

♀
MERCURY
RISING

A
BRIDES FOR THE BLOOD LORDS
NOVELLA

ALESSA THORN

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THE INFERNO UNIVERSE

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[About the Author](#)

[IRONHEART](#)

[1.](#)

[2.](#)

[Also by Alessa Thorn](#)

Asteria's lungs burned and ached with every breath of freezing air. The mountain path was barely existent; the tall and branchy trees seemed almost determined to obscure her way. She didn't know if it was by design or not.

The creature she was looking for was said to have been some kind of magic user in his time, so it would make sense he would try and protect his resting place with dark sorcery. Even the air in the forest seemed to be against her, the ominous sense of dread weighing her down.

This would have to be one of the dumbest fucking ideas you've ever had, she told herself.

What choice did she have? The vampire clans fighting against each other were set to tear the city apart. Her own family had been slaughtered needlessly because of their war.

The Evandruses had served the Amulius family for centuries. All it had taken was the current clan prince, Valens, to snap at the wrong patriarch. The Cassius family had responded by sending an assassin to kill Asteria's parents and brother because they knew attacking the Amulius family would mean starting a war. Their blood sworn servants were the next best thing.

Who cares about a bunch of Renfields, right? The nickname still grated her fucking nerves. It limited the extent of what the blood sworn families did for their masters. It was supposed to be a relationship of protection and respect. At least, it used to be.

Asteria stopped walking and bent over to clutch at her knees. A scream of rage and grief tore out of her chest, and she was unable to stop it.

She had been out that fateful night with some girlfriends, celebrating a new job that Zia had received. When she returned to the estate, there was only blood and body chunks waiting for her. While Asteria had been getting drunkenly railed in a bathroom stall, her family had been dying.

She would never stop feeling the shame for that, which was why she was going on this damn suicide mission. She wanted payback, and she knew the vampire to give it to her.

Asteria couldn't count on the current Amulius patriarch to get revenge for her family. They couldn't keep their own safe anymore. No, she needed to find the old master to deal with this mess, and she didn't care if she incurred his wrath along the way.

If half the stories about the old master were true, he had been one of the founding members of the city of Inferno. He had represented the whole of the vampires, not just his family. It was his *auctoritas*, the immense power of his authority and influence and his seat on the First Council that had ensured the vampires maintained a position of privilege in a city run by supernatural creatures.

The only ones more powerful were the dragons. No one fucked with the dragons.

Asteria was far enough away from Inferno now that she could no longer see the smudge of smoke of it in the distance.

These mountains and forests were no place for a human, even a trained one like herself. She could fight well against all supernatural creatures; it was part of being her master's protector during daylight. This forest had magic, and that was a different kind of adversity.

There were stories that said they were full of feral werewolves. She hoped that whatever spells the old master had on the secret trail would be enough to protect her. Wishful thinking. That was what this whole damn trip was.

Asteria pulled out the map once more and tried to figure out her position. The map had been given to the head of the Evandrus family by the old master himself. Not even his own vampiric family knew where he slept. He hadn't trusted them with the location like he had his blood sworn.

Truth be told, Asteria had thought the map was a family story too until she had found it when cleaning out her father's safe. The map had given her the grand idea of hunting the old master down and waking him up.

If he killed her for the audacity, she was ready to go. Anything was better than trying to serve Valens a second longer. That was before she even got to

the guilt that was eating her alive.

Asteria ran her finger over the twisting red line on the map. She was getting close, and she would be hiking upwards from now on.

Taking a sip from her water bottle, Asteria put the map away before adjusting her pack and starting the climb. The forest soon began to thin out, and the ground turned to sharp rocks.

Trust a vampire to build his resting place in the ass end of nowhere. The old ones were always paranoid, not to mention bat shit crazy. Asteria could use someone bat shit crazy.

How would the old master feel about the way his family was being run? She doubted he would be impressed with Valens's blood orgies that only played shitty dance music.

She hoped he would turn up and clean house. *Literally*. She hated the dead-beat groupies and influencers that were always sucking Valens's dick just to be seen with one of the members of the founding families.

Asteria was embarrassed to be blood sworn to such a vapid waste of immortality. She knew her family had been ashamed of Valens too, which made their death, caused by his running mouth, so much worse.

Asteria's legs burned, her back ached, and she just wanted to lie down or go home... She froze. There was a presence in the air, a press of magic and influence.

"Nice try! I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not going back!" she called out. She was the last Evandrus for fuck's sake. She wasn't going to be dissuaded by some simple spell.

Asteria was about to stop and check her map again when she circled around a small ridge and found herself at the end of the path.

In the rock face before her was carved the alchemical symbol for Mercury. It was sacred to alchemists because it transcended both solid and liquid states. It was also a representation of life and death—the transcendent state of all vampires and immortals.

"Hello, master," she whispered.

Asteria took a small knife from her belt and sliced the tip of her finger. Blood welled, and she took a steady breath. She really hoped that the stories were true.

Asteria traced her bloody finger over the grooves of the symbol and prayed. The sleeping god inside must've listened to her because the rock opened like a door into the darkness.

"Here we go." Asteria switched on her torch and went to meet her fate.

Asteria expected darkness, cobwebs, maybe some bats. She didn't expect electric lights to flick to life as soon as she stepped through the door. How did the master get electricity all the way out there? She wasn't sure electricity had even been a thing when he was still awake.

Asteria paused on the steps, suddenly worried about traps. If the blood sigil had let her through the stone door, then surely it would have disabled any arrows or flying blades. She pulled her dagger from her belt. It wouldn't do much good to her if the traps were still active, but it made her feel better. It was the family blade, and it reminded her of why she was doing such a stupid fucking thing to begin with.

Asteria came to the end of the winding stone stairs and opened a carved wooden door. Light danced from one lamp to another until the chamber was shining. She looked up at the black wrought iron chandelier. The floor was covered in plush red carpets, woven with black designs. Oil paintings of landscapes, saints, and mythological scenes hung on the walls.

The master clearly hadn't been interested in hiding in a coffin like any old peasant vampire. The entire chamber was his lush tomb to rest in.

There were doors that must've led to other rooms, though Asteria couldn't imagine what they held. From the stories she'd heard, the master had left all his wealth in the vaults under the mansion or in the banks run by the dragons.

Asteria stepped further into the room and placed her pack on the floor. It held supplies she thought she might need, including bags of blood. She was willing to feed the master herself, but he'd been asleep for so long, she didn't know how much he would need.

Asteria couldn't see a stone sarcophagus or anything like a coffin. She followed the hallway to the left and found a large bed that had been positioned in an alcove carved from the rock. It was made of heavily engraved black wood with a canopy of black lace over it. Swallowing hard, she tiptoed closer and pulled the lace back.

Lying on top of a black and gold brocade bedspread was a large man. She didn't know why she had expected some kind of hairless nosferatu creature. She just hadn't expected the master to look like he was merely taking a nap.

He had lived before the fall of Rome and been turned in the prime of his life. He had curling black hair with only the finest traces of silver, a strong nose, and full lips. Even his beard looked as if it had been trimmed recently.

Mercury, the sorcerer—that was what they used to call him. Perhaps it was magic that had kept him looking so good. *Very good.*

Asteria realized she was staring and quickly bowed her head. "Forgive me for waking you, master, but I don't have a choice. I am of the bloodline of Evandrus. I'm not your enemy, and your family needs you before it's destroyed too."

Summoning every ounce of her courage, Asteria toed off her boots and climbed up onto the bed beside him. She brushed her thumb over his full bottom lip to open his mouth a little, her heart beating too fast. Taking her family blade, she opened her wrist and held it to his mouth. Crimson stained his lips, and she pressed the bleeding cut further into his mouth until it touched his teeth.

"Please, master. Please, wake up," she begged, her eyes filling with unexpected tears. She was so tired of her grief eating away at her. She hated feeling so alone. "Please, Mercury, I need you."

A large hand grabbed her forearm with lightning speed, and Asteria tried to pull back in fright. He held her firm, clamping her wrist down to his mouth, and his golden eyes opened.

"M-Master?" she whispered, but the eyes didn't acknowledge her. Sharp fangs pierced her skin, making her cry out before euphoria and desire rushed through her veins. Sweat trickled down between her breasts, and her thighs clamped together. A vampire's bite could be an aphrodisiac—she knew that—but she'd never experienced it for herself.

Mercury's mouth sucked hard on her wrist again, making her groan. Asteria was suddenly on her back, the huge vampire on top of her, pinning her down between his strong thighs.

"Master! Wake up! I'm your blood sworn!" she said, trying to get through to him. A deep growl rolled through him, his dominant power making her body react accordingly. She bared her neck, an act of submission that she wasn't sure if he would recognize in his current state.

He was on her like a starving dog. Sharp fangs tore into Asteria's throat, making her cry out. It wasn't in pain.

She would *not* come when she was so scared. Her body wasn't getting the message. She ground her pussy against him, her breasts pressing into his chest.

Mercury hummed against her skin and sucked harder. Asteria's orgasm exploded through her, soaking her panties and making darkness wash over her.

Mercury didn't notice, nor did he stop drinking. Her body would give out soon. Her vision began to tunnel, and her body went heavy.

"Kill me if you need to, my master...just avenge them," Asteria begged him softly before the darkness took her.

Everything was bright and burning. Blood was pounding through his veins, his heart thudding rapidly for the first time in... He didn't know.

He tasted warm skin, female perfume, and arousal. Blood like spice and honey. He could hear her heart too as it got slower... Mercury pulled back with a gasp. He wasn't dreaming; there was a woman underneath him, and he had been killing her. Her hair was a messy braid of dark hair that shone red in the lamp light. She had full lips and eyes that would be big if they were open.

Memories started to filter through to him. Her voice saying something important. He brushed his fingers over her pulse. It was still flickering but there.

I am of the bloodline of Evandrus.

"Oh, no," he wheezed, his voice husky from sleep. He couldn't let his blood sworn die. He bit his finger and let three drops of his blood drip into her mouth.

A moment later, color flushed back into her light brown skin and lips. Danger averted, he became acutely aware of the blood rushing through him, most specifically to his dick. He quickly moved off the woman, the impropriety making him ashamed of himself.

"What brought you to this, little dove?" he murmured, staring down at her.

A bloody dagger was resting on the bed beside her. Not just any dagger. It was a *pugio*, a small Roman dagger that had been used by soldiers. Mercury recognized it immediately. He had given it to the first of his blood sworn in the time of Augustus. She was Evandrus after all.

Mercury tried to remember through the blood haze what else she had whispered as he fed from her. *Please, Mercury, I need you.*

The yearning in her admission made his dick go hard again and mouth water. She smelled like sweat and sex and sweet blood.

He cursed in Latin and took an extra step back from the bed. He needed information but didn't want to wake her up. Following her scent, Mercury found her large leather backpack. He took it though to his laboratory and emptied the contents. There was a map that he recognized as the one he'd given the Evandrus family, some human food, and five bags of blood in some kind of cooling bag. The human food was somehow preserved, but it smelled awful. He wondered how she could stomach it.

Mercury searched the other pockets and found a purse and a driver's license with her photo on it.

"Asteria Evandrus," he read aloud. There was also the crest of Inferno City. It was a stylized fire with seven tongues, each one representing the seven kinds of supernatural creatures that first founded the city—dragons, vampires, werewolves, mages, daemons, gargoyles, and fae.

Mercury opened one of the blood bags, tipped it into a flask, and set it over a flame. He hated cold blood. If he had a choice, he would be drinking straight from the veins of his pretty Asteria. Unfortunately, he had to let her recover before he went back for more. He drank the blood and tried not to gag. It was not that it wasn't human and sufficient; it was that his mouth had tasted Asteria, and now he craved more.

Mercury was surprised he had woken up at all with such little encouragement. Going off the date on her license, he had been asleep for the last hundred and forty-seven years. Longer than he'd expected to rest.

Mercury frowned. Valens had been instructed to wake him on the hundredth year.

Not only had Asteria managed to wake him, but she'd also found her way easily to him. True, she had the map, but he had specifically laid out warding spells to keep people away, except if there was a dire emergency and his family was at risk.

What had happened while he had been sleeping? Why had Asteria woken him?

Mercury went to check that she was still sleeping. She would need proper food if he was to keep feeding off of her. He had no intention of letting her starve, and that preserved food wouldn't do. He wasn't interested in drinking

any of the other blood bags either.

Mercury shifted into a large wolf and ran up the stone stairs and into the night. The forest smelled so fresh, so alive, after centuries of being underground. He ran, stretching his legs and getting his heart racing. It didn't take him long to pick up the scent of a deer, and the predator in him roared to life, wanting the chase, the triumphant moment when the animal submitted to him before the kill.

Mercury had always been a hunter, and the deer wasn't the only prey he intended to get to submit to him that night.

Mercury had always been good at magic and bending the world to his will, even before he was made into a vampire. It didn't matter that he had no servants to attend them in his mountain tomb; his magic had taken care of things.

By the time Asteria woke, there was a hot bath and roasted deer waiting for her. He could eat human food, but it didn't taste interesting enough for him to bother. He had a few bottles of wine he enjoyed and had set one out.

Mercury had also taken the time to bathe and dress in fresh clothing. He didn't want to frighten his sleeping beauty, though she was an Evandrus, so he doubted she would spook easily. She certainly hadn't been afraid to walk into his precious sanctum and wake him up. He would get his answers from her, one way or another. He wouldn't need to sleep when the sun rose, not after over a hundred years of rest.

Asteria would know what had happened to his family, and Inferno, since he'd been sleeping. Valens should have been the one to wake him. The more he thought about it, the more it bothered him. It felt like a betrayal, and if there was one thing Mercury wouldn't tolerate, it was a traitor.

Asteria sat bolt upright, her knife in her hand and ready to attack something that wasn't there. It took her a few moments to realize where she was and whose bed she was lying in. That someone was standing in the doorway, watching her like a big lion ready to jump on her.

Mercury Amulius seemed to be even bigger when he was upright. He looked refreshed and had obviously washed and changed. His black hair was combed out around his shoulders. Gold eyes brushed over her, and she quickly dropped her dagger.

Asteria had met old vampires before, but the aura of power coming off him made her want to curl into a ball or just stare at him. She was used to dazzling vampire beauty, but Mercury was brutally male in comparison. He was a vampire, the kind that was chosen for his power, not because he was pretty.

"Hello, Asteria," he purred with a voice like sex and whiskey.

"Master," she said, sliding off the bed as quickly as she dared and onto her knees. She bowed her head low, hardly daring to breathe. Her head was fuzzy, and she didn't know what to do. Cool fingers brushed the hair from the back of her neck and over the intricate scar that was the Amulius family crest.

"Who did this to you?" Mercury growled, making the hair on her arms rise.

"Valens did. It's tradition for all of your household to be marked with a brand so that the other vampires know who we belong to," Asteria replied. It had hurt like all fuck when he had done it. There had been something about the gleam in Valens's eye that said he enjoyed that pain. She hadn't given him

the satisfaction of letting out even a whimper.

The air in the room chilled. "A tradition," Mercury repeated, his voice barely a whisper. "It's not a fucking tradition. I freed your ancestor from slavery over a thousand years ago and gave him the name Evandrus. There should be no slave marks on your skin."

Asteria didn't know how to respond to that, so she kept her head down and said nothing. It seemed the best way to deal with pissed off vampires. Mercury's fingers slid under her jaw, and he lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. His golden eyes had turned red with fury.

"I have prepared a bath for you through that door. You didn't have spare clothes in your pack, so I laid out something of mine," he said, pointing. "Go and refresh yourself and meet me in the dining room."

Before Asteria could thank him, he vanished. It was probably for the best. Red eyes meant he was fighting rage and bloodlust, and she didn't need to be around him like that.

Asteria got up off the floor and went into the bathroom. There was a cast iron tub with water steaming away. The tomb had electricity and running water. It was more like a hidden getaway place. She supposed in a sense it was.

Asteria had found no paperwork or stories about why Mercury had decided to remove himself from the world. If he didn't rip her throat out for waking him, she might have a chance to ask him.

There was no mirror in the bathroom, which was annoying but not surprising. Vampires had no reflection, and Mercury hadn't built the place in order to entertain human guests. She smelled terrible after the hike, and she imagined she looked worse. She touched her neck where Mercury had bitten her. There were no marks, just a tender feeling that sent an unexpected shot of desire through her if she pushed too hard.

You brought him blood. You won't need to embarrass yourself again by coming every time he bites you.

Asteria got in the tub and washed her hair and body thoroughly. Mercury wasn't someone you kept waiting, no matter how much you wanted to soak in hot water. She thought she would be sorer from the hike. Weird. She was fit; she had to in order to be blood sworn, but she had walked for hours. After she was done in the tub, she washed her dirty clothes in the sink and hung them over the towel hooks.

The outfit that Mercury had left for her was a long red velvet robe lined

with black fur. Not exactly what Asteria expected, but it covered her up and would keep her warm while her other clothes dried.

Asteria walked barefoot through the halls until she found Mercury sitting at a cherry wood dining table, drinking wine. The space to his right had been set out with a platter of steaming meat, fresh fruit, and vegetables.

Mercury rose and pulled out her chair. "Please sit and eat. You must be starving after your efforts to find me."

Asteria swallowed audibly. "Thank you. You didn't have to do this. I brought supplies with me."

"Your 'supplies' smelled disgusting. I couldn't allow you to eat them," Mercury replied, sitting back down.

"Thank you. This is very considerate of you."

'When in doubt, be polite,' her mother always used to say. Asteria drank some water before starting on the deer. She had taken two bites before Mercury started talking again.

"Why did you wake me?" he asked, leaning back in his chair. He could have compelled her to answer, but he seemed to want the conversation.

"Because Valens allowed my whole family to be slaughtered by assassins working for Cassius," she replied. She wouldn't lie. She wasn't dumb. He could drink her blood and see for himself she wasn't making it up.

Mercury's eyes glowed red again. "Explain."

Asteria took a deep, centering breath before she told him about Valens insulting the patriarch of the Cassius family and the tension that had been building between all the vampires. Her voice shook only a little when she told him of coming home and finding her family massacred.

"It must have been done by vampires or some other supernatural creature. My family is trained to fight from the moment we open our eyes. They wouldn't have fallen like that to just anyone. If it *was* vampires, they would've had to have been invited into the house, which means we would've trusted them," Asteria explained, her mind running through the details like it had for days. "None of it makes any sense."

Mercury rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Go on."

Asteria drank some of her wine, trying to find the courage to say what she needed to.

"I went to Valens. It's a vampire's duty to protect his blood sworn family, and he let it happen on the Amulius family grounds. He told me that he wouldn't risk going to war over some Renfields and that he'd make another

blood sworn family to replace them. He didn't care. After centuries of serving the Amulius family, it didn't matter. He didn't seem to be bothered that the Cassius family's assassins walked into the grounds and did as they pleased." Asteria was still so damn angry about that last conversation that her hands shook.

"It's insulting, and the other families will think so too. There won't *be* an Amulius family much longer if Valens is allowed to keep ruling. He doesn't care how close we are to ruin. It's why I risked coming here to wake you. There's no one left to go to."

Asteria didn't realize she was crying until Mercury leaned over and brushed the tears off her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Don't be sorry. You've done the right thing by coming to me," he replied. His tone was gentle, but his eyes were furious.

"This complicates matters and puts me in a difficult position. There is some kind of treachery happening with Valens, and in my freshly awoken state, I'm not strong enough to defeat him and the other patriarchs that might be readying to assimilate the house. I'm going to need your help."

Asteria ducked her head. "I'm here to serve. Tell me what it is you need of me, master, and I will do it."

"I want to know everything you do about the state of things in Inferno and amongst the vampire families," Mercury replied before his tone softened. "If I'm going back to war, I need to be prepared."

Asteria lifted her eyes. "If you stop Valens and get revenge for my family, I will do anything you ask of me for the rest of my days."

Mercury's eyes turned golden again, lips lifting into a small smile that made her pussy wet and her mouth dry.

Asteria had never had a reaction to a vampire like that before. She had been around them her whole life and was immune to their sexuality and beauty. She wasn't even a little immune to whatever the hell Mercury was doing with one small grin.

"I need your assistance to help me through this transition and get back to my full strength," he replied after a second too long. "Which means I need to feed, and I need to fuck because a newly woken vampire is voracious for both."

Asteria's eyes went wide. "Oh. The blood I brought with me—"

"Insufficient," Mercury shut her down. "I need it fresh and strong, and I did enjoy the taste of you."

Heat crept up Asteria's chest. She had seen people that had been turned into junkies after being with an average vampire. Would she survive a creature like Mercury? She was blood sworn to him, so she didn't exactly have a choice, and her family ghosts were crying out for revenge.

Asteria had known the trip to the mountains was suicide. She had been prepared to die for her revenge, and that hadn't changed.

"I'll do it. I'll let you do whatever you want to me. Kill me. Turn me into your blood whore. I don't care. Just kill the fuckers who murdered my family," Asteria replied, looking him in the eyes.

Mercury's expression turned serious. "They will die, little dove. I can promise you that. I would never turn you into a blood whore either. Only idiot fledglings that have no control do that. You will have your own mind once this is through."

"Then I'm yours," she said, her words barely a whisper.

"Excellent. We have a deal." Mercury smiled in triumph.

Asteria didn't know why he'd bother to even ask permission. He had wanted her agreement, which made him a better man than any other vampire she knew.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Like I just lost a game that I didn't know we were playing, she thought but wisely kept her mouth shut. Asteria was in over her head, and it didn't matter. Only her revenge did.

"Much better, thank you. The bath and the food have restored me."

"Good." Mercury angled toward her, his smile growing sharper. "Then come to me, little dove. I want to see what this bargain has bought me."

Asteria wasn't shy about her body, or about sex, so she didn't know why one command from Mercury turned her into a trembling virgin. She went to him, trying to hide how nervous she was, and stood between his open thighs.

"You are shaking. Do I frighten you?" he asked softly.

Asteria shook her head. "No, just...nervous, I suppose."

"Have you ever had another vampire bite you before?" Mercury asked, his fingers stroking the tie on her robe.

"No, master. Only when I woke you."

Mercury's dark brows rose. "Really? Not even when you swore yourself to Valens?"

"He only branded me. There was no blood exchange."

Mercury smirked. "Good. It means you're not blood sworn to him at all. You will be mine alone."

Asteria had never heard such possession over her before. She was a Renfield, a daylight bodyguard. Nothing more.

Mercury tugged on the tie, and her robe opened enough to reveal her breasts, the curved slope of her stomach, her pussy. He stared at her until her nipples went hard. She had no idea what her body was telling him, but he smiled.

"You are so lovely, little dove. I'm so glad another hasn't tasted you," he said. His fingers traced the curve of her waist before resting on her hip. He drew her closer. "It's going to be one less vampire I will have to kill." He kissed the skin over her hammering heart, and he inhaled deeply. "So much

life thrumming in there."

He licked the underside of her breast, his tongue circling her nipple and making a small whimper escape her. She was wet before his fangs scraped against her skin, and a small dose of his bite's aphrodisiac rushed through her. His tongue swiped over the tiny cuts, lapping at the small beads of blood.

"You taste so good," he said, pulling her into his lap so she straddled him. He was hard underneath her which made a female part of her smug. It was good to know she wasn't alone in the desire that was building between them.

Mercury's hand moved to her pussy, stroking through the slick wetness that was already coming out of her. He lifted his fingers to his mouth and licked them. "So sweet everywhere."

Holy dark gods, she was not going to survive him at all. Asteria dared to undo the buttons of his shirt, revealing a delicious stretch of strong chest covered in dark hair. He was built for strength, not for looks. All muscle. All power.

Mercury let her explore, his hands wandering under the robe until it dropped from her shoulders. There was something so erotic about leaving it on but being naked at the same time.

Asteria buried her hands in his hair as he bent to kiss along her shoulder. He smelled like spice and man, and when his fingers went back to her pussy, she thrust gently against him. His fangs entered her as his fingers did, making her cry out in surprise before lust overwhelmed her.

She thrust hard against his fingers, needing the release so badly, she was almost mad with it. Her orgasm shook her from the top of her head to her curling toes.

"Master..." she whimpered, her breath coming in pants. His mouth moved back, licking the bite closed.

"I was going to break you in slowly, but I must have more of you," Mercury growled. He knocked aside the wineglass and lifted her onto the table. His hair was a mess from her hands, his lips still red from feeding.

When he bent to kiss her, she met his lips head on. He tasted of her blood and sex, and she wanted more. She widened her legs to make room for the bulk of his body. Mercury pressed a hand to her chest and pushed her back on the table. He stared down at her, his fingers gliding over her skin.

"So wet, you're shining with it, dove," he said, voice dropping to a growl. "Anyone would think it was you that hasn't been fucked in over a hundred years."

Asteria laughed. She couldn't help it. "It feels that way."

Scarlet bled into Mercury's eyes. "I will need the names of your lovers too before I'm through."

"Possessive much?" she said before she could bite her tongue.

"Yes, I am. Because this..." Mercury replied, giving her pussy a light slap that made her yip in surprise, "is mine. All of you is mine."

"I can't tell you their names. I never bothered to get them." It wasn't a lie. Asteria liked one-night stands with no names or complications.

"You were wasted on such lovers. I will not make their mistake," Mercury promised. He undid his pants, and his hard dick sprang free. It was big and thick like the rest of him. Asteria was suddenly glad she was so wet. He stroked himself as she stared. "You like what you see, dove?"

"Yes," she replied, biting her lip. He was beautifully made everywhere. She hadn't realized she said it aloud until his smile widened.

"Thank you. It's always nice to hear from a lover," he said, rubbing the head of his dick over her slick entrance. "You should know that I don't share, dove. If another lays a hand on you, they will die."

"Yes, master," she replied, trying not to moan at the way he was rubbing his dick on her.

"Do call me Mercury," he said and thrust deep into her. The air left her lungs, her body screaming at the invasion before it melted around him. She'd never had a lover stretch her so completely.

"Fuck," she whimpered.

Mercury brushed his fingers over her lips. "Are you with me, dove?"

Asteria's heart softened that he would check on her. "Yes. I just need you to move."

Mercury's soft laugh turned her whole body liquid. "As my lady wishes." He fucked into her in slow, deep strokes that left her gasping. He gripped her hip tight with one hand to stop her sliding away. His other hand went to her clit, teasing it as his pace quickened.

"By Jupiter, you take my cock well, Asteria. Such a tight little cunt you have," he said, making her blush. She'd never had a lover speak dirty to her. Maybe some of them might have if she'd bothered to notice or stick about for a second date.

"Fuck, I'm going to come again if you keep talking like that," she stammered, her hands gripping his forearm.

"Good. I want you to come on my cock before I bite you again. I want to

taste the desire in your veins," he said, his fangs dropping. His eyes were glowing. He was losing it as much as she was.

Asteria had a death wish because she replied, "Then fuck me harder, master."

Mercury's snarl was glorious before he unleashed and pounded her pussy hard enough that she became a blabbering mess. Her orgasm tore through her, making her bones feel like they were going to break under the pressure of it. Mercury pulled her up into his arms, his rhythm never faltering as he wrapped a hand tight around her throat.

"Scream for me, little dove," he hissed savagely and bit into her throat.

Asteria screamed, and another orgasm tore through her. She was scratching up his arms and back, but he didn't stop fucking her until she screamed again. Blood trickled down over her breasts, and her hands buried into Mercury's thick hair. She was so full of him, so utterly connected in a way she'd never experienced. His fangs and dick were inside of her, and all she felt was complete.

Mercury came hard enough that his mouth ripped away from her so he could gasp out a ragged breath. Asteria stared at the wild look in his eyes, the blood on his chin, the utter wonder in his expression. The man even came pretty. She was kissing him before she could think about it.

Mercury sat back down, still buried in her, and deepened their kiss. His tongue slid gently against hers before his spicy blood filled her mouth.

Asteria moaned, the high rushing through her veins and making her pussy clench around his dick. He was hardening again, and she was riding him before she was aware she was doing it. Euphoria was rushing through her, turning the colors of the room bright and making her hypersensitive to every sensation.

She fucked him harder, drowning in him, until they both came again, and his release was leaking down her thighs. Asteria came back to her body with Mercury kissing the blood from where it had dripped over her chest.

He pinched her chin and licked her scarlet stained lips. "Pretty dove, you're all mine now."

Mercury carried Asteria to the bathroom and placed her into a freshly filled tub. He began washing all the blood and his come from her, ignoring her when she tried to take the cloth from him. He was satisfied, deep in his bones, at the utter mess he'd made of her. She'd lost control as much as he did. It boded well for their arrangement.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Asteria said, her cheeks turning pink.

"It embarrasses you?" Mercury didn't stop tending to her.

"Yeah, a little. It's unnecessary. You are my master. You shouldn't be washing a servant like this," she replied. She said 'servant' in a way that he didn't like. He hated that Valens, someone he'd trusted to take care of his household, had made her act in such a way.

"As your master, I have a duty to take care of you and your well-being." Mercury brushed her hair from her shoulder to ensure his bite had healed. "I was not as gentle with you as I ought to have been. I want to ensure that you are well."

Asteria's lips quirked. "I wasn't exactly gentle with you either. If I was hurting in any way, I would tell you."

Mercury studied her hazel eyes, the long lashes, the curve of her lips. "All the same. I will tend to you as I wish because it pleases me to do so."

She wouldn't accept that she needed, and even enjoyed being cared for, so he had to make it about him. The way the blush crept down her chest and heart rate fluttered told him he was right about that too.

Mercury made sure they were both clean before he lifted her out of the

bath. He caught her looking him over and fought not to preen. He'd never been vain. It was ridiculous, especially at his age, but he liked that she obviously enjoyed the way he looked. He certainly enjoyed the way she'd been carved by the gods. She had her own kind of strong beauty, more attractive than pretty. She was brave and bold and fucked like she enjoyed it.

Mercury had to stop thinking about fucking. He wouldn't break her with his appetite. He wanted her safe and with him at all times.

After they dressed again, Mercury took Asteria into his library. She was wearing one of his white shirts that came to her knees. It was sexy and distracting, but he didn't try to cover her up more.

"Wow, this is an extensive collection for someone who was going to sleep for over a century," she said, going to the shelves.

"I like having my favorites with me. Besides, Valens isn't a reader, and I didn't want them getting destroyed from his neglect," Mercury replied, sitting down in one of the plush armchairs. "You read?"

Asteria nodded. "A lot. Bodyguarding has so much quiet time. Valens has hired guards on patrols around the estate too, so me standing outside his bedroom in the day is more out of habit than necessity."

"He never invited you inside his bedroom?" Mercury asked.

Valens was the opposite of him. Long limbed, blonde haired, almost delicate with male beauty. It was why he'd been changed by one of Mercury's children.

When his master chose the sun over eternal life, Mercury had made sure Valens had been taken care of. He had always been better at diplomacy than Mercury. It was one of the reasons he'd left Valens in charge.

Asteria laughed. "Oh, god, no. Valens is too much of a pretty boy for me, and I'm not Valens's type either."

"And what type is that?"

"Beautiful," she said simply. "Sure, I can put makeup on and look nice enough, but he only fucks the prettiest models. He's fussy like that."

Mercury frowned. "You're something better than simply beautiful, Asteria. You're interesting. It's a rarer quality."

"Thanks," she said, her attention already back on the books. She clearly didn't care what a man thought of her looks, and that made him like her even more.

Mercury let her peruse for a few moments, simply enjoying watching her lost in thought and the way she rose on bare toes to reach for a title.

"Tell me why the vampire families are bickering once more," he asked her.

"Boredom. It's more like a cold war, like when you have too many cats living in the same space, and they are trying not to fight each other." Asteria looked up from the book in her hand. "You know, you could just take the information from my blood."

"I could, but I want the conversation," Mercury replied.

Asteria's dark brows drew together. "That's not the way a vampire acts."

"But it is the way a gentleman does." Mercury was starting to despair about what had happened to good manners while he'd been sleeping.

Asteria smiled at him, big and true. It lit her up from the inside. She was so damn beautiful, and he was glad Valens had been too fickle to see it. Mercury had never been one to share.

"The arguments are all small and petty. Their businesses encroaching on one another. Mistress stealing. Boredom. Valens insulted Aulus, patriarch of family Cassius, at one of their monthly meetings by giving his number to one of his consorts," Asteria replied, shutting her book. "He probably wouldn't have done anything, except the consort was seen in one of Valens's clubs later that night sucking his dick. Aulus responded by killing my family. Valens seemed to think the trade was worth it because he did nothing to stop it." Asteria's whole body was shaking. Mercury could taste her anger and grief in the air.

He held out his hand to her. "Come to me."

Asteria put the book back on the shelf and obeyed. Mercury kissed her palm and the fluttering pulse of her wrist. She softened, and he guided her down into his lap.

"I will get revenge on Aulus, little dove. I promise you. Your family was important to me, and he knew it. I would be surprised if this was about Valens at all. Aulus was just waiting to be comfortable enough to try to take something from me," Mercury replied. He didn't know how his dove had survived, but he was going to ensure nothing ever happened to her.

Asteria let out a breath. "Why was my family important to you? We are blood sworn, but so are a lot of families."

"Your ancestor was the only servant I kept after I turned into a vampire. I had slaves; so did every one of my class at the time. I set them all free, but he refused to leave. He was stubborn and wasn't afraid of what I was. I knew I needed protection and help in the daylight hours, so I made him blood sworn

and gave him the new name Evandrus. In mythology, he was the son of the god Mercury. It was fitting. He'd been in my household since he was a child." Mercury smiled at the memory. They had been good friends until the day he died.

"You never thought to turn him into a vampire?" Asteria asked. Her fingers were toying with the ends of Mercury's hair, but he didn't think she realized.

"Evandrus wanted children and didn't want me left unguarded after his death. To honor our friendship, I always kept your family as a part of mine." Mercury was going to murder Aulus. He was going to tear him limb from limb for hurting what was his. "Can I ask how you survived your family's massacre?"

Asteria froze. "It's embarrassing."

"You can tell me. Don't be afraid," he said, stroking her back.

"I went out celebrating with a friend. I had the night off," she said, squirming a little. "I hooked up with a guy and didn't come home until dawn. The assassins didn't do their research well enough, it would seem, or they didn't care I wasn't dead too. That was when I went to Valens and, well, you know the rest. They died while I was being drunk and stupid."

Mercury hated the idea of anyone else touching her, but his rage wasn't what she needed. "It wasn't your fault, Asteria. You said yourself that they weren't normal killers. It wouldn't have changed anything if you had been home that night, except you would have been dead too. I would have still been asleep, and Aulus would never be punished."

And I would never have known you. Mercury's chest hurt at the intrusive thought.

"I know you are right. It still hurts," Asteria whispered.

"I know." Mercury kissed her head. He didn't want her to be sad, so he went for distraction instead. "I saw you pick up Horace just now. Do you like Roman poetry?"

"I like Greek better, and Horace's *Odes* is basically fan fiction Greek poetry," Asteria replied. She looked up at him, and his shock must have been on his face. "Why the look? I have a lot of time to read in the daylight hours. As I said, Valens has armed guards roaming the grounds. Guarding his door has become more of a tradition than actual protection. What else am I meant to do?"

Mercury wanted to kiss her badly. Instead, he made his expression grave.

"Well, then I suppose I have a very serious question for you."

Asteria smiled. "What's that?"

"Herodotus or Thucydides?" he asked.

"Herodotus. What kind of ridiculous question is that? Thucydides is dry as dust," she said, laughing. Her eyes twinkled. "Homer or Virgil?"

"Homer," Mercury answered automatically. "I know, very un-Roman of me, but Homer is just better."

"Agreed," Asteria replied with a firm nod.

Mercury liked this game. "Plato or Socrates."

"That's a trick question." Asteria poked him in the chest. "We only know about Socrates through Plato because if Socrates wrote anything, it's been lost. We wouldn't even know about Socrates's trial if it wasn't for Plato and Xenophon."

Mercury's laughter boomed out of him. He couldn't help it. She was lit up with passion for the intellectual argument, and it disarmed him completely. "Oh, Asteria Evandrus, where have you been all these centuries?"

"I was hanging out in the Ogdoad with all the other souls, waiting to be shoved into a human body," she replied with a wide smile.

"Did you... Did you just make a Hermes Trismegistus joke at me?" he said, mouth falling open.

"Who's joking?" she replied.

"Don't make me fuck you again, Asteria. I promised myself I would give your body time to rest," he said sternly.

Asteria was still laughing when he kissed her. She had made a Trismegistus joke at him. Venus save him, he was officially in love.

Mercury was careful his fangs didn't scrape her lips as his mouth took hers. Her hair was so soft in his fingers, her body pliant and yielding. She breathed his name against his lips, and he knew then he was never going to let her go. He would make this arrangement permanent, even if it killed them both.

Time had no meaning in Mercury's tomb. They talked for hours in the library before Asteria yawned so wide, her jaw popped.

"Time for bed, dove," he said, patting her thigh.

Asteria reluctantly climbed out of his lap. She didn't want to leave him and go to bed alone. "Are you... Are you coming?"

"I've slept long enough," Mercury replied, and her heart sank.

"Okay, well, good night. Or good morning," she said and hurried back to the bedroom without a backward glance.

You are such an idiot, she thought and climbed under the soft blankets.

Asteria usually found people difficult to talk to. She had friends but none that she could really unleash certain sides of herself. She didn't have anyone who would ask her if she preferred Plato to Socrates; that was for damn sure.

Mercury challenged that part of her that she always kept hidden. Men especially didn't usually like it when women were smarter than them. He was always going to be the most interesting man she'd ever met. He didn't seem remotely threatened by her interests. He wanted to know about them.

Asteria stared up at the black lace curtains above her and tried to center her breathing. She *liked* Mercury. He was a force of nature—someone she absolutely shouldn't romanticize in any way because underneath that sexy, intelligent facade was a stone-cold killer. He needed her for blood, not her company. It was just so rare for her to want to connect with anyone.

You had his blood; that's the only reason you feel this way. You can't fall in love with him. He's not your friend. He's your master, and when you return to Inferno, you will be back in your place, and he will be in his.

Asteria was still his blood sworn. If Mercury took over the family from Valens, would it be his bedroom she would stand outside of every day and listen to him fuck other people? The thought soured her stomach with jealousy. Making a bargain with him was going to be the worst decision she ever made. Everyone who made deals with vampires found that out eventually.

There was a slight change of energy in the room, and Mercury was suddenly standing by the bed.

"I changed my mind. I could do with a nap. Any objections?" he asked, ever the gentleman.

"None at all." Asteria swallowed back her sudden nerves. She couldn't have a crisis while he was beside her. He would know.

She politely averted her eyes as he stripped off and climbed into the bed beside her. It wasn't out of a sense of decency; it was self-preservation. She just knew if she saw him naked again, she would forget any common sense she had left, and would climb on top of him.

It was a bad idea to get attached. She knew better. He'd not only disarmed her but climbed over the walls she'd built about herself. She'd all but flung the gates open for him to walk in and destroy her.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, his warm hand reaching out and finding hers. "Your energy is tense and upset. It wasn't like that in the library."

"I'm fine. Just a lot on my mind. When did you want to return to the city?" she asked, her eyes fixed on the patterns in the lace.

"The next nightfall. The sooner I deal with Aulus and Valens, the better. Aulus has been waiting to get his revenge on me for centuries, and he won't waste the opportunity if Valens is weak," Mercury replied.

Asteria turned her head to looked at him. "Why does he want revenge on you?"

"In about 4 CE he wanted me to change him into a vampire. He had figured out there wasn't something right about me and stalked me until he learned the truth," Mercury replied, his fingers lighting twining with hers. "Long story short, I refused to make him a vampire, so he went to Canidia, who turned him with magic."

"Canidia... Wasn't she the witch Horace wrote about? The creepy grave robbing one?" Asteria asked, hopelessly drawn to his brain as much as his body.

Mercury laughed softly. "That's her. There was more than one witch in

Rome, but she was the most powerful. Her skills leaned towards necromancy, and she somehow managed to turn Aulus. Perhaps she always knew the secret. I turned myself, an experiment gone wrong. That's a story for another night though."

"Promise?" Asteria asked. He could probably hear her heartbeat suddenly pounding.

Mercury lifted her hand and kissed it. "I promise. Go to sleep, little dove."

Asteria didn't move her hand from his as she closed her eyes and let herself finally drift away.



ASTERIA WOKE SLOWLY to a hand on her bare hip and heat along her back. She murmured sleepily and wiggled backward into the warmth behind her. It wasn't just warmth. She was suddenly aware of something hard. Mercury was in bed with her. She knew she should move away and not enjoy being spooned, but she didn't want to.

"Hello, dove. Did you sleep well?" he greeted huskily by her ear.

"Like the dead," she joked lamely. The hand on her hip moved to her thigh, and she let out a small whimper as she shifted against him.

"You keep rubbing your ass against me like that, and I'm going to think my dove needs to be fucked awake," Mercury warned her. His mouth brushed down her neck, breathing her in. Her nipples went hard under the soft shirt she was wearing. She was still half asleep, none of her defenses in place. Her body wanted whatever he decided to do with her.

"Mercury," she whispered, a soft plea. His hand on her thigh slid under the shirt to cup her breast, his thumb brushing over the hard nipple.

He licked the fluttering pulse at the curve of her jaw. "So soft and sweet for me. I've been wanting you for hours."

His hand explored over the soft roll of her stomach and back to her thigh. He gently moved her leg to rest on top of his thigh. His fingers brushed over her pussy, and Asteria shivered. She wasn't ever going to be able to deny him, and it had nothing to do with their bargain.

Mercury made a pleased humming sound as he stroked her. She was wet, and he used it to slick over her clit and make her gasp.

"Oh, god, that's so..." she couldn't finish. How could he know exactly where to touch to make her feel like she was losing her mind? Maybe centuries of practice ensured he knew how to find a woman's clit, but fuck, did he know how to work her.

Mercury began kissing her neck again and pressed a long finger inside of her. Asteria thought she would be more tender after the night before, but she was just horny and impossibly wet. Taking some of Mercury's blood had probably healed any other damage.

Asteria's fingers gripped his wrist, needing something to hang onto as she fucked his hand. He whispered something against her skin in Latin, but she couldn't catch it. She was too far gone, lost in the sensation.

"Come for me, pretty dove," Mercury whispered. The fingers inside of her curled as his thumb pressed into her clit, and her body gave out. She gripped his hand, gasping as her orgasm rocked her. Wetness soaked his hand and the inside of her thighs. He moved his hand from her, bringing it to his mouth and licking his fingers.

"So delicious everywhere," he murmured.

"Fuck. That was an unexpected way to wake up," Asteria said, trying to catch her erratic breath. She didn't get a chance to before Mercury pulled her leg higher over his hips and guided his thick cock into her. "Oh, god. Fuck yes."

"What did I say about calling me Mercury?" he chuckled, thrusting slow and working himself deeper. Asteria's hand moved behind her to bury in his hair, twisting her head to finally look at him. He stared back, his golden eyes glowing with lust and something softer. Affection. Maybe she wasn't the only one who was catching feelings. Surely not.

"Kiss me," she whispered. He smiled and did so. His tongue slipped into her mouth, one hand wrapping about her slender throat. She couldn't move and didn't care. It felt so good, so safe, to be trapped by him.

Mercury kept a deep, sensuous pace until she was fucking herself back on him in perfect synchronicity. She stopped kissing him so she could try and catch a breath.

"You are heaven in my arms," he said reverently. Before her pleasure-drenched brain could come up with a reply, his fangs sank into her throat, and she came hard enough that she cried out his name.

Mercury stayed hard inside of her, his hands stroking her bare skin and making her feel like she was losing her mind as he drank from her. He licked

the wound on her neck closed.

"You taste better than ambrosia, Asteria. I can't get enough of you," he said. He ran his fingers over her lips. "This mouth of yours is so pretty. It makes me want to fuck it."

Asteria's pussy clenched at the thought, making him swear. She wasn't a blow job girl, but she liked the idea of pleasuring Mercury in any way that he wanted.

"You can if you want to," she said, her cheeks flushing red.

"I do want to. I want you to know how sweet we taste together," he growled. He moved out of her and rolled her on her back. He undid the buttons of her shirt, his eyes feasting on her breasts. "So fucking beautiful."

Asteria stroked his side, admiring the hardness of his body. "You are too."

Mercury smiled like the devil. "Lie back on the pillows and open that pretty mouth for me, dove."

Asteria ignored the flutter of nerves in her stomach and licked her lips. Mercury moved his thighs on either side of her head and grabbed the ornate headboard.

"Tap my leg twice if you need to stop," he said and brushed the wet head of his cock over her lips.

Asteria nodded and opened her mouth wider. Mercury thrust gently into her, and her hands moved to squeeze his perfectly toned ass. He tasted like the both of them, and it should have felt filthy, but it wasn't. It made Asteria even hornier. She didn't want him to share anything like this with another. Something dark and possessive rolled through her, and her hands gripped him tighter. He was *her* master and no one else's.

Mercury's body was all male power and beauty. Her eyes were watering, and her gag reflex was struggling, but Asteria couldn't look away as he lost himself in her. His head went back, flashing his fangs as he began to come, her mouth flooding with it. She tried to swallow him down, but it still came out the sides of her mouth.

Mercury's eyes were glowing, all vampire, as he took in the sight of her. He eased back down her but kept her pinned. He didn't say anything before he licked her lips and kissed her. The heady taste of his blood filled her mouth, and Asteria drank deep. She wanted every part of him that she could possess.

In her deepest heart, she knew she couldn't keep him. She wrapped her

arms around him, holding him to her. The thought of letting him go hurt too much.

Asteria had spent her entire life around vampires and had sworn to never fall for one. It would only ever end in heartache and death. It had taken two days, if that, for her heart to change. She didn't know why of all the vampires in her life, she had to like the unattainable one.

She could never have Mercury, not in the way she would want. When the time came and she had to let him go, it would tear the heart from her, and all the bloody pieces that were left over would still belong to him. She could never leave his household, no matter what happened. Becoming more attached to him was going to be the worst mistake of her life, and she still held him tighter.

The night was clear, and the moon was full when Asteria walked out of Mercury's tomb. She didn't feel like the same person who had walked in a few short days ago. Her purpose was still clear—get revenge on the person who killed her family.

Mercury sealed the tomb behind them, his blood feeding the sigil carved into the rock.

"You are the only vampire I've ever seen that can also do magic," Asteria said once he joined her.

"It's because I was a magician before my change, and it was my own magic that cursed me," he replied, his eyes turning to the nighttime forest around them. The wolves called in the distance, and he smiled. "Don't worry about them. They are my friends."

Asteria adjusted the straps of her pack. "We need to get moving if we are going to get back to the city before dawn." Her stomach was already in knots about going back.

"What's wrong? Your scent has changed," he said.

"You do know Valens is going to try and kill me for waking you up, right? Like I've betrayed him by telling on him," she replied, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Valens won't lay a finger on you," Mercury hissed, his eyes shining gold in the moonlight.

"Just promise me, if he does rip my throat out, you will still get revenge for my family? It's all I care about," she replied. Caring about anything else was just another kind of suicide.

Mercury's expression shuttered. "I see. Well, we had best get moving. You will ride me back to your vehicle. As you say, we don't have time to waste."

Asteria didn't understand why he sounded so pissed. It didn't matter. She had accomplished what she had come to the mountains to do.

Mercury shifted into a giant dire wolf and shook out his glossy black fur. He was as big as a bear and twice as terrifying. He went down so that she could climb onto his back. She gripped the fur of his ruff and tried not to think about how insane it was that she was riding her master like a pony.

Asteria clung to him as Mercury took off in a trot and then a run. The forest blurred around them, his massive paws chewing up the earth underneath them. Howls echoed around them, the wild pack joining them in the run.

Mercury won't let Valens kill you. It's going to be okay, she tried to tell herself over and over. She needed to pull herself together.

Whatever had happened, or began to happen, between her and Mercury in the tomb was over. She had restored him, and as soon as they got back to Inferno, there would be a line of people wanting to service the great Mercury around the corner. She had fulfilled her half of their bargain, and now he would fulfil his.

Life would return to normal. She would be the blood sworn of the Amulius family until she joined her own in the afterlife.

God, you are morbid today. She couldn't help it. She didn't trust Valens or the other vampires to not try and kill Mercury. He had been asleep for so long that they wouldn't look at his return as a good thing. He would make them all look bad just by being his magnificent, sexy self.

Asteria shook the thought away and focused on staying on the wolf's back.

Three hours later, they arrived at the edge of the forest where Asteria had parked her Jeep. Mercury had followed her scent all the way to it and didn't need any instructions from her. She climbed off his back with wobbly legs and fished around in her pack for her keys.

Mercury shifted back into a vampire, a touch of wild still about his windswept hair and feral golden eyes. "That run did me good. How are you?"

"My butt is numb, but I'm sure I will recover," Asteria assured him and tossed her pack into the back of the Jeep. She got into the driver's side and gripped the steering wheel.

Mercury got into the passenger seat beside her and inhaled. "Why does this car smell like a man?" he asked suspiciously.

"It was my brother's car," Asteria replied. "Not that it should matter because it's not your business."

The Jeep still smelled like her brother's deodorant. It reminded her to put some steel in her spine and re-centered her into her old life.

"Any man around you *is* my business," Mercury said, the muscle in his jaw flickering.

Asteria looked away. She couldn't deal with that right now. She was trying to put her walls back up, her survival instincts insisting on it. She started the car, and they drove back to Inferno in relative silence. She had left the classical music station on so she wouldn't feel the need to talk. The more Mercury talked, the more she liked him.

Inferno was a sprawling metropolis of buildings, lights, and magic. It had been built originally near the site of Nestos National Park in northeastern Greece. The Thracian Sea was a glittering blue jewel on one side, and mountains and rivers were on the other. It had been land that the supernatural had claimed, and the world had known better than to argue with them.

Mercury stared at it in wonder as they drove through the districts and into richer areas where the Amulius estate was.

"It grew so big," Mercury said. His smile was wide and infectious. "Who would have thought the dream would not only survive but thrive? Are they still taking in refugees from other countries?"

Asteria nodded. "Yes. Some parts of the world have become more tolerant towards supernatural creatures, but many haven't. There are still programs to re-locate persecuted families to Inferno all the time."

"Incredible. It's good to know that some things haven't changed," Mercury said. They pulled up in front of the massive iron gates of the Amulius estate, and he eyed the armed guards. "Unlike my own house."

"Watch your back, okay?" Asteria said quickly. The gates were opening, and it might be the last private conversation she would get with him. "Don't trust Valens or any other vampires to be like they used to be. They have no honor, and I don't want them driving a stake into you because you think they are going to play by the old rules."

"Little dove, please don't worry about me," he replied. She tried not to flinch when he stroked her cheek. She couldn't handle the softness, not when she was trying to harden her heart.

"I do worry because they will see your return as a threat. I know you're powerful, but just trust me, okay? Watch your back," Asteria repeated and drove through the gates and up to the main house.

They got out of the Jeep and walked up the stone steps and past the magnificent marble columns of the front facade. Asteria could already hear the base thumping through the house and tried not to look at Mercury.

The doors blew open, and Valens stepped out in nothing but a pair of leather pants. His lean torso was covered in glitter, lipstick, and flecks of blood.

"Mercury, what the fuck..." Valens's ice blue eyes glared as they reached the top of the steps. His gaze flicked to Asteria. "You woke him? You fucking bi—"

Valens was suddenly clawing for where his throat used to be. Mercury's hand was dripping with blood.

"Perhaps by the time you heal tomorrow night, you will have developed a more civil tongue," Mercury growled. Valens was on his knees, blood pouring over his chest and onto the marble.

All the hair on the back of Asteria's neck stood on end. *This* was the true Mercury, and she would do well to remember it.

"Asteria, you are dismissed for the evening. You don't need to witness this," Mercury said.

Asteria had enough sense to bow low to him. "Yes, master." She moved back down the stairs. She was climbing into the Jeep when a roar shook the mansion from the inside. Windows and doors were suddenly crammed with fleeing vampires and blood whores, all trying to scramble out of Mercury's murderous path.

"That's right, assholes, the master is home at last." Asteria started the Jeep and smiled the whole drive home. She needed to get inside before anyone decided it would be a good idea to come after her.

There were some rules that all vampires had to abide by, and being invited in was one of them. It made her family's death all the more mysterious. Not even Valens had been invited into the Evandrus manor house.

Asteria pulled into the garage, shutting the door again before she got out. As soon as she got into the kitchen, she dropped her pack, sat down at the table, and burst into tears.

"I did it," she told the ghosts of her family. "I woke the old master, and I

swear we will find out who did this to you and put you to rest."
The ghosts didn't reply.

The situation was worse than Asteria had told Mercury. Perhaps their house had been in ruin for so long, she didn't know any different.

Mercury had tried to prepare himself for the worst, but seeing that his beloved home, which he had designed from the ground up, had been turned into nothing but a seedy brothel had made him see red. He had dragged Valens by his hair down to a dungeon and thrown him into it.

If he didn't get Valens out of his sight, Mercury would kill him. He needed the little fucker alive so that he could learn more about who had killed the Evandrus family. It was only the memory of Asteria's tears that stayed his hand.

Mercury had ordered the house cleaned from one end to the other. He couldn't tolerate seeing it in such a state. His own chambers were still locked, and thanks to his wards, they had been undisturbed for the last century. Everything was covered in dust, but the bathroom was still cleaner than any of the others in the house. He showered the blood off and dressed in clothes he found in the wardrobe. They smelled a little dusty, but it couldn't be helped. It was getting too close to dawn to get more.

Mercury ran his fingers through his raven hair and tried to rein in his anger. He was tempted to burn the mansion down and start again. Perhaps he should.

Mercury knew he wouldn't find any rest in his chambers that day. He had a clawing, aching feeling inside of him. It had been there since Asteria had driven away from him. It didn't matter that he had commanded her to. He needed her on a level he had never experienced before.

What if whoever had killed her family returned to the house to finish her off? He couldn't rest knowing that she could be in danger. He craved her blood and her scent. The warmth of her soul that seemed to shine out of her eyes.

Mercury was walking across the estate before he could think it through. His house was in ruins; Inferno was now unrecognizable, and the only thing that made sense in any of it was Asteria.

She had been colder towards him since they left the tomb, and he didn't know why. It was bothering him because he didn't know what had changed. She was pulling away from him, and he couldn't allow it.

Mercury walked up the gravel path that led to a three storied manor house. It was as he remembered, painted a grey blue color with a dark grey trim. There were high, neat hedges, trees, and a pretty garden. It had been lovingly maintained unlike his own home. He hoped that the secret tomb was still useable.

Mercury walked up the steps and across the porch to the front door. The stained-glass feature in the door was of the Staff of Mercury/Hermes, surrounded by wreath of pomegranates. It was no wonder Asteria had quoted the Thrice Great at him. The Evandrus family had been more loyal than his own, which was why he had given them the name of the son of Mercury. They always had been there for him. Mercury had to find a way to keep her close by his side. Anything else would be unbearable. Who would he talk to and help him navigate this strange new time he'd found himself in? He had enemies on all sides but only one ally.

Mercury straightened the cuffs of his black silk shirt and knocked on the door. He tuned in his hearing and picked up the thrumming heartbeat of his dove. She was close, but she wasn't answering the door. Was she afraid of him now? He couldn't handle that thought. He would never hurt her. He knocked again.

"Asteria? It's me," he called. Still there wasn't movement inside, but her heart rate leaped. Was she ignoring him? Unacceptable. "Please, dove, open the door."

There was a soft sigh from the other side of the wood, and Asteria opened the door. The light behind her made her look like she had a halo, and like a lightning strike, Mercury knew he was going to convince her to become his bride. He'd never had one before, an eternal partner to share his vampiric life with. It went beyond a simple turning. A bride was an equal and would share

his power.

"Master," she greeted softly. She was dressed for bed, in loose white satin pants and a top with a lacy hem. She looked good enough to eat.

"I thought about what you said about me not being safe until Aulus is dealt with," he said, crossing his arms and leaning against the door frame. "I would like to use the emergency crypt to rest."

Asteria's brow furrowed. "What emergency crypt?"

"The one under this house, dove. Valens is in a cell, but I don't trust anyone in the mansion right now."

"They are all paid to protect you, master. You scared all the others away."

Mercury leaned a little closer. "Invite me in, dove."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she whispered.

Mercury hated the scared look that was suddenly in her eyes. "What happened, Asteria? What has changed between us?"

"We came back to the city. I know my place," she said, not looking him in the eye. "Master."

"Your place is with me. We had an agreement, remember?"

"I fulfilled my half. There are other people that can provide blood for you," she replied. The muscles in her jaw flexed. "Once word gets out that the great Mercury has risen, you'll be beating them off with a stick."

There was something in her scent and tone that Mercury hadn't smelled before. He tried not to grin. His dove was *jealous*. In the two days they had spent together, she had become attached. Relief melted the tension in his shoulders.

"I don't want anyone else. I want to be with you so that I can keep us both safe. Whoever killed your family could come back now that you have returned to the city, and only *I* am powerful enough to fight them off."

Asteria finally looked him in the eye, and he saw the fear and worry inside of her. She hadn't been afraid to wake him, an ancient starving vampire, but she was terrified of whatever creature had torn her parents and brother apart.

"Mercury Amulius, won't you come in?" she asked and stepped out of his way.

Mercury stepped inside with a small nod. "Thank you, Asteria."

"This is inappropriate for a master to stay with his blood sworn, and it's going to make people talk. It might make your position worse," Asteria said, her arms hugging about her waist.

Mercury lifted her chin. "Do you think I give a fuck what other people think? I shall do as I wish. I will have what I want. I dare anyone to challenge me or try and get in my way. Is that understood?"

"Yes, master," she replied, dutifully.

"What did I say about calling me master?" He brushed his lips over hers.

Asteria stilled. "You *are* my master. It's not good for me to forget that in my position."

Somehow, Mercury knew that she didn't mean in a political sense.

"Your position is whatever I say it is. On your knees, on your back, bent over the nearest table," he said, unable to stop himself from teasing her. Her lovely cheeks flushed with pink, making his mouth water and dick throb.

Mercury knew he should say something about how he was beginning to feel about her, but she was too on guard to accept it. He was a patient hunter and could afford to wait. He would find Asteria's family's murderers for her, perhaps spike their heads in her front yard as a present, and then he would make her his bride.

"Show me where the bodies were found, Asteria. Perhaps I can pick up a clue."

Asteria led him through the house. It was full of small pieces that the generations of Evandrus had collected over the centuries. The walls were covered in framed paintings and photographs of the family. Everything seemed to have its place. It *felt* like a home. A small treasure house of memories and love.

Asteria stopped in front of a door. "It's through there. I don't know what you might be able to sense because Valens paid to have it cleaned. His idea of an apology. I'm staying here. I can't..."

Mercury brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "It's okay, dove. I understand. Let me have a look."

Mercury stepped into the small living room, but all he could smell was cleaning chemicals. They were strong enough to blank a normal vampire's senses, but he wasn't a normal vampire. He shut the scent out and focused on others. No matter how good a cleaning was, there was no getting everything. Mercury walked to the wide bay of glass windows overlooking the pretty garden. He paused and opened the window. Instantly, he smelled sulphur, myrrh, and some kind of lavender. Under that was mangy, wet dog but distorted.

"Fuck," he growled. The sun was coming up, and he knew he had to wait

until it was down again before investigating further.

"What is it?" Asteria asked from the doorway.

Mercury shut the window and rejoined her in the hall. "I think I know how your family was taken down. There are scents of a sleeping spell outside. A mage would have only needed a line of sight to knock them out. There're also scents of wolves. Not normal shifters. Wolf men. They were let in through the windows and attacked your family when they were unconscious."

Asteria's face went white. "I knew it couldn't have been vampires. There was no way for them to get in. They were helpless to do anything but die..."

Mercury shut the door to the room and quickly gathered her in his arms. "It's okay, dove. We will find them and make them pay for such a cowardly act."

Asteria couldn't stop crying, and he wasn't going to leave her like that. Sun or no sun. He picked her up and carried her up the stairs. He followed his nose to her bedroom on the top floor. Kicking off his shoes, he lay down on the bed with her.

"W-Wait, I have to..." Asteria reached over and pressed a button by the bed. Dark blinds slid down over the windows, making the room light tight. She had made it into a crypt.

Asteria's lips were trembling when they found his. He kissed her back gently until the trembling stopped, and she rested her head onto his chest.

In the darkness, she whispered. "I don't want you to go."

Mercury wrapped his large body around hers. "I'm not going anywhere." If he got his way, she would never sleep alone again.

The following evening, Asteria woke as the sun began to set. Mercury was still in her bed, stretched out like a giant cat. She ran her hands over his strong body, her sleepy consciousness possessive and needy. He *did* say that their bargain wasn't over, and all she'd felt was relief and agonizing want. He didn't want to feed on any of the blood whores waiting to service him. He'd come to her.

Asteria rested her forehead against his chest. "Why are you making me fall in love with you?" she whispered helplessly. He said he wanted her, and it made something in her yearn for that devotion forever. It was a hopeless dream.

Asteria could only have him for this brief moment of time, and she wanted to make the most of it. She had been so miserable before he had turned up the previous night. Seeing him outside her door had made everything feel right again.

Mercury's skin was cool under her lips, and she knew exactly how she wanted to heat him up again. She licked and kissed her way down his hard torso, opening his shirt as she went. She was addicted to his spicy smell, the feel of him under her hands. She opened his belt buckle and pants. It was still pitch black, and it somehow made everything sexier. There was only the feel of skin and abstract shapes. There was no master and servant. Just bodies and lust.

Asteria licked the end of Mercury's cock and down the underside of his shaft. He shifted a little in his sleep but didn't wake. Asteria bobbed down on him, taking him as far as she could before using her hand on the rest of him.

"Asteria..." he moaned, voice husky with lust. Her nipples hardened, and she sucked him down again. Mercury's eyes opened, glowing soft and menacingly scarlet in the dim light.

"Good evening, master," she said, her hand jerking him gently.

"Naughty little dove," he growled. "Someone needs to teach you a lesson about waking a vampire in such a manner."

There was a flurry of movement, and Asteria fell forward face first on the bed. Mercury yanked her satin pants down and buried his face into her pussy. Asteria yelped and tried to wriggle forward, but he only yanked her hips higher and ate her out from behind.

His hands were tipped in claws, scraping against her soft skin. In that second, she was reminded that he was all vampire...and he was starving. A thrill swept through her at the danger, making her wetter. She knew he would never hurt her, but the threat was there.

"Bite me, Mercury," she begged and then screamed as his fangs pierced the groove of her groin. Lust and pain exploded through her, making her come harder than she ever had in her life. Mercury held her steady, drinking from her, his tongue still brushing over her sensitive clit. His fangs retracted, and he licked over the wounds to heal them.

"Mine," he growled against her pussy. "Only mine."

"Yes, my master," she sobbed. Bargain or not, she was hopelessly his.

Mercury's cock caressed over her soaking hole, and he thrust hard into her. Asteria cried out into the mattress, her back arching for him, wanting him deeper. It was disorientating in the darkness, but glorious. Only the intense pleasure that was ricocheting through her mattered. Only the feel of her master claiming her pussy over and over.

"You are not to leave my side again, Asteria," Mercury snarled, his sharp nails tearing the satin singlet from her. "I want you with me always."

"Yes, master."

"I understand you feel you need to call me master in front of others, but not for too much longer," he said, breath hot on her ear. "You will call me Mercury when we are alone, and I'm buried in this tight cunt of yours. Understand?"

"Yes, Mercury," she whimpered. He thrust into her harder, deeper, and she started to unravel beneath him.

Mercury didn't stop. Didn't give her a chance to breathe or move. His lips were a hot promise against her skin. "You tried to pull away from me

yesterday, and I hated it. You won't do that to me again either. Every wall you build around your heart I will smash down, Asteria. I will win that stubborn heart of yours so that you can never escape from me."

Mercury's fangs buried into her neck as she came, and he filled her with his own release. She was too boneless to move. Too shocked by his confession to say a word. He wanted to win her heart...

Mercury kissed down her spine, his cock slipping free from her and making Asteria moan at the loss.

"You are going to come with me to the meet with the Council tonight, and I want them all to know who you belong to," he said between kisses. His fingers no longer had claws as he glided them over her damp skin to her pussy and pressed his come back into her.

"I want to be leaking out of you all night so I can smell my mark on you. My beautiful Asteria—all mine."

Tears slipped down her cheek, and she was glad he couldn't see what his possessiveness did to her.

"Yes, Mercury, I'm all yours," she replied.

Mercury tilted her head back so he could kiss her. The sweet tang of his blood hit her tongue, and she rolled onto her back so she could pull him back down on top of her. His blood sang in her body, healing it, making her faster and harder to kill. If she was to face the vampire council that day, she would need all the strength he could give her.

"What do we need to go to the Council for?" Asteria asked when they finally broke apart. Mercury shifted so he could lay his head on her stomach.

Asteria combed her fingers through his hair, the soft intimacy of the moment making her jaded heart sing. She had never been a romantic sort of person, but she could get used to this gentleness.

"At this point, speaking with the council is a courtesy. I am taking over the family again, and they need to know about it. We don't have evidence to pinpoint on the Cassius family yet, but showing Aulus who he's pissed off might make him slip up," Mercury replied, his beard tickling against her soft skin. "Valens won't be able to cause any trouble locked in the cells and..." He lifted his head abruptly.

"What is—"

Mercury's hand went over her mouth to silence her, and he whispered, "Someone is breaking in."

Mercury slipped out of bed and went to the bedroom door. He cracked it open and was instantly hit by the smell of wolf men. Three of them.

They hadn't even bothered with the mage this time, which told him they underestimated Asteria.

Someone at the mansion, or one of the cronies whom he had kicked out of the house, had told their enemies that Asteria was still alive. They must've thought she meant nothing to Mercury if they didn't think he would protect her.

Fuck. He was going to have to get rid of his entire staff and start again.

Mercury slipped out of the room and down the stairs. They had entered the same large windows as last time. *Idiots.*

Mercury kicked open the lounge room door, and the three men in the room froze. They weren't expecting a pissed off, naked vampire. They rallied, ripping free of their human skins, and attacked.

Mercury grabbed the first one by the arm, snapping the bones before hurling him against the fireplace. The other two were on him in a blink, tearing into him with claws and fangs. One of the wolf men's jaws were closing in over Mercury's head before it came clean off. Asteria had joined the fight. Her silver *gladius* was streaming with wolf blood, her eyes furious as she turned on her next opponent. She was magic with a blade, her strikes clean and purposeful. It was true that without the mage to knock her family out, there was no way the Evandruses couldn't have handled the wolf men assassins.

Mercury broke bones and incapacitated one wolf man while Asteria

slaughtered the other in precise, powerful attacks before taking off his head. She was covered in blood and gore when she turned back to him. The wolf at Mercury's feet whined as Asteria closed in on him.

"Get out of my way," she hissed. "This fucker killed my family and has to die."

"He will, dove, but we need to keep this one alive for questioning first," Mercury said. He hit the wolf man in the back of his head, and he collapsed unconscious to the ruined carpet.

Furniture was smashed to rubble; blood and bits covered everything, and Asteria was a scarlet stained warrior queen. *His* queen.

Mercury was kissing her before he could stop. Asteria dropped the sword and climbed up into his arms, mouth devouring his. She tasted of blood and heat and rage. Mercury slammed her up against the already broken wall and tore the long shirt she'd managed to clothe herself with. She was naked underneath it, thank the gods. He needed to be inside her like he needed blood to live.

"You are so damn fierce in battle," he said against her lips.

Asteria scratched her nails down his chest. "I couldn't let you have all the fun."

Mercury spread her legs wider and slammed his cock into her. She was still soaked from their last bout of lovemaking, and he hit her limit in one deep stroke.

"Fuck me harder, Mercury. Make me feel it," she pleaded, legs locking around his lower back. He grinned viciously, his fangs out and eyes still full of scarlet. Asteria wasn't afraid, if anything, she fucked him faster. She was going to be the perfect bride.

Mercury sank his fangs into her neck, her sweet taste flooding his mouth with desire and her adrenaline. Asteria screamed his name, her perfect pussy gripping him so tight, he had to pull his mouth off her to catch his breath. Asteria pulled his head down to hers so she could kiss him again, uncaring of her blood in his mouth. She was wild with battle lust, covered in the blood of her enemies, and he had never seen anything so fucking beautiful in his life.

Mercury grabbed her hands and pinned them to the wall above her head. Her pupils blew out, and he knew she was about to come again.

"That's it, my Asteria. Come on my cock before I fill you up again," he panted, driving into her.

"Mercury..." she groaned before leaning forward and biting into his

shoulder. Her blunt little teeth tore into him, and her tongue licked the wound. His orgasm was instantaneous, whiting out his vision and making him cry out her name. He came so hard, he almost dropped her in shock and awe.

They sank down onto the carpet, Asteria still in his lap. Mercury rested his forehead against hers. He clutched her face with his hands, needing her closer.

"By Jupiter, what are you?" he whispered, trying to get his body to calm itself.

Asteria ran her nose against his. "I'm yours, Mercury Amulius. I'm yours."

Mercury's arms went around her, pulling her closer still. They were soaked in blood and surrounded by bodies of their assassins, but he'd never felt more at peace.

"And I'm yours, Asteria Evandrus," he replied, cradling her closer. "Wholly and irrevocably."

An hour later, Asteria was walking into the black onyx and porphyry halls of the chambers of the Blood Lords of Inferno. She had never been into them before and had prayed she would never have to. They had been built to be terrifying and imposing, and if it wasn't for Mercury by her side, Asteria wouldn't have dared to step one foot on the property.

They had showered and dressed appropriately—Mercury in a suit that made him look like sex; Asteria in her official black uniform blazer and pants that had the house crest embroidered in golden thread on the back.

Mercury signaled to the vampiric guards at the main doors. They were smart enough to know who he was and rushed forward.

"There is an unconscious wolf man in the back of our vehicle. Bring him," Mercury ordered, and Asteria gave them the keys. They couldn't help fast enough. Asteria smiled with pride. This was the type of master she had wanted to serve her entire life. He had the type of authority that infected everyone around him and made them obey. It was heady to stand by his side, to wear his family crest. She hadn't expected to be in love with him as well, but that was there too.

"You are grinning, dove," Mercury commented.

"I can't help it. It's all the sex and fighting that's put a spring in my step," she replied. She wanted to take his hand but didn't dare. It wasn't the time and place, and a thousand vampiric ears could hear them.

"There's still plenty of enemies to kill off too." Mercury winked at her. Asteria had to fight not to climb into his arms again.

They didn't need to reach the main chamber doors before someone was

there to open them for him. The council went quiet as Mercury strolled in and sat down in Valens's old seat.

Asteria went and stood behind his chair, keeping her eyes downcast. She knew better than to look at any of these vampires in the eye.

"I apologize for interrupting. Please continue," Mercury said, waving a hand at the vampire who had been speaking. Going by the crest on his ring, the vampire was from the Drusus family.

Asteria glanced about the room and spotted a familiar face. Zia was sitting with the Volso family head, Corven. Asteria knew that she had picked up a job with them, and it was going to be dangerous, but she didn't expect to see her in the council chambers. Zia's blonde brow went up at her inquiringly, a small smile on her face. She knew of Asteria's plan to wake Mercury and looked thrilled that it had worked.

Zia was a *dhampir*—half human, half vampire—and a powerful mage to boot. She had been hired by Corven to deal with a family matter that would have her entrenched with them for the next few months. Corven wanted to retire from being patriarch of the family and was using Zia's formidable skills to make it happen.

Asteria mouthed, '*Call me,*' at her before her attention was brought back to the chairman of the meeting.

"Mercury Amulius, it has been a long time," he said, his voice cutting through the silence like a blade. "We were not informed that you were returning."

"It's because I didn't know it myself, Claudius," Mercury replied, leaning back in his chair. "I was awoken by my blood sworn to deal with the murder of her family at the hands of the Cassius family."

"You're fresh out of the ground and telling lies already, Mercury?" a vampire on the opposite side of the chamber laughed.

Aulus Cassius was a tall, slender man with piercing green eyes and a narrow face that made him look foxlike. Asteria's hand twitched, yearning to drive her dagger into his eye. He was looking at her like she was something he'd scraped off the bottom of his shoes.

"Gentleman, please," the chairman said, a growl of rebuke in his voice. "Mercury, tell us what this is about before you start making accusations."

Mercury recounted everything that Asteria had told him about Valens's insult and the bodies of her family. He also told them about the mage and wolf men team that had been hired.

"Wolf men hired as assassins. It seems unlikely. They are too hard to control and don't have the discipline," one council member said.

"I have proof because the fuckers tried to kill Asteria tonight, and we stopped them. Bring my prisoner in!" Mercury called.

The wolf man struggled against the vampires holding him. Bones snapped and whines echoes from his throat as the shift took hold of him and he became a beaten and bloody man once more. He was hauled to the center of the room in front of Mercury. He didn't seem to have enough sense to be afraid.

"You are being accused of attacking a member of this council," the chairman informed him.

"I wasn't there for him. Just that bitch he was fucking," the wolf man snarled.

Mercury leaned forward. "Call her that word again, and I'll rip your skin off, piece by piece."

"Enough!" the chairman said, banging his staff on the ground. "Creature, tell us who hired you. Was it Aulus Cassius or a member of his family?"

The wolf man smiled, his teeth bloody. "No. It was Valens Amulius."

Aulus laughed, and Mercury snarled. "It's impossible. Valens is in a cell under my mansion."

"I think you might find we are being brought into a family squabble. This is no council matter," Aulus said. Asteria was going to kill him one day if Mercury didn't get to him first.

"I'd like permission to keep this creature in the dungeons here while I fetch Valens. There is more to this than a family squabble," he said, rising to his feet and buttoning his coat.

"Agreed. Take him away," the chairman replied, waving at the guards to remove the assassin from the room.

The wolf man sneered at Asteria. "Gonna get you sooner or later. Just you wait."

Mercury's hand shot out, and he backhanded the wolf man in the face, sending him sprawling across the marble.

"Very protective of his newest pet, isn't he?" Aulus said, making a few of the other vampires chitter.

"Yes, he is," Mercury replied, eyes bleeding scarlet, and his voice so cold that the hair rose on Asteria's neck. "Something that you should keep in mind."

He turned on his heel and strode out, Asteria hurrying after him. She didn't dare raise her eyes until they were getting back into the car.

"Do you think Valens really could have hired them?" she asked.

Mercury shook his head. "No. Nothing can escape my dungeons. It's also too complex for Valens. He's always seen vampirism as an eternal party. He doesn't have the stomach for this kind of game."

Asteria started the car. "I suppose we are about to find out."

By the time they got back to the mansion, dread had settled in Asteria's stomach. Even if Aulus Cassius couldn't be linked to the assassins, there was hatred in his eyes when he looked at Mercury. He would find another way to try and bring the Amulius house down.

Mercury led the way through the mansion, the remaining servants getting out of his way. Asteria had never seen the place so clean before. They were even repainting walls where they had been repaired.

Mercury pulled an iron key from his pocket and opened the doors that led to the cells.

The unease that had been building in Asteria's stomach turned to ice. Valens was gone.

Asteria had never seen anyone as angry as Mercury had been in the dungeon. He vibrated with enough power that she had to fight not to cower in front of him. He had picked her up and sprinted back to the Evandrus house so fast, she didn't have time to blink or argue.

"You will stay on this property until I return," he said, eyes glowing with ruby fire.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, unwilling to let go of him.

Mercury lifted her hand and kissed it. "I'm going to track down Valens, and I can't do that if I'm worried about your safety. Please, dove. Stay here and be safe for me."

"I will. Remember what I said about watching your back. Don't trust anyone," she replied. There was no point fighting him about it. She was good with a blade, but she would only slow him down.

Mercury kissed her once, and then he was gone.

Asteria went upstairs ignoring the smell of blood and gore that was creeping under the lounge room door. Mercury wanted to keep it for evidence, so she had to deal with it. Asteria pulled on some training clothes and went back down to the gym that was attached to the garage. The night was warm, so she opened up the glass doors that looked out over the back garden and tried to let it soothe her.

Asteria hated feeling like she was some kind of useless human that couldn't help Mercury. She had thought that killing the wolf men would feel good, but all it had done was make her angrier. It wasn't over. The assassins might have been the ones to kill her family, but they weren't in charge; they

were only the tool.

What if Valens really had hired them? Why would he want her family dead but not her?

"None of this makes sense," she said and drove her fists into the punching bag.

"Life's like that, sugar," a voice replied.

Asteria whirled about just as a wave of magic slammed her to the floor. A slender man with colorless hair stepped through the open doors and into the gym. *The mage*. He looked familiar, and Asteria suddenly saw him in her mind's eye with make-up and a dusting of glitter through his hair. He was one of Valens's regular groupies that had been lurking about for the past month.

"Let me go, you little fucker!" Asteria snarled, flailing her arms and legs. The magic pressed her into the concrete harder like a giant invisible fist was pinning her down.

The mage knelt down beside her and brushed her hair back from her face. "No can do, sugar. I have a job to do." He took a silk scarf from his pocket and gagged her. "There now, don't fuss."

Asteria was going to fucking kill the bastard. He cuffed her before whistling, and another wolf man came through the doors. He picked Asteria up and tossed her over one hairy shoulder. She tried to struggle and throw herself off, but all she succeeded in doing was making the colorless mage laugh.

"Such a little fighter. It's almost a shame what's going to happen to you," he said. He went up on tiptoes and blew a handful of sweet-smelling powder in her face. "Sweet dreams, sugar."

Asteria's vision spiraled, and then there was nothing.



ASTERIA WAS COLD AND WET. That was the first clear thought she'd had in hours. She opened her eyes and tried to make sense of where she was. She was lying on a wet rock, the cavern walls rising up around her. She twisted her head and spotted the torches that were lit along the walls. Waves boomed in the distance, and she figured they must be in one of the sea caves that dotted the coastline. They were notorious hiding places for smugglers and less savory sea creatures.

Asteria moved her hands and realized she was chained to a great metal spike that had been jammed into the rock face.

"Ah, she wakes at last. I was wondering if you were going to come about at all. You think a mage could get a drug dose right," Valens said. He was crouched on the rocks above her, his golden hair shining in the torchlight.

"Where is Mercury?" she asked, her mouth sticky.

"Gods only know. Hunting for me, I suppose, and probably ranting because his favorite pet is missing. He's going to be dealt with soon enough."

Asteria glared up at him. "Why, Valens? Didn't we serve you well enough?"

"You are just collateral damage. It's not personal."

"You killed my family. It feels pretty fucking personal. What the fuck is your problem?" she shouted, her voice bouncing off the rocks.

"I don't have a problem at all. Aulus wanted you dead, and we are all subject to his will. He has the power to make the vampires strong again. We should be running Inferno, not playing nice with councils and fucking board meetings."

Asteria shook her head. "You're insane. That kind of power play will ensure the city tears apart in a civil war. You can't be this stupid."

"Aulus is going to be king of the vampires. One way or another. I'm hedging my bets because it's better to serve the devil than heaven or however that saying goes," Valens replied with a lazy wave of his hand.

"The saying is: 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.' If you're going to try to quote Milton to sound clever, at least do it properly," Asteria snarled and yanked on her chains.

Valens's smile went cold. "You always did think yourself smarter than everyone else. Waking Mercury was the last fucking straw. I couldn't let you live after that insult."

"He's going to kill you for this. You do get that, don't you? If he doesn't, the vampire council will. They already know you hired the wolf man assassins."

Valens laughed. "I may have paid them, but Aulus was the one who put the order through. If I get hauled in front of the council for questioning, I'll tell them the truth. I never killed you or your family. Don't you see? In a few hours' time, the tide is going to do that for me."

"Lying like one of the fae now, are you?" Asteria glared up at him. "It won't save you. Mercury isn't going to sit back and let Aulus become king of

the vampires, and neither are any of the other families."

"You'd be surprised how many are on Aulus's side." Valens stood up and brushed the sand off his jeans. "I'm sorry it had to end this way, Asteria, but your fate is sealed."

"So is yours," she promised him.

Valens laughed and gave her a little wave as he disappeared.

Asteria pulled at the chains holding her before testing the metal spike for any wriggle room. There was none. Her shoes had been removed, so she couldn't even kick it properly. Helplessness swept over her. She was going to die chained down like a damn beast. There was no way to fight a rock or the sea.

Asteria swiped the tears of frustration and anger from her cheeks. She was never going to see Mercury again. There was no way to warn him of what Aulus was planning or how Valens was involved. She would never get a chance to tell Mercury that she loved him.

Asteria had almost said it that morning after the fight with the wolf men. It had been on her lips, and she'd held back out of fear. She hadn't wanted him to think it was the adrenaline or the orgasms talking. It didn't matter if Mercury didn't feel the same or that due to their positions, they couldn't be together. She still loved him. It had taken less than a week, and she knew it to be true.

Asteria pulled at the cuffs, trying to slip her hand through. They were on too tight, and even if she broke her fingers, it wouldn't be enough.

Asteria lay back on the cold rock, her tears flowing freely. *Mercury, I'm sorry.*

Mercury tracked Valens out of the city to the ocean before his scent vanished completely. Frustrated, Mercury shifted into a swarm of bats and flew back to the mansion. He must have missed something.

Mercury shifted into his vampire form and landed on the grounds. He stretched out his perception to check in on Asteria and found...nothing. Not a flicker of a heartbeat.

"No..." Mercury ran to the Evandrus house and pulled open the door. He traced Asteria's scent to the gym, and then everything was swamped by the sting of magic. The same magic that he had smelt in the gardens. Mercury's roar of fury shook the house and cracked the glass doors.

"Think, Mercury. Don't let your fear cloud your logic." He closed his eyes and breathed. It helped calm some of his rage, so he didn't tear the place apart.

He had to analyze the facts—like how Valens and the mage were obviously working together. Could he track the magic? Not quickly enough. The mage was smart and would protect himself against such a trace. There was no body, so Asteria must have been kidnapped for some kind of purpose.

Mercury had received no threats or offers to bargain, so she wasn't being used to bait a trap for him. No, this was just to hurt him as much as possible. Valens wouldn't be able to resist taunting Asteria or watching someone else kill her.

"Find Valens, find Asteria," he told himself. There had to be something down at the coast that he had missed.

Mercury went outside, shifted back into a swarm of bats, and flew back

the way he'd come. He had shared blood with Asteria enough now that he might be able to track her telepathically. It wasn't a gift he liked taking advantage of. He wanted Asteria to have her own mind, which was why he hadn't pulled information about her from her blood.

I'm sorry, beloved, but I'm going to have to violate your privacy after all.

The nighttime coastline came back into view, and he landed right where Valens's trail had gone missing. Did he have a lair close by? Somewhere he could hide out? Mercury didn't think he'd be stupid enough to go to Aulus for refuge, but he also never would have thought Valens would be stupid enough to attack his blood sworn either.

Mercury stood on the cliffs and watched the tide rising. He slowly lowered his mental shields and focused on Asteria. Her laugh, her voice, the way she warmed him up from the inside out. She was so bright and beautiful. Vibrant. Passionate. Everything he could ever want in a bride.

Asteria, he called, forcing all of his will and magic into her name. Something flickered like a star at the edge of his conciseness. **Asteria, come to me...**

Mercury. Her voice was the barest of whispers. Mercury gasped as the feeling of cold water enveloped him. He got a mental flash of a stone and water and darkness. She was in the water somewhere. A cave.

Mercury, I'm so sorry I wasn't strong enough to fight them off. I'm sorry I never got to tell you that I was falling in love with you...

"Asteria!" Mercury shouted at the wind. He needed more than his normal senses. He shifted back into a bat and flew down the sides of the sea cliffs. His echolocation senses lit the world up, and he spotted the black gash in the rock. An opening to a cave. No wonder he'd lost Valens; he must have dropped or climbed straight down the cliffs.

Mercury flew into the cave, following its twisting path until he heard the waves and the chinking sound of chain rubbing against rock. Mercury shifted back into his vampire form and searched the water. Asteria's dark hair was flowing about her, her lips sucking in a mouthful of air before the water rushed over her.

Mercury jumped down into the waves and pulled the chains from the stone with one hard yank. Asteria breached the surface, coughing and spluttering.

"Breathe, my love, breathe," Mercury said, pulling her to him and holding her above the surface.

"P-Perseus, I presume," she coughed.

Mercury kissed her salty wet face, relief making him dizzy. "You are fairer to me than any Andromeda, my dove."

Asteria wheezed out a laugh, her head resting against his shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said, holding her closer as he carried her out of the waves and back onto dry land.

"Did you find Valens? He was here for a while, boasting about everything but his next stop," Asteria said. Mercury broke the metal cuffs about her wrist. They were red and raw from chaffing, her long fingers bruised from where she'd fought against the cuffs.

"I will kill him for this," Mercury said, kissing her fingers gently. "He tried to take you from me, and I will make him suffer."

"We need to find somewhere safe first." Asteria touched his face, bringing him out of the vortex of rage he was about to spiral into. "Is there somewhere you know?"

Mercury didn't have to think too hard. "The Blood Lords have their own rooms at the council chambers to use if needed. It is a neutral zone. No one will dare to spill blood there."

"Do you think Valens might have gone there too?" Asteria asked.

Mercury growled and picked her up. "He better not have. I'll carry you there, and you will not fight me about it."

Asteria kissed him, her lips still blue from being in the cold water. "I have no intention of fighting you. Take me wherever you think is best, just don't let me go, Mercury."

"My dearest Asteria, I'm never letting you out of my sight again," he promised and carried her out of the cave.

Asteria was half frozen by the time they arrived at the council chambers once more. It wasn't a moment too soon because dawn was already starting to stain the sky in orange and red.

"Lord Amulius, your chambers are at your disposal," the guard said on their arrival. He handed Mercury a key card before sparing a shivering Asteria a glance. "Should you require a doctor, we have one on staff."

"Thank you. May I ask if Valens has showed his face yet?" Mercury asked.

"Lord Valens isn't on the premises. As you have now reclaimed your house seat, he has no access to the guest apartments."

Mercury gave the guard a nod of thanks before taking Asteria's hand and leading her through a lords only access door. Her fingers were numb, and her teeth were chattering. She was so tired and couldn't believe Mercury was with her. She had thought for sure that she was dead as she watched the tide rise and had accepted it. It was probably a good thing she couldn't feel her hands because they were black and blue from where she had tried to tear herself free.

Mercury's chamber doors were painted in the black and gold of his house and were decorated with the family crest. Asteria barely registered the opulence of the room. She was too exhausted to care or to argue when Mercury led her through to the bathroom and started to help her out of her clothes. He took her into the shower and any strength she had left her. She sagged against him, a sob breaking free from her.

"It's okay, dove. Cry if you need to. Your body needs to release the

adrenaline," he crooned softly to her.

"I thought I was dead for sure," she said against his chest. "Valens did it for no other reason than Aulus wanted it. All my family's years of service, their sacrifice meant absolutely nothing to him."

Mercury kissed her forehead gently "You are everything to me, and he will die for this. I promise you. Any lenience I could have had for him died in that cave. What else did he say to you, dove?"

Asteria told him of Valens's rant, about the plans to get Mercury out of the way and to make Aulus king of the vampires.

Mercury gradually made the shower warmer as her body heated. Her hands started to throb with agony. Mercury bit into his wrist and offered his blood to her.

"Drink, Asteria. I won't have you in any unnecessary pain. It's been a long night, and you have been in a brawl with wolf men and almost died," he said.

Asteria licked the wound before taking a mouthful of spicy sweet blood. In moments, the pain in her hands and body lessened before vanishing altogether. She pulled away from his wrist before standing on tiptoes to kiss him softly.

Mercury ran his hands over her wet hair. "I almost lost you."

"But you didn't. I'm safe and here because of you," she replied, staring up into his beautiful golden eyes.

"Being awake and immortal wouldn't be worth it if you died, Asteria. You are the only thing that makes any sense anymore." Mercury lifted her hands and pressed kisses along her knuckles. "Become my bride."

Asteria's heart leaped. "Do you mean marry you or...be a *bride* bride."

"Both, if you want them," Mercury replied without any hesitation.

"Oh," Asteria's knees went as soft as jelly, so she lowered herself onto the marble bench.

Mercury crouched down in front of her. "I know this is a lot to consider, but I can't lose you. I really do love you, and I don't want to live without you."

"Are you sure you're not being rash? I'm blood sworn to you. I'm already yours, Mercury. You are so freshly awaken, and I don't want you to rush into something because we have good chemistry, and you like how my blood tastes."

Mercury frowned. "Are you suggesting I don't know my own mind? I have been alone for centuries, Asteria. When I'm with you, I don't feel that

gnawing darkness inside of me. I'm not the kind of man who has ever made rash decisions. I know what I want, and that's you by my side."

Asteria sat back against the cold marble and tried to think. For a moment she wondered if she'd actually died in the cave. "I really don't know how to process this."

Mercury kissed her hands. "You have been through a lot tonight. You don't have to decide anything now. I only want to be honest with you. You are the last of the Evandruses, and becoming my bride would mean that you can't have children."

"I never wanted children anyway," Asteria said. She touched his cheek. "That's not my hesitation. I'm thinking of the backlash you will get for choosing a servant as your bride."

"I couldn't give a fuck what anyone thinks. Who I choose to love is no one else's business. They will have other things to talk about, especially when we give testimony that Aulus has plans on becoming king."

Asteria yawned. "I will tell the council myself if I have to. I just need to sleep first."

"Of course. It's almost dawn." Mercury helped her out of the shower, dried her in the soft towels before carrying her to bed. He went to the door and whispered some instructions to the guards that Asteria didn't catch.

"What was that about?" she whispered as he got into bed beside her.

"They are there to serve me. I'm making good use of them. Don't let it worry you, my dove." Mercury pulled her into his arms, and Asteria sighed against him. "Sleep now. I'll be here." She felt the slight compulsion in his words but didn't fight it. She let the magic pull her under and take all of her worries with it.

The following evening Mercury's request for a private meeting with the council members was answered with curiosity and concern. He straightened the cuffs of his jacket and mentally prepared himself. He'd stopped running about, looking for Valens, and had used his influence in the city. It had borne fruit. It had been a good reminder to him that even if the council didn't give him what he wanted, there were plenty of other strings he could pull on.

They wanted to play politics. He'd learned this dance with the senators of Rome, and they were bloodthirstier and more devious than any vampires. Mercury was older than all of them, and they had forgotten that detail. The dragons hadn't, and old favors were always a currency they honored.

Mercury sat in his throne in the council chamber and waited for the others to arrive. He reached out to touch Asteria's consciousness, the barest of brushes to make sure that she was safe. Even in the council chambers, he didn't trust anyone with her.

He was still waiting on her reply to be his bride, but his intentions were made clear to her, just like they would be made clear to the rest of Inferno that night.

Mercury nodded politely to all the lords as they entered. Only Aulus was absent.

"It's most unusual for you to summon us, Mercury. Out of respect, it has been allowed, but in the future, I trust you to use the right procedures to call a meeting," the chairman intoned. Mercury only smiled until the chairman looked away. "The floor is yours."

"I have the evidence needed to implicate not only Valens, but also Aulus Cassius in conspiracy against this council. Aulus has plans to be king, and tonight we will see just how deep his treachery runs," Mercury said pleasantly. He quickly noted anyone that shifted nervously. Vampires were good at hiding their tells, but they were still there if one knew where to look. Mercury signaled to the guards who opened the back chamber doors. Two dragon shifters carried a struggling Valens between them and dumped him on the floor at Mercury's feet. He'd been found hiding out in an opium den. Valens was always a slave to his passions, and they had been his undoing. The dragons knew everything, and it hadn't taken long to find Valens drinking with a glassy-eyed boy.

"My thanks to you both. Please inform your master that we are now even," Mercury told the dragons. They bowed to him and left without a word. It was good to know there was some respect still left in the city. Mercury leaned forward and plucked the black bag of Valens's head.

"Hello, nephew," Mercury purred. Valens launched himself at him, fangs bared. Mercury slapped him, sending him sprawling across the floor to the chairman's feet. "As the patriarch of the Amulius family, I give you permission to Truth Tell him."

"No!" Valens screeched. He tried to make a run for it, but the chairman was quicker. He snatched a now sobbing Valens by the throat and held him still. The Chairman was almost as old as Mercury and held his position for his special ability. He could make any creature, human or vampire, tell the truth. It was something that was only permitted by the head of families because it was the least diplomatic approach to any argument. Mercury might have spared Valens the embarrassment of it if he hadn't gone after Asteria. Now, Valens's word meant nothing.

"State your case against him," the chairman said, keeping his grip firm.

"Yesterday evening Valens was released from my dungeons and decided to chain Asteria Evandrus to a rock inside of a cave and let the tide kill her," Mercury said, barely controlling his own rage. "He opened his young, foolish mouth and revealed some interesting plans for Inferno."

"You have no proof of this!" Valens snarled.

Mercury gestured to the guards, and the door opened. Asteria walked into the room, head high and so beautiful, Mercury wanted to weep. She was dressed in a black satin gown edged in gold. Her dark hair fell in soft waves over one shoulder, and her heels clicked across the marble. She looked every

inch the queen she was.

Valens hissed obscenities as Asteria crossed the chamber floor and sat at Mercury's side. It was a position reserved for brides only. They might not have gone through the transformation yet, but Mercury had declared his love to the world.

"You're so fucking dead, you blood whore," Valens spat.

"You tried it once and failed." Asteria crossed her long legs and stared down at Valens. "You should have slit my throat when you had the chance instead of being a coward."

Valens stared at the Blood Lords. "You are going to believe what this human says over me? I sat in that seat for over a hundred years!"

Asteria looked at the chairman. "You have permission to Truth Tell me as well if you wish. Everyone should know about Aulus Cassius's plans to make himself king of the vampires."

A murmur of outrage slipped about the room, and Mercury smiled. Asteria had to be frightened of so many immortal eyes on her, but she didn't show it. She was going to make an excellent vampire.

"Mercury, do you permit me to glamor your future consort?" the chairman asked, and he nodded. Guards appeared to hold Valens still, and Asteria walked to the chairman. She took the vampire's hand and looked out at the council.

"Ask your questions," she said, head held high. Mercury had never been more in love. Asteria told them everything. The mage attacking her, the cave, Valens's boasts that Aulus was going to be made king.

When Asteria finished, the room was quieter than a tomb. The chairman's magic let her go, and she didn't stumble. Mercury had seen vampires sob openly after his magic had held them in thrall. Asteria walked back over to Mercury and sat beside him. He took her hand and kissed it.

"Bring him to me," the chairman gestured to Valens. Mercury sat back, turning a deaf ear to Valens's pleas for mercy.

Mercury's heart was ice. "You shouldn't have touched what belongs to me," he said and gestured to the chairman. "Tear the truth from him."



ASTERIA GRIPPED Mercury's hand and drew strength from his solid warmth. It

had taken everything out of her to step into that chamber. Her burning need for revenge and her fierce love for Mercury had kept her breathing.

Valens's terror was now gone, his voice monotone as he told the council about killing her family and the name of the mage he had hired, all under Aulus's instructions. He spoke of how Aulus planned to use blackmail and murder to tear the council apart from the inside until there was so much chaos that they would beg Aulus to be their leader.

Mercury's expression didn't change once during the entire testimony. He knew what Aulus was capable of, but the other Blood Lords looked furious and offended in turn.

"I believe we have heard enough. I suggest we call Aulus Cassius to the chambers to answer for this betrayal. Who agrees?" the chairman demanded, and every hand in the room went up.

Valens was a crumpled mess on the marble, sobbing softly. Asteria didn't feel sorry for him. He was a stupid party boy who should never had played politics.

Mercury didn't let go of her hand while they waited for the summons to bring Aulus to them. His thumb ran over her wrist in slow, delicate strokes that made lust zing through her.

She couldn't wait to be free of that horrible building and be in his arms once more. She had wanted him when she'd woken, but he'd only kissed her and told her that he wouldn't have everyone in the building share the sounds of pleasure he was going to wring out of her. She hated that it made her hornier.

"Whatever you are thinking of, you really need to stop it," Mercury whispered in her ear. "I'm having a hard enough time not tearing that dress off you as is. The heels you can keep on."

Asteria's blush was instant and hotter than the sun. Their moment was disrupted by the doors banging open and Aulus appearing in the most dramatic way possible.

"What in the gods is all of this about? How dare you summon me like I am some fledging," he snarled at the chairman. Aulus took in the room—Valens on the floor crying and Asteria at Mercury's side. He blurred, moving too fast to see and tore Valens's head off. There was a spray of blood, and he was gone again. Asteria felt the air move around her, and suddenly, Aulus was being tossed across the chamber by Mercury.

"Chairman! Permission to seek a blood debt," Mercury shouted.

"Granted," the chairman replied.

Asteria gripped the arms of her chair as Mercury and Aulus faced off against each other.

"I always knew it would end this way with the two of us fighting for supremacy," Aulus sneered, his fangs lengthening.

"Then you were always the fool I suspected you to be," Mercury replied.

Aulus lowered into a crouch. "When you're dead, I'm going to take that bitch of yours and fuck her bloody."

Time seemed to stop moving, and then everything was going too fast. Asteria only saw brief moments of the fight. Claws and fangs slicing and gouging into flesh and blood spilling on the floor. She didn't move; didn't breathe. Mercury's face had changed into something unrecognizable. He was utterly feral as he took out all his fury onto the man who had thought he could destroy his family.

Aulus's attack fumbled, and Mercury's claws ripped through his throat. Aulus's eyes widened in surprise right before Mercury tore his head free from his twitching body.

Mercury strode across the chamber and went down on one knee in front of Asteria. He placed the head at her feet. "Your family has been avenged, Asteria Evandrus. Please accept this gift and become my bride."

Asteria didn't care that he was covered in gore or that all the Blood Lord's eyes were on them. She leaped into Mercury's arms and kissed him.

"Yes," she whispered against his bloody lips. "Take me away from here and make me yours."

The chairman cleared his throat. "There are still some matters to attend to..."

"Then attend to them." Mercury picked Asteria up in his arms, and they were gone before anyone could stop them.

Mercury entered the mansion, carrying Asteria with a single-minded focus. Servants and workmen scattered as he took her into his freshly prepared quarters and slammed the doors shut. Magic exploded out of him, and the protection wards lit up over the doors and windows.

"Gods help whoever decides to try and disturb us," Mercury growled. He turned towards her, and Asteria had never felt more like prey in her life. His glowing eyes looked her over. "Take it off before I tear it off."

"Tear it off," Asteria whispered.

Mercury smiled, then satin and lace were falling in pieces to the floor. Fine scratches on her skin welled with blood, and Mercury licked them one at a time, working his way to his knees before her.

"My perfect bride," he purred against her stomach before he lifted a leg over his shoulder. Mercury began licking her pussy, and Asteria grabbed onto his hair, needing something to hang onto as she tried to keep her balance in her high heels. His strong hands gripped her ass, holding her steady as pleasure drowned her.

Mercury's tongue thrust into her in teasing strokes, his fangs brushing over her tender skin in a way that was both threat and promise. Asteria clutched at his head, fucking his perfect face until she was shaking with her release.

Mercury lifted her up and carried her over to the bed, dropping her onto her back. Asteria stared up at her gorgeous vampire as he stripped off, his eyes never leaving her. He grabbed her by the hips and dragged her down onto his cock. Asteria's legs locked about him, her heels scratching and

digging into his lower back, and tried to breathe as he stretched her pussy to its limit.

"Nothing has ever felt as good as being inside of you, my dove," he growled. Asteria reached for him. He kissed her hands before the tender moment was gone. He pinned her hands above her head, holding her down.

"Mercury, make me yours," she begged. His eyes went scarlet, and he fucked her hard and deep, pinning her in place as he took her. Asteria loved it, the feeling of him possessing her, using her however he wanted.

When his fangs sank into her breast, all she could do was scream his name as she came harder than she had in her life. Mercury kept fucking her as he drank her life down, so she was in the throes of another orgasm as her heart beat its last.

Hot, spicy blood flooded Asteria's mouth. Strength flowed back into her, and she gripped Mercury's wrist to her lips.

"That's it, my most precious Asteria. Drink deep. Don't stop," Mercury crooned softly in her ear. She couldn't stop. He tasted so good. All she wanted was him.

Asteria was vaguely aware that he was carrying her into a bathroom, but all that she could focus on was the ancient life infusing every part of her. Sudden pain wracked her body, and she let go of his wrist to thrash against the agony.

Mercury held her in a bathtub as hot water flowed from the shower above them. "You're safe, my bride. Your body is dying. That's all. I have you. The pain will pass. Focus on me."

Asteria stared up at Mercury, and she was awe struck. She could see every whisker of his beard, the different shades of gold in his eyes, the finest sprays of water on his eyelashes.

"Mercury," she whispered. Her lips crashed onto his. "Mercury, my Mercury."

"Yes, beloved. I'm yours now. Forever and always," he replied. The hot water washed the blood from them, and Asteria felt every drop hitting her skin. She lost herself in Mercury kissing her, the pain easing and leaving as he distracted her with the softest of caresses. Asteria straddled him and sank down on his cock once more.

Mercury laughed breathlessly. "Take me how you want me, my perfect bride."

"I love you," she said and fucked herself down onto him once more.

"From the second I saw you sleeping on that bed in your tomb, I knew you would change me forever. I had to have you."

"I had to have you too." Mercury kissed her, his fangs scraping over her lips and turning their embrace bloody. "Now, fuck me, my bride. Claim me."

Asteria's claws dug into his shoulders as she rode him, making him groan in pain and pleasure. She had never felt so good in her life. She felt powerful, invincible, hopelessly consumed with love for the man underneath her. Fangs exploded from her gums, and she sank them into his throat. She came hard and endlessly, her whole body turning boneless.

Mercury was smiling softly as he dried them both and took her back to his bed. Asteria was manoeuvred onto her stomach, and Mercury took her from behind. It was deep and slow and claiming until they had both come again and were dozing in each other's arms.

"You are mine now, my beautiful bride," he whispered against her neck. "Mine forever."

"You are *mine*, forever," Asteria said and kissed him. Her vampiric eyes took in every mesmerizing part of him. She was addicted to his love, the devotion in his eyes, and would never get enough of him. "Tell me, was this the future you were expecting when you went to sleep all those years ago?"

"No, my dove. I could never have imagined this. I went to sleep because life had lost its luster for me." Mercury cupped her cheek with his big hand, love shining brightly in his soft smile. "Something tells me that with you by my side, the future is never going to be boring again."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I believe that all monsters and villains deserve their happy endings. I prefer my clothes black, eyeliner winged, and books full of hot romance.

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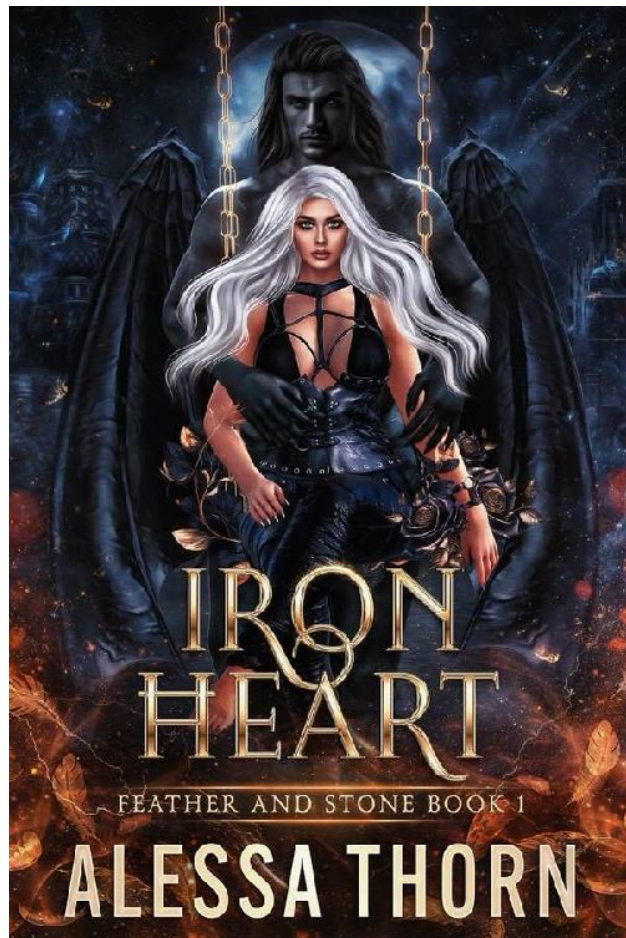
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IRONHEART



1.

**Our history is written in the blood of the holy, the stone of beasts,
and the curses of gods.
- Kitezhd Codex**

Zori stood in front of a wall of glass windows and watched the snow fall over Moscow. She looked down at the street, waiting for the black town car to arrive, which would mark the beginning of her two weeks of freedom.

Come on, Maxim, leave already, she thought, hopping from foot to foot.

She needed to get out of the penthouse that she'd been locked into for days. She didn't like the memories of that place, crowding around and constantly trying to drag her under.

Zori's earliest recollection of being there was of Maxim taking her by the shoulders, looking deep into her eyes, and saying, "*Magic is not real, Zoria.*"

It was something he had repeated often, especially after her mother's suicide.

Some people would have told their four-year-old ward that her mother had been turned into an angel and flown to heaven. Not Maxim. He was a scientist who did not believe in anything other than what he could see under a microscope. Instead of an easy, comforting lie, Zori had gotten the truth.

Your mother was my best friend, and I cared for her deeply, but she was sick in her mind, and she killed herself. You carry the same sickness inside of you. Always beware of voices in your head that aren't your own, Zoria.

Like Zori would tell him if she did hear anything. Doctor Maxim Bogrov wasn't exactly God's chattiest person, but he had done his best with raising

her and keeping her from dying. He had devoted his life to studying the brain disease that had eaten her mother's sanity away.

Zori had been taking his cure since she was fourteen to make sure it never happened to her. Now at twenty-six years old, she was beating the odds.

That was why whenever she got the chance, she escaped Maxim's security team and went to cause some trouble. She was on borrowed time, and she had to make the most of it in any way that she could.

Maxim had a conference in England for two whole weeks, and Zori was going to escape the building if it was the last thing she did. It was infuriating being locked up like a child.

Zori was planning on celebrating her first night out in months, and fuck, did she need it. A dying girl couldn't live on vibrators alone, and with any luck, she would get a few hours of freedom to find a big Russian boy with long hair and lots of tattoos to fuck her blind before Maxim's men tracked her down.

Zori checked the street beneath them again, impatient to get her night started. Her anxiety was up, and she needed to dance and fuck it out of her system. Still no car.

"Hurry the fuck up and leave already," she grumbled.

Zori fidgeted with the necklace she always kept hidden in her bra. It was a pendant with a woman holding a skull in one hand and a bundle of twigs in the other. She didn't know what it meant. It had belonged to her mother, and she had given it to Zori the night she had died.

Zori had memories of her mother, telling her stories of fairytales and magic and saints, but she couldn't remember who the lady on the pendant was meant to be. She carried it for luck and because it was the only thing Zori had left of her mother. Maxim had gotten rid of everything else. She made sure she kept it out of sight.

Zori sighed and stared out at the city of her birth and her mother's death. They hadn't been back to Moscow since her mother had jumped from the balcony on the other side of the penthouse.

After they had left Moscow, Maxim had promised to look after Zori, and they had lived all over the world. She'd had new teachers and tutors in every country they had lived in. She spoke Russian, English, German, and French fluently. She had a voracious mind, and Maxim had made sure to keep it busy.

She hadn't been allowed to go to public schools or universities, and with

the way they moved, there had been no point. When she suggested that she get a job, it had been shut down immediately. Her job was to stay alive and help Maxim with his research.

It wasn't that she was ungrateful to him, but God, she was lonely. He was rarely around, and when he was, it was to make sure she was healthy and was studying whatever new thing had caught her interest. They weren't close in the way she had read other families were, but he was all she had.

The building they were now in was Maxim's main research facility in the Tverskoy District. Like all the other places they had resided in, Zori always had her own apartment-sized rooms, like some kind of princess in a tower.

Or a lab rat in a pretty cage, she thought gloomily and pressed her forehead to the cold glass.

It was why Zori made sneaking out of the buildings they lived in an art form.

Outside, snow was falling again over the city in steady drifts. They had spent the last few months in a warm, tropical climate, so seeing snow again was beautiful.

Zori stared out at the night, her heart fluttering strangely in her chest, yearning for something she couldn't name. All she knew was that she wasn't going to find it in her cage.

Down on the street below, Maxim's black Mercedes pulled up, and she saw him climb in. She held her breath as it pulled from the curb to take him to the airport, and a grin spread over Zori's face.

"Finally!" She rushed to her wardrobe and pulled on a black low-cut top, her corset, and harness.

Zori might have been a shut-in, but she had full internet access and a weakness for online shopping and music. She had already found a club three blocks away and was going to make sure she blended in. She pulled on her leather pants and boots and went to check her make-up in the bathroom.

Zori had naturally Nordic silver hair and full lips like her mother's. Her blue eyes she got from a father she had never met. She unraveled her braid, letting the waves fall down to her breasts, and painted her lips red.

Zori pulled on a black fur coat that came to the back of her knees before she cracked open the door to her bedroom. It was almost 11 p.m. when the building's security teams changed over, and the daily cleaners left. If she timed it right, she could blend in with the group of people leaving.

It wasn't like the cleaning staff knew what she looked like, and if anyone

asked, she would say that she had been working in the labs or offices on another floor. No one would ask. No one ever did because Maxim's staff was so big, there was always a new face.

The new security guard she had encountered that day certainly hadn't known who she was when she flirted with him and stole his key card off his belt.

Amateur, she thought and grinned. Really, someone should have warned him.

Zori had learned if she wore a tight enough top, she could pick most men's pockets.

Zori took a deep, calming breath, slipped out of her bedroom, swiped the card on the fire escape door at the end of the hall, and stepped inside. It was freezing cold, so she pulled on her leather gloves and hurried as fast as her boots would take her.

She'd learned from Maxim's other buildings that he never installed cameras on the fire escape stairs. Why? She couldn't guess other than he didn't want to pay for them. He might have been a scientist, but dear Uncle Maxim was also a businessman and didn't waste money on things he didn't need.

Zori's legs were jelly by the time she got to the ground level of the building and into the staff room where men and women were pulling on heavy coats and gloves.

Zori pulled the hood of her coat down further before joining the back of a group of women talking loudly about one of their daughter's new babies and how fat and sweet she was.

Zori's heart pounded as they moved through the underground parking lot and out of the staff door. No one stopped her or called her name as she followed the women down the street in calm steps. They rounded a corner, and she was free.

Zori tried not to do a victory dance, but there was a definite skip in her step as she followed the map on her phone. *Almost there, deep breaths.*

Zori heard the club before she spotted the door to it. Two bouncers stood on either side of it, smoking cigarettes. It was still early, so there wasn't a line yet. They both looked her over, and she threw them a flirty smile as they opened the door.

"Have fun, baby," one of them said.

Zori winked at him. "I always do."

The music was loud, and the club was dark, just the way she liked it. Zori left her heavy fur coat with the coat check and let the heady beats draw her down the hallways. There was a bar on either side of the dance floor and shadowy alcoves everywhere. The decor was black and silver with candles melting on tables and along the bar. It was full of people but not so packed that she would have to wait forever for a drink. It was *perfect*.

Zori let out a happy cry and allowed the pull of the dance floor to take her away.

2.

Zori stamped her feet, trying to push out all her frustrations into the movement. The music was loud enough that when the cry of anguish and helplessness broke free from her, it blurred into all the other sounds.

This was what Zori had needed for months—the physical release of not feeling like the patient, the dead girl in waiting, the burden child of a man who wasn't interested in being a parent but had taken on the task anyway.

She was still panting heavily when a tingle spread down her spine and a hand closed on her hip.

“Are you okay?” a deep voice asked in Russian by her ear. “You look like you were getting crushed in this crowd.”

“I’m fine,” she replied in English. She swore and repeated herself in Russian. She turned slowly, still moving with the beat, and let out a startled squeak. “Damn, you're tall.”

The man's face was sharp in the flickering lights. Straight black hair fell to his shoulders, and blue gray eyes shone in amusement. He was *exactly* what she needed, thank all the saints.

"Thank you. Are you sure you are okay?" He was frowning in concern, and she really couldn't figure out why.

Zori took the chance. "I could use a drink. Can I buy you one..."

"Vladik," he replied, his bulk already parting the crowd to lead her off the dance floor. "And I'll have a vodka."

"Of course," she said, lips twitching into a grin. "I'm Zori."

She headed for the closest bar. With a light touch of his fingers on her back, Vladik made sure he didn't lose her in the throng.

Zori's heart fluttered with adrenaline every time he grazed her bare skin. It had been over a year since her last one-night stand in New York, and the physical contact was jarring her in all the best ways.

Zori squeezed her way in at the end of the bar and gave the guy behind it a little wave.

"What can I get you, beautiful?" he asked, tugging on his lip ring as he stared at her tits.

"Two vodkas on ice," she called over the noise, passing him the cash. The bar tender's smile lost some of its shine when Vladik moved to take one of the vodkas. They moved out of the crush of the bar to one of the shadowy alcoves.

"*Na Zdorovie*," Zori said, tapping her glass against his before they both took a drink.

"What accent am I hearing in amongst your Russian?" Vladik asked in English. Zori's panties melted a little at his own deep accent.

"All sorts. I've lived in a lot of places. I've only just come back to Moscow from three years in America," she replied and let out a small laugh. "It's the first night out I've had in the city actually."

"First night and all alone?" Vladik smiled, making his stern features soften. "It's just my luck I found you."

"Or mine," Zori said, looking him over from his lace-up leather boots, black jeans, and shirt. He had enough stubble that it would burn deliciously against her skin.

Vladik was staring back at her just as intently. "I like these little straps." He looped one of his fingers under her leather harness, stroking down it and lightly grazing the top of her breast.

Zori's breath stuttered. "You do?"

Vladik's eyes darkened, and he gave the strap a tug. "This harness makes me want to clip a lead to you and make you my little puppy."

Zori's pussy clenched, and she quickly had another mouthful of vodka. "You haven't even kissed me yet. I need to assess whether I *want* you clipping a lead to me."

Vladik tugged on the harness, bringing her closer. "If you wanted to be kissed, puppy, you only needed to ask." He tilted her head up and pressed his full lips to hers. It was a soft, tasting caress that had her rising up on tiptoes to meet it. She opened her mouth for him, and a deep growl vibrated through his chest.

Zori was suddenly pressed up against the wall, his leg between hers and his tongue sweeping into her mouth. Zori's hands dug into his shirt, and she kissed him harder, her teeth nipping against his lip. She was on fire, her heart pounding in her ears. He smelled crisp like a winter forest with a spice that she didn't know the name of.

"Fuck, puppy, you are delicious," he said, voice husky as he kissed along her jaw line. "I want to kiss you everywhere." His lips sucked against her ear lobe, and she ground herself against his leg. He chuckled softly. "Sensitive ears? Good to know."

His hands dropped to her hips and pulled her up against him as he kissed down her neck. Zori whimpered, her senses overwhelmed and pussy aching. She shouldn't have been this turned on by some making out and light grinding, but damn, she wanted more.

Vladik's hands slid up her corset. "Can I touch your pretty breasts, puppy?"

"Touch me anywhere," Zori stammered, her own hands tightening on his shirt. No one could see them in their shadowy nook unless they were really looking. She was fast becoming too horny to care.

Vladik lifted her up as if she weighed nothing. God, she loved strong men. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands moving over his chest. He had some thick muscles under his black T-shirt that she would love to get to know better.

Vladik's mouth took hers again, and Zori gasped as he cupped one breast, his thumb brushing over her nipple. He pulled back from her with a wide grin.

"Your nipples are pierced?" he asked and tugged at the small hoop through her top.

Zori let out an involuntary moan, her legs clenching around him. "Y-Yes. Fuck, that feels good."

"I have to taste them, puppy. Please let me," he said, and the hand still on her ass gripped her tighter.

"Yes, do it," Zori panted, her hands going around his neck and into his silken hair. He lifted her higher with one hand, the other one tugging down the side of her top and bra.

His mouth fixed over her nipple, and the soft, wet heat of it made Zori cry out. Fuck, it felt too damn good.

Her fingers tightened in his hair as he toyed with the piercing, sucking

and tugging in a way that sent little shock waves straight to her clit. She was going to come with her pussy untouched if he kept it up. She needed to get him into a bathroom stall and get his dick inside of her before she ran out of time.

Vladik's fingers snagged on a chain, and her mother's necklace came free. He stared at the pendant, curiosity and confusion on his face. "What's this?"

"Nothing. Just a good luck charm from my mother," Zori said, taking the necklace from him and shoving it into the pocket of her pants.

Vladik cupped her cheek, his eyes searching her face. "You are not what you seem, my puppy."

"I'm exactly what I seem, and that's a woman who really needs to be fucked, so if you want to continue this in the bathroom, I'm—"

"Zoria, it is time to go home," a deep voice said behind Vladik. Zori jumped and quickly made sure she was covered. "Sir, please put her down before I make you."

Vladik lowered Zori to her feet but didn't let her go. He moved to reveal Anton, Maxim's head of security.

Vladik's lip curled. "She's not going anywhere that she doesn't want to."

"Zoria, you had your fun. It's time to go home. Dr. Bogrov is expecting your call," Anton said firmly.

Vladik went to move, but she grabbed his arm. "Don't. It's fine, Vladik."

Zori gave his hand a squeeze before moving around him and going to Anton. He somehow already had her coat and put it around her shoulders.

Zori swallowed hard and looked back at Vladik. His eyes were troubled, but his face was stone cold. "It was nice to... Nice to meet you."

She turned away, her heart clenching, and let Anton lead her out of the club. There was no point in fighting. She'd learned that long ago.

Outside, the snow was falling heavily. Anton opened the back door of an SUV, and she got in. Vladik came out of the club entrance, and she gave him a small wave, helplessness crashing over her. She just wanted one night of freedom.

"You could have taken longer to find me, Anton. Let me have some fun for once," she said, hating how sad she sounded. In the past, he'd given her at least three hours.

"I'm sorry, Zoria, but Moscow is a dangerous place, and I couldn't risk it," Anton replied. "Dr. Bogrov has enemies in this city, and he would never forgive himself if he lost you."

Zori doubted Maxim would notice she was gone, but instead of saying it, she leaned her head against the glass and said nothing.



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