



A Hunger Soft and Wild

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires, Lesbian Romance

Description: A dangerous mercenary. A runaway vampire. A hunger neither can resist.

Aria Valienne spent her life under the iron rule of a vampire clan who sees mercy as weakness. Now hunted, wounded, and desperate for freedom, she flees into the wild—only to be found by a hardened mercenary with sharp eyes and an even sharper blade. Roan should be just another danger in a world that seeks to devour her, yet something about the woman makes Aria hesitate...and hunger. Roan Talrik knows better than to get involved. She's spent years selling her sword, keeping her past buried and her heart untouched. Helping a runaway vampire is a mistake—one that should have ended the moment Aria could stand on her own. And yet, every night by the fire, every stolen glance, every quiet confession sinks its teeth into Roan's resolve.

When the shadows catch up to them, will they survive the hunt—or will they be forced to sacrifice everything for a love they never meant to find?

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Aria

They say a vampire can't bleed out.

Tonight, I might be the exception.

I never thought I'd flee barefoot through the woods—but here I am, stumbling through bramble and moonlight like a half-feral thing.

My cloak catches on a branch again—another sharp tug that nearly spins me sideways. I curse and yank it free, breath shallow, shoulder screaming. Every step jars the gash trailing from my collarbone to the edge of my back, left by an enforcer's blade the moment I turned to climb the estate wall.

A punishment. A reminder. A warning.

I press a shaking hand to the wound. It's warm and wet beneath my palm—too much blood, too fast. The scent of it coats the air, metallic and damning. A beacon. I might as well be leaving a trail for them, breadcrumb in red. My mother's loyal hounds—her enforcers—will follow it.

Keep going, Aria. Don't stop. Don't look back.

If I could just find a place to hide, to catch my breath and think, maybe I could avoid bleeding out.

The night is too quiet. No birds. No insects. Just the slap of bare feet on wet moss and

mud. It's not silence, but stillness. The kind of stillness that comes before something awful. It's as if the forest itself is watching, waiting.

I almost laugh. This used to be my clan's land—patrolled, safe. Now it's possibly my execution ground.

Twigs snap behind me.

My heart stutters. I lurch forward, nearly pitching headfirst over a knotted root, catching myself on a tree trunk slick with lichen. The bark bites into my palm, grounding me.

Focus. Move.

Don't think about the pain or the way your legs tremble.

Don't think about how your boots were torn off in the fight, or how your mother stood at the top of the marble steps, watching you run like she was already writing your eulogy.

A bitter laugh bubbles up in my chest. She must have guessed I'd attempt this sooner or later, but I never expected her to stand back and let me fight her enforcers alone. Or was that her plan all along—to make me realize how hopeless escaping would be? The memory of her cold stare burns in my mind, a more potent wound than the gash in my shoulder.

"If you leave, never show your face again."

Her words still throb like bruises inside my skull. She didn't yell. She never yells. Her calm is always worse. Measured. Absolute. "You'll die out there, Aria. You're nothing without us. You're not like them."

She's wrong. Or maybe she's right, and I simply don't care anymore.

The moon slips between the trees, casting silver ribbons across the forest floor. I glance down and see the cut on my shoulder again—red against pale skin, gaping and angry. The blood runs down, staining my cloak and dress.

I dig my nails into my palm to stay upright. Vampires heal faster than humans, sure. But not when we're starved, not when the blood loss is this bad. And I haven't fed in... gods, two days?

Panic claws at my ribs. If I stop now, they'll catch me. And if they catch me, they'll bring me back. And if they bring me back...my mother will deliver a punishment worse than any I've suffered before. Or maybe she'll make an example of me, prove to the clan that no one—especially her daughter—defies the matriarch.

No. I won't let that happen.

But how much further can I go like this? How much longer until my body gives out?

I blink up at the sky, its cold clarity framed by boney branches. The stars don't care if I live or die. Why would they?

But I do.

I do.

Keep going, I chant inwardly and straighten up again—each step a small act of defiance. Just until dawn.

If I make it until dawn, I can escape them.

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Her enforcers—those snarling shadows she calls loyal—are all turned vampires. Twisted creatures made, not born. The sun sears them to ash. But not me. Born into vampirism, I can endure its light.

It's the one thing I have that they don't.

If I can just hold out a little longer, survive the night—I'll be free.

The branches overhead shift, rustling like hushed whispers of disapproval, and I catch a distant shout: the enforcers are close. My heart lurches, and my throat closes around a sob, but I choke it back.

I was never supposed to get out.

In the estate, everything was laid out for me—a role carved in polished stone. Be still. Be silent. Serve the clan. That's what daughters are meant for in our world—daughters with fangs and pretty faces, born to strengthen alliances or decorate cages.

But I couldn't be a part of it anymore. I've witnessed enough cruelty, enough innocent bloodshed to know that.

So I ran.

And now, I'll pay the price.

You're a fool, Aria.

But a fool is better than a monster. At least that's what I tell myself.

Still, I force myself to stand. To move.

No more, no more...My lungs burn. My limbs feel stiff and awkward, as if I'm breaking apart at the seams.

"Just a little farther," I promise myself, voice cracking.

But it isn't hope that keeps me upright. It's terror.

My mother's voice still echoes in my skull, smug and cold: "When you die out there, it will be your own doing."

Maybe so.

But I'll die as myself.

Behind me, a branch cracks.

I bolt.

Please, just a little farther. The ground dips, and I tumble down a short embankment, landing hard on my bad shoulder. The impact sends a scream ripping through my throat. My vision blooms with white-hot stars, before fading into blackness that nibbles at the edges of my vision.

Get up. If you stay down, you die. So I drag myself upright, chest heaving.

I trip forward, each step half a stumble. The sense of being hunted closes in on me, pressing like a physical weight.

Ahead, the trees thin out just enough to let a sliver of moonlight spill onto a small clearing. My breath rattles with relief, though the clearing is hardly a refuge. If I can just make it past this ridge, maybe I can find a place to hide.

Another half-choked laugh. The plan is shaky at best—more dream than strategy—but it's all I've got.

My body screams in protest, but I force myself across the open patch of moonlight. It feels like stepping onto a stage in front of a silent crowd, vulnerable and exposed. The distant baying of pursuit echoes through the trees, fueling my ragged sprint. Each step sends jolts of agony through my wounded shoulder, but still, I run.

The ground slopes downward, thick roots clawing up from the earth like skeletal hands, but I don't slow—I can't. My lungs burn, each gasp tasting of moss and cold night air. Branches whip against my face, tearing at my clothes, but I barely feel them over the throbbing wound in my shoulder.

The forest thins, trees growing sparser, their twisted fingers giving way to scattered stones and rotting logs.

And then... I see them. The ruins.

Ancient stone arches jut from the ground like broken ribs, twisted and half-swallowed by ivy. Vines creep up cracked pillars, and the shattered remnants of windows glint under the moonlight. I've only seen them from afar before, warned by the elders that the land was cursed, forsaken. That no blood runs clean where the gods once wept.

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Perfect.

A fitting grave, if it comes to that.

The ruins loom larger as I stagger into their shadow. Towering pillars lean at impossible angles, and beneath them, a courtyard opens—half choked with weeds, half paved with cracked stone. I lurch toward the nearest wall, my hand catching rough, ancient stone as my legs give out.

I collapse against the wall, stone cool against my fevered skin. My hand clutches at my wound. Blood slicks my palm. I press harder, hard enough to make myself gasp, to remind myself I'm still here. Still fighting.

The forest beyond the ruins is eerily silent—no snapping branches, no distant howls. My ears strain for the hunt, but for the first time since I fled, I hear nothing but my own broken gasps.

Did I lose them?

No, a cold voice whispers in my head, you bought yourself time. That's all.

They're out there. I can feel them. My mother's enforcers, prowling like wolves in the dark, blood-bound and loyal to a monster in silk. But maybe—just maybe—they'll hesitate before following me here. Superstition runs deep in the clan, and this place reeks of old gods and older vengeance.

I tilt my head back against the wall, the cool stone grounding me, and a ragged sob

rattles from my chest. My eyes burn, but no tears fall—I'm too spent.

Above me, the sky stretches wide and star-swept, a thousand glittering pinpricks looking down without care. The stars don't blink for me. The night doesn't pause. I'm a fleck of shadow beneath an indifferent cosmos, and yet—despite everything—there's something like relief threading through the pain. Fragile. Foolish. But there.

I made it this far.

That has to count for something.

Except my body's done. I can't run again. I can't even crawl. If they find me here, it'll be over before I can lift a hand in protest. Not that I'd manage more than a whimper.

And if I don't stop the bleeding soon, I'll never live to see them arrive.

A bitter laugh bubbles up in my throat, dry and pained. "So," I whisper to the night, voice hoarse, "is this where it ends?"

The ruins give me nothing back. No whispered comfort, no answer from the gods the elders used to fear. Just shadows and silence.

Yet, the silence here is different. Not just the hush of the forest, but something deeper—like the place itself is holding its breath.

The moon looms overhead, heavy and full above the broken walls.

It stares down like a witness. Like it sees me—really sees me—and still offers nothing. My lips part around a wordless plea. Help me. Please.

But there's no one.

No gods. No allies. No soft-voiced rescue waiting in the wings. I'm alone.

“I won't...” My voice fractures, thin and brittle, but I grit my teeth and force it out. “I won't go back.”

The vow lands like a stone in the stillness. Sharp. Absolute. I may be bleeding out on ancient cursed ground, I may be alone—but I'd rather die in this ruined place than ever kneel at her feet again.

Then, despite my best efforts, my body surrenders. The cold creeps in, tangling with the terror, and I wonder if all those thoughts of freedom were just pretty lies.

At least I tried.

The darkness comes slow. Like sleep. Like surrender.

But in my last flicker of awareness, I imagine her face—the clan matriarch, my mother, watching from her gilded halls, waiting for me to crawl home.

She'll wait forever.

Because I'm never going back.

Not even if it kills me.

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Roan

I've never cared much for old ruins, yet here I am, trudging through the night with only my sword and a nagging sense of regret for company.

The wind howls through broken archways like the place is still mourning whatever civilization left it behind. Dust skitters across cracked stones, stirred up like restless ghosts. A smarter woman would be in a tavern right now, boots off, meal in hand, maybe a little buzzed on cheap ale and even cheaper company. But no—I'm out here, alone, freezing my ass off in the armpit of nowhere, because of a job that slipped through my fingers.

I grunt and run a hand through my short-cropped hair. Should've seen it coming.

I had a good deal lined up—decent coin for escorting a wagon of silks from one side of the valley to the other. Easy ride, I thought. Guard the goods, keep my blade clean. But then the merchant got nervous, said he didn't like the idea of relying on "just one sellsword," especially not a woman. Said it'd be safer to hire a pack of local guards instead.

Coward.

He gave me a quarter of the promised coin, mumbled something about appreciating my time, and that was that.

I'd have told him to shove his silks where the sun never shines, but I needed at least a portion of that payment, and that stings worse than the dismissal.

There went my job. My ride to the next town. My damn pride.

Now I've got enough silver to last a week if I ration hard—no ale, no hot meals, and no inn unless I'm desperate. I've pinned my hopes on the border town of Elden Hollow, a few day's journey from here if I don't collapse halfway. It's not glamorous, but it's busy—positioned right between three hostile territories. To the south and west, vampire clans dig in like ticks. Up north, there's a cluster of gold-hungry towns itching to spill blood over coin. And further north still, the werewolves stalk the frost fields, answering to no one but their own hunger.

In other words, Elden Hollow is exactly the kind of place a merc like me thrives. Plenty of threats. Plenty of frightened people with coin to spare.

But first, I have to get there.

I can either camp under the stars or brave some tumble-down relic that might offer shelter from the wind. Between an open field and a battered ruin, the choice isn't hard.

My boots crunch over loose stones as I step forward, scanning the remains of what might've been a temple once, or a manor. Hard to tell—age and decay have wiped most of the details clean.

Better not to get curious, I remind myself.

Curiosity doesn't pay. Contracts do. And right now, I've got none.

Still, I move carefully, scanning for signs of trouble. Bandits sometimes use these places for hideouts. I've learned the hard way that “empty” corridors can hide a lot more than old pottery shards. My sword-hand flexes in a reflexive test of readiness. The hilt is as familiar as my own skin—my truest companion on the road.

At least the sky's clear. The moon's doing me a favor tonight. Its light drapes over the broken stone like a half-hearted blessing, just enough for me to pick my way through the rubble without tripping. But the cold? The cold bites deep. It's in my joints, my jaw, my spine—wrapping around my bones like it wants to root there.

I'd kill for a hot fire.

No, scratch that. I'd fight for it, not kill—although the night is young, and you never know what you might have to do out here.

My stomach rumbles. I haven't eaten since dawn. Rations are slim: a heel of stale bread, a scrap of dried venison. I push away the gnawing emptiness.

If I can find a decent corner to hole up for the night, maybe I'll hunt at first light. Rabbits don't usually stray too far from places like this—too many hiding spots. And I'm fast when I need to be.

Wind kicks up again, sharper this time. It whistles through the shattered stone like a warning, sending a chill across my neck. My cloak snaps around my calves, but I keep walking, stepping over a slab of stone that might've been part of a grand doorway centuries ago.

The place is eerily quiet, except for the wind. If there were bandits squatting here, they'd have made themselves known by now. Thrown a rock, rattled a blade, something to mark their territory. No one hides this long unless they're planning something, and somehow I don't think this ruin's hiding a trap. No warmth in the air. No scent of cookfire or stale sweat.

So maybe—for once—I'm actually alone.

Still doesn't mean safe.

I work my way deeper into what appears to be the remains of a small courtyard—stone columns, some intact, most just jagged stumps. The ground slopes here, scattered with loose stones and creeping ivy. By the faint moonlight, I see a curved wall still standing at the far end, half-swallowed by vines. Perfect spot for shelter. I can tuck my back to it, keep watch, and maybe get a few hours' rest.

That's all I need. Then I'll move on, find work in Elden Hollow, and forget all about the night I spent in the bones of a forgotten place.

Except... something prickles at the back of my neck.

A shiver—not from cold this time, but instinct.

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I freeze.

Because suddenly, I'm not sure I'm alone after all.

At first, I think it's a trick of the shadows—a bundle of fallen cloth or twisted ivy at the base of the wall. But no, there's a shape slumped against the stone, human-sized. Small. Still.

Not a bandit. Too slight for that. A traveler, maybe. Or a body.

I curse silently, pulse kicking up hard and fast. My stance shifts without thought, weight rolling to the balls of my feet. Sword-hand inches toward the hilt. Ready for a fight.

But the figure doesn't move.

Which somehow feels worse.

The smart move would be to walk away. Keep my distance. I've seen too many sob stories turn into knife wounds. Still, something tugs at my gut, stubborn and low. Not quite guilt, not quite instinct—just that sick, sour churn that says if you leave them and they die, you'll carry it.

And gods, when was the last time I felt that?

I contemplate the figure a moment longer, then decide that if it's a trap, well...I'm armed. I can handle a trap.

Slowly, carefully, I edge closer.

Gravel crunches beneath my boots—loud in the quiet ruins, louder in my ears. My sword's already half-drawn from its scabbard. I keep to the edge of the moonlight, moving slow, careful, each step deliberate. My eyes scan the wreckage around me for movement, signs of life, ambush. Nothing. Just stones and silence.

Closer now.

And I see her.

My breath catches in my throat before I can stop it.

She's slumped against the stone, limbs splayed awkwardly, hair matted across her face. My stomach lurches—it's definitely a woman, and she looks...bad. Pale. The kind of pale that drains the color from the world around her. Her shoulder's soaked in blood—dark and dried now, but still too much, and her dress is torn.

Dead?

I pause a yard away, heart thudding against my ribs hard enough to hurt. The air feels tight, like it's holding its breath with me.

I've seen plenty of corpses. Buried more than a few. But this doesn't feel like death. Not exactly. There's something about her posture—slumped, but not slack. Like she was fighting to stay upright. Like she didn't want to go down.

Gods. Is she breathing?

The glimmer of moonlight on her face reveals an almost ethereal pallor, and for a moment I wonder if she's some wraith from an old story.

Don't be foolish, Roan. She's flesh and blood.

All the same, I can't just stride up without caution. I've heard the stories—bait left out for mercs like me, waiting for the soft-hearted to lean in close.

But this... this doesn't feel like bait.

I scan the ruins one last time for signs of an ambush—a blade glinting in the shadows, or another figure lying in wait. Nothing. Just the wind, the hush of ancient stones, and a wave of unease that makes my palms sweat.

The mercenary in me screams caution—leave her, walk away.

I let out a quiet, muttered curse and move forward. My sword eases back into its sheath with a click.

Stupid, maybe. But there's something about her. I can't walk away now. Not if she's dying.

And gods help me, she looks like she's dying.

A breeze stirs the tangle of her dark hair, and there's an odd pallor to her lips that I don't often see in the living. I crouch beside her, and swing my pack off one shoulder. She doesn't stir. Doesn't flinch. Not even when I brush a few strands of hair from her face.

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I reach into my bag, fingers fumbling through bandages, water flask, whatever half-crushed salve I've got left.

"Hey," I say, keeping my voice low. No sense startling her. "Can you hear me?"

Her eyelids flutter—barely a twitch at first. Then they crack open, and her gaze snags mine.

Panic.

It hits her face like a lightning strike—wild, unfiltered, immediate. I see her flinch before she even moves, and then she's scrabbling to press herself deeper into the crumbled wall behind her. Her body's trembling, half-frozen, half-fighting.

My hands fly up, palms open. I stay low, crouched and nonthreatening, sword untouched.

"Easy," I murmur. "I'm not here to hurt you. Just...just hold on."

She doesn't answer. Just stares at me, eyes wide and glassy, lips slightly parted like she's still catching up to where she is and who I am. The kind of fear she's carrying—it's not the usual bandit jumpiness or traveler's suspicion. This is something deeper. Like she's seen hell and it chased her here.

I shift carefully, reach for my pack without breaking eye contact, and pull out my canteen. The water inside sloshes quietly. Still some left. Good. I fish out the rest—dried meat, a broken bit of hard bread. Nothing fancy, but it might be enough to

ground her.

“I’ve got water,” I say, holding the canteen out. I keep my voice gentle, low. “You look like you need this.”

She stares at it, doesn’t move. Her breathing’s shallow, chest rising in short, fast bursts. Her skin’s too pale, almost luminous in the moonlight—and gods, the gash across her shoulder is bad. Ugly. Deep enough that even I, used to gore and worse, feel my gut clench.

“You’re hurt,” I add, shifting closer. “I—I can help, but you have to let me. Here, I have a bit of water left.” I hold the canteen out to her again, fingers outstretched like she might snap if I get too close.

Her eyes flick to mine, then to the canteen, before she closes them and shakes her head weakly. It’s not a refusal, exactly, more like resignation.

Shit.

I glance at the blood soaking her cloak, at the way she’s curled into herself.

Something about the color of her blood—no, maybe it’s the dim light, but it seems different. Thick. Rich. I push that thought aside, a nagging sense of unease blooming in my chest.

She tries to sit up. I move forward instinctively, pressing a hand to her good shoulder to steady her. “Whoa, careful.”

Her gaze snaps to where my palm rests, and I realize I’m in her space. Too close for someone who looks like a trapped animal.

Too much.

Shit, Roan, back off.

I pull my hand away quickly, holding it up again.

I fumble for words. “I—I’m Roan,” I say, voice a little rough. “Just passing through. I can leave, if that’s what you want. But that wound... it’s not going to heal on its own.”

She swallows, and I can’t help but notice just how sharp her cheekbones are, how those amber eyes nearly glow in the waning light. Gods, I don’t know what’s going on with her. Hunger, fear, maybe both.

“I’m...fine,” she manages. Her voice cracks halfway through the word.

“Alright,” I say, exhaling slowly. “If you say so.” But she’s clearly not fine. Her hand trembles on the ground, fingers curling in pain.

I look at her—really look this time. Not just at the wound or the blood, but the woman underneath all that fear. And something about her makes my chest feel tight. She looks like she’s been hunted. Like she’s still being hunted.

And I can’t turn my back on that.

“Look,” I say again, quieter now. “I’ve got food. Water. I can patch you up, if you let me. Might even keep you breathing until morning. I don’t want anything from you.”

She looks torn.

Her eyes flick between the canteen in my hand and my face, back and forth like she’s

trying to measure something behind my expression. Like she's waiting for the catch. Her jaw tightens, the muscle twitching just once before she stills again. Pain's got a grip on her, no question—but there's something else there too. A war behind her eyes. Pride, maybe. Mistrust. Or maybe she's just too used to suffering alone.

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I know that look. I've worn it myself.

Then—finally—she gives a small, jerky nod. Barely there, but enough. Relief breathes out of me before I can stop it. My shoulders loosen. I inch a little closer, slow and careful, like she's a wounded animal who might bolt or bite. Neither would surprise me right now.

I unstop the canteen, fingers brushing the metal lip, and a familiar thought returns like a distant echo: What the hell have you gotten yourself into this time, Roan?

Another stray. Another lost soul bleeding in the dirt. Another damn complication.

I don't take in strays anymore. Learned that lesson the hard way—years ago, when getting involved cost me more than I care to remember.

But here I am.

And gods help me, I can't walk away. Not from this one. Not yet.

"Here," I murmur, holding the canteen toward her lips, angling it gently. "Drink."

She hesitates again—just long enough for me to wonder if she'll change her mind. But then she leans forward, lips brushing the canteen's edge, and takes a slow, cautious sip. I watch her throat work as she swallows, and for a moment everything else fades. The wind, the ruins, the risk of ambush... it all narrows to the sound of her breath and the feel of her exhale brushing my fingers.

She lifts a shaky hand to grip the canteen herself, and I let go, watching her fingers tremble around the metal. Strong hands, but fragile now. Like the strength's still there, just buried under too much hurt.

She lowers the canteen with a shaky breath, wipes her mouth on the back of her hand. And then I see it—a glint of something behind her lips. Sharp. Clean. Fangs?

I blink. Just a trick of the light, maybe. Or exhaustion catching up to me.

“Thank you,” she breathes.

Quiet. Careful. Like the words are precious and rare, something she's not used to giving. But even soft like that, there's steel buried beneath. Something sharp and fierce that doesn't quite match the way she looks—pale, spent, barely upright.

She should sound as wrecked as she looks, but there's still fire in her, even if it's dimmed to embers.

My hands go to my pack again, searching for the strip of cloth I know I packed. Something to staunch the bleeding, at least. Something to give her a fighting chance.

I should ask questions. Who she is? What she's running from? Why am I getting involved when I damn well know better?

But I don't.

Not yet.

I don't think she'd answer anyway.

Instead, I find the cloth and tear a strip with my teeth, fingers already moving on

muscle memory. When I glance back, she's watching me. Warily. Like she doesn't quite believe what I'm doing is real.

"Alright," I say quietly, ignoring the twist of anxiety in my gut, "let's see about that wound."

As I reach for her shoulder, she tenses, a tremor shivering through her frame. I steady her with one hand, gentle as I can manage, and kneel beside her so I can get a better look in the moonlight. Her shirt's torn and dark with blood—thick, black-red, pooling against pale skin. Too thick. I try not to let the unease show in my face, but it settles in my gut like a stone.

I peel the fabric away. She hisses through her teeth, eyes squeezing shut, but she doesn't pull back. I admire the hell out of her for that.

"Sorry," I murmur, fingers brushing her skin. "I just need to see how bad it is."

She nods, lips pressed into a hard, bloodless line. Her breath comes shallow. Controlled. Every part of her is wound tight, like she's holding herself together with sheer will.

The wound's deep. Ragged. Like something dragged claws or a serrated blade across her flesh. It's not clean. It's not recent. And judging by the half-dried edges, she's been running on it for hours.

Not good.

I run my tongue over the back of my teeth, thinking. I've seen wounds like this before, in battlefields and back alley brawls, but this one feels different. Feels personal. Like whoever gave it to her wanted her to suffer, not just bleed.

She winces as I dab the cloth around the edges, and I have to steady my hand, jaw clenched. I don't know what it is about her, this stranger in the ruins, but something about the way she's trying so hard not to flinch makes me want to tear apart whatever monster did this to her.

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Careful, Roan.

Don't get attached.

But for some godsdamned reason, I want her to live.

I press the folded scrap of cloth firmly against the cut, and she hisses—a sharp, tight inhale through clenched teeth

“Yeah, I know,” I murmur, easing up on the pressure. My voice goes low, quieter than usual. “I'll be quick.”

My hands are steady enough to work, but not steady enough to satisfy me. They tremble—just a whisper of movement—but it's enough to piss me off. I've field-dressed worse injuries than this, in worse light. I've stitched gashes with nothing but whiskey and spit. But this is different. Maybe it's her breathing—shallow and strained, like she's trying to pretend she's not hurting. Or maybe it's the way she watches me, those amber eyes sharp despite the pain, like she's waiting for me to turn on her.

I don't know why that gets under my skin.

I tighten a strip of bandage around her shoulder, tying it off with a firm knot. She exhales shakily, and I catch a flash of those oddly bright eyes—too bright.

“You got a name?” I ask, an attempt to distract us both from the tension. My voice sounds steadier than I feel.

She hesitates, as if the question itself is dangerous. Then, in a near whisper, she says, “Aria.”

“Aria,” I echo, testing the syllables on my tongue. It’s soft, but there’s something sharp beneath it—like the wind through autumn leaves before the frost sets in. And for a reason I can’t explain, I feel the name—Aria—rooting itself somewhere beneath my ribs, where it won’t be easily forgotten.

I shift slightly, easing the tension in my stance. “Roan,” I offer in return. “Like I said before.”

She doesn’t acknowledge it, just watches me, wary. I don’t take it personal. People don’t trust easily when they’re bleeding in the dirt.

I reach into my pack and pull out a scrap of dried venison, holding it up in silent offer. “Hungry?”

She stares at it like I’ve offered her a handful of gravel. “I’m fine,” she says, but her voice trembles at the edges.

I glance at the bandage, where a faint stain of crimson has already started to bloom through the cloth.

“You’re not,” I mutter, more to myself than to her.

But I let it go. Pushing her now won’t help. Whatever she’s running from—it’s recent. It’s raw. And it’s got teeth.

I tear off a piece of the venison for myself and chew slowly, eyes flicking her way now and then. She’s trembling again. Subtle, but there. Like a wire strung too tight, ready to snap. And maybe she thinks I don’t see it, but I do.

“Look,” I say, stowing the food back into my pack for now, “I don’t know what happened to you. And I’m not asking, alright? But you’re alone. You’re hurt. We can share this spot for the night. Safety in numbers, yeah?”

Her gaze lifts to the sliver of moon above the trees, like she’s measuring how much longer she has to survive. Then she nods, just once.

My knees protest the cold ground, but I ignore them.

She holds my gaze for a long, tense moment, then turns her face away. I settle down near her, half propping my back against the crumbled stone, sword still strapped to me in case we’re not alone out here. Sleep won’t come easy, but I’ll be damned if I leave her now.

This might be the dumbest thing I’ve done in years.

In fact, it might be my most reckless decision yet. But a flicker of something—compassion, curiosity—keeps me here, heart pounding in time with the slow drip of her blood.

Aria

I can’t sleep.

Not even with the relief of dawn beginning to brush the edges of the sky in pale, silvery light. It’s close now—I can feel it like a hum in my bones, in my blood.

Am I safe now?

The makeshift bandage on my shoulder itches, pulsing with a dull, rhythmic throb that matches the slow drag of my heart.

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People like to say vampires don't have heartbeats. That we're cold, lifeless things. They're wrong. We do. It's just...slower. Quieter. We're not the dead—they only like to pretend we are.

But I feel every beat of mine tonight. Heavy. Loud. Anchoring me to the pain, to this moment, to the stranger only a few feet away who saw me bleeding and didn't walk away.

Roan.

She leans against the remains of a crumbling wall, her sword still strapped across her back, legs stretched out in front of her. She's not asleep either—I can tell from the way her fingers twitch now and then, like she's ready to move at the first sign of danger.

I should be grateful—she's done more for me than anyone else in recent memory. But caution gnaws at me, sharp as a fang against flesh. I've been taught to trust no one—especially not a pretty human with a blade.

My eyes flick to her hands, the calluses and faint scars telling their own story of violence. They aren't the hands of a noble or a scholar—they are a warrior's hands, roughened by years of wielding a blade, no doubt. They are hands built by survival.

But the rest of her isn't as harsh.

She is...handsome. Not in the delicate way the court used to whisper about when discussing potential blood-bound suitors. There's nothing delicate about Roan. She's

all sinew and edge—strong jaw, square shoulders, scars littering her skin where blades must have glanced her once, long ago. Her dark hair is shorn close to her scalp—efficient, no nonsense and her posture is the kind that comes from always being ready for a fight.

And yet, when she bandaged my shoulder, her hands were careful.

She keeps glancing in my direction, scanning my face as if trying to decide whether I'm a threat or a burden.

Probably both.

Her gaze lingers—not just wary, but calculating, like she's trying to solve a puzzle she didn't expect to find tonight.

It's like she's waiting for me to turn into something else. Or maybe she's trying to decide what I already am.

I don't know how to feel about that.

The wind picks up through the bones of the ruins, stirring fallen leaves and whispering across broken stone. I shift slightly where I'm propped against the cold wall, and pain flares hot and sharp beneath my ribs. I grit my teeth and ride it out, breath shallow. The movement stokes another kind of discomfort—worse than the pain. Deeper. Familiar.

Hunger.

Not for food. Not for water. Not for comfort.

The real kind. The kind that curls in my belly and scratches at the inside of my throat.

The kind that comes with the scent of blood, faint but maddening, even now. It used to be so easy—back at the estate, back when I didn't know better. Blood was a given. Poured into crystal goblets, offered up on silk-draped wrists. Never questioned. Never earned.

But I left that behind.

I press the back of my head harder against the stone, breathing in through my nose, willing the ache back down. Roan's scent is close—leather, sweat, iron. Earth and danger. It's not helping.

She doesn't know what I am. Not really. She hasn't seen the fangs. She hasn't seen what I become when the hunger slips its leash.

Roan clears her throat, gaze lingering on the bandage. "You good?" she asks, voice pitched low.

My throat feels desert-dry. "Yes," I manage, the word coming out faint.

She nods slowly, watching me a moment longer. I can feel the weight of questions pressing against her tongue, but she doesn't ask them. She just watches. Her silence—it should be a relief, but it unsettles me more than if she'd pried. Kindness, the real kind, always feels like a trick. I pull my knees up against my chest, trying not to wince at the pressure in my shoulder.

An owl calls in the distance, and my gaze shoots to the darkness beyond the crumbling walls, scanning for shadows. No movement, just the hush of the night. Tension eases in my chest—if the enforcers were closing in, they'd likely have revealed themselves by now.

Then why did they stop?

Did I lose them?

Did they stop when I entered the ruins?

Or is dawn too close for comfort for them?

I shiver, unsure which answer unnerves me more.

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I swallow, tasting copper.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask softly, the question slipping from my lips before I can call it back. I’m not sure if I want to her to answer.

She glances away, as though my question unsettles her. “Couldn’t just...leave you there.” Her voice is gruff, uncomfortable. “I’m not a saint, but I’m not a monster, either.”

At the wordmonster, my breath catches. I glance down at my torn cloak, the dried blood crusted on the fabric. Monster. The word lands hard. My clan wore it like armor—like pride. We are the strong. The feared. We take what we want because it is our right.

But I never wanted to drink power like that. Never wanted to rule with blood on my tongue.

Roan leans forward slightly, resting one arm over her knee. “Anyway,” she adds, a short sigh escaping her lips, “if it makes you feel better, I’m not expecting anything. Just figured you needed help.”

The knot in my chest tightens. Relief and guilt twist together until I can’t tell which one is sharper.

“Thank you,” I whisper. The words taste foreign, like language I’ve never spoken but somehow still know.

She nods. Her shoulders ease, just a little, and the edge in her eyes softens. “Try to get some rest,” she says quietly. “I’ll keep watch.”

I cradle my injured arm close to my body and lean against the cold stone. Warnings clamor in my mind—don’t trust her, don’t trust anyone. Especially not a human with a sword and a voice that sounds too much like a lullaby in the dark.

But I’m tired. Gods, I’m so tired.

Overhead, the stars are fading, blotted out by the first dredges of dawn. I focus on the ones I can still see. I count them, one by one, as my breathing steadies. My eyelids slip lower, but not before the memory returns, uninvited. My mother’s face—sharp and cruel, her voice honeyed and hollow.

"Suffer now, or suffer later."

I grit my teeth and will the image away. The stars blur. The cold presses in.

And then...darkness.

I jolt awake to a soft rustling sound. The stone beneath me feels unfamiliar for half a second, and panic sinks its claws into my spine. My shoulder throbs violently beneath the bandages, and for one terrifying moment, I think I’m back at the estate.

I’m not.

A shape stirs in the dim firelight—Roan, crouched near the far side of the chamber, stirring the faint embers of a small fire. She glances back over her shoulder, her face drawn with fatigue.

“You’re alright,” she says, though it sounds more like a question than a statement.

My hands shake as I brace against the ground, dirt pressing into my palms. “Yes,” I rasp. “I just—thought...”

“Nightmare?” she asks gently, rising to her feet with a small grunt.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. My jaw aches from how tightly I’ve been clenching it.

She doesn’t push. Instead, she jerks her chin at the barely-lit sky. “Sun’s not fully up yet, but it’s close. Figured I’d warm things up for a bit. You were shivering.”

Gratitude and something else—an unnamed emotion—clench in my chest.

I brush damp curls from my forehead and try not to notice how badly my hands are shaking. I feel...hollow. Starving.

“Thank you,” I whisper again, and hate the way my voice cracks.

She watches me too closely. Her eyes narrow, studying the pallor of my skin, the dryness of my lips. “You’re welcome,” she murmurs, then adds more cautiously, “But you don’t look alright. You look—” She stops herself.

“I’m fine,” I say quickly, too quickly.

She doesn’t argue. Just retrieves the canteen and holds it out again. “Drink.”

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Water. If only that solved my real problem. But I take it anyway. She doesn't need to know what I really need.

My hands tremble as I drink. The water soothes the raw edge of my throat, but it does nothing for the deeper ache.

The fire crackles softly, dancing shadows on the broken walls. Outside, the wind carries distant sounds of creatures stirring. For a moment, I let myself wonder what it would be like to stay here, in this quiet corner of the world, free from my clan's reach. But I can't forget they're still hunting me. That dream—nightmare—might become reality again the moment they find me.

When I hand the canteen back, Roan takes it without a word. She nods in acknowledgment and settles down across from me, one arm draped over her raised knee. There's a tension in her posture, like she's ready to grab that sword at any sign of trouble.

Still, there's something almost comforting about her. She hasn't left my side yet, hasn't asked for money or demanded explanations. In this world, that counts for something.

We sit like that, surrounded by crumbling stone and firelight, the ruins a cradle of brokenness that somehow holds us both. I close my eyes. Just a little longer, I tell myself. Just until the sun rises.

Because somehow, I think she'll still be there when it does.

And that fragile sense of safety is enough to let me slip under the veil of sleep once more.

Roan

I rake a hand through my hair, trying to shake off the layer of fatigue settling in behind my eyes. Exhaustion's creeping in—slow and thick, like fog—but I keep my eyes on the fire. Aria's asleep again, her breathing soft and shallow as she leans against the ruined wall. The small fire crackles, painting her pale face in flickers of orange.

She looks younger in sleep. Or maybe just vulnerable. The bandage on her shoulder is already starting to spot through with blood again, and there's a faint tremble in her hand, even now. I should be used to this—people falling apart in front of me, people I barely know depending on me to pull them out of whatever hell they've landed in—but this is different.

She's different.

I press my palm to the hilt of my sword, feeling the worn leather beneath my fingers, grounding myself in its familiar weight. Usually, that's all I need—steel, instinct, a plan.

This time, it feels like I'm winging it. Seeing her lying there, battered and alone, did something to me I can't quite explain.

I don't know what she is—not really. But no human should've survived a wound like that. Not without screaming. Not without breaking.

And still, she's here. Quiet. Breathing. Alive.

And gods help me, I can't stop watching her.

I stand slowly, joints crackling in quiet protest as I stretch. My cloak shifts with the movement, and I cross the ruin to the narrow archway that faces east. A breeze cuts through the stones, crisp and sharp, stirring my cloak around my boots and prickling goosebumps along my arms.

Dawn's coming.

The sky's gone from indigo to a soft bruised blue, a whisper of light brushing the treetops in the distance. No birdsong yet—just wind and silence. I scan the horizon, listening for anything that doesn't belong: the snap of a twig, the crunch of careless boots, the hiss of drawn breath in the underbrush. Nothing. Just cold air and solitude.

I breathe out slowly, relieved and on edge all at once. "Well," I mutter to myself, glancing back at Aria's sleeping form, "no one trying to kill us this very second. That's something."

She shifts in her sleep, face contorting like she's caught in another nightmare. Her hair falls across her cheek, and for a moment, she just looks...exhausted.

There's still too much I don't know. Everything about her is a warning dressed up in desperation.

Either way, it's serious. Too serious for her to keep stumbling around the forest alone like this.

But how far does my responsibility go? My job's usually pretty straightforward: guard a caravan, escort someone across dangerous territory, or handle rowdy drunks at a tavern door.

Taking care of a strange woman with secrets in her eyes isn't something I've done before.

I wander back to the fire, crouching low to poke at the embers with a charred stick. Sparks leap into the air—brief, brilliant. Gone just as quick. It makes me think of her. Aria feels like something on the verge of vanishing.

One strong gust and she'll disappear altogether.

She stirs, exhaling a faint sigh. I let her rest, a knot twisting deeper into my gut. She barely touched the water I offered, hardly glanced at the food. There's a gauntness to her features that reminds me of folks who've starved for weeks.

But it may not be hunger for bread.

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I tap the edge of the stone with my boot, remembering the strange glint of her eyes and that moment I thought I saw something flash behind her lips—fangs.

Gods, I must've imagined that, right? Unless...

Vampire.

The word tastes wrong in my mouth, even in thought. Not because I haven't heard it before—we all have, anyone who's done time near the borders. Whispered rumors in taverns. They say vampires are fast, near-immortal, beautiful in a way that makes your spine itch. They drink blood, vanish into mist, and some—if the stories are to be believed—can walk under the sun.

Those are the dangerous ones.

Now I might be sitting ten feet away from one, if my suspicions are right.

I glance toward the firelight, toward Aria. She doesn't look dangerous now. She looks like she's hanging on by threads.

And if she is a vampire, what then? Do I run? Drive a stake through her heart?

The thought curdles my stomach. She's clearly in no state to attack anybody. She saved her own life by crawling here—barely. I look at her bandaged shoulder, thinking of how that thick blood seeped out. Different, that's for sure.

Still, something doesn't sit right. That wound on her shoulder? If she were really one

of them, wouldn't it have healed by now? From what I've been told, their bodies knit back together like torn cloth. But Aria bled. She bled a lot.

And now, hours later, she's still weak. Still trembling. Still broken.

Unless she can't heal. Not like this. Not when she's too hungry.

The realization hits me low and hard, a cold weight in my gut. Too hungry to heal.

Shit.

My gaze flicks to her face again. Her lips are cracked, her color worse than it was. And if she is what I think she is—if she's a vampire, and she's hungry—then we've got a problem. What happens when the hunger wins out? What happens when instinct takes over? My fingers brush the hilt of my sword instinctively, but I don't draw it.

Because here's the thing that matters: she hasn't hurt me. She hasn't even tried.

And if I leave her like this, she'll die.

Aria stirs again. Her lips move like she's speaking in a dream, but no words come out. I watch her brow furrow, see the flicker of fear pass over her face like a shadow. Another nightmare. And I'm just sitting here, arguing with my own damn conscience while she bleeds out beside me.

I sigh, dragging my pack closer, fingers brushing over the straps. Normally, I'd already be gone. Travel light. Don't get involved. Don't stay anywhere long enough to get entangled. But here I am, stuck in a half-collapsed ruin with a maybe-vampire whose name I only just learned.

And still, I can't bring myself to leave.

Something in me wants to give her at least a chance—mend that wound, keep an eye out for whoever’s tracking her.

I rub my thumb over a seam in my glove, leather worn smooth from years of habit. Then I toss a stick into the fire, watching it spark and curl into smoke.

“Alright, Roan,” I mutter under my breath, “you’re in this now.”

If someone’s hunting her then I need to be ready. Not just for her sake, but mine. I won’t get caught off guard.

But who the hell is hunting her?

That’s the part that claws at me.

Hunters? Mercenaries like me? Or is it something worse—her own kind? That thought sticks sharper than I expect.

I’ve never had to fight a vampire before.

The stories are always the same: faster than a blink, stronger than ten men, and clever enough to make you think you’re safe—until your blood’s already on their hands. But none of those legends account for this. For a girl curled in on herself by a fire, clutching a bandaged wound, half-starved and shaking in her sleep.

She doesn’t look like something out of a nightmare. She looks like someone still trying to wake up from one.

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“You’d best not make me regret this,” I murmur, my voice low—part warning, part wish.

She doesn’t stir again. The only answer I get is the wind whistling through the cracks in these ancient stones. Staring at the small fire, I slip into a rhythm of waiting—listening for footsteps, scanning for flickers of movement.

She’s not a job, I remind myself. She’s a person in trouble.

I don’t know what happens next. I don’t know what she is, or what I’ve signed myself up for.

But I do know one thing: I made a choice. I stayed.

And until she’s back on her feet again—strong enough to stand, to look me in the eye without swaying—I’m not going anywhere.

Aria

I come awake slowly, the damp chill of mid-morning clinging to my bones.

It takes me a moment to remember where I am: tucked against a crumbling wall with my shoulder bandaged and the remains of a small fire nearby. Above me, the sky glows in a cloudless blue, and sunlight slants through the broken archways, golden and sharp.

My breath catches in my throat. Not from fear, exactly—but surprise. I never see the

sky like this. Not so open. Not so exposed.

My clan keeps to a strict nocturnal schedule, our world ruled by velvet shadows and moon-silver silence. To wake beneath an open sky—beneath the sun—feels jarring. Foreign. Like I've crossed into another life by accident.

The sun is no enemy of mine—it won't burn me to cinders or reduce me to ash like the old myths claim. That fate belongs to the turned—those cursed by a bite and left to rot in their hunger. But still, it's so bright, almost too bright, burning across the ruins with a clarity I'm not used to.

That's the real danger.

The sun doesn't kill us. But it reminds us that we don't belong to its world.

It lays us bare, strips away the veil of darkness where we thrive. Makes us look too human, too soft. Makes us want things we shouldn't.

I lift my hand—the one not bound tight with bandages—and stretch it out of the shadow. Sunlight pierces through a crack in the stone above, sharp and gold, like a blade held to my skin.

The light kisses my palm first. Warm. Brighter than I remember. No fire. No smoke. Just the press of morning against my skin, as if the sun itself is daring me to believe in something more.

I watch, mesmerized, as the light glows along the curve of my knuckles, settling into the pale of my palm. I turn my hand, slow and trembling, letting it catch in the golden spill.

For a breathless second, I forget the gnawing hunger. I forget the ache in my

shoulder, the weight of fear, even the chase that brought me here.

I feel something else instead. Something I don't have a name for.

And then—

“You always greet the dawn like it's a god, or is today special?”

I jolt slightly, snatching my hand back into the shadows. My head snaps toward the voice before I can stop myself.

Roan.

It's startling how close she's come without a sound. She's watching me—not with suspicion, not with fear, but with something like...curiosity.

I look at her then—really look. The sun catches in her hair, brushes gold across the edge of her jaw. And for one impossible moment, I feel caught between worlds.

One foot in shadow. One in the light.

And she's the tether between them.

Roan raises a brow when I don't respond. Then she shifts her weight, tilting her head slightly, voice gentle but teasing. “You're awfully quiet in the morning, huh?”

The remark—simple, unthreatening—cuts through the strange hush between us like a blade into silk. I let out a breath that edges toward a laugh.

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But it catches—because that’s when it hits me.

The hunger.

It doesn’t creep in. It crashes.

A violent surge, blooming hot in my chest and gut, curling low like a fist closing around my insides. I lean hard into the stone wall behind me, trying to ground myself. My gums throb, the pressure sharp and familiar. My fangs want to drop. My vision sharpens and tunnels at once, focusing on the outline of Roan—alive, warm, too close. My shoulder pulses in time with the hunger, the bandage tugging uncomfortably as my body strains under the ache of too many needs unmet.

The sun won't burn me. But this hunger—it might.

“Hey.” Roan’s voice cuts through the fog. She’s suddenly there, crouched in front of me, her face etched with concern. “You alright?”

“No.” The word tears from my throat before I can stop it. My arm jerks out instinctively, palm outstretched. “Stay back.”

Her body stills, every line of her posture alert, respectful. She doesn’t move closer. Doesn’t press. But her eyes—gods, her eyes—go soft with worry.

I turn my face away, ashamed of how close I’d come to reaching for her.

Don’t look at her. Don’t imagine what it would feel like—warm, pulsing.

Gods help me.

My hands curl into fists against the stone, nails digging half-moons into my palms. It's not her fault. It's not. But the scent of her—sweat, leather, life—is too close. Too sharp.

"I know how to hunt," she says, as if sensing the storm rolling behind my eyes. "Habit. Picked it up after I lost a job—years ago. Ran out of rations halfway through a contract. Learned my lesson real quick."

The story tumbles into the space between us like a stone skipping across a lake. Distracting. Mercifully so.

I latch onto it, dragging my mind from the ache gnawing at my ribs. "It's not rabbits I need," I whisper, before I can stop myself. "I need..."

Roan doesn't pounce on the pause. She just watches me, quiet, steady. "Go on."

My mouth feels like cotton. "I need... to tell you something."

My throat tightens. I can feel the truth pressing against the inside of my ribs, demanding air, even if it gets me killed.

She waits.

"You may have guessed, but..." I glance away, toward the broken stones and the stretch of pale morning sky beyond them. "I'm not human."

A beat of silence.

Then she shifts. Not much. But I catch it—the tension in her shoulders, the slight curl

of her fingers like she's bracing for something.

"Yeah," she says at last, voice careful. "I figured." Her tone isn't cruel, but there's steel threaded through it. "Vampire, right?"

The word lands harder than I expect.

But I nod. "Yes."

Something in me braces for revulsion. For judgment. But all Roan does is exhale slowly, eyes pinned to mine like she's turning the truth over in her head.

"How bad is it?" she asks.

The question catches me off guard. "How...bad?"

She gestures toward me, vaguely. "Your injury. Your hunger. Whatever it is that makes you... need, you know. Blood?"

I wince. Not at the word, but at the plainness of it. The honesty. It scrapes raw against years of secrecy, of pretending.

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“I’ll manage,” I start to lie—but the look she gives me stops the words mid-air.

“No,” she says, not unkindly, but firm. “Real answer, Aria. Don’t give me the version meant to keep me comfortable. I’m not some wide-eyed farm girl you’re gonna scare off.”

A beat.

My defenses rattle in their cage. Slowly, I let out a breath. “It’s not... it’s not that I’m about to lose control.” I pause. “But it’s worse when I’m injured. Healing drains energy. And that hunger—it gets loud.” I close my eyes briefly. “I haven’t fed since... before I ran. Not properly. It hurts.”

There. That’s the truth.

She nods, like she’s fitting it into a map in her head. “Okay,” she says, and I see the worry soften just slightly at the edges. “So... animal blood helps?”

“Helps,” I echo. “Doesn’t fix it. But yes. Better than starving.” My voice drops. “I don’t feed on humans. Not unless—” I stop. “Not unless I have to.”

Her posture eases, just a little. “Alright.” Then, after a beat, her brow quirks. “So... rabbit?”

I blink.

She’s serious.

And suddenly I can't help it—a soft laugh escapes me, breathless and stunned. Of all the reactions I'd imagined, this wasn't one of them. "Yeah," I murmur. "Rabbit might actually do the trick."

Roan gives a satisfied nod, like she's already planning her next trap. Like this is normal.

Like I'm not a monster.

She glances toward the treeline like she's measuring the distance between here and wherever the nearest rabbit might be hiding.

"I'll see if I can find something," she says, adjusting the strap of her pack and rolling one shoulder. "You rest. Try not to move too much, or that shoulder'll split open again."

She turns halfway, then pauses, gaze flicking to me. "Anything I should be on the lookout for?" she asks, tone light—but it's not casual at all. Her fingers hover near the hilt of her sword. "I mean... if someone's still hunting you, I'd rather not walk straight into them."

The question stills the breath in my lungs.

I lower my gaze to the fire, watching a coal collapse inward, glowing briefly before it dulls. "Yes," I murmur, the word scraping past my throat. "They're hunting me."

"Hunters?" she asks.

If only it were that simple.

I force myself to meet her eyes. "It wasn't hunters that did this," I say, nodding

toward my bandaged shoulder. “It was... my clan. I left them. And they didn’t take it well.”

Roan stiffens, the way people do when they hear something worse than expected. Her jaw tightens, a muscle twitching along her cheek. “Your clan?” she echoes. “You mean...”

“Vampires,” I finish for her, voice brittle. “My family.”

She’s silent for a beat too long.

“Hells,” she mutters, low and rough. “That’s...a lot.”

I look away, memories gnawing at the edges of my mind—the sharp teeth of betrayal, the shadows of faces I once called kin. “They don’t take kindly to deserters,” I murmur, my voice tight. I’m not ready to spill the rest of the details—that I’d grown disgusted by the clan’s brutality, or that my own mother had me cornered in a courtyard with her loyal guards. “And they’re not going to stop looking for me.”

She purses her lips, exhaling a slow breath. “Sounds messy.”

I huff a bitter laugh. “That’s one way of putting it.”

Her eyes narrow slightly. “And they’re still looking for you?”

“Yes.” I glance toward the treeline, heart ticking up. “They’ll send enforcers, but most are night-bound. Turned. I slipped them—for now. But they’re relentless. And I know my mother. She’ll send everything she has until I’m dragged back or dead.”

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Roan exhales sharply through her nose, then mutters something under her breath—too low for me to catch.

“So,” she says at last, “what do they look like, these enforcers? I should know who to gut if they show up.”

The sheer practicality of it punches the air from my lungs.

“You’re serious?” I whisper.

She looks at me then. Really looks. “You’re bleeding and hunted and alone. I’m going to at least get you upright before we part ways.”

A strange heat settles in my chest—something close to gratitude, something dangerously close to hope.

“They wear dark armor,” I murmur.

Finally, she stirs, pushing herself upright. “Well,” she says, voice a touch lighter, “guess we have a plan for the day. Stay alive and try not to piss off any vampire clans.”

She turns away, adjusting her cloak and slinging her pack over her shoulder. “I won’t be gone long.”

“Roan,” I call softly, before she steps away.

She pauses.

“Thank you,” I say, the words small but true.

She glances back over her shoulder, eyes meeting mine across the space between us.
“Don’t thank me yet. I haven’t caught your damn rabbit.”

Then she vanishes into the trees, and I’m left alone with the fire, the morning light, and a heart I didn’t realize had started to ache for something more.

Roan

I haven’t exactly done this before.

The ruins disappear behind me as I trudge through the midmorning light, my boots sinking into damp earth. The day is still young, sky a pale wash of blue streaked with thin clouds. It’s quiet—too quiet—and I keep glancing back at the crumbling arches, half expecting something to emerge from the mist. She’s still in there, tucked against stone and shadow, bleeding slow and quiet.

She’s a vampire.

The word still sounds foreign in my head. It shouldn’t. I’ve heard all the stories—old wives’ tales, tavern mutterings, horrified whispers. I’ve killed bandits, soldiers, mercenaries...but never a vampire. I’ve avoided that lot. Never thought I’d meet one, let alone sit across from her, wrap her shoulder, watch her fall asleep by a fire I built.

And now I’m out here hunting a rabbit not to eat, but to drain. To save her.

Gods, what the hell am I doing?

I lengthen my stride, boots crunching over grass as the sun warms the far hills. Aria can't run if trouble shows up—not in her state. That wound of hers is still too deep, too raw. Her hunger's worse than she let on. It's in the way she flinched from the firelight, in the tension coiled under her skin. I saw it in her eyes this morning—golden and wild and starved.

And still... she didn't touch me.

She could have. She looked like she wanted to. But she didn't.

That counts for something.

The land slopes gently downward, and I spot a narrow path where deer tracks have left the earth soft and uneven. The breeze carries the scent of pine and something faintly metallic. I scan the underbrush with practiced eyes. I'm no expert hunter—I'm better at taking down two-legged opponents—but I've trapped enough game to get by. Usually it's for meat. For survival.

Not for blood.

The absurdity of it all almost makes me laugh, but the knot in my chest keeps the sound buried.

A flicker of movement catches my eye—a rabbit, half-hidden beneath a tangle of ferns. It's still, twitching its nose, nibbling at dew-covered greens. I crouch low, heart steady, hand moving to the hilt of my knife.

It's small. Too small. But it'll have to do.

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I move like I've been taught—slow, quiet, measured. No wasted steps. I'm close enough to see the shine in its eyes when its ears perk and it tenses to run. I strike.

The rabbit writhes once in my grip, claws scraping against my bracer. My jaw tightens. I hate this part. I always have.

“Sorry,” I whisper, and then I end it.

It's fast. One cut, clean and final. The blood seeps out into the oilskin pouch I've brought. I hold it steady, careful to catch every drop, the copper tang curling sharp in my nose. It's not like I haven't taken lives before. But this—this is different. Colder. More intimate. I'm not fighting. I'm feeding someone.

I cinch the pouch shut and pull in a slow breath through my nose.

The wind shifts, rattling through the trees, and I sling the pouch into my satchel. It's warm, still. I glance once more at the clearing's edge, then turn back toward the ruins.

The trek back feels longer than before, each step dragging with the weight of what's tucked inside my pouch.

Blood.

Still warm. Still necessary.

The wind stirs the tall grass, whispering through it like a warning. I keep glancing over my shoulder, not out of paranoia—no, this feels earned. I can't shake the

thought of someone trailing us. One of them. Aria's people. Her clan. Her family, if you can call them that.

The ruins appear through the trees—tumbled stone and fractured columns bathed in morning light. Beautiful in a way. Ancient. But all I can think of is how easily this place could become a grave if I'm not careful.

When I slip back through the broken archway, the hush of the clearing wraps around me again. There she is. Exactly where I left her—sitting against the wall, knees drawn up, her body coiled in that way people get when they're trying not to look like they're falling apart.

She lifts her head at the sound of my boots on stone, and for a second, the steel in her gaze softens. Relief. Surprise, maybe.

"You're... back," she says, voice low. Thready.

I hold up the pouch. "Yeah. Did what I could."

Her eyes snap to the bag. There it is again—that flicker of hunger she doesn't want me to see. She tries to hide it, but it's there, plain as day. Right next to the guilt. Shame. The kind you wear like a second skin.

I kneel beside her, slow and careful, setting the pouch on a clean strip of cloth I brought just in case. My movements are measured, deliberate—trying to make this easier somehow. Trying not to make her feel like an animal.

Her gaze lifts to mine, and something in it punches the breath out of my chest.

"Thank you," she murmurs, barely audible.

I nod, throat too tight for words. If this keeps her alive—keeps her from going feral or collapsing—I'll do it again if I have to.

I rise and step back, giving her a bit of space.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks. The wind curls through the broken stones, stirring the dust motes in the sunlight. The silence between us isn't uncomfortable, but it is heavy. The kind that feels like it's holding its breath.

"Eat," I say, finally, quietly. It's not an order. Just an offering.

I put my back to the wall and focus on cleaning the rest of the rabbit, letting the rhythm of the knife keep my hands busy.

I focus on my own hunger and the rabbit to give her some semblance of privacy. I slide the knife carefully beneath the fur, peeling it back with practiced ease.

This isn't the strangest thing I've done in my life. But it's close.

I listen for the sound of her breathing steadying. It does, eventually. I don't turn around.

Instead, I keep working, my mind spinning even as my hands move by instinct. I came out here looking for a place to sleep between towns. And now... now I'm draining rabbits to keep a vampire alive.

It's done, I tell myself, swallowing hard. You promised to help, and you did.

But as the quiet stretches on, part of me wonders if I'm more entangled than ever.

Aria

The oilskin pouch sits in front of me like a quiet challenge—small, unassuming, but heavy with everything I’ve been trying not to feel. Even from this distance, the scent reaches me: copper-bright, sharp with iron, undercut by something earthier, like damp fur and wild grass.

My body reacts before my mind can catch up. A twitch of my fingers, a faint tremor through my core. Hunger snaps its teeth, eager and urgent, as if sensing relief within reach.

But guilt settles just as quickly, cold and hard in my chest. A rabbit. She killed a rabbit for me. For me. No hesitation. No judgment. Just quiet determination and a pouch full of blood left on a clean scrap of cloth like it was nothing.

My clan would’ve sneered at the gesture. They laugh at remorse, mock hesitation, revel in taking without thought. A rabbit is nothing to them. A human is barely more. But I’m not like them. Not anymore. And the weight of what Roan chose to do—even something this small—presses down on me.

I glance up. She’s crouched by the fire, slicing pieces of meat from the rabbit with methodical focus. She doesn’t look at me, but her shoulders are tense, like she’s waiting. Bracing. She’s trying to give me privacy, and yet I know she’s aware of every movement I make. Not because she fears me, but because she sees me.

That might be worse.

My stomach clenches, a hollow twist that leaves me dizzy. My throat is dry, my gums ache. I need it. Every part of me needs it.

With shaking fingers, I reach for the pouch. It's cooled now, the heat fading—but it's still warm enough to make the craving worse. I brace the weight of it in my lap, breathe in once, twice, and then tip it to my lips.

The taste hits fast—metallic, thick, with that familiar tang that always turns my stomach just a little. Animal blood is never sweet. Never indulgent. It's survival. Nothing more. And still, the rush that follows is dizzying. Warmth spirals out from my chest. The shaking in my limbs fades. My vision sharpens. I can feel my strength returning in slow, steady pulses—like waking up from a nightmare you didn't know you were having.

I pull the pouch away and press my sleeve to my mouth, wiping at the blood. Shame prickles along my spine, hot and crawling. Not because of what I am—but because someone saw me like this. Vulnerable. Wanting. Bare.

When I glance at Roan, she's watching me now. No wide eyes, no flinch. Just quiet observation. Her jaw is set, her expression unreadable—but there's a softness in her eyes I wasn't prepared for.

"Feeling better?" she asks, her voice low and even, like she's afraid to break something between us.

I hesitate, then nod. "Yes. It helps." I glance down at the pouch in my lap. "I'm sorry," I add, throat tight.

She gives a half-shrug and looks away, cheeks coloring. "We do what we have to, yeah?"

The matter-of-fact acceptance in her voice surprises me. I'm not sure which I expected—pity or revulsion—but not this steady calm. I let out a slow breath, letting the tension in my shoulders ease.

For a moment, silence stretches between us, punctured only by the hiss of the dying embers in the fire. My shoulder still aches, but it's dull now, something I can live with. Something I can survive.

I trace a finger along the edge of the pouch, then glance back at her. "Thank you," I say again, softer now. "I don't take it for granted."

She shifts, rubbing the back of her neck like my gratitude physically unsettles her. "You're welcome," she mutters, voice low. Then, mercifully, she changes the subject. "We should figure out our next move. I don't want to stay here if your clan's on the hunt."

The weight of her words lands hard in my chest, pressing the air from my lungs.

"They'll come eventually," I whisper, voice like ash.

Roan's jaw sets, and for the first time, I see a flicker of real anger in her expression—an anger that isn't directed at me.

"Well, let them come," she mutters. "If they think they can sneak up on us, they'll have another thing coming."

Something flickers in me—hope, maybe. Or the fragile ghost of it. I smother it quickly. Hope is dangerous. Hope is a door you open right before someone slams it shut.

"You can't fight them, Roan. No one survives them," I say.

She shrugs one shoulder, the motion easy, casual. “Maybe not,” she says, a wry twist of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. “But I won’t let them drag you off without a fight.”

My heart stutters, caught somewhere between fear and something far murkier. Her words settle in my ribs like an echo I don’t know how to hold. This woman barely knows me. She should’ve left me in the ruins to bleed out. But she didn’t.

“Why?” The question slips out before I can stop it, low and hoarse. I search her face, looking for something—an answer, an explanation, anything that makes sense. “Why are you doing this? You don’t owe me anything.”

Roan’s expression shifts—her smirk falters, doesn’t quite vanish, but there’s something else behind it now. Her eyes narrow just slightly, her gaze flicking away before settling on me again, slower this time.

“I don’t like leaving things unfinished,” she says, too casually.

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It's a lie. Or at least, not the whole truth. I can see it in the tight line of her mouth, in the way her hands flex at her sides like she's holding something back. Something she's not ready to share. Maybe something she never intends to.

"That's not an answer," I say quietly, narrowing my eyes. I don't have the energy to press hard—but I want to. Gods, I want to know.

She huffs, running a hand down the back of her neck again. A nervous tell, maybe. "It's the only one you're getting."

I don't look away. Neither does she. The air between us shifts, thick with something unspoken, something she won't let me see. I know there's more to this—more to her—but she won't give it to me. Not yet.

Finally, she shakes her head, voice low. "Doesn't matter. I'm here. And I'm not letting them take you. That's all you need to know."

It should frustrate me. It does, a little. But under the frustration is something quieter. Something warmer. I swallow it down.

I exhale, my voice softer now. "You don't have to do this for me."

Her smile flickers. Not the cocky grin she wore before. This one is faint, fleeting, like a shadow of something more vulnerable. "I know."

And yet... shewill.

I glance at her, really look at her for a beat, then ask, “What were you even doing out here?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Contract hunting. I was on my way to Elden Hollow.”

“Oh.” My brows lift. “So you’re a mercenary.”

Something like amusement flickers across her face, but it fades quick. “Something like that.”

I swallow down the questions that rise—about the blade on her hip, about how many things she’s killed and why—and force a nod.

“All right,” I say. “Let’s...start with leaving this place.”

She tips her head in agreement. “Soon as you can walk.”

I push to my feet, gritting my teeth through the pull in my shoulder. The blood helped. My limbs are steadier. The weakness still lingers, but I can move.

I straighten slowly and meet her gaze. “I’m ready.”

Her lips tilt in the barest smile, the kind that feels like a promise. “Then let’s go. We’ll head for denser cover. Easier to hide. Easier to hunt.”

She nods toward the broken archway, where morning light spills through the cracks in warm, golden streaks.

I take a step toward it. The path ahead is unknown, uncertain. But as Roan falls into step beside me, close enough that our shoulders nearly brush, I feel the slightest shift.

A tether. A pull.

Not to the past.

To her.

And whatever comes next, I won't face it alone.

Roan

The sun creeps higher than I'd like, warming the back of my neck as I lead Aria deeper into the woods. We've been walking for hours, leaving the crumbled bones of the ruins far behind us.

Aria trails close behind. I can hear her breath catching now and then, can feel the slight drag in her pace. She's trying to keep up, I'll give her that—but Elden Hollow is still too far, and at this rate, we won't reach it today. Probably not even tomorrow.

The terrain isn't doing us any favors. The trees here twist like old pain, thick roots buckling up from the forest floor, waiting to trip the unprepared.

The deeper we go, the more the forest seems to swallow the light—only fractured slants of gold make it through the canopy overhead, like sun filtered through a broken window.

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Good. Less chance of being spotted from a distance. Less chance of scent or sound carrying too far. Not perfect, but better.

Still—sleeping out here? With a clan hunting her? I hate it.

Every step deeper into the woods adds a twist of unease to my gut. I'd rather keep moving, press on through the night. But she's slowing down, and pushing her further could do more harm than good. The thought of her collapsing out here, or worse, bleeding again... No. We'll need to hunker down before dusk.

Even if it means sleeping with one eye open and my sword under my hand.

I glance over my shoulder.

She's moving better now—the blood I brought her must have helped—but she still holds herself like every step could bring fresh pain.

“You holding up?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

“Yes,” she replies, breath just a little shaky. “I’m simply...not used to so much walking.”

I grunt softly under my breath.

City vampire. Or the manor-born type. The kind who lived soft behind stone walls, surrounded by silk and servants. I've heard enough stories from mercs who crossed their paths—clans lounging in grand estates, sipping from chalices, always warring

over territory and pride. Petty and powerful.

Aria doesn't fit the image exactly. But there's a polish to her, a delicateness that speaks of something once-shielded. Something that wasn't built for life on the run.

Eventually, I spot a shallow depression tucked into a ring of oaks, hemmed in by thick underbrush on all sides. A natural hollow—low enough to avoid the worst wind, dense enough to hide us unless someone's right on top of us. It's not much, but it's better than nothing.

I nod toward it and push through the thorns first, letting my cloak catch the brambles so they don't tear at her. The clearing is small and cool, the ground blanketed in last year's leaves. It smells of damp earth and moss, like the woods here are half-asleep, waiting for nightfall.

"Here," I say, turning a slow circle, listening. Nothing but birdsong and the rustle of trees. "We'll make camp for the night."

Aria steps in behind me, eyes flicking around the little hollow. She looks wary, uncertain. Her foot sinks into a patch of moss and she frowns, tugging herself free. "You do this a lot?"

I drop my pack beside the biggest tree trunk and stretch my arms out with a quiet groan. "Often enough. Mercenary life doesn't exactly come with fine lodgings or featherbeds." I shoot her a crooked grin. "This is luxury, trust me."

She arches a brow but says nothing.

"Come on," I continue. "We'll clear a bit of space."

We start clearing space, brushing aside twigs and dead leaves. I go to gather fallen

branches for kindling, and she tries to help, but it's clear she's not used to this. She cringes when something squishes under her bare foot, and when she bends to snap a dry limb in half, it slips from her grip and smacks her shin with a soft thud.

I bite back a smile, shaking my head. "Stick to the dry stuff," I murmur. "Snaps easier."

She mutters something under her breath I don't catch, probably cursing the woods or me. Still, she doesn't give up. Her fingers tremble when she crouches to gather twigs, but she keeps going, teeth gritted.

There's grit in her, even if she doesn't quite know how to use it yet.

"Easy there, city mouse," I tease, catching a branch before it slips from her grasp.

She straightens with a sharp exhale, brushing a leaf from her cloak with the kind of irritation that's half pride, half embarrassment. Her eyes flash, bright and sharp. "I'm not a mouse."

"No?" I let the grin tug at one corner of my mouth, easy and unhurried as I toss the branch onto our growing pile. "Feels like it suits you. Skittish, quiet... but stubborn as hell. Trying real hard not to look out of your depth."

Her cheeks flush a soft, dusky pink, and she levels a glare at me—more huff than bite. "Oh, so that's how it is."

I shrug, the corner of my mouth still curved up. "You're right—maybe that's unfair. Would you prefer 'city cat'? 'Pretty bird'? You've got that wide-eyed look about you."

She huffs, turning away from me, but I don't miss the small, reluctant smile tugging

at her lips. “Are you always this ridiculous?”

“Comes with the job,” I say. “Lighten up. We’ll be safer if we can laugh off the worst of it.” Or at least pretend to.

We scrounge enough wood for a decent fire ring, though I’ll keep it small. No smoke if I can help it. I dig a shallow pit, stacking stones around the edges for a makeshift hearth. Aria watches carefully, like she’s taking mental notes.

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Once that's done, I unroll a thin bedroll from my pack and toss it down in the driest spot I can find. "It's not much, but it beats sleeping on damp leaves," I say, straightening up and dusting off my hands. "Take it," I say, nudging it toward her with the toe of my boot. "You need the rest more than I do."

Aria shakes her head. "No, I couldn't possibly... You should take it."

My brow furrows as I tuck my hand behind my neck, massaging the tension there. "Nah. Trust me, I've slept on worse—tree roots, mud, a busted dock once, during a storm. You, though?" I glance at her shoulder. The bandage's frayed edge is faintly stained. "You could use the cushion."

She opens her mouth to argue, but I catch her look. She's torn between manners and misery. I cock an eyebrow, daring her to fight me on it.

Finally, she sighs and settles onto the bedroll with a wince. "All right," she mutters.

"See?" I lean back on my heels. "You can be agreeable when you try."

She rolls her eyes, pulling her cloak tighter around her shoulders, but her body eases a little as she sinks into the fabric. I resist the urge to hover. Instead, I busy myself with rearranging my supplies, making sure everything is within reach if we need to move fast.

The canopy overhead rustles with the breeze, scattering flecks of sunlight. Aria tilts her head back, closing her eyes for a moment, and her posture loosens just a hair.

I lower myself onto a patch of dry moss and start working through my pack. Jerky, stale bread, one half-emptied tin of some questionable stew I've been avoiding. I chew a strip of meat slowly, jaw aching with each bite. My eyes drift back to her, just once. She hasn't fed since earlier, and that rabbit I caught won't keep her full for long. Not at the rate she's burning through whatever energy it gave her.

Somewhere nearby, water trickles over stone—a stream, maybe. Good. That means I can wash up, clean the blade, and get a fresh drink before I go looking for another meal.

“Gonna need to get another rabbit,” I say, more to myself than her. My voice comes out rougher than I expect. “Shouldn't be too hard, tracks looked fresh coming in.”

Aria blinks at me, then tilts her head. “You don't have to—”

I cut her off with a sharp look. “I'm not letting you starve, Mouse.”

She huffs, wrapping her arms around her knees. “I wouldn't starve.”

I snort. “You'd be miserable, though.”

That earns me a quiet glare, but she doesn't argue. Instead, she picks at the loose thread on her sleeve, thoughtful.

Silence settles between us, not uncomfortable, but heavy in its own way. I chew the last of my jerky, lean back against a moss-covered log, and let my eyes close for a beat. I can feel her watching me, just like I've been watching her. Not with suspicion anymore. Something gentler. Something stranger.

I could get used to this.

After a stretch of silence that hums low and warm between us, Aria speaks.

“You’re a lot nicer than you pretend to be, you know.”

I let out a bark of laughter, a bit too loud in the hush. “Nicer, huh? Don’t spread that around—I’ll lose my fearsome reputation.”

Aria actually smiles then, the tension on her face easing. It softens her, makes her look younger—though I know better than to trust appearances when it comes to vampires. They’re said to age differently, gracefully. Time barely touches them, smoothing away the years where it would carve lines into the rest of us.

Still, I wonder. Just how old is she? How long has she spent under her clan’s rule? The thought lodges deep. Heavy. Uncomfortable.

Before I can ask—before I can start peeling back things that probably aren’t mine to touch—Aria tilts her head and murmurs, “I don’t think anyone’s buying it.”

I blink. “Buying what?”

She huffs a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “Your fearsome reputation.”

I snort. “Is that so?”

She just smirks, arching one elegant brow in that way that makes me feel like I’ve already lost some unspoken game. She knows exactly how to get under my skin—worse, I think she likes doing it.

And gods help me, I think I like it too.

The air hums with the lingering warmth of the sun, but there’s a chill creeping in,

threading through the trees like a silent warning that night is on its way. My focus lingers on Aria. The smirk on her lips, the way the tension that's lived in her shoulders since we met has finally eased just a fraction.

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It's a strange thing, seeing her like this—unguarded, even if only for a moment. I don't think she realizes she's doing it.

I clear my throat, shifting where I sit. "Come on," I say, standing and stretching out my sore muscles. "There's a stream nearby. We should check it out—get some water, maybe find a rabbit while we're at it."

She lifts a brow, still seated. "You just want me to stop calling you nice."

I grin, cracking my neck. "That obvious?"

She sighs and stands, brushing off her cloak with a faint eye-roll. But I catch it—the glint of something soft in her gaze, something quiet and curious.

And she follows.

I lead the way, weaving through the trees as the sky shifts from deep gold to a dusky purple. The fading light catches in the spaces between the branches, scattering streaks of warmth that contrast the growing coolness in the air.

By the time we reach the stream, the sun has nearly vanished beyond the horizon. The water moves slow and steady, reflecting the dying light in shifting ripples that glint against the smooth stones beneath the surface. It's shallow, clear, the kind of place that feels untouched, hidden away from the rest of the world.

Aria steps forward first, crouching at the edge. She dips her fingers into the water, testing the water, then cups a handful and presses it to her face. Droplets cling to her

skin, catching in the loose curls of her hair, shimmering like molten copper in the twilight.

I turn my attention to my own tasks. I unfasten my waterskin, dunking it into the stream, watching as the cool rush fills it to the brim. The water is crisp against my fingers, biting at my skin as I bring some to my arms, rubbing away the sweat and grime from the day.

Movement draws my gaze back to her.

She's pulling at the makeshift bandage on her shoulder, unwinding the cloth with gentle fingers. My breath catches.

The wound—the one that had been angry and bleeding not a day ago—is gone.

Well, not gone, but close. Her skin is pink and new, still healing, but there's no tear left. No ripped flesh. No exposed muscle. Just smooth, damp skin and a quiet flex of muscle as she tests the movement in her shoulder. I knew vampires mended fast, but I've never seen it before.

She tilts her head slightly, muttering, "Still stiff."

I swallow, my voice rough when I manage, "You heal fast."

She glances up, offering a wry smile. "Perks of vampirism, I suppose."

I should look away. Give her space. But I don't.

It's not just the healing that has me staring—it's something else. The way she moves, so careful, so deliberate, like she isn't used to tending to herself.

“You didn’t always have to do this, did you?” The words slip out before I can stop them.

Her smile falters. Her fingers brush across her shoulder, tracing the edge of new skin like she’s trying to memorize it.

“No,” she says finally, voice quiet. “I didn’t.”

She doesn’t elaborate. Doesn’t have to. The silence that follows says more than the words could—of a life spent being tended to, controlled, watched. Cared for, maybe, but not kindly. Not freely.

I don’t press.

Instead, I stand, tightening the cap on my waterskin. “Come on,” I say, holding out a hand. “We should head back before it gets too dark.”

She hesitates just long enough that I almost repeat myself—but then her fingers slide into mine.

Cool. Firm.

She lets me pull her up, and for a moment, I don’t let go.

Neither does she.

Then, like a shift in wind, she pulls away—delicate, not rushed. She wipes her palms on her skirts and looks at me, something unreadable in her expression.

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Then she smirks. “Lead the way, mercenary.”

I freeze.

Something about it—her voice wrapped around the word, teasing but gentle—sinks deep into my chest, settling there, heavy and warm.

I smirk, turning back toward camp. The quiet stretches between us as we walk, but it’s not the tense, brittle kind we started with.

We’re almost back to the clearing when I catch a rustle in the underbrush. I raise a hand, and Aria stills beside me, instinct sharp as mine now. I edge forward and spot it—another rabbit, nibbling beneath a bramble, its soft ears twitching. Luck or fate, I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter.

I crouch low, eyes on the animal, and motion for her to stay back.

She steps past me before I can stop her.

Her movements are smooth, silent—almost beautiful, if I let myself think that way. The rabbit senses something too late. She moves fast and in one clean motion grabs it. The next, she bites it.

There’s no struggle.

No cruelty.

Just necessity.

I turn my back, gaze fixed on the trees, giving her space. It feels like the right thing to do.

Some things aren't meant to be witnessed. Not out of disgust, but out of respect. I hear her breath hitch softly, then deepen. Feeding. Just survival.

I focus on the wind through the trees, the distant cry of an owl. The press of sword leather at my hip.

She doesn't take long.

A few heartbeats pass in silence, and then I hear it—soft, barely there.

“...Sorry.”

The word hangs in the still air like a thread. I turn, just a little.

She's kneeling by the rabbit, fingers stroking its fur with something close to reverence. Not guilt, exactly—just... sorrow. Her lips move with another whisper I can't hear, then she sets the creature gently down against the roots of the tree, like it's being laid to rest.

Our eyes meet.

And gods, there's something in her expression that stops me. Not shame. Not fear. Just... a kind of quiet grief. Like this wasn't just a meal, but a reminder of everything she's trying not to be.

I hold her gaze.

No words. Just a nod.

I understand.

Her eyes are clearer. There's color in her cheeks, faint but there. Life—or something close to it—restored. I don't ask her how it felt. She doesn't offer. We just keep walking, side by side.

The silence returns, but now it feels like a shared thing. The trees thin as we step into our makeshift clearing, the dying sun casting a faint glow against the mossy ground.

I drop my pack near the log where I sat earlier, the worn leather landing with a soft thud. Every step of the day sits heavy in my bones—too many hours walking, too many moments watching our backs, waiting for the sound of pursuit that, thank the gods, never came.

Still. I don't let myself relax. Not entirely.

“We're keeping a more human schedule now,” I say, glancing toward Aria as I unbuckle my sword belt. “Bet that's a change for you.”

She hums softly in response, almost to herself. “I don't mind it.” Tilting her head slightly, she gazes at the slivers of deep indigo sky visible between the trees. “The sun feels... different out here. Softer. I think I almost like it.”

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Almost.

Something about that word makes my chest tighten in a way I don't quite understand, so I busy myself with unbuckling my sword belt, setting it within arm's reach before easing down to sit against a sturdy oak. Aria sits on the bedroll after a moment of hesitation.

"I'll keep watch," Aria volunteers, shifting forward, her posture alert, her eyes scanning the treeline. "You've been awake longer than I have. You should rest."

A part of me wants to argue; it's part of the nature of my job, after all, to stay vigilant. But exhaustion tugs at my limbs, and a dull ache lodges between my shoulder blades. I think about the last time I truly slept—must've been at least two nights ago, maybe more.

I arch an eyebrow at her. "You sure? You're still...recovering."

Her mouth thins to a determined line. "I feel much better," she says quietly, "and if you're so determined to look after me, then maybe I should return the favor."

I don't think anyone's offered to watch my back in years—not like this. Not without coin on the line. There's no bluff in her tone, no obligation. Just... intention.

I exhale, slow and quiet, and nod. "All right, Mouse," I murmur, letting the nickname slip out with a grin that's softer than I mean it to be. "Keep watch. But wake me if anything seems off. Anything."

She nods, solemn as a vow. “I will.”

I settle myself at the foot of an oak, drawing my cloak around my shoulders. The bedroll is hers to use, and I’m too damn tired to care about comfort. I’ve slept on worse. Rock, snow, the floor of a jail cell once.

I let my eyes fall shut, but not before I glance at her one more time. She’s seated upright, shoulders squared, face calm but alert. Her hands rest in her lap, fingers twitching like she’s ready to move, to strike, to run. She looks like she doesn’t trust the quiet. I get that. I don’t either.

But I’m not alone on watch, not lying with one eye open fearing an ambush. There’s a strange comfort in knowing I’ve got someone—somevampire, ironically—looking out for me too.

Just before sleep claims me, I catch a glimpse of Aria turning her head, watching me with those bright eyes. I wonder if she feels the same fragile trust blooming between us.

Aria

Ahushsettlesoverour makeshift campsite as the days slip by, each one bleeding into the next beneath the thick, dappled canopy.

We haven’t made for Elden Hollow yet. We’re close enough that Roan could lead us there within two or three days, but we both know it’s not safe to move just yet—not with my strength still returning, and not when we’ve had no sign of the enforcers. That’s the danger. No signs. Roan says they would’ve left some trace if they were nearby, but I’ve lived long enough among predators to know how silence can be its own kind of warning. A held breath. A stillness that masks teeth in the dark.

So we stay.

And I try not to count the days.

Part of me dares to hope they've lost my trail. The rest of me braces for the moment they prove me wrong.

We've settled into a daytime rhythm that doesn't feel quite like survival anymore—though it's not safety either. Something between.

It's a strange adjustment, feeling the sun on my skin for more than brief stolen moments. I grew up in the dark—my clan kept strictly nocturnal hours, our lives defined by moonlight and shadow. But here, in the thick of the forest, the sun's golden fingers slip through the canopy, warming the earth, touching my face.

I don't mind it as much as I thought I would.

Every morning, I wake to the sound of Roan cleaning her sword. It's always the first sound I hear—metal sliding over oiled cloth, steady and deliberate. I pretend I'm still asleep, but really, I'm watching her. The way her brow furrows in focus, the way her fingers move with practiced confidence, checking every inch of the blade. There's something reverent about it. I wonder if she even realizes how graceful she looks, lost in her routine.

When she's done, she doesn't announce it. She just stands, stretches in that quiet, grounded way of hers, and slips into the trees to scout the perimeter. I never ask what she sees—if she finds any signs of passage, or if she just walks for the silence—but I always listen for her return. The moment I hear the crunch of her boots, I can breathe again.

In the afternoons, we hunt rabbits. I drink their blood; she eats their flesh. We rarely

discuss it, though.

At dusk, we tidy camp. Roan moves like she's done this a thousand times—checking the edges of the clearing, reinforcing our little fire pit, brushing away footprints and disturbed leaves. She always tries to wave me off when I offer to help, muttering something about my shoulder still healing. I think she just wants to give me space to rest.

Instead, I find ways to contribute—organizing our few supplies, collecting water, tucking flat stones around the hearth to reflect the heat. It feels small, but it's something. Some sliver of control over a world that's been nothing but chaos for so long.

It's at night, though, that everything slows.

That's when we talk—truly talk. We settle around the faint glow of embers or find spots near the trees where moonlight filters through, creating strange patches of silver on the ground. Roan sits close, her sword always within arm's reach, but her posture is relaxed in a way I wouldn't have believed possible when we first met.

I start small, sharing tidbits from my childhood: how I learned to read by sneaking into the clan library, stolen books, secret corridors, my befriending a stray cat...and heavier things like blood slaves, expectations. Each story feels like lifting a scab off a half-healed wound, stinging and yet strangely cathartic.

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Roan listens quietly, eyebrows drawn together in concentration or disapproval depending on the tale.

One evening, after the fire has burned low and the forest is hushed with that particular silence that only comes just before midnight, I gather the nerve to talk about my mother.

“My mother’s name is Lysara,” I say, voice barely above the crackle of the embers. The name lingers on my tongue like old blood—sharp and cold and too familiar. “She’s the High Matriarch of the Crimson Court.”

Roan doesn’t move, but I can feel her attention shift toward me like the slow tilt of the moon. I don’t dare look at her yet.

“I never knew my father,” I continue. “She said he was a mistake. A thing she needed at the time.” I let out a breath, bitter and too loud in the quiet. “Apparently, he gave her exactly one thing she wanted. Me.”

There’s a difference between those who are born vampires and those who are turned. The turned ones—mortals who were given the gift, or the curse, depending on who you ask—cling to scraps of their former humanity. Some of them resist the hunger for years, even centuries, before it fully consumes them.

But the born vampires? We were never human to begin with. We are raised with teeth already bared, hungering not for milk but blood. There is no “before” for us. No other life to remember.

To some, that makes us even more monstrous than the things turned vampires eventually become.

I look up, but not at her. Just past her, at the shadows shifting along the tree line. “I used to admire her. I thought she was strong because she never showed mercy, never let anyone question her authority. I thought that made her powerful.”

I swallow the tightness in my throat, my fingers curling into the fabric of my cloak. “But strength without compassion... that’s not power. That’s fear.” My voice wavers. “And the day she turned that fear on me—really turned it on me—I realized she wasn’t powerful at all. Just cold. And hollow.”

The fire snaps, sending a thin spray of sparks skyward.

“She tried to break me,” I whisper. “Because I questioned her. Because I hesitated to hurt someone she said deserved it.”

“He was new,” I say quietly, staring into the fire as if it might swallow the memory whole. “A bloodslave. Barely two days into captivity.”

Roan doesn’t speak, but I can feel her eyes on me, steady and listening.

“He was still fighting. Still screaming that he didn’t belong there. Kept calling for help, for anyone who might listen.” My voice tightens. “They caught him trying to escape. Dragged him back in chains.”

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly too dry. “He couldn’t have been more than sixteen.”

Roan mutters something under her breath, a curse, maybe. I glance at her. Her jaw is clenched.

“They brought him into the courtyard,” I go on, the words slipping out like splinters. “Bleeding. Terrified. He looked at me with wide, terrified eyes, and I remember thinking he still believes someone might save him. And she—my mother—she handed me a blade.”

Roan’s expression darkens, but she doesn’t interrupt.

“She said it would be a lesson,” I murmur, voice cracking. “That he needed to understand what happens to those who defy the clan. She told me to carve the warning into him myself.”

I look down at my hands. They’re trembling.

“And when I didn’t... when I just stood there, she smiled. Like she’d been waiting for it. Like she’d always known I’d fail her.”

I shake my head, breath shuddering.

“In her eyes, mercy is weakness. And weakness is betrayal,” I finish.

The silence stretches between us. Heavy, but not empty. It’s Roan who finally breaks it.

“You got out,” she says quietly. “That’s something.”

The words are simple, but they land like a blow and a balm all at once. She doesn’t say it like a throwaway comfort. She says it like a fact.

I glance at her, and the firelight catches her jaw, her cheekbones, the dark sweep of her lashes. She’s watching me, not with pity or fear—but with something heavier. Something steadier.

And something shifts inside me.

It's the way she holds still when I speak, the way she doesn't interrupt or prod. The way she listens with her whole body. Like she's memorizing me, piece by piece.

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For the first time, I want to kiss her.

The realization rolls over me like heat from the fire—slow, intense, all-consuming. I want to lean in and press my lips to hers. Just once. Just to know if the steadiness in her voice feels the same on her mouth. If the softness she hides beneath all that armor is real when it's this close.

But I don't.

I swallow hard, dragging my gaze away before she can see too much. The fire crackles between us, and I force myself to focus on it instead. Because whatever this is—whatever it's becoming—it's dangerous. And I've already led Roan into enough danger.

Another night, as the moon glimmers overhead, Roan shares more about her own life. She talks in short, clipped sentences about jobs she's taken, battles she's fought, the near-misses that left scars on her arms and back. "Some people say I've got a death wish," she admits once, a rueful twist to her mouth. "I don't. I just never had anything worth...staying put for."

Her words settle into me like stones dropped into still water, rippling outward. I catch myself studying her face—the scar along her brow, the sharp line of her jaw—and wondering how someone so capable could ever believe she had nothing tethering her to life.

But I don't push. We've formed this quiet pact of sorts: we share only as much as we can handle, each revelation feeling like an offering in the dark.

Each night, I tell her more—about the petty hierarchies of the Crimson Court, about ritual duels and punishments disguised as traditions. Once or twice, her hand settles on my shoulder or knee, a cautious touch that sends a quiet warmth coursing through me.

She doesn't say much in those moments, but she doesn't have to. Her presence is enough.

And so the days pass in a peculiar dance of routine. We measure time by the light slicing through the canopy, by the caw of distant crows. At times, a heaviness settles over us when we remember the enforcers, but we manage to brush it off, lulled by the illusion of safety we've carved out for ourselves.

I keep talking, piece by piece revealing the story I never thought I'd share, waiting to see if Roan will look at me differently. And every time she doesn't pull away, doesn't lash out, a small flicker of something sparks in my chest.

A small part of me is convinced that I'd be happy to let forever pass like this.

Roan

The forest hums with quiet life as I run the whetstone along the length of my sword. The rhythmic scrape is familiar, grounding. Across the clearing, Aria paces, fidgeting with the sleeve of her dress. I've noticed the restlessness growing over the past few days—her movements sharp, her eyes darting toward shadows that don't exist.

She's nervous. And nervous people make mistakes.

I set the sword down and stretch my legs out in front of me. "You'll wear a path into the ground pacing like that, Mouse."

Aria freezes mid-step. “I’m not pacing.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Really? What would you call that, then?”

She opens her mouth, then closes it, cheeks flushing. “Fine. Maybe I am.”

“Come here.”

She hesitates before stepping into the center of the clearing. Her hair is loose, curling wildly in the humid morning air, and her shoulders are tense.

I push to my feet and gesture toward the dagger strapped to her hip.

She hasn’t drawn it once. The blade sits there, unused, an ornament more than a weapon. And I’m not even sure if she knows how.

“Draw it,” I say.

Her brow furrows. “What?”

“Your knife. Draw it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re pacing like a rabbit in a fox’s den,” I say, voice even. “And if you want to survive, you can’t always run. You need to learn to fight.”

She licks her lips, uncertainty flickering across her face. I can see the thoughts spinning: I’m not strong enough. I’m not fast enough. I don’t want to fight.

“You’ve been taught form, haven’t you?” I ask.

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Her chin rises slightly. “A little. My mother hired a tutor.”

“Right. Fancy tutor from the fancy manor.” I roll my shoulders, grip my sword, and point it at her. “Form’s good if you want to look impressive at a tournament. But it’ll get you killed out here.”

Aria’s grip tightens on the dagger. “What am I supposed to do instead?”

I smirk. “Cheat.”

Her eyes widen into pretty earthy spheres. “Cheat?”

“Yes, Mouse. If you want to live, fight dirty. Go for soft parts. Throw dirt in their eyes. Use their weight against them.” I step back and gesture to the open space. “Come on. Let me show you.”

She hesitates only a moment before stepping into the clearing. Her fingers tighten around the hilt before she finally draws the dagger, the blade whispering free of its sheath.

Technically, she’s holding it correctly—blade angled, grip firm—but I can tell in an instant that it won’t do in a fight. There’s hesitation in the way she stands, too upright, too careful. She holds the weapon like an expensive trinket rather than an extension of herself, like someone who’s seen violence but never truly taken part in it.

I roll my shoulders, adjusting my stance. “Ready?” I ask.

She gives me a small look of skepticism, like she's already doubting whatever lesson I'm about to give, but still, she trusts me enough to say, "Ready."

I swing first, a slow, telegraphed arc she easily dodges. "Good," I say. "But don't move backward. That's what they expect. Go sideways, and use your blade."

We go again. She sidesteps this time, her dagger flashing up to deflect my blade. The metallic clang echoes through the trees, sharp and clean. I shift my stance slightly, weight distributed, watching how she resets hers.

"Better," I murmur, lips twitching at the corner.

She's quicker than I expected. Her footwork's neat—measured, deliberate—but too careful. She's thinking too much, waiting for my next move instead of trusting her instincts. I can see it in the way her eyes flick from my shoulders to my hands, reading my posture like a book.

So I give her something to read.

I press harder, tightening the rhythm of my strikes. One, two, three—sharp angles meant to drive her back. She parries them all, blade to blade, her breaths coming quicker now. There's a slight wobble in her stance, the kind that comes from fatigue or doubt. Maybe both.

"This seems a little unfair," Aria huffs, parrying another blow.

I snort. "And what, you think a fight's supposed to be fair?"

She exhales sharply, frustration creeping into her movements. "I just—" She deflects my next strike but stumbles a half-step back. "I don't want to hurt you."

That makes me laugh. A full, genuine laugh that echoes through the trees. I drop my stance just enough to flash her a smirk. “You’re not going to hurt me, Mouse.”

Aria’s lips press into a thin line, her grip tightening on the dagger, but her hesitation lingers. I push forward again, testing her, and sure enough, I can read her every move. She’s predictable—too measured, too thoughtful. She reacts instead of acting, waiting for the strike instead of dictating the fight.

Another swipe, another neat deflection, but I catch the shift of her weight before she makes it. I’m in her head already. She doesn’t realize she’s telling me exactly what she’s about to do.

“Stop thinking,” I growl, circling. “Instinct, Aria. Not choreography.”

Her eyes snap to mine, narrowed, burning with a spark that wasn’t there when we started.

Good.

I feint left, and she reacts a heartbeat too late. I hook my foot behind her ankle and sweep her legs out from under her. She lands with a soft thud, breath whooshing from her lungs. I follow, stepping in, driving the point of my blade into the dirt beside her shoulder.

“Dead,” I say, grinning down at her.

Her eyes flash—not with frustration, but something sharper. Sharper and dangerous.

In a blink, her legs scissor around mine. She twists with sudden strength, and I lose my footing, the world flipping upside down. I hit the ground hard, the impact rattling up my spine. Before I can react, cold steel kisses my collarbone.

Her dagger rests there, steady enough to remind me who's in charge now. And she—gods—she's straddling my hips, breath coming fast, curls tumbling over her shoulder.

I freeze.

She doesn't move either.

Her weight presses into me in all the wrong ways—or all the right ones, depending on how dangerously I'm feeling. The heat of her sinks through the fabric between us, and my body answers before my mind catches up.

“Well, shit,” I breathe. My voice comes out rough. Raw.

Her lips twitch. “I cheated.”

“Good girl,” I say—too low, too soft. The words slip out before I can catch them, landing between us.

Her cheeks go crimson. Heat rises in my own face.

I shift beneath her, heartbeat in my throat. The press of her thighs, the gleam of sweat on her collarbone—it all hits at once, and it hitshard.

Then, realization dawns on her face. She scrambles back, fast, almost clumsy.

The cool air between us stings, sharp.

I push up, grab my sword from the earth with more force than necessary, and try to shake the feeling clinging to my skin.

“Again?” I ask, voice hoarse.

She nods, barely looking up. “Yeah. Okay.”

I roll my shoulders, the blade heavy in my grip. This was supposed to be a spar. Just training. Just survival.

But I can still feel the heat of her hips on mine, the curl of her breath when she thought she’d won.

This was a bad idea.

Areallybad idea.

And gods help me... I want to do it again.

Aria

I’mstillbreathinghardwhen Roan lunges again. Her strikes are fast, sharp as lightning. My arms ache from blocking, but something in me refuses to stop.

The ground is uneven beneath my bare feet, littered with fallen leaves and damp moss. I remember her words—don’t retreat, move sideways—and shift just before her next strike.

“Better,” Roan grunts, sweeping low with her sword.

I sidestep the blade and dart toward her side. The dagger in my hand feels natural now, more extension than object. My instincts buzz with anticipation.

She pivots with me, sword raised. My heart slams against my ribs.

She's testing me. I can see it in her eyes: a spark of amusement mixed with calculation.

"Cheat," I whisper to myself.

I pretend to stumble, letting my shoulder drop. Her gaze flickers toward the opening—and I strike. The hilt of my dagger jabs into her ribs. She grunts and staggers back.

"Nice," she says, breathless. "Mean little trick."

"Learned from the best," I tease.

Roan's grin is sharp. "That you did."

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We circle each other. My legs burn from the effort of dodging, but I can't stop now. I don't want to stop. The heat in my veins isn't just exertion—it's the ghost of Roan's body beneath mine, her eyes dark, mouth parted, like I'd knocked the wind from her lungs and something else right along with it.

Part of me wants to see if I can pin her again.

She lunges, sword angled toward my side. I feint right, but she anticipates it, stepping in close, too close.

Our bodies collide.

The dagger slips from my fingers. Her arm snaps around my waist with instinctual force, dragging me flush against her. My breath catches mid-gasp. The world contracts to the point of contact: her chest against mine, her palm splayed low on my hip, the whisper of her breath brushing my cheek.

"Dead again," she murmurs, voice pitched low.

I don't know if she means me or her.

We stay there—locked in place. A heartbeat. Maybe two. My pulse stutters, tangled up in hers. She's warm and solid and too close, and every nerve in my body lights up like a fuse.

"Roan," I whisper.

Her name tastes like a question.

She lets go of me like she's been scorched. The heat of her hand still lingers at my waist. Her jaw tightens, eyes unreadable, all the teasing gone from her face like it was a mask she just peeled off.

"That's enough for today," she says briskly. "You did well."

"Roan—"

But she's already moving, stooping to retrieve her sword. When she straightens, she doesn't look at me.

"Let's cool off. It's almost dusk."

She turns, walking toward the stream with sure, quick strides like the trees might swallow her whole if she doesn't keep moving.

I watch her go, heart pounding in the hollow of my throat. Her words say distance—measured and polite. But her shoulders are stiff, her grip tight around the hilt of her blade.

She's not cooling off.

She's running.

And gods help me... I want to chase her.

Later that night, the fire crackles between us, its orange glow licking at the damp

night air. The scent of burning pine mingles with the loamy tang of the forest floor.

Across the fire, Roan sits with her legs stretched out, back against a fallen stone pillar. Her knife glints as she runs it along the whetstone, the scrape breaking the fragile quiet. Her eyes stay locked on the steel.

She's been like this for the last hour—silent, coiled like a bowstring. The tension in her jaw, the furrow between her brows...it's different tonight. Not the wary alertness she always carries, but something deeper. Heavier.

"You always do that when you can't sleep?" I ask softly.

The blade pauses mid-stroke. Roan's mouth twitches into something like a smile. "What?"

"Sharpen your weapons."

"It's just a habit." She shrugs, dragging the knife across the stone again. The sound feels louder now, too sharp in the thick stillness.

I pull my cloak tighter around my shoulders. "Something you learned, or something you can't let go of?"

The question hangs in the air. The knife slows, then stops. Roan stares at the blade for a long moment, then exhales through her nose.

“Both,” she says.

The fire crackles louder as if leaning into the space between us. Roan’s gaze drifts to the scar on her left forearm. I’ve seen that scar before but never asked about it.

But tonight... tonight feels different.

There’s something in the way her shoulders are set, the way her jaw tenses just slightly, that makes my chest tighten.

I hesitate, then push to my feet, gathering my cloak around me as I cross the short distance between us. The ground is cool beneath me as I settle beside her, close enough that I can see the faint crease in her brow.

“Is this...about earlier?” I ask lightly, nudging my knee against hers. “Am I reallythat terrible of a student?”

Roan huffs a quiet laugh, dragging the knife along the stone again. “Let’s just say, you’ve got potential. Even if you fight like someone who’s never had to actuallywinbefore.”

I scoff, feigning offense. “Excuse me, I had you pinned.”

She pauses mid-motion—just for a beat—then clears her throat, not quite meeting my eyes. “Once.I let you have that one.”

“Oh,letme, did you?” I arch a brow.

Roan glances up at me—and for a second, I think she’s going to say something sharp, something clever like she usually does. Her mouth even quirks like she’s about to smirk, about to fire back with some teasing jab that’ll make me roll my eyes and pretend it doesn’t make my chest flutter.

But the words never come.

Roan doesn’t answer, just keeps working, the scrape of metal filling the quiet between us. It’s not uncomfortable, but it’s weighty, like there’s something she’s holding back. I wait, letting the silence stretch, feeling the shift in the air around us.

Then, finally, she exhales, setting the knife down beside her. Her fingers tap against the hilt, once, twice, before stilling.

After another long silence, she says, “I had a partner once. Name was Garrick.”

The words slip out low and unceremonious, like they’ve been waiting in her chest for a long time and finally pushed past her guard.

A story.

It’s the last thing I expect from her now—especially after the shift in her mood, after the way she shut the door between us earlier. But then again... this is our routine, isn’t it? Stories in the quiet. The slow trading of truths like worn coins passed across a firelit table.

So I stay quiet. I don’t move, don’t speak. Just wait.

Her voice is steady but lower than usual, rough around the edges. “We worked together for a couple of years. Simple jobs, mostly—bandit patrols, escort missions, the occasional bounty.”

The idea of Roan working with someone else, fighting alongside someone she trusted, unsettles me in a way I don't expect. Not with jealousy, exactly. But with a soft ache.

Because Roan doesn't talk about people. Not like this.

I say nothing, careful not to break the fragile thread of her story.

"He was a good fighter. A good person too. Too good, maybe." Her lips press into a tight line. "Garrick believed the best in people. Thought he could read anyone. I told him once that trust was a luxury we couldn't afford." Her jaw flexes. "He laughed. Said I was too cynical."

The firelight dances across her face, highlighting the scar along her cheekbone. I resist the urge to move closer. "What happened?" I ask softly.

Roan's eyes shift to mine. For a moment, I think she won't answer.

Then she looks back to the fire. "We took a contract protecting a merchant caravan through Dawnreach Pass. Dangerous route. Lots of ambushes." Her fingers curl over her knee. "The man who hired us was named Thaden Vire. Big smile, smooth voice. Promised us double the going rate if we made it through with all the goods and merchant intact."

Her mouth twists into something bitter. "Garrick was excited about the coin. I was suspicious from the start. The man smiled too much. Like a gambler who already knew how the dice would fall."

The air between us cools. The warmth of the fire feels false against the chill tightening in my chest. "What happened?" I ask again, though I'm not sure I want to know.

Roan's gaze drops to her hands. "Two days into the journey, we hit the pass. Narrow cliffs, only one way through. Perfect spot for an ambush. I kept telling Garrick we should turn back, or at least scout ahead." Her voice cracks slightly. "But Vire convinced him to press on. Said his scouts had checked the path. Said it was clear."

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Her hands clench into fists on her knees.

“And it wasn’t,” I whisper.

“No.” Her eyes lift, sharp and cold. “We walked into a trap. Bandits came down from the cliffs, arrows raining on us from both sides. Horses panicked. The caravan splintered. Garrick and I fought back-to-back, cutting through them as best we could.”

I can see it in my mind—Roan, sword flashing, surrounded by chaos. And beside her, someone I’ll never know.

“We were holding our own,” she continues. “Until Garrick went down. I heard him hit the ground. Turned in time to see them dragging him toward the tree line.”

Her throat works as she swallows.

“I went after him. Cut through five of them before I saw him.” Her voice turns sharp, brittle. “Vire. Standing on the ridge above us. Watching it all. Never lifted a finger. Just smiled and turned away.”

My pulse races. “He set you up?”

“Yeah. The cargo we were guarding? Empty crates. The merchant? One of Vire’s men. The caravan was bait. Garrick and I were the real prize.” Her lips curl in disgust. “Turns out the crew we’d stopped a few months earlier had put a bounty on our heads. Vire cashed in.”

The fire crackles. I feel its heat against my face, but the rest of me has gone cold. “Did you find Garrick?”

Roan nods slowly. “I got to him right after they slit his throat.” Her voice fractures on the last word, and she looks away.

I suck in a shaky breath. “Gods.”

“I buried him there.” Her eyes shimmer faintly in the firelight. “Used his sword to dig the grave.”

I reach out, hesitating only for a breath before my fingers find her hand. It’s warm, solid beneath mine, rough with callouses. A warrior’s hand. A survivor’s hand. I give it a gentle squeeze, hoping she knows I mean it, that I see her.

Roan goes still. Her fingers twitch beneath mine, just the slightest movement, like she isn’t sure whether to pull away or hold on. For a moment, she doesn’t look at me—her gaze fixed on the fire, the glow flickering in her dark eyes. Then, with a slow inhale, she turns her hand over, her calloused palm pressing lightly against mine before she lets go.

Her jaw flexes. “I should’ve seen it coming. I knew Vire was trouble. Garrick trusted me to watch his back.”

“You did,” I say fiercely. “You fought for him.”

“Not fast enough.” She swipes a hand over her face. “After that, I stopped taking partners for a while. Figured it was safer that way.”

The weight of those words sinks in. I’ve wondered why Roan is so guarded, why she always looks over her shoulder. Now I know.

I shift, moving around the fire to sit beside her. I don't touch her again—just sit there, close enough for warmth to bleed through the inches between us.

“You let me stay,” I murmur.

Roan exhales a soft, disbelieving laugh. “Didn't have much of a choice. You were half-dead when I found you.”

“Is that really the reason?”

She hesitates, eyes locked on the fire. “You're different.”

The words settle in my chest like a fragile, precious thing.

“How?”

“I don't know.” Her fingers graze the scar on her forearm. “You don't feel like a job. Or a mistake.”

My breath catches. The moment stretches, unspoken possibilities threading through the air.

The fire pops, sending a spark skyward.

Roan shifts, clearing her throat. “Anyway. Garrick was the last real partner I had.”

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My heart aches for her—for what she lost, for how she still carries it.

“What about Vire?” I ask.

“I killed him.”

The fire crackles, but the world around us stills. I stare at her, expecting guilt, hesitation—something—but Roan’s face is unreadable, locked behind that familiar steel she wears like armor.

“You—” My throat tightens. “You found him?”

Roan nods once, her eyes dark, distant. “Years ago. He thought I wouldn’t come for him. Thought he’d slip away into some cushy contract under a different name.” She lets out a humorless laugh. “I made sure he knew he was wrong.”

I search her expression, waiting for regret, but there is none. Not even relief.

“How?” I whisper, though I’m not sure I want to know.

Roan exhales through her nose, tilting her head back slightly as if weighing how much to say. “It wasn’t quick.” A pause. “It wasn’t clean.”

A shiver runs through me—not from fear, but from the sheer finality in her voice. She’s done what needed to be done, and she hasn’t looked back.

I swallow, my pulse uneven, then say, “I’ve killed people too.”

Roan's gaze sharpens, but she doesn't speak. She just waits.

"Not for revenge," I murmur, my voice quieter than before. "Not for anything as justified as what Vire did to you. I've killed people simply because they existed. Because...it was what was expected of me."

The fire flickers between us, casting moving shadows over her face. When Roan finally speaks, her voice is softer than I expect.

"Did you want to?"

A breath shudders out of me. I shake my head. "No."

She watches me, her expression unreadable, and then, slowly, she reaches out. Her fingers brush over the back of my hand—tentative, uncertain. I turn my palm upward and lace my fingers through hers.

For a long time, we sit like that, staring into the flames, quiet but comforted by each other.

At some point, my body sags against her. I don't remember deciding to lean into her warmth, don't remember when my head finds the solid curve of her shoulder. But I do remember the steady rise and fall of her breath, the way she doesn't move away.

And for the first time in a long time, I sleep deeply.

Roan

I don't move.

Not for a long time.

The fire has burned low, little more than glowing embers now, but I stay perfectly still, barely breathing, afraid that even the smallest shift will wake her.

Aria is curled against me, her head resting on my shoulder, her body warm despite the chill creeping into the night. Her breath is soft, steady—completely unguarded in a way I've never seen before. And our hands... I glance down at them, still laced together, my calloused fingers curled around hers.

I could pull away. I should pull away. But I don't.

Instead, I sit there, staring at the way her smaller hand fits against mine, tracing the contrast of her pale skin against my rougher knuckles. It shouldn't feel so easy. It shouldn't feel like this.

But it does.

The weight of her is grounding, and for the first time in years, I don't feel like I need to keep watch. I should—I always should—but something in the way she leans into me, something in the way her fingers stayed tangled with mine even in sleep... It makes my chest ache.

I swallow hard, tilting my head slightly to look at her.

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Her face is relaxed, the sharp edges of her usual guarded expressions smoothed away by exhaustion. I wonder if she ever got to sleep like this before—without fear, without the weight of the world pressing down on her. If I let myself think about it too long, my thoughts will go places I can't afford.

So I don't think. I just stay there, unmoving, until the dark sky begins to shift into softer shades, until the edges of night begin to fray.

At some point, I must have drifted—just for a moment. Not quite asleep, but not fully present either. My eyes had closed, my body lulled by the quiet hush of her breathing and the steady warmth where her shoulder brushed mine. A kind of stillness settled over me, the kind I haven't felt in... longer than I can remember.

Only when the wind changes—carrying the scent of dew and moss and the promise of dawn—do I carefully untangle myself.

I lift her gently—gods, she's light—and ease her down onto the bedroll, shifting my cloak beneath her head as a pillow. She stirs slightly, brows pulling together, and for one heart-stopping second, I think she's going to wake. But then she sighs and settles again, burrowing just a little deeper into the fabric.

I let out a slow breath, watching her for a beat too long.

I don't speak of Garrick often.

That thought sticks, winding itself through my ribs, settling somewhere deep and unfamiliar.

I don't know what's happening to me.

I stand, stretching out stiff muscles, but my gaze keeps drifting back to her. It's a dangerous thing, letting myself care. But I can't stop it.

Aria shifts slightly, eyes fluttering open. The moment she realizes she's alone, something flickers in her expression. But it's gone quickly, replaced by something softer as her gaze meets mine.

She pushes up onto her elbows, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Morning."

I grunt, crouching to roll my shoulders. "You sleep alright?"

She nods, then pauses, as if second-guessing herself. "I—yeah." Her fingers brush the fabric beneath her. "You, uh... you gave me your cloak?"

I shrug. "Seemed softer than the ground."

She huffs a quiet laugh, but it's warm, real.

Then she stretches, rolling her shoulders. "I'll get us some fresh water," she offers.

A flicker of unease prickles at the back of my mind. Letting her out of my sight, even just for a few minutes, doesn't sit right with me. "I'll go with you."

Aria shakes her head. "I'll be fine, Roan. The stream's barely a few steps away."

I hesitate. My gut tells me not to let her out of my sight, but she looks at me with quiet certainty, and damn it, I don't want to smother her.

"Fine," I say, exhaling through my nose. "But don't take too long."

She rolls her eyes but gives me a small, almost amused smile before disappearing into the trees.

I listen. I hear her steps, the faint rustling of leaves as she moves, the quiet trickle of water not far away. Only then do I let myself sit down by the fire, rubbing a hand over my face.

The rest of the day continues like that.

We don't talk about Garrick again. Or Vire. Or the people Aria has killed. Who knows how many? It's not like I can judge. I've killed for revenge. For coin.

And if needed... I'll kill to protect her.

Aria

That evening, the fire crackles softly, warmth brushing against my face as I sit cross-legged on the bedroll.

The familiar rasp of stone against metal fills the air—Roan sharpening her sword, just like every night. It's a ritual now: the fire, the scent of smoke and damp earth, the low murmur of our conversations punctuated by the steady thrum of steel being honed.

Tonight, she's more relaxed than usual—and that's strange, isn't it? After everything we confessed recently—Garrick, Vire, the people I've killed—it should feel heavier between us. It should be unbearable.

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And yet, somehow, it's like a weight has lifted, like speaking it aloud bled some of the poison from our wounds.

Roan sits with her legs stretched out in front of her, back against a mossy boulder, her grip on her blade loose instead of tense. When she glances up from sharpening it, her crooked half-smile is easy, effortless.

"Plotting something, Mouse?" she teases, voice low and rough with amusement.

I roll my eyes and poke a stick into the fire. Sparks leap and curl into the air. "Hardly. I'm too busy trying to figure out why you insist on treating your sword like a delicate lover."

Roan chuckles, the sound rich and deep. "Better to baby the blade now than die because I neglected it later."

"Practical as always," I say with a smirk.

Roan snorts. "'Steel doesn't forgive neglect.'"

"Neither do people," I say before I can stop myself.

Roan glances at me, a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes. She doesn't argue, just goes back to her blade, her motions slower now. More thoughtful.

"People don't," she agrees. "They remember what was done and what wasn't. What should've been said. Who didn't show up."

Her eyes lift to mine.

There's no challenge in her gaze, no pity either—just quiet understanding. The kind that comes from experience. From wounds still tender beneath the surface.

“I know what it's like,” she says. “To keep offering more of yourself and getting less back. To be told you owe someone something just because you're still breathing.”

I swallow, the fire crackling between us. I want to ask her who neglected her, what she gave up to end up out here, alone with her sword and her scars—but I don't. We don't push each other that way.

Instead, I say, “My mother used to say loyalty was everything. That if someone hurt you, they deserved it right back. Twice as hard.”

Roan's mouth pulls into a grim line. “That sounds like someone who never earned loyalty in the first place.”

I look at her, and for a long moment, neither of us speaks.

Her hands still. “You don't have to prove you're worth something, Aria. Not here. Not to me.”

The words settle between us like dust in the firelight—soft, but unshakable. I stare at the flickering flames, unsure how to respond, feeling the heat on my face and not knowing if it's from the fire or from her gaze still resting quietly on me.

Eventually, she clears her throat, like she's breaking her own spell. “Besides,” she adds, that familiar dry tone sliding back into her voice, “if I let you mope too long, you might start composing sad poetry.”

I blink. “I don’t write poetry.”

Roan lifts a brow. “Not yet. But give it a few more dramatic stares into the fire and a rainy day—you’ll be halfway to tragic ballads.”

A laugh escapes me. “Well, if I do, I’ll make sure to rhyme something with ‘mercenary.’”

She smirks. “Good luck. That’s a tough one.”

I glance at her, lips twitching. “Oh, I think I could manage. ‘Legendary,’ ‘visionary,’ maybe even ‘unnecessarily sarcastic.’”

Roan chuckles, the sound low and warm. “I’ll allow it.”

I shake my head, but I’m smiling now. And I catch her smirking too, just faintly.

I should look away. But I don’t.

Instead, I let myself drink it in—the glint of firelight in her dark eyes, the way it traces the curve of her jaw, the slow ease in her posture now that the edge of the day has worn down.

She looks at home in the half-light, at home in the hush between us.

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And for just a moment, I think I could belong here too.

We've fallen into a companionable silence that stretches long and easy between us, like we've done this for years instead of days. The fire crackles low, casting ember-glow shadows on the mossy ground, and Roan has shifted to sharpening her smaller knife, her motions slow and idle. I'm sitting cross-legged beside the dwindling heat, a piece of bark in my hands that I've been absentmindedly peeling apart.

That's when I hear it.

Faint. Rhythmic. Steady.

My fingers go still. The bark slips from my hands and lands in the dirt with a soft rustle.

Hoofbeats.

The sound is distant, but unmistakable—leather and muscle moving over packed earth, slow and deliberate. Not the wild, erratic gallop of a stray horse. No, this is controlled. Someone's riding. Someone nearby.

Roan notices immediately. "What is it?"

I swallow hard, heart racing. "A horse."

In an instant, Roan sits up, muscles taut. She sheathes her knife with practiced ease and scans the forest beyond the fire's glow. "Direction?"

I tilt my head, straining to isolate the sound from the whisper of wind in the trees. "West. Getting closer."

The fire crackles beside me, its flickering glow painting us as easy targets against the dark. A lump forms in my throat. Should we put it out? Hide? If it's them—if my mother's enforcers have finally caught up—there won't be anywhere to run.

Roan shifts, and I see the decision harden in her eyes before she speaks. "I'll check it out."

She moves to stand, but before she can take a step, I reach out and catch her wrist. My grip is tight, desperate. "Wait—don't go alone."

Her gaze snaps to mine, sharp and assessing. I see the argument form behind her lips, the instinct to keep me tucked away, out of danger.

But I shake my head before she can protest. "I'm coming." My voice wavers slightly, but I steel my spine, refusing to back down.

Her jaw tightens, a muscle jumping near her temple. She wants to argue. I see it. But when she looks at me—really looks at me—her shoulders drop the smallest fraction.

She exhales through her nose, muttering something under her breath before nodding once. "Stay close. No heroics."

The way she says it, like I'm the one she's worried about, sends a strange warmth through my chest. But I ignore it, pushing down the emotions clawing their way up my throat.

We douse the fire quickly, leaving only the faint glow of embers. The hoofbeats grow louder as we move through the underbrush. Roan leads the way, steps silent, shoulders tense. I follow her, trying to breathe through the fear clawing up my throat. Clan enforcers ride horses. If they've found us here—

The mare emerges first—a sleek bay with a black mane, snorting softly as it steps into a patch of moonlight. Its rider follows, dismounting with fluid grace. Leather armor, weathered and scarred from years of use, clings to the stranger's lean frame. Her eyes are dark beneath the shadow of her hood.

And when she speaks, it's with a grin that seems carved from familiarity.

“Well, well,” the woman drawls, resting a gloved hand on the mare's neck. “If it isn't Roan Talrik. Thought you'd retired to a cushy noble's guard post by now.”

Roan goes still beside me, her entire body stiffening like a wolf scenting danger.

“Selis,” she says, voice cold. “What are you doing all the way out here?”

The woman—Selis—doesn't answer. Her gaze shifts to me, and her smile widens as she pulls down her hood and leads her horse closer. Her hair is pale and long, tied back in a braid that falls down her back.

“Who's your friend?”

The question lodges like a thorn beneath my skin. I glance at Roan, hoping for some sign of reassurance, but her jaw is locked tight, her shoulders rigid. The tension between them crackles more sharply than the fire ever did.

I want to ask how she knows this woman, but the words stick in my throat. Selis stands too easily, too comfortably, like she's used to sharing Roan's space. Her

presence tugs at something unfamiliar inside me—a prickling discomfort I can't name.

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And when Selis's eyes linger on Roan a beat too long, I recognize it for what it is.

Jealousy.

Roan shifts beside me, jaw tight as if she's grinding her teeth behind closed lips. Her hesitation is a hair too long before she finally speaks.

"This is Aria," Roan offers. Nothing more.

"Aria." Selis repeats my name, slowly, like she's sizing up an opponent rather than greeting someone new.

I lift my chin, meeting her gaze, and decide immediately that I don't like her.

Still, I keep my voice polite, as I say, "It's nice to meet you."

Selis smirks, eyes gleaming with something unreadable, then flicks her attention back to Roan. "Well, this is unexpected."

Roan's expression hardens, but before she can snap out a response, Selis tilts her head toward the dark sky. "I was planning to make camp not far from here. But since fate's thrown us together again, why don't we make it easy? One fire's better than two."

I glance at Roan, trying to gauge her reaction. I don't want her to say yes. I don't want this woman in our space.

She hesitates. I can feel it, see the small crease between her brows. But then Selis

grins, nudging Roan's boot with the tip of hers.

"Come on, Talrik. It'll be like old times."

Something flickers in Roan's face—something tight and unreadable. Then, she exhales sharply, shoulders dropping the smallest fraction. "Fine. Just for the night."

A triumphant spark dances through Selis's eyes as Roan jerks her head toward the trees, leading the way back to camp.

I trail behind them, my stomach twisting. Like old times. I don't know what those old times entailed, but I don't like how easily Selis fits into Roan's world. The space we carved out in this vast wilderness—the small world of justus—suddenly feels too open. Too exposed.

Selis is a reminder that the world is still turning. That we can't stay hidden here forever. Or rather...that I can't stay here forever...

By the time we reach the clearing, the fire is little more than glowing embers. Roan kneels to stir it back to life while Selis drops her pack beside a tree, stretching with a lazy roll of her shoulders.

"Still traveling light, I see," Selis muses, watching Roan work. "Good to know some things don't change."

Roan doesn't look up. "Aria, sit. Relax."

The words are gruff, but there's something beneath them, something softer. Maybe she senses my unease. Maybe she just wants to keep me out of Selis's path. Either way, I don't like how easy she is with Selis, even if she's not warm.

I lower myself onto my usual spot near the fire, but I don't relax.

Selis follows suit, settling across from me with a smirk that feels like she's enjoying a joke I don't understand. "She listens well. That must be new for you."

Roan's head snaps up, eyes sharp and dark in the firelight. "Watch your mouth, Selis, or it will be two fires instead of one."

The weight of her voice silences the space between them. Selis holds up her hands in mock surrender, though the smirk lingers at the edges of her lips. "Easy, Talrik. Just making conversation."

Roan doesn't answer, doesn't look away until Selis does.

Finally, Selis exhales through her nose and tosses a twig into the fire, her expression smoothing into something more neutral. "Fine, fine. No need to bare your teeth." She stretches her legs out, reclining like she owns the damn ground beneath her. "It's been a while since I've had decent company. You should be flattered."

Roan mutters something under her breath and goes back to tending the fire, but I don't miss the way her shoulders remain tense, the way her jaw is still locked tight.

Selis settles, but the air between us doesn't. The tension lingers, stretching thin between the three of us.

I really don't like her.

The flames catch, growing taller, throwing flickering shadows along the trees.

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The fire between us is smaller than before, a pale flicker of warmth casting long shadows over the ground.

Roan sits beside me this time—not across, not apart. Close enough that her knee brushes mine when she shifts, just once. Her legs are drawn up, forearms resting casually over her knees, but her body still hums with quiet alertness. Like she’s ready to move the second the world gives her a reason.

The mare grazes a short distance away, reins looped loosely around a branch, calm and unaware.

Selis has been talking for a while now, spinning stories of mercenary contracts, odd jobs, and close calls. I’ve barely heard half of it—too focused on the way Roan’s expression has shifted into a mask of polite disinterest.

Selis stretches, the leather of her armor creaking. “You know, Roan, I still tell people about that Wilkinson job. Gods, you were a nightmare with that crossbow.”

Roan’s jaw twitches. “I remember. We nearly died.”

Selis barks a laugh, eyes glinting. “Yeah, but we didn’t.” She kicks at a stray pinecone, then glances at me. “So, how’d you two meet? Doesn’t seem like your usual company, Roan.”

The question hits like a splash of cold water. I sit up straighter, glancing at Roan for

guidance. My pulse jumps when I see the muscle in her cheek flex.

“We met on the road,” I say carefully. “Ran into each other by accident.”

Selis’s gaze sharpens, as if trying to dissect me. “That right?”

Roan shifts, drawing her sword to rest across her knees. The metal catches the firelight. “Leave her alone, Selis.”

“Relax, Talrik.” Selis holds up both hands. “Just curious. It’s rare to see you with company.”

I force a smile, but my hands clench in my lap. It’s rare to see you with company. The words swirl through my mind, sharp and cutting.

Selis speaks like she knows Roan—knows her habits, her temper, her solitude. Yet, Roan hasn’t so much as smiled since Selis arrived. Her voice has turned brittle, her eyes colder than I’ve ever seen them.

Something happened between them.

Selis’s foot nudges Roan’s boot. “Remember the tavern in Deneris? That bet with the captain from Blackhold?”

Roan doesn’t respond.

Selis grins. “You made me carry you home after three rounds of firewine.”

The silence that follows is suffocating. My stomach twists as the image forms in my mind: Roan, drunk and laughing, leaning on this woman. Trusting her enough to let her guard down. The tightness in my chest sharpens.

I don't realize I'm gripping my knee until my nails dig into the fabric of my trousers. Selis sees it, too—her gaze flicking to my hand with faint amusement.

She shifts slightly, leaning toward me. "So, Aria, right?"

I nod, wary.

"You always travel with mercenaries?" Selis asks, voice smooth.

"No. Roan's the first."

Selis's smile curves wider, far more predatory than welcoming. "First time for everything, huh? Must be quite the adventure."

I shift slightly, the urge to put more space between us creeping up my spine. I don't really want to talk to her, don't want to play whatever game she's setting up. Still, my voice comes out, stiff but polite. "You could say that..."

Her gaze flicks to Roan, lingering just a beat too long before sliding back to me. "You're braver than you look. Or maybe just lucky."

I don't like the way she says it. Like she knows something I don't.

A prickle of unease runs through me, but my curiosity outweighs my discomfort. "Why lucky?"

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Selis chuckles softly. “Well, traveling with Roan is like dancing on the edge of a blade. Exciting. Dangerous.” She leans in just a little more, her voice dipping lower. “But she does know how to keep things...interesting.” Then her eyes drag over me, slow and deliberate. “And I imagine she’s even more interesting with the right company. You seem like someone who could keep up.”

I don’t understand at first, the weight of her words slipping past me like mist. But then Roan moves.

She stands so fast it startles me, her sword in hand, knuckles white around the hilt. Her expression is thunderous, a cold fire burning behind her eyes—sharp, dangerous. There’s something raw in the way her shoulders square, in the way her chest rises and falls just a little too quickly.

Selis meant more than just Roan’s mercenary life.

And suddenly, I realize—this isn’t just about Selis pushing boundaries.

Roan doesn’t look at me, doesn’t spare me a single glance, but I see it now. The tension isn’t just irritation; it’s something deeper.

“Enough,” Roan says, voice low, tight. “Get some sleep, Selis. You leave at first light.”

Selis reclines back with a lazy grin. “Of course, Talrik. Wouldn’t dream of overstaying my welcome.”

Roan doesn't wait for a response. She turns abruptly, walking toward the edge of camp, her back rigid with restrained fury.

Selis watches her go, then flicks her gaze back to me, lips curving into a knowing smirk.

I try to hold her gaze. I try.

But something cold curls tight in my chest, and before I can stop myself, I look away.

The shame is immediate. The unease lingers, gnawing at the edges of my heart long after she turns her attention back to the fire.

Roan

Morning comes slowly, dragging pale light through the tangled branches above. I sit on the edge of the clearing, sword across my knees, eyes locked on the dying fire. My muscles ache from tension more than exertion, jaw sore from clenching all night.

Selis is gone. Good riddance. The space she occupied still feels tainted by her presence.

Behind me, Aria stirs, the rustle of her cloak loud in the brittle silence. My throat tightens as I remember Selis's voice from the night before, low and teasing: You're braver than you look. The way Aria's brows pinched in confusion, unaware of the undercurrent in those words. Oblivious to how Selis's attention had latched onto her like a predator testing new prey.

"Didn't sleep much?" Aria asks softly as she wakes.

"Didn't need to," I reply, too curtly. I regret it the moment the words leave my

mouth.

“Is she gone?” she asks after a beat.

I grunt in response, not trusting myself to say more.

Aria exhales, the sound soft—relieved, maybe. That shouldn’t make me feel anything, but it does. My grip tightens on my sword.

She sits beside me, folding her legs neatly beneath her, her body close but not touching. We watch the embers in silence, the quiet settling thick between us.

After a moment, she lifts a hand to her hair, fingers combing through the dark strands, untangling them absently. I’ve caught myself watching her do this before—how the light catches in the dark waves, how she tucks errant curls behind her ear with a practiced motion.

But this morning, I don’t let myself look.

“She knew you well,” Aria says cautiously, her voice threading through the quiet like a careful stitch.

I press my thumb against the pommel of my sword, grounding myself in the familiar feel of steel.

“We worked together. A few contracts,” I say, nothing more.

“She seemed... interested.”

My gut twists. I stare at the ash and grit my teeth. “Selis is always interested in whoever she can unsettle. Don’t mind her.”

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We don't usually press each other for more than we're ready to give. That's been the unspoken rule between us from the start—our stories offered up like spare coins, never demanded. I expect Aria to let it drop.

But she doesn't.

There's a pause, and then, quietly, "Well, she talked about you a lot."

The sword scrapes as I snap it into its sheath and stand. My pulse thunders in my ears. "Why did you even talk to her? She's not safe. People like her... they don't care about anyone but themselves."

Aria's eyes widen. "I barely spoke with her, Roan. Besides, she was far more interested in you than me... What's wrong?"

I rake a hand through my hair and turn away, pacing along the edge of the clearing. My chest is too tight, my thoughts too tangled. "Nothing. I just—" My jaw flexes. "Forget it."

Silence falls, thick and heavy. I know she's watching me. Waiting for me to explain. But how do I tell her the truth?

How do I tell her that I hated seeing Selis here?

Not because of who she is, but because of how she looked at Aria.

Like she was something to be figured out, a puzzle to solve with amusement curling

at the edges. Like she was something to test—poke, prod, see what makes her react.

Like she was something Selis could have if she wanted.

And gods, the way she smiled at her—lazily, knowingly, like she already had the answer. Like she'd seen the way Aria tucked close to me by the fire, the way I always positioned myself between her and anything that might be a threat, and thought, That's interesting.

Like she could take her.

Like I wouldn't kill for her.

And that's the worst part. Because I would.

I know exactly what kind of person Selis is—how she tests people, presses too close just to see them squirm, takes what she wants simply because she can. I've seen it before, been on the receiving end of it more times than I care to admit.

And I'll be damned if I ever let her try it with Aria.

I grip the hilt of my sword and force my jaw to loosen before I crack a tooth.

Because how do I tell Aria that I wanted to tear Selis apart for even looking at her?

I turn away from the fire. My pulse hasn't settled since Selis rode into camp, all easy smiles and casual familiarity. It should've been a brief annoyance—a flicker of the past, easily snuffed out.

Instead, it's lodged beneath my skin like a splinter.

“Roan?” Aria’s voice cuts through the quiet, cautious but steady.

I clench my jaw and run a thumb along the sword’s edge. “Aria.”

She doesn’t move. I can feel her eyes on me, sharp and searching. “Are you...well?”

I let out a short, humorless breath. My hands are still tight with the urge to rip something apart.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I say, forcing my voice to stay even.

Her fingers twitch against her knee, like she wants to reach out but thinks better of it. “You’ve been tense ever since she showed up.”

Tense. That’s a polite word for it.

I grip the hilt tighter. “She’s gone. Doesn’t matter now.”

Aria shifts on her feet, arms wrapping around herself. Her hair, still mussed from sleep, falls into her eyes. “You don’t mean that.”

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“Does it matter what I mean?” The words come out harsher than I intend.

Aria blinks, hurt flashing across her face. “Of course it matters. You were...different when she was here. Closed off.”

“Was I?” I sheath the sword with a metallic snap and start pacing. My boots crunch over the brittle leaves. “Seems like you got along fine with her.”

“What?” The disbelief in her voice makes me pause. “Roan, I barely said three sentences to her. I didn’t know what to say,” Aria stammers. “She kept asking me questions about us. About you.”

“And you answered.” I regret the accusation the second it leaves my mouth, but it’s already hanging there between us, sharp and ugly.

Aria recoils like I slapped her. “I didn’t tell her anything important. I didn’t know it would... upset you.”

“I’m not upset,” I snap, even as my pulse hammers harder with the lie.

Her eyes narrow. “You’re standing there gripping your sword like you want to cut down the next person who breathes wrong. So, yes, I’d say you’re rather upset.”

I bark out a laugh. “What would you know about it?”

She goes still. I can see the moment the hurt shifts into something colder. “Apparently, not much.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and turn away. The last thing I want to do is lash out at her, but the storm in my chest won't settle. Selis's voice lingers: First time traveling with a mercenary, huh? Brave or foolish. I remember Aria's nervous smile, the way she answered without realizing she was being sized up.

The memory makes my teeth clench.

"I didn't want to talk to her," Aria says after a long pause. Her voice is quiet but sure. "She made me uncomfortable. I thought you saw that."

I exhale slowly. "That's what she does. She makes people uncomfortable."

"But you're angry at me."

"I'm not angry at you." I rake a hand through my hair. "I'm angry at myself."

The honesty slips out before I can stop it.

Aria steps closer, her eyes searching mine. "Why?"

I want to tell her. Because I care too much. Because the idea of someone like Selis in the same vicinity of you makes my skin crawl, and the idea of Selis getting close to you makes me want to draw blood. Because I haven't felt like this about anyone in years, and it terrifies me.

Instead, I shrug. "She got under my skin."

Aria's expression is unreadable. Then, after a moment, she sighs. "She was trying to." Her voice is soft but firm, like she's stating an undeniable fact. "You didn't have to let her."

That lands sharper than I expect. I don't know how to answer, so I don't.

Aria exhales, then stands, brushing dirt from her palms. "I'm going to wash up," she says, tilting her head toward the faint sound of running water beyond the trees.

She walks away, leaving me standing there with my heart racing and my mouth dry. I want to call her back, to tell her that Selis was never what mattered.

She was. Aria.

But the words stay locked behind my teeth.

Aria

I spent longer than necessary washing up, letting the crisp morning air settle my thoughts.

The cold had numbed my fingers, cleared my mind, but the moment I spot Roan crouched by the remains of the fire, the tension tightens its hold on me again.

She looks up as I step into the clearing, eyes sharp even in the low light. A rabbit dangles from her grip, freshly caught. The coppery scent of blood lingers in the air.

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“Figured you’d be hungry,” she says, her voice unreadable.

I stop in my tracks. “You—” I swallow, my throat tight. She caught it forme.

She just waits, her grip firm around the rabbit’s hind legs. A small offering, wordless but weighty.

I step closer, hesitating before reaching out. Our fingers brush for a brief moment as she hands it to me. The warmth of her skin lingers longer than it should.

“...Thank you.” I lower my gaze, cradling the rabbit carefully. The heat in my face isn’t from the rising sun.

Roan nods, then steps back, busying herself with kicking dirt over the last of the embers.

I exhale, tension easing just a little. It’s easier this way—actions instead of words, survival instead of whatever unspoken thing lingers between us.

Still, I can’t ignore the way she keeps glancing at me, her expression unreadable. And I can’t ignore the strange relief in my chest, knowing she thought of me while I was gone.

We sit in silence as I feed. Roan leans back against her pack, arms crossed, eyes flicking occasionally toward the trees, as if the woods might spit Selis back out.

Selis. I squeeze my eyes shut at the memory of her knowing smirk, the way her gaze

had lingered on Roan—like they shared a language I couldn't hope to understand.

I remember the tightness in Roan's voice last night, the sharp edge of anger when she demanded to know why I'd talked to Selis at all.

She's not safe. People like her... they don't care about anyone but themselves.

I'd never heard Roan sound so... unsettled.

Finally, I shift, setting aside what remains of the rabbit. The weight in my stomach isn't just from the meal.

"I didn't like her," I blurt out.

Roan stills.

"Selis," I clarify. "I didn't like her."

A pause. Then Roan turns her head, watching me carefully. "Yeah?"

I nod, staring at the ground, fiddling with a blade of grass. "She was... loud. And cocky."

Roan huffs a quiet laugh and looks away, but I catch the faint upward curve of her lips.

"She's always been like that," she says. "Annoying as hell."

"And she kept... looking at you."

Roan stiffens. She doesn't say anything.

I drop my gaze to my hands. “She acted like she... knew you. Like she had a claim.”

“She doesn’t,” Roan says too quickly.

Silence swells again. My chest tightens as questions I don’t want to ask gather in my throat.

What was she to you? Did you ever talk with her the way you talk with me? Did she ever sit beside you like this, the air crackling with things unsaid?

I swallow hard and force my voice to stay even. “So... who was she?”

Roan doesn’t answer right away. She scrubs a hand over her jaw like she’s wiping something away. “Someone I worked with. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” I ask, softer this time.

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I shouldn't press. We don't press. But the question slips out before I can stop it. I need to know. I don't know why, only that I do.

Roan hesitates. Her jaw ticks. "Mostly."

The word sinks like a stone in my chest.

Mostly.

I nod like it doesn't mean anything. Like the air between us doesn't feel thinner now. Like the answer didn't crack something small and stupid in me.

Roan leans forward, elbows on her knees. "Selis is a parasite," she says softly. "She finds people, uses them until they're no good to her anymore, and moves on."

"And you?" I ask quietly.

Her lips press into a thin line. "I was no exception."

There's something hollow in her voice, a bitterness that feels old and worn. Her hand shifts toward her sword hilt, thumb moving absently over the worn leather, as if grounding herself in the weight of it.

I sit still for a moment, pulse quickening, then I shift closer before I can talk myself out of it. Close enough that our shoulders almost touch.

"Whatever Selis did to you," I murmur, "you didn't deserve it."

Roan turns slightly, glancing at me. Her expression flickers, unreadable. “How would you know?”

I hesitate. My heart feels too loud in my chest. “Because I saw how she looked at you,” I say. “Like she wanted to remind you you belonged to her. And I saw the way you looked back... like you were trying not to flinch.”

I swallow, the words thick and unfamiliar in my mouth, but I say them anyway. “You don’t deserve that. Not from her. Not from anyone.”

Roan doesn’t move. Doesn’t speak. But I can feel the shift in her—like the silence has settled deeper, heavier.

I press on, quieter now. “You helped me. Saved me. Even when you didn’t have to. And maybe you don’t think it matters, but it does. It matters to me.”

Her breath hitches, just slightly.

“You only deserve good things, Roan,” I whisper. “And she isn’t one of them.”

Her jaw tightens, like she’s fighting some response she won’t let out. She still won’t meet my eyes, but her hand has stilled on her sword hilt.

My chest tightens.

“I know I can’t fix any of that. I can’t undo what she did to you, but I wish I could.” I glance down at my hands, fists curled in my lap. “And I wish I could redo last night...”

Roan shifts beside me, her voice low. “Yeah?” Her tone is casual, but she finally looks at me. “What would you have done?”

I lift my head slowly, meeting her gaze. “I would’ve told her off.”

The answer comes out before I can really think it through, but it’s true—undeniably, viscerally true. Selis stirred something hot and raw beneath my skin. Something I can’t name yet.

“I would’ve told her exactly what I thought of her,” I add, heat rising to my cheeks, but not from shame. “That she doesn’t get to look at you like you’re something she owns. That she doesn’t get to talk to me like I’m some fragile thing she can twist around for fun.”

There’s a beat of stunned silence. Then Roan huffs a laugh, a real one—warm, surprised. She shakes her head, the smirk curling at the edge of her mouth softening into something more fond than mocking.

“I’d have liked to see that,” she murmurs. “My little mouse, all fierce and ready to bite.”

My little mouse.

Hers.

The words and the warmth in her voice makes my stomach flutter in a way I’m not prepared for.

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I look between her dark brown gaze, only to find her eyes dip lower than mine, to my lips.

The moment lingers, the tension stretching between us like a thread about to snap. But then Roan clears her throat and stands, stretching her arms above her head. “I’ll check the perimeter again. Make sure we’re still alone.”

I watch her walk away, my chest still too tight with things I don’t know how to name.

Roan

As the day stretches on, the tension loosens its grip, unraveling thread by thread. We settle back into the routine we’ve built, the quiet understanding between us smoothing over the sharp edges left in Selis’s wake.

The sun sinks behind the trees, streaking the sky in dying embers. Shadows stretch long over the forest floor. Night is coming.

I circle the perimeter of our camp for the third time this afternoon, double-checking every inch of brush, every bit of cover. It’s become almost obsessive—but then again, so has the rest of my life lately.

Everything’s changed since I ran across Aria in those ruins, half-dead, more ghost than girl.

I stop, pressing a hand to the rough bark of an old oak. Its surface is warm from the sun, ridged and solid beneath my fingers. Leaf-shadows flicker across my forearm,

wind weaving through branches above.

From here, I can see her.

She's seated on a fallen log at the edge of our camp, her cloak pooled around her like ink. One hand moves slowly, absently smoothing the fabric between her fingers. Her gaze is distant, turned inward. Whatever thoughts she's chasing, they have her full attention.

And her eyes... Gods. In moments like this, when she thinks no one's watching, they hold a kind of softness that guts me. A quiet ache. She tries to mask it with sharp edges and silence, but I see it. I always see it.

There's something about her that pulls me off-center, that makes the air feel heavier and the ground less solid. A ghost in the ruins, and yet she's the most alive thing I've ever known.

You're in deeper than you planned, Roan. My own voice in my head is wry.

I press my lips together and continue my patrol, stepping carefully over knotted roots.

I don't like staying in one place this long, don't like the feeling of roots digging into my boots when I should be moving. I'm used to the road—town to town, contract to contract, never letting anybody get too close.

But here I am, forging a makeshift refuge for the two of us.

I rationalize each moment as a job, another task.

Keep the perimeter secure. Keep Aria safe.

Except no one's paying me. And worse—I don't care. There's a sense of...purpose, maybe. A reason to keep watch besides the promise of coins or a warm tavern.

When I return to camp, she looks up quickly, startled. "You're quick," she says, a little breathless.

"Force of habit." I roll a kink from my shoulder. "Everything looks clear for now."

Her gaze lingers on me—just for a second—and something in it softens. She gives a small nod. "Thank you."

Two simple words. But they land heavier than they should. I've heard thanks before—loud and slurred from tavern drunks, tired and transactional from merchants. But this? From her?

It's real. Quiet. Earnest.

And it unsettles something in my chest. A tight pull I don't have a name for. Don't get used to it.

Then she shifts on the log, rolling her shoulder. The faintest wince crosses her face.

"You okay?" I ask, my voice coming out rougher than I mean for it to. "Shoulder bothering you?"

She glances at me, then away, flexing her fingers like she's debating how much to admit. "It still aches sometimes. It's nothing I can't handle."

I frown. It's been over a week since she got hurt. The last time I got a deep wound like that, it took months to heal, granted, but she's a vampire. Shouldn't she be healing faster? My gaze flicks to the exposed stretch of her shoulder where her sleeve

has slipped. No bandage, just raw pink skin, tight and new. Still healing.

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Slowly.

I remember what little I know about vampires and their healing—fast, near instant if they're well-fed. I've kept her on a steady supply of rabbits. It should be enough.

"Let me see," I say, setting my knife aside and leaning forward.

She stiffens. "It's fine."

I raise an eyebrow. "Humor me."

Reluctantly, she shifts the fabric aside. My fingers hover, then brush the edge of the healing wound. Just a light touch. Gentle. Careful. Too careful.

Aria shudders.

Not a flinch, not a recoil. A shudder.

My breath catches. She's warm. Unexpectedly so, considering. She feels alive in a way I wasn't prepared for.

Her body stills under my fingers.

I yank my hand away before I do something stupid, before I let myself linger and learn too much—like how she'd feel pressed against me, how the warmth of her skin would seep into mine.

“Not healing as fast as you should be,” I murmur, forcing my voice even.

She clears her throat, still not looking at me. “Animal blood isn’t as strong,” she admits, rolling her sleeve back down. “It works, but... it’s not the same as human blood.”

The words settle uneasily in my gut. I nod once, flexing my fingers, still tingling from the contact. “Guess that makes sense.”

She stands suddenly, too fast. “I’ll grab more firewood.”

I open my mouth to stop her, instinct ready to protest—she’s still not fully healed and I don’t want her out of my sight—but I swallow it. She’s trying to be useful. To keep some piece of control.

“Sure,” I say. “We’ll need fresh branches. We’re down to scraps.”

She disappears into the trees without another word, her cloak trailing behind her like smoke.

The camp feels colder without her. Empty.

And I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, pressing a palm to the center of my chest like I can soothe the ache blooming there.

Maybe she needs the space.

Maybe I do, too.

I tell myself it’s responsibility. Duty. That I’m just doing what anyone decent would’ve done. But that excuse has worn thin—and now the truth settles in my gut

like a stone.

It's not just responsibility anymore. It hasn't been for a while.

It's crept in slow, like tidewater through a cracked wall. At first, she was just a girl bleeding out in ancient ruins, hunted, half-conscious, barely more than a whisper of a person. I couldn't leave her there. So I didn't. Then came the rationalizations—she was weak, I was capable. Keeping her alive made sense.

But now?

Now I watch her too closely. I know the way firelight dances over her skin like it belongs there. I know the exact shape her lips make when she's lost in thought. I know the rare softness in her face when her guard slips, the quiet curve of her smile that undoes me more than any blade ever could.

And I know how she shuddered beneath my touch.

And how I want to make her do it again.

I exhale, sharp and unsteady, and drag a hand through my hair. The gesture does nothing to settle the fire under my skin.

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Doesn't matter. It can't matter.

She's still in danger. We both are. And whatever this is—whatever's clawing its way up through the cracks in my self-control—it only complicates things.

I rise to my feet and grip the hilt of my sword hard enough to hurt, staring out into the trees where she vanished minutes ago. The shadows stretch long, dusk bleeding into darkness.

“Don't be stupid, Roan,” I whisper.

I turn back to camp, crouching by the fire pit and reinforcing the ring of stones. Clearing dried pine needles. Busy work—quiet, methodical. The kind of thing I've done a hundred times in a hundred camps.

But my thoughts drift, unbidden. Back to Aria's stories of her clan—of their cruelty, their rituals, the ice in her mother's eyes. The way her voice would go quiet when she talked about the ones she left behind.

If they come and I have to defend her against an entire clan—what then?

I shove the thought away. One step at a time.

By the time Aria returns, arms cradling a small pile of branches, I've refreshed our fire pit. She offers me a tentative smile, which I can't help but return.

“Thanks,” I say gruffly, reaching for a few of the branches to stack in the pit.

As dusk thickens, I take my usual loop around camp. The air tastes cooler, and birds have gone quiet—a sign that night’s about to settle in. On my way back, I spot Aria standing near a mossy boulder, gazing off into the distance. Her posture is too still—rigid in a way that sets every nerve in my body on alert.

Something’s wrong.

I clear my throat softly. “What’s wrong?” My voice comes out low, coaxing. “Your shoulder again?”

Maybe another rabbit will help.

She doesn’t move right away. Just breathes—shallow, uneven. Then, slowly, she turns her head, and the look in her eyes twists something deep inside me.

Haunted. Wide. Distant.

“They’re here,” she whispers. “I can hear them.”

My blood turns to ice.

“Who?” I ask, though I already know. I know.

“Enforcers,” she says, barely breathing. “From my clan.”

The words hang in the air like a death sentence.

My hand goes instinctively to my sword. The forest suddenly feels too close, too quiet. Every tree a potential hiding place, every shadow holding danger.

They’ve found us.

I meet her gaze. “Show me where,” I say, trying to keep my voice calm, steady. My heart’s pounding like war drums beneath my ribs, but I can’t let her see that.

She nods faintly, eyes flicking toward the darkened trees. “They’re close,” she murmurs. “Very close.”

The air between us stills. A hush, thick and expectant, falls over the camp.

And though every instinct in me is screaming to act, I wait—wait for her eyes to meet mine again before repeating, “Show me where, Aria.”

Aria

I can’t breathe.

I can’t think.

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My senses ring with the echo of footsteps—too close for comfort. Every pulse of blood in my veins feels like a countdown. My clan's enforcers are here. They've come for me.

Images flash behind my eyes: dark corridors in my mother's estate, cold laughter when they cornered me, the echo of steel on stone. My mouth goes dry as I remember how I barely escaped with my life.

They'll do worse if they drag me back.

Before I fully register my own actions, I turn to Roan. She's already in motion—her sword half-drawn, muscles tense. She's scanning the perimeter, determined, her brows knit in concentration.

The mere sight of her readiness both steadies and terrifies me.

She has no idea what they're capable of.

I take a trembling step toward her. "Roan," I whisper, voice ragged. "You can't fight them. You can't—"

She glances at me, a fierce glint in her eyes, but doesn't speak. She's too focused on picking up any sign of movement in the trees. The tension in her body sends a bolt of realization through me—She's doing this for me.

She's willing to risk everything, face an entire clan if that's what it takes.

My heart twists, a dizzying blend of gratitude and dread.

I can't let her do this.

My breath comes in shallow spurts, and the panic tightens my chest. My clan has no mercy, no compassion. They'll kill her or worse, all because she tried to help me.

"I... I should go," I stammer, stepping away. "If I surrender, maybe they'll—"

Her head snaps around, eyes locking on mine. "What?"

My throat tightens. The words rush out, frayed and desperate. "If I turn myself in, they might leave you alone. They only want me. That's how they work—they break you, make you an example. Then they leave everyone else untouched." My voice cracks.

She straightens, sheathing her sword with a sharpclick. In two strides, she's close enough that I can see the flare of anger in her eyes.

"No," she growls, a blunt refusal that resonates with surprising warmth.

Tears well up, and I press my trembling hand to my mouth, trying to steady my breathing. "I—I won't watch them hurt you," I manage, voice muffled behind my fingers.

Roan's grip lands gently on my good shoulder, forcing me to meet her gaze. "Aria." She says my name firmly, making me focus. "We didn't make it this long for you to surrender."

My pulse hammers. I can't quell the swirl of memories—fleeing under moonlight, blood on my clothes. "You don't understand," I choke out, shaking my head.

She exhales, her tone softening. “Then explain it to me. Help me understand. But don’t you dare run off alone and hand yourself over to them.”

I pull a shaky breath in, leaning into her touch despite every instinct telling me to withdraw. “They’ll kill you.”

Roan’s jaw clenches. “Maybe,” she says quietly. “But I’m not letting you go without a fight. And I’m sure as hell not letting them drag you back to whatever hell you escaped.”

My throat constricts, tears pricking my eyes. The force of her conviction both floors and reassures me. She’s never seen my clan’s enforcers in action, yet she’s ready to stand her ground.

I should be grateful. I should feel safer knowing she won’t abandon me.

Instead, fear squeezes tighter in my chest.

She doesn’t understand.

Roan has faced death before—I know that much. I’ve seen it in the way she moves, the way she watches the treeline like it might betray her at any moment. She’s fought, bled, survived.

But my mother? My clan?

They don’t lose. They don’t stop. And Roan—gods, Roan thinks she can protect me. But this isn’t just another fight.

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These are the monsters who raised me, broke me.

And I can't let her walk into their jaws just because she feels responsible for me.

Just because of Garrick.

That name tightens something in my chest. The partner she lost. The man she couldn't save. Since him, she's built walls no one could scale.

Until me.

I swallow hard, the words catching in my throat before I force them out.

"I'm not Garrick, Roan."

She freezes. The change is immediate—like a wire pulled taut, every inch of her going still. Her shoulders lock, lips flattening into a hard line. And her eyes...

Gods, her eyes go dark. Guarded. Distant. Like I've pressed a blade to something she keeps buried too deep to name.

I want to take it back. But I can't. She needs to hear it.

Because I'm not a replacement. I'm not her chance at redemption. And if she gets herself killed trying to prove otherwise—

My heart stutters.

I can't lose her.

"I know that," she says, but the words are clipped, bracing.

She turns slightly, exhaling through her nose. I don't know what I was expecting—an argument, maybe, or for her to deny it altogether. Instead, she grips the hilt of her sword like an anchor, knuckles pale.

A long beat passes before she speaks again.

"I know that," she repeats, softer this time. "I know exactly who you are."

Her gaze doesn't waver, doesn't so much as flicker.

"You're the woman who left everything behind because you couldn't stomach their cruelty. You're sharper than you let on, braver than you think, and stubborn enough to drive me mad." She exhales sharply, tilting her head just slightly, like she's measuring her words before she says them. "But not now, Aria. Not with this. You don't get to be stubborn about your life."

Her fingers twitch at her side like she wants to reach for me, but instead, her voice lowers, rough around the edges. "Not when I've already decided to fight for it."

For a moment, I can't breathe.

Roan isn't a woman who says things lightly—she speaks in action, in movement, in the way she sharpens her sword every night like a prayer. But now, she's standing in front of me, voice low and steady, saying this like it's the simplest truth in the world.

It sends something splintering through my chest, something terrifying and fragile and impossible.

And somehow, that terrifies me more than anything else.

I try to look away, to gather myself, but Roan reaches out—just enough for her fingers to brush the edge of my sleeve. A grounding touch, not quite holding me but not letting me drift away either.

“I don’t want them to take you, Aria.” The roughness in her voice is back, barely restrained. “So don’t make me watch it happen.”

A shiver runs through me, part fear, part something else I can’t name. I nod, slow and careful, because it’s the only thing I can manage.

Roan watches me for a beat longer before pulling her hand back, jaw flexing like she’s fighting herself. Then she shifts her weight and clears her throat, stepping back, giving me space I don’t want but probably need.

The tension between us settles, not gone, but wrapped around us like something inevitable.

I take a shaky breath, forcing a small, wavering smile. “You really are terrible at letting things go, mercenary.”

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The corner of Roan's mouth twitches, just a flicker. "And you're terrible at listening, Mouse."

The words should be sharp, but they're not. They're soft, edged with something almost... fond.

I swallow, stepping back so I can straighten. My heart still thuds like a war drum, but my voice comes out steadier this time. "Okay," I manage, meeting her eyes. "I'll try to listen for once. If we face them, we do so together."

Roan grins, and I find myself offering a small smile back. "That's more like it," she murmurs, scanning the gloom once more. "Now, stay close. We need to figure out how many of them are out there. And remember what I taught you," she says, low and pointed. "Cheat."

A huff of laughter escapes me, too quick and nervous to be real. "Right. Cheat. Because that's what's going to save us against trained enforcers."

Roan's expression sober. "It might."

Her gaze lingers, searching, and I know what she's really asking. Do you understand? Are you ready for this?

I nod, pressing my lips together. "I remember."

"Good," Roan murmurs. Then she turns, stepping silently toward the underbrush, every movement controlled, predatory. She tilts her head slightly, signaling me

forward. “Lead the way.”

I force my body to move, to shove my fear down deep, where it won’t get in the way. The forest is thick with shadows, the scent of damp earth clinging to the air. Every rustle of leaves sends my pulse hammering harder.

Roan moves like she belongs to this world, slipping through the darkness with effortless grace. I do my best to mimic her, keeping close, remembering how she taught me to step lightly, to keep my weight centered.

We move deeper into the trees, and the hush of the forest stretches taut around us. My fingers tighten around the dagger at my hip.

Because if it comes to it, I won’t hesitate.

Roan

My griptightens on the hilt of my sword as I press my back to a thick trunk, forcing my breath to slow.

I can feel Aria’s ragged exhale at my side, her shoulder trembling barely an inch away from mine. We’ve managed to slip into the shadows near a giant pine—a vantage point with just enough cover to see the enforcers filtering through our forest.

There are four of them—two pairs moving in tandem, their dark cloaks blending seamlessly into the shifting gloom. They’re careful, methodical, sweeping through the underbrush with a lethal sort of patience. Trained. Disciplined.

Vampires.

And not just any vampires—her clan.

A sharp pulse of adrenaline burns through my veins, but I force myself to steady. I've never fought a vampire before, but I've seen Aria bleed. I know what she is. I know what they are.

And if they bleed, they can be killed.

I tighten my grip on my sword, testing the weight of it in my palm. My knuckles ache from how hard I've been gripping the hilt. I exhale slowly, rolling my shoulders back, keeping my stance loose. Fear will only make me slower.

I spare a quick glance at Aria.

She's gone still beside me, but not in the way I'd hoped. Her breath comes too shallow, her fingers trembling just slightly where they curl against her cloak. Her gaze darts between the moving figures, not with strategy—but with something dangerously close to terror.

She's afraid.

I swallow hard, my grip tightening on my sword.

Of course, she is. This isn't some nameless enemy. This is her past hunting her down, the monsters that raised her closing in like wolves scenting blood.

And for all her sharp words and steady hands, she's still standing frozen beside me.

My stomach knots at the fear etched across her face, but I can't let that distract me. If I lose focus now, we're both done for.

So I do the only thing I can—I nudge her, just enough to pull her back from wherever her mind has gone. Just enough to remind her she's not alone.

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“Breathe,” I murmur under my breath, eyes still locked on the approaching figures.

Her fingers twitch again, and this time, she tightens them into fists.

Another figure joins the group, radiating authority, whispering orders I can’t quite make out. I catch fragments—“search,” “don’t let her escape,” “traitor.” The words ignite a spark of anger in my chest.

They’re talking about Aria.

Movement draws my attention to the left. One of the cloaked enforcers breaks off from the group, heading closer to our position. My body tenses. We can’t just wait here to be discovered, and I doubt we can retreat without notice.

My pulse pounds against my ribs as I shift forward, every muscle coiled tight.

Five against two. The odds suck, but I’ve survived worse.

And this time, I have something to fight for.

Aria is silent behind me, but I can feel her presence, her nervous energy thrumming in the air between us. She hasn’t bolted, hasn’t crumpled. But she’s not a fighter, not really—not yet. I can’t let them get to her.

I press a hand back, fingers brushing her arm in the faintest of reassurances. Stay behind me.

She gives a shaky nod, pressing herself against the tree as I slip past her, drawing my sword in one fluid motion. The enforcer moves closer, his steps quiet but not quiet enough. He's confident. They all are. They think they have this under control.

They don't.

The enforcer steps into a slant of moonlight, close enough now that I can make out the sharp lines of his face, the gleam of his fangs as he parts his lips slightly, scenting the air. My grip tightens around the hilt of my blade.

Then he freezes.

His head snaps up, his dark eyes locking onto mine.

Shit.

No more waiting.

I lunge.

In one swift motion, I pivot around the tree, sword slicing through the stale air. The enforcer's eyes widen in surprise—the bastard didn't expect me to strike first.

Good.

My blade arcs downward, forcing them to raise their own weapon. Steel meets steel with a jarring clang.

They're quick, pivoting to avoid my follow-up slash, cloak billowing. I push forward, ignoring the sting of branches crunching under my boots, focusing on driving them back. Behind me, I hear Aria's ragged breaths.

Another figure rushes in, and I shift to block them, taking a glancing blow on my forearm. Pain jolts up to my elbow, but I grit my teeth, batting their sword aside. We trade two rapid strikes, sparks flying in the dim light, before I manage to kick them square in the chest. They stumble into the dirt.

The fight is chaos.

I don't get a moment to breathe—the other three close in, moving in perfect tandem. Not amateurs. They try to flank me, their steps practiced, their eyes cold. This isn't some scouting party. They aren't here to warn or capture.

They're here to kill.

And they're here to take her.

Not happening.

My free hand fumbles for a dagger at my belt, the weight reassuring as I pivot sharply. One leaps forward, blade angled straight for my chest, and I barely parry in time. The impact rattles through my arm, but I keep my stance firm. Another shifts behind me, fast. Too fast. I spin, hooking my foot around their ankle, and they crash to the ground with a sharp curse.

No time to celebrate. The first one is already resetting, coming at me again. I slam the pommel of my sword into their temple, sending them staggering.

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Movement in the corner of my eye—Aria.

She steps from the shadows, moving with a silent grace that almost startles me. She cheats, I think, watching as she wrenches a thick branch from the ground and swings it directly into an enforcer's ribs. They stumble, eyes widening at the unexpected hit, and she follows through with a brutal shove and a slash of her dagger.

She's learning. A surge of pride flares in my chest—but it's short-lived.

"Get back!" I bark. Stay safe.

She doesn't listen. Of course she doesn't. Instead, she stays close, eyes darting between me and the remaining attackers. She's tense, wary—but she's not running.

I don't have time to argue. Another enforcer lunges at me. I meet them halfway, blades clashing, sparks flying in the dim light.

And then I hear her.

A sharp intake of breath—one that doesn't belong to me.

I risk a glance.

Aria's face has gone pale. Her whole body has locked up, her grip on the dagger faltering. And then I see why.

One of the enforcers steps forward, face half-lit in the flickering glow of the fight.

His mouth twists into something cruel as his gaze locks onto Aria.

“Well, well. Look what we have here.” His voice is smooth, mocking. “I almost didn’t believe it when they said you ran. But here you are, playing human.”

The enforcer tilts his head, amusement dancing in his cold eyes. “Your mother will be so disappointed. All that power, all that promise—wasted on this.” His gaze flicks briefly to me before settling back on her. “Did you really think she’d just let you go?”

A slow, deliberate step forward.

Aria doesn’t move.

“Come quietly,” he murmurs. “Save us the trouble. Save her the embarrassment.”

He reaches for Aria.

Her breath catches—a soft, shuddering thing. She doesn’t move.

She’s frozen.

Something inside me snaps.

I shove her behind me—hard—just as his fingers graze the air where she stood.

"Not happening," I snarl, stepping between them.

His eyes cut to mine, sharp with irritation—but I don’t give him a chance to speak. I slam my elbow into his gut, and he doubles over with a grunt.

But he’s fast—too fast—and already recovering, blade out, teeth bared.

I brace for impact.

Then there's a sudden scuffle behind me—footsteps, breath, panic.

Aria.

She didn't run.

She should've run.

I twist, just in time to see her, dagger in hand, eyes wide and wild. Her hands shake, but her feet are sure.

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With a sharp inhale, she lunges.

The blade sinks deep into his side, between the dark armor, buried up to the hilt.

He chokes on a gasp, eyes going wide.

So do hers.

And then the blood comes.

A flood of it, warm and thick and real, soaking through the dark fabric of his tunic.

Aria's whole body jolts. She stares at the wound, at the way his blood coats her hands, staining her fingers. Her breath comes in short, uneven gasps.

The enforcer stumbles, but doesn't fall.

He turns on her, a snarl twisting his lips. "You little bitch."

I don't let him take another step. I knock him back hard. The blade slides out and his body crumples against the forest floor, gasping, bleeding out.

The remaining two try to rally, but they're already lost. They should've run when they had the chance.

I move fast, brutal, efficient. A blade finds its home between ribs. The last one tries to flee—I don't let him.

And just like that, it's over.

Five bodies, motionless beneath the canopy. The scent of blood heavy in the air.

Silence.

I turn to Aria.

She's still holding the knife.

Her chest heaves, fingers trembling around the hilt. The enforcer at her feet has stopped moving.

She's still staring at the blood.

"Aria," I say carefully.

She blinks, then looks up. Something in her eyes has changed.

Her lips part like she wants to say something—but then, instead, she drops the knife. It clatters against the dirt, the sound oddly loud in the sudden quiet.

I step forward and catch her wrist before she can turn away.

"You did what you had to do." My voice is quieter than I expect.

Her jaw clenches. Her free hand curls into a fist. "I—"

Her breath stutters.

I don't let go.

She swallows, and then finally—finally—nods.

“We need to go,” I say, voice still low.

She nods again, eyes lingering on the bodies.

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I grab her discarded dagger, wipe the blade clean, and press it back into her palm.

Aria

I stand in the heavy silence, heart pounding in my ears as I stare at the scattered enforcers on the ground. It takes a moment for me to realize we're still alive, still standing.

My legs feel like water, and my fingers tremble from the rush of power that coursed through me a moment ago.

I stabbed someone.

Not just anyone—Maelric. One of my mother's most loyal enforcers. I remember him from the estate halls—always silent, always watching. Cruel in the quiet way, the kind that didn't need to raise his voice to make you flinch. He was the one who punished the bloodslave I refused to hurt. I can still hear his screams.

And now Maelric's bleeding because of me.

The weight of the dagger still lingers in my grip, my palm sticky with his blood.

I did that.

I hurt him.

I can't decide if I'm horrified or proud.

Roan, blood beading on her forearm, shifts her stance. Her blade is still in her hand, but her grip has loosened slightly now that no one's attacking. She scans the bodies on the ground, sharp eyes flicking between them. I watch as one of the fallen enforcers stirs, a pained groan slipping from his lips.

“They’re not dead,” I murmur.

Roan glances at me, then at the man I stabbed, watching as his chest rises and falls with uneven breaths. A muscle feathers in her jaw.

“How do we make sure they stay down?” she asks. Her voice is flat, but I hear what she isn’t saying. Do we kill them? If so, how?

I swallow hard. “The quickest way is fire,” I say. “Or beheading. But blood loss will kill as well.”

Roan’s expression doesn’t shift, but something unreadable flickers in her eyes. Her grip tightens slightly on her sword, her gaze sweeping across the bloodied bodies again. For a long, breathless moment, she doesn’t move. Just stands there—still as stone, eyes sharp and distant, as if she’s already ten steps ahead.

Calculating.

The sight twists something low in my stomach. She’s weighing lives. Outcomes. Risks.

“They’ll wake up,” she mutters finally, almost to herself. “And they’ll come after us.”

I know she’s right. But...

My eyes drop to Maelric. He’s still unconscious, blood seeping from him. He

crumpled with a sound I'll never forget.

I stare at him now, this unconscious weapon shaped by the same hands that shaped me. And for all my fear, all my anger—I don't feel relief. Just... hollow.

This could've been me, a voice whispers inside.

It almost was.

I force myself to breathe. "If we kill them, others will come looking," I say, voice tight. "They always do."

Roan exhales sharply through her nose. I can tell she doesn't like it. But after a beat, she nods. "Fine. But we're not leaving empty-handed." She gestures toward the fallen enforcers. "Grab what you can."

Relief floods through me, sharp and dizzying—but it doesn't last. It never does. Unease creeps in just as fast, curling cold around my ribs.

Looting them?

The thought turns my stomach, but I don't argue. Roan's right. We need supplies—whatever we can carry. It's survival now. Clean hands are a luxury I can't afford.

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Ignoring Maelric, I step past him, over a fallen branch, the forest floor damp and soft beneath my feet. My bare feet. I'd almost forgotten how cold they were until now.

The first enforcer I reach is a woman, maybe a few years older than me, sprawled on her side. Her gloved hand lies open beside her, fingers slack, a dagger resting inches away. I hesitate, breath catching in my throat, then reach out and close my fingers around the hilt. It's lighter than I expect. I slide it into my belt.

Her pouch is small but heavy—I unfasten it with quick, fumbling fingers and tie it to my own, trying not to think too hard about it. Just things. Just tools. Just survival.

Then I pause.

My gaze flicks down from the pouch to her boots. Sturdy. Well-worn. My eyes travel from her feet to mine—filthy, blood-smeared, scraped raw from days of walking without shoes. I'd lost mine fleeing the estate. I hadn't stopped moving since.

She's about my size.

I bite down hard on the taste rising in my throat and reach for her laces.

The leather is stiff, stained dark, but they fit. Not perfectly, but close enough. The warmth of them feels wrong—someone else's—but necessary. I don't let myself hesitate.

Across the clearing, Roan crouches beside another enforcer, her expression grim. She moves with purpose, tugging a purse of gold from his belt, then rifling through his

coat pockets in quick, practiced motions. There's nothing mercenary in her face—no satisfaction, no cruelty. Just the cold efficiency of someone who's had to do this before. Who knows what survival costs.

“Anything useful?” I ask.

She tucks the purse into her coat. “Coin. A couple of knives. Some flint.” She nudges one of the fallen men with the toe of her boot. He groans in response, face pale. “Nothing else worth carrying.”

We don't bother with anything more. No sense in weighing ourselves down.

Roan steps back, surveying the unconscious enforcers one last time before her gaze flicks to mine. We need to move.

We're not out of this yet.

Within moments, we're on the move, slipping away from the bodies and into the cover of thicker trees, back toward camp. The scent of blood follow us. Roan's wounded. That gash on her arm could get infected if we don't clean it soon.

The sound of rushing water reaches my ears before I spot it—our narrow stream, winding in a gentle curve through moss-covered stones. I breathe a shaky sigh of relief.

I glance at Roan. She's favoring her injured arm, her movements a little stiffer than usual, but she doesn't complain. I don't think she ever does.

“Sit,” I murmur, nodding toward a fallen log near the edge of the bank. “Just for a moment. Otherwise, they'll wake and follow your scent.”

She hesitates, scanning the area for threats before finally lowering herself onto the rough bark. Even injured, she keeps her sword within reach, her eyes sharp beneath furrowed brows. Always ready. Always on edge.

I kneel beside her, reaching for the scrap of cloth she's been pressing to her arm. "Can I see?"

"It's only a scratch," she grumbles, but she doesn't stop me when I peel the fabric away.

The wound is shallow but jagged, blood seeping sluggishly from the torn skin. The edges are raw and inflamed. My stomach tightens. This is my fault. If not for me, she wouldn't have had to fight those enforcers.

I dip a strip of cloth into the stream, the cold stinging my fingers. "I'm sorry," I whisper, voice catching in my throat.

Roan watches me, dark eyes unreadable. "You don't have to be," she mutters, but there's a flicker of tension at the corner of her mouth, betraying the pain she won't acknowledge.

Carefully, I press the damp cloth to her wound. She hisses between her teeth, her whole body flinching.

"Oh, for—Roan, hold still," I chide, biting back a smirk.

She exhales sharply. "You enjoy this, don't you?"

I arch a brow. "Oh yes, inflicting pain is my new favorite pastime."

She grunts, but the corner of her mouth twitches—just slightly. The sight of it makes

something warm settle low in my stomach.

We fall into a silence thick with something unspoken as I clean the wound, my fingers careful, precise. Too careful, maybe. She's warm beneath my touch, her skin fever-hot where my knuckles brush against hers.

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Her voice cuts through the quiet. “You alright? You... looked different back there.”

I freeze for half a second before forcing myself to focus on her arm. “I guess...” I swallow, choosing my words carefully. “I forget what I’m capable of sometimes.”

The memory flashes behind my eyes—the way my strength surged before I even realized what I was doing, how easily I sank my blade into flesh. How easy it was.

Roan studies me, her gaze sharp, assessing. “Does it scare you?”

“Yes,” I admit, barely above a whisper.

A beat of silence. Then, her uninjured hand reaches out, steadying my trembling fingers. Her thumb brushes against my wrist—just once, just enough. A grounding touch.

“Better that it scares you,” she says quietly. “Means you’re not like them.”

Something in my chest twists. Her faith in me—her certainty—steals my breath.

I blink rapidly, pushing the lump in my throat aside. “All I wanted was to leave that life,” I murmur, dipping the cloth back into the stream. “I never wanted to hurt anyone—human or vampire. I just... wanted peace. Somewhere I can exist without looking over my shoulder every second.”

Roan nods, letting that confession settle between us. The breeze rustles through the canopy, sending ripples through the water.

“Peace,” she finally says, as if testing the word. “Elden Hollow’s not far from here. If we can slip in quietly, we could gather supplies, maybe find a place to lie low for a while.”

I glance at her, uncertain. “A town? With people? Are you certain that’s wise?”

She offers a wry smile. “It’s a risk. But staying out here doesn’t seem safer. They’ll keep coming.”

Elden Hollow. The thought of a town makes my stomach tighten—crowds, too many heartbeats in one place, the scent of warm blood filling the air. But it also means shelter, anonymity. A place to vanish.

“Alright,” I say softly, wringing out the cloth and pressing it one final time against her wound. “Then... we go to Elden Hollow. Together.”

She exhales, nodding once. Together. The word hums between us, settling into something weighty, something solid.

I wrap her arm as best I can, fingers lingering a little too long as I tie the bandage in place. Her skin is warm beneath mine, rough with old scars, but she doesn’t pull away.

I glance up, expecting her usual stoicism, but her eyes are already on me—watching, unreadable. The space between us feels smaller than it should.

She swallows. I do too.

I should let go.

“Done,” I murmur, forcing myself to pull my hands away.

“Good,” she says, just a little too quickly, shifting back. “You’re almost professional at that.”

“Oh?” I smirk. “If that’s the case, perhaps I should charge you for my services?”

Roan snorts. “You want coin, Mouse?”

I huff a laugh, but something about the way she looks at me lingers.

The tension sits too thick, too heavy in the air. So I break it first—rising to my feet, brushing the dirt from my palms.

“Let’s pack quickly,” I say, already turning toward the tree line.

But my heart is still thrumming, and my fingers still burn where I touched her.

Because for the first time in a long while, I’m not just running.

I’m falling.

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Roan

I'm not sure when pity turned into protectiveness, or when protectiveness bled into something even more complicated. The realization washes over me like a slow tide as Aria and I trudge through the thinning trees, the lights of Elden Hollow coming into view.

It started as something simple—don't leave a wounded stray to die—but somewhere along the way, I found myself caring about whether her eyes lit up with hope, whether she felt safe enough to fall asleep without trembling.

She wants a normal life, peace. I'm under no illusions that it'll be easy—her clan's still out there, and a vampire wandering into a mortal town comes with its own problems.

But in this moment, all I can think of is how fiercely I want her to have that chance.

“Stick close,” I say, my voice hushed as we step onto a dirt road leading between weathered cottages.

The smell of smoke and spiced meat drifts from a tavern somewhere down the lane. A few residents mill about, hooded against the cool twilight, but no one spares us more than a passing glance. After splashing most of the blood off at the stream, we look just like any pair of tired travelers seeking an evening's rest—a lie, but a convenient one.

Aria follows me in silence, and I sense her anxiety in every step. The tension in her

spine, the way she keeps her hood drawn low. I want to reach out, reassure her, but I'm not sure what words would help.

Instead, I lead her through the narrow alleys, passing shuttered shops and lantern-lit doorways until we find a modest inn with a sign that reads *The Lion's Hollow*.

I step up to the heavy wooden door and push it open, pausing just long enough to glance at Aria. Without a word, I gesture for her to go first, holding the door wide.

She hesitates—just for a second—then ducks inside, brushing past me as she steps into the warmth beyond.

Inside, the common room is warm with laughter and the scent of hearty stew. My hand never leaves the hilt of my sword, though—I can't let my guard down, not when I know how quickly a friendly face can turn hostile if they discover Aria's secret.

But she needs a roof over her head, even if it's just for one night.

I approach the innkeeper, dropping a few coins onto the scarred wooden counter. "Room for two," I say, keeping my tone gruff but polite.

The older man counts the gold, wipes his hands on a stained apron, and slides a heavy key across to me.

"Up the stairs, second door on the right," he instructs, eyeing Aria's hooded figure with mild curiosity but no suspicion. "It's the last I got."

Once we're in the cramped hallway, I slip the key into the lock. The door creaks open to reveal a simple space: one bed, a chipped washbasin, a rickety table by the window, and a tiny balcony.

I glance at Aria, half-expecting her to recoil, but she just lets out a sigh that sounds like a quiet kind of relief.

“Not exactly luxury,” I mutter, stepping inside first to check the corners—old habit. “But it’s a bed.”

“It’s an upgrade for us, isn’t it?” she says, voice quiet.

She pulls her hood back, eyes flitting around the room. The tension in her shoulders eases slightly. I shut the door behind us, shooting the old lock bolt home with a solidclick. My heart hammers, wondering if this truly counts as safety—or just a temporary reprieve.

Still, I think of the promise I made back by that stream. I didn’t say it out loud, but it settled in me like stone. I’ll keep you safe. Whatever it takes. It wasn’t born out of duty or pity. It was something deeper.

I don’t know the word for it, but when I look at Aria—exhausted yet determined—I can’t deny there’s more than simple compassion pooling in my chest.

I exhale, catching her gaze. “Go on,” I say, nodding toward the basin in the corner. “You wash up first.”

She looks like she wants to protest, but something in my expression must tell her I won’t budge.

Instead, she offers me the faintest of smiles, and in that moment, I know: I’ll keep my blade drawn against the entire world if it means giving her just a few hours of rest and a small taste of the peace she craves.

Aria

The warmth of the clean water still clings to my skin, a rare indulgence I hadn't realized I'd been longing for.

Now, fresh linen wraps around me, and the faint scent of lavender soap lingers in the air. I sit on the edge of the small wooden bed in our rented room, absently combing my fingers through my damp curls while Roan leans against the windowsill, sharpening her knife.

Outside, the town hums with soft, distant chatter, the occasional clang of metal or call from a vendor punctuating the otherwise peaceful night. It's strange, being here—somewhere settled, safe, at least for now. My body is unused to stillness, my mind unsure how to sit in this unfamiliar quiet.

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Roan catches my gaze and smirks. “You keep looking at me like that, Mouse, and I’ll start thinking you’ve got something to say.”

Heat prickles at the back of my neck, but I refuse to look away. Instead, I roll my eyes. “I was thinking. It’s our first night like this.”

She tilts her head, studying me. “Like what?”

“In a room. Safe.” I shift slightly where I sit, curling my fingers around the edge of the bed. “Just... existing.”

Roan considers that, twirling the knife between her fingers. “Yeah. Feels strange, doesn’t it?”

I nod, the admission heavy in my chest. “I’m not sure what to do with it.”

She huffs a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “You? The one who lived in a noble estate? Surely you had entire nights of leisure.”

I snort. “You think I lived in some grand hall with endless banquets and dancers twirling through the night?”

Her grin deepens, eyes glinting with mischief. “Didn’t you?”

I hesitate, a slow smile tugging at my lips. “Not exactly. There were gatherings, of course, but they weren’t...free. The dances were more about appearances, proper form, careful steps. They weren’t something I enjoyed.”

“But you’ve danced before?” she asks.

I shrug. “Only because I had to.”

Roan hums in mock contemplation, drumming her fingers against the windowsill before pushing away from it with easy grace. “That’s a damn shame.”

I narrow my eyes. “What is?”

“That you’ve never danced for the hell of it.”

A laugh escapes me. “I fail to see the tragedy.”

Roan steps forward, slow and deliberate, like a predator testing the waters before a lunge. Then she extends a hand, palm up, calloused fingers slightly curled. “Then let’s fix it.”

I blink at her, utterly lost. “Fix what?”

“You,” Roan says simply. “Dancing. Because you want to.”

I stare at her outstretched hand like it’s some kind of trick, something sharp hidden behind the offer. “You’re joking.”

“Dead serious.” Her smirk is smug, but there’s something softer beneath it. An invitation.

I shake my head, crossing my arms. “There’s no music.”

She shrugs, unbothered. “We don’t need any.”

I hesitate. Roan has a way of making ridiculous things sound simple, as if they are just a matter of willpower and confidence. And maybe that's what draws me in—that ease, the way she fills a space like she belongs there.

Like I could belong there too.

Before I can overthink it, I place my hand in hers.

Her fingers wrap around mine, warm and steady. “Come on,” she murmurs, leading me out onto the small wooden balcony attached to our room.

The night air is cool against my damp skin, the town's lights flickering below us like fireflies trapped in glass.

Roan turns to me, lifting my hand. “Just follow my lead.”

I let out a slow breath, standing stiffly as she guides me into the first steps. It's awkward at first—her grip sure, mine hesitant. The wooden planks creak beneath us, and the night hums with a distant breeze.

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Roan grins. “Relax, Mouse. You’re moving like you’ve got a stick up your ass.”

I scowl at her, though it’s half-hearted. “I don’t exactly do this often.”

She steps closer, her hand settling lightly at my waist. “Then don’t think about it. Just move.”

I inhale sharply at the proximity, suddenly hyper-aware of the warmth of her palm, the way our bodies shift together in this slow, quiet rhythm.

The world narrows. No running, no fear. Just Roan’s steady hold, her breath against my temple, the whisper of her boots brushing against the wood.

Something flickers in her expression when our eyes meet, something unspoken but heavy between us. The playful smirk fades into something softer, something unreadable.

The air tightens.

I swallow, my pulse a betraying thing against my ribs. “This is ridiculous,” I murmur, though I don’t step away.

Roan’s thumb strokes absently along the back of my hand. “Yeah.” Her voice is lower now, rougher. “But it’s nice, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer. I can’t.

Because if I do, I might say something neither of us is ready to hear.

Something like I don't want this to end. Or I feel safer with you than I ever did in my clan. Or worse—I think I'm starting to fall for you.

So instead, I stay quiet. I let her hold me, let the night wrap around us like a borrowed cloak, soft and temporary. We exist here, just for now, in a space where danger feels distant and longing is something we can pretend isn't real. A fragile breath of peace that I never want to end.

Roan

Aria's hand is soft in mine. She moves tentatively at first, each step hesitant as if she's afraid to get it wrong.

But she catches on quickly—quicker than she realizes. Her weight shifts into mine without thinking, her body responding to the rhythm we create out of nothing but the whisper of wind and the distant clink of metal from the town below.

I tell myself it's just a bit of fun. A distraction. But the way she looks up at me beneath those dark lashes—curiosity and uncertainty mingling with something I don't dare name—makes my heart stumble.

She smells of soap and firewood. Clean and wild all at once.

Get a grip, Roan.

“You're a natural,” I say, trying for levity.

Aria snorts softly. “I feel like an idiot.”

“You don’t look like one.” I let go of her waist for a moment to twirl her under my arm. Her laughter, surprised and bright, cuts through the cool night like a spark.

When she settles against me again, the tension’s shifted. The stiffness is gone, replaced by an ease I don’t think I’ve ever seen from her.

Her head tilts slightly. “You’re good at this,” she says, voice soft. “Dancing, I mean.”

I shrug, though the comment lands harder than it should. “Picked it up a long time ago. One of my first of many odd jobs involved guarding a noble’s estate during some grand festival. Lots of music. Lots of dancing.”

“And you... joined in?” Her lips curve in faint disbelief.

“More like got dragged in,” I admit with a grimace. “One of the noble’s daughters thought it would be funny to haul me onto the floor.” I roll my eyes. “I was all stiff armor and too many weapons. Looked like an idiot.”

Aria laughs again, and the sound digs into me, warm and unguarded. “What happened after that?”

“Her father nearly skewered me with his cane for stepping on her toes. Since then, it’s rare to find the time to dance.”

She goes quiet at that. Her fingers flex in mine. “Why now?”

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I open my mouth to toss out something flippant. But the truth slips free instead. “Because I wanted to see you smile like this.”

Aria’s breath catches, and her eyes soften in that way that always makes my chest ache. Like I’ve been struck without warning—right in the ribs.

The urge to kiss her hits me hard. Sudden. Sharp.

I wonder what it would be like—if she’d tense or melt beneath me. If her lips would be cool like her skin, or if she’d burn just as fiercely as she looks when she lets her guard down. I imagine the way her hand might curl in my shirt, the way she might exhale my name like a secret she didn’t mean to spill.

My heart hammers once, hard.

Then—

Crack.

The sharp shatter of glass below jerks us both back. We freeze, listening. A voice rises in slurred protest from the street, followed by the clatter of a barrel tipping over.

Tavern chaos. Nothing unusual.

But the moment is gone, fractured like the bottle on the cobblestones.

I release her hand and step toward the balcony rail, squinting into the shadows. The

town square below is half-shrouded in mist, lanterns casting flickering halos against the cobblestones. The tavern's stable boy scurries across the street to right the barrel while two men stagger away from the disturbance.

Nothing more. Still, the unease remains, curling low in my gut.

"Just some drunks," I mutter, though I don't entirely believe it. "We should get inside."

Aria hesitates before following me back into the room. I secure the balcony's wooden latch and double-check the lock on the main door.

When I turn back, she's sitting on the bed, fiddling with a loose thread on the blanket. The candle on the nightstand casts flickering shadows across her face, highlighting the faint bruise of exhaustion beneath her eyes.

"Take the bed," I say.

Aria looks up. "We can share."

I almost choke. "We're not sharing."

"Why not?"

Because if we do, I won't sleep. Because I'll spend every second pretending not to notice the way her hair spills across the pillow or the warmth of her beside me. Because it's already hard enough to remember where the lines are.

"You need real rest," I say instead, leaning my weight against the doorframe. "I'll keep watch."

Aria frowns, crossing her arms. “You always keep watch.”

“And you always argue with me about it.” I smirk, trying to keep the mood light. “Some traditions shouldn’t be broken. I’ll take the chair.”

Aria sighs but doesn’t press further. She stands to pull back the blanket, and her eyes flick toward the window one last time. “You think they’re close?” she asks softly.

The enforcers. Her clan. The ones that won’t stop until they drag her back.

“They’ll find us if we stay here too long,” I admit. “But we’ve got a day, maybe two. Long enough to get some supplies and figure out where we go next.”

Aria nods, though her jaw tightens. “I wish we didn’t have to run.”

“Me too,” I say. “But we’ll figure it out.”

She gives me a small, grateful nod and slips beneath the blankets. I settle into the chair by the door, sword within reach.

It’s quiet, save for the faint hum of the town outside.

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And still, I sit there, heart restless, the memory of her laugh lingering long after the warmth of her hand has faded from mine.

Aria

Ilieonthebed, my back pressed against the rough linen, staring up at the low ceiling. The washbasin in the corner still drips, each plunk of water echoing in the quiet room. We've both scrubbed off the grime of travel—my hair is damp against my neck, and Roan's smells faintly of cheap soap. That mundane detail makes everything feel strangely ordinary, except it's anything but.

She's still in the chair, arms folded across her chest, posture stiff and unmoving—like she's expecting the door to blow open at any moment. Like she's ready to throw herself between me and whatever comes through it.

Her eyes keep drifting to me, even when she thinks I'm not looking.

It's been nearly an hour since our dance, and I haven't slept a moment. Not with the echo of her hands on my waist still lingering. Not with the way she looked at me—like I was something delicate and dangerous all at once.

I shift beneath the blankets, the mattress creaking softly under me. The room is dim, lit only by the dying glow of a single candle. Shadows pool in the corners like silent watchers.

“...Roan,” I whisper.

She grunts—a low, tired sound—but it tells me she’s awake. Still on guard. Still watching.

“You don’t have to keep watch,” I say, my voice barely above the hush of the wind against the window. “We’re in an inn. The door’s locked.”

She exhales through her nose, a sound halfway between a huff and a laugh. “You think your clan cares about locked doors?”

My throat tightens. Because she’s not wrong.

I remember every wall they’ve broken through, every fortress that failed to stop them. But something about tonight—the normalcy of a modest room, the presence of a bed we can actually rest in—makes me yearn to pretend, just for a few hours, that I’m not being hunted.

“They might not,” I admit, “but we need sleep. You need sleep.”

“I can manage a few hours on the chair. I’ve done it before.”

In the lantern’s glow, I can see the lines of fatigue etched at her brow, the way her shoulders still carry the tension of the day’s skirmish. My chest tightens. I don’t want her hunched up by the door, half-dozing and half-worrying whether enforcers will appear or not.

“Roan,” I say, voice soft yet firm. “Come share the bed with me.”

A flicker of something—surprise, maybe—crosses her face. She hesitates, eyes darting to the single mattress. “I—”

I tug at the blanket, offering a few more inches of space. My heart beats so loud I’m

sure she can hear it.

“There’s enough room for both of us,” I say, hoping I sound braver than I feel. “And if anything happens, we’ll know. We’ll wake up.”

Her throat works as she swallows. She looks torn between stubbornness and the obvious fact that she’s bone-tired. Finally, with a resigned sigh, she steps away from the window, unlacing her boots as if she might change her mind at any second.

“Fine. But if anything so much as creaks, I’m up,” she grumbles.

My lips twitch, and I quickly agree, “Deal.”

I turn my eyes to the ceiling, face warm, acutely aware of how close we’re about to be. The bed dips under her weight as she sits on the edge. She shifts awkwardly, stretches one arm, and then slowly lies back. The distance between us is small—far too small for my racing heartbeat.

A tense silence settles. I can sense every breath she takes, the faint rustle of fabric as she adjusts the blanket. My shoulder barely brushes hers, a spot of heat that sends a shiver down my spine.

“You okay?” she asks, voice low.

I nod, belatedly realizing she might not see it in the dim light. “Yes,” I manage, clearing my throat.

Roan exhales something like a laugh, but there’s an edge of nerves to it. “Good.”

I’m not sure how much time passes between us. Seconds, minutes, hours. The world outside carries on, oblivious to the way my pulse pounds in my ears, to the way my

skin feels too warm under the blankets.

Roan shifts beside me, the mattress dipping slightly with the movement. Neither of us has spoken since we settled in, but sleep still feels far away.

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I hesitate, then let the words slip out. “You were incredible earlier.”

Roan lets out a soft huff of laughter, the sound rough and quiet in the dim room. “Incredible?” she echoes, her voice still edged with exhaustion.

I nod, even though she can’t see it. “I had no idea you could fight like that.” I turn my head slightly, daring to glance at her. “It was like watching a goddess.”

That gets a real laugh out of her this time, low and throaty. “A goddess? Hell of a title for a mercenary.”

I smile despite myself. “I mean it.”

Roan doesn’t answer right away. She’s staring at the ceiling, her expression unreadable. Then, after a pause, she murmurs, “I just did what I had to.”

I chew my lip, considering that. “It was more than that.”

Roan shifts again, rolling onto her side to look at me. The room is dark, but in the slivers of moonlight filtering through the window, I can see the way her brow furrows slightly, the way she studies me like she’s trying to figure something out.

“You weren’t so bad yourself,” she finally says, her voice softer now. “That was a damn good trick with the dagger.”

I snort, shaking my head. “I panicked.”

She smirks. “Panic or not, you still got the bastard.”

A flicker of pride sparks in my chest, but I don’t say anything. The silence stretches again, thick with something unspoken.

Roan exhales, rubbing a hand over her face. When she speaks next, her voice is quieter. “You really thought I looked like a goddess?”

I blink, heat creeping up my neck. “I—” I clear my throat. “I was just—”

She chuckles again, this time deeper, almost teasing. “That flustered, Mouse?”

Groaning, I bury my face in the pillow. “You’re impossible.”

The bed creaks slightly as she shifts. “Maybe,” she says, softer now. “But you’re the one who called me a goddess. Can’t just expect me to ignore that.”

I glance over at her, trying to glare. The smirk on her lips makes it impossible to hold onto my indignation. “I said you fought like one. Not that you were one.”

Roan hums, as if weighing my words. “Mm. Pretty much the same thing.”

I scoff, shaking my head, but the warmth in my chest lingers. The teasing melts into something quieter, something I can’t quite put a name to.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The only sounds are the faint murmur of voices from downstairs, the occasional creak of the inn settling.

I exhale, voice soft. “Well. Thank you.”

Roan shifts slightly beside me. “For what?”

“For everything,” I murmur. “You didn’t have to...”

She turns her head, and I feel the faintest brush of breath against my ear. My breath stutters.

“I wanted to,” she says simply. “Look, I’m not great at this—whatever this is—but you deserve some peace.”

The words sink deep, settling like a weight in my chest. Heavy. Steady. Warm.

I want to say something more—to confess that she’s the reason I’m still holding it together. That her presence, her steadiness, her hands on mine when we danced, are the only things keeping the shadows at bay.

But the words tangle on my tongue.

So instead, I settle for resting my hand on the blanket between us, close enough that our fingers nearly touch.

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She notices; I can feel her tense, then exhale. If I shift just a little, I could slip my hand into hers. The awareness of that possibility sets my nerves alight, but neither of us moves.

We've held hands before, but not in bed. It feels almost taboo to even want it.

Minutes pass. The murmur of voices downstairs fades. My eyelids grow heavy. The warmth of the bed, the steady sound of Roan's breathing beside me, and the knowledge that—for tonight—I'm not alone, finally starts to lull me toward sleep.

"I'm here," Roan murmurs.

So quiet, I almost miss it.

Warmth blooms in my chest. I close my eyes, let the dark cradle me. She's here.

And for the first time in too long, I feel safe enough to drift off, leaving my fears to rest beside me, overshadowed by the gentle presence of the woman lying next to me.

Roan

I lie there, eyes unfocused on the low-lit ceiling, pretending my pulse hasn't just leapt into my throat. Even with the muted glow from the lantern on the table, I can see the curve of Aria's cheek and the damp curls of hair clinging to her temple.

She's so close that her scent lingers in the space between us—soap and firewood and something distinctly her, something that curls around my senses and settles deep.

It's a reminder that I'm sharing a bed with someone I've come to know too well—and still not enough. Someone I've bled for and fought for as though my own life depended on it.

It's scandalous, in a way. Irresponsible. Foolish, even.

After Garrick and Selis, I swore I'd never let anyone close enough to carve themselves into me again. I've prided myself on staying two steps removed, prepared for the worst.

But now, I'm lying here beside her, muscles thrumming with tension...and something soft. Something dangerous. Something that doesn't belong in the same breath as survival.

My hand twitches, itching to shift just a little closer. But I keep still. Frozen. Watching.

Her eyelids flutter, heavy with exhaustion, and gradually her breathing slows. Deepens. Each exhale longer, steadier than the last.

Sleep draws her in with a gentleness that makes my chest ache.

Is it possible to be jealous of sleep?

Because I am. I'm jealous of the way it touches her without fear. The way she surrenders to it, safe enough in this moment to let go. I've fought to keep her alive, to hold off the horrors that follow her like a shadow—and sleep just... slips in and steals her away from me.

Her mouth softens, lips parting slightly. The sharp lines of her face blur, smoothed by dreams. Hopefully good ones. She deserves good dreams.

There's a hush in the room now. Not silence—no, this is deeper. A kind of sacred stillness. A pocket of quiet that feels like it belongs only to us.

It takes all my willpower not to reach out too soon, not to disturb her peace. Peace like this is rare. And the last thing I want to do is take it from her.

But I can't help myself.

Once I'm certain she's asleep, I let my hand slide across the blanket, until the tips of my fingers hover just above hers. A whisper of contact—skin to skin—makes my pulse flutter wildly.

What are you doing, Roan?

My mind hisses the warning, but my heart overrules it.

Carefully, I turn on my side, facing her fully. The smell of her damp hair lingers between us, and I breathe it in, unable to look away from her tranquil face.

The plan was to keep watch. To stay alert. But I find myself watching her instead, and the combined warmth of Aria's body and my own exhaustion seeps in, loosening every tight knot in my limbs.

Before I realize it, my eyelids begin to droop, the pull of sleep subtle but relentless. I try to fight it, clinging to that last shred of vigilance—but the bed is too soft, her presence too steady, too safe.

And without meaning to, without wanting to, I begin to drift. Closer to her. Closer to sleep.

Warmth.

That's the first thing I notice. A steady heat against my side, solid and real, pressing into me in a way that makes my body instinctively relax. The weight draped over me is comforting, grounding, like being wrapped in something safe.

The scent hits next—smoke and soap, something faintly sweet underneath, something distinctly her. It curls into my senses, soothing in a way I don't fully understand. My fingers flex slightly, brushing against soft fabric and the firm muscle beneath it. I shift just a little, and the warmth presses closer.

It feels good.

Too good.

The realization slams into me like a punch to the ribs. My breath stutters as my mind claws its way fully into wakefulness, sluggish and reluctant. The weight on me isn't just some vague comfort—it's her.

Aria.

And I'm holding her.

My pulse kicks up hard as my senses sharpen, taking in everything at once—the way her arm rests over my waist, fingers curled lightly against me, the way our legs are

tangled, the way my own hand is still on her hip, gripping just a little too tight.

Shit.

A slow, creeping tension replaces the drowsy peace from moments ago, along with a rush of embarrassment—like I've crossed a line I didn't know existed. I go completely still, barely breathing. Did she wake up like this too? Is she still asleep? How the hell did we even—?

I force a slow, silent exhale, willing my heartbeat to steady, but it does little to calm the sensation crawling up my spine. Aria shifts again, her breath soft against my collarbone.

I should move. Should have moved the second I woke up like this.

Instead, I hesitate—just for a breath, just long enough to catch the way her fingers twitch against the fabric of my shirt before curling slightly, as if grasping for something. Me.

I close my eyes against the sting of guilt. And something else. That same sharp, dangerous thing.

Enough.

I turn my head sharply, jaw clenched tight as I force my body into motion. Every instinct screams at me to stay—to linger in the warmth still radiating between us—but I don't listen. I can't.

With slow, measured movements, I peel myself away from her side, careful not to jostle the mattress too much. Aria stirs, a soft, sleepy sound escaping her lips, and my chest seizes. But she doesn't wake.

I sit on the edge of the bed, dragging a hand down my face. My skin still burns with the ghost of her closeness, like she's imprinted there.

Get it together, Roan.

That was too close. Too much. What would she have thought if she'd woken first?

Food. I need food. Something real, something grounding.

Not this... not the warmth still clinging to my skin like a memory I'm not ready to let go of.

I stand carefully, grab a scrap of parchment from my pack, and scribble a quick note. It's not eloquent, but it'll do. I place it on the table near the balcony, stealing one last glance at her before slipping from the room.

The common room is quiet. It's too early for the morning crowd with the exception of two men at a back table, muttering in hushed tones, the scent of spiced stew and roasted meat thick in the air. My stomach aches—I hadn't realized how hungry I was.

I make my way to the counter, nodding at the barkeep. "Something hot," I murmur, sliding a few coins his way. "And a tankard."

He grunts in acknowledgment and moves off, leaving me to scan the room. No obvious trouble. No strangers eyeing me too closely. Good.

As I wait, I let my gaze drift toward the far end of the inn, where the men sit nursing their drinks. Based on the few words I catch—damn wolves getting bolder... might have to move deeper next time—they're hunters, through and through. The kind who

know these woods better than the back of their hands.

Perfect.

I don't even think before I push off the counter and approach.

"Hunting's good around here?" I ask, keeping my tone casual.

One of them, a grizzled man with a scar tracing down his cheek, eyes me warily. "Depends what you're looking for."

"Rabbits," I answer without hesitation. "Something easy to snare."

His suspicion fades a little. "Forest east of town. Small game's sparse, but if you set up early enough, you may catch something. Damn things are quick."

I nod, absorbing the information. Aria's been living off rabbits, but it's been a while since she last fed. She's got to be getting hungry. How long does she usually go before the hunger sets in too deep? The thought makes my stomach twist.

"Appreciate it," I say, slipping a few extra coins onto the table before turning back to the counter.

By the time my food arrives, the thought of smuggling a damn rabbit into the inn has taken root in my mind. Though draining it into the oilskin pouch would do in a pinch, I've learned she prefers the blood from the source. Where the hell would I put it? Maybe in my pack, wrapped in cloth.

A chuckle almost slips from my lips at the absurdity of it. Me. A merc. Sneaking

rabbits around like some desperate thief.

I shake my head and take a long drink, letting the warmth of the ale seep into my bones. The stew is rich, hearty, better than anything I've had in a long time. And as I sit there, listening to the low hum of voices around me, the soft crackle of the fire, something unfamiliar settles in my chest.

Contentment.

For the first time in a long, long time, I feel happy.

And damn me, but it's because of her.

Aria

I wake to emptiness.

The warmth is gone before my mind can fully surface from sleep, leaving only the ghost of it behind. A hollow ache flares in my chest before I even pry my eyes open, instinct searching for something—someone—who isn't there. My fingers drift over the sheets, seeking out lingering heat, some proof that I didn't imagine the way we fit together in the quiet dark. But the linens are cool. Too cool.

A knot forms in my stomach, twisting tight. Did she leave?

The thought grips me hard enough that I'm upright before I even know I've moved, breath uneven as I scan the dimly lit room. There's no sign of her. No sword propped within reach. No heavy footfalls pacing near the door. Just stillness.

I swallow down the surge of panic, trying to steady my breathing. She wouldn't just vanish, would she?

That's when I notice a slip of paper on the little table by the window. My pulse slows, relief pulsing through me as I jump up to grab it:

Mouse,

Went downstairs for breakfast. Don't wander off without me.

—R

"Mouse." My cheeks flush.

She's the only person who's ever called me that, and against all reason, the nickname makes me smile. I fold the note and press it to my chest for a moment, exhaling a shaky breath.

Okay. She didn't leave.

After quickly dressing—at least enough to not look like I've just tumbled out of bed—I slide downstairs. My senses stir at the mix of scents: old ale, burnt coffee, warm stew. The inn's common room bustles with early morning travelers, their raucous chatter filling the air.

A quick scan finds Roan at a table near the back, legs stretched out, her sword leaning against her chair. There's a tankard in front of her, and a nearly empty bowl of something that might pass for breakfast.

I'm about to step forward when I notice she's not alone.

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A woman with vivid red hair is leaning over the table, one hand braced near Roan's arm. She's laughing at something, all bright-eyed and close. Roan doesn't look entirely displeased, either—her posture is relaxed, and she offers a small grin at whatever the woman just said. My chest clenches in a confusing swirl of emotions.

Is that jealousy? That's ridiculous, I scold myself.

Still, my feet stall. An odd heat crawls up my neck, a strange possessiveness I'm not sure how to handle.

She's free to talk to whoever she wants.

And yet I can't bring myself to walk over there. The urge to vanish, to avoid that potential awkwardness, nearly drags me right back upstairs. My stomach churns, torn between an irrational desire to stake a claim and a sudden fear that I have no right to.

Before I can decide, my attention snags on a trio of travelers at the adjacent table. Their voices carry across the room, and one word alone tunes me into their conversation: vampire.

"I'm telling you, it's a dangerous bounty," a bearded man says, leaning in conspiratorially. "Heard it from the guard pinning the sign—some runaway vampire they're after."

"These clans like stirring up trouble," a woman replies with a huff. "But it pays a small fortune if you bring her back alive. I'd do it myself if I had the nerve."

I shrink into the shadow of a wooden post, blood turning cold. They've placed a bounty on me? I should've guessed my clan wouldn't stop at just sending enforcers. A public price on my head will draw in mercenaries, adventurers—anyone desperate enough to try their luck.

Which puts Roan in even more danger than before.

Shame and guilt settle in my gut. Of course Roan's in danger. Even if she doesn't care about the money, dozens of other people will.

I spare another glance at her across the room. She's dismissed the red-haired woman now, or maybe the other woman just gave up. Either way, Roan's alone, sipping from her tankard, staring out the window.

She'd never forgive me if I just ran off, I tell myself.

But the thought that she could be safe if I leave is a persistent, poisonous whisper.

I retreat quietly, heart thudding in my ears. The innkeeper flashes me a vaguely polite smile, but I barely notice as my mind races.

Leaving might be the only way to keep Roan from getting dragged into a clan war or worse. She's strong, skilled with a sword, but a bounty changes things, doesn't it?

The stairs groan as I climb them, each step heavier than the last. A part of me wants to turn back, slip into the warmth of the common room where Roan sat—where I could pretend a little longer that this could last.

But I can't.

A wave of regret crashes over me the moment I step inside our cramped little room.

The space still smells like her—leather, steel, and something unmistakably Roan—but it's just an illusion of presence. The reality is cold and empty, the fleeting comfort of last night already unraveling.

For the first time in weeks, we had something close to peace. No keeping watch. No running. No fear flooding my gut at every snap of a twig. And I'm about to throw that away.

It's for the best.

I take a moment to splash water on my face from the washbasin. The cold shock steadies my nerves, though it doesn't erase the gnawing dread of what I'm about to do. My reflection in the warped metal mirror looks pale, eyes too wide.

"You can do this," I whisper. "You have to."

My fingers tighten around the strap of my small pack, knuckles whitening. Then, before I can second-guess myself, I yank it open and start to gather my things.

One by one, I fold my few belongings—an extra shirt, a short cloak, the small stash of coins we took from the enforcers. I pack them methodically, trying to quiet the tremor in my hands. Every second, a part of me screams that I should talk to Roan first, tell her what I heard, discuss a plan. But another part insists she'll never let me go .

My jaw tightens. I can't drag her further into this. She's already bled for me.

Guilt hammers at my chest. If leaving spares her from more violence, I have no choice but to do it quickly—before she comes upstairs, before I lose my nerve.

I don't even know what this is—what we are, what we're becoming. There's no name

for it, no clear shape, just the steady pull of something that feels right in a way nothing else ever has. Like warmth after a lifetime of cold.

But it's not mine to keep, not if it endangers Roan.

Roan

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I glance up from my half-finished meal, absently rolling my tankard between my hands when movement at the bottom of the stairs catches my eye. Aria.

A flicker of warmth stirs low in my chest before I can stop it—a remnant of the night before, of waking tangled in her warmth, of the soft sound of her breathing against my skin. The memory is dangerous. Too easy to sink into.

She stands frozen at the landing, dark hair slipping forward as she peers into the common room. But something's wrong. The relaxed ease of waking beside her is gone, replaced by a tightness in her posture, the way her fingers clutch at the banister like she's bracing for a blow.

My stomach knots.

Then, as if deciding something in an instant, she turns on her heel and disappears back towards our room.

The warmth from before vanishes, replaced by cold unease curling in my gut.

What the hell was that?

I barely have time to register the weight in my gut before the conversation at the table beside me cuts through the tavern's background noise.

“—bounty's high enough to turn anyone's head.”

I still.

“Vampire girl, dark hair. Some noble’s runaway brat. Word is, the clan wants her back alive.” A rough chuckle. “Alive don’t mean whole, though.”

Ice floods my veins.

Shit.

I’m on my feet before I have time to think, my chair scraping loudly against the wood. Grabbing my pack, I sling it over my shoulder. My instincts scream at me not to attract attention, but my movements are too hurried, too sharp. The table discussing the bounty—two men and a woman, all dressed in worn traveling leathers, blades strapped openly at their hips—continue their conversation, oblivious to the way my pulse thunders in my ears.

“—last sighting was a town over. They’re closing in.” The woman speaks in a low, confident drawl, tilting her tankard to her lips. “She won’t last long on her own.”

The larger of the two men chuckles, a rough, unpleasant sound. “Doesn’t have to. Not when she’s worth that much coin.”

The third scoffs, leaning back in his chair. “If it’s smart, the leech will let itself get caught by its own kind. Better that than the alternative.”

A sharp laugh. “What, someone like us getting to her first?”

My fingers tighten around the strap of my pack, breath slow and controlled despite the fire curling in my chest.

I slide the empty bowl of stew and half-empty tankard back toward the barkeep with a curt nod. He barely glances at me before turning to another patron.

I take the stairs two at a time, heart slamming against my ribs.

Mouse.

What the hell are you doing?

I push the door open without hesitation, already bracing for the worst.

Aria stands at the small table, shoving items into her pack in frantic, uneven motions—an extra cloak, the handful of coins we looted. Her hands tremble as she works, but the moment she hears me, she goes still.

Slowly, she straightens, her shoulders tense.

And when she turns, I see it—the guilt flashing in her eyes, raw and undeniable.

Just like that, every suspicion rattling in my head is confirmed.

“You’re leaving,” I say flatly, voice rougher than I intend.

She clutches her pack to her chest, lips pressed into a thin line. “I—yes,” she admits, stumbling over the words, raw and hesitant. “It’s for the best.”

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Anger flares in my chest, molten and unforgiving. “The best for who?” My voice is harsh as I step closer. “Because it sure as hell isn’t best for me, and I doubt it’s best for you.”

Her jaw locks, stubborn as ever, and her eyes flick toward the door like she’s already calculating her odds. Like she thinks she can slip past me if she times it right. As if I’d let her.

“They’ve put a bounty on me, Roan. Half the people downstairs are probably already sharpening their knives. If I stay, you’ll get dragged into it—more than you already are.”

I cross my arms, planting my feet, and refuse to acknowledge the ripple of unease at the mention of her clan. I’m not afraid of them. Not for myself, anyway. But for her? For what they might do if they ever get their hands on her again? That’s a different story entirely.

“So your brilliant plan is to sneak out alone?” My voice is rough, edged with something dangerously close to desperation. “You really think they won’t find you again? Or that you’ll be safer on your own?”

She flinches, and I see the shadows of memory in her eyes—probably recalling the last time her enforcers caught up to us, or maybe it’s that night, the one where she finally ran, her whole world left behind in the dust.

“At least you won’t be in danger,” she murmurs, almost too low to hear. “You can go back to your life. No more vampires, no more dangerous scrapes.”

My throat tightens. She thinks this is just an inconvenience, like I could walk away unscathed.

The idea of her doing this without even asking what I want sends heat rushing through me—anger, yes, but underneath that, something deeper, something worse.

Fear.

Fear of losing her.

“Dammit, Aria,” I growl, stepping forward without thinking.

She backs up, pressing against the rickety table, wide eyes flick to mine, full of defiance and uncertainty in equal measure.

“You think I’m going to let you run off and get yourself killed?” My voice is low, roughened by something I can’t shove down fast enough. “You really think I can just...forget about you?”

She breaks my gaze, fingers twisting in the pack’s strap, the tension in her shoulders drawn so tight I can almost feel it in my own skin.

“You could have a normal life,” she says, voice barely above a whisper. “Without all of this. Without me.” I open my mouth to argue but she keeps going. “I saw you,” she adds, quieter still. “With that red-haired woman. Earlier. You looked... like you belonged there. Smiling. Talking. Like nothing was chasing you.”

Her words land harder than a blow.

I exhale slowly, dragging a hand down my face. “I don’t even know her name,” I say flatly. “I wasn’t interested. I was being polite.”

I hold Aria's gaze, letting the truth settle between us.

"She meant nothing. I don't want normal. I don't want her." My voice drops, rough.

She looks away again, jaw clenched. "It doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't."

She goes rigid.

I lower my voice. "You think I smiled at her like I smile at you?"

Her fingers tighten on the strap, but she doesn't answer.

"You don't get it," she whispers. "This is my problem. I won't let you suffer for my mistakes."

A sudden wave of possessiveness swells in my chest, so fierce it momentarily takes my breath.

She still doesn't see it—how much of her I've already chosen.

How dare she think I could give her up that easily?

As if she's just another contract, another lost cause to cut free when things get too complicated.

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As if she doesn't know me at all.

I should be calm. Rational. But the thought of her walking away rips through me like a blade to the gut.

"You're not going anywhere," I snap, the force of it surprising even me.

Her head jerks up, disbelief flashing across her face before it hardens into something sharp.

"You don't own me," she snaps back, voice shaky but unwavering. "And I'm not about to drag you further into my clan's hunt."

I exhale through clenched teeth, forcing down the growl rising in my throat. "I'm already in the hunt, Aria. You think I haven't been since the moment I found you bleeding in those ruins?"

Her lips part, stunned—but I don't stop.

"You can't make me leave it. You can't make me leave you."

Silence crashes between us, thick and searing.

Tears brim at the edges of her lashes, a mirror to the roiling storm in my own chest. I swallow hard. My pulse pounds in my ears, drowning out everything but her.

I'm losing her, a panicked voice screams in my head. If I don't do something, she'll

vanish for good.

All the emotions I've been wrestling with—the worry, the anger, the bone-deep fear of losing her—collide in a single, reckless moment. My pulse is a war drum, drowning out reason, drowning out anything that isn't her.

Before I can think it through, before she can slip away, I grab her wrist, my fingers wrapping tight around hers, and yank her toward me.

She lets out a sharp breath, eyes going wide, lips parting in shock.

“Roan—”

I cut her off the only way I know how.

My mouth crashes into hers, hard and desperate, a collision of breath and heat and all the unspoken words I can't seem to shape. It isn't soft, isn't careful. It's a demand, a plea, a warning.

Don't go. Don't leave me behind.

For a heartbeat, she's rigid against me, frozen in place, as though she might push me away. But then she exhales—a small, trembling sound against my lips—and something in her melts.

The pack she was holding slips from her grip, hitting the wooden floor with a dull thud.

Her hands, hesitant at first, slide up, fingers ghosting over my arms, then gripping my shoulders. I take the invitation, my free hand moving to her waist, pressing against the curve of her hip, drawing her impossibly closer.

My fingers flex at her waist, a quiet war waging in my head—closer, hold her closer, don't let her slip away.

Her lips are soft but urgent, and when she tilts her head just slightly, pressing back into me with a need that sends fire racing through my veins, I let out a low, shuddering breath. The kiss deepens, the space between us vanishing, lost to something too big, too raw to contain.

I don't know where she ends and I begin.

I don't care.

Her fingers thread into my hair, nails scraping lightly against my scalp, and I groan into her mouth, fingers tightening at her waist. It's not enough. It'll never be enough. She will never be enough, and yet she's already everything.

A sharp gasp breaks between us, her lips parting just enough for me to feel the way she's struggling to catch her breath. I ease back an inch, my forehead resting against hers, both of us breathing hard, caught in the tangle of heat and need and the terrifying realization of what just happened.

She doesn't pull away.

She doesn't run.

And neither do I.

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I swallow hard, my grip on her waist loosening just slightly, afraid to shatter whatever fragile thing has settled between us.

“Roan,” she whispers again, her voice unsteady, barely a breath of sound.

I close my eyes, exhaling against her lips. My heart is still pounding, still demanding more, but I force myself to pull back just enough to see her face. Her wide eyes search mine, filled with something I can’t quite name—shock, maybe. Or something deeper. Something that mirrors the ache curling in my own chest.

She sways slightly, like she doesn’t trust her own legs to hold her up. My hand steadies her without thinking, fingers skimming her spine.

Aria is beautiful. Her lips are kiss-bruised, her breath uneven, and when she blinks up at me, it takes everything in me not to lean back in, not to get drunk off her all over again.

But she hasn’t spoken. She hasn’t moved. And for the first time, a flicker of doubt seeps in.

What have I done?

I clear my throat, voice rough. “Tell me to stop.”

Aria blinks, her grip tightening on my arms. She doesn’t let go.

Silence stretches between us, thick with unanswered questions.

Then, barely above a whisper, she says, “I don’t want you to stop.”

Her words crash through me like a jolt of lightning. I don’t move. I barely breathe. I don’t want you to stop.

It’s a whisper, a confession, a permission wrapped in something fragile. Something I don’t dare break.

My fingers flex against her waist, a barely-there touch, waiting for the moment she realizes what she’s just said and pulls away. But she doesn’t. She stays pressed close, her breath still uneven.

I swallow hard, every muscle in my body tense with restraint. “Aria...” Her name tastes different in my mouth now, heavier.

She looks up at me through her lashes, something unreadable flickering in her dark eyes. She’s still catching her breath, still holding on, and I wonder if she even realizes it.

I should let go of her. I should. But instead, I lift a hand, trailing my fingers over the curve of her jaw, tilting her chin just slightly. She leans into the touch before she can stop herself, the smallest movement, but it’s enough to undo me all over again.

“You don’t want me to stop?” I ask, my voice rough, low. A final chance for her to step back.

She shakes her head. Slow. Deliberate.

“Then tell me what you do want,” I murmur, brushing my thumb over her cheekbone. Her breath hitches.

“I don’t know,” she whispers, voice unsteady. “I...” She trails off, lips parting, searching for words that won’t come.

I exhale sharply, resting my forehead against hers. She’s shaking, just slightly, but she doesn’t pull away. “Aria,” I say again, softer this time.

Give me something, Mouse. Anything.

She sways closer, her hands curling into the fabric of my shirt, like she’s grounding herself. Her breath trembles against my lips. “I just want us to be safe,” she admits, so quiet it almost isn’t there. “Both of us.”

Something sharp lances through my chest. Because I know that feeling. The weight of it. The ache of it.

I tilt my head, nudging my nose against hers, grounding her as much as myself. “We’re safe right now,” I rasp. “And we’ll figure out the rest.” My fingers tighten at her waist, my voice dropping lower. “But I’m not letting you go. No matter what’s hunting us, I’ll be the one standing between it and you.”

She makes a sound, something caught between relief and uncertainty, and before I can stop myself, I close the space between us once more.

This time, the kiss is slower. Less desperation, more certainty. A quiet promise between us, unspoken but understood. She softens against me, hands still tangled in my shirt, like she’s afraid I’ll disappear if she lets go.

I kiss her like I can convince her otherwise. Like I can prove it to her.

Her lips part beneath mine, hesitant but willing, and a deep, shuddering breath escapes me. I tighten my hold on her waist, drawing her flush against me.

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She makes a small noise against my mouth, something that sends heat racing through my veins. My fingers press into her back, desperate to keep her close, to memorize this, just in case—

No. I shove the thought down before it can take root. I won't let her leave.

When we finally break apart, our breaths mingling in the small space between us, she looks up at me, wide-eyed, lips slightly parted.

I run my thumb along the curve of her hip. "Don't run off, Mouse. Promise me." My voice is rough, quieter than before.

She hesitates, biting her lip. But then, slowly, she nods.

"I promise," she breathes.

And just like that, the tension in my chest finally eases.

I press a lingering kiss to her forehead before pulling her fully against me, arms wrapped around her like a shield. She buries her face in my shoulder, exhaling shakily, and I close my eyes.

For the first time in a long time, I let myself hold onto something.

Because she's not running anymore.

And neither am I.

And if I have to fight a goddamn vampire clan to keep her safe, I will.

Aria

Roan holds me like she means it, like she won't let go unless I force her to. And gods help me, I don't want to force her to.

I close my eyes and breathe her in—smoke and steel, something earthy beneath it, something that has started to feel like home.

But we don't have time to linger in this stolen moment.

She exhales against my temple before finally pulling back, though her hands stay firm on my waist. Her brow is drawn tight, mouth set in a way that tells me she's already thinking ahead.

The bounty has changed everything.

The walls of this inn, this room, had started to feel safe. That was a mistake.

Her voice is steady, but there's tension beneath it. "Well, we can't stay. Every minute we do, the risk gets higher. So let's pack."

I swallow, forcing my gaze to the window, imagining the streets below. "And go where? Every town within a day's ride will hear about the bounty soon enough. Running only buys us time."

"Time's the only thing keeping us alive right now," she counters, setting the blade aside. "And I'd rather have more of it."

I bite my lip. She's right. But the weight of this chase—of dragging her into my

mess—settles heavy in my chest. "You don't have to do this," I say softly.

Roan exhales sharply, shaking her head. "We're not having that conversation again, Mouse."

I turn to face her, heart pounding. "It's not just about me, Roan. If they realize you're with me, if they put a price on your head too—"

"We'll be careful." She stands, slipping the knife into its sheath.

I let out a bitter laugh. "Careful? The bounty's high enough to turn anyone's head. And we don't even know how many enforcers are already in this town looking for me."

Roan strides toward me, her presence as solid and steady as always. "Then we find out," she says. "We listen, we watch, we figure out what our next move is. But we don't panic. And we don't separate."

The finality in her tone leaves no room for argument.

Her expression softens, and for the first time since the kiss, she reaches out, fingertips brushing mine. "We'll figure this out," she says, quieter now. "Together. You promised."

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I nod, exhaling shakily.

Together.

For however long that lasts.

The warmth of her body radiates against mine, and my heart stumbles over itself as she lifts a calloused hand, tucking a stray curl behind my ear.

How did I let myself get this attached?

Her fingers linger against my jaw, the barest whisper of contact, and I ache at how careful she is with me.

I lean in first.

The kiss is soft, slower than before, but no less consuming. It deepens, her hand sliding down to my waist, pulling me into her again. I don't realize I'm trembling until she soothes a thumb over my knuckles.

Her thumb strokes absently over my jaw, but there's something else in her eyes now. Something sharp, assessing, as we pull back.

Roan tilts her head, studying me. "You've got that look in your eyes."

I blink, swallowing around the sudden tightness in my throat. "What look?"

She doesn't answer right away. Instead, she reaches up, fingers ghosting over my cheek, my temple, like she's cataloging every flicker of tension in my expression. It's infuriating how easily she reads me, how she sees through the careful control I cling to.

Then, softly, she murmurs, "You're hungry."

I stiffen. Shame curls up my spine. "I—" I swallow. "A bit."

It's a lie. I need to feed. My last feeding wasn't nearly enough—animal blood never is. Now my veins hum with a hunger I've been ignoring since last night, the same hunger that made me flee my clan in search of a better way.

Roan's hand moves to my waist again, pulling me close enough that I can feel the steady beat of her heart. "Then let me help," she murmurs.

A shiver runs through me, my body betraying me even as my mind stumbles to catch up. "Help?" I echo, wary.

Her grip on my waist tightens ever so slightly. "I was going to hunt for you," she says, voice calm, measured. "A rabbit. Something to hold you over. But this—" she tilts her chin down, her dark gaze locking onto mine "—this might work, too."

It takes a second for the meaning to sink in.

Then my stomach plummets.

I jerk back, horror slamming into my chest as I pull away from her. "Roan, no," I blurt. "I won't feed on you. I—I can't."

Her brows knit together. "Why not?"

I stare at her, heart hammering. “Are you serious?” My voice comes out higher than I want, thin with disbelief.

Roan doesn’t flinch. “Completely.”

Panic curls its way up my throat. I shake my head. “It’s dangerous.”

Her mouth twitches at that, not quite a smile. “You think I’m afraid of a little danger, Mouse?”

The nickname doesn’t land like it usually does, playful and teasing. Instead, it sits tight beneath my ribs, pressing down on something raw.

“This isn’t a fight in the woods, Roan,” I say, barely managing to keep my voice steady. “Or a well-placed dagger or some quick-footed maneuver. This is me sinking my teeth into you.”

Her expression doesn’t waver, not even a flicker of doubt. “I trust you.”

My stomach twists. “That’s not the point.”

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She exhales sharply, dragging a hand through her hair. “Then explain it to me.”

I swallow hard. “If I lose control, I could kill you.” What more is there to explain?

Roan studies me for a long, agonizing moment. Then she steps forward, slow, deliberate, closing the space between us once more.

“Do you want to?” she asks softly.

The question knocks the breath from my lungs. “What?”

She tilts her head, dark eyes steady. “Do you want to kill me?”

The sheer ridiculousness of it almost makes me laugh. Gods, she’s infuriating.

“No,” I snap. “Of course not.”

She nods like she expected that answer. “Then you won’t.”

I let out a sharp, disbelieving breath. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Doesn’t it?” She lifts a brow. “You’ve fed before without killing, haven’t you?”

My throat tightens. “That was different.”

“How?”

Because it wasn't you, I want to say. Because the hunger was never tangled up in something else—something deeper, something I don't want to name. Because it wasn't like this.

The notion of biting her, sinking my fangs into her skin—it simultaneously terrifies and tempts me. Images flicker through my imagination: the warmth of her blood, the closeness of our bodies.

A bolt of heat rushes through me, sharp and unwelcome. I squeeze my eyes shut, shaking my head vehemently. “No,” I whisper. “I promised myself I'd never feed on a human again.”

She cups my face, her touch so achingly gentle it almost breaks me. “Aria,” she murmurs, thumb brushing my lower lip. “It's your choice. But if we're on the run, it might get harder for you to find animals. Harder to stay healthy.”

I can't breathe. I hate that she's right. My control is fraying, and the road ahead of us isn't getting any easier. Still, the thought of taking from her—of feeling her pulse under my lips, of tasting her, even for a second—scares me more than anything.

I swallow past the hunger clawing up my throat. “If I lose control—”

“You won't.”

The world tilts. The hunger in me roars at the offer, the call of her blood so close, so willingly given. I feel my pulse rise, a tingling at the edges of my senses.

I shudder. “You don't know that.”

She studies me for a long moment before nodding. “Alright,” she says softly. “Then we'll find another way.”

Relief crashes over me, but beneath it, something else lingers. A low, persistent ache. A hunger that has nothing to do with blood.

I slide my hands up her arms, fingers ghosting over the scars and callouses. I'll never get sick of kissing her, will I?

This is dangerous. This is selfish. You're selfish, Aria.

But the thoughts are easily silenced when our lips meet again. Warmth floods my chest, and a darker, deeper need pulses through me. I part my lips, tasting her, letting the sweetness mingle with the sharp tang of longing. She gives a low, throaty sigh, her body pressing closer until there's no space between us.

We break apart, foreheads touching, breath mingling in the hush of the room. I can sense her willingness, her trust—and it both exhilarates and terrifies me.

"I've...heard things. That it doesn't have to hurt—that it can even feel...good." She swallows, the faintest color tinging her cheeks. "We could keep it controlled."

"I..." I start, voice trembling. "I don't want to hurt you."

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She brushes her fingers through my hair, calming my frayed nerves. “You won’t.”

There it is again: the reassurance that I’m more than a monster.

I’m not sure if it’s belief or bravado, but her certainty warms me. My fangs ache in response, the hunger surging again. I resist it, for now, pressing a softer kiss to the corner of her mouth.

“Roan...” I murmur in protest.

She seems to understand; she lets out a small, rueful laugh and glances at the door. “We should get ready to leave then,” she murmurs. “Before the wrong person recognizes you.” She threads her fingers with mine, gives my hand a small, reassuring squeeze. “We’ll figure out the rest,” she says, as if she’s heard my worries. “All of it.”

Looking into her eyes, the hunger twists into a more profound ache—one for safety, acceptance...love. I haven’t let myself want these things for a long time, but Roan’s presence makes it impossible not to hope.

“Together,” I promise, swallowing the lump in my throat.

She bows her head, kissing my temple, and I close my eyes, savoring the hush of her breath against my skin. Then, reluctantly, we pull apart so we can prepare to travel once more.

Roan left not long ago, strapping her sword to her back with a firm, “Stay put, Mouse. I won’t be long.”

We need supplies, and Roan is better suited to move through town unnoticed. She knows how to blend in, how to keep her head down. I, on the other hand, have a bounty on my head.

Still, waiting is worse.

I’ve spent the last twenty minutes pacing the cramped inn room, crossing from the window to the door and back again, arms folded.

What if she doesn’t come back?

I shake off the thought and exhale sharply. Paranoia won’t help. Roan is careful, and she promised she wouldn’t take long.

The floor creaks under my boots as I move to sit on the edge of the bed, rubbing my temple. The room feels smaller by the second, too warm, too—

The door creaks open behind me. I hadn’t even heard it unlock.

My heart lurches. Roan’s back earlier than expected. That’s good—we need to leave as soon as possible. The weight in my chest lightens as I turn—

Then I see who’s standing in the doorway.

Selis.

Every nerve in my body goes taut. She leans against the doorframe, all sharp angles and cocky amusement, her dark eyes sweeping the cramped room before settling on

me.

“Well, well,” she drawls, crossing her arms over her chest. “Look at you. Settling in like you belong.”

I say nothing, my breath locked in my throat. She shouldn’t be here. How the hell did she find us? My mind races, counting the possible exits, but I don’t move—not yet. If she’s alone, I can handle her.

Her smirk widens, as if she can hear my churning thoughts. “Relax, sweetheart. If I wanted you dead, we wouldn’t be having this lovely little chat.”

I force my spine straight, masking the unease slithering through me. “What do you want then?”

Selis steps into the room, shutting the door behind her with an infuriating amount of ease. Like she belongs here. Like she’s done it before.

“I was in town, grabbing a drink,” she muses, inspecting her nails as she strolls forward. “Then I hear some interesting news. A runaway with a price on her pretty little head. Imagine my surprise when I realize the description sounds... familiar.”

Her gaze lifts, piercing me.

My stomach tightens, but I keep my expression smooth. “Is that right?”

“Oh, don’t play dumb.” Her gaze flicks over me, slow and deliberate. “I knew Roan had a soft spot for strays. I told her it would get her into trouble one day.”

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I grit my teeth at the way she says it, the implication curling around her words like smoke.

Selis doesn't stop moving until she's close—too close. I smell the leather and steel on her, the faint hint of ale clinging to her breath. I don't back away. I won't give her the satisfaction.

Her lips curve. "You think she's yours, don't you?"

I go still. A flicker of heat—not from embarrassment, but from fury—ignites in my chest.

She laughs, low and knowing. "I've seen that look before. The way you stiffened up when I found you two roughing it south of here. The way you're looking at me now. You don't just want to survive—you want to keep her. Like she's some prize you've got your bloodsucker claws in."

I keep my voice steady, controlled. "You don't know anything about me."

Selis leans in, voice dropping to something almost conspiratorial. "I know Roan. And trust me, sweetheart, she doesn't—"

I don't let her finish.

I move fast—faster than she expects. My foot hooks around hers as I shove forward, sending her off balance. At the same time, I grab her wrist, twisting it behind her back with a strength that shocks even me. She hisses, cursing as she stumbles

forward, her knee hitting the rickety table with a thud.

For a heartbeat, she freezes.

Then, to my utter confusion, she lets out a short, sharp laugh.

“Well, shit,” she breathes, panting slightly. “That’s a Roan move.”

I tighten my grip, jaw clenched. “She’s been teaching me.”

“No kidding.” Selis shifts her weight, testing my hold. I don’t let up.

“Tell me something, sweetheart,” she drawls, voice laced with something that makes my stomach tighten—not fear, but something colder, something that makes me want to bare my teeth. “What do you think she sees in you?”

I stiffen.

Selis smirks, reading me too easily. “She’s got a type, you know. The desperate ones. The ones who need saving.” She tilts her head just enough to look up at me properly, eyes gleaming. “She plays the hero well enough, but she never sticks around, not really. Must be nice thinking you’re different.”

My grip falters. Just for a second.

That’s all she needs.

With a sharp twist, she wrenches free, slamming her elbow into my ribs as she flips our positions. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs, and before I can recover, she’s the one pinning me down, her knee pressing just enough into my stomach to keep me still.

“Too easy,” she murmurs, clicking her tongue.

I buck against her hold, but she’s already leaning in, breath warm against my cheek. “You’re sloppy,” she says, faux sympathy dripping from every syllable. “Should’ve known you’d fall for it. But hey, don’t feel too bad—you’re not the first to underestimate me.”

I bare my fangs. “You cheated.”

She snickers, pressing a little more weight onto me. “And? Thought Roan was teaching you how to fight dirty?”

My muscles tense, but I force myself to stay still. Fighting head-on won’t work. She’s stronger than me. I need another angle.

Selis lets out a slow, pleased breath. “Shame you’re worth more alive.”

My pulse stutters.

She grins down at me, enjoying this. “Took me all of five minutes to figure out which room you were in.”

I glare up at her, fury burning beneath my skin. “You followed Roan.”

“Watched her leave, actually,” she corrects, lazy and smug. “Figured she’d be back soon, but I was too curious to pass up a peek inside. And look what I found.” She taps my chin with a finger, like I’m some amusement. “Roan’s little pet.”

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I see red.

I don't think—I just act.

My knee jerks up, slamming hard into her ribs. She gasps, grip loosening just enough for me to twist out from under her. I move fast, using the momentum to grab her wrist and yank her sideways, throwing her off-balance.

This time, when she lands on the floor, I don't hesitate.

I pin her with my knee, grip iron-tight on her wrist. The dagger I snatched from her belt presses just under her chin.

Selis stills.

Then, slowly—infuriatingly—she grins.

“Well,” she breathes, voice thick with something close to admiration. “Now that’s a Roan move.”

We’re both panting heavily when the door creaks open again.

Roan steps inside, arms full of supplies. She halts mid-step, eyes darting between me and Selis.

A beat of silence.

Then, dryly, “What the fuck?”

Roan

The sight that greets me when I push open the door is not what I expected.

Aria, straddling Selis, a dagger pressed against her throat.

Selis, grinning like she’s enjoying every second of it.

We’re all breathing too hard, the air charged with something sharp and dangerous.

I stare. Blink.

“What the fuck?”

Aria jerks her head toward me, wild-eyed and flushed, as if just remembering where we are. But she doesn’t lower the blade. Good.

Selis tilts her head back slightly to get a better look at me. “Hey, Talrik,” she purrs, unbothered. “Didn’t expect such a warm welcome.”

I don’t move from the threshold, but my grip on the sack of supplies tightens. My eyes flick to Aria’s knuckles, bloodied. Her shoulders are tense, trembling slightly.

I exhale, slowly. “What,” I say, carefully enunciating every word, “the fuck—is happening here?”

Selis lets out a dramatic sigh. “Relax. Just a friendly chat.” She winks up at Aria. “Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

Aria's jaw tightens. The dagger doesn't waver.

I'd be proud if I wasn't so angry, but my stomach twists. Aria had been alone when Selis showed up...Shit.

I set the supplies down with deliberate care, keeping my eyes locked on the woman pinned beneath Aria. "You always had shit timing, Selis."

She hums. "Yeah, well. This time, I might be in luck." Her gaze slides back to me, dark and calculating. "See, I heard somethingveryinteresting in town."

I don't react, but my pulse ticks up.

Selis grins. "Turns out, our little runaway here is worth alotof coin." Her voice is almost conversational, like she's discussing the weather. "And if I know you, Roan, youhateleaving money on the table."

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I go still.

She keeps talking, confident, despite being the one pinned. “Now, I could turn her in myself. Drag her back kicking and screaming, deliver her all nice and wrapped up. But—” she flicks her gaze to me, gauging, “—I figured I’d give you an offer first.”

The air in the room shifts. Aria tenses above her, waiting.

Selis’s smirk widens. “We split it. Fifty-fifty. No one gets hurt. No one even has to know you were involved. Hell, I’ll even be the one to do the dirty work. Just say the word.”

My fists clench.

Aria stiffens like she’s been struck, her breath catching audibly.

Selis chuckles. “C’mon, Roan. You’re practical. You know this is a bad investment. She’s dangerous—”

“She’s not yours to sell.” My voice cuts through the room, cold and sharp.

Selis’s amusement falters.

I take a step forward, slow and deliberate. “I don’t sell innocent people, Selis. And I don’t betray them.”

She exhales through her nose, shaking her head like I’m the one being unreasonable.

“That’s rich, coming from you. You of all people should know what happens when you let yourself get attached to strays.”

A very specific kind of anger flares inside me.

She sees it. Pushes it.

She tilts her head, watching me with the kind of casual cruelty that used to be entertaining—before I learned better.

“You’d think after last time, you’d have learned your lesson. What was his name again?” she purrs, voice laced with mock sympathy.

My stomach turns to stone.

Selis grins, seeing the shift in my expression. “Ah, that’s right. Garrick.” Selis hums thoughtfully. “You and I both know how that ended. You can’t help yourself, can you? You find some poor bastard, make them feel safe, and then—”

She doesn’t get to finish.

Because Aria moves.

Faster than I expect, faster than Selis expects.

The knife flicks from Selis’s throat to her shoulder, and Aria presses—just hard enough to make a point. Just hard enough to break skin.

A thin line of crimson beads against the steel, slipping down in a slow, deliberate path.

Selis hisses through her teeth, the first crack in her carefully crafted arrogance.

Aria leans in, voice low and lethal. “Say his name again,” she dares, her grip steady. “See what happens.”

She presses the blade just a fraction deeper, and Selis flinches.

Aria’s lips curl—not in amusement, not even in anger, but in something colder. Sharper. “You know, I’ve been very good lately,” she murmurs, her breath ghosting against Selis’s ear. “I swore off feeding on humans. Told myself I wouldn’t sink to their level. That I’d be better.”

She tilts her head, studying Selis like a wolf sizing up a wounded deer.

“But you,” she continues, voice silky with menace, “I think I could make an exception for.”

Selis’s smirk is gone now, wiped clean. Her breathing shallows, her pulse a rapid staccato in her throat.

“You talk too much,” Aria adds, a mockery of casual indifference. “And I do get hungry.”

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She drags the blade ever so slightly, enough for more blood to well up.

Selis stiffens, her muscles tight. I can see the war inside her—pride versus self-preservation. She doesn't fear me. But Aria?

She isn't so sure.

And I—

I just watch.

Because the way Aria holds her, the way her lips curl slightly, the way her shoulders square in absolute certainty—

It's beautiful.

It's dangerous.

And for the first time since this whole mess started, I think Selis might actually be afraid.

I almost smile.

Almost.

Instead, I step closer, towering over them. I fix my gaze on Selis, who, for the first time since I walked in, seems to realize she's not winning this one.

For a moment, just a moment, I let it sit. Let Selis feel it.

Then I step forward, voice calm, coaxing. “That’s enough, Mouse.”

Aria’s eyes flick to mine. There’s something wild there, something feral, but after a beat, she exhales sharply through her nose and pulls back—though not before giving Selis’s shoulder a parting scrape with the blade.

Selis swears under her breath, jerking away. “Fucking hell,” she mutters, pressing a hand to the wound. “You’ve got a type, don’t you, Talrik?”

I grip the back of her collar before she can move. “Get up.”

She groans but doesn’t fight me. She knows better.

I lean in, voice low and edged with steel. “You’re going to forget you ever saw us, and if I ever hear you went sniffing around this bounty again—” I tighten my grip on her shirt, yanking her close enough that she can see just how serious I am. “I’ll make sure Aria isn’t the one you have to worry about.”

Selis exhales, long and slow. “Damn,” she murmurs, shaking her head. “Guess I hit a nerve.”

I slam her against the wall—gently, by my standards.

She grunts as her back connects with the wood, the smirk finally slipping from her face.

“Shit, Talrik—”

I cut her off by twisting her arm behind her back, forcing her to her knees before she

can fight back.

“Yeah,” I mutter, yanking a length of rope from my pack. “Guess you did.”

She jerks once, testing my grip, but she’s not stupid enough to push it. “Tying me up? Didn’t know we were still into that.”

I scowl. “Shut the fuck up.”

Then I haul her up just enough to tie her hands behind her back.

Aria watches, silent.

I work quickly, securing the knots with practiced ease. She tries to shift her weight, but I press my boot to her shoulder, keeping her where I want her.

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Selis exhales through her nose, something amused and resigned in the sound. "Damn," she muses, glancing between me and Aria. "Now I get it. Why you're breaking your own damn rules for this one."

My jaw clenches. "Shut up."

She grins. "Hit a nerve again, didn't I?"

I reach for a scrap of cloth and shove it between her teeth before she can get another word out. Her eyes glint with something between irritation and amusement, but she doesn't fight it.

Aria steps closer, eyeing Selis with a lingering wariness, her lip curling slightly. "How long will that hold her?" she asks.

"Tied like this? A while." I give one last tug on the rope, ensuring the knots won't give. "Not our problem anymore." I rise, dusting my hands off, and turn to Aria. "We need to move. Now."

She nods, exhaling. "Yeah."

But before I can turn, she catches my wrist.

I look down at her, expecting hesitation, maybe regret—but all I see is resolve.

"You really don't feel bad about this?" she asks, tilting her head toward Selis.

I smirk, brushing a thumb over the scrape on her cheek, a remnant from the scuffle.
“Doyou?”

She hesitates—then grins. “No.”

“Good.” I lace my fingers with hers, squeezing once before pulling her toward the door.

We don’t look back.

The tension in my shoulders lessens a fraction as we slip out of the inn, though I can’t quite shake the prickling sense that everyone in town is watching us. The bounty on Aria’s head weighs on my mind like a constant drumbeat: Hurry, hurry, hurry.

We don’t have time to linger, not if we want to keep half the population from trying to claim her.

I shoot a glance at Aria, her hood pulled low to hide her face. Her lips press into a thin line whenever we pass a stranger. I can practically see her self-consciousness. Every time I think of her bolting, the knot in my gut pulls tighter.

Not again, Mouse, I vow silently. I won’t let you run off alone.

The market square is busy at this hour—carts and stalls laden with turnips, salted fish, and rough-woven textiles. A few merchants eye us as potential customers, but mostly folks are shouting their wares, trying to catch the attention of passersby.

My gaze snaps to a stout man loading crates onto the back of a wagon. A sign on the side reads Humboldt & Co., Fine Ceramics.

I nudge Aria. “Wait here,” I murmur, not waiting for her protest before I stride forward.

The merchant sizes me up the moment I approach, eyes flicking from the sword at my side to Aria’s hooded figure lingering just behind me. He doesn’t like what he sees—I can tell from the way his fingers twitch near the edge of his belt, as if debating whether he should reach for a weapon or call for a guard.

I don’t blame him. I look like trouble. Iamtrouble.

But when I mention coin—more than fair pay for a ride out of this town—and a little extra protection along the road, his expression shifts. Greed flickers in his eyes, overtaking caution, and I know I’ve got him.

“Mercenary work?” he asks, voice gruff with suspicion. “You one of those sellswords, then?”

“Something like that,” I reply evenly. “Not looking for a fight, just a ride. My...companion and I need to get out of town.”

His eyes cut toward Aria again, still shadowed beneath the hood of her cloak. He can’t see her face, but something about the way she stands—tense and poised, a little too still—seems to set him on edge.

“You two in some kind of trouble?” he asks, tone casual but pointed.

I force a smirk, leaning a little closer, enough that he catches the steel beneath the amusement in my tone. “Not the kind that concerns you.”

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The merchant exhales through his nose, scratching at his stubbled chin. He's still debating, I can see it—the risk, the payout, the unknowns. But in the end, money wins. It always does.

“Fine,” he grumbles, waving a hand. “But you stay in the back, quiet. I don't want my business getting mixed up with whatever storm you're running from.”

I reach into my belt pouch and toss him a handful of coins, more than he was probably expecting. His brows lift slightly, but he pockets them without hesitation.

“You two keep low,” he advises, louder, so Aria can hear as he wipes his brow with a handkerchief. “Don't want to lose any of my merchandise—or my neck.”

“Understood,” I say curtly, lifting a crate aside to make enough space. “We won't be any trouble.”

He mutters something about “mysterious couples,” but I pretend not to hear. Once he's back to loading a few final boxes, I turn to Aria.

“Come on,” I say, voice gentling. “It's not luxurious, but it'll get us far from here.”

Her lips tighten—more at the discomfort of being hidden in a stranger's cart than anything else, I think—but she climbs in without protest. I follow suit and we arrange ourselves among tightly packed crates wrapped in straw. The smell of hay and fresh clay dust tickles my nose.

“It's a step up from the last time I had to hide in a cart,” I say, forcing a bit of levity

into my tone. “At least we won’t be sitting on sacks of potatoes.”

Aria lets out a soft snort, adjusting her cloak so her face is mostly concealed from anyone looking in. “You’ve hidden in a potato cart before?”

“Don’t judge,” I shoot back, smirking. “I was young and needed the free ride.”

Her eyes flick up, and for a moment, the tension around her mouth eases. I like that little glimmer of humor in her expression, even if it’s fleeting. It feels good to see her relax, if only for a second.

The merchant hauls himself onto the driver’s seat and snaps the reins. The cart jerks forward, and I instinctively brace an arm behind Aria’s back to keep her from toppling into a stack of crates.

“Careful,” I mutter, lowering my voice.

I know she isn’t fragile. I’d be a fool to think so after seeing her fight, after feeling the sharp edge of her defiance when she pinned Selis like she was nothing more than an inconvenience.

And yet...

Some protective instinct flares deep in my chest, unshakable and instinctive. Even knowing what she’s capable of, even with the image of her restraining Selis, blade steady and gaze colder than I thought possible—I can’t help it.

I shift slightly, adjusting so I’m shielding her from the jostling cart.

Aria doesn’t move away. If anything, she leans into me, letting out the softest exhale, like some part of her needed this. Like she’s letting herself rest, if only for a moment.

Still, she whispers, “You’re fussing.”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. “I don’t fuss.”

But the lie is barely out of my mouth when a rough bump makes her shift, and I tighten my grip, steadying her without thinking. My fingers brush the edge of her cloak, tugging it back into place to keep her hood up, even though it hasn’t slipped.

“Roan,” she murmurs, a faint smile curving her lips, “you’re quite literally fussing right now.”

The corners of my mouth tug upward. “Fine. Maybe I’m fussing a little.” Letting out a breath, I place my arm more comfortably around her, feeling the warmth of her body. The cart jolts again, straw rustling beneath us. “Better safe than sorry, Mouse.”

She huffs at the nickname. “Still calling me that, hm?”

“‘Til something better comes along,” I say, smirking. “Anyway, don’t pretend you hate it. I see that little blush creeping in.”

Aria huffs, trying to hide her face in the folds of her hood. “You’re ridiculous,” she grumbles, but there’s no heat in it. If anything, her tone is playful, and I count that as a victory.

A few miles out of town, the merchant settles into a steady rhythm. The clip-clop of the horse’s hooves lulls the busy chatter of the marketplace into memory. Dust kicks up around the wheels, the road opening out to rolling fields under a high sky.

In the relative privacy of the wagon, I let myself relax, resting my cheek against the top of her head. She doesn’t pull away. If anything, she settles more against me, like she belongs there.

I'm half-dozing when her voice breaks the silence.

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“Did you and Selis ever...?”

My eyes snap open. My body tenses before I force myself to loosen it, but I know she feels it.

I tip my chin down, catching the edge of her expression under the shadow of her hood. Her gaze stays on the road beyond the cart, but there’s something careful about the way she’s holding herself, like she’s bracing for an answer she doesn’t want.

I could lie. Or brush it off. But neither of those seem right, not with her.

So I sigh, rolling my shoulders. “For a while,” I admit. “Nothing that mattered.”

She hums, unreadable. “And why was that?”

A slow grin tugs at the corner of my mouth. “What, you looking for advice?”

Aria swats me lightly on the chest. “I’m serious.”

I chuckle, but the sound fades quickly. I let my head rest against the wooden frame of the cart, staring up at the endless blue sky. “She and I worked together for years. We were good at it. And when you live that kind of life—moving from one job to the next, never knowing when you might not make it out—you take whatever warmth you can get but...”

Aria is quiet, absorbing that. Then, softer, “But?”

“But it was never real,” I say simply. “Selis doesn’t do real. She doesn’t do care, not unless there’s something in it for her.”

I glance down at Aria, expecting more questions, but she’s watching me with that sharp, assessing look—the one that makes me feel like she’s peeling me apart, piece by piece.

“Have you really tied her up before?” she asks after a beat, lips twitching slightly.

I huff a laugh. “More than once.”

She lets the silence hang for a breath, then asks, “And what did she mean... breaking your rules?”

That question sticks in my ribs.

I shift, exhaling slowly through my nose, and lean back slightly like distance might make answering easier. It doesn’t. Still, I choose my words carefully, tasting each one before I let it go.

“I don’t let myself get attached,” I say, the words low and even. “It’s not smart. You learn that quick when you lose people. It’s easier not to have anyone in the first place.”

Aria tilts her head, looking up at me. “And yet,” she murmurs.

The words settle in my chest like a weight. She doesn’t have to say more. The implication is clear. I broke my own rules with her. Selis was right.

I glance down at her, and she’s still watching me—steady, thoughtful.

“Really though, Roan, that sounds...” Her voice softens. “Lonely.”

I swallow hard, but I don’t look away. I should. But I don’t.

Because the truth is, it is lonely. It has been, for a long time. I just didn’t notice how much until she started filling the quiet.

The cart jostles over a rough patch, and she presses against me to keep her balance. My arm tightens around her waist, steadying her instinctively. Her breath hitches, barely audible.

Something shifts in the air between us, something slow and warm, curling through my chest like embers catching on dry wood.

“You were incredible back there,” I say, voice lower than I mean for it to be.

Aria blinks at the sudden change in topic. “What?”

“The way you stood up to Selis,” I clarify, letting my fingers skim lightly over her hip before I catch myself and stop. “I’ve never had anyone defend me like that.”

Her lips part slightly, a flush creeping up her neck. “Well,” she mutters, shifting as if suddenly self-conscious. “She was a bitch.”

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I blink, startled—and then a laugh escapes me, rough and genuine.

“Gods,” I chuckle, shaking my head, the grin tugging at my mouth. “Shewas.”

She chews on her bottom lip, hesitating. Then, quietly, “And I didn’t like how she talked to you. No one should ever talk to you like that.”

The words settle deep in my chest, heating through me.

For a moment, I forget the cart, the road, the merchant a few feet away. I forget everything except the way she looks up at me, wary and wanting at once.

I lift a hand, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She doesn’t pull away.

“Mouse,” I murmur, voice dropping lower, more careful. “You keep looking at me like that, and I might start thinking you actually like me.”

Aria’s gaze is steady, unwavering. No hesitation, no uncertainty—just quiet certainty as she meets my eyes and says, “I do.”

The words sink into me, settling somewhere deep, and before I can fully process them, she moves.

She kisses me like she means it. No tentativeness, no caution—just firm, deliberate intent. It’s different from before, from the hesitant touches, the stolen moments of uncertainty.

This is hunger. This is decision.

I don't hesitate either. My fingers thread into her hair, tugging her closer, tilting her head just enough to deepen the kiss. She goes with it, pressing into me, her hands fisting in my tunic like she never wants to let go.

Gods, I like the way she kisses. There's no more holding back, no more careful restraint—just need, raw and undeniable.

And then—I feel them.

Her fangs.

I hadn't noticed them before. They're usually so small, barely there, just a hint when she spoke or smiled. But now... now they're longer.

That happens when she's hungry.

A shiver rolls down my spine, something sharp and dark curling in my chest. Not fear. Something else. Something just as dangerous.

I press my tongue against one, tracing the razor-sharp point, testing the edge. Aria makes a quiet sound—a soft, startled exhale that turns into something else entirely when I tug her closer.

It should make me wary. Should remind me exactly what she is, what she could do if she wanted to.

Instead, it just makes me want her more.

The kiss grows deeper, fiercer. She's pressing into me, hands gripping the front of my

tunic like she's afraid I'll pull away, and fuck, I have no intention of doing that.

Then pain—sharp and quick.

I jerk slightly as the sting registers, realizing too late that I've cut my tongue on her fang.

Aria gasps against my lips, going rigid for half a second before her grip on me tightens. Her tongue flicks out, tentative at first, then bolder as she sucks at the wound, drawing my tongue into her mouth, tasting the blood.

Heat licks up my spine, something primal twisting deep in my gut. The sensation is dizzying, her mouth soft yet possessive, her fingers digging into my arms.

Then, just as suddenly, she wrenches back with a strangled breath, her chest rising and falling too fast.

Her eyes—wide, wild—lock onto mine.

“Sorry,” she whispers. One hand flies to her lips, as if she can still taste me there.

I reach for her, but she flinches, shaking her head.

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“Aria—”

“I’m sorry,” she breathes, voice unsteady, eyes darting to my mouth, to my tongue, then back to mine. There’s something raw in her gaze—fear, hunger, and something deeper.

I exhale, forcing my pulse to steady even as heat thrums beneath my skin. “Don’t be,” I murmur, watching her carefully.

But she already looks torn, fighting some invisible war with herself.

I want to tell her that I didn’t mind. That I liked it. That I wouldn’t have stopped her.

But she looks so shaken, so uncertain, that it tugs on my chest.

Her breath hitches, her whole body going rigid against me. My lips are still tingling, my pulse still hammering from the kiss, but it’s the sudden shift in her that pulls me fully into the present.

“Hey,” I murmur, voice low and careful. “You alright?”

She turns her head away, her jaw tight, a single nod cutting through the tension. But I see it now—the sheen of sweat on her brow, the way her fingers clutch at her cloak like she’s anchoring herself in place.

A pang of concern sharpens inside me. “Aria...”

She sucks in a sharp breath, like she's trying to force herself steady. "I'm fine," she manages, too quickly.

I know better.

Hunger.

The realization strikes like a blade, slicing through the haze of everything else. I've picked up on the signs by now—the way she tenses, the subtle flush in her cheeks, the way her breathing turns shallow like she's holding back something dangerous. And after the fight with Selis, the adrenaline, the blood drawn, it must be worse.

Damn it.

Her last real feeding was what? Early yesterday morning? The scraps from small animals aren't enough as is, and the stress of running hasn't exactly helped.

I press my palm against her thigh, grounding her. "Hey," I whisper, voice firm but gentle. "You're not fine. You're hungry."

Her fingers twitch, curling tighter around the fabric of her cloak. "No," she mutters, shaking her head. "It's nothing. I can manage."

Frustration flickers in my chest, but I force my voice to stay steady. "You don't have to manage alone," I remind her, my fingers pressing slightly into the fabric, feeling the heat beneath.

Her whole body locks up, and when she looks at me, there's panic in her eyes—maybe even something dangerously close to temptation. "No. We're not talking about this. Especially not here," she hisses. "We can't—"

I nod, exhaling slowly. She's right. Not here. Not in a merchant's cart on a road where we're nothing more than cargo. It'd be reckless, and she'd never forgive herself if something went wrong.

Still, seeing her like this—struggling, barely holding herself together—it makes something fierce claw up inside me. I hate that I can't fix this for her, not right now. And worse? A part of me is tempted. A part of me wonders what it would feel like—her fangs grazing my skin, the sharp edge of pain mingling with something else. The closeness of it.

I tighten my arm around her waist, pressing her closer. "We'll stop soon," I murmur.

Her shoulders rise and fall with a measured breath, and little by little, she relaxes into me, though I can still feel the tension humming beneath her skin. I don't think she'll ever truly let it go. Not until she feeds. Not until the ache fades.

The cart rattles over uneven ground, jostling us together again. She exhales sharply at the movement, eyes fluttering shut for a moment as she fights for control.

I duck my head, my lips brushing the shell of her ear as I whisper, "Are you going to survive my terrible jokes until then?"

She makes a choked sound—somewhere between a laugh and a groan. "Somehow."

The merchant calls something over his shoulder—probably telling us we'll reach the next town by nightfall. We exchange a glance, understanding passing between us without a single word. Towns mean people. Prying eyes. Risk.

But also, a chance. A moment to breathe. To recover.

I shift, pulling her just a little closer, letting her settle against me again. She doesn't

resist. If anything, she leans into me more, the tension easing, if only slightly.

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For a few precious hours, it almost feels normal.

Two weary travelers resting on a merchant's cart, the road stretching ahead of us, the world quiet except for the steady rhythm of hoofbeats against dirt.

But I don't forget the hunger in her gaze.

And I don't forget what we promised each other.

We'll figure it out. Together.

We have to.

Aria

The late afternoon sun spills across the winding cobblestone streets as we bid the merchant goodbye. He waves once, tipping his hat, then rumbles off with his cart of ceramic goods. There's a cool breeze rolling in, carrying the faint smell of spiced bread from a nearby bakery. It's a comforting contrast to the tension that's been knotting my stomach all day.

I caught the name of the town when we passed the weathered sign at the entrance: Cliffhollow. Small, quiet, the kind of place that might forget our faces if we leave quickly enough.

There's salt on the air. Are we close to the ocean? I think so—the wind tastes like waves and deep things just beyond sight.

Roan steps up beside me, scanning the tidy row of buildings. She's calm, as ever—if you don't know her as well as I do now, you'd miss the slight furrow in her brow that betrays her concern. We've only just arrived, but I can sense her internal debate. Is this place safe? How long until someone notices us?

The same questions swirl in my head, but I push them aside.

"There," I say quietly, pointing toward a modest-looking inn nestled at the curve of the lane. Its painted sign sways gently in the breeze, The Driftwood Lantern.

The windows glow with warm amber light, promising a hot meal for Roan and maybe—just maybe—a few hours of peace for both of us.

Roan gives a single nod and steps forward without a word, her hand closing around the door handle. She glances back at me, raising one eyebrow—Ready?

I nod.

We go in together.

The innkeeper, a middle-aged woman in a simple apron, greets us with a brisk smile. "You folks looking for a room?"

"Yes," Roan replies, fishing out a couple of coins from her belt pouch. "If you have one available."

The innkeeper gives our travel-worn clothes a polite once-over, then nods. "I've got a room or two free on the second floor. Cozy but clean. One bed or two?"

The innkeeper's question lingers in the air like an unsprung trap.

Roan tenses at my side, stiff as a dagger wedged too tightly in its sheath. But the memory of this morning still clings to me, the ache of waking up alone, of finding only her scrawled note in place of her warmth.

My pulse stumbles.

“One,” I blurt before I can overthink it.

Roan’s head snaps toward me, surprise flickering in her eyes. “One?”

The innkeeper shifts uncomfortably behind the counter, clearly aware that this is no simple lodging decision.

I clear my throat. “I don’t mind sharing,” I say as I glance up at Roan from under my lashes. “Do you mind?” My voice is suddenly quieter than I intend.

Something flickers in her dark eyes, something unreadable. She huffs out a breath, lips curving into that familiar half-smirk, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“DoImind?” she echoes, as if the thought is absurd. “No, Mouse, I don’t mind.”

The words sit heavy between us, weighted with more than their meaning.

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Roan shifts, rubbing the back of her neck. “You’re sure though?” she asks, voice lower now, rougher. “I mean, last time, you—”

“Iwassure last time,” I cut in, raising my chin. “You were the one who insisted on the chair.”

She blinks, clearly caught off guard, before her smirk returns, sharper this time. “So youwantedto share a bed with me last night?”

Heat crawls up my neck. “That’s not what I said.”

“That’s exactly what you said.”

I open my mouth, then snap it shut when I catch the innkeeper’s wary expression—eyes flicking between us like she’s caught in the middle of something private. She scratches at the back of her neck, and I swear I can see the moment she regrets every life decision that led to this moment.

My cheeks flare with heat.

Wait. Is this... improper?

I mean, we’re nottechnically—but still, the thought latches on and twists low in my stomach. Roan’s lips. Her hands on my waist. The way we practically spent the entire night breathing each other in.

The way I want to do it again.

And again.

Does that make it proper though? Just because I want to do it?

I square my shoulders and lift my chin. “It’s not improper.”

Her lips twitch, clearly enjoying this more than she should. “That wasn’t exactly my concern, Mouse.”

The innkeeper clears her throat, looking from me to Roan, then back again. “So... one bed, then?”

“Yes,” I say quickly.

Roan exhales through her nose, shaking her head, but I catch the ghost of a smile before she mutters, “One bed’s fine.”

“Right,” the innkeeper says, dragging a key off its hook and setting it on the counter with a solidclunk. “Up the stairs, second door on the left. Breakfast is at dawn. Enjoy your... stay.”

The pause doesn’t go unnoticed. I bite the inside of my cheek as I take the key, murmuring a quick thanks before turning on my heel and heading for the stairs.

Her gaze lingers, and I suddenly realize how we must look—standing too close, voices lower than necessary, the air between us crackling with something too tangible to ignore. I bite my lip, grab the key, and turn on my heel before she can add anything else.

Roan follows me up the stairs, her breath warm at my ear as she murmurs, “Not improper, huh?”

I elbow her lightly in the ribs. “Shush.”

By the time we reach the top landing, my cheeks are warm, and I can’t tell if it’s from the day’s heat or Roan’s proximity. Probably a bit of both.

The room is nothing fancy—just wide enough for a single bed, a small washbasin, and a wooden chair by the window. A worn rug covers the floor, and everything smells faintly of old timber and salt. I can practically feel Roan’s cautious gaze sweep the corners, checking for any sign of danger.

“Clear?” I tease, a small grin quirking at my lips.

She snorts, kicking the door shut behind us. “Yeah, clear,” she says. “Just the occasional monster under the bed, maybe.”

“Oh,” I murmur, leaning closer, “I’m the only monster allowed around here.”

Her eyes flick to mine, amusement sparking there. “Right. My mistake.”

My heart thuds. The wordmonster doesn’t sting the way it once might. Not with her.

I toss my cloak onto the chair, trying to ignore the slight tremor in my hands. Roan sets her sword carefully against the foot of the bed, then shrugs off her jacket. Her posture is relaxed, nonchalant, but I sense the undercurrent of readiness—like she expects me to bolt still.

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I cross the room, meeting her gaze. “I...” My throat tightens. She doesn’t rush me, just watches, dark eyes steady. “I think...maybe we should try it.”

Roan’s expression softens, and she tilts her head. “Try...?”

Heat flares in my cheeks as I look at the pulse in her neck—a steady drumbeat that’s called to me for too long. “Feeding,” I manage, voice low. “From you.”

The corner of her mouth curves, an almost playful smile. “Oh. That.” She says it like we’re discussing something as casual as the weather. “I was wondering when you’d ask.”

A breath of nervous laughter escapes me, too thin to hold shape. “You don’t look worried.”

She shrugs, easy and confident. “Should I be?” Her gaze skims my face, bright and unwavering, like she’s not offering blood and trust in the same breath.

The tension in my chest doesn’t vanish, but it twists—softens—into something molten and breathless. Not just gratitude, not anymore. What’s stirring low in my stomach feels heavier than that. Hotter. A deep ache that has nothing to do with blood and everything to do with her.

I drop my eyes, whispering, “You don’t know what you’re offering.”

Roan tilts her head. “Then tell me.” A beat. “What made you change your mind? Didn’t you promise yourself humans were off the menu?”

I swallow hard, looking back up at her. “That was before I met you. Promises can change.”

Her expression shifts—something in it sharpens, softens all at once. Her teasing fades, replaced with something more tender. Her thumb brushes the back of my hand, grounding me.

“How do you want to do this?” I ask, the words sticking to my tongue, heavy with weight I can’t name.

Roan smirks. “You’re the expert, aren’t you?”

“I’ve fed before,” I say quietly, “but not like this.” Not with someone who matters. Not with someone who’s looking at me like I’m not a monster. “This is different.”

She studies me for a beat, then steps back and gestures toward the bed. “Then we take it slow.” Her voice is low, gentle, but edged with steel. “Come on. Sit.”

I move toward her with hesitant steps, my heart pounding louder than my thoughts. I sit on the edge of the bed, hands in my lap, trying to breathe past the storm building inside me.

Roan kneels in front of me, steady and close, like a prayer I’m afraid to whisper, and for once—I don’t feel like I’m about to lose control.

I feel like I’m about to choose.

Roan’s presence is steady, unshakable. Her hands come to rest on my knees, warm through the fabric, grounding. Her touch doesn’t command, doesn’t push—it offers. Quietly, solidly.

I watch her throat work as she swallows, her pulse fluttering just beneath the skin. The scent of her—leather, smoke, something earthy and hers alone—fills my lungs until I feel dizzy with it.

“Hey,” she says softly, tilting her head to catch my eye. “You’re shaking.”

“I know.” I try to smile, but it wobbles. “It’s not fear. Not really.”

Her brows lift slightly. “Then what?”

“Desire.” The word slips out before I can stop it. My voice is barely audible.

Roan’s eyes darken, her grip tightening slightly on my knees. “Then take what you desire.”

The words crack through me like lightning, sharp and impossible to ignore. I draw in a shaky breath and lean forward, one trembling hand brushing her jaw. She doesn’t flinch. If anything, she leans into it, like the contact steadies her too.

We’re eye level, despite her being on her knees. It should make me feel powerful. It doesn’t.

It makes me feel seen.

Unraveled.

Like every carefully-stitched piece of myself could come undone with just one more look from her.

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Her skin is warm beneath my touch, the rough line of her jaw giving way to something softer as I lean in and press my lips to the corner of her mouth.

She exhales into me like she's been holding her breath all day.

Her arm snakes around my waist, strong and sure, and she eases me further toward the edge of the bed until there's no space left between us. My legs fall open to accommodate her body, instinct more than thought, a wordless plea:closer.

Always closer.

Her lips meet mine again—slow at first, unhurried, like we have all the time in the world. But there's intent in it too. Purpose. She kisses like she's tasting something precious, like she doesn't want to miss a single detail.

And gods, I melt for her.

The tension drains from my limbs, every breath unspooling something tight in my chest. Her fingers press into my side through the fabric of my shirt, not hard, but just enough that I feel her there—anchoring me. My own hand slides into her hair, tangling in the soft strands at the base of her neck. I don't think I could stop kissing her if I tried.

She groans softly into my mouth, and the sound punches straight through me, heat pooling low in my belly. Her presence surrounds me, a wall of warmth and strength and something wild I can't name.

And still—beneath all that want, all that dizzy heat—there’s something else, tight and trembling under my skin.

Hunger.

Not for blood. Not yet.

And when I pull back, just enough to search her face, I see it mirrored there—her eyes half-lidded, lips parted, jaw tight with restraint.

She wants this too.

“You’ll stop me if—”

“I’ll be fine, Mouse.” Her lips twitch with the nickname, but her voice is all conviction. “I trust you.”

It undoes something in me.

Carefully, reverently, I lean in again. My arms loop her neck, tugging her closer, closer. My lips brush her throat—barely there, like a prayer. Her breath catches.

I let them linger.

The skin there is warm, impossibly soft, and when I press a featherlight kiss to the hollow just beneath her jaw, she exhales sharply—like I’ve knocked the air from her lungs with nothing but a touch. Emboldened, I do it again. Slower this time. Then trail another kiss just below it, letting my lips part slightly against her pulse.

She tastes like salt and skin and something heady I can't quite name. And I shouldn't

notice. Feeding is supposed to be just blood. Just survival.

But gods, I feel it low in my belly, a flicker of heat sparking where hunger and want blur together.

Her breath ghosts against my temple, uneven now, and the sound only makes it worse. She shifts beneath my touch, barely perceptible, like she's trying not to move. Not to press herself into me.

It's never felt like this before. Not with any human I've fed from. Not close. There was no anticipation, no ache that lived beneath the hunger like this sharp, sweet need.

I'm not just craving her blood—I'm craving her. All of her.

My fangs ache, lengthening in response to the nearness of her blood, and I have to shut my eyes, center myself. One more second, just one more breath—

Not too deep. Not too fast.

I can't lose myself in it. Not with her.

I part my lips, letting them linger against her skin. Then, with a whisper of hesitation, I sink my fangs in.

She gasps.

Not in pain—but insurprise. Her hands curl around my arms, anchoring me. And gods, her blood—warm, rich, unlike anything I've ever tasted. The animal blood, the scraps, the desperate half-starvings—they were ashes compared to this.

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But what stuns me isn't the taste of it from the source. It's what's underneath it.

The emotion. The trust.

Roan doesn't fight it. She lets me in, completely, murmuring a quiet, "Aria," and it wrecks me.

There's only breath and blood, and something between us that feels like it could become more than either.

Roan

Isuckinasharp breath, every muscle tensing the instant Aria's fangs pierce my skin.

For half a second, my instincts scream danger—something's biting you, run—but then a deep, tingling warmth blossoms at the spot on my neck.

My heart pounds, beating an erratic rhythm that matches the fierce pull of her mouth.

It's not just pain. Sure, there's a sting, a quick jolt that makes me grit my teeth—but it fades almost at once, melting into a flood of heat that travels down my spine. Her body presses close, the hesitant grip of her fingers in my shirt as she draws my blood, and yet it's not close enough.

The sensation is heady, intimate in a way I never imagined.

This is crazy, I think, yet somehow it feels...perfect.

I slide my hand up to cradle the back of her head, holding her there as she feeds, not wanting her to pull away too soon. A strange mix of euphoria and dizziness washes over me—like standing too fast, but with sparks of pleasure dancing at the edges.

Is it always like this? Or is it because of her?

The way her mouth moves against my skin—gentle, reverent—makes it feel less like being fed on and more like being wanted. Needed.

And gods help me, I don't want it to stop.

Ever.

My breath comes in unsteady gasps, and I realize, with a jolt of surprise, that I'm barely aware of anything beyond Aria's soft, urgent mouth at my neck.

She stops before I lose myself entirely. Her fangs withdraw, leaving a warm trickle on my skin. I swallow hard, forcibly steadying my heartbeat. Aria exhales against my throat, then nuzzles the spot she bit, sending another wave of heat through me.

Her tongue flicks out—slow, deliberate—as she licks the blood from my neck. A strangled sound escapes her chest, half-whimper, half-growl, and it punches straight through me, heat pooling low in my belly. She shudders against me like she can't help it, her fingers tightening on my hips, and I can feel the restraint in every line of her body, the razor-thin line she's walking between hunger and something far more dangerous.

She's still pressed against me, trembling, lips just barely grazing the sensitive skin where her fangs had been. I should be catching my breath, re-centering. Instead, my pulse is a wildfire.

Aria starts to pull back, but I tighten my grip at her waist, voice low, husky. “You got your taste, Mouse,” I murmur, my mouth brushing the shell of her ear. “I think it’s only fair I get mine.”

She stiffens, a sharp inhale dragging between her teeth. Her head turns just enough for our eyes to lock—and gods, I can see it there. The want. The trust. The flicker of something deeper.

“I thought humans didn’t bite,” she says, but her voice is breathless, teasing.

I chuckle, dragging my knuckles slowly up the inside of her thigh. “I’m not most humans.”

Her skin erupts in goosebumps beneath my touch. “Where do you want to bite me, then?” she asks, tone playful—but her pupils are blown wide with heat.

I smile—sharp, hungry—and lift her easily, guiding her backward until she’s flat on the bed. I settle between her legs, hands skimming up her bare thighs, pushing fabric away.

“Here,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to the soft flesh of her thigh. “And here.” Another kiss, higher now, making her arch. “Might even leave a mark or two. Just so you remember who made you shiver.”

Aria lets out a strangled laugh, her hands tangling in my hair. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you love it,” I whisper, just before sinking my teeth in—not hard, just enough to tease. She gasps, her back arching, and the sound she makes goes straight down my spine.

“Roan...” she breathes—barely a whisper, more breath than sound.

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My name on her lips is a prayer and a curse, and it pulls something fierce and tender from deep inside me.

I kiss her thigh, right where my teeth left a mark—my mark. The imprint blooms against her pale skin, and I press my lips to it with something like reverence, soothing the ache I caused. Tasting it. Tasting her.

But gods, I want more. I want to know how she tastes everywhere.

I push her skirts higher, and she parts her legs without hesitation. My breath catches. Her trust in me—still so new, still so raw—it undoes me more than anything else.

I let my mouth wander the soft skin of her inner thigh. She trembles, a shiver running through her, and her hand tightens in my hair, guiding me, her skirts falling higher.

She's wearing the thinnest scrap of fabric I've ever seen. It clings to her, soaked through, the only thing standing between me and her heat. Between me and everything.

“Fuck,” I murmur, the word catching low in my throat.

My nose brushes the dampness, and I inhale—slow, greedy, needing. Her scent is warm and sweet and dizzying, and I exhale against her center, breathing her in like it's the only thing that matters.

“Roan, what are you—”

Her voice stumbles into a tremble as I kiss her through the thin fabric. Once. Twice. Then harder.

I can't stop. The little taste I get isn't enough.

“What does it look like I'm doing, Mouse?” I murmur, my lips brushing against the wet cotton, my voice thick with hunger. “I'm getting my taste.”

I pull back just enough to look up at her from between her thighs.

And gods.

Her cheeks are flushed the prettiest shade of pink, lips parted, her chest rising and falling in shallow, shaky breaths. But it's here—wide and dark and locked on me—that nearly level me.

“You're beautiful, Aria,” I say, the words falling out before I can soften them.

There's a weight to them, something fierce and real that settles right behind my ribs. My heart pounds loud enough I swear she must hear it.

I want to see her come apart. I want to be the reason.

I curl my fingers around the waistband of her panties. “Let me make you feel good, Mouse,” I whisper, my voice hoarse now. “...Please.”

There's a beat—her eyes search mine, something unspoken passing between us—and then she nods.

A smirk curls on my lips, sharp and hungry.

I slip the panties off slowly, savoring every inch of revealed skin. When they fall away, she shifts, legs closing slightly, as if instinctively trying to hide herself.

No. Not from me.

I press her thighs open again, gently, firmly. And what I find makes my breath catch.

She's glistening. Wet. Wanting.

There's a small patch of dark brown hair, surprisingly short. Unexpected, perfect. So Aria.

I lean in, pressing my mouth to her cunt like it's something sacred. Her slick heat coats my tongue as I slowly trace her slit, teasing her folds open. Every lick is a prayer. Every gasp she gives me, a reward.

Her clit peeks out, swollen and needy, and when I circle it with my tongue—light, slow—she gasps, her fingers gripping the sheets like a lifeline.

“That's a good girl,” I rasp, breathless against her.

Gods, I want to touch myself, but I don't. Not yet. Not until she falls apart for me.

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Her clit gets harder under my tongue, and I groan, burying my face deeper, tasting her like I'm starving. My fingers slide between her legs, finding her dripping entrance.

She's soaked.

"Please, Roan," she begs, hips rising to meet my touch. She's desperate.

And I give her what she wants.

I sink two fingers into her slowly, deeply, curling them just right. Her walls tighten around me, warm and pulsing, and I growl against her cunt, licking her clit with renewed hunger. My tongue and fingers move together—driving her higher, chasing every moan that falls from her lips.

She bucks against my mouth, a wild, beautiful thing, and I hold her open, driving her to the edge.

When I suck her clit hard between my lips, her back arches off the bed and a guttural cry rips from her throat. Her cunt clenches around my fingers, and her whole body shudders.

She's gorgeous like this—ruined and panting, her pleasure painted across her face.

Slowly, I slip my fingers free, bringing them to my mouth. I suck them clean with a soft groan, savoring her taste.

"Roan, come 'ere," she breathes, tugging at my shoulder.

Gods, yes.

I crawl up her body and kiss her like I'm starving for it. Desperate and deep, mouths open, tongues tangled. I know she can taste herself on my tongue—and I want her to. I want her to know how delicious she is.

I kiss her deeply, exploring her mouth as she opens it to me.

As we kiss, her hand slips between my legs, palm pressing against my aching core. I groan into her mouth, hips rolling into her touch.

My pants are damp, and her fingers boldly stroking me there are only serving to dampen them further.

“Fuck, Aria,” I pant against her lips, then kiss down—her neck, her collarbone, anywhere I can reach. My hips move on instinct, chasing the pressure of her fingers.

Her fingers hook into the waistband of my breeches, tugging urgently. I lift my hips to help her slide them down, and we toss them aside.

She slips her hand under the damp fabric of my underwear, and when her fingers brush my clit, I nearly cry out.

“Fuck, yes,” I whisper hoarsely. I tilt my hips into her hand, needing more, needing her.

She teases my clit—then suddenly, pain. Sharp, exquisite pain.

Her fangs sink into my neck.

My whole body tenses, a shock of agony and ecstasy crashing through me. Her

fingers keep moving against my clit as she feeds, and I cling to her, gasping as pleasure builds hard and fast beneath my skin.

I let her feed, tilting my neck, moaning as her fingers stroke me through it and I buck against her hand.

Her teeth pull away from my neck too soon, leaving a trail of blood trickling slowly from the wound. She laps at it as she flicks my clit.

“Gods, you taste like—”

I cut her off with a kiss, crushing my mouth to hers. I taste blood—my blood—on her tongue, and it only makes me hungrier. I suck on her tongue, then slide mine deep into her wet mouth.

Her moan echoes in my mouth, and I’m close—so close.

When I come, it’s all heat and light and need, my body shuddering against hers, hips grinding into her hand.

I collapse against her, breathing hard, chest rising and falling in sync with hers. After a moment, I shift, rolling to the side.

Her skin is soft against mine. And when I finally catch my breath, I glance over—and smile.

She's mine.

And gods, I'm hers.

Tangled in sweat-damp sheets and tangled limbs, I pull her close, brushing her hair back from her flushed face.

After what feels like forever, I murmur, "I'm going to be so smug about this."

She snorts softly, curling into me, her legs tangled with mine. "You already were."

"Fair." I press a kiss to her forehead, her skin still warm where she rests against me. "But you're mine now, Mouse."

She hums, the sound barely audible but content, one tiny fang peeking out from behind her lips. "I already was."

That hits me harder than it should. I lie there in the hush of the room, my body aching in the best way—sated, warm, like I've been put back together with something stronger than sinew or bone. Something that sounds like belonging.

She shifts slightly, dragging her fingers along my side, and lifts her head just enough to look at me. Her gaze flicks over my face, soft and serious. "Are you okay?" she asks.

The question shouldn't catch me off guard, but it does. Most people don't ask. Most don't care past what they can get from me. But she's looking at me like she wants the

truth, like it matters.

I nod slowly, letting my hand trail through her tangled hair. “Yeah. Better than I’ve been in a long damn time.”

She smiles, but it’s brief—replaced quickly by something more thoughtful. “You lost blood,” she murmurs. “Not much, but still. You should eat.”

I open my mouth to brush it off, but she sits up, pulling the sheet around her like a makeshift cloak and pushing to her feet with more grace than someone who just drained me should have.

“Stay here,” she instructs, suddenly all business again. “You may feel dizzy for a bit. Let me get you something to eat from downstairs.”

I blink at her, propping myself up on one elbow. “Are you seriously trying to fuss over me?”

She glances back, all challenge and fire. “Yes. Someone should.”

I scoff. “You barely fed.”

“You’re pale,” she fires back.

I raise an eyebrow, smirking. “So are you.”

“That’s different,” she mutters, reaching for her cloak.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed with a grunt, ignoring the slight wave of lightheadedness. “Aria, I’m fine. I’ve fought half-dead before. A little blood loss isn’t going to knock me down.”

She whirls around, hands on her hips now, expression pure exasperation. “Exactly. Which is whysomeoneshould look out for you when you won’t.”

I stare at her for a beat... then laugh. A low, rough sound that spills out before I can stop it. “You’re bossy when you’re happy, you know that?”

She blinks, a little caught off guard—and I catch the flicker of a smile she tries to hide.

And gods help me, I want her to boss me around like this every damn day.

“Somebody has to keep you in line,” she shoots back. She looks so alive—shoulders squared, eyes bright. Even her posture seems lighter, like she’s finally rid of a burden that weighed her down.

Gathering herself, she heads for the door. “I’ll be right back. Don’t...fall over or anything.”

I roll my eyes good-naturedly. “Sure, Mouse. I’ll try not to keel over in your absence.”

She darts me a playful glare, but her cheeks stay pink. Then she slips out.

I watch her go, every step, every shift of fabric, memorizing the shape of this moment. Because there’s something dangerous blooming in me, and it’s got her name all over it.

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Once the door shuts, I release a breath I didn't realize I was holding. My hand drifts to the closed little pinpricks on my neck, fingertips grazing the faint sting. Strange how something that should feel dangerous turned into something...intimate.

I let out a small laugh, still a bit dazed, and lean back on my palms.

I'll stay put—for the moment, anyway—just like she said. And as the lingering warmth from her bite pulses softly at my neck, I wonder if, for the first time in my life, I'm actually okay with being fussed over.

Aria

I hardly notice the rickety steps as I descend from our room, humming some nameless tune under my breath. It's ridiculous, really, how light I feel. My limbs aren't weighed down by hunger anymore, and my heart—well, that might be another story, entirely.

A faint, delighted flush lingers on my cheeks, not just from feeding on Roan... but from everything else that followed. The memory of her taste and the warmth of her body pressed to mine fills me with a dizzying sort of joy.

I press a hand lightly to my lips, remembering the feel of hers. Her taste still lingers on my tongue. And the way she looked afterward... half-lidded, pink-cheeked, her voice raw with wonder after I finished feeding.

She didn't recoil. She didn't look at me like some monster, the way so many others have in the past, even the more willing bloodslaves that my clan kept.

Roan looked content. Sated. Soft in a way she rarely lets herself be.

And I want to keep that softness safe. I want to see her eyes go soft like that again. Maybe only for me.

The tavern door creaks open at the bottom of the stairs, and I slip through, half-dreaming. The scent of stewed meat and fresh bread wraps around me like a warm shawl, tugging me back into the real world. Voices rise and fall around the room—tankards clink, chairs scrape, someone laughs too loud.

It's grounding. And yet... part of me is still upstairs, tangled with her.

I weave through the narrow path between tables and stools, making my way toward the counter. The innkeeper turns just as I approach, wiping a mug with a cloth that's seen better days. It's the same woman who handed us our room key—the one who asked, not-so-innocently, "One bed or two?"

Heat flares across my face.

She doesn't say anything, but her eyes do a slow, knowing sweep over me. Then she smirks—subtle, restrained—but it's there. Gods, she knows.

"What can I get you?" she asks, all business, but her tone is amused beneath the din of the tavern.

I keep my chin up as I slide a few coins onto the counter. "Something hearty. Good meat, whatever's hot. And a mug of ale."

"For you or the lady up in your room?" she asks, already turning toward the kitchen window.

I blink. My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

She chuckles under her breath. “Thought so.”

Mortified, I duck my head and busy myself with brushing nonexistent lint from my sleeve. “Thank you,” I mutter, trying not to combust on the spot.

She hums in response, hollering the order into the back. I take a seat at the edge of the counter, fingers tapping restlessly against the scarred wood.

My thoughts drift again—to Roan, of course. Always her.

Feeding from her had been... different. Not just because of the sex that shortly followed, but because it felt like something sacred. Like she offered herself not out of obligation or reckless curiosity, but trust. Real trust.

A half-buried memory surges: a terrified villager pinned by one of my clan’s brutes, crying out while I stood frozen nearby, forced to take my share. The taste of their blood was bitter with fear and revulsion, the act forced and violent.

My clan’s way—my mother’s way—was always about domination, never tenderness.

But tonight...tonight was different. There was no fear in Roan’s gasp, only a startled kind of pleasure mixed with a little pain. And I felt safe, enveloped in her strength instead of drowning in another’s terror.

I let out a soft, contented sigh, pressing a hand over my still-fluttering heart.

And the way she’d whispered my name—rough and breathless—while my fangs were buried in her throat...

I press my thighs together under the bar and let out a soft, shaky breath.

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Maybe we'll leave tomorrow. Maybe we'll ride until the road forgets us. I don't know where we'll end up.

But I know this...I'll carry the taste of her on my tongue for as long as I can.

I'm so lost in thought, it takes me a moment to register the tone of a conversation happening just behind me. At first, all I catch is the word "vampire" in a hushed, urgent voice. My entire body goes rigid, panic clawing at my throat.

They've found me.

Instinct screamsrun, but I force myself to hold still, straining to listen.

"—must be real trouble, bringing her here," one man mutters. "Heard she's searching for someone who left."

A woman's voice answers, quieter still. "Clan mother, that's what they say. She's commanding the others. Dangerous lot, especially if you cross them. Could tear a person to pieces. Best to let 'em be."

My pulse hammers.Clan mother.My mother.She's here?The shock of it lands like a blow to my stomach.Already?

I thought we had a little more time, that maybe she'd be content sending her enforcers after me.

The idea that she's come personally implies...She's desperate to drag me back.

The clink of the tankard hitting the wooden table snaps me back to reality. The scent of roast meat and warm bread wafts up, but it does nothing to ease the tightening in my chest. My heart stumbles over itself, pulse quickening until it roars in my ears, drowning out the low murmur of tavern conversation around me.

My mother. Here.

The words repeat in my head like a drumbeat, each syllable hammering deeper, faster.

My mother.

Here.

My stomach churns, the panic rising so fast it leaves me lightheaded. I grip the edge of the table until the wood bites into my palms, grounding me in something solid. But the pressure doesn't stop the spiral.

She's close. So close that strangers here in the tavern are talking about it. The enforcers must've tracked my scent.

The thought makes my breath hitch. We need to leave. Now.

The fire crackles in the hearth across the room, but the heat doesn't reach me. My eyes dart toward the door. Roan's weakened, but I can drag her out of the bed if I have to. We'll disappear into the night before the enforcers close in.

But how far can you really run?

The question slams into me like a punch to the ribs. Just when we thought we've gained distance, my clan closes in. My mother is relentless; she doesn't know how to

let go. I know that better than anyone.

And Roan...

Roan is upstairs. Vulnerable. Still weakened from the blood she let me take not even an hour ago. I think of her sprawled on the bed, paler than usual but pretending she wasn't affected. The guilt slices through me like a knife.

I took from her, and now she's too weak to fight if it comes to that.

What have I done?

The room spins around me. The sounds of laughter and clinking glasses warp into something distorted and distant. My throat tightens, my breath quick and shallow.

I can't think.

She'll kill her. My mother will slit Roan's throat without hesitation if it means dragging me back.

We should've kept running. We should never have stopped here.

I need to get up. I need to move. The instinct to flee rises in me like a wave, but my legs won't cooperate. I sit frozen, the weight of inevitable doom pressing against my chest. My breath stutters.

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I can't breathe.

We have to run. We have to get away.

But even if we leave now, what then? Another town, another stretch of endless road. More nights of Roan sitting with her back to a tree, sword across her lap. More cold, sleepless mornings. I can't keep dragging her through this.

But if we stay, she'll die.

Unless there's another way...

The thought slithers through my mind, cold and sharp, and it stops me mid-breath. My fingers tighten around the edge of the table until the wood creaks beneath the pressure.

Another way.

I could give myself up.

The idea shifts deeper, wrapping around my ribs like a vice.

My mother doesn't want Roan. She never wanted anyone else—only me. It was always me. The rogue daughter. The traitor. The disappointment. The asset she let slip away. If I walked into her grasp willingly, she'd have no reason to hunt Roan.

Roan would live.

I'd make sure of it.

The panic that had been choking me shifts into something else. Something heavier. The weight of inevitability settles over my shoulders. My vision blurs, though whether from the tavern's smoke or the sharp sting of tears, I can't tell. My heartbeat slows, each thud matching the dull roar of dread in my ears.

Will I survive the clan again? I don't know. But if it means Roan gets to live—gets to be free—I can endure it.

I swallow hard and glance toward the stairs. Roan won't let me go without a fight. I know her too well now. Even half-weakened, she'd follow me. She'd tear through the night with that stubborn, unrelenting protectiveness that both infuriates me and makes me want to lean into her warmth.

Unless I slip away while she's sleeping.

The thought lands like a stone in my stomach.

The ground tilts beneath me. I sit there, the tavern spinning around me, knowing that I've just crossed some invisible threshold.

Because now it's not just a passing notion.

It's a plan.

You said you wanted to protect her, I remind myself. Well, this is how.

The voices behind me grow louder, so I steel myself and swivel on the stool, mustering a friendly smile. "Excuse me," I say, trying to keep my tone light. "I couldn't help but overhear. You're talking about...vampires in town?"

The older man looks me up and down, and for a moment, my heart flutters in fear that he'll notice something off about me. But he just nods, eyes glinting with the thrill of gossip.

“Aye, a group of ’em arrived a bit ago. Heard they’re staying at the old Miller house. Lot of commotion, or so folks say.”

“Right,” I murmur, gripping the tankard handle to steady my shaking hand. I force my voice to stay even. “Where exactly is the Miller house?”

The table quiets. Three sets of eyes land on me, suddenly more curious than before. The woman closest to me frowns. “Why’re you asking?”

“I just want to avoid it,” I say quickly, fumbling for the lie. “If there’s trouble, I’d rather stay clear.”

They exchange glances, and finally the older man huffs. “Western edge of town, just past the wind-bent pines. Looks abandoned, but don’t be fooled—folks keep their distance for a reason. Even without vampires in town, that place draws trouble. Wrong-doers, squatters, folks with nowhere else to go. Some say it’s cursed. Others say it’s just unlucky.”

My mind races, breath growing shallow. They’re so close.

“They’re not to be trifled with,” the woman adds, shooting me a wary look. “Best keep to yourself. Last thing you want is vampire blood on your hands...or yours on theirs.”

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I swallow, forcing a tight smile. “I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.”

They nod, and I turn away, hugging the plate of food and mug of ale to my chest. My pulse thuds loud in my ears, dread pumping through my veins with each heartbeat. She’s here, I think, and if she finds me...

I clamp down on the panic.

“Just get upstairs,” I whisper under my breath, pushing through the crowd.

Get to Roan, feed her, let her rest, and get out.

Jaw set, I take one last steadying breath and hurry back up the stairs. The floor creaks under my stolen boots, an echo of my racing pulse. The dread gnaws at me—my mother is here, and time is running out.

Roan

I hear Aria’s footsteps on the staircase and there’s an instant lift in my chest—like she’s carrying sunshine with her.

A vampire carrying sunshine—imagine that, eh? A small laugh falls off my lips.

By the time the door cracks open, my heart’s already pounding in anticipation, and I must look ridiculous beaming at her like a puppy. But I don’t care. She’s here.

She balances a plate of roasted meat and a tankard of ale, nudging the door shut with

her hip.

“Brought you dinner,” she announces, breezing into the room. Her voice is light, playful, but there’s an edge in her eyes that I almost miss.

I push myself up on the bed, ignoring the faint lightheadedness lingering from our...adventure. Totally worth it, I think, a pleased hum escaping my throat.

“You spoil me, Mouse,” I tease, extending a hand for the plate.

She snorts, setting both plate and ale on the bedside table. “Well, I owe you after that.”

Her cheeks color at the memory—I can almost see the moments replaying in her head, the press of her mouth at my neck, the jolt of warmth that followed. And then everything else. A pleasant shiver runs through me at the thought.

“Feels like I’m the one who owes you,” I reply, patting the space beside me.

She ducks her head, but not before I catch the flicker of hesitation in her eyes. It’s fast—so fast I almost miss it—but I know her better than that now. Still, she offers me a small smile, and even with that ghost of something behind her eyes, she walks over and perches on the edge of the bed. Close enough that her warmth radiates through my shirt.

I glance at the food and let out a low groan as my stomach growls. “So, are you actually gonna let me eat, or just make me stare at a perfectly good roast?”

“By all means,” Aria says, scooting closer. “Dig in, mercenary.”

There’s a gentle tease in her voice, and I grin, exaggerated, playing along. “Careful or

I'll withhold all future cuddles," I warn, waving a piece of meat dramatically in her face.

She smothers a laugh, but it's tight around the edges. "You wouldn't dare."

"Want to test me?" I raise a brow, then take a huge bite of the roast. The flavor hits my tongue like a revelation. "By the gods, that's delicious."

"Good?" She leans in, bracing one hand on the mattress. Her other reaches up to graze the spot on my neck where she bit me. "Still no pain?"

I shake my head, licking grease from my thumb. "Just a bit of a tingle." I wash it down with a swig of ale. "Trust me, I've had worse."

A lopsided smile tugs at her lips, but there's something off in her expression. Her gaze keeps drifting, like she's trying to hide a shadow in her eyes.

"Glad to hear it," she says, but her voice wavers just a hair.

I set the food down, appetite fading as unease prickles along the back of my neck. She's too quiet. Too still.

Something's wrong.

I reach out, fingers brushing against her jaw, and gently tilt her face up to mine. "Hey." My voice drops low, steady. "You okay?"

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Her eyes flick away for half a second—just long enough to make my chest ache.

Gods, please don't let it be what I think it is.

My heart tightens with a sick twist. Is that it? Does she regret it—feeding from me, or worse... the sex?

Because if she does, if that's what's weighing down her shoulders right now, it might just shatter me.

Her eyes dart away, and when she answers, it's too fast. Too smooth. Too practiced. "Fine," she says, even though I can feel the lie vibrating under her skin.

She lifts a finger, presses it gently to my lips before I can call her out.

"Really, I'm fine. Just...tired. Post-meal high." Her smile is faint, forced. "Speaking of, you should finish your meal."

I don't let her deflect. Not this time.

I catch her hand in mine, curling my fingers around hers. My heart hammers as I ask the thing clawing at my insides. "Do you regret it?"

Her brow furrows, confused.

"The blood," I clarify. My voice is quieter now, almost afraid of the answer. "Or... the sex. Or both."

She blinks. Her breath catches. And then she's moving, leaning in, her palm cupping my cheek like I'm something precious.

"No," she murmurs, so soft it melts into the space between us. "I don't regret any of it."

Before I can respond, her lips brush mine—slow and sure, the kind of kiss that silences doubt. Her fingers stay threaded in mine, grounding me as the tension starts to ease from my chest.

When she pulls back, her gaze holds mine. Clear. Steady. "Not even a little."

A breath I didn't realize I was holding slips out of me, slow and shaky.

Not regret.

Thank the gods.

I close my eyes for a second, pressing my forehead to hers. That soft admission—it takes some of the weight off my chest. Something's bothering her. I know it. But at least it's not that. Not what we shared.

I slide my hand along her jaw, my thumb brushing just beneath her cheekbone. "Okay," I murmur, voice a little rough. "Okay."

She leans into the touch, but her eyes flick away again—only for a moment, but I don't miss it. Whatever it is she's carrying, she's not ready to name it yet.

That's fine. I can wait. I've waited longer for less.

But gods, I hope she lets me in soon.

For now,I let it go.

I pick the roast back up, shoving the rest of it into my mouth in a few wolfish bites. The ale goes down smoothly, warmth spreading in my chest. Between the feeding and the food, my body's caught somewhere between drowsy contentment and an uneasy flutter that's purely about Aria.

When I glance at her, she's watching me.

Half-leaning against the headboard, eyes soft but brow creased like she's trying to puzzle something out. Her fingers toy with the edge of the blanket, nervous energy rolling off her in quiet waves. When I glance her way, she doesn't look away.

“Are you sure you're okay?” she asks, voice careful, like she's afraid of the answer. Her eyes flick to the spot where she fed from me—not even bleeding anymore, barely a twinge—but I see it clear as day...

So that's what's bothering her.

She thinks she hurt me.

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The realization lands heavy in my chest, and I can't help the crooked smile that tugs at my mouth. Gods, this woman. I raise a brow and wave my hand lazily through the air.

“Mouse, I’ve lost more blood stubbing my toe.”

Her eyes widen, then she scoffs, but it’s faint—like a laugh pressed into a sigh. “That’s not even anatomically possible.”

“Sure it is,” I say, settling back against the pillows. “You’ve never seen me walk into a table corner at full speed. Gruesome stuff.”

She rolls her eyes, but a reluctant smile flickers at the edges of her lips.

“You’re ridiculous,” she mutters.

“And yet here you are,” I reply, shifting closer until our legs brush, “voluntarily sharing a bed with me. Makes you questionable by association.”

That gets a real laugh—soft, but genuine—and it eases something tight in my chest. She’s still carrying whatever’s weighing her down, I can feel it, but at least the silence between us doesn’t feel like a wall anymore. Just a pause. A breath.

“I’m fine,” I say, quieter now. I catch her gaze and hold it. “Really. You didn’t take too much. I’d tell you if you did.”

She studies me, long enough that I feel it in my bones, then finally gives a small nod.

I take her hand, lifting it, and press a kiss to her knuckles, slow and deliberate. “You won’t break me, Mouse.”

She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t pull away either.

I scoot closer, setting the empty plate on the nightstand. “You sure you’re okay?” I ask again, this time quieter, wary.

She nods. “Come here.”

I crawl up beside her without protest, slipping under the blanket. She slides down next to me, her body stiff for half a second before she lets herself soften into my side. Her back molds to my front, the crown of her head fitting perfectly beneath my chin. I drape an arm over her waist and feel her exhale. My breath catches a little when she relaxes into it.

This—this I could do every night for the rest of my life.

The hush of the room settles over us, broken only by the faint clatter of dishes downstairs and our quiet breathing. My eyelids grow heavier as the day’s fatigue creeps in, but I fight it off.

Her fingers drift to mine, intertwining like it’s second nature. I feel her press closer. But her breathing is uneven, and I can feel something tight in her frame. She’s not at ease. Not really.

“Aria,” I murmur, not even sure what I want to say next.

Maybe I just want to hear her voice again. Maybe I just want her to remind me this is real.

She doesn't answer. But she threads our fingers tighter.

I lean in, kiss the side of her head. "You don't have to say anything. But..."

Her shoulders tense slightly. It's the smallest thing. If I weren't holding her, I might have missed it.

I swallow. Then say it anyway. "I think I'm falling for you, Mouse."

There's a pause—long enough for my heart to trip over itself. The air between us goes taut, like a bowstring pulled too tight. I half expect her to go still, to pull away. But instead, she lifts my hand—our fingers still laced—and presses a soft kiss to my knuckles. Her lips are warm, reverent, almost apologetic.

Then, quietly, she whispers against my skin, "Don't say ridiculous things."

I blink. For a heartbeat, it stings. Not because I expected her to say it back, but because something in her tone sounds like she wants to believe it—and doesn't think she can.

I shift, pressing closer to her back, resting my chin near the curve of her shoulder. "It's not ridiculous," I murmur. "I do. I am. I...I love you."

She exhales sharply, like the words knocked the wind from her. Her thumb strokes over my hand in slow circles, but she doesn't speak.

"I know I'm not great at saying what I feel," I add, voice barely above a whisper, "but it's not some passing thing. I love you, Aria. Every damn piece of you. Fangs and all."

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Still, she stays quiet. But I feel it—the tremble in her breath, the way she presses her body tighter against mine like she’s scared I’ll disappear.

And maybe she doesn’t say it back.

But she doesn’t let go either.

Then, softly, barely more than breath, “You make it hard not to feel safe with you.”

The words are quiet but sincere, and something in my chest gives—like a rope finally slackening after being pulled too tight. It’s not I love you, not quite. But it’s something real. Something earned.

“Good,” I whisper, brushing my nose against the curve of her neck. “You deserve safe.”

She hums a low, content sound, and I feel her lips press gently to my fingers again before they settle back between us.

The warmth of her, the steadiness of her breathing, the softness of the bed—it’s a lullaby I can’t resist. I fight to stay awake just a little longer, to hold on to this fragile, perfect moment, but it’s already slipping.

The last thing I feel before sleep takes me is Aria’s fingers tightening around mine.

And for once, I don’t fight the darkness. I sink into it willingly, with her warmth curled against me and the echo of her voice still soft in my ear.

Aria

For a while, staring at Roan's peaceful face in the low light. Her breathing is soft and steady, lips parted in the faintest smile. She looks content and...fragile in a way I've never seen.

My chest clenches at the sight—fragile and Roan in the same thought shouldn't fit, but it does now, because of me.

And that's terrifying.

I bite the inside of my cheek, dragging in a breath that doesn't settle anything.

I made her a promise. Don't run off, Mouse. Promise me. I remember the way her voice dropped when she said it—quiet, but firm, like she was daring me to believe she might not survive it if I left again.

And I promised her I wouldn't.

I meant it. I did.

But promises can change. Especially when they become too dangerous to keep.

Guilt gnaws at my insides, warring with the tender warmth that still lingers from the feel of her arms around me, her whispered confession. I love you. The words echo in my mind, each time piercing me a little deeper. I never thought I'd hear those words from anyone. Never thought I'd want to hear them.

And I do. I want them again. I want her.

That's exactly why I have to go.

I thought I'd rather die free than live under my mother's rule. But now...now I have Roan to think about.

My breath shakes as I peel her arm away, inch by careful inch, hoping she won't stir. She's beyond exhausted—between travel, fighting, letting me feed, and sex. I take advantage of that weariness now.

Slipping from beneath the blanket, I press one last kiss to her temple, letting my lips linger on her skin for a heartbeat too long. Then I force myself to stand.

One hand twitches in her sleep, like she's reaching for something. Reaching forme...

I turn away before I can be tempted to crawl back into that bed and pretend I'm not already breaking her heart.

I gather my things in silence, biting back tears that threaten to blur my vision. My chest feels hollow, a dull ache settling in as I realize this is the last time I'll see her like this—peaceful, unguarded, safe. The corners of my mouth tremble, but I can't let myself cry.

Not yet.

On the bedside table, I find a spare scrap of parchment and a stub of charcoal. I write:

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Roan,

Sorry to spoil everything. Turns out I'm just a mouse after all—skittish, darting away when danger's near. But I can't let you risk your life because of me. Forgive me. You deserve a mercenary's life with less fuss.

Thank you, for everything.

—Mouse

I reread the note, wishing there were some way to make her understand this isn't a rejection. That I care for her, more than I should. But I know Roan—it'll sting. Still, I pray she'll see the truth shining through the words: I'm doing this to protect you.

I leave the note by her half-finished mug of ale, gently propping it against the tankard so she can't miss it.

Then, swallowing the tightness in my throat, I slip through the door.

My hand lingers on the wood a beat too long, but I don't look back. I can't.

My heart pounds as I descend the stairs, each creaking step louder than it should be. The tavern's night crowd has thinned, most of the tables empty now, only a few half-drunken patrons still murmuring over mugs. None of them glance up. None of them notice me leaving—and why would they?

I'm just another woman with a hood pulled low, vanishing into the night.

Except one person does see me.

The innkeeper stands behind the bar, drying a mug with the same rag she's probably been using all night. Her eyes flick up as I pass. For a heartbeat, our gazes meet.

She doesn't smile. Doesn't ask questions. She just gives me a slow, subtle nod.

Like she knows.

Like she's seen this before—someone leaving behind more than just a warm bed upstairs.

I nod back, throat tight, and keep walking. Out the door. Into the chill air. Away from the warmth I promised I wouldn't run from.

And I don't let myself look back.

The moon slicks the cobblestones in silver, making it easier to navigate the winding lanes. The roads are mostly empty, only the faint rattle of a shutter or the bark of a dog keeps me company as I walk. Each step echoes too loudly in my ears.

The night smells like wood-smoke and damp earth, but all I can taste is dread.

The old Miller house. That's where they're staying.

The thought of walking straight into my mother's grasp sends my pulse skittering, but I cling to the memory of Roan's sleeping form. Her whispered I love you still clings to my skin like a balm—and a wound.

She trusts me. She loves me.

And I love her, too.

If they catch her—if they use her to get to me—I won't survive that, and neither will she.

No. This ends tonight.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to no one. To Roan.

The town falls away behind me, and the lane narrows, curving through a patch of trees that have long since surrendered their leaves. The Miller house looms ahead—tall, half-rotted, the edges of its silhouette softened by lantern light spilling through warped windowpanes.

The voices inside are low, sharp-edged. Familiar.

Clan.

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I cross the threshold of the weed-choked property, heart drumming so loudly I'm sure they'll hear. My stomach lurches. Every instinct screams to turn around, to run back to her. But I keep walking.

Because I'll trade myself for her a hundred times over if it means she stays free.

Because love, real love, doesn't always mean staying.

Sometimes...it means walking into the dark alone.

There's no chance to knock, no chance to hesitate—two enforcers slip from the shadows like wraiths, their hands closing around my arms in the same breath. I don't flinch, but my breath hitches, a startled cry rising in my throat before I bite it down. I have to do this. For Roan.

One of them leans in, breath hot against my cheek. "Didn't think we'd see your pretty face so soon," he sneers.

Damaris. His voice drips with familiarity, twisted now with cruel amusement. The other one is silent, but his grip bites into my elbow hard enough to leave bruises.

They drag me through a battered door that creaks and groans like it's protesting my return. The scent hits me first—mildewed curtains and splintered wood, but underneath it, that thick, metallic tang that pierces my senses. Blood. Fresh. My stomach knots.

I'm paraded through a grand foyer that's barely clinging to its former glory. Dust

hangs heavy in the air, lit by slivers of moonlight through broken windows. What furniture remains is splintered, torn, or bloodstained. It's as if the house itself has been feeding.

They shove me forward. Not rough enough to bruise, but firm enough to remind me who is in control.

The enforcer on my right—Tallen, I think—peels off and disappears down a long hallway. His boots echo against the cracked tiles as he goes to fetch her.

My mother.

That word claws something raw and buried from inside me.

When Damaris finally releases me, I don't stumble. I stand still. I keep my chin up, even though my palms are clammy and my stomach twists like I've swallowed stones.

Damaris stays behind, lingering a few paces away. He doesn't say anything. Doesn't need to. He just watches. Always watching.

I'm back in the den.

The center of the web.

And this was always going to happen, wasn't it?

But I didn't expect it to feel like this—like every cell in my body is screaming for Roan. For her arms. Her voice. Her steadiness.

I told myself I had to protect her. That walking into this place meant keeping her safe.

Now that I'm here, caged and alone, I realize just how much of myself I left behind in that bed.

Damaris shifts slightly, arms crossed, weight resting on one hip like a bored vulture. His expression is unreadable—apathetic, maybe. Or patient.

He's my mother's favorite. That loyalty's carved into every inch of him.

I wrap my arms around myself. Not to protect. To contain.

Because every instinct is screaming to run once more.

But I won't.

Not this time.

Not while I have even an inch of strength left in me.

The house groans—an old, aching sound that rattles somewhere deep in the bones of the walls. Damaris glances toward the hall, then back at me, and I swear I see the ghost of a smirk.

“Didn't think you had it in you,” he murmurs.

I don't respond, don't give him the satisfaction. I just keep staring forward, hands clenched, waiting.

And the air shifts.

She's here.

I turn to find her—my mother.

She stands in the doorway, dressed in dark finery, hands folded with an almost regal poise, as if she appeared out of thin air.

Her eyes meet mine—piercing, unblinking—and suddenly, I'm a child again. Small. Uncertain. Desperate for the smallest scrap of approval. My knees threaten to buckle under the weight of her gaze.

She regards me with a disdainful little tilt of her head. Her eyes flick to Damaris and a faint flicker of satisfaction ghosts over her features.

She's not surprised to see me. Of course she isn't. She knows me too well. She knew I'd give in, come back. She planned for this.

Silence stretches.

Her lips part, and a cruel smile slices across her face.

"Aria," she says, my name dragged out like a weapon. Her voice is low, threaded with condescension—soft as silk, and just as cold. "So you've finally remembered where you belong."

My stomach twists, but I force my chin up. I can't let her see how badly my hands are shaking. This is it. No more running. Roan's safety depends on this—on me.

Then I hear it—footsteps, soft but deliberate. The creak of wood, the rustle of cloaks.

Enforcers begin to spill into the foyer behind her, one by one. Tallen's among them—his presence unmistakable. Beside him, a broad-shouldered woman I barely recognize, eyes sharp and cold. And others... too many others. Some I know by name. Some I've only seen in passing, faces blurred by memory. Some I don't recognize at all.

They fan out behind my mother like shadows drawn to blood.

She steps forward slightly, her expression sharpening. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten your place entirely."

My throat constricts. Even after all this time, the urge to bow my head, to cast my eyes aside, creeps in.

Stay calm. Remember why you're here.

I make my voice as steady as I can. "I came to end this."

She lets out a low, mocking laugh. "You end nothing. If you had any power to speak of, you wouldn't have slunk back to me like a whipped dog."

Her words sting—because they're not entirely wrong. But I don't flinch.

"Tell me the truth," she purrs, circling me like a viper toying with its prey. "You didn't come back out of loyalty."

She pauses, letting the silence stretch, then adds, “Maelric reported someone was with you. A mortal.”

My breath hitches.

“He said she fought like a soldier,” she continues, voice low and deliberate. “Swordswoman. Fierce. Protective.”

She steps back into view, tilting her head, studying me like I’m some curious puzzle she’s halfway through solving.

“You’re not alone,” she says, soft and certain. “So who is she, Aria?”

I bristle, jaw tightening. “Does it matter why I came back?”

“Doesn’t it?” Her smile widens, all teeth and calculation. “You brought someone into our affairs. Into my affairs. Did you fall for some backwater stray, Aria?” She tuts. “You always had a soft spot for humans and strays.”

The words land harder than they should.

I flash—unbidden—back to the old estate gardens, where I’d snuck scraps of meat to a half-starved cat that kept slipping past the guards. I was barely twelve. I thought I was being kind. When my mother found out, she had the creature killed in front of me. She said mercy was a weakness the world would punish. Then she made me bury it.

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“You’ll care for a thing, and it will cost you,” she’d whispered, voice like a blade pressed to the base of my throat. “Let this be your first lesson.”

I suck in a breath, an ache knotting deep in my stomach. She’s always known exactly how to unnerve me. How to twist the knife.

“If you want me,” I say, forcing the words past the rising burn in my throat, “if you want your—your property back, then I’m here. You don’t need her too.”

Her lips twitch, suppressing a laugh. “Ah, so it is about a mortal. How predictable. You never did understand our superiority, did you?” She sweeps forward, her presence dominating the shattered foyer. “You never understood what it meant to be one of us. You threw away strength and station for...what, exactly?” Her gaze flicks over my scuffed boots and torn cloak, and the distaste in her expression deepens. “Honestly, Aria, you look...pathetic.”

My shoulders tense, jaw locked, but I stay silent. She’s baiting me. Poking old wounds to see if I’ll bleed.

I won’t give her the satisfaction.

When I don’t respond, her expression hardens—elegance turning brittle.

“Come.” She extends a pale hand, fingers rigid, ringed in silver like the promise of a cage. “We leave immediately. Back to the estate. You’ve wasted enough of my time.”

My voice breaks through the tension. “What about her?”

Her eyes flick toward me, amused. “Your...friend need not be harmed, so long as you don’t make a fuss.”

I swallow, trying to quell the panic flooding my chest. I can’t let her or the clan near Roan—there’s no way she’ll spare her. If I press, I might lose any chance of protecting Roan at all.

Still, I have to ask. “Why do you want me back so badly? You have an entire clan—”

Her eyes flash with anger, cutting me off. “You dare question me? You are my daughter,” she hisses, “and you carry our blood. There is no running from that. Your little rebellion has been...entertaining, but I’m done playing. You will return to your place. Or I will burn whatever hole you’ve crawled into.”

She signals the enforcers again, and they step forward to grip my arms once more. I freeze, panic rising hot in my chest.

This is it—she’ll drag me back, and Roan...

My mind whirls, heart pounding. I see Roan—sleeping, unguarded, back at the inn. I’d parted from her to protect her, to keep her out of this, but I was a fool to think distance would be enough. My mother could track a breath through a storm—she’s a master tracker. That’s how she followed us this far, isn’t it? Roan’s scent, the faint trail we left behind, every misstep I thought we’d hidden... all of it led her here. And if she wants to, she’ll follow it right back to the inn. Right back to her.

I suck in a breath. My voice comes out quieter this time, trembling around the edge of desperation. “If I come with you quietly... you’ll leave her alone? Forever?”

A languid shrug. “If she’s wise enough to keep out of my way.”

My eyes fall for a heartbeat—and that’s all she needs. She strikes like a snake, one gloved hand grabbing my chin, yanking my face up.

“You will obey,” she murmurs, her tone laced with chilling finality. “Because that’s what you were born for. You’re only here now because you can’t hide forever. Don’t lie to me, Aria. But you and I both know who holds the leash. I’m the only one who can grant your mortal a chance, flimsy as it may be.”

I want to scream. I want to tear her apart—but the thought of Roan in my mother’s path sets ice in my veins.

Instead, I say, “Yes.”

The word tastes like blood and surrender.

Damaris exhales sharply behind me. One of the enforcers nods. My mother’s smile spreads, triumphant.

I glance toward the door, as if I could see Roan from here. I can’t. But the echo of her warmth is still tucked beneath my ribs.

“I’ll go with you,” I say, voice low. “I’ll obey.”

And for the first time since I left that inn, I feel truly cold.

The silence shatters.

A crash—sharp, jarring. A muffled shout. And then a sound that turns my blood to ice: a wet, visceral tear, like flesh parting from bone.

My mother’s fingers jerk from my chin, and her head whips toward the noise. Around

me, the enforcers go still, muscles taut and ready, eyes darting toward the hallway with sudden, silent panic.

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Something's wrong. Something's here.

Something violent and immediate.

And then the door slams open, a gust of cold air bursting through the threshold.

My breath catches. The world narrows.

“Roan...”

She stands in the doorway like a storm in human shape, sword slick with fresh blood, face set in a fury I've never seen before. Her dark hair clings to her forehead, disheveled, damp with sweat, and her chest heaves like she ran straight here without stopping.

Oh gods, she came after me.

My knees nearly give out, a rush of something sharp and bright bursting in my chest—relief, disbelief, bone-deep terror.

Roan's eyes lock on mine, and for a heartbeat, she looks at nothing else. Not the opulent rot of the ruined foyer. Not the enforcers tensing around me. Not my mother's icy expression curdling into rage.

Just me.

Her voice cuts through the stillness like a blade.

“Mouse,” she says, low and furious, “what the hell were you thinking?”

The nickname lands like a fist to my chest. My vision blurs.

Gods.

I want to run to her, to throw myself into her arms and scream I’m sorry until I can’t breathe. But I can’t move. Not with my mother standing inches away, her wrath rolling off her in cold waves.

Roan takes a step inside, slow and measured, but her blade stays raised. Blood drips to the floor, one dark drop after another. She’s hurt—no, someone else is. She fought her way here.

For me.

Tears well, hot and helpless. She doesn’t know what she’s done, what she’s walked into. Or maybe she does. And it doesn’t matter. Because she came anyway.

Because she loves me.

A tear slips down my cheek as the silence in the foyer stretches thin, ready to snap.

Roan came for me.

And now, everything is about to break.

Roan

I see her—Aria—trapped between two enforcers, her arms pinned, her eyes wide and glassy with tears, and something inside me snaps.

Rage surges like wildfire, unstoppable. The blood in my veins ignites, a roar rising in my ears that drowns out everything else. She left me. She signed 'Mouse' in that goddamn note and walked into hell alone.

But I'll be damned before I let them touch her again. I'll burn this whole place down if I have to. I'll tear them apart piece by piece.

Because she's mine. And I'm not leaving without her.

My grip tightens on my sword, the hilt slick from the blood already spilled. I raise it slowly, blade still dripping, and aim the point toward the woman on the far side of the ruined foyer. Raven hair, fine clothes, a regal pose that sets every muscle in my body on edge.

Aria's mother, Lysara.

She stares at me like I'm nothing more than a stray dog tracking mud through her throne room. My lip curls.

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“You want her?” I growl, voice low and venomous. “Then you’ll have to go through me.”

The enforcers go still, their glowing eyes glinting in the half-light. Dust floats through broken beams of moonlight like ash from a fire not yet started.

This is the match.

The woman—Aria’s mother—tilts her head. “You’re bold for a mortal,” she says, voice cool and lilting. “Bold and very, very foolish.”

Behind me, the door hangs crooked, cracked from where I forced it open with my boot. I’m bleeding—shoulder, thigh, somewhere on my ribs. Doesn’t matter. I’ve fought through worse. And this time, I have something to fight for.

Aria gasps, twisting against the enforcers’ hold. “Roan...” her voice breaks on my name.

That’s all I need.

I shift forward, jaw clenched, sword raised, breath ragged in my chest. I don’t care if they outnumber me five to one. Ten to one.

I’ll bury them all.

“Kill her,” the woman says, voice like breaking glass.

The enforcers move. A blur of speed—unnatural, fast, lethal.

I catch the first blade mid-swing and shove it aside, pivoting into the attacker with a slash across his chest. Blood sprays warm and thick, and he collapses. But the next one is already on me, something sharp raking across my shoulder. Pain tears through me, white-hot and blinding.

I barely dodge the third, feeling the edge of steel graze my ribs. The fourth slams into me like a battering ram, and we go down in a tangle of limbs and snarls.

I twist beneath him, using my momentum to flip him over, pinning him with my weight. He thrashes, wild and fast, and when I drive my elbow into his throat, he chokes—but not before his lips peel back in a feral snarl.

His fangs flash—too long, too sharp—and he lunges, trying to bite.

I don't hesitate.

I catch the glint of my blade and drag it across his throat in one clean, practiced motion. His body jerks once, then stills beneath me. Then I'm up again as the next two swing at me.

Every breath feels like a firebrand in my lungs. My sword arm screams in protest, but I don't stop swinging. Can't.

I catch a glimpse—Aria, straining, thrashing—her captor's knee slamming into her ribs to keep her down. Her voice rises above the din, sharp and shaking: “Stop—please!”

I look up—blood in my eyes—and she kicks one of them. He stumbles. She twists—

“Roan, I—I love you!” she shouts.

The world narrows.

The words slam into me harder than any blade, flooding my chest with a desperate, aching warmth. She loves me.

And that’s it.

The next enforcer gets a pommel to the jaw and collapses like a sack of meat. I spin, blood flying from my blade, and take down another before he can lunge.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her mother move, her dark silhouette crossing the debris-littered floor. She picks up a fallen sword and test-swings it with chilling poise, like she’s done this a thousand times. Maybe she has.

“Hold her,” she snaps at the others.

They obey. A second enforcer grabs Aria, keeping her down, and she screams my name. It guts me.

Lysara lifts her sword and levels it at me with a smug little smile. “You think you’re worthy of my daughter’s defiance? Of her love?”

My breath burns in my throat, but I raise my sword, refusing to kneel. “I think,” I rasp, blood dripping down my arm, “that I won’t let you take her.”

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Her lip twitches. And then she lunges.

Our blades clash, the sound echoing through the gutted foyer. The impact jars my spine, nearly takes me off my feet. She's fast—inhumanly so—and strong. Each strike sends shocks down my arm. I parry, pivot, duck—barely keeping ahead of her relentless attacks.

She spins. Her blade slices across my thigh. I stagger, biting back a scream. My blood hits the floor in a hot rush, and I nearly drop to one knee.

But I see Aria, still pinned, still fighting. She loves me.

And that gives me enough strength to lift my sword again.

I won't fall. Not while Aria still needs me.

Not until I've burned this whole damn house to the ground.

Aria's voice, sharp and ragged, cuts through the chaos like a blade. She's crying out for me, begging them to stop, and it fuels me like fire in my veins. Just a little more, I grit out in my mind, swinging harder.

I catch a break—a sloppy parry from her mother, and I lunge forward, slashing hard. My blade slices through the woman's sleeve, drawing blood. A thin line, not nearly enough. But it makes her pause.

She doesn't flinch. Just smirks.

Then she steps in again, faster than I can track, and the tip of her blade bites into my collarbone, driving me backward. I stumble. Her strength is relentless, crushing. My knees dip. Her sword presses deeper.

“Enough,” she hisses.

That’s it—she’s going to kill me.

In that second, I catch a flicker of movement—Aria’s captors are distracted. They think it’s over. They think I’m done. I use that. I roar through gritted teeth and slam my shoulder into her mother’s, knocking her off-balance. The sword glances off my side with a burn, but I don’t care.

She stumbles, not expecting resistance, and I use that precious second to hurl myself at the nearest enforcer. My sword arcs in a vicious slash, freeing Aria with a startled gasp from her captor’s grip.

I pivot on instinct, hurling myself toward the next nearest enforcer. My blade arcs, fast and vicious. Blood spurts. He cries out and drops. Aria gasps—free.

I barely register the relief before a glint of metal flashes in my peripheral vision. Her mother, graceful and terrifying, is stepping forward again, sword rising. Her enforcers are raising their swords as well.

“Kill her,” Lysara says, calm, final. A command.

Two enforcers lunge towards me, one in front, one behind.

I won’t make it.

I know I won’t make it.

And then Aria moves.

She tears past the enforcers like she's made of fire. Her cloak whips behind her, her fangs bared, and her voice rings out in a vicious snarl.

“No!”

It happens too fast: an enforcer lunges for my exposed back, blade raised for the killing blow. Aria intercepts him in mid-swing, arms outstretched.

The sound it makes—the thunk of steel sinking into flesh—is the worst thing I've ever heard.

“Aria!” I scream.

Time fractures. Everything slows.

Her body jerks, blood blooming across her midsection. She collapses back into me, the shock in her eyes quickly giving way to agony. My arms catch her automatically. The sword clatters to the floor. I don't even remember dropping it.

I can't breathe.

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Then, out of nowhere, her mother moves—inhumanly fast—and drives her hand through the enforcer who struck her daughter. Through his ribcage. It's an inhuman gesture. Bones crack. Blood sprays. He drops like a rag doll, lifeless. Just like that.

She yanks her hand free, slick and dripping, and the room goes still.

Aria sags in my arms, her breath rattling against my throat. I drop with her, cradling her against my chest as we crumple to the floor, together. One hand presses to the wound—hot, wet, endless blood spills over my fingers. My hands won't stop shaking.

“Aria?” I choke. “Aria, stay with me.”

She doesn't answer, just whimpers between gasps.

Her mother stares at us, a pale statue, black eyes flicking between Aria's pale face and my frantic hold. She's not triumphant. Not furious. Just... still. Her black eyes track every movement, but she doesn't speak.

Her silence is worse than her cruelty.

“Fool,” she murmurs, voice low. “You'd die for this mortal?”

Aria shifts, barely, her lips parting. But there's no voice behind the breath she exhales. I feel her slipping—slipping right out of my grasp.

And I break.

I pull her tighter to me, jaw clenched so hard it aches. “You don’t get to speak like she’s nothing,” I snap, rage cutting through the terror. “You don’t get to watch her die!”

The mother blinks. Something flickers behind her gaze—not pity. Not yet. Maybe... curiosity. Then, to my shock, she turns away from us both. She doesn’t strike; she doesn’t finish me off. Instead, she gestures to the few remaining enforcers, an order of retreat. Most leave, one lingers.

When she turns back to us, her steps slow, calculated. She tilts her head like she’s studying something foreign behind glass. “Intriguing,” she murmurs. “You love her as well.” A pause. A faint narrowing of her eyes. “I wonder... why?”

The words strike something raw inside me.

My jaw clenches, rage rising so fast it nearly chokes me. I can’t believe I’m still kneeling here, bloodied and gasping, while this woman dares to ask why. While Aria—my Aria—lies barely breathing in my arms.

I hold her tighter, her weight pressing against my chest like the world is trying to crush me. Her blood is warm and slick beneath my hands, and I’m doing everything I can not to fall apart.

“Because she’s good,” I rasp, my voice shaking with fury. “Because she’s brave. Because she left everything behind to be better than what you made her into. That’s why.”

I look up, eyes burning. “And because I’d rather die here with her than live in a world where she doesn’t.”

Her mother says nothing.

The foyer is too quiet. The kind of quiet that rings in your ears and makes your heart feel like it's the only sound left in the world. Aria's blood keeps soaking into my clothes. I can't stop it. I can't stop it.

"She's dying," I whisper, my voice cracking, raw. "Help her. Please."

Her mother stares down at me with that unreadable expression, her gaze flicking from Aria's face to mine like she's reading a ledger—measuring loss, weighing cost. She doesn't move. Just watches. As if she's deciding whether Aria's life is worth the price of mercy.

My gut twists. If she says no—

"Why?" the woman finally asks, cool and calm, as though my desperation is some academic curiosity. "What drives you to beg your enemy?"

Isnap.

A scream tears from my throat. "Because she's everything!" I shout, voice ragged and wild. "Because I love her! Because I don't care what happens to me—just fucking save her!"

I don't wait for her to answer. I can't. I draw my dagger and slash a deep line across my wrist. The pain barely registers. Blood flows, fast and hot. I press it to Aria's lips, my fingers trembling.

"Come on, Mouse," I beg, my voice cracking. "Just a little. Please. You have to drink."

She doesn't.

Her lips stay slack. Her breathing is shallow, fading by the second.

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I tip my wrist again, letting the blood fall. “You can yell at me later. Just... stay. Please, stay.”

But her body stays limp in my arms. Her lips don’t part.

“No,” I whisper, pressing my forehead to hers. “No, no, no...”

Then a sigh.

Cold, clipped.

I look up just as Aria’s mother steps forward with a flick of her hand. The remaining enforcer obeys instantly, bringing her a clean blade. She doesn’t even glance at him. Instead, she kneels—so casually it’s almost unnerving.

“Stop flinching,” she mutters—to me, I think—as if I’m some child wincing at a scrape.

I watch, heart stuttering, as she slices her own palm open. Thick, black-red blood wells up and drips onto Aria’s wound.

I flinch anyway.

“Our blood can heal,” she says absently, disdain curling her lip. “If we so choose.”

And I realize what she’s doing.

Aria jerks suddenly in my arms—a small, startled gasp. Her fingers twitch. The wound in her side begins to close, slow but sure. The worst of the bleeding stops. Her skin, once too pale, begins to flush with warmth again.

“Aria,” I whisper, barely able to breathe. I cradle her tighter, pressing my cheek to hers. Her lashes flutter. Her hand clutches weakly at my shirt.

Relief hits me like a blow, stealing the breath from my lungs.

I don’t even notice her mother standing until she speaks again.

“Loyalty and love,” she muses, rising to her full height. “You mortals cling to it in such baffling ways.”

She turns her gaze on Aria—still dazed, still cradled in my arms—and something flickers there. Not softness. Not anything close to love. But curiosity. A crack in the porcelain mask.

Then she nods once to her lone guard. “We’re leaving. Take the wounded. Let them be.”

He obeys without question, passing the order to the others. No one so much as touches us.

As the enforcers melt into the shadows, the woman lingers one heartbeat longer. Her gaze flicks to me, something dark and unreadable in her eyes.

“You love her,” she says again, quieter this time. “Perhaps that’s worth watching.”

And then she’s gone.

I don't move.

I don't breathe.

I just hold Aria, her blood still on my hands, my arms locked tight around her trembling frame. Her breath hits my collarbone—real and fragile and there—and the sob I've been holding back shatters through me.

She's alive.

For now, that's enough.

Aria

A Few Days Later

The fire crackles between us, painting Roan's face in soft amber and shadow. We're tucked beneath a canopy of stars in a clearing off the main road—no tents, no walls, just the open sky and the hush of wind through pine.

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I should be cold, but I'm not. Not with her beside me.

It's been days since the incident at the Miller house—since I stood face to face with everything I once feared. We spent a few days at the inn while Roan recovered, coaxing her to rest, convincing her more than once to try my blood for a change. It seemed to speed up her recovery, even if it disgusted her.

Now we're back on the road, between towns again, the weight of the past growing fainter with every step forward.

Roan lounges against a fallen log, one leg stretched out, the other bent just enough for her arm to rest against. Her sword lies within reach, but her fingers aren't twitching for it like they used to. No sharp glances over her shoulder. No tension in her jaw.

Just the quiet warmth in her eyes when she glances at me.

Peace used to feel like a lie. Like something meant for someone else.

But now? Now it's here, flickering between us like the firelight, and I can't quite believe it.

"I heard something strange in town today," Roan murmurs, flicking a small twig into the flames.

I lift my head from her thigh, blinking the sleep from my eyes. "What kind of strange?"

She glances down, meets my gaze. “The bounty. It’s gone.”

I sit up. “Gone?”

“Disappeared. Along with any mention of it. Posters pulled down. No one’s asking questions. It’s like it never existed.”

My breath catches. A chill skates down my spine, even as relief rushes in after it. “So... it’s really over then.”

She nods, slow and sure. “Feels like it.”

I fold my arms around my knees, staring into the fire. My mother’s face flickers in my mind—cold, sharp, unreadable. I don’t know what finally convinced her to stop. Maybe it was seeing me bleed out. Maybe it was seeing me choose. Or maybe... she just lost.

Whatever the reason, she’s not coming. I know it. I feel it.

Roan reaches for my hand, and I give it to her without hesitation. Her fingers are warm and calloused, thumb sweeping along my knuckles.

We sit like that for a long time, saying nothing. Just letting the quiet stretch between us as we watch the flames.

Then she speaks, her voice soft, like she’s afraid to break the moment. “I was thinking...” she pauses, tugging me a little closer, “maybe we find somewhere to stay. Not just for a night.”

I blink at her. “You mean... settle?”

Roan shifts slightly, gaze flicking to the fire before returning to mine. A faint blush colors her cheeks, just visible in the firelight. Her fingers drum once against her thigh, almost like she's second-guessing herself.

A small, almost shy smile tugs at her lips. "We don't have to grow vegetables or anything," she says, voice quieter than usual. "Just... stop running. Build something. A place that's ours."

The word lands like a spark catching dry tinder. Ours.

It hits something deep inside me—something I didn't even realize had been hollow until she filled it.

I shift to face her fully, one leg crossing over hers. "Where?"

"Doesn't matter." She shrugs. "Somewhere with a roof. A lock on the door. A window you can sit in when you're feeling dramatic."

I laugh under my breath, but my chest is tight with feeling. "You want to stay with me?"

Her brow furrows like it's the stupidest question I've ever asked. "I nearly died for you, Mouse. Of course I want to stay."

The fire pops, sending up a shower of sparks. I turn my hand in hers, threading our fingers together, grounding myself in the quiet weight of her palm.

Roan's thumb brushes over my knuckles once, then stills. "But I need you to promise me something," she says, her voice low, careful.

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I turn to her, heart already beating faster. “Anything.”

She looks at me then—really looks—and I swear the heat of the fire has nothing on the warmth in her eyes.

“No more running. No more goodbyes in the dark,” she says, voice steady but laced with something raw beneath. “If something happens—if the danger comes back—we face it. Together.”

She pauses, and I see it—feel it—the flicker of pain behind her calm. “But if you leave again... if I wake up and you’re gone, I won’t survive it twice, Aria.”

The words land like a stone in still water, sending ripples through every inch of me. I think of the note I left her. The hollow ache that followed me in every step after. The look on her face when she found me again—relief buried beneath heartbreak, like she wasn’t sure she should let herself hope.

She needs to know I won’t do it again. That I won’t shatter her like that.

I reach for her hand and squeeze it tightly, grounding both of us.

“I promise,” I whisper, fierce and certain. “I vow it. I won’t break it. And if there’s a next time... I’ll run to you. Not away.” My voice shakes, but I don’t look away. “I’ll choose you, Roan. Every time. Even if the world turns against us. Even if I’m scared. Especially then.”

Her fingers tighten around mine, but I press on, needing her to hear it all.

“You were the one who stayed when I had nothing left. Who taught me to fight—not just with blades, but to live. You never asked for my trust, but you earned it. And you held it, even when I didn’t deserve it.”

My throat thickens. “So I swear to you... no more running. No more silence. If danger finds us again, I’ll stand at your side. I’ll fight for this. For us. Because I want a life—with you. Not in spite of everything that’s happened... but because of it.”

Roan’s eyes shine in the firelight, and for once, she doesn’t speak. She just leans in, forehead resting against mine, and in that quiet, I feel it—

The vow settling into something sacred between us.

Roan exhales, slow and quiet, as if she’s been holding her breath since the moment I returned. Her shoulders finally ease.

“Good,” she murmurs. “Because nothing—no amount of danger, no shadow from your past or mine—could ever keep me from you.”

Tears burn at the edges of my eyes, but I manage a smile, soft and trembling. “I know...I love you.”

Roan’s expression shifts—goes soft, open in a way she rarely lets anyone see. The world narrows down to the warmth of her breath and the quiet between heartbeats.

“I love you too,” Roan murmurs, voice so raw, so real, I know I’ll remember the sound of it for the rest of my life.

I close my eyes, imprinting this moment into memory—the firelight dancing over her skin, the strength of her fingers laced through mine, the feel of her mouth as it brushes over mine, gentle and lingering. But it doesn’t stay soft for long.

Her fingers flex against mine, and she shifts closer, her thigh pressing against mine, her warmth chasing away the chill of night. The kiss deepens without either of us meaning to, like we've both been holding back and the dam finally gives.

She kisses me like I'm something sacred. Like she's starving for something only I can give.

A soft sound slips from my throat as I slide my free hand up the curve of her arm, to the back of her neck. Her skin is warm, her pulse strong beneath my fingers. She tilts her head, deepening the kiss, and I feel her sigh against my mouth—rough and low and aching.

The fire crackles beside us, but I barely hear it. Nothing else exists except for her—the slide of her lips over mine, the way her thumb strokes absent circles on the back of my hand, grounding me even as she sets my body alight.

When she finally pulls back, just enough to look at me, her gaze is dark and hooded, her breath uneven. “Tell me if you want me to stop,” she says, voice thick, hoarse with restraint.

I shake my head, already chasing her mouth again. “Don't stop,” I whisper. “Please don't ever stop.”

Her hand leaves mine, sliding up my arm, my shoulder, then down—slowly, reverently—over the curve of my waist.

She draws me into her lap, and I go willingly, straddling her thighs. The new angle makes everything sharper, hotter. I can feel her under me, strong and steady and wholly mine.

“You're sure?” she asks again, but this time her voice is a little more frayed, a little

less composed.

I answer with a kiss—deeper this time, full of hunger and aching need. My hips rock once, unthinking, and Roan groans softly into my mouth, gripping my waist with both hands.

Her touch stirs something raw inside me—a hunger soft and wild, nothing like the monstrous cravings I’ve known before.

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The firelight paints her in gold and shadows, and when I pull back to look at her—really look—I think my heart might split open. She's so beautiful like this. Flushed, breathless, eyes dark with want.

Her hands slip under my shirt, and I shiver at the first brush of her fingertips over my bare skin. She's slow, careful, even as the heat builds. Like she's memorizing me. Like this means something more.

It does.

I lean in, brushing my lips along the edge of her jaw, trailing down to the tender place just beneath her ear. She shudders when I kiss her there, and I smile into her skin, emboldened by the way her breath catches.

Roan's hands skim my ribs, tracing every line like she's mapping them, committing them to memory.

For a fleeting moment, a thought flits through me: someone could stumble across us. We're just off the main road, half-clothed in the woods, breathless and tangled in each other. But instead of pulling back, the thought thrills me.

Let them see. Let the whole damn world see.

Roan is mine.

Her hands slide higher, cupping my breast, and I moan softly against her neck. My hips keep moving, slow and seeking, grinding against the heat between us as her

fingers tease and play, sending sparks through me. My body aches. Wet. Desperate for more.

I fumble with her shirt, peeling it up and off, and she lifts her arms to help. We break apart just long enough to toss the fabric aside. My eyes trail over her chest—strong, lean, scarred. Beautiful. My fingers trace one of the marks, following it until it leads to the curve of her breast. They're smaller than mine, firm beneath my palm, and I keep moving, keep rocking against her, needing that friction, that closeness, that contact.

“Roan,” I breathe, brushing my lips over hers, “I want to try something.”

Her brows rise slightly. “Here?” There's a flicker of surprise in her voice. “What if someone comes upon us?”

I smirk, mischievous and already pulsing with want. “I thought you weren't the type to worry about what's proper.”

“I'm not,” she says with a small growl, fingers gripping tighter at my waist. “But that doesn't mean I want anyone else looking at you.”

My laugh is soft and wicked. “Jealous?”

“Damn right I am.”

I work the rest of her clothes off—her breeches first, then her underwear—kissing a path down her stomach as I go. She groans, hips twitching under my touch. Then she grabs the hem of my dress, tugging it upward. I raise my arms, and she helps me slide it over my head. My skin feels fever-warm, flushed with need.

I climb back over her, straddling her hips. Our breath mingles. Our chests brush. My

knees settle on either side of her, and my core hovers just inches above hers.

Gods.

I can feel her heat. Slick. Waiting. It makes my pulse stutter.

Then our bodies brush. Just barely. Her wetness grazes mine and I gasp, hips jerking.

“Oh, gods,” I whisper, eyes flying open—and hers are already on me, blazing. Intense. Like I’m the only thing she sees.

When our pussies slide together again, wet and hot and perfect, I cry out. My slick mixes with hers, and the scent of it—raw, intoxicating—floods the air. My hands grip her ass as I grind down harder, faster, gasping with each brush of her clit against mine.

Her voice is low and dark when she says, “My turn, Mouse.”

Then she moves—flipping us easily, breaking contact—and I whimper, already missing the friction. She swallows the sound with a kiss, firm and possessive, then presses me gently back to the ground.

She looms above me like something wild and divine—hair tousled, lips kissed raw. A goddess with hunger in her eyes.

I shiver.

She shifts, thigh sliding between mine, and pulls me closer until our cores touch again. Her hips roll—slow, devastating—and I can barely breathe.

Our slick centers grind together, perfectly aligned, and I arch up into her with a moan.

Wefit. Like this was always waiting for us.

She rotates her hips in tight, aching circles, her clit catching mine just right, over and over, until I'm keening beneath her.

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“Roan!” I don’t know if it’s a plea or a warning.

Her pace quickens. Faster. Rougher. My body chases hers, hips rutting up into every stroke, every grinding thrust. Her moans are right in my ear, low and ragged, and they drive me mad.

I clutch at her hips, guiding her, begging silently for more. The sound of our slick cunts grinding fills the air, joined by our breathless cries. She fucks me like she needs it. Likewise, I need it.

And we do.

My climax rises hard and fast—like a wave that’s been building for too long. My body tightens, back arching, fingers clawing at her shoulders.

She thrusts one last time, crying out as she comes with me. Her voice breaks, and I swear the world breaks with it.

We’re still tangled, still gasping, when I finally collapse beneath her. Our skin sticks together. Our thighs tremble. My chest heaves against hers.

When we finally still, tangled in each other beneath the soft hush of firelight, there’s no more room for fear. Only the quiet beat of her heart beneath my palm, the slow rise and fall of our breathing.

Roan presses a kiss to my shoulder, then to my temple. “Aria,” she breathes, voice thick with sleep and something softer. Something that curls around my ribs and

refuses to let go. “Say it again.”

My heart thuds gently, steady and certain. “Say what?” I whisper, my lips brushing against the curve of her collarbone.

“Say that you love me,” she pleads, quiet, raw.

“I love you,” I murmur against her skin. “I love you.”

She exhales like the words undo her.

Tomorrow, the world might start spinning again. But here, in the quiet warmth of her arms, everything is still.

I press one last kiss to her chest, just above the steady beat of her heart. It’s slow. Strong. Hers.

“I’m not running anymore,” I remind her, voice low but certain.

Roan’s fingers tighten gently around mine. “Good. Because I’d only chase you down.”

I smile, eyes fluttering shut, her words settling in my chest like a vow.

Every part of me hums with the echo of her touch—my skin still tingling where her hands had lingered, where her mouth had claimed me. I feel marked, not just by pleasure, but by belonging. Loved. Chosen.

The hunger I’ve carried for years— for freedom, for safety, for something that felt like home—

It's quiet now.

Because I found it.

In her.

Epilogue

Roan

Wegrowvegetablesnow.

I still can't say it with a straight face.

Every morning, Aria's out in the little garden we dug behind the cottage, barefoot in the dew-damp grass, hair a mess, cloak tossed over the fence. She hums to herself as she waters the tomatoes like they're sacred, muttering encouragement to the carrots like we'll take it personally if they wilt.

She told me once it's her way of keeping me fed. Said it with that half-smile of hers, the one that tugs at my chest every damn time. You do so much for me, she said. This is something I can do for you.

As if she hadn't already given me more than I ever thought I could have.

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So I let her tend the dirt like it's holy, and I stand in the doorway each morning—warm mug in hand, watching her move barefoot through a world she's building with her own two hands.

And every damn time, my chest gets tight in that ridiculous way I still haven't gotten used to.

Because we made it.

The cottage is small—two rooms, one stubborn hearth that always smokes when it rains—but it sours. Tucked on the edge of a sleepy village that asks no questions and offers fresh bread in exchange for firewood and vegetables.

We're too far off the map to draw attention, and the last time we passed through town, the bounty board was still empty.

It's over.

She's safe.

And I get to wake up next to her every morning.

Aria straightens from where she's crouched beside the squash vines, wiping the back of her hand across her cheek. There's a smudge of dirt along her jaw, and something stupidly tender blooms in my chest.

"I see your cult of tomatoes is thriving," I call, grinning.

She turns, one eyebrow arched. “Jealous? You could’ve helped plant them.”

“I carried the bucket.”

“Once.”

“I made the fence,” I shoot back, lifting the mug in a mock toast.

“Then you knocked it over.”

I smirk, leaning against the doorframe. “Andre made it. Better.”

I set aside my drink and saunter out toward her, the grass cool against my bare feet. She narrows her eyes like she knows what I’m up to, but doesn’t move as I slip behind her and wrap my arms around her waist.

“You like this life,” I murmur against her ear. “You were made for it.”

Her laugh is soft. “You were worried I’d get bored.”

“I was,” I admit, pressing a kiss to the curve of her neck. “But you’ve become a very intimidating garden vampire.”

She hums, tilting her head to give me more room. “And you’ve become a very devoted housewife.”

Oh. Right. I asked Aria to marry me.

It wasn’t grand. Just the two of us by the firewood pile at dusk, the scent of split cedar hanging in the air, her cheeks still pink from the cold. My fingers were twitching towards my pocket where the ring had been burning a hole for days.

I didn't plan to do it then—I'd been waiting for something better, whatever the hell that meant. But she looked up at me, all soft eyes and wind-tousled hair, and I couldn't hold it in any longer.

"So," I said, like a coward. "You ever think about marrying someone who's terrible at expressing her feelings but very good with a sword?"

"Only every day," she whispered.

And gods—when I pulled the ring from my pocket, just a simple silver band I'd bartered for weeks ago, her eyes went wide like I'd handed her the sun and moon wrapped in a promise.

She didn't even look at the ring, not really. She just looked at me.

Like I was the thing she'd been waiting for.

And, well... she's not wrong.

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I might've become a very devoted housewife.

Now, I snort. "Don't tell anyone. I've got a reputation to ruin."

She twists in my arms and kisses me—dirt-streaked, sun-warmed, home. When she pulls back, her smile is crooked, knowing.

"You love me," she says, like she's daring me to deny it.

I look between her eyes slowly. "Yeah," I whisper. "I really, really do."

We stand there for a moment, the wind brushing through the leaves, the world blissfully, impossibly quiet.

I think, not for the first time, that I'd fight a thousand enforcers to protect this fragile peace.

Because we aren't alone anymore, not in the ways that matter. We share a life, a future, a hope. And for someone like me—a once-aimless sword-for-hire, hardened by violence—it's more than I ever dared to dream.