



Blood Secret

Author: *Ava Benton*

Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Vale's is awakened from his vampire slumber by four witches who have a very special assignment. The assignment breaks all the Nightwarden rules as he knows them, but seeing as how three of the witches are from the High Council, he's almost convinced he won't face consequences. Janna's perfectly happy in her starving artist way of life. Okay, not perfectly happy because, starving. Hello! Who would be happy starving? But she loves her life, and thinks that her next series of sketches will give her the income she so badly needs. Her new series of creatures that roam the streets at night will make her rich. Then she can stop relying on her mother's generosity. Except, her mother isn't who she think she is. And Janna isn't who she things she is either. And now there's this hot, sexy, mysterious guy who keeps insisting he's there to protect her. Who's going to protect her from him?

Total Pages (Source): 61

Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

Prologue

Years ago, more like centuries and centuries ago, there a new strain of vampires was brought to creation. Nightwardens, they were called by those who knew of their existence. A Nightwarden's mission was simple. Guard the High Sorceress he was assigned to until needed no longer, then return back to his place deep within the earth, a place called The Fold.

A new High Sorceress would come to power every so often among the covens. Some covens were fortunate enough to have Nightwardens to keep them safe. These Nightwardens were bodyguards in essence, except they were bodyguards without a choice. Bound by the blood of the one they were charged with protecting, the Nightwardens were faithful, monastic, and unemotional. Or so it was thought.

No one counted on the emotions that would arise in these creatures that walk the dark and protect the sorceresses that wield power.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

1

Vale

It wastime to wake up again.

And something was different.

My eyes snapped open and above me stood a vision of beauty. Tall, slender, with creamy skin and long, shimmering brown hair that reminded me of chocolate. Amazing, the things that would run through a vampire's head on waking up after his century in The Fold.

I couldn't afford to pay attention to those random waking thoughts when the taste of blood was on my lips, my tongue, running down my throat and spreading through my body like wildfire. It lit me up inside and brought me back to life.

The familiar chanting filled my cell, as the witch and the High Council presided over the ritual.

I would imprint on this witch, this High Sorceress, and be her Nightwarden throughout her reign over her coven.

I didn't particularly look forward to my job, but I supposed none of us ever did. It wasn't as if we did it because we wanted to.

She looked down at me, and her eyes were almost purple. Intoxicating.

I wondered if she was as lovely on the inside as she was outside. I had already done my time with beautiful but impossible witches, and didn't look forward to another such assignment.

More of her sweet, life-giving blood dripped into my waiting mouth, giving me a glimpse of who she was. I sensed her hesitation, her apprehension. That seemed natural—she was undertaking a very serious vocation, leading a coven.

I'd be nervous, too. I sensed a gentle nature, which was a relief. The only thing worse than being forced into service was serving a shrew who thought the world revolved around her.

Still, something was wrong. Not just apprehension over her new role. Something deeper, more troubling. A great deal of uncertainty. I had the sense to stay silent until the chanting ceased and the ritual ended.

"You may rise," the witch said, stepping back to give me room.

Sitting up was a relief.

I could hardly wait to stretch my limbs. I saw in all the information granted by those first drops of blood that she lived in a large house with plenty of ground. I hoped to have the room to run, to expend some of the century's worth of pent-up energy.

Her smooth brow creased when she frowned. I looked over her shoulder to where the members of the High Council stood.

I recognized them from my last awakening, and from the visit they paid before I went into stasis. Esme, Serena, and Maeve. They looked just as concerned as my new charge.

“Your name is...?” I asked, trying to at least seem willing for the sake of appearance.

I wasn’t any more thrilled with the prospect of living with another witch than she was about living with me.

“My name is Isobel,” she said. Her voice was soft, flat.

“I am Vale.” Shortened from Valerian.

“I know.” A slight smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Of course, she knew. But one has to say something when introductions are being made.

“Vale.” Serena stepped forward, and her robes swirled around her feet. “The situation you’ve awoken to is somewhat different from what you’re accustomed. We’ve had to loosen a few of our rules pertaining to this unique set of circumstances.”

I waited for her to continue, looking from her to the other witches.

They loved creating dramatic scenes and drawing every last ounce they could.

“What will I do?” I prompted.

“Why don’t you get dressed first, and we’ll meet you in the chambers?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

They didn't give me the chance to answer before they left, all four of them. A set of clothing waited for me, folded on a chair in the corner. The only piece of furniture in my cell aside from the wooden slab which served as a bed.

I'd wondered in the past why we had to live such monastic lives. Not that I was ever one for luxury, but an actual bed with pillows and a soft blanket would've been welcome.

I ran a hand over the stubble which covered my cheeks and chin, then through the dark hair which hadn't grown or even changed to gray in the hundred years I'd been asleep. The same as always.

The same as I was the night I ceased being human and became something else. Something hungry and vicious and brutal. The lust had calmed over time, and I could control it when I needed to, but the underlying hunger never went away.

Once dressed in what they'd left me—a simple pair of pants, a thin, cotton shirt, and thick-soled shoes, which I knew would be most of my meager wardrobe—I followed the long, narrow tunnel through The Fold, past the many cells containing my fellow Nightwardens. T

hey were sleeping off their last assignments, waiting for the time they awoke to the taste of a witch's blood on their lips. There were so many, enough to be sure the High Sorceresses would be well-served throughout our millennium of slavery.

I used to imagine freeing all of us, of putting an end to the insanity that was our existence. Even if it meant dying—which it certainly would—wasn't it preferable to

our conscripted service as bodyguards to witches?

The large, comfortable chambers which the High Council used while spending time among those of us in The Fold sat at the end of the tunnel, and a fire burned there.

I could see the warm, glowing light shining through the open doorway. The only open door in the place—every other door was sealed shut with magic. Just like the fire was magic and the eternal youth and beauty of the High Council was magic.

Nothing about them was real—they or any witches. I reminded myself of that as I stepped into the room. I couldn't let Isobel lull me into a false sense of camaraderie, no matter how kind she seemed. We weren't going to be friends.

The four of them sat around a wooden table, drinking what looked like wine.

My tongue darted over my lips before I could stop myself. I hated looking desperate, but I needed to feed. Watching them drink only made me want to drink, even though it wasn't wine I wanted.

"Ah, you're ready." Esme waved to a chair, offering me a seat. I refused, choosing to stand with my hands clasped behind my back. It was better not to get comfortable, because I would certainly not be comfortable in my assignment.

Serena looked mildly amused by my reaction. Well, she could afford to be amused, sitting in comfort the way she was.

The high-backed chairs with their velvet cushions in the same color blue as the Council's robes. The thick rug beneath my feet, a rug I sank into with every step.

I would've bet my next feeding that the wine was an excellent vintage. Another point about witches: their inability to exist without the best of everything at their fingertips.

I supposed I would've magicked up an excellent wine or a warm fire if I had the ability, too.

"Isobel is the new High Sorceress of the Willow Flame Coven," Serena explained with a warm smile in my charge's direction.

I frowned. "The name isn't familiar to me."

"It wouldn't be," she replied. "They're a new coven, only recently decreed an official branch of our sisterhood. They came to our attention several years back, when we received word of a group of witches descended from those of us who left either the Crescent Moon or Cascade Circle Covens for one reason or another. Dissent, banishment, things of that sort. The current members wished to be acknowledged as a real, legitimate branch, entitled to all the honors and benefits of the other two. After much deliberation," she said, eyeing up her fellow Council members, "we decided to include them in our larger family."

It hadn't been an easy decision, I noted.

Maeve's mouth was set in a hard line while Serena recounted. Clearly, she wasn't in favor of the ruling.

So, that was why Isobel seemed so frightened and unsure. It made all the sense in the world. As an outlier for so many years, she wasn't accustomed to the traditions of the other covens. Their use of Nightwardens to guard the High Sorceresses against sorcerers and other threats.

It must have come as some surprise, the introduction to The Fold and the rituals necessary. Especially imprinting, which was the most intimate bond two creatures could experience. Nothing to be taken lightly.

“However,” Serena continued, “it’s not Isobel you will be guarding.”

It was like the bottom dropping out of my world. Just when I thought I had figured things out.

“What do you mean? How is that possible? She woke me.”

“Yes, because the person you’ll guard doesn’t have the ability to wake a Nightwarden. Her blood lacks the magical qualities which set us apart—though she does share Isobel’s genes.”

I looked at the gentle, dark-haired witch. “She’s a relation of yours.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. My daughter.” There was a quiver in her voice when she announced it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“And her blood isn’t magic?” I looked at the High Council, their lovely faces serene and blank. I wanted to drag my claws down those soft, unlined cheeks if only to get a reaction from them. “She’s human? You want me to guard a human?”

It was tantamount to guarding a child. A stupid, silly, brainless human with no knowledge of our ways.

“She’s my daughter, but her father was human,” Isobel admitted.

My nose wrinkled in disgust. Humans were good for one thing: food. And even then, I wasn’t permitted to feed from them. No Nightwarden could feed from anyone but his appointed charge, to keep the imprint pure.

This witch had mated with one? My opinion of her took a nosedive.

“Does she know who she is? I mean, who her mother is?”

Isobel shook her head. “I placed her for adoption immediately after her birth.”

“Then, how do you know she has no powers?”

“We found her,” Serena explained. “We’ve studied her for months. There is no evidence of her possessing magical power, and no sense of it from any of us who’ve come into contact with her. Even I ventured into the human world and brushed against her while waiting in line, and I felt nothing. Not only that, but she had no reaction to my presence. She sensed nothing from me.”

The way she talked about it, I would've thought she expected an award for posing as a human. Then again, I wouldn't have wanted to do it unless someone was paying me a lot of money. Hell, who needed money? Maybe a handful of fresh, ripe bodies to feast on.

"Why do you need help with her? Wouldn't a witch who presented powers be a much more dangerous prospect? If she has no powers, who could want to hurt her?" Another question occurred to me. "And why is this any concern of ours? What about the human police? Do they no longer exist? Can't they keep their own safe?"

Isobel looked pained, delicate brows knitting together as she winced. She looked at the Council like she needed their help in explaining the problem.

There was something they weren't telling me, and Isobel didn't know how to say it.

"Without knowing much about her," Serena said, speaking slowly, "the most reasonable theory is that she somehow... feels how special her blood is. Spending time with humans doesn't interest her. She would rather wander through the underworld."

"Witches, vampires, sorcerers, the occult... they all hold great interest for her," Esme murmured with a glance in Isobel's way. They all tried to be as delicate as they could for her sake. "We've tracked her to several rather seedy clubs in New York which she evidently visits quite a lot. They're populated by characters she has no business spending time with. There's no way she knows how dangerous this truly is."

"The great concern, other than her well-being, is a powerful sorcerer sensing how special she is and using her against her mother and the coven," Maeve explained.

To me, it seemed that her well-being was the true concern, since she seemed bent on her own destruction. But there had always been stupid humans who refused to listen

to reason, who refused to believe there truly were creatures they'd only heard of in fairy tales.

I looked around the table with a resigned sigh. "What do you want me to do with her?"

"Keep her safe. Protect her." Isobel's intensity was almost palpable.

"Where? How so? What should I do? Wander the streets with her? Find her someplace to stay? Where does she live now?"

"She has an apartment in Brooklyn and works as an artist. I don't see why she wouldn't be safe there, if only she would stop putting herself in harm's way." She wrung her hands, rocking back and forth. "Why does she insist on being destructive?"

"It's likely she has no idea," Serena explained, going to her, patting her back. "The human world oversimplifies our world. Treats it like a game, like entertainment. Fun. She can't help being drawn in. And, again, the pull is organic. In her blood. She doesn't understand it. She only feels it."

I wasn't in the mood to discuss the underlying causes of a brainless human's actions. I wanted to get to work. "I'll need a supply of blood to keep me going," I announced.

"Of course. We'll provide anything you need." Serena stood up straight. "You'll need money, too, and transport. One of our drivers will take you out there—a long drive, but it will give you time to familiarize yourself with current times. You'll be surprised what New York looks like now, compared to what it was when you were last there."

"Fair enough. And when I find her? How do I imprint without explaining the need to feed from her?"

“You won’t imprint.”

I couldn’t disguise my surprise. “You expect me to hold true to my assignment when I have no blood bond with my charge? You must trust me.”

Just like that, Serena went from calm to stern. “I’ll remind you once, and only once, that the stakes have not changed. You are still bound to protect whoever it is you’ve been assigned, and any refusal puts your Sire and his progeny at risk of destruction.” Her hand landed on Isobel’s shoulder. “The blood you’re provided came from Isobel, not a laboratory, and has been enchanted so as to keep it fresh. Once you’ve depleted the supply, we will provide more. The imprint will be as strong as ever.”

It looked as though they’d considered everything.

As always, I had no choice but to comply.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“One question,” I said.

Serena gave me a warning look.

I ignored it. This was a matter of life or death. Mine. “Ra Protection?”

Ra Protection was a spell cast by the one we were assigned to. It protected us from the sun’s rays and allowed Nightwardens to be outside at any time of the day and not burst into flames.

Ra Protection mattered to me. Greatly.

“Ra Protection is in place,” Maeve affirmed.

I took one last look at the High Council, then at the anxious Isobel. “When do I get started, then?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

2

Janna

I took a step back from the sketch pad, tilting my head one way, then another. I couldn't quite get it right. Something was missing. I needed a live subject instead of relying so much on my memory, but I wasn't friends with any of the people I chose to put down for posterity. And they weren't the sort of people I wanted to invite to my apartment, either.

I was nuts, but I wasn't stupid.

It was a warm morning, about to turn into a hot day. I ran the back of my arm over my forehead before remembering the charcoal already smudged all over it. Well, now it would be on my face, too. Not like anybody was there with me. Not like I'd care if they were.

The box fan in the window was only making things worse—the air it circulated was hot and sticky. Trying to get any work done was pointless.

I did my best work at night, anyway, even if natural light was better to sketch in. It was cooler, there were fewer distractions from my neighbors, and the memories were sharper.

I peeled off my tank top and wondered why I had even bothered putting it on when it only ended up soaked in sweat and covered in black smudges. Hair stuck to the back of my neck, and I considered for the hundredth time this summer chopping the whole

damn thing off. And maybe dying the stubble bright pink. Or electric blue.

But I wouldn't keep up with it, just like my bitch of a mother always reminded me. I never kept up with anything. The dark brown would come back and grow out, and it would stretch halfway down my back again in no time. I never remembered to go for a trim, either.

A cold shower helped cool me off. One of the few things I had plenty of was cold water. Even in winter, but that was another story. I looked down at the water swirling around the drain. Black. Charcoal. I sometimes ended up with more on me than on the paper.

Instead of using a towel, I padded across the wide-planked wooden floor and stood in front of the box fan to dry off. One of the benefits of having a brick wall as a view: nobody could look in at me.

Warm breeze hit cold water and evaporated it. I turned around and shook out my hair, making droplets of water fly in all directions. Better than a blowout in the heat—and I wasn't the girl who spent hours a week blowing my hair out, anyway. I never could understand girls who did. My arms would fall off by the time I finished getting my whole thick, long mop dry. Once it was partway there, I brushed it out and pulled it into a topknot. As fancy as things got for me.

It was after eleven, and I hadn't slept yet, working all morning after getting home around four. I could try to get some rest, but one look at my bed made me rethink the idea. I was never any good at sleeping when it was hot. What I wouldn't have given for air conditioning, even a cheap window unit. Anything.

But until my next series went up for sale at the gallery, I was living on cereal and instant coffee. And even that was running low. I had roughly ten dollars in my checking account, and my savings account only laughed at me when I checked the

balance.

Only one thing to do. And I hated like hell to do it.

“Mom.” I paced the length of the single room which served as my home, my studio, my everything.

“What’s wrong now?”

I closed my eyes for a second. “Right to the point, huh?”

“Why would I waste time?” she asked with that heavy, isn’t-my-life-pitiful-but-I-struggle-on sigh of hers. “You know how busy I am.”

Busy? With fucking what?

I bit my lip until it stung. “All right, then. Have it your way. I need money.”

“Of course, you do.”

“Mom, please. There was a delay at the gallery, and my latest series isn’t going up for another two weeks. You can call them yourself and ask if you don’t believe me.”

“Like I have the time to do that.”

“Well, then. That’s the situation.” I could see her sitting there on one of her silk couches, with one of her snow-white, ankle-biting Shih Tzu dogs in her lap, probably already having a cocktail though it wasn’t even noon yet. “I’ve stretched my money as far as it will go, but all I have in the pantry is half a box of generic corn flakes and a quarter jar of instant coffee. I don’t even have milk for the cereal.”

“And yet, if you had just stuck with the job your brother pulled all those strings for you to get...”

Another bite on my lip. Another sharp sting. This time, I was fairly sure I tasted blood. “I told you. The bastard put his hand up my skirt.”

“Language, Janna.” Her voice was like a whip. “And maybe if you hadn’t been wearing such a short skirt...”

“You don’t even know what I was wearing!” I howled. “And even if half my ass was exposed, he had no right to touch. So I’m sorry if Jimmy worked so hard to get me a job with his scumbag boss, but it’s no wonder the scumbag goes through assistants the way he does. I’m sure I wasn’t the first. Some girl’s probably getting felt up as we speak.”

“Jimmy tells me Mr. Hackett cracked down harder than ever on him after you drove your knee into his crotch.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“He deserved it.” And much worse, the sick fuck.

“He was your boss.”

“I literally can’t believe you’re defending him.” I rubbed my forehead against an impending migraine. I could feel it coming on as sure as I felt my heart racing and my palms sweating. Sometimes, if I concentrated hard enough on concentrating on nothing, it went away before things got really bad. But that would mean getting off the phone. “Mom, please. My head’s really starting to hurt. Can you help me or not?”

“A migraine?”

“Maybe. And I don’t even have aspirin in the medicine cabinet.”

“I can hear it in your voice.” The one way I was ever able to get her attention, to garner sympathy. A migraine. “All right. I’ll transfer money into your account.”

“Thank you, Mom. I swear, I’ll pay you back.”

“As you always say,” she sighed. Then, in a softer voice, “Get some rest. Find a way to get out of the heat. I’m sure it isn’t helping.” One of the most motherly things she’d said to me in ages.

I thanked her before ending the call as fast as possible and tossing the phone onto the bed.

The pain started at the base of my skull and radiated through my head. Mom was

right about something for once—the heat wasn't helping. I pulled the fan from the window and placed it on the little table which served as a nightstand, then soaked a wash cloth in cold water and barely wrung it out before crawling into bed and draping it over my forehead.

Sleep was the only thing that would help, and letting my mind wander freely while I did everything I could to relax was the only way I would get to sleep.

I couldn't help but think about Jimmy, and Mom. The way she had defended him since we were kids, no matter what he did. The way slights against me meant nothing compared to slights against him. He pulled the head off my favorite doll? Boys will be boys. I kicked him in the shin for it? I was a hellion, incorrigible, and grounded for a week.

It didn't matter that his filthy, slimy, fat pig of a boss pinned me up against his desk and stuck his hand up my skirt. That his breath was hot and rank with the smell of whatever nasty shit he'd eaten for lunch that day. That I'd scrubbed my skin raw when I got home later, after kneeing him in the balls, before sitting with my knees drawn up to my chin in the shower until there was no hot water left. Even then, I had stayed there with the icy water pelting down on me, shivering, weeping.

Because it was more than the memory of that heart-stopping terror when I'd realized what he wanted from me. When I had asked myself what I was supposed to do to keep him from doing worse. It wasn't even the way my skin had crawled when he'd breathed a heavy, hot sigh and pressed his pathetic excuse for a cock against my thigh.

It was knowing I had lost an otherwise great job. Security for the first time since leaving Mom's house. When my brother had first found the job for me, I'd been beside myself. Sure, it meant working in an office with a bunch of soulless drones—or so I'd told myself—but it also meant being able to pay my bills without

worry. Being able to get takeout whenever I wanted instead of eating another packet of Ramen. Going to the doctor whenever I needed to since I'd have health insurance through the company. Buying a window air conditioner, and a space heater when the apartment froze in winter.

Maybe even moving to a better apartment, or renting studio space to work in whenever I had the time.

All those dreams had dissolved that day. And all my mother wanted to harp about was how much harder Jimmy's life was as a result. Nothing about what it did to me, being groped like that, losing a great-paying job with benefits. Getting knocked down, just like I always did.

Thinking about that wasn't doing anything to help my head.

I turned my thoughts to the club, where I'd be again that night. There was just way too much interesting material there to keep away. Too many people to take mental pictures of, to run home and sketch out in pencil before I forgot the details. I already had enough of those quick sketches to turn into my next series. Children of the Night, maybe.

And they were children of the night, for sure. Their skin was so pale, almost translucent, that it looked like they never stepped foot outside during the day. There was so much beauty about them, but it was a savage beauty. Like beautiful, vicious animals.

How could I not want to draw them, capture them for the rest of the world to see?

Not everybody had the balls to hang out in their clubs.

Not that they were for real, not even close. A bunch of posers, people who pretended

to be who they weren't because they didn't like who they were. They felt powerless, so they had to invent power. I couldn't blame them for it. How many times had I wanted to do the same thing? But I wouldn't pretend to be a blood drinker. I wouldn't call myself a witch and worship the moon, or a bunch of goddesses people made up back when there was no such thing as science to explain normal, natural phenomenon.

We were all outcasts. That might have been what called me to them, what made them so interesting.

Anybody in their right mind would steer clear.

Mom would have a cow if she knew where I was getting inspiration for my work. A great, big, full-grown cow.

The thought made me smile in spite of the pain.

Pain that was diminishing the longer I let myself relax. Knowing there would be money in my account the next time I checked helped me relax, for sure. She could be a real bitch, but she generally came through when I needed her. Even though I had to reach dire straits first.

Then again, I didn't like asking for help unless I was on the verge of disaster. Who would willingly put herself through feeling two inches tall unless it was absolutely necessary? Why would I call and be reminded of how I screwed up that job with Jimmy's boss unless I was down to half a box of dry cereal?

Someday, my work would be famous.

And I would be rich.

And men like Mr. Fat Ass Wannabe Rapist Hackett would pay for what they did to girls like me.

I slid into sleep with a smile on my face, with my head finally full of the sort of thoughts that made the pain go away.

3

Vale

No amount of research on the long drive to the city could've helped prepare me for what I found when I stepped out of the car and looked around Times Square.

I was alone in an impossibly dense sea of people. Their voices overlapped to the point of becoming unintelligible, and my sharpened sense of sound turned it into a head-splitting roar.

I pulled the slip of paper from my pack and looked down at the list of locations. There were three places at which the Council's spies had spotted Janna Reed, all of which existed within Manhattan.

Two of them were clubs for vampire worshippers who didn't know there were actual blood-sucking vampires among them, dancing alongside them. Taking those who caught their eye to back rooms, where feeding would take place.

Humans were so insufferably stupid—walking into dangerous situations, refusing to see what which was right in front of them.

Didn't they have instincts? Didn't they want to preserve their safety? Their lives, even, seeing as how it wouldn't take much for one of their thirsty hosts to take too much?

No, they thought it was fun and sexy. Anything to get away from the pain of real life.

Or the drudgery.

The third was a popular spot for witches and those who fancied themselves to be witches. Occultists, wishful thinkers. Again, they had no idea the reality of the witches they drank alongside. Humans only saw what they wanted to see.

Regardless of who chose to frequent the clubs, I couldn't enter any of them and expect to leave alive. Nightwardens were the elite of the vampire world, to the point where we sat outside the rest of them.

They would know who I was and sense I wasn't like them.

Witches, on the other hand? There was no love lost between our species in general.

They, too, would spot me and kill me just for being on the premises.

I had stared at Janna's photo for so long, I had it memorized. One of the Council's spies had captured her photo as she was leaving a vampire club one night.

Long, almost black hair. Like her mother's. Heart-shaped face. High cheekbones, a delicate nose, heavy eyebrows which framed eyes that were also Isobel's.

The first thing I had noticed about her on waking up. A full, pouty mouth which she had coated in deep red lipstick. Blood red.

I would know that face anywhere. I could point it out in the middle of Times Square if I saw it, even with thousands of other faces swarming around it. Only she wasn't there. I didn't sense any magical blood around me.

It was too early for her to be in the city. I could always go to her home. I had the address. I could wait for her to leave and follow her to whichever club she chose to

visit. It seemed smarter to follow her before approaching her, to get a feel for who she was. It didn't matter how much information the Council had compiled. I wanted to know how she thought, what she valued, whether she walked with a long, graceful stride or a short, quick one.

I had always found it easiest to guard my charges when I knew them intimately—not as a friend, but as a specimen. We were never friends. We weren't supposed to be.

There was already a fully mapped-out plan for me to navigate the city boroughs via the rail system, so I followed it. It wasn't difficult, and I managed to blend in. I found humans were willing to ignore that which didn't differ from the norm, and a pair of tinted glasses hid the telltale red ring around my irises.

However, judging from some of what I saw in my travels, strange eyes would be the least strange thing of all. I looked downright normal compared to some of the trains' more colorful characters.

Janna's neighborhood was run down, to say the least. I could imagine a time when the sprawling homes were sharp with new paint and fresh, green lawns. In a different world. Immediately, I knew she didn't have much money. An artist, they said. A starving one, from the looks of it.

The day was hot, steamy, and I could just imagine how hot it would be on the top floor with the sun beating down on the roof. Was she up there? Or was she smart enough to hide out somewhere cooler?

Would anybody living in the neighborhood believe the girl living on the top floor was a thrill seeker who rubbed elbows with supernatural creatures?

People sat out on front stoops up and down the street, fanning themselves, smoking, drinking out of paper bags. I decided to do the same—I didn't believe anyone would

challenge my right to be there. I very much got the impression that neighbors minded their business around there.

Funny, but the neighborhood seemed nicer only a block or two away. Perhaps this was the poor section. It hardly fit in with the image of a witch's daughter, but I couldn't think of her that way when she didn't think of herself in those terms.

The first rule of working as a Nightwarden, for me at least, was understanding my charge as she understood herself. Getting inside her head, as it were.

When I had the luxury of imprinting, that was easy. Nothing about this particular assignment would be that easy, however.

I wouldn't be able to sense her emotions because I wasn't able to imprint on her. Only on her mother, whose blood waited for me in sealed containers in the bag between my feet. Not just there, either. In my mind. Always in my mind. Taunting me, reminding me of its presence. All I had to do was drink until there was no more, until I finally got enough...

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

But it wouldn't be enough. There was no such thing as "enough." It was as I imagined the way an alcoholic would feel.

Instead of giving into the never-lessening lust which threatened to consume me like wildfire, I kept my job in mind.

I focused on her, imagining her face in front of me, reminding myself of the danger she was in. Only I could help her. That thought, plus the spells cast on me to prevent the blood lust from overwhelming my sense, helped me hold on to my senses.

Hours passed.

The sun sank.

Lights flicked on above-head, in some of the windows up and down the street.

When I was reasonably certain no one was paying attention, I rose and craned my neck to get a glimpse of her window. The lights were on there, too.

It would only be a matter of time.

And not much time, either.

She must have wanted an early night, leaving the apartment at only ten o'clock. Either that, or she was planning to visit more than one location. What could she possibly get out of it?

These questions and so many more ran through my head as she walked down the stairs from the porch, brushing past me just gently enough to stir my hair, but nothing else.

I watched her walk away—head down, hands deep in the pockets of a black, sleeveless dress which hung on her like a curtain.

She didn't want to wear anything form-fitting, the way so many girls had as they'd walked past on the street.

I'd wondered time and again why they bothered wearing anything at all. Nothing was left to the imagination.

Not with Janna.

The dress was short, but she wore stockings underneath and a pair of heavy boots which came up to her knees. Her long hair hung in a thick braid between her shoulder blades, and when she turned her head to the side to check for cars as she crossed the street, I caught sight of thick-rimmed glasses. She wore no jewelry, nothing to set her apart except for a leather satchel slung across her body. It was high-quality, unlike everything else she wore.

A gift from her adoptive parents, I guessed as I followed her at a distance.

She dashed down the stairs to the subway as easily as if she had done it a thousand times. It wasn't always so. She'd grown up with drivers and nannies and tutors. Yes, her adoptive family was quite wealthy. Father involved in banking, mother who sat on the board of a dozen charities.

Wealthy wives did much the same in the present time as they had during my last assignment. Some things hadn't changed.

She rode the train with her head down, not even looking from side to side. There were plugs in her ears, and I could hear music coming from them even where I sat halfway down the car.

Something loud, driving, not much like the music I remembered. It sounded angry. Was she an angry girl?

It would be just my luck to guard an angry girl with a grudge against the world. That fit in with the image the Council had given me. A lost, angry girl who only wanted something to fit into. A group, a crowd of friends, a lifestyle to identify with.

From what I saw all around me, she wasn't the only one. Every nature and style of dress was on display, not to mention face paint of all kinds and multicolored hair.

I remembered the days when a woman didn't show her ankles, and when pinching her cheeks to give them color was considered loose.

Janna didn't wear that sort of paint on her face—only a thick, dark line around her eyes which served to make them look even closer to violet than Isobel's.

That, and a deep crimson on her lips. Like she had just fed.

No, no, of course she hadn't.

Wishful thinking, maybe, or the thirst that still ticked in the back of my mind like a clock which would never wind down. No matter whether I wound it, it went on just the same. I only had to ignore it as best I could.

It was a long trip into the city, which gave me time to observe the way she moved in the world.

I didn't blame her for keeping to herself. I wouldn't have drawn attention to myself if I were her, either, a pretty young woman in a sea of wolves. Which was what they were.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

Did she know the things they thought about her? The way their eyes traveled over her body? The ones who watched a bit too closely as she crossed her legs, the ones who took a look at her ass as we waited for another train? Did she know about the tall, thin man who licked his lips when she bent to pick up a dropped coin?

I saw myself pulling him behind a pillar on the subway platform, breaking his neck with a single, deft move and leaving him there on the floor, leaning against it with his eyes closed.

No one would question whether he was dead or alive, as so few humans seemed to see anything which didn't fit into what they wanted to see. They would immediately categorize him as a homeless character and look away, if they even saw him at all.

No. That fantasy wasn't nearly satisfying. What if I pushed him in front of an oncoming train? A moment of sheer terror, of knowing his days of using women and imagining them in filthy, degrading situations were over?

No to that, as well. The innocent people on the train didn't deserve their trip ruined, nor did the people on the platform who'd witness the fall.

I wanted to hold his heart in front of his face so he could watch it beat its last. I wanted to bathe myself in his blood and stare into his eyes as the life drained out of them. I wanted to torture him, bleed him slowly, make him beg for the pain to stop. I wanted him to know why his useless, degenerate life was coming to an end.

None of that was possible on a crowded platform.

And I could hardly end the lives of every human that ever did something or thought something animalistic, evil, dark. I would have to destroy most of the human race, unless human nature had changed considerably while I was in The Fold—which I doubted very much, based on what I was watching just while riding the subway.

The city was even more vibrant at night than it had been during the day, something which I wouldn't have believed unless I saw it for myself.

The sidewalks were jammed, shoulder-to-shoulder in some places. Saturday night and everyone wanted a good time. The scent of a dozen types of cuisine, maybe two times that many, clogged my nostrils and made me sick to my stomach.

I wondered if humans also smelled rat feces and cockroaches the way I did. No, of course not, or there would be no restaurants at all.

I kept my eyes away from them and on her back as I followed her through the crowd. It wasn't difficult—people seemed to make room for me without my trying. Perhaps they sensed something about me.

She didn't.

She went on about her business as though no one was following. Was she that oblivious? Or that hell-bent on destruction?

The club was close.

So close.

I could smell those of my kind. I could feel them. And they would be able to feel me—but then, there were enough of them that my presence would fade into the larger whole. I'd keep my distance, just the same.

She walked straight into the club without hesitation.

It looked like any other business on the street—unmarked, no special signs or lights or anything which would denote its presence.

Smart. One wouldn't want to stand out.

The human world hadn't accepted vampires as part of its reality, and while many standards had loosened, I doubted the acceptance of our species was one of them. They still had no choice but to live and hunt at night.

When they saw her, what did they think? Fresh meat. Fresh, special meat.

They might not have known who she was for certain, since she didn't present any powers, but they had to feel something was different.

I would've bet she was very popular among them. it probably went to her head. All the more reason for her to go back again and again—there were thirsts just as potent as my thirst for blood.

Like the thirst for attention. For feeling special. It was dangerous and could prove deadly.

Especially with vampires involved.

I would have to announce my presence when she left the nightclub. The time for observation was over.

4

Janna

“What’ll you have?”The bartender looked me up and down with one eyebrow cocked.

The many silver rings threaded through his brow caught the light.

I wondered if it ever hurt to have that many piercings there. I’d probably roll on my face in the middle of the night and permanently embed metal in my face.

“Vodka tonic,” I ordered with a smile. But not too bright a smile. That would make me stand out.

The general mood was one of darkness. Extreme darkness. Dark, thudding music, heavy on percussion and bass. The floors, walls, ceiling, and all furnishings were black. Lack of imagination? Possibly.

I leaned more on the side of theming. Whoever decorated the club didn’t believe in subtlety, that was for sure. I guessed blood red would’ve been a little too obvious, even cartoonish.

It was busy, even for relatively early in the night.

I scanned the dance floor as I sipped my drink.

The usual mix of people in the usual clothing—black, tight, short, shiny in most cases. Leather, vinyl, latex. People who got off on pretending they were outside the norm. I wondered what had to happen to a person for them to develop that particular kink—acting like a vampire.

But God, the material.

There was so much beauty, cat-like grace. Men and women moving together, flowing like water as they reacted to the music. They didn't say a word. Their bodies did the talking.

I wished I had my sketchpad with me. There was only so much my memory could recall after the fact. Besides, I'd never be good enough to recreate what I was looking at. Something would always be missing, some vital thing I couldn't quite touch with my pencil or charcoal. I couldn't even name it.

It was like that all over the place, people moving around each other, eyeing each other up. They reminded me of panthers in the jungle. Only where was the prey? Was that how they saw each other?

Or how they saw me?

No, that couldn't be it. None of them even approached me. I was fine with that, since vampirism wasn't my kink, and I wasn't into black latex.

One-night stands might be fun, but I didn't trust any of these people to not pass along some weird disease. The least I would get was a bite on the neck, and I didn't love that idea, either. It was better to go alone, stay alone and go home alone. I wasn't there to socialize.

Sometimes—not always, but sometimes—I asked myself what my mother would

think if she knew what I did with my nights. I would save that revelation for the perfect moment. Sometime when it would really blow her mind. When she was being a Super Bitch, busting my balls for being an artist or for living in Brooklyn. Or for quitting a job where I felt threatened.

I'd wait until she was into her third or fourth martini and drop it on her. She'd fall over and crush one of those stupid, useless dogs of hers.

I smiled to myself and tossed back the rest of my drink before signaling for another.

It wasn't lost on me that my drinks would come out of the money Mom had transferred to my bank account.

The vodka seemed to sour on my tongue. There I was, thinking about how much I'd like to give her a heart attack, but she was still taking care of me.

Oh, just one or two big sales, just one major commission... I could cut ties once and for all, forget the bullshit that was my life as her daughter, as Dad's daughter, as Jimmy's sister. And I could disappear. Somewhere they'd never find me, if they even bothered to look.

A single tear spilled over onto my cheek, and I reached up to wipe it away without thinking about the thick eyeliner I had put on before leaving the apartment.

"Shit," I whispered to myself when the side of my hand came back smeared with black. Just like when I was working. Would my hands ever be clean?

I took my drink to the ladies' room with me.

It was just as dark in there as it was out at the bar, on the dance floor.

I wondered how anybody was supposed to see a thing in there—I could smell that wonderful mix of piss, shit, and menstrual blood and wanted to stay away from it. No, probably not menstrual blood. After all, I was in a club with vampires.

I rolled my eyes at my reflection as I wiped under my eye with a wad of damp paper towels.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

Soft moaning came from the end stall. Otherwise, I was the only person in the room. I averted my eyes to keep from looking over there in the mirror, but it was almost impossible to fight off my curiosity.

What was going on?

The sliding of hands on cloth, on skin. Heavy breathing. Sighing.

I was starting to feel a little jealous.

A single hand curled over the top of the closed door, fingers spreading and clutching at the wood. Then, a second hand which looked nothing like the first.

Both female.

Then, a third hand.

Male.

And a forth.

Female.

Jesus Christ.

I tiptoed out of the room just as the moaning reached its peak.

How the hell were so many of them in there together?

My heart was racing as I walked down the narrow hall which led to the dance floor, and if my dress had a collar, I'd be hot under it.

I hadn't gotten any in way too long if all it took was the suggestion of sex to get me worked up.

Unless it wasn't sex. Unless they were...

Nah. That sort of thing didn't really happen, the whole "feeding" rumor. Just something the club's owners had spread around to keep things dangerous and sexy for people who were into that sort of thing.

As long as they thought activities like that went on, it was enough to keep the patrons interested.

Wasn't it?

There weren't any seats left at the bar. The dance floor was more crowded by the second, with white and purple lights swirling around from the ceiling. A fog machine spread mist over the space and added to the dreamy feeling.

I could feel the bass vibrating through the heels of my boots, all the way up my legs.

Writhing bodies disappeared in the mist, then reappearing. Arms moving, draping over bodies, wrapping around shoulders and necks and waists. It was spellbinding.

I couldn't take my eyes off them, even though I wanted to. I did want to. Watching them felt dirty, like I was a Peeping Tom breaking into their intimacy. Even though they were in public, all around me, rubbing their bodies together for all to see.

But it was impossible to look away. Something about the pure, raw intensity in front of me glued my eyes and set my heart racing faster than ever.

One of the men, whose bare back was to me, took his partner by her hips and pulled her close until they were grinding together. The girl, whose hair was a shade of purple that obviously came from a bottle, threw her head back and laced her fingers behind his neck. He buried his face between her breasts as their hips swayed back and forth, dipping and grinding, and one of his hands gripped her butt tight enough that I was sure it had to hurt. She didn't seem to mind.

Her eyes opened and locked on mine, like she felt me watching and wanted me to know she did.

A chill ran up my spine.

As her partner groped and ground against her, she stared at me. His lips ran up her throat, but she never broke eye contact.

Her tongue ran across her top lip before she smiled, and her teeth shone brightly. That smile was an invitation.

And a challenge.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I backed away, into the shadows which I hoped covered me. I shouldn't have watched. What was I thinking? What would happen if she challenged me, freaked out because I was looking at her boyfriend or whoever he was? Or thought I was watching because I was into her?

My eyes darted around the room. I had backed myself into a corner, literally, and I could see the entire dance floor and bar area where I stood. I could also see the metal staircase leading up to a second level which I had never seen.

In the dozen or so times I'd been there, I had only watched a handful of people climb those stairs. Usually, half-naked women led by men in black leather pants.

Did I ever see them come back? I searched my memory as hard as I could for those girls. I had never even seen them on any other night, either. What happened...?

I had to get out of there. What was I thinking? It wasn't fun anymore.

I elbowed my way through the crowd.

All of a sudden, it was impossible to breathe. All I saw around me was dark eyes, bright eyes, eyes that bore holes into me as I tried to slip through and get outside where the air might have been just plain old Manhattan smog, but was cleaner than what I was struggling to breathe in just then.

Why wouldn't they let me through?

My heart was about to burst through my chest and sweat ran down my chest, between

my breasts. Blood rushed in my ears and drowned out the pounding, driving music. I would never get out of there. I would die there, crushed in between all those bodies. It was like a nightmare. I would never wake up.

When I burst outside, gasping for air, it was like getting my life back again. That feeling after waking up from the worst nightmare imaginable and knowing it was all just a dream.

I was never so relieved. And, just like that feeling of knowing the fear came from something playing inside the mind and nowhere else, I questioned myself right away.

I must've had an anxiety attack. That was all. I had imagined all of it. I was such an idiot, freaking myself out like that.

"Janna."

I looked up at the tall, muscular man standing in front of me. That was the only way to describe him, at least at the first glance. Somebody who lived at the gym. But not overly bulky, just really muscular.

The surprise of him dissolved when I realized he'd just called me by my first name.

"Do I know you?" My right hand slipped inside my satchel so my fingers could close around the can of mace I kept near the top.

"No. But you will."

I blinked rapidly. My brain couldn't make sense of what he'd just say.

"I... what?" I looked around, hoping to find help.

Why the hell did I ever leave home? Was it a full moon? Was that why there was so much insanity everywhere I went?

“I said, you will.” He looked toward the door I had just stumbled through. “What happened to you in there?”

“N—nothing. Nothing happened. What is this?” I was starting to feel more like myself and less like I was on some hidden camera reality show.

I backed away from him as I pulled out the mace—I didn’t hold it up, but kept it at my side. Just in case.

“I can tell you everything, but I need you to come with me.” He held out one impossibly large hand.

I looked down at it and laughed in disbelief.

“You think I’m going to come with you? Yeah. Right.” I turned and ran.

I didn’t know why I was running. I only knew that I needed to get away from him, by any means necessary. It wasn’t easy, moving that way in the clunky boots I wore, but panic went a long way toward helping.

I heard his heavy footfalls inside my head as I turned the corner and ducked between two buildings. Fell between them was more like it, really, since I had intended to lean against the wall but fell through empty space, instead.

I caught myself before falling on the dirty, littered concrete, which was a relief—I didn’t love the thought of landing on broken glass, even if it sparkled like diamonds in the light from the bulb mounted on one of the brick walls.

I pressed myself against that wall, cursing the light but, hoping he'd run past without noticing me. It was a narrow alley, easy to miss.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

He never passed by.

I held my breath as I waited and prayed as I had never prayed before. What if he was waiting for me? What if he never stopped waiting until I came out? How did he know who I was?

My heart stopped when I heard footsteps—but from the other direction, further into the alley. I almost melted into the bricks, I plastered myself so tight to them.

It was a matter of either waiting to see who or what came out, or running back to the sidewalk and finding out what waited for me there.

Terror kept me frozen instead, panting like a trapped animal.

“Well, well, well. You thought you could just run out on me like that, huh?” A female voice.

It didn’t make me feel any less threatened, especially since it sounded so menacing. Light, but with an undercurrent of nastiness.

She came closer, and I recognized her eyes right off. The girl from the dance floor. Who could forget ice-blue eyes, ringed in red?

I had seen so many eyes like those over the weeks I had spent at the vampire clubs and wondered where the contacts came from. They seemed popular.

I kept my mace hand tucked down by my side and put the other hand on my chest.

“You scared me.”

“You look scared. Why? What are you doing here in this alleyway?” She came a little too close for comfort, and I took a step to the side.

She followed.

Like we were dancing.

She didn’t look so tall in the club—her partner must’ve been built like a skyscraper if he made her look short. Purple hair shone in the light from that lone bulb, and pale skin. Didn’t she ever go outside in the day?

“A guy was following me,” I whispered. “But I think he’s gone now.”

“A creep?” She shook her head. “This city is a cesspool. Absolutely disgusting what men think they can get away with, isn’t it?”

“It is.” I couldn’t help but think of that office, and the hand up my skirt.

“Wouldn’t it be great if we could punish all those men? Those predators?” She leaned in a little, and there was a scent hanging around her that I couldn’t put my finger on. Not perfume, not sweat. Maybe a little bit of both mixed with a lot of something else.

I couldn’t focus on figuring it out when her eyes seemed to glow the way they did.

“Yeah. That would be great. They need...”

“To know they can’t get away with being the way they are,” she finished, nodding slowly. “And you know what?”

“What?” I breathed.

It was so easy to listen to her. Her voice was like music.

She smiled, and her teeth almost glowed, too. “I know how to do it. To punish them, I mean. To be strong enough.”

“How?” I could barely hear my voice, it was so small.

She was so close. And that was all right. She was smart. She knew what she was talking about. She wanted to help me... with something. I didn’t know what, but she’d make it all clear...

Only she never got the chance.

A tall, dark blur burst in from my right, knocking me back against the bricks and tackling her to the ground.

I shook my head, dazed, and looked over in time to see her fly through the air like a rag doll and hit a dumpster with a sickening crash.

A scream fought its way to my mouth, but I couldn’t draw in enough breath to let it out. Nobody could survive something like that.

She did.

But she didn't just survive.

In the blink of an eye, she was on her feet and throwing herself against the stranger.

They tussled, gripping each other's throats, snarling like a couple of animals.

No, I had to be imagining that. My brain was completely fried by then. I wasn't processing anything. I was wrong when both of them looked like they grew fangs and snapped at each other with them. I covered my mouth with both hands and almost forgot to breathe when she slammed her attacker into the wall and sent bricks showering down on both of them.

"Enough!" he roared before taking the top of the girl's head in one hand and jerking it roughly to the side.

I watched in horror as he bit her—no, as he sank his teeth into her throat and pulled back, tearing half of it away all at once.

She let out a breathless shriek before going stiff all over.

The attacker flung her body to the ground, where she landed in a heap.

When he turned to face me, I saw her head dangling from his clenched fist, hanging by the hair.

My mouth fell open in a scream, but nothing came out. I was going to die.

It was all over.

My mind would break, and he would kill me, and that would be it.

I looked up and recognized him from earlier, the one I had run away from.

He tossed the head aside, and I struggled against a rush of bile in my throat. Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I scream? Shock froze me solid.

"We have to get back to your apartment, and fast." He was peeling off his bloody shirt and rolling it into a ball, stuffing it into a backpack before putting on a clean shirt.

"Hurry. Come on." He grabbed my arm with one bloody hand.

"No!" I gasped, slapping at him with both hands, jumping to my feet.

All it took was his touch to snap me out of it. I tried to pull away, tried to get away, but he was too strong.

"Listen to me!" he snarled, pulling me close enough to feel his hot breath on my face. "I have to take you someplace safe, and fast. They're going to come looking for her, and you can't be here when they do."

"Who? The police?" I looked down at the body and couldn't believe what I saw.

It had turned to something that looked like stone—pale gray, with white eyes.

"No." He pulled me behind him.

His hand was so tight and strong, I thought it might break my wrist. I wanted to fight him, to kick and scream, but it was all happening so fast.

He hailed a cab and threw me inside before I knew what was happening. He barked my address at the driver as I pressed myself against the door, fumbling around for the handle.

“How do you know my address?” I asked.

He stared coldly. “I know everything about you, Janna. And now you’re in more danger than ever.”

5

Vale

The music in the car was so loud, there was no chance of the driver understanding us if we spoke low enough.

I leaned closer, and she all but climbed through the window to get away from me. “I was sent to protect you. You don’t have anything to fear while you’re with me.”

“Protect me? From what? You’re the one who... who...” She shook her head and looked away. “How could you do that? No. It can’t be real. You can’t have done that. I was imagining things.”

“You weren’t.”

“You tore her head off.”

“I did. And I would do it again.”

“No, no.” She shook her head like a willful child. “You didn’t. That didn’t happen. Somebody slipped me something in the club, and I dreamed the whole thing. That doesn’t happen in real life.”

“It does, and it did.”

“And you know me? You know who I am? How is this possible?”

“What happened tonight was bound to happen. I’m surprised it didn’t happen before now, honestly, the way you’ve been taking chances by visiting those nightclubs. My job is to make sure that doesn’t happen again—and to do what I did back there if you’re ever in danger again.”

“I wasn’t in danger. She was trying to pick me up, for fuck’s sake! So what? I could’ve said no, thank you, and that would’ve been the end of it.”

“You think she was trying to...?” I frowned. Pick her up?

“She was coming onto me. Trying to, you know, hook up with me. She didn’t deserve that!”

“You have no idea what she was trying to do.” I didn’t know if I hated her naïveté or if it made me want to protect her even more. She was like a babe in the woods, absolutely without an understanding of the forces surrounding her. “That thing was trying to possess you. She was going to attack you, turn you into something like her. Or drain you and leave you for dead.”

She blinked as her mouth fell open. “You honestly believe that? This isn’t part of some little game you people play. That whole lifestyle isn’t real.” She kept looking down at my hands, then back at my face. “You killed her because you think it’s all real? Oh, help me, please. God, help me.” She started weeping.

“Stop crying,” I spat.

The car flew over a bridge and, I guessed, into Brooklyn.

I didn’t want her attracting attention from a passerby, especially when we reached her apartment.

“Stop asking for God to help you, while you’re at it. If some invisible entity was going to help you, don’t you think they would have when you were seconds away from being attacked by that bitch? I’m the one you should be praying to for help. I’m the one who saved your life.”

“You’re insane. You’re sick. Please, just get out of the car the next time we stop. Please, I’ll give you anything.” She fumbled in her purse. “My debit card. I’ll give you the PIN so you can use it. Just take everything.”

In the blink of an eye, she thrust her hand up at me.

There was a small, black item clutched in it.

My reflexes were much too fast to allow her to do more than drop the item on the seat between us as I twisted her wrist—not enough to break or even strain, but enough to make her wince in pain and surprise.

“I am not the enemy.”

“Who are you, then?” she asked as she rubbed her wrist. “Some avenging angel? A bodyguard? A superhero?”

“I’m someone sent to you to protect you, as I said. Who or what I am doesn’t matter. And I think we can agree that my presence in your life this evening is quite opportune.”

“Who hired you for this?” she whispered. “My mother? Of course, it was her. Only she would think I needed protection, and she would hire somebody like you. Crazy enough to take her literally when she tells you to do anything it takes.”

“You don’t know how close you are to the truth,” I muttered, looking out the window

to check our progress while always keeping her in the periphery. She wouldn't come to heel, at least not right away. "If you hadn't run back there, none of this would've happened. I could've explained everything, and we might be someplace safe at this very moment. But no. You had to run away and get yourself into trouble."

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“You stalked me! You’re still stalking me!” she hissed.

“As I’ve told you, this is my job. I’m not stalking if I’ve been assigned to your safety. It’s my job to know where you live and to follow you when you walk into obviously dangerous situations, as you did tonight.” I sneered at her. “How could you do something so stupid? To think you call me crazy.”

“You know nothing about my personal life—oh,” she said, eyes suddenly opening wide. “I get it. She told you what she thinks is the truth, not the actual truth. But how would she know the truth? She had you follow me around because she thinks I’m taking unnecessary risks for my art. Is that it?” She let out a bitter laugh while shaking her head. “That b—”

“You’re mistaken. I can clear everything up for you once we’re somewhere more private. You clearly need help understanding what’s going on around you.”

“I don’t need your help, and I didn’t ask for your help. Thanks very much, but you can get the hell out of this cab once we stop at the next light. And don’t worry, I won’t tell the cops it was you. Nobody needs to know what happened tonight.”

“How very generous of you. But I cannot accept your offer. I’m not worried about your police.”

She frowned. “My police?”

The car pulled to a stop in front of her building. “Come. I’ll tell you everything you need to know, but I can’t do it here. I’ve sworn to protect you and would never do

anything to hurt you. I know you don't have to believe me, but it's the truth. Give me a chance."

She searched my face with those fascinating eyes of hers. "I don't know..."

"I swear, I won't hurt you. You've seen what I can do, and I did it to protect you. Pay the driver, and let's go."

He was starting to pay attention to us. I didn't want him hearing too much.

She reached into her bag again, and this time pulled out a wad of crumpled bills which she tucked into a slot in the divider between us at the driver.

"Come on. Hurry." I followed her out to the sidewalk and thought she might be disappointed when I followed closely.

As if I would let her get too far from me, knowing she might run again. I was faster than her even on my worst day, but I couldn't put on the speed I was capable of in the middle of a busy street.

"Don't even think about trying to run away or trick me," I warned as we walked up the stairs to the porch.

"I wasn't. You think I would try to piss you off when I've seen what you're capable of?" What amazed me was her disgusted tone.

I hardly expected her to fall to her knees and thank me, but a little appreciation would've gone a long way. I took a tremendous risk, killing that vampire. All because Janna ran away.

We reached the top floor, and she unlocked the door, but hesitated before opening it.

“Tell me this isn’t a huge mistake,” she whispered, touching her forehead to the scarred wood.

“It isn’t. It’s not even a small mistake.”

She snorted. “Because you would admit otherwise.”

Still, she opened the door and stepped into a small, cluttered room which I immediately surmised was all the apartment offered. A sink and two-burner stove, an iron bed frame against the faded, flowered wallpaper. A large pad of paper resting on an easel, and a table covered in pencils, paints, charcoal.

“This is it?” I asked, sizing the place up.

“Sorry. I’m having the penthouse on Central Park redecorated right now.” She tossed her bag onto the floor, then turned to me with arms crossed over her thin waist. She didn’t eat enough. I

wondered if that was by choice or by necessity—how much could she afford? What would Isobel think if she knew her daughter was literally a starving artist?

A small washroom sat on the other side of a door beside the stove, and I stepped in to wash away the blood on my hands. I could still taste it on my lips and ran my tongue around to catch any lingering drops. It had been so long since I had a fight, a good fight, and I was still exhilarated. Even though it pained me to know the vampire’s clan would be looking for her murderer, I couldn’t deny how much fun it had been to kill her.

Janna was still standing where and how I had left her.

“What do you want to know?” I asked. “I’ll tell you everything. No exceptions. It will

be easier if we get off on the right foot, with a clean slate. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, I completely agree," she said, nodding hard. Sarcastic.

I never did have much patience for sarcasm.

"So? What do you want to know? You already guessed your mother sent me, and you were correct. What else can I tell you?"

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

She threw her hands in the air, exasperated. “Why? Why would she be that insane? I mean, did she tell you? Did my father piss somebody off? Are there hitmen after me?”

“Did the girl in the alley strike you as such?”

“No, but she didn’t strike me as a threat, either.”

“Be honest with yourself. Really think about it. Remember how you felt. The things she was saying to you. Did it seem like she was putting you in a trance? Saying things that sounded true, even if they weren’t necessarily true? Things which make no sense now that you’re looking back at them?”

She gasped softly, and her eyes drifted to the wall over my shoulder. “Yeah. She did, now that you mention it.”

“Did you know her?”

She shook her head. “If I had, don’t you think I would’ve reacted differently when you tore her throat out?”

“There is no predicting what a person will do when they’re in shock.”

She nodded. “Yes, I can understand that. But I didn’t. I only noticed her tonight at the club. First time I’ve ever seen her.”

“And she noticed you.”

Her cheeks went pink. “Yes. She did.”

I could just imagine. She had set her sights on Janna and would’ve stopped at nothing to have her. A new conquest. Fresh blood. Maybe a new playmate, someone to help on the hunt or serve as a minion to repeatedly feed on.

“She was going to enslave you, or worse. She must have sensed what was special about you and took a chance in following you outside. You were worth it to her. Don’t you see? It was my job to keep her from doing what she planned.”

She hesitated like she was thinking it over—then, shook her head. It wasn’t going to be easy to get through to her. Stubborn little half-blood.

“No. I don’t believe you. There’s nothing special about me. I’m just me. You need to leave now.”

“That’s not possible. At least not until you know the truth of who you are. And who your mother is.”

“I know who she is.”

“You don’t. Your mother is a witch.” I paused to let it sink in before added, “That means you have witch’s blood in your veins. You don’t have powers, obviously, but the blood is still there. And it makes you a very unique creature in our world.”

Her forehead creased just slightly as she thought this over.

I waited, watching, anticipating her breakdown. Or her violent denial.

I didn’t predict her raucous laughter.

“What?” She threw her head back and laughed helplessly, filling the room with the sound of her disbelief. “Yeah. Okay.”

“I understand why you wouldn’t want to believe it.”

Though she wasn’t laughing at me, it wasn’t easy to hold onto my temper.

“It has nothing to do with want,” she gasped, wiping away her tears of mirth. “It’s impossible to believe.”

“There are many things you’ll need to believe before this is over,” I predicted as I took one, then another step toward her.

I’d show her something that would turn her into a believer.

6

Janna

The little bit of leftover laughter died in my throat when he came toward me with his fists clenched.

He hated that I wasn't taking him seriously, and I was about to see him turn on the viciousness he had shown in the alley.

"Wait." I held up my hands, palms out, and he froze in place.

It was the first time I had seen him show any sort of nerves, and it surprised me. Was that all it took?

I looked at my palms, then at him. "What? What's the problem?" There was nothing wrong with my hands that I could see.

"It's just that..." He chuckled, but there was no humor in it. "You honestly don't know. I keep forgetting."

"Forgetting what? Oh, right. That I have witch's blood in me." I pointed them at him again. "Are you afraid I'll cast a spell on you?"

"No, because you don't have power. But you do have witch blood. And don't roll your eyes, because it's true."

“I didn’t roll my eyes.”

“You did.” He frowned. “Didn’t you know it?”

“No.”

“You probably do it so frequently, it’s become second nature.”

I rolled my eyes. “See? That’s an eye roll.”

“It’s exactly what you did before.”

“Oh, my God.” I shook my head, eyes closed. “It’s like an episode of The Twilight Zone.”

“The what?”

I blinked. “The TV show. Yeah, it’s old, but I thought everybody’d heard of it.”

“I never have.”

“Where have you been your entire life? In a cave?”

He chuckled again, only this time it was genuine. The chuckle became a laugh. “You’ve come closer than you know.”

I didn’t bother asking what that meant. Every question only led me deeper down the rabbit hole.

“Fine, whatever. Let’s take a few steps back, because I would genuinely like to know what you’re talking about when you say my mother’s a witch. I mean, yeah, there are

times when I've imagined her sitting on a broomstick, zooming through the sky."

I pantomimed the motion with my hand, moving it up at an angle as I made a whooshing sound.

He frowned.

What a surprise.

"Why would a witch do that?"

"Because... that's what witches are supposed to do. I mean, on TV, in books, cartoons."

The man is more lost than ever. I'm pretty sure he came from another planet. It's the only explanation I can put together on the fly.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“Oh, yes. I remember. Pointed hats, broomsticks, black cats.”

“You remember? Why would you have to... never mind.” I couldn’t make head or tails of him, and he only confused me more by the second. “Anyway, explain yourself. My mother is a lot of things, I admit, and I don’t like many of those things. But she isn’t a witch. I mean, I would know.” I swallowed hard. “Wouldn’t I?”

“The woman you’re speaking of is not your mother. Not your biological mother, at any rate.” His face didn’t move. He didn’t even blink his freaky eyes.

Nothing.

Like he was telling me it would be hot again tomorrow.

No big deal, your mom’s not your mom.

It was like a bomb going off inside my head. Wiping out everything I ever knew and putting everything into place at the same time.

Could bombs do that?

I didn’t think so, but this bomb did. I tried to take a deep breath, but my throat was closing. I couldn’t get even a little bit of air in there.

“You’re going to faint.” He took control instantly, sitting me down, placing one strong hand on the back of my neck and forcing my head between my knees.

I couldn't fight him off or even tell him to keep his hands to himself. I would have to be able to breathe to do that.

"Focus on breathing. As deep as you can. Count to four, then release for four."

"Shut... up..." I wheezed, even though I was trying to do as he said because it made sense.

He was crazy, but he made sense.

I focused like he told me to and did what I could to count slowly, steadily. It was easier than thinking about what he'd just told me.

Mom wasn't my mother. Not really.

It made so much sense. My whole life, I had never understood why I couldn't just fit in. Why couldn't I be like Jimmy, like Mom and Dad, like the children of their friends? She was always holding them up in my face, comparing me to them, wondering why I wasn't as serious as them, why I couldn't do as well in school or better in sports or be a cheerleader. Why I didn't have serious career plans. Why I couldn't marry some dickhead who went to Yale or Columbia or something, whose daddy ran a hedge fund.

Why I never, ever felt like I was one of them.

It wasn't me. It was them all along. They weren't like me. I wasn't wrong. I was just different. And they were normal, boring, pathetic. Just like I had always told myself.

"That's why," I whispered. I noticed I was shaking. Shock?

"What's why?" he asked.

“Why she doesn’t like me.” I squeezed my eyes shut, but it was too late. Tears dripped onto the carpet before I sat up.

“The woman who raised you?”

“Yes.” I covered my face. “Why did she adopt me if she didn’t want me?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say, anyway. It’s a rhetorical question.”

“Pardon me if I’m overstepping my boundaries... but I’m sure your adoptive mother wanted you.”

“Maybe. It doesn’t matter.” I wiped my eyes. “That’s all over. The past. Thank you for helping me make sense of it, anyway.”

He crouched down at my side, watching me. Like I was an animal, something to be observed.

“You never questioned what I just told you. About your adoption.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because... I know. I only needed somebody to confirm.” I tapped my chest with one finger. “I knew it in here for a long time. If anything, it’s a relief to hear it out loud. I’m not crazy, and it’s not just a matter of me being a spoiled brat whose Mommy and Daddy didn’t understand her. The way she always made me feel.”

“It’s not easy, being different.”

I laughed. “No. It’s not.” I could’ve kissed him just then, if he didn’t freak me out so much.

Those eyes. I would never get used to them. “You have the same contacts in your eyes as the people from the club,” I observed, since I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“What are contacts?”

“Okay, just stop that.” I stood up and rubbed my arms briskly. “I know you think you’re funny and you’re having a good time messing with my head, but enough’s enough. I can only stand so much of it in one night.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fuck off!” I blurted out as I spun on him. “Look, I don’t know who sent you—”

“Your birth mother. Along with a few others.”

“Fantastic. Great stuff. But that doesn’t mean you get the right to screw with me. Stop acting like you don’t know about normal, everyday stuff and start being real.”

He stared at me for a moment, before his mouth fell open in understanding. “Right. You don’t know anything. I keep taking for granted that you do.”

“Great, more bombshells. Like I want to hear more. This is a fucking joke.”

“You use a lot of profanity.”

“No shit,” I sneered. “What is this? The olden days? When women weren’t supposed to use dirty words?”

His eyes narrowed, and I had a flash of memory.

The way he pulled that girl’s head off. It wasn’t enough to disable her or even kill her. He tore her goddamned head off and tossed it aside like a ball. And he was in my apartment, with only me, and I had just pushed a little too far.

I didn’t want him around me anymore. He was bad news.

“Thank you for helping me tonight and for telling me about my history. It’s time to leave now,” I announced as I walked to the door.

He beat me there.

One second, he was sitting on the edge of the bed.

The next, he was standing in front of me with his back to the door, arms folded over

his chest.

I jumped back like he was made of fire, scrambling, and my ass hit the floor with a solid smack.

I didn't feel it.

"How did you do that?" I whispered.

"Do what?"

"You know what. Don't play innocent. How did you get from there," I pointed to the bed, "to there?" I pointed to him.

"I walked. Just the same as you did."

I shook my head. "Not that fast. There's no way you couldn't walked that fast. Nobody can."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“What does that tell you, Janna?” He waited, face like a blank sheet of paper. Not even blinking.

Oh, dear God, what was he?

The way he’d torn into the girl’s throat in the alley. I had seen his teeth.

No. Fangs.

And he had torn her up, yes, my brain didn’t want to go back to the memory of that moment, but it was there.

It had happened.

He had torn her throat out and spat out her flesh, and her blood had flowed and splattered on the ground. And her head had swung from his hand.

No. I was imagining it. Didn’t I already decide I was imagining it? That somebody had slipped me a drug? But when could that have happened? I took my drink into the bathroom. Something through the vents, something airborne? It would explain why I had an anxiety attack.

But that didn’t ring true, either, because I wasn’t there anymore. Would the effects linger that long? They had to, because the alternative was unthinkable.

Unthinkable wasn’t the same as impossible.

“You’re not human. You can’t be.” That would explain the eyes, too, and the weird way of speaking, like he came from another time.

For the second time in maybe four minutes, I couldn’t breathe. I was sure a hand was squeezing my heart. Or an elephant was sitting on my chest. Either one.

“You’re right. I’m not.” His shoulders moved ever so slightly. Like he tried to shrug.

“Just like that? You’re going to tell me just like that? Whoops, sorry, I’m not human.”

“I didn’t say I was sorry. That’s where you’re wrong. I only said I wasn’t human.”

“What are you, then?”

“You don’t know? You spend enough time among them. They fascinate you, don’t they? Did you wonder why?”

I sputtered. “I—I draw them.”

“Some people draw flowers. Dogs. Landscapes.” He took a step toward me. Then, another.

I scrambled backward, away from him. Anything to get away from him. My back hit the foot of the bed, and I fought my way to my feet, even though my legs were rubbery. I couldn’t rely on them to hold me up, so I crawled backward to the headboard and curled up against it.

“Think, Janna. Why do you think you chose a bunch of vampires and witches to use as your subjects?”

“They’re—they’re not, really,” I stammered.

My heart thudded like a bass drum, and my thoughts spun out of control. Did I have any weapons? Knives, but they were across the room. Not a lot of help. I could’ve kicked myself for not keeping something close to the bed, maybe under the pillows.

He watched me think things through, and the look on his face told me he knew I was thinking things through and that was the most terrifying of all. He had me pinned and was watching me squirm, and I was pretty sure he liked it.

I cleared my throat and forced myself to speak above a whisper. “There’s no such thing as actual vampires.”

“Are you sure? Are you very sure?” He loomed over me, like he had somehow magically gained several inches.

I told myself my eyes were playing tricks on me when his canines seemed to lengthen and sharpen into dangerous points.

His eyes went from that eerie gray-ringed-in-red to completely red, blood red, like some special effect out of a horror movie.

Except I was looking at it in real life.

“No. Stop this.” I turned my face away and crossed my arms in front like that would stop him from hurting me if he really wanted to.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I was still fuzzy after getting drugged at the club. That was it.

Not that it made me feel better, but it was an explanation and somehow more comforting than the idea of being alone in my apartment with...

No. Impossible.

Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes slowly, cautiously, waiting for him to jump at me and surprised he didn't. That didn't mean he wouldn't, though, which I reminded myself as I lowered my arms.

He looked the same as ever.

I must have imagined it. "I think there's something wrong with me," I whispered slowly. "I'm seeing things."

"What things?" He sounded lightly amused. One eyebrow arched inquisitively.

"I... I don't know. Your face changed. You looked different."

"You still think that was a hallucination?" He smiled, then shook his head. "You are truly determined not to see the truth."

"Don't do this to me. Don't get inside my head and stir things around." My chest rose and fell in time with my rapid breathing as I looked up at him.

“I realize I’m stirring things around, as you say, and I’m sorry for that. I’m sure this is a lot for you to take in at once.” He pointed to the bed, as if to ask permission to sit near me.

I nodded. Not that I had a choice. I had never felt so torn between wanting to escape and wanting to placate someone so they wouldn’t hurt me.

Oh, God, I’m going to become one of those girls on the news, the ones who end up dead in their apartment after letting the wrong person upstairs. This is how it happens.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

“Yeah, well, that’s what they all say, I’m sure.”

“The difference is, I mean it. The purpose of my being here is to help and protect you. Not to hurt you.”

“Protect me from what? Help me with what? I don’t need either, thank you.”

“You didn’t feel that way earlier tonight.”

I winced. “Earlier tonight was different. Girls get accosted at clubs. It happens all the time—and I’ve never needed a bodyguard before.”

“You think that was an everyday occurrence? Come, now. I thought we had already discussed this?”

“No. Don’t be a jerk. I only mean she didn’t want to hurt me. Maybe hook up with me since it seemed like she liked me, but—”

“No. That’s where you’re wrong.” His body seemed to vibrate with intensity. “I

meant everything I've said. I wasn't trying to deceive you, and this is no hallucination. Everything you saw tonight was real. Everything I've told you is the truth. That vampire girl saw who you were—yes, perhaps she was attracted to you, as you're an attractive girl. But it wasn't entirely sexual. She wanted your blood, and she wanted you on her side."

"Her side."

"You're not a threat to them," he explained, "but you're not a friend, and she felt it. Vampires don't like witches or even half-bloods trespassing in their world. She sensed about you what I'm willing to bet you've sensed in yourself, only you didn't understand until today what made you different. Even now, it's likely you can't fathom the extent of what your blood means."

I wanted to cover my ears and make it all go away. "Stop it. Just stop it. Who are you, Dumbledore?"

"Enough." Just that one simple word, spoken in a flat, toneless hiss but with as much force as if he'd screamed it, sealed my mouth shut and sent goosebumps running up and down my arms. "I've had enough of your sarcasm, your poor attempts at avoiding the truth of the situation. You're wasting my time, and your own. Wouldn't it be easier for you to simply accept what your mind is telling you? Somewhere in there, you know this is the truth. You know your eyes are not deceiving you. You can lie to yourself, but such lies only last for so long."

He leaned closer, hands on the mattress, and I glanced down to find he'd suddenly grown claws. Claws like an animal would have.

They dug into my sheets, and I wanted to tell him to be careful of them, which was such a ridiculous reaction that a burst of laughter bubbled up in my chest and threatened to come out.

Insane laughter.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I was losing my grip.

His eyes changed. They started taking on that red color again.

Oh, my God, this is it, I've lost my mind. I never woke up today. The migraine wasn't a migraine. It killed me. I died, and this is some sort of limbo. Or maybe it's hell.

No.

A voice. A voice that voice was louder and stronger than the panicked one trying to convince me I'd died of a brain hemorrhage.

Listen to him. Accept it. Move on from it. You're not going to lose yourself. You're going to move forward from this, but you have to start listening to him and thinking rationally.

I wanted with every ounce of my being to lean away from him, but I didn't.

"All right. I'm listening. I'm believing. And you're trying to tell me that you're an actual vampire."

"Correct." His teeth started lengthening again.

No, not his teeth. His fangs.

Bile churned around in my stomach, and I realized vaguely that I hadn't eaten all day.

Probably a good thing—otherwise, I would’ve covered us both in what was left of it.

“And even though I don’t have witch powers, I am half-witch.”

“Also correct.”

“And... somebody might hurt me for that. Or worse.”

He paused. Frowned. “Correct.”

I took a deep breath.

It sounded ridiculous.

I wanted it to be ridiculous.

But the man was showing me proof of what he claimed.

He had fangs, for Christ’s sake. Not the kind he had to glue on to his regular teeth, either.

I wasn’t imagining or hallucinating. I was really seeing it. They grew before my eyes.

“You’re really a vampire.”

He nodded, and when he spoke, he did through the fangs which touched his bottom lip even when his mouth was open.

“I am.”

7

Vale

She was, without a doubt, the most impossible person I had ever known. She had all the worst traits of both a human and a witch.

I got up from the bed to give her space and used the opportunity to look outside.

It took a little craning of my neck to get a glimpse of the street, but all looked calm. It was well after one o'clock, and I still heard voices coming outside the corner store, where a small crowd had been gathered when we left the taxi.

"It's sick," she announced.

"What is?" I didn't turn around.

"Wanting to believe somebody drugged me earlier tonight. It was preferable to what I saw out there in the alley being the truth."

I nodded. "It's not difficult to understand. We don't want to accept the truth when it's a truth that's been presented as a lie for so long."

"Of course, she wasn't human," Janna murmured to herself. "She didn't even get hurt when she hit the dumpster. I wondered why she bounced back like that."

"Exactly." I took a quick look out of the corner of my eye.

She was utterly drained, paler than usual, eyes as wide as saucers with dark rings where tears had ruined her makeup.

I wondered in the back of my mind if I could've been more sensitive when announcing her parentage, but she was a strong girl, and I didn't have the time to coddle her. Or the patience.

"Where is my mother? My real mother?"

"I don't know exactly where she lives. I never met her before yesterday, when she sent me to you."

"And she's a witch, huh?"

"A very important one. Normally, I would've been assigned to protect her, not you. I'm sure there's another Nightwarden guarding her now."

Normally, if she had imprinted on me there couldn't be a second imprinting, but it was clear the High Council had loosened their rules for her sake.

"A Nightwarden? Is that what you're called?"

"Yes. We don't exist alongside other vampires, like the ones you've been spending time with." I turned from the window and cast a disparaging look her way. "What were you thinking?"

She drew her knees to her chest with a shrug. "I told you. I draw them. They're interesting. Beautiful. I thought it was a fetish. That's all. Strange, creepy, but innocent."

"There's nothing innocent about them."

“Tell me something else I don’t know,” she groaned, miserable. “It all makes sense now. I didn’t want to believe it. God, it all sounds so impossible. Like there’s a whole other world out there I know nothing about.”

“That’s because there is,” I agreed. “Our worlds coexist, but they’re very different. And it’s better that they intersect as little as possible.”

“Why did they let me in there, then, if vampires and humans aren’t supposed to intersect?”

“That’s different. Would the wolf refuse the sheep, when the sheep is ignorant enough to step into their den?”

She covered her face with her hands. “I can’t believe you’re putting it like that.”

“How would you describe it? Humans offer themselves up like dinner to them. All because they find them fascinating, special, different.” I sneered. “Beautiful.”

“Watch it,” she warned.

“Your instincts should’ve been stronger,” I snapped back. “Or, what’s probably closer to the truth, you should’ve listened to them instead of insisting they were wrong. Because I find it hard to believe that you never felt there was something off about that club. You talked yourself out of it, just like you spent so much energy trying to talk yourself out of what you saw clearly in that alley. You watched me kill that vampire. You knew she was trying to put you under her thrall. But you still fought it, told yourself you were drugged. That insistence on denying fact almost got you killed tonight.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“Stop. Just stop, all right?” She looked away, toward the pathetic excuse for a kitchen. “I don’t need you to rub my nose in it. Maybe you should try putting yourself in my shoes for a second. Give empathy a shot. You wouldn’t be so mean.”

“It’s difficult for me to empathize with a willfully ignorant creature.”

“Yeah, well, give it a shot. Vampire.”

“My name is Vale.”

“I don’t care.”

“It doesn’t matter.” And that was the truth.

She didn’t have to like me or care what my name was, and vice versa. I was there to do a job. My eyes traveled the length of her body, assessing.

“You’re dirty. You should clean up and try to get some rest. It’s been a trying night.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” She sat up and unlaced her boots, then pulled them off and dropped them on the floor. They fell with a resounding thud. “Just because you’re here doesn’t mean you have the right to mess up my schedule.”

“I wasn’t aware you had a schedule I was interfering with.”

“I hope I remember everything clearly.” She turned her back before sliding her dress over her head, then bending at the waist to remove her stockings.

Challenging me? Or proving she didn't care whether or not I stayed? I wasn't strong enough to keep my eyes from her round, firm backside under the little scrap of fabric that I guessed passed for undergarments. She was smooth, like she'd been carved from marble. She pulled a thin, baggy shirt over her head which just barely reached her upper thighs.

My eyes snapped away from her body when she turned back to me.

"What is it you plan to do?" I asked despite the abundance of saliva in my mouth.

She made it water just like the promise of blood did.

"I have to draw what I saw tonight. I want to draw her, on the dance floor."

"You what?" I laughed for the first time in as long as I could remember.

"What? That's the reason I go to the club in the first place. I told you." She went to the pad on the easel, twisting her braid up on top of her head as she did and using a band to secure it. "I sketch what I see there. I have a collection of work going up at a local gallery soon, and this is part of a follow-up series."

"You're serious?"

Curiosity got the better of me, and I went to the supply-covered table. There was a stack of rough sketches there. Shadowy figures, tall and imposing. Secretive—no, furtive was a better word. She had captured that. Leaning against the bar, dancing together, huddled in corners. Half-hidden by darkness. There was a feeling of dread, of intrigue. Yes, even of beauty. A dangerous beauty.

I could believe the creatures she drew had many secrets, many dark desires. I could almost see why they fascinated her the way they did.

“What do you think?” I looked up to find her working rapidly, arm moving back and forth as she did a quick sketch with a worn-down pencil.

“I think I understand why you chose them as your subjects,” I admitted. “I think you have talent.”

“Thanks so much,” she smirked. I couldn’t see her, but I could hear it in her voice.

“And you sell your work?”

“Of course.”

“This is not the impression your birth mother has of you. I feel like you should know that.”

“What impression does she have?”

“She thinks you’re drawn to the danger. That you’re one of the humans who wants to be part of their world—the vampires, the witches.”

“Ah. I see. She doesn’t understand me any better than Miriam.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“Miriam?”

“My adoptive mother. Miriam Reed.” She chuckled, still working. “God. I can’t believe what a relief it is to know she’s not really my mother.”

So there was no love there, or very little. I could just imagine what a willful, stubborn child she must have been.

“She is, however. She raised you.”

“And I’m sure she would’ve done things differently if she had the chance. Don’t worry. I’m not upset. I’ll pay her back everything I can and be done with it.”

“You really don’t care?”

“I really don’t.” She looked back over her shoulder. “You think that’s wrong? That I’m a bad person?”

“No. I suppose I’m surprised, is all. But I don’t know how what your youth was like.”

“I’m sure you could imagine if you put your mind to it.” She took a step back, tilting her head from side to side as she studied what she’d sketched.

I could see it coming together and, frankly, I was impressed. After just a few minutes, she had already created the shape of two figures locked together in an intimate dance.

“She’s never missed a chance to tell me I’m not good enough. Not a good enough

daughter, student, representative of the family. Not even a good enough artist. You've freed me."

"Oh. I'm glad for you, I suppose."

She chuckled and went back to work. "Talk to me, please."

"About what? Shouldn't you be focusing on your work?"

"No—if we hang around in silence, I'll go crazy. My brain needs things to distract it, or this will all sink in at once, and I'll lose my mind." There was an edge of desperation to her voice, too.

"All right." I sat on a small chair against the wall, in front of the easel, stretching my legs out in front of me and crossing them at the ankles.

I folded my arms over my chest.

I told her about the Nightwardens, how we came to be. The original attack back in the homeland and the curse which doomed us to a thousand years of service. The witches we served.

"What's that like? Knowing you have to do whatever they tell you?" she murmured.

I couldn't see her with the sketch pad between us, unless she leaned over slightly.

She did that then, and I saw plain curiosity in the way she raised her eyebrows.

"We're not puppets, if that's what you think."

"I wouldn't have used that word—but, I mean, here you are. You didn't have a

choice, did you?"

I bit back a snarl. Just because she was right didn't mean I had to like it. "I didn't have a choice. You make a good point."

"Not to rub it in or anything."

"I'm sure."

She sighed. "I was only asking."

"How would you like it? What would that be like for you?"

"I would hate it, of course."

"Why bother asking, then?"

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“I hit a sore spot, didn’t I?”

I shifted on the chair, glaring at the wall. “I wasn’t aware this was an interrogation. I thought we were talking so you wouldn’t lose your mind.”

“Shut up and stay still.”

I looked over at her. “Excuse me?”

“Damn it.” She threw her hands into the air. “I told you to stay still, so you turned your fucking head.”

“Again with the language.” I stood, suspicion growing as I walked around the easel.

Sure enough, there I was, captured on paper.

“When did you start doing this?”

“Not long after you started talking. You didn’t even notice me tearing off the old page and starting a new one. You were really into your story, and... I don’t know... you were interesting.” She stepped back, hands on her hips, tilting her head from side to side as she had before. “I think it’s a good start.”

Was that how she saw me? That imposing creature, dwarfing the chair it sat on? Was that really how I looked? The heavy brow casting the eyes in shadow, the brooding expression. Faint stubble on my cheeks, setting off the line of my jaw.

I rubbed my face as I studied her work.

“See? I think I did a nice job here.” She traced the straight nose, the way my lips pursed when I was thinking. “You were very deep in thought.”

“I was.”

She had exaggerated my body a little, but not by much. I recognized the broad shoulders and muscled arms, long legs lean with muscle.

There was an air of insolence about that figure, and loneliness. Sitting against an empty wall.

“I hope I didn’t insult you.” She stretched her arms over her head, bringing the hem of her shirt up dangerously high.

I averted my eyes, but not in time to miss the curve of her hips and the place where her thighs met. I had never met a woman so carefree and comfortable with her body.

There was no hint of her trying to attract me, which only made her more attractive.

I wanted to see what else was under that shirt.

“Not in the least.”

It was safer to look out the window and away from her as she worked tightness out of her muscles.

The little bit of sky visible over the top of the neighboring building was beginning to lighten.

She had worked for hours.

“It’s going to be hot today,” she predicted. “Miserably hot.”

She was right. I could feel it, even if it didn’t affect me the way it did her. She flipped on a fan and propped it in the open window, which at least stirred the air around.

“If you weren’t here, I wouldn’t be wearing this.” She stood with her back to me, in front of the fan, letting the air run up the shirt and blow it out around her.

“Don’t let me stop you from being comfortable,” I offered, looking her up and down again.

“That’s all right. I’ll live.” She looked over her shoulder, eyeing me up. “You think about things like that?”

“What do you think? You were there when this happened.” I tapped my fingers on that first drawing of the couple in the club. How close they’d been to each other, the raw animal lust in every line of their bodies. “We feel things just the way you do.”

“That’s unfortunate for you.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“Why? Am I so disgusting that you can’t imagine me doing something like this?” The man looked like he was skewering the girl right there in the middle of a throng of dancers.

Janna had barely indicated the presence of others in the club around them, but they were there. Maybe watching, the way Janna had been.

A flush crept over her skin. “No. You already described your life as being pretty sparse. It sounds lonely. And it would suck to get all horny or whatever and not have anybody to do anything about it with.” She pulled the sketch away and placed it inside a folio which she snapped shut. Her skin was still flushed when she turned back toward the window and the fan.

“I have to feed,” I announced. “You might not want to watch.”

“Feed?” Her face was a blank mask of fear when she looked over her shoulder. “You mean, on me?”

“Would that be a problem?”

“Of course!”

“I’m not going to feed on you,” I assured her.

I shouldn’t have taunted her like that. She had been through so much. But the temptation to soften that sarcastic edge of hers was too great.

“I have a store of blood with me. Provided by your birth mother.”

She turned her face toward the window. The rising sun's first rays played over her delicate features, so much like Isobel's. Her chest rose and fell in time with her deep breaths.

“Well. That's... creepy. That's very creepy for me to hear. I don't know what to think about that.”

“I'm sure it is. But you don't need to worry about hurting my feelings. I don't care either way.”

She winced but didn't reply.

“I'll take a shower and give you some privacy.” Her eyes were low, focused on the floor, as she hurried past me.

The bathroom door closed a little louder than it needed to.

8

Janna

I wokeup with sweat plastering hair to the back of my neck. Why did I bother showering? I kept my eyes closed in the hope of feeling out the space around me before letting Vale know I was awake.

Was he watching me? Had he watched me the whole morning? The thought made me grit my teeth.

He had told me he didn't sleep, and I had shown him the collection of books under my bed.

I had been planning to hang bookshelves for as long as I'd lived there, but had never gotten around to it. Just like so many things. Days melted away when I got into my work. Sometimes I'd forget to eat all day, even two days.

I didn't hear anything from him, but that was because of the fan next to the bed drowning out all other sounds. I had offered to leave it in the window to help him stay comfortable, but he had insisted.

It didn't bother him anyway, he said. He didn't feel the heat or cold as acutely as I did. His words.

The old-fashioned way he spoke was charming. Definitely more interesting than the sloppy text talk my generation had slid into.

He was pretty much perfect, except for the whole “drinking blood” thing. Oh, and the ripping heads off thing. Didn’t react to extreme temperatures, didn’t catch colds or other viruses, could move with lightning speed.

I had seen that one for myself. His body was like steel. I had seen that, too, when he hit the brick wall and didn’t so much as groan in pain.

Where was he? What was he doing?

I opened my eyes slowly, cautiously, but I could barely see a thing without my glasses. They were on the table.

When I put them on and looked around, my mouth fell open.

“Did you sleep well?” Vale was placing the last of my books on the shelves he had magically hung while I was sleeping.

Unconscious, obviously, since I had slept through it.

“What the hell went on here?” I asked.

It wasn’t just the shelves.

He had straightened up my supplies, cleaned the paint brushes and set them to dry in cups on the windowsill. The kitchen, what there was of it, sparkled. He had picked up my clothes from the corners and put them in the hamper, lined up my shoes by the front door. Even the windows looked clean—not that I had much to see on the other side of them.

“I had time on my hands,” he explained. “And you sleep like the dead.”

“You would know,” I fired back, only half-aware of what I was saying. It was unnerving and endearing all at once. “I can’t believe I didn’t know you were doing all this.”

“Don’t forget: I move fast, and I can be very quiet. I’m not the type to sit still and read for hours on end. I enjoy reading, but I prefer movement.”

“You probably think I’m the world’s biggest slob,” I mumbled.

“Not the world’s biggest.”

It was the closest he would come to being nice.

I decided not to press my luck.

An awkward silence spread between us and threatened to choke me.

What was a girl supposed to say to a vampire who’d just cleaned her apartment? That was something “Dear Abby” had never covered.

“I like where you chose to mount the shelves,” I offered. They were along the wall across from where I normally worked, near the window. “That’s where I was hoping to set them up.”

“I’m glad.” He pulled one of the many art books down and stood by the window as he flipped through the pages.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I found myself watching him, looking for his reactions. The way his eyebrows rose when he saw something that interested him. The way his forehead creased when something challenged him. The quirk of a half-smile.

I wondered what made him smile.

He looked up from the pages and caught my eye. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Just... wondering what you thought about what you were looking at.”

“I have to admit, it doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“Abstract art doesn’t make a lot of sense to many people.” I went to the shelves. “Let’s see how you feel about impressionism.” I flipped to one of my favorite paintings and handed the book to him.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “Ah, yes. I know this one. The Starry Night.”

“You know it?” I couldn’t believe how glad I was that he did.

Like there was one thing we could relate on.

“My last charge, Larissa, was quite well-traveled. We toured Europe together, and she haunted numerous art galleries and private collections. This was before things became dangerous there, of course. I never saw the end of the Great War. My time in The Fold started before then.”

“The good guys won,” I offered.

“There were no good guys. Not really. Having a long view of history helps one understand this.” He closed the book. “Thank you. It’s nice, remembering that trip. I enjoyed it.”

“I didn’t know you were allowed to enjoy things.”

“It’s not against the rules,” he pointed out. “No, there aren’t many opportunities for me to enjoy my existence, but it’s all right if I do when possible.”

“I see. What do you enjoy?”

It looked like he was at least thinking it over. “I don’t remember. Seeing new things, experiencing life in its many forms. That’s one comfort about living for so long. Not everything is...”

“Dark? Depressing? Violent?”

He nodded with what almost passed as a smile. “Correct.”

I tapped my forefinger against my chin. “I think you need an enjoyable day.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I grinned. “And you saved my life last night. I had a lot of time to process everything while I was asleep and it’s obvious that I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“Just let me do this, all right? Besides, I can’t hang around here all day. It’s stifling.”

He weighed his options, then nodded. “So be it. I’m in your hands for the day.”

I couldn’t help but grin.

Yes, he was.

9

Janna

“This is what people do nowadays?”he asked for at least the third time.

And for the third time, I elbowed him. “Could you not sound so obviously out-of-touch? Stop talking about nowadays. Now is now.”

“Right. Of course. It isn’t easy to remember.” He took everything in through the lenses of his sunglasses. “This is what people do for fun?”

I looked around at the view off the observation deck at the top of the Empire State Building. “I thought it would be something you’d like. Seeing the city from this high up for the first time. Seeing how it’s changed.”

“Oh, I don’t need to see how it’s changed to know it has,” he muttered.

My heart sank. Why did it matter if he was happy?

He was obviously determined to feel miserable and negative.

I should let him be that way and leave it.

But he had saved me.

And he had mounted my bookshelves, which for some reason meant even more.

“Can you tell me about those times?” I asked in another attempt to reach out to him. “The last time you were here, I mean. I’ve always been fascinated by the Victorian Era, the Gilded Age. Those days must have been so much more graceful and beautiful.”

“There was a beauty to them,” he admitted. “If one cared about such things.”

“But you didn’t.”

No matter how he tried, he couldn’t make me forget the way he’d smiled when he saw the Van Gogh in that book.

He did have nice memories. I refused to believe his entire life had been nothing but darkness.

“Beauty fades. It never lasts.” He walked from one corner of the observation deck to the other, looking pensive.

“Art lasts,” I argued as I followed him. “The Starry Night lasted. And you remembered it, and it meant something to you.”

“If it makes you feel better to tell yourself that...”

“Stop making fun of me.”

“I’m not. I would never make fun of ignorance. It’s not your fault that you haven’t seen enough of the world to truly understand it.”

“I swear to God,” I muttered, and I poked him in the back to get him to turn around. “I’m tired of talking to the back of your head, and I’ve never in my entire life been called a Pollyanna.”

“What’s...”

“Somebody who’s always positive,” I snapped. “I’m probably the most negative person I’ve ever known, which is one of the many reasons I never fit in with the people around me. I’ve always seen the darkness instead of the light. But you’re, like, perverse about it.”

“You don’t like hearing how much like your Pollyanna you are,” he observed with a wry smile, which only made me want to throw him off the building.

“You’re right, because you make it sound like I don’t have a brain in my head. And that’s not so.”

“Oh, I believe that’s not so,” he murmured.

I couldn’t see his eyes behind those tinted lenses, so I didn’t know if he was being serious or just taunting me.

“Just because you’re all emo—depressed,” I corrected, rolling my eyes, “doesn’t make you unique. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“You’ve made your point,” he murmured. “Anything else you think I should know?”

“You’re a dickhead.”

“Another point taken.”

“I’ve bent over backward today, trying to be nice to you and make it up to you. Last night, I mean. I know I forced you into what you did because I ran away from you—though you could’ve handled that a lot better, honestly. You don’t have much of a personal touch. You suck at it.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “Is that what this was all about? Making something up to me? That’s not how it works, Janna.”

“None of this is how it works, Vale, and in case you forgot, I’m new to all this.”

“I don’t need you to make anything up. Why would you go out of your way, when all I’m doing is my job?”

I looked out over the south side of the building, over the almost endless stretch of buildings.

So many people. So many stories. None of them would believe what I had found myself stuck in the middle of.

“I guess because I wasn’t raised with it. I don’t expect it. If it was an everyday thing, deserving your protection, I wouldn’t think it was a big deal. I would accept it.”

“You weren’t raised with servants, then?”

“You know I was.” I had seen the research peeking out of his backpack after he fed. “And I didn’t like that, either. It always felt unnecessary. Just another reason for me to never fit in. My brother? Oh, Jesus, he loved it. Probably still does. I could never get used to it.”

“This is just the way things are. You’ll have to try.”

“And I’m not supposed to care whether you’re comfortable, or bored, or miserable?”

“No. You’re not. Our lives don’t intersect. They were never intended to.”

“I don’t want any of this.” I looked up at him. The wind whipped through his hair, brushing it back from his face. His stupid face. “I release you. I won’t live in a single room with someone I’m supposed to ignore unless there’s an emergency—which, by the way, won’t happen now. If you think I’ll step foot in one of those clubs again, you’re nuts.”

“It’s not a matter of you releasing me,” he explained. “It doesn’t matter whether or not you want me with you, because you’re not the one who assigned me. If your mother—”

“Who I’ve never met,” I muttered.

“—or the High Council want me here with you, this is where I’ll stay. It isn’t my fault you live in a single room.”

“I don’t want this. There’s no reason for any of it.”

“That’s not for you to say.”

“I hate you,” I whispered, still looking out over the skyline.

And it had started out as a nice day, too.

I had wanted to make him happy as a way to thank him. Was I more naïve than I had ever imagined? Yes, and much less of a hard ass, too. I had finally found somebody I didn’t have to be hard toward, and all I wanted was to show him what he had missed over a hundred years. I wanted to share things with him because, damn it, I was desperate and lonely.

“I really hate you right now,” I insisted.

“Irrelevant.”

My heart sank even further than before.

He didn’t care.

And I’d be stuck with him for as long as some faceless witches said I had to be.

And I used to think my adoptive mother was a pain in the ass.

10

Vale

Our ride home passed in silence. Silence between the two of us, at any rate. There was little silence around us, anywhere we went.

It was the weekend, and there were dozens upon dozens of people ready to squeeze into every train. There was a heavy stench everywhere, the stench of human bodies and sweat. How could any of them stand it? Didn't they smell themselves? Normally, I suffered through ignoring the tantalizing smell of blood. I could barely make it out from everything else assaulting my senses.

She ignored me.

I wasn't disappointed—in fact, that was as it should be. I should fade into the background to be used when she needed me. Nothing more. We weren't friends and would never be friends. It wasn't done.

She would get used to it.

It was easy to forget she was so young.

The witches I had guarded always looked decades younger than they were and possessed a much broader understanding than she did. She knew nothing of my world, of the blood she came from.

I couldn't hold that against her.

And her feelings did her credit. I could admit that to myself.

She put on a show, pretended to be tough and hard. She hadn't had an easy life, probably never had friends. No sympathy from her family. It made her wary of showing her true nature. But that nature was there. She was kind, caring, deeply emotional. An artist.

That didn't make her any easier to handle.

Just my luck.

Why couldn't I get somebody boring? Even vapid would be better than emotional. Trying to create a relationship where there wasn't one.

"Are you hungry?" I asked as we walked up the stairs from the last subway ride.

Night was falling by now, and she had only eaten a small muffin while riding into Manhattan hours earlier.

"I'll live."

"I didn't ask if you would live. I asked if you were hungry. I'm sure you'll live, though from the looks of you there's no telling for how long."

"I'm too skinny now? Sorry. I'll add gaining weight to my list of things that would make your job easier. Right under ignoring you."

"Good. If I can think of anything else for you to work on, I'll let you know."

It was better this way. If I told myself so enough times, I'd even believe it. We were coming up to the corner store.

“Stop in and get yourself something to eat. I would rather not have to leave the apartment again tonight.”

“Do you really have to come with me when I go down to the corner for milk?”

“Yes.” I left it there.

She sighed softly, but kept her mouth shut.

Miracles were possible, after all.

I followed her into the tiny store and walked behind her as she picked up dried pasta, sauce, bread, milk. And more ice cream than any human could crave at one time.

“So you're hungry,” I observed wryly as she dropped three containers into the basket over her arm.

“You're the one telling me I'm too skinny.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“I didn’t mean you had to gorge yourself to prove a point.”

She threw a withering look my way. “I like ice cream. I can’t decide which kind I want. I have a freezer. It doesn’t take a genius to understand this.” She pushed past me on her way to the counter.

I was about to follow her and come up with a retort when something else caught my eye.

Someone else.

Watching from just inside the door, though he pretended to thumb through a magazine.

Not a vampire—I didn’t sense it about him, and his eyes were still like a human’s. But he looked exhausted, with heavy circles under his eyes and sallow skin. His long, brown hair was greasy and lank. His clothes hung on him. He was one of their minions, no better than a cow for repeated milking.

And he was looking for her.

I kept my eyes focused on the back of her head as I walked to the counter, but he was always in the corner of my vision.

He watched her the way I did.

Who sent him? Did the one I killed in the alley have a mate? It was likely. Perhaps

the male she danced with, the one Janna had watched.

I leaned in and caught the scent of her hair, her skin. She was still warm from all the sun she had soaked in throughout our day.

I brushed my lips against her ear, like a lover's caress.

She went stiff.

"Relax. Act like nothing out of the ordinary is happening."

"Why?" she breathed.

I could almost hear her heart racing. Even now, when I felt the stranger's eyes on me, I could barely resist the temptation to taste her skin.

"Someone's watching you. Do not look. He's by the door." I wrapped my fingers around her shoulder and held her in place. "Everything will be fine. I'm going to take him outside. You wait here."

"And do what?"

"Just wait. You don't have to do anything." I squeezed a little harder than I needed to for effect.

She needed to remember who was in charge. This wasn't the time for her to get ideas in her head about taking care of herself.

All I had to do was stand in front of him and flip up my sunglasses. As soon as he saw my eyes, he knew who he was dealing with.

“Outside,” I muttered. “I don’t want to do this in front of humans.”

“You... you don’t know who you’re dealing with...” His voice was high-pitched, anxious.

“Neither do you.” I took him by the arm and half-dragged him out the door, then around to the side of the building.

There were no prying eyes there.

I slammed him against the wall hard enough to make his teeth rattle.

“Please don’t hurt me!” he pleaded, shaking from head to toe.

I reminded myself he was just another stupid human who’d gotten in over his head.

“Who sent you here?” I snarled as my fangs descended.

His eyes went wide and perfectly round, and his lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace of horror.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I could smell the fear coming out of his pores.

“I—I can’t tell you,” he whimpered. “He’ll kill me.”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t,” I promised. “And I’ll take my time.”

“I’m not allowed!” His voice turned into a whine.

Killing him would be worth it if only to get him to stop whining.

“I only need a name. You don’t even have to tell me where to find him—I’ll find him on my own. Just one little name is all.” I looked deep into his eyes, pushing his thoughts aside, demanding answers.

Nothing he felt or thought mattered, anyway.

Only what I needed.

He was going to give me what I needed.

“Bradley,” he whispered before squeezing his eyes shut. Tears squirted out from under his lids and his pale eyelashes. “Please. Let me go now.”

“Where is he?”

“You promised!”

“I promised nothing.” My mouth lingered near his throat, and my tongue darted out to slide along his skin.

His pulse raced.

It would be so easy to drink my fill. His heart would pump the blood straight into my mouth, down my throat. I wouldn’t even have to try to drink.

“You’ll tell me where he is, and you’ll tell me now.”

“He... he lives beneath the club...” he managed to whimper.

“And why does he want her?” It was worth asking, even if I was fairly sure I knew the answer.

“Desiree. Desiree is dead. He loved her.”

“And she wanted the girl. Is that it? He thinks the girl had something to do with Desiree dying. That’s why he wants her now, because she was going after the girl and ended up dead.”

“Not just that. She’s special. Not pure human. He wants to know what she is before he...”

I snapped his neck before he could go on.

I knew what Bradley wanted to do.

A half-human, half-witch would be a wonderful new consort since he’d lost his mate. Either that, or he’d kill her just to set an example. My job was the same regardless: keeping him away from her.

What to do with the body hanging limply over my arm?

I looked around and decided on a dumpster.

He folded up easily and nestled in among overflowing bags of garbage.

She was waiting for me inside the store. Her face lit up when she saw me through the window, and I had to admit surprise that she had followed my instructions.

She hurried out of the store with her bag of groceries in one arm. “What happened?”

“Hurry. Once we’re upstairs, I’ll tell you about it.” My eyes swept the street as we rushed to her building with me nearly carrying her just to get there faster.

He could be anywhere.

If he knew where to send his minion, he could easily send another. Or come on his own.

11

Janna

I had to lean against the sink for support when my knees went weak. “You killed him and stuffed him in a fucking dumpster?” Just when I thought he couldn’t horrify me any worse than he already had.

He blinked. “What did you expect me to do?”

“I don’t know what I expected, but I never thought you would do that! Why would you? He didn’t do anything to hurt me!”

“He would have.”

“You don’t know that!” I came close to throwing a pint of ice cream at his head, but my temper wasn’t that far gone. Yet.

“No. You’re the one who doesn’t know.” He was on me in the blink of an eye, pinning me to the sink with one hand on either side of me. His eyes started going red—he was losing control.

My heart seized in terror.

“That creature wasn’t human anymore. He was a minion. The vampires feed on creatures like that and give them just a little of their blood—only enough to keep them in their thrall and control their actions, even their thoughts. He was nothing

more than an animal or a puppet. He couldn't think for himself anymore. He would've gone straight back to Bradley and reported that you're home tonight and being guarded by a vampire. What do you think would've happened then?" He leaned closer until his body was flush with mine.

And damned if my body didn't betray me. Goosebumps rose on my arms. I turned my face away, staring at his arm instead of looking up into his darkening eyes. I didn't want to see them turn blood-red, and I didn't want him to see what he was doing to me.

"They would've come for me," I whispered.

"Damn right, they would have. And then what? I can more than hold my own, but you can't. I'm not going to invite a boatload of vampires up to your apartment just so I can prove myself."

"All right, all right. I just don't see why you have to go right to murder all the time. Doesn't it matter to you?" I sneaked a look at his face.

He had gone back to normal once that first burst of anger fizzled—but he hadn't let me go.

I was still pinned between the sink and his unforgiving body. And his face was still dangerously close to mine.

Why didn't he back away to give me room?

"Doesn't what matter?"

"Life. Doesn't it matter that he was alive and now he's not? And you stuffed him into a dumpster? And Jesus Christ, what happens to the shop owner when a body is found

in his dumpster? What if he has to close down the store while they investigate? He could lose money on that. All because you had to kill that pathetic thing.”

“What would you have me do?” he whispered.

He was even scarier when he whispered like that. His face filled my world, blocking out everything else except his scent and the feeling of him all around me.

I struggled to keep my thoughts together. It wouldn’t be right for him to see how he undid me.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“You don’t have to know, do you? You can stand there in judgment of me, talking about the sanctity of life and how I had no right to kill a living thing. Even though that living thing would’ve seen you killed if it meant currying favor with his master. That’s all he cared about. Do you think he would’ve told his master not to kill you, that your life was precious?”

“I... don’t know...” I couldn’t breathe when he was so close.

“Do you think he would’ve begged for your life? No. He would’ve watched whatever Bradley had in store for you, and he would’ve told his master he did a good thing, the right thing, the only thing.”

“Don’t,” I whispered.

“He would’ve watched while that monster sucked you dry. Or, worse, turned you into a minion. You would spend the rest of eternity as a mindless thing, doing what you’re told, begging for even a sip of blood to get you through the day. An addict, desperate, sweating and pleading. And he would’ve let it happen to you.”

“I can’t. Please.” I placed my hands on his chest. “Please. Stop. No more.”

He was silent, looking down, and I realized he was looking at my hands.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I lowered them slowly, feeling guilty for touching him.

He was like stone, but warmer, though not as warm as me.

Did his heart beat? It had to, or else how was he alive? There was so much I didn't know.

He cleared his throat and put a little more space between us. "You have to understand the stakes. You need to for your own safety. This is no game—I would think you knew that after seeing what you did in that alley, behind the club. I don't kill because it's enjoyable. I kill because I have to."

"Don't pretend it's not even a little enjoyable for you," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "I saw you when you killed her. You were exhilarated."

"Exhilaration is not enjoyment."

"You're lying. I thought you said you would always be honest with me." I held eye contact until he chuckled.

"All right. I admit it. There's something thrilling about the hunt. The fight. Winning. Because it's a fight for more than glory. It's life-or-death stakes. If I win, it means I keep my life."

"I thought your life was so depressing and bleak. Why would you fight to save it?"

His mouth opened, then snapped shut. "Do you always ask so many questions?"

“When I have a question, I ask it.”

“What else do you want to know?”

“Nothing right now.”

“And that’s a lie,” he announced. “There’s a lot you want to know. You want to know all about me. Don’t you?”

“There’s nothing we need to discuss right now.” I needed to breathe, to think. He was too much. How could I go from hating him after he hurt my feelings to wishing he would kiss me?

He nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off me. “I could use a shower after touching that... thing,” he decided.

I shuddered when he called him a thing. Tricked into thinking he’d be strong, powerful, if Bradley took him under his protection. More cowardly and pathetic than ever.

Dead in a dumpster.

“I’ll move the body later,” Vale announced, as if he was reading my mind. “Once the streets are empty, later tonight. As long as you promise to stay here with the door locked behind you. I’ll take it down to the river or someplace a little more public, so the store owner’s business isn’t disrupted.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t know what else to say.

It seemed stupid to thank him for something that was only the right thing to do in the first place. But he seemed to expect some response, and that was better than nothing.

I could breathe more easily when he was on the other side of the bathroom door.

His presence was just too damn much for me to handle. I was actually excited after that little bit of contact. Just touching him, feeling him close to me, feeling his breath on me. I splashed cold water on my face in the hopes of cooling down.

When I turned off the tap, I caught the sound of whimpering from the street.

A faint whimper, sad. Heartbroken. And young.

A child.

One of the kids who lived on the block?

I went to the window and leaned out, looking down to the sidewalk.

She was sitting against the wall opposite me with one of her knees pulled up close to her chest.

It was bleeding.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

Her bicycle sat on its side next to her, wheels still turning. Her tears dripped onto the ground, and the sound of her crying broke my heart.

She sounded so pitiful.

“Are you gonna be all right?” I called down to her.

She looked around, surprised, then looked up at me. Tears streaked her chubby, little girl cheeks. There was a scrape on her chin, too. Poor thing.

“My mommy’s at work all night,” she whimpered. “My knee hurts. I need a Band-Aid.”

“I have some,” I offered. “Do you want some help?”

“Please.” Her chin quivered, and fresh tears sparkled in her eyes.

I rummaged through one of the cabinets above the sink and pulled down a box of bandages and a bottle of peroxide.

Vale wouldn’t even be out of the shower by the time I got back—and he could kiss my ass if he had a problem with me helping a little girl that fell off her bike.

I hurried downstairs and out to the narrow passage between my building and the next one over.

The bike was still there, but the girl wasn’t.

“Hello?” I called out, looking up and down the street. How did she get away that fast?

“Hello.”

Not a little girl’s voice.

A man’s.

Deep, gravelly, knowing. Satisfied.

I turned. There he was, standing in front of me, blocking me from the street.

I recognized him from the club.

He was dancing with her.

Warmth trickled down the inside of my thigh, and I realized I was pissing myself.

Because he was going to kill me. It was all over.

“A soft heart,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Always the downfall of you women. Even some men, but mostly women. So easy to take you in with a crying child or a wounded animal. I’m sure your friend warned you against going out on your own, didn’t he?”

My friend.

He would be out of the shower soon.

He had to be.

And he'd come down when he saw me gone.

I only had to stall for a minute. "Why are you here? What do you want from me?"

"I didn't even care for you, not really." He was tall, so tall, and he towered over me.

Dressed in black, tight clothing that looked like something he'd wear to the club. He moved with unbelievable grace as he slid through the darkness, coming closer with every unhurried step. There was something sexy about him, a sensuality that seeped from him. His red-rimmed silver eyes flashed.

"She wanted you. My Desiree. Thought you would make a nice addition to our... family. And she felt what I feel about you now. That blood of yours. Powerful. So tempting. You're not only human, are you?"

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“I... I don’t know...” I hated how I sounded. Like the little girl who fell off her bike and didn’t know what to do next. Who needed help, but there was no one around to help her.

He had tricked me so easily.

“You do know. Stop lying. You have witch blood. And I’ve never tasted witch blood before.” His tongue slid over his lips, touching the tips of his fangs.

“I didn’t hurt Desiree,” I whispered, desperate to make him understand. “You don’t have to do this, because I’m not the one who killed her.”

“I’m not doing this for vengeance,” he whispered, smiling nastily. “I’m doing it because I want to. Because I’ve been watching you ever since the first time you visited my little club. Sitting alone, drinking alone, not even dancing. Your heart wasn’t in it. You weren’t there to have fun. You were watching us, isn’t that it? Like zoo animals. Something to amuse you. Well? Did we amuse you?”

“It wasn’t about amusement.”

“I don’t care what it was about. You made yourself visible, and here we are. It’s a shame you won’t be able to learn a lesson from this. Stick to your world and let us go about our business.” He lunged at me then, taking me by surprise, and I only had time to let out a moan of dread.

Vale’s face flashed in front of my eyes before agony wiped every other thought from my head.

12

Vale

The shower hadn't helped anything. I was just as overheated as ever. And it all centered around her.

What was happening to me? Like something had snapped in my brain, and I wasn't the same as before. It had been a terribly close call back there, against the sink, bodies touching.

I could still smell her even with the scent of soap all over me, hanging in the air. Nothing could wipe her from my mind. Nothing could erase the feel of her warmth, the way my skin had tingled wherever it touched hers.

I wiped steam from the mirror and looked at myself. My eyes were half-lidded with lust. It was like wanting blood but even worse, because blood kept me alive. There was an excuse for wanting blood. I couldn't help it. Without it, I'd starve.

What was the excuse for wanting her? None. I could live without her. I would do better to live without her. No matter how much I had hated myself in the past for being so weak when blood was concerned,

I hated myself ten times more for being so weak around her.

The silence got my attention first.

The fact that I couldn't hear her out there, making noise, being sloppy. Dropping things, letting them lie where they fell.

"Janna?" I called out, sliding into a fresh pair of shorts and jeans.

I would need to have my clothes washed soon, since my supply was limited.

Nothing but silence.

I flung open the door.

The apartment was empty, the front door closed.

"Janna!" I bellowed, running for the window, looking out.

The narrow alley between buildings was empty, along with the sidewalk. And yet the smell of blood hung heavy in the air.

No, no, no.

The word repeated over and over as I ran out into the hall, threw myself headfirst down the stairs, burst out onto the sidewalk and around the corner.

No, no, no.

Not her. No.

It wasn't possible. What had she done? How had it happened?

"Janna?" I whispered, scanning the dark passage.

All I saw was a pile of rags against the wall. A pile of rags which rose and fell slowly, barely moving at all. Not a pile of rags.

A body.

I collapsed beside her, pulling her into my arms. She was covered in blood and bruises.

Her head lolled against my shoulder.

“Oh, Janna, what did he do to you?”

She was gone, or nearly.

Her breathing was nothing more than a shallow rasp which she struggled for, and a gurgling sound came from her chest whenever she drew in air.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

She was all broken up inside.

I couldn't leave her out here in that filthy little place. I couldn't let her die. I looked around, watching for him.

He was gone.

He knew better than to linger at the scene of the crime. I had to take a chance to get her back upstairs before it was too late.

If it wasn't already too late.

"I'm sorry for this," I muttered as I lifted her.

She was so light. Almost nothing. Her blood painted my skin as I draped her over my shoulder, and she let out a sigh of soul-rending agony that threatened to tear me in two.

Janna.

I had let him do this to her. I held her in place with one arm as I used my other hand and bare feet to climb the brick wall—there were enough cracks and openings in the brick and mortar to give me adequate holds.

I couldn't risk taking her up the stairs in case one of her neighbors happened to see.

Moments later, I was easing her through the window and lowering her to the floor

before climbing in behind her.

In the light, the damage was gruesome.

Almost too much to take in at once. I could barely contain my rage when I saw everything he did to her beautiful body, her face.

The light cotton dress she had worn that day was filthy, shredded by his claws and soaked in drying blood.

He had bruised and gouged her thighs, probably trying to rape her, but her underwear was still intact. Her chest was crushed, nothing but a bruised pulp, and his claws had torn her throat, her face, her arms.

Handfuls of her hair were missing, while the rest was a matted, bloody mess. A piece of her eyeglass frames stuck out of her skull as though he had slammed her face into the wall. Her nose was broken, too.

She coughed, and blood bubbled out of her mouth and onto the floor. She tried to open her eyes.

“Oh, Janna. Darling,” I whispered, taking it all in at once, frantic because I knew she was about to die.

She was going to die, and the world would be without her.

I would be without her.

I couldn't let that happen. She was my job. She was the only light in my life. She was innocent.

She was everything.

I was losing her, letting her slip through my fingers like sand.

Every shallow breath could be her last and damn it all, if there was a merciful God it would be because she was suffering unthinkably and I had let it happen.

I touched the side of her face, her once-beautiful face. She was the only beauty I had ever known—living, breathing beauty, and she had wanted to share herself with me, and I had pushed her away because I had to, didn't I?

I couldn't let her get too close. What difference had it made? She was dying in front of me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Nothing...?

The idea teased the corner of my furious thoughts.

I didn't want to let it take control because I knew it was a terrible idea, a dangerous one, one which would be my undoing but what other choice did I have?

To let her die, to watch her light extinguish and leave the world—my world—in blank, empty darkness?

Page 43

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

I could save her. I could damn her to hell along with me.

I didn't have time to think it over.

I had to act, and quickly, because she was almost gone. Her breath was slower and slower, shallower, more pained.

I acted.

My fangs slit the inside of my wrist, and I held it over her upturned mouth.

"Drink," I begged, stroking her face with the other hand. "Please, Janna, please, take this and swallow. It's your last chance. I'm begging you. I'm ordering you to drink."

My blood dripped onto her lips, into her mouth.

She only had to swallow before she died.

I watched her torn, blood-caked throat for any sign of her obeying. Could she even hear me? Was she already far away?

Her eyelids fluttered as another pained, labored breath tore through her.

I could almost feel her pain, and it caused me pain.

All she had to do was swallow.

“Swallow, damn you,” I hissed.

When her eyes snapped open, they locked on mine.

And the red ring crept along the outside of her violet irises.

It had worked.

I had damned her.

“Drink more,” I instructed, holding my wrist closer to her mouth.

She tried to turn her head, even as I knew she must be desperate for it.

“You need it to heal. Come on. Now’s not the time to be stubborn.”

More of my blood spurted out onto her mouth, and she was gone the moment she tasted it.

Her growing need, so fresh and hot and desperate, overtook her fading human sensibilities as she latched onto my wrist and sucked. Hard.

My eyes closed and I groaned as I felt her draining me, swallow by swallow.

I remembered feeling that way, that first burst of complete, all-consuming lust. Hating myself for it, feeling dirty and wrong for needing that sweet, coppery-tasting fluid. Every swallow only made the lust stronger. A thirst that would never be slaked.

I felt myself slipping away and realized she was about to bleed me dry.

“Enough!”

I pulled away using every last bit of strength she had left me.

My blood mingled with hers, smearing over her mouth and chin.

“What... did... you... do...?” she managed to pant before the full change began.

13

Janna

I was dying. I was burning up from the inside out. Every nerve, every muscle, every part of me was wracked with agonizing, blinding, screaming pain.

I writhed on the floor, wishing I could crawl out of my burning skin, wishing I would die and it would all be over.

I opened my eyes and my vision blurred, doubled, tripled.

His face hovered over mine.

Vale.

Where was Bradley? I could almost see him if I tried hard enough, but I didn't want to try because he was a monster, he tried to kill me, he had hurt me so much, so much, everywhere. He might come back for me.

No, no, he wouldn't, he thought I was dead.

And I was dead, or dying, and that was fine because I wanted it to end. I wanted it to all end. What did I ever do to deserve this hell? My muscles clenched and I doubled up, rolling onto my side.

He was whispering, over and over. It won't last forever. It will end. It won't last

forever. Stay with me. Stay with me.

What did he do to me?

He had made me drink his blood. I could still taste it, mingled with my own, but that didn't make sense because how could I tell the difference?

I drank his blood, and I had liked it. No, loved it, even though it repulsed me.

I didn't have a choice, did I?

No, there was no choice, because the blood was all that would keep me alive.

But I didn't want to be alive anymore. What was I going to do? My mind was snapping, shattering into a million pieces. I would never be whole again. I would go insane and stay that way.

Oh, God, I'm dying. When will it end? I just want it to be over. I don't want this, any of it, please, let me die. No matter what I did in my life, no matter how many sins I committed, I don't deserve this. Please, let me die. I don't want to live anymore if this is all there is.

But it didn't end. It went on and on, the feeling that my bones were breaking and mending over and over, the way my muscles stretched and cramped and burned, the way my heart pounded until I was sure it would explode out of my chest and my brain raced with crazy thoughts, scorching the inside of my head with images I couldn't explain and didn't want to see because they were terrible, awful, disgusting and inhuman and brutal.

And he was there, trying to hold me through it.

I felt cold water on my face and realized he was washing me, but it didn't give me any comfort because the fire was inside and he couldn't put it out by putting cold water on my outside. It wasn't working.

I turned my head from side to side and moaned helplessly.

“Shh... try to be quiet...”

That had to be a joke. How could I be quiet? I opened my eyes and looked up at him and tried to focus.

“When... will it end?” I rasped before moaning again as fresh pain raced through me from head to toe.

“Soon. Soon. I promise. Just hold on.”

I closed my eyes and arched my back as even deeper anguish settled in my chest. My chest. I remembered something about my chest. Oh, yes, he had stomped on it with those big, heavy shoes of his.

I had heard my ribs cracking and snapping and could feel them stabbing me inside, but there was nothing I could do about it then.

He was so much stronger.

I remembered tasting my blood, hearing it bubbling in my chest when I tried to breathe.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

This was a special kind of horror. Was I healing? Was it possible? If so, it hurt almost as much to do that as it did to fall apart.

A fresh wave of burning, searing heat swept all other thought away, and I lost consciousness.

My next conscious thought was of peace.

Peace, finally.

I felt the floor under my body and wondered if I was even still alive, since there was no more pain and I was sure the only thing that could stop that sort of pain was death.

I had to be hovering in between life and death. That had to be it. My body was on the floor, and I was aware of it, but I was on the brink of death.

I couldn't have survived.

Yet when I curled my fingers, they curled until my hands were in tight fists. When I took a deep breath, I felt the air moving through my throat, into my lungs. I felt my chest expanding. No more pain, no more gurgling noises. It was all real. I had to be alive.

I opened my eyes.

Still the same ceiling. I blinked hard. My eyesight was perfect, but I wasn't wearing my glasses. The brief memory of them shattering when I hit the wall flashed in my

consciousness, but it faded away just as quickly. I didn't need them anymore.

Footsteps.

Vale knelt down next to me. "You're back."

"Am I?" I whispered.

I was so thirsty. My throat was parched as a desert, and I could barely speak.

"It looks that way." His hand was gentle on my face, even if his skin was rough. "It always seems like the pain will never end, but it does. I've seen a lot of us change over—even though you're the only one I've ever turned, personally."

"You... you turned me?"

Of course, he had. That was where all the pain came from. That was the only reason I was still breathing.

Bradley had killed me, or almost. I would've died in another minute if Vale hadn't saved me.

But what did he save me for?

I sat up, shaking him off when he tried to help.

"I don't need your help. Oh, God, what happened to me? What did you do?"

I looked down at my body, which was virtually exposed. I was still wearing the rag which used to be my dress. I was filthy, blood-covered. But there were no wounds. No bruises. I had healed completely. I closed the dress as well as I could, even though

he had seen me with it hanging open.

There was a bucket next to the bed, and I made the mistake of looking into it. “What is that?” I asked, recoiling.

“You were sick for a long time. Hours.”

“That came out of me?”

“Blood, mostly. Your blood. The blood that was inside you after you got hurt. Your body rejected it during the sickness.”

“The sickness?”

“It happens to all of us when we turn.”

I wanted to reject the idea. Like there was a door I could close, and I would never have to consider it ever again—being like him. A vampire. No, that wasn’t possible. And yet I had sucked the blood from his wrist and liked it. I had wanted more. I wanted more right now and here, in fact. If he had offered me some, I would’ve taken it. My tongue slid over my dry lips.

And he knew why. He was watching with an expression of sympathy.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” I warned.

“But I am. It was all I could think to do. I couldn’t let you die like that.”

“I wish you had.” I turned away from him and slammed the bathroom door between us.

The bastard. The evil, stupid, monstrous bastard.

I looked at myself in the mirror—aside from the dirt and blood, my eyes got my attention first. They had the same red rings his did.

I closed them and wept. I wept for everything I would never have, never feel, never be. I might as well have died in the dark, against that brick wall. I should have. It wouldn’t be any worse than what I was facing for the rest of my life. All of eternity.

I had to wash myself off and think clearly. The shower was hot—I saw steam rising from the water as it poured out of the shower-head, but it didn’t burn my skin. Right. I wouldn’t feel it the way I used to, just the way he didn’t.

I tried to remember everything he had told me about the differences between us, but it was all a jumble in my brain. No sunlight—I knew that much. Nobody had put a spell on me the way my mother had on him.

Water swirled around my ankles, black and rust red, and I stood there as long as I could before the water pressure went low.

I had to face him eventually. What was I supposed to say to him? Should I thank him for condemning me to misery? To always being thirsty? I wrapped a towel around my body—I was stronger, firmer than before, like I had gotten in a year of daily gym visits in a single night—and went back out.

“You look more like yourself,” he observed.

I didn’t answer.

Instead, I noticed that he had cleaned the blood and dirt off the floor and emptied the bucket. “Thank you for cleaning up.”

“Of course.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, hands in my lap. “I hate you for doing this. I think I should tell you that right off.”

“I expected that, at least at first.”

“At first? I’m supposed to be okay with this over time?” I looked up at him and wondered if the lines of his face had ever looked so sharp, if the stubble on his cheeks had ever been so defined. Of course not, not when I was looking at him through human eyes. I could even see the pores along his nose and forehead. I could make out individual hairs on the nape of his neck, even from across the room.

“I think you’ll become accustomed to it.”

“How is that possible? How can you even say that?”

“I did. I felt much the same as you do now, but I became accustomed to being what I am. What you now are.”

“I never will.”

“I thought that, too.”

“Stop telling me what I’m going to feel, all right?” I held my head in my hands. It was splitting, but not the way it used to when I’d get a migraine. I would never feel one of those again.

Small blessings. Even so, pain was starting to spread.

“You need to feed,” he explained.

“Bullshit. I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll die if you don’t feed, but not for a long time. You’ll suffer first, and it’ll make what you just went through look like a day at the park.”

“I can’t just go down to the corner and pick up blood, can I?”

“No, but I have a supply with me.”

I looked up at him again. “No. Not her blood.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“There’s no other choice, unless you want to go hunting. I don’t recommend that. You’re too young, inexperienced.”

Something terrifying was happening to me, something I couldn’t control. It was like he’d set a fire in my brain when he mentioned blood.

Before he said the word, I was all right. Thirsty, but all right.

After? And knowing there was available blood right there, ready for me to drink my fill?

My breathing sped up like I had just run up the five flights of stairs from the sidewalk to my apartment. I couldn’t hold a thought in my head except for the thought of blood. Sustenance. I didn’t have to be thirsty anymore, because it was right there. I needed it. I had to have it. I would kill him for it if he tried to keep it away from me.

I leaped up from the bed before I knew what I was doing and pushed him against the wall.

“Give it to me,” I snarled, leaning close. I would take his if he didn’t give me the supply. I didn’t care whose it was.

“Let go of me and I’ll get it.” When I stepped back, and he moved, I saw an outline in the wall.

I had dented the plaster with his body.

I looked down at my hands, flexed them, but that was a secondary concern. What mattered was feeding. Immediately.

I shook with need as he pulled the cap from a bag of thick, red liquid and guided the nozzle to my mouth.

I sucked hard, greedily, closing my eyes to let the sensation of getting what I needed more than anything, more than air, wash over me in blissful waves. It was so good, the best thing I had ever tasted. I didn't want it to ever end.

But it had to end. I sucked the bag dry, and Vale had to pull it from my pursed lips.

"That's enough for now. You don't need more than that."

"You don't know what I need," I snapped, shoving him aside to go for more.

There were five bags left and by God, I was going to empty all of them, and he couldn't stop me.

But he did. He pulled me away from the backpack and threw me to the bed.

"Enough, I said. You don't need more than that right now. I know you feel like you do, but you don't. You have to learn control, and fast."

"Fuck you," I sneered.

My towel had fallen open, but what did I care?

All that mattered was getting to the blood and taking it for myself because I needed it, I deserved it, I was already thirsty again and oh, how was I supposed to live like that?

My human thoughts wouldn't go away no matter how all-consuming the lust was. I couldn't forget being human. Reasonable. Rational.

I curled up in a ball, lying on my side. Sobbing. "What did you do to me?" I asked without turning to him. "Who am I? What's going to happen to me?"

His arms closed around my body and pulled me back to his chest. I nestled against him but the tears wouldn't stop flowing. I cried it all out—the confusion and horror and the question of what I was supposed to do with the rest of forever, the question of who I was going to become.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He was rocking me, crooning in my ear, trying to soothe me.

"Why did you do this to me?" I wept, even as I rested my head on his arm.

"I couldn't let you go. I had to make a decision, and fast, because you didn't have much more time. Letting you die... it just wasn't an option, Janna. I need you to understand that. I couldn't sit by and watch you die, even if the alternative wasn't much better. It was selfish. I'm sorry. I condemned you to this..." His lips brushed against my shoulder, my neck, the side of my face. "I didn't want to live without you."

The truth of what he said sank in slowly, unwinding in the middle of my fevered brain and sending shockwaves through it.

"I know it doesn't sound right. I know I'm a bastard for doing this. But without you in the world... there is no world. It was more than letting my charge die—which would've been bad enough, failing my assignment. I wasn't thinking about an assignment when I held my blood out for you to take. I was thinking about me, needing you. I haven't needed anyone in so long. Hundreds and hundreds of years.

But I need you. I'm so weak. I'm so selfish."

"Enough," I whispered, turning around to face him, sliding my arms around him.

"Enough, now. Just kiss me. Make it all go away for a little while. Please."

The first taste of his mouth against mine was almost better than blood.

Strong, firm, musky, hot. He ran his tongue along the seam of my lips and slid between them, and I handed myself over to him when I opened my mouth and slid my tongue against his just as my body slid against his.

I wanted to forget everything but him, if only for a little while.

14

Vale

We had a problem. I debated over how to break it to her. But time was slipping away and with it, the chance to escape alive.

I got up with a wince. I didn't feel pain for long, no matter the injury, but she was a young vampire. Fresh, new, stronger than she would ever be again. Crisscrossed scratch marks covered my back, chest, and ass. I could feel every one of them and hoped they healed quickly.

"We have to keep you out of the sun," I explained, peering out the window. It would be dawn soon. "I don't know if the Ra-Protection extends to only me, or if it's through the blood of the High Sorceress. If the latter, you should be in decent shape since you fed on her blood."

"If not?"

"You'll have to stay here throughout the day. But only this day. We have to move."

She sat bolt upright. "What?"

"We can't stay here. You see that, don't you? Two vampires? What happens if one of Bradley's minions comes knocking, checking to see what happened to you? If you died down there, or if I saved you?"

“What difference does it make? I’ll kill anybody who comes near me—especially that bastard,” she growled, and her eyes went red.

“Control it. Calm down.” I went to her, kneeling at her feet with her hands in mine.
“Janna. Control it.”

“I don’t know if I can,” she gasped, breathing heavy.

Her fangs descended. Her claws dug into my palms.

“You must. You don’t have a choice. Get it under control, damn it. It will pass. I swear it will.”

“I want him dead,” she wailed.

Her body shook with the intensity of her need to see him dead.

“I know. So do I. But we might need to leave before that can happen.”

“Why? Explain it to me. Talk me down from this, please,” she begged, still shaking.

But she didn’t grip my hands with the same desperation as before.

She wouldn’t like hearing it.

“What I did to you went against all our laws. I’m not permitted to create other vampires. The council will find out about this. I’m sure they will. And when they do…”

“What?” she asked, eyes wide. They were back to their normal color, I noticed.

“They might kill me. Which would kill you.”

Her eyebrows knitted together. “But... why would you do it, then? If I’ll just die anyway...?”

“We have to get away from them. That’s the point. If we can escape, they don’t have to know, and we can be together somewhere else.”

“Where? What would we live on? How would we feed? I don’t know what the hell you were thinking.”

“Do you think I knew at the time?” I asked, dropping her hands and standing. “I’ve been asking myself all along what the hell I was thinking. The whole time you writhed and begged to die, there on the floor. Every time you threw up more blood, every time you slid in and out of consciousness, I asked myself what I was thinking when I did what I did. And I told you why. I didn’t want to lose you.”

“But you’ll lose me anyway!”

“I know that!” I roared. “And that’s why we have to move!”

“Where? Where can we go?”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“I don’t know. I have to think. You still have money, right?”

“Yes.”

“We could use that to spend the night elsewhere. In a hotel, maybe. Away from here.”

“And then what?”

“I told you, I don’t know. What I do know is, we have to stay together. Not just physically. We’re a team. We need to work as one.”

I watched rage and fear and understanding and resignation fight for control of her, as everything she thought moved across her face. Resignation won.

“All right. We’re a team.” She looked around the room with a grim smile. “I always wanted to move someplace else, someplace with more room. I never thought this would be why I had to do it.”

I shrugged. “This isn’t the sort of thing anyone can plan for.”

15

Vale

The hotel room was considerably larger than the apartment and much more comfortable. Not that it mattered. I wasn't in the mood to relax, and neither was she.

At least we had moved under the cover of darkness, safely. Without prying eyes following us. None of Bradley's minions.

I wondered if he was ready to give up on her, assuming she had died before anything could be done. That would be for the best.

She paced, wringing her hands. "I'm thirsty. Hungry."

I checked the time. It had been many hours since she last fed. It seemed safe to let her have more, even though I was starting to get thirsty myself and the supply was running low.

Isobel had promised more when I needed it, but what would happen when somebody delivered it, and we were no longer at the apartment?

I could explain the need to keep her safe, which wouldn't be a lie, but that would only last so long. And what if one of the council's spies spotted us and knew Janna had turned?

I tossed her a bag of blood and turned my face away while she fed. Watching her lose

control of herself, becoming a greedy, sucking monster who only cared about one thing—and knowing I had done it to her—was difficult, to say the least.

I turned my attention to the view outside the windows.

And nearly tore the drapes from the walls.

“You chose this place on purpose,” I snarled, pointing to the club. Directly across the street from where I stood.

“What?” Her face was a mask of innocence.

“You’re a terrible liar. You were as a human, too.”

She dragged the back of her hand across her mouth, wiping away any leftover blood, then licked it. “All right. I chose this on purpose. That’s true.”

“You can’t go over there.”

“I can, and I will. You can’t stop me. Don’t make me prove that you can’t.” Her claws started to lengthen. She didn’t need to explain her meaning.

“It’s suicide.”

“Says you.”

“You’re right, says me. You have no idea how many there are, living under that club. You can’t go. You cannot. We have much bigger problems at hand.”

“If there are a hundred at the club, all I have to do is kill him and they’ll all fall. I know that’s how it works. That’s why I would die if you did. Right? He probably

created all of them.”

“There’s too much uncertainty. Too many guesses.”

She opened her mouth, ready to keep fighting. Instead of firing off another argument, however, she sighed. Her shoulders drooped. Her face fell. “It doesn’t matter. If he kills me, he kills me.”

“Don’t say that.” I went to her with my hands held out.

She didn’t pull away when I took her in my arms.

“Don’t ever say that. Please.”

She trembled, and I held her tighter.

“I can’t let you go. I can’t let you take risks with your life, not when I’ve risked so much to keep you with me. I need you. Don’t you see that?”

She buried her face in my neck. “I see it.”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am

“I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. I know it’s inconvenient.”

She snorted. “You could say that.”

“It was all I could do.”

I wished I could make her understand. She was mine. She was mine from the moment I saw her walking down the stairs in front of her building. She was mine when I watched her on the train platform, when I wanted to kill that filthy pig for what he thought about doing to her. She was mine when I killed Desiree to protect her.

Her arms slid around my waist. “I know.”

“You’re set on going over there, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I must. I have to make him pay.”

There was no fighting her—stubborn as a human, insufferably stubborn as a new vampire.

“All right. I’ll go with you.”

16

Janna

We followed the alley we'd been in that first night, where Vale had killed Desiree. It ran along the back of the buildings on that block, from end to end, and the club was in the center of the row.

It was such a wide building that there were three doors leading inside.

"It was probably three separate buildings at one point, and the owner had the walls removed to create one large space," Vale murmured as we crouched behind a dumpster, watching.

"That doesn't help. What happens if we choose the wrong door?"

"You sound like you expect me to know the answer to that. You're the one this is so important to, not me."

The last thing I needed was his sarcasm.

It was bad enough I couldn't make sense of the war going on in my head, between the constant driving desire for blood and the rage that was always just under the surface of my thoughts.

It wasn't Vale's fault I was the way I was. Not really. It was Bradley's fault. More and more of the attack was coming back to me, usually when I wasn't thinking about

it.

Peeing down my leg. The way he had laughed as he took me by the back of the neck and smashed my face into the wall. The sharp, mind-numbing burst of pain starting from my nose and radiating through my head. Not being able to see through the blood running in my eyes. His hands on me once he tore my dress, his claws digging and scratching.

And still, he had laughed.

Even when he stomped on my chest, he had laughed. Brutally, nastily. He had loved it.

It was after four in the morning as we waited to go inside through one of the back doors. The club would be closed, and the stupid, clueless patrons would have left.

Amazing how little time it took for me to start thinking the way Vale did about the humans who spent time there. How could they not see what was really happening? It was nothing more than a way to attract fresh blood to feed on.

I ran the back of my hand over my mouth at the thought of blood.

“You all right?” He was watching me, always watching, waiting for a signal that I was about to go over the edge.

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself it was for the best.

“Yes. I’m fine. Just... ready to do this.” I chose one of the doors at random. “That one. On the right.”

I was out from behind the dumpster and on my way before he had the chance to

register what I'd said.

The door was locked, but that didn't matter to me. I nearly ripped it off the hinges.

"Easy, now," Vale muttered as he closed it behind us. "No need to sound an alarm to warn them in advance."

"I know, I know." I didn't care if they knew. I almost wanted them to. I was jonesing for a fight. I knew I could take on all comers and only needed the chance to prove myself.

We were in the liquor storage room, surrounded on all sides by shelves stocked deep with bottles of everything from vodka to mixers.

We stepped out into a dark, narrow hallway—I could see the fully-lit dance floor to my right, at the far end, and stepped back into the doorway.

"Club," I mouthed, pointing to the right.

I poked my head out and looked left. There was a stairway leading down to a lower level. I took off for it and heard Vale muttering curses behind me. I didn't care about anything but getting to Bradley.

What I saw when I reached the bottom of that rusted, decaying staircase floored me.

"Holy shit," Vale whispered, squeezing my arm.

I didn't reply. I was too busy counting the coffins which lined the walls on all sides of the wide, deep basement.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

Actual coffins.

They took their vampirism seriously.

I lost count after a little while—it was too dark, too difficult to make one coffin out from another once the shadows thickened.

It didn't matter, anyway.

We didn't have the time.

Where was Bradley? That was all I cared about. How would we ever know?

I walked quickly, quietly, examining the coffins. Which was his?

I looked at Vale, who shrugged.

I turned to the coffin in front of me. Well, I had to start somewhere.

I flipped open the lid to reveal a sleeping girl. Probably my age when she was turned, whenever that was. Blonde hair. Perfect face and body. Gorgeous. Probably great at reeling men in.

All this went through my head in a split second before her eyes opened and she screeched, claws extended, reaching for me.

That was when all hell broke loose.

Lids flew open in all directions, and the sound of howling filled the room.

This was a mistake. A big mistake.

I gaped in horror as I backed away from the blonde and looked around at the chaos.

“Great move!” Vale shouted over the screeching, stepping in front of me to shield me from them.

I was still looking for Bradley. Where was he?

In the one coffin whose lid hadn’t opened. I flew to it and pried it open—he had it locked from the inside, but he hadn’t counted on a newly-turned’s strength.

There he was, waiting, eyes already open and staring into mine. “You.”

“Me.” I reached in and closed my hands around the collar of his shirt, hauling him out and throwing him across the room with one smooth movement.

That was power.

I was strong, invincible, unstoppable. I was at his side as soon as he hit the floor and I picked him up again as he roared in surprise and rage.

This time, I threw him into the group of vampires charging at Vale. They fell like bowling pins.

“Hurry!” Vale yelled, claws out and slashing the air as one after another came at him and he cut them down.

I charged through the crowd, throwing bodies aside on my quest to get to my prize.

He got to all fours and shook his head like he was clearing the cobwebs.

I reached him before he got to his feet.

Our eyes met for just the length of time it took to blink.

I remembered his sneering face, the laughter as he brutalized me.

I remembered other things, too. Every time a man had made me feel small by harassing me. My boss at the office, that slimy bastard, feeling me up. He wasn't just Bradley. He was all of them.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

And he knew I was about to kill him.

I planted a solid kick to his chin that tore his head clean off his neck.

It stunned even me, and I was the one who did it.

His head bounced off the floor, then rolled until it reached a wall and came to a stop.

Just like that, dozens of bodies fell like puppets whose masters had let go of the strings. Dead. The room went silent.

“Holy... shit...” Vale panted like an exhausted animal.

He had taken down at least a dozen vampires with his two hands and was covered in blood all over again.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t quicker,” I said, going to him. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Never better. You?”

I looked over at where Bradley’s body had fallen. He was nothing. Just a memory.

“Yes. I’m fine. Let’s get out of here.” We used our speed to race up the stairs and through the storage room—there was chaos in the club section, probably because the few humans or vampires not related to Bradley had just witnessed others die on the spot as they cleaned the place up.

We burst through the back door hand-in-hand.

I was elated, over the moon, ready to get on with the rest of my life.

And if that meant spending eternity with Vale, that would be just fine. We would find our way together. If we could take down a basement full of vampires, we could do anything.

That was when I saw who waited for us out there in the alley.

Four tall, beautiful women in flowing robes. One of whom looked just like me—or, rather, what I had looked like before Vale turned me.

He gasped before his hand squeezed mine in a crushing vice. “Isobel?”

17

Vale

“What are you doing here?” I was painfully aware of how I looked. Blood-covered, winded, probably glowing with exhilaration.

Serena’s eyes widened, but she maintained her composure. “We became aware that you’d created a new vampire. Now, it all makes sense.”

I should’ve known they would sense it somehow. They knew everything we did. There was no such thing as privacy.

“My daughter...” Isobel reached for Janna, then thought better of it.

Anyone with eyes could see how badly she wanted to hold her daughter.

“You’re my mother?”

“What happened to you?” Rage twisted her beautiful features as she glared at me.

“What did you do to my daughter?”

A nightmare was unfolding.

“We should get out of here, don’t you think? Not everyone inside is dead.”

“You’re right.” Maeve stepped forward and took one of my hands, then one of

Janna's. "Come. We'll discuss this elsewhere."

And I knew where "elsewhere" was. I wished I had the chance to warn Janna about what she was about to see before Maeve ported us to The Fold.

The alley dissolved, replaced by the interior of the High Council's chambers. Had it only been a handful of days since I stood in that room, hearing the details of my assignment?

I saw life through different eyes. I knew what it was to love something more than myself, to care for another's well-being over my own. The Vale who left The Fold in search of a self-destructive artist didn't exist anymore.

Isobel, Esme, and Serena joined us a moment later.

While I didn't exactly feel relaxed, since I knew I was in for a world of pain, it was easier to face them here than in that alley with the threat of discovery.

I looked down at myself and grimaced at the amount of blood caking my shirt.

"Take that off, please." Serena's nose wrinkled. "This is what we sent you to Manhattan to do?"

"Where are we?" Janna looked around with wide eyes, mouth hanging open. "It's beautiful."

"This is The Fold," I explained before I peeled the shirt off and over my head. "This is where we wait for our assignments."

"We traveled all the way here just like that?" She snapped her fingers.

“Just like that.” Isobel sounded as troubled as she looked.

“I’m sorry for this,” I said, jumping in without being asked to. “I know this wasn’t part of my assignment.”

“That’s an interesting way to describe it,” Serena spat. “You’ve gone against everything. All the rules we operate by!”

“I realize that, but you must know it wasn’t for my sake that I did it. I wasn’t acting selfishly. It was on her behalf.”

“You turned her into a vampire for her benefit?” Isobel shrieked.

Janna shrank back.

I caught her against me and held her there.

Another mother was rejecting her.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

She trembled against my chest.

“She would’ve died. She was only moments away,” I explained, looking at all of them.

Pleading for them to understand. Witches, especially the High Council, weren’t renowned for open mindedness.

“That was why we went to the club tonight,” Janna whispered. “The head vampire almost killed me. It’s a long story, and I know it was my fault for living so dangerously. You have to believe me. I didn’t know they were real vampires until Vale explained everything. By then, it was too late.”

“I had already killed one of them when she tried to attack Janna,” I added.

I couldn’t believe how desperate I was for them to believe me. For the first time in five centuries, I wanted to live.

“He saved me then, and he saved me when the lead vampire nearly killed me.” Janna chose Isobel to focus attention on.

When the older witch averted her eyes, my heart sank for the both of them.

“And you went back tonight? You took such a chance?” Esme sneered at me. “You allowed her to do this?”

“She needed to even the score for herself. I couldn’t stop her. She would’ve gone

without me. You know how strong young vampires are. I couldn't restrain her. It was better for me to back her up. Would you rather I have let her walk in alone?"

"I don't know what I would rather," Isobel admitted. She looked at the other witches. "What he says is true. It was his feels which first alerted me to there being a problem. That was what brought me to you."

"I see," I muttered. "You sensed what happened to her because of how it affected me."

"Correct. Though I hadn't guessed it was anything this... severe." She looked at Janna again. "You're just as lovely as you were in your pictures."

"The pictures taken without my consent or knowledge," Janna murmured. Typical of her, not letting her mother play the injured party.

Isobel blanched. "I was looking for you. I looked for you for such a long time."

"Maybe if you hadn't given me up, none of this would've happened," Janna suggested with a shrug. "I would've known there were real vampires in the world, and real witches. I wouldn't have spent my life feeling like a freak compared to everybody around me."

"You would still have stood apart from the rest of us," Serena murmured, not unkindly.

"Right. Because I wasn't good enough to be a proper witch, either. No powers." She shook her head. "At any rate, I'm glad you found me when you did."

"Are you sure about that?" I looked down at her. "Look where it got you."

She looked up at me with a sigh. “I’m looking. I meant what I said. I would be dead twice over by now. This isn’t ideal, but...”

“You mean you’re glad to be a vampire?” Esme asked, one eyebrow quirking up.

I bristled but held my tongue. The disdain witches held for vampires wasn’t a surprise.

“I’m glad to be alive,” Janna replied in a cool tone. “No, I can’t pretend it’s ideal. I wouldn’t choose this life for myself if presented with a range of choices. But I didn’t have a range of choices. It was either suffocate on my own blood or stay alive.”

Isobel let out a strangled whimper, but Janna didn’t react.

I admired her matter-of-factness.

Evidently, so did Serena. She was always a straight shooter, as much as any witch could be. “You realize your new lease on life is only a temporary state, I’m sure. Because according to our laws, we can’t allow Vale to live after committing such a serious crime.”

The announcement ricocheted around my skull.

It wasn’t a surprise—I had expected it—but hearing it from Serena’s lips was another thing entirely.

The other two didn’t even flinch, so clearly, they agreed.

Isobel, on the other hand, let out a cry of surprise. “No! You can’t do that!”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

I couldn't have been more surprised.

She had barely been able to make eye contact with Janna, so I had assumed she was just as disgusted as the others.

Serena shook her head, looking mournful. "Isobel, you know the law. No Nightwarden can create another vampire. It's an offense punishable by death and always has been."

"But he wasn't acting as a Nightwarden while he was protecting Janna," she argued. "We released him, remember? He wasn't my Nightwarden, and he isn't now. He's not serving a witch. The law shouldn't apply in this case."

Serena's eyes narrowed. She didn't like being contradicted. "But he's one of the vampires Ralf sired. He falls under the category of Nightwarden."

"I refuse to accept this," Isobel protested. She drew herself up to her full height and looked down her nose at the council. "You sent him out there to protect my daughter at my request. He did the best he could, to the point where he risked his existence to preserve hers. Can we really punish him for that?"

"I don't think you understand the severity of the offense," Esme murmured, trying to position herself between the two witches.

The energy in the room fairly crackled, and I wondered which one would be the first to throw magic at the other as I positioned Janna slightly behind me in case I had to shield her.

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand,” Isobel insisted. She wouldn’t back down. Her daughter was at stake, even if her daughter was a vampire. “It would be one thing if Vale had created her for his benefit. To build an army, something along those lines. Or if he had done it to turn her into his minion. He didn’t. He did it to prevent her from dying.” Her voice cracked before a single tear trickled down her smooth cheek. “Isn’t there an exception we can fall back on? He knew what he was doing could get him killed, but he did it because he only thought of her.”

“You don’t know that,” Serena reminded her.

“You forget, I sensed his feelings. The imprint is still there.” Isobel looked at me with those eyes so much like her daughter’s. They were nearly the other’s mirror image. “It was more than protectiveness. It was more than duty. I sensed the intensity, and I felt you fighting with yourself. You couldn’t let her die. You would never forgive yourself. You wouldn’t wish your life on her, but you didn’t want to live without her.”

The memories of those critical moments surrounded and threatened to crush me.

Janna wrapped an arm around my waist and rested the side of her face against my shoulder.

She was worth it. “I would do it again,” I announced.

Maeve stepped forward with a soft smile. “There’s a way to settle this,” she murmured, holding her hands out. “If you’ll allow me.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

Janna’s arm tightened protectively.

“I won’t hurt him,” Maeve assured her. “But I can see what happened, if he’ll let me in. I don’t like to pry into memories unless it’s absolutely necessary, yet it seems like this is an example of such a time.”

I looked at Janna and nodded for her to let go.

Maeve placed her hands on either side of my head and closed her eyes.

I closed my eyes and opened the door to that night. Finding Janna in the alley, torn and crushed and bloodied. Climbing the wall. Looking down at her, broken in a dozen places and choking on her blood. Listening to her wheezing, labored gasps, torn between duty and the rules and my need for her to stay alive. That raw, unshakeable certainty that life wouldn’t be worth living without her.

Maeve lowered her hands, and I took a deep breath before opening my eyes.

Tears shone in hers as she turned to Janna. “My dear, you had a very close call. I am so sorry that happened to you.”

Janna murmured something that sounded like thanks.

“Well?” Serena prompted.

“It’s as Isobel described it—and much worse,” Maeve replied. “I felt his conflict and understand why he chose the way he did. It was a terrible thing he witnessed. His protective instincts wouldn’t allow her to die. He acted on instinct, as well as the strong feelings he had for her.” She blushed a little and left it there.

I was glad for it, since having her inside my head was unnerving enough.

“Serena, please. Let them go,” Isobel pleaded in a quiet voice. “They don’t deserve

punishment.”

“You think he deserves to be freed after this? Even if we leave him with his life, shouldn’t he be imprisoned for acting rashly?” Serena looked around.

I could tell she knew her argument was weakening.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

“I don’t think he should,” Maeve announced. “Sister, maybe it’s time for us to loosen our laws a bit when it comes to situations such as these. It was Beatrice’s decision to cast her curse over Ralf and his progeny, and we’ve been tasked with upholding the laws she put in place. But that was five hundred years ago. Times have changed.”

“I agree,” Esme added. She wasn’t the type to step up on her own, but she was more than happy to second someone else’s bravery. “We’ve done the best we can, and our witches have benefitted from Nightwarden protection. But we cannot punish those who have nothing to do with the original reason for the curse. Neither Vale nor Janna had anything to do with what happened back then. It was Ralf’s crime.”

Serena was smart enough to know when it was a waste of breath to argue. “This is something we can discuss at further length in private,” she announced. “For now, suffice it to say that I don’t agree—but am willing to step back and accept the advice of others.”

“You mean... we’re free?” Janna whispered.

“You are,” Serena confirmed. “And you’re welcome to leave at the earliest convenience.”

She was a rather sore loser, but as long as she let us go I didn’t care. And I knew well enough not to push my luck.

“Come on,” I said, still a little stunned by the way things had gone. It seemed too good to be true.

“I’ll go with you.” Isobel led us out of the chamber and down the tunnel leading away from it.

She moved quickly, like she understood the urgency of getting out of there before anyone changed their mind.

Janna followed without saying a word as Isobel led us to the mouth of the cave, which led out to the woods.

“Wait a moment.” She turned to us before we could leave and looked at Janna. “You need Ra-Protection.”

“Oh. Right.” She let go of my hand and stood with her arms at her sides. “What should I do?”

“Nothing,” Isobel smiled. “It’s up to me. Just stay still.” She held her hands over Janna’s shoulders—hovering without touching—and chanted the ancient words which would provide protection from the sun’s rays.

The ritual didn’t last long, but the way the two women looked at each other when it was complete made me think something indescribable had passed between them.

They would never have a typical mother/daughter relationship. This was as close as they would ever come.

“Thank you,” Janna murmured with a shy smile.

“You’re welcome.” She cleared her throat. “Come. I’ll take you back to your apartment.” She took our hands and ported us before I could say a word.

In the blink of an eye, we were back in Brooklyn.

“Why couldn’t you do that from the chambers?” I asked, blinking against the abrupt change in light.

The tunnel had been dark, while sunlight streamed through the apartment windows. Another hot day.

“I’m not a member of the High Council. I can’t port there, or from inside The Fold.” Her attention fell on the stack of sketches next to the easel. “Is this your work?”

Janna hesitated, looking at me before replying. “Yes. Some of my more recent work.” She was used to mother figures disapproving of her and waited for more of the same.

Only she didn’t get it. “You’re so talented,” Isobel murmured, flipping through the sketches. “You are truly gifted. I’m humbled by this. I could never create anything this remarkable.”

“...really?” Janna joined her, watching her mother’s face as she examined the work more closely. She was so eager for approval, as much as she pretended not to be.

“Really. I would love to see more of your work someday. If you would allow me.”

“I—I don’t see why you shouldn’t,” Janna sputtered. “I don’t know how my new life will affect what I do. I don’t know where we’ll go or any of that. But I would love for you to see more of what I do.”

Isobel looked around again. “As much as I respect you for working hard and living within your means, perhaps I could help you find something more comfortable.”

Janna bristled. “I like this apartment.”

“You were ready to leave it last night,” I reminded her.

She shot me a dirty look.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

Isobel snorted. “Please. I only want to help you live more comfortably. And, frankly, to get you away from any remaining vampires who might be aware of you. Killing the leader only works on their progeny. He might have others who he didn’t turn, still looking for vengeance.”

That got through to Janna. “What should we do?”

“The coven provides for my needs. I would be happy to help you. I live on Long Island—there’s a converted barn on my property. I would be happy to host you both there until you decide where to settle.”

“You would do that?” Janna whispered, eyes wide.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because... you don’t owe us anything. We’re not like you. I thought you didn’t get along with—”

Isobel held up her hands. “Stop. I don’t want to hear anything more about it. You’re my daughter. I would never have let Serena punish you for who you are.” She turned to me. “I know you feel how sincerely I mean it.”

“I do.” And I knew she was still uneasy, too.

She wasn’t the only one. But she was willing to take the first step toward building a relationship, even if it meant going against the grain.

“Maybe the High Council’s laws aren’t the only things that need a little loosening up,” she decided. “This animosity between witches and vampires should end, too. At least, between our two groups. We know each other. We’re not strangers. There’s no sense in disliking each other out of hand.”

“Very progressive,” I observed.

“As long as it won’t put you in any uncomfortable spots,” Janna fretted.

“It won’t. Besides, I can get you all the synthetic blood you need. And you’ll need a lot of it in these early days, I guess.”

“Oh, you had to go and say that, didn’t you?” Janna’s eyes went red, and Isobel took a step away from her.

“I left the supply at the hotel,” I realized, dismayed.

“No, no, I already collected it for you.” Isobel pulled the backpack from the closet with a sheepish look. “I wanted to be prepared. I have my ways.”

I didn’t want to ask what those ways were, and I didn’t have the time.

Janna fed greedily, gulping down blood as fast as she could.

Her mother turned away, frowning. She was still troubled. I could imagine why, especially since it was her blood being sucked down.

“I’m sorry,” Janna gasped when she finished.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I murmured.

“He’s right,” Isobel agreed. “And, as you can see, you’re going to need some help. I can get you everything you need. And, as long as I’m being honest, it will be nice to have you nearby. I would like to get to know you, if possible.”

Janna offered a tentative smile. “I would like that.”

Isobel reached out slowly to slide her fingers over Janna’s hair. “You really are beautiful. I’m so proud to have such a beautiful daughter. And so talented, too.”

Janna’s smile lit up the room. She finally had everything she never knew she wanted, which gave me everything I had never considered before meeting her.

Seeing her happiness was enough to make me happier than I ever thought possible.

“I’ll give you two a minute to get yourselves together, but we really should get moving. I know I’ll feel better once you’re away from here.” She stepped out into the hall, leaving the door cracked slightly. A typical mother.

Janna turned to me. “What do you think? You’ve been awfully quiet. It’s not like you to let things go without an opinion.”

“My opinion?” I placed my hands on her waist. “I would go anywhere with you. Even if it means living on Long Island for a while.”

“Oh, Vale.” She took my face in her hands. “Don’t you know I was already falling for you before you turned me? And when you pushed me away, I couldn’t believe how much it hurt. I barely knew you, but you already had the power to hurt me. I think... I think we were meant to be from the beginning. I know it sounds silly and romantic, but it’s true.”

“It’s not silly.” I stroked her hair, then took the back of her head in my hand to pull

her in for a deep kiss.

It wasn't silly at all. I was the one who had turned her based solely on the short amount of time we'd spent together.

I knew even then that I couldn't live in a world without her, even when I didn't know if she would ever feel the same about me. It was enough to know she would live. If that wasn't love, I didn't know what was.

"I'm afraid you're stuck with me for... eternity," she whispered with a shaky laugh when we pulled away, both of us breathless.

"I'm willing to take a chance," I whispered back before kissing her again.

Epilogue

Janna

“I swear to you, if you don’t stop moving around...”

“I’m not moving,” he insisted, shifting in his chair.

“You did it again, damn it!”

“I didn’t!”

“Oh, screw it already!” I tossed the charcoal aside and got up to stretch. “This is a waste of time. You’ve got the jitters today or something. What’s with you?”

“Sorry if I’m not in the mood to play statue today,” he grumbled as he got up and stretched his long legs before pacing the length of the loft I used as studio space.

“Maybe it’s time for me to find a new model,” I muttered.

“Maybe it is. Why don’t you ask Troy to do it for you?” he asked, referring to Isobel’s Nightwarden.

I raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Not a bad idea. He’s an excellent physical specimen. The perfect artist’s model.”

Vale’s deep-throated growl reverberated through the room. “Watch it.”

“You suggested it. I wonder how much he’d be willing to take off for me...”

“I’m serious.”

“It was your idea! And it was a good one.” I burst out laughing as he tackled me to the floor. “Okay, okay! I give up!”

He pinned me by my wrists and smiled in triumph. “You won’t ask Mr. Adonis to take it all off for you?”

“I won’t ask Troy to pose for me. I won’t, I promise.”

He attacked my neck, kissing and nipping as I giggled helplessly.

“Hey, it’s not like you model naked, anyway.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want you turning any artistic corners,” he snorted, moving further south with his kisses.

I closed my eyes and let him light me up from the inside out, the way he had been doing for the eight months we had been living together in Isobel’s barn. More like a guest house, and roughly ten times the size of my old apartment. At least.

It gave us plenty of room for ourselves and lots of privacy when it mattered. We tended to keep to ourselves, in case the neighbors got curious. Not that her neighbors lived close enough to care, but we didn’t want to take chances.

All the more reason for us to spend time the way we were just then—working, playing, loving each other.

* * *

Later, as I pulled my clothes back on, I giggled softly. “We have a habit of doing that.”

“What? Having sex?” he laughed as he zipped his jeans.

“No. I mean, yes. But getting carried away at random times. That’s what I meant.” I stayed on the floor, propped up on my elbows. “Will it always be this way, do you think?”

“I hope so, or else the rest of eternity will get pretty damn boring,” he chuckled, running his hands through his hair to settle it down. When he saw my frown, he grew serious. “This is something you’re really worried about, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I guess so. I mean, you’ve been a vampire for hundreds of years. The concept of eternity is a lot fresher for me than it is for you.” I would be twenty-six forever. Forever and ever. I would see the world change drastically while I never changed at all. If I slept anymore, it would keep me up at night.

He knelt next to me. “I can’t see myself ever getting tired of you, or of us. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:13 am

“I do worry about it. That I’ll bore you or annoy you after long enough.”

“Are you kidding? I learn something new about you every day. Sometimes, I wish you weren’t so damn interesting and a little more boring.”

“And you’re the one who likes to keep moving! Isobel’s going to have to start paying you for all the work you’ve done around the farm.”

“It’s the least I can do,” he reminded me, as he always did. “Meanwhile, you’re always working on something new. Putting together new shows at new galleries. Meeting buyers.”

“Ugh. Having to put in contacts,” I muttered, shivering.

I hated wearing the lenses that made my eyes look human again.

“It’s not a bad trade-off when you’re earning so much money for your work,” he reminded me. “Pretty soon, you’ll want to leave the farm, and we’ll end up running around all over the world when you’re a famous artist. Maybe you’ll get tired of me when that time comes.”

“Never. Not ever, ever.” I sat up, taking his hands. “I mean it. Nothing means anything without you. I wouldn’t want to be popular or successful if I didn’t have you to share it with.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

“Absolutely?”

“Uh, yes. Why are you being so weird?”

He withdrew one of his hands and reached into the pocket of his jeans. “You wanted to know why I was so fidgety earlier,” he murmured, looking down.

“Yes...” I looked down in time to see him pull out a diamond ring. My mouth fell open.

“This is why. I didn’t know how you would react to this. And this is why I want to be sure you’re in this forever, because I know I am.”

I pulled my eyes from the ring—it was so big! So sparkly!—and looked at him. I couldn’t have loved him more if I tried.

“I’m in it for the long haul,” I whispered before tears choked me.

He slid the ring on my finger, and something seemed to slide into place when the band slid home.

The one missing piece in my life. I had a career, a mother who supported and encouraged me, and a love stronger than death itself. A love that had not just saved my life. It had given me life. It continued to give me life every day.

I held his face in my hands and kissed his forehead, nose, cheeks. “I love you,” I whispered before each kiss, like a mantra. I love you, I love you, I love you.

I was more than happy to keep it that way for the rest of my life—no matter how long it lasted.