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OF  
VAMPIRES  
BOOK 2

# Eternal Shade

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Published by Caroline Peckham and Susanne Valenti 2019

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Eternal  
shade

CAROLINE  
PECKHAM

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VALENTI

AGE OF VAMPIRES  
BOOK 2



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.



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# Erik



1300 YEARS AGO

I tilted my face toward the sinking sun, drinking in its pleasant warmth as I bathed in the stream. Summer was in the air, but the first kiss of it had yet to bronze my skin.

My village was far enough away that I could no longer hear the chatter of my people.

“Hey wanderer, why are you off on your own again?”

I turned, spotting the beautiful Kyla on the riverbank, stripping out of her clothes.

“I'm not on my own.” I grinned as she joined me in the stream, sliding her hands around my neck. Her auburn locks brushed against my shoulders as she leant in for a kiss.

“You know we're going to get caught one day,” I said, evading her kiss with a teasing smile.

Her amber eyes sparkled with mischief. “The Earl has five wives, he won't miss one.”

“But you are his most prized wife.” I gave up on holding back, dropping my mouth to the silken skin of her neck. She inhaled deeply, winding her arms around my waist.

“Don't pretend you care,” she laughed and I nipped her flesh as she arched into me.

People rarely came to this part of the stream. It ran into a larger pool further into the trees where most of the village washed. Despite that, Kyla guided me further upstream behind an outcrop of rocks.

“You're worried,” I remarked.

“Earl Haver is in a foul mood today,” she said, but her hands roamed further down my body, telling me she was willing to risk it. As always.

“The Earl is always in a bad fucking mood.”

“He knew I wanted you,” she whispered, digging her teeth into her lip. “He married me out of spite.”

My stomach knotted at her words. I'd never really thought about taking a bride. It always seemed like something men did for power in my tribe. But Kyla would have been my first choice if I'd ever wanted to settle down. Earl Haver had taken that choice away from me, like he did to many men in the village. He took the beautiful women for himself and killed anyone who challenged him. His son, Fabian, was the only decent man in his family. He was like a brother to me, but his father had never liked me. I questioned his rule, never bowing too low or agreeing too easily. If he hadn't been a drunk I might have respected him more.

I was on the verge of losing myself in Kyla's soft skin when someone shouted my name, “Come out, Erik! Quick!”

My friend Clarice's voice filled the air and Kyla's eyes widened in alarm. I snatched her hand, tugging her after me as we waded out of the stream. Clarice thrust our clothes at us, not giving a damn about seeing us naked. She was one of the few people I trusted implicitly and I knew she'd never give away our secret.

Today she looked fierce, her golden hair wound into a tight braid and her dark armour in place. She was one of the strongest shield-maidens in our village. And when she was dressed for a fight, it usually meant there was one coming.

“What's going on?” I demanded, dragging on my clothes despite instantly soaking them through.

I picked up my sword as Kyla pulled on the last of her clothes and took out a knife.

“Our parents are going mad,” she spoke directly to me. “They're ransacking the village. They say someone is coming for us. And they're looking for something they say will appease them,” she said, her beautiful features pinching.

“Who's coming?” Kyla asked, equally baffled.

Clarice shook her head. “They speak of the gods. And they have a fear in their eyes like I've never seen.” She quickened her pace to a jog and I hurried after her through the trees, the chaos in the village sounding from up ahead.

I took the lead as we arrived amongst the first houses and Kyla scampered off, not wanting to be seen with me. It didn't matter though, Clarice had been right. The place was mayhem. No one was paying attention to us.

Miles sped out from the nearest house, jogging toward me half dressed. "Erik, my father's gone insane. All of them have."

I gripped his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

He pointed across the camp and I spotted my father tossing a woman's things out of her house into the dirt.

"Father!" I shouted, sprinting toward him and sheathing my sword.

He was in a frenzy, muttering to himself as he broke apart a jewellery box and rifled through the contents.

"Stop." I grabbed his arm, yanking him back and his elbow smashed into my nose.

I stumbled, fury snaring me. "What the hell are you doing!?"

He turned to me with a mad glint in his eyes. Eyes the exact iron shade of mine. "Where is it? Andvari demands it. He's found the gold. He knows what we've done."

"What have you done?" I growled, grabbing his shirt in my fists.

He tried to shove me off, but I wouldn't let go. Over his shoulder I spotted Earl Haver in a similar rage, his oldest wife Talia on her knees beside him as they smashed apart a supplies box.

Their son Fabian was next to them, staring around the madness. His eyes locked with mine and I released my father, marching toward him.

Miles and Clarice kept pace with me and I spotted their own parents interrogating a group of children by the remains of the fire.

"Fabian, what's happening?" I asked.

"Our parents have scorned the gods," he spat, terror marring his handsome features. "They say they stole Andvari's gold. Hid it in a mountain to the east. Now he says a piece of it is missing."

I shook my head just as fire bloomed to life in one of the houses. *My fucking house.*

I stormed toward it, hearing a cry from inside. Ripping the door open, I squinted against the roaring flames and hurried inside, lifting my shirt to cover my nose.

"Erik!" cried my younger sister and I turned over the table she was hiding beneath, dragging her out by the arm.

She clung to my side as I hauled her out into the fresh air. "Did you start a

fire, Meredith?" I demanded, checking her over to make sure she was alright.

Her hair was singed and her skin was flecked with ash but apart from that she was remarkably okay. She gazed up at me with a fierce expression. "No, it started out of nowhere, Erik."

"Fires don't start themselves. Why were you even in there?" I asked, glancing over her shoulder as the small wooden structure I'd called home for years went up in smoke.

"Mother sent me to look for gold." She shook her head, shrugging her small shoulders.

Some of the village people appeared with pails of water but I knew it was too late. The roof was already caving in. Anxiety gripped me as I sensed this was the least of my worries.

I held onto Meredith's arm, scouring the village for my mother. I spotted her on her knees, weeping on the ground, her ebony locks in a mess around her shoulders. "Please give us more time. I know where it is."

At her words, the parents of my friends stormed towards her. My father was quick to follow and I kept Meredith close as I jogged after them.

My mother was a strong woman. I'd never seen her like this, openly crying and speaking to someone who wasn't there.

"Mother, are you alright?" I asked, pushing past Miles' father and dropping to my knees.

She lifted her chin as I rested a hand on her arm. "Erik...you must find what he seeks. You must."

"What are you talking about? Who is seeking what?"

"The...ring." Mother convulsed, falling into the dirt, her eyes rolling up into her head. My stomach clenched with fear and Meredith wailed.

My father barrelled past me, dropping to her side and cradling her in his arms. "My love, is Andvari close?"

"He's here," my mother rasped. "Stop, please stop Andvari," she choked, jerking again in my father's arms.

Father turned to me, his eyes wide with terror. "Son, gather the men and saddle the horses. We must run."

"Are you mad? What's happening?" I reached forward and took Mother into my arms. She slowly stopped fitting and finally fell still, opening her eyes. Her gaze shifted over my shoulder and she gasped in horror. "No...he has come."

"Who?" I growled, but my question was answered by an ominous voice

behind me.

“I have. Your god is here. Bow down to me.”

I turned, finding a man behind me in brown robes which were so long they brushed his bare feet. His eyes were blank and nearly white; his hair was a dark tangle of weeds and his face was a hollow but beautiful thing.

Fear crackled through me as I absorbed the sight of him. This was no man...

He raised his arms and a harsh wind seemed to blow from his fingertips, forcing my entire village to their knees.

I clutched my mother tighter, looking for Meredith and spotted her between Miles and Clarice. Their own siblings had appeared too, the three blonde men holding swords as they were forced to the ground.

“Who are you?” I breathed, though I knew in my bones that he was a deity; his body gave off a powerful atmosphere that sank deep into my bones.

“Andvari,” he purred. “Do you not even recognise me, human?” His hand whipped out and my mother was wrenched from my arms, rolling violently across the earth. Panic seized me as Andvari advanced on her. He reached out a hand and she seemed to choke, writhing on the ground beneath him.

“Stop!” I roared.

Andvari turned to me with a cold smile. “Son of traitors. Your mother and father have deeply wronged me. What is the name of the boy who would stand against a god?”

My throat tightened as I rose to my feet, sensing my father crawling closer to me on the ground. “Erik Larsen,” I said firmly, though a tremor burrowed through to my core. “What is it they've done?”

“Not just them, Erik Larsen,” Andvari snarled, his gaze shifting to others in the village. Miles, Clarice and Fabian's parents all cowered on their knees, their faces haunted with guilt.

“They have stolen from me,” the god continued, pointing at each of our parents in turn.

“We gave you back the gold!” my father cried. “We just need a little longer to find the final piece.”

“Your time is up,” Andvari snarled. “You have wronged me too deeply. I shall find it myself.”

“No – please!” begged Miles' mother, Neela, her golden hair hanging in a sweaty mess down her back. “One more day, that's all we ask!”

“You think returning the ring to me would be enough?” Andvari slashed

his hand through the air and Neela's head wrenched sideways, her face marked with a red palm print.

Earl Haver hurried forward with a sword in his hand and Fabian strode behind him looking equally forbidding.

“You wish to fight me?” Andvari mocked, punching the air and forcing them to the ground with his power.

Fabian and his father collided in a tangle of limbs, scoring a path through the dry earth.

My heart tripled its pace as I tried to decide what to do. How could we face a god? We were only men and he was all-powerful.

Clarice ran to her parents' sides, shielding them with her body.

“We will do whatever you want,” Miles said, pulling his brother and my sister behind him. “Just leave our families alone.”

Andvari started laughing. “Such loyal children...” His gaze snapped to my father. “I believe we can come to some arrangement here.”

“Yes, anything,” Father said, staggering upright.

He clutched my arm, trying to force me behind him but I wouldn't budge. I spotted my mother gaining her feet and my heart lifted a little at knowing she was alive.

“Bring all of your children to me, Viking scum,” Andvari commanded and a painful silence followed.

The people of my village were still on their knees, but weapons were in many of their hands. One word from the Earl and I knew they'd fight Andvari to their deaths. But that word never came. Earl Haver shakily ushered Fabian and his older sisters toward Andvari.

“Father?” Fabian questioned, but Haver didn't answer, grinding his jaw.

*Coward.*

Fabian moved toward Andvari with his siblings and slowly, Miles, Clarice and their brothers came forward too, urged on by their parents.

Meredith hurried toward me and I clutched her in my arms, turning my gaze to my mother. Fear pounded through me. I couldn't let anything happen to my family.

“Please don't hurt them,” Mother begged, but Andvari ignored her, directing us all to stand in a line before him.

I kept my hand around Meredith's as I took my position, glaring at Andvari, brushing my fingers over the sword at my hip.

Andvari eyed me curiously, seeming to sense my indecision. I slowly drew

the sword, pointing it at him. “We haven't wronged you. And I will fight to the death if you lay a hand on any of us.”

“A pointless threat. You would be dead before the tip of that blade was a yard from my chest, boy.”

I ground my teeth. “I am no boy,” I spat. “I have twenty eight years in this life and I will give up all of them to end you.”

Andvari eyed me with interest then chuckled softly. “Go ahead.” He stretched his arms wide and I felt Meredith tugging on my shirt.

“Don't,” she begged and I turned to meet her deep blue eyes, shining with strength.

Fabian lifted his own sword, gritting his teeth as he threw me a nod.

At once, we moved, a silent decision flowing between us. I charged forward with a bellow tearing from my throat, my sword lifted high.

Andvari twirled a finger through the air and my legs moved of their own accord. I lost all control as I turned and aimed my sword at Fabian instead. He cried out, parrying the blow at the last second, stumbling from my ferocity.

Andvari moved us like puppets, raising his hands in the air and crashing them together. Fabian swung his sword, trying to slice it into my side. I darted back to avoid the blow, my hands forcing me to strike at him again. I fought back with all my might as Andvari made me lift the sword above my head. Fabian came at me again and I kicked out his legs so he hit the ground, bringing the sword down in a deadly arc.

“No!” he yelled and I cried out for Andvari to stop.

A millimeter from Fabian's face, my arms jerked to a halt.

Andvari smiled broadly. “Back in line,” he hissed.

I shuddered as I reached down, pulling Fabian to his feet. He gave me a grave look, turning to rejoin his siblings. As I moved, a sharp tug pulled the sword free from my hand. I spotted Fabian's flying through the air too and Andvari caught each of them in his outstretched palms.

With a ring of laughter, he raised them above him and they began to melt from the blade down, dripping to the ground in a mess of molten iron.

Andvari surveyed us with a cool expression, tossing the hilts into the remains. “Enough of this. It is time penance was given.”

He circled his hand through the air and a wicker basket seemed to weave itself from nothing until it hung from his arm. A glimmer of gold winked inside it.

“I have thought long and hard on this punishment,” Andvari said with a dark smile. “And today I have decided I will not punish those who have wronged me...it will be their children who pay the price.”

My heart juddered in my chest and I pulled Meredith closer.

“No!” Mother cried, but Andvari forced her into the dirt beside my father.

Our parents struggled to get up, but it was futile.

My mouth grew dry and a shudder ran through me as I tried to figure out how to act. Andvari was impossibly strong. There was no way to fight him.

Andvari's fingers trailed over the basket and he plucked a round object from within it. A golden apple was clutched between his long nails and I eyed it with unease.

“Idun's apples were quite difficult to come by. But not all of these are the fruit of the goddess...” He smiled broadly, walking forward with an ethereal grace. He held out the apple to me with a smirk. “Take it,” he commanded and I reluctantly reached for the golden fruit, knowing I had no choice.

It seemed to shine with hidden rays of the sun, its skin unspoiled and gleaming. When Andvari handed the next one to my sister, I lurched out and tried to knock it from her hands. Andvari flicked his finger in my direction and my arms locked tight so I was unable to reach it. Anxiety tangled with my veins.

“Meredith, don't eat it,” I ordered under my breath and she gave me a small nod, her eyes twinkling with tears. My chest crushed at the sight. I was unable to help, to do anything to stop this.

When all of us had an apple, Andvari watched us with mirth in his gaze. “Eat,” he commanded, but none of us moved.

Our parents started screaming, begging for mercy, but a wave of Andvari's hand silenced them.

The village was terrifyingly quiet and nothing but the summer breeze rustling the leaves sounded around us. The sun was low on the horizon, turning the sky to a dusky blood-red. I wondered if it was the last sunset I'd ever see.

“Eat!” Andvari demanded once more, raising both hands. My arm lifted under his power and the urge to bite into the fruit overwhelmed me.

I battled as hard as I could, but my shaking hand raised and the gleaming apple met my lips. Meredith sank her teeth into her own, her eyes clouding with fear.

*No, don't eat it.*



I was forced to take a bite and the sweetest juice I'd ever tasted seeped over my tongue. I chewed through the soft pieces, unable to stop, intoxicated by the flavour.

As I swallowed, Andvari's power released me and I threw the apple to the floor. Meredith discarded hers beside mine, but it turned ashen grey and rotted away before our eyes.

She fell forward and I caught her with a cry of fear, dropping to my knees as I held her.

Others were falling down too, but I could only see my sister, my heart tearing in two.

“What have you done!?” I roared at Andvari, but just his cold laughter came in response.

Meredith jerked in my arms and foam spewed from her mouth. Her eyes rolled back into her head and blood joined the mess around her lips.

My throat tightened and a pain took over me unlike anything I'd ever felt.

My body spasmed and I was certain death was coming for me too. I turned to find that Clarice, Miles and Fabian were the only ones still alive. The rest of our siblings were dead at their feet or trembling in their arms. Clarice screamed her pain as she clung to her brother and Fabian stood in shock, taking in his fallen sisters.

A force struck me like nothing I'd ever felt before, causing me to buckle forward. Electricity coursed through my veins and thrummed through my muscles, leaking a powerful energy into my body.

My mouth ached; my canines grew and sliced into my tongue. A hundred scents flooded me, everything from the camp fire to the earthy smell of the dirt beneath me. Sounds grew louder, pounding into my skull. A scream tore through the air, making me wince with the sharpness of the noise. Andvari had released my village from his spell and chaos descended around us, but I couldn't turn my head to learn why.

Above it all was the slow, dying thump of my sister's pulse. It called to me. Surrounded me. Meredith fell still in my arms and I lay her on the earth, crawling away from her, battling the horrifying sensation taking over my body.

The grief wouldn't come. I was taken hostage by a growing need at the base of my throat. I desperately wanted something. I *hungered* for it.

My vision shuddered, growing keener until the world before me was alive with colour. One colour stood out amongst it all. Red. Blood was flowing

from Neela's neck. Miles was atop her, ripping into her throat with his teeth. His own mother. As the scent of blood hit my senses, a tingle ran through my jaw. I lost myself, spiralling down into a dark pit within me.

The people before me suddenly meant nothing. I rose to my feet and ran toward a man with ebony hair. He tried to scramble away but I caught him by the throat and pinned him to the ground. My instincts told me what to do and I wrenched his head sideways, biting into his neck until blood poured into my mouth.

Nothing existed to me but that taste. It was metallic and so sweet, I couldn't get enough of it.

I drank until there was nothing left and the man stopped begging. As he fell still, he muttered to me, "My boy...I'm sorry." For a second, I half-remembered who he was. A thousand memories of my father hovered on the edge of my senses. But in moments, they fled again, leaving me in this hungry state with a single need I had to sate.

I sped through the village, ripping out throats, drinking from everyone I caught. I killed without care. And I was so fast, no one could evade me.

I tore into a girl with auburn hair and skin as white as pearls. She called my name and begged me to stop, but I didn't know myself. I didn't have the will to stop and I didn't care to either. All that mattered was blood.

When the girl lay still beneath me, I lifted my head with an animal-like snarl, sniffing the air for my next prey.

*I must satisfy this need. I must drink every drop of blood I can find.*

The camp was burning around us, smoke billowing from the houses and coiling toward the red sky. Andvari walked amongst us, bringing the village to ruin as every man, woman and child was cut down around him by me, Clarice, Fabian and Miles.

Soon, the four of us were the only ones still living. I stood above my final kill with blood soaking my clothes and dripping down my chin, gazing across the devastation. No breath moved through my lungs, no guilt reached my heart. I was nothing but a monster in the aftermath of a frenzied slaughter.

Andvari moved toward me and my thoughts slowly began to realign. Emotion slammed into my body and I blinked heavily, absorbing what I'd done.

"No..." I lifted a trembling hand to my blood-soaked lips, the metallic taste of my entire village flooding my tongue.

"Gather," Andvari commanded and my friends moved towards us, their

eyes haunted as they awakened from the bloodlust. They were the same people I'd known my entire life and yet, they weren't. Their beauty was startling, their features enhanced and any blemishes in their skin smoothed out.

Clarice reached me first and she gazed at me in horror before eyeing her own bloodied clothes. "What's happened to us?"

"You are undead creatures of the night," Andvari announced, looking between the four of us. "Immortal beings who feast on the blood of the living and cannot stray into sunlight."

"We're not alive?" Miles asked, resting a hand on his heart as if to check.

My own hand moved to my chest and no reassuring thump came in response. Shock rattled through me and a searing pain started to take me hostage. My mother...my father...my sister...Kyla. They were all dead.

"You will be frozen in time, living but not alive. Dead but never at peace. Everything about you is designed to tempt humans and you will always hunger for their blood. This is your curse in payment of your parents' crime against me," Andvari snarled, dark flames flaring in his eyes.

Fabian clawed at his long hair. "No! No you bastard. Take it back!"

"That, I cannot do. But I will give you a single way to break the curse."

"How?" Clarice demanded, her hands shaking as she gazed across our devastated village.

I was on the verge of breaking, of going mad with the horror of what we'd done.

The full moon was rising in the evening sky, gazing down on us with its watchful eye, judging the monstrosities Andvari had caused.

The god started chanting a riddle and the air seemed to pulse with the power of his words.

"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."

Andvari fell quiet, but the words echoed on in my mind, making no sense at all.

“What does it mean?” I demanded.

“The answer lies within the riddle,” Andvari chuckled. “If you decipher it you shall return to your human forms.”

“How? It doesn't make any sense!” Fabian cried, his shoulders trembling and his hands curling into fists.

Andvari turned, ignoring him as a snarl twisted his features into a demonic glare. “Idun! I know you're here!”

From the smoke winding its way through the village, a beautiful woman emerged with golden skin and fiery eyes. She was clad in a silken white dress which seemed to float around her willowy body. Her golden hair fanned out behind in her a wind that wasn't there.

Idun, goddess of immortality. A deity I knew from the tales of old. Her gaze was unnaturally probing and slid over all of us, her fury evident.

“What have you done?” she spoke softly to Andvari, but her tone held a strength in it that made the air shudder.

“I have borrowed your power to avenge myself,” Andvari growled.

Idun's face contorted with rage. “I have hunted for you, Andvari, and now I found you have done the unspeakable with the fruit of my immortal tree. I will never forgive this.”

Her eyes fell on me and a power slid through my body like vines curling around my heart. I crumpled to my knees, clawing at the dirt as my organs squeezed.

“You cannot kill them,” Andvari spat. “They have your gift now.”

“Undo it,” Idun commanded, her voice causing a breath of warm air that blew out the fires devouring the houses around us.

“They are bound by the curse, nothing can undo this but the answer to my prophecy.” Andvari stepped toward her and lifted his palms. Fire scorched the earth between them in a wide line, warning her off.

Idun opened her mouth and sharp teeth were revealed. “You are altering nature for your games, Andvari. Take back what you have done.”

“I cannot!” Andvari bellowed and a tremor rocked the ground beneath me.

I eyed the others and they gave me a desperate look. We had to run. We had to get away from these monsters.

“Then I shall destroy what you have made,” Idun whispered, but she didn't come for us as I expected. Instead, she turned and disappeared into the smoke.

Andvari's form rippled as he faced us once more. “If you do not break the

curse, blood will be your payment. You will hunger for every human you meet until the sun bakes the earth and you are turned to dust.”

He vanished and all that remained was the hollowness of my soul, the smoke weaving its way around our broken home, and the metallic taste of my family's blood on my tongue. A taste I knew I would never be rid of.

# Montana



**E**rik Belvedere, a royal Count of the New Empire, had kissed me.

And I'd kissed him back.

I stayed awake late into the night thinking over what that meant. Of why I'd reacted the way I had. Why had he kissed me at all?

He was a damn vampire. An undead *monster*. How could I be attracted to him? And why on earth was he attracted to *me*? Someone who was supposed to be his food source!

The more I dwelled on it, the more doubts I had. What if this was a trick? Another way to try and get me to play along with his plan. He needed me to spy on his brother, perhaps he thought toying with my feelings was a good way to keep me on his side. But it hadn't felt like that...

All I knew was that Count Erik was either one-percent less of an asshole than I'd previously thought, or ten times more of one.

When birds called beyond the window and I sensed morning was closing in, my thoughts turned to what he'd told me about Fabian. That he ruled the Realms. That he was the one responsible for the conditions I'd lived in my whole life. How could I flirt with him now I knew that? It was nauseating. And yet, it was the only choice I had. Erik would free Dad from the blood bank and pardon Callie of her crimes if she was caught. That was what I had to focus on. And knowing I had at least a little more faith in Erik now, I found sleep coming for me at last, guiding me away on silent wings.



*A storm was rising in me. A burning need. A single cause.*

*"We have to get them out."*

*Callie's voice.*

*I tried to reach for her and the more I focused, the clearer the world became around me. An overturned carriage. My hands bound in chains, bashing against a barred window.*

*The vision shuddered and I was in the arms of a powerful man with long hair hanging around his face. His eyes captivated me the most. His face was just inches from mine. The moonlight shimmered around us and something felt so incredibly right about the closeness of him.*

“-sir you really must hire a professional stylist, I'm just a maid!”

I jerked awake, sitting up with blurry vision as Erik strode into the room dragging Nancy behind him. The dream fell away from me and the soothing company of the stranger dissolved with it.

My aching eyes told me I couldn't have gotten more than a couple of hours sleep. And that was definitely going to make this day a whole lot harder.

“You just got promoted,” Erik announced and Nancy shook her head. I blinked heavily, taking in his crisp white shirt and the fine trousers which hung from his slim hips. His eyes were brighter today than I'd ever seen them, seeming more like molten silver than the harsh iron tones I remembered.

“Please, sir, I really must insist-”

“Enough.” He took Nancy's shoulders, angling her toward me. “See all the hair sticking up on top of this girl's head?”

“Yes,” she stuttered and I grumbled my annoyance.

“Tame it,” he commanded. “And make that squinting face fit for royalty.”

“Erik?” I croaked as my vocal chords tried to warm up.

“Yes, Rebel?” he answered formally.

“Stop being an ass.” I reverted to my usual tone, figuring it was best to pretend nothing had ever happened between us. He'd told me to forget about it anyway, so I was more than happy to oblige. Especially if it helped me move on from that kiss.

“Noted,” he muttered with a smirk. Something fluttered inside me but as a smile tugged at my lips in response, I battled it away.

Erik was a vampire. And no matter what I'd felt toward him in that fleeting moment of foolishness, it didn't matter. Because humans didn't fall for bloodsuckers. Even if he did seem different than the rest of them...

Erik gazed over me, seeming anxious to say something more. Instead, he turned to Nancy and murmured, “Good luck,” then headed out of the room.

The tension in the air disbanded and I soaked in the relief at being apart from him again. He was too intoxicating up close and I really didn't want to be distracted. I needed to focus on getting through my day with Fabian. Nothing else. Especially not midnight kisses and late-night heart-to-hearts.

Nancy sighed dramatically then moved forward and ripped my covers back. "Up, up, up," she prompted and I slid out of bed, yawning broadly.

My sleep had been muddled with strange dreams so the few hours of rest I had managed to get hadn't been the most refreshing. The only thing positive about it was that my dreams had been of Callie living a free life with a strange warrior who she seemed to trust. I hoped it was true. And at the very least, the dreams had given me some comfort that it was possible.

"Come on. Sit down. Chop chop," Nancy urged.

"I need to pee." I headed toward the en-suite as she nodded, looking embarrassed.

Shutting the door to the bathroom, I released a slow breath. I needed a moment alone to gather my wits, to mentally prepare myself for my time with Fabian.

I washed my face in the cream basin then pinched my cheeks like always before gazing at myself in the silver-rimmed mirror. My eyes were heavy with dark circles and my lips were overly pale. I grazed my fingers across them and my heart thumped with irrational glee at the memory of that world-shattering kiss. Shaking my head, I mentally swore at myself and stared directly into my earthy brown eyes.

*Just suck it up today, Montana. Be the best spy Erik could have hoped for so he simply has to help Dad and Callie. Forget about everything else. Don't let him get under your skin.*

When I felt ready for whatever came my way today, I headed back to the bedroom. A renewed fire blazed in my heart as I dropped down onto the seat in front of the dresser and Nancy started combing my hair.

Nearly an hour later, I was primed for Fabian with my face painted to perfection and my hair coiling down my spine in loose waves. There was no trace of the tiredness around my eyes and I had to marvel at Nancy's skill with a makeup brush.

"Lovely," she announced, threading her fingers through my hair as she arranged it over my shoulders. "It's so good to see you smile, Montana."

I glanced at myself in the mirror in surprise, discovering that she was right. I was smiling. I hadn't even noticed. What the hell had gotten into me?



When I didn't reply, Nancy gave me a knowing look which brought heat to my cheeks. "Count Erik is quite the catch."

"Is he? I hadn't noticed," I said, forcing my lips to fall flat. "He's not really my type, being a hungry blood-sucking demon and all."

Nancy's soft features skewed with hurt. "We're not all bad," she said gently, moving away.

I caught her wrist, an urge to apologise filling me though I didn't know why. For the life of me, I couldn't force out the words. I wasn't going to say sorry to a creature who would happily drink a cup of my blood if I handed it to her.

I quickly changed lanes. "Thanks for this." I circled a finger around my face. "I don't look like the undead now."

She laughed softly, squeezing my hand before I released her. "Actually, I'd say the opposite. The undead are very attractive in the New Empire." She headed across the room and I allowed myself a grin at her words when she wasn't looking.

*What's gotten into you?!*

Nancy searched my closet, looking through the dresses before picking out a long green gown the colour of General Wolfe's robes.

"Not that one," I begged and she frowned.

"Fine. You pick one," she said, planting her hands on her hips.

I headed to the closet, rifling through the dresses, wondering what the best option was for today. I had to 'seduce' Fabian so looking appealing was high on my priority list. My fingers halted on an ebony gown with lace sleeves and a slightly low-cut neckline. Something drew me to it instinctively. I'd never cared about the clothes I wore back in the Realm, not beyond choosing whatever was most practical. But with the options I faced here, I started to see why the vampires liked their finery. It felt good to wear beautiful things just for the sake of it.

I took a slow breath, making my decision as I plucked it from the rack.

Nancy helped me into it then stood back, admiring the flowing gown which felt like a soft cloud hugging my body. "Does it look okay?" I asked.

Her eyes sparkled. "See for yourself." She guided me toward the large, dark-edged mirror on the wall and I nearly froze as I spotted my reflection.

I barely recognised myself. I looked...radiant. Nancy had applied a rose colour to my cheeks over a soft powder which seemed to make my skin glow; I only really noticed it now that my painted face was paired with this

incredible outfit. The dress was bordering on a little much. But it was striking and even made my meagre cleavage look fuller. This was definitely the one.

I turned to Nancy with another smile. I must have smiled more this morning than I had in weeks. "Thank you."

She bowed her head then hurried to exit the room, leaving me to my thoughts.

*I'll bring Fabian to his knees for what he's done to humans. I won't let him get away with it. And if I have to dress up and play nice to achieve it, then bring it on.*

Nerves pooled in my belly as I waited, the minutes ticking by as I expected Fabian to come for me. But the next person to step through the door was Erik.

"I just wanted to check you hadn't decided to dress in rags." His eyes slid from my head to my toes and I felt suddenly exposed. Heat sparked at the base of my spine as I awaited his conclusion.

"Are these rags alright?" I asked and he seemed to jolt out of some reverie.

Erik cleared his throat and his voice was slightly strained when he spoke. "Yes. Passable."

I rolled my eyes and he chuckled softly.

"Very agreeable," he said with a dark smile.

I became overly aware of us being alone again just feet from where he'd kissed me last night.

My heart thundered in my chest and I suddenly wasn't sure where to look.

"Um, so..."

"Fabian," Erik took the reins of the conversation and I relaxed in a wave. "Do as he asks today, but feel free to tease him in your usual way. I suspect he will fall for it hook, line and sinker."

"Did you want me to ask him anything specific?" I inquired, shifting from foot to foot.

*Oh my god. I'm actually going to do this.*

"Not today. You must earn his trust first." He stepped closer and offered me his arm. "I'll walk you to his room."

I nodded, dipping my head as I took it. Tension knotted my belly. I wanted to look up at him, but something stopped me. My cheeks were flaring like they were on fire. Why did Erik always take my body hostage? I couldn't seem to control anything it did around him. My thoughts however, I could wrangle. So they were what I focused on.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked as he led me from the room. "Oh, wait. Do

you even sleep?" I'd heard so many rumours about vampires in my lifetime, I didn't know what was true and what wasn't.

"Yes, I sleep. But only every few days. We don't need as much as humans."

I nodded and we drifted along a bright corridor with beautiful paintings of the garden hanging on the walls. All I could hear was my pulse thrumming musically in my ears.

"How did you sleep?" Erik asked.

"Er...not great actually. I keep having strange dreams. I saw my sister..."

"The fugitive?" he asked and I nodded, fighting a scowl at the word. "I ordered my men to bring her here when she's found."

I stopped walking, gazing up at him in utter relief. Not that this castle was a great place to be, but it was better than dead. My nails dug into his arm as desperation filled me. "Here?"

"Yes." Erik nodded stiffly, his gaze glittering with a promise I hoped he'd keep.

His hand pressed into the base of my spine, causing a ruffle of feathers in my stomach. I stood inches from him, taking in the sharp line of his brow, the day old stubble on his jaw that never seemed to grow thicker. His throat bobbed. My hand twitched where it lay against his arm.

"Let's not keep my brother waiting," Erik murmured, though he made no move to continue walking.

I nodded but still we stood there, a thousand unspoken words seeming to thicken the air between us.

Erik released a slow breath then encouraged me along the corridor. As we walked, hope expanded like a balloon and floated in the centre of my chest. Dad would be saved soon. And I might be reunited with Callie too, though a small part of me hoped she'd continue to evade the vampires. If anyone could survive out in the harsh world beyond the Realms, it was my sister.

Erik tugged me to a halt again as we arrived outside a black wooden door. He lowered his head, talking into my ear as all the vampires seemed to do when they didn't want to be overheard. Although this time, it felt more intimate than convenient.

"Only kiss him if you have to, Rebel." His breath floated over my neck and I shivered, fighting away the urge to reach out to him. My thoughts tangled as I tried to decipher the meaning behind his words. Why was he saying that to me? Because he was jealous? Or was it simply a tip on how to attract Fabian?

Taking my wrist, he pulled me in front of the door, rapped his knuckles on it then disappeared in a flash of movement. I glanced around, shell-shocked at his abrupt departure which had left my skirt fluttering around my legs.

The door opened and I came face to face with Fabian. He was dressed in a blood-red uniform, looking godly with his dark locks pulled up into a neat bun atop his head. His eyes were two dusky coins, gleaming with interest. “Hey gorgeous, I was about to come and fetch you.”

“I guess I found you first.” I tried out a smile and it wasn't too hard. Despite what I knew about Fabian, his aura wasn't nearly as oppressive as Erik's.

“Clearly.” He grinned, stepping into the corridor and offering me his arm.

I took it and we began walking through parts of the castle I'd not seen. I battled to keep my hatred for Fabian at bay as we moved through a lavish music room and a hall of tapestries before heading into a conservatory that overlooked the huge garden. I desperately needed to keep a handle on my hot-head around him. I could never let on what I knew.

Breakfast was laid out before one of the windows and Fabian guided me toward it, pulling out a chair at the table and gesturing for me to sit.

Thanking him, I dropped into it and eyed the selection of food. Crescent-shaped breads sat beside pots of coloured jellies and a slab of butter.

“Croissants,” Fabian announced, sitting opposite me. “A food humans like apparently.”

*Why not send some to Realm G then, Fabian? Or are they all saved up for Realm A to enforce your lies?*

Keeping my expression neutral, I breathed in the doughy scent and my stomach growled in response. They smelled like heaven and I simply knew they'd be delicious.

I prised apart one of the croissants before spreading a red jelly on it. When it entered my mouth, my taste-buds went crazy. It. Was. Incredible. Sweet, flaky, utterly mouthwatering.

I audibly sighed, taking bite after bite and soon devouring two of them in rapid succession. Fabian watched me in fascination before picking up a black and white paper which had been left on the table. *The Royal Times* was printed across the top of it and I realised this was the newspaper he'd mentioned when I'd bumped into him yesterday.

“No story about Erik's undone fly, I'm afraid, but apparently a flock of pigeons caused a mess on an Elite.”

A laugh broke from my throat as Fabian lowered the paper with a grin. “Kidding.”

“I’d love to see that,” I said then bit down on my lip, unsure if I should have admitted it.

His grin grew and I noticed a small dimple in his right cheek. “Oh me too, believe me. Some of the Elite piss me off to no end.”

I relaxed a little, eyeing another croissant and hesitating to eat it. I’d never indulged like this before, but the pastry was so delicious I longed for more.

“Go on...treat yourself,” Fabian said with a mischievous wink.

Figuring I might as well get through this on a full stomach, I snatched up another and started buttering it.

With my belly satisfied, I felt bounds better, ready to take on the world.

*Now I just have to pull off being a spy.*

My gaze was drawn to the peaceful woodland beyond the conservatory and I itched to explore it. To immerse myself in the seemingly endless stretch of trees. What I’d give to just have a day to myself in this place...

“It’s called Central Park,” Fabian said, jolting me back to the room. “Or it was, before the Final War. Now it’s just the castle grounds.”

“Humans used to live here?” I asked. Despite having known the fact, it was hard to imagine them walking freely amongst those trees and lounging on the grass.

“Yeah,” he replied. “The park was a tourist attraction.”

“What does that mean?” I leant my elbows on the table, drinking in the information like water. He might have been an asshole, but I could at least glean some information from him.

His eyes twinkled with delight as he started telling me about the old city, how people would travel from all across the world to visit it. Families would play in the fields and frolic in the woods. It was captivating. He built up such a picture in my mind that I could practically see them out there now, living that peaceful life.

My heart sank as I slowly came back to reality and my expression fell. Fabian was responsible for taking away our freedom. He was one of the reasons we couldn’t live that way anymore. And the more that settled on me, the more I despised his angelic face and charming tone.

Fabian gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, I’m glad you told me...” My eyes were drawn to the woods again and Fabian rose to his feet.

“Would you like to go for a walk?”

I nodded quickly and stood, anxious to get outside and breathe the fresh air.

We took a set of winding stairs down to a door and Fabian opened it, leading me out into a little walled garden. I shivered in the chilly wind and Fabian shed his jacket, sliding it around my shoulders.

I was swamped in the large thing, but was immediately warmer.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile.

“No problem. It's a shame to cover that gorgeous dress up though, did you wear it just for me?” He grinned then took my hand, winding his fingers around mine.

My throat grew dry at his sudden closeness, but I played along, squeezing his hand in response. “Well I would have looked a little silly showing up without it,” I teased and his smile grew wider.

“There's not a chance in hell I'd have thought that was silly.” He winked and my insides shrivelled up.

The leaves crunched under my feet as we walked, but Fabian barely seemed to disturb those beneath him. I gazed up at the tall trees, eyeing the little birds hopping between the branches. I recalled watching the birds flitting back and forth above the Realm, going wherever they pleased. More than once, Callie and I had pretended to have wings, flapping around our tiny kitchen while Dad laughed. I'd dreamed of what it would have been like to just fly out of that place and go wherever I wanted. Now I was far from home in the most luxurious place I could have imagined and I felt more like a prisoner than ever.

Fabian told me about the trees as we walked, naming every one of them. Then he spoke of the stream and the birdlife, seeming impassioned by nature. I happily drank in the information, stashing away the knowledge of things I could rarely have imagined learning about once.

As we headed through a cluster of oaks, I shifted closer to him, feigning a shiver. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders as I'd hoped and the mellow scent of him sailed under my nose.

“So how are you feeling about us vampires now you've had a couple of days to settle in?” Fabian asked, his grip on me tightening.

“I suppose you're not all bad,” I said airily. *Well, at least one of you isn't. And it isn't you.*

“We're not all good either.” He gave me that mischievous smile again and I

knew my attempt at flirting was working.

I glanced up at him and my legs trembled as I met his hungry gaze. Shit, what would he do if he knew what I was planning?

“Would you like to see something?” Fabian asked and my brows lifted with curiosity.

“Sure.” I shrugged and he gestured for me to take a seat on a fallen tree.

I rested against the log, running my hands over the gnarled bark, wondering if other humans had sat here before the Final War. If children had played on it and their laughter had joined the birds’ chorus in the trees.

Fabian gazed up at the canopy, seeming to search for something. He shut his eyes for a moment then a rush of wings announced the arrival of a huge bird.

I gasped as a brown owl dropped onto the log a few feet from me. It was huge, with mottled colouring and huge white tufts over its sharp talons.

“He’s tame,” Fabian promised, moving closer. “You can stroke him if you like.”

I tentatively reached out, running my palm over the owl’s silky feathers. “Wow,” I whispered, glancing up at Fabian. “Did you train him?”

“Not exactly.” He dropped down beside the bird, raising an arm and the owl hopped onto it. Fabian stroked him as he explained, “I can control him. Any animal I bond with will be eternally linked to me. I can see through their eyes, guide them wherever I like...”

My mouth parted in shock. “Like a spy?”

He grinned darkly. “We call them Familiars.”

“Can all vampires do that?” I asked as a cold realisation hit me. The vampires had always known everything in the Realm. Was this how they’d been able to keep an eye on us?

“Yes, but some are particularly good at it. Like myself.” Fabian lifted his arm and the bird took flight, hooting as it rose into the trees. “I have a natural affinity with animals. Sometimes I prefer them to people.” He chuckled lightly.

My gut churned. No wonder the vampires always had the upper hand with us...

“Can I be honest with you, Montana?”

My own name sent a jolt through me. Erik insisted on calling me Rebel no matter how much I told him not to. Hearing my name from Fabian’s mouth almost made me feel like an equal. But that was the last thing I was when it

came to him. I may have been playing games with this vampire, but he was playing his own. There wasn't a crack in his facade. I almost could have believed he liked me. But how could he when he did such despicable things to my kind?

"Okay," I replied.

"The day you walked into the courtyard, I thought you were trouble. But that's not what I see here sitting beside me."

My throat tightened at his words. "Trouble?" I whispered, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear.

*Please don't see through me.*

"Yes, but maybe I misread your fear as rebelliousness?"

I nodded quickly, despite it being a lie. "Yes, I was angry and afraid. I didn't want to put a dress on. I'd been kidnapped, Fabian, and I thought..."

He reached up to tuck the lock of hair behind my ear as it came loose again. His hand on my skin made me stiffen, but I forced myself to lean into his touch instead of recoiling.

"That's fair," he remarked. "I'm sure this is all very confusing for you."

I nodded again, giving him a shy smile rather than the slap I wanted to offer for his patronising tone.

"I just...don't understand what you want with us," I said, wondering if I might get more of an answer from him than I had from Erik. Why did they want us to pick them? Surely not just for the sake of turning us into vampires or they would have done so already...

"Yes, well, be patient and all will be revealed." He gave me a boyish grin which almost deceived me. "Come on, you'll get cold if we stay still too long."

I nodded and he drew me to my feet and tugged me right into his chest. "Of course, there are *other* ways to warm you up."

My heart pounded frantically as he took my chin in his hand.

*Oh hell no, is he going to kiss me?*

The glimmer in his eyes said he was. And as he leant in, I recalled the female vampire from the bar Erik had taken me to and at the last second I offered him my cheek.

His mouth met my skin and a devilish laugh rolled up from his chest. "You're playing cat and mouse with me."

"Am I?" I asked in an innocent tone, but my heart crashed against my ribcage with the need to get away from him.



He held me a moment longer, biting into his lip. “One kiss from me and you'll forget all about Erik.”

*Play the game, Montana. Don't let him see the truth!*

“Erik who?” I whispered and he moved to kiss me again.

I ducked out of his arms, dancing away, my chest tight as I escaped. My heart rate settled a little as I put some more distance between us, but he hounded after me with a hungry look.

“You'll have to earn that kiss,” I insisted, turning away and taking a deep breath when he wasn't looking.

*How long can I keep this up? What if he demands it of me?*

“I intend to,” he chuckled, sliding an arm around my waist as we headed further into the woods. I hesitated before slipping my own arm around his waist too, clinging to his shirt and feeling hard muscles beneath my palm. He was a feral animal dressed up as a tame pet. And those muscles told me all I needed to know about my chances against him if he ever decided to hurt me.

“So how are you getting along with Erik?” Fabian asked, gripping me tighter.

“Not great,” I said - which was sort of true. Except after last night I saw Erik in an entirely different light. But if Fabian didn't like him, it was better to play up to that. “He's not very nice to me. He's always so rude.”

“That sounds like Erik,” Fabian remarked. “He's a shit to his own kind, let alone humans.”

I nodded, but my heart rate spiked with anger.

*And you're nice to humans are you, Fabian?*

I longed to speak my mind, to demand an answer for why he treated us so badly but I simply couldn't.

“I just wish Erik would leave me alone,” I continued, sensing this was a good way to bond with Fabian. A trickle of guilt ran through me. For some reason, I felt like I was betraying Erik by bad-mouthing him to his brother.

“He will if you pick someone else at the ceremony.” Fabian nudged me and I grinned up at him.

“Well it's you or Miles. What's your other brother like?”

“Emotionally unavailable,” he remarked and my eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“His bodyguard is his consort. It will probably become apparent when you spend time with him tomorrow.”

“What does he want a wife for then?” I demanded, a little sharper than I'd

intended.

Fabian didn't seem to notice. "It's our duty, that's all."

I bit back a retort. Duty? What did that even mean? Why take wives if they didn't really want them? My mind swam with a hundred questions and I decided to air one of them as calmly as I could. "How many wives do you have?"

Fabian eyed me, seeming unsure whether to answer. "I have seven."

I sucked in a breath, trying to get my head around that. "What about Miles?"

"Three," he revealed. "And Clarice has many consorts in her harem, although none of them are officially married to her. She wishes to marry for love." He snorted as if that idea amused him.

"What's so wrong with that?" I asked. Surely of all the things these royal vampires could afford, love was one of them. I'd never had that luxury in the Realm, too afraid of losing anyone I got close to. It was insulting to learn someone as privileged as Fabian could scoff at the idea of it.

Fabian's gaze burned into me. "Nothing, I suppose. I'm not saying it isn't possible..." His hand trailed up my arm and I gave him a hopeful expression as if I actually wanted that from him.

I bit my lip as I prepared to ask about the final Count. The one who made my heart beat in a way it never should for a vampire. "And Erik?"

Fabian's eyes grew colder. "He has none. He's refused his duty to marry humans."

The way he specifically mentioned humans made me desperately curious. "What about vampires?" My throat was overly tight as it released the words.

Fabian's face flashed with irritation. "He has lovers occasionally." He shrugged. "Let's not talk about my brother."

My heart sank, but I knew I couldn't push the issue. If Erik was romantically involved with a vampire, that was not my concern.

*Then why does it bother you so much?*

The sound of voices rose in my ears and I turned. My mouth dried up as I spotted Erik strolling through the woods with Paige locked under his arm a hundred yards away. His eyes wheeled our way and he nodded stiffly before marching on.

Paige threw me a small wave and I returned it, eyeing her beautiful peony gown and flowing blonde hair. A strange feeling writhed in my belly at seeing him with her. Why was he spending time with her anyway, I thought

he didn't want any of the girls to choose him?

“Has he spoken to you about his preferences between the girls?” Fabian asked and I jolted back to reality, unsure how I should answer.

“Um...no,” I said and Fabian’s eyes narrowed.

“But he kissed you, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” I said, my stomach swirling. I’d almost forgotten Erik had told Fabian about the kiss we’d shared at Valentina’s apartment. But that wasn’t the memory I focused on now.

“And yet you deny me the chance to make you forget about that kiss.” He grinned wolfishly, stepping closer and my veins hummed with revulsion.

Before he got too close, Fabian's head snapped up and he turned toward a sound I couldn't hear. An Elite sprinted through the trees, her eyes piercingly blue and her hair a deep copper.

As she arrived, she bowed low to Fabian, throwing me an inquisitive glance. “Forgive me for the intrusion, your highness. I have unfortunate news.” She gave me another look, seeming uncertain if she should continue.

“Speak freely,” Fabian encouraged and the woman bowed her head.

“Chancellor Torin was found dead this morning. His remains were gathered from his apartment, but we're unsure of the cause. Although...” She eyed Fabian and he nodded. “There were signs of forced entry.”

My gut writhed as my thoughts wheeled to the murder I’d witnessed just last night. Was this related? Was the violent monster who killed one of the guards involved in this death? I didn’t know if I could voice my thoughts on the matter. Not to Fabian anyway.

“I see,” Fabian said tersely. “Thank you for informing me, Constable Mirell.”

She bowed once more before hurrying back in the direction she'd come.

I gazed up at Fabian's taut expression. He sighed, turning to me. “Sorry, Montana. I have to take a trip into the city. Can we meet later for dinner? I'd like to continue trying to earn that kiss.”

My stomach squirmed at his seductive tone. “Oh, yeah sure,” I said quickly.

“I'll escort you back to the castle.”

“It's fine, I know the way back.” I suddenly longed for time alone.

He surveyed me for a moment then nodded. “Alright. But no detours, trouble.”

I smiled and he bent down, placing a soft kiss against my cheek without

aiming for my mouth this time.

My skin felt singed when he stepped away. He gave me a look of longing then rushed after the woman at high speed. I stood there in the woods, totally alone, wondering if I should have tried to go with him for the sake of Erik's plan. But he probably wouldn't have let me anyway...

I glanced back in the direction of the castle, but something drew my feet along the path Erik and Paige had taken. After a few hundred yards, their voices carried to me and I pressed myself against a tree, glancing around it. They were sitting on a blanket on the lawn beyond the woodland, laughing about something.

My jaw tightened as I watched and I became overly aware I was acting like a stalker.

*Maybe I could go over to him and tell him about the Chancellor's death?  
No, stop being creepy and turn around.*

I gathered my pride from the ground, hurrying back through the trees and the castle soon came into view.

The halls were quiet as I headed inside and my skin prickled with a strange sensation. I jogged upstairs, intending to return to my room, but the feeling wouldn't subside. I felt...watched.

I eyed the corridor, searching, but there was no one there.  
*Maybe I'm being paranoid.*

Continuing toward my room, I quickened my pace, wanting to put a closed door between myself and the quiet hallways.

Before I stepped into my room, a rat scurried across my path. I'd seen plenty of the creatures in the Realm, but I wouldn't have expected to find one here in the immaculate castle. I watched as it paused a few feet away then glanced back, looking directly at me.

"Shoo," I hissed, wafting my hands.

"Vermin in the hallways," a malicious voice cut into me. "Tut. Tut."

I turned sharply, coming face to face with General Wolfe and my gut clenched violently. His cold blue eyes weren't on the rat, but me. "What will we do about this infestation?" he mused.

I clasped the door handle behind me, desperate to escape this vile vampire. But the moment I tried to open it, he moved toward me in a flash, slamming his hands either side of my head and crushing me to the door.

"Get off me!" I cried, hoping someone might hear me.

His hand crashed against my mouth and a wave of terror flowed into my

veins.

“No one's here. It's just you and me. And I've been wanting to have this conversation for a while.” I hated how beautiful he was, how cruel something so perfect-looking could be.

My throat was too dry, my knees too weak. But I didn't want this bastard to see me cower.

“I'm going to remove my hand, if you scream I'll make sure you regret it,” he growled, his lifeless eyes drilling into mine.

I nodded and he released me, but kept me caged within his arms. “Five vampires were killed outside of your Realm, human. Your sister was present when it happened, now tell me how that could be possible.”

My heart thudded harder. His words unfolded in my mind and I shook my head, having no answer for that. Callie couldn't have killed them. It was impossible.

“I don't know,” I breathed.

“Hm,” he grunted with a false smile. “I think you do know. In fact, I think your family are hiding a nasty little secret.” He snatched my right arm, dragging up my sleeve in the exact same way Valentina had done yesterday. He turned it left and right, inspecting it under his nose.

“What are you looking for?” I demanded, fighting to keep my voice steady.

He dropped my arm, reaching into his robes and producing something wrapped in a sheet of thick leather. Unfolding it, he revealed a curved golden blade with runes inscribed on the hilt.

Fear took me hostage and I leant harder against the door to try and put some space between us.

*He won't hurt me. The royals wouldn't allow it.*

But the royals weren't here, so how could I be sure?

“Take the blade,” Wolfe commanded, offering it to me on the unfolded sheath of leather.

I shrank back, shaking my head. What the hell?

“Take it!” he barked and I reached for it, having no choice.

I took hold of the hilt and it immediately warmed in my palm. Wolfe eyed me closely and I wondered what he was waiting for. Did he want me to attack him? Maybe he wanted an excuse to kill me. But why would anyone believe I'd attack an Elite?

The blade seemed to hum with energy and I gasped as a strange voice

entered my mind. *Nightmare*.

It vibrated quietly in my palm and the urge to strike Wolfe overwhelmed me. I fought it back, knowing that would equal my end.

“Well?” Wolfe snapped.

“Well what?” I whispered, refusing to tell him what I'd heard or how this weapon *felt*.

“Is the blade hot?” he snarled.

My lower lip threatened a quiver. The blade seemed to whisper to me, *don't tell him the truth*. I must have been going crazy. Perhaps it was just my voice I was hearing. Either way, I knew in the depths of my soul I needed to do as it said.

I gazed at Wolfe for a few more seconds then constructed my face into confusion. “What do you mean *hot*? It's a knife so it feels cold like any knife.”

His fingers twitched as if he wished to touch the blade himself but couldn't.

“Do not lie to me.” He shoved a finger in my face.

“I'm not,” I insisted, praying I was convincing him. He placed the sheath of leather over his palm and I could tell how much he didn't want to touch the blade.

“Give it to me,” he ordered.

As I handed it over, I purposefully dropped the handle so it touched his exposed wrist.

“Ah! You little *bitch*,” he hissed, quickly wrapping the knife in the leather.

I eyed the burn on his wrist with a thrill dancing in my chest. Whatever this blade was, it was designed to hurt vampires. And that made it my new best friend.

As he stowed the dagger beneath his robes, my heart ached with longing like it wished to be reunited with the weapon. My fingers tingled from the loss of it and my right forearm began to itch.

Wolfe lowered his head so he was nose to nose with me. “You will show me your arm again in a few days, then we'll see.”

My heart nearly stopped as he forced me harder against the door. My back began to ache from the pressure. His hips dug painfully into mine.

I ground my teeth, refusing to beg. His gaze willed me to crack, but I wouldn't. Not ever.

Finally, he released me and relief tumbled through my chest.

Wolfe stepped back, lifting his angular chin. “Your sister will be caught

soon. If you wish for her to arrive here without any little *accidents* happening, I suggest you keep this to yourself. Tell Count Erik I questioned you and I'll make sure she is gutted on her journey here.”

Fear burrowed into my heart. I glared at him, wishing I could hurt him in the way he'd hurt me and my family. If only I had that blade and a place I could drive it into his chest without anyone noticing.

He turned on his heel, marching away and I half-fell into my room. My hands balled into fists as I fought the urge to scream my rage. My forearm continued to tingle and I wrenched up my sleeve, eyeing it for some reaction. Nothing...

I shut my eyes, wishing I understood what had just happened.

Light flooded my vision followed by a glimpse of swaying trees. Birdsong and the rush of wind through a thousand leaves filled my ears. Golden hair danced around my face, tickling my cheeks.

“Callie?” I whispered aloud, then the vision faltered and I found myself on my knees in a cold sweat.

I gathered myself up, trying to still my racing heart. I pulled my hair into my hands, eyeing it closely. Dark curls gazed back at me. I blinked hard, feeling a little dizzy. Maybe my mind was playing tricks on me. But the feel of that heated blade had been all too real.

What did Wolfe know? What was he trying to prove?

I dropped into the velvet armchair, folding my legs beneath me. A heaviness fell over me like my body was trying to will me to sleep. I finally gave up trying to stay awake and was pulled down into dreams of a forest and the sense that I was somehow achingly close to my twin.



*Cold stone walls surrounded me. I was alone, the one beating heart in a room filled with the dead. They stared at me with their too-beautiful faces and eyes full of hunger. They smiled but I could only see the sharpness of their fangs in the gesture. I touched a hand to my neck as if that might protect me from them.*

*The iron-cold eyes of a stranger found me but instead of feeling fear, my heart leapt with excitement. He was like the one solid point in the centre of the room. While the rest of them circled me like a pack of dogs searching for weakness, he stood still, waiting for me. If I could hold on to him then I might just survive.*

*I ran towards him, reaching for him but the faster I moved the further he seemed to retreat. And the rest of the monsters were getting closer. They closed in on me, blocking my view of him until I couldn't see him at all. I instantly forgot what he looked like.*

*I could only see his eyes in my memory. His iron gaze burning its way through my soul. Trying to burrow into my heart.*

“No!” I gasped as I shoved myself upright, the last dregs of sleep clinging to me.

I squinted around in confusion, trying to figure out where I was. I reached out for Montana like I had a million times before when her bed had been right beside mine and she'd always been so close to me. Now she only seemed near in my dreams.

I dropped my hand to the flattened grass and took a deep breath as I ran my fingers through it. She wasn't there, I couldn't do anything to help her.

I glanced around at the small space we'd slept in and shivered. We'd made camp under the feeble shelter created by the broken carriage. It was barely big enough for the two of us to lay in. But after an awkward evening where



neither of us had acknowledged the weird moment that had passed between us and effectively made it a hundred times weirder, I'd escaped into sleep as early as I could.

The last I'd seen of Magnar was when I'd turned my back on him and closed my eyes, willing sleep to take me so that I didn't have to concentrate on the inch of space which separated us.

He was nowhere to be seen now.

I rubbed my skin where the manacles still encircled my wrists. Magnar had managed to cut the chain free using the axe but without the key I was stuck with these bracelets for the foreseeable future. The idea made my heart flutter with discomfort but I forced the feeling aside. We had bigger problems to deal with.

"Magnar?" I called hesitantly, wondering if he was having trouble sleeping again. He always woke before me and I wasn't sure he'd ever fallen asleep before I had either. In fact I couldn't really be sure if he slept at all. Maybe lying in slumber for a thousand years meant he didn't need sleep anymore.

There was no reply so I pushed my coat off of me and shifted onto my hands and knees. I crawled towards the dim sunlight which shone between the broken axles of the wagon's wheel.

A thin tarp fluttered in the wind, lifting a little and giving me a view of the clearing outside. I reached out and pulled it aside.

"Magnar?" I called again, looking around uncertainly.

There was still no response so I crawled out into the cool air, stepping over the runes he'd scratched into the soil last night, careful not to disturb them. If any more vampires came for me I intended on leaping straight back under the cart within their protection.

Birdsong called to me on the far side of the clearing so I headed towards it, wondering if the slayer had gone to check for any signs of more vampires.

I passed the spot where he'd killed the Elite, her robes a blood-stained heap on the ground.

My mind wandered as I walked, sifting over the details of my dreams. Though trying to do so felt like examining grains of sand. Each piece was impossible to line up with the next. The more I tried to find meaning in them the more confused I ended up. Sleep wasn't the escape it used to be. My dreams were plagued with thoughts of Montana and the vampire who tormented her.

I only hoped that it didn't mean she was being tortured by some psychotic

immortal in the blood bank but the idea that it might be the case put me into a sour mood.

I made my way between the trees, pausing as I tried to decide if I should call out to him. My gut prickled uneasily as I looked left and right. Where would he have gone? Why didn't he tell me?

A bunch of wide leaves sat to my left, the morning's dew gathering on them in little puddles. I stooped low and lifted one to my parched lips, tipping the water into my mouth. It was sweet and cold, sending a chill racing down my spine and quenching my thirst.

I pushed my sleeves back and splashed some more of the water over my face, shuddering against the chill as I rinsed my skin clean.

"You should have stayed in the safety of our shelter."

I flinched in surprise and looked up to find Magnar standing between two thick pines, watching me with an eyebrow raised in disapproval.

"Holy shit Magnar, you shouldn't sneak up on people like that!" I pushed myself upright and scowled at him. "Where have you been?"

He stepped between the trees, closing the distance between us before dangling a silver key in front of my eyes. "I thought you might prefer to remove your new jewellery."

"How did you find it?" I asked, my irritation forgotten as I offered him my wrist and smiled widely.

"I merely searched the robes of the dead vampires." He shrugged as he tossed the first manacle to the ground then took my right hand to repeat the process.

My heart lifted as the iron cuffs left my skin. I'd been a prisoner for too much of my life and being stuck in the shackles had felt like a reminder of what I'd wanted to leave behind.

As he dropped the second cuff, he turned my hand over, brushing his fingers along the slayer's mark on my flesh. Goosebumps rose in response to his touch and I glanced up at him hesitantly, wondering what he was thinking.

"Thank you," I said, hoping he could hear how much I meant it. Though I wouldn't have wasted my breath complaining about it, the idea of being stuck in those shackles had been weighing on me all night. It was like he'd known how much I needed to be free of them and had gone to the effort of making sure I could be. I'd never had anyone care about me like that aside from my family.

“It was no burden. I had to retrieve our supplies anyway.” He shrugged, releasing my arm and headed back towards the clearing.

I followed quickly, noticing the two packs which hung over his shoulder. We’d hidden them before our failed ambush on the vampires and I’d presumed they’d been lost far behind us. I guessed I needed to stop underestimating Magnar’s abilities.

“So, I’ve been thinking it might be an idea if I had *some* knowledge of how to wield Fury,” I said hesitantly.

“You wish for me to teach you how to kill a vampire?” he asked without looking back at me.

“Well, yeah. I mean, I know I won’t be able to learn much before we get to the blood bank but surely having one or two moves under my belt would be worthwhile. I mean, it might just save my life. Or yours.”

Magnar let out a deep chuckle as if I’d been joking and heat rose in my cheeks.

“I cannot teach you the ways of my kind unless you take your vow... but I suppose a few basic lessons would not be going against the will of the gods.”

“Really?” I asked hopefully, a smile finding its way to my face. The idea of facing a vampire with a better chance of holding my own against them lit a fire of excitement coursing through me.

We made it back to the overturned wagon and Magnar dropped the packs.

“Draw your blade,” he instructed as he unclasped his cloak and hung it over the carriage.

I pulled Fury into my hand and it seemed to hum with excitement.

“Move quickly, strike for the heart. Try not to overthink things. Let the blade guide you; it knows what to do.” He removed Tempest and Venom from the sheaths on his back and placed them onto the cart too before stooping and retrieving a long branch from the ground.

“What’s that for?” I asked, frowning at it.

“The vampires carry swords. Imagine it’s a sword.” His eyes danced with amusement and I bit my lip as I began to wonder what I was getting myself into.

“Why don’t you just use one of your blades instead of a stick then?”

“Because a blow from one of my blades could cut you in two and I’d sooner avoid killing you.” His mouth twitched and I was struck with the desire to wipe the smile off of his face. I frowned down at the blade in my palm, sure it was responsible for the violent thought.

“Shouldn’t I use a stick too?” I asked. Fury was much smaller than his blades but it was sharp enough to skin an acorn. I was sure getting stabbed by it would be no fun at all, especially as he’d instructed me to aim for his heart.

Magnar’s reply was a deep laugh and I ground my teeth as I moved closer to him. Fury wanted to punish him for mocking me and I was beginning to feel the same way.

I stepped towards him and he smacked the stick into the ground between my feet. I lurched back in surprise, looking up at him with a frown.

“Stay light on your feet, don’t stomp.”

“I don’t *stomp*,” I objected.

I stepped forward again but his stick slammed down, crushing my toes. I bit out a curse but he swung the stick again, aiming for my other foot. I hopped back, dancing away as he continued to aim for my toes.

Each time I placed my foot back down, the stick was there; it caught my feet more than once, sending pain racing through me.

“Why aren’t you trying to kill me?” Magnar mocked as he drove me further and further back.

I had no time to even think about the blade in my hand as I tried desperately to avoid the blows aimed at my feet. I squealed more than once as my toes were crushed. He moved so quickly, it was impossible to avoid him.

Anger licked down my spine. Fury raged in my palm. As he struck my foot again, I released a hiss of pain.

There was no way for me to avoid his strikes let alone try to attack, unless...

I planted my feet, forcing my attention away from the pain which flared as he hit my left foot and lunged for him with Fury singing its joy in my palm.

I made it to within an inch of his fighting leathers before he batted my hand aside, almost knocking the blade from my grip.

“Good,” he commented. “Now just-”

I twisted towards him again, my movements guided by Fury which had grown hot enough to burn though it didn’t so much as singe my skin.

I ducked beneath the stick as he swung it for my head and kicked out at the side of his knee. My boot connected with his leg and my ankle buckled from the impact.

Magnar’s stick swung out, sweeping my other leg out from beneath me. I caught his arm, my legs tangling with his as I fell and I yanked him off balance.

We both fell into the dirt and Magnar laughed as he caught my arm in his grip, pressing my wrist into the grass so that I couldn't get Fury close to him again.

He knelt over my hips, pinning me beneath him and smirked. "That blade is teaching you to fight dirty."

I struggled feebly in his grip, forcing the heels of my boots into the mud as I tried to buck him off of me.

"And you're all about fighting honourably?" I asked with a sigh, feigning defeat as I laid back in the grass. Fury continued to whisper instructions through my mind though and I glanced at the knife he had strapped to his belt. "Like with that Elite yesterday?"

"You don't approve?" He raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I just don't think the bloodsuckers deserve an honourable death. I'd rather do whatever it takes to get the job done than risk my life." I lunged forward and snatched the blade from his belt with my free hand.

Magnar caught my hand before I could even release it from its sheath, twisting my wrist so that I was forced to drop the knife. He caught it and leant forward, pressing it to my throat. His hair fell around his face which was just inches from mine as he looked into my eyes.

"Nice try," he breathed.

My heart pounded as I stared up at him, unable to form any response as his close proximity sent my thoughts scattering.

He held my gaze for several seconds then cleared his throat and stood up. The heat from his body left me and I shuddered as I pushed myself up onto my elbows.

"Can I try again?" I asked.

He walked away from me and started rummaging in his pack. "We need to get moving." He tossed me an apple which we'd found on a tree yesterday. A lot of them had been rotten but there had a been a few that were still edible.

I caught it and stood as disappointment filled me. I knew we needed to get to the blood bank as quickly as possible but learning to use the skills my ancestors had mastered had set something burning in my blood. It felt good. Right. Like what I'd been born to do.

"Today you can start to hone your skills if that's what you want. You can begin by learning to move silently while we travel," Magnar instructed.

"Okay..." I frowned at him as he replaced his swords and cloak on his back before shouldering his pack and heading out of the clearing.

I wasn't entirely sure if it was just an excuse not to talk to me but I didn't have a good enough reason to object so I agreed to it. Besides, any skill that I could learn from him might help me when it came to getting my family the hell away from the bloodsuckers.

I quickly retrieved my coat from beneath the wagon and pulled it on before racing after him.

"You're already failing terribly," he commented as I crashed my way over broken twigs and fallen leaves in an attempt to catch up with him.

"You could have waited for me," I grumbled in return.

He grunted in place of a response, his attention fixed on the ground. I sighed as I fell into step behind him and tried to focus on keeping my feet silent as I walked.



I followed Magnar in silence as he stalked between the trees.

He'd been unusually quiet all morning which for him meant he'd basically been silent. I didn't know if it was something I'd done or just his usual demons haunting him and I hadn't felt brave enough to ask.

My thoughts kept drifting to the feeling of my mouth on his skin after he'd released me from the vampires. My imagination itched to find out what it would have felt like if our lips had really met. I thought I'd caught him watching me a few times since our encounter and I wondered if his feelings were in line with my own. Or if I was just trying to convince myself of that possibility.

Perhaps the hush between us was as much my doing as his. I bit my lip as I considered starting conversations about various topics from our families to our hopes and dreams but I never voiced any of them. I guessed I was afraid of his rejection; if my questions were met with silence then I'd have to face the fact that he might be upset with me.

After all he'd done to save me yesterday, I could only imagine my actions were the reason for his silence. Maybe he had been in love with someone before he'd slept. He'd told me he'd had to give up a lot of things and leave a lot of people behind. If that was the case then I couldn't be surprised that launching myself into his arms had forced him to create a distance between us again.

My gut tightened at the thought of heading south once I'd reunited with my

family. I hadn't broached the subject with Magnar but I was pretty sure he wouldn't come with us. He'd made it clear that his whole point of living was to kill the vampires and I doubted that tallied up with getting as far from them as humanly possible. The thought made me feel sadder than I would have liked but there was nothing I could do about it. We were on different paths. That was just the way it had to be.

At least I had Fury back. The strangely comforting blade hung in a sheath at my hip and I found myself running my thumb along its hilt more than once. I enjoyed the way it felt when I touched it; like a cat arching its back to be stroked. The fondness I felt for the lump of metal may have been peculiar but it was like travelling with an old friend. I knew it had my best interests at heart. It wanted to help me. Wanted to be with me. And I wanted to be with *it* too.

*I've made friends with a knife. Pretty sure that counts as insane.*

My foot landed on a pine-cone and it crunched loudly as it crumbled beneath my boot. I froze guiltily as Magnar turned his disapproving gaze on me.

"You move with all the grace of a pregnant buffalo," he growled. I'd quickly learned that his teaching technique was firmly in the tough love camp. Minus the love part.

"Wow, calling me a buffalo really wouldn't cut it? You had to add pregnant to the mix?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Magnar folded his arms as he regarded me. "You place your feet with no care at all. If someone was hunting you they would find you with ease from a great distance. You do not survey your surroundings as you enter them. Your movements are careless and sloppy. If you do not fix these things then you make yourself an easy target for the monsters who crave your blood. Would you sooner go without my help in fixing this?"

*I'd sooner not be called a pregnant buffalo.*

"Okay," I sighed. "But maybe you could give me some advice rather than just insulting me when I get it wrong."

"You're right. I advise you to move silently." He turned his back on me and walked away without letting me respond.

I scowled at him, stooped down to retrieve the crushed pine-cone and threw it at the back of his head. Infuriatingly, he ducked aside before it could make contact.

"Next time, try throwing it *silently*." He continued to walk away from me

and I began to wish that he would inadvertently step on a twig. But of course he didn't.

Why the hell was I thinking about his mouth on mine when all I really wanted was to punch him in the head?

*Yeah, keep telling yourself that Callie.*

I ground my teeth in irritation as I attempted to stay silent while mentally cursing him in as many ways as I could come up with. He was infuriating, irritating, enraging and so distractingly attractive it drove me insane.

As we moved on, he kept pausing, ducking low to the ground and pushing leaves aside. The ground had frozen solid in the night and I couldn't make out any tracks despite his constant observations. I itched to ask him what he was seeing that I couldn't but I guessed that would go against my mission of keeping quiet.

As the day wore on, I began to get better at placing my feet and spotting the things which would cause me to give away my movements. Magnar's insults grew fewer and farther between and I began to believe that I might actually be adapting in the way he'd hoped.

Magnar paused just outside a clearing, staying hidden in the shade of the trees as he looked out.

I crept towards him, stopping a few feet away.

"Better," he announced in a low voice and the almost-compliment felt like the highest praise after a morning of insults. Not that I let it show on my face, but it was annoyingly difficult not to smirk.

"So am I going to find out what we've spent the morning looking for?" I asked in a whisper.

In answer, Magnar pointed to the clearing and I leant closer to see around him. Two large, black shire horses chomped at the green grass by their feet. They were tethered together by a half-smashed contraption which I guessed was what had been securing them to the vampires' carriage before they'd broken free.

Bloody red stripes stood out on their rears marking the trails made by the vampires' whips. My gut lurched at the sight. It seemed the vampires' cruelty extended to all warm-blooded beings. I felt a natural affinity to the creatures. They'd been slaves to the same wicked masters as I had and they'd gotten free too.

"How are you with horses?" Magnar asked gently as I watched the beautiful animals.



“I’ve never seen one this close before,” I admitted. “Occasionally I would see an Elite riding one when they had to visit the Realm but I’d always just head the other way, hoping not to attract any attention.”

“Then you can consider this your next test. We have tracked these beasts and employed stealth as we approached them. Now it is important that we gain their trust. They will help us to cover more ground and get to the blood bank quicker. We have taken quite a detour and it concerns me that the vampires have held your family for so long.”

My gut twisted uncomfortably as I thought of them locked in that dungeon. If the horses would mean that we could save them sooner then I’d do it. I’d sworn to do whatever it took and approaching two beautiful creatures was the least challenging thing I’d had to do so far.

I took a deep breath and stepped around Magnar, ignoring the pull I felt towards him as I passed by. I continued to practice what I’d been learning today, picking my steps carefully and moving silently towards them.

The closest horse whinnied softly as it spotted me approaching and I started to murmur reassurances as I closed in on her. The second horse seemed a little more nervous but that was okay, he’d been through a lot after all.

“Hey pretty girl,” I said softly as I held my hand out in greeting.

The horse turned towards me, tugging her companion around too. She took a step forward and I stilled. They were *big*. I swallowed a lump in my throat and made myself take another step, forcing my nerves not to show.

The braver horse shifted closer and pressed her soft nose against my hand. I smiled up at her as I stroked the smooth hair covering it and gently rubbed her beautiful face. She tilted her head into my palm, enjoying the attention and I was able to grasp the leather bridle which encircled her head.

Magnar appeared beside me and reached up to take the reins from her back. I continued to pet her as he cut the broken remains of the carriage away and separated the two horses. The stallion began to feel a little braver as he got used to our presence and he moved close enough for me to stroke him too.

“I take it you cannot ride?” Magnar asked me as he hitched a rope over the mare’s back before tying his pack in place upon her.

“No,” I admitted, wondering what that would mean for his plan to use them to get to the blood bank. If I couldn’t ride one of the horses then how would we get there?

“We have no time for you to learn. You’ll ride with me.” He plucked my pack from my shoulders and added it to the mare’s back.

I eyed him with interest as he expertly secured our things then tied a rope to the mare’s bridle. Next, he cut the long driving reins from the carriage and tied them so that they could be used to direct the stallion.

Once everything was prepared, Magnar leapt up onto the huge animal. The movement was so swift and precise that I was sure he had done it a thousand times before.

I backed away as the horse snorted unhappily, chomping at the bit while his nostrils flared.

The black stallion stamped his feet as he shifted uneasily beneath Magnar. He tossed his head and reared up. I stumbled away in fright, a squeal of surprise escaping me as I tried not to get trampled.

Magnar tightened his grip on the reins, managing to stay on as the stallion slammed his front feet back to the ground. The horse snorted wildly, trying to toss his head as Magnar fought to control him.

My back hit a thick trunk and I recoiled against it as the huge animal continued to protest against its new rider. Magnar gritted his teeth and rumbled some kind of command to the beast which I couldn’t make out. The horse reared up again but through some miracle, Magnar held his seat. He wrangled the horse into submission, making it trot up and down in the small clearing as the mare followed.

I watched them nervously as he continued to make the stallion bow to his commands and the horse slowly gave up on fighting them.

Magnar directed the beautiful creature towards me and I bit my lip nervously as I looked up at him. The horse’s back was almost level with my head and I had no idea how I was supposed to climb onto him. Or if I even wanted to. That was a long way down if I fell.

Magnar smiled knowingly as he noted my hesitation and held out a hand. “Come. I won’t let you fall.”

I gazed at his hand indecisively and he sighed.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

*With my life.* “Yes,” I breathed as I placed my hand in his.

His fingers enveloped mine and the rough calluses which lined his palm brushed against my skin. He pulled me skyward, swinging me up onto the huge animal’s back as easily as if I weighed nothing at all and placed me in front of him.

The horse shifted from foot to foot beneath us and I shrank back against Magnar's chest as he chuckled at my fear.

"I've got you," he assured me, wrapping his powerful arms around my waist. My heart thumped with a mixture of terror and something I didn't want to admit to.

Magnar snapped the reins and clicked his tongue at the horse who started walking at the command.

I gasped at the strange sensation as I struggled to hold myself upright, clamping my legs tightly around the stallion's body.

"Don't fight the motion," Magnar rumbled in my ear, his breath dancing against my cheek. "Let your body move with him." He tightened his grip, pulling me closer to him so that I could feel his movements.

I tried to force myself to relax but it was almost impossible while he held me like that. The lines of his body pressed against mine and heat flooded through me as I struggled to force my thoughts away from him.

"Better," he commented though I hadn't done anything other than give in to the urge to press myself against him. My treacherous body wanted to move in time with his and I was shamelessly taking advantage of the situation.

I frowned as I thought about us parting again and wondered if I dared ask him about it. A part of me didn't want to know so that I could convince myself there might be some hope for the feelings he was beginning to stir in me. But I had to.

"I was wondering what you'll do after we free my dad and Montana," I asked him, my voice quieter than I'd intended as though that might shield me from a truth I didn't want to hear.

"After?" he asked and I wished I could see his face to gain some idea of what he was thinking.

"Yeah. I mean once you've destroyed the blood bank and freed the people trapped there. What then?"

Magnar shifted his grip on the reins as the silence stretched and I began to wonder if he'd even reply.

"I must find and kill the Belvederes. I have to finish what I started a thousand years ago." I wasn't sure if I detected a hint of regret in his tone or if I was just imagining it.

My heart sank although I'd always known that would be his answer. After the things those monsters had done to him and his people and were still doing to humans now, I knew there wouldn't be any other choice for him. He'd

been on that path since before my great grandparents were born, he was hardly going to turn from it now. He'd already sacrificed everything he'd ever loved in his pursuit of the Belvederes, and I paled into insignificance beside that.

We continued on through the trees, heading downhill and moving steadily south. I felt as if the blood bank could be just beyond the next ridge, waiting to end our time alongside each other with bitter finality. We had a few days left together at the most. And though I desperately wanted to get there as quickly as we could to save my family, I hated to think about saying goodbye.

"You could come with me," Magnar said, though he sounded like he already knew my answer too.

"I have to make sure my family are safe." I shook my head sadly. "We can't head towards the very people who want to hurt us. I... I have to go with them and get away from the vampires. We have to head south to the sunshine." A single tear slipped past the resolve I was clinging to and I let it track down my cheek in silence, not raising a hand to remove it. That was it then. After the blood bank we'd be heading separate ways. Neither of us could change our plans and neither of us could ask it of the other.

Magnar's grip tightened around me and his thumb brushed a line along the back of my hand. I bit my lip as more tears threatened to find me. It felt like he'd just said goodbye.

# Erik



1200 YEARS AGO

**A**ndvari was mocking us, I was sure of it. Any chance of returning life to my body seemed to wane before my very eyes. I had already spent much of my undead life searching for the answer. But the riddle Andvari had delivered to us was maddening.

We were cursed to thirst for blood, to live on this earth as demons and to torture humankind. And I'd had enough. I'd found the strongest place inside my heart and taken shelter there. A place that whispered to me a promise of redemption. My own human death was what I craved. Not even the life before it anymore.

The people of my lands called me Draugr. Vampire. I was a beast feasting on flesh. A man turned animal. Only the four of us remained from our village. Clarice, Fabian, Miles and I. Four pillars of stone who'd never fall to dust.

The others had found a way of life, something to keep them sane. They had bowed to the blood lust. After a time, we'd taken different paths and headed to the four corners of our lands in hopes that we would draw less attention to ourselves. But some of my siblings had flaunted their powers...

In the south, Miles offered eternal life to those who gave him blood and had grown a sizeable group of pious followers.

In the east, men flocked to Clarice for her beauty, worshipping her in the belief that she was a deity. Their blood sacrifice was the price of her company and they gave it willingly.

In the north, Fabian used his animal spies, his Familiars, to seek out the vulnerable. Humans who strayed from their towns, the lone travellers and the

outcasts. He took those who wouldn't be missed to ensure he was never hunted down. Fabian's fear of death made him the most cunning of us all. He never caused a stir, always sired humans who could help him gain access to more blood, made deals and played tricks to keep his name from growing too famous. Andvari had come to us once and told us how to sire mortals, make them like us. But I'd refused to do any such thing, unlike my kin.

Through all the years that had passed, I'd remained on the west coast. My homeland. The rolling forests, the fjords and high rivers were a comfort to me.

I had tried all of my family's ways over the years to find a place in this world. A manner of living that provided blood at the smallest price. I'd even attempted not to kill for blood, but sometimes the hunger was all-consuming. And now I felt the burden of those deaths weighing on my soul.

It had been weeks since my last feed. I'd wandered too far inland, roaming the forests of old, praying to the gods, trying to get some answers.

My footfalls made no noise as I crossed the mossy ground, following a well-worn path once used by tradesmen. But they'd long-since moved on from this area. They believed it cursed. And I supposed I was proof of that.

*What would you have me do to end this? I will do it, Andvari.*

No reply came to my thoughts. Sometimes the god spoke to me in whispers between the rocks, from shining puddles and stagnant water. He was ever-present and yet always eluding me.

I paced to the still pool between five trees. It appeared green beneath the canopy and was formed of several boulders in a circle. I'd discovered this place long ago. The wind barely stirred the air here, the atmosphere was denser and the forest seemed to hold its breath.

Andvari was near.

"Tell me again." I perched on a boulder, poised in a crouch as I gazed down at the glass-like surface. Despite the glossy sheen of the water, no reflection was cast back at me.

A single golden leaf dropped from a branch above, spiralling down and landing on the pool. As ripples spread out around it, the water changed until my reflection appeared. Andvari always spoke to me this way, with my own mouth. A way of tormenting me perhaps.

My reflection moved, but I didn't. It crept closer on the boulder whereas I remained perfectly still.

"Speak your name," Andvari purred in my own voice.

“Erik Larsen,” I breathed.

“You shall be known otherwise one day,” he replied.

“When? How?” I demanded, my tongue as dry as ash in my mouth.

“There is a great journey in your future,” he said, tilting his head to one side, his mouth lifting in a mocking smile.

“Tell me how to break the curse. Tell me again,” I begged.

Andvari reached toward the surface of the water and the leaf began to spin in slow circles.

“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 tried to find new meaning in the words, but I couldn't see the answer. “Please, tell me more. Tell me what it means.”

Andvari chuckled. “Time is your friend now. You have many years to decipher the meaning.”

“I don't want to live this way!” I picked up a stone by my feet and threw it at the pool.

Not a splash, not a ripple. The stone sunk to the bottom and Andvari regarded it with amusement.

“You have no choice,” Andvari said.

I thought on the prophecy but there was only one part of it I understood. “The holy mountain is Helgafjell. A place of the afterlife. My family and I have already sought it out. We have found the treasure our mothers and fathers stole from you. You know where it is. Is this not enough to pay our debt?”

Andvari sat back on the boulder, regarding me. “That is only one part of it, Draugr...”

I scraped a hand through my hair. I was growing weary and so, so hungry. I was losing my mind in this forest. Sometimes I feared I would sit down against a tree one day and never rise again.

“Blood will sate you,” Andvari whispered. “You only need to seek it out.”

“The curse...it speaks of a debt,” I said, refusing to accept his words. He

would try to lead me astray as always. I had to find the answer to his riddle. “If I pay it in hunger will it break the curse?”

A smile pulled at Andvari's mouth. “Do you believe that is the answer?”

“I don't know.” I rubbed my throat, the ache there growing unbearable. If Andvari wanted suffering, perhaps this was the solution. Perhaps it might be enough to return life to my body if I refused to give in to the urges of the curse.

“You will go mad with hunger,” Andvari said, his voice as sweet as honey. “That is a high price to pay, Erik Larsen. You will break. You will cave. You will not last a year in hunger before it forces your hand.”

“I am stronger than you think,” I snarled, growing impatient. “If that is the price, I will pay it.”

Andvari's reflection started to fade and I knew he was leaving me. Was that my answer? Could this be the debt the prophecy spoke of?

As the water returned to a glistening pool of dark green, my decision was made.

There was only one way I could stop myself from breaking. I'd find a place I could seal myself inside. I'd take away the option of submitting to the curse.

I would pay my debt. And pray my heart would beat with human life once more.



I headed north to speak with Fabian. My brother. Or so we called ourselves now. Our true families were dead so we'd united as siblings instead. But it did nothing to ease the pain at the loss of my real sister.

The days merged. Night and day were barely distinguishable. The daylight barely grew to dawn beyond the dark clouds this time of year. The further north I travelled, the more snow I encountered. Its icy touch was nothing in comparison to my cold body and it was no more a burden than the winding trails of the forests.

As I stood one day at the peak of a hill beneath the heavy shade of an oak tree, a raven landed on a branch above my head.

It cawed to me and I tilted my head to look at it. It nestled down on the branch and I sensed this was one of Fabian's birds. Dropping down, I sat with my back to the tree and waited for him to come.

Darkness fell and silence crept across the land as animals took roost. After



a time, an easterly wind swept over me and I caught the scent of blood on the air. I ran my tongue across my fangs, the hunger in me begging to be sated.

I held my knees and closed my eyes, willing the urge away.

*I will not be the monster Andvari made me.*

The blood drew ever closer, a group of five at a guess. Their scent was somehow familiar, but the ache at the base of my skull drowned any chance of me working out why.

They drew near on silent feet. Too silent for humans, I realised.

My senses grew sharper and I stood up, searching the dark surroundings. My eyesight was keen and I could see as well at night as I could in the day. The forest at the base of the hill was concealing them, but I knew they were there. I could taste them on the wind.

A rush of noise made me lurch aside and an arrow embedded itself in the oak tree behind me. I snarled as the group broke free of the trees, charging up the hill clad in fighting leathers.

*Slayers.*

I had been careless during my journey here. I hadn't wondered if I was being followed. It had been months since I'd last encountered their kind. They were Idun's revenge upon us for Andvari's crime against her. Men and women gifted with the strength to fight us. So to me, they were the enemy. An enemy I hadn't chosen but was cursed with all the same. Their ancestors had been cousins to my kin once and I'd been welcome in their halls. Now all they saw in me was the monster Andvari had created.

Spilling their blood was a dangerous thing. But I was too hungry to drown out that need as they ran on swift feet in my direction, bringing me the nourishment I craved.

I grew weak in that moment. And I knew as they crested the hill with battle cries and swords drawn that the curse was about to claim me once more.

"Stop!" I roared, but they didn't.

Two women and three men.

A man reached me first, just a youth barely past eighteen.

He lunged with his sword and I shifted aside, grabbing his wrist and snapping it like a twig. His wails died as I dug my fangs into his throat, taking the first drink I'd had in months. It tasted sweet and metallic at once. The blood lust took over, drowning me, turning me into the feral creature the gods had made me. The second slayer came at me from behind and I threw my elbow back, catching him in the nose as he tried to drive a dagger into my

back. He hit the ground and I twisted around, breaking his neck with a sharp crack.

The final three fell atop me at once. A searing pain scored into my side as a slayer blade met my skin. The woman it belonged to was dead at my feet in moments and a girl of similar looks screamed in pain at her loss. It didn't matter, because she was my next victim. Her body was soon slack in my arms as the final man grabbed my neck from behind, bringing his sword around to my throat. Before it made contact, I rammed my head back into his face, dropping us both to the ground.

I felt nothing. I was nothing.

I turned atop him and buried my fangs in his throat. He clawed and scratched, his sword fallen to the ground and lost to the cold depths of the snow.

The white world turned red around me. The monster in me fed until it could get no more.

Blood soaked my body and ran down my chin as I spat out the last of my drink. I cared minimally for their loss. But I cared more for my immortal soul. A soul now marred in blood once more.

“Brother!”

I turned, spotting Fabian as he sped up the hill toward me. He was at my side in moments, clutching my arm.

“I heard the fight, I came as fast as I could,” he said, shaking me when I didn't respond.

The pain in my back grew sharper and I clutched the wound as my body struggled to heal from the cut of a blessed blade.

I gazed down at the bodies surrounding us, wishing I'd stayed back on the coast and found a cave to seal myself inside there. But I needed to tell someone where I was. If I was remade as a human, I had to ensure someone could let me out.

“Fabian,” I whispered, meeting his dark gaze. “I may have found a way to break the curse.”

His eyes roamed over me. “Is that so?”

“I wish to rid myself of this hunger by starving it out of me.” I hissed between my teeth at the pain in my side. Slowly, it was easing. But it would take a while. The slayer blades were nothing like a human's. They were designed to hurt us.

“You say this covered in blood.” Fabian smiled, dropping to his knees and

digging his fangs into one of the women.

I watched with cold detachment as he drained what remaining life she had left.

“I do not wish to be like this forever,” I told him as he rose beside me, a glimmer of satisfaction in his gaze.

“Come, stay with me a while, Erik. You can make peace with the blood lust. There need be no guilt in it. I pick off the weak, that is no crime in our world of hardship. The townspeople will thank us.”

“Fabian...” I shook my head sharply. “My decision is made. I will trap myself inside a cave. I want you to be my guardian. To watch over my crypt until the gods return life to my body.”

He slid an arm around my shoulders, guiding me down the hill. “You are too hard on yourself. Don't be a fool. You will go mad with the hunger.”

“Perhaps, but Andvari will be watching, Fabian. This could be the debt he speaks of in the prophecy.”

Fabian sighed. “I can see your mind is made up.”

“It is. Will you help me?”

He clutched my arm. “Of course, brother. I will do as you ask.”

“It could bring your life back too,” I said. “Maybe this will be enough of a payment for all of us.”

Fabian ground his jaw. “Perhaps,” he muttered, glancing away.

We walked on for miles, heading deep into the forest until we arrived at the edge of a large cave which sat on the curve of a river.

“Are you sure about this?” Fabian asked. “At least spend an evening with me first.”

I shook my head. “Now, Fabian. It can't wait another day. My penance must begin now.”

I started gathering large rocks, building a wall before the cave and ignoring the stabbing pain in my side. Fabian finally joined me as we covered the entrance. It was nearly morning by the time a small hole was all that remained in the wall, just large enough for me to enter through.

I stepped toward it and Fabian took my arm. “Don't do this, Erik.”

I cupped the back of his neck and pulled him into my shoulder. “Let me pay this debt. Do not deny it of me.”

He sighed, releasing me and gesturing for me to go inside.

“Visit me every week,” I asked and he nodded stiffly.

I climbed through the narrow space, wincing as my skin flexed against the

wound. I dropped into the dank cave beyond the wall and fear flickered on the edges of my heart, but I didn't let it seize me. I was a born warrior. And I would die as one too. But not until my human body was restored.

“Fabian!” I called. “Do not release me until I am human. Let me waste here until the debt is paid.”

“As you wish, brother.” He forced stones into the hole and continued until it was packed solid.

I lowered myself down onto a rock, the darkness absolute.

And there, I would wait.

# Montana



*T*rees surrounded me, seeming to swirl like mist. Darkness gripped the world and made me squint as I tried to find something solid to focus on.

*A figure came into view in strange attire. He looked like a warrior from one of Dad's stories. Tall and roguish with streams of dark hair.*

*The world shuddered once more and he was suddenly closer. His eyes shone like molten gold and my heart stumbled with an ache of longing.*

*The world trembled around me and suddenly I was sat on a horse, swaying from side to side. Hills rolled out before me, merging into grasslands and trees.*

*The sun warmed my cheeks and the wind fluttered my hair.*

*Arms tightened around my waist and I gazed down, finding the tanned hands of a stranger.*

*A voice filled my mind as familiar as my own. Callie's voice. "I'm coming for you."*

A cool palm on my cheek stirred me. I jerked backwards as I woke fully, thinking of Wolfe but finding Erik crouched before the chair I was curled up in.

He extracted his hand, giving me a slanted smile, his metallic eyes warmer than usual. "Good evening."

Evening? I'd slept all day? Holy shit.

I glanced toward the window finding the shutters open, revealing a low moon above the trees.

"I take it your date with Fabian didn't go too well." He raised a brow, looking mildly intrigued by that fact.

I sighed. "He had something to do in the city. A Chancellor died apparently."

Erik's eyes glittered. "Ah, that makes sense."

I frowned as he rose to his feet then perched on the bed opposite me.

"Aren't you concerned?" I asked.

"No." He shrugged. "I was the one who had him killed." He smirked and my heart rate picked up.

"What? Why?"

Erik flopped backwards onto the mattress, not answering.

I stood from the chair, moving forward and tentatively sitting next to him. He gazed at me with a roguish grin.

"Well?" I pressed.

"Chancellor Torin had been poking around in my business for too long. I decided it was time to keep his beaky nose out of things for good. Besides, he's not the only one who's been killed lately. My men are being targeted, so I'm entitled to strike back."

My mouth grew dry as I absorbed this information. It was strange to know vampires had their own feuds. And were even willing to kill each other. I didn't know how much I could ask, and was even less sure if Erik would give me any answers.

Before I could pick a question from the torrent flowing through my mind, Erik snatched my arm, dragging me down beside him. A breath jammed in my lungs as he rolled onto his side to look at me, his mouth hooked up in a playful grin. My heart thundered as he lifted a palm and pushed a coil of hair from my face. The order he'd given me to forget about last night hovered at the edges of my mind, but it was impossible with him so close. His masculine scent was like a drug I was getting hooked on. But I'd always had strong willpower and I was determined not to get addicted. Especially not to a bloodsucker.

My thoughts realigned and I finally asked my first question. "Did you kill him yourself?"

The vampires were cold, undead creatures anyway so I wasn't sure if it mattered. Although the foundations of that belief were getting thoroughly shaken by Erik.

He released a breath of laughter. "Of course not. I have men for that. Women, too."

A stretch of silence dominated the space. I decided it was best to move on from how many people he may have killed in his lifetime. "Was this because of Faulkner? Did you find out who killed him?"

“Yes. And no I haven’t. Not specifically anyway,” Erik growled, darkness invading his eyes, revealing the deadly creature who lived there. “I am certain my brother was behind it, though. I sired Faulkner. He was loyal to me and no one else.” He ground his jaw, surveying me as if considering whether to continue. “Faulkner had been doing some work for me, gathering intel on Fabian’s men. I suspect Fabian found out and decided to send me a message. Of course, I at least had the courtesy to end Torin’s life quickly. The way Faulkner was killed... it’s clear Fabian wanted him to suffer.”

My throat grew dry as I absorbed his words. Fabian’s boyish manner didn’t add up with someone who could be so heartless. But then again, I’d learned not to trust the ways of a vampire long ago. Dad had once said, *‘a man who trusts a vampire is a fool. And a fool in this world will eventually be a dead fool’*.

If he could see me now, laying on a bed with one of them he’d be appalled.

My stomach prickled with guilt, but I didn’t move. I didn’t want to move. Erik was different. Or at least, maybe that’s what I hoped...

“How was your date with Paige?” I asked, wanting to move on from the subject of murder. “I thought you didn’t want any of the girls to pick you.” Not that it bothered me. Except it definitely did.

Erik gave me one of his famous smirks. “Jealous, Rebel?”

I spluttered a non-response, shaking my head. “Of course not,” I insisted, filling my voice with as much strength as I could muster.

His grin widened, his eyes glittering with amusement. “Then why were you skulking in the trees watching Paige and I earlier?”

Burning humiliation engulfed me. I didn’t have an answer to that, even for myself. Why the hell *had* I gone sneaking after them like a creep?

“I wasn’t skulking,” I insisted, composing myself. “I got lost looking for the castle.”

“Did you think staring at me for a while would help you find your way back?”

“I did not *stare* at you,” I growled, shame seeping through every inch of me.

*You idiot, Montana!*

“I was checking to make sure you weren’t feasting on Paige,” I said airily, trying to cover for my ass.

“Really? I thought you said you were looking for the castle.” Erik’s taunting smile was puncturing holes in my chest. Hell, why did he have to be

so confounding? I couldn't think straight around him. It was leaving me exposed and I despised being vulnerable.

I didn't have an answer so I just remained silent, knowing I'd never dig myself out of this cavernous hole.

Erik cupped his hands behind his head, finally releasing me from his punishing gaze. My eyes travelled to his biceps as they strained against the inside of his shirt and I immediately forced myself to look at his face again.

A devilish look captured his features. "Perhaps a wife could be a good idea after all. Her kisses tasted much sweeter than yours...maybe she's the one."

My lungs stopped allowing in air. He was such an asshole. How could I have thought for a second that our kiss had meant anything at all to this beast?

I was hot all over from his words, embarrassed and angry, hurt and furious with myself.

My cheeks were betraying me, turning scarlet by the second.

Erik started laughing.

My teeth ground together and I cursed myself for reacting the way I was.

I sat up, tucking my legs beneath me. "Why *did* you kiss me?" The question left my lips before I had time to filter it.

He tilted his head to look at me, mirth gripping his features. "Why did you kiss me back?"

I gaped at him, having no answer and despising myself for it. Maybe I'd been drunk on some vampire pheromones he'd given off. But I knew that was just a lie I was trying to convince myself of. The truth was, I'd kissed him back because it had felt so *right*. Like all the chaos in the world had suddenly felt a little easier to bear. Because kissing one of the monsters who'd haunted me my entire life had felt like the clouds parting and letting in the sunshine.

I didn't let any of that show on my face. And considering his mocking tone, I let a cold front drip over me and offered the words I hoped might scold him in the way he'd scolded me. "I was sad and you were there. I suppose it helped take my mind off of things for five seconds. You said we should pretend it never happened so let's continue with that."

His jaw hardened. "Fine by me. I only wanted to tick an item off my bucket list anyway."

"What's a bucket list?" My eyes narrowed.

"Something for people who have hopes and dreams. You know, like item number one on *your* list would be pissing off a royal vampire. You can put a



big tick next to that one by the way.”

I glowered at him. “Let’s move back to the real issue here.”

“Which is?” he asked coolly.

“That you can never kiss me again, Erik.”

He chuckled, annoying me further. “Can I add an escape clause to that verbal contract?”

I frowned. “Like?”

“Well...I'll promise not to kiss you again *unless* you ask me to.”

“Ha,” I spat. “Agreed, because that's never gonna happen.”

His lips pursed. “If I actually tried to court you properly, Rebel, you'd be begging me to kiss you in a matter of minutes.”

I released a hollow laugh. “You are so arrogant.”

“No, I'm simply stating facts.” He grinned keenly and I rolled my eyes. “So,” he changed the subject. “Are you going to stay in here all night? Fabian's been waiting for you in the dining hall for nearly an hour now.”

“Erik!” I gasped, springing to my feet. “Why didn't you tell me?” The last thing I wanted to do was piss off Fabian, the vampire responsible for a hundred atrocities. Who knew how he might react if I stepped out of line too much?

Erik shrugged. “I just did.”

“I thought I was supposed to be spying on him for you.” I hurried to the mirror, checking my make-up which thankfully wasn't smeared down my cheeks.

“You are. Keeping Fabian waiting will only serve to turn him on. And as much as I'm kind of disgusted with myself for being involved in that, I also know it is essential for him to fall for you.”

“Erik...” I frowned, turning to him as my heart took a dive. “Do you expect me to marry Fabian? Because I...I'm not sure I can do that.”

He was at my side in a flash, taking my arm and guiding me toward the door. “Don't worry about that, just focus on tonight.”

I went to protest but my right forearm suddenly seared with pain and I gasped, rubbing it.

Erik followed my gaze and I quickly dropped my hand, biting down on my tongue.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I lied quickly. “Just static shock.”

He raised his brows, but didn't question me further. I didn't know what the

hell was up with my arm, but telling Erik about it was a bad idea. That could lead to me mentioning Wolfe and if I did that, the General would make sure Callie didn't arrive at the castle in one piece.

We took the stairs down to the dining hall where I'd eaten on the first night. Instead of leaving me to it, Erik opened the door and followed me inside. The large table had been removed from the room and four tables were set up around the space instead. Clarice sat at one opposite Frank, his dark eyes flicking to me as I arrived. Across from them was Miles looking radiant in a white shirt and his blonde locks swept perfectly over the crest of his head. He was sat with Brianna who looked stunning in a sky blue dress which hugged her curves. Beyond them, Paige waited at a table alone, threading her fingers through her golden hair. Sitting at the final table was Fabian. He didn't look angry as I'd expected, but there was a definite tension in his expression.

Soft music filled the air, the tinkling notes creating a strangely romantic atmosphere. Erik squeezed me tight, his eyes on Fabian as he pressed a kiss to my hair.

I fought the urge to cringe away, still angry with him but knowing we had to play this game. Erik released me and made a beeline for Paige, filling the room with his dominating aura.

Lifting my chin, I strode toward Fabian and he rose from his seat as I arrived. "I thought you weren't coming," he growled, seeming offended.

"Sorry, I fell asleep," I said quickly, moving to his side and gripping his arm. Figuring I needed to make up for leaving him waiting, I tip-toed up and brushed a feather-light kiss to his lips.

A quiet little voice inside my head told me I was doing it to make Erik jealous. And I immediately regretted it.

Fabian tried to snare me in his arms, but I twisted away and dropped into my seat with a playful smile. Inside, my emotions tangled into an intricate web. I was rolling the dice every day with these devils. I had to keep a clear head.

Fabian eyed me like a wolf, then slowly sank back into his seat. "That was a nice surprise," he purred.

I blushed, glancing over at Erik as Fabian snapped his fingers at a guard. "The Courtier will have her meal now."

Erik's eyes bored into mine and he promptly took Paige's hand in his, shifting his gaze to her. My gut squeezed at the sight and ignited a fire in me

I couldn't stamp out.

A waiter arrived, placing a plate of steaming food under my nose. Pasta and some red sauce stared back at me, looking utterly mouthwatering. I happily seized the distraction from my overheated body and started eating.

The waiter returned with chalices of blood for the vampires and I fought hard not to wrinkle my nose as Fabian sipped on his.

A giggle from Paige caught my ear and I refused to look over at their table. "Did you have a nice trip to the city?" I asked Fabian.

"Not particularly," he muttered. "Let's talk about something else. It's been a stressful day."

"How come?" I asked.

"More murders in the city. Rebels probably, but maybe not." He ground his jaw and I wondered if he suspected Erik was involved. "But like I said, I don't want to talk about it."

Damn, how was I supposed to spy on a guy who was clearly never going to tell me anything? I guessed I had to try and build a bridge of trust between us first, but doing so made me uncomfortable.

*For the people of the Realms. For Callie, for Dad. You have to do this.*

"Okay...so tell me about you. What do you like to do when you're not running the country?"

Fabian relaxed back into his seat, seeming to enjoy having the spotlight on him. "Mostly, I train. I am adept with many weapons."

"Like?"

"Swords, bows, guns. You name it, I am an expert at it."

"I'd like to see that sometime," I said, fluttering my lashes as if I was impressed. If anything it had only served to remind me of how powerful these royals were. They could rip off my head with their bare hands, let alone what they could do to me with a weapon.

"If you choose me at the ceremony, there will be plenty of time for that."

"Noted." I grinned.

"What do you do in *your* spare time?" Fabian asked and I realised I should have been prepared for this question. I tried to think of a hobby I might have enjoyed back in the Realm if I hadn't had duties and the general worry of seeing through a day there. I supposed there was one thing I'd done regularly...

"I like walking," I said. *More like pacing.* "And um...reading." The few books Dad had managed to stow in our house had been read so many times

they'd been falling apart. And I'd still struggled with deciphering some of the words.

A prickling feeling in my gut told me Erik was giving us his attention and I battled away the urge to look over at him.

“Uhuh.” Fabian sipped on his blood and red stained his lips before he licked it away. A pang of nausea made my nose wrinkle, but he didn't seem to notice. He started telling me more about his training and my eyes drifted around the room as I tuned him out.

Clarice had moved into Frank's lap and he didn't seem to mind, his hand stroking her thigh. What the hell? He looked thoroughly under her spell and I wondered if this was how I'd looked last night in Erik's arms. I shifted my gaze to Miles who was laughing about something with Brianna. Both of them seemed at ease and I wondered if I was the only one left in this place who was still trying to hate these royals. I let my eyes drift to Erik and my heart clenched.

He'd pulled Paige up to dance and she giggled as he taught her the steps, seeming enthralled by him. They held each other close as Erik guided her and his eyes flickered with light.

My throat tightened. I couldn't seem to get in any air as I watched, transfixed.

“-broadswords, daggers, I can almost wield a slayer's blade if I wear a leather glove. But they still manage to devour my gear eventually...”

My eyes snapped back to Fabian, his words suddenly interesting me. “Slayer's blade? What's that?”

His earthy eyes sparkled as he leant in closer. “The slayers were a species who tried to oppose us.”

My right arm tingled at his words and I nodded, hoping he'd go on, wanting to know more about the slayers after Erik had briefly mentioned their existence. Valentina had once been one of them so what had made her join the vampires?

“We wiped them off the face of the earth.” He grinned maliciously.

“Erik mentioned that Valentina was one of them,” I said boldly, hoping he might shed some light on that snippet of information.

“Did he now?” Fabian growled. He took another sip of his drink and I kept my eyes trained on him, willing him to go on. “She has made up for her crimes as a slayer. She came to us many hundreds of years ago and offered to help us defeat her kind.”

“Why?” I gasped and Fabian’s gaze narrowed.

“I suppose you’d have to ask her that.”

*Maybe I will...*

“So the slayers...they could kill a vampire?” I asked, knowing I was on dangerous ground, but desperate to learn more. A species who could kill vampires sounded like my kind of people.

“Yes, they had many defenses against us. Their strength for one. And their blades were designed to hurt us. We couldn’t even hold them without being burned by their runes. But none of that mattered in the end. Now the slayers are all dead.” He grinned triumphantly.

My mouth parted. That *had* to be the type of blade Wolfe had given to me. But why?

As I recalled the feel of its warm hilt and the way it had seemed to whisper to me, a longing grew in me again. A dreamy feeling floated over me and I rose to my feet.

“What are you doing?” Fabian asked and I jolted out of the strange sensation, shaking my head. What was I doing? For a moment, I’d been snared by the desire to find that blade. Like it possessed me in some way.

I eyed Erik as he swept Paige around the room. “I thought we could dance,” I said quickly to cover my tracks.

Fabian stood, moving promptly to my side and pulling me into his arms. “Place your hands like this,” he instructed, resting one of my hands on his shoulder and keeping the other in his palm. He tugged me closer, resting his free hand on my waist. My skin crawled from his touch, but I needed to play along.

“Follow my feet,” he instructed, moving slowly as I got the hang of it.

I was clumsy and continually stepped on his toes, but he corrected me every time without anger and soon we were moving around the room at a slightly faster speed. I had to concentrate so much on the dancing that I was able to forget about the blade for a while.

Erik twirled Paige past us by one hand, his eyes wheeling to me. “Perfect,” he told her. “You’re clearly a natural. Unlike some.”

I stepped on Fabian’s foot again, cursing myself. I tried to mimic Paige’s grace, but felt even more like a clumsy idiot as I tried to keep up with Fabian.

“You’re a terrible instructor, Fabian.” Clarice appeared beside him with her hand around Frank’s. “Here.” She pulled me from Fabian’s arms, pushing me into the hands of Frank.

He raised his brows in alarm. "I don't really dance, your highness," he told Clarice.

"You will when I'm through with you," she teased. "Now take her waist."

Frank slid his arms around me and the warmth of his skin was so nice in comparison to the vampires' icy touch. It reminded me of home. Of living amongst my own kind. And it stoked a warmth in me I hadn't felt for a long time.

"Hi," I breathed and he beamed.

"Hey." His soft eyes sparkled and I gazed over his cheeks which were naturally flushed with human blood. He was so unlike the royals with their pearly skin and cold touch.

Clarice arranged our hands, moving around us at high speed. She took hold of my waist, stepping close behind me. "Relax, honey."

I did, able to concentrate a bit more in the hands of Frank.

"That's it, now follow us." Clarice took hold of Fabian's arms, yanking him closer and they started dancing at a slow but incredibly fluent pace.

Frank guided me after them and I finally got the hang of the rhythm. He caught on quickly too and even spun me in a circle like I'd seen Erik do with Paige.

As Fabian danced his sister around the room and they began talking in hushed voices, I grabbed onto the private moment with another human.

"How's she treating you?" I whispered.

"Fine," Frank admitted and I gazed up at his dark features and deep green eyes. "I thought this place would be hell, but it's not so bad here once you get used to it."

"Do you miss home?" I asked, a longing filling me for my family.

"I miss the people," he said and I nodded my agreement. "Not so much the place."

He tugged me closer, dropping his head by my ear. "Do the males treat you okay? I worry about the girls here..."

"We're all in the same boat," I answered. "You're in as much trouble as us."

"I suppose..." His eyes filled with some knowledge that I felt I was unaware of.

"Do you know something?" I whispered.

He nodded but before he could answer, hands dragged me away from him. I glanced up, finding Erik there glaring icily at Frank.

“May I cut in?” he snarled before shoving Frank roughly toward Paige.

I gazed after him, desperate to learn what he'd been about to tell me. Erik grabbed my hands, placing them both around his neck unlike the way I'd been dancing before. He tugged me flush against him and started to move in a slow circle. I managed to keep up and was thankful I didn't make an idiot of myself, despite how hot I was getting from his proximity.

“That was rude,” I remarked.

“I don't give a shit,” Erik growled.

I stamped on his foot with purpose. “Oops,” I said innocently and his mouth hooked up at one corner.

“How clumsy of you,” he muttered. “I suppose you can't teach grace.”

I ignored him, spotting Miles twirling Brianna in the corner of my eye. He looked much more pleasant than Erik; a constant smile was hung on his face. I was kind of looking forward to tomorrow where I wouldn't have to pretend to seduce Fabian or be stuck with Erik's confounding moods.

“There's a lot to be said for a girl who can dance,” Erik said, his eyes whipping to Paige.

“I must have skipped all those dance lessons back in the Realm,” I said dryly, trying not to grow annoyed at Erik's obvious interest in her.

Erik tightened his hold on me, pulling me into his chest. His mouth dropped to my ear and flames roared at the base of my spine.

“If you'd like a private lesson in my room later, you only need to ask, Rebel.”

I tried to push away from him, but he held on tight. What was he playing at? Was he mocking me? If he was, I couldn't unravel his words enough to see the joke.

“I don't think dancing is my thing, but if you'd like to teach me how to drive a blade into a vampire's heart, that would be appreciated.”

He chuckled darkly. “That can be arranged.”

My brows arched at his tone. “Can it?” I asked hopefully.

“Of course, because it wouldn't matter if you were the finest swordswoman in the country, you still wouldn't be able to get a knife in my chest.”

“At least let me try,” I urged with a grin as dark as his own.

“Perhaps I will.” He spun me away from him with one hand then yanked me back against his body, making me stumble. He was so strong, I couldn't do anything but follow his lead.

I spotted Fabian moving closer, having released Clarice from their dance.

Erik muttered quickly in my ear. "Come to my room at midnight, Rebel. It's down the hall from yours, the one with the red door." He released me and I gazed at him with wild, baffled thoughts as Fabian snared my hand.

He glowered at his brother and tension tangled with the air. "I suppose you heard about Chancellor Torin and the other murders in the city?" Fabian inquired.

"Indeed. What a loss to the world Torin will be," Erik remarked coolly.

"Yes, it is quite the blow. One of my finest Chancellors has been reduced to dust. Do ensure your Chancellors watch their backs, Erik. There is clearly a madman at large so we must be vigilant."

"Thank you for the warning," Erik said with an icy smile. "I have already been made aware after the brutal murder of my guard, Faulkner."

"Faulkner?" Fabian frowned. "How terrible."

"Quite," Erik bit out.

Fabian tugged me away and my heart stuttered as he led me straight out of the dining room into the low-lit corridor.

"At last, I have you alone." Fabian grinned, releasing my hand but stalking closer.

I backed up, unable to help myself as I eyed his hungry expression.

My spine hit the nearest wall and Fabian took hold of my chin. "I think I've earned that kiss now."

God, I did not want to kiss him. An angry creature had reared its head inside me and it didn't want Fabian anywhere near it.

"I, um, I'm not ready, Count Fabian," I said in an innocent tone.

"Nonsense, you were the one who kissed me first." He crushed me to the wall and I felt more like a prisoner than a royal Courtier.

I pushed against his chest, but it was useless.

*Play along, Montana. You have to do this.*

Shutting my eyes, I gave into the inevitable as Fabian's lips captured mine. His tongue invaded my mouth and I fought the urge to bite it. His hands roamed up my sides and I stiffened, desperate to make him stop.

His hips pressed into mine as he finally released me from the kiss. "Come to my room," he begged, taking my hand.

"No," I squeaked, pulling back and quickly recomposing myself. "I think we should wait," I said, more firmly.

"We don't need to wait." His mouth dropped to my neck and I wanted to rip his lips off.



“Fabian,” I demanded, pushing his shoulders.

“Come on, trouble.” He dragged me forward and fire spewed inside me. My hand flew through the air and smashed into his cheek.

Fabian gawped at me, unable to believe what I’d done. My heart roared with flames and for a moment, I didn’t care what the consequences were. I was *not* going to be forced into this animal’s bed.

Fabian’s lips pulled up into a hungry smile. “You’re playing games again.”

“She doesn’t want you. Get the hint, asshole,” Erik’s voice sliced the air to ribbons.

Fabian threw him a dark look and I took the moment to rub my stinging palm. “Fuck off, Erik. This is none of your business.”

I spotted Paige giving me a wild-eyed look from beside Erik. “Leave her alone,” she insisted and my heart swelled at her siding with me.

Fabian’s eyes whipped to her. “I know it’s hard seeing me with another Courtier, Paige, but this is how the ritual works.”

The arrogance of these jerks was unreal.

I took the opportunity to slip out of his arms and half-jog toward the staircase. I didn’t look back as I stormed upstairs.

I barely took a breath until I entered my room, leaning against the door and holding my chest. My heart pounded an unsteady rhythm beneath my fingers.

How was I going to go through with this? If I picked Fabian at the ceremony, he wouldn’t take no for an answer when it came to his bed.

I shut my eyes, hating this whole ritual, this *game* I’d been wrapped up in.

The clock on the wall told me it was nearly ten. Two hours until Erik wanted me to go to him. I shuddered.

*I’m not going. I’m staying here until I’m forced out of this room again.*

With that, I tore off my dress and pulled on the silken pajamas tucked under my pillow.

Midnight came and went, but sleep wouldn’t find me. I sat in bed with nothing to do and only anxious thoughts for company.

At one in the morning, the door quietly opened and I shut my eyes, pretending to be asleep.

*Leave me alone, Erik.*

I couldn’t hear him moving through the room, but I was certain he was. My skin prickled as he slid back my covers and I continued to keep up the pretence of sleep.

Something warm brushed my arm and my eyes flew open. *Nightmare.*

“Say hello to your friends in hell, *slayer*,” said a cruel voice I didn’t recognise.

My eyes locked with a female vampire, her expression as cold as winter.

Terror consumed me as I went to cry out, but she slammed a palm down on my mouth. “The royals will find you gutted in your bed with a slayer's blade in your hand and they will praise my name for assisting them.” She jumped atop me and straddled my hips.

Fear scored a path through my chest.

I eyed Nightmare as it pressed against my wrist, a voice filling my head. *Fight or die.*

The vampire took a short knife from her hip, lifting it up, ready to drive it into my heart.

“No,” I begged against her hand, flailing beneath her. My fingers brushed Nightmare and I snatched it, my arm lifting of its own accord.

She beamed at me, seeming to revel in my weakness. “I don’t know what all the fuss is about with you.”

Nightmare flared with heat and I stabbed at her as hard as I could, awkwardly jamming it into her side.

She screeched in rage, jerking backwards, giving me half a second to act. I lunged upright, raising Nightmare but the vampire snatched my collar and threw me hard across the room. I hit the window shutters with an almighty crack before slamming into the floor.

My breath was knocked from my lungs. Splinters of wood showered down around me from the broken shutter.

I gazed up at my attacker and horror seized my heart as she approached.

*I’m going to die.*

Nightmare was still in my hand, burning like the heat of the sun. *Stand and fight. End this creature of darkness.*

Strength filled me as I rose to my feet and the vampire came at me again, wielding her blade. She was tall and terrifying to behold, her icy eyes promising my death. I had no chance against her, but Nightmare seemed to have other ideas.

The vampire flew at me in a blur of movement and Nightmare guided my hand. I rammed the knife upwards as the vampire's blade stroked my neck.

A look of horror crossed her eyes as she realised Nightmare was buried deep between her ribs. With a choked cry, her face crumbled and her entire body turned to ash at my feet. Her knife hit the floor with a heavy thunk and

the sound echoed through my head for an eternity.

*I killed her. I killed a vampire.*

I trembled from head to foot, a line of blood trickling down my neck from where her blade had cut me.

I gazed down at the dark robes of the vampire which were covered in the debris of her crumbled body. My forearm flared with pain and I spotted a small, red mark growing there in the shape of a blade.

Something swelled inside my chest. Triumph and strength. Nightmare seemed to praise my name, singing our victory.

“Rebel!?” Erik's voice carried from the hallway. I gazed at the blade in my hand and reality hit home. How the hell was I going to explain this?

*Hide me.* The voice flared in my mind and something inside told me to obey.

I had less than a second to act as I tossed Nightmare under the bed and slumped to the floor beside the pile of ash, pretending to have fainted.

The door hit the wall as it opened and Erik heaved me into his arms a moment later, laying me on the bed.

“Montana wake up,” he begged, running his finger over the cut on my neck. It hit me that this was the first time he'd called me by my name.

I blinked awake, fear rolling through me at how he was about to react.

“What happened?” he demanded, glancing at the remains of the vampire and the broken shards of wood from the window shutter.

I shook my head, not knowing how I was ever going to explain myself. But I had to get one thing straight at least.

“She attacked me,” I breathed. “She chased me over there and I think she...impaled herself on the broken wood.”

Shit, did that even sound plausible?

Erik's eyes flooded with confusion. “She *attacked* you?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “I was sleeping. She came in and...” I shook my head again, my body starting to tremble once more.

Erik moved to the vampire's robes, sifting through them as if looking for something. Giving up, he turned back to me and I suddenly realised he was shirtless.

Scars marred his arms and a crescent-shaped one was stamped on his midriff. I dragged my eyes up from his muscular body, finding his expression furious. “Who the fuck would do this?” he snarled, raking a hand through his hair.

“I don't know,” I whispered, dropping a hand to my forearm and covering the mark there. “Would Fabian-?” I started but he cut me off abruptly.

“No, why would he?” Erik snarled. “He doesn't know anything.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, having no other suggestions.

What would Erik think if he knew I'd killed that vampire? And with a *slayer's* blade no less.

“Stay here,” he muttered and I nodded as he sped from the room. A key turned in the door and I was for once thankful about being locked in.

Moments later, Erik returned with a strange hand-held machine with a hole at one end. He turned it on and it made a loud whirring sound. Erik moved to the vampire's ashy remains, sucking them up with the object.

I gazed at him in alarm as he worked. When the dust was gone, he gathered the vampire's robes into a linen bag from my closet. Turning to me with his jaw ticking, he said, “Don't speak about this with anyone. I'll deal with it.”

I nodded firmly then pointed to the object in his hand. “What is that?”

He glanced down at it. “A hoover.” He cleared his throat, heading to the door. “I'll be back soon.”

He exited and I hugged my knees. My heart drummed against my ribcage, refusing to slow. I'd killed a vampire. Something I'd dreamed about doing my entire life.

I ran my thumb over the mark on my arm, sensing it was important somehow. I didn't want Erik to see it, I was sure that was a bad idea. Heading to my closet, I grabbed out a sweater, tugging it on to hide the mark.

The vampire's voice filled my head again. *Say hello to your friends in hell, slayer.*

Did she really think I was a slayer? How could that be possible?

My thoughts turned to General Wolfe. Surely he had to be behind this, it was too much of a coincidence that he'd clearly been accusing me of that exact same thing.

I dropped onto the bed and could feel Nightmare's presence in the room like another heart beating in my chest.

Erik finally returned and I prayed he wouldn't be able to sense the blade in the way I could.

Locking the door, he turned to me with an anxious look. “What did she say to you?” he growled, his rage evident.

“Nothing,” I lied.

His jaw was locked tight as he marched into the bathroom, returning with a

damp washcloth. He dropped down onto the bed, reaching out to my neck.

“Here,” he said surprisingly softly and I relaxed at his tone. He wasn't angry with me despite the fact that one of his kind had died in my room. That had to be a good sign.

He gently wiped the blood from my neck, frowning all the while. I couldn't even feel the pain, the adrenaline in my veins was still keeping it at bay.

“I'm sorry this happened,” he murmured, tucking his legs up onto the bed. “I'll get to the bottom of this, I assure you. Someone in my household has betrayed us. No one else would be able to gain access to the castle. If only I'd seen the vampire's face...do you remember what she looked like?”

“She had dark hair and was tall with light blue eyes,” I said, trying to remember anything else about her.

He nodded stiffly, that information obviously not enlightening him. “Was she an Elite?”

I thought about it and shook my head. “I don't think so.”

“Alright...I'll stay with you tonight,” Erik announced.

My throat tightened but I nodded, not wanting to be left here after the attack. My eyes dropped to his naked chest and I cursed myself for the way my body reacted to the sight.

“If you'd come to my room like I'd asked, this wouldn't have happened.” Erik cocked a brow, dropping the washcloth beside him.

“I didn't want to be manipulated anymore,” I revealed, feeling strong after what I'd just managed to do.

Erik's face contorted. “I wasn't trying to manipulate you.”

My filter unleashed everything I'd been holding back. “That's all you've been doing since I met you, Erik. And I'm tired of it already and I'm scared of what will happen when I choose Fabian at the ceremony. I don't want to be his wife, I don't want to – to-” I couldn't say the words.

Erik's brows drew together. “I know...”

I shoved his solid chest. “You don't know. You have no idea what this is like. You're whoring me out to your brother and I can't stand it and all I want from you is to help my family. And you're going to make me do the unspeakable to earn that priv-”

He pressed a hand to my mouth to halt me. “I *know*,” he reiterated, his eyes boring into mine. “I didn't expect things to get this...complicated.”

I leant away from his cool palm, my throat growing dry. “It's not

complicated for you. You can dangle my father's freedom over my head and you know I'll do anything to help him. What's complicated about that?"

His Adam's apple rose and fell, but he didn't answer.

Despite his cold skin, heat seemed to radiate from his body. My eyes travelled over the faint scars on his torso, the marks silvery and pale.

He turned away and I caught his arm. "What aren't you saying?"

He sighed heavily. "I've become slightly, *minisculely*...attached to you, Rebel."

I released a small, empty laugh. "How kind of you to care so little about me."

"I am a royal Count and I do not take wives or bed unwilling humans. I am at least eighty-percent of a better man than my brother so have some faith in me that I won't allow him to hurt you."

"I don't have faith in you. How can I? This is all *your* doing!"

I shoved him again and he caught my arm, tugging me closer so our mouths were barely an inch apart. "I'm covering up a vampire's death in your quarters, Rebel. Is that not enough for you to trust me?"

"I'll never trust a bloodsucker." The words were my dad's. *Rule number one in this world: never trust a bloodsucker, baby girl.*

"Then we're at a stalemate." He stood, releasing me violently and moving to the chair before dropping into it. "Sleep," he commanded and I glowered at him for a few long seconds before lowering down onto the bed and tugging the covers up to my chin.

Erik switched the light off and I released a slow breath as I willed my heart rate to slow down.

I hated myself in that moment. Because I knew with a terrifying certainty that I was slightly, *minisculely* attached to him too.



The horses' hooves clip-clopped loudly along the hard tarmac as we headed down an old highway into a small town. I could feel Magnar's tension coiling through his rigid posture where he was still pressed against me on the stallion's back.

Night was drawing in quickly and we still hadn't found a place to make camp. Though the horses had sped our journey south, we now had the added difficulty of finding a shelter big enough to house them as well as ourselves.

Although Magnar had wanted to avoid the town when we'd first spotted it, I'd convinced him otherwise. The area we'd been travelling through had held few houses and the town was the first real sign of anything from the old civilisation that we'd seen in hours. I had the feeling that it was our only chance to find a building large enough to house us for miles around and Magnar had begrudgingly agreed.

It was the largest group of buildings we'd come across so far that hadn't been destroyed by the bombs in the Final War. Dead leaves had gathered along the kerbs, husks of rotting cars blocked the streets. The whole place screamed its unnatural silence at me. It should have been full of life but instead it was abandoned and eerie.

A raven cawed from the top of a lamppost and I flinched as I stared up at it with mistrust.

"Is that one of their creatures?" I asked in a whisper as the bird's gaze followed our progress along the street.

"No. Its soul is clean. When you have seen as many Familiars as I have you'll be able to recognise them easily. They don't move or react naturally and their eyes shine silver in the light. You see how the vampires can make you mistrust everything though?"

I nodded. The more I learned about the vampires the more reasons I found to fear them.

As the cluster of concrete boxes grew around us, a feeling of unease started to settle on me. In such an enclosed space with so many things to hide in and between, it was hard not to imagine eyes peering at us from every darkened corner.

I placed a hand on Fury but the blade was quiet, almost seeming to sleep. That was the best reassurance I could get that no vampires lurked nearby but I couldn't help but continue to feel uncomfortable.

"How were such places created?" Magnar murmured behind me and I twisted in his arms to get a look at him. His brow was furrowed with either concern or confusion and I wasn't sure which worried me more.

"You mean the buildings?" I asked, following his gaze to an old sign which was shaped like a giant brown cowboy hat.

I tried to sound out the words splashed across it but the swirling yellow text was illegible to me with my limited reading capabilities and I couldn't make out anything after the big capital R.

"They are so square." Magnar continued to frown at them and I smiled.

"I think they used machines to make the bricks and stuff." I'd had little success in explaining much about mechanical things to Magnar. My own understanding of them was so limited and he'd had nothing like them in his own time. It was easy to forget just how strange the world must have been to him. He'd found himself plucked from the reality he'd grown up in and dumped into the ruins of a civilisation beyond anything he ever could have imagined.

He didn't ask anything else but I could sense his continued unease.

"What about that?" I asked, pointing to a huge building with heavy metal shutters barring the windows. The sign above the door was written in clearer script and I frowned at it as I forced the letters to become words. "Su-per mar... market; I think that's a store where they sold food."

"This is where they held the market?" Magnar asked, grasping onto the word that made sense to him.

"I think so. Maybe we'll get lucky and find something they left behind before the Final War," I added hopefully. We'd eaten the last of our supplies that morning and my stomach was pitifully empty. Hunger was a feeling I was well used to but it was one thing that I hadn't had to deal with since my escape from the Realm and I hadn't missed it.

Magnar guided the horses into the concrete space before the supermarket and dismounted in front of the glass doors. He led the stallion to a metal post



and tied the reins before turning back to help me.

I swung my leg over the animal's back and slid down. Magnar caught me before my feet could hit the ground, his hands shifting the material of my coat up and brushing against the skin on my lower back. A spark of energy danced across my body at his touch but he released me as soon as my boots were on the concrete and we stepped apart.

I bit my lip and tucked a strand of my long, golden hair back behind my ear. I hadn't braided it since I'd washed it in the river and I was enjoying the feeling of leaving it loose. In the Realm I'd always been afraid of it attracting attention but now that I was free I could do what I liked with it.

Magnar pulled Tempest from his back and cautiously approached the glass doors. I followed his lead and released Fury but the blade slept on, unaware of any threat nearby. I wanted to ask Magnar if I could rely on the blade's assessment of the situation but he was already pushing the door open.

I stayed several steps behind him as we entered the store and the massive space opened up around us. There were aisles and aisles of shelves lining what looked to be one huge, open area. Magnar moved away to check the shop was clear but my gaze fell on something which stopped me from following.

I moved forward with a smile pulling at my lips as I recognised the picture on the wrapper. *Chocolate*. A whole shelf was stacked full of it, just waiting to be devoured.

I grabbed a bar as long as my forearm and jogged after Magnar into the depths of the store

I hurried down the aisle I thought he'd chosen and upped my pace in excitement to share my find with him. Halfway along the aisle, I paused as a rack of lightbulbs and flashlights caught my eye. I knew Magnar had never seen electricity in action and my vague explanation of it couldn't compare to seeing it for himself.

I grabbed a flashlight from the display, ripping off the cardboard packaging before starting after Magnar again.

As I ran out at the far end of the aisle, someone tackled me, lifting me off of my feet before propelling me around and pressing me against the wall. A squeal of fear escaped my lips.

"Have you forgotten everything you learnt about stealth already?" Magnar growled as he held me still and my heart leapt. It was almost pitch black this far from the doors and I could only make out the outline of his silhouette so it

was hard to tell if he was really annoyed or just teasing me.

I tried to force my heart rate to slow as I relaxed knowing it was only him.

“No. But Fury doesn’t think there are any vampires nearby and I found something I wanted to share with you.” I smiled encouragingly, hoping he’d see the funny side and be tempted by my offer.

His grip on me slackened as he sighed but he didn’t step back to release me.

“You shouldn’t rely on that blade entirely. Your own senses shouldn’t be ignored in favour of blind trust. The runes help it to sense when a vampire is close but they found ways around the runes in my time. When the Belvederes realise I’m back, I’m sure they will remember some of the tricks they used to use on us.”

“Okay. Lesson learned.” I didn’t bother to point out the fact that if any powerful vampires were that close to me then I didn’t stand a hope in hell of escaping them anyway. “But you have to try this.” I ripped open the wrapper and broke off a piece of chocolate for him.

Magnar still didn’t move so I sighed dramatically and lifted the square of sugary goodness to his mouth. He reluctantly accepted it and I could tell he was still thinking about telling me off for my clumsy approach. My fingers brushed against his lips and I pulled back, heat clawing at my cheeks. At least I could hope the darkness concealed my blush.

As he started chewing, his muscles relaxed and his grip on me loosened further.

“Isn’t that the best thing you’ve ever tasted?” I asked enthusiastically as he swallowed.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Something they used to eat before the war. It’s called chocolate. I couldn’t have you thinking everything about this time is bad.”

“It isn’t *all* bad,” he replied evenly and a tingle ran along my spine at the implication. He looked away from me, towards the front of the store. “I should bring the horses inside and place the wards. It’s nearly nightfall.”

“I found something else,” I added quickly before he could leave. I pulled the flashlight from my pocket and flicked it on.

Magnar released me and stepped back suddenly.

“By the gods,” he cursed and his hand strayed towards a knife at his belt.

I stifled a laugh and bit my lip. “It’s just an electric light. Like I told you, remember?” I turned the flashlight off again and held it out to him.

He eyed it suspiciously and clenched his jaw before holding his hand out to accept it.

He turned the flashlight over in his hand and I slowly leant forward, placing my finger on the button. He watched as I pressed it and the light came on again. Only the faintest flicker in his gaze gave away how disconcerting he found the little device. He lifted it higher, shining it along the closest aisle before switching it off.

“I’m sure this will be useful,” he said eventually, though his tone made me think he’d sooner throw it away than keep it.

A smile pulled at my lips and I reached out and took it from him. “I can look after it, if you’re worried it might bite you or something.”

Magnar caught my wrist before I could pull it away from him and brushed his thumb across my slayer’s mark. “If you’re going to mock me you might want to remember that I can put you on your backside in the blink of an eye,” he warned, his tone playful.

“Not before I can flash my scary light at you,” I replied, flicking the flashlight on and off.

Magnar chuckled and shook his head. I stayed put as he released me and walked away. Something about knowing that I was going to be leaving him soon made the tension between us feel stronger than it had before. But the more I told myself to keep my distance, the more I found myself seeking him out.

My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn’t eaten and I stuffed a lump of chocolate into my mouth, savouring the creamy taste as I started to hunt the shelves for something more nourishing.



It turned out that the store held more than we ever could have hoped for. Though a lot of the food left lying on the shelves had rotted away years ago, much more of it hadn’t. We’d enjoyed a meal made up of all the different things we’d found in more packets and cans than I could count.

Bags of porridge oats had made a meal for the horses too and the large animals were now wandering the aisles contentedly.

Magnar had lit a fire in a huge metal bin to keep us warm and the building was big enough that we didn’t have to worry about the smoke.

We’d also found an aisle filled with bottles of water. There was so much of

it that I'd claimed some so that I could wash and found a quiet corner of the store to do so. I had even found some soap and it wasn't like the scentless communal bars we'd been given in the Realm's bathhouse; it smelled good enough to eat. I'd taken a while to decide on a scent and had eventually settled for strawberry. They even had a special soap for my hair! The picture of the woman on the bottle had told me what to do and I scrubbed half of the contents through my waist-length locks before using two bottles of water to rinse it back out again.

On my way back to the fire, I found an aisle filled with clothes. I grabbed armfuls of the different materials greedily before settling on a bottle green shirt which hugged my figure and felt as soft as butter. I added new underwear and a pair of black leggings to the ensemble and revelled in the feeling of being truly clean.

By the time I rejoined Magnar, I was grinning like a Cheshire Cat. He'd washed too and his long hair glistened with moisture as he sat shirtless beside the fire. The wounds he had gained from the vampires were all healing incredibly quickly apart from the two bites given to him by the Elite.

I took a seat beside him and watched as he inspected the row of tooth marks on his right arm.

"You're not about to develop a taste for my blood are you?" I teased, although a small part of me was afraid he might. There had been plenty of rumours about how someone became a vampire and getting bitten was pretty high on the list. Though I guessed he would have been more concerned about the bites if that were the case.

"It is rather more complicated than that to turn a mortal into a monster," Magnar replied and I couldn't help but feel relieved. The idea of becoming one of them was about the worst thing I could imagine and I was glad it couldn't happen easily. I'd rather die than be a vampire.

"How does it work then?" I asked, a morbid fascination gripping me.

"A human has to drink their blood as well as being bitten," he replied with a sneer of disgust. "It's like being infected with a disease as well as their venom."

"That's it?" I raised an eyebrow curiously.

"Then they have to die. It doesn't matter how so long as the heart is intact. Nothing else is fatal to them. They can fuse severed limbs back into place; even heads with some help. Only a direct blow to the heart will end them."

"That's... so gross," I said, not knowing what else I could say about a

creature that could stick its own head back on.

“Indeed. Nothing about them is natural. They are an insult to the living.” He continued to inspect the row of tooth marks on his arm and I leant a little closer to see too.

“So why isn’t your super-healing working on the bites then?”

“Just as my people developed ways to combat the vampires’ power, *they* developed ways to resist us. Their teeth hold a venom which stops blood from clotting so that they can drink freely from their victims. It also combats the innate ability in my blood to heal. While that venom remains present, my body can only hold the blood back but cannot force the wounds to mend. Now that I have flushed them with water, they should heal well. I am just making sure no venom remains.”

“You can see it?” I asked as I looked at the bite mark again curiously.

“It shines like moonlight. A mark of the curse which ties them to the hours of night. Look, I missed some.” He held his arm out to me and tilted it while pointing at one of the puncture wounds. The flickering light of the fire highlighted a glimmer of silver within the wound.

Magnar lifted a bottle of water and tipped it over the area, flushing the bite clean. When he inspected it again, all of the venom was gone and I could have sworn the skin around the bite already looked less inflamed.

“Do you need help with the one on your neck?” I offered. He clearly wouldn’t be able to see it to check the venom was removed properly.

He regarded me for a moment and I got the feeling he wanted to refuse. “Thank you, that would be helpful.”

I smiled as I shifted closer to him and he tilted his chin up so that I could inspect the injury. I could instantly see that this injury was a lot deeper than the one on his arm. The flesh was torn around the holes the vampire had punched into his skin and despite his gifts fighting against it, some blood still trickled from the wound.

I couldn’t believe he’d been suffering with the pain of it for over a day and hadn’t said a word.

“Why didn’t you ask me to help you with this before?” I scolded.

“We couldn’t spare the water and I could take the pain,” he replied dismissively.

“I would much sooner have gone thirsty for a day to save you from suffering,” I said irritably. It was ridiculous to put himself through such a thing.

“And I would sooner not see you going without food or water. Especially as that is a burden you have had to bear before.” His gaze flicked to my too-thin figure and I shifted uncomfortably.

“It’s something I’m more than used to. It wouldn’t have been a problem,” I replied dismissively.

“It would be a problem for me. While I am with you I will do all I can to make sure you are provided for. You will not convince me otherwise.” His gaze was firm and I sighed in defeat as I turned my attention back to the job of tending his wound.

I moved to kneel before him and picked up the bottle of water. His gaze met mine for several long seconds before he turned to look at a point beyond my head.

I started to pour the water over the bite and his fist clenched tightly in his lap. I’d never seen him show a reaction to pain before and the sight made my stomach twist uncomfortably.

“Sorry,” I breathed.

“You weren’t the one who tried to rip my throat out,” he replied lightly, raising one huge shoulder like it was some kind of joke.

“Well if you had just kept your swords in hand instead of offering her a fist fight...”

He laughed and the deep rumbling sound of it pulled a smile to my own lips.

I began to rinse the wound clean again and tried to ignore the tension in his body. I was so close to him that it was beginning to make my heart beat faster. It might have helped if he’d had a shirt on. Having his muscular body inches from mine was making indecent thoughts flash through my mind.

*It can’t happen. We’re on different paths.*

I bit my lip to stop myself from looking down at his chest and forced my eyes to stay fixed on the bite.

“You smell like strawberries,” he said, his voice rough with an emotion I couldn’t quite place.

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“No.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that so I kept my attention on the bite instead of replying.

He tilted his head, blocking the light so that I couldn’t see what I was doing. I reached up and caught his chin, lifting it slightly with my fingertips.

The rough stubble lining his jaw scratched against my thumb as I shifted my grip and I bit down harder on my lip to distract myself from it. The point where our skin touched sent sparks of energy racing right back to my thumping heart.

I felt his gaze shift to my face but didn't dare turn to meet it.

I continued to rinse the wound until all of the venom swirled out of it, leaving silver trails down his broad chest between the lines of his muscles. I realised I'd let my gaze slip down to stare at his body and quickly flipped my eyes up to meet his.

His golden eyes burned with molten fire and took me captive.

He didn't move an inch and I didn't release my hold on his jaw.

I tried to blink or turn my head or do anything to break the connection between us but my treacherous body wouldn't let me.

*If he kisses me it will break my heart when he leaves. If he doesn't kiss me I don't think I can bear it.*

I shifted my hand, my fingers sliding across his strong jaw as his stubble grazed against my skin. I slid my hand down to his neck and I could feel his pulse hammering away as quickly as my own.

*I should let go. I should never let go.*

Magnar released a deep groan and the sound of it tied a knot in the pit of my stomach. He caught my waist between his strong hands and dragged me forward so that the inch of space between us disappeared.

When his mouth claimed mine a fire lit beneath my skin. My grip on his neck tightened as I wrapped my other arm around him, pulling him closer still. He lifted me into his lap and I melted against him, giving in to him completely and letting the last of my resolve disappear.

His kisses chased away my doubts and made every inch of my body ache for more. I'd never felt anything like this and wanted as much of it as I could possibly get.

He moved his hands higher, his fists knotting in my hair as he pulled my head back and ran his mouth across my neck. My skin burned for him and I moaned as I let any remaining walls between us come crashing down. My own hands ran down his chest, feeling the firm lines of his muscles beneath my palms. I couldn't get enough of touching him; the feeling of his body against mine was the most wonderful sensation in the world.

His mouth made it back up to mine and I lost myself in the feeling of his lips.

It was going to hurt a hundred times worse when he left me now but I didn't care. I wouldn't have traded this for anything.



# Erik



1000 YEARS AGO

**N**ine times I almost broke and tried to force my way out of the cave. But the gods were mocking me. They had sealed it themselves, I was sure of it. When my fingers tore at the rocks, they wouldn't budge.

Andvari whispered to me sometimes and his laughter made my bones weak.

I was a rabbit in a trap but it was a trap of my making. And I had to endure this hell if it would bring me salvation.

The hunger grew maddening as I'd predicted. Soon, I saw visions. Shadows. Light dancing in my periphery.

Sometimes I saw a girl who looked like the moon. Other times the sun. Andvari was taunting me and I began to despise him and all of the gods along with him. Their omniscient cruelty. Their punishment for a crime I didn't commit.

I cursed my parents' names. I scratched at my skin, trying to release my soul from this wretched body. Other times I lay still for days, weeks, months. Years perhaps.

Time was nothing. Time was a trick of the mind. A plague that killed humans, but never me. I would live on and starve and fall into insanity. That was my fate. The gods would never free me. The debt would never be paid.

Fabian visited less and less. Sometimes he called out to me, other times he only came near enough to listen for signs of life. There had been times where I'd begged him to release me, but he'd stuck to his word and kept me caged.

Now, I lay on my back, feeling weightless like I was floating in an endless abyss. The hunger had hollowed out everything else inside me. I could barely

remember why I'd come here. But when I came too close to forgetting, Andvari would appear to remind me. Like he did right then.

"Draugr, you are cursed for your parents' blasphemy against me. You are starving yourself in payment of the debt owed to me."

"Am I getting close to paying it?" I asked, my voice croaky like the snap of dry bark.

"That depends," he purred and I felt his holy presence fill up the space inside the cave, drowning me in his powerful ambiance. "Do you feel you have the answer to the prophecy?"

"I think on it sometimes," I admitted. "I try to find meaning but sometimes I fear there is none. That the prophecy is just another of your ways to torment me."

"There is meaning, Erik Larson."

I shut my eyes, going over the prophecy in my mind. "Twins of sun and moon. Sometimes I see such things."

"Yes..." Andvari whispered. "And what does it mean?"

I rubbed my face, having no answer.

"I cannot have children," I whispered. "It cannot be that."

"Oh but you can, Draugr."

My brow creased and my heart thudded once. "Children?"

"A human mother could bear you a child," Andvari said, beginning to laugh.

"And what animal would that child be?" I growled.

Andvari's voice began to fade as he started chanting the first line of the prophecy. "Warrior born and monster made. Warrior born and monster made."

"Stop!" I clawed at my ears, willing him away.

Silence fell. And Andvari didn't speak to me again for a long time.



"A circle of gold," I whispered into the frozen air. "Shall join two souls."

I repeated the line of the prophecy for a while, my tongue heavy and begging for blood instead of words.

*The sun? Could that be the circle of gold?*

"Two souls...twins...children," I repeated what little I knew from Andvari's ramblings. I would never birth a child with a human, it was just another trick.

Another lie to drive me mad.

“The slayers are rising in numbers. Many are awoken now,” Andvari's voice cut into my ears.

Fabian hadn't visited for many weeks, but the last time he had he'd spoken of the battles between the slayers and my family. Clarice and Miles had joined him in the fight. When he'd visited, he'd asked me to help them, but I'd refused. If I was killed in a battle, the curse would never be broken. And I would never die a human death with my soul intact.

“Why are you telling me this?” I breathed.

“They will come for you if your brothers and sister are defeated,” Andvari growled, seeming frustrated by that fact.

“And then you will have no one to torment,” I said, realising why it bothered him so.

“All the answers you seek are in the prophecy.”

“Am I on the right path? Is starving here helping at all?” I pleaded.

“A debt must be paid,” Andvari whispered, but I didn't know if he was confirming or denying what I'd asked.

“Is this the debt?” I demanded, my anger rising.

I stood and hunger gripped me in an unyielding fist. I dreamed of blood. It was all I'd thought of when my mind began to fade and I could hardly recall the words of the prophecy.

“Please,” I begged when Andvari didn't answer. “If I am wrong then tell me so that I can find another way to pay the debt.”

Andvari chuckled and began to recite the prophecy again. At some point, I snapped. The words broke me or perhaps it was the lack of blood.

I roared, punching stone and tearing at the wall. It didn't buckle even with all my strength behind the blow.

“YOU'RE KEEPING ME HERE!” I bellowed at Andvari. “You won't let me out! You'll never let me out!”

“You chose to come,” Andvari said sharply. “I am helping you keep your promise.”

I sank down to my knees, my mouth burning and my throat so tight I was suffocated. “You're not helping me. If you were helping you'd tell me what to do.”

“A riddle hides a secret in its words. It is there in plain sight if only you would pay attention.”

I groaned, pressing my forehead to the icy floor. “The words are branded

in my skull. I see them in the darkness bearing down on me. And still I cannot find the answer!”

“Erik...” A warm presence floated around me. “I admire how you try, I come here because you are the only one of the cursed who attempts to pay his debt.”

“Then help me,” I snarled. “Help me pay it.”

“The answer lies between the moon and the sun, Draugr. You will find your answer there.”

I laughed bitterly. “On earth you mean? Somewhere on earth is my answer, is that supposed to be helpful?” I spat.

“You see things too literally,” Andvari sighed. “Look into the space between the words, what does that tell you?”

I shut my eyes, wishing he'd leave me alone. “I don't know,” I sighed. “*I don't know.*”

“A river can be water, but it can also be a life force. Do you see better now?”

“I see that your words hold more riddles. I see that you take pleasure in my pain. I see that the gods are cruel and unforgiving.”

“That is where you are wrong, Erik. I can forgive. And I will forgive. But you must pay the debt...” He drifted away and silence found me once more, wrapping me in its lonely arms.

# Magnar



1000 YEARS AGO

**A** cold wind blew in from the north and Baltian whinnied in soft protest beneath me. I patted his neck absentmindedly as I continued to watch the road.

The sun was bright in the blue sky despite the time of year and I was fairly certain it would keep the parasites out of sight until nightfall. Not that I'd be against taking a few of them out if they showed up.

My small band of warriors waited anxiously behind me on their own horses. To have been given charge of the six of them despite my sixteen years was a great honour and I was determined to prove myself.

Father had promised me a surprise if I managed to complete my first mission to his satisfaction and I was determined not to disappoint him.

I pulled my furs closer about my neck as the day wore on. It wasn't like the Sacred Followers to deviate from their route. They believed their passage was assured safety by the false god they followed.

The evergreen trees were dense around us, concealing us from view as we waited for our prey. The landscape was dominated by the dark green pines interspersed with lumps of grey rock. We were south of the mountains here but the icy chill of the wind still reached us from their snow-crested peaks.

My lip pulled back in distaste as my mind wandered to the vampire Miles. He may have thought himself a god amongst men but I was determined to burn every last alter to the ground.

I would have been tempted to release his Followers from this earth too if I didn't have to follow our laws. *No human shall die by my blade lest my life itself is at risk.* I snorted in disgust. The Sacred Followers dreamed of becoming vampires. No doubt I'd be killing them in the end anyway. Why

wait for them to gain immortality and become more difficult to dispatch?

I sighed as I forced my mind away from the thoughts I'd had a hundred times before. I'd tried voicing them to my father and his response had been clear. Our laws would be followed. Our opinions weren't relevant. Taking the vow meant forfeiting my own thoughts or feelings on my actions. I was a weapon to be wielded now. And I would follow orders.

My brother was the only one who I could share my thoughts with on such subjects now. Though my opinions never meant that I would deviate from my path, I needed an outlet for the injustices I saw in our work. So many of the slayers followed the path blindly. I was adamant that I would always keep my mind open despite the fact that I couldn't choose my actions. I would still own them. And I would still question them.

A faint noise sounded around the corner as a wagon drew near.

I pointed to Cassian and Eldred, indicating for them to head further up the hill and cover us with their crossbows. The two warriors followed my directions without complaint despite the fact that they were both over ten years my senior.

Bells sounded and the Sacred Followers began chanting. I beckoned for the remaining four warriors to follow and nudged Baltian into motion beneath me.

The chestnut stallion had been a gift from my mother for my thirteenth birthday. He had been as wild as a storm; untameable by the three men who had tried before me.

The clan had laughed when he was presented to me, yanking against his lead rope and frothing at the mouth in his desperation to be free. No one had thought I would be able to tame him. They believed my mother was playing a trick on me, making me look like a fool. But I knew better. She was giving me the opportunity to show them my mettle. They were the fools to doubt me and they soon learned such.

No one had questioned my grit since that day. And no other man could ride my horse. I smiled at the memory as we waited for the carriage to draw closer. I was about to prove myself again.

It had been a week since I'd taken my vow. No warrior younger than eighteen had done so in over a hundred years. But I'd known my own destiny since I was a boy and when the leader of the Clan of Prophecies had visited us three moons ago I'd asked her to show my father my future. She had foreseen my rise to greatness, my path as a leader of men and destroyer of

vampires. My future was entwined with that of the Revenants so completely that even my father had had to agree I was ready. I was never going to be anything but a slayer and there was no need for my vow to wait.

Despite the assurances of the prophet, I refused to leave my future up to fate. Each day I would work harder than the last. I would prove to all men that I deserved my place amongst our people.

Miles was about to learn of me too. I'd spoken to my father of my hatred for the Sacred Followers and he had given me permission to discourage their worship in any way I saw fit. I might not have been able to take the life of a mortal but I would happily take everything else from them.

The chanting and ringing of bells drew closer and the carriage appeared on the road. I eyed them for several long seconds, noting their flowing white robes and ornamental weapons. I doubted any of the silver swords would stand a blow from a slayer blade.

I silently drew my blade from the sheath on my back and my warriors followed suit.

As the carriage passed our hiding place, I finalised my count. Twenty-four Followers to seven slayers. It almost didn't seem fair.

A savage smile pulled at my lips and I indicated for my warriors to move into the road behind the carriage as I pulled Baltian around. I kicked the stallion into a canter and we sped through the trees to the front of the group of Followers.

The stallion leapt onto the dirt road and reared up, sending the two cart horses into a frenzy of panic. I pointed my heavy blade, Tempest, at the man driving the cart and smiled.

"We'll be taking everything from here. I suggest you don't resist."

Shouts of confusion started up and the Followers fell into panic. A few of the braver men ran at me with their ridiculous swords raised. I batted their strikes aside almost lazily. One of them got too close to me and I kicked him squarely in the face, knocking him into the mud.

His white robes were coated in brown filth and I barked a laugh at him as he flailed around, scrambling to get up.

Baltian aimed a kick at another man who tried to circle around behind me. He was lucky the horse missed him; Baltian was a savage bastard and a solid kick from him could break a man's ribs or worse.

I spun towards the man as he tried to stab Baltian's flank and bellowed a battle cry as I swung my blade around, knocking his weapon from his hand.

He ran from me, screaming in terror as he raced back towards the rest of his twisted congregation. I bared my teeth at him like a beast; no man would harm my horse and live to tell the tale. Laws be damned. If he'd managed to strike Baltian his head would have parted company with his shoulders. He should thank the gods he'd missed.

My warriors surged in behind the carriage, blocking any Followers who tried to run.

I whistled a signal and Cassian and Eldred loosed arrows from their positions on the hilltop, striking the wooden carriage. The heavy arrowheads buried themselves deeply within the frame of the cart and several of the women screamed in fright.

"Those who surrender need not be harmed!" I shouted loudly enough for all of them to hear me over their own panicked cries.

The Sacred Followers all turned to look at the man who sat at the reins of the cart. I guessed that meant he was the leader of this branch of devotees. The Sacred Father. His eyes darted between my warriors fearfully and I could tell he was wondering why I was the one addressing them.

"I may be younger than my men, cretin, but I assure you I am more than a match for any one of them. You would do well not to disrespect me by looking to them for help," I growled. This was my first mission against the Sacred Followers and I couldn't expect them to know who I was yet. But they would. Soon they would all cower at the sound of my name and turn from their vile master rather than risk crossing me.

"Don't you know who we are?" the man asked incredulously. "Don't you know whose protection we are under? We follow the Immortal Creator, giver of eternal youth. He drinks the blood of those who deny him his offerings!"

"I should like to see him try," I growled. Immortal Creator was it now? The last I'd heard, Miles called himself the Benevolent Saviour. Perhaps one egotistical lie wasn't enough for him.

I signalled for my men to start stripping the Followers of everything they owned and directed Baltian away from them as I oversaw their work.

As most of their belongings were already loaded on the cart, it didn't take my warriors long to gather the rest. They forced the men and women to place everything, including the clothes from their backs, onto the cart and then directed them to stand by the side of the road.

Holbard jumped up into the cart and a high-pitched scream sounded as he dragged a young woman out of hiding by the scruff of her neck.



“Please sir!” she called desperately, her eyes seeking me out. “I’m not a Follower! Please don’t leave me with them!”

“The girl is ours,” the Sacred Father hissed. “Take the rest and be on your way, but she stays with us.”

I eyed him distastefully then beckoned for Holbard to bring the girl to me. He checked her for weapons a little more thoroughly than was necessary then deposited her by Baltian’s feet.

The girl shrank back, clutching her white dress closer to her thin frame as she tried to avoid Baltian’s restless hooves.

“Speak,” I instructed when she remained silent. If she expected me to consider her request to take her away from the Followers then I needed an explanation. Her long, brown hair hung over her face but I could see that she was attractive. The translucent white gown did little to hide her body either.

“Please sir, I’m not a Follower. They took me from my family to offer me up as a sacrifice. If you leave me with them then they will feed me to their master.” Tears swam in her eyes and I could see how desperately she wanted saving.

My eyes whipped to the Sacred Father. “Is this true?” I demanded.

“Everyone knows that pure, virgin blood tastes the sweetest,” he replied, as if that were an explanation. “Such an offering may be the last pledge I need make before he awards me the gift of eternal youth.”

The man was already well into his forties and didn’t appear to be in the best of health. I knew for a fact that Miles would never sire someone so old. He favoured the young and the beautiful to add to his collection of immortal monsters. The girl he intended to sacrifice was more likely to be offered immortality by the false god than he was.

Holbard struck him across the face and he fell back into the mud.

I offered my hand to the stolen girl and hoisted her up onto Baltian behind me. She wrapped her arms around my waist and I could feel her sobbing her relief into my battle leathers.

I nudged Baltian forward so that I could peer down at the Sacred Followers as they clustered together, naked and pathetic in the mud. None of them was either young or beautiful enough to be a likely candidate for one of Miles’s ‘gifts’ so I doubted I’d be facing any of them as immortals in the future.

“If you survive long enough to see your false god again then you can deliver a message to him for me. Tell him that Magnar Elioson did this to you. He doesn’t know my name yet but he will be hearing it more and more

until the very sound of it fills him with dread.

And once I am finished with his Followers, I will be coming for him and his brethren. I shall be a thorn in his side. An itch he can't scratch. A voice promising death in his ear. And a knife through his heart. So send him my warmest greetings and tell him I'll be seeing him soon."



Holbard had gone ahead to take news of our success to our clan's camp and by the time we arrived with our haul, the drums were beating and a feast had been prepared.

I tried not to smile at the treatment. No doubt my mother had organised the celebration and despite it being a little over the top, I couldn't help but be pleased.

The fire burned brightly in the centre of camp as we made our way towards the rest of the clan. Platters of food were laid out on a long table and the smell of it made my mouth water.

We handed the carriage off to some of the unsworn; members of the clan who had yet to take the vow.

I dismounted a little way from the ring of clansmen who had gathered around the fire and held my arms up to catch the stolen girl as she followed. She stared around nervously, leaning close to me as she eyed the men and women who passed between the tents. I imagined we were almost as terrifying to her as the Sacred Followers had been. A travelling war camp wasn't the most familiar of surroundings for a village girl like her.

"We aren't as savage as we look," I teased her. "Stay by my side tonight and tomorrow I'll make arrangements to take you home. What's your name?"

"Natalia," she replied in a small voice, her wide eyes still taking in the strange surroundings mistrustfully.

"You shouldn't trust a word out of Magnar's mouth if you want to keep your virtue sweet Natalia!"

I turned and grinned at Julius as he approached us, holding his hands out for Baltian's reins. "Don't mind poor Julius," I said in a low voice which I knew would carry to him all the same. "He is just bitter because Father didn't let him take his vow with me."

"We can't all be the great and powerful Magnar Elioson," Julius sighed

dramatically. “Some of us are only destined to be the forgotten younger brother. Thirteen full moons between our birthdays and you would think it was all the time in the world.” Unlike me, Julius chose to cut his dark hair short but we were similar in most other ways. Our bronze skin and dark eyes were mirrors of our mother’s but we had our father’s warrior build. Despite our young years, we both towered over men twice our age already and we weren’t finished growing yet.

“Julius is bitter because he has to clean up horse shit before he can join the feast.” I pulled Natalia under my arm and she didn’t resist, instead she leant into me seeming grateful that I’d taken her under my protection. Julius rolled his eyes and reached up to pat Baltian’s neck. My brother was the only other person the horse would allow to handle him.

“Well, if the great and powerful Magnar wants to head towards the fire and warm his great ass while I do all of the work then who am I to complain?” Julius began to lead Baltian away from us then paused to look back over his shoulder. “Father’s surprise has arrived for you,” he said, his eyes sparkling. “Why don’t you take sweet Natalia to see what it is?”

“Why don’t you give me a clue?” I asked, sensing mischief in his teasing. He knew something I didn’t but he only shook his head as he led Baltian away between the tents.

When I’d taken my vow early, a small part of me had worried that my relationship with Julius would change. I’d worried that my elevation might leave a bitter taste in his mouth. The unsworn had to serve the slayers and help with a lot of the menial work around the camp when they weren’t training. Until last week we had done so together, our easy camaraderie and competitive natures making the work fun. But as he continued to treat me exactly as he had before, my worries lifted. Nothing would break the ties between us. Especially nothing so petty as jealousy.

Feeling like I was on the back foot, I began to guide Natalia towards the fire. Her white gown trailed around her ankles, skimming her bare feet as she walked. The light of the fire was making her body very visible through the sheer material and I wasn’t entirely sure she’d realised it. She clung to me fearfully as we approached the laughter and shouting that carried from the men around the fire.

Some of the warriors noticed our approach and began to call my name in greeting. I smiled at them, trying hard not to look as smug as I felt. The crowd parted, leaving space for me to approach my mother and father who

were sitting on the far side of the fire. Many of the men and women we passed reached out to clap me on the back or offered words of praise.

“He’s here!” I heard my mother cry excitedly though I couldn’t see her between the press of bodies. Natalia clung to me in a way that was a little indecent but I didn’t mind. I’d saved a maiden from the jaws of the vampires and if she wanted to follow me around with her gaze full of wonder and gratitude then I wasn’t going to stop her.

Finally, I made it past the throng of clansmen and found Mother and Father standing together while they waited for me. My father was a fearsome warrior, his long hair braided with rune-covered beads and his blade, Venom, was strapped across his back like always. His gaze travelled to the indecently dressed girl who clung to me and his jaw ticked in irritation. I wondered why for a moment but my attention was drawn away from the issue as my mother spoke.

“We hear you have had a great victory,” she said loudly, a radiant smile filling her beautiful face. It was said that my father fought fifty battles to win her hand in marriage. But she didn’t accept his proposal until he’d managed to defeat *her* too. The clan still told stories of the fight between them and of how he had barely won. Only his love for her had let him prevail. To this day she still teased that she had let him win, wanting his hand as badly as he’d wanted hers. I didn’t believe that though; my mother was not the kind of woman to lose a fight willingly even if it was for the man she loved.

“It was only a cart driven by mortals, Mother,” I replied modestly. Though I was proud of the way the mission had gone, it certainly wasn’t as if I’d fought a battle against the vampires.

“Exactly,” my father rumbled. “The boy has done well but there’s no need to fuss Freya.”

My mother smiled lightly but I could see pride shining in her gaze and it filled my chest with satisfaction.

“I hear I’m to have a surprise of some sort?” I asked, unable to resist asking any longer.

“Indeed.” My father gave me a penetrating stare and I could feel the warning in his gaze. He didn’t think I was going to like this. I squared my shoulders a little, relaxing my features into a mask of ease. The whole clan was watching us, I would have to keep my feelings in check if I was about to be disappointed. But I couldn’t for the life of me think why he would give me something he didn’t believe I’d want. And in front of the entire clan of all

things.

“A prophet foresaw a chance for our clan to grow stronger,” Mother said carefully.

Something twisted uncomfortably in my gut and I pulled Natalia a little closer under my arm.

“There is to be a union between our blood,” Father said loudly, his smile holding a hint of regret that only I could see. “Let me present to you your bride my son. This is Valentina of the Clan of Storms.” He stepped aside and a girl moved forward, a shy smile gracing her lips as she assessed me.

My heart grew cold in my chest as I stared back at her. I was sixteen. I’d taken my vow only eight moons ago and already the gods had decided on my bride?

I tried to ignore the fluttering of my heart which beat like a bird trapped in a cage desperate to fly free. I’d known that this was a possibility when I’d taken the vow but it rarely happened. Arranged marriages were for the purity of our bloodline and no doubt some future child of ours had been *seen* doing great things. But all that I could see in that moment was a strange girl I was expected to share my life with. My parents had married for love and I’d grown up watching their union with the greatest hope that I might one day find a match like theirs.

“It’s an honour to meet you, husband,” the girl said playfully.

I clenched my jaw before I could say something that would embarrass our clan. I forced myself to look at her objectionably. She was pretty in an obvious kind of way. The cut of her gown was designed to draw my gaze to the swell of her breasts and the curve of her hips. She was tall enough not to be dwarfed by me and her dark hair was braided artfully. I wondered if she usually dressed that way or if someone had forced her to come here dressed up like an offering.

I wondered if she was just as unwilling as I was to follow through on this marriage. But as I met her gaze, I could see that she wasn’t. She appraised me appreciatively and her eyes glimmered with excitement.

“It’s an honour to meet you too, my lady. But I’m not your husband yet.” I forced myself to offer a teasing smile to take the sting out of my words.

Valentina’s eyes fell on Natalia and ice formed in them. It appeared she didn’t appreciate my scantily clad companion. The knowledge made me tighten my hold on the stolen girl as I struggled to think of anything else to say.

“I presume you are some years older than me,” I said, landing on the first thing that came to mind. “As you have already taken your vow.”

“I’m twenty-two,” she replied with a small nod and I could see that the information didn’t bother her.

“Well, let’s hope you can still bear children by the time we are wed.”

My mother coughed loudly and stepped between us, placing a hand on my elbow. “Magnar, you must be famished after your day on the road. Let us find you some food and you can get to know your bride while you eat.

She led me away and I didn’t resist, grateful for the momentary escape she was offering.

“Don’t worry my love,” she breathed in my ear, her touch gentle on my arm as she sought to comfort me. “The gods may have seen your union in the stars but they said nothing of a date. This betrothal could go on for years and years. Who knows what might happen in such a span of time.” She pressed a kiss to my cheek before leaving me to gaze down at a plate of food I had no appetite for anymore. But she had given me the one thing I needed. Hope.

# Montana



**W**hen I woke the next morning, Erik was gone. I wondered how long he'd stayed watching over me. Did he suspect another attacker might come? Did *I*?

Whoever wanted me dead surely wasn't going to give up so easily. Once they realised their assassin had failed, how long would it be before they sent more after me?

Light filtered through the broken window shutters, just a dreary, wintery glow. For some reason, the ordeal I'd been through didn't make me want to run. Instead, a strange feeling was stirring inside me. An intangible sensation like an anchor rooting my heart to this place. Something was urging me to stay...

*Moon child.*

I sprang out of bed, my pulse pounding at the silky voice in my mind. Dropping down to my knees, I fished for the blade under the bed, certain it was the source of the voice. My fingers were drawn to its magnetic aura and as I grasped the hilt, calm filled me like I'd been reunited with a vital piece of myself.

"What are you?" I breathed, turning the beautiful dagger over in my palm. It heated my skin and seemed to sing a quiet song just for me. Holy shit, was I talking to inanimate objects now?

The shimmering gold blade was perfectly polished, reflecting my hazel eyes back at me. I blinked as they momentarily appeared blue, the colour of my sister's. I was either losing my mind or something strange was going on with me. The dreams, this blade and now the mark on my arm...

I checked the clock on the wall, figuring I should probably wash and get dressed. I had to be ready to spend the day with Miles.

Reluctantly, I tucked the blade back under the bed and headed to the

bathroom.

The heated water was a sweet gift. If there was one thing good about this place, it was this. I washed my hair, running my fingers through it and thinking about the vampire I'd killed. How was it even possible that I was capable of such a thing? I didn't feel bad about it. In fact, it made me feel strong. Capable of taking on the creatures who had kept me prisoner my whole life. And yet...for once, I didn't want to do that to all of them. Well, not Erik anyway. Which sent my thoughts into another desperate spiral.

Why was I so drawn to him? He was evil personified. And yet he wasn't. Beneath his harsh words and sharp expressions was a softness that spoke of another side to him. I'd seen it the night he'd kissed me. I'd seen it when he'd cleansed the cut on my neck.

As I rubbed the soap against my skin, I scrubbed at the strange mark on my arm which seemed less red today than it had before. My fingers traced the image of a blade and I wondered if it was possible that I was a slayer. Fabian had told me they'd been wiped from the earth, so I was sure it was a dangerous secret I had to keep. But if General Wolfe had sent that vampire to murder me, I was in serious trouble. Would he tell the royals what he suspected? Or try to end me before they found out? Either way, I had to be prepared.

Tension coiled in my belly. The only thing that seemed to help me relax was the thought of having Nightmare with me. Whatever strange power possessed that blade, it seemed to unveil a potential in me I'd never realised had been there. The ability to fight back.

Could I carry it around the castle? Keep it concealed?

The idea made my heart swell. I'd have to find a way. Because if Wolfe attacked me again, I was going to defend myself.

Stepping out of the shower, I wrapped myself in a fluffy white towel and walked into my room.

My heart stuttered.

Erik had returned and was standing there in a shirt and trousers, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Could you ever knock?" I hissed, hugging the towel tighter around me.

His eyes travelled over me and a grin formed on his lips. "I'll add knocking to the long list of ways I so wish to please you," he dead-panned.

I rolled my eyes, moving to the closet and opening the door so it concealed me before I dropped my towel. I tugged on some underwear, followed by a



long skirt and a white blouse. I wasn't trying to impress Miles today, so I was gonna wear what I damn well liked.

Shutting the door, I found Erik in the exact same position he'd been before, as rigid as a statue.

“So are you standing in my room like a lump of ice for any particular reason?” After our argument last night, things felt off between us again. Maybe I should have been kinder, seeing as he had covered for my ass. But something about seeing him today made my blood boil. The more I thought about the strange way he'd admitted to caring about me, the more insulting I found it. And the fact that my heart was captured by him made me all the more furious. How dare he mess with my emotions? And make me think he felt something between us too by kissing me.

“You're angry with me,” he stated.

“No shit,” I muttered, moving to the dresser and snatching up a hairbrush. There was no sign of Nancy today so I guessed Erik agreed I didn't need to look my best for Miles. “Did you just come here to remind me of that?”

“No I...” His lips pressed together as I watched him in the mirror. For a moment I glimpsed that softness in him again, glimmering just beneath the surface of his eyes. But it couldn't have been real, could it? Surely this was all a ploy to get me to cooperate.

He cleared his throat. “I came to apologise.”

I stopped brushing my hair as shock rained through me.

“You were attacked last night and I should have been more considerate.” His brows pinched together as if this was a struggle for him to say.

It struck me that Erik *had* been considerate. I just hadn't liked the honest truth when I'd heard it.

My heart weighed in my chest. My thoughts scattered all over the place. Did he care? Truly?

His eyes told me he did. But how could I believe it? Were vampires really capable of feeling something for a human?

The only thing I had to guide me was my instincts and they compelled me to believe him. As I started to accept that, Nightmare whispered, *trust him*.

My throat constricted. It might have been crazy, but the knife's conviction gave strength to my own. Erik cared. And that was important. It meant he might protect me. But for how long, I couldn't guess.

“Thank you,” I breathed at last, a heaviness lifting from me. “And I'm sorry I called you a bloodsucker.”

He chuckled, his eyes brightening in an instant. "I'm more of a blood-sipper."

I couldn't fight a laugh. "So what's on your agenda today, blood-sipper?"

He grinned, moving closer and resting a hand on my shoulder. "I will continue my pretence of courting the other girls. I believe I'm spending the day with Brionna today. Or is her name Briony?"

"Pretence?" I echoed lightly, not correcting him on Brianna's name. "I thought you were interested in Paige?"

He dropped his head beside mine, gazing at my reflection in the mirror. "There's only one thing I'm interested in this world. And it's not Paige. Or any girl." His breath tickled my neck and I fought the temptation to lean closer.

"Well women all over the world are sighing a huge breath of relief right now." My gut told me I was not remotely pleased about what he'd said, but I refused to think about why.

"Funny, I don't see you sighing, Rebel. In fact, I would guess you look a little disappointed." He stood, leaving me in a heatwave that engulfed my whole body.

*Damn him.*

"So what is it you do care about?" I asked.

"Not your business."

I bit back my annoyance, not wanting to descend into another argument.

Erik fiddled with his hair in the mirror, his shoulder jamming up against mine. "I've sent General Wolfe to the west coast to release your father," he revealed in a causal tone.

I turned to him so sharply my mouth collided with his cheek. I awkwardly threw my arms around him, not giving a damn what he might think about that.

"Thank you," I gasped, pressing my face into his shirt.

He turned, sliding his arms around my shoulders and holding me closer. "I told you I would," he muttered.

Tears leaked from my eyes full of relief. Relief that my father would be freed and relief that I really could trust Erik.

"Will you bring him here?" I asked as I fell apart in his arms.

"Is that what you'd like?" he asked.

I nodded, not having thought of it as an option before. He couldn't go back to the Realm, it was unthinkable. And I wanted to see him with my own two eyes, to prove he was really okay.

“Then it's done,” he promised and for once I believed him wholeheartedly.

I leant back, quickly wiping my cheeks, embarrassed for showing weakness in front of him.

“Thank you, Erik, really,” I whispered, my heart thumping madly in my chest.

He stood upright with a small smile. “Enjoy your day with Miles. There's nothing to fear from him. He'll be along soon.” He bowed his head then seemed confused by doing so before he headed to the door and exited.

I used the powder in the drawer to lighten the redness of my face then headed to the bed, bending down to retrieve Nightmare.

My hand curled around the warm hilt and I stood, carrying it to the closet and taking out a silk scarf. I lifted up my skirt, holding the blade against my thigh and tying it there with the scarf. When I was sure it was secure, I dropped the skirt and eyed myself in the mirror. No one would be able to tell I was carrying it. And its presence built a wall of strength around my heart.

A rhythmic knocking came at the door. “Oh beautiful Courtier, are you in there?”

I raised my brows, hurrying to the door and opening it.

Miles gave me an appraising look, flicking a lock of blonde hair from his deep blue eyes. “Good morning, hottie, you look ravishing. No wonder my brothers are warring over you.”

I laughed, warming to him immediately. “They aren't warring over me,” I said. *Especially not Erik.*

“Yeah yeah, play it modest. They'll eat that up.” He winked then snatched my hand, tugging me into the corridor. I spotted a beefy guard standing behind him in a black uniform. His dark hair was shaved short and his jaw was sharp and square.

“This is my bodyguard, Warren,” Miles explained. “Don't worry about him, he'll just follow us around and scare off pests.” He pulled me along and Warren fell into step beside us. “You're Montana right?” Miles asked and I nodded. “Miles and Montana has a certain ring to it, don't you think? If you don't wanna pick Freaky Fabian or Evil Erik at the ceremony, then your safest bet is me.” He threw a glance at Warren who rolled his eyes. I recalled what Fabian had said about Miles and wondered if Warren really was his partner.

“I have a surprise for you this morning. But first-” Miles reached into his navy robes and produced an apple. “Breakfast.”

“Thanks.” I took it and my empty stomach encouraged me to bite into it.

Miles made smalltalk as we made our way downstairs and headed out to the front of the castle. A gleaming white car awaited us and a guard handed the keys to Warren as we approached it.

I held the apple core in my hand, swallowing the last of it. Miles plucked it from my fingers and tossed it into the trees.

“In you get.” He opened the back door for me and I dropped inside. He followed, beaming as he sat beside me. “So here's the deal, Snow White.”

I frowned at the name. “What?”

“You know, dark hair, pale cheeks, blood-red lips. Like the story?”

I shook my head, having no idea what he was talking about.

“Never mind. So anyway, you may have heard on the grapevine that I'm with Warren.”

I lifted my brows, surprised by his honesty.

“So if you pick me, I'm gonna be more like a friend than a husband, alright? I'd like to get that clear in case you fall for my roguishly good looks today. It's not that I don't like girls...I just like guys more. One guy in particular.” He gave me a slanted grin and I released a small laugh. Warren glanced at us in the rear-view mirror with a glint in his gaze.

“Okay.”

“Good.” He sat back in his seat with a satisfied smile. “But you know...we might still have to er, kiss and stuff occasionally. For show and that.” His eyes dimmed a little and I sensed his displeasure at the idea.

“Why do you have to take wives if you're with someone else?” I asked.

His golden brows drew together. “It's just the way it is.”

A pang of sympathy ran through me which was followed by a sharp flare of heat from Nightmare on my thigh.

I rubbed my leg a little, trying not to give away my discomfort.

Warren drove us into the city and we took lanes left and right, sailing between towering skyscrapers which blocked out any glimpse of the sunlight beyond the clouds.

The further we drove, the more relaxed I felt about putting some distance between me and the castle. I felt less like a prisoner beyond those walls but I wondered if I'd ever escape them fully.

Warren parked us outside a glass building nestled between two tower-blocks. We exited onto the street and Miles took my hand, keeping me close. Warren opened the trunk of the car, taking out two duffel bags. He followed

without a word as Miles led me up to the building and pushed through the door.

A sharp scent reached me in the heated air and I glanced at Miles with curiosity.

“Good morning, your highness,” said a female vampire behind a wide desk. “We've had everything organised for the Courtier.”

“All warmed up?” he asked and she nodded, gesturing to a wooden door across the room. “The changing rooms are just through there.”

I frowned as I followed Miles through the door and we emerged in a short corridor. Two doors stood ahead of us, one marked with the symbol of a man and the other with a woman.

“Here.” Miles took one of the bags from Warren and thrust it at me.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked, eyeing the bag.

“Get changed into the bikini and meet us back here,” Miles announced before heading through the male door followed closely by Warren.

I was left feeling a little shell-shocked as I headed through the other door and emerged in a blue room full of cubicles and a row of small cupboards on the wall.

Heading into one of the cubicles, I unzipped the bag, finding the item Miles had called a 'bikini' which looked like underwear to me. The only difference was it was bright red and had a strangely smooth texture.

I hesitated a couple of minutes, not liking the idea of walking around in next to nothing. Especially with the mark on my arm. Something told me I should keep it hidden.

Spotting a white gown in the bag, I tugged it out and relaxed a little. Stripping off my clothes, I eyed the blade strapped to my leg with concern. I'd have to put it in the bag...but what if someone checked it?

Not having any choice in the matter, I loosened it from my leg and wrapped it in the scarf before tucking it at the bottom of the bag. Stuffing my clothes around it, I pulled on the bikini and looked down at myself.

This was...weird. What the hell did Miles have in mind for us to do?

Putting on the robe, I took the bag and headed back out into the hall, finding Miles there in nothing but tight blue briefs. Beside him, Warren was slightly more decent in a long pair of black shorts. Both of their bodies looked cut from glass, their abs firm and shining.

My mouth opened in surprise.

“You don't need that.” Miles strode toward me, snatching the bag from my

hand.

He headed into the women's changing room and I gazed at Warren with an awkward expression.

“He's a little extroverted,” Warren commented. “You get used to it.”

I nodded, smiling a little as I scrunched up my toes. I supposed I didn't have anything to worry about if these men were only into each other. But I hoped I didn't have to take the robe off any time soon.

“So...doesn't it bother you that Miles has to take wives?” I asked, slightly concerned I might offend him. But surely this was maddening for him? Why would any of the royals take wives if they didn't want them? Erik didn't, so why did Miles?

“I can handle it,” Warren muttered. “For the greater benefit.”

“Which is?” My eyes narrowed and my heart thumped frantically.

“It's not my place to say.” He looked away, ending the conversation.

I sighed, sensing I wasn't going to get anything more out of him. When the quiet became unbearable, I asked, “Why are we wearing this underwear?”

“Because we're having a spa day!” Miles reappeared, pulling me along.

“A what?” I asked, my brow wrinkling as I jogged to keep up.

“Pampering,” he explained, but I was still a little confused.

I soon learned the entire building was designed to indulge in various treatments and Miles ensured I had all of them done. When all of my nails were painted red and my face had been scrubbed and moisturised, Miles led me along another corridor. He and Warren looked like plastic dolls since they'd been oiled up during something called a 'massage'.

“What's next?” I asked, unable to stop staring at their shiny bodies.

“Pool time,” Miles announced before leading the way through a set of double doors.

We emerged in a massive glass room with a bright blue pool at the heart of it. A fake arrangement of rocks sat at one end where a waterfall ran into it, causing the surface to bubble and foam.

Miles ran toward the edge of the pool, diving into the water and swimming under it in a graceful arc.

Warren followed, coming up for air beside Miles before they both turned their eyes on me.

My stomach twisted. My throat tightened.

I'd never been near water like this. The pools at the bathhouse had been cold and shallow. This was something else. And I wasn't able to swim. Not

only that, but taking my robe off would expose the mark on my forearm.

“Come on, Snow White!” Miles urged. “Jump in.”

I shook my head, backing up from the edge of the pool. “I’ll just watch.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Shed that robe and get in here,” Miles demanded.

I shook my head, but he swam forward, clearly intending to come after me. My heart rate spiked and I knew I had no choice but to get in.

Taking off the robe, I dropped it on a reclined plastic chair and moved to the edge of the pool. I clutched my hand over the mark on my arm, gazing down into the water.

“I can’t, I...” I bit into my lower lip as the hot water lapped against my feet.

Fear took hold of me. What if I sank to the bottom like a stone?

Miles’ playful expression shifted into concern. “Oh...” He swam to the edge, reaching out to me. “Here, I’ve got you. I won’t let you drown. And if you do, Warren will give you mouth to mouth.” He chuckled and Warren rolled his eyes.

I lowered myself to sit on the edge, dunking my legs into the water. Miles took hold of my hands and I had to release my arm. Thankfully, his eyes didn’t stray from mine.

“Promise you won’t drop me,” I asked and his eyes lit up.

“Promise, Snow.”

I took a breath, steeling myself as I slid over the edge and dropped into the water. The heated pool enveloped me and Miles seized my waist, keeping my head above the water. My legs flailed and my arms thrashed, but he never let go.

“You’re alright, just stop jerking like a finless dolphin and let me guide you,” Miles laughed.

I relaxed my limbs and he tugged me to his chest. I curled my legs around him on instinct and he started chuckling. “That’s it, make Warren good and jealous.”

Warren barked a laugh then started swimming on his back, moving his arms over his head as he went, cutting a path through the water.

“Can you teach me?” I asked Miles and he smiled keenly.

“Course. Let’s get you to the shallow bit.” He guided me over to the side of the pool where I could put my feet on the ground and I immediately relaxed. With the water up to my shoulders, I could still keep my arm concealed.

Miles demonstrated how to move in the pool, swimming in a style he called breaststroke. Thankfully, it allowed me to keep my arms under the

surface. I practised for a while in the shallower depths until I actually started to get the hang of it. The movements grew more fluid as my body adjusted quicker than I'd expected.

“Wow, you're a natural,” Miles commented. “Wanna swim to the waterfall?” He pointed across the pool and I nodded quickly, feeling more confident in my movements.

As we arrived at the falls, Warren appeared from underneath it, the water streaming over his glossy skin. “There's a cave back here.”

“Go on in,” Miles said and Warren gestured for me to follow him.

Holding my breath, I swam under the flow of water, emerging in a plastic cave lit by blue lights.

Warren sat up on a bubbling pool that was cut into the fake rocks. I drifted closer, keeping my arms under the water but a second later he dragged me up to sit beside him.

With a jolt of horror, I tried to cover up the mark but Warren followed my gaze and in an instant, his expression turned to alarm. He snatched my arm, yanking it up to look at the mark and I tried to pull away from his vice-like grip.

He released me, his eyes whipping up to mine. “Holy shit,” he breathed.

My gut spiralled. “Don't tell Miles,” I gasped just as Miles appeared under the falls.

“Don't tell me what?” he asked, his eyes flicking between us.

I shook my head at Warren, begging him not to say anything, but he tugged Miles up beside us and lifted my arm beneath his nose.

Miles gawped at it for several long seconds and fear thrummed through my bones.

“Please don't hurt me,” I blurted.

Miles looked to Warren then back to me. “You've got five seconds to explain yourself,” he demanded, his light tone thoroughly abandoned.

“I don't know what it is,” I admitted. All I had was the truth and I prayed it would be enough. “It appeared yesterday.”

“Miles,” Warren growled. “We have to inform the others.”

“No, please don't,” I begged, certain that would put me at risk.

“She has slayer blood like all of them do,” Miles replied to Warren, acting like I wasn't there. “Hers must be stronger.”

I chewed on my lower lip, beginning to shake. They knew about this? What did that mean?



“This is not normal, Miles,” Warren pressed. “They are never *this* strong.”

“Please explain to me what you're talking about,” I pleaded and Miles finally looked at me again, taking in my shivering form.

He sighed, touching my arm. “Don't be afraid.”

“I'm trying,” I whispered.

His expression grew intense as he thought about something, then he turned to Warren again. “What if this is a good thing? If she's a true slayer, she could be the one.”

“Miles...” Warren shook his head. “Don't you dare say what you're thinking.”

Miles' expression grew calculated as he turned to me. “I won't tell anyone, Montana,” he promised. “But you must pick me at the ceremony.”

My heart thumped in my ears. My skin tingled all over with some feeling I couldn't unravel.

“Promise me.” Miles' hand gripped mine, his desperation obvious.

I didn't have a choice. I had to agree or he'd tell the others. And who knew what that would mean? Surely nothing good. A vampire had tried to kill me because she thought I was a slayer, maybe the other royals would do the same.

“Okay,” I breathed at last, knowing it could be the end of me. If I chose Miles, I'd break my promise to Erik. But if I didn't, he'd expose me.

I prayed Dad was already released from the blood bank. But if I chose Miles, would Erik have him imprisoned again?

My options were limited. I had no choice. I had to pick Miles.



**I**t took nearly the whole day for us to reach the blood bank and with the short hours of daylight due to the harsh winter, the sun was already beginning to sink towards the horizon.

I shifted uncomfortably as night began to fall around us. I doubted I'd ever be able to feel truly at ease after dark even with Magnar by my side. It was like it was built into my psyche to head inside once the sunlight faded. My skin prickled uneasily and I leant back against Magnar, stealing some strength from his presence.

"You really think we can get my family out of there?" I asked quietly.

We still sat on the stallion's back and the beast's chest rose and fell steadily beneath us as he cooled off after the long ride. Magnar had stopped him within the trees, keeping us out of sight from any guards who might be on rotation outside the menacing building. The mare sidled closer, nuzzling her companion affectionately.

The blood bank was solidly built with red bricks and spread away from us out of sight over one level. Dad said it used to be a factory before the Final War. Hundreds of humans would have worked there. Now it was a place where all mortals dreaded ending up. It was the final destination on our way to the stomachs of the vampires. The place they took you when the only value you held was the blood running through your veins. I doubted any human who had entered there since the vampires' rule began had made it out alive.

Tall, white chimneys stood at either end of the menacing building, the one on the right belching black smoke into the darkening sky. An acrid stench filled the air and I tried not to think about what they were burning. Everything about the place made me want to turn and flee in the opposite direction.

I swallowed a thick lump in my throat. How on Earth were we supposed to get my family out of there?

“Are you sure we can do this?” I breathed.

“I will get them out or die trying,” Magnar promised.

“Less of the talk about dying,” I teased, trying not to take his words seriously. I knew that what we were about to attempt was all kinds of stupid and death was one of many terrible outcomes. But even if there was the smallest chance of getting my dad and Montana out of that hell hole then I had to try.

Magnar brushed his hand through my hair, slipping it back over my shoulder so that he could press a kiss to my neck. My skin came alive beneath his touch and my heartbeat stammered with surprise. A blush crawled across my cheeks at the casual intimacy of the gesture. He didn't seem to have any of the reservations I felt about touching him but I was more than happy to let him lead. I leant into him, letting my eyes fall closed for the briefest moment as I enjoyed the sensation of his mouth on my skin.

My mind travelled back to our kiss last night and I bit my lip to stop myself from turning to face him. I'd slept in the comfort of his arms and had never spent a night feeling so secure before.

But with the cold light of dawn had come the truth I'd wanted to avoid facing. Each moment we spent together was bringing us closer to the time when we had to part. Every brush of his skin against mine since then was filled with the promise of goodbye. I wanted to grab hold of him and refuse to let go but it was like trying to hold water in my hands.

Though I was afraid of the feelings which grew with every moment I spent with him, Magnar seemed to see it differently. He took every opportunity he could to touch me, holding me close while we rode together. It was like he didn't want to waste this time while we still had it and I couldn't bring myself to pull away from him.

“There is nothing to fear in death,” he breathed. “It is the natural way of things. In death we are reunited with those we have loved. I have many people waiting for me there. I am not afraid to join them when my time comes.”

“Well I'm not ready to lose you,” I replied. A tiny voice in the back of my head reminded me that I'd be losing him either way. We were still on different paths and if everything went well, we would go our separate ways before the sun rose tomorrow.

Magnar released my hair, letting it fall against my neck again as he shifted back. Apparently he hadn't forgotten either. And he hadn't changed his mind.

“I will do my best to stay alive,” he agreed before dismounting and holding his hands up to help me down too.

I slid from the stallion’s back and wrapped my arms around Magnar’s neck as I looked up at him. The setting sun made his bronze skin shine with hidden warmth.

“I never thanked you,” I said gently as I held his gaze. “For saving me the day the vampires took my family captive. At the time I was so angry and upset that I couldn’t see what you’d done for me. If you hadn’t stopped me from running to them then I’d be stuck inside that building now too. And we’d have no hope at all. Whatever happens tonight, I need you to know how much you’ve done for me. How much I appreciate it. If anything goes wrong then I just want you to know-”

Magnar stopped my rambling with a kiss that set my skin on fire. He crushed me against him and I lost myself in his strong arms as my heart swelled with something I’d never thought I’d feel. I’d never wanted to feel it before. But I’d never had him before either.

I stood on my tiptoes as I pushed my body against his, feeling the firm press of his muscles as his hands fisted in my hair.

All too soon, we broke apart and Magnar trailed a hand down the side of my face, brushing his thumb across my lower lip.

“I was alone before I found you,” he said roughly and a knot formed in my stomach at his words. “And no matter what happens tonight or tomorrow, no matter if our journeys take us away from each other, I am not alone in this world anymore.”

My lips parted to reply but I didn’t know how to form the feelings zipping through my body into words. I slid my hand from his neck down to his chest, laying it over his heart which I could feel pounding beneath his fighting leathers.

“I was alone too,” I said eventually. “I just didn’t realise it until now.”

Magnar leant forward once more, pressing his lips to mine in the gentlest brush of a kiss before stepping away.

My skin grew cold without him and I watched as he moved to gather supplies from the bags on the mare’s back. I turned away from him and walked towards the tree line as I looked out at the blood bank again.

I needed to set my mind on our mission. Dad and Montana were in there and it would take everything I had to get them out.

Goosebumps swept over my skin which had nothing to do with the

freezing wind. I didn't need to put a hand on Fury to know that there were vampires nearby. I could feel their presence like a breath on the back of my neck.

Despite the undeniable fear that coursed through my veins, I was also filled with hope. Montana and Dad were so close. I'd never gone a day without seeing them before and it had been nearly a week. One week since my whole world had changed in every imaginable way. But now we were finally here, and if by some miracle this plan worked out then I might truly be able to live my life in freedom. Such a thing had been nothing more than an impossible dream such a short time ago and yet now it was almost within reach. We only had to take it.

"They have Familiars watching the area," Magnar said softly behind me. "We will need to remove them before we can approach."

"How will we do that?" I asked as my stomach plummeted. The last Familiar I'd tried to destroy had easily gotten past me. If these were anywhere near as slippery as that rat had been then I didn't rate my chances against them.

"We can't head out into the open with them watching so we will have to draw them to us."

"And won't the vampires notice us killing them?"

"Hopefully not. The connection they maintain with the creatures is not constant. The vampires set them tasks then leave them to it. If the animal sees or hears something the vampire would want to know then they use the connection between their minds to send a message. We will need to kill the creatures without being seen and in all likelihood, the vampires controlling them won't know anything about it until it's too late. Unless we get unlucky and they choose to contact the creatures themselves we should be safe." He gave the building one more sweeping glance then beckoned me further into the trees.

I turned away from the view and followed him, making sure to keep my footsteps silent. I didn't want to take any chances this close to our enemies.

Magnar led me to a small clearing and handed me the flashlight we'd taken from the store. I waited while he moved around the area, inspecting the trees and vegetation until he'd found what he was looking for.

"I want you to hide here and point the light back towards the building. Once I am in position, start flashing the light on and off. That should draw them to us and I'll take care of them."

I nodded in understanding as I looked down at the little flashlight in my hand. I knew the plan made sense but the idea of drawing those creatures towards us felt more than a little insane.

I ducked down into the bushes and waited while he took cover behind a towering trunk opposite my hiding place. Magnar pulled Venom into his grasp and held it ready as he fell still. In the diminishing light, he was little more than a silhouette to me and I knew where to look for him. Hopefully that meant the creatures we hunted wouldn't stand a chance.

I took a deep breath and flicked the flashlight on and off again. I waited a few moments then repeated the process. Seconds dragged into minutes as I continued to flick the light on and off and we waited, and waited... soft snuffling approached and I flicked the light off, leaving us in darkness.

I held my breath as the faintest padding of paws drew closer through the undergrowth.

A large, grey rabbit hopped into the clearing, looking about curiously. I almost doubted that evil could lay inside such an innocent looking creature but Fury burned at my hip in recognition of what lay within the animal.

The rabbit hopped closer and Magnar delivered a swift blow, cleaving through its small body and striking its heart. The vampire's slave dissolved into dust before my eyes and Magnar quickly moved back into the cover of the trees.

The second Familiar arrived a moment later in the shape of a rat. I glared at the creature, noting the little white mark down the centre of its nose. It wasn't the same Familiar that had eluded me in the tree days ago but it still made my stomach twist with irritation. Magnar dispatched it as quickly as the first and I started flashing the light again.

It took a few minutes before the third Familiar approached. I almost didn't notice the huge bird as it swept through the trees. The owl landed silently on a branch not far from my hiding place. It twisted its head back and forth as it searched for the source of the light.

Luckily it had landed with the tree's branches blocking Magnar from its sight but there was also no way for him to approach it without it spotting him.

I bit my lip as I tried to decide if I should take it on. I was the only one able to reach it without being seen first but after my failed attempt with the rat, I was terrified of missing again. If the creature got word of us back to its master then any chance we had of making it into the blood bank and saving my family was gone.

I had a better chance of success than Magnar though so I had to take it. I held my breath as I eased myself upright and took my first, tentative step towards the bird.

It ruffled its feathers as it scoured the clearing again and I took the opportunity to close in on it from behind. The branch it had chosen for a perch was low enough for me to reach from the ground and I silently unsheathed Fury as I stalked closer.

The blade hummed excitedly as I closed in on my quarry. *Strike fast and true*, it urged eagerly and I let its excitement guide my arm as I swung the blade forward.

The owl turned as I leapt at it and drove the knife into its back but it dissolved into dust before its eyes could find me.

I allowed myself a wide smile as I took cover again to wait for the final creature to come and investigate our trap.

Minutes dragged on but nothing arrived. I willed Fury to use its gift to search for any signs of another Familiar approaching but it couldn't sense a thing.

Eventually, Magnar stood and beckoned me to join him. I left my hiding place and made my way over to him in the clearing as he placed Venom over his shoulder.

"The final creature has moved away but I am confident it remains unaware of us. We shall have to risk it returning while we are exposed but there is little more we can do to draw it out without raising too much suspicion and bringing the vampires to us too," he explained.

"Okay, so what now?" I asked.

"It is time for the Belvederes to learn of my return," he growled. "Let's make sure they know I'm coming for them." A fierce smile lit his features and I stole a little of his courage as he led the way through the trees towards the blood bank.

I already knew what my role would be once we made it inside. While he fought and killed any vampires we found, I had to release any humans they held captive. We would stay together so that he could protect me and clear a path to my family. Fury would help me when I needed it and I trusted Magnar to keep me safe. If anyone could do this, it was him.

We made it to the edge of the trees and hesitated in the safety of their shadows.

The sun was sinking beneath the horizon and darkness loomed. This was it.

The time the vampires held dear. We were attacking their stronghold during the hours when they held the most power. I didn't question Magnar's decision to go in at night but what I would have given for a blazing summer's day to aid us.

The moon appeared in the sky, low and fat, a shining silver ball to take the place of the sun. Mom had always called us her sun and moon. I tried to take the sight of it as a sign that Montana was close.

*Not long now Monty.* I smiled as I pictured her face pinched in irritation at the nickname. I hoped to be seeing it for real very soon.

"Draw your blade. Keep close to me," Magnar instructed and I pulled Fury into my grasp again.

Yesss it sighed in anticipation. *So many. So close.* I swallowed a lump in my throat as I drew on the blade's enthusiasm to try and banish some of my own fear.

"Fear is a weapon you can wield," Magnar said, catching my eye with his golden gaze. "It is your own desire to survive. The very essence of mortality. The things you shall fight are already dead. They know not what it is to live. And they know nothing of love."

My heart skittered at his words.

"You fight for the freedom of your family," he continued. "And you will succeed at all costs."

"I will succeed," I echoed, needing the power of the words to get me through this.

What we were about to do wasn't about me. It was about *them*. The vampires had taken my family from me once but I would happily die before I let them keep them from me.

I felt the power of that determination rise through my blood like a tide and the slayer mark on my arm tingled in anticipation. I wasn't afraid. I was ready. And heaven help any bloodsucker who stood in my path.



# Magnar



1000 YEARS AGO

I lay beneath the thick canvas of my tent with my arms behind my head and frowned as the wind battered the material. Usually I loved the sound of a storm when I was tucked within the confines of my tent. Knowing the wind and rain were thwarted in trying to reach me always made me feel like I was somehow outsmarting the gods themselves.

I wished that were true today more than ever. If ever I'd needed a way around the will of the gods it was now.

"Idun?" I murmured, careful not to wake Natalia as she slept soundly beside me. I'd tried to forget my worries in the comfort of her body but the distraction had barely lasted an hour. And once she'd fallen into a satisfied slumber, the reality of my situation had drawn close again.

When the sun rose I had to pledge myself to Valentina and make our betrothal official. Today I had to give up any hope I had of finding love. Or happiness. I would tie myself to a stranger and forfeit the dreams I'd had of a life holding something *more*.

"Idun?" I muttered again a little louder, hoping the goddess might heed my call. If only she'd listen, I'd offer her anything she asked of me. Anything but this. I only wished for one thing in this life and that was to find a woman who was my equal in every way and to love her for everything she was. I knew in my heart Valentina wasn't that woman. "I will give you anything if you'd just free me from making this promise."

The tent began to buckle and sway under the pressure of the storm and I pushed myself upright as I sensed something powerful drawing closer.

I stood and placed a hand against the thick canvas, a chill creeping across my palm from the pounding rain outside.

I pulled on my trousers and fastened my boots as my skin prickled from the electricity in the air. Thunder crashed overhead.

I took hold of Tempest and moved towards the exit, unfastening the toggles so that I could lift the flap and peer out into the storm.

Rain fell in torrents, skimming over the tents and pooling in the mud. Lightning forked through the sky, momentarily illuminating the camp around me. No one else was stupid enough to be outside in such weather.

The wind shifted, driving water into my face and Natalia mumbled something from the bed behind me as the cold air found her bare skin.

I stepped outside, dropping the tent flap. The freezing rain cascaded over me, plastering my hair to my scalp and raising goosebumps along the exposed skin on my arms and chest.

Tempest purred with expectant energy but I didn't get the sense that a vampire drew close. This was something else.

Darkness pressed in thickly, the deep storm clouds blotting out the moon and stars. It was hard to see anything of the camp around me and I squinted at the space to my right where I knew my parents' tent lay. I wondered if I should wake them but something stopped me. Whatever was coming wasn't meant for them. It was here for me.

Shimmering golden light caught my eye and I turned to find a bare footprint pressed into the mud beside me. The water which pooled in it sparkled with golden light like the rays of the sun.

I frowned at it as another golden footprint appeared further away.

I adjusted my grip on Tempest and followed the trail through the pounding rain.

I passed by my parents' tent and my brother's. The trail wound its way further through the camp, beyond the horses who huddled together to try and escape the worst of the storm. Baltian lifted his head and whinnied hopefully as he spotted me but I couldn't spare him any attention.

The footprints drew me further into the night, away from the camp towards a sheer cliff lined with pale rock. Further and further I walked, until the camp was far behind me and the cliff towered overhead.

Lightning flared above me and a figure appeared at the base of the cliff. She sat on a throne which seemed to grow from the ground itself. Each time I tried to look at her, my gaze fell upon the throne instead. It seemed to call to me, offering me everything and promising nothing at once.

Its legs were roots which twisted into a thick trunk lined with glimmering

golden bark. The back of the throne rose up behind the figure who sat on it, splaying into branches which rippled in a faint breeze, much more gently than the raging storm which buffeted me. Along the branches golden apples sparkled appetisingly. The sight of them filled me with a longing I couldn't understand. They called to me, whispering promises of dreams fulfilled and life never ending.

I took a step towards them, my hand raising as if to pluck one from the closest branch.

With a growl of irritation, I dropped my hand and forced my eyes away from the temptation of the fruit. Those thoughts had not been my own and I wouldn't let my fate fall on the bite of some apple.

Finally I managed to look upon the face of the goddess who sat on the throne. I didn't need to have seen her before to recognise her. I knew who she was in the pit of my stomach.

Idun smiled as my gaze met hers. Her face was beauty beyond words. My heart stumbled in my chest as I took in her full lips and shimmering skin. Her hair was the same bright gold as the apples which adorned her throne and it trailed down the full length of her body, pooling around her bare feet in swathes as soft as silk.

The rain didn't touch her. She sat in an impossible bubble of calm amidst the raging storm which fell on me.

"I'm impressed," she purred and her voice was deep and seductive. "Not many men can resist the temptation of my immortal fruit. But you are no ordinary man are you?"

"I do not compare myself to other men," I replied fiercely. An ache of longing filled me and I was struck with the urge to throw myself at her feet, begging for a moment in her arms. "Your tricks won't work on me." I pushed aside the desire to worship her and stepped closer, entering the pool of warmth which surrounded her. The pounding rain withdrew and only the water dripping through my hair remained.

Idun surveyed me through narrowed eyes, a small smile pulling at her lips. Her dress was a living carpet of vines and flowers which twisted its way around her figure, blossoming before my very eyes. "No, there's nothing ordinary about you at all."

"I wish to be free of the promise I am to make today. Don't ask me to take Valentina as a bride; the only thing I've ever wanted for myself is love. I will give you anything else. Everything else. But please don't take that from me."

I gazed at her imploringly, hoping to find some humanity in her glassy eyes.

“And what of that which has been taken from me?” she asked and a hint of rage laced her tone. “Who will set that right for me?”

“I will,” I replied instantly. “Only tell me what it was and I will return it to you.”

She laughed and the sound was a dark thing which mixed with a rumble of thunder from the sky above us. “The thing they stole was their immortality. Your people have tried to right that wrong for two hundred years already and to no avail. I created your kind to do just that but I have been sorely disappointed. I saved a pregnant girl from the Revenants’ village when they were in the first throes of their bloodlust. I gave her much more than I should have and created a village of warriors strong enough to protect her unborn twins and save her bloodline from the vampires. In return all of them swore to destroy those creatures but none of them succeeded. What makes you think you will be able to do what they have not?”

“I don’t understand.” I knew that she had created our people to fight the vampires and end their curse but I had never heard of them stealing anything from her before now. If all she wanted was their deaths then I was already committed to delivering that.

She stood and approached me. The urge to drop to my knees flooded through me but I did no such thing and she smiled as she reached out to touch my chest. The vines which created her dress shifted, exposing much of her flesh and drawing my eyes to roam over her. My body shuddered with desire as her hand skimmed across my skin and she circled behind me but I didn’t move.

“Of course you don’t understand. You mortals never do. What I desire is the return of my reputation. *I* am the keeper of immortality and I never offered that gift to the Revenants. While they continue to live, I continue to suffer the shame of their creation. If you want my help then finish what your ancestors started.” She moved back in front of me and I shivered as she removed her hand from my skin.

“My life is devoted to destroying the Revenants already; I took my vow two years early. If you need further proof of my dedication-”

“Your dedication doesn’t interest me,” she hissed. “You are all so dedicated to the task and yet you are no closer to achieving it than you were when I created your kind. All four Revenants still roam this earth, mocking me with their very existence.”

“Tell me what you do want then.” Desperation clawed at me. I needed to be free of this betrothal.

Idun sat back in her throne and plucked an apple from its branches. She took a bite, her eyes staying on me as juice poured over her bottom lip and her dress blossomed with white flowers, covering her exposed skin once more.

“Prove your dedication,” she said quietly. “If you wish for true love then you shall find it... eventually. Once you’ve proven yourself to me.”

She snapped her fingers and my heart thumped solidly in my chest as her power washed over me. I buckled forward as something flowed through my body, rocking my soul so that it felt like it wanted to burst free of my skin. I gasped, plunging Tempest into the ground as I used it to hold myself upright and the wave of power slowly faded away again.

“So that’s it?” I asked. “I don’t have to go through with my betrothal to Valentina?”

Idun laughed again and the storm roared beyond our cocoon of warmth. “Oh you’ll have to go through with it alright. You shall seal your betrothal when the sun rises this very day. You want to prove yourself don’t you?”

“But I thought-”

She waved a hand, silencing me. “Many challenges will come your way now Magnar Elioson,” she promised. “And if you manage to pass every test then your reward will come to you. *True love*,” she sighed like the idea appealed to her. “But you cannot falter. You cannot fail. You will end the vampire curse and remove the gift of immortality from those who should never have been offered it. Or you will die trying.”

I opened my mouth to respond but lightning flared so brightly that I was forced to close my eyes. The pool of warmth that surrounded me disappeared and the freezing rain slammed down onto me once again.

I opened my eyes and the goddess was gone. I was alone in the rain with nothing but the hope that she would keep to her promise. I had to follow my vow and end the Revenants. And perhaps one day I’d be able to find my own happiness in return.



By the time I made it back to camp, the storm had blown itself out and all

that remained of it was the deep puddles and thick mud between the tents. A sliver of sunlight had crested the horizon and I could finally see clearly in the growing light.

I didn't know if my interaction with the goddess had helped me or not. My position hadn't improved but she'd given me hope that it might. I only had to pass whatever tests she lay before me and destroy the Revenants. The fact that our people had been trying to do so for hundreds of years didn't deter me. I had always been dedicated to finding and eradicating them.

The fact that she had said all four of them still remained stirred a feeling of unease within my chest though. There had been no sign nor report on the whereabouts of Erik in over a hundred years and my people had begun to believe him dead. If he'd managed to remain hidden for so long then finding him now may prove to be very difficult indeed. But I would rise to the challenge. Perhaps the deaths of his siblings would draw him out of hiding.

People were waking and leaving the shelter of their tents as the sun began to climb into the sky. I doubted sleep had come easily to many while the storm raged.

As I closed in on my tent, someone stepped into my path and I blinked heavily as my gaze landed on Valentina. She was dressed immaculately in a deep blue gown which was cut low, exposing much of her chest and leaving her stomach bare. I let my eyes trail over her appreciatively. It wasn't as though I didn't desire her as I would any beautiful woman. I just didn't know her at all.

"I came looking for you at your tent, I thought we might have breakfast together," she said, her eyes searching my face for something I doubted she would find. "I thought maybe we could get to know each other a little but your brother told me you weren't there. Where have you been?"

I glanced down at myself. I was half-dressed and soaking wet. It was clear I'd been out in the storm and no doubt she was wondering if I was insane.

"I needed to clear my head. Breakfast sounds good though." I offered her a faint smile and her eyes lit up.

Julius appeared behind her and I turned my attention to my brother.

"Been walking in the storm Magnar?" he asked with amusement. "No doubt you were tossing and turning in your bed all night with the excitement of today and could hardly sleep."

"Something like that," I replied.

"I got quite the surprise when I came looking for you at dawn. To find

your bed... abandoned like that.” He raised his eyebrows suggestively and I knew he’d found Natalia precisely where I’d left her. Perhaps bedding the stolen girl the night before my betrothal hadn’t been the best idea I’d ever had. I guessed I owed Julius for covering for me.

“Thank you for your concern brother. I was just about to have breakfast with my bride to be. Perhaps you could make sure my tent is tidied before I return.”

“No doubt you’ll reward me well for such service. Save me some breakfast.” He smiled at Valentina and turned away, heading towards my tent. I knew he’d arrange for someone to return Natalia to her village and she’d be long gone before Valentina even remembered her existence.

“Your brother is still unsworn?” she asked me as she watched him leave.

“For now. We plan to have his prophecy told after his sixteenth birthday so that he might also take his vow early.” I turned away from Julius and led her through the tents towards the campfire which was being built up again after the rain.

“You must be so proud to have taken your vow early,” she breathed, laying a hand on my arm. “No one has ever done so before.”

I wondered why she was telling me something I already knew but I murmured some response in agreement.

“So do you often go walking in the rain?” she asked and I was reminded that she belonged to the Clan of Storms. Perhaps walking in such weather was normal for her people.

“I was searching for... answers I suppose. But the goddess wasn’t very forthcoming.”

“The gods often speak in riddles,” she agreed. “Did you find any clarity?”

I half considered telling her about my encounter with Idun but I doubted she’d appreciate the fact that I’d gone to beg to be released from the promise I had to make her.

“I suppose I did find clarity,” I agreed eventually. I knew now that I had to prove my dedication to the goddess. I had to do this and anything else she asked of me if I ever hoped to find love for myself. So I would lock myself into this betrothal but I intended to follow my mother’s advice too. I wouldn’t go through with the wedding unless my hand was forced by another prophecy or if by some miracle I fell in love with the girl walking beside me.

I took a seat on one of the huge logs which sat around the campfire, choosing a spot away from the unsworn as they worked on preparing

breakfast so that we could have some privacy. Valentina dropped down beside me, angling herself towards me.

Guilt stirred in my gut as I looked at her. It wasn't as though she'd asked for this either but she certainly seemed more willing to accept it than I was.

"Is this betrothal truly what you want?" I asked her quietly.

"Of course it is," she replied, her dark eyes finding mine. "Don't you want it too?"

I couldn't force my tongue to bend around a lie so I offered her something else instead. "What man wouldn't desire a woman like you?" I reached out to brush her hair back over her shoulder and she smiled. She was certainly appealing if nothing else.

"I know I'll make you so happy Magnar," she breathed.

Before my mind could conjure up a response, she leant forward and pressed her mouth to mine. Her lips were warm and firm against my own but the heat of them didn't ignite anything within my soul. She slid her hands across my chest as she deepened the kiss and I kissed her back, fighting against the urge to pull away. Perhaps I wasn't being fair to her. Maybe I was so sure I wouldn't feel anything for this stranger that I was blocking off the possibility of it. But nothing about the two of us felt right to me. I wasn't even drawn to her in the way I had been to other women before her. She just wasn't the right fit for me.

My father cleared his throat from somewhere close by and I took the opportunity to release myself from her.

"I'm glad to see the two of you are getting along." His gaze met mine and I was sure he could see the reluctance in my eyes. He reached out and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "The sun has risen, it's time to make this betrothal official."

Valentina jumped to her feet and hurried past the fire to join my mother who was waiting for us. My father held me back as I moved to follow.

"I know it doesn't feel like this is the right thing now," he murmured. "But I hope that in time you will come to see that following the path laid out by the gods will always work out for the best. Your sacrifice will be rewarded."

"I know," I replied. Idun had told me so herself. I had to face this challenge and any more that came after it. In the end I had to have faith that it would be worth it.

"I'm proud of the way you are dealing with this. It is a lot to take on at such a young age. You need to seal the betrothal today but your mother



suggested we hold off on the wedding until after your training is completed.”

“She did?” I looked across the fire to my mother who gave me a knowing smile. There was no set time for how long a warrior's training would take but I'd only bonded to my father a week ago. At the very least this would buy me a year. Likely more.

“Would you prefer that? As Earl it is up to me to decide, if I say your training must take priority then none can go against me.”

“I would.” I practically sagged with relief and I reached out to grasp his arm. “My training is the only thing I want to focus on at the moment. I haven't learned enough myself to consider marrying and having children yet-”

“I wouldn't mention grandchildren to your mother if you want to keep her on side with this. If she thinks the situation will bring babies for her to fawn over then she'll be all for pushing you into it as soon as possible,” he chuckled. “I fully realise she is steering my hand in postponing this union.”

I released a breath and smiled with a little embarrassment. Perhaps allowing my mother to fight this battle for me wasn't becoming of a sworn slayer but I didn't care. I would take whatever help I was offered in this matter.

Father laughed, placing an arm around my shoulders and drew me after Valentina to a clearing beyond the fire. I'd knelt in that dirt just nine moons ago and taken my vow. My father had agreed to train me and the skin on the back of my right hand had been marked with a crescent binding us together. I brushed my fingers over the mark now. It had felt like freedom at the time, now it felt like a trap.

The rest of the Clan gathered around and I caught sight of Julius watching me with pity in his eyes. For all his teasing, I knew he was probably the only one here who fully appreciated what doing this was costing me.

I took my position in the centre of the circle created by my people and Valentina stood opposite me. The rising sun shone down on us and I felt the air humming with a touch of the power I'd felt last night. The goddess was watching. Making sure I kept to my word. I wouldn't disappoint her.

My father moved to stand beside us, lifting my hand and placing it over Valentina's heart. I could feel it beating solidly beneath my palm. He lifted her hand next, placing it on my chest too. My heart rate picked up but it wasn't through excitement. It wished to be free.

“Those gathered here will bear witness to the binding of your souls. Speak

the words and let your lives be tied together from now until death divides you. This promise will lead to your union and the birth of blessed children. Do you understand the oath you are making?" my father asked loudly enough for everyone gathered to hear him.

"Yes," Valentina replied firmly and I nodded. I knew what I was about to do and my heart was heavy with it.

"Valentina of the Clan of Storms, do you claim this man?"

"I claim Magnar Elioson of the Clan of War to be my betrothed. My heart is his. My life is his. We will be one." Her eyes danced with excitement and for a moment I thought I saw lightning flashing within them.

"Magnar of the Clan of War, do you claim this woman?" my father asked.

A long beat of silence passed before I forced the words from my mouth. "I claim Valentina Torbrook of the Clan of Storms to be my betrothed. We will be one."

If anyone noticed that I didn't pledge my heart and life to her then they didn't speak. Valentina's lips lifted into a full smile as the weight of the goddess moved closer to us. I could feel Idun's power wrapping its way around us like a rope biding our souls together.

Pain blossomed beneath Valentina's palm on my skin and I sucked in a sharp breath. Valentina gasped as runes began to appear on the flesh above her heart too.

The power finally faded and I retrieved my hand. I glanced down at my skin as Valentina drew back as well and looked at the new tattoo which curled beneath my heart. The runes spoke of love and my bond to the stranger standing opposite me. The desire to burn the thing from my skin gripped me and I clenched my jaw as I forced myself to look away from it.

"It is done!" my father announced. "Let the feast begin!"

A cheer went up from the people surrounding us and they surged forward, slapping my back and calling out their congratulations. I forced a smile onto my face and let them sweep me away from my bride to be.

I hoped the goddess knew the sacrifice I'd made to her. And I hoped she intended to keep her word. Because her promise was the only thing that was keeping me going in that moment.

# Montana



I'd sat in my room all afternoon, having made my excuses once Miles had taken me back to the castle. He'd returned to his pleasant tone during the journey, but I'd barely said another word to him when I'd realised he wasn't going to tell me more about the mark.

Sitting on my bed, I hugged my knees to my chest, thinking about Nightmare which was now tucked under my pillow. If Miles had found it, would he have been so lenient with me? I couldn't bear to think about what would happen if the royals perceived me as a threat.

The more I thought about choosing Miles at the ceremony, the more fearful I became of my dad's fate. Why would Erik keep his word to me if I betrayed his? It was too much of a risk. But did I trust him to protect me if I revealed the mark to him? What if he refused to help me then anyway?

No, Miles hadn't reacted harshly. If anything, he'd seemed possessive of me. Even suggested that all of the humans here had slayer blood running in their veins. Perhaps this mark made me different, but maybe it made me valuable too...

I warred with myself, reaching for Nightmare and taking the hilt in my grasp. I wondered if it could steer me in any particular direction. Insane as it was, the blade did seem to have an opinion on Erik. And a good one at that. I felt in the deepest regions of my bones that I could trust its judgement.

*Have faith, Moon Child.*

"Have faith in what?" I whispered, feeling foolish the moment I openly replied to the object.

*This vampire of old is different.*

"You mean Erik?" I asked, but no reply came this time.

I guessed that was as good of an answer as I was going to get. And it had to be enough. My decision was made. I'd tell Erik about the mark.

I hid Nightmare again and waited for Erik to come to my room like he usually did, but the hours ticked by and he never came. As evening arrived, I decided to seek him out myself.

*I must be brave and tell him the truth.*

Creeping into the hallway, I hurried along it, searching for the red door to his room. I soon found it and lifted my hand, readying to knock.

Hesitation gripped me. Now that Nightmare wasn't close enough to reassure me, doubts started to trickle in again. What if Erik reacted badly to this? What if he didn't take it as well as Miles had?

Stress was taking me prisoner and it wasn't letting me knock on that door.

*Calm down. Take a breath. Erik won't hurt you.*

But could I be sure of that? Erik had protected me last night, would he continue to do so if he found out what had really happened?

"Impressive, Rebel, nearly a full minute without knocking. Should I be flattered?"

I turned in alarm, finding Erik approaching me in the hallway as silent as ever.

I dropped my hand, my mouth growing dry. Whatever expression was on my face suddenly morphed his into concern.

"What's up?"

"Erik I...need to talk to you," I said, my palms beginning to sweat.

"Well would you like to do it at a party, we're all going out. Everyone's waiting downstairs, I figured Miles had told you."

I gaped at him, shaking my head. "I can't, I really need to tell you something."

He stopped half a foot from me, his brow lowering to shade his eyes. "Go on."

I opened and closed my mouth.

*What if he hates me for this? What if he tells the other royals and they have me locked up? Or worse...executed.*

I dug deep for my faith in Erik, but with Nightmare too far away to call on, it wouldn't come. I was choked and unable to force the words out.

He folded his arms, waiting.

I cleared my throat, trying to gather my thoughts as they shattered around me. "Is my father free?" I blurted suddenly.

His eyes swam with confusion. "Not yet, Wolfe is on his way there. He'll be free by tomorrow."

“I changed my mind,” I said suddenly. “I want you to let him go. Once he's free, release him outside the Realms.”

He gazed at me in astonishment. But maybe this way I could keep my secret and still give my father a chance at freedom.

“That is a big ask,” he growled.

“Please,” I breathed. “Don't bring him here, he'll hate it. I just want him to be free, where he always wanted to be.” *And maybe he'll find Callie and they'll evade the vampires together.*

He shook his head. “Rebel, it's not that simple. There are laws I must follow.”

I reached for him, gripping his arm tightly. “Please,” I begged, desperation drowning me.

He took my hand in his, drawing me closer.

“Please,” I whispered again, hating myself for being reduced to begging. But it was that or trust him and my faith in him was floundering. Dad had impressed upon me never to trust vampires, it was ingrained in me. How could I go against that?

Erik nodded stiffly. “I'll do my best.”

“More than that,” I urged. “Promise me, Erik.” I moved into his personal space, driven on by my need, sliding my hand up his arm and gripping the back of his neck.

His throat bobbed as he gazed at me.

“Montana...” he said in a dry voice.

I tip-toed, pressing against him, willing him to comply.

*Say yes, please say yes.*

He nodded at last and I released a shuddering breath, pressing my forehead to his chest. He ran a hand down my spine and electricity sparked through my veins.

“You're shaking,” he commented, drawing me into a firm embrace. “What's gotten into you?”

“After last night, I'm afraid,” I said and it was partly true, but not for the reason Erik believed. I was afraid of this mark and what it meant. I was afraid for my own life and of what would happen if I chose wrongly at the ceremony. But most of all, I was afraid for the only people I cared about in the world. Callie and Dad had to be safe, that was all that mattered.

I pressed my cheek to his chest, breathing in his rich scent, comforted by his hold and this quiet moment of peace.

*I wish I could trust him.*

Erik reached into my hair, releasing a soft sigh. "I'll always protect you."

Did he mean it? Maybe I should have told him the truth. But even as I considered it all over again, he stepped away and took my hand. "Come, get ready. We'll enjoy the night and you'll feel better."

I moved to follow but a deep, male voice called from Erik's room. "A circle of gold shall join two souls..."

Erik stiffened at the voice and I turned to the door, a strange presence creeping over me.

"Who's in there?" I asked, my skin chilling all over. Something drew me toward the door and I found myself opening it.

"No one." Erik followed me as I stepped into his room.

Dark walls stared back at me. The space was vast with a huge four-poster at the heart of it, draped with blood-red curtains. Beyond the bed was a large desk piled with books.

I glanced over my shoulder and Erik watched me intently as I approached the desk, my heart drawn to something atop it. I scoured the names of the books; all of them had titles to do with Norse mythology but I didn't really know what that meant.

As I search for the source of the strange pull in my chest, my eyes fell on a silver hand mirror. The handle was engraved with flowers, running up and around the oval glass. It was captivating, more than just beautiful. Something about it called to me almost like Nightmare did. I picked it up and Erik darted to my side in a flash of movement.

"Don't," he warned, but I didn't know why.

My reflection stared back at me. It was just a normal object...wasn't it?

"What is this?" I asked.

Erik took it from me, his face etched with some unreadable emotion. "It's just a mirror."

I shook my head, certain it was more than that, but I didn't know why.

Erik's grip tightened on the handle and his eyes searched his own mirrored gaze. As I watched, his reflection smiled, but when I looked up Erik wasn't.

"What the..." I stared at him hoping for an answer, but he gave me none.

Erik placed the mirror face-down on the desk, his eyes hardening. "Forget you saw this."

"Why?" I demanded, my neck prickling uncomfortably.

"I shouldn't have let you come in," he said, but not harshly.

I frowned, hugging my arms around myself as the room seemed to grow colder. "I heard a voice Erik, who was that?"

He sighed wearily, taking hold of my arm. Something stopped me from pulling away. I sensed a heaviness weighing on him. And I was sure it had to do with that mirror.

"I have lived a thousand years, Montana," he said and shock rolled through me. That long? It was impossible to imagine living so many lifetimes, seeing the world change through all that time.

"The mirror is almost as old. Sometimes it speaks to me....in riddles."

"What?" I breathed, thinking of Nightmare. Did this mirror speak to Erik the same way the blade spoke to me? I knew I couldn't ask too many questions without revealing my possession of the knife. It was too risky. There was so much we didn't know about each other and it was too difficult to put my faith in him.

"Forget the mirror." Erik squeezed my arm. "Let's go out and enjoy ourselves for once."

I sighed, giving in. I had my own secrets to keep and Erik clearly had his, so I nodded, letting him guide me across the room.

We exited into the hallway and a feeling of relief swept over me at putting some distance between the mirror. Its aura was oppressive, unlike Nightmare's warm presence.

Erik escorted me to my room, halting me outside it. His eyes bored into mine, holding a hundred unsaid words in them. Taking a breath he whispered, "Go get ready."

I slipped away into my room, shutting the door between us. It felt like much more parted us. An entire sea of secrets. But until I found a way to trust him, it had to remain that way no matter how curious I was about that mirror.

As quickly as possible, I changed into a pale blue gown of soft silk and did my make-up as best as I could. My hair had curled from the time in the pool, but it looked surprisingly okay so I left it as it was. Exiting the room, Erik took my hand and I soaked in the final moment of comfort before the reality of my horribly complicated situation sank in again.

Nightmare was strapped to my thigh once more and it seemed to purr in response to Erik. It was a strange sensation and I wondered why it reacted to him differently than it did the other vampires. It was weird enough that the blade seemed to emit certain feelings at all.

"Fabian will be there tonight," Erik said, dragging me back to reality. "If

you get a chance to listen in on any of his conversations, I'd appreciate it."

I realised he seemed agitated which was only apparent because of the way he kept pushing his hand into his hair. I'd not seen him like this before; something was bothering him.

"Okay," I agreed. "Is everything alright?"

"I think so." He squeezed my hand and his thumb brushed back and forth across my knuckles.

My stomach swirled as I realised he wasn't doing this for show. No one was looking at us as we approached the staircase. My breathing quickened and I wondered how such a tiny movement could fan the flames of a thousand fires in my body.

Clarice waited in the hall below us in an incredible black gown that hugged her narrow waist. Beside her was another one of her Courtiers with sun-kissed skin and huge muscles. I vaguely recalled his name was Luke.

"I sent the others ahead," Clarice announced, tossing a golden curl over her shoulder. She beamed at me as we joined them. "You look gorgeous, Montana." Her eyes snapped to Erik. "Miles took Brianna with him, she looked a bit disappointed."

"She'll get over it," Erik growled, gripping my hand tighter. "Montana would have missed the party if I hadn't fetched her."

Clarice shook her head at him with a knowing smile. "Well we wouldn't want that, would we Erik?"

He pursed his lips and said nothing more. My heart beat a little harder. Most likely, he just wanted me to spy on Fabian.

Clarice clapped her hands. "Come on, the car's waiting."

She took Luke's arm and we followed them down the corridor leading toward the entrance hall. Erik released my hand and slid his arm around my waist instead, pulling me against his hip. I glanced up at him and he looked down. His touch was starting an earthquake in my body which was impossible to ignore. Why was he all over me again? His moods were as fickle as the wind.

Clarice led the way out of the castle and we were swallowed by darkness as we followed, moving down the steps.

Two black cars awaited us on the road and Erik promptly steered me toward one of them, opening the door and sliding in beside me. Clarice and Luke headed off in the other vehicle and our driver sped after them.

I understood the concept of a party from what Dad had told me, but



attending one was something else. I had no idea what to expect as we carved a path through the flood-lit streets of New York, gazing out of the window in search of our destination.

As we arrived on a brightly lit street, I spotted a crowd of vampires on the pavement behind a cordon. A row of guards held them back with large guns strapped to their bodies. The crowd's faces were skewed with anger and they held signs in their hands which highlighted the cause of their protest. The words written on them made my stomach churn.

*We have the right to bite!*

*Let us chase the human race.*

*We won't abstain from the vein!*

"Who are they?" I asked, turning to Erik.

He scowled out at them. "Rebels. They don't want human blood provided to them. They want to hunt for it."

My breathing hitched and he reached out, resting a hand on my wrist. "It's just a bunch of fanatics. My family and I would never allow it to happen. Well...most of us anyway."

"Fabian?" I guessed as nausea gripped me. "He supports them?"

"Not openly. But I have my suspicions. They have been more organised lately. My guess is that someone more powerful is leading them."

We rolled up opposite the crowd beside a fine-looking building on the corner of the road. It was a gigantic square tower of cream stone with an impressive porch. Flags of red, white and blue hung from a balcony over the doorway, fluttering in the breeze.

A guard before the entrance hurried forward to open the car door and Erik stepped out, pulling me after him by the hand.

The crowd started shouting as they spotted Erik, chanting, "We have the right to bite!" over and over until the words were drilled into my head.

Erik ignored them, pulling me toward the doorway but I glanced over my shoulder to look back at them. Some bared their fangs at me, openly salivating.

"Erik give the humans to us! Their blood belongs to everyone!" a female vampire cried, looking desperate to move past the armed guards.

Erik's jaw ticked as he led me up the steps, but I couldn't look away. A shadowy figure caught my eye amongst the crowd, standing rigidly with no picket in hand. He was huge, built with muscle and something about him screamed familiarity. Though his hood was pulled up and his face was

shrouded, I was certain I recognised him.

“Erik,” I hissed, tugging his sleeve.

He turned to me with concern and I pointed back at the crowd. I narrowed my gaze, searching for the vampire, but he was gone.

“What is it?” Erik asked.

“I...” I looked left and right, hunting for the vampire who’d reminded me of the frightening brute who’d killed Faulkner. But I hadn’t seen him properly and there could have been a hundred vampires like him in the city. Maybe I was wrong.

“Rebel?” Erik questioned.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head, convincing myself I was imagining things.

“Come on then.” Erik guided me up the steps and I tried to shake the anxious feeling crawling up my spine.

As we approached the door, I spied a name above it written in golden lettering on the frosted glass. *The Plaza*.

“What is this place?” I asked, thankful for the distraction.

Erik slid his arm around my shoulders. “It’s a hotel, a place people stay when they’re visiting from elsewhere.”

“Are we staying here?” I frowned. We hadn’t exactly come far from the castle. What was the point in it?

“No, we’re using some of the rooms for the party that’s all.”

“Oh,” I breathed, ready to ask more questions, but as we stepped into the entrance hall, my thoughts abandoned me. An ornate floor sprawled out before us, decorated with painted red roses on swirling gold vines. A huge table at the heart of the room was topped by an elaborate arrangement of white flowers.

Vampires milled about the space in elegant clothing; the women wore sparkling dresses and high heels which they walked in with impossible ease. The men were dressed almost as fine as Erik with long-tailed coats and bright waistcoats glinting beneath them.

Erik dropped his mouth to my ear. “Feel free to interrupt if any of these ass-kissers try to inflate my ego too much.”

I giggled at his tone then composed my face into a teasing grin. “If your ego gets any bigger, Erik, it will need a castle of its own to live in.”

He smirked. “That’s what I like about you, Rebel. Zero ass-kissing. Although if you fancy putting your mouth anywhere else on my body tonight,

you only need to ask.”

I jabbed him in the ribs, my grin growing beyond all control. I could sense people’s eyes on us, taking me in with curious looks.

My heart pitter-pattered and I couldn’t fight the swell of adrenaline that coursed through my veins. Being at Erik’s side felt powerful and something inside me liked it.

He led me through the room with purpose and vampires turned to him, bowing low or offering comments of praise on his royal attire. He nodded and replied politely, but shared a wink with me when they turned away again. I grinned at the private joke we shared, my heart floating in my chest.

I spotted Clarice surrounded by a group of male vampires all seeming keen to get closer to her than her Courtier. She smiled as we passed her by and Erik guided me up a beautiful white marble staircase, following the line of a golden railing as it led us to the balcony above the room.

As we trailed along side by side, I leant against Erik and whispered, “I counted four ass-kissers and at least one brown-noser back there. How’s your ego doing?”

“It’s reached its maximum, I think,” he murmured, leaning in so close his breath skated over my cheek. “But I’m pretty sure that’s because of the girl on my arm, not because of a bunch of empty compliments.”

My throat grew parched as I turned toward him, eyeing his mouth with a pang of longing.

*Stop thinking about kissing a bloodsucker!*

*I can’t help it goddammit.*

We entered an elevator and Erik guided me to the back of it as a group of vampires filed in behind us. Some of them tried to catch Erik’s attention, but he ignored them, angling himself towards me. His hand slid around my waist and he pinched the material there. “I wouldn’t say this to any other girl, but seeing as you were a twig when I met you I think it’s reasonable to tell you you’ve put on some weight,” he said and I snorted a laugh as eyes turned our way.

“I suppose that’s one good thing about being your prisoner: regular meals,” I whispered even though I was sure everyone in the elevator could hear me. But Erik’s playful tone was bringing out the rebel in me and I didn’t want the fun to end.

“That’s the only good thing?” He cocked a brow, giving me a hungry smile.

“Stop it,” I laughed, pushing his chest.

“Make me,” he growled as the doors opened and the vampires stepped out. They started chattering about us, but their voices were drowned by the music pounding through the room.

We followed them into a low-lit bar with glinting crystal chandeliers hanging above the space. Several vampires were dancing, grinding up against one another, seeming to be having the time of their lives.

Erik led me through the crowd, keeping me close as he forged a path between the men and women. He took my hand as we emerged in a seating area with black sofas and chairs surrounding small tables. I spotted Fabian chatting with a group of men in suits; Paige and Brianna were sat across from him, talking in low voices.

Fabian's eyes fell on Erik's hand circled around mine. He promptly lifted my palm and placed a kiss on my knuckles which sparked an excited energy in me. He quickly released me, muttering, “I'll fetch us drinks,” before disappearing into the crowd.

I dropped down beside Paige with an impossibly wide smile and she immediately gripped my arm. “Isn't it beautiful here?” she cooed, her blue eyes widening.

I nodded, taking in her silver dress which sparkled like moonlight.

“How was your day with Miles?” Brianna leant forward, brushing down the folds of her crimson gown. “I think he's my favourite.”

My heart sank a little as I recalled my time with Miles. “Yeah...it was okay.”

“Who are you going to choose?” Paige asked, her fingers knotting in her skirt.

I glanced over at Fabian who had returned to his conversation, but I suspected he might have been able to overhear us if he wanted to. His hair was neatly tied back by a coil of black silk as dark as the robes he wore.

“I'm not sure,” I answered honestly. Miles would keep my secret, but choosing Fabian ensured Erik kept his promise. And I only had until tomorrow to decide.

“Imagine if we all picked the same brother! We'd all be sharing a husband,” Brianna said, her nose wrinkling. “Who are you thinking, Paige?”

“Erik's nice.” Paige threw a glance over her shoulder and my stomach knotted as I followed her gaze, spotting Erik by the shiny black bar. At his side, clad in a glimmering green gown, was Valentina. Her hand was curled

around his arm and they looked intimately close as she spoke to him. My gut clenched further. He oozed charm and I could tell Valentina was lapping it up.

Nice? That wasn't exactly the word I would have chosen to describe him. Bewitching maybe...

"Are you going to choose him?" I whispered, keeping my expression neutral, trying to unravel my twisted stomach. That definitely didn't bother me. Nope, it definitely did.

"No," Paige revealed, leaning toward me. "He told me not to."

My mouth dried up and my lips parted. "What, why?"

"He told me the same thing," Brianna announced with a shrug. "I was pretty keen before that."

Paige eyed me closely. "I think he has his eye on *you*, Montana."

A laugh rolled from my throat. "I don't think so." She had no idea what Erik's intentions really were, and the last thing he wanted was for me to pick him at the ceremony. But then why was he being so flirtatious with me tonight? Perhaps he was like that with all the girls...

"He's all over you," Brianna agreed, not seeming too pleased about that. "But Miles is the only one I even slightly trust in this place."

Paige glanced around at the vampires, waving her hands to hush her. "Don't say that."

"Why? What are they gonna do? Drain me?" Brianna glowered.

I had to agree she had a point. But talking openly about our dislike for the vampires probably wasn't the best idea in a place full of them.

"So who then, Montana?" Paige pressed.

My mouth was so parched I started to grow agitated that Erik hadn't returned with my drink in favour of talking with Valentina. "I don't know," I insisted. "Who are you going to pick?"

She pursed her lips then her eyes drifted to Fabian. "Well Erik was my first choice, but I suppose *he* isn't a bad second."

"Do you actually like him?" Brianna interjected before I could answer. Picking him was an awful idea and Brianna obviously sensed that too. I wondered why, considering I was probably the only one privy to the knowledge that he ran the Realms. If I hadn't known that, Fabian wouldn't have seemed like a terrible option.

Paige ducked her head, her cheeks reddening. "I know he's a bit handsy, but Fabian said my family will be moved here if we cooperate. So what's

better than that? We'll all be safe and we'll never have to go back to the Realms.”

“But they want us to be *vampires*,” Brianna hissed in disgust and I spotted a few eyes turning our way.

I was thankful for the distraction as Erik reappeared, planting a glass in my hand. I gazed down at the red drink swimming in a strangely-shaped glass which resembled an upside down umbrella.

“What is it?” I asked him, sniffing the liquid.

“It's a raspberry Martini,” he said.

I sniffed it again, sensing something vaguely sharp beneath the fruity tones. Sipping it, my tastebuds seemed to crackle as the sweet mixture slid down my throat. Heat spread through my belly as I swallowed another mouthful. It was divine.

“Do you like it?” Erik asked, perching on the arm of a chair across from me and I nodded quickly. In his hand was a crystal glass filled with a dark brown liquid.

“You're not drinking blood?” I asked in surprise.

He shook his head. “We don't have to drink it constantly, Rebel.”

I spied the array of chalices and glasses in the hands of the other vampires in the room, realising he was right. They weren't all drinking blood. Which was a complete surprise to me.

“I didn't think you could drink anything else,” I said and Erik shrugged, taking a sip from his glass.

“Well now you know.”

Paige grabbed her own drink from the table; it was clear with chopped green fruit floating in it.

“Can I try yours?” she asked, offering me her own glass.

We swapped and I sipped the citrusy flavour of hers with a grin. Paige started giggling and I had the urge to join her as a floaty feeling took over me.

“Montana, would you like to dance?” Fabian's voice made me jump. I turned to him, finding he'd planted himself in front of Erik, blocking him from view.

I forced away my hesitation, slapping a smile onto my face. “Sure,” I said, taking his hand.

A tingle of trepidation ran down my spine as he pulled me upright and guided me away. After the last time I'd seen him, I didn't feel remotely

comfortable around him. How was I supposed to get any information from him? He was hardly going to spill his secret plans to me. Still, I supposed I had to be seen trying.

Fabian gently slid an arm around my waist, starting to sway me to a slow song that warbled through the room. "I wanted to apologise for yesterday. I acted like an idiot, Montana. I obviously misread the situation."

I sighed, relaxing a little. "Thank you."

"I hope I haven't ruined my chances." His mouth hooked up at one corner and his eyes grew warmer.

I shook my head, but glanced away, my eyes drawn magnetically to Erik. I noticed he'd slid into my seat beside Paige and I forced myself to face Fabian again.

"Erik won't offer you what I will," Fabian said in a low tone. "I know he seems charming now but when the ceremony is over, he will use you. That's how he is." His upper lip curled back slightly and I caught sight of his fangs.

My throat dried up as I nodded. Erik was using me already and Fabian had no idea.

"You don't like him," I stated and Fabian's eyes darkened.

"It isn't about like or dislike. We have different visions for what the New Empire should be. He doesn't agree with me and I don't agree with him."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, suddenly curious for myself as much as I was for Erik. He was technically my ruler after all. And if he gained full power, would things get even worse for us humans?

Fabian's eyes glowed as he answered. "This world needs a single leader. The four of us are too different to rule together. I wish to take on that responsibility and steer our country toward greatness."

"How?" I whispered, a pricking feeling crawling up my spine.

"We need to colonise more of the world. More vampires, more strength. That is my sentiment."

A male vampire suddenly grabbed Fabian's arm, his eyes darting left and right. "Your highness, a word please."

"Not here, Miguel," Fabian snarled at him. "I told you to keep your distance from me."

Miguel muttered an apology, but didn't leave. "It's important."

Fabian schooled his frustrated expression, turning to me. "Sorry Montana, I'll find you later." He released me, pushing the man ahead of him as they moved toward the bar.

I stood stock still, unsure what to do, but my legs urged me after him. Whatever it was Miguel wanted to say was clearly important. And if I was going to keep my promise to Erik I had to try and listen to their conversation.

The throng of bodies kept me concealed as I moved after them and stood a couple of feet from Fabian at the bar.

“-is everything under control?” Fabian hissed.

“Yes, sir. But...” The vampire glanced around nervously again and I shrank back into the crowd.

“Come, let's talk about this in private,” Fabian said and they started moving through the room again.

My heartbeat stuttered as I willed myself to make a decision. Nightmare was growing hot on my leg, seeming to whisper *follow*.





**W**e crossed the open field before the blood bank in silence, my lessons from the previous day guiding my movements.

The grass shone silver in the moonlight, the tips of the brown stalks sparkling with a new frost as the temperature plummeted. My breath rose before me in a cloud of vapour, reminding me of the warm blood that pumped through my veins. I was mortal. I was a slayer. And I was *alive*. No vampire could claim such things. And it was time they remembered they were dead.

Fury pulsed with anticipation in my palm. The blade was working itself up into a frenzy as we drew closer to the danger. I was starting to feel its revelry too. We were about to find my family. I was going to get them back.

The thought alone made my chest swell with hope and banished the fear from my body.

Magnar led the way straight up to the wall of the blood bank before turning right, using its shadow to conceal us from prying eyes.

The building's windows had all been bricked over. The newer mortar and brickwork stood out like ugly scars against the rest of the old factory but I guessed the vampires hadn't cared about the way it appeared.

We moved quickly; I was almost at a jog as I hurried to keep up with Magnar's long stride. The chilling silence kept us company. Even the wild animals knew this place was evil. Nothing dared approach it.

A piercing scream suddenly sounded from within the building and we both froze as the echoes of it reverberated into the valley. I knew my old Realm lay somewhere in that direction, though no lights shone to show me where. I wondered if anyone had heard the screams tonight.

My gut clenched with terror but I hardened myself against it. I was no longer a helpless human hiding in my apartment after dark while the pain-filled howling on the wind sent nightmares to my slumber. I was going to see

this place destroyed. Tonight would be the last time the Realm was terrorised by these screams. The constant threat of the blood bank was about to be removed from the humans' lives for good.

Magnar started moving again and I followed in his shadow. As he made it to the corner of the building, he stopped and held out a hand to me.

Fury growled a warning across my flesh.

I bit my lip as Magnar slowly released Tempest from the sheath on his back before sinking into a crouch. His hand swept through the bristly stalks by his feet for a moment until he located a stone which filled his palm.

As he stood again, he tossed the stone ahead of him and it thumped into the grass a few feet away, making it rustle unnaturally.

Magnar's grip tightened on his blade as he held it ready and a vampire stepped into view. Before her eyes had even taken us in, they widened with alarm and understanding as he drove his sword through her chest.

She was carried away on the gusting wind and Magnar tossed the small pile of her clothes into the shadows behind me.

"The lesser vampires will not cause us much issue," he explained in a whisper. "But I can feel the presence of more than one Elite inside. If at any point I tell you to run, then run."

"I won't leave you," I breathed passionately. Did he really think I'd have followed him all this way just to abandon him if he needed my help?

"You will do as I command," he replied angrily, his eyes burning with a fierce desire to protect me.

"You forget that I haven't taken any vow Magnar," I replied icily. "So I don't follow your commands unless I want to. And there is no way that you could make me leave you behind to save myself."

"What if I said that I won't go any further until you swear to do as I ask?"

"Then I'll go in alone," I replied. "Because my dad and Montana need me and I won't abandon them any more than I would abandon you."

He glared at me for several long seconds before turning away and heading around the corner. I jogged after him, pleased that he hadn't forced a promise from my lips which I wouldn't be able to keep. No matter what he told me to do, I knew I could never save myself at the cost of his life and if I told him otherwise it would be a lie.

A heavy wooden door stood ajar ahead of us and Magnar made a beeline for it. I stayed close, relying on Fury's information to reassure myself no vampires were about to strike.

Magnar stepped through the doorway and I slipped in behind him. He hesitated as he looked up at the long fluorescent lights which illuminated the wide corridor we found ourselves in.

“What magic is this?” he breathed in astonishment, seemingly unable to tear his gaze from the flickering bulb above his head.

“It’s just electricity,” I reminded him gently, laying a hand on his arm. “Like the flashlight but bigger.”

I felt the tension ease out of his muscles a little at my words but his gaze remained fixed on the lights for several more seconds before he forced himself to look down.

He frowned at the ground as he processed what he’d seen and convinced himself to accept it before moving on. My gut twisted uncomfortably at the pain which flashed in his gaze. Every time he was reminded of the changes which had happened to the world in the thousand years he had missed, it seemed to bring up what he’d left behind.

A set of double doors lay directly in front of us. They were made of heavy metal and the handle on the right-hand side was drooping in a way that suggested it was broken.

Magnar squared his shoulders and began walking quickly, closing the distance to them in several long strides. I glanced nervously down the corridors to my left and right before scurrying after him.

His eye caught mine as he placed a hand on the broken handle and eased the door open.

A wave of warm air washed over us and a cloud of smoke caught in my throat. I slapped a hand over my face as my lungs filled with pressure and I fought back the urge to cough.

Magnar headed inside and I followed him into a wide room lit by an orange glow which came from a furnace on the far side of the space.

The hot air was dry and made my tongue swell. The smoke filled my nostrils and a sickly stench accompanied it. I had to fight the desire to cover my face. I really didn’t want to know what they were burning in here but I got the feeling I was about to find out.

I began to cross the open space and head towards the furnace. Magnar caught my arm suddenly, yanking me to a halt. I stumbled, glancing up at him in confusion and he pointed to the ground before my feet. I squinted in the dim light and could just make out a hatch on the ground.

Magnar released me and dropped down to pull the hatch wide. Soot

spiralled out of the area below as the air was disturbed and I blinked down at the dark space in confusion.

I fumbled in my pocket and pulled the flashlight out, glancing at Magnar for confirmation before flicking it on. He nodded and the small beam of light illuminated a shaft beneath us.

I frowned as I leant closer, peering down at a drop of around ten meters to the basement below. All I could see was piles of ash and soot. I swept the beam from my flashlight to and fro and gasped as the light fell on a skull.

I almost dropped the flashlight as I stumbled back. Magnar let out a low curse before swinging the wooden door closed over the hatch.

“They’re burning people,” I whispered in horror, my gaze shooting to the furnace which continued to blaze beneath the giant chimney. “Do you think they’re alive when-”

“It is very unlikely. They would want to remove all the blood first,” Magnar growled.

A fluttering of relief passed through my chest. Death was bad enough but the idea of being burned alive filled me with a special kind of horror and disgust.

“We should move on,” Magnar said in a low voice. “There isn’t anyone alive in here.”

I nodded my agreement, feeling more than happy to turn my back on that room and its disgusting stench. I flicked the flashlight off and jammed it into my pocket before following him back out.

Magnar hesitated for a moment, running his thumb across the runes on Tempest’s hilt before choosing to follow the corridor to the right. My connection to Fury made me feel sure that this was where most of the vampires were assembled and I let out a long breath as we made our way towards them.

Magnar stopped at the first door we came to and eased it open. I peered over his shoulder as cold air washed out of the room and kissed the exposed skin on my face. A shiver ran down my spine as I recognised it as a giant refrigerator. Magnar shifted aside and I spotted trolleys holding row upon row filled with bottles of gleaming red liquid.

“They take human blood as if they were milking cattle,” Magnar growled angrily as he stepped inside.

“We had to *donate* two pints of blood every few months in the Realm,” I explained as I eyed the bottles with disgust.

A sound like the growl of a feral beast escaped Magnar's lips and I barely managed to jump aside as he sent one of the huge racks crashing to the ground. The sound of the metal trolley hitting the floor alongside a hundred bottles smashing was more than enough to tell every vampire in the building that we were here.

I leapt out of the way, leaning against the cold wall as he lunged towards the next trolley.

The other three racks quickly followed suit and the ground was littered with smashed glass. A tide of spilled blood washed over the toes of my boots before flowing out of the refrigerator into the corridor.

"The vampires," I breathed in alarm, barely able to believe what he'd just done. "They'll know exactly where we are-"

"Let them come," he growled, pulling Venom from his back to join Tempest in his other hand. "Stay behind me."

I scrambled away from him, pressing my back to the rear wall as the sound of the vampires approaching reached my ears. The fact that they weren't silent was enough to tell me just how many of them were coming our way.

Fury burned red-hot in my palm but rather than hurting me, the heat seemed to find its way into my veins, pricking at my senses and dialling them up. My vision seemed sharper and more focused, every sound was clearer in my ears. Even the metallic scent of the blood pooling by our feet smelled stronger in my nostrils, the taste of it racing along my tongue.

Instead of cowering against the wall, I stood ready to defend myself, Fury in hand. If it came to a fight, I would face it.

Magnar rolled his shoulders, casually rotating the two huge blades as he awaited the vampires' arrival. I could tell he held no fear, only rage at what they'd done to us. Rage at what the last thousand years had brought upon the mortals. And he was about to collect payment for that debt.

The first of the vampires made it to the door and he cut through them before I could even count how many he killed. Dust swirled behind his blades as he swung at them again.

The clash of metal on metal rang out as the next row of vampires realised they were under attack and drew their own weapons.

He held them back at the doorway, using the narrow space to stop them from overwhelming him. He swung his swords and mercilessly hacked his way through them.

More of them surged forward and Magnar was forced to step back,

allowing them to spill into the room. He roared a challenge at them as they tried to make it past the fury of his mighty blades but none could get close.

I watched in utter awe, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm as time and again, he parried blows and delivered death.

Magnar swung to the left and a vampire leapt around him, aiming straight for me. His eyes glittered with malice and my pulse hammered in my ears as he swung his sword.

Somehow, I managed to get Fury between us to take the blow. I cringed back as the strength of his attack resonated right down to my bones and he swung at me again.

My feet moved quickly and I danced aside, half feeling like I knew what I was doing as Fury poured information into me like I was an empty vessel. Whatever the blade was doing, it was working so I didn't question it as I ducked beneath a third swipe of his blade.

*Strike now!*

I did as it asked and the golden blade sliced across the backs of the vampire's legs, spilling blood that was too bright a red to be human.

The vampire hissed as he fell backwards, his legs unable to hold him upright anymore. I scrambled away from him, ducking to my right as I came close to the raging tornado which was Magnar.

Before I could decide what to do about the vampire I'd brought to the ground, Magnar's sword carved him in two, finding his heart and leaving a heap of clothes and ash where he'd been.

In the moment he'd given to help me, a female vampire had leapt onto his back, wrapping her arms around his neck. He tried to throw her off but she held on tight, snarling as she attempted to find his flesh with her teeth.

As he swung around again, her back was presented to me and I took the opportunity to return the favour he'd offered me. Fury found a space between her ribs and made it to her heart with a sigh of pleasure.

Magnar didn't spare me a glance as he was released from the vampire's grip by her death. He moved away to take on his final two enemies.

He cut down the first and the last one turned and fled. I pushed away from the wall, expecting us to go after her but Magnar held up a hand to stop me.

"Let her tell her masters what she found here. We will be elsewhere by the time they get back." He headed out of the room, taking the other corridor and heading away from the fleeing vampire.

I didn't question him as I hurried to follow, trailing bloody footprints along

the corridor as we went. It wouldn't be difficult for the Elite to locate us and I just hoped Magnar would be ready for them when they arrived. It was one thing for him to fight a group of lesser vampires but I'd seen how much more of a challenge the last Elite had been for him to defeat. I wasn't sure what would happen if he had to go up against more than one of them.

We moved quickly and Fury didn't seem to think any more vampires were close to us yet so I allowed myself a moment to catch my breath.

The corridor we were in held no doors and we continued along it at speed, searching for a way on. I glanced down, happy to find that I was no longer trailing blood in my wake.

Finally, we made it to a door and Magnar pushed it wide. I jogged in behind him, squinting as we were plunged into darkness. The light from the corridor illuminated a switch on the wall and I flicked it on just as Magnar slammed the door behind us.

Light flooded the huge space as bulb after bulb came on above us and Magnar flinched in surprise. A smile pulled at my lips as I glanced at him. The warrior who didn't bat an eyelash at enraging a group of vampires flinched at the flick of a light switch.

The door we had passed through was made of heavy metal and held large bolts which I quickly slid across to secure it.

"Will that keep the Elite out?" I asked. I knew they were strong but I was doubtful that they could punch through solid iron.

"It looks like it might," Magnar agreed, placing Venom back into its sheath.

I returned my attention to the cavernous room we'd found ourselves in. It was filled with two long rows of coffin-sized boxes.

"I didn't think vampires really slept in coffins," I said as I took a step towards the closest row.

"They don't," Magnar replied darkly. "This is something else."

I bit my lip as I approached the first box. There was a glass lid over the top of it and two tubes ran into it from the ceiling. One was filled with clear liquid. The other was filled with blood.

I peered over the edge of the box and came face to face with someone I knew. Thomas lay completely naked and perfectly still beneath the glass. His chest rose and fell steadily, though he showed no other signs of life. The last time I'd seen him, he'd punched me in the face for following him out of the Realm. I guessed this meant the vampires had figured out that he'd been

leaving too.

The clear tube delivered a drip directly into a vein in his left arm while the red tube took blood from a vein on his right.

“It’s like intensive farming... on people,” I said in disgust. “They’re keeping them alive so that they can drain them.” This was what we’d always known went on here and in a way it was a relief to see him sleeping the way he was. He didn’t know what was happening. It wasn’t like he’d been strung up or was even conscious, he was just... asleep. It was practically humane. If you ignored the fact that he was there against his will and having his bodily fluids stolen to be used as food for monsters.

I looked around for some way to release him from the coffin but there was nothing. The whole thing was sealed shut. I shoved at the glass lid then pounded on it with Fury’s hilt but nothing happened. It was shut tight.

Magnar moved beside me and threw his shoulder against it, his muscles straining as he tried to force it open to no avail.

“How are we supposed to get them out?” I asked desperately.

“We should locate your family. We can figure out how to release these people once we know where they are. I’ll check one row while you check the other. I saw your father when he was taken but didn’t get a clear look at your sister. Her hair was dark wasn’t it?” he asked.

“Yeah, her hair’s as dark as mine is light but we’re twins so we still look a lot alike. Probably enough for you to recognise her. Mom used to call us her sun and moon.” Magnar’s brows pulled together as I said that but I didn’t have time to answer any more questions. My family were close, I just knew it. They had to be.

“Just call me over if you see anyone you’re unsure of!” I hurried across the room and started moving along the other row of coffins.

There were many faces I didn’t recognise but some that I did. Most were people who had been taken from the Realm for breaking rules. And a few were elderly people who had just disappeared in the night.

“Callie?” Magnar called. I ran back to look into the coffin he’d found with my heart in my throat. A girl around my age lay in there, her hair was as dark as Montana’s but the similarities ended there. I shook my head as disappointment ran through me and I returned to my search.

As we approached the far end of the room, my heart plummeted. There was no sign of them. If my family weren’t here then I didn’t know what we would do. I had no idea where else they might have been taken. No idea what



the vampires might have done to them.

Tears pricked my eyes but I quickly forced them away. We would rip this place apart before I'd give up on them. If they weren't in this room then I just had to presume they were in another.

I reached the end of the row and my soul fractured a little as I didn't find them. I turned to Magnar and he shook his head sadly, confirming he hadn't located them either.

I moved past him and began to check his row for myself. He didn't know them. He couldn't be sure like I could be. I had to check again.

As I closed in on Thomas's coffin, a huge crash sounded from the door we'd bolted and my heart hammered in terror.

"We hear a human has dressed themselves up like a slayer of old!" a voice called from the other side and I began to back away as my slayer's mark tingled in warning. "Why not come and see if you can face a real opponent or two!"

The door rattled again and Magnar caught my arm, pulling me behind him. We kept backing away until we made it to the far end of the room again and I turned around to try and find a way out.

A small door was tucked into one corner and I jogged towards it, trusting Fury's assessment before pulling it wide.

We found ourselves in a control room filled with CCTV screens. I recognised it from the Realm. They'd had one just like it in the Emporium and I'd seen the little cameras that recorded us in all of the communal spaces. Even the bathhouse. My skin crawled as I thought about the invasion to our privacy. They wouldn't even allow us that much dignity.

Magnar froze as he looked at the screens, his eyes flicking from one to the next as he tried to process what he was seeing.

"Think of it as looking at lots of different places at once," I said quickly. "It just shows us what's happening elsewhere."

He stared at them in fascination and slowly raised a hand to point at one of the screens. "Isn't that your father?" he asked.

I spun around to stare at the man he'd pointed out and the bottom fell out of my stomach.

"Dad," I breathed, a tear spilling down my cheek.

He was in a small room, his arms were suspended by chains at his wrists. They'd removed his shirt and he shivered in just a pair of torn jeans. Blood trickled across his skin from wounds on his neck and wrists.

I flinched as someone else moved into the view of the camera and I realised he wasn't alone.

General Wolfe stalked towards him, his finger raised as he pointed it directly into my dad's face. It looked like he was asking him a question but there was no audio to go with the footage.

Dad shook his head firmly though I could see something horribly like fear in his gaze as he did so.

The General shouted angrily, striking a blow to my father's face which sent him staggering back. He only remained upright because of the chains holding him so. Before he could recover, the General leapt forward and bit his neck.

My own scream met the one I could see falling from my father's lips as I rushed towards the screen, wishing I could get to him.

"We have to find him! We have to help him!" I sobbed as Magnar caught me in his arms.

"We will. He must be here. We'll find that room." He pulled me against his chest for a brief moment then released me, holding me at arm's length. "Is your sister on one of these boxes?" He pointed at the screens and I got the distinct impression he didn't like them.

I forced myself to look at the CCTV again, searching frantically for any sign of Montana but she wasn't there. I shook my head, unable to say it out loud. Where else could she be? It didn't make sense.

My thoughts snagged on that skull I'd seen in the basement beneath the furnace. Maybe she hadn't been unconscious when they took her away. What if the General had kicked her too hard? What if she'd never woken up?

"What if she's... I mean what if they..." I couldn't say it out loud. If she was dead I'd die too. I just knew it. There couldn't be a world where one of us existed without the other.

"What does your heart tell you?" Magnar demanded, forcing me to stand still and placing his palm above my racing heart.

I took a steadying breath, banishing the panic as I looked into his eyes. "She's alive," I said firmly.

Magnar nodded. "Then we will find her."

# Montana



I watched as Fabian headed through a door at the end of the room about to go after him, but I was pounced on by Valentina.

Her full lips curved up into a bright smile. “Good evening, Montana.”

“Valentina,” I acknowledged her with a small nod, glancing over her shoulder as I tried to get by.

“Have you made your choice for the ceremony tomorrow?” she asked, fluttering her long lashes.

“Er...not yet.” I tried to get by again but she took hold of my arm to keep me there. Tension rippled through me. What did she want?

She gave me a concerned frown then lowered her tone. “I’m sorry you have to go through this.”

I gazed up at her, her heels giving her an extra few inches on me. “Why do you care?”

She shifted closer, glancing cautiously around the room. “I don’t want to see you getting hurt, Montana.”

“I can handle myself,” I said firmly.

I glanced longingly at the door Fabian had exited through. I needed to hurry up.

Nightmare hummed frantically on my thigh. *Follow, Moon Child.*

I gave her a brief smile. “If you’ll excuse me...”

I tried to step past her but she took hold of the back of my neck, pulling me close so her mouth was by my ear. “When Erik finds out what you are, he’ll kill you. I’m trying to protect you. You’re the last of our kind.”

My heart thundered in my ears. I tugged away from her and her eyes flashed like there was a storm brewing in them.

“What do you know?” I whispered.

“Enough,” she breathed, stepping closer so she could talk into my ear

again. “I know that I have many regrets. Being sired is one of them. And if there are slayers being born again, I want to help them.”

Nightmare buzzed angrily on my thigh, urging me to hurry.

Doubt trickled through me. I didn’t know if I could trust her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, figuring it was best to play dumb.

She pursed her lips, eyeing my right arm as if she wished to check it once more. “Maybe I’m wrong but...” She shook her head, seeming confused and I took the opportunity to leave.

I hurried across the room, glancing over my shoulder to make sure Valentina wasn’t watching me. She floated toward the bar seeming deep in thought. Taking a breath and angling my thoughts back on the task at hand, I moved toward the door Fabian had exited through.

When I was sure no one was watching I slipped through it.

A dark hallway lined with doors greeted me. I listened, trying to work out which room Fabian occupied. Moving as quietly as I could along the emerald green carpet, the sound of voices finally reached me.

Creeping closer, I approached the door I was sure Fabian was behind, my palms growing slick.

What if he caught me here?

I willed the fear away, stepping up to the door and pressing my ear to it.

“-if anyone realises I’m involved in this I’m in deep shit,” Fabian snarled. “I must end this tonight. Promise me it will be handled quietly.”

“It will, your highness, I assure you,” Miguel answered, his voice quavering.

“Then pull yourself together!” Fabian snapped and the sound of a smack rang through the air.

*Hide.* Nightmare's voice flared in my mind.

Certain I should obey, I darted toward the nearest door and turned the handle. It swung open into a pitch black room and I fled inside, pushing it closed with a quiet click.

I rested my ear to the door, willing my heartbeat to slow as Fabian's voice carried into the corridor. “I want him dealt with before the night is out. I won’t have him causing us any more issues.”

My breath was choked from my lungs. He must have been talking about Erik.

I clung to the wood, desperate to hear them leaving but they moved as

silently as the wind. I couldn't believe how close I'd come to being caught. Without Nightmare, I would have been.

Their voices sounded further down the hallway and I relaxed a fraction, pressing my forehead to the door.

Nightmare cooled and started to hum with a different kind of energy. I wondered what it meant, but had no idea how to decipher the strange feelings it gave off.

When I'd waited several minutes, I gripped the door handle and opened it. Stepping into the corridor, I was suddenly crushed face-first to the opposite wall.

Cold hands held my wrists behind my back and I cried out, terrified Fabian had caught me. My captor flipped me around and I came face to face with Erik.

Anger and relief tangled inside me.

"You bastard." I thumped his chest. "You scared the hell out of me."

He grinned darkly then stepped forward, pressing me to the wall again. I sucked in a breath as he pushed a knee between my thighs to hold me in place.

"What are you doing?" I gasped.

"I came to find my rebel. She's been missing from the party." He laughed lightly and I wondered what the hell had gotten into him.

Nightmare seemed to sing as loud as my heart.

"Why are you down here?" he asked, leaning into my personal space even further. His whole face was shrouded in shadow so all I could see was the wolfish glint in his eyes. A bitter scent on his breath reached me and I tried to work out what it was.

"Fabian," I whispered, then my thoughts sharply realigned. "I overheard him. I think he wants to hurt you, Erik." My lungs crushed, barely allowing in a sliver of air.

Though I couldn't see his expression well in the dark hallway, I could tell he wasn't distressed. "That's not news to me. Can we talk about something else?"

I knotted my hands in his shirt, finding his jacket now removed. Why was he so damn calm? "No, *tonight* Erik. I think he's planning something tonight."

He blinked slowly, still not seeming particularly concerned. "Thank you for telling me," he murmured, lowering his head so my breaths warmed the

tiny space between us.

My heart juddered and thumped.

He lifted a hand, skating his thumb across my cheekbone. “By the gods...why are you so captivating? It’s driving me crazy.”

“Erik, what are you playing at?” I demanded, half tempted to shove him again, but the other half of me wanting him this close. Even Nightmare seemed to want that.

*Damn horny blade.*

“I’m just wondering how long it's going to take for you to ask me,” Erik said in a rumbling tone.

“Ask you what?” I hissed, trying to keep up my angry pretence, but my body was telling a different story. A waterfall of desire was flowing through me, pooling in my stomach.

“For the kiss you want,” he remarked.

I ground my teeth, annoyed by his usual arrogant behaviour. “I don't want a kiss.”

“Is that so? Then why are you quivering like a leaf right now, Rebel?” He moved his mouth to my neck and brushed a path to my ear.

“Please,” I begged but I wasn't sure if I was begging him to stop or continue.

His teeth ran over the shell of my ear and a moan escaped my lips, betraying me.

“Say it,” Erik commanded, crushing me to the wall.

Nightmare thrummed like a living thing, begging me to comply with him. And I broke. My resolve crumbled to dust and I went slack in his arms.

“Kiss me,” I breathed and his mouth claimed mine. The strong flavour of his last drink rolled over my tongue.

His hands snared my waist as he lifted me, tangling my legs around him and pushing me to the wall.

His kiss was rough and demanding, turning me into a ragdoll in his arms. I wrapped my hands around his neck then clawed at his hair. The rougher he was, the more I bit back, the more I took out my anger on him for the way I felt towards him. For allowing this and revelling in every second. For caring about him at all.

I finally found my strength and pushed his shoulders, knocking my head back against the wall as I broke apart from him.

Erik's jaw hardened as he gazed at me.

“Why?” I demanded.

He dropped me to the floor, stepping away. He started marching back in the direction of the party and I hurried after him, seething. “*Erik*,” I snapped.

He kept walking, opening the door into the ballroom and pushing me through it. Eyes turned to us and I straightened my dress as the temperature in my cheeks skyrocketed. I had guilt written all over my face and from the looks people gave us, they knew exactly what we'd been doing.

I glanced up at Erik, wondering if this had been his intention.

Remembering the real problem at hand, I searched for Fabian in the room but couldn't spot him. Erik guided me back to the seating area and Paige smiled dreamily at me as she sipped on her drink.

“Hey, where have you been?” Her eyes scraped over my hair then narrowed. “And what have you been doing?” She gave me a knowing look and my blush increased as Erik barked a laugh and walked away.

“Nothing,” I insisted, snatching my own drink from the table. I noticed Fabian's associates had vacated the seating area and Miles and Warren had taken their chairs.

“Where's Brianna?” I asked and Paige pointed into the crowd. She was dancing with her arms in the air, grinding her hips against a male vampire.

“Oh shit,” I breathed. “What's she doing?”

“I dunno. I think it's these drinks...that make you feel all *swimmy*.” Paige smiled lazily and I quickly put my drink back on the table.

I spotted Erik making a beeline for Brianna through the crowd, roughly pushing people aside before snatching her arm.

“Hey!” she shouted at him, but he didn't let go even when she clawed at his arms.

He guided her toward the sofas and planted her down in a seat, looking furious.

Luke stumbled out of the crowd with a bemused look and Clarice came bounding after him.

“Just rest for a minute,” she urged, pushing him toward the sofas.

“*Miles*,” Erik snapped and his brother looked up. “The humans are getting drunk.”

Alcohol. It was suddenly so obvious. Some of the boys in the Realm had made the stuff from potatoes. They'd always had a glazed look about them after drinking it. Maybe that was why Erik had been acting so weird too.

“So what? They're having fun,” Miles said with a shrug.

Erik's jaw ticked as he turned to me, seeming to assess if I was affected like the others.

"I'm fine," I answered his probing look. "I didn't even finish my drink. Unlike you." I pointed to it on the table and he smirked.

"Are you accusing me of being drunk?" he asked.

"It would explain a few things," I replied with a raised eyebrow and his smile grew wider.

His eyes whipped to Paige. "What about you?"

"I only had one," she insisted.

Erik shifted his gaze to Brianna and Luke on the sofa, now leaning against one another for support. "Right, they can take my car back to the castle."

"Oh leave them be," Miles complained, throwing an arm over Warren's shoulders.

"No, Erik's right," Clarice bit at him. "They can't stay here like this. People are beginning to stare."

Erik leant down, pulling Brianna to her feet and Luke stood, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"Can you walk straight?" Erik asked them.

Luke nodded and Brianna hiccupped.

"Follow me," Erik ordered, turning on his heel.

I caught his hand as he passed me. "Erik, I'm worried about what Fabian said."

He glanced down at our fingers, suddenly intertwining his with mine. "Would you like to go home with them?" Mischief sparkled in his gaze.

It felt like he was offering much more than that. I thought of his mouth on mine, of how my body had reacted to his touch. Oh hell.

Nightmare whispered encouragements in my head and I found myself nodding.

"Okay, let's go." I glanced at Paige. "Do you want to come?"

"Stay!" Miles called from behind us, patting his seat. "Come on Paige, we'll have fun without these bores."

She broke a small smile, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "I'll stay," she said to me, squeezing my hand.

I nodded, giving her a wave as I headed after Luke and Brianna. Erik snatched his jacket from the back of a chair on the way, folding it over his arm. He took the lead, moving at a steady pace as we guided the others downstairs.



We soon arrived in the entrance hall and exited onto the street. The temperature had plummeted, causing me to shiver in the frosty air. Thankfully, the protestors had moved on and a guard was removing the cordon on the other side of the street.

A car was waiting for us and as Luke and Brianna drifted towards it, Erik took my arm. "I'm sorry about earlier."

My throat constricted. Were we really having this conversation *now*?

"It's fine, really," I said, though I knew it wasn't enough of an answer. It didn't go anywhere near the feelings that were swelling inside me, threatening to spill over.

"It's not." He held me tighter, stopping me from following the others. His iron eyes turned to liquid silver. I shivered harder and he quickly put his coat around my shoulders. He gripped its lapels, keeping me trapped in his gaze. As the car door closed behind Luke and Brianna, we were suddenly alone, bathed in the golden light of the porch. The sound of the engine starting filled my ears.

"I don't understand what you want," I whispered, my breath fogging before me. "You're so hot and cold. Sometimes...I'm afraid you're using me."

His eyes burned with more light than I'd ever seen. "Montana, I-"

BOOM.

Fire flared. I hit the concrete and pain exploded through the back of my head.

All I could see was black hair as the weight of someone crushed me down.

Erik. He was forcing me onto the stone floor and a roar of noise told me something terrible had happened.

I pushed my head out from beneath him and ash sailed down over my face. Smoke billowed into the sky and I caught sight of the car reduced to a burning husk.

My ears rang so hard, it swallowed every other sound but the thumping of my heart.

Erik was saying something, but I couldn't hear him as I tried to decipher the movements of his lips.

He cupped my cheek and I felt blood trickling down the side of my neck. Erik held the wound I couldn't feel, his shirt sleeve turning red.

His face swam in and out of focus as Nightmare thrummed against my thigh. Just before the darkness claimed me, it spoke words in my head I didn't understand.

*A warrior born but monster made, changes fates of souls enslaved.*



**“W**ait here. I’ll deal with the Elite,” Magnar commanded as I tried to follow him out of the control room.

“But-”

“I’ll fight better if I don’t have to worry about you. You should find a way to free those humans from the coffins.” He gazed into my eyes and my resolve wavered. He was right. I would only get in the way and I might even get him killed if he had to try and protect me.

“Okay,” I answered in defeat. He turned away but I caught his hand and pulled him to me. “But promise me you’re coming back.”

His mouth quirked up at the side. “I’m coming back.” He placed his palm against my cheek for an impossibly brief moment then turned and left me alone, closing the door between us.

My chest ached as he headed into danger but there was nothing I could do about it. I had to trust in his strength and believe his promise.

*He’ll come back to me.*

I moved to look at the screen which showed the warehouse where Magnar stalked towards the exit, swords in hand. I bit my lip anxiously as he approached the door the vampires were trying to break through. I didn’t know if I wanted to watch but I didn’t think I could tear my gaze away either.

As the bolts securing the door gave way, I realised I couldn’t watch those monsters trying to hurt him while I hid away in here. I pressed my eyes closed. He was born to take down the creatures of the night and I could only trust in his ability to do just that.

I opened my eyes and turned my attention to the screen which showed my dad hanging forward, slumped in his restraints. At first I thought he’d passed out but then he lifted his head, seeming to look right at me through the camera. It only lasted a second but my resolve hardened as I gazed into his eyes. I was going to get him out alongside everyone else stuck in this hell

hole.

I searched the screen for some sign of the General but I couldn't see him. It took me several seconds before I spotted him striding down a long corridor. It was impossible for me to tell where he was heading but I had the immovable feeling that it was straight towards us.

My heart fluttered like a bird in a cage as I watching him moving too swiftly for it to be natural. Though I was afraid of all vampires, the General awakened a special kind of terror in me. This was the man who had taken everything from me as if it were nothing. His teeth had pierced my father's skin. He was responsible for whatever had happened to my sister. I longed to end his immortal life more than anything else. I wanted his presence struck from this world and his soul banished to the deepest pits of hell where it belonged.

Fury sang in my palm, wishing the same fate on him. The blade ached to feel the final beat of his black heart and curse him into death.

*Take your vow sun child and we can end them all.*

I blinked in surprise as the voice swirled through my mind from the blade. I hadn't given the vow any more thought since Magnar had told me about it. Though the idea of having the strength to take on General Wolfe was seriously tempting, I still didn't want to relinquish my freedom in exchange for that power.

The sound of swords colliding reached me from beyond the door and my gaze snapped straight back to the screen showing the warehouse. Magnar was locked in battle with three of the Elite at the farthest end of the room. It was hard for me to make out much of what was happening between the four tiny figures on the screen and I nervously chewed the inside of my cheek.

He threw one of the vampires away from him and she collided heavily with a coffin, reminding me of the task he'd set.

I forced my gaze away from the screens and started to scour the room for some way to release the humans.

On the opposite wall to the screens were various things connected with power cables and several switches and levers.

I moved towards it and flicked the closest switch. The light above my head instantly went out and I cursed myself as I fumbled my hand along the wall to find the switch again and turn it back on.

I decided to leave the other switches for now and grabbed a handset instead. It stayed connected to the wall via a cord and I frowned at the

buttons which covered it. The numbers one to nine ran in sequence, waiting expectantly for me to do something.

I stared at it for several seconds then pressed number one. I glanced hopefully over my shoulder at the screen showing the coffins but nothing happened.

“Hello?” The handset was talking to me. I stared at it mutely, wondering what I should do. “Hello?”

“Yes?” I held it at arm’s length and frowned at it in utter confusion.

“We had a report that you were having some trouble over there? Did you still want us to send a team?” the tinny voice asked.

I moved the handset a little closer to my ear so that I could hear it better. Somehow, I seemed to be talking to a vampire somewhere else. I realised the thing must have been a phone and my hand trembled as I tried to figure out what to say.

“Um no... false alarm,” I replied a beat too late for it to come off naturally.

“Is there something wrong with the line?”

I wondered what line he was talking about and answered the only way I could. “Not that I know of. Thanks.” I quickly placed the handset back where I’d found it and hoped the vampire hadn’t noticed anything being off.

I gave the screens another sweeping glance but my dad hadn’t moved and it was too difficult to make out much that was going on with Magnar. He was still fighting though so he was still alive. I had to hold on to that much for now.

A few of the levers had signs beside them, labelling their uses and I cursed myself for my nearly non-existent literacy.

“Bee-oh, un-it... bi-oo unit?” I cursed again and begged my brain to cooperate as the letters almost seemed to dance around to avoid me reading them. “Bio unit!” *Okay, next word.* “Rel-ee-aa-ssss. Release!” I grinned at my find and quickly yanked the heavy lever down.

I looked up at the screen showing the warehouse and sighed in satisfaction as I spotted the coffins all sliding open. As I watched, my mood shifted from elated to terrified as one of the Elite started running in a blur of motion towards the room I was hiding in.

Magnar tried to cut him off but two more vampires leapt into his path, holding him back.

I stumbled away from the door, raising Fury as it burned in my palm. I was dead. I knew it. The vampire knew it. Hell, Fury even seemed to know it too.

The blade felt sluggish in my grip, almost like it had already accepted our defeat.

The door was thrown wide and I gasped as I recognised General Wolfe. His cold eyes gleamed with triumph as he spotted me.

“Callie Ford. How I have hunted for you!” he hissed excitedly as he stalked towards me.

I balked as he said my name. “Why? What’s so special about me?”

If I kept him talking then I had the faint hope that Magnar might be able to get to me. Fury was urging me to attack and I shifted my grip on its hilt as I willed it to be quiet. I might have gotten lucky with a few lesser vampires but I wasn’t foolish enough to rate my chances against an Elite. Especially *this* Elite who might just have been the most evil, terrifying creature on the planet.

I swallowed a thick lump in my throat as I backed up, putting a small office chair between us. It was a pretty pathetic line of defence but I felt better with there being something to separate us.

“Nothing,” he spat. “You’re just a worthless human. You’re all just as irrelevant as the next. At least to me. But my master wants you for your blood.”

“My blood?” I recoiled. That was nothing new; we were just food to them. But why would some important vampire want *my* blood specifically?

“Yes.” He licked his lips and I caught sight of his fangs. A shudder ran down my spine.

“Your master?” I’d backed up as far as I could go and bumped against the wall.

“Erik Belvedere has something in mind for you and your sister. I’m going to take you to join her in New York.” He smiled at me like he wanted to eat me and my stomach swooped. But one thing he’d said gave me reason to hope. Montana was still alive and he was here to capture me not kill me. Not that I’d be going anywhere with him if I had any say in it.

“Erik Belvedere?” I asked, trying to feign ignorance but I remembered that name. The vampire who had murdered Magnar’s father and turned him into a vampire. Killer of a Thousand Souls. If Montana was with him then I had no idea how we would save her.

The General kicked the office chair aside as he continued his lazy advance. It spun away on rickety wheels before bumping into the desk and coming to a halt.

“Don’t worry, there will be plenty of you left for him to toy with when I’m finished. But I can have my fun with you first.” He leapt at me and I screamed as I tried to twist aside.

Fury blazed commands into my mind but I couldn’t react quickly enough to even try and use them. The General grabbed a fistful of my hair, wrenching my head back and exposing my throat. His other hand caught my wrist and he twisted viciously, forcing me to release my hold on Fury. My metal companion clattered to the ground, the sound filling me with dread. As the blade left me, the warmth of its presence fled too. I was hopelessly alone.

Wolfe forced me back, slamming me against the cold wall, his free hand splaying across my stomach as he pinned me in place. I was a fly caught by a spider, unable to do anything but watch as it came for me.

General Wolfe increased the pressure on my hair, forcing me to bare my neck to him. I gritted my teeth against the whimper of pain which tried to escape me. I wouldn’t let him see my fear. I’d never let him know he was hurting me.

He leant forward, his horrifyingly beautiful face closing in on mine as if he might kiss me. But it wasn’t desire for my body that heated his gaze, it was lust for my blood.

My heart thundered wildly as he shifted closer and panic tried to take hold of me. He released a deep growl in the back of his throat as he pressed his cold lips against the skin of my neck, inhaling deeply.

I recoiled, my stomach roiling with disgust as I tried to squirm out of his grasp but his unbreakable strength held me paralysed.

He inhaled again and ran his icy tongue along the length of my neck. Bile built in my mouth and I was pretty sure I was about to vomit on his polished boots.

He sighed, almost sounding disappointed, and moved back an inch. His dark eyes met mine and I swallowed back the bile as I let every ounce of hatred I felt for him boil in my gaze. His eyes glimmered with amusement like my anger pleased him.

“I may not be allowed to sample the goods yet,” he purred. “But I’m sure my master will share you with me once he’s finished.”

I stared into his eyes, wondering how on Earth I’d just escaped the call of his bloodlust. I could still see it swimming beneath the surface of his barely-maintained composure. He longed to taste my blood. But his fear of his master held him back. And if this monster was that afraid of Erik Belvedere

then I knew without doubt that I had to escape before he delivered me to him.

Any creature horrifying enough to strike fear into General Wolfe's dark heart had to be beyond evil.

*And that's who has Montana.*

The blood drained from my face as I considered that. She was facing a worse fate than I'd imagined. I *had* to save her, no matter what it took.

He released my hair and shoved me towards the door with such force that I slammed down onto my knees.

Fury called to me from inches away and I lunged forward, reaching desperately for the blade.

General Wolf laughed as he kicked Fury away, sending it skittering out into the warehouse. A line of smoke rose from the toe of his boot, a burn from the blade marring the leather. "Tell me Callie, how did that slayer awaken your mark?"

I started crawling after Fury, my heart pounding as the General's footsteps slowly followed. Magnar was still locked in battle with the two Elite at the far end of the room. The sound of clashing blades and cries of rage filled the cavernous space.

"Did you have to do something? Maybe he made you recite an ancient chant or do some savage dance to the moon? Or did he make you screw him?" he chuckled but there was no joy in the sound, only malice.

I was getting close to Fury again and the General kicked me in the stomach, sending me rolling away from it. I gasped as the air was forced from my lungs and pain blossomed through my body. I glared up at him as I scrambled back into a crouch. He was a cat playing with a mouse. But mice had teeth too and he'd find that out if I got the opportunity to show him.

"Fuck you," I spat. I might not have been much of a slayer but the blood of my ancestors flowed through my veins and I refused to cower in fear before him.

The General smirked, his gaze drifting from me to look at the rows of coffins which now stood open. "You know, this batch of stock hasn't been producing the best quality of blood lately. We've been meaning to have a clear out." He strode towards the wall and reached over to open a panel filled with controls and switches.

I got to my feet shakily, my gaze flicking between the General and the door at the far end of the room. I knew it would be useless to try and run but adrenaline flooded my limbs, urging me to do just that.



General Wolfe hit several buttons on a keypad and turned to smile at me as he yanked on a big lever. He had dimples. How could something so cruel have such a beautiful face? But I could see through the visage to the darkness beneath it.

A mechanical whirring started up and I looked around at the room in confusion. Bright green fluid began to slide down the tubes which had been delivering the drips to the unconscious humans. I wheeled around, looking down into the coffin beside me where a middle-aged woman with greying hair lay sleeping. I stared in horror as the green fluid made contact with the woman's blood and she began jerking violently.

A gasp of alarm escaped my lips and I raced around the coffin, yanking the drip from her arm before it could deliver any more poison. She didn't stop fitting though and all around me, the humans contained in the boxes were jerking and flailing as the poison flooded into them.

The General released a soft laugh as he stalked towards me.

I forgot about the pointlessness of it and fled. My boots pounded through the warehouse and I tried to ignore the dying humans all around me as their bodies fitted and fell still.

I raced towards Magnar and my approach made one of the Elite hesitate just long enough to give him an in. Tempest plunged through the vampire's heart and the Elite fell apart like a million scattered grains of sand.

I'd almost made it to Magnar's side when Wolfe caught me. He lifted me clean off of my feet and hurled me straight past Magnar and the last Elite. I crashed to the ground, pain tearing through my body as I tumbled over and over before slamming into the heavy metal door.

I coughed weakly as I tried to push myself upright and Magnar let out a roar of pure rage. "Callie!" he bellowed and I blinked up at him, trying to align my thoughts as my vision swam.

Before I could get up, Wolfe caught my arm and dragged me out into the corridor.

I lost sight of Magnar but I could still hear the clash of steel as the last Elite stopped him from following us.

The General raced down the corridor, dragging me behind him so quickly that I could only kick my heels against the floor in an attempt to stop him wrenching my arm from its socket.

As we approached the refrigerator where Magnar had spilled the human blood, I threw myself aside, twisting my arm in his grasp. I scrambled to my

feet as he was forced to pause and he slapped me squarely across the face.

He yanked me into motion again and pain tore through my arm but I'd achieved my goal. My boots were coated in blood and my footsteps left a trail of it as he dragged me further into the building.

I only prayed Magnar would survive the Elite and be able to follow it. He was my last hope.

# Montana



“-**h**ave any idea how close I was to *turning* her?” Erik's sharp voice made my head ache. And hell did it ache. My left shoulder hurt too; more of a slicing pinch than the throbbing in my brain. I didn't know which was worse.

I groaned, reaching out and finding soft sheets beneath me.

“Well thank the gods you didn't,” Miles' voice filled the air. “She still has to choose tomorrow.”

“Is that all you fucking care about?” Erik barked at him.

“Well she wouldn't be much use to us if she wasn't human anymore, would she?” Miles retorted and my chest tightened as I realised Erik had actually considered turning me into a vampire. Were my injuries that bad? And why the hell was it important that I was still human anyway?

*Probably just for their stupid ritual. They want me married to one of them first. Who knows why that's necessary, but at least my heart is still beating.*

“Shut up, Miles. Just leave him with her,” Clarice hissed and the sound of a door shutting sent another dagger through my skull.

I blinked, groggy as I took in the room. My room. I was back in the castle.

Erik paced toward me, his clothes covered in dust and stained with blood.

“What happened?” I murmured, my heartrate picking up as he dropped onto the bed and took my hand.

“Fabian,” he snarled. “He rigged my car. That should have been us in there.”

Panic spilled through me. “Luke...Brianna?”

“Dead,” he confirmed in a cold tone.

I sucked in a breath as that truth burrowed into my heart. I hadn't known them well but their loss still cut into me like a knife.

*Oh hell...what if it had been us in that car?*

My stomach roiled as nausea gripped me.

“Did you catch Fabian?” I asked, desperate to know he'd been dealt with.

That he was no longer a threat.

Erik shook his head. "He has an alibi."

"But you know it was him." I reached for his hand. "I heard him."

"No one will believe you," Erik said in a low tone. "No one but me."

"But you're as powerful as him, aren't you? Can't you do something about it?"

"I have no proof, Montana." He squeezed my hand. "It's your word against his and he'll have a hundred Chancellors backing him to the bitter end. Besides..."

"What?" I questioned.

Erik frowned deeply. "It doesn't make sense that he'd set a bomb to kill me. I'm immortal. It would take a lot more than that. It was either a failure by whoever he ordered to set it, or..."

"Or?" I pressed, my heart picking up.

He shook his head. "I don't know..."

I wanted to push him for answers but my head throbbed again and pain bloomed along my left shoulder, distracting me.

"You hit your head on a step," Erik said, his tone softening. "I'm sorry I didn't catch you quick enough. If I hadn't been drinking..." His face contorted with anger.

"It's okay," I said gently, reaching up and finding a large lump on the back of my head. "Where did the blood come from?" I asked, eyeing the red stains on his shirt.

"A piece of shrapnel hit your shoulder. I had a larger piece in my back. If I hadn't gotten in the way you..." He shook his head, the light in his eyes dimming.

*I'd be dead.*

A deep v formed between Erik's eyes. "I had a vampire brought here who used to be a human doctor. She tended to your wounds."

I nodded slowly, absorbing that information. "Are you hurt?" I breathed, my heart stammering at the thought.

Erik turned, tugging up the ripped remains of his shirt, showing me his untarnished skin. "I heal, unlike you."

His eyes drifted to the blood on his shirt and he suddenly took it off completely, tossing it aside. When he looked back, his pupils had dilated. I spotted the faded scars marring his flesh and wondered how it was possible they were there if his body could heal itself.

“How did you get that?” I pointed to the crescent-shaped scar on his midriff.

He glanced down at it with a frown and my fingers tingled with the urge to touch the silvery mark. “A slayer. Their blades are designed to hurt us. They’re the only weapon which can leave a mark like this. It takes a lot longer to heal from a cut delivered by their blades.”

My heart pounded faster at the mention of the slayers. “Fabian told me about them. He said they’re all dead now?” I inquired, wondering how much more Erik might reveal.

He nodded. “We defeated them a long time ago. But there were a few who presented more of a challenge.”

I reached out, unable to help myself as I brushed the tips of my fingers over the scar on his stomach. His skin was silken and not quite as cold as I’d expected.

“Does it hurt?” I breathed, tracing the half-moon.

“Not anymore,” he said, his tone deep and rumbling. The feel of his cool skin started to have a strong effect on me and for the life of me I couldn’t pull my hand away.

“A slayer called Magnar Elioson gave me this. He was gifted by the gods. He called himself a ‘Blessed Crusader’.” His nose wrinkled.

“The gods?” I shook my head, finding it difficult to believe.

“I know how it sounds, but trust me, I’ve dealt with the wrath of the gods my entire immortal life. They are the reason vampires exist at all.” He looked uncertain as to whether he should go on, but I didn’t want him to stop talking.

“And the slayers? Why do they exist?”

Erik chuckled darkly, winding his fingers around my wrist and holding my hand flush against his body. “To destroy us.”

My throat constricted until I couldn’t get out any more words. Quiet fell between us and Erik’s eyes drifted to the bloody shirt he’d discarded on the floor.

“Can you smell the blood?” I asked, unsure how I felt about that.

He nodded and a flash of guilt passed through his eyes. “Yes but...I’m not an animal.”

“But my injuries make you hungry,” I said, conjuring a grim smile.

He gave me a bemused look then gazed down at the gown I was still dressed in. “Would you like to change? I can help you.”

I shook my head, remembering the blade concealed on my thigh. Shit,

what would he think of me if he suspected I was a slayer? His sworn enemy?  
“I'll manage, thank you.”

“Let me help,” he urged, releasing my hand and reaching for the buttons.

“No,” I insisted. “I can do it.”

He gave in, looking vaguely hurt.

I pushed myself upright, hissing at the pain as I moved my shoulder. I found the sleeve of my left arm had been cut away to bandage the wound and I had to be grateful it wasn't the right. What if someone had seen the mark?

Erik took my wrist, helping me off of the bed. I rose on shaky legs and my head spun in circles. My vision darkened and I stumbled forward into Erik's strong arms.

He held me tight, resting his chin against my head. “This is my fault, please let me help you.”

“You didn't set the bomb,” I said dryly.

“No, but it was me Fabian was after and he would have taken you down with me.”

Shock unfolded inside me as I realised he was right. Fabian would have been more than happy to let me die in that car too.

Erik's phone rang in his pocket and he snatched it out, eyeing the screen as if considering not answering. “Shit, one second.” He lifted it to his ear, still gripping my arm to support me. “Get to the point Wolfe, what is it?”

My thoughts sharpened at the name. Had he freed my dad?

“What?!” Erik roared. “How is that possible?”

He fell silent as Wolfe answered and I gazed up at him, my heart thumping harder at his anxious tone.

“Who said that?” he hissed, grinding his teeth whilst Wolfe replied. “Good, bring her here immediately. And don't you dare play your usual games with her. She is the sister of my Courtier, understand? That makes her life more valuable than yours.”

“Callie's there?” I gasped, suddenly desperate to hear her voice. “Let me talk to her!”

Erik eyed me, listening to something Wolfe was saying.

I reached for the phone, but Erik leant back so I couldn't grab it. Desperation filled me. Nightmare hummed on my thigh. I could almost sense my sister's presence on the other end of that phone call.

“I...” Shock poured through Erik's eyes. “Describe him,” he growled and a moment later he ground his jaw so hard I was sure he was going to break

some teeth. "Get his fucking name, Wolfe." He hung up a second later and his gaze drifted down to me.

"You didn't let me speak to her," I snarled, my eyes scorching with unshed tears.

He sighed. "She's fine, Rebel. Relax. Wolfe will bring her here."

A jagged lump rose in my throat and I looked away. "I'd like to be alone now."

"Montana-"

"Go!" I demanded and he reluctantly released me, heading toward the door.

"I'll come check on you soon," he murmured before exiting.

I held my aching shoulder as I headed into the bathroom, a mixture of emotions rolling through me. Callie was safe. But she was also with Wolfe. And he'd already threatened to hurt her. Would he keep his word to Erik and bring her here in one piece? And what about my dad? Had he been released yet?

Slowly, I managed to strip out of my clothes without jolting my shoulder too much. I unwrapped Nightmare from my thigh and it seemed disappointed with me. Who knew what I'd done to piss it off. But its stony silence spoke bounds. Either that or I'd hit my head harder than I'd thought.

I carefully took the bandage off my shoulder, finding a neatly stitched wound on my pale flesh. Leaving the bandage on the sink, I stepped into the shower and turned the water on. I made sure it wasn't too hot, letting the cool stream soothe my aches and pains as ash and dirt gathered around my feet.

Callie was okay. That was what I had to hold on to. And surely that meant dad would be free soon too? My breathing slowed as I relished that information. Maybe I should have asked Erik to send Callie away with my dad. I didn't want her to come here and get wrapped up in the twisted company of the royals. I half wondered if he'd let me go too...

I recalled how he'd kissed me at the hotel and squeezed my eyes shut, lifting my face into the shower of water.

Why had he kissed me? And why the hell had I let him? *Again.*

Something about Erik drew me to him. He wasn't like the vampires who'd guarded the Realms. None of the royals were. Even Fabian hadn't openly acted like a heartless bloodsucker until tonight.

I drew in a deep breath, trying to unwind my web of thoughts to no avail.

As I exited the shower and wrapped myself in a towel, wincing at every

movement, I thought of tomorrow. That was the easiest way to manage things. One day at a time. Perhaps if I asked Erik, he'd let me skip the choosing ceremony. After what had happened tonight, maybe they'd postpone it anyway.

I took Nightmare back to my room and pushed it under my pillow, wanting it nearby after my close call with death.

I pulled on some pajamas, leaving the wound bare on my shoulder. I couldn't wrap it up myself anyway. Laying back in my bed, I sighed as I relaxed against the pillow which concealed Nightmare.

*Rest, Moon child.*

Relief swept through me at hearing its voice. I guessed it had gotten over its mood. So that was one thing to be thankful for.

*Yup, you're talking to a knife. Things are really looking up. Montana.*





**W**olfe dragged me to the end of the corridor where a row of doors were clustered together on both walls. He tore open the final door on the left and pulled me inside. I kicked out at the wall as he yanked on my arm, smearing blood from the side of my boot along the grey brickwork for Magnar to see.

*Please be alright. Please come for me again.* I was making a habit of relying on him to rescue me but I didn't even care. I'd never wanted anyone to give a damn about me until I'd met him but now that I knew he did I never wanted him to stop.

Wolfe slammed the door behind us and threw me away from him, sending me flying into the rear wall. I crashed to the ground and used the wall to claw my way upright again. I turned to glare at him, keeping my back pressed to the freezing stone.

The room was empty save for some chains which hung from the ceiling. It was cold and dank, a dirty puddle covered the floor. It looked just like the room my father was being held in and I wondered if he was trapped nearby.

My gaze skimmed past the evil creature standing before me and found the wooden door. *If only I could get out of here then maybe I could find my dad...*

"What do you want me for?" I demanded, my voice sounding braver than I felt. I straightened my spine in defiance, hoping that my slayer blood would help me to hold my own.

Wolfe's gaze flicked to me without any real interest and he pulled a cellphone from his pocket, dialling a number before turning away from me to talk.

"Good evening sir, I'm sorry to interrupt your-" He cut off abruptly and I caught sight of a scowl on his face which didn't match the simpering tone he was using with whoever he was talking to. "It's just that a situation has occurred here. I'm afraid we had to destroy the current batch of humans being held in the blood bank."

He winced as the person on the phone started yelling at him, their outraged voice reaching me. I couldn't hear the words behind the tone but I could tell they were pissed. I wondered if he was speaking to Erik Belvedere; if the answer to my sister's whereabouts was within reach.

"We had a security issue. The bio-units were all compromised and there was a chance of contamination to the product. The decision had to be made in the interest of public safety. I'm sure we can make up the loss by upping donations within Realm G for the next few months. We might lose a few of the weaker specimens but it never hurts to cut the wheat from the chaff."

I glared up at him angrily as I realised what he was saying. The people in the Realm would suffer because he'd killed the prisoners here.

"I'll kill you," I growled, moving towards him with my fists clenched. "You psychotic piece of—" Wolfe took a step towards me and slapped me hard enough to split my lip. I stumbled back as the iron tang of blood filled my mouth.

"Sorry, sir. That was the other reason for my call. The Ford girl is the one who broke in here."

He paused to listen while the vampire on the other end of the phone spoke. I glared at him as he eyed me hungrily, his gaze snagging on the blood which lined my lip. Fear licked down my spine as he took half a step towards me.

"Of course. I understand but... she wasn't alone. There is a man here with her. A slayer. And I don't mean someone who has trained themselves to hunt us; this mortal is like a slayer of old. If I hadn't seen him with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it.

He was taller than any man I've ever met and built like a bear. He fights with two slayer blades the likes of which I've never seen and he has killed almost all of us who were here tonight. The last I saw he was still fighting Helga but I am not confident she will win. Of course I only avoided killing him myself to be sure of bringing you the Ford girl."

"More like you were afraid!" I shouted before slamming my mouth shut, wondering why on Earth I was goading this monster.

Wolfe bared his fangs at me as he listened again.

"Tall, like I said. Long, dark hair. Thick with muscle and full of rage. There are tattoos and scars on what little of his skin I could see but he is wearing fighting leathers so that wasn't much."

He fell silent for a few seconds then looked down at the cellphone like it had done something surprising. "Oh I'll get you that name," he growled as he

pushed the phone into his pocket and advanced on me.

I backed up, hitting the cold brick wall behind me as my heart rate spiked with fear.

“Count Erik wants to know the name of the slayer who brought you here,” he growled.

I took a deep breath to buy myself a moment before I answered. If *Count Erik* wanted to know who Magnar was then I wasn't about to tell him.

“Why not ask him yourself? Or does he frighten you?” I asked, waiting for his anger to fall on me. There was no way I would give him Magnar's name and I forced my own fear aside as I prepared to take what was coming for my silence on the matter.

“I don't even remember what fear is, but I'm sure *you* know it well,” Wolfe hissed. His eyes dropped to my mouth and the blood which I could still feel on my lip.

“That'll be why you ran from him like a frightened little bitch then,” I replied with a smile I knew would earn me a smack.

Wolfe punched me in the gut and I doubled over as the breath was knocked from my lungs. Before I could recover, he grabbed me and pinned me against the wall, his fingernails biting into my shoulders.

“Tell me his name!” he roared and his anger sent terror coursing along my spine.

I gathered every inch of resolve I had left and spat in his face.

Wolfe growled like a feral beast, seizing me around the throat and raising me up above his head. “I will have his name from you, whore. Or I will have his head!”

The door burst open, slamming against the wall hard enough to break one set of hinges.

Wolfe dropped me as he spun away from it and I crashed into the concrete floor, pain flaring along my side.

The vampire stared up in horror, recoiling from the huge man who stood in the doorway.

“My name is Magnar Elioson and I was put on this earth to wipe your kind from it. Tell your master I have returned for him. I hope he has made the most of the extra years he has been given, because his time is up.”

My heart flared as I scrambled towards Magnar but Wolfe was quicker; he lunged at me, catching my arm and heaving me upright against his chest.

I tried to kick and claw my way free of him but his hold was unwavering

as he pulled out a dagger and pressed it to my throat. I stilled as the sharp blade scratched against my skin and a warm trickle of blood leaked down my neck.

“What’s it to be, slayer? My life or hers?” Wolfe hissed.

“You fear me that much? What will your master say when he learns you didn’t even attempt to stop me from coming for him?” Magnar asked icily.

“He hasn’t asked me to kill you. He just wants me to bring *her*.” He pushed me forward a step but Magnar didn’t move aside.

“And which Belvedere’s day am I ruining by stopping you from taking her?” Magnar asked.

“Count Erik has requested Miss Ford’s presence and I will be delivering her along with your name. Do you think you can stand against he who has killed a thousand slayers?”

Before Magnar could reply, Wolfe shoved me towards him and leapt forward to attack.

I stumbled into Magnar’s chest and he twisted, delivering me into the safety of the corridor whilst trying to block the thrust from Wolfe’s dagger. He grunted in pain as Wolfe managed to drive the small blade into his bicep and a gasp escaped my lips.

Magnar slammed his fist into Wolfe’s face, throwing him back into the room where he crashed against the rear wall. While he righted himself, Magnar wrenched the dagger from his arm and tossed it at my feet.

“Find your father,” he commanded. “I’ll catch up with you.”

Wolfe was on him again before I could respond and I quickly grabbed the dagger from the floor, wiping Magnar’s blood off of it on my pants. It was a cold, soulless thing, nothing like a slayer blade; just a hunk of sharpened metal. It did little to reassure me as I held it close and I desperately wished I hadn’t lost Fury.

I hesitated as I watched Magnar slamming into Wolfe and driving him back into the small room again. He still hadn’t drawn his blades and I hoped he wasn’t holding back because Wolfe was unarmed. If any monster deserved a swift death then it was him.

A pain-filled groan drew my attention away from their battle and I recognised my father’s voice. I spun around and ran to the door behind me, wrenching it open and finding him still hanging by the chains on his wrists.

“Dad!” I gasped, racing into the room and throwing my arms around his neck.

“Callie?” he frowned in confusion, his voice sounding fuzzy. “Am I dreaming again?”

“It’s me Dad.” Tears slipped from my eyes as I squeezed him tighter and he groaned in pain.

I released him guiltily and made myself look at what they’d done to him. He seemed thinner than he had a week ago, his ribs poking out harshly through his skin so that I wondered if they’d even fed him in all this time.

His bare chest was marked with bruises in colours ranging from yellow to blue, purple and red telling me that he’d been beaten repeatedly over the last week. But the cuts on his arms and neck were the worst of his injuries. I counted more than ten bites, all of which continued to ooze blood. It was hard to be sure of exactly how many of them there were because they overlapped so many times.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” I promised. “You’re going to be okay.”

I stood on my tiptoes to inspect the chains which held his wrists suspended and was relieved to find they were only secured by thick iron pins. I yanked the first pin free and his arm fell heavily as he swung towards the other side.

I grabbed his arm and pulled it over my shoulder so that I could take his weight, releasing his other wrist. It didn’t seem like he’d be able to do it himself and I was afraid he would fall if I didn’t help him.

“Where’s your sister?” he muttered.

“We’ll get her back too,” I promised. “Let’s just get you out of here first.” I pulled the other pin free and he fell against me. I stumbled as I struggled to take his weight and he groaned weakly.

“Can you walk?” I asked anxiously.

“I’ll walk for you, Little Sun,” he mumbled.

He leant against me and I half dragged him towards the door. I hesitated as we reached it, the sound of Magnar and Wolfe’s continued struggle making me unsure of the best course of action.

“Wait! Your mother’s wedding ring.” He pointed to small table beside the door. On top of it lay my mom’s golden wedding ring hanging from a silver chain. Dad had worn it around his neck ever since she’d died.

“Here.” I grabbed it and handed it to him as a faint smile lifted his lips.

“She’d never let me live it down if I lost it. It’s been in her family for generations,” he muttered as he placed the chain over his neck. I nodded vaguely; a piece of missing jewellery was the least of my concerns at that moment. And seeing as Mom was dead I highly doubted she cared either

way.

I set my jaw and dragged my dad out into the corridor. He shuffled along as quickly as he could manage and I pulled him to move even faster.

Magnar roared in anger behind me and I chanced a look over my shoulder just as the two of them fell out of the room where I'd been held.

My breath caught as Wolfe landed on top of Magnar and lunged towards his throat but Magnar slammed a powerful fist into the side of his head before his teeth could make contact.

I returned my attention to helping my dad along, wrapping my arm more firmly around his back. We needed to get out of this place before their fight followed us along the narrow corridor and crushed us with its ferocity.

We finally made it to the heavy wooden door which led outside and I flinched aside as General Wolfe went flying over our heads, crashing into the wall.

Magnar came running after him with a challenging cry and I watched with wide eyes as they collided again, their fight moving them towards the room with the furnace.

I forced my attention back to getting my dad out of there and shouldered my way through the door. Dad's teeth started chattering as the winter air hit his exposed skin and I moved him towards the wall, resting him against it as I quickly shrugged my thick coat off.

He tried to protest but I forced his arm into the padded material and he relented. It wasn't big enough to fasten over his broader frame but he stopped shivering as he huddled into it.

A heavy crash sounded from inside the building and my heart leapt. Magnar hadn't taken this long to finish an opponent before now and I was beginning to worry that he'd met his match in the psychotic General.

I wished I hadn't lost Fury.

As my mind drifted to the blade, I could feel my connection to it calling me back inside. I guessed it was still where I'd last seen it, laying in the room of coffins which was now filled with the dead. I wanted to run and retrieve it but my dad was too vulnerable to leave alone.

He'd closed his eyes and was leaning against the wall so heavily that I wasn't sure I'd be able to get him moving again. The horses were so close to us, hidden within the trees but retrieving them would mean leaving him.

An almighty crash sounded from within the building and I flinched backwards, fear clawing at me as I waited to see what had happened.

The door flew open and I spun to place myself in front of my father, holding the pathetic metal dagger before me as Wolfe paced out.

Magnar didn't follow him and my heart twisted painfully as I stared in horror at the beautiful demon who stalked towards us.

"Don't cry little slayer," he purred as he closed in on me, paying no attention whatsoever to the blade I held ready. "I'm sure you'll be joining that one in death before long. Count Erik has such plans for your family and I can't wait-" He stumbled forward, a cough falling from his lips and bringing up blood which trickled down his chin.

I recoiled as he staggered towards us, grasping at something behind him. He turned, his hand closing on the hilt of the blade which hung from his back. With a grunt of pain, he ripped it free but bright scarlet blood continued to spill from the wound.

Wolfe hissed in pain as smoke rose from his fingers and he flung the golden blade aside. It embedded itself in the ground by my feet and I snatched it into my grasp, relief flooding me as I recognised my violent companion.

*So close.* Fury sighed in disappointment and I almost smiled.

Magnar shoved the door aside as he exited the building. Blood ran down his face from a wound hidden in his hairline and he was coated from head to toe in grey soot.

"That fall should have killed you," Wolfe spat angrily. "Next time I'll make sure you're dead."

"You're not looking so capable of following through on that threat," Magnar replied with a challenging smirk as Wolfe's wound continued to bleed. "I wonder what your master will say when he finds out I set his blood bank on fire?"

The stench of smoke filled the air and I noticed flames rising from the building behind Magnar, silhouetting him in golden hues.

The vampire looked between Magnar and me for a moment, seeming to see that his odds of survival were dwindling by the second.

"If you're thinking of running, you have to know I'll catch you in your present state," Magnar threatened as he continued to close the distance between them. "Why not let your eternal torment end? I can give you a warrior's death. What more can any man ask for in the end?"

"You forget *mortal* that I am no man. And I have no plans to die. Ever." Wolfe leapt into motion but instead of heading for Magnar, he turned his

murderous gaze on me.

I gasped as Fury tried in vain to guide my muscles into action so that I could defend myself but he was moving too quickly. The moonlight glinted on his sharpened fangs and his dark eyes glittered with malice.

A second before he could collide with me, my dad threw his weight into me instead. I crashed to the frozen ground and my dad cried out as Wolfe's attack fell on him.

I shoved myself upright again but the General had already leapt off of my father and was running away, a heavy limp in his stride slowing him down.

My dad clutched at his neck as blood pulsed between his fingers and I threw myself towards him with a sob catching in my throat.

Magnar began to move after Wolfe as I prised my dad's hands away from the wound to try and assess the damage. The bite was unlike the others, Wolfe had ripped into the skin, tearing it jaggedly so that it bled like crazy.

"No," I breathed as the blood continued to pulse from the wound. "No, no." I used Fury to slice a long strip from the base of my shirt and wadded it up to press against the bite. It was saturated quickly but I kept pressing down, willing the blood to stay in his body.

"Why?" I breathed, holding my dad's eye as his gaze flickered. That blow had been meant for me.

"I'd never let anything happen to you girls," he replied, his voice hoarse.

I flinched as Magnar's hand landed on my shoulder. "Keep pressing on the wound," he said. "We need to flush the venom out."

I looked up at him in confusion as he bent low to lift my father over his shoulder. My dad wasn't a small man and even with the extra weight he'd lost he would still have been almost impossible for me to move alone. Magnar had let Wolfe escape to help me save him.

"Thank you," I said, another sob catching in my throat.

I stayed close, pressing on the wound as Magnar started a quick pace back towards the horses. Blood soon coated my hands and began to drip between my fingers onto the frozen grass at my feet despite my best efforts to hold it back.

A freezing wind gusted around us and I shivered as it kissed the exposed skin on my stomach. The air was thick with smoke and I looked over my shoulder to see the blood bank engulfed in flames. Golden light lit up the night's sky as the fire reached towards the sky, consuming the building which had been the source of my nightmares for so long.



We made it to the horses and Magnar lowered my dad to the ground before hurrying to retrieve some bottled water.

He'd passed out and I leant down, pressing my forehead to his and willing him to stay with me as tears poured from my eyes and ran over his cheeks.

Magnar returned quickly and pulled my hands away from the bite. I couldn't bear to watch as he flushed it clean but kept my cheek pressed to my dad's chest, listening to the slow thump of his heartbeat to reassure myself that he was still alive.

"There is nothing more I can do," Magnar said quietly. "The rest is up to him."

I pushed myself upright and looked down at the thick bandage Magnar had made from his own shirt and tied around the wound. His fighting leathers lay on the ground beside him and his bronze skin shone in the moonlight that made it through the trees.

"Is he going to be okay?" I asked and I didn't miss the pleading tone my own voice had taken on. We'd come so far and gotten so close, I just couldn't bear to lose him after we'd risked so much to make it here.

Magnar hesitated before replying. "Callie," he said softly, my name sounding like a prayer on his lips. "He's lost a lot of blood and he has been used for food many times this past week..."

I felt a pain like nothing I'd ever experienced carving its way through my chest at his words and I descended into sobbing again as I wrapped my arms around my dad.

Magnar reached forward to touch my arm but I shrugged him off aggressively. I didn't want his pity. I just wanted my family to be okay.

"If he is as strong as his daughter then perhaps he can fight his way back from this," Magnar added carefully and though I could hear the doubt in his voice I clung to his words like a life raft. They gave me the only thing I needed right then; a chance. And I wouldn't let it go until my dad took his very last breath.



I didn't remember much about our journey during the early hours of the morning. Only holding my dad's hand as I walked beside the stallion where Magnar had tied him in place to stop him from falling.

We'd taken shelter in an old barn and I'd made a somewhat comfortable

bed for my dad to lay on amongst the old hay bales. The stacked bales also served to block the drafts which found their way into the building, making our shelter relatively warm. I wished we could have found somewhere suitable to build a fire but we'd had to settle for the first place we came across. Travelling on horseback was only making Dad's situation worse.

I sat on the floor beside the bale I'd made into a bed for him and clung to his cold hand. He hadn't woken since our escape and I was trying not to focus on the blue colouring around his fingertips. I squeezed him tightly, hoping to lend him some warmth. Not that I had much to spare. He still wore my coat and I shivered in my ruined shirt despite my best attempts to make our shelter draft-proof.

Magnar had been gone for hours. He'd taken the stallion and gone in hunt of supplies despite protesting against the idea. But I'd insisted he go. It was daylight and for once, the sun was shining down, lighting the earth in golden tones and hopefully keeping any vampires nearby at bay. If my dad was to have any chance at all then we needed bandages and warm clothes.

I knew he didn't want us to stay here for long. Wolfe would have reported back to the Belvederes about Magnar's return by now and they would no doubt be sending an army of Elite to hunt him down. But Dad was in no state to travel. I knew a day on horseback in the freezing cold would take what little strength he had left from him.

He'd lost too much blood. If I could have cut open a vein and given him some of my own I would have done it in a heartbeat. I'd have given him all of it if that was what it took. I'd sooner die than face the rising tide of pain I could feel coming for me.

I'd seen it in Magnar's eyes when he'd carried my father into the barn. He wasn't going to survive this.

Not wanting to listen to the truth in his gaze, I'd sent him away from me. But now all I wanted was for him to hold me in his arms.

Dad groaned weakly and I squeezed his fingers.

"I'm here Dad. We're safe," I said soothingly. It wasn't the first time he'd made such a sound and I could tell that his moments of rising consciousness were filled with pain.

His fingers momentarily tightened around mine then relaxed as he passed out again. It was impossible to know if he really understood what was happening. If he really knew that we'd gotten him out of that place. I hoped he did though. I hoped that somewhere deep down he knew he was finally

free and that I was with him.

I wished Montana was here too. She deserved to have the chance to say goodbye if nothing else. My heart swelled with worry for her and whatever plan the vampires had in mind. It seemed like whatever it was included me too and I hoped that by staying out of their hands I might be buying her some time.

The sound of hoofs clip-clopping on the concrete path outside the barn made me freeze. I removed one of my hands from my father's and rested my palm against Fury's hilt. The blade remained peaceful, a feeling of easy companionship resonating from it in response to Magnar's swords approaching. I let out a relieved breath and turned towards the barn door as Magnar pulled it open and led the stallion in. The mare whinnied in greeting as she was reunited with her friend and trotted over to nuzzle him.

Magnar pressed the door closed behind them to keep the freezing wind out and took the supplies he'd gathered from the horse's back.

Magnar approached me, his arms filled with a pile of blankets and I swallowed a lump in my throat as gratitude flooded me. I didn't know what I would have done if he'd never found me. Even if by some miracle I hadn't been taken alongside my family that first day then I'd never have been able to get Dad out of the blood bank on my own. And even now, he was still with me. He'd let Wolfe go in favour of helping my father. He was going to hunt down the vampire who had Montana too.

He'd done nothing but help me from the first moment we'd met and I doubted I'd ever be able to repay that debt. I'd never met anyone like him before and I couldn't imagine myself parting from him now.

"How is he?" Magnar asked solemnly and I could tell he was half surprised to find my father still breathing.

"Good. Better," I said a little defensively as I took the blankets and quickly piled them on top of my dad. I tucked his cold hand inside them too and stood watching him for a moment, hoping that he might feel warmer already.

I chewed on my thumbnail as I stared at him, wondering if there was any chance that the blankets would be enough to warm him. Maybe even save him.

*He can't die. I don't know how to live without him.*

"Better?" Magnar asked gently and I could tell that his observations meant he didn't agree.

"He squeezed my hand. He almost woke again," I said, desperation

seeping into my tone. “That’s a good sign, right?”

Magnar looked down at me sadly and reached out to tuck my hair behind my ear. His touch sent an ache of longing through me and I had to fight the urge to throw myself into his arms. If I gave in to the feelings of despair that were growing in me then I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold back the tears.

“Would you like me to check his wounds?” he offered gently. “I found clean bandages.”

“Yes please.” I had no idea how to dress a wound or anything like that but Magnar seemed well trained in such things. I only wished that didn’t mean he was so sure of what was to come. It was obvious he’d seen these kind of injuries before and his prognosis was based on more than guesswork.

Magnar headed back to the stallion and returned with a new coat for me as well as the bandages. He held out the thick jacket and I slid my arms into it gratefully. I hadn’t realised that I’d been shivering until I stopped.

He fastened the toggles and tugged me closer to him, pressing a kiss to my forehead. I leant into him, grabbing onto some of the strength he radiated and taking it for myself.

I blew out a long breath and stepped back so that he could tend to my father.

I backed away as Magnar knelt down beside my dad and pulled his arm out from beneath the blankets.

My stomach knotted as Magnar removed the strips of black fabric he’d used to bandage the bites earlier that morning and I realised they were still weeping blood.

Magnar began rinsing the wounds with bottled water again, his shoulders taut as he concentrated on his work. He finally finished and began wrapping the white bandages tightly around Dad’s arms. I bit my lip as blood seeped through them, slowly staining them red.

“Why is he still bleeding?” I asked desperately. “I thought all the venom was out?”

“He is not slayer born,” Magnar replied sadly. “A human can only stand so much of their vile secretions before their body is overwhelmed. The venom has made it into his bloodstream. It flows within his blood, stopping it from clotting. Slayer blood does not do that. It will not merge with the venom but instead tries to force it from our bodies, keeping it near the surface so that we are able to wash it out. It is possible for him to survive one or two bites but this...” He didn’t finish his sentence but his meaning was clear.

Pain caught in my chest and suddenly I couldn't breathe. I sank down onto one of the hay bales and started shaking my head. This couldn't be happening. I refused to believe it was happening.

The bale shifted beside me and Magnar pulled me into his arms. I resisted for a moment then gave in to his embrace with a shuddering sob as the tears finally came. I clung to Magnar as he held me and I cried against his chest about all of the injustices my family had suffered.

We'd come so close to freedom. My dad was finally out from under the vampires' control and it didn't even matter.

It had all been for nothing.

# Montana



**M**orning arrived and I held on tight to the fuzzy moment somewhere between dreaming and reality. Callie was somehow closer when I was asleep and waking always felt like her fingers slipping through mine.

The moment my eyes opened, she was gone and my bitter reality stared back at me. A strange heaviness clung to me, like a weight attached to my heart. I didn't know why but Nightmare seemed to sense it too, giving off a strange, sad vibe beneath me.

I slid my hand under the pillow, trailing my thumb over its warm hilt and it relaxed at my touch - if a knife *could* relax.

The door opened and I jerked my arm back, causing a stabbing pain in my shoulder.

Groaning, I curled in on myself until it passed.

"Sorry," Erik muttered. "I forgot about the knocking rule."

I tugged my covers up to my chin as I sat upright, taking in the sight of him fully dressed for the day in his royal attire.

"Going somewhere?" I croaked.

"It's the ceremony today. It's customary for us all to attend an opera beforehand."

"In the morning?" I wrinkled my nose.

"It's past noon," Erik said with a crooked smile.

As the cogs in my head started whirring, I realised that the ceremony hadn't been postponed as I'd hoped.

"Erik..." I dropped my eyes to the duvet. "I was hoping maybe...things had changed since yesterday. That the ceremony might be put off."

He sighed, stepping closer with a taut expression. "I tried to buy a couple of days but my family take this time off specifically for the Courtiers. We will return to our homes and our duties once it's over."

“Oh...you don't live here?”

“Not normally. The castle is equally ours, but living on top of each other is a little suffocating for all of us so...” He shrugged.

My mouth grew dry. “Do you still expect me to choose Fabian?”

The door flew open before he could answer and Clarice stormed into the room with her hair streaming out behind her. “Erik! You're not supposed to spend time with the Courtiers on the day of the choosing. Get out.”

“The circumstances are a little different today,” Erik snarled as she shoved him, but he didn't budge an inch.

Clarice's eyes whipped to me then widened to saucers. “She's not even out of bed! Where's your stylist? Get her in here!”

“Fine.” Erik pushed her hand off of his arm, threw me a small nod then dragged his sister out of the room.

I gazed at the closed door, a weight crashing down on me. I still didn't have my answer. Was Erik going to continue to use me as Fabian's spy? I'd been a pretty useless one so far anyway. The single piece of information I'd managed to obtain hadn't changed anything. We could have been dead despite it. But poor Brianna and Luke had died instead.

My throat knotted up until I could barely draw breath. Tears stung my eyes and I instinctively reached for Nightmare.

*Hush. Be still. Be calm.*

I gripped the hilt to my chest under the covers, hugging it tight. Maybe it was stupid, but the thing gave me courage and I needed it badly at that moment.

Nancy soon appeared holding a leather bag, looking flustered as someone shoved her through the doorway. I didn't need to guess who.

Tucking Nightmare back under my pillow, I shifted out of bed.

“Take your shirt off, Montana, the doctor advised me how to clean the wound,” she said gently.

I wrapped my arms around my body, shaking my head. Not because I was embarrassed but because of the mark on my forearm. I couldn't take the risk of it being seen again.

“Don't be silly, I'm not going to look at you.” She released a laugh but I didn't join in.

After a moment, she headed to the bathroom to fetch a towel then held it out to me.

Having no real choice, I turned my back on her and tugged my shirt off,

wrapping the towel around me so only my left arm was poking out. I looked like an idiot, but Nancy didn't question me as she opened her bag and took out a bottle of clear liquid and some fresh bandages.

She patted the stool before the dresser, encouraging me over. I sat on it and she shifted my hair aside, taking the cap off of the bottle and pouring it over the wound.

Fire flared inside my arm and I bit down on a cry. "What the hell was that?" I demanded.

She gave me an apologetic look. "I'm just following instructions."

I sucked air through my teeth and the pain finally subsided. Nancy started binding the wound with a new bandage, being more gentle with her movements.

When it was done, she picked up my pajama top and passed it to me. "The doctor will check on you again tomorrow."

I nodded and she turned her back while I pulled my shirt on.

We set into our usual routine as she brushed my hair and made my face beautiful. Was I pretty without it? I wasn't really sure. I'd received attention from boys back in the Realm but I'd never taken an interest in preening myself for them. I'd never valued prettiness before. Or even wanted boys to look at me.

My stomach clenched as I thought of Erik. The way his touch sent goosebumps skittering across my skin. How his kiss ignited a fire in me like nothing I'd ever felt. It wasn't the same flame as the urge to survive. It was something even more intense than that. Something needy and urgent I couldn't explain.

I zoned out as Nancy muttered to herself about how Erik needed to be more considerate about her line of work despite the wage increase he'd given her.

I found myself lost in my own eyes, wondering if I even recognised the girl staring back at me. Something told me I needed to trust this new girl. I needed to have faith in my instincts.

Nancy finally stepped back, leaving me looking polished to perfection with my hair pulled up into a delicate bun and dark curls hanging loose around my neck. I had to admit, this was Nancy's best work so far. She admired me a moment longer before heading to the closet.

"Erik already chose a dress for you. He sent it here yesterday." She took out the item hidden within a large white bag before unzipping it.



I stood, curious as she pulled out a gown that seemed to embody the night sky.

The deep, navy material was speckled with tiny diamonds which glittered like starlight. It was long sleeved - thankfully – with lace arms and a satin corset. At the bust was a glittering brooch as bright and as round as the moon.

“It's...” I shook my head, not finding the words.

“It's fit for a Countess.” Nancy smiled and her final word ricocheted through my mind.

The choosing ceremony wasn't a distant fear any more. It was here. Today. I wasn't getting out of it.

And whoever I chose, I'd have to marry.



I stood in a royal box beside Paige, my hand locked around hers as we gazed down into an incredible theatre. Our eyes were on a dark wooden stage where a woman sang her heart out in a luxurious cream dress.

The sound was nothing like anything I'd ever heard before and it evoked an ache in me over what had happened in the last week. To me, to dad, to Callie. Something about the music spoke of that pain, their absence. Though she didn't sing in any language I knew, I understood her more than I'd understood any words before.

Behind us sat Clarice's remaining two Courtiers, Frank and Justin. They were dressed in suits as fine as the royal brothers'. The family sat on the other side of the theatre in a box of their own, the gilded lettering on the front of it blazing with the name Belvedere.

I shut my eyes to avoid looking at them, drinking in the final notes of the song as fear gathered in my heart. We'd been told that the moment the opera ended, we'd be taken to the choosing ceremony.

I wasn't ready. I hadn't made my choice.

I needed a moment alone with Erik to talk. But then what? Would he still send me into the dangerous arms of Fabian after what he'd done? And would he deny my Dad's freedom if I chose Miles instead?

My forearm prickled and I released Paige's hand to rest my palm over the material hiding the mark. Nightmare was strapped to my thigh again, humming a tune as beautiful as the woman's song. The emotions in my body seemed like someone else's. Like another soul was reaching into mine and

telling me I should be sad. But why?

Paige wiped a tear from under her eye as the song ended and the silence in the room turned to roaring applause. The red curtain fell and the crowd started filing out of the theatre, heading along the aisles toward the exit.

I spotted the royals moving too and watched as Erik took hold of Fabian's arm, tugging him to a halt before he vacated the box. Erik snarled something in his ear and Fabian shook his head at him with a look that said he was angry. I sensed I knew exactly what was being exchanged between them and hoped Erik was giving him hell.

Paige prodded me and I turned, finding two guards with swords on their backs gesturing for us to leave the box. I ducked past them but they followed closely, guiding us down the corridor with crimson carpet and cream walls.

We were prisoners walking to the hangman's noose. Only the noose was a wedding ring.

I couldn't marry Fabian. I wouldn't. And Miles? The idea of him holding my secret over my head was terrifying. Choosing Erik wasn't an option, and would I want that anyway? I didn't want to marry him, no matter what strange feelings I had toward him. All I really wanted was to walk out of this city and be placed back in the hands of my family. Somewhere free and far, far away.

But as my imagination got carried away with that idea, Nightmare vibrated angrily on my thigh. The nagging feeling it emitted told me not to leave Erik behind. And I battled it as hard as I could, hoping to suffocate it away.

*He is a vampire. And I am human. We will never be equal. And we will certainly never be anything but enemies.*

This life was casting a spell over me and I vowed to break it. Whatever my fate was today, I wouldn't bow to it willingly. I would never marry one of them and be turned into a vampire, I'd die before that happened. So I had to fight. I had to look for the options. Find a crack of light in my dark fate and step into it.

The other Courtiers and I were led downstairs and out of a door onto a dark street. A shout filled my ears and something whipped past my head, smashing against the wall. I gasped as I took in the broken bottle and blood splattered all over the brickwork.

"We have the right to bite!" a protestor called and I spotted a crowd running toward us under the orange glow of a streetlamp, their eyes flaring with anger.

The guards grabbed us, tugging us toward a huge jeep and pushing us into

the back of it.

Paige pressed up against me on the back seat, immediately taking my hand. “Oh my god, what’s going on?”

Shots were fired out on the street and I instinctively ducked my head, adrenaline surging through me as our driver sped off down the road.

“Nothing to worry about,” she called to us when we were a block away from the mayhem. “The rebels always get agitated during the choosing ceremony. It’s under control.”

“It doesn’t seem under control,” Frank muttered and I had to agree.

My heart wouldn’t settle even when we rounded another corner and put more distance between us and the rebels.

We approached a tall building with an arching glass window at the front of it. A red carpet ran all the way up the street before it and I caught sight of the Elite stepping out of cars and moving along it in beautiful dresses and suits. Surrounding the carpet were rows of vampires. A group at the far end of it seemed to be filming the event with large cameras. Armed guards with an array of swords and guns stood on the pavement and I hoped that meant the rebels would be kept away from here.

Instead of driving up to the carpet, the jeep veered to the left and passed down a dark street beside the building. We turned down a steep ramp and arrived in a huge car park beneath the building. A couple of guards hurried forward to open the doors for us and I kept Paige’s hand in mine as we followed them. We moved across the huge, concrete space and approached the steel doors of an elevator.

“Where are we going?” Justin asked one of the guards as she punched her finger on a button beside the doors so they slid open.

“Floor two, an official will be waiting for you,” she said, gesturing for us to go inside. I eyed the gun at her hip with unease as I stepped past her into the space.

The doors slid closed and I glanced at the others, wondering if they were as nervous as me.

“Are you ready?” Frank asked us and I shook my head.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Justin replied, pushing a hand into his hair.

I looked to Paige who dabbed at her eyes, seeming emotional.

“Are you alright?” I breathed.

“It’s just Luke and Brianna...what happened to them was so awful. And then those rebels, I don’t know, they just gave me a fright.”

I nodded, leaning closer to her, feeling a bond of strength growing between all of us humans. We had to stick together now. Whatever happened.

“Paige listen to me,” I said as the elevator rose upward, figuring we might not get another chance to talk tonight. Her bright blue eyes turned my way. “Don’t pick Fabian. I can’t tell you why, and I know he’s offered to look after your family, but Miles is a good guy. He’ll help you too. Just don’t pick Fabian...promise me.”

Her mouth parted, but she didn’t answer.

“I think Montana’s right, there’s something off about Fabian,” Frank said, giving me an anxious look.

Paige nodded weakly and I hoped that meant she agreed.

The doors opened and a bright hallway with marble flooring opened up before us. Two guards stood on either side of the elevator and a male vampire with jet black hair and a silver ring in his ear stood waiting for us. He had a clipboard in his hand and immediately pounced on us, ushering us out of the elevator. “Come on, come on, we don’t have all day.”

He scanned us from head to toe then put a large tick on his clipboard. “You’re all looking fabulous, now you’re going to step through this door up here and I want big smiles for the cameras, okay? The whole of the New Empire is watching tonight!”

We nodded as he escorted us to a set of red double doors at the end of the corridor and my heart rate spiked.

I glanced at the man for instructions, but he seemed to be listening to something as he pressed a finger into his ear. “One minute,” he announced and my pulse drummed faster under my skin.

I still had my fingers locked with Paige’s and Frank suddenly took my other hand. Justin took hold of Paige and we shared a look as I bit into my lip.

*At least I’m not alone in this.*

“Okay, go go go,” the vampire called and the doors opened before us.

A hundred flashes of light blinded me as we walked forward onto a huge stage. Before us was a grand ballroom with a polished floor glimmering under the light of an enormous chandelier. A series of steps scattered with rose petals led down from the stage into the room. The place was packed with Elite, all gazing up at us with golden chalices in their hands.

The crowd applauded at the sight of us and I spotted the camera crew filming us at the bottom of the stairs.

A huge screen at the back of the hall showed a live feed of us all standing in line. We didn't look afraid as I'd expected, but strong. And I took pride in the sight, lifting my chin as I gazed down at the sea of vampires.

My dress sparkled like stars, winking as the tiny gemstones caught the flash of the cameras.

Our attention was snatched by a woman to the right of the stage dressed in a silken purple gown. I instantly recognised her. Felicia looked as beautiful as the first day I'd met her when we'd been presented to the royals. Her flowing dark hair was braided with a white ribbon and her stunning features lifted in a wide smile. "Ladies and gentlemen of the New Empire, welcome to the twenty first annual choosing ceremony! Our royals have chosen the finest humans of the Realms, but today they will make their own choice and pick a Count or Countess to unite with."

Doors opened at the far end of the hall and the royals appeared, walking into the room and dominating the air. Erik's brow was drawn low and Fabian took the first opportunity to break away from him.

As Erik's eyes turned to the stage, his gaze locked with mine. Time seemed to slow and oxygen stopped travelling in and out of my lungs. His mouth pulled up at one corner and I mirrored him, achingly drawn to him in that eternal moment.

Felicia gestured for us to descend the stairs and I guessed that was our cue to join the party. I finally dragged my eyes from Erik and moved down the staircase, immediately more at ease out of the spotlight. Eyes still turned our way, but the Elite parted, allowing us through as they talked amongst each other.

We found a space amongst the crowd and turned back to face the stage. My heart skittered and danced. Adrenaline surged through me and I found myself searching for Erik, hoping I might steal a moment with him.

Felicia raised her arms, calling out to the room again, "I present to you the wives of the royal brothers!"

Through the red door appeared a group of female vampires in white gowns, followed closely by children of varying ages. My heart raced at the sight of them.

*What on earth..?*

Clarice let out a cry of excitement, running up the steps to greet them and falling to her knees as she gathered a couple of dark-haired kids into her arms. "Aunt Clarice!" many of them called to her.

Miles was hot on her heels, placing kisses on some of the women's cheeks before kneeling to embrace a few fair-haired girls.

I stopped moving. Stopped breathing. Because I was terrified of what it meant. I finally located Erik across the room and his expression confirmed what I suspected. My fear turned into a penetrating certainty. This was why they wanted human wives. This was what they wanted from us.

Children.

Nightmare was angry on my thigh, trembling with rage as if the sight of the children upset it as much as it upset me.

Fabian moved to greet his wives, kissing the backs of their hands like he was the perfect gentlemen. I gazed at the youngsters gathering around him, narrowing my eyes. Their skin was glossy like a vampire's but something about them screamed life. How was it possible?

I backed up, bumping into Paige and she gave me a look that told me she'd figured it out too.

"I can't – I won't," I gasped, unable to draw breath.

She opened her mouth as if to warn me to be quiet, but I pushed past her, desperate to be away. To find some breathable air.

I darted back through a door and found myself in an empty corridor. I was thankful for the moment alone as I rested a hand on my pounding heart.

*No. Not this. I don't want this. I won't do it.*

Nightmare whispered soothing words. *Be still, Moon child. You mustn't allow this fate.*

I shook my head. "How? How can I avoid it?"

The door opened before Nightmare replied and I grimaced as Erik appeared, suddenly disgusted by him.

"Montana," he said in a low voice. "Listen to me."

"No," I snarled. "I don't want to hear it. You're not going to convince me to do that. To have children with one of you. I won't. I'll die first." Nausea gripped me. I'd never wanted human children before, let alone this.

It wasn't right. It was twisted.

"Please." He approached slowly like I was a rabid dog about to bite. "I won't ask this of you."

"It's not *you* who'll be doing the asking!" I cried, unable to control my temper a moment longer. "It'll be Fabian or Miles and I—" My back hit the wall as panic captured me. I could sense I was about to lose it just as Erik pressed a palm to my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

My rampant breaths wouldn't slow, but as my gaze met his I found a sliver of calm there to hold onto. There was a promise in his eyes that I desperately longed to believe. And Nightmare encouraged me to do so, coaxing me towards trusting him.

“Listen to me, Rebel,” Erik commanded, not blinking. “I’ll give you a way out.”

I nodded. What choice did I have anyway? And if he had another option for me that meant I never had to have children with a bloodsucker, I’d gladly jump on it.

“I don’t want children, I never have.” He gently took my waist, leaning in close by my ear. His words were a whisper, a promise and a gift. “Pick me.”

He squeezed my fingers, leaning back as he brought my knuckles to his lips and placed a sweet kiss there.

I couldn't force out a word before he turned and headed back into the ballroom, leaving me melting against the wall.



I couldn't remember when I'd started pacing but the nervous energy filling my veins had needed an outlet and I guessed my feet had come up with the solution.

The day had been the longest I could ever remember and yet it had gone by too quickly as well.

Dad was still breathing but it was becoming more laboured and I was finally beginning to accept the fact that he wasn't going to pull through. The inevitability of the situation was what made it impossible to bear. I knew he was dying but he was still with me as well. A part of me just wanted it to be over but I hated that part of me too because if it was over then he would be dead.

"You're exhausted," Magnar rumbled. Not for the first time. "Come and sit with me. I'll watch him while you get some rest."

I hesitated as he held a hand out to me. If I didn't sit I was at risk of falling down anyway. His hand enveloped mine and I let him guide me closer. He pulled me down so that I could lay with my head in his lap and I tried to force myself to relax.

"I promise to wake you if anything happens," Magnar said as he started to run his fingers through my hair. The feeling was incredibly relaxing and despite the worry churning through me I let my eyes fall shut.

My hand drifted to Fury which was strapped to my belt. Its calming presence made me feel more secure almost instantly.

*Come Dream-Walker.* It seemed to sigh.

I didn't expect to actually sleep but before long my exhaustion forced me to let go and I drifted off.

*I was walking down a street the likes of which I'd never seen before. Everything was clean and bright, shining in the light of a blazing sun. There*



were people everywhere. Some were laughing or talking to each other as they walked by. Others were moving quickly, sighing in irritation as the ramblers got in their way. All of them were human.

I stared around in awe as I realised this was what the world had been like before the Final War. Before the vampires.

A woman came jogging towards me, her hair loose and golden like the rays of the sun. "I know, I know," she called as she approached, a smile dancing on her lips. "I'm late again. But I promise I'll make it up to you!"

Her gaze was on someone right behind me and I turned to see who she was talking to.

"Dad?" I asked in surprise as my eyes landed on him. He was younger than the man who lay dying in the barn. His hair was thicker and darker, less lines marked his skin.

The huge smile he had plastered across his face slipped as his gaze moved from the woman to me. "Callie?"

I spun back to look at the woman again, suddenly realising who she was. My mom stood before me, her features clearer than they ever were in my own memories. I reached out to touch her but she dissolved before my eyes, swirling away alongside everything else that surrounded us.

I quickly turned back to my dad, wondering what the hell was happening. He was the only thing that remained with me as everything else disappeared. Slowly, he began to change: lines formed beside his eyes and his hair thinned too. It started to turn silver at the sides, far more grey appearing than was there in real life. I wondered if that was how he saw himself.

"What is this?" I asked in confusion.

"I was just visiting the best parts of my life," he replied, lifting a hand to my cheek. His touch felt as solid and real as if he were truly standing before me. A tear slid down my skin.

"Does it hurt?" I asked. "Are you in pain?"

"No, my love. I only wish Montana were here too." At his words, the scene around us changed and shivered until we were standing in our old apartment in the Realm. Montana stood between us. Her eyes were full of more life than I remembered and her smile was wider than it had often been. I realised I was seeing her the way that he did. I'd always noticed the sadness in her eyes but he'd always seen the light. Perhaps my life under the rule of the vampires had left me damaged in some way if even my memories held a touch of misery.

*Though Montana had joined us, it wasn't the same. She smiled and blinked and looked almost normal but it wasn't really her. This was Dad's dream and we were the only ones who were really here. He just wanted Montana with us.*

*"Are you really here Callie? Is it truly you?" he asked as he frowned at me. "Something tells me it's really you standing there."*

*"It is me. Do you remember what happened?" I stepped closer and took his hand. It felt so firm and real in my own, I could have sworn we were truly together.*

*"Are we free?" A smile lit his face as he thought back on it. "Did you come and rescue your old Dad?"*

*"I did but..." My gaze travelled to Montana, I didn't know how much he knew about what had happened to her.*

*"The vampires took her somewhere else," he said and I could hear the pain of being separated from her in his voice. "The one who held me said someone called Count Erik took her and that he wants you too. You have to keep away from that-"*

*My dad stumbled forward and sank to his knees as the dream world around us flickered in and out of focus. Montana fizzled out of existence and I moved to grasp his arm as we were left in darkness.*

*"Callie?" He frowned up at me in confusion as I helped to pull him back to his feet.*

*"I'm still here," I assured him. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here with you for as long as you need me."*

*Dad ran a hand over his face and the darkness around us began to lift until we found ourselves standing in a park filled with lush green grass. Dad looked at something over my shoulder and I turned to find Mom and Montana lying on a red and white chequered blanket. The sun warmed my skin and birdsong filled the air.*

*This wasn't a memory. Montana and I had never been to a place like that. And our mom had died long before we'd grown up. I looked down and found myself wearing a thin blue dress with daisies around the hem. It was perfect for the rolling heat that surrounded us but I'd never worn anything like it in real life. I guessed this was how Dad wished our lives had been. Lazy days in the sunshine with all of us together.*

*Dad moved to sit beside Mom and she took his hand, gazing at him lovingly.*

*“Sit down Callie,” Montana pleaded. “You’re blocking the sun.”*

*I noticed the shadow I was casting over all of them and smiled as I sat too. This was too weird. But it was too good to miss out on. Tears prickled in the backs of my eyes as I gazed around at my family. I wished this was real. I wanted it more desperately than I’d ever wanted anything in my life.*

*They all made small talk and joked together and I just watched, basking in the glorious almost-reality.*

*“Have you forgotten why you’re here?” Dad asked me suddenly and I looked up at him in confusion. For a moment I couldn’t work out why he wanted to ruin such a perfect moment. And then I couldn’t remember why I had come at all. There was something dark waiting for me outside of this perfect illusion. Something I didn’t want to face. It was so tempting to lose myself in the dream. To let it become mine as well as Dad’s and just soak it in for as long as it lasted.*

*I glanced at Montana but instead of laughing in the sunshine, I found her terrified and struggling against the hold of a man whose face was obscured in shadow. I tried to reach for her but found her further away than she’d been a moment ago.*

*Each time I tried to close the distance between us, it grew instead.*

*“You need to get to her,” Dad said urgently and I turned back to him. Mom and the picnic blanket were gone. The park was no longer bathed in sunshine but a full moon had risen into the dark sky.*

*“But I don’t know how. I need to get to the Belvederes. Wolfe said they’re in New York but I don’t know where that is!” The enormity of the task before me was enough to drown me. I didn’t even know where to begin.*

*The heavy wooden table which had sat in our old apartment materialised beside him and Dad laid a big piece of paper over it. I bent closer to see it and recognised the battered map he’d scavenged from the ruins when we were children. He’d spent some time trying to teach us about the states and cities from the world before the Final War but it had never meant much to me. Our world was confined to the Realm and anything beyond that had been impossible to imagine until recently.*

*“We’re here, in northern Washington.” Dad pointed at a place on the left of the map. “If Montana is being held in New York then you’re going to have to cross the whole country. It’s not a short trip.” He traced his finger all the way over to the right-hand side of the map and tapped on a spot near the coast.*

*“How long will it take?” I asked. If Montana could just hold out for a few more days then maybe we could get her out...*

*“On foot? Weeks. Months actually. Too long. But if the vampires already have her there then there must be another route available. Over the years I’ve heard them talking about supply trains coming from the east once or twice. That might be your best bet.”*

*“What’s a train?” I asked in confusion, the term was vaguely familiar to me but I couldn’t remember what he’d told me about them.*

*The ground beneath my feet started to vibrate and a deep rumbling echoed all around us. Wooden tracks appeared beside us, marking a trail through the darkness.*

*“The tracks will lead you to them,” Dad said.*

*The noise continued to grow as something huge closed in on us. I turned as a gust of wind pulled at my hair and found myself looking at a monstrous metal vehicle as it sped towards me. The train shot past us, sending my long hair flying as it raced by. Carriage after carriage loaded with all kinds of things from people to stacks of lumber to vehicles. I stared after it with my mouth hanging open. My dad’s stories had never been able to explain things like that. The images my brain had conjured were not in any way like the reality.*

*Before I could think of anything to say in response to what I’d just seen, a roar started in the sky and I twisted to look up as a gigantic metal bird soared overhead. I blinked rapidly, realising this was an aeroplane.*

*“The other option would be to fly,” Dad explained as he stepped closer to me. “But it would be a lot harder to find a way to board a plane secretly than a train.”*

*“What if I can’t do it?” I breathed, uttering my deepest fear. What if there was no way I could free Montana from the Belvederes? I may have had Magnar on my side but we were still only two people. And they were the leaders of this new and fucked up world. A thousand vampires could be standing between us and them.*

*“I believe in you Callie. The two of you are two halves of one whole. I know you’ll find your way back to each other.” He smiled at me encouragingly but I still wasn’t convinced.*

*Everything around us flickered in and out of focus and suddenly my dad disappeared too.*

*My heart leapt in panic and I twisted around, trying to locate him in the*

darkness. He appeared again behind me and sank down to sit on a soft, brown armchair.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you soon, Little Sun,” he sighed and I could tell he was struggling to form the words.

“Not yet,” I begged as I ran towards him and grabbed his hand. “Please stay with me a bit longer.” The rising tide of grief was growing closer but I pushed it back, wanting to enjoy what time I had left with him.

“I wish I could. I wish that I’d gotten us out of the Realm before now. I wish I could have given you girls a real life. A free life. I wish... so many things. More than I ever got to give you. Most of all I just want you to be together. Free and happy. Promise me you’ll find happiness.”

“How can I be happy without you?” Pain was constricting my chest and my grip on his fingers began to feel like it was the only thing keeping him there at all.

“You will be. I know you can be. Take this.” He removed Mom’s wedding ring from the chain around his neck and handed it to me. “Your mom wanted you girls to have it but as there were two of you I never knew which one of you to give it to. Then I just got used to wearing it. Maybe you can take turns once you get back to Montana.” He smiled knowingly; the two of us had never been able to share well as children and ‘take turns’ had become Dad’s catchphrase as he was constantly reminding us. The thought that I’d never hear him say it again nearly tore me in two.

“I’ll find her Dad. I promise,” I said, knowing he needed to hear it.

He let out a deep sigh and our surroundings began to shimmer unsteadily. When they solidified again, he’d moved away from me and the chair was gone. My hand closed on nothing where his fingers had just been. My Mom reappeared standing further away still, a serene smile on her face.

Someone took my hand and I found Montana standing beside me, smiling bravely. It still wasn’t truly her though.

Dad walked away from us, pulling Mom close and pressing a kiss to her lips. I wanted to follow him but a gulf of space had opened up between us and I was forced to remain where I was or fall into the ravine.

“I love you girls.” Dad said sadly as he turned to face us one last time. “Never forget it.”

I tried to reach for him, to cry out and beg him to stay with me but everything faded away. The last thing that remained was the golden ring in my fist, its imprint forcing its way onto my palm as I gripped it tightly but

*then that faded too. And I was left alone.*

Magnar was shaking me as I came back to my own body and a sob escaped my lips as I woke in his arms.

“I’m so sorry Callie,” he breathed.

I pushed myself upright and buried myself against his chest as tears poured from my eyes in a steady torrent. I didn’t need to hear why he was sorry. I already knew. Pain flourished through my chest more sharply than I’d ever felt it before and he held me tightly as sobs racked my body and the grief came crashing in.

My Dad was gone.

# Montana



*Pick him.* Nightmare purred its agreement with Erik's offer for the millionth time. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Nightmare hadn't shut up about it since. Who knew why the blade seemed to trust Erik, but maybe it was worth putting my faith in. It hadn't led me astray before...

I stood with a drink in my hand, keeping my distance from the surrounding vampires in the ballroom. The other humans were caught in conversation with many of the Elite, but I avoided every eye that came my way.

Erik had just given me the option I needed but it still left me with one problem. The mark.

Miles would tell Erik if I betrayed him. So I had to tell him first. Frustratingly, Erik was currently surrounded by vampires. Every time he seemed to break away and I shifted toward him, someone else would snare his attention.

Anxiety seized me. I needed to discuss this now before I was forced to choose a Count in front of the whole crowd.

Music started up and the guests parted to make a dance floor at the centre of the room. Clarice pulled Frank into a slow dance as the soft strumming of a string instrument trilled through the air. Fabian approached Paige, offering her his arm and she quickly joined him in a dance. Miles and Erik started searching the crowd and I knew there was only one person they were looking for. Me.

*This is my chance!*

I made a path for Erik, placing my drink on a waiter's tray. Miles approached faster, gripping my wrist and pulling me onto the dance floor.

*Goddammit.*

I watched as Erik stood at the edge of the crowd, looking like he was about to walk out here and take me from Miles' arms.

*Please do.*

Miles pulled me against him and I rested one hand on the shoulder of his dark green jacket, having no choice but to comply.

He tugged me closer, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "All set for today?"

I considered telling him the truth, but I couldn't risk him talking to Erik before I did. So I beamed and nodded. "Of course."

"We're gonna make a great couple. I'll move you into an apartment that overlooks the Brooklyn bridge. You can have anything you want Montana, you just have to name it."

"And in return you want children?" I said through gritted teeth.

He cleared his throat as he led me faster around the dance floor. "Yeah...but it's the only thing I'll ask of you, I promise."

I shook my head in anger. "I don't want to."

"I know," Miles said in a low tone, moving his mouth to my ear. "I don't want this either, but it's the only way. And the kids are worth it, I promise you'll love them."

"The only way for what?" I whispered, ignoring his final comment. I wouldn't be having children with him. Ever.

He shook his head, his sparkling blue eyes dimming. "Not here, Montana. I'll tell you after the ceremony."

I was about to push him for answers when Erik snared my waist, cutting into the dance. Miles bowed his head to him, but he looked annoyed as he backed up into the crowd and folded his arms.

Erik guided me along, his eyes pinned somewhere over my head as we moved. I tried not to falter, but didn't really care what the crowd thought of my dancing abilities.

"So?" Erik breathed. "You've made your choice?"

"You told me to pick someone else," I said in a whisper, unsure how much I should say, but Fabian looked engrossed in a conversation with Paige.

"And now I'm telling you otherwise, Rebel. Keep up." His mouth lifted in a smirk and I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

I gathered my courage, wishing we could have had a more private place for me to reveal the truth. But I'd run out of time.

"Your sister's on her way here, are you excited to see her?" Erik asked, throwing me off balance.

Callie...what if Erik refused my deal when I told him about the mark? What would keep her safe then?



“I want to change the deal,” I blurted.

Erik hitched up an eyebrow. “Again?”

“Yes, again. Callie doesn't come here. She goes free with Dad.”

Erik pressed his tongue into his cheek as he avoided my eye. “We'll talk about it after the ceremony. Besides, don't you want to see her?”

“Of course I do but...we're still prisoners here, Erik. It might look freer, but it's just another way of being a captive.” *And I can't risk her getting caught up in this.*

My eyes strayed to the children who were beginning to dance and integrate with the crowd.

Erik followed my gaze, tugging me closer. “You're not a prisoner, Rebel. Once this is over, you can move elsewhere. In the city or to the country, wherever you prefer.”

“I just got a very similar offer from your brother,” I said dryly.

“I've already told you I won't hold you to that deal. Children was never the plan for me,” Erik said, though his eyes flickered with something I couldn't decipher.

The song was coming to an end and I started to fear what would happen if I didn't tell Erik the truth right now. “Erik, promise me you'll set Callie free, no matter what happens.”

“What do you mean? What's wrong?” Erik stopped dancing, holding me firmly by the waist.

“Promise me,” I begged, clutching his lapels.

He skated his thumb across my cheek, his voice lowering. “Just tell me what's wrong.”

I reached for my right arm, my fingers brushing the place the mark was hidden. “Erik, I-”

“Master, a word please!” General Wolfe burst through the crowd, his hair disheveled as he marched toward us straight across the dance floor. He awkwardly clutched his back as he moved, his expression stretched with discomfort.

“Wolfe, what the hell are you doing here?” Erik demanded, releasing me as he took in the fiendish General.

Nightmare flared with hunger as if it longed to drive itself into the heart of the beast before us. My heart beat harder as I searched the space beyond Wolfe, suddenly terrified I might see Callie there. But there was no sign of her.

“I got the first flight back – I lost my phone. It's very important I talk with you.” Wolfe bowed low and I noticed many of the vampires behind him were beginning to mutter.

“Where's my sister?” I demanded, the heat in my blood rising.

Wolfe's eyes snapped to me as his upper lip curled back. He looked ready to berate me, but managed to return his gaze to Erik.

“This is the second time you've interrupted the Courting, General,” Erik snarled at him. “You had better have a good explanation.”

Wolfe nodded, bowing his head again. “Please, let's speak in private, your highness.”

Erik muttered an apology to me before taking Wolfe's arm and pushing him roughly through the crowd. I watched as they slipped behind a curtain, heading into a concealed passage.

Nightmare urged me to follow, but before I could, Fabian snared me in his arms and forced me to dance. “Good evening, Montana,” he said lightly. “You're looking beautiful tonight.”

Rage spewed through me at being captured by this monster when so much was at stake. But I couldn't let my fury be known to him.

“Are you alright?” he asked gently. “I heard about what happened last night. You must have been terrified. There are more and more rebels in the city these days, it's quite dangerous for humans beyond the castle grounds.”

I gazed up at him, trying to compose my face into something that resembled innocence. “Thank you. Yes, I'm fine. My shoulder was injured. It was lucky Erik was standing in front of me at the time or I don't think I would have survived.”

“Absolutely,” he said with a nod, his eyes bright with concern. He was a damn good liar, which made him a formidable kind of enemy.

“So, have you thought about who you'll pick tonight?” Fabian asked with a slanted smile.

“Um...” I chewed on my lip, unsure what to say. What I really needed to do was talk to Erik about this mark. But I wondered how much time I had left to do so. “I'm not sure.”

“You're cutting it quite close.” He grinned keenly. “Surely there's someone more appealing to you?”

I shrugged, glancing over at Paige who was now dancing with Miles. I hoped she'd heed my warning and pick him over Fabian.

The song finally changed to a merry tune and the rest of the vampires

joined in with the dancing, filling up the surrounding space. I took the moment to break free of Fabian and dart into the crowd.

With my eyes set on the curtain Erik and Wolfe had disappeared behind, I started walking at a fierce pace.

*Where's my sister you twisted piece of shit?*

I reached the curtain and slowed to a stroll as eyes turned in my direction. Feigning interest in the beautiful surroundings, I inched along, listening hard to try and pick up their voices.

“-the slayer is alive, it's true.” Wolfe's voice.

“How is that possible?” Erik snarled. “He is supposed to be dead. And even if he somehow survived, no mortal can live a thousand years.”

“I don't know how, but he lives. And now he has the Ford girl. They ran off with her father.”

My heart screamed with joy. They'd escaped. Callie and Dad were free, just like I'd hoped.

Nightmare seemed to reach out to me, vibrating with a warning I didn't understand.

“You let them get away?!” Erik barked at him and a heavy thump followed.

When Wolfe spoke, he did so with a murmur of pain. “I tried my hardest, Master. But he was powerful and had already killed many of the Elite. My back still isn't fully healed from the slayer blade he drove into me.”

“Do you think I give a shit about your injuries? What's the point in having a General who cannot kill a slayer? What use are you to me?” Erik snarled followed by another thump.

My gut knotted. *Will Erik want me dead too when he finds out what I am?*

My breathing quickened as I listened, pressing myself to the wall. A flare of pain shot through my shoulder and I released a gasp before I could suppress it.

Silence fell beyond the curtain.

I turned to run, but an arm shot out and dragged me behind it.

Erik's eyes flared as they narrowed on me. “Spying, Rebel?”

I gathered my wits, figuring I had every right to know what Wolfe had to say.

“You can hardly be surprised.” My eyes adjusted to the darker space and I spotted Wolfe against one wall with a trickle of blood flowing down his brow.

The General's eyes narrowed on me. "She's one of them!" he cried. "Look at her arm. She's the same as her sister. I saw the Ford girl with a slayer's blade. She may have been weak, but there was fight in her like no normal human."

Fear made my heart pound as Erik's gaze travelled down me, seeming to hunt for something. Nightmare hummed so loud, I feared it would give itself away.

"Erik-" I started, but he snatched my right arm, ripping up my sleeve.

Time stuttered to a halt as his eyes fell on the mark. A snake seemed to tighten around my throat. I had no words, no explanation. I'd wanted to do this on my own terms, but Wolfe had taken that from me. He'd stunned me when I'd learned Callie might have been the same as me.

"Montana," Erik growled in a deadly voice that dared me not to test him. "Are you a *slayer*?" He said the word like it was his salvation. I couldn't make any sense of it. Wasn't that a bad thing?

I shook my head, then nodded, unsure what the answer was.

"I don't know – maybe." I glanced at Wolfe over Erik's shoulder, my heart beating at a frighteningly fast pace.

"But if Callie's one, then I must be too. She's my twin." I gazed up at him, praying the repercussions of this weren't going to be brutal. But I had no choice now. This was what I'd wanted, just not under these circumstances.

"Twin?" Erik breathed, his silvery eyes melting like solder. "You're *twins*?"

I nodded, unsure why that was important but his intense expression told me it was.

"Fuck." Erik scraped a hand through his hair, his brows knitting sharply together. "We've been wrong all these years."

"What do you mean?" I begged just as Felicia's voice rang out from the ballroom.

"The choosing is about to begin! Courtiers please make your way to the stage immediately!"

Erik gazed at me, but he didn't seem to see me at all, his eyes glazed in thought.

"Go," he whispered at last, pushing me toward the curtain.

I stumbled away, my mouth desert dry as I returned to the ballroom and the crowd nudged me in the direction of the other humans at the top of the steps.

My heart swelled with every stair I climbed. Erik wasn't angry about the

mark. He wasn't going to hurt me over it, I was sure. And my family had escaped Wolfe and were somewhere in the world completely free.

I moved to Paige's side, a smile gripping my face. She gave me a curious frown, but I couldn't get out of my own head to respond. As the cameras were pointed our way, my smile was reflected back at me on the large screen opposite us.

Nightmare vibrated more furiously, sending a tremor through my body. What was the matter with it?

Felicia drifted closer with a bright grin as the crowd gathered and gave us their full attention. An electric tension pulsed through the room as the vampires fell quiet.

Fabian, Miles and Clarice stood at the bottom of the stairs, gazing up at us with anxious looks. Erik pushed through the crowd, his expression chaotic as he joined Fabian's side. He turned to face me with his throat bobbing and his eyes anxious, a silent plea inside them.

Frank moved to my side and Justin stood beyond him, seeming agitated.

“Frank, make your choice,” Felicia asked and a spotlight fell on him. The rest of the room darkened and a hushed silence fell.

Frank visibly swallowed, gazing down at the vampires. “I choose to join Clarice’s harem.”

A tumult of applause broke out and Frank moved down the steps, taking hold of Clarice’s waist and placing a kiss on her cheek. She smiled then turned her attention to us once more.

“Justin it’s your turn,” Felicia said and the spotlight fell over him.

Justin shifted from foot to foot. A bead of sweat sailed down his brow as he gazed from Clarice to the camera crew. “I want to go to Realm A.”

A jolt went through me as I gazed at him, unsure if I’d heard correctly.

“You said I had a choice and I don’t want to be a vampire,” Justin went on, looking to Clarice.

She smiled, but looked disappointed. “I did. And if that’s what you want, you can have it. Your family will be moved there too.”

Justin’s shoulders sagged as he jogged down the stairs and Clarice embraced him. A moment later a couple of guards strode to his side, escorting him away.

My throat constricted as I shared a confused look with Paige. This had been the offer Clarice had given the men? How was it fair that they were allowed a way out and we weren’t?

At least I didn't have to have children if I chose Erik. But what about Paige..?

"Paige." Felicia gestured for her to make a choice and my heart galloped into top gear.

She gazed across the three brothers, knotting her fingers together. "I choose..." She took a breath, glancing at me before saying, "I choose Count Miles."

My heart sang with relief. I reached for her and she squeezed my hand before darting down the steps. Miles seized her in his arms, placing a brief kiss on her lips.

The crowd applauded, crying out to them and my gaze turned to Fabian who was fighting hard to not look pissed off. For once, the mask he wore had slipped and anger shone in his eyes. A second later, he turned to me expectantly.

*Not if you were the last option on earth, creep.*

Felicia turned to me and the spotlight fell over me. Suddenly, I wasn't afraid. My answer was obvious. I'd work out the rest later. Callie and Dad were free, maybe I'd find a way to join them after tonight...

"I choose-"

Nightmare screamed bloody murder inside my head and I winced sharply, raising a hand to my eyes. Something shifted inside me like a switch turning on and brightening up a world that wasn't mine.

A vision engulfed me and I saw a hundred scenes, flitting through my head at high speed. Rows of humans in strange coffins. Vampires snarling, biting, dying. Blood spilled at the feet of a fierce warrior.

I blinked and the vision faded away. My eyes met the concerned gaze of Erik and I drew in a breath. Some of the vampires muttered their concern and I quickly gathered myself together.

"I choose Erik," I announced, my voice ringing around the room.

Erik's shoulders slumped and Miles' mouth fell open.

I took a step down, but my foot never met the stair. The visions swept me away again, dragging me into a barn where my father lay in a pool of blood. His face was deathly still. A hand was gripped around his. My hand. No...not mine. Callie's.

I felt her pain, her grief. His death rang in my head like a gong. I knew it was true with a clarity that tossed me into a black pit of despair.

The vision shifted and I saw Callie on the ground before the warrior, their

hands clasped around a blade just like Nightmare.

I seemed to fall into an eternity of darkness, my knees never hitting stone.

Nightmare sighed softly and the blackness broke just enough to reveal a strange glow in my periphery. The feeling of something omniscient surrounded me and my body seemed to melt away. I became like water cupped in the hands of a divine being. And it spoke to me in a voice almost like my own.

*“You must be made, Moon Child. It is time you are made.”*



I'd cried until my eyes were sore and no more tears could find their way from my body. After everything we'd done to bring down the blood bank. Everything we'd risked to save him, my dad was gone. A hopeless kind of despair filled me as I stared at the cairn we'd created around his body.

Magnar had carried him to the top of the hill for me. It was the highest point for miles around and we'd lain him to rest looking down on all of it. He was finally free.

It had taken hours to collect the stones required to cover him. My fingers were numb from the cold and coated with dirt from digging the rocks out of the soil. My fingernails were broken and bloody but I couldn't feel any pain from my injuries. The pain in my heart was too much to allow room for anything else.

The sun began to set as I looked at the monument we had created for my dad's final resting place. The clear sky was streaked with lines of pink and orange and the full moon had already risen too. It was like the heavens had brought the sun and the moon together to say goodbye.

I clutched Mom's wedding ring which now hung on the chain around my neck. The metal felt warm, its presence making me feel closer to my parents somehow. Like carrying it with me kept their souls close to mine.

My mind drifted to Montana, trapped with the murderers who had done this. She didn't even know. It wasn't right that she didn't know.

I gritted my teeth as my grief began to give way to rage. Who did the vampires think they were to do this to us? How could they rip my whole world apart and feel no remorse? The pain clawing at my soul needed an outlet.

My father was gone. They'd taken Montana to the other side of the country. I was being hunted like some kind of animal. And for what?

It wasn't right. I wanted them to pay. I wanted to make them feel an ounce



of what I was feeling. I wanted to storm into their so-called kingdom, tear the walls down on top of their heads and let the sun burn them alive. I wanted them all dead. And there was only one way I could achieve that.

I turned towards Magnar who stood silently at my side and took his hand in mine. He raised his eyebrows in surprise as he caught sight of the determination in my gaze. The time for grieving was gone. Now I needed revenge.

“I’ll take the vow,” I said fiercely. “Tell me the words and I’ll say them. I want my gifts unleashed. I want to be a full slayer like you. I want to kill the Belvederes.”

Something sparkled in Magnar’s golden eyes and he wrapped his other hand over mine.

I waited for him to tell me what to do.

Fury burned at my hip in excitement, urging me on. *Seize your destiny Sun Child.*

This was what I’d been born to do. It was what I was made for.

“No Callie,” Magnar breathed. “Not like this.”

“What?” I stared at him in astonishment. I’d thought he would have been pleased, thrilled even. He was the last of his kind. If I joined him then there would be two of us just as dedicated to his cause as he was now. We could stay together and hunt down the monsters who had started all of this. I wanted to help him destroy the vampires. I needed to do it.

“Not like this,” he repeated firmly. “This isn’t a decision that you should make while you’re feeling this way-”

“I’ll never not feel this way,” I hissed angrily. Who was he to tell me my own mind? “My father is dead! Don’t you get it? They killed him!”

“You know I understand that pain better than anyone,” he growled and I remembered what Erik Belvedere had done to his father. He did understand, so why wouldn’t he help me?

“So let me take the vow. Let me help you to destroy them!” I demanded.

“There are other implications, things that you don’t understand. If you take your vow I will have to train you and then we can’t-”

“I don’t care!” I yelled, snatching my hand from his grasp. “I don’t care what the price is. I would give anything to get my sister away from them. I would give my soul, my life, anything at all.”

Fury continued to grow hot at my hip, seeming desperate for me to do this. It wanted me to realise my potential. It wanted me to become a true slayer.

I grabbed the blade from its sheath and a feeling like being submerged in warm water enveloped me. I gasped as a strange wind pulled at my hair and a power unlike anything I'd ever felt surged around us.

I dropped to one knee holding fury before me, its tip embedded in the frozen mud.

"Don't do this Callie," Magnar begged and a small part of me felt his anguish like a punch in the chest as he moved to stand before me.

*I know the words, Fury breathed excitedly. Let me guide your tongue.*

My eyes locked with Magnar's and a fresh kind of pain hit me as I looked into his desperate gaze but I couldn't go back on my decision. I needed my gifts. I could feel it in every inch of my body. I had to say the words.

"I vow to always walk in the light," I said and the power of the words locked my body in its position as my blood thrummed in my veins. "I will seek out those who dwell in the darkness."

Blinding light grew to the right of me and though I couldn't turn my head, I could feel the presence of something far greater than any mortal or vampire. The being moved closer, watching us and willing me on, its power seeming to flow into me as I spoke.

"My days shall no longer be my own. I give them to the cause."

Something immense slammed into my body and I gasped as its power radiated through my blood. I couldn't move an inch. Each breath I took was laced with something which tingled and burned its way right down into my lungs before spreading further, finding every fibre of my being and moulding it into something new. I was being reborn as a creature of pure power, my human weaknesses leaving me and blowing away on the strange wing which spiralled around me.

Magnar growled in resistance as the being spread its power towards him and he was slowly forced to his knees opposite me. His eyes were filled with regret as his hands closed over mine where they clasped Fury's hilt. His rough palms were hot against my skin and I sensed the same strange magic burning through his blood too. It flowed between us, forming a bridge from his soul to mine.

"Please stop Callie," Magnar whispered but I doubted I would have been able to even if I wanted to.

"I dedicate myself to my mentor," I said in a voice that didn't sound like my own anymore. "My life is in his hands. We will be bound by our cause, forfeiting all other ties. I will follow the path he sets."

The power in my chest surged from me to surround Magnar too and his eyes burned fiercely as he fought against the urge to speak. The seconds dragged as he clenched his mouth shut and sweat beaded on his temple. His jaw ticked as he concentrated on resisting the power which pushed against his will. His gaze burned with a desperate plea for me to end this and release him from the promise he was about to be forced to make.

A small part of me wished that I could. I wanted this for myself but I hadn't meant to make him do something he didn't want too. He'd already lost so much and the look in his eye made me feel like I was ripping the final piece of his happiness away from him.

I could sense the being beside us growing displeased. The swirling vortex around us grew so bright that it became hard to see Magnar's face just a few feet from my own. The wind howled, sending our hair flying and whipping my coat out behind me. The being made a sound like an ancient gong ringing and my ears pounded as it pushed its influence into Magnar until he uttered the words he had been fighting against.

"I dedicate myself to this novice. Her life is in my hands." Magnar locked his jaw again, refusing to finish the oath and his eyes flared with pain as the being forced her will into him again. "We will be bound by our cause, forfeiting all other ties. I will lead her into the light."

A sharp pain seared across the back of my left hand and I gasped as I spotted a mark shaped like a five pointed star branded into my skin. Magnar's grip tightened around my own and the same mark appeared on his hand. His shoulders slumped in defeat and he dropped his gaze to glare at the ground as the power continued to billow around us.

"I will follow the way of the slayers until the last vampire is wiped from this earth or until death releases me," I swore and the raging torrent of my grief rose in me again as I remembered exactly why I had to do this. It wasn't a choice. This was who I'd always been meant to be.

Power unlike anything I'd ever felt hit me like a tornado. If I hadn't been fixed in place I was sure I would have been tossed aside like a rag doll and dashed to death in the eye of the storm.

My vision wavered and I couldn't see Magnar or the hill or anything else that sat around me anymore. Instead I could see slayers, hundreds of slayers living across thousands of years. Everything they'd ever learned poured into me. Every battle they'd fought, every passion they'd felt. All of it. I lived it all again and again. All of their memories tearing into me, filling me up and

ripping me apart. I was them and they were me. I had lived a thousand times before. Always dying for the cause. Always taking the vow again.

Fury was thrumming with excitement and its voice rang out clearly in my mind. *Twins of sun and moon will rise, when one has lived a thousand lives.*

The power rose in me like an angry wave carried on the tide of my grief and I raised my head to the sky and screamed. I screamed for my father and my mother and for my sister trapped far, far away. She deserved to know what had happened. And I needed to know she was alright.

I reached for her, my soul clawing its way out of my skin and away from me in a desperate bid to find her. I needed her. I needed her more than I ever had in my life.

And suddenly she was there. I was looking through her eyes at a hall full of monsters and a surge of memories rushed between us like the tide. It was too much. My mind couldn't take it and like a switch had been flipped, everything went black.

As my consciousness swam in an eternal sea of darkness, one thing stayed with me. She was alive. And we would be reunited.

*Whatever it took.*

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