGE OF VAMPIRES
BOOK 1



A warrior born but monster made,

Changes fates of souls enslaved.

Twins of sun and moon will rise,

When one has lived a thousand lives.

A circle of gold shall join two souls,

And a debt paid rights wrongs of old.

In a holy mountain the earth will heal,

Then the dead shall live and the curse will keel.





I suppressed a shudder as an icy drip fell onto the back of my neck and raced down my spine.

My heart beat faster as I fought the urge to shudder. Any movement could give me away. I couldn't risk getting caught. Not if I wanted my family to survive the winter. Everything depended on this.

Rain fell steadily, pinging off the metal rooftop above my hiding place in the ruined building. Freezing raindrops made their way through holes in the rusted roof. I tried my best to ignore them, but a second drip rolled beneath my collar, stealing what little warmth my body clung to. I didn't adjust my posture though.

I might have been uncomfortable, but I'd been waiting in the rafters for a reason. And I wasn't about to give my location away because of the cold.

I squinted down at the courtyard outside the building. Four floors below me, the remains of a decorative fountain were crumbling in the centre of the open space but everything was so wet due to the downpour that it hardly stood out.

I'd braided my blonde hair tightly to keep it out of my eyes but I missed the warmth of it around my ears as the cold wind blew mercilessly through my hiding place.

Just as I'd expected, Thomas stepped into the courtyard and moved towards the fountain. He paused, pulling his collar higher around his neck.

Satisfaction coiled through me like a living thing and I allowed myself a triumphant grin.

I drew in a long breath, willing my heart to stop racing. If I was right about this then everything might be about to change for our family. Anything Thomas could do, I was sure I could do better.

He stood in the pouring rain, glancing about nervously as it slicked his muddy-brown hair to his forehead and obscured his eyes. I understood his

need for secrecy. If anyone figured out what he was doing they'd either follow him like I planned to or worse... they'd turn him over to the vampires.

Another drip slid down my spine and its freezing touch slipped into my veins. I longed for the end of winter already and it had barely even begun. With hardly enough firewood to go around and food scarcer than ever, it was shaping up to be a pretty horrendous season. Unless I could pull this off.

Finally trusting in the fact that he was alone, Thomas moved across the courtyard. This was as far as I'd been able to track him until now. I knew he came to this courtyard regularly but for the life of me I had no idea where he went from here.

My sister's warning sounded in the back of my head. *He could be getting it from a vampire. For all we know he gets it by selling the rest of us out.* But my gut told me that wasn't it. A worm he might be, but I didn't peg Thomas for a rat. No. Somehow, he was getting in and out of the Realm. Undetected. Until now anyway.

I smiled to myself as he stepped over the partially shattered wall of the fountain and waded through the deeper water beyond it.

He glanced over his shoulder one last time before climbing the higher wall on the far side and dropping down beyond it. I could just make out the top of his head as he stooped low and a dull sound reached my ears like something heavy being dragged over concrete.

The noise stopped and Thomas stood upright again, surveying the area. I held steady in my shadowed position in the rafters despite the cramp growing in my muscles. I knew he couldn't see me but my heart leapt as his gaze swept across my hiding place. He didn't even give my location a second glance, but turned back to look at whatever was by his feet then dropped out of sight.

My breath caught and I leant forward an inch. The wind drove the pounding rain into my face and I squinted to try and see where he'd gone. It was no good. He didn't reappear.

Indecision froze me in place. If this was another attempt to flush out anyone following him, then stepping out would give me away. And if he caught me spying on him he'd never make the mistake of letting me do it again. This was my only shot. If I didn't go soon then I was going to lose him.

"Screw it," I muttered as I gripped the edge of the thick beam I was perched on and swung myself out of my hiding place.

I hung suspended from the wood for a few seconds and used my toes to feel for the edge of the wall beneath me. My gut lurched with fear as I struggled to find it and my arms began to tremble. With a surge of relief, my right sole connected with the crumbling masonry and I swung myself towards it until both of my boots found it. Once I had my balance, I released my hold on the beam and dropped into a crouch atop the wall.

A high-pitched squeak warned me half a second before a black bat almost collided with my face. I managed to contain my shriek of surprise as I lurched backwards, nearly losing my balance. My stomach swooped and my right arm cartwheeled wildly for a moment before I managed to grasp the brickwork again.

The little creature spun away from me, zipping across the sky in a blur of motion as I tried to calm my nerves. I glanced down at the courtyard I'd nearly been plastered all over and released a shaky breath.

Nice work Callie; why not throw yourself to your death because a creature the size of your palm made you jump? Pathetic.

I forced my mind away from mentally berating myself and looked back towards the crumbling building instead.

I scrambled down the inside of the wall where half of the second floor was still intact and landed on the floorboards with a soft thump. The wood felt springy beneath my feet. Not exactly reassuring. Ignoring the less-than-trustworthy floor, I jogged towards the stairwell.

Four stairs hung suspended above nothing and the rest lay in a shattered heap below. The grimy remains of a carpet coated what was left of the first floor. Two decades of rain blowing in hadn't done it any favours.

The hole which used to be a staircase extended all the way to the ground. The rope I'd used to scale the building hours ago still hung in place where I'd left it. I wrenched my make-shift grappling hook out of the soft floorboards and searched for something else to secure my rope.

There wasn't really any choice apart from the thick bannister which marked the top of the decayed staircase. I kicked it, trying to gauge its stability. It shifted slightly which was less than ideal. It was that or lose my hook though and the rusty piece of metal was practically priceless to me. Certainly irreplaceable.

I threw the hook into the small bag I wore on my back and tied the rope around the bannister.

Here goes nothing.

I dropped over the edge and started shimmying down quickly. A shudder trembled through the rope and a heavy creaking sounded above me.

“Shit!” My heartbeat thundered in my ears.

My palms went slick as panic seized me in its grasp. I gave up on shimmying and let myself slide. The rope burned my palms and pain lanced through them.

I made it past the second floor and was level with the first before the sound of splintering wood rumbled above me and the rope went slack.

My stomach soared and a scream built in my chest. I hit the floor hard on my back, the air violently whooshing from my lungs. I blinked through the pain and spotted the bannister hurtling towards me.

I rolled aside, throwing my arms over my head before it could flatten me and the floor vibrated as it crashed to the ground.

I peeked out from beneath my arms at the devastation I’d created. No chance it would go unnoticed. Damn bloodsuckers knew everything. *Nearly* everything anyway. But there were no rules about staying out of the ruins even this close to the edge of the Realm. There weren’t even any rules about not destroying things out here. Who’d care anyway? So a useless banister fell down in a useless building. It didn’t matter.

I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the pain in my back and shoulders. I was pretty sure I’d have some impressive bruises by tomorrow. I’d have to be careful to cover them up around Dad. Although if this panned out then I was sure he’d agree it was worth the risk. Maybe.

I just had to hope Thomas hadn’t heard me. Or gotten too far away. I *had* to locate him again.

I ran out of the building into the rain. I wished my coat had a hood. It had a hole in the right pocket and a fraying hem along the back of the blood-red material. Despite that, it was considered a pretty good coat by most people’s standards.

But I saw what the vampires wore. Winter coats should be thick and warm and have hoods. The worst thing about it was that *they* didn’t need to stay warm. They couldn’t get cold but they wouldn’t let us have coats like that and they damn well knew we could feel the icy kiss of the season. Every winter people froze to death. Some even volunteered for the blood bank rather than face the slow inevitability of that fate. Poor assholes.

I splashed across the courtyard and clambered into the fountain. The water washed over the tops of my boots and soaked my feet. *Perfect.*

Climbing over the back wall took two attempts; it was level with my chin and slick with rain water. On the far side, I hit the jackpot. Thomas had lifted a drain cover revealing a dark hole which led... well wherever he was gone. Out of the Realm no doubt.

I glanced about nervously. There was no sign of anyone amongst the ruins nearby. If the vampires caught me leaving the Realm... *no time for chicken-shit thoughts*. I bit my lip and dropped into the drain.

I landed in a crouch and squinted as my eyes adjusted to the darkness.

All of the drains had been caved in along the edges of the Realm to stop this exact thing from happening and yet, I could see light up ahead.

Cautiously, I started moving towards it. There were no sounds in the tunnel so I guessed that meant Thomas was gone. It didn't matter anyway. If this got me out then I could do what I needed and get back without him ever knowing I'd learned his secret. Unless he was as observant as me.

I'd noticed him having more to trade recently even though he'd taken care to spread himself between many vendors. I'd also noticed the healthy flush his family had in their cheeks. And the subtle upgrade in their clothing. He was being smart about it. But there wasn't much that got past me. Especially when I was pretty sure another harsh winter could kill my family. There was no way I would let that happen.

Sure enough as I closed in on the light, I came across the caved-in part of the tunnel. Some of the rubble had been cleared though. Just enough to allow a large man to crawl through. Which meant it was more than big enough for me.

I climbed up to the hole and hesitated. If I did this, I was officially breaking the law. Leaving the Realm could land me in the blood bank. If I was caught and they sent me there it would tear my family apart. Dad and Montana were all that I cared about in this world and the idea of being taken from them froze my limbs in place.

But if I didn't do this then I wasn't sure we would survive. I'd been skipping breakfast for weeks, allowing the two of them to have a little extra without them realising it. I left the apartment first in the mornings and I was gone before they woke. All I had to do was leave a bowl drying on the rack to make it look like I'd eaten my portion of the porridge before I left. And even with that sacrifice, I could tell they weren't getting enough.

The rations we were given daily were slowly decreasing. Bit by bit we were receiving less food as the weeks wore on. My ribs already showed too

clearly through my skin and my hips jutted out in a way that spoke of the meals I'd missed. We needed more food.

If I had to risk the blood bank to make sure we survived then so be it.

I took a steadying breath and crawled through the hole.

No turning back now. I'd just crossed a line I couldn't come back from. I'd broken the law and left the Realm. I just had to hope it would be worth it.

I looked ahead and spotted the source of the light. Another drain was open above me and I quickly scaled the ladder.

I peeked above the rim of the manhole and paused. This was it. If I climbed out then I had definitely, one hundred percent broken the law and left our Realm. Although as I'd probably already done that when I crawled through the hole in the rubble there wasn't much point in continuing to worry over it... I hesitated for another few seconds then climbed out.

The street was much like the one I'd been standing on minutes ago, it was just on the other side of the electric fences which kept us trapped in our Realm. With a jolt, I realised that I'd never been this far from home. My whole life had been conducted and contained within that space. Five square miles. That was it, always. Twenty one years lived within clear boundaries. *Until now.*

I grinned as I started down the street, anticipation gripping my heart. There was no sign of Thomas and I hoped it stayed that way. I knew his secret but I'd prefer it if I could keep that information to myself. No need for him to know I knew. I'd rather he wasn't able to rat me out to the vampires if they got suspicious. And if they caught him they'd make him talk. No way he'd die to protect me.

The closest apartment blocks had been ripped apart by whatever bomb had destroyed the ruins I'd been hiding in so I skipped them. Nothing good was going to have survived in a building missing walls.

I jogged the length of the block and swung east. An intact apartment block greeted me and I made a bee-line for the entrance.

The rotating door groaned in un-oiled protest as I forced it to allow my entry. Once inside I paused. Excitement thrummed through my veins. I didn't know where to begin.

A corridor led away from me to my left so I took it. The first door I came to was ajar and I pushed it wide, holding my breath.

The door's movement sent dust swirling ahead of me as I entered. The apartment looked untouched. I doubted anyone had entered it since *before...*

Life without vampires had always sounded like a fairytale to me. My twin sister Montana and I had the bad luck to be born the year they took over, so anything pre-*them* was nothing I would ever know.

I headed further into the apartment and found a bedroom. The closet whispered sweet promises to me and I approached it, sliding the door wide. My mouth fell open. I felt like a total idiot but there it was; I stood with my mouth open wide as I stared at the kinds of clothes I'd only ever dreamed about. Thick winter coats with *hoods*. I reached out hungrily, tearing a white coat from the hanger and swapping mine for it as quickly as I could manage.

It was better than I ever could have imagined. Like being wrapped in a cloud which caressed every part of me. I pulled the furry hood over my head and hugged it close to my face. My eyes fell on a floor-length mirror and I stilled. There was no way I could bring this back. No way I could ever explain it.

I stayed wrapped in its warmth for five more seconds before slipping it back off. My heart broke over the perfect item as I carefully hung it back where it came from and retrieved my threadbare coat from the floor.

I tried to ignore the chill from the damp material as disappointment curled in my gut. I sighed as I hunted through the rest of the things hanging in the closet. At the back I found something I could take. Sets of thick, thermal underwear were folded neatly on a slim shelf. I took two women's sets for me and my sister and a men's set for Dad.

I carefully folded them into my pack and turned my back on the coats which could have made such a difference to us. My gaze landed on the thick duvet covering the bed and I had to force myself not to cry. All of this was here, so close and yet completely out of reach. Everything the human population of our realm could ever have wanted. What difference did it make to the vampires to keep this from us? They clearly didn't want it and leaving it to rot here, just meters from the boundary of our Realm was beyond cruel.

I wondered if they laughed at us as we shivered. If finding people frozen to death in their beds was amusing to them. Hatred coursed through me more readily than usual as I thought on it.

My fingernails dug into my palms hard enough to draw blood and I hissed in pain as I made myself flex my fingers. There was no point in worrying about the things I couldn't take. I needed to focus on those I *could*.

I hurried into the kitchen and started opening cupboards. I'd already been here longer than I should have and I needed to get back.

There were several tins of food which I rammed into my pack. I didn't waste time trying to decipher the scribbles on the labels which no doubt told me what was inside them. The pictures gave me a good idea and though I wouldn't have said I *couldn't* read, I couldn't exactly claim to be able to either.

It wasn't like I'd ever needed to anyway. Dad had tried to teach us but I'd never had the patience for it like Montana. Besides, I didn't see how reading would ever be of much use to me.

The last cupboard I checked held stacks of plates and bowls but peeking out from behind them, I spied a brown wrapper.

I pulled out the slab of plastic-wrapped food and frowned at it. I had no idea what I was looking at but the kids pictured on the wrapper were smiling while eating it. Curiosity got the better of me and I ripped the corner of the packet open. After foregoing my breakfast rations my stomach was pathetically empty and it rumbled in anticipation as I licked my lips.

The food inside was brown. I wrinkled my nose, thinking it was gone off, but a delicious smell reached me. I lifted it closer to my nose and sniffed again. It smelled *good*.

I tentatively broke off a square and placed it into my mouth.

The most delicious thing I'd ever tasted started to melt on my tongue and I let out a groan of pure pleasure. I'd never had anything like it before and I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to get enough. I closed my eyes to savour the taste as it slowly dissolved on my tongue.

Carefully folding the wrapper back down, I tucked the delicious food into my bag before closing it and throwing it over my shoulder. That was it. I couldn't take any more and get it back subtly. It was more than we'd had in a long time. We'd have a good meal tonight and something to keep us warm while we slept. That was more than I'd hoped for when I'd decided to follow Thomas.

I grinned at that thought as I headed for the exit. Things were going to be so much better now that I held this secret.

Montana



Callie, you idiot. I know exactly what you're up to.

I queued in line for our daily rations, pulling my collar closer to my neck. It was fur. Well, sort of. The material was itchy and half of the mottled fluff had fallen out over the years. But better that than let the icy rain in.

The mud was deep beneath my feet where people had been queuing all morning. The road in this part of the realm had worn away long ago and several harsh storms this winter had left the ground waterlogged. I glanced over my shoulder at the apartment blocks in the distance, just a few hulking grey shapes as miserable-looking as the sky.

I was later than usual, having tried to talk Callie out of following Thomas to god only knew where. People didn't get out of the Realm. That was simple fact. But Callie refused to believe me. It didn't mean I was happy to resign myself to the confines of this place for the rest of my life, but my sister was risking her neck. And I couldn't bear to see her caught and shackled by the guards. Whipped and chained. Or worse: hauled off to the blood bank...

My stomach writhed as I shuffled up behind Bert and Martha in front of me. Bert's hair had been reduced to a few grey tufts above his ears and Martha kept her thinning locks tucked under a threadbare hat. As usual, we greeted each other with curt nods and polite conversation.

"Weather's bad today."

"It'll probably rain for the whole month like last year."

It was the unsaid things that haunted me. The weather was a safe topic, one that most people stuck to. But their hollow eyes told of sleepless nights, the fear of growing one year older. Bert and Martha were nearly sixty. And the older members of society sometimes just...disappeared. No one would even mention it. One day they'd be here, the next gone. And everyone would act as if they never knew them.

They turned back to face the queue and I shuffled up behind them. The

Emporium was the single building which had any kind of regular maintenance in the Realm. White walls stood out starkly against the rain and a slanted roof carried the water over the edges in torrents.

I ducked my head around Bert, trying to get a look at *them*. The vampires fascinated me. Sure, I hated them right through to my bones, but there was something about them that always set my pulse racing. And it was more than fear. It was their pearly skin and inviting eyes. They were so alluring, I couldn't help but stare. Plus, they provided the only hint available at a world beyond this one. Their clothes were well-made. New. Which spoke of a place outside of the Realm we had no idea about. A town? A city?

All I knew was that the vampires didn't live in squalor like we did, but I could barely picture what that place might be like. Most of the books from *before* had been burned a long time ago. We still had a few tucked beneath our beds back home, but the main source of information I had about a life beyond this place was from Dad.

He told stories of beautiful cities, sprawling meadows and a sparkling blue sea. What my mind had conjured in response was probably all wrong, but it kept me going all the same. Something to dream about in this place was a precious gift.

I tucked my long curls behind my ears. Callie and I were non-identical twins. I'd inherited Dad's ebony hair and equally dark eyes, whereas Callie was like Mom with her fair blue eyes and golden locks. That was pretty much the only thing I remembered about our mom. She'd died long before I'd been old enough to have a real conversation with her. It didn't stop me missing her though. There was a hole in my chest where she belonged, and nothing would ever fill it.

"Next," a vampire barked up ahead. The front of the Emporium held a counter and as Bert and Martha took their small linen bag of rations, I jogged under the shelter of the porch, approaching the vampire.

"Name," he demanded, his pale grey eyes moving from my rain-soaked hair to my neck.

"Montana," I said. "Of the Ford family."

"Ford," he growled my surname, eyeing a list before him, typed not written. He struck out the name as he found it.

I couldn't read particularly well, but Dad had told me about the technology from *before*. The only time I'd ever witnessed it was here at the Emporium. Beyond the vampire was a series of screens which were fed live footage from

around the Realm. The public places were closely monitored, but that still didn't explain how the vampires always knew *everything*.

The vampire slammed a linen bag down before me and my nose wrinkled. It was small. Smaller than usual. I pulled it open, taking a glance inside. "Only one piece of bread? We're a family of three, um, sir." My courage was at its strongest when it came to our family. And reducing our rations qualified as a threat to them.

The vampire gazed down my clothes with obvious disdain. "Cutbacks," he announced, then glanced over my shoulder. "Next."

I remained rooted to the spot, my fingers shaking as I clutched the bag. "We're barely getting by as it is," I said, trying to keep my tone level. Raising your voice to a vampire was a punishable offense. We were supposed to bow our head to their every whim, but even *they* must have known starving us to death was screwing themselves over too. They needed the single thing we provided. The sole value of our existence. Blood.

"Be thankful for what you're given, girl," the vampire snarled at me, a warning in his eyes.

Anger rose in me like acid. I didn't want to cause trouble, but the last thing we needed in this harsh winter was less food than we were already given.

As the vampire dropped his gaze to the list and someone tried to approach the counter, I slammed my hand down under his nose.

"We need more than this," I demanded.

Careful, Montana.

My hot-head had gotten me in trouble before. Keeping it in check made sure I was safe. But if my family became too weak to function, we'd all be sent to the blood bank. And I simply couldn't let that happen.

The vampire's upper lip curled back. "Step away, girl."

A sharp lump grew in my throat. Someone tried to get past me again but I wouldn't budge.

"Please," I lowered my tone as the people waiting in line began to mutter.

At my begging, the vampire's lips dragged up into a smirk as he unsheathed a shiny watch on his wrist. "Do you know what this is?" he purred and my heart beat harder at his velvety tone.

"A watch?" I guessed. I'd seen them before and we were allowed the dignity of clocks in our homes.

"Yes.. And this watch is the difference between you and I. It holds value. Like I do. Like all of my kind do. But you..." He leant closer and the scent of

fresh linen filled my nose. A smell I only knew because of them. “You are *food*. Roaming cattle. When crops don't flourish, the animals have to go hungry. And the crops aren't flourishing, human.” He ushered me away and my pulse rose so high, I could feel myself reaching breaking point.

Someone touched my arm and I turned, finding my neighbour Lilien there. She was a year older than me and so thin, I knew she was going hungry to feed her three kids. We were encouraged to *breed*. But one of the few things I had control over was my body. And the last thing I would ever do in this world was bring children into it; more blood bags for the vampires to suck dry.

“Leave it, Montana. Go home,” Lilien urged.

In her watery eyes, I found my resolve. We were doing better than her family. One loaf of bread and the measly amount of cheese and dried fruits would be just enough for us.

I nodded, throwing a scowl over my shoulder at the vampire and heading away across the muddy terrain.

I made it three feet before something jammed into my back and what felt like a thousand volts of electricity burst through me. I hit the wet ground, my vision stamped with white stars as I jerked and writhed against the pain.

Hold on, just hold on a second longer. No pain lasts forever.

I was on the verge of vomiting my pathetic excuse for a breakfast up when the torture stopped. My eyes unclouded and I found myself gazing up at the vampire from the Emporium. Visceral hatred clawed at my gut. I ground my jaw, forcing myself not to say another word despite the stream of curses I longed to hurl at him.

His face twisted into a hungry smile. “You'd do well to keep that smart mouth of yours strapped shut. One more toe out of line and I'll have you strung up and drained for the whole Realm to see.”

I shuddered beneath him, my veins turning to ice as the puddle surrounding me soaked through my clothes.

It was an empty threat. People were rarely killed by the vampires. Our blood was too precious. But there were plenty of ways they could hurt me without ending my life.

I gritted my teeth, swallowing my pride and nodding at him.

He stalked away, splashing more mud over me as he went. I rolled to my knees, finding the ration bag sinking into the mud, half the contents emptied on the ground.

I bit back the curse words sitting on my tongue once again and gathered up the spoiled food, knowing I'd made my family's situation a whole lot worse.

Why can't you ever keep quiet and accept what you're given?

Because if I do that, I'll die inside. I'll become like the others who've lost the light in their eyes.

If there was one thing Dad did for us daily, it was stoke the flames of our hearts so we'd never give up. No matter how hopeless things became.

As I wound through the monotonous rows of apartment blocks, I spotted my father hurrying up the cracked pavement toward me. His coat was too big - but too big was always better than too small. His eyes darted left and right as he jogged the final steps toward me.

"What happened?" He eyed my muddy clothes and haywire hair.

"Nothing. I fell," I lied, not wanting to put the burden on him of my stupid mini-uprising at the Emporium. My heart weighed with shame and disappointment. We'd go to bed with growling bellies tonight because of the pathetic rations. And there was nothing I could do about it.

"Where's Callie?" he demanded.

"She's not back yet?" I gasped, then heat struck my cheeks as I realised I'd given away that I knew exactly where she was.

"Back from where?" Dad snarled, his tone angry, but his eyes betraying fear.

"She went to the washhouse," I lied quickly. It was the only place in the Realm where fresh water resided and you could have a semi-decent bath. But we were only allowed in there once a week and I mentally tried to recall whether Callie had already visited.

Dad seemed to relax and my shoulders slumped too.

"They've cut our rations," I said, opening the bag and revealing the muddy contents.

Dad's brow creased with worry. "We'll be fine. I have some saved from yesterday."

He dropped his arm over my shoulders, steering me back to the apartment block we called home. Dad wrenched open the wooden door which had swollen in the rain, making sure it got stuck every time someone used it. Stepping into the icy stairwell, we headed up the dank stone stairs towards the first level.

As I walked into our apartment, I froze. A bell was ringing across the whole of the Realm, loud and piercing. Dread slivered into my chest and

made a home there. That sound meant one thing.

Once a year – though we never knew when – a group of Elite vampires would come to the Realm and test people's blood. They'd go door to door at random, then take away whoever they deemed to pass their 'test'. No one knew where they went, and no one wanted to find out.

So far, Callie and I hadn't been tested. But every time that bell rang it sounded ominous, like an oncoming storm.

“Get inside,” Dad murmured and I hurried to obey.

I placed the linen bag down on the single work-top in the kitchenette; the room made up half of our living space beyond the tiny bedrooms.

My spine tingled with nerves as the bell continued to ring, on and on. And there was only one thing I could think about.

Callie, get your skinny ass back here.



I'd done it. The smile on my face was staying put all the way until tomorrow at the earliest.

We'll eat well tonight.

That wasn't something I'd been sure of in months. The thought alone stopped my stomach from growling for the first time in a long time. Energy ran through my limbs from the sugary treat I'd devoured and I ran through the drain excitedly. I couldn't wait to get home with my haul.

I made it to the ladder and quickly clambered up it. I wanted to sprint all the way home and show Dad and Montana what I'd found. My sister was going to freak out. I'd *told* her what Thomas was up to and she hadn't believed me. She could eat her words alongside her meal.

I released a laugh of pure smug satisfaction just as I made it to the top of the ladder and climbed out into the rain.

"Bitch!" I barely recognised Thomas before his fist made contact with my jaw. I flew backwards, landing heavily on my side and slamming my elbow into the concrete. I reeled from the sudden attack, blinking through the muddle of my thoughts and the raindrops slamming down on my face.

I rolled over, rising onto my hands and knees but his foot connected with my stomach before I could gain my feet. I yelled out in pain as I fell back to the concrete and rolled away before he could kick me again.

My heavy backpack jammed into my shoulder, one of the tin cans catching my ribs painfully.

"Wait," I gasped, raising a hand to stave him off.

Thomas advanced on me again, rage glittering in his eyes. I'd always pegged him for a mean bastard but I'd underestimated him. He was more than just mean; that look made me think he might just kill me.

I scrambled back, keeping myself out of his reach as he advanced. I had no weapon; we were forbidden to carry anything that could be used as one. He

was half as tall as me again and twice as heavy. If he wanted to kill me, I was dead. *Why the hell did I let him catch me?*

I spat a wad of blood from my mouth and managed to get to my feet, backing away further.

“I won’t tell anyone else,” I swore, holding a hand out defensively. I was pleased that it wasn’t shaking despite the fear licking its way down my spine.

“You won’t be able to when I’m through with you,” he growled. “How did you even find out?”

“You’re not as clever as you think.” I slipped my bag from my back as he closed the distance between us, catching it in my right hand. “It was easy to figure out what you were doing as soon as I started paying attention.”

Thomas’s lip curled back as he lunged towards me but this time I was ready. I ducked aside and used my momentum to swing my pack at his head. It connected with a solid thunk. Eleven cans of food slammed into the side of his skull and dropped him like a sack of crap.

I stared down at him in shock, the silence in my ears punctured by the plink of raindrops hitting cement. Thomas lay in a growing pool of blood which seeped into the murky puddles surrounding him. I released my pack and it fell beside me, splashing water over my boots.

My heart thrummed in my chest. *I’ve killed him. Holy shit.*

I started to back away then stopped. If I really had killed him I’d have to confess to it. If the vampires found him... they hated dead bodies, wasted blood. Maybe I could come up with an excuse or something. Tell them he’d attacked me or... *Pull yourself together Callie. Check his pulse.*

I battled against my fear and moved closer to Thomas’s fallen body. I leant down slowly, edging the toe of my boot away from the blood beside his head. My fingers shook slightly as I extended them towards his neck.

His skin was warm beneath my cold fingers. I couldn’t feel anything at first but then the faint beating of his pulse came alive beneath them. I sagged in relief. He was an asshole and I’d have to tread very carefully around him from now on, but better a living asshole than a dead one.

He groaned and shifted beneath me, making me stumble away. I backed up quickly and tripped over my pack on the ground but managed to stay on my feet.

Thomas opened his eyes at the noise and I stared at him as he met my gaze.

“I know your secret and now it’s mine too,” I said more bravely than I

felt. “So just keep your mouth shut and so will I. They’ll never know.”

His face contorted angrily but I didn’t give him the chance to reply. I grabbed my pack from the puddle beside me and turned to sprint away.

The cans rattled as they bumped into each other and despite the blood I could taste from my split lip, I still knew it had been worth it.

I kept running towards the occupied part of the Realm. There were no rules against exploring the ruins but hardly anyone bothered anyway. There wasn’t anything left out here worth taking and most people didn’t see the point in wasting their energy. I liked it in the ruins though. It was the only place that I could go where it was truly quiet.

I ran on but suddenly the pounding of the rain wasn’t the only sound. A high-pitched ringing was coming from the town centre. I knew that sound. And it meant that I had to get home *right now*.

I increased my pace and started sprinting. The pack on my back suddenly seemed so much more conspicuous. I didn’t know if I should try to hide it before I got back or if I was better off concealing it in the safety of our home.

The ringing grew louder as I made it to the outskirts of town. The roads were deserted. Everyone had already headed back to their homes. There was no time for me to try and hide my treasured pack. I’d just have to get it back to our apartment.

I raced down abandoned street after abandoned street, the emptiness making my skin crawl. I was late. I didn’t know what that would mean if they came knocking on our door but it couldn’t be good.

I finally made it to the junction of our street and turned onto it. I pulled up short, my boots skidding in the mud as I spotted a group of vampires heading straight for the doors to our apartment block.

I didn’t move. I’d never seen them wandering the Realm like that. Not in a group. There were five of them; four stood in a kind of formation around the one in the centre. They all moved with cat-like grace. It wasn’t natural.

The four guards wore thick coats lined with golden thread, the hems trailing in the mud. They had long swords strapped across their backs but they looked more decorative than practical. It wasn’t like they needed weapons to overpower us anyway.

Their skin almost glowed in the sunlight which made it through the rain clouds. I knew it wasn’t enough to hurt them but if the clouds just broke then *poof*. Or maybe not *poof*, maybe it would be more of a slow burn. I wasn’t sure exactly how it would kill them but I suspected it would. The one thing

we could be sure of was that they couldn't face direct sunlight. If the sun was shining we never saw them. Not that there was much hope of that during this storm.

As if he'd felt my attention on him, the vampire in the centre of the group stilled and turned towards me. His movements were so unnatural. When he froze he literally stopped moving. I didn't even think he was breathing. *Do they even need to breathe?* His icy blue gaze locked with mine and his too-perfect mouth curved into a mockery of a smile.

I knew he was one of the Elite without having to be told. I hadn't seen many of them in my lifetime but even amongst the other vampires they stood out as something... more.

Their beauty was beyond eye-catching; it nearly stole your breath. Everything about them drew you closer but a feeling in the pit of my stomach always warned me away too. It was like I could *feel* how dangerous they were. Like some ingrained primal part of my makeup recognised the predator that lay beneath their stunning exterior.

His clothes were like something from one of our Dad's stories. He was wearing a cloak. An emerald cloak. *What the hell?* It would almost have been funny if I couldn't see my death glittering in his eyes.

The vampires guarding him stepped forward and he turned away from me as they guided him inside.

As if a spell had been broken, I reclaimed the use of my limbs and turned back the way I'd come. No way I was following them inside but I could make it in through the back.

The dumpsters behind the apartment building were overflowing as usual and I leapt up onto the closest one. The fire escape ladder hung a meter above my head and I jumped up, catching hold of it. My shoulders throbbed with pain, reminding me of the many injuries I'd sustained today but I had no time to listen to the protests of my body.

I heaved myself up onto the ladder and started climbing. I made it to the top and onto the metal walkway that marked the first floor. I crossed it quickly and climbed off the other side of it, gripping a thin lip of concrete that lined the brickwork as I shimmied towards our window.

I tapped on it urgently as I reached it and Montana's worried face appeared through the glass a moment later. She shoved the window up and I half fell inside.

"Callie, what the-" she began but I shushed her as I turned to secure the

window again.

“Look,” I whispered excitedly as I pulled the bag from my back and opened it to reveal the contents.

Her eyes lit up as she spotted the haul of food and clothes but before she could ask me anything else, a sharp knock came at the front door.

We both froze, looking towards our bedroom door in horror. We’d never been tested before. Why would they come for us now? I hoped it had nothing to do with my trip out of the Realm.

My heart started to race and Montana snatched the bag from me, tossing it beneath her bed before pulling the worn blanket down to cover it.

“What the hell happened to your face?” she whispered urgently and I raised my fingers to my split lip guiltily.

“I’ll explain later. How bad does it look?”

She shrugged and bit her lip letting me know it was pretty awful. I quickly shed my jacket and kicked off my mud-caked boots as I heard Dad heading for the front door.

Montana grabbed a clean shirt from my closet and tossed it at me as I threw my saturated one to the floor. We repeated the process with clean pants and I kicked my sodden clothes into a corner before moving to stand beside her at our door. It was the final barrier between us and something that I really didn’t want to face.

The sound of Dad sliding the deadbolt out of place rattled through the silence, filling my mind with images of the vampires who were waiting beyond it. The icy blue gaze of the Elite had burned its imprint onto my retinas and I didn’t relish the prospect of facing him again.

With a deep breath, I moved beside Montana and we stepped toward the door, ready to face our fate together.. If anything I’d done today had placed my family in danger then I wouldn’t hesitate to take whatever punishment the vampires required of me. I just had to hope it wouldn’t come to that.

Montana



“The Ford daughters are to be tested today. Bring them to me immediately,” the demanding voice filled our house, sending a tremor through my heart.

I gazed at Callie, curling a hand around her wrist as we pressed our ears to the bedroom door. Though neither of us voiced our fears, I knew we were both putting off going out there.

“Of course,” my Dad answered in a flat tone. “Please make yourselves comfortable, I'm afraid we've only got three chairs but I'm sure some of your Elite asses will be quite comfortable on them.”

Jesus, why was Dad jabbing at them? No answer came from the vampires and I wondered if they even knew what humour was at all.

Dad's footsteps thumped in our direction and Callie and I nodded, opening the door before he had to beckon us.

I came eye to eye with Dad whose mouth was stretched into a painfully thin line.

“Girls...” He didn't finish that sentence as the vampire's voice cut the air to ribbons again.

“Out here. Now.”

Callie threw a glance back into the bedroom before we moved past Dad, rounding into the kitchenette.

My heart stumbled at the sight of three vampires before us. The front door was wide, revealing two more standing on either side of the entrance.

The obvious leader was dressed in an emerald robe and had a dangerous glint in his eyes as they swung between Callie and I. His dark hair was neatly cut and his sharp jaw was perfectly clean-shaven. A beautiful, deadly bastard. There was no doubt he was an Elite.

None of them had taken up Dad's offer of a seat – not surprising. But two chairs had been pulled out before the tiny kitchen table, evidently waiting for

us.

“Sit,” the leader ordered and we dropped into the chairs side by side, our hands clasping beneath the table. “Out,” he spat at Dad and I forced myself not to look at him as his footsteps pounded out of the room.

The vampire's eyes slid between us, surveying, calculating. “I am General Wolfe of the New York Elite. Do you know what that means?”

I shrugged and Callie shook her head.

“It means I own you. Every damn hair on your head and every single blood cell in your veins. And I will not tolerate disobedience during the testing, understand?”

“Yes,” Callie bit out and I gritted my jaw as I nodded.

This vampire wasn't like the guards who patrolled the fences. He emanated power. And when he said he owned us, I had no doubt he was telling the truth.

He gazed at Callie with narrowed eyes. “What happened to your face?”

Callie touched her swollen lip and I tightened my grip on her hand, my heart thundering in my ears.

Lie well, Callie.

“I fell,” she said easily and I relaxed a fraction.

“Hm,” Wolfe grunted, evidently satisfied. Turning, he gestured to the dark-robed vampires beside him and one of them produced a syringe with a slim needle on the end.

Callie was first and she didn't even flinch as the guard drew out a large vial of blood from her forearm. When the guard moved to my side with a clean syringe, a shudder cascaded down my spine like cold water. I folded up my sleeve, offering the pale skin of my forearm to him. My eyes remained on the needle the entire time. A sharp pinch followed a vile dragging feeling in my veins.

Next, they cut a small lock of our hair and put it in separate bags then wet our fingers in ink and took our prints.

The house was deafeningly quiet. Wolfe's sharp orders were followed by our ascent and the soundless movements of his guards.

They wrapped up everything they'd harvested from us in a sheath of leather which Wolfe tucked inside his robes.

“You will be notified with your results in twenty four hours,” Wolfe said, moving toward the exit.

I rose from my seat, my heart pounding frantically as my chair screeched

backwards across the floor.

“What happens if we pass the test?” The words left my lips before I had time to rethink them.

Wolfe glanced over his shoulder with a menacing glare. “You will only find that out if and when you pass.”

“What if we fail?” Callie demanded and tension spilled through the air.

Wolfe grew eerily still, his dark gaze flicking between us. “Questions are for sentient beings. But unfortunately for you, the law does not recognise humans as such.”

Anger flared in my veins hot and fast. I took a step forward, but a hand slammed down on my shoulder. A quick glance informed me Dad had returned.

“Thank you, General,” Dad spoke loud and clear, forcing the conversation to end.

Wolfe eyed him with disdain before exiting our home and leaving the door wide open as he sailed away with his guards in tow.

Dad darted around us, slamming the front door and pressing his back to it. His jaw ticked as he looked between us, stress evident in his rigid posture. “You're going to pass...I just know it.” He pressed his fingers into his eyes and both Callie and I hurried forward into his arms.

He hugged us tight, placing a kiss on each of our heads. “We must be prepared.”

“What happens if we pass?” I asked.

“You'll be taken away,” Dad sighed.

“Where to?” Callie whispered.

“Somewhere you won't come back from.” Dad murmured, holding us tighter.

Whether he knew more or not, he didn't let on as he started muttering about supplies and the patrol at nightfall. The longer I stood there in his arms, the more fear crept into me. If Dad was afraid, I knew we should be too.

“We might not pass,” Callie offered and Dad nodded, a sad twinkle in his gaze.

“Of course.” He nodded firmly. “Now go to your room, I need to think a while.”

Callie and I moved back to our bedroom in tense silence, shutting ourselves away. Our two single beds were practically touching in the small space. Just a small path between them led up to the lonely window. Perched

on the one table in the room was a half-burnt candle and a stagnant glass of water. Last night, Callie and I had kept the candle alight longer than usual, telling each other stories and imagining up a life beyond the Realm. Fantasy was the best way to escape this world, but the reality was, we were trapped here. And our conjured dreams of safety had just been thoroughly stamped out.

I dropped onto my bed and Callie sat on hers, our knees nearly touching. The room seemed more monotone than usual, even my sister's golden hair appeared dimmer.

"Where did you get the food?" I whispered, my heart still pounding out of rhythm from our encounter with Wolfe and his creepy gang.

"There's a way out. I told you Thomas was getting supplies from beyond the fences." Her eyes lit up with mischief as she reached under my bed, extracting the bag and pouring the contents onto the mattress. A bunch of tinned food and some thermal underwear lay amongst the haul.

"Oh my god," I breathed as realisation stabbed at my chest. "If they find out, Callie, they'll-"

"They won't find out," she insisted. "Thomas has been sneaking in and out for months."

"It's not going to go unnoticed forever." I pulled at the collar of my shirt, feeling overly hot all of a sudden. The test, Wolfe, and now this. We were in serious trouble one way or the other.

"Maybe we won't be here forever." Callie's mouth pulled up into a grin. "We could leave. Take Dad and get out of here."

"We can't *leave*," I gasped, a tremor rocking through me. "We wouldn't get two hundred yards before they caught us. And then they'd throw us all into the blood bank." My hands shook with the mere idea of it. All our lives, we'd looked out for each other. The three of us. Now our safety seemed like an illusion. But leaving was just another way of getting ourselves strung up and drained.

Callie knotted her hands together, thinking on it. "Maybe there's a better world beyond the fences, Monty."

I cringed at the nickname she knew I hated, but she continued on, ignoring my expression.

"We always dreamed about it when we were kids. What if there are still places out there like the ones in Dad's stories? And even if there's not, do you really want to spend your whole life in the Realm?"

My gut prickled. I didn't want that. No one wanted that. Regular blood-givings may have made us valuable to the vampires now, but we all knew what happened when we grew old, useless, weak.

An ache grew in my chest. "Of course I don't," I sighed. "But the patrols will be extra tight while the Elite are still here. The guards always try to impress them with how vigilant they are."

Callie nodded her agreement. "So we wait until tomorrow morning--"

"And hope the sun's shining," I finished for her and she solidified our decision with a firm nod.

The room seemed to brighten again as rays of sunlight streamed through my chest. We could actually pull this off. Really get free of this place.

A knock came at the door and Dad entered, a grim expression pinching his features. His eyes fell on the haul beside Callie and his brow creased in confusion.

"I know a way out," Callie announced, lifting her chin. We never kept anything from Dad. He was probably more of a rebel than us at times.

Dad shook his head with a small chuckle. "Why doesn't that surprise me? You better show us where it is then Callie, because I'm not letting those bloodsuckers take my daughters anywhere."

My heart swelled and something bloomed inside me that I hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Hope.



I didn't sleep that night. There was no way I could switch off the swirling thoughts which chased their way through my brain. We were leaving the Realm. I didn't know if it would be the most exciting thing I'd ever done or the most terrifying. Both, I guessed.

The biggest question I kept coming across was where we would go once we got out. Dad remembered the world before the vampires but the places he'd known had been mostly destroyed in the Final War. Even if he could figure out somewhere for us to go there was no way of knowing if it was safe. Or even if it still existed.

We would be heading towards a hope and a dream. Which really wasn't very reassuring. *Stop being so negative Callie.*

I rolled over for the hundredth time and considered voicing my concerns to Montana. We'd talked ourselves hoarse when we'd finally turned in for the night and eventually drifted into silence, but I was sure she was still awake too.

Somehow breaking the illusion of sleep didn't appeal to me though. We'd promised Dad that we would try and get some rest before our journey and starting up another conversation felt like breaking my word.

It wasn't like there was anything she or I could say anyway. We were heading into the unknown. Plans wouldn't matter one bit once we made it past the fences. We knew nothing of the world beyond the Realm aside from the stories Dad had taught us. I didn't even know if those were all true. He'd told us just as many myths and legends as he had memories of the way the world used to be.

I could very well have gotten some of them muddled up in my mind. Maybe there really were trolls hiding under bridges and it was the giant redwood trees he'd visited with Mom that didn't exist. The more I thought about it, the more my brain ached.

At least I'd gone to bed with a full stomach. We hadn't held back on demolishing the supplies I'd found. Dad had reasoned that we'd need our strength for tomorrow and I wasn't going to argue against a decent meal. We planned on grabbing more food and clothing from the apartment block I'd raided when we got that far anyway. I had my heart set on that white coat.

Is there really any way we can survive this? The negative voice in the back of my skull wouldn't be silenced by the promise of a warm coat. I sighed loudly and pressed my thin pillow over my face, resisting the urge to scream into it.

Maybe we shouldn't risk running. There was a good chance we wouldn't pass their test and we could just carry on living here. I'd have to get up and follow my normal pattern of hiding in the ruins and avoiding interactions with the people who lived near us. Keeping to myself so that I didn't have to risk feeling the pain of loss when someone went missing. Slowly watching my family starve to death while the vampires breathed down our necks, just waiting for an excuse to take us and bleed us dry...

The thought alone was enough to make my heart sink. Although the idea of escape was terrifying, it was also the realisation of a dream I'd never dared to believe in before.

Life in the Realm was no life at all. The only time I ever felt free was when I escaped into the false reality of one of Dad's stories and I always had to come crashing back to the misery of our lives when it ended. This could be our one shot at true freedom. And no matter how fleeting it might end up being, we *had* to take it. Even one day of freedom would be worth whatever punishment they gave us for it.

My mind drifted to the blood bank and I wondered if that was really the case. The stories about what happened to the people who got sent there were so horrendous that I struggled to believe they were true. But sometimes at night when the wind was blowing in the right direction, we could hear the screams coming from that place.

It wasn't even in our Realm. The huge building was at the top of a large hill miles to the south and we'd had it pointed out to us on multiple occasions. Black smoke poured from the giant chimney and though it was too far away for us to really smell it, sometimes I woke with the taste of ash on my tongue. Like a warning about what would happen to me if I ended up there. That was where we went if we didn't follow their laws. That was what happened to anyone who disobeyed them. No one who was sent there ever

came back.

A shiver ran down my spine and the doubts crept in again. *Was it worth the risk?* It had to be; my soul yearned to be free and I had to embrace the chance to get out of here.

My heart fluttered like a butterfly trapped in a jar, aching for the lid to be lifted. Freedom. It was like a whisper in the dark and I ached for it. I'd never wanted anything the way I yearned for that sweet promise. No one to answer to, no one to take my blood from me for their own sustenance. To be more than just a food source for a bunch of parasites. A life of my own.

A smile tugged at my lips and the fear slid back like a retreating tide.

Our battered blind was pretty useless at shielding our window and I watched as the space beyond it slowly brightened into a new day.

I gave up on any pretence of sleep and got to my feet to look out properly. Between my worrying through the night, I'd desperately wished for a sunny day to aid in our escape but luck wasn't on our side. There was no sign of the sun beyond the thick grey clouds which blocked out the sky. At least it wasn't raining. But I'd have given anything for a blue sky and a blazing sun.

"Do you really think this will work?" Montana asked from her bed beside me. I looked around and found her wide eyes gazing up at me from beneath her blanket. I didn't blame her for staying put; the temperature had dropped below freezing in the night and my toes were already beginning to feel numb despite my thick socks.

"It has to," I replied more bravely than I felt.

She didn't voice any more doubts even though I could see them written across her features. I was sure a hundred of my own were painted on my face for her to see too. No matter how much of a front we put up we'd never been able to lie to each other. We were two halves of the same whole. Twins couldn't keep secrets from each other, even if we tried.

I caught her fingers between mine and held on tightly.

"We're going to be *free* Monty," I whispered, smiling at her. She didn't even protest at the nickname she hated as a smile gripped her features too.

"Free," she breathed in agreement and I could hear the same wonder in her voice that I felt.

We'd both been born prisoners here, the concept of freedom wasn't something either of us could fully understand. And yet it called our names in the silence of the cold nights. Whispered to us over the growling of our empty stomachs. It was the voice we'd never dared to listen to before but

now that we were, it was screaming our names.

I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a tight squeeze before heading for the bathroom.

The light bulb flickered above the cracked basin as I entered the small space. I shivered and hurried to brush my teeth in the ice-cold water.

When I'd finished, I surveyed myself in the small mirror, hoping to banish some of the fear that glowed in my blue eyes before I had to head outside. The mirror was tarnished and had a jagged crack running through the centre of it so I'd never really seen a good reflection of my face. I wondered how I looked to other people. Would they see the fear I was trying to hide? Worse than that, would they see the truth? If anyone guessed that we were going to run then they might tell the vampires. Turning in traitors got you extra rations, new clothes. I couldn't expect any loyalty from the rest of the humans in the Realm. They had their own families to worry about. They wouldn't think twice about handing us in.

News would have spread by now about our tests. We had to at least turn up for our duties before making our escape. If we didn't show our faces then the alarm would be raised that much sooner.

I started brushing my blonde hair, teasing out the tangles caused by my restless night. It hung to my waist in loosely twisting curls. I knew it would be more practical to cut it short but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was the one thing I'd gotten from our mom. Whenever I thought of her I had trouble remembering much about her features apart from her long golden hair and bright blue eyes. It was soothing somehow to carry that little reminder of her wherever I went, even if it was hard work to look after.

Once I'd removed the knots, I expertly braided my hair down my back to keep it under control. I rarely left it loose during the day despite how much I loved it. It attracted too much attention and I preferred to go unnoticed.

One complication I didn't need in life was the attention of men. At least not anything serious. Relationships just gave you someone else to love and lose. It was hard enough worrying about Montana and Dad all the time without adding anyone else to the mix. Losing Mom had nearly killed Dad and I could still see the pain of her loss hiding beneath the surface when he thought we weren't looking. Even after all these years.

Once I was done, I headed into the kitchen and started on a big batch of pancakes. I'd been skipping the first meal of the day a lot recently to preserve our rations but we wouldn't be coming back here and there was no point in

leaving it behind. Besides, a big meal was just what we needed to set us up for the day ahead.

Dad appeared at the scent of the food as I dished out the first batch. His hair was dark like Montana's and thinner than it used to be. He smiled enthusiastically at the meal as I pushed it towards him but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asked seriously.

"No," I replied honestly. "But how could I ever be ready to run away from everything I've ever known? I'm excited though, if that's not insane."

"It's not." He smiled warmly. I may not have inherited his looks but we had the same spirit. While Montana had always loved the stories he told us because of the romance and magic in them, I'd always loved them for the adventure. Though I'd never thought I'd be able to see what the world held beyond our Realm, I'd dreamt about it every night for as long as I could remember. I wanted to be Jason leading the Argonauts to find the Golden Fleece or Hercules fighting the Hydra. In a terrifying way, all of my wishes were coming true.

"What if something goes wrong though? What if the vampires catch us?" I asked even though we'd already been over this.

"We can't be much worse off than we are now anyway. If you hadn't found that way out of the Realm yesterday we might very well have starved or frozen to death this winter. The only thing we might face is a slightly quicker death. And if we really do manage to escape them then we may even get to live real lives of our own choosing. This is the opportunity I've waited for for a long time. I've dreamed of getting you girls out of this damned place and it's finally happening." His eyes glimmered with enough hope at the possibility that I put my fears firmly aside. I needed to focus on this plan and on getting us out of here. There was no point in wasting energy on the idea of it not working.

Montana came out of the bathroom with her dark hair brushed and her cheeks flushed from washing her face in the cold water.

"Are we ready to do this then?" she asked as she accepted a plate of pancakes and I took my own over to the small table to join my family in devouring them.

"Let's get the hell out of here girls," Dad replied enthusiastically.

We all smiled at each other eagerly as the reality of what we were about to do settled over us. Yeah, it would be dangerous but if it all worked out

then we would really be free. For the first time in mine and Montana's lives we would be able to choose our own destinies.

I fell on my pancakes ravenously, pushing aside the twist of guilt I always felt when I ate well. For once we weren't being frugal and I was confident that we could get more than enough food outside the Realm in the abandoned buildings.

As we finished our breakfast, I pulled the brown packet I'd found yesterday from my pocket and held it up to show them. "Just wait until you try this," I said eagerly as I broke the brown food into three equal pieces.

"What is it?" Montana asked as she reached for it unenthusiastically.

"Trust me, it tastes better than it looks," I promised.

"I haven't seen chocolate in a long time," Dad said as he turned his little slab over in his fingers. "Your mother absolutely adored it. I used to pick up a bar every Friday night on my way home from work and we'd share it while watching trashy TV."

"The picture box thing?" I asked. Dad had explained about the kinds of technology they'd had before the vampires came but hardly any of it was allowed in the Realm anymore. The only TV I'd ever seen was the CCTV monitors at the Emporium and I couldn't really imagine myself wanting to spend hours watching that.

"Yeah," he laughed.

"Well if it was Mom's favourite..." Montana took a tentative bite, looking as though she'd already decided she wouldn't like it but as the chocolate hit her tastebuds her face transformed. "Oh wow."

I grinned at her and quickly followed her lead, taking a bite of my own chocolate and closing my eyes for a moment as I lost myself in the taste of it. I wasn't surprised it had been Mom's favourite. I couldn't imagine anyone eating some of it and not wanting more.

As we finished eating, Dad took our plates and placed them on the counter beside the sink. He didn't wash them though and gave me a knowing smile as he walked away from the mess. We wouldn't be needing them again anyway.

I headed back to our room and grabbed my pack. We couldn't take much with us or it would arouse suspicion but each of us could carry a small bag without being noticed. It wasn't like I had much worth bringing anyway. I tossed in a small sketch our mom had drawn of a soaring eagle. The corners of the page were wrinkled and marked from years of me holding it but I'd

always loved looking at the way she'd captured the bird's movement. Dad had other pieces she'd drawn but it had been hard to come by the supplies she'd needed for her art so there weren't as many as there should have been. The vampires even took that from her.

Aside from that, there was nothing personal I wanted to bring so I added a change of clothes and my toothbrush to the bag then zipped it shut.

I dressed in the thermal underwear I'd found yesterday and topped it with a pair of faded denim jeans and a long-sleeved shirt which had probably been a much brighter shade of green when it was new. I threw on my boots and dark red coat to finish it off and headed for the door again.

Montana opened it before I got there and gave me a tight smile as she collected her own bag from her bed. She was dressed in her best clothes too though they weren't anything special; dark jeans, boots and her own well-worn coat. I hoped we'd be able to upgrade our over-used outfits quickly once we were out of the Realm.

We'd spent every night of our lives in this room and the idea of leaving it behind was a little scary but it was liberating too.

"Is it strange that I won't miss this place?" I asked her as we gave the bedroom one final look.

"This might be the only place we've ever lived, but it was never our home," she replied.

"Then it's about time we went and found somewhere to call home for real," Dad said loudly behind us and I jumped a little at the sound of his voice. He wrapped his arms around us and we all squeezed each other tightly. "You both remember the plan? Do whatever you have to to make sure no one suspects anything and then we all meet outside the Realm in one hour."

I nodded into his chest and Montana murmured a yes. I'd explained how to get out of the Realm last night and we'd agreed that it would be better for us to meet on the other side of the fence. If any of us were seen hanging around by the drain then it might alert the vampires to our way out. Better not to stand about where we might be spotted.

"Let's get going then." Dad released us and we all headed out of the bedroom together in silence. I didn't look back. I didn't care about leaving it behind and I hoped I'd never see it again.

Montana



Fear pinched my heart.

In less than a few hours, we could be running into freedom and leaving this godforsaken place behind. I half wished I could see the look on the vampires' faces when they realised we were gone.

Callie left first, then Dad followed. Callie was going to circle through town and visit the well like she often did in the mornings and Dad was going to pick up some firewood from the Emporium.

I'd already waited twenty minutes and within the hour, we'd all head to the stone fountain in the ruins and meet on the other side of the tunnel.

Simple. Easy.

Except it wasn't. It was the most terrifying thing in the world.

I paced back and forth in the quiet hallway, my pulse somehow louder than my footfalls.

My plan was simple: head to the east corner of the Realm and take the trail beside the fences toward the ruins. I often paced the Realm like a caged tiger, it was the only thing that kept me sane. And it was going to benefit me now, because no one would bat an eyelid at me taking one of my usual morning strolls. My duties didn't normally start until midday when I took over from some of the women at the bathhouse, so I wouldn't be missed until then.

Gripping the door handle, I threw one last glance back at the tiny kitchen and said the most certain goodbye of my life.

The second I opened the door, I almost crashed into our neighbour Lilien and the baby in her arms wailed in surprise. The crying continued and Lilien bounced him up and down, trying to shush him.

“Sorry to bother you, Montana. Could you watch the kids for me? I need to go to the Emporium and Hamish didn't come back last night. Again. The Briar boys are making vodka out of potatoes and he'd rather spend his night there drunk than help with his damn family.”

Lilien's face was turning red with stress and my heart jolted with the immediate roadblock in my plan.

"I-er...I can't Lilien, I'm busy." I tried to move past her, causing the baby to shriek again when she didn't move.

"Please, Montana," she begged. "I can't bring them with me, they'll cause mayhem. I won't be more than an hour if the queue's short." Her eyes glistened and I could tell she'd barely had a wink of sleep. My gut twisted with guilt at knowing I was leaving her and her family behind. But we couldn't tell anyone what we were doing, it was too risky.

I shook my head. There was no way I could do it.

"I'm sorry Lilien. Another time, okay?"

She gazed at me as if I'd just caught fire. Heart fluttering, I made use of her momentary surprise and darted into the stairwell.

"Montana! What's gotten into you?!" she called after me.

I ground my teeth, hating myself for abandoning her in her time of need. But if I didn't meet Dad and Callie within the hour, they'd think I'd been caught.

The baby's crying followed me all the way out onto the street and I fought back the lump growing in my throat.

I'm sorry, Lilien.

I hurried along the cracked road, wanting to put some distance between Lilien and I in case she started running after me.

Turning left into a muddy alley, I took a slow breath to calm my nerves.

She doesn't know anything. She just thinks you were rude. And in an hour's time, it won't matter what she thinks of you because you'll be gone forever.

The grimy walls seemed to press in on either side of me. The gloomy day did nothing to ease my anxiety. Why couldn't it have been sunny, just for today? Just for this one single morning?

I glanced up at the sky, silently cursing our luck. Hopefully that was the only bad luck we'd receive today.

The alley forked onto a stone path that followed the line of apartments. I slowed my pace to a casual walk, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets, trying to act as I normally did.

There weren't many people around, but the few who passed nodded or said hello. No one stopped me.

The ruins came into sight in the distance and I took another few turns past the housing until I finally met the overgrown track that charted a path all the

way to the first electrical fence.

Static crackled in my ears as I reached it and I eyed the grass that grew up high and tickled the metal wire.

Beyond it was another fence, then another. A ripped coat on the first row of barbs was a constant reminder of someone who'd tried to escape and failed. The corpse had been removed, but the day the boy had tried to run was etched permanently into my memory.

The vampires had taken out their fury on the whole town. No rations for a week. Random beatings and children going missing in the night. They'd wanted to strike terror into our hearts and they'd achieved it. That coat scared me more today than it had in many years. What would happen to the people of the Realm once the vampires discovered we'd escaped?

I couldn't focus on that. Attempting to leave this place was better than remaining in it. It had to be...

The wind sent a shiver through to my bones and I forced myself to slow down again.

Not too fast. Just take your time.

The first shattered house came into sight, just a hulk of stone under the dark sky. Dad said bombs had rained down on the world during the Final War. The one that humans on both sides had fought so hard to win. But no one could ever have predicted this outcome. The vampires had been lurking in the shadows, waiting for us to make a mistake. To destroy just enough of ourselves so they'd have the upper hand. I supposed immortality had given them the patience we couldn't afford.

A crunch made me yelp and I cursed myself for my idiocy as I spotted the broken glass beneath my boot.

I glanced left and right, checking to make sure no one had heard me.

A shadow stirred in my periphery.

I whipped around, but no one was there.

Keep it together, Montana. No one will be out this way.

I felt exposed as I coiled through the labyrinth of broken stone and fallen mortar. Why Callie liked coming to this place was a mystery to me. It was a constant reminder of the war that had landed us in this hellhole.

I spotted the fountain up ahead and hope swirled through me like hot steam. Maybe Callie and Dad were already underground waiting for me.

I halted before the shattered remains of the water feature, slowly moving around it and searching the overgrown grass for signs of a hatch. My eyes

landed on a metal plate on the ground. Moss clung to it but the edges were clear, proving it had recently been moved.

Bending low, I clawed my fingers into the grooves and dragged it aside. A dark hole gazed back at me and the scent of mildew reached my nose.

Bending down, I hung my legs over the edge before finding the metal rung of a ladder. Carefully, I eased myself lower, counting my breaths as I went down, down, down until I could no longer see the Realm.

The taste of freedom met my tongue in the form of damp air and I devoured it. Reaching up, I tugged the cover back into place and a metallic gong rang through my entire body.

My palms were slick as I descended into the darkness, cursing myself for not having lit a match first.

As I reached the bottom, I fumbled in my bag for one, but a scratching noise followed a hiss and a match illuminated before my eyes.

Dad's smiling face swam into view. "Hey, Monty."

"*Dad*," I complained. I hated that damn name.

"C'mere." He dragged me into a hug then tugged me along, lifting the match higher to light our way forward. The old tunnel was nothing but rubble and dirt, but ahead a glimpse of daylight shone like a guiding star.

As the match went out, Dad dropped it and started traversing the rubble, using his hands to steady him.

"Where's Callie?" I asked.

"Just up ahead. I told her to hide in one of the buildings."

In case we got caught, I added in my head. But Dad had done the right thing. No point risking all of our necks when we didn't have to.

I followed Dad across the rocks, dropping down onto all fours when it grew too uneven. Finally, the tunnel opened up again and a ladder came into view, illuminated by a circular shaft of light.

We hurried up to it and Dad turned to me, cupping my cheek. "I'll go first, wait until I tell you to follow. If I don't, then run back to the Realm. Don't waste a second."

"Dad-" I complained, but he shook his head to silence me.

"Do as I say," he urged and I gave in, squeezing his arm. But there was no way in hell I'd really leave him.

"Love you," he breathed and I whispered it back as he climbed up the ladder and heaved himself out of the drain.

I waited, craning my neck to try and catch sight of him, but all I could see

was the sombre sky. I placed my foot on the first rung, my heart thumping hard against my ribcage.

“All clear,” his voice carried to me and I sighed my relief, hurrying up the ladder.

As I reached the top, Dad thrust his hand down to pull me out. My head breached the hole and air rushed into my lungs. Despite being a hundred yards from the Realm, it was the freshest breath I’d ever taken.

The shadow of a bird sailed over us and Dad straightened. He angled his head toward the electrical fences and I immediately sensed something was wrong.

A cry carried to us from the Realm and I tried to spot where it was coming from.

“See!”

My heart slammed into my throat.

Lilien stood beyond the fences surrounded by *eight* vampires. One of them was dressed in green robes and fear struck me as I recognised him. *General Wolfe*.

I shoved Dad to get him moving and we stumbled into a run as terror pounded through me.

The path was lined with rubble from the ruins and I nearly tripped more than once, but we never stopped, never looked back. I wouldn’t give up. We were too close to freedom to have it ripped from us now.

“Just keep going!” Dad cried, skidding to a halt.

“Dad- what are you doing?!” I spun on my heel, spotting him sprinting back in the direction of the vampires. They sped out of the drain like ants, surging toward him at a ferocious pace.

“No!” I charged after him.

“I love you girls!” Dad roared as he collided with the first one, something glinting in his palm. The female vampire took him to the ground in an instant, baring her fangs.

Anger guided my actions and I stooped down to grab a rock before throwing it as hard as I could. It smashed into the face of the vampire holding him. It was only enough to distract the beast but her eyes whipped to me instead of my father. In a flash, she sprinted toward me and a wave of fear crashed against my chest.

“Montana, watch out!” Callie shouted from somewhere close by.

I couldn’t leave Dad. I wouldn’t.

The vampire collided with me. I crashed into the ground and the breath was forced from my lungs. Adrenaline surged through me like molten lava. My arm flailed beside me as I hunted for a weapon. My fingers closed around a broken hunk of concrete and I screamed my rage as I slammed it into her temple.

Blood oozed from the wound, but she didn't react.

She started laughing, her red locks falling forward to surround her beautiful face.

"Get off!" I screamed, bringing my arm up to hit her again. She caught my wrist, slamming it into the ground and ripping the rock from my hand. I groaned as her nails dug into my skin.

"*Bitch,*" I hissed.

With inhuman strength, she rolled me beneath her and dragged my arms behind my back, locking them with metal cuffs.

I gazed at the group of vampires surrounding my dad, forcing him down on the concrete.

Dad, oh god, Dad.

A tear of regret slid down my cheek. I couldn't help him. I wasn't strong enough to help him.

"Which way did she go?" a cold voice dripped over me. My head was wrenched back, forcing me to look up at General Wolfe as he approached.

Hatred coursed through me like nothing I'd ever felt before.

My veins thrummed with fury, terror. I'd never give up my sister. *Never.*

I curled my upper lip back. "Screw you," I snarled.

His boot collided with the side of my head and darkness swallowed me whole.



My mouth fell open in horror as I stared at my Dad racing towards eight vampires while wielding an old kitchen knife.

Montana hesitated for a moment, fear gripping her as she realised what he was doing. She grabbed a rock from the rubble at her feet and hurled it into the face of the vampire pinning Dad down. My heart leapt with pride but the moment dissolved in a heartbeat as the red-haired vampire switched her attention to my sister.

I clambered out of the ruined building I'd been hiding in and started running towards her along the narrow alleyway.

"Montana, watch out!" I yelled, urging her into action as the vampire raced towards her. My warning was pointless, she had no chance to do anything before the vampire collided with her, sending her crashing to the ground.

The remaining vampires swarmed around my dad like a tide crashing against a rock. Montana tried to fight off her attacker but it was no use. The vampires were like statues given flesh. Their strength was unmatched and the monster holding her laughed as she took a blow to the head.

My heart pounded desperately as panic tore through me and I sprinted faster to try and help. I didn't know what I could possibly do to save them but I had to do *something*.

I made it to the end of the alley but before I could step out, someone grabbed my arm, yanking me back into the shadows.

I went to scream but before I could, a huge hand slapped down across my mouth silencing me.

I tried to struggle, kicking and punching with my free arm but it was like the blows I landed didn't even register. My attacker spun me around, slamming me against the cold stone wall of an apartment block.

His fingers dug into my cheek as his hand clamped my mouth closed,

stopping me from making a sound.

I could only watch in horror as the vampire bound my sister and my heart felt like it might tear in two. I battled to fight my way free but he tightened his hold, his bulk immobilising me completely.

“It’s too late for them,” he breathed in my ear.

I tried everything possible to get away from him but I was totally overpowered and barely able to move an inch. With a lurch of surprise, I realised he wasn’t a vampire. The heat radiating from his body where it was pressed against my back told me otherwise.

I couldn’t understand why he was doing this to me. What difference did it make to him to hold me back while my family needed me?

Tears ran freely down my cheeks while I watched in horror as the vampires took my family from me. A soft whimper escaped my throat as my whole world fell apart and I felt my captor’s tension increase at the sound.

The vampire who had been restraining Montana stepped away from her and started looking around at the surrounding buildings. I held my breath, fear coursing through me as her gaze passed over the alley I was hidden in. We were deep within the shadows but for a moment I thought she’d seen me. Her gaze swept on though and my lungs remembered how to work again.

Another vampire lifted Montana’s unconscious body into his arms like it weighed nothing. General Wolfe directed him back towards the Realm and he carried her away, dropping down into the drain and out of sight.

I tried to cry out, a muffled sound barely making it past the hand which crushed my mouth. His grip tightened painfully, his fingers digging into my cheek so hard that I could feel it bruising.

My pitiful attempt at a sound was drowned out by my father’s pleas as he begged the vampires not to take his child from him.

“She was only following me!” he cried. “I asked her to help me search for food out here - take me instead!”

“Don’t worry,” the General replied, a cruel smile twisting his beautiful features. “We haven’t forgotten about you. Your daughters have a price on their heads. Where is the other one?”

“Back in the Realm,” my dad lied for me and my heart shattered into a thousand pieces as the vampire struck him. The blow looked almost casual but it sent my dad flying to the ground. A gash opened up across his cheek, spilling blood to the pavement.

“Don’t lie to me *human*,” General Wolfe warned. “You will tell us

everything we want to know eventually anyway.”

“I’d sooner die than betray my children,” Dad hissed as he struggled to regain his feet.

The vampire shoved him back and my dad fell to the ground as if he’d been struck with a baseball bat. He skidded backwards on the concrete, his grey jacket tearing at the impact.

The monster with the face of an angel advanced, reaching out to brush his fingers along the bleeding wound on my dad’s cheek. He lifted his hand to his mouth and licked the blood from it, closing his eyes as he savoured the taste.

Acid burned my throat as revulsion raced through me.

The lesser vampires all shifted like cornstalks in a breeze as they watched the interaction. I could practically feel their hunger. A shiver passed across my skin as their excitement grew.

“I always did prefer my meals... *fresh*,” the General hissed as he opened his eyes. The bland look had been banished from them and a dangerous gleam glowed desperately behind his pupils. He seemed to take a moment to try and restrain himself but gave up and leapt forward, crushing my father to the ground.

Dad screamed as the demon bit his neck but the vampire caught his arms, pinning him in place as easily as if he were a child instead of a full-grown man.

I struggled even harder against my captor’s grip and he grunted as he pressed himself against me more firmly, stopping me from running to my father’s aid.

The General released his hold on my dad and sat up, blood running down his chin as he turned his head to the sky and sighed in satisfaction. My dad raised trembling fingers to the wound on his neck as the vampire climbed off of him and returned to stand before him like nothing had happened.

“Where is your other daughter?” Wolfe asked again, tipping his head to the side in a gesture that looked anything but human. My dad pushed himself to his feet before he answered and more tears pooled in my eyes as he staggered with the effort of doing so.

“Go to hell.” My dad reared back and spat straight in the General’s face.

The vampire glared at my father as he wiped the wad of spittle from his cheek. “It would be rude of me not to share my meal,” he said icily and it took me a moment to realise what he meant.

The six lesser vampires understood more quickly than I did and they all leapt at my dad excitedly, knocking him back to the ground.

He roared in pain as six sets of teeth found his flesh and I screamed around my captor's fingers as my father's limbs flailed wildly beneath the attack.

"Don't kill him," General Wolfe added after a few more agonising moments had passed. "He still needs to tell us where his other daughter went."

The lesser vampires reluctantly stopped their feasting and moved away from my father's body. He wasn't moving. I could see rings of tooth marks bleeding on both of his arms as well as one on his leg where the vampires had shredded his pants in their efforts to devour him alive.

My stomach clenched and flipped over at the sight, bile filling my mouth as I fought back the urge to vomit.

General Wolfe sighed impatiently as he realised my dad had lost consciousness. "Bring him." He snapped his fingers at the vampire standing closest to him. "He will answer my questions when he wakes. The rest of you, search this place for the girl. She can't have gone far, but don't forget the Royals want her. She's not to be bitten."

The five remaining vampires turned and headed into the streets surrounding the buildings like dogs hunting a scent. Thankfully none of them headed towards us.

"We have to move," the man holding me hissed in my ear. I struggled against his hold again as my father was dragged away. I didn't care about the vampires who were looking for me, I just wanted to stop them from taking my family away.

The man seemed to realise I didn't plan on going anywhere with him and shifted his grip on me so that he could flip me around to face him.

He was huge; over six foot tall and built with more muscle than I'd ever seen on a man. He had long, black hair which was loose over his shoulders and his face was shadowed with stubble that was almost long enough to be called a beard. His clothes were dark and clung to his broad frame, it looked like they were made of leather.

His eyes were the most striking thing about him though; they were golden in colour and almost glowed despite the darkened alleyway we were hiding in.

He kept his hand pressed tightly over my mouth and glared at me. I felt

myself shrinking under his heated gaze.

“We can’t stay here,” he insisted. “But if you come with me I will help you get your father back. I know where they’re going.”

I wanted to refuse, to push out of his grasp and run after my family before the vampires could get too far away but a small, defeated part of me knew I couldn’t help them. I’d only get myself caught.

My eyes slid back towards the courtyard which was now empty. Wolfe had followed the vampire carrying my father back into the Realm. The only other option I had was to chase after them but then what? It was suicide and I knew it. They’d capture me as easily as they had my family and then we’d have no chance of escape. If this man really knew where they were being taken then maybe I’d have a chance. Albeit a slim one...

With a surge of resolve that tore my heart in two, I nodded.

He watched me for several seconds like I was some kind of cornered animal and slowly removed his hand from my mouth.

I shoved him back and glared at him. No matter what help he was offering me now, he had stopped me from going to my family when they’d needed me most.

“How do you know where they’re taking them?” I whispered angrily. I wasn’t just going to blindly follow some stranger and trust in his promises of help.

“Come,” he instructed in a whisper as he turned away and started walking. Strapped across his back were two heavy, golden blades, their hilts covered in strange lettering. I bristled at his total disregard for my question.

“Who are you?” I hissed, staying exactly where he’d left me. I’d never seen him before, I was sure of it. No one in the Realm was anywhere near as big as him or as intimidating.

“Silence,” he instructed fiercely and I recoiled from him then cursed myself for it.

I glanced back to the street where my family had been minutes before and wondered if I should just go after them myself. *This guy could be a psycho for all I know.*

He took three long strides towards me, boxing me in against the wall again. I forced myself to stand straight and tilted my chin to hold his eye. I hoped I looked braver than I felt.

“If you don’t follow, they will hunt you down and kill you or worse. I am going to free the humans they have taken. Come with me or don’t. It’s your

choice.”

“Not much of a choice,” I muttered angrily. He glared at me and turned away without looking back to see if I was following.

I glanced back out towards the drain which led back into the Realm. They’d taken Dad and Montana back inside but I knew they wouldn’t be returning them to our old apartment. Following them would only serve to get me caught too.

I had no chance of freeing them right then but if this man really did know their destination I just might have a shot.

No one would expect another human to be outside the Realm. And even though they knew I’d escaped, they’d never expect me to come after them. They’d expect me to head south and keep running until the burning sun stopped them from following. But I wasn’t going anywhere without my family.

The General had said the Royals wanted us for something which I guessed meant that we had passed their damn test. Whatever they wanted us for, it couldn’t be good. I didn’t even know the vampires *had* Royals but it didn’t matter. They could stick a crown on their undead heads or stick one up their asses, it didn’t make a difference to me. I wouldn’t bow down to their wishes, I’d do whatever it took to get my family away from them.

Maybe they’d decided that our blood was particularly delicious and wanted to serve us up like the main course at a feast. Perhaps in the east where the Elite were rumoured to live they liked to drink their blood fresh; biting through flesh as the General had done to my dad. The thought of their razor sharp fangs piercing my skin sent a wave of fear rolling over me. The agony present in my father’s screams when they’d bitten him told me all I ever wanted to know about the pain that would cause.

I hesitated again then cursed as I ran to catch up to my unexpected companion. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, he seemed like my best chance of survival for now. At the very least he would make a more appetising meal for the bloodsuckers if they found us. And while they were dealing with him I’d have a chance to escape.

He quickly led me away, taking turns between the buildings so rapidly that he must have been familiar with the route. I struggled to keep up with his long stride and fast pace.

“Hold,” he said suddenly, putting a hand up to enunciate his point. “One of them has found us. Wait here.” He stepped out of the alleyway we were

occupying, grasping the two blades over his shoulders and pulling them free of their sheathes.

“Wait, what do you mean?” I jogged after him then staggered to a halt as I spotted the vampire standing in the road less than fifty feet away. She turned towards us with a triumphant smile, her scarlet hair twisting around her devastatingly beautiful face in a breeze I couldn’t feel.

“There you are sweet girl,” she purred.

My gut clenched in panic as I wondered how she could ignore the man-mountain prowling towards her with a pair of swords in favour of me.

“If you want her, you’ll have to come through me,” he rumbled as he closed in on her.

The vampire finally switched her attention to him and her eyes narrowed as she pulled her own sword from her back. “Slayer,” she growled. “We’d begun to think you were all dead.”

“You thought wrong.” He twisted towards her so suddenly that I almost missed the motion. His blade swept low, aiming for her stomach but somehow she leapt above it, parrying his second blade with her own.

The clash of colliding metal set my heart galloping in my chest but my feet were rooted to the spot.

They danced back and forth, matching blow for blow in movements so graceful they almost felt choreographed. The man-mountain moved far faster than I would have believed possible for someone of his size. Each time she leapt at him, he was ready for her and drove her back onto the defence.

I shifted back a step, wondering if I should be running away but unable to tear my gaze from the battle before me. My foot caught against something heavy and I glanced down to find a broken brick beside me. I bent down and grabbed it, feeling better to have something vaguely weapon-like in my hand.

The vampire noticed my movement, her head twisting towards me as her eyes flared. He took her momentary distraction as a gift and swung forward viciously. His blade sliced straight through her slender neck like it was nothing but paper and her head fell from her body with a wet thump.

I sucked in a breath.

It rolled towards me, trailing blood across the concrete and I felt my mouth fall open in some mixture of horror and awe.

Heavy footsteps made me look up from her face which was frozen in a moment of confused realisation.

“What’s this?” he asked, pointing at the brick which I now held so tightly I

thought it might be cutting my palm. I dropped it in embarrassment. It clattered loudly as it hit the ground.

“You killed one,” I said. No other words seemed relevant. I’d dreamed of killing one of those things every day of my life but I’d never believed it was actually possible.

He glanced at the decapitated body as though he’d almost forgotten it was there. “Not quite.” He turned one of his blades in his palm and drove it through the vampire’s heart.

A sound like raindrops falling filled the air and I watched in fascination as her body disintegrated into thousands of tiny pieces like grains of sand.

Some of it caught in the breeze and swirled towards me. I held my breath and took a step back. *Who knows what would happen if I breathed in vampire dust?*

“You’ve never seen one killed?” he asked with a frown.

I shook my head feebly.

“I’d begun to wonder if it was even possible,” I breathed.

His frown deepened and he looked about at our surroundings as though he were seeing them for the first time. “What year is this?” he asked slowly.

I wondered why he was asking such a strange question but as I looked into his golden eyes I could see that he really needed to hear the answer. “It’s twenty one thirty three. Why?”

His gaze clouded over and he turned away from me to look up at the grey sky. “Forgive me Brother,” he muttered and I could hear raw pain in his voice. “I slept too long.”

Montana



This was a nightmare, it had to be. But the cold, steel box I was trapped in could only be real. I'd never seen anything like this in the Realm to even imagine it existed. I was chained to a hard metal bench, my hands and feet clad in cuffs.

I thought of Callie, praying she'd made it to safety. But even if she had escaped, did that really make her safe?

We'd been told stories of the ravaged world beyond the Realm's electrical fences. A relentless sun and scorching desert where birds waited to pick the flesh from your bones. That was to the south. But to the east? Who knew? The Elite were rumoured to come from there. Was that where I was being taken? Or was my destination more obvious than that? The blood bank.

My stomach turned over. Was Dad there? Why wasn't he with me if that was where I was being taken?

I thought of him strung up, barely alive, kept on a drip so he wouldn't die, but continuing to produce blood. If we were free-range in the Realm then the blood bank was the vampires' version of intensive farming.

God, not there. Anywhere but there. Please be okay, Dad.

I was jostled from side to side and the movement made me think I was in a vehicle, something Dad had told me about. A van maybe.

I cried out to whoever was driving, but no answer came. So I thrashed and kicked the metal floor, making as much sound as I could. It did nothing but ease some of the anxious energy flowing through my veins.

The vehicle made a rumbling noise and I jerked to one side as it stopped moving.

“State line, let me see your papers,” a voice cut through the air beyond the metal walls.

“Hey!” I called out instinctively. “Hey – who's there?”

The voice fell silent, then another deep male tone sounded from the front of the vehicle. "I've got one in the back from Realm G. She's bound for NYC."

"You're heading to the airfield?" the man asked and I started slamming my feet to the floor again, making a cacophony of noise.

Bastards, all of them. How could they take me away from the only people I had in the world?

"Let me out!" I demanded but no one replied.

"Open up, let's get a look at her."

My heart stumbled as footsteps closed in on the two doors at the back of the vehicle. As they opened, daylight fell over me but it wasn't much more than a vague glow between the dark clouds. A drizzle hung in the air around the two men standing there.

No, not men. Vampires. Both were alluring and built with lean muscle.

I fell silent as I gazed at them and the one in a black uniform breathed in through his nose.

"Delicious," he sighed and my skin prickled. Despite knowing I was a food source for these creeps, I'd never been looked at like I was a steaming hot meal ready and waiting to be devoured.

My eyes slid to a paved road behind them surrounded by a thick forest so green and bright, I was sure I'd never seen anything so vivid in nature before.

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded, keeping my tone strong.

"She hasn't figured it out yet," murmured the one who I assumed was my driver.

The other one chuckled. "They keep 'em stupid in the Realms for a reason."

"Wait-" I cried, but the doors slammed in my face again, drowning any more protests I might have been able to conjure. Fighting this was useless. They didn't see me as an equal; I was their inferior. They weren't going to let me go, no matter how much I begged. So I only had one option left: escape.

With my bound hands and feet, that wasn't a possibility right then. But they had to unshackle me eventually. Didn't they..?



At some point, I fell asleep. I didn't know if it was the lull of the van or the

utter exhaustion creeping into my bones that won in the end.

I was only half-aware when the vehicle stopped moving again and the doors cracked open. Night time. My pulse ticked loudly in my ears. We never went out after dark in the Realm. The vampires were in their element beyond dusk...that was when people went missing.

A floodlight stood out starkly behind the dark figure climbing into the van. My heart hammered as I tried to get a good look at him and my driver came into view. He freed the chain that held me to the seat, but my hands and feet remained bound together as he drew me toward the doors. With inhuman strength, he lifted me into his arms and threw me over his shoulder.

Rage spewed through me and I slammed my shackled hands into his back over and over, but his only response was a musical laugh.

When he planted me down, I was turned to face an enormous, winged thing. Like a giant, ugly bird.

Another man approached, dressed in a dark red uniform with an emblem on his breast pocket.

Royal Guard. What did that mean?

My eyes lifted to his smiling face. “She's the last one.” He took my arm, drawing me away from the driver and tossing him a bottle which glinted red in the moonlight.

My heartbeat grew frantic as the new vampire tugged me along toward the giant bird thing.

“What is that?” I asked as we approached a woman in uniform. She was waiting at the bottom of a metal staircase that led up into the bird, her dark hair pulled back into a neat bun. Her glowing eyes landed on me and she cooed. “Aww, so cute.” She patted her knees like I was a stray dog and my nose wrinkled with distaste.

“You're such a soft touch, Maria,” the man holding me spoke.

“I don't know why we can't keep them as pets.” Maria pouted, gesturing for the man to take me up the stairs.

“Because we're not animals,” I spat at her.

Maria's eyebrows went skyward. “Oh, gwumpy little human,” she chuckled.

I glared at her as the guard tugged me up the steps. “What is this?” I whispered and he eyed me in surprise.

“An aer-o-plane,” he spoke slowly like I was dumb.

I suppressed a groan. My mind sparked with memories of the time my

father had told me about the flying vehicles. The aeroplanes. I tucked that word away in my mind as I rounded into a row of seats. In every one of them was a human, bound in place. Men and women in a similar state to me with ragged clothes and hollow cheekbones.

The only feature that unified us was our youth. At a guess, I'd say no one there was more than twenty five. The youngest probably seventeen. The most frightening thing was that I didn't recognise a single one of them. Callie and I had guessed there were other Realms, though the vampires had never confirmed it. But I knew everyone in my Realm, if not by name then at least by sight. These people were strangers and that hinted at the scale of the vampires' oppression.

I was escorted toward two empty seats and shackled in place next to a man with a ragged mop of dark hair and a thick beard on his face. He smelt of sweat and mud. But I probably did too, so I wasn't about to complain.

My eyes travelled to the empty seat on my other side and I suddenly put two and two together. It must have been reserved for Callie. But they hadn't caught her.

Relief tumbled through my chest.

Keep running, don't ever let them catch you, Callie.

The uniformed vampire gazed at everyone, seeming to count us. With a stiff nod, he banged on a door behind him and called, "All set for take off!"

The engine rumbled beneath us and the guard closed the door, locking it tight with a large red lever.

Fear rolled through me as the plane picked up momentum until we were hurtling along into the darkness. The window beside me only allowed a glimpse of floodlights as we whipped past them at high speed.

My stomach clenched. My pulse rose.

I glanced at the man beside me who seemed to be muttering prayers under his breath.

I was pushed back into my seat as we took flight and fear devoured me as we climbed ever higher. Wherever I was going I was leaving Callie and Dad far, far behind. And I didn't know if I'd ever see them again.

When the plane levelled out the guard pushed a trolley down the aisle, handing us each a small plastic cup filled with a syrupy orange liquid. My throat burned for moisture, but I hesitated to drink it, sniffing its saccharine scent, trying to work out what it was.

"Drink up!" the guard demanded when everyone had a cup in hand.

The man beside me brought the cup to his lips and swallowed the contents. “Better we drink it by choice, huh?” he whispered to me with a sad gleam in his eyes.

I sighed, gazing down at the syrup, certain he was right. “Is this really a choice?” I murmured and he reached over, resting a hand on my arm. Despite not knowing this man, the gesture was surprisingly reassuring.

“No, but it helps to pretend.” He gave me a ghost of a smile and I tentatively returned it. “I’m Frank.” He blinked heavily as I tore my gaze from his and looked down at my cup.

For a second, I considered not responding. But no one here knew my name and I didn’t want to be just another number in the masses.

“Montana,” I whispered.

Taking my cup, I gulped down the sweetest thing I'd ever tasted. It took less than a minute for me to realise I'd just unwittingly drugged myself. Wooziness washed through me and my eyelids felt weighted with lead.

As the pressing darkness took hold of me and dragged me down into a dreamless sleep, I felt Frank’s shoulder press against mine.

If I’m headed toward a terrible fate, at least I’m not alone



I couldn't help but stare at the open landscape around me as we made our way through it. Our Realm had small patches of grass growing among the mud but nothing like this. My mind scoured Dad's stories until I found the word I was hunting for. *Meadow*. I'd never seen anything so green. I wondered how it would look in the summer when the flowers were blooming.

My silent companion continued to lead the way. He hadn't spoken since I'd told him what year it was and I wasn't brave enough to breach the silence he'd built between us.

We'd left the ruins behind hours ago and though I couldn't help but look over my shoulder repeatedly, I was beginning to believe that we'd actually managed to escape the vampires who'd been hunting me.

I wasn't sure if I should thank my companion or not. He'd certainly saved my life from the red-haired vampire but I still felt a burning rage when I remembered the way he'd pinned me in place while my family needed help.

I was beginning to wonder if I'd been wrong to follow him. I didn't know the first thing about him and the longer this silence stretched between us the more uneasy I felt about my decision. What if he was wrong about where the vampires had taken my family? What if he was just some crazy guy living alone out here who just wanted my company in his crazy guy shack?

That one might be a bit of a stretch Callie...

My mind went back to how easily he'd killed that vampire and my worries eased a little. Anyone who could do that would surely be able to free my family too. But I didn't even know his name...

I shook my head to banish the worrying thoughts and tried to focus on my surroundings instead. I'd never been outside the Realm and the world was a whole lot bigger than I'd ever dreamed.

Everything was new to me, from the soft earth beneath my boots to the

sound of the wind whispering through the bare branches of the trees. Even the smell was different here; away from the press of thousands of human bodies everything was so crisp. I'd never really smelt the rich odour coming from the pine trees which lined our meadow. Or the clean fragrance of the air which hadn't passed through corridors of concrete.

The sun was dipping low towards the horizon and I bit my lip as I thought about what that meant. Night was the time the vampires were at their strongest. It was *their* time. No human could stand a chance against them beneath the light of the stars.

I pulled my new coat tighter around my neck. Though we hadn't spoken in the time that had passed since he'd killed that vampire, we *had* looted an apartment. While he'd stocked up on food, I'd taken the opportunity to get myself some warmer clothes. It wasn't the white coat I'd wanted but I'd begun to think that was a good thing; white wasn't exactly a great colour for staying out of sight. The thick coat I now sported was deep blue and it still had the fur-lined hood I'd dreamed of.

Winter was well underway and as the sun dipped, the temperature plummeted. I'd never owned something like the coat before and the fact that I wasn't shivering my ass off proved its effectiveness. The man-mountain had pulled on a thick grey cloak lined with fur which only added to his gladiator-like appearance.

My mind was beginning to teem with unasked questions. I was afraid to open my mouth but it was getting to the point where my curiosity was going to overrule my fear. We'd been walking for what seemed like an eternity and I only had a promise he'd made hours ago to make me think we were heading after my family. I needed to know how he knew where they'd be. And how he expected to get them out.

Somehow, I couldn't voice my concerns though. The sadness that had seemed to fill him when he learned of the year was so constant that I almost felt it myself. If I hadn't had enough of my own worries to last me a lifetime then I would have asked him about it already but that was breaking one of my own rules. Never ask personal questions. Don't form unnecessary bonds.

He veered from our path and turned aside, making his way between the trees which lined the meadow. I followed carefully, breathing in the fresh green scent of the pines.

I had everything I'd ever dreamed of and my worst nightmare all at once. As amazing as all of this was, it didn't mean anything without having my

family here to share it with.

We walked through the trees for a short while, the pine needles crunching softly beneath my boots. I couldn't help but look about in wonder and I even caught sight of an owl hopping between the trees, watching our progress. I paused to look up at the bird, a smile tugging at my lips. It seemed so carefree. I wondered why it found us so interesting and lifted my hand in a kind of greeting to it.

A flash of movement caught my eye and a small blade swept through the air, knocking the owl from the tree to fall dead on the forest floor. I let out a shriek of horror and ran towards the beautiful creature.

"What did you do?" I demanded angrily as my companion stalked towards me.

He bent down to retrieve his knife, not even offering me the courtesy of looking at me, let alone answering my rage. Before he could turn away, I grabbed his wrist and forced his gaze to meet mine. His golden eyes seemed dimmer than they had before, like something in them had broken.

"Why did you do that?" I spat, grief for the creature stoking my anger and lending me extra bravery.

"That was a Familiar," he replied, his voice even and patronising. "I saved your life again."

"A what?" The point where I grasped his wrist between my fingers was growing hot and I released him as I looked down at the dead bird.

"A beast whose soul is tethered to a vampire. Its sole purpose is to be their eyes and ears. A living, breathing spy." He continued his original task of retrieving the knife and as he pulled it from the owl's chest; the bird dissolved into dust just like the vampire had that morning. I recoiled in disgust and realisation swamped me.

"That's how they always knew what was happening in the Realm wasn't it? They had eyes on us all the time." I couldn't believe we'd never realised it. There were more than enough rats in the Realm for them to be watching every one of us. If I added birds and other animals to the mix then it was no wonder no one had ever been able to keep anything from the vampires.

He only nodded at me before replacing the knife in a sheath at his hip and continuing with our journey through the trees.

I guess we're back to not talking then.

I followed him again but before I could question him on our destination, he led me out through a final group of pines and pointed me into a cave

which was formed in the hollow of a large rock face. Once I'd stepped inside, he paused on the threshold and used one of his long blades to draw runes into the dirt outside it.

As he finished, a wave of warm air passed over me and a shiver raced down my spine. It wasn't unpleasant but it sure as hell didn't feel natural either.

"What was that?" I demanded, taking a step away from the entrance and further into the shelter of the cave.

"I've placed a ward on the entrance to this place. No evil being shall find us or be able to pass over it."

I felt my eyes widening in disbelief but I couldn't deny the strange pressure I'd felt when he'd carved those runes.

"What are you?" I asked suspiciously. He sure as hell wasn't from the Realm.

"Something the world forgot and time left behind." He turned away from me and started gathering firewood.

I took a step towards him to help but as I moved closer to the ward I had the strong urge to head back into the cave instead. *Better to stay where it's safe.* Without really meaning to, I turned and headed back inside.

I shook my head, wondering how I could have forgotten to help collect the firewood then turned back to the entrance. As I approached the ward again, I half turned away from it, the urge to stay inside gripping me fiercely. *Stay inside, it's safer.* The thought flitted through my mind but it was like hearing someone else speak. I didn't want to stay inside.

I clenched my jaw and crossed the threshold despite the rising urge to stay in the cave. My steps felt like they were made through quicksand as I crossed the ward and glared at it, suddenly sure it was the reason the strange thoughts had planted themselves in my mind.

I broke free of the weird hold it had on me and quickly started gathering firewood.

As I filled my arms I noticed the man-mountain watching me and stood to glare at him. "Is something wrong?" I challenged when he didn't drop his gaze. The evening light illuminated the rich bronze colour of his skin and lit a fire in his golden eyes. I realised I was staring and blinked a few times to break the connection between us.

"Why didn't you stay in the cave where it's safe?" he asked slowly and I stiffened as I realised the voice in my mind had felt like his somehow.

“Was that some kind of trick?” I asked. “To try and make me stay in there? I don’t want you messing about in my head.”

“I only wanted to keep you safe,” he murmured. “Forgive the intrusion to your thoughts. The ward was just to encourage you to stay within the protection of our shelter. I’m surprised you were aware of its effect on you and even more surprised that you were able to overcome it.”

I scowled at him for a moment. It almost sounded like he was suggesting he’d used magic.

“You’re a sorcerer?” I asked. Images from my dad’s stories filled my mind of children going to magic schools and wise old men who wandered the woods. He didn’t look like either and I was pretty sure none had ever really existed anyway.

“Any such men died out before my time. Which is a very long time ago indeed. I only used the power of the wards and it has many limitations.” He stepped forward and took the small stack of firewood from my arms, adding it to his own much more impressive heap. Without another word, he turned away and carried it into the cave.

I glanced about at the darkening woodland and wondered if any more animal spies were watching me. I hugged my arms tight around my body and jogged after him. As I crossed the ward again, I felt its power welcoming me in. I didn’t want to like it but I did.

“I’m Callie,” I said as I moved to take a seat beside my companion who was starting to build the fire. The silence stretched uncomfortably and I let out a huff of irritation. “This is the part where you give me your name,” I prompted.

“A man’s name holds a lot of power.” He finished building the fire and began striking two flints together to light it.

I scowled at him and started coming up with names for him in my head. If he didn’t want to give me his name then I’d give him one myself. Like Asshole or He-who-doesn’t-talk or Arrogant-jerk or Phillip....

The fire bloomed to life and he leant back to watch it. “Magnar Elioson, first of the Blessed Crusaders. It means warrior of the sun. I was my clan’s Earl before I slept.” He pushed a hand through his long hair and sighed like the weight of the world lay on his shoulders.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked in confusion.

“I’m a slayer, perhaps the last of my kind. It was our job to protect mortals from the wrath of the vampires. They should have been wiped from this

world nine hundred years ago but something went wrong. I was betrayed.”

“You... betrayed? What do you mean nine hundred years ago?” Instead of his answer helping me it only seemed to present me with more questions.

“That is a very long story.” His gaze lingered on the growing flames and I wondered if he planned on telling it to me or not. “A long, long time ago the leader of the Clan of Prophecies foresaw the downfall of those monsters. She saw me leading the Slayer’s Crusade against them and bringing down the Belvederes once and for all.”

“Sorry, who?” I didn’t like interrupting him but he’d already lost me. I had no idea who the Belvederes were or what they had to do with the vampires.

Magnar turned to look at me and I could tell he was more than a little surprised by my ignorance.

“That is the name the original vampires gave themselves when they crossed the sea to this land. They are the ones who started all of this over a thousand years ago. Do they go by another name now?” he asked.

“I’ve never heard of them but I don’t really know much about what goes on outside of the Realm. The vampires never bothered to tell us about the way things are run.” I shrugged apologetically.

Dad had always said the vampires kept us ignorant on purpose because the less we knew about them, the less likely it would be for us to find a way to rise up against them. Humanity’s greatest weakness was ignorance. But the cure to ignorance was knowledge and if he knew something I didn’t then I wanted to hear it. All of it.

“I suppose they wouldn’t want you to know how they came to power,” Magnar said thoughtfully. “But my people have always known that bringing down the Belvederes would be the key to the downfall of the entire vile species. We hunted them to the ends of the earth until they were forced to separate and hide from us like the worms they are. No matter how hard we searched, we couldn’t locate any of them. But then the prophecy came to light.

They were going to be together, gathered in the same place for the first time in a century. I was supposed to lead the Slayers’ Crusade against them with my brother beside me. Our victory was written in the runes.

The only issue was that it wasn’t going to happen for a hundred years and there was only one way that I could be there to fulfil my destiny. While the rest of the clans prepared for the battle and raised the next generations ready to fight for the freedom the world deserved, I was to be shielded from the

ravages of time so that I could lead them. My brother and I were put into a rune sleep for one hundred years so that we could wake ready to lead the crusade and bring them to their knees.”

“A rune sleep?” I wasn’t sure if anything that he was saying made sense. It sounded like he was claiming to be a thousand years old and though I knew the vampires were immortal I had never heard of a human man sharing that gift.

“Yes. My mother was of the Clan of Dreams whose people had power over sleep. Among their gifts was the ability to trap someone in their dreams, locking them in place with a rune much like those I carved outside this cave. Such runes lose their power over time but my mother was powerful enough to be able to choose the exact moment when their effects would run out. If she chose to lock someone in a dream for an hour or a month or a year then they would stay there with no way to free themselves unless she released them.”

“And they wouldn’t age during that time? Or die of thirst?” I asked with a frown. Even if I believed what he was saying then it was hard to imagine how someone could survive in such a state.

“That part took a little help from a goddess.”

I opened my mouth to deny the existence of any such being. My dad had told us all about the old religions and I knew people in the Realm who still prayed to God daily but I’d never believed in anything like that. What kind of god would just sit by and watch all of the horrendous things that were happening to his followers? I hesitated long enough for Magnar to catch the gist of my thoughts.

“Don’t worry, cursing or denying the gods’ existence in my presence won’t offend me. I curse them daily. They do not offer mortals much beyond pain and suffering for their own amusement. But the goddess Idun has helped the slayers many times over the centuries because she shares our hatred of the vampires.”

“Why?” I blurted, unable to help myself.

“Because they are immortal and that gift should never have been given to them. She is the goddess of eternal youth and no one but her should have been able to bestow such a thing. It has left her rather bitter.”

“So if she didn’t make them immortal then who did? And can’t she just undo it if she’s so unhappy about it? What’s the point of being the goddess of immortality if you can’t take it away from those who don’t deserve it?” I demanded.

“Feel free to ask her if she ever deigns to speak with you. The gods seem to be a lot better at making messes than they are at fixing them. Or perhaps it just amuses them to watch us as we struggle to deal with what they’ve set in motion. Who knows?”

The idea of gods and goddesses laughing at the destruction which had befallen the world set my blood boiling and I ground my teeth angrily as I tried to turn my mind from the idea. Dad had told me that people who believed in religion always did so blindly anyway. So Magnar’s story about a goddess helping him could be nothing more than a fantasy he’d convinced himself of. Although if that was the case then I wasn’t sure how to explain his time-hopping abilities and something in my gut told me he wasn’t lying about that. He really was a thousand years old.

“What went wrong then? You said your mother knew exactly how to set the runes so that you could sleep for a hundred years. Did she screw it up somehow?”

“She would never have made such a mistake. This must have been caused by someone else. Someone who betrayed us all,” he growled darkly.

“And that’s why the vampires are still around but the slayers aren’t?” I asked.

He nodded sadly. “A thousand years has passed and I have woken to a world ruled by those I despise and void of my kin.” He shifted slightly, his gaze never wavering from the building flames and I felt his sorrow like a physical force. Despite all of the new questions his story presented, I knew in my gut that he was telling the truth.

I had no idea what to say in response to such pain. My family had been taken from me but I still had hope. There was a chance, no matter how small, that I might be able to get them back. Magnar was completely alone.

Montana



My eyes flickered open and I found clouds above me beyond the grate of a metal cage. The sky was grey and oppressive, no sliver of sunlight, not a crack, not a gleam.

The bump and jostle of my body informed me I was in another vehicle. I tried to sit upright, but a strap across my stomach held me down. I lifted my head high enough to find others bundled in beside me like sardines.

I craned my neck to get a view beyond the cage and my heart slammed into my throat at the sight unfolding around me.

We were crossing a bridge over a gleaming river, its rusted metal struts rising high on either side of us. Ahead, was a city. It had to be. It was too large to be a town and the buildings were frighteningly tall. In the distance, I could just make out what appeared to be the bombed ruins of the city's suburbs. A demolished bridge poked out of the water, the broken remnants of the structure twisted and bent. Whatever had remained of this part of the city had clearly been rebuilt.

The truck slowed to a halt and I quickly dropped back down, pretending to be unconscious like the others. My heart strummed a frantic tune as I peeked through my eyelashes, spotting a couple of vampires with large swords investigating the truck bed.

I remained still as they gave the order for our driver to continue and we sped off of the bridge, passing through an iron gate that thumped shut behind us.

The gleaming glass of towering skyscrapers leered down at me, reaching so far toward the sky it made me dizzy.

This place was beautiful and untarnished, just like the vampires themselves. And the further we travelled, the more glitz and glamour shone down at me. Whoever lived behind these sparkling walls held the fates of

humans in their palms. And one tight squeeze would crush us all.

We arrived at an enormous brick wall that stretched above me twenty feet. It was painted white and looked newly built. I tried to lift my head to see more, but guards filed around the truck again, checking it over.

I kept my eyes closed until we started moving then caught a glimpse of an iron gate as we headed through the wall. The scent of freshly cut grass and the rush of a thousand wind-blown leaves snatched my senses.

A fan of branches stretched above me as we passed along a smooth road, winding through the forest. I could hardly believe the sprawling sight of coloured leaves, turning brown and deep gold as they prepared to fall. I'd seen the woodland on the edge of the Realm do it a hundred times. Their leaves dying and falling before returning the next summer. The winter seemed to be arriving a little later here – wherever *here* was. But the trees near the Realm were long-dead, their colour drained from the world.

I lifted my head, desperate to see more, but only trees and a mosaic of golden leaves on the ground stared back at me.

I lurched as the truck hit a bump and someone groaned beside me. Glancing down, I found a golden-haired girl sleeping soundly at my side. As my eyes trailed across the others, I realised they were all female. Something told me that was no coincidence, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out why.

When the truck eventually stopped, I caught sight of a tower between the trees. A flag stood atop it with red and white stripes. One corner held a blue rectangle speckled with white stars.

As uniformed vampires surrounded the truck once more, I returned to feigning sleep, not wanting to be drugged again...or worse.

Hands near my stomach made me stiffen as someone knelt either side of me. I refused to tremble as he unbuckled me. The shift of bodies told of other guards climbing into the truck and I was soon hauled into a vampire's arms, carried over his shoulder as he descended from the vehicle with light grace.

As he silently walked along, I dared to open my eyes once more, trying to get a look at where I was being taken. Frustratingly, my hair veiled my view and lifting a hand to move it would have alerted the vampire to my wakeful state.

A shadow fell over me as we entered a building and a moment later I was dumped on a vaguely damp floor. Without warning, water cascaded over me in a torrent and I yelled in surprise. I heard the other girls rousing and quickly

sprang upright. My heart rate spiked as I found myself in a metallic room with drains at our feet. I counted fourteen other girls standing beneath the shower that was raining down from the ceiling.

Warm, luscious water ran over me. It took me a few moments to register the incredible feel of it. I'd never felt anything so good.

Before us stood three vampires, all male and staring at us with impassive expressions as they clutched their black robes away from the water. One of them spoke, lifting his chin, his eyes two murky pools of green.

“Wash. Use the soap provided. Remove your clothes and dump them in the bin.” He pointed to a metal container on one side of the room.

The girls started stripping and picking up the bars of soap left in a pile at the back of the shower.

I turned my back on the vampires, pulling off my sodden clothes. Being naked sent a ripple of vulnerability through me, but I tried not to let the pounding of my heart overwhelm me as I picked up a bar of soap and started scrubbing. The scent of honey filled my nose as the soap lathered. It almost smelt good enough to eat.

The blonde from the truck stood beside me, her olive skin growing brighter as she washed the filth from her body.

“Hey,” I whispered, but before she could answer one of the guards barked, “No talking!” and the blonde turned away from me.

I ground my teeth as I gathered up my clothes, moving to the bin and dumping them in it.

One of the vampires approached me and I didn't miss the way his eyes slid down my body. There was no lust in his gaze, just curiosity. He stepped past me, close enough to brush my arm and I recoiled on instinct.

He pressed his hand to a panel beside a metal door, unlocking it. It swung open, revealing a circular glass chamber and the white room which lay beyond it.

“In,” he snipped at me and I skirted around him, clutching my hands over my chest as I made my way inside.

The glass doors slid closed behind me, locking me inside the tiny space.

“Hands up, hair too,” the guard commanded.

I did as he said, gathering my hair above my head, my brows knitting sharply together.

One breath, two. Then a bright blue beam of light illuminated the floor at my feet, moving up over my skin. I gasped at the strange sensation which

made every hair on my body tingle. As the light travelled further up, I spotted my leg hairs collecting at my feet. My pubic hairs swiftly followed, then my armpits.

I lifted my chin with an inhale of alarm, but the beam evaporated before it reached my neck. Releasing a shaky breath, I gazed down at the sheen of my skin where the hair had been removed.

What the hell..?

Water spurted out of holes at my feet, washing it all away. The second the water stopped, a whoosh of hot air turned the chamber into a whirlwind. I spluttered against the ferocity of it, covering my face from the blazing wind that pummelled every inch of me.

As the wind died, my hair fell feathery and silky soft against my shoulders.

The glass door opened ahead of me and I stumbled out of the machine, spotting a row of fluffy white gowns hanging on a railing. I snatched one and wrapped myself in it, my cheeks still flooding hot from the strange grooming I'd just experienced.

I bent forward, sliding a hand over the smoothness of my calf with a breath of confusion. Why on earth were they doing this to us?

One by one, all of the girls stepped into the chamber and went through the same process. I took it upon myself to hand out gowns as they entered the room, looking wide-eyed and afraid.

The blonde girl I'd tried to talk to was the last to arrive and I held up a dressing gown for her so she could quickly slip into it.

"Thanks," she breathed and I nodded, a pathetic excuse for a smile tugging at my lips. "I'm Paige."

"Montana," I breathed.

"Quiet," one of the vampires snapped as he marched through the chamber followed by the others. "Keep moving." He pointed at the way ahead; a white corridor leading out of sight.

My gut prickled with nerves. What if we were being herded to the slaughter? Were they having us wash so our bodies were clean when it came to the butcher's axe?

No, they won't kill us. Vampires don't kill, they drain.

My stomach roiled and I fought for my courage as I hurried along with the other girls into the corridor.

We were escorted into another room where racks of dresses sat across from a wall of mirrors, all lit by bright bulbs. I scoured the place, confused as a

female vampire appeared beyond the dresses. She was clad in a black jumpsuit that showed off her toned arms. A set of shiny heels peeked beneath it, clicking across the tiled floor as she moved.

“Hello, my name's Felicia. I'm here to look after you,” she said in a disarmingly soft tone that I refused to let fool me. “Please pick out some underwear and an outfit then come to me when you're dressed. You will need to look your absolute best so be sure to choose something that suits your body shape. If you need some advice, just let me know.” She waved her hands at the vampires behind us and they reluctantly left us to it, shutting the door behind them.

Some of the girls floated toward the dresses but I remained in place, scowling at the vampire.

“What's this for?” I asked and she gave me a sweet smile.

“You're going to see the royal family.” She beamed as if that was a wonderful treat for all of us.

My breathing hitched. The Elites thought so much of themselves that they actually had a *royal* family? It was a joke. What did they want with us anyway? Weren't we just a food supply? I didn't want to parade in front of them in a stupid dress.

The girls continued to tug on the slinky dresses, some knee-length and others long but low-cut. I'd never seen anything like the clothes. And it was obvious our hair-free skin was meant to be shown off in them.

I approached a stack of underwear, pulling on the most simple black pairing I could find amongst the lace and silk.

When I was done, I wrapped my fluffy gown back around me, gazing at the girls in dresses designed to belittle us further. With a breath of decision, I turned to the vampire. “I'm not wearing one.”

Felicia's eyes practically popped out of her head. “Oh my dear, but you must! Come over here, perhaps you'll feel better once your face is done.”

“What?” I had no idea what that meant, but approached her all the same, eyeing an array of dark and light powders before her on a table next to some coloured sticks.

“What is this?” I asked, cringing away from it.

“Just hold still,” Felicia encouraged, dabbing a brush in a dish of pale liquid. I stiffened as she brushed it against my cheeks, the sensation strangely affectionate as she continued to paint my face.

Weird weird weird.

She used powders next, then picked up a brush dipped in black liquid that she carefully pushed against my lashes. When she ran a red gloss over my lips, I'd had enough, drawing away to the nearest mirror as one of the other girls took my place.

I could count on one hand the amount of times I'd seen my full reflection. Mirrors were a luxury in the Realm and the tiny cracked one my family owned had hardly shown anything of our bodies. And why would I care about looking at myself anyway?

Now...staring at my face painted to hide blemishes and enhance my features, I grew angry.

My blood boiled, my face itched to remove the stuff plastered to it. I brought up the sleeve of my robe and started rubbing. It didn't come off easily and left me with two streaks of the black stuff from my eyes bleeding down my cheeks.

My face was a mess, but I didn't give a damn. I threw a look over at Felicia whose eyes widened in alarm.

"For the love of the gods!" she gasped. "What have you done? Come, let me fix it." She ushered me toward her and I cringed away.

"No," I snarled. "What's this all for? Why are you dressing us up and trying to make us look like- like-" I struggled to find the end of that sentence but then it hit me like a heart attack. "Like *you*." *Like vampires with their glossy hair and perfect skin.*

Paige finally spoke up. "She's right, what's this about?" Her tone was strong and it gave me hope. Maybe I'd find an ally in her yet.

More murmured questions sounded from the girls until Felicia slammed her hand down on the table to shut us up.

"Enough," she hissed. "You are to be presented to the royals! They will not be pleased if you haven't made an appropriate amount of effort."

Fear tempted me toward the dresses, but rebelliousness kept me rooted to the spot. These vampires had ripped me from my home, taken me from my family and now they expected me to *please* them? Well I sure as hell wasn't going to play along.

A persistent drumming noise sounded beyond the room and Felicia looked at me in alarm. "There's no more time. You'll have to go as you are."

"Fine by me," I muttered, falling into line behind the other girls as she led the way through a door.

Another corridor. More white walls.

The drumming grew louder and the sound of a crowd gathered in my ears. Nerves scraped at my veins as a door was thrust open and daylight spilled over us.

I was the last to step out and Felicia snatched the dressing gown from my shoulders as I passed her. My cheeks flamed as she slammed the door behind me.

A thousand eyes stared down at me from a huge stand, rising high up above the stone courtyard we'd been ejected into.

Upon a podium opposite the crowd were four vampires dressed in regal clothes. Three male and one female, all sitting on chalk-white thrones. The youthful-looking woman sat between the painfully handsome men; her head was crowned, her skin glitteringly pale and her hair like sunshine itself. Her dress was cream and flowing, the folds and swathes of silk pooling at her feet.

The men were somehow even more captivating than her. All were dressed in a deep navy uniform with heavy cloaks hanging from their shoulders the colour of the night sky. Swords were hitched to their waists and medals glinted on their chests. Despite their unified clothes, they were all so different, equally beautiful but in their own unique way. Upon their heads were crowns, but none so lavish as the female's, just simple rings of black metal.

The vampire on the far left had dark blonde hair which was pushed back in a boyish quaff, his jaw square and his eyes two deep pools of a summer sky. Beside him was a vampire with a mane of hazel hair pulled into a tight ponytail at the base of his neck. His cheeks were hollowed out and his nose was a chiselled rectangle. His eyes were two dark pits, but were fair in comparison to the final vampire whose eyes were iron itself.

He stood on the far right of the line-up, his constricted jaw looking as powerful as a weapon. His raven hair was pushed back from a brow smoothed in boredom and stubble clung to cheeks cut from glass. I'd never seen an unshaven vampire and the gritty look it gave him was more punishing than beautiful.

I trained my eyes on all four of them as they gave us their attention.

What is this about?

A door opened on the opposite side of the courtyard and men stepped out to join us in the courtyard. Humans, all clean-shaven with close-cut hair that was rarely seen in the Realms. Their clothes were the biggest joke of all.

Suits, almost as fine as the vampires'. With a spark of recognition, I spotted Frank amongst them, his long mane now cropped short. As his gaze locked with mine, his brows drew together. His mouth turned down at the corner and he gave me a small nod of acknowledgement. Something about his expression planted a seed of courage in my heart.

Felicia appeared on the podium several steps away from the so-called royals, lifting her chin to speak. "Countess Clarice of the New Empire, and Counts Miles, Fabian and Erik I present to you this year's finest human stock of the Realms." Each of the Counts nodded to their name, marking them in the order they stood from left to right.

Applause broke out from the crowd behind us. I refused to turn, refused to cower like some of the girls did, or even bow low like one girl who was in a dress of rose-gold.

I stared up at the royals, glowering and embracing the semi-nakedness of my body. I wouldn't let them see me cringe from their scouring gazes, or bend my back in any semblance of submission.

Countess Clarice lifted a single finger, winding it through the air. "Spin for us."

I scowled as some of the men and women complied, turning on their heels in a slow circle. The rest followed. Even Frank did a kind of half-pivot. But not me. I pressed my bare feet to the icy stone and when the entire royal family turned their gaze on me, I fought the flash of fear that struck my heart.

"Turn," Clarice asked me, softer this time.

I considered obeying, I really did. But as I drank in their opulence, I thought of the cutbacks on our rations. I thought of the vampire jamming a cattle prod into my back. I thought of Callie and Dad and the worn eyes of the people in the Realm. So instead of doing what this *Countess* said, I hacked up saliva and spat it on the stone floor before me.

Silence stretched so far and wide I feared I'd gone deaf. My heartbeat ticked like a timer in my head, counting down to the inevitable backlash I was surely about to receive.

Erik, the bored looking Count with the penetrating eyes lifted his head, amusement flickering through his gaze. "This is what you call the finest in the Realms, Felicia?" he laughed.

My eyes whipped to Felicia, her composure draining from her head to her spine as she sagged in apology.

Fabian tutted at Erik then turned his back on him. "Make your choice,

Miles,” he instructed the blonde Count.

The line of girls shifted uneasily as Miles’ bright blue eyes trailed across us. Some of them dipped their heads or clasped hands with those beside them. I ground my jaw, willing away my fear as I tried to work out what being picked might mean.

Surely nothing good...

“What’s your name?” Miles called down to the group, pointing at a raven-haired girl with ebony skin and large eyes.

She stepped forward, lifting her chin and I noted the defiance in her stance. “Brianna,” she replied, smoothing down her short mauve dress.

“Nice to meet you, Brianna,” Miles said with a sideways grin. He turned to Felicia with a nod, but Brianna spoke up again.

“What’s this about?” she asked and chatter sounded from the crowd behind us.

I threw a glance over my shoulder, taking in the stands filled with vampires. They didn’t look anything like those who patrolled the Realm. They were smiling, leaning in close to one another, seeming enthralled by this whole event.

“We’ll explain everything soon,” Miles replied, his eyes shining with kindness. But I wasn’t fooled. There was something terrifying hiding behind his amiable expression. There had to be.

“I choose Brianna,” Miles called to Felicia and my heart thundered as a guard stepped forward from the edge of the courtyard, taking her arm and guiding her toward a door. As she stepped through it, she glanced back at us with a glimmer of fear in her eyes.

“Countess, are you ready?” Felicia asked Clarice.

The golden-haired vampire beamed as her eyes dragged over the group of men in the courtyard.

“Those two,” Clarice pointed at a tall man with fierce eyes and another with broad shoulders and a shaved head. “Oh and throw in that one.” She pointed to Frank and my heart squeezed. The small moment of unity we’d shared on the aeroplane still seemed important to me. And seeing him chosen made my bones turn to ice.

Two guards escorted the men away, taking them through the same door as Brianna.

Was being chosen better than not being chosen? I had no idea, but the way my skin prickled all over told me I didn’t want to be picked.

“Count Fabian, have you decided?” Felicia asked him and the royal vampire with the long hair stepped forward, his dark eyes whipping across us. As his gaze fell on me, a fire started in my belly.

My shoulders trembled with anger and I prayed he didn’t take it as a sign of weakness.

A small smile tugged at the corner of Fabian’s mouth, twisting his unnaturally stunning face. My gut squirmed and I looked toward the other girls, my eyes falling on Paige. She was biting her lip, gazing back at me with concern.

Fabian followed my gaze to her and his brows arched.

“Name?” he asked, pointing at her.

Paige’s cheeks turned ghostly white as she stepped forward. Sickness gripped my stomach. Had I drawn attention to her?

She cleared her throat and the sound echoed off of the stone walls. “Paige West.”

Fabian tilted his head, giving her a hungry grin before turning his eyes to Felicia. “I’ve made my choice.” At his words, a guard jogged to Paige’s side, taking hold of her arm.

She released a squeak of fright as he led her away and I took a step in her direction, my heart drawing me after her.

Please don’t hurt her.

“Back in line!” a guard snapped at me and I balled my fists as I complied.

Felicia wrung her hands as her eyes wheeled to Erik. “Um, Count Erik, will you be making a choice this year?”

Erik looked up from a device in his hand, having been completely ignoring the world around him in favour of it. “Hm?”

Fabian bared his fangs at him. “She said, are you going to choose this year or will you play your usual games, brother?” he growled and Erik straightened, his cold eyes flaring with irritation.

“I rarely play games, Fabian,” Erik said with a glower. “But when I do, I always win.”

Tension snared the air between them, their rivalry obvious.

Slowly, Erik’s gaze dropped to the line-up of girls and cast briefly over us. When his eyes landed on me, I ground my teeth, glaring calmly back at him.

Pick me and you’ll regret it, vampire.

Erik shrugged, making no choice and a flicker of relief darted through me.

Fabian looked to Felicia with a polite smile. “I think we’re done here-”

“That one,” Erik announced loudly and it took me several long seconds to realise he was pointing at me.

My heart thundered in my ears as his gaze locked with mine and his mouth hooked up into a smirk. “Name?” he demanded without any farce of sweetness.

I didn’t want to give him my name. Doing so felt like offering him a piece of myself. But there was one thing I could give him and that was a reason not to choose me. Because anything had to be better than being picked by this formidable creature. “I’m the girl who will make your life a living hell if you choose her.”

Erik’s eyes glittered with malice. He looked to Felicia with a nod and terror strummed a painful tune in my heart.

“She is clearly disobedient,” Fabian said quickly, seeming concerned. “Choose appropriately, Erik, or do not choose at all.”

My heart rate spiked as I waited for my fate to be decided for me.

Don’t pick me, don’t pick me, don’t pick me.

“I’ve made my choice.” Erik gave a half-shrug. “This is the offering and I’ve chosen a girl from it.”

My breath snagged in my lungs. *Why me? Why would he choose me?*

Clarice moved between the two brothers, placing a hand on their chests. “She’s lovely, she just needs a little TLC.”

Erik smirked and Fabian snarled at him, baring sharp canines. My stomach knotted at the sight.

“Fine,” Fabian snarled, throwing a nod to the guards. One of them approached me at a swift pace and I backed up, shaking my head.

A wild fear took hold of me.

I didn’t like the way Erik’s metallic eyes followed me, or the way he sneered in my general direction. And as the guard’s hand curled around my wrist, I started fighting, too afraid of what would happen if I let him take me.

I scratched his steely skin, trying to claw his hand off of me and some of the crowd started booing. Panic seized my bones and made my muscles tense.

No no no no.

I dug my heels in as the guard hauled me across the courtyard and shoved me through the door. I stumbled into a white room, finding the chosen ones waiting inside it.

Paige ran to me, sliding her arms around my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t. Not even slightly.

“What do they want with us?” Brianna asked but no one had an answer.

My eyes locked on Frank whose face was taut with despair.

As the sound of the crowd died down beyond the walls, silence trickled over us. No one wanted to voice their concerns. Everyone was tense with worry.

Eventually a door opened on the other side of the room and a woodland became visible beyond the heads of two male guards. “Follow us,” they commanded and Frank led the way as we filed out of the room.

I kept close to Paige and Brianna, moving after them onto a stone pathway that disappeared into the trees. We marched on in silence and I gazed around at the expansive garden, wondering if it was worth trying to run. But the vampires were faster. I’d never outpace them.

We continued for several painful minutes, our footsteps the only noise between us.

Eventually, a large building built of brown stone with high walls came into view. A series of steps led up to an arching wooden doorway manned by two vampires with menacing swords on their backs.

They opened the doors, watching us closely as we passed. A beautiful marble hallway greeted us; pillars held up an ancient ceiling painted with intricate pictures.

I barely had time to absorb the sight before we were led down a hallway and guided up a winding staircase adorned with red carpet. More guards greeted us at the top of the stairs.

A man with cold blue eyes gripped my arm, leading me away from the group as everyone was taken in different directions. My heart tripled its pace as Paige disappeared around a corner and my escort directed me to the right.

My throat swelled with anxiety as I followed him, unsure what else to do.

If I run, they’ll catch me. If I fight, they’ll hurt me.

We soon arrived at a wooden door and he pushed it open, nudging me inside. As I stepped into the bedroom, the door swung shut behind me and a key turned in the lock.

“No!” I slammed my weight against it, hammering my fist on the door. But no answer came. I was stuck here until someone decided to let me out.

Trembling, I turned to face my prison.

My eyelashes fluttered as I took in a bedroom which was unlike anything I’d ever seen.

The space wasn't just grand, it was bordering on ostentatious, stretching

away from me in a space at least twice the size of my family's apartment. Fine red carpets and carved furniture stared back at me.

Maroon sheets sprawled out over a massive bed, meeting with a huge wooden headboard of black oak. Beside the bed was a dresser with an oval mirror inlaid with sparkling green gemstones.

Dark shutters were clamped over the single window, keeping all daylight out of the room.

I headed to the closet and ripped the doors open, finding an array of gorgeous dresses inside. Beneath them was a white dressing gown like the one I'd had before. I grabbed it, wrapping my bare body in its soft embrace.

My heart stuttered as I moved toward the bed, crawling onto it and curling into a tight ball. I shut my eyes, trying to will away the fear creeping into my body. But it was useless. Whatever those royals wanted with us, it couldn't be anything good. And the longer I lay there waiting for someone to come, the more images sprang to mind of the kind of horrors I was soon going to face.

There was only one thing I could really be sure of. I was in serious trouble.



I woke as the sun broke through the trees and blinked around at my strange surroundings in confusion. For twenty-one years I'd woken in the same bed every morning. Looking up at the grey stone of the cave's roof was more than a little disconcerting.

I rolled onto my side and blinked the sleep from my eyes as I looked at the embers from our fire the night before. I missed the warmth it had given and without it, the frosty bite of the stone beneath me had worked its way into my bones. I shivered and reached out hopefully towards the charred pieces of wood which remained in the soot but no heat found me. I sighed in disappointment and tugged my hand back inside the sleeve of my coat.

I sat upright and a thick fur cloak slipped off of me to pool in my lap. I ran my fingers over the soft grey fur and frowned at it in surprise. I'd fallen asleep wrapped in my coat but remembered shivering in the night as the fire died down. Magnar must have placed it over me. The gesture was so at odds with his stony attitude towards me that I wasn't sure what to make of it.

I looked around for him and spotted him sitting in the cave's mouth, gazing out at the woods beyond it. He was unnaturally still and I took the opportunity to observe him unnoticed. Now that I was looking for it, everything about his clothing spoke of another time. My clothes were made from cotton and polyester but he wore a leather jerkin and trousers secured with silver buckles.

His face was somber but strangely alluring too, though much of it was hidden behind the rough stubble which was close to being a beard. And despite the fact that I'd never seen him smile, something about the natural curve of his mouth made me think that it used to be something he'd done a lot.

I imagined his deep voice raised in laughter before everything had been

stolen from him and my own pain over losing my family stabbed sharply through my chest. I couldn't imagine waking up to realise that everyone and everything you'd ever known had died a thousand years ago. How did you even begin to grieve a loss like that?

Everything in his posture made me think of some kind of wild beast. He was alert and poised to attack even though he was sitting quietly. I doubted he'd missed the sound of me waking up and realised that probably meant he could tell I was staring too.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably as blood rushed to my cheeks.

"Thank you," I said awkwardly as I folded the cloak and held it out to him. He didn't turn my way so I placed it on the ground instead. "For the cloak," I explained as he continued to maintain the silence.

"You were cold." Magnar still didn't turn from his observation of the trees and my jaw ticked with irritation. I knew he was miserable but he didn't have to be so rude all the time.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked, forging on with the one-way conversation in the hope that he might start talking a bit more. We didn't need to be friends but it would be easier if we were at least civil.

"I rested a little. Sleep does not hold much appeal these days."

"I can imagine," I replied.

"No. You cannot."

Back to being an ass today then. I huffed with irritation, wondering why he'd even helped me in the first place if my presence annoyed him so much. I needed him if I wanted any chance of saving Dad and Montana though so I kept my thoughts on his tone to myself.

"You said you'd help me get my family back," I began. "But how do you know where they've been taken?"

"When I awoke thirteen moons ago, I scoured the area for signs of my kin and found my enemy instead. I observed them, and I saw what they did to the mortals under their care. I had hoped to track down my brethren before confronting them but with the news you delivered, I fear they are all gone.

Without me, the Slayer's Crusade was doomed to fail but they would have tried anyway. My people were not the kind to back down from a fight no matter how likely they would have been to lose. While I slept, they were slaughtered, I know it in my heart. The task now falls to me alone." Magnar stood and turned to look down at me. He seemed even more intimidating from my position on the floor as he towered over me, his muscular form

blocking most of the light from the cave entrance behind him.

“I’m sorry but you’re losing me again. What task?” I asked with a frown.

“The sole purpose of the slayers is to hunt and destroy the vile creatures who have enslaved your kind. Though that task shall be harder alone, I will still take it on. And I shall start with destroying the place where they hold your family.”

Though I’d already suspected it, his words made me ask the question I’d been trying to avoid. I had to know what we were heading into even if it confirmed my worst fears.

“Do you mean... were they taken to the blood bank?” I asked, my voice barely cracking beyond a whisper.

“I know not what they call it but that name would seem to fit. It is where they take all of the humans they remove from the caged town. They torture them and drain them of their blood with the most vile of practices. I was hard pushed to stay my blade when I first discovered it but that was when I still had hopes of finding my kind. I will not hold back this time.”

“Well, for what little it means, you’re not alone.” I stood and offered him a smile which didn’t try to hide the fact that I knew I wasn’t going to be much help.

Magnar surveyed me for a moment and I thought I could feel the faintest crack in the wall he had built behind his gaze. He nodded and pulled a blade from the belt at his hip. “Here. If you are to be a warrior, you shall need a blade.”

I tentatively reached out to accept it. The metal was golden in colour and the hilt felt warm in my palm. It was carved with runes just like those on his other blades. I looked closely at the beauty of the intricate designs they formed with appreciation.

I’d never held a weapon before and the knowledge that I was about to break another of the vampires’ laws sent a thrill of rebellion through me.

I grasped the hilt and a powerful surge juddered through my body, resounding in the depths of my chest. I let out a small gasp as the strangest sensation flooded through me, like *deja vu*. Though there was nothing at all familiar to me about standing in a cave with a barbarian while wielding a dagger.

Something about the small weapon felt *right* against my skin. Like it was calling to something deep within me. The sensation seemed familiar although there was no way it could be. Like the memory of a dream.

“Fury,” I murmured, the name skipping through my mind like the whisper of an old friend.

“What did you say?” Magnar stepped towards me suddenly, catching my wrist in his grip. “How do you know that name?”

My heart leapt with surprise and more than a little fear as his burning gaze tore into my own. I recoiled from him, dropping the blade and trying to pull my hand out of his grasp. He ignored my attempt and twisted my hand in his own, roughly pushing the material of my coat up to reveal my forearm.

He brushed his fingers along the exposed skin of my inner arm as if he was trying to remove something from my skin. Goosebumps rose along my flesh in response to his touch and I yanked my arm away more firmly, finally managing to break away from him.

“What the hell?” I demanded angrily as I backed away. I was more aware than ever of the differences between us. If he attacked me I’d have no chance of defending myself. He was even more formidable than the vampires; at least with them I knew my blood was too precious to spill.

“Forgive me.” Magnar spread his hands slowly and took a step back. “For a moment I thought...” He shook his head sadly. “I was trying to see something that couldn’t possibly be there. I have lost so much and I leapt to the wrong conclusion. Please accept my apologies.” He stooped to retrieve the blade I’d dropped and offered me the hilt again.

I eyed it suspiciously but something about the weapon had been comforting. I liked the way it had felt in my palm. I slowly reached out to take it and felt that same sense of power and relief as I held it again. As I concentrated on the sensation, I heard its name in my mind once more. *Fury*. I wasn’t sure how I knew it but that was what this blade had been named by its creator. I could almost feel the heat of the furnace, hear the sound of the hammer moulding the metal.

As I focused on the sensation, other images flashed through my mind. I saw the blade wielded by many sets of hands. It had taken lives and saved them, passing from hand to hand as hundreds of years passed. It had killed vampires before. And I knew it could do it again.

I looked up at Magnar in astonishment but he didn’t seem to know what the blade had shown me and I hesitated to tell him after his reaction to me knowing its name.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

Magnar tipped his head to me and turned away. He retrieved his cloak

from the floor and wrapped it around his shoulders, making sure that he could still reach his swords. He stamped on the final embers of the fire and stepped out of the cave, striking his blade through the runes he had carved on the threshold. I felt their power fizzling out of the air around me.

He continued away from me, lost in his own thoughts again as I hurried to follow. He might have been all kinds of terrifying but he was the best chance I had of breaking my family out of the blood bank. After that we could continue with our plan to escape this place and he could go on his way too.

Montana



A knee jerked into my body. Then again. And again until I winced as it connected with my hip.

“I know you're awake,” a dark voice poured over me like liquid fire.

Somehow, I'd fallen asleep after hours of being left alone in the fine bedroom and now I wished I never had to wake up. But there was no point feigning sleep any longer so I reluctantly opened my eyes.

My heart pounded wildly as I discovered Erik towering above me, his cloak removed to reveal a black shirt as dark as his hair. I recoiled on instinct, my pulse elevating further as I took in the devilish vampire. He was the most captivating monster I'd ever seen. Even the Elite didn't look this perfect - and that was saying something. His face was all sharp angles, from the straight edge of his brow to the clear-cut diagonals of his cheekbones. The silvery lacquer of his skin was punctuated by the dark shadow on his jaw and the fortress of iron in his gaze. Power emanated from him in a way that made me feel as brittle as a twig. At least I'd had the sense to wrap myself in a gown before I'd fallen asleep; I didn't ever want to be exposed so close to this formidable beast.

“Hey Rebel, guess what?” he drawled, moving to sit on a dark-wood armchair and leaning back into its red velvet cushions.

“What?” I bit out, fighting hard not to lose my nerve. I'd never been in a room completely alone with a vampire before. And if I had, I wouldn't have expected to step out of it with any blood left in my veins.

“You're now my property. And if you have any notions of escape, of fighting back or even slashing open those pretty veins of yours to end it all, I urge you to forget about them. At least until this ritual is over anyway.”

“What ritual?” I breathed, gathering myself to the edge of the bed and

knotting my hands in my gown.

Erik blew out a breath of irritation. “Don't ask me questions. You can think of yourself as a glorified pet if it helps. Whatever keeps you quiet and doing what I say.”

“No,” I snarled immediately. Count or not, royalty didn't mean anything to me. In fact, the only thing it meant was that these people were not only my enemies, but they were the ones who'd decided to shove humans into the Realms and strip us of our rights.

My upper lip curled back. I may not have been alive when humans were at the top of the food chain, but whatever driving force had gotten us there once still lived in my veins.

“No?” Erik echoed, seeming confused by my response. One second, he was patting down his fancy trousers, the next he was standing above me with a penetrating glare. “What kind of human says no to a Belvedere Royal?”

“A kidnapped one.” *One taken from her family by force.* But I didn't air that thought. My family were locked away safe inside my chest. And I didn't want this guy to have any leverage on me.

His heavenly, haven't-smiled-in-years face lifted into something resembling a grin. “Kidnapped? You're *food.*” He shook his head in confusion then tapped my forehead with a cold finger. “This is a privilege, you realise? I think the other humans have grasped it, are you slow or something?”

My scowl grew and my rage followed. “Why did you even bring me here? What do you want?” I demanded, gaining my feet so I didn't feel so small on the bed. It was useless considering he had half a foot of height on me and even if he hadn't he was a damn vampire. So I had absolutely no chance of fighting him.

“Two reasons...” He stalked a little closer. “The first is none of your business. And the second is because you didn't want to be chosen. So that intrigued me.”

“Why?” I hissed, my spine straightening.

“Because as much as humans try to pretend they're above screwing over their own morals, they rarely pass up a chance to gain privileges. You however...” He released a derisive laugh. “Well you're either stupid or you have more of a backbone than most of the humans who walk into the royal palace.”

“And what good does that do you?” I asked through my teeth.

“You'll find out soon enough.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Enlighten me...why did you walk into that courtyard looking like a rebel today?”

“Maybe I am one,” I whispered, unsure where the words came from. I'd always been outspoken with the vampires. Maybe it was my father's stories of the old world that had kindled such a fire of hatred in me. Whatever it was, it was out in full-force now.

“Lucky me, as a rebel is just what I need.” He pinched my chin between his finger and thumb, his hold rough and terrifyingly strong. He inspected me and I refused to let him see how rattled I was at having a vampire's icy hands on my skin. But inside, my spine turned to mush and my heart thrummed like the wings of a bee.

“My brothers have chosen pretty kittens to entertain them so I've picked an angry little dog to chase them about.” He chuckled, releasing me at last and my hatred for him inched a little deeper into my chest.

“Oh don't look so sad, Rebel, if you play along maybe I'll put you back in the pig pen with the rest of the bacon.”

Fire coursed up my throat and spewed from my mouth, “My name is Montana! And I'm not a pig. I might be your food, but you'd be nothing without humans so maybe you should show us a bit of respect!”

The words had circled in my mind for years. The thing I'd dreamed of shouting at one of the Elite. Of seeing some acknowledgement of the wrongdoing they did. Some pity, or regret, or *something*.

Erik's eyes were shadowy and blank. Not a hint of regret passed across his stoney face. He didn't care how humans were treated. All he cared about was our blood somehow making its way to his stomach.

I seethed, I glared, I considered trying to scratch some emotion into his chiselled face, but it was all in vain.

He smirked, moving toward the exit and smoothly turning his back on me. “Hey Rebel?” He glanced over his shoulder as his hand landed on the doorknob. “Next time you wanna wound me, don't bother aiming for my heart. It's impenetrable to you or anyone else for that matter.” He ran his tongue across his lips, his glassy eyes holding little emotion. “I know you don't want to be here so just do as I say and I might send you back to whatever Realm they scraped you out of.”

The door slammed between us and I threw myself at it, ramming my fist into the pristine wood. I snarled my anger as my fingers curled up and pain flared across my knuckles.

“I hope you choke on your next drink, you freak!”

He didn't reply, but he must have heard me and that gave me *some* satisfaction.

I gazed down at my swollen hand, shaking it out as I started to pace the beautiful room. My feet carried me to the window shutters which I tried to prise open for several long minutes before giving up.

The drawers were filled with lingerie, dresses and - thankfully - trousers and shirts. I dragged on the more practical clothes which were snug around my body, finding a grey sweater to pull over them.

At last, I was dressed in something I didn't feel vulnerable in. Heading to the dresser across the room, I surveyed my face which was still smeared with the black liquid from my eyelashes. Grabbing a pack of moist wipes from a drawer, I started rubbing it off.

If Erik wanted a rebel, he was going to get one. But the worry that he might not send me home settled over my heart. It was all I had to hold on to. The thought of finding Callie and Dad.

Get back to the Realm. Find out where they are. Go after them.



Worries wriggled in my belly like worms. After being left for hours on end in the luxurious bedroom, I'd reverted to thinking about what these royals wanted. If it was blood, they'd simply take it. So what was it?

It was a sad fact, but I knew what value I held in this world. Food. Nothing more, nothing less. My mind had been burdened with that truth my entire existence, and now these vampires were throwing it into question.

To someone who hadn't been branded as a blood supply since their conception, the answer might have been more obvious. But this was shaking the foundation of everything I knew to be true.

1. Vampires drank human blood.
2. Humans were weaker and therefore unable to avoid said vampire-feasting
3. Vampires didn't give two shits about human rights beyond the continuation of them breathing and producing their delicious blood

cells.

So what the hell was this about?

Finally, someone opened the door. But that someone didn't fill me with any hope of getting answers.

Erik strode into the room, leaving the door ajar as if to emphasise his ability to catch me if I considered trying to escape.

He gave my attire a sweeping glance then snarled, "No."

"What?" I breathed, folding my arms over my chest in a pathetic attempt to protect myself.

"You will be the belle of the ball tonight, Miss Rebel. A baggy sweater is not going to cut it."

He moved around me and I eyed the open door.

I could run.

He would catch me.

But maybe I'd find a window to launch myself out of first.

Then I'd have to try and scale that big wall...

"Rebel?" Erik questioned in a bored tone. "Stop staring at the door like you're going to run."

My legs moved and I fled. Because why the hell not? I was a damn prisoner! And I wasn't going to be a compliant one.

BAM.

Erik's chest collided with my face. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, it hurt like hell.

Something in me wanted to hit him, but years of living under the vampires' rule stopped me. I couldn't fight back, I knew that all too well. And a trickle of fear rolled smoothly down my spine as I remembered that.

Erik took my wrist and forced me to twirl as he shoved me further into the room.

On the bed was a blood-red gown that looked more fitting for the Countess, Clarice, than me.

"Put this on," he growled by my ear, sending a shudder through to my core. "Don't test me. I'll put it on you myself if I have to."

He stepped away and I released the breath that was jammed in my lungs. I scowled at the dress as I crept toward it.

"Why?" I turned, but Erik was gone, the door firmly shut.

My teeth stamped together as I plucked up the dress, trying to decide what

to do. I didn't think Erik was lying when he said he'd force me into it. But putting it on felt like submitting.

I rubbed my eyes, tension knotting every muscle in my body.

"I can't hear you changing, Rebel," Erik growled through the door, making me jump.

I cursed myself as I made my decision then tore off my clothes and tugged the silken thing on. There was a zip up the back and I couldn't reach it no matter how much I twisted my arms.

Erik re-entered the room, moving toward me with purpose.

"I can do it," I insisted, bending my arms to their limits. *Don't touch me you creep!*

"Stop it. You look like the worst contortionist in history."

"A what?" I snapped, giving up and dropping my hands.

He ignored me, taking the zip and dragging it up my back so fast I squeaked. The dress clung to my figure, but was loose in some important places.

His hand was suddenly on my waist, pinching me through the material and I fought the instinct to lurch away. "Don't you eat in your Realm?"

I released a derisive laugh, figuring he was joking. And a cruel joke at that.

"I'll take that as a no," he muttered, turning me sharply to face him.

"Face. Hair," he demanded.

I shook my head in dismay and his eyes went skyward.

"Shit, what do the others do?" he murmured to himself then an idea lit up his steely eyes. "Wait here."

"Where else would I go?" I dead-panned, but he'd left the room by the time I'd finished speaking.

I gazed down at the dazzling dress that fell to my ankles, scowling at my bare toes. What the hell was this about?

The door finally reopened and Erik appeared pushing a flustered-looking vampire into the room. She was short, pretty and wore a white apron over a black uniform.

"Oh, um, Count Belvedere, I'm not sure I'm the right choice for--"

"Nonsense," Erik cut over her, steering her toward me. "Your hair and makeup is always impeccable and that's what I'd like you to provide for this...train-wreck."

I wasn't quite sure the meaning of the insult, but I knew it was one.

"She's very pretty already," the vampire girl commented, tucking a

luscious black curl behind her ear.

Erik's lips pressed together as his gaze dripped over me. He grunted - which could have been an affirmation or a denial, I didn't really care which.

"Everything you need is in the dresser," Erik commanded and the girl bowed low.

"Yes, sir," she said. Her eyes remained on the floor until he left.

The sharp click of the door seemed to echo on for an eternity.

She glanced up, looking nervous as she floated toward the dresser. "So...do you like your hair up or down?"

I glowered, not answering.

"Okay, let's go with up." She searched around in the drawers, taking out some makeup - the same stuff Felicia had painted on me - and a hairbrush.

The girl patted a cushioned stool in front of the dresser. "Sit."

I drifted closer, knowing I was going to have to face the wrath of Erik if I didn't comply.

"My name's Nancy, what's yours?" she asked as she picked up the golden brush and started running it through my dark locks.

I considered not answering, but figured I had no one else to talk to around here. "Montana."

She beamed, seeming to relax at hearing me speak. "Well, Montana, I think you're going to like it here."

"Ha," I spat and she looked a little hurt.

Nancy continued to brush my hair, her cheeks sucked in as she started braiding it. "You're the first human Erik's ever chosen, you know?"

"Lucky me," I muttered.

She sighed, evidently frustrated with me. Well she obviously didn't know what it was like to be kidnapped did she? That was real frustration, *Nancy*.

We fell into silence as she coiled my braid and pinned it into a bun. Next, she started painting my face and I begrudgingly let her. The softness of her cold hands didn't fool me. She was a vampire through and through. And I wasn't going to let my guard down around anyone in this place.

When my face was transformed into something more like a mirage than my true features, Nancy stood back to admire her work.

"You look perfect, if I do say so myself." She grinned and two dimples formed in her cheeks. She was a wolf in sheep's clothing. And I did not smile back.

Nancy moved to the wardrobe, returning with a pair of shoes that had

ridiculous heels on them.

“No,” I refused, folding my arms. I wasn’t going to put anything on my feet I couldn’t run in.

“Oh…” Nancy looked concerned, but didn’t force the issue as she returned to the wardrobe and produced a dainty pair of flat shoes.

They would have to do so I took them from her and slipped them on, finding them perfectly sized for my feet. I wondered how it was possible that these vampires knew my measurements and disgust gripped me when I realised they must have been taken at some point during my kidnap.

I glanced down at my fancy dress and the delicate shoes on my feet, my stomach hardening into a cold ball.

The door flew open and Erik stepped back into the room, looking impatient.

“Done?” he asked Nancy before his eyes fell on me.

I hated the way he looked at me. It was like the sun staring at the earth. All-powerful and radiating importance.

“Is this what you had in mind?” Nancy prompted when he said nothing.

He jerked his head in a nod then held out a hand to me. I gazed at it in confusion before he rolled his eyes, stalked forward and took my hand.

I suddenly missed Nancy's quiet demeanour as he hauled me out into the corridor. He released me as he straightened his fine suit jacket, then offered me his arm.

My nose wrinkled in response and he eyed my scrunched up face with irritation. “That's an order, Rebel.”

“Montana,” I corrected harshly, but took his arm all the same. I wasn't about to start a fist fight with a vampire.

“Whatever.”

As we walked, he reached out his other arm to unveil his wrist, exhibiting a garish silver watch. At the top of a grand staircase, he tugged me to a halt, his eyes firmly on the timepiece. My gaze slid to the red carpet which ran down the centre of the stairs, curving into a large hallway of tan and white tiles.

I grew anxious as we stood there, unsure what the hell we were waiting for. The watch reminded me of the vampire back in the Realm who'd jabbed a cattle prod into my back. And the longer I looked at it, the more I despised these royals and every single one of their lavish possessions.

Erik's iron gaze slid up to my face. “Do you have a problem with my

watch? Or perhaps your tiny brain cells are trying to work out what it is.”

“I know what a watch is,” I hissed. “And it's disgusting.”

A cloud of confusion crossed his gaze. “That's an odd choice of word.”

I almost bit my tongue on my next outburst, but if he wanted to know then why keep it quiet? He obviously wasn't in any rush to cut me open and drain me of blood.

“It's the principle,” I said, my spine straightening. “My dad told me about the value of stuff like that in the old world. And that watch could have fed a family of ten.”

“What?” he balked, evidently trying to work out a riddle in my words I was sure wasn't there. “Oh, you mean a *human* family.” The penny dropped, but I didn't spot any regret over that fact in his expression. “You're all kept in luxury compared to what you deserve, I've seen it for myself. You should be damn grateful to us for the life you're given.” His jaw snapped shut as if the case was closed but it was far from closed.

“*Luxury?*” I snarled. “You think we should be kept in worse conditions than we already are?”

Dammit, this guy was a piece of work. How could he flaunt his wealth and not give a damn that the humans who kept him well-fed were half-starved?

“Yeah, know why?” He shoved up against my body, pinning me to the banister with impossibly hard muscles and furious eyes. “Because the humans who end up with my brothers and sister are always snivelling and begging for better conditions. In my opinion it's greed. You see what we have here and you want more. Never happy. You wouldn't be satisfied even if I handed you my castle.”

The last word threw me off balance a little, despite the stream of insults he'd just dished me.

“Castle?” I murmured, feeling foolish, but wanting to know exactly what that was.

His beautiful features skewed again as if he thought I was an idiot. “Been missing school lately, Rebel?”

I had to laugh at that one: a hollow, angry laugh of course. Surely he was having me on?

I reverted to sarcasm, trying to stave off the anger rising to a dangerous level in my body. “Oh yes, we're quite well-educated in the Realm. The vampires love to teach us a good lesson or two.” *With their cattle prods and their constant threats and bared fangs.*

Erik's eyes were back on his watch. "Uhuh," he grunted, evidently done with this conversation. "Right, that's long enough." He yanked my arm and guided me down the stairs, turning me sharply as he shouldered through a set of double doors.

The scent of cooked food hit me so hard, my tongue wasn't ready for it. I salivated like a hungry animal at the sight of a banquet stretching across a large table at the heart of the room. With a jolt, I realised I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning.

Tapestries hung from the walls, a roaring fire danced in a hearth, but all I could focus on was the mouthwatering feast before me.

The humans who'd been chosen by the royals were sat around it, the five of them still wearing the same dresses and suits from earlier. I might not have attended any formal events in my life, but even I could tell my fine gown and perfect hair was complete overkill. What was Erik thinking?

The royals stood at the back of the room in a rigid line as if they'd been waiting for us.

"Late as always. You're getting on my last nerve, Erik," Fabian growled, his upper lip curling back to reveal glinting fangs.

"Newsflash: your last nerve died a long time ago." Erik steered me toward the table of humans, planting me in the only remaining seat beside Paige.

"Why is she dressed like that?" Miles asked, pushing a hand into his unruly blonde hair.

Erik moved toward them, joining the line-up. "The finest flower deserves the finest dress." His eyes slid to Fabian whose mouth twitched with annoyance.

Paige caught my hand under the table, drawing my eyes away from the royals. "Are you okay?" she breathed and I nodded firmly.

"Are you?"

"Yes. But hungry." Her soft green eyes fell to the food but my gaze remained on her light features, my thoughts wheeling to Callie. This girl's looks were sharper but everything about her colouring was the same. It made me like her even more.

"Eat," Clarice encouraged and I glanced over at our weird entourage who stood in a formal line, watching us.

The men and women tucked in and the clink of fine china was the only sound to taint the silent air.

"Music," Miles groaned. "It's so awkward without music." He glanced at a

guard in a corner of the room. I spotted more of them hiding in the shadows, as still as statues. No wonder I hadn't noticed them...

The guard Miles had addressed moved to a large wooden thing against one wall, lifting its lid and placing a black disc at the heart of it. Music filled the air; a soft instrumental piece that was so alien to me. All I knew of music was the songs sung by the people in the Realm and the clash of instruments made from steel drums and kitchenware.

I started filling my plate with potatoes and steaming veg, my stomach growling too much to even consider starting a hunger strike. Besides, why would the vampires care if I didn't eat? The only person I'd be screwing over was myself.

I glanced across the table at Frank and he gave me a small nod as he chewed on his food. "You okay?" he asked when he'd swallowed. The other two men shifted in their chairs, glancing over at the royals, but the vampires didn't rebuke Frank for speaking.

I nodded, offering him a ghost of a smile as I tucked into my meal. I devoured a plateful of the delicious vegetables, my tastebuds alive with the perfectly salty food. The others made polite conversation as they ate and I soon discovered the other two men's names. The one with broad shoulders and a deep bronze complexion was Luke and the other with thick muscles and a copper beard was Justin.

When I'd eaten enough, I glanced over at the royals who were talking in voices so low I couldn't catch a word. Their mouths barely moved as they whispered, despite the fact their eyes were all pinned on us. It was damn strange and confirmed the rumour that a vampire's hearing was far better than a human's.

I plucked up my courage as I watched them then rose from my seat. All eyes in the room snapped to me and my bravery dipped for a moment.

"Are we going to get an explanation for what this is all about?" I forced myself to say.

Paige and Brianna gave me a hopeful look that served me the strength to remain standing.

Erik threw a bored look at Clarice who promptly stepped forward.

"You're the luckiest humans in the Realms," she announced with undisguised excitement. "Every year a handful of you are tested for the quality of your blood. You've all passed with flying colours which means you're very valuable to us."

“In what way?” Frank asked, taking my cue to rise from his seat, too.

“By the end of the formal ritual, all of the girls will be officially paired with a Count and the men will be paired with me.” Clarice beamed, but the men shared anxious looks.

I eyed the girls who shifted nervously in their seats.

Clarice went on. “In the sake of fairness, we’re giving you four days to make your own choice. You don’t have to choose the Count who picked you, ladies, but I’m afraid the men are stuck with me. However, as I prefer to have a willing harem, I will offer the men another choice which will be discussed in private.” She grinned mischievously.

“Why would we choose any of you?” My hand tightened around a dinner knife I hadn’t realised I’d been holding.

Erik’s eyes honed in on me, but it was Clarice who answered. “Because if you choose to pair with one of the Counts, they will one day sire you.”

Breaths were sucked in around the table, but I didn’t know what that meant and clearly a few others didn’t either.

“What does that mean?” Paige asked before I could.

Fabian’s eyes clawed over her. “It means, we’ll turn you into vampires and bestow on you the greatest wealth in the New Empire.”

Silence.

My heart ticked painfully in my ears. From the expressions on Justin and Luke’s faces that possibility was a godsend. But Frank looked angry and both Paige and Brianna shared a look of fear. The idea of being *sired* made me sick to my stomach. So much so, my legs grew weak.

“And if we still don’t choose?” I pressed, fighting deep for my courage.

A ghost of confusion gripped Clarice’s features before she answered. “Well...”

“You’ll be sent to the nearest blood bank,” Erik said with a grim look.

My jaw literally dropped. “I thought you said I could go back to the Realm.”

“I lied,” Erik replied coolly.

“So we don’t have a choice?” I choked out, my throat constricting further and further.

“You do,” Miles replied with an encouraging smile. “But granted not a huge one. We all understand the difficulty of your situation and don’t expect you to acclimatise immediately. But you must try to look at the positives in the situation.”

“Positives?” Paige whispered. “What about our families? My mom's back in the Realm, she's going to be sick with worry.”

“If you cooperate and choose well, your families may be moved to more comfortable houses in the city,” Fabian said in his deep tone. “We will try our best to make this transition as easy as possible for you, but the rules are the rules. You will make your choice in four days time.”

“How are we supposed to choose?” Brianna piped up, her deep brown eyes sparkling with concern.

“You will be given the opportunity to spend time with all of us over the next few days,” Clarice answered with anticipation dripping through her expression.

My gaze roamed over the three Counts at my disposal. I already held so much hatred for Erik that I immediately ruled him out. From the remaining two, I preferred the light aura that Miles gave off. Fabian seemed too cold, too forbidding.

Erik's shoulders stiffened. “You will be cared for by the Count or Countess who selected you initially until the day of the choosing.”

The words were spoken to the room, but his eyes bored into mine, confirming they were for me. It was a warning. For whatever reason, he was possessive of me. And I suspected there was much more to the so-called gift of being sired than the vampires were letting on.

“Yes, I was getting to that,” Clarice muttered to him then her sunbeam smile was directed at us again. “Tomorrow the girls will spend the day with their original royal, then each day after that, the Counts will alternate so that you are given time with each of your potential suitors. Each of the men will get a day with me too. And on the fourth day, a ball will be held where you'll all make your official choice.” She bounced on her heels, evidently excited by that prospect.

My shoulders sagged. The walls seemed to close in on me. But I didn't have any time to process that news as the door opened and a vampire walked in, stealing everyone's attention. As I turned to him, recognition snatched my breath away.

General Wolfe was flanked by two officials in uniform as he took in the room with his hellish eyes. “Forgive me, your highnesses, but I need to speak with you on an urgent matter.” His gaze scoured the space then landed on me. His jaw clenched and his expression morphed with realisation. He took a purposeful step toward me, but Erik flew into view at an impossible speed,

blocking his way to me.

“You have my attention, General. Now step outside or I'll have you reprimanded for your impertinence.”

“Yes, sir,” Wolfe snarled, turning on his heel and marching out the door.

When the doors shut behind them, Clarice clapped her hands. “The guards will escort you back to your rooms. Make sure you get a good night's rest before tomorrow.”

The screeching of chairs sounded around me but my feet were rooted to the spot. My heart trembled with the aftershock of seeing Wolfe. The man who'd accosted me and arrested my father.

He must know where my family is.

Without thought, I charged from the room, darting into the gleaming hallway where Erik stood before Wolfe with his arms folded.

“-from the Realm. It will cause quite the scandal if word spreads-” Wolfe's words died on his lips as he spotted me.

Guards poured from the room behind me and I sped toward Wolfe, fear and anger forcing my legs to move.

“Where are they?!” I cried at him, not caring one bit about the scene I was causing.

Erik raised a hand to halt the two guards who were inches from grabbing me.

Wolfe's sharp blue eyes crept over my face and a scowl skewed his beautifully harsh features.

“Where's my family?” I demanded, my body beginning to quake as I stared at him, desperate for him to answer.

“What's this about, General?” Erik growled.

“This girl is related to the fugitive,” Wolfe replied in an icy tone.

A hundred emotions flowed through me. Fugitive meant Callie. It had to. I'd seen the vampires catch Dad, so it had to be her he was referring to. But what did that mean for Dad?

My heart burst with pain and I threw myself at Wolfe, pounding his iron chest with my fists. “Where's my dad, what did you do with him?!”

Erik seized me from behind, pulling me away.

Wolfe surveyed me with satisfaction spreading into his cool eyes. “In the blood bank of course, where all the traitors go.” His eyes flipped to Erik behind me. “It may help my case if I could speak with this girl.”

“Interrogate me, you mean,” I snapped, a ripple of fear radiating through

me. I wrestled against Erik's solid arms, but couldn't get free.

A beat of silence hit my ears before Erik responded. "That won't be possible. This girl is under royal protection."

"But, sir-" Wolfe started.

"No, General," Erik growled. "Go to my office if you wish to discuss this further."

Wolfe stalked away and Erik released me.

Hot tears spilled from my eyes as my worst fears were confirmed. Dad was in the blood bank. Callie was free. But for how long? And what would they do to her if they caught her?

"Go to your room," Erik commanded, pushing me toward the royal guards.

I spotted the humans being escorted past us up the stairs and Paige gave me a concerned frown.

I didn't follow, determined to remain there until I got some answer.

"Take her," Erik snarled and the guards dragged me away.

My body went slack as I gave in to their superior strength, sobbing as they took me back to my bedroom and shoved me inside. A key twisted in the lock, but I didn't care. I threw myself onto the bed, curling into a ball and crying into my pillow.

Despite how hard I tried, I couldn't get myself to calm down. I was stuck here, unable to help my family.

The image of my dad's strong body strung up in the blood bank filled my mind, completely paralysed but entirely awake. Was that how it was in that awful place?

I unravelled further, hating how weak I felt. How useless I was to help him.

Oh Dad, hold on. I'll get you out. I'll find a way, I promise.



Our journey through the woods only lasted a few hours before we came upon the remains of a city destroyed by the bombs.

As far as I could see, mounds of rubble and half-collapsed buildings filled the area. Patches of long grass and several saplings had sprung up between the concrete where nature had begun to reclaim the ground. But with the onset of winter, everything was dying off and the landscape was predominantly grey.

It was depressingly reminiscent of home.

I gazed at the open land with more than a little fear. So far we'd managed to travel within the shelter of the woodlands but once we stepped into the ruins we would be a lot more exposed.

Magnar stopped at the edge of the trees between two huge pines and looked out across the ruins with a frown.

"I grew up learning everything there is to know of vampires and yet I never heard of them causing this kind of destruction before. How did they accomplish such devastation?" he asked.

I was surprised enough that he'd asked me anything that it took me several seconds to form a response.

"This wasn't the vampires," I replied. "Humans did this to each other in the Final War."

Magnar turned his golden eyes on me searchingly. "How?"

I hesitated under the heat of his gaze. He was always so intense that it made answering him difficult. I felt too much pressure not to get anything wrong. "It ended the year before I was born and I've lived my entire life inside the Realm," I began so that he would excuse the holes in my knowledge.

"You've never been beyond those fences before?" he asked with another frown.

“I... No. In the last few days I’ve seen more of the world than I did in the last twenty-one years. That’s how humans live now.” I shrugged defensively as I saw pity flash in his eyes but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

“But you do know how the world came to be this way?” he asked, his tone a little gentler than before. I bristled against the change in his attitude. I didn’t want him to pity me. I was sure he already saw me as weak enough without him feeling sorry for me as well.

“My dad told us the stories,” I confirmed. “There have always been wars so I’m sure you can understand that much. He said that the more power people got the more they wanted and they would sacrifice anything to get it.”

“That has always been the way of men,” Magnar rumbled. “If they had banded together, they might have been able to wipe the vampires from this earth a long time ago but every time they came close, their own selfish desires got in the way. That is why the slayers stopped asking for their help. Humans cannot get out of their own way for long enough to see what truly matters.”

“Are you saying you’re not human?” I asked with a frown. My memories of my dad’s stories were pushed from my mind as his history intrigued me yet again.

“Slayers are something more than human and something less. We were given gifts by the gods to help us fight the fanged demons. But those gifts come with a price. We value our cause above our lives individually. Nothing is more important to us than destroying the vampires. We give our lives to it but that means that we don’t always get to make our own decisions about things that most humans take for granted.” He shrugged dismissively like that was a price he had long since decided to pay and it didn’t bother him.

“Like what?” I asked, fascinated despite myself. I was doing a terrible job of avoiding asking him personal questions but I’d never met anyone like him before. I’d never really wanted to know about someone the way I did about him.

“Love. Family. Where we go and when. Do you think I wished to sleep for a hundred years? When I was due to wake, everyone I’d ever known would already be dead and I’d have to start anew with their great grandchildren. At the time I’d thought my brother was to join me in our slumber so I was to have one familiar face when I woke but now...even he has been taken from me.” He sighed. “But that is what it is to be a slayer. We don’t get to choose what we do with our lives. Our sole purpose is the eradication of the

vampires. Which is why I want to know about the world as it is now. I need to know how they seized this power.”

I wanted to say something to comfort him about the loss of his people but I didn't even know how to start. I reached out to him on instinct, my fingers brushing the back of his hand for a moment before I drew away. He glanced at me in surprise and I felt heat rising in my cheeks. I hurried to tell him what he wanted to hear so that neither of us had too long to think about the awkward gesture.

“So, my dad said that the war escalated quickly. There was a lot of politics involved and one country threatening another which went on for years and then one day someone launched a missile. No one even knows which country fired first. Before the first bomb could drop, all the other countries had hit the red button to fire their own. In the space of a few hours pretty much every major city in the world had been destroyed.

Billions of people were killed. In this country alone pretty much every central and southern state was destroyed. Apparently it's all just a wasteland of parched desert now. The few survivors pretty much all live on either the west coast like us or the east. Dad said the missiles aimed at those cities were intercepted.

And then while the survivors tried to salvage something from the wreckage, the vampires appeared. Dad said they must have been waiting for us to be weak enough. Biding their time until the world was on its knees and they could sweep in and take control.”

Magnar sighed heavily and I frowned up at him. “What?” I asked, wondering why he didn't seem to understand what I'd said.

He folded his arms and tilted his head before voicing the issue. “And what, exactly, is a missile?”

I stared up at him with wide eyes for several seconds and then let out a laugh. “Right. There are probably quite a few things like that that you have no idea about.”

Magnar grunted in irritation and started to head out into the wreckage left by the bombs. I jogged to keep up with him and fell into step by his side.

“I can try to catch you up on things while we walk. If you like?” I offered.

“Please,” he replied tightly.

I gave him an encouraging smile as I tried to figure out where to begin. A thousand years was a hell of a long time to have missed out on and my

sheltered life hardly made me an expert on much, but I was willing to try and help him figure things out. At least it would go some way towards paying him back for helping me find my family.



“I find it hard to believe that a metal box could ever fly through the clouds,” Magnar said in disbelief several hours later. I’d been trying to describe an aeroplane which was pretty damn difficult considering the fact that I’d never even seen one for myself. Dad had been adamant that they really had existed once though so I didn’t doubt it. Like Magnar, I’d always found it pretty hard to imagine too.

“It’s true,” I insisted with a smirk. Hours of discussing the things he’d missed out on had gone a long way towards thawing our frosty relationship. It wasn’t like he’d started smiling or anything but my stories had definitely captured his interest and had gone some way to help him forget a little of his misery for a while.

He even seemed to have moved past the embarrassment of having to ask for so many explanations. He accepted the holes in my knowledge without judgement too and I was grateful to him for that. My life had been immeasurably sheltered in comparison to his but instead of the pity I’d noticed when I first told him about my incarcerated existence, it now seemed to kindle anger in him. I could feel his simmering rage at the hold the vampires had on the human population and it was stoking the flames of my own anger too.

For so many years I’d had to accept my lot in life. Dreams of escape had come frequently but I’d never really believed I might live to see them fulfilled. I’d always accepted that my fate wasn’t mine to choose. My life would end when the vampires decided it should and not a moment of it would ever have been my own.

Thinking about that now made me angrier than I could describe. I’d finally made it out of their clutches and I’d sooner die than allow them to take me back to the Realm or anywhere else. Once I’d gotten my family away from them, I fully intended to get as far from the vampires as humanly possible and live out my days beneath the sun.

“And this was used for transportation?” Magnar confirmed, bringing my mind back to our aeroplane conversation.

“They were really fast. You could zip from one side of the country to the other in less than a day. And I think that’s a pretty long way away,” I confirmed.

“It is further than you can imagine,” he replied. It was strange that his knowledge could fill in some of the gaps in my own like that. In some ways we were both as ignorant as each other about the world we now travelled through.

“And there was another flying machine with big, spinning blades on top of it called a hoppercopper or hopelcopter. No wait it was-”

“Silence.” Magnar raised a hand to halt me and pressed his back to the wall of a partially collapsed building. I quickly followed suit, my heart pounding frantically as he tilted his head to listen for something. “They’ve found us,” he breathed.

I blinked up at him as fear coiled in my gut. A stupid part of me had been hoping that the vampires had given up on their hunt for me. I was just one, insignificant human, lost in a huge world. Why waste their time trying to track me down? That hope had been foolish though. Of course they’d want to find me. They’d want everyone in the Realm to see what happened to anyone who tried to run. Ice flooded my veins as I imagined the terrible things they might do to me to make sure no one ever tried to follow in my footsteps.

“They’ll kill me,” I breathed in horror. “They’ll string me up in front the whole Realm and drain my blood for everyone to see. They’ll make an example of me and-”

Magnar caught my face between his hands and forced me to look at him, silencing my panicked rambling. I gazed into his golden eyes, finding a pool of strength there.

“They will not take you Callie,” he promised. “You are under my protection and I won’t allow them to lay a hand on you. I give you my word that I will keep you safe.”

I stared at his face inches from mine and my heart lurched in a way that had nothing to do with the danger coming for us.

“Okay,” I breathed, pushing my fear aside. Despite everything I knew about the vampires, his confidence made me believe he just might be able to keep that promise.

He nodded and released me, leaving a line of fire across my skin where his hands had been.

Magnar closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he concentrated. “I

believe there are only five of them,” he said softly after several long minutes.

“Only?” I squeaked. One was more than enough to take me down. I had about as much chance of standing against five of them as a mouse stood against a wolf.

Magnar turned to me and placed a hand on my arm. I drew my eyes up to meet his. “In your chest beats the heart of a warrior. You will fight for your life and you will *win*,” he said fiercely. Suddenly I could see the reason he had led his people. The way he spoke left no room for doubts. I could imagine men and women following him into battle without an inch of fear in their hearts.

Somehow, I found a few scraps of my own courage in his golden eyes and clung to them, building on them with my own resolve and determination to survive. Dad and Montana needed me. I wouldn’t let the vampires take me. I wouldn’t let them stop me from getting to my family.

“Say it,” Magnar growled.

“I will win,” I replied with as much grit as I could manage.

He released his grip on my arm and pulled the blade he’d given me from my belt, pushing it into my hand. “Then prepare to stand and fight. They’re nearly upon us.”

As the hilt connected with my palm, I could have sworn I felt a kind of excited energy coursing through it. This was what it had been made for. It hungered for the blood of the creatures that hunted me. It wanted to find a home in their flesh. *Fury*. Its silken voice beckoned me to join with it and I found myself almost eager for the vampires’ arrival.

Magnar reached up to his shoulders and unclasped his cloak, letting it fall to the ground and revealing the leathers he wore beneath it. Though he had called me a warrior, that seemed like some kind of joke in comparison to him. He was the embodiment of power. A weapon given flesh. I pitied anyone who tried to stand against him.

“Come on out, poppet,” a cold voice cooed from somewhere beyond our hiding place. A large measure of my confidence turned and ran screaming for the hills at the sound of that voice but a small portion of it stayed with me.

“It’s been a long time since someone called me poppet,” Magnar replied gruffly as he stepped out from our hiding place and pulled one of his blades from his back. It hung loosely in his grip as he moved into the open space before us where four vampires stood waiting.

I followed, leaving him enough space to wield his weapons without

taking my head from my shoulders but not allowing the gap between us to increase too much. He might have called me a warrior but I had no idea how to wield any kind of weapon. And though I might have been willing to try and defend myself, I knew I was no match for the immortal beings who had come for me.

The vampires dropped back a few steps, hissing like alley cats as they watched Magnar approach.

“Slayer,” spat a male with long, white-blond hair. “Not possible.”

“I was there when the last of you died!” cursed a strikingly beautiful female with dark skin and piercing blue eyes. “The Belvederes gutted every last one of you!”

“Then I must be a ghost,” Magnar replied calmly, not even showing a flicker of emotion at the words she delivered. “Although I do not feel dead.”

“You soon will be.” At a signal I barely registered, the four of them leapt towards him at once.

Magnar didn’t even flinch as they surrounded him, each swinging their weapons at him from different sides to try and overwhelm him.

He swept his blade in a wide arc, parrying two of theirs and managing to slice into the leg of the blond male.

They came at him again, moving so quickly I could hardly follow it and yet he managed to evade their blows, dancing between them like he was toying with them.

He grabbed his second blade from his back and threw it, catching the green-eyed male in the chest. The blade must have pierced his heart because he let out a blood-curdling scream. His face disintegrated and fell into dust which blew away through the clearing before the sound of his voice had fully faded.

Their fight started to move closer to me and I stumbled back, wishing I could do something to help but knowing I’d only get in the way if I tried.

As the three remaining vampires rushed at Magnar again, the hilt of my blade started to feel hot beneath my palm and I was struck with the urge to turn around. I spun on my heel, suddenly remembering that Magnar had said there were five vampires coming for us.

She rushed at me like an oncoming tide. I screamed as I threw myself aside and her fingernails scratched against my coat without managing to gain purchase. She came for me again, her thick brunette hair flying around her too-beautiful face as she reached towards me.

I ducked beneath her grasping hands once more and slashed at her with Fury. The blade felt alive beneath my palm, almost like I could feel a beating heart within the unnaturally warm metal. It hungered for her blood and I ached to give it what it desired.

The third time I tried to evade her, I failed. She smiled wickedly as her hand closed around my throat and she lifted me clean off of my feet.

I flailed wildly in her grasp, my feet kicking desperately as I tried to fight her off. She was even stronger than I'd imagined. Her smile widened as she raised me above her head. Black spots started to dance before my eyes as I struggled for oxygen.

I started to panic but Fury called to me, urging me to use it. With every ounce of energy I could muster, I slashed the blade down, carving it into her arm. She dropped me with a cry of surprise and I hit the concrete hard, pain rippling through my body.

She howled in rage as bright, crimson blood poured from her arm and splattered on the pavement. Smoke rose from the wound and the smell of burning flesh tainted the air.

I scrambled back, trying to get away but she leapt on top of me, driving the breath from my lungs.

"Don't worry pet; they want you alive," she hissed.

She threw a punch into my gut and grabbed my throat again with her other hand, crushing me into the concrete. I would have been dead already if she wanted to kill me but by some miracle she had orders to spare my life. That gave me one clear advantage; I could keep fighting for my freedom but she couldn't finish me off. I struggled in what would have been a useless attempt to break free except that I managed to get Fury into the small space between our bodies.

With every drop of strength I had, I jammed the blade up and under her ribs. Her brown eyes widened in horrified surprise a moment before they turned to dust and crumbled apart. Fury sang with victory in my palm and a searing pain flashed along the inside of my forearm.

I scrunched my eyes shut and clamped my mouth closed as the remains of the vampire scattered over me. I rolled over quickly, wiping my face with the arm of my coat and spitting on the ground to make sure I didn't ingest any of her. I kicked her clothes away and pushed myself upright.

As I regained my feet, I watched Magnar exchanging blows with the two remaining vampires. I hadn't seen him kill the other one but a pile of blood-

spattered clothes marked where it had happened.

I stared on, wanting to help but not knowing how I could as the clash of metal rang out again and again.

The female vampire fainted to the left before lurching back. She managed to get beneath Magnar's guard, striking a blow that cut through the flesh of his arm.

He yelled out in anger and pain as she came at him once more. The male vampire lurched forward as Magnar exposed his back to him.

I whipped my arm back and let Fury fly. My aim was true and the blade found its home in the vampire's thigh, making him shriek in pain. His head whipped around and he wrenched the blade from his leg. He screamed again as smoke rose from his palm and the stench of burning flesh reached me once more. He tossed Fury aside in horror before coming for me.

I stumbled back, unarmed and completely at his mercy as my heart pounded a violent rhythm against my ribs.

My eyes widened as I spotted Magnar behind him. He swung his blade with ferocious force and took the vampire's head clean off. Without sparing me a glance, he returned to his battle with the female, finally able to give her his full attention.

I skirted the decapitated body and ran to collect my blade. As I grabbed it from the ground, I could have sworn it was pleased to see me. The hilt hummed with energy as I sprinted back to the twitching body and drove the blade home in its heart. Fury seemed to sigh with satisfaction as the vampire fell to dust beneath me. *I've waited so long.* The words flitted through my mind and I wasn't even convinced I'd really heard them. Maybe I was going insane.

The sound of swords clashing had stopped and I looked up to find Magnar grappling with the final vampire. Their blades lay on the ground and she clawed at him as he threw punches. He caught her by the throat and slammed her against a crumbling wall, sending bricks tumbling from it.

Before she could fight him off, he grabbed a dagger from his belt and stabbed her in the gut. She cried out as he stabbed her again and again, finding her heart on the fourth strike. His fist which had been around her throat closed on dust as she fell apart.

He turned to me with his chest heaving and a fire burning in his gaze that I hadn't seen before.

"So this is what you live for huh?" I teased as the adrenaline drained from

my body and the reality of what had just happened began to press in on me. “I can see why you enjoy it so much.” I gave up on trying to stand and sank down to the ground, placing my trembling fingers against the cold concrete.

Magnar looked at me for several long seconds and let out a booming laugh. I couldn’t help but smile in response. If there was one thing that could make you forget your problems for a while, then it was looking your own death in the face and saying fuck you.

Montana



My eyes were sore from crying, but I'd finally gotten a handle on myself. I was left with a hollow space in my chest that grew larger the longer I laid there. Even in the Realm, I'd never felt this powerless. I was stuck in a game I didn't want to play while Callie was being hunted by vampires and my dad was in too much trouble to even dwell on.

The door clicked as it unlocked, but I didn't move from my fetal position on the bed, feeling too heavy. Too hopeless.

"Have you calmed down yet?" Erik's flat tone rolled into my ears.

I stiffened, but didn't answer.

"I knew you were a rebel, little human, but Wolfe has now informed me of just how deep that rebellious streak runs. A sister on the run...your father in the blood bank. How chaotic." His weight pressed down the bed and my body knotted up from his proximity.

"I can't help them," I breathed. "I'm all alone here." Voicing my fears made me tense and I immediately wished I'd remained silent.

"You have other humans here to keep you company," he said, his voice terse.

"I don't want them, I want my family," I hissed, rage spitting like hot water in my chest.

Erik sighed. "I don't want your emotions affecting the ritual."

"Screw your ritual." I rolled over fast, sitting up and glaring at him. I must have looked a mess with my tangled hair and reddened cheeks, but I didn't give a damn. "And screw you and your parasitic brothers and sister." My heart was stronger again, but coming eye to eye with him threatened to crack the fragile walls around it.

Erik's face remained unchanged, but he scratched at the thick stubble on his chin as he considered how to answer. "If you would just take a breath--"

I launched a pillow at him and he caught it with ease, tossing it to the floor.

“You're acting very childishly,” he remarked and my body flamed from the comment.

I ground my teeth, fighting for my resolve. “I won't play along with this. I won't do anything until my father's safe and your vicious General stops hunting my sister.”

The demand had been circling in my mind for hours. It was the only leverage I had to play.

Erik released a breath of annoyance. “That's not for you to decide. You will do as I say.”

“No I won't,” I snarled and tension spanned through the air as our gazes locked together. Fear threatened to make me back down, but I couldn't. The only thing I had left to hold onto was my resilience, and I wasn't going to let this vampire steal it from me.

Erik rose to his feet. “I can't deal with these emotions, Rebel. It's not my place to comfort you.”

“No, but apparently it's your place to keep me prisoner here to do as you like with.”

“I'm not going to talk to you unless you curb your tone. I am a Count and you will address me with respect.” Erik marched out of the door, slamming it behind him.

Good, I'd pissed him off. That was something to be proud of at least.

Minutes stretched into an hour and I started to wonder how Erik might respond to my outburst. Would he punish me? Hurt me?

I shuddered, drawing my legs up to my chest and resting my chin on my knees.

Hurt me all you like, vampire, I will not obey your commands.

Low voices sounded beyond the door, making my ears prick up.

“Just talk to her. For the love of the gods, Clarice, I don't know what else to do. She's going to cause problems if she continues the ritual in this manner.”

“You are such an idiot sometimes,” Clarice replied and my heart thudded harder at the thought of her coming in and trying to give me a pep talk. It damn well wouldn't work. She wasn't going to make me comply. I'd had enough of their orders.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Erik growled.

“She needs support through this transition, Erik. You need to learn how to

look after her if you're going to have any chance of her choosing you at the ball.”

Is that all they cared about? Some ball? And what the hell did they want us to choose them for anyway?

Whatever it was, they were all fooling themselves if they thought I'd willingly pick any of them.

Erik released a growl of frustration. “I don't understand her, how am I supposed to help?”

“Is it really so hard?” Clarice snipped. “Her family is in trouble. You'd care if it was your family, wouldn't you?”

Erik didn't answer and I lifted my head as the door swung open and Clarice strode into the room with a sad expression.

“Hi Montana,” she said softly. “That's your name, right?”

I nodded as I spotted Erik pacing out in the corridor. Clarice pushed the door closed and I eyed her beautiful cream gown with golden lace adorning the corset.

She stood before me, dropping her hands by her sides. She truly was stunning, her skin glowed like it was dipped in morning dew.

“I heard you're a little upset with General Wolfe,” she said.

A blade dug into my heart at his name. “It's what he's done that I'm upset about.” I bit down on my lower lip as it threatened a tremble.

“I never liked that man,” Clarice remarked, surprising me. She fought a smile, dropping onto the edge of my bed. Something about her wasn't as frightening as the other vampires. She almost seemed...human. In her manner anyway. Not her ethereal looks.

“Yes...well, maybe Erik can help your family. I'm sure he will if you ask him.” Her cerulean eyes lit up, filling me with hope. It was so strange getting that feeling from a vampire.

“Do you really think so?” I whispered, aware he was probably still pacing beyond the door.

“Yes, but...” She frowned and a tiny crease formed between her eyes. “You have to make an effort with Erik. Do as he asks. Don't bite back. Not too much anyway.” She gave me a little wink and I fought hard not to smile. There was no way I was going to like this vampire. No chance in hell.

“I don't want to do as he says,” I breathed. “I want to go home and find my family.”

A small sigh parted from her lips. She reached out and I jerked backwards

as she tried to touch my hair. She dropped her hand and it fell between us on the bed. "That's not possible, Montana. This is your only option. You've been welcomed into our family, so why not try to make the most of it?"

I considered her words. What if Erik *could* help my family? Would he really do such a thing?

The only thing I could do was try out Clarice's suggested approach. My family's lives were worth swallowing a few hateful words for.

"Okay," I agreed at last.

Clarice beamed as she rose to her feet. "Good. See you soon, Montana."

She exited the room, leaving me feeling like I'd just been put under a very powerful spell. But the spell was broken entirely as Erik reentered, resting his back against the door.

His jaw ticked as he surveyed me and silence built a wall between us. It was a battle of wills to see who would break first. So I bit the bullet and followed Clarice's advice.

"I've calmed down now," I said, forcing my tone to remain level and trying not to dip my voice in too much sarcasm.

"What a relief," he muttered. "So are you going to ask me, or are we going to keep pretending I didn't hear that entire conversation?"

Claws tore at my stomach. I bit down on the insides of my cheeks as I tried very hard not to snap at him. Mustering as much self-control as I had, I swallowed my pride and asked, "Can you help my family, your royal highness?" The last words were spoken with a little disdain, but it was a definite improvement on my usual tone.

His mouth lifted into a mocking grin. "That's better."

I cringed, shutting my eyes, feeling like a dog who'd just been petted by its master. "So?" I pressed through my teeth.

"Well that depends, Rebel." He dropped into the velvet armchair, stretching his arms over the back of it.

"On?" I asked, knowing I wasn't going to like the next words that came out of his mouth.

"How well you behave. You see, I've got a little job for you. And if you do it without complaint, I'll *maybe* think about helping your family."

"I need more than maybes," I demanded, though not sharply. A small voice in the back of my head reminded me of how crazy it was to negotiate with a vampire. But too many crazy things had happened in the last few days for me to care.

“Fine.” Erik ran a hand into his ebony hair, mussing it up. “I give you my word that if you do what I ask of you, I will free your father from the blood bank.”

My gut clenched tightly, my pulse thumped a frantic beat. Would he really do that? The word of a vampire was dirt to me, but what other choice did I have?

“And what about my sister?” I asked icily.

He shrugged. “When she is caught, I will ensure she doesn’t end up in the blood bank as well.”

“Or hurt,” I snarled. “Or punished at all.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Agreed.”

A frown weighed down my brows as I considered what he was offering. Could I trust him? Maybe not. But if there was even a small chance that he would keep his word, I had to do as he said.

I lifted my chin, my decision made. “What do you want me to do?”

Erik’s face split into a dark grin. “You’re going to pick Fabian at the ball. But before that, you’re going to make him want you so badly, he’ll be begging you to choose him.”

I stared at him for several long seconds as those words sunk in. First, relief swept through me at knowing this heartless beast didn’t in fact want me at all. But then the reality of what he was asking descended on me. I’d barely flirted with a boy in my entire life. From a very young age, I’d known I would never choose to bring kids into the world. And the idea of falling in love with someone who might be dragged away to the blood bank at short notice had never been on my to-do list. So how on earth was I going to pull this off?

You have to, Montana. It could save Dad and Callie.

I took a slow breath, then nodded. “Okay, but I don’t um...I’m not exactly sure how to do what you’re asking.”

He cocked a brow in amusement. “I do love when you’re on the back foot, Rebel. It’s rather entertaining. Are you telling me you don’t know how to seduce a guy?”

My heart hit full speed in a matter of seconds. My cheeks flushed despite the ludicrousness of being embarrassed about this in front of a damn bloodsucker. Why did I care what he thought of my flirting skills? But my burning face told me I did.

I fumbled for the right answer in my head, trying to regain some of my pride. “Well he’s not just any guy. He’s a royal vampire.”

Erik rubbed his bristly chin, his fingers barely concealing another grin. I wanted to smack his smirking face, but I'd probably have ended up with more than a bruised hand for it.

“Well you'll be spending all day with me tomorrow so I'll be sure to give you some pointers.” He stood, throwing me a wink that was more demeaning than flirtatious.

“Oh how grateful I am, your mightiness,” I muttered.

“The pleasure will be all mine, I'm quite sure.” His boyish smile grew and a light flared in his eyes for the first time since I'd met him. This was a real smile, nothing like the empty grins he threw around at people. And it stoked a small fire in my gut.

As he stalked toward the door, I threw myself back on the pillows, resigning myself to a broken night's sleep and the promise of another hellish day in Erik's company. Not much to look forward to, but now that I had hopes of saving my family, the hollowness in my chest had fleshed out again. And that was what I had to hold onto.



The sound of running water called merrily to me and I managed to find the energy to up my pace despite the fatigue that had been slowing me down for the last few miles. The ruined city had given way to rolling fields interspersed with woodland. My throat was way past parched and we had gotten through the last of our drinking water after our run-in with the vampires the day before.

“Beyond the next ridge,” Magnar promised. I bit my tongue against pointing out that he’d said that about the last ridge too. The water definitely sounded closer now so I was inclined to believe him this time.

We made it up the hill lined with brown grass and thick mud and finally found the stream on the other side of it.

I dropped my bag with a groan of longing and crouched down to scoop the ice-cold water into my mouth. Magnar followed suit beside me and we satisfied our thirst in silence.

I sat back and sighed as my belly sloshed contentedly. My scalp was itching from days of leaving my hair tightly braided so I leant back against a tree and started to unravel it.

When I finished, I ran my fingers through it and left it hanging loose around my shoulders. I looked up to find Magnar watching me and heat clawed at my cheeks unexpectedly.

“You have the sun in your hair,” he commented. I was pretty sure it was meant to be a compliment but I didn’t understand it.

“What?” I frowned at him. Over the last few days I’d gotten used to the strange way he said things but some of the stuff he came out with still confused the hell out of me.

“Your hair is the colour of the sun. You shouldn’t hide it away, it will bring you luck.”

“But it won’t if I tie it up?” I teased. “That seems like pretty dubious luck to me.”

He shrugged and offered me half a smile then pulled his cloak from his back and removed his blades, carefully laying them on top of it. I raised an eyebrow as he started to unbuckle his jerkin and pulled it off to reveal his toned, muscular body. His bronze skin was marked with various scars and tattoos and I itched to ask him about them.

He noticed my attention and paused with his hand on his belt. “Does it offend you if I bathe? It seems like we should take the opportunity while we have it.”

I tried to clear my throat then shook my head. “No, I mean yes, wash. That’s a good plan.”

He kicked off his boots and removed his trousers next. As he made a move to take off his underwear too, I quickly interrupted him. “Maybe leave something to the imagination there Magnar,” I laughed. “I’m not sure I’m ready to see *all* of you.” I waved my hand in the vague direction of his crotch and laughed again, hoping he would get the message about unnecessary nudity without feeling the need to question me on what I meant. Heat crawled across my cheeks and I was sure that he could clearly see the blush which lined them.

His eyes glimmered with what looked almost like mischief but he blinked and it was gone. He nodded, leaving his underwear on as he waded out into the water and I was left wondering if I’d imagined it.

He made it to the middle of the icy stream and crouched down to dunk his head beneath the water. I cast furtive glances at him from beneath my lashes as the water ran over his body. It wasn’t like it meant anything; I’d have to be blind not to notice how attractive he was and it wasn’t as if I liked him aside from appreciating the shape of his body.

He was still a total ass most of the time even if he had saved my life more than once now. The few things we did have in common were far outweighed by our differences. We had literally grown up in different worlds. Once we ran out of things to tell each other about the places we came from I doubted we would find anything else to discuss.

He turned away from me and I stole a look at his broad back. The tattoos which marked his skin almost spoke to me. Like they were written in a language I used to understand. I frowned at the ridiculous thought; I couldn’t even read words written in English so I knew there was no way I could read

those symbols.

As I continued to stare at him, I grew more sure of my understanding of them. They were runes just like the ones carved on the hilts of his blades. They spoke of power, devotion, honour and love.

Magnar turned towards me and I followed the path of the tattoos which marked his chest. They curved around his muscles as if he'd been born with them patterning his skin rather than having them added in ink.

I frowned in concentration as I studied a small line of runes which ran beneath his heart. The words *promise* and *bound* filled my mind as I looked at them and I bit my lip in confusion.

"Callie?" Magnar asked.

I flinched and looked up at him guiltily as he tilted his head in a way that made me feel like I'd just been caught staring. Which I supposed I had.

"Sorry," I coughed awkwardly. "I was just trying to decipher your tattoos and I couldn't work out what that one meant." I pointed at his chest and he looked down at the one I'd selected.

His lip curled back in distaste and he rubbed a thumb over the tattoo as if he wished he could scrub it from his skin.

"That is the mark of a decision I did not make for myself. I had hoped that after waking from my sleep the stain of it might have been removed from my skin. I can no longer keep that promise anyway. But it would seem that the gods still hold me to it despite the fact that I can no longer go through with it. Or perhaps they've just left it there to remind me."

"What promise?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Magnar hesitated like he couldn't decide whether to tell me then shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. The person I made it to is long since dead so perhaps some good has come about from my situation after all. Aren't you bathing as well?"

The sudden flip in the conversation was enough to make me drop the subject. He clearly didn't want to talk about it and there was no reason for me to push him on it. My eyes dropped to my lap while I tried to focus on his question and I plucked a piece of grass from the riverbank, twirling it between my fingers. "Oh, I just thought I'd wait until you were done." *And until you'd gone somewhere else so that you wouldn't be looking at me.*

"We shouldn't linger too long; the sun will set soon and we need to find somewhere to spend the night." He started to scrub at his long hair and I nodded in defeat as I shrugged out of my coat.

I wasn't looking forward to submerging myself in the icy stream but we'd only ever had cold water for washing in the Realm so it was nothing new.

I yanked my shirt off quickly, trying to ignore the bite of the cold wind against my exposed skin. I took my own advice and left my underwear on, silently grateful that it was black and wouldn't turn transparent on me.

I sucked in a deep breath and held it as I plunged into the freezing water. I knew from experience that it was better to get the dunking over with fast so I ignored the protests of my shivering body and ducked down so that every part of me was submerged.

I gasped as my head broke the surface again and quickly started scrubbing at my hair and skin to remove any dirt.

I kept my back to Magnar, not wanting to know if he was tempted to look at me too. I was painfully aware of the way my bones showed through my skin and I doubted he would be overly interested in looking at the consequences of the poor rations I'd eaten in the Realm.

I dunked myself beneath the water once more to remove any final dirt then quickly rang out my long hair.

As soon as it was done, I raced back to the bank and hauled myself out again. I squealed in surprise as I came face to face with Magnar but his eyes were locked on my arm.

I followed his gaze and frowned as I spotted the strange red mark on the inside of my right forearm. It was like a curved blade with a small diamond beneath it. It almost looked like it had been burned onto my skin.

"What the-" I began but Magnar caught my hand in his before I could continue and raised it up to look at the mark.

"I knew I felt it," he murmured as he traced his fingers over the reddened skin. I flinched as he touched it, expecting it to hurt but he was gentle, gazing at the mark as if he didn't quite believe he was seeing it.

"What?" I asked in frustration. I half wanted to pull my arm out of his grip but I remained still as his fingers skimmed across my skin again, raising goosebumps in their wake.

A freezing wind gusted around us and I started shivering violently. I was soaking wet and almost naked. It wasn't the most ideal way to be standing about in the depths of winter.

Magnar released me and pointed to my clothes. "Get dressed. We must find shelter for the night and then we have much to discuss."

I didn't need any further encouragement to put my clothes back on as

another wind swept around us. I quickly fished fresh underwear out of my pack and turned my back on him to change into it before pulling the rest of my clothes back on over the top. I zipped my coat up last and pulled the hood tight around my face, more grateful than ever for the amazingly warm garment.

“Come.” Magnar turned and led the way along the stream in silence. I wanted to ask him what the hell was bugging him but the set of his shoulders told me I wouldn’t be getting any answers yet.

He set an even faster pace than usual and the difference in our strides had me half jogging to keep up with him. I cursed him under my breath, knowing he could hear me and not caring as he charged on.

Finally, a little house came into view along the stream’s bank near the foot of the valley.

The daylight was quickly bleeding out of the sky and it wouldn’t be long before night fell around us.

As we approached the little building, we started gathering firewood to see us through the night. The silence was tense between us as Magnar refused to discuss whatever was on his mind and I grew more irritated by having to wait for answers.

Eventually we made it to the building and headed inside. Everything was covered in a layer of dust but other than that, it was comfortable enough. There was a small fireplace in the living area and Magnar left me to build the fire while he headed back outside to place wards by all of the entrances to keep the vampires away.

While I waited for him, I searched the tiny kitchen and found a few cans of sweetcorn and kidney beans as well as a sealed bag of breakfast cereal which didn’t even taste stale. I heated the beans and corn over the fire in an attempt to make them more appetising and dished them up with the cereal to create a strange but perfectly edible meal.

Magnar reappeared and accepted his meal with a nod of thanks. I waited for him to finish eating it but when he still didn’t start talking, I cracked.

“Are you going to explain what this means then?” I asked, shoving my shirt sleeve up and brandishing the mark at him, fearing he might deny it was there if I didn’t prove it.

In response, Magnar pulled his jerkin over his head and held his own arm out to show me. On his inner forearm, the exact same mark stood out against his skin. His was pale, almost silver like an old scar with a touch of

something more powerful to it.

“This is a slayer’s mark,” he said slowly, giving me a moment to absorb his words.

“You mean I... you...” I frowned at the mark on my arm. Apart from its pink appearance it was an exact twin to the one on his skin. “But how? I mean my dad is just... Dad. And Mom never even tried to fight back against the vampires. Not even when she was dying and they came for her. Neither of them were secret vampire hunters-”

“You have slayer blood running in your veins from one parent or another. They probably never even knew they had it. Not everyone with our blood chooses to join the order. Some natural born slayers left us and married humans, had normal lives. You are most likely descended from one of those. But for your mark to have awakened, the call of it must be strong in your blood.”

“I felt a pain in my arm right after I killed that vampire who was trying to catch me,” I said, remembering the searing burn. At the time I hadn’t been able to spare it any attention and afterwards so much had been going on that it was driven from my mind entirely.

“Embracing your slayer nature awakened some of your gifts.”

“Gifts?” I wasn’t sure how I felt about finding out that my blood was different from other people’s but I couldn’t deny the spark of excitement it ignited. If I was even the smallest bit like Magnar then I might have a chance to fight back against the vampires. It could be enough to get my family safely away from them.

“To some degree, each generation of slayer passes on their own knowledge and training to the next via their blood. If you train, you will *feel* things that you haven’t been taught yourself. Your senses will heighten, your reactions will get faster and once you learn to trust the instincts of your ancestors you will be able to fight the vampires as an equal.” His gaze burned with purpose and I could tell that he was hoping I would embrace this part of me.

“You say *if* I train?” I asked carefully.

“To some degree this gift is yours whether you embrace your calling or not. I can help you learn to use it and you will be stronger for it. But I cannot train you fully unless you decide to take the vow. The true extent of your gifts will not be realised until then.”

“Vow?” My voice was low and my mind whirled with the strange possibilities that were suddenly before me.

“If you choose to embrace your slayer nature, you will have to take a vow to place the destruction of the vampires above all else. Your life’s purpose will be to bring them down and destroy them. That is not something to choose lightly. There are repercussions; you may not be able to choose your own husband or make your own decisions on having children. You may be forced to sacrifice your own life or that of others for the sake of the cause.”

“I don’t want a husband anyway and I definitely don’t want children,” I said firmly. The sacrificing myself part I wasn’t so sure on.

Magnar sighed and looked away from me into the fire. “You might not be able to choose not to have them either. If the cause demands you take a husband and produce more children to inherit the gift then you would be obligated to do it.”

“The cause? Aren’t *you* the cause? I mean, it doesn’t seem like there are any other slayers left so I’m guessing those decisions would be down to you.”

Magnar shrugged. “The runes still hold power. It is possible there are more of us out there. The gods may decide to speak to us and tell us their wishes. Or a prophecy might come to light which demands such things of you. Or of us.”

“*Us?*” I stared at him for several seconds before realising what he was implying. We might have been the only two slayers in existence so if some prophecy demanded slayer babies... I got to my feet quickly and walked away from him to stand by the small window which looked back towards the stream. “No way. I’m not some hapless fool you can use to have little vampire-killing offspring with.

Besides, doesn’t this mean you might be my great great great great grandad or whatever?” I shook my head. “I’ve had more than enough of being told how I’m going to live my life. Twenty-one years in a prison is more than enough, it’s too much in fact. From here on out I’ll be making my own decisions and no prophecy or vampire or any other supernatural bullshit is going to decide for me.” My chest heaved with the sudden onslaught of emotion and I shook my head in anger.

Magnar looked at me curiously, the light of the fire sending shadows dancing across his bare chest and making some of his scars stand out fiercely.

“I didn’t mean *us* like that,” he said and a trace of irritation flitted across his face. “If I take on your training then no such thing could ever take place between us anyway. So your disgust at the idea is unwarranted.”

I opened my mouth to protest. I hadn’t meant it like that. It wasn’t that the

idea of me and him was the problem, it was the fact that I might not get to choose it for myself. Who would want to be with someone without making the decision to do so of their own free will? Before I could think of the right way to correct his misunderstanding, Magnar stood.

“I’m going to check the wards again. We both have a lot to think on.” He headed out of the small room and I watched him go without saying another word.

Nice work Callie.

Guilt tugged at me but I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do about it. All Magnar wanted was to find some of his kin and now I was standing right before him, telling him I didn’t want to be one of them. Or was I? The thought of having even a fraction of his gifts definitely called to me but the trade-off against my own free will felt like such a high price to pay.

I’d only held freedom in my hands for a matter of days and now I was being asked to consider enslaving myself to some cause for the rest of my life?

No way.

I moved towards the fire and sank down before it, letting the heat of the flames warm me as I turned everything over in my mind. A faint whispering echoed at the edge of my thoughts and my hand drifted to the blade at my hip.

Fury sighed in satisfaction as I gripped its hilt. Perhaps I wasn’t going mad after all. Maybe the things I felt from the blade had something to do with the slayer blood that coursed through my veins. Magnar said that everything innate in my blood came from the memories of my ancestors so perhaps the blade could help me to understand that.

I concentrated on the feeling of the blade in my hand as I placed it across my lap and closed my eyes. *Show me*, I asked it, wondering if I really was going insane.

The blade grew hot beneath my fingers and I could feel its eagerness to share its life with me. Images started to flash through my mind of people wielding Fury before me. I was a man creeping through a dark cave. A dark-skinned woman fighting with my back against a wall while more vampires than I could put a number to came at me. A child learning to hunt in a forest. An old woman defending her grandchildren from a hungry wolf.

More images than I could count. More people than I would have thought possible. Year after year, the blade passed from hand to hand. I felt its love

for those who'd wielded it, its hate for the vampires it vanquished. And somehow they were all a part of me and yet not me at all.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there, watching as my ancestors fought and died. Loved and lived and passed the blade on through the generations.

My palms felt cold and it took me a moment to realise Fury was no longer in my grasp. I fluttered my eyes open in confusion and found Magnar kneeling before me.

What the hell was that?

He was staring into my eyes with a fierce intensity. "What did you see?" he demanded.

"Everything, everyone who came before me." I frowned, unsure of how else to describe it.

"You're sure it was before?" he asked. "It wasn't still to come?"

"No. It was definitely before." I knew that deep within me.

He reached out and took my hand in his. "You're freezing," he said irritably. "You went too deep." He released me and moved to grab his cloak from the back of the moth-eaten sofa before draping it around me. He left his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer to lend me some of his warmth.

"Too deep?" I shook my head as my mind returned sluggishly to the present. I turned to look at him, his face just inches from mine and he stilled under my scrutiny. "You shaved." There was still stubble lining his jaw but the beard was gone.

He sighed and released me, shifting away a little and leaning towards the fire. "The beard was irritating me," he replied vaguely.

I watched him as he worked on building the fire back up. Without the beard he looked younger than I'd presumed before. His face seemed a little softer too and I could see more of his strong jaw. I wondered how old he really was. Not counting the thousand years he'd spent asleep.

"How old are you, were you... you know what I mean..."

His mouth twitched in amusement. "Discounting the thousand years I spent in an unageing slumber? I lived twenty seven years with my kin and spent ten of those as an Earl hunting the Belvederes to the ends of the earth."

I nodded, trying to pretend I knew what he meant by that. I was pretty sure being an Earl meant that he'd been a leader. He was certainly bossy enough for me to believe he was used to being in charge of people.

When he was satisfied with the fire, Magnar turned his gaze back on me and the heat in it made me squirm internally.

“If you are not too tired, I would like to try something,” he said seriously.

“Okay,” I said in response, unable to turn away from him.

He leant around me and I froze as he drew close enough to touch me but instead, he pulled one of the long blades he usually wore across his back into his lap.

“You can feel a connection with Fury. I want you to see what you can feel with this.” He held the heavy weapon out to me and I eyed it nervously. I could already feel the energy pouring off of it. Fury was a much smaller blade and its power almost overwhelmed me. I wasn’t sure what would happen when I accepted that weapon.

I licked my lips and cautiously held out my hands, palms up. Magnar lowered his blade onto them and the solid weight of it took me by surprise. I had no idea how he managed to wield such heavy weapons with the speed he did.

The sword didn’t sing to me like Fury did. Its response was sluggish and resistant. I ran my fingers across the runes carved into the hilt, trying to feel more from it.

“Tempest,” I breathed, though the name hadn’t come to me willingly.

I urged the blade to show me more but it resisted. The power in it felt dark and roiling, waiting to be released. As I pushed harder, it finally showed me a few scraps.

I was Magnar, fighting shoulder to shoulder with many men and women dressed like gladiators. We cut through vampires like they were blades of grass.

Everything around me shifted but I was still Magnar, back to back with a man I knew was his brother as we faced a cavern filled with vampires. Outnumbered but not outmatched.

I saw him hunting a raven-haired male vampire across the land and sea, his heart aching for vengeance as grief for his father drove him on. His thirst for that vampire’s death motivated him like nothing else. I tried to push for more information on his identity but the blade drew me away.

I was Magnar decapitating the red-headed vampire who had come for me after my dad and Montana were captured. I saw myself through his eyes as I stared up at him in gratitude and fear. He felt an overwhelming urge to protect me but I couldn’t tell why.

Magnar pulled the blade from my grasp. “Well?”

“Tempest,” I said again, clearing my throat before I continued. “I think that

blade is a lot more loyal to you than Fury is. It didn't want to show me anything and all I did see was you."

He nodded. "Fury was given to me as a gift by the leader of the Clan of Dreams. It was forged to be wielded by those of their bloodline and has never connected to me as it has to you."

"What does that mean?"

"That I'm not your great great grandfather, though I could have told you that myself as I neither married nor had children before I slept," he replied with half a smile. "Your bloodline is of the Clan of Dreams. I am of the Clan of War."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Of course you are."

He smirked in response. "You do not have to be afraid of this part of yourself. And don't think about the vow for now. I have never known someone to find out about their blood right at your age. Our children always knew what they were. They knew they could take the vow when they turned eighteen and had all of that time to make their decision. You should feel no pressure either way. It is a decision you must come to on your own."

"Thank you." I reached out and took his hand for a moment and he looked down at the point where our skin met.

The fresh cut on his arm already looked like it had half healed and I frowned as I pointed it out. "Didn't you get that yesterday?" I asked, pulling my other hand out of his.

He looked at the long wound and grunted dismissively. "It was a clean cut. It will heal well."

"But it already looks like it's a week old," I insisted.

"Those of my clan's bloodline heal faster than most mortals. Injury is a peril of war."

"Right." My head was starting to feel fuzzy with all of the information he was putting on me. "Today has been... a lot to take in."

"Sleep. Let your mind and body rest. We can talk more on it tomorrow."

I wanted to protest and ask him another of the thousand questions which were racing through my mind but exhaustion tugged at me. I settled myself down in front of the fire and let my eyes fall shut.

Despite all of the concerns being a slayer raised, I could be sure of one thing. It could only help me when it came to getting Dad and Montana out of the blood bank and that was really all that mattered.

Montana



When I woke, I found a long white dress waiting for me laid across the velvet chair. A hand-written note from Erik was attached to it. My dad had tried to teach Callie and I to read, but I'd always been better at it than her. I still struggled to decipher Erik's curling handwriting, but eventually managed it.

If you're not wearing this by the time I knock on your door this morning, you're going to meet my angry side. And no, you haven't met him yet.

Your humble ruler, Count Erik.

God, I hated him. It writhed in me like a living thing. I'd always hated the vampires, but this was personal.

A knock came at the door, making me jump.

Shit, I'd promised to do as Erik said. And if he was ever going to help my family I needed to stick to my word. Ripping my nightwear off, I grabbed the dress and threw it over me. My head got stuck and I realised there were buttons at the neck stopping me from getting it on. I flailed, desperately trying to undo them and make my way through the head hole.

Damn damn damn!

Erik's raucous laughter pounded in my ears and I turned scarlet from my head to my toes.

"Help," I said weakly, giving up and standing with the thing half-on, knowing I looked like a complete idiot.

Strong hands grabbed me and in moments the dress was yanked down to my heels. I was eye-level with a gleaming brooch holding a cloak in place around Erik's neck. He pushed me back a step and I finally dared look at him properly. He was dressed regally in a fine black uniform with silver

embroidery on the lapels.

“That note was so worth my time,” Erik remarked.

“I hate you,” I said, but if my comment affected him his face showed no sign of it.

“Remember what I said about your tone?” He turned me around sharply, fastening the buttons up to my neck, his cool fingers brushing my skin. A shiver gripped my spine and I fought hard not to twitch away from his electric touch.

“Something about respect?” I bit out. *Which I have none of for you.*

“Oh good, it listens.”

I pursed my lips, fighting back a torrent of abusive language as he flipped me around to face him once more.

His eyes whipped up to my bed hair and he glanced over at a brush as if he actually considered doing it for me.

“I can manage,” I said quickly in case he followed through on that thought.

Heading to the dresser, I picked it up and started combing out the tangles in my mane. My curls soon fell loose around my shoulders, but my hair never did what I told it to for long. Not that I cared.

Erik was so silent as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and pinched life into my cheeks that I very-nearly forgot he was there. Apart from the fact his aura was like a bell ringing in my ears.

My eyes found his in the mirror as I discovered him watching me. *Guess vampires have reflections then...*

His expression was impassive, but his eyes vaguely curious.

“That good enough for you, your highness?” I asked sweetly, raising my brows. *You better keep up your end of the deal, your royal assholeness.*

“Passable,” he muttered, glancing away. “Come on then, let's not stand here until we turn to dust.”

I wish you would turn to dust. “Okay,” I said instead with a forced smile that didn't fool him in the slightest. Putting on the delicate shoes I'd worn the previous night, I glanced at myself in the mirror. I took in the strange sight of myself looking almost as good as a vampire in my fine dress.

He offered me his arm and I took it without hesitation this time. His fingers curled tightly around my wrist, sharply reminding me I was still his prisoner.

We stepped into the corridor and he guided me downstairs and through a marble hallway. We arrived in the expansive entrance-way with stone pillars intersecting a bright marble floor.

Two guards stood sentinel on either side of the arching doorway. They saluted Erik before pulling the doors wide for us and we walked out into the daylight. Cloudy daylight, but I supposed Erik wouldn't step out of his front door under the midday sun. Not that that was a common occurrence. Even during the summer months, I'd rarely witnessed full-blown sunshine. I wondered whether the rumours were true that sunshine could kill the vampires. I decided to air my thoughts as we made our way down the series of stone steps towards the beautiful woodland.

"What do you do in the summer, Erik? Live indoors?" I allowed a little bit of mocking into my voice. I was obeying, but I wasn't bowing down.

"I lock myself in a coffin and watch TV on my tablet."

I glanced up at him, trying to discern his flat expression. I didn't understand the last word, but I could kind of work it out. I knew what TV was because of Dad's stories.

"You're joking aren't you?" I guessed.

"Yup." He smirked.

Asshole.

We continued walking in silence, heading onto a stone path that wound through the grass. "So?" I pressed, not wanting to be dismissed so easily.

"The sun doesn't kill us, if that's what you were hoping. It makes us weak though. But we have a way of keeping the sunlight at bay in this part of the country."

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised by how candid he was being and hoping he might enlighten me further.

Erik cleared his throat, seeming conflicted. "It's difficult to explain to someone who has no idea about the true powers in the world."

I narrowed my eyes, curiosity flaming inside me. "Can you try to explain?"

He sighed, his brow furrowing heavily. "Vampires are not the only powerful creatures on earth. There are others. Or there were. Now there is only one left and she helps us to evade the sun."

I frowned. He was talking in riddles, but fear grew in me at the knowledge that there were other beings like the vampires. "I'm not sure I understand."

Erik tugged me to a halt as we met a smooth stone road. I followed the line of it with my eyes as it disappeared into the woodland, wondering what we were waiting for.

"You don't have to understand. Because that, Rebel, is the last thing I'm going to say on the matter. Today is about preparing you for your time with

Fabian tomorrow not discussing things that aren't your concern.”

My gut knotted tightly as reality hit home. I glowered, remaining silent as we continued to stand on the edge of the road.

A noise filled my ears. A persistent clip-clopping. When the sound revealed itself, all thoughts abandoned me. Two white stallions appeared pulling a beautiful black carriage behind them. I'd seen the animals occasionally; vampires used them to pass messages between each other in the Realm. But these horses were magnificent. They were dressed in golden bridles with gleaming red gemstones on the edge of their bits.

My heart thrummed an excited tune. I didn't know why, but the idea of riding in that carriage looked kind of...enjoyable. I didn't realise a smile had spread onto my face until Erik noted it with a raised eyebrow.

I turned away, spotting a male vampire in a fine coat and hat sitting on a perch at the front of the carriage.

“Good morning, Count Erik,” he called, pulling the carriage to a halt in front of us. He glanced at me, then tipped his hat in acknowledgment. It was probably one of the most respectful greetings I'd ever received from a vampire. And it was damn strange.

The man jumped down from his seat, opening the door of the carriage and bowing low. Erik released my arm and I took the opportunity to approach the nearest horse. I'd always wanted to touch one, to see what their coat felt like...

As I moved in front of it, the horse released a soft snort and I grinned. Reaching out my palm, I spoke quietly to the dazzling creature. “Hello, what's your name?”

The horse pushed its nose into my palm and it was the softest thing I'd ever felt. My mouth parted as I slid my hand up between its eyes, gently rubbing the velvet patch of fur.

“That's Cain and the other one's Able,” the driver told me.

I glanced over at him with a nod and spotted Erik watching me like I'd gone mad. His expression quickly morphed into disinterest then he turned his gaze to the trees. “We haven't got all day.”

“I thought we did?” I teased, but Erik didn't answer. Mr Bossy clearly wasn't going to indulge my time-wasting much longer.

I stepped away from the horse, returning to Erik's side. Snatching my hand, he tugged me toward the open door and gestured for me to go first.

I glanced over my shoulder in surprise as he pushed against my palm, helping me up into it. What the hell? Did the heartless Count actually have

manners? And manners he gave to a human, no less.

Inside was a lavish space with dark leather seats and a gleaming lantern hanging on one wall. Windows on either side allowed us a view beyond it and I settled myself beside one, gazing out into the trees. My heart skipped and jumped as I realised we were about to see more of the landscape.

Erik dropped into the seat beside me, his leg pressing hard against mine. My throat grew dry at his proximity and I didn't know whether it was from fear or not. My anticipation was swallowing up everything else.

“Where are we going?” I asked, rounding on him with wide eyes.

His mouth tugged up at one corner. “Into the city,” he said then turned away. Evidently that was the most information I was going to get, but it was enough to set my pulse racing.

The carriage took off at a steady pace and I marvelled at the world unfolding beyond the window. The woodland stretched away from us into a fairytale landscape. Leaves floated down from the branches, twirling in the wind and scattering across the ground. Gold, burnt amber, fiery orange and lemon yellow. More colours than I'd ever seen at once.

We followed the winding path for a while then headed over a tiny bridge with a glistening river flowing beneath it. Fat ducks swam on it, heading downstream at a leisurely pace. Star-shaped leaves twisted on the surface, spinning under the force of the current. It was so peaceful to watch and I was glad when the path turned and we started following the line of the river so I could keep drinking in the sight of it.

The trees finally thinned and we emerged on a neat stretch of grass that led right up to the huge white wall ahead. Beyond it, forbidding skyscrapers reflected the dark clouds back at us, seeming to hold an entire sky within them.

The carriage slowed as we approached the iron gate and two guards hurried forward with swords strapped to their hips. They checked the carriage over before looking inside. Erik didn't pay them any attention, his eyes on a strange device in his hand. It was like a miniature TV and I wondered if this was what Dad had called a phone.

Losing interest, I returned my gaze to the view as the guards opened the gates and we passed through them. We headed onto a street that was so wide, it was big enough for five carriages side by side. A few gleaming black cars drove along the road and some green-robed vampires were on horseback, trotting along a lane that seemed to be specifically for the animals. The

carriage pulled onto it and I pressed my cheek to the window as I tried to gaze up to the top of the buildings. I felt like a child immersed in a new world. It was thrilling and terrifying at once.

I wanted to see more. To know more. I'd never had those desires before. Dad's stories had always been entertaining but they'd relied on our imagination. This was so real. I could reach out and touch it, feel it, *experience* it.

I was half way out of my seat by the time we rounded a corner onto a narrower road, passing through imposing black tower blocks marked with the royal flag of red, white and blue. Vampires roamed the streets at ease, looking surprisingly normal amongst the strange surroundings. I spotted couples hand in hand, a female admiring a gleaming water feature, a male reading a book on a bench. I should have been angry with it all, but it was like watching animals in their natural habitat. Strangely fascinating.

Erik tugged my dress so I fell back into my seat. I turned to him with irritation but he just smirked and gestured for me to continue.

"It's so...big," I murmured to myself.

"It's called New York City," Erik supplied and I tried out the words on my lips in a quiet voice.

He gave me a bemused look, shaking his head before continuing to look at his phone.

"How does it work?" I asked, eyeing the object.

Erik frowned then promptly passed it over.

I weighed the cool thing in my palm, unsure what to do with it.

"Press the screen," Erik directed.

I did as he said and it lit up, revealing a series of colourful squares.

Erik reached over, tapping a button with a crescent on it. "You can call people from here."

My brows lifted as I thought of Callie. "How?" I demanded and he snorted at my expression.

"Only vampires. Humans don't have phones. And even if they did, you can't call someone without a number."

"Oh," I breathed, vaguely disappointed but not really surprised.

I spotted his family's names amongst his recent calls and my finger hovered over Clarice.

"Can you show me?" I breathed, tempted to press her name.

"You wanna call my sister?" He barked a laugh, snatching the phone from

my palm. "Another time, Rebel. We're here."

I hadn't even noticed that the carriage had stopped. The driver opened the door and Erik stepped out first, offering me his hand.

My tongue became desperately dry as I took his large palm and he guided me down the metal stairs to the pavement. I craned my neck as I looked up at the huge stone building towering above us, tapering to a point at the top.

"This is the New Empire State building," Erik informed me, nodding a goodbye to our driver as he pulled me toward a set of glass doors that seemed to rotate.

I clung to his arm, anxious as he guided me into one. We were pressed together, moving through it as it circled, allowing us inside.

"Nervous, Rebel?" he murmured as we stepped out.

"Something like that," I whispered. I was a human at the heart of a vampire nest. How was I *supposed* to feel about that?

A glossy hall greeted us where several guards stood in corners. An Elite in dark robes hurried out from behind a desk, bowing low. It was their superior beauty which gave the Elite away. In comparison to the royals, however, they almost paled to normalcy.

"Your highness, we weren't expecting you," the vampire said, seeming flustered.

"Is that a problem?" Erik demanded.

"No, sir," he answered. His cheeks were hollow and his eyes were as bright as moonlight. "I'll have a table prepared for you immediately."

"Thank you, Angus," Erik said with a curt nod.

Angus beamed, gesturing for us to follow him as he headed towards a set of metal doors. He pressed a button beside them and the doors opened, revealing a large metal box.

I wrinkled my nose as we stepped into it, taking in our reflection on a huge mirror at the back. I didn't look anything like myself in the gorgeous gown with a royal vampire on my arm. It was a complete paradox.

Erik turned me to face the doors as they slid closed and I glanced around, feeling like I was missing something.

"How's business, Angus?" Erik asked as the floor seemed to jerk upward and a strange weight pressed down on my shoulders.

What the hell is happening..?

"Fantastic, sir. I've just opened another bar in Brooklyn which is booming. You should come along sometime."

“I’ll make sure of it.” Erik threw him a small smile and if I hadn’t been so confused about what was going on, I might have been more surprised by his warmer demeanour.

The doors opened again and my heart slammed into my throat. We were in a completely different room. My feet were glued in place as I took in the huge space with high black tables. Beyond them were enormous windows, looking out at the sky. I finally put two and two together. The metal box must have been an elevator. I’d nearly forgotten about them, but there’d been old shafts in some of the apartments in the Realm which had once been designed for this exact thing. So now we must have been somewhere way up inside the building.

Erik drew me into the room which was full of vampires, standing at the tables with silver cups in their hands.

Angus guided us past them and eyes followed us as the vampires noticed Erik. Many of them whispered and pointed. And suddenly their eyes were roaming over me too, scouring, tearing me apart, sizing me up. My gut clenched and I fell back on my old ways, throwing them dark scowls.

Angus led us to a velvet rope, beyond which was a crescent-shaped leather sofa, pointing toward a large window. Two Elite sat there dressed in fine clothes, their heavenly faces fixed with surprise at the sight of us.

Angus snapped his fingers at them. “I’m sorry you’ll have to vacate the VIP area, our royal highness is here.”

The two men rose to their feet, eyeing Erik before bowing low. They headed past us and Erik tugged me toward the seats they’d just vacated.

“A chalice of Realm A,” Erik ordered then glanced at me. “And food and water for my Courtier.”

“Food?” Angus squeaked and Erik rounded on him with a dark smile.

“Yes, human food. Is that a problem?” Erik inquired casually, his back now to me.

“N-no, sir,” Angus said, bowing so low his nose nearly touched the floor.

“I’m used to not having breakfast,” I said quickly. “It’s not a problem.”

Angus straightened, eyeing me hopefully.

“Nonsense,” Erik bit out, ushering Angus away.

He hurried off and Erik turned to me with a frown. “What Realm are you from?” he asked as I moved to the window.

I forgot his question in an instant, sucking in a breath as I eyed the city unfolding below me. We were so high up, I could see for miles. It was more

than my eyes had ever seen in one go. Beyond the gleaming skyscrapers were ruins, bombed remains of a huge section of the old city. And beyond that was a hint of green. A forest maybe? Or something else?

My veins sang with energy. It was kind of alarming. The vampires resided in such luxury, it was hard to believe I was really seeing it for myself. Living amongst it...

“Rebel?” Erik muttered, moving to my side. “Your Realm?”

I thought on it. I didn’t really know much about the other Realms, but I recalled what one of the vampires had said during my journey here.

“Realm G, I think,” I replied.

“West coast,” he said to himself. “Realm G is a lower brand of blood. Something to do with the climate, I suppose. The type of food you're given, perhaps...” He fell quiet in thought and my neck prickled with his words. There were classes of blood quality? Gross.

“A chalice of Realm A for your highness.” Angus reappeared, passing Erik an ornate silver cup. As Erik took it with a nod of thanks, I spotted the deep red liquid inside.

Realm A... urgh, was that a good brand? The thought made me ill and I drifted toward the sofa, dropping down as a weight hung from my heart.

“The human food will arrive shortly,” Angus promised before hurrying away again.

Erik sipped from his fancy cup, eyeing the view. My throat tightened. In all my lifetime, I'd rarely seen vampires actually drink blood. Humans gave it every few months and then it was bottled and sent away. They never drank from us directly. But seeing him sip from that cup seemed somehow worse.

Whose blood had it been? A man's? A woman's? A *child's*?

Erik neither knew nor cared. And that made the whole thing so much more twisted. If he saw the blood spilling from a human's veins, would it make him hungry?

I shut my eyes, feeling queasy, not wanting to watch Erik drink any longer.

“Something wrong?” Erik asked, his weight pressing down the seat beside me.

The metallic scent from his cup sailed under my nose and nausea gripped my stomach.

“Where's the bathroom?” I asked, fighting back a heave.

“Over there.” He pointed across the room toward a set of doors.

I rose to my feet, pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Heat

flooded up my spine, followed by a wave of ice. My legs didn't hold me and I hit the floor before I knew what was happening.

My vision darkened and when I regained my sight, I was lying on the sofa with my head in Erik's lap.

"You fainted," he said and I noticed his chalice was now gone.

I gazed up at his chiselled jaw, unable to believe I was actually resting in a vampire's lap. I bolted upright, jerking away from him and he thrust a glass of water under my nose. I gulped it down, the cool drink settling my knotted stomach.

"The blood upsets you," Erik remarked.

My boldness grew again followed by a wave of embarrassment for having passed out. But it was all too much. Seeing them drink blood in front of me, I might as well have had my own veins hooked up to their damn chalices.

I am food. I will never be anything else to these vile creatures. My family's blood has gone down their throats. My blood too...

"If I sat here drinking the blood of your friends, wouldn't you be a little upset?" I bit at him. God, how could I have been excited about coming here? What had I been thinking?

Erik's lips pursed, but he didn't bite back at me. "I can avoid drinking in front of you, if you'd prefer."

I'd prefer if you stopped drinking altogether and turned into a pile of soot.

I simply shrugged, growing angrier with him. With all of them.

"It's something you will have to get used to," Erik murmured.

I continued to ignore him, angling my head away from him so I didn't have to think about the blood he'd just swallowed.

My dad was strung up in a blood bank somewhere and this was where his blood would end up. In glitzy bars designed for the vampires to feed. It was disgusting.

Erik's hand landed on my arm and I jolted in surprise, turning toward him. His face was contorted in a strange expression as if he didn't even understand the emotion he was trying to express. "When the ritual is over you'll be made into a vampire and blood will no longer be unappealing to you," he said and I could feel my face paling by the second.

"I don't want that. Please don't let anyone do that to me." My mouth was raw and bile was pushing at the base of my tongue.

Erik gave me a concerned frown, his fingers tightening on my arm. "I don't wish to put this curse on anyone, but it is the way of things now."

I gaped at him, unable to believe what I was hearing. He ground his jaw, glancing over at the other vampires seeming worried that they might have heard him.

“You think it’s a curse?” I hissed, my heart strumming a frantic tune.

“I *know* it’s a curse,” he laughed dryly, then a heavy sadness filled his eyes. “Perhaps bringing you here was a little...insensitive.” he spoke the last word as if he was unsure. Was he seriously feeling bad about this? Did he actually have a heart in that ice-cold chest of his? And what had he meant about being cursed? Did he really believe that?

I nodded firmly and he seemed to relax.

“You’re the first human I’ve chosen,” he said. “I’m not sure what is appropriate and what isn’t, but I will try to learn.”

My brows lifted in surprise and my throat finally loosened enough to allow me to answer.

“Thank you,” I forced out. Not because I was grateful, but because I needed him to know that this was not okay. And if he was willing to try and empathise with my situation, then I had to encourage that.

“So,” he said, sharper. “Let’s discuss Fabian.”

I sighed. This was what today was about. I had to be strong and fulfil my side of the bargain to ensure Erik stuck to his.

“Okay,” I agreed.

A mask of formality slid over his features. “My brother is a highly political man. But he has his weaknesses. A pretty girl can capture his attention for a while, but it is a certain rare breed who can captivate him entirely. I believe you are that breed.”

I snorted in disbelief. “Why?”

He grinned darkly. “You are beautiful, for one. But you are also fiery. And that kind of spark is what some men like in their women. Fabian included. I knew that when you stepped into the courtyard dressed in nothing but your underwear and your face smeared with mascara. Although Fabian would never have picked you in front of our entire royal court for the sake of propriety, I could tell he was tempted.”

I cleared my throat, trying not to focus on the fact he’d called me beautiful. A boy in the Realm had once called me that and I’d steered clear of him for a month to ensure he never said it again. But hearing it from Erik was something else entirely. How could a vampire admire me when I was supposed to be his packed lunch?

“But you also have a lot of work to do. Fabian won’t wish to be seen with you if he feels it will damage his reputation. So we have some damage control to do.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Tomorrow, you will not only be dressed respectfully, but you will show the right kind of interest in Fabian.”

“What do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes.

“He must feel desired by you, but you must also play hard to get. Something the girls do not often do. If you capture his attention, he will forget all about your initial misconduct.”

My toes scrunched at his words and my neck heated up fast. I groaned in answer and Erik laughed in a deep rumble.

“Come here.” He patted the space between us and I reluctantly slid closer. He dropped an arm around my shoulders, took hold of my face and angled me toward a couple across the room. I tried to ignore his cool touch as I took in the female vampire dressed in a tight black dress that showed off her curves. She was running her hand up the male's arm, giggling about something as he spoke.

“You see what she's doing?” Erik asked.

“Yes...”

“That is how you must behave.”

I took a breath, nodding my agreement. This was going to be degrading.

As I watched, the male leaned in for a kiss and the woman offered her cheek at the last second.

Erik smirked, dropping his hand onto my knee. I nearly jumped out of my seat, but he kept it firmly in place.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

He turned toward me, brushing a lock of hair from my ear as he whispered, “The Elite are watching. I'm supposed to be courting you. They mustn't know what I'm really planning.”

I bit back my urge to ask more about Fabian. I'd only worried about *how* I was supposed to do this up until now, but the *why* was suddenly devouring me. Why did Erik want me to seduce his brother? What was the point in it?

Erik's fingers trailed over my neck and every fibre in my body came to life with his caress. Part of me wanted to pull away but I was locked in place and the longer his hands remained on me, the more I liked it.

What's the matter with you? He's a vampire!

“I have a meeting in an hour,” Erik purred in my ear, sending goosebumps skittering across my neck. “You will accompany me.”

Angus arrived with my food and I jumped on the opportunity to push away from Erik. I eyed the strange arrangement of bread, a turnip, a raw potato and some strawberries mixed in with a couple of radishes. My features skewed as Angus looked to me for approval. I supposed he'd tried his best...

“Eat,” Erik commanded as Angus placed it on a table before us with another low bow.

Despite not feeling remotely hungry, I picked up the plate and forced down a few bites. A lifetime of rations made me anything but complacent. And I had to keep up my strength.

Erik sat back in his seat, taking out his phone again and giving me some semi-privacy as I ate. I spotted the Elite watching me and offered them scowls when Erik wasn't looking. He might have wanted to keep up appearances, but I didn't care what they thought. And Erik hadn't specifically requested that I pretend to be interested in him, so I damn-well wasn't going to.



I was trapped, pushing through swathes of white material as a man laughed. There was no joy in his mocking tone.

If they found me here I was as good as dead.

Food. I'm just food.

I cried, trying to run as the endless material caught around my legs, tripping me. Ebony hair spilled around me. Montana's hair.

I was a captive. I would never get free of this place.

Dark eyes danced with joy as he found me and I stood frozen in place, the material wrapping its way around my body. He watched as it crushed me. Squeezing and squeezing until I couldn't breathe. He watched and he laughed.

I didn't know who he was or why he wanted me. I only knew one thing.

I was his.

"Callie?" Strong hands clamped around my arms, shaking me roughly. "It's time to wake."

I opened my eyes, fighting off the strange dream as the fear from it clung to me. Despite the strangeness of it, I'd found it weirdly reassuring. Like I had been *with* my sister, not just dreaming about her.

"Alright, I'm awake," I muttered as I squinted up at Magnar whose face was disconcertingly close to mine.

He offered me a hand and pulled me upright. "Were you having a nightmare?" he asked.

"Not exactly... I had a strange dream about Montana."

"Your sister? Perhaps she is sending you a message."

"A what?"

"She is your twin so she has slayer blood too. You are both of the Clan of Dreams and as such, your innate gifts hold the power to communicate while

you sleep. It is unlikely that either of you would be strong enough to do so in any fully conscious way without taking your vows though. And even then it is doubtful that you would be strong enough considering the fact that you are not full-blooded slayers. But anything is possible.” He shrugged.

“You mean I could talk to her in my sleep?”

“Perhaps. Whenever I was visited by an unrelated member of your clan in my dreams, I was shown only images. But my mother was of your Clan and when she visited me we could hold a full conversation. That could have been due to our blood tie. Or it could have been due to her considerable strength. She was undoubtedly the strongest Dreamer who ever lived in my time.”

“Why do your answers always leave me with more questions?” I asked. Even if the dreams did turn out to be some kind of weird connection to Montana it didn’t really help me. They were nonsense. I couldn’t glean any information from them other than the hope that she was still alive.

“We have a problem,” Magnar said, choosing to ignore my remark. “Something tried to break our wards last night.”

“Oh?” I asked, attempting to sound super casual about it but coming off more like a frightened mouse.

“It is not possible for a lesser vampire to even detect the wards let alone fight against them. Any who come close to them would find themselves heading away again and never even realise they’d been influenced to do so. The fact that someone has pushed very hard against those impulses concerns me. Someone of much greater importance must be hunting us now.”

“But that’s no issue for you right?” I asked. “I mean, you’re the guy who said ‘there’s only five’ the last time they came for us.”

“Your faith in my skill is quite flattering,” he replied, placing a hand on my shoulder. “But I am only one man. And all men die.”

“Wow. Thanks for the pep-talk. Are you really that concerned?” My heart fluttered uncomfortably at the thought that he was worried about this.

“No. But I do not wish for you to think of me as immortal. Death is a constant possibility. Every time I unleash my swords I know it could be my last fight. This is something you must accept if you are to be a slayer.”

“Got it. You might die, I might die, immortality is only for assholes. And speaking of immortal assholes, do you have any idea *who* has been sniffing around us?” My mind went to General Wolfe and my gut plummeted. I’d never seen a vampire feed off of a human before but the way he’d torn into my father was something I could never banish from my memory. It had been

like watching some kind of crazed animal attack.

“It is certainly one of the Elite. I fear that if we continue on our course to the blood bank as we are then the one following us will figure out our destination. With the best will in the world, a single slayer will not stand a chance at taking that place down if they know I am coming.”

“One and a half slayers,” I teased.

Magnar tilted his head at me and smiled. “Maybe one and a quarter.”

“Harsh. But probably more accurate,” I conceded. “So what makes the Elite more formidable than the lesser vampires anyway?”

Magnar pushed his long hair back as he considered his answer. “Essentially it is because of who created them. A vampire’s strength comes from the one who sired them so the closer they are to the original line, the stronger they are. Those who were turned by an original vampire are the strongest of the Elite and any they sire are a little weaker, then any sired by them are weaker again.”

“So it’s kinda like each generation is less powerful than the last?” I asked, trying to follow what he was saying.

He nodded. “Do you remember what I told you about the Belvederes?”

“The ones who call themselves royalty?” I asked.

“They are the original vampire family. We called them the Revenants once but the gods decided to unite them under that false name.” His lip curled back in disgust and I could tell his hatred for them was more than just because of what they were. It was personal.

“You mean, they’re the ones who started all of this? How? Where did they come from?” I asked, shifting a little closer to him.

“There are many stories about that. Many theories. I suppose the only ones who truly know are the four of them. But if I ever get close enough to ask, I won’t be wasting time on questions,” he growled.

I itched to ask him why he hated them so much but the darkness in his eyes made me afraid of the answer.

“So you said they’re a family?” I asked, grasping onto a safer question.

“Yes of sorts. Though family is usually tied together through love and those monsters are incapable of such an emotion. Their loyalty to each other is born more out of a lust for power. They are siblings, or so they say though they bear little resemblance to each other. I do not believe they truly shared the same parents when they were human. There are three males and a female. And they call themselves royals,” he laughed like that was some kind of

twisted joke and I shifted uncomfortably.

If he knew this much about them then it meant they'd held this power since his time. They'd had over a thousand years to solidify their influence and control before they'd taken over. How were we supposed to stand a chance against such an ancient power?

"What else do you know about them?" I asked, unsure if I really wanted to know the answer.

Magnar scowled as he thought about it. "The woman, Clarice, was known as the Golden Whore in my time. She is beautiful beyond words, though the sight of her porcelain face always turned my stomach. She has gathered an army about her who she calls her harem. Men who she seduced while they were still human and brought to her bed before turning them into one of her kind.

She would appear in human villages, flaunting herself at men she found desirable and would encourage them pursue her until they fell begging at her feet. There were nearly a hundred of those pathetic creatures trailing after her, aching for her touch and willing to lay down their lives for time between her legs."

"And they just went along with that? They were happy to become like her? To leave their lives behind for a soulless monster?" I asked in disgust. I knew the vampires were beyond beautiful to look at but it had never made me desire them. Their beauty was unnatural and cold. The idea of going to bed with one of them made me feel ill. "Didn't any of them refuse?"

"I think they were so deeply under her spell that the idea of refusal wouldn't have occurred to them."

"And the others?" I asked, wondering if I really wanted to know.

"The brothers. Fabian the Snake, Miles the False God and *Erik*," he spat the final name with venom. "Killer of a Thousand Souls."

I stared at him with wide eyes, waiting for him to continue.

"Fabian created the Familiars. He found a way for the vampires to thread a piece of their soul into the hearts and minds of unwitting creatures. They would become their eyes and ears. Sunlight didn't hurt them so they could spy on us even when we believed we were safe.

It caused devastation. The vampires would appear when we least expected them, always knowing our plans and lying in wait. We even executed some of our own, wrongly believing they had betrayed us before one of the prophets figured out what Fabian had done. We believed the colonies of bats

that swarmed above our camps at night only came for the insects drawn close by the light of our fires. By the time we realised what he'd done, many souls were already lost."

My mind whirled with the idea of the slayers having to come to terms with the fact that they had wrongly sacrificed some of their own because of the vampires' cunning. It made me wonder if the Realms weren't as bad as I'd thought. At least they didn't kill us anymore. They made us give them blood but our lives held value to them now. It sounded as though it hadn't always been that way.

"Miles was a different kind of monster," Magnar continued. "He set himself up as a god, offering eternal life to any who proved their devotion to him. People built temples in his honour and showered him with gifts in the hopes that he would grant them immortality. But of course eternal life comes with a price which must be paid in blood.

Once he had changed those poor souls into vampires, he cut them loose claiming to want them to enjoy the freedom of eternity. But they craved blood above all else. Often they would return to their home towns in hopes of seeing their families only to be overwhelmed by their thirst. It would seem that most of those who are newly sired have little control over the bloodlust that drives them. They would lose control, killing those they loved and anyone else unlucky enough to cross their paths in their desperate need to satiate their desire for blood." Magnar fell quiet and I shifted closer to him, my thigh brushing against his as I tried to offer him some comfort from the terrible memories.

The silence stretched and I could tell he didn't want to speak of the final brother but I needed to know.

"And... the last brother?" I asked tentatively.

"Erik," Magnar growled. "If I do one thing with my time on this earth then it shall be to remove him from it."

"What did he do?" I asked, my voice almost a whisper.

"Many things. Countless atrocities. It was he who killed my father in the Battle of Atbringer. The clans were almost destroyed that day. He killed hundreds of us with his army of monsters.

Unlike his siblings, Erik has always been more particular about those he sires. He seeks out the greatest warriors, the most ruthless politicians, only the best of the best for his army. The Belvederes were the only creatures to leave that battlefield with their lives. Although my father returned to us as

well. But he was no longer alive. That monster had turned him into one of them, hoping to corrupt his soul and use him for his own vile purposes.

My father had enough of himself left to return and tell us what had happened to him. He bid farewell to my mother and brother and begged me to end his suffering. That evil creature killed my father once and then forced me to do it a second time. I was seventeen.

I can still see him kneeling before me, begging me to lead the clans to victory against the Revenants. He gave me his blade, Venom, so that I could take his life and release his soul to the protection of our ancestors.”

“I’m so sorry Magnar,” I whispered, laying my hand on his arm, my fingertips brushing the slayer mark upon his skin.

He turned to look me in the eye and my heart stumbled uncertainly.

“It was foreseen that I would end that family. I may be nine hundred years late, but I intend to fulfil my destiny.”

His gaze held such intensity that I struggled to hold it.

“So what do you suggest we do about the Elite who’s tracking us now?” I asked, breaking eye contact with him as my heart beat out of rhythm.

“We need to create a diversion and lay a trap.”

I smiled at the idea of playing the vampires at their own game and nodded encouragingly.

“Tell me what to do.”

Montana



I was eternally relieved when we left the vampire bar behind, taking the carriage further into the city. I never wanted to go near that place again and I no longer gazed out of the window with any kind of joy. A dejected feeling was descending on me as I eyed the vampires going about their lives.

Growing up in the Realm had at least impressed upon me the importance of my blood. It wasn't much, but humans had held value there. Here, the Realms were ignored. Our blood was harvested for vampires to drink. We were the odd meal in their day and held no impact on any other part of it. It had always felt degrading, but now it was worse than that. Like we were barely a blip on their radar. And questions started to rise in me again about this whole royal ritual thing.

I glanced at Erik who was watching me with a scrutinising expression. "Why aren't I a vampire yet, Erik? You say it's a curse, but that's what you want us for isn't it? So why do it like this? With courting and formalities. I don't understand."

Erik's throat bobbed as he thought on my question. "There is a reason, Rebel. But we don't speak of it until after the choosing ceremony."

My lips pursed tightly. "Just tell me."

"No," he said simply, his eyes growing harder. "Don't ask me again." I expected him to turn away, but he didn't. Instead, his gaze drilled into mine as if he was trying to make me submit. But I looked back with equal ferocity, refusing to budge.

The carriage came to a halt and I glanced toward the door as it opened. The driver bowed low, waiting for us to exit.

"Close the door," Erik barked at him and a tremor rocked my heart.

The door snapped shut and terror crawled through my veins as Erik shifted closer to me. His eyes were two lakes of ice capable of turning my heart to frost.

“When we go upstairs, I need you to be obedient. The woman we're seeing will be able to help you with Fabian.”

My throat grew dry and I forced myself to nod. He turned away, but words slid from my mouth before I could stop them. “Have you released my father yet?”

The question hung in the air. His shoulders stiffened as he remained with his fingers on the door handle. “I'll deal with it.”

“So that's a no,” I snarled, heat charging my veins.

My hands curled into fists as I gazed at the back of his head.

“If you do well with Fabian tomorrow, I'll make it a priority.” He opened the door, descending quickly from the carriage so I couldn't ask any more questions.

He didn't offer me his hand this time. Whatever fragile bridges I thought we'd started building between us had been an illusion. And I reminded myself not to forget that.

I dropped down the steps, folding my arms as I took in the shadowy street and a tall apartment block ahead of us. I shivered as a bitter wind blew around me, hugging my chest to try and keep the cold out.

Erik remained silent as he strode up to a large doorway and jammed his finger on a button beside it.

“Yes?” a female voice answered.

“It's Erik,” he said and a buzzing noise sounded before the door opened. I guessed from the informal way he'd announced himself that he was on close terms with whoever waited inside.

I followed him into a stairwell before the door closed in my face. He barely threw me a glance before storming up the marble staircase at such a fierce pace, there was no way I could keep up.

I decided not to chase him like an alley dog and continued climbing at my own speed.

As I ascended level after level, I was reminded of how much I despised him. With his stupid good looks and superhuman gifts.

I hope you fall and break your neck on these stairs, Count Erik.

I recalled how I'd reacted to his touch at the bar and ground my teeth, hating myself for it. I would not buy into his fake charm whenever he decided to switch it on. He was like the eye of a storm. You thought you were safe until the winds picked up again. And the winds were definitely picking up.

I finally caught up with him, panting as I joined him in the stairwell. He

was leaning against a wall, eyeing his phone but clearly waiting for me.

When I reached him, his eyes dragged up to meet mine. “My time is valuable, stop wasting it.”

“I can't move as fast as you,” I snapped, my temper spilling over. How could he be angry with me? I'd done everything he'd wanted. So what was the deal?

“I noticed,” he snarled.

“What's your problem?” I demanded.

He sped forward in a blur of movement until he was right before me. “What did I tell you about the way you should speak to me?”

I gaped at him, completely baffled by his changing moods. He pushed right up into my personal space and I slammed a hand to his chest to keep him back. Not that I could really stop him. “But you can speak to me however you like?”

He prised my fingers away from his jacket, keeping my hand in a vice-like grip. “Yes, because I am your superior.”

My upper lip curled back. “What's this really about?” I whispered in a deadly voice. This wasn't about my tone. I'd been playing pretty nice all day.

His eyes roamed over my face. His jaw ticked with fury. “Nothing,” he snipped. “Just behave.”

I shook my head at him in dismay, stepping back to put some distance between us. My heart was thumping wildly out of tune. Why did he affect me so much?

Erik turned to the single door in the hall, rapping his knuckles sharply against it.

The door whipped open a moment later and a devastatingly beautiful woman came into view. The vampire was tall, willowy with golden brown hair that hung straight all the way down to her midriff. Her eyes were earthy and inviting and her skin was glimmeringly pale. But despite the allure of her face and her inviting aura, she felt like something... else. I had no idea why I was sure she was different, but something in my bones told me she was.

“Master.” She beamed at Erik. “It's so good to see you.” In a heartbeat, her gleaming arms were wrapped around his neck. Her face was so close to his, for a second I thought they might kiss. But Erik remained rigid throughout the entire display.

“Valentina,” Erik growled. “How are you?”

“Fantastic, Erik. Do come in.” She tugged him by the hand and it was only

then that her eyes fell on me. Her mouth parted, puckering into a perfect O. “By the gods, Erik, you didn't tell me you were bringing one of *them* with you.”

I instantly disliked her, not that I'd had any plans of liking her.

Erik pulled his hand free from Valentina's grip, turning to me. “Come here,” he beckoned me like a dog and I swallowed every ounce of pride I had and moved to his side. His arm slid around my shoulders, but there was no warmth in it like there had been at the bar. I felt like a possession being flaunted in front of this vampire.

“My first human,” Erik announced as he guided me into a brightly lit hallway. “What do you think?”

He pushed me toward Valentina and she immediately reached out to me, running her fingers through my hair, breathing in my scent then plucking at my dress. “She's a little scrawny. Why did you choose this one?”

Counting to ten in my head, I tried to block out their conversation.

“This one is particularly obedient,” Erik said and I had to bite down on a laugh. He knew as well as I did that was the last thing I was. It felt like a private joke between us, but I refused to let it shift the ice around my heart.

“You do realise you have to marry her if she chooses you at the ceremony?” Valentina's words punched me in the gut so fast, I wasn't remotely prepared.

Is this what Erik had been hiding? Did that mean he wanted me to *marry* Fabian?

“I realise that, thank you,” Erik responded curtly.

Repulsion filled me as Valentina strode ahead of us into another room and I glared at Erik.

He took my arm, dipping his head so his mouth was by my ear. “One word out of you and you'll regret it.” He pulled me along and I envisioned scratching his eyes out to sate my fury.

We arrived in a large living room filled with white furniture and a huge TV on the wall. Floor-length windows looked out toward a red-brick tower block framed by the cloudy sky.

Valentina appeared with two glasses in hand, both swimming with blood. I ground my teeth as the two of them dropped onto the pristine sofa and she passed Erik a glass. Valentina looked me up and down as if she was trying to work something out. Evidently, I was not invited to sit.

Erik placed his drink on a side table and didn't touch it again.

“I thought you were here about our line of work,” Valentina asked Erik.

“Later. I'd like you to help me with a little problem I'm having with my Courtier first.”

There was that word again. *Courtier*. Whatever it meant, I knew it referred to me.

“Oh?” she tittered, seeming delighted. “What kind of problem, master?”

Why did she keep calling him that? It was damn weird.

My skin tingled with anger and a pain grew on my right forearm. I rubbed at the spot, trying to find what the issue was but there seemed to be none.

“She doesn't know the first thing about men, Valentina. She's sheltered and repressed. I'd like you to loosen her up a bit.”

Humiliating. That's what this was. The feeling scurried over my body like hungry ants.

“Perhaps you're not ready for this kind of commitment,” Valentina said and lightning seemed to flash through her irises.

“That's an order, Valentina,” Erik snarled, his patience wearing thin.

She rose to her feet, rolling her eyes as she moved toward me with cat-like grace. As she took my chin in her palm, my skin rushed with a strange energy. The sky beyond the window darkened and a heavy presence seemed to fill the room.

What the..?

“Okay, let's see...” She tipped my head side to side and I fought the urge to jerk away from her. “Go and sit in Erik's lap,” she murmured, a sly grin forming on her full lips.

I glowered, tempted to disobey. But then I thought of Dad in the blood bank and what Erik had said about my 'behaviour'. What would he do if I didn't make an effort?

With an internal groan, I did as she said, moving in front of Erik. He opened his arms with a mocking expression and I lowered myself onto his lap, fighting all of my instincts.

“That's it,” Valentina encouraged. “Now show him how you adore him. Push your hands into his hair and gaze lovingly into his eyes.”

Yup, it was official. I was gonna throw up.

With my teeth grinding to dust in my mouth, I did as she said, reaching into Erik's hair. Soft as feathers, of course. Nothing like his steely gaze which was piercing and formidable. If this was supposed to be romantic, Valentina was deluded.

“Softly,” Valentina clipped and I realised my fingers were knotted tightly in Erik's hair like I was attempting to rip his head off. He lifted a brow, seeming amused by my efforts.

I shut my eyes as I battled myself into doing this. Softening my hands, I followed Valentina's instructions until my palms were cupped around Erik's cool cheeks.

“That's it, now kiss him. Gently mind, let's not get ahead of ourselves.”

My heart slammed into my ribcage. My hands dropped dramatically to my sides. I leant back, shaking my head wildly. Erik started laughing.

Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted Valentina giving us a confused frown. “Is there a problem?”

“She's shy,” Erik answered for me with a smirk.

If looks could kill, mine would have dismembered him by now.

“Alright.” Valentina seemed frustrated. “I'll turn away.”

As she whipped around, I figured we'd just pretend to kiss but Erik slammed his mouth against mine.

Hot acid poured down my spine. My stomach knotted into a tight ball and my heart combusted.

Erik's grip on my waist held me in place.

I could have leant back. *Why wasn't I leaning back?*

I yanked my head away and Erik grinned like the devil himself.

Bastard!

“Well it's a start,” Valentina said and I wondered when she'd stopped giving us privacy. “But you can't force chemistry into existence. I'm sorry Erik, she's not very good at this.”

Erik didn't look at her, instead pushing me from his lap so I stumbled to my feet. “She'll do just fine.”

“Can we talk in private now?” Valentina asked, seeming frustrated.

Rain started pattering against the window and a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

“Valentina,” Erik snarled in a warning, but I wasn't sure why.

She sighed and her eyes flashed to the window. The rain ebbed to a slow drizzle and the clouds seemed to brighten. If I hadn't known it was crazy, I would almost have thought Valentina was responsible for the changing weather.

Erik ushered me out of the room and my body was too hot as I backed away, thinking of that kiss.

I was more than glad to make my escape, practically running from the lounge and finding myself in a kitchen. Except it wasn't much of a kitchen. There was a sink with some cleaning products beside it and a single, enormous silver fridge. That was about it.

I could have guessed what was in the fridge but I still opened it. Inside, was a hundred gleaming red bottles all labelled with the names of the Realms. I was tempted to smash the whole stock, but Valentina would only replace it. Shutting the fridge door, I pressed my back to it and found myself sliding to the floor. I hugged my knees, burying my face in the folds of my dress.

He'd kissed me. That animal had actually kissed me.

My body was like a furnace from the encounter. My mouth tingled as if it had frostbite. And maybe it did after that ice-cold kiss from Satan.

I gazed at my knees, my stomach hardening into a tight ball.

Right. No more moping. I had to do something.

I got up, moving to the sink and turning on the sleek white tap. Cupping the water in my hand, I rinsed my mouth, spitting it back into the basin in an attempt to get rid of the feel of Erik's mouth. I hoped it might also short-circuit the electrical energy charting through my veins.

Erik chose that particular moment to enter the room and I was glad when his eyes turned to shade.

Yep, your kisses are spat out Erik. That's how much I want them.

"We're leaving," he announced, turning his back on me.

When he was out of sight, I blew out a breath and started following him, but found my way suddenly blocked by Valentina.

She smiled at me, but there was no kindness in it. As I tried to step past her, she caught my right arm, pushing up the sleeve of my dress as if she was trying to catch me out at something.

"What are you doing?" I tugged away from her as her cold fingers roamed over the inside of my forearm. Where she touched, my skin began to burn.

Her lips pursed then she shrugged, releasing me. "Nothing. Off you go." She stepped aside just enough so I had to squeeze past her, tugging down my sleeve as I went.

What the hell was that about?

She leant in low as I passed, whispering directly in my ear, "If you want some real advice about Erik, I'd suggest you don't trust a word he says."

I slipped away into the hall, my heart hammering. Whatever the intention

of her words, it made me question the promise Erik had made to me. Had he discussed it with Valentina? Maybe they'd had a good laugh at my expense as Erik revealed he had no intention of helping my father at all. But then why would Valentina try to warn me of that?

My gut knotted as I exited the apartment, finding Erik waiting for me in the stairwell.

"Don't look so sad, we have hours of fun left to have." Erik headed down the stairs and I followed, a scowl growing on my face.

"If this is your idea of fun, I'd guess you don't have many friends."

Erik glanced at me, his pace matching mine as we descended the steps. "Oh good, Rebel is back," he deadpanned.

My mind shifted gears to what I was fairly sure I'd witnessed in Valentina's apartment. I prayed Erik wouldn't laugh at me when I voiced my thoughts. "Tell me if I'm mad, but did Valentina..." *Make it rain?* I couldn't get the words out, knowing how insane they would sound.

"Control the weather?" Erik offered and I gaped at him, unable to believe I was actually right.

"Did she?" I gasped.

He nodded, a beautiful smile spreading across his face. "I'm impressed, Rebel. You're sharper than I thought."

"How is that possible?" I demanded.

"I told you we have a way of keeping the sun from shining here," Erik said.

"But...magic?" I whispered, feeling foolish. But that was surely what it was. Dad's stories had been filled with all kinds of strange beings like witches and mages. He'd said it wasn't real, but this suggested otherwise.

"I suppose you could call it that," Erik mused. "It's a gift from the gods. Valentina was once a very different kind of being to the vampires. Since I sired her, she has kept many of her ancient powers."

"What was she...before?" I asked, my pulse thundering in my ears.

His answer was another riddle for me to dwell on. And it struck a strange kind of feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Our enemy. A slayer of the Clan of Storms."



I gripped Fury firmly and willed my hands to stop shaking. I hadn't realised quite how tightly my own bravery had been tied to Magnar's presence until he'd left me perched in this goddamn tree.

Smoke spiralled to the south, letting me know that he'd succeeded in lighting the fire. Hopefully the vampires tracking us had spotted it too.

I bit my lip as I scanned the horizon for any sign of Magnar. He'd said if he had enough time he would make it back to me before they arrived. If not, I was on my own.

My heart beat an unsteady rhythm against my ribs. I still couldn't see him.

Fury grew warmer in my palm and my mouth went dry. He'd assured me the vampires wouldn't look for me in the branches at the top of a pine tree. They'd be too distracted by the fire to waste time hunting the foliage above them.

Up, up! Fury whispered in my mind and I frowned in confusion as the urge to look skyward gripped me. I squinted into the branches above my head, trying to spot anything amongst them.

It took me a moment to pick out the large, brown rat hidden within the thick boughs. It tilted its head at me in a gesture that looked anything but natural and I lurched towards it, swiping my blade.

The rat let out a high-pitched squeak and leapt to another branch as I swung my blade again.

Fury ached to end the Familiar but my awkward position in the tree made it impossible to get close to it. The rat scurried along the branches, dodging every attempt I made to slice it open before finally making it past me and leaping to the ground.

Indecision paralysed me as the rodent scurried out of sight into the long

grass at the base of the tree. I knew I wouldn't be able to catch it and whatever vampire it was linked to now knew exactly where I was.

Where the hell are you Magnar?

If I stayed here then it was only a matter of time before they found me. And I'd be trapped at their mercy.

My stomach knotted as I made my decision, sheathing Fury and starting my awkward climb out of the tree. I scrambled down as fast as I could, skinning my palms on the rough bark. I rolled as I hit the ground and quickly regained my feet, searching the surrounding area for the vampires who hunted me.

There was no sign of anything beneath the trees but as I grabbed Fury again, the heat from its hilt practically burned me. The blade hummed with the promise of bloodshed and I kept hold of it as I started running.

Magnar had said that if the vampires were too close for him to rejoin me before their arrival, he would take up position downwind from the fire. The smoke blew steadily to the left so I headed after it as fast as my legs could carry me.

I was tempted to shout for him but I couldn't be sure of who would hear me first. I willed Fury to let me know which way they were coming from but it gave me nothing. It was as if it were telling me that they were approaching from every direction at once.

I stumbled to a halt as I realised what that meant. The blade wasn't refusing to help me, it was telling me exactly what I'd asked. I was surrounded.

Silence pressed in on me from every side, making goosebumps rise along my arms.

I looked around cautiously, holding the blade up defensively. My skin prickled uneasily. Now that I was paying attention, the utter silence was more than enough to warn me that there were far more vampires coming than we'd thought. Instead of laying a trap for them, it seemed that we'd fallen into one ourselves.

I cursed my luck as the silence stretched on. I'd been stupid to believe that we could ever outsmart them. Of course they'd thrown everything at us this time. We'd killed five vampires two days ago. I doubted any human had managed such a thing in the last twenty-one years. They were hardly going to risk sending a small group a second time. This time they'd make sure they caught me, drag me to the blood bank and drain me alongside my family.

My limbs began to tremble at the thought and I forced myself to think the way Magnar had taught me. I had the blood of a warrior. I would stand and face them like one.

I gritted my teeth and held Fury in front of me, daring the first of them to come and hoping Magnar would appear before they got to me.

As the silence dragged and the tension bit at me, I raised my chin higher and glared out at the swaying grass around me.

“What are you waiting for?” I called when I couldn’t take it anymore. “Surely you’re not afraid of one human girl?”

Fury pulsed with excitement as the first vampire finally rose from the long grass. She was taller than any woman I’d ever seen and her straight, black hair fell like a sheet of ink to her waist. She walked towards me, surveying me through narrowed eyes.

I felt like a mouse waiting for the cat to pounce. I could tell at once that she was an Elite. Even if it hadn’t been for her fine clothes, there was something about the way she held herself that screamed power. Her face was so devastatingly beautiful that it was almost hard to look at. Her skin seemed to glow and her lips were the deepest blood red. The colour made me wonder about the last time she’d fed and I forced myself to swallow the lump in my throat.

“Are you all alone out here sweet girl?” she asked, her voice almost as alluring as her face. Their perfection repulsed me. All of that evil wrapped up in a beautiful lie.

“Alone? I’m here with you aren’t I?” I narrowed my eyes at her as she stopped a few meters from me. Her gaze zeroed in on the golden blade in my hand and I smirked at her knowingly.

“Vampire killer,” she hissed, her eyes still locked on the weapon.

Yesss, Fury replied deep within my bones. It longed to meet her properly and I could feel her death winding its way through the blade’s deepest desires.

“I’m so sorry, were some of those dead bloodsuckers your friends?” I wasn’t entirely sure why I was taunting this vampire but something about Fury’s excited energy was rubbing off on me.

“You expect me to believe *you* killed them?” she spat, her demeanour slipping as the monster inside her rattled its cage, wishing to be let loose.

“You already believe it. Otherwise you’d come a little closer.” I took a purposeful step towards her and a thrill raced down my spine as she stepped

back.

I wondered how long I could keep this up. Perhaps it would give Magnar enough time to get to me.

I took another step towards her, an arrogant smile finding its way to my face as I taunted her. The vampire backed away again and I held Fury a little higher as I advanced.

“Perhaps you did kill them,” she admitted. “But we came prepared in case that were true.” She stopped backing up and smiled at me mockingly as she raised her arms.

Vampires rose from the long grass surrounding me in a silent wave of motion. I did a quick count and made it twenty. I wasn’t just outnumbered, I was totally screwed.

I tried not to let my panic show on my face. *They won’t kill me. My blood is worth more than my life.*

I planted my feet squarely and waited for them to attack. My heart fluttered like a bird in a cage.

Fury hummed with excitement. That made one of us. But as blades couldn’t exactly die, I guessed it had no place for fear.

The Elite waved a hand and they all rushed forward at once.

I wanted to stand and fight but I didn’t even know which way to turn. I spun wildly, slashing Fury before me in a vain hope of staving them off. Some of them dodged away from the blade, others took the wounds it dished out.

I curled my free arm over my head as more hands than I could count grabbed any part of my body they could reach.

Somehow my right arm found the smallest amount of space to move and I let Fury guide my hand as I thrust it skyward. A scream rang out and several of the vampires recoiled in horror as dust fell in a torrent down my arm.

I had half a second to smirk in satisfaction before an iron grip closed on my wrist and twisted violently, forcing me to release my weapon.

As Fury fell from my grasp, my own courage floundered pathetically. I was slammed down onto my back in the grass, each of my limbs pinned in place by a different vampire.

Once they were sure I was secured, the others moved away, allowing the Elite to approach.

My chest rose and fell rapidly as I glared up at her between strands of my golden hair which had fallen across my face.

She stooped to retrieve Fury from the ground but cursed and released it again just as quickly. Smoke rose from her hand and I noticed an imprint of Fury's runes burned into the flesh of her palm.

I smiled at her triumphantly despite the four vampires who held me pinned at her mercy.

"Show me her right arm," she snapped angrily and the vampire holding that limb yanked my coat sleeve back to reveal my mark.

The Elite hissed as she spotted it. "Slayer," she growled, making the word sound like a curse.

My heart started beating faster as doubt crept in. The vampires would never waste human blood by killing me but would they feel the same about a slayer? What if their laws told them to kill slayers on sight?

Any time you want to jump in and save me Magnar, that would be great.

The Elite leaned down to glare at me, her black hair hanging an inch from my face. "The Belvederes will be very happy to see you, vampire killer," she hissed and the glimmer in her eye sent a dagger of fear slicing through my chest.

She pulled a square of plastic from a pocket within her robes and pressed a button on it, lighting up a screen. I stared at it in confusion as she hit some more buttons then pressed it to her ear.

"General Wolfe?" she said and my heart froze solid in my chest as I realised that what she held was a cellphone. The vampire on the other end of that conversation was the monster who had ripped my family apart. If she took me to him...

"It's Eve. I-" the Elite pulled the cellphone from her ear and glared at it. "Curse it! The signal has gone again. I *hate* the west coast. Let's load her up and head back, I'll inform the General of our success when the gods deign to return the cell service."

The Elite stormed away from me and I let out a shaky breath. Wolfe still didn't know she had me. I was safe from his sadistic clutches for a little longer, I just had to hope Magnar would return before he got his hands on me.

The vampires heaved me up onto my feet and started dragging me back up the hill.

I searched the space around us wildly, desperately hoping to see any hint of Magnar coming to release me. There was no sign of him though.

My heart pounded with panic as each step took me further from the slayer

whom I'd entrusted with my life. What if he didn't know they'd captured me? Or if this group was too big for him to deal with? Perhaps he just wouldn't think I was worth the risk...

What if he's left me to face this alone?

Montana



The carriage ride was painfully silent as we drove back through the city. Daylight was draining from the sky and the concrete world looked more bleak than ever beyond the window.

Valentina's words crawled into my ears again. *"If you want some real advice about Erik, I'd suggest you don't trust a word he says."*

I didn't know who to trust. Erik had told me Valentina had once been their enemy. But despite trying to get more answers out of him, he'd been stubbornly silent on the matter since. Perhaps she really had been trying to help me. But something in my gut told me to beware.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I needed to get assurance that Erik was going to keep up his end of our deal. Nothing else mattered but that. I just needed some time alone to figure out how to do that.

When we headed back into the royal grounds, I wondered if Erik had decided not to spend any more time with me after all.

A girl can dream.

Soon, we exited the carriage outside the castle and I gazed up at its imposing walls. Our silence continued as we walked toward the entrance, but before we got there, Count Fabian stepped out of the door in a dark red uniform.

Erik tugged me against his hip so fast, I squeaked in alarm.

"Evening, Erik," Fabian said curtly as we approached. "How was your day of courting?"

"Better than yours apparently. Clocking off already?" Erik mocked.

Fabian blew out a breath, his dark eyes dropping onto me. "Has he been an asshole?"

"Yes, all day," I said, a small smile gripping my mouth. *Take that, Count Erik.*

Erik's fingers dug into my hip. "Well you were running your hands all over me half an hour ago, so I can't have been all bad." He threw me a wink and my brow wrinkled.

"Was she now?" Fabian drawled, throwing me a curious glance before returning his gaze to Erik. "So you're going to see the ritual through, are you? I have to say, I'm rather surprised you're finally accepting your duties."

"I suppose I was waiting for the right girl." Erik squeezed my arm and I fought the urge to roll my eyes. The urge grew even stronger when he leant down and placed a kiss on my temple.

Overkill, much?

I decided to get a little payback. "I guess it *was* rather cute when you realised your fly had been undone all through lunch," I said with a sweet smile. My attempt to humiliate Erik made Fabian bark a laugh. Well, I was supposed to make him like me, so why miss an opportunity to throw Erik to the wolves at the same time?

Erik's hold grew painfully tight.

"How embarrassing, I do hope someone snapped a picture for the Royal Times tomorrow." Fabian beamed, looking to me again. "Perhaps we'll read through it together over breakfast in the morning?"

"I look forward to it." I gave him a girlish grin, keeping to my word on flirting with him.

Erik's grip on me was growing too uncomfortable to bear.

"The night is still young, brother," Erik said to Fabian, showing no visible signs of embarrassment. "Perhaps she won't want to spend the day with you after finishing the night with me."

I bit my lip in the way I'd seen the vampire do at the bar, glancing up through my lashes at Fabian. "I highly doubt that."

Erik pressed his mouth to my ear and heat surged right down to my toes. I was divided on wanting to pull away and stand there forever absorbing that feeling.

"Come on, let's get you somewhere quieter where you can kiss me again."

I bit down on my tongue as he drew me away from Fabian, half-dragging me toward the castle.

"Laugh, dearest," Erik growled and I forced out a giggle as he pulled me inside.

My smile fell flat as we stepped through the doors and Erik immediately released me.

This was a farce of epic proportions. Neither of us smiled as we headed upstairs and Erik escorted me back to my room. At least I'd get a night to myself without having to breathe the same air as him. Or maybe he didn't breathe at all. Either way, I wanted out of his general space.

Erik opened the door for me and I was more than a little annoyed when he followed me inside.

He released a heavy sigh, dropping down into the velvet chair. "This isn't going to work if you hate me, Rebel."

I perched on the edge of the bed, my throat growing dry. "Then why have you been working so hard all day to *make* me hate you?"

His lips pressed together. "That was not my intention."

"Well it must be your personality then," I sassed, seething all over again. How long was I going to have to live like this? Having to spend time with this bastard of a vampire who seemed to take joy in tormenting me.

Erik opened his mouth, looking ready to scold me, but I cut him off before he could.

"Oh don't start on my tone again. If you want me to hate you less at least let me speak my mind."

His jaw ticked then eventually, he nodded. "Fine. But not in front of my family. I won't be disrespected. And I do suspect the game you played with Fabian just now worked rather well. So feel free to bad-mouth me to him all you like tomorrow."

I shook my head, confused by him all over again. "Why, Erik? What is this all for? Why on earth do you want your brother to like me?"

"The why is not your concern," he said, his tone softer.

"Maybe not, but it would put my mind at rest. Do you know how frustrating it is being stuck here and told absolutely nothing about anything?"

He surveyed me like I was a puzzle to be solved. Leaning forward in his chair, he rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. "I think, perhaps, I've underestimated you."

My brows went skyward.

He continued, "You're more inquisitive than I expected. And not nearly as fearful as I'd prefer."

"You want me to be afraid of you?" I asked, my heart rate ratcheting up. It was cruel. Why would he want such a thing?

"Only in the name of control," he muttered. "I don't take pleasure in seeing you squirm if that's what you're thinking."

“I don't know what to think,” I breathed. “I don't trust you one bit. I've spent my life being corralled by your kind, belittled and hurt when I spoke out against them. And now you're doing it too, only in a different way. And I can't stop fighting back, Erik, not until you show me some decency. Something that can assure me you'll keep your end of the bargain.”

His eyes roamed over my face for a few eternal seconds, bringing heat to my cheeks. “Fabian seeks to take control,” he said at last and I could hardly believe he was opening up to me. “For now, the four of us hold equal power over the New Empire. But that time is wearing thin. And Fabian has ideas that are...different to mine. Our purpose here as rulers was never to create a tyranny. It has gone too far down that road already. So I wish to undermine Fabian's plans, but I can't do that until I know what they are.”

My heart juddered in my chest as I worked out what he meant. “You want me to spy on him?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, nodding. “A human is the most perfect spy I could hope for. No vampire would ever suspect you, Fabian included. We are all too caught up in our superiority to pay attention to what you might be capable of.”

It was a twisted sort of compliment. I was glad he was embracing the fact that humans weren't just a food source without a brain though.

He went on before I could say anything. “Once I know what Fabian's plans are, I will be able to strike out against him. I wish to unseat him from power. Miles and Clarice will easily bow to my whim, but not Fabian. And when he is dealt with I will take full control of the New Empire and focus on what is truly important to our kind.”

“Which is?”

His throat bobbed as he considered whether to answer. “That is not relevant. I have been as candid as I can for now. And that will have to be enough.”

My heart drummed faster, but I decided to let it go as an idea struck me. “So if you take control, you could make any law you wanted? Even one that benefited humans?”

Erik snorted, shaking his head. “What are you suggesting, that I offer something to your species if you help me?”

I jutted up my chin, realising this was so much bigger than my father.

“Yes,” I replied and he started laughing.

“Rebel, you really are a piece of work,” he commented when his mirth had

subsided.

I folded my arms, not backing down. “You want my help, don't you? So offer me something worth helping you for.”

“I've already agreed to free your father and pardon your sister when she is found,” he said, his eyes flashing.

“Yes, but now I know your plan so you have to do as I ask.” A smile grew on my face as he gave me a confused look.

“Oh do I? And why is that?”

“Because I'll tell Fabian what you've told me and your plan will go to hell-”

“Then your father will never be freed,” he cut across me sharply.

My gut writhed but I had to play this hand as well as I could. “Or perhaps Fabian will be so grateful to me that *he'll* free him for me.”

Erik pressed his tongue into his cheek then rose to his feet. He lifted a finger, pointing it in my face. “You are in dangerous territory, Rebel. Do you have any idea what would happen to you if I declared you to my family as a spy?”

“And what would you tell them exactly? That I was going to reveal your plans to screw over your brother? I imagine they'd keep me alive long enough to hear that nugget of truth.”

“Unbelievable,” Erik exclaimed. “You're given food, fine clothes, a bed in my family's castle and you're threatening to betray me!”

“No, I'm trying to negotiate.”

“You're trying to blackmail me,” he retaliated. “A human goading a Count of the New Empire, it's ridiculous!” He started pacing before me, working himself up into a rage, his body primed like an animal's.

“You're trying to make me do what you want and offer me as little as possible for it. I'm only asking to be heard. For humans to be given some semblance of decency!”

“Decency? What *are* you talking about?” He glowered at me for several long seconds, then a decision flared in his steely eyes. “Get changed. We're going out. Wear something warm.” With that, he marched from the room and slammed the door.

My mouth parted as I gazed at the door. Heat flooded my veins, making me want to rip the whole room apart. How could he be so stubborn? Didn't he care that humans were being treated like dirt under his very nose?

And probably by his command.

I sighed, realising I was fighting a pointless war. Erik didn't care, that was the problem. I'd never get through to someone who could barely even acknowledge that I was a living, feeling being.

As I pulled off my dress and tugged on some jeans and a warm sweater, I spotted an object on the chair. With a jolt, I realised it was Erik's phone.

I darted toward it, snatching it up and pressing my thumb down on the screen. A bunch of numbers lit up and despite tapping several of them, I only caused the thing to vibrate angrily. Words lit up at the top of the device.

Passcode invalid.

I was about to give up, when it buzzed again and a message flashed up from Valentina.

I think you should cut her loose, like we discussed. She's more trouble than she's worth. Find a new human to work with.

Time seemed to slow as I reread the message, making sure I'd understood it right. Erik had discussed his plan with Valentina. So she knew this was all a pretense and I was just a pawn at the heart of their game. And not only that, she was trying to screw me over.

I clenched the phone in my hand as fear trickled through me. What if Erik did as she said and got rid of me? I'd never save my dad if that happened. And what if they caught Callie..?

Without thinking, I threw the phone at the wall as hard as I could. It bounced back, slamming into the floor at my feet.

A jagged crack glared up at me from the now-blank screen. My breathing slowed as I gazed at it. Erik might be angry, but at least this would stop him from reading that message.

Picking it up, I placed it back in the velvet seat where I'd found it, chewing on my lower lip.

Shit, Montana, what now?

Should I hide it?

Pretend I never saw it?

Erik stepped back into the room and I had no time to do anything about the cellphone. My jittery body immediately gave away that I was anxious. Erik's eyes slid to the seat and his jaw hardened.

I recomposed myself as he whipped it from the chair, turning to me and holding it out to show me the screen.

“What is this?” he snarled.

I cleared my throat, figuring it was best to keep up my taunting. “A

phone?”

“Stop playing games. Tell me what *that* is.” He pointed at the enormous crack and I gave him an innocent shrug.

“A crack?”

“And how did it get there, Rebel?”

I tapped my chin, continuing with my game. He'd toyed with me all day so I was going to toy with him right back. “Well I'm not sure, your highness. Perhaps you sat on it with your royal ass.”

His mouth twitched and I was almost certain he was about to smile. Instead, he pocketed the phone and gave me a sweeping glance. “Funny, I didn't realise my royal ass could be so destructive.”

“Oh I suspect royal asses can be quite destructive when they want to be. Arrogant too.”

He laughed, and the sound wasn't cruel or mocking for once. It was rumbling and soft and sent a quiver through me. “Very funny, Rebel, now put a coat on or you'll freeze out there.”

“We wouldn't want that,” I remarked, heading to the closet, hardly able to believe I'd gotten away with destroying his property. I fished out a fur-lined jacket and tugged it on. When I'd zipped it up, I moved to Erik's side, eyeing his less-imposing expression.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You'll see,” he replied, taking my arm and guiding me from the room.

When we stepped outside and the milky moonlight flowed over us, I expected to find another carriage waiting, but this time a shiny black car was parked on the road.

He opened the back door for me and I slid across the smooth leather seats to make room for him. The driver politely welcomed Erik then set off down the road, knowing exactly where we were going. Unlike me.



We drove for nearly an hour and Erik refused to tell me where we were headed. I was confused when we pulled onto the huge bridge that led out of the city and my heart stumbled with trepidation.

We soon passed through a ruined part of what I assumed was still New York. I gazed out at the hulking shadows of broken buildings and decimated houses, spotting a raccoon digging through some of the rubble.

Lights called to us in the distance and my curiosity piqued as we closed in on a set of huge metal fences. A floodlight shone down on us and I caught sight of a sign hanging beneath a wooden tower. Atop it was a vampire holding a large gun. I rarely saw weapons like that; the vampires usually carried blades, but I'd seen the odd pistol in my time. This was something else. A huge thing strapped to the vampire's body, aimed directly down at us.

Erik exited the car and was immediately greeted by an Elite in dark robes, his face startling beautiful. I couldn't hear their conversation, but a moment later a metal gate opened ahead of us and Erik jumped back into the car.

"Where are we?" I whispered, the strange place making my senses tingle with fear.

"Realm A," Erik announced and my heart tripled its pace.

What the hell were we doing here?

"I had a more fun-filled evening planned, but since you insist on talking politics, I decided a change of plans was in order."

"Why?" I gasped, not wanting to be paraded in front of the weak people of a Realm. To see their hollow faces and haunted eyes. Would they despise me for being seen with a vampire?

As we passed through the gate and headed onto a street as smooth as the one we'd left, I was hit with complete shock. This wasn't like the Realm I knew. The houses were newly built with gleaming windows and stately porches.

Humans wandered along the sidewalk, talking and laughing. Children were out playing in manicured gardens with toys. Actual toys. Wooden spinning tops and plastic balls. One even had a tiny car he seemed to be controlling with a remote.

"Erik..." I whispered. "What the hell is this?"

"I just told you," he murmured and his hand slid onto mine, encompassing it in his palm. "I'm not going to hear another vague complaint from you about the humans' conditions. So I want you to point out what's so terrible about the way we run these places and I'll decide if it needs to be addressed."

I shook my head, unable to find the words to answer as we turned down another street and a beautiful old building came into view with a grand clock embedded in the wall. From my dad's stories, I wondered if this might be a town hall. As our car drew closer, a crowd of people poured out of the arching doorway dressed in warm clothes.

Erik rolled down the window as we approached the group and when they

spotted him, some cried out while others covered their mouths in alarm.

“It's Count Erik!” a woman called.

“Erik we love you!” another shouted and I gazed at her like she'd gone mad.

“Good lord, is he going to get out?” a man muttered, backing up a little.

My world crumpled in on itself. I rested a hand against my heart as Erik stepped out of the car and started chatting with the people like he wasn't a complete monster. Some of them held back and fear rippled in their eyes, but respect too.

Erik glanced over his shoulder when he noticed I hadn't followed, but I couldn't do anything except sit there, frozen in place as realisation pounded through me. This was a lie. I didn't know who had concocted it, but someone definitely had. This wasn't like my Realm, and from the gaunt look of the men and women who'd travelled to the royal castle with me, I didn't think it was like any of theirs either. It was a sham. A sweet falsehood for the vampires to swallow so they didn't need to feel any discomfort about their treatment of us.

Erik had insisted I was ungrateful about my conditions because he didn't know about them. He couldn't. This was the only truth he saw. That humans were kept in towns as lavish as their own. And despite the fences, they looked happy. Maybe I would have been happy too growing up somewhere like this. Maybe I wouldn't have fought back so hard. Maybe I would never have questioned the vampires' rule...

Erik ducked his head back into the car. “Are you getting out?”

I shook my head, unable to form the word no.

He frowned, then dropped back into his seat. “So? What exactly would you like me to improve?”

I ground my teeth together, unable to voice the truth. He'd never believe me anyway. “I just want to go back to the castle,” I said, not looking at him.

The air crackled with tension. “Rebel, this is not something I offer on a daily basis.”

I shook my head, too choked up to answer.

“What's wrong, what have I done now?” he asked, sounding completely baffled.

I blew out a breath, ducking my head so my hair swept forward and created a curtain between us. “Nothing, Erik. I just want to go back.”

Silence followed my words, then Erik ordered the driver to turn around in

a sharp tone. I wrung my hands together in my lap, feeling suffocated by what I'd learned.

I shifted my gaze to the window to avoid looking at Erik. Tears pricked my eyes but I attempted to hold them back. I could have tried to convince him of the truth, but why would he believe me?

As we sailed toward the exit, I spotted a schoolhouse beside a large restaurant. My heart was obliterated. This was why he thought I'd skipped meals to get so thin and why he questioned my ignorance about the world.

"Most humans don't want to be free, Rebel," Erik said as we headed out of the gate. "Any cause you think you're fighting for is an illusion. Your kind are safe, housed and given free food. All we require of you is blood donations. Is that really so bad?"

A tear slid from my eye and I was glad of the darkness to hide it. I let it drip into my lap, keeping my head turned away as I refused to answer.

The situation for humans was worse than I ever could have imagined. Even the vampires themselves didn't know the extent of our pain. Something splintered inside me and I longed to see my family more than anything in the world.

I couldn't trust Erik. He didn't know the truth and he never would. To him, I was just some ungrateful human from a town like Realm A. So why would he help me?

Perhaps he wouldn't. And even if he did, he'd send Dad and Callie back to our Realm and they'd be stuck in misery for the rest of their days.

"I'm starting to think picking you was a bad idea," Erik growled and his sharp tone cut daggers into my heart.

Fear sped through my veins. I was suddenly certain that when Erik spoke to Valentina, he was going to cut me loose. She'd convince him to get rid of me in favour of someone more compliant.

I couldn't take that risk, so I made a terrifying decision.

I had to escape.



The carriage swayed rhythmically beneath me as the vampires drove it north. Away from the blood bank. Away from my family. Away from Magnar. I couldn't work out what that meant. Were they taking me to General Wolfe? Or back to the Realm to make an example of me in front of everyone?

The terrifying possibilities were endless and each time I convinced myself to dismiss one of them, another awful prospect filled its place. Whatever they wanted me for, it couldn't be good. You didn't shackle someone and lock them in a cage unless you were planning on doing something unspeakable to them.

The pressing dark of the night was broken up by silver moonlight.

In the Realm, we'd always been home before the moon rose, afraid of being found by a vampire in the darkness. It was like the sun helped the vampires to remember their humanity, at least enough to leave us be. But after dark all bets were off.

People who went outside couldn't be sure to come back again. We never found out what happened to them. Perhaps they were simply taken to the blood bank but in my gut I'd always feared it was something far worse. I guessed the creatures of the night were at their most dangerous in the dark and being surrounded by them now left me feeling more than a little afraid.

Despite the close proximity of the vampires, I couldn't help but stare at the beauty of the lunar being. It felt so alien, so separate from everything we did beneath it and yet it watched over us all the same. I guessed the moon was one of a very few things which hadn't changed for Magnar while he slept.

Thinking of the slayer caused an ache to form in my chest. It had been hours since he'd left me to wait in that tree. Had he known I'd be caught?

Had he decided that looking after me was too much trouble after all?

I didn't want to doubt the fragile bond I'd thought I'd felt between us but it was hard not to while I shivered in the dark. I'd never felt so alone in all my life. And if he really had abandoned me then my fate was already sealed. No one else was coming.

Montana and Dad were already in the hands of the vampires. And no other soul in this world gave a damn about me. That had always been the way I preferred it. My family were the only people who mattered to me so there was no one else for me to lose. So long as I had them, I had everything. Or so I'd tried to convince myself.

But now that I sat alone in the dark, knowing that no one in the Realm even cared where I was, I wondered if that had been the right way to live. Maybe isolating myself hadn't protected me from anything. It only made sure that I hadn't really lived at all. And now if it turned out that I was going to die or live out the rest of my days in the blood bank it just meant that the small measure of freedom I'd experienced in my life had been wasted.

If by some miracle I ever made it out of this mess then maybe it was time I started looking at things differently. The vampires had us so terrified of losing each other that we didn't dare to care about one another the way that we should anymore. It was just another weapon they used to control us. But I refused to keep living in the shadow of that fear. From now on all of my choices would be my own. I'd make them for myself. And not out of fear.

I groaned at the many small hurts and bruises the vampires had inflicted when they'd searched me and tossed me into this cage. I wasn't sure how kicking me in the ribs was meant to help them make sure I didn't have any more weapons on me. I guessed they'd thought I'd earned the treatment when I'd killed their friend. Not that I regretted the world having one less bloodsucker in it.

The wooden box was bolted to the back of a big horse-drawn carriage and wasn't tall enough for me to stand in.

I was perched awkwardly on a hard bench which ran along the left-hand side of it. They'd taken my coat and boots, leaving me to shiver in the freezing winter air which billowed in between the bars of the single window on the rear door. I hunkered in the back corner, wishing I could wrap my arms around myself to stay warm but the heavy chains they'd used to secure my wrists prevented that.

The muted clip-clop of the two shire horses' hooves was the only sound

aside from the creaking of the wooden carriage. I wondered why none of the vampires spoke to each other. Or if they were still all accompanying me at all. For all I knew, half of them could have taken off now that they'd caught me. It wasn't like the slow pace set by the horses would have been their preferred speed of travel.

I could only see four of the vampires walking at a distance behind the carriage. Their eyes were alert and their swords were in hand as they forged paths through the long grass which reached as high as their waists.

I could taste blood and my tongue was swollen from one of the blows I'd received at the hands of my captors. The iron tang of it made me think of the blood bank and a sliver of fear ran through me. There had been hundreds of rumours about that place but no one ever came back from it to confirm or deny them.

Some people said they would string you up upside down and slit your throat above a huge vat designed to collect every drop of blood. Others said they used the humans there for sport, forcing them to fight each other and taking blood from the losers.

I'd also heard tales that the vampires there fed from humans directly, biting them to gain access to their blood. The idea of that terrified me. I'd heard the way my father had screamed when General Wolfe and his lackeys had bitten him. He was a strong man, never one to complain of pain or overreact and the horror I'd heard in his screams told me all I needed to know about the agony it had inflicted.

There were stories involving every imaginable form of torture and we'd all heard the screams carrying on the wind from time to time. I wasn't sure what to believe but I knew nothing that happened there could be good.

I scoured the open fields beyond my moving cage with fading hope. Had Magnar really abandoned me? I was beginning to believe he'd left me to my fate despite his promises. It wasn't like he owed me anything anyway. Why risk his own neck for some girl he'd just met? Even if there was a chance that I might become a slayer like him...

"This is ridiculous," muttered the Elite vampire, Eve, her lilting voice easy to recognise even through the wood that separated us. "I'm going to send a message to Wolfe just as soon as I get a signal, demanding they supply us with off-road vehicles and motorcycles. I mean, a horse drawn carriage? It's archaic. It's insulting."

"Yes my lady," a male vampire replied. "It would certainly make our work

easier if we were given more modern vehicles. But as there are so few on the west coast-”

There was a sound like a slap and the male vampire stopped talking.

“I was voicing a complaint, not asking the opinion of a *lesser* like you,” Eve spat.

“Apologies,” he simpered and their conversation came to an end.

The vampire guards continued to prowl behind the carriage, spread far enough apart to create a wide, impenetrable perimeter around me.

I watched them silently as they struggled to force a path between the grasses which were getting longer the further we travelled. The swaying brown and green stalks were so tall they brushed against their chests in places.

As I studied their near flawless features it was strange to think they were just lesser vampires. Though they were unnaturally attractive, they still held imperfections. One of them had a hooked nose, another’s lips were too full compared to the rest of her features. Though minor, the imperfections allowed me to see the humans they’d once been beneath the visage.

The Elite on the other hand were nothing short of perfection. Looking at Eve had been like seeing a statue given life. Something that perfect couldn’t be natural. Her features were symmetrical in a way that defied nature. Comparing the lesser vampires to an Elite was like comparing the sun to the stars: though they were the same, one shone a lot brighter.

If what Magnar had told me was right, then the Elite were those who had been turned into vampires by one of the Belvederes directly. That also meant that the vampires who called themselves royalty must have been even more stunning than the Elite. Such a thing didn’t even seem possible to me.

I alternated my gaze between the four rear guards, a kind of morbid fascination gripping me as I studied the unnatural way they moved. There was something almost feline about their steps as they prowled along, balancing the weight of their weapons in a loose but ready grip.

Their long cloaks kept catching in the grass and I couldn’t help but feel a tug of amusement as they struggled with their impractical clothing. *Serves you right for swaggering about like a bunch of pompous assholes.*

A male with a scarlet cloak stopped and yanked the thing off of his shoulders in frustration as it got caught again. I watched as he cursed the long material and wrapped it into a ball which he wedged beneath his arm. He looked up and caught me staring, the venom in his gaze making me quickly

look away again. I hardly needed any extra reasons for these bloodsuckers to hate me and laughing at one of them wasn't likely to do me any favours.

I looked for the vampire who had been walking to the right of my view but he wasn't there any more. I frowned, scouring the field for him but there was nothing to see. I wondered if he'd dropped further back, the darkness of the night swallowing him from my sight.

My gaze travelled back to the male with the red cloak just as he was yanked out of sight beneath the grass. I sat up straight, leaning forward slightly to see what was happening. There was a flash of movement as a golden sword swung above the grass but it was gone again just as quickly.

Magnar. My heart leapt in excitement and I sat forward eagerly. The two remaining vampires who walked behind the carriage hadn't looked back yet and their fallen comrades had gone unnoticed.

I bit my lip as my heart pounded excitedly and the third vampire suddenly dissolved into dust which scattered away on a soft breeze as her clothes crumpled into the long grass out of sight.

The final vampire paused, his head beginning to turn as he noticed something was wrong.

"Hey!" I shouted loudly, drawing his attention back to me before he could turn. "Can I get some water? A girl could die of thirst in here!"

I shifted across the hard bench, moving towards the bars that lined the window. A loud banging sounded on the roof of my cage and I flinched back into the corner.

"Silence! Or a dry throat will be the least of your problems," a male vampire yelled from above me. "I might find myself parched as well."

I cringed at the implication but when I looked back out between the bars, the final vampire was gone. A satisfied smirk pulled at my lips.

The breeze picked up, sending a wave of motion rustling through the grass surrounding us. One of the horses snorted uncertainly like it could tell something was about to happen.

I moved slowly towards the bars, my chains rattling against the movement as I leant forward to look out.

The jostling of the carriage came to a sudden halt and I was thrown into the door, my shackles slamming loudly against the bars as I tried to catch myself.

"Where are the rear guard?" the Elite snapped, her tone trying to mask an edge of concern.

“I saw them a moment ago,” another vampire replied. They can’t-” His voice cut off suddenly and something metal clattered onto the roof above my head. The Elite shrieked in anger as the other vampires all started yelling commands.

The ring of clashing blades sounded violently ahead of me and I pressed my face to the bars, hoping to catch sight of what was happening at the front of the carriage.

The vampires swore as they struggled to respond to the attack and I heard Magnar’s deep voice raised in a challenging growl.

“Turn this thing around and get us the hell out of here!” Eve shouted.

Someone whipped the horses into motion and the carriage wheeled about, sending me crashing back down onto the bench. My head slammed into the wooden wall and I cursed as pain lanced through my skull.

The carriage tilted precariously as the horses dragged it around and I felt the wheels lift off of the ground on the left-hand side. I grabbed one of the bars on the window, gripping it tightly. With my wrists bound together by the chains, I wouldn’t be able to save myself in a fall.

The carriage righted itself with a heavy thump as the wheels made it back to the ground and I almost lost my grip as I held on for dear life. We began racing back the way we’d come, allowing me a view of the battle taking place behind us.

Magnar stood between eight vampires, wielding both of his long blades like a warrior from the legends my father had told me. He danced between them, severing limbs and deflecting blows as if they were nothing.

Moonlight glinted off of his swords, glittering faintly in the darkness. Fear gripped me as the monsters surrounded him but he met every blow they tried to land with a slash of his own weapons. It was as though he could see each strike coming before it did. His skill was astonishing and my lips parted in awe as I watched him.

My heart froze in my chest as a vampire leapt at his exposed back, sword raised for the kill but Magnar twisted aside just in time. His long hair flew around his face as he thrust his blade up and pierced the vampire’s heart, sending him scattering into dust.

Two vampires raced forward on either side of him, trying to use the coordinated attack to take him down. He parried both blades at once, swinging his swords between the two of them before leaping forward, causing them to stumble into the space he’d just been occupying.

He launched Tempest at them, the huge blade twisting end over end before cutting through the neck of one and embedding itself in the other's chest. Though both of them collapsed into the long grass, neither body disintegrated so he mustn't have struck their hearts.

Left with his father's sword in his grasp, he shifted his grip to wield it with two hands, swinging it with such ferocity that the five remaining vampires fell back rather than tackle the blows. One wasn't fast enough though and Magnar cut through her chest in a single, savage sweep of his blade, sending her spiralling into dust before he'd completed the movement.

At the sight of her death, a male vampire shrieked in undeniable distress, throwing himself at Magnar with his teeth bared and sword forgotten. The slayer met his rage with a sharp thrust of his sword, sending him racing into death after his mate.

The carriage hit a rock, making it bounce wildly and I lost my grip on the bars. I fell back, slamming onto the wooden floor hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs.

The chains restraining my wrists made it difficult to regain my balance as the vehicle careered over the uneven ground. The driver whipped the horses mercilessly and they whinnied in pain and protest as they galloped on.

I finally made it to my hands and knees and managed to claw my way back up to grab the bars over the window again.

We crested a hill and the length of the grass made it impossible to see what had happened to Magnar and the remaining three vampires.

The carriage thundered on and I clung to the freezing metal bars, straining my eyes in a vain effort to spot the slayer.

I bit my lip as I waited, my heart pounding anxiously for any sign that he was alright.

The horses snorted with fatigue and the carriage began to slow despite the continued hiss of the whip.

"Faster!" Eve barked.

"They aren't built for speed," a male voice replied defensively. "The carriage is too heavy: If we keep at them like this they might collapse!"

The horses grunted and snorted in further protest as if backing up his point and the carriage slowed a little more.

The Elite cursed them but it made no difference to our speed.

I clung to the bars as desperation made my heartbeat thunder in my ears.

Where are you Magnar?

My eyes prickled with unexpected tears and a thick sob broke free of my throat. He wasn't coming. And if he wasn't coming then that could only mean one thing.

Pain blossomed through my chest and my grip on the bars turned brittle as tears filled my eyes.

I realised I *had* let myself care about someone aside from my family. And now he was gone too.

Montana



When Erik left me in my room, I started packing a bag with warm clothes. I didn't have any food, but I could go a few days without it. My stomach was hardened from years of rations and once I was out of the city, I'd search the ruins for nourishment. Callie had found supplies that way, so I could too. I drew strength from my sister, picturing her fierce eyes and determined expression.

I'm coming Callie. I'll find you.

The river I'd crossed over into New York was well-guarded, that much I remembered from my arrival. But I'd seen a glimpse of trees from the skyscraper bar in the opposite direction. That was where I'd head.

I hurried to the shutters and tried to open them. Failing, I headed to the closet and took out one of the high heels surely designed to cripple a woman's feet. Heading back to the window, I pushed the thin heel into the gap in the shutters and wrenched it sideways. They groaned then something snapped and they swung wide.

With a soaring feeling in my chest, I tugged them open to reveal the window. It was just a single pane with no handle. I sighed, figuring I should have known that would be the case.

Gazing down at the dark grounds, I spotted the stone steps leading toward the woods. No guards were in sight, but that didn't mean much. There were probably a handful of them crawling around the castle, but I just had to hope I could sneak past them.

I headed to the door, turning the handle and finding it locked. Refusing to give up, I dropped to my knees and gazed through the keyhole. It was blocked by the key, but at least it was close. Heading to the dresser, I took out a thin makeup brush and a piece of paper from a notepad. I moved back to the door and pushed the page under the lip of the door into the corridor.

My breathing grew ragged as I stuck the handle of the brush into the keyhole. Slowly, I eased the key out and it hit the paper with a faint tap.

I eased the page back under the door, bringing the key with it. Victory snatched my heart as I grabbed it and pressed my ear to the door, listening for sounds of movements. It was probably pointless considering the vampires were as silent as the wind, but I had to try.

After several seconds, I stood, pulling the bag onto my back and sliding the key into the lock. Achingly slowly, I twisted it until a soft click sounded, sending a quake through me. With a shaking hand, I took hold of the handle and eased it down until the door opened.

Pulling it wide, I glanced into the hallway to check it was clear.

Empty.

A shaky breath passed my lips as I crept into the corridor, a pair of boots in my hand as I moved silently in socks across the floorboards. I reached the staircase, moving down it at a steady pace, trying to battle the urge in me to run.

When I'd made it into the dark hall, I turned in the direction of the entranceway. I hurried toward it but as I approached, voices caught my ear and I shrank quickly into the shadows of an alcove.

My stomach clenched tightly as I waited.

"Count Erik has retired to his room," a male voice said.

"He won't mind if I go to him," Valentina's voice sounded in reply and I stiffened, pressing myself harder against the wall.

"I'm sorry my lady, but you'll have to wait until tomorrow."

Valentina tutted. "Nonsense!" Her voice was nearer and I forced myself further into the corner as she swept past my hiding place with the guard in tow.

"Please, my lady, I have to ask that you respect the Count's wishes!" he cried, jogging after her and trying to catch her arm.

She quickened her pace, disappearing in the direction of the stairwell and I seized my advantage.

Stepping out of the darkness, I glanced into the entrance hall, finding it empty with the door wide open. The night air beckoned and I fled toward it, arriving on the steps and racing down them toward the trees.

I didn't breathe until I slipped between the boughs and darkness enveloped me. Tugging on my boots, I listened hard for approaching footsteps but only the sound of small animals reached my ears.

Taking a steady breath, I carved a path across the fallen leaves which cracked under my feet.

The moon was hidden tonight, giving me the extra cover I needed to remain concealed. Perhaps fate was on my side. Maybe I'd keep getting lucky until I made it out of the city.

Every sound was heightened in my ears. Every snapping twig and rustle of leaves made me run faster.

Soon, I made it to the wall. It stretched above me nearly twenty feet, but there were gaps between the large white bricks in places. Not any near the ground though...

My heart swelled as I spotted a fallen tree resting against it a few hundred yards away.

Luck's on my side. I'm going to get out of here!

I hurried toward it, my breaths fogging before me in the freezing air. The tree almost reached the top of the wall. I prayed I could make the climb. Maybe a more sensible girl wouldn't even attempt it. But I wasn't just any girl. I was a Ford. And the Ford family had hearts of steel which wouldn't be kept chained.

I braced myself on the trunk, finding a foothold and starting my ascent. Placing my hands on the rough knots of the bark, I began climbing.

As I made it halfway, a scuffle caught my ear followed by heated voices.

"Hey – what are you doing out here?" a man demanded and for a moment I feared I'd been spotted.

I froze, clinging to the bark and pressing my cheek to the cold wood.

"I'm here for you," another man answered in a rasping tone.

"No – hey. Get back!"

They came into view and I spotted a vampire with dark red hair wielding his sword at the edge of the tree-line. A shadowy figure followed him, lazily swinging a blade in his hand.

The red-haired vampire slashed out with his sword, but the other was quicker, darting around him and slicing the vampire's throat open.

Horror drowned me. I pressed a hand to my mouth as the blood poured and the red-head hit the ground, clutching his neck. His attacker stepped forward, his body concealed by an ebony robe, but I could tell he was a frightening size. He took hold of the vampire's scruff and dragged him back into the trees, stabbing him over and over as he went, everywhere but his heart.

I shut my eyes, willing my pounding pulse to slow down.

What if that vampire catches me?

As they disappeared into the trees, I forced my legs to move and started climbing once more. I couldn't focus on what I'd just witnessed. I just had to get out of here.

I moved as fast as I could and was soon forcing my way through a tangle of branches which were crushed against the wall.

I gazed up at the final five feet of bricks I needed to scale, desperately searching for a handhold. I spotted one above my head and carefully rose to my feet, balancing precariously on the trunk. My heart stammered as I leant forward, my fingers flexing as I tried to reach it. My hands locked into it and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Gazing up, I set my sights on the top of the wall.

I am Montana Ford and I am strong enough to escape this prison.

I found a foothold and pushed with all my might, finding another small crevice for my hands. I dug my nails in as the stone crumbled, holding on tight. One foot at a time, I rose until finally I grasped the top of the wall. My arms ached as I heaved myself onto it then flattened myself to the stone, gazing over the edge.

A sheer drop glared back at me and my heart forced its way into my throat.

I gathered my wits, looking up and down the wall, searching for a way down. Not too far ahead was a tall structure below me on the street. It was a couple of meters from the wall and about a third of its height, but it was better than nothing.

My palms were slick as I dragged myself along, finally arriving before the structure. Now I was closer, I could see it was just a wooden shelter with an old metal sign beside it.

The street beyond it was dark, but across the road were large houses with lights on behind the windows.

I drank in a breath of cold air and willed myself to stand. I couldn't make the jump from my knees so I had to move fast to ensure no one spotted me. Bending low, I gathered all the strength I had and threw myself toward the wooden roof. I plummeted through the air, my legs wheeling and kicking as I fell.

I slammed into it with a loud bang and gasped in agony. My knees were torn open on the rough wood and pain ricocheted through my hands. I released a groan as I crawled to the edge and lowered myself down.

I landed in some bushes and my arms were scratched as thorns found my

skin through my clothes. I heaved myself out of them to a patch of grass between the shrubs and the wall, crouching out of sight.

My jeans were torn at the knees revealing broken skin from my fall. Hissing between my teeth, I dropped my pack and opened it, taking out a t-shirt. I ripped it in two, wrapping it tightly over the wounds, praying it would be enough to stem the blood-flow.

With a steadying breath, I tugged on my pack and rose to my feet, keeping within the shadow of the wall. I orientated myself and quickened my pace to a jog, thinking of my family and nothing else.

Keep going, Montana. Just keep moving.



A faint masculine roar reached my ears and I gripped the bar tightly as I blinked away the unshed tears. I heaved myself higher, willing it not to be my imagination as the sound drew closer.

The vampires sitting above me in the carriage began cursing and two of them leapt down, swords raised defensively just as Magnar crested the hill.

My heart swelled as I spotted him, the terror that had been threatening to crush me crumbling to dust as I laid eyes on his face.

He was sprinting after us, a battle-cry tearing from his lips filled with a terrifying promise.

Relief flooded me and my knees almost buckled with the weight of it. *He's alright. And he's not going to let them take me without a fight.* The thought set something fluttering through my veins like wildfire. I wasn't alone.

Magnar ran with both of his swords held ready on either side of him, the dim moonlight managing to highlight the crimson blood of the fallen vampires which coated them.

The two lesser vampires leapt forward to intercept him but he cut through them like they were nothing but flies, sending their remains spiralling into the air behind him before continuing his pursuit of the carriage. He released another roar of rage and a shiver raced down my spine.

He was magnificent. A legend brought to life right before my eyes.

The Elite snapped a command and the final four lesser vampires jumped from the carriage to take him on.

For a moment, Magnar's gaze caught mine and I could see a golden fire swirling within his eyes.

The carriage veered right and I fought to maintain my hold on the bars as I lost sight of the slayer.

The Elite whipped the horses back into a gallop and they whinnied in

protest as they struggled to haul the carriage on.

“Move you great beasts!” Eve screeched as she tried to force them to up their pace.

A heavy wooden thump sounded and the carriage suddenly lurched forward before crashing into the ground. My grasp was ripped free of the bar and I was thrown around the confined space as the carriage tumbled over the uneven ground before slamming to a halt. I crashed down onto what had been the roof moments before and winced at the pain that blossomed across the side of my head.

The sound of galloping hooves moved away at speed.

Something wet trickled down my forehead and I lifted my bound hands to investigate it. Blood stained my fingertips and I winced again as the movement sent more pain resounding through my skull.

I crawled forward, finding the barred window and peering out to see what had happened. We’d made it back into the woods before crashing in a small clearing. Moonlight shone down on the open space but the shadows between the trees were deepest black.

“Your friends are dead and it was easily done,” Magnar mocked as he strode towards the destroyed carriage. “Do you think you might give me more of a challenge?”

Now that he was closer, I could see blood seeping from wounds across his body but if they bothered him, he showed no sign of it.

“Where did you come from slayer?” Eve hissed as she moved into view. She stopped a few feet from Magnar and her rigid posture reeked of fear.

“I slept long and deep, waiting for this moment,” he rumbled. “And in that time you parasites forgot about my kind. You grew fat and lazy on the presumption that we were gone. I have torn through nineteen of your lackeys without breaking a sweat. In my time even lesser vampires were well trained in swordplay and could pose *some* challenge. Is it too much to presume you might make this any harder for me?” He took a step to his right, swinging his blades in a lazy challenge and she followed his lead, circling clockwise to maintain the distance between them.

“Those fools were nothing compared to me,” she replied. “My kind will sing songs about the last slayer and how he couldn’t even save his little whore before I ended him.”

Magnar’s gaze slipped to me for a moment and my grip on the bar tightened. I didn’t want my presence to distract him. The Elite noticed his

attention and laughed.

“Once I have cut off all of your limbs, I will slit her throat and drink her dry before your eyes while you watch. The last thing you will ever see will be her death. And your final act on this earth will be failing to save her.” She smiled widely, taunting him as she adjusted her grip on her sword.

“Perhaps.” Magnar shrugged one huge shoulder. “Or perhaps I will cleave your head from your neck and burn your body. All but your heart which I shall leave beating so that you can exist as a decapitated skull for the rest of time.” He smiled wolfishly at her and I could see a savageness in his eyes.

I could barely breathe as the tension increased and they continued to circle each other slowly, neither making the first move.

Finally, the Elite cracked. She let out a shriek as she leapt forward, swinging her sword straight for Magnar’s throat. He deflected the blade with one of his own and brought the other around sharply, slicing into her abdomen and spilling blood.

She hissed like a feral beast and quickly spun aside so his second blade swept through empty air instead of finding flesh.

She aimed a thrust at his back but he twisted, raising Tempest to take the blow from her sword. The metal flashed angrily where they met and I could see his arm straining against the power of her strike. Before she could remove her weapon, he swung Venom around, trapping her blade between both of his.

Eve snarled as she fought to reclaim her blade and Magnar kicked out, catching her in the stomach and sending her flying. She managed to twist and land on her feet but she lost her hold on her weapon and it flew through the air to disappear into the trees.

Her eyes darted about wildly and Magnar spun his blades in his grasp as he advanced on her.

“Brave of you slayer, to come for my life with two blades in hand while I hold none,” she spat angrily.

Magnar halted his advance and tilted his head as he considered the vampire. “You think me cruel, monster? You think it’s unfair?” He laughed then sheathed both blades on his back.

“Magnar don’t!” I cried, unable to hold my tongue at the madness before me. She would rip him apart.

He didn’t even spare me a glance, his gaze fixed immovably on the Elite.

A hauntingly beautiful smile crossed her red lips as she took a step towards him. "Always so predictably noble," she mocked.

Eve raced into motion, colliding with Magnar hard enough to send him flying.

Magnar fell to the ground, skidding through the dirt before rolling himself up onto one knee. The fire in his eyes danced wildly and I couldn't shake the feeling that he was enjoying himself.

The vampire gave him less than a moment to prepare as she leapt at him again and he raised his arm to deflect her attack. Her teeth sank into his flesh and he let out a grunt of pain before slamming his other fist into the side of her skull. There was a sickening crunch and she was knocked free, leaving a set of bloody tooth marks on his skin.

She scowled, hesitating as she touched her hand to her jaw which didn't seem to be hanging right anymore. He started to advance on her and she pointed upwards as she barked a laugh.

A huge raven plummeted from the sky, aiming its sharp beak straight at Magnar's face. He raised his arms just in time to shield himself and the Elite tackled him.

Eve threw him to the ground heavily, the impact resounding beneath my feet through the carriage. She grabbed his face in her taloned hand, forcing his chin up before piercing his neck with her teeth.

The raven continued its attack, avoiding the Elite while aiming its vicious beak and claws at Magnar's arms and legs while he struggled beneath the feasting vampire.

A scream escaped my lips as I slammed against the bars of my cage in a futile attempt to get to him. My metal chains clanged loudly on the bars but they didn't shift an inch.

Magnar grabbed a fist full of the Elite's long, black hair and ripped her off of him with a roar of rage. He threw her aside like a rag doll and leapt to his feet, blood running freely from the wound on his throat.

The raven cawed aggressively as it swept towards his face again and he caught it, snapping its neck with one sharp jerk then throwing the corpse at its master.

The Elite hissed as she launched herself towards him but Magnar twisted aside. Before she could move out of range, he caught a handful of her hair again and yanked her back down.

She fell to her knees howling in rage as she tried to claw at the hand

holding her hair but Magnar had already unsheathed Tempest. With one ferocious swipe, he took her head from her shoulders and everything fell silent.

He dropped the head, letting it roll away from him as he turned his gaze on me.

I stared at him, unable to form words as he moved away from her corpse and paced towards me.

“You came for me,” I breathed as he crouched before the carriage and peered in at me.

“Of course I did.” He reached between the bars and pushed my golden hair away from my face as he inspected me. “Are you alright?”

“Apart from being stuck in here.” I offered him a weak smile as my arms began to tremble.

“I can fix that.” He stood and moved out of sight. I could hear him rummaging through the supplies the vampires had brought with them on the carriage. “Stand back.”

I crawled away from the door and the heavy thud of an axe clanged against the metal padlock which secured me. It took three more strikes before the lock gave way and Magnar heaved the barred door aside.

I hurried out of the cage and leapt onto him, knocking him back to sit on the grass. I managed to hook my arms over his head despite my bound wrists and wrapped my legs around him too as I buried my face against his broad chest. Relieved tears squeezed from my eyes as he wrapped his strong arms around me.

“I’m so glad you’re alright,” I whispered as I breathed in the scent of his skin and pressed my ear against his thumping heart.

“I’m glad you are too,” he replied, holding me tightly.

I leant back to look up at him, my chained wrists behind his neck keeping our faces close to each other. His breath danced across my skin and words fled me as I lost myself in the depths of his eyes. His hands slid lower on my back, finding their place at my hips.

Seconds stretched endlessly before the heat building in my cheeks made me drop my gaze. I pulled my arms back over his head and clambered out of his lap feeling embarrassed at my overt display of emotion.

He got to his feet and looked down at me for a moment, his eyes moving to the chains on my wrists.

“Let me help you with that,” he said, turning away from me but I reached

out quickly to catch his hand.

“Thank you,” I said, forcing myself to meet his eye so that he could see how much I meant it. No one had ever done anything like that for me. He’d risked his life to save mine and it meant more to me than I could ever describe.

I pushed up onto my tiptoes, meaning to press a kiss to his cheek but he turned towards me in surprise and my lips met with the corner of his mouth instead. I lingered for a moment as my stomach fluttered and my heart skittered with unexpected intensity.

I forced myself to pull away despite the longing I felt to stay locked in that moment.

I gazed up at him, drinking in every inch of his face as I tried to decipher the thundering pattern of my heartbeat. I half wanted to lean closer to him again but something stopped me.

Once this was all over and we’d gotten my family back out of the blood bank, I intended to run south with them. Freedom was the only dream we had and it only existed away from the vampires.

Magnar’s calling would take him in the opposite direction. He needed to fight against them. He would give anything, including his own life in his pursuit of the Belvederes. He wouldn’t stay with me.

Though I’d decided to let myself care about him, I wasn’t sure if I could cope with opening my heart to him completely. I’d seen how heartbreak had haunted our Dad for fifteen years and I wasn’t sure I was strong enough to bear it.

I didn’t know what I wanted from him but I knew I wanted him close to me.

Magnar watched me intently for several seconds as if he were searching for something. I couldn’t tell if he found it or not before he turned his back on me and walked away without a word.

I watched him go and bit my tongue against the desire to call him back. If I was going to have any hope of surviving after he left me then I had to keep this distance between us.

I just wished it didn’t hurt so much.

Montana



My knees ached as I moved and I could feel the blood soaking through the thin t-shirt wrapped around them. Could vampires smell blood? And if they could, how close would they have to be to sense it?

I ran in the dark shadow of the wall, forcing my anxiety away as I moved. I'd gotten this far and that gave me hope. Hope of finding my way back to Callie and Dad. Hope of living the free life we'd dreamed about for so many years.

Someone collided with me so hard that I was smashed into the ground, my face slamming against the earth.

"No!" I cried with a wave of horror. I writhed beneath the vampire, desperate to escape. I flailed like mad and my attacker let me roll beneath them. My eyes locked with Erik's and I took in his fierce eyes and the dark stubble on his jaw that clung to him like a shadow.

Pain welled in my chest. Although I knew I couldn't win a fight against him, I started thrashing to try and free myself.

"Let me go," I snarled. "Get another human to help you. It's what you want anyway. Just let me go."

He snatched my wrists, forcing them into the soft grass and bearing down on me.

"Stop fighting," he commanded, his breath an intoxicating mix of sweet and bitter.

His knees pressed hard on either side of my thighs, forcing me to remain still and I relented, knowing it was pointless.

"I don't want another human," Erik said, his voice frighteningly level. Did he really mean it? Would he let me get away with trying to escape? Or was he going to punish me for it?

"Please, I don't want to become a vampire," I whispered. "I'm no use to

you anyway.”

“That's not true, Rebel.” He rose to his feet, tugging me up after him and my heart crumbled like ash.

He kept a tight hold on my wrist, but I pulled back all the same. “I read Valentina's message,” I revealed, certain she had spoken to him anyway. “I know she wants you to get rid of me.”

His brow creased and he shook his head. “I don't give a shit what she wants. Is that why you ran?”

I nodded, my heart still pounding like a drum in my chest. “I don't trust you.”

He sighed then lifted his eyes to the wall. “Get on my back.”

When I didn't move he turned and pulled my arm over his shoulder. With a painful flare of acceptance, I slid my other arm around him and he tugged me up onto his back. As I linked my legs around his waist he jumped, snatching hold of the wall and scaling it with impossible ease. At the top, he rose to his feet and I gazed down into the trees over his shoulder with fear trickling through my veins.

“Wait-” I hissed. “There was someone down there. Someone who attacked one of the guards.”

“What?” he snarled.

“Over there.” I pointed to the tree I'd climbed and Erik leapt forward. I cried out as we plummeted toward the earth. His feet hit the ground with a jolt and he dropped me, snatching hold of my arm.

“Show me,” he demanded.

I trembled as I led him to where I'd last seen the vampires. As we approached the dense woodland, Erik breathed in deep then quickened his pace, dragging me along behind him.

A dripping noise sounded from up ahead and I shuddered as I spotted the source. The red-haired vampire was strung up in one of the trees. His hands were bound in chains behind his back and a knife was dug deep in the centre of his chest. Blood dripped in a steady flow beneath him. His mouth was gagged and he cried against it as he spotted us.

Erik released me, darting toward the man, gazing at the chains holding him up.

“Hold on, Faulkner, I'll get you down.” Erik moved to the tree trunk, taking hold of the chains and snapping them apart as easily as if they were made of thread.

Faulkner hit the ground hard and Erik sped to his side and took hold of the blade's hilt. Faulkner screamed against his gag, shaking his head as Erik yanked it out. The blade jolted against something and didn't come free.

A second turned to an eternity as Faulkner wailed and exploded into dust before our eyes. I stumbled back in horror as the scattered remains of him cascaded around Erik who was left gripping the blade in his palm. My stomach spun as I noticed the end of it had split into four serrated spikes.

"It opened when I pulled it," Erik gasped. "He tried to warn me." His face morphed to horror as he gazed down at the remnants of his dead guard. "I should have taken the gag off."

"You didn't know," I whispered, shaking from head to foot. I crept closer, urged toward him by a strange pull in my chest.

He turned to me with a dark eyes. "You saw who did this."

I shook my head, pausing a foot away from him. "He wore dark robes, that's all I saw. He was large, muscular."

Erik's eyes dropped to Faulkner's clothes on the ground, tarnished with the fragments of his body. He gathered them up, rising to his feet with a heavy sigh. "Faulkner was a good man...a friend. I sired him."

"I'm sorry," I breathed and he turned to me just as the moon broke through the clouds above.

"Are you?" he asked, seeming lost and anxious. "Why would you be?"

My mouth grew parched as I gazed at him. The moonlight illuminated his pearly skin, making him appear more ethereal than ever.

"It's just...I know what it's like to lose people you care about." I thought of my mother. Of the people in the Realm who disappeared without a trace. Neighbours, friends, the law-breakers and the elderly.

My throat welled at the memories of so much loss.

"Count Erik!" Several guards burst through the trees and Erik turned to them with a hard stare.

"Faulkner is dead. Search the grounds. His killer may still be here."

They bowed quickly and Erik thrust Faulkner's clothes into the arms of one of the men. Erik took my hand, guiding me back toward the castle, brushing the dust from his jacket.

When we entered, Valentina came rushing toward us, her black gown floating out behind her.

"By the gods, wherever did you run off to Erik?" Her dark eyes fell on me, drifted to my bag then narrowed. She slowed to a walk, folding her arms.

“She ran.”

The statement made my skin prickle.

“She took a walk,” Erik grunted, tugging me along, but Valentina caught his arm.

“She's trouble. Do what we discussed,” she hissed.

“I'm right here,” I snapped, my temper growing.

Her eyes slid to me. “Yes, I see that. But you won't be for long. Perhaps we'll send you to the local blood bank where no one will ever think of you again.”

“Enough,” Erik snarled at her. “Go home, Valentina. The girl stays. One more fucking word about dismissing her and you'll be the one I cut loose.”

She gazed at him in horror and I couldn't fight a smirk as she stormed past us out of the door. Lightning flared in the sky as her fierce mood altered the weather. The sight of her power quickly wiped the grin from my face.

Erik's grip on my hand firmed as he led me upstairs in the direction of my room. He walked me inside then planted me down on the bed, his gaze dropping to the strips of shredded t-shirt around my knees.

He sighed, lowering to the floor before me and starting to untie them.

“Erik,” I gasped. “It's fine, I'll do it.”

“Just stay still,” he insisted, easing the bindings free and revealing the grazed skin beneath.

He frowned, rising from his knees and heading into the bathroom. He returned a moment later with a warm cloth and began wiping the dirt from the cuts with surprisingly gentle hands.

I winced as the torn skin stung from the touch of the hot cloth.

“You wouldn't have gotten far like this. There are vampires in the city who would not have acted so kindly if they'd found you.” His eyes flashed with some emotion I couldn't place.

“And you care about that?” I asked, confused and rattled by the night I'd had.

He surveyed me for so long that my insides frayed and unravelled. “Yes, I care.”

“Then why don't you listen to anything I say?” I breathed, my heart squeezing painfully.

He bowed his head, seeming conflicted as silence passed between us. “I'll listen. Go ahead.”

My throat crushed my voice-box as I fought for the words I wanted him to

hear. *Really* hear. But would he believe me?

“Realm A is a lie,” I whispered. “My Realm is nothing like that. We live in hollow buildings with no heating and rationed electricity. We're given one bag of food a day that's barely enough for a single meal.” My heart thundered harder and the words started to flow quicker, unleashing everything I'd been through and praying he'd believe it. “People disappear and they don't come back. Sometimes we hear the screams from the blood bank in the south. Anyone who defies the vampires are beaten in the street. There were times when they'd tie people up for days and strip their clothes...whip them daily.” I shook my head as tears stung my eyes and blurred away the world before me. “My family and I wanted to escape for so many years. After the testing, we knew we'd be torn apart. My sister and I were going to be sent away and we'd have to leave my father. He's getting older and eventually they'd take him like they do all of the elderly. They vanish. I see it in their eyes, the fear. The worry that they won't live out another day. That they'll be brought to the blood bank and drained for the little value they have left. One way or another the only people in the world I ever cared about were going to be taken from me, and I couldn't let that happen...”

The tears fell and Erik's cool palm came to my cheek, wiping them away. My vision was restored and I found him before me, leaning in so close I couldn't breathe.

“Is that true?” he whispered, a pain growing in his eyes.

“Yes,” I choked, another tear hitting my lap.

“Fabian runs the Realms,” he revealed with a snarl. “They're his responsibility. I'm not saying I'm not to blame, but if you help me bring him down I won't let those standards continue.”

My mind swam with his words. Fabian was to blame for the Realms' conditions? If that was true, then I had an opportunity to do something about it. A chance that no human had ever had.

I swallowed away my tears as a hard determination grew inside me. For the sake of everyone in the Realms, I had to help Erik. And in return, I was starting to believe Erik would help me and my family too.

Erik leant in close and my breath got trapped in my lungs. He was an inch from me, his mouth so close and the scent of him snaring my senses.

“Don't run away again,” he whispered and my heart started pounding against my chest as if it was fighting to get closer to him.

“I won't,” I agreed.

“Let's pretend tonight didn't happen,” Erik growled and I nodded, unable to say another word. “Including this.” His mouth met mine and my glowing heart fractured into a thousand shards of stardust. I bathed in the light he ignited inside me, scattering into every corner of my body.

As he took hold of my waist and his kiss deepened, three things became clear to me.

I knew I'd stick to his plan.

I knew I'd do anything it took to save my family.

And I knew Erik Belvedere was going to break my heart.

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