



Cruel Vampire King

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Description: The tyrannical Vampire King wants to claim me as his personal feeding human.

I was innocent until he had my family killed. I vowed to get revenge. So I volunteer for the blood-soaked annual Trials, which bring me close to the King I hate.

But when his obsessed gaze lands on me, he decides I'm his to do with as he pleases...

The annual Trials are the entertainment program for the vampire elite.

That's where they laugh at us while we kill each other off.

The Vampire King is the worst of them; he's a ruthless, cold-blooded beast.

And yet when his unrelenting focus settles on me, my body gets embarrassingly hot.

I trained myself to survive the fights and the temptation challenges.

But when he drinks from me, all of my training goes to waste.

His cruel possession of my scarred body breaks down my resistance.

His overwhelming claim on me makes me want to give him the one innocent part that I still have.

Am I becoming the Vampire King's powerless slave?

The undying Honeyblood Vampire King is a dark, tyrannical ruler with no remorse and no empathy. When he meets his mate, his aim is clear: claim all of her, until she belongs to him completely.

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Chapter 1

Holakas was reported to be the most beautiful city on the southern continent. At least, that's what the Holakas family would have the people of Taimarah believe.

The vampires had ruled the kingdom for centuries now, and had founded the city, named after themselves, shortly after they conquered the old kingdoms that had been there. According to the vampires, they 'united' the kingdoms into one unified entity covering half the continent.

It spread from the Humbolt Sea to the west all the way to the Monkshood Mountains in the east, bordered by the kingdom of Peche to the south and Ananke to the north.

I'd never been to Holakas before I rode in on a high-speed intercity train. The clacking of the wheels running over the tracks grew softer as we passed through the gates. Around me, the other passengers pressed their noses to the windows and gazed out at the city in wonder. Towering skyscrapers built out of multi-colored glass shone in the morning light, reflecting rainbows on the streets below. Besides the trains, there was no driven traffic; everyone was on foot or riding bicycles in their designated lanes.

For a moment, I was distracted by the sights as well. I hadn't expected to find so many garden plots in the streets. It seemed like a river of green wound its way next to the train tracks, bursting with colorful flowers, vegetables, and fruit. There were no fences or guards around these plots. Maybe there were cameras to stop people from plundering the gardens?

Shaking those thoughts from my head, I checked the dimly lit screen over the seats opposite me, showing where we were and what stops were next. My hands tightened on my knees. It had taken years of preparation, but I was finally here.

“Do you think they’ll broadcast the Blood Trials again this year?” one of the young men next to me asked his buddies eagerly.

I studied him in my peripherals. He was tall and muscular, with a neck tattoo of a bloody dagger. His dark hair hid the tips of his ears, but he had a certain graceful fluidness, even in standing still, that marked him as an elf.

He and his buddies started to talk about what they’d do if they were conscripted into the Trials. I tuned them out as soon as they started to brag about how easily they’d kill each other. It amused me to imagine their reaction if I stood up and said I was here to volunteer.

If they looked at me, they’d see a badly scarred woman who didn’t look threatening. The bulky sweater I wore hid my muscles, and my legs were so short that I had to push my feet to tip-toe for them to reach the floor. Humans tended to be shorter than most of the other species, but I was small, even for a human.

I got off at the next stop and made my way through the streets toward the colosseum. This was the day I’d spent the last four years dedicating every day to prepare for. I was going to win the trials, no matter what I had to do.

I was going to get Darcie back.

A bored-looking orc with a heavy jaw and protruding lower tusks sat at the entrance of the colosseum. She was one of several scribes taking the names of the volunteers.

“Name,” she said, not looking up at me.

“Elara Tideborne,” I answered.

She typed my name into her laptop. “Age?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Species?”

“Human.” I had some selkie in my heritage, but they didn’t need to know that.

“Right. Your number is—” she cut off abruptly when she looked up at me. Her eyes widened.

I smiled, my scarred lips twisting in a way I knew unsettled people. With the turtleneck I wore, she could only see the old burn scars that disfigured the lower half of my face. They traced lower, down my neck, and wrapped around my body in a wave that ended at my hip. Few people had seen the full extent of these scars.

The orc cleared her throat and handed me a sticky label. “Your number is five-oh-four. You’ll need to head to the blue banner for your qualifications.”

“Thanks.” I stuck the label with my number to my sweater and headed to the banner. There were several banners through the wide, open space of the colosseum, under which milled various configurations of people.

Netting created a dome over the colosseum, diffusing the sunlight. Undoubtedly, that was to ensure our vampire lords could watch with greater comfort. Vampire skin was sensitive to sunlight, especially fresh-turned vampires. The ones with vampire heritage tolerated it better, but it still gave him burns and sunstroke faster than many other species.

Tall walls rose up around the opening of the colosseum, lined with rows on rows of seating. A few dozen vampires milled about in these seats already. I imagined that once the Trials actually began, their numbers would swell greatly.

I swept my gaze over the vampires sitting above us, seeking out any familiarity in them. Disappointment hit me when I recognized none of them, but I chided myself quickly. I wasn't here for revenge, and assassinating anyone this early in the game would only ruin my chances to save Darcie. I hadn't dedicated my life to rescue my sister only to blow it now because I was impatient.

A tall, thin woman with a severe haircut clapped her hands, calling for our attention. Her silver eyes glowed, marking her as a vampire.

"Welcome, Volunteers, to the Blood Trials. Before we accept you into the Trials, you will have to prove your worthiness to be here," she said, clasping her hands behind her back. "It's not entertaining to watch small, weak people be torn to shreds, and an insult to the Gods for organizing these Trials in the first place."

Her gaze landed on me, and a sneer twisted her lip. I gazed back coolly. It didn't matter if this woman thought I couldn't make it. Being underestimated was just one of my advantages.

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I did wonder, though, if she thought she was fooling anyone with that Gods nonsense. The Blood Trials had been implemented a century ago as an annual bloodbath to entertain the vampire lords. Supposedly, it was something that had been organized by the gods themselves. A likely story. The gods didn't care about entertaining anyone except themselves.

The woman opened her mouth, then stopped. A hush fell over the colosseum; everyone beneath the other banners and even the vampires in the stands craned their necks, silent. From where I stood, I could only see the backs of the other volunteers. I sidestepped around a hulking troll to find a tall, hooded man had entered the area.

There was a fluidness with which he moved that belied his size. I watched him, all of a sudden fighting the urge to stride over to him. Who was this, who could command silence just from his mere presence? He walked alone, no sign of attendants or guards. I leaned forward, as though there was a magnet inside of him that was drawing me close.

The man paused in the center of the colosseum and threw back his hood. Recognition swept through me, and my blood started to race. It was him.

Luken Holakas.

The vampire king himself.

All I could do for a moment was stare, that strange urge to run forward overwhelmed by the sheer shock at seeing him. I hadn't expected that he'd show his face here, today. I thought he would sit in his private box with a glass of bloody wine, laughing

in the days to come.

After my initial shock wore off came another blast of surprise as a slither of heat swept through my body. I'd seen plenty of pictures of him, but it didn't compare to the real thing. His thick dark hair contrasted against his warm, golden complexion. He wore it long, put into an elaborate series of braids, which looked more elven than anything else. I had to remind himself that while his father was a vampire, his mother had been an elf. He must style himself this way as a way to build more connection with the elves.

Nobody would mistake him for an elf, however. Though there was a slant to his ears, they weren't truly pointed. His muscular figure, combined with his height, gave him a wild sort of appearance that wasn't at all like the fluid grace that elves held themselves with.

"This is the year's tributes?" he asked, his voice low and melodic.

A chill swept through me. I was supposed to hate him, not ogle him! He'd ruined my life. Took everything from me. I wasn't here to dwell on how attractive he was. I filled my mind with images of his decapitated corpse—let's see how handsome he'd be then!

"Yes, your Majesty," the woman in my group said. "They have not yet gone through the placement tests yet."

The king's eyes flickered to me. They glowed a warmer light than the woman's, a sort of amber gold rather than silver. I stiffened as our gazes locked. He probably expected me to look away. I should look away. As a human, I was especially meant to show deference. We were among the shortest-lived of the species, we were little more than a tasty beverage for vampires.

My heart pounded in my throat. Though his eyes didn't move from mine, I could feel his gaze like a physical touch on my body. It reached right through the layers of clothes I wore, laying me bare before this man. I felt as though he was devouring me with a mere look.

Focus up, I told myself, unsettled by this reaction.

I wasn't eighteen years old anymore.

I wasn't a naive child seeing a vampire for the first time.

My parents were dead. My only living sister taken away, claimed as a sacrifice to the gods. I was alone in this world, with no happy thoughts to chase off the demons in my nightmares. All because of him. He took it all. My family, my innocent way of viewing the world, my sister. He was the reason I was here, the reason I could look at the faces of the people I was going to kill without a shred of remorse.

"Start the placement, then," the king said, still not moving his eyes from me. He lifted a hand and pointed at me. "Her first."

A prickling raced over my scalp. I broke my gaze from him, turning to the surprised-looking vampire woman. She gestured me forward, and I moved quickly and silently. An uncomfortable question made my stomach clench. What if Luken recognized me? Surely, after four years, he wouldn't...

"Elara Tideborne," the woman said, reading from her tablet. "Age twenty-two, human. A volunteer. Please give us a demonstration of the skills you think earns you a place in the Trials."

She gestured toward a dummy set up halfway between herself and the king. I confidentially strode forward, pushing this strange reaction I had to the vampire king

to the back of my mind. It was just what he did. I'd bet my right arm that every person—man and woman—in the arena felt that same pull toward him. They didn't call vampires sex fiends for nothing.

A weapons rack was lined up next to the dummies. I took my time selecting one as the other tributes started to shuffle from foot to foot, restless to prove themselves. All the while, the king didn't move his eyes from me. I could feel his gaze like a caress on my form. Dimly, I was aware that beneath the other banners, others were already demonstrating their skills.

I selected a sword. Something sturdy and light, but not my preferred weapon. I couldn't show off all my skills if I was going to bank on being underestimated. I held the sword with an almost-not-right grip, and stalked up to the dummy. In a flash, I'd noted its weak points. If I was going to get through the initial placement, I needed to strike off its head. The neck was reinforced, but the torso area, not so much.

I braced myself, leveled the sword, and swung. It was dull, but I'd expected that. The blade bit only halfway through the pine rod that made up its spine. As the blade stopped, I carried my momentum, swinging it from my arms into my body. I leveraged my weight over the sword and swung up and around, slamming both heels into the rod. It cracked open, and the dummy split in half, the top skittering away in the dust.

I came down, landing lightly, and straightened.

Luken was still looking at me. A smile spread over his face, and he clapped his hands once. Something in the depths of his eyes burned but this time, I remembered myself. I lowered my eyes. A low chuckle sounded from somewhere, but I wasn't quite sure if it was the king or someone else.

"You can go to the red banner," the vampire woman said, sounding oddly... upset.

I bowed once and headed for the red banner. There were already a dozen or so people lingering beneath it. Most were big, muscular, and had the scars to prove they'd been in many fights ahead of this. One of them, a hulking troll with blue skin and eyes the color of moonstones, leered at me.

“Are the vampires giving us some... entertainment?” he sneered.

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My gaze flicked over him. Tall, muscular, brutish. But he was rubbing his leg. From the way he was standing, it was bothering him. I wouldn't think he'd make it through the placements if not for the prison tattoos lining his arms. It was clear he had a bum leg—meaning he was one of those tributes that was sure to be ripped to pieces soon enough in the Trials.

I ignored his crude innuendo and focused on the contestants still moving through the placement. The king had left while I was walking over here, and I tried not to feel a sliver of disappointment that stole through my belly.

There were two ways that tributes ended up as part of the Blood Trials. Those, like me, who were free citizens and volunteered, drawn by the prize of winning. Others were criminals; some sentenced to die, but mostly, people picked at random, being punished for minor crimes.

Minor, so that if any of the prisoners won the trials, a hardened criminal wouldn't have any power over the king.

It was all very straightforward. First, the tributes showed off their fighting skills... by killing off all the other participants. There could only be one survivor, who would then be taken to the vampire king to prove their ability to resist temptation.

A vampire's bite was an orgasmic event. If vampires were sex fiends, their appeal was heightened even further when teeth penetrated flesh. On the first pull, even the most steadfast monk would beg to be bedded. And Luken Holakas was a vampire even more powerful than any other. And the desire he'd create in a person's body? It would be even more intense than a regular vampire.

If they managed to resist, the king would grant them one wish.

In the century that the Trials had been going, only one person had won that prize. I intended to be the second.

“Even if you survive the bloodbath, do you think a little thing like you will be able to resist the king?” the troll asked, edging closer to me.

I sighed, annoyed. “I think I have as much chance at resisting his... desires as you do. I hear he doesn’t care what hole he uses, just so long as it’s tight and warm,” I said. I hoped my implication would get the troll to shut up.

“Ha,” the troll laughed. “It’s not about what he likes but what I do. And I can show you—”

He reached for me, but before I could break his arm, a vampire was between us. “You are not permitted to touch one another before the trials start. And during the trials, you will be watched. If you attempt to sexually assault another contestant, you will be automatically disqualified.”

Meaningkilled.

The troll scowled and stepped away from me. “Was only having a bit of fun. No need to get testy.”

“Just keep to yourself,” the vampire ordered.

The placements slogged on. Most of the day was spent waiting and watching the other participants win their places. I had to do an obstacle course and spar with a young woman my size. Given her wide eyes and pale face, she was a prisoner forced to be here. I wondered what she’d done, then shut down that line of thinking.

It was drawing near midnight before the final tributes were announced. I was among them. We were led out of the arena and to the temple of the queen of the gods, Trinia. It was she who first birthed the world, and these trials were of particular note for her, as was all the shedding of blood, just as she shed her own blood to bring life to this world. The Trinian Oracle, speaker of the gods, waited for us. This oracle was swathed in so many shrouds it was impossible to see any defining feature. When they spoke, it was in a keening wail.

“Prepare yourselves for death,” they cried. “You will be assigned in teams for the first trial. Your survival depends on your teammates. Learn to fight as a unit or die as one.”

The silver-eyed vampire woman from before stepped forward and cleared her throat. “Our first team.”

I braced myself, and was unsurprised when she called, “Elara Tideborne,” before any other name. I stepped forward, my jaw clenched. The king seemed to have singled me out. I have no doubt that he decided I’d be a tribute the moment he looked at me. Though the question was, if he wanted me to die, why not oust me from the competition and slit my throat in some dark alley?

“Kael Ironsmith,” the woman continued, and an orc stepped up next to me. “Ysara Bend. Greyson. Thessa Ashthorne.”

Three others joined Kael and me, but I didn’t look at any of them. I didn’t want to get to know them. We were a team right now, but in the end, there was only one survivor of the Blood Trials.

And it would be me.

Chapter 2

There was a drunken revelry that night at the colosseum. I found a safe corner to put my back to and meditated. I wasn't going to sleep. Who knew when the vampires would call for us to kill each other? But I wasn't going to get drunk, either. So, I rested my body while being aware of what was going on around me.

In the morning, half of the contestants were nursing hangovers and had bloodshot eyes.

“Assemble your teams,” the silver-eyed vampire shouted as the sky turned grey.

Much grumbling and hisses followed the command. I fluidly got to my feet and retrieved a staff from the weapon's rack before anyone else could select their weapons. Then, I joined the others in my team, who had gathered together already.

All of them were clear-eyed except the little girl who was called Thessa. Though ‘little girl’ might not be entirely accurate. She was younger than me, probably in her late teens. Her eyes were red, but not from a drunken lack of sleep. Her cheeks were damp with tears.

I didn't look at her too closely. She would be dead by the end of this, just like the rest of them.

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A line of scantily dressed humans marched into the arena, carrying with them heavy rucksacks. They silently deposited the sacks into our arms and filed out as the vampire explained that this was the food and water we were assigned for the first leg of the trial. In the sacks were blindfolds, and we were instructed to put them on.

I didn't like the idea of this, but shrugged my heavy sack onto my back and, holding my staff with one hand, tugged the blindfold on. We were marched from the colosseum and loaded up into vehicles; vans, most likely.

"Seems like we haven't been introduced," a masculine voice said next to me. "We couldn't find you last night. Busy partying?"

Was he talking to me? I waited to see if anyone else would answer.

The man chuckled. "Ah, I see. Not the talkative type."

The van smelled of ambergris and cherries, scents that were popular among the vampires. I listened to the breathing around me, mapping out the space. By the time we stopped some hours later, I knew exactly where everyone else in the van was, and I had a good idea as to where we were. When we were permitted to remove our blindfolds, I found I was right.

"Welcome to Wickham Forest," the silver-eyed vampire said. "You may call me Marissa. I will be your guide."

My teammates murmured to each other. Excitement coursed through my blood as I looked on the towering trees. I'd heard so many stories of Wickham Forest, a place

that was said to be the headwaters of the magic in Taimarah. I had no magic but could feel it sparking in the air like electricity. It was meant to be filled to the brim with dangerous beasts like griffins and redcaps. But what few people knew, what I only learned through the nunnery I lived at while recovering from my burns, was that it was protected by the gods. Ordinary folk couldn't step inside unless the gods gave their direct permission.

It was the perfect place to have the sacrifice that was the first leg of the Blood Trials. The survivors of the forest would betaken back to the colosseum to fight to the death, bringing the Trials full circle.

“We’re the only ones here,” the girl said in surprise, looking around.

Marissa smiled indulgently. “The others are being taken to other locations to start the Trials. We have magical attachments on each of you, to see what you do and where you go. You are not to set foot in the forest tonight. You will make your camp here and get to know each other. Tomorrow morning, you will receive further instruction.”

“Tomorrow?” the orc, Kael, frowned at the vampire. “What was the point of waiting all last night if we have to wait another full day?”

Not the most patient one. I made a note of that—he was likely to get us all killed if he was this reckless in the forest. The vampire didn't answer his question, merely smiled and went back into the van. They drove off. I moved to a flattish space on the ground and knelt, opening my rucksack.

“Well, now that we only have time...” the man who had spoken in the van crouched close to me, checking the contents of his rucksack, too. “You’re Elara, yeah? I’m Greyson. That was quite the party last night. Smart to keep yourself separate.”

The others had joined us as well, and now that we were here, I was forced to take

note of them. Greyson was an elf. He was tall and conventionally handsome with a strong jaw, high cheekbones, and dark, glittering eyes. His long, dark hair was pulled into a series of three braids that had then been braided with each other, keeping it out of the way. He was armed with a bow and arrows and dueling knives.

“I consider myself lucky to be on the same team as you,” he said, grinning at me. “I hoped I would be the moment I saw you snap that dummy in half. That was beautiful work.”

He winked at me. My hands paused as I sorted out my supplies. Was that flirting? Of course, I’d been flirted with before, but in this situation? Greyson must be trying to throw me off guard. Heat crept into my cheeks all the same. I did enjoy being praised for my abilities. Gods knew I’d never trust anything anyone said about my looks.

The girl sniffed, fresh tears tracking down her face. Greyson’s eyes softened as he reached over to lay a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t give up, Thessa. You never know what twist of fate the gods have planned for us.”

His gentleness with the girl changed my mind. He wasn’t trying me off guard at all, but rather hoping to ease the tension in our group. They might all be destined for death, but the vampires had a point. With so many others in the forest, I needed these people to watch my back until we got out again.

“Lots of meat. That’s good,” the third woman in our group said. She crouched over her rucksack with a lean, hungry look. Her skin was pale, and her sharp yellow eyes indicated she was a wolf shapeshifter. She was around the same age as me, maybe just a little older.

Ysara Bend. That’s what her name was.

“The forest will provide plenty. We’ll need to gather and hunt as much as we can, to

make our preserved stores last as long as possible,” the orc, Kael, said. He sat back on his haunches and glanced around at us, a furrow in his brow. His grey-green skin seemed sickly in the bright sunlight. “Suppose we might as well talk about what brought us here.”

“I’m being punished,” Thessa volunteered without prompting.

She appeared to be human with curly black hair, dark brown eyes, and olive-brown skin. For half a second, I was reminded of the dark eyes and beaming smile of the sister I hadn’t seen in four years. I quickly averted my eyes.

“What could you have done?” Greyson asked, sounding shocked.

“I did something unforgivable in the gods’ eyes.”

Kael glanced askance at her. “For me, it was tax evasion. Not paying a measly few thousand is worthy of death, it seems. If I win this damn thing, I’m going to make it so nobody in my entire family ever has to pay taxes again.”

Ysara laughed. “I appreciate the pettiness, Kael. No taxes. Some of us have grander ideas than that. I’ve trained for two years for the Trials. I’m going to found my own kingdom. Wolves aren’t meant to bow to vampires.”

She spat on the ground and grinned. Thessa stared at her in disbelief. “if you do that, the vampires will just wipe you all out.”

Ysara’s smile faded. She toyed with the sword at her hip. It was short and broad, well suited for someone with her upper body musculature. “I’ve got it all worked out. Not that I need to explain it all to you.”

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“Your own kingdom, huh?” Greyson laughed as he straightened. “Not going to lie, that’s more ambitious than why I signed up.”

I folded my supplies back into my rucksack and swung it onto my shoulder. Didn’t want anyone pilfering from it while I wasn’t paying attention. “Why did you volunteer?” I asked Greyson, my interest piqued despite myself. I might not have an electrical attraction to him, but he was handsome, and I was curious about him.

Greyson laughed. “Oh, I just want a little mansion by the sea. Some land to go with it. And immunity to slice my brother’s throat open.”

Thessa gasped.

“Don’t be too scandalized,” Greyson told her. “He’s a terrible person. He murdered my mother—he’s only my half-brother—and killed more people than I will ever be able to prove. But he was turned into a vampire when we were boys. And vampires, as we all know, protect themselves. None of them are punished for the murders they commit.”

I thought of Luken and nodded my agreement. Vampires treated themselves above the laws they created. It didn’t surprise me that Greyson would have to risk his life to get the justice he sought.

Greyson’s eyes turned to me, and he arched one manicured brow, waiting for me to speak. I pretended not to notice.

“What about you?” he finally asked. “Why did you join the Blood Trials, Elara?”

“I want to be given shares in the Abalone Trading Corporation,” I lied easily. The less they knew about me—and by extension, the less the people watching us knew—the better. “Enough to buy a mansion or two every year. Enough to pay for the surgeries, but I need to get rid of this.”

I gestured to my face. Kael and Ysara both nodded. Greyson shrugged and turned away, starting to work through some easy stretches. But Thessa’s eyes filled with tears again. She approached me without any sign of hesitancy.

“How did it happen?” she asked.

Really, I should look at this gentle, sweet persona she had and think it was an act. If the vampires wanted strong warriors in the Trials, Thessa had to show something to have been thought of as worthy. Unless it really was simply an execution. Maybe every team was given a weak link like her. Maybe it amused the vampires and gods to watch these teams fight to protect a helpless member.

Regardless, I wasn’t about to tell her the truth. The more truth these people knew, the more they could use it against me.

“It was a fire,” I said flatly.

“How did it start? When did it happen?” She reached as though to touch my cheek, and I slapped her hand away. Her eyes widened, and she backed up a step. “Sorry. It’s just that... never mind. I’m sorry.”

That night, we decided to all sleep. Since the Trials wouldn’t start until dawn, there was no need for a watcher. I briefly wondered about the beasts of the forest, but the gods wouldn’t want to see us dead before their Trials could begin, so I stretched on

the ground and slept.

It was midnight when I woke to a hand covering my mouth. I reached for my staff, but another hand grasped my wrist. My eyes snapped open, and I found myself staring into the silver glow of Marissa's eyes. I kicked out at her, but before I could make contact, she'd lifted me in her eyes. The wind whooshed into my face, stealing my breath away as she gracefully raced across the night-black land. What was going on?

I twisted my head to put my mouth near her shoulder, where a slight air pocket finally allowed me to pull in a breath. "Where are you taking me?" I demanded.

"King Luken wishes to see you," Marissa replied easily, showing no sign that she was running out of breath. "So I'm taking you to him. To the palace."

Chapter 3

We were at the palace before I could fully wrap my head around what was happening. Luken had recognized me. Emotions surged through me, distracting me. We were already there before I could remember that I should be fighting back.

It wasn't the palace within Holakas that Marissa brought me to, but it was grand nonetheless. Domed turrets lifted toward the sky, and every window glinted with an inner light, bathing the grounds in a myriad of colors. It seemed that Luken had decided that all his windows needed to be scenes of stained glass.

Marissa zipped through the front doors and up the stairs before I'd gotten more than a cursory look at the grounds. Tapestries, portraits, and what no doubt were priceless antiques whizzed by in a blur before she'd slipped through a set of massive ebony doors and deposited me.

My lungs were burning for proper breath, and as I sucked in the air greedily, my head started to spin. How long had the wind been stealing the oxygen away from me?

“Why am I here?” I asked, fighting against the shakiness of my legs.

Marissa threw open another set of doors, leading into a walk-in closet bigger than most apartments. “I told you. The king wishes to see you. Now come along, Miss Tideborne. You must get dressed. It would be best if you could bathe first,” she said, casting an unhappy look over her shoulder at me, “but the king insisted you come to him as quickly as possible.”

“I’m not going anywhere near him,” I snarled.

She pulled a sleek blue gown from the closet and held it up, eyeing me critically. “Blue would look good on you. But I think maybe something less...”

She dropped the gown to the floor and pulled out a forest-green jumpsuit. With a click of her tongue, she dropped it as well. With a satisfied cry, she grabbed a simple A-line dress made of a jewel-toned purple. She strode toward me.

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“I’m not putting that on,” I said.

She ignored my protests. Her grip was stronger than any vampire I’d come up against before. Within moments, she’d stripped off my shirt and pants. I snarled again and tried to punch her face, but she dodged my fist and clicked her tongue.

“I don’t know what the king wants with a human child like you, but I don’t ask questions,” she said, tugging the dress over my head. She hadn’t reacted whatsoever to my scars. “And if you keep enough of his attention that I can spend the night with my lover, all the better for me.”

She winked, and I had to fight back a gasp. Keep his attention. How, exactly?

“I’d have preferred the jumpsuit,” I said, stuttering over my words as images flitted through my mind. The type that had me sitting on the edge of a table with my skirt bunched up at my hips. I liked dresses—impractical as they were—but if I’d guessed right in what the king wanted from me...

Marissa shrugged. “And it’d be stunning on you. But it’s too casual for your first meeting with the king.”

I bit my tongue before I could tell her it wasn’t my first meeting at all. Marissa stepped back, smiled, and nodded. She touched my dark hair as though she planned to take it out of the braid, but I jerked back. There was only so much to this I could take!

She shrugged again and briskly walked away, clearly expecting me to follow. I looked around for a weapon before reminding myself that killing Luken wouldn’t get

Darcie back. She had been claimed as a sacrifice to the gods four years ago. The girls chosen were kept pure and in comfort in the temples, though nobody knew exactly where. Darcie was safe, until she turned eighteen.

She had been fourteen when she was taken.

I was out of time—I had to get her out now. The Blood Trials were the only way I'd be able to do it.

So I squared my shoulders and followed after Marissa. Down the hall, to the final door, into a richly decorated sitting room. The amount of color that burst from every wall brought me to a halt. Portraits of wondrous natural scenes hung on every space on the walls. Flowers, forests, oceans, sunsets. It was so breathtaking that I first missed the square table in the middle of the room, laden with different seafood.

Then, the smell of shrimp and lobster hit my nose. My mouth watered, and I turned, my gaze sweeping over the offerings. It wasn't just the shellfish, but also fish of salmon, haddock, cod, and vegetation. Badderocks, dulce, nori, hijiki. The sort of foods my parents used to gather and prepare from the sea.

"Sit down," a smooth, dark voice said.

I glanced up and found myself locked in Luken's amber gaze. He smiled as he pulled out a chair.

"It's been a long time, Elara," he said. "You can't be surprised that I want to catch up."

My heart raced. My hands trembled, but I managed to keep my expression blank. I sat, and he pushed in my chair, leaning close. He inhaled deeply, inches from my skin. I resisted the urge of taking a handful of salmon and shoving it in his face.

“What’s going on here?” I asked. To my disgust, my voice shook.

“Like I said, I want to catch up.” Luken stood at the corner next to me. He rested his elbows on the table, his amber gaze not moving from me.

I clenched my fists together under the table. Catch up. Catch up?

“Perhaps you don’t remember. It was a long time ago,” he said softly. “You lived in Kondar, a little fishing village near the sea. The local earl had just turned fifteen and invited me to attend the celebration for his birthday. I decided to attend. The whole village was decorated with flowers. It was a pretty village, I remember that. And though I was a guest at the Earl’s estate, we went to the inn. And that was where I saw you.”

And where I saw him. I remembered that moment with too great a vivid recollection. I’d been wearing a new dress. It was cut daringly low—just to the top of my breasts, hardly showing any cleavage, but it had felt daring to me. My hair had been braided with flowers to celebrate the Earl’s birthday, and I had been harboring fantasies about his older, wealthier cousin falling madly in love with me.

The instant I’d laid eye on the king, all other fantasies disappeared.

“I wanted you to come back to the capital with me,” Luken continued, his voice low and gravelly. “The moment I saw you, smelled you, I knew I wanted you. You would have been my personal blood donor. And you wanted to come with me.”

I stared at the food on the table, trying to quell the rush of heat through my chest. Anger? It had to be.

“Your parents refused to let you go. And you were only eighteen. Old enough to leave if you chose to, but young enough that you feared disappointing them.” Luken

picked up a wine goblet and drank deeply from it. I watched his Adam's apple bob. "I meant to give you a few more years. To grow into yourself more, to figure out how to fight for what you wanted. I planned to come back for you. But then I learned you were dead, killed in a fire."

His words were like a bucket of ice poured down my back. The heat in my chest, the anger, disappeared in an instant, leaving behind a hollow ache. I opened my mouth but stopped myself.

Luken's eyes grew sharper on my face. He leaned forward, as though he was hoping I'd speak. A few tense moments passed before he slumped back in his chair and let out a heavy sigh.

"Eat, Elara. You will do well to have food in your belly before entering Wickham forest tomorrow." He selected a shrimp off a platter and popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly.

While turned vampires couldn't digest food other than blood, born vampires like him could enjoy the foods that other species ate. It didn't sustain them, but it was well-known that King Luken employed an army of cooks to satisfy his tastebuds.

"I didn't know you were alive until I saw you at the Trials. You can't imagine my shock, seeing you there."

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Did he really think I would be swayed by this... this poetry he was spouting? If he was so concerned about me being alive or dead, he wouldn't have burned down the inn in the first place! I could feel the accusations creeping up my throat. If I blurted them out, would he decide to kill me, too? How would I be able to save Darcie then?

So I swallowed down what I wanted to say and reached for the same shrimp. He smiled, pleased that I was following his lead.

"I remember that day well," I said, tilting my voice to sound softer and younger. "I was... bewitched when I saw you."

"Bewitched," he repeated. His voice hardened slightly on the word, as though he was unhappy I'd chosen it.

Quickly, I asked the only question that seemed safe to do so, "How did you recognize me? It's been four years."

Amusement twitched the corners of his lips. "I remember in perfect clarity events that took place four decades ago, a century ago. I'm over three hundred and fifty years old, Elara. Four years is nothing."

Something burned in his eyes as he spoke. Something that made my scalp prickle. I took a deep breath and pushed away from the table. I was off-balance, and the smell of the food made it hard to think clearly. It reminded me of the days at the inn, a family laughing at dinner as we talked and ate. My parents never adhered to the adage of 'children should be seen and not heard.'

I walked away from him, to the stained glass window that adorned the one wall without paintings. It was a scene from the elven histories, of their Queen Camilla ascending to the heavens to become the consort of the moon-god Sel. It was a beautiful image, the glass lit up from the electric lights inside the room. It must look even more beautiful when lit by sunlight in the morning.

“Even if four years is nothing, I’ve changed. These burns...” I touched the scars that marred the lower half of my face. I’d been pretty four years ago. I was pretty now, if they were covered.

Luken’s footsteps sounded lightly on the carpet behind me. He stopped so near me I could feel the heat of his body through this chiffon dress. One of his hands touched the back of my neck, following the pattern as it traced up my jaw to the other side of my face.

“These scars only show how resilient you are,” he murmured. “Third-degree burns. Your shirt rode up on the obstacle course. How much of your body does it cover? Thirty perfect?”

I shivered at his touch and his words. “Fifty,” I answered in a whisper. Even though I shouldn’t. But his touch was cool, soothing. I hadn’t realized that these old scars were heating until the coolness of his fingers against them. “Most of my torso and down my legs.”

Luken’s breath wafted on the back of my neck, causing shivers to run down my spine. I was certain he was going to move closer. That he was going to bite into me and draw out the blood he’d wanted four years ago. His words about my scars showing inner strength only served to confuse me.

I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath, reminding myself how I got these scars. “Don’t touch me.”

He paused, then withdrew. The warmth from his body dissipated, leaving me in the blessed cool. I turned, my arms wrapped around myself, as I lifted my chin to glare at him.

“If you’re hoping that I’ll give up my place in the Blood Trials and be your personal juice box, think again,” I said. “I entered for a reason, and no amount of flattery is going to change that. If you want me for your personal donor, you’re going to have to offer me a hell of a lot more than some pretty words.”

The light of his eyes increased as his jaw tightened. “Very well. You will be returned to your team in the morning, and none of them will be any the wiser. I expect that you’ll keep it that way.”

Despite how he looked at me and touched me, there was a clear, underlying threat to his words. Good. I could work with that. It showed me that this persona he was trying to persuade me with was just that. A persona. It wasn’t real. He was just a vampire king who had killed my family because my parents didn’t want to give me to him four years ago.

If he was really that concerned about me, he would have had his men drag me to the palace, regardless of my parents’ no. Of my no.

He seemed to read my thoughts in my eyes. “I’m not that sort of vampire, Elara. Blood isn’t sweet unless it’s freely given.”

His voice was low, and my mind flashed to Marissa’s warning to the troll who had been harassing me. Any attempt at sexual assault against another combatant was instant death. Did the vampire king have morals after all? Though they weren’t strong, if he decided to wipe out my family because I refused to go with him to the palace four years ago.

“Come back to the table, before the food gets cold,” Luken said, backing away from me. He didn’t turn as he made his way back to his chair.

He stared hard at me, sending fresh chills over my body. I hated the way I felt when he looked at me like that. Hated the way my breath grew more rapid. My stomach tightened, and nomatter how hard I tried, I couldn’t quite convince myself that it was all fear.

I sat back down and started to eat, because he was right. I’d had a modest meal at supper with my team, and more food now meant I could live on less food later.

“Where have you been these last four years?” Luken asked me.

“None of your fucking business,” I said automatically.

His jaw tightened further. “You could do worse than being the king’s personal donor.”

I rolled my eyes, exaggerating the motion. “Sure, sure. Like what?”

He didn’t speak again as I ate, only watched me. The prickling goosebumps never died down. The awkwardness of being watched so closely set my teeth on edge. As soon as I declared I was done, he called Marissa to take me back to Wickham Forest. She took me back to the other room, allowing me to change into my clothes this time rather than doing it for me.

She was slower taking me back than she had been running me to the forest. By the time I arrived, my thoughts had gotten so snared trying to figure out what Luken Holakas wanted that all I could do was collapse back into my bed and sleep. It was a deep sleep filled with dreams I couldn’t remember, the taste of the sea still on my tongue.

Chapter 4

True to Luken's word, none of my team showed any indication they knew I'd been gone the previous night. If it weren't for the lingering fullness of my stomach, I would have thought it was just a particularly vivid dream. I'd had plenty of them where Luken was concerned over the past four years. Sometimes, they were even more vivid than reality... those ones tended to be nightmares, though.

Marissa arrived at our camp shortly after dawn.

"You again?" Ysara lifted her lip in a snarl. "For fuck's sake! How long do these trials take to get started? I thought I'd have killed someone by now."

Marissa's expression was utterly blank, unlike that flippant way she'd talked to me the previous night. "Your task is to reach the heart of the forest. There is an artifact there, and the team that brings it out of the forest will be moved to the next step of the Trials."

"You mean we'll kill each other at the Colosseum," Greyson said smoothly. His tone was flirtatious.

At this, Thessa whimpered. I moved slightly closer, though I knew getting attached was a bad idea. But her dark curls and big brown eyes reminded me of another face. One that I sometimes worried I wouldn't recognize if I saw again. A pang hit me, and a sudden wash of dread moved over me like a wave.

What if I'd wasted a chance last night? If Luken remembered me, still wanted me

enough to spirit me away to his palace... could I have traded myself for Darcie's safety?

Or would that only give him more leverage over me?

I closed my eyes and did a quick breathing exercise to calm myself. Going into the forest with my thoughts all in a snarl would only get me killed.

"Here is a map for you," Marissa said, handing Kael a flimsy piece of paper. "Remember, you are meant to work as a team. If you turn against each other in the forest, we will see and you will be disqualified."

Kael grunted. "Are there any other surprise rules? Do we have to carry an egg with us and keep it from breaking, or we'll be disqualified?"

Marissa cocked her head as she studied him. "That's a good idea. I will bring it up to the board for the next Trials."

"That's not what I—" Kael cut himself off, his massive shoulders rippling.

"Easy," Ysara said. She moved lithely and planted herself in front of him. He towered over her as she put her hands on his shoulders. "Don't get the team disqualified before we even have a chance to see what's in the forest. I always wanted to hunt a dragon. With any luck, we'll run into one."

Kael's gaze cut to her. "They're really not that hard to kill. It's the dragon shifters that are the real threat."

The vampire cleared her throat. "That's all there is to it. I will see you when you leave the forest." Her gaze sharpened, and she let out a low, deadly chuckle. "That is, if you leave the forest."

She was so different from the woman who had casually chatted about hoping to spend the night with her lover. Which was the bigger faked persona? The friendly one from last night or this cold-blooded ice queen? It had to be the one from last night, right? Otherwise, why would she be chosen to facilitate the Blood Trials, knowing that all but one person she interacted with would meet a violent end?

“What happens if another team gets this artifact and returns before the others?” Kael asked in a rumbling voice.

“Oh, it’s quite simple. If one team emerges from the forest before the others have perished, then the winners will be taken to the next stage of the Trials, while the losers will be hunted down for sport,” Marissa replied cheerily. “And recall that you have the magic trackers on you. So you had best try your hardest to be the survivors, shouldn’t you?”

Thessa and Kael looked shocked at this turn of events, but Ysara and Greyson seemed to expect it. Given that they had volunteered for the Trials, no doubt they’d put enough research into them to know what was going to happen. I was surprised that Kael, at least, after being selected to be part of it, wouldn’t have educated himself.

“I believe that’s all.” Marissa tapped her chin, as though she was deep in thought, then shrugged and turned away.

Kael rolled to the balls of his feet, as though he was considering attacking her. Good. His thoughts were easy to read in his face and he was clearly driven by emotions. That meant that, if we faced each other in the Colosseum, he would be easy to defeat despite his physical strength.

“Please,” Thessa started in a thin voice.

I glanced at her. Her hands clenched into fists, her eyes so wide I could see the whites all around them. I winced, wishing that we were allowed to kill off our own team members. It would be kinder to end her fear and suffering now. But some part of me, some part that I didn't want to acknowledge, I knew that even if we were, I wouldn't be able to do it. I'd prepared myself for killing people in these Trials.

But a young girl who clearly didn't want to be here? No. I wasn't prepared for that. For the cold-blooded murder, no matter how much I could justify myself. It unsettled me. Any wavering would end up putting all my work to naught. And wasn't I counting on people underestimating me? How could I be sure that Thessa wasn't the same?

We headed into the forest, moving quickly. The air was calm and still, with no sight or sound of any other living thing. As we walked, Kael and Ysara took point, with Greyson and I following up. Thessa had naturally taken the middle, the most protected space. The words of Emilly, my trainer in the Assassin's Coven I had taken up with after my burns were healed, floated through my mind.

You're too soft for this work. You will never be ready to kill, she'd said, disgust written on her face as she gazed down at me. I'd been flat on my back, her sword at my throat.

I had thought she was going to kill me, but she spat on me instead and left me. Maybe it was true. Maybe I wasn't ready for this yet.

But I didn't have a choice in the matter. Darcie was turning eighteen, and she'd be sacrificed to the gods if I didn't get her back. She was the only thing I had left in this world worth fighting for, so I would fight. I would die, if necessary.

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The burn of determination swept through me as I sucked in a deep breath. Some part of my mind wanted to ask, What about the king? What power and sway could I have over him if he still wants me? But I shoved it away. I wasn't going to let myself get distracted. He'd have offered me rewards already if he was that interested.

"It's quiet," Ysara muttered from the head of our group. "Too quiet. Don't let yourselves grow complacent."

Good advice. I inhaled the earthy scent of the forest around me and let go of my tangled thoughts, instead focusing on sensing danger approach before it could reach me.

Four Years Earlier

Mom's lips pressed tightly together in the way they always did when she was trying not to laugh as she frog marched Darcie over to me. Darcie's dark hair was white with flour and a thin paste clung to her apron and dress. Though she had a contrite look on her face, there was an impish twinkle in her eyes.

"Take her home and see if you get this out of her hair," Mom told me, pushing Darcie next to me.

I clutched my broom, frowning. The local lord was meant to be coming to the inn for the festivities and bring King Luken with him. I didn't want to miss it! "She can clean herself up. She's fourteen, not four."

“Yes, and she’ll make some excuse to start reading and we won’t see her the rest of the day.” Mom shot a knowing look at Darcie, who bent her head. “Hurry up and you’ll get back in time to see the king.”

With a groan, I grabbed Darcie’s hand and headed out of the inn. Darcie, apparently realizing that I was serious, didn’t drag her feet as she usually would have. I was tempted to scrub her down at the well, but she really was too old for that.

“You’re too old for this,” I told her crossly. “It’s time you stop acting like a baby.”

Darcie laughed. “Relax, Elara. You’ll still have plenty of time to see the king. The festivities will go on all day and he is presiding over them all.”

“But if I’m not there when he arrives, Mom will have someone else serve him!” I wailed.

As I dragged her across the road, a dozen or so vehicles came down the road. I pulled to a stop, my heart hammering. In the middle of the convoy was a long, black limo with the flags of Taimarah waving in the wind. It was him! I hesitated, torn between sending Darcie on her way alone and obeying Mom. Well, it was too late to be the first one to serve him now but waiting a few minutes to see him wasn’t going to hurt, right?

The convoy pulled into the inn’s parking lot and vampires poured out of the vehicles. I squeezed Darcie’s hand tightly as I bounced on my toes, trying to see over their heads. Finally, he stepped out of the limo. He was wearing dark clothes, the sort of ceremonial garb I often saw him on TV. A blood-red sash crossed his chest. As he stepped toward the Inn, his head suddenly whipped around.

Goosebumps rose over my arms as his glowing amber eyes went straight to me. The air left my lungs and I stood there, numb and thrilled all at once. It was as though all

the world disappeared around us. Fairies sang and the ocean roared its approval. My heart hammered wildly as the king turned abruptly and headed straight for me.

“Elara, ouch!” Darcie whined, twisting her hand in mind.

I loosened my grip, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. The King, with his vampires following, walked right up to me. His nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply.

“What is your name?” he asked me and his voice sent shivers down my spine.

“Elara Tideborne.”

The king nodded once.

Darcie giggled. “You’re very handsome.”

I yanked on her hand.

The king’s severe expression softened as he glanced at her. “Thank you.”

“My sister, Darcie,” I mumbled, my cheeks heating.

His smile widened as his eyes came back to me. “You’re the innkeeper’s daughters, aren’t you?”

“Two of them,” I agreed.

“Come along, then,” he said, gesturing back to the inn. “We will have to speak with your parents.”

I hesitated. “I was supposed to help Darcie clean up.”

“You can after.” His voice was smooth like butter and I nodded, unable to deny him a second time. He walked next to me, his eyes never leaving me, as we headed back to the inn. My heart was going all over the place. The vampire king was looking at me as though I was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Was this a dream?

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If it was, I never wanted to wake up.

Mom, Dad, and our other siblings waited for us inside. Mom had a strange look on her face, almost afraid. I spared half a glance to her but couldn't take my eyes from the king that long.

"Your Majesty. Thank you for coming to our humble inn," my father said, sounding uncertain. He was usually so confident that it pulled me out of my daze. He broke away from the rest of the family to come stand next to Darcie and me. "If there's anything we can do to make your stay more memorable, please let us know."

The king's expression hardened again as he viewed my father. "I thank you for your offer but I will not put you through any trouble. Especially seeing as I'm taking your daughter Elara back with me to the palace, to be my personal blood donor."

Darcie gasped and squealed. Dad swayed on the spot. Mom covered her mouth with her hands.

My heart hammered as I gazed at the wonderful, intimidating, and achingly handsome man before me. Like most girls, I'd always harbored fantasies of some rich, titled man falling desperately in love with me. I'd imagined what my life would be like, dripping with jewels and with servants at my beck and call all day. Now here I was. The King of Taimarah himself was staring into my eyes, making my heart beat faster, telling me he wanted me to go with him.

Go with him and... what? Be his personal blood donor. I knew what that meant. I was eighteen, I knew all about sex and that stuff, even if I hadn't experienced it myself. I

knew he wanted more than my blood... and I wanted it, too. I wanted it more than I'd wanted anything before.

I'd seen him from afar and it set my heart blazing with want for him. Now, with only a few feet separating us, that want had flared into an almost painful need. All it took was for our eyes to meet once and I knew he was the one for me.

He wanted me to come with him. Which meant he felt the same way. It was like in the fairy tales I read. Love at first sight, the strongest type of love.

But what would my family do without me? The inn couldn't run itself. We were just getting comfortable. My older sister, Jessica, was about to go to college. If I left now, who would take my place? She'd have to stay home. Part of me thought, but I could just send them money.

My dad put a protective arm around my shoulders. "My daughter is not for sale, my Lord," he said, his voice thin but determined. "She will not be going with you."

"She is the one who will make that choice," the king said flatly.

"She's only eighteen," my mom protested. "She's too young."

The king didn't answer, but one of the other vampires did. "Eighteen for a human is old enough to join the army, pay taxes, get married, and enter the blood donor program. There is no reason why she isn't old enough to be the king's personal donor."

"But," Mom started again.

"Her choice," the king interrupted, and his voice was like thunder, stopping all arguments.

I wanted to say yes so badly. But I couldn't. Not when I was still needed here at the inn. I twisted my hands and lifted my chin, trying to force myself to be more certain than I felt. "I thank you, but no. I cannot go with you."

The king's amber eyes sharpened. My heart pounded, part of me hoping that he would simply say too bad and take me away regardless. My favorite stories of the gods was how the demon king of the night stole away summer's daughter and made her his wife. The story always ended with the girl refusing to leave her husband, having fallen in love with him.

It would be easy to fall in love with this dangerous, handsome vampire who looked at me as though I was already his.

Instead, he sketched a bow, turned on his heel, and left.

He left.

The festival didn't happen that day. Not with the shock of the events that actually transpired and our guest of honor leaving so abruptly.

After he was gone, my family gathered around me and told me it was okay, that he wasn't going to take me. They mistook my heartache for fear. When they found me with red-rimmed eyes, they were quick to tell me that I didn't need to cry, because the king wasn't coming back. He'd forget all about the innkeeper's daughter from a small town.

Oh, if only they knew! I moved through my chores with a forced smile on my face, not daring to say what was truly in my mind.

A week after the incident, my mother pulled me aside. She took in the pallor of my cheeks and the dullness of my eyes and touched my forehead.

“You’re cold,” she said. “Elara, I’m going to ask you a few things and I need you to be honest with me. Some of these questions may be difficult, but it is very, very important that you tell me the truth, alright?”

My brows pinched together in confusion but I nodded.

“When the vampire king was here, did he...” Mom looked away, her cheeks darkening with a blush. “Did he... touch you?”

“Touch me?” I repeated. Did she mean like a hand brushing mine, or a hand under my skirt?

“See you alone?” she prompted, as though that clarified anything. “Drink from you?”

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Heat rushed to my face at her words. “No. No, I only saw him that day. When he asked for me to go with him.”

Mom’s relief at my words quickly fell away. “Asked? More like demanded. I was afraid he was going to slaughter us all where we stood. But no matter. If you are still pure, that’s all that mattered.”

Her words rankled me. And that was the day when the resentment started to grow. What was purity, anyway? And why was it so important? She wouldn’t have said it if my brothers had caught the eye of a female vampire. It was only because I was a woman and somehow the thing between my legs was magic, so long as nobody touched it.

That night, I started to pack. I wasn’t sure if I’d have the bravery to leave but the idea of slipping away, of running to the palace excited me. Daydreams filled my mind of the soft smile that would grace the king’s face when I turned up on his doorstep. I imagined him pulling me close in his arms, his lips against mine...

My door opened and Darcie wandered in, looking annoyed. She flopped onto my bed and groaned. “Can I move in with you? I’m tired of sharing with Jessica.”

A twinge hit my heart. We lived in a large house just next to the inn. All at once, the same doubts that had made me tell Luken—I glowed with joy just thinking about his name—no the first time hit me again. What sort of situation would I be leaving my family in if I was to leave?

Darcie pushed herself up on her elbows and glanced at the bag I’d been packing. A

frown crossed her face. “What are you doing?”

My heart started to beat faster. I could lie... but I'd been breaking myself to pieces for these last few days, trying to hide my true feelings. “Darcie... I have a secret. You can't tell Mom and Dad.”

Darcie held her breath, her large brown eyes growing wide. She nodded seriously, the excitement barely contained in her expression. I had to smile. If anyone could understand this, it was Darcie. She was still very young, but out of all my siblings, she was the only one with a romantic soul.

“I'm running away,” I told her. “I made a mistake by telling the vampire king no. I'm going to him.”

“Oh, Elara!” Darcie clasped her hands together. “Are you in love with him?”

Love. The word sent chills through me. Even though we'd only spoken once, I knew truth when I felt it. I nodded. “I love him, Darcie. And he loves me, I just know it. It's why he wanted me to go with him. When I'm with him, everything is going to be perfect. And I'll take care of everyone.” It seemed so simple, so clear, now. Of course Luken would take care of my family. I wasn't needed here, when I could be with such a powerful, handsome man.

“How will you get there?” Darcie asked, her brow furrowed.

I hesitated, unsure how to answer. How would I get there? I didn't have much money myself. The trains to the capital were cheap enough, but once I was there...?

“I'll find a way,” I decided. “Because it's love. And we will find a way to each other again. I'm certain of it.”

“I expected to have been in a fight by now,” Ysara grouched when we set camp that night.

Thessa sighed heavily. “I’m glad we didn’t have to fight. Maybe the other teams have been caught by the beasts of the forest. Maybe we’ll get the artifact and get out easily.”

“Maybe,” Greyson said with a laugh. “And once we’re in the colosseum, which one of us would you prefer to kill you, Thessa? I’d make it quick for you.” She stared at him in horror and he shook his head, regret crossing his face. “I’m sorry, young one. It’s just that there is no happy ending in this. There will be bloodshed enough by the time this is over. Nobody refuses King Luken and lives to tell the tale.”

His words made me wince. They reminded me of the general four years ago. A half-dozen elven mercenaries had come to the inn while Darcie and I were talking. My guess was that they demanded me once again and my father refused. I’d never know. They cut him down where he stood.

Darcie heard the screams before I did. I got her out of the house and saw the torches flickering as the mercenaries headed for the house, yelling for me. I’d told Darcie to run, to hide in the forest. I never had the chance to hand myself over to the elves. Mom had stepped out. I remembered her silhouette in the darkness, backlit by the torches. Why were they using torches instead of flashlights? The thought had seemed distant, like I already knew.

“He can’t have her,” Mom said.

There was a sick noise and her silhouette changed. Something thin erupted through her back. She didn’t scream.

“Nobody refuses King Luken,” the mercenary general said. “Consider this as punishment for refusing to have over what is his.”

The rest of the night was a haze of blood and smoke. I didn’t know if the elves realized I was the one they’d come for when they threw me back into the fire, to die with the rest of my family. Darcie had saved me, somehow, but she’d never told me what she’d seen, never told me how she got me out of the flames.

I ground my teeth and I made a space for myself to sleep near the fire. Thessa was doomed. They all were. But as I fell into a fitful sleep, it wasn’t the flames that greeted me—at least, not the ones that I was used to. Instead it was a pair of glowing amber eyes and cool fingertips on my scars.

Chapter 5

Even though no vampire whisked me off that night, I knew they’d been around. Because in the morning, a small, silver tablet had been left on top of Thessa’s pack. Ysara proved herself a wolf shifter by taking her wolf form and sniffing around the area, but couldn’t find any traces of them.

“What do you think it’s for?” Kael asked, picking up the tablet. “A message? I don’t recall this being in the Blood Trials before.”

“We never had a year with the Trials that didn’t start with bloodshed, either,” Greyson pointed out lazily. “Something’s different this year. Wonder what it is.”

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Me? Could I be the reason things had been... uneventful so far? I tried to shove aside that thought. I wasn't going to be pulled into the fairytale again. There was no grand love; there was no destiny. Luken wanted something from me and he was punishing me for denying him. I wasn't going to grow complacent. I wasn't going to let myself start thinking I was special. It would only get me killed.

"I bet he's planning a spectacle," Ysara said. "It is an anniversary year, after all. They tend to have something more exciting every five years."

Yes, that must be it.

The tablet flickered to life. Luken's image appeared on it, smiling broadly. The sight of him caused my heart to ricochet off my ribs, and I scolded myself harshly for it.

"All of you, contestants and viewers, are no doubt wondering why we have this strange start to the Trials. Where is the bloodshed? Why have there been no attacks, no action? Are these the Blood Trials or a picnic in the forest?" Luken chuckled, sending prickles wash under my skin.

Why did I still respond to him like the naïve eighteen-year-old I once had been?

I struggled to pay attention to his words when my head was so full of other thoughts. My body was responding to the sound of his voice, heat pooling in my belly. There was something dangerously seductive about him. I understood now how I could have been so deceived four years ago. That girl I was didn't stand a chance?

Taking a deep breath, I dug my fingernails into my palm. Hard enough to cause a

slight prickle of pain, but not hard enough to cause damage.

It was how I'd trained myself to preparing to bring drunk from at the end of the Trials. It had been a... difficult task. A vampire drinking caused a surge of hormones in the person they bit, sending that person into sexual bliss. I'd started small, putting myself through pain every time I was sexually aroused. I'd even allowed vampires to drink from me before, pairing these instances with more pain. It was supposed to train my body not to respond to the stimuli... and except for these damned reactions to Luken, I believed I'd gotten to the point where I mastered my own body enough to ignore the arousal.

It was hard to be horny when you were writhing in pain. Even now, with that low simmering heat in my belly, my shoulders were tense, waiting for the pain to befall it.

The sting of my fingernails in my palms helped ground me. But it also highlighted an unfortunate side effect I hadn't counted on when training myself. Every now and then, it worked in the opposite way. The pain would cause this heat to flash through me. It was rare, though, and I knew I could handle it.

"Glory be to the Gods," Luken said. The image disappeared off the screen.

I blinked, cursing myself. I'd missed the whole speech! What was the real reason for the delays? I glanced at my team to find their faces all grim, except for Thessa, who had both hands over her mouth. Did I dare ask what I'd missed? It would show a terrible weakness on my part... although, it might also make them underestimate me even more.

I gripped my staff in both hands and leaned against it. Quickly, as the others were still staring at the tablet, I arranged my face into a confused expression.

"I don't get it," I said, shaking my head slowly.

Greyson arched one manicured brow. Today, his hair was braided into a single plait, exposing the slender, pointed tip of his ears. “You don’t... get it?”

“What’s there not to get?” Kael spat. “They’re letting loose creatures into the forest that have been specially trained to hunt us down and have twice as many contestants as they normally do. It’s going to be quite the spectacle, isn’t it? Bad enough that they’ve made watching the channels mandatory.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t talk like that,” Thessa said, her hands fluttering.

Kael turned on her. “Why not? I never even wanted to be here!”

“But they’re watching,” Thessa insisted. “And if they don’t like what we say...”

She trailed off, looking around nervously as though a vampire was going to jump out of the bushes and attack us. I wondered, suddenly, how many people were turned into our channels. Every person in the Trials had their own channel, broadcasted through the kingdom. It would keep playing until that person died. Betting on the Trials was a common practice among all levels of society. Not that it helped anyone within the Trials. They didn’t get anything from it, except recognition if they won.

Winning the combat section of the Trials did bring recognition and fame. The person who survived the colosseum was given land and wealth. They often made even more money by writing about their experiences or using that fame to propel their careers. None of them had successfully resisted Luken when he drank from them, but that didn’t mean they came out with nothing.

I’d watched the interviews with past winners. Whenever they were asked what it was like to be drunk from by the King, they would all get these wistful, far-off looks. Most refused to talk about it, and those who did ended up waxing poetic. One woman I remembered had said, “It’s what I think about every night and every morning. I

would go through the Trials again just to have the honor.”

Funny how that worked, though. Once a person went through the Trials, they weren’t permitted to volunteer again. Now, I couldn’t help but wonder if Luken chose the winner every year, the person he wanted to taste, and manipulated the Trials to ensure their survival. And then I wondered how far he went with them when he drank; men and women both had won the Trials. Orcs, elves, shifters, gnomes, humans, even other vampires. The winner could be of any species.

Surely, not all of them could be his type. Surely, he wouldn’t want to sleep with every winner. But then, perhaps he did. Maybe it was less about who and what he laid with, and more about the power he held over them as soon as his teeth sunk into their skin.

A shiver ran through me as I tried to imagine Luken with, say, Kael. But in my mind’s eye, it wasn’t Kael in Luken’s arms but me.

Dammit.

We started to move through the forest with Ysara leading us in her wolf form. We moved in a tighter group than we had the previous day. The same silence hung over us, but it seemed darker and deeper than it had been before.

When a twig cracked behind us, it echoed like a gunshot. Kael and Thessa whirled. Greyson pivoted, facing to the right of us. Ysara gave out a short bark and lunged to the left. I brought up my staff in a defensive position. I searched the brush around us.

The ambush came at us from all sides. They shouted and whooped as they came at us. A human with a broadsword charged at me. I braced myself, caught his first blow on my staff, and then shoved him away. Pirouetting, I faced off with him. He laughed, a sound that sounded both fascinated and desperate. The human already had a gash on

his forehead and moved with a jerky gait. Clearly, he'd been wounded before. His lips pulled back over his teeth, his eyes wild and bulging. His pupils were blown, so huge it filled nearly his whole eye. Drugged or concussed?

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I lifted my staff, blocking the swipe of his broadsword. The blade sunk into the wood and lodged there. I spun the staff, yanking the sword from his hands. It went flying, smacking one of the attackers in the back. No time to think about that. I followed up with a solid blow to the man's chest, and another to his forehead. He stumbled back, wheezing and coughing. His hands fluttered a moment before he drew a knife.

My heart pounded in my throat. This wasn't like training. This wasn't learning. It was real. Kill or be killed. I let my body move, shutting off the parts of my brain that would cause me to hesitate. I used the staff to fling myself forward, kicking both feet into the man's chest. He soared away, slammed into a tree, and then crumpled at its base.

I didn't stop. The staff went above my head, and I brought it down, using the leverage of its weight to crack that man's skull open.

Bits of human splattered every which way. He wouldn't be getting up from that. I whirled, swinging my staff out and around. An elf had crept up on me, and the staff slammed into his ribs. I heard a crack, but he lunged, stabbing toward my throat. I twisted aside just in time to avoid being skewered. A cry burst from my mouth as I twisted my staff around behind my back and turned the other way. My hand met something wet and sticky as I rammed the butt of the staff into the elf's ribs again.

Then Kael roared. He jumped behind the elf and brought down a double-handed axe. It cleft through the elf's neck with ease.

Two thumps, one louder than the other, and everything grew still.

Ysara shifted to human form. She was utterly naked, her skin slick with blood. Especially around her mouth. She licked it off her fingers and laughed.

“Looks like we finally got our fight. Any injuries?” Her tone was cool and professional, as though this happened every day. What sort of life had she come from?

“None that I see,” Greyson said, glancing around at the team. His gaze lingered on me, a spark in his eyes that I couldn’t quite read. “You did better than I expected. I thought you’d hesitate. You don’t seem like the sort to have killed before.”

I lifted my chin, met his eye, and grinned, showing all my teeth. “Just goes to show you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

He laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Inside, I was not so calm. The sight and sounds of my staff doing its deadly work played in my mind. I breathed through my mouth so I wouldn’t have to smell the aftereffects. The bodies lay strewn about, and I carefully checked my pack, making sure nothing had gotten contaminated, to avoid looking at them. My blood felt like ice in my veins.

Despite my bravado to Greyson, this was the first time I’d killed another person. Knowing that the Trials would be a bloodbath hadn’t prepared me for the emotion of killing. My training with the coven hadn’t gotten to the point of killing. It was why Emily told me I wasn’t ready for this.

“Should we bury them?” Kael asked doubtfully.

“No, but we should take their weapons and supplies,” Ysara said. She’s already claimed the human’s broadsword. “What we can’t carry, we’ll throw in the river so

nobody else can use them, either.”

I sucked in a breath and headed for Thessa. “You and I can look through their packs for food.”

Thessa shied back from me. Her eyes were wide. I hadn’t paid enough attention to the others in the team to know if she’d killed anyone.

Ignoring her flinch, I crouched near a pack that had been dropped in the bushes. I opened it up and started to move the food into my pack. Surprisingly, I found about half as much as what we’d been given. Had this team already gone through so much? Had they hid some of their bounty? I didn’t want to admit there was another possibility.

Thessa crouched next to me. “Elara?”

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye.

“If we do make it to the colosseum, will you kill me?”

My hands paused. I stared at the pack, the blood rushing in my ears. Was that a request or a fear? I couldn’t tell. After what we’d just done here, it was only natural to wonder who was going to kill who when we survived this. I didn’t know what to tell Thessa. The stark contrast between what I’d imagined and reality had put me on my hind foot. I felt this more keenly than I was prepared for.

“I—” I started.

The slight rustle of bushes was the only warning I got. The flash of a blade shone through the air and then there was a howling, a screaming. Thessa was screaming. I whirled, swinging my staff. It slammed into the side of the human who had jumped at

us. The human keeled over, writhing and gasping.

A sleek, tawny-gold panther backed away from the human, blood dripping from its muzzle. The knife still lay in the human's hand, unused. I turned to the panther, and deep brown eyes stared up at me. A sound like snapping bones filled the air, and the panther melted back into Thessa. Blood stained her mouth and neck. Unlike Ysara, she had stayed completely clothed in the transformation.

“Gods, I thought there was something familiar about you,” Ysara crowed. She'd pulled on a tunic and trousers and sauntered over. “That was quite the reveal, kid. A panther. You might actually come in handy after all.”

Thessa scrubbed her sleeve over her mouth, shaking.

I turned back to the packs and quickly took what I could, hiding my own surprise. It was just one more reminder here that I couldn't underestimate anyone on this team. I had to put some trust in them so long as we were here in Wickham Forest, but they were out to get me. Thessa was clearly more dangerous than she appeared to be. She hadn't hesitated when that human threatened her with the knife.

Was he coming for her or for me, though?

I shook my head, dismissing those thoughts. It didn't matter. There was only one way that this was going to end, and I would not allow my emotions to get the best of me. I'd killed once already. I'd kill again. There was no room for hesitation here.

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So yes. No matter how much she reminded me of Darcie, when we reached the final trials, I would kill Thessa.

Chapter 6

Wickham Forest was not as large as one might think. Though the trees were wide around the trunk and taller than most buildings in the cities, they were relegated to a somewhat small parcel of land. The cedars, pines, and spruces that dominated the vegetation had spent so many centuries dropping their needles that it had turned the ground acidic, and this, along with the overlapping canopy, prevented a lot of undergrowth. The deeper we made our way into the forest, the less bushes we had to slog through.

The trees were big enough for a dragon to hide behind, but we came against nothing after that first fight. I could only imagine that our channels had low ratings.

We came to a lake unexpectedly. The terrain and vegetation hadn't changed. There was no slope to indicate that we would be heading toward a bowl for water to collect, and no sign of the brush that was so thick on the edge of the forest where we started. I hadn't even seen the lake through the trees. Just rounded a large oak and suddenly it was there.

“Whoa,” Thessa murmured, coming to a stop.

The six of us drew to a stop, staring out over the lake. It wasn't mentioned on the map, but this was the heart of the forest. It was difficult to pinpoint exactly where the lake began and the ground started. It was all just a smooth transition. The light

reflected off the still, smooth surface so perfectly that I at first thought it was a salt deposit, like the ones that were left in shallow pools near the ocean, after the water had all evaporated.

“You think it’s in there?” Ysara asked, frowning doubtfully.

“Unless we went in the wrong direction, and this isn’t the heart of the forest,” Kael answered. He picked up a stone and tossed it into the lake. The water swallowed it up with hardly a ripple.

Thessa backed away, shaking her head. “Still water. This is a dangerous place. We can’t go in there.”

“If the artifact is inside, what choice do we have?” Ysara snapped at her.

Greyson was watching me. I felt the prickle of his gaze, as though he was expecting me to do something. I ignored him as I studied the surface of the water. It wasn’t right. Even still, water would show more disturbance after a rock was thrown into it. I moved to the edge of the water and crouched near it. It seemed as though I was staring down into the deepest part of the lake. An illusion?

“Elara!” Thessa screamed.

My head jerked up, but it was too late. A flash of white crested over me as something sharp bit into my leg. Water hit my torso, and I gulped in a deep breath before I was under, being dragged away. The light from the surface grew dim, focusing into a tiny pinprick. I twisted, widening my eyes. The Selkie part of me allowed me to see as clearly under the water as I could above it. A mane of tangled seaweed flowed into my face, and I pushed it away.

A horse had my leg in its teeth, galloping on the water as though it was running on

land as it dragged me deeper into the lake. Of course! A kelpie. That's why the lake looked so still—it was an illusion. A spike of fear washed through me, begging me to take a breath. I sealed my nostrils, calling on my innate water abilities to keep myself still. The kelpie would keep dragging me until it thought I was dead.

Selkies have magic that allow them to breathe underwater. My distant selkie heritage didn't allow that much resilience to the water, but it did give me extra lung capacity. I held my breath, letting the beast tire itself out. I wasn't sure how long it was—five minutes, maybe—before it cantered to a stop, next to a large dome of sticks, bones, and mud.

Its lair.

The kelpie dropped my leg and stomped one heavy hoof onto my stomach, driving out half of my precious air. It hooked my clothes onto a branch and then sauntered off, probably to catch one of the others.

I waited until it disappeared into the gloom to make sure it wouldn't come back. Twisting in the water, I groped along the branch until I found the spot where I'd been fastened to the lair. Fortunately, the kelpie hadn't secured me with its slime or kelp. It was easy enough to free myself from the branch. From there, I pulled myself down the branch, closer to the pile of bones and sticks that was its lair. Kelpies weren't hoarders by nature, not like a dragon, but if there was an artifact we had to recover, it would be here.

Had the vampires put the artifact in the lair, or had they given a sacrifice to the kelpie? Didn't really matter. It was just like them to make us handle the dead to get their precious artifact, whatever it was.

My stomach ached from the kelpie's kick, and my leg burned. Ribbons of blood started to seep out around me. My lungs grew uncomfortable as I shifted through the

piles of bones. A glint of something caught my eye inside a skull as I tossed it away so I paddled closer. I turned the skull over to find a fist-sized pendant lodged in its brain cavity. Gotcha!

Tucking the skull beneath my shirt, I kicked for the surface. I cut through the water as my lungs started to burn. The sound of swirling water heralded a shadow passing over me. My heart stuttered. The kelpie!

It dove, a scream reverberating through the water. Its ears pinned back against its skull as it came for me. I twisted myself but wasn't fast enough to avoid its thundering hooves. The sharp ends clipped my sides, and the kelpie lunged, biting for my neck. I grabbed hold of its ears, holding myself away from its ravenous, sharp teeth. It jerked me from side to side and rammed its head into my chest.

All the rest of my air exploded from me. One of my hands slipped free. It twisted itself from my other hand. It kicked me again, hard in the chest. I felt something crack. Then, its teeth clamped onto the side of my neck.

The surface seemed even more distant. Pain flashed over my vision, and I opened my mouth to scream. Water rushed into my lungs, and the flash came again, bright white against the darkness. Wasn't I supposed to see my life in these flashes? The light switched from white to red, and the kelpie screamed. It wrapped itself around me and pulled me through the water. The light was getting brighter. Was this the tunnel of darkness that was death?

I wanted the light. So badly it hurt.

A rumbling sounded in the water next to me. I tore my eyes from the light to see an angel holding me. It must have stolen me from the kelpie at some point; I wasn't sure when. A soft amber glow bathed his face. And with a ripple of shock, I realized who my angel was.

Luken.

My head broke the water. My lungs exploded, trying to expel the liquid in them. I choked, gasped, and clear air flooded into me. There was still too much water and I coughed, my whole body aching with the force of it. Luken's arms were still around me as we floated toward the shore. No, not floated—he was swimming. I was clasped to his chest by strong arms as he kicked. I could feel his muscles moving through his torso and chest.

And despite the blood still seeping from my wounds and the deep ache in my chest that spoke to at least one broken rib, I was... safe. His body was warmer than the surrounding water. I held my face into the air and tried to kick, even though I couldn't breathe. But the feeling that swept through me was safe and warm, and that was all that mattered.

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I wasn't sure if it was shock or if I blacked out a moment, but the next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground. My head tilted slightly as Luken pressed on my stomach and chest. I groaned and choked on the water as it spilled from me. He bent over me, pinching my nostrils shut, and sealed his mouth over mine. Warm breath eased into me, filling my lungs.

He started to pull away, and a spike of... something went through me. Don't leave me. I reached out, catching his long, wet hair in my hands as I lifted my body to him. Pain made my vision go white, but I still found his mouth with mine. My lips moved with his as I slipped my tongue into his mouth, eager to taste him.

Some part of me wondered what the hell I was doing—but I didn't care. This couldn't be real. How could Luken have gotten to the lake? How could he have pulled me out?

So it wasn't real. Which meant I didn't have to act the way I knew I should.

Luken broke the kiss, cupping his head under my head. He chuckled, his amber eyes dark as he studied my face. "Easy, Elara. Not now. Not until you're in your full mind."

"Why did you do it?" I whispered. I was never going to ask him in reality—not about to give him the satisfaction of knowing how deeply he hurt me. But here and now, when he was just some figment of my dying brain? Why not ask? "Why did you kill them?"

"Kill who?" His brow quirked as he asked.

“My family.” I let out a shuddering, burning breath. “I was going to come to you. I’d decided to leave home. But before I could, you burned it to the ground.”

Luken’s eyes grew wide. His hand smoothed the hair from my face, his touch still warm in comparison to the air. The chill from the lake was setting deeper into me, my lungs aching and raw from their lack of air. Was being dead supposed to hurt this much? I didn’t think I was dead. If anything, I was caught in that moment between life and death. That must be why I was hallucinating Luken now. Because he’d been my obsession since the moment I saw him.

He was so beautiful. His skin glistened with water, emphasizing the golden tones. His amber eyes, so deep and expressive. He was stricken by my words. Figures that a hallucination would fall back into that golden king, that heroic figure I’d made him into when I first saw him.

“Is that really what you believe?” he asked, his voice low and pained. “You think I killed your family as vengeance because you told me no?”

I nodded, and the pain grew sharper in his eyes. His fingers brushed against my cheekbone, sending tingles in their wake.

“Why?” his voice remained low.

“Who else had a motive?” I answered. “Nobody had any reason to send those mercenaries after us. Only you. And they told me. They said you sent them.”

“They told you?” He frowned at me. “Did it not occur to you that they were lying?”

I laughed weakly. “Who else had reason to attack us?”

His eyes darkened again, but his brows drew closer together this time. It was anger

rather than lust. “Who, indeed?”

He muttered something about the gods, but I couldn’t hear him clearly. The pain in my ribs was getting worse. Darkness swirled at the edges of my vision, and I blinked rapidly, trying to fight it back. My lungs were heavy, too heavy. More water had gotten in. Ah, that must be proof that I was still dying beneath the surface of the lake. I choked on the liquid in my lungs.

Luken’s hands moved on my body. They were rough and quick as he moved me to my side. I coughed and spluttered but couldn’t get my breath.

“Pulmonary edema,” he muttered.

I’d heard the term before. Dry drowning. After near-drowning, sometimes the lungs decided to simply fill with liquid and kill the person after they were saved. It was rare. More common among selkie-kin. A trueborn selkie could breathe with a lungful of water, unlike both humans and seals. It was part of their magic. Even a half-selkie didn’t have that same adaptation, but if they nearly drowned, some part of that distant magic would try to breathe through the water.

And so the lungs would fill and drown them. It happened far more rapidly than in other species. But I was still beneath the surface, wasn’t I?

A spike of panic washed through me. What was happening to me?

Luken’s hands pressed to either side of my face, making me look at him. “Elara, hold on. This isn’t the end.”

I stared at him, unable to do anything but think, This isn’t the end, repeating it on loop in my mind. He bit his finger, slashing through the skin with one elongated tooth. Propping my head back, he dripped two drops of blood into my mouth.

“This will heal the worst of your injuries,” he told me. “You’re not so close to death as to become a vampire. Don’t worry, Elara. You’re going to be okay.”

And that was when I knew. It was all real. How he’d gotten here, why he was here, I didn’t know. But the tangy blood hit my tongue and I knew. Pain burned through me as my bones knit together. Luken’s hand was still cupped behind my head. I couldn’t let it end like this. I couldn’t...

I reached out and grabbed his collar. I dragged him closer, whimpering with pain as I did so. “Luken...”

“It’s okay,” he whispered.

I growled, fighting the darkness. “I will never forgive you.”

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He said something, but I was too deep in the well of pain and darkness to hear him. Cold crept over my body and I welcomed the bliss of unconsciousness.

“Elara! Elara, please!” Darcie’s hands were on me, shaking me. She sobbed. “Come back, please!”

Pain burned through me, followed by panic. No! No, I had already lived through this. I couldn’t go through that again. The months of recovery, my body stitching itself back together after the fire had burned away parts of me that could never be replaced. I’d already grieved my family and moved on.

I can’t go through that again.

“Elara?” Darcie asked hopefully.

I forced my eyes open. A pair of brown eyes stared back at me. But they weren’t my sister’s eyes. Thessa. I blinked in surprise and opened my mouth, but only a groan came out.

“You’re bleeding,” she told me. “Your leg. The kelpie...”

Kelpie? I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, relaxing my body. Pain ached through me, but not as strong as after the fire. The sharp sting on my legs and the roughness of my lungs told me that I hadn’t hallucinated the kelpie attack. But afterward? With Luken? It was hazy and indistinct. Had I imagined it all?

I tested myself, moving slowly. He'd fed me his blood. It should have healed up all my injuries, but I was still in rough shape here. I managed to sit upright, and my head swirled. Thessa grabbed my shoulders, holding me steady.

"Don't try to move. I think your ribs are bruised," she said worriedly.

Luken was a vampire, not a wizard. The lights I'd seen—thought I'd seen—had looked like spells. Maybe the kelpie had brought in someone from another team, from another part of the lake? It couldn't have been Luken. He had no reason to save me.

Right?

"Where are the others?" I asked, my voice rasping.

"Cooking the kelpie," Thessa answered. "They said you'd drowned, but I couldn't give up. We're quite a ways from camp."

I rubbed my eyes. "The kelpie is dead?"

Thessa nodded. "It floated to the surface with its throat torn out. We thought you must have done something somehow."

I shivered but refused to think about the implications of this turn. Instead, I smoothed my hand down my shirt. The bulge of the skull I'd pulled from the kelpie lair sat at my hip. I pulled it from under my shirt and held it up in the air.

"Let's get back to the others," I said, ignoring Thessa's questioning look. "It won't be long before the other teams are told we have the artifact."

Chapter 7

By the time we returned to the camp the others had set, they'd retreated from the water's edge. Kael was on guard duty as Thessa helped me through the forest. With a shout, he strode forward and picked me up. I stiffened, hissing at me, but he ignored my protests.

"Thought you were a goner for sure," he said, grinning broadly.

My heart pricked. He hadn't wanted to be part of this. He'd been forced to participate in the Blood Trials. And now, it was clear he was happy to see me alive. Doubts slithered into my gut. I didn't want to kill him. I didn't want to kill Thessa, Ysara, or Greyson. I didn't have any attachment to any of them, except Thessa. But I didn't want to kill them, either.

This wasn't what was supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to get to know them.

"Thought you drowned," Ysara said from the fire. She was roasting the flank of the kelpie over a low-burning fire.

"Would have, if I didn't have selkie heritage," I said, forcing myself to sound cheerful. Kael set me down and handed me a waterskin. I took it and sipped on the tepid water, sighing as I did so. "The kelpie sure did its best. Thanks for looking for me," I added sarcastically.

Ysara shrugged, her gaze not moving from my face. "Honestly? I hoped you died. One less person for me to kill when the time comes. There's been an announcement. The artifact was found. So now we've got to find the bastards that found it and take it from them."

A smug smile came onto my face. The morbid moment had passed, and I was focused again. They were still useful to me, but I had to start shifting my view of them. It was clear Ysara had already done so. I still didn't know why Thessa had been branded a

criminal in the first place, so I couldn't see her as some soft innocent.

She wasn't Darcie.

"Careful," I drawled as I hefted the skull in my hand. "There's some of us that will take umbrage to being called bastards."

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I brought the skull down hard, smashing open the waterlogged bone. Then I picked the pendant out from inside the remnants. It was a pentagram in shape, with a circle inlaid, touching all the edges. A star sat in each of the corners. The inside had the image of an eye in the center of a hand. It was all made from a bronze-colored metal that shone with a golden gleam when turned at certain angles. The pendant hung from a thick iron chain that was just showing signs of rust.

“By moon and blood,” Greyson breathed. His eyes widened as he leaned forward. “You got it? How did you get it?”

“It was in the kelpie’s lair,” I answered.

Ysara whistled. “So we’re the bastards that all the other teams are going to be coming after, then.”

“But we found it. Why...” Thessa trailed off and shook her head. “That’s a stupid question. Nobody wants to be hunted down by the vampires for sport.”

A heavy grimness settled over us. Dark thoughts threatened to creep in, and I shook my head hard, banishing them again. Now wasn’t the time for me to worry about the future.

“Let me see it,” Greyson said, holding out his hand.

I reflexively pulled it closer. He lifted one sculpted brow and smiled at me, as though amused by my actions.

“We still have to get out of here together,” he reminded me. “If any of us double-crosses the others, it’s an automatic death sentence.”

That was true. I shook my head again and handed it over. “We should find a new campsite. One that’s more easily defended than this. The others will see the fire and come after us.”

“I suppose it only took two nights to get to the lake,” Ysara murmured as Greyson studied the pendant. “With the food, we’ve been able to scavenge so far...” She nodded once and started to kick dirt onto the fire. “We don’t need the kelpie meat to stretch out our store. Ya’ll, come help me.”

Thessa and Kael both began to toss dirt onto the fire. I remained sitting where I was, watching them; my near-drowning still left me exhausted. The fire flickered and hissed. The smell of the roasting Kelpie dissipated as Ysara took the flank off the fire and dragged it into the woods. It occurred to me, then, that by doing this, we were marking ourselves as the ones with the artifact. Who else would be in such a hurry to leave as to abandon food?

There was no point in thinking about that now. What was done was done.

“Hold on,” Greyson said suddenly. He twisted something on the pendant and let out a stream of curses.

“What is it?” I pulled myself up and leaned close to him. His skin was warm. The smell of the woods, smoke, and bergamot clung to him. Surprise rippled through me as I pulled in the pleasant scent. Had he brought cologne with him? Odd choice... or was this his natural scent?

Greyson held the pendant in his open hand. He’d opened it up, revealing intricate wiring. A computer chip? I leaned in closer, frowning.

“Why would they put a chip in it?” Thessa asked.

“It’s not just a chip. There’s a strong magic around this thing. And if I…” Greyson wiggled his fingers over the device and murmured a word in Elvish. A holographic image sprang up from the artifact. It was an image of Wickham Forest, but far more vast and more detailed than the first map we’d been given.

My stomach swooped as my eyes traced over the map. The lake wasn’t the heart of the woods at all. “There’s a colosseum in the center of the forest,” I murmured.

Thessa opened her mouth and closed it again.

“Then we’re not leaving the forest at all,” Kael said. His shoulders slumped. “We have to get there. But the first map we were given—”

“I thought it was strange that Wickham Forest was so small,” Thessa whispered. “The Gods would never accept such a tiny portion of the kingdom.”

We all stood in silence, staring at the artifact. Finally, Ysara went back into the forest and dragged back the flank. She set it back on the fire and went about building it up again. I studied the new map. We were still very close to the edge of the forest. It would take us several days to get to the colosseum in the heart of Wickham Forest.

I had to admit, even though part of me was furious for this trick, I was impressed. Everything had been so easy thus far we’d let down our guard. Acted in haste. The devastation on our faces as reality sunk in would make good TV. How many viewers did our channels have now? I wondered if anyone was rooting for us. How many bets were placed on our survival?

“I’ll take first watch tonight,” Thessa said, throwing back her shoulders. “I wasn’t hurt in the fight.”

Kaela and Ysara nodded. Greyson turned the map off, closed the pendant, and held it out to me. I took it gladly. Our fingers brushed, and he turned his hand and held onto mine.

“I can use some magic to help you heal,” he offered, his thumb stroking over my knuckle.

Surprise rippled through me. Using magic was meant to weaken the user, something that took time to replenish. Wouldn't he be better off letting me weaken, putting me in a more vulnerable place if we were attacked? Better they kill me than him, especially since the time when we were going to kill each other was drawing even closer.

His cool gaze softened, and he pulled his hand away. “If you're not comfortable, I understand.”

Not comfortable? With the attention? The place he moved his thumb over my skin tingled slightly. Nothing in comparison to the feelings that had gone through me when I hallucinated Luken touching me, but... but this was real. And Greyson wasn't a murderous bastard.

“I’d like that,” I said, feeling bold.

Greyson smiled, pleased. He sat behind me and pressed his hands into my shoulder blades. “Lean into me.”

Following that order was... difficult. Leaning against him put me in a vulnerable position. He could move aside suddenly, and I’d be left tumbling to the forest floor. I did it anyway, trying to enjoy the warmth of his touch, the feeling of his strong hands against my back. Anything to erase this lingering feeling in my gut that said I wished it was Luken with his hands on me.

A subtle heat spread from his hands. It sank into my body, soothing the lingering pain along the way. I let out a sigh, letting my eyes close. It felt tingly, like the touch of a feather. As the magic worked its way through me, it spread down my arms, wrapped around my torso, and sank into the core of me.

“Don’t be alarmed if it turns you on,” Greyson murmured in my ear, too quietly for the others. “Elvish magic sometimes has that effect on other species. It’s why elves are so popular as doctors.”

I bit my lip as the tingling grew stronger. I felt the vaguest sense of arousal, but I pressed my teeth a little harder into my lip. The dull pain reminded my body of the consequences, and any sense of arousal I had disappeared. The warmth eased my ragged lungs and allowed some of the pain to disappear. However, when Greyson’s hands started to drift downward, I pulled away.

“I think that’s enough for now,” I told him.

“Are you sure? I can still sense damage,” he answered seriously. “I could do an even better job with direct skin contact.”

I scooted away from him. “I see. Sorry, Greyson. You can’t make me forget there are cameras on us. I don’t want to be featured on the porn sites.”

Greyson laughed and raised his hands. “You got me there! But you should try to rest. We’re going to have a busy few days ahead of us. We should all rest... while we can.”

I nodded, understanding the wisdom of his words. I stretched out on the ground, finding a comfortable spot. The kelpie flank spat and hissed over the fire; I’d eat some in the morning. For now... a yawn stretched my jaw. For now, I needed to sleep.

Ysara took second watch. Just before dawn, she woke us. “We should get moving. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

I rubbed my tired eyes and reached for my pack. My staff sat nearby—Thessa had retrieved it after the kelpie took me below the surface—and I used it to help get myself to my feet. My muscles ached and protested, but they’d ease off soon enough, I was sure.

An arrow sailed through the air and struck Greyson’s shoulder. Thessa screamed as she lunged for her sword. Ysara shifted to wolf form, and Kael snatched up his double-sided axe. I twisted, searching the trees where the arrow came from. Greyson let out a raged howl and threw his hand outward, yelling a harsh language. Flames burned from the tips of his fingers, shooting towards the trees. They burst into flame.

A human stumbled from the trees, a burning, ruining bow in his hands. He shouted as

he slapped at the flames. The rest of his team leaped from the bushes, shouting as they charged us in turn. I whirled, striking my staff across the back of an elf that went for Thessa. The elf whirled, laughing when her eyes landed on me.

The elf abandoned Thessa and came at me, wielding a double-bladed weapon. She spun and danced like a snowflake blowing on the wind. It was all I could do to keep her from striking at me. Her wrist flicked, and I spun away, using my staff to block the blade that bit at my neck. She was tall and lithe but stronger than she looked. My staff was forced backward, nearly knocking me in the head.

My lungs burned, proving that I hadn't yet recovered. My movements were slower than usual, my muscles weak. I ground my teeth and fainted to the left. As the elf dodged that way, I used my staff to vault myself to the right. I jumped onto the elf's back and brought the staff down on her hands. The blades skittered away on the ground. Locking my legs around her waist and my elbows around my staff, I brought it back to slam into her throat. I growled through the spike of pain that wound through me as I pulled with all my strength, crushing the elf's throat.

She went down, gasping and gurgling. I released her and yanked my staff free. I whirled just in time to see an orc behind me. He swung a longsword at me, and I rolled out of the way. The slice of the blade hit the end of my braid, cutting through it cleanly.

At least it'll be a quick death if he gets me. I laughed to myself as I rolled to my feet and dug my heels into the ground. Having lost the element of surprise, the orc backed off half a step. His eyes were wary as he circled to my left. The sounds of fighting from my team sounded in my ears, but I blocked them out, focusing solely on the threat facing me. The orc lunged, and I dodged, smacking him in the face with the staff. It hardly seemed to bother him.

"You could switch teams, you know," the orc growled in a gravelly voice. "Join us.

We're stronger."

I didn't bother engaging, swirling in below to jab the staff into his groin. There was no switching teams. The orc's face went white as he stumbled back, dropping the longsword. I rolled for it, and the orc lashed out, kicking me in the face. He knocked me over and leapt on me. His fists rained into my face, breaking my already broken nose further. Blood pooled at the back of my strength.

The assault paused. I gasped for air as the orc lifted a rock in two hands over his head. Fear bolted through me, and I tried to throw him off, but he was too solid. Suddenly, he was yanked backward. His weight left me and I was able to roll to the side as the rock fell heavy into the earth. Tawny paws wrapped around his shoulders and dragged him back from me as Thessa's jaws closed over his head.

How such a little woman could shift into such a huge panther, I didn't know. Her teeth cut through bone and sinew without effort and she tore the orc's head clean off. She bounced back, spitting the head out.

That was twice she saved my life. And this time when she shifted back, there was no horror in her face. Just bleak determination. She strode over to me and held out her hand. I grabbed it and groaned as she pulled me to my feet.

"Are you okay?" she asked, then winced. "Your face..."

"I'll be fine." I touched my throbbing nose. It was nothing compared to getting burned alive. "You hurt?"

Thessa shook her head. Gods, but she had a knack for avoiding injury. I glanced at the others. Kael was already going through the pockets of our attackers. They were all dead, and we were all alive. My heart hammered, and I tried not to examine my feelings too closely.

“I’ll be fine, thanks for asking,” Greyson groaned. Ysara was tending to his shoulder.

Kael kicked the head of the decapitated orc aside. “We have to get moving. There will be more where they came from.”

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There would be. I pulled in a deep breath, attempting to ease the hurt in my body. Was it just my imagination, or did I feel worse than when I went to sleep? Movement would help. I just needed to loosen up my muscles again. I grabbed my pack and slid it onto my back.

“Let’s get going,” I said. “And Greyson? Try not to waste anymore of your magic.”

He smiled and winked. “So glad that you care.”

I turned away. I didn’t care. I just didn’t want him to die before he helped me get my goal. Didn’t I?

Chapter 8

The day was suspenseful, but we weren’t attacked again. Though Thessa caught sight of some minotaur tracks, we didn’t run into any beasts other than a flock of griffins. They were small beasts, only about the size of a house cat. The real danger was that their noise would alert others to our location, so we killed them quickly.

That night, we cooked the griffins over a low fire. We still had at least a week’s worth of travelling, and we only had three days of supplies left. Best to extend it as much as we could. It was a shame the kelpie flank had ended up full of maggots the morning after we cooked it.

Greyson joined me as I was setting traps to protect us from a night ambush.

“I was finally able to see you fight when we took out those griffins,” he said, leaning

against a tree. “You’ve got a good technique. I’ve always found flexibility to be the most desirable trait in my women.”

I tightened the snare and glared up at him. “Your women? Are you counting me in that number now?”

Greyson’s smile remained firmly on his face. “I think you’d enjoy being my woman, Elara. I’ve made my interest clear, haven’t I?”

A retort rose on my lips. I’d had plenty of male interest. Before my family was slaughtered, there were Michael and Jaxon, both who had vied for my attention. Neither of them had gone any further than holding my hand, but I sometimes wondered how far they wanted to go, and how many ‘no thanks’ signals I’d been sending them. My head was so full of romantic notions that the pimple-faced boys I knew couldn’t fit.

And at the coven... well, there were plenty of males who thought my legs would fall open the moment they complimented me. After all, how else could I thank them for being so generous enough to give me their attention? Me, the scarred woman, missing half her face. And that wasn’t even counting the times I’d overheard them wonder—what other parts of my body had been scarred? I had breasts, but did I have nipples left? What did my ass look like under my clothes? Had my clitoris been burned off?

I stopped myself from snapping back at Greyson. He didn’t flirt with Ysara or Thessa, although Ysara flirted with him and Kael. If he was just looking for someone to take advantage of, Thessa, being as young as she was, would be the prime suspect.

Maybe he was earnest in his interest. Maybe he wasn’t wondering about my body as a collection of parts that may or may not work for his pleasure.

Greyson wagged a finger in my face. “That nose is pretty nasty. How about I fix it up for you? Your injuries will make fighting more difficult, and we still need to stick together.”

“I don’t understand you,” I admitted, squinting at him.

“Maybe you can’t understand that I’m genuine,” he murmured, his voice low.

His dark eyes certainly seemed sincere as he gazed up at me under his lashes. My heart skipped a beat as I took in how handsome he was. Even being in the forest for these days, he was elegant and attractive. His shoulder was bandaged still, and I absently ran my fingers over the bandages.

“Are you sure you should be wasting it on me?” I asked. His scent drew me in, sweet in the forest.

And I found myself wanting... something. What exactly, I wasn’t sure. Maybe I wanted to feel a draw to him that would allow me to forget about the ever-present vampire king, even for a few moments. Would Luken be watching my channel now? I hated that I couldn’t stop myself from wondering what he thought about this.

“Sure, you can heal me,” I finally agreed.

Greyson grinned and opened his mouth. A high, keening wail burst through the trees. It was distant but still felt like nails raking down my spine. The wail was answered by a series of screams. It was a symphony that had been haunting us all day. The other teams were close enough that we could hear their deaths, whether, by other teams or the beasts of the forest, I wasn’t sure.

“Gods, I wish we knew how many there were left,” I sighed.

Greyson snorted. “Where would the fun be with that?”

I rolled my eyes and gestured at my face. “Get on with it.”

His lips twisted briefly, but his smile came back soon enough. He put his hands on my face, cupping my cheeks tenderly. I closed my eyes as the tingling heat radiated from his hands. A sharp pain went through my nose as the bones realigned. I winced, but the pain went straight to my core. If I’d been turned on a little last time, now it felt like a liquid fire was taking root in my belly.

Would it hurt so badly to give into the flesh?

“That’s enough,” I said quickly, pushing aside Greyson’s hands. My face wasn’t so puffy; when I touched it, the swollen flesh only throbbed dully. “Thanks. I’ll take the second night watch—wake me when it’s time.”

“What about the griffin?” Greyson asked, his eyes widening.

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I shook my head, not willing to answer. My heart hammered in my chest and I found a good spot to stretch out on. What had that been? He wasn't kidding when he said his magic could be erotic. But I couldn't shake the feeling that maybe he hadn't exactly been trying to keep that eroticism contained...

It was dark when Greyson woke me. "Time for you to take watch," he whispered. His face was close to mine. "Unless you want to slip off for a bit? Nobody will notice."

I'd been dreaming of him—at least, his face. It had been Luken in that strange way that dreams were. There was still that earning in my core. I glowered at him as I pulled away.

"No, thank you," I growled, harsher because of my physical arousal. It didn't take long for me to get my body under control, but my mind was another story. It kept wanting to replay the images it'd dreamed... only with Luken's real face.

Seriously, what was wrong with me?

Greyson leaned back on his heels. "Is there something wrong with me?"

I brushed my hair from my face and put it into a fresh braid. "Just because I'm saying no doesn't mean anything is wrong with you."

"Snarling as though the offer is offensive indicates something else," he said, his eyes narrowing. "I'm a handsome guy. We're in this forest without anyone else. We could

both die in the morning. What's so repugnant about wanting to have a quick fuck in the forest?"

"There are cameras on us," I said, grabbing the hindquarters of one of the griffins. I tore the meat off the bones. "I told you before, I don't want to end up on porn sites. So just leave it alone. Ysara's been flirting hard with you. What's wrong with her?"

Greyson grunted and shrugged, not looking at me this time.

Was he more of a douche than I'd thought? Could he really be trying to turn me on with his magic? I didn't want to examine that too closely. Maybe I didn't feel that electric pull toward him because I was unconsciously protecting myself. Not that I was comparing my attraction to him to the all-encompassing pull I felt toward Luken.

If I had any sort of self-preservation, I shouldn't be attracted to either of them.

"Ysara's already with someone. I'm not in for that sort of threesome," Greyson muttered.

I frowned at him as I chewed and swallowed the tough meat. Only then did I realize that Thessa was the only sleeping figure in camp. I stiffened, looking around. Kael and Ysara were missing! My heart started to beat harder. Kael was supposed to have the map. Had they slunk off, betraying us?

"They left some time ago," Greyson said coolly.

I understood the implications of his previous words. But I jumped to my feet anyway. "It's not smart to go sneaking off. Stay here with Thessa."

Part of me wanted to wake her up and drag her with me. If I didn't feel safe with Greyson, why would Thessa be? But it wasn't entirely that I didn't feel safe with him.

Even if he had tried to stoke my fires with his magic, I didn't think he'd go any further than that. And I'd be back soon enough, to stop him from using his pretty mouth to get his way with her.

Besides, some arrogant part of me insisted that Greyson wasn't interested in just anyone. He wanted me.

Our wolf-shifter and orc had left a clear trail through the forest. With the full moon overhead, the shadows were short, and the terrain easily traversed. Still, I heard them before I saw them. The grunts, the cries of pleasure. I hesitated before I crept to the edge of a cedar and peered through its branches.

They'd both discarded their clothes. Ysara straddled Kael, gyrating her hips wildly as she leaned against his chest. Their eyes were locked on each other, oblivious to the forest around them. A surge of something went through me, and I beat a hasty retreat. It wasn't arousal; the sight did nothing for me. Whatever it was, it was the same reason I didn't interrupt them, why even though I'd gone to bring them back to camp, I was leaving them.

Pity?

Jealousy?

As their cries of pleasure faded, my mind turned to Greyson's offer. Was this really something that I needed to hold to? What did it matter what people thought about me? I'd been meticulous in preserving my modesty during the Trials. Hiding in bushes when I relieved myself, keeping myself covered when taking care of my injuries. I didn't want people to look at me that way. It made me sick to my stomach to think of strangers jerking off while thinking about me.

I tried to imagine sex. Not with anyone in particular, just the act. When I'd first

gotten my period, my mother had sat me down and explained the facts of life. Sex feels so much better when you wait for marriage, she told me. I'd full-heartedly believed it. After her wedding, my oldest sister, Anna, had casually said that the first time was awful and she wouldn't have waited if she'd known what it was like.

I would have gladly fallen in with Greyson at one point in my life. That time was long ago, though. Even Kael and Ysara taking advantage of what comfort they could from the physical act was outside of possibility for me. I'd trained myself not to react. I'd trained myself not to become aroused. I had a purpose.

Maybe I'd damaged myself too much to ever enjoy that sort of relationship. In the end, it didn't matter. Because this wasn't about me. It was never about me.

I snorted, annoyed at myself. I'd lost focus. Between Greyson's flirting and Thessa's innocence, I'd started to think of ways to end this without my team dying. Even Kael and Ysara, though I didn't feel particularly bonded with them. We were getting closer to the end, when I'd have to kill them.

"Don't get weak now, Elara," I murmured to myself.

Arms wrapped around me. I gasped as I was pulled backward, a hand slapping over my mouth. I elbowed back instinctively, but whoever had grabbed me seemed to have anticipated this move. I was spun around, my elbow grazing nothing but air. Then, I was suddenly pinned against a tree. There was no pain, only pressure as two hands grasped my wrists and pinned them over my head. A rigid body pressed to mine.

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And glowing amber eyes were inches from my face.

All the air seemed to disappear from around me. Everything I'd just been reasoning with myself for why I wasn't more attracted to Greyson was like smoke on the wind. Heat swept through me, originating at the place where his cool fingers wrapped around my wrists. I was in such a vulnerable position right now, his body too close to mine for me to fight back, my hands incapacitated.

The heat didn't care.

He moved both my wrists to one hand and dropped his other to my hip, where his fingers dug in. It was just shy of painful and I found myself wanting him to dig those fingers in deeper. My chest heaved, pressing my breasts against him. He seemed unaffected by our closeness, that square jaw set firmly in disgust.

"What the hell is going on between you and that elf?" he snarled, his voice low with jealousy as his grip tightened possessively.

In response, liquid pooled between my legs. I pressed my thighs tightly together, trying to quell the feelings there. Frustration burned through me. Why did my body insist on reacting like this to him, of all people? Why couldn't it be Greyson I found utterly irresistible?

I lifted my chin, glaring at him. I might not be able to control my body, but I could control my words. "Why do you care what I do with Greyson?"

Maybe if I provoked him enough, I'd finally get some answers!

A low growl answered me. All my senses seemed to grow sharper. I felt the rough bark of the pine behind me, smelled the crushed grass mingling with the scent of resin and Luken. The silvery moonlight mingled with the amber glow of his eyes, bathing his handsome face. The sharp lines of his cheekbones were thrown into sharp relief, his stern brow, his kissable mouth...

Luken pushed his body up closer to mine. A thrill washed through me as I felt the length of his erection against my belly.

“I have a vested interest in whose cock goes inside of you, Elara,” he rumbled.

“And if you’ve been watching, you’ll know I turned him down. The cameras, remember?” I twisted my hands free, and he let me. He even stepped back when I pushed both my hands against his chest. The space between us filled with the chill night air, making me shiver. “There’s no cocks going inside of me. Not his. Not yours.”

Luken’s lips twitched.

I shoved harder at him, forcing him back another step. My blood was on fire as I scrambled to regain my wits. What was the reason I’d said before? Oh, right. Cameras.

“Speaking of, what are you doing here?” I asked, drawing a knife from my belt. It was unlikely to do much damage to the vampire king, but I had to have something to keep him away. “Is this a weird PR stunt? Make people think that you care and have them feel sorry for you when I die?”

Luken smiled coldly at me. “Your channel is having some... technical difficulties. And there will continue to be more, so long as I require it.”

“And why do you require it?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

I should be afraid. I should be terrified of the bloodless killer who had murdered my whole family. But now that there was space between us and he showed no move to come at me again, I could only think of the tender way he’d cupped my face after the lake. The surprising softness of his mouth on mine as he breathed life back into me.

With nothing but moonlight between us, I felt something... intense pulling me toward him. It was as though I was a fish on a hook, being relentlessly drawn forward. Or maybe that was too violent an image. Perhaps I was the climber on a cliff, clinging desperately to a rope as the person at the top drew me closer to him, closer to safety.

Even though there was nothing safe about Luken.

I put the knife away. It wouldn’t do any good anyway. “If I tell you what’s going on between Greyson and me, will you answer my questions?”

“No.”

His flat refusal startled me. I pulled my braid over my shoulder. It was knotted, greasy, and dirty. I must look like a mess. Yet if the bulge in his pants was anything to go by...

“Was it real?” I asked, my voice low.

He lifted one heavy brow. “Was what real?”

“If it’s real, you know what I’m talking about.”

He stared at me, then a genuine smile crossed his lips. He chuckled lightly. “You mean, did I really pull you out of the lake? Did I really save you from the kelpie?”

A shiver ran down my spine. It was real. “Why?”

“Because I wanted to,” he answered with a careless shrug.

I waited, holding my breath. He was answering the question of why he saved me. Not the question I’d really asked. It was the same one I’d asked when he had pulled me out of the water. Why had he killed my family? He had to know that was still the question at the forefront of my mind. He had to know. If he had anything to say, anything to defend himself, now would be the time to say it.

He was silent, staring at me.

This was insane.

“How do you have magic?” I demanded.

“I’m half-elf. It’d be weird if I didn’t have magic,” he drawled.

“Did you use it on me?”

His other eyebrow lifted, and he gave me a look that questioned my sanity. “Of course I did. You’ve been dead if I hadn’t.”

So, was it that magic that was making me so desirous for him? Why was he playing these games, anyway? If he was hard, if he wanted me, why not just take what he wanted? A man like him, he didn’t care about the effect it would have on me. Certainly not after he killed my entire family! So why was he standing there, as though waiting for me to make the first move?

“Why bother saving me from the kelpie?” I snarled, because it was the only question I could ask. “Why go through that trouble when you’re happy enough to put me through the Blood Trials in the first place?”

His face darkened. I’d upset him. His nostrils flared and for a moment, I thought he was going to open his mouth. But he didn’t say a damn thing. He only turned and stalked off through the forest, leaving me weak-kneed and shaky, craving his closeness even as my hatred for him grew.

Chapter 9

My legs stayed shaky as I made my way through the moonlit forest. I jumped at every little sound, but not from fear. Even when a death scream rattled the night—too distant to be Ysara or Kael—I wasn't afraid. I kept bracing myself for the sweep of desire that would take me if Luken decided to jump out of the bushes again. Was he watching me still? Or had he taken off by now, laughing at the joke he'd played on me?

At camp, Greyson breathed deeply as he stretched out near the fire. Thessa was awake, heating some of the leftover griffin above the flames. As I entered the clearing, she looked up, her hand going for her sword.

Relief washed over her face. "Greyson told me you and the others were hunting another team that got too close."

Hmmm. Wonder why he hadn't just told her the truth? Not that it mattered. I shrugged the question off and sank down next to her. "Everything is fine, Thessa. Go back to sleep. I'll take watch."

Thessa studied me, her clear eyes full of trust even as she tried to parse out the truth of my words. It was almost unnerving how easily I could read her face. She was an open book. Even though I knew I shouldn't think these things, even though I knew I shouldn't underestimate her... it was impossible not to think of her as a kid, every thought laid bare on her face.

"Thank you," she finally said. "I am exhausted."

I nodded once, staring into the fire.

"I thought you might be hungry." She nodded at the griffin carcass. "It's safer to cook

it again. Although we really shouldn't eat it at all when we can't refrigerate it."

Despite myself, I chuckled. "Go to sleep, Thessa. Don't worry about me."

"I'm just saying, food poisoning is no joke."

She laid down, though, pillowing her head on her arms. Her eyes soon grew heavy, her face relaxing in sleep. She looked more like Darcie than ever in this moment. What had brought her here? I still didn't know what crime she'd been convicted of. Didn't know if there was anyone out there, watching her and praying to the Gods to spare her life.

I turned quickly and cast a puzzled look at Greyson. Why had he told Thessa we were hunting another team? Protecting her innocence or...? I didn't know.

Eventually, Ysara and Kael returned, yawning and smelling of sex. I added a few small twigs to the fire, giving them a disapproving look.

"You're taking stupid risks," I told them. "Is sex really worth risking getting caught by another team or one of the beasts of the forest?"

"Spoken like a true virgin," Ysara answered breezily.

I growled, my cheeks flushing. "Spoken like someone who doesn't want to get massacred because her teammates decided to—"

Kael lifted his hand. "Hey. There's no point in arguing here. We didn't go that far, anyway."

"It's still a stupid risk," I insisted.

“Mind your own business,” Ysara snapped, her usual careless mask slipping. “By moon and blood, girl! If you can’t understand why we’d think that such a risk is worth it, you don’t have the experience to be talking to us. Keep to your watch and leave us be.”

She turned her back to me. I stared into the coals, my shoulders slumping. I’d taken that too far. I knew that now. I’d only lashed out like that because I was frustrated and jealous and confused. I stayed quiet, letting Kaela and Ysara slowly fall asleep. At one point, Greyson twitched, and I thought he might wake up, but he only changed positions and fell back to sleep.

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Soon enough, I was left alone with nothing but my thoughts and the flickering fire.

We were getting closer to the end. I'd been so focused on what would happen next that I hadn't let myself dwell on what would come right after. Namely, after I'd killed my teammates in the colosseum, I'd be taken to the palace. Bathed, dressed in rich clothes, and taken to the king's chambers. Would Marissa get me ready? Would she put me in the same purple dress?

I couldn't really picture myself, but I could picture him. Luken. His handsome lips smiling, his amber eyes glowing. Would he talk to me first, or just pull me to the bed and lower his lips to my neck?

Ysara was right about one thing. I was a virgin. Out of everything I'd gone through, it was the one innocent part of me I had left. I knew pain. I knew loss. I knew pleasure. I knew death. I knew killing. But there were still parts of my body that nobody had touched... not even me. Sometimes I wondered if I was stupid for it, for clinging to virginity as though it was a protective shield.

My mother had always warned me to guard my virginity. My purity. My precious gift. There was an awful lot of weight put on keeping my legs closed. Especially when it wasn't something that I could necessarily guard. If the elves that killed my family had decided that they wanted to slake their lust on me, I couldn't have stopped them.

The one thing I could comfort myself about that night was that none of my family had been raped. The elves were more interested in killing us than anything else.

I stood and walked a perimeter, trying to force those thoughts from my mind. I didn't want to dwell on that night. No, it was best if I focused on what was to come. When Luken drank from me, the desire I already felt toward him was going to explode. I had to be in perfect control of myself if I was going to resist that draw, so I could get my one wish from him.

Would it be helpful for me to keep my virginity and have this second thing I was protecting when the time came? Or would having sex with Greyson, experiencing the act for myself—and spiting Luken, because who was he to say it was his business whose cock was in me?—help guard me against breaking in that moment?

I wished my mother was here, so I could ask her. I did my best not to wish for what I couldn't have. I did my best to put the dead aside to focus on the living. But Gods, sometimes it was hard.

Would I be so wary of sex, of losing my virginity, if it weren't for my mother's warnings?

Back in the assassin's coven, it was common for the members to have sex with one another. They'd say there was no point in holding back on life's pleasures. Not only that, but by holding anything as sacred would put them at a disadvantage when that thing was threatened. It was a hard life, being an assassin, full of pain, misery and death. More than once, Emily encouraged me to go 'get some.' She'd even gone so far as to pay a handsome young man to seduce me.

I'd always answered the same thing, that I was practicing self-restraint, learning how to control my physical urges so they couldn't be used against me. Emily would always answer that the same way.

“Bullshit. You're putting too much value on a piece of skin, Elara.”

More than once, I'd seen the orgies that the others would end up in. Sometimes I even watched, as a means for arousal to train myself out of it. But though the attraction was there, I'd never felt anything real enough to tempt me. No man or woman, regardless of their looks, their species, or anything else. Nobody except Luken, that was.

I stepped outside of the ring of light from the fire so I could search the darkness of the forest better.

Which only made it more confusing and frightening how intensely I reacted to Luken's presence. There had to be some sort of magic happening. Maybe he'd slipped something in my drink when I was eighteen. Maybe he had that effect on anyone. That would account for how starry-eyed the previous winners of the Blood Trials were, even when they failed his test.

Regardless, I'd done too much and come too far to fail. I already knew it would be painful when he drank from me. I'd been drunk from by other vampires, and I knew how intense it was when I wasn't attracted in the first place. Which meant I was going to be in hell when Luken drank from me.

I'd just have to hold onto my anger. Let it fuel me, prevent my body from changing my mind. Someone had to save my sister, and I was the only one who could.

Taking a deep breath of the clear air, I carefully set my thoughts of sex and Luken aside. I'd face that when it happened. And if he was out there in the forest watching me, or back in his palace by now, it didn't matter. He wasn't getting what he wanted from me, no matter what. Maybe after he'd agreed to save Darcie... yes, that's what I'd do. After she was safe, I would give him anything he wanted.

Because I had to be certain he wouldn't come after her again, wouldn't punish her for my no, like he had all those years ago.

Another deep breath in. Let it out slowly.

Think about Darcie. Nothing but Darcie.

Four years was a long time. How would she have changed? When I last saw her, she was fourteen, round-faced, bright-eyed, with an easy smile and dimples that looked like Mom's. She knew those dimples were a weapon and wielded them with impunity. The effects were devastating in our village.

"That girl is going to leave a string of broken hearts wherever she goes," our father had said more than once, shaking his head in exasperation. But then he'd smile, so I knew that he was just happy that Darcie was happy.

It had been a cold winter night when Darcie was born. I was having trouble sleeping. I shared with my two older sisters at that time, and they were snoring away, almost as loud as the howling wind outside. I kept seeing shadows beat against the windows and was convinced it was a frost demon trying to come in and carry us away. In my young mind, the only thing stopping it was that I was still awake.

A low moan came from the hallway and when I rolled over in bed, a sliver of light from beneath the door caught my eye. The door opened, and Dad came in, buttoning his red flannel shirt. His eyes were tight, and he didn't see I was awake. Was he here because of the demon? Was he going to make it go away?

He crossed the room to Anna's bed and shook her gently. Anna groaned and rolled over.

"Anna, I need you to wake up," Dad murmured.

Anna pushed herself to an elbow. "I was sleeping," she pouted.

“The baby’s coming,” Dad said. “Aunt Janet is coming over, but I need to take Mom to the hospital right away. We need you to look after the house until Janet arrives, okay?”

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Anna sat up, the sleep seeming to have gone from her. “But the baby isn’t due until next month!”

I knew by the alarm in her voice that something was wrong.

“I know,” Dad said. “Try not to worry, sweetheart. The doctors will know what to do.”

He kissed her forehead and headed out. The shadows seemed to grow even larger outside the window as Anna pulled on her slippers and padded out. I didn’t sleep a wink that night, praying to the gods to protect us, to protect the new baby, and most of all, to protect Mom.

Darcie had had to stay in the hospital for a week, but when she was brought home, a tiny, pink bundle with large dark eyes and a solemn gaze, I knew I’d do anything for her.

The forest was still silent, so I slipped through the trees and returned to the fire. My scars ached tonight. They were tight and itchy and far too sensitive to the slight temperature fluctuations. I rubbed my face absently, trying to erase the discomfort.

With Darcie having been claimed for the gods, at least she’d be well treated. She wouldn’t go without. She wouldn’t be taken advantage of. The gods demanded only the purest souls, so she wouldn’t have faced the same horrors of the world I had seen. She wouldn’t have the same scars that I had.

Darcie was still the innocent child I remembered.

And I'd still do anything for her.

Chapter 10

The central area of the forest had a gradual downward slope. The new map showed no sign of a lake at the bottom of the valley, but after the kelpie, I wasn't going to make assumptions. The vegetation around us slowly shifted day by day. Whereas before, we had much more of the evergreens dropping their acidic needles onto the forest floor, the lower we got, the more of the deciduous trees there were. Oaks replaced pines, then elms started to dot throughout the forest. Ash trees, with their brilliant red berries, birches, and aspen, dominated the forest soon enough.

Unfortunately, as we got into the brighter greens and fruit-bearing trees, the undergrowth came in much thicker. Our progress slowed significantly, though we were able to snatch handfuls of berries more often. They helped to sate our hunger and thirst a little.

We hadn't heard the dying screams of the other teams in a couple days when Kael suddenly called for us to stop. He gripped his axe in both hands, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air. His eyes widened as we watched him. I cocked my head, searching the forest, but none of my senses indicated danger. The only thing I smelled was the sunbaked forest, with the sweet scent of honeysuckles lingering in the air.

"There's a manticore nearby," Kael murmured. "I can smell it."

My grip tightened in my staff. Manticore. What was that again?

"Are they aggressive?" Thessa whispered.

"Very." Kael glanced at my staff doubtfully. "Listen carefully. If you hear what sounds like a cat's meow, that's it."

We were all quiet. The distant noises of birds and squirrels seemed terribly loud in the stillness surrounding us. Then I heard it, a soft meowing. I started to turn, but Ysara grabbed my arm. Her yellow eyes were focused just behind me.

“They swallow their victims whole and spit out the bones,” she murmured. “But they only attack once you’ve made eye contact. It’s behind us, waiting. If we’re going to kill it, we need to split up. Lure it into an ambush. Nobody look back.”

My lips pulled back slightly. The hairs prickled on the back of my neck. Thessa’s brown eyes were huge, her breathing rapid. I wanted to reach over and reassure her, to tell her that everything was going to be okay. But I didn’t dare move. The meowing crept closer, and a shiver raced down my spine.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Kael rumbled. “Greyson and Ysara, you break off to the left and work your way behind the manticore. Thessa and I will go to the right. Elara, you’re our bait. Don’t turn around. Keep moving forward, drawing it after you. When you get to a clearing, stop. Lift your staff to be a T over your head. It can only expand its mouth so far. So long as you keep the staff in place, it won’t be able to swallow you.”

“Very reassuring,” I said, a little sarcastically.

I didn’t like being bait. How did I know this wasn’t Kael’s attempts at getting me killed? But I was also the only one with a staff. I sucked in a breath through my nose—the honeysuckle scent was even stronger—and nodded once.

The others peel off from me and I headed forward, walking as bravely as I could. I held my staff above my head, laying it crosswise on my head with my arms looped over it. I heard nothing following me, except that little meow every now and then.

The brush was so thick it was a struggle to get through. Sweat itched under my

clothes as I battled through the branches. I must look like a pretty helpless piece of prey. And not in the way I wanted to be when I signed up.

I stumbled out of a particularly thorny bush into a clearing. Hawthorns ringed the space, which was a wide meadow with blue, white, and pink flowers scattered through it. A boulder sat in the middle of the clearing. Perfect! I hurried toward it. It would give me something against my back when I did this. I hesitated a moment before turning, my staff still held above my head.

The manticore flew at me at once. It let out the roar of a tiger as it came at me, claws outstretched. Its head was human enough, but as it opened its mouth, three rows of teeth stretched in a hideous maw. I dropped, pressing my back against the rock as I held the staff fast, one end on the ground, the other against the rock. The manticore slammed face-first into it. The wood groaned but held as the manticore snapped its jaws shut. It nearly took off my fingers. I had to drop the staff.

Before it could open its mouth again, there were four loud shouts, followed by the sinking of blades into flesh. An axe whistled through the air, and Kael took off the monster's head with a single blow. He pulled the axe back before it could touch my staff or the ground.

Heart hammering, I scrambled to my feet and looked down. The manticore had the tawny, lithe body of a lion. Its tail, which was shaped like a scorpion's, had been taken off, too. A thick green ooze flowed from the body.

"That's that," Ysara said, wiping her sword off on the ground, "Let's keep moving."

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“You don’t give us much time to recover,” Thessa muttered.

“None of us were hurt. What do we have to recover from?” Ysara snapped. She glared at Thessa, but just before she turned away, I thought I had caught something in her eyes. Guilt, maybe?

We left the body where it was, eager to make up for lost time. We took turned blazing the path, cutting through the bushes. When it was Thessa’s turn, she found us a deer path that let us move more quickly for a few miles. We set camp near a river. Ysara, Kael, and Greyson all stripped off their clothes and bathed.

“Care to join us, ladies?” Greyson asked, waist-deep in the water. It was a calm river, moving swiftly enough but not causing a lot of noise.

“I don’t want to be on porn sites, either,” Thessa said rather stiffly. “And can’t you be downriver? We need to fill our waterskins. Wish we had a pot. Then we could boil it up for safety.”

I dunked my waterskin into the water as Thessa muttered about parasites and germs. Dehydration was the greater danger. We’d emptied our waterskins early in the morning, and now was the only time we could refill them. I dipped my face into the water, sighing as it wet my parched throat. My scars felt especially tight, and the moisture helped relieve some of that discomfort.

If I was alone, I would shed my clothes and lay in the river, letting it cool off my body. Well... if I was alone and wasn’t being magically spied on, that was.

“You know, that manticore earlier made me realize just how few dangerous encounters we’ve had,” Thessa said, setting aside her waterskin to kill Ysara’s. “Even the other teams that attacked us. They weren’t really that good. It’s just odd, isn’t it?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Greyson beat me to it. “I’ve noticed that, too. It’s almost as though someone is clearing our way for us.”

My mouth snapped shut. Clearing our way? Luken just might be doing that. I hadn’t seen him again since the night when he grabbed me, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t there. And where the vampire king was, there were certain to be other vampires as well. He could be clearing their way for them, so he could get me on the end of his fangs, where he wanted me to be.

The confusion that swept through me was familiar. What was his plan? What did he really want? Why put me through this if all he wanted was my blood in his mouth?

I shook my head, retreating from the river. We had nothing to cook, and the night promised to be warm enough we didn’t need a fire tonight.

“I’ll take night watch,” I volunteered.

Only Thessa acknowledged me. This was our normal routine. I’d sleep before night fell, so I could be up and watch the camp later in the night. I lay down, focusing on the discomfort of my scars. It was the only thing that could bolster enough rage to block out the questions about the vampire king.

Except one.

I wonder what he’d do if I stabbed him through the heart.

I smiled as I let myself drift off to sleep. Yes, that was a pleasant dream. Bodies

pressed together, blood flowing...

“Where is my pack?” I demanded.

It was dawn. We were all getting up to start the day, but when I went to where I’d left my pack, it was gone. I turned, thumping my staff into the ground near my feet. I glared at the others.

Thessa rubbed her eyes. “What?”

“My pack is missing. Which one of you took it?” I demanded. I strode forward, though I wasn’t sure who I would suspect most. Maybe Thessa—because my first reaction was that she couldn’t have taken it. Which was why I had to consider her first. She did a good job of putting on that innocent air, but she was still here!

“My pack’s gone, too,” Kael said.

I turned. He was near a bush that he shoved this way and that, as though the pack had snuck off and was giggling in the leaves. Ysara, Greyson, and Thessa soon took up their own cries. All of our packs were missing. A feeling of dread settled in my stomach. Oh, no. Luken was watching. Whether in person or through the magical cameras, it didn’t matter. When we were talking about how it was suspiciously easy yesterday, he must have decided to make it more difficult.

So now we had no food. I touched my waist, relieved when my waterskin was still in place.

“Do you all have your water?” I asked.

Greyson did, still on his waist. Kael, Ysara, and Thessa had all let theirs in their packs. I'd seen nothing move in the moonlight while I was on watch last night, and neither did Greyson, on first watch, or Ysara on second watch. However, after a few minutes of searching, Thessa pointed out some strange footprints on the riverbank.

They looked like bird tracks, but with four toes instead of three. There was a slight webbed indentation between these long digits. A little further down, I found the image of a perfect hand in the mud. The fingers were twice as long as a human's, tipped with slight claws. As I studied the mark, a memory from a lifetime ago bubbled in my mind.

"Grindyloes have moved into the pond," Dad said grimly. "Little Peter Johnson was nearly snatched today." He looked down at me and shook his head. "You stay in the house today, Elara. The water's dangerous right now. Stay with your mom. And be good!"

I must have been six, maybe seven.

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“Grindylows,” I said aloud, turning to the others. “They like to snatch children and small animals. Guess they took the packs.”

“And how come none of us saw anything?” Greyson narrowed his eyes at me.

Kael cleared his throat. “The little devils are well camouflaged. Pretend to be rocks most times. And in the dark...” He let out a heavy sigh and shook his head.

Ysara fingered her sword. “Are they good eating?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I answered.

She grunted. “Right. Grindylows stay in the water, right? So even if we get our packs, the food will be waterlogged. So much for stretching our stores.”

A thought occurred to me, and my heart jumped to my throat. “The map! Thessa, you had the artifact. Did you—”

She pulled it out from under her shirt and I breathed a sigh of relief. At least we hadn’t lost it along with everything else. My shoulders slumped forward as I sank to the ground. Based on the progress we’d been making, we were still a few days out from the center of the forest. Food, we could get by, I was sure.

Water, however? Could all five of us subsist with two waterskins? No. Especially since we didn’t know when we’d get the chance to get more water.

“We need to get our packs back,” I said, drawing myself back up. “Grindylows live in

more marshy areas. We'll have to search around the river for bullrushes. They'll have stashed the packs in them."

Ysara turned her face toward the sky.

"Can't we just push on through? We're not that far," Thessa said. There was a note of exhaustion in her voice I didn't like. That's how it started, the end. Being so tired that you started to make reckless decisions. It always seemed like the end was just around the corner.

As I turned to try to explain, though, Greyson sat next to her. "I know, it's hard. You just want this over. The waiting, the struggle. The fear. Oh, so much fear," he murmured, his voice low and soothing. He squeezed her shoulder lightly, and Thessa shuddered delicately. The tension eased from her face. Her shadowed eyes brightened slightly. "It's not easy to keep going when we're so afraid. But we have to keep going. And we have to be smart about it. The vampires don't care if we live or die. So we have to care. For ourselves."

What did the people watching our channels think about that? For a moment, I imagined Luken, glowering at the screen as I watched Greyson and Thessa. For his sake, I allowed a soft smile onto my face, and I crouched near them. I put my hand over Greyson's. His skin was soft and warm.

"We should get moving quickly, if we're going to get those packs back before noon," I said. "We shouldn't search alone. Grindylows might specialize in children, but they'll take an adult if they can get them alone. Thessa and I will search downstream."

Greyson met my gaze. I thought he was going to offer to come with us, but he only nodded. He turned his hand, pressing his palm into mine. A slight tingle shivered up my arm. I let my fingers move down his wrist slightly. The reaction to him was so

slight in comparison to what I knew my body could do.

Ugh. I didn't want to think about that again. I pulled away.

Thessa and I headed downstream while the other three went upstream. I was glad that neither Kael or Ysara had decided to come with us. I wanted a chance to talk with Thessa alone.

"When we're out of this forest, I'm going to have such a long, hot bath that I turn into a prune," Thessa said as we walked along the rocky shore. "I've never done such hard work in my life!"

I'd meant to ask her more about her life before the Blood Trials, but her words brought me up short. She was looking forward with such hope. Didn't she remember that we weren't finished yet? There was still the colosseum. It was something I hadn't forgotten, even when I put it from my mind.

Cruelty. It was the only explanation I could think of for why we'd been forced to rely so heavily on each other through Wickham Forest, only to turn on each other once we reached the end. Luken was a cruel, cruel man.

All at once, I knew that he was laughing behind his screen. He didn't care about the little games I played, touching Greyson, or any of it. This was more punishment. I stumbled over my feet, and Thessa caught my elbow.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Slippery there," I lied.

Why hadn't I thought of it before? He was still punishing me! He didn't care if I died in the attack on my family. And that night when he took me to the palace, that was to

see if I would bow to his wishes. He sent me back to punish me for turning him down. It was all just the same thing. Of course, he was going to leave me in the Trials, because how else was he going to make me suffer for telling him no?

“Thessa,” I said, drawing to a stop. “Before... now, you asked me something. About when we entered the colosseum.”

Thessa’s brown eyes darkened. She looked away quickly. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I didn’t either. But I had to. I took a deep breath, reaching for her hand. “Thessa, please. It’s too important. None of us are going to hesitate once we’re in the colosseum. You can’t, either.”

“I’m not meant for this. And even if I was to survive...” Her hands clenched into fists as she looked up at me, her eyes fiery. “I don’t want him to drink from me. I don’t want anymandrinking from me. I’d rather die.”

The intensity of her words caught me off guard. I almost asked why but stopped myself. It didn’t matter why. It just meant that she wasn’t planning on surviving the colosseum. Maybe I should have suspected her of lying, but there was too much conviction in her voice. She didn’t want that. She didn’t want to survive to move to the next Trial.

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Would she let herself be killed, then? Would she pick one of us to fight alongside? Or would she turn herself into the sacrificial lamb?

And when she died, would anyone care? Was there anyone out there, wanting to save her the way I wanted to save Darcie?

Chapter 11

We searched all day but didn't find the missing packs. Finally, around mid-afternoon, we gave up. We each drank our fill from the river, topped up the waterskins, and headed away from the river.

It wasn't worth sticking around, in case the grindylows stole our weapons or the waterskins we had left next. Unfortunately, the graceful downslope we had been traversing shot into several steep hills that we had to struggle up. By the time night came, we were all hot, sweaty, and exhausted.

Worse, we'd found no more water.

"I might be able to rig something up to collect dew," Thessa said, searching the bushes around our campsite as dusk fell. She collected several broad leaves. "Or maybe we should get a water auger?"

"Stick with collecting dew," Ysara offered. "We don't exactly have the time for drilling a well."

What would we do for water if we didn't find more? My mouth was dry already—but

that was a problem for tomorrow.

Tonight, I had a different problem.

In that, Marissa came for me again. She was already carrying me through the forest before I even woke. I let out a yelp, but when I started to squirm, she clasped me closer to her chest.

“Calm down. You’ve been invited to a ball,” she said, then laughed a silvery laugh. “You know, your team should be better at setting guards. That big elf-man that was supposed to be on watch took off as soon as you were sleeping. I wonder if he’s planning a double-cross.”

Greyson left us? I didn’t say anything. He couldn’t double-cross us until we were out of the forest. Maybe he was looking for water. But why wait until we were sleeping?

I shoved those thoughts away. I’d confront him tomorrow... if I came back. The forest whisked by in a dark blur. We seemed to be going uphill first, then downhill. Abruptly, the trees disappeared. Marissa carried me across a wide, flat lawn toward an estate house. It wasn’t the same palace as before, the one with the stained glass windows. It was no less impressive, though.

Marissa moved more slowly across the lawn this time, and I caught sight of a line of limos and fancy cars in a distant parking lot. We slipped in through the back of the house, through a set of double doors made of heavy, dark wood.

“I can walk,” I told her.

“Not fast enough.”

She carried me through a small door nearby, into a narrow corridor. It was well-

constructed, the walls covered with expensive wallpaper and thick carpet on the stairs. But it was very clear that this wasn't the main staircase. If I had to guess, she'd whisked me up the servant's staircase. I cocked my head and caught a few passing sounds of laughter or talk.

"So he doesn't want anyone to know I'm here, does he?" I asked sourly.

She gave me a hard look. "Of course, he doesn't. What do you think?"

That wasn't exactly what I expected her to say, and I fell silent.

Marissa emerged into a richly decorated bedroom. She set me down, and I took a moment to collect myself before I took a good look around. It was a smaller room than the first time, but I liked this one better. A queen-sized canopy bed sat in the middle of the room, the emerald green curtains drawn. Along one side of the room was an ornate writing desk with a rolling top. Beside it were five floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, each shelf full of books.

I headed over to it as Marissa disappeared through a second door. Poetry, the old classics, new bestsellers, books I'd never heard of. They were all ornate. When I pulled one off the shelf, my heart leapt to my throat. Sprayed edges! The cover was ornately decorated, hand-painted if I didn't miss my guess. I carefully opened it and it fell open to a brightly illuminated page.

I hadn't read a book in four years. Now with the weight of this fancy book in my hands, a sudden pull of longing filled my chest.

By the moon's blood, I hated my life.

"The bath is ready," Marissa said as she came back into the bedroom.

I closed the book and put it back, then turned to her. My jaw was set as I lifted my chin. “I’m not taking a bath. Take me back to my team in the forest.”

Marissa clasped her hands behind her back. “I won’t do that until the king orders me to. But I also won’t force you to bathe, Elara Tideborne. I don’t think you understand the king. But that’s alright. You’ll see in time.”

I squinted at her in suspicion. “What’s your name, anyway?”

“Marissa.”

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“Marissa. Why am I here?” I demanded, putting my hands on my hips.

She blinked. “Because the king wishes it.”

“But why?”

“I don’t question the king. He ordered me to bring you, so I did. I love him, so I obey him,” she said casually.

I inhaled sharply. Unbidden, a spike of jealousy went through me. “So he’s your lover?”

Marissa burst out laughing. “Gods, no! I love him the way any subject loves him. The way a woman might love her cousin,” she added. “I don’t want to fuck him.”

If my relief showed on my face, she gave no indication. She gestured for the bathing room, and I, hesitating, stepped through. I peeled off my clothes, stiff with mud, sweat, and blood. I didn’t even care if Marissa saw me naked. The call of the hot water in a tub the size of a pool was too tempting. I waded in, sighing as my aching muscles eased.

“How do you expect me to explain this tomorrow when the team sees I’m all shiny and clean?” I asked as I unbraided my hair.

“Do you really think they’ll notice?”

“Yeah. We have no water, and they’ll notice that my face is clean,” I answered.

Marissa shrugged. "I'll show you a nearby spring before I leave you when you go back. Then you can share it with them and say you bathed in the night."

Okay, that was clever. And helpful, too.

Now that I was here, and the shock of being whisked from the forest was wearing off, I was able to think clearly. Luken had me brought here for a reason. And that meant I could talk with him. Bargain with him. Plead. I might not have much power here, and I had no idea how much he actually wanted me and how much was just about control, but I had a chance to change things.

I scrubbed myself quickly, choosing unscented soaps to clean myself with. There was only so much a secret spring would explain to the others, after all.

Once I was clean and dry, I put on the underwear and slip that Marissa had left for me in the bathroom. It was very sexy, I had to admit. The panties were a lacy thong, the kind that was easy just to rip off my body. The bra was covered in lace but was more structured. And it was comfortable! Somehow, it managed to lift and plump my breasts while also feeling like they were being held by clouds. The band fit perfectly. The slip was silk. Actual silk, and not polyester satin. It was cool and light against my skin, and thick enough that it hid my body.

It occurred to me that just the underwear alone probably cost more than I'd ever held in my hand at one time.

"I've picked out a few gowns for you to consider," Marissa said, nodding to a few clothes racks holding dresses. "You're to attend the masque tonight. I'll dress your hair while you consider your gown."

I frowned at her. "A masque?"

“You’ll enjoy it,” Marissa said. She gestured for the chair, and I took my seat. She started to oil and brush my hair in a way that reminded me of when Anna or Mom would do my hair for parties in the village.

I clenched my hands in my lap. “Does he do this every year? Pick a contestant and... whisk them away to fancy parties?”

“No.”

Could I believe her? I sighed. Of course, I couldn’t. Which meant any further questions were irrelevant. Except maybe... “Does he bed them all? The winners he drinks from?”

Marissa hummed as she coiled my hair into an elegant knot, hiding the ragged ends. “I’ve never asked. It’s really none of my business, is it? What dress would you like?”

I pointed to one that was a rich burnt umber. The neckline plunged, but not so deep to reveal my scars. The sleeves were long and would reach my wrists. The skirt was full and floor-length, embroidered with darker orange vines. It might not be the most beautiful dress, but it would cover me the way I wanted it to. It fit like a glove, and the venetian mask that came with it had a lazy veil that covered the lower half of my face. Before Marissa led me from the room, I checked the other masks. They all had that veil.

Of course. If anyone at this party watched the Trials, they’d recognize my scars. So I might be a guest but my identity was being kept secret.

Marissa led me down the wide, curved stairs to another room. It was decorated in reds and blues, with a massive painting taking up one full wall. It was the image of a beautiful elf woman sitting in a chair, a small child on her lap. Beside her was a vampire I first took as Luken, resting his hand on her shoulder. As I studied the

painted face, though, I realized that his eyes were brown, not amber like Luken's.

"My father and mother," he said behind me.

Chills ran down my spine.

"And me," Luken added, stepping up beside me. "I was only two at the time. She was beautiful, wasn't she? My mother. I miss her."

Anger surged through me. He missed his mother? Had she been brutally murdered? If he was trying to humanize himself to me, it would take more than that. I missed my mother, too. I missed my whole family!

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I turned on him, but the angry words died in my throat. I needed his mercy. The thought bubbled in my gut, but I stopped myself from saying what I really wanted to say. He stared at me, hungrily, even though all he could see of my face was my eyes.

“What’s going on?” I asked, reigning in my temper.

“You are escorting me to a masque,” he answered casually. He lifted a Venetian mask over his face.

While he did it, I took a good look at him. He wore a dark blue coat with gold filigree, a white ruffled shirt, and tight tan breeches. The cut fit him perfectly, emphasizing how wide his shoulders were. His hair was done in a basketweave braid on top, and loose and flowing at the bottom. He’d never looked more elf-like before. I looked back at the portrait. He might have his father’s coloring, but much of his mother was still in him. The harsh angles of his father’s face were softer in him, and with a start, I realized he had his mother’s eyes.

“There are dignitaries and ambassadors from other kingdoms here tonight,” Luken told me as he secured his mask. “Try not to make them suspicious.”

“Why am I even here?”

Luken smiled. His long canines flashed. “I wanted you on my arm tonight. And after your struggles today, I thought you might like to have some good food and drink. There are plenty of non-alcoholic beverages available.”

He slid his arm through mine, and sparks erupted under my skin. I warmed to his

touch, even though he was cooler than I was. My heart hammered against my ribs, my breathing unsteady. He met my eyes and the glow grew brighter as his eyes pinched upward at the corners. He didn't smile with his mouth, and the pleased look seemed even more intense for it.

"I..." I trailed off, not sure what to say.

Now that I was here, thinking I could trade my blood for the sake of the team, I wanted nothing more than for him to push me against the wall right now. But that would hardly be enough to get me what I wanted. I needed to play this smart. Leave him wanting. Build up his desire, so I had something to actually work with. Should I go so far as to flirt with him, or would he find it suspicious?

"You?" he asked, lifting a heavy brow.

I scrambled to figure out what he was asking of me. Right. I'd started talking. "I think I should thank you," I said slowly. "For giving me... um, food."

It was pathetic, but it was as much of gratitude as I could think of. Maybe I'd think clearly if I didn't have so much to think about. My family. The Blood Trials. Thessa. Darcie. Now here I was at some fancy ball, on the arm of the vampire king, and the lives of myself and four others weighed on how I conducted myself... and I didn't even know if it would make a fucking difference.

Luken's gaze remained on my face, hungry and unnerving. But there was something else in his eyes that told me he was regarding me with as much suspicion as I was giving him. But he didn't say anything else as he swept me from the waiting room into the ballroom. Marissa—dressed in a stunning silver dress that mimicked the look of chainmail and left nothing to the imagination, stood at the top of a set of red-carpeted stairs.

“His Majesty, Luken Holakas, King of Taimarah,” she bellowed, her voice echoing through the air.

What exactly was she to him? She said she loved him, and it wasn’t a romantic love. She couldn’t be related at all. I frowned, disturbed by how curious I was. Luckily, the mask and veil meant nobody could actually see my expression. Not even Luken, standing right next to me. I still tensed when I turned from Marissa to view the faces staring up at us.

There was so much color it nearly blinded me. Everything was bright, highly saturated. Men and women alike wore every color of the rainbow. Even though they all wore masks, it was still easy to tell there were a wide variety of species. Luken kept my hand tucked into his elbow as he moved around the ballroom, chatting with an elf ambassador here, an orc princeling there. I snatched refreshments from passing servants as I could, filling my belly and sating my thirst.

“Who’s that woman with the vampire king?” I heard at one point during the night.

“Some whore, no doubt,” came the dismissive answer.

I tensed, fighting the urge to shout at the unknown conversationalists.

The first voice grunted. “He’ll never make good on the prophecy if he slakes himself with whores.”

Luken growled softly, so softly I was sure I was the only one who heard him. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. He swept me away from the conversation, his amber eyes hard.

“Don’t pay them any mind,” he whispered to me. “Ignorant tongues will always wag.”

I nodded, a little unsettled all the same. It was easy enough to hide my unease as I focused on preparing myself for my offer to Luken. Soon, my mind was too busy thinking to pay full attention to what was happening around me. It didn't help that Luken kept shooting me small glances that sent fresh shivers through my body every time. My core tightened and something inside of me ached, wanting to be touched. And this time, I let myself indulge in the fantasy. It wouldn't be hard to give myself to him, if it meant that my team would survive.

But what about Darcie?

Luken tugged on my hand. I turned to find his eyes smoldering behind his mask. He slipped his hand down to mine and pulled me through the crowd. I grabbed a glass of something as I passed a waiter and downed the drink. It was fruity and pleasant, with the faintest aftertaste of alcohol. My heart was pounding as Luken pulled me through a set of doors and whisked me up the stairs.

We were back in the room where Marissa had first brought me before I knew it.

Luken spun me around as soon as we were inside. He pressed me against the door and groaned as he leaned into me, careful to keep some distance between my hips and his.

"You smell utterly sinful," he groaned.

I knew what he wanted and lifted my chin, my body shivering in his arms. With one hand, he lifted the mask off his own face then removed mine. I felt cold all of a sudden, my chest feeling too tight. Before I could tell him he couldn't have it, not until he gave me something in return, he bent his head. The air evaporated from around me as his lips pressed to mine. So light. Like a feather. Almost... tentative, gauging my reaction.

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I was frozen in his arms. My thoughts wouldn't form, and all I could do was feel them. The cold disappeared in an instant, a sweep of heat rushing through me. My heart seemed to stop entirely as I tilted my face up to his, pressing our mouths even more closely together. All the tension fled my body in an instant and my hands curled into his jacket.

He sighed into me, sweeping his tongue over the seam of my lips, encouraging me to open them.

My fingers went rigid, and I stiffened. What was I doing? I had to ask first. No. Not ask. Demand. I needed... I needed to save them. I released my hold on his jacket and pressed my palms flat against his chest. But I didn't push him away, even though I should. I grew still but that was as far as I went.

He pulled back slightly, the amber glow of his eyes softening. "Something's wrong."

"You could say that," I murmured, my voice hoarse in my throat.

"What is it?" His brows knitted together.

Now, I did push against him. At first, he didn't move, but after a moment, he allowed me to put a few more inches between us.

"What's wrong," I repeated under my breath. "Everything is wrong! What the hell do you want from me?"

His hand dropped to my hip, tracing the flare of my curves. "Everything. I want to

drink from you. To fuck you. To wake to you in my bed every morning. I want to possess you in every way that's possible. I want you to belong to me."

Sheer shock rippled through me. I gasped. But I couldn't deny the rush of heat that pooled between my legs, the dampness that gathered on the thong.

Luken's nostrils flared as the scent of my arousal lifted between us. A triumphant look came across his face, and he grabbed a handful of my skirt and started to lift it up. My hand shot down, grabbing his wrist.

"Wait," I blurted. "I need a moment to think."

"You want me, too. What's there to think about?" Luken demanded. His fist tightened in my skirt, like he wanted to rip the fabric off my body.

You killed my family! I pressed the words back. He probably would be confused that I was insisting on holding onto that. Otherwise, he'd know exactly why I was so hesitant. Unless that part was a hallucination. Maybe he saved me from the kelpie, and I'd fallen into a dream. Maybe he didn't realize that I knew he killed my family.

I settled on the safest question. "If I say yes, what then?"

"Then you'll experience pleasure like you've never known before," he promised.

I believed him. And the desire that flowed through my blood made me feel more vulnerable than I'd felt before. Even lying helpless and hovering on the brink of death in that nunnery, in constant pain, I didn't feel like this. It would be so very easy to give in to him. It was what he expected.

"That's not what I mean. I know that part. I mean for the others. My team in Wickham Forest. The Blood Trials." I started to inhale through my nose, but

hisscent—an indescribable, manly scent that made my toes curl—messed with my head, so I breathed through my mouth instead. One hand remained on his chest, the other holding his wrist.

“I want you. You don’t have to go back to the forest.” His gaze dropped to my mouth. “Elara, I don’t think you understand how much power you have over me.”

Didn’t I? Well, it was time to put it to a test. “Will you pull out the rest of my team? Pardon Kael and Thessa for whatever crimes they committed? Give the Blood Trial a different ending, one where they all survive?”

His eyes widened as they moved back to my face. He dropped my skirt and stepped back. His departure made me feel cool, and I shivered. His jaw clenched.

“No.”

I ran a hand over my face, then moved to pull the pins out of my hair. It uncoiled, laying heavy on my shoulders.

“I still want my prize from winning, then. You need to grant me that one wish.” I could still save Darcie, right? Even though it made my stomach twist to turn my back on my team, my sister was still the most important thing in this world. I could sacrifice them if it meant saving her. My cheeks were flushed, my fingers cool. I tried to warm them against my skin, holding my face as I met Luken’s gaze. “Will you give that to me, if I say yes?”

He inched forward. “As my consort, you can have anything you want.”

“Then I want my team to be declared equal winners,” I answered swiftly. “And more. But there’s no point in asking you for more if you won’t give me that. I don’t want them to die in the colosseum.”

His shoulders slumped as he stepped back once more. “No.”

I stared at him, another offer on the tip of my tongue. Would he say yes to taking Darcie from the gods? In an instant, I knew he wouldn't. He spoke pretty words about me having power, about getting everything I wanted. But the truth was, he was only interested so long as I gave him the power right back to him.

“If no is your answer, it's mine too,” I said quietly. There was no emotion to my voice.

Luken worked his jaw. “I don't want you to agree just because you want something from me.”

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“Funny. Because I would do anything you asked for if it meant getting eyes from you,” I answered. “Not that I’m surprised. What’s one human girl when you could have any female in your kingdom? You’ll find another naïve eighteen-year-old to seduce soon enough, I’m sure.”

“You think that’s all there is?”

“How can I think there’s more when you promise me anything I want, only to say no to my first request?” I challenged.

Luken’s mouth twisted into a bitter smile, but he didn’t answer.

I hoped he didn’t see the disappointment in my eyes. “Send me back. I’ll finish out the Blood Trials with the rest of them.”

I started to push off the door but he was back on me in an instant. His hands wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer to him. His mouth dropped to my neck, sending fireworks sparking throughout my body. My hips rocked forward as though they had a mind of their own, wanting friction. I pressed myself against him, feeling the evidence of his arousal through our clothes.

“Are you sure?” he whispered huskily in my ear. “You want to stay. You want to be with me.”

I closed my eyes, my hands resting on his shoulders. This time, when I took a deep breath, I inhaled through my nose. I pulled his scent into me, letting it flood my senses. It was true. Part of me wanted to stay, regardless of the consequences. His

kissing grew more intense, working his way down over my collarbone. With one hand, he tugged my bodice lower and kissed the tops of my breasts. They seemed to swell under his attentions.

And finally, my arousal grew so powerful as to be bordering on pain. At that moment, the training I'd put myself came back in an instant. My body tensed, expecting pain at any moment. The heat beneath my skin cooled.

"I'm more than sure," I said, dropping my hands to my sides. I went utterly still, and so did he. "Send me back."

Luken moved back. His hands remained where they were on my body, but something shifted in his eyes. His expression darkened, and he dropped his hands.

"Go put your clothes back on, then," he said coldly. "I'll have Marissa return you to the forest."

I lifted my chin and skirted around him, heading to the bathing room. Surprise lingered in my chest, tightening it. But I didn't turn back. I didn't want him to see the disappointment in my eyes. Because I did feel disappointed. Some stupid part of me still thought he was my prince charming who would move mountains for me.

So stupid. I was so very, very stupid.

Chapter 12

Marissa left me at the spring and gave me instructions on how to get back to camp. I washed the smell of vampires and soap off my face and hands, then rubbed a bit of dirt in my hair to disguise the oils left in it. My body ached, exhausted from the long trek and the equally long night. I stumbled back to camp just as dawn's rosy arms started to reach across the sky. Great. Another punishing day lay ahead of me.

Frustration clawed at my chest. I was frustrated that I was still disappointed, that there was this sharp pain in my chest when I thought of how Luken had looked at me when he told me I wasn't worth changing the rules of the Blood Trials, just this once.

"Hey," I called as I entered camp.

Thessa sprang to her feet. "Elara! Where were you? We were so worried."

I gave her a stiff smile, then glanced at Greyson. So he'd returned during the night. "I woke up last night, and Greyson wasn't around. I went looking for him and found a spring. Got turned around, though, and had to wait for the light to make my way back."

Ysara turned to Greyson. "Where'd you go?"

His expression didn't change, still looking vaguely amused. With a shrug, he tied his hair back behind his head. "Must have when I had to take that massive shit."

"Gross!" Ysara wrinkled her nose. "I thought elves were supposed to be elegant and glamorous."

"Guess that's why they kicked me out," he quipped.

Ysara laughed and the moment of suspicion passed. We had nothing left to pack, so we were all ready to get moving quickly. I led the way back toward the spring, hoping nobody would question me too deeply on the events of last night. I was so tired I might end up spilling more than I should. I doubted they'd look kindly on me if they knew I'd been at a party last night.

We emerged to the small clearing to find...

My heart seized. A half-dozen elves stood at the edges of the spring. They were all armed with swords, wearing black armor, though none of them wore helmets. My mind flashed to the mercenaries four years that burned down the inn. I hadn't seen their faces that night but I knew this armor. Blood rushed in my ears. He'd sent them after me again. Why? Was he going to have them drag me back to the palace after sending me back here? Or were they here to kill me this time?

"What—?" Thess started, sounding bewildered.

The elves sprang at us without a word. Greyson grabbed my arm and dragged me back as a sword slashed through the air where I stood. Thessa was not so lucky. She screamed as a blade cut through her chest. Blood splattered through the air and she fell as though she was in slow motion. The elf laughed.

Laughed.

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All sound cut out. I didn't feel anger or fear. As I moved forward, the world seemed to stand utterly still, muffled and distant. I was hardly aware of what I was doing as I clubbed the elf over the head with my staff. His brains sprayed every which way. Ysara tore the throat out of another one as I whirled and smashed my staff into the face of a second elf. His bones cracked and broke as I drove the staff through his head. Another elf came at my other side, and I ripped the staff free, twisting myself away from the sword. I smashed his hand, crushed his throat.

Greyson danced out of the clearing, dueling with another of the elves. I snatched up a fallen knife and plunged it through the eye of the elf I was fighting. Greyson caught a blow to the shoulder, but Ysara leaped on that elf's back and snapped his neck.

Greyson had the left one. I spun on my heel in time to see him emerge again. My grip tightened on my staff as my gaze raked over his blood-stained clothes. Elf. Elves killed my family. I wanted to kill them all. Destroy them. But Greyson was innocent. Not one of the mercenaries. My muscles tensed all the same. My heart felt torn open, bleeding. Kill them all.

No. He's innocent. I can't kill innocent people.

I sucked in a noisy breath, and the sounds of the forest came rushing back. Kael groaned as he clutched his shoulder. My heart raced, blood rushing in my ears. Greyson stared at me with a startled expression. Did he realize the urge I'd had for that split second? The scent of blood filled my nostrils. For a second, I wished I was a vampire, so I could feed and get stronger and go after Luken. The real villain. The one who sent them after me—twice now.

A whimper caught my attention. I turned toward the first elf I'd killed, but he wasn't the one making the noise. Thessa's chest rose and fell rapidly as blood stained her shirt.

Alive.

She was alive!

"Thessa!" I screamed. I flung my staff aside and dove to her side. Her eyes were wide, her face bloodless as she stared up at me.

"Elara," she whispered.

I ripped off my shirt and turned it to the cleanest part to press against the bleeding gash across her chest. I had to stop the bleeding. I couldn't tell how deep it was or if it needed stitches. Right now, I just needed to put pressure on it, stop her from bleeding out right now.

"Is it...?" Kael murmured from somewhere behind me.

"These elves... they don't look like other combatants," Greyson said.

Greyson.

I twisted, finding him quickly. "You can heal her!"

Greyson jumped. His cool, dark gaze met mine, and his jaw tightened. My heart sped. No! No, he wasn't going to tell me no.

"Heal her," I begged. "Heal her."

“I don’t have much left in my stores,” he said. “I won’t be able to do enough.”

“Try.”

Greyson’s expression hardened.

I snarled under my breath and grabbed a knife. “Try, or I swear by my blood, I will kill you right now.”

Ysara and Kael lingered nearby, but they didn’t say anything. Only watched. Greyson heaved out a sigh and came to kneel next to me. His eyes never left my face as he shoved aside my shirt and laid his hand on Thessa’s chest.

“Give me your hand,” he ordered roughly. “If you want this, I’ll be using your energy.”

My energy? I put my hand in his without question. I didn’t know how magic worked but if this was what he said he needed, I wasn’t going to argue. He closed his eyes and I gasped. Fire swept through my veins, followed by ice. My limbs grew heavy as I sagged over Thessa. Her eyes widened even further and her mouth opened in a silent scream as her back bowed.

“Stop it!” Ysara yelled, suddenly yanking Greyson away from both of us. “Stop!”

Greyson shrugged her off. “Tell Elara that. She’s the one that threatened to kill me.”

I ignored them, gasping as I checked Thessa’s injury. It was still oozing, but not bleeding so profusely. Her eyes had rolled to the back of her head and her jaw hung slack. She was breathing, though barely. I pressed my shirt back into place. It was so dirty. I was going to infect her wound. The bleeding had slowed—I needed to clean the wound now.

“It’s cruel,” Kael murmured.

I shuffled toward the spring but his heavy hand came onto my shoulder, stopping me.

“Elara. It’s better to let this kill her quickly. She’d rather die than have to kill any of us. You know that. You’ve seen the way she’s wept. It’s cruel to make her hold on when the colosseum is the only thing that’s waiting for her.” Kael’s voice was low, soothing, and full of hurt.

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Unwillingly, I looked up to his face. Tears rolled down his cheeks. For all his hulking figure and heavy, boarish jaw, he looked small and vulnerable. Hurting as much as I was. He wasn't a warrior. Like Thessa, he'd been forced into the Trials. Bitterly, I wondered how many of the people watching us were taking bets on what I was about to do. How hard was Lukenlaughing? Was he pleased with my torment or was he angry that his mercenaries hadn't killed me?

"No," I whispered. "No, I can't accept that. There has to be another way. Those fucking vampires have caused enough pain... he has caused me enough pain." I searched the forest, not even certain what I was looking for until my gaze fell on some flowering bushes nearby. "We need yarrow. I'll build a fire and... and find a way to boil water. I'll clean her wounds. We need yarrow and willow and... honey, if you can find it."

My voice rasped with every word.

Ysara crept forward, eyeing me warily the way you would a wild animal. "It would be better to—"

"I'm not giving up. I'll do anything. Do you understand me?" I threw my head back and screamed at the sky. "I hate you but I'll do anything!"

"Fuck's sake," Kael yelped, pulling back from me. "You challenging the gods now?"

I laughed as tears burned my eyes. No. I wasn't going to cry. I'd cried my last tear four years ago. Crying did nothing. Action. I had to keep busy. If they weren't going to help me, I'd just do it myself. I'd survived on my own already. Nobody cared

about me. I was alone in this, and that was fine. I could at least rely on myself.

I dunked my shirt in the spring and began frantically scrubbing the dirt off it. Then I left it in place and darted around the clearing and gathered the dry branches and tinder I needed to start a fire. Soon, the first flames started to lick against the brown grasses. I blew on it, urging the flames higher. I didn't look up until a splash caught my attention.

Kael had finished scrubbing out my shirt and laid it on a rock to dry out. I gave him a tentative smile but he didn't return it. His eyes were shadowed, as though he wasn't sure we were doing the right thing.

"She'll have to be kept warm," he said as he removed his own shirt. "I'll go look for that yarrow."

"Honey will be more useful," I interjected quickly.

He frowned at me.

"Honey has natural antibiotic properties. Greyson mostly stopped the bleeding already, and that's what yarrow is good for," I explained.

Greyson and Ysara, in the meantime, had ransacked the elf bodies.

"I'll take these fuckers away so we don't draw in predators," Ysara said.

Greyson hefted one of the elf spears. "I'm going to go hunting. Who's got the map?"

Kael nodded at Thessa.

Greyson grunted. "Good, then. Let's leave it here."

He turned, then paused as his gaze sought me out. I ignored him as I continued to build the fire. I didn't want to look at any of them. Ysara started to drag the bodies out. Kael helped with the first one, but didn't come back for the second. Greyson, after staring at me for too long, left, too. I tore my shirt into strips and hung them close to the fire before putting rocks in among the coals.

I kept one aside and used it to clean Thessa's injury. It had stopped bleeding, thank the gods. Her face was still ashen, as pale as a corpse. She was still breathing, though.

Next, I found a fallen cedar and hacked through the bark until I could feel a thick section off it. It was curved, not very deep, but would work well enough. I brought this back and rinsed it thoroughly, then filled the hollow with water and put the fire-rocks into the water, and placed new rocks in the fire.

By this time, the strips of cloth were dry so I dressed Thessa's injury.

"You shouldn't put river rocks into the fire. They have a higher chance to explode," Thessa murmured, not opening her eyes.

My heart skipped a beat. I smoothed her hair from her face. "Hey. Are you waking up?"

Thessa cracked one eye open and gave me a feeble smile. "Wish I wasn't."

"You're going to be okay. I promise, you're going to be okay. Greyson healed you and—"

"Elara." She reached out with a shaky hand and grabbed my sleeve.

My words died in my throat as I gazed at her solemn brown eyes. And it was then that I realized I was more innocent than I'd let myself realize. I talked myself into

believing that being a virgin was the only pure thing left at me. But it wasn't true. There was a part of my heart that was still innocent and kind. I hadn't even known it existed until now.

"I don't want you to die," I whispered. A single tear ran down my cheek. I would never have been able to kill her in the colosseum.

I needed to protect her. I needed to look out for her, defend her. It wasn't fair! I didn't want to care about her. I wanted to be able to focus on a single-minded mission. But this stupid heart of mine had other ideas. My lips trembled, and I bit them hard. Please, Luken. Please don't do this to me. I will be yours. I will let you possess me if you'll just...

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“I thought I heard them in the night,” Thessa whispered. “I heard someone talking. You were gone, and I thought... I thought...”

She trailed off as though it was too horrible to say. But in those clear brown eyes of hers, I saw something. She knew something. Something that sparked a deep betrayal. She stared at me as though she knew that when she needed me, I was off kissing Luken. Even now, there had to be something more I could do, but I wasn’t saying the words out loud.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Her eyes fluttered shut. I leaned in, a sob catching in my throat. Her skin was icy to the touch. But she took a laborious breath. She was still holding on. And I needed to warm her up. She was right about the rocks I’d put in the fire—they might explode. So I plucked them out of the fire and rolled them away, then carefully moved Thessa closer to the flames.

She was still sleeping, so I hunted further from the spring for rocks that would be safer. These I brought back and continued to heat the water until it was lukewarm. I tipped a waterskin into her mouth, hoping the warmer water would help fight off any chills.

With that done, there wasn’t much left to do other than wait for the others to come back and keep heating the water. I searched close to the spring but found nothing that could help. There were no fish in the water, either.

Hours passed.

Ysara finished dragging the bodies away, then disappeared without explanation.

More hours passed. Dusk began to fall.

What if there were more elf mercenaries in the forest? What if the others had already been killed? What if Luken was just waiting for Thessa to die to name me the default winner?

Thessa remained cold, so I gathered vegetation from around the spring and built up a small wall against her, on the other side from the fire. Then, I hacked a few branches off the trees with the swords that the elves left. I used these to build a lean-to that would reflect the heat back at her. Thessa moaned a few times but didn't wake up.

When it was well and truly dark, I checked her injuries. The bindings were wet with blood, but it hadn't soaked too deeply. Good. The bleeding had stopped at last.

As I moved the scrap of cloth near her collar, a glint of metal flashed. I paused, brushing Thessa's cut shirt just a little out of the way. A small pendant hung on a sturdy leather strap around her neck. The pendant was in the shape of a heart, with tiny seals edging the outside. The image of a piece of seaweed bent over itself in the middle of the heart, making the letter 'D.'

Darcie's fingers were cold in my hand as we stood with the rest of our siblings. We were dressed in somber colors. The wind brought the sharp scent of frost to mingle with the salt of the sea. We were lined up on the beach, facing the ocean. The waves rocked a small, closed boat that was tethered to the docks.

"Is Grandma going to come back after she's finished her trip?" Darcie's high, curious voice rang out.

“Hush,” Anna snapped at her, tears glistening in her eyes.

I put an arm around Darcie. All she was told was that we had to see Grandma off. Not that Grandma was gone. Dead. That the boat was her coffin, and once it was far from the shore, it would disappear into the water and return Grandma to the ocean where her selkie ancestors came from.

Darcie sighed as she fiddled with her necklace. It was the last thing Grandma gave to her. A heart-shaped pendant with the letter D on it. “It’s for both of us,” Grandma had told her. “My name is Darcie, too.”

“No, it’s not,” Darcie argued. “Your name is Grandma!”

I held my sister closer, pressing my face into her hair. I didn’t want to be the one to explain to her that Grandma wasn’t coming back. We watched the boat float from shore, magically born against the currents and waves to head back to the sea.

Darcie’s little hand closed over the pendant. Her eyes grew distant, and I thought, Maybe she does understand after all.

The small pendant was just bigger than my thumbnail. But it felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds as I stared at Thessa.

Chapter 13

Between the loss of blood and the lack of proper care, Thessa slipped into unconsciousness before the others returned. In the morning, Kael put a comforting arm around my shoulders as he looked on with worry at Thessa. Somehow, seeing her close to death like this made everything so much clearer. Emily was right when she

said I wasn't ready for the Blood Trials.

But I think if I was really ready for them, I wouldn't have joined. To be ready for something like this you had to turn off the part of your heart that cares... and if I did that, I wouldn't care about Darcie anymore, either. So I'd never be ready. The only question was, now that I knew that was the case, what did I do now?

I couldn't save Darcie and Thessa both. Could I? Maybe there was something I could do, some bargain I could strike...

Luken told me no last time. Maybe if I changed the offer? Maybe if I promised to be his devoted slave, he'd accept my terms. But even those thoughts had no hope. If he'd been interested in manipulating me into agreeing to be his possession, he could have worked harder the night of the masque. I gave him that opening already.

There would be no miracle, no clever twist to make him change his mind. I had no power over him. He wasn't a prince bewitched by my beauty and I was no fairytale heroine. That was the sort of thinking that got my family killed four years ago. I couldn't fall back into those hopes.

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If I was going to save Thessa, I would have to do it. I couldn't pin my hopes on any sort of soft heart from the heartless vampire king.

The four of us carried Thessa on a makeshift sling of branches and clothes as she shivered and twitched in her sleep. I walked at the front with Kael, whose expression was both grim and sad.

Around noon, Ysara called for us to stop. We set Thessa down, and Ysara took Kael's hand in hers. She didn't look back, not once, as she led him into the forest. Kael glanced at us, and the sorrow in his eyes made me wince. He'd written Thessa off, too. They all had. At least she was still cool to the touch while not being cold. No fever, despite the risks of infection.

Greyson crouched next to me. "This isn't going to work, you know. We can't save her."

"We can try," I answered softly.

He sighed. "How did you end up in the Trials anyway? You're not cut out for it. I thought the vampires liked to see actual fighters."

"They like to see entertainment. And I guess it's entertaining enough, isn't it? To watch us fight our fates?" I asked, not moving.

He didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Ysara and Kael returned sometime later with the herbs and smelling of sex. Despite

the circumstances, I couldn't find the energy to be angry with them for taking pleasure in each other. Greyson sniffed the air conspicuously and rolled his eyes.

"We found some roots that will be edible if we process them," Kael said. He lifted a handful of tubers into the air.

"Right, and that's all you did," Greyson muttered.

Ysara gave him a scathing look. "You could have joined us if you wanted."

"I guess it'll be more fun for the viewers to watch that than us sitting around with a dying girl," he said. He'd been alternating between pacing and whittling this entire time while I built a fire and tried to keep Thessa comfortable. Now, he leaned against a tree and frowned, watching as Ysara used two rocks to pound the tubers into a paste. "This is cruel. We're only going to kill her once we reach the colosseum anyway. We should be managing her pain, not fruitlessly trying to save her life."

Ysara's hands stilled. Kael sucked in a deep breath.

Greyson glared at his knives. "It's what we've all been thinking this entire time. She's going to die, one way or another."

"Not if I can help it," I murmured before I could stop myself.

"And what are you going to do?" Greyson gave me a scornful look. "Stand over her, defend her as we fight to the death, and then plunge a sword through your own heart?"

A bitter laugh fell from my twisted lips. Would I? Could I sacrifice myself and my sister for a girl I didn't know? But she was wearing Darcie's necklace! She couldn't be Darcie, not as a panther shifter... but she looked so much like how I remembered

Darcie. Part of me wanted to hope Thessa was my sister, even if it was impossible.

But the fact was, she knew Darcie somehow. I had to know.

The others were looking at me strangely. Greyson's eyes were hard, Ysara's curious, Kael's compassionate. It was funny how the ugliest expression was on the most handsome face, while the kindest was on the ugliest.

I wrapped my arms around my knees, considering. I hadn't even told the assassin coven what my backstory was. They'd found out, as was their job, but even when Emily had applied torture techniques to make me confess, I remained tight-lipped. Only after I passed that trial did she admit she'd known everything all the while.

"Luken Holakas slaughtered my family," I finally said, lifting my head. "Because he wanted me, and I told him no."

The words were bitter on my tongue.

I told them what happened that night, about the elf mercenaries, ones that wore the same armor that attacked us near the spring. I described how I'd been burned badly and left for dead.

"I should have died," I said, running a hand through my hair. My hands had grown restless during my explanation, so I loosened the braid. I combed through the tangles that had formed and started to braid my hair again. "I wouldn't have survived, if I didn't have something to live for. My youngest sister survived, too. I lived for her."

Here, I hesitated. Had I just given up too much for Luken? Maybe, the way he thought I was dead, he didn't know Darcie had survived.

Had I just put her in greater danger? I cursed myself for the slip of my tongue.

“For a while, at least,” I added. I let my rage and sorrow leak into my voice.

Kael’s eyes grew moist as understanding dawned in them. Ysara looked away.

“That’s the truth of why I joined. Because I wanted to... get revenge, maybe. I’m not sure what I was thinking, only that I have nothing left.” I hesitated a moment. Should I tell them about how Luken had been snatching me away from the forest? I had no idea if the cameras were still on us or if there were ‘technical difficulties’ to preserve his reputation.

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Even the big bad king of Taimarah would face backlash for this sort of behavior.

I shook my head and sighed. “We’ve all noticed that our path was surprisingly easy. He killed my family because he wanted me, and there is still something I have to offer him. My blood.”

Even after telling them, some tiny, irritating part in my heart whispered whether it was the whole story. How could the Luken who touched my scars so gently be the same one to cruelly take my family from me? How could the man who rescued me from the kelpie also send mercenaries after me to kill me? He’d sent me back here because I told him to. He could have taken my blood at any time, but he didn’t. He seemed to be waiting for my permission.

I shook my head again. I didn’t want to think about how it felt to have his body close to mine, his lips on my neck. It was just making me confused again.

“If he’s watching... if you’re watching...” I finished my braid. “I’ll give you what you want if you remove Thessa from the Trials. She doesn’t deserve to be here.”

I stared at the sky, hoping to catch some shimmer indicating the magical cameras on us. A wind whispered through the branches, making the leaves shiver. It was strong enough that the combined sound was like rain on a roof. I closed my eyes, inhaling; there was no scent of rain on the wind.

Just as well—it would be miserable to keep marching.

Kael was the first to speak. His voice was smooth and flat, like a mirrored surface.

“Thessa doesn’t deserve to be here. But the rest of us do? You’re only bargaining for her life?”

I met his gaze. “I’m not bargaining for my own life, either.”

Kael held my gaze for half a second longer before his eyes flicked away.

Ysara’s yellow eyes never left me. She stared hard at me while I explained, and now there was a look on her face as though she’d just been able to put together pieces of a puzzle she hadn’t yet been able to complete. Something flashed behind her gaze, but when I stared back, she shrugged and looked away.

What was she thinking? Had she noticed something off about me? If any of them could smell how clean I’d gotten on my two forays to Luken’s luxury, it was her. But she said nothing, only resumed pounding the tubers.

“Do you think it will really work?” Greyson asked doubtfully.

I laughed bitterly. “No. But it’s worth a try, right?”

The lithe elf crouched near me, his gaze dark and intense. “I thought he was watching you strangely during the choosing of the participants. I guess we know why everything was so smooth for us. It was rigged. If he wants your blood that badly, the colosseum will be rigged, too. Why should he accept your bargaining when you’re working toward it anyway? We all die, he gets to drink from you anyway. And once he does—”

“I’m not going to let him,” I snapped back. “I won’t let him put his mouth on me unless Thessa is removed from the Trials.”

Greyson shifted positions, sitting with his long legs stretched out in front of him.

“You’re acting as though he’ll give you that choice, Elara. But vampires don’t care about consent. Though I have to wonder about everyone who’s watching us now. What do they think about the Gods’ Game being rigged like this?”

Oh, we were having ‘technical difficulties’ for sure. No way would Luken be allowing anyone to watch it. Maybe he was. Perhaps he’d turned off his feed, too. Maybe he didn’t watch at all... but the maybes were where I’d go crazy.

“Does it matter when he has all the power?” I asked, shaking my head. “I can only worry about one thing at a time.”

Greyson nodded, his expression softening. His arm snaked around my shoulder. He would have pulled me close to him if I hadn’t stiffened. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. His mouth turned downward briefly, but he soon removed his arm.

“What he put you through is horrible. Nobody should have to deal with something like that.” He shook his head, a bitter smile twisting his lips. “I might be ruining my chances of survival here, but the king should be tortured and killed for what he did to you. And for everyone who has suffered under his reign.”

I tried to find comfort in the idea, but my stomach knotted. Luken had ruled Taimarah for something like three hundred years. If he was killed, especially without an heir, what would happen? Vampires didn’t do well with change; the whole kingdom would suffer, I was sure, if we had that sudden vacuum of power.

It wasn’t because I didn’t want to think about Luken being tortured. I wouldn’t let myself feel sick at the idea of it. He didn’t deserve that loyalty from me.

All the same, the conviction with which Greyson spoke was off-putting. It couldn’t just be about me. What deeper resentments did he have toward our vampire king?

Chapter 14

An infection set in overnight.

In the morning, we started to move again. My stomach wouldn't settle, and I couldn't eat any of the nasty tubers Ysara had spent so long preparing. She didn't press me and took my portion for herself. Which was just as well. No use in letting it go bad.

"Mmmm," Thessa groaned. Her eyes slowly pried open. "Mama?"

My heart jumped and squeezed at the same time. "Let's put her down."

We set her down. Thessa started to stir but cried out in pain. I quickly leaned over her, pinning her in place gently.

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“Easy,” I cautioned. “Try not to move.”

Thessa blinked, her expression pinched. “Thirsty.”

I pulled out the waterskin and dripped some water into her mouth, careful not to give her too much. She licked her lips and groaned. “It’s too hot. Can’t we cool down?”

But even as she said it, she shivered. Kael knelt on her other side and touched her cheek. She was flushed, her hairline damp with sweat. I stared hard at Kael, and he sighed.

“She’s got a fever. What do we need to fight it?” He looked up at me.

I shook my head. Even though this was part of my training, I hadn’t memorized much beyond immediate concerns. Yarrow to stop bleeding. Willow bark for pain management. Why had I been so stupid? It seemed that every turn just showed something else I was woefully unprepared for.

“I know something about the forest. If we can get the right herbs, I might be able to make a poultice,” Kael said. “Aspen bark, honeysuckle, raspberry leaves. It’ll be a good idea to find more water so we can clean out that wound again. Ysara, I need someone to watch my back.”

She nodded once, and they slipped off into the forest together. Part of me wanted to ask Kael how he knew about healing herbs now but seemingly hadn’t yesterday, but I was too grateful he was actually doing something this time. I dripped some more water into Thessa’s mouth and looked up at Greyson.

“Will you—” I started.

“I’m going to look for water,” he said, spinning on his heel. Then he stopped, took a deep breath, and looked back at us. “And if I spy any beehives along the way, I’ll get honey. It might help fight the infection.”

I nodded gratefully at him. He smiled, his dark eyes warming, before disappearing into the forest again.

“Elara?” Thessa’s large eyes were on my face as Greyson left. “How bad is it?”

I took her hand and squeezed it lightly. “You’re going to make it, Thessa. I promise.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I hesitated but only smiled at her. Now would be the perfect time for me to ask her why she had Darcie’s necklace. I should ask. But I found I couldn’t—it felt too much like giving up on her, like if I asked now, it meant Thessa was doomed for death.

The wait was excruciating.

Kael returned first, bringing handfuls of herbs and a pocketful of rocks. “We’re going to need to make a tea. If you build a fire, I’ll prepare a bark bowl to heat the water in. Gods know this would be easier if we had a frying pan. But I suppose this is the hand that we’ve been dealt.”

I gathered what we needed for a fire and set about trying to coax a flame into existence. By this time, Thessa had fallen asleep again. She kept shivering. I was reminded of the months I’d spent in the nunnery, always in pain and fighting off the fevers and infections. It was a miracle I’d survived, the nuns said so often.

Why hadn't Luken sent for me again? He had to have seen what I offered...

"You're going to win in the colosseum," Kael said suddenly. He was preparing the herbs, carefully processing them. "We all know it. You're going to win one way or another. It might be better if..."

Smoke started to rise from my little bundle of tinder. I blew gently on it, trying to ignore Kael's words.

"If I killed her now, it would end her suffering. Then, the vampires would kill me as soon as we reach the colosseum. And it'll be easier on you," Kael murmured.

I winced. "Why care about making it easier on me?"

Kael shrugged. "I really don't have anything I'm fighting for, other than my life. You are. As soon as I was selected for the Trials, I knew I was going to die. And living in fear is getting tiring."

The fire licked up the tinder, taking hold. I fed it a few twigs to keep it alive. For several minutes, neither of us spoke. I almost thought that Kael was asking permission. But was it permission to give up, or permission to keep fighting?

"We don't know that I'll win," I finally said. "And if I let you do that, who knows. Maybe I'd be punished for it. So no. You're not giving up, Kael. I'm sorry but you're going to have to keep fighting to stay alive."

He snickered, nodded, and fell silent.

By the time I had a healthy fire going, Kael had gotten the bark bowl and herbs ready. We poured the rest of our water into it, and he started to heat the rocks in the fire. Ysara returned with a couple of rabbits that she dressed and cooked over the fire. Last

to return was Greyson, though he came triumphant; he'd found a small creek from which we could get water.

"You go with him and refill the waterskins," Ysara told me. "I've been running around enough while you've sat on your ass."

Thessa was awake again. I glanced at her nervously, thinking about Kael's words to me earlier. If I left now, would she be alive when I came back?

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“Maybe you can find some berries?” Thessa suggested.

I forced a smile and nodded. Then I shot a warning look at Kael, but he only shook his head as he traded the fire-rocks for fresh ones, heating the tea some more. Greyson gestured for me to follow him, and I stumbled away. Funny how stiff I was. I hadn’t thought I’d been sitting for that long.

We got to the stream and filled the waterskins. I drank directly from the stream, filling my belly. As I straightened, Greyson stepped up behind me and rested his hands on my hips. I stiffened.

“I know you’re worried. I can help you, Elara. We can blow off some of this tension,” he suggested, his voice low. “It’s not just because you’re here, you know. You’re smart and a goodfighter. You’ve got a lot of spunk, and I admire that. I won’t say that this desire is selfless. I want to distract myself, too. But that doesn’t mean my attraction to you isn’t real.”

“Greyson—”

He spun me around and pressed me into a tree. My heart jumped as I remembered Luken doing just this. Greyson’s dark eyes were eerily similar, dark with lust. But while Luken’s look had been intense, possessive, Greyson’s was... cold in comparison. As though Luken wanted me because he wanted me, but I could be replaced by another woman in Greyson’s eyes.

It was ridiculous. And I didn’t want to wish that it was Luken’s hand on my waist, rather than Greyson’s.

“Why should we deny ourselves the right to comfort, Elara?” he asked, leaning closer. “You keep talking about not wanting to be on the porn websites, but let’s be honest. You’re already on them. We all are. Vampires have no respect for our lives, our modesty, anything. Let me take away your worries, even if it’s only for a little while.”

I was quiet as I stared at him, trying to figure out why I didn’t feel the same way toward him as I did Luken. Greyson was undeniably attractive. He had treated me well and made his attraction plain. He had a likable quality to him, and never acted as though he was better than the rest of us. More than that, he’d offered me sympathy when I told him about my family. He didn’t act as though I owed myself to him.

It was natural for people to act on their urges in these situations. Why not embrace, as Greyson said, what comfort we could get?

The problem was, I didn’t want Greyson to fuck me.

Maybe I’d held onto my virginity too long. Perhaps I’d built it up in my head to something that was just too precious. Maybe it was because Greyson would fuck me. We wouldn’t have sex; it wouldn’t even be us fucking each other. It would just be him doing it.

On the other hand, if Luken had come into the forest to demand what was between Greyson and me before, maybe this was the best way to get his attention now.

“I... don’t know,” I said slowly, hesitating on the lie. Was it really fair to Greyson to lead him on? “I think if you really want it, you should ask Ysara.”

“I don’t want Ysara. I want you, Elara.” Greyson moved closer. The heat of his body was markedly different from the coolness of Luken.

I put my hand on his chest, bringing a stop. “Let me think about it. With everything else that’s happened, I don’t know if I can give you a proper answer right now.”

“Just say yes,” he urged. “What do you have to think about?”

He leaned forward to kiss me. I slipped out from under his arm and backed away, frowning at him.

“I told you I have to think. So just accept that, okay?” I snapped.

Greyson’s mouth twisted. “We don’t have much time. We’ll make it to the colosseum soon enough.”

“Don’t wait for me,” I told him. “If you need to be close to someone to feel comfort—”

“I already told you, I don’t want Ysara. What’s wrong with me? Why don’t you want me?” he demanded, his hands clenching into fists.

I didn’t answer. I turned and headed back the way we’d come, his question lingering in my mind. Why didn’t I want him? I wished I did. But I had a feeling that the reason was a pair of glowing amber eyes that wouldn’t leave me alone.

Chapter 15

Marissa came for me again that night. Thessa was sleeping soundly, and Ysara took watch. When I kept tossing and turning, she finally shoved the empty waterskins at me—we’d had to use them up again to make more tea for Thessa’s pain management—and told me to go fill them up. Shortly after I’d left our camp, Marissa’s silver eyes lit the darkness.

“They’re going to be suspicious,” I said as Marissa scooped me into her arms.

“Maybe,” she answered non-committedly. The darkness blurred by us, but she moved slower this time than previously. “He didn’t do it, you know.”

I frowned. Her face was bathed in the light from her eyes, but I couldn’t read her. “What?”

“Luken didn’t kill your family.”

My whole body tensed. I wanted to ask her what she meant, but I locked it down. Lies. She was lying, to make me soften toward the vampire king. He’d put her up to it.

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“He didn’t,” she said, her voice softer now. “If you ask him, he’ll tell you. But he isn’t going to bring it up. He’s looking into who really did it, so he can present their heads to you. He didn’t kill them.”

I locked my jaw and didn’t answer. After it became apparent that I wouldn’t say anything else, Marissa sped up. The rushing wind made conversation impossible after that. She set me down at the edge of a cobble-paved path that had solar lights strung up along the edges.

“He’ll be waiting for you,” she said and took a seat on a nearby fallen log.

I frowned at her as she pulled out a book that was tucked into her waistband. But I was here. So now was my chance. I took a deep breath and trotted along the cobblestone path. The ash trees opened up to reveal a large pool. A few picnic tables were set up on a large, flat area near the pool. As I approached, the scent of minerals and sulfur clung to the air. Steam rose from the water, and an unexpected shiver of delight ran down my spine.

A hot springs.

“Elara.”

Even his voice made goosebumps break out over my arms. I swallowed hard as I turned toward where Luken strode toward me. He was dressed in a tunic and pants that would have been in style two hundred years ago. A sword was belted around his waist on one side, several throwing stars were secured on the other, and a dagger in his boot. His hair was loose tonight, wafting in the wind. The pools were lit by

several tall floodlights which set a silver gleam to his dark hair.

Looking at him, being close to him, erupted everything I didn't feel with Greyson just hours before. I clenched my hands, despairing at myself. Even now. It was unbelievable.

Well, at least I know it's not just because I'm horny, I thought wryly.

"Join me in the water," he said, his eyes not leaving mine as he unbuckled his belt.

I backed up a step, my mouth going dry. "Here?"

Luken laughed as he dropped his weapons near a large rock, then peeled off his shirt. "Here. At a hot springs. Come in; you'll enjoy the water."

He stripped off his pants and dropped them with the rest of his clothes. The planes of his body were laid bare, gleaming under the floodlights. He was beautiful, all sinew and muscle. My gaze dropped to his thick cock. It lay placid and just as big as I imagined between his legs. I expected him to take it in hand or tell me to come kneel in front of him, but he slid into the hot springs and waded until he was waist-deep, then turned back to me. An inviting smile played at his lips.

"Come," he called, waving his hand toward me.

I eyed the weapons he left near the rock. Could I get to them before he did? If he was even half as fast as Marissa, that was a no.

He wasn't going to stay patient. And if I had a chance to trade my blood and body for Thessa...What will happen to Darcie?

I undressed, trying to move swiftly, but my hands were clumsy as the heat at seeing

Luken's naked form was doused by reality. I shrugged out of the garments, stiffened by sweat and blood and dirt, and headed for the springs. I didn't look at Luken, didn't want to see his reaction to my naked body. Or the scars.

They wound from my face, down across my neck and then wrapped in a wave around my torso. The underside of my left breast had been thickened with the burn scars, all the way to the edge of my nipple. The other breast had been spared, but the scars continued, marring my stomach and then wrapping around to my ass. My right butt cheek had been completely destroyed by the fire. It was only through extensive surgery and physical therapy that I could walk now. Both my legs were covered in scars as well, but these were more from the surgeries, the skin grafts rather than the fire itself.

I quickly got deep enough into the water that I could dunk to my shoulders, hiding my body from view. Only then did I look up at Luken. His gaze was serious but I didn't allow myself to read into his expression.

"Why do you keep bringing me to you?" I asked.

"Because I've wanted you by my side from the moment I saw you four years ago." He crouched in the water as well, the steam obscuring his face. "When I thought you were dead... I can't tell you the feelings that went through me. After my mother died, I thought there was no one else in this world I would grieve. Until you. I could have destroyed myself after I heard what happened."

His voice was low, rough. In anyone else, I'd believe him without question. A strange point of light burned in the center of my chest. On the one hand, it nearly made me smile to hear that my supposed death hurt him so much.

On the other, it made me want to crow. At least the attack on my family backfired on him in some way.

That being said, he was probably exaggerating his distress.

“As the king, I face threats to my throne,” he continued, not looking at me. He sighed, dipping his head back to submerge his long, loose hair. From my vantage, I saw it spread around him. My fingers itched with the desire to go and touch it, to see if it would be as soft as I thought. “I don’t have many people I can trust. Even my own half-brother betrayed me.”

“Brother?” I repeated.

I hadn’t heard that he had any family. With vampires being the way they were, though, I supposed it wasn’t really that surprising. It’d be more surprising if Luken didn’t have any siblings... My mind flashed to Marissa. They didn’t look anything alike, but could she be a sister?

Or a daughter?

But she’d said that he was like a cousin to her. If their relationship was any closer than that, surely she wouldn’t have chosen that descriptor?

“My father had a dalliance with an elf after my mother’s death,” Luken said, his tone clearly disapproving. “He fathered my half-brother in the... arrangement. I disliked how quickly my father moved on, but I never used that against my brother. I thought that we were close. Friends, even. Until he tried to coup me twenty or so years ago.”

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“I’ve never heard of any coup attempts.”

Luken grinned, exposing his fangs. “Of course you haven’t. I take great pride in keeping such things from public notice.”

“I see,” I murmured.

“In any case, I believe that the elves that came after your team in the forest a few days ago were sent by my half-brother. Though I had him incarcerated, he escaped last year. My informants tell me that he’s plotting a comeback.” Luken’s eyes darkened. “He must have learned about you somehow and sent those mercenaries after you. They weren’t the only ones. I lost a few people taking out the others before they could get to you and your team.”

I searched his expression, keeping quiet. Was he telling me that it was his brother, not him, that killed my family? But that had been four years ago, while his brother was still locked up.

“And how would he have known, if he was jailed and you only saw me the once?” I demanded.

Luken sighed. “I have enemies in my court. If any of them preferred him over me for king, is it really that difficult to think that they would have told him? He had help escaping, after all.”

“What does this have to do with me?” I asked, switching gears. “I asked you why you keep bringing me away. What does your brother have to do with it?”

“Because I want you, Elara.”

“So you’re trying to frighten me into going with you?” I demanded.

He stood and waded closer to me. “I don’t want you to die, Elara. I want you by my side. I’m telling you this because it’s not just the monsters in that wood that endanger your life. You’re a volunteer in the Blood Trials. If you claim coercion, I can intervene. Pull you out.”

“You saw what I told the others,” I said flatly. “You know what I want. Is this you taking me up on that offer, then?”

He reached me, looming over me like some sort of giant. I didn’t want to expose myself to him, but I also didn’t want to stay low and vulnerable like this. I straightened, the water sluicing off my body. His gaze dropped, roving over my figure.

“I’m giving you my offer, Elara. I can get you out. The girl is going to die. Let her die,” he said, his voice lowering.

And if I asked for Darcie’s freedom, he’d say the same thing. The thought sent a stab of pain through my chest. I circled him, putting his back to the edge of the pool. Why did all of this have to be so damn confusing? Why did I keep losing sight of what he truly was? He was probably lying about his brother, just as he had Marissa put doubt into my mind.

He killed my family. He might as well have the knife to Thessa’s throat, too. He might as well be the one tying Darcie to the Gods’ alter.

Pressure started to build in my chest. I sucked in a deep breath, forcing myself to meet his eyes. I arranged my expression to soften, as though I believed him. Behind

him, the weapons he'd left by the pool glinted temptingly. It was a mistake to act rashly, but after what he'd done to me... if my only choices were death or stand by his side, then what was rash about choosing his death with mine?

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Elara?" he searched my gaze, moving closer. "She can't be saved."

"The nuns said that about me, when I was laying in their hospital, dying." I gestured to my scars.

His mouth pinched. "That's a much different circumstance. The Gods are not to be trifled with."

"Are you saying that the Gods care what happens to Thessa?"

"Yes. Who do you think decided she'd be part of the Trials in the first place?" His brows furrowed together.

What? I hesitated, torn for a moment. But then I pushed it away. He was lying. Trying to distract me from his crimes by pinning them on the gods. I smiled at him anyway, letting my stance soften. "Show me, then. Show me that I can put my trust in you."

His eyes glowed brighter as his smile widened. My heart fluttered as he came closer to me. His arm slid around my waist, pulling me closer, though he angled our bodies so that our hips were slightly offset. He leaned in close, touching his nose to mine a moment before pressing his lips to mine. I nearly forgot my purpose as the softness of his mouth enveloped me. He was warm from the hot springs. I put my arms around him, careful to keep my back bent at an angle to avoid crushing my breasts against him.

I leaned into him, urging him backward. His hands moved slowly over my wet skin, gentle and searching, as I walked us both toward the edge of the pool. My stomach knotted. When he broke from my mouth to kiss the sensitive skin of my throat, I gasped.

“Don’t,” I blurted.

“I’m not going to drink from you,” he promised. He brushed my hair from my face. “I know it’s going to take time. I’m showing that you can trust me, Elara. No drinking. You can set the pace for tonight.”

The knot in my stomach grew tighter. I kissed him again, hungrily, putting all my emotion into him. We reached the pool's edge, and he leaned back against the rock, reaching for my hips.

I let one of my hands drop from his shoulder to the rock, then trailed to the dagger he’d left behind.

He broke the kiss, starting to turn. I didn’t give him a chance as I plunged the knife into his back.

Chapter 16

I planned to yank that knife out and drive it back into him again and again, until the hot springs was stained with his blood and there was nothing left of him but a rancid sack of flesh. Then I'd spit on his corpse and burn it in a bonfire, just to make sure he was dead and dead forever.

Things didn't quite go according to plan.

Luken's eyes widened, and I lingered there, my hand clenching around the knife. His body was so close to mine. I saw in his eyes the moment that he understood what I'd done. Slowly, he pulled away from me. The heat of the springs rose up in a thick mist that hid the forest around us. My heart hammered in my chest, a bitter taste on my tongue.

He reached around and plucked the knife from his back. The blade was covered in thin, watery blood. With a flick of his wrist, the knife soared through the air and disappeared into the mist. A soft splash told me it had hit the water. Luken stared at me for a long moment before he twisted to look at the injury to his back. It was too high and too close to his shoulder to be anywhere near vital arteries.

My breath exploded from me in a jagged exhale. Luken touched the spot, swiping a bit of his blood onto his fingers.

"You actually stabbed me," he said, surprise coloring his words. "I didn't think you had it in you. Not a good blow, though. You can't have meant it, otherwise you would have had better aim."

“I did mean it,” I answered at once, just to be contrary.

Gods. I’ve just made the biggest mistake of my life.

His amber eyes glowed when he looked up at me. A shiver ran down my spine, and I wanted to shrink into myself. Apologize. Explain. Something. Anything! But when his gaze locked on mine, I found I couldn’t speak. I could only stand there, startled by the expression on his face. He wasn’t angry or upset or anything as I expected.

He was amused. A slow smile spread over his face as he waded toward me.

“You don’t believe a word I told you, do you?” he asked, shaking his head slowly. “You’re good. I thought you believed me.”

“About your brother and all that? Of course, I don’t believe you,” I answered scornfully. “You’re manipulating me. Creating a shadow for me to hate but I know the truth. You’re the one who killed my family, no matter what you want me to believe. Oh, that’s right.” I rolled my eyes. “I bet you ‘don’t know’ what Marissa told me, either.”

I took half a step back, and he paused, studying me. The depth of his eyes seemed to pierce right through me as he moved forward more slowly. When he was in arm’s reach, he cupped my face with his hand.

“I’m pleased that you’re a warrior, Elara. But if you want to fight—really fight—you’re going to have to do better than that.” His hands shot out, grabbing my biceps.

I made to break his grasp, but before I could, he’d come in close. So close. His body was cool despite the heat of the pools. I was distracted by the droplets of water sitting on the smooth planes of his chest. Faint scars crisscrossed his torso, and my fingers

tingled with the desire to feel the raised rigids, to trace the story of his life. Then his leg hooked around mine, sweeping my feet out from under me. I went down, catching a lungful of air before he pushed me under.

I squirmed, trying to free myself but his grip on me was tight. His leg was still under mine, pulling me down so it was as though I was sitting on his lap under the water. My lungs had plenty of air so I went still, hoping to frighten him into pulling me back up. Once I stopped struggling, the ripples of the water cleared. He smiled down at me—I could see him more clearly than he could see me—and started to laugh.

That bastard! He knew I was part selkie. He knew I was in no danger from a few minutes beneath the surface. That or he was trying to drown me into submission. I wasn't going to stand for this! I couldn't yank myself free so I had to make him release me.

I undulated my body, bringing myself even closer to him. I wiggled, scooting my ass backward. Luken's grip on me tightened as soon as I brushed up against his cock. His expression changed, growing hungry. Just what I wanted. It was starting to be uncomfortable, not breathing. I swung around, pulling one of my legs out from behind him. His grip finally loosened as I arched my back, lifting my hips up out of the water.

I promptly hooked my knee behind his neck and twisted, grabbing his wrists now. I used my torso to flip him forward, cartwheeling beneath the water as I pulled him down. I slipped from his grasp and grasped a handful of the rocky spring bottom to shove both my feet into his chest. I kicked him hard, sending a flurry of air bubbles out of him. Then with a few kicks, I was back on my feet, several meters from him.

He emerged coughing and spluttering. It took him a moment to regain his balance but when he did, he looked up at me with that same hungry expression.

“Fuck, Elara,” he said, his voice low and gravelly. “You are a fighter.”

“I am,” I answered, thrusting my chest forward. His eyes dropped to my breasts. The difference of temperature from the air and the springs had made my nipples pebble. “And I’ve got more where that comes from.”

He dove for me. I sprinted back, filling my lungs as I slipped under the water. The knife would have hit around here somewhere... there! I reached for it but then his strong grip caught around my ankle. He yanked me back, my fingers slipping from the knife’s handle. I twisted and lodged my other foot into his stomach, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“You have an advantage in the water,” he growled, dragging me backward. “I suppose the only thing to do for you is to get you out.”

With a firm shove, he turned me around under the water, then lifted me out entirely. Water sloughed off our naked bodies as he sprinted up the low bank and deposited me several meters from the water’s edge. The chilly night whipped across my skin, making me shiver.

I balled my fists and crouched into a fighting stance. “I’m not done yet, your Majesty,” I snarled sarcastically.

He smiled in return. The bastard was genuinely enjoying this! “I would expect nothing less, Elara.”

With a howl, I threw myself forward. He punched at me, and I dodged it, but I didn’t see his second fist in time. It hit me in the stomach, making me double over. For half a second, panic swept through me. I couldn’t breathe! But then, as the pain blossomed through my torso, my body decided that since I was in pain, it must mean I was training—which meant I was meant to be sexually aroused.

Heat pooled between my legs. I was glad for the water of the springs. I could pretend that was why I was damp down there.

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A gentle hand lowered to my back, rubbing in soft circles. “Ah, I thought you’d dodge that. I didn’t mean to hit you so hard.”

My heart skipped a beat.

No! It’s all lies. I won’t let him do this to me. I won’t let him keep making me crazy.

I attacked, putting all my training to use. Jabs, kicks. Parrying, dodging, choosing what blows to take so I could get in a blow of my own.

It was all for nothing. I held my own for a few minutes—or he was teasing me—but my strength faded too quickly. Days of constant stress and motion, combined with a lack of nourishing food, had taken their toll on me. I was a little too slow as he spun behind me. His arms wound around me and we were falling. He brought me down over his chest, lying splayed out. I gasped for breath as I shivered from exertion and exhilaration.

His arms locked me in place as he twisted, putting me in a headlock so I breathed onto his smooth chest.

“I have no intention of letting you go, Elara Tideborne,” he hissed in my ear, sending shivers down my spine. “No matter how many times you try to kill me.”

His words were like liquid fire running through my veins. One of my legs was askew, opening slightly, and the scent of my own arousal hit me. Luken lay next to me, his naked length pressed into my hip. He was aroused, too. I tried to wriggle myself free, but it did no good as he kept me locked in that headlock. My breathing was sharp and

rapid.

One of his hands released me and drifted across my cheekbone. He might as well have left lava in his wake. My eyes widened as I lifted my head enough to stare into his eyes. His pupils were dilated, his breathing rapid.

“That was fun,” he said, his hand moving downward. His fingers caressed the line of my neck, lingering on the hollow of my throat, before moving again. Lower, over my breast. He traced the lines of scarring on the underside of my breast, then cupped it in his hand and circled my nipple with his thumb.

I groaned, lifting into his touch. My body was on fire. I needed his cool touch to ease the burning inside of me, or it would consume me again.

“Do you want this?” he asked.

His hand lowered, sweeping over my stomach. His knuckles brushed my inner thigh, nudging my leg open further. I let it fall open, still staring into his eyes. They were mesmerizing.

“Do you want this?” he asked again, his voice a low growl. “Do you want me to touch you?”

“Luken,” my voice was hoarse. “Don’t make me say it. I can’t say it.”

His eyes widen slightly. His hand pauses as he studies me. “If you can’t say it, then show me.”

That I could do. Fighting with him had awoken new urges, new passions. I couldn’t say yes, but it wasn’t because I didn’t want him to touch me. It was everything else. Once I started talking, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to stop. And then where would we

be? I burned for him so deeply I could barely breathe.

So I took his hand in mine and moved it between my legs. My lungs ached, not for air but because the need inside of me was too strong. How did I ever think I'd be able to resist him? Even now, knowing what he did, with Thessa and Darcie both hanging in the balance, I couldn't stop my need for him.

Luken adjusted his position, laying half over me. His eyes were locked on mine as he slid his fingers against my most intimate place. A place that had never been touched by anyone but myself before. He explored languidly, getting closer and closer to my clit without touching it. I bit my lip as I grabbed onto his shoulders. My eyes grew wider.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

"Of course I am," I answered. The words, as true as they are, tasted like a lie.

He leaned forward and pressed a whisper-soft kiss to my lips. As he pressed harder, his fingers finally found my clit. It was already hardened with desire, and at his first touch, an electric shock rushed through me. My hips jerked slightly as I bit back a cry, not wanting him to see how much a single touch affected me.

"You're still fighting me," he murmured into my lips. "I'll admit that this battle will be much more pleasurable for both of us."

My fingers dug into his shoulders as he circled my clit with his fingers, stroking languidly around it. When he swiped his thumb over the hardened little nub, I jerked again. This time, he lingered, stroking harder then lighter. Tension built in my core, as though my skin was too tight. My breasts pebbled in the air, and Luken dropped his head to my scarred one, kissing lightly against the sensitive skin.

I let my head fall back. I closed my eyes, then opened them again. I couldn't bear not looking at him, my vampire king.

His wet hair fell across his cheek as he swirled his tongue around my nipple and his fingers around my clit. The sensations that swept through me left my mind racing. Was I really letting him do this? Not just letting, but encouraging? I wanted it more than anything else in that moment. The reasons to shove him away from my mind fell away as easily as my legs fell open.

I wanted this. I wanted him. I wanted him to touch me, to set my nerves on fire. I wanted him to make me feel desirable, as though I still held some of the beauty I'd once had. I wanted him to bring me to tears with the want in his eyes. I wanted him to hold me, to make me feel like that fairytale princess. I wanted to feel safe. I wanted to feel as though there was an ending for my life that wasn't blood and tears.

"Luken," I gasped as he moved to my other breast. He nicked my skin with his wicked fangs. Enough to sting but not enough to draw blood.

"Tighter, Elara," he whispered as he kissed his way up my neck. His breath was hot on my ear as he eased a finger inside of me. "Hold me tighter. Like you're trying to crush me between your hands."

My moans turned into laughter. "I'll hurt you."

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His eyes sparkled as he kissed my jaw, easing a second finger in with the first. “That’s the whole point, Elara.”

One of my fingers traced the injury where I’d stabbed him. So now I was worried about hurting him? Regret spiked through me, followed by a wave of pleasure that wiped it from my mind. I did as he said, pulling him tighter, crushing him to me. He curled his fingers inward and upward, igniting something inside of me that I hadn’t known. My whole body trembled as I arched myself, rocking my hips in time with his hand as he pumped it in and out of me. It was too much and not enough all at once.

His thumb swept over my clit again and again. A shock went through me, shuddering to my core. All my muscles tensed up, and I held my breath as the tightness inside became too strong to bear.

“That’s it,” Luken urged, his dark voice warm against my skin. “Sing for me, Elara. Scream my praises to the sky.”

He made it sound like I was worshiping him. And then, suddenly, I was. I did as he said, screamed as everything inside of me exploded. The orgasm was almost a violent thing. I clawed at Luken, needing him closer, needing him inside of me even as the shockwaves rocked me. His fingers slid out with a pop, and for a wild moment, I wondered if that was it.

Could he tell? Could he feel that nothing had ever been inside of me like that before?

His eyes were dark as my vision finally refocused.

“I want to taste you,” he breathed.

My blood.

If he could do this to me with just his presence and his fingers, how much better would it be when he was drinking from me? It was an orgasmic experience, something that evolved in vampires to keep their prey coming back again and again, willingly. In some of the less reputable areas of the kingdom, vampires who had been exiled for court or who had never been high enough status to be in it in the first place would sell their fangs just for that.

My father used to say, “Anyone who would pay a vampire just for the vampire to get what he wants is a fool.”

Luken’s lips touched my neck, and I reacted with pure instinct.

“No.”

The king paused. Our bodies were so close. His cock was hard against my thigh. I could feel his pulse beat inside of it. It would be so easily for me to sling my leg over his hip and let him have everything he wanted... But then I was paying him for the privilege of giving him everything. My blood, my body, was the only bargaining chip I had. I couldn’t waste it.

He pulled back, leaning on his elbow as he stared down at me. His hand, slick not with the hot springs but with me, rested lightly on my hip. Disappointment clouded his eyes as he panted heavily. My heart thundered, my grip still tight on him. Despite my words, I wanted him to convince me. To touch me again and bring me back to that safe place.

The fire hadn’t cooled inside of me at all. If anything, it was stronger.

With his clean hand, Luken twisted one strand of my hair in his fingers. “No,” he repeated.

I shivered and reminded myself why I had to say no. I closed my eyes, breathing in his heady scent, and then remembered the smoke the day the inn burned down. The fire of desire was replaced in my mind by the fire the elves had tossed my body on. My lips parted and it took all of my strength to tear myself from what I wanted, what my body needed.

“No,” I repeated.

Luken pulled away from me.

Another shiver ran through my body as I lay there, exposed, ready for the taking. I listened hard to the sound of his breathing, wondering if he was considering his options. My eyelids parted on their own to find him with one knee drawn up, his elbow resting in it. The dissatisfaction that glowered from his amber eyes as he stared at me kept me pinned to the spot.

I ached between my legs. He’d only had two fingers inside of me and I still ached. Was I still a virgin after that? He’d been inside of me. It wasn’t his cock, but he’d put himself inside of me. He’d brought me to orgasm. Touched me places nobody else had. Was I still innocent?

Clearing my throat, I carefully pushed myself into a sitting position. “I’ll let you drink from me if you take Thessa out of the Trials and forgive her crimes.”

“Is that why you let me touch you?” His voice was flat. “So you could try this again?”

“No. I let you touch me because I wanted you to touch me,” I said, shaking my head.

Maybe I could have lied, but I thought the truth would serve me better. “I want you to save me. But I can’t let that stop me from remembering everything else I want. So you can’t have my blood until I know Thessa is safe.”

Luken snorted. “The Gods have declared the laws for the Trials. I can’t go against them. Not...”

He trailed off.

My head fell back to the ground. Though desire still lingered like fireworks, ready to be set off with just a touch from him, I shoved it aside. “Then let me go. Take me back to my team.”

He surged to his feet, so suddenly I flinched. His cock was still hard as he glared down at me. “Nobody has ever resisted me before. But if you wish to be so stubborn, then fine. I won’t touch you again until you’re begging me to do it.”

I wasn’t sure if it was a threat or a promise.

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As my jaw tightened, ready to give him a fight, it suddenly occurred to me it was neither. Just a statement of fact.

I pulled myself to a sitting position. His hand flexed, as though he offered to help me, but he didn't. I was grateful. If he offered, I might accept. As I gazed down at myself, I saw a pattern of splotches starting to rise up on my skin. One of the bruises was on my ribs, and I poked it lightly. The throb went straight to my core, making my clit throb in time with it.

Well, that seemed to have backfired. I put myself in training to stop my body from wanting sex, and here I was, all the more turned on because of the violence between Luken and myself. An unsettled feeling sank into my stomach. I wasn't sure what to name it, but it was something akin to shame. I looked around for my clothes as I absently spoke.

"You seemed to enjoy bruising me up."

"You seemed to enjoy it, too," Luken answered swiftly. He turned slightly to show a large black mass forming on his hip. "And you gave back as good as you got."

The mark was in the shape of my foot. A pleased smile ghosted across my face. I did like it, at that. I liked that I'd left a mark on him that was all me. My smile disappeared as the unsettled feeling welled deeper.

Moving slowly, taking stock of every ache in my body, I went to my clothes and pulled them on. Donning the smelly, torn items was like putting on armor. Every item bolstered my wavering resolve. I didn't want to go into the colosseum. If I asked him,

he'd find a way to pull me out of it. Regardless of what he said about the Gods and not being able to subvert their will, he would pull me out. I knew it in the marrow of my bones.

"I want to go back to my team now," I told him once I was dressed.

I turned to find that he was still hard, standing upright and pointed at me. Like the needle of a compass. The thought was so ridiculous that I snorted despite myself.

"You better make sure you stay alive until the end," he told me, his voice low and warning.

I narrowed my eyes at him. If he was really that concerned... I shoved that thought away as I breathed in through my nose to steady myself. How many times did I have to tell myself not to romanticize him and his words?

"And what if I win?" I asked, my voice low. "What if it gets to the point when you're supposed to drink from me as part of the Trials? And I still say no?"

Luken's face went blank. "Will you still say no?"

"Yes," I answered, though I wasn't entirely certain I would.

He shrugged once. "Then you'll have failed the Trials and won't get your one wish."

"That's not—" I started, but bit back on my protests.

A small smile crossed his face. I wasn't sure if it was bitter or smug. "I always ask, Elara. I'm used to getting what I want. And what I want is youryes."

As if I needed anything else to be confused about. He's not what I expected, the

monster I built in my head to fight against. That's exactly what I thought that the prince of my fantasies would tell me. But I braced myself. Part of me wanted to ask about what he'd just done to me, pinning me as he moved his hand between my legs—but he had asked. And I had given him my yes.

“Marissa will be waiting for you at the end of the path,” he said, nodding to the cobbled road that led away from the springs. “She’ll take you back to your team.”

“And what are you going to do?” I asked him.

He took himself in his hand and stroked himself from root to tip in a slow, firm motion. “Think about you.”

Heat spread through my body. My skin felt too tight, and for a moment, I thought, Would it be so bad to touch him the way he touched me?

I shut down that thought quickly and turned away. My legs were wobbly as I walked away, listening to him as he grunted softly. And to my irritation, the desire in me didn't fade, even after he was no longer in sight.

Chapter 17

When I returned to the camp, Ysara gave me a startled look, her nostrils flaring. The smell of the hot springs still clung to my skin. I was glad for it. The minerals and sulfur would be enough to hide the scent of anything else still on me. I ignored her look and curled up on a soft piece of ground near Thessa. I slept fitfully, dreaming of Luken's hands on me intermingled with the night my family died.

Was Marissa telling the truth?

Was Luken?

In the morning, I was utterly exhausted, worse than I'd been in years. I felt as though the old wounds had been ripped open, and I was bleeding grief afresh. Ysara, Kael, and Greyson must have sensed something off, but they didn't say anything. Ysara didn't tell them about my foray into the forest, and none of them asked about the now-faded smell of hot springs on me.

They did, however, leave me with Thessa as they went to hunt. We had no food, and our starving bellies were causing us all issues.

Thessa's fever had broken, and the wound across her chest didn't look as bad as it had yesterday. The naïve part of me thought maybe Luken had done something after all. A vampire could have crept into camp last night and fed her a few drops of healing blood. Vampires and their ability to heal others worked in a way I didn't quite understand. Some sources said that they had to bite you to heal you, but Luken had healed my injuries from the kelpie with his blood.

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The conflicting reports on turning into a vampire were just as confusing.

When Thessa opened her eyes, blinking and yawning, I put those thoughts from my head. I had no desire to become a vampire, so it was inconsequential.

“Elara.” Thessa smiled when she saw me. “Where are the others?”

“Getting food.” I hesitated a moment, but if I wasn’t in a position to save her, I could at least get information. Right? “You’re wearing my sister’s necklace.”

Thessa’s hand moved to the pendant, hidden beneath her shirt. Her smile slipped away.

“How did you get it?” I demanded, leaning forward. “Was it given to you? Did you steal it from the temples?”

“No. No, I didn’t steal it.” She pulled the leather strap over her head and held the delicate pendant in her palm. “I was selected to be a tribute to the gods. We were brought to the temples together and shared a room. She gave me the necklace because she’s my best friend.”

All the air seemed to disappear around me. My hands clenched into fists as I struggled with a well of emotion that crashed through me. Through the last four years, I hadn’t allowed myself to think of anything else, except that Darcie was taken as a tribute. But there was always a part of me that wondered if it was lies, if she had been sold off or murdered.

But she was there.

“How are you not sacrificed?” I blurted. “You’re nineteen.”

“Seventeen,” Thessa answered softly. “They just said I was nineteen to put me into the Trials. It’s my punishment for running away from the temples. I didn’t want to be a tribute. They said my blood would be spilled in honor of the gods one way or another.”

Who was ‘they’? The vampires? The priests? A shiver ran down my spine. I couldn’t focus on that when I had such a limited time. My lungs seemed unable to pull in enough air and I realized my eyes were wet.

“Is she happy?” I blurted, leaning closer. My lips trembled as I fought to keep my voice level. “Are you treated well in the temple? Does she know you’re here? What is life like for the tributes?”

Thessa winced at my barrage of questions. Her eyes widened as she looked around, as though expecting the shadows to consolidate into assassins that would slit both our throats. She shuddered and then moaned, her eyes shutting. Her face pinched with pain. I collected some willow bark tea to let her drink. She took a few sips from my cupped hands, then sighed.

It had been too long since I saw Darcie. I didn’t even know who she was anymore.

“We are treated well in the temple,” Thessa murmured. “We’re given good food, dressed in fine clothes, taught in music and arts. The priestesses are all very kind and understanding. We work, but we’re treated like noble daughters rather than servants. It is a good life. I’m a weaver. I make beautiful cloth that’s given to the Gods and worn by the royal vampire courts. Remember the broadcast from King Luken on that first day of the Trials? He was wearing some of my silk. I recognized it as my work.

Darcie hand-embroidered the sash he wore.”

I soaked in this information, tears welling in my eyes. So it was a good life. Short, but good. My shoulders slumped in relief.

“They say that you’re guarded well,” I probed, wanting to know more.

Thessa nodded. “Where us girls live, only women are allowed in. And even then, they are strictly vetted. When we needed to see the Gods, we were brought to the courtyards where we were kept together, not allowed to wander.”

“You saw the Gods?” I demanded.

“They claimed they were, anyway,” Thessa said doubtfully.

I lifted one eyebrow. “You don’t think they were?”

Thessa pinched her lips together a moment before she whispered, “If I believed everything I was told there, I wouldn’t have run away. I kept my doubts to myself; I don’t know if anyone else felt the same way I did,” she added a little too loudly.

Was she talking about Darcie? Was she worried that if she said too much, it would put Darcie in danger? I wanted to ask her more, but I had to be mindful, too. Darcie was still in the temples, and if the priesthood suspected she was a non-believer, she might be punished worse than Thessa was.

“Never mind about that.” I tried to make my voice soothing. “What about Darcie? Do you see anything of the outside world in the temples? Will she know that we’re in the Trials?”

She slipped the necklace back over her head, and her gaze took a far-off look. “We

never saw the Blood Trials at the temples. So I suppose at least there's that. They won't be seeing us..."

She trailed off, and her shoulders slumped. I shifted my position so I was sitting cross-legged as I studied her. Was this why Luken told me he couldn't pull Thessa out of the Trials? He wasn't the one who decided she'd be a part of them. The Gods themselves did.

But if he didn't have the power to save a tribute who escaped, did it also mean he didn't have the power to get Darcie out of temples?

The memory of the look on his face after I'd told him not to drink from me came back. At the moment, I'd been so focused on figuring out what I was feeling, reeling from the shock of my orgasm and trying desperately to assert some self-control that I hadn't paid much attention. Was it right now to think his expression was pinched in worry, as though the weight of the world sat on his shoulders?

"Why did you escape?" I asked, my own gaze distant. Thessa's face was a blur in my peripherals.

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“There was too much that didn’t add up. They talked about prophecies, but if I asked questions, I was punished. I tried to swallow my doubts, but instead they swallowed me. Especially when I overheard the sisters there was a certain prophecy about King Luken, that he was going to...” she hesitated and shook her head. “I don’t believe it anyway.”

I tried not to let my curiosity get the best of me. What did she hear about Luken? I focused on what was important. “Did they tell you how the tributes were sacrificed?”

“They said it was painlessly. But I don’t believe it. I don’t want to be a sacrifice. I want to choose my own path.” Thessa sighed again. “I want to experience life with someone I love.”

I focused on her again and reached for her hand. “Of course you do. I think that’s all any of us really want. Someone we can be safe with as we go through life.”

Thessa looked around again. Her cold fingers curled into mine as she took a deep breath. “There’s more, Elara. Darcie told me about you. About how the king came for you, and you told him no, and that the night you decided to go to him anyway, your family was attacked.”

My scars tightened painfully at her words.

“We heard rumors... that the Gods demanded the tribute system, as well as the Blood Trials, as a way to sow hostility toward the king. Some of the sisters said, they couldn’t interfere directly without losing too many of their own, so they decided to weaken him in other ways. By creating rifts and making people hate him. If the

people love him, he'll be too strong," she said all of it in a rush, so low and fast I could hardly hear it.

My blood rushed in my ears. It was all too similar to what Luken had told me last night. Enemies to his throne, that he didn't have the power to fight the Blood Trials the way he wanted. Could it all be true after all?

And if that was true, did Marissa tell me the truth, too? Was Luken innocent of the crime I'd spent four years hating him for?

Chapter 18

Two days later, Thessa had recovered enough to walk on her own. Her recovery surprised me, but perhaps the injury was more superficial than I'd realized before. Or maybe Luken did have a vampire sneak a few drops of blood into her system. Although it was more likely that Greyson had a store of magic left and used some of it to heal her while the rest of us weren't around.

Why couldn't I feel toward him the way I felt about Luken? He was a better match, someone who had proven he actually cared about people other than himself. So why did my hormones seem fixated on the king I hated?

"Is that it?" Thessa asked.

We all drew to a stop, squinting through the trees. They'd grown thinner over the last two days, allowing us the occasional glimpse of the valley floor. Now, I thought I could make out the rounded shape of a wall some distance away. My stomach knotted. Luken hadn't sent for me since the hot springs. I was running out of time.

I had to make a choice. Thessa or Darcie. I couldn't keep thinking that I could save both. I'd be lucky to even save one, so I had to put all my energy, all my power, into

saving one of them.

If I had more information about the sacrifice, I'd have a better idea of what to do. Saving Darcie from a virgin life as a temple sister was far different from saving her from being butchered.

A noise in the forest caught my attention. I turned, and a splash of blood spurted over my face. Kael's eyes widened, a slash across his throat from one side to the other. He opened his mouth but made no sound. He dropped, and the creature behind him smiled at us. It was taller even than Greyson, with a wolf's head atop a man's body. Huge hands and long fingers ended with claws. Patchy, scraggly fur covered its body.

It was bright daylight. How was a werewolf attacking us?

Ysara screamed a high-piercing sound that I knew all too well. She shifted to her wolf form and threw herself forward, snarling and snapping at the werewolf. Greyson hollered and drew his sword. I grabbed Thessa and twisted her away, putting myself between her and the werewolf.

"Elara!" she gasped.

I turned, swinging out my staff instinctively. It smacked into the head of a second werewolf as it bolted from the trees, hands eagerly reaching for Thessa. I set it off-balance, but it grabbed the end of my staff and knocked me backward. Thessa took her panther form and jumped for its throat. It laughed and backhanded her into a tree.

The werewolf crouched and flung my staff away. It sprang at Thessa's crumpled form, and I screamed, dodging to block its path. Something heavy hit my back, and I stumbled, the air escaping my lungs. It hit again, and I went sprawling, my staff wrenched from my grip.

“Elara!” Greyson yelled.

I was too far. Thessa twitched as the werewolf landed next to her. Something dark brushed over my vision. A heavy thud, followed by a gurgling gasp. My vision cleared as the werewolf dropped the furry body onto the ground. It swayed on the spot as blood dripped from its throat. Greyson grounded, the sounds of fighting still raging behind me.

A pair of yellow eyes stared at me as the life drained from them.

It was Ysara. Not Thessa. Ysara’s body was torn open by the werewolf as she tore out its throat. Thessa staggered to her feet and dropped again, whimpering. Was she injured?

No time.

I scrambled for my staff, grounding my teeth as pain erupted from my back. It was cold and smooth under my hand. Adrenaline shot through me as Greyson cried out. I pushed myself to my feet, stumbling again as a wave of black washed over my vision. I turned, watching as Greyson battled the werewolf. It was criss-crossed with bloody injuries, but so was Greyson. His arm hung at a strange angle as he fought off the beast with one hand.

I surged forward, bringing my staff over my head. I threw my body into the swing as I brought it down. I missed my target, striking the werewolf’s back rather than its head. It growled, starting to turn. Greyson took the opening and stabbed the beast through its chest. It snarled, lifting a hand to strike him. I smashed my staff into its arm, sending it off-balance.

Between Greyson and me, it was over in seconds.

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My skin was cold. The blood splashed over me was starting to dry, the metallic scent of it heavy in my nostrils. I didn't have to look at Kael and Ysara again, but I did. Just to be certain. Their eyes were already starting to fog over with the veil of death. I was glad they were already dead.

But Thessa was alive.

I clutched my staff as I returned to her. She stirred, shifting slowly back to her human form. Dropping the staff, I checked her scalp. There was a nasty bump on the back of her head, but her pupils were fine, and it didn't seem as though her injury from the elf attack had reopened. When she saw Ysara and Greyson, she let out a wail and pressed both her hands to her mouth.

"We have to get going," Greyson urged.

Painfully, I pushed myself to my feet. "We bury them first."

"Elara..." Greyson strode over to me and gripped my shoulders. "Only a potent magic would allow werewolves to walk around in daylight. We have to get out of here before he sends more creatures after us."

Luken. He said I better survive. Apparently, he decided he had give us too easy of a time. How could it be entertaining for the vampires to watch us breeze through without trouble? He had to kill them, to make sure I knew he wasn't going to show them any mercy. Punishment. I was a fool to question. Ever since that first night when he told me he was glad I was alive, I'd overestimated my worth.

Thessa or Darcie. I could save one of them.

Not both.

Not myself.

I'll be your slave, Luken. But only if you give me one thing in return.

The air left my lungs in a whoosh. "It won't be entertaining for them if none of us survive, or if the final battle in the colosseum is obvious from the start. We bury them, Greyson."

Greyson strode forward and put his hands on my shoulders. He opened his mouth, but whatever he saw in my face brought him up short. His dark eyes widened, then his hands dropped to his sides. Finally, he spoke. "It's not your fault, Elara. It's his. He's the one you should blame."

Oh, I did. I blamed Luken for all of it. I didn't need to be told.

We worked quietly and slowly, all three of us in too much pain to do much. We used sticks to scrape a shallow grave into the earth, where we laid Kael and Ysara together. They looked mismatched; he was a hulking orc, and she was small in her wolf form. But they'd want to be buried together. They found comfort together in life, so why should we put them alone in the cold grave?

Once the grave was covered in what stones we could find, we stood in silence. Up until now, we'd had a charmed experience. Now, the weight of reality settled on my shoulders. But with their deaths, it finally felt like my mind was clear. There was no trusting Luken. And the next time I drove a knife into his back, I wouldn't miss his heart.

Greyson's warm snaked around my shoulder, warm and comforting. I leaned into him despite myself. Exhaustedly, I wondered how much of a 'fuck you' it would be to Luken if I did decide to just throw it all away and give the elf my virginity.

We'd have to leave Thessa alone and unguarded. No, I wasn't going to do that. If only because I didn't want her to be alone and frightened in her final moments.

What will it be in the colosseum?

"It's not your fault," Greyson whispered in my ear. He rubbed his nose against my cheek. "But at least now we don't have to fight them in the colosseum. He won't have the pleasure of watching you beg for their lives, too."

Was that supposed to be comforting?

I pulled away from him, unsettled by his choice of words. "We should get going. I want this whole fucking experience done already."

Thessa nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. I reached out to her, and she leaned into me, reminding me of when Darcie leaned into me on the docks when her best friend was lost at sea. Her body had felt small and fragile, just like Thessa's.

I can't save both. So which one do I choose?

Chapter 19

We were all walking slowly as we came to the edge of the forest. It transitioned abruptly into a manicured lawn stretching to the huge, round stadium that was the colosseum. This one was built in exactly the same style as the one in the capital city. My shoulders hunched. Why did they have us come here, rather than take us back to the city?

Could it be possible that two games were being played this year? Was my team led here on purpose, and was there a second team that would fight to the death in the city? I wouldn't put it past Luken to have such trickery up his sleeve.

"Here we are," Thessa said dully. She clutched her stomach as she stared at it, her expression utterly numb. "I suppose I should have been smarter than to think there was ever going to be an escape."

Dozens of fancy cars lined up outside the colosseum. I briefly thought about suggesting that we go and wreck as many of them as we could before the vampires caught us, but the thought disappeared swiftly. Marissa, flanked by two huge vampires that had once been orcs, approached us. Her silver eyes were cool. She wore a sleek black power suit that enhanced her hourglass shape.

"We're waiting for you," she said coolly. "I must say, I've enjoyed watching your battles as they were presented. It's unusual for our champions to be so boring in their day-to-day, though. Not much backstabbing among you lot... which I suppose will make it even more thrilling to see you turn on each other now."

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I didn't hesitate. "How many vampires know that you secreted me away for clandestine meetings with the king?"

Thessa gasped, but Greyson looked unsurprised.

Marissa laughed. "That was quite fun to watch."

It wasn't an answer, but I didn't push it. My mind was racing. Was there a possibility left for us to get out of this?

We were escorted into the colosseum and shoved through the low arches into the arena right away. I was glad they weren't delaying it. A stadium announcer gave us our names and read the bios we'd given at the start of this. They conspicuously didn't name Thessa's crimes or why she'd been selected from the games. Her eyes were wide, her breathing rapid as she continually looked round. Several times I thought she was going to bolt, but she didn't move.

The crowd jeered but suddenly fell silent. A prickle washed over my skin and I knew without turning that Luken had just entered. Thessa's head jerked around and she gasped. Greyson was slower. His hands tightened into fists. I remained where I was, not looking. Even so, I saw him in the corner of my eye. He was dressed all in black, in the traditional royal garb. The one that Thessa said she had made. And Darcie...

I turned then, meaning only to look at the sash and examine my sister's work. But as soon as my head turned, Luken's eyes caught mine. My heart hammered. Dressed as he was in his royal finery, with a heavy silver circlet on his brow, he looked every inch a king... no, he looked like a god.

The oracle, swathed in a shroud that hid everything but their height from the crowd, stood next to him. They spoke in a wailing voice that changed in such fluctuations it sent shivers down my spine.

“The final trial will begin. You three will fight now, to the death. There can only be one survival of the Blood Trials. Only one will experience their rebirth in the blood that has been spilled.”

“And what if we don’t?” I demanded, speaking despite myself.

Luken’s expression didn’t change but the gathered vampires murmured to each other disapprovingly. Apparently, they didn’t like having their entertainment talk back.

“If you refuse, you will have insulted the Gods themselves,” the oracle said. Their voice wasn’t quite so mystical this time, and I thought the tone sounded feminine. “If you refuse, then they will have no mercy. You will be vanquished and the Gods will consume your souls.”

Thessa moaned and whimpered. “That’s exactly what I was trying to escape.”

“Give them their weapons,” the oracle ordered.

A handful of guards came forward, carrying with them three fresh swords. Apparently, our chosen weapons were being taken away. Thessa swayed on the spot as they approached. She shied toward me only to stop. Bracing herself, she lifted her chin.

Was it hopeless, then? I stared hard at Luken, and he stared back. I couldn’t read him. If all my begging and bargaining up to this point had been for nothing, was it worth trying again? Or would he just laugh at me? I handed over my staff without complaint. My mind was blank. There was no getting out of this alive, not with

Greyson and Thessa surviving as well.

Who do I fight for? Thessa or Darcie? If I got Thessa through this, would she have the wherewithal for her wish to be Darcie's freedom? Or would she succumb to Luken the moment he put his fangs in her? She only got her wish if she resisted him. I couldn't imagine that she could. Not a naive young girl as she was. If anything, she'd end up like me four years ago.

Helplessly in love and doomed to suffer daily.

Could I really put her through that? And the guilt of survival... that might be as deadly for someone like Thessa as a sword would be.

Greyson traded his sword for a new one and tested its weight in his hand. "No point in delaying this any longer." He shook his head as he sheathed the sword and began to braid his hair. As he did so, he met my eyes. His gaze was flat, hard, lacking all of the warmth he'd showed during our survival in the forest. "I really wish you had let me fuck you."

The hard cadence of his words made me flinch but I pushed it aside. Right now, I was thinking the same thing. My heart pounded as I broke my gaze from Luken and reached for a sword of my own. I had to kill him. There was no other choice here. He had to die. I really ought to have given him my body. Maybe he would have some comfort in these last days of his life, then. Was my virginity really worth it?

I needn't have protected it so much, I thought bitterly. I'm going to lose it to Luken. To the man who killed my family. I should have given it away to someone else. I should have been cavalier with my body. Instead, he is going to take the last innocent thing from me.

I had no doubt he would. He told me I'd be begging him to take me—and I didn't

doubt that, either. I would beg him if that's what it took to save... whoever I was going to save.

Thessa's sword dangling limply from her hand, the point tracing abstract patterns in the dust. Her head swiveled constantly, as though she still thought she could escape. I braced myself. If I saved Darcie, she would never have to know what happened to Thessa. She'd be free...

What exactly did Thessa mean when she said she was trying to escape the Gods devouring her soul?

This was it. I closed my eyes, preparing myself. Taking a few breaths, I tried to empty myself of emotion. The way Greyson already had. The way Thessa could not. I turned slightly, so my back was to the crowd. Greyson was the bigger threat. I'd take him out first. That way, whatever I decided for Thessa...

There's no more time to vacillate! I should have chosen already.

Panic threatened to rise in my chest. I fought it down.

"Before the final battle begins, I have something to say," Luken said, his voice clear and even.

My eyes snapped open. They sought him out without me telling them to do so, as though they were entities with minds of their own. He wore a sword at his own hip, and his hand rested lightly on the pommel of a knife. His amber eyes pinched at the sides as he smiled, but there was no humor in his face. A cold arrogance radiated from him that made me shiver as much as it drew me in.

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“Greyson,” Luken rumbled, his amber gaze lingering on the elf. “You are not who you claim to be.”

Greyson’s grip on his sword tightened. He narrowed his eyes at Luken.

With a flourish, Luken turned to the waiting crowd. “This man is no elf. He’s half-elf, half-vampire. And he has been working with dark forces against me, against our kingdom. He’s tried to destabilize us and bring about a reign of ruin. Haven’t you... brother?”

The guards who brought us our weapons backpedaled with shocked cries. I twisted automatically, shielding Thessa as Greyson lifted his sword. There was no denial on his lips, no anger in his eyes. A smile spread over his face as he eyed down Luken.

“How did you figure it out?” he asked casually.

The air seemed to thin around me. Brother? Greyson was the half-brother that Luken told me about, the one that had been imprisoned? My head whirled as Thessa’s cold fingers wrapped around my wrist, as though she wanted to pull me away from him. The entire colosseum was silent as they watched the confrontation.

“Your arrogance, for one,” Luken drawled. “But also... we captured some of your elf confederates alive. I’ll admit, your magical prowess caught me off guard. You’ve learned a lot to be able to use such advanced magic to change your features. I thought it might be a glamor, but you’ve done something deeper, haven’t you?”

Greyson grinned. “All except my fangs.”

The light seemed to blur about him for half a second. When it faded, a set of elegant fangs was in his mouth. My heart grew faster as I gripped my sword with both hands. What the hell was going on? Why would Luken's brother enter the Blood Trials?

"What did they promise you?" Luken's voice was so low I wondered if anyone else heard it.

"Everything. The Gods are tired of you, Brother," Greyson snarled. Except, that wasn't his real name. What was his realname? I couldn't remember if Luken had told me. "They are going to strike you down and raise me up in your stead. I entered the Trails so that my own wish, to challenge you for the throne, would be granted. Even you can't deny the winner of the Trials. And once I've killed them, I'll kill you."

Thessa whimpered.

Luken lifted a brow. "What makes you think you'll win?"

"You can't intervene. Not until the winner has been declared," Greyson said, throwing his shoulders back.

Hot anger swept through me. Luken's eyes didn't move from his brother but I found myself understanding something. If this was the brother who had escaped his incarceration, if he was the one that sent the elf mercenaries after us in the forest... then four years ago...

"You entered the Trials under false pretenses," I blurted, and Greyson's head turned toward me. I straightened as I pointed my sword at him. "You aren't Greyson, the elf. It's against the law for vampires and half-vampires to participate in the Trials. Which means your entry is null and void."

Greyson narrowed his eyes at me. "The Gods themselves decreed that I should be

king. They gave me the plan to see this through. My participation was foreordained and blessed. Ask the oracle! They will tell the truth of my words.”

The oracle let out a high, keening wail. “The Gods do not interfere in the Trials. Nor do they give blessings to this man or that to give him power over others. They do not ordain the king, only ask for the respect that is owed to them.”

A startled look flashed over Greyson’s face. If I saw it, Luken must have, too. Was the oracle conspiring against him? He gave no indication he’d seen it or had any such suspicions.

“You have been trying to thwart me for years, brother. I have been kind. Generous.” Luken’s gaze hardened. “I let you live, and you have only worked against me. I should like to show mercy again... but what have you done to earn that mercy? My responsibilities are for more than my own conscience.”

Greyson’s jaw worked hard. “I... I’m not who you think I am. I’m not your brother at all. I was hired by a half-elf vampire to pretend. He promised me that he’d help me win the Trials and—”

“You’ve sent assassins after by blood donors for decades,” Luken interrupted. “You thought that by sabotaging them, you would make me weak. You should have stuck to the shadows.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not him,” Greyson insisted. “I was promised—I was going to open the way for the true king.”

Luken gave him a withering look. My heart slammed into my ribs as I tried to piece together my own feelings on the matter. Greyson was more than willing to take ownership of being Luken’s brother until the oracle failed to back him up. Was he really that much of a coward? Or was it true? Was he really not the one that Luken

thought he was?

But more than that... sabotaging his blood donors? Did that mean what I thought it did?

The whole colosseum was silent, watching. It was quite the spectacle for them. This face-off between the brothers while Luken revealed Greyson's identity to the whole world. If he was right. If Greyson's backtracking now is just a desperate attempt to live to fight another day.

Beside me, Thessa's fingers wrapped around my wrist. "He was after you. How did he manage to be part of our team? Did he bribe someone?"

She believed it, then.

"Your crimes haven't just been against me." Luken turned suddenly, starting directly at me. "You were behind the mercenaries that were sent to kill Elara Tideborne and her family. You were the one that had their inn burned down and the family slaughtered. All because you didn't want me to have a new blood donor."

I couldn't look away from Luken. Though his face was impassive, his eyes were intense on me. Prickles washed over my scalp. There was a vulnerability to Luken's intensity that I understood at once. He wanted me to believe. He wanted me to understand, to know that he wasn't behind my family's deaths after all.

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But if he wasn't, what would I do with all this hatred in my heart?

I'd fought so long between mourning what I thought he was and hoping I was right about the romantic figure I'd imagined at eighteen.

As my mind was reeling, the oracle started to speak again. "These crimes are heavy on the head of the accused. If he is guilty, let the people see him for who he is. They need to see the proof, otherwise, his death will be unjust. If there is no proof, let him compete in the final battle of the Blood Trials."

Greyson smiled.

Luken glanced at the oracle, his lips quirking. It was strange, seeing him react that way. He was the king... but it was sinking in now that he really wasn't as powerful as I'd built him in my mind. How could he rule if the people refused to bow to him? And what was a better way to make them refuse to bow than to threaten their eternal souls? The Gods were powerful. Even people who didn't believe in them could use them to increase their own power.

Up until now, I thought Luken just used them as an excuse for the Blood Trials. The tributes I knew to be real but the Trials...

He told me the truth when he said he had no choice.

He really was the prince of my dreams.

"You want proof? Here. Have your proof." Luken whirled suddenly, his hand

slashing through the air. A ripple of sound burst like a gunshot, echoing in the arena. A wave of blue washed from the spot where Luken had motioned.

Greyson tried to dodge it, but the magic hit him crosswise. He dropped, howling as his sword went flying. Thessa screamed, her fingers digging into my arms. I pulled her back, away from the writhing mess that was Greyson. As we watched, he changed. His ears shortened, his jawline became heavier, his cheekbones lifted, and his nose grew smaller and straighter.

When the transformation was done, and he lifted his head, his eyes glowing brown in his face, a collective gasp ran through the audience. The large viewscreens on either side of the colosseum were filled with the image of Greyson's face. His real face. He looked so similar to Luken that even though I'd never seen him before, I would have recognized them as related instantly.

The only familiarity was those reflections of Luken. I'd hoped that I would look at him and see one of the monsters that slaughtered my family. But he wasn't one of the mercenaries. He'd sent them to do his dirty work.

"I saw him at the temples," Thessa whispered. "He talked about the prophecy with..." she trailed off, as though unwilling to continue.

I hardly heard her. A new feeling washed through me—relief.

Because finally, finally, I believed Luken. He hadn't killed my family. He wasn't a monster who slaughtered the people I loved to punish me for hesitating. He'd told me the truth when he said he was going to wait a few years, to let me grow up a bit and be ready to come with him to the palace. He was telling the truth when he said he mourned me. When he said, he wanted me to be with him.

Greyson's lips curled back over his teeth. His fangs lengthened as he glared with

sheer hatred at Luken. A shudder ran down my spine as I recognized the hints of his anger I'd seen in him through the forest. No wonder I felt so uncomfortable, even when I was trying to convince myself otherwise. He'd been seeking to use me, to hurt me, from the start. There was an evil in him that I reacted to, even if I didn't know it.

Greyson pulled himself to his feet, continuing to glare at Luken. Luken stared back at him, utterly impassive.

"Will you keep denying your identity, or will you finally be a man and face the consequences of your actions?" he asked coolly.

Greyson stared back at him for a long moment before his eyes flashed to me. The hatred that burned in their depths made me flinch back. But as he looked at me, a smile curled his lips. A cruel smile transformed his handsome face into something ugly and terrifying. He started to laugh.

"Do what you will to me, brother. Just know that whatever you have, there is something that I took that you will never have. I tasted the girl first. I had her blood and her body. When you enter her and find her no longer a virgin, just know that your little brother broke her in for you," he crowed.

Anger swept through me. "That's a lie!" I shouted.

"Of course, you'd say that," Greyson mocked. "But you can't hide the truth, Elara. You called out my name as I drove my cock into you. And no matter how many times my big brother fucks you, I'll always be the first man you had."

"I'm still a virgin," I snarled, my voice loud in the colosseum. I didn't even care if other people heard me. I hadn't guarded myself for so long just for someone like him to lay claim to my first time! "The only person who has ever touched me is Luken."

My stomach churned. I wanted to vomit and kill him all at once. My thoughts were jumbled. I'd never had sex, but was it possible that he could have raped me, and I not know about it? I didn't think so. There'd be evidence left behind, wouldn't there? Pain, blood. I inhaled through my nose, calming myself. There were no unexplained blackouts while we were in the forest. There was never a time when he could have done that. No doubt he thought I wasn't a virgin, and he was just trying to hurt Luken.

Did Luken believe me? I turned to search his gaze, and the soft look in his eyes told me that he did. Relief washed through me.

"I'm still a virgin," I repeated. "He never touched me."

And even though I was thrilled that Luken would believe me without proof, some small part of my mind whispered, Would it make a difference to him if I wasn't a virgin?

Greyson moved suddenly, dodging for his sword. Luken's hand moved so quickly that all I saw was a blur. He threw the knife at his belt directly into Greyson's eye. Luken turned as he threw it, his expression melting into a thunderous hate. Greyson stumbled. The point of the blade protruded through the back of his skull. His hands fluttered, then he keeled over and lay still.

Luken started to turn toward me, the hatred melting off his face.

Before he could take a step toward me, the oracle lifted their arms toward the sky. The shroud covered ever their hands, preventing me from seeing anything that might indicate their identity.

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“The Gods are pleased that the false contestant has been taken,” the oracle called, as though bringing attention back to them. Their voice was sharp, not containing the undulating wails that they had hidden behind before. Was that desperation I heard? “The final two contestants must fight.”

A ripple of whispers ran through the crowd. My heart seized, and my head jerked around toward Luken. He wasn't going to let this happen, right? We knew that the Gods were trying to overthrow him. This was just another thing. They sent Greyson after me. They had used him to overthrow Luken...

But who would believe it? Who would rise up against the Gods? If Luken stood there and declared he wasn't going to follow the Gods anymore because his brother claimed they'd sent him to overthrow the king...

Well. Luken would be labeled a heretic at best. At worst, Greyson would be claimed as a martyr, and a rebellion would rise in his name.

“My brother tainted the Trials,” Luken said through gritted teeth. “It's an insult to the Gods to continue them. We must hold new Trials to cleanse the ritual.”

My eyes widened. More Trials? After all the death and bloodshed already? My mind flashed to Kael and Ysara. What were their deaths for if the Blood Trials were just going to be held again?

“The Gods see no filth in these two,” the oracle said in that high-pitched wail once more. “They are satisfied with the blood that has been shed thus far. But the Trials must be completed. The sacrifice must be made.”

I shook Thessa's hand off me and stepped away. "The Gods see all."

"They do," the oracle agreed.

"Which means they saw that Greyson—or whoever he is—was a part of it from the start. He may have gained access through deception, but the Gods know all, and they decided to allow it," I quickly said, my hands tightening on the sword.

The oracle hesitated while Luken narrowed his eyes at me. Finally, the oracle said, "Yes."

"Which also means that the Gods know that the king has touched me. He has ignited the fires in my blood. And I've proven my resistance. I've already completed the Trial of restraint, by telling him no and walking away when everything in my body screamed at me to give in." I didn't look at Luken, though my cheeks warmed at my admission.

"They do, and you have," the oracle said, sounding reluctant.

I took a deep breath. Thessa or Darcie. No more time. I have to choose. "Then all I have to do is drive my sword through Thessa's heart, and I'll have won the Blood Trials?"

Something passed over Luken's face, but I ignored it.

The oracle straightened. "Yes."

I turned. Thessa's brown eyes were huge as she stared at me, as though she didn't quite believe what was happening. I looked into her eyes so she could see I was genuine when I whispered, "I'm sorry."

Then I drove my sword straight through her heart.

Chapter 20

Thessa's lips parted, and a dribble of blood trickled down her chin. Her eyes were wide as she stared down at the sword piercing through her body. I yanked it out, gasping at the sick, squelching sound it made. Am I ready now, Emily? My former mentor would be watching. What would she think about this? Would she be proud of me?

It made me sick to think of it.

Thessa's hands moved to the wound in her chest, trying to stem the bleeding. Her dark eyes moved to my face, pain, and betrayal written in them. For half a heartbeat, it seemed as though it was only her and me in this arena.

Thessa slowly sank, as though she knew she was going to fall and was trying to get it out of the way. Her eyes remained locked on mine as she went to her knees. The color rapidly drained from her face as she crumpled backward, dropping to the ground. A loud, harsh ringing buzzed in my ears.

At first, I thought it was the shock of my own actions, but after a moment, I realized it was the winner's anthem being blared throughout the colosseum. All around me, vampires were on their feet and cheering. Others looked disappointed, clapping idly. A few even tore up betting tabs with frustrated expressions.

I dropped to my knees next to Thessa, my heart in my throat. I pressed my hands over hers, firmly pressing to stop the gush of blood. Her eyelids flickered, and her pulse beat in her throat. I needed to speak, but my mouth didn't work.

Everything seemed to be moving slowly around me. Even Luken walking toward us.

His footsteps sounded harsh and loud, even louder than the buzzing of the stadium all around us.

“And we have the betrayer,” the stadium announcer yelled into the microphone. “This year’s winner of the Blood Trials, Elara Tideborne!”

I pulled Thessa into my arms. She was losing blood too rapidly. She wasn’t going to last long. My breathing became ragged as I tucked her head under my chin. I wanted to say I was sorry, but my voice still wouldn’t work. Luken came to a stop next to me, and I looked up at him. His dark eyes were expressionless as he held his hand out to me.

“You’ve won,” he said. “It’s time.”

Snarling, I knocked his hand away. “I want my one wish!”

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My voice came out in an explosion. I'd broken through the cold and shock, and all the fury I felt toward Luken returned in a rush. So he hadn't killed my family. So he had told me the truth. He was still the reason I was still here. He was the reason Thessa was bleeding out and why Ysara and Kael were dead. He was the king, the most powerful man in the kingdom.

If he really wanted me that much, he'd have to prove it. Otherwise, I'd finish the job his brother started and drive a stake through his heart next.

"I won," I screamed, and my voice tore at my throat. "I want my wish! Heal her."

Luken's dark eyes bore into mine as the colosseum fell silent.

"The rules of the game are that she can't be healed," Luken answered, his voice flat.

I sucked in a quick breath. Thessa's heart was slowing. I felt it, weak and jerky, beneath my hand. "Then change her. Turn her into a vampire. Then, her life is done. She won't be able to go back to where she was. Turn her."

Luken only stared at me.

"I'm going to need a bodyguard if I'm to become your personal blood donor," I hissed between my teeth, so quiet only he would hear. "And this is the last time I make that offer. Save her, or I swear, I will kill you."

He looked unmoved.

“What’s this?” the speaker said into the mike. “She’s claiming her prize before completing the final trial? What an arrogant bitch this year’s winner turned out to be!”

I ignored him, my eyes locked on Luken.

“Well, we can see what she wanted from the start now,” the speaker continued, his words in a rush. Desperate to turn the crowd against me. “She’s used the Trials to trick us. And now—”

He fell silent as Luken lifted his hand. The gold of his rings flashed in the sunlight. “What is the place of a king if he cannot show mercy to one who deserves it? We’ve all watched the panther. Can any of us truly say her crime is so terrible to suffer such a fate?”

Was he going to save her? Tears burned against my eyes as I stared at him. The anger and harshness melted away as a slow, approving smile came onto his face. He didn’t speak as he knelt beside me and carefully pulled Thessa slightly toward him. He waved his hand at something—the cameras, maybe?

“Well done. You’ve found a loophole,” he murmured to me.

His fangs lengthened in his mouth. They moved forward, like the fangs of a snake, and glistened translucently. A red liquid pooled in them, and then he plunged them into Thessa’s chest. Her back arched, pushing her upward into his bite. The fangs pierced through, sinking to the gun into her body. Her eyes flew open, and a scream ripped from her lungs.

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, keeping her still as Luken worked. My lungs heaved, and the buzzing was back in my ears. The vampires watching us were all silent, and I didn’t spare a glance to see the emotions on their faces.

When Luken finally pulled back, blood dribbled down his chin. No, not blood. It was as red as blood, but seemed thin and watery. Vampire venom? Was that how they changed the other species into vampires? Luken wiped his chin off and stood.

“Marissa, prepare a room for the new blood,” he ordered.

Thessa moaned. Her eyes fluttered open again. Pain was written on her face. “El-ara?”

“I’m here,” I said, holding her closer. “It’s alright. You’re going to be alright.”

A spike of panic shot through me. What if she wasn’t? What if she didn’t want to be a vampire? I’d made that choice for her. I hadn’t stopped to think that Thessa might rather die. What waited for her now that she was a vampire? Would they send her back to the temples? Had I, in trying to save her, condemned her to a fate even worse?

She let out a slow moan. “So... thirsty...”

She lunged suddenly, fangs blossoming in her jaws. I yelped, but before she could bite me, Luken was there again. He whisked her out of my arms and deposited her into the waiting embrace of a tall, muscular man. This man folded Thessa’s limbs into a tight ball and trotted out of the colosseum as Thessa let out a wail.

“Wait!” she screamed. “I’m so thirsty! Wait!”

Luken watched her go, then turned back to me. He held out his hand, and I hesitated, staring at it.

“Is it a trick?” I asked him doubtfully. “I didn’t finish the Trials...”

He chuckled. “You’ve proven your self-discipline, again and again, Elara. How many people do you think can resist me as much as you have?”

I tried to remind myself that I didn’t have proof, only his word, that he really did want me. But I couldn’t stop my shoulders from slumping in relief. This one triumph was more than I’d started to believe I could have. The question still was, though, how much could I trust the vampire king?

“I didn’t kill them,” Luken’s voice was low, serious as he stared into my eyes. “You do believe that, don’t you?”

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That one question was so... vulnerable. It made tears come to my eyes. I nodded. Gratitude swept through me as I pressed my hand into his. It was over. I found a loophole to save Thessa. And with Luken on my side, we would also find a way to save Darcie. I was certain of it. I wanted to bury my face into his chest and seek all the comfort I'd been denied for four years.

My family wasn't killed because I said no. All the blame I'd laid on myself wasn't justified at all. It was all because of the pettiness of someone I'd never even met, trying to overthrow the king!

"The celebrations will be held as usual," Luken declared, his hand big and firm around mine. "In the meantime, you'll have to excuse me. I have something I need to do."

He grinned at me, his eyes hot with lust. A thrill washed through me. He was going to drink from me. And then I would give him my virginity. I had no reason to hold back now. My blood simmered as I let my gaze move down his pleasing form. How would it feel to finally give into what I'd wanted for years now? The memories of the hot spring were vivid in my mind, but the feel of his skin on mine paled in comparison to the coolness of his hand in mine at this very moment.

A smile started to cross my face when movement near Greyson's body caught my eye. At first, I thought it was the wind blowing his shirt. Then his hand lifted.

"Luken—" I called.

Too late.

Greyson shot upright, yanking the knife out of his eye as he did so. A chill went through me, but even as Luken turned, Greyson's arm snapped out. The knife flashed through the air.

And hit me dead center in my chest.

Chapter 21

The sky was bright blue. It was too bright. The light hurt my eyes. I didn't feel any pain, but I knew I would soon. My limbs were going cold and numb. I was about to fall over. I tried to suck in a breath to steady myself, but my throat didn't seem to work. I couldn't breathe, only watch as Greyson was piled on by vampires. Darkness welled around the peripherals of my vision; I couldn't tell if they were tearing him to pieces or not.

Something warm wrapped around me. I gasped as the pain lanced, spreading like a spiderweb from my chest. Even that single breath hurt. My head fell back as my strength deserted me. Everything seemed to spin as the warmth pulled me closer. Darkness crept in, turning the clear sky black.

A fresh point of pain erupted. The feeling was like two thin needles piercing right above my breast. I gasped again, my lungs burning. At the same time, something warm and wet touched my tongue. I licked it, finding the taste coppery with a tang of salt. Blood. I knew that taste. Had tasted it often enough when I was learning how to fight.

The darkening sky started to lighten. The sounds of distance cries grew closer, as though they were rushing at me. I blinked once, finding that my body responded to my commands again. The pain still lingered, but when I glanced down, it wasn't the knife still wobbling in my chest. It had been taken away. A head of dark hair leaned over me, and I caught a glimpse of golden skin. Warmth slowly started to register.

The feel of lips pressed over my skin.

Luken. He was drinking from me. I realized my lips were pursed around something that dripped that salty, coppery liquid into my mouth. One of his fingers was stuck between my lips. Hewas feeding me even as he drank from me. Was he changing me? Turning me into a vampire?

I didn't have much time to consider. Because he gave a deep pull, and all of a sudden, my body was on fire. My blood had turned to lava as it sloshed through my body. My core tightened, and I could feel my clit enlarging. I arched myself to his touch, wanting more. It wasn't enough to have his lips on me. I needed everything else.

"Luken," I ground out, fighting the arousal, though it was more powerful than anything I'd felt before.

His lips left my skin, and he looked up, his amber eyes blazing. And knowing for certain it was him was all it took to tip me over the edge. I reached out and seized his long hair in my hands, dragging him closer. I needed him more than I needed my next breath. In that moment, he was the whole world. Nothing existed outside of the glow of his eyes.

"Luken," I growled when he resisted my pull. "I want you."

One of his hands came to my hip, pinning me down. "Give it a minute. Healing isn't instantaneous."

"Don't deny me," I begged. "I want you. I want you to be inside of me. I want your body pressed to mine. I need you. Now. Don't make me wait, please."

Nothing was as important as he was. Nothing more desirable than to have my skin fused to his. I tore open his shirt, buttons popping every which way. Luken laughed

and caught my wrists. The smile on his face nearly made me weep. He was so beautiful it was impossible not to stare at him in utter awe. How could he be so magnificent and not a god himself? I wanted to give him my all, the last innocent part of myself. Only that seemed like enough of a tribute, a blood sacrifice for his might.

“Luken,” I breathed out in a prayer. “Please.”

He scooped me into his arms, picking me off the ground. “I told you you’d be begging for it.”

I laughed in delight as he rushed from the colosseum. Giddy elation ran through me as he carried me away from this place and all the pain and bloodshed it contained. There was still a slight ache in my chest, but it was nothing compared to the heat rushing through my body. I curled myself closer to him, cupping his chin in my hand. His scent was divine and I kissed his neck, eager to get a taste of him.

Luken’s arms tightened around me. Wind rushed in my ears. Then he put me down, steadying my feet beneath me. I whimpered, hating to be separated from him.

I pressed myself to my tiptoes and caught his mouth in a kiss. I tasted the blood still on his lips, but I didn’t care. His mouth was so soft and warm, his touch igniting a fire and cooling it all at once. I needed more. My skin was too hot and too tight, and only he could cool the inferno, which was sure to make me burst into flames.

“Wait a moment,” Luken chided.

It occurred to me how ridiculously unfair it was that now he was the one telling me not to get carried away. I gripped his biceps tightly but forced myself to hold still. He’d waited for my yes. I could do the same for him.

“I need to check your injury,” he explained lightly as he carefully lifted my shirt up

over my head.

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“Just tear it off,” I urged. “It’s ruined anyway.”

“I want to enjoy this, Elara. We will have plenty of time for rushed, passionate sex in the future. I want our first time to last as long as possible.” He cupped my cheek with his hand, staring into my eyes. “You want that, too, don’t you?”

I nodded, suddenly breathless. First time. Did he know? Should I say something? “Luken...”

His hand had started to slip down my neck, but he paused and looked questioningly at me. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s just... should we talk about... our histories? I’m a virgin...”

“I know,” he answered softly.

I swallowed hard. “And you are the only one to touch me, but I... there were other vampires who drank from me.”

Luken’s smirk was enough to make me grin back. “I don’t care about your history, Elara. I only care about right here and now. But if there’s anything you want to know...” He trailed off, quirking a heavy brow.

“I... do you...” I floundered, not knowing what I was meant to say now. “I don’t have experience. With others touching me. Except you at the hot springs...” I trailed off, biting my lip. “What I mean is, I’m not sure what to do. I want it to be good for

you, too.”

His eyes widened slightly. One of his arms slid around my waist, and he pulled me closer. “Thank you for telling me, Elara. I will adjust my actions accordingly. I want you to be an active participant with me. Do what feels good, what feels natural. Don’t worry about being awkward, okay?”

I nodded. “And I know it’s going to hurt, so you don’t have to worry about being gentle.”

Nerves flitted in my stomach. Even though I still wanted him more than anything, I started to worry. What if my training kicked in at just the wrong time and killed my desire? What if I wasn’t good at it? What if my instincts were all wrong?

Luken pressed his mouth to mine. My worries melted away as I felt the promise in that kiss. It was safe. That was all I wanted, to feel safe again.

As his hands moved around my body, exploring softly, I let my fingers trail down the front of his shirt. The buttons were already gone, so I moved my hands to his skin. It was soft, cool beneath my fingers. The muscles beneath were hard and gently rounded, defined and strong. Luken moved his mouth from mine to kiss down my jaw. He unhooked my bra and pulled it off me, then stepped back to sweep his gaze over me.

I bit my lip, watching his expression. At the hot springs, we’d both been guarded. Now, I saw the wonder in his eyes. He cupped my breasts in his hands, and a pleasant tingling made them tighten. He leaned down and kissed the burn scar lightly.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “Mostly, though, it’s just... numb. I can’t even feel your

kiss on it.”

A trace of devastation crept into my voice. Because of Greyson, I couldn’t feel Luken’s touch on all of my body. I thought I’d grieved for everything when it came to these injuries, but now something new had opened up. Because of someone else being jealous and bitter, I’d lost something I didn’t even know I could have.

Luken turned my face back to his. “I’m so sorry that you went through that.”

I nodded once, then slid my hands up his shoulder, pushing his shirt off. I watched as a crisscross of scars was brought into view as I pulled the shirt off his body. “Where are yours from?”

“Three hundred and fifty years of fighting,” he answered.

I traced my thumb over a silver scar that ran from his collarbone down over his chest. If I wasn’t this close to him, it wouldn’t even be visible. His hands rested lightly on my hips, letting me take my time as I touched him. When I unbuckled his belt, he let out a soft gasp.

Startled, I froze. “Did I hurt you?”

He laughed breathlessly. “Quite the opposite, my dear. You don’t have to worry about hurting me. I like the pain.” He winked at me.

I was suddenly seized by a boldness. As I continued to unbuckle his pants, I leaned in closer and kissed his breast. “You like it?”

“Yes,” he answered.

I scraped my teeth across his chest, settling at his nipple. I took it between my teeth

and bit, following my instinct. I gauged the pressure of his skin between my teeth, not wanting to get too hard. He gasped and groaned. As he did so, I pushed his pants down to his knees. His cock was hard already, and seemed to twitch as I bit a little harder.

“Gods, Elara. You’re a natural at this.”

I couldn’t help but giggle as I pulled back and licked over the red mark I’d left behind. I reached to take him in hand, but Luken picked me up suddenly. He kicked off his pants as he carried me to a table, setting me on the edge. With a few swift movements, he’d discarded my own pants and tossed them carelessly aside.

“I am going to taste you now,” he told me.

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A shiver ran through me, and I nodded eagerly. Then, I lifted my chin to give him access to my neck. To my surprise, his lips only skimmed over me and moved further down. He kissed and licked his way down my torso before settling on his knees before me. His hands gripped my thighs, spreading them as he pulled me to the edge of the table.

I gripped the edge of the table, my eyes going wide. “There?” I gasped.

He kissed my thigh and laughed. “Where else am I going to taste you?”

“I thought you’d drink from my neck.” My cheeks went warm, warmer than the rest of me.

Luken paused, then chuckled as he kissed me again. “I don’t mean tasting you that way, Elara. Haven’t you heard of oral sex?”

My blush deepened. Of course, I had. I’d even seen it, when I watched the others at the coven have their orgies. Why had it not occurred to me, even with him kneeling before me like that? “I thought men didn’t like doing that.”

“Some men don’t. I do.” Luken moved one hand to my hip. He kept his eyes on me as he slowly kissed his way to the juncture of my thighs.

I watched him, enjoying how his hair spilled out of its braid over his shoulders. He was so handsome it took my breath away. I held my breath as his tongue flicked out, finding my clit almost at once. A bolt zinged through me. My breasts tightened, and my core swelled. My hips jerked, but Luken’s hand on me kept me in place.

“You taste exactly how I thought you would,” he said, humming in pleasure.

He didn’t say much for quite some time after that. His face buried into me as his jaw worked. His tongue and lips moved over me in ways that were as intense as his fingers had been in the hot springs. My body undulated, wanting more and trying to escape the overwhelming sensations all at once. I let my head fall back and groaned. My hands remained locked on the table, afraid that if I released it, I would grab his hair and make him stop.

“Oh, no wonder women go crazy for men,” I moaned. “This is... amazing.”

It wasn’t a good enough word. It was as though I’d reached the final prize in a journey that had done its best to break me. It was as though, up until this moment, I had been lost and alone, and now there was someone who saw me. Was this what sex was, I wondered? Or was this something else? Was it about me and Luken? Would I have felt this same way if it was anyone else with their tongue driving into me?

My thighs trembled on either side of him as I gazed down, my eyes half-closed. He worked me expertly, as though he knew everything that would have me gasping out his name. It was more intense than I could have imagined. But even with this pleasure sweeping through me, a small spike of dissatisfaction crept into me.

It wasn’t enough.

It was wonderful, but I needed him closer. I needed to touch him. I needed to see his eyes darken in pleasure. There was too much space between us like this.

“Luken,” I gasped.

He redoubled his efforts, making me curl inward as I cried out.

“Luken!”

His hand left my hip and wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer.

“I need you,” I whined, rocking my hips to seek more friction even as I wanted more of him. “I want you closer. I’m ready. Take me. I need you.”

“Just a minute,” he urged me, the vibrations doing amazing things to the hardened bud he was working. “You’re close, Elara. Let me give this to you. I want this for you.”

Part of me wanted to tell him it wasn’t necessary, but his voice was deep and husky. The need in his tone left me shaking. I could hold on. I gripped the table tighter and let my gasps grow quicker. His mouth worked more wickedly, igniting the fire as it coursed through me. The tension advanced quickly, and I gasped in a single breath before he traced his tongue in a slow, languid motion, and I came undone. I fell forward, over him, as I cried out.

He caught me and shifted me down off the table, pulling me into his lap. He caught my mouth on his, and we kissed, deeply and passionately as the stars lingered throughout my body. I explored his body with mine, pressing up against him as tight as I could. I reveled in the feeling of our skin against each other.

His fingers tangled in my hair as his tongue tangled with mine in my mouth. I mimicked him, kissing him the way he kissed me. We only broke apart when he lifted me into his arms and stood fluidly.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” he asked, a twinkle in his eye as he carried me to the bed.

“Very much,” I told him seriously.

He laid me on the bed and climbed over me. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, pulling him closer. I didn't want him to leave me, not for anything. Burying my face in his shoulder, I inhaled his scent. He'd done everything I needed him to. He was who I thought he was four years ago. Tears burned my eyes unexpectedly, but I didn't let them take root.

“Do I need to do anything?” I asked him, letting my hands trail down his back. He was unmoving over me, his chest heaving as he nibbled at my skin. “It's time, right? Do I need to...”

I trailed off, not sure what I was asking.

Luken smiled as he leaned back on his elbows. “Just keep doing what you're doing. I love how you're touching me. Your fingers dance over my skin like spots of sunshine. Your touch is everything, Elara. It's like I've never known light until I looked into your eyes.”

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I melted against him, pulling him closer again. I traced down to his ass and cupped it in my hands, enjoying the softness and firmness of his body. He watched me watching him as I moved one hand to comb through his long hair, the other going to his cock. I wrapped my hand around it, my fingertips barely touching, and a shiver moved through me.

“Is something wrong?” he asked as I bit my lip.

“I... I’m worried that you won’t fit. And then you’ll be upset,” I confessed, blushing. I knew he would. He had to, right? That’s what my body was designed for, to be the perfect fit for his. At least, that’s what I felt like it should be.

But I knew all too well that reality wasn’t the same as ‘should be.’

“Don’t be worried,” he told me. “I’m not going to be upset.”

“So you’re worried it won’t fit, too?” I asked, giggling.

He kissed me. “There are plenty of other ways to have pleasure if it doesn’t. But I do need to do more to prepare you.”

Amazingly, disappointment rushed through me. I wanted him inside of me now. I wanted to feel that connection, that closeness.

However, the disappointment and impatience was short-lived when his hand found me. He teased and stretched and worked me with his fingers, bringing me to orgasm several more times. I was helpless beneath his touch; everything was too much and

not enough. And I loved it. I begged him for more. Every time he brought me to climax, it just deepened the sensations. I needed more. I stroked his cock when I could, amazed that he could stay hard for so long. His self-discipline was better than mine. He must have been going crazy with desire, but he held back, wanting to make sure I was ready enough.

Finally, both of our bodies coated in sweat, he lay over me and pressed against my entrance. He met my eyes and kissed me tenderly as he started to enter me. I braced myself, my hands on my shoulders.

There was no pain until he was fully inside of me. At first, it was only pressure and pleasure. Then, as he started to move, pain pierced through me. I winced, gasping, but the pain only enhanced my arousal. Luken gasped, too, but didn't change his rhythm. Our eyes were locked together as he moved inside of me. The intensity I'd felt to this point paled in comparison as we moved together. I matched him, rocking my body in time with his.

We could have been like that for minutes or hours. The world disappeared and all that existed was him and me, linked together. My orgasm hit me suddenly, making my back arch and a gasp escape my throat. Luken tenderly kissed my throat and released himself as well. His movement grew jerky, the pistoning of his hips losing their rhythm. A new heat flared inside of me, and I held him closer, tighter, until I knew we'd both be bruised from it.

It was only then that I became aware that the pain was still there. Only, it wasn't inside of me as I expected. It sat on my skin, a faint burning on my belly and chest. I ignored it as long as I could, but when Luken shifted backward, I glanced down.

And gasped.

A spiderweb full of swirls and whorls had crept over my skin. Intricate patterns

covered my torso, from my hips all the way up my chest to my collarbone. They were a faint amber-gold pattern, but when Luken traced the pattern with his finger, they turned to a solid black. The same pattern was mirrored on his stomach and chest. I touched the tattoo that had appeared on him, and it shifted to black as well.

“What is this?” I asked, confused.

“It’s proof of our connection.” Luken eased out of me, and I winced. I was more raw than I’d realized. He kissed me lightly as he shifted his weight to lay next to me. His fingers continued to trace the patterns, a satisfied look on his face.

“You’re special to me, Elara. I don’t think you realize how special,” he said musingly. “I’ve met hundred of people in my lifetime. And I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

Warmth started to spread through me. Luken’s hands cupped my face. His gaze grew intense as he gripped me tightly.

“Never forget this. It will be true whatever happens,” he breathed.

A shiver broke through the perfect fairytale that had been building in my mind. “What’s going to happen?”

“Plenty before this is over,” he answered, his tone grim.

I swallowed hard, not liking the look in his eye. All of a sudden, I realized that this wasn’t the ending of a story. It wasn’t the moment when everything else would just fall together and allow me to sink into his arms, safe and warm forever. A creeping unease stole over me. It was just the beginning.

I didn’t want to dwell there, but the question came out before I could stop it. “You

said that you couldn't save Thessa. So why did you?"

"You found a workaround," he answered. "So I could after you made your request."

"I thought... I thought you were the one that implemented the Blood Trials," I said hesitantly.

A humorless grin stretched his lips. "I did. But it wasn't by my choice. The Gods told me what to do. They said they would send famine and plague on the kingdom if I didn't. A few dozen sacrifices every year for the safety of the rest of the kingdom was worth it. So I set it up, let people think I was using the gods as an excuse to have my bloodsport."

"The Gods... speak to you? Personally?" I asked, going still.

He smiled back. "Sometimes, yes. I've been working to loosen their power and their hold on our world for many hundreds of years. Always keeping to the shadows so they wouldn't know. But now?" He pressed his lips to my palm. "Now, everything is about to change."

Chapter 22

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 2:57 am

When I woke the next morning, there was a pleasant ache through my body. I felt as though I'd gone hard in a workout the previous night—which, looking back, I definitely did. I stretched, noting a particular soreness between my legs. It was the same sort of pleasant ache that came from a day of successful training.

“Morning,” I murmured as I opened my eyes.

I was alone.

I pushed myself up, letting the blankets fall around my waist. The big room was bathed in golden sunlight, and without Luken to distract me, I took in my surroundings. We were in the same room I'd been brought to for the masque. Slipping out of bed, I padded over to the massive library stacked up against the wall. Finally, I was going to have time to indulge my reading. I hadn't read anything but instructional books for four years.

I'd saved Thessa. I gave up my one wish to do it, but Luken was powerful, and he was ready to challenge the Gods. He'd save Darcie. I was sure of it.

I glanced down at myself, at the vivid tattoos spread over my torso. They were beautiful. I touched them, and winced when my fingers traced the rough texture of my scars. So, I wasn't miraculously healed. Like Luken told me—it seemed like ages ago—they were a testament of my strength. But thinking of my scars made me think of something else.

The bed was crumpled, and I returned to it, throwing back the blankets to check the sheets. There were smears of blood on the sheets that had dried to a brownish-red,

transferred from my body. Some of it was mine. Some of it was Thessa's. I smirked as I started to strip it off.

The door opened and I turned, but it wasn't Luken who entered. A vampire woman with glowing blue eyes came in. I covered myself, but she didn't seem to notice my lack of dress.

"Good morning, my lady," she greeted with a curtsy. "I'm here to prepare you for the feast."

"Feast?" I repeated.

"The celebration to honor the lives sacrificed during the Blood Trials," she answered, peeking at me through her lashes. "And to celebrate you as the winner."

I nodded. Still, with a blanket around me, I went to the bathing room, where I ran myself a bath. The maid kept trying to do things for me, so I finally sent her to the main room while I scrubbed myself clean. She had selected an appropriate cocktail dress by the time I was done. She did my hair and makeup quickly, perhaps sensing my impatience.

Luken would be at the feast. He must have had urgent business to take care of and that's why he left. I hardly noticed the way she put my hair up, and I certainly didn't spare a glance in the mirror before I left the bedroom. The maid led me to a large dining hall. A dozen or so vampires were already there, including Marissa. She smiled and whispered to the elegantly dressed woman next to her. She was a tall redhead with glowing green eyes and gave me a quick, dismissive look.

Disappointment hit my stomach. Luken wasn't here at all.

Quickly, though, that disappointment turned. "Thessa!"

I hurried over to where Thessa stood in a corner, tugging at the tight-fitting dress she wore. Her eyes glowed brown, and when she glanced at me, I thought I had seen fear in them. But then her shoulders relaxed. A small, hesitant smile crossed her face, and she nodded once at me. I slid to stand next to her, my back to the wall. The vampires milled about, murmuring to each other.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Thessa, staring intently at her. I had no idea what changes happened when someone was turned into a vampire.

“Different,” Thessa answered. She held a glass in her hand, and with the ring finger of her other hand, she traced circles around the lip. “You make them nervous.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

Thessa jerked her chin toward the other vampires, who quickly pretended like they hadn’t been watching us. “They don’t know what your presence means. I think the only one who isn’t worried is that silver-eyed woman.”

Marissa glanced over, laughed, and linked her arm through the redhead’s.

With a delicate shudder, Thessa turned slightly, so her back was more toward the other vampires. Her gaze landed heavily on me. “You entered the Blood Trials to save Darcie, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“But you used your one wish to save me instead.”

I nodded again. Though my stomach cramped when I thought of Darcie still out there, still doomed to be sacrificed, but we had several months yet. “It won’t happen until the end of the year. It gives me time. I’m the king’s donor now. I have more power

than I used to.”

Thessa’s eyes grew distant as she touched the pendant at her throat. “So do I. I received a pardon. I’m not marked for death, and I’m a vampire... no lands, no money, but I have the blood. And you.” A fierce look of determination swept over her face as she turned to seize my hands. “Promise me that we’ll get Darcie out. Promise me that you didn’t trade her life for mine.”

“I swear it,” I told her seriously. “We will save her.”

Thessa nodded, drawing herself more upright. Her gaze swept over the gathered vampires again. None of them, not even Marissa, watched us. “It won’t be easy... the location of the temples moves every day. We’ll have to find where they are if we’re going to get her out before it’s too late.”

“Wait, the location changes?” I gaped.

Thessa nodded. “We never knew what would be outside the door when we woke up in the mornings. It’s one of the reasons we had such a strict curfew. If you’re outside of the temple walls when they move, then you’re left behind. It’s how I got away. I slipped out just before it moved.”

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There was so much that I didn't know about the world I lived in. I'd have to study harder if I was going to figure it out. "But Luken will know. He'll help us."

As though drawn by my words, the huge double doors at the far end of the room opened. Luken was announced as he strode in, wearing all black. A pleased smile played about his lips. His eyes met mine quickly, and his smile widened. Mine did, too. My heart fluttered, and Thessa gave me a quick, searching glance.

"You do know he won't be able to come with us, right? Men can't get to the temples unless they're specifically invited. And if the Gods know we're coming to take Darcie, they won't let him near. We'll have to go without him." She spoke rapidly under her breath. There was a strange note to her voice, like she distrusted that Luken would come with us regardless.

The thought of leaving him again made my stomach clench but I pushed it aside. I'd get Darcie, and come back. After feeling the way he touched me last night and seeing the look in his eye as he moved in me, I knew one thing for certain.

I loved him.

I'd loved him for four years. I fell in love the moment I saw him. And from the way he looked at me, the way he mourned me when he thought I was dead, I was pretty sure he loved me, too.

"Welcome, friends." Luken spread his arms, grinning at everyone. "I'm glad to see my closest companions all here, gathered for a feast. I present to you my new donor, Elara Tideborne. Elara."

He held his hand out to me. My heart skipped a beat as I went to him, taking his hand. Our skin tingled where it touched. He lifted my palm to his lips and pressed my wrist into his nose, inhaling deeply.

“Ahhh. You smell even better, knowing what you taste like. It’s a shame we can’t have our own feast like last night.” He winked at me, causing me to blush.

I felt like a teenager again. Everything had worked out. With Luken, I was going to save Darcie, and then I’d have the charmed life I wanted. The man who killed my family was punished for it. I’d found the loophole to save Thessa and I would find another one to save Darcie.

Luken pulled a chair out for me, then took the one next to me. Marissa sat on my other side, and Thessa was placed at the far end of the table. Servants came out with plates laden with food. Roast meat, savory pies, seasoned vegetables. It was more than I’d ever seen before, and my mouth watered. I’d heard that vampires enjoyed indulging in normal food, even if it didn’t sustain them the way blood did. I started to load my plate, suddenly ravenous.

Marissa served herself a delicate portion of roast lamb and cleared her throat. “Well, Elara. You’ve won the Blood Trials, and you have a place at the king’s table and in his bed. What’s the first thing you’re going to do with this new life of yours?”

I smiled. “I had a sister survive the slaughter of my family.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Luken lowering his fork.

“She was taken from the nunnery where I recovered from my burns and claimed as a tribute for the Gods. It’s her final year before she’s sacrificed.” I fought back the sick feeling that filled me. I wasn’t alone in this anymore. “Thessa and I are going to find the temples and get my sister out before that can happen.”

Marissa's eyes widened. Several of the other vampires grew quiet and shot almost...fearful looks at Luken.

"You will do no such thing," he rumbled.

I turned, my gaze briefly catching Thessa's. Her hands clenched into fists, staring wide-eyed at me. Before I could tell Luken exactly what I meant, he continued.

"I will not allow you to leave."

My whole body jolted as though he'd struck me. Not allow me? When did I agree to be his property? My hands clenched into fists. I tried to remind myself that he was probably just concerned for me. But I didn't like it.

"You won't allow me?" I repeated softly. "I'm not asking for permission. Everything I've done, is to save my sister. I'm not going to let the Gods kill her. She's the only family I have left."

Luken leaned back in his chair, his eyes still narrowed.

"You can't keep me here against my will," I spat. As soon as I did it, I realized I was saying the wrong things. I needed to explain to him that as soon as Darcie was free and safe, I'd be more than happy to stay with him—I just didn't like him making unilateral decisions for me as though I had no mind of my own.

He recognized that now wasn't the best place for us to have this discussion, too. Not with all the staring eyes. He pushed back his chair and held his hand to me. I took it, grateful that he reached out to me still. He pulled me to my feet rougher than I expected. His arm wrapped tightly around my waist, and he half-carried me out of the room. I caught a glimpse of startled faces before we were in a closet.

Luken's hard body pressed up against mine, and a fire swept through my veins. Even angry at him, I couldn't help but enjoy the feeling of him against me. And judging by his hardening length, he was just as intoxicated by my presence.

The fantasy was short-lived.

"I very well can keep you here, or anywhere else for that matter, as long as I want," he snarled, his face inches from mine. "I'm the king. My word is law in this kingdom."

"Then you'll send for my sister and get her out of the temples," I answered quickly. "You'll have her brought here, and I won't have a reason to want to leave."

Luken's amber eyes blazed more brightly. "Is that what this has all been about, then? Your sister?"

"Everything I've done, it's been for her."

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His hand roughly grasped my hip and pulled me tight against him. “Is that why you gave me your virginity? Because you thought it would buy your sister’s life?”

My fingers curled into his shirt. “I slept with you because I want you. Because I’ve felt the connection between us for four years, even when I hated you. But you said... last night...” I struggled to remember his exact words and gave up. “You’re the king. You can get her back.”

Luken snarled lightly. “I wish I’d fucking known that’s what you wanted before now. All that talk about saving your team, and this random panther girl! What were you thinking? You should have asked for your sister if you wanted to save her.”

The heat of his touch cooled. My scalp prickled. “Luken...”

“There was a prophecy long ago. Only a king united with his true mate can defeat the Gods and free this land from their cruel grip.” Luken’s own grip tightened. His fingers bruised my skin. “You are my true mate, Elara. I knew it the moment I saw you. And you knew it, too. It’s why you have felt this draw to me, even when you didn’t want it.”

I remained silent, trying to process what he was saying.

He nuzzled my neck, inhaling my scent. “The moment our eyes met, we both felt it. That connection. From the instant I saw you, I knew you were meant to be mine. That your blood would make me stronger than anything else. You were the one that would fulfil the prophecy.”

Was that all it was, then? The prophecy is what brought us together? I tried to think of it as a romantic fate but I couldn't quite get there. This was all so... confusing.

"It's why my brother targeted you. It's why your family was killed, because he was trying to keep me from getting you. You have no idea how powerful I will be with you at my side, Elara." He touched my chin, and this time, he was gentle. "It's why the Gods set my brother up to do their dirty work. I will overthrow them, and you are central to those plans."

"If you want to overthrow them, then you can make your first act saving my sister," I said quickly.

Luken shook his head. "I have not been laying plans for a hundred years just to throw it away on a bitch I've never met."

I shoved him hard. "Don't call my sister a bitch!"

"She is nothing. You are my mate, and I'm yours. The tattoos that appeared on our bodies when we fucked prove it," he said. "I am your mate, Elara. I'm the only one you need."

"It's not about needing anyone," I tried.

Both of Luken's hands cupped my face, staring intently into my eyes. "You shouldn't have lied to me. I gave you the girl. You can't expect that I will be able to move the heavens to get what you want. Nor will I. I have far more things to care about than the life of someone you don't even know anymore."

I couldn't hide my shock. Couldn't even try to. "You're being cruel," I whispered.

"That is because I am a cruel man, Elara. After three hundred years of ruling this kingdom, my own brother stabbing me in the back..." He shook his head, his eyes

never leaving mine. “No. You give me my strength, and I will not let you go. You will stay here, with me, at all times. We will marry and fuck, and I’ll drink your blood, and it will give me what I need to defeat these false gods.”

His grip tightened again. Not painfully, but the look in his eye said it wasn’t a discussion. He’d made up his mind and chose my fate.

I kept making the same stupid mistakes.

He didn’t save me because he loved me. He didn’t care about my death because it hurt him to his soul. No. It was just because if I was dead, he wouldn’t have access to this strength. I was a tool to him, something to increase his power.

It felt as though my chest was torn open. The same bleeding pain that I’d suffered while lying helpless in the hospital bed came back to me in a rush. He wasn’t going to help me save Darcie. I had to fight him to save her... and myself. And I’d shown him my hands. I’d given him my heart and now he crushed it in his hands.

I closed my eyes, forcing the numbness I needed to fill me.

“Very well,” I said flatly.

“You understand?” he asked, his breath on my face.

I nodded. I understood perfectly. He betrayed me. And I would never forgive him. I would hate him for this. I would hate him until I was dead.

THE END