



BLOOD SLAVE

THE SANGUINE SELECTION



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
M.J. MARSTENS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LOXLEY SAVAGE

BLOOD SLAVE

THE SANGUINE SELECTION

M.J. MARSTENS
LOXLEY SAVAGE

CONTENTS

WARNING

1. [Marek](#)
2. [Marek](#)
3. [Mikhail](#)
4. [Mikhail](#)
5. [Oxana](#)
6. [Oxana](#)
7. [Oxana](#)
8. [Oxana](#)
9. [Oxana](#)
10. [Jasper](#)
11. [Oxana](#)
12. [Oxana](#)
13. [Oxana](#)
14. [Mikhail](#)
15. [Marek](#)
16. [Oxana](#)
17. [The Betrayer](#)
18. [Mikhail](#)
19. [Oxana](#)
20. [Marek](#)
21. [Oxana](#)
22. [Mikhail](#)
23. [Oxana](#)
24. [Marek](#)
25. [Oxana](#)
26. [Mikhail](#)
27. [Oxana](#)
28. [Marek](#)
29. [The Betrayer](#)
30. [Mikhail](#)
31. [Oxana](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[About M.J. Marstens](#)

[About Loxley Savage](#)

COPYRIGHT

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of a copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by fines and federal imprisonment.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This is a Dark Vampire Romance and is not suited for those under the age of 18.

Copyright © 2023 Loxley Savage & M.J. Marstens

The Sanguine Selection (Blood Slave Book: 1)

First publication: October 30, 2023

Cover by Claire Holt

Formatting by Vellum

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by Loxley Savage & M.J. Marstens

✿ Created with Vellum

DEDICATION

This one is for the moms out there who do it all with no recognition, to the moms with the fullest plates and the heaviest responsibilities. To those kick ass moms who hide away their pain and replace it with strength for their kids. This is for the women who feel so lost in the darkness and wonder if they'll ever climb out, whose only escape is within the pages of a dark romance book. You are fucking killing it. We see you. You are not alone.

WARNING

This is a dark vampire romance book not intended for people under the age of 18.

Within these pages are scenes of graphic violence, explicit sex, group scenes, blood play, foul language, and more which may be difficult to read. If such material triggers or offends you, please do not read this book.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED

MAREK

LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

I TAP my leg in time to the seconds ticking by, willing them to go faster. Only five more minutes, and then she's mine again. Five endless minutes, three hundred eternal seconds. When you're immortal, time drags on even more, and I despise it for keeping me from what I crave.

I'm like an addict. I can't get enough of her blood, of her sweet pussy. She consumes my every thought, both waking and unconscious, for it's her face that haunts my dreams and invades my darkest nightmares. If I try, I can taste the metallic flavor of her on my tongue, but it's not enough.

At the two-minute mark, I rise from my chair and charge into the room. Normally, I wait longer since the sight of my twin fucking our delectable blood-slave deteriorates my self-control, but I have no patience today. Besides, I need to ensure he doesn't take too much.

Humans are such fragile creatures. We only drink a couple times a day each from our slave, but luckily, her tight cunt is always available to slake our other thirst. In between feedings, we give her a blood tonic, meant to replenish her precious life-force as well as strengthen her.

My brother and I are not gentle lovers, and we've broken our toys in the past, but not this one. This one is special. There's something about her—the taste of her, the feel of her—I would burn the world to nothing but smoldering ashes to have her.

It's not love. I'm too old, too jaded, for such a trite emotion. It's obsession, plain and simple. She's a madness in my brain, an infection in my blood, that I have no hope of curing—not that I'd want to. My singular desire is to drown in her essence, only to be revived and do it again.

Mikhail fucks our slave from behind, his teeth buried even deeper in her

neck than his dick in her pussy. Her breathy moans echo around us, and my balls tighten in anticipation. A tingle skids down my spine, and I know my twin is close.

Over the centuries, our emotions entwined to the point where I sometimes wonder who is truly experiencing what, but in this case, I know. I've sunk myself between her legs, and the shadow of pleasure I sense from my brother is a fraction of what I taste when I'm inside of our blood-slave.

"Your time is up." My twin's eyes flash at my words and he growls, his hips never slowing, fangs sinking farther into our slave's flesh. "Mikhail, stop! We have The Claiming in a few hours, and she mustn't be depleted."

Mikhail's brows snap together and he retracts his teeth, but not his cock. He knew I only meant for him to stop drinking. He reaches around our slave's petite form, curling tighter around her as he cups her luscious tits in his hands.

Her moans turn into airy pants as he fucks them both over the edge before they collapse onto the bed together, still joined. Neither moves, and my jaw ticks as I force myself to remain passive. My brother punishes me for interrupting him, but he knows he would do the same.

Like me, this *human* woman wormed her way under his skin. Nothing has come between my twin and me since our creation, but this one little human might be our undoing. There's a tension blooming amid the three of us that I can no longer ignore.

"Mikhail, we must talk. Precious, I'll leave you to rest for a bit."

My brother's ruby-red eyes snap open, acknowledging the importance of what I want to say that keeps me away from our perfect plaything. She doesn't stir, worn from the constant attention my twin and I lavish on her body.

I step back outside of the room and summon a servant to bring me her tonic. Since she's sleeping, I inject it directly into her bloodstream. With The Claiming so close, I don't want her weakened before we take from her.

Tossing the needle aside for someone else to clean, I motion for Mikhail to follow me. I slip through two doors before reaching our private library next to our sleeping quarters. We each have a chamber on either side of our slave but spend most of the time in her room.

Mikhail licks his red lips stained with our slave's blood. "Are we going to war?"

My twin's question takes me off guard. "No."

A subtle shudder passes through him as his throat works to swallow the last bit of her down. He blinks, holding my gaze without wavering as no one else can, his eyes darkening. “We better be. It’s the singular reason I’d allow you to pull me away from her so abruptly without ripping you to shreds.”

I heave a sigh. “Our lands are safe and our rule undisputed. I want to talk about...her.”

Mikhail’s eyes narrow, still blazing crimson from his recent feed. “What about her?”

“That—that’s what I want to talk about. The possessive growl.”

“You mean the same one you have whenever you mention our slave?”

“Yes.” My quiet admittance stymies him. “Brother, she’s coming between us, and that is dangerous. A divide in our rule means a divide in our crown. We have too many enemies, let alone fawning admirers, who would happily take advantage. They will try to steal our slave and throne—”

A feral hiss escapes Mikhail’s lips. “They can try. We will rip them apart until there’s nothing left but marrow and gristle.”

I smile without humor. “Indeed, but why get to that point?”

“What do you propose?”

“You and I must become a united front again—and not just in appearance. This girl...she’s becoming a divide.”

The veins bulge from my brother’s pale head, fury etching his expression. “We will not get rid of her!”

Mirthless laughter spills from my mouth. “I couldn’t if I tried. She’s a septicity in our blood but shouldn’t be to our bond.”

Mikhail runs a hand through his black hair, a perfect mirrored image of me. His now silvery eyes—our only difference as mine glow gold—close before reopening. “You’re right, brother. We’ve become covetous of our pet to the point where it’s blossoming into a problem between us. As you said, not only does it spell disaster for our crown, but also, for you and me. You are the only one I trust in this rapacious, savage world. My kingdom is your kingdom, and the blood-slave is ours—we will demonstrate this to our court tonight at The Claiming. We must remind them as you have reminded me. We’ll start by sharing her publicly.”

His words arrest me. We’ve never shared our slave in such a manner, drinking at the same time. To do so will send her pleasure—and ours—to new heights. Mikhail nods, his thoughts an echo of my own. Our unspoken acknowledgment makes everything else seem trivial.

Why hadn't we done this from the beginning?

MAREK

WHEN I RETURN to her room, our pet sleeps soundly, curled up on her side, her pouty lips parted as she exhales, blonde hair blanketing the surrounding pillows. Even from a distance, I spy the tiny blue veins that crisscross her temple where her pale skin is thinner. I hear the whooshing of her blood, and the beating of her heart, and both create a throbbing pulse at the base of my cock.

A gentleman would let her rest, but I am not gentle nor even a semblance of a human man. I'm king, a vampire, and take what I want when I want—except concern for my blood slave seeps in, muddling my brain. Only Mikhail warrants my worry, but I rarely experience the emotion as he does nothing to unnerve me. However, this human woman seems to be doing just that and more.

Growling lowly, I tug the end of the blanket to reveal her seductive form, inch by tantalizing inch. The first supple part of her to appear are her tits, large and tipped with rosy nipples that beg me to suck on them. Then her slightly rounded stomach before tapering off to the apex between her thighs. The flare of her hip draws me forward as I pull the covering completely off her naked body.

My pet shivers but still slumbers. For now. Trailing a finger over her leg, I pause to caress her knee and am rewarded when she stirs in her sleep. By the time I reach the center of her legs, she's shaking, an unconscious reaction to my touch. Even asleep, my slave recognizes what's to come.

Rolling her onto her back, I grip the inside of her thigh, my fingers digging into my pet's flesh. My grasp will leave a bruise against her light skin, and the possessive hunger inside of me unfurls with a vicious snap. My

fangs elongate at the thought of marking this little human. She's mine—and Mikhail's—and I will eviscerate anyone else who even thinks to take her.

My slave awakens with a gasp when I spread her thighs wide and run my nose along the inside of her leg. It takes a moment for her blue eyes to focus and her mind to understand what's happening, but by then, I'm tongue-deep in her pussy. The sound of her coming apart at my touch is almost as good as the taste of her coating my mouth.

“My king!”

Her breathy cry creates an inferno of lust in my veins that rages violently. Only one thing will smother the flames, but I must be patient. As much as I want to drink from her, I will wait until The Claiming to ensure she's strong enough. But everything inside of me rebels and my fangs scrape perilously against her soft, welcoming flesh.

“Marek,” I snarl like a rabid animal. She rises up on her elbows, a questioning look dancing across her face. “My name is Marek—say it.”

She licks her lips, the bottom one glistening in the candlelight. “Marek.”

The second she voices my command, I shove my tongue back inside her tight warmth. Hearing her say my name sends a heady rush straight to my cock. No other slave has ever called me by such before—and no other ever will. There's only her, my precious, submissive slave, and I reward her by licking her pussy like it's my last meal.

I'm working my tongue so fast against her clit that I cut it with my fang. She screams in an erotic mix of pain and pleasure, as the sweet tang of blood scents the air and fills my mouth. Saliva mixes with the addictive flavor as I thirst for more. My blood pales in comparison to that of my blood slave. Perhaps one little sip won't hurt...

Before I can test my will-strength, my pet comes undone, her orgasm a surprise I lap up like a ravenous wolf. Her orgasms are for me and Mikhail to control. She's never come without our express approval, but instead of being angry, I wonder what had such a visceral reaction to rip the pleasure from her.

“I'm sorry.” She whispers her apology, but I'm too busy savoring her cunt squeezing my tongue with the aftershocks of her ecstasy to acknowledge her misbehavior. Now to replace my mouth with my cock. I'll punish her later for coming without permission, but I must be inside of her first. Now. It's the only thing that'll appease the ache in my balls and fangs, aside from drinking her blood.

Nipping at her clit, I grip my pet's hips and flip her onto her stomach, yanking her ass high into the air. My slave moans into the bed coverings as I sweep my tongue from front to back in slow circles. Not until she's squirming under my touch do I slide between her slick folds, slamming my cock until I bottom out against the cleft in her ass.

Our combined groans ricochet around the chamber, just one note of many in this symphony of desire. Movement in my peripheral catches my eye, and I sweep a protective arm around my slave, hauling her to me. I pin her back to my chest as I unleash the deadly predator which always lurks inside of me.

My eyes bleed crimson in anticipation only to meet the scarlet gaze of my brother. I didn't hear Mikhail come in, a testimony of how far gone I am with our slave, but from the fire in his stare and the hand around his rock-hard cock, he's enjoying the show. For once, none of the possessive rage reflects in either of our gazes.

Instead, his urges me to continue. I angle our slave so that she sees my twin. Her sharp inhale thrusts her breasts high, and her pussy clamps like a vice around my length. *She likes him watching.* It takes all my control not to sink my teeth into the crook of her neck, the blood there beckoning me forward.

I bury my face in her golden curls, reaching up with my right hand to wrap around her neck. My left hand digs into her hip, anchoring her body to mine while I fuck her raw. Slowly, my fingers tighten their hold, cutting off her air and covering the spot I yearn to bite. I turn my head and lick the outer shell of her ear, relishing the tremor that racks her frame at my touch.

"Do you want to come again?" She nods mutely, unable to answer. "Mmmm, but *should* you come again, is the real question. I'll let you...after you tell me what tipped you over the edge before."

My pet never tears her gaze from my brother's face, but I hear her confession when I loosen my fingers.

"You made me say your name."

A name was her undoing?

"Is that so? Then say my name and come on my cock, doll."

Ever the compliant plaything, she belts out 'Marek' at the top of her lungs just as I savagely thrust into her pussy. It flutters around my cock like butterfly wings before tightening almost painfully, mimicking the way I choked her not just moments before.

Her orgasm tips my own, but still I hold back, wanting to prolong my

pleasure, knowing I can't taste her delectable blood until later tonight. I clasp her to me as she rides out her passion, and I wonder if I can coax yet another from her dripping cunt when she tips back her head. Her soulful gaze peers up into mine as she reaches backward to cup my jaw. "Larissa."

The one word acts as the catalyst to my impending downfall. Slamming my eyes shut, I roar as I come harder than I ever have in my entire life—without a single drop of blood to fuel my lust. A string of curses pours from my mouth as I fill her pussy with every last drop of my cum.

Even then, it's still not enough, and I realize that it never will be. Knowing her name is just the start of a dangerous game that will eventually spiral out of control and become something more than just blood sport. Because even now, I crave more than just her body and her blood. Our slave inadvertently gave me a piece of her heart when she offered me her name, but I don't want just a small sliver.

I want the whole fucking thing.

MIKHAIL

THE AIR HAS SHIFTED, and not a subtle change either. A charge exists around me, like the air itself has a pulse that I've only just laid my finger on. The steady thrum of the world surrounds me with excitement, desire, and an almost desperate need.

Claim her.

Make her yours forever.

I close my eyes and sink deeper into the tub, encouraging my muscles to relax. Tension has been ever growing, even before I suggested sharing the blood-slave with my twin, drinking from her simultaneously. I can feel it—we both can. It's there in every unnecessary breath, every needless beat of my lifeless heart. I can't quite put my finger on what it is exactly. It's almost as if the very world exists for this one moment, that the earth is waiting, every living creature holding a bated breath to watch this night, this momentous occasion, unfold.

And yet...they do not even remotely understand what they are in for. This isn't simply a claiming—it's a message. A conveyance, a proclamation of who and what Marek and I are as rulers, as Kings. An open declaration to the coven, to Libarryn, to the fucking world that we are united as one—a single unit, unwavering in not only our respect for each other, but in our trust. In the world we exist within, nothing is more sacred.

To share a blood-slave behind closed doors is even taboo. But to do it openly, publicly, under the ever watchful eye of every member of the coven from the elders to the newly born is unheard of. So this...this will make a statement. This will be a night to remember.

Word will spread across the lands of what has been seen, of the power

twin kings wield. Of our utter devotion to each other and our pride in flaunting it. Already this situation is rare—for twin vampires born or bred hardly exist in our history. Especially none that share the same blood-slave. Whispers of other pairs centuries before us have reached my ears. Legends of exponential power and catastrophic demise flutter down through generations, though no eyewitnesses remain to stake any claim on the truth.

Besides, we both would refuse to believe it. Refuse to believe anything could bring us down, shatter what we've built, or break our trust in one another.

Trust...

One simple word.

Five letters that hold such meaning. Put in the wrong hands, trust can be your undoing. But used correctly and the options are limitless.

That is what tonight is all about, a display of confidence and reliance on one another, that we'd be willing to share such an intimate moment with the whole world watching because of our faith and integrity in each other.

A shift in the air has me opening my eyes as a group of five human slaves walks into my chambers. As is customary, they all disrobe immediately, their gossamer gowns pooling around their feet, leaving them bare before me. I do not require this to satisfy my unyielding sexual needs, but for assurance, that they possess nothing which could harm Marek, myself, or our blood-slave for that matter, in any way. Hard to hide weapons when wearing nothing but your skin.

The males bow and the females curtsy, waiting for permission to move or talk for that matter. As is required, their hair is pulled back from their faces, bound at the base of their necks, and their disgustingly hairy human bodies are shaved clean. "You may speak."

A short slave with a head full of bouncy brown curls deepens her curtsy, her head dipped just so, eyes averted to the ground. Her tits are slight, more nipple than breast, her waist narrow, ass almost non-existent. Not a woman I'd bestow a second glance at. "Good evening my lord, king." Her voice is meek, cautious, every word carefully chosen. "Jasper has sent us to get you ready." She holds her pose, knees still slightly bent, and will continue to do so until I dismiss the gesture.

I scoff, letting my irritation show, lowering my voice so the hint of a growl is embedded in my every word. "It's just like Jasper to interrupt my bath without permission. Tell me, slave, what did you think would happen

when you entered my chamber uninvited? Did you believe the act would go unpunished?"

One of the men swallows hard, and a woman gasps ever so slightly. Both noises would be inaudible to the human ear, but not to me. I hear it all, smell it, *taste* it. The potent scent of the slaves' fear at my question permeates the space, seeming to billow out from the stone walls like smoke from a fire. Heart rates increase, beating as if a hundred horses were galloping inside my head. Their fear empowers me, makes me hard, makes me...*thirst*.

"I...uhh..." She stumbles over her words, thighs beginning to tremble from holding the position for so long.

"Answer me," I hiss, gripping the edges of the tub and rising from the heated water. I step out from the copper basin and make no move to cover myself, letting the water drip down my body like beads of wax on a burning candle. My body is a canvas, an artwork in itself, sculpted to perfection by sheer genetics. Every muscle is corded, lean and powerful, rippling under my pale skin as I shift my stance, facing the slaves without an ounce of humility. That is a weak human emotion.

"Look at me when I speak to you, slave."

She jerks at my demand, eyes blinking rapidly as she struggles to obey. She has been instructed to never look a king in the eye, her bodily instincts screaming for her not to as her mind desperately tries to obey my command. Her gaze skirts across my feet and up my legs, pausing on my erect cock for a moment longer than she should. Up my abdomen to my chest, holding at my lips. I make a show of displaying my teeth, almost shockingly white as they rest behind my red lips, then slowly, I lick my fangs and watch as her body begins to tremble.

But there's another reaction to my display of dominance from two of the humans on my right—arousal. I twist my head, scenting the air, and ignoring the curly-haired slave, saunter towards them. It's easy to pick them out. The man couldn't be more obvious, his tiny prick flooded with blood as it tries and fails to stand proud. Such a small thing, hard to believe it could satisfy even a human. I shift my gaze to the woman beside him who is almost as easy to detect. Black hair pulled back in a braid, breasts heavy, dark nipples puckered with excitement, her breathing is erratic, chest heaving, all signs of arousal. However, the aroma coming from between her legs gives her away.

I place a finger under her chin. "Rise." She inhales sharply and stands from her curtsy. "Spread your legs, slave." She swallows hard, obeying,

heart thumping wildly in her chest as I drag a single finger down her body, from the hollow of her neck to her pulsing cunt. I cup the greedy thing in my hand and swipe once between her folds. She moans as I discover her desire, as it coats my fingers. “You want me, don’t you slave? You want me to fuck you right here, in front of the others?”

She nods, eyes still downcast. “Yes, my king.”

Well, at least she didn’t lie. In fact, I appreciate her forwardness.

I inch closer to her, our skin a breadth away, and lean down to her ear, my voice but a whisper. “And do you believe you deserve to take my cock inside you slave? What have you done to earn such an honor?”

Her human desperation to touch me is palpable, and she balls her fingers into fists to try and stop herself. “I am a faithful servant, my lord, but that is not enough to deserve you. Though I cannot help myself from this...desire.”

I take a step back, the heat from her body no longer warming my skin. On another day, in another lifetime, I would have taken her right then. Fucked her raw, drank her dry with my cock still buried in her cunt.

But today is not that day. Today I must squash my need to drink, to fuck, and save it all for The Claiming. The only human I could ever want is my blood-slave, the little blonde thing I share with my twin.

I pace back and forth before them, hands clasped behind my back. “You may all rise.” The third girl falls as she attempts to stand, her feeble human muscles giving way from a mere few moments of squatting.

How weak.

How pathetic.

“You were all sent here to get me ready, yes?”

The slaves acknowledge my question with “Yes, my lord,” or “Yes, my king.”

“Well, don’t let me stop you. Prepare your king like good little slaves.” They move like bees scenting an order from their queen, to a cart against the back wall. “Not you,” I say, seizing the arm of the man with the tiny prick.

“My king.” He falls to his knees before me, singing my name upon his thin lips, pathetic dick bobbing between his legs. “What will you have of me?” Then, he touches me without permission, his hands braced on my thighs, the final straw of his meager existence. I thread my fingers through his muted brown hair and he moans, closing his eyes as I tug on the roots, lips parted to take me inside his mouth. As if I’d ever stoop so low.

“I will have everything.” Before he can even open his eyes, I’ve launched

myself on his neck. Not to drink, but to kill. My fangs slice through his skin with ease and I grip his airway in my jaws and squeeze. His scream dies in my mouth as I rip out his throat and spit it on the floor.

Ahh...the one thing that can satiate my need to drink or fuck my blood-slave—to kill, to have my fangs sunk into my victim as life leaves their body. It's...indulgent, and oh so satisfying.

The other slaves scream and make to run from my chamber, but I snap my fingers and the only door leading out slams shut. “Going somewhere? I thought you were sent to get me ready. Perhaps I misheard you?” I murmur innocently, as if the blood of their fellow slave were not leaking from my mouth and dripping down my chest. “I do believe I have a ceremony to attend this evening. I would imagine the ones responsible for my delayed attendance would be...brutally punished.” I emphasized the last two words, lowering my voice. “Now, where to begin? Oh! Perhaps a nice, warm, uninterrupted bath. Seems I’ve not had the pleasure of enjoying one in a very long time.”

Inwardly, I grin as they scurry about, warming more water over the fire and emptying the water I was in only minutes before. Soon a new bath is ready, the dark liquid sprinkled with lilac and rose petals. As I sink into the water and rest my arms along the copper tub’s edge, I close my eyes and allow my thoughts to wander.

To her supple body...

To her decadent blood...

To The Claiming.

After tonight, there’s no going back. After tonight, everything changes.

MIKHAIL

THE LAST TWO hours have been almost amusing. Slaves skittering about, shrinking away as I bark orders at them. Two I allowed to bathe me, every fucking inch, feasting on their fear at simply being close to me. I made curly clean my cock and my ass, knowing she was least likely to enjoy it. Her terror had my fangs aching and my cock yearning for my blood-slave, for all the things I will do to her tonight.

That we will do.

My twin's voice rings in my head and I sense him beyond my door seconds before it swings open and he enters my chamber. Dressed in a black suit with a cream shirt, unbuttoned halfway, my brother is the epitome of what a king should look like. His hair has been brushed making it appear as though the black strands shine with a light all their own. Atop his head rests one of two twin golden crowns. Its sharp peaks are adorned with fiery red rubies, rare black opals, and sparkling diamonds of the highest clarity.

On a thick gold chain hanging from his neck is the symbol of the Novikov bloodline—the ankallah. It resembles a Christian cross, only instead of a vertical section piercing upwards through the horizontal line, the ankallah's top is circular, almost like a large needle awaiting thread. The ends of the horizontal line are blunted, but the lower end of the vertical line is pointed like a sharp dagger. Used sparingly, our ankallah is a sacred thing, adorning our thrones, crowns, bodies, and even our castle, The Sintara.

I finger the lapel of my coat, moving to face Marek and look him up and down. “Damn brother. You look almost as good as me.”

As usual, Marek ignores my jests, a rather annoying trait of his. “The coven is ready. Sintara is ready. The question is, are you, *brother?*”

I roll my eyes and turn back to the empty mirror, wishing I could appreciate the gorgeous king who should be staring back at me. “My cock is at alert if that’s what you’re asking.”

“This is no time for jokes, Mikhail,” he snaps in irritation. “Something like this has not been done before.”

“Calm down, brother. Two vampires have shared a human before. This will be no different.”

Marek storms forward and pulls open a pair of red curtains. An eruption of cheers pours in from the coven, entering my chambers through the open balcony. He points towards our subjects. “It is different, Mikhail. And this is why. Because every fucking one of them is watching.”

I wave him off. “You act as if exhibitionism is a new kink for you, but we both know that couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

He grins at me savagely. “It is when our blood-slave is involved. Shall I have her brought forth to the dais below now? Alone without protection? If you feel nothing for her but a desire to feed and fuck, then this should be an easy question to answer.”

Instantly blood boils within my veins at the thought, my undead heart lurching at the very idea of her alone down there, a human woman surrounded by a thirsty coven of vampires. My twin, seeing and sensing my reaction, arches one dark victorious eyebrow. “Ahh. So there is something else there, isn’t there Mikhail? She’s not just a blood-slave. Larissa is so much more.”

My gut twists as if I’ve just been impaled by the end of a silver spear. “*Larissa...* She told you her name.”

Marek nods. “After I told her mine.”

“You’re a fool,” I spit. “Letting her in like that. How can you hope to control yourself when you allow her to live in here.” I tap the creamy skin of his chest. “And now, you’ve forced me to suffer this knowledge along with you. I didn’t want to know her name.”

“But know it you do, and that fact cannot be undone. If we are to do this claiming, then we must be on equal playing grounds. No secrets. No lies. Only the purest truth. It is the only way to come through this unscathed.”

“Tis a simple drink, brother. Even you can control yourself.”

A look passes over his golden eyes, an unsureness so abnormal for Marek. He’s always been the confident one, seeming to know the answers to questions not even posed. A tyrant some might say, but he cares so deeply for

his coven, for the longevity of them, he'd do anything for them...

For me.

He casts his gaze back out over the crowd, standing utterly still. "But this time, I do not drink alone. This time, we feast on her together."

"I hear your words but sense the meaning behind them. This is more a nightmare to you than a dream come true."

He says nothing for a moment, then turns to me and speaks softly. "I care for her, Mikhail. Perhaps more than I should. I don't want anything to happen to her, to us."

I move beside my twin and place my hand on his shoulder. "Nothing will happen that isn't supposed to. This is a moment to feel excited, not concerned. Can you not sense it? The very air has changed."

I sense Jasper approaching the door and wave it open before he can knock. Jasper enters, a human man who has worked his way up the ranks proving himself a very loyal and useful servant. Unlike most human slaves, Jasper is allowed normal clothes and the pleasures of a woman, vampire or human I care not. He bows deeply, one gloved hand behind his back. "Good evening, my kings. The stage is set. Your presence is requested."

Marek and I turn to each other. "Shall we?" I ask.

He nods.

I close my eyes and squeeze, picturing the entrance to the hall below. A moment later as the lick of flames around my feet subside, I open my eyes and find myself standing exactly where I wanted to appear, Marek arriving a moment later in a blaze of orange fire and black smoke.

Music begins to play, a violin, uttering a sad song filled with melancholy and despair. It's perfect. Marek and I begin the walk, down the long aisle to the dais. We could elect to simply vanish and reappear at our destination, but that would make our entrance less impactful than the slow waltz up the stone walkway. The violin's song changes cadence, something softer and morose, as if the music was welcoming one to their death. Torches light the cavern and candelabras hang low from the carved cathedral ceiling causing the entire space to flicker in a soft orange glow. Sconces blaze from the walls, their fires gleaming inside the gaping mouths of iron dragons.

Every seat is taken, every bench filled end to end with vampires. Our human servants line the perimeter. Even without their transparent slave gowns or metal cuffs secured to their wrists and ankles equipped with d-rings allowing for quick securement, they would still be conspicuous. Humans are

vastly smaller than vampires, their frames weaker, their skin and eyes more muted colors than our superior race. If not for their physical appearances, their pounding hearts give them away.

I dare not look around, keeping my eyes locked on the dais at the back of the cavern. Twin iron thrones gilded with ornate decorations and adorned with sparkling gemstones await us. Our ankallah gleams proudly from the top of each throne. Behind them, carved right into the stone are hundreds of niches each containing flickering candles.

Marek and I ascend the stairs to the dais and take our place before our thrones, then as one, we turn to face our coven. Cheers erupt once more. Applause and even some excited growling reach my ears, though the coven does not yet know what they've been summoned to witness, only that it is of utmost importance.

It's Marek who addresses them, much more eloquent than I could ever be. Where his words are smooth and eloquent, mine are more abrupt and perhaps a bit condescending.

But shouldn't that be expected? I am the fucking king.

As the welcome from our coven dies down, Marek spreads his arms wide and the violin sings a final, sorrowful note. "Welcome everyone to this momentous occasion. My brother and I are honored to have you here to witness it. Looking around I see many familiar faces. The Volkov family, almost kin to my own. The Federovs, Leukins, the Babanins... you all honor Mikhail and I this night."

Knowing it's expected that we both address the coven, Marek turns to me and I pause, choosing my words carefully. "I know our coven is run differently from many others. Our slave labor is often brought into question but to our sovereignty we hold true. Because the truth is, we are not like the others. We keep to the old ways. We are superior. We are...*more*."

Beside me, Marek's heart beats one thunderous thump, sounding like the crash of a gong to my ears. The fact that it lurched at all speaks volumes, because our hearts never beat. Ever. Unless our emotions have run high. Marek speaks again. "Too long has our rule come into question. Too long have we suffered the whispers of what it means to have twin kings, a rarity almost unheard of in all of vampiric history. Rumors have reached our ears that a wedge has embedded itself between Mikhail and I, that we are fighting more than we are uniting. That we are playing a constant game of tug of war with each other, trying to best one another instead of ruling as one, singular

unit. Well today, we seek to disprove that and do something that's never publicly been done before."

Murmurs seep through those gathered, from the curious to the asinine, I hear them all. "Before more lies invade the coven..." I pause, letting the disapproval of such nonsense resound in the tone of my spoken words, "Let us invite our special guest forward. You may not have seen her before but I'm positive you know exactly who she is."

Larissa.

Marek and I snap our fingers at the same exact moment, as if for a second our minds melded as one. Her scent engulfs my nose before she's even entered the cavern. She smells sweet, like fresh honey on a dusky summer's night. My tastebuds prickle at the mere memory of her blood still fresh on my tongue. My fangs itch, aching to sink into her flesh once more as our blood-slave appears at the far end of the aisle.

I'm thirsty. So very thirsty.

Her appearance is different from her fellow humans. The tincture we give her to heal contains trace amounts of our blood, enhancing her own body as a result. Her blonde hair shimmers, her milky skin almost glowing as she begins her journey toward us.

Unlike the other slaves, she is dressed in a sleeveless golden gown. The deep cut neckline of the bodice is low, almost to her belly button, displaying the supple swell of her breasts. Fuck, her perfect tits bounce softly as she moves in the most erotic way, her plump nipples tight from the cool air in the cavern are pressing enticingly against the thin fabric. I just want to take one between my teeth and bite, feel her jerk below me, hear her gasp at the pain, the pleasure.

The front hem of her gown is short, barely long enough to cover her cunt from the hungry eyes of the coven. The back hem is long, like a human wedding gown. I swallow hard as I take her in, knowing she's bare beneath that gown for Marek and I do not allow her to wear underclothes.

Golden chains are wrapped around her upper arms in intricate knots. The length of her toned legs are also adorned with the delicate gold threads, making her look like an exquisite piece of jewelry of the rarest and highest quality.

Free from the thick arm and leg bands, *Larissa* almost glides down the aisle, her bare feet gently padding across the floor. Her head is bowed, hands clasped before her, eyes downcast as a slave's should be.

As she ebbs closer and closer to Marek and me, my senses heighten. Not only my pure lust and thirst for this human girl, but also a fierce feeling of protection, one I've not felt before regarding anything or anyone. The cavern is filled with hungry vampires, who react quicker than they think, whose cocks and cunts drive their desire more profoundly than their brains. That kind of restraint comes with time, and even then sometimes our instincts outweigh our senses.

Though I sense the enticement is there, to take her, drink from her, *fuck* her, they wouldn't fucking dare. Not here. Not with both kings ever watchful.

Closer.

Closer.

A mere ten feet away.

Larissa.

How? How can a name hold such weight, such power? How can that one simple piece of knowledge change everything? That kind of power should be banished from all Sintara.

And yet, here it is, walking down the aisle in a golden gown, her long hair falling in soft waves down her back.

My fangs have already descended, and I know my eyes are gleaming red. My need, my unquenchable desire for this human is almost unbearable.

I need her.

Now.

Marek must sense my restraint waning, because he clasps his hand around my wrist squeezing just hard enough to pull me from the fog of seduction and starvation. *Larissa* ascends the steps, stopping just before us. Her heart pounds in her chest, her breathing quickened. She's afraid.

Good.

Her fear turns me on. And so does the thought of stripping her bare, draping her over my lap, and disciplining her ass for making my cock so hard.

Marek reaches for her first, lifting her chin, displaying her angelic face to us. Her pink lips part as she waits to see what we might have her do.

"So beautiful," my twin hums softly, much too low for anyone but her to hear as he swipes his thumb over her lower lip. "My sweet little kitten. My brother and I are going to touch you now. Take you here, in front of thousands of hungry eyes." Marek glides the back of his fingers down her cheek and neck, then fingers the thin strap of her gown. "And then, once your

cunt is dripping and all your inhibitions are but a scent on the wind, we will drink from you.”

“Together,” I add and hear her suck in a breath, her pulse crashing inside her chest. “Yes, precious. Just imagine, both your kings taking from you at once. The pleasure you will feel is almost unimaginable. The bond we will make, unbreakable.”

I mimic Marek and grip one strap of her gown. *Larissa* shudders as we lower the fabric, letting it graze over her nipples, slide over her hips, and pool at her ankles. My brother and I take a moment to breathe her in, to run our eyes over every decadent inch of her exposed flesh.

“Turn to face them now,” I urge. “Let them see how submissive and flawless the kings’ blood-slave is.”

A hush falls over the coven as all eyes peruse what belongs to me and my brother. She doesn’t even attempt to cover up, to hide herself. Like a true kings’ blood-slave, she simply endures what is asked of her.

A noise jars us as a newborn vampire charges the dais. He’s taken out quickly by a silver-tipped arrow. Another rises from the crowd, fangs descended as he rips his shirt in half and belts out a harrowing roar which dies in his throat as another arrow finds its target. Six more lose their minds at the sight of her, by her tantalizing scent as it permeates the space.

She never once cowers or flinches. Displaying her trust in us completely to protect her from harm.

A thought crosses my mind, how I’d give my life for hers, but I quickly extinguish it. Vampire kings do not think such things, especially regarding their human blood-slaves.

But she is more than that, isn’t she brother?

Corpses of the newly dead vampire are piled around the dais, a reminder of the fate awaiting anyone who attempts to steal what is ours.

Marek and I take our seats in our thrones, my brother pulling *Larissa* down onto his lap. He extends her left arm and offers me her wrist. I lick at the pulse throbbing there as Marek lifts her right leg over the arm of this throne exposing her cunt. *Larissa* moans as my brother plays with her pussy and quickly the perfume of her cum has my fangs finding purchase in her flesh and biting.

Her pleased screams echo and she comes on my twin’s hand, as I suck on her delicate wrist, as her honeyed blood flows over my lips and tongue, unfurling an almost desperate desire inside of me.

“Such a good little slave,” Marek hums approvingly, licking his fingers clean as she catches her breath. I take one more long drink then reluctantly release her from my grip. Marek clasps her by the hips and lifts her to me, passing her as if she were nothing but a wisp of a child.

I turn her to face me and press my face between her tits, strumming my thumbs over her nipples. “I’m going to fuck you now, fill your cunt full of my cock while the entire coven watches. You can come too as loudly as you desire.”

I pull my dick out from my pants, already rock fucking hard. She lifts her lithe body up on her knees, and I align with her wet hole before gripping her hips and pressing her down. I offer my brother her right wrist as I bounce her on my cock, tits swaying in my face. I feel her shudder as he bites, her cunt choking me as I snatch her nipple between my teeth. She gasps as I hold the pert bud like a vice, licking my tongue over the tip there.

She moans loudly, head lolling back. It doesn’t take long for me to come, not with her, not knowing all those eyes are watching, wanting what’s rightfully mine, their cocks and cunts aching too. But this is not the time for an orgasm of this magnitude. I know how euphoric it is, how unaware I become.

“I love you, Mikhail.”

Her words are like thunder in my heart, like poison in my veins that kills me and brings me back to life all in the same moment. All hope of control is lost.

She loves me...

Larissa.

I fuck her with vigor, needing to pull pleasure from her, the screams of ecstasy. I want—no—need her to feel what my lips won’t allow me to say. How much she means to me.

She is more, brother.

She shrieks out her climax, cunt milking my cock as I fist her tits in both hands and squeeze. Her cunt takes all of me as I fill her up. A shadow casts over us and I lift my head to see Marek behind her, naked and ready, cock bobbing impatiently. I reposition her, lifting her ass more for him as he buries himself within her in one quick motion. She mewls, her hot breath fanning my neck as she wiggles her ass against him, trying to find that sweet spot for him to hit.

Marek doesn’t hold back, slamming into her cunt, fingertips digging into

her hips hard enough to draw blood. I tug on her nipple and wrench her head to the side, running my nose down the planes of her neck. The pulse in her neck draws me like a magnet and I'm completely unable to stop myself from biting.

Sweet, sweet blood fills my mouth as I take from her as much as I can pull from her veins. My cock is ready again as the blood-lust uncoils inside of me like a venomous snake longing to strike. Marek's eyes gleam red as he watches, as he fucks her while I drink. His face has grown slack, his eyes glazed in pleasure, his teeth still coated in her blood.

"It's too much," she whimpers. But her words don't penetrate the dense haze of lust fogging my brain. I dig my fangs in deeper, and she hisses in discomfort.

"You are ours to use, kitten," Marek growls, his usual composure absent. "Everything you are, all you have, belongs to us. And we intend to have it."

Marek bellows out a roar as he comes, muscles clenching, taugth from his position behind her. His monster flares briefly, then he lunges. With my fangs cemented inside her neck, Marek ensnares her shoulder with his own.

I hear a pained cry in the distance, but it has no relevance to me. All that matters is this essence, this eternal fountain from which I drink.

Desire.

Need.

Consume.

Take.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

So thirsty. So fucking thirsty.

More screaming, terror filled, even farther away, and my vision blurs, ears filled with the endless sounds of a stormy sea. Numbness creeps up my limbs from my toes and fingers, down my arms and legs.

Then I'm plagued by a frozen chill so icy my teeth would chatter if there wasn't something between them. One final guttural cry plagues the air, the prey finally dying by the hands of a predator. I find myself pleased that I no longer have to hear its pain.

Then my world comes crashing down, the realization of what's actually happened as her blood turns to ash in my mouth and I begin to violently vomit. Where once was a vibrant human, full of life—of love—now only a corpse exists.

Larissa...

“No!” Marek comes out of his blood-lust, like a crazed animal, his cock still inside her. “No! No! No!”

He picks up her lifeless body and slams it to the ground, beating on her chest, willing her heart to come alive again. Words are lost on my lips. My heart would have stopped if I weren’t already dead.

My insides recoil, rebelling against my existence. More vomit, the rest of her blood, now nothing more than ash and ruin. I risk a glance at the horror I’ve been party to and glimpse her bloodshot eyes, staring into the empty void beyond. Her open mouth, blood pooling from her lips in an endless, eternal scream.

No!

I can’t see.

Can’t hear.

Can’t think.

Death.

Murderer.

Killer.

I love you, Mikhail.

No. No. No.

Blackness creeps inside of me, winding through my veins, encasing my skin in an immobile prison, until I am nothing, no one.

Empty.

Devoid of all things.

Floating through the black vastness of time, I cease to exist. She was the harbinger of life and in return, I gave her death.

Falling.

Falling.

Down.

Down.

Down.

An eternity of torturous suffering, of insatiable thirst, of gut wrenching longing.

Withering.

Decayed

Rotten.

As the final strangulating strands of darkness consume my mind, I’m left with one final thought, a single vow, a promise to myself with my last shred

of sanity, of humanity, should I ever arouse from this exhaustless sleep...
I will never love again.

OXANA

100 Years Later

A SHRIEKING wind rattles the ice-thin window panes, the sound a harbinger of the storm to come. I sit close to the hearth, stirring my pathetic concoction of thin broth and vegetables, seasoned with whatever spices my father managed to forage.

I pull my shawl closer around my shoulders, but the action nor the burning fire does anything to warm the coldness creeping over me. A frozen breeze sweeps under the door and a shiver trembles my bones—it's as if Death himself has laid an icy finger against my skin. The sensation jars me and I stand so fast that I knock over the tiny wooden stool in an effort to get away.

Rubbing my hands up and down my arms in a feeble attempt to warm myself, I pace frantically back and forth, and wonder when Papa will be home. Howls join the wind, unnatural and strange, and a tremor shakes my hand as I finger the necklace Papa slipped over my neck before leaving—the one he always wears when he goes out.

Never in my twenty-two years has he left to hunt without it, and I fear what it means, but I also know it would've been pointless to ask. Whenever I pose questions about the outside world, Papa just tells me there's nothing for me to worry about.

Except I'm grown now, and he won't be here forever. I'll need to learn how to do more than just throw ingredients into a pot over a fire and call it a stew or mend torn clothing with tarnished needles. It's the duty of the man to provide for his family, but never once has my father spoken of me marrying.

He cloisters me away in this house, hiding me from everything, and forcing a disguise upon me even in the few moments when I've been allowed outside to enjoy a breath of fresh air.

The world outside is cruel, this is all I know from him—I would no sooner step out the front door than have my throat slit—but I can't help but wonder if he's thought of what will happen to me when he's gone. Who will care for me? Only a fool would take someone like me for his wife. I don't even have the basic knowledge to take care of myself. How the hell could I ever take care of a family? In his bid to protect me, Papa's left me completely defenseless.

Vulnerable.

I exhale and return to the hearth, righting the stool and sitting back down. My mind is set. Tonight when Papa gets home, we're having a talk. I'm a grown woman, and my future should be settled. At the very least, I should have a say in it. The stress of the unknown, of feeling so unprepared is killing me more than the truth of what's out there ever could. Or...at least that's my argument.

I mean...humanity lives on out there right? We're not the last two people on earth. They are surviving out there somehow, so why can't I? By my age, Mama had been married for three years and already had me for two. I glance over at the charcoal drawing of my mother, the only image I have of her. She's wearing the same necklace my father gave me before he left.

Bitterly, I look away. The damned thing obviously didn't help her, so I don't know why Papa thinks it will save me. I blame her death for the reason why everything is so bleak in my life, and why my father is so extreme.

Some days, I believe him about the world outside, but if it's so terrible, how come he leaves and comes back unscathed every time? I think he lives mired in his guilt and grief over the loss of his wife and can't bear to lose me, too. In return, Papa does the only thing he thinks is safe—to keep me under lock and key.

Hidden and forgotten.

But this is no life, there's no happiness imprisoned within the four walls of our small hut we call a home. Aside from learning how to sew, cook, and the basics of reading and writing, I know nothing of use—how to hunt for food, how to tan the hides to make clothing, nothing. Papa has always been adamant that anything which could cut or hurt me was too dangerous. Even allowing me a sewing needle was against his better wishes.

Not a single drop of blood must be spilt from you.

Those were his words. I knew to be careful growing up if I wanted to keep the privilege of sewing and cooking. I mustn't ever prick my fingers or burn myself. My movements must be slow and cautious, not just with a needle or a ladle, but in life itself.

Because of this, I'm normally quite methodical and careful, but in recent months, I've become quite stir-crazy. The four walls of my tiny home close in around me more and more every day as something grows inside of me that I don't understand. All I know is it wants out.

My thoughts are interrupted when the door bursts open, and Papa's large body fills the frame. Relief courses through me at the sight of him holding not just one, but two jackrabbits. His hunt was successful, the outcome which is becoming less and less frequent. I rush forward and take the kill to prepare them for dinner. "These will make a fine stew, indeed!"

Papa smiles but it twists into a grimace. "It's been a long time since we've had a proper dinner."

Too long.

"Did you find any vegetable roots?" Despite trying to sound nonchalant, there's a wistful note in my voice.

Papa lowers the jackrabbits to the floor and shrugs off his thick, winter fur coat, his lips pulling into a frown. "No, I'm sorry, my child. I was barely lucky enough to scrounge up the ingredients for your tonic."

I blanch, whirling away to skin one jackrabbit. Papa's tonic is a vile concoction meant to keep me strong and healthy. And while it works, the taste of it turns my stomach, made worse by the fact that it's usually too empty to handle the potent tonic. "That's all right. I'll get this meat cut up and cooking in no time. Go clean up for dinner."

My father eyes the knife in my hand. "Be careful." His gruff command is even more curt tonight than normal.

"Are you feeling ok, Papa?"

He waves a hand. "It was cold out there tonight. I tracked our dinner further and longer than I intended."

It's at this moment that I see how aged Papa has become, how weary. He's no longer able to hide the limp in his gait or the curling of his fingers as arthritis sets within his bones. "I was beginning to worry..."

Papa gives me a wan grin of reassurance. "Don't fret for me, child. Now, finish dinner while I go change."

He strides away but pauses to eye the necklace resting against my chest. I reach to take it off so that he can hang it back by the door where it belongs, but Papa stops me. “Keep it on for now.”

His words surprise me. We always put mother’s necklace back. It’s tradition, as if her spirit is within and watches over us while we do our chores and sleep. I open my mouth to ask the questions burning inside me, but Papa walks away, his shoulders set in resolution. I’ll have to wait until he’s full from an actual meal and sleepy before I try to get anything out of him.

As I lay the first aside and begin to cut up the meat, the silver of the blade glints, catching the light from the fire behind me when I shift. Something dangerous sparks inside of me, fueled by my banked vitriol, and I run the blade along my skin.

The tip drags over my flesh, promising pain, but I’m not foolish enough to actually cut myself. Not when the thing’s covered in the blood of another animal. Papa’s told me stories about the infections that run rampant in the city from mishandling animal meat, causing festering sickness.

Whatever madness flitted into my mind drifts away just as quickly. It’s unnatural to contemplate self-harm, but, at times, my father’s overbearing order seems to have eradicated any common sense. He’s encapsulated me, away from all other life, that other than worry I’ve forgotten how to feel. I find even pain alluring, because it’s something more than the emptiness I feel inside, more than the lack of feeling. I’m so sick of bearing this hollowness. It’s depressing. I eye the blade again and wonder if my blood is as red as the jackrabbits. Wonder if the muscle inside my body is pink too. *Or tastes as good.* I smile ruefully, shaking my head to dispel my thoughts.

Papa comes out a short time later, his movements labored. I cast furtive glances in his direction, trying to discern what’s wrong. Never has he returned from a hunt so worn down. I frown, wishing he would drink some of my tonic to make him just as healthy as me, but he refuses, insisting I need it more.

I’m so busy looking at my father that, for the first time in all my life, the knife slips. The sharp end catches the tip of my pointer finger, and I gasp at the contact. There’s pain, but something more hidden underneath. It hurts... but I like it.

I know it’s strange to enjoy such a sensation, but for years all I’ve felt is panic, worry, hunger, and longing. It feels good to experience something new, something *more*.

“Oxana!” In an instant, Papa is at my side, his eyes wide and frantic. “Quick, stem the flow with this!” He pulls out the kerchief Mama embroidered for him as a wedding gift to wrap around my wounded finger. For twenty-four years, he’s kept it with him, treating the lacey scrap of fabric with reverence, his one prized possession.

As red blood bleeds into the fabric, staining the ivory, anguish builds in my chest at destroying this one memento he has from her. “Papa! You’ll ruin your kerchief!”

“It doesn’t matter,” he mutters, and I gape. I’ve never even touched the squared cloth until this moment because my father reveres it so much. We stand in silence until Papa finally removes the kerchief to inspect my finger. “The bleeding’s stopped.”

I peer down, quietly disappointed that I didn’t get to see the blood bead along the cut and drip down my skin. There’s a small red dot to indicate the origin of the wound, but beyond that, nothing, and I marvel at how fast my body worked to stop the bleeding.

Without a backward glance, Papa tosses the kerchief into the fire. I cry out, lunging toward the flames, but my father catches me, holding my petite frame captive. He’s a burly man, standing nearly six feet, but I take after my mother, barely coming up to his chest.

“Let me go! We can wash it!”

His grip upon me tightens. “It is gone—leave it.”

“B-b-but you love it!”

“Not as much as I love you.”

His words don’t make any sense. What does his love for me have to do with my mother’s wedding gift to him? Does he think I think he loves it more than me?

My father releases me, his breathing shallow. “Finish cooking dinner.” He turns to go sit in his chair near the fire, and he hisses, gripping his side.

“Papa, are you ok?”

He collapses into the wooden seat he carved long before I was born and lets out a long, exhausted breath. “I’m fine.”

He doesn’t say anything more, and my worry escalates but I leave him alone. A serving of warm stew will do him a world of good. I work quickly but with more caution so as not to cut myself again. In no time, I place a chipped bowl filled with hot stew in his hands, watching as they shake.

“You’re not fine,” I accuse, angry at his lies.

Papa tries to wave me off as he's done a million times before. "It's nothing—"

"Stop saying that! You always say, 'it's nothing, child,' but obviously, it's something!"

Papa tenses, avoiding my eyes. "I'm just...a little under the weather. Nothing to worry about."

My teeth grind together at his continual use of *nothing*. "Then we need to get you some medicine."

"Later. Let's just enjoy our meal. It reminds me of a recipe your mother used to make... I can't believe she's been gone so long." His eyes glaze with tears, and my anger melts faster than snow under the warm Spring sun.

We tuck into the stew, and I try to pace myself. Although the temperatures outside are cold enough to keep the food for many days, it's dangerous to leave anything outdoors that could draw wild animals—or worse—to our home.

Instead, we eat the fresh meat now and will smoke the rest to store in our pantry for later. This time of year, it's very bare, and I look forward to lining its shelves with something other than empty glass jars and sparse, shriveled plants Papa finds.

My father shifts, dabbing his cheeks. At first, I think it's tears glistening there, but when he swipes across his forehead, too, I realize it's sweat. Even though he sits close to the fire, our home is never warm enough in winter to induce *sweating*.

I swallow my bite and set my spoon in my bowl. "Papa, you're more than just a little under the weather. You barely finished your stew and are sweating profusely."

When he tries to speak, he stumbles over his words, coughing violently instead. My father falls forward, and I lunge to push him back into the chair. His bowl clatters to the floor, but I ignore the mess. By some miracle, I manage to keep him upright. It's then that I notice the red stain spreading across the bottom of his shirt.

I whimper, pushing up the cloth to reveal three deep gashes seeping blood. "Oh, Papa, what happened to you?!"

"N-n-nothing."

"PAPA!" I shout his name in frustration and fear.

He winces as I apply pressure on the wound. "I was attacked...by an animal hunting the same jackrabbits."

A sob catches in my throat. “Why didn’t you just let it have them? We would’ve been fine with just the plants.” It’s the truth. We’d survived on far less in other winters.

My father coughs again. “I promise I’ll be fine. I just need rest.”

I doubt his words. One look at that wound and I know this requires more than rest to heal. More than what we have here in our home. But like the good little daughter I’ve always been, I listen. With my arm around his waist, I help him to his room, then clean and dress his wounds before tucking him in bed. He’s asleep before I can ask any more questions, and I pull the thin, worn blanket over him as best I can.

After ensuring his breathing is calm and even, I go back out and clean up the spilled stew, lamenting about how wasteful it is while fretting about my father. Like me, he’s hale and hearty, rarely getting sick.

My mind wanders as I clean, as the image of those gashes flash before my eyes. I’ve never seen anything like that before. Sure Papa has gotten a few injuries during his hunts, but nothing like this. Nothing even close.

What kind of animal causes a wound like that? And how deep does it run? What if it’s too deep to heal with just rest? What if...

Realization hits me. What if he doesn’t survive? What if he’s too stubborn, too concerned about my own safety that he risks his own? The encounter with this wild animal...it could kill him. He could lose his life over a fucking bowl of stew. Terror lances me at the thought of losing him.

After I finally get everything picked up and check on Papa again, I ease into my bedroom, and try to still my racing heart. It consists only of a bed and a chest that once belonged to my mother. Inside are a few articles of clothing and her wedding dress that I hope to wear one day.

I sit on the edge of the bed, touching her necklace. The weight of the silver soothes me as my mind races, but I finally succumb to sleep, worry ebbing to exhaustion. I hum a lullaby my father used to sing to me when I was scared as I attempt to quiet my mind and fall asleep. As I run through the pitches and tones of the melody, I make a decision—if Papa isn’t better in the morning, I will leave to find a healer.

No longer can I hide indoors while Papa’s health is at stake. It’s time to face this world he’s always hidden me from, no matter the risk. My fear could cost his life, and that’s a price I’m unwilling to pay. Papa is all I have, and no matter how frustrated I am at his refusal to tell me anything, I never want any harm to come to him. It’s time for me to act like a grown woman

and step out into the world beyond my front door.

Little did I know it contained monsters out for my blood.

OXANA

SLEEP EVADES ME, like the last warmth of summer I try so hard to cling to before the cool chill of fall sets in. Tossing and turning, all my thoughts are jumbled, racing at all the possible outcomes of father's illness.

What happened to Papa?

Were those claw marks or was he bitten by a wild animal?

Why must he be so elusive?!

I'm a grown woman, not a child, and I know I can handle the truth—*if he would just tell me*. Instead, he leaves me guessing, a book half read, the final pages torn from the binding. I finally drift off, trying to fill those blank pages with my guesses, but my seldom moments of sleep are not restful.

Dreams filled with nightmares, harrowing music that echoes around cavernous chambers, and pale monsters with rivets of blood dripping from fanged mouths greet me. I wonder if perhaps this is what torments Papa, why I hear him crying in his sleep across the hall.

Are these the very monsters chasing him in his own dreams—*his nightmares*? Am I seeing, through his eyes, the creatures that might have wounded him? *No*. Such things do not exist—certainly not here in the central ring.

But maybe that's exactly why he keeps me so close, because our part of the world does not only live here in the central ring. There are more rings, outer rings, maybe filled with the creatures I sometimes hear howling along with the wind.

A pained shout rings out from Papa's room, and I throw off the moth-eaten quilt that's covering my legs. Hurrying to his bedside, I note the thin blanket soaked from sweat and his face contorted in pain. He's worse—*far*

worse—than he was at dinner. Sucking in a breath, I shift the covering and lift the hem of his shirt, revealing the wound.

A rotten stench fills my nose, a putrid odor unlike anything I've ever come across before. Staring down at the shredded vestiges of skin, I confirm the wound is definitely a bite. It festers, weeping not only blood but a yellowish, milky liquid, and then there's the smell. Gods above, it smells of something awful, like death itself. There's no time to waste. If I don't do something now, Papa is going to die.

"Papa?" I grip his hand, squeezing lightly as a frantic sense of urgency courses through my veins. "It's me, Oxana. I'm going out to find help. There are a few coins left in the space hidden in the floorboards. I'll use it to buy medicine or a tonic to get you all better. I'll be back soon, I promise. And Papa? I love you."

He doesn't react to my words, his face wincing in pain even in his sleep. Fever dreams no doubt. This is not good. I swallow down the tears that threaten to fall at the possibility of losing him, but I refuse to think that into existence. Papa is strong—a fighter. He'll come through this just as he has through every other injury. *Only this one feels different.*

Back in my room, I open a dresser drawer and pull out a thick garment made from furs. Mother sewed the dress together herself years ago, and Papa told me she'd wear it when taking me outside to play in the snow. I thread myself through it, shoving my arms down the sleeves.

As I adjust the dress, thinking mother and I must have been about the same size, a waft of something floral invades my nose, a smell so foreign yet so familiar. *It's her.* Mother's scent is embedded in the fur, and a wisp of a memory flits through my mind. Her laugh, joyous and full of life, and her bright blue eyes blazing with love as she smiled down on me.

Then it's gone, the image foiled by another cry from my father. His agony threatens to collapse me, my body weak with worry, but I will myself to remain strong for Papa's sake. I snuggle deeper in my mother's dress, tightening it around my curves, pretending she's embracing me from beyond—from wherever she is now—anything to make me feel less alone.

I pull on a worn pair of stockings and then slip my feet into shabby leather boots. The strings have broken many times over the years and are tied back together in several different spots. Finally, I reach for Papa's coat since I don't have one of my own. Father has never let me leave the house, so wasting the scarce resources we had to make myself one seemed foolish.

The dark fabric hangs over my small frame like large curtains draped across a tiny window. The hem drags along the floor as I walk, but at least the coat is warm—and *smells like Papa*.

This comforts me for a moment as I take the knife which pricked my finger only hours ago and slip it inside my pocket. If the animal who attacked Papa is still out there, then I had better be prepared to face it. My father always said that once an animal tastes the flesh of man, it will crave it for the rest of its life.

I tighten Papa's coat with a length of leather belt threaded through loops and turn towards the door. So many times over the years have I pictured this moment—anticipating the sense of freedom—but as I grip the cool handle and push the door open, all I feel is trepidation.

I'm aware of how unprepared I am and how truly vulnerable I really am. All I've ever known are the four walls of this very small house, and as I step across the threshold taking in my surroundings, I'm unable to conceive how vast the world really is. Even this sliver of reality overloads my mind, overwhelming me with how unlikely I am to find what I need to save Papa.

But I must try.

Stepping onto the broken cobble steps, I quietly shut the door behind me and look around at the land I've only really seen through dirty glass windows. Surrounded by trees, naked and swaying against the winter winds, everything looks taller. A quiet blankets the land thanks to a fresh powdering of snow, already thick enough to cover my father's footprints from earlier.

Tears brim in my eyes as a sense of powerlessness washes over me once more. I don't know where to go or what to do, and once I leave this place I don't know if I'll be able to find my way back. With so many unanswered questions, like my entire existence is one giant guessing game with no possible way to win,

When father heads into town to the place where my tonic is made, he always turns right. So that's where I begin my journey. Forcing one foot in front of the other, a bitter cold wrapping around my legs, even with my father's coat wrapped around me. Snow crunches under my footfalls, the only other sound besides my thumping heart beating loudly in my ears.

I wonder how many more hours until morning as I move through the trees. When suddenly the entire world lights up as if a hundred candles were lit at once. The fresh snow glitters like jewels as I look upwards to find the source of the light. Hanging high in the dark, night sky, the moon shines

brightly, basking the world in a soft glow. I'm awed standing below such an object, wondering how it hangs there and doesn't come crashing down to the ground. I feel small, useless, a tiny spec on the earth, unworthy of this moon and its guiding light.

I've only walked for a moment or two when I turn back to see the house in the distance, almost out of sight. Fear winds through me, an icy grip squeezing my insides. Thinking quickly, I use my knife and pluck a chunk of bark off the nearest tree, marking my path in case I find myself lost as more snow falls, threatening to cover my impressed footsteps.

A cracking noise sounds behind me and I twist my body, not daring to breathe lest I be discovered. When it doesn't come again, I continue. Step by step, doing my best to ignore the chill seeping into my poor, frozen feet, I head towards an unknown, marking trees as I go. The moon illuminates my pathway and after what feels like an hour, I finally see signs of life. Well, not life exactly but evidence other people besides Papa and me do exist.

Having been forbidden to ever leave my own home, I often thought maybe there were no other people on the earth. Just Papa and me. Through books, I've read stories of kingdoms lost, battles won, and felt the throbbing ache of love, but never have I met another real person. Suddenly I feel embarrassed, walking through the dark, in the dead of night, an oversized coat weighing down my thin frame, my hair dirty, and blood still staining father's coat. What if they're afraid of me, or worse, I'm afraid of them? What if they won't help me? Then what will I do?

I shake the thought from my mind because standing here in my own fear isn't going to help Papa. I'd sacrifice anything for him, even my own life.

Marching through the snow, I come upon a clearing of sorts. Six small homes face the very center of town marked by a tall, wooden structure. I know it's the center because Papa told me of this very thing in one of his stories. Murdered for any wrongdoings, people are hung from the top for the rest of the townspeople to see. A warning to behave. Yet I still do not understand who is in charge of our lands if not the people.

I thought Papa only told me that story to scare me into being good when I misbehaved, yet here it is, looming in the dark, a rope swinging in the breeze bound to the topmost tresses. I shiver at the connotations as an icy sensation skates down my spine. I need to get this over with and hurry back to father.

Moving towards the first home, feeling more determined than ever, a sudden sound rings out, a noise I can't describe though it causes anxiety to

press inside my chest. It rings out again, echoing across the darkness, like the clang of a drum if it were made from metal. It crashes through my ears like a warning. It makes me want to cower and hide, to run.

That's when I see my first two humans. Coming out from behind the farthest house, the pair, huddled under coats of their own, rush into the house closest to me. I take a breath to cry out for them when something snaps behind me. Terror grips me as a shadow passes in my peripheral and I swallow down the words in my throat.

As I watch, frozen behind the trunk of a thick tree, the lights in every house extinguish and locks click into place, leaving the windows dark, the homes appearing deserted.

Drum...

It thrums loudly and seems to come from everywhere all at once. I think that's what the people were running from—the sound of something ominous, of something to be feared. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and sweat drips between my breasts. Never have I known such fear as this and it only worsens as a new figure emerges from the darkness, following the same path those people took.

Only... it doesn't look anything like them. It's taller, bulkier, moving with more grace than a person, almost animal-like in countenance. It pauses by the wooden tower, head lifted to the moon, long hair waving in the cool breeze. The howl that emits from its lungs has me smashing my hands to my ears. It's haunting, nightmarish, and brutal, a predator's call warning its prey as it prepares to hunt.

I've lingered too long.

Another howl breaks the silence, this one farther away but no less terrifying. I back away into the shadows, praying to the gods that I'm not seen.

Drum...

What are these things? Half human, half animal? A mutation? Or are these creatures the very reason Papa has kept me hidden all these years? To ensure my safety from monsters.

Drum...

The pounding sounds come quicker now and a snarl erupts somewhere close. Goosebumps rise along my skin as terror itself twits within me.

I should never have come.

The padding of swift feet sounds all around me and it takes every ounce

of bravery I have to force my legs to move. A whisper of my footprints still remains and I head back the way I came but think twice. If these are the creatures that bit father, then perhaps they might have followed me here, walking along the very prints I'm retracing.

Forging a new path, I dart through the bare trees, racing towards where I hope my home is. Here, my pathway isn't marked and everything starts to look the same as if I'm moving in circles. A black bird leaps from a low branch, its caw heightening my fear. The snow deepens, my legs sinking to my knees with each excruciating step.

I'm not going to make it.

A howl emerges from my left, closer this time. More snapping branches, a deep growl, and the clang of metal as if blades were being drawn.

Drum...

Breaths panting, causing a smokey mist to emit from my lungs, I beg and plead with my body to keep moving, to fight through this cold freezing my limbs. A shadow runs beside me, not fifty meters away, a hairy beast racing through the trees, a silhouette of a demonic being rising from the depths of hell to chase me.

Hunt me.

This is this the end, I think as I surge past the pain, eyes searching the thick woods for evidence of my home. I shift to my right, away from the huffing beast, back towards the marked path, and see a trunk nicked from my blade. My previous footsteps marking the snow have been worn over by other prints—thick-soled shoes and clawed paws. I don't stop to look closer.

Drum...

My heart rattles in my chest, lungs aching from sucking in breathfuls of cold air. No longer am I able to feel the tips of my ears, the end of my nose, or my pinky toes. I'm suffocating under all this fur though I know to shed it would ensure my death.

Howling. Howling all around. I'm so scared. Papa was right all along. The world is no place for a girl like me.

Exhaustion claws at me, making my legs feel as if they weigh two stones a piece. I fear I won't be able to go on and curse myself for failing Papa. After all he's done for me to keep me safe, and I can't even survive one single night outside alone.

And then I see it, our meager home hidden between the tall trees. A surge of energy rushes through me and I barrel towards it, desperate to outrun

what's hunting me. I yank the door open and slam it shut behind me, resting my back against the cool wood as if it could somehow save me from the terrors beyond. It has all these years. I can only hope it still will now.

Otherwise, Papa and I are both as good as dead.

OXANA

SAFE.

I'm safe—at least I think I am after nearly half an hour of panting with my back pressed against the front door. Nothing comes barreling through nor does anything break the windows rattling in the shrieking wind, but that doesn't stop the haunting sound of howling from ringing in my ears. It's only the garbled cry of anguish from Papa that draws me away with reluctance. I dash into his room to find him collapsed on the floor, his clothes torn and bloody.

“Papa!”

His clothes hang in a shredded mess of rags from his limp form. He jerks as if in agonizing pain, his body contorting while he twitches. Papa's eyes open, his mouth stretched into a silent scream, before his eyelids flutter shut again. Only occasionally does a sound come out, a keen yip one might hear from the mouth of a dog abused by its owner, and what originally drew me into his room.

He's all but naked, and I suppress the urge to cover my eyes since I've never seen a nude man before. Papa always took care to make sure that he was covered properly as I was, too, but there's no time for modesty right now. Rushing to his side, I link his arm over my shoulder, sitting him upright. He's boiling hot, his skin slick against mine. He groans, the motion crunching his wound together as blood and puss seep out.

I know I'm only adding to his pain, but I must get him off the cold and drafty floor and back into the bed where he can be elevated and more easily taken care of. “Papa!” I scream his name and shake his shoulders, hoping to rouse him, but it's like he's in another world and not able to hear anything I'm

saying. He's semi-awake, but definitely not lucid, and trying to get him back into his bed is a nearly insurmountable task on my part.

When I finally succeed after nearly an hour of fruitless attempts, Papa promptly rolls back off the bed, and I howl in frustration. The sound reminds me of what chased me earlier, and I freeze, having forgotten about my escapade outside the house. I glance over my shoulder, my hands shaking in remembrance, but the only noise I hear comes from the living area. It's the crackling embers of the dying fire.

Shadows dance along the narrow hall beyond Papa's room, but none belong to the monster I've attributed the howling to. Sighing in relief, I turn back to Papa and steel my spine for the task ahead. If I got him into the bed once, I can do it again. It's just a matter of perseverance, but my strength is waning fast. My limbs tremble in exhaustion, the task is no easy feat, and it takes two more tries before I get him in the center of the bed so that he doesn't fall right back off.

Briefly, I wonder if perhaps he's drawn to the cool floor in his feverish state, an unconscious attempt to quell the raging fire burning in his body. I leave Papa to grab some rags while checking the meager amount of water we have left. It's tepid from sitting near the fire and not nearly cold enough for what I need. The smart thing would be to grab a bucket of snow, but I'm too afraid to even open the door to scoop some up.

These are things Papa would have done for me but he's not here to help me right now, and I have a choice to make. I quiver with indecision but another cry from Papa spurs me into motion. Dashing into the common room, I grab the spare bucket that Papa uses to fill with extra water or plants he forages. Acknowledging the foolishness of what I'm about to do, I peek out the iced-encrusted window.

It's too murky to see anything as night casts darkness across the land surrounding my small home. Everything is a blanket of black under the obsidian sky. After a minute when I don't detect any motion, I creep to the front door, easing it open. To my infinite relief, nothing springs out of the shadows to attack me. With haste, I lean over the jamb and scoop up some snow that's blown against the side of the house. Slamming the door shut again, I latch the wooden lock in place, praying it's enough to keep out whatever chased me.

Armed with my supplies, I return to Papa's room, eyeing his wound in trepidation. It needs to be cleaned, but the extent of damage is far beyond my

measly healing skills. With a gentle hand, I dip the rags in the snow, allowing it to melt against the warmth of the fabric before bringing it to his forehead. I rest it there for a moment and then wash down one cheek and then the other. Finally, I wrap the cool compress around his neck.

Papa's eyes crack open, staring sightlessly past me. Panic wells up inside my chest, but I tamp it down, choking back my tears as I clean his arms. I'm afraid to touch his torso—of the pain I might cause him—but steady my hands and lean forward. When the rag touches his flesh, Papa doesn't even flinch, and my gaze flies to his face. He's staring at me, studying my features, unnerving me even more.

“Natalya?”

I shake my head. “No, Papa, it's Oxana, your daughter. Natalya was your wife.”

His eyes narrow. “I would know my Lya anywhere. So beautiful, so fucking beautiful. Taken from me for *them*.”

“Them? Them *who*?”

His eyes darken, lips pulling back and baring his teeth as he seethes. “The coven. They wanted her blood but also her body—your body. To strip you down, lay you bare, and fuck what's mine.”

A gasp escapes my lips at his crass words. Although I've heard Papa mutter his fair share of curses, he's never used them in direct conversation with me. He raised me the way he thought my mother would approve, and even though we were dirt poor, he still was determined that I would become a lady. And while I'm proficient in most day-to-day tasks, I'm largely ignorant of the world around me, and how men and women interact.

“Papa, you don't know what you're saying—I don't know what you're saying—”

His anger melts away, and the look on his face is pure disgust. “You don't remember how we used to fuck, Natalya? How much you loved my body covering yours as I thrust in and out of your heat? Or did they turn you against me, using your body in a way that I could never fulfill?”

His words are desperate and bitter, confusing me even more. “No one's... used me. It's me, Oxana. I've never left this house, remember?”

It's a lie, but one Papa doesn't know, and he's too ill to see through my deception. Not that I'm trying. My mind whirls, wondering what he means about covering his body over Mama's. His words are as foreign to me as if he were speaking in another language altogether, but even I am not naive

enough to mistake the illicit meaning inside of them. What did he and Mama used to do when he covered his body with hers and why did she go somewhere else? Who was this coven? What did they want—*did they kill Mama?*

“Yes.” Papa’s rasp draws my attention back to him. He’s staring at me again but his eyes are clear, his face relaxed of the feverish intent from when he last spoke.

I place a trembling hand on his feverish cheek. “Papa, do you know who I am?”

With much effort, he places his hand on top of mine and squeezes lightly. “You’re Oxana, my daughter.”

My shoulders sag in relief and a sob escapes me. “Yes, I am. Before, you thought I was—”

“Your mother. I’m sorry. You look so very much like her, and my mind is...confused.”

The tension in the room grows as I hold my breath waiting for him to continue, but he doesn’t. A day ago, I would’ve been too meek to risk Papa’s anger, but so much has happened. His very life hangs in the balance, and I can’t live in the shadows of his lies anymore.

“What were you answering ‘yes’ to?” I prod.

To my surprise, he answers. “When you ask if they killed her.”

My hand flies to my mouth, shocked at his words, for I hadn’t even realized that I had asked that question out aloud. All this time, I thought something *natural* took Momma from us, and that’s why Papa wouldn’t let me out of the house. The dangers that lie beyond our front door were grim but part of our everyday life, such as the perils of wild animals, the bitter coldness, or even sickness.

I pull away from Papa, easing off the bed. “Who is this coven? Who are they? *What* are they?” My father shakes his head, tears welling in his eyes. They spill down his cheek, but still, he does not answer me. “Papa! I’m not a child, and I’m done with your *fucking* secrets!”

He stares at me, shock painting his features as it seeps into mine. I’ve never sworn aloud before, but the harsh word feels right, emphasizing the desperation I feel inside.

Papa keels over with a coughing fit. Clots of blood fly from his lungs and he gasps for air, clenching the bite marks with a wince as he catches his breath. Papa looks at me with such sadness that my own heart begins to

break. “I... I cannot tell you, my child. My time is dwindling here with you —”

My anger drains at this, deflating me. “No! We'll get help!”

He shakes his head. So fucking stubborn. “There is no help for what ails me. *You...you must kill me.*”

I gape at the sheer absurdity of his words. Yes, he's sick, but there's no illness on this earth that would merit those words. Kill him!? I wonder if perhaps he's not as lucid as I think for him to even ask me to do such a thing. It is a cruelty that I could never act upon, but my father just sighs as if he asked me for a glass of water instead of the magnitude of what he did.

“You have to kill me, Oxana—it's the only way to save yourself and others.”

What others?

I run a hand through my tangled blonde hair, long since torn from its braid. “No, no! Have you lost your mind, Papa? You really think I could do that? Kill you? You're my father, my family. It's insanity to ask that of me. But what I will do is find a healer, and we will make you better. I... I'll give you some of my tonic!” I break off realizing that I haven't had any in a day.

“Your tonic!” Papa echoes, his face paling even more and the sheen of sweat stands out in stark contrast against the pallor of his skin. He murmurs something too fast for me to catch, but I can't discern what, even though his worry is evident. “We must get you that tonic!”

His fervor startles me as he struggles to sit up, and I rush over to push him back down onto the bed. “Lie down! You are unwell. My tonic can wait. I promise I'll be fine and will not catch whatever you have.” Of this, I am not certain. Papa's warned me about spreading sicknesses that have decimated whole families, but I know to wash my hands and stay clean.

Papa grabs my shoulders, shaking me hard, his fingers digging into my skin until I cry out. “This is not something you can catch, but it is something that will kill you if you do not kill me first!”

“You're not making any sense, Papa. I don't understand—I don't understand!” I repeat this over and over, hoping to get through to him.

“Get me the ankhallah.”

I pause at his new command. “What?”

“Get me your mother's necklace.” His voice is laced with determination, and he sounds like his normal self. I know better than to question him, so I reach inside my furs and lift it over my head.

When I move to hand it over to him, he hisses like a feral animal, shying away from the gleaming silver antique. “Pull on the tip. It sheaths a dagger.”

Doing as I’m told once more, I remove the tiny scabbard and expose a small knife no bigger than my middle finger. I turn it over, examining the weapon I had no idea was hidden inside. Although it’s sharp, it appears too tiny to do any real damage. “Papa, what do you want—”

“Stab my heart.”

Although he just asked me to kill him, *again*, I’m still stunned at his demand—that he still thinks I’m capable of such a feat, of murder. “No!”

Anger and urgency lace his words. “Yes, Oxana, you must! I cannot do it myself, and it must be carried out with the sacred silver imbued into that blade.”

Tears fill my eyes and run down my cheeks. “Papa...what you’re asking me to do... Besides, this dagger isn’t big enough to kill you, at least not immediately. It will puncture your flesh, opening you up to rot and a slow, tortuous death. Is that what you want?!”

He licks his dry lips, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. “I promise, child, it *will* kill me. Perhaps not instantly, but far quicker than you realize. I beg of you, help me. End this agony that has become my life while yours is only beginning.”

A chill runs down my spine at his premonition. “What do you mean, Papa?”

His eyes lose focus as something wild chases across his face. He belts out a pained roar, his voice deeper than I’ve ever heard it as fur pokes out of his skin and his nails elongate into claws. At the same moment, the drum sounds loudly again, closer this time, followed by a bevy of howls that raise the hair on my arms—the most worrisome coming from the man on the bed in front of me as he transforms from the father I love into something from my nightmares.

“Run.” Papa’s snarling voice comes from around the vicious row of sharp teeth in a muzzle where a face should be. “RUN!” Clutching Mama’s necklace, I turn and flee from the only person who ever loved and cared for me, sobbing in painful realization.

Nowhere is safe.

OXANA

FRANTIC. That's the only way to describe what I'm going through. Like I've been shoved outside during a powerful, raging storm—nowhere to hide from the crackling lightning, no protection from the pounding thunder, completely vulnerable to the elements.

I only just have time to snag Papa's coat before slamming the door of the only home I've ever known behind me, somehow realizing I might never see it again.

Papa... *what's happening to him?*

A howl cleaves the night and behind me Papa answers with one of his own, surging from inside the wooden walls of my home. I can't wait another second. With no plan in mind, I start to run, feet slamming onto the snow-covered ground, my mother's necklace burning in my hand.

Moonlight reflects off the snow, brightening the forest floor, and for once, I'd give anything for it not to. Plunged into darkness, my odds of staying safe would increase. Or at least that's the lie I tell myself when I look down and find I'm retracing the path I took when fleeing back towards the inner circle.

Gooooong...

I almost jump as the sound of an ancient cymbal cleaves the night again, seeming to echo from everywhere all at once. My head pounds from the power of it, my inner ears vibrating from the intensity. Desperation fuels me, my love for Papa giving me the strength I need to keep pressing on in spite of the bitter cold, in spite of the potent fear gripping my insides.

A rustling sound pulls my attention and I halt in my tracks, crashing my back against a broad oak. If my raspy attempt to catch my breath doesn't give

me away, then my thumping pulse sure will. I glance up at the sky, the full moon shining bright above layers of empty branches...

The full moon!

Shit!

My entire life Papa has stressed the importance of taking my tonic on the night of the full moon, that if I didn't something terrible could happen to my body. A skitter of fear runs through me wondering what it could be. Will I become something other than I am now? Break out in painful boils or cramp up with a belly ache? Will I not recognize myself, transform into something *inhuman*, like Papa? Then another thought runs through my mind—that perhaps he has a tonic too that he didn't take and that's why he's ill. Maybe it's not his wound which made him sick after all but some horrible illness kept at bay by another tonic, one he kept hidden from me so I wouldn't worry.

Papa and his secrets...

In his stubbornness, he never learned to trust me, to confide in me, only kept me at arm's length. *It's for your protection*, he'd say. What about now, Papa? Who's going to help me save you when I don't even know what it is you need saving from?

Fear and anger war within me as I push off from the tree and continue my trek, slower this time, quieter. I know I'm not alone out here, reminded by the spine chilling howling that comes in waves, and the absence of crows squawking, demanding I leave their part of the woods alone.

But I'm not alone, not anymore.

A blackened silhouette lumbers in the distance, a dog perhaps or a fox? I can't be too sure having only seen such animals in the few children's books Mama had bought me as a young child. The depictions weren't exactly life-like, the dog had thick glasses and the fox wore a bonnet and drank tea ever so delicately. This animal looks nothing like those, even from afar its outline is larger, harrier. And when it lifts its snout to the night's sky and belts out a howl, I'm more sure than ever—this is a creature arising from hell itself.

The tiny hairs along my body raise and I swallow hard, trying to make myself as small as possible, moving away from the creature. I just pray it doesn't hear me. Not five minutes later, my toes numb, ears and nose frozen, I see the darkened homes again.

I survey the other houses, just as stark and crumbling as my own. It doesn't look like anyone is home, but I know otherwise. Extinguished

candles and closed doors be damned, someone is going to help me—has to help me. Teeth clenched, I push my legs harder, letting the cool air whip across my face, blonde hair billowing behind me as I dash along the streets in my quest. I must help Papa. There has to be someone who can save him.

A surge of energy races through me and I begin to scream. “Help! Help me, please!” I trip on something hard buried below the thick snow, my bare hands burning as they plunge into the frozen flakes to stop my fall. I right myself, brushing the snow from my jacket and shaking it from my hands, clenching them into fists for any semblance of warmth. I glance between the shabby homes, still devoid of life, hope shattering. “My Father is dying! Help me! Please!”

Silence answers my plea, an old friend or a fervent enemy I cannot tell. Nor do I have time to ponder as I hike through the knee-deep snow to the first house on my left. Not much larger than my own, the log home is in poor shape. A large crack runs through the front window, and several roofing blades are scattered in the snow, recently blown off by the last storm perhaps. Stacked against the side is a dwindling pile of chopped wood for fire. Even with the little knowledge I do have, it’s easy to see this will not get them through the winter, not by half.

I step up to the door, glancing behind myself to ensure I’ve not been followed, my breath fanning out like fog as it expels from my lungs. It’s so bitter cold, and the frozen breeze feels like needles stabbing into the exposed skin of my hands and face. Papa’s coat and Mama’s dress keep most of me warm but I’m quickly losing feeling in my fingers and toes.

“Help!” I call, as I rasp three times on the door. “Help! Is anyone there? My father is sick. I need medicine, please!”

I wait only seconds before hiking to the next house, ignoring the looming wooden structure to my right as it creaks and groans in the wind. A tendril of smoke whispers from the chimney here, surely someone will answer.

Drum...

My heart stumbles in my chest, anxiety ramping up with another boom of the ominous sound. I crash my fist against the door. “I need help! Dammit, please!” Frustration has tears forming in my eyes that freeze on my cheeks as they tumble down my face.

Will no one help me?

I belt out a defeated sob as I move on to the third house, screaming at the top of my lungs now. Desperation has clouded my mind, drowned my use of

caution as thoughts of losing Papa compound inside my head. Maybe everything Papa said was true, that this world is a treacherous place, and the only ones we can depend on are each other.

But who am I to depend on now?

Stuck in the bitter cold, alone in the vastness of the dark sky and the shadow of the full moon, I turn away from the door and hug myself. Snow falls quickly now, thick flakes stick to my eyelashes and freeze in my hair.

Even though I know it's useless, I step up to the final two houses. No one answers my incessant knocking, no one comes to my aid as I beg and plead for help.

I've failed him.

After all he's done for me, protecting me for the past twenty years by himself, and I can't even accomplish this one thing, one task to repay him for taking care of me. And my failure will result in his death. A death I'm responsible for because I can't help him. Because I'm not strong enough.

Defeated, I step away from the houses to the wooden tower, glancing up towards the top. Should I climb to the top and test fate, leap from the farthest beam and tempt death to take me? I don't want to exist without Papa, can't survive in this world all alone. I mean...what do I have? I have nothing. Not a coin. Not family. Nothing of value aside from Mama's necklace which I would never part with anyway. I'd rather die than sell it.

And perhaps that's just what I'll do—die clutching the closest thing to family I have left. I place the necklace over my head, tucking it safely inside my dress, and curl my frozen fingers around the lowest beam, searching for any strength left to climb. My grip slips when I attempt to pull myself up, completely numb from exposure.

When did I become so useless, so damn incapable?

I curse the gods and stagger backward, sinking to my knees in defeat. I hang my head, my frozen hands pressed against my face as sorrow sucks the air from my lungs. Tears fall freely now, such a desperate feeling of isolation unlike anything I've ever known. It's one thing to feel alone in the hours Papa leaves on a hunt. But this...to realize how insignificant I am, to know when I inhale my final breath, my heart ceasing to beat, no one will care. No one will know. The world will go on as if I had never existed at all.

“What's a little thing like you doing out in the clutches of a cold, winter's night, hmm?”

A dark, rumbling voice behind me breaks the silence, and I gasp, freezing

in place, eyes flying wide open. Something tugs on a strand of my hair and presses against my back. A hard yank on my hair has me lurching to my feet as I turn to face, well, I'm not sure what he is.

I know what a man looks like, the characteristics, but the man standing before me isn't what I would expect. For one, he's huge, towering over me by a foot at least. Long black hair hangs over his face which is hidden by a thick beard. A scar over his left eye still bleeds. Speaking of his eyes, they're glowing. It's subtle, a soft yellow. But maybe this is normal, having never met another person, how am I to possibly know.

Wearing a red, leather jacket, with nothing on under it, I wonder how the hell he's not frozen. His body is all hard lines and a smattering of black curly hair graces his chest and again just above his belt buckle.

He pulls something out of his pocket. It's white, narrow, and about four inches long. One end he slips between his lips, the other he ignites with a match. I watch, awe-struck, as he sucks on one end, inhaling a plume of smoke which he expels from his nostrils. "I asked you a question, girl. Are you deaf or just too stupid to answer?"

I gulp, instinctively reaching inside my jacket to grasp the necklace. The stranger watches the movement, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. "I uhh... Umm..."

Words? What are words? So many times I've imagined meeting someone else, considering what they might look like, what we might talk about. This interaction couldn't be more different. I swallow hard. It's not relief I feel upon having someone answer my calls for aid—it's fear. "I need help," I manage to get out, my voice wavering. "My—my father. He—he's sick."

The man cocks his head to the side and takes a step towards me, sucking on the white stick again. He pauses before me, blowing the smoke into my face and I choke on it, coughing it out of my lungs. He laughs at my struggle, reaching for me but I take a step back. His brows furrow. "I can help you out, you know."

Father always said he could tell if a person was good or bad in the first moment of meeting them. My gut is telling me this man is a bad one. "Actually, now that I think about it, I'm sure he'll be okay. I'm just over-reacting, father says I do that a lot." The excuse sounds lame even to me. "I'll just be on my way. You should too, the snow is falling harder."

I ignore his blatant, unnerving stare and walk around the man, giving a wide berth before heading back the way I came. Father must have his own

tonic somewhere in the house—I'll find it and give it to him. Then everything will be back to normal.

"It's rude not to accept help when it's offered," he calls as I reach the tree line. I turn back and find him gone, nothing but an empty courtyard. It's like he was never there. The houses are still dark and quiet, the wooden tower still stretches high overhead.

Maybe I imagined the whole thing. A howl fractures the silence, and it sounds as if the origin is just beyond the houses. I step back, right into something hard and cold. Abruptly, I spin and come face to face with a second person. He's smaller than the first, but no less intimidating. With skin paler than the moon itself and crimson lips looking as if painted with blood, he's more unnatural. More *inhuman*.

His hair is also long, but pulled back away from his face and bound with a length of cord. Unlike his friend's burly appearance, this man is more proper, more put together. Wearing a long black coat and matching pants, his feet stuffed into elegant suede boots, he oozes superiority and something else I can't quite put my finger on.

"Let us help you, little girl" he purrs, his words rolling off his tongue like liquid chocolate. I find myself focusing on those supple lips, wanting to taste them. He trails the back of his pointer finger down my cheek. "But our services will cost you."

I shake my head, squashing my erratic thoughts and pull away from his touch. "Thank you but...I don't have any money."

Warmth presses against my backside, and I glance over my shoulder to find the bearded man there. He wraps one arm around my waist as the second one grips my chin and angles my head to face him. "It's not money we seek," he murmurs, shifting me so his lips can graze against my neck.

Hands dip inside my coat and fondle my breasts as a pair of cold lips suck on a tender spot on my throat. "Yes, little one," the first man rumbles, his voice raspier, growly almost. "I think you have just what we need."

I'm frozen in fear, shaking in terror not knowing what these two plan on doing to me. This is wrong. My breaths saw in and out, my body quaking with tremors. "I really should be going," I whisper.

I cry out as the man with the blood-red lips bites my skin then releases his hold on me, licking my blood off his teeth. Suddenly the man behind me captures my arms behind my back, my wrists bound in one of his large hands as he sneaks the other inside Papa's jacket and across my dress, plucking at

my nipple through a broken stitch in the fur. “You’re not going anywhere.” A cold hand encases my throat and a burlap sack is shoved down over my head. “Never have I been more excited about the fruits of a hunt as I am tonight, little girl. You have no idea what sort of trap you so willingly walked into.” Another bite on my neck has a new sensation igniting within me, but I can barely register what it is as a callused hand painfully chokes my breast. “But I promise, you’re about to find out.”

Something hard crashes against the back of my head and I fade into darkness, praying this is all just a dream.

Little did I know, I’d be soon waking up inside a nightmare.

OXANA

SOMETHING COLD TICKLES MY NOSE, and I blink my eyes open. They're heavy, and there's a dull ache on the back of my head. At first, nothing comes into focus, but when it does, I'm confused. I'm not staring at the ceiling of my bedroom, but rather the dark expanse of sky at night.

The coldness I feel is the snow falling down on me, melting when it hits the warmth of my skin. *Why am I outside?* Many more moments pass before I can form any kind of cognitive memory, but when I do, my heart stills.

Everything comes racing back to me in a flash—Papa, the howls, the sound of a gong, and two monstrous men chasing me, catching me. *Hurting me.* I raise a hand to my neck, to the bite throbbing there, and wince in recollection.

A million thoughts and worries tumble after one another. *Where am I? Why am I alone? Is Papa okay?* I think back to the creatures. One was covered in fur, more animal than human. While the other—the other was just like from my dream and even more monstrous than the beast that was with him.

I recall his mouth moving against me, and the strange feelings it induced. Reaching up, I touch my neck again, fingering the two puncture holes and knowing with a certainty that *thing* drank my blood.

A bubble of hysteria wells up inside of me as I wonder if they've intentionally left me in the snow like Papa does to carcasses in order to preserve the meat. Are they just waiting for me to freeze to death and then come back and cook me later?

A noise somewhere nearby snaps me to attention. I have mere seconds to make the critical decision whether to stay or run. If I stay, I'll inevitably die,

becoming dinner or worse for one of these monsters. My only option for survival is to flee.

Sitting up swiftly, my vision swims, and nausea rolls through me at the onslaught of pain from my head. I choke on the gag that I'm trying to suppress, not wanting to make any noise. With supreme effort, I manage to stand up, but my legs are shaky, and practically numb.

I feel weak, weighed down by my mother's unfamiliar dress and Papa's heavy coat, but I manage to move forward. My footsteps echo around me, my feet crunching through the top layer of ice that's crusted there, my toes have long since lost feeling.

A twig snaps from behind me, and a rush of adrenaline surges through me as I gather up my skirts and run. Suddenly, I see the world with crystal clarity, and the pain I once felt is completely blotted out by the fear now coursing through my veins.

More branches break, and I realize the sound is coming from above me. Whatever is hunting me is up in the trees. Terror spikes through me, and my feet stumble in the snow. My hands whip out to break my fall, and they sink into the cold expanse of white.

Something crashes into the tree to my right, and the entire trunk shudders with the force of it causing snow to cascade down from the disturbed branches. I glance up as a howl rends the air, and I know it's the wolf man coming back to eat me at last.

I'm barely able to make out his form in the inky black of the night, but it's enough for me to see his head tipped back, his arms out-stretched, his claws curled inward. And it spurs me into action.

Run, Oxana, run!

Turning blind into the blowing snow, I race away. My heart pounds in my chest, which is tight and uncomfortable from the cold air and exertion, but I don't stop. Not for a second, not to even catch my breath.

My effort is wasted because seconds later, the creature is upon me, knocking me deep into the snow. Though it looks soft and fluffy, the snow does nothing to soften the blow, and as I slam on my stomach, air whooshes from my lungs, expelling past my lips in a painful wheeze.

I tremble under the warmth of the beast's furred body. He howls, the sound loud and triumphant, piercing my ears. I whimper, burying my face in the snow, and clamp a hand on either side of my head to drown it out.

He paws my back, and I tense, waiting for the slashing agony of his claws

cutting into my flesh, but after a moment, I realize none is coming. Instead, he hooks the hood of my mother's dress hanging over Papa's coat and tugs. My spine bows back, arching my neck in invitation.

The thing curls a hand around my throat, squeezing lightly. There's just enough pressure to give the impression of the beast's strength, and it's a thousand times more menacing than if he simply strangled me to death.

Soft puffs of hot air tickle my ear where the creature pants, and I wonder if perhaps he's out of breath. As if in answer, the giant wolf-man rolls off my back and onto his side. I stare in disbelief before dashing off again. Behind me, the beast makes a strange chuffing noise.

I don't even make it to the next tree trunk before his massive body slams back into mine, knocking me down once more. Dread pools in my stomach, and I kick out blindly. The creature yelps as my foot connects and he releases me, but when I try to escape, he yanks on the long length of my hair. I tumble back, falling in a heap at his feet.

He chuffs again, and I realize he's *laughing*. White-hot rage transforms my fear into something less debilitating. This time, I don't flail carelessly but with the intent to hurt the furred monster. Although innocent, Papa told me where to aim to hurt a man, and even though this beast isn't human, he's still all male.

Lashing out with my left foot, I miss the spot between his legs, instead landing against the hard planes of his fur-covered stomach. It's enough to garner a reaction, and the wolf-man growls, but he doesn't attack me like I expected—*he moans*.

That's it. I'm done.

I attempt to scoot away but he quickly grabs hold of me, yanking me towards him, encasing my hips with his thick thighs, tutting as he does. "You want to play rough, pretty little thing? Because I sure fucking do."

He snarls out his words, pushing them past gnashing teeth and a quivering snout. I'm half horrified and half awestruck, wondering how it's even possible for him to form speech. Catching me staring, he bares his fangs and I gulp, convinced this is where I meet my demise, but he just takes my hand and flattens it against him.

My eyes are shut so tightly, I don't see where he places my palm, but wherever it is, I feel skin, not fur. My stupid curiosity gets the better of me, and I pry one eyelid open to sneak a peek. It's almost too dark to see, but my gaze homes in on my hand tucked against something long and hard.

I jerk back with a screech, making the wild beast guffaw at my expense. My body flushes with embarrassment with the knowledge of what I touched, and the wolf-man rumbles out another laugh before taking my hand back.

This time, when he forces me to touch him, he keeps his furred hand covering mine, his long claws imprisoning my much smaller fingers. The blush staining my cheeks intensifies, and I hold my breath against the clamor of fear blossoming inside of me.

The beast grins, baring razor sharp teeth as his tongue comes to loll out the side of his gaping muzzle. After a moment, he jerks my hand up, only to slam it back down. He repeats this over and over, faster than I can blink or even comprehend what's happening.

Something foreign sparks inside of me at the sounds the creature makes. His chest rumbles as he exhales harshly, his howls growing more and more gruff. And then it's over. The beast stiffens, as if wounded, and something sticky and wet spurts between my fingers.

I pull back, confused, staring down at my hand. Thick white cream coats my pale skin, and I bring it closer to my face to inspect. The wolf-man reacts faster than I can blink, snaking out an arm to grip my wrist, moving my palm mere inches from my face.

"Lick it." He barks out this command, startling me. I shake my head, denying his request, and his other arm shoots out of the dark to push me back until I'm lying in the snow. He pins my neck down, applying more pressure than the last time.

"Lick it. Now." Tentatively, I flick out my tongue, tasting just the smallest amount of the strange substance. To my surprise, it's saltier than even preserved meat, and not as heavy as the cream I originally thought it might be.

He rocks against me, chest rumbling. "Good, isn't it? Now, be a good little human, and eat up the rest. Then, I'm going to fuck your tight, little pussy and fill it up like I did your hand."

His words don't make sense, but my body rouses at his use of 'fuck', and I scowl at my reaction. Because it's something naughty, something forbidden that sends a thrill through me. But this isn't how Papa raised me, and I feel ashamed.

Why would this monster's vulgar curses excite me?

Is there something wrong with me?

"But first, you're going to run some more." The beast's announcement

jars me, and I inhale sharply as it dawns on me the feral man is taunting me—has been this entire time—playing some sick game of cat and mouse.

My anger returns, stifling much of my common sense. “I will get away from you!”

Wolf-man snickers. “You think so, little one? Well then, how about I make you a deal.” He points at a pair of trunks not more than twenty yards away. “If you can make it past those two trees before I catch you, I’ll let you go free.”

An unladylike snort escapes, my fury still fueling my reactions. There’s no way in hell he is letting me go, but this could be my only chance to actually run away from him. With this thought, I harness the rage ready to boil over inside of me, and I take off.

The beast grunts, surprised at my easy acceptance of his game, but I have no plans to play by his rules. Soon enough, I veer sharply to the left. My smaller size makes it easier to turn, but the wolf-man towers over me by nearly two heads, his body built for speed and the harshness of our brutal winters.

In no time, he’s close enough to touch, and his claws snatch at my clothes. With a growl of my own, I squirm out of Papa’s warm coat, leaving the thing behind me empty handed. The wolf-man howls, and I nearly stumble at the haunting sound.

I refuse to look back, pushing my body to the limits to get away. The wind blows across my frame, biting into my skin with the absence of Papa’s jacket, adding another hindrance in my valiant effort to escape. Everything around me fights my progress. The barren tree branches scrape my skin and catch on my hair while the snow sucks down my feet.

A scream clogs my throat as tears threaten to spill from my eyes. All I want is to be back home, safe with Papa. This final thought breaks the dam, and I sob for the one person I’ve leaned on my entire life, who’s now gone and can’t save me.

Blinded by my tears, I crash into something solid. Arms envelope me, and a familiar scent wafts into my nostrils. *Papa*. My cries come harder as relief courses through me. My father’s alright and has come to help me, but when I pull back, it’s not Papa’s kind gaze that looks down at me.

It’s the ruby-red stare of the other monster.

“Hello, love, where are you running off to?”

My body shakes, overwhelmed with the crushing realization that I’m not

free, I didn't escape, and Papa isn't here at all. Instead, it's the creature who drank my blood that holds me—and he's wearing Papa's coat, meaning I've been nothing but a pawn in their game.

On cue to this thought, the furred man steps into view, human looking again, thick beard dotted with flakes of snow. My anger long since drained away, leaving me limp in the other man's hold. Tears continue to spill down my cheeks, and I wonder if I look as pathetic as I feel. *Did I ever stand a chance?*

"Pretty girl, don't cry," the blood-drinker croons. "I'm going to make you sing."

My insides twist as he yanks my back against his chest and wrenches my head to the side, sinking his sharp teeth deep into my neck. One hand strokes my breast before clamping down hard, squeezing me there until I scream. As promised, I do sing, but it's a broken, garbled song of pain and despair.

"Stop, p-p-please!" I feebly try to push him off me but it's like trying to move stone.

The bearded man laughs at my expense, a cruel declaration of his intent to hurt me even more. For now, though, he seems content to watch his friend suck the very life from my veins. "Spread her, Elias, so I can fuck her while you drain her. I want to see the spark extinguish from her eyes when she dies, and then, I fill her corpse up with my cum."

Elias laughs. "You always come up with the most twisted ideas, Bandar."

Elias, the evil man holding me, lifts me into the air as if I were nothing but a child, and Bandar steps forward, wrenching my legs wide to fit his massive frame between them. I'm sandwiched between the two monsters, pinned in a way that ensures I can't escape, and I know... my death is now inevitable. I punch him as hard as I can and he barely notices, my knuckles stinging from connecting with his rock-hard body.

Bandar pushes my dress upward, revealing the most hidden part of me. *No. No. No.* I cry out and cringe with embarrassment, my thighs trembling with the force I exert trying to close them, but the Bandar easily counters my effort. He leans forward, aligning something long and hard at my secret spot. I jolt with recognition.

I know what that is and what he's about to do, and I fight with renewed force. *Fuck* isn't just a naughty word... *it's an act.* A terrible act that will tear me asunder, but what does it matter with Elias at my neck, drinking the very life force from my body?

Bandar positions himself at my center, a smirk still stretching his face, but howls in pain when he leans forward to nuzzle my breasts.

I blink in confusion when he pushes off me. Now off-balance, Elias unlatches from my neck, and we both tumble backwards into the snow. “You fucking idiot dog!” he shouts, keeping his hands locked on my upper arms to ensure I can’t get away. “What’s your fucking problem?!”

Bandar looks at me, eyes blazing with fury. “She burned me!”

This seems to arrest Elias, who stares down at me while I look back helplessly, shaking my head. “I d-d-didn’t!”

“The little bitch must be wearing silver!” At Bandar’s snarled words, I raise a shaky hand to Mama’s necklace, still hidden under my dress exactly where the beast placed his head against my breast.

Elias notices my reaction, reaching inside my gown to finger the heavy silver pendant, a speculative look on his face. “Leave her tits for me then while you fuck her cunt raw for daring to burn you,” he hisses, and then resumes feasting from me without warning, his touch almost savage.

Bandar contemplates his friend before shrugging and falling on top of us both, sinking Elias’s teeth deeper into my neck. Pinned once more between the two of them, I struggle against their hold.

“Hurry,” Elias splutters, and droplets of my blood splash onto my face.

Everything inside of me slows, and I know I’m close to death as Bandar once more positions himself to tear my body in two. I close my eyes, too weak to do anything else, and pray that I die soon, when a shout echoes into the night.

“HALT!” To my surprise, both my captors freeze. “You’re in direct violation of The Selection! Release the female and step back.”

The selection?

Neither monster holding me moves, and whoever spoke rushes forward, pushing Bandar off of me. He howls in pain, and I catch the glint of something being pressed into his side. Smoke and the scent of singed fur fill the air, and I realize they’re burning him—*with silver!*

Elias suddenly retracts his teeth from my neck and shoves me forward into the arms of another group of men that I hadn’t noticed. He turns to run but a man wearing some sort of uniform grabs him first. “Not so fast. You’ve broken the rules of The Selection and will stand trial before the kings.”

The creature’s sneer is painted red with my blood, adding a sinister air to his words. “The kings are dead and are never coming back!”

“They are coming back, and you’ll rue the day you crossed them,” another man in uniform vows.

A shiver runs through Elias and his smile fades. A shimmer of fear dances in his gaze, and in return, one skids down my spine. For all his bravado, this terrible monster is afraid of these so-called kings.

As I’m led away, a uniformed guard hands me back Papa’s coat, and I slip it over my dress, fingering Mama’s silver necklace through the layers of fabric. I thank him and suddenly don’t feel so alone or defenseless. There are good people in this world, these men... they saved me.

I’m learning secrets of this new world that I never knew existed, but I know I’m still largely ignorant. My only hope is that this ‘selection’ will keep me protected long enough to heal and find a cure for Papa, but a kernel of worry takes root inside of me.

What kind of terrible monsters must these kings be to scare the creature from my nightmares?

JASPER

IT'S BEEN a hundred years since the kings' demise, a century of insecurity, of a land in turmoil. A hundred years since I've served them, yet here I still stand—a human amongst monsters. It's astounding I've survived this long without meeting my own demise, not from jealous vampires but from time itself. I shouldn't be alive, shouldn't be watching out my window as a carriage arrives at Lord Vikkon's castle just down the mountain from Sintara. It contains guests ripped from the clutches of those wretched wolves for another Sanguine Selection. I shouldn't be witness to another, part of the hopeless charade which always ends in defeat.

Back when my kings were less undead than they are now, as a gift for my unwavering servitude, I was offered a chalice filled with sweet scented red liquid. Of course most would have assumed a deep, red wine swirled around the golden glass but I knew better, knew immediately what was offered. I could have said no but I could not predict their reactions to my dismissal of something they held so sacred. So I drank and it changed me, altered the very core of who I was—of who I remain to this day.

I believe that is the sole reason I remain alive today, because a part of the kings, however small, still lives within me—their faithful servant. Sometimes I'm filled with regret at my choices. Muddling through this past century has been less than enjoyable. The kings held everything together but now, the world has begun to fall apart.

Vagrants roam the thick woods, leaving their dens deep within the third ring and venturing within the inner two. Yes, we're well aware of that here in the fourth ring but have allowed it to happen. It gives the wolves something to look forward to, a chance to become the very monster they're so desperate

to portray. As if we needed more proof of their brutality.

It must be something in their blood, something they're born with, causing the fierce need to dominate and prove their power to the fourth ring. But none here blink an eye at their often vile and ruthless displays. We're too old, the elder coven members too powerful with their minds to be moved by brute strength. They don't require gnashing teeth and sharp claws for battle when they could crush you with just a thought in their minds. To a vampire lord, seduction is their greatest weapon. Well...aside from the fangs.

The wolves have grown desperate as the decades come and pass. Humans are dwindling, their numbers half of what they used to be while their poverty is the highest it's ever been. I used to campaign on their behalf, being human myself, but my efforts have not carried much weight since my kings have slumbered.

Imagine if they had listened, even once, to let the humans have more ground to cultivate and grow their population. Perhaps we would have found someone in a previous Selection years ago instead of agonizing through another uncertain round. The more females there are, the more chances to find the perfect match. But the coven had other thoughts, wishing to stay out of the problems of humanity, far below their standards of course, in spite of their obvious need for them for their own survival. It's just ridiculous. I've seen what happens when they eat only from animals—they change and not for the better.

But once, every twenty years, by order of the high ranking vampires of Libarryn, the kings' coven, the wolves legendary Hunt must cease, and the rumor is—it hasn't. Not that I needed confirmation. The constant shrieking and cries for aid travel well on the cool wind, even after it was ordered for the Hunt to stop weeks ago.

It never stops—a constant, deadly game played in the bowels of the woods. A blind eye we can turn no more, not now, not after another twenty years has passed and my kings are still withering away, buried within their gilded caskets below the frozen earth.

Outside, the carriage comes to a halt, frozen breath of the braying horses casting a mist around their heads. Carriage is really too grand a word, it's more like a cage on wheels. A network of thick iron bars offering no protection from the elements is how they've traveled. Huddled together, no doubt frozen and shivering, I count at least ten women and hope there's more.

Hope, that damned word again. When will I wipe it from my vocabulary,

bury it alongside my kings?

The members of Libarryn grow restless as the Selection approaches. Some wish to abandon the Novikov bloodline in favor of someone new, a powerful vampire who can immediately take up the empty thrones and lead Libarryn again. More than once have I stumbled upon a secret meeting I was not privy to, strained to hear the whispered words spoken in the dark corners of Sintara. Part of me understands their reasoning though my loyalty remains true in spite of what I know, what I feel.

The kings are wasting away. I fear, if a match is not found this Selection, my kings, Marek and Mikhail, the great and powerful Novikov twins, will be so far gone no amount of blood will be strong enough to wake them. I can feel it day by day, with their blood still running through my own, how weak they've become. Their slumber will soon become eternal, the ramifications of which I do not wish to see. Should that come to pass, I shall relieve my veins of every ounce of blood and rest alongside my kings.

A second carriage arrives, pulling next to the first. A wolf bound in silver howls into the night. Beside him is a lesser vampire, one I've seen lurking with those who consider usurping my lords who goes by the name Elias. I've made it a priority to learn every member of Libarryn, who they associate with, the human's they've enslaved, whose blood they drink, and the children they've created without permission from my lords in their extended absence.

It's a game, a game in which I'm playing behind the scenes. That way, I'm ready. Prepared. Should the kings arise I shall have a century's worth of information to tell them. They will not be shrouded in the dark, not on my watch.

A knock on my door has me turning away from the display below my window.

"Come."

Softly it opens and in walks Kara wearing a mostly transparent drab shift marking her as a human slave. When I first began working for the kings, I have to admit that I was most distracted by the obscene display of nudity, though I much appreciated it. So normalized it has become that I hardly even look anymore. Kara curtseys slightly, her head bowed just enough so our eyes cannot connect. "Jasper, sir. The females are being led to a holding room in Lord Vikkon's castle. They are waiting for your arrival before continuing."

"Thank you, Kara. Please inform them I am on my way."

She nods and curtseys again before closing the door behind her. I let out a deep sigh, turning back to the window. Both cages are empty of their charges, the horses pulling them back to the stables for food and warmth.

It is time.

Glancing in the mirror, I adjust my lapel, and smooth down my warm, wool jacket. I make sure every hair on my head is combed and any semblance of emotion is devoid on my face. As a human, I cause less stress to the females than our vampires do. Even the young ones are so vastly different, scary to the girls especially after having just been captured.

You see, most of them do not wish to be here, do not want to be part of the Selection. But by law they are bound to be. This does not stop them from hiding but there's no where they can hide in which a vampire cannot find them.

Another hopeless cause.

Two dozen females have already been rounded up by the Vampire Pride—a segment of guards loyal to the kings who maintain the peace and punish those who break the laws set down by the kings. Some came forth willingly, others were outed by frightened family members who understand the consequences of harboring a female of age. And some, like the women I'm about to go see, are victims, spoils of a nefarious Hunt, and probably reek of werewolf already.

As I weave my way through Sintara, walking over the worn marble floors, passing cool, stone corridors lit with flickering sconces housing yellow and orange flames, I begin to feel something stir in my chest. Anticipation maybe, a dire wish that she could be there, right now, just waiting to awake them. No. It's more than that.

I pass several open doors, none of which I peek inside of. I know what I'll see—a defiled slave, man or woman it does not matter. Forced into vulnerable positions in a usually violent display of sexual domination or feasted on for their blood, humans are but toys to the Libarryn. Toys which they frequently bore of and play with in the most sick and sadistic ways.

I pretend it does not bother me, but how could it not? Seeing them like that is a struggle I battle daily, but it is something, in my current position, I can do nothing about. Ignoring the pleased cries, the agonized screams, and the heated moans, I descend down the main staircase into the grand foyer which is open to the first three floors of Sintara. Several members of the Pride are waiting for me below and safely escort me to an awaiting carriage. I

could just walk down the mountain to Lord Vikkon's castle, but won't risk losing a toe to frostbite. This winter is one for the ages, the chill deep and colder than I can remember in years past.

As a Pride member opens the carriage door and I step inside, I notice I'm not traveling to Lord Vikkon's castle alone. Sitting on the plush, red velvet seat is Lord Navar, stroking his long, black beard. A trust exists between the two of us, having both served the mighty Novikov kings with fervor though neither of us speaks as the door clicks shut behind me.

The crack of a whip renders the night and the carriage lurches down the snow-covered cobblestone. I clasp my hands on my lap and wait for Lord Navar to break the silence. He sits quite still aside from the shifting caused by the moving carriage. Even after all these years, their stillness is still quite unnerving.

"Has it been twenty years already, Jasper?" Lord Navar casts his black eyes on me, and though vampires cannot age, he looks tired and worn.

I let out a puff of breath between my lips. "Somehow it sneaks up on us time and time again."

"And the females? Have you combed through them?"

I shake my head. "No. They've all been housed at Lord Vikkon's castle, much safer for them there than at Sintara. Libarryn has been restless of late, I'm sure you've noticed."

He offers me an almost imperceptible nod before glancing out the carriage window. "A hundred years, Jasper. A hundred years is a very long time, even to a vampire. Should this Selection not be found fruitful, we might have to consider alternatives."

I attempt and fail to be unsurprised by this but I know he can hear my heart race in spite of my stoic facial expression. "I've considered that too. Perhaps we summon all the human males as well." A lie—the kings would never hear of it but I need an excuse for my elevated pulse.

"Perhaps," he murmurs as the carriage stops. "Ahh. We're here. Best not keep the cattle in the cold for too long. Frozen milk is no good to any of us."

It takes all I have not to offer him my thoughts on his animalistic descriptions of the women. They didn't ask to be here. How dare he, especially knowing what I am. Perhaps this is a test, to see my reaction, how far I'm willing to go. The answer—to the ends of the earth. I have no limits, nothing I won't do or say for my kings' return.

Nothing.

Lord Navar steps from the carriage and I follow after. As a cold wind whips around us, we're met outside tall iron gates by half a dozen human slaves. Even in the bitter cold, they are only permitted gossamer shifts, and they shiver as they wait to escort us in. I don't offer them a second glance, can't if I wish to keep the look of pity and anger off my face.

Oh please, my kings, let me discover a perfect match for you.

The slaves bow deeply and a male steps forward. Cleanly shaven with a slight build, he looks no older than eighteen. A baby to the vampires. "Welcome to castle Drock. Lord Vikkon awaits just inside. Please, follow me sirs."

He bows with a sweeping hand and turns with the elegance of a dancer before the gates swing open. Lord Navar catches my eye and raises his dark eyebrows as we follow the slaves inside.

Through a pair of stone doors and down an arched hallway we are led, a route I've taken five times now over the past century. Standing before the holding area is Lord Vikkon. An ancient vampire, one can feel his power before you ever set eyes on him. It's almost suffocating at times as is his cockiness. "Welcome, friends." He smiles but it does not meet his eyes. "I have not done my own evaluation just yet but even through the door it does not smell promising." There's a happy glint in his eyes at the prospect of yet another failed Selection which shouldn't be there if his allegiance was to the kings.

Ignoring the sneer playing on his lips, I grasp the handle of the door. "Do not be so quick to judge, Lord Vikkon. The first test has not even begun."

Not waiting to see his reaction, I open the door, step into the barren room, and quickly close it again behind me. Twelve women gaze up at me from their seats on the cold, stone floor. The fireplace isn't even lit. My eyes graze between them, every one of them dirty, broken, or beaten. The liveliness that should be flaring in their eyes is absent. They look as hopeless as I feel.

I can smell it—their fear. Rarely is it the wish of a human woman to enter the Selection. Sure there are exceptions, a raving vampire fanatic whose only wish is to die with the lips of a vampire lord attached to them. But most have lived their lives afraid of the creatures that lurk outside the inner two rings.

And they should.

"Good evening to you all. My name is Jasper, and I will be assisting you. Most of you know why you're here, but for those who don't know, allow me to explain."

I take a deep breath, ready to recite the words I know so well as an ember of hope begins to burn as it does with each Selection. May this flame of promise be the one we can nurture...

Or I fear it will be snuffed out for eternity, never to be lit again.

OXANA

EVEN THOUGH I know I'm safe, my heart still races. My future is uncertain as I'm carted off into the unknown. Just because these men—guards—saved me from the two inhuman men back in the woods doesn't mean that they themselves aren't taking me to a different set of monsters.

Bigger ones.

Scariest ones.

I swallow thickly, trying to calm my nerves. There's no way for me to know anything for certain, so I refuse to go down that path of thought. But around me, a horde of women sobs and wails into the darkness of the night.

Surely they wouldn't keen so loudly if they didn't know their fates.

Some sick part of me enjoys their nearness, to be surrounded with other people after living a life of isolation. Squeezing myself to the front, I press against the bars of the cart being drawn by a horse. An ornate carriage rumbles along ahead of us. It speaks of a wealth I've never known and never will, and I wonder who it houses inside. Clearly someone who doesn't think we're little more than animals to be treated as such.

Whoever they are, he or she is no friend of mine.

Still, I feel safer up near the front. Although the girls around me aren't doing anything but crying, I sense the underlying tension growing—their hostility waiting to boil over. When it does, I don't want to be in their paths.

I close my eyes, resting my head against a bar, but the images that dance before me of sharp fangs and a phantom set of cold lips pressed against my neck. I quickly reopen my eyes. My hands tremble even closed around the cool bars, and I wonder if I'll ever be able to sleep peacefully again.

But I already know the answer to that.

It's not just what's happening now, but everything. Papa is at the forefront of my worries. What he turned into, not knowing if he is okay, or if he's another monster, too, waiting to hunt me down.

To hurt me—*kill me*.

The shaking in my hand drifts until my entire body trembles, half due to the bitter wind freezing my bones, the other due to intense fear. What would Papa do to me if he did become something other and hunted me down?

Hunted me and caught me like the others did. I burn with shame, my body betraying me as it comes alive at the memory of the monstrous men. What they did was wrong—and I fought them—but at the same time, I was curious about what they were going to do. My mind is torn, and I don't understand the sense of guilt that washes over me.

Perhaps it's the culmination of everything that has happened and knowing I should have just listened to Papa. Maybe none of this would've happened if I hadn't left the house, but I acknowledge there was nothing I could've done to help—or even save—my father.

Everything transpiring is far beyond my scope of understanding, and I'm just now beginning to have an inkling of the world around me. It's suffused in a darkness that gives no hope of finding the light, but it doesn't matter.

In the end, I failed Papa. He only wanted to protect me, and now I'm like a lamb being brought to slaughter. Deep down I know that I'll be bathed in my own blood, just like in my nightmares, monsters chasing me at every turn.

A shout from a guard distracts me from the morbidity of my thoughts. There, looming over the magnificent carriage, is an even more magnificent structure—a building so large my mind can barely comprehend.

Behind me, the girls stop crying to whisper amongst themselves. I catch snippets as the wind rushes their words past my ears. The word 'castle' lingers and stirs memories long forgotten, of my mother singing and telling me tales of a place so spectacular that it was beyond imagination. I barely can recall now the details of the castle she spoke of, but I thought they only existed in stories Papa calls fairytales—make believe—and yet here one stands. It's larger than life, a beacon of light in the darkness of the night.

There are hundreds of windows, each ablaze with a single candle. The glass panes are clear and clean, unlike mine back at home which are covered in frost and muck. To have such money—to have that many candles—makes my heart squeeze.

There's an opulence I never knew existed. It seems cruel that fate chose

to have Papa and me scrimp and scrape by, barely surviving one winter to the next, while some people in this world have more than enough to share for three lifetimes.

As we grow closer and closer, this castle gets bigger and bigger. It's a veritable giant of stone. When the carriage finally stops in front of massive doors, my unease grows tenfold. Nothing good can await me behind them, but ever since I heard that gong, I've feared that I'm fighting against a destiny that's come to collect.

The guards waste no time in getting all the women assembled before ushering us forward. My feet refuse to move, but a shove from someone behind me mobilizes my frozen limbs. I stumble a few steps, pins and needles stabbing my numb feet, until I'm crossing the threshold into the unknown building.

The press of bodies keeps me going as the guards herd us into a large atrium where three men wait. Two are tall with the same feral beauty as Elias, and I shrink back at the memory of him touching me. The other man is squatter, his features not nearly as smooth and handsome.

All three men appear decades older than me, but the shorter one looks more worn, his forehead wrinkled with time and something more. *Worry*. It's this less imposing figure of the trio that steps forward to address us.

We're guided through a door into a smaller, colder room where the worried man joins us and shuts the door behind him. "Good evening to you all. My name is Jasper, and I will be assisting you. Most of you know why you're here, but for those who don't know, allow me to explain." He spreads his arms wide, a poor impression of a smile pulling on his thin lips. "Welcome to Castle Drock, your first stop in The Selection. If you're found worthy during the first round of testing, you will go through a second round, and then a third after that. We are looking for a very *special* woman whose blood will rouse our kings."

My throat goes dry. Rouse the kings? From what? And why is our blood necessary?

A wave of fear permeates this room. As I dart my eyes from the face of one girl to the next, I realize just how terrified they are. For once, my ignorance might actually work in my benefit. I don't know what to be afraid of.

Jasper pauses, gauging our reactions. Most women huddle in on themselves, hiding their faces, attempting to become as small as possible as I

wonder who these kings might be. “I am the personal messenger of the kings. I alone carry their royal decree to speak for them in their absence. As I’m sure you’ve surmised, there is a world here in the fourth ring unlike the one you’ve been raised in. Even if you come from the second ring, where humans willfully serve vampires, many of you still do not understand the magnitude of why you’re here.”

He pauses to let his words sink in, and I mull over the fact that there are four rings, and his use of the word, ‘vampire’. Although I’ve never heard it before, I instinctively know he means the creatures from my dreams—*the ones who drink blood*. Ones like Elias. I finger the bite on my neck and my heart races as I realize I’ve been brought here to serve them—to be their fucking food.

Jasper clasps his white-gloved hands in front of himself. “Each of you will provide a sampling of your blood. If it is determined special enough for more testing, you’ll advance to the second round of The Selection and be taken to the next location. If not... well, we’ll address that when the time comes. For now, please follow Lena to be bathed and prepared for the sampling.”

With this, we’re dismissed. All the other women turn to the maid, but I balk at blindly following orders from a man who isn’t my father. He has no authority over me, nor do I have any allegiance to his kings.

It’s foolish to fight, this I know. I’m outnumbered, and the guards have proven they have a supernatural strength. But at the same time, I cannot simply hand over my life. When everyone else follows Lena, I turn toward the man called Jasper. “Please, sir, what happens if our blood is not found to be what you are wanting?”

Although not the most pressing of my concerns, it is something I’d like to know—what could happen to me and the other women if we don’t have what they’re looking for. The squat man approaches me, sniffing the air. “I don’t think that will be a problem for you, my dear. For now, go get bathed. Enjoy the hot water. It will help soothe your nerves. You will be given clean clothing and some food. And I promise that nothing bad will happen to you here. The Selection is an honor. And every woman, regardless of whether she continues or not, is provided for.”

I blink in surprise at his words. Before when he spoke, it hadn’t sounded like this was an honor. Instead, his announcement was foreboding with ominous undertones. I open my mouth to ask more questions to see if there’s

another way out, but Jasper steps forward to gently push me toward the group of women walking away. “Go, my child. Your destiny awaits you.”

In truth, I'm too tired to argue with him, and so I follow the others like the meek little lamb I've always been. The thought of a hot bath is a novelty, and food is something I desperately need if I have any prayer of regaining my strength.

Lena leads us back into the atrium and up three flights of stairs—*three flights!*—and I marvel at the vastness of this place. The group of women turn this way and that way, pointing and whispering amongst themselves as we pass paintings, fountains, and statues. Clearly, they are just as overwhelmed and in awe as I am.

“Come along!” Lena calls out briskly. “This way.” She ushers us through a door into a room lined with benches against a wall. “Here you can take off your things and set them down. Through the next door is the bathing pool. Once you are all clean, you will enter another room to get dressed. Only then will you be fed.”

We all nod in understanding. Immediately, the rest of the girls start to undress. I'm slower at the task and obviously much more self-conscious, averting my eyes from the expanse of nude flesh now before me.

Not until everyone is out do I slowly slip off my dress. I finger my necklace, taking it off and placing it in the pocket of my mother's fur dress. I'm worrying about what will happen to my clothes when Lena pops her head back in. “Hurry up, dearie.”

“Lena, will I get my dress back? It was my mother's and has sentimental value.”

The maid's eyes widen at my request. “Of course, but most women are happy to take the new clothes and want nothing to do with the old.”

Although she doesn't say it in a scolding manner, I bite my lip, feeling ungrateful—which is ridiculous since I've been brought here not necessarily against my will, but I certainly didn't come running.

Lena's stare lowers to my breasts and then further south, and I place a hand in front of me. Her gaze snaps back to mine, and I see something familiar swimming in their depths. Bandar and his Elias wore such expressions when they looked at me. I shrink back as a strange tingle overcomes me. Splashing echoes behind us, snapping Lena out of her daze. “It sounds like the other girls are already getting out. Come along. We don't want to keep Lords Vikkon and Nevar waiting.”

Cautiously, I slip out, relieved to see that she's right. I hope Lena's too busy attending to the other women to come back and check on me when I'm swimming in the pool naked. I walk over to the edge of the large rectangle sunk into the floor filled with water. I'm awestruck. An entire room purely for bathing. You could fit six beds in here. Hell, the expanse of the room would take up half of my tiny house.

Steam rises from the water, telling me that it is indeed warm. I dip a toe in to test, finding the temperature most pleasant. Carefully, I creep down the steps, submerging myself. Although I cannot swim, I let myself sink below the surface, holding my breath and pretending none of this is happening. After a bit, I come back up for air.

As Jasper predicted, the water does soothe my nerves, and I wish I could stay in here forever. But I know Lena will be back soon, so I grab a towel to dry off before heading to the other room to get dressed.

The gown provided is made of the finest silk and is a luminous shade of white, as if highlighting the purity of our sacrifice. When I finally have it smoothed over my hips, I try and tug the bodice up, as my breasts threaten to spill out.

"It's supposed to be low-cut." I startle, turning to see Lena leaning against the door. "Ready to eat?"

In answer, my stomach rumbles, and I laugh ruefully. "Yes."

She gestures towards a flight of stairs and I descend down them, following the mouthwatering scents of a hot meal. I spot the long tables lined with food stretch from one end of the room to the other, enough to feed Papa and me for a year. It's a veritable feast, and I can't tell whether the tears that sting my eyes are ones of resentment or gratitude for this boon.

Like a feral beast, I rush toward the tables and fall upon the platters, stuffing my mouth while trying to be mindful of Lena and my too-white gown. I wash everything down with a deep red liquid that makes my head dizzy. The maid rushes forward when I pour another glass.

"Whoa, slow down. It's only meant to cleanse your palette, but too much will dilute your blood and Lords Vikkon and Nevar must taste you at your fullest."

Taste me? Like Elias did? The food in my mouth turns to ash as she so casually talks about these men drinking my blood. Before I can say anything, Lena presses something into my hand. I glance down as my fingers curl around the top of my mother's necklace. "Don't lose this. It's special, I can

tell.”

The necklace warms in my hand. “Um, thank you.” She nods and turns away but I call her back. “Lena, do you know what happens to women whose blood is not worthy?”

Lena straightens her back, hands clasped before her. “You’re given the option to serve at court or return home.”

“What happens when someone goes back?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I chose to serve.”

Her words startle me, and I look at her with new eyes. “You were part of The Selection?”

“Twenty years ago.”

“Why... why did you choose to stay?”

Her brown gaze holds mine steady as she answers. “For security. For the pleasure that they give you.”

My brows knit together in confusion. Security I can understand, but pleasure? “What pleasure?”

Lena clutches at the white ruffle at her neck. “You are untouched, and it’s not my place to tell you... but the feeling they can give when they take their fill of your blood is indescribable. Enough that I’ve never looked back on my past.”

I tremble at this, because deep down, I know she speaks the truth.

If I stay, I might very well lose my soul.

OXANA

MY HEAD IS SPINNING but my belly is full. Perhaps a little too full, as a burp creeps up my throat and I try to swallow it down. Never in my life have I been in a situation where food is abundant, where empty platters are quickly replaced with freshly cooked and perfectly seasoned meat. Where bowls with mounds of mashed potatoes bathed in swaths of butter are steaming hot and ready to be gobbled down. Where loaves of bread pulled right from the oven fill the room with the smells of home.

Of home...

Ignoring the ache in my chest, I wipe my mouth and pretend to have manners but quickly realize I'm not the only girl to devour her food. A girl a year or two younger than me, her arms like twigs, eats the potatoes right from the serving bowl. A pair of twins sits towards the end of the table, delicately using their forks and knives to bring small slivers of food to their mouths, eyes looking down at the rest of us in disdain. No doubt they hail from the second ring.

It's now, dragging my eyes from the twins, that I even realize the expanse of the dining area. The tables must be as long as my entire house, perhaps even more. Dozens of wooden chairs housing women anywhere from a young sixteen to those in their late thirties are polished, gleaming under the soft lighting of flickering candles. Above us, the arched ceiling is painted with the snarling faces of demons with gray bodies ripping flesh from the pale necks of naked female victims.

I swallow hard, and so do the others who followed my gaze. Fear begins to sink in and the gauzy dress we've been put in feels like a beacon of death, the way Papa told me the dead used to be dressed in their finest as they were

laid to rest below the earth. Lambs for slaughter. Ripe fruit ready for picking.

I glance from face to face, wondering at how very different we all are, marveling that this many different faces could be looking back at me. One girl has hair a shade of orange I've never seen before, another has one thick eyebrow where there should be two. One of the oldest of us waddles around the table, her belly heavy with child. I've never seen a pregnant person before, only imagined it in my mind, from the stories Papa would tell of Mom when she was pregnant with me.

It's incredible, to grow a life within you and I press my hands to my own belly somehow knowing I'll never get that chance. No one speaks as forks, knives, and spoons are laid on the impressive table, not even a whisper of wonder, encouragement, empathy. It's the calm before the storm, I can almost feel the tension rippling across my skin.

A pain against my palm has me relaxing my fingers around the necklace, and as a set of double doors swings open, I quickly place the necklace over my head but keep the charm behind me, resting against my spine, covered by my hair. The way Lena spoke of it confirms that it has some value and I do not wish for it to be stolen. Perhaps the chain alone wouldn't be worth the effort.

Lords Vikkon and Navar saunter in with a fluidity in their movements that feels almost unnatural. They flash smiles at us in what is supposed to be a disarming sort of way, but their teeth are too white, almost animalistic, feral. And it just makes them look scary. Someone whispers the word, "Vampires," behind me. The face of Elias flashes in my mind, of his lips on my neck, tasting my blood, the sting of his bite.

Peering at the Lords, I notice many similarities to Elias. The stillness of their actions, the pale skin, foreboding smiles. There is something so distinctly inhuman about them, something that reminds me of Elias. These Lords, indeed, are vampires. My blood runs cold. The instinct is to run from them, to get away, to hide all my skin from their hungry eyes. But I'm stuck, a prisoner without shackles.

Lord Navar steps forward, stroking his long, black beard. "Welcome to the Sanguine Selection. You are the lucky thirty-five, women who have the potential of being the chosen one to wake our kings." His voice is melodic, alluring, soothing almost. "As there is no higher honor for a human female, precautions must remain in place and testing must be done. As Jasper informed you, a sampling of your blood will be taken and the high ranking

lords of our coven, Libarryn, will taste them all. It is our hope that one or more of you will stand out amongst the others, that a few of you will be exquisite and unique enough to make the cut and give us cause for a second round. Now, if you will, please follow me.”

With a sweep of his tailcoat, he heads back through the door, Lord Vikkon on his heels. Tentatively, we push our chairs back and stand, no one wanting to be the first to follow. With an annoyed huff, the twins mumble, “Well I guess we’ll go first,” and head out the door, their long, auburn braids, swaying behind them.

The rest of us hurry after them into a narrow stone corridor. Niches carved into the walls house grotesque statues illuminated by candles, the wavering shadows making the creatures appear to be moving. I can almost hear them growling.

Our bare feet pad along the cold floor and I wrap my arms around myself trying to stave off the chill that these flimsy dresses do nothing to suppress. On the hottest day of summer I’d still be wearing more than this.

An orange glow up ahead has me craning my neck to see what awaits us. I scent burning wood of a fire but something else as well, a heady, enticing smell that has my mouthwatering but not for hunger.

Funneled into this next room, the lucky thirty-five as we have been referred to are lined up against an empty gray wall. Directly across from us, perched in elaborate, plush chairs are men and women so hauntingly beautiful that I almost can’t look at them, but at the same time can’t tear my gaze away. Dressed in sharp suits, and curve hugging gowns, hair perfectly styled, facial hair neatly trimmed—they must be the high ranking individuals Lord Navar spoke of and amongst their ranks are Lords Vikkon and Navar themselves.

To my right a massive hearth houses a blazing fire but the hearth itself has my breath catching. For this is no ordinary fireplace. Carved into a great, gaping maw, this fire roars behind a set of sharp, stone teeth, ensconced inside the mouth of a beast.

It’s terrifying.

The woman standing next to me trembles and I reach for her hand, giving it a squeeze so she knows she’s not alone. Because nothing in this world is worse than being alone. The door swings open and in walks Jasper, the man who first greeted us, his ancient face and white hair less oppressive than the others. He bows deep to the lords and ladies before turning to us, hands

clasped before him.

“Now that you’ve been bathed and dressed, I hope you all are feeling much better. I trust the meal was prepared to your liking.” He reclasps his hands behind his back and begins walking the length of the room. “I’m sure you’re all wondering how this sampling is to be completed. And while I cannot in good faith assure you it’s painless, I can confirm that this is the only way for it to be done without contamination.” Lord Vikkon snaps his fingers loudly and the door opens again, this time allowing entrance to a man and woman even more scantily clad than we are, causing more than one of us to gasp. The woman’s hair is a soft brown and curly, bobbing against her shoulders. Her barely there gown does nothing to hide her...assets yet she has no shame in her face, not a hint of embarrassment as her breasts bounce with each step she takes, nipples pressing against the fabric. The man, handsome and clean shaven with long dark hair bound at the base of his neck, wears only a pair of loose pants in the same sheer material displaying a thick length between his legs that sways as he moves, and I find I want to see it up close.

Bands of metal are bound to their forearms, and another encases their necks, all of which have empty rings dangling off of them, ready to house a charm perhaps, or maybe something more sinister.

Both are carrying a serving tray filled with silver chalices. The man offers them to each lord and lady who take one without even acknowledging him with so much as a glance or a grunt, just disregarded as a lowly servant, a *slave*. Once his tray is empty, he bows deeply and leaves. The woman waits with patience to be called on.

Jasper pauses and beckons one of the twins forward. She holds her head high and tosses her braid over her shoulder, stopping a few feet in front of him. Jasper extends a hand to a handsome lord with dark skin and bronze eyes that almost seem to burn with excitement. The lord places an ornate item in his hands and I realize as a blade flicks open, that it’s a knife, and by the looks of it, quite sharp.

The twins’ sass falters as Jasper firmly grips her forearm and exposes the tender flesh on the inside. “Hold still or this will only be worse,” he orders as he places the blade along her skin...

And cuts.

“Ahh!” she cries out, attempting to tug her arm away but Jasper’s grip holds—the old man must be stronger than he looks.

“Hold still, I said,” he barks sharply. Red blood seeps to the surface of the

cut and, cradling her arm gently, Jasper leads her to the ladies and lords. To my horror they extend their chalices, catching her blood. Down the row of lords and ladies she's lead and Jasper squeezes blood from the girl to fill each one's cup. The skinny girl faints where she stands and another gags as one by one, the beautiful people bring the cups to their lips, sniff and drink.

Drinking blood.

Vampires...

I have a hard time believing this is real. Surely I'm really at home, tucked in bed, stuck inside one of my nightmares and unable to wake. This can't be real, can't be happening. They speak to each other in a language I've never heard and by the surprise in the other women's faces, neither have they.

The twin is escorted from the room but her sister isn't having it. "Where are you taking her?" she demands.

"To a safe place, I can assure you," Jasper soothes, his voice cool and even.

Her face reddens, fury in her eyes. "I demand—"

"You demand nothing," a lady with venomous green eyes hisses. "You are here for us, for the kings, not for her. And if you have forgotten as much, we'd be happy to remind you." Out of the shadows, two menacing looking men emerge, larger and more terrifying than the rest. A length of chain dangles from the pale hand of one and he cocks his head as if daring her to defy him.

The remaining twin shrinks back into line, mumbling an apology, head hanging in defeat. A scream echoes from outside the room but is quickly cut off and I gulp at the insinuation. The slave woman offers clean goblets to the ladies and lords, who load her tray with their soiled cups. Jasper beckons a second girl forward. And another. And another. Each slice of skin met with a groan or a hiss, each taste of blood seeming to be unremarkable. The girls are led from the chamber that is until the skinny girl's turn.

A soft murmur picks up as her blood is tasted and instead of leaving the room, she's escorted to the other side of the hearth, her arm wrapped in white cloth to stop the bleeding. Servants enter and exit, bringing clean cups and taking away those tarnished with blood. After a dozen more girls are sampled, only one more has joined the skinny girl—the girl with bright, orange hair. I'm filled with relief when the pregnant woman is escorted out, glad she's not made it to the next round and will be returned back home.

At least...I hope that's what's to be done with those whose blood isn't to

standard.

My feet are frozen as the rest of the girls are called forward, another two are set aside until it's finally my turn—the last of the thirty-five. The lords and ladies look bored by this point as they take clear, crystal glasses this time. I can't hide my shaking when I extend my arm to Jasper. The knife this time comes from Lord Vikkon and as Jasper slices through my skin accompanied by my own pained hiss, Jasper bristles. His eyes flick to mine before he conquers his emotion and hovers my bloody arm over the empty glasses.

In some messed up way, there is a beauty to it, to the dripping liquid, how it erupts from my arm, the way it pools in the bottom of the glasses. As the ladies and lords bring my blood to their noses and inhale, I notice a few reactions similar to Jasper's and wonder how awful it must smell to them for such stoic and schooled individuals to be unable to control their reactions of clear disgust.

Heat blazes on my cheeks and I avert my gaze back to my arm, unwilling to watch them gag on the taste of my blood knowing how the smell affected them so. I hear someone groan, another belts out a satisfied exhale after drinking me down and I wonder if maybe it wasn't so bad. Then scold myself for wishing that it tasted good to them. Because why do I care if they like it or not?

Right?

I mean, the goal is to leave this castle and return home.

Right???

I lie to myself, saying that I only wish to make it through the next round to see more of the castle, more of the people who live here. That my captivity at the hands of my father has just made me more curious than others. The lie festers as Jasper wraps my arm and to my utter surprise, doesn't have me escorted from the room. Instead I join the other four girls who have passed the first round.

The woman with poisoned eyes stands abruptly and walks my way, grabbing me by the arm. "Not her, Jasper. Her blood held nothing of consequence. I'll personally lead her to my own castle so you don't have to dispose of her yourself."

"Not so fast, Belladonna," Lord Navar growls, standing quickly. His next words to her are in the other language. She shouts back at him, her fingers sliding up my arm to my neck. As another lady joins Lord Navar's cause,

Belladonna reluctantly releases me and storms from the room, winking at me before the door shuts behind her.

I turn to look at the other girls whose faces harbor the same confusion as my own. Why did that woman, Belladonna, try to take me for herself? And what about my blood made the others insist that I move on?

When the talking dies down, the lords and ladies rise from their chairs, one even going so far as to drag his finger through the dregs of my blood and suck the remnants off the tip before setting his glass down on the empty tray. “Exquisite. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again soon.”

As each glass is set down and the beautiful ones leave, I notice that not a single drop of my blood remains in any glass. Not one drip.

I swallow hard and lick my lips, the other girls noticing as well. Jasper watches all the lords and ladies leave aside from Lords Vikkon and Navar before speaking to us again. “Congratulations to our top five women. A carriage will escort you to Sintara for the next round. There, I will lead you to your rooms for the night. Tomorrow the second round of the Sanguine selection will begin. Please follow Lord Vikkon. And join me in thanking him for his hospitality today.”

We mumble our thanks, unsure of what to say as we file past Jasper and out the door. Through more winding corridors we walk before ending back in the atrium where it all began. Those huge metal doors groan open and a gust of snow filled wind. My feet are already burning from the thought of dredging through snow when we’re all given back the clothes we arrived in. Gratefully I slip on Papa’s coat and my fur boots, relishing the warmth and the smell of them before we’re led outside. At least our ride this time won’t be in a cold, iron bar-lined box. A man wearing a pressed uniform of crimson and gold even opens the carriage door for us and offers us his hand before we enter.

The seats are luxurious, hugging my backside, giving me comfort even as my arm throbs from the knife wound. The man leans in as the last of us sits. “Keep the curtains closed at all times. That is an order.” Then he shuts the door and the distinct click of a lock sounds. None of us attempt to open the door or even speak to each other as the carriage jostles and begins to move.

From the angle of the carriage, I can feel we’re going uphill and the patter of horse hooves strains. The trip isn’t long and soon the carriage comes to a stop. Eyes wide, my lower belly gives an uncomfortable twinge and I brush off the pain as being nervous.

When the door opens, and we exit, I realize we're not outside anymore, but rather, inside a large, covered space housing a dozen or more horses and a whole fleet of carriages. It smells foul and my nose wrinkles as I wave uselessly at the air before me. The uniformed man appears and mutters, "Follow me."

A few of us exchange worried glances but hurry behind him, not wanting to be the brunt of his anger should we not obey his commands. Up a flight of stone stairs to a wooden door we're led. Knuckles bashing against the knotty oak, he knocks four times. A moment later the door swings open and Jasper appears in the threshold, white gloved hands clasped before him. It's almost a relief to see him, a familiar face amongst all this newness and uncertainty, even if he greets us with a solemn expression and just a hint of a nod. "Welcome to Sintara, a castle rich with history, and the home of our beloved kings. Here you will stay as guests until the Selection is complete. I must warn you to stay within your given rooms. It is not safe for you to wander about the halls while our kings remain...detained. Now, if you would please allow me to escort you through the castle. And don't touch anything along the way."

Wrapping Papa's coat tight around me, I follow after Jasper, the rest of the girls close behind me. The passages we take are much like the other castle, narrow stone walls and high ceilings, though no tapestries or paintings line the corridors here. It's bare and cold, smelling musky as if fresh air has struggled to find a way in. Torches blaze in sporadic sconces as our footsteps echo loudly, making it sound as if there are many more of us than just five. Well. Five girls, Jasper, and the grumpy servant in the uniform.

My thighs tremble as we're met with more stairs, worn from the hundreds of shoes which have traveled across them over time. Up and up the spiralizing steps ascend until I'm almost dizzy and sweat coats my skin making me flap Papa's jacket to get some air within it. Heavy breathing comes from behind me and I know I'm not the only one struggling from exertion. Yet Jasper, old as he appears with his stark white hair, seems unfazed as if he climbs these very stairs routinely.

Perhaps he does. Maybe it was his footfalls alone that wore the stone smooth below my feet. Another twinge deep in my gut has me gripping my lower abdomen and a small hiss escapes my lips. No one seems to notice, for which I'm grateful. I can't say why but I don't want to appear weak in this oppressive castle, or injured in any way.

As I ponder the pain, our hike up the stairs ends and we enter a hallway lined with arched doors. But as we walk past the first one, I realize they're not doors—they're bars, and they aren't just rooms behind them, but cells.

I swallow hard, clutching Mom's necklace in my hand for comfort. Jasper stops at the end and turns to face us. "Your rooms, ladies. Complete with private bathing chambers, a change of clothes, and freshly made beds. An assortment of breads and cheeses are waiting for you as well. As a precaution you will be locked inside but rest assured—though it may appear contradictory to my words, you are not prisoners here. This is for your own safety. Servants!"

As Jasper shouts the final word, a pair of servants appears in each doorway, one man and one woman wearing similarly scantily clad clothes as the servants we saw in the other castle. A pair comes out to greet me and as they link their arms through mine and gently guide me inside a room. I release Mom's necklace, allowing it to proudly rest against my dress. Jasper's eyes widen for half a second, locking on the charm but he schools his expression so fast that I wonder if I imagined it. The servants' grip is surprisingly firm as I'm led beyond the bars and inside the room.

Before me is a bed big enough for two with an iron headboard ornately decorated. Plush crimson bedding smelling of spring flowers perfumes the air, the blankets accompanied by several fluffed pillows. Candles burn atop a bedside table where a tray filled with bread and cheese waits to be eaten.

A fire roars to my left, making the room warm and cozy, and a rocking chair sits in front of it inviting me to enjoy the dancing flames. And spread out, covering most of the stone floor, is an elaborate rug woven in a mix of yellows, reds, and hints of blue.

"This is where you'll stay," the woman murmurs, petting my shoulder with her free hand. "And through here is where you'll bathe and wash to prepare." They tug me past the bed to another room complete with a washing basin, and to my surprise, a toilet made out of a shiny white material. Much better than the rather smelly one Papa carved from the stump of a fallen tree.

I try not to dwell on my father, to wonder if the sickness has taken him to the world beyond ours or perhaps some place worse. Though it does give me peace to think of him and Mother together again.

The servants release their grip on my arms and begin tugging my coat off my shoulders. "Let us help you relax," the man croons. But I push away from them.

“I don’t need your help, thanks,” I grunt out, shrugging back into the coat. Unperturbed by my refusal, they simply bow and make their way out, closing and locking the sliding bars behind them.

Leaving me trapped.

I let out a deep sigh and walk over to the bed, flinging myself on the soft blankets, staring at the ceiling. The pain twists in my gut again and I stifle a groan, curling on my side, bringing my knees up to my chest.

What’s happening to me?

Then it hits me...

The full moon.

The tonic...

The tonic! Is this what Papa tried to stave off? Some horrible sickness that comes with the full moon?

Tears blur my vision as I grit my teeth against another wave of pain, and not just the one low in my belly, but the one inside my broken heart. The discomfort travels from to my lower back, and up to my breasts, even my nipples ache as I touch them.

“What is happening to me?” I whisper to the empty room, hugging my knees, wondering with desperation how I ended up here.

Isolated.

Alone.

Dying...

Maybe Papa was contagious, his sickness running havoc through my veins, turning my body into something other—something inhuman.

Sure I’ll never find rest here in this place of false freedom, in this elegant prison, I grip Mom’s necklace tightly in my hands and let the tears fall freely.

I’m so tired of faking I’m okay when I’m not. So tired of pretending to be brave when I’m so broken and scared.

I’m so tired...

My eyes close and sleep takes me...

But my nightmare is only beginning.

OXANA

I WAKE UP WITH A START, disoriented and soaked in sweat. The room is dimly lit by the faint glow of the dying fire, casting eerie shadows on the walls. The excruciating pain that plagued me before my slumber lingers like a haunting memory. I clutch my abdomen, trying to steady my breathing.

Where am I?

The realization comes crashing back – I'm in Sintara, trapped in this opulent prison with no way out. The cozy room feels like a mockery, a gilded cage meant to deceive. A glance at the door reveals it's too far away for me to even see if it's locked.

Panic grips me as the agony within rises up like a surging storm. My mind scrambles to recall everything that's happened, but my thoughts are a jumbled mess made hazy by the tempest raging inside of me.

My fingers instinctively reach for my mother's necklace as a source of comfort. The pendant rests hidden beneath my dress, nestled against my skin. It's the only tangible connection to my past, my family, my home. I clutch at it, wishing this was all a dream.

Another wave of pain ripples through me, my body feeling like it's betraying me, twisting and contorting the very bones and muscle that formed me. Desperation takes hold, and I curl into a fetal position.

Screaming in anguish, the sound is a raw roar of pure suffering that echoes around the room. The door suddenly crashes open, and I freeze, barely twisting my head to peek past my pain and fear of who it might be.

It's not the guards or the servant from before, but Jasper. His face appears expressionless, but a flicker of concern flairs in his gaze when he takes in my trembling form. The entirety of the bed shakes under the weight of my

shivering.

“Are you cold?”

“N-n-no,” I bite out past the torment.

“What’s wrong?”

“I...don’t know. This pain—it's too much. It feels like I'm being torn apart from the inside.”

Jasper steps closer, peering down at me, and sniffs. He fucking sniffs, as if my pain were a scent in the air. His eyes widen. “I know it's unbearable, but you're stronger than you think. You must carry on—for their sake.”

Once more, the eviscerating sting slices through my stomach, blotting out Jasper’s cryptic words. My back bows off the bed, and I swear that my insides are being shredded. I wrap an arm around my midsection, unconsciously rocking, desperate for any relief. Sorrow fills me when I conclude that’s the only rational explanation for the source of such pain.

“I’m dying, aren’t I? My father, he... he always had me take a tonic before the full moon, but I wasn’t able to this time.”

The strange man shakes his head. “No, you’re not dying.”

The familiar horror returns because if I’m not dying, then... “Oh God, I’m becoming a monster.”

My companion heaves a sigh. “What is a monster, Oxana? Is it defined by its appearance, or its actions? Or is it something more complex, something hidden beneath the surface, waiting to be understood after centuries of being misjudged?”

His words hang in the air, a profound question that lingers in the midst of my suffering. Part of me rebels at his enigmatic questions, the pain overwhelming everything. I know he’s trying to tell me something but I don’t understand why he simply doesn’t say what he means.

I shift, turning over to face him to ask, but Jasper leans forward to trace the edge of my pendant, staring as if all my answers are within it. Before I can react, he takes my mother’s ankh from around my neck, lifting it into the air until the moonlight glints off the surface.

The man cradles it in his hands, and then, with a careful twist, Jasper reveals the dagger hidden within. My eyes widen in astonishment as the tiny blade flashes with an otherworldly sheen. I gasp, dazed by the realization that he knew it was there all along.

"How did you know that was there?"

Jasper's gaze meets mine, a sad smile curling the edge of one side of his

mouth. "There are many things about this place that you have yet to discover, Oxana. They will be revealed—but all in good time."

I want to scream at this, but the cramping in my stomach increases, the intensity of my pain growing with every passing second. I squeeze my abdomen, a strangled cry escaping my lips before I start coughing and gasping for breath. Blood coats my tongue, the red drops spackling my dry mouth.

Jasper mutters something before he slips the dagger back into its hidden sheath and returns it around my neck. His touch is surprisingly gentle, but still, I whimper at the contact. Even the slightest brush of his fingers sends untold agony spiraling through me.

"Easy, child. Breathe—this shall pass."

A snort gets strangled in my throat, and I choke around the sound. Whatever is happening isn't going to pass. In fact, I have a feeling it's just going to get worse. The pain wracking my body radiates into my soul and doesn't show any sign of abating.

And yet, Jasper's presence soothes me. Maybe I instinctively know he means me no harm, or perhaps in my darkest hour, I'm lonely and searching to find comfort or companionship. Either way, Jasper provides a calm that I can no longer perpetuate.

I find myself clutching his arm as if he were the only lifeline in this turbulent sea of internal suffering. The moments stretch on, marked by my labored breathing and this pain that seems to have no end.

Breathless and drenched in sweat, I pant. Tears blur my vision, and I'm overcome by the relentless despair of my situation. Tugging Jasper closer, I pull his face near mine with a trembling hand.

"Please, I can't bear this any longer. You must put me out of my misery!"

Jasper recoils in shock, his expression an echo of my own when Papa asked me to do the same. At the time, I was appalled that he dared ask such a thing of me, but now...now I understand. To kill him would've been a mercy if he felt even a fraction of the agony pulsing through my body.

"No, child. I know it feels like you are dying, but you are not meant to depart from this world yet. You have a greater mission to fulfill here first."

I groan, rocking my body to soothe the pain. "What mission? Nothing you say makes sense!"

"You are changing—not into a monster like you think—but what you are destined to become."

More tears stream down my face, blinding me as I try to process his words. "Changing? What does that even mean?"

He steps back toward me, reaching down to brush a matted blonde strand of hair away from my face. "There are forces at play here that are far beyond our understanding. You're part of something much larger, Oxana, and I promise you, I'll do everything I can to help you through this, but to do so, you must come with me."

I nod weakly, unable to summon any more words. The pain is a relentless tide, threatening to drown me in its vicious torment. All I can do is hold on, praying that Jasper indeed can help me—that there's a light at the end of this agonizing tunnel.

As the world around me dissolves into a whirlwind of sensations and disorienting flashes, I feel like I'm being torn apart and remade. The pain surges to an almost unbearable peak, and I clench my fists, trying to endure the indescribable transformation.

I gag at the pain, my belly contracting as if a fist was gripping my insides and twisting. The ache flows lower, deeper, throbbing between my legs. An agonized cry expels from my lungs, a sound I've never made before.

A sound like dying. Around us, bellowing through the corridors of this ancient, stone castle, snarls ring out, and a tremor shakes the entire castle as if it's just woken from a century's long slumber. Even through the window, howls render the night, cleave through my pain, adding something more nefarious—fear.

Unable to control his emotions, Jasper swallows hard, eyebrows arched as he looks me up and down. A second wave of growls, hisses, and other animalistic grunts pound through my ears, closer this time.

Jasper stills, turning towards the open doorway, sniffing again. "We must hurry," he utters. His arms wrap around me, surprisingly strong, lifting me effortlessly off the bed. My heart skips a beat, and I gasp in surprise as Jasper carries me out of the room as if I weigh less than the down feathers we used to stuff our pillows.

Jasper strides down the halls of the castle with purpose, as if he has every right to be there although I know he is no Lord. There is a presence that surrounds the man like a cloak, an unseen authority that must be directly linked to his status with his masters.

Breathing through the cramps as Jasper instructed, I try to make note of where the man is carrying me, but eventually give up. There are more twists

and turns than a winding river, and the hallways more numerous than the snow that falls in winter.

After descending many floors, Jasper pushes into a dimly lit chamber. It's filthy, the very air clogged with dust from Jasper entering and disturbing the quiet. The room is a stark contrast to the spotlessness of the rest of the castle, and despite my pain, I'm intrigued.

Shelves line the room from top to bottom, full of books. I've never seen so many in one place, but Jasper ignores the treasure trove of knowledge. He stops before a tapestry depicting two men. Even in the haze of my pain, I note they are the most handsome men I've ever seen and completely identical.

Twins.

Jasper brushes aside the vibrant wall hanging to reveal a door. He sets me down, where I collapse to my knees, unable to hold my body upright. The man apologizes profusely while reaching inside his elegant tunic to retrieve a key.

With it, he unlocks the door and swings it open. Immediately inside, stone stairs spiral downward. Jasper scoops me back up and descends into the darkness. The air is cool and musty, and his steps reverberate as we make our way deeper into the castle's hidden depths.

My breathing turns erratic, fear taking up residency beside the pain eating me alive. I can't see a thing, but Jasper appears calm, walking with confidence. Either his vision is a thousand times better than mine, or he knows this stairwell better than his own reflection.

Eventually, he stops, setting me down once more. There's a rattle and creak as he opens yet another door, and then, silence. Only the sound of my panting fills the space. I sit there for a small eternity, too scared to move, when a light pierces my eyes.

It's Jasper, returning with a lantern. He uses it to prop open the door before turning back to light the others in the chamber. When he's finished, Jasper once more picks me up without complaint—nor permission, but I'm too weak to argue.

Despite being in the bowels of the castle, the room Jasper walks into is *cavernous*, the ceiling so high that it disappears into darkness above our heads. The chamber itself is filled with stone pillars that stretch upward, all made of the same smooth, white stone of palatial structure.

In the center of the room sits an enormous circular dais made of stone. On the smooth, pale surface, intricately carved symbols dance in the lantern light.

Although I can't read what it says, my already heaving stomach twists at the sight of them.

As Jasper approaches the dais, I sense the subtle vibration emanating from the stone—like the heartbeat of the castle itself. The carvings on the stone begin to glow, their otherworldly light casting strange shadows on the walls.

The very air hums with a mysterious energy, and I can feel the weight of centuries pressing down upon us. It's as if we're on the cusp of unveiling a long-forgotten secret, a revelation that has been hidden from the world for far too long.

And there, atop of the raised dais, is a massive gold sarcophagus, from where all the shadows of the room stretch out. It's as if the tomb is a beacon for them, calling the darkness inside while the light is repelled.

I shudder, half in pain, half in premonition. If Jasper notices, he says nothing, just continues the silent trek that brings us ever closer to this macabre throne. It's then that I realize who rests inside the sarcophagus.

“J-Jasper, put me down. I want to go back upstairs.”

Again, he ignores me. I struggle in his hold, my anger and fear giving me the strength to fight back, but my bravado is ill-matched for the man. He simply weathers my attempt with a stoic expression until I tire. Eventually, I go limp, the rush of energy leaving me spent and aching. The pain I had forgotten for a moment returns.

A guttural scream escapes my lips, echoing through the chamber's ancient stone walls. My world narrows to a single, excruciating point of suffering. I double over, clutching my abdomen as if trying to quell the relentless turmoil within.

Jasper's voice is a distant murmur, lost in the tempest of my pain. He counsels me to breathe, but the waves of agony threaten to drown out all reason. The room itself seems to pulse in time with my torment, as if its ancient energy amplifying the intensity of my misery.

Desperate and helpless, I screech at him to save me—anything. He nods, marching the rest of the way to the dais and stepping onto the flat surface. With surprising gentleness, he places me on top of the massive stone sarcophagus, its cool surface a stark contrast to the searing fire within me.

I writhe and fall to my knees upon the ancient tomb, the pain reaching an unbearable crescendo. Suddenly, I can see myself above my body, as if my spirit has left me. I'm detached from my pain and note that the sarcophagus is

actually two joined together in the middle. Each is a compartment for one twin king, but the tomb itself is one to forever unite them in their death. Demonic faces peer up from each tomb gaping maws filled with sharp teeth. My knees in the center of each mouth, easy prey for such a predator. The tombs tremble as if ready to close their jaws on my skin at any moment.

Take me.

Kill me.

I willingly join them.

With this thought, something dark and tumultuous breaks free inside of me, like a burst dam, releasing a flood of surging water. Another wave of pain has me arching my back as rivers of blood empty from inside of me, flowing down my spread thighs to where my knees are braced on the twin tombs. Everything hurts, even the clothes on my skin ache as I tug at the fabric restricting me. I tilt my head back and keen into the darkness around me, both in relief and in torment before my world grows hazy. This is it. I'm going to bleed to death. "I love you, Papa," I mumble as I collapse backwards, my head resting on the cool stone, my submission to death.

My only prayer—*that it ends this misery.*

MIKHAIL

BLOOD.

Food.

Salvation.

Something drips on my withered bones, waking me from the mania which has become my existence. A tonic? No. An *elixir*.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

My mouth is a desert endlessly filling with sand, my body frozen as if bound in clay at the bottom of a breadth of quicksand. I cannot move. Cannot think. Only desperate desire, the basic needs of survival urges my bones to move.

Hungry.

So fucking hungry.

The dripping is maddening, an exquisite torture in the darkness. I must get to it, get to the source. My fangs attempt to bare themselves, ready to engorge on this meal, this divine miracle coming to take me away from the hysteria, from the chaos in my mind.

My thoughts are unclear, primal...

Carnal...

As if everything I was, everything I could become awakens all at once. My nerves tingle, a slight buzz rippling through me from the ends of my fangs to the tips of my toes.

Hungry.

Starving.

Angry...

Who did this to me? I am more than this hunger. How did I become nothing but this one feeling? Who was I before nothing encapsulated me in the depths of its cold darkness for decades or more? What was I and how did I get here?

Drip...Drip...Drip...

So warm. So fucking warm. And sweet. Where is it coming from? I must find the source. Find it, and claim it. Drink from it. Consume it until it is as withered as I am now.

I try to move, to get to the source, to rip it apart and bury my face inside it.

Drinking.

Sucking.

Fucking.

Yessss. There's an old feeling I quickly miss, other ways to stave hunger. My limbs refuse to respond, refuse to move. I'm so fucking weak. On the verge of true death for a vampire king.

A king... Yes... I still, a memory jolting me. Of another vampire king staring at me with golden eyes, our faces mirror images. My lord? No... My brother. My other half. The emptiness in my chest isn't only from lack of blood. It's from his absence.

"Marimekko..." My lips refused to shift, the jumbled sound more of a pig's grunt than the name of my brother.

At once his presence slams into my mind, through our shared link. Projected images of his contorted body, feelings of his own unquenchable thirst. Of his rage. His madness matches my own.

Someone will pay for this. Pay for what we've become. The great kings of the Novikov line rendered something akin to ash and dust. To utter decay.

It's blasphemous.

Mikhail... My name. That's my name. Whispered by my brother right into my mind.

Marek... I shoot back, forgoing audible words for the ones echoing down our bond. So much easier this way.

His presence leaves me and I feel so alone. So weak. So damn tired, even after years of fitful slumber. The rage renews.

Drip...Drip...Drip.

A scream bellows around me. No. *Above* me. The cry awakens another

memory, this one of a gorgeous woman—a human. Of the swell of her breasts, of her slick cunt clenched around my cock, of her blood, sweet and seductive, filling my mouth, bringing me back to life. An ache in my chest crumbles at the memory of what she was, who she was to me. Of the empty vacancy now left inside of me. Of the name whispered across my lips, one I will never utter again. Of what I let myself do, who I became when I lost myself in her.

And killed her.

Then it all comes crashing down, the madness pulling me under. A roar, loud and clear, expels from my lungs. It's agonized and harrowing. Ominous and foreboding, drowning in sorrow and fury. Crazy and frenzied.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I must get to the blood. Get to the source.

Another scream, the sound heating me, causing new desires to arise, to be the cause of those screams whether by pain or pleasure I do not care.

Eat. Drink. Fuck. Kill. All these desires threaten to rip me apart, assaulting my decrepit mind. And my immobile body is unable to satiate any of them.

A crack booms around me, around *us*. I realize, sensing my brother's prone body next to mine, that we are together in this hell. Another crack, scraping, like claws are taking down my very skull. Then light. Blinding, and my immobile arms are unable to shield me from it, to take away the pain.

It hurts. But the hurt morphs into fury, and anguish, and lust.

Move, I demand of myself. *Fucking move or you were never worthy of her to begin with.* I shake the image of her from my mind. Vowing to never think of her again. To never allow myself to feel. To remain as hard and impenetrable as stone. Never again will I become so vulnerable, or allow my brother the weakness.

She meant nothing, a food source, a hot cunt to fuck, flesh to bite. That's all they ever mean. There is no room for anything else. *Lies.* My brother's thoughts meld with my own and after another pained scream, the stone above us shatters completely. Blood flows freely now, basking our bodies in the sweet nectar. Every drop soaks into my shriveled bones, into my dried-up skin, bringing me back from the brink of insanity.

My vision is unclear, my eyes seeing only blurry images and blinding light. Shapes above me shift, my fingers twitch.

Move dammit!

Panting. I hear panting. And moans. Tingles radiate from where this blood caresses my skin, my bones, scaling up my throat to my mouth and nose. Then it hits me, the scent...

Her scent...

I become crazed, an animal, watching myself as if hovering above my body, as if viewing an arena housing a fight to the death, and me as a spectator in the stands.

Mine, part of me declares. *Mine, mine, mine*. A fierce need has me trembling, my entire body thrumming with the urge to feed, to claim, to devour. Her scent, her warmth... Soft flesh and a hot cunt, heated blood housed behind throbbing veins.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Kill...

Fuck.

Claim.

She cries again, followed by another flow of blood, and this time I can turn my head to catch some in my mouth, forcing my seized jaws to move, to take in as much of her as possible.

More. I need more.

Lifting my arms is tenuous, as if my body has become mortar between the stones of my castle.

Sinatra...

Libarryn...

What has become of our castle and coven in our absence? Part of me does not want to know the answer.

But as a mouthful of blood slithers down my dehydrated throat, I start to come alive again. I free one arm and reach up to the blurred image, to the woman I know is hovering above me. She screams again at my touch but is immobilized by fear. I can taste it, taste her terror, and it's almost as delectable as her blood.

A wicked laugh escapes me as my bearings fall into place. The bony tips of my undead fingers grip her thigh and I pull her down to me, to *us*. My brother rumbles beside me, his excitement palpable, his thirst a twin to my own.

My twin...

And with the melodic sounds of her pained sobs and terrified shrieks, memories flooding back, Marek and I feast. With her blood filling me, I

recall just who and what I am. Power begins to thrum within me and if I had lips, I'd be grinning almost diabolically. The king I once was no longer exists. I am less and more of who he was. More power hungry. More dominating and less kind. More cruel and less patient.

I will take without asking. I will use without consent. I will drink and fuck and kill without consequence. Feelings be damned. A stone-cold heart is much safer, stronger, more predictable. Gone are the emotions that once clouded my mind. I see clearly now, my path to the future. Marek and I are the beginning of the storm, one so powerful it will be discussed for years to come, a raging inferno passed down through generations. People to come centuries later will speak of it, of our reign, of the power the Novikov twins were able to wield.

And this time, no one will stand in our way. Not within these hearts of stone.

MAREK

IN THE SHADOWED realms of my tormented slumber, there is no sensation, no light, and no rest. Only an endless abyss that devours my thoughts and devolves them into fragmented memories and distorted emotions.

Time slips through my grasp like the sand of an hourglass falling through my fingers. I drift through this mercurial abyss, unaware of the world beyond while locked in the confines of my own mind.

How long have I languished in this void—years, decades, centuries?

There is no way to measure the passing of the seconds in this desolate place where the boundaries of consciousness blur into a disorienting haze. My thoughts are a jumbled mess of my memories.

Pain is the only thing I can feel, creating a symphony of agony that knows no end inside of me. It's a relentless, haunting melody that echoes through the recesses of my being, reminding me of everything that I've lost.

I'm trapped in this dark limbo, separated from the world outside, disconnected from my own existence. There is no reprieve from the turmoil that festers within me, no respite from the unending torment that gnaws at the fringes of my consciousness.

Because within it, I remember her and what once was.

It is a suffering deeper than any physical pain, an existential torture that pierces the very core of who I am *now*. In the waking world, I was once a king—a sovereign of the night.

Yet here in this abyss, I am reduced to a mere specter of my former self. The memories of my reign and my dominion over our coven are mere fragments now, fading like fractured pieces of glass that puncture my mind

with their cruel sharpness.

The power and authority I once held have crumbled to dust, like ancient ruins swallowed by the sands of time. Worse, because of my own self-importance and foolishness, I've lost more than just my throne.

My brother is gone.

She's gone.

I'm gone—all but dead.

But wouldn't death be a beautiful reprieve from the hell of my thoughts?

Alas, the torment that courses through me cannot be undone by anything, for my brother and I cannot truly be killed. And so, we lie and rot, waiting for someone to revive us as our kingdom crumbles around our tomb.

The Novikov line, once feared and revered, has been reduced to mere legend. My brother and I—our bodies the last remnants of our dark lineage—are nothing more than withered husks, shadows of our former glory.

And so I wait in an eternal sleep.

My slumber is deep and dreamless, a void that mirrors the emptiness within me. Time stands still, and my consciousness hovers on the precipice of oblivion, except I never tip over, and memories still plague me.

This goes on forever until...*a voice pierces through the hollowness of my subsistence.*

The majestic timber of it resounds with the weight of ages. It's a voice I know all too well—Mikhail. *My twin.* Somehow, he's reaching out to me across the psychic bond that has linked us since birth.

"Marek!"

His mental call is a desperate, urgent cry that tears through the void of my dormant mind. At first, I'm too numb to respond, lost in the endless expanse of my own suffering. Mikhail's voice is a lifeline that I try to grasp but can't quite reach.

Sensing my despair, he calls again, only louder. Like a bolt of lightning searing through the darkness, his presence jolts me from my tormented detachment. My senses, dulled and disoriented, slowly begin to awaken.

Confusion grips me as I struggle to make sense of my surroundings. The abyss that had held me captive for what felt like an eternity starts to recede, like the tide withdrawing from the shore. My mind, accustomed to the formless chaos of the void, grapples with this new reality.

Mikhail's voice reverberates in my mind once more, insistent and imploring. *"Brother, it's time. We must rise. Taste what is being given!"*

His tone snaps me to attention, and suddenly, I'm acutely aware of my own existence once more. With a sharp intake of breath, I draw in the cold, stale air of the chamber where we have slumbered for countless years.

The sensation is jarring, a stark reminder of my corporeal form. My senses slowly come back to me, one by one. I feel the unyielding stone beneath me, smoother than the ice that forms in winter.

In the air, I scent the dampness that lingers. Around the chamber, screams reverberate, and before my closed eyelids, pops of color explode. But everything is dulled by the intoxicating taste that fills my mouth.

Warm.

Decadent.

Blood.

Primal hunger courses through my shriveled body, breathing life back into my limp form. The taste of the red elixir ignites every fiber of my being. It's a reminder of our nature, of our very existence as kings.

The bond between Mikhail and me thrums with newfound vitality, renewed by the source of our revival. For the first time in decades, the Novikov twins are stirring from their slumber, driven by a hunger that transcends the boundaries of all.

It's then that I tune into the source of my nourishment—a writhing, screeching female, blood coursing out like a river from between her legs. Her heartbeat, rapid and erratic, is a primeval drumbeat that resonates clear into my soul.

The scent of her fear, mixed with the metallic allure of her blood, intoxicates me. It's a symphony of sensations, a feast for my senses. With every swallow I take of her crimson essence, my hunger intensifies.

My world narrows to a singular focus—the pulsing vein that snakes beneath her fragile skin. My fangs elongate, responding to the call of her blood. The damned thirst—now an unquenchable fire—roars to life within me.

Mikhail and I move as one, our actions synchronized by the psychic bond that binds us. We seize the trembling girl in a vice-like grip. She cries out in terror, but her pleas fall on deaf ears, spurring us on instead.

In this moment, she is nothing more than sustenance, a means to satiate the relentless hunger that has plagued us for far too long. She is the tool that will give us back what we need to dominate once more.

As her trembling form is brought closer to us, my lips part, revealing the

elongated, razor-sharp fangs that have lain dormant for eons. The anticipation—this burning, primordial craving—reaches its zenith.

I desire nothing more than to sink my fangs into this female's delicate throat, but a flash of the last woman I drank from bursts in my mind, and by extension, Mikhail's. For a split second, we freeze at the image of what sent us to our slumber.

My brother is the first to eject Larissa's face from our minds, and I quickly follow suit. Now is not the time to think about her—if ever. Instead, I focus on the life source pouring into my mouth.

The taste of scarlet elixir explodes across my tongue, a symphony of flavors that I had almost forgotten. It's a heady mix of salt and iron, of life itself, and it courses through me like a torrent. The warmth of it, the sustenance, floods every fiber of my being, igniting a long-dormant fire.

A guttural moan escapes my lips as I drink, the primal satisfaction of feeding nearly overwhelming me. It's a reminder of what I am—what I have always been. The relief that washes over me is palpable, a sensation of coming back to life after a small eternity of dormancy.

My senses sharpen, and I am acutely aware of the woman's heartbeat slowing, her struggles fading as her life force wanes. I feel her fear ebb away, replaced by a strange sense of peace. In this moment of communion, I am both predator and savior, the angel of death and the harbinger of rebirth.

“STOP!”

Mikhail's mental roar jolts me back to the present. I'm confusing what was and what is. The woman above us still pulses with life, and I realize she is the key to regaining our power. Her blood is nothing like I've ever tasted before—even more addicting than Larissa's.

But this intoxicating creature can never be more than a source of food.

My twin and I were felled before by our foolish emotions, vested in someone other than ourselves. Kings can only be ruthless. There is no place for love in our hearts, nor can there ever be if we want to rule as we once did.

As I finish feeding, I can feel the psychic link between Mikhail and me strengthening, solidifying our connection. It's as though a part of me that had been missing for so long has been restored. The bond pulses with our shared experiences, renewing my inner fervor to be free.

With an effort, I pull away from the woman, and open my eyes for the first time in ages. Although my body is still weak, my senses are sharp. Next to me, Mikhail lies, the remnants of blood staining the entirety of his lower

face bright red.

He turns to face me, his eyelids slowly peeling back until his gaze locks with mine—eyes blazing crimson from the fresh feed. “*We’ve been betrayed.*” Even in my head, there’s a rasp to his voice. It’s edged with bitterness at the acknowledgement that those who once swore their fealty to us have now turned their backs to our authority.

“*We will make them pay.*”

My brother’s lips curl with my cruel vow. “*Yes. We’ll rise from the ashes of our former selves, stronger and more ruthless than ever before—they will know our wrath.*”

The hunger still lingers, the craving for more blood and power a constant undercurrent in my veins, but I won’t view it as a weakness. Instead, it’ll be the driving force that I use to achieve my goals—*our* goals. “*We do this together.*”

“*Together,*” Mikhail echoes, and in that moment, I know that nothing can stand in our way.

We are the Novikov twins, reborn from the darkness, and we are unstoppable. With this thought, the entirety of Sintara trembles, as if its residents know of the hell to come—hell my twin and I will unleash on those who have forsaken us.

As the true coven leaders, Mikhail and I are connected to every vampire, old and new, born of our lineage. We innately sense the political dissent, the secret coup that threatens to overthrow our rule—it’s how Mikhail immediately knew of the betrayal, of the corruption.

But this only fuels our burgeoning thirst to reassert our dominion.

The taste of blood on my lips is a reminder of what I am, and delicious power flows through my body. But as this power surges, I feel it also wane. It will take many more women and a lot more blood before Mikhail and I are whole again.

I slowly sit up, taking in the shattered stone lid of my sarcophagus as well as the woman who lies unconscious, spread before my brother and me like a feast. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a flicker of movement that casts shadows along the stone walls.

Jasper—the only one truly loyal.

“*We must reward him.*”

Mikhail nods in agreement. “*We shall.*”

“*And what of the female?*”

“Jasper will take care of her. She is...special, but she can never know this. She is food, nothing more.”

“I know, brother. Now, let us rise from the remains of our tombs and take our rightful positions on our thrones.”

Mikhail grins again, the action frightening with his decayed flesh pulling away from blood-covered teeth. *“I’m looking forward to destroying everyone who doubted our rule.”*

My lips twist, mirroring my twin’s wicked expression, and I almost pity the world outside, unaware of the storm that has just been unleashed. The Novikov twins have awoken, and the thirst for vengeance, power, and dominion burns within us like a relentless fire.

With every breath, we draw closer to a future that will be defined by our ruthless reign, and everyone will soon learn that challenging the kings of darkness was a grave mistake. The night belongs to us, and nothing will stand in our way as we carve our path.

Nothing.

OXANA

I THINK I blacked out for a moment because when I open my eyes, I expected to see the bright light of beyond, of the life which exists after a mortal one ends. I wondered, if perhaps, I'd see my mother's face when my lids peeled back, that we'd be reunited in the next life, maybe my father with her.

But no. That, it seems, is not my fate.

Instead I'm met with something much crueler, fouler. That deep ache clenches between my legs and I rock my head back and forth trying to rouse myself, to wake up from this stupor. I feel drugged, my movements slow, my vision hazy. But I can feel—feel the unfamiliar pain, the stone digging into my back, the throbbing of my head. And the smell... Oh god's what is that wretched smell?

Other senses come back, too. The ringing in my ears waning, giving rise to a disgusting slurping sound accompanied by a pair of raspy voices almost whispering in a language I do not know. But their intention is evident.

A power of pure evil thrums from below me, beseeching the world for its malevolence. A dominating force writhing together with utter arrogance and male avarice. The force of it steals the air from my lungs and burns my eyes. Around me, the entirety of this gods-forsaken castle begins to tremble as if cowering to this power, submitting to the control demanded from within.

A rasp bellows from below, a pleased hiss followed by more whispers as something cold and hard slithers around my thighs. At first I think a length of rope has wound its way around my flesh, choking my veins, but then a second coils around my other thigh and squeezes. A hardened, powerful grip, seizing my legs as if I were an anchor and it had just found me, its beacon,

after being lost in a tumultuous, raging sea.

I swallow hard as another twinge of pain cramps deep within me. I feel it then, the blood leaking from inside me, from between my legs. The metallic, iron-filled scent isn't coming from the walls or this tomb, but from me.

I'm dying. I must be. No one can lose this much blood and survive it. But somehow, though the world spins slightly, I somehow know my life doesn't end like this. I groan and attempt to take a deep breath, the exhale coming out shaky as I search for any semblance of bravery to lift my head and look, to see what lies beneath me, what has me in its cool clutches.

Memory of the monsters who dwell in my dreams ripple over me, of the terror they evoked. The harrowing laugh of the wolf-man—Bandar—and his pale friend with the sharp fangs echo inside my ears, the one who sank those fangs deep into my neck and fucking drank. I can't shut it out. Not the flashes of their desire as they groped my body or the sounds of their laughter aimed at my fear, all at my expense.

Inside my chest, my heart pounds quickly as if it were running to save its life, as if every beat were a step farther away from it, from the doom below.

Move, I beg my body, beg myself, but I'm frozen in equal parts fear and exhaustion. A headache blooms on the back of my head as I will myself to rise and look, to fight at the restraint shackled around my thighs. Terror clamps down on me as I raise my head, using my elbows to aid in lifting my shoulder blades off the cold stone. Immediately, I regret it, for what I see embeds in my brain, sears itself into my eyes like a brand.

"Monsters," I whisper out in disbelief, voice trembling. Actual fucking monsters are between my spread legs, lapping up the blood dripping from inside me. Drinking like my blood is a fine red wine and they are too thirsty to wait on goblets. Red tongues and crimson teeth snap and snarl, the grip in my legs is their skeletal fingers, yellowed fucking bones encased around my flesh.

I scream then, my eyes darting around the tomb, looking for help, for a way out. I tug at my legs, trying to release their hold on me but their grip tightens farther, opening me wider, my bare pussy on display, their faces buried inside it. One look at their wretched bodies and I want to puke, hurl up the meager bread and cheese I ate last night.

They aren't much more than dehydrated flesh and yellowed bone, like long dead corpses unburied from ancient graves. Strands of slimy black hair are plastered on dull ivory-colored skulls. Sunken faces devoid of life, deep

sunk eyes whose lids flutter open and close almost involuntarily, an innate reaction to their satiated hunger. A flash of molten crimson and fiery gold burn in their eyes making them somehow even more terrifying, more inhuman. I shiver at how it would feel if those eyes lifted and bored into my own, at the feelings it might wrench from me. It might kill me.

Gnarled flesh, or what's left of it, is pulled taught over their skeletons, ripped and torn in many places, revealing pruned and shriveled muscle beneath them. And their hands are cinched around my thighs, icy fingers curled around my flesh like shackles, their old bones constricting any movement. I'm surprised by the strength in their grips considering their deteriorated condition and wonder briefly, as the fear gives way to curiosity, who or what they might have been a lifetime before this.

One creature opens its mouth wide as another cramp twists my insides. I watch the flow of blood leave my body and get swallowed down by his, revealing a fissured tongue and sharp teeth. They paw at me as I could give them more, withered tongues licking up the inside of my legs, closer to my pussy.

I lurch as a tongue presses inside me, tasting, searching. It's cold and foreign, slithering around, the creature groaning at whatever he finds. The second one pushes the first away and as his tongue slips out of me I turn and vomit. It's so fucking gross. So horrific, to see this second demon repeat the actions of the first.

I cry out as that cool tongue creeps inside my body, licking, searching. I want to fucking die, willing to sell my own damn soul if it meant I could get away from this torture. Teeth rake down my skin as if searching for purchase but can't seem to find the strength.

It's too much. Too many sensations filling me at once. Overwhelmed I can only sit here and cry. Too afraid to move. Too disgusted to reach between my legs and push the creatures away, not that I could anyway. My feet are numb, body twitching from the revulsion of what I'm forced to do in this moment.

I'm lightheaded, blackness creeping at the edges of my vision but I will myself to stay present, too frightened of what might happen to me in the dark. My arms give way and I fall back again, my bruised head bouncing on the stone once more. Pain flashes and I sob, smashing my fists against the tombs in my frustration.

Stuck.

Trapped.

With foreign fingers enslaving me, and frozen tongues abusing and tasting the most intimate parts of me, I wonder if this isn't real, if this is one of my dreams again, a night terror gone too far. But as their hold on me eases, their wretched lips removed from my skin, a noise jars me. I let my head fall to the side, unable to move my body on my own anymore. Through the haziness of my blurred vision, someone approaches. A dark suit comes into focus, then gloved hands and a head of white hair.

Jasper.

He steps closer and relief washes over me—he's come to help, to save me from this fate. But to my horror, he falls to his knees before the tomb, head bowing so deep his forehead rests on the stone, mere inches from the monsters. I remember then—he brought me here, he left me at the mercy of the monsters. He did this to me.

Jasper shows no fear, only devotion, as he lifts his head and gazes down at the blood-soaked monsters. A smile tugs at his lips, and... relief perhaps, as he utters, "My kings."

My blood runs cold.

The kings.

The Selection.

Oh my god. Horror fills me as a realization dawns...

The monsters are not monsters—they are the famed vampire twins, my reason for even being here was to try and awaken them. I didn't know what that meant, not really. In my head I pictured two ancient royals lying on ornate beds, crowns of gold surrounding their dresses of white hair. But this I could never have imagined, not even in my nightmares.

"Rise Jasper, our most loyal servant." A raspy hiss, sounding like crumbling rock more than words.

"My kings," Jasper whispers again, emotion clogging his voice. "It has been a hundred years. There is much to tell you. But first, a rest. I've had your chambers prepared. Let the blood awaken you, revive you, then I'll tell you all of it."

"And the girl?" one rasps.

Jasper's eyes shift from the sight of his kings and back over to me, like he'd forgotten I was here. His face hardens. "She's no one of consequence, my lords. Food for your survival, nothing more."

That hurts more than it should. At the Selection it appeared that

whomever could awaken the kings would be recognized and respected. But Jasper's words are like a slap to the face. Was it all just lies?

Another deep twist has me groaning, and I close my eyes as the pain surges down low. I belt out a raspy scream as a final explosion of blood expels from me. The kings are on me in an instant, dragging me to them, faces again buried between my legs.

My vision finally blanks and darkness envelops me as I realize with horror...

My worst nightmares have come true.

THE BETRAYER

INKY DARKNESS SHROUDS THE CORRIDOR, where flickering torchlight paints eerie, undulating tapestries upon the chilled, stone canvases of the walls.

My footsteps resound softly, akin to the hushed confidences of a malevolent mystery, as I proceed towards a clandestine rendezvous.

Within this ominous realm of duplicity, I am distinguished as the embodiment of villainy, a figure that flourishes in the labyrinthine depths of deceit, but only I shall free the inhabitants of Sintara. My intentions, veiled in the obscurity of shadow, reflect the maleficent ambiance of the ancient castle itself.

Guiding my way through these faintly illuminated passages, the disconcerting tidings of the newly awakened kings and their recent acquisition reverberate in my consciousness. They have seized the girl, the female an enigma yet to be unraveled. Her very veins course with an alluring elixir of life potent enough to rouse the wizened, twin monarchs. The mere notion of her presence gnaws at my core, setting ablaze desires and aspirations capable of shaking the very pillars of this somber realm.

My steps quicken, hastened not by urgency but by the turmoil churning within. The awakening of the kings, that inexorable stirring in the blood of ancient power, leaves an indelible mark on my conscience. I, who have walked the shadowed paths of duplicity for years, harboring secrets that could topple empires, now find myself at the precipice of treacherous change.

The kings were never meant to stir, never meant to reclaim their dominion. My loyalty to them, a facade impeccably maintained, is like a serpent that coils around my blackened soul.

For I, a vital cog in the rebellion's machinations, am pledged to their service, sworn to uphold their rule.

But this allegiance, a mask concealing my true intentions, is my sanctuary and my cage. To renounce it would be to expose my hand too soon, to relinquish the treacherous game we play in these darkened corridors.

With every step, the weight of my intentions hangs upon me like a noose. The consequences of betrayal are dire, their specter a constant companion in the darkest corners of my mind. But the intoxicating allure of power, of usurping the throne, of claiming the girl for myself, proves an irresistible beacon. The line between survival and ambition blurs, and I teeter on the precipice, uncertain of the abyss that awaits should I falter.

My clandestine journey through the shadowy passages comes to a sudden halt as I reach the threshold of my destination. A folded parchment, adorned with the sinister insignia of the kings, lies there—a summons. My fingers curl around it, and I feel the weight of my impending doom.

The ceremony, a ritual that demands unwavering allegiance to the very monarchs I seek to overthrow, looms on the horizon. It is a sinister affair, one where oaths are renewed and betrayals sealed in blood.

Resentment courses through my veins like a venomous asp. To attend this ceremony is to stand amidst my enemies, to partake in a macabre masquerade where loyalties are professed in false whispers and treacherous smiles.

The stakes, I know, are as high as they come. Should I falter, should my act of defiance be laid bare, the consequences would be unbearable. Yet, in the dark recesses of my mind, a plan festers—a daring gambit to steal the throne from under their very noses. It is this audacious aspiration, this coveting of power, that fuels my reluctance and bolsters my resolve to endure the ominous gathering.

As I stare at the summons, an insatiable lust for power has me thirsting, like a craving for a potent elixir.

The throne, that coveted seat of authority, calls out to me like a seductive siren, promising dominion over this treacherous realm. For far too long, the rule of the kings has bound this dark kingdom in chains of their guilt. Their reign of dormancy went on longer than should have ever been allowed and their once-vital vision now crumbles like ancient stone. It is time for a new order, one forged in cunning and ambition, where I shall be the master of my own destiny.

Still, frustration grows within me, a simmering tempest of resentment.

The kings lost sight long ago of what Sintara could really be—a realm of darkness with a limitless amount of blood if we merely just took what we wanted from the humans.

I'm determined to end the kings' reign, shatter their namesake and dynasty while overtaking the castle and the girl. And it's in the very shadows of Sintara, concealed from prying eyes and betraying whispers, that my clandestine plans take shape.

A rebellion, a secret gathering of like-minded souls, stands ready to challenge the kings' authority. With whispers of betrayal and the promise of a new era, I have garnered the support of those who, like me, yearn for change.

Together, we shall rise like a tempest, our ambitions unyielding, our thirst for power unquenchable. The time of reckoning approaches, and the treacherous winds of revolution blow in our favor.

Amidst the swirling chaos of my ambitions and treacherous designs, a name dances like an enchanting melody through the corridors of my mind—Oxana. The kings' blood slave, a creature of both vulnerability and untold power, a tantalizing puzzle waiting to be unraveled.

I knew the moment she was presented to me what she was and who she will become.

The girl is the very embodiment of temptation, a luscious morsel of intrigue that beckons to me in the darkest recesses of desire. And now, my obsession with the little blood slave knows no bounds. It is an insidious flame that consumes me, a relentless hunger that gnaws at my core. Her mere presence within the castle walls is a beacon of temptation, a whisper of sweet sin that promises both ecstasy and damnation.

I covet her with a fervor that borders on madness, for she is not merely a blood slave but a key to unlocking the secrets of power that have eluded me for far too long.

The things I plan to do to her body...

Fuck her.

Drink from her.

Own her.

Because of this, in the depths of my twisted psyche, a sinister plan takes form. I envision a shadowy alliance with those who share my hunger for dominion.

The wolves.

Oxana, with her intoxicating allure and the untapped potency of her

blood, shall become the linchpin of my designs. And the kings, blinded by their own arrogance, will never see the impending storm until it is too late. Their new blood slave will be their undoing, just as the last one was.

Hidden in the labyrinthine corridors of intrigue, I scheme the best way to claim Oxana for myself.

She is the embodiment of power, the path to both my ascension and the kingdom's rebirth.

All I need to do is set the stage and put the pieces in motion. I am the puppet master, working from the shadows, and will orchestrate a symphony of treachery that will reshape the destiny of the realm.

THE NIGHT of the accursed ceremony descends upon Sintara, casting a shroud of eerie darkness over the castle. The torches lining the grand hall flicker like forlorn spirits, and the very air seems charged with malevolence. It is a night when allegiances are renewed in blood, oaths are sworn in whispers, and treacherous secrets fester beneath the surface like an infected wound.

As I step into the heart of the castle, my footsteps echoing on the cold, stone floor, a surge of inner conflict grips me like a vise. Even though I harbor designs of rebellion, I must bow before the kings in a display of fealty. It is a grotesque masquerade, a dance of deceit in the name of survival.

I wear a mask of loyalty while concealing the venom of defiance within.

The atmosphere is thick with tension, and I catch glimpses of my fellow conspirators in the dimly lit corners of the hall.

They are like phantoms, shadows within the shadows, biding their time for the opportune moment to strike.

The rebellion, once a mere whisper of dissent, has grown into a formidable force, a serpent coiled and ready to strike at the heart of the kingdom when I finally give the signal.

MIKHAIL

TO BE BACK in the throne room so soon after waking is almost jarring. Our thrones remain the same, the stone walls and flickering sconces just like they once were. Yet something is...off.

What is this feeling pulsing through my veins, causing my blood to heat once more, forcing painful lurches in my dead heart? It's more than a feeling, it's a sensation. An almost miraculous experience though I'm as of yet, uncertain why. What I do know, is something monumental is building. I can feel that too, like static in the air before a bolt of lightning spears across a darkened sky.

My body...it's healing. There are moments of clarity in which I have not experienced for an age. My once blurred vision, seen through dry, decayed eyes, begins to sharpen. My hearing, which recently sounded as if my ears were buried beneath the earth, has cleared. Scent is becoming more potent, my ability to distinguish between each individual within Sintara purely by their smell heightens.

As members of Libarryn kneel before us, swearing fealty, I can scent their emotions again. Anger, lust, and deceit, though I cannot pinpoint who it comes from. Sinatra is not as we left it. New smells congregate with the old, distinguishable like oil mixed with water, these new faces. Those loyal before our downfall, those who took the blood oaths, still have our blood within them. It lingers there, demarcating them as different. Of course, after a hundred fucking years, there would be new blood here within the castle. I'm not naive enough to think it remains unchanged after a century of our absence.

But the once consistent aroma of Sintara, one that would envelop me and

give me peace even when the chaos of the coven threatened to drown us all, is noticeably absent. And that disturbs me. It smells like us, and yet, does not. I'm not yet sound of mind enough to figure it out, to piece together all the segments of this broken puzzle. But I will be. And there will be hell to pay once I do.

My immobility is maddening, my mind healing before my limbs. Jasper has kept this little tidbit of information that those looking to undermine us would die to get their hands on, secret. At least for now. How long can we hide behind the illusions, that we do not merely perch on our thrones because we want to but because we *have* to.

Jasper has fabricated chairs with wheels to move Marek and I around. But beforehand, all rooms must be cleared, hallways abandoned. We cannot afford to look weak, even though most of Sintara would be understanding considering we were just unearthed a day ago. It's not the majority we put on this show for...it's the others. The reason a hostile odor permeates our ancient castle.

Yes. Things are different now. In the slight glimmers of normalcy, it's evident. Part of me excites at the prospect of bloodshed, of lashing out my power to extinguish that of another. To coat my skin in the blood of an enemy, relish in it, the feeling of it warming me even as their body cools and dies. That...is power.

And I've come to crave it, almost as much as another thirst gnaws at me, a desire for *her*.

Immediately, I push any thought of her away, but it's like she's around me all the time. Her scent misting the air like precipitation in a dense fog. I don't even know what she looks like yet, but I can smell her. Feel the softness of her thighs under my skeletal fingers, feel the slight tremors in her legs as we drank from between them. I can't escape it, escape her, and it's only been a fucking day. Not that I'd want to, but I *need* to. Mistakes of the past will haunt me, and I will not repeat them again.

Not ever.

More is at stake this time, an entire kingdom, our coven. Even the humans are more at risk than ever, the wolves using our absence to their advantage. So much needs to be done. Jasper will have to run it through us again.

Jasper...

As the lesser vampires bow before us, pledging their fealty with words I

care not to hear, I consider Jasper's actions. That man will be rewarded beyond his imagination for what he's done. Riches, women, men if he so wishes. Without his undying loyalty, I don't know what might have become of Marek and I. Perhaps we'd have met the true death decades ago, if not for his protection. If he didn't act quickly and get our withered bodies down into the crypts of our ancestors, sealing the doors before anyone else learned of its location. We owe him everything, and we intend to pay up.

We will, brother. Marek's mind melds with my own, a relief to speak freely again without having to use our still healing voices. And without the risk of others hearing. *My eyes grow weary. I must rest.*

The final vampires approach, nose touching the ground with their deep bows. I nod my stiff neck, the action taking more concentration than should be required of such a simple movement, and wave them off, sensing my brother has reached his limit. *Go then. I will join you shortly. I have a thirst that needs to be satisfied.* This hunger is almost as bad as the darkness.

Almost.

I feel it too, Marek laments. *It's caustic, fatal if we're not careful.*

Once the throne room is emptied aside from Jasper, I swivel my head towards my brother. *I know. Rest now, then feed. Strength is our first priority. Everything else comes second.*

He blinks slowly, his face still a stranger from the male I once knew. He looks haggard, beaten and broken. Clumps of his hair remain missing, dirt still covers every inch of him. He attempts a feeble smile and a hint of yellowed teeth peer through his dry, cracked lips. He's ghastly to say the least, and I know my appearance is a twin to his.

I'd be embarrassed if I wasn't so damn arrogant. Humiliated by my withered condition. Marek and I have yet to bathe, to change clothes. No. We are exactly as we were when we ascended from our tombs. Libarryn needs to see what we survived, outlived. See that the fancy crown and gilded clothes don't give us power. We are the fucking power. Even like this, even diminished as we are, half the kings we used to be, the other's cannot even come close.

We are legends.

Twin fucking kings of the ancient Novikov line.

Merciless. Ruthless. Omnipotent.

And as we take more of her within us, this human Jasper searched so diligently for, our might is limitless. Decayed we may be, but retribution is

coming. Hell will reign with us, destroying the filth within.

I can feel it.

I can also feel the grumble of my empty belly, the ache of my regrowing fangs desperate to pierce soft flesh.

Patiently I sit, waiting for Jasper, lost in the storm of my own thoughts as Jasper takes Marek to our chambers. How he'll manage to get my twin into his bed, I do not know. As reward for his service, we have given Jasper mouthfuls of our blood. But after so long, its potency must be almost non-existent. Whatever his methods, I trust Jasper. Trust him with our secrets, with our lives.

The quiet throne room unnerves me. Every sporadic thump of my heart is like a drumbeat, reverberating around the empty space. Outside, through a stained glass window in the shape of a chalice, snow falls in droves. I used to love the snow, the feel of it, something even colder than my heart. I loved to take *her* out in it wearing almost nothing, watch how it affected her human form. Those tiny goosebumps that would ripple on her skin, her panting breath became a mist, and her peaked nipples, like shards of ice. How I'd suck them into my warm mouth, how she'd moan at the feeling. Then I'd pull her dress aside, baring her, and—

“Sire?”

I shake my head, lost in a stupor of memories I should not dwell on, a new ache throbbing in my torn pants. Thank fuck that didn't completely deteriorate during those dark years. “Yes?” I try to keep my raspy voice normal but Jasper looks at me through narrowed eyes. Dirt from my brother's clothes has left dust on his otherwise impeccable suit.

“Sir. I called your name three times.” His blue eyes rove me up and down as if my injuries weren't already obvious. “Your hearing has not been restored, I see. Must be why you lacked conversation with *any* members of the coven.”

“They do not require my conversation,” I snap and immediately regret it. There's a flare of hurt in Jasper's eyes but he quickly schools his features.

He straightens his back and clasps his white, gloved hands in front of him. “While it may not be required, sire, it would be amenable to repair lost faith within Libarryn. It was they who survived a century without their leaders. A word or two wouldn't kill you.”

I pause, would be gaping at Jasper's audacity if my jaw would concede to work, then burst out with laughter at his forwardness. No one has ever spoken

to me that way aside from Merik. “Jasper! Seems our absence has afforded you a fucking personality at last! Come, take me to eat. I’m starving.”

The corner of his mouth twitches as he fetches the wheeled-chair and brings it to the bottom of the stairs. Now that I gaze down, wondering how the hell I’m going to climb down there on broken legs, I consider that I don’t even recall how I got into this throne in the first place.

Blood. I need more blood.

I swallow thickly as Jasper ascends. “May I, sire?” A swift nod is my only response as he scoops me up like a child and descends, gently placing me in the chair. I eye him with caution, for he should no longer have such strength. “Lord Navar’s blood fuels me, my lord. I drank it at his insistence since I began to age without your own to aid my human body.”

“Understandable. I will have to thank him for his loyalty. Now, take me to my slave, Jasper.”

Jasper moves behind me and pushes the chair. The wheels bump along the marble floor as we exit the throne room behind a tapestry and enter a maze of secret corridors only he and my brother are aware of.

After a few quiet moments, Jasper breaks the silence. “It would not be wise, my king, to drink from your slave just yet. The moon is still full and is taking a toll on her already weak body. She needs time to recover her blood supply until it passes.”

Disappointment churns in my chest though I understand his reluctance. As I’m not in the right frame of mind, and I know he has my best intentions at heart, I will take heed to his suggestions. I do not wish to mimic what happened before...

“However, I have been anticipating your reawakening and have prepared something for you that I think you’re going to like.”

I can hear his excitement, hear his little human heart increase its beating. As our path winds around a bend and over a wooden bridge, under which a warm current rolls by, I’m hit with a scent that has my new fangs aching to descend.

Blood. And lots of it.

“Jasper...” I start but he cuts me off.

“It’s better to see in person, sire. For if I tried to describe it, words would not do it justice.”

He couldn’t be more accurate. Through an old copper door dusted with patina, Jasper steers my chair, the scent growing stronger. Sounds hit me

next. Moaning. Groaning. Crying? Then an overwhelming sensation—fear. Palpable, delectable feminine fear. And as we find our destination, my eyes alight in surprise and excitement.

“Jasper, you really have outdone yourself.”

He grins and wheels me over to the first woman, handing me her collection with a slight bow. “Enjoy, sire. Oh, and try to leave some for Merik will you?”

I’d laugh again if the hunger didn’t overtake me, and as I bring the heated blood to my lips with a shaky hand I know...

I am about to lose myself in bloodlust and for once, I give myself freely to it.

OXANA

I SCREAM OUT, roused from sleep by nightmares. Panic claws at my chest and I swallow hard, letting my eyes adjust in the dim light of a dying fire. A room comes into focus—my room. Here, housed in some ancient castle locked away in a hidden room where no one will ever find me.

Untwisting my body from the covers wound around me, I push them down to my hips and sit up, swiping the sweat from my brows. A chill prickles at my skin as the perspiration cools and my eyes twist towards the bathroom, to the tub I know is sitting in there but empty.

I'd give anything for a good soak and a hot meal. Even a simple vegetable stew, the broth more water than flavor like at home.

Home...

I stuff down the image of our little house and survey my surroundings, my nightmare still vivid in my mind. In it, a pair of rotted corpses were drinking from...drinking from...

No.

It couldn't have been real. "Just a dream," I mutter to myself. But as I pull my legs from the covers, I startle. There, on my pale legs, on my thighs, is the evidence of what happened to me. It wasn't a fucking dream.

Bruised fingerprints, long and narrow, have turned my skin dark blue. Two pairs, two sets of hands. I gulp, my mouth going dry. Fear clutches in my gut, twisting my insides, making my heart race in my chest.

A scream builds in my lungs, one filled with terror and anguish. My stomach clenches low, squeezing. I felt the same, horrible sensation last night as something gushes between my legs.

I spread my thighs and see blood. So much blood. I swipe my hand

through it, wondering what's happening to me, desperate to clean it off, to learn where it's coming from. I slip from the bed and race to the bathroom as a soft voice whispers to me from the barred doors to my room.

“Do not wash yourself. That blood is sacred.”

I still like prey trying to hide from a predator and slowly turn to face the intruder but my fear fades quickly. A human woman enters my room. She looks about my age, maybe a little older. She wears the same thin shift I'd seen other servants wearing during the Sampling. Transparent and thin, the shift reveals every inch of her body beneath it from her small breasts to the apex between her thighs.

Around her forearms is some kind of metal brace, and on each brace is a metal circle, like a segment of broken chain. A similar piece is bound around both her lower legs, mid calf to ankle. Her bright orange hair is pulled away from her face and bound at the base of her neck, exposing some kind of wound. Two circular punctures, scabbed over but the skin around them still pink and healing. No idea what kind of weapon could cause such a thing. Then a memory surfaces, of Elias, of his chilled lips as he sucked at my skin...

And bit me.

A phantom pain stings my neck and I scrub at my skin, rubbing my own twin scabs, still swollen and uncomfortable. She notices my gaze and reaches up to touch her own. An unspoken message passes from her to me in the softening of her big, brown eyes, an understanding of having experienced the same thing herself. Both victims of the same cruelty.

“Why are you here?” I ask, remembering she spoke when she entered my room. “And what do you mean the blood is sacred?”

She takes a step forward, a tentative step. “I have come to retrieve you at Jasper's request.”

I huff and roll my eyes, noticing she doesn't answer my second question. I cross my arms over my chest and say rather hastily, “Well you can tell Jasper that I'm not coming.”

Her voice deepens, taking on a stern tone. “To defy Jasper is to defy the kings. I know you're new here and do not yet understand how Sintara runs but—”

“What the hell is Sintara?” I interrupt, her eyes widening.

She clenches her fists and her sides and I can tell I've annoyed her. “Sintara is the castle. Your home. Some believe the castle itself is a sentient

being. Now, put this on and follow me.” She bends down to retrieve a small, brown satchel from the floor and tosses it towards me. “It is not a request.”

“And if I don’t?” I taunt, feeling more blood dribble down my leg.

She arches a brow at me in challenge. “Then I shall send someone else to retrieve you. A male, perhaps?” I can feel my face pale and she knows she’s won. Stooping, I pick up the satchel and dump out the contents on my bed, subconsciously rubbing my sore belly. It contains an outfit, same as hers, complete with arm bands, leg bands.

“Am I to be their slave,” I whisper, holding up the shift, tears blurring my eyes.

“No. You are to be much more than that, more than any of us could hope to ever become.”

I nod solemnly but don’t believe her words, then notice another item. Something small and made of shiny gold metal. It’s the width of a medium sized carrot, and three inches long. One end is rounded, and the other has a small loop attached to it. I turn it over in my hands and spin back toward her, holding it up. “What do I do with this?”

A blush creeps up her face, making her even prettier. “It goes inside you. A stopper of sorts, for the blood.”

I blanch, voice shaking. “Inside me... Will...will it hurt?”

She shrugs. “Maybe a little, if it’s your first time. More uncomfortable than actual pain. Best get it in before you lose any more blood. That will make the kings most unhappy.”

Like I give a shit about the kings. I keep that thought to myself. This whole moment is surreal, I think, as I grab the contents of the bag and make my way to the bathroom, the bathroom with no door on it. If I face away from the girl at least I’ll have a semblance of privacy. I shrug out of my nightgown, letting it pool at my feet and quickly slip the shift over my head. Just like hers, I can see my entire body beneath it. Every single inch.

Mortified, I bind the bands around my lower legs then pick up the golden item, staring at it like it will start murmuring directions at me. I have no idea where this damn thing goes.

“Would you like me to show you where to put that or do you already know?” I jump and spin around. The girl snuck right up behind me and I didn’t even notice. She looks at me expectantly.

“Umm...” I stutter out, wanting to say yes and no at the same time.

She must understand, and sits down on the ground just outside the door.

“Sit,” she orders, gesturing at the space in front of her. I do, crossing my legs while tugging the shift to cover myself. To my shock, she spreads her legs wide, baring her...her...private areas to me. Using two fingers on one hand, she parts herself, completely unashamed, and with her other hand slips one digit next to an opening in her body.

“Right here,” she says softly, slipping the finger inside herself, “is where you put that. Just like this.” She extracts her digit and pushes it back inside her again. I can’t stop staring. There’s something so...I don’t know the right word... Attractive maybe? Something attractive about her exposing herself to me so close I can smell her musky scent. Something enticing about that finger slipping inside her. She clears her throat and I raise my gaze, cheeks heating as if she caught me doing something bad. She juts her chin towards my body. “Your turn.”

My turn... Oh, Gods...

I grasp the finger in trembling hands, and blink slow in disbelief, shaking my head. I can’t believe this is my life, that I have to do this.

“Can you look away while I do it?” I ask, wincing.

She closes her legs and stands back up. “Of course. But time is ticking. We must leave soon or someone will come looking for us.” She shifts uncomfortably at that admission then heads back to the main room. I spin on my butt, my back facing her way now and part my own legs. Just like she did, I part myself with one hand, never really having looked at it before. I slide a finger down my center, everything covered in blood, and sink into the opening.

God that feels weird, I think, as I take the gold finger and press it inside. It’s like my body slurped it up, as it disappears in a mess of blood, just the little loop hanging out of me. I have a weird, proud feeling that I accomplished something that scared me. That feeling quickly fades as I rise, and wash the blood from my hands. After drying them off, I scoop up the arm bands, and walk out to the girl. Hell, I don’t even know her name.

“I uhh...need help with these. Please.” I offer her the bands and she takes them, buckling my forearms in tight. “Oww. You’re hurting me,” I hiss.

She ignores my plight. “Better tight than have them falling off when in use. You can be punished for such things.”

Punished?

I decide I don’t want to know as I allow her to guide me from the room on bare feet. The stone is cold and hard, unyielding. The finger inside of me

is a constant reminder of my lack of freedom. I feel it with every step, so foreign and unwelcome, unforgiving even. “Where are we going,” I risk asking, voice low as we pass through a corridor with low ceilings and no doors or windows.

“The moon station,” she replies like I should know what the hell that means. “Quickly now.”

She hastens her steps and I rush to keep up with her as we wind through this maze of hallways. Finally we come to a door made of metal. It’s a browner tone, but stained greenish in places, like moss has grown over it.

The girl ushers me through and that’s when I hear something. Something that sounds like muffled crying. A new fear emerges and I become reluctant to follow her but my feet keep moving in spite of myself. In spite of the terror. The sounds grow louder. Whining. Moaning. *Feminine*. And a cold chill snakes down my spine, skin on the back of my neck prickling.

As if sensing my uncertainty, the girl grips my upper arm, her hands stronger than I expected, and hauls me to the end of the hall where a room with no door sprawls before us. I rub my eyes, not believing what I’m seeing, my heart plummeting to my feet.

Run, a voice in my head whispers, but I’m frozen in fear, my hands clinging to my face in shock.

The stone room is long, but shallow, almost like an oversized closet, but grander. Torches emit their flickering light from the back wall, spaced every five feet, but I hardly notice them. Because lined down the entire space are around twenty seats kind of like wooden chairs connected in a bench. Except there is no seat, just this little shelf to sit your butt on. And strapped to each one is a woman, dressed just like me. They face out towards us, shifts bunched around their waists, knees pulled up towards their chests and spread wide, no undergarments to be seen. Bindings cinch behind their knees and around their ankles, holding their legs open. I can see each one of them bleeds where I do, that same secret place the girl showed me. Except these girls have no secrets anymore, every one of them is half naked, their other half barely covered by the thin shifts.

As I come to grips with what I’m seeing, my eyes roving over each girl, I notice something even more grotesque. Below them all are crystal bowls catching the blood as it leaks from their bodies, like one would collect rainwater in a barrel to water their garden.

At the end of the row is Jasper. He stands behind a chair on wheels

instead of legs, the thing seated inside it greedily drinking blood from chalice. I almost puke, my stomach roiling. He doesn't even acknowledge me as he stands there, holding a second filled cup, ready to hand it to the thing in the chair.

The girl pulls me down to the other end and points to an empty chair. "This one was saved just for you," she says almost proudly, like the idea would excite me or make me happy. How messed up would you have to be to want to do this? How warped is her mind?

"No," I mumble, backing away, right into the hard chest of a man. I squeal as he grips me and practically tosses me into the vacant chair. He's not a vampire, but another servant, a human slave like me. "Stop!" I yell trying to kick out but he's much stronger than me, much bigger, and he quickly locks my bound wrists onto the armrests, restricting me. "Please," I cry, tears flowing freely now, desperation in my words. "Why are you doing this?!"

He doesn't even look at me as he binds my legs just like the other women, as he bares me and spreads my legs, then locks me in place until I can't move an inch. I want to fucking die. I now know why I could hear the other women crying. Because this is torture.

I tug and pull but nothing gives, if anything the bindings feel tighter than before. "Why..." I sob again, my head hanging between my knees. It's then I notice the absence of a bowl below my body but don't dwell on it as a girl cries out in pain and I yank on the bindings again. "Jasper... Help me!"

Jasper ignores me. I thought he was my friend, or at least, someone I could trust. Twice now, he's betrayed that trust. First by telling me that I have some greater purpose before feeding me to the entombed monsters. The second is happening right now, but hearing my pleas for help and pretending he can't hear them.

I don't know how long I sit here with the other women, amongst their groans. Mine mix and my stomach clenches low, that finger inside me feeling like it's growing larger by the second. Every couple minutes Jasper rolls the creature nearer and nearer, wheels squeaking. As they inch toward me, the macabre sounds of the monster slurping and sucking down the red liquid fills my ears. It spilled over his grayed, withered face and down his filthy clothes.

He's ravenous, emptying bowl after bowl, chalice after chalice, getting closer and closer and closer to me. Two girls away. One. And then, wheels squealing, Jasper rolls him in front of me.

It's like reliving my nightmare.

The creature pauses, sniffing, and raises his eyes up to mine. They glow red. It's not possible. I want to cower, to hide, to drown myself, anything to get away from this moment, from this potent terror. His nose is half gone, long nostrils sniffing again, eyes blazing. Skin peels from his face like one would peel the skin off a potato before boiling. And the blood. It's everywhere, his absent lips, and mouth filled with teeth unable to catch it from the chalice before it tumbles down his chin, his clothes.

A scream erupts from me and I swear the monster smiles. He fucking smiles and it's the most savage, most harrowing thing I've ever seen.

Jasper bends down, his face next to the creature and gestures to me. "Your Blood Slave, my lord."

Blood Slave...

My lord...

This...this is one of the kings from the tomb. My nightmare was real. Part of me still had hope, that the bruises on my legs were from the sheets bound around me. That the creature before me only lived in the darkest corners of my mind.

It whispers to Jasper, "You said she was resting." His voice is a hiss, as if a snake were trying human language on its serpentine tongue.

Jasper chuckles, happily. "I wanted to surprise you, my king, with the main course of your dinner." I tremble uncontrollably as the creature grins wider. Jasper moves to help the decayed king from his chair and to my surprise, he lies under me, his rotten face resting where the crystal bowl should be.

"Oh my god," I whimper, appalled and sickened, as the king raises one bony finger up, up, up. *He's going to touch me! He's going to touch me just like that wolf man did!* I try and fail to make myself as small as possible, to close my legs to his perusing. But he simply reaches for the loop on the golden finger still within me, and pulls.

A flood of blood releases from my opening, a torrent, and he gapes his mouth wide, groaning as he collects it all. He doesn't even swallow, just siphons it all down, like a well with no ending. My body clenches, pressure releasing as another flow washes over him. And he relishes in it, rubbing my blood all over himself as if it were soap, as if it cleansed him of evil and would reincarnate him, giving him a new life.

I shudder, his jaws gnashing under me, too close to my private area. Try as I might, I can't peel my eyes away, stuck on my body and the creature

below it. The bleeding stops for a moment and he runs a sickly tongue over his teeth, capturing every last drop. Then something happens that I don't expect.

The destroyed king stills, glowing eyes closing, and to my utter shock, right before my eyes, his body... it heals. Not completely. Segments of hair shed and regrow into lush black strands. His gray skin flakes and new, ivory skin replaces it. His body knits back together as if a hundred little people crawled along his skin sewing all the places it was broken.

Even his nose starts to grow back.

“My king?” Jasper tries to rouse the king but can't wake him up. He doesn't try long, lifting the thin king back into the wheeled-chair. He heads out of the room but as if he forgot something, pauses and comes back to me. “You were excellent for King Mikhail. I expect the same for King Marek when he wakes. Now, where did he toss that finger?”

I can't move. Can't breathe as Jasper finds the discarded golden finger and sinks it back inside me, filling me again. “No. Jasper. You can't do this.” My voice wobbles with each word.

He looks up at me and stands, a momentary sadness in his gaze quickly replaced with his usual stoicism. “Oh, child. It is already done.”

And then he strolls away, as if heading to the market. As if I weren't still here, trapped, exposed, used...

I'm so tired. So exhausted. Flanked by a dozen other women, each one as enslaved as I am. Bound I might be, but they can't keep me locked down here forever. And when they let up, even for a moment, I'll take my chance. I won't be their food, like cattle herded for their milk. I won't be chained down and bared for anyone to see.

But what choice do I have?

Time slips by, and with each passing second, I lose a part of myself that I can never get back.

I can only hope that if I can make my way out of this, there will be enough pieces of me left to put back together again. Or am I as doomed as they are, fated to shatter, the broken fragments of me scattered over the world.

Destiny be damned.

Or is it me who was damned all along...

MAREK

I'M TRAPPED AGAIN in the endless abyss of memories, a relentless current that sweeps me back to that fateful night when we, my brother Mikhail and I, unwittingly killed the woman we both loved. Her haunting gaze, filled with pain, bore into my soul as I relive every agonizing detail. It is a nightmare that refuses to release its grip on me, chaining my consciousness to the depths of despair.

Larissa.

A name that used to fill my heart with warmth and longing now eviscerates me. That night lives in my memories with such clarity that I swear I'm forever stuck in that moment when Mikhail and I drained her. In the throes of our insatiable lust, I became the very monster that I swore to protect the one woman I loved from.

The memory is a storm of emotions—helplessness, regret, and a seething rage at our own weakness. I am lost within it, drowning in the regret of what I've done. It's all my fault. Mikhail never would've opened his heart, bared his soul, had I not pushed for it, had I not fallen first. In my ignorance, I thought we were too strong to be felled by such feelings.

I was a fool.

Suddenly, a voice pierces through the darkness of my mind. "My king, it's time."

It's Jasper who calls, jolting me from the abyss that longs to consume me. My chest heaves as I'm ripped away from the memory, and my eyes snap open to the chilling reality of the present. The tantalizing aroma of fresh blood dances in the air, stoking my dormant hunger into an inferno of need.

Beside me, lies Mikhail, and I gape in shock at his transformation. No

longer is he an unrecognizable creature, aged from centuries of rot and decay. My twin is nearly completely restored to his former glory—and not a moment too soon. Neither of us can afford to appear any weaker with usurpers lurking around every corner of our castle, waiting to dethrone us.

“Jasper, look at him.”

“Yes, my lord. The Blood Slave has proven to be most restorative for your brother. I’m excited to see how her essence heals you.”

The Blood Slave—the one who woke Mikhail and me. She’s special, different, but neither my twin nor I can ever acknowledge this beyond making it a statement. Her status will be elevated, her role as a slave more meaningful because of her blood, but she will never be anything to either Mikahil or me.

She can’t be.

I sit up as Jasper assists me into a wheelchair. My body shakes, slick and clammy with sweat, partly from my nightmares and partly from my need for sustenance. The memory of Larissa's death lingers bitterly, but the hunger gnawing at my insides demands my attention more.

As my Jasper wheels me into a dimly lit room, my senses sharpen, and the hunger within me roars to the surface. He positions me near a row of women, each bound and exposed, their spread thighs bearing the marks of those before me.

Blood drips from their cunts into precious crystal bowls beneath them. That, coupled with the sounds of their cries, creates a beautiful symphony of emotion to thrum within me. But none please me as much as the hoarse whimpers coming from the woman on the other end of the room.

The Blood Slave.

Licking my lips, I ignore the other women as well as Jasper’s urges for me to drink from them. The more blood I consume, the quicker I will heal, but the only taste I want in my mouth is *hers*. The little human’s eyes are round with fear the closer I approach, and the twisted darkness inside of me delights in her terror.

Once I’m positioned squarely between her thighs, Jasper backs away. The Blood Slave’s scent beckons me forward, and I brush my nose against her clit while inhaling. She smells like divinity, and for a small moment, I let myself go, awash in her perfection. But I quickly rein it in. I can never lose my head over a woman again—never.

The tiny creature trembles before me, as everyone should, but her fright

mingles with something else. Curiosity. It amuses me that the little lamb is brave enough to see past her fear. Around her, the other women writhe in equal parts of ecstasy and agony, but the Blood Slave lacks their coyness. She isn't trying to seduce me. Where others throw themselves at my feet, she would gladly run away.

But that will change.

With a wicked grin, I snake my tongue out to lick the inside of her parted legs. The Blood Slave shivers at the contact, turning her head from the monster before her. I tsk and nip at the tender flesh with my fangs until her head whips back to me. Even without words, I know she understands what I want—*eyes on me*. I won't let her escape into the recesses of her mind.

For a small eternity, I tease her, watching the fire gather in her gaze. Beyond her fear is a seething rage, growing as I toy with her. Unlike the other women in Sintara, this one doesn't want me to touch her, but she will soon learn her only job is to please her kings. And while I would normally see her fiery nature as loathsome, I find it entertaining.

It will make it so much more enjoyable when I finally break her.

As I lap at her core, a rush of desire surges through me. My cock springs to life, pulsing with need. Nearby, Jasper hums at the sight, but whether it's from his happiness that I'm well enough to get hard or his own arousal, I don't know. Unfortunately, I'm too weak to do anything about it and must choose between sating my thirst or my lust.

I choose the former, licking around the Blood Slave's pussy, even though there's no blood. My brother would never leave anything so precious. To get what I want, I must remove the gold finger that acts as a stopper, catching and holding the delicious red elixir these human females expel every month when the moon is full.

With gnarled hands, I pop the finger free, and instantly, a river of crimson floods out into my open mouth. My eyes flutter shut at the taste coating my tongue.

Perfection.

Only one other has ever tasted this good, but I shut down before my mind can go to her. I won't think of Larissa while feeding from this nameless—meaningless—Blood Slave. Her essence might remind me of what happened a lifetime ago, but this fragile creature spread before me is a reminder of what can never happen again.

She mewls like a kitten every time my nose bumps her clit, and I want to

tease her further, but I'm lost in the sensation of my body regenerating. I can feel my skin knit back together, the rot replaced by something far more sinister and powerful. Soon, I won't look like a monster, but I'll always be one.

Who knows how long I feast, growing stronger with every passing second, but when I finally pull back, my bloodlust no longer hammers in my skull like a death bell tolling. Instead, another hunger bombards my body—the lust from before. With the Blood Slave's pussy glistening with my saliva, it's easy to envision her wet from other things.

Namely her juices and mine.

But fucking the tiny female isn't only foolish, it's dangerous. There are hundreds of other women who can service me that don't make me think of my past, whose lives would be inconsequential should I go too far. Snapping my fingers, Jasper comes over and I whisper in his ear what I want. He nods eagerly, always ready to do my bidding. He is truly the only one my brother and I can trust in our court.

He scurries off and returns shortly with a dark-skinned woman. The Blood Slave eyes her warily while I grin at her unease. Still seated in my wheelchair, it's easy to take out my cock and seat the other woman atop me, her back pressed into my chest. She slides down, her hot cunt sheathing my cock as she bounces up and down along my length.

But I pay her no heed. Instead, my gaze is locked with the Blood Slave. Her eyes are wide, and beyond her fear, I scent what I've been waiting for—her arousal. Although she doesn't want to be, she's turned on by the sight of me fucking another before her very eyes. My smirk curls into something crueler, and she scowls.

There's that fire.

For someone so timid, our Blood Slaves hides a bratty side that I can't wait to punish out of her. But for now, I'll have to be content fucking the other slave. She moans and pants, nearly bringing herself to climax, but she knows better than to come without permission. Sweat dots her brow as she tries to hold off, ensuring that I explode first, but I'm the master of my body.

Only one time did I fail to control myself...and it cost me dearly.

My amusement returns when the wench cries out in dismay and rapture, coating my cock with her release. When she comes down from her high, she freezes in my lap, knowing that she's failed. Her shoulders quake with her suppressed tears, and I almost relish this as much as when she was riding me.

“I’m so sorry, my king—”

“Do not speak to him, slave!” Jasper snaps on my behalf. “You will be punished. Now leave.”

The woman lifts off my cock with a pop and flees from the chamber, my dark chuckle following her as she tries to escape what she’s done.

“I apologize, my lord. Let me find you another.”

“No, Jasper, I will finish myself off and this Blood Slave will watch me until the very end.”

“But, my king, your seed should find a home in an eager receptacle!”

Now I laugh in earnest, strength flowing through my veins, all thanks to the Blood Slave. “Oh, it will find a home.”

Just not an eager one.

Dismissed, Jasper steps back as I stroke my cock. From the angle the Blood Slave reclines, she can’t see, but her expression tells me that she knows what’s happening, or perhaps has an inkling. It’s obvious that she’s innocent, our Blood Slave should be untouched by everyone but us.

I hear her respiration increase the faster my hand moves. Our gazes lock, hers wide with the bombardment of emotions running rampant within her—ones that I can smell and taste, thanks to her blood. Whether she likes it or not, we’re connected, her essence forming a bond that she will never be able to escape.

Leaning in, I bump my nose over her clit, my tongue lashing out to lick at the precious droplets of blood dripping from her cunt. She tries to twist away, but I bury my face between her legs, pinning her in place as I lap at her pussy. Poor thing hates the pleasure that I’m making her feel, but I won’t stop—can’t stop.

Just as I’m about to show her the very secret of her sex, I pull back and unleash my own, rope after rope of cum spurting out and covering my hand. It’s grayish and thin, nothing like the creamy seed I’m used to, but I’m still very, very weak. But not for much longer. From this moment on, I will only get stronger, as will my twin.

Elated at the thought, I cup my hands together to keep my cum from leaking away. With a final lick of the Blood Slave’s cunt, I signal for Jasper to place the golden finger back inside of her. And then I paint the fluid I’m holding all over her spread form, concentrating on coating the delectable center of her pussy.

The Blood Slave gasps, her nose wrinkling. Instead of taking offense, I

laugh, her displeasure bringing me happiness. I want her to cower, to fear me, but never do I want her to be content. Not like Larissa was. This female is only a means to an end—that being her blood gives my brother and I the sustenance we need to restore our kingdom to the way it once was.

And when it is, Mikhail and I will stop at nothing to destroy anyone who stands in our way.

OXANA

IT'S ALL FUCKED UP.

The kings are even bigger monsters than the others, and I'm just part of their sick plan, woven into it as a meal for them to feast upon so that they may become stronger while I become weaker. They debase me like a lowly animal and I hate them—but not as much as I hate myself and the reaction that I have to their touch.

These men that my blood awoke aren't what they seem. I watched them transform before my very eyes, their skin knitting together by some dark magic. It's inhuman and unholy, but I'm drawn to these creatures whose eyes glow red and gold.

In a world that's been turned upside down from me, I feel safe in their presence, calmed by their touch when I know I shouldn't. These kings are not good men, and they do not want good things for me. But I'm beginning to wonder if I don't want them for me, either.

Maybe all the time Papa spent hiding me wasn't from monsters, but from the one lurking deep inside of me. It's an insidious, dark temptress that promises me things I've never known, if I only take the leap. I despise these black thoughts and remind myself that I can't trust anyone, not even Jasper.

Not even myself.

He's proof enough that no one will protect me, that no one in this castle is looking after me, and so I must do it on my own—but it will take time. If I want to escape this place, I need to know how everything works. And right now, I can barely unjumble my own thoughts, but I must find a way to break free. If not for my sake, then Papa's. There's no telling what happened to him.

He could be dead or worse—*alive and in the hands of monsters just as I*

am.

It's ironic how it feels like we switched roles. He was once the protector where I was the child, and now he needs me to help him. Papa would never abandon me, and I will do anything within my power to go to him now.

The restless urge to flee stirs in my chest, but I quell it. The clock is ticking and I must get to my father soon, but I must also bide my time. Everyone in this place is so compliant, so submissive. Their obedience is expected and it's obvious anyone who disobeys is severely punished.

Although it will likely nearly kill me, I must be the epitome of complacency. Whatever these kings want, I must give them. My stomach churns at the thought because I know deep down they want more than just my blood. These monsters want my body and soul as well—am I really strong enough to give them *everything*?

The thought of the man with golden eyes licking between my legs flits through my head, his smug expression forever seared in my memories. He was toying with me the entire time and enjoyed it. It's like he's waiting for me to lash out just so he can punish me, like the girl he...*fucked*.

But if she felt a fraction of the pleasure I do when the kings touch me, then I can't blame the poor woman for succumbing to it. Even now, I see her eyes rolled back in her head in ecstasy, her face a picture of bliss. And then how crestfallen she looked when she realized her mistake. These kings are sadistic, waiting to pick apart our faults and prey upon them for their own pleasure.

But I will not give them what they seek—I will remain stoic and strong.

My stomach flutters, as if my body is more aware of the lie than my mind is that I'm telling myself. Or perhaps my body doesn't think I'm strong enough to withstand whatever the kings will do to me, that my mind will bend and break. But I can't let that happen. I refuse to become someone mindless and meaningless. I will break free.

One way or another.

MIKHAIL

THIS EVENING FEELS different than the last few have felt as I wake with the setting sun. I feel young again, rejuvenated, as if I had not spent a hundred years dying, hidden beneath a stone tomb. The air smells fresher, my body loose and limber as I sit up and stretch, sheets pooling around my waist. Power thrums within me, within us. I can sense my brother across our combined chambers, slumbering in his quarters, the scent of a freshly fucked female lingering alongside his scent.

I take a moment and reflect, my eyes roving over my old room, the gray stone walls. So much of it is unchanged, yet subtle differences let me know how much time has passed. A new mattress for one, the feathers soft and fluffy inside it. New pillows too. The heavy drapes that once shrouded the dark metal bed posts have been replaced with something more...modern. Yet regal nonetheless with rich crimson tones and gold tie backs.

Across the floor, the original rug remains, its ornate design hailing from a far away land. And the fireplace of carved stone, chiseled by a renowned artist in likeness of Sintara at a distance, still stands proudly, a fire still sparking inside of it.

An expensive gold rimmed mirror stretches across the wall to my left, allowing me to appreciate the views of what happens in my bed, even if I cannot see myself.

Stained glass windows depicting my brother and I in full king garb stare back at me. The faces so familiar yet not, their cares far different than mine are today. The first time I saw the window was jarring, for never had I seen myself through another's eyes. Not in a mirror, or in a reflection in water, never. I sigh, looking at them. Those kings had no worries, aside from whose

turn it was to drink and fuck Lar—

No...

Never the name. Never say the fucking name, not even in your head.

I chastise myself and hope Marek did not listen in on my thoughts, that I hadn't projected it to him, and the answering silence gives me relief. I take a deep, unnecessary but calming breath, forcing my lungs to expand and contract as I empty my brain, my heart, and stand.

I reach down and grab a note on my nightstand, reading Jasper's elegant handwriting detailing the responsibilities of the day, and head to a pair of French doors. With a flick of my wrist, an order to my magic, they open and I walk to the black, iron railing surrounding the balcony, resting my hands on the snow-covered top rail. Frigid, winter air rushes around me, cooling my naked body. It feels freeing and I suck in a lungful of frozen air, allowing it to cool me from the inside as I look around, the setting sun painting the sky in swirls of pale pinks and bright oranges. It is glorious. From this high up, one can clearly make out the expansive forest of the third ring, where the wolves dwell. Jasper's whispered words have indicated something is amiss within our wolf relations, an issue I plan on promptly addressing this afternoon.

It has not taken long for Marek and I to obtain our full strength and we have Jasper to thank for that. His endless devotion to us over the years has been fruitful, having found our newest Blood Slave. I have to admit, her blood drove me wild when I first tasted it in the tombs, but I was crazed then, a mere fragment of myself, a ghost of who I once was.

Then again, in the moon room—a brilliant idea and design by Jasper—I tasted her again, beheld her body through my blurred vision, but only for a moment. For once her blood touched my lips, again I lost my mind. Lost myself in her scent, the taste of her moon blood, the richness of it, the cloying aroma. Every swallow was imperative, urgent, and I could feel it, feel her, entering me and gliding through my veins, awakening me, healing me, bringing me back to life.

Blood lust threw me into oblivion and I relished in it, in her blood. Uncaring what the consequences were. And that is the danger of her, of this new Blood Slave. I've not yet even fed from her veins, or touched her in other ways, and already have lost myself because of what she is. I must be careful. *We* must be careful, restrained, stronger of mind than our desperate desires.

But I'd be lying to myself if I didn't long to taste her again, from the vein

I know pumps in her upper thigh. My fangs ache to sink into her flesh, to hear her hiss at the pain, fight it, fight me, and be able to do nothing about it. Nothing gets me hotter than a woman in restraints, open for the taking.

A submissive little pet, that is all you shall ever be. A nameless source of food, a hole to fuck, nothing more.

My cock lengthens in spite of my proclamations, rising proudly against the winter wind. Devil's tits, I'm going to need to fuck something soon or I might lose myself to another kind of lust. A subtle knock on our chamber door jostles me from my thoughts. "Come."

I do not have to turn to see who enters, I could smell them from the hallway, the human slaves, biding their time til the clocks chimed noon. Nor do I hide myself from their prying, hungry eyes. Let them look. Let them see their king in all their glory, healed and primed. Focused.

Ready.

The slaves move about behind me, readying a bath, hanging out my clothes for the day as if this were a normal occurrence for them. Of course, that could not be farther from the truth. I've never met these slaves before, the ones inhabiting the castle before my demise are now long dead. I can sense their nerves, taste their sweat in the air, as they prepare for me. Soon, I'm sinking into heated water, paying the slaves no mind as they wash and dress me. As they comb through my long, dark hair until it shines like an onyx gem.

"Leave," I order as the last button on my jacket is closed, and they scurry out like rats when a candle flickers to life in the dark. I almost laugh at their cowardice as I stride to the mirror. Though I cannot see my reflection, I can appreciate how the clothes drape across my body.

I'm keeping things less formal today, wearing a simple ivory shirt, halfway unbuttoned, displaying my healed flesh below. Tight, black leather pants hug my legs, showing off my toned, reformed muscles. And on my feet are shiny heeled boots—one does have to demonstrate some class.

With a snap of my fingers, my crown appears in my hand. It is as beautiful as I remembered it to be. Ornate gold filigree wraps around it like woven vines, peaking into six pointed tips filled with rubies, diamonds, and sapphires. And in the center is the insignia of the Novikov line. And though I've kept my clothes casual, I will wear my crown today as a reminder—that I am the fucking king. Me and Marek rule everyone and every fucking thing.

It is all ours, and it is time Sintara and our allies were reminded.

If the whispers of rebellion cannot be soothed by my twin and I simply awakening, then perhaps a visual of brute strength will do the trick. Either way, this meeting should be interesting. A hunger stirs within me, one calling for freshly spilled blood and torn flesh, a violent desire that has my fangs aching, and my claws elongating.

I shove it down, that deep longing to hunt and kill, to watch the living perish into the dead, my lips sucking the last ounce of blood their beating heart will ever pump. Even the wolves can do no such thing, their teeth and claws simply mutilating their prey. That is one of many reasons why vampires are so much more than wolves will ever be. Our patience, our cunning, our ability to restrain ourselves until the time is right.

“Come,” I say as Jasper’s scent encroaches on my chambers. I watch in the mirror as he enters through the door and shuts it behind him, black suit ironed into perfection.

He bows, head of white hair glistening in the light of the fire, our eyes locking in the mirror as he rises. “Sire. I have assembled a meeting for you. Everyone is settled and awaiting your arrival.”

I straighten my lapel and turn to him. “Good. And Karynth?”

“Present.”

I grin wickedly. Karynth, the alpha of the wolves, does not take kindly to my summons. Never has. I was quite surprised to learn that his reign has held all these years. At two hundred and fifty years old, he is quite elderly for a wolf. A younger wolf would be better suited. What quality does Karynth have that has withstood his aging power and continued his dominance over much stronger members of the pack I wonder?

“Should we wake Marek, sire?” Jasper asks, gesturing towards my brother's private rooms.

I shake my head. “No. I can take care of this myself. My brother needs to rest.”

The look on Jasper’s face suggests he wants to remind me that I need rest as well but he clamps his lips firmly and inclines his head. “Of course. Let’s let him rest then. We’ll fill him in when he wakes. Shall we?”

Jasper gestures towards the door with his gloved hands and leads the way. This time we don’t take the secret corridors reserved only for Marek and I, and our Blood Slave if we need to summon her quickly. No, this walk to the meeting is purposeful. Jasper takes the long way down, guiding us past the upper levels of Sintara where high ranking Lords and Ladies take residence.

Seeing me back to full health and strength is important for Libarynn. Part of me thinks the blood ceremony was done prematurely. Had Marek and I been mended by then, it might have swayed allegiances earlier.

Instead they met with withered kings whose minds were not yet healed enough to understand what was happening around them. Kings who didn't have enough blood in their veins to offer a drink to those who swore fealty. Their fruitless bows and empty words meant nothing without our blood to discern who spoke true. Something I intend to fix in the near future, especially with my castle swarming with new vampires.

I've come close to chastising Jasper for allowing such things to happen. Procedures are in place for new coven members, where they are trained and vetted. But I know the human man had no choice up against the actions of much powerful vampires in our absence. So I let it go. I've let so much go.

I pause as we pass by a room with its door opened wide. Beyond is a veritable feast of blood and flesh. In the center, a woman hangs from the ceiling, manacles binding her wrists. Torn, white cloth hangs in ribbons from her body, leaving her all but naked. A vampire prowls around her, a whip in his hand. He murmurs something to her and she shakes her head, her red, curly hair bouncing from the movement.

The male dislikes her response, and pauses behind her, snaking a hand to her front to pinch a plump, pink nipple. She moans, pressing her ass to him, but then he moves. Aggressively, he slaps her breast, then, using his whip, lashes her backside with two loud *thwacks*. She shrieks, head falling back, tits pressed forward. He growls, standing behind her sagging body, and sweeps her hair away from her neck before sinking his fangs inside her tender flesh. The sight is arousing, and I have to pull myself away before I rip the male in half and take this woman for myself.

Not because I find her particularly attractive or am jealous of this vampire, but because of how appealing I find dominating human women. So helpless and fragile. Something about their vulnerability excites me, especially when I can smell their fear. And, since my revival, I have not had a moment to experience this for myself, an issue, I decide, that needs to be amended rather quickly. I will think clearer once I am able to release some of the pent up violence on a bound woman, sinking more than just my fangs into her.

I shake the thoughts from my head and divert my eyes to continue on, my mission not to be thwarted. There will be plenty of time for fucking.

We descend a flight of open stairs to the first level, when the scent of wolves hits me like a winter breeze. It's earthen and foul, like the abhorrent odor of a wet dog. Jasper says nothing as he pulls open a door, its hinges creaking, and I sweep past him, pausing just inside.

I take a moment to linger my gaze on each guest as I take my seat at the head of a long, rectangular table, noting if they defer their eyes in submission or not. The oak table is cool beneath my hands as I clasp them on top. To my left is Lord Navar, my oldest ally, a vampire I might even call a friend. He strokes his long beard in his thin hands, not aging a day since I last saw him. He nods then sips from a chalice of blood resting before him. Next to him are Sarafina, Lamark, and Spensyn, three vampire lords in their own right.

Sarafina's red eyes blaze as she stares at me, her dark skin making her white fangs appear even brighter, more menacing. She's a fierce vampire, fighting her way to the top of a coven without an established bloodline. For she's a made vampire, not born. But Jasper told me what happened during The Selection, how Sarafina attempted to take my Blood Slave for herself after proclaiming her blood was unremarkable knowing full well that was a lie. I regard her with caution now, knowing she did not have our best intentions at hand. I cannot fault her completely though, wanting to strengthen herself above others is second nature to vampires. But still...

Lamark pushes his chair back, bowing at the waist, long, red hair draping over his face. "My king. How good it is to see you back to health."

I place a hand on my chest as the male sits back down. "Thank you, Lamark. It is good to see you as well." His tight grin belies the monster I know lurks beneath his skin. Lamark, a vampire with a thin frame and unnatural yellow eyes, is one of a select few of vampires who have a second form, a monster who can be called to the surface at will much like a wolf can switch between his human and beast form. Marek and I can shift parts of ourselves—fingernails to claws, all our teeth into fangs, but nothing beyond that. Lamark is a male we've worked hard to align with.

Then there's Spensyn, appearing as a human male with pale skin and dirty brown hair, not much older than thirteen. Turned at such a young age, he is often underestimated by his appearance alone. But the vampire is ruthless and cunning, and has been a high ranking lord in Sintara for years living in one of the exquisite suites at the top of the castle. It unnerves some but I like the effect he has on others. "Sire," he murmurs, inclining his head.

I lift my own chalice in salute. "Spensyn. Your youth mocks me." His

eyes sparkle with amusement as we sip the fresh blood in our cups, still warm from its donor.

At the far end of the table, directly across from me, sits the Alpha wolf, Karynth. Wolves, though they have a much longer life than mere humans, are not immortal as we vampires are. Karynth has...matured. His once youthful face is covered with age lines and healed scars, his amber hair flecked with gray strands at his temples and throughout his long, unkempt beard. I might not have recognized this male save for his scent, like wet leaves on a cool fall day.

“Karynth,” I address the wolf, absently swirling the blood in my glass. “I must say I was quite surprised and amused to learn you still hold the title of alpha. Tell me, how do you remain so youthful to overpower those much younger than yourself?”

The wolf doesn't bristle, his face immovable as he twists the stem of his wine glass between two pudgy fingers. “Good bloodlines, King Mikhail. You ought to know something about that.”

He sips his wine, blue eyes blazing and fixed on me as the young male wolf to his left snickers. I slam my fist into the table at the insult, blood and wine spilling as I shift my gaze to a wolf I have never met. In an instant I'm before him, his shirt fisted in my hand, his feet dangling off the floor, my fangs bared. “You dare disrespect me in my own castle! Wolves have died for less,” I sneer, his face morphing with terror.

Karynth leaps between us, one hand on my chest as if that could stop me from ripping this wolf's head from his neck. “Apologies, king. Young Danigo has a lot to learn which is why I brought him.” Karynth pants, his own fear lingering in the air. “Please, sire, he's my son.”

I growl and drop him to the floor like discarded laundry. “Leash your pups better Karynth, or I'll be having them for dinner.”

Danigo, a bulky wolf with the same amber hair as his father, though barely twenty years old by his scent, cowers as Karynth backhands him then tosses him back into his seat, right next to Lord Vikkon. Vikkon sneers down his long, narrow nose, waving the air around his face away as if it offends him, and scoots his chair closer to the vacant one on my right, a chair set for Mikhail should he wake and wish to join us.

I saunter back to my chair and sit with grace, leaning back and crossing my one leg over the opposite knee. “Now, several issues have been brought to my attention. Issues that leave a foul taste in my mouth. And after

spending a century buried in a crypt, I must admit, my patience grows thin. Lord Navar, you may begin.”

Navar narrows his eyes on the wolves. “Karynth, you have been summoned today to tell the kings why you thought it unnecessary to call off The Hunt during the Sanguine Selection as is law. To break such a law is punishable by death. As it were, one of your wolves almost fucked the kings’ Blood Slave. Had the Vampire Pride—”

The rest of his words are lost as a rage like I’ve never felt before rises within me. Heat blazes, anger churning in my gut like molten lava. “What do you mean one of your wolves almost fucked my Blood Slave!” I rage, snarling, fingers elongating into claws.

Karynth’s eyes widen as he drops to his knees, hands up in submission. “Sire, I had no idea. She-She wasn’t even yours yet. This happened before The Selection. Right Danigo?”

Danigo cowers under my gaze and lowers his eyes, nodding. “Y—yes sir. But he didn’t work alone. A vampire assisted him.”

I flick my gaze to Navar who stares back calm and cool. “Why am I just learning of this now, Navar?” I can’t keep the anger from my voice, the snarl.

Navar spins to face me, hands clasped on his lap. “My king, you were, shall we say, incapacitated. But fear not, I have handled the situation and secured the males for you.” He shifts his gaze behind me to Jasper. “Jasper, if you will, please locate Brim guarding a carriage outside. Tell him to bring in the prisoners.”

A malicious smile grows on Navar’s face. I try my best to calm my nerves, needing to kill, or drink or fuck, perhaps all three at once to relieve the tension as I sit back in my chair, fingers returning to normal. I drum them along the table top, no one daring to breathe out of turn as we wait for Brim, head of the Vampire Prime, to bring in the accused.

A few moments later a knock raps on the door and in walks Brim, a huge vampire with dark skin and dark eyes. Hulking, his muscles ripple under his uniform, the threads threatening to burst with each movement. Behind him, led by chains pinned to collars around their necks, are a wolf and a vampire, neither of which I know. The thought unsettles me, how different things really are since Marek and I last reigned over the castle, how many strangers roam in our lands now.

Brim tosses them to the ground with a growl, then stands at ease with his hands clasped behind his back.

“On your knees.” I bark out the order, the males scrambling into position but finding it difficult with their hands bound behind their backs. “Identify yourselves,” I grit out, trying and failing to remain calm.

Long, scraggly black hair shrouds the wolf’s face. Tatters of a red leather jacket and dark pants, dirty from either a battle or time in the dungeons cling to his body. And across one eye, a pink scar gleams, fresh and still healing. “I am Badar,” he declares defiantly, raising his chin in spite of his precarious position. Stupid, proud wolf.

I jerk my gaze to the vampire, one of my own, who at least has the decency to look ashamed. “And you, vampire scum?”

Strands of his dark hair have fallen from the leather strap binding it away from his face and he winces as he shifts. I notice the silver on his collar, most uncomfortable for a vampire. “Elias, my lord.”

Lord Navar stands, pushing his chair back and walks over to the prisoners. “Now, who would like to go first and tell our King of your treachery hmm?” When no one volunteers, Navar bends down and cups the wolf’s chin in his hands. “How about you, wolf. And know King Mikhail can scent lies in the air so I would suggest you tell the truth.” Navar tosses Bandar’s head and the wolf falls back but catches himself, a low growl emitting from his throat.

Brim is there in an instant, Bandars grimy hair in one fist, the other hand holding a very sharp knife to the male’s neck, the tip already dripping with blood. “Growl again, and I’ll cut off your fucking tongue,” Brim promises. *I like him*, I think.

Bandar glares but represses his aggression. “I would never have hunted, *sire*, if not for the gong. As soon as I heard it, something inside of me shifted and it’s like I couldn’t help but hunt. I assumed since the gong sounded, that the hunt was a go.”

I’m almost shaking with anger. “And how close did you get to fucking what’s mine?”

Bandar swallows hard. “I...I got my dick out, but the Prime caught me before anything happened. I swear, nothing happened.”

“You had her lick your fucking dick!” Elias reveals to Bandar’s horror-stricken face. I almost kill the wolf then.

“I’ll deal with you in a minute,” I promise the wolf who whines as I turn to the vampire. “Elias,” I hiss, my limbs trembling with fury. “As a vampire of Libarynn, you knew full well that The Hunt is ordered to cease during

years when The Sanguine Selection takes place. Yet, not only did you aid a fucking wolf, you also participated in the XXX wolf event.” I lower my voice an octave and step in front of the vampire, crouching down in front of him. “Tell me, Elias, when Bandar was so close to fucking my Blood Slave, what were you doing to her?”

He gulps, averting his gaze to the ground. “I—I was trying to help—”

“Liar!” Bandar shouts. “He was fucking drinking from her, sire!”

Fury turns to rage inside me. “Is this true?” My voice rumbles with the promise of pain. Elias shakes his head as I lift one finger, allowing the claw to burst forth from my skin, then skim the sharp tip down his cheek. I catch a droplet of his blood and bring it to my nose, inhaling deeply.

It’s there, faint, but there, *her* scent.

Mine...

Red mists my vision and I explode, grabbing Mikhail’s empty chair and breaking it over my thigh. Gripping a shard of the chair’s wooden leg in my hands, I impale it through Elias’s chest, the vampire exploding on impact.

Soaked in the blood of my enemy, I turn to Bandar. “Brim. Hold him.” The large male posts up behind Bandar, securing his upper body so he can’t move. Reaching into my boot, I pull out a very sharp dagger created in the likeness of the Novikov insignia, then reach for the wolf’s pants. I make quick work of the leather as he shrieks, then clasp his dick in my hand. “You tried to rape my slave,” I growl out, almost unable to form words. “You had her mouth on your cock. For that, you die.”

“No!” he hollers as I place my blade at the base of his dick, and slice through. Blood sputters as I hold up the severed appendage and as the wolf bellows in pain, I shove his dick down his throat. I let him choke for a moment, before I take his head between my hands and twist it off of his neck.

I let his blood pour down on me as I raise the severed head above my own, then toss it to the ground staring at Karynth. “Tell your fucking pack what happened here. Tell them what happens to those who fail to submit to my rule, who take what was never theirs. You tell them that I am wrath, that my fury is their fate should they put a claw out of line. You tell them King Mikhail is back and I’m taking no prisoners.”

No, this time, I am out for blood.

OXANA

I'M SO CONFUSED. I can't get used to this life—is being bound, drunk from, and teased into madness as normal as things will ever be for me? Yes, I know it could be worse. Much worse. I could be a lower slave like the others I've met. Forced to clean this ancient castle, Sintara I think they called it. I could be owned by a less savory lady or lord who would use me for things other than blood, debase my body in ways I can't even imagine.

I've heard noises in the corridors of the castle, when I've been ushered from place to place. Moans that weren't wrought from pain. Screams not loosened by a beating or neglect, but something more, something pleasurable. In spite of the blood drinking and being surrounded by monsters, I know that not only heinous things happen here. There are naughty things, filthy things, things my simple brain can't even comprehend. I get the idea that I might like to find out one day, with the right person.

But I have no people—and I don't see that changing anytime soon. The other slaves, the humans, have a camaraderie about them, an understanding and a support system on a much deeper level than I can comprehend. It reminds me of my relationship with Papa, the only other relationship I've ever experienced. And though I trusted him with my life, I also knew he kept secrets. He didn't trust me, or my judgment. His fierce protectiveness over me clouded his ability to see that I was my own person with my own feelings, thoughts, and desires. If what I wanted was different from his own ideals, it was squashed and never discussed again.

In some fucked up way, I was as much a slave then as I am here, I just didn't know it. Only now, I'm not alone, not completely anyway. This castle, though it is a prison of sorts, is filled with life. Vampires and humans bustle

along its halls and mingle in its rooms. Carriages come and go, taking people away and dropping others off. Day turns to night, and night back to day, the air not filled with endless inhuman howling. But the main difference is I'm not filled with terror. Trepidation yes, but the gut wrenching terror that clogged my throat day after day, the endless worry every time Papa would leave the house, that has diminished.

Maybe I just don't care anymore. Maybe in some way, I've given up. An emptiness grows inside of me with each passing hour and a desperate yearning for something I can't quite put my finger on. I know there's something I crave, but I don't know what it is. It's maddening.

Turning onto my back, I stare up at the ceiling and let out a sigh. Is this what my life really is going to be—hours filled with endless boredom while I wait to be summoned by the kings? Memories of the moon room have me shivering and a phantom sensation has me reaching between my legs to ensure that golden finger isn't still lodged inside of me. The things they had me do, forced me to do, are appalling.

But at least my body is mine again, the blood stopped for now. And I know what to expect when the next full moon rises in the night's sky, what the kings will be like, while also understanding why Papa tried so hard all my life to stop this bleeding from happening. I shudder at the memory of one of the kings—I don't remember which—lying between my spread legs, his grotesque mouth stretched wide, capturing blood as it poured out between my legs. The noises he was making were sickening.

Slurps and growls.

I must have been going mad because I swear his face...it changed as he drank, morphed from monster to human. And I couldn't look away, my eyes fixed on this creature drinking from me as if my blood was the most decadent thing he'd ever had the pleasure to taste. It was so gross, but some part of me was almost proud of it. Proud that of all the women in the moon room, of all the females sifted through during the selection, that it was me, my blood that called to them. And that right there is how I know I've lost my mind.

No one with a clear head would even consider the things I'm thinking.

Feeling restless, I toss off the covers and slip from my bed, pacing from the fireplace to the iron bars keeping me inside. Try as I might to empty my mind of the twins, I can't seem to do it. Every thought that flits through my mind ends up at them. At what they might have looked like before they withered away. At what they might do to me once they regain their strength.

Another shudder, this one not wholly in revulsion.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I wish I could blame it on lack of sleep or starvation, but neither one of those would be true. I'm fed like a royal here, too much most of the time. And I'm so exhausted at the end of each night that I sleep practically all day long. My days and nights have switched since I came here. How long has it been anyway? I should ask for some paper or a bound journal to keep track of things—who knows what might be helpful to reflect on in the future.

I pause in front of the fireplace and sit down on the rug lying before it, the fabric a rich crimson. Flames dance happily inside, the colors ranging from bright yellow to orange to blue. The sound of crackling wood comforts me and I draw my knees up to my chest, surrounding them with my arms while rocking slightly on the floor. I'd kill for something warmer to wear, and wonder where they've stored Papa's coat and Mama's fur dress or her necklace.

The necklace!

My hand lurches to my neck, but it's not there.

No, no, no.

Mama's necklace—it's gone! I know I had it on when I first got here. Jasper had looked at it with such awe, like he'd seen it before. Hell, when he pulled that blade out of the bottom, it all but confirmed his knowledge of it. But how did he know? And was he the one who took it, during my first night here, when he brought me into the tombs?

I thought he was my friend or at least someone on my side, but my opinions of him have vastly changed. Within my chest, I feel the well of sadness deepening. Tears won't even surface now, the supplies all dried up.

Outside the window, dawn has given way to day, but the sun's bright rays can't be seen through the thick, winter clouds that blanket the sky. Sleep calls to me, my eyes growing heavy even as my room lightens with the rising sun. Sunshine can't quell the ache in my heart, the disparity growing there. What's the fucking point of trying to live when everything here seems to be set on using me, or worse. I've seen the glowers, the stares. Even some of the humans look at me despairingly, though it seems more like jealousy than anything.

Because I'm not cleaning up the dirt and blood leftover from the vampires.

I'm not the one who could be grabbed at any moment and used for

whatever purposes the monsters see fit.

I'm the Blood Slave.

I scoff aloud. The title hasn't granted me extra comfort or powers. No extra protection that I've noticed. Unless you count the iron bars keeping me captive within this room.

Sighing again, I push off the ground and gaze out the barred window to the world beyond. Snow falls in thick flakes, gently covering the empty limbs of the forest. The sun peeks out from between fluffy clouds, casting sparkles on the snow wherever its rays touch. It's beautiful. Serene even. But no more tangible than a picture hanging on a wall.

Shutting the heavy curtains over the window, I head to the bathroom and wash up before walking back to my bed. In the five minutes it took for me to use the bathroom, someone had entered my room, made my bed, and laid out a nightgown for me to change into. I glance around, wondering how they got in, and how the hell I didn't hear them. A shudder ripples through me and I wonder if I'm being watched all the time by some secret magic.

My hands brush across the fabric of the nightgown before snatching it up. It's beautiful, but sheer, with long sleeves and delicate embroidery along the modest neckline. Looking around one more time to ensure I'm alone, I pull off the shift and slip into the nightgown. Though I appreciate its beauty, I loathe it. Loathe that it isn't warm. That it exposes every fucking inch of my body, making me feel more vulnerable and more insecure than I already am.

Part of me wonders if, perhaps, vampires do not feel the cold as humans do. Maybe they are hot all the time and that's why they dress us in such thin attire. I shake my head in disbelief, still in shock that such things are real.

The covers are so warm as I cuddle inside them, bundling myself up into a cocoon. I leave one candle flickering on my nightstand as my eyelids grow heavy and close on their own accord. It only takes mere moments before sleep pulls me into its comforting arms.

I WAKE SUDDENLY from a deep sleep, my senses heightened, hairs on my body prickling. My breathing shallows as a fear creeps up my body from my head to my toes, goosebumps rising with each sparse breath.

"Who's there," I call out to the dark room. No answer as I shift my gaze

to the windows, noting that no light shines beyond them. Nighttime is upon the land. And in the night is when the monsters wake.

A sinister laugh bellows, echoing all around me, male and terrifying. A second joins the cruel voice, deeper, a snarl. I curl my body into a ball, desperate to hide myself, knowing I'm defenseless. But there's no way in this room right? Only through those iron bars...

A scrape, a rush of fabric, a hiss, and a sizzle. The candle flickers out and I'm plunged into darkness. Try as I might to stay calm, a scream ripples up my throat as a pair of glowing eyes appear above me, yellow and terrifying. My covers are pulled away and a hand clamps over my mouth as a second pair of eyes, orange and frightening, hovers over my head.

Terror builds as my wrists are snatched and my arms are yanked up, held over my head. Another growl, a groan, and the whisper of cold fingers skate down my sides to the bottom of my nightgown. Tears fall from my eyes as the fabric is lifted, higher and higher, exposing my naked body below it.

I try to wriggle, kicking out with a leg, but that is caught as well and yanked to the side, held between the thighs of the creature with yellow eyes. A nose runs down the length of my neck, sniffing, while an icy hand palms my core. I can't breathe, can't move, suffocating under the weight of them. One chuckles deeply, a tongue licking up my inner thigh.

"Drink quickly, we do not have much time," one whispers, his scent earthy, like fallen leaves.

The one between my legs pauses at my center, his hair tickling my legs. "Oh, I plan on doing much more than that."

As his tongue licks up my slit I scream against the hand covering my lips, then bite.

"Oww!" A pained bellow cleaves the darkness and the orange eyes no longer hover over me. "She fucking bit me!" A slap lands across the side of my face, and it's like I've been woken from my stupor, my fear subsiding. Anger battles with the terror inside me and I shout, then kick out with my free leg, connecting with the man between my thighs.

Body freed, I roll off the bed and try to crawl underneath it, hoping they're too big to reach me here. But hands encase my ankles and pull me back, my bare backside pressed against the crotch of one attacker. "Ahh, yes, I do like it from this angle, little human. My cock will fit so nicely in your ass."

"No! Please!" I cry, clawing at the ground as a thumb sounds in front of

me.

A second later my hair is pulled back, my cheeks squeezed in an unforgiving grip, the male panting hard. “Open up, bitch. I’m going to shove my cock so far down your throat you’ll be seeing stars.”

The one behind me shifts, and I know he’s taking off his pants. A spank lands on my ass. I shriek, crying hard.

“Please!” I plead once more, and the one behind me laughs.

“I do like it when they beg, but not as much as I want to hear you scream.”

Help! I shout in my head, as fingers dig harder into my cheeks, my jaws widening. *Help me, please!* I don’t know who I’m begging—to the gods I guess, although they’ve never answered me before. Something long and hard slaps at my lips, while something else prods at my ass.

My hips are held firm, my head locked in place. And I can’t even see my attackers. Flashes of my time held in the woods between the vampire and the wolf flare in my mind. The vampire...he hissed when he came into contact with my necklace. I’d give anything to have that back. Anything. I ready myself for the pain as something pushes against my asshole, another slipping inside my mouth—

A harrowing growl slices through the darkness and the air inside my room grows thick as if a fog has nestled inside of it. The male before me suddenly disappears, then a crash vibrates the floor. The grip on my ass vanishes in the same way before another slam resounds. I then realize I’m free and scramble away, trying to find a safe corner in the dark.

Snarls and growls, the scent of blood. Screams and snapping bones. I cower in a corner, my legs drawn up, hands covering my lowered head. One final anguished and drawn out bellow, then silence. It’s like time itself has paused and I dare not even breathe for fear of being caught. I even will my heart to stop beating, the pulse so loud in my ears.

“Get. Up.” The command comes on the edge of a growl but is said with so much power and authority. Fear returns, making my limbs tremble. “I shall not tell you a second time.”

I swallow hard and glance up. Through the darkness I see two pairs of glowing eyes, one red and one silver—not the attackers. “I’m scared,” I admit to them, unsure why I feel safe enough to say that out loud.

“Good. Fear will keep you in your place, *Blood Slave.*”

A moment of silence, the eyes just staring at me unblinking as I try and

force my shaking limbs to obey their command. Slowly, I rise, but stay pressed to the wall, arms hugging myself as footsteps rush down the hallway outside, the glow of a light source growing brighter.

“My kings,” Jasper pants, eyes wide as he enters my room. His black robe has come loose, pajamas beneath it. He must have been asleep. “I came as fast as I could. What happened?”

Kings...

Dread fills me as I shift my gaze from Jasper to the vampires with the glowing eyes. The twins. Even shrouded in shadow their presence is overwhelming. They tower above me, broad shoulders giving way to tapered waists. Shirtless, the candlelight flickers over rippled muscle, inhuman physiques. But even more imposing than their size, is their presence. It's... suffocating, clogging my throat and dizzying my thoughts. My gaze settles on the pair of gleaming silver eyes. “Ready the crate, Jasper. Have it brought to our chambers immediately.”

Crate?

Jasper bows deeply. “Of course, King Marek. It shall be done.”

Marek... his eyes glow silver. Which means the king with the red eyes is

—

“Mikhail,” Marek says, his voice smooth and silken. “Seems our Blood Slave needs a royal escort.”

Mikhail's lips pull back and white fangs gleam, even in the dark. “Mmm,” Mikhail purrs. “Just in time for a morning snack.”

I squeal as they lunge for me but they don't hurt me like I expect. Aside from the firm grips on my upper arms, the kings simply do as they said and escort me through the castle. I feel so small between them, like a child. Their scents invade my nose in a delicious sort of way. Worn leather and something sweet. Clove maybe. Cinnamon. It calms me somehow.

“Where are you taking me?” I find the courage to ask as we round a corner and trudge up a flight of stairs flanked on either side by black banisters. Everyone we pass pauses and bows to the kings, but I notice the hungry eyes lingering on my body all but exposed beneath the sheer, red fabric of my nightgown. I'm embarrassed, and shame heats my cheeks.

“You are not to speak unless spoken to,” Mikhail replies but doesn't answer my question.

The rest of the journey is silent as we ascend to the top of the castle, across a covered bridge to the tallest tower. A pair of guards flank a set of

massive golden doors, the way inside.

As the guards each grab a handle, and the doors creak open, it's like my fate is being sealed, the lid of a coffin being closed and nailed shut. This is the point of no return and I know that regardless of what happens beyond this threshold...

I'll never be the same again.

MAREK

FUCK, *the rebels are growing too bold.*

The volatile rage coursing through my veins flares brighter when I link my mind with Mikhail, but I know I need to calm down before our rage overtakes the castle and reduces it to nothing but ashes. Next to me, my twin snorts, not giving a damn if we burn down the entire kingdom.

No one touches what's ours, he hisses.

Our realm is consumed by shadows and secrets, but their dominion will soon crumble. Together, we traverse the dimly lit corridors of our ancient castle, our steps echoing like foreboding whispers. The scent of blood, heavy and tantalizing, lingers in the air, a reminder of what happens to those who oppose us.

We move swiftly, our powerful strides carrying us quickly to our chamber. Between my brother and me, the Blood Slave trembles. She fears us. *Good.* The sooner she remembers who's in charge, the better. We are not her saviors—we're her masters, and no one touches what belongs to the rightful kings.

At least, no one does and lives.

Renewed wrath erupts inside of me, warring with other emotions. It creates a tempest of primal urges that nearly has me pinning our pet against the wall so that I can bury both my cock and fangs inside her warmth. Mikhail snarls, hearing my thoughts, and with a supreme effort, I rein in my desires. He already teeters the edge of sanity, I mustn't push him off the ledge.

The Blood Slave's terror wafts in the air, and for a moment, she peeks up at me with wide, horrified eyes. An echo of guilt flits through me at all she's

suffered. The girl is nothing but a pawn to the rebels, a beautiful and delicious hostage they think to hold against my twin and me. What those fools underestimate is the bond we've already forged with the lovely, little slave.

Her blood flows within us, and in return, Mikhail and I can sense her emotions and thoughts. Poor thing doesn't even comprehend how much she already belongs to us, even her body quivers in anticipated awareness. Her innocence is as much a beacon to those who lurk in the shadows as her blood, but we won't let anyone taste what is ours.

We never should have let her out of our sight. Our mistake almost cost us.

Never again, Mikahil vows.

Smell, I order.

My twin inhales deeply. Her fear makes an intoxicating perfume.

Yes, but underneath it, do you scent it? She's curious.

What are you suggesting, brother?

Is she not ours to do with as we please? A toy to play with at our leisure?

She is a pet, nothing more and nothing less.

We can at least pamper her a little.

Mikhail remains silent. The last pet we pampered took half our hearts and all our souls—not that there was much left of the blackened things.

There's a gilded cage waiting for her in our chambers, what more could a slave want?

Pleasure.

My twin snorts. *There are hundreds of willing women, waiting at our beck and call, why toy with this one?*

Because she's not willing. Her mind fights what her body already knows—that she belongs to us. And I want to prove it to the little firebird. The sooner we mark her, the better, and not just with our fangs. It'll be another testament to the rebels as well as to her.

Fine, but we're not fucking her with our cocks.

I groan because that's exactly what I want to do, but I understand my brother's reticence. There are other ways to gain pleasure and mark the Blood Slave without creating an even deeper bond. Where she's concerned, we must tread lightly, lest we tie ourselves even further with the wench. It's one thing to hold power over her, but never can it be the other way around.

The rest of the walk, Mikhail and I are silent, only the stuttered pants of our slave can be heard, and they fill me with the deepest pleasure. With every

step, her trepidation grows. Although she instinctively trusts us, she knows we're no knights in shining armor. In fact, Mikhail and I might be worse than the other monsters that lurk in the cover of darkness.

Her fear is an aphrodisiac that I want to drown in.

My brother waves his hand and the door to our living quarters opens. It's a useless show of power meant to intimidate the ragdoll in our hands. Once inside, he reseals the door shut, warding it for extra measure. Only Jasper is welcome in this area, and only by our special summons. The Blood Slave doesn't understand the honor we bestow upon her by allowing her into our private space.

I propel her forward, toward the towering, golden cage that sits in the middle of the room. The flames from the hearth glint off the gilded bars, adding sparkle to the otherwise dark room. This time, I flick my wrist, using my power to unlock and open the metal door. The Blood Slave balks under my hand when I gesture for her to step inside.

"P-please, don't lock me up like an animal," she cries.

Tsking at her distress, I lick a tear tracking down the side of her cheek. "My dear, you are mistaken. We would never lock an animal in such fine accommodations. You are our pet and deserve to be treated as such."

"Pets *are* animals," she grits out in a show of backbone that makes me hard for some reason.

She is naturally submissive, but there's a fire inside of her that even her recent hardships can't extinguish. If anything, it just makes it burn brighter. I want to bask in the light of that flame, even though I know it's dangerous. A Blood Slave, by definition, is meant to be of service and nothing more. Mikhail grunts as he hears my thoughts.

Fire burns, brother. It's not wise to give our pet such a weapon. Her temper amuses you but you will have a battle on your hands when it grows out of control.

I chuckle silently, unlike my twin, I wouldn't mind the little thing becoming bolder...it just gives me a reason to punish her. Mikhail snorts.

We don't need a reason to punish her. We own her, body and soul. She is ours to do with as we please. Her punishment doesn't need to be justifiable. It only needs to bring us pleasure.

"I'm sorry, I can't understand you when you spit your words," I taunt the lovely creature before me.

"Pets. Are. Animals!"

“Mmm,” Mikhail hums, propped up against a far wall, watching our exchange. “Just remember we eat animals and won’t hesitate to gobble you up if you displease us.”

This silences the Blood Slave, who stares at her toes. From the ire rolling off her in waves, I know she isn’t cowed. Any other human would be on their knees, begging for mercy, but not her. She remains stubbornly quiet, and I want to hear her pleas again, so with a hard shove, I push the girl into the cage.

She gasps as she tumbles back, slamming into the door just as it closes and locks. “Wait! I’m sorry. Please, I’ll do anything!”

Mikhail and I share an amused glance.

“Anything?” I repeat.

“Anything!”

The foolish woman just gave you exactly what you wanted, didn’t she?

I laugh out loud at my twin’s assessment. While I do enjoy taking, there’s so much more pleasure when someone begrudgingly gives you something instead. I get to experience the satisfaction of both acquiring and receiving against the person’s deepest desire not to. It’s sick, but I don’t care.

I make a show of licking a sharp, white fang. “Do you swear, pet—remember that my brother and I can compel you to do anything we wish, so if you disobey me and don’t give me what I desire, I will *make* you do something even worse.”

The little slave stutters in a breath. “I-I swear, my lord.”

“Excellent,” I all but purr as I reopen the door and help her out. “Stroke my cock.”

My abrupt command startles the Blood Slave, her gaze flying to mine in bewilderment. “I...don’t know how to do that.”

“Like this,” Mikhail calls.

Her head swivels to take in my brother, who leisurely caresses his hard length through his pants. She whimpers at the sight, her knees buckling, but I catch her before she can crash to the ground.

“Easy enough, right?”

She nods at my question before reaching a hand forward to lightly brush down the front of my pants. Her touch is feather-light, a tease more than anything else, but after a moment, she grows bolder. She flattens her palm against my cock, wrapping her fingers around it as best as she can through the fabric of my pants.

Her gaze never leaves Mikhail. She stares at him intently, trying to mimic his moves. My twin's arousal spikes, as does mine. Our pet's tongue flicks out to lick her full, lower lip, her expression one of concentration. It amuses me, but I don't want her lost in her thoughts—I want her lost in how she feels.

I pick her up, her tiny frame weighing nothing, and wrap her legs around my waist. A shudder wracks her body as I grind my cock against her pussy. Even through my pants, I can feel her heat, her center already wet. Another delicious whimper escapes past her lips when I bounce her up and down a few times along my hard length.

“You're going to help me put on a show to make my brother come.”

Her eyes widen, and although she's innocent, she knows what I want. “No, I can't—”

“Ah, ah, you promised,” I tease in a sing-song voice. “Now be a good little slave and fuck my cock over my pants.”

The Blood Slave opens her mouth to protest—or perhaps tell me that she doesn't know how—so I grip the luscious globes of her ass and flex my hips, pushing my cock deeper into her warmth. Fuck, I wish I was really inside of her, but Mikhail would throw a fit, so this is as close as I can get to heaven between her legs.

In no time, her instincts take over as the Blood Slave rolls her hips in rhythm with my movements. Across the room, Mikhail groans, feeling exactly what I do—it's as if she is riding us both. The gorgeous woman's head falls back, exposing her neck in irresistible temptation.

Leaning forward, I skim my fangs over the delicate skin, and she moans. It probably isn't an invitation, but I take it as one. Ever so gently, I pierce the soft flesh, barely sinking the tips of my fangs into her. She freezes before going wild in my arms, and I'm astounded at the reaction my tiny bite has on the woman.

Writhing in abandon, our pet mutters an endless stream of nonsensical words as she chases her pleasure—except, it's not hers to take, and only mine and Mikhail's to give. With reluctance, I remove my fangs and let her body slide down mine until she crumples to the floor at my feet like the ragdoll I've likened her to.

Mikhail smirks. He might be the bigger bastard of the two of us, but his ruthless ways are nothing compared to how long I can edge a woman, bringing her to the brink of ecstasy, only to take it all away cruelly. Their

frustration and needy arousal feeds my own depraved pleasure, but as king, it's my right to do whatever the fuck I want.

“Go back to stroking my cock.”

She huffs, and Mikhail laughs loudly enough for us both to hear him. She shoots him a feral look under her lashes but squeaks when I wrap a hand in her long hair and yank her up until her toes barely skim the floor. Our Blood Slave is so small, her human frailty adding to her list of weaknesses. “You will show your kings the proper respect.”

“Y-yes, my lord.”

“Apologize to my brother.”

“I'm so—”

“On your hands and knees before him!”

The instant I release her, she scrambles over to Mikhail, bowing before him, mumbling a string of apologies that he promptly cuts off by shoving his cock in her open mouth. She was so busy groveling she never saw him unleash it from his pants. He pushes in too far, causing the lovely thing to gag, and now I chuckle. Mikhail fucks her face with measured brutality that makes me even harder.

I prowl behind where our Blood Slave kneels before my twin, stooping down until I'm crouched over her, and then I snake a hand out to cup her sex from under her sheer, crimson nightgown. She jolts at my touch, trying to pull away from both my twin and me, but neither of us will let her. Poor creature is between a cock and a hard place.

Tracing languid circles around her clit, I watch the fight drain out of our little human. Now her body is tense with something else altogether—need. She moans around Mikhail's cock, and my twin tries to block from me how much he loves her mouth on him. As if he could hide such a thing. The both of us are two halves of a whole, and I know him better than myself.

Mikhail is too far gone in rapture to realize how intently I'm watching both him and the female. It's easy for me to envision myself in my twin's place, the pretty Blood Slave's lips sucking me in. My movements between her legs grow rougher, and I'm forced to hold her up again as she nearly collapses under the weight of her desire and my brother's ministrations.

Just as she is about to tip over the edge, I roar a mental command to my twin. “Come now!”

He snarls, despising being told what to do but trusts what I have in mind. Beneath me, her body stiffens, ready to convulse with the pleasure I have no

intention of giving her. Mikhail shoots hot spurts of cum down her throat that she has no choice but to swallow as I move away from them both.

Tears stream down her face when my brother finally pulls back, strings of saliva connecting his cock to her mouth still. It's damn near the most beautiful thing I've seen, but not as lovely as the broken expression of raw need on her pretty face. It's so perfect, I could laugh. Mikhail and I can never fall for a woman again, but what better way to keep the Blood Slave at our side and loyal if she falls for us?

And the first step is to make her want us like she's never craved anything before. Our touch, our presence—everything. But to do this, we must break her first. Snap her will and remold it to our liking, and the easiest route is to gain dominion over her body. Soon, she'll know pleasure like none other, but for now, she will only get small tastes until she's ready to be ours.

And then my twin and I will use her to flush out the traitors.

OXANA

LOCKED IN A GILDED CAGE, a royal pet to the twin kings—that's all I am. All I think I might ever become. I thought things were bad before, but I couldn't have been more wrong. The bars of my old living space seem like thick walls compared to this... this cage.

Never before have I felt so trapped, so...just taken advantage of. When the kings rescued me from those attackers, I expected—

I don't know what I expected. Certainly not this. Not a cage of bars standing alone in an ornate but abandoned bedroom. The kings come and go from two adjoining rooms, taking turns to watch me or something, like I'm a child that needs a babysitter. But they don't talk to me like I'm a person. Hell, they usually don't acknowledge me at all.

It's maddening.

My mind runs through cycles of boredom, reciting the books I had back home, the ones I've read hundreds of times, knowing them word for word. Then I sing all the songs I know—in my head of course— before starting it all over again. So badly, I wish to ask for a book to keep me company, just anything to pass the time besides their comings and goings and the ticking beats of my forlorn heart.

But I don't, afraid of the retribution my next words might cause them to seek. And as much as I hate to admit it, I almost want the punishment, because it would break up the monotonous days that are my existence.

Almost.

More often than not, my mind wanders to thoughts of them, of what they've made me do, of what they've done to me.

Of how much I liked it.

I'd be lying to myself if I denied it, denied the pull drawing me towards them though I'm always thwarted by these damned golden bars.

As though they timed it, both of their gilded doors swing open and out walk the twin kings. My heart lurches and instinctively, I scoot to the back of the cage, tucking my knees up to my chin. They look impeccable today, both wearing dark leather pants and loose cream tunics. Both have their hair pulled back, though a dark strand of Marek's has fallen out and hangs loosely by his beautiful face.

Beautiful?

I stare at one, then the other, my eyes grazing down their skin like a soft caress. From the heated gazes of their unnatural eyes, to the sharp angles of their high cheekbones and angular noses, to the supple lips around rather scandalous mouths that are practiced at the most wicked things...

They are beautiful, no other word fits perfectly.

They are also frightening and unpredictable, and sometimes I get confused if I actually want them, or despise them.

The twins stare at each other, eerily unmoving, as if some unspoken words are exchanged, then Marek steps to the door of my cage. I suck in a breath as he waves his hand and the lock clicks open. He swings the door wide and extends his hand. "Come, little pet. We have need of you."

Cautiously, I rise and straighten out my pathetic excuse for a nightgown and step towards him, placing my hand in his. Their touch is always cold, a shock to my system. Unless their mouths are on me, then they heat up like a carefully cultivated ember, their temperatures slowly rising. Maybe it has something to do with my blood.

So gross.

I can tell by the way their eyes blaze that they hunger, and I know their fangs will be embedded in my skin soon enough.

Marek leads me out of the cage and releases me just before Mikhail. His eyes roam down me and my body quickly recalls how it felt to be on my knees before him, his...cock in my mouth.

I shiver as he pulls something out of his pocket. It's a length of leather and my brows furrow inquisitively. "Turn around," he orders, and I do, my face almost smashing into the hard chest of Marek. Shit, when did he get so close behind me. I lift my eyes to his and the corner of one lip twitches as he reaches for me. I jerk away when he reaches for me, very aware of how Mikhail's... private area presses against my lower back.

Marek tsks. “Settle down, little one, I only need to lift your hair. No need to be so jumpy.” I swallow hard as he lifts my hair, tugging harder than is necessary, while Mikhail wraps something cool around my throat. My hands fly up to pull it away but suddenly I can’t move my arms, can’t move anything.

Marek grins, swiping up a tear that trails down my cheek and licking it off his finger as the band around my neck tightens. I hear a lock click into place, then my body is my own again. With my eyes fixed on Marek’s, I reach up and finger the strap.

Then I hear a snap of metal before the band tugs at my neck and I turn to Mikhail. With a smug grin he holds up a length of leather attached to the one at my neck and I gasp, realizing what this is.

“A collar for our little pet,” Mikhail muses. “Oh, I almost forgot the best part.” Marek laughs from behind me as if he already knows what’s about to happen as Mikhail reaches into his pocket and pulls out...a bell? He rings it, then, with a swift movement, he has it hooked to the collar. “There. Now we always know where our little pet has run off to.”

I’m mortified.

Mikhail tugs me around and stands next to his brother. “Our little pet is almost perfect.”

“Now to just find her a fluffy tail,” Marek suggests and my jaw drops open. The vampire king narrows his eyes. “Keep that mouth open and I’ll find something to fill it up with.”

I quickly shut my mouth, heat blazing on my cheeks as my eyes shift to Mikhail, remembering what we’ve done. He smiles down at me and flicks the bell, causing it to chime. “Something tells me, she might like that, brother.”

Marek opens the door with a wave of his hand. “The part where we shove a tail in her ass or have her kneeling and gagging on our cocks?”

If possible, my cheeks flame even more as Mikhail laughs but my body elicits another response, a low curling in my belly followed by a dampening between my legs. Mikhail's laugh comes to a screeching halt as he sniffs, Marek doing the same.

Oh gods...

They glare at each other, then tug me along by my leash, bare feet padding on the cold stone floors of the castle. I want to ask where we’re going but know I’d suffer for it, and they wouldn’t tell me anyways. I’m led through the castle, over the bridge and down several flights of stairs to a

hallway I've been in before. Private rooms line this corridor, and things happen within them. Things that have my fear amping up and my heart racing.

Marek enters a dark space with low, stone ceilings and empty stone walls. A few sconces are lit, casting a yellow glow. There's no furniture and no windows either. The room is occupied by several vampire males leaning against the back wall and my pulse quickens as we approach them. I wrap my arms around myself as the vampires look at me inquisitively, baring their fangs and hissing. Do they mean to leave me here with them? I start to tremble as Mikhail lets out a low snarl. The vampires retract their fangs and drop to their knees. "Leave us," he demands and they scurry away, whispering apologies to their kings.

"I'm sure you're wondering why we've brought you here, Blood Slave," Marek begins, taking the leash from Mikhail. "You see, your kings are feeling *ravenous* tonight and we thought you might like a change of scenery while we dine."

I'd roll my eyes if I wasn't so scared. Change of scenery? And they bring me to an empty room with no windows.

"You have permission to speak, if you wish," Mikhail says, rather nonchalantly as Marek cocks his head, staring with those strange, blazing golden eyes.

"I...Umm... I was wondering...if you wanted to give me a change of scenery and all which is so nice of you I might add. Umm.." God I'm blowing it. I finally have permission to talk, and I just stumble over my words.

"Continue..." Marek croons, inching closer.

The twins cage me between their hard bodies, their hands gliding along my skin causing my mind to cease working. "Umm. It's just that... well... there's nothing to see in here," I manage to squeak out as one hand curls around my throat and another skates up my thigh." This isn't a change of scenery, it's literally no scenery."

"Oh that is a problem, isn't it Marek," Mikhail murmurs, his lips ghosting along my neck.

Marek's hand pauses, just hovering over my sex. "It is indeed." His finger ever so gently, skims down my slit causing my breath to catch. "We must rectify this, immediately."

In an instant, we vanish from the room and appear in another. "Whoa," I

mumble on unsteady feet. Mikhail has his hands on my hips, stabilizing me as I take in this new area. It's a large room, with soft lighting. And this one is anything but empty.

Dark leather furniture is spread through the room, and several vampires are occupying them, along with... humans? Mostly naked men and women are...servicing the vampires with their blood or bodies. There's so many vampires. And the sounds, the slurping and the moaning.

Oh gods.

Me and my stupid mouth.

"Devils tits, where have you brought us, brother?" Marek asks, in feigned surprise, his gaze moving from couch to couch.

Mikhail shifts his gaze to me. "A change of scenery."

My body is weightless for a moment, then I'm suddenly sprawled out on my back, the leash wound around my wrists which are held over my head. Mikhail straddles my hips with his thighs then tears my frock in half, baring me completely. "Such a good idea you had, little slave. We should allow you to speak more often."

Then he's on me, tongue dragging down my belly and lower. Marek holds my wrists firmly as he toys with one nipple while bringing the other into his mouth. Fuck it feels so good, like a connection exists between my breasts and my sex.

Mikhail slides down my legs, freeing them from his thighs before spreading mine apart. He presses one ankle against the back of the couch, while holding the other wide.

I close my eyes, horrified at what he sees, what he'll find there. "What's this," Mikhail coos, then I feel his tongue gently tasting me, licking my entrance. "Mmm. You taste so good, slave. Tell me, do you like my tongue in your cunt?"

I can literally feel myself clenching around the air but can't bring the words to form on my lips.

"Pity," he says, and my eyes fly open as he lifts his head.

"Yes," I shout a little too loudly as Marek drags his teeth over my nipple. I arch into him, the pleasure inside me building.

Mikhail's eyes grow molten and he bares his fangs, lowering his mouth to me again. He slips a finger inside of me and circles a sensitive bundle of nerves with his tongue. Soon I'm writhing against his face, needing more. So much more. Marek licks up to my neck, sucking the soft flesh into his mouth,

his hand still plucking my nipple. He pinches hard and I gasp, eyes widening but not seeing anything as Marek's fangs pierce my flesh.

Mikhail adds a second finger as Marek's bite bleeds from burning to pleasure. My whole body ignites. I'm trembling, ready to fucking explode, but just before I do, Marek abandons my sex and sinks his fangs into my upper thigh, while still fucking me with two fingers.

It's too much.

It's not enough.

Pleasure ebbs and flows, and I'm constantly on edge, constantly almost there. I no longer care that other people are here. No longer care that many eyes have descended on us. All I care about are their wicked mouths and talented fingers. I want to lose myself in the abyss of pleasure and I get so close. So fucking close.

But never close enough.

As the kings drink their fill, Marek lifts his head, mouth crimson from my blood. "So fucking needy aren't you." He chuckles softly and lands a spank on my breast. "You don't come without permission, remember that, slave?"

I try to jerk out of their grasp, anger at their denial replacing the heated desire. Anger at myself for letting go as much as I did, for craving them so much.

"Fuck you," I spit out and instantly regret the words fully aware that I'm still spread and on display, still held captive by their strong hands and bodies.

Marek lifts his head from my thigh, and I gasp at the release, my sex still throbbing and desperate for more of their touch. "You don't deserve our cocks inside your pussy, slave. You never will. What you deserve is this exquisite torture of your clit." He circles the bud again with maddening slowness, not quite touching where I need. "I want it to hurt. Tell me it hurts."

"It hurts," I whimper.

"And these hard, aching nipples," Marek adds, pulling and rolling mine between his fingers. "Tell me how lonely they are. How you wish I'd increase the pressure, how much more you need."

"Please!" I'm begging now, out of my mind. "I'll do anything."

Mikhail slips his fingers back inside me, fucking me for a brief moment before pulling them out and stretching them wide, my arousal coating his fingers. "And an empty cunt. That is what you have earned. After a century of longing, maybe then we will give you what you so desperately desire."

The room fades again and suddenly we're back in the kings' chambers. Marek all but tosses me inside the cage and locks the door before the twins abandon me and enter their private rooms.

All alone, I tug the severed halves of my frock closed and curl into a ball. So many emotions bring this torrent of tears to my eyes but the one that hurts the most is shame.

I am so ashamed of my actions. Of my desperation. Of how I'd do it all again to have their hands on me.

I sniff back the tears knowing I have nothing to entice them with, but I also have nothing to lose.

And nothing is more dangerous than a woman backed into a corner.

MIKHAIL

“COME ON THEN. KEEP UP.” I tug on the leash clipped to my slave’s collar and she sneers at me as she stumbles from the harsh jerk. I know she’s pissed but I also know she will not admit such a thing in fear of more...*punishment*.

But how I wish to punish her once more, to see her unravel. To do things to her body which have never been done, to touch places on her knowing I was the first to claim it.

Claim her.

I cannot deny my own desire for the little creature, her supple body when spread before me is a feast made for kings to devour. Ever since her mouth sucked so sweetly on my cock, I cannot get the image out of my head or the fierce desire to do it again. Never was I one to deny my own cravings. I do what I want. Take what I want if it pleases me. This shift, having to impose restraint upon myself, is a challenge.

But I like a challenge.

The life of a king can become mundane. This much has become clear since we reawakened. The constant vying for our attention from the members of Libarynn and even outside of Sintara, the measly issues we must resolve. The tenuous boring conversations that must be had. It can be infuriating to say the least.

Jasper has shared that the kings’ schedule is quickly filling. Meetings with high ranking Lords and Ladies, a second discussion with Karynth, the wolf alpha. Then there’s the addition to the castle I’d like to make, an issue I’ve not yet even discussed with Marek.

As we pass through the castle, my little slave pattering just behind me

with warm, booted feet, my subjects bow, not rising until they are no longer in my sight. I tug the leash again, not because she's fallen behind but because I enjoy it. I enjoy the control I have over her, directing her every move. I also get a kick out of the bell chiming away with each step she takes, and the fact that it infuriates her.

She mutters something under her breath, and my smile grows wickedly as I abruptly step in front of her, hand clasped around her throat. Her blue eyes widen in surprise and her lips part in a very seductive 'o'. "Something you wish to say, slave?" I tilt my head, appraising her and feel her swallow hard under my palm.

She grips onto my hand, shaking her head, snapping her lips shut.

Pity.

"Thought so," I murmur, releasing her throat. I take a step back, assessing. Always assessing. A thick fur coat covers her body, a coat that was once her father's. It stinks of forest animals, but that is one of the reasons I have allowed her to wear it. It is a deterrent for me, for my brother, for our desires. Her own scent is exhilarating, from the perfume of her blood to her cunt, everything about this Blood Slave is enticing.

And that is not a good thing.

"Quickly now, come along." I turn away, pulling her down the grand staircase and through the three story foyer to the front doors. Two members of the Vampire Pride offer me a quick bow and open the doors. I let out an, "Ahh," as a whoosh of cold air hits us though I can tell my slave is not as thrilled.

Instead, she bundles herself even tighter in her father's smelly coat, her soft blonde hair willowing in the breeze.

"Do you require the Pride to guard you, Sire?" asks Brim, a huge vampire, and head of the Pride. Quickly, I have learned of his undying allegiance to Marek and I. The bastard is loyal, there is no questioning that.

I wave him off. "Not this time, Brim. If anything out there is foolish enough to attack me, or *her*," I gesture to the slave girl, "I welcome it. It has been almost two days since my last kill. You know how much I enjoy killing."

A grin tugs at the corners of Brim's lips, but ever the professional, he composes himself and gestures towards the stairs beyond with the sweep of a gloved hand. "Enjoy your walk, Sire."

I pull in an unnecessary lungful of the fresh, cool air and start my descent,

my boots crunching on the fresh snow. Tonight, the skies are clear of clouds, the moon—a waning gibbous—shines brightly, casting the blankets of snow in its soft light. The ground sparkles and it is breathtaking. One could almost forget out here, that the world is not at peace. That enemies lurk beyond the fourth ring, *and even within*.

I have come to terms with that fact, after the attack on our slave. She has not taken well to the crate, caged in our chambers, and I find her annoyance quite amusing. I would not have left her there tonight even if Marek had been able to keep watch. But the bastard had already left when I awoke, leaving me no choice but to take her with me anyway.

So I have leashed her for her own good. Because a leash shows ownership of the thing it is attached to. And she is *mine*.

And Marek's, but that is neither here nor there.

“You are so damn slow,” I complain as the leash becomes taut again, a clear indication she's fallen behind once more. “Move those little legs of yours, or do you require...inspiration to walk quicker?”

She harrumphs, and I swear I could hear her roll her eyes though she says nothing. I glance back and notice her shiver as we leave the grounds of Sintara, and I wonder if it's the cold or her fear that causes the reaction. “Are you afraid, slave?” I ask in a teasing fashion.

“Yes,” she admits, a little breathless, her eyes darting from tree to tree.

“Good. A little fear heightens the senses, don't you think?” The wind is less harsh in the forest as I guide her across the tree line and pause. “This is the boundary separating the third and fourth rings. Historically, the wolves do not prowl the perimeter where the third and fourth rings meet. But things are different these days. They could be watching us at this very moment.”

I'm a bastard, I know, for wanting her to be afraid, for liking what it does to her body. First is the quickening of her breathing, then the escalating of her pulse, and the tightening of her pretty pink nipples beneath that offensive coat. My fangs ache as the scent of her fear hits my nose and a low growl escapes me. I know my eyes are becoming crimson, my desire for her after feeding from her, touching her lithe, little body, hearing the little noises she makes, the tiny gasps and sharp cries under the ministrations of Marek and I.

She is perfection.

Part of her appeal is how vastly unaware of the world she is, even regarding herself. She had never even been kissed much less experienced pleasure, never attended a ball, never had a meal she didn't cook herself. It's

a wonder she survived as long as she has, so on her own, her father leaving her for hours or days at a time, as the other slaves have reported to me. As weak as she is, I find it appalling. Jasper has mentioned that she wishes to know the fate of her father, though I do not think she'll like the answer. She's under enough duress for me to add to it, not because I really give a damn about her emotional state, but because her stress levels change how her blood tastes. And right now it is sweet and decadent, a delicacy to be sure. It is like drinking from the fabled fountain of youth, a direct elixir of power. One suck off her neck and I was done for, her blood causing every inch of my body to tingle, strengthen. It made it hard to hold back what I truly wished to do to her, how hard she fucking made me.

We head left, down a path I've taken so many times. Jasper has seen to it that my route has been cleared of snow and lit lanterns hang in the trees lightning the way casting a soft, buttery glow.

"Wow," my slave exclaims, seeing the beauty of the woods for herself while simultaneously having no idea how stunning she looks standing in the middle of it. Though I much prefer her without that fucking coat.

"What are you wearing under that wretched jacket?" I ask, turning to her and fingering the lapels.

"Please," she begs, pushing my hands away as I reach to untie the leather band holding it together.

Before she even knows what's happened, I've pulled the band free, yanked her hard against the trunk of a tree, and secured her hands above her head. I stop before her, fangs descending, and open the sides of her jacket. "No one stops me from doing anything, slave. I don't fucking care what you want. It's about what I want." I unclip her collar and toss it over a low branch. "You do not get an opinion. You do not have the privilege of stopping me because you do not wish to obey. You have no choice but to submit." Her heart is practically thundering, pupils dilated, breaths panting as I unbutton the cream shirt covering her. "And right now, I wish to see you, touch you even. Maybe sink my teeth into that pulsing vein in your neck or dip my fingers between your thighs. Or maybe you need a reminder of who is in charge."

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her breath coming out as a mist before her face.

"Mmm," I groan as the last button comes undone and I push the sides of her shirt away, revealing her tits. She shivers. "I know the cold must be

excruciating on your human body. Just look how hard your nipples are.” She mewls as I grip the peaked tips between my thumb and forefinger, plucking and rolling. “Does this hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She wines as I flick her nipples, then lower my mouth, catching one between my lips and sucking. Her body trembles as I drag one hand down her taut belly to the edge of her pants. I release her nipple with a pop and stand up to my full height, her neck craning to look up at me. She’s so fucking small, so tiny. “Spread your legs for me, slave. There is so much of you I wish to explore in the cold, winter air.”

“But I’m s-so c-c-cold,” she hisses, her words shaking.

I lean down and brush her hair behind her shoulder, then lick the shell of her ear and whisper, “You must like to be punished.” She stiffens as I kick her leg to the side and land a hard spank on her clothed pussy. She keels, hissing between her teeth, her legs clamping together, but my knee is there blocking the action. “I said, spread your fucking legs, slave.”

A lonely tear releases from her blue eyes, blazing with hate. I can’t tell if it’s from anger or loathing, either way the sight satisfies me and I drop my head, licking the salty tear off her cheek. I grip her chin and lift her face towards mine. “I won’t ask you again, next time I’ll just take what I want.” My eyes flit between hers, a blue so pale it would challenge the beauty of a sunset.

Her nostrils flare and I feel her legs relax. “That’s a good girl.” She blinks at the praise as I release her chin and skim the back of my hand down her body. She sucks in a breath when I reach her pants, but I do not slip my hand inside them. Instead I tease her from the outside, first cupping her cunt and squeezing, knowing even my cold hands feel warm by this point. “I have a surprise for you, you know.” I begin to move my hand up and down the seam of her pants. “And I’m anxious to give it to you.” I run my nose up her neck, licking a pathway to her ear. I growl against her skin and caress the tender flesh with the tips of my fangs. She shudders, her desire floating around me like the mist of her heated breath. “But you have been so naughty, little slave, that I am no longer sure you deserve it.”

I add little slaps to her cunt as I rub, adding pressure with each stroke, and by the way her breathing shifts, I know she’s enjoying it. Little does she know, I have absolutely zero intention of letting her come, not after lack of submission. “I wonder, pet, if I dipped my fingers inside your pants, would

your sweet cunt be wet again. She bites her lip and closes her eyes, head falling back against the tree. “Now this is a fucking sight to behold. Just look at you draped so prettily for me, like a piece of fucking art.” I glide my hands back to her chest, cupping her breasts in my palms. “Tits out, nipples like twin chips of ice.” I take my time toying with them, and she can’t stifle a moan, the sound going right to my cock. “You know what I think, slave? I think you like it when I touch you. And I think you hate yourself for liking it.”

She opens her eyes and glares up at me as I give her frozen buds an aggressive tug, loving the way her breasts bounce back against her chest when I release them. “So fucking pretty,” I purr, running the back of my hand down her cheek. “So soft and delicate.” I flick open the button on her pants and slip my hand inside, dragging a finger down her very wet cunt. “Mmm. So fucking juicy. Proof, slave, that you are enjoying this.”

She mewls and squirms as I dip my finger between those lower lips and release a moan of my own at learning just how wet she is, how fucking warm. I take my time, toying with her entrance then slide my fingertip back up to ever so slightly skim over her clit. She gasps at the sensation and her hips buck towards my hand, wanting more, needing more, making me chuckle. “Tell me you like it, tell me how good it feels and maybe I’ll let you come.”

I know she can’t bring herself to do it, and I love the conflict in her eyes as she tries and fails to form the words. She can’t do it, can’t admit to herself that she could like such a thing.

So I stop. “I’ll have to try harder next time,” I muse, slipping my hand from her pants. I tap her clit one more time, then button them back up. Next I fix her shirt, reluctantly hiding away her pebbled nipples and perky breasts. Then I reattach her collar before removing the leather band from her hands and threading it back through her coat, closing it up.

“You disappoint me, slave, and that is no way to treat your king.”

I can almost taste her anger in the air mixed with the sweet tang of her arousal and I arch an eyebrow, daring her to say something. I know she’s pissed, left wet and wanting, but that is just how I want her.

I begin walking again, down the lit path, thinking of all the other ways I intend to tease her body. Hot wax. Snow. The kiss of a whip or two. See what kind of noises I can coax out of her, how hard I can make her come without even touching her cunt.

My dick is so hard it aches, but I refuse to touch her in that way. Not yet.

It's too...personal. I need to remain detached. Already I've crossed a line with her I promised myself I would never do again. She's toxic to me, a drug I cannot help but take. But I also cannot be away from her, and not only because I worry for her safety. It's because I *want* to be near her. And that is a problem.

I let her sit in my disappointment, stew in silence as we continue down the lit path. Up ahead lies her gift, skewered on the sharp end of a spike. Her human eyes cannot make it out yet but I'm more than happy to point it out.

I wrap my arm around her and stop a few feet away. "Your gift, slave," I say, pointing to the severed head. She jerks to a stop, eyes wide, hands coming up to cup her gaping mouth. "The head of the wolf who touched you. No one touches what's mine. I protect what's mine."

"You...You killed him?" she stutters, unable to move her eyes away from the gruesome sight.

"With my bare fucking hands, slave. He hurt you, made you fucking taste him..." I can feel my rage burning within me and try to smother it. "His death was far too lenient for his crimes. He should have suffered, as you did."

She shifts her gaze to me, dropping her hands from her beautiful face. "Thank you."

Now it's my turn to stiffen. Whatever her reaction might have been, that was not what I was expecting. But it pleases me. "The vampire is dead too, but sadly, there was nothing left of him for me to display." She nods and gulps and I find my legs walking to her even though I tell them not to, find my hands holding hers, even though I've forbidden myself from displaying her kindness. "I told you, I protect what's mine. And you are mine, pet." I run my thumbs over the back of her hands and her lower lip quivers, bright eyes glistening with tears. "His head will remain here in the woods as a reminder to anyone who dares to lay even a single finger on you. The price for such transgressions is death."

"I'm yours?" she asks softly.

I nod. "Mine and Marek's"

I don't elaborate as I tuck her under my arm and guide her back to the castle. I don't tell her the truth, continuing to lie to myself. I call her slave, I boss her around. I use her when I see fit, exploit her for my own happiness. I treat her as more of a pet than a peer, more animal than human. Because if I don't, if I relent and admit to myself how she really makes me feel even for one moment, it might all come crashing down—just like it did before.

Besides, I made a vow to myself, to my twin, that I would never love again.

And that is a promise I intend to keep.

OXANA

SEVERAL DAYS HAVE COME and gone, most of them spent in my crate like an animal. Sometimes they come for me, to feed from me, their bites are painful, yet so much more than that. I hate myself for feeling the way I do, how I've started to crave the pierce of their fangs, the scrape of them down my skin, the fanning of hot breath that skates over my body as they decide on where to ensnare me for the day.

Sometimes it's just one. Mikhail with his longer hair, dark and soft as it drapes over my body. He's more aggressive than his twin, keeping me on the edge of pain longer or drawing it out farther. And when his eyes begin to glow, an enticing crimson, I know he's also close to going over the edge. I still can't get over what he did for me—skewering the head of that wolf, a message to anyone, not to touch what's *his*.

Because I'm his now.

The sense of ownership, of entitlement to my body brings up all sorts of emotions I've not yet decided to digest.

Then there's Marek. More regal, more controlled, his bites precise yet no less profound. He is more calculating, conscious, the definition of what a vampire king would be. His hair just touches his shoulders, just as soft and luscious as Mikhail's is. And when his eyes glow, a swirling golden, I almost get lost in them, forgetting just who and what he is. His bites I want just as much, find myself arching into them even as disgust with myself battles my conscience.

And sometimes, though rare, they feed off me at the same time. Those times I'm all but restrained. They use ropes or straps of leather to hold me down. And often I'm held in place by nothing but their power. I can feel it in

the air when they use it, a thickness to every breath I suck inside my lungs, a spicy tang, the scents of their power. It coats my tongue in the most delicious flavor. My body becomes immobile during those times, though my skin remains clear of anything to hold me back.

And usually, if they both appear hungry, they keep me in my cage and feed off me through the bars. I don't know what they think I'll do if I'm freed. I have no power over them, no sway. It's not like I can fight back or stop them from using me. And if I'm honest with myself, I wouldn't want them to. It's the only time of day I'm allowed out of here, and the more they drink, the less, for lack of a better word, freedom I have. No more meals with the other humans, something I really miss. There was no pressure with them, even if I didn't fit in exactly, I knew they wouldn't pretend I wasn't a living thing and simply feed off me without acknowledgement.

Because that's how it is with the twins—they don't even speak to me. They just come in, eyes blazing, tug me out of my cage and place me wherever they want to while they drink. Sometimes the bed, a table, a floor. Sometimes they...disrobe me, their wicked hands skating along my skin, searching, caressing, stroking.

Something low in my belly curls at the thought, an ache between my legs throbbing. An ache I want to relieve on my own so fucking bad though I've been forbidden. And I just know that if I did so without their permission, they'd know. Their sense of smell is a power all on its own. They can scent people lingering in the hallways. Scent what I've eaten for the day before they pierce my flesh with the tips of their sharp fangs.

Sometimes I think they can control how their bites feel to me, because I can feel pleasure ebb and flow, build and release, over and over and over again. It brings me to the brink of an explosion, as if my body might literally burst into flames. Electricity zaps, coiling within me til my vision goes black and I can no longer see, only feel.

Then it simply drifts away leaving me aching and wet between my legs, desperate for their touch, painful or not. I can't stand it though I hunger for it as much as they thirst for me. But what drives me crazy more than anything is how they can just pretend that I'm not here, caged in their rooms. Here, I have no privacy, not even a name.

It's always, slave, or pet, or little human, if they even call me anything at all. I usually know what they want by their actions, slight tilts of their heads, where their inhuman eyes land on me. Jasper told me shortly after my blood

was found worthy, to never, *ever*, tell them my name. That it could mean my life if they ever learned it. I can't wrap my head around that, how the knowledge of a name could be so profound. What could possibly happen if they knew who I was? It would mean nothing, another useless name from another useless human girl.

I wrap father's coat around myself and inhale, his scent still lingering in the fur is the only thing that gives me peace, that makes me feel so not alone. Jasper had said he'd try to find out what happened to Papa. Part of me already knows the truth because how could he have survived? I saw the wound. Saw how quick the fever spread. But I refuse to acknowledge that, refuse to grieve for something I can't prove to be true.

Feeling restless, I rise off the mattress and pace the short length of my cage on bare feet. Today, Marek has slept in here with me, he on the bed and me on the floor. They rotate, the other drifting off to separate rooms behind closed doors, rooms that I never get to see.

Heavy deep red curtains are drawn over the bed so I can't see him inside. The same drapes are closed over the single window, leaving the room in utter darkness even in the day. At least it would be if the fire went out. But it crackles and flickers on the wall opposite mine. Sometimes I get lost in the flames for hours, seeming the only company I have at times. And the kings, when they sleep...it's like they're dead. Papa used to snore, the sound so loud it would echo through our little home and vibrate the sides of my head at night.

The kings are silent. Like they don't even breathe. They don't move, don't twist in their covers or fluff up their pillows. It's all so...unnatural. Sometimes I wonder if that is the reason for the drawn curtains, so I don't see the truth, see them when they are most vulnerable.

Hell, I wish I had some curtains to hide myself from their prying eyes and heated glances. The only times I'm able to hide behind a door and actually be alone is when I'm using the bathroom. Thank the gods, because if they stood there while I was—

The curtains around the bed pull back and Marek sits up, silver eyes boring into mine. A moment later Mikhail appears from his room, bare chested, low slung cream pants almost dripping off his hips. Without realizing it, I've crawled to the edge of the cage and wrapped my fingers around the bars, desire coursing through me, burning me, like hot coals raking down my skin. I lick my lips, and drag my gaze up the length of the

vampire king to find him staring as intently at me as I am at him.

Marek moves beside his brother, and I watch him intensely. Twin kings. They almost vibrate with power and dominance. They are seduction personified, with their glowing eyes and muscled bodies, lush hair, and white teeth. Their lips are perfect for sucking, supple and full. Their hands are strong and deft, and their scent... My eyes practically roll into the back of my head as I inhale sharply and expel a heated breath.

Marek tilts his head, eyes shifting from shimmery silver to bright gold. Mikhail turns to his brother, and though his lips don't move, I would bet my life that they are communicating. A moment later Marek shakes his head and his eyes blink, the gold fading back to silver. And as their eyes return to normal, so do my senses. I release the bars and scoot back to the other side of the cage, away from them, wrapping Papa's coat around myself again.

Mikhail moves to the window, pulling open the curtains. The waning crescent moon steadily rises in the sky, stars sparkling around it.

"Enter," Marek says lazily and my eyes shoot to the door as Jasper walks in, dressed impeccably as usual.

He bows. "My kings. The servants are ready to prepare you."

"And the human?" Mikhail asks, still staring out the window.

"Lord Navar has offered to...keep an eye on things while you three get ready."

Mikhail shifts his gaze back to me and cocks his head. "I could think of no one better."

Jasper bows again, then snaps his fingers. Like a colony of ants, servants—humans—enter the space. Some wheeling carts filled with jugs of steaming water. Other's holding hangers draped with clothing. So many questions tickle the edge of my tongue, like what are they getting ready for, but I swallow them down. I'm not to talk unless spoken to or receive...receive...

Punishment.

The word has a deep, shameful heat growing low, expanding beneath my skin. But I dare not open my mouth, especially not in front of Jasper. If he saw what they did to me, I'd be mortified. Would he stop them, I wonder, or would he simply stand by and watch?

I already know the answer as the kings drift off into their private rooms adjoining this one and more humans pile in. Still, I can't get used to the sheer clothing they wear, and their absolute lack of humility when their bodies are exposed as they are. I'm embarrassed, and it's not even me.

Another rolling rack filled with water is wheeled into the bathroom—this one, for me. And before I'm even let out of the cage, a familiar vampire lord saunters into the room as if he owns the fucking place.

Lord Navar.

I haven't seen much of him since The Selection and to be honest, I'm surprised to see him here, that the kings have allowed it. As he casts his gaze around the room, stroking his long, black beard, his red eyes land on me.

A flashback sucks the air from my lungs and I jerk back, fear rising inside me though I don't know why. Something about him just doesn't sit right with me. Something about him gives me the creeps.

Maybe it's his intentional blatant stare, his unblinking eyes tracking my every movement like a skilled predator. But he makes me uneasy. And heaven forbid I tell the kings, how dare I consider speaking without authorization.

So I don't.

Curled up in the back of my cage, Papa's coat draped across me, I watch him right back as he walks right over to me and stops at the cage door. "Jasper," he calls with an irritating sense of superiority. "Open this... atrocity will you? The Blood Slave must get ready for the ball."

The ball...

My stomach plummets, my chest feeling heavy with anxiety. I forgot about the ball. It was mentioned so casually several days ago that I didn't really pay it any attention. Hell, I was half out of my mind when the kings brought it up.

And now it's here.

A ball. A dance. My mind creates an image of fancy dresses and music and food, an enormous space filled with laughter and the clinking of glasses, the squeaking sounds of cutlery on food-covered plates and platters. But I'm sure whatever the kings have planned is a far cry from what I've read in fairytales. And that scares the shit out of me.

Jasper fishes out a key from his pocket, attached to a long, red ribbon, and opens the crate. I don't move, frozen as Lord Navar stares at me without a barrier between us. "Out, slave. And leave that disgusting coat behind. It smells awful." He waves his hand in front of his face as if to dispel the odor, and anger builds inside of me though I tamper it down.

But it's Jasper's coaxing that has me moving. "We mustn't keep the kings waiting."

He's right.

Dropping the coat, I stand and walk towards them, aware of my meager shift, and my body visible below it. I try to ignore the shame I feel, try to force the blush from creeping up my chest to my cheeks, but it's so damn hard. And with Navar's eyes roaming all over me, I just want to run and hide myself away. I cross my arms over my chest for a semblance of modesty as a servant with brown braided hair curtseys before me. "Hello miss. Name's Ryla. I'll be helping to get you ready for the night."

I incline my head and shuffle past Lord Navar who inhales deeply as I pass.

Gross.

Ryla guides me to the bathroom where a steaming bath is ready. I smell roses and lilacs as I glance at the water and see petals of all colors floating on the surface. Ryla helps me remove the shift, not like I needed any help, and I step in the tub, very aware of her stare on my body.

Fuck, I'm so unbelievably uncomfortable. It's hard not to compare my body with everyone else's. I'm much too skinny compared to the other women. Years of hardship took its toll on me. But since I was allowed to-to bleed for the first time, my breasts have started to change. They've become heavier, my nipples even seeming to grow slightly and become more sensitive to touch and changes in temperature. I never even noticed anything about my chest before but now it's like, they're in the way sometimes.

Devils fucking tits.

As Ryla fills an empty vessel full of water and begins to pour it over my head, a voice fills the tiny space—a male voice.

"Now that is a sight to see," Lord Navar hums, still stroking his stupid beard.

"Lord Navar," Ryla startles, as he enters the bathroom and stands at the foot of the tub. "Sir. She is bathing. You shouldn't be in here."

He narrows his eyes and shoos her away. "Do you think I would be in here if the kings hadn't demanded it? I was ordered to keep a watch on the human, and I intend to follow through."

The kings allowed this?

The hopeful part of me that thought maybe I could one day mean more to them than I do now, more than just a blood slave, almost shatters. If they don't care about me enough to offer me any privacy from...from him, then they really don't care.

I've never felt so alone before.

I hug my arms around my chest and keep my thighs pressed together, even though he probably can't see my body through the bubbles in the tub.

But he tries.

And as Ryla washes my hair, and the bubbles begin to pop, my shame grows and grows. Navar never takes his eyes off me, his eerie, red eyes. Mikhail's eyes turn crimson when he's...feeding, but the sight doesn't scare me, or even compare to Navar's feral gaze. Washing myself is horrific, but I try to pretend he's not there as I clean my more intimate parts. And by the time the water has chilled, and all the bubbles have gone, Ryla moves to grab a towel folded on a small wooden stool.

But Navar snatches it up and shakes it out. "Come, blood slave. Let me dry you off, hmm? Wouldn't want you catching cold before the ball even begins. The kings might become quite angry if I allowed you to suffer a chill."

Manipulation, that's what this is. He's using the power of the kings to get me to do what he wants. I don't think they would allow him to do this. But I also know they are in the rooms right next to mine. Navar is many things, but he's not stupid enough to touch me this close to the kings unless he had their permission. My heart falls down another rung.

I take a breath and grab the side of the tub with one hand, covering my chest with the other arm and pull myself up. Water rushes down my body as I step out of the tub and stand before Navar, turning and offering him my back. He doesn't cover me immediately, drinking me in with his eyes, before the warmth of the towel is draped over my shoulders. I tug the sides together covering myself.

Navar's hands begin to roam, pressing the towel as if it were a sponge and he was trying to soak up a spill. But when he gets to my ass, and squeezes in a way I know was never meant to help soak water from my skin, I can't help it. I lose it, and swat his hands away. "I can do it." My words are clipped and Ryla's right there to help me. To save me from him.

"This way. Please." She wraps her hand around my back and guides me from the bathroom and back into the main room. She opens the doors of what I thought was a wardrobe, but inside is a huge mirror seated above a desk with a fur-covered stool. She sits me down and lights the oil lamps as a second girl joins her and starts to detangle my hair.

I get lost in the sensations, keeping my eyes closed. I know Navar is near,

I can smell his pungent scent of cigars and lavender. It's nauseating. Girls move around me, opening the little drawers and pulling out what I've learned is makeup. I follow their directions....

Open your eyes.

Close them.

Pucker your lips.

Look up.

Look down.

Blott.

Suck in your cheeks.

It's dizzying. I've never worn makeup before or had someone else brush my hair. Even my fingernails and toenails are painted with a subtle pink. By the time they're done, I feel like a piece of canvas that has been painted on by an artist. Ryla guides me up from the stool and over to where a dress is splayed across the bed.

It's beautiful. All golden and shimmery. "Is...Is this for me?"

I look to Ryla, who nods. "Kings had it custom made. I'll help you put it on."

And good thing. With my back towards Navar, I drop my towel and allow Ryla to slip it over my head, then tug it down my body. It hugs every dip and curve, feeling like a second skin. Ryla turns me away from the mirror as she finishes up, clipping golden bands into my hair, She adds little crisscrossing chains to my upper arms, and another set wraps down my legs. Rings are added to my fingers, too. And once she looks me up and down with a final nod of approval, she walks me to the side of the bed, where the full-length mirror runs down the entire length of the wall, and places me in front of it.

But I no longer recognize the woman staring back at me.

MAREK

I STAND at the entrance to the grand ballroom in Lord Navar's castle, unmoved by its opulence. To someone from the Inner Ring, the sheer splendor of the ball would be awe-inspiring. Glistening crystal chandeliers hang from the ornate ceiling, casting a soft, warm glow over the room, while countless candles twinkle in their holders, creating an almost ethereal atmosphere.

The marble columns, adorned with intricate carvings of ancient battles and legendary tales, reach up to support the high ceiling. The walls are draped in rich, dark velvet, framing enormous mirrors that seem to multiply the already impressive expanse, reflecting only its human occupants.

As I gaze across the room, I watch the couples dance from within the polished marble floor, gleaming brighter than jewels in the sun. Around me, enchanting music from a live orchestra fills the air, its sweet melodies wrapping around the guests as they move and socialize, unaware of my brother's and my true purpose for tonight's festivities.

Across the ballroom, a colossal, golden clock stands, its arms unmoving, a symbol of the immortal life my ancestors created for everyone attending tonight's event. If not for them—if not for Mikhail and me—they would be *nothing*. They owe their allegiance to the lineage that gave them renewed hope, for without us, they would already be dead.

Soon enough, though, many will be, and those that survive what my twin and I have planned will be reminded of their place in this world. They are fools to think they could ever outwit or overpower us. They think us weak while they wait in the shadows, ready to pounce. What they don't realize is that Mikhail and I *are* the shadows, and we will consume them.

Tonight's festivities are but a farce meant to draw out the rebels, who will grow emboldened by their own sense of superiority and drunk on the blood we've provided. And my brother and I have eyes and ears everywhere this evening, ready to exploit our people's thirst for all that glitters.

The grand ballroom reflects elegance and decadence, the two intertwined seamlessly, but underneath the beauty, cruelty shares the same dance floor. Nothing can distract me from our mission and the role I must play to set Mikhail's and my plans in motion, but my mind flits back to thoughts I shouldn't be having. Cursing myself, I mentally search for my twin, but his attention is preoccupied, and when I turn, I see why.

The Blood Slave.

Fuck, she's a vision, and I'm momentarily spellbound by the woman's breathtaking transformation. She stands there, bathed in glowing candlelight, and for a moment, it's as though time has reversed, and I see Larissa. Her golden curls cascade down her back, each strand gleaming brighter than the sun. It creates an ethereal halo around her, and I wonder if I'm looking upon an angel from my past.

But no. Larissa was all meek subservience. The woman before my eyes doesn't cower or bow her head. Instead, her chin is tipped up, as if she's better than everyone in this room, and my cock pulses in delight at the knowledge of punishing her for such a display of assertion. No matter how many times Mikhail and I kick her down, the Blood Slave keeps getting back up—her humility will know no bounds.

My twin continues to stare. The custom-made dress we had designed for her accentuates her beauty in a way that makes it impossible to look away. The gown itself is a work of art, fashioned from the finest silk and lace, clinging to the Blood Slave like a second skin, but it's nothing compared to the woman sheathed within it. The deep golden fabric hints at the secrets hidden beneath—secrets only for Mikhail and me—and I realize everyone's hungry gaze is upon our slave.

Resentment courses through me when my heart quickens at the thought. The jealousy she incites within me reminds me of the danger of emotions. Feelings are treacherous and are what killed Larissa. They stole the woman I loved and nearly destroyed the kingdom my brother and I fought so hard to build. I must be cold. I must be cruel. And above all, I must not feel.

But as the Blood Slave glides through the ballroom with ease, her every step oozing sensuality, I find myself struggling to control the storm of

emotions raging within me. Across the room, Mikhail remains shut off, as stoic as ever. He's never battled like I do, his heart etched in stone, and guilt swamps me for bringing him down. It's my fault he opened himself to love Larissa, and my fault our throne is now questioned, but I will redeem myself.

Here.

Tonight.

I will find the rebel leader and make him pay, take all my pain and wrath out on them. A smile tugs at the corners of my lips at my plan as I watch our pretty, little pet walk over to Mikhail. At least she knows her place, unlike the rest of the ingrates who grace the dance floor. My brother and I have made it clear that the Blood Slave is ours alone, and yet, they look, their lingering, hungry stares touching every part of what's *mine*.

Dark possessiveness clouds my mind, and I clench my hands into tight fists to keep from scratching out the eyes of everyone who dares to gaze at what doesn't belong to them. They disrespect my brother and me with their unbridled lust for what they can never have. Our absence has made everyone bold, and this simply will not do. Perhaps I should make an example of someone and rip out their heart for the audacity to desire *our* Blood Slave...

Calm, my brother.

Mikhail speaks in my mind, equally infuriated, but we have a plan and must stick with it. The rebel leader must topple first if we want everything else to crumble. It's why the fool seeks to end my brother and me for if you cut off the head of a giant, the body will soon follow. But those who conspire against us are no match for my twin and me, our power alone can fell great buildings, let alone what it can do combined.

Everyone is staring.

Let them look. Let them lust.

Mikhail's words shock me.

She is ours!

She will draw out the rebels.

It's true that the human slave's blood acts as a beacon to my kind, calling out with its intoxicating scent, but only we can taste the ambrosia flowing through her veins. Her nectar can sustain no one but the highest in the realm. Mikhail murmurs an agreement in my head, and I realize he's not just testing everyone in this ballroom—*he's testing me*—and bitterness sweeps over me.

I deserve no less for what happened in our past, and now, my twin must ensure that I won't succumb to the treachery of my own emotions again. And

so I swallow past the obsessive rage that demands I bend the Blood Slave over my arm while I sink my fangs into her neck, marking her as mine. I want nothing more than to fuck her against the cold, hard ground, and prove to everyone that she will never belong to anyone but Mikhail and me.

Instantly, memories of Larissa flood my mind, and I know my lust for the Blood Slave is turning me into an unhinged monster. I must redirect my passion elsewhere lest it incinerates me. Everyone is waiting for me to fail, even Mikhail, although he tries to hide it. But I won't shatter under the intensity of my emotions. I will harness them as my brother directs and use them as a weapon against those who dare oppose me.

Nodding at Mikhail, I saunter over just as he snaps the leash into place at the collar around the Blood Slave's throat. He passes the gold chain to me, and I give it a cruel tug, making the woman stumble in her heels. Even with the added height, she barely comes to the top of my chest. Her gaze flicks to mine as she rights herself, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment at the scene I'm making, but I'm proving a point—to her, my brother, the ballroom, and myself.

Without a backward glance, I tug the Blood Slave to the center of the dance floor, whipping her into my arms. Her pupils dilate, the scent of her arousal perfuming the air, and I suppress the growl trying to escape as those close to us lean in for a sniff. All week, my brother and I have tormented the wench, bringing her close to ecstasy but never giving her a full taste. Perhaps someday, but she must learn that her pleasure is a gift—never hers and always ours.

Until she fully submits, she will find no relief by me.

We twirl around the floor, the Blood Slave's heart beating faster with every spin as it brings us closer and closer together. My cock presses into her stomach, a rock hard heat reminding her of what she'll have. If Mikhail and I can't fuck her, then nobody can. I snarl at the thought of touching what's mine, and the woman in my arms jumps at the sound. I leer down at her.

“Something wrong, my pet?”

“No.” She quickly looks away, and I scent something beyond her need—a fear that is not of me or my brother. I reach out to grip her chin in cruel fingers.

“Don't ever lie to me again. Got that?”

The Blood Slave nods meekly. “Yes, my lord.”

“Now, let's try this again. What's wrong?”

With a swallow, she leans forward, bringing our bodies even closer. “I don’t like the way *he* watches me.”

I raise a brow. “*He* owns you.”

A frown mars her lips. “I thought only you and your brother owned me.”

Anger, sharp and murderous, rises up inside of me when I realize the Blood Slave wasn’t referring to Mikhail, but some other man. “Who are we talking about?”

“Him.” She tips her head to the corner of the room where Lord Navar stands. I quickly whip the little female away so as not to attract attention but call out to Mikhail.

He walks over, laughing and toasting our subjects as he passes, before extending his hand to the Blood Slave. “May I cut in?”

“Of course, brother. Enjoy.” We share a devious grin as I place the Blood Slave’s palm in his. As he whirls her away, I relay my conversation with her to my twin. With a nod, he escorts her from the crowd and all the prying eyes and listening ears. He’ll figure out what’s going on but maybe the man we’ve always trusted is not who we think he is.

Beware, Lord Navar.

THE BETRAYER

YES. Everything is coming into place so perfectly, it's like I planned it myself. Oh wait, I did. The kings' arrogance will once again become their demise as it happens so often to those in power. They cannot see past their own triumphs and desires. Refuse to see the destruction as it plays out before their eyes.

The table is set, the gun is loaded. Now all we need is them. Several minutes have passed since they showed up in all their glory, and once again I'll be forced to bow before them. My mask is slipping, more and more with each passing day. Discussions have become grating on my very patience, though I do my best to keep myself in check. To do anything otherwise could thwart all the planning I've done in these past months.

Had the kings not awoken, I already would have been successful. Enough of Libarynn is in silent uproar that my ideals would have gathered quick support. Everyone needs a leader, someone to follow, someone who is fucking present and not stashed up in the tallest tower drinking and fucking a human in a cage.

No.

She will be freed under my rule. Free to run about the castle. Free to explore the grounds. Free to run, so I can fucking chase her. Capture her. Ensnare her.

She will be mine. Soon. And she doesn't even know it.

But she's also part of my greater plan. So coveted is this human by all Libarynn vampires, that I've promised her to each and every one of them who aids my succession. They'll do anything for a taste of her—blood or body.

I glance around the ballroom, noting those who have already shown up, the kings included. My partners in a sense, taking up strategically placed positions at various locations. I have eyes and ears everywhere. Nothing gets past me, not anymore.

The Blood Slave is here as well, her dress draped over her body like a tight fitting glove. It accentuates all her attributes, hiding almost nothing. The kings are fools for letting her out in that, for exploiting that which we all crave, throwing around their cocks like younglings might.

Ridiculous.

The neckline of her dress is cut severely low leaving all that bare skin open to the imagination. My fangs ache to pierce her flesh, to be the reason she shudders. I envision her on her knees before me, dress shredded, body open for my exploration, for my dark desires.

Soon, I tell myself. Promise myself.

I swirl around the fresh blood in my cup, as the Blood Slave glances over at me from Marek's side, her eyes widening in fear. I raise my cup, and with her gaze still locked on mine, sip the warm blood and smack my lips afterwards. She looks away, murmuring something to Marek as I shift my gaze to the dance floor. I much prefer drinking from the source and will do so once the kings have allowed me to open up the bar. Because, of course, nothing can begin without them, not even their own destruction.

Laughing to myself, I take a sip from my glass and wonder which human scattered about is the donor. It's tangy and scents of citrus, like it might have come from someone who hails from the south, somewhere the sun shines brighter than it does here.

I cast my eyes around as I replace my cup and consider how different this ball might have been had my first attempt at her capture been successful. In what I can admit was a poor judgment call, I sent two less capable members of the rebellion to obtain her. They have shown such a lack of control that I'm happy the kings disposed of them. From what I've heard, the pair almost fucked the human girl. I would have been jealous enough to have killed them myself.

C'est la vie.

Mistakes are made to be learned from, and I've taken previous failures of the rebellion and studied each of them. Learned our weaknesses, our strengths. Admittedly, having the Blood Slave bound to the kings' chambers has made the start of our mission much more difficult to acquire but I won't

be deterred. She is the fucking catalyst to it all. Once we have her, everything else will fall into place.

The kings will fall.

And I will rise.

A new reign is on the horizon.

And everyone will bow to me.

MIKHAIL

HER FEAR MAKES me hard even if the source of it isn't derived from me. The girl is pent up, wound so tightly as she huddles against me, not cringing away as I settle my arm around her narrow waist. She's so damn fucking small, so very fragile that I have to stop myself from whisking her away back to Sintara and as far from Navar's castle as possible.

Back in her cage, behind the safety of her gilded bars.

But I cannot, at least not yet. Marek and I still have a point to prove, and prove it we shall.

The orchestra ends on a rather melancholic song and starts another. In comparison, it's upbeat, and I find myself almost bobbing to the rhythm while I imagine fucking her over one of these tables to the tempo, her pale ass jiggling with each thrust, raised red handprints painted across her flesh.

Not fucking now, Marek scolds through our bond, though I know he is farther on the brink than I am in regards to the slave. He falls much faster and harder than I do, gives in to his humanity. Usually it is the other way around—me asserting control. So to have him remind me of my place, of keeping her at a distance is slightly unnerving. He can sense how close I've come to losing all control.

And it's not just her blood. It's her sass. Her hatred of us. It's the scent of her pussy, how wet she gets, how good she tastes, how she trembles when we touch her, how her little mewls get all breathy when she is close to coming.

Soon we're going to allow her the release she's been dying for us to give. It will be a game Marek and I will play, seeing how many times we can make her come in a single night by touch or by fang. Fuck her til she's barely able to breath, till her body is covered in bites and marks. Used and abused.

Satiated. Till my fucking balls are empty and filling all her holes.

Brother, Marek shouts down the bond, louder this time.

I am in complete control, I assure him and guide our little pet to the bar gesturing to the barkeep, a middle aged female vampire with a head of striking red hair and rare green eyes, to open up.

She bows and yanks on a golden pull allowing the curtains once hiding the bar to fall away. Beside me, the Blood Slave gasps, her hands coming up to cover her mouth in shock. And I get a smug satisfaction from it. Because this is no ordinary, human bar. This is how vampires drink.

Where one would normally see shelves upon shelves of liquor, instead are a smattering of humans. Ranging in all different shapes, sizes, colors, and shades, the humans are bound, hanging from the ceiling in rather intricate shibari knots. Cleverly designed, the ropes leave certain areas of their bodies open for drinking.

Each human is naked, cocks and cunts bared regardless of how they've been hung. Makes for easy access in case a vampire is thirsty for something other than blood. Already, members of Libarynn are lining up for the sampling. A man with tan skin and a head of loose curls is among the most popular.

He is bound upright, his arms over his head, thighs spread wide, and by the stance of his cock, he is just as excited to be here as we are to sample him. Funny, how some humans crave our bites while others cower from them. Personally, I prefer the latter. Fear adds a tang to the blood.

Fangs descend as the barkeep uses a dagger to cut a vein in his upper thigh. The human hisses in delight, his dick pulsing as vampires hold small shot glasses under the stream of blood, tasting him. I dunk a finger in someone's glass and bring his blood to my lips, making sure my slave is watching as I suck it off rather seductively.

Something flashes in her eyes at the sight, and a smile tugs on my lips. "You are jealous. Do not try to deny it. I can scent it on you."

She takes a breath no doubt to rebuke my statement but quickly catches herself. "Good girl," I praise, dragging the backs of my fingers down her soft cheek. "Since tonight is a special occasion, I am giving you permission to speak your mind tonight but only to Marek and me."

She huffs, crossing her arms under her breasts, testing the seams of her dress. Fuck I hope they break and those luscious tits pop free. I quickly enclose my lips around those pretty pink nipples of hers and—

Mikhail! For fuck's sake brother! Marek's voice booms in my head. I'm close to shutting this shit down and fucking her right on the dance floor. Get a drink and calm your mind, or you might shatter my control completely.

I send a growl down the link but do not respond otherwise. He's right, though I hate to admit it.

"I am not jealous," my pet retorts, bringing me back to the present. "This is disgusting."

"Is it?" I give her leash a tug and she stumbles, hands pressed against my chest and fuck if I don't almost shudder at her touch. "If I remember clearly, you didn't find it so disgusting when Marek and I had you spread out on that leather couch." Her cheeks flame and I chuckle softly, skating my fingers along the side of her neck and up through the strands of hair at her nape. "He on your neck and me between your thighs, the taste of your honey on my tongue mixing with your blood. As I recall, I didn't even have to hold your legs open, they simply fell to the sides all on their own, allowing me access to your sweet cunt. Even with all those other people watching. Or am I remembering it wrong?"

I watch her intently as the blush in her cheeks drips down her cheek to her chest. I grin as her pulse quickens, and her nipples tent under the shimmery golden fabric of her dress. And then my fangs descend as an intoxicating scent hits my nose, one of her arousal.

"I..."

"Thought so."

Marek steps in beside our pet, caging her between us as I turn and face the bar. I have my eyes set on a pale woman with bright orange hair, her body smattered with freckles in the same shade. She is bound face down, her wrists and ankles cinched together behind her back. Her hair drapes across her face as I spin her sideways, displaying her bare tits, which are red from the tightness of the ropes.

Using the end of a blade, the barkeep makes a small cut on the woman's nipple. She jerks, her body bouncing from where it hangs from the ceiling as the barkeep pinches the woman's other nipple and cuts that one too.

Beads of blood form on the tips of those rosy buds and I extend my tongue over the bar, lapping at one, my slaves leash still held firmly in my hand so I know she's close, know she's watching. I squeeze the bound woman's reddened tits, encouraging the blood to flow more freely as I latch on and suck. She moans as Marek tastes her too, both of us feasting on her

bleeding tits. She tastes like fresh air, like a meadow in springtime just before the sun rises. Her blood is light and airy, almost floral.

I pull off her breast and back away from the bar, Marek close behind. “Still not jealous?” I prod.

She scowls, her little nose wrinkling. “What could I possibly be jealous of?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Marek muses, leading us to an empty table in a dark corner. He pulls out two chairs facing one another and plops down in one, while I sit in the other. “Of our lips upon the flesh of another perhaps. But that’s silly, isn’t it Mikhail? Our pet doesn’t even like us. Even when we do this.”

He rises, caging her between us, his fingers latched to the arms of the chair as I encase our pet’s wrists in my hands and keep them firmly at her sides. I watch from behind our slave as Marek inches the sides of her dress over her tits. “Not here,” she begs. “Please. Others will see.”

“Maybe I want them to see,” Marek quips as her hardened tips peak out from the gilded fabric. He groans and cups her tits in his hands, running his thumbs over her nipples before lowering his head and sucking one in his mouth.

She sucks in a sharp breath but as Marek hums against her skin, her head falls back onto my chest, her fight fleeing. My nerve wanes, the desire to take her and bite her and fuck her warring within my mind. She’s so alluring, her chest pressing forward into Marek’s touch.

“You should stop, brother. She does not like it when we touch her, remember?”

Marek lifts his face, eyes bleeding into glowing gold letting me know his hunger is rising as his ability to resist her begins to fail. And I echo him as he reluctantly sits back in his chair and I toss our pet into his lap, leash clutched in his hand.

She doesn’t even try to cover herself, one breast still glistening from my brother’s mouth as I lean forward and drag the hem of her dress up over her creamy thighs, higher and higher. “Tell me slave, if you hate our touch so much, surely your cunt would be dry as a desert right now. So I’m going to spread you wide and find out if you’ve been a bad little pet and have lied to your masters.”

She bits on her lower lip watching me with dilated pupils. I know she’s enjoying this, I just want to hear her say it. I run my hands up her legs from

ankle to knee and lift them over my brother's. "Last chance," I croon, grazing my fingers closer and closer to her smooth cunt. "Or you can tell me, tell us, how wet you are for us, and maybe then we'll allow you to come. Right here, in front of all these vampires. Would you like that? All you have to do is admit it. Admit that you like our touch, that you crave it. Admit that right now, admit that your pussy is fucking drenched for us and I'll have you coming in less than a minute."

I rub my thumbs up and down the crease of her thighs pulling slightly to spread her pussy lips. I can see how she glistens. "Tell me, slave." My voice is raspy, my mouthwatering as I move my thumbs to the sides of her clit and pinch the little bud.

She shouts, back arching as I soothe the ache with soft circles around her clit, then I sink a finger inside her. I fucking groan when I find her core already clenching around me, but pull my finger out and show her. "Too late, pet. You lied. Just look at your honey covering my fingers like the needy little thing you are. Your body craves us even if your mind does not. The proof is right here on my fingers."

I make a show of sucking her arousal off my finger, my brother letting out a growl of his own. I am lost in the sensations of her and forget myself almost completely when the orchestra falls silent and the vibe of the room shifts.

Mikhail, Marek grumbles, and he juts his head to the stage upon which stands Lord Navar, one of my most trusted vampire lords and also the vampire on the top of my shit list.

I blink, and release my pet, closing her legs as Marek fixes her dress and we all turn our attention to Navar. He stands arrogantly, as all older vampires do, with his hands clasped behind his back. He gazes out into the crowd ensuring all attention is on him before extending his arms out to his sides. As he lifts them higher, a throne emerges from out of the stage floor and my dead heart lurches. Because it's not just any throne.

It's hers.

Did you know about this? I demand from my twin.

Not a fucking clue, he grumbles back. *How did he even find it? It was missing from the throne room upon our return.*

I had assumed it was destroyed. Should we put a stop to this?

Marek is quiet for a moment, then says. *Let's see how this unfolds. I am curious what Navar has up his sleeve.*

“What aren’t you two saying?” our pet asks quietly. “You’re doing that weird silent mind shit again, aren’t you?”

“You are a clever little thing,” Marek muses, skating his fingers up and down her arms.

She shrugs. “Not really. But seeing as you keep me locked in a cage in your rooms, you two are the only entertainment I have. And I... I’ve paid attention.”

I wish to ask her more but Navar clears his throat and fixes his gaze on us. “Tonight is a momentous occasion. After a century of slumber, our kings have arisen!” Libarynn members clap and shout out their fealty, the sound humming in my chest. He gestures towards the throne and I almost look away. Memories of what happened that night, of what we did—

Navar flaps his hands, signaling for everyone to quiet down. “Now, as a special surprise for our kings, I have had the throne of their previous Blood Slave refurbished. Consider it a token of my appreciation for your newest Blood Slave and my fealty to you. Let’s have her try it out, shall we?”

I don’t like this at all, Marek says, concern lacing his words. But we show no fear tonight, only power.

Then we should put a stop to this— I start but Marek cuts in.

And let him win? Prove us unworthy to remain in control? We will be a mockery. Marek is silent for a moment, then says, *It is just a throne. It isn’t hers. Not anymore.*

Then he grips our slave’s hips and lifts her from his lap before standing beside her. I follow my brother as he leads her by her leash up the set of steps at the side of the stage. Marek slips on the mask of a king and extends a hand to Navar, shaking it with enthusiasm. “This is most appreciated, and unexpected, Lord Navar. The crown will not forget this...gift you have bestowed upon us.”

Navar walks around the back of the throne and appears on the other side, then pats the seat with his hand. “Come on then, Blood Slave. Libarynn is waiting. The throne is yours.”

I attempt to squash the feeling of unease that settles over me. I glance at our slave and notice how uncomfortable she’s become, knowing it has nothing to do with the throne and everything to do with him.

But I squash my feelings down. She means nothing to me. Nothing but the blood in her veins. I should not care whether she sits on this throne or not. And as Marek tugs her leash, guiding her to the throne I know one thing for

sure.

She's not the only one who's been lying.

OXANA

STARING over the stage at Lord Navar, several things became clear to me at once. First is that a noticeable shift had taken place in the ballroom. And not just the unnerving attention of a room full of vampires all set upon me. It's the tension, a thickness that I can almost inhale, a smokiness that clogged my lungs. It's like the static generated before expelling itself in a bolt of lightning spearing itself in zigzagging lines across a darkened sky. It makes the tiny hairs on my arms raise in suspicion.

Secondly, the behavior of my kings is...*off*. They want to resist me, and seem to almost be desperate to keep me away but their actions tonight have been quite contradictory. And while they have...used me before in front of the eyes of others, it was at Sintara. And as fucked up as it is to say, I feel safe there with the kings surrounding me. But not here. Not in this strange castle with strange people. All the leering, the blatant lusting. How quickly they seemed to forget we were sitting in a public ballroom as they bared me and tasted me. It felt different. They lacked control.

Something is wrong.

Thirdly, and probably what I see most clearly, is Lord Navar himself. The bastard is almost smug as he stands beside a rather gaudy throne, patting the seat with his pale fingers. He disgusts me, from his voice to his actions, to the way he strokes that damn beard of his as if it were his pet dog. And how, right now, the kings seem oblivious to his blatant display of manipulation. Mikhail and Marek are not idiots, but for some reason, they either don't notice, or are choosing indifference. I can't fathom the latter as being true which makes this realization even more scary—they simply don't notice.

"Come," Navar coaxed, beckoning me with a single finger. "The throne is

yours now.” I felt myself pressing away, backing as faraway from him as possible as the warning bells were ringing loudly in my head.

I turned my back on Navar and faced my kings, neck craning to see their faces. “Don’t make me do this,” I pleaded in whispered words but their faces become inhumanly impassive.

Mikhail lifted his hands and gripped my shoulders. The usual awareness in his eyes was muted, even his scent was slightly off. I can’t even put the shift into words. “It is just a chair, pet. It will not bite you.” His words were cold as he spun me around and guided me to the throne. It just feels wrong, like a snake coiled to strike. He turned me again and practically pushed me into it.

I waited with bated breath, sure that some harm would come to me but nothing happened.

Lord Navar began to clap and I lifted my gaze to his, instantly regretting the emptiness in his gaze as the resounding applause became almost deafening. Navar beckoned to someone off stage and a human servant rushed forward with a golden tray perched on gloved fingers. Three chalices filled with what I can only imagine is blood, are offered to him, then the kings who all take their cups.

Navar lifts his glass. “I propose a toast.” I expect him to drone on about the kings and loyalty and blah, blah, blah, but he turns his attention on me. “To the newest Blood Slave. May the power in her blood awaken us all.”

Marek and Mikhail let their eyes linger on me as they sip from their own glasses. But something happens as the blood touches their lips. Their eyes widen in what appears to be shock, but as quickly as it comes, their expressions smooth into blank stares.

“The time for change has come!” Navar practically shouts, shifting my gaze back to him. “Libarynn has always been a coven of power. Created long ago by legendary vampires, Alrick and Vastryn Novikov, whose blood has been shared with us all. We are *all* part of their family now, perpetuated by the sharing of the blood of the kings.”

“Here, here!” someone in the crowd shouts and that tension I’ve been feeling begins to grow, pressing on my chest, pushing me further into the throne til my spine is against the crimson fabric.

“Most of you do not remember Alrick, but I do.” Navar’s gaze moves along the coven and stops on a vampire I’ve seen twice before. “Rikkon, I know you remember,” Navar says with a laugh and Rikkon lifts his own

goblet before taking a sip. “Alrick was a fierce vampire who, above all else, valued power. Cruel as a leader, ruthless as an enemy, he led with a sternness which was never questioned. He was almost tyrannical, but effective. Our enemies were few and those that were too ignorant to bow before them were swiftly disposed of. He left no room for argument, no room for consideration. He acted as he saw fit, almost instinctively. Nothing mattered more than the continuous rise of Libarynn. Alliances did not matter. And why would they? Back then, *we* held all the power. Any allegiance made would do us a disservice. He saw that, recognized it, and ruled the coven with a heavy fist making our coven the most powerful it ever was.”

I turn to look at my kings, to see their reactions to all of this. They stood almost emotionless, unmoving, not even blinking as Navar walked back and forth across the front of the stage.

“My kings,” I whispered, trying to get their attention, but it’s like they can’t even hear me. Like I’m not here at all.

“And let us not forget about Vastryn, the seductress who wormed her way into the heart of Alrick, a mere *human*.”

My eyes widened at this, to learn one of the founders of Libarynn was human, like me.

Navar paused, sipping from his chalice. “Yes. Her blood is the single reason our newest Blood Slave sits in the very throne where all who came before her sat. Alrick’s lust for her grew and grew until he no longer saw things clearly. Until the slave became his equal, a blasphemous consideration for any vampire king or not. So much of her blood King Alrick had consumed that more of hers filled his body than his own. And thus, the first Blood Slave was also born, and with it, his existence was bound to her own.”

I swallowed hard, not liking where this was going. “Marek,” I said a little louder. “Mikhail, please. Look at me.” My gaze darted from them to Navar, terror creeping along my very bones. They just stood there, staring into oblivion.

Navar takes another sip from his glass then plucks my leash from Marek’s hand. Something in my chest cracks at the ease in which they gave me to him. “Of course I saw her for what she was—a weakness. But how were we, the members of Libarynn, going to get around that little problem. How are we going to move forward? Alrick lost his life to Vastryn. After years of feigning love and adoration for the king, she stabbed him right in the heart as he slept then fled the kingdom. Her whereabouts were never

located.”

“Marek!” I shout this time, uncaring who hears me. My unease is suffocating, and I push off the throne but am instantly propelled back as a pair of gold shackles clamps down on my wrists.

No. No. No!

A length of chain affixed both shackles is threaded through two holes in the stage floor. Panic rises as I try to lift my hands, but the weight is so heavy, forcing my arms down onto the armrests of the throne.

“Mikhail!” I scream. “Help me!”

The kings’ chalices drop to the ground, and Navar cackles, head thrown back as one by one they fall, literally crumpling to the ground.

“No!” I tug at the binds, fear now a bitter taste on my tongue. Commotion in the crowd rings in my ears, the clash of weapons, hisses and snarls.

An attack.

Suddenly the throne tips backwards and I’m falling, falling, falling, screaming as I drop into darkness.

For a moment, I’m sure I’ve died but then the muffled sounds of the fighting above become clear again and my eyes start to make out images in the dark. The pulsing sound of my blood rushes through my ears and the clinking of the chain as I try to move but can’t.

I’m trapped.

A whoosh sounds and the room blazes to life. Two huge, black candelabras each housing a dozen pillar candles ignite at once. I regard the room, taking it all in, twisting as much as I can to see all around me. Gray stone walls rise above me, and my throne sits in an alcove with a little arched ceiling just above it.

I realize now the throne is on a platform and just beyond the light of the candles are two rows of four benches, facing towards me. My stomach plummets.

It’s an altar.

Movement from the shadows has me jerking my head to the sound of footsteps. Navar appears unscathed and ominous. He narrows his black, beady eyes on me and stalks over to the throne. My whole body tightens at his closeness, at the desire blazing in his eyes.

“The time has come, pet, for you to meet your new master.” His words trickle over my body like beads of ice. “Too long have I waited for this. For the taste of your blood...and other things.” As he moves his eyes along my

body, I shudder in revulsion.

In an instant, he bares his fangs, head lowering to my neck.

“How did you do it?” I manage to squeak out, needing to distract him, delay this eventuality as long as possible. The thought of another’s lips upon my skin, tasting me. His breath heats my skin as I crane away from him, but he pulls away, hands enclosed around my shackles.

“The curse of the Blood Slaves,” he says with a grin. “Something I devised a hundred years ago.”

“B-Before the kings were entombed?” I’m trying hard to understand.

He nods. “Did they tell you, pet, what happened to their last Blood Slave? Did they tell you why they’ve leashed and collared you?”

I swallow and lick my lips, my mouth parched. “No. I just assumed—”

“Assumed what? That she died of old age?” His tone is mocking as he slides a hand behind my neck and releases the collar, the cool air kissing the heated skin beneath the leather. He tosses it to the ground in disgust. “Blood Slaves live as long as their masters once the king’s blood has been shared. But they didn’t share theirs with you did they? No... They just took and took and took and left you defenseless.”

“I don’t understand. If she didn’t die of old age, then how? How did she die?”

Navar cracks his neck and stands to full height. He’s not as tall as the kings but every bit as big as Papa was. I can’t even risk thinking about my father, not for one second. Not while this predator has me in his clutches.

“Your kings killed her,” he reveals with a sinister grin. “I watched it happen. They drank her to fucking death, and it nearly killed them. Would have, too, had Jasper not been so quick to get them to the tombs of their ancestors.”

That crack in my chest completely fractures. “They wouldn’t do that.”

Navar laughs. “They couldn’t help themselves, of course. So completely lost to their blood lust, were your kings, that they didn’t even hear her screams. She died with their fangs still embedded in her flesh, their cocks impaling her cunt and her ass. They consumed her until there was nothing left but ash and bones.”

I try to form words but none come. I’m at a loss. I could have come to terms with just about anything regarding the previous Blood Slave but this? Knowing it was them who killed her? I feel myself go boneless, all the fight I had left leaking from my soul. Foolish I was to ever have feelings for them.

They haven't just killed their enemies, but their Blood Slave. And by circumstance, they almost killed themselves.

Navar fingers his gross beard, his nose upturned. "It's all coming together in that pretty little head of yours isn't it, slave? All the pieces creating a rather gruesome picture painted on a canvas of flesh." He paces in front of me as the noise above us grows quiet. "Do you see now, why they kept you in that cage? Because they no longer understand how to wield their power, how to use you. They've allowed their fear to affect how they rule and the members of Libarynn have grown tired of it. Power is to be shared, wielded. And I will wield you."

The coppery scent of blood hits my nose as a dozen vampires infiltrate the stone room. Some I recognize from Sintara and my blood rages, knowing they've turned on their kings. They all bare their fangs, eyes blazing, nostrils flaring. Most are covered in blood and immediately I wonder if it's the kings, then wonder if I really care after what I've learned.

So I face them and hold my head proud. "So what then? You kill me? Kill them?"

"No, silly human. You are now my greatest possession, my most potent weapon. Your blood will not only strengthen me, but the rest of the rebellion. You, my dear, are the fuel to our entire operation. And as for your kings, they are already dying. You see, I laced their drink with something, the one thing that could kill them, something I've been guarding with my life the past hundred years hoping one day it could be of use to me."

"What is it?" I ask, hating how quickly my bravery gives way to the tremble in my voice.

"Blood. Her blood. Siphoned from the Blood Slave they loved then killed." My jaw drops in shock and Navar laughs at my discomfort. "See how clever your new master is? I collected little drops over the years, when her body healed from a brutal night, then the kings were still sleeping off their high from her essence. Tonight, in toasting you, they drank down the last remaining bit of her. And since she is already dead, so is the life essence in her blood, and therefore, so are they. It is the only poison powerful enough to kill a king. Right now, it courses through their veins, infecting them, invading their minds, their twisted souls. It won't be long until your bond with them breaks and I can claim you as my own but for now, a taste will do."

I scream as they launch themselves at me. My entire body rages in pain as bite after bite sinks into my skin. It fucking hurts, agony rippling through me

in waves that has my vision darkening, lungs struggling to inhale a breath.

They are going to kill me, I think as I give in to the horrors and let myself slip into nothingness. My last thoughts are of Papa, of how I failed him. Of how I failed *them*. Was my life never worth anything? Was I not destined for something more than this?

I can't stay awake now, the blood loss taking me down into the all consuming arms of darkness.

This is not your end, a voice whispers inside my head before consciousness finally ebbs.

And I become one with the shadows.

TO BE CONTINUED IN BLOOD SLAVE 2:
THE SANGUINE SEDUCTION

DEAR READER

We want to thank you so much for picking up our dark little vampire book, and hope you loved it as much as we loved writing it. We promise you an HEA at the end of book 2 which will come out next year. Thank you for supporting us! We love you all!

Xoxo

Lox and M.J.

ABOUT M.J. MARSTENS

USA Today bestselling author M.J. Marstens mixes romance and steam to create unforgettable worlds and characters.. When she's not creating spicy scenes, she's refereeing her four children that she homeschools. In her free time, she loves to eat, sleep, and pray that her children do not turn out like the characters she writes about in her books. To read more about M.J., please visit these websites and sign-up below!

[WEBSITE](#)
[FACEBOOK](#)
[NEWSLETTER](#)
[M.J. BOOK LIST](#)

ABOUT LOXLEY SAVAGE

Loxley is a USA Today Bestselling Author who enjoys creating dark and spicy books for her readers to enjoy. Loxley is a proud, single mom who loves puzzles, books, escape rooms, reality tv, and rollercoasters. To follow her on social media, please click on one of the links below.

Social Media Links:

[Facebook Group](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

[Amazon](#)

[Bookbub](#)

[Instagram](#)