

ROXIE RAY LINDSEY DEVIN



MADE BY
THE
VAMPIRE
KING

MADE BY THE VAMPIRE KING

BATON ROUGE VAMPIRE: BOOK 3

ROXIE RAY
LINDSEY DEVIN

CONTENTS

1. [Nic](#)
2. [Leia](#)
3. [Nic](#)
4. [Leia](#)
5. [Leia](#)
6. [Nic](#)
7. [Leia](#)
8. [Nic](#)
9. [Leia](#)
10. [Nic](#)
11. [Leia](#)
12. [Nic](#)
13. [Leia](#)
14. [Nic](#)
15. [Leia](#)
16. [Leia](#)
17. [Nic](#)
18. [Leia](#)
19. [Nic](#)
20. [Leia](#)
21. [Sebastian](#)

[Chapter 1 Preview - Ruthless Prince](#)

[Ruthless Prince](#)

[Made By The Vampire King](#)

NIC

“What?” I stared at Leia, but there were no more words. Just... “What?”

She wanted to be turned. I wanted to turn her, but not like this. Not like fucking this.

Her eyes were lifeless as she looked at me...right *through* me. I still smelled of blood. So much blood. *Too* much blood, the iron scent seeming to roll from me in thick, cloying waves. Blood and death from the army of newly risen fledglings Francois had created.

But still I wanted to take my mate into my arms and hold her. Every instinct in me tugged toward her. I wanted to press her against me and breathe her in, but I just couldn't sully her with the stench and the gore of battle.

“Leia.” I wanted her to look at me, to truly see me. Fuck, I wanted to turn her. I wanted her by my side, with me, forever.

But it couldn't be like this.

That moment could never be about a desperate desire for revenge—everything that consumed Leia's thoughts right now. It was supposed to come from love and yearning. It was supposed to be beautiful.

Leia wanted to surrender to ugliness. Whether she knew it or not, that was what she was doing, and we'd both resent it if I gave her what she thought

she wanted right now.

As creeping cold filled me, I reached for her hand. She didn't move. Not away from me, not toward me. She just sat.

I glanced around at the worn soft furnishings of the shifter safehouse. This was a side of the alpha Conri I'd never expected, a classic Americana look of patchwork quilts and cross stitch samplers. I shook my head as I returned my attention to Leia.

There was no one else in the house with us. Aimée and that shifter woman had made themselves scarce. My nose twitched at the lingering scent of cookies.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Leia, but she continued to look right past me, a bleakness to her face I'd never seen. Her brown eyes were darker than usual and seemed hollow now that the initial fire of fury had receded.

I needed some of her fight back and for her to want to live with the same passion she'd always demonstrated. She'd been a warrior. The only human to ever have attracted me—the one meant for me. I'd loved her just as she was... and now she was different.

I was already mourning the Leia who was slipping away.

"Leia." I tried again. "You should eat and drink."

That got her attention.

"What?" She whipped her head so her eyes met mine, and finally they glowed like embers of anger lit them from within. "You think I care about *eating* right now?"

Her words were little more than a hiss, but I grabbed hold of that display of emotion.

I nodded. "You need to eat."

She laughed sharply. "To fuel this weak human body?"

I almost nodded again but I caught myself. Those words were a trap. "You're not weak."

"I couldn't save him." She whispered this time, the sentence not intended

for me. “I’ve *always* saved him—always been there, been able to figure something out in the end. Why couldn’t I save him this time?”

Her eyes went dead again, blank with grief, and my heart squeezed.

I touched her hand, brushing my thumb over her cold, clammy skin. “You’ve had a shock—” I started.

The laugh she interrupted me with bordered on hysterical.

“More than a shock,” I amended as all my words deserted me.

There was nothing I could say or do to make this better for her. To take away some of the pain, no matter how badly I wanted to. She’d watched fucking Francois Ricard rip her father’s throat out, had been close enough to smell the blood. I hadn’t been human for a long time, and I couldn’t imagine how she felt. The empathy I wanted to tap into had already left me.

She curled her fingers around my hand until her skin shone white in the pale shaft of moonlight still streaming through the window. “Turn me. If you turn me, I can fix it all.”

She looked at me, but I shook my head.

“Please,” she whispered, a desperate tone I’d never heard before entering her voice. “I need to make it all right again. It’s gone wrong and it can’t stay wrong. I need to... I need to fix it.”

Her sad gaze met mine, although a small flicker of hope burned deep in her eyes.

“This can’t be fixed, Leia.” The words hurt as they ripped from me, their sharp edges slicing my throat. “Francois has done something that can’t be fixed. His actions can never be undone.”

I wasn’t familiar with helplessness, but it gnawed inside my chest now, creating a hole there. There wasn’t anything Leia could do to fix this, and there wasn’t anything I could do, either.

“If you *turn me*,” she ground out, “I can *kill him* if you turn me.”

“It won’t *fix* it.” My voice was low as I insisted, making my point again. It hurt to repeat it, and from the way Leia flinched, it hurt to hear the words.

“I can kill him, though,” she repeated. She stared over my shoulder as she spoke, quiet vehemence marking her words.

I shook my head. “No. *I’ll* kill him. That’s the very least I can do.”

She didn’t need Francois’s blood on her hands, and I already had enough that one more final death being my responsibility wouldn’t matter.

“Why won’t you turn me? I know you want to.” Her gaze became a little sly. “Think how much more fun we could have together if we were both vampires. I wouldn’t be as...” She paused and her tongue touched her lower lip. “Breakable.”

I stopped, caught between what I wanted and what I knew I had to do.

“I do want to turn you,” I admitted, unashamed to want her to be mine always. Then I took a deep breath as I measured the rest of what I had to say. “But I can’t. Not like this. Not for *revenge*.”

“Why not for revenge? Seems as good a reason as any. And then I’m turned. You get what you want, I get what I want. It’s simple.”

Regret coursed through me as I shook my head, denying myself the thing I wanted most but protecting my bride as best I could. “It’s not right. Not like this.”

“At least tell me why.” She sounded distracted again, like she was only half present, her brain already moving onto other possibilities, other avenues.

“So many reasons. But really only one that matters.” I waited until she shifted her gaze to meet mine. “A true turning should only happen through love and a need to be together. Not revenge, or anger, or bloodshed.”

Desperation tightened in coils around my ribs when I considered my need to be with Leia and keep her safe in the only way I knew how.

My goals hadn’t changed. I had to turn her. But it couldn’t be at her angry demand.

If I turned her now, it would always be tied to this anger and need for revenge, and those bad feelings would permeate every part of her.

“But I need...” She floundered, shrugging her shoulders and gesturing

vaguely with her hands. “I need...this.”

“No, Leia.” I tried to be firm, and she lifted an eyebrow, her unvoiced question clear.

Why? Although she didn’t speak it, the word echoed around my head. She wanted a better reason, even though I already gave her the best I had. But I’d try to explain it better, in a way that might get through to her.

“Vampires who are created out of hate or where bitterness and vengeance is a driving factor never function well in society.”

Leia scoffed, and I changed the grip of our hands, curling her fingers into mine.

“You’d be little more than a...thrall.” I swallowed as I thought of the creatures, hooked on blood and losing all trace of themselves, although I didn’t think Leia knew what they were.

She shrugged. “Looks like I can be one or the other—a vampire or just enslaved to a vampire—then, right?”

Her barb pierced home, reminding me I’d essentially doomed her by not turning her already. Guilt weighed heavily on me.

“I’ll get Francois,” I said again. “I’ll make him pay. If I turn you while you feel like this, all you’ll want to do is kill and feed even once Francois is dead. That’s not something we can risk.” I couldn’t lose her that way. I needed to bring her back her back to me, to turn her properly.

Losing her to bitterness would be like watching her die slowly in front of me, and I would be responsible for that death. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t condemn her, and I couldn’t watch. We just needed more time, a chance for her to heal a bit, and then we could do this safely. The right way, for the right reasons.

She nodded, but her face had shuttered again, and she’d disappeared inside herself.

I stood then leaned forward to pick her up, clasping her against my chest. She curled into the right shape, but didn’t relax, tension obvious in all the

lines of her body. I stroked a hand down her back, trying to soothe her.

“It’s okay,” I murmured against her hair. “I’ve got you.”

I walked across the room, dodging the oversized, cozy furniture, and took her into the bedroom. The bed was narrower than we were used to, but I carefully undressed her before drawing back the comforter and placing her in the middle.

The fledgling blood had soaked right through my clothes and stained my skin, coating me in their stench, so I undressed and showered before joining Leia, curling my body around hers so I could hold her quietly through the night.

It took a long time for her breathing to even out to the soft tempo of sleep I’d become used to from her, and guilt wracked me the whole time for all the horrors she’d seen and the world I’d drawn her into. Danger lurked everywhere in my life; I had many enemies. And Leia always seemed to end up right in the middle.

Leia was right. I could only ensure her survival by turning her. She’d become a thrall otherwise, even if I continued to ration the blood I took from her. But turning her with violence and vengeance on her mind... I suppressed a shudder. I’d read enough in the Book of Gray since Aimée found it to know that would be a worse end.

My only chance was to help her rediscover her balance and help her remember her love for me.

Maybe then she’d want to be at my side for all the right reasons. I’d talk to her as soon as she was well enough to have the conversation, but for now I was content to just hold her and keep her physically safe in my arms, even if there was little I could do for her in the moment otherwise.

I STRETCHED MY ARM OUT, missing the feel of Leia against me. The sheet was

cold under my hand when I patted it, and my eyes sprang open.

No Leia.

I rolled over, the mattress bouncing and squeaking a little beneath my shifting weight, until I faced the window. The thin curtains let the first glow of the morning light through, and Leia sat in an armchair, her knees drawn up and covered with a throw, just watching. She didn't seem to notice I'd woken up—she didn't look in my direction, anyway.

“Leia?” I spoke her name softly, not wanting to startle her.

She didn't so much as flicker an eyelash. Nothing moved. She simply watched, staring into nothing.

I tried again. “Leia.”

When she still didn't respond, didn't even seem to have heard, I climbed slowly from the bed and approached her. I walked slowly and softly and even held my hand out first, like she was a wild animal that needed to know my scent in order to trust me.

“*Leia.*” I spoke more firmly. “Leia, can you hear me?”

She moved like she was dazed, her head swiveling in my direction. The motion was almost eerie, but when she met my gaze, her eyes were alert.

I relaxed a little, letting loose an exhale. “Are you feeling any better?”

Her eyes dulled again, and she turned away, watching something and nothing in the direction of the curtains.

I crouched at her side, taking her hand and resting it lightly against my cheek. I turned my head, brushing her fingers with my lips. “Leia, it's time to take you home.”

“Home?” Her voice was raspy.

“Yes.” I kissed her skin again. “I'm going to take you home.”

I couldn't let her stay here, not in this state. She was further away from me than she'd ever been, and it was brutal, even after less than a day.

If I didn't do something, I might never get her back. Getting her far away from where everything had happened seemed like a good first step. I fell

silent, just watching her and she stared ahead, like she didn't even know I was there again.

Exhaling a sigh, I stood. "I'll pack your things."

It wouldn't take long—there wasn't a lot. I'd brought her a couple of things after our initial trip out here, but that was when I'd been anticipating she might have a longer stay.

Back when I'd thought I could actually keep her safe. Back before I'd failed.

Epic fucking fail.

I shook my head and grabbed the duffle bag from the top shelf of the closet then began to shove her belongings inside. Mrs. Ames could fix the mess. I just had to be sure to get everything home. I wanted Leia somewhere familiar, where I could control her environment to increase her peace and make her comfortable.

After I'd gathered everything in the room up, I turned to her.

"Leia, let's get you washed and dressed."

She seemed to stand willingly enough, and she followed me without complaint. She followed without a word at all, and I glanced behind me to make sure she *was* following. It was like being trailed by a zombie.

I spoke to her the whole time she was in her shower, just a mindless stream of chatter while she washed herself with precise, mechanical movements. When she was finished, I drew her from the cubicle.

"Now to dry you and dress you," I murmured. Usually, I'd find this part sensual but not with Leia like this. I was efficient but careful, gentle with her as I ran the towel over her skin then dressed her in clothes comfortable enough to travel in.

"Can I get you something to eat before we leave?" I was well aware Aimée had almost abducted Chef and brought him here, and I would never tell my sister, but I approved of the action.

If Leia responded to anything, maybe it would be beignets. But she shook

her head without a sound.

“Please, Leia. You have to eat,” I whispered.

I sighed, exasperated by the stubbornness that had amused and irritated me so much previously. I’d admired it, really. It made her stronger than she realized, but for now, I needed her to let it go, to let me in.

I watched her carefully for her reaction, hoping she might let me in now, that she might agree to let me take care of her.

But she shook her head again. “No.”

LEIA

Rage.

So much rage I could barely contain it.

So I focused on staying as still as I could so it didn't escape and fill entire rooms with its scorching heat and the accompanying ice-cold hatred of Francois. Those two emotions consumed me, tasting sweet and bitter on my tongue, and tangling my insides into twisted knots. They made it hard to breathe.

So I focused on just that one thing. Drawing breath. Occasionally, Nic spoke, but he couldn't see my struggle to breathe, didn't know the fight to fill my chest.

Eventually, another thought began to pulse through me, throbbing like a second heartbeat.

Revenge.

I saw in color. Just one color: red. Red blood as it sprayed through the air and coated me in warmth. Red blood as Francois ripped my father's throat out. Red blood as it dripped from Francois's fangs as he revealed them with the madness of his smile.

Red when I closed my eyes and tried to forget. Like the whole scene was seared onto my brain, and I couldn't escape it as it played like a movie behind my eyelids over and over again.

I sat in the back of Nic's limo and watched the scenery flash by as Jenkins effortlessly handled the vehicle, keeping the ride smooth as always. But this ride was nothing like the first journey I'd taken with him, when my eyes had been round with wonder and fear of a one-month contract with a stranger.

Now, everything had changed.

I knew too much. The world I'd believed in no longer existed. It had dropped away to reveal monsters.

And now I wanted to be one, too, because the only way to kill a monster was to become an even bigger monster.

Nic left his hand lying in the space between us, but I ignored it. I didn't want a connection with him right now, didn't want to touch anyone, in case I lost my self-control. I didn't even look at him, but he looked at me.

Often.

And he sighed quietly when he did.

I turned to face out of the window, blocking him out. But I didn't really see. I no longer cared to see anything. I'd seen too much.

My vulnerabilities had been revealed in spectacular fashion—but also the threat I posed to everyone in life merely by existing and remaining human.

And Nic wouldn't turn me. That thought festered in my gut, growing hot and making bile rise to my throat. It was what we both wanted, so to deny it was just... I almost glanced at him but I remained strong. To deny us both was just fucking *stupid*.

And Nic's *reasons* were sounding more and more like *excuses*. It wasn't as if I didn't know what I wanted—I'd been making adult fucking decisions for myself for a hella long time. After Mom died and I picked up the slack with Dad, I made our decisions, and I was the only one I could depend on.

I curled my fingers into my palms, pressing little crescent moons of anger into my skin with my fingernails.

Maybe it was time I wasn't so swept up by Nic. Perhaps I needed to start

depending on myself again and making more decisions for myself. Like the old days.

I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead to the glass, letting the vibrations from the movement of the car wash over me.

When the movement changed and the car slowed, I looked again, noting the approach of Nic's house. He'd said he'd bring me home but here we were. *His* home. A place I'd even started to think of as my home, had thought of that way just days ago, hours really. But I wanted *my* space now. The quiet, the memories.

My heart squeezed as an image of Mom flashed through my mind. I'd let *her* down too because I hadn't been able to look after Dad. What would she think if she was able to see the way he'd been torn apart while I stood there doing nothing?

Jenkins drew the car to a stop, and small stones crunched under the tires as we rolled gently into position at the foot of the steps. Mr. Baldwin and Mrs. Ames stood by the open front door, Mr. Baldwin looking expectant and pleased at the arrival of Nic, Mrs. Ames wringing her hands in her usual fashion when something wasn't quite right in her world.

I didn't care anymore. Nothing was right anywhere, and hand-wringing wouldn't fix any of it.

Chef stepped from the door, but even his unusual appearance didn't actually interest me. Nic appeared at my door and opened it before offering me his hand to help me from the car. I almost ignored that too, but then I took it, barely curling my fingers around his.

This was just the most efficient way to get out of the car. It had nothing to do with wanting his touch.

Nic drew me to him anyway. Mrs. Ames bobbed into what looked like a small curtsy as we passed, and Mr. Baldwin definitely gave a small bow. They both spoke, but I tuned out the noise, keeping my head straight, my eyes forward.

Part of me almost gave into the guilt of ignoring them; Mom hadn't raised me to be actively rude. But I couldn't engage. I just couldn't. Not when I still had so much unspent rage burning a hole through me from the inside out.

It would only take someone being too kind—a sympathetic look or a concerned word—and I'd crumble completely. I couldn't afford that kind of weakness right now. I couldn't be so vulnerable. Francois was still out there. I couldn't lose my focus under an all-consuming weight of grief.

“My room tonight.” Nic glanced at me as he spoke, and I looked at him before quickly looking away again.

We slept in my room, in my wing, never his. His whole wing was out of bounds still. More by unspoken word than anything he ever said anymore, but still.

Tonight, he wanted to be in *his room*?

“I think you need a change of scene. Something, anyway.” He sighed and shrugged.

I didn't reply, but I inhaled deeply as we entered Nic's wing and the scent of him filled my lungs. The familiarity of being so completely surrounded by him started to unravel some of the tension coiled in my chest, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or not.

He pushed open the door to his bedroom and I followed him inside. It was undeniably masculine, with dark woods and dark soft furnishings. I almost laughed as the phrase *black like my soul* echoed around my head.

Nic's masculine, spicy scent hung even heavier in the air here, and it surrounded me like a hug, like I was coming home. The curtains were already closed, and several lamps burned low, offering a warm glow to the room.

But I didn't really feel anything. The welcoming feeling of the room dissipated quickly, and my numb haze returned.

Nic was infinitely gentle as he led me to the bed and sat me on the edge. He peeled off my clothes almost in slow motion, and although the urge to be more active echoed weakly through me, I didn't act on it. He dressed me in

soft, cozy pajamas with equal care and showed me to his thoroughly modern bathroom before helping me into his large bed.

His scent was even more tantalizing here, and I closed my eyes as I breathed him in once more. Fabric rustled close to me. The comforter moved at my back as the mattress dipped and Nic pressed himself to me, his arms draping loosely over my waist.

I squeezed my eyes tighter, willing back tears. I couldn't let the emotion out—I had to maintain control and focus on my goal. Even as I lay perfectly still, Nic began to relax behind me.

“Nic?” My voice was hoarse as I whispered his name, and he tensed, immediately alert again. “Will you turn me?” I held my breath as I waited for his reply.

Maybe now that we were home, he'd reconsider.

He cleared his throat, which was an obvious stalling tactic. Nic never needed to hesitate before giving a reply.

“No.” His whisper was the softest I'd ever heard his voice, filled with regret and a touch of longing.

I bristled anyway, irritation spiking through me and stirring my pulse to beat faster. “I just don't get why.” The words were clipped with anger as I spoke them.

Nic nuzzled softly against my neck, and his sigh was a mere whisper over my skin. “I've already told you why. I wish I had a better answer for you, or that the circumstances had changed. I know my answer isn't what you want to hear.”

He pressed his lips against my skin, the touch a question and a need.

I arched away a little, normally ready to give him greater access but my thoughts were too clogged tonight.

“I can't,” I said. “I can't let you love me tonight. I just can't.”

My voice nearly cracked on the last word because my inability to accept love was overriding my need to surrender to it.

But Nic merely pressed one last kiss to my neck and drew back, his hold relaxing over my waist once more. “Sleep well,” he murmured.

As his breathing slowed, my eyes began to flicker shut almost against my will until they finally refused to open again, and my only awareness was of Nic silently at my back, protecting me with his presence as he always had.

Then I wasn’t even aware of him any longer.

“LEIA,” my dad rasped from a booth in The Pour House, and I looked up, shock icing my veins.

“Dad?” What was he doing here? “But you... But you...” I didn’t finish. I couldn’t.

He grimaced and swigged his shot of bourbon then held out his glass for more.

I arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

He simply nodded and moved his glass even closer.

I sighed. Perhaps dead Dad was as much as an asshole as the alive Dad I’d lived with since we lost Mom. I poured him a small measure of bourbon, and he huffed.

I topped it off—what did it matter now? He was dead.

He downed the shot in one and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Maybe I wasn’t the greatest of dads.”

I scoffed as I wiped a rag over the bar, the habit ingrained in me after so many years standing in this exact spot. Then I met his eyes and sighed.

“No.” Then I hesitated and considered my next words. “But hell, Dad. You used to be. You used to be my hero.”

I focused again on the warped woodgrain in front of me while I blinked back sudden tears at all the memories of my childhood.

When I glanced toward the window, I could see straight into the gardens

of my childhood, the way Dad had thrown me up onto his shoulders and taken Mom by the hand as we walked down to the edge of the water.

“What went wrong, Dad?” A tear escaped to slide down my cheek, and I couldn’t look at him.

“She died.” He sounded so broken, and I looked at him then. He was watching the scene outside, too, his eyes on Mom as she laughed at something he’d said.

My heart ached for those days. We’d all been so fucking happy...

“She left me.” He spoke so quietly that I strained to hear him. “Everyone leaves.”

Anger trampled my grief. “You fucking gambled me away, Dad,” I ground out.

He looked at me, his eyes wide. “I didn’t... I wouldn’t have...I didn’t mean...”

I sighed and shook my head, already tired of this version of Dad. The one outside, the one happy and in love with Mom and his life and his family... that was the Dad I clung to. The one I’d never been able to bring back to me after he lost himself in alcohol and gambling.

And then he’d lost me.

Fuck. I swiped my rag over the bar again, wiping up the tiny wet dots my tears left as they landed. I missed those happy days. The Sunday dinners where Mom would invite friends and the house would be filled with laughter, and the quiet family times where only we three had mattered.

It had been like only the three of us existed sometimes. And it had been so fucking good.

I poured Dad another shot. Maybe Dad had been an asshole, and maybe he didn’t deserve my devotion, but I was still his daughter, and I still needed to avenge his death. Francois had stolen all hope of ever recovering my dad, and I needed to ensure he suffered for that.

It would be the last thing I could do for my dad. For Mom. For the family

we used to be.

As Dad lifted the shot I'd poured to his lips, he began to fade, and I returned my attention to the scene outside, watching as the glow of the setting sun eclipsed my view of my family until all that remained were the memories.

NIC

I paced the hallway of my wing before leaning my fist on the closed door of my bedroom.

Three days.

Three fucking days.

“Leia.” I bumped my fist gently on the wood, frustration burning through me. I was in control in every avenue of my life, I had an answer for every situation, but not this one. It was like my mate was the one riddle I couldn’t work my way through, the one command I couldn’t give.

Fuck. I *hated* it.

I sucked in a breath and knocked quietly on the door. Leia was inside, but she didn’t make a sound. I hadn’t expected her to, really. She’d barely spoken since we returned from Conri’s safehouse—only to ask the same question she always did.

The one I kept saying no to.

I waited long enough that she would have spoken if she was going to then pushed the door open. It brushed over the carpet, the loudest sound in the room. Even Leia’s breathing seemed quieter than usual, like she was growing less vital with each minute that passed. Even her heartbeat thumped with less vigor.

She was fading right in front of me, taking pieces of my heart with her.

I'd never connected with what people referred to as a *broken heart* until now. Vampire hearts were old and dried up, and mine was like a weight in my chest.

But it ached more each day as I watched Leia.

As I entered the room, I breathed in the mixture of our scents in my space, and contentment briefly claimed me. But then I saw Leia.

She was sitting in an armchair that looked out over the gardens, her gaze unfocused and her purple-smudge underlined eyes too dark in her pale face. My chest constricted. She looked more corpse-like than any of the newly risen.

Untouched beignets sat on a plate at her side. Fucking *untouched*. Chef sent three meals per day to my room. Plus snacks and seemingly endless amounts of hot chocolate, but Leia ignored all of it. Chef had threatened to come and talk to Leia himself, and I was almost of a mind to let him.

I didn't know what else I could do, since she obviously wasn't interested in anything I had to offer or say.

"Leia?"

Still, she didn't look at me. Not a flicker of her eyelashes or a tilt of her head.

I asked the rest of my useless question anyway. "Can I get you anything?"

I glanced at the half pitcher of water on the low table in front of her. At least she was still drinking. It was cold comfort at the moment, though.

I stepped forward and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. It had lost some of its shine.

Slowly, she turned toward me, and as she parted her lips, my heart plummeted to the floor. We had this conversation every single day. And every single day it took all of my strength to deny her. Sebastian told me that was because it wasn't in vampire nature to deny the wishes of a true mate—even when their deepest desire was harmful to themselves or others. So I

fought myself.

I fought to control the situation and keep Leia safe.

But every time she asked, my resolve slipped a little.

I steeled myself for the inevitable question and the way it would slam through me to steal my breath.

“Will you turn me today?” Even her voice sounded like wind through the creaky branches of an old tree or rustling autumn leaves. Like listening to death talk.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head, threading my fingers gently into her lank hair.

“We’ve discussed this,” I murmured. It was too hard to give her a direct no now. It felt like whatever I did, she might die. If I didn’t turn her, she’d fade away. If I fed from her to help her strength by introducing venom to her system, that would hasten her descent into thrall, and if I turned her, she’d be angry and full of bloodlust until she wouldn’t know herself any longer.

There was no solution that would result in us living happily together forever, and I didn’t know what to do.

I bent and brushed a kiss over her temple. “I can’t.”

She turned her face away again, shutting me out.

“I’ll take care of Francois for you. I’ve told you I will.” A hint of desperation leaked into my tone. So far, I’d had no luck in locating him, and I couldn’t bring final death to a man I couldn’t find.

But Leia gave no indication she’d even heard me. Every time I told her I couldn’t turn her or that I’d enact vengeance on Francois, she drew away a little more. There was distance between us now, and that distance widened with each day.

I didn’t know how to get us back, how to find the Leia who’d accepted my body inside hers.

She shivered suddenly, an involuntary movement, and I absentmindedly tucked the blanket a little tighter around her. Already, her bones seemed to jut

out a little more.

“I’ll check with Chef about what he’s making for your meal.” I spoke to her back as she allowed the blanket to slip a little, making no move to keep herself warm.

As I stepped out of the bedroom, Baldwin met me in the hallway.

“Sir,” he said, greeting me with the strange little formal bow he sometimes still defaulted to. “Miss Aimée is downstairs. She would like to see Leia.”

I cast a glance to the closed door behind me. Anything was worth a shot. I definitely needed some help to rescue Leia from the depression that seemed to be pulling her deeper every day. Maybe Aimée was just the person I needed to do that.

“I should probably check with her first.”

Baldwin nodded like he’d expected my reply. “Yes, sir.”

I tapped lightly on the bedroom door as a courtesy to let Leia know I was coming back in, but when I stepped inside, she hadn’t moved. “Aimée is here. She’d like to see you.”

I paused, not expecting a reply. But she surprised me.

“No.” The quiet word was the firmest thing she’d spoken in days.

I waited a little longer to see if she had a reason, but she said nothing else. Still, I hung on to the one word she’d spoken like she’d just recited the entire works of Shakespeare. Leia was still in there somewhere.

When I turned to leave, though, my general feeling of hopelessness returned. If she wouldn’t allow Aimée to come and see her, and my presence wasn’t helping, I didn’t know what *would* help.

I shook my head at Baldwin as I stepped outside the room once more.

“Very good, sir,” he murmured as he hurried away.

But it wasn’t good, was it? Not for the first time, the rogue thought that I *could* turn Leia skimmed the edges of my mind, but it was fleeting. I had no guarantee it would put her in better spirits—more likely, it would only result

in me losing her completely.

No matter how many times I considered it, it just wasn't a viable solution.

She needed more space. I repeated the words like a mantra in my head as I descended the main staircase. Aimée looked up at me as I approached, her face pinched, her make-up less expertly applied than I usually saw it. Even her hair was a little disheveled, like she'd just pulled it into a loose ponytail with no thought rather than her usual sleek and polished locks.

"How is she?" Her gaze held hope, but that quickly faded when I tightened my mouth.

"She's the same."

"The same as the last night in the cabin?" Aimée had been the one to return Leia to Conri's safehouse after she witnessed Francois kill her dad. She'd been the one to see Leia begin to shut down.

I shook my head a little. "Worse a little, but maybe she just needs more time?"

My sister stepped forward. "Time? Really, Nic?" She scoffed quietly. "I know humans say time heals all wounds, but do you really believe that?"

I drew a deep inhale. In an infinite life, things faded, but would time really help Leia get over witnessing the death of her father?

"What should I do then?" I snapped out the words. "Turn her?" I shook my head, my next words more defeated. "I've considered it. Fuck knows I've considered it so many times. She asks me every day. But I can't." I met Aimée's gaze again. "Every way I look, I stand to lose her."

Jason walked in our direction. "Everything okay?"

I released a sigh so slowly I hoped neither of them would notice, but Jason's gaze sharpened immediately.

"Still no change?"

"No." I paused before my next words, but Aimée jumped straight into the brief quiet.

"We're trying time."

Jason twisted his mouth. “What a very...*human* concept.” But his eyes were sympathetic as he looked at me.

I shrugged. “I don’t have a solution yet. I’m not sure even presenting Francois’s head to her will help at this point, if she’s not the one to remove it from his body.”

“She needs turning.” Aimée spoke with authority, and my sigh was dramatic and designed to be heard this time. There was no point in her rehashing our conversation just to achieve Jason’s support for her side.

“You know I can’t do it while her head is filled with thoughts of revenge.” I kept my most private fears to myself, only voicing the reason everyone would understand, the one I kept trotting out every time I needed to seem rational, sensible, logical.

But... I’d never turned anyone before. What if I got it wrong? What if I changed Leia—not just from human to vampire, but the very core of who she was? I loved her. I loved her as a human, and what if turning her changed her too much?

It was Aimée’s turn to sigh. “I know.” She acknowledged my reason again. “So just time is the plan for now?”

“No.” I huffed out my displeasure, angry at Aimée and at myself. “The plan for *now* is for Jason to stay close to Leia. And I need to go to La Petite Mort to oversee the renovations there. I’ve been away far too long as it is.”

The painful memory of my casino with the front almost completely gone lodged in my mind.

“How’s that going?” Aimée spoke as Jason made his way upstairs to take up his position outside my bedroom, but I didn’t answer. Jason wouldn’t make himself known to Leia unless he thought she was in danger, but I felt better just knowing he was near to her.

After everything we’d both been through, I wanted Leia protected. La Petite Mort was obviously not safe for her—recent events there had proven that—and it wasn’t like I could take her anywhere in her current condition

anyway.

“She’ll get better.” It was like Aimée could read my mind as she offered her reassurance, but I just nodded my head absently.

Leia *had* to improve. If I repeated it to myself enough times, it was almost like I could control it, even as my lack of control twisted at my gut.

So I was about to do two things I could control: go to La Petite Mort and drive myself there. I didn’t want to be dependent on Jenkins if Leia or Jason suddenly needed me.

“Do you want to see the casino?” It seemed rude to just leave Aimée at a loose end in my house while Leia wouldn’t see her and I was about to leave.

She tilted her head and pouted a little like she was thinking. “I could. Tomas isn’t expecting me any time soon since I told him I was visiting Leia, so he probably has visions of movies or face masks or me just watching Leia eat or something. Something that could take hours.”

I nodded. “Come on then. I’d like to get back and be around in case Leia starts to feel better.” Even just watching her eat sounded like a dream at the moment, although Chef would probably want to come watch that, too.

Aimée kept up fairly rapid chatter on the way to the casino, like she was scared to let silence fall between us. I was glad of it, though. Her talking prevented me from slipping too deeply into my own thoughts.

As I turned toward the casino, she gasped, and her fingers curled at the base of her throat.

“I know what you said, Nicky, but I don’t think I really believed it.”

I glanced at the frontage of the casino, at the scaffolding and the masonry that had yet to be repaired. “It was worse than this when the bomb first hit.”

I could still see all the injured and dead people, too.

My customers, my staff... All victims of Francois’s obsession with my mate. And now he’d killed Leia’s father. His cruel madness truly knew no end.

I drew around to the back of the casino and threw my car into a parking

space. It looked pretty quiet, but Kyle was definitely inside. His motorbike was parked at its usual obnoxious angle in front of the staff door.

“Not many people here.” Aimée seemed to echo my thoughts.

I shrugged. “We’re not operational while we’re being rebuilt.”

She turned to me. “Aren’t you worried your customers won’t come back?”

I laughed as she took me by surprise. “Aimée.” I turned to her. “I’ve been an expert at parting humans from their money for a couple hundred years. I don’t think I’ll let one small bombing put me off that endeavor.”

But the words tasted a little bitter. Until I caught and dealt with Francois, I couldn’t guarantee anyone’s safety, and that was a worry. It pricked at the one thing I tried to rarely use—my conscience.

I left Aimée talking to one of the card dealers who was at work to list and advise what needed replacing on the floor as I strode through the area to talk to the builders.

“Looks like good progress.” I spoke to the foreman, the same one who’d been in charge of the renovations to Leia’s home and The Pour House.

He smiled, flashing a little fang as he did. “Yeah. Things are going well. We’ve repaired about half of the structure so far and we’ve done some of the finishing work inside.”

I glanced above me, noting the new paintwork and the repairs to the crown molding. If the building work progressed like this, there’d barely be any evidence left of the damage the suicide bomber had wrought.

Well, little evidence other than the chain of events Francois had set off. My thoughts wandered back to Leia, trapped inside her thoughts in my bedroom. I needed to do something.

I spent a couple more minutes looking around the repairs, but my mind was already elsewhere.

“Well, thanks.” I clapped the foreman on the shoulder, my sudden enthusiasm fake. Now that Leia was back in my thoughts, she dominated

them.

I called to Aimée as I made my way back through the main game room. “I’m just going to find Kyle. You okay down here for a little while longer?”

She nodded her head and grinned. “Sure. Take your time.” Then she returned her attention to the dealer and laughed at something they were talking about.

When I didn’t move on right away, she waved a careless hand in my direction, shooing me away.

I hurried up the steps toward my office. Chances were, I’d find Kyle there.

“Kyle?” I pushed the door open and found him leaning over the desk, paperwork spread before him. “Everything okay?”

He glanced up and flashed me a smile, but he looked more tired than usual as he rubbed his hand briefly over his face. “Yeah. But how’s Leia?”

My sigh was automatic. That was all anyone wanted to ask me these days, and I understood it, but wished that I had something better to tell them. “She’s not doing great. I hope she just needs time.”

Kyle nodded like that made sense. “Sometimes humans do, I heard.”

I nodded too. “I hope that’s *all* she needs.” Then I glanced at the paperwork on the desk and changed the subject. “This about the renovations?”

“Sure. Just keeping an eye on the budget.”

I almost chuckled. The idea of a budget was relative. I had the money to repair La Petite Mort many times over, but Kyle always kept me as frugal as possible. “And how are things going?”

“Good.” Then he twisted his mouth. “But you know Fred. Always looking to make an extra buck if he can.”

I did chuckle then. “Yeah, I know, but how many other crews do you know who work around the clock?”

Kyle shrugged. “I guess.” Then he looked at me, his gaze shrewd. “But

are you really here to check on the renovations?”

I dropped into one of the chairs. “I need to know how the search for Francois is going.”

Kyle raised an eyebrow. “It’s going. I have Temple on it.”

That caught my attention. “He crawled back out from under his rock?”

Kyle nodded. “Sure did. And he seems better than ever. He’s on form, Nic.” He added that last part like he wanted to reassure me, but I didn’t trust anyone but my own men.

The involvement of an outsider, particularly someone supposedly loyal to Francois, made me wary. My private business was my private business, and I usually liked to keep it that way, but Kyle assured me this was the best way to find Francois, and I trusted Kyle implicitly.

“Did he find anything yet?” I asked. Maybe if I could bring news back to Leia, that would rouse her a bit.

Kyle shook his head a little. “Not yet, but he’s investigating a few leads.”

“Well, fuck.” I closed my hand in a fist. “Where the hell can the fucking Prince of New Orleans find to hide that he can evade us this long?”

He shook his head again. “I don’t know, man. I don’t know. But we’ll find him and you’ll get the chance for revenge. For you, for Leia. For your mating. You’ll get Francois’s head.”

LEIA

The door clicked closed gently behind Nic as he left the room. I hadn't looked at him when I refused to see Aimée but the disappointment vibrating from him was almost palpable in the stillness of the room.

I knew he'd respect my decision, though. Nic had done nothing but respect me and try to care for me the entire time I'd known him, let alone the last few days.

The only thing he wouldn't do for me was fucking turn me... even though he knew all of my reasons. And each reason was valid. Mom... Dad... That was all Nic needed to know, really. He understood the value of family. He looked after his own well enough.

It was revenge.

It was vengeance.

But it was also my last chance to look after my own family. And it was closure. It was a final act of love.

I needed to go up against Francois, to kill him. And it had to be me. Because when he took Dad, he took the last pieces of Mom from me, too.

But to kill him, I needed to be more than human. I'd come to terms with the idea that I needed to be vampire, and I was at peace with it. I was the last Boucher left—no one to miss, no one to miss me.

A wry chuckle ripped from my throat. I'd been hanging on to my humanity for Dad and the memories of my childhood, but now I realized there was no reason to remain weak and inferior for ghosts.

I stood from the chair, my legs stiff as I changed position for the first time in hours. Everything ached a little and my stomach was just an empty void I couldn't be bothered to fill. Eating seemed like too much effort when my head was so jumbled with thoughts I couldn't process or express.

So Nic wouldn't turn me, and that was okay. From what I understood about the process, it didn't even need to be Nic. Any old vampire would do. And maybe it would be better if it wasn't Nic, because that left me entirely in control of the process. I could solve my own problems—just like I'd always done.

I could pick a sire and ensure I got exactly what I wanted. It would be completely on my own terms, and there would be no strange resistance or resentment from Nic to cloud our relationship once it was done. After all, I'd been looking out for what was best for me for long enough to know what was best for me.

I took a tentative step toward the closet. I needed to find my phone before Nic came back in or I received another well-meaning visitor who couldn't help me. No one in this house would help me—I'd have to be stupid not to know that.

Each staff member or family member or friend was one-hundred percent loyal to Nic, which was just the way it should be for a king.

Only I had one other option, and luckily for me, Nic had programmed my phone with everyone's numbers when he first got worried about Francois, his reasoning being that I'd always be able to reach someone stronger than me.

Now that reasoning tasted bitter. I wanted to be the strong one... and I could make that happen with the right phone call.

I dug around in the last purse I'd used and pulled out my cell. Miraculously, it still held a small charge, but I hooked it up to the charger

anyway, while I ran back through my decisions.

They seemed sensible. Nic wasn't the only vampire in town, but he was the only one who kept refusing to turn me, so I needed to explore other options. Other choices. Other contacts. It hurt him every time I asked him to turn me. I could prevent all of that future pain by just arranging things to be different.

And taking control back for myself again actually felt pretty good.

Plus, I knew at least one vampire who owed me a favor.

Mind made up, I grabbed my phone and scrolled through the numbers. I returned to my chair and tucked the blanket over me to fend off a sudden chill. A quick glance at the beignets created an answering ache in my stomach, but I couldn't afford to be distracted by Chef's cooking.

Thinking and eating like a human could derail me all over again, remind me of what I'd be missing once I turned.

I sat and looked at Sebastian's name for a while. Was it really any better to make him bear this responsibility? I nodded to myself. Sebastian had more than proven his loyalty to Nic and me, and he'd do this if I asked him to.

Yet still, I hesitated. Nic had spoken of love playing a part during a turning, which I understood. But I didn't doubt his love for me at all. I didn't need for him to be the one to turn me for further proof of that—and turning could be much more of a transaction rather than the romantic gesture that Nic seemed to want it to be. I needed it to be that way. Transactional to the point of cold and impersonal. So that I stayed in control and didn't lose any more of myself to anyone.

Taking a deep breath, I pressed the touchscreen to call Sebastian, and then I waited for the ringtone.

I almost hung up. It suddenly seemed like a weird favor to ask. But if I didn't ask him, it would never happen. I was pretty sure Aimée wouldn't help me, and neither would Jason, but I was partly banking on Sebastian being a wild card who felt just as much loyalty to me—for some reason—as to Nic.

Sebastian answered quickly. “Leia?”

I nodded, so surprised for a moment that I couldn’t speak when I opened my mouth.

“Are you all right?” Something akin to worry crept into his tone.

“Yeah.” Shit, my voice was hoarse. I took a quick sip of my water, grimacing at the slightly stale taste from the days-old glass I’d just grabbed by mistake. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Only his soft breathing could be heard for a moment over our connection before he spoke again. “Is Nic there?”

I shrugged loosely. “He’s out.”

“Out where?” The worry had disappeared, and now Sebastian just sounded curious.

I shrugged again. “I don’t know.” Had he even said? I couldn’t remember.

Silence fell again, like we were each daring the other to speak first. I reached for my freshest glass of water and took a sip.

“I need a favor,” I finally said.

“Oh?” He sounded curious again.

“Can you come to the house and meet me?”

“That’s the favor? Meeting you?” Definitely curiosity. And perhaps a little hesitation.

“I think I need to ask in person.”

When he remained silent, I spoke again.

“Please, Sebastian?”

He sighed, the sound loud and gusty. “Okay. Where?”

I described a private part of Nic’s garden. “Do you know it?”

“Yeah.” Now he just sounded resigned. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

As I disconnected the call, excitement mingled with apprehension inside me. I was really going to do this, and thirty minutes didn’t give me very long to figure out exactly what to say.

I didn't want to shower, but I got in anyway. My hair was limp and greasy and sticking up in various unnatural directions, and I was fairly sure I smelled pretty rancid, even if I couldn't smell myself and Nic never complained.

After I'd dried myself off and dragged some jeans and a T-shirt on, I even swept a brush through my hair. More a lick and a promise than an actual styling session, but it was enough to make me feel vaguely human again. I stumbled over thinking about being human. If Sebastian granted my request, being human would be a thing consigned to my memories.

I quietly opened Nic's bedroom door, ready to sneak my way through the house, but Jason turned around, surprise already showing in the lift of his eyebrows.

"Leia?"

I glanced behind me like he might be talking to someone else before I turned back to him. "Yeah. I... I thought maybe a walk in the gardens might help."

"But it's getting dark soon." He drew his brows down now.

"And the scent of the night jasmine is like perfume," I challenged.

He reached for his cell phone. "I should tell Nic you're going for a walk. He'll be happy to know you've come out of the room."

I laid my hand on his forearm. "I'd rather surprise him when he gets back. Do you know how long he'll be?"

Jason nodded then checked his watch. "Uh, I guess maybe forty-five minutes to an hour?"

That didn't give me very long to convince Sebastian to make me a vampire. Technically, *his* vampire. I'd be his sireling like Jason was Nic's.

"Is Nic a good sire?" I asked suddenly.

Jason glanced over his shoulder at me as he led our way down the hall and toward the stairs. "He's not going to do it for the wrong reasons, Leia."

I withheld my sigh. "It was a genuine question. What's it like to have a

sire?”

He faced forward again. “I feel like I don’t know any different. It’s good to have someone to rely on. To support me, and I know if things go wrong, he has my back. But he’s just my sire, not my mate. The bond is different.”

“So... A sire is like a parent.”

Jason cocked his head. “I don’t recall, really. From what I’ve seen of human relationships recently, maybe? Parallels could be drawn, I think, anyway.”

I filed that information away. Selecting Sebastian as my sire made even more sense now—I didn’t want my relationship with Nic to turn parental. Maybe Nic’s refusal really was for the best.

When we stepped out of the French doors in the library and onto a small ornamental patio, I took a deep breath of the fragrant night air. “This is beautiful.”

Jason nodded and drew a chair from under a table. “Would you like to sit down for a while? Watch the stars, maybe?”

I tilted my head and looked at the sky, taking in the tiny pinpricks of light. “How long have you been looking at these same stars, Jason? Do you worry about when they’ll start to go out?”

He scratched his cheek, and the rasp of day-old stubble sounded in the night. “I live for today, Leia. Take it one day at a time, like you do.”

I nodded. It didn’t sound like there was too much difference in being a vampire than a human. Not the way Jason put it, anyway, and the forgetting Aimée had talked about previously would almost be a blessing once I’d hunted down Francois. Maybe one day I could forget the rage and grief and hate inside me.

Jason was still standing by the chair, and I glanced at him before I spoke. “Do you mind if I just go for a wander through the gardens? I think I need some time to decompress after being so cooped up.”

He narrowed his eyes a little, the light streaming from the open French

doors casting light and shadows on his face. “I’m not sure Nic would like—”

“I thought Nic had ensured the gardens were safe for me to spend time in?” I interrupted quickly before he had chance to disagree with my plans.

“True.” He adjusted his stance. “I’m not going back inside, though. I’m going to wait right here for you.”

“Okay.” He’d really presented me with the perfect solution. Now that I knew exactly where he was going to stand, and approximately when Nic would be back, I could meet Sebastian without too much of a cloak and dagger routine. “I won’t be long. I just want a few moments to appreciate everything I nearly forgot.”

Jason nodded, and I walked out onto the lawn. The grass was damp underfoot. It tickled my skin around the flip-flops I’d slipped on, which slapped softly against my heels as I moved.

“Nic’ll be back soon—don’t go too far,” Jason called, and I waved an acknowledgment. I didn’t plan to spend very long chatting with Sebastian.

When I reached the bench where I said I’d meet him, Sebastian was already there, his face tight with tension as he turned to look at me. But the minute his searching gaze met mine, he relaxed, and his usual grin took control.

“Leia,” he murmured. “It’s good to see you. We’ve all been worried.”

“Oh.” I paused. What had Nic been saying about me? I nearly asked, but then I shook it off. I had more important things to discuss with Sebastian. “Thanks for coming.”

I sat at the other end of the bench but angled myself so I could face him.

He seemed to be sitting directly in a beam of moonlight, and it simultaneously made his expressions very easy to read and gave him an aristocratic look, his skin seeming to glow with the pale hue of fine porcelain.

“Why am I here?” Sebastian looked away from me as he spoke, like he was disinterested, but there was a tension in the lines of his body that belied his careless air.

I shrugged, and he half turned toward me at the small movement, like I'd captured his attention with that alone. "I told you. I need a favor."

We sat in silence for a moment longer, then Sebastian leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I assume this is something Nic wouldn't like?"

I shrugged again, aiming for really casual this time. "I need to take back control of my life for myself. And it isn't something I can keep asking him for."

This time, Sebastian looked at me directly, and even the crickets seemed to cease their noise for the next few moments. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

I paused to think over his words. I couldn't answer his question. "That all depends, I guess."

"It depends?" Sebastian turned completely toward me now. "Depends on what?"

I glanced away and sucked in a breath. I'd remember the smell of this jasmine forever. "It depends on how you feel about making me vampire."

"*Turning* you?" Sebastian stood so suddenly the bench rocked with the force of him pushing against it. He walked several steps away before turning back to me and raking his hand through his hair, leaving it disheveled, like he'd not long ago woken up.

I stood as well and nodded. "Yes, turning me."

"But why would you want *me* to do it?" His eyes glittered with pain and something else... Longing? I couldn't tell while he stood out of the moonlight. "Why not Nic?"

"He says he can't, that he'll take care of Francois. I don't think he understands that I *need* to take on Francois myself. Besides, I spoke to Jason. I'm not sure Nic is the right choice for this."

"*Not the right choice?*" Confusion echoed in Sebastian's tone. "But mates turn mates. It's the way it is."

“Not this time,” I murmured. “It’s something he’s repeatedly said he can’t do.”

“Can’t...or won’t?” Sebastian stepped closer.

I shook my head and shuffled my feet a little as the grass tickled my toes again. “I don’t think I know any longer, Sebastian. But to avoid me becoming one of these thrall things, we need to do it at some point, and sooner rather than later is better. I know that much, anyway.”

Sebastian crouched for a moment, his head in his hands. “But it should be Nic. He should be doing this.”

I touched his shoulder. “But Nic *isn’t* doing this. That’s why I need your help.”

He looked up at me before rising to stand again. “And you’re certain you want to be vampire? You won’t benefit from Chef’s magnificent cooking any longer.”

One corner of his mouth twitched up in a wry grin.

“Pales into insignificance, I think.” I shot him a rueful grin of my own. “I watched Francois kill my dad, and I need the strength and speed of a vampire before I face him and make that right.” I gestured forward briefly with my hands. “I can’t have vampire speed and strength without actually *being* a vampire, so...”

“And you don’t believe that Nic will take care of the whole Francois situation for you?” Sebastian paced away again, and I sank onto the bench, a sigh leaving me as I did.

“No, it’s not that. I *know* Nick would kill Francois for me. He’d bring me his head and probably any other body part I requested, but that’s not what I want.” I waited for Sebastian to look at me before I continued. “Look, it’s like this. I’ve taken care of my dad since my mom died. He was his own worst enemy and I kept trying to bring him back. Several times, I felt like I might even achieve it, and he might be the dad I remembered again. Most recently, it looked like Nic’s intervention might be the thing to save him.”

I stopped. I didn't know I'd been seeing that as the last resort, the last effort to get my dad back.

Sebastian wrapped his hand over mine and squeezed gently. "I know Nic hoped it would be enough too."

"It never would have been, though, right? Involving Dad in this world was wrong." I could see it all so clearly with hindsight. "Nic must have known the dangers of involving me in this world, too...but he did it anyway."

Sebastian nodded just a little, although whether it was in acknowledgment of me speaking or in agreement of what I'd said wasn't clear.

I followed my thought to its logical conclusion. "And now he won't even fix the mess he created the day he came slamming into my life with that ki—" Shit. I'd nearly said kiss, the true first time we met. "With his contract. His damn contract."

"And you're *certain* this is what you want?" Longing glimmered in Sebastian's eyes, and for the first time, I hesitated before I said yes.

Did I really know what I was asking for?

But I nodded. It was the only way. "I need to avenge Dad. I looked after him but I couldn't save him. I need to ensure his killer doesn't walk away from this. I'm going to send Francois to his final death myself."

I looked at Sebastian again, meeting his eyes and drawing strength from the very center of myself.

"I have to do this, Sebastian, even if I need to go knocking on the door of every fucking vampire I know until I find one who will be my sire."

He reached out suddenly and brushed my hair over my shoulder, the backs of his fingers lingering against my neck. "It isn't about being able to bear being your sire, Leia. Not like that, anyway. It's not that simple. It's..."

"It's what?" This sounded like something I should know.

"It's nothing." He shook his head and stared down at the ground, his head bowed, his shoulders dropped. "You know what?" He sucked in a breath through his teeth before he met my eyes. "I'll do it, Leia. I'll turn you."

LEIA

I was sitting in the chair looking out over the garden when Nic crept into the bedroom behind me. He inhaled sharply, and his quiet footsteps stopped.

“Leia?” My name was a murmur on his lips. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” I answered him straight away, the word popping out of my mouth. And I really was okay. My discussion with Sebastian had clarified a lot of things and allowed me to regain control in a life that had been rapidly spiraling away from me.

Compared to a few hours ago, things were actually pretty good.

Nic walked closer and rested a hesitant hand on my shoulder. I pressed my fingers over his, regret for what I must have put him through since the battle lodging in my chest now that my fog was clearing. He’d been so kind and calm in recent days, just waiting for me.

And now I was back. Or working my way there at least.

Some of my old self was battling to be free.

Nic sank to his knees in front of me, his eyes searching mine. “How are you really feeling?”

I cupped his cheek. “Better than I have in a while.”

He smiled slowly, and it was like a sunrise to banish away a dark night. On impulse, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his, the desire to connect

with him again overriding all else.

He rocked back a little under our sudden contact, but his arms wrapped around my waist as he parted his lips. He made a soft *mmph* sound, and I pressed closer to him, trying to erase the distance I'd created.

I wanted to apologize but I didn't want to pull away from our kiss. I needed this moment, this connection. I wanted us back.

Like he could read each of my thoughts, Nic tugged me toward him, spilling me onto the floor but catching me to soften my fall as he leaned over me, deepening our kiss. I pushed at his jacket, trying to dislodge it from his broad shoulders, and he lifted away for a moment to shrug it off completely before he returned to kiss me.

His hand cupped my breast and I sighed with how right it felt to be touched by him again, like I was his to touch. I wanted that. I wanted Nic to acknowledge me as *his*, to display his right to touch me in ways I wouldn't allow anyone else.

There was something primal about that, and I worked my hand between us to cup the sudden bulge in his pants. I grinned slightly, stretching my lips against his, at the promise it held, and a shiver fluttered through me.

But he drew carefully away. "Not tonight," he whispered. "Let me just kiss you tonight."

I was about to protest but he pressed his lips to the side of my jaw and moved them down my neck in soft teases. I leaned away, offering more of myself to him.

"I want you, Leia," he mumbled. "But I want you properly. When you're ready. Not now. Not on the floor. Not when you might just be back."

I wanted to protest that I was ready. Of course I was ready. But then Nic folded me against him, pressing me to his body, holding me, and I relaxed completely, breathing him in.

We stayed that way, our silence full and rich and comfortable until he finally helped me up and we made our way to the bed.

I WOKE the next day with fresh purpose. Nic had held me closer all night, his lips seeming to rest against my neck just above my pulse point. His joy had been plain to see when he returned home and I spoke to him, and for a moment guilt skittered through me at the things I hadn't told him about my walk in the garden.

But what did it matter? I'd found a solution to my problem without needing to ask him again. Surely, he'd be glad about that in the long run? Sebastian turning me would benefit Nic as much as it would me—maybe more so because Nic wouldn't have to worry about my safety going forward, wouldn't have to spare any of his men to protect his weak human mate in the middle of an all-out war.

That could only be a good thing, right?

When I stirred in his arms again, Nic kissed my neck, and heat slid through me.

“Good morning.” He kissed me again, and I wriggled back against him, smiling sleepily.

“Feels like a *very* good morning to me, Mr. Dupont.”

He groaned a little as I nudged up against his erection then reached behind myself to wrap my fingers around it.

“You're up early today,” I whispered, and he groaned again and I stroked up and down his shaft.

It had been too long since felt him move inside me, and I let go of him and turned in his arms so that I faced him.

Now that I'd found my solution, the anger I'd been carrying had started to recede and I had space again, I wanted Nic. I could love him the way he needed again.

My strength of feeling for him almost took me by surprise.

I'd missed him.

Missed *us*.

He buried his face at the crook of my neck and inhaled. “Fuck, you smell good, Leia.”

I grinned. “I do?”

He inhaled again. “You smell like...mine.”

For a moment, my heart faltered, but then I reached for him again, taking his arousal into my hand and sending tremors through him. I was his. Nothing would change that.

“Always,” I breathed as he began to press a line of kisses along my jaw.

Then his hands were on my breasts, and I arched toward him, offering more of myself to his touch. He bent toward me and sucked my right nipple into his mouth, his tongue toying with the sensitive flesh, and I released a breath as I wove my fingers into his hair and held him close.

I’d missed this. I’d almost forgotten what his love felt like.

I pressed my thighs together to calm the sudden ache between them, and Nic released a ragged breath.

“You smell so good,” he whispered as his fingers skimmed my hip. “I want to taste you.”

I shook my head, denying his request. “I want you inside me,” I countered as I tugged gently on his hair, urging him to look me in the eye so I could kiss him properly.

He rolled me to my back so he leaned over me, kissing me hungrily, and I twined my arms around his neck as I first coaxed him to gentle the kiss then took control from him and deepened it again.

My desire for him consumed me like a hot burning flame, and I parted my legs without even thinking about it as he shifted position. The tip of his cock nudged against me, and I exhaled in relief that he wouldn’t delay this part.

I needed him.

I pressed downward a little, inviting him inside me, and his hand fisted in my hair, forcing me to meet his gaze as he slowly filled me. Then he claimed

my mouth again, teasing me with his tongue against mine, invading my mouth just as surely as he did my body.

I caught my breath as he began to move, his pace unhurried, and my neck tingled like some sort of automatic response to sex with Nic. As he thrust faster inside me, I broke our kiss and tilted my head away, exposing the curve on my neck for him. His eyes darkened as he looked at it.

“Bite me,” I whispered, but pain flared briefly in his gaze.

“I shouldn’t.”

“It’s been a while since the last time. You only need to take a little.”

Almost like he couldn’t help himself, he dropped his head closer until his warm breath skated over my skin, and his hips lost their rhythm for a moment, until I clutched him to me, my short fingernails pressing into his back.

I bucked against the first slice of his fangs, before the ecstasy his venom induced set in. Then I whispered his name and moved against him, encouraging him faster. I reached between us and gently rolled my clit under my finger, seeking my own release too. My movement seemed to drive his excitement level higher.

My orgasm took me by surprise, crashing over me as Nic pulled gently at my neck and thrust powerfully into me. His speed increased until he just seemed to hang, suspended in time, and his cock jerked.

He slowed the drawing at my neck until his tongue flickered over my skin and his lips merely rested there. I relaxed completely, lifeless and Jell-O-like beneath him. Completely sated and relaxed.

“Good morning,” I said again.

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Morning.” He hesitated as he looked at me, his gaze turning a little wary as he drew away, like he expected me to say more, but I hid my smile.

I had a plan, and I wouldn’t ask Nic to turn me today. I didn’t need to. The way his face relaxed as it became apparent that I wouldn’t ask my usual

question was all the reassurance I needed that I'd chosen the right course of action by taking Nic out of that particular equation.

"What've you got planned for today?" I spoke as he started to disentangle our limbs and ease from the bed.

He grinned at me over his shoulder as he headed to the bathroom. "Sadly, Kyle requires my presence again, so I need to go, unless I receive a more tempting offer...?"

I sighed and stretched, ignoring his question. More time in bed with Nic sounded like bliss, but I was meeting Sebastian at The Pour House. "Who do you have coming to babysit me today?"

He narrowed his eyes slightly. "Aimée isn't babysitting you. She's worried after..." He swallowed and gestured. "After, you know."

Yes, I knew. After I watched Francois kill Dad. "I know. And I'll be glad to see her. Hurry up in the shower; I need to get ready." My stomach grumbled loudly. "Chef's beignets," I murmured. It would probably be the last time I could enjoy them. For a moment, my resolve faltered. "Do you like the beignets?" I asked Nic.

His eyebrows drew down quizzically but then he answered the question. "I suppose I appreciate them more than like them."

I nodded. That would have to do. If I could grow to appreciate Chef's food after I turned, I'd be happy.

"Join me?"

"Hmm?" I focused on him again, realizing he'd asked me a question while I was distracted.

"I'll wash your hair for you..." He dangled the prospect like a treat I couldn't resist.

I climbed out of bed and took his hand, letting him lead me into the bathroom.

"Wash my hair?" I questioned quietly after he turned on the water and the bathroom began to fill with steam.

He glanced at me, his eyes full of heat. “And anywhere else you think might be a little dirty?” He phrased it as a question, and I grinned as I leaned against him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“Oh, I’m often dirty.” I kissed him but not softly.

I kissed him like I meant it, like we hadn’t just woken up in the best way possible a few minutes earlier, and he responded straight away, weaving his fingers into my hair and holding my head in place as he bit gently on my bottom lip.

He drew away. “Then I might need to clean you very thoroughly indeed.”

I nodded and took his hand as he stepped into the oversized shower cubicle. He drew me briefly through the spray then lathered his hands with some sweet-smelling liquid soap before smoothing his palms over my skin, his firm, slow touches both deliberate and sensual.

He rinsed the suds from me and kissed me where my collarbone met the base of my neck before trailing his mouth lower still, over the upper curve of my breast. I inhaled softly and cupped the back of his head.

Sliding from my grasp, he ran his fingers down my waist before taking gently hold of my hips and kneeling in front of me. His gaze met mine. “Quality control,” he murmured before probing delicately in the folds between my legs.

I gasped as he nudged against my clit and backed against the cold tiles as my knees threatened to buckle when he did it again.

There was mischief in his gaze when he looked at me this time, leaning forward and lifting one of my legs to prop on his shoulder. I wobbled and pressed against his head for balance.

“What? Nic?” I closed my eyes.

“Shh,” he whispered before his lips ghosted over me, and I clenched my jaw against a moan.

His tongue touched me next. Such a clever tongue... able to find something so small with no problem at all. He sucked my clit into his mouth,

and I tightened my fingers around his hair, surrendering myself to the sensations rolling through me.

As he continued with his mouth, he pressed a finger inside me, and I clenched around him as I moaned softly.

His sweet assault on me intensified until I couldn't think at all. Couldn't remember his name, didn't know my own. I was lost to everything except how he made me feel. I clenched tighter against him as waves of pleasure crashed over me and my body throbbed in response.

Nic steadied me, taking my weight when I would have lost the ability to stand. He rose, pulling me against him as my breathing steadied. I reached for him again, finding him hard and heavy.

He drew a sharp breath and would have stepped away, but I tightened my hold slightly as I lowered myself in front of him. It was my turn to offer him pleasure.

“You don't need—” he started.

“Shh,” I whispered. I knew what I needed and what I wanted, and both of those things were Nic.

I pretended to soap him the way he'd soaped me, but really, I was just running my fingers over his skin, luxuriating in the feel of him. And I had an almost hyper-awareness of his erection, and the way it jutted toward me like it was waiting for my attention.

All in good time.

I kept my touches casual, sweeping his abs, teasing across his upper thighs, and he closed his eyes as his teeth pressed gently on his lower lip.

“Leia.” He sounded a little tortured.

“Yes?” I kept my tone light and a little preoccupied, like I didn't know the effect I was having on him. It was the exact effect I wanted, and I almost didn't dare hope I could drive him as crazy as he drove me.

I lowered myself to my knees... an appropriate position to worship him from. Then I pressed a kiss to the center of his thigh, and waited a moment,

my lips still in contact with his skin.

He wove his fingers into my hair, and I grinned as I licked a slow trail up his leg, heading in one direction—the only direction I wanted to go. His fingers tightened slightly, but he didn't direct me in any way.

I nuzzled his cock, just feeling the hot hardness against my cheek as I cupped his balls gently in my hand, taking their weight. He drew a soft breath, and I lifted myself higher to press a kiss to the tip, swirling my tongue across the bead of precum that I found there.

He tensed, the muscle of his thigh contracting under my palm, and he hissed an exhale. Opening my mouth wide, I sucked the head of his cock between my lips and just maintained my suction for a moment. Then I ran the flat of my tongue down the underside of his shaft as I lowered my head, taking more of him into my mouth.

I'd expected him to move, but he didn't. He remained perfectly still as I got used to the size and feel of him. Each time I bobbed my head, I took a little more, and I worked my hand up and down anything I couldn't fit, timing the stroking with the movement of my head.

Nic's breathing quickened, and his hips began to pump ever so gently, the movement encouraging rather than off-putting or overwhelming.

"Leia," he mumbled and tried to draw back.

I shook my head and hummed a reply, not letting up. He pressed his fingers tighter and inhaled a gasping breath as his cock jerked in my mouth and I swallowed convulsively as I kept my lips wrapped tightly around him.

He breathed deeply for a few moments, before touching my shoulder. I released his cock from my mouth and he wrapped an arm around me as I stood against him, savoring the peace I found in his arms and his presence.

"SO YOU'RE FEELING BETTER? Like really?" Aimée glanced at me over the

rim of her goblet. It contained blood, and my stomach turned at the thought.

I wasn't clear how I'd get past the part of being made to feel nauseated by the idea of drinking blood, but that was something I could figure out later.

"Really," I agreed as I practically inhaled another beignet. Maybe simple appreciation wasn't good enough for these after all.

I checked my watch. I'd need to leave soon if I was going to meet Sebastian as planned. "I should check in on Nic," I said. "Have you talked to Tomas this morning?"

Aimée's face brightened at the mention of her mate. "I should tell him you're doing better. He'll be so happy."

I nearly laughed. Tomas very rarely expressed any sort of emotion. I certainly couldn't imagine actual happiness, but he made Aimée happy, and that was enough. "I'm going to step into the garden to call Nic. Is that okay?"

Aimée nodded. "I just need to run and get my phone from my purse."

"Take your time." I was already partway out of the room. If I could get off the grounds and call an Uber, I'd be home free. I wanted something anonymous, not the taxi company I'd used before.

As Aimée waved at me on her way up the stairs, I hurried from the house, grabbing my purse on the way out. Then I stood out of view outside the gates and made my call. A nondescript, dark blue car picked me up from the nearest cross street minutes later, and I was on my way, not even daring to look back.

THE POUR HOUSE was silent and empty when I arrived, and I was confident Ben wouldn't just appear. Nic had already told me he'd asked for Ben's help with the rebuild at the casino in the mornings, so the guy was probably spread pretty thin.

Still, I wasn't about to just waltz in through the front door, so I walked

around the back. Ben had even worked wonders in the alley, and I paused for a moment, taking in the gleaming new dumpster and distinct lack of discarded cardboard on the ground. The area looked like Chef could set up an outdoor kitchen and still be within hygiene standards.

As I looked around, trying to take in all the changes, from the general tidiness to the new lighting, to the fresh paintwork, Sebastian materialized effortlessly from one of the shadows.

“Good morning,” he murmured, and I had a flashback to the way Nic had greeted me this morning.

Guilt teased through me, but I quashed it with an image of Francois dangling my dad by his throat. Approaching Sebastian had a purpose. It was merely expedient and scientific, and it meant I didn’t need to add to Nic’s stress every day asking for something he couldn’t give me. I was back in charge.

“Are you well?” Sebastian seemed suddenly formal as he bowed slightly and took my hand to brush his lips across my knuckles.

A warning shiver ran through me at the unexpected intimacy of his touch, and the same guilt as before returned. I’d come here for a simple business transaction. A mere service he could provide. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Where do you want to go to do this?” He sounded hesitant, maybe even nervous, and I glanced at him, but his face gave away no trace of emotion. His jaw was set and his mouth firm, his gaze focused straight ahead as we waked toward the side entrance to the bar. “We should probably be somewhere comfortable for you.”

At the last moment, I veered to the set of steps that led to the tiny upstairs apartment. I’d never used it for anything other than storage, but the rooms were furnished from whoever had last lived there. Probably someone in the sixties or seventies, looking at some of the colors and styles.

The metal steps echoed and shook a little under Sebastian’s boots as we climbed them. I didn’t look back.

Initial tendrils of guilt were threatening to become waves of doubt.

What the hell was I doing here with Sebastian? I wanted Nic's bite, not his... but I'd tried asking Nic, and he'd refused. He's refused me *every single day*.

He knew how important it was to me, and why, and his constant rejection of me hurt. Plus, Sebastian was his brother, someone Nic trusted to fight alongside him. I hadn't approached a *stranger*. Really, I was keeping things in the family.

I fumbled the keys as I tried to get them into the old lock, and Sebastian closed his hand around mine, helping to steady my grip and aim. I drew in a breath.

The door opened with a creak, and dust had created a thick layer on the surfaces. I threw some of the thin curtains open to try to let some light in, but it didn't improve the atmosphere or assuage my now gaping chasm of doubt. I made a few more nervous movements—unnecessarily shifting mostly forgotten boxes from one pile to another before I turned to Sebastian, my fingers tangled together in front of me.

He stepped a little closer before reaching for my hands and lifting them to hold in his. "Has anyone explained how this works?"

I thought for a moment then shook my head. I didn't recall a detailed explanation, but I'd skimmed snippets about being turned in the Book of Gray. I hadn't focused on the process, though. I'd only wanted to know if being turned would get me what I wanted—being able to match and beat Francois. He wouldn't be expecting any sort of strength or speed from me, so I'd definitely have the element of surprise.

"I know a blood transfer is involved," I offered.

He nodded. "Yes, and it isn't pain-free, I'm afraid. I'll do what I can, but you need to be as comfortable as possible first." He looked around. "Is there a bedroom up here?"

I swallowed my sigh. I'd hoped to just do it out here. "Isn't this okay?" I

gestured around us.

He wrinkled his nose. “You should be lying down, I think. In case the pain overwhelms you.”

I froze, fear and uncertainty starting a slow creep over the wet surfaces of my bones. “That much pain?”

It never hurt when Nic bit me. Not really. Pleasure made the initial sensation worth it, and the pleasure *always* came fast and intense.

Sebastian stroked my hair. “I’ll try to limit it, and I’ll try to take you the other way, but I...I can’t guarantee it. Not during a turning.”

“Okay.” I drew a deep breath, filling my chest with whatever courage I could draw from the stagnant air. “The bedroom’s this way.”

I opened a door half-hidden behind a stack of boxes. I’d forgotten what was even in these boxes. Something we no longer needed in the bar. One day, I’d sort through them but it wouldn’t be today. I was on a different mission.

“Come on then.” I left these curtains closed. The less I saw of the process, probably the better. I didn’t need to see Sebastian vamp out on me. A huge protective sheet lay over the bed, gray with grime and age, and I whipped it away, coughing as I disturbed the years of dust.

“Lie down.” Sebastian gestured toward the bed, like I didn’t know where he meant, and I narrowed my eyes at him before complying in silence. I needed to get this over with, not start petty arguments.

Sebastian and I would never be best friends, but we could be amicable for this at least. And we’d need to stay amicable going forward for it to work properly—I guessed a sire needed to be on good terms with their sireling.

“So after you drink my blood, then what?” I lay awkwardly on the bed, unsure how to position myself when all I really wanted to do was curl up and close my eyes until it was all over.

“Well then, you drink mine.” Sebastian kept his face matter-of-fact, but his eyes gleamed with an excitement I couldn’t name.

My stomach roiled, rebelling against the idea of his blood. “Do I *have* to

do that part?” My mouth filled with warm saliva, spurred by my nausea, and I swallowed carefully.

“That’s the magic. But it usually needs to be done more than once.” Sebastian spread his hands. “Would you like me to lie down next to you?”

I flinched away at his words. “No.” I bit out the word. “No. I mean thank you, but this is just business.” Sharing the bed with him would be too intimate. “Nic is my mate. No one else. The only reason we’re here now is because Nic keeps saying no, and I need to take control over my own life again. I know what I need to achieve and accomplish, I know how to do it, and Nic wants no part of it, so I’m not going to keep laying that burden on him. That’s all this is.”

For a moment, Sebastian’s eyes clouded and his mouth parted like I’d gut-punched him, but he immediately replaced any hurt with his usual royal expression—slightly snooty, jaw tense.

He nodded. “Of course. This exercise is simply about avenging your father. I understand that.” He bowed slightly again. “My queen,” he murmured.

I nodded as well, flinching away again as he loomed toward me. “Shit,” I ground out, as I placed my hands against his chest. “Just give me a moment.”

Sebastian dropped to his knees alongside the bed. “It might be easier if you wriggle closer to the edge. You won’t have to see anything. Just offer me your neck.”

Without meaning to, I pressed my fingers to the skin over my pulse, the place Nic usually bit me.

“That’s right,” Sebastian said. “That’s where I need to drink from.”

But he didn’t know what I was thinking. He didn’t know this suddenly felt like a betrayal.

But I couldn’t afford to make this emotional. I had to go through with it for Dad. For Mom. For me.

I moved my fingers away and gathered my hair, sweeping it under my

head so it didn't get in the way. I closed my eyes and turned my head to face away from Nic's brother, conjuring Nic in my head instead. I reached out my hand as if I'd be able to feel him next to me, but I met empty air. A tear crept from beneath my eyelid and ran down the side of my nose.

Then excruciating pain stiffened every muscle in my body, and I inhaled a gasping breath as Sebastian's fangs pierced my skin. It felt like fire and fury, and like I might not survive it.

The pain slammed into me like an out-of-control semi. It was never like this with Nic. It didn't make any sense—it was the exact same action, there wasn't any reason for it to feel so different.

Except there was no love.

“Sebastian.” I croaked out his name, and pushed my hand into his hair, trying to force his head away. “It hurts.”

My whole body throbbed, amplifying the pain, until even my blood seemed to burn me, like molten lava running through my veins.

The sound of Sebastian sucking didn't change, but as I focused on that noise in the quiet room, I almost began to float. Euphoria began to blur the edges of the pain, but it was different than when Nic fed from me. There was no arousal, no desire...no impending orgasm.

Nothing else existed. Only happiness, only warmth. I didn't even remember why I was doing this. What was I doing again?

Just as I began to relax into the rolling sensation, it was gone, ripped away, replaced by a cold that seeped through every part of me. I shivered as I started to sit up, but my head spun, and I gagged as my stomach twisted and tried to empty. I closed my eyes against the kaleidoscope room and the objects coming in and out of focus, and the sound of snarling permeated my head instead.

The noises continued, returning me to reality with the abruptness of a lightning strike. I gasped as I opened my eyes to see Sebastian fighting with someone equally as quick as him, equally as aggressive, equally as

monstrous.

The snarling continued, as Sebastian and his assailant slammed each other into walls before twisting and moving away, each raining blows on the other as they moved in a blur.

“Stop!” The cry ripped from my throat. “Sebastian!”

I touched my neck where two thin streams of blood trickled toward my collarbone.

Sebastian. Someone was attacking him. I stood from the bed, caught between moving away and trying to save Nic’s brother. He was my last chance to become a vampire. He couldn’t turn me if he died.

A howl of pain erupted from the two fighting men, both obviously vampires, and the rip of flesh sent blood spray splattering over me. I sprang into action, trying to grab one of the rapidly moving limbs and tug, trying to separate them.

“Sebastian,” I yelled again, fear making my voice shrill. I turned my attention to the other vampire. “Stop. You’re killing him. Stop it! I need him!”

I tugged on the unknown vampire again, but he shifted, and I lost my grip, leaving me spinning into the bed.

I cried out.

Immediately, the snarling and growling stopped.

“Leia?” Nic’s voice was thick and gruff, and I glanced up at him, my breathing full of effort as I clutched an arm across my waist.

I shrank away. Nic looked...foreign. Alien. Monstrous.

Attacking Sebastian. Why the hell was he attacking his brother?

Nic’s eyes glowed red, his cheekbones were sharp and cast shadows in the hollows of his cheeks. His fangs usually excited me, but right now they were huge and sharp and tinted pink.

I shuddered and shrank away, glancing at Sebastian. His cheek hung in tatters, and he clutched a hand to his face, trying to stem the flow of blood

even as it pooled on the apartment floor.

I flicked my gaze back at Nic, and his face creased as he reached for me, but his nails had extended into fangs, and I shrieked as I scrambled away.

This wasn't *my* Nic.

This monster wasn't my mate.

NIC

I could barely think. Only see Leia, her eyes wide and glistening with unshed tears. I lurched away from her as anger pulsed through me like an entirely separate entity. Like it had a life of its own—one I couldn't control. But quick to follow that anger was grief.

I turned away from Leia, catching a glimpse of myself in an old, age-spotted mirror as I did. Shit. I hadn't lost this much control in years. Drawing a deep breath, I focused inward, trying to will myself calm.

Sebastian had lurched away from me and collapsed in a corner, his breathing heavy. "Brother," he gasped, and I snapped my full attention to him, moving to loom over him.

"How dare you call me that," I ground out, my anger rising again at his betrayal.

"You wouldn't help her," he wheezed. "I just wanted to..."

"I know what you wanted." I dropped my voice lower as I moved closer to him. "You wanted my mate bound to you forever. You were fucking trying to take her again. *Again*, Sebastian."

Anger vibrated through me again. I could have lit up the whole room with the excess energy.

It took everything in me not to bring about my own brother's final death right then.

He lifted his gaze to meet mine. His eyes were swelling shut, but defiance still glinted in the depths of them.

“She’s my queen.” His whisper was hoarse. “I was giving her what she wanted.”

What she wanted.

She’d asked me to turn her every single day since we returned from the safehouse. Every single fucking day, and I’d refused.

But this was no better. Sebastian fucking *knew* better. I clenched my fist. The urge to destroy still claimed me.

“And *I* am your king.” I wanted to roar the word, but Leia’s fear still perfumed the room, the scent bitter. I spoke from between gritted teeth, instead. “I should see you to your final death for this.”

If I’d expected Sebastian to show remorse, I was wrong. Instead, he lifted his chin, bold even now.

“You should have looked after your mate, brother.” Sebastian shook his head slightly, his admonition clear. “You should have listened to what she wanted and why.”

I smashed my closed fist against the wall by his head, the drywall falling away in one big chunk, and Leia gasped. I closed my eyes. The damage didn’t bother me—I knew guys who could fix any amount of damage I could wreak—but her fear did.

My mate shouldn’t be scared of me. I didn’t want to believe the things Sebastian said, but maybe I’d been wrong. Leia shifted, and I breathed in her scent at the movement. Should I have turned her myself? I shook my head.

No... No, surely not. The Book of Gray had said anger wasn’t the way.

But glancing around the pokey bedroom in this small apartment above The Pour House, where my brother had almost taken everything from me—well, this was no fucking better.

Whatever the Book of Gray cautioned, I could have worked it out, worked around it if I’d just been given enough time. I was fucking king. No

one stole my mate from me. Not the dusty pages of an out-of-date book and certainly not my own brother.

I scoffed as I stood over Sebastian. “You nearly just took everything from me. Is it my throne you want?”

But even as I asked the question, I knew. Sebastian didn’t want my throne. He only wanted Leia. He’d always wanted Leia. His need caused him to lose control of himself, apparently. Make bad decisions. Would he always be a threat?

I smashed the wall again, taking little comfort as more drywall crumbled. Razing the entire building wouldn’t help me. Even fucking killing Sebastian wouldn’t help me this point. Pain opened a wide chasm inside me, and I drew a deep, ragged breath.

Mother would never forgive me if I killed her made son.

“I should kill you.” I repeated my earlier threat, but we both knew it was empty.

“Maybe you should,” he agreed, his tone suddenly conversational. “Because I’d make the same decision all over again if Leia asked me to.”

Fury made it so I could barely see. I smashed my fist into his face, taking satisfaction at the crunch of bone before his head lolled forward and he was finally quiet.

Leia made a muffled noise behind me, and I turned to her, wanting nothing more to wrap my arms around her and hold her against me, reassure myself she was still mine. But when I turned to her again, her wide eyes and pale face stopped me from reaching out.

She backed up to the bed, almost scrambling away from me, and I gestured forward with my hands, the claws tipping my fingers capturing my attention.

Shit. Of course she didn’t want to be anywhere near me—I looked like a monster. Still, the anger coursing through me only fueled my appearance. I took some deep breaths and closed my eyes, trying to calm myself and slow

my system.

I could enter almost a meditative state if I wanted. As I focused on my breathing, the tension in my face eased and the burning behind my eyes stopped. My fingertips tingled as my claws receded, and when I was sure I looked normal again, I opened my eyes and reached for Leia.

She had her hands over her face and had drawn her legs up to her chest.

“Leia.” I murmured her name as I dropped to my knees by the bed. “Leia. It’s okay. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I let you see that.”

“What are you doing here?” She didn’t even peer between her fingers.

I touched her finger, but she flinched, and I dropped my hand back to my side. “Please don’t be afraid,” I whispered. “Look at me. I love you.”

Slowly, she moved her fingers until I could just see her brown eyes behind them.

“I was protecting you.” I didn’t need to justify my actions against Sebastian’s transgression, but maybe I needed to let Leia know there was nothing I wouldn’t do for her. “Your pain... It was so vivid. It called to me. You *needed* me.” I paused and shook my head. “Sebastian shouldn’t have done that.”

“I asked him to.” Her whisper was cracked and dry and half-broken. “I asked him to turn me.”

My chest hollowed. “You did what?” It didn’t seem possible for my mate to want someone else to make her vampire. The room expanded around me before compressing back own until I was claustrophobic in the space, and I struggled to take my next breath. “Why would you do that?”

She shrugged. “Because I needed him to.”

I released a slow exhale. “But why him? Why my brother?”

She shrugged again, and the rise and fall of her shoulders exposed the bite marks at her neck. Blood still trickled lazily from them, almost reigniting my fury. The wound was jagged and red. He hadn’t even been careful.

I reached out again. “Is it sore?”

“Not really.” Her words were quiet. “Why did you stop him?”

I plucked the handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed gently at her neck, channeling all of my energy into caring for her. “Because you’re *mine*.”

I kept my voice low and measured, the sentiment inarguable.

“But...” She faltered. “But you wouldn’t. I thought that this would be... would be...”

I stopped dabbing at her skin and waited, hardly daring to look at her as she lowered her hands from her face.

“It was supposed to be easier. I wouldn’t need to keep asking you. I could just get it done by myself and I’d just be stronger. On my own. No one’s responsibility. No one’s burden.”

I sighed again and resumed stroking over her skin. The blood was gone now, but the puncture wounds still looked angry. “It’s not like that. I thought you understood my reasons?”

“The anger?”

I nodded.

“Anger fades.” She half-smiled. “Determination doesn’t.”

My lips lifted in response. “No, I see that. I don’t think I understood.”

Tension started easing from her. “Sebastian did.”

I cast a glance at my brother, still just lying in the corner of the room. Even if he regained consciousness, he knew better than to leave. He’d accept his punishment or face my wrath.

“Sebastian also knew better. Turning my mate is an honor and privilege meant only for me.” I looked at Sebastian’s puncture marks on Leia’s neck one more time, and the need to erase them completely consumed me. “May I heal you?”

She nodded slowly and arched her neck toward me. I leaned toward her and kissed the edge of her jaw. She inhaled a sharp breath and her heart rate increased. I relaxed a little—she was still mine, her body still responded to my proximity, my touch. Slowly, I trailed my lips to her neck, planting soft

kisses as I moved, until I flicked my tongue over the bite, inducing a shiver in my mate.

She whispered softly and I grinned just a little as satisfaction filled my chest. Yes, she was still mine.

I laid one last lick over the healed bite my brother had marred my bride with and released my hold on her. She sat back, her movements wary as she switched her glance between me and Sebastian.

“I’ll call someone to pick him up,” I said as I reached for my phone.

“What are you going to do to him?”

Irritation flared at her concern for him but I pressed it back down. Leia didn’t understand vampire politics or hierarchy. Or territorial natures or even diplomacy, apparently.

But I hadn’t explained it all to her. I couldn’t expect her to understand.

“I’m going to put him in the cells until I decide.” I shook my head. “I’ll have to tell Mother. He’s her son.”

And really, she needed to control him better. I shook my head. I could tell her, and we’d argue about his punishment later. I’d probably defer to her wishes regardless.

“Why did you come here?” Leia looked genuinely curious.

“Because you’re mine. You aren’t Sebastian’s.” I could keep telling her that, but I didn’t know if she’d really understand. “Because I need to take you home.”

She yawned. “I know it’s early still, but I’m really tired.”

I frowned. “Sebastian took too much.” I held out my hand. “Let’s go home.”

For a moment, I thought she might reject me, and my heart squeezed in anticipation, but eventually she nodded slowly, and I took her hand to steady her as she climbed from the bed.

She wobbled a little as she stood up and blew out a rush of air. “Head spin,” she mumbled, and I shot Sebastian a glare.

My phone was still in my hand, Ben's number on the screen, ready for me to call him. It was either him or Kyle. Maybe both. I wanted Jason at home, helping Aimée to guard Leia. I hadn't anticipated her sneaking away, and especially not to meet Sebastian as part of a plot to get him to turn her.

Perhaps I should have done it already, but all the advice cautioned about creating angry fledglings. But Leia tied to another man was far worse. I wouldn't ever be able to reverse that.

I pressed to connect to Benedict as we walked from the bedroom.

"Hi. Yeah. Sebastian's in the apartment above the bar. He needs a ride to the cells at La Petite Mort. Kyle is available if you need him." I waited a moment, but Benedict didn't ask any questions, merely murmured his assent.

Leia looked at me as I disconnected the call. "You aren't going to kill him, are you?"

"I should." I bit the words out, still angry with my brother. The fucker. What the hell had he been thinking?

"But it would be my fault. Don't make me responsible for Sebastian's final death."

I shook my head. "Sebastian has only himself to blame. You didn't know what you were asking him."

"Maybe not." Leia's voice grew quiet. "But I knew that something about it felt wrong, in the moments right before. I should have stopped it, but I could only think of my parents."

I didn't answer right away as I helped her into the car. Then I walked to the driver's side and climbed in. Leia watched me almost expectantly, like she was waiting for my reply.

"I'm sorry I got it wrong," she said.

"It's okay." I started the engine. "I think there are probably a few things I've gotten wrong, too."

I rubbed my hand over my face. I'd nearly lost Leia again. Sebastian had nearly stolen her from me in an unforgiveable way.

Her change to vampire belonged solely to me as her true mate. My skin prickled at the disrespect he'd shown.

I drove in silence, checking on Leia periodically as her eyelids fluttered. Fucking Sebastian.

When I drew up in front of the house, I unfastened her seatbelt. "I should get you to bed. You need to rest."

Her eyes flew open, panic clear in her gaze. "Not in your wing, though."

I nodded slowly. "All right. But why?"

"A vampire lives there," she murmured. "Earlier..." She cleared her throat. "Earlier you looked..."

I nodded again, the movement brisk. "I'll take you to your room. You can stay in there until you're ready to return to me." I brushed a kiss over her knuckles. "I want you to always feel safe, Leia."

She stared at her knuckles. "I just don't know what to do. I don't know how to get what I need."

"I know."

I PUSHED CLOSER TO LEIA, my arm draped loosely over her waist as I protected her with my body, curving myself to her spine. She murmured a little and pressed back against me like she was seeking warmth or protection. I kissed the side of her neck, trying to be soft and not wake her.

She stirred anyway.

"Good morning," I whispered. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep if you like."

She squirmed and stretched a little. "No, I'm good. Who's babysitting me today?" She half-turned to look at me over her shoulder, and her brown eyes melted me as always.

"Actually, I have a surprise for you, if you're up for it?"

Her eyes widened a little. “What surprise?”

I chuckled. “Now if I told you, it wouldn’t *be* a surprise.”

Then I kissed her neck again and she arched toward me.

“I could reward you for telling me?” she suggested.

I groaned as my cock twitched at my awareness of her soft skin pressed against mine. “I’m sure you could,” I agreed, “but I *really* want to surprise you.”

“Okay.” She sounded thoughtful. “So not even this will persuade you?” She reached behind her and took my shaft in her hand.

“Hey.” But my chastisement was gentle when my body reacted to her right away. I shifted slightly away, and she turned, a small pout teasing her lips.

“You don’t want me to touch you?”

“I want to surprise you more, Leia. You’re my priority today.” I’d let her down enough, not understanding her desperation to be vampire.

“Okay.”

I bit back the disappointment that she’d agreed so quickly, but staying in bed really wasn’t my plan for this morning. I had so much more to show her. “Breakfast on the go or Chef’s beignets?”

It was like almost no choice at all, and Leia rolled her eyes. “Beignets,” she said, in the same tone as *duh*.

After a shower and quick stop in the dining room for breakfast, I led her out to the car.

“Where are we going?” she asked, making her eyes wide and innocent.

I laughed. Things were almost back to normal between us, and my chest loosened as I shed some of the tension I’d been holding from her sadness and the fact I couldn’t fix it. She seemed less angry today.

I’d let go of my initial rage of seeing Sebastian on her neck, too. I’d wanted to kill Sebastian, but I’d also been angry at Leia for her betrayal. Only she hadn’t really understood.

All she'd known was that I refused to do what she'd thought she needed, so she'd defaulted to the same behavior that had kept her alive and moving forward for all the years since her mom died—she'd tried to meet her own needs the only way that made sense to her.

I hadn't explained how sacred it was for a vampire to be the one to turn his human mate, and I hadn't been able to explain my own more personal fears about turning her changing the essence of who she was.

No wonder it had just looked like I was putting up fucking roadblocks.

As if she could read my thoughts, she half watched me as I climbed into the car beside her. "I haven't forgotten that I want to be turned, you know," she said, her tone completely neutral.

I nodded my head in concession. "I know."

As we traveled toward Leia's house, she sat a little forward on her seat, and I reached for her hand. Maybe this was a stupid place to bring her. Her last memories of being in her place couldn't be good ones. Francois and his army had captured her directly from the bedroom I'd created for her there.

But she looked at me, her eyes gleaming, and her tone was excited when she spoke. "Am I going home?"

I nodded.

"Is my month up?" She tapped her chin thoughtfully, and I tightened my hand a little around hers.

"I really hope you don't think so."

She tilted her head and made a humming sound. "It doesn't feel like a month?"

I played along as I lifted her hand to my mouth and kissed the back of it. "Then our time together can't be over."

"But you're still taking me home?"

I nodded. "Yes, the work is completely finished now, but I want your approval on it all in case it needs any changes."

She nodded and sat back again, but her heart accelerated.

A short while later, I drew into her driveway, and she gasped as she lifted her hands to her chest. “The gardens.”

“They’re the last thing to have been properly completed.” I glanced around as I spoke. Every single one of my instructions had been followed. “Are they as you remember them?”

She nodded as I rolled to a stop. “They’re perfect.” She opened the door and got out. “Everything even smells the same. How did you know?”

I chuckled as I followed her farther onto the lawn, watching as she trailed her hands over leaves and petals. “I’ve walked these gardens at the height of their beauty many times.”

She stopped walking and turned so fast that I bumped into her. Then she threw her arms around my neck and pressed a firm kiss to my mouth. “Thank you, Nic.”

LEIA

I released Nic and spun around, my arms wide—exactly as I used to do as a child, breathing in the same familiar scents of the flowers Mom favored and spent hours tending. “I can’t believe this.”

He chuckled, the sound warm as it washed over me. “There’s more garden to see.”

I glanced off in the direction of the water. I could barely hear it from here, but the familiar sound as it lapped directly against the lawn was easily brought to mind.

“Want to explore?” Nic’s fingers curled around mine, and he looked at me, one eyebrow raised and a lazy smile teasing at his lips.

“Always.” Being with him like this again felt so normal and natural.

He led the way between trees and bushes that looked as though they’d been in place for years. He’d turned the garden into a paradise that looked as though it had been established for years, and when he stopped, I pressed my hand over my mouth to stifle a giggle.

“A fig tree, Mr. Dupont?”

He grinned again. “I know your mom didn’t have one in her garden, but I thought you might appreciate it.”

I walked closer to him, not stopping until I lifted myself on tiptoe and my breasts pressed against his chest. “I think I might appreciate it very much,” I

murmured as I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

For a moment, he just let me kiss him, then his lips moved beneath mine and he drew me closer to him by tugging on the belt loops of my jeans. He moved his hands to my ass as he turned us so my back rested against the trunk of a towering bald cypress. I breathed in the herby, evergreen scent and touched Nic's lips with the tip of my tongue.

He responded immediately, sliding his tongue into my mouth, and intensifying our kiss, and it would have been so easy to lose myself in him. I nearly did. My hands were in his hair, my body straining toward his as I let go completely.

But the memory of Sebastian's lips at my neck flashed through my mind, and I jerked backward, slamming my head against the tree trunk behind me.

"You okay?" Nic met my eyes, concern obvious in his as he smoothed the back of my head.

I shivered a little, my mood for kissing evaporating. "Yeah." I wasn't mad at Nic but I needed a little time to process the events I'd instigated. "It's just been a big couple of days."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. I guess it has. Would it help if we stayed here for a little while instead of returning to *Vitam Immortalem*?"

Nic rarely gave his home its name when he spoke about it, but I'd looked it up.

It meant *Eternal Life*.

And that reminder of everything I didn't have, everything I'd nearly accepted from Sebastian, was a cold slice through my chest. I stood a little straighter.

I glanced toward my house—my beautiful, newly renovated house. "I know it's not as grand as yours," I started.

"It's your home." Nic cut across me and voiced the simple words I'd been thinking but couldn't seem to find the courage to voice in case I just sounded ungrateful.

Unexpected tears filled my eyes. “It’s my home,” I agreed on a whisper.

Hell, it hadn’t been truly a home for a long time, but now it was again—thanks to Nic, and he was happy to let me experience living here again. Even to join me.

The kiss he pressed to the edge of my jaw was tender and gentle. Nothing pushy or expectant in it. “I just want you to be happy,” he whispered. “I want to *make* you happy.”

I shifted a little, my clothes shushing over the bark behind me.

“I’ll do anything,” he murmured, his mouth hovering at the crook of my neck, his breath fanning against my skin.

I froze, each of my muscles tensing. “Anything?”

His breathing stopped. No air seemed to move in or out of his body as he stood like a statue in front of me. Sudden tension radiated from him, and it was like the air around us electrified.

But he’d said *anything*, so anything was fair game. He’d led me right to the question, and I couldn’t back away. I knew what I wanted. *Nic* knew what I wanted. Even fucking Sebastian now knew what I wanted.

I grimaced.

“Anything at all?” I tried again, pushing him just a little, trying to figure out how serious he was.

He swallowed.

I waited.

Finally, he blew out a sigh, and I let my shoulders drop. Disappointment lodged in my chest, growing until I could taste it. Nic didn’t even need to speak. I could quote the script for him, and I did, my voice robotic.

“It shouldn’t be done in anger,” I said. “It’s about love. You’ll avenge my father for me.”

Nic looked up, his gray eyes swirling with emotions I couldn’t define. They were like low clouds scudding over an ocean, today. Not quite signaling rain, but not entirely peaceful, either.

“All of those thing, yes,” he said.

But there were more words he closed his mouth against. For the first time, there seemed to be things Nicolas Dupont was afraid to say.

“Why the conflict, Nic?” I kept my voice quiet, but I couldn’t entirely disguise my curiosity.

He sighed again, and it sounded like it came from the depths of his soul. “So many things.” He spoke on an exhale. “I want nothing more than to make you mine. I just can’t...yet.”

He spoke the last word so quietly I barely heard it. It was like the ghost of a promise.

But it reignited something I didn’t understand. “Nic?”

He focused as he met my gaze. “Yes?”

I waited a moment to think about how to phrase my question, the wind rustling through the trees around us. “I know you keep saying it’s about love, not anger.”

He nodded.

“And I can almost understand it. Like, your reasons seem to make sense, based on the few details I understand. But why was it different for Sebastian? He was happy to turn me.” I waited, unsure how mentioning his brother would affect our conversation.

Nic turned his head, looking out across the gardens. “He was careless. Arrogant, even. Sebastian was selfish when you asked him to turn you. He didn’t consider the impact on you.”

“He...”

Nic looked back at me, and I swallowed before trying again.

“He didn’t agree right away.” I glanced down as I spoke, remembering how I’d almost had to cajole Sebastian to my point of view.

Nic’s jaw remained tense as he nodded. “That small act of chivalry won’t save him. He knows better than to turn another man’s mate. Particularly *my* mate.” His eyes turned bleak. “I am his king and his brother.”

I nodded. The finer points of vampire politics still eluded me, but I knew when I'd stepped in something I shouldn't have. "Did I do the wrong thing?"

Nic suddenly crushed me to his chest, squeezing the breath from me with the strength of his embrace.

"No. *He* did...Well, maybe, yes, but you didn't know you were. I can't hold it against you because I should have explained better. I did the wrong thing too, and now we all know better." He chuckled a little bitterly as he loosened his hold. "But whatever happens in the future, please know this. There's nothing I'd like more than to bring you Francois's head and for you to know retribution has been served."

When I nodded this time, it was in the knowledge that Nic hadn't closed the door completely to making me vampire himself. He'd said *no matter what happens in the future*, which at least meant something *could* happen.

I grabbed that potential and screwed it into a ball to sustain me. I could still yet be powerful enough to take Francois on my own.

"Shall we walk a little?"

I nodded at his suggestion. I was only prepared to push the turning argument so far. In reality, I wanted to run and make myself safe from confrontation.

Maybe I'd been kidding myself these past few years that I was becoming stronger and more confident, dealing with my shit. Watching Dad die had brought my insecurities rushing back—all the survival shit that being the daughter of an alcoholic had conditioned in me.

Right now, I wanted to hide. I ducked my head and took the hand Nic offered. Avoiding this conversation suddenly seemed like a matter of survival. Like so many other conversations over the years that had the power to destroy me.

I'd lived in fear of opening Pandora's Box more years than I cared to count, always afraid of pushing Dad over the edge he teetered so close to, or finding out things I couldn't unknow. Maintaining silence and distance was

my ultimate protection, and it had served me well.

“What are you thinking?” Nic looked at me, his brows drawn down curiously. He squeezed my hand gently. “Penny for them.”

I laughed. “They’re not worth even that much.”

He steered us down a white gravel path, and the sweet scent of almond verbena enticing as we walked. Crepe myrtles lined the path further on, and I grinned as I recalled the way Mom had trained them into arches. She’s always told me I’d walk beneath them toward the man I was about to marry. I’d forgotten that memory, and it was bittersweet now.

“I’d pay far more than pennies for your thoughts, Leia.”

I sucked in a breath at the low urgency in his voice. He really meant it.

“I’d like to know, if you’re willing to share?” he probed gently, and I lost the will to keep everything hidden.

“I was a bit lost in my memories.” I glanced up at him, and he nodded consideringly.

“Because of the restoration of the garden?”

“That—” I reached out and caressed a leaf gently as we passed by a banana shrub. “And also because just everything is throwing up reminders of the past. Since Dad’s death, I’ve been a bit lost in the past and things I should’ve done or could’ve done. Things I did that maybe I shouldn’t have.” I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s all thrown up a lot of the insecurities I thought I’d moved past.”

I took a deep breath, my sudden vulnerability sitting uncomfortably in my throat. I swallowed, but the slightly lightheaded feeling that accompanied me laying myself bare to Nic’s judgment continued.

“You were the adult, taking care of everything.” Nic was matter-of-fact as he focused ahead, giving me the illusion of privacy by not looking at me.

I released my breath as a whoosh. “Yes, I was. Dealing with Dad every day, managing him along with running the bar, involved a lot of walking on eggshells.”

Nic tensed. “Did Jean ever hurt you?”

I shook my head. “He wasn’t violent.” Then I reconsidered. “Well, occasionally he’d smash or break things, but his violence was never directed at me. In a way, it was sadder than anything. He was a pretty miserable drunk. Morose, even. He’d get lost in memories, and I was almost scared he’d never come back.”

“I didn’t know if I’d get you back after what Francois did.” Nic spoke in a tone shaded with vulnerability.

I left that comment alone. Following the threads of his thoughts would only lead me back to being turned and my wishes to kill Francois myself. The longer I remained quiet, the more my courage faltered.

Nic didn’t need to know the blackest moments of my life. Not now anyway. And confession wasn’t particularly good for my soul. I carefully slipped the memories back where I kept them and padlocked them away. They’d keep.

“Show me the rest of the gardens?” I injected some enthusiasm into my tone, and Nic grinned at me.

“Where would you like to start?”

I shook my head. “Surprise me.”

“Well...” His grin widened. “I did take some liberties. There are some design features that weren’t put here by your mom.”

“I’m intrigued.” Excitement fizzed inside me. Nic had taken a personal interest in the design of the garden. “Was it just the fig tree?”

“Nope.” He pressed his lips together but his eyes sparkled with mischief. Then he dropped my hand and stepped behind me to cover my eyes.

“Nic.” His name was a breath as it left my lips.

“Yes?” His voice deepened as he leaned forward to kiss the side of my neck.

My pulse spiked. Without the use of my eyes, every other sense was heightened, and it was like I could *sense* Nic. My skin prickled at his

proximity, my breathing hitched at his touch, and for just a moment I flashed back to soft, sweet-smelling grass beneath my head, fig juice over my skin, and Nic moving inside me.

Nic groaned slightly like he was aware of my thoughts and pressed his mouth to the side of my neck again, this time lingering, and his tongue brushed gently over where my pulse fluttered. My knees weakened, and his hold around me strengthened as my arousal grew.

I wanted him.

“Leia.” He murmured my name before fabric rustled and he moved around me, his vampire speed on display as he captured my lips beneath his. I responded immediately. My body always wanted him, and I pressed against him as I twined my arms around his neck, my fingers already in his hair.

“I wanted to show you the gardens,” he mumbled briefly.

“Show me later.” Something about the heavy, green scent surrounding us and Nic’s body pressed against mine made me almost wanton, and I swallowed a moan. “Please.”

“What are you asking for, Leia?” He drew back, putting the smallest distance between our mouths.

“You.” The word burst from me. “Only you.”

I pressed our lips back together, desire for Nic turning my blood molten as it coursed through me.

He groaned softly and crushed me harder against him, his hands in my hair, tugging on the strands until my scalp tingled. I worked his shirt loose from his pants and slid my fingers over his abs, exploring the dips and ripples of his muscles as they shifted under my touch.

I wanted this man. All thoughts of anger and disappointment were gone, replaced with the raw need only he evoked in me. I slid my hands back to his waist and worked to unfasten his belt and pants. The belt jingled, and I grinned against his mouth as I smoothed over the bulge I found. It moved under my palm, and I stroked him again.

I pressed closer to him. I needed him hard and fast, and I needed him now. Without thought or doubt or too much analyzing. Just us.

Together.

Pure physical chemistry.

“Please, Nic.” I whispered my desire to him again, and he drew back.

“Please what?” His eyes were the soft red of desire, and his voice was rough and low.

“Fuck me.” My simple words hung in the air for a moment before he lifted me so my legs draped over his hips and his erection ground at the seam of my jeans.

I tore my lips from his. “Too many clothes,” I mumbled.

He set me down, drawing me down the length of his cock as he did so, and I pushed my jeans and panties off my legs, thankful I’d worn slip-on shoes.

When Nic lifted me against him again, the head of his cock bumped against my skin, and I was wet with need. I wanted that connection, the way he filled me, the intimacy, and I tightened my legs around his waist as I hovered my face over his then kissed him hungrily.

If I was starving, I would only ever need Nic. Our bond was like nothing I’d ever experienced.

He thrust upward, the movement sudden, and he entered me in one quick stroke. My gasp of pleasure was muffled against him, and I grinned as he braced his arms behind me, protecting me from friction against the tree as he thrust in and out of my body.

He wouldn’t tire—he never did, and his vampire strength and speed were both in evidence now.

“Touch yourself,” he ground out. “I want you so much. I can’t hold back.”

His face creased in what looked like a mixture of concentration and pain, and I slipped my hand between us before using my fingertip to gently roll my

clit.

I gasped as electricity prickled through me, lighting me up, and I did it again, faster this time, nudging against Nic entering me as I did. Shit, I wanted this. I pressed harder, chasing my orgasm as Nic chased his, his breathing emerging as harsh panting at my ear.

“Fuck, Leia,” he murmured. “Fuck, you feel good.”

As he spoke, my body began to tighten and I drew in a long breath then held it, riding out the wave as I spasmed around Nic’s cock, squeezing him and interrupting his rhythm.

He thrust harder, quicker, until he held still and groaned against my neck. As I blew out my breath slowly, relishing the lazy relaxation weighting each of my limbs, Nic thrust a last couple of times and kissed my neck gently.

He chuckled. “You want to see the rest of the garden now?”

I tightened my arms around his neck and lifted myself against him, eliciting a small groan from him as I drew myself off his cock. Scattered around the garden we were in were statues, milky white in the darkening evening.

“What’s this?” I looked closer, resting my chin on the top of his head as I took in the scene and scent of native Louisiana plant-life interspersed with statues that looked... Hell, Greek? Roman?... in origin. “What is this? More Dupont family heirlooms?”

“Uh...” Nic cleared his throat. “You like them?”

He carefully lowered me to the ground, and I reached for my pants, still glancing around as I did. “You know, I kinda do. I can wander around here and pretend I’m Medusa, or something.”

Not quite a vampire, but a gargoyle fantasy would have to do for now.

We wandered a little further, and I took in all the ways he’d reawakened Mom’s garden. Emotion welled up inside me, and a sob caught in my throat without warning.

Nic glanced at me at the sudden sound, but he was blurry through the

tears that had gathered in my eyes. I swiped a hand over my face.

“Sorry,” I croaked out. “I don’t know why I’m...”

He tugged me to him, wrapping me in his familiar, spicy scent, and I didn’t try to contain my grief any longer. I cried as though Mom had only just died, like I’d lost her all over again, and Nic just held me. Something constant just for me.

As my tears slowed, I glanced around the gardens, my eyes aching and swollen. “I don’t think I can stay tonight after all, Nic. I don’t think I can go in the house.”

I could see Mom everywhere. The gardens were beautiful, but they had resurrected her ghost as surely as if she’d been turned.

“Okay.” Nic kissed my temple and smoothed a hand down my back. “We can return whenever you want. You just say the word.”

Then he took my hand and led me back to his car instead. Back home.

NIC

Leia was quiet as I drove home. Every so often, I stole glances at her profile in the seat next to me. Her expression was relaxed but tainted with grief. She'd been through a lot, and I still couldn't say the words I knew she needed to hear.

I couldn't tell her I'd turn her. And that was fucking ridiculous because I wanted nothing more than have Leia by my side for the rest of our immortal lives. As my bonded mate, as my bride, as the woman I'd turned out of love.

No ulterior motives.

No anger.

No vengeance.

Simply mine.

She didn't speak as I steered the car down the quiet backroads between our houses. The heat of the day had waned enough that I could open the windows and let in the damp, green smell of verdant plants and trees that did little more than silhouette the sides of the road. The noise of the crickets formed our soundtrack, and occasional sets of eyes shone from the undergrowth, captured by the headlights.

I took a deep breath and reached for Leia's hand, only relaxing when her fingers curled gently around mine. Her conflicted feelings vibrated in the air around us, and my chest tightened in acknowledgment that I was a source of

confusion for her.

I wanted to give her everything... And she wanted the one thing I couldn't give her.

Her anger could come back at any time... But no. Who was I kidding? It wasn't about the anger anymore—I was just still so scared of getting it wrong and altering her forever from the woman I'd fallen so hard in love with—a love I'd never anticipated. A love I didn't want to ruin.

I just needed a little more time.

With a soft sigh, I lifted her hand to my lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it. We were in a much better place, and I couldn't be more grateful, but we still had a lot to sort out.

The windows at my house glowed with soft light as I turned into the driveway. With her usual, impeccable sixth sense, Mrs. Ames seemed to be welcoming us home, even though I'd expected to stay away, at Leia's house.

It was quiet inside when we entered, though, and I turned to Leia. "Where would you like to sleep?"

"My room." Her reply was soft but definite, and I nodded.

I saw her to the door before leaning forward to capture her lips. Even through the shroud of sadness that seemed to have descended over Leia earlier, our connection fizzed between us, catching the air alight, and she parted her mouth almost immediately, her invitation clear.

But I drew back, my reluctance to let her go obvious in the way my hands and lips lingered. "I have to go to the casino," I murmured. "Kyle took Sebastian there for holding."

Leia tensed. I hadn't shown her the cells beneath the building, and she didn't need to know all the details, but she'd overheard enough talk recently to have an idea of the building's general layout.

Not that I'd ever expected to have one of my brothers in the cells.

"Will you be back tonight?" She glanced at her door as she spoke.

"Will I be welcome?" I probed gently.

She nodded, already touching the handle to let herself into the room. “Always.”

ALWAYS. The short word echoed through my mind as I made the familiar turns to La Petite Mort. I didn’t want to be away from Leia long—hell, I didn’t want to be away from her at all—but I needed to see Sebastian and find out what the fuck he’d been thinking.

He clearly *hadn’t* been thinking, and he’d put me in a damn near impossible position. I couldn’t balance both being a brother and a king now. I had to pick one.

The temperature dropped as I walked down the stone steps to the cells. It was damp down here—witch magic only created so much usable space, but I had more space than most, and my cells were well used, a fact that brought me little satisfaction.

Still, maintaining order was ultimately my responsibility, one I’d overseen on behalf of even my father for many years.

I approached Sebastian’s cell with some trepidation. My initial red-hot fury had receded, leaving something much icier that afforded me the ability to at least think.

Sebastian turned to me as my footsteps sounded between us, and I paused. His eyes were shadowed and red-rimmed, his face already gaunt, and there was something a little wild and disheveled about him. His hair was out of place, like he’d spent the time since I last saw him running his hands through it, and his shirt was half untucked from his pants, his sleeves sloppily rolled up his forearms.

“Nic.” His voice was cracked. “I didn’t know if you’d come.”

I stopped and drew up a wooden chair outside the bars of his cell. “Of course I came.” I sighed, sympathy overriding my anger for a moment. “Oh,

Seb. What messes you get into.”

Memories of previous years flooded me, of all the times I’d saved his ass and he’d lived another day to be Mom’s golden boy. But the final memory brought me to my senses, wiping out the nostalgia—Sebastian with his fangs in Leia’s neck.

Rage started a slow burn inside me again, and I turned away from him before I lost my focus and control completely.

“I’m sorry.” His words emerged as a pained whisper. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking... I *wasn’t* fucking thinking. Just... I wanted to help. I... Leia...”

I whirled around. “Don’t you dare mention her fucking name. Nothing about her belongs to you. Not her neck, not her desire to be vampire, not her blood, not her name. *Nothing.*”

He nodded, his gaze on the floor. “I know.”

I stepped forward and gripped one of the thick bars, my knuckles whitening.

“Why would you take this risk, brother?” I sounded just as desperate as Sebastian had moments before. “You know the position you’ve put me in. I should put you to death for biting my mate.” But even as the words crossed my lips, I knew I never could. How could I order the final death of my brother? Especially when it would destroy our mother. That was an extra complication I didn’t want to think about. “Why take this risk?”

When he returned his gaze to me, horror froze each of my muscles, and I couldn’t even reach out my hand to stop the stream of words about to pour from his mouth. It was written in every line of expression. He loved Leia.

My brother loved my mate.

I swallowed convulsively as bile churned in my gut, but still I couldn’t stop his confession.

“I love her.” His voice was that of a broken man. “I love her, Nic. Maybe I do deserve to die because I don’t know what to do. I wanted to make her

happy, to give her this gift.”

“And you wanted to be closer to her?” I couldn’t help poking the wound he’d just opened between us.

He nodded. “I wanted to be part of her life in whichever way she’d have me.”

“But you are already her brother... At least you will be.” Frustration at myself for not turning Leia earlier and avoiding all this mess warred with my anger and irritation at my brother.

At our hearts, we were creatures of instinct—Seb probably still more so than any of the rest of us. He still had a side to him that he couldn’t keep in full check. Of course Leia had been a temptation, and she was one I’d failed to mitigate for him sufficiently.

I blew out a breath, and Sebastian twisted his fingers together as he sank to his knees and looked up at me. “She came to me with the offer of being her maker, and I was weak. I was greedy. I wanted to be her sire and have a bond of my own. I knew better but I convinced myself otherwise, that it was an unselfish act, giving Leia what she wanted.” He paused and swallowed. “What she *needed*, Nic.”

I closed my eyes against his words, my instinct to deny the truth in them. “But now I have the right to see you to your final death, Seb.” But my use of his nickname probably told him I wouldn’t. I clenched my fist as frustration surged through me. “Just... just what the actual fuck?”

But he’d already told me all he could, and asking the same questions wouldn’t change his answers.

“I wanted to protect her.”

Those words made it no better. *My* fucking job had been to protect my mate, and Sebastian had just told me I’d fallen short in that duty, that he’d thought he could look after Leia better than I could.

Fucking brothers.

“Sebastian.” I ground out his name like a curse as I started to pace before

him. I had many things to consider.

Could I really blame him for loving Leia? The whole fucking world should love her. But he'd tried to turn her...how could I possibly overlook that?

“Brother...” Sebastian invoked our relationship, and I stopped mid-stride. “My sword is still yours.”

I swallowed a groan as he reminded me of the war with Francois. I hadn't forgotten, not really. But the knowledge my brother had bitten my mate had taken priority over all else.

“Please. Allow me to atone.”

“Again.” I couldn't stop the bitter word as it left my lips.

“Again,” he agreed, his refrain sad.

But how could I not? I still needed him. The war with Francois was far from over. I'd sworn vengeance when he kidnapped Leia, and since then Francois had done nothing but escalate his behavior. It had seemed impossible at the time, but he'd tried to block our cash flow by destroying La Petite Mort and he'd killed Leia's dad In front of her.

I blew out a long sigh. “You're giving me an impossible choice.”

Sebastian bowed his head. “Allow me to make things right with my brother by serving my king.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but my cell phone vibrated. “Damn it.” I slid the phone from my pocket and glanced at the screen. “It's Mother.”

Of course it was our mother. I smiled ruefully. She was undoubtedly calling me to plead for the life of her son. The thought brought me no happiness.

“Nic.” My name exploded from her before I even said hello. “Nic, please.”

“Mother,” I greeted her.

“Please tell me he's still alive.”

I leaned a shoulder against the wall as I watched Sebastian in his cell,

careless of the damp seeping through my suit jacket. “Yes, he is.” I held my phone in Sebastian’s general direction. “Sebastian, would you like to say hello to Mother?”

His eyes widened. “Hello, Mother,” he called, and when I brought the phone back to my ear, Mother wept quietly.

“Oh, thank you,” she murmured. “Thank you.”

I shook my head slightly, irritated at her, the emotion fast and irrational.

“You realize your son has put me in an impossible situation?” Even to me, I sounded bitter. Part of me suspected she’d always preferred her made son to me.

“We’re all in an impossible situation,” she said.

When I remained quiet, she spoke again.

“We *all* are.” She emphasized the idea we were all in this mess together, and I turned from Sebastian, not enjoying his gaze on me as Mother pleaded for his life.

“He should die for biting the mate of the king,” I reminded her.

“I know.” A sob echoed down the line. “I know. I heard what he did. I heard...” She broke off. “But he’s my son, too. One of my sons should not kill the other. That’s not the way. We’re family.”

I closed my eyes. “How many times, Mother? How many things must I overlook in the name of *family*?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “He’s never been an angel, Nic. He’s struggled more than any of us, I think.”

I chuckled without humor. “You think?”

“Please, Nic.” She whispered the words like I was an avenging angel, the only one who could save Sebastian from his sins, and maybe I was. His fate hung in the balance on a word or a deed from me. “He deserves another chance.”

I played with some of the moss growing between the stones in the wall, running my fingertip over the soft surface as my mind churned with thoughts.

There were too many. Too much emotion, and now a fine layer of guilt perfectly applied by Mother.

I sighed. “Thank you for your call. I will take your concerns into account. In the meantime, you’re not to worry.” Then I disconnected our call.

Of course I couldn’t fucking kill my brother.

I returned my attention to Sebastian in his cell. He hadn’t moved from his knees in front of the bars, and his entire posture remained submissive.

“What am I to do with you?” I murmured. “Mother wants you alive.” I bared out a laugh as I slid my phone into my pocket. “She called to plead with me.”

That idea tasted strangely bitter, like she hadn’t known all along that I’d spare Seb’s life, like years of shared history meant nothing, like even now, our mother didn’t really know me at all.

Sebastian made no reply beyond a deep inhale that lifted his shoulders. He didn’t even move his gaze from the floor—a true condemned man awaiting his fate. But I took no pleasure in the power granted to me by my position. Not today.

“I need you at my side in this war.” I truly believed there was probably no one who had my back more than my brother. Not Kyle, not even Jason. There was a lot to be said for the bonds of family, for a shared history, and those memories and experiences bound us even now.

For a moment, relief flickered over Sebastian’s face, but he quickly concealed it, like he understood I wasn’t done with my judgment.

“But if Leia ever reaches out to you again—for anything, no matter how small—you are not to reply or respond in any way.” I dropped my voice, making it soft. “If she calls you, hang up the phone, brother. It’s clear my mate is too much of a temptation for you. She leads you to act in dangerous ways. You’d lose your life for her.”

Disappointment he couldn’t conceal this time drew his brows down, but he nodded.

“There will be no point at which you and Leia can be together. Your feelings for her are dangerous to you.” Not least because jealousy made me irrational, and I couldn’t think of my brother lusting after my mate. I needed a clear head.

“Yes, Nic.” Sebastian’s voice was low too as he acknowledged my words.

I held up a hand. “I’m not done. I will spare your life, but don’t mistake this kindness for weakness on my part. Others will, but you must not. Once the war is over, you will travel. There must be no way for you and Leia to ever be together, ever cross paths.”

He swallowed.

“Find a new home, Seb. Start again. Take a year or two, however long you need, to get her out of your head.” I snorted. “Out of your fucking blood.”

Sebastian sighed again, and his eyes gleamed with tears as he looked at me, but he nodded. “Yes,” he croaked.

I nodded. Our business here was concluded. Sebastian’s disappointment at being exiled was palpable, but I couldn’t help that.

“You’ve been lenient, my king,” he acknowledged as I turned to leave.

I glanced over my shoulder. “No. Your brother has been lenient. Don’t make me regret it.”

He nodded and I walked away, already eager to return to Leia. Sebastian had taken too much of my time, but I was lighter now that I’d dealt with him. The weight of that responsibility had lifted.

AS I ENTERED MY HOME, Leia’s light floral scent surrounded me. There was a different tinge to it now that Sebastian had bitten her, but that was already fading. I curled my fingers as I considered afresh what my brother had done,

but I shook the thoughts away. It was over. He wouldn't do the same again. He wouldn't be able to.

I followed my instincts, the way my mate glowed like a beacon for me, and found her curled up in a chair in the library, the Book of Gray spread across her lap. She rubbed the edge of one of the old pages gently between a thumb and forefinger as she prepared to turn it, and it made a pleasing shushing noise.

I stood in the doorway and watched her, an odd sense of foreboding filling me like the darkest of shadows. It was a crunch time. If I didn't turn her, everything could be taken from me.

If not by Sebastian, then by another opportunist of fate. The clock was already ticking for Leia. I'd set it in motion the moment I first bit her.

"Anything interesting?" I kept my voice light as she looked up.

She grimaced slightly, and I swallowed. I'd told her bits and pieces of information, and it wasn't the first time she'd flipped through my book of family history and lore, but today seemed different. Her scrutiny was more intense, and she seemed to be absorbing each word.

Today could change everything for us.

I hesitated before fully entering the room. I'd resisted turning her for all the right reasons. But what were my reasons now?

Her grimace became a smile as she watched me. "Hi, Nic." She spoke softly, and the hardness I'd constructed around my heart for dealing with Sebastian began to melt away.

She returned her attention to the book briefly, and her smile widened. I almost sighed. She'd found something in there that made her happy—something she thought strengthened her case, that might persuade me to turn her. She had no idea how close to that edge I already walked.

I glanced to her left, almost grateful to note the cup of steaming tea and the half-eaten beignet. At least she'd waited for me this time.

LEIA

N*ic.* A joy I couldn't explain filled me when I saw him enter the library. Even when I was mad at him, the joy had burned deep in my chest, and ignoring it had been difficult the last several days—I'd only realized how much after some of the anger had started to seep out of me. Something about the very essence of him called to me, like he was the moon controlling my tide. It was something I had almost no resistance to.

I'd never really read the Book of Gray properly before. I'd skimmed it and treated each of the thick pages with the reverence they deserved, but I hadn't tried very hard to decipher the various handwritings, picking up only what was easiest. It seemed like a cross between a family bible and a book about mythology. Well, if I still believed vampires to be only myth, anyway.

I'd half hoped for an exact recipe on how to become vampire. A shortcut to being turned, given that Nic didn't seem to be in any more of a hurry after I'd approached Sebastian.

A sliver of guilt pierced my chest as I thought of Sebastian, and responsibility for his current predicament clouded my thoughts.

I'd as good as manipulated him—I'd known he wouldn't be able to refuse my request for him to turn me, and I'd used his attraction to me against him. Perhaps, when things had calmed down between him and Nic, I could fix things. Maybe I'd have a better chance of influencing both of them if I was

vampire.

That was just one more reason to redouble my efforts.

If there were rules to being turned, I was looking for loopholes or a way to skirt around them. If I could turn myself somehow, without needing to involve anyone else, even better. I consulted the open notepad by my side. I was trying to note down anything that looked relevant so I could refer to it again if I needed to.

Worst case, I'd have a list of things to ask Nic about.

Just before Nic came in, I'd stumbled on a section about fated mates. I'd written a lot of points down and underlined them *twice*.

"Anything interesting?" Nic sounded casual, but he had no idea how interesting my night had truly been.

I took my time in replying, though. I didn't want to make him defensive. I needed him to open up to me about everything. I'd half-listened to all the things he'd told me so far, and I'd thought I understood, but it turned out there was so much more.

I glanced back at the pages in front of me. A lot of this information would be very useful. I just needed his take on it.

He hovered a little longer, looking around the room as though he could find clues to something from my surroundings.

I beckoned him closer. "Come and sit with me, Nic."

I shuffled up in the chair. It was a seat and a half, really. A little too big for one, not quite big enough for two, but we could probably make it work.

He glanced skeptically at the small space I'd made, and I gave an exaggerated sigh and stood.

"You sit first then." I gestured at the chair.

He did, taking up all the space and patting his thigh. "Now you."

I grinned. "Well, that wasn't quite what I intended, but if you insist."

A small smile captured his lips. "Oh, I very much insist."

I settled carefully onto him, and he wrapped an arm around my waist,

holding me closer to him.

I relaxed against his body and glanced at my notebook. “Nic?”

“Yeah?” He sounded tired.

“I’ve been reading about fated mates.”

“Yeah?” There was a little more alertness in his tone now, and he tensed beneath me but dropped a kiss into my hair. “Find anything interesting?”

Such an innocuous question, but it meant so much—to both of us.

I took a quick breath, relieved he’d asked, irritated I’d had to read the information to understand it fully. But now that I did understand it, at least what Nic’s book said, it opened so many doors for both of us. My soul-deep connection to him made sense, and all of the possibilities for us loomed large.

“We can be so much more, Nic.”

He did that weird vampire thing where he went so still it was like he didn’t even take a breath. I glanced up at him, but it still took a moment before he replied.

He swallowed first then cleared his throat—nervous gestures he didn’t usually make. They were too human, like he was stalling for time. “I know we can.”

I waited for more, but he didn’t say anything, so I continued instead. “And I know you need to turn me. I know you could lose me if I don’t.”

I kept my voice careful and free of anything that sounded like a personal attack. The conflict darkening Nic’s gaze told me he wasn’t happy about this either.

He sighed. “I know.”

“Then why wait?” This was the part I didn’t truly understand. If waiting could kill me, and he didn’t want to lose me, why take the risk?

He shrugged slowly before he met my gaze. “For the right time. Leia, I’ve read the book too. I found lots I didn’t know when I first met you. Before you, humans were merely an annoying source of wealth for me. The majority of them still are. So I didn’t feel like I needed to know all these

things about them. But you're different." He kissed my temple. "You're *mine*."

"Then make me yours forever."

"I want nothing more. Believe me." He sighed again. "But I've read this book backward and forward since Aimée found it. At first, turning you while you were still so angry would have been dangerous. I would have lost you all ways. There was no way to keep you. I needed to wait for the right time."

But what about now? The little voice in my head wanted me to ask, but I took a deep breath and followed a different thread instead, trying to get him to confirm as much as possible for me, so I could tell I'd understood all I'd read. "I did read something interesting, though."

He chuckled, the sound warm and smooth as silk as it wrapped around me. "I think it was all interesting, judging from how many things you have underlined on your notepad here."

He nudged the book slightly with his forefinger, and when I pressed my palm over the writing, he chuckled again—indulgently, this time.

He crooked his forefinger under my chin instead and tilted it up toward him before leaning forward and capturing my lips in the softest of kisses. I parted my mouth immediately and his tongue flicked gently against mine as his hold tightened around my waist, his touch moving from my chin to my hair as his fingers entwined in the strands and pressed against my scalp. He angled us closer together and intensified the kiss, his hand sliding from my waist to cup my breast as his tongue slid further into my mouth to tangle with mine.

Desire rocketed through me, and I pressed so close there was no more space between us. His body heat seeped through our clothes, and I gasped against his mouth.

He groaned softly, and I shifted in his lap, the outer edge of my thigh nudging against his erection.

He groaned again, but this time the noise was frustrated.

“You’re distracting me, mate,” he muttered, but he grinned against my lips. “I thought there was something you wanted to tell me? Something about...true mates?”

He nuzzled the side of my neck, and the tip of one of his fangs grazed the skin there, sending a shower of sparks to heat my blood.

It was true, there was so much we needed to talk about—but in this moment, the only thing I wanted to tell him was how much I needed him, how much I wanted him inside me, how much my body responded to him.

“What did you find that particularly interested you? What have you underlined in your notepad?”

My face heated. “It’s about the true mates.”

“Go on.” He sounded distracted as he nuzzled me again. “I want to know what you have to say about true mates...*mate*.”

“All true vampire mates started out a human.” The words left me in a rush, and Nic paused his attentions to my neck. “It’s true,” I whispered. “Vampires turned their mates.” I laughed, sudden nerves getting the better of me, and gestured to the Book of Gray. “Seems like a tale as old as time.”

“I know,” he murmured, so quietly I almost thought I’d misheard.

I completed the rest of my story quickly, curious how much more he already knew. “Okay, but when their vampire mate doesn’t turn them, they become thralls—which I think you’ve mentioned before, so maybe I just didn’t get it?—and then they will die. So if you don’t turn me—” I looked at him and lowered my eyebrows. “If *someone* doesn’t turn me, I will die, and there will be nothing anyone can do about it. At least, I think. There are some pages missing at the end of that story.”

He nodded slowly. “Lettie told me a few things, too.”

Wait. What? Lettie?

“You’ve known since...?” I shook my head and took a deep breath. It didn’t matter now. All that mattered was getting Nic to agree. “The point is, despite all the other arguments, I could actually *die* if you don’t turn me. I

could lose you. You could lose me, if not to anger, to this...thrall thing. Isn't this the kind of thing you've needed to know for sure, like a sign or something?"

I watched him for a moment, almost able to see the thoughts churning through his mind.

"Will you turn me now?" I finished, my voice quiet and earnest.

He exhaled a slow breath. "I wish I could. I mean, I *will*. I need to. I just —" He broke off, his face a brief mask of pain. "I just need a little more time. I just need..." Then he shook his head and reached for the Book of Gray. "Let's take a good look through this together. There are probably a lot of things I still need to explain to you properly."

"I can read, Nic." Frustration made my words snappy. "I know what the book says."

"Context is everything, though, Leia." His eyes were like gray mist right now—capable of concealing all the things he wanted hidden but also holding a trace of lingering sadness in the cool eddies and swirls.

I sat for a moment. Maybe this was a victory. He could tell me his interpretation and I could explain mine, make him see things my way. He was already caving, had already acknowledged that it would need to happen at some point, so...

I could be persuasive, right? I drifted my hand up his thigh, until his cock twitched beneath my light touch. Hell, yeah, I could be persuasive. I had this.

"Leia." He all but shouted my name, and I jerked my hand away from him like the touch had burned us.

Nic was a whirlwind of movement, standing from the chair and clutching me against his chest before depositing me behind one of the heavy bookshelves that made up the structure of the room.

"Fuck," he shouted. "Baldwin, get Jason, get Aimée. Call fucking Kyle."

"What?" I placed my palm against his chest to steady myself, and his heart beat a full percussion band tattoo beneath my touch. "What's wrong,

Nic?” I tried to look around him, but he kept himself in front of me like a shield as he watched something out of the window.

“Jason, for fuck’s sake,” he called. “Aimée.”

Energy vibrated the air around him, and instinct made me remain hidden at his side.

If Nic was protecting me, he was responding to need rather than just throwing his weight around. I trusted him and I trusted his motivations. This was bigger than anything we’d just been discussing.

“What’s going on?” I whispered, and when Nic glanced at me, his eyes shone the dull red of heightened emotion. “Nic?”

“A portal,” he whispered as he returned his attention outside. “Some fucker has just opened a portal on my grounds.”

He clenched his fist until I almost heard the bones in his hand crack.

“Jason, Aimée,” he bellowed again and his position altered just enough that I could see outside as he turned toward the door.

A huge blaze of purple fire undulated and shimmered just above the lawn, sparks trailing from its edges. It was massive but otherwise similar to the one Nic had taken me through when he rescued me from Francois.

“Are we being invaded?” I whispered the words as fear tickled lazy fingers down my spine.

“I don’t know.” Nic reached for me as an old man stepped from the portal. At his side were three people who emanated power. When the old man looked up, his eyes gleamed red, and his gaze found me right away.

Nic stiffened. “Émile Ricard,” he ground out.

“Who’s that?” I whispered beside him, my voice barely audible.

But he didn’t have time to answer before Jason and Amy barreled through the door.

“What’s going on?” Jason came to an abrupt stop beside us, and Aimée took up a defensive position at my other side.

“Francois’s father, fresh from his stasis. And he’s brought some magical

friends.”

“What?” Jason’s eyes widened. “What? But I thought Lettie said another fifty years.”

Nic shrugged. “Magic must be an imprecise science. Aimée, take Leia to the safe room. Don’t let anyone but me or Jason in.”

“What?” I glanced at Nic and Jason as Aimée took a firm but gentle hold of my upper arm. I knew this stance. It meant she was about to whisk me somewhere at vampire speed.

And a different time, I would have protested, but this didn’t seem like a time to argue with Nic. It wasn’t worth it. I couldn’t divide his attention when he was trying to protect me, trying to protect his house and everyone inside it. Besides, the mention of Francois and his father created more fear inside me than I liked to admit. I wasn’t ready to take either of them on just yet—I wasn’t strong enough, and I didn’t intend to waste an opportunity to get to Francois by dying at the hands of his father.

“Nic.” As I spoke his name, he pressed a fierce kiss to my lips.

“Go with Aimée,” he said. “I’ll come for you when it’s safe.”

I nodded and surrendered to Amy’s grasp, allowing her to whisk me from the room in a blur of sudden color and sound.

NIC

“**W**hat the actual fuck?” I turned to Jason as the four people in my garden watched us through the window. “Get Kyle on the phone now.”

“He’s already on the way.”

I nodded. Jason usually had everything under control on my behalf. “What the fuck?” I said again. “I *pay* for these wards.”

I’d paid extra to keep Leia safe, and it seemed the witch I’d handed the cash over to couldn’t uphold her end of the bargain. I’d have her head for endangering my mate like this.

“I want the witch,” I said.

“Already tried.” Jason shrugged, his gaze also tracking Émile and the witches he’d brought with him. They didn’t seem to be doing anything threatening—just standing and exchanging the occasional word. “Can’t get hold of her. She appears to have vanished.”

“For fuck’s sake.” But it wasn’t just a matter of reliability. After what Francois had done to Lettie, a disappearance didn’t just mean someone had cut and run on an agreement. I cut a glance toward my sireling. “Foul play?”

Jason shrugged again. “I can investigate.” He gestured toward the new arrivals. “Why do you think they’re here?”

“For Leia.” The certainty hit me like a gut punch. They could *only* be here

for Leia—it was the only thing worth this kind of a risk.

They'd come for my mate.

“Bold move,” Jason observed.

“Fucking *stupid*, more like,” I replied. “It’s another act of war, invading my home like this.”

The fact Émile hadn’t used diplomatic channels to arrange a meeting spoke volumes. This wasn’t a friendly moment. He was deliberately pushing boundaries. But... I skated my gaze over the witches he’d brought. Three, a powerful number. Some would say perfect.

But it indicated that Émile was by no means near his full strength.

“He’s here with a full complement of witches,” I muttered. “Do we know anything about them?”

Kyle strode into the room. “I’ve reached out to Temple to find out what he can tell us.” He kept his voice low. Then he glowered a little. “He should have already been in contact. Told us about the old king waking up.”

“I guess Francois being on the run created a power vacuum. Maybe that’s caused his early return somehow?” Jason folded his arms and eased into a more relaxed stance, but he only looked more menacing.

I considered Jason’s words. They made sense. Francois leaving the New Orleans area could have yanked Émile from his stasis. I’d never paid a great deal of attention to the old king before, most of my diplomatic duties having been directly with Francois as he ran New Orleans in his father’s stead, but since we’d journeyed through Émile’s mausoleum to recover Leia, I’d made it my business to learn as much about him as possible.

And now it seemed I needed information from him, especially if he’d thrown himself straight into his son’s ill-conceived war effort and kidnap attempts. Perhaps the old man even knew where Francois was. That wasn’t beyond the pale.

I took a step forward. I’d only find out the information I needed to know one way. “Time to greet our guests?”

Jason took up a position behind me, alongside Kyle. We were also three. That fact wasn't lost on me.

And we exuded a power of our own.

I unlatched the French doors that led outside. There was no real security because the wards were supposed to be enough. Three witches and a vampire could have entered the library without issue, but for some reason, they'd waited for us outside.

"Good evening," I greeted them, although there was nothing good about their visit so far. "Émile."

I nodded at the vampire king. There was power in knowing a man's name, and I wanted him to know I held it.

He nodded in return, and his face split in a garish smile—except he literally ripped his skin with the movement. Mere strands of flesh held his face together.

He looked like a walking corpse. His skin was desiccated and dry, yet something squelched wetly underneath when he made any movement, and moist red flesh gleamed wherever tears appeared. His cheekbones stood out like sharpened blades in his face, and the clothes he'd lain in stasis in hung from his emaciated frame.

What the hell had gone wrong since we'd seen him in his tomb? He hadn't looked this terrible.

"You're looking well." I spoke the words we all knew to be false, and laughter creaked from him.

"I *will* be well." He lifted his hand to his mouth and bit the juicy fruit he held.

But no, he wasn't holding fruit. The rich tang of coppery blood permeated the air around us, and red smeared his lips. He gnawed at the heart in his hand again, and my stomach turned at the sight of the organ, bulging between his fingers in his tight grip. It was a fresh one, barely stopped beating.

He ran his other hand through his hair, and broken strands sifted like fall

leaves to litter the lawn below. The bald patch of skin he left behind shone in the pale moonlight.

He was a truly gruesome sight, like some kind of Frankenstein's monster created from sheer desperation.

"To what do we owe this unannounced visit?" I maintained my composure. It wouldn't pay to lose my cool now. Although... that didn't mean I couldn't probe a little. "Some would say it could be an act of war to intrude on another king's property via portal."

He laughed again, that same creaky sound. "Some would say," he agreed before taking another bite of his snack.

Some pink seemed to have returned to his yellow, paper-like skin, and his eyes were shrewd and knowing. Everything this man did was calculated, and he was even more coldblooded than Francois, if his reputation was correct. Not every king could hold their thrones through stasis as he did.

I waited a little while, not wanting to prompt him as to his reason for being here. Asking such a question a second time could make me look weak.

Kyle saved me the trouble of asking again. "What is your purpose here?" he barked out.

Émile tutted. "Really. You shouldn't allow your staff to speak to your guests that way."

But his mouth slid into another sly smile, the hideous flesh rearranging itself a second time to form the gash of his amusement.

I merely shrugged. "He works security. It's within his remit to ask the question."

For a moment, Émile lost his self-satisfied expression, but then it reappeared, larger than before. "I've come to claim what belongs to the House of Ricard."

For a moment, I almost thought he might sweep a bow after his grand pronouncement.

"There is nothing here that belongs to House Ricard." I was very definite

about that fact. “Nothing at all, Émile.”

“Oh, Nicolas, Nicolas, Nicolas.” He shook his head as he sing-songed my name, his French accent as perfect as Francois’s. Then he glanced over his shoulder at his witches, and they laughed as if on cue. “If I can’t convince you peacefully, I’m afraid we may have to settle the debt you’ve accrued another way.”

One of the witches took a step forward, his stance menacing as he moved his hands in front of him like he was molding a giant piece of clay or doing Tai-Chi. Kyle reached for his waistband. I had no idea what weapon he was carrying—possibly nothing—but Émile didn’t know that. His eyes flickered with something that could have been concern before they cleared and a smile that would have been genial in any other face appeared.

“I’m sure there’s no need for weapons,” he said as he spread his arms wide in the accepted *nothing to hide* pose. “We can settle this in a way that befits our statuses.”

He looked at me, an eyebrow raised in challenge like I might deny my own position or dishonor it.

“I’ll say it again. There is nothing here that belongs to House Ricard.” I spoke like it was a proclamation, my strident tone traveling across the gardens.

“And *again*—” Émile lingered over the word. “I’ll beg to differ.”

I watched him as he began to fidget, appearing to lose his patience. He scrubbed his hand over his head again, losing more hair in the process, but revealing a pinker scalp than before. Then he popped the last piece of the heart into his mouth and chewed before licking his fingers in quick, efficient strokes of his tongue.

“I really don’t have time for this.” He shook his head. “I’ve come here to collect Leia.”

I laughed. “Don’t be ludicrous. My mate doesn’t belong to House Ricard.”

But Émile nodded his head smartly, the bones crackling. “She’s Francois’s true bride, Nicolas, not yours.”

Jason and Kyle stepped closer behind me, ready for anything, it seemed.

Even the crickets stopped chirping for me to make my reply. “You are mistaken. It seems you missed much during this stasis.”

I shook my head. The old man’s mind was truly addled after all. It wasn’t just rumor or conjecture. I was the only one who’d pierced Leia’s skin. Even the memory of that first bite sent a ripple of lust through me.

There was no way she belonged to Francois. She was my true mate and my bride. *I* fed from her first and *I* took her virginity. There was only me, and she was wholly mine.

“Leia is mine,” I ground out. “My true mate and my bride.”

Émile would understand what both of those things meant without me having to elaborate on how I’d made it so.

“I’m not about to let her go.” I couldn’t make my message clearer as both Jason and Kyle stepped ahead of me, their stances turning the atmosphere around us menacing.

Aimée and Leia were in the new safe room I’d had constructed as soon as I’d realized the danger Leia’s status posed. They could probably remain there for many days in safety. There was enough food to satisfy Leia, and living off baggies of blood wouldn’t bring any harm to Aimée.

“You have no choice.” Émile’s laugh was more of a wet-sounding cackle this time. “Leia is Francois’s bride, and I am here to stake his claim, seeing as my son couldn’t even get this part right.”

He seemed to be talking to himself for those last few words and a part of myself I didn’t want to acknowledge felt pity for Francois. He’d been raised by this monster.

“How the fuck is Leia Francois’s bride?” Jason tensed his jaw as though even asking the question was distasteful.

If Émile laughed one more time, I’d... but he simply smiled. “Glad you

asked. It's really very simple. When Leia was with Francois, she wasn't... conscious all the time." He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "And during one of these moments when her awareness was impaired, Francois took a single drop of blood from her finger."

I shook my head. "Not fucking possible."

"Oh, Nicolas." Émile tilted his head in a parody of sympathy. "Very fucking possible."

And I couldn't disprove it. Francois was crazy enough to feed himself a single drop of blood...

Émile nodded like he was following my thoughts. "Very good, Nicolas. I see you're fitting the pieces together. The full picture shows that Leia is Francois's bride, and her power belongs to him." He broke off and shook his head sadly. "As I fear you may have witnessed, living without his true mate is driving my son quite mad."

Rage roared through me. What the fuck was Émile talking about? *I* had Leia's power. I'd claimed her. I loved her. She was *mine*.

"She belongs only to me," I bellowed, and I leapt forward, my hands outstretched, my claws already replacing my fingernails. I'd sever Émile's head at the neck. No one would ever take Leia from me. *No one*.

But a strong arm tightened around my waist, and another over my chest, until I was restrained by Kyle and Jason.

"Ignore him. He *wants* you pissed and irrational and doubting yourself." Jason's mouth was close to my ear, but I couldn't guarantee Émile hadn't heard him.

He was pretty old, but I didn't know if his hearing was affected by the stasis or not.

"Let me go," I ground out. "I simply wanted to show our guests the way off my property."

Kyle chuckled darkly.

Émile nodded thoughtfully. "Well, one way perhaps, but if you brought

about my final death, Nicolas, you would unleash an attack of vengeance the likes of which you could only imagine in your nightmares. New Orleans would not stand by after such an attack by Baton Rouge.”

I breathed in deeply and closed my eyes. Something was wrong with this whole picture. Émile was too cocky and self-assured, too definite that his version of events was the only version of events. Had he even seen Francois? When?

But I focused and regained control, retracting my claws and opening my eyes. “There will be no attack today.” I stopped short of offering an apology—I’d never apologize for defending Leia. “But I cannot promise the same the next time someone comes uninvited and unannounced onto my property and threatens my mate.”

I held Émile’s gaze. What the hell was I missing here? No way was Leia the mate of Francois, that was for sure.

I had that first blood. There was no denying the power boost I’d felt, or the way just her proximity affected me. Even thoughts of her sent a rush of awareness through me, like I could sense her with me always.

She was mine.

No one could deny or argue that. Not with all I felt for her and all she made me feel.

“She’s mine, Émile. Nothing you say or think will ever change that.”

Émile gestured to the male witch who’d made the Tai-Chi moves before. “Take us home.”

The witch immediately opened a portal, and it blazed brighter than the first one. When he saw me glance at it, he smirked, and his display of power was obvious.

I needed better wards. I needed to find a better fucking witch.

The witches fell into formation around Émile, the one who’d cast the portal in the front, and the other two following behind. In the tradition of anyone playing to their audience, Émile stopped just before he entered the

portal, and turned, his eyes with a slight red glow. “Let me just warn you, Nicolas. If you don’t hand Leia over, there will be an army of New Orleans vampires unleashed on Baton Rouge, and it won’t be Francois leading them this time.”

Then he turned to the witches behind him and glanced between the two of them. He licked his lips and punched out his fist, smashing straight through the ribcage of the smaller witch.

Her body stiffened for a moment before Émile withdrew her hand. It beat a couple of times in his hand before he slashed through the artery with the tip of a claw.

Then he glanced at me one last time and bit into the heart as he walked through the portal, leaving the body of his witch on my lawn.

Fucking Émile.

“I’ll deal with the witch.” Jason strode toward the body and picked it up.

Her jaw hung slack, her eyes still round with shock.

“Witches must be easier to come by in New Orleans,” he said, as he arranged her in his arms, careful to give her some degree of dignity, even knowing who she was and why she’d been here.

“What’s the plan?” Kyle moved closer to me, and I almost laughed. He was my strategy man.

“What do you think is best?”

He shrugged. “How much are you going to tell Leia?”

I drew the corners of my lips down as I thought about it. “As little as possible. Nothing, if I can help it.”

It felt like I’d only just gotten her back. News like this could set her right back into being the same person who returned with us from the safehouse, and the thought of her quiet rage again made my chest ache.

“She’s only just returning to normal after watching Francois kill Jean. How do you think she’d react if she knew Émile was coming for her now?” I almost spat his name. Both Francois and Émile were sick fucks.

Kyle nodded, his gaze on the far distance as he thought things through. “We’ve still got options, though.”

“Your contact?” I hadn’t liked that jumped-up little shit when I met him, but I couldn’t deny the help he’d given us when I needed to recover Leia from Francois. We couldn’t have done it without him.

Kyle nodded. “Yeah. Temple. Want me to get word to him about this latest? See what he can find out?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s the best place to start.” I kicked a foot over the blades of grass. “Just...just *fuck*, you know?”

He nodded again. “And this way we’ll find out if the old king really is assembling a fresh army.”

I glanced toward the house, my mind seeing beyond the walls to the location of the safe room. If I could, I’d leave Leia in there, where I knew nothing could touch her or hurt her. But that wasn’t practical. I needed to guard her the best way I could, and that started with gathering intel on Émile and his activities. Maybe we’d also find out where Francois had escaped to.

“Okay, Kyle. We need Temple again. I’ll pay whatever price he demands.”

Kyle nodded again, his eyes thoughtful as he continued to focus on the middle distance. “I think it might be steep this time, Nic.”

“Anything for Leia.”

“And...” He blew out a breath and looked at me. “I’d like to go to New Orleans and see what’s going on for myself.”

I studied him for a moment. “You don’t trust Temple?”

Kyle scrunched his nose before he met my gaze. “I do, but I don’t trust anyone like I trust myself. When I see the situation, I’ll know how to reach to it. I’ll be able to give you my firsthand opinion rather than interpreting someone else’s data.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I might need you here.”

He cut me a glance, as close to scathing as he ever got. “Really, Nic?”

I sighed. “I don’t like it. They know you in New Orleans. They know your face. They’ll know what you’re doing as soon as you arrive.” I couldn’t risk Kyle’s life, too.

“I’m not used to standing on the sidelines. I need to get in there. I need to lead from the front for you. I can keep Leia safe, if you’ll let me. I’ll hook up with Temple, and he’ll help me stay undercover.”

For fuck’s sake. I couldn’t argue with that kind of logic. I’d do anything for Leia, anything at all, and Kyle knew that. He’d invoked her name on purpose, but it didn’t make his words any less true.

“All right.” I clasped his shoulder. “All right. We’ll do things your way. You can go gather your intel and we won’t tell Leia anything right away.”

As Jason rejoined us, we turned to head back into the house. Things were starting to change. First Sebastian’s betrayal and upcoming exile, and now Kyle’s request to do his own reconnaissance.

For the first time in a very long time, I had no idea what the future would look like.

LEIA

I walked past Nic's home office on my way to breakfast, and glanced in as I always did, then did a double-take.

"Nic?" He wasn't usually there at this time of day. "Why are you here?"

He glanced up. "I live here."

I paused and leaned against the doorpost. "But why here *now*? Don't they need you in town? At the casino or Vibrer?"

He shrugged, his pen still poised over whatever paperwork he had in front of him. "I shuffled a few things to work from home. You going to the dining room?"

I nodded. "Yep. Time for breakfast."

"I'll come with you." He stood without hesitation and moved around his desk. Even though he was only working from home, he wore well-tailored pants, and a button-down black shirt that clung across his shoulders and chest, hinting at his muscular physique.

When he reached me, he draped an arm around me and kissed my lips, the gesture tender. "Good morning," he murmured. "How did you sleep?"

"Pretty good." I glanced around, but there was barely a sound in the quiet house. "No Jason or Aimée today?"

"Nope." He kissed the side of my head. "I want to be with you today."

I cast my mind back. “Okay... And yesterday and the day before that?”

His eyes flickered for a moment, becoming cloudier before he smiled at me, and as always, that smile was like the sun coming out. “I want to spend more time with you.”

“Hmm...”

His words were sweet, his body language attentive, all of his touches warm and as possessive as ever but that look in his eye before... There was something he wasn't telling me, and there'd been a number of hushed conversations, as well as Kyle's name being thrown around when they thought I couldn't hear them.

I was used to that after all of his closed-door war meetings with the guys, but this was bigger somehow. When I had any sense of him at all, he felt... guarded. There was no other word for it.

The aromas of beignets and bacon scented the air in the dining room, and I inhaled appreciatively. “Smells amazing as always.”

“Mm.” Nic agreed with me, but he pulled out his phone like he was distracted, his attention divided.

I waited until we were sitting down and Nic had dismissed Mr. Baldwin before attempting an actual conversation. And even then, I paid excessive attention to scooping up the powdered sugar from my plate with the bitten edge of my beignet, attempting casual. “Nic?”

He looked at me like I'd startled him, his eyes slightly wider, and something like trepidation flickered through his gaze.

Yeah, something was up. Something he didn't want me to know. Or something he didn't think I *needed* to know, perhaps. But I was done with other people's actions controlling my life.

“Yes?” He took a sip from his goblet after he prompted me.

I inhaled a short breath. “When you sent Aimée and me to the safe room, what happened?”

That night, even Aimée had been frustrated, listening at various walls, but

her vampire hearing was no match for the solid walls designed to prevent mortals and immortals alike from detecting the room.

She'd even tested for weak spots on them before giving up and declaring that the entire room was as close to bombproof as she'd ever seen.

"It's like we've been walled up in a tomb," she'd moaned as she flopped onto one of the ridiculously comfy sofas.

I'd chuckled as I grabbed a book. Nic had stocked the room with all of my favorite things—which did kind of make me wonder how long he expected me to be locked in here.

I was contemplating between breaking open the mini-bar—an actual mini-bar—and asking Aimée to tell me what she knew about turning, when the skin at the nape of my neck prickled in awareness.

"Nic's nearby," I murmured.

"Oh, thank fuck for that." Aimée jumped up and studied the screens showing the CCTV feeds from parts of Nic's plantation home. Then she blew out a long, gusty sigh of relief. "He's at the door right now." She hurried to open it.

"Wait." I held out a hand. "Do vampires use glamour?"

Aimée barked out a laugh. "Do you think anyone would dare glamour themselves to look like the King of Baton Rouge? And do you think any glamour anyone could create would make them feel like Nic to you?"

She didn't even wait for my reply before she wrenched the door open and Nic strode into the room, his face more ashen than I was used to seeing it.

Without even speaking, he'd gathered me into his arms, and clutched me to his chest as he turned and left the safe room before taking me to my room.

From that point, he'd barely left my side.

I looked at him over my breakfast. "I know *something* happened." I paused but he said nothing. "I think it might have been something bad."

Too many thoughts fought for prominence in my head. Had Francois come back? Did Nic know his location? Whatever the issue was, it was to do

with the war, and it was something I couldn't help with.

My continued humanity made me redundant and useless.

"Tell me?" I whispered. I closed my eyes and hoped, but when I opened them again, Nic shook his head, the movement slow.

"There are things to do with vampire politics that you don't need to worry about. You're my mate, and I will always protect you. That, I promise." His eyes practically shone with his earnest words.

I almost shook my head to disagree with him, but I knew this Nic—the one who thought he knew better than everyone else, the one who commanded everyone's attention and who everyone obeyed. So I stayed quiet for now.

His words didn't change the facts, though. I needed to turn, and thanks to the things Sebastian had said and the Book of Gray, I knew how to become a vampire. How I would be *made*.

I sighed and looked at my mate. He loved me. I didn't just *know* that, I could *feel* it, and he showed me in the way he looked at me or held my hand. He just knew what I'd need or want, and he made it happen. Like it was his pleasure to do things for me.

But he needed to make everything right with his conscience or whatever the fuck was holding him back and turn me already. I *needed* him to. First, because I didn't want to be this thrall thing and die, but also because I wanted all the things being a vampire and Nic's true mate would give me.

But I'd been self-reliant way too long to just hand all control over to Nic. I had to trust in myself to see my way ahead and shape my future—the way I'd always trusted in myself. I'd needed to do that then, and I still needed to do it now.

Especially if it meant I didn't have to be helpless anymore.

I GLANCED up from the book I was barely reading anymore and caught sight

of Nic in the doorway of the library. Something about him still exuded worry. His shoulders were a little less straight, and he vibrated a kind of low-level anxiety I wasn't familiar with in him. "Hey."

He smiled, and it bought him back to me, painting confidence back into his expression, and giving his eyes their usual mischievous glint as he roamed his gaze over my body.

"Hey," he said softly in return.

"You okay?" I wasn't used to him being this available to me during his workdays. It was weird having him so close, especially when I didn't technically need him, or he shouldn't have been worried about my state of mind.

"Just feeling undercharged today. I'm going to go feed, and I didn't want you to think I left." He tapped the door frame like his subconscious didn't know what to do with some excess nervous energy.

"Okay." I smiled at him. "You may go."

I waved him away loftily, but his smile turned wistful before he walked away. His footsteps echoed away over the hardwood floor, and the desire to follow him drew me to the door, like our connection had pulled taut.

I crept after him, unsure whether he'd pick up my approach. I hadn't been in his wing since Sebastian had nearly turned me—I'd actively avoided it, even though I no longer felt like such an intruder here.

I found Nic in his blood room, the place I'd first thought might be evidence of serial killer tendencies but where he'd revealed his true nature instead.

A shiver crept through me as I remembered that first dart of fear intermingled with the disbelief I tried to cling to...then the confusion later on when I'd still found myself attracted to him.

Today, there was a distractedness to Nic as he swirled the contents of his ridiculous novelty mug. I didn't think too closely about either the mug or the contents as I stepped into his field of view.

“Leia?” He put his mug down on the counter beside the sink and stood, something about him suddenly compelling and commanding.

Thoughts of thralls and begging to be turned vanished, and all I saw was Nic, my mate, and I wanted him.

His nostrils flared, and his face tightened. “You’re aroused,” he whispered, and I stood perfectly still as he moved toward me with the grace of a deadly predator. Stalking me. About to claim me as his.

My heart rate accelerated as anticipation wound through me, and my throat dried.

“Leia,” he murmured again, as he reached me, and his eyes glowed that dull red of heightened emotion.

I didn’t wait for him to move any closer, instead launching myself against him as I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him.

He wobbled slightly under my sudden weight, but soon steadied, and I rested my hands on his hips as I explored his lips with mine. A groan rumbled through him, and his kisses were quick and passionate. Demanding.

And I wanted to give him everything he asked for. I was already wet for him. Wet and needy and wearing too many clothes. I reached between us, but unfastened my own pants this time, breaking our kiss only long enough to push them down my thighs.

“Please, Nic.” Maybe I’d always beg this man. He was like a drug to me. Perhaps I’d never get enough.

Heat raced through me to gather between my legs.

“Please,” I whispered again as he pushed his hand up my T-shirt to cup my breast over my bra. His possessive hold spoke of strength and ownership.

But it wasn’t enough.

“Nic.” I spoke urgently as he dropped his head to trail kisses along my jaw and down my neck.

I pushed my hands into his hair and tugged at the short strands. I was on fire for him.

He maneuvered us so my back was against the table, the one that held the warmer for his blood, then he swept that out of the way and lifted me so I was perched on the edge of tabletop. His attention returned to my neck as he swept my hair over my shoulder.

“Leia.” He mumbled my name between kisses, and I arched against him, an ache inside me only he could take away.

I worked his buttons free until his shirt hung open, and I smoothed my palms over his heated skin. His belt jingled as he unfastened it, his lips never leaving my throat. Then my panties were gone, ripped away by a hand I couldn’t see, and cool air whispered over my clit, heightening my desire further.

He trailed his hand up my thigh, higher and higher until he dropped his forehead to my shoulder and groaned. “You’re so wet.”

“I need you now.” I didn’t want to waste time with teases and touches and waiting. I only wanted us. Connected. Joined. Intimate.

He nodded like he understood and the sound of his zipper being drawn down filled the room, the click of each tooth separating fueling my arousal.

Then the head of his cock nudged against me briefly and I drew a deep breath as he thrust quickly inside. No warning, no unnecessary touching... Just all of Nic inside me, where I wanted him.

I inhaled again as he thrust forward, rocking his hips steadily. His mouth captured mine again, his tongue commanding as he took possession of my mouth. I wasn’t just his prey. I was *his*. Heart, body, and soul.

I drew back. “Bite me, Nic.”

The request felt so natural. I wanted to give myself to him, for him to take me.

He hesitated, all of his movements freezing, and I offered him my neck, teasing him. Hoping to tempt.

“Please,” I whispered, begging again. “Bite me... Turn me.”

He moved closer to my neck, until his hair tickled the skin there and his

warm breath fanned over me, making me shiver in anticipation. He wanted to do it, I could tell. And for the first time, I wanted to bite him back. The impulse rocketed through me, taking me by surprise, and as if he'd felt the same thing, Nic jerked forward, sinking his fangs into my neck. I surrendered to the familiar rush of desire that lit each of my nerves on fire, and almost immediately my breathing became ragged and my muscles began to tighten as Nic brought my release.

But the instinct to bite him back didn't leave me, and as he drew away after lapping his tongue over the puncture marks, I urged him back and kissed his pulse—then bit down.

Human teeth weren't made to break skin like fangs, and Nic grunted but then he gasped and pushed his fingers into my hair, urging me closer. The first touch of his rich, coppery blood against my tongue was like an elixir, and my clit throbbed with desire.

I'd never experienced anything so erotic. I hadn't known it would be like this. I sucked greedily as I touched myself, rolling my clit beneath my fingers, and Nic rocked gently inside me, not even pulling away from my mouth. It was like I'd bespelled him.

His blood brought an awareness of change. Something different. Stronger, and I sucked harder as a second orgasm crashed over me, leaving me weak as I sank against Nic's chest and he gave one last thrust.

NIC

I staggered back, away from Leia, one of my hands on her shoulder to ensure she didn't slide completely to the floor. I pressed my other hand to my neck, to the jagged wound my mate had created. A thin stream of blood trickled between my fingers, but that would stop soon enough, and my body would heal.

I looked at her, and she grinned sleepily. "Leia. *What?*" I had no coherent thoughts. "What was that?"

She shrugged. "It just... It felt right."

Holy fuck. Right? It had felt fucking *amazing*. I'd never let anyone drink from me before. Never wanted to. But now... I wanted her to do it again. Again and all the fucking time.

But no... No, we couldn't. Oh, shit. I scrubbed my palm over my face.

"Leia?"

She glanced up, her eyes sleepy and a little unfocused yet bright, like she'd drunk too much alcohol.

"What was that?" Maybe she didn't realize what she done... What she'd *started*.

Except... What she's started was perfect. She was turning. She'd requested it, and I hadn't stopped her. I'd let her. I *wanted* it, and in the moment, all my reasons and fear felt so silly. So meaningless in the face of

what could be.

I didn't have to think or overthink now. The process was started, and perhaps that was for the best. Maybe this was the ultimate way to protect her in the inevitable battle to come.

It wasn't perfect... but what had really been holding me back besides fear? She hadn't been truly angry for a while now—not in a way that it was still a valid excuse.

Now, *currently* we had love and passion and desire... Wasn't that all we needed? Wasn't that why a man turned his mate? I had everything I'd been telling Leia we needed. We could just finish this now.

Perhaps it *would* be perfect.

Because who really defined perfection but the people chasing it?

I lifted Leia from the table and held her against me as I sank into the armchair. I just needed a moment. Both to come down from the unexpected exhilaration and to figure out what to do next.

Leia giggled a little. "Wow," she murmured.

I chuckled. Wow, indeed. But now there was a lot more to determine now. "Do you know what you started?"

In response, she flung her arms around my neck. "Can we do it again?"

My cock twitched at the idea Leia might bite me again. "We need to have a talk first." I smoothed her hair from her face and kissed her temple. We had to talk about finishing it.

Well, when I could get her to focus on me. Her attention was everywhere but where I needed it to be, and I chuckled at her.

"I didn't know it would feel like this..." She peered around the room like there were things only she could see. "Look at all the colors. Is everywhere always so bright?"

"Leia..." I almost sang her name in an effort to bring focus back to me.

When she did turn to meet my gaze, she gasped and pressed my cheeks between her palms. "When did you get so beautiful? You... You...?"

“Sparkle?” I supplied.

She laughed. “No. But you’re amazing.”

I laughed as well. “I think you’re a little blood drunk.” I paused as she leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. “But Leia, there are some things we need to discuss.”

She shrugged her shoulders in an elaborate but sloppy gesture. “Does this mean I’m not going to die?”

“What?” Again, I could only look at her. I didn’t think I’d had chance to explain thralls... Had I inadvertently told her what she might become? Surely not. I had more self-control than to worry her like that. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged again. “The thrall thing. We both know it will kill me, right?”

I clasped her tighter to me. “I would never let you die.”

And surely that was the truth. But when my two alternatives had been her death—either by being in thrall to me or by being so overtaken by anger she knew only bloodlust—what would I actually have done if she hadn’t taken matters into her own hands? What *could* I have done?

“You wouldn’t have died on my watch. You *won’t* die.” I couldn’t let her. Particularly not now that we’d started the process that would turn her. But did she understand what had happened?

“Why did you bite me?” I tried to sound merely curious. Like her response didn’t matter.

But it did matter. It really mattered.

She scrunched up her face like she was puzzled. “It just felt right. Like something my body did. I didn’t think a whole lot about it.”

I almost sighed my relief. She hadn’t planned this—the true mate bond had driven it. The same true mate bond I felt, that was growing even now. Surely fate wouldn’t allow for the true mate bond to trigger so completely if it would end badly?

It was another sign that the time was right for her turning at this very

moment.

“Am I vampire now?” Her eyes were round and large as she looked around the room again then back at me. “Is that why everything feels so weird?”

I smiled down at her. “Sadly, no. It’s not quite that easy.”

“Then what?” She scrunched her face again, and I ran the tip of my forefinger down the bridge of her nose like I could smooth it out.

“We need to do it again.”

“Oh, yeah.” She looked beyond me, like she was remembering something. “He said...”

“Who said?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

But I already knew. Probably Sebastian had explained the process to her a little bit. But just the renewed thought of my brother sharing this with my mate made my gums ache and my claws appear with the need to rip out his throat.

“Nic?” Leia touched my face and peered closer at me, like she was examining my eyes. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Yes.” Then I shook my head as I made my decision. “But we need to finish this process.”

“Hmm?” She was engrossed in playing with my hair, ruffling the short strands forward and back with her fingers. “Finish what?”

“Turning you.”

She stopped her movement then twisted to me almost in slow motion. “What?”

I used her shrug from earlier. Casual, loose, sloppy. Lazy. “We’ve started to turn you, and we can’t walk that back, so we need to finish. Are you okay with that?”

She nodded. “Yes, I just didn’t think... right then.” And she tilted her neck for me. “Do you go first or do I go first?”

I laughed again. “No, not here.” I couldn’t let the backdrop of refrigerators humming be the soundtrack in my mind when I thought of turning Leia.

“My room?” She lifted an eyebrow.

“Mine is closer.” I grinned at her, and she smiled back, although her cheeks pinked.

“You sure you’re okay?” I checked in with her again, although her obvious embarrassment was cute.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I think maybe this was the way it was supposed to be.”

Before we had chance to think any further, I carried her from the room and down the hall. Her heart rate increased until it was the only thing I could hear—and it called to me in a way it had never done before.

Anticipation of what was to come chased me all the way to my bed, where I laid her down and just looked at her for a moment. She was an exquisite work of art created just for me.

Hell, I was old. So old, some days I didn’t want to put a number on it anymore. And I’d been alone for a long time. Leia had brought an end to all of that, and tonight I’d make her mine forever.

My anticipation became a full case of anxiety, like I was an untried youth. What the hell was I doing? Would I get this right? I’d done many things over my lifetime. But never this.

I almost didn’t know what to do first. Lie down with her? Remove my shirt? My pants? Undress her? So many choices... So many things to get wrong. I should have laid her on the bed. I should have stood her with me, started more naturally.

Well, fuck. Now I actually *looked* like I didn’t know how this part went. I’d turned people before. Just never my mate. I’d never cared so much about an outcome, about preserving the things I loved most about her humanity even as she changed.

Before I could overthink it anymore, Leia sat up.

“Nic?”

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?” She climbed from the bed and walked to me before raising her arms and clasping her hands loosely behind my neck. “Do you need a hand with anything?”

She grinned as mischief lit her gaze, and she pressed herself suggestively against me.

My cock jerked, and I closed my eyes briefly. When I opened them, I tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“I think I’ve got everything under control,” I murmured before I bent toward her and took her lips in a gentle kiss.

Leia was eager and would have intensified the moment right away, but I wanted this slow and right. It was the first and only time for both of us. I kept the pressure of my mouth light and teasing. But there was also something earnest because this was the start of a promise. My promise to honor her every day of our lives.

I broke off briefly. “I love you,” I murmured.

She winked. “I know.”

Then she pressed her lips against mine again and flicked her tongue against the closed seam. I resisted at first, but she was insistent, and finally I opened my mouth, slipping my tongue out to tangle with hers before allowing her entry.

She made a soft sound of contentment, and I grinned. May she always be so easy to please. Her kisses were everything—soft and gentle, and other times firm or even commanding when she wanted to take the lead, and I surrendered to her. We had an immortal lifetime to play.

I hadn’t done much but pull my pants back up in my blood room, and my shirt still hung open. Her hands found my chest, her palms smoothing over my skin. My heart beat wildly beneath her touch, but if she knew, she didn’t

say anything.

She pushed my shirt from my shoulders, and I let it fall to the floor behind me as Leia kissed along the edge of my jaw. Small, wet kisses, where her tongue darted out every so often to send an electric charge through me. She drifted the kisses down my neck, paying extra attention to the still-healing bite she'd created, and I tensed as she flicked her tongue over it, like I'd done to her so many times to quicken healing. Soon, she'd have that power. She continued downward, holding my hips for balance as she kissed from my collarbone to my sternum and down over my heart toward my abs.

As she traveled lower, she sank to her knees in front of me, and I caught my breath. She brushed her hand against the bulge of my cock as it strained at my pants now, desperate for her attention. I wove my fingers into her hair, but not for domination, just to reassure myself she was there.

“Nic?” My name was a request for permission and I nodded.

“Please.”

She unfastened my pants and teased my zipper open, freeing my cock. For a moment, he just looked at it. Then she kissed the underside of the head before looking at it again. She began by licking around the head then the length, and she used one hand to shove my pants out of the way so she could cup my balls and roll them gently in her palm. She rose up a little higher and took the fleshy end of my dick into her mouth, her tiny teeth barely noticeable, but the threat of a bite was there, and I shivered at the trust and intimacy of Leia kneeling before me with my cock in her mouth.

It was an act of worship, and I tugged on her hair a little as she bobbed her head, taking more of me into her mouth. Every time she pressed back down, she took a little more, and the hand on my balls moved so she could wrap her fingers around the base of my cock so she could stroke the remainder of my shaft.

There were too many sensations to experience them all, and pleasure blocked most of the rest of them out, anyway. I watched Leia until she turned

her gaze to me, and the sight of my cock moving in and out of her mouth was almost too much.

I drew away. "I don't want to finish like that."

The mischief returned to her gaze. "And could you?"

I nodded. Hell, yeah, I could've, but not today. "One day," I murmured, as I helped her stand and pressed my lips to hers again as I took hold of the hem of her T-shirt and lifted it upward, skimming her ribs and delicate, lacy bra.

I teased my fingertip over the fabric, and circled the darker areola before bending forward and sucking her nipple into my mouth. It pushed against the fabric, and I tapped against it with my tongue.

Her hands were in my hair this time, her nails pressed to my scalp as her breathing became irregular. I reached behind her to undo her bra, and it fell away from her body, revealing her to me.

I inhaled sharply. "Beautiful," I murmured before leaning forward to toy with her nipples with my tongue again.

My hands were on her hips, but when she wobbled, I lifted her and put her back on the bed before shedding the rest of my clothes completely and joining her. I kissed her again, taking my time as I moved my lips over hers.

I skimmed my hands over her body, savoring her warm skin, then followed the path I'd created with my mouth, pressing soft kisses to her as I moved downward. She wriggled a little.

"Nic?" Her voice was a question.

"Shh," I whispered. "Let me take my time."

She sighed as I repositioned myself lower down the bed, and lifted one of her feet. I restarted my kissing at her ankle before moving up her lower leg and the side of her knee. She froze as my lips touched the inside of her thigh, not even breathing for a moment.

"Leia?" I needed to make sure she was okay with this.

When she didn't answer, I glanced along her body to find her watching

me, her eyes wide.

I nuzzled my cheek against her soft skin. “Is this all right?”

She nodded, and I smiled then continued my kisses, lapping against her with my tongue and hearing her breathing hitch as I worked my way higher. I waited a moment for her to relax, and when she parted her thighs, I grinned against her. It was a small movement, but it was permission and acceptance all in one.

I probed gently forward with my fingers and a groan rumbled through me. “You’re so wet, Leia.” And she smelled fucking amazing.

I circled my forefinger around her clit and she moved against me, undulating slightly, setting the rhythm she wanted me to follow. But I wanted to tease her a little more first.

“Not so fast.” I chuckled softly. “I’m not finished taking my time.”

I kissed higher up her thigh before replacing my finger with my tongue and sucking her clit into my mouth.

She gasped and arched her back, offering all of herself to me.

I nudged a finger inside her, and she moaned, the sound vibrating right through her. When I glanced at her, her eyes were closed, her cheeks flushed, her hair a cascade of soft brown as she raised her arms above her head, elongating her body. She looked like a queen.

My queen.

I lapped over her with my tongue again as I moved my finger in and out of her body before adding a second.

“Nic.” She brought one of her hands to my head. “Nic, I want you.”

I stopped what I was doing so I could reply. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, and the sound of her movement rustling against the pillows filled the room like a soft whisper. Everything this woman did invaded my senses. My body was already tuned to her. Her heartbeat echoed through me like I’d acquired a second one, and her excitement seemed to thrum through me, too.

I moved back up her body, kissing as I went again, until we were face to face. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she replied, the word barely a breath.

I kissed her again. I’d never tire of kissing her. She parted her thighs wider beneath me then wrapped her legs over my hips. I nudged forward, easing into her slowly, stretching her body as I pushed in. I stopped for a moment, waiting for her to signal she was happy to continue, but mostly because I wanted to enjoy this moment.

I drew back out before entering farther, then again, as I tested my self-restraint and control. My instincts screamed at me to slam into her, to take what was mine, but this was too special to do anything but go slow and remember every moment.

Leia gasped as I set a steady rhythm, thrusting in and out of her body. She caressed my neck with her fingers, lingering over the nearly healed bite marks she’d created the first time, breaking my rhythm as her touch sent a jolt of desire through me.

“Who bites first?” she whispered.

I shook my head and chuckled. “I don’t think it matters as long as we each have the blood of the other in our mouths at the same time.”

“Can I?” she sounded hesitant, but the memory of her first bite thickened my cock, and I nodded.

I lowered my head, offering my neck to her, and she anchored her fingers in my hair. When she bit me, there was no hesitation, and immediate euphoria surged through me. A growl rumbled through my chest as something primal took over. I moved more rapidly inside Leia, and the soft sound of her sucking and swallowing was the most arousing thing I’d ever heard.

She released me as suddenly as she’d bitten down, throwing her head back as her body tightened and pulsed around mine, squeezing my cock rhythmically inside her.

My mouth was on her neck immediately, and I pierced into the skin just above her pulse, inhaling the familiar, floral scent of her skin as the first drop of her blood touched my tongue.

She gasped and her body tightened in waves again.

With the taste of her on my tongue and reaction to our blood exchange, I couldn't hold back. I gave one last thrust and held still, her blood running down my throat as I released inside her. I'd never felt anything like it. I crushed my lips to hers, our tongues sliding together, mixing our breaths and our blood as I rode the wave of exhilaration.

It was everything I'd never known I was missing.

Leia was fully mine at last.

LEIA

Nic rested over me, still inside me, bearing his weight on his forearms, and I grinned up at him before opening my mouth to tell him I loved him.

But the sound that emerged wasn't a litany of love. Instead, I screamed as pain ripped through me suddenly, searing me with molten heat and tearing through the fibers of my muscles.

Nic jerked back, withdrawing from me, his eyes wide, face tense. "Leia?"

I couldn't answer him. I thrashed under another intense wave of pain, curling my hands into tight fists as I grasped the sheets below me. I screamed again, the sound inhuman. This was even worse than the pain when Sebastian had bitten me.

"Leia, Leia, it's the venom. It's all right. You'll be all right." Nic's eyebrows were drawn down and pain flashed in his eyes. He touched my shoulder, and I screamed again.

He flinched and drew away before yanking his pants on and jogged to the door of his room.

"Baldwin," he called, and the volume of his shout was like a piledriver pounding my brain to mush. "Baldwin, tell Aimée I need her."

Leaving the door slightly open, he returned to me and reached for my hand then returned his hand to his side. "It's the venom," he said again, and I

wincing.

“Too loud,” I ground out, and my own voice boomed around the room, seeming to amplify in the small space. “Too loud.”

Nic knelt by the bed so he could look me in the eye, his hand touching my hair—the only part of me that didn’t feel like it had caught fire.

I was burning from the inside out. “Dying,” I croaked out, my tongue thick in my mouth, my gums cracking and bleeding.

But Nic shook his head, sadness still lingering in his eyes. “No, sweetheart, you’re not dying. You’re turning. It’s the venom.”

“Nic?” Aimée bustled into the room, and I shrieked at the noise. My scream rang through my head and I closed my eyes, trying not to lose myself as everything inside me seemed to fragment.

But I needed to know what they were doing. I just barely cracked my eyes open and peered through my lashes.

Nic grabbed his sister’s arm and pulled her close, bending to whisper in her ear.

But I could still hear every fucking word he said. “She’s turning, Aimée.”

“Oh!” Aimée clapped her hands over her mouth. “Oh, shit! You did it.”

She grabbed Nic’s hands and started jumping up and down, each thud against the floor like a bomb going off in my brain.

My fucking brain was going to be mush, Jell-O oozing out of my ears.

Aimée glanced at me and hissed an excited whisper at Nic. “You really did it? You have an eternal mate?”

Although his gaze was worried, he couldn’t hide a small, satisfied smile. “Yes.”

“Okay.” Aimée looked at me again. “What can I do?”

Nic shook his head. “I don’t know. But she’s in so much pain, I don’t know what to do.”

“Book of Gray?”

“In the library.” Nic jerked his head toward the door like Aimée wouldn’t

know where the library was, that he hadn't hidden it somewhere behind one of the doors in his room.

"I'll grab it." Aimée left the room and squealed all the way down the hallway. Then she raced back into the room, almost screeching to a stop as she halted from vampire speed, the pages of the Book of Gray ruffling as she flipped it open.

"Did you not read this part?" She looked at her brother accusingly, and I twisted on the bed as more pain wracked my body. "You need to help her. Look at her."

The whispers became more vehement.

"Well, what helped you? I don't know how this part goes or feels. I wasn't turned—I was born, remember?" Nic sounded urgent.

"What makes you think I remember my turning?"

Usually, I would have laughed at Aimée's snappy tone but everything hurt. There was no laughing. Only the tears that crept from the corners of my eyes.

"Orgasms?" Aimée glanced at the book.

"What the fuck, Aimée? Do you think Leia wants an orgasm right now?" Nic gestured at me, and I did nearly laugh at the ridiculousness of it, but my body almost ripped in two, and I screamed again instead.

Still, Aimée's whisper reached my ears. "That's what it fucking says in the fucking book, *Nicky*."

I groaned. Neither one of them was coming anywhere near me. Orgasms weren't a thing right now, as far as I was concerned. I was dying. And this was all Nic's fault, anyway. Kinda felt like orgasms got me here.

I burned like I was already on my way to Hell.

I squeezed my eyes closed and forced myself to recede in my head. I needed the screaming to stop. Who the hell was screaming again?

“SHE’S QUIET NOW, AT LEAST?” Aimée’s questioning whisper permeated the fog in my head.

“Yeah.” Concern radiated from Nic.

It vibrated in the air around me.

“But she’s still in pain,” he said. “I can feel it.”

“You know what sometimes helps me with pain?” Something rustled, the sound piercing as Aimée shifted her position.

“No more fucking talk of orgasms, Aimée.” Nic scrubbed his hand over his cheeks—the rasp of stubble gave it away.

I took mental stock of the room. The screaming had stopped, but I ached all over. Even my eyelids ached. I didn’t want to move them. Was I still dying?

“A bath, Nicky. Every girl needs a bath when she’s sore.”

“I can draw Leia a bath.” The fabric of Nic’s pants crinkled as he stood, and his footsteps shushed across the thick carpet as he walked toward the bathroom.

The faucets squeaked a little when he turned them on. How did they bear this? All the noise, all the time. I opened my mouth to ask Aimée but only a hiss emerged from my dry throat.

“Nicky!” Aimée forgot herself and yelled her brother’s name. “Nicky, I think she might be hungry as well.”

“Really? Already?” I cracked an eye open as Nic popped his head around the bathroom door. “Isn’t that a bit early?”

Aimée walked toward him and lowered her voice further but I could still hear them. My body seemed to drift. Waves of pain interspersed with bone-deep fatigue.

“I don’t remember much about being turned, but I do remember intense hunger,” Aimée said.

Hunger? My stomach didn’t grumble, and I had no cravings...

Suddenly, Nic was at my side. “Would you like a bath, Leia? Aimée

thinks it might help with the pain.”

I opened my mouth, but even that movement hurt as my jaw ached and my skin seemed to stretch beyond what it was capable of.

As if he'd read something in my gaze, Nic bent and lifted me against him. My muscles all tightened in protest and a strange gurgle emerged from my throat.

“I've got you,” Nic murmured. “I've got you.”

“You think you can get her through this, Nicky?” Aimée's words sent horror spiraling through me. No one had mentioned any possibility of *not getting through*.

“Yes.” Nic's reply brooked no argument. Like there was no other way.

I turned my face against him, inhaling his spicy scent like it was some sort of anesthetic as he walked carefully across his room.

He lowered me straight into the bath and I hissed as my skin touched the water. But as it lapped around me, and the scents of lavender and chamomile surrounded me, I began to relax.

“Any better?” Nic narrowed his eyes slightly as he looked at me, like he was trying to gauge my pain levels.

“Nicky?” Aimée knocked on the door. “Can I get anything to help you?”

He didn't move from by my side, helping to hold me up in the water. It felt like if he let me go, I might submerge and never see the surface again.

“Uh, maybe blood?” Nic sounded uncertain so very rarely that it took me a while to recognize the tone.

“Any particular type?”

“O negative,” he said without hesitation. “Purest blood, universal donor, most likely to be easy on her stomach, don't you think?”

If Aimée heard the question directed at her, she didn't reply. Perhaps she'd already left on her mission.

Blood. I turned the word over in my head. I'd never in my life thought blood would become my food. I didn't exactly believe it now, even. Blood

was... Life. Not food. The idea used to nauseate me, but now I felt nothing.

Perhaps that was how vampires did it, drank so much blood. They simply didn't care.

Aimée knocked on the door again, and the sound pounded a little less loudly through my head. She entered the room brandishing Nic's favorite mug.

"Here you go, Nicky. I think I warmed it correctly." She shuddered delicately. "I don't know how you survive on this stuff."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yet I do." Then he lifted the mug to his lips and sipped. "This is great. Just right." He adjusted his hold on me so he could bring the mug to my lips. "Drink, Leia," he urged. "It should help."

The coppery tang of the blood stirred my interest, and for the first time, my stomach ached with emptiness rather than mere pain I couldn't identify.

"Ready?" Nic looked at me and I nodded.

Actually answering seemed too much work. I could barely function at all. Maybe the blood would help that.

He tilted the mug and I parted my lips, allowing the warm liquid to trickle into my mouth. It was thick and cloying, and I swallowed hard before it went slowly down my throat.

"There you go," Nic murmured. "You'll feel better soon."

Gradually, he encouraged me to take more but always the smallest of sips.

"Just go steady."

I relaxed into the gentle sound of his voice and against his strong hold. "I love you."

He tensed a little and surprise vibrated from him. "I love you, too." He nuzzled against my hair. "It's good that you're feeling better."

I smiled. Yeah, I was feeling better. The blood must have worked.

"Is blood the cure for all ills, then?" I turned to look at him and he grinned at me.

He began to reply but I didn't hear him because a noise like a freight train started in my ears and my stomach bubbled and roiled, and then Nic was covered in red. It poured from my mouth and dripped from his face and hair, and he started yelling but I couldn't hear him because the noise wouldn't stop.

Each of my muscles tightened and released, out of my control. The water in the bath splashed and frothed like someone was boiling it.

Nic's face blurred before me, but I was aware of him lifting me from the tub and laying me on the floor. The tiles were cool beneath my skin but still my body thrashed and moved without permission. My jaw tensed and my teeth pressed hard together. Strained and muffled noises emerged from me.

"Aimée! Help!" This time when Nic bellowed for his sister, I heard exactly what he said. "Leia's seizing—she's rejecting the change."

Then my eyes closed and I didn't hear anything else.

TRAPPED. I was trapped in a pain that had rushed back to claim my body, and it was worse. Everything burned. Maybe I was melting away. My lungs wouldn't inflate. I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't fucking breathe.

My limbs had disappeared. I was floating in a big ball of agony and I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, I couldn't shout.

I couldn't even see.

It was dark... So dark.

Then it wasn't. A pinprick of light floated from the edge of nowhere toward me, growing bigger until it wasn't simply light.

"Mom?" I gasped her name as she materialized in front of me, and the black surrounding us became my gardens at home. Only, not *my* gardens. Not the ones Nic had created for me, anyway. They were the gardens of my

childhood. The ones Mom had tended and nurtured.

She looked at me, mischief in her eyes, and she laughed before darting away, in the direction of the swing and the high hedges.

I knew this game. Listening to the sound of her giggles, I turned away and covered my eyes as I began to count. I wriggled my toes in the soft, damp grass, and I inhaled the scents that awoke all my memories of happiness.

Perhaps I *had* died. Maybe this was Heaven. Heaven with my mom. What else could it be?

I laughed and stopped. That wasn't my laugh. I pulled my hands from my face and wriggled my small fingers then looked at my little, bare feet. Wait. How old was I?

"Mom?" I called. "Mommy?"

Her laugh floated to me on the light breeze. "Marco," she called back.

"Polo." I took off running, sheer joy flooding my whole being. I was a child again, looking for Mom in our garden. I had a do-over.

I glanced in the direction of the house as I ran and almost stumbled. It was in perfect condition. Near gleaming, in fact. And our old maid was somewhere around. She was humming, just as she always had.

"Marco," I shouted again, but I spluttered the end of the word as more blood surged up my throat and my muscles tensed.

I crashed to the floor as waves of pain seized me. I tried to call for my mom but my jaw wouldn't move and sounds only gurgled from me. The darkness crept back in at the edges of my vision, and I tried to fill my fists with blades of grass—anything to anchor me to this place, this time, this happiness.

I wanted to be back here. I wanted my mom again.

I didn't want to leave.

The blackness closed in and the smell of antiseptic filled my nose. I retched. This smell held no good memories, and neither did the quiet

murmuring of the nurses as they comforted my dad. I didn't want to open my eyes.

But I did.

Mom lay still—too still—in the hospital bed, and Dad clutched her hand like he could bring her back through sheer force of will alone. And I simply watched her, my eyes on her chest like any moment it might move again as she drew another breath.

But it wasn't going to. My rational mind knew that, but the rest of me held onto hope. I almost didn't dare look at Dad. I'd made that mistake before. I'd seen the exact moment he gave up, the second he surrendered the best of himself to follow Mom wherever she'd gone.

I'd seen the shell of the man left behind.

And I couldn't bear witness to any of that again.

Except, like it was destined and I'd never be able to change it, my gaze tracked across the room to Dad, sitting in the chair by the bed, the nurse's hand on his shoulder, and his eyes met mine.

There.

That was it. That split second glance where his eyes changed and never returned to the dad I'd always known. In that moment, my hero became the weight I'd carry until his death.

I lost them both that day.

I turned away from him. I couldn't watch anymore. And I couldn't watch Mom either.

They were both gone. They'd both left me on the same day, and I'd fought to survive every day after that.

As the muscle-twisting pain started to creep into my body again, I steeled against it. No. I wouldn't end my days like this, trapped in too much pain and my memories. This wasn't it for me.

I'd survived. I'd forged my own fucking path and dragged Dad down it with me. I'd created our life, and I'd made my choices. Damn if I'd let

anyone take that life from me.

I wasn't ready.

As I dug deep in myself for the resolve and the will to survive, I pushed back against the pain.

This wasn't my end.

NIC

“It’s been three fucking days.” I barely resisted shouting the words as I looked at my mate lying in my bed.

She was peaceful now, but sometimes she still seized without warning. Aimée looked exhausted as she sat in the chair she’d drawn up to the bed, the Book of Gray open on the table at her side. She rubbed her hand over her face and sighed.

I looked at her nearly gray pallor. “You need to eat.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Who can think about feeding right now? I want to help my friend.”

“Help her how? She slips in and out of consciousness, and we don’t know if she’s going to recover.” Helplessness claimed my words and I sat heavily on the chair on the other side of Leia’s bed. “I don’t know what to do, Aimée. I just don’t know.”

“Relax.” She looked up. “We’ve got this. I’ll carry on reading the Book of Gray.”

I coughed out a laugh and looked at the ceiling. “You’ve been reading it for the past three days.”

“And I’ll carry on reading it until I find out what to do. Our ancestors had a lot of...” She paused and seemed to weigh her words. “*Conflicting* things to say about turning their human mates. I was wondering, do you think you have

any other texts about it in your attic? I can send Baldwin or even Tomas up there to look.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know if it would do any good.”

I reached for Leia’s hand. She was still warm but maybe not burning up as she had been. She just looked so pale against my dark gray sheets now.

“I can’t lose her,” I croaked out.

Aimée glanced up, both mischief and sympathy present in her gaze. “I never thought I’d see this day.”

“What day?”

She laughed softly. “The day you would have been so taken by a human that we’re where we are now.”

I looked back at Leia. It wasn’t something I would have predicted either. It was a far cry from the usual structure of my world, where I was always confident I’d win, where *my* house *always* won in the end. Where the odds were always carefully stacked in my favor.

But I wasn’t sure about these odds.

“What was it like for you?” It was the question I wasn’t even sure I wanted to know the answer to, but I had to know. Anecdotally, females had a tougher time transitioning to vampire, and I hadn’t been present for Aimée’s when our father turned her.

She laughed a little, but it was bitter. “I’ve heard I nearly died.”

I nodded slowly.

“But that’s *nearly*, Nicky. Look at me now.”

And I did. I looked at both of us sitting at Leia’s bedside and took in Aimée’s graying complexion again.

“Who sat with you?” Perhaps I should have been more involved at the time. I’d now more now if I had been, anyway.

“Father, I think. Possibly Mother, too.” She tilted her head to one side like she was trying to remember something. “I know it’s harder for you to understand because you were born fully formed, but for those of us who were

turned, it's different. The biological change is dangerous." She looked at me. "But you've done nothing wrong. This was necessary. Leia would have died without it."

My own laugh was harsh as I gestured to the bed. "She doesn't seem much better off now." And I'd done it. After everything we'd been through, I'd nearly killed her anyway.

"No." Amy's voice was quiet but vehement, without any respect for a king. "No, you do *not* get to think like that. Not now, not ever. Look at Leia now. Yes, look at her. This woman loves you so much that her entire body is rearranging itself to be your perfect match, so she can stay with you forever. And she's *strong*, Nicky. She's strong. I wasn't able to feed so early. I wasn't awake like she was immediately after."

"Well, she's not awake *now*," I snapped back. "She slipped into this zombie phase right after." I looked away from Aimée, away from the eyes that saw too much. "I can't lose her," I said again. "I don't know what I'd do. Don't know how I'd carry on."

Before Aimée had chance to respond to the words I hadn't intended to speak, I stood. "I'm going to get another cool cloth to help keep her temperature down."

THE NEXT DAY, I woke to Aimée shaking my shoulder. "Nicky. Nicky, wake up."

I surged from sleep to full consciousness, adrenaline pounding through my system. "What is it? What's wrong?"

But my sister laughed. "Nothing's wrong. I think Leia's fever has broken. Look at her."

I turned my attention to my mate, and Aimée was right. The small beads of sweat that had marked Leia's hairline and brow were nowhere to be seen,

and the red color had faded from her cheeks. I exhaled a long sigh. “Thank fuck for that.”

Aimée laughed and bent to kiss my cheek. “Listen, I’m going to update Tomas and find somewhere to feed, but I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’m sure there are things you’ve been neglecting, Your Majesty.”

She offered my title in a teasing way, and I laughed, my heart suddenly lighter.

“I’ve got nothing more important than Leia. Nothing.” My last word was emphatic, and Aimée nodded as I looked at her.

“I’ll be back so you can check on things, anyway.” With one last press of the back of her hand to Leia’s forehead and a soft smile of satisfaction, she left the room.

I stood and bent over Leia, pushing the loose strands of hair from her face before kissing her cheek. “Nearly there,” I whispered. “You can do it. Come back to me.”

My heart swelled with hope, but my mind urged caution.

I didn’t listen to my mind. I only hoped.

I hoped and wanted.

I needed Leia.

As I sat back down, content to just watch my mate and listen to her breathing, quiet and regular now after the past few days of a horrible rattling sound that seemed to happen far too infrequently to sustain life, my thoughts turned to Kyle.

I’d been so worried about Leia, I hadn’t even left my room, never mind asking for any kind of update on how things were going in New Orleans. I glanced toward the closed curtains like I could see beyond them and all the way to wherever Kyle had hidden himself.

Jason would have reported to me if anything had gone wrong. He would have known it was important enough to interrupt my vigil at Leia’s bedside to tell me that kind of news.

But now that I'd thought of Kyle and his situation, I couldn't rest. I drew my cell phone from my pocket and grimaced at the battery life on it. The charger was across the room so I left Leia's side to make my call, keeping her within my field of vision the whole time.

I listened to the long, drawn-out ringing on the line, counting the seconds before Kyle picked up. He was somewhere noisy, and the first voice I heard, murmuring in the background, was female.

"Thanks, Chesca," Kyle said before he greeted me. "Nic. Give me a second. Let me get somewhere quieter. How is Leia doing?"

His question relieved a little of my guilt that I hadn't been more on top of checking in with him. Someone had been speaking to him if he was aware of Leia's condition. Most likely Jason, but possibly Ben. Someone more organized...or just less distracted than me, anyway.

Not for the first time, I was grateful for the men I had surrounding me. Even Sebastian.

Well, Sebastian made the list most of the time, anyway.

I listened to muffled sounds and chatter as Kyle made his way through a crowded space. From the noises, it was most likely he was in a bar—not exactly keeping his head down and lying low, then.

A door creaked before he spoke again. "What's up, boss?"

"I'm just checking in." Holy hell, even just getting an update from Kyle felt good. It was something normal after the past few days of turmoil.

I couldn't help another glance at Leia, taking in the way her chest rose and fell with each breath she drew. Perfect. I definitely had hope now. And all I needed to improve my day was a good report from Kyle as to how things were going in New Orleans.

"Are you safe?"

He chuckled. "Safe as I can be. But I know enough of the right people to hold my own."

I considered his words. There was probably more information in the

things he *hadn't* said. "Okay. And how are things generally?"

He waited a beat then a beat too long, and my mind started filling in the blanks.

"Things are that good there?"

He sighed. "Put it this way, I'm glad I came to see for myself."

Far, far from good, then. A sigh from Kyle was a pretty big indicator things weren't going his way.

"Want to catch me up? I've been a little out of the loop."

There was a brief silence. Perhaps he'd nodded. "And Leia?" He asked after my mate again, and a smile curved my lips.

"Hopefully over the worst. She's resting easier today."

Kyle blew out another sigh. "Glad to hear it."

Then we both had a moment of silence while I contemplated what I would have done if Leia *hadn't* turned the corner.

Maybe Kyle was doing the same. "So all your thoughts are back on the war with Émile now?"

I could barely take my gaze from Leia. "Most of them," I agreed.

"Good." The genuine relief in his tone caught my attention and I sat in the closest chair. This conversation sounded like it was about to take a very bad turn indeed.

"What's going on over there, Kyle?" I lowered my voice. Who knew what Leia could actually hear, and I didn't want her to know any of this if it was bad. Her fever had only just broken. Bad news could worsen her condition all over again.

"Émile is coming good on his promise, Nic. The threat he made about building a vampire army. And he's more skilled at it than Francois was. These aren't just hungry fledglings who won't know anything but bloodlust."

I nodded. I wouldn't have expected Émile to use the same tactics as Francois. I knew he'd be better, less crazed perhaps. Certainly more experienced. But this wasn't the news I'd wanted to hear.

“And you think the target is still Leia?” My gaze wandered to her once more.

Émile would certainly have a surprise if he came back for her now, but it meant I had a lot to do to get her ready. Resolve strengthened my desire to keep her safe.

“How long do you think it will take Émile to make his army?” I grabbed a notepad and pen from inside a drawer in the table so I could write the details down to share with Jason and Sebastian later.

“That’s the thing, Nic. This isn’t Francois we’re dealing with anymore. He had no choice but to make his army. No nearby king will deal with him, but Émile has a lot more influence.”

I paused, my pen hovering over the empty page. “And how is he using that influence?”

“He’s made deals all over Georgia. They’re sending men to boost his numbers.”

The pen cracked in my hand before I readjusted my grip.

“We’re outnumbered,” Kyle added, like I hadn’t already done the math.

“I assume you have a recommendation, though.” Kyle was my best strategist, so if he didn’t have a plan, we were all in trouble.

“Yes. You need to go back to the wolves. They bolstered our numbers last time, and the same strategy can work again. If you move quickly, you can launch an attack before they’re ready. Surprise might be your best strategy.”

There was some raucous yelling in the distance near to wherever he was, but he didn’t change the subject or end our conversation, so he was obviously under no threat.

“And how did you get this intel?” My pen scratched furiously across the paper as I tried to capture Kyle’s words and my initial ideas.

“I have a new contact.”

I stopped writing. “Oh, yeah?” Anyone else who knew our business was a potential danger to Leia and to my position.

“Relax.” As ever, Kyle seemed to read my mind. “She’d good. She’s Temple’s sister. Francois turned her at the same time as he turned Temple. Apparently, he’s been looking for and mistaking women for his true mate for many years.”

I shook my head at Francois’s obvious desperation to forge links where none existed. What drove a man to that? “So why is she involved?”

“Many of the same reasons as Temple. She was turned against her will, and she doesn’t believe in this war. Not when Francois has killed so many women trying to turn them—Chesca just got lucky.”

There was that name again. Kyle had been with her when he answered this call.

“She wants her freedom from him.”

I nodded as I captured the details about Kyle’s new source then glanced at Leia again. She was still resting easy. Hell, I hadn’t expected this part to be *more* difficult. Turning her should have been the solution to all of our problems, or at least the start of that solution.

“Okay. I understand that. And you’re sure you can trust her?” I asked because Kyle had a lot resting on this new name.

“She’s Temple’s sister.”

That wasn’t really an answer to my question, but Kyle’s tone said it was the only one he was going to give. “Right. I’ll talk to Jason and Sebastian and bring them up to date. We’ll make a plan about who to contact and how quickly we can mobilize, if you think surprise is the best tactic we’ve got.”

“Pretty sure it’s the only tactic we’ve got, Nic. More vampires arrive in New Orleans each day.” His tone was grim.

A chill danced across my skin. New Orleans sounded like a powder keg, and one of my best men was right in the middle of it.

“We’ll get it figured out.” I said a hurried goodbye and hung up the phone then debated what to do next.

Aimée still wasn’t back to take over watching Leia, and I didn’t want to

leave her on her own yet. Still, I could call Conri before I spoke to Jason and Sebastian. I still had his number from when he'd agreed to a meeting before, although I'd hoped to never use it again.

"Hello?" He was gruff when he answered. Gruff and suspicious.

"Conri," I greeted him, still keeping my voice low. "It's Nic Dupont."

Probably best to lead by being relatively familiar and offering him my nickname.

We weren't exactly friends, but even grudging allies didn't require formality. Not when I was essentially trying to broker another deal, anyway.

"I know." So he was still a man of few words. Good to know.

And he least he hadn't greeted me with *what do you want?* I could be thankful for small mercies these days.

"How are you?"

He greeted me polite enquiry with the hollow laugh it deserved. "More importantly, Dupont, how are *you*? And what do you want this time?"

I withheld my sigh. Sounding irritated wouldn't help my case at all. "I have another deal to discuss with you."

"Oh, yeah? That human still giving you trouble?"

I looked over to Leia again at his words as I weighed up how much to tell him. "Some," I finally allowed. A little vulnerability had helped grease the wheels last time, after all.

He sighed. He seemed to have some sort of soft spot for difficult humans. "What is it you want?"

"A proper, negotiated deal. No favors." I didn't want to be beholden to the local wolf pack.

He laughed softly. "I'd expect nothing else."

"I need numbers again. New Orleans is amassing an army." I jumped right in with my requirements. There was really no point in hiding it.

He made a noncommittal noise like he already knew what I wanted... Which just meant he didn't know what I had to offer. I almost still didn't

know what I might offer. As little as I thought I could get away with.

I sucked in a quiet breath as I revised that thought. Where Leia was involved, I'd offer as much as I needed to in order to guarantee her safety.

The silence was heavy between us, each of us too alpha to want to be the one to break it, but I had most to lose if this failed, so I went first again.

"I have some land holdings bordering and extending a little way into Texas that I'm willing to trade." This was land that would give Conri power over the Texas packs, and we both knew it.

"Interesting," he murmured. "We're always looking for new trade routes."

I held my breath for a moment before speaking again. "I can provide you with that."

His silence stretched on, but I refused to break it this time. It was better to let him tell me what he wanted than for me to offer up anything else first.

"If I agree to send men, I want you to take New Orleans completely."

I hadn't thought much beyond neutralizing the threat against Leia. But of course he was right. I couldn't leave another power vacuum in such a position of strength in the state.

I'd have to fill it myself.

"We can help with that, but in return I want some of New Orleans added to the bargain," Conri said. "Some of the city will fall under wolf control. We have..." He hesitated. "*Business interests.*"

The tone he added the last part in let me know not to ask too many questions, but thanks to Jason's friendship with Conri's beta, I already knew their interests were more along the lines of drug running or weapons dealing... Nothing that interfered with my own business interests, anyway.

But did I want to share with Conri? We'd always kept our distance before. Back when I didn't fucking need any help from anyone. Part of me missed those days. The other part of me understood this new status quo was entirely worth it.

Yet I still hesitated to give Conri what he wanted. I didn't want his success to seem too easy or like I had nothing I wasn't prepared to lose.

"Dupont," he prompted. "Do we have a deal?"

"Let me get this clear," I said. "We're going into New Orleans to capture the whole place?"

"That wasn't your plan?" Surprise changed the timbre of his tone.

Of course he was surprised. That should have been my plan all along. Remove Émile and instate someone I could trust. Someone who would work with me.

"It is now. And you'll get your share."

We ended the call by negotiating percentages and amnesties and the finer points of working alongside beings who'd spent most of their lives with mutual animosity. When we hung up, I moved to sit by Leia again, triumph creating a smile on my lips.

I'd done it. I'd brokered the deal that would protect my mate into the future.

And I was about to take New Orleans.

LEIA

I woke in an instant. Nothing the like the groggy time it usually took me to drag myself from sleep before I'd exchanged blood with Nic. One minute I'd known nothing, the next my eyes were open, and it felt like I knew *everything*.

I instinctively knew where the sun was in the sky, where Nic was—he vibrated along some sort of bond that hadn't been there before—how many others were in the house, and... Holy crap. There was a human somewhere outside the house.

The colors in the room were the brightest I'd ever seen, like they existed on a spectrum I'd never had any knowledge of. I glanced around Nic's bedroom, but I could have lain there with my eyes closed and known I was alone. I swore I could hear Mrs. Ames breathing in one of the rooms on the first floor.

A sense of purpose flooded me as I got out of bed. Shit, I'd never felt so alive...so fucking strong. There wasn't another word to describe it. I was *strong*. The me reflected in the mirror in Nic's closet was like the super-amped version of me. I was leaner, the lines of my body fierce now, like excess fat had burned away during my transition.

I tried out my bond to Nic again. It was like tweaking on a wire that existed between us. I brushed against it tentatively with my mind and the

vibrations traveled up and back letting me know Nic was nearby. I concentrated harder. There was something else. He was distracted, focused on a task. I concentrated harder but couldn't figure out what. Maybe that would come later, or maybe I was never supposed to have that kind of insight.

I shrugged. I'd ask him later.

Actual mind reading sounded cool, but it would be pretty invasive, especially if it went both ways. I probably wasn't ready for that kind of deep connection. There was still too much crap in my head that no one else needed to know about.

Aimée didn't seem to be anywhere in the house, but her scent lingered in this room as though she'd spent a lot of time with me. I breathed in deeply, missing my friend.

But a second aroma caught at the back of my throat. Something more delicious than I'd ever smelled in my entire life.

Food.

My stomach gurgled and growled, and I took off, out of Nic's bedroom, following the delicious, tantalizing aroma as it led down the hall. My speed was off the charts but still not fast enough.

My prey would get away.

I reached out and pressed my hand to the bannister that ran along the top of the stairs, overlooking the entrance hall below, and I sprang over it, landing in a light-footed crouch on the hardwood floor.

Mr. Baldwin's eyes widened in an unfamiliar look of surprise on the butler's face as he walked by. "Miss Leia—"

But that was all I heard as I raced off to chase my first meal.

Kitchen... kitchen... My target repeated itself in my mind, and I burst through the door to find a delivery driver unloading boxes into the center of the room. He took one look at me and ran from the room, shouting his fear to anyone who'd listen.

But we were in the middle of nowhere, and I was fast. And strong. Oh, so very strong.

I leaped after him then eased off, allowing him to think he'd escaped. The laugh that bubbled from me didn't sound a whole lot like me, but this was fun. In a world where I'd once been the lowest of the low, dragging myself from day to day, in basic survival mode, I was now an apex predator.

Unstoppable.

As I increased my speed again, about to catch him this time, my fingernails became claws, and my gums ached with a ferocity that momentarily halted my movement as I covered my mouth with my hand and looked around.

I swiped toward the man, but I'd misjudged the distance between us, and my claws caught the nylon fabric of his uniform, leaving it hanging in shreds.

He screeched again, and his heart thundered, filling the air between us with the most seductive sound I'd ever heard. I almost wanted to sway in time with each beat.

The guy scrambled away as I stepped toward him, falling to the ground. His gaze never left my face as he began to scuttle along like a bug.

"Help me," he yelled. "Help!"

I crouched low, ready to make my move, and my fangs descended, slicing through my gums with a faint *snick*. Then I growled, startling myself, but even that sounded cool.

"Leia! Leia, no!"

I made the mistake of looking behind me to see Nic racing toward me, his arms out like he was about to grab me. I snarled and jumped closer to the delivery guy on the ground. Nic couldn't have this blood. It was mine. The delivery guy squealed as I touched him, but before I could lower my mouth to his neck, I was scooped into strong arms.

"Baldwin," Nic barked over my head. "Move the courier. I'll come back and deal with him when I've secured Leia."

“Yes, sir.”

I glanced over Nic’s shoulder as he sped me away to see Baldwin helping up a very shocked man from the driveway.

“What are you doing?” Nic glanced down at me. “It’s good to see you awake, by the way. I didn’t expect our first encounter for you to be naked on the driveway, though.” An amused smile captured his lips.

Bloodlust still rocketed through me, and I struggled against his strong arms, growling a little as I did. What the hell did a little unplanned nudity matter when I needed... I swallowed. I couldn’t even find it in me to care about being naked. I needed *blood*.

Nic chuckled. “Hungry?”

WE ENTERED Nic’s blood room after a brief stop to grab Mom’s robe from the back of the bathroom door in my room, but I took one smell of it and rejected it. It smelled too much like human. I shook my head, and Nic shrugged his shoulders.

“You need to wear one of mine, then. I can’t have you running around the house and grounds without a stitch of clothing on... Unless we’re playing a very private game of hide and seek.” He winked. “Maybe we can book that in sometime soon. Our more immediate issue, though, is my very hungry mate.” He kissed the side of my head then lowered his voice. “I’m sorry you woke alone. I should have been there to prevent this.”

“I felt you.” I slipped on the robe he handed me from his closet, folding back the sleeves where they hung below my hands. My voice was still thick around descended fangs.

“Hm?” He looked back at me as he led the way to his blood room. Then he grinned, partly shy, partly proud. “That’s our bond. I was on my way to you, but you were faster at getting to that delivery guy, unfortunately. Never

mind. We have days to train you to the bagged blood.”

“Days? But I thought you said you needed to deal with the delivery guy I almost ate?” Because, shit, I would absolutely have eaten him if Nic hadn’t intervened. As my fangs receded into my gums, my remorse grew at the way I’d behaved. I gasped. “I almost ate a guy. I could have killed him. Holy shit. I terrified him.” I probably traumatized the guy for life—and that was the best-case outcome. I’d never known such hunger or been so uncontrolled. Heat flooded my cheeks. “Is he okay?”

Nic nodded, but the heat didn’t recede. Shame at my behavior kept it there.

A second memory slammed through me. I covered my face with my hands. “Oh, God, and I was running around *naked*.”

As I peered between my fingers, Nic chuckled.

“Baldwin has seen far stranger, believe me.” He walked over to the first fridge and opened the door. “Take a seat in the chair over there.” He pointed to the one easy chair in the room. “I’ll provide your beverage, house red, madam?”

He swept a low bow, and I laughed, glad of the sudden levity.

I watched his almost familiar ritual of emptying the warmed contents of a blood bag into his mug, only this time that blood was for me. I swallowed nervously, the convulsive movement painful.

“Here you are.” He handed the mug to me. “Sip slowly.”

I lifted it to my lips and sniffed the contents. This blood didn’t smell half as good as the delivery guy had, and I glanced at the door.

“Uh uh.” Nic shook his head. “You don’t have the self-control to start on humans. You’re a fledgling. It’s this for now.”

I grimaced then took a slow swallow. It didn’t feel too bad going down. Smooth, almost. I lifted the mug to take a second sip, but my stomach rolled, and I jumped up from the chair to stand over the sink before red sprayed from my lips and splashed onto the stainless steel.

“Okay.” Nic held my hair back. “Okay. We can work on this.”

Fatigue crashed over me. “I’m tired.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “We can try again after you’ve had a nap. I’ll take you back to my room and call for Aimée while I go chat to the courier who was almost your first meal.”

I slept in Nic’s bed, Aimée by my side, until Nic jostled my shoulder. I was instantly alert again, looking around the room, absorbing the colors and the sights and the smells.

Aimée wasn’t there anymore.

“You ready to try some more blood?”

“How long was I out?” My stomach grumbled.

Nic shrugged. “About a day.”

“A day?” I sat up and climbed from the bed. “No wonder I’m hungry.”

He shrugged again. “Babies sleep,” he teased.

I nudged him in the ribs and he clutched his hand where I’d bumped against him. “Careful. I bruise.” Then he laughed again. “We’re going to need to train you to use your strength after we get you eating properly, too.”

“But first, the eating.” I almost rubbed my hands together at the idea of more blood. Even that almost tasteless stuff in Nic’s fridges. “Lead the way.”

Nic took my hand, wrapping his strong fingers around mine. “We’ll try another bag, but I’ve got a surprise for you, too.”

“Okay.” A shiver of anticipation whispered across my skin, lifting the fine hairs there, and Nic pressed a kiss to the back of my hand.

In the blood room, he fed me some more blood, and I held more of it down.

“That was better.” Nic released my hair and handed me a Kleenex. “It takes a while to get used to the bagged blood, is all. But it teaches control as well.”

I pulled the corners of my mouth down. “So the rest of my life exists in these little baggies, now?” The fridges no longer looked as harmless as they

once had. They were my immortal future.

Nick moved his head side to side consideringly. “Not quite.” He rinsed out the mug, swilling away the last dregs of the blood.

My stomach gnawed again as I watched the last dregs of the blood circle the drain. “Feels like a waste,” I muttered.

Nic drew a small knife from his pocket and flicked it open before making a small slash in his wrist and holding his dripping arm over the cup. He watched the blood level rise in the mug before he pressed his wrist to his mouth and licked the wound until it closed. Then he handed me the mug.

“Special of the day,” he murmured.

The tantalizing scent drifting toward me made me lightheaded. I closed my eyes as I inhaled, drawing it deep into my chest. I’d never expected Nic’s blood to be attractive or turn me on, but it was both of those things.

I pressed the mug to my lips and tilted it, savoring the warmth of Nic’s blood fresh from his body. The texture and taste awoke every one of my instincts, and my fangs descended.

I tried to cover my mouth. “Oh, shit. Sorry,” I mumbled, but when Nic looked at me, his eyes glowed red, and his cock formed a bulge in his pants.

“Watching you drink my blood is such a turn-on.”

His fangs descended as I watched, and heat pooled between my thighs as he stepped closer.

“Leia.” My name was smooth and soft and velvety, and his fingers touched his neck. “Bite me.”

He was up against me before I could make another sound, and I drifted my lips over his neck like he’d done to me so many times before.

“Fuck me, Nic,” I whispered as my mouth touched his skin.

He groaned, and his belt buckle clinked as he undid it. Then my robe loosened as he tugged the knot free, and cold air tickled my bare skin.

I was immediately wet for him, and the sound of his zipper only made me more so.

“Nic,” I whispered again.

He lifted me and sat me on the counter as his cock nudged at my opening. There was no time for touches or caresses. This was urgent and fast and, fuck, I wanted him.

“Bite me,” he gasped out as he plunged into my body and began to thrust against me.

I didn’t need any more urging. My fangs were ready and his pulse beat swiftly just beneath his skin. I rested my fangs there, hesitant now.

“Do it, Leia,” he urged, and as I pressed harder, my fangs slid in swiftly, exactly where he needed to be, and his blood flowed into my mouth immediately.

He gasped then groaned out my name and sped up his thrusting, his cock drawing in and out of me as his pulse sent spurts of blood into my mouth. I swallowed in huge reflexive movements, drawing his essence right into me as he worked his hand between us and rolled my clit beneath his finger.

I swallowed then lifted my head away and gasped before sucking strongly on him again. He cried out and arched, pausing all of his movement as his cock thickened inside me.

“Fuck, Leia,” he ground out. “You’re amazing.” As he spoke, he stroked his finger over my clit again, and I came hard and fast, tightening around his cock until he inhaled sharply. “Never before.”

I grinned as I swept my tongue over the puncture marks I’d made, satisfaction welling in my chest that I was able to heal him now. “So,” I said, “my future is baggies and *you*?”

He glanced at me. “Oh, yes.”

I laughed and kissed him, letting my tongue linger in his mouth. He began to harden again inside me, and I wriggled my hips encouragingly, but he chuckled and withdrew.

“I shouldn’t overtire you.”

I pouted. “But this is the best I’ve felt in days. I feel so alive like I

could...like I could really kick some ass, you know?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I’ve never felt so much energy. Like it’s going to explode out of me.”

It sounded like an exaggeration, and I sounded like a kid on Christmas, but it was the craziest thing. Like the excitement was about to burst from me in a ball of energy I couldn’t control.

“Well, I didn’t intend for Jason to get his hands on you today, but maybe you need a focus.” He nodded like he’d decided something as he refastened his pants. “Come on, let’s get you dressed.” He slid his cell phone into his hand as we left the blood room, and the next person he spoke to was Jason. “I’ve got Leia with me and she’s got some excess energy I thought you could put to good use?”

He hung up the phone after a few more seconds and looked at me appraisingly. “We need to put some clothes on you. Have you got anything you can work out in? Move freely in?”

I checked the closet in Nic’s room first. He’d brought me every type of clothing I could possibly imagine. Far more styles than I could ever wear.

I selected a workout outfit in soft heather gray and took the opportunity to admire myself in the mirror again. I was definitely sleeker, and my muscles had greater definition.

“I didn’t expect this.” I turned to Nic as I indicated my new shape.

“You’ve always been beautiful,” he murmured as he held my hand above my head and twirled me so he could see my whole body.

Then we left the room and his wing, and my cheeks heated as I remembered the last time I’d ventured downstairs. I hadn’t even bothered with the stairs, and I’d been naked, launching myself over the balustrade like something feral.

I walked quietly down the staircase, hopeful we wouldn’t meet anyone before we reached the basement, but Mr. Baldwin slid silently into view in

the entrance hall.

“Sir,” he murmured. Then he nodded at me. “Miss Leia.”

I offered him a small wave, but looked down at the woodgrain on the floor as we walked past him.

I hadn't been in the gym in Nic's basement before, and I glanced at the theater on the way past. That would have been a far more pleasant way to spend my afternoon but so much had changed since I'd spent afternoons in there, first with Jason and then with Aimée.

Nic pushed open a door and we entered a large space with machines and equipment to one side and a large open space to the other.

Jason stood in the middle of the open space. “Welcome to the first lesson of your vampire training.”

He spread his arms wide and grinned, a hint of fang touching his lower lip.

LEIA

Jason moved so fast he was a blur, and if he'd done that while I was human, I wouldn't have been able to see him. But as a vampire, I could track him—although tracking him and topping him were apparently two things.

He had a dagger held to my throat before I even defended against his proximity.

A chuckle sounded from his lips and he glanced at Nic. "Looks like we need to start from scratch."

For a moment, Nic bared his fangs before he relaxed, but the relaxing seemed to require effort. "Of course. She's new."

Jason nodded and stepped away from me. "Of course," he echoed.

It was like he'd just been reprimanded by his dad, and I laughed. "Yeah, Jason. I'm *new*," I taunted, and he narrowed his eyes teasingly when Nic couldn't see.

I laughed again. It was like being part of a club now.

"How are you feeling?" Jason looked at me, his expression softening. "Are you up for this today?"

I laughed again because now more than ever, I wouldn't break. All the times I'd felt strong in the past were a myth. Humans weren't strong. They were weak. Nic's contempt for them made so much sense now.

“I feel great.” I glanced at Nic. His blood had a lot to do with that.

He offered me a secret smile before wandering away and leaning against the wall. “Proceed.” He waved his hand, the gesture both lazy and royal.

Jason grimaced. “Okay, first, we need to get a handle on your speed.”

“Like this?” I took off and returned back to the spot so fast that my giggle still hung in the air between us.

“Well, looks like you have speed down.” Jason nodded approvingly. “Let’s have a look at strength and also at how you handle a weapon—”

He broke off and glanced at Nic, one eyebrow raised.

Nic’s nod was so slight that had I been human, I probably would have missed it.

“I get to use weapons?” I raised an eyebrow. “Like actual weapons that can hurt people?”

Jason nodded and walked to the wall before pressing against a nondescript area. A portion of the wall slid away to reveal a weapons stash that was better described as an armory.

We worked the rest of the day on footwork and swordplay, even though I looked at the daggers longingly. Jason said it was important for me to master one weapon at a time and that swords also helped me exercise my new strength.

I’d shrugged. His argument made sense, but I didn’t have to like it.

As I started to set up for another hand-to-hand sparring match, I drew a deep breath and a tantalizing scent lodged in my chest. I whipped my head to the door and Nic was at my side before I could move any farther.

He glanced at Jason. “Time for the next stage?”

Jason shrugged in response. “As good a time as any.”

Nic took my hand. “I need you to come with me.”

“Where?” My voice held a note of suspicion as I breathed in again.

“Do you trust me?” The aroma grew stronger as we ascended the stairs, and Nic’s hand tightened around mine like trust wasn’t entirely a two-way

street.

I nodded. “Of course.”

We walked to the kitchen, where the same courier I’d attacked previously was having a discussion with Chef. Everyone looked in Nic’s and my direction as we entered, but the delivery guy didn’t even flinch. His gaze passed over us before returning to Chef.

And the human still smelled absolutely delicious, but I stole a glance at Nic and the part of his neck where his pulse beat strongest, and the urge to taste anyone else receded.

“Is everything to your satisfaction?” Nic directed his question to Chef but sneaked a look at me.

“Oui.” Chef’s answer was short and to the point, and I nodded.

We left the kitchen and I pressed closer to Nic. “Why didn’t that guy recognize me? I came super close to ripping his throat out, and it’s like he doesn’t even know who I am.”

“I made it that way.” We walked up the stairs to the second floor as Nic spoke, and we paused at the top. “Your room or mine?”

“Yours.” There wasn’t even a hesitation. Only his. The room I’d always slept in still held too many memories of my life. “But wait. What do you mean, you *made* it that way?”

He looked at me for a beat too long, uncertainty swirling in his gray eyes. “We can do a thing called *compulsion*. It can make humans act a certain way or it can make them forget.”

“You made him forget me?” The thought was wild. “Wait. Can I do that, too?”

He nodded slowly. “With some training.” Something weird still echoed in his tone.

“Have I ever seen you do it before?”

He took a deep breath. “I compelled *you* once.”

He waited, like he was watching for my reaction. But I waited too.

Why the hell would he have compelled me? The emotion filtering through our bond wasn't remorse or regret. It was more protective than that. Something had made him act to look after me.

"What happened?" I whispered.

He started to unbutton his shirt, turning from me as he began his story. "We were in New Orleans the first time and..."

I covered my mouth against a gasp. "When we went to The Neutral Zone?"

"Yes." His reply emerged as a growl. "After you left the restaurant, you were cornered and attacked by some of..." He hesitated like he had trouble with the next word. "Some of Francois's vampires."

"What?" That didn't seem right. "I was attacked?"

I clutched the amethyst necklace Lettie had given me, the one I rarely took off.

Nic nodded. "And you weren't ready to know. I needed to protect you from what they had just revealed."

I nodded as I sat on the edge of the bed. "It was almost too much when you told me. I don't think I could have gotten past an attack like that, not that soon."

But now that Nic had spoken of that evening, memories pushed at the edges of my mind. Red eyes, fangs. Hot, unwelcome breath at my neck. That night... I could have lost my life. Or I might not have been Nic's.

I stroked my fingers over my skin where the sensation of breath and scratches lingered, and Nic turned to me. He was at my side, his arm around me before I had another thought.

He drew me close. "It's okay," he murmured. "I've got you. I'll always have you."

SPRINGING awake would never get old. I was alert and ready to go. I tested the bond with Nic—he was busy somewhere else in the house. And focused. There was no answering tug of awareness from him. There was a note of tension, though, like something was going on for him and the guys.

I stretched out in the bed then curved my back like a cat in the sun. Being a vampire was amazing. Captivating, even. And while Nic was busy... I grinned. Well, I could play, right?

I'd been cooped up...trapped...in this house for long enough. It was a true gilded cage.

But I longed to explore farther than the boundaries of Nic's gardens. I didn't have a built-in babysitter now that I was a vampire—Aimée only came by as a friend rather than a guard—and probably all the men were with Nic, so it was a great time to let myself off the leash and explore a little. See what this new body could do.

Because, hell, it could do a shitload more than the human body I'd had before.

I got up, showered, dressed, and helped myself to a blood bag from the blood room. It wasn't as good as taking from Nic, but it sated the worst of the hunger.

Then I headed downstairs, slipping down the back staircase and straight into the kitchens. Chef was nowhere to be seen, and I walked right out of the back door, trying to keep my mind clear and free of any particular destination.

I wasn't exactly sneaking out, but I did want to know how far my new skills extended. *Could* I be sneaky if I wanted? Being such a new vampire still meant the others didn't have a lot of faith in me. I was still mostly excluded from war room talk, and I wasn't sure I'd ever explored the boundaries of what I could do in weapons training and hand-to-hand combat.

Jason still seemed to forget I was actually vampire now, often backing off at the last moment or going easy on me—even when Nic wasn't watching.

As soon as I made it to the tree line, I ran, laughing as the wind blew through my hair, as I swerved spindly trees at the last moment, and as I ducked the branches threatening to rip my face to thin shreds. I had insane new instincts.

And they were mine forever now. I let loose a happy yell as more trees and vegetation passed by in a blur. And I leapt up a rock formation like I had springs in my legs and traction on my feet, never missing a foot or handhold. I stood at the small peak and bellowed my triumph, laughing as a flock of birds rose from the trees before me.

My new vision picked out feather-fine details as they flew away in their panic, and I sank into a sitting position so I could better test my eyesight over the terrain before me.

The details on the smallest leaves stood out now. Every knot and bump in the bark of the trees.

I sensed Nic before I heard him. “Hi,” I said without turning around.

“Hey,” Nic replied like we were two people out for a walk.

I turned my face up to the sky and closed my eyes as he settled himself beside me. “What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

He chuckled and my heart stopped for a moment as the sound seeped into me.

“I always know where you are, Leia. I *will* always know. You will never be lost to me again. I can feel you in my soul now.” As if to show me, he tugged a little on our connection, and I tested it back. He slipped his arm around my waist. “We’re tethered together now. Wherever you go, I’ll know. I’ve got you.”

I rested against him, the warmth in his tone soothing me. For too many years, I’d struggled alone. Struggled to keep the business afloat, the bills paid, to keep Dad alive, and now I didn’t need to struggle. Nic would look out for me, be there for me. Back me.

We were together. Bound.

The war lurked between us, but it was a joint purpose now. I could help him, and I could help him win. I had a new life and a new purpose.

“Shall we take a walk together?” he asked.

“Where are we going to go?” I was comfortable here, resting against him. But he shifted. “Town? There are some things I want to show you.”

I hesitated as he stood up and began dusting his pants off. “Am I safe to walk through town?”

The delivery guy might not have remembered me, but I remembered me, and how delicious he smelled, and how instinct had driven me to taste him. I would have ripped his throat out.

“I’ll be there.” Nic held his hand out. “I’ve got you, remember?”

I let him help me up and we climbed back down the rocks. Nic seemed to take extra pleasure in my enjoyment of each movement. My body was a machine now. A weapon, almost, that I had at my full control.

“Will it always feel like this?” I asked him.

“Nope.” He shook his head and grinned. “It gets better.”

We used our speed to get to the edge of the city before slowing down to a normal walking pace. To anyone who looked, we were a normal couple, enjoying the sights of Baton Rouge. No one could see how each passing human captured my attention a little or how Nic always focused my attention back on him before I could lose myself. I held his hand, curling my fingers alongside his, and I laughed as he joked and talked to me about nothing.

“See how the renovations are coming on?” I asked as he led me to La Petite Mort, and I gazed up at a perfect frontage.

“You wouldn’t even know,” I murmured. I’d seen some of the photographs of the aftermath. I’d never expected the casino to look like this so soon afterward, but Nic had a miracle worker team on his side. My own home was testament to that.

“I’ll always know.”

When I looked at Nic, his jaw was set, his expression grim. There was

nothing else I could say. Nic would always carry the sorrow of this loss.

And it reinforced my determination to end Francois. He'd caused too much destruction and too much death. But I'd be the last thing he saw in the world, and that brought me some satisfaction. I could avenge what he'd done to Dad *and* avenge the pain he'd caused Nic at the same time.

"I have something else I want to show you." Nic spoke to me, dragging me from my thoughts and centering my attention back on him.

"More?" I glanced around us at the people walking up and down the sidewalks and the cars passing by. All of this was a far cry from the life I'd lived before. In both ways, actually—I'd always been too busy to venture very far into downtown Baton Rouge, and I would have avoided this end on principle, due to the casino. And also, I was no longer human. My connection to these people was growing thinner. We had very little in common anymore.

They knew nothing about the predators in their midst.

I shook my head as more pity for them snuck into my thoughts.

"Come on," Nic said. We set off walking again, out of town at the other side, and the entire time I marveled at colors and all the things I could hear. Micro-expressions on people's faces cued me into their moods, even when they thought they'd disguised them, when their tones of voice and fake smiles said something else.

We left the busy streets and gradually the store fronts gave way to irregular homes.

"Are we going to The Pour House?"

Of course we were. There was nothing else out here, but I asked anyway.

Nic looked at me, mischief sparkling in his eyes. "I could say no, but you'd sense the lie."

We walked the rest of the way in silence. The last time I'd seen my bar, Ben had worked wonders at initial renovation, but when we turned the corner and I saw it all over again with my new vampire sight, it was like witnessing an actual miracle. Every detail was perfect—and I could see them all.

“It’s like I can see it properly for the first time,” I said.

“Wait until you see inside.”

“I know. Ben has done a great job.” I’d spent an evening with him when I left Nic’s house—the same night Francois had abducted me.

“I think you’ll find it’s even better now.” Nic grinned as he spoke, his satisfaction evident.

Ben was one of his most trusted men, but the one I’d seen least of. He handled a lot of Nic’s business affairs and had overseen the growth of my business and all of the renovations before also turning his attention to La Petite Mort after the suicide bomber had destroyed so much of it.

My gaze roved over my bar as we walked up the short flight of steps. It now looked like an actual tourist destination rather than a rundown dive bar for locals, which is what I’d run for most of my life.

There was even a bouncer at the door, and he simply nodded acknowledgment at Nic and offered me a slight bow before opening the door and letting us inside.

I gasped as we walked in. I’d thought it was good last time, but this was amazing. “It’s incredible.”

People crowded the place like they just couldn’t wait to spend their money, tables were filled with groups, laughing and chattering, and servers wound their way through the tiny spaces left, their hands held high to protect the trays of food from being bumped and jostled.

“Look at Ben.” Nic almost had to yell to be heard over the people in the bar.

“Wow.”

Ben looked entirely at home behind my bar, full of energy and life as he behaved like some sort of mixologist. He threw bottles through the air, behind his back and filled glasses and cocktail shakers alike, never seeming to stop his energy or patter of chat.

A line of women stood in front of him, their money lined up on the bar.

“That’s more than I used to take in a week.” I nodded at the cash, and Nic grinned like he wasn’t at all surprised.

He squeezed my shoulder. “I knew Ben was the right man for this job. I should speak to him for a moment, though. Will you be okay?”

I nodded, already distracted by my next mission. So much had changed in here, but hopefully some things had stayed the same. A loud familiar laugh rang out just as the crowd in front of me parted, and there they were—Harry and Pierre Allard, the closest thing to uncles I had. They’d watched over me during all the years I’d struggled.

I almost ran over to them, careful to keep my new speed in check.

Pierre stood as soon as he saw me. “Cher,” he greeted me as he wrapped me in a fierce bear hug.

I almost cried at the familiarity of him.

Harry took me next, and his hug was just as fierce. “The place looks great,” he said thickly, and when I drew back, the tell-tale tracks of tears lingered on his face. “We heard about Jean,” he said.

“And we’re so sorry, cher,” Pierre finished. “At least you can draw comfort from the fact he was getting help. He wanted to be better.”

I nodded. Nic had ensured the official story was that Dad had died in rehab from a heart attack. An unexpected tear leaked from my eye, too, and I brushed it away as a tray of shots arrived at the table. I glanced at the bar and Nic caught my gaze, nodding as he did.

“A drink to Dad?” I raised a glass and Harry and Pierre did the same.

The irony that we were drinking to commemorate the passing of an alcoholic didn’t pass me by, and it probably didn’t for Pierre or Harry either, but Dad would have laughed. He’d have downed more than his fair share, too.

I glanced at the two men with me. This felt right.

We drank for the rest of the night, with Harry and Pierre filling me in on all the changes they’d watched Ben make.

“Are you ever coming back, cher?” Pierre asked, his mouth turned down. I glanced briefly at Nic. “I don’t know.”

It was the last answer I’d ever thought I might give. In my head, right up until this moment, I’d always been coming back. But now, with everything so up in the air and dangerous, I simply didn’t know.

“Does he make you happy?” Harry pitched his voice low, but Nic would have heard him anyway.

My lips curved into a smile before I answered, though. “Yes.”

“That’s all we needed to hear.” Harry covered my hand with his. “You deserve some happiness.”

“And don’t worry about us,” Pierre chipped in. “We’ll keep an eye on this place for you.”

I chatted to the two of them for a little while longer before I was aware of Nic’s focus changing. When I glanced up, he was saying goodbye to Ben and standing.

“I should get going.” My tone was apologetic as I spoke to the two older men. “I’ll see you again soon.”

After a flurry of hugs and kisses, Nic and I left, my disbelief factor still high at all of the changes Ben had wrought.

Nic and I swung our joined hands loosely as we walked back to his house, down the barely lit road. I watched the fireflies as they darted over the meadows to our left.

“Did you have a nice night?” Nick spoke against a percussion backdrop of crickets.

I nodded. “Yeah, I really did.” But at some stage over the course of the night, something inside me had shifted. “It was good to remember Dad with Pierre and Harry.”

And maybe that had been the catalyst for my change. I hadn’t exactly lost my desire for revenge, but now I wanted more for my future. I wanted happiness with my mate, like Mom would have wanted for me, like Dad

would have wanted if he could have thought with a clear head.

I wrapped my arm around Nic's so I could walk closer to him, resting my head against him. "I want forever, Nic."

His muscles shifted as he looked down at me. "We've got forever."

"But I want a life and someone to come home to. I think... I think I want babies, and for us to live long and be happy together."

My need for vengeance had definitely dropped down my priority list, but that didn't bother me.

So much else had been clarified.

Nic dropped a kiss into my hair. "I'll do anything for you, Leia. Anything."

NIC

Something was different. I woke with that certainty. A disturbance in the wards and a familiar presence. I climbed from the bed and drew some pants on, careful not to wake Leia. Last night had been an emotional one for her, and the conflict inside her as she both began to reject humans and clung to the ones she loved best resonated through our bond.

She needed to sleep and not be bothered by whatever this morning brought to pass.

I met Baldwin hurrying along the hallway toward my bedroom. “What is it?” I asked him.

“Kyle is waiting for you in your office.” His tone was neutral, but his posture was tense, like even Baldwin knew this could be important. He probably did know. Not much happened in my home without Baldwin being aware of it.

I nodded like I’d expected his visit but a thread of worry wove through my mind. I clamped down on it before I gave anything away to Leia via our bond. I was still unused to being so completely connected to another.

She was still asleep, though—I could feel it. The vibration she emitted wasn’t emptiness like she wasn’t there, though. It was comfort and warmth. I held my awareness of her closer and went to my unexpected meeting with Kyle.

He stood from a chair when I entered the room, and he held his hand out in greeting, but I pulled him into a brief hug and clapped his back.

“Good to see you.” I meant every word. No matter his confidence that he’d survive a trip to New Orleans, I hadn’t been so sure. I’d let him make this trip against my better judgment, and was relieved to see him in the flesh in front of me.

He grimaced. “It’s good to be back, Nic. Things are volatile in New Orleans. Émile is like a man possessed, although no one seems to see him or Francois. Messages filter through the growing number of vampires, but I’m never sure of the source.”

“Oh?” Then what news had he brought back? I gestured to the seat he’d stood from. “I assume you’ve brought back news?”

He nodded but remained standing, his hands clasped behind his back, his feet in the *at ease* stance. But Kyle never looked truly at ease. His instincts and reactions were the finest honed I knew, and he could go from relaxed to holding the head of an enemy in mere moments.

“Temple’s worried.” Kyle made the declaration like what Temple chose to worry about was significant.

I didn’t say anything immediately, so Kyle continued.

“Look, if something about the New Orleans situation is making Temple anxious then we need to pay attention. He doesn’t panic, and he doesn’t worry lightly. He’s been working this situation from the inside for a long time, and he says things are changing.”

I nodded. Temple had been key when we rescued Leia. His information had been exactly right, so he obviously knew the things he was talking about. But I had to be sure.

“You still trust him?” Informants and allies could be turned for the right price.

But Kyle nodded. “Yes, and his sister. Both Temple and Chesca are actively working against House Ricard like it’s their own personal mission to

bring it down. Émile doesn't enjoy the full support of New Orleans, by any means."

I sat behind my desk. "The people of New Orleans need our help and numbers. I've spoken to Conri again."

Kyle finally sat down again. "I'm not sure how much time we have to make our plans." He leaned forward as he spoke, fresh urgency entering his tone. "Temple is worried that things are very unstable right now, and any more agitation will mean Émile will give the order to bring the battle straight to Baton Rouge."

I looked up from the maps of New Orleans that Jason had spread over my desk yesterday. Fighting in Baton Rouge wasn't what any of us had planned. I couldn't allow my city to become overrun by enemy vampires. It would weaken my position regardless of having turned my mate if I couldn't protect my people.

"Unthinkable," I said. "That's the one thing we can't allow. We need to contain Émile and his army to New Orleans."

Kyle made a murmur of agreement but didn't go as far as to offer a suggestion.

I watched him. "It's unlike you not to have a plan."

He shrugged. "Is there any point in me telling you the things I think you already know?"

I laughed, the sound slightly bitter. "Heavy is the head that wears the crown, is that it?" Maybe it truly was lonely at the top because I had to make these decisions alone. The burden of responsibility was mine. I couldn't put it off any longer. "The time to act is now, then."

I reached along my bond to Leia, but she was still asleep. Good. I needed to be the first one to tell her this news.

"Gather Kyle and Sebastian. My brother is currently spending some time with our mother." I grimaced a little at the idea that I'd need to soon enact Sebastian's exile. But I needed him for this, and I trusted him to remain loyal

to me. “I need to go tell Leia that the time for war has come.”

Kyle stood, already reaching for his cell phone, and I hurried from the room. By the time I returned, Kyle would have assembled everyone I needed.

I crept back into my bedroom, my gaze roaming over my mate as she lay in bed, the dark sheets tangled around her sleeping form. We’d tangled them last night. My cock twitched even now at the thought.

I sat in a chair in the small sitting area, the same one I’d made my call to Conri from, and waited. As if she was aware of my close presence, she stirred a little. Then her eyes blinked open and she was awake and fully alert immediately.

“Good morning.” I smiled as I spoke. It was always a pleasure to see her.

She glanced toward the curtains and the faint daylight glowing from behind them. “I slept late.”

I shrugged. “Then you needed it.”

She glanced. “So are you just lurking in the bedroom to watch me sleep? Some would call that creepy...”

I laughed briefly. “I could watch you sleep all night long.” Then I shook my head. “But that’s not why I came back. I just met with Kyle.”

“He’s in Baton Rouge?” Leia climbed out of bed and walked naked across the bedroom to grab my robe. Every line of her body moved with grace, and I watched her like I’d never seen her move before.

“He’s in my office.” I grinned ruefully as Leia spun around.

“He’s in the house? Does he have news of Francois’s location? Is everything okay?”

I nodded. “Yes, he’s in the house. We haven’t talked about Francois—”

Leia’s eyes blazed a fierce red for a moment. “Then why is he here? Finding Francois is the number one priority.”

I shook my head as I stretched my legs out. “This isn’t Francois’s war anymore. And his father has...other ideas. Kyle has brought the news that things are reaching boiling point in New Orleans. The time for war is now.”

Leia froze, her body entering that eerie state of stillness all vampires could attain. It was still a novelty to see it on her—I'd grown used to her near-constant fidgeting while human. Even while still, her body had never been truly at rest.

"Now?" She spoke only one word.

"Yes. Our only current option is to go to New Orleans to bring an end to this." I inhaled, drawing the combined scents of Leia and me into my chest. It calmed me. "I can't allow them to reach Baton Rouge, to endanger my family and my people."

"I'm coming." Leia's words were still clipped.

I sighed. I'd expected this.

Her eyes glowed red again. "Of course I'm coming. You can't leave me here in Baton Rouge like a big red target while you go charging off, and you've known all along that I want to be the one who finishes this."

She disappeared into the bathroom but soon reappeared and stalked to the closet. Her irritation transmitted itself in her every movement and zinged between us.

"I don't plan to stop you," I said. She didn't reply, but she'd heard me because she stilled again. "You aren't the same delicate human anymore. You're a strong vampire now. You've been training with Jason. I know you can take care of yourself."

Besides, I'd be at her side the whole time, minimizing any risk. And she's been right—I couldn't leave her sitting here in Baton Rouge. She had to be with me. It was the only way to keep her truly safe.

"So I'm coming to New Orleans to fight with you? You agree with me?" She slipped a T-shirt on.

"Yes." I stood and crossed to her side. "I wouldn't have it any other way. There is so much you're capable of now, Leia. You're amazing. I was trying to protect you before, but now I need never stand in your way again. I want you beside me, not behind me. We can end this battle together, and you can

have your revenge.”

I swept some of the loose hair from her forehead as I met her gaze, needing her to see how earnest I was.

“I might love you a little more now you’ve said that.” She grinned at me as she lifted onto her tiptoes for a kiss.

WE WERE UNUSUALLY SOMBER on the plane as we approached New Orleans. Sebastian was at the other end, studiously avoiding even looking at Leia. She’d greeted him as we walked by when we boarded, but that had been the extent of their interaction. Sebastian knew better than to cross me again.

“What’s the plan?” I looked at Kyle. He was taking lead on this mission again because he had the New Orleans contacts and he’d spent time there himself. He knew the situation better than any of us.

He answered me with a question of his own. “Are Conri’s men on standby?”

“Yes, they are,” Jason jumped in and answered. He was handling the finer details of their involvement now that Conri and I had agreed terms.

“Okay.” Kyle nodded and returned his attention to me.

I glanced at Leia. She was looking out of the window at her right, but her left hand was tense around mine, and lines of her face were taut.

“When we land in NOLA,” Kyle continued, “we’ll proceed straight to the Ricard mausoleum. It’s empty now, and it’s the quickest way onto their property undetected.”

“You don’t think they’ll have locked that own after last time?” It didn’t seem believable that Émile wouldn’t tighten security after we’d used his portal to trespass on his property once before.

Still, if he hadn’t, it was no different than him just opening a portal directly onto my fucking lawn. Sudden anger heated my blood, and Leia’s

hand gently tightened around mine as she offered me comfort without even changing her position. Secret comfort no one else even knew about. I valued our bond even more.

“I’ve let Temple know to meet us at the airport. He’ll have a witch with him—one who can open the portal and get us onto Ricard land.”

I nodded as Kyle spoke. I didn’t like being beholden to another witch, but it was our only way.

As we fell silent, I closed my eyes and rested my head back against the seat to wait the rest of the journey out.

The flight was a calm one. Not even a hint of turbulence—the only disturbance was in my fast-moving thoughts, which wouldn’t quiet, no matter how much I attempted to relax. I remained antsy the whole time, leaning forward as we made our final descent.

I scanned the area around the runway, and Kyle was true to his word. Temple stood in the shadows as we disembarked, and alongside him was a woman I’d seen before.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

She was one of the women I’d seen before on my fucking lawn. She’d narrowly escaped being Émile’s next snack.

She drew back a little and looked away submissively. “The king killed my sister.”

“Fuck.” I spat the word as I looked at Temple, and I pointed at the witch. “I can’t work with her.”

“I can vouch for her.” He spoke immediately, something protective about the way he defended the witch. “Besides, she’s our only shot. The only one who was willing to help.”

“I knew Lettie.” The words tumbled from the witch in a rush. “I knew Lettie and I know what they did to her.” She stopped speaking and jerked her head toward Leia, who’d come to stand beside me. “And I know about her from when she was human and the first time she came to New Orleans. I

know what Lettie did for her.”

Without warning, she leaned forward and grazed her fingers over Leia’s pendant.

I caught her hand in mine, ready to rip it right off, but Leia stopped me through our bond.

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t. Whatever she’s done to the pendant, it feels good. It’s helping me.”

“What did you do?” I demanded, while Temple continued to glare at me, and my men shuffled their feet impatiently behind me. The sun was setting fast, and we needed to make our move.

“Small protection spell. Nothing fancy.” She looked at Leia again, speaking directly to her. “But you’ll be able to evade most black magic now.”

“Nic.” Jason spoke from behind me. “We should get going.”

“We need the witch,” Kyle added like I might try to prevent her from helping—although maybe he was right. The urge to send her away still burned through me.

“We need to move fast. I’ve got Ciara.” Temple grabbed the witch and swung her into his arms before speeding away across the tarmac.

After a moment’s hesitation, we followed him, blurs in the night that no human would see as we headed to end a war we didn’t even want them to know about.

I SLOWED as we approached the old Ricard mausoleum, stopping everyone while I listened. But only crickets chirped. The dead were quiet, and there were no guards.

“Really, no guards?” I couldn’t hide my disbelief.

“Nope.” Temple grinned. “Émile seems to exist on a mixture of confidence and arrogance. And I’m not sure how much Francois even shared

with him about how Leia was stolen away from him. A confession like that would have cost Francois dearly.”

I nodded. That much was true. Émile seemed to have no respect for his son. But no... That sounded too easy.

“Surely there’s someone here.” I looked around again, my vision slicing through the gloom and shadows.

“No.” The witch shook her head. “There’s really no one here. I’d know because I’d sense them, especially if they had magic. We’re alone.”

I ground my teeth a little, the noise loud in the quiet. I still didn’t trust her, but she wasn’t lying about us being alone.

“Can we proceed?” Temple had been a little shit the last time we met, too, with no respect for my position at all.

I made a show of checking my watch. “I think it’s time to conjure the portal,” I announced.

Temple glanced at Ciara before she stepped forward and positioned himself in front of her, making sure he entered the mausoleum before anyone else. He looked out a moment later. “It’s empty,” he announced before stepping back to allow us into the small space.

It was exactly as I remembered it, except that raised table where Émile had lain in his stasis was now empty. I shook my head. He was an evil bastard.

Fucking Émile.

We shuffled farther into the room, taking up most of the space before Temple closed the door, plunging us into darkness. The candles that had been alight before to hold vigil over Émile no longer burned, and I reached for Leia’s hand, drawing her closer to me. My vision cleared and I could see again, as we probably all could except the witch.

“It’s time for the portal,” I bit out, and I’d barely finished speaking when she lifted her arms and intoned a rapid chant.

A blazing purple portal appeared on the wall behind her, and it spat

purple and turquoise sparks.

Beside me, Leia gasped. “What’s that?”

Perhaps she didn’t remember the portal we’d brought her through when we rescued her. It was possible—she’d been very traumatized. “You doing okay?”

She turned to look at me and nodded. “Better when those fuckers are dead,” she muttered. Then she looked at the portal again. “And we just walk through that?”

I looked at it too. “Yep.” Something still didn’t sit right about this. It was still too easy.

“Are we going, then?” Leia stepped forward, and I held her back before stepping ahead of her. My mate wasn’t passing through a portal first.

I looked at Temple’s witch. “Can you sense anything on the other side?”

She shook her head.

“Okay.” I looked at my men. “Are we ready?”

They nodded their faces grim.

I offered a small, silent prayer to anyone who might be listening to help me keep Leia safe, and I stepped into the center of the purple fire.

LEIA

I drew a deep breath as I watched Nic walk into the fire and stepped after him, flinching as the sparks surrounded me. It should have been hot. The sparks should have singed my skin, but I didn't feel a thing. If anything, passing through the portal sent a wave of cool air over me, although my amethyst pendant and the charm bracelet at my wrist all tingled against me like they recognized the magic.

Nic stopped so abruptly on the other side that I almost walked straight into his back. I could barely see past his broad shoulders, they formed a perfect shield, and his back was like a slab of granite.

A man a short distance away laughed, and the sound started a slow roll of fear rising through me, rearranging all of my organs as it went.

“Nicolas.” The man who'd laughed greeted Nic in a sing-song voice. “How nice of you to also drop by *my* home. As you can see, I'm already having a small party for my close friends and family. Ah, but I see you've brought friends and family of your own.”

I glanced around Nic to view the man who was speaking, and I stopped. He was familiar, so familiar. I flashed back to when Francois had eaten with me in his dining room, and the portrait on display there. This was Francois's father. He'd created the monster Francois had become.

He also needed to die.

As I watched him, sheer fury began to replace my initial fear, and I relaxed into the new emotion, letting it fuel me, drawing strength from it, allowing it free rein within me. I hadn't been this filled with rage since Francois had killed Dad in front of me, and I welcomed the icy heat back.

It made me strong.

And now that I was vampire, it brought clarity and additional strength. My vision sharpened and the sights and sounds of the garden wrapped around me. There was something dead here, in this space. Something decomposing and rotting that marred the damp, green smell of the foliage and stole any beauty that should have existed. My gaze drifted to a row of small mounds in the grass, and I shuddered. I could have joined the dead things.

Maybe that had been the plan.

Movement ahead of me and to my right caught my attention, and I looked up, meeting the hot gaze of Francois.

His lips moved. "*Ma petite.*"

I didn't need to be able to hear him to know what he'd said.

He held his hand out like even now I might go to his side, but I was back in the battle at the shifter property, watching my father dangle from Francois's grip as he gasped for the breath he needed to survive.

And he hadn't survived because Francois had ripped his throat out right in front of me.

As I watched.

I released a blood-curdling holler, a whooping war cry, and I dodged around Nic, only one man in my sights. This was what I had come for, this was my moment.

Francois's eyes widened at first, his surprise and shock easy to read at my unnatural speed as I moved toward him. Then anger glowed in his eyes as he realized what I was, and he swung his gaze briefly behind me, to where I'd left Nic.

I whooped my intention to battle again, and his attention returned to me.

Some of the anger had bled from his eyes, the red glow diminishing, and I nearly slowed as I recognized the same hopelessness and loneliness I'd always seen him in. He looked even smaller now that he stood beside his father, like the older man somehow diminished his son, stealing the power I knew Francois possessed.

Defeat radiated from Francois. I could almost smell it over the decay.

A female vampire stepped in my way, her shoulder against my chest, and I lost my forward momentum, but not for long as I slashed out in front of me and my claws caught the side of her face. Blood spurted from deep gashes as I ripped half of her face off, and a howl rose from her as she clutched a cheek that was little more than ground beef now.

Her eyes flashed and she tried to grab me, but I reared back and smashed my fist into her face, splintering bone. Then I reached into her chest and ripped her heart free, retching at the sudden slimy feeling between my fingers.

All the hand-to-hand training in the world with Jason couldn't have prepared me for this.

I sought out Francois again. He hadn't moved from the spot and instead watched me, his eyes wide, his mouth gaping. Oh, yes, I was different now. I wasn't the same woman he'd kidnapped from Baton Rouge and kept in his museum of a home. I wasn't the same woman who'd watched him rip out her father's throat.

And I wasn't the same woman who'd been powerless against him.

I was strong now, and he was mine to kill.

This was the time for my vengeance.

Understanding started to permeate Francois's gaze as I flung out an arm to rip the still beating heart from another young vampire who thought his strength could match my purpose.

But no one in this garden wanted a death as badly as I did. No one here deserved to kill as deeply as I did.

I was Francois's reaper, his angel of death. I'd release him from whatever torture he found here on Earth.

I dispensed with more fledglings, each kill easier than the last rather than tiring me, and still Francois only watched, like he'd already surrendered, like he wanted my final justice.

And it would feel good to stomp his heart beneath my foot.

Around me, the noise of other battles raged, the growls of vampires ripping through the air and providing the bassline to the sounds of shredding skin and pained howls.

My whole world slowed, and my focus narrowed to only one thing—Francois. I only saw him.

Only he existed.

My head quieted as I blanked out all sounds of battle and tapped into the vampire predator side of myself.

I was done being prey.

Francois was mine now.

But I was ripped from my sole focus when a huge vampire slammed into me from the side and tumbled me to the floor. We rolled under his momentum, and when we came to a stop, he grinned menacingly down at me, saliva dripping from his sharp fangs as he pinned me beneath his weight.

"Well, well..." He breathed putrid breath all over me. "The new Queen of Baton Rouge. This will be my pleasure, Your Majesty."

He laughed, and the sound grated over me. Then he lowered his head and the touch of his breath on my skin sent me back into the memories Nic had hidden, the ones of being attacked during my first trip to New Orleans.

The fear raced back over me, and I writhed to free myself from this vampire's grip, bringing my knee up sharply and connecting with something soft. He yowled in pain and reared back, and I reached for Nic along our bond, borrowing strength from him as the urge to spill blood overtook any self-control I'd managed to hang on to.

Fresh determination surged into me, and I moved so fast the vampire's bones snapped as I ripped myself from his grip. He shouted out his pain again, and I laughed, a sound I didn't recognize as it emerged from me, loud and cackling.

And manic.

I wasn't under anyone's control anymore, and I didn't need permission or a hand to stay my behavior. I rolled us so I sat straddling the vampire, and his face paled, becoming that of the walking corpse he was.

I'd be more than Francois's reaper today, and it would be my pleasure to end as many of these vampires as I could. They threatened everything about my current existence and future just as surely as they'd taken my past. They couldn't be allowed to continue.

I hesitated, thoughts surfacing from deep in my brain... Human thoughts, thoughts my new vampire side pushed back against. I didn't want to spill blood. I didn't care about the others, I only wanted to end Francois... But my new instincts flared. I had a vampire's strength and reflexes, and a new fledgling's thirst for blood, no matter how much that repulsed my human side.

I growled, pure instinct making the noise, and the vampire's eyes bulged as he watched me.

My gums ached as my fangs descended, and I smiled at him. "Are you ready to meet your new queen?"

He shook his head, desperation creating lines of panic on his face as his vampire features receded, remolding his face to something much softer and more human. But his change in appearance didn't alter what he was or the fact he would have ripped my throat out mere moments ago.

And it didn't dull my bloodlust.

I took a moment, savoring the feeling as it rose through me, willing more, abandoning myself to the loss of control.

But this opportunity was too good to lose. I jumped off the vampire I'd

pinned down, watching as he scrambled to his feet. His eyes were wild and black with fear as he looked at me.

“You’re crazy,” he hissed. “You belong here in New Orleans.”

I shrieked as I leaped toward him, and he wasn’t quick enough to run away. I’d learned from Francois, and I’d learned well as I slashed my hand across the vampire’s neck. Skin dangled from my claws as a fresh plume of blood spray sputtered in the air, covering me in red, warm droplets.

I licked my lips, capturing some of the blood, and shrugged. I’d had better.

The vampire staggered backwards, his hands at his throat as he tried to hold himself together, but air gurgled out of the hole I’d created and his chest no longer inflated. I advanced after him, stalking him, waiting for that sweet moment of final death.

I glanced at Francois, who was still watching me, deep fascination mixing with the twitch of approval on his lips. Oh, yes, I was the monster he’d created. He’d given me this rage, and he’d shown me what to do with it.

I dropped the pieces of the vampire’s windpipe. I’d never know his name now, and I didn’t care. He deserved to die due to his alignment with Francois.

Due to his alignment with the fucking man who’d killed my father in front of me.

I fell on the vampire, clawing at him even as he entered his death throes. I shredded the clothing I could reach, gouging deep into his skin and snagging my claws on sinew and muscle, ripping him apart as his blood ran in a slick stream over the lawn.

Finally, when the blood slowed to an ooze and he was just a mass of flesh, I turned to Francois. He was my endgame.

He alone was my prize.

My emotion had all bled away, replaced by a cold, hard killer.

I could take care of myself now.

I could kill.

And I'd come for Francois.

I smiled at him. He smiled back. He knew.

The game was on.

I stood from my latest kill, covered in his blood, nothing but the tang of copper in my nose, and I began to walk toward Francois. I didn't need to run. He wasn't trying to escape.

He was waiting because he knew he needed this.

I was going to free him.

I paused and cocked my head. My bond with Nic resonated with another battle, and I glanced in the direction of my mate. Francois's father was running in his direction, but Nic was ready. His determination spilled over into me, and I basked in it.

I didn't need to worry. I didn't have the emotional space to worry.

I had only one goal.

I hadn't fully accepted that vampires were killing machines until now, but we were.

A new cold-blooded element of me switched on, sliding into place, and logic overrode all emotion. I knew what needed to be done.

Still, Francois waited, his familiar half smile in place, his hand still out like he was inviting me to dance.

And perhaps he was.

This would be our most complicated dance yet. Our final dance.

I nodded at Francois as sudden pain tugged at my bond with Nic, and I hesitated again. The urge to protect him nearly overwhelmed me—a human emotion encroaching on my moment of clarity. It propelled me to leap toward Francois. I needed this fight to be over. I needed to help Nic.

Every fiber of my being tugged me toward my mate.

Francois was no longer the most important piece of this chess board. I just needed to deal with him and go.

The pleasure at the idea of Francois's death had faded. Now it was just

another task that needed to be done. I needed to follow through.

But I'd jumped too early, and he was ready for me.

He caught me easily, and clutched me to his chest. "Really, *ma petite*," he purred. "I know it's been a while, but there's no need to throw yourself at me." His gaze should have held the hard humor that matched his words, but I found only heat there as he pressed our bodies closer together. "And I find myself content that Nicolas has done all the hard work creating you. Now, it will be my pleasure to own you."

I tried to rip myself away but his hold was steel around me.

"Ah, ah, *ma petite*," he chided, but his eyes glowed the dull red I was used to seeing there when we were close. "Although I do like this new side to you." He dropped his lips to my neck. "I like this ferocious side *very* much indeed."

I froze. I was covered in blood, and Francois liked it. I must have looked exactly as he looked when he killed Dad. He believed us to be the same.

"You're less fragile now. Less breakable. You require less care." He met my gaze again. "But I still believe you to be perfect." He hesitated. "Just one taste? I can make it good for you."

The old insecurity I'd seen in him before flared in his eyes, and I caught my breath at the hope shimmering there.

I fought again, hoping to take him by surprise, but he just shook his head, his gaze turning sad.

"We could have been good together, Leia," he whispered, and I tensed at the use of my name. He never did that, and the vulnerability it lent him made my heart ache briefly.

I shook my head. No. I wouldn't feel sympathy or pity for a monster. Francois had killed my dad. He was a murderer many times over, if his garden was any evidence, and he needed to be stopped.

I struggled again and he abruptly released me. "All right." He sighed. "I can see you want to show me your new skills." He grinned. "But it really

isn't necessary. You have always been my end game, *ma petite*."

Desperate, and with another loud war cry, I shot forward on a burst of speed faster than any I'd accessed before, and I swiped Francois's face, aiming for his eyes. But he jerked back, and I merely slashed his cheek. A wound opened immediately, and blood dripped down his face. It shone almost black, rather than the bright red I'd expected.

Francois tutted and glanced down at his shirt. Then he shrugged. "What's a dry-cleaning bill between lovers-to-be?"

"I will *never be your lover*," I ground out between wild swipes in his direction, but I was losing my control over the situation in allowing Francois to goad me and also checking on Nic via our bond. My focus was slipping.

I sped toward him again, throwing my body weight at him, trying to overbalance him and gain the upper hand as I had with the previous vampire, but Francois laughed as he allowed himself to fall and clutched me to him.

We landed on the blood-slick ground, and he rolled us, pinning me beneath him. "If you'd wanted to lie down with me, you only needed to have said. I could have found somewhere much more..." He sucked in a breath. "Comfortable." His gaze changed again, becoming lucid as he looked at me. "We could have had so much. I would have given it all to you. But you resisted." Then he shrugged, the movement expansive and characteristically Gallic, evidence of his heritage. "But maybe this is the way it must be between us. My plan has certainly worked."

He lifted an eyebrow and grinned, the tips of his fangs pressing against his lower lip.

NIC

Émile approached me, his arrogant smile in place, his right eyebrow raised. “Yours is a heart I shall very much enjoy eating, boy. There’s more than one way to derive the benefit of a true mate, and her blood pounds through your veins every bit as surely as it does through hers.”

His words sent a spiral of rage to heat my blood, and I sprang forward, striking him in the face. His neck snapped backward, and his lips split open immediately, spilling blood down his chin.

He laughed again, the sound still a slight gurgle. “No matter. I’ll replace this from you after I kill you.”

Émile looked different than when I’d last seen him. Not as crumbly. Certainly, pieces weren’t about to fall off him, and his frame wasn’t as emaciated.

But neither was he at full health. There was hesitation in his movements, and when he reached for me, his grip wasn’t strong. My fist connected with his face again, only one thought in my head—make this world safe for my mate.

His laughter rang out once more. “Have you forgotten? I am very old.” He sneered. “I survive stasis. You are young and weak.”

I hit out at him again and again, landing many, watching as his face became little more than a bloody pulp. Still his laughter continued.

He was right. He was old enough to be ancient. The only vampire who'd matched him was my father, and he was gone. I needed to prove myself in this moment. I had Father's legacy to live up to, and the responsibility conferred by my role as king. I had to show my people that I would do anything for them and my mate.

I had to triumph in this war. There was no other way.

Panic flashed along the bond I shared with Leia, and my concentration wavered. Émile lashed out, his long, diseased-looking claws slashing my skin, and my blood joined his on the grass, but my wounds began to close up almost as soon as he made them, my healing superior to his.

We traded blow after blow, my health and vitality an equal match to his age and experience. Pain radiated through me as Émile thrust his hand into my chest but I dodged away before he could close his hand around my heart, my breathing heavy.

"Almost," he crowed. Then, "Next time."

The light of promise shone in his eyes. I couldn't let there be a next time, but I didn't speak. Monologues and trading verbal blows wouldn't help me win this fight. Conserving and using my strength wisely would.

But Leia screamed, and the noise pierced my heart, shattering my concentration. Émile seized his moment, raking his claws from my shoulder to opposite hip, and I fell, the world spinning away before I landed on the slick grass, the blood-soaked lawn cushioning my fall.

I glanced toward Leia, regret seizing me. Fuck.

Then a growl sounded, and a blur of fur passed above me.

Conri's wolves.

I almost laughed. Talk about last minute. The pack had nearly missed all the action.

A large, black wolf barreled straight at Émile before snapping its jaws around the vampire's neck and shaking him like an oversized chew toy. Émile gurgled his screams as the wolf ripped his throat away, dragging his

windpipe from his chest and sending blood in an arc through the air.

The smell of Émile's newly released blood was foul, and I covered my nose against it. It was old and rotten and sour. The wolf looked at me as I struggled to sit, the injury Émile had caused me already starting to heal. One wrong move could split me wide open again, though.

With one last glance at me, the wolf turned and raised its head, nose to the moon, to emit an eerie howl. An answering chorus carried across the night, and the atmosphere in the garden changed. I'd lost sight of my men during the fight with the old vampire king, but now I located each of them and their renewed bursts of energy now our back-up had arrived.

"Thank you." I addressed the wolf who'd saved me directly, and he blinked his wise eyes as he nodded a slow acknowledgment.

I didn't regret not making the killing blow myself. It didn't matter. Émile was dead and wouldn't enact his plan to capture Leia.

Leia.

My chest became a cold hollow as I cast my gaze around the yard trying to locate her. The last spot I'd seen her with Francois was empty. She wasn't here.

Vampires around me fought each other until I wasn't sure which side they'd started on. My men made light work of their opponents, and wolves snapped necks and limbs, the sound of cracking bones ricocheting through the night like gunfire.

Satisfied things were under Baton Rouge control, I tugged on my bond with Leia, trying to locate her. Rain started to fall from the sky, further soaking the grass and getting in my eyes as I tried to move forward through the garden. I slipped as the lawn quickly became mud beneath my feet, and my healing wounds pulled and tugged at my uneven gait, some of them opening again and allowing more rivulets of blood to run down my rain-damp skin.

Skidding across the ground slowed me down as much as dodging the

warring vampires and wolves, and my usual bursts of vampire speed didn't help, sending me careening out of control in the wrong direction if I skidded.

I slowed and focused, throwing out occasional punches as enemy vampires stumbled into my path.

Émile was dead. I only had one focus now.

My mate.

And fucking Francois.

I growled as my fangs descended, ripping through my gums. He would meet his final death when I found him. He deserved no less.

I reached for the bond with Leia, fury claiming me when her fear met my probe. But I hadn't lied to her before. I would always know where she was.

Always be able to find her.

Our bond would lead me to her.

It pulled at me, and I half ran, half slid to the huge house I'd rescued Leia from before. The mansion trapped in a time warp. Emotions filtered through our bond—emotions Leia seemed to be trying to erase from herself.

I needed to talk to her about that. Becoming vampire wasn't about deliberately shrugging off our human selves. We kept the best parts of our previous selves intact.

I tried to send reassurance through the bond, let her know I was on my way. I'd found her. I'd reach her.

I entered the house through the same door as before, past the scullery area where we'd left the dead girl. That had eaten at Kyle for days. From there, I half relied on memory, half on the bond to draw me forward in the right direction.

It pulsed strongly inside me—my own guiding light. But more of Leia's emotion bled through. Fear gripped me.

Her fear.

Quickly followed by determination.

I almost allowed myself a smile as I quickened my steps. There could still

be staff in here, though, and I hadn't fared so well last time around Francois's staff. I moved forward carefully.

For the first time, hope echoed down our bond. She knew I was coming. I took the stairs two at a time before stopping outside a closed door. This fucking room again. It was where Francois had held her the first time.

I wanted to race into the room but I held myself back, testing the door handle first. It turned easily and I swung the door slowly open.

Francois didn't see me, and for a moment, I didn't see Leia. But I could hear her and I could sense her. Then Francois shifted and my rage solidified into a burning pain in my head. Leia struggled beneath him, her clothes half hanging off, her wrists and ankles tied to the bed.

She wasn't strong enough to hold him off yet. She was still too young. A buzzing noise that blanked out all the sound in the room accompanied my rage. My fangs descended and my vision bled to red as my claws ripped through my skin.

"You fucking bastard. That's my *mate*." The words were a roar tearing from my throat as I pounced on Francois and ripped him away from Leia.

He hit the wall behind me and drywall crumbled over him as he slid to the floor.

I met Leia's panicked expression as she struggled against her bindings, and I wanted to free her, but Francois was still a danger. He wasn't dead yet.

Leia recoiled from me the way she had when I'd fought Sebastian, but I couldn't comfort her this time. Francois wrapped his arm around my neck and yanked, but I wrestled free.

Francois grinned at me. "Nicolas," he said, my name a taunt on his lips as always.

"You fucking bastard." I pounded my fist against his face and then again, waiting for his grin to slip, but it didn't. "We killed your father, and now we're taking you."

Francois' face became a mass of blood, but the liquid was dark green and

smelled rancid. He didn't put up any fight, instead relaxing into the rhythm of my punishment.

I raised my arm to swing again but caught myself midair. "What the fuck?" I looked at the blood staining my old enemy again. "What the fuck, Francois? How long have you been on dead man's blood?"

That shit rotted brains and drove men crazy. My arm shook as I lowered it, my rage still barely contained.

"What the actual fuck, Francois?" I bellowed each of the words. I couldn't kill a man under the influence of dead man's blood.

He couldn't be held accountable for his actions—he was completely mad.

Fuck. I cast a glance at Leia before returning my attention to Francois.

This wasn't something I'd wish on anyone—not even Francois Ricard. And now I had to remember my position, remember diplomacy, rather than punishment and ending his life. He needed to be processed correctly now.

I grunted my frustration and looked at Leia again. She wouldn't understand this.

"It was a witch." Francois's fangs glinted through the mass of blood on his face. I'd left nothing but pulp as evidence of my rage, and it glistened as he spoke his garbled words. "I thought...I thought she loved me." He gurgled a laugh that sounded like bubbles. "But she didn't. So I made a deal for power." The noise of bubbles came again. "Power. Look at my power, Nicolas. Don't you wish you had all this?"

He gestured loosely around a ruined room.

I left him on the floor and walked to Leia. She shook as I approached, but I held out my hand and she closed her eyes to receive my caress to her cheek. I began to unfasten her from the bed as Francois continued to talk.

"We were meant to be together. She was mine." Again that laugh. "At least I thought so."

I cut him a glance before focusing back on Leia. I looked at her and lowered my voice. "I'm not sure he's had a clear thought in years. Dead

man's blood makes a man crazy.”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “He needs to die.”

“I can't.” My words were a plea. “I can't, Leia. I need to take him back to Baton Rouge to be dealt with by the council.”

“What the hell is dead man's blood, and why does it give him a free pass?” She spat her sentence, and resentment flowed through our bond. “I'll kill him. I need to.”

“You can't. Dead man's blood is exactly what it sounds like. Blood from dead people. Highly toxic to vampires in large doses, and in small doses it will just turn the vampire crazy.”

“But why would he take it?” Her eyes widened as she focused on Francois where he lay on the floor.

“He probably didn't know when he first started.” Hell, even I had pity for the guy now. Fucking stupid Francois. Forever under Émile's thumb, and now look at him.

This was no way to meet his end. He was so addled, he just lay there laughing occasionally.

There was a movement in the corridor outside, and I covered Leia with the blanket from the bed, hiding her from whoever had arrived.

My nose twitched. Wolf.

Conri stepped through the door, his gaze immediately on Francois then me and Leia as I finished untying her. “Everything good here?”

“Not really.” I secured the blanket around Leia as I helped her to stand. “Dead man's blood.”

I nodded toward Francois, and Conri whistled through his teeth.

“Really? How long?”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. Fucking long time, judging from the state of his blood.”

Conri nodded, a grimace flashing his teeth. “I could smell it from outside.” He paused. “We're about done out there. Just catching the last of

the ones who believe in flight over fight, but my shifters have that handled. You need me to do anything else?”

I drew Leia to my side, focusing on our bond, trying to reassure her as I spoke. “Can you get him to Baton Rouge? The council will ensure that justice is served.”

I squeezed Leia’s hand.

It wasn’t the news she wanted or the end she needed, but it was the best I could offer.

LEIA SAT QUIETLY on the jet on the way home, but it wasn’t the same shocked quiet as after the first battle at Conri’s safehouse. There was something resigned and dignified about her silence now. Our bond told me I hadn’t lost her. Her grip on my hand, even though she kept her face averted as she gazed out of the window, told me the same.

In time, she’d understand why I couldn’t bring about Francois’s final death. I’d explain it to her better when we got home, but I couldn’t be sure how much she’d agree with.

My men were quiet, too. Even Kyle. Perhaps especially Kyle, but he often went somewhere darker after a battle. I met Jason’s gaze. His eyes were a little too wide.

“You doing okay?” I checked in on my sireling, and he nodded.

“Yeah. I just...deposing a king, that’s pretty big. Are you worried about the power vacuum we’ve created?”

I considered his question. “I have some plans.” Then I chuckled ruefully. “And I know Conri has some plans. I think New Orleans will be okay.”

He nodded thoughtfully but remained quiet for the rest of the flight.

Jenkins met us at the airport and drove us home, and Leia rested her head against my shoulder as we drove the familiar route.

Everything had changed, yet nothing had. We'd killed Émile but Leia hadn't enacted her vengeance on Francois. Her father's killer had essentially walked away.

At home, I followed her up the stairs, unsure which way she'd turn, but she walked to the west wing without hesitation and got ready for bed. I offered up a small prayer of thanks to whichever force had listened to me earlier. My mate had returned with me, safe.

When I finally climbed into bed next to her, I gathered her into my arms and breathed in the smell of her freshly washed hair.

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "I know that wasn't the outcome you wanted."

She shrugged like she didn't care, but her voice was small. "I know you have your reasons."

I sighed. "They aren't *my* reasons. They're ancient ones. Ones I have to abide by or the council could demand my death. Francois isn't of sound mind, and he needs assessment and trial for his crimes. The council needs to determine how much responsibility he truly bears."

She sniffed softly, and I drew her against me.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "But please know I will always protect you above all else. I love you." My words were urgent. "You're my true mate, Leia. We'll be together forever. The threats against our happiness have been taken care of, and we can really start building our future now."

She turned her face toward me, and I captured her mouth beneath mine, touching against her tongue slightly when she parted her lips on a sigh. Desire zinged through me but I tamped it down.

Now was a time for tenderness more than passion.

But Leia had other ideas about the passion, pressing herself against me in the smallest of seductions. My body reacted right away, my cock hardening against the soft skin of her thigh.

I swallowed a groan, not wanting a moment of tenderness to be overtaken by my desire for my mate, but her fingertips grazed against my shaft and my

resolve was swept away as I deepened our kiss, sweeping my tongue farther into her mouth and letting loose a muffled groan. I captured her against me, pressing our bodies together so her hardening nipples grazed my chest.

I wanted her.

I'd never stop wanting her.

She was mine.

She cupped my cheek like I was fragile, delicate and she captured every nuance of my importance to her in the gentle hold. I skimmed my hand from her shoulder to her waist, lingering over the curve of her breast, and she sighed against my mouth. I hardened further at the indication of her pleasure, wanting to be inside her.

I slipped my fingers between her thighs. "You're so wet," I couldn't help my quiet exclamation.

She grinned against my mouth. "Ready for you," she whispered. "Don't make me wait."

But I wanted to please her. I rolled her clit slowly under my fingertip, focusing on the slow, gentle motion she preferred at first, and she moved her hips to meet me, setting the rhythm she needed.

I kissed her as she struggled to control her breathing, absorbing her gasps and exhaled sighs, intensifying my touch on her body as I felt its changes. She grew wetter as she approached orgasm, and I focused my touches, pressing a little harder, rolling slightly faster until her breathing picked up into a series of staccato gasps she didn't seem to have control over.

She sucked in a last inhale, and then all breath movement ceased as her thighs trembled and she rode her moment. Her hand clutched my wrist when I didn't ease up, choosing to push her further, and she gasped again.

"No more," she whispered. "Too sensitive. Inside me."

I responded to her curt commands by positioning myself above her, my cock finding its own way forward, nudging carefully inside her body. I exhaled as I sank deeper, Leia offering no resistance at all to my intrusion.

“Yes.” Her voice was a mere breath of approval and acceptance.

I withdrew a little before thrusting forward again. Then again and again until I built up the rhythm that offered the most pleasure to both of us. I nudged against her, angling to the spot inside her that brought her the most pleasure.

She rose to meet each of my thrusts, and I lost myself in the feel of her, not even thinking anymore—simply experiencing.

My cock thickened and my balls tightened, and I considered pulling back, holding off, but my release crashed over me, leaving me powerless.

I dropped my forehead to Leia’s then kissed her cheek and rolled us carefully to the side, wrapping my arms around her to hold her close.

Passion and tenderness went hand in hand.

LEIA

Six months later

The mirror reflected Aimée and Nic’s mom bustling around behind me as I put the finishing touches to my make-up and hair. Nic’s mom was doing something to the flowers, and Aimée was unpacking a box that seemed to only be full of delicate tissue paper as she removed layer after layer.

“It’s been such a long time. I’ve forgotten what to do.” Nic’s mom stopped moving and looked at me. “Maybe we should hold more weddings.”

I laughed. When I’d suggested I marry Nic in a normal (human) ceremony, no one had known quite what to do because it had dropped out of favor in vampire society.

True mates—mates of any kind, really—didn’t require a ceremony that was mostly symbolic and about the exchange of tokens. But Nic had agreed quickly, the same way he did when I expressed desire for anything at all that he could grant me.

Another piece of tissue paper fluttered as Aimée pushed it to the floor behind her. “Who the hell am I kidding?” she muttered. “I still don’t know what I’m doing.”

I caught her eye in the mirror and grinned. “And that makes it even more special that you’re here with me. Thank you for humoring this.”

Ever since I’d been a child, I’d had the exact spot in Mom’s garden picked out for where I wanted to hold my wedding. In my head, I’d already set up the gazebo and strung the fairy lights, arranged the chairs for the guests, and woven ribbons between the flowers and trees.

And I knew Aimée and Nic’s mom didn’t really understand. I wasn’t sure it was even something they truly remembered or even connected with actual weddings but they were both fully involved for me, and that was all that mattered.

The perfume of all the flowers scented my room, and Nic's mom glanced up. "I'll get Baldwin to move these downstairs. I think they're ready."

I glanced over the vases Nic's mom had arranged to line the paths to the gazebo, and I smiled. "They're perfect."

I returned my attention to my face in the mirror as I applied eyeliner to my left eye. It was a face that would never age now.

Never ageing. How did that happen?

But I pictured Nic, and I didn't regret my choices.

I'd only been a vampire for six months, and the war had been won for nearly as long. It had really been the perfect time to plan a wedding. Mom would have been proud of me. I liked to think Dad would have been too, that maybe I could have walked down the short aisle on his arm, his old smile in place.

I glanced at the dress I'd selected for the ceremony. It was simple and white, a little bit boho, with daisies that reminded me of my mom stitched around the hem. It didn't quite say *wedding* but none of the vampires would really know or care.

"Aha!" Aimée's eyes glowed triumphantly. "It looks perfect."

My room was strewn with tissue paper when I turned to look at her, and I grinned at her enthusiasm. "You've decorated my room with paper?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, silly."

Then she reached into the box and drew out a long, ivory gown.

I covered my gasp with my hand and blinked back the tears that threatened to undo all of my careful work with my make-up.

"Mom's dress?" My voice was just a croak.

Aimée still looked triumphant as she nodded. "Yes. Turns out Nicky's not the only one with an attic he rarely goes into."

I'd seen that dress every day in the wedding pictures Mom had scattered around our house—reminders of one of her happiest days, she'd always said. But I'd never dreamt I'd see it again today.

“Aimée, you might be a miracle worker.” I stood and walked toward her, reaching out to touch the soft fabric of the dress. “Thank you for letting me see this today.”

“Letting you see it?” She scoffed, the sudden noise out of place. “I hope you’re going to *wear* it. I’ve had it tailored to your measurements.”

This time, I couldn’t stop the tears that spilled down my cheeks. Oh, well—I could redo my make-up. I grabbed Aimée into a fierce hug, and she yelped a little.

“Vampire strength,” she wheezed out, and I relaxed.

“Sorry,” I murmured against her hair. “And thank you. Thank you so much, Aimée.” I gave her an extra squeeze again because I just couldn’t help it.

“Are you ready to try it on?”

I looked at the dress again, disbelief driving me to touch it again. Like it couldn’t be real. “I’m ready.”

But as I spoke, I shook my head, belying my words. Wearing Mom’s dress had never even crossed my mind.

“Something old,” Aimée murmured and she prepared the dress for me to step into.

Nic’s Mom moved forward, a pair of delicate pearl earrings in her outstretched hand. “And here is something borrowed. Nic’s father gave them to me, many years ago.”

Her eyes grew a little misty, swirling the same gray as Nic’s.

I giggled through my tears. “You two have really done your research.”

She simply smiled. “Of course. You’re part of our family now, Leia, and you’re important to Nic, so you’re important to all of us as well.”

Aimée had outdone herself with Mom’s dress. It fit me perfectly and dropped the floor in an effortless, graceful flow of fabric. When I moved, it clung and swished in all the tight places. “I feel like a princess.”

“Isn’t that the way all brides are supposed to feel?”

I glanced at Aimée. Apparently, she'd been reading and memorizing bridal magazines. I almost teased her for it, but instead I nodded, feeling touched. "Yes, I think it is."

She smiled like she was proud of her work then finished fastening the row of tiny buttons that tracked my spine.

I exhaled a calming breath as she lifted something else from the box— Mom's veil—before fixing it into my hair with delicate flower clips accented in the palest blue.

"The shoes are new, right?" She sounded worried, and I laughed.

"Yes, we have our old, new, borrowed, and blue bases completely covered." I nudged against her. "Thank you. Both of you." I included Nic's mom, and she smiled.

"Nic will be wondering where you are."

"Brides are supposed to be late," Aimée reeled off another fact she must have read in a magazine.

"Still, I don't want to miss it completely," I acknowledged and took a deep breath before unnecessarily smoothing Mom's dress and turning toward the door.

Longing for my dad squeezed my chest. He should have been here for this part, but maybe it was more fitting that I walk alone. I'd supported us alone for more years than I could count, and I'd made my decision to enter this life alone.

Well, alone except for Nic.

I took a deep breath and left my room to start my walk to the garden.

Nic

LEIA BROUGHT out so many emotions in me that I wasn't used to

experiencing. She always had. Today, I stood at an altar in a gazebo in her childhood yard, my insides tangled into knots as I waited for her to appear. There wasn't even any reason to be nervous.

She was my true mate. She'd wanted a wedding. But I checked my watch again. She was late.

I glanced at Jason. "She's late."

He cleared his throat. "I think they're supposed to be," he muttered. Then he grinned. "Don't take it personally."

I looked around the gardens, the ones I'd had restored. It was like a trip down memory lane. I'd spend many evenings walking these gardens, listening to the stories of Leia's maternal ancestors. They'd intrigued me as humans, the only family to capture my interest, and now that seemed fated. Like I was just waiting for the one to capture me for all time.

And now she had.

Music seemed to swell from nowhere at all, and the cue that things were starting carved a hollow in my chest, releasing all of my breath just as I tried to draw a fresh one. Leia appeared in view, and I almost sank to my knees at the sight of the beautiful woman slowly walking toward me, her approach both the ultimate offering while also being almost predatory.

A small smile curved her lips, and I tried to return it, but my face felt frozen as she continued to walk toward me. She was my mate. I swallowed past the lump in my throat as I wrestled with the idea that this beautiful, strong woman was mine.

My eyes prickled and I swiped at them, hoping for discretion, but Leia smiled a little wider, so perhaps she'd seen my gesture.

When she reached my side, I took both of her hands and pressed my mouth to hers, eager for the softness of her lips, but she drew away and chuckled.

"That's for *after* the ceremony," she whispered and glanced at the official.

I chuckled too. Adherence to human standards meant very little to me, but this day was for Leia.

The celebrant recited words and pledges and vows, and I spoke the words back to him, meaning every one as I looked in Leia's eyes and promised her my body and my soul.

Leia said she'd made very few changes to a traditional marriage ceremony, so as much as she actively seemed to be trying to shed her humanity, she clung to elements of it and rejoiced in that connection to all she'd previously understood and lived by.

I didn't want her to lose that. I wanted to give her everything she needed.

"This is the kissing part." Leia's voice broke into my thoughts, and she stood on her tiptoes to press her lips to mine.

I clutched her against me, deepening the kiss, uncaring of the onlookers watching the ceremony. I had everything I needed.

My true mate.

My bride.

My wife.

SEBASTIAN

I sat on Mother's couch and watched Nic standing, so imperious and pompous behind the delicate chaise on the other side of the room—like he couldn't bear to be near me.

I could hardly bear to be near *myself* after everything I'd done and tried to do—after the way Mother looked at me now. Her disappointment weighed on me far heavier than any anger. At least her anger would have been short-lived.

Well, shorter. The woman had been known to bear a grudge for centuries.

She wrung her hands as she watched me now, a handkerchief clutched in them, her fingers white-knuckled as she clasped them. Her eyes were pink-rimmed, and it was all for fucking show. This was for Nic's benefit today, to ensure he didn't have me put to immediate death. Sometimes, being Mother's inexplicable favorite had benefits.

"Brother," Nic intoned, his gaze assessing Mother before landing heavily on me. "You have done me a great wrong."

With difficulty, I withheld my sigh. "I know."

I even managed to sound contrite rather than exasperated... But how many times did he want to retread this old ground? We could go over this ad-infinitum and ad-nauseum but each retelling wouldn't change the facts.

I'd tried to turn his true mate and that hadn't been my right.

“Sorry,” I added belatedly. “I’m... I’m truly sorry, I mean, my king.”

I bowed my head before glancing back up at him. The expression on his face suggested he didn’t believe my apology...but he was prepared to accept it.

I *was* actually sorry, though. There were simply only so many times I could utter the phrase before it became meaningless and sounded disingenuous. I’d been sorry as soon as... Shit. As soon as Nic discovered us and stopped the turning.

I would have gone through with it, though. I would have completed the process and made Leia my sireling. Even now, the thought left me cold. Just the rift it would have created in our family... Hell, I would have *deserved* my final death.

Yet, I still couldn’t bring myself to *regret* the one thing I was truly sorry for. How did that duality work? Why did I feel sorry yet not find it in myself to regret?

Perhaps I simply couldn’t regret Leia.

“Brother,” Nic said again, and it was like he’d been attempting to get my attention while I’d been lost in my thoughts. His tone verged on frustration, and his fingers curved over the back of the chaise, his knuckles white now.

“Yes?” Again, I managed to sound more meek than irritated.

Perhaps he’d just come to gloat again. After all, he’d done that several times since he’d enforced my stay with Mother on the grounds he could no longer trust me to roam freely in Baton Rouge or even live in my own home.

I was as much a prisoner here as I ever had been in Nic’s cell, and in some ways the cell had been preferable. At least I’d known what my activities were limited to, and I hadn’t needed to ask Mother’s permission for everything like I was the newest of fledglings.

“I’ve decided what to do with you.”

“Oh, good.” I almost rubbed my hands together, and my tone conveyed a hefty dose of sarcasm.

“Sebastian.” Mother warned me with one word—my name, which she had certainly overused recently—and I resisted rolling my eyes.

“Yes, Nic? What is my punishment?” I met my brother’s gaze and he narrowed his eyes slightly, but I could only apologize to him so many times. “I’m ready to do my penance and repent.”

Okay, so I shouldn’t have added that last part, but drawing this out wasn’t benefitting anyone.

“Hail Marys and Our Fathers won’t cut it.” Nic smiled at his joke, but I didn’t bother.

“Then what will? What can I possibly do, Nic, that makes up for almost turning your true mate?” This time, I allowed my frustration to show.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Nothing. But Mother said I must keep you alive, and you’re my brother, so here we are. All in a room.”

“Yes, we are.” I couldn’t disagree with him. We were indeed all in a room.

But what did my brother intend to do about it?

I tried to keep my face neutral. Pleasant, even, but when I glanced at Mother, she held herself tense as she watched Nic.

“What have you decided?” She asked the question almost like she didn’t want to know the answer.

“I’m sending Sebastian away.” Nic’s words fell into the sudden silence like small, sharp stones.

Each of them seemed to cut me. But I hadn’t expected anything less or more or different. Of course he’d exile me. He’d told me as much when he visited me in the cell, and it would have been wrong of me to assume that the passage of time, that my help in his war against Francois would have changed his mind or softened his attitude.

“Away?” Mother spoke as if it was the last thing she’d expected, but she’d always been queen of the last-minute reprieve where I was concerned, never quite coming good on her threats or punishing me like she’d warned.

Nic wasn't like her, though. He was king, and kings needed to say what they meant and mean what they said.

"Yes, Mother," Nic confirmed. He watched me, his gaze not wavering. "Sebastian knows the terms of his continued position among the land of the living. He survives merely at my will, currently."

Mother paled. "But surely—" she began, but Nic shook his head, and her protest died before she could finish it. Possibly before she could even think of a good enough one. "So where are you sending him?" She sounded resigned now.

Exiled was better than dead.

Almost *anything* was better than a final death.

"Not far." Nic's amusement came with a hint of a fang, and a chill rushed through my blood.

"Oh." Mother glanced at me. "That's good, sweetheart, right? You won't be far."

I nodded but my movement was hesitant. "Mm." I was noncommittal because it sounded too good to be true. "How close is close?"

"We've been there together recently. A couple of times." He nodded, and his look of pleasure grew.

I wasn't going to like this. I didn't even need to question it. Whatever Nic had in mind was going to keep me busy because there was no way he'd keep me close if he thought I'd be at a loose end. After all, who knew what I might get up to then?

Although, it wasn't like I was still a danger to him or to Leia. They'd had a human marriage ceremony, and I'd done them both a damn favor—Nic had finally turned her, and they were both nauseatingly happy.

Not that I was bitter.

Suddenly, being sent somewhere else didn't sound quite so bad. I'd actually be glad of the space. I'd never quite redeemed myself for the incident I'd caused in Roanoke...and now I'd merely added Leia to my list of

misdemeanors I needed to find forgiveness for.

I studied Nic, really trying to take him in. I'd wronged him, and yes, this part was demeaning... I was a centuries old vampire, for fuck's sake, being chastised and sanctioned like a fledgling, but I had actually brought it on myself. I'd probably been fucking building up to it for years.

And maybe I was benefitting from the fact I was the king's brother. Hell, there was no maybe to it at all. I was still alive because of who I was, who I knew, the fact the king's mother had turned me.

"I'm sorry, Nic," I murmured, and it was the most heartfelt I'd sounded for a while.

He nodded sharply. "What I'm going to ask you to do won't be easy, and it isn't to see you fail. It's because I have faith in you. You're my brother, a Dupont, I trust you."

I... hesitated. I'd been about to trot out some throwaway line about not failing him, but... he *trusted* me? And his gaze said he spoke the truth.

I lurched from the couch and took a knee in front of him, my movements suddenly clumsy. "I won't fail you, Nic."

He chuckled. "I know you won't."

"Where are you sending him?" Mother's question refocused my attention, and all the clues Nic had laid out suddenly made sense.

"I'm going to New Orleans," I said. It wasn't even a guess. It was knowledge, sure and steady, beating inside me like a second heartbeat.

Nic nodded. "I need a regent there, a representative with the Dupont name. Someone to command the respect of our royal family, and I still have rebuilding to do here. I can't divide my attention, and I can't be in two places."

"Plus it keeps me busy and it keeps me out of the way." But I wasn't bitter about it. Everything Nic had said made complete sense.

And I was lucky he still wanted me so close, still trusted me to act in the best interests of the family. He could have cast me out completely.

“Sit down, Seb. Let me tell you what I know about New Orleans.”

I moved back onto the couch and Nic moved for the first time, walking around to take the seat next to me. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket like he'd prepared a list. I glanced at the bullet points and his neat handwriting. Yep... he'd prepared a damn list.

He indicated the top point. “Kyle is currently there, but mostly just keeping an eye on things. Nothing seems to be out of hand, things are just ticking over, but we need to establish our rule. The Neutral Zone will need a facelift—we can make it our new seat of power and erase Francois from the minds of the people all in one go if we get it right.”

I nodded.

“Jason will be there sometimes, liaising with Conri's beta over the various agreements we're putting in place with the wolves.”

I nodded again. Perhaps I should be making notes, too. “What's Kyle's remit?”

“Currently, he's mostly gathering information—people of interest, the current political climate, things like that.”

“People of interest?” I couldn't imagine any of Émile and Francois's people would be that interesting.

“I have him seeking out contracts, mostly—people who signed on with House of Ricard who might also be of use to use.” He waved a hand. “You've probably noticed, we have a particular shortage of witches, and Francois killed the only one who'd been inclined to be friendly to our family for a while.”

It was my turn to nod. “Got it, so I have two tasks?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Establish our rule and find a witch to act alongside our family?”

He chuckled. “That's about the size of it.”

I tensed my jaw. I could do those things. Now that he'd given me my mission, I'd do anything I could to prove to him that I was worthy.

Get Ruthless Prince Today!

CHAPTER 1 PREVIEW - RUTHLESS PRINCE

SEBASTIAN

Nic certainly enjoyed a life with all the trappings. His jet was very comfortable, and I relaxed against the soft leather of the seats after we took off, glancing around and remembering the time I'd ridden in this and been part of the team. I could still see Nic's most trusted guys taking up the other seats.

Damn it all. *I'd* been among the most trusted too.

Now I was just an exile. Sent away.

And it was all my own fault.

Unbidden, my thoughts strayed to Leia and I waited for the usual twinge of pain. That pain had been lessening with each day, and this time it was barely there at all. Perhaps I'd ruined my life for a damn schoolboy crush. I laughed bitterly at myself as I traced one of my fingers inside one of the shallow creases in the leather-covered arm.

Apparently, although I'd gotten older, I still remained an immature juvenile.

I closed my eyes and tried to banish thoughts of Baton Rouge. This was my fresh start. That was what Nic had said, at least. And it hadn't been a suggestion. I was pretty sure it was the only thing that had kept him from killing me. Well, that, and Mother.

The smirk curling one corner of my lips almost hurt. Interference from

Mother. Truly still a juvenile, then.

“Mr. Dupont?” I cracked an eye open and studied the nervous flight attendant wringing her hands in front of me. “Would you like a drink?”

I never used to make women nervous. Word of what I’d done to Leia must have already spread, although that didn’t make a whole lot of sense. Leia had *asked* me to turn her. I hadn’t forced myself on her. I wasn’t that guy.

But my conscience nagged at me. I wasn’t exactly a good guy, either. Leia hadn’t belonged to me. Turning her hadn’t been my right.

The flight attendant’s cheeks turned pink as I continued to stare at her while my thoughts played out. “Mr. Dupont?” she prompted.

I waved carelessly, my lack of manners shaming me too late. “Bourbon. On the rocks.” I paused then added, “Please,” as I turned to look out of the window into the darkness. We were nearly ready to begin our descent.

The cabin behind me was reflected in the window, but I peered out to the lights below. New Orleans. I swallowed the bile that rose up my throat. Nic had recently claimed it as his own, and now he’d sent me to regain order. *Fucking fantastic.*

Yes, it was my penance and my chance to prove myself, to regain his good favor... but damn, this was a tight leash. I was still within spitting distance of him, and my task wouldn’t be an easy one.

Émile hadn’t been a popular king, and Francois hadn’t exactly been a powerful prince, but Émile’s demise and Francois’s absence had left a power vacuum. One that Nic expected me to fill.

The flight attendant set a crystal tumbler in front of me, and I downed it in one, forgetting to savor it as I sought to drown my bitterness.

The alcohol burned its way down my throat, but the liquid fire helped. I could do this shit. The tumbler thumped back onto the table as I lowered it too fast. I could bring New Orleans back under control. I could redeem myself. I could make Nic forget my transgressions.

I hesitated. Okay, so maybe not forget. But he'd forgive me.

Again.

He always forgave me eventually. That was what older brothers did for their younger ones, after all.

And now this younger brother needed to prove himself.

As the plane began to angle downward, resolve flooded me. I could prove myself again. This time. Hopefully this *last* time.

The plane touched down gently—hopefully a sign of what was to come. A gentle introduction to my new to my life in New Orleans sounded pretty great.

I disembarked slowly—I had nothing to rush for. But suddenly a figure waved, and I squinted into the darkness shrouding him.

“Kyle?”

“Good to see you, Sebastian,” he called back, and I winced as I searched for any sort of duplicity in his tone.

Was it *really* good to see me? How could it be? I was a disgraced prince.

But I pushed those thoughts away. I was also still Sebastian Dupont, Baton Rouge prince and now the king's representative in New Orleans.

“Kyle.” I held my hand out as I approached him, and he clasped it. “I didn't expect you to be here.”

He shrugged, the movement easy, casual, disinterested as he glanced around the surrounding area like he was checking for potential threats. Typical Kyle. The guy never relaxed.

“I'm taking you straight to the house so you can get yourself set up before you tackle the business angle,” he said. “Thought you might like to get your thoughts in order.”

I nodded and swallowed my groan. I'd never owned or managed a business before—only been on Nic's support team, and even then, I was fairly far down the pecking order for actual support. Nic's go-to guy for anything business related had always been Ben—the guy was like magic at

turning businesses around and knowing what to do or who to contact. He also got shit done *fast*.

I shuddered at the idea Nic expected me to be anywhere near Ben's league. But I needed this to work. As I followed slightly behind Kyle, his footsteps so silent he could have been a ghost or a ninja of some sort, I glanced around me. New Orleans smelled different to Baton Rouge, and this was my home now.

I could do this. I could make it work. I'd learn everything I could about the business and the role Nic needed me to fill for him. I'd give him a properly ordered New Orleans with people who respected his rule and reign.

I owed him that much.

Kyle led me to a car, and I raised an eyebrow.

"No bike?"

The corner of Kyle's lip curled "You'd want to ride behind me, wrap your arms around me while we go around the corners? No, dude."

I chuckled. "Good point."

I got into the passenger seat and soon we were driving away from the airport. I'd only brought a small suitcase of things. I had some clothes with me but honestly, what I hadn't brought, I'd buy.

"Nic put you close to The Neutral Zone."

The Neutral Zone. Damn. Was I supposed to rename it? I mean, it did what it said on the tin, right? Vampires from all over could discuss business there without fear of attack... but it also held memories of Francois and Émile, and those were the kinds of memories I needed to eradicate from the minds of the locals.

I shuffled the thought to tomorrow's to-do list. I didn't need to make any big decisions tonight, and it was probably wise to observe the lay of the New Orleans land first. I didn't want to make any fast decisions I might come to regret—I didn't need to give Nic reason to doubt that I had this under control. Not on day fucking zero, anyway.

After a mostly silent ride, Kyle swung the car toward a closed gate. He flipped down his sun visor and pressed a button on a small device clipped to it, and the gates swung open before he pulled forward into a parking space big enough for two cars. Kyle's bike seemed to be taking up the rest of the space, though, parked at its usual obnoxious angle. He gave it a wide berth, cutting the engine as a security light came on and bathed the entire area in harsh illumination.

I blinked. "Trying to blind people?"

He cut me a quick glance. "Only if they're where they're not supposed to be, I guess."

I nodded. That made sense. No one should be back here but me or one Nic's other guys. I swept my gaze up the side of the house. I'd expected something small—a hole in the wall—but this was...almost palatial.

"What was Nic thinking?" I murmured.

Kyle shrugged, the movement visible in peripheral vision. "That he's the king?"

I nodded. Well, yeah. That made sense too.

The house was huge. It had a painted red exterior, and there was a balcony on the second story at the front, the pretty filigree wrought iron almost framing the upper floor-to-ceiling windows.

It was narrow but stretched a long way back, and a bridge led over a courtyard just visible through a gate—more wrought iron.

"Where does that go?" I pointed.

"Guest rooms." Kyle's reply was nearly lost as he opened his door and climbed from the car. He popped the trunk and lifted out my small suitcase as I joined him.

Warm, damp air surrounded me, pressing against my skin like a hug.

"The Neutral Zone is just down there." He indicated back out of the gate before I returned my scrutiny to the house. It stood alone, the largest on the street, although it was nothing like the home Francois and his father had

shared during their reign here.

The mere thought of them sent a whisper of a shiver straight down my spine, and I gave in to the answering shudder as I took my case from Kyle.

“Someone step on your grave?” For the first time in a long time, Kyle lifted an amused eyebrow.

I grinned in response. “Something like that, although I don’t intend to make New Orleans my grave.”

His answering silence was almost ominous as he walked toward the house. Behind us, the gate rolled shut, obliterating the view of the street and caging us in.

“Okay,” Kyle said as he stepped into the kitchen of the house. Everywhere smelled of fresh paint. “Nic had it decorated for you, and the furnishings are new. I’ve got some crap in one of the guestrooms but you can choose where you sleep.”

If I knew Kyle, he only had the barest of essentials with him, and he would have chosen the most basic room. I glanced around, missing my home in Baton Rouge. Hell, I missed Nic’s home in Baton Rouge, La Petite Morte, and I even missed the damn cell where Nic had taken me before he gave me my reprieve.

Homesickness gnawed a small pit in my stomach, but then a loud jangling echoed through the home.

“What the hell was that?”

Again, Kyle’s face registered faint amusement. “Doorbell, dude, and we ain’t got no Baldwin yet.”

I glanced at him and shrugged. “You expecting anyone?”

But he was already busy, opening the fridge. I shrugged again and walked in the direction where I expected to find the front door, and the jangling noise sounded again.

“All right, all right. I’m coming,” I muttered. I had more pressing matters for my attention than an impatient unwanted guest.

I swung the door open to find Jason standing on the front step, grinning. The homesickness that had been creeping over me immediately began to wane.

“Sebastian,” Jason said. “Got any extra rooms? I could have stayed with the wolves, but the smell of wet dog gets a bit stifling after a while.”

He grinned wider and I stepped back to allow him in.

“How are things going with the wolves and the power share?” I asked. Nic had explained a little of the deal he’s made with Conri, but Jason was his man for keeping the peace between the wolves and the vampires in New Orleans due to his friendship with Conri’s beta. “Anything I need to know?”

Jason shook his head. “Just the usual teething crap, you know? They’re all pups, really. Too excitable when they have something new. I have no idea how Conri keeps them all in line. Bet he’s watching me and laughing.” His smile faded to a grimace before returning. He glanced up at the where the steps led to the second floor. “What do you think of the place? Nic thought you needed a base close to the club and befitting someone of your family.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s pretty nice.”

But really, the house was the lowest priority item on my agenda. I’d been to The Neutral Zone, and I agreed with Nic’s description of it. It was like stepping directly into a whore’s rotting pussy. God alone knew what Francois had been thinking with all of the red and black decoration—although perhaps his madness had a lot to answer for. More than any of us really knew.

I needed to turn the restaurant and club into a space people wanted to come. Somewhere modern. As I considered the possibilities, excitement fizzed in my chest. I’d always wanted to be successful, to prove myself...

This was my chance.

“Come on.” I turned to Jason. “I was just about to take my shit upstairs and find a bedroom. You might as well do the same.”

I groaned and rolled over, burying my face in the soft pillow. That was different—the softness rather than lumpiness, and the smell of new paint that I could taste in the back of my throat. I huffed and threw myself onto my back, throwing my arm over my face to cover my eyes against the sunlight I hadn't managed to prevent from streaming through the windows.

“Sebastian!” My name rang through the hallway outside like Kyle had forgotten which one of us was the prince.

I shook my head—no way in hell he cared.

“We need to get to the club.”

I huffed again and clambered from bed. “Coming. Give me ten.” I introduced myself to the shower and threw on some clothes before joining him downstairs.

He handed me some sort of foil wrapped breakfast sandwich. “Let's go. We're walking so you get a better knowledge of your local area.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

The walk was quite pretty, but I was glad when it ended. It was like I'd just stepped out of the shower all over again as a mixture of sweat and humidity clung to me.

We reached the club and I looked up at the exterior. It was on a busy street, but nothing called for customers to come in. It was as neglected as Francois's home.

“We need to close it,” I said. “For a proper renovation job, we need the building quiet and empty.”

Kyle nodded and slipped his phone from his pocket before wandering away to have his conversation. After he slid his phone away again, he returned to me. “Contractors are on their way.”

“Have you got anything else you would rather be doing? Or that you need to do?” I all but made a shooping motion with my hand. It wasn't that I wasn't grateful for his help and ability to handle the situation, but... Hell, I wasn't fucking grateful at all. I wanted to do it myself. To prove to Nic that I could.

Kyle looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, his eyes narrowed. Then he nodded. “Yeah, I try to check in with Temple fairly regularly. See what the general feeling is among the New Orleans vampires. I’ll go and do that.”

I nodded too. “Let me know what he says.”

But Kyle was already gone, his silent feet carrying him through the street. I barely saw him as he wove himself into the crowd then disappeared from view entirely.

I drew a deep breath and looked over the front of The Neutral Zone again. The Z hung crooked, tempting me to reach up and rip it off entirely, but I could discuss all the changes with the contractors when they arrived.

“So a month, then?”

The man nodded and made another note in his book. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

If anyone else had used that tome, I wouldn’t have believed him, but I recognized these guys as the ones Ben always used. Their work was impeccable, and I’d never known them to run late on any of the projects he’d managed for Nic.

I appreciated Ben sending them my way—it gave me an instant advantage in impressing my brother, if nothing else.

“And you said you’d begin tomorrow?” I confirmed.

The foreman opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, the front door burst open and a young brunette woman rushed inside.

I stepped forward to tell her we were closed, but she narrowed her eyes and settled her hands onto her hips, the fire in her gaze stealing my words.

“What the hell is going on?” she spat. She glanced around. “Fuck. Where are all the customers?”

Wild brown curls and ringlets cascaded over her shoulders and down her back like she was some sort of gorgon come to turn me to stone under her

gaze—and I had no doubt she could harden at least one part of me to stone very quickly. Her deep brown eyes were like pools of liquid chocolate. Maybe I'd drown in them.

Whatever happened, this woman could be my end.

My start and my end, and I didn't want it any other way.

I stepped closer to her. I probably couldn't get close enough. The desire to hold her to me, to feel her body pressed against mine, crashed over me, and I swallowed.

“And who...who are you?” Even with halting speech, I sounded imperious and snooty, and the fire in her eyes blazed harder.

“I'm the singer. Booked to sing here today. Who the hell are *you*?”

Ah, a question I could do something with. I reached into the back pocket of my pants and extracted a business card.

“Sebastian Dupont,” I said. “Representative of the new king and the owner here.”

Her mouth fell open. “You own The Neutral Zone now?”

I grimaced. “It's called *Allécher* now.” I'd wanted something that both spoke to our French roots and followed Nic's conventions for naming his businesses. Plus, I wanted to give customers a heads up about the seduction and enticement they could find within these doors.

The woman in front of me wrinkled her nose. “You gave it some new fancy French name?” She shook her head. “Good luck with that being enough to improve the place.”

I chuckled. “That won't be the only change now that Francois's gone.”

“He's *gone*?” Her words were a whisper and she lifted her hand so her fingers clawed at the base of her throat. “Francois is dead? What about *Émile*?”

I shook my head. “Francois isn't dead, but he's no longer in power. *Émile*, however, is very dead indeed.”

She closed her eyes briefly and blew out a sigh then seemed to recover

herself and focused back on me, her gaze steely again.

“Who are you?” I shouldn’t have cared. She was just a club singer—someone Francois paid to entertain his customers. I had no guarantee she was even any good. But I held my hand out anyway, wanting to feel hers clasp it.

She hesitated, but I willed her forward, almost holding my breath as I waited to touch her skin.

“Kayla McKenna,” she murmured as I finally curved my fingers over the back of her hand.

“Kayla.” I smiled. I couldn’t help it. Her name brought me inexplicable joy.

She still clutched my business card in her other hand, and she turned it over to read the print on the back. Then she grimaced doubtfully, and I wanted to smooth the expression from her face.

“So have I still got a job or what?” She was pretty abrupt, and I almost laughed but part of me didn’t dare to disrespect her indignant anger like that. “I mean,” she continued. “I only went on vacation for a week, and it was all agreed officially.” She lifted her head and looked around, taking in men who were already scattered around the space, measuring things and making notes. “But now everything’s changed.” Then she returned her attention to me, a hard glint in her eyes.

She clearly wasn’t happy.

“Everything’s changed,” I agreed.

She tugged her hand from mine like she’d only just realized I still had hold of it. “So?” She raised an eyebrow.

I let my hand drop to my side and flexed my fingers briefly, already missing her touch. “So...what?” Holy hell, I really was dumb around this woman.

She blew out a rapid breath. “My *job*. Have I still got one?”

“Oh. I... I...” I didn’t even fully know what Allécher was going to be yet, apart from exclusive. Invite only exclusive, probably. I wanted people to

want to be here, to aspire to it. But I wasn't sure what that meant for any sort of lounge singing vibe. That was too much to explain on the fly, though—especially if I kept stuttering out all of my words.

“Well?” She all but started tapping her foot.

I nodded at the business card in her hand and forced myself to be far more flippant than I felt. I had a business to run, after all. “Give me a call in a month when we're ready to reopen. I'll know more then.”

[Get Ruthless Prince Today!](#)

RUTHLESS PRINCE

[Get Ruthless Prince Today!](#)

MADE BY THE VAMPIRE KING

BATON ROUGE VAMPIRE: BOOK 3

Roxie Ray & Lindsey Devin

© 2021

Disclaimer

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and events are all fictitious for the reader's pleasure. Any similarities to real people, places, events, living or dead are all coincidental.

**This book contains sexually explicit content that is intended for
ADULTS ONLY (+18).**