



# Ever Dark Academy: Vol. 1

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**Category:** Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Grayson Duke hates Vampires. His curse of telekenisis ruined his life and now with Vampires being out and proud, people are suddenly noticing the odd things that happen around him. Floating objects? Check. People being thrown through the air? Double check. His goal is to be unnoticed, but with Vampires being real, everyone is looking for the next magical thing and he's it. So when a bleeding man stumbles into his store and tells Grayson a dark secret with his dying breath, Grayson can't believe his bad luck. Because the only place he'll be safe now is at Ever Dark Academy, the school for humans who want to be Vampires.

Weryn Vampire Lord Ryder hates Ever Dark Academy. Weryn Vampires are pack and they alone choose who joins their Bloodline. Yet he's been ordered to pick the Weryn's fledglings from the academy's students only. But he doesn't intend to follow that order. That is until Grayson Duke is literally thrust into his arms. One look into Grayson's eyes and Ryder knows this student must be his mate even if it might bring the whole academy down.

**WARNING:** This is a long serial that is divided into book-length segments. Every single one ends in a cliffhanger. We anticipate there being 9 volumes.

**Total Pages (Source):** 89

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:39 am*

## CHOSEN

“Vampires are real,” the beautiful young man said. He was smiling and serene. His purple eyes were mesmerizing. Even over the crappy, convenience store television set with the occasional loss of signal and fuzziness, he made the viewer want to hear everything he had to say, and believe it, too. “And tonight we’re going to start to answer your questions about them, and even tell you how you might become one.”

A female newscaster interrupted the segment stating, “As many of you already know, that is Julian Harrow, son of the famous explorers and television personalities, Jack and Joanna Harrow, who, until recently, were dead.”

She glanced down at her notes, as if she wanted to confirm that part was true, though it had been stated time and time again by other reporters, confirmed by scientists, and affirmed by almost every country on earth. Vampires and people coming back from the dead were real and it just got stranger after that.

“But, most importantly, Julian Harrow is the Vampire Prince,” she said, her voice lifting at the word Vampire. “He is the one and only fledgling of Vampire King Daemon whose school for aspiring Vampires is opening tomorrow. Or, as it is always night in the Ever Dark, where the school is located, we should say it will be opening tomorrow night.”

She paused and smiled at the audience as if to see if they all got her little joke.

“Julian and his best friend--an Eyros Bloodline Vampire--Christian Thorne are recording a series of videos that will be shared with the public,” she said, showing

just a trace of traditional media's disdain for Youtube content creators. But considering the sleek and glamorous video of Julian Harrow she'd just shown no one could truly deny that the series didn't look incredibly professional. "They are documenting their own and the Harrows' journeys to becoming Vampires. Our understanding is that another segment will be aired--"

Grayson Duke changed the channel on the television to another of the nightly news programs. He wanted to see the weather. Rain streaked the glass door of the convenience store, making the outside street lights blur and causing passersby to hunch over as the rain pelted their heads. But every program it seemed was focused on the opening of Ever Dark Academy. Grayson grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was think about Vampires or, more accurately, was to have anyone else thinking about Vampires and their gifts.

I wonder if they consider them curses, too, Grayson thought sourly.

Ever since the existence of preternatural beings had been confirmed, that was all anyone and everyone wanted to talk about. And, worryingly, it had opened some minds to the possibility of other things being real, too. And Grayson really didn't want that.

It made Grayson nervous, because before it had become common knowledge that the paranormal was real, mistakes he made with his own gift were easily explained away. A trick of the light. Something in a person's eye. A freak occurrence. But now people were willing to believe and that led to all sorts of problems.

Before he could change the channel again he had to set down the remote as a customer had come up to the till wanting to be rung up.

As Grayson scanned the barcodes on the man's purchases--a gallon of milk, Slim Jims, Cheetos, and a package of Trojan ribbed condoms, which Grayson thought

were just wishful thinking--another newscaster spoke up.

This time it was a man with a plastic smile and unmoving hair, who said, “Only 100 people from all around the world were chosen to attend this first class of Ever Dark Academy after a rigorous vetting process.”

“Is it true, Karl, that the students were all interviewed by Eyros Bloodline Vampires? You know, the ones that can read minds?” His bubbly blonde co-anchor asked.

She was all wide-eyed as if this was new to her. But Grayson was certain that every reporter around the world could repeat the names of the Vampire Bloodlines--there were 11--and what their powers were--each one was different and they ranged from reading minds to bringing back the dead--without missing a beat. But it appeared that these newscasters were pretending to be their own audience. Though, again, Grayson wondered if anyone with access to a television or the internet was unaware of the Vampires and what they could do now. But perhaps hearing about them on their local nightly news made their existence less impossible.

“That is true, Candi! The Immortal Eyros himself did the final sweep of their minds!” Karl answered her with a megawatt smile in return. “But that was just one part of the vetting process, which I’m told was extraordinarily rigorous.”

“Can you imagine letting someone in your head like that?” the male customer asked as Grayson stuffed the man’s purchases into a paper bag. “I mean, fuck yeah, eternity, but fuck no, knowing about my private thoughts.”

The male customer’s face was heavily lined with exhaustion and hard living. Grayson wondered though if he truly had any secrets that a Vampire would care about, let alone be shocked by. In his 24 years of life, Grayson had found that most people were intensely boring.

Their secrets were about cheating on their partners, having the “wrong” kind of kink or talking behind their friends’ backs. He didn’t look down upon them for living lives that really wouldn’t cause a Vampire to lift an eyebrow. After all, he had the opposite problem. He had real secrets that he was pretty damned sure would keenly interest the immortals and humans as well. He would never allow his mind to be read if he could help it.

Guess no academy for me, he thought mirthlessly.

Yet Grayson found himself asking, “But if you really had a chance to live forever would you turn it down just because someone wants to look in your head one time?”

The man, who had a toothpick in his mouth, switched it from one side to the other before answering, “They’re never going to choose people like us to join their immortal, perfect life, are they?”

Without waiting for Grayson to answer, he picked up his purchases and left. The bell over the door to the convenience store rang loud and clear to mark his passage.

Like us? Grayson thought as he closed the till’s drawer again.

He and the man probably shared some things in common. They were both poor, lived in a dangerous part of the city, likely both worked a dead end job, and wondered if their futures were going to be any different than their presents. While some might believe there was always a brighter tomorrow, Grayson knew that sometimes you just had to pray that your life didn’t get worse. But that was where the similarity in their lives likely ended. He and the customer were nothing alike.

Grayson scrubbed his hands through his thick, dark brown hair that was long on the top and shaved on the sides. It was the easier hairstyle for him to maintain without having to spend precious dollars at the barbershop or beg a friend of a friend to trim

it.

He saw a reflection of himself in the little mirror that Tandy had glued to the top of the register to check that she didn't have lipstick on her teeth. He looked pale and his angular face appeared drawn. His skin was a little too tight over his high cheekbones and around his square jaw. His light gray eyes were shadowed. He was already exhausted and it was only 10:30 pm. His shift wouldn't end until 6 am the next morning when Tandy relieved him.

He grabbed a Coke from the mini-fridge under the counter and popped it open, taking a deep swallow of the sweet, carbonated beverage. He had to stay awake. He'd not been sleeping well since the Vampires had outed themselves several months before.

He didn't think they were emissaries of Satan or demons in disguise or anything like that, which was causing some people to go out hunting them—unsuccessfully, of course—with crosses and wooden stakes. He'd just been having dreams. His memories of them were hazy at best, but they woke him up leaving him feeling breathless, exhilarated and terrified at the same time.

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The cobwebs of them left him not sure what was real and what was not when he made his way down the stairs from his small rat-hole apartment above the convenience store to start his shift. Manny had let him rent it incredibly cheap as a perk of working the late shift. The shop had been robbed a few times and no one wanted to work there after that. Now that the Vampires had shown up no one really wanted to work after dark. But Grayson wasn't afraid of being on his own. The gift that had made his life Hell also kept him safe now.

Now that I can mostly control it, he thought.

His attention went back to the television. The newscasters were still talking about the Vampires and their school.

"I suppose if you're interviewing people that you're going to spend all of eternity with you have to be a little choosie!" Candi laughed too brightly.

"Right you are, Candi! But more than that, there are ten very different Vampire Bloodlines that will be required to find their fledglings among the students," Karl answered just as brightly. "The eleventh, of course, is Daemon's Bloodline, but Julian will be his only fledgling."

"So the Vampires can't just pick someone off the street and turn them?" Candi asked. She really did make these canned lines almost seem natural.

"They used to, but as part of the Blood Pact between humans and Vampires, it has been agreed that only students at the academy are eligible to be turned into Vampires," Karl reminded her and the audience. "So they need to have a large

selection of different types of candidates, I assume.”

“So will everyone at the academy be chosen to be turned?” Candi asked, shuffling the papers in front of her.

“No, not everyone. Though the candidates are referred to as students and the academy is a school of sorts, the truth is that while they will be learning about Vampires, of course, they will really continue being tested,” Karl explained.

“Tested? But what are the Vampires looking for exactly? Is there something similar about the candidates?” Candi asked.

“Not that I could tell, but our audience should make its own determination,” Karl said, turning fully back to the camera. “As you know from our own Bryce Williams’ interviews with several of these students, they share little in common!”

A segment of one of those interviews flashed across the screen. The first student was an elderly Japanese man. The white hair on his head was thinning so that some of his scalp could be seen through the fine strands. His skin had the papery appearance that many elderly people got. But his dark eyes were alight with intelligence and life. He was dressed neatly in all black, hands folded almost primly in his lap. He smiled at the interviewer, one Bryce Williams, with benevolence and patience.

“So Mr. Goda, I have to admit that you are not the typical person I would expect the Vampires would choose as a potential fledgling,” Bryce stated with an uncertain smile on his Ken-doll like face.

Grayson guessed that Mr. Goda could have easily taken offense at this statement on multiple levels and multiple ways.

But Mr. Goda smiled warmly and answered, “I wondered to myself if they would

take someone of my advanced years. After all, when we see Vampires in the media, they are always young and beautiful. I am none of those things.”

Grayson had to agree with Mr. Goda. Not about his looks, but about his age. Eiji looked to be in his 80s. Though now that real Vampires were presenting themselves for interviews, there was far more variety in age, race and body type than he had assumed there would be. He admitted he had believed that they would all be Eastern European in appearance with pale faces and sharp teeth. There were plenty of people that fit that stereotype, but far more that didn't. In fact, there were Vampires from every country on the planet. They were everywhere or so it seemed. Or so it was feared

“You're quite handsome, Mr. Goda,” Bryce told him kindly.

“Eiji, please. I am beyond such vanity now, I hope,” Eiji Goda said with a quiet chuckle.

“Eiji, and please call me Bryce. Now what made you want to become a Vampire?” Bryce asked, putting on a serious expression as if he could pick emotions out of a closet and try them on for size.

Eiji cocked his head to the side in an almost birdlike manner. He seemed so frail that Grayson worried his neck would snap from the movement. He sincerely hoped that whatever testing was done in the academy that it didn't require physical exertion because it looked like a weak wind might be able to carry him away with it.

“Ah, I see what you mean. In some ways, I imagine that people look at me—having had a full and satisfying life—and hope that I would be content to go into the next one,” Eiji suggested, even as it was clear that he did not agree with that viewpoint. “Wanting immortality at my age might seem greedy.”

Bryce put on a concerned expression. “I think that since most of us will never get the opportunity to become immortal that we look to our elders to accept that we move on from this life. I think there is, well, panic now at the thought of death, even though we’ve been assured there is something beyond it, because there is a choice where there seemingly wasn’t before. To see that someone, as you yourself described, after having a long, satisfying life still wants to become a Vampire... well, I think it makes people more nervous about their own mortality.”

Eiji nodded, also looking serious, but then a small, almost impish smile, played over his wizened face as he said, “I cannot speak for others, only myself, but I can say that my 82 years on this planet have not been enough by half. If I was content to pass on, I would not have applied to the academy and the Vampires would not have accepted me. So do not look to me as an example of those who would find contentment in another life, but one that will fight with all he has to stay in this one.”

Bryce smiled back. “So you’re saying that you’re an example for those in their golden years who don’t want to fade away?”

“Exactly. And I would argue, Bryce, that young people are the least able to know if they wish to live forever,” Eiji smiled kindly as he said it. “Remember that old adage: youth is wasted on the young.”

The segment ended and it went back to Karl and Candi.

“What an interesting fellow!” Candi exclaimed. “Are all the students like him?”

“Eighty-two years old and a successful businessman out of Tokyo? No, but I do have to say that each candidate is quite impressive. Let’s watch another interview of an Ever Dark Academy student,” Karl enthused.

The screen changed to show the Ken-doll like Bryce sitting opposite a plump, smiling

Indian woman who looked to be in her early thirties. Her smile was wide, but there was a wariness in her brown eyes as she regarded Bryce, but Grayson couldn't decide whether it was personal to the reporter or if she was just naturally cautious. Dressed in a black pants suit with a bright red scarf, she looked like a highly successful professional.

“Now, your name is Amara Biswas, correct?” Bryce asked. “I should say Dr. Biswas?”

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“Yes, it is such a pleasure to speak with you Bryce,” Amara answered in a British-accented voice, which was precise, but warm. “My parents and I have watched your program for many years.”

“Thank you so much. I’m thrilled to have you on. Now.” Bryce regarded her with bright eyes. “From what our producers found out about you, is that you’re a medical doctor?”

“Yes, an oncologist.” There was the slightest pause before she gave her speciality. “But I no longer see patients. I am doing research for Dewar Pharmaceuticals.” Then she gave a lopsided smile as she quickly amended, “Well, I was until I was accepted into the academy. We are, as you know, required to give up our former lives when we become a candidate.”

“So you aren’t trying to get some Vampire blood for Dewar?” Bryce waggled his eyebrows at her.

Amara looked alarmed. “No, indeed not. Even if I am chosen and turned, I will not be allowed to return to Dewar. That is not allowed.”

“So you’re giving up all of your research on solving the problem of cancer for a chance to be immortal?” Bryce asked, and there was a touch of judgment in that.

“No, I think of it as allowing me to conduct research at a far higher level for a far longer time,” she corrected him stiffly. “Being a Vampire will allow me to do more for humanity without having... well, without having some of our frailties.”

“As a scientist, was it harder for you to believe in the existence of Vampires than say a less educated guy like me?” Bryce asked self-depreciatingly.

“On the contrary, I think it was easier because the Vampires provided proof of what they were,” she answered and there was a scientist’s gleam in her eye. “In that moment, when proof was given, the whole world opened up like a flower. The possibilities, Bryce... oh, the possibilities.”

Bryce gave her an almost conspiratorial look as he asked, “I’ve asked the other students this that I’ve had the honor of interviewing so I hope you don’t mind me asking you.”

“What is the question?” Those intelligent brown eyes focused on the reporter.

“What Bloodline are you hoping to get chosen by?” Bryce asked, scooting forward to the edge of his seat.

Suspicion left her eyes and Amara laughed throatily. “Oh! That is a good question. But surely you know that it is best if I do not answer.”

“Best?” Bryce gave her a quizzical look.

“While I may think I have a preference now, I have not met Vampires from each Bloodline so I truthfully could not say what Bloodline I’d want,” she answered. “But, even if I did know, I would keep it to myself in order to increase the possibility of my being chosen by any of the Bloodlines. My goal is to become a Vampire to serve humankind.”

“But surely a doctor such as yourself would be intrigued by being a Kaly Bloodline Vampire and be able to raise the dead! Or—”

“A Wyvern Bloodline Vampire who can teleport around the world in moments? Or a Syrin Bloodline Vampire who can use song to heal? Or a Weryn Bloodline Vampire who can shift into an animal form?” Amara shook her head. “They are all incredible. How could anyone be disappointed with any one of those gifts?”

Bryce gave her a bashful look. “When you put it like that, doctor, I think I see your point.”

The screen went back to Karl and Candi in the studio.

“Well, she is impressive, too! What an interesting bunch they all are,” Candi said.

“Indeed. We only got to speak to half a dozen of the students. The identity of the rest has been kept secret from the general public,” Karl explained.

“So for those of us Harry Potter fans is there a train involved in getting to the academy?” Candi wheedled. “The school is in the Ever Dark, which is an alternate or pocket dimension--no human seems quite sure--that can be accessed via hidden gateways. So how are students going to arrive?”

“My understanding is that they will receive written instructions. A literal invitation or golden ticket as it were, which will tell them where to go and when exactly to get there,” Karl answered. “We haven’t seen the invitations. That’s all hush-hush, but I’m sure we’ll learn more soon.”

The bell over the door rang and Grayson turned to see who it was. He let out a slight sigh as he caught sight of Sam. Sam was homeless with a severe drinking problem. Grayson often had bought him food and a blanket. Normally though when Sam came in on his own it was because he had enough money to buy booze.

But it’s cold and wet tonight. It’s too late to get into a shelter, not that he’d go, so can

I really deny him this small comfort? Grayson thought. Maybe I can convince him to just bed down in the back room out of the rain.

“Sam, hey,” Grayson said. “Need a dry, warm spot to get out of the rain?”

“G-Grayson,” Sam’s words were already slurred and the reek of alcohol surrounded him like a miasma already. “Just got to get something to drink to warm me on the inside.”

Grayson grimaced again as the homeless man tottered towards the back case where the cheap beer and rot-gut whisky was.

“What about some water and a little food instead?” Grayson called after him. “You can stay my whole shift... if you don’t drink.”

Sam waved him off and kept shuffling towards the cooler. “Just need a drink. No worries.”

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Grayson was about to make another offer when the bell jangled more harshly than usual as something burst through the door. He turned his head in annoyance as the figure--a man in a trenchcoat, half keeling over--stumbled into the store. At first, Grayson thought it was another drunk person as they staggered over to him. But that thought fled as soon as they leaned heavily on the counter and bright, red droplets of blood dripped onto the counter before Grayson.

The man looked up with wide, frightened eyes, and begged, "Help me! You've got to help me! They're trying to kill me!"

### TRICK OF THE LIGHT

"Help me!" The man repeated and this time he spat up blood.

"Oh, my God," Grayson breathed as he realized the man had been stabbed.

Beneath the trenchcoat the man wore a suit with a white shirt. A dark, red stain was spreading all across his chest like a new continent. Grayson pulled off the button down shirt he had on over his sleeveless black t-shirt. He immediately balled it up and pressed it against the center of the wound.

"Sam?! SAM?!" Grayson called to the homeless man who was hovering at the back of two aisles, lips parted in shock and rheumy eyes wide. "I need a little help here!"

"I-I don't know, Grayson," Sam warbled, looking pale and swaying on his feet, but he did take a step towards Grayson and the man. "I don't want to get involved in this. You shouldn't either."

“C’mon, Sam, I need your help! I just need you to hold this shirt over his wound really tight,” Grayson begged. “Then I can call 911.”

“Cops?!” Sam’s head jerked right and left as if looking for the dreaded police.

Grayson winced. While many of the police officers were kind to Sam, some of them weren’t. But all of them were constantly telling him to “move it along” and “you can’t sleep here” and “publicly intoxicated again, Sam? Got to bring you in” and other unpleasant things. So the homeless man feared them all.

They weren’t Grayson’s favorites either. For a moment, he saw the swirl of red and blue lights, a man in uniform squatting in front of him asking him questions he couldn’t answer, and the world blurred by tears. But he pushed those thoughts away. This man was dying. Old fears would not control his present actions. That was something the streets had taught him. Get too locked onto the past and one missed things in the present that would keep one alive or kill one stone dead.

“He needs an ambulance,” Grayson said gently, but firmly. “Sam, please!”

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.” Sam wobbled down the aisle, knocking a few chip bags off the shelves before making it to them. He wiped his hands on the front of his none-too-clean plaid shirt before he took over putting pressure on the wound.

“There’s no–no time. They’re coming!” the man gasped and sagged against the counter, trapping Sam’s hand and his bunched up shirt between the man’s chest and the counter’s edge.

“Who’s coming? Who did this to you? Why did you stab you?” Grayson asked as he fished his phone out of his back pocket.

The city was dangerous. There were muggings, rapes and drive-bys every night of the

week, but stabbings like this? Not so common. Grayson had lived on the streets since he was 10-years-old and thought of himself as pretty damned jaded, but watching this man bleed out had his movements shocky and quick. He was dialing 911 on his phone's cracked screen before the man answered.

"S-Sect of D-Dawn," the man spat out and more bright blood formed a starburst pattern on the peeling counter.

Grayson froze. Had he heard the man right? Not a drug dealer or a prostitute or a gangbanger, but the Sect of Dawn?

"911. What's your emergency?" the female operator asked, her voice tautly professional, even as Grayson stared at the man in shock.

"They don't exist. They're an urban legend," Grayson found himself saying.

The Sect of Dawn was allegedly a group of virulent anti-Vampire humans who stalked their immortal prey giving them their Second Deaths. Unlike most anti-Vampire humans, they were said to actually be good at hunting and killing Vampires. But to Grayson the group had sounded like the Illuminati or other secret society that there was no real proof for and seemed to exist only in heated imaginations.

But then again Vampires were once thought imaginary too. And most people would never believe I can do what I'm able to, Grayson reminded himself.

Not to mention that this man was not a Vampire. He had brown eyes, not silver. All Vampires, excluding Julian Harrow and King Daemon who had purple and red eyes respectively, had silver eyes like liquid mercury. So unless this man was wearing colored contacts, he was human enough. Besides the stab wound that hadn't stopped bleeding proved that anyways. A Vampire surely would have healed by now.

“They’re all too real,” the man said almost sadly.

The man smiled at him with gray lips and glassy eyes that he kept turning towards the door as if waiting for his attackers to follow him into a brightly lit shop with two witnesses. Yet the skin between Grayson’s shoulders twitched. He had found that ignoring his sixth sense was a bad idea, and yet he was doing so now. He realized it was because he wanted to. He didn’t want this man—with all he brought with him—in his shop. It was like when one was desperately trying to avoid the cops, but police cruisers kept showing up every block.

“911,” the operator repeated with a touch of annoyance in her voice, “What is your emergency?”

Grayson shook himself out of his shock and inaction. The man was here. He was Grayson’s responsibility. He had to get over it and handle it. He explained firmly and succinctly, “A man’s been stabbed. I need an ambulance and the police.”

The 911 system automatically picked up his address. The operator asked him to confirm it, which he did.

“An ambulance is 10 minutes out,” she told him. “Now, describe the wound to me. Can you put pressure on it?”

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“We’re doing that,” Grayson began, but then the man reached over and closed his hand over Grayson’s, the one that held the cellphone.

Grayson thought he wanted to speak to the operator and released the phone into the man’s possession. But the man stabbed the “End Call” key. Blood smeared across the keypad. He tossed the phone on the counter.

“No,” the man rasped.

“What are you doing?” Grayson cried.

The ambulance and police were still coming, but the operator might have been able to help until they arrived.

“Can’t–can’t trust them. Can’t–can’t trust anyone,” the man told him.

“I agree!” Sam nodded eagerly.

The homeless man licked his lips and glanced down at the bottles of beer in the refrigerator at the end of the aisles. Grayson didn’t blame him. He could use a beer about now. Maybe ten.

“I’m not a big fan of authority either,” Grayson told him, “but you need medical attention and–”

“Not going to make it. I can’t fucking believe it,” the man let out a phelgmy laugh that was filled with bitterness. “Just when I was almost–almost beyond all of this.

When a knife couldn't hurt me.”

The man laughed again, the sound was wetter and thicker than before. He sagged further over the counter. He gave out a choked sound and his legs nearly went out beneath him. Grayson grabbed him just before he went down hard on the ground. The man felt so fragile under Grayson's hands. Almost as if the blood leaving him had reduced his mass until he was little more than twigs and frayed twine.

“Maybe he should sit down, Grayson?” Sam suggested, looking a little queasy as blood oozed through Grayson's shirt and over his grimy fingers.

“Yeah. Here. Let's use this.”

Grayson let go of the man before he took his own stool and lifted it over the counter. He came around the counter as well and, between him and Sam, got the man on the stool. Grayson had to keep hold of the man's shoulders though to keep him from toppling off.

“Is this better?” Grayson asked the man.

He coughed wetly. “There's nothing to be done. I don't think death should be comfortable. It should make you feel it. I want to feel every last, damned bit.”

“You're not dying. You're going to be all right,” Grayson insisted.

But he'd seen people dying before, mostly of drug overdoses and all of them had become this grayish color and their eyes hadn't focused and this man was like them. Sam looked up at him and he saw that Sam thought the man was dying too.

“You're going to be all right,” Grayson repeated as if his words would somehow change things.

They never had before, even when they were the truth. Why did he think that lies would cause a different outcome?

“The ambulance should be here soon,” Grayson said.

He thought the man murmured “no” but it was drowned out by a fit of coughing. More blood splattered the ground.

Heart slamming against the interior of his chest, Grayson looked out the door towards the dark, wet street.

Where the Hell is the ambulance? She said 10-minutes! It’s nearly been that long!

But he did think he saw something outside through the rain-spattered glass. Was there movement across the street? Was there someone hanging about the mouth of the alleyway that was just opposite the convenience store? On a cold, rainy night not even Sam would stay there. He squinted.

It’s nothing. Just a trick of the light.

A cold chill ran down his spine as he thought that. How many times had he explained away his own gift to people by using that very line? People didn’t want to see the paranormal. Not really. Not when they weren’t separated from it by a television or movie screen.

“Grayson! He’s dying!” Sam shouted.

Grayson’s attention snapped back to the wounded man. He had started to slide off of the seat again, his eyes closing and his breathing becoming shallower. He was on the edge of death. Grayson could almost see his soul clinging with the lightest of touches to his body, about to slide away towards whatever was after.

“Hey! Hey! Stay with us! C’mon, you need to stay awake!”

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Grayson slapped the man's cheeks and started asking him more questions to keep him conscious. He doubted that the answers would be lucid. The Sect of Dawn answer showed him that.

But who would make that up? And why?

"Why do you think the Sect of Dawn is after you?" Grayson asked, seeking something to ask the man about to keep him conscious.

"Maybe we shouldn't ask, Grayson," Sam suggested. His big bushy eyebrows lifted, showing that his eyes were bloodshot, but they were surprisingly lucid. "Maybe it's best we don't know."

But before Grayson could take the question back the man was answering, "Because I got the ticket. The golden ticket."

The man winced and sweat started to pour down his clammy forehead. His eyelids were fluttering wildly as if he was having a seizure.

But Grayson was caught up in what he had said. "Golden ticket?"

It can't be. He can't have an invitation to the academy! Grayson thought and almost let out a wild laugh of disbelief. One hundred people in all the world get them and one of the students just happens to walk into the convenience store?! No. No way.

He had thought he was safe here. In this obscurity. No Vampires or the Vampire-adjacent as he thought of the wannabes and worshippers would bother coming into

this run-down neighborhood to this even more run-down store. It wasn't like the Vampires desired Doritos, Coke, or some candy and he was sure that the wannabes would wish to keep their bodies pure by "eating clean". There was nothing here except the week-old oranges that would fit that bill. Yet here this man was.

It can't be possible. It's like I'm being hunted.

"To the—the academy. They want it. Eliminate me and send their own person in," the man wheezed. "Can't let them do that."

"The Sect of Dawn wants to send in one of their own people to the academy with your golden ticket?" Grayson asked, his eyebrows lifted.

The man didn't answer. His eyes were closed and he was leaning over as if he were about to be sick, but Grayson knew the man simply didn't have the strength to sit up. Yet he managed to stuff his right hand into the inside pocket of his trenchcoat and draw out an envelope. He left a blood fingermark against the pure, white paper. A name was written in gold calligraphy. It was Gregory Starn. The man shoved the envelope at Grayson as if he wanted to be clear of it or, like the ring of power in Lord of the Rings, as if he desperately wanted it but knew it was bad for him.

"I can't use it. Can't let them have it," the man wheezed. "Not going to let them win."

"Don't take that, Grayson! He got stabbed for it!" Sam warned as he looked at the door over his shoulder just like the man did.

The paper felt expensive under Grayson's fingertips. There didn't seem to be much inside the envelope. Maybe a single sheet of paper. He recalled that the students were to be given directions to a gate to get to the Ever Dark. Maybe that was all that was in the envelope. Coordinates to the Vampire World. For a moment, he wanted to rip the envelope open and see what was inside. He shook himself. He was avoiding

Vampires, not seeking them out.

But still, this envelope was worth... Well, he couldn't imagine how much. Yet wouldn't the golden ticket be attached to an individual? It wasn't like the Vampires would let someone else in even if they had the right ID. The Eyros Bloodline Vampires would know they were lying about their identity. But then again maybe the Vampires would be impressed by a person's ingenuity and cruelty to get in? But there was one thing that Grayson was sure of.

"The Vampires will know if their enemies take your place, Gregory. Those mind-reading Vampires will figure it out right quick." He grasped the man's trembling hand and tried to put the envelope back into it. "You need to hold onto that."

"They've figured out a way to—to pass. Why—why do this to me otherwise?" Gregory asked.

Grayson didn't want to say that it could be just terrible luck. Or that the Sect of Dawn was dumb. But either answer would minimize what this man was going through.

So Grayson tried to change the subject to something important, "Is there someone we can call for you? A wife? A husband? Kids? Parents?"

The man shook his head and he wouldn't take back the envelope. Only more of his blood stained it. Grayson grimaced and stuffed the bloody envelope into the back pocket of his pants. He would deal with that later. The man was clearly not going to the academy tonight regardless.

The front door gave a shudder and the bell rang once. All three of them snapped their heads towards it. But no one was coming in. It was just the wind. The storm had evidently increased in fury.

“Lock the door,” Gregory said through trembling lips. Whether he was cold from loss of blood or fear wasn’t clear to Grayson.

“We need to keep it open for the ambulance,” Grayson said.

“They said ten minutes. Should be here soon,” Sam agreed though he couldn’t quite take his eyes off the door either.

“No ambulance is coming,” Gregory said softly.

“Of course on is. But I can call again,” Grayson said, reaching for his phone.

But Gregory was shaking his head. His brown eyes were open fully again, and though they were glassy, they were full of intelligence. “If an ambulance were coming we would be hearing its siren by now. The police too. But there’s nothing. The street is empty, too. Strange for this road at this time of night, no?”

Grayson slowly looked back over at the door. Gregory was right. How often had he heard the wail of sirens in the night even when they weren’t coming down this street? Plenty of times. And the road should have been thick with traffic. People honking at pedestrians who threaded their way through cars rather than crossing at the cross walks. Even with the rain, he would have expected the prostitutes and the drug dealers who lingered in doorways to be out. But he didn’t see one person.

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Without realizing he was doing it, Grayson had walked over to the door. His eyes scanned the night. He squinted again as he stared towards that alleyway opposite the shop where he had thought he had seen someone lingering. The barrels filled with broken furniture or crates were not lit. No homeless people clustered around them, trying to keep warm and dry.

Grayson slowly reached up to the turn bolt on the door. Turning it would lock the door. He snapped it shut. The sound was awfully loud. It echoed. Grayson backed away from the door, wishing that there was a curtain or set of shades he could pull down to block out people's view of the inside of the store. With the lights on inside and the darkness outside, they were illuminated as if on stage.

"When the ambulance comes, I'll open the door again," Grayson said in a voice that sounded like he didn't believe what he was saying. He forced himself away from the door and back to the counter where his phone was. "I'm going to call 911 again."

"You won't be able to get through," the man said.

"That's insane. Of course, I will," Grayson said.

He punched the numbers in with a slightly shaking hand. He brought the phone to his ear, but there was no sound. No ringing. No electronic sounds. Just silence. He brought the phone down and looked at it. He had bars. He had put in the right numbers. He had pressed the "Call" button. Even if he'd run out of minutes--which he hadn't--calling 911 was always available. He ended the call and tried again.

And again.

And again.

He couldn't get through to anyone.

"I told you," the man said with a large, gulping breath between each word.

"Why? Why is this—"

"The Sect is everywhere. Like dawn, they always come," the man gasped and spat crimson on the cracked, linoleum floor.

There was another gust of wind that shook the door again. The bell jangled as did Grayson's nerves.

"It's the wind," Sam said, but it sounded more like a question than a statement.

"What else could it be?" Grayson murmured. "The Sect is made up of humans. They're not magical. If the Sect even exists."

But wasn't there one Vampire Bloodline that could control the weather? Horys? Was that their name? Grayson had both read about the Vampires obsessively, but also ignored what he knew at the same time. It was like a guilty pleasure. That Vampires existed should have made him feel less singular, but instead it made him angry. The Vampires had one another. He had found no one like him. And because of that, he had been alone when things had gone wrong.

"They're coming for me and I can't get away, but you can." The man grasped the front of Grayson's shirt in a surprisingly tight grip. "I see that now. You need to take that golden ticket and go."

"I'm not you. They won't let me in," Grayson responded even as something in his

chest expanded and curdled at the same time.

“They’ll take you. I think... something about you,” Gregory’s voice drifted off. “You’re different. I’ve always been able to tell—”

Gregory got nothing else out. The door to the convenience store blew off its hinges. But it didn’t fly straight back into the shelves as it should have. No, it angled.

It came right for them.

Without thought, Grayson put up one hand. The door froze in mid-air. It hung there. Suspended in space. The fragments of metal that had wrenched off the frame also levitated.

“W-what are you doing, Grayson?” Sam’s voice quavered.

Grayson turned his head to look down at where Sam crouched, hands over his head, big eyes flickering between him and the door. Cold washed through Grayson.

“W-what are you, Grayson?” Sam’s voice cracked.

Grayson closed his eyes for half a moment before another voice came from the doorway. It was a female voice that asked in a softly, sibilant voice, “The real question is who is he.”

## FUEL FOR THE FIRE

The speaker was a woman who looked to be in her mid-forties. She had silver eyes in a fox-like face with a pointed chin and blunt-cut black hair longer in the front than in the back. She wore a stylish black leather coat, belted around a small waist, black skinny jeans and high-heeled ankle boots. She looked like any number of fashionable,

wealthy women that he would have seen walking on the Magnificent Mile with luxe brand bags casually draped over their arms.

But the look in her eyes made it clear to Grayson that she wasn't one of them at all. He'd met plenty of predators on the streets. He knew one when he saw one. No matter how pretty and petite they pretended to be.

"Who are you?" Grayson hissed, even as he kept the door and the metal pieces floating in the air.

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It was too late now to try and hide what he could do. His unconscious mind had reacted, saving him, Sam and Gregory from severe injuries. The metal and glass door had been hurled towards them. The glass would have sliced skin. The metal would have broken bones. Besides, he had a feeling that she, like the predators he'd met on the streets, would need to be dealt with and his powers were the only real way to stop people like her.

"How are you able to use telekinesis?" she asked. Her voice was cultured. There was a faint accent to her English, but he couldn't place it. Maybe Spanish or she could be from somewhere in Mexico or South America. "You are not of the Ashyr Bloodline. In fact, you are not a Vampire at all."

"V-Vampire?" Sam stammered and there was a scraping sound as he scuttled a little away from Grayson.

Grayson felt that terrible empty pit open in his stomach when people retreated from him. That Sam would have been afraid of him, someone he had known for years, someone he had helped and who had helped him, versus this woman dug into Grayson's greatest fears about himself.

But Sam saw what he could do.

Humans couldn't do that, right? That's what the news said. That's what the scientists claimed. That's what the Vampires led on anyway.

And there were rumors that Vampires killed homeless people, those who wouldn't be noticed. They might drink daintily from willing folks, but with the homeless they

could simply let go of all restraint and drain them dry. Sam clearly believed him to be one of those. But he wasn't a Vampire unless there was such a thing as a Vampire that was mortal, could go out under the sun and didn't drink blood. He was something else, he supposed. Something singular. But his cheeks flared with hot color and the shame of what he could do—of not being normal, of being actually dangerous—flooded him like it had so often.

“He's not and that's what is so odd,” she answered. “Not a Vampire, but with the powers of one. I wonder...”

The woman stepped into the shop. She kicked away a stray piece of glass that had splintered out of the door that Grayson still held in place with more and more difficulty. It made a tinkling sound as it slid away and disappeared beneath one of the metal shelves.

“Don't,” Grayson told her, his voice low and steady. “Don't come closer.”

She froze. One foot in and one foot out of the store. Her silver eyes—like liquid mercury—flashed at him. “Or what?”

“Or you'll find out that as easily as you blew this door in here that I can wrap it around you like a scarf,” he told her.

He hadn't used his powers in some time though. Not since he'd gotten this steady job and a place to live that wasn't in an abandoned building. Having roommates with fellow homeless, many of whom were slaves to drugs or crippled by untreated mental illness, had kept Grayson on his toes. Not to mention those who were simply interested in hurting others weaker than them that roamed the streets. He'd used his powers to protect himself from all of them. No one would believe what many saw as the refuse of humanity said. So his secret had been kept safe.

But it had been several years since he'd done anything large like this. That he'd wake from those strange nightmares and everything in his apartment would be floating, including him and the bed, didn't count, because he wasn't consciously in control of it. But at least the door and pieces of metal were steady and so was he. For now.

"I see." She tilted her head to the side.

"Is she one of them, Gregory?" Grayson asked the wounded man without looking at him. He was surprised that Gregory hadn't reacted to her entrance. "Did she hurt you?"

Gregory had told him that the Sect of Dawn was responsible for his injuries. But this woman had blown the door in. Humans couldn't do that except... Well, he did things like that. But he had this feeling that she wasn't like him. Maybe she wasn't even human.

He was not able to get his answer though. Because his only response to Grayson's questions were wheezes and then the wounded man fell from the stool and collapsed onto the ground. Grayson dared to look away from the woman for a moment. Gregory's eyes were shut. His mouth was open as he struggled to breathe. His skin was gray like parchment.

"Sam, get him on his back! Put pressure on the wound!" Grayson ordered.

Even though Grayson's hands were "free" and he could have done it himself he likely would have lost control of the door. He needed all of his attention to keep it up. Sam though did not move.

The homeless man was sitting on the ground with his knees up to his chest. His rheumy eyes were huge. He was highlighted by one of the fluorescent lights and the veins in his face stood out. His cheeks were ruddy, not with health, but because his

skin was chapped. His lips were dry and cracked. He looked older than Grayson had ever seen him and scared. So scared.

“Sam, please, it’s me,” Grayson said and he hoped he didn’t sound as pleading to Sam and the woman as he did to himself.

Sam let out a groan and reached for the discarded shirt. He rolled Gregory over. There was a small gush of air that exited Gregory’s mouth. There was blood at the corner of his lips. Sam again applied pressure to the wound. Would it be enough? Maybe if the ambulance arrived in the next few moments. But there was still no sound of sirens. The night was abnormally quiet.

The terrible, dark irony that Gregory had been going to a school where he could have been made immortal was not lost on Grayson in that moment. And he also remembered Gregory’s insistence that Grayson could get away, could stop his killers from getting their hands on the golden ticket, that this was all that could be done.

You need to take that golden ticket and go. Go. Go. Go, Gregory’s words echoed in his head.

Part of him wanted to go. Part of him wanted to run. To send the door flying at the woman and to just take off into the night. He would leave Sam and Gregory behind. Who could blame him? Other people just slowed you down. He couldn’t do anything further for either of them, could he?

But this came from the little, frightened boy inside of him who had been hurt and let down countless times. The man he was, or maybe should have been, didn’t move. He stayed. He would stay. He wouldn’t leave Sam and Gregory to whatever terrible fate this woman had in store for them.

This is crazy. I’m crazy, he thought.

But he still stayed.

There was a faint scrape and Grayson's head shot back towards the woman. She was two steps nearer to them. The little smile on her face indicated that she knew he noticed and found it amusing. He moved the door so that it was directly between them. He had the small pieces of metal spinning in her direction. His lack of practice had a tremor running through him. How long could he keep this up?

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I should have practiced. I should have!

But it was too late for this encounter. And what was more disturbing was that this woman didn't seem afraid of him or what he could do. She was studying him like a bird of prey. Normally, the simple evidence of his telekinesis terrified the predators, but not her. Not her at all.

"The police are coming," Grayson lied, not believing it for one second any longer. He didn't know if his call had been intercepted or if the police were simply in on it. Both sounded as insane as he felt, but the evidence in front of him told him that one of those things had to be true. Yet he insisted to her, "You need to leave."

"Because I'm the one showing paranormal powers?" She smiled at him.

Were her eye teeth pointed?

"They won't look at me," Grayson told her even as his heart hammered in his chest. That wasn't true. They'd looked at him before. They hadn't thought he could move things with his mind, but they had thought he'd done something bad. "I'm just a store clerk. I'm no one important."

She stared at him without blinking. The irises of her eyes moved like liquid. "You've gotten good at hiding. I suppose you would have to. Someone so unique. Someone so interesting. I guess getting two for the price of one makes up for this mess."

The "mess" wasn't stabbing Gregory, Grayson guessed. It was letting Gregory get away. And now, she acted like Grayson was another prize. Like the bloody letter in

his back pocket.

A wash of arctic cold went through him. Normally when he'd used his powers, people were scared. But he'd always feared the day when someone was more interested than afraid of him. And she was that person.

The weight of the door was growing and he swallowed hard. Soon he would have to drop it to the ground. Better to drop the small bits of metal first so he could use his remaining strength on the door. But the moment he let one nugget of metal drop, her head snapped towards it and those luminous, silver eyes narrowed while her smile grew. She knew he was tiring. Grayson did not let another metal piece drop. He fought not to shake visibly.

He gritted out at her again, "The police—"

"Aren't coming, dear. No one is coming," she said almost wearily.

No one is coming, those words echoed inside of him, reminding him of so many times when he'd been in danger and a predator had sing-songed that dark promise to him. No one is coming to save you. No one is coming to stop me. No one is coming to end this. No one...

Sam made a low sound of fear and began to slap Gregory's face. "Grayson! Grayson! I think—oh, damn, I think—"

"He's dead, yes, but I wouldn't mourn Gregory too deeply," she said.

Grayson's heart seemed to stop. He hadn't known Gregory. And that was wrong for a man to die among people he didn't know. When he had been on the cusp of something great. But Gregory was gone. He felt it. There was an absence in the room.

The Kaly Vampires say there is something beyond this life. I pray that Gregory finds it and it is wonderful, Grayson prayed.

She took another step closer. It was a small step.

“Don’t,” Grayson said through gritted teeth.

“Gregory was a very naughty person,” she continued as if he had said nothing at all.

She actually reached for one of the spinning metal pieces and touched it. Her eyes widened in pleasure as it spun away from her.

“I don’t believe anything you say,” Grayson told her.

He pushed the door towards her. It wobbled, but only a little. She backed up again. A single bead of sweat ran down his right temple. He prayed she wouldn’t notice, but her eyes went directly there and she licked her lips as if imagining tasting his sweat. If he hadn’t already been alarmed, he was now. He needed to get himself and Sam the hell out of there.

She’s likely not the only one involved in this either, Grayson thought. Others are probably out front. Waiting on her. So that’s not an escape route.

The convenience store’s back door was blocked by one of those large, industrial trash bins in the alleyway behind the store. It was a fire hazard and he’d complained about it loads of times, but there wasn’t enough space back there unless the trash bin was pressed right up to the door so nothing had been done. He was glad about that now. He figured the Sect or whoever had done this to Gregory wouldn’t be waiting back there. But he could use his powers to bust through and run.

I have to take Sam, too. Grab him and run after sending the door hurtling towards her,

he thought.

Another bead of sweat trailed down his right temple and then a third down his left. A shudder went through him. He had to build up the energy to do what he needed. He concentrated on the flicker of flame inside of him that he'd always imagined as powering his gift. He imagined throwing in logs to this fire to build it up. He wasn't sure what truly happened when he did this, but his gift did grow. He shoved this imaginary "wood" into the flames.

"Gregory worked for us, you see," the woman continued. She looked at her nails. They were beautifully painted a black-red color that changed depending on how the light hit them. "He analyzed everything we knew about the Bloodlines and, of course, the two people most responsible for choosing the students. Balthazar and Caemorn are not exactly shrinking flowers in the Vampire World. Their personalities are well known."

Grayson fed another log into his fire. Sweat though was now freely coursing down his face and dripping off of his chin. Sam had drawn his legs up against his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He was rocking and moaning softly, sure that he was likely to die.

"Gregory was... well, a student of human nature. He was brilliant at it," she said with a small smile at her nails. The sleeve of her coat on her right arm slid up towards her elbow and he saw a tattoo there. A lightning bolt.

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Silver eyes. Ability to use the weather. Lightning bolt tattoo. She's a Horys Vampire! Grayson realized. But what would a Vampire be doing in the Sect of Dawn?

Maybe he had been right that the Sect was simple nonsense and Gregory mistaken. But she was saying Gregory worked for them, for her, so why would she pretend to be a member of the Sect?

"Gregory found the perfect candidates," she said as she negligently pulled her sleeve down to hide the evidence of her Bloodline. "He helped them craft the perfect entrance letters and interviews. He just also must have realized that he... well, that he was a perfect candidate, too."

Grayson didn't want to speak to this woman. He didn't really care what she had to say. But he needed more time to fuel himself. And the more she talked, the more wood could be added to his fire.

"How did he get past the Eyros Vampires? They can read minds, right? So they would have known that he was working for the Sect," Grayson pointed out.

She nodded. "Look at you. A little Sherlock Holmes! If the Eyros Vampires were perfect at what they did all the time well... then the War would never have happened. But it did."

He vaguely remembered hearing about the War between the various Immortals who sired all of the Bloodlines. They had battled for supremacy when King Daemon had chosen to go into an almost death-like sleep to await his fledgling's birth. Many Vampires had died. Many Immortals had too, which Grayson found fitting and yet

ironic because of their title. If they had been foolish enough to fight simply to be yet more powerful than they deserved what had happened to them.

“Aren’t there other Vampires though that can see the future? Those Seeyr ones? Surely, they can see what you’re planning,” Grayson suggested, not really interested, but still trying to keep her attention elsewhere.

More wood.

More fire.

More sweat.

More shaking.

But he was almost ready. His eyes flickered down to Sam. The man didn’t weigh much. His bulk came from the layer upon layer of clothes he wore. The only calories he likely got came mostly from alcohol. Grayson thought he could lift and carry Sam if he had to until they burst out the back door. Then he’d set the homeless man down and they’d both hightail it out of there.

“Seeyr?” the woman laughed. It was not a nice laugh. “She couldn’t even stop herself from being imprisoned in the damned Spire! She says it was the only way to ensure that Daemon returned and got all the good things coming to him. But we know better. She is limited.”

Grayson frowned. He felt what she was saying was wrong, though really how would he know? There were rioters in the streets against the Vampires. There were religious cults--outside of the Sect--that hated the Vampires and wanted them destroyed. Surely if the Vampires were as gifted and powerful as everyone said they would have done a better job of revealing themselves to the world.

Unless it has to be this way, a part of him whispered. Unless King Daemon is enjoying himself. Setting up a challenge. Winning...

He snapped back to the moment as he realized the woman was practically pressed against the door. And the door had sagged a few inches towards the ground. There was the sound of screeching tires outside and the thump of car doors opening and shutting.

“Ah, our ride,” she said with a wide smile. “I don't want to get wet again.”

Before he could do anything, she moved. Somehow she was around the door and on top of Sam. Her teeth were at the homeless man's throat. Sam let out a wail of terror. Grayson couldn't use the door against her as it would harm Sam, might even kill him. Besides there were two figures by the threshold of the store, about to come in.

He sent the door flying towards the entrance and jammed it there to keep the other Sect members out. The tiny bits of metal he sent spinning towards her. She let out a scream as one sliced her arm and another cut open her cheek. He tried bringing them around again to cut her more. If he could move them fast enough they could blast through her like bullets. But they seemed slow and sluggish.

She whirled around to face him. Her mouth was covered in blood. It ran over her lips and down her chin. Her fangs were fully out. The moment should have paralyzed him with fear. But some part of him recognized this as if he'd seen it many times before.

“Should have taken you out first,” she wheeled. “I'm sure you taste better than an old drunk anyways. But I needed to dampen my enthusiasm. You need to live after all.”

Grayson's eyes slipped past her to Sam. It had only been a moment. Not long at all. But the homeless man was dead. She hadn't just sunk those needle-like fangs into his throat. She had torn out the front of it. Sam gazed skyward, eyes unblinking,

unseeing. The room again felt empty. Sam was dead.

“Why are you so upset by their deaths?” she asked as she wiped the back of one hand over her mouth, just managing to smear the blood. “You’re a loner. You’ve had a hard life. You keep to yourself. Yet here you are, all bleeding heart! Another interesting thing about you.”

Bright, hot anger burned suddenly in him. It burned through the fear. It burned through the voice telling him to go, go, GO!

“He had nothing. He was a homeless drunk. But he was kind. He was gentle. He didn’t hurt anyone but himself,” Grayson told her. “And he shared what he had with those who...”

His throat closed up. Sam had been the first street person he’d ever met who hadn’t been cruel, but genuinely kind to him. He’d shared food with Grayson when Grayson had first taken to the streets. He’d given Grayson a blanket. He’d told Grayson where it was safe to sleep and where it wasn’t. He’d even urged Grayson to go home... if only that had been a possibility.

“You killed him for what?” Grayson’s voice was taut. “Because you were hungry? Or bored?”

She stared at him almost blankly. If his words reached her, he didn’t know. But then she smiled. A bloody smile and said, “I bet you taste sweet.”

And then she lunged for him.

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But he was ready for her. And the anger inside of him fed that fire far better than imaginary wood. He thrust his arms out at her and she went flying backwards. She hit the edge of the metal shelving so hard that some of it buckled, but the sturdier parts didn't. A long, ragged piece of metal withstood his push and speared her through the chest.

For a moment, the two of them stared at one another. Shock in both of their eyes. He expected death to enter hers in an instant as blood began to rain out of her and patter on the linoleum floor.

But she didn't die.

She let out a garbled scream of rage and started to inch her way off of the metal spear. More blood cascading down her front. There was the crash of glass as the people at the front door smashed the glass out of the door and started to make their way inside.

There was no one left here to save.

Grayson turned and ran towards the back of the shop. His powers shredded the back door and trash bin beyond and he kept going. He didn't slow down. He ran and ran and ran. He wasn't heading anywhere. Just away.

But he knew that there was only one place where he might be safe.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend, the old adage floated through his mind.

He was going to seek the help of the Vampires at Ever Dark Academy.

FLY

Vampire Lord Ryder of the Weryn Bloodline and second-in-command of House Legion flew over the Vampire capital city of Nightvallen in the Ever Dark. The dual moons—one red and one blue—reflected off the feathers of his many glossy, black wings.

He had used the Weryn gift and shifted into a flock of ravens to scout the city. He had done this many times over the months he had resided here, but the city was filled with mysteries and seemed to change when one wasn't looking. Ryder though was intent on knowing it like the back of his hand. Knowing the terrain was the best way to ensure a defensible position. Not that he or the Weryn feared any other Bloodline, but so many Vampires had not been in one space together since before the War.

And he was careful.

And there was tension.

He flew low along one of the streets that was being prepared for the students. Book shops, coffee shops, restaurants--casual to fine dining--and clothing stores, among others, were all being set up, staffed by Acolytes or even Vampires. The students would only be allowed to leave the Ever Dark and return to Earth through the gates if they were not chosen to be turned. Otherwise, they would spend the entire year in the Vampire World and, if they were very lucky, become a Vampire at the end.

Not that any would be Weryn Vampires out of this class or any other. His Master--Lawson Hughes, leader of House Legion and de facto head of the Weryn Bloodline--had made that clear.

This idea that Vampires must vie with the other Bloodlines for fledglings from a handful of humans chosen by other Bloodlines had to be crushed. Even if it was King Daemon's idea. The Weryn had tradition and history. That could not simply be ignored and overridden by an Immortal who had gone to sleep before any of them had been born for the first time.

As Ryder flew over the street, workers unloading books, meat or clothes all glanced up at the flock and many narrowed their eyes. A group of ravens was called an "unkindness", a "treachery" or a "conspiracy" because of the ominous feelings that the birds often engendered in the onlooker. But Ryder simply found them beautiful. And if others found them menacing... Well, all the better.

It was just one of the species that he could shift into. Most Weryn could only shift into one type of animal, but Ryder found that new animals opened up to him all the time. In fact, he had just mastered becoming a bear, but the joy of becoming a new being usually brought him had not been there.

Just a few hours earlier, he had shown his new animal form to Lawson, his Master having come to Nightvallen for the opening ceremonies of the academy. Ryder's heart had been beating fiercely with pride as he let out a roar in his bear form.

He had shifted effortlessly into a massive brown bear with sharp teeth and a heavy, powerful body covered in thick fur. He had risen up on his hind legs and extended his front ones towards the moons, his claws seemingly trying to rake them and leave his mark.

There were shouts, whistles and claps at his new form from the other members of their House. It was always a celebration when a Weryn discovered their animal form. Of course, normally, it was newly made fledglings--not Vampires over 450 years old--that were showing off their animalistic prowess. But Ryder was the exception to this as he was in many things.

Lawson had called all of House Legion to join him in one of the courtyards of the mansion assigned to all Weryn Vampires. There was one palace for every Bloodline forming a semi-circle with King Daemon's palace at the center. But no Weryn were able to enter the Weryn Palace, because the Immortal whose Bloodline sired them all had not yet returned to life... or perhaps did not remember themselves yet.

Lawson's mood had grown darker and darker as he'd watched other Bloodlines coming in and out of their magnificent palaces while the Weryn were excluded from theirs. Not that their accommodations were poor in any way. They were lavish.

The mansion that King Daemon had given them was as large as a whole city block. He had also made sure it was to their taste. There were plenty of courtyards open to the sky with trees and gardens filling them. The Weryn were piled into one of those now and it suited Ryder admirably. He thought the others would love it too, if only Lawson would allow himself to realize that it wasn't a snub. But Lawson had been brooding and ill-tempered since the Vampire King had returned.

The courtyard was filled with fragrant trees and studded with plenty of places for people to sit and congregate as the Weryn liked to do. Unlike the Kaly Bloodline, for example, which consisted of solitary, sociopathic Vampires who avoided others of their own kind, including their own Masters and Houses, the Weryn were pack-like, enjoying being together more than anything.

His Master--a big man with dark blonde hair and a broad face that was quick to smile and laugh or cloud with anger--was sprawled out on a huge pillow on a grassy area. There was a glass of blood mixed with wine in one of his hands while the other was tangled in the locks of his current paramore, another Weryn Vampire named Natasha Lyon, who, like her name, could shift into the big cat. Unlike Lawson's usual lovers, Ryder liked Natasha as she was the leader of her own House and didn't allow Lawson to push her around. Perhaps it was because they were both lion shifters and no lioness would take guff.

Natasha smiled and clapped loudly, too, for him like a proud Mistress. But she caught sight of the fact that Lawson was not celebrating Ryder's newest animal form. She reached up to take Lawson's hand from her hair and urged him to clap like everyone else. Lawson only did so half-heartedly and Ryder felt a stab of disappointment and something else.

Tension.

As Ryder went back down onto all fours, he shifted to his human form and stood, proud and naked before his House. His best friend and Blood Brother Demos stepped up beside him and handed him a robe to put on.

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“What number is that now?” Demos asked, his handsome ebony face splitting into a grin. “Eleven--”

“Twelve,” Ryder corrected. “Twelve different forms I can take on.”

“You had me add that bear last week. Did you know then that it was your next form?” Demos chuckled as he tilted his head towards the two sleeves of tattoos that covered Ryder’s massive, muscled arms that Demos had inked with skill and enthusiasm.

“I could sense it,” Ryder admitted. “And then... it was there.”

The tattoos were all done in shades of black. There was the face of a wolf on his right, outer forearm with a hissing cat on the inside. An eagle graced the back of his elbow rising up towards his shoulder where a raven perched. A stag raced towards his throat while a lion’s head waited for it on the other shoulder. A panther curled around the lion on his skin in a way it likely would not have in life. A snake wrapped around his left bicep while a gazelle appeared to run from it. An exotic bird swooped past the gazelle as it was tracked by a sly fox on his left forearm. The bear was proudly displayed on his right bicep.

“You’re out of room on your arms for any more!” Demos chuckled again, but goodnaturedly with a shake of his head. “We’re going to have to start on your back or maybe your legs?” Demos stroked his chin. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something fantastics,” Ryder grinned.

Natasha gestured for him and Demos to approach. Two of the younger Vampires

brought them wine and blood as Ryder and Demos lowered themselves gracefully onto the cool grass. While it was always night in the Ever Dark, Ryder noted that dew always appeared about this time. The grass was slightly damp between his bare toes.

“A bear?” Lawson grunted and took a large swallow of wine. “There are no bears in House Legion.”

“Yes, it was a surprise,” Ryder tried to sound easy about it. His heart quickened as he remembered when the form had called to him. He eagerly recounted it to his Master, “But I could just feel it under my skin and—”

“You could not be satisfied with being a lion?” Lawson interrupted him. “Or a wolf? Or a raven? Or an eagle? No, you also had to be a bear.”

Though Vampires could not get drunk on normal wine, Lawson’s voice sounded thick and almost slurred. It was the sound of drunken belligerence. Ryder knew it well from his biological father’s voice though he hadn’t heard that in centuries. Lawson had never spoken to him in this way. Well, not often.

“I love my lion form. All my forms. You know that,” Ryder said quietly.

The lion form had been his first form. Lawson had been so proud that Ryder, too, had been a lion. When Lawson had turned Demos a century later, he had seemed just as proud when Demos had shifted into a black panther and then--to everyone’s shock--Ryder had done the same. Two forms. Both big cats. It had been a coup for Lawson to have a fledgling with two animal forms.

Not anymore, Ryder thought as he drank his wine. It was rich and the blood was heavily spiced, but he barely enjoyed it.

Natasha, who had been watching Lawson with slightly pursed lips, said, “It is a

wonder that you can shift into so many different animals, Ryder. It is a great thing. I am quite jealous though I love being a lioness.”

Lawson grunted and finished his wine before thrusting out his glass for more. Ryder felt a dull dread in his stomach. His Master had gone to see King Daemon before coming here. Had something untoward happened that had put him in such a terrible mood? What could the Vampire King have said to have turned his Master’s usual love against him?”

Demos’ eyes narrowed, but then he said lightly, “I personally like your little kitty cat form, Ryder. The one that is small enough to ride on my shoulder or the palm of my hand.”

Ryder snorted. “The Rusty Spotted-Cat is one of the mightiest hunters--”

“House cat,” Demos teased.

“No! It is a wild cat--”

“You like to be petted behind the ears when you are in that form!” Demos rocked back and forth in amusement.

Ryder playfully elbowed his Blood Brother. “Just wait until I sneak into your room and bite your toes off. You will fear my kitty cat form then.”

“Promises! Promises!” Demos laughed.

“You should not show off any more of the forms you can shift into. That is for new fledglings,” Lawson abruptly stated. “People will say that you are unsettled in your skin and will wonder about you.”

Silence fell among the group. It was such a shocking thing for Lawson to say. Ryder swallowed.

“They do not wonder that, Master,” Demos said, his voice dropping slightly.

Though Lawson had turned them both and they owed him their Second Lives, Demos had never felt the urge to please Lawson as many fledglings do their Masters. It wasn't that their relationship was rocky, but Ryder and Demos had developed a much stronger bond than Demos and Lawson ever had. Whenever Lawson and Ryder fought--rarely, but it did happen--Demos always took Ryder's side, even if Ryder was in the wrong. Ryder reached out and touched his Blood Brother's leg. He didn't want a fight over this. He wasn't even sure what this was.

“What do they wonder, Demos?” Lawson asked as he swallowed half a cup of wine. Some of it trickled down his chin and he wiped it away with a heavy hand.

“Let's have some more wine. There is a long night ahead of us,” Natasha suggested even though almost everyone's cup was full and Lawson clearly did not need anymore.

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“I am curious what my youngest fledgling has to say,” Lawson said, staying Natasha’s hand from gesturing for the younger Vampires to serve them.

“No one is saying anything,” Ryder stated firmly and gave Demos a look that said, “Enough.”

“Everyone knows about Lord Ravenscroft, or should I say Eyros,” Demos ignored him, “and Lord Losus, or should I say Kaly.”

“Lord Balthazar Ravenscroft. Exile. Master-killer. And now... recognized as the Immortal Eyros and tasked with running the academy with Lord Caemorn Losus. Former Precept of the Order. Master-killer. And now... recognized as the Immortal Kaly,” Lawson listed off the two Immortals that were running the school. “Are you saying that Ryder bears some resemblance to them?”

Master-killer... What's going on here?

“Walk with me, Master,” Ryder said suddenly as he rose to his feet in an abrupt movement.

Lawson focused on him. “Are you asking me or telling--”

“Walk with me, Master. Please,” Ryder stated.

Demos was glaring daggers at their Master still. Lawson appeared belligerent, but he got to his feet slowly. Ryder towered over him by six inches and was broader by several as well. Ryder started walking down one of the white stone paths that

meandered through the courtyard. He did not stop until they reached a water feature. It was a nymph-like creature blowing a horn from which water emerged. The nymph appeared to have fangs.

“Why did you task me to represent the Weryn Bloodline at the academy?” Ryder asked.

His Master was silent. There was shock on his features, but then he hardened them into that belligerent again. “You are my Second--”

“Because you do not seem pleased with me these days,” Ryder continued as if his Master had not spoken. “Why did you choose me then if you have no faith in me? If you would suggest...”

Master-killer...

He couldn't even say the words. It was insane!

Lawson was quiet again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lawson wince. His Master felt badly about the tension between them. That had Ryder letting out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

“It is not you that is displeasing me,” Lawson finally admitted as he reached down and whipped a stray stone into the fountain. “Demos is being disrespectful--”

“He's only doing that because he feels you're being unfair to me,” Ryder interrupted. “You know that he is a born protector. He would stand up to anyone.”

“Am I being unfair?”

“You used to be proud of what I can do. Now... now you view it as if it is a failing,”

Ryder pointed out. “You and I have always been honest with one another. Now everything you say is veiled. What is going on? What is the source of this--this tension between us?”

Again, he saw the jaw muscle flex in Lawson’s face. Then all of the tension just bled out of him. “Some are saying about you what they said about Balthazar and Caemorn.”

Ryder let out a sharp laugh. “That I’m Weryn reborn?”

His Master nodded. And, for a moment, Ryder felt like he did when he was about to step off a cliff and become a creature of the sky. There was always a moment when he wondered if he would shift or if he would plummet to earth. His stomach quivered with anticipation and nausea. He thrust the feeling away and did not examine it further.

“Well, they are wrong!” Ryder shook his head.

Lawson was quiet for long moments. “I did not select you to represent the Weryn at the academy.”

Ryder’s forehead furrowed and a frown graced his lips. “What are you talking about? You announced it to everyone after—”

“King Daemon told me you would be the representative,” Lawson interrupted this time.

Ryder stared at him silently. He couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing. And his mind refused to draw any conclusions from it. He had a single glance at King Daemon since he’d arrived here. It was at a party to celebrate the Blood Pact with humanity and the upcoming opening of the school.

“Why would he ask for me? We don’t know one another. I am your Second and--”

“Perhaps because he wishes me replaced,” Lawson answered. “You know our ways, Ryder, as, evidently, does he. If you are--are Weryn then you will wish to take your place as our leader.”

And if Ryder did that, he would have to make Lawson bow to him and no Master ever bowed to a Childe in the Weryn. So that left open only a bloody battle where one of them would be given their Second Death.

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A cold chill wound its way through Ryder. He grasped Lawson's right arm to get his Master's full attention.

"I am not Weryn reborn!" The madness of even saying this had Ryder's jaw gritting. He shook his head violently as if to clear the idea out of it. "But even if I was, you are the only real father I have ever had. I love you. I love House Legion. I have no desire to change anything. To take over anything."

"King Daemon thinks otherwise," Lawson said, his silver eyes scanning Ryder's face.

"He is wrong. He is trying to interfere in our business!" Ryder scowled. "He thinks that I will go along with his plan to find our fledglings at the school. I will not. We should show him that by having you take my place at the school and—"

"No," Lawson stated. His big shoulders curved forward in relief and sadness. He cupped Ryder's face, running his thumb along Ryder's bearded jaw. "It is a command that you do this from our king."

"I am like Demos in this! I will not give respect until we are given respect. And that means that you are recognized as our leader and—"

"I see that I was being foolish and that you... you are on my side." Lawson smiled at him broadly. "I feared that this would cause a breach between us. It is a heady thing for people to wonder if you are an Immortal, and to have a king interested in you."

"I don't care what people think and I have no thoughts about King Daemon," Ryder told him.

“Well then, we should celebrate your new form. A bear! You were big!” Lawson laughed as he slapped Ryder’s back and led him back towards the party.

But Ryder hadn’t stayed long. He’d needed to clear his head. The revelations Lawson had told him were unnerving. The fact that his Master had been so quick to distrust him. That was not what he had taught Ryder. Weryn were pack. Weryn were loyal. Weryn were family.

What is King Daemon trying to do? Ryder thought, more comfortable blaming the Vampire King than Lawson.

He wheeled towards the main square where gates had been anchored to bring in all of the students. He and Demos had been assigned to greet Gregory Starn. The man was a psychologist of some sort. He saw Demos’ tall, muscular form standing in the square by a glowing gate. He was dressed in a long, black leather duster, matching pants and white feathers in his long dreads. He looked up before Ryder landed.

Once Ryder had shifted, he handed him clothes. “I am not your valet, Ryder.”

“I’m sorry, brother,” Ryder answered a little sheepishly as he took the clothes from Demos. “Nice choices though.”

Demos had chosen his favorite faded, ripped jeans, suede knee-high boots with buckles, and leather jacket with black fur around the collar. He pulled everything on and stamped his feet into the boots.

“Lawson apologized to me,” Demos stated suddenly.

Ryder lifted his head to look at his Blood Brother. “Did he? Good.”

“He didn’t explain to me why he was acting like a lion with a poisoned belly towards

you,” Demos stated.

Ryder grimaced. “King Daemon is the reason.”

And he told Demos everything. Demos grunted as he finished and shook his head.

“Bullshit,” Demos uttered in his deep baritone.

“What? No. It’s true. Lawsone feared my head would be turned–”

“By being who you are?” Demos stared at him.

“I’m not Weryn,” Ryder said.

Demos’ eyebrows rose. “Then let me put it this way: if you are Weryn then it is Lawson who should step aside. There should be no fight for power. He should cede to you. And as an Immortal there can be no shame in that for him.”

“He thinks differently–”

“No, he doesn’t. What he thinks is that by telling you that you have to fight him, kill him, that you won’t do it, won’t claim who you are, won’t be who you should be,” Demos said with a violent shake of his head. “He knows that you value loyalty more than anything. More than even... being who you truly are.”

Ryder felt that sense of jumping off a cliff. His chest was suddenly tight. He turned towards the gate and said, “We need to get the human. Let’s go.”

“You’re going to have to deal with whatever this is, Ryder. Whatever is holding you back,” Demos muttered.

But Ryder was already stepping through the gate so he didn't hear what else his Blood Brother had to say. There was that sickening flying sensation as he was pulled through the gate to Earth. He jerked forward on his feet as if he had abruptly stopped moving. Demos appeared behind him. They were in an abandoned church.

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The doors to the church were thrust open and a young man shouldered his way in. When he saw Ryder and Demos standing there in black leather, he froze then his eyes widened.

He was breathing hard as if he had been running full out. The scent of blood was heavy upon him though it was not his. The young man reached behind his back. Both him and Demos stilled, but then the young man was thrusting out a bloody envelope towards him. It was the envelope that contained the location to this church. A location for the student Gregory Starn to come to meet them.

“You are not Gregory Starn,” Ryder stated, not taking the envelope.

“No, he’s dead,” the young man told him, “and his killers are after me.”

### TRUTH AND LIES

The Vampire who had spoken to him grasped Grayson’s biceps with both hands and lifted him off the floor. Grayson let out a yelp of surprise, but the Vampire simply placed Grayson physically behind him, and then used his own body as a shield from anyone who might come through the front doors of the church. Before Grayson had realized that this Vampire was simply moving him to protect him, he had stiffened and a broken pew near him had shifted as his gift activated.

The Black Vampire’s head shot towards the sound. The pew was still firmly on the ground, but Grayson could have swung it like a bat at the Vampires’ heads if he had needed to. But he didn’t need to. They weren’t his enemies. Not yet anyways. The Black Vampire turned back to Grayson and frowned. Somehow he suspected that

Grayson was the cause of the pew shifting.

They're Vampires. They can believe in the paranormal because they are paranormal, Grayson thought.

Unease flitted through him. The female Vampire had seemed awfully interested in him because of his gift. Would these Vampires also be? But he let the pew go from his mental grasp, careful not to let it simply fall with a bang, as his strength was already at a low ebb. He didn't want to attract the Black Vampire's attention again either. He needed these creatures on his side. He was in no fit state to fight himself.

Both of these Vampires were huge and moved with the grace of big cats. When he'd first seen them he'd known exactly what they were. He'd wondered how people hadn't realized that Vampires existed before they revealed their own existence to the world.

Predators through and through. Sleek predators with the facade of civilization to them, but wild somehow, Grayson had thought.

And these two were beautiful, which made their predatoriness that much more dangerous. The Black Vampire had skin as dark and smooth as ebony. That skin covered rippling muscles. He had a broad, emotive face and an intelligent brow, which meant he could put those muscles to good use in a fight. He wasn't a blunt instrument by any means, but a strategist. That would be needed against the female Vampire.

The bearded Vampire was massive all over. His bare chest, which was exposed almost completely by the leather jacket he wore alone with no shirt underneath, was cut like a diamond. There looked to be no spare fat on him. He had chiseled features and generous lips that his neatly trimmed beard didn't hide. His eyes were silver, as all Vampire eyes were except for King Daemon and Prince Julian's, but there was a

warmth in them that Grayson had not expected to see. But it was likely a ruse to draw prey in.

Despite the two Vampires clearly being born of different parents, there was something alike in them both. Grayson would have called them brothers. He'd been an only child but he'd always wished he'd had a brother. Someone to look after him and someone for him to look up to. But he'd always been on his own. Not even his parents had been there to help him. He hadn't expected Vampires to be so close to one another. But these ones were.

Yet even if they were friends to each other—and despite the warmth in those eyes now—the moment the bearded Vampire had pointed out that he was not Gregory Starn, Grayson knew that lying was not an option. With those powerful muscles they could have simply ripped him apart without breaking a sweat.

It had been the right move nevertheless. Any lie he could have come up with wouldn't have held water for long. Clearly, they knew what Gregory Starn looked like. He and the dead man bore no resemblance whatsoever to one another. He was sure there were other safeguards as well to make certain that only people who belonged in the Ever Dark got in, but a picture of the student was the easiest way to confirm an identity.

Besides, if he'd lied then there would have been too many questions and he was sure that the female Vampire and her cohorts were on his tail. He'd impaled her on the shelf. She was wounded badly, but he knew that she wouldn't let that stop her. She'd likely killed again so that the blood of some other innocent could heal her wounds completely. The only question was whether would they follow him in here when there were others of their kind present or would they slink away? If it was the latter, he wasn't sure what he was going to do.

“We need to get him through the gate, Demos,” the bearded Vampire said.

“Well, this evening has just gotten better and better, hasn’t it, Ryder?” The Vampire named Demos asked with a grunt of amusement. “I wonder if we’ll get demerits or something by sending an uninvited human to Nightvallen!”

“Yeah, it’s been a damned blast and they can give us all the demerits they want to. Doesn’t matter if we’re in last place,” the Vampire named Ryder gritted out. His silver eyes focused on Grayson. “We’re sending you to the Ever Dark. Going through the gate is... unpleasant. But you’ll be fine—”

“I’m not going to the Ever Dark!” Grayson nearly shouted.

His plan had been to find some more Vampires to deal with the Sect of Dawn. He’d found them. He needed to go no farther into the Vampire World. He just wanted to be free of them.

Ryder lifted a thick eyebrow in amusement. “Why not? Not that you have a choice about it.”

Grayson’s cheeks heated and he mentally was touching that pew again. But those eyes were kind. He grimaced and let it go as he growled out, “I’m not a wannabe Vampire! I just want you two to take care of the ones coming after me and then I’ll be on my way.”

Demos let out a choked laugh and shared a disbelieving look with Ryder before staring Grayson dead in the eye. “Be on your way, will you? I don’t think so, little one. There are questions that need answering. Ones like how you managed to not get killed and made your way here when a Vampire was after you.”

Alarm spiked in Grayson. He licked suddenly dry lips. What kind of Vampires were these? Were they the Eyros ones that could read minds? Even if they weren’t, he was sure that there would be tons of those in the Ever Dark. They’d know what he could

do and then they'd... he didn't know what they'd do to him. But he was sure it wouldn't be good. It was never good when his gift was revealed. And that meant he couldn't explain anything about what had really happened at the shop.

"They were busy killing other people so I ran," Grayson lied.

They'd already killed everyone but him. He'd just staked their leader and kept the other two out with a jammed door.

"You out ran a Vampire?" Demos chuckled again even as his silver eyes narrowed with suspicion. "You just keep bringing up more and more questions with every word you say, little one."

"They were busy like I said!" Grayson snapped. "They didn't come after me right away. I managed to lose them."

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“Out ran them. Lost them. Next you’re going to tell us that you out fought them, too!” Demos laughed.

He actually had. But he understood Demos’ disbelief. Sam had been gone in a second when that female Vampire had determined she wanted a snack. Only his gift and a lot of luck had brought him here unscathed. But again, he couldn’t tell them any of that.

“I’m thinking that there weren’t any other Vampires.” Demos pointed a finger at Grayson’s chest. He advanced with every word. “You just killed Gregory Starn and took his invitation. You figured out a story that would get you into the Ever Dark while pretending to not want to go!”

“What? NO!” Grayson cried, horrified, but seeing how that was a more believable story than him evading three Vampires. He wondered if they’d believe his denial less or more if he told them that these Vampires were part of the Sect of Dawn, a group that supposedly hated their kind. “I didn’t--he came in already stabbed. He was dying. I tried calling an ambulance and the cops, but they didn’t come!”

“And why was that?” Demos’ eyes were slits.

He was now just a foot away from Grayson. Ryder stood there, observing them both, not showing anything he was feeling. Did he think like Demos did? That Grayson was a killer? He met those silver eyes, but he found no comfort there. Ryder might not believe one way or the other.

Grayson had the pew again. Now he might have two more Vampires on his tail!

“I--I don’t know, but I think...” Was he really going to tell them about the Sect of Dawn now? Evidently, he was. In for a penny, in for a pound. “They’re not alone. They’re part of a group called the Sect of Dawn. They intercepted my calls to emergency--what? Why are you laughing again?”

Demos was chuckling, but not mirthfully but with disbelief. “The Sect of Dawn? That is out of a comic book, little one! And you made another mistake. The Sect of Dawn hates--”

“Vampires, yeah, I know!” Grayson shook his head. “I don’t understand it either, but that’s what Gregory said! I’m telling the truth!”

Demos leaned in further. His fangs were clearly visible. “Little one, you’re either a fool or crazy. But we’re not to be messed with. And the people we’re going to take you to? Well, they most definitely aren’t ones you want to be lying to.”

Ryder stepped between them, holding up a hand to Demos. “Enough. The boy is scared out of his wits. Something happened to him.”

“Killing somebody will do that,” Demos growled, unconvinced. “Lawson said that this academy shit would cause the humans to tear each other apart. And it’s already starting with this innocent-faced kid.”

“Maybe that innocence isn’t just skin deep. We don’t know. Maybe his story will check out,” Ryder said.

“It better or he won’t have much of a mind left when those Eyros get done with him,” Demos muttered.

Before Grayson could say or do anything in response to that, there was a sound. A roof tile sliding down the sloped roof and falling to the ground. Everyone’s head

jerked up towards the ceiling. The roof was still intact or so it seemed. A loose roof tile could have been dislodged due to the rain or age or neglect. It didn't have to be a booted foot kicking it loose as that person crawled along the roof above their heads. Grayson's mouth filled with bitter tasting saliva. Were the other Vampires here? That would be both a blessing and a curse.

Story of my life!

"There's more than one," Grayson whispered, realizing he needed to tell them how many of their kind they faced.

"How many?" Demos asked as he drew out a knife.

It was a small knife. More like a curved dagger just four inches long. Grayson stared at the knife. What was Demos doing? And why? And did it involve him?

"He needs the blood to write the symbol to reopen the gate to the Ever Dark," Ryder explained, having seen where his distress was coming from.

"I'm not going there, remember?" Grayson's eyes snapped with anger.

"Why don't you want to go?" Ryder asked. "Is it because you killed Gregory? Are you afraid that the Eyros will dig that secret from your mind?"

"No!" Grayson hissed, his eyes darting to the ceiling again.

Was the chandelier up there shaking slightly as someone walked across the roof? Why weren't these Vampires checking it out?

"What's your name?" Ryder asked.

“Is it really the time for that?!” Grayson growled.

He definitely thought he heard a boot scraping on top of them. Was it the female Vampire? Was she up there just dreaming about sinking her teeth into his throat?

“Tell me your name or I’ll just call you ‘little one.’” Ryder’s lips twisted into a smile.

“Little--I’m not as big as you two, but I’m... it’s Grayson, okay? Happy now?” Grayson answered and immediately regretted it. Ryder had baited him into answering. But to be called “little one” like he was some kind of pet or something! It was not sweet or endearing or anything like that to hear “little one” coming out of Ryder’s mouth. “So, are you the good cop while he’s the bad cop?”

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Ryder lifted that eyebrow again. “Sometimes we switch.”

“He’s got the sunnier disposition! Good cop suits him better,” Demos snorted.

His eyes though weren’t on Grayson or Ryder. They were unfocused as if he weren’t seeing anything at all. Or maybe he was seeing beyond the church’s walls.

“Listen, Grayson, you are going to the Ever Dark.” Ryder’s silver eyes stared into his. “So long as your story checks out, I’m certain they will let you go.”

“But if it doesn’t... let me tell you that even other Vampires don’t like Eyros for a reason,” Demos chuckled darkly.

“I’m not lying!” Grayson hissed.

He wasn’t lying about killing Gregory or Charlie or even who had done it. But if the Eyros really could read minds so well then they’d know about Grayson’s gift. Once he went to the Ever Dark, he doubted he would ever return once they discovered that. Maybe they’d want to drink his blood to see if it transferred the gift to them. Maybe they’d want to take him apart. Would this Vampire with the kind eyes care about either of those possibilities?

Grayson felt the world dim a bit around him. Fear had him in her cold grip. He tried to force it down. He’d been calm at the store. But now, he felt like he was running on the fumes of his self-control. It was all too much. Gregory dead. Sam dead. He’d impaled a woman. And now his whole pitiful life might be over. He must have swayed, because Ryder had a hold of him.

“Whoah, there. It’s okay. You’re okay. Demos and I won’t let anything happen to you,” Ryder promised and his silver eyes burned with truth.

“You don’t understand,” Grayson said weakly.

“What don’t I understand?” Ryder’s deep voice was soft. Appealing.

“Don’t you go falling for a pretty face, Ryder!” Demos warned.

“Demos,” Ryder warned.

But Demos’ words were like cold water thrown over his head. Grayson shook himself. He couldn’t give way! He couldn’t confess anything to this Vampire! He had to take care of himself. Like he always did. There was no one and nothing that would do it better.

“I don’t want to go there! I don’t like Vampires! So I don’t want to go to a world filled with--with you!” Grayson snarled. Why can’t you just get that through your head?”

Ryder’s right eyebrow rose as Grayson then pulled away from him. Grayson firmed his legs beneath him. He had to stand on his own goddamned two feet! But he noted that Ryder wasn’t that offended by what he had said because the Vampire kept watching him to see if he fell. A wail wanted to exit Grayson’s throat. Being weak in front of these predators was so dangerous and he was failing.

“You don’t like us? You’re in a very small minority. The powers that be likely won’t let you stay in the Ever Dark, Grayson, if you’re telling the truth,” Demos stated flatly. “Everyone there is important or is there for a very special reason. You? Doubt you fit either category. So don’t worry, you’ll be coming back here soon enough no matter what you want if you’re being honest.”

“People want power. People don’t want to be prey. Humans have been the rulers of this world for a long time. Suddenly, they find out they’re not. They don’t like you. They simply want to keep being on top.” Grayson glared at Demos, just daring him to say otherwise.

“You’re not lying about that,” Demos admitted and actually smiled genuinely.

Demos’ eyes were focused again. There had been no sounds from the roof in some time. Maybe it was just a false alarm. Or maybe those Vampires were simply keeping out of sight. That didn’t help Grayson’s case. This meant that they would definitely be taking him to the Ever Dark and the Eyros to find out the truth. But even if he could escape these two--and he doubted that--wouldn’t that just leave him exposed to the Sect of Dawn?

What if the female Vampire already called her comrades and told them about me? That means that even if she’s taken care of, others could come after me, Grayson realized with a sickening lurch. But then he thought of her personality. No, she wouldn’t want to admit her failure. She would do everything she could to catch me on her own.

He hoped that wasn’t just his hopes speaking though.

“I think we should go.” Ryder made one more glance at the roof even though there had been no sounds.

“Agreed,” Demos said.

“No, no, please. Let’s stay here a bit more. They’ll come and you’ll see I’m telling the truth!” Grayson begged Ryder.

Ryder’s expression twisted. He clearly saw Grayson’s fear and it affected him in a

way that Grayson didn't think a predator would experience. It was empathy. Sadness for him. But Ryder was not changing his mind.

"We can do that more safely for you in the Ever Dark," Ryder said.

Demos then strode to the back wall of the church, behind where the altar should have been. Though Grayson was not at all religious, he wondered that the Vampires would use a church as one of their gates, a gate that required the person to write a symbol in blood, it seemed, on the wall. They both watched as Demos then cut his finger and used the blood to write a symbol. The symbol shimmered for a few moments and then went dark.

"What the Hell?" Demos growled.

He wrote the symbol again. This time it didn't even shimmer. Demos spun around to face them. His expression was a mixture of annoyance and alarm.

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“Something is wrong here!” Demos cried. “Am I writing the symbol wrong?”

But Ryder shook his head. “It’s perfect. It should work.”

“What’s that?” Grayson pointed towards a brick towards the bottom of the wall that flickered with a strange green light.

Ryder went over to it and hunkered down. He touched the brick briefly and jerked his hand away as if it was hot. He got out a phone and took a picture of it before rising to his feet.

“We need to get to another gate,” Ryder said with a grim determination on his face. “What this is, it’s messed up the gate..”

Messed up the gate? Grayson thought. The Sect had Gregory’s letter. They knew where this gate was. They did something to it so that... what? To stop him from going? Delay him somehow?

A cold chill went through him. They did need to get out of there.

“The nearest gate for Nightvallen is thirty miles away,” Demos said with a grimace. “I’ll get us a ride. I know a general House number in this city but--”

“No,” Ryder said with a shake of his head.

“Why not?” Demos’ eyebrows rose.

“Because if Grayson is telling the truth then any Vampire we call may be in on this,” Grayson told him. “We boost a car. We get out of here as fast and quiet as we can. We talk to no one until we get him to the Ever Dark.”

Grayson again wanted to argue he didn’t want or need to go there but that would fall on deaf ears. Besides, he now had thirty miles to get away somehow. To get every Vampire out of his life.

“How many Vampires are there?” Ryder asked him again as he looped an arm around Grayson’s waist.

It would have looked like a friendly hold, but Grayson guessed it was to keep him from running.

“Three. One woman and two men, I think. I got a really good look at the woman, but not them,” Grayson explained. “She’s... really quick. Oh, and I think she’s one of those Ashyr Vampires. That or Horys.” At his words, Demos and Ryder shared another of those looks. “Everybody knows your guys’ powers! They’re not secret!”

“Okay. Fair enough. But why exactly do you think that she was one of those Bloodlines? What did she do?” Ryder asked. His voice was remarkably calm though it was clear he was on alert.

He’s a warrior of some sort. Maybe he was before he was turned. He’s done this before, Grayson thought.

“She threw a door at me... I mean, she threw the door of the store inside...” Grayson grimaced.

Ryder’s expression was neutral. Unlike Demos, who clearly knew Grayson was omitting things, he couldn’t read Ryder at all. It was far more unnerving.

“I don’t know if she used her mind to throw it in or maybe with a gust of wind,” Grayson finished with a shrug. “She didn’t do anything else... I mean... she...”

He again saw her mouth red with Sam’s blood in his mind and trembled. Ryder’s hands moved from his waist to Grayson’s shoulders, steadying him. He normally didn’t like being touched by someone he didn’t know. Hell, even people he did know. But this touch was surprisingly good. Yet he still stiffened and Ryder dropped his hands.

“She killed my friend, too. Like he was nothing,” Grayson got out, his voice tight.

“I’m sorry,” Ryder said simply.

“You sound like you mean it.” The words left Grayson’s mouth before he could stop them.

Ryder lifted an eyebrow. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re a Vampire,” Grayson said as if that should answer everything.

“No time to school him about how Vampires work, Ryder. We have more issues,” Demos said. “I say we haul ass out the back way.”

“Sounds good,” Ryder said.

Again, that arm was around him, steering him to the back of the church and down a hallway that smelled of dry rot and rat droppings. Grayson thought this was the type of place where the homeless and junkies would hang out. He would have stayed here back in the day, but it was remarkably free of people. Only Vampires could keep the desperate away from this place. They neared the back door at the end of the hall when Demos froze. Ryder did the same and was, once more, shoving Grayson protectively

behind him.

Before Demos or Ryder explained the sudden stop, the female Vampire's voice rose up from outside, "I think we've been discovered!" Her voice was filled with laughter as if this were going to be fun. "You'd best just bring the boy out to me. He's been very naughty." Her voice dipped as she added, "Don't let me ask twice."

### CRAVING

Ryder felt Grayson tense against him. That lithe body was coiled like a spring now. He had stiffened whenever Ryder had touched him, but like a wild stallion who just wanted to be calmed by a steady hand, had relaxed after a time almost as if against his will. Though Grayson was smaller than Ryder was, the young man was nicely muscled. He had the body of a natural athlete, not one pumped up in a gym like an over-inflated balloon. But every one of those muscles had gone rock hard hearing the female Vampire's voice.

Fight or flight. Yes, he's met her before. He didn't lie about her, Ryder thought.

Ryder turned his head and accidentally drew in the young man's scent. There was the tart smell of fear. Some Vampires loved that scent. It was what every prey gave off when cornered. But it spoiled the blood in Ryder's opinion. It made it acrid and bitter somehow.

But there was another scent beneath that coming from Grayson, a scent that began to overwhelm the one of fear. It was a cold, icy smell. It was one Ryder had smelled around true warriors before a battle. They turned their terror into fuel. They turned their rage into power. They turned their power into death for their enemies. It was not a scent he had expected to smell on this modern young man.

Grayson's fierce response to Demos and Ryder himself, knowing they were Vampires also, pointed to a warrior spirit though he had thought it foolishness. But he had been wrong. Grayson was not a fool. And perhaps that and the warrior inside explained how he had survived an encounter with these other Vampires.

But Grayson was still a human, warrior or no. Fragile. Easy to break.

“How many?” Demos growled as Ryder’s senses were better than most anyone’s.

“Let’s hope there are only three still. She’s had time to bring some friends,” Ryder answered as he cocked his head to the side and unleashed his vampiric hearing.

At first, he could just hear their heartbeats in the hallway. Demos’ was steady and strong as always before a fight. His was a faster beat but still slow even as he prepared for battle. Grayson’s though sounded like the frantic beat of butterfly wings. He listened more closely to that delicate thump.

That was a mistake.

He must not have fed enough that night, spending more time flying than feeding, because his pupils expanded and his fangs ached. Grayson was beautiful. One would have to be blind not to notice that. But there were many beautiful young men in the world and they were about to be attacked. Now was not the time to be distracted, though the predator in him disagreed. Now was the perfect time, it seemed to think.

Almost against his will, it was like Grayson was the only person in existence. Ryder’s senses narrowed down to just him. The predator in him swarmed to the surface as he focused in on that human heart, the whoosh of rich blood through Grayson’s veins, and the rasp of his frenzied breathing.

Grayson was in full flight or fight mode. Perspiration coated his silky skin. There were scrapes on his right cheekbone. A delicate beading of blood which was the only kind of makeup that drew a Vampire like no other.

Draw away, he thought, but he didn’t.

Hunger for this young man was suddenly bright and blooming inside of him like fireworks. It was so unexpected that he was paralyzed by his own desire. They were about to fight! They did not need this distraction! But the predator within betrayed him again. He fisted his hands. He held himself very still. He needed to know how many more Vampires--competitors, his predator self snarled--were nearby.

“Phone suddenly has no signal. No backup is coming that way,” Demos grimaced as he slid his back in his pocket, waiting on Ryder’s report on what they were facing, not realizing the hunger was trying to take over. Demos nodded his head at Grayson. “Guess you weren’t lying about that.”

“I wasn’t lying about anything!” Grayson hissed. “What are we doing? If they’re out back then let’s go out front!”

“Ryder?” Demos asked, wanting to confirm that they weren’t heading into yet another trap.

Ryder felt his fangs come out as his gaze rested upon the pulse point on the right side of Grayson’s neck. It was such a lovely neck. Long and supple. He imagined how it would feel to let his fangs sink into that sweet flesh and taste the first, fresh draw of Grayson’s blood...

“Ryder!” Demos hissed as he saw where Ryder’s attention actually was and it was not on their enemies.

Demos struck Ryder’s left shoulder. It was a blow that would have crushed human bones, but just got Ryder’s attention. Ryder whipped his head around towards his Blood Brother, fangs bared, and... he stopped. This was Demos. They were in a church surrounded by enemies.

What am I doing?

The sound of Grayson's heart was gone from his ears and he was free of its malign influence. Even as Demos stared at him in consternation his senses finally obeyed him and swung outwards.

"Can't leave the front way either," Ryder finally said. "Two more out there."

He had heard one of them scraping his foot along the pavement, stubbing out a cigarette. The other was tapping a fingernail against their leg. He focused on where the woman's voice had come from. For a moment, his hearing had once more flowed over Grayson, but he dragged his senses away from the young man. Sweat beaded his upper lip.

What is wrong with me?

"Three out back, including the woman," Ryder got out and turned his head away from Grayson and Demos as he wiped the sweat from his face. It was cold and his hand trembled.

What the Hell happened? I haven't lost control like that since I was the newest of fledglings on the hunt. Then another thought occurred to him. Maybe it isn't me at all. Maybe Grayson is the cause of this.

He turned back to face them and some of his suspicion must have shown in his eyes as the young man retreated a step then, defiantly, crossed his arms over his chest and remained where he was. Ryder's eyes narrowed further. While Grayson hadn't been lying to them about the Vampires chasing him, he was definitely hiding something.

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Hiding things that make him dangerous to Vampires? Ryder wondered. But Demos seems completely unaffected by him.

“Five,” Demos grunted. “Not good. But not terrible.”

“We’ve handled more loads of times,” Ryder said.

“Two against five doesn’t sound like good odds to me,” Grayson said. “Isn’t there any other way out of here? Maybe we can get up onto the roof and jump to the next building?”

That icy, warrior scent rose up from Grayson. Ryder swallowed thickly. “They’ll be on us from both sides before we make it halfway across.”

“You said she was fast, right?” Demos pointed out. “She can jump high too. Vampires are the best acrobats you’ve ever seen.”

“So there’s no way out?” Grayson’s heart was thrumming again.

Ryder grimaced and swallowed again. “We can handle them. You need to let us take care of this, Grayson.”

“Right. Sure. I can’t do much against Vampires,” Grayson said with a shrug, but that icy smell was so much stronger.

“Grayson,” Ryder put a note of warning in his voice, “whatever you did before to get past these Vampires won’t work twice.”

“Okay,” Grayson lied again as the scent had Ryder by the throat.

He glanced over at Demos. His Blood Brother showed no sign of smelling that odd scent.

Am I going mad?

Ryder grimaced. Demos’ expression was shrouded. He hadn’t bought Grayson’s story of Sect of Dawn Vampires, but it looked to be true. Yet like Ryder he sensed something was off here.

But he’s not being affected by it like I am.

“Where’s the plan?” Demos asked. “Like that time in Egypt?”

Ryder grinned. “I was thinking more about Brazil.”

Demos’ eyebrows rose. “Brazil? Well, well, well, someone’s intent to turn this evening around.”

“Egypt? Brazil? What are you guys talking about?” Grayson asked.

“We’ve been getting out of tough spots for a long time,” Ryder explained. “This is no different. We encountered situations like this in those places.”

“That Vampire out there she’s... she’s different,” Grayson said and swallowed.

The fear in his eyes had the opposite effect of the scent and the heart. Ryder felt a flush of shame. This boy was terrified. He was in need of protection. And that’s what Weryns offered.

At least now we do.

“We’ve dealt with crazy before, Grayson. It’s been sort of our bag,” Demos answered.

Grayson frowned, but neither of them explained. The Immortal War had needed soldiers. Each Bloodline had made Vampires based on their level of aggression, no other trait was necessary. The crazier the better. While they had been ideal as foot soldiers, they couldn’t be trusted afterwards to keep the existence of Vampires a secret.

They killed without compunction and mostly just for fun. They were sloppy leaving drained bodies like party favors strewn across cities. And he and Demos hunted them. They called these lost Vampires War Children. Lawson had called Balthazar a Master-killer, but from all Ryder had seen, Roan Tithe had been one of the War Children. He had just hidden it better than others. Maybe this woman and her minions were War Children. That would make sense though bringing the Sect of Dawn into it was odd. But that was just one more odd thing about this night.

“Are you down with Brazil?” Ryder asked.

Demos nodded and strode past them towards the front of the church.

“Where’s he going?” Grayson asked, eyes widening and breathing becoming heavy once more.

“Don’t worry about that. We’ve got this,” Ryder said.

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Ryder grasped the young man by the upper arms and bodily carried him to a closet he had glimpsed on their way back here. Grayson let out the same squawk he had earlier when picked up. It was almost cute. Okay, it was cute. He held Grayson in one arm while opening the closet door with the other. He placed Grayson inside. The young man immediately tried to dash out. Ryder put up a hand to block him.

“What are you doing?” Ryder asked.

“What are you doing?” Grayson demanded.

The fear smell was back in full force. Ryder hoped it would be enough to stop the craving. It was. But more than that it was the sheer terror in Grayson’s eyes. But it wasn’t terror of the unknown or just Vampires. It was the terror of having seen things, experienced things, that most people did not. This kid was a survivor if nothing else.

“You’ll be safe in here,” Ryder said.

“Safe?!” Grayson let out a sharp laugh and tried to duck beneath Ryder’s arm.

He caught the young man and gently, but firmly put him back in the closet and blocked the way out with his body.

“You’ll be out of the way, which is as safe as we can make you until we take them out,” Ryder amended.

The young man had a good eye for odds and fighting. Again, survivor. Warrior.

Something else. The full scent of him was in Ryder's nostrils as they were both in the small space of the closet. Ryder licked his lips and swallowed. The predator wanted to come out.

Good. Use it on our enemies. But leave this boy alone.

"We'll come get you when it's over," Ryder said.

"No, I--I don't want to be in here! I need a way out!" The young man looked ready to climb the walls.

"This is the only way to keep you safe," Ryder said even as he wanted to respond to that fear with something other than these harsh words. "Keep it together. You've done well all evening. Don't fail now."

He hadn't expected his words to have any real effect on Grayson, but they did. The young man drew in a deep, shuddering breath and held himself in a tight embrace.

"I can do this. I can. It's not the same... not the same," Grayson said, but Ryder wasn't sure if he was speaking to Ryder or himself.

"I'll be back," Ryder said and shut the door.

"Promise?" Big eyes stared at him.

Ryder nodded. "Promise."

He then pulled it towards himself until there was a crunching sound as the door was crushed against the door jam, wedging it closed. Only a Vampire could release him. And he was just in time.

“Oh, you fools, you’re making me repeat myself,” the woman sounded truly aggravated, but then there was a lilt of laughter in her voice as she said, “Not that we were going to let you live your Second Lives anyways.”

Thunder rumbled above them. Lightning streaked through the sky, illuminating the church in a silvery glow for a moment.

Horys Bloodline. Can control the weather, Ryder thought.

Ryder shifted into his treachery of ravens form. His clothes dissolved and his cellphone thudded to the ground. With a soft flutter of wings flew to the roof where he had seen an open patch. Dark as night he flitted through the opening into the air. No Weryn, but him could do what he did next. He divided himself into two large treacheries of ravens. One group went to the front while the other group headed to the back. His vision was split up further than simply amongst the individual birds, but also the two treacheries. But Ryder had been practicing this.

There were only two Vampires in front just like his senses had alerted him. One was a whip-thin Asian woman with her long black hair coiled like a serpent on the back of her head. Her lips were a scarlet slash. She was a study in starkness in her black and white outfit. Only the lipstick gave her any color. Beside her was a man dressed all in white. Even his hair was white. He too was thin as a reed. He was the cigarette smoker. He ground out another butt beneath one heel.

Ryder also saw the Vampires at the back of the church at the same time as the ones at the front. There, in the back, he saw the woman--their leader--standing with her two Vampire companions on either side of her. Her hands were lifted to chest height in front of her. Lightning played between her fingers. There was another crack of thunder and the air shivered. Cold wind brushed his feathers.

The silvery white light of her gift revealed that her chest was covered in blood. Her

shirt was wrenched open. That blood on her shirt was not human, but Vampire or mostly Vampire.

How did that happen? Ryder wondered. For a brief moment he considered, Grayson? Could he have done it? No. There would be no way.

He wasn't surprised at her anger and recklessness at that moment though even if Grayson wasn't the cause. Her aggression was up because she'd been badly injured. She'd likely drunk enough to heal herself quickly, but he was sure she was still craving and Grayson was the nearest source of blood. His own predator nearly had him issuing a screech of challenge. If anyone was drinking from that boy it was him!

But he shoved that down and told himself to think. Why would she chase the boy merely to drain him? She wouldn't. She had to know that Grayson could have spilled all he knew to them already. So she couldn't be here simply to keep what he knew from getting out. Though she said she was going to kill Demos and him. But the phones had worked until recently.

No, something more is going on here. She wants Grayson in one piece, I think. All the more reason to take him to the Ever Dark and not let him out of my sight!

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Even before he saw the shadow of Demos' big cat form leaping towards the church window from inside, Ryder was already diving at the Vampires. He hadn't made a sound in his bird form so they didn't see him coming until they were being dive bombed by dozens of birds.

The leader let out a shriek as he pecked at her face, going for her eyes. She blindly thrust out her hands and lightning arced from her fingertips and hit the asphalt--shattering huge chunks of it and spraying the air--and the back of the church--two windows shattered and glass rained down. She also struck some of his bird bodies who let out a caw! And then burst into feathers that fluttered down to earth. He felt their loss like body blows, but they didn't incapacitate him in any way.

On the front side of the church, he had dive bombed the whip-thin Asian woman and the old man. Both had ducked down to cover their faces. His talons drew blood and ripped strands of hair from their heads. He heard the old man curse with a British accent. The air pressure changed just before a wave of wind sent many of his bird bodies slamming against the church's facade. Pain rocketed through Ryder, but he kept on attacking them.

The large front window of the church exploded outwards as Demos jumped out of it in his panther form. His massive front paws landed on the Asian woman's shoulders as he took her down. She got out one shriek before Demos' jaws closed around her throat and ripped it out. There was a gurgling sound and the older man shouted, "No, Ana!"

The old man then leaped on Demos' back as he sent another wind wave that had all of Ryder's bird forms on this side of the church splatting on the ground, broken and

then bursting apart. Ryder was now only in the back of the church. Demos would have to hold his own.

He saw the leader and her two followers join hands just before they brought the whirlwind. Trees, branches, debris of all sorts gave the whirlwind its funnel-type shape. It ripped his bird bodies out of the sky and then shredded them in the blender of air. Ryder only stopped from passing out by disengaging his consciousness from those forms. But soon he was down to only a handful of ravens.

“You fucking stupid Weryn! Think a flock of birds can end us?” The leader laughed. “Now you DIE!”

But that was the thing about Ryder. Unlike the Weryn they were used to, he was not limited to one form. He flew a single bird body behind them while they picked off the rest, thinking that they were killing him.

And then he shifted again behind them into his new bear form.

He rose up on his hind legs. He lifted his two front paws on either side of the minion’s heads. Then he smashed their skulls together. They went to jelly in his hands. Brains and blood squished between his claws. The headless bodies slumped to the ground.

But he only had time to look up from his handiwork before a lightning bolt struck him in the center of his chest. He was thrown back over twenty feet. His bear body hit the ground and kept sliding. The pain was indescribable. He couldn’t breathe, but he could smell burnt bear fur and flesh. He couldn’t hear his own heartbeat.

I should be dead. I should be dead...

Then he saw the leader come into view. She had a rictus of a grin on her face. Blood

streaked her cheeks. Her eyes were bright with malice. Her hands glowed with lightning.

One more strike...

But then she wasn't grinning anymore. Wood splinters as large as stakes stuck out of her torso as if she were a pin cushion. Blood flooded down her chin as she stared in horror at the mess where her chest once was. She went down onto her knees and then fell completely over. He realized then that the "wooden stakes" was the church's back door that had been shattered and then sent flying towards her at incredible force.

Ryder heard footsteps. He smelled the cold, icy scent that he now recognized as Grayson's. The young man hove into view. He was swaying. His face was pale as milk.

Grayson? Grayson, how did you do that?

But he was still in his bear form and the words didn't come. He managed to just catch Grayson as the young man collapsed in his arms.

NO CHOICE

The water surrounded Grayson. Or maybe it wasn't water. But he was suspended in it. It was a dusky blue, lightning above him to a clear gray and darkening below him to a pitch black. Grayson slowly spun in a circle, trying to see if there was something different depending on where he looked, but every direction showed him the same: nothing.

And yet... Grayson felt like he had been here before. In this nothing. Though when he couldn't quite place.

“... did Grayson do that? How? He’s not a Vampire,” Demos’ voice rose up behind him.

Grayson whipped around, but Demos was not there. He was alone in the blue void.

“Humans have spoken about powers like those for ages. I always thought that it was because of their exposure to our kind,” Ryder answered on the other side of him.

Ryder?!

Grayson spun around again, but, again, it was still him.

“As far as I know, there are no humans who can do what he did,” Demos said.

“And yet, here he is,” Ryder said.

Grayson thought he felt someone tucking a blanket around him. He wasn’t sure if he imagined the brush of warm fingers against his jaw or the light placement of a palm against his forehead,

Ryder?!

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He knew it was Ryder touching him. The man--or Vampire--was a mass of contradictions. He seemed to want to protect Grayson. Picking Grayson up as if he was a toy. Standing between Grayson and danger. Touching him as if his hands should be an anchor for Grayson. And they weirdly had been. He didn't like being touched, but when Ryder had done so... he'd felt safe.

But safety was an illusion.

Then there was the Ryder who looked at him out of narrowed, burning silver eyes as if he suspected Grayson of something. There was hunger in his clenched jaw and parted lips. Ryder seemed wild in those moments as if about to lose control.

The two aspects of him shouldn't be allowed to exist in one man—one Vampire—but they did. And that meant that any safety that Grayson felt with him had to be fought. The Vampire was a predator. Through and through. No matter that he could be gentle. No matter that he seemed to have a desire to protect. He was still a creature who drank blood, who fed on Grayson's kind.

“What happened between you two back there at the church?” Demos asked, and his voice was now located forward and to Grayson's left.

Grayson couldn't just hear him, but also the hum of tires on the road, and the faint thump-thump as they passed over sections of highway.

We're in a car. Demos is driving. I'm in the backseat, probably lying down and Ryder is in the front passenger seat, Grayson realized even as the blue world did not change. Am I asleep? Unconscious? Somewhere between the two? Yeah... must be. Used too

much of my power and now I'm here.

“What do you mean? There was nothing,” Ryder’s voice had gone all growly and low, which gave lie to his words.

Demos noticed it too. The duality. But he seems to think it’s unusual for Ryder to be the way he was with me.

Demos let out a bark of laughter. “What do I mean? Don’t you play me, boy! I know you down to your bones and I swear I thought you were going to take Grayson right then and there with our enemies all around us. Now Grayson is beautiful and he’s got that doe-look you like so much, but when we’re about to battle? You have never been so distracted as that before. So what is the deal?”

Ryder made a sound. Was it pain? Grayson remembered the burns on the bear’s front. He had known that bear was Ryder. He’d known more than that. He’d known that Ryder was in danger. Being in the closet--why did he put me there?! I wasn’t safe there! Small and horrible and... he didn’t know. He didn’t have any idea. And I got out--had been hard.

Staying still and silent in the dark while the sound of fighting was going on had been almost impossible. But then he’d heard the triumph in that female Vampire’s voice, faint though it had been. He’d blown open the door to the closet and then... then he’d moved with a certainty that he’d never had before. He’d shattered the back door to the church and sent the stakes flying at her before he’d even seen her. He’d known where she was. He’d known.

They know now too, Grayson realized. They know what I can do and they aren’t scared... but they’re going to take me to the Ever Dark and there’s nothing I can do.

“His blood would be useful right about now,” Ryder answered, this time a mixture of

amusement and discomfort.

“Blood we took off those homeless was not enough, I know, but it would have been too dangerous for them if we took more,” Demos reminded him. “And you did not want to stop and find a club—”

“No, we need to get Grayson to the Ever Dark. Plenty of willing Acolytes there to feed me and heal this,” Ryder answered.

Grayson could faintly smell the scent of burning flesh. He thought of Ryder’s perfect chest all blackened and weeping fluids.

“It could have been loads worse if Grayson hadn’t... well, hadn’t staked that Horys Vampire,” Demos said almost casually, but Grayson knew that the emotions behind those words were not casual. These two men were friends, brothers, and the devastation of losing the other could not likely have been calculated.

Grayson wondered what it would be like to have someone you could trust like that. Was their kinship an illusion? If it was tested would it last? But, more importantly, caring that much for someone else was dangerous. Because it meant you were not free to get out of a situation. They counted on you. You counted on them. Definitely dangerous.

“She was much more powerful than I thought,” Ryder answered. “She was able to send lightning out of her hands.”

“We’re sure she’s dead?” Demos asked after a moment of digesting this news.

“I hope not. I want her alive to be questioned. But she’s dead enough that she won’t get out of the trunk. Nor will the others. Got to find out who they are. The Eyros will do it,” Ryder answered. “Or... the Kaly. Whichever, I suppose.”

A chill went through Grayson. The female Vampire was just feet away from him in the trunk of the car and he was unable to even move, let alone run if he needed to.

“The old dude was a lot tougher than he had any right to be either,” Demos said and Grayson assumed he was talking about one of the Vampires he fought. “Not good that he got away.”

“They got the drop on both of us.”

“Not my finest hour, that is for sure,” Demos said quietly. “So you didn’t answer my question. What is the deal between you and the little one?”

There is no deal! Grayson huffed. And I am not little! These two are abnormally big!

Ryder let out a sigh, but then said, “I don’t know. I felt like I was losing control--”

“Felt like or were?” Demos countered.

“I was. I fixated on him like we used to do when we were young fledglings just out for our first hunts,” Ryder admitted.

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Grayson swallowed. He could feel his throat and mouth. That was good. But was what he was hearing good? A Vampire being fixated on him couldn't be good.

"Maybe it has something to do with his powers. Maybe his blood called to you," Demos suggested.

Oh, right, make it my fault that Ryder nearly loses control and--and bites me! Grayson thought.

"If that was the case, it should have called to you as well and it did not, right? Or did you just hide it better than me?" Ryder asked, and there was a hint of possessiveness in his tone as if Demos better not have craved Grayson's blood.

Grayson felt odd when he realized that. Everyone who had found out what he was wanted him gone. His powers scared them. He couldn't be normal. He was dangerous. His powers hurt people. But then the female Vampire hadn't been scared, but found him fascinating. She should have been scared though, considering what he did to her.

"No, I did not. Doe-eyed and broken are your thing, not mine," Demos snorted.

Doe-eyed and broken? Is he saying that about me?!

"He just seems... haunted. When I put him in the closet I think I made a big mistake. He was ready to claw his way out of there," Ryder said.

Grayson swallowed again and pushed down the claustrophobia that even thinking of

dark, tight places brought. This strange blue place was vast. He felt a different kind of angst here. But so long as he could hear their voices, he was okay. He'd just pushed himself way too hard. He'd never used his powers this much. His fire needed fueling. But right now he needed to rest.

"And you still put him in there?" The disbelief in Demos' voice was hard to miss.

"It was the safest place!" Ryder hissed, clearly annoyed. "I couldn't just leave him sitting on a pew! I could bring him with me! He needed to be somewhere he wouldn't be able to get into trouble from—"

"And yet, thank the Immortals, he did because he saved your Vampire ass and likely mine too," Demos interrupted him, completely unrepentant.

"You've changed your tune on him. Where's all the suspicion and narrowed-eyes from before?" Ryder pointed out.

It was true that Demos seemed to be more in his corner than before, which Grayson was glad about. But, then again, it was because they had him unconscious in the back seat and Grayson had saved Ryder's life as he said. So that's all it took to take Demos to change his mind.

"He was lying, Ryder. I sensed that and was playing bad cop since you were ready to pat him on the head--or more like kiss his temple--and tell him everything was going to be all right," Demos teased.

Grayson thought he felt heat flare in his cheeks. Kissing him? Demos thought that Ryder wanted to kiss him? This was ridiculous to feel embarrassed about.

Kiss me or feed from me. Which is it? Or is it both?

“He looks like he’s had a hard life,” Ryder said, not denying the kissing bit, which had Grayson feeling all sorts of strange.

“Yeah, imagine having powers like that. I bet it's played havoc with his life,” Demos agreed.

“He lied to us probably because anyone he’s told about them has either disbelieved him--

“Which we, of all people, would not have done!”

“Right, but the other sort of people would have wanted to examine him,” Ryder pointed out.

Grayson’s heart started to thump faster. He heard someone turn around in their seat. He thought it might be Ryder, having heard the difference in his heart rate, and was checking on him. Grayson tried to calm himself down, but being unable to move was making that difficult.

“Is he coming to?” Demos asked, more squeaking and shifting as he moved, too.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” Ryder muttered. “Not quite yet.”

He felt fingers move along his forehead, smoothing out tension lines that he hadn’t known were there, and Grayson found himself relaxing under those touches. He told himself not to. He told himself to fight the comfort that Ryder’s touch brought. Had he not just heard them talking about how Ryder was having difficulty not wanting to bite him?

“It’s okay, Grayson. Let yourself sleep. You’re safe,” Ryder soothed.

And Grayson, despite himself, drifted down into the blackness. But it wasn't scary. It was comforting. And he slept.

The next time he came to, he was no longer in the blue space, but was actually awake. He knew this by the fact that his head felt like someone was drilling a hole into it and then pouring in acid before sloshing his brain around. He lifted a hand to his head, relieved to be able to move, and touched his temple. But even that caused him to wince.

He lay there, trying to figure out where he was without opening his eyes and looking around. He wasn't in the car anymore. He didn't hear the hiss of tires over asphalt or the thumps. Also, wherever he was no longer had streetlamps that would flash over his closed eyelids. The room was dimly lit, if there was any light at all. For this he was eternally grateful.

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But then he wondered if the room was small. Like a closet or a coffin small. His hands stretched out to his sides. All they found was more sheets. Definitely, crisp, cool, cotton sheets overtop a very comfy mattress. He turned his head slightly to the right. His nose hit a soft pillow that had a faint sandalwood scent. There was a light duvet over him. It was airy and yet very warm. He was comfortable except for his head.

I'm in bed, he realized. And then he realized what that meant, I'm in the Ever Dark!

His eyelids shot open and, thankfully, the only light came from wainscoting at the top of the wall where the walls met the ceiling. Soft, silvery light was emitted from there. Most of the light was blocked by the heavy hangings that surrounded the bed. It was a four-poster, something that Grayson had only ever seen in movies that had castles. So it fit the Ever Dark. Wasn't every city in the Ever Dark supposed to be one of the Immortal's castles in a way?

He heard a sound--the scratch and hiss of a match being lit--and his gaze shot towards the fireplace at the end of the bed. A man was kneeling there, lighting kindling. It caught quickly and immediately cast a golden glow on the person's features.

He was in his mid-thirties--though he was likely a Vampire so how he looked didn't mean anything about how old he really was--and wearing a well tailored three-piece suit in gray and blue. He had dark blond hair that brushed the top of his collar.

"Hello, Grayson," his voice was tinged with an English accent.

Grayson jerked and his head thrummed with pain. He brought both hands up to his

head and opened his mouth in a silent scream even as he curled into a fetal position.

“Oh, dear, I didn’t mean to startle you, but I thought since you’d seen me that it would be all right to speak. My fault. Should have checked,” the man continued.

Through his fingers, Grayson saw the man—Vampire—gracefully rise from the fireplace and approach the bed. Grayson couldn’t even move or talk to tell him to keep back! He doubted it would have worked anyways. He noticed that Vampires did what they wanted. The man then touched him and he didn’t like it!

“Not Ryder!” Grayson managed to shout, which just had his head vibrating like a bell with agony.

“Not Ryder? Hmmm, so he isn’t the only one to feel a connection,” the man murmured, undeterred by his words as he put fingers on Grayson’s temples.

“No! No!” Grayson cried.

He was trying to say that he had no connection to Ryder and for this man not to touch him. But everything came out garbled and not as he wanted. The pain was just unbelievable! Ice picks stabbing his brain. Acid sizzling his gray matter. Throbbing pain that radiated throughout his body.

And then... it was gone.

The man took his fingers away from Grayson’s temples and drew a chair over to the side of the bed. Grayson didn’t move for long moments as he tried to ascertain if the pain was really gone. After all, how could it be there--ever present and agonizing--and then vanish?

“It’s not actually gone. I’ve just told your mind not to concentrate on it. The

command will fade when the pain has gone away,” the man said.

“You--you read my mind?” Grayson brought his hands down on his face and looked at the Vampire.

The Vampire sat easily with his legs deftly crossed one over the other. His long fingered hands were loosely held in his lap. The word to describe his affect was... languid. He was completely at ease, so at ease that he was arguably melting in his chair.

“Who--”

“Am I? Lord Balthazar Ravenscroft or the Immortal Eyros, if you prefer. I answer to both.” The Vampire--or Immortal--bowed without leaving his chair.

“Eyros... you’re the headmaster of the academy. The Vampire wannabe school, right?” Grayson asked as he took in the well-dressed figure who smiled at him with absolutely no fear, disgust or concern.

“Vampire wannabe school? Oooh, I’m going to use that to annoy Caemorn. He is deadly serious about this school and the students,” Balthazar said with a pleasant, low laugh.

His silver eyes glowed softly in the low light. They were... mesmerizing. Not in the way that Ryder’s were, but they invited him to relax and open up and tell Balthazar everything...

“What the Hell?!” Grayson rocketed up in the bed and winced in expectation of pain, but it did not come.

Balthazar merely chuckled again. “You felt that, did you? Interesting! One of so

many interesting things about you.” He put a hand to his chest and explained unnecessarily, “I read minds. I’m reading your mind.”

“I don’t want you to!” Grayson grimaced because he heard the child’s wail in his voice. He doubted what he wanted mattered.

“I’m afraid not. Not in this case in any event,” Balthazar said, reading his mind again. He brought his hands together and leaned forward on his elbows. “As unpleasant as the thought of me poking around in your head is, isn’t this better than having to tell me everything?”

Grayson opened and shut his mouth. Being questioned was what he’d always feared. Why he’d fled before the red and blue lights flared outside his home’s windows. Why he’d never let his mother even open her mouth to ask the obvious question: How did you kill your stepfather, Grayson? How could a boy do that?

“I guess there’s some benefits,” Grayson finally said, thrusting those thoughts out of the front of his mind.

“Yes.” Balthazar nodded, clearly knowing this was true regardless of what Grayson said out loud. “And I’ve only looked at tonight’s events. No further back. Though I really wanted to.”

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Grayson tensed. “Just tonight? Why?”

Balthazar sighed. “I’ve been asked not to.”

“By who?”

Did Ryder ask?

“Oh, Ryder most certainly didn’t want me asking you anything. He got quite het up when I told him that he couldn’t be here with you while I looked at your memories,” Balthazar said.

“I don’t know why he would care,” Grayson lied.

But was it a lie? He didn’t understand why Ryder would care? Or why he would care that Ryder might care.

“He doesn’t either! Which is interesting in and of itself.” Balthazar leaned back in his chair with a grin. “He is a protector. And you’re his type, though you’re a bit tougher than you look.”

“I’ve had to be,” Grayson found the words just slipped out.

Balthazar tilted his head to the side. “You’re special. And the world wants to destroy special people unless they’re strong enough to survive it.”

Grayson didn’t answer. He tried keeping the memories that those words brought up

down so that Balthazar didn't read them. He wasn't sure if that actually worked. But he had to try. Though this Vampire seemed all right it wasn't safe. None of this was safe.

"Am I... am I in the Ever Dark?" Grayson asked, wanting some of his own questions answered.

"Yes, in the city of Nightvallen. You're actually in the Eyros Palace. My palace." Balthazar beamed.

He was clearly quite proud of this.

"So if you looked into my head and know what all happened with Gregory Starn, I take it that I'm not staying here?" Grayson didn't actually think this. He was simply hoping it was true.

"You know that's not happening," Balthazar snouted softly. "Even if we were to just let you go, do you think that would be a good idea?"

"I..."

"The Sect of Dawn--or whoever this group really is--will be gunning for you," Balthazar reminded him. "You have no money to relocate. You have no car to simply drive off and disappear into the sunset. You have no family to take you in. You are a sitting duck."

Grayson swallowed. "But you can't care about that! I'm nothing to you."

Balthazar went very still. He didn't even seem to breathe. And then he was moving again like a photograph come to life.

“Well, that’s not true. Among other things, we want to stop those people who want to stop you,” Balthazar said.

“The enemy of my enemy is... my friend?” Grayson asked, recalling the old adage.

“Indeed!” Balthazar’s grin didn’t dim.

But Grayson was sure he wasn’t telling the full truth. He didn’t have to read minds to know that.

“So... what do you want?” Grayson asked, hands fisting in the duvet that seemed deceptively soft now.

“Many things! Ask me what I want and you might as well ask me what the meaning of life is! But what you’re really asking is what is going to happen to you now?” Balthazar rephrased.

Grayson just nodded.

“We want you to stay here and go to school at the ‘Vampire wannabe academy’. Oh, I so love that!” Balthazar’s grin was infectious if it wasn’t for the dread he felt.

“Why?”

“As I said before, you have nowhere else to go that is safe. We want to keep you safe,” Balthazar said. “Maybe you can help us figure out who these people are. Maybe you can figure out who you are.”

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Grayson stared at him. “I know who I am.”

“You know who you are now. Let us help you discover who you are going to be,” Balthazar said.

“I don’t want your help with that.” Grayson slid his legs out from under the duvet. He was no longer wearing the clothes he had been in. He was wearing just a light pair of drawstring pants. “And as to those people, they just found me by accident. They weren’t looking for me. So they won’t keep looking. They have—”

“They’ll keep looking, Grayson.” Balthazar’s voice was soft. “We both know that. And though you have demonstrated great skills, you were lucky. You won’t be so lucky again.”

“I saved your people!”

“Yes, you did. But you couldn’t have gone up against five Vampires alone, could you? You needed Ryder and Demos as much as they ended up needing you, didn’t you?” Balthazar’s silver eyes were focused on him like twin lasers. Seeing inside of him. “You shouldn’t lie to yourself and it really is pointless to lie to me.”

Grayson swallowed. “Staying here isn’t a request, is it?”

Balthazar’s smile did not dim. “We now have an open spot at the academy. Most people would kill for it. But we’re giving it to you, Grayson. Be sensible and simply take it.”

“Right, just give in and be your--”

“Student! There are so many things here that will benefit you,” Balthazar told him, and then with a rather impish smile added, “Including Ryder. He’s outside my palace. Pacing. And being ridiculous and all Weryn-like. It’s very exciting.”

“I don’t care about--”

“Remember what I said about lying, young man?” Balthazar wagged a finger at him. “Now, you should get dressed. Ryder is waiting. And we have some pomp and circumstance to get through.”

## BLOOD RUN TRUE

Earlier...

“Fascinating! You say he used telekinesis to do this? A human?” Lord Balthazar Ravenscroft asked as leaned over the body of the female Horys Vampire. The stakes still stuck out of her body like a porcupine’s quills. Balthazar touched the pointy end of one and mock-shivered. “Ouch!”

“Yes, Grayson did this. His name is Grayson. The one that you took away was the one to do this,” Ryder’s voice was low and angry.

They had practically ripped Grayson out of his arms. He hadn’t been craving the boy again. Not really. Not exactly. But he’d wanted to take Grayson somewhere safe in the Weryn house. Tuck him into his own space. Then, after talking to Lawson, he would have reported this to Balthazar and Caemorn. But the moment they had arrived through the gate, the two Immortals had been there to greet them as if expecting this.

And Grayson had been taken from him.

Taken him away.

“Your job was to bring back Gregory Starn. After we question you, there is no need for you to have any more interactions with Grayson,” Lord Caemorn Losus replied icily.

Caemorn wore a long crimson coat that showed off his pale skin and nearly white-blond hair. His features were handsome yet sharp. He stroked his goatee absently as he stared at the near corpse even as he spoke to them.

They were in the Eyros Palace, and yet they were in a suite of rooms that was reserved for Lord Caemorn Losus or the Immortal Kaly. There was, in fact, a Kaly Palace. It looked like a gothic abomination, but it suited the Kaly Bloodline down to its bones. Yet this space, though very different with its modern glass, steel, stone and wood, also fit Caemorn.

Half of the space was a laboratory where the female Horys Vampire was laid out for them to study on a metal autopsy table. The other half were comfortable rooms with neat shelves for books and scrolls and a very clean aesthetic.

Why Caemorn would have a suite of rooms in another Immortal’s palace was unclear. Ryder certainly had no idea. He’d thought that maybe Balthazar and Caemorn were lovers, but it was hard to imagine Caemorn touching anyone with desire unless it was the desire to marionette their dead body. Besides, they sparred with one another more like brothers or frenemies. Those barbs had been aimed at Ryder this time and he decided to throw them back.

“And whose job was it exactly to make sure that Gregory Starn got to us alive? Not to mention that the gate worked properly?” Ryder growled. “You are the headmasters of this academy and, it is my understanding, that you are the ones who planned everything about it.”

“Well, with Seeyr’s help, of course,” Balthazar stated another Immortal’s name.

The Immortal Seeyr’s gift was to see the future. So maybe these two had expected this. But why then hadn’t they saved Gregory Starn? Or ensured that he and Demos had not almost been given their Second Deaths by allowing the gate to be blocked? The image of that glyph had already been sent to the two of them to decipher. Though if they recognized it, they weren’t telling Ryder or Demos.

“Of course, more Immortals pulling the strings!” Ryder snarled and his chest ached.

He swallowed more blood from the packet, finishing it, but it was not enough to do much other than reduce the severity of his burns. Demos touched his lower back to remind him that they were not talking to just any Vampires, but two Immortals, the leaders of the Eyros and Kaly Bloodlines, and favorites of King Daemon.

But did it matter if he said the rude parts out loud or kept them to himself? For Balthazar, who had the gift of mind reading and mind control, would know regardless of what he said out loud. But in the Weryn Bloodline there were rules to be followed, respect was to be given to elders, especially Immortals now. So Ryder bit his inner cheek so hard that he tasted his own blood on his tongue to keep his inner thoughts from flowing out.

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“We’ve had quite the evening, gentlemen. Not the one we thought we would have. Based upon everything that’s happened, we think we should be informed,” Demos stated calmly. “Ryder is here representing the Weryn after all. One assumes you will be telling all the Bloodline representatives about this?”

Balthazar, wearing a modern three-piece suit that was cut perfectly to his lithe form, lifted his eyes to meet Caemorn’s. Something passed between them. But even without being able to read minds, Ryder was certain what it was. He crossed his arms over his wounded chest but grinned coldly instead of grimaced.

“I don’t think they do intend to tell the other Bloodlines, Demos,” Ryder said evenly. “I think they want to keep this little matter locked down. They need us to keep silent in order to do that.”

“You know that Balthazar could simply read your minds and alter your memories of what occurred,” Caemorn replied just as evenly. “You wouldn’t even know that had been done,.”

A wave of unease swept through Ryder. These two Bloodlines--the Kaly and the Eyros--were looked upon with suspicion by the other Bloodlines. Eyros, because not even Vampire minds weren’t completely immune from their control, and Kaly because... well, Kaly controlled the dead.

“Now, now, Caemorn, that wouldn’t be friendly.” Balthazar waved a delicate hand through the air as if that was no nevermind. “And we’re supposed to be friendly. Working together. One team. There’s no ‘I’ in team!”

Demos snorted. Balthazar flashed him a smile. Caemorn's expression did not change. He was still regarding the Horys Vampire's body as if she were already dead and he wanted to string up her corpse. Balthazar turned away from his own perusal of the body.

"You are correct that we would like to keep this quiet, for now," Balthazar said agreeably. "And I have a feeling that you two can keep a secret."

"The Weryn don't gossip," Ryder agreed. Well, they didn't gossip outside of their pack.

"The Weryn are highly parochial and prejudiced. You pretend you are a pack because you shift into animal forms, but, ironically, you treat other Vampires as outsiders when logic dictates that your philosophy should incorporate every Vampire, regardless of Bloodline into your pack," Caemorn remarked.

"Humans have family units, city or town units, countries, etcetera. They are all human, but they don't consider everyone family," Ryder objected, stung by Caemorn's observation for some reason.

"They do now. Because they have a common enemy." Balthazar put both hands on his own chest. "Us."

Ryder pursed his lips. He couldn't really argue with that.

"And now we have the Sect of Dawn or whatever she really belongs to as a common enemy," Balthazar pointed out.

"Don't you know?" Demos frowned. "Can't you read her mind and know if she spoke the truth to Grayson?"

“Her mind is like a bowl of vegetable soup right now. I can poke around and things might float to the surface, but they don’t really show me the whole,” Balthazar described.

“I could simply take her soul and make her talk to us.” Caemorn took out a gem the size of a pigeon’s egg from his pocket. It was a deep red and pulsed as if alive.

Demos took a step back from the Immortal Kaly. It was Ryder’s turn to calm him down. He patted Demos’ arm and that stopped his Blood Brother from retreating.

“Yes, but if we heal her, I can get all the information out of her and turn her into a spy for us. A double agent, so to speak.” Balthazar covered Caemorn’s hand with his and urged the other Immortal to put the gem back into his pocket.

Caemorn complied with a sniff. “I suppose that has some merit.”

“It has a lot of merit,” Balthazar told him firmly. “Once she’s no longer of use, you can do whatever you like to her. But, for now, I think we need her to recover. Elgar! There you are!”

Ryder whipped around to see a dark-haired man in a lime green sweatsuit holding a skull in one arm. He hadn’t heard him enter the room. Neither had Demos whose fangs were showing. The man was almost as tall as Ryder, but he was much thinner, though not a weakling by any means. Yet there was a diffidence about him. Ryder realized that he never looked at anyone, including Balthazar, even as he spoke to the Immortal.

“Master, I have already prepared the bowl,” Elgar murmured, an unknown accent--maybe German, maybe French--tinting his words.

“Of course, you already anticipated what I wanted,” Balthazar sounded pleased.

Elgar smiled at the skull. “Master turned many enemies into friends in the past. I thought it would be no different here.”

“You’re right! It isn’t!” Balthazar grinned at all of them as if Elgar had performed a neat trick. “See, Caemorn, we don’t have to kill everyone to get what we want.”

Caemorn shrugged. “My way would be easier. But I see the value in yours. Proceed.”

“She’s all yours, Elgar!” Balthazar said with a smile.

Elgar lifted the Horys Vampire in one arm as if she weighed little more than a cat and carried her from the room.

“Now, about that Weryn secrecy thing,” Balthazar tented his fingers under his chin, “we need you to keep what happened here between us. No one else.”

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“Our Master and head of our House will want to know,” Ryder said. “Beyond him, no one will be told.”

“Oh, I’m sure Lawson would! He wants many things that he’s not getting!” Balthazar let out a laugh. His silver eyes narrowed and, suddenly, he did not seem so foppish or unserious. His smile was like a blade and his words were like daggers, “Are you the representative of the Weryn Bloodline or are you not?”

“At the academy, yes, I--”

“Are we not at the academy now?” Balthazar cut him off.

His cheeks flamed. Balthazar was suggesting that he wasn’t a leader. That he could not be the leader. Not if he relied upon Lawson. Arguably, he could say they were in the Eyros Palace, not the actual academy, but he didn’t. He gave a brief nod.

“And did not King Daemon himself request you to represent the Weryn Bloodline here?” Balthazar asked.

“Yes,” Ryder hated that he sounded so unsure.

Not that he doubted this happened or that it was Daemon’s will. But he didn’t know why he had been chosen. And he resented that it had put a wall between himself and Lawson.

“Do you intend to disobey King Daemon’s command and run to Lawson every time a decision is to be made?” Balthazar’s voice was cold. “Or do you intend to act like the

leader of your Bloodline?”

Balthazar knew his inner conflict. He had, undoubtedly, read in Ryder’s thoughts everything that had occurred with Lawson already. Maybe Seeyr had foreseen it.

“You already know my answer,” Ryder said.

“No, no, I don’t, because you don’t know it yet,” Balthazar said with an acidic laugh.

Ryder swallowed. “I am Second in my House. Lawson has been the Weryn leader for centuries. I’ve been put in an impossible situation--”

“You doubt our king’s judgment?” Caemorn asked softly and that had Demos shifting uncomfortably.

“I don’t doubt his judgment, but I don’t understand why he is doing it,” Ryder admitted.

“Why don’t you ask me?” A voice as soft as silk whispered behind them.

Ryder and Demos whirled around to see the Vampire King standing on the threshold, smiling benevolently. He wore a long wolf fur coat that fell to his ankles and black leather pants. No shoes or boots or shirt. He looked so much like a Weryn Bloodline Vampire that Ryder was stunned into inaction. He heard more than saw Balthazar, Caemorn and Demos fall to their knees. Demos tugged at Ryder’s leg to get him to sink down too, but he couldn’t move.

Daemon was larger than Ryder. He filled the space as if his shadow was a mountain. Daemon’s eyes were red like the embers of a fire. None shared that shade.

The Vampire King reached out to Ryder. Without thought, Ryder took that large hand

and sank gracefully down to his knees. His head lowered last so he could no longer see Daemon's face, and yet, in his mind it was still there. Smiling knowingly. Smiling as if he had seen an old friend. Ryder had that sensation he always got before a new form was revealed to him. But this was bigger and yet it did not come.

Why did you choose me over Lawson? The thought came unbidden, bubbling up inside of him.

You already know, Daemon answered. His mind voice was as rich and startling as his outside one.

No, I...

But Ryder flashed to a memory of Lawson--drunk and belligerent on zombie-dust infused wine, the only kind that truly made Vampires drunk--swearing at some of the new Weryn Vampires and then chasing them with a broken bottle of wine to see if their blood ran true.

You stopped him. You always stop him, Daemon pointed out.

It's only when he's drunk and that's--

Too often, Daemon interrupted. Once is too much. And it's been more than once.

He apologizes when he comes to his senses! But Ryder knew what a weak defense that was as he said it. Demos and I have stopped him--

From what? Daemon asked. From hunting your own Bloodline? Or other Bloodlines? Be honest, Ryder, why have you not taken a fledgling?

Ryder blinked. That was such an intimate question. It delved into the heart of him. I--

I haven't found the right person! They must match not just with me but with the House and--

And with Lawson? What sort of fledgling would you want with Lawson? Daemon asked.

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Ryder grimaced. You're making him seem like something he's not!

Am I? Because every time you think of Lawson like this, you think of your father--

He means nothing to me!

You wish he did, Daemon sounded sad. There is a phrase I have grown to enjoy. History does not repeat, but it does rhyme.

Ryder struggled to fight against the tide of memories of times when Lawson had stepped across a line. And when Ryder had been glad that he didn't have his own fledgling to protect. He had the House to take care of. That was overwhelming enough. And he remembered the smack of his father's hand against his mother's skin overlying all of that.

If you are so sure of him, I want you to imagine him drunk and alone with Grayson, Daemon suggested.

The image immediately popped into Ryder's head. He felt like his throat was closing up.

No! Ryder cried before he could help himself.

Would your feelings for Grayson not be enough to keep Lawson under control? Could he not do this for you? Daemon murmured. Surely, he wouldn't harm who you care for no matter how new that caring, would he?

But the images kept coming. Grayson retreating from Lawson's swaggering form. Grayson telling Lawson to stop. To leave him alone! Threatening to use his powers if he didn't. But Lawson would keep coming. Lawson would laugh, his silver eyes shining with malicious mirth, not believing that a human like Grayson was anything other than prey.

Does your blood run pure, Grayson? Lawson asked as his gaze focused on Grayson's throat.

NO! Ryder screamed and he would have tackled Lawson. He would have bashed his head in and... Lawson was not there.

Ryder's breathing was erratic. He felt more than saw Demos' head crank to the side to check on him. His Blood Brother knew he was in distress. But there was nothing to be done. And he didn't want Demos to catch King Daemon's attention too.

You would have me hate him, Ryder whispered.

Would I? Daemon's voice was just as soft. Or does part of you hate him already?

I... But Ryder did not finish that sentence.

Daemon was no longer standing in front of him, holding his hand. Instead, the Vampire King was over by Balthazar and Caemorn, speaking softly to both of them. Ryder blinked. When had Daemon moved? When had Daemon left him? He glanced over at Demos who was also blinking as if surfacing from deep water. Both of them shakily got up to their feet.

"... you must only look at today's memories, Eyros," Daemon said in an almost cajoling tone.

“But a human with telekinesis! There’s so much there to explore! We need to understand where this comes from!” Balthazar responded to his Immortal name as if he had no other.

“Grayson would be among the only humans we have found with gifts similar to ours,” Caemorn pointed out, somehow surprisingly on Balthazar’s side.

“I realize, Kaly,” Daemon said, calling Caemorn by his Immortal name, too. “But merely because Eyros does not divine the information from Grayson’s mind does not mean we will not learn it.”

Balthazar lifted a sculpted, disbelieving eyebrow. “Yes, but do we really have time to play such games--”

“Games are all we have time for.” Daemon chuckled and patted Balthazar’s shoulder, which had him looking almost mollified. “Besides, sometimes how we gain such information is even more important than the information itself.”

“I can’t see how,” Balthazar sulked.

“I know. But you will,” Daemon answered with a smile. His gaze slid to Ryder. “Grayson will be staying in the Ever Dark as a student of the academy.”

Ryder blinked. He held himself still and tall so he didn’t shrink from that red-eyed stare. Daemon saw so much more than the surface. And the power he exuded made Ryder want to submit. But talking about Grayson made him hold his ground.

“Then I will meet him when it is time to bring him to the school,” Ryder said.

Balthazar lifted an eyebrow. “You’re telling us that you--”

But Daemon lifted a hand and Balthazar was silenced. “Yes, you should finish what you started and get Grayson to where he is supposed to be. But I would see about your wounds and your clothing before that.”

Daemon dipped his head towards Ryder’s still burned chest. He nodded.

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“May we have your leave to attend to these things, King Daemon?” Ryder asked, remembering himself this time.

“You may.” Daemon inclined his head again.

Both Ryder and Demos bowed to the three Immortals. It was a little stiffly done, but it was the honor their positions were due. It was hard though for Weryn to bow to anyone but their direct leaders.

It is hard to bow to Lawson? Knowing what you know? Feeling how you feel? Thinking how you think? Daemon’s mind was like a faint breeze and then gone.

Demos and Ryder left Caemorn’s rooms and headed back the way they had been brought in. Ryder sought out Grayson’s heartbeat for a moment, but then he stopped himself. He could not allow the strange craving the boy created in him overwhelm him again when he actually needed blood. So he pulled his senses tight to himself. He knew that Balthazar and Caemorn would honor their word as they had made it to King Daemon, and Grayson would be his to protect. At least for a little while.

“Are you going to tell me what happened in there with King Daemon?” Demos asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“No,” Ryder answered too quickly. He saw the flash of hurt on Demos’ handsome face and grimace. “Not right now.”

Demos and Lawson’s relationship was already rocky. He had always known that but now he saw it far more clearly. What had kept the two of them from going at each

other's throats was Ryder. If Ryder told him what Daemon had shown him--what Ryder had thought and felt in response--he wasn't sure what Demos would do. Or maybe he did know. But he had to keep the peace. Lawson, for better or worse, was their leader.

For now, a voice whispered in his head.

"Are we going to keep Grayson a secret from Lawson?" Demos asked, and his expression was unreadable. He would go with whatever Ryder wanted to do.

But Ryder didn't even have to think as he answered, "Yes. We're not letting Lawson anywhere near Grayson."

Demos lifted an eyebrow at him. He saw a million questions in his Blood Brother's eyes. But something in his own must have answered them at least enough that Demos wasn't going to ask him to elaborate.

"We keep Grayson and everything else," Ryder said with quiet determination, "to ourselves."

## NEXT STEPS

Grayson stared at his reflection in the full length mirror in the clothes that Balthazar had brought him. He wore khaki pants, a white, button-down shirt, and a black v-neck sweater. There was a crest on the sweater located just over his heart. It was embroidered in rich, jewel-toned colors with a rather gothic-looking school building in the center and symbols for all of the Bloodlines along the outer edge. Balthazar had also provided him with a long, black dress coat--also with the crest--a pair of black leather gloves lined with fur, and a crimson cashmere scarf. Overall, it looked like some rich, preppy school boy outfit.

Grayson sighed and shook his head. The one truly good thing about it--well, there were two things--were that no one would ever recognize him in this outfit and the clothes were warm. On the street, fashion didn't matter, but warmth did. If something kept you warm it was worth its weight in gold. These clothes were incredibly finely made and they would last. They were probably the nicest things he'd ever worn.

There was a quick knock on the bedroom door. Before Grayson could say anything, Balthazar poked his head in.

"Oh, it's perfect!" Balthazar enthused from the doorway as he took in Grayson's outfit.

"It fits all right. Not exactly my style, but I guess it will do," he said as he walked over to the side table and took a bite of a sandwich.

The food was amazingly good here as well, which rather shocked him for a school run by Vampires. He was almost certain that while Vampires could eat human food, they didn't need to. But they'd clearly taken great care with it for the humans that would be attending the school.

The bread was freshly baked. It had a nutty quality that he liked. The turkey was cut off an actual roast bird. The mayonnaise was creamy and there was plenty of it. Juicy tomatoes and crisp lettuce finished the sandwich off. They tasted like they'd come just off the farm. He wondered if there was a farm in the Ever Dark, but he doubted it. Sunlight never shone. Yet there were plenty of plants that seemed to flourish.

"Are all the students wearing this or just me?" Grayson asked as he plucked at the front of the uniform.

"Just you." Balthazar smirked.

Grayson stared at him.

“Of course not just you. We want people to come in as equals and differentiate themselves by how they do here. Uniforms level the playing field,” Balthazar said.

Grayson crunched a chip. Also fresh. “Really? I thought someone just had a uniform fetish.”

“Grayson!” Balthazar laughed delightedly. “Teasing me after the night you’ve had! You must be feeling not only better, but comfortable.”

Grayson played with the pickle on the plate. “Comfortable? But how could I be? You’re a bunch of predators. The fact that you’re like you are--”

“Beautiful? Even those of us who aren’t traditionally so still have that fascination, yes? Some kind of sensuality?”

“That makes it worse. You’re made to lure people in,” Grayson said.

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“Yes, yes, it does, doesn’t it?” Balthazar tapped his chin. “But you do feel comfortable nonetheless.”

Grayson’s head lifted and he swallowed. He did. He had no idea why. Maybe it was the food. The sleep. The warmth. He almost felt safe here and that was totally crazy. What was even crazier was that he was comforted by the thought that Ryder was outside, waiting for him. He imagined the big man pacing, stopping with his hands on his hips, and staring at this place then pacing again. He wondered if Ryder would be wearing a shirt... He shook himself when Balthazar chuckled knowingly.

“Oh, don’t worry about going shirtless yourself. More clothes and shoes and everything you need will be put in your room at the academy,” Balthazar said.

“That’s generous.”

“We want you to continue to feel comfortable here.”

Grayson’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

Balthazar gestured expansively as he said, “This isn’t a prison. We aren’t jailors. Yes, we need you to stay here, but because of that we are going to make you as comfortable as possible.”

“Am I comfortable for the same reason I don’t hurt from using my powers?” Grayson suddenly asked as that very uncomfortable thought occurred to him.

“No.” Balthazar sighed.

“It’s just I don’t like a lot of people. New places pose challenges because I don’t know where all the exits are,” Grayson struggled to explain his normal anxiety. “But even though you’re all predators here I don’t feel anxious. I don’t feel anything at all like I usually do.”

“When the possibility of danger is everywhere the threat of it becomes dull.” Balthazar shrugged. “Or you believe that you are actually safe here despite everything.”

Grayson finished his sandwich. He didn’t know if either of those statements were true for him. But his anxiety was so much less. His mind felt empty instead of filled with the possibilities of being discovered, having to escape an enemy and losing everything. Maybe because he was truly stripped down to nothing. All he had and would have would be provided to him. He owned nothing any longer really, not even the secondhand clothes he had stored in his shitty little apartment.

“Since I’m not a real student here, what am I going to be doing exactly?” Grayson asked as he dragged the pickle through the remnants of his chips.

“Not a real student? Well, you will be joining the other students in all student activities, you are wearing the uniform and you will be called a student. So... you’re a student!” Balthazar smiled.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to be a Vampire. Isn’t that what this school is all about? Wannabe Vampires? Humans trying to prove themselves worthy?” Grayson asked.

“Meaning that you’ll be a bad student because you won’t be trying very hard?” Balthazar seemed to find this beyond amusing.

“Well, I guess if you put it that way, I’ll be trying to fail.”

“Hmmm. Well, let’s leave that for now. The thing is we cannot let you back out into the world until we know more about this Sect of Dawn and have eliminated them. Otherwise, I might as well drink you dry myself right now, because you will be so very, very dead otherwise.”

Grayson’s right hand went to his throat. He quickly dropped it. “Why do you care if they kill me or not?”

“Seriously? We’re Vampires not sociopaths,” Balthazar answered.

“It’s just an awful lot of trouble for you to go through for a person who you don’t know,” Grayson pointed out.

“Gregory is dead so there’s room. How much effort is that?” Balthazar mused.

“I’m sure you have a list of people that could fill his spot that want to be here so... you haven’t said anything about my... my abilities,” Grayson said awkwardly.

“Is there something you want to tell me about them?” Balthazar perked right up at that.

It was so strange that he didn’t just read Grayson’s mind and know everything about them. But Balthazar had said that someone had asked him not to do that. Yet who would care that much about Grayson’s privacy? Wouldn’t they want to know how he could do the things he could do?

“Humans would be far more interested in your abilities than us. After all, we know how we get those gifts,” Balthazar answered. “You were wise to hide them, because now, especially, the humans would be very interested in you. And they would do most anything to get them, including terrible experiments and likely dissection.”

Grayson's shoulder blades twitched and he crossed his arms over his chest. "The other Vampire seemed interested in me, too."

"Yes," Balthazar answered, but said no more.

"But you aren't?" Grayson narrowed his eyes at him.

"That wouldn't be completely accurate. But we aren't going to hurt you, Grayson. While what you can do is impressive we have a whole Bloodline who can do it better. Not to mention all the other advantages we have," Balthazar answered with a shrug.

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“But it doesn’t worry you that a human has these powers?” Grayson pressed.

“You’re the only one we’ve ever found so it’s not like there’s an army of you out there,” Balthazar said with another rather gallic shrug.

“One of me is not much against all of you?” Grayson gave a small smile.

“No, which is why you’re safe here. We do not see you as a threat,” Balthazar answered.

“But if you did...” Grayson let the statement stand.

“We don’t and that’s all we need to discuss on this matter,” Balthazar cut off the conversation. He flashed another smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He brought his hands together underneath his chin. “Now, you will take your place among the students. But, as I’m sure you know, you should say nothing of Gregory Starn, the Vampires who hunted you, the Sect of Dawn... or your powers.”

“I didn’t intend to talk about any of that,” Grayson answered a little mulishly. “I’m not stupid.”

“No, no, of course not.” Another smile.

“So am I going to class or something? Vampire Biology 101? Vampire History 102?” Grayson asked.

Balthazar laughed, but then seeing he was seriously said, “Oh, there will be some of

that. But we're trying to find out what kind of person the students really are. What makes them tick. What Bloodline they'd be most useful to and fit in with. All of that."

Grayson frowned. "But you just read their minds during interviews to get into this place, can't you just tell from that? Why do you need a year to watch them?"

Balthazar stared at him with barely concealed amusement. "I only wish it was so easy! But, the truth is, that... well, the other Vampires likely wouldn't take my word for it that someone would be perfect for them and vice versa."

"Why not?" Grayson's frown deepened.

"People need to learn things for themselves. Merely telling them--even if you have facts, logic and all that on your side--doesn't really convince them. Truth is something that is felt much more than known," Balthazar explained as he leaned one shoulder against the door jam.

"I guess I see that. Plus someone liking someone else enough to want them with them forever... well, no amount of reading minds probably can determine that definitively," Grayson said.

"True, unless, of course, you can simply make the person like you," Balthazar said.

Grayson remembered then that Eyros Vampires didn't just read minds, but could control them. That's why he wasn't in pain after all. He felt no different. He was not aware of the command in his mind. It was incredible and terrible at the same time. He wondered if humanity really understood the power of these Vampires. He somehow doubted it.

"Is that why the other Vampires don't trust you? Because you could make them do

things?” Grayson guessed.

“Yes, and that none of their secrets are safe.” Balthazar picked a piece of lint off his impeccable clothing. “Eyros don’t have the flashy powers like controlling the weather or changing into animals or raising the dead.”

“That last one...” Grayson couldn’t help but shiver.

“Indeed! The Kaly are even less trusted than the Eyros, which is why... Well, now we stick together. Eyros and Kaly, the best of friends.” A real, fond smile crossed Balthazar’s face. “But what the Eyros can do... well, we can control all those other Vampires and through them all of their gifts so that makes us possibly the most powerful after Daemon.”

“Yeah, I can see why they’d be nervous around you,” Grayson said.

Balthazar nodded. “Exactly.” Looking Grayson over. “You appear ready to go.”

“I still don’t understand what I’m to do here.”

“Just act like you belong.”

Grayson stared at him. “You’ve read my mind. You know I’ve never belonged anywhere.”

“But you will belong here,” Balthazar assured him even as he stepped aside to let Grayson walk out the door before him. “You finally have people who know what you can do and are not afraid of you. And you can relax a little, because there are more powerful people here that can keep you safe.”

“Yeah, but there are also people after me... people like you--”

“Not quite like me.” Balthazar tipped his head up. Proud as a peacock.

“Okay, but Vampires after me and I got the impression from Gregory and the woman that he wasn’t the only one that got into the academy on behalf of the Sect,” he pointed out.

Balthazar frowned. "I did see that."

"How did Gregory get accepted into the academy? I mean, you read minds as part of the process and look into their future, right?" Grayson asked. He grabbed the coat, gloves and scarf before slowly walking past Balthazar into the hallway. "Surely, you would have figured out that he was part of this Sect. You would have known that he was an enemy. So how could it have ever worked?"

They started walking down the hallway together. It was beautiful with one wall completely made of glass looking out on an interior courtyard garden and the other wall covered in exquisite paintings. The whole space was lit with golden, offset lighting that made Grayson feel incredibly peaceful.

"Well, there are several ways I see it working." Balthazar crossed his arms behind his back. "One way is that they are idiots and underestimated the power of the Eyros, not to mention Daemon, and thought they could sneak in their little spies."

"That Horys Vampire didn't seem like an idiot to me," Grayson said, remembering the woman's sadistic glee.

"No, that is the least likely of the possibilities, I admit. But we must always account for stupidity," Balthazar told him.

"Never assume malice when simple stupidity could explain it? Okay, I guess I can follow that," Grayson nodded.

They crossed into another hallway larger than the last, more a main thoroughfare.

Ahead of them, Grayson could see a marble foyer, a set of grand stairs leading down to a set of brass and glass doors. He was surprised when his heart began to beat harder as he realized he would soon see Ryder again. Now that he wasn't running for his life, he could admit that the Weryn Vampire was attractive.

Grayson was attracted to big guys. It was a mixture of liking their strength compared to his, but also to knowing that his powers secretly meant that he was stronger. It had been a long while since he'd had sex with anyone and he imagined Ryder would be literally an animal in bed. And since he knew about Grayson's powers, Grayson wouldn't have to hide them if he got too excited.

He thought that Ryder was interested in him as well. So maybe they could make a night of it. Except, unlike on Earth, there would be no "one and done" with Ryder. He'd see the Vampire everywhere. The anonymity that Grayson counted on to not get attached wouldn't be there either.

It's a bad idea to get involved with him for a lot of reasons, not to mention he is a Vampire, Grayson reminded himself.

Yet he was still curious if Ryder would be shirtless when they met once again.

"My next theory," Balthazar continued on, "is that they have Eyros Vampires working with them who are clever and powerful enough that whatever mind work he or she did wouldn't be detected. Alter their memories so they... fit," Balthazar said.

"That sounds risky," Grayson said.

"Yes, and arrogant, because they would have to get past me. But that is most likely what they did. Gregory's mind must have been restored after the interviews but that was foolish. Redoing it would take time and would most likely be noticed, but..." Balthazar chewed on this. "We did try to go back and get his body. Caemorn thought

his soul would likely still be attached to it due to the violence of his passing.”

“Caemorn is--”

“Kaly! So he can literally raise the dead, control souls, all of that. So we could have learned much from dear Gregory, but alas... they took the body.” Balthazar’s mouth screwed up in almost distaste.

Grayson’s hands fisted at his sides. “What about Sam’s body? Did they--”

“Both bodies were removed and the shop was set on fire,” Balthazar said.

“Oh, my God.” Grayson let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

They were at the doors.

“The police were, of course, looking for you. Whether as a victim or--”

“Or what?” But Grayson already knew. “They think that I did that? That I set fire to the store?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll get it all sorted,” Balthazar said as he pushed open the doors.

“Besides, that’s your old life. This is your new one.”

Grayson looked out of the doors and saw Ryder standing there between two rose bushes. He wore jeans that hid nothing, a gray t-shirt, and another leather jacket that looked well worn and well loved.

“Aw, he covered up for you,” Balthazar snickered.

Ryder strode over to them. He stopped a foot away and looked Grayson up and down.

Grayson shifted uncomfortably. Did he look bad? Like a dork in this outfit? Was his hair all right? Did he have anything between his teeth? Even as he thought these things, he tried to remind himself that he wasn't getting involved with Ryder so it was probably best that the Weryn Vampire thought he looked bad.

"Everyone really is going to be wearing this uniform, right, Balthazar?" Grayson pressed as the minute examination continued.

"Of course! You are the first student to put it on, but yes, yes, you're fine. Doesn't he look fine, Ryder? He's quite well," Balthazar stressed.

Ryder grunted. "You look better than you did. You were barely conscious last time I saw you."

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“How’s your chest?” Grayson asked. Balthazar let out a bark of laughter. Grayson glared at him. “He was burned! That’s all I’m asking about!”

Ryder’s eyebrows lifted at the exchange, but a smile tugged at his lips. “My chest is fine. I fed well. One sleep cycle and it will be as if it never was.”

Still glaring at Balthazar, Grayson turned back to Ryder. “That’s good. It looked pretty bad.”

“It would have been far worse if you hadn’t acted,” Ryder told him. “Thank you.”

Grayson blinked. He wasn’t used to being thanked, let alone thanked for using his powers. And he had an idea that Ryder didn’t give out such compliments lightly.

“You’re--you’re welcome, I guess.” Grayson scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

“Now that we have the thanking out of the way, Ryder, you agreed to take Grayson over to the dorm and get him settled in. I assume you read the packet regarding orientation, yes?” Balthazar looked at him hopefully.

Ryder chewed his inner cheek. “There’s a packet?”

“Yes, it was an addendum to the Rules and Regulations Guide you were emailed,” Balthazar said with anticipation.

“There’s a--”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t get it? Didn’t read it? It’s 500 pages long. I detailed everything about how the school would run and you...” Balthazar narrowed his eyes at him. “You will regret not reading it, Ryder.”

There was more twitching of Ryder’s lips as he regarded the nettled Eyros Vampire. “Oh, I’m sure I will. But I think I can walk Grayson to his room without reading 500 pages plus an addendum.”

“That was just my portion of the guide...” Balthazar sniffed. “Well, there’s still time for you to peruse it--”

“You know that’s not really necessary for the Weryn,” Ryder said and there seemed to be more meaning there than what his words conveyed.

Balthazar’s eyebrows lifted. “Ah, you’re still on that course, are you?”

Ryder nodded and said nothing else. Grayson looked between them. Both Vampires stared at one another. Neither looked away until he cleared his throat. The staredown abruptly ended with both of them looking at him.

“Everything okay?” Grayson asked.

“It’s fine. Let me take you to your room,” Ryder said and gestured for Grayson to walk next to him.

“Oh, wait! I nearly forgot.” Balthazar reached into his inner jacket pocket and took out a beautiful cream envelope sealed with red wax that had the same crest as his sweater. “This is today and tomorrow’s events. It tells you where you need to go and when along with various rules.”

Grayson took the envelope from him. “Not quite 500 pages.”

“Not quite.” Balthazar flashed a smile. “We want you to be surprised.”

“Oh, okay, that sounds interesting.” Grayson wasn’t sure what he thought of it.

“Remember that phones don’t work here. There’s no internet. No cell service. Nothing. We’re setting something up, but it’s spotty. So things will be done the old fashioned way by paper or word of mouth,” Balthazar said.

Grayson nodded. He had heard that the Ever Dark wasn’t on Earth so no cell service would make sense.

“Well, go on now.” Balthazar made a shooing gesture with his hands. “And make sure you have lots of fun.”

DANGEROUS

Ryder kept glancing over at Grayson. Now that the young man wasn’t in terror for his life, spattered with blood or unconscious, Ryder could truly see him. Grayson was beautiful, definitely. He had a powerful jaw and high cheekbones. While very masculine, there was a delicacy about some of his features. Especially his mouth, which was very emotive.

Whenever Grayson felt something, he was sure to do something with his lips that would give it away. Ryder dragged his gaze away from those lips when he imagined them parting in a moan of pleasure. He really did need more blood. He was still acting like the newest of fledglings around Grayson.

If only the young man were just beautiful and nothing more. A pretty package usually concealed an empty box. But Grayson was hardly empty. He had much going on behind that lovely facade.

They walked in silence together through Nightvallen's gracious, curving streets. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but a companionable one. Ryder liked that Grayson did not feel the need to fill the space with words. He seemed more to be absorbing the city and the Ever Dark overall.

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Grayson had stopped dead in his tracks to look up at the double moons, staring at them for a full five minutes, full lips parted softly as he gazed upon them in awe. He'd studied the architecture and stopped as well to look into the lit buildings. Some of them were the shops that were to be open for the students. Inside, staff were busy filling the shelves with good things to eat, fascinating books to read or fine clothes to wear.

Ryder did not understand the need to have such shops. The students wouldn't require money to buy anything. Everything was provided free of charge. He supposed Balthazar and Caemorn had wanted Nightvallen to seem a little more like a human city in that there were cafes to sip coffee at or wine bars to satisfy the snobbiest palate. There was even a brewery, which had quite good malt beer and a distillery that produced a smooth yet fiery whisky that Ryder was rather fond of. Every shop was actually a part of a Vampire-owned business on Earth so they'd had plenty of time to hone their craft.

In between formal "classes", the students would be free to roam and take in the town together or with a Vampire who asked them out. It would almost be like dating. Ryder shuddered. To "date" humans to discover if they were to join one in eternity was the epitome of shallowness in his opinion.

One year and a few cups of coffee to know if someone was one's Childe? Ridiculous! And to have the pool limited to those chosen by Balthazar Ravenscroft and Caemorn Losus? Even more absurd! As impressive as those two Vampires were, they did not have the same sensibilities as any Weryn. Eyros and Kaly Vampires were not known to even seek out others of their own Bloodline for company, let alone care what the rest of their Bloodline thought about any particular Children they wished to turn.

They simply couldn't understand Weryn's ways.

"It reminds me a little of London," Grayson finally said as he took in one of the curving highstreets.

"Yes, I can see that similarity," Ryder agreed, happy to be distracted from his thoughts.

"My mom told me that London is set up to be a very walkable city. The buildings are a certain height so that they draw the eye, but don't overshadow the street. It really looks just like that here," Grayson answered. He then bit his lip as if surprised and a little dismayed he had said so much.

"Did you visit London or live there?" Ryder asked.

Again, Grayson bit his lower lip, but he reluctantly answered, "Visited. My mother was English. We had some relatives there. They're all gone now."

Gone. Dead? Or simply not interested in being connected to Grayson because of his powers?

"Are your parents--"

"I don't want to talk about them." Grayson grimaced. Again, that mouth betrayed the young man.

"All right." Ryder tried not to appear nettled.

Speaking of one's family, one's connections, whether by blood or by choice was important to Weryn. It was important to him. It anchored a person in the warp and weave of things. Grayson was like a loose thread. So what should Ryder care if he

would withhold his past?

But he, obviously, isn't one of us and won't be, Ryder remanded himself. I'm judging him by a standard that is unfair.

Grayson continued to bite his lower lip and he was staring at the cobbled road with anxiety. Suddenly, he burst out, "I didn't mean to be rude."

"You were clear about what you were willing to discuss. I would rather that than lies," Ryder attempted to unbend.

Grayson's eyes flickered to him and then away then, taking in a deep breath as if he gird himself for battle, the young man rushed out, "My dad died when I was three. I don't remember him. He was a good guy or so I heard. Mom remarried someone not so good. Things went wrong."

Things went wrong. There could be a novel read into that single sentence.

There was a pause here and Ryder saw a flash of despair on Grayson's face that was so raw it hurt to see. Now he wished he hadn't asked--and hadn't been offended--about Grayson's family. This was not easy to discuss for Grayson obviously.

"I left home when I was just a kid," Grayson continued. "Lived on the streets. Did what I had to do to survive."

Again, another novel in those few words. A whole series of tragic adventures.

Another pause, and Ryder truly wanted to kick himself. His protective instincts towards Grayson--which seemed to be constantly triggering when he wasn't hungering for the young man--were blaring on high alert now. He should have left things alone!

“But I managed. Got the job at the store. The apartment above. I was surviving, you know, until... until what happened with Gregory and the Sect,” Grayson finished.

Surviving is not thriving.

What Grayson had told him was a bare bones, a barely there recital of a life that Ryder guessed had been far from easy. A life with powers, a life on the streets, a life of surviving was hardly a life at all. No friends. No family. Hiding who he truly was and what he could do. Only to have even that paltry bit of peace and comfort ripped away from him by a bunch of Vampires in a spray of blood and gore.

Yet, his life was not what it should have been before we entered it. Would it have improved? Or would Grayson have lived a desperate, empty life with no one else in it?

“So now that you know about me, what’s the deal about you?” Grayson’s light pewter-colored eyes slid to him again.

“What do you wish to know?” Ryder asked, feeling a bit at a loss at giving his biography. Then remembering that humans were often fascinated by a Vampire’s age stated, “I am 484 years old.”

Grayson let out a laugh and gave him a quick, amused glance this time. “So you’re too old for me, is that what you’re saying?”

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Ryder colored. He hadn't blushed in ages. "No, I... that was not why I was informing you! I am aware that our immortality interests mortals. I thought that you would want to know that."

"Interests? Yeah, I guess. I mean, it is pretty cool thinking that you've lived so long and seen so much. But the one thing that always threw me was how you could ever be interested in a human," Grayson said.

Ryder frowned as he studied Grayson's rather elegant jaw. "Why?"

"The age gap. We all must seem like kids to you."

Ryder shrugged. "Some perhaps. But have you not met someone younger than you who seems wise beyond their years?"

Grayson slowly nodded and nibbled on that tempting lower lip. "Yeah, but that's normally something earned from a hard life."

"Yes, that's true."

"Uh, so you're a Weryn Vampire, right? You can turn into animals? I mean I saw you do that, which was pretty cool, by the way," Grayson said with a shy smile.

"Yes, I am Second of House Legion. I am representing the Weryn Bloodline at the academy," Ryder answered and shut his mouth after that.

He felt the urge to share with Grayson since Grayson had shared with him, but Weryn

Bloodline business was not necessarily the best thing to discuss. Yet Grayson seemed to hone right on in it.

“What you said to Balthazar, something about it not mattering if you read the rules or not, are you not like a part of the school? Not going to pick your humans or whatever from the class?” Grayson asked.

Ryder grimaced, but even though this young man seemed to have no desire to become a Vampire, perhaps it was best he knew exactly where Ryder and Weryn overall stood. It was strange though that his stomach seemed to curdle in his chest a little as he thought that.

“The Weryn do not pick our fledglings from a pool of candidates,” Ryder’s voice sounded frosty even as he said it. “There is a spiritual connection between ourselves and the ones we turn. They are not just becoming our Children, but the Children of the Weryn. They are pack.”

Grayson’s eyebrows rose. “You sound more like shifters than Vampires, or at least, how shifters are described in the books. Are there real shifters?”

“We are likely what those stories are based on. A sort of legend that was passed down,” Ryder admitted.

“So you’re not going to choose anyone from the school?” Grayson clarified.

Ryder shook his head. “We are here to honor the king, but we will not be made to abandon our traditions and what matters to us to make the humans feel at ease.”

Grayson’s eyebrow rose. “That honoring the king thing though... Daemon wants this, right?”

Ryder's expression grew blank as he remembered his experience with the Vampire king. It had been heady and overwhelming. Daemon was truly their leader.

"So don't you worry about pissing him off by not choosing someone? Or are you just going to never take on another fledgling forever and ever?" Grayson asked.

Ryder blinked. "He... he understands our position."

"But he doesn't like it, right? He doesn't accept it? After all, not doing something your king wants sounds treasonous or something, isn't it?" Grayson asked with a blithe wave of one hand through the air.

For all of Grayson's easy words, he had said exactly what Ryder had feared from the beginning. Was there some way to honor Daemon, but not do what he wanted? They were attempting to thread that needle. Grayson sounded like he didn't think it was possible. It was easy for him to think that the young man's words meant nothing since he clearly didn't understand all the nuances. Or, it could be that the answer was so obvious that even someone barely considering it knew the truth and that the Weryn were tying themselves into knots thinking there was a way to disobey their king without disobeying.

"We hope that Daemon will come to understand our position better in time," Ryder said stiffly.

Grayson stopped outside one of the clothing stores. There was a man placing some more clothing options with the academy's crest on it. There was a long black coat with popped collar, casual tops that skimmed the wearer's form and flared out at the bottom, cotton trousers that had the crest running down the outside edges, and more. There were even shoes with laces with the crest, socks with the crest and underwear with the crest.

“So I’m really the only one going to be dressed like this,” Grayson said darkly.

“There appear to be a variety of styles with crests. Yours is--”

“Balthazar’s choice. I didn’t get an option. He chose this. He really does have a uniform fetish.” Grayson chuckled and shook his head, the annoyance leaving him as fast as it had come.

“You look... quite handsome,” Ryder said.

“I look like a preppy--”

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“You always look beautiful. Even if you were wearing a sack you would be beautiful,” Ryder said.

Grayson’s eyes widened and his lips parted. “Oh... that’s... uhm, thanks? I guess. I wouldn’t mind wearing some of what you’ve got going on.”

He pointed at Ryder’s coat. Ryder touched the buttery soft material. It was worn in just the right places. He imagined taking it off and sliding it onto Grayson. He imagined his scent mixed with Grayson’s. The young man being warmed by the remnants of his own heat.

Grayson said, “I really liked the one with the fur on the collar you had on before.”

“So did I.” Grayson sighed. “A victim of the shift. But I have others.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s cool. It looks good on you... even with a shirt,” Grayson remarked and quickly looked away.

Ryder’s eyes widened. “Well, I shall consider that next time I choose my outfit.”

Grayson ducked his head and looked up at him through dark lashes. The scent of arousal washed off of him. “Cool.”

The moment stretched. The twin moons played warm red and icy blue over the young man’s face. The urge to simply reach out and touch that gilded cheek. He could curve his hand along Grayson’s jaw and draw the young man to him. Those expressive lips would part--whether to object or to submit--would not matter as the pleasure of their

first kiss would wash all of Grayson's doubts away.

He was hungry. So very hungry. Grayson was here. So very here. They were alone. They were both wanting something. Why not satisfy his lust and thirst? Why resist this young man's allure? He had done more for less.

Why does this feel familiar and yet so very dangerous? Ryder wondered.

But he knew why. His desire was not his own. It was the predator's inside of him. Every Vampire knew that there was a thin line of control. And to cross that line was forbidden. Yet maybe he would just be skirting that line if he crushed Grayson to him and carried the young man back to his rooms. There he would lay the young man out on his bed in a room lit just by firelight and strip off these foolish clothes. Grayson would look well against the furs his bed was piled with. Those pewter eyes would go black with desire as Ryder drew his mouth all over that beautiful, exposed skin and then--

"I wish I was an Eyros," Grayson said.

His words broke the spell that seemed to hang over Ryder. He blinked rapidly and looked away from the young man. "Oh, why?"

"Your expression went blank for a second there, but it was clear you were thinking something. Was it interesting?" Grayson asked.

"I was... just thinking about what I have to do tonight." Ryder's lips firmly shut over his very sharp and extended fangs.

"Huh." It was clear that Grayson did not believe him.

"Come. We need to get you to the student living quarters." Ryder turned and strode

firmly away from the dangerous shop window.

They turned a corner into a larger, more palatial avenue than even the last one. At the end of the street were the student living quarters. It was a four-story rectangular building that stretched a whole city block. There was a wide set of stairs leading up to several brass and glass doors. Golden light spilled out from the atrium. Students and assistants were streaming into the building. There was excited talking and laughter. The smell of their blood came over Ryder in a wave, but, despite being hungry, he felt no desire for all those warm and willing humans.

“Whoa,” Grayson breathed.

Ryder turned around. Grayson had stopped again and that lush mouth was parted in surprise.

“My understanding is that you will have your own room, but it is a quad, meaning that you share the common living room, dining room and kitchen,” Ryder said.

“For a man who didn’t read the 500 page email attachment, you sure do know a lot about the dorm!” Grayson was smirking.

Ryder smiled. “I know as much of Nightvallen as it will allow me to know.”

“Allow you?”

“The Ever Dark is... not like Earth. It is alive somehow. I cannot explain it. The city changes,” Ryder said.

Grayson’s eyes widened. “That’s not been in the news.”

“No, many things have not,” Ryder replied dryly.

“They don’t know that, do they?” Grayson tilted his head towards the students.

“No, but they are here nonetheless. Some of them might even guess that we are hiding much from them, but they don’t turn away,” Ryder said with a grimace.

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“They must think that what they know is greater than anything they don’t,” Grayson surmised.

“For some that may be true, but for most? And we are supposed to find our Children among them?” Ryder shook his head.

“Gregory made it pretty clear to me that the Sect got other people into the academy,” Grayson said as he stared at the students with a darkened brow.

Ryder frowned. “That seems so unlikely to me with the Eyros guarding us.”

“I know. But...” Grayson turned determinedly to Ryder. “Balthazar said that I was to pretend to be a student here while he and the others figured out who these Sect people are and what their plan is.”

Ryder lifted his eyebrows. “He did?”

“Yeah, and I admit that for a moment I thought that I could sit back and let him and whoever do that, but you and I fought them,” Grayson pointed out.

“Yes, but that hardly makes us experts,” Ryder pointed out. “They bear no mark that identifies them as Sect and we cannot read their minds. We won’t know who they are unless they decide to stick a knife between our ribs.”

“Maybe, though they are likely to do that considering what we did to them, right? Shouldn’t we be looking to take them out first?” Grayson countered.

Again, Ryder lifted his eyebrows. But why was he surprised? Grayson, for all his beauty and fragility as a human, was a warrior. He'd sensed it--smelled it--at the church and there was a faint whiff of it here and now coming off of him.

"Perhaps, but that seems like more reason for you to keep yourself safe, not seek out trouble," Ryder said.

"Trouble comes to me. It always has. And I've never been able to count on anyone to keep it away." Grayson gritted his jaw. His gaze was distant as he clearly remembered something from his past, maybe a bunch of somethings. Then he focused on Ryder. "I have an idea."

"That sounds dangerous." But Ryder found himself grinning.

"You need a way for Daemon to overlook the fact that you're not playing by his rules with the fledgling thing," Grayson said. "And I need help against the Sect of Dawn. So why don't you help me get them? The two of us work pretty well together. If anyone asks while you're interested in spending so much time with me, you tell them that--"

"I'm interested in you as a fledgling?" Ryder's eyebrows really did shoot up this time. He had no idea how he felt about people even thinking he was looking for a Childe.

"If we can find out who the spies are for the Sect in here, that will impress Daemon and maybe make him more forgiving about anything else you're failing to do. And it will give me my life back faster," Grayson said.

"As I said, this sounds dangerous."

Grayson's pewter eyes narrowed. "They killed Sam. A harmless old man who hadn't

hurt anyone. Alcohol was the reason he was out on the streets. They cut him down like he was nothing. So dangerous is just fine in my book.”

Ryder thought then that Grayson sounded awfully like a Weryn right then. But he kept that to himself.

“All right,” Ryder said slowly. “I agree to help you with your dangerous plan.”

“Good.” Grayson flashed a smile. “Now let’s go meet some of the suspects.”

## BAIT AND SWITCH

Grayson snuck a look over at Ryder as they strode towards the very fancy dorm building. What was it about this Vampire that caused him to behave as he did? After all, he did not apologize for being rude. Who cared what people thought, who dug into his past? He didn’t. He thrust those people away as fast and hard as possible. But not Ryder, evidently. Besides, the size of the man indicated he probably wouldn’t be able to physically push him all that far anyways. A faint smile appeared on his face. He did so like big guys and Ryder was huge.

Is that why? Because I find him attractive? I don’t want him to go until I get what I want from him?

Ryder moved with an easy grace that few big guys did. He was silent, too, his footsteps not making any sound on the cobblestoned streets. He was utterly comfortable in his body.

Well, he’s been in it for nearly half a millennia. That’s enough time, I suppose.

Was that why he asked Ryder to help him with the Sect? Because he was capable? Grayson didn’t “team up” with anyone, let alone someone he hardly knew. He didn’t

rely on anyone to have his back. Because people disappointed you nine times out of ten. Or maybe it was ten times out of ten, really. It was a surprise when someone did not betray or turn away or simply could be counted on. Yet from almost the moment he had met Ryder he had known on some level that this person could be trusted to show up.

I feel that I have to look out for myself because I have no idea if Balthazar and whoever else will put me first when it comes to the Sect. Yet I think Ryder will? Grayson grimaced. Maybe it's because he's an outsider too. For all his talk of pack and belonging, he's set apart somehow. I wonder why.

There was a burst of excited talking and laughter from the crowd of students and Vampires around the dorm's steps. There were at least forty people there, talking, looking about, milling around, and generally cluttering up the broad street. Grayson found himself slowing his steps. Ryder immediately caught it and his eyes narrowed. Grayson licked his lips, nervousness entering him at the sight of the excited crowd.

There were people of all ages, races and nationalities. Some were conventionally attractive, but many weren't. All though were bright eyed as they gazed at Nightvallen and the twin moons and at the Vampires who openly used their powers as if it were nothing.

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He saw a female Vampire in her mid-fifties with long, curly hair teleport from below the steps of the dorm to the top of them and then teleport again onto the dorm's foyer. One student was chased around by a rain cloud that had her running and giggling. Mirryr Vampires would suddenly take on the appearance of the student they were talking to. Helm Vampires turned invisible. There one second and gone the next. Syrin Vampires were singing sweet, soft melodies that rose on the wind, welcoming all to this place. His shoulders relaxed slightly as the song reached him.

"Are you all right?" Ryder asked.

"Fine." Grayson didn't know how he felt watching this open use of powers in front of so many people who, instead of being afraid, were acting like it was the best show in the universe.

"Ah, the notorious fine that means so many things." Ryder quirked a smile at him.

Grayson grimaced. He didn't talk about his feelings with people. It was messy. It opened up... what? What did it open up? Ryder already knew what he could do. And watching these Vampires use their gifts made what he could do seem normal. So how was he protecting himself by being silent with this man? Confessing part of his past stopped Ryder from continually asking him things. Maybe if he said something now his anxiety would lessen and Ryder would let it go.

"I would avoid crowds like this before," Grayson said, the words sticking in his throat like shards of glass as he explained his strategies to someone else, "because if I got excited or angry or anything really, my powers might be triggered. People seeing what I could do was potentially death."

He wondered if that was still true. Wouldn't people just think he was a Vampire now? Would they really be so shocked and afraid like they used to be? Only those who realized he was human would be a danger to him. People who wondered if they could take what he could do and give it to others. Maybe the safest place for him to be was in a world filled with Vampires.

They'd both stopped walking just outside the scrum of people. No one was really looking at them. There was too much of a spectacle going on to wonder why two men were just standing there, hanging back, not completely engaging.

"So this is strange?" Ryder tilted his head towards the Vampires and students.

"Strange? Yeah. It's like I've gone down the rabbit hole and what was up is now down and what was down is now up and... I don't know." Grayson shrugged his shoulders. "I actually resented Vampires exposing themselves before."

"Really? Why?"

"Because a lot of what kept me safe was people not believing in supernatural things," Grayson explained. "You all came around and boom! Everybody's a believer. Everything is possible. Including a human who can move things with his mind."

Ryder nodded slowly. "So you saw it as your world getting smaller rather than larger with us in it? It wasn't freeing?"

"The more open you were, the more I had to hide," Grayson said. "I felt more of a freak than before."

"You could have gotten yourself a set of silver contacts and just pretended to be an Ashyr Vampire," Ryder suggested in a neutral tone.

“Would you have done something like that in my position?” Grayson asked, lifting an eyebrow at him. “Pretended to be someone or something you’re not?”

Ryder surprised him though by saying, “Sometimes it is better to fit in.”

Grayson turned fully towards him. “You can’t believe that.”

Ryder lifted an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Just... you’re so comfortable with yourself. With who you are... or, what you are, I guess,” Grayson suddenly wasn’t so sure. “I mean what would you have to hide?”

Silence fell between them. Grayson was, again, doing something he didn’t do. He was asking someone else questions about themselves that were intimate, private, and would demand a quid pro quo. Then again, he had told Ryder about his past.

“Mirryr Vampires hide in plain sight. They can be whoever they wish,” Ryder said suddenly.

Watching one of the Mirryr Vampires change sex and race in a second had Grayson shaking his head. “Do they actually physically change? Or is it some kind of limited mind control where we see only what they want us to see?”

“Good question. I’ve never asked,” Ryder admitted. “But, then again, since I can shift into a bear and a wolf and more it’s not really a big deal to shift from being human to human.”

“Fair point.” Grayson hunched his shoulders as the crowd grew more raucous.

Vampires were coming around with silver platters full of champagne flutes that they were handing out by the dozen. Grayson was handed one. Ryder though waved them

off.

“Aren’t you going to have one?” Grayson asked, studying the delicate crystal glass. He’d had champagne once when his mom let him have a sip. He took another now, surprised by the bubbles on his tongue. He took another, liking the fizzy yeastiness.

“No, though alcohol doesn’t affect Vampires like humans, I need to focus. There is much I must do tonight. So... come. We should get you checked in,” Ryder said.

Grayson nodded and downed the champagne. He needed something to keep him calm. He set the empty glass down on a nearby tray and prepared to shoulder his way through the crowd. Though it was really the amount of luggage some people had brought that had him dodging and weaving more than the amount of students. He had always traveled light. A pair of jeans, a few t-shirts, underwear, socks, boots and a jacket. That was his complete kit. But from what he could see some of these students had brought pets, furnishings, artwork, and more.

There was actually a birdcage as big as a car with half a dozen birds inside. The Vampires were not phased by it, but easily lifted it and carried it inside. Another student had brought dozens of canvases, oil paints, and easels evidently to continue their art career or hobby, Grayson didn’t know. Someone even brought a pool table.

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“They’re really planning on staying, aren’t they?” Grayson muttered to Ryder.

Ryder snorted. “Pack like you already belong. It’s a strategy.”

“I guess.”

They’d made it to the wide, broad stairs that led up to the dorm. To call this place a dorm was like calling the Ritz Carlton a no-tell motel. No, this place matched and exceeded the luxurious buildings he had seen in London and New York. The brass doors were polished to a mirror-like shine. The glass was spotless. The white and black marble floor of the large foyer formed the school’s crest.

“Balthazar is really into branding,” Grayson muttered.

“What’s weird is that he didn’t do this. The city itself did. It just appeared here after this site was chosen for the students,” Ryder told him.

Grayson frowned. “Seriously? I mean... you said the city was alive, but--”

“I know. It still shocks me. The Ever Dark is a mystery to us. One of the many,” Ryder answered. “Ah, looks like they’re waiting for us.”

“Who?” Grayson asked as he looked in the direction that Ryder was staring and he came up short. “That’s Julian Harrow!”

“Prince Julian,” Ryder corrected softly. “Yes, he and Christian are playing greeters tonight.”

“They aren’t here because of me, right?” Grayson frowned.

“Not completely, but you’re one of the chosen ones they’re focused on. They are here to help out, but also because they are familiar figures to humanity,” Ryder explained. “Seeing them calms people, reminds them of why they chose to apply to the academy.”

“You really did read that 500-page manual, didn’t you?” Grayson snorted.

“That was just Balthazar’s addendum, but yes, I read everything.” Ryder nodded, looking a little unhappy.

Julian Harrow and Christian Thorne were the Vampires to know in human terms. They started out as paranormal adventurers with a huge Youtube following. Once they’d been turned into Vampires by none other than King Daemon and Lord Balthazar themselves, they’d used their show and fame to explain the existence of Vampires to the mortal world. Basically, they had made Vampires accessible as well as cool.

If you’re into that sort of thing...

Grayson had watched every one of their videos. He’d done so in order to know the enemy, so to speak. But he had to admit a slight sense of awe in seeing them in the flesh, especially, when he looked into Julian’s purple eyes. Unlike all other Vampires, even the Immortals excluding Daemon, Julian had purple eyes instead of silver or King Daemon’s red. He was also said to have all the gifts from every Bloodline as well as some super secret ones. Grayson felt suddenly absurd for having worried about having telekinesis when he compared himself to the Vampires around him.

“You shouldn’t feel that way,” Christian Thorne said, appearing at his side. “You were alone with this ability that you have no idea where it came from. We get ours

after having to accept a whole lot of things. The gift part is really the easiest. Imagine being told that to survive you have to drink blood. It's an interesting thought experiment."

"Yeah, I--I guess I can see that," Grayson said, not sure what he really saw. There were too many people in the foyer and he felt utterly exposed.

"Nightvallen is big. The Ever Dark is bigger. You'll have space to breathe soon," Christian told him. "I'm not fond of crowds myself."

How does he know that? Oh, right...

"Uhm, you're Christian--"

"Thorne, yes. I'm one of Balthazar's fledglings. Eyros Vampire. That's how I know. Also, Balthazar let me listen in on your conversations earlier so you don't have to worry about filling me or Julian in."

Christian had blond hair that fell in waves to his chin. He was fine-featured with an almost fox-like prettiness to him. He was dressed in a pair of slim, dark jeans, a black turtleneck and a black coat with a popped collar. His silver eyes flickered over Grayson's face as if memorizing it or looking for something.

"You've had a hard night, but you seem no worse for wear. You're very resilient, I imagine. You've had to be. Come, let me introduce you to Julian and then we'll take you to your rooms for you to meet your quad-mates," Christian said. "Ryder, I'm sure you'll want to get back to your Bloodline in preparation for the parade. We'll take things from here."

"Wait, a parade? You're going to be in a parade?" Grayson swung around to face Ryder, even as heart squeezed into his throat.

He'd been fine with Balthazar, but he'd known that Ryder was waiting for him nearby. Now Ryder would be going off to his people and Grayson would be alone...

But alone was how he liked it! Alone was how he'd always dealt with things. This ridiculous need to see a familiar face in the midst of all this change was dangerous and unworthy of him. He needed to--Ryder touched his arm. The racing thoughts quieted. Grayson drew in a deep breath.

"It's more of an exhibition. To show the students our gifts in a more carnival barker like setting," Ryder remarked dryly. "No offense to your Master, Christian."

"I actually agree with you, but he does like his spectacles." Christian shrugged, not offended seemingly in the least. "He understands people way more than you or I so maybe we should follow what he suggests?"

Maybe he was a little offended.

But Christian's silver-eyed gaze remained as neutral as ever as he gazed dispassionately at Ryder.

Ryder flushed slightly. "Yes, yes, I am certain he knows people very well." He turned back to Grayson. "We shall meet up soon."

Grayson bit back on the ridiculous urge to demand when, where, and how. He simply nodded. His throat felt thick. Ryder searched his expression for a moment, but then bowed and turned on his heel. The desire to call Ryder back was just as strong but he swallowed the words.

"He will be back," Christian said.

"Why did you send him away?" Grayson demanded.

It hadn't been what he had intended to say. But Christian was an Eyros Vampire, he read minds, so he knew how Grayson felt about Ryder being there.

"The Weryn are not in good standing," Christian answered softly.

"I'm not here to become..." He bit off his words as he looked around at all the students and Vampires. He was supposed to keep that secret. Christian already knew that he wasn't here to become a Vampire so it didn't bear repeating. "It doesn't matter to me."

“This isn’t about you. Not fully anyways,” Christian said with a sigh. “Because you weren’t the only one that wanted Ryder to stay. He wanted to stay.”

“And?” Grayson’s heart leaped even as he tried to stuff it down at the thought that Ryder had wanted to stay with him so much that it was a punishment to send him away.

“And he doesn’t get what he wants right now. He was already given a reward for his good actions by being allowed to walk you here,” Christian answered simply. “Now, he needs to go.”

Grayson wanted to ask why he had to be the one punished too for the Weryn’s bull-headedness about the school. But what was he to these people? No one. He had just bumbled into the whole thing. Charlie had just gotten in the way too. They were offering him someplace safe--relatively--to stay, feeding him and clothing him. He would take what they offered but he had to remember that he wasn’t one of their chosen ones. So he had to take care of himself and Charlie’s memory.

Yet Grayson did find himself saying, “He seems like a good guy. Someone who is loyal and has the group as a whole’s best interest at heart.”

“He thinks the whole is the Weryn Bloodline. But he’s wrong. It’s all of the Vampires. Every Bloodline,” Christian explained.

So Ryder really does need a win with the Sect. Weryn really are in the dog house.

“But come, Julian should be free in a moment.” Christian barely brushed his fingers over Grayson’s nearest elbow to lead him towards Julian who was surrounded by students all eager to get his attention. “Daemon already filled Julian in on things as well, so no need to be concerned there either.”

“Ah, so you were listening to my conversation with Balthazar and Julian just knows all about me from your king?”

Grayson’s eyebrows crept upwards as a tightness filled his chest. He liked to go unseen. Suddenly, he was known, and there was nothing secret. Forget the crowds, he was in the spotlight!

Christian flashed him a sympathetic smile, evidently reading his mind and knowing the cause of his discomfort. He was both annoyed and relieved that he didn’t have to explain himself or answer questions, but Christian could know things he didn’t wish him to.

“The Eyros gift doesn’t quite work that way,” Christian said, picking up again on what he was thinking. “Your surface thoughts are, of course, quite clear to me. Your emotions are strong enough that I know what they are. But imagine that your mind is the whole of the internet and I am a single user at a computer. While, objectively, I could access everything I ever wanted to know, it would take a great deal of effort.”

“So you can’t know everything I’m thinking or my past?” Grayson asked.

“Not without a lot of effort,” Christian answered. “I am a pretty new fledgling, but due to being a Childe of Eyros, I am very powerful. Yet still it would be difficult to know all you know even with your consent.”

The crowd was thinning around the Vampire Prince. In fact, Julian was dismissing them with a smile and a wave before making his way over to them. He smiled broadly at Grayson, but there was some sympathy in his eyes.

“You don’t like crowds either, huh?” Julian asked, his voice a pleasant tenor. “I’m Julian Harrow, by the way.”

“Yeah, I know. I think everybody knows.” Grayson dipped his head towards the eager line of students and Vampires who wished to talk to Julian.

Julian grimaced, which immediately had Grayson liking him a little. He wasn’t fond of the attention either. Despite being Youtube personalities, he didn’t get the sense from either of them that they craved attention in any way. The adventure had been what they loved. Sharing it with others was important but not the point.

“Let’s go up to your rooms,” Julian said and he gestured for Grayson to precede him and Christian up a set of sweeping stairs.

Grayson felt the curious and jealous gazes of many humans on his back. He wondered if it was wise for them to be singling him out like this. Besides his natural desire to keep a low profile, shouldn’t they want to treat him like any other student? Having the prince and his best friend personally take him to his room seemed like it was highlighting him. But perhaps that was the point. The more interest there was in him there was, the more likely the Sect would also show interest.

Am I being used as bait? Grayson wondered.

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Normally, he would have resented such a thing. More than resented. But since he was intent on finding the Sect, too, this played into what he wanted as well.

“Gregory’s room is obviously your room now,” Julian explained. “We didn’t have much of a chance to personalize it for you.”

“A room’s a room. I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Grayson shrugged. It couldn’t be worse than the flophouses he’d crashed in or the boxes under the bridge he’d lived in for years. All of this was luxury beyond anything he had ever thought to experience. But it didn’t dazzle him, more like it made him uneasy because he felt so much more out of place.

“Did Gregory know who he was going to room with?” Grayson asked.

“Ah, you’re thinking that there might be another Sect member among the other roommates?” Julian asked and sent a look towards Christian as if he had expected Grayson to be thinking this way.

“Don’t know. Just curious to understand what he knew,” Grayson answered.

“Other than those few individuals we allowed to be interviewed, none of the students were to know who their fellows were until they got here,” Christian answered.

“Though it was the Sect that killed Gregory, there are people who want to come to the school for other reasons,” Julian said. “The students were always at risk so we kept their identities as secret as we could.”

“People talk,” Grayson said. “Even if they’re not supposed to. Especially if they aren’t. Getting accepted would be a big deal.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Christian agreed.

They had reached the fourth floor. Julian and Christian led him down the beautiful marble floored hallway to an elaborate carved wooden door. There was a symbol, not a room number, carved into the door. The symbol was a stylized wave pattern.

“Place your palm against the symbol,” Christian instructed.

Curious, Grayson did as he asked. The symbol lit up all gold and bright. Grayson snatched his hand back and saw the symbol reflected on his palm in that same golden light. It faded until his palm looked normal again. There was a click and a thunk before the door swung open of its own accord.

“Only you and your roommates can open this door. And only those you bid enter can come in,” Julian said. “A safety precaution.”

As the door fully opened, two faces inside peered out with interest. Grayson felt a wave of unreality hit him as he recognized two of his roommates. He’d just been watching their interviews that night before all hell had broken loose. Dr. Amara Biswas and Eiji Goda stared back at him.

## CHANGES

Julian gestured for Grayson to step into the quad ahead of him and Christian. His two roommates--as this was a quad, there must be another PERSON who was not there yet--looked at him curiously. The bright, dark eyes of the elderly Eiji Goda were creased with a welcoming smile. Dr. Amara Biswas blinked rapidly as if trying to clear her vision because she wasn’t quite sure what she was seeing. Neither of them

was wearing the school uniform he had on.

Going to kill Balthazar.

Grayson kept his expression studiously neutral, even though he felt the urge to retreat into some dark shadows until they forgot about him. But that was not to be. He was definitely in the spotlight. By having the Vampire Prince and his best friend escort him personally to his rooms had been a mistake. Or maybe not. People would want to know him, because they would think he was something special.

Special, not just different, he reminded himself.

He'd been different all of his life and not in a good way. It had cost him everything to be different. Hiding had been safety and security. Escaping notice had been necessary. So he knew he was ill-equipped for this kind of scrutiny.

The Sect knows who I am already, I bet, so notoriety will give me the opportunity to suss out everyone. I need to figure out who is in on this, otherwise I'll never be safe, he thought.

"Hello." Dr. Biswas extended a hand to Grayson. "I'm Amara and you are?"

He was somehow impressed that she hadn't stated she was a doctor. He imagined that getting that title had been difficult and something one would be proud of and want to show off. But here she was yet another student who wished to be a Vampire. Her old life was the past and it didn't matter here.

He clasped her hand lightly in his and shook it. "Grayson. Nice to meet you. I saw your interview. Both your interviews."

Eiji Goda offered his hand as well. It was light and cool as paper as they shook. Eiji

half bowed.

“Grayson, nice to meet. I am Eiji Goda,” the old Japanese man answered.

“Nice to meet you too,” Grayson said awkwardly and stepped back from them towards the corner so that he could see the whole of the shared space and where all the exits were.

The room was large and rectangular. Upon entering there was a cozy sitting area with a large overstuffed sofa with blankets thrown over the back of it. There was also a dining table that could seat six. And there was an open air kitchen with a large island made of stone and steel for more to sit. The far wall held a set of french doors that led out onto a generously-sized balcony which had a sleek gas flame fireplace and more comfortable seating to take in the stars. On either of the short ends of the rectangular room were hallways, which he guessed led to their bedrooms. The space engendered connection. It practically urged people to sit down with a glass of wine opposite someone new and get to know them better. But wasn't that what the school was about?

Eiji's dark eyes briefly narrowed as he saw how Grayson positioned himself so that there was as little open space behind his back as possible. He wondered if the man understood why. Eiji was old, not as old as the Vampires by any means, but older than most of the humans here. He could have lived quite a few lives in his over 80 years. Who knew what his past held?

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Eiji and Amara were both the most obvious—and the least likely—for the Sect to have recruited. They were some of the very few that had been interviewed so the fact that they had gotten into the academy was public knowledge. The Sect could have approached them, blackmailed them or convinced them to join in their cause, after they had been chosen. Choosing them after they got through the rigorous process would explain how they weren't identified before. But the Vampires would have had a watchful eye on these two for just that reason that they could be harmed or approached by their enemies. So reaching them would be the most difficult as compared to other students. He'd have to watch them just as carefully as anyone else. They weren't ruled in or out.

“Your final quad-mate is downstairs,” Julian said, breaking him out of his thoughts, then added dryly, “She brought a few things.”

“Not the one with the birdcage.” Grayson frowned. The thought of birds squawking at all times of the day and night--well, all times of the night as there was no day in the Ever Dark--would be Hellish.

“No, no.” Julian scrubbed the back of his neck with one hand though as if what this person had brought was worse than the birds.

“It's the one with the pool table,” Christian remarked.

“You're kidding!” Amara burst out then plastered a smile on her face as if she was afraid that objecting would have points taken against her. “I guess that explains the empty spot over there.”

She indicated an empty corner of the common room where that pool table would just fit. Grayson wondered if the birds would have been better.

“I’m afraid so,” Julian said tightly.

“I suppose it will be something we can do together,” Amara said just as tightly, but she tried to smile. “But don’t they understand that we’re starting new lives here? Holding onto something as large as a pool table is--is hardly doing that.”

“Some wish to hold onto their past,” Eiji remarked neutrally with that benevolent smile.

“Indeed. You don’t seem to bring anything with you at all, Grayson,” Amara remarked as she took in his lack of luggage.

“Oh, my pool table is yet to be delivered,” Grayson deadpanned.

Amara blinked again, but then let out a pleasant laugh. “Right! We’ll have dueling pool tables!”

“Grayson, why don’t we go look at your room and see if there’s anything you want changed,” Julian suggested.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Grayson said.

He suddenly didn’t want to see his room. It was to have been Gregory’s. He already felt like a fraud and that would make him feel more so. Besides, no matter what was in his “room” it would be better than anything he’d had since he was a kid.

“Well, we want to make sure you’re completely comfortable,” Christian said and gestured towards the left hallway.

Grayson resisted the urge to sigh and headed down the dark wood hallway with a tight smile. He could almost feel the questions in their eyes following him. Now the Vampire Prince and his best friend were assuring that his room was to his liking. What were they likely thinking of him? He'd been a street kid and now he was... what? He felt conspicuous and strange.

"It's the last door on the left," Christian said as they neared the first door to his right.

He found himself glancing inside the first room. It was very spare with grays and whites predominant. There was a futon with no pillow on the floor and a low table with pillows on either side. It clearly evidenced a Japanese aesthetic.

Must be Eiji's room. Beautiful.

He realized he immediately presumed his own room wouldn't be half so nice. But then they reached his room, or rather Gregory's room. It was meant for Gregory so why would it be less nice than Eiji's? It wouldn't. He was just staying there. It wasn't his room. He hesitated by the door, unwilling to push it open and see what had been planned for a dead man.

"We changed things based on what we thought you might like," Julian said quietly, as if understanding the reason for his reluctance.

And maybe he did. Prince Julian was said to have all the gifts, including that of Eyros to read minds. But Grayson sensed that Julian just guessed what he was feeling out of sheer empathy. That caused him to speak out loud what was eating him up inside.

"I saw him die," Grayson said. "Though he was supposed to be a spy, he wanted to be a part of this. One of you. It makes me wonder what I'm doing here."

That last phrase just slipped out. Grayson wondered if that single glass of champagne

had been a mistake and made his tongue loose. But that rarely happened to him. Not that he often drank to excess--though he had to quiet the nightmares--but he normally became more withdrawn when he drank as his mind offered visions of his past. But he did not feel at all drunk. He was stone, cold sober and yet he had spoken out loud what he truly felt.

“Seeyr believes that fate is real. Some things, no matter what we do, must happen. Seeyr is an Immortal. She has the gift of seeing the future,” Julian explained gently. “This could be one of those things. You being here could be meant.”

Grayson studied the intensely handsome face of the Vampire Prince. He saw no lie or con in it. Julian was telling him the truth as he saw it. Could this be meant? All his life he’d had this ability that, in the movies and books, should have led him to some incredible fate, but all it had done was to destroy his life.

Except for now. This is the first time that my gift has led me somewhere good.

He couldn’t believe he was thinking that of the Ever Dark. Not to mention he was likely still being hunted by the Sect. So...

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“Can you imagine if Gregory had come and we did not find out about the Sect until something tragic happened to one or more of the students?” Julian continued. “No matter what else you do here, you have stopped that. You’ve likely saved lives, Grayson. We owe you for that. Everyone here owes you for that.”

“Not to mention if you keep looking for the Sect and find it,” Christian added.

“I should have known that I couldn’t keep that secret with Eyros Vampires around,” Grayson remarked. “Makes me wonder how the Sect is doing it.”

“There are ways to guard your thoughts,” Christian said. “And like I told you before, not everything is accessible, but you were thinking hard on your plan.”

Grayson nodded. He wasn’t actually annoyed by Christian and Julian knowing as they seemed to approve. Not that it would matter if they didn’t. He’d do what he had to do to keep himself safe. Though normally that meant retreating, there had been times when he’d had to act. A flash of a stiletto smile and drug-glazed eyes flashed through his mind. If he had to go on the offense, he would. That’s what he was doing here.

The sense of not belonging, of being an imposter, eased a little bit, too. Grayson rolled his shoulders back. He wasn’t here out of some kind of pity or charity. He was here because he had gotten crucial information to the Vampires. Now they were paying him back in small part with a place to stay and food to eat. And they, evidently, knew he intended to still keep looking for the Sect.

While there was definitely a selfish aspect to it--protecting himself was crucial--he

would also be protecting the innocent people here from fates that had taken Sam and Gregory. He had a purpose and it wasn't just to pretend to be a student. His goal was greater than that. Grayson opened the door to his new bedroom and blinked.

He recognized this place.

Or more like he recognized the sort of place it was. His grandparents on his father's side had a cabin that he'd gone to once just the year before they'd died. It was high up in the woods where the snowfall blanketed the ground under a sea of white and the sky was awash with stars so bright and numerous there had hardly been any darkness. He had loved that cozy yet elegant space.

After their deaths, his mother had married his stepfather and that had started the bad times. It had seemed that when the one link to his father--his grandparents--had been broken, everything had gone with it. And this was so like their cabin. Not exactly, but so close. It was like the very soul of it had been pulled out of his heart and placed here before him.

This can't be possible.

The floor, walls and ceiling were all wood. Bare, open beams were visible on the ceiling. The king-sized bed had a dusky, heather-gray headboard and a broad mattress covered in white and tan blankets. There was a fur throw across the corner of the bed. A dark leather couch sat before a stone fireplace where a fire already crackled. A chandelier in the shape of a wheel with faux candles that could be dimmed reigned above the space.

There was a hallway that led to a walk-in closet and a massive bathroom with a standalone shower and deep soaking tub. The closet was filled with new clothes just like Balthazar had said there would be. He ran his hands over the fine material. This was more than all the clothes he'd had together in his life.

So much to lose...

“This is... how did you... I wasn’t unconscious for long enough for you to change things that much,” Grayson found himself saying as he sat down half in a daze on the back of the sturdy leather couch. That was when he noticed Julian and Christian’s faces. “What? What is it?”

“Ah, we didn’t...” Julian began and then stopped.

Something was wrong. But what could be wrong? This place was perfect. Julian looked at Christian for guidance or advice. Christian’s expression was harder to read. They were clearly talking about something. Christian turned towards him and smiled, though that smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Nightvallen changes to suit certain of the people in it,” Christian said. “It appears to have changed to suit you.”

“Why? I’m not expected here. I mean...” Grayson’s voice drifted off as the two other young men exchanged looks again.

Julian turned back to him and said, “It looks like you’re welcome. I hate to do this, but Christian and I have to get back downstairs. Will you be all right on your own for a bit?”

Grayson almost said, “I’m always alone.” But he just nodded. He didn’t understand how this room could so perfectly suit him. Were they honestly telling him that the city had done this all on its own. For him? Why?

Christian gestured towards a tidy desk beneath a window. There was a thick black, leather binder there and a stapled piece of cream paper with typing on it.

“You’ll find tonight’s activities on the loose paper. You’ll be getting a new schedule every day. The binder has all the general information you’ll need about the school. Maps. Where you can get food. All of that,” Christian explained, clasping his hands in front of him. He pointed to a very fancy watch on the desk in a leather case. “You’ll actually need to use a watch. Phones don’t work here. Oh, and expect some... disorientation. The lack of a day-night cycle will play havoc with your sleep schedule. There are sun rooms and vitamins that we have provided and recommend you take. There are physicians on staff to help you at any time.”

With every word, Grayson’s eyebrows lifted. He shouldn’t have been surprised that there would be such luxury here. Doctors on staff. He hadn’t seen a doctor in... forever. He didn’t get sick often and, thankfully, he’d never broken anything. He’d always been paranoid that something off about him would be given away during an examination. Now he could go if he wanted to without any fear. They already knew what he could do.

He set the coat, scarf and gloves on the bed. He didn’t need them right now. It was so warm and pleasant in the room. As he did so, he couldn’t help but compare his old life to this one. He did feel lucky, but he also experienced a flare of anger that the only reason his life was better in this moment was because he had gotten the equivalent of a lottery ticket to the Ever Dark.

With quite the cost.

“Thanks,” Grayson told them. “I appreciate it.”

“We’ll let you get settled in. We’ll see you later,” Julian said and waved as he and Christian left the room and shut the door.

The only sound was the crackle and pop of the fire. Grayson got up from the couch and decided to look more carefully at his surroundings before joining his quad-mates

outside.

He ran a hand over the silky dark leather of the couch, noticing that there was a pile of books on a side table. He ran his fingers over the spines. It was The Lord of the Rings trilogy. He'd started reading that the last year before he... he had to leave home. He'd used libraries as places to keep warm during some of the winters and books had been a comfort then. But he'd never read that trilogy again, because it reminded him too much of what he'd lost. But now here they were as if they'd been waiting for them.

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He went over to the bed and sat down on the edge. It was incredibly comfortable. He leaned all the way back on it and spread his arms wide. The blankets were soft and silky underneath his hands. The wood-beamed ceiling above him was interesting to look at, drawing his eye along the wood's grain. He could have just shut his eyes and fallen asleep then. But there was a parade that night. He couldn't miss seeing Ryder in a parade. He grinned and sat up.

He went over to the desk and saw that the stapled paper had tonight and tomorrow's events. Tonight was the parade. Tomorrow there was a welcome breakfast and orientation. He took the watch out of its case. The face had a blue metallic sheen and a solid, leather strap. He put it on his wrist. It felt cool against his skin. It appeared to already be set to the appropriate time, which was 4 in the afternoon. He was definitely going to have some sleeping issues.

He heard the thump of a door and a loud female voice lifted in greeting. He turned around.

Must be the owner of the pool table. Would a Sect member be this bold? Let's find out.

He raked his fingers through his hair and strode out of his room and back down the hallway. Eiji stood with his hands crossed at the wrists behind his back. Amara was blinking again from her seat at the kitchen island. They were both looking at a woman who had short, bright red hair with black tips, green snapping eyes and freckles all over her engaging--if not pretty--face. She was snapping gum and smiling. When she saw him, she hopped down from her perch on the back of the couch.

She grinned at him and with a broad Irish accent said, “Ach, so here’s the celebrity!”

“Celebrity?” He lifted an eyebrow.

“Come in with a Weryn by your side, though they claim to be sitting this school year out. Then you have Prince Julian and the Speaker to the Dead Christian hanging about you like old friends.” She ticked these things off on her fingers. “So what’s your story, mate?” Her grin grew bigger. “For I bet it’s a big one.”

IMMORTAL

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

Ryder’s hands curled tighter around the balcony’s stone railing.

How will I know unless I taste it?

The echo of Lawson’s voice from the vision that Daemon had given him rocketed around in Ryder’s head. Well, the first statement was from the vision, but the second was his own imagination. But it was what Lawson would say.

Would your feelings for Grayson not be enough to keep Lawson under control?

Ryder’s tongue clove to the top of his mouth as all the saliva drained out of it, leaving it mummified at Daemon’s remembered question.

Would he not do this for you?

Fledglings did things for their Masters, not the other way around.

Surely, he wouldn’t harm who you care for no matter how new that caring!

Ryder drew in a deep breath and his eyelids flew open. The west interior courtyard of the Weryn lodgings swam into view. Tall trees with silver bark and leaves that were so dark green they were almost black stirred in a sweet wind. The sound they made reminded him of running his hands over silk.

You would have me hate him.

Would I? Or does part of you hate him already?

Ryder drew in another deep breath. He turned on his heel and headed into his room. Though he left the sky behind, the room's high ceilings kept him from feeling claustrophobic. He strode to the single piece of furniture in the room. A table that could seat twenty, but held only one at the moment. But it was the only person--other than Grayson--that he had a mind to see.

"You need more blood." Demos pushed the decanter and glass towards him. The dark red liquid sloshed and left a red haze in its wake. "It would be better fresh."

"I have no time for amusements," Ryder said as he poured himself another glass.

The thought of taking a warm body into his arms at that moment, of putting his lips against skin, of feeling a heartbeat swell under his tongue, of hearing moans of pleasure travel up his fangs were not what he could bear at the moment.

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

Ryder swallowed down another glass of tepid blood the consistency of molasses. He grimaced.

How will I know unless I taste it?

“Oh, but you had time to walk Grayson to his rooms?” Demos’ left eyebrow rose. “And to take your sweet time in getting him there? You even went inside with all those students that we’re supposed to be ignoring. But there you were. A part of the party. Like we’re all some happy family.”

“He’s a link to the Sect of Dawn,” Ryder said as he stared down into the glass. It was stained red. The coppery scent of blood filled his nostrils, but he felt no hunger, no desire, nothing at all.

How will I know unless I taste it?

He swallowed hard.

“And the fact that he’s all edges with soft, wounded eyes has nothing to do with you taking your time? And making people wonder if Weryn is in it?” Demos took a sip of his own blood and grimaced as well. But both of them were wounded.

We’re all wounded.

“Grayson wasn’t meant to have such edges,” Ryder found himself saying, and realizing he had walked straight into Demos’ trap, shook his own glass at his Blood Brother. “He’s interesting. A human with powers like that...”

Demos nodded. “Yes, he is interesting, which is why that pup Christian set you off with a flea in your ear for hanging around him! Not even a year old and he bosses you around.”

Ryder snorted even though being sent away had been unpleasant. Though Christian had done it in such a way that had not been arrogant, but instead full of righteousness. He was Balthazar’s fledgling after all and Ryder--all the Weryn--were not falling into plan with his Master’s little school idea. But he hadn’t even been rude just cold. Cutting. A searing indictment with a flick of silver eyes. He had to admit that Balthazar had chosen his own fledgling quite well. Maybe he could pick the fledglings of others with equal good taste, but Ryder had no intention of finding out.

“Christian would boss you around, too,” Ryder suddenly pointed out with a dry

chuckle. “There’s something about him. More than being Eyros’ fledgling or the Prince’s best friend. He’s different.”

“He is too friendly with Kaly. He can talk to the dead and know what’s beyond,” Demos stated the gossip about Christian Thorne. “He’s a strange one, to be sure. But he only thought to send you on your way because Grayson is interesting to the King. Forget Balthazar and Caemorn. The King himself came to see that broken boy.”

“He’s not broken. He’s just...” Ryder grimaced again when Demos laughed at him.

“Gods forbid, he is not broken! How can you fix him if he’s complete? He does not need Ryder to lure out the wild creature he is and set his wing or brace his wounded paw then!” Demos teased.

Ryder let his head fall back. His chest still ached when he did this. The skin on his chest was too new to be stretched or strained. Fresh blood would have been better to heal himself quicker, but he’d needed to see Grayson again. Needed to make sure the boy was all right, and was being treated well. If he told Demos that--assuming his Blood Brother didn’t already know--he’d never hear the end of it.

“Grayson is right that if we can discover who the Sect of Dawn is then Daemon will be indebted to us,” Ryder pointed out. “And we need that debt. One of the reasons that Christian felt no compunction against dismissing me is because the Weryn are not in Daemon’s good graces. Lawson... Lawson was like a bull in a china shop with him. He did not represent us well. Instead of getting our points across, he likely just angered the king.”

Demos studied him long and hard. Ryder strove not to squirm beneath that incisive gaze. Despite Demos being the younger of them, he had the ability to see into men’s hearts even without the ability of Eyros.

“You have never spoken against Lawson before,” Demos said carefully as he traced an infinity symbol on the table with a droplet of blood. Was he consciously drawing Daemon’s symbol or not? “And not wishing to tell him about Grayson is... not like you either.”

“Lawson will be leaving tomorrow. I don’t want him staying--”

“You don’t want him to stay?” Demos lifted an eyebrow.

“If I am... if I am to represent the Weryn at the school, having him here... won’t work well,” Ryder explained haltingly.

“Only if you let him stand in your way.”

“I have no intention of fighting Lawson for control of the Weryn--”

“No, you just want him out of the way so that you can control things without dealing with him,” Demos stated flatly.

“He’s our Master.” That sounded lame to his own ears. It was lame.

“He’s the one who turned us, Ryder, but both of us know--whether you want to admit it or not--that he’s never been either of our Masters,” Demos shook his head. The feathers in his hair fluttered.

Ryder looked down. “I respect him for what he’s given us.”

“We’ve brought more in than he’s given us,” Demos challenged.

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

Ryder closed his eyes and swallowed. “I know.”

Silence fell. When he opened his eyes again, Demos was gazing at him with nothing less than shock.

“Whenever we’ve had conversations like this in the past, you’ve never conceded any of my points,” Demos said. “What’s changed?”

“Nothing.”

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“Oh, bullshit, my ass that nothing has changed! What’s changed?” Demos demanded.

“Daemon...”

“What? What did he say to you?” Demos went very still. “You can tell me, Ryder.”

“I know. I just...”

“What did Daemon say?”

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

“Maybe what I already knew,” Ryder whispered. “Do you think it’s the wrong move? To--to team up with Grayson? To keep it from Lawson?”

Ryder practically held his breath. Demos’ judgment was always good, but he did not want to tell Lawson about Grayson no matter what. Yet he didn’t trust his judgment about the young man. He was attracted to him. Grayson was just his type but amplified a thousand fold.

“No, it’s not wrong at all! It’s right! I like that you are stepping out from his shadow,” Demos said with an emphatic thump of his hand on the table. “He thinks he speaks for all of the Weryn, but he doesn’t. I think Daemon’s return has left us all uncertain of what the right path forward is. Lawson has aimed us in a direction. But is it the right one? Is it the one we should be taking? You already know what I believe. But what do you think?”

“He may not be right about many things. He may not be the right leader either. But... he’s not altogether wrong either. We have tradition in how we choose our fledglings for a reason. We know what happens when Immortals are in charge of this.” Ryder’s expression grew grave. “The War showed their true colors. Fledglings were not made to add to the group harmony, but simply as cannon fodder.”

“I am not saying that I am keen on Eyros, Kaly and Seeyr choosing the pool of candidates either for us to pick from.” Demos held up his hands. “But now that the humans know about us there needs to be rules. The school seems fair.”

“Humans want rules for us, but for themselves? Every rule they make, they break if it suits them.” Ryder crossed his arms over his chest. “We need to choose the best to be among us. We can’t allow their fear--or our fear--to cause us to make mistakes again.”

Demos nodded. “That’s true. But how do we know that Eyros and the others haven’t chosen the best with this year’s class?”

“Gregory was a member of the Sect of Dawn,” Ryder reminded him dryly. “He can hardly be the best.”

“But Gregory led us to Grayson.” Demos pointed out.

“That was luck. Bad luck for Grayson perhaps,” Ryder said, flashing back though on the unwilling sketch of Grayson’s hard past. He was glad that Grayson wasn’t decaying in a dead end job with no friends and no prospects.

“Was it though? Was it luck at all? You said yourself that Seeyr played a role in picking who was chosen,” Demos pointed out.

Seeyr was another Immortal like Balthazar and Caemorn, but she had not died and

been reborn. She had been imprisoned in her own tower, the Spire, in the Ever Dark since the time of the War. Her eyes had been plucked out and not allowed to regrow due to near starvation levels of feeding. But that had not stopped her from seeing--and making happen--the one future where Daemon returned to rule both Vampires and humans.

“She picked Gregory--”

“But maybe because it was the only way to lead the Sect to reveal itself and bring a most unusual human into the game. Grayson seems to have no love for Vampires,” Demos said. “He would never have come here absent Gregory.”

“But that feels like luck! Like a coincidence!” Ryder paced.

“She plays the long game. Things that seem unimportant end up deciding everything. Yet here we are. In the future she foresaw and wanted,” Demos reminded him this time.

Ryder scrubbed his fingers through his beard. Grayson was unusual. Was worthy. Was interesting. Getting him here willingly when he otherwise would never have come on his own was brilliant, if true.

“He’d never have accepted coming here if we had trapped him,” Ryder remarked softly as he realized that this might have been the only way Grayson would have ever accepted being in the Ever Dark.

“Grayson? Oh, hell, no. That boy would have broken himself completely on the bars of any cage,” Demos agreed.

“I was thinking that perhaps we could reach out to your friend Dani for him,” Ryder said as he continued to pace.

Demos' eyebrows lifted. "Why would you want to talk to Dani about Grayson?"

Unlike most Weryn, Demos befriended Vampires of all Bloodlines and Dani was an Ashyr Vampire. They had gifts similar to Grayson's in that they were telekinetic.

"I was thinking if we are going after the Sect that Grayson should hone his gift. What better person to help him than an Ashyr Vampire?" Ryder suggested.

Demos pursed his lips. "I see where you are going there."

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“But you don’t approve?” Ryder stopped pacing directly opposite where Demos sat sprawled at the dining table.

Demos lifted his silver eyes to Ryder. “Have you thought how Grayson might be perceived, especially by an Ashyr Vampire?”

Ryder opened and shut his mouth. “I...”

“I know that you are not so enamored with the idea of the Immortals returning. You don’t care if Weryn ever shows up... or if he’s here already.” A stare from Demos had him shifting uncomfortably. “But others do care. Very much. They see how much favor the Bloodlines whose Immortals have returned are getting. Not just the pretty palaces that are open to them, but the affection of our king.”

“You don’t think that Grayson is--is Ashyr reborn?” Ryder let out a sharp laugh that somehow hurt.

Demos spread his arms. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because he... simply because he is telekinetic doesn’t mean he’s Ashyr reincarnated! When Balthazar was human he couldn’t read minds! When Caemorn was human he couldn’t raise the dead!” Ryder insisted.

Demos’ stare should have shot right through him at this rate. “Balthazar was the second son of some lord or another. He was a drunk and a gambler. Yet... yet he always won. He should have lost against the cretins he played against in games of chance, become indebted to the low lives of society, but he never did.”

“Meaning he was reading their minds?” Ryder felt his throat growing tight as he said this.

Another shrug of those big black shoulders. “I think he either had the luck of the Devil or he knew what cards were in everyone’s hands and knew when the dice were loaded. As to Caemorn... Well, there are stories about him dissecting dead animals as a child and perhaps even bringing a crow back to life. But less is known there. I could go onto Wyvern, as well, but--”

“Enough.” Ryder ripped a hand through his hair. “I see your point. But none of them is as powerful as Grayson with their gift when they were mortal.”

“And you think that means it’s less likely he’s Ashyr?” Demos eyebrows were practically one with his hairline. “Why are you so against him being an Immortal really?”

“Because...” Ryder stopped.

He wasn’t sure how to express this, how to put what he felt into words. This sensation of being chained with the knowledge that you had a life before this one where you had created monsters instead of children to fight for you. That your best intentions became the worst of acts. The War between the Immortals after Daemon had gone to sleep to await Julian was born was so brutal. He hadn’t been alive during it, but he knew what it had done to all of them. He just knew...

“Grayson is already saddled with a dark past. Being Ashyr wouldn’t relieve that. It would only add to his burden,” Ryder finally said.

Demos regarded him with an almost sadness in his eyes. “The Order lied about what happened during the War, Ryder. Only those who were actually there know which Immortals started it and what was actually done versus the grim fairytale the Order

told us to keep us in line.”

“We know how bad it was because of the safeguards that were put in place because of it.” Ryder grimaced. “Our traditions are not just because we have a greater tie to nature than the other Bloodlines as we turn into other living beings. But because we so abused that during the War that it was determined never again would we allow ourselves to behave that way.”

He was practically shaking. Talking about the War, about Weryn, about all of it caused his skin to want to split open so that he could crawl away from himself.

“All this talk about me being Weryn and Grayson being Ashyr is not good news, Demos. The Immortals’ hands are covered in the blood of their own children. The Vampires that are... off all come from that era.”

“Lawson wasn’t alive then,” Demos said quietly as if that proved something.

“He was turned by Legion,” Ryder reminded him unnecessarily.

They both went silent then. Legion had been Weryn’s top general in the War, though he had not been the oldest of Weryn’s Children. But he had been the most ruthless and the most dangerous. Lawson, of all his fledglings, was the only one not to have been brought down afterwards by Vampire hunters like himself and Demos. The only one that was not tainted by madness.

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

Ryder shook his head violently as if to shake that vision out of it. But the echo of the words remained.

“Weryn made Legion. Approved his barbarity. We shouldn’t want Weryn back,

Demos,” Ryder insisted.

“I thought we were talking about Ashyr here,” Demos replied softly.

“We shouldn’t want any of them back! And those that are need to prove they have the right to rule us again! But Daemon’s just given them all the power yet again!” Ryder gritted his teeth.

“Daemon isn’t like the other Immortals,” Demos said, stroking his chin. “We’ve been around enough of the crazies to know he isn’t like that. He trusts Balthazar and Caemorn. Shouldn’t we?”

“I know. I know.” Ryder threw up his arms. “But I think he’s blinded by his love for the Immortals from the past. He doesn’t know what they became without his leadership and guidance. He still sees them as the beings he knew. But they changed while he slept. Or maybe, not being weaker than them, he didn’t know what they were really like at all.”

Silence fell between them except for the popping of the tree-branch sized logs in the fireplace that spanned the length of one wall. The heat from it embraced the whole room. Ryder had piled furs and pillows in front of it. Other than the table, that was the only real touch of habitation he had brought to this space.

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As he stared at the furs, his mind offered him the image of Grayson lying there, nude and asleep, head turned to the side so that he was snuggled into the soft blankets. The firelight would flow over his long, lean form. Ryder could imagine running one hand down his naked flank and watching as Grayson stirred from his touch. Those soft, wounded eyes would open, dark lashes fluttering, as Grayson focused upon him. A slow smile would lift the edges of that plush mouth. Ryder could almost taste their kiss.

“We should get ready for the parade,” Demos said, draining his glass. “The show must go on.”

Ryder nodded, still staring at the blankets that held no warm, pliant body.

Seeing where he was looking, a smile alighted on Demos’ lips, but it was a little sad too as he said, “You know, I thought you wouldn’t want Grayson to be Ashyr reborn because... well, because he couldn’t be yours.”

Ryder’s head snapped towards him. His heart was in his throat. He wanted to protest this. He wanted to yell that this couldn’t be true. Even as he knew that Grayson was out of the running to be his fledgling for so many other reasons, even if he had wanted Grayson to be his Childe. Yet he didn’t want Demos to add yet another one.

“The Ashyr Bloodline would never let their Immortal be turned by another Bloodline,” Demos said and with a narrow-eyed gaze, “especially if that other Vampire weren’t an Immortal themselves.”

**BELONGING**

“How about you tell me your name first, before I tell you my story,” Grayson said dryly as he moved over to the kitchen island and took a seat there.

He wanted to buy time. He should have a simple explanation for himself. One that wasn't too far from the truth, but avoided the things he had to hide. But he wasn't quite sure what that story was. He normally had one prepared in advance and took the time to practice it. Make it short, sweet, forgettable. Even people as inquisitive as the redhead normally could be discouraged from asking for more, but the whole plan here was to get to know his fellow students to figure out which one was involved with the Sect.

“Fair enough.” She put her hands together in front of her. They were surprisingly delicate and graceful in their movements like a musician's or a pool player's, he supposed. “Mairead Byrne, at your service.” Her first name sounded like Mi-rade. “And yours is Grayson Duke.”

“You seem to know a lot about Grayson already.” Amara crossed her arms over her chest and lifted an eyebrow at Mairead.

“I like to know things.” Mairead looked completely unrepentant and snapped her gum. “You have to know your competition. Besides, downstairs is a buzz about it!”

Grayson hid his grimace. He had known that people were watching him, especially when Christian and Julian escorted him upstairs. But he hadn't realized that Weryn's decision to stay out of the choosing of fledglings was common knowledge. At least not among the students, but clearly he was wrong or Mairead had niggled it out of someone. She did like to know things.

I bet she wants to be an Eyros.

“We're not in competition.” Amara shook her head.

“You can’t be so naive! We have to be.” Mairead laughed.

“Do we?” Eiji murmured.

“Ach, you were very clever during your interview not to answer them when they asked what Bloodline you want to be, Goda-sama.” She wagged a playful finger at him. “But you wanted to maximize your chance of any Bloodline choosing you. Makes sense since you’re so old.”

“Can you be any more rude?” Amara snapped.

The naive comment hadn’t gone over well and the “old” comment really hadn’t, though she had used the honorific for Eiji that showed she placed him at a social position higher than herself.

“She is honest,” Eiji said with a dry chuckle. “You are right, child, that I am looking to maximize my chances by not offending any of the Bloodlines. I am curious though why you think we are in competition with one another. The Vampires have been clear that there is a place for every one of us. They did not accept too many.”

Mairead cocked her head to the side, a smile curling her lips. “I think you believe we’re in competition too. There are 100 students. There are 10 Bloodlines, well, nine, since Weryn is out for now, anyways.” She gave Grayson a sidelong look. “No Bloodline will accept getting less fledglings than another. And there will be favorites among the Bloodlines and the students. So not everyone will be offered the one they want. While the students may be flexible like Goda-sama here, will the Bloodlines? They already resent this process.”

Amara shook her head and let out a soft laugh. “You are assuming much in those statements. If what you say is true then I am certain that they chose the proper amount of fledglings for each Bloodline.”

Grayson was sure she was right. Balthazar would literally know who would fit best, but also, what person a Bloodline would want. Balthazar would even make sure there were equal amounts of fledglings for each Bloodline.

“But for some of them it won’t be about who is best for their Bloodline,” Mairead laughed. “They’ll just want to win.”

Grayson thought that Mairead was also right. There was bound to be a lot more politics in turning someone now. When it had just been the individual Vampires on their own, no one was watching to see how they did, who they seduced, and whether they won. Now, everyone would be watching and everyone would know. Maybe Ryder was right that this wasn’t the best way to choose fledglings when something other than who was the best fit was playing a role.

Amara made a disbelieving sound though and she checked a thin gold watch around her right wrist. She got down from her chair and grabbed a long dark orange scarf that she wrapped around her neck.

“Are you going to the parade?” Grayson asked. He hadn’t thought it was for some time yet.

She smiled at him but shook her head. “No, I already have a meeting set up with one of the Bloodlines.”

“A meeting?” Mairead’s eyebrows lifted and she looked amused. “It’s not like this is a business transaction to become a fledgling.”

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“My dear, that is exactly what this all is,” Amara responded coolly. “I will see you all later. Do enjoy the parade.”

She nodded to all of them and headed out of the quad with a waft of her jasmine perfume leaving a trail behind her.

“My, my, she is a person with a plan,” Eiji remarked.

“She claims not to be worried about competition but here she is already networking. Do you suppose she was in contact before or after she came to Nightvallen?” Mairead asked. “If it was before then some rules were broken. Naughty, naughty, Dr. Biswas.”

“I doubt she’s gotten where she is without knowing what she wants and how to get it,” Grayson murmured. “So that’s why there’s no competition for her.”

“You’re probably right. She excels at everything, I’m betting. Good to know I’m among quality company,” Mairead remarked with an almost sheepish grin as if she knew how rude that was to say and was in on the joke of it.

“Though it might be childish, I, however, am looking forward to this parade. Would you care to join me?” Eiji looked at both him and Mairead.

“Absolutely.” Mairead grinned. “I wonder if they sent their best or worst to entertain us tonight.”

“They’ll want to put their best foot forward, I think. But who looks impressive on the outside is not always who truly is,” Eiji said.

Mairead narrowed her eyes at the Japanese businessman speculatively. “Yeah, you’re right at that. Appearances can be deceiving.”

Definitely wants to be an Eyros. Though I don’t know if I’d want her as one.

Grayson hesitated, but then got down from the chair himself. Maybe Amara did have a meeting with a potential Bloodline or maybe she had a meeting with a member of the Sect, getting her orders, or doing something else nefarious while everyone was enjoying the parade. He had to find out. He wasn’t here for parades.

“I’ll catch up with you,” Grayson told them with a wave.

“Hey! You didn’t answer my questions even though I gave you my name!” Mairead cried.

Walking backwards, Grayson gave her a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I have to keep you guessing.”

Then he turned and hurried off down the hallway. Luckily, that orange scarf Amara was wearing was easy to spot, which meant she wasn’t going to a secret rendezvous or she was just really bad at blending in. He, on the other hand, could blend in very well.

He hung back about fifteen feet from her as she wove her way through the excited students and Vampires in the dorm’s foyer. No silver eyes flashed their way. He was surprised that all the students didn’t have minders. But this was a school, not a prison. Yet knowing the Sect was trying to infiltrate them and do them harm seemed unwise, but, then again, maybe he just wasn’t seeing all what the Vampires had planned.

Amara went out the back of the dorm, not the front. She passed through a series of rooms before they reached the back doors and another street. There was a group

dining room and what looked like several meeting rooms with cozy fireplaces and plenty of seating. They were all darkened though as the activity was in the front of the dorm, the rooms and soon it would be outside.

He caught the back door just as it was closing. Amara had turned right and was headed down the graceful street at speed. She wasn't looking right nor left, let alone at the gorgeous white stone buildings with their mixture of ancient and modern. Her eyes didn't even lift to the dual moons. She was, as Eiji had said, a woman with a purpose. She did though bring out a folded sheet of paper from her right pocket and consult it periodically.

A map. I should have grabbed one, too, out of the material packet, Grayson thought.

He'd always had a pretty good head for directions though. He could figure his way back, he was sure. But he should study the map the next time he had a chance and really know the place. If, for no other reason, than to understand where the exits were. Though from what he had read of the Ever Dark, the cities were the only civilized places.

Dangers of an unknown sort surrounded them. And one was only able to get from one Ever Dark city to the next by using gates. One couldn't walk or fly or sail between them. The forests, oceans and fields were said to go forever. He wasn't sure if that was true. But it fit with the sense of otherness the Ever Dark presented.

He realized soon enough that Amara was heading towards the Bloodline palaces. They were set out in a semicircle with the main palace at the top and a huge fountain in the exact center. Each palace was different--and magical--and said to reflect its Immortal's character.

If she's going to a palace then whatever Bloodline she's visiting must have their Immortal present, Grayson realized. Doesn't mean she's not meeting a member of the

Sect though. The Sect has Vampires in it.

Though she had taken a back way to get to the palaces, he found himself having to move closer to her in order to keep her in view. It appeared that this was where the parade was going to take place with Vampires coming out of their Immortals' palace or, at least, standing in front of it. He wondered which was the Weryn palace. He almost lost sight of her as he found himself looking for the very different figure of Ryder. He wrenched his gaze away as he nearly plowed into some other students. He backed away, nodding his apologies.

Next time we meet I'll have something to tell him if I keep my eye on the ball.

He was a little surprised at his desire to impress the other man. He normally didn't care what people thought of him. He'd gotten too many snarls or blank looks when he'd been homeless to think well of people. Acceptance was a fragile thing. Having a dirty face, ripped clothing, being out in the rain and people who would have helped you if those things were different all changed. Yet Ryder claimed to have deeper ties to his Bloodline than that. Maybe it was true. Maybe if Grayson was a Vampire he, too, would have such acceptance.

But I'd have to live off of blood and stay away from the sun. I'd be beholden to a Master. Awful lot to give up for that kind of kinship.

A memory of shivering on a doorstep, knees brought up to his skinny chest, as icy rain pelted him returned to him. Then there had been Sam. He'd been in a nearby alleyway, standing about a fire barrel. He gestured for Grayson to join them. It was Sam and two other rough-looking men who were more interested in the bottles in their hands than him. He'd been so cold that his hands were shaking even though he could barely feel them. He'd learned to avoid people already, especially the ones that offered to help. They were the worst. But he'd been so cold and the fire looked so much warmer.

So he'd gone to the fire.

And it had been all right.

Well, it had been a warmer place than he'd been in before.

And now Sam was dead, snuffed out for no reason than a Vampire wanted a drink and Sam was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ryder was nothing like Sam. But he seemed to be standing near a warmer fire. And if he would help Grayson take down the people who had killed Sam for nothing then it would be worth it to reach back to someone just this once.

Focused once more, Grayson located that orange scarf again. People were drifting about with glasses of champagne and plates of food, chatting gaily with the other Vampires and humans among them. Mairead might think that they were all in competition, but from what Grayson could see they looked more enamored of simply being here.

They're the chosen, Grayson realized. They don't have to doubt that they belong. Yet, anyways, until the games begin or whatever they plan to do to pick fledglings.

He kept that flash of orange in sight. But he didn't have to wonder where she was going. She headed up a stone path to the front door of one that looked rather like an ancient Greek temple. A girl with blond hair in pigtails who looked rather like an anime character greeted her warmly and escorted her inside. They soon disappeared from view.

So she is going to see a Vampire, but who? What Palace is this?

There were no names to identify them. He found himself drifting around the side of the palace, looking through delicate spun glass windows to see if he could follow Amara's progress inside. But there were apple trees blocking his view and though he darted from window to window, he only saw graceful pale, cream rooms inside but nothing and no one else. He stopped, realizing that he had lost her. The smell of the trees was sweet but not cloying, as ripe fruit hung heavily from the branches.

How can anything grow without sunlight?

He reached up towards a perfectly shaped apple and plucked it from the branch. He smelled it. The scent was crisp and tart. The skin was firm. He fought the urge to bite into it though. It might look like an apple, but it might not be one.

Pretty poison.

"Grayson, could you please assist me?" A woman's voice, rich and educated, reached his ears.

He spun around in surprise. He had thought he was alone. But the fear that quickened his heartbeat and caused adrenaline to squirt into his veins tamped down when he saw the person who had called his name. It was a beautiful woman in a long, pale dress with a strip of the same color fabric over her eyes as if she were playing blind man's bluff.

Though she couldn't have been able to see through the fabric, she was facing him directly, an open smile on her beautiful face. Though he couldn't see silver eyes, he knew that she was a Vampire. You could not mistake her for anything else despite her seeming lack of predatoriness. He was not afraid. She meant him no harm. He was a good enough judge of character to know that. She was able to cause him harm, but she had no intention to.

The fabric over her eyes tugged at him. What was the meaning of it?

He let out a slow breath and said, "I didn't see you there."

"No," she agreed.

They continued to stare at one another. Or rather, he stared and her face was turned towards him yet he was certain she could see him.

Seeyr... the Immortal Seeyr. That's right. I read about her. She's missing her eyes, but she can see the future, Grayson recalled and there was a deeper tug on him, but he couldn't have said why. There was a familiarity about her, but there couldn't have been. He would never have forgotten her presence.

"You--you asked me for help. What do you need help with?" he asked.

Seeyr would know his name, would know who he was. Balthazar or Caemorn would have told her. The big three that ran the school. Yet it was odd that she could identify him when she'd never met him before. It wasn't like she could have seen his face and placed it.

"Would you get Meffy down for me?" she asked with a rather helpless gesture towards a rather large apple tree.

"Meffy?" Grayson looked up into the tree's branches, expecting to see a delinquent child, perhaps like the one that had met Amara. But, at first, he saw nothing at all.

Then there was the sweet little mew! And a black cat, little more than a kitten appeared, quivering on a branch.

"Oh!" Grayson exclaimed.

The little ball of fluff mewed piteously again.

“Yes, he ran away. He was playing and now he’s stuck. Balthazar will be in tatters if I don’t bring him round for the parade,” she said. “Could you get him down for me?”

He measured the tree in his mind. The trunk and branches looked sturdy enough for him to climb, but Meffy was far out on one limb. He didn’t think he could shimmy out onto the branch easily.

“You’re not considering climbing, are you? You’ll ruin those clothes,” she laughed.

“I don’t intend to wear them again,” Grayson muttered.

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He would find something more him, even if it did have the academy's logo on it. Maybe he could rip the logos off...

"Balthazar does try his best to make people at ease by giving them what he thinks they want, or more like, what they think they want," she said.

"I can assure you that I wouldn't want to be a preppy school boy at an exclusive school," he answered.

"Maybe not, but you'd like to belong, wouldn't you? Fit in? Be a part of something?" She tilted her head to the side.

He opened and closed his mouth.

"You've not had a chance of doing that since your gift manifested, have you?" She made it a question, but it wasn't one. She knew. "Even when you've been around people who have accepted you on some level, you've always known that it's been a fragile acceptance. Likely to go away. Especially if they knew the real you."

He swallowed and said nothing. But he did think back on watching the Vampires use their powers so openly. What had he felt when he'd seen it? Alarm? Yes. Fear for them being caught out? Yes. And then jealousy when he realized that they could do these things openly.

"So, Balthazar, in his way, was trying to make you understand that you do belong here. You fit in," she said. "A real insider actually."

“By putting me in clothes that no one else is wearing?” Grayson finally spoke.

“He’s not perfect, but he does try. In his way,” she said, her smile twinkling at him.

He slid his hands into his pockets and slowly approached her and Meffy. “I bet that an Immortal could leap up and grab Meffy out of that tree without my help.”

“Oh, yes, but Meffy would be frightened if I did that. But if you used your gift he wouldn’t be. And a happy Meffy means a happy Balthazar which means a happy Daemon so... won’t you?” She gestured towards the kitten again.

“I’m out of practice,” Grayson said as he stared at the ball of fluff that was holding on the tree limb with little claws, the desperation to get down to them huge in its round eyes. “I mean... I never really practice.”

“You should!” She smiled brightly at him.

“We’re trying to hide what I can do,” he reminded her. “Practicing would be a bad idea, wouldn’t it? More chances I might be seen.”

She shrugged as if hiding what he could do was a foregone conclusion. A chill went through him. She was the Immortal Seeyr. Maybe she did know that. He glanced around to make sure he hadn’t missed another person nearby.

“It’s just the three of us,” she assured him.

Grayson took in a deep breath and concentrated on the kitten. He imagined the light weight of the little one. He imagined the softness of his fur and the sharpness of his claws. Then he pulled. Gently. Meffy let out a murp! as he detached the kitten’s claws from the tree and slowly lowered him down into his arms. Meffy’s eyes were huge again, but they closed the moment that he was in Grayson’s hands. The kitten

was as sweet as he looked. Grayson found himself smiling and leaning down to kiss the furry head.

“Oh, Meffy is very happy!” Seeyr grinned.

“So Balthazar will be happy?”

She looked up at him with those bound eyes. “And Daemon will be, too.”

“It’s good to have the Vampire King happy,” he guessed.

She put her arm lightly through his. “It is, Grayson. It most certainly is.”

“Does he know about the Sect then?” Grayson asked as she started to direct them out of the garden and towards the parade grounds.

“Of course,” she said.

“And you know?”

“You mean did I see the future and glimpse them?” Her smile didn’t dim.

“Ah, yeah, that’s what I do mean,” he said.

She laughed. “Asking a Seeyr about the future is like asking a mortal about their age once they hit a certain decade.”

“Meaning you don’t like to be asked?”

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“Meaning that sometimes the cost of knowing is often too high,” she answered.

“That sounds bad.” He stopped, intent on finding Ryder at that moment to warn him.

But Seeyr tugged him forward gently. “I know you believe you’re here to solve that particular problem.”

“Because I am. They killed my friend. They killed an innocent old man for nothing!” Grayson’s voice rose, which had Meffy meowing sadly. He patted the cat as he said more softly, “They’re evil. I think they are truly evil.”

“Some of them are, yes. But some of them are just trying to hold onto what they’ve always known and their place within that known universe,” she answered, not seemingly disturbed by his anger. “But things are changing. And change is hard for everyone.”

He licked his lips. “You said that I think I’m here for the Sect, meaning that I’m wrong about that. If that’s true then what am I here for?”

She patted his arm gently as they left the orchard and entered the raucous square. Her words were nearly drowned out by the raised voices, but he thought she said, “You’re here, because you belong.”

### UNWANTED MEETING

Ryder shifted the cloak over his broad, bare shoulders as he surveyed the Weryn who would accompany him in the parade. All of them wore cloaks, too, and nothing else.

They would be shifting after all and why destroy good clothing? The cloaks were long, brushing the tops of certain people's feet, but the hem only came to mid-calf on Ryder. He flexed his bare toes on the grass sward, relishing the coolness of the earth underneath his feet.

His gaze only swung towards the unlit Weryn Palace once. It was a beautiful structure with its deep wrap-around porch, gracious covered balconies and occasional tower spearing the sky.

Huge trees with wide, spreading branches and thick roots shrouded most of the palace from view. Ryder imagined that if he ever stood on one of the palace's balconies that it would seem like he was living in the trees. In fact, the path up to the front entrance of the palace was lined with these same trees whose branches reached up above him, nearly fifty feet high, and formed an almost arched roof over the pathway.

Silvery balls of light, similar to the mysterious glowing balls on Earth that showed up on abandoned mountains or in deep marshes, appeared between the trees and bobbed lazily over the path. Some of them were so near the palace that he could see a bit of the rooms beyond the mostly shaded windows.

When he had flown over it in bird form, he had found that like the building they were in now, there were vast courtyards and gardens in the Weryn Palace. He had been tempted to land in one of them that had a brightly trickling stream that he could see between the deep, dark trees. But he'd stopped himself at the last moment as electricity had raced through his feathers when he'd dropped down. It almost felt like he was about to shift. But the sensation had been deeper as if some part of him would change forever and never go back to how it had been. He'd avoided the palace after that.

But seeing its darkened entrance now, his heart contracted in his chest. If he truly was Weryn, shouldn't the palace welcome him and open up as it had for Caemorn and

Balthazar, along with the other Immortals? Or did it require something more?

The palace opens for the Immortal only after the Immortal opens himself to the palace, a voice that sounded like King Daemon's whispered in his mind.

His head jerked up as he scanned the crowd for the Vampire King, but Daemon was still in his own palace where the parade would end up that night for the opening ceremonies. Perhaps Ryder had imagined that voice. Or maybe it really was the Vampire King. He didn't know which was the better thought.

"Everything is in order," Demos said, stepping up to him. "Smaller shifters in front, followed by the wolves, then big cats and finally the bears, great apes and others. The bird shifters are scattered throughout like you wanted. You haven't said which form you're going to take, Ryder."

"Not sure yet. Maybe bear so that I make sure all get out before me, or bird so I can oversee everything," Ryder said, still debating the merits of both forms. "Maybe both."

Ryder was pleased to note that the Weryn looked excited to be there. Without Lawson present to dampen down their natural enthusiasm, Ryder saw that his people were just as interested in the human students--and the other Vampires--as everyone else.

There was no denying that there was a buzz of electricity in the air from being around so many powerful Vampires. Some of the excitement was actually suppressed aggression that came from predators not being terribly fond of being so close to one another. But there was also a surprising sense of comraderie. Ryder had felt that it was more pronounced in the Weryn overall, but he was seeing it even with the highly individual Kaly.

Regardless of race or sex, most of the Kaly had silvery-white hair. They wore all black so that their heads appeared to glow in the ghostly light of the monstrous Kaly Palace. None knew what the other Bloodlines were going to bring to the parade, but considering the Kaly were masters of controlling the dead, he fully expected dancing skeletons or something equally macabre. But whatever they were doing, they were doing it together. Vampires were seeing other Vampires as “us”. Or perhaps as “pack.”

That should have pleased Ryder, but it just made him feel uneasy and conspicuous. Were the Weryn the only Bloodline with reservations about this school? Were the Weryn being left behind in history’s dust as the other Bloodlines embraced the future? Were either completely right to be doing what they were doing?

“I should ask what’s with the glum expression, but maybe you already know what I’m about to say,” Demos grunted.

Convinced that Demos was going to tease him about Grayson again, Ryder said, “Grayson is supposed to be ingratiating himself with the other students to find out who might be in the Sect or, at least, working with them. I don’t expect to see much of him tonight.”

And he tried not to be disappointed by this fact, but he was not altogether successful.

Demos frowned and lowered his voice, “No, I wish that was what I was going to say, though, in a way, I’m glad to hear that Grayson will be scarce around you tonight. Natasha convinced Lawson to come to the parade.”

The skin prickled between Ryder’s shoulder blades at that same moment as he felt and smelled their Master behind him. It took all of his will power not to spin around and find out exactly where Lawson was. His heart began to beat faster in his chest.

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

All the saliva in his mouth dried up. He had hoped--no, he had prayed--that Lawson would keep to the Weryn quarters drinking and carousing with the Bloodline, ignoring everything else, before leaving the next day. He had convinced himself that there was little chance for Lawson to even see Grayson, let alone realize the young man's importance. But Lawson was here and...

Grayson is here.

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Ryder's Vampiric senses immediately zeroed in on that now familiar heartbeat of the young man with edges and wounded eyes. He was farther away from Ryder than Lawson, near the central fountain, but still within eyeshot. He was likely mixed in with the crowd though. One more human among the humans that Lawson shouldn't give a damned about.

Ryder zeroed in on the beings surrounding Grayson. The heartbeat near the young man was strange. Slow. Very slow. Steady. Very steady. Not responding to the edge of excitement in the air. This person was very much completely in control of themselves. It had to be an Immortal or a very, very old Vampire. And there was the soft pitter pat of an animal's heartbeat mixed in.

What was going on with Grayson?

Who had he found to keep company with?

Had he gotten himself into trouble already?

A bead of sweat ran down Ryder's left temple. He could not look over his shoulder at where Grayson was, because Lawson was looking at him right now. He knew it. If he looked, Lawson would look, and their Master would know that something was different.

"What's wrong?" Demos lightly touched his arm.

"Grayson. To our right," Ryder muttered.

Demos glanced over casually and his eyebrows rose. “Good gods, he’s with Seeyr. And he has a... a cat with him.”

“A cat?!”

Ryder nearly shot around again, because he thought that Demos meant a Weryn Vampire, once of the big cat shifters. But no, the animal he was hearing was small. Too small. Not even his tiniest cat form was as small as this.

“It’s a... kitten,” Demos explained with a crack of amusement in his voice. “What has your boy been up to? Leave him for two seconds and he’s paling around with Immortals and kittens. Now that sounds like a good story.”

Ryder had been about to object, almost automatically, to Grayson being called his boy, but he stopped himself. Because he realized that he liked Grayson being referred to in this way. As if he was so connected to Grayson that it was something obvious to all. He then remembered he didn’t want everyone to know, because that meant Lawson would know.

“Why did Natasha bring Lawson here?” Ryder muttered.

“You know why. She wants him to cool down and think about what he’s doing,” Demos answered with a whistle of air through his teeth.

“She doesn’t want our traditions upended though.” Ryder frowned.

“No, but she’s not a fool either. Change is coming. Change is here. I think she believes that it’s just a matter of time before we all come around,” Demos answered.

Ryder looked at Demos sharply. “Do you want us to choose our fledglings from the school?”

Demos pursed his lips. “I don’t know. I don’t think we’ve had a chance to consider everything yet.”

“Things are moving fast,” Ryder agreed.

Ryder saw Natasha herself adjusting her own cloak among the other big cat shifters. She smiled and gave a wave. His smile was rather tighter and wave briefer. He was still internally cursing her for convincing a likely belligerent and angry Lawson out for this.

Slowly, Ryder turned to face Lawson. Their Master strode across the parade route, nearly barreling into other Vampires, a scowl on his handsome face. There were bared fangs from the Vampires he would have jostled, but for Vampire-quick reflexes and glares at the broad back. But Lawson ignored them and beelined to Ryder and Demos. Ryder realized how tense both of them became and how they both hid it with preternatural stillness.

You would have me hate him.

Would I? Or does part of you hate him already?

Ryder swallowed. He drew in a deep breath through his nose and slowly relieved it through his mouth, centering himself. By the thunderclouds that had already formed on their Master’s brow, what was coming was not going to be pleasant. Lawson came to a stop before the two of them. He gave a toothy grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes and he pounded both their backs with beefy hands.

“Do we have a float? Maybe for fireworks? Or are the Horys planning on doing that for their act?” Lawson asked with a slight snarl in his voice.

Lightning was in fact crackling behind some clouds that had newly formed above the

city. It was all different colors from gold to purple to blue. And Ryder had to admit that it was both beautiful and impressive. He was certain that the Horys would put on quite a show.

“We’re going to shift in groups as we move all the route,” Ryder explained. “Shift and shift back. It will impress.”

He had already told Lawson this. He kept his tone neutral even as he wanted to snap. He breathed. In through his nose, out through his mouth.

“Why do we need to impress anyone?” Lawson really snarled this time.

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The thought of the Weryn not playing any role in the festivities had been discussed between himself and Demos. But Ryder had vetoed that and he was glad he had. He remembered Christian's icy demeanor towards him already with mostly full participation in the academy. They were on thinner ice than Lawson understood.

"Because being in the parade does not undercut our position regarding how we choose our Children," Ryder again strove to speak neutrally. "Offending Eyros, Kaly and Seeyr is not the point of our sitting out. Let alone angering King Daemon. So we're here. And we're doing this."

This had also been told to Lawson ad nauseum. His voice was sharper than he wanted. Demos' eyes flickered towards him. He couldn't read his Blood Brother's expression though. Was Demos worried that they would start a screaming match that ended in a brawl? And wouldn't that give the other Bloodlines something to talk about even though Weryn routinely settled conflicts that way. But between Master and fledgling such fights were rare and considered serious. Or was Demos hoping that he would stop repressing what he really felt and acted?

"We're like monkeys on display," Lawson still complained, hands on hips, as he stared out moodily at the building crowd.

"Actually, the big apes will come in the back," Demos replied dryly, his silver eyes flickering with anger that he couldn't quite hide.

Lawson finally noticed that neither Ryder nor Demos was in a good mood and he swung his gaze to his two fledglings. He studied them both sourly, but then his face broke into a smile and he patted both their shoulders.

“I’m sorry, boys. I wasn’t thinking how hard this is on you. You’re just trying to keep the peace. You don’t want to be here anymore than I do,” Lawson said.

Did Ryder want to be there? No. He would have rather been sitting down with a decanter of blood and wine, staring into a fire. But what he would have really liked to be doing was having Grayson in his room.

He could well imagine being sprawled on the furs and pillows before the fire with Grayson seated between his legs, the young man’s head resting against his bare chest, only a fur blanket covering them as the fire hissed and snapped. He imagined lazily running his hands through Grayson’s hair and then leaning down to brush his lips across the young man’s left temple. This imagining was so vivid that a sense of unreality stole over Ryder and his body felt strange and distant. Unconsciously, his head turned towards Grayson.

And, of course, Lawson saw where he was looking and turned, too, to see what so entranced him.

For now there wasn’t only Seeyr and this little black kitten by Grayson, but Balthazar and Christian were there too. In fact, Balthazar was gushing over Grayson as he took the tiny black kitten from Grayson’s gentle hands. The Eyros Vampire’s eyes were bright seemingly with tears and he kept patting Grayson’s right shoulder and then his cheek and then half embracing him as if Grayson had performed some great service for him.

Christian was smiling too in a far less cold and distant way than he had when Ryder had met him. He looked almost indulgently at his Master. It was clear that there was great love between them despite Balthazar’s many foibles.

Or is that persona he puts on like a coat to obscure the truth of him?

“I cannot believe the Immortals are lowering themselves by catering to that boy!”  
Lawson scoffed.

Ryder should have felt relieved that Lawson had mistaken his interest in Grayson for interest in the Immortals who surrounded him.

Lawson bumped his shoulder against Ryder’s. “I guess we know who these fledglings are truly for, don’t we?”

“What?” Ryder’s upper lip threatened to writhe back from his teeth.

“It’s obvious that they brought that boy here for one of them! And Balthazar just took a fledgling this year,” Lawson chuckled. “Eager to spread his Bloodline, I see.”

“That’s not...” Ryder bit back the words he was going to say at a warning look from Demos.

“Or Seeyr. Sly old girl. Imagine starving in her own Spire all these millennia! Yet still she smiles!” Lawson’s grin was almost wolfish.

Seeyr’s head turned towards them. There was a bandage around her eyes, or rather where her eyes should have been, so it wasn’t possible that she was physically seeing them. And yet a chill went down Ryder’s spine. Even Lawson quieted and his lips pursed until her gaze seemingly left them and went back to Grayson and Balthazar.

The Eyros Vampire was letting Grayson pet the kitten’s head and seemed to think it was a great honor to do so. Grayson seemed to agree. Or at least, he appeared to like it. There was a smile that would bloom on his face like the sun peeking out from behind clouds. He would try to hide it away again, but then Balthazar would say something charming and Grayson would be practically laughing.

“Tell me that those two didn’t choose humans that were perfect for them? Not for the rest of us. Just them,” Lawson muttered.

“Well, Seeyr does see the future so she would have known that Weryn wouldn’t be accepting any fledglings from the academy,” Demos said evenly.

“Meaning?” Lawson scowled at him.

But it was Ryder who answered, “Meaning that there are no fledglings for us among the humans. We told the king we didn’t want any and she would have already known that.”

Lawson’s scowl deepened. “Yet we’re still in their damned parade. And the two of you took your own good time bringing back one of the students. But we don’t even get consideration?”

Ryder’s back teeth were clenched so hard together that when he opened his mouth to speak his jaw muscles practically creaked, “We can’t have it both ways.”

“But they are!” Lawson exploded.

That had more than Weryn heads turning in their direction. Lawson’s cheeks were flushed an angry, dull red. The vein in his right temple throbbed visibly. His hands were fisted at his sides. Ryder shut his eyes for a moment and he breathed. In through his nose, out through his mouth.

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He was so focused on this that only when Demos shook his arm did he realize the sound of Grayson's heart was very, very near. His eyelids popped open. Grayson was just five feet away. A look of concern was on his face. He had seen Lawson's behavior. He had read Ryder's discomfort. And he had come to help.

That was not something he thought that Grayson did easily or lightly. He knew that much about the young man. He didn't stick his head up. He didn't get involved. Except for very certain people like that man Sam. And now, evidently, him. But there was something a little fragile in Grayson's approach as if wasn't sure what he expected Ryder to do, but he was going to act anyway.

Ryder didn't know whether he wanted to scream, cry or vomit. He did none of these things. Instead he stared at Grayson stupidly.

"Hey, Ryder. Hey, Demos," Grayson said with an easy tip of his head at both Vampires. And then he met Lawson's steely gaze. He didn't back down or back away. Even though Lawson had likely fifty pounds of muscle on him at least and, not to mention, he was a Vampire while Grayson was human. "Who's your friend here?"

"Who am I?" Lawson put one of those meaty hands against his chest. A smile was on his lips as if he couldn't quite believe this boy was interrogating him.

"Yeah. We all know one another. But I don't know you," Grayson stated simply with a challenging stare.

Demos met Ryder's gaze. His Blood Brother, too, looked like he was torn between doing something rash to save Grayson from Lawson's certain wrath or laughing

hysterically at how their best laid plans had just imploded in front of their eyes.

“You do?” Lawson’s gaze flickered to Demos and then Ryder before focusing on Grayson. “Well, you must be the student that these two picked up.”

“Something like that,” Grayson answered.

While Lawson’s arms were crossed over his chest in a defensive pose, Grayson’s were loose at his sides. Ready for whatever was to come, Ryder realized.

Oh, dear gods, he thinks he’s going to need to fight Lawson for me, Ryder thought.

That had him snapping out of the paralysis that had gripped him. He stepped between Lawson and Grayson. He put his hands on Grayson’s upper arms so that he could control where the young man went next.

“Grayson, why don’t we go talk over there?”

“Uhm, okay, but--”

“No, buts. Let’s go.”

Ryder firmly pushed Grayson towards the Weryn Palace, underneath the trees, but hopefully out of sight and earshot. Demos had grabbed Lawson’s arm and kept their Master in place, even though Lawson’s eyes tracked them.

“I thought you were going to mix with the students,” Grayson said firmly even as he relished taking in Grayson’s tall, lithe form.

My boy... mine...

“Yeah, I did. I mean I tracked one already. She wasn’t lying about where she was going though. Ended up saving a cat in a tree.” Grayson smiled at the memory of this and Ryder wished he had been there to see what exactly had caused that smile. Yet then Grayson was focused back on him, eyes sharp. “But forget that. Who is that guy?”

Grayson tipped his head back towards Lawson with an angry press of lips.

“That guy is Demos’ and my... Master,” Ryder answered with a reluctance he could not hide.

He had meant to keep Grayson far away from Lawson, but instead Grayson had charged right over. Yet Grayson’s reaction to Lawson hadn’t been fear, but aggression. And even now his expression didn’t match what Ryder had thought it would be.

Grayson stared at him blankly for long moments before he said, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

And in that moment, Ryder felt more ashamed than he had ever felt though he was not sure why. One should be proud of one’s Master, one’s Sire, one’s Dark Father. But he wasn’t. And now he wished that Lawson and Grayson had never met for far different reasons than he’d had before.

“You’ve made a judgment about him after a few words?” Ryder protested.

“It wasn’t just a few words. It was how you froze up and looked ready to kill him a few times. He can’t be your Master!” Grayson argued.

Ryder swallowed. “He is.”

“But that’s not at all what...” Grayson stopped as he seemed to read something in Ryder’s posture and expression. He chewed his inner cheek. “I thought that Masters were... I don’t know... not that. Loving? Something... I don’t know. Sounds stupid.”

“Lawson is older. He’s one of the Children of a War Vampire... Vampires are not like that now,” Ryder found himself explaining.

Grayson’s forehead bunched. “Yeah, okay, but you told me that the Weryn don’t want things to change. That you want things to be like what you had. But you’re saying that loving Masters aren’t... aren’t what you had... have?”

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Ryder stared at him. That was a good point. He had nothing to answer with. There was the sound of trumpets. Both of them jerked and looked back towards the parade route.

“Looks like it’s staring,” Grayson said softly.

A shudder went through Ryder. Lawson was staring at Grayson with narrowed, silver eyes.

Does your blood run pure, Grayson?

“Yes,” Ryder said just as softly. “We need to get back to our places.”

### THE PARADE

Ryder walked Grayson back to the main parade route. One of those big hands was on his lower back, possessive and protective, the whole time. Grayson was surprised by how much he liked it, how much he actually did feel safe, even though Ryder’s silver eyes flickered every which way, but mostly towards Lawson. His Master--and Grayson wanted to put that in quotes--was looking over at them just as much as Ryder was looking at him. Though Demos and a female Vampire kept Lawson from coming over to them again.

When they reached the main road, Ryder put his hands on top of Grayson’s shoulders. It was something that Grayson would have disliked if anyone else had done it. Too confining. Too potentially controlling. But his body didn’t tense up at all and his mind was perfectly calm. He rather liked the weight of those hands on his

shoulders.

“I want you to go...” Ryder grimaced and his eyes cut to Lawson and then back to him. “Go have fun tonight.”

Grayson’s eyes narrowed. He felt a trace of surprising hurt. But Ryder’s hands on him told Grayson this was not a rejection of him. So it had to be something else. “But not with you?”

Ryder winced. “It’s not... safe.”

“Why?” Alarm caused him to straighten. “What’s wrong? Are you in trouble? With your--your Master? Because I’m pretty sure we can take him.”

At that last half-joking statement, Ryder let out a brief laugh, but then shook his head. “If only it were that easy.”

“So why isn’t it?”

Ryder’s gaze lowered. “There is politics at work here with the Weryn... Lawson won’t understand what I’m trying to do.”

“So he wants something different than you do?” Grayson’s forehead furrowed.

“No... yes.”

He smiled despite himself. “That makes things infinitely clearer.”

The right side of Ryder’s mouth curled upwards. “Doesn’t it?” He drew in a deep breath and let it out. “Lawson hates us even being here. Seeing me hanging around with a student--”

“Not a student. A fake student,” Grayson corrected.

“Yes, but he doesn’t know that and we’re not going to tell him.” Ryder’s gaze caught his and held it. There was a bone deep seriousness to his look and tone.

Grayson wondered why they weren’t going to tell Lawson, not that he wanted anyone more to know about him than already did, but it was curious that, of all people, Ryder didn’t want his Master to know about Grayson and the Sect. But he had a feeling that there was a ton of things here that he couldn’t see like icebergs.

“Okay,” Grayson said.

And his instinct not to fight this now proved the right thing as Ryder’s large, broad shoulders relaxed and he looked as if a weight had been lifted from him. “Good. It’s just for tonight. Lawson will be returning to our territory tomorrow. So we won’t have to worry about him.”

Again, that urge to ask what exactly they had to worry about raised its ugly head, but he bit his inner cheek. There would be time when Lawson was gone to figure out what was going on here.

If I want to do that. I mean what do I care if Ryder has issues with his Master? It doesn’t concern me. It’s safer not to get involved.

And yet though he told himself this, he maybe even believed it to be true, some part of Grayson rebelled at it.

It’s safer to be alone. What Seeyr was saying about belonging can’t be true. It doesn’t even make any sense. I wasn’t supposed to be here.

Yet, again, Grayson didn’t brush off Ryder’s hands and take a few steps back and tell

him he didn't give a shit. He stayed where he was.

And as if his mouth had a mind of its own said, "If you need me, I'll be nearby."

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What the Hell am I saying? What am I doing?

Ryder blinked and then smiled. It lit up his bearded face and crinkles formed by the sides of his eyes. “Thanks, I’ll do that. Just not for this.”

But this is the only thing you’ve gone up against that you’re not sure you can defeat.

Grayson though only said out loud, “Sounds like a plan. I see some of my roommates. I guess I’ll head over there.”

Eiji and Mairead were standing on the opposite side of the road. The silver trumpets blew again indicating that it was yet closer to the time of the parade, perhaps moments away.

“Good. We will meet up tomorrow and confer,” Ryder suggested.

Grayson nodded. Only then did Ryder’s hands slide seemingly unwillingly from his shoulders and fall to Ryder’s sides like dead birds.

“Uhm, one question before I go,” Grayson said, his lips twitching.

“Yes?” Ryder looked like he wanted the conversation to continue as well.

“Your cloak... you aren’t wearing a shirt under that, are you?” Grayson asked.

“No. Not pants either.” Ryder grinned at him.

Grayson let out a caw of laughter and shook his head. He waved to Ryder as he headed over to Eiji and Mairead who were both looking curiously at him and Ryder. Almost as curiously as Lawson was. He jogged over to his roommates who greeted him warmly. Well, Eiji greeted him warmly while Mairead began a soft interrogation.

“You’re with the Weryn again?” Mairead clucked.

“His name is Ryder. Not the Weryn,” Grayson corrected. He wondered if he should have even said that much. But he doubted he could stop her from finding out what she wanted to know. “He and Demos were the ones who brought me in.”

He hoped that this would be enough to satisfy her. She nodded.

“You shouldn’t waste your time on him though,” Mairead warned.

“Ah, why?” He asked, even though he already guessed.

“Because they aren’t taking fledglings from this class. Made a big stink about it,” Mairead explained. Her information was good. “And, even if they were to change their minds, they’re in the dog house. Not worth looking at.”

“I see,” Grayson said, seeing quite well what she valued.

“You don’t want to taint yourself by association,” Mairead continued.

“Then maybe you don’t want to hang out with me either?” Grayson asked. “You, too, might be tainted by association.”

His voice was cool.

“No, I’m not worried. Just giving some advice,” she said with a shrug.

Eiji's dark eyes twinkled. "She saw you with Seejr and Balthazar. She likes the company you keep."

"Ach, Goda-sama, you ratted me out!" But Mairead didn't look all that upset. "I'm just saying the Weryn are in a complicated position. You have options. It's clear you have loads of options, even if you aren't going to interviews just yet." Her lips puckered as she spoke of Amara's earlier actions. "You don't want to mess it up."

"I'm not worried about that." Grayson glanced back over to where the Weryn were assembling.

Ryder was looking over the other cloaked Vampires with an almost paternal air, making sure that they were all settled. In contrast, Lawson glowered. He wasn't wearing a cloak, Grayson realized. He wasn't part of the parade. He was just there to what? Give Ryder a hard time? Lawson's gaze was on him again. Grayson stared back steadily.

"I do not think that Vampire likes you," Eiji murmured, barely moving his lips.

"The feeling's mutual," Grayson said.

"He reminds me of an old associate who would drink too much and let his temper lead him. He only had a gun. A Vampire has other weapons," Eiji continued speaking in that low voice that Grayson didn't even think Mairead heard. "Be careful."

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“I will. Thanks,” Grayson answered even as all he wanted to do was glare right back at Lawson.

He’ll be gone tomorrow. Just forget about him. Don’t draw attention. Keep your head down.

Voices were suddenly lifted in song. It came from Vampires dressed in gold and white. They filtered forward away from a palace, though still dark, glittered with the same ethereal light that they did. The heavenly sound of their voices lifted in a single note, at first, was split apart by the thumping of drums. The sound had Grayson standing straighter and his heart pumping.

The Syrin Vampires--for that’s who it had to be--were capable of driving humans mad or making them fall in love or causing them to go to war or whatever it was the Syrin wanted. That want was threaded through their beautiful voices and could cause riots or for people to fall asleep. This time it invigorated and caused Grayson to feel pride and awe at simply being there.

As they marched forward, some of the Syrin danced. Their dancing wasn’t the usual shimmy-shake, but flips--forward and back--lifts, leaps, pyramids of individuals that formed and broke apart with the Vampires seeming so light that it was as if they were floating in the air. Gold powder slashed their cheeks and sparkled on their lips. They looked like music themselves. Glorious, sun-drenched, vibrant music. A young Asian man with almost too beautiful features was at the front of this group.

Though Grayson hadn’t been a big fan of his music, he recognized the wildly popular kpop artist, who evidently also happened to be a Vampire. There were screams of

delight and recognition. Some of the humans jumped up and down and pointed at the famous singer, evidently, not knowing until now what his true identity was. The artist took it in stride. He threw kisses to the crowd even as he seemed to sing his heart out.

Grayson couldn't help the tapping of his foot and the clapping of his hands. The drumbeat pulsed up from the ground and filled his body with wild vibrations. His reaction was muted compared to others. He saw students start to dance by themselves, with each other, and in groups. There was a sort of ecstasy to it. Grayson though felt unnerved. He was out of control and he didn't like it. He shook his head to try and clear it.

"You don't trust this happiness?" Eiji asked, but it was more a statement.

"I don't like other people setting the tune," Grayson answered.

He noted that the Japanese man was bobbing his head and smiling benevolently, but wasn't quite in time to the music. He was close, but not quite. He was faking being moved by it. Grayson's eyes widened.

"You don't like people setting the tune either," Grayson murmured.

"Perhaps I am a little set in my ways," Eiji answered, but continued to smile and bob his head so that no one but Grayson knew the difference.

Mairead was grinning and bouncing in place. Her green eyes were bright and there were spots of color on her freckled cheeks. "Isn't this great? Imagine having this power over people!"

Grayson strove not to frown. After all, he was pretending he wanted to be a Vampire, and if one wanted to be a Vampire surely one wanted power as well as immortality and wealth. So he gave a nod and said nothing.

Balthazar's voice was suddenly booming, but not in the air, in his mind. In everyone's mind. Grayson saw his fellow students jerk in surprise as they too heard the Immortal speaking.

Welcome, welcome, everyone! Balthazar greeted them. For those who do not recognize me, I am one of two headmasters of this academy. I am the Immortal Eyros, though some call me Balthazar. Being able to speak mind to mind certainly ensures you'll hear me clearly. And I'll even know if you are really enjoying yourselves.

Grayson's head jerked up as he realized that Balthazar was levitating directly over the fountain. Meffy was perched on his left shoulder, another bit of darkness. Balthazar was dressed in a fashionable dark suit with a longer coat that came to his knees. A blood red tie was paired with a rose of the same color in his buttonhole. His hands were drawn together almost as if in prayer underneath his chin, but a grin was upon his lips.

Those lovely voices you hear are coming out of Syrin Vampire throats, Balthazar continued, Ever thought about the power of music? It can move us to tears or sadness or joy. Cause the soul to soar or fall. Music is the Syrin's gift. If you catch a Syrin's eye the idea of "our song" will take on the most intimate of meanings.

There was startled laughter in the crowd as Balthazar waggled his eyebrows. Lightning--red, yellow, blue and purple--radiated inwards across the sky like the spokes of a wheel with Balthazar as the center.

Grayson though turned his head to look back at Ryder. He wondered what Ryder felt about all of this. He had been pretty skeptical about this parade, but so far it was pretty cool. Grayson's cheeks heated as he realized that Ryder was looking at him. Quickly, the Vampire looked down but then back up again with an almost sheepish smile as if he couldn't quite help himself from checking in on Grayson. Grayson

smiled back.

But let's meet our next Bloodline. Balthazar rubbed his hands together. These are being introduced in no particular order, though this happens to be one of my favorites as it is ruled over by my good friend, Fiona, please welcome the Wyvern!

The area around the fountain had been empty of people, but suddenly in a blink of an eye, over a dozen Vampires appeared, perched on the fountain's edge. Balancing on the top of the fountain's main statue stood a beautiful black woman. She had long hair in elaborate braids that fell to her mid-back and wore what looked like a golden corset over a skin tight black, bodysuit. Her head was thrown back. One arm was outstretched.

She looked like a gorgeous ornament on top of that fountain. Then in a flash, she was gone. They all were, but then they reappeared in another formation, that of a star again surrounding the fountain. They disappeared again and formed a square. They disappeared again then reformed a triangle. The disappearances and reappearances became so quick that they seemed to flicker in and out of existence like an old black and white movie. The crowd roared and clapped in appreciation as they reappeared this time seemingly for good. The woman in the golden corset bowed, her black skin gleaming with sweat from exertion, and then gestured to her people who took their bows. She clapped for them and waved a hand in the air as her people once more disappeared then reappeared farther along the parade route.

Wyvern! Balthazar announced with a flourish of his left hand. Want to truly ghost someone? Theirs is the power to do that, Balthazar chuckled. Or rob banks. Or enter places where you're not supposed to be. Like museums or houses of the rich and famous... Now, now, I'm not advocating breaking the law. Just as a Wyvern, it's so much easier to do.

"Do you suppose there are Vampire thieves?" Grayson asked Eiji.

“Of course. It is not as if most of them can get real jobs. They are limited in that way. While the older ones may have wealth and connections, the younger ones would have to earn their own way,” Eiji said. “Vampires are made to be criminals. Highly successful ones.”

For a moment, Grayson remembered using his own powers to try and lift wallets from purses or pockets. He’d just have to walk past a person--close, but not actually touch them--and boost the wallets out of their semi-secure locations and into his hands. It hadn’t been as easy as he’d hoped. He had to see the wallet for one thing in order to lift it. When the wallet bulged in a back pocket that was best, but that also meant when he moved it with his gift that the person was more likely to feel the sensation of it moving against their body. So he found he had to distract them. A shoulder to their chest. An accidental knock of their arm. Asking if they had lost a scarf or a glove or something that would distract them. Those had often worked.

He remembered how the money would sometimes still be warm from their body heat. He’d only taken the cash as he couldn’t risk being seen using a credit card that could be traced. For a while it had been brilliant. He’d had tons of cash so much that he wanted to share it with Sam. But when his friend had seen it, he’d gone white and crushed the cash back into Grayson’s hands.

“No, no, Sam, this is for you,” Grayson had said with a smile as he’d tried to give the cash over again.

“No, kid, don’t flash that kind of green around. Not even to me,” Sam had said, eyes darting all over to see if anyone was around.

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“But why? Look, I took it from some tourists and--”

“How many tourists? That’s a lot of cash. So you must be good at it,” Sam muttered.

He wasn’t exactly good at it. Well, not in the traditional sense that Sam thought. But he was getting good at using his powers to get a little something he wanted.

“I’m all right.” Grayson shrugged.

But he couldn’t help the proud smile on his face. His powers had never been good for him, never helped him, had destroyed his life, but now, maybe they could give him a good meal, a warm bed and even a shower with some new clothes. What could be wrong with that?

“You’re going to attract attention.” Sam’s eyes, rheumy even then, but somehow sharp that day fixed on him. “Kid, there are territories here. You know that. You start edging in on those territories, you start being good on someone else’s turf, and it’ll be noticed.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be discreet,” Grayson assured him.

Except of course, Same had been right and he had been wrong.

Who shall be next? Balthazar asked. One of his hands swept outwards as if it were a needle on a compass. It hesitated, moved back and forth, then settled. On Ryder. Welcome our brothers and sisters of the claw and wing and every other appendage. Welcome to the Wyvern Bloodline!

Grayson's head shot towards Ryder and the other cloaked figures. He felt the excitement of the crowd build. While Syrin and Wyvern had been spectacular, who didn't have a little urge to be able to shift into an animal form?

The Weryn marched out from their palace. They shouted "hoo!" and then "ha!" Their hands swung at their sides. They thumped their chests as they cried out. The crowd leaned forward, trying to get a closer look, when the first line of Weryn seemed to disappear. Their cloaks fell to the ground and out of them stepped not Vampires, but gorgeous red, white and black foxes with fur so soft and inviting even Grayson wished he could pat some fuzzy heads. Awwws and ohhhs followed.

The foxes were followed by bucks. Beautiful, tall and graceful creatures with racks of horns that were works of art on their own. There were gasps. Wolves then filtered among them, not looking at these animals as prey, but as companions. Birds burst out from among the group and rose up in the air, performing elaborate flying formations in the air before swooping down just above the crowd. There were cries of shock and joy.

People clapped wildly as the big cats began to arrive. Lions, tigers, pumas, panthers, lynxes and more. They sauntered down the road with their feline grace with silver eyes, looking unimpressed, and yet very impressive.

Grayson lifted his eyes to find Ryder. What form would he take? Grayson had already seen his bird and bear form, but he was sure there were others. But he couldn't see the Weryn Vampire through the crowd. He'd lost track of him and Grayson's heart inexplicably fell into his feet.

A hand closed around his right wrist and a voice crawled into his right ear. "Grayson, right? We need to talk."

Grayson turned his head and looked into Lawson's predatory eyes.

## MEASLY HUMAN

Grayson looked down at the hand around his wrist. Two things seemed to happen at once. His stomach curdled in that familiar way when a more powerful person wanted to control him or hurt him. But there was also that spurt of adrenaline, a feeling of almost excitement, at getting to use his powers and attack. But could he attack here? This was Ryder's Master after all.

Ryder...

A glance at the Weryn Vampires showed that they had already rounded the fountain, continuing on with the show. Ryder had no idea that Lawson was doing this.

Clever, sneaky bastard.

But he wasn't alone here even without Ryder. He was surrounded by people, including his roommates. Eiji's gaze cut down to Lawson's grip on Grayson's wrist and the old man sidled away, disappearing into the crowd, taking Mairead with him. Grayson felt a wave of despair as they left him to face Lawson alone. But then he stuffed that feeling down and straightened up.

So I'm alone. Always alone. So much for belonging. But it doesn't matter. I can take care of myself.

He slowly lifted his eyes to Lawson's, hiding everything he felt. He kept his gaze cool and neutral.

"I'm going to watch the parade," Grayson said and turned his head back towards the road though he was keenly aware of Lawson's hold on his tightening.

"Are you a child that wishes to see a parade?" Lawson mocked.

“If you want to talk to me, you do it here,” Grayson stated firmly.

He had a mental hand on his powers. He wondered if he would have to use them. And if he did what would happen? He drew in a breath and waited.

“You want to be a Vampire?” Lawson’s voice was soft, but Grayson’s alertness was so high that he could hear him clearly despite the roar of the crowd.

“I’m a student at the academy, aren’t I?” Grayson asked, not lying exactly but letting Lawson draw his own conclusions. Evidently, Ryder hadn’t thought to take Lawson into their secrets so he wasn’t going to either.

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“If that’s what you want then being around Ryder is not in your best interests,” Lawson said.

Now let me introduce the Helm Bloodline! Balthazar’s voice boomed in Grayson’s mind.

But the street remained empty or so it seemed. People leaned out from the sides of the road to see the Vampires who must have missed their cue.

Helm? Helm? Are you there? Or are you... invisible! Balthazar laughed.

The crowd gasped as a line of Vampires suddenly appeared directly in front of them out of nothing. They wore pale gray pants with nearly sheer tops, even the men. They flipped back effortlessly from the crowd, disappearing in mid flip, before reappearing back down on the ground, arms outstretched.

They take the meaning of the phrase ‘now you see them, now you don’t’ to a whole new level! Balthazar enthused. And you never do know where they are. Think you’re alone? Think you’re confessing your secrets to the moon and the stars? Better check every inch of your room, because it might not be true.

Suddenly, the Helm Vampires disappeared again. Grayson felt someone tap his shoulder. He turned to see a blonde-haired Helm Vampire appear in an instant, wink at him, and then disappear again.

The Helm used to have it easy when we snuck into people’s rooms to catch a bite to eat, Balthazar said. There were teasing “boos” at his bad joke. What?! It’s true!

Throughout this display, Grayson felt Lawson's eyes on him. He could feel his breath against his throat. There was the faint reek of whisky and blood. Definitely blood. He'd smelled it enough that night to recognize it now. A chill ran down his spine. What did this conversation look like to others? Eiji had sensed danger and flown. But what about the others? Were they even looking? He didn't see Seeyr. Didn't she see the future? Or maybe not everything. And maybe not things she considered important like his fate.

Balthazar was floating above the fountain, doing his commentary thing. He wondered vaguely how he was doing that. But the Eyros Vampire had his hands full, too full to notice what was happening with Grayson. And if Daemon--the literal Vampire King--gave a damn about what Lawson was doing, he wasn't apparently there. Not yet.

"I know that Weryn isn't taking fledglings this year," Grayson finally said.

Was that what the Vampire was worried about? That Grayson thought he could get Ryder to turn him?

Lawson shook his arm sharply. "Or any year!"

Yeah, that was it. The desperation lacing Lawson's voice was clear. He feared that Ryder would decide to break "tradition" and take a fledgling from this class of the academy. That wasn't what was going on between him and Ryder. But it looked that way to everyone not in the know. It clearly looked that way to Lawson. He considered telling him that it wasn't what he thought.

But then Lawson spoke again, "We won't be taking the leavings of any Eyros or Kaly or Seeyr."

"Right," Grayson answered neutrally even as he thought the diss on these other Bloodlines sounded ignorant to the extreme, especially considering his experience

with some of them.

Balthazar was introducing another Bloodline. This time it was the Mirryr Bloodline. Even if Grayson hadn't known what their power was, he would have now. For every single one of the dozen Vampires looked exactly the same. They were a beautiful Indian woman in dark red colored pants and a cropped shirt edged with gold and flowers. A pink cloth covered their dark hair and blew in the wind. A golden ornament was looped around head and hung from her hair.

She--they--were beautiful, graceful, bewitching. And they moved as one. They danced down the street, hands making intricate patterns in their air, hips gliding right and left and right again, and feet hardly touching the ground.

They spread out and, like the Helm, faced individuals in the crowd. One faced a woman to Grayson's right. She let out a gasp of shock and delight, one hand lifting to her lips, as the Mirryr Vampire looked just like her. The Mirryr Vampire mimicked her movements.

"How are you doing that?" the student asked.

"How are you doing that?" the Mirryr Vampire repeated perfectly in the same tone and pitch.

"Oh, my God!" the student laughed.

The Mirryr Vampire did the same, but this time there was less of a delay between the subject and the clone. The student shook her head in amazement. This time there was no delay with the Mirryr Vampire not just looking like the student and sounding like her, but anticipating what she would do and say. The student's eyes widened, as did the Mirryr's. It was eerie and cool at the same time.

But it wasn't enough to distract Lawson from his task.

"You act like you don't believe me. But I'm in charge of the Weryn. I make the rules," Lawson told him.

Yet you waited to scuttle over here when Ryder was distracted. Yeah, sure you're in charge, Grayson thought with disdain.

"Okay." Grayson shrugged.

"So sniffing around Ryder isn't going to get you what you want," Lawson told him.

"So you say."

"I command and Ryder obeys!" Lawson snarled.

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And that is the biggest lie you've said tonight.

"Then why are you here? Talking to me?" Grayson asked.

Lawson reached up and grasped Grayson's chin, turning it towards him. The urge to slug the man was strong, but Grayson held his temper. Lawson wasn't an ugly man. He had a raw, sort of animal magnetism that Grayson bet some loved. There was a sense of wildness about him, but it was the wildness of something not quite right about him. It was violence. Unreasoning violence just simmering beneath the surface.

"Because you have a pretty face and wounded eyes," Lawson said softly. "And Ryder turns into a knight-in-shining-armor for people like you."

"But you're in charge. You're in command of the Weryn," Grayson said quietly.

"That's right." That smile on Lawson's lips dimmed.

"So what you're telling me is that your control, your command, can be broken by a pretty face and wounded eyes?" Grayson challenged, not liking that description of himself at all. He wasn't some meek flower. He wasn't a fragile stem.

That smile widened, showing teeth that looked abnormally sharp. They were accentuated by the flash of multi-colored lightning above them and the boom of thunder. The ground shook. People nearly lost their footing. There was more lightning. More thunder. The lights that lined that road dimmed and then winked out so only the lightning lit the night.

Everyone, can you smell the ozone in the air? Can you feel the very earth beneath you shaking? Now that is the power of nature focused and harnessed and made pure! Balthazar announced as the darkness descended once more.

He saw flashes of Lawson's face as the lightning erupted and dimmed. The bones seemed to be shifting underneath the skin, turning Lawson into someone, not something, else. But the next flash showed them back in place.

This is the power of the Horys Bloodline! They rival the Thunder God of old! Hell, maybe Thor was a Horys! Balthazar laughed.

And in that moment a ball of lightning appeared in the hand of a native American man, one of the indigenous people of North America. He had long dark hair and chiseled features. A strong jaw and a powerful nose. The lightning showed he wore a dark purple shirt that was open to the top of his black tight pants. There were leather chords around his wrists and a pendant hung against his heavily muscled chest.

He raised that lightning filled hand to the sky and a bolt of brilliant light streamed up to the clouds. There was a massive crackle and thrum! Lightning then came down from the sky towards them. The hair on the back of Grayson's neck stood on end, but not from Lawson. The lightning was caught by dozens of Horys Vampire hands. People yelled in excitement, but that was almost drawn out by the boom of thunder.

Wind rushed among them all and the scent of rain was heavy in the air. People turned their faces up towards the sky as a few cool drops came down and dotted their skin. Then the Horys Vampires were moving, sending lightning up and then catching it every few feet. But Grayson was focused on Lawson despite the show.

"I don't want people getting the wrong idea. Ryder is loyal to me. He knows our ways. No one--no king or measly human--is going to change that." Lawson patted Grayson's cheek. "Just so we're clear."

“We’re clear.”

“Good.”

Grayson should have let it go. If he acted cowed now, Lawson would likely give him another smirk and walk away. Point made. And there would be another person in the world who just believed he was a weak boy that they could threaten with no consequences. The fact that Lawson was a Vampire gave him more of an edge than the others Grayson had disavowed of that belief, but he was still a bully, looking to punch down, exert his authority.

And Grayson was sick of Vampires pushing him around.

“What about what Ryder wants?” Grayson challenged.

There was another clap of thunder. So loud that it was deafening and he wasn’t sure if Lawson had heard him except the hand on his wrist, which had been loosening, now it curled tight again. “You think he wants you?”

The voice held a lilt of laughter as if such a thought was ridiculous!

Grayson slowly smiled. “Actually, you think he does. All this talk of control and command and loyalty. Nobody who really believes they’re in charge says that kind of stuff. Not to some measly human. No matter how pretty or wounded their eyes may be.”

Lawson scowled as lightning cut the sky in two. “You’re walking a dangerous line here, Grayson.”

“Am I?”

Lawson was a little taller than him. Not much. An inch or so. Not Ryder's mammoth height. He was broader, too. Not as big as Demos. But he was a big man. And someone as lithe, though muscular, as Grayson shouldn't have really been that big of a threat to him. And, again, being a Vampire made him arrogant. That was just fine. Grayson didn't mind that.

"You waited until Ryder was out of sight to come to me. You're acting friendly in case anyone glances our way. You aren't so sure of yourself even with this measly human," Grayson pointed out.

"You think you're special because some Eyros idiot chose your application?" Lawson asked, eyes glowing.

There were veins on the sides of his nose that were darker than the others and reddened his skin, ruddying it in a way. He really did look like he was an alcoholic, but Grayson was pretty sure that Vampires couldn't be.

"You're afraid that Ryder thinks I'm special," Grayson pushed. "You're afraid that he is slipping the leash that you have on him. But if there ever was a leash, it's not there anymore. You're not in charge. You're not in control. You're about to lose everything and you know it."

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Lawson moved as fast as the lightning. One of his burly hands fastened onto Grayson's throat. The other squeezed his wrist until the bones rubbed together. The pain though was good. It focused Grayson. Anger always made the power come. And the match was lit and the fire was burning bright.

"You little shit! You think you can speak to me--what? What the Hell?" Lawson's voice went from a snarl to a wail.

Lawson's eyes went huge. The lightning and thunder was keeping everyone's attention. They didn't see Lawson's hands moving of their own accord off of him, releasing him. Grayson strove not to show his relief to have his throat and hand free.

Let's see how he likes it, Grayson thought.

He forced Lawson's hands around his own throat and made them squeeze. He'd never used someone's own body against them before. But a hand was like a rock. An arm was like a board. He had a feeling that if he really tried, he could use the air alone to do this. It was a ticklish thought at the back of his mind or the tip of his tongue. He could almost know how to do it. Almost remember...

"What--what are you?" Lawson's eyes were bugged out of his head.

You may wonder how I, Eyros, can be floating here in space. Is there some power I haven't told you the Eyros have? Balthazar joked, but Grayson thought his eyes cut to them though the street lamps were only slowly coming back on. But no! This is the power of telekinesis. This is the power of the Ashyr Bloodline!

“What the fuck are you?” Lawson gasped out, his face purpling.

And that was when the lights came back on and Grayson saw an Ashyr Vampire dressed in deep green, holding one hand up towards Balthazar, keeping the Eyros Vampire in the air, floating, but her gaze was on him. She saw what he was doing.

She knew what he was doing.

She stared at him, but then her view was cut off as more Ashyr Vampires emerged from the crowd and blocked him from her. They levitated themselves, each other, sent objects spinning through the air, made the water leave the fountain and form water balloons--without the balloons--that they playfully splashed the crowd with. That was all he saw as he brought them into the trees.

“What--what are you?” Lawson asked for the third time.

“Someone you shouldn’t have messed with,” Mairead laughed.

Her voice came from behind him... as did the growl of a bear.

Ryder!

And then a panther appeared at Grayson’s side, teeth bared at Lawson.

Demos!

“I’m sorry it took so long for us to return, Grayson,” Eiji said softly. “It looked like help beyond what we could offer was needed.”

“You didn’t just leave,” Grayson said, not intending to say the words.

Mairead snorted. “No, silly! We wouldn’t leave you with that bully! I wanted to punch his lights out but Eiji said--”

“That it was best to have other people with certain skills handle it,” Eiji finished for her. “Humans are not very good against Vampires.”

“I don’t know about that. Grayson seems to have things in hand,” Mairead said with a frown clouding her face.

Grayson closed his eyes and felt a welling of pain and joy and hope. Had Seeyr been right? Had he found a place to belong? That was such a foolish thought. Yet he had it.

The bear--Ryder--lumbered around his side and roared at Lawson. His big body rested against Grayson’s side protectively. People shot around, all turning to look. Grayson released his hold on Lawson. The Weryn Vampire coughed and touched his throat but then drew down his hands as if they burned his skin. He was likely afraid that Grayson would cause them to strangle him again.

How many people saw that other than the Ashyr Vampire? Or more like, how many people saw and understood what I was doing?

Yet he didn’t regret it.

Not one damned bit.

Lawson’s gaze though was not on him, but flickering between Ryder and Demos in their animal forms. The panther growled. The bear started to get up on his hind legs making him stand over eight feet tall and almost as wide.

Lawson’s nostrils flared. His skin was the color of day-old cream. Those prominent veins looked like track marks in his skin. He breathed heavily. Betrayal was stamped

across his features.

They didn't betray you, you bastard. You betrayed them, Grayson thought.

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Yes, he did, a voice said, dark and deep and somehow familiar. And you did well.

Grayson's head shot towards the trees behind them. That was where the mind voice had come from, not from the opposite direction where Balthazar still hung in the air like some huge ornament. For a moment, Grayson thought he saw two glowing red eyes disappear from sight, but he wasn't sure if they were real.

Is everything all right over there? It was Balthazar's voice this time.

Grayson looked back. He met the Eyros Vampire's eyes.

You knew what he was doing, Grayson realized.

Of course, Balthazar answered, narrowing the thought just to him, he understood.

And you were... watching?

We didn't leave you, Grayson, Balthazar said gently. You're not alone.

Grayson blinked. Suddenly, hot tears filled his eyes. He could not cry in front of everyone. This was ridiculous! He was fine on his own! He didn't need anyone!

It's not about need. It's something deeper than that, Balthazar said. Now... shall we go on? Or...

Grayson jerked his head up. You're letting me decide if the parade goes on?

The crowd was shifting uncomfortably. People were murmuring to each other. They were also looking over at him and the strange tableau they must have made. He looked up at the bear who was gazing down at him. If this went badly it would reflect on the Weryn. It was in his hands to decide. Lawson had struck first. He lightly brushed his fingers through fur that was terribly soft.

Don't stop the show, Grayson said. Don't stop it for Lawson. He's not that important.

Balthazar grinned and flung his arms wide. And see what having a Weryn friend or two can do for you! I wonder if they'll all let us pet them!

The crowd started laughing, unsure what was happening, but suddenly--inexplicably--losing interest in them.

The Eyros power at work, Grayson realized.

But of course! Balthazar laughed.

A lioness stalked over to them. Her eyes were shadowed. She was looking at Lawson as if he had broken her heart. Lawson's jaw worked as if he might spit out some words, but he didn't. He turned on his heel and stalked away. The lioness gave Ryder and Demos a final look before loping off after him.

It was only then that Ryder and Demos shifted out of their animal forms and into their Vampire ones. Ryder gently cupped Grayson's jaw, turning his head right and left at the bruises that Lawson must have made. He gently caught Grayson's injured hand too.

"You're not all right," Ryder's voice sounded thick with pain.

"I'm fine," Grayson said, and tried to put meaning into those words.

“I wasn’t here,” Ryder whispered. “I wasn’t here and he--”

“Doesn’t matter. He’ll be gone tomorrow and I’m fine,” Grayson repeated. He had, after all, allowed the painful grip to last as long as it had to fuel his fire, which was now surprisingly banked but ready to burst to life if he needed it.

“He’s leaving tomorrow,” Demos said with a silent snarl as if still in his sleek panther form.

“He’s leaving tonight,” Ryder growled.

“No,” Grayson said and held onto Ryder’s hands. “Don’t run after him. Don’t ruin this night because of him. He’s not worth it.”

“He hurt you and--”

“He hurt himself. You’ve got to believe me that I really am fine,” Grayson said, even as his throat was sore.

“You don’t want to be alone. No, you shouldn’t be. I can’t leave you again while he’s still here,” Ryder said, misunderstanding Grayson’s desire for him to stay as a desire to be kept safe.

Grayson let out a breath. If it kept Ryder here and Demos out of trouble for a while that was good. They needed cooler heads when they dealt with Lawson. He urged the two of them to join Eiji and Mairead, who were desperately pretending not to listen to every word, but they had earned that. They hadn’t really left. And, more importantly, they’d come back.

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“Let’s watch the rest of this parade,” Grayson said. “It’s already been quite a show.”

### THE FINAL BLOODLINES

Ryder’s eyes slid down to Grayson’s beautiful face, which was illuminated by the silvery-white street lamps. The young man was determinedly looking at the parade route and not at him or even Demos. Was the young man angry, hurt or perhaps afraid of the Weryn now?

Who would blame him?

The bruises on Grayson’s throat and wrist were dark and painful looking. They were like a chain around those delicate parts. The soft skin bloomed with purples, blues and blacks. Unlike a Vampire’s wounds, a human’s could not be cured with just a sip of blood. Grayson would touch his bruises and wince a little, but he was smiling and seemingly alert to everything going on. Not alert as in alarmed, but alert as in interested and excited.

“Grayson, I am truly sorry for Lawson’s actions,” Ryder said again, knowing that words could never be enough to erase what had happened even though the young man had handled himself very well.

Grayson had given far more than he’d gotten, and, the truth was, Ryder wondered who exactly they had been saving when they charged over to Grayson and Lawson. Yet the guilt still burned him. Grayson hadn’t known he needed to protect himself against Lawson. Ryder had. But he hadn’t warned Grayson. He hadn’t insisted on being by his side. King Daemon had practically given him a neon warning sign and

he'd just... ignored it.

No, I underestimated how low Lawson would go. I thought that Lawson might only take advantage of an opening where they were left alone together. Not that he would seek Grayson out. My mistake...

Grayson looked over at him, but then quickly went back to staring at the parade route. He was flushed. Ryder thought that was better than pale. But perhaps it was because he was feeling ill. Ryder wanted to fix this. How could he fix this? Why had he ever left Grayson alone? Even for one moment?

"You're not responsible for him," Grayson said. "I'm more worried about what he's going to do to you two."

"Us?" Demos' eyebrows lifted. "You're worried about us?"

"I saw how he was with you and Ryder earlier," Grayson answered, lips flattening into a thin line.

Ryder tried to remember if Lawson had been anything different than he ever was when he was upset. Not really. Ryder's concern had been Grayson. But Grayson's concern had been him. Them.

"Aye, he's a bit much right now, in general, because of the situation," Demos said evenly. "He feels control slipping from him."

"You're downplaying it. He's a bully. A creep. The type that has a short fuse and is just waiting to explode onto people near him. Shrapnel everywhere," Grayson answered, summing up Lawson so quickly and clearly that Ryder felt foolish.

Demos met Ryder's eyes then and there was a touch of "I told you so" in them. No

one else would say anything against Lawson in their Bloodline, let alone their House. And he normally didn't care what other Vampires thought, not that they ever spoke to him about his Master. But here was Grayson laying bare what he and Demos had not even said to one another.

"You sound like you have some experience with people like that," Ryder said, eyes shadowed.

"On the street you learn to put people into boxes to keep yourself safe. We like to think we're different, singular, and stuff, but there are types," Grayson said with a shrug. "Even if you're wrong, and someone isn't the bad thing you think, it's safer to make that kind of the mistake than the other."

On the street... Ryder found himself grinding his teeth.

Grayson was beautiful, and though he was so tough, there was a vulnerability to him. Something about those wounded eyes that said he had once known life as sweet and still held onto that. He hadn't become hard and all sharp edges. In a way, his gift might have spared him that, because he could defend himself where others couldn't.

"Lawson is a type, huh?" Demos asked lightly. "Yeah, he is at that."

"Is Lawson your Master, too, Demos?" Grayson asked, not looking at Demos either.

Could he not bear to look upon them? Ryder felt the urge to vomit paired with the desire to go after Lawson and pummel him into next week.

"I think of him as the one who turned me, not my Master," Demos said.

Grayson blanched as he glanced at Demos. "Oh, God. I'm sorry I didn't think when I said--"

“You’re thinking as a Black man calling anyone ‘my master’ is offensive no matter what the context?” Demos guessed with a thin smile. “There’s something to that. But no, that’s not why I don’t think of Lawson specifically that way.”

Grayson’s shoulders relaxed though he looked contrite. “I’m sorry. I should have thought before I said anything.”

“No, little one, you’re just fine. I don’t offend easily especially when no offense is meant,” Demos explained. “I don’t think of Lawson as my ‘Master’ because he has never mastered himself and he certainly could never master me. You’re right about your typing of him though.”

“No one could master you, Demos,” Ryder grunted.

“Indeed not. And it looks like Lawson couldn’t master Grayson either. That was quite the Jedi mind-trick you pulled with him, having him strangle himself, little one,” Demos pointed out with evident amusement and a touch of dark enjoyment. Though Ryder knew by the way that Demos, too, kept checking out those bruises that he was concerned about Grayson as well.

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Why did I leave him alone?

“I had an opportunity to let him think he’d won.” Grayson’s expression darkened. “But I wasn’t sure it was wise. Someone like that doesn’t stop because he thinks you’re weak. That might just inspire him.”

Again, Ryder felt a sickness inside of him at how Grayson understood his Master far more than Ryder had. King Daemon had seen it all too. Maybe it hadn’t taken an Immortal to figure out that Lawson was bad news. Maybe it just took someone with eyes to see.

At that moment, two of the Weryn Acolytes appeared with clothing for him and Demos. One handed Ryder leather pants, boots and a white, ribbed long-sleeved t-shirt while the other gave similar styled clothing to Demos, though he wore no shirt, just a long fur-lined leather coat.

“Pants. Finally,” Grayson breathed.

“That’s why you won’t look at us?” Ryder could not hide his relief.

Grayson flushed hotly. “You--you both must get used to being naked all the time.”

“It’s a hazard of being a Weryn Vampire. It’s Hell on clothes, too,” Demos said as he stroked his favorite jacket. The thing was that this was the fifth version of his favorite jacket that had gotten shredded in shifts over the years.

After Ryder had pulled on the pants and was sliding the shirt over his head, Grayson

asked, “Why did you think I wasn’t looking at you?”

“Can you not guess, little one? From the guilt on his face, he fears you see us all as Lawson,” Demos answered as he shrugged on the long leather coat.

“What?! No, he’s not like you. Nothing like you.” Grayson’s eyes lingered on Ryder’s long legs before he was yanking his gaze back to the parade.

“I’m glad you don’t think so,” Ryder answered softly.

“Not just me. Eiji and Mairead knew you weren't either. That’s why they went and got you,” Grayson said, and there was this flash of almost bashful pride as he glanced down the line of people at those two other humans.

Mairead waved back and then said, “Aww! Eiji-sama, they put their pants on.”

“Young people.” Eiji just shook his head with amusement.

The old man had gone up to Ryder without any fear. More than that, he had spoken with the voice of command to let him know Grayson was in trouble and needed his assistance immediately. Ryder wondered what Eiji had done before deciding to become a Vampire. Whatever it was, he had Ryder’s respect. It had stopped any delay in them reaching Grayson.

“A woman saw me with Lawson. An Ashyr Vampire. I think she knew what I was doing to him,” Grayson said, frowning slightly.

“Which one?” Ryder asked, his gaze swinging out towards the crowd again.

They were all keeping their voices low. Eiji and Mairead were standing next to him, but the crowd was loud as they were excited for the next Bloodline and he doubted

that human ears could hear them. He wasn't sure how much they had seen themselves. They either had seen nothing or were just pretending they hadn't.

"It's the one keeping Balthazar suspended up there." Grayson tipped his head towards the floating Eyros Vampire.

Ryder caught sight of the Ashyr Vampire near the other side of the fountain. She had long black, curling hair that fell to her mid-back. Huge, kohl-rimmed silver eyes were set in a golden-skinned face. He thought she might be Arabic. Those eyes were fixed on Grayson and only flickered to his for a moment. He felt a cold ball of dread form in his stomach.

"She knows," Ryder stated. "She knows you did something at least."

Did she think that Grayson was Ashyr reborn? The fact that Grayson had been greeted by several Immortals as if he were an old friend was already causing talk. The fact that he had single-handedly taken care of Lawson would as well. Those who hadn't seen what Grayson had done would outwardly wonder. This Ashyr Vampire would know. She might think her Immortal had returned.

What if she's right? What if Grayson is Ashyr reborn?

Ryder had given one reason to Demos why he didn't want Grayson to be Ashyr, but the other reason was that he would lose Grayson's company. The Ashyr would protect their Immortal. And considering that Lawson had already attacked Grayson... Well, he doubted he'd be allowed anywhere near the young man.

"At least, she's too tied up with Balthazar to come over here and demand to know how a human can do what only her Bloodline can," Demos muttered. His Blood Brother didn't look all that happy at the idea of the Ashyr Vampires knowing about Grayson either.

“I don’t regret it,” Grayson said, tipping his chin up. “If the Ashyr have a problem with me being telekinetic without being part of their Bloodline so be it.”

Ryder met Demos’ eyes again. The young man had no idea that his ability might mark him as the founder of that Bloodline.

“Grayson, we might need to talk about that,” Ryder began.

But then there were screams from the far end of the road. People’s heads craned that way to see what was coming, but though there were more cries, most couldn’t see what the problem was until there were roars and snarls and howls!

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“What’s going on?” Grayson asked and Ryder could almost feel the hum of the young man’s power in the air.

“Not sure.” Ryder positioned himself between Grayson and this unseen danger. Demos joined him.

Two werewolves--they could be nothing else--stood on their hind legs, looking like a cross between man and wolf. They stood over seven feet tall. They were covered in gray fur, except for their considerable sexual organs that looked partially engorged. They lifted their snouts to the moons and let out howls of delight.

“Tarn and Farun!” Demos laughed. “Looks like this is part of the show.”

Demos clapped Ryder’s shoulder and snorted.

“Tarn and Farun? Are they Weryn?” Grayson asked.

He’d somehow managed to wiggle between Ryder and Demos and was staring wide-eyed at the werewolves.

“No, they’re creations of the Kaly. These two are Caemorn’s... pets? Friends? Who knows with that Immortal,” Ryder explained with a slight moue of distast.

“I thought the Kaly Bloodline controlled the dead,” Grayson pointed out.

“They can do a lot more than that, little one,” Demos answered. “Yet I don’t think the Kaly Bloodline is next. I think... ah, yes, I should have guessed.”

Tarn and Farun were not alone. They were herding creatures ahead of them.

“Monsters!” Grayson cried.

Dozens of Night Hags were harried ahead of the werewolves. They looked like elderly women swathed in ancient tattered robes, but they were deadly predators that could spring over twenty feet and take down prey many times their size. Night Hags, unlike the other monsters in the Ever Dark, were attracted to life so they surged ahead eagerly towards all of the humans, eager to feast on their flesh and organs, leaving only picked bones in their wake.

There were creatures resembling weeping willow trees only they walked and their branches were sharp as spears and dipped in blood. They sank those branches through their prey, pinning them to the ground and sucked them dry. They called them Weepers not only because of the types of tree they resembled, but also because they let out cries that sounded like the wailing of women and men.

Then there were the Rabid Hounds. They reminded Ryder of the dogs in a video game called Resident Evil where the skin was all peeled off and only raw muscle, slick with slime or blood or something, glistened on their bodies. They had no lips so their massive jaws and razor sharp teeth were clearly visible.

“Are you sure this is part of the parade?” Grayson shrank against Ryder’s side.

Ryder was surprised at the burst of pleasure that brought him. He slid an arm around Grayson’s back.

“Yes... I am pretty sure,” Ryder said with a glance at Demos who shrugged his shoulders as if to say he was keeping an open mind.

The creatures started to advance upon them. Hunger and actual evil seemed to radiate

from them. The crowd reared back. Alarmed cries rang out. But then figures in elegant black emerged from the darkness behind the creatures. They crossed their arms and bowed their heads towards Balthazar before turning their gazes upon the slathering horde.

Which stopped.

In their tracks.

“What’s happening here?” Grayson asked.

They barely seemed to breathe. The eyes that had been illuminated by hunger and malevolence were now blank. They stared ahead but did not see. Their gaping mouths shut. Those that had arms had those arms hanging loose at their sides. The clacking of fangs ceased. The crowd crept back along the edge of the parade route to get a closer look.

Now, you know from experiencing my voice in your mind that the Eyros Bloodline has the power to speak telepathically. We can know your thoughts. Your deepest secrets can be laid bare for us, Balthazar sounded smug, but he had earned it from this display. But there is another side of our power, which is that of control!

Balthazar gestured for the creatures to be marched forward. And they marched. They were controlled. They looked neither right nor left. They moved in unison to the Eyros Vampire who had hold of their minds. A girl with short black hair, black lipstick, and silver eyes controlled the nearest Night Hag. The hag started to wrestle for control, blinking and snarling confusedly. The scent of her prey so near was causing her to yearn.

She lunged for a nearby male student that sank to his haunches in fear. But the girl lifted her chin and the hag jerked backwards. The girl made a circular movement with

her right hand and the hag danced a jig. There was shocked laughter and awe. But there was also a touch of something else.

Was it fear?

Ryder glanced towards Grayson. The young man's eyes were huge. He stared at this display with a mixture of awe and shock.

“The other powers were really cool, but this...” Grayson stopped and swallowed. “It's different, isn't it?”

It was.

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“The Eyros’ power makes them seem... more alien from humans than the rest of us,” Ryder admitted.

“They’re power is more personal. More what a human would fear from a Vampire,” Demos said with a grunt. “You see that Night Hag twirling and you know that’s not her nature. So if they can do that to her, what can the Eyros do to you?”

Grayson slowly nodded.

Mairead jumped up and down, clapping her hands excitedly, as if she were seeing her favorite sports team in action. The other students were not as outwardly enthusiastic, but there were many speculative glances at the Eyros Vampires as they calmly walked by with their monstrous charges. How many of the students now wished to become an Eyros?

“This parade wasn’t stupid,” Demos grunted as he looked at the back of Tarn and Farun frolicking amongst the Eyros and the creatures.

“No, it wasn’t,” Ryder agreed, and felt a fool for the second time that night.

The parade had allowed the Bloodlines to show off, to engender interest. Perhaps someone had come wanting to be a Wyvern in order to travel the globe with a thought, but maybe after seeing the Horys’ control of nature they would rather have the ability to strike their enemies down with lightning or cause the earth to shake with thunder. How many had written off the Mirryr only to see that the ability to become anyone at any time, to shift to fit one’s environment, to be whatever and whoever was on top, was damned powerful? And who had seen the ability of the Weryn to become

truly one with nature and wanted that as well?

“That was brilliant! Wasn’t it, Eiji-sama?” Mairead breathed, one hand over her heart.

“Indeed. There are only two Bloodlines left. I thought that Lord Ravenscroft would put his own Bloodline last, but evidently not,” Eiji murmured.

“Oh! Oh! Look! There’s someone there!” Mairead pointed down from where the werewolves had appeared.

A single man, dressed in a long crimson coat that hung to his knees stood in the center of the road. His head was lowered so they could only see his fine, white hair. His legs were spread shoulder’s length apart and he had a black walking stick that he had sunk the tip of into the road before him.

Caemorn, Ryder realized, recognizing Lord Caemorn Losus, the Immortal Kaly.

What appeared to be thick white mist surged between Caemorn’s legs and started to flow over the stones towards them. It was so thick and overwhelming that Ryder lost sight of him.

Then the mist looked at Ryder.

Ryder reared back in shock as a ghostly face stared into his own.

“This isn’t mist!” Ryder growled.

“It’s spirits!” Grayson sounded strangled.

Ryder thrust Grayson behind him, keeping their bodies touching as the spirits swirled

among them. Aching cold seemed to seep into Ryder's bones as the spirits caressed his skin. Grayson let out a gasp and Ryder wrapped his arms around the young man. Grayson thrust his face against Ryder's chest and breathed hard.

"It is all right," Ryder said as he stroked Grayson's back, trying to soothe both of them.

"I can feel them," Grayson said against his shirt. "I can feel them!"

Ryder wished he had a coat to cover Grayson in and keep him from the wispy fingers of the spirits. He looked over at his Blood Brother. Perhaps Demos would give up his coat.

Demos stood very still as a female spirit with a haggard face tried to speak to him, but no words came. That she was suffering was clear. Demos swallowed hard, but averted his eyes from her. The request for his coat died in Ryder's throat.

"God, I think that was my gram!" Mairead choked out.

"Do not worry. The Kaly would not bring the spirits of people we know," Eiji cautioned. The Japanese man's expression though was hard.

Suddenly, there were glowing lights just above head high from where the single figure in red had stood. The spirits were suddenly being drawn away from them. The mist retreated, being sucked into the glowing lights. As the spirits disappeared, Ryder realized what was happening. The lights were soul gems held in Kaly Vampire hands. The spirits were being imprisoned within them.

When all the spirits were gone, Caemorn no longer stood alone, but was surrounded by a dozen Kaly Vampires. All of them, no matter what race, all took on the white hair and solemn aspect of that Bloodline. They slowly lowered their glittering soul

gems, now filled with spirits, to their sides.

But they were not done yet. The show continued.

There was a clacking sound as a hundred skeletons, not just human, but some recognizable animals like bear or wolves or deer, but others clearly of the Ever Dark variety, marched out of the graveyard that was the Kaly Palace's front yard. This skeletal army followed the Kaly Vampires who sauntered ahead of them with Caemorn in their lead.

The only sound other than the clicking of bones was that of Caemorn's walking stick hitting the stones. The crowd was silent. People looked on with huge eyes and pale faces. Some covered their mouths with their hands as if to hold a scream in as the Kaly Vampires swept by in their stately procession.

Truly the Kaly need no introduction nor does their Immortal, my good friend and co-headmaster of the academy, Lord Caemorn Losus! Balthazar flung his right hand towards the Kaly Vampires.

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There was a scattering of applause that died out as the Kaly simply walked by without looking at anyone. Only Caemorn deviated from the procession when he, like Balthazar, was suddenly lifted off of the road and was levitated alongside his co-headmaster. Balthazar patted his arm, which Caemorn seemed to tolerate. He did give Balthazar a thin smile. And he did pet the cat on Balthazar's shoulder under the chin.

The Kaly! Are they not magnificent? Are they not terrifying? Balthazar asked, which had people jerking as if they felt the sting of judgment against them for judging the Kaly. And you haven't seen anything yet!

"Why does that sound like a threat?" Demos muttered.

Grayson withdrew his head from Ryder's chest though he didn't make a move to exit Ryder's arms. He looked pale and a little shaky, but he was intent on watching the rest of the show.

For those of you counting, we have one more Bloodline to go. Balthazar again rubbed his hands together. Ah, you might be asking what about King Daemon's? But that is a Bloodline available just for two. No! The last Bloodline, but hardly the least is... Seeyr!

Once more that right hand shot out and at the end of the road was the Immortal Seeyr with her bandaged eyes. A child-looking Vampire stood beside her with blonde pigtails and a wide smile. There were only half a dozen Seeyr Vampires in existence. They all wore creamy white and smiled gently at those that they passed.

There was no fanfare. There was no magic show. They simply walked and smiled.

Ryder saw that each Seeyr Vampire, including the Immortal herself, carried a dozen or so white envelopes. They stopped walking at the base of the fountain and turned to face the crowd.

“Bit anticlimactic if you ask me,” Mairead muttered.

“They tell the future. What could they do for a trick? Read our fortunes?” Eiji asked.

For those of you wondering what the Seeyr can do, they have the gift--and burden--of knowing the future, Balthazar explained. Do you notice the envelopes they are carrying?

The little child Vampire held up hers so that all could see.

There is one envelope--sealed!--and addressed for each of you, Balthazar said. Inside it are the answers to what you most want to know. Will you be a Vampire? Who will be your Master? And what Bloodline will be yours?

The students, excepting Grayson who stayed put in his arms, surged forward towards the Seeyr, wanting to get their hands on the envelopes. Lightning bolts struck the ground between the students and the Seeyr. The crowd scattered. Grayson's hands tightened on Ryder's shirt, but he looked more bemused than scared.

Now, now, we can't make it that easy for you! Balthazar laughed. As you know this is a school, and along with classes, there will be tests. If you fail these tests your chance of joining a Bloodline may be over... unless! Unless you are able to steal your envelope from one of the Vampires who will hold it! Or... if you get it early, you can just skip to the end.

The crowd gasped. The students looked avidly at the envelopes. Grayson shook his head.

“Oh, man, this isn’t good,” Grayson muttered. “This is going to cause some people to act crazy.”

“I think that may be the point,” Ryder muttered as he strove not to sniff Grayson’s hair or nuzzle his wounded throat.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Grayson sighed.

But I’m sure that all of you will succeed! Balthazar grinned. We chose you all very carefully. So welcome to Ever Dark Academy! Welcome to the World of Vampires!

Story Continues in Book 2!

## REMEMBERED OR IMAGINED

The feel of Ryder’s arms around Grayson was comforting. It felt right. Natural even. And arousing. It had been too long since he’d been with anyone and his body was hungry to be touched.

Normally, he wouldn’t allow the guys he was with to hold him and kissing was only done with closed eyes. He almost always engaged in desperate, passionate, hot, but also impersonal sex. The thrill was the act, not the person. There was nothing intimate about it. Nothing comforting.

Yet here he was, leaning back against Ryder’s muscled chest, letting those massive arms enfold him, and not feeling claustrophobic or the need to break away. He imagined what it would feel like for Ryder to run a hand through the back of his hair and along his neck, just dipping his fingers into the collar of his sweater. Goosebumps rose on his arms at just the thought of those powerful yet elegant hands gliding along his bare skin.

All he had to do was turn around in Ryder's arms and look up into that handsome bearded face through his lashes and he would find out if his imagination captured reality. Ryder would know what he wanted with those needy glances. The Weryn Vampire wanted it too, Grayson guessed, from how easily Ryder touched him and the smoldering look in his silver eyes. From the first moment they'd met, Ryder had been interested. They could go somewhere--back to his rooms, back to Ryder's place--and feed this hunger in both of them until it was satiated.

But it wasn't just raw desire that had him craving more of Ryder's touch. When the spirits had come and the memories--no, not memories. Nothing like that has ever happened to me--had flooded over him, Ryder's strength had been like a lifeline. He'd been safe even as his fingers had dug into Ryder's back and he'd buried his head against Ryder's chest. The Weryn Vampire's scent had been warm and welcoming like cinnamon and fresh cut wood. It had blocked out the cold, icy smell of the spirits and the memory--not memory!--of their touch.

But, like always, the familiar warning thoughts crowded one on top of the other like they always did whenever he got too close to someone.

Counting on someone else is dangerous.

They'll let you down.

Everyone's out for themselves.

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Don't let yourself get too comfortable with this.

Don't trust this.

Don't trust him.

With every thought, Grayson had gotten stiffer and stiffer in Ryder's arms, his passion cooling, until he stepped out of Ryder's grasp altogether, feeling like he couldn't breathe properly. He needed to be free and loose for when things happened.

What things? He didn't know. Hadn't the Vampire woman and Lawson shown him there were plenty of reasons to be prepared for anything? Things were more dangerous here than they had been on the streets. Back there he'd been the only one with powers, but here? Here he was just one of many. So he couldn't be weighed down. He needed to be able to get away or act immediately to protect himself.

He had felt the reluctance in Ryder's arms in regards to letting him go. He shrugged off the regret at how he suddenly felt chilled without Ryder's warmth. He clapped with the rest of the students at the end of the parade, acting as if he'd lost nothing.

"Are you all right, Grayson?" Ryder asked softly over the clapping and the cheers.

"Fine. That was pretty cool. The parade. Not what I thought it would be," Grayson said neutrally even as his stomach knotted when Ryder lifted his hands to touch him again, but dropped them at the last moment. "I thought it would be cheesy, but it wasn't. All those powers. Pretty impressive."

“Yes, it was,” Ryder said equally neutrally. “But some of the gifts can be... overwhelming. Kaly’s gift--”

“I wasn’t scared,” Grayson shot out and immediately pressed his lips together. The disbelief that flashed in Ryder’s eyes for that moment though told him how foolish he sounded. “I was just... I don’t know.” He turned his head and saw Ryder’s handsome face, looking just like he’d imagined and he swallowed. “It’s going to sound crazy, but maybe not. You guys say that reincarnation is real so maybe...”

Ryder’s eyebrows drew together. “Maybe?”

“It was a memory. The spirits... the way they rose up like mist and then came towards us... for a second, I remembered that,” Grayson said.

“You remembered that?” Demos asked and he shared one of those quick glances with Ryder.

But Demos couldn’t possibly understand what had happened in just a few seconds. It wasn’t something that Grayson could really explain.

“You thought you’d seen spirits like that before?” Ryder asked almost too casually.

“I don’t know. I...”

Grayson’s eyes went unfocused as he recalled what he’d seen or imagined or remembered or whatever it was. He had been in a dark field. The tall grass had been mostly beaten down around him as if a great number of people had walked that way. A whole army of them.

There was blood on the crushed stalks and he thought that, in the distance, he could see bodies on the ground. Black mounds among the tall grasses. And then there was

this mist that filtered through the stalks that were washed of all color by the moons.

It had drifted slowly towards him like that old line about a cat on creeping paws. He remembered or imagined that he had gathered his power inside of him. His power was a burning, roaring fire far greater than he'd ever built within himself before. He'd used the air, thickening it by pushing molecules together, and sending it towards the mist, trying to disperse it. But it hadn't worked.

The mist kept coming.

He remembered—or imagined—the dry sound of the stalks as he started backing away from the mist, still slashing at it with his power, still looking for something—or someone--more substantial to attack. But there had not been anyone in view.

He'd remembered—or imagined—thinking that maybe one of the black mounds, one of the seemingly dead bodies, wasn't really dead, but was just pretending to be to evade his power. But none of them stirred to alert him to their charade.

The mist kept coming.

He was moving more swiftly then, turning and running but still glancing back to check on the location of the mist. It was the thin crawling strands anymore between the stalks. Instead, it was a white wall behind him. There were voices, so many voices, and then he was surrounded by the mist as if it were a wave that had crashed down upon him and there was silence. So quiet. Like the sound had been sucked out.

He remembered—or imagined—stopping running as he could not see where he was going and that was dangerous. He built the fire inside of him higher, preparing for something or someone. And then the mist looked at him. It was then he understood that it wasn't mist at all, but spirits with faces pressed tightly together. They were the mist.

They came for him...

And that was all he remembered... or imagined. He'd snapped out of it in that moment as he'd turned from the spirit and found Ryder's chest.

Grayson raked a hand through his hair. "I don't know what I mean. I can't remember something that never happened to me. I mean unless... I don't know."

Ryder though just nodded as if what he was saying made complete sense. Grayson didn't feel that Ryder was simply patronizing him. That chill filled him again and he rubbed his arms. The air wasn't that cold and his sweater, as much as he disliked it, was warm. But he was still cold.

"Perhaps we should get you back to your rooms," Ryder suggested. "You look a little tired."

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The thought of going back to his rooms where the fire danced in the grate and a warm, soft bed waited for him sounded really good then. Especially when his mind conjured up being spooned by Ryder in that bed. He'd never let anyone sleep with him ever. But, again, here he was wanting things he shouldn't. Wanting things that weren't safe. But he did feel safe with Ryder even though the Weryn Vampire was associated with dangerous people like Lawson.

“I...”

Before he had a chance to answer, a servant came by with a silver tray with more champagne. Another followed with mini-burgers, steak sandwiches, melty ham and cheese toasts, crab puffs and more finger food. His stomach growled and Ryder took some of the food to simply hold for him because he couldn't carry enough.

“Hungry after using my gift, I guess,” Grayson said between bites of the smoky ham and the sweet crab.

He'd noted the fact that the servant's eyes were not silver--nor had the eyes of the people who had brought Ryder and Demos' clothes earlier--which meant that they were human. “Are all the people who work here human?”

“Some.” Ryder shrugged and offered Grayson a tiny burger with cheese and bacon. He popped the whole thing in his mouth. “They are Acolytes, but others are young Vampires who are earning their place.”

“Acolytes? They're humans who you feed from, right? Ones that give themselves over in exchange for the chance to be turned?” Grayson searched his memory for the

definition of the term.

“Some of them. Others simply want to be near us and our power. And others have desires they can only be quenched with our fangs,” Ryder answered.

The arousal that had cooled burst to life in Grayson once more. He couldn't help but understand the desire to be with a Vampire as he stared at Ryder's long legs, taut waist and powerful chest. He could easily imagine those lips and tongue and teeth against his throat. Yes, he could understand those desires very well. He finished his champagne.

“Look at this. Look at how weird this is,” Mairead said as she came over with Eiji, swallowing champagne herself.

Grayson glanced to where she gestured. The Vampires stayed in their Bloodline clusters, not eating or drinking, but smiling to a certain extent. Yet they were not going over to any of the students. And, at the moment, none of the students were going over to them. In fact, Grayson, Mairead and Eiji were the only humans mixing with Vampires.

“I admit this reminds me of some bad middle school dance where the guys stay on one side of the room and the girls on the other,” Grayson said.

“Why is no one going up to them?” Mairead's eyes narrowed. “There was nothing in the materials about keeping our distance, was there? No, there wasn't.”

Grayson was sure she would know if there were.

“Maybe it will take one brave soul to break the detente,” Eiji suggested.

“Perhaps, though everyone is pretending they didn't see Grayson and Ryder

cuddling.” She cast a narrow-eyed glance at him.

“Ah, well, yeah, the Kaly...” Grayson muttered and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Right. Sure. Likely story,” she said.

“You grabbed my hand, Mairead,” Eiji pointed out.

“I thought you grabbed mine.” But her cheeks were red.

Grayson hadn’t thought he would like Mairead. She was brash and rude, saying out loud what should only be thought. But she’d come back when he needed help and she evidently saw Eiji as her charge. Grayson wasn’t sure if Eiji needed Mairead, but he didn’t seem to object to her. And Grayson found himself softening towards her.

“It was impressive. I mean all of them were awesome, but the Kaly... they’re a little different,” she said with a shrug.

“And it appears we have caught their Immortal’s interest... or Grayson has,” Eiji noted.

Grayson’s head jerked up. Caemorn and Balthazar were being lowered to the ground. He wondered if the Ashyr Vampire holding them up would make her way over to confront him then about what he’d done. But it was Caemorn, just like Eiji had said, who started towards him the moment that his booted feet hit the ground. The sound of his walking stick tapping against the stone road as he strode to Grayson.

“What is the deal with every Immortal wanting to talk to you?” Mairead asked.

Grayson was starting to wonder himself. If he was to keep a low profile, this wasn’t doing it. But maybe he wasn’t. Maybe by making him a “favorite” or something then

Sect members would gravitate towards him.

Ryder stood on one side of him and Demos went by his other the moment the lithe, blonde Kaly Vampire dressed in crimson stopped in front of Grayson. The memory or imagination of the mist becoming spirits had sweat breaking out on Grayson's brow. But he held himself still. Mairead and Eiji lingered nearby, but Caemorn cast a single look in their direction and Eiji took Mairead's arm and gently tugged her away. She squawked, but not too loudly and didn't really resist. Caemorn then turned his attention fully back to Grayson.

"Grayson, my name is Caemorn," Caemorn introduced himself.

"The Immortal Kaly, right? Just like Balthazar's the Immortal Eyros?" Grayson asked.

Saying the name "Kaly" felt familiar despite its unusualness. Again, there was this feeling of remembering and imagining.

“Exactly.” Caemorn dipped his head.

He was an elegant Vampire dressed neatly in a long, crimson coat, fitted black pants and boots. He had blonde hair so pale it was almost white. It was shorn close to the sides and slightly longer on the top. His features were fine, almost delicate, and he spoke and moved with precision as if every single thing he did was thought of and considered carefully.

“What can I do for you?” Grayson asked.

“He needs to sleep, Caemorn,” Ryder growled. “He’s exhausted.”

“Is he?” Caemorn lifted an elegant pale eyebrow. “Well, I suppose it is exhausting to be manhandled by a Weryn Vampire.”

“I handled Lawson just fine,” Grayson stated stiffly.

He hated how Ryder flushed and dropped his gaze, looking guilty over Lawson’s actions.

“Yes, but you were seen,” Caemorn stated.

Grayson looked over his shoulder at the female Ashyr Vampire. She had been waylaid by Balthazar who was forcing her to pet Meffy. Her eyes kept shifting to Grayson though.

“Yeah, well, that was bound to happen,” Grayson said, trying to act like he had

wished to keep it hidden for at least a day. He'd managed to keep it secret on Earth most of his life. But here he'd been sloppy, yet he didn't quite care.

"Indeed." Caemorn smiled thinly. "Some gifts cannot be hidden. But I am here to ask if you would like to attend an interrogation tomorrow."

Grayson blinked. "Ah... who are you interrogating?"

Ryder shifted. "He doesn't have to be exposed to her again!"

"We can tell him what we find out. He doesn't need that," Demos agreed.

It took Grayson a moment to understand what he was talking about. "You mean the-- the female Vampire that killed Sam? She's dead, isn't she? I killed her."

Grayson quickly looked over at Eiji and Mairead who were sipping champagne and talking quietly together. They hadn't heard what he'd said. He focused again on Caemorn.

"No, she is not dead. That would make things easier." Caemorn pressed his lips together. "But Balthazar insisted on keeping her alive and then diving into her mind. He will do that tomorrow. We thought it would be good for you to be there. Unless you wish to sit through classes on Vampire through the Ages."

"You don't have to go, Grayson," Ryder said. "I don't know what they expect you to add."

"Perhaps he would like to know more about the people who changed his life forever and murdered his friend?" Caemorn lifted that eyebrow again.

Grayson didn't know what he felt about the Sect Vampire still being alive. He

thought he had killed her. He thought he had avenged Charlie in part.

“When you’re done questioning her, what happens to her then? She’s let go? I mean Sam was just a human, and just a homeless human at that so he matters even less than the other other mortals so--”

“No, Grayson, as you will discover Balthazar’s gift will allow him to turn her into our greatest ally,” Caemorn said.

“Like they did with the monsters?” Grayson asked.

That had been impressive, but he couldn’t see that working long term. The one Eyros Vampire had lost control of one of the hags for a moment.

“No, not like that. That was crude.” Caemorn grimaced. “Flashy, but crude. She will literally be ours in all ways.”

“So she gets away with it?! She’s--”

“She won’t be her anymore, Grayson,” Caemorn almost gently interrupted his rushed angry response. “The person she was will be gone. It is a punishment beyond anything you can imagine.”

Grayson wasn’t sure what that meant or how it would work. But he accepted it. For now.

“So would you like to be there to learn some answers?” Caemorn asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’d like to,” Grayson said.

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Ryder did not look happy about it. “Then I’ll be there, too.”

Slowly Caemorn turned his silver-eyed gaze on Ryder. It was such a cold and distant look as if Caemorn were staring down at an insect. “Won’t you have your hands full? You have to ensure that Lawson leaves tomorrow, do you not?”

Ryder’s jaw worked. He didn’t back down from Caemorn even though many strong people would have. He didn’t respond though. Finally, Caemorn tipped his head.

“Pleasure to meet you, Grayson. You will be collected tomorrow at the appropriate time,” Caemorn said.

The Kaly Vampire turned neatly on his heel and walked off, his cane tapping on the ground. Grayson’s shoulders slumped. He was suddenly exhausted.

“Come, let’s get you back,” Ryder said gently, putting a hand on Grayson’s shoulder.

“Y-yeah, that sounds good.” Grayson nodded.

“Will you be all right by yourselves? I want to talk to our people and... check in on Lawson and Natasha,” Demos said.

“That sounds good. Keep me apprised?” Ryder asked.

“Will do.” Demos nodded his head and stalked off.

Grayson watched as Demos headed off towards the Weryn. They were all dressed--

seeming in versions of black leather and fur--and staring intently at Grayson and Ryder. In fact, the intensity of some of their stares were strong enough to burn through metal. Ryder glanced over, but seemed mostly unmoved by their looks.

“Let’s go,” Ryder said, putting a possessive-protective hand on Grayson’s lower back.

“Heading back to the dorm. See you two later!” Grayson waved to Eiji and Mairead.

Seeing Ryder’s hand on him, Mairead simply lifted her eyebrows. Eiji waved back and the two of them headed towards a grouping of Vampires. They were going to break the ice. The Ashyr Vampire and Balthazar were nowhere to be seen. He wondered if Balthazar had changed her mind about what she’d seen Grayson do. He didn’t know what to think about that. He was slightly ashamed at the relief he felt at the thought that she might not remember what he’d done.

He and Ryder walked in silence back towards the dorm. Grayson’s mind flitted from one image to the next of the parade, of Lawson, of Ryder’s holding him. The last he got rather stuck on.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea that you’re around me so much?” Grayson asked.

Ryder’s eyebrows rose as he turned to Grayson. “What do you mean?”

“Your people--the other Weryn--didn’t look happy about it. Lawson’s anger was focused on that, too. He was pissed because he thought that you were not going to hold the line about the whole no-fledglings thing,” Grayson said quietly.

“He had no true reason for his behavior,” Ryder growled.

Grayson had to admit that he liked the fact that Ryder didn’t think there was any

acceptable reason for what Lawson had done.

“Yeah, but your people are going to think you’re breaking from tradition, because they’ll think you’re courting me? What do you call starting a relationship with someone you want to turn?” Grayson asked.

“Courting is appropriate.” Ryder smiled. “You do not need to worry about the Weryn. Demos will calm them. And once Lawson leaves tomorrow, the rest of the issues will be solved.”

“Will he leave?” Grayson asked.

Ryder frowned and Grayson had the urge to tease those lips back up into a smile. “King Daemon requested I be the representative of the Weryn here. Lawson must go.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Grayson lied, though he hoped it was true.

They reached the dorm and went up the steps to the doors. They slowed down then. Grayson assumed that Ryder would leave, meet up with Demos, deal with Lawson and the fallout. But Ryder gestured for Grayson to precede him into the dorm.

“You’re going to walk me to my door?” Grayson smiled.

“I am going to spend the night with you,” Ryder stated simply.

Grayson blinked. “You’re going to--”

“Keep you safe, Grayson,” Ryder told him. “I will do whatever it takes to accomplish this. So... may I come up?”

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Grayson stared at that handsome face. The voice in his head that warned him of becoming attached, of trusting, of wanting too much, of putting himself at risk started to babble. But he shut them out. Those steady gray eyes were stronger at this moment than his doubts.

“Yeah, yeah, I want you to come up.”

### DANGEROUS

Ryder followed Grayson’s lithe form up the stairs to the young man’s rooms. He stalked after Grayson. His eyes focused on that firm ass and long legs. For a moment, he imagined those legs over his shoulders and his cock in Grayson’s tight back passage. Then he’d turn his head and kiss that sleek calf and let his fangs sink into the tender skin. His mouth flooded with saliva and his fangs ached.

What were they going to do in Grayson’s rooms?

What did he want to happen? The raw scent of arousal that arose from Grayson every time he came near told him that the young man found him attractive, if nothing else. Every Vampire had the ability to Seduce. It was like a low level Eyros power, but far more unconscious than that.

How many times had he seen a human’s eyes go glassy with desire and their body go slack with invitation? Offering every single part of themselves to him? To accomplish this was as easy as breathing for a Vampire. Balthazar had written--likely on page 103--of the manual that the Vampires were to keep that part of themselves in check with the students. At least for the first semester. But that, he knew, would likely just

make the Vampires--and the humans--all the more keen for one another. It was likely going to backfire in Ryder's opinion if Balthazar intended the students to think that Vampires were tame.

But Grayson was not a student.

He was only pretending to be one. And Ryder wasn't interested in Courting. Wasn't supposed to be. This would just be a passing fancy for both of them. If they did anything at all.

At that moment, Grayson unlocked the door to his rooms. He paused in the doorway before half turning around and leaning against the doorframe. Grayson's long legs crossed at the ankles and a faint, almost challenging smile appeared on his lips. Ryder's cock pulsed in his pants, which already felt way too tight.

If we do anything at all? Who am I kidding?

"I don't know if it's true, but Christian and Julian told me that all Vampires have to be invited inside our rooms. So... I'm inviting you, Ryder," Grayson said, his cheeks pink, as he swept his hand towards the interior.

"I heard that, too. But I believe it's just a myth. Something to make the students feel safer," Ryder said.

"When they're not really safe?" Grayson's expression was neutral and Ryder wondered what he was thinking.

Ryder wanted to assure the young man that he was safe, at least. But that wasn't true. Lawson had attacked him. Every Immortal in existence seemed to be paying Grayson too much attention. And Ryder was just dying to taste his blood and feel the hot tightness of Grayson's body wrap around his cock. Grayson was not safe at all.

“They’re here to offer themselves to us,” Ryder finally answered. “They are not safe.”

Grayson nodded slowly after a time. “The parade showed me that. At first, the powers just seemed neat, but then it changed. You really got to feel how powerful you guys are.”

“We showed only a fraction of how powerful we can be.” Ryder grimaced. “We’re not tame, Grayson. We’re not pets. We’re not safe.”

Another nod and then Grayson said, “Luckily, I’m not either. Come on in.”

Grayson swept a hand inside and Ryder inclined his head before he stepped in. He was surprised when his skin tingled as he walked through the threshold. He rolled his shoulders back to try and shake off the sensation, but it lingered longer than he would have liked. Balthazar and Caemorn really had managed to do something here. That was one smart thing, one nod to the Vampire’s true nature in this fun house mirrors school.

“You okay?” Grayson asked as he shut the door behind them.

“There really was some kind of magic,” Ryder said. “See?”

He held up his arm and the hair was standing on end. Grayson ran his hand over the lifted hair. Ryder shivered, but for a different reason. Grayson didn’t seem to notice his hooded eyes though or the way his breath caught. He wasn’t smelling any arousal from the young man either. Had he completely misread Grayson’s attraction to him? Perhaps the arousal hadn’t been for him at all but one of the other Vampires.

Like Caemorn! No... no!

Ryder twisted his neck from one side to the other as his body tensed up like it did before he shifted and fought. But there was no enemy here. Not one he could fight. If Grayson was attracted to Caemorn then...

Is that the real reason he asked Grayson to the “interview” tomorrow?

“What do you like to drink?” Grayson asked as he slid behind a bar and into the kitchen. “I wouldn’t mind softening the landing some more with booze.”

“Is that pool table standard issue?” Ryder asked as his gaze swept over the common room.

It was a comfortable space with intimate corners for speaking sweet nothings in the cusp of human ears, of letting hands linger for longer than they should and roving where they shouldn’t, and for lying down together with the crackle and pop of the fire to accompany moans of desire. His cock hardened more. He swallowed and turned back to Grayson.

Of course this place is to encourage intimacy. Everything about this school is to lure us and the humans together.

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Grayson pulled out a dusty bottle of red wine from a wine rack that ran for seven-feet underneath the counter. He blew off the dust and ran his fingers over the fine embossed label. He showed it to Ryder.

“I have no idea if it is any good,” Grayson said.

“Ghost Horse Vineyard Spectre Cabernet Sauvignon, 2008 vintage. It’s about \$3500 a bottle,” Ryder answered. “The 2013 vintage is better, but this will do.”

He took the bottle from Grayson’s suddenly slightly trembling hand. “W-what? Three-thousand--”

“Five-hundred, yes. I’ve seen it go for more, but not much less.”

Ryder uncorked the bottle with the wine key that had been left on the counter. He gestured for Grayson to get two of the delicate Reidel crystal balloon glasses that were hanging from the ceiling rack to Grayson’s left.

“Uhm, should we be opening that? I mean is it for some special occasion? Or maybe it just accidentally got placed here.” Grayson’s expression was a little tight as he did get the two glasses.

A brief look at the other bottles already confirmed what Ryder knew. “All of these bottles are in this price range or more. I’m not surprised that Balthazar or Caemorn or both of them are wine snobs.”

Grayson set the glasses down on the bar and Ryder poured into each a generous

serving of the dark red wine. The scent of it reminded him for a moment of the old taverns along London's wharf. He'd long ago lost his accent and adopted that of his new country. But he remembered the scurry of rats and the flicker of candles and the reek of red wine. It startled him to recall it so vividly. This wine was so much finer than any of the thin, vinegary stuff they drank because the water was vile and dangerous.

"But the money..." Grayson said and shook his head, breaking Ryder out of the memory. "That would be my rent for five months, but it's not here. It's just one bottle of wine that's for anytime drinking."

"Money is not a problem for Vampires." Ryder pursed his lips as raucous tavern laughter flitted through his mind. That and the gaunt faces of young men with huge eyes but not enough food in their bellies and only themselves to sell to get those a few pence, if that. He swallowed and shook that memory away too. Why was he thinking of this now? "Even if you took away that we are immortal and have the time to earn money, an Eyros can read your mind and--"

"Know your pin number?" Grayson's eyebrows rose and his lips twitched.

"Among other things."

Ryder pushed the one glass of wine to Grayson while he swirled his own to let more air enter the liquid, allowing it to breathe. A wine like this should really be decanted after having sat upright for a few days, but a sniff of the rich aroma told him that it was wonderful just like it was. He took a sip and swished the wine in his mouth much like he had in the glass before swallowing. It tasted of the earth the vines were planted in and the sunshine that had caused the grapes to grow. The wine in the taverns had always tasted of mud and never the sun as if they had grown in shadow.

That is not now...

“And I’m betting if you’re a Mirryr then stealing someone’s identity really takes on a whole new meaning?” Grayson asked as he, too, sipped the wine. His eyes widened and he took a larger sip. “Okay, I thought the it-costs-more-so-it’s-better was bullshit, but this... God, this!” He held up the wine and took another big sip.

“Only sometimes is that true. But not all of the time. Not this time,” Ryder told him.

He savored the wine and tried to wash away the faint acrid taste in his mouth from the memories. Grayson was not like those boys. He wiped the floor with Lawson. He had wounded eyes, but he was not a victim.

“The Helm could get into any museum or vault or private collection,” Grayson guessed as he listed off some of the Vampires’ abilities, but really they didn’t need to use them to get money.

Ryder chuckled softly. “Yes, exactly. But humans aren’t exactly... Well, they don’t resist us very hard. If we want something, a human will give it or we just take it.”

“Take what you want? Or we just give it to you, huh?” Grayson tapped the top of the glass against his chin.

“So money is no problem.” Ryder shrugged.

The Vampires would never be the boys with hungry eyes. Well, hunger would be there. But they’d only appear innocent and needy. Until they dragged the unwary into a dark alleyway and drained them dry.

“Or anything else you want?” Grayson lifted an eyebrow. There was faint color in his cheeks and the scent of arousal flooded the air.

Ryder put his glass down. “Yes, Grayson. We are what you think we are.”

“Predators.” A statement, not a question.

“Predators. You saw some of that tonight up close and personal.” Ryder pursed his lips and stared down at the wine with distaste.

What had he come up here for exactly? To keep Grayson safe? To simply be near him? To assure himself that Lawson couldn’t creep in here and hurt this young man who he couldn’t stop thinking about?

And why is Lawson interested in him at all? Because I am. That’s the only reason. By staying here aren’t I putting Grayson in greater danger?

He thought of the looks from the other Weryn. They were not blind nor deaf nor dumb. They had all recognized that he was drawn to Grayson. They didn’t know that Grayson wasn’t a student. If that even mattered. It had caused him to come to near blows with Lawson. Demos would explain to them... what? What could Demos say? That while they weren’t going to take fledglings from this class that he was going to lead one of the students on? Was that honorable? The Weryn had to walk a very narrow line where they respected King Daemon’s activities at the school, but refused to participate. But being here with Grayson was making that much more difficult.

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Grayson regarded him out of those luminous eyes. “You’re not all like Lawson.”

Ryder grimaced and was the first to look away. “No. I want to say no. But more are like him than--”

“Like you or Demos?” Grayson finished for him. He shook himself and took another sip. “Just because you’re strong enough to do a thing doesn’t mean you will. I can’t believe I’m saying that.”

Grayson was now looking down into his wine and glaring at it as if the wine had said something it shouldn’t.

“You don’t believe that? Because it sounds like you do,” Ryder suggested.

“I don’t. I... I do. I don’t know!” Grayson shook his head. “I didn’t grow up on the streets. I was... I don’t want to say normal because normal doesn’t really exist. But I had a good life. I was really safe until my powers kicked in. Though maybe that’s not really true. I don’t know.”

“It’s all right not to know. New information can change one’s mind.”

“That’s just it! I was trusting and wanted to believe in people for a long time. But most people cannot be trusted.” Grayson bared his teeth for a second. “Sam tried to help, but he was drunk most of the time and that made him as much a potential victim as I was.”

“But you had your powers,” Ryder pointed out softly.

He poured more wine in their glasses. Grayson took an angry swallow, but his expression relaxed for a moment as the wine did taste remarkably good.

“I did, but, in the beginning, I couldn’t control them.” Grayson’s hand fisted around the delicate glass balloon. But he relaxed his grip before the glass shattered. “Bad things happened because of it.”

“I can imagine.”

And Ryder could. A telekinetic push could send a human flying into a wall, break their back, shatter their skulls, end their lives. And if Grayson’s powers were like any of theirs, when he was angry or upset or afraid the stronger the powers were, but the less in control they were.

“I actually believe that.” Grayson let out a breath.

“When we’re in our animal form, the urge to hunt--to hurt--that’s always there as a Vampire is so much more. We become more basic in our needs and our control,” Ryder explained.

“Yeah?” Grayson studied his face.

“I’ve hurt people, too. People I didn’t intend to,” Ryder said.

And then he remembered why the tavern came into his head. The boy he’d taken into the alleyway. It had been a pathetic trap by the boy’s pimp. Get him alone with his trousers down, rob him, and likely beat him to death. But he hadn’t been their prey. They had been his.

Killing them had not been necessary. A wiser course would have been to knock their heads together and take the pimp’s coin. Tell the boy to run and never come back.

But Ryder had been new and eager and angry. So he'd shifted.

And he'd attacked.

He barely remembered that other than the screams and the hot taste of blood on his tongue. He remembered it because that was the last time he'd lost control. But with Grayson, he felt that hot, eager desire of the Vampire within. Not to hurt. Not that. Not exactly. But he couldn't explain it.

Why am I here? To keep Grayson safe or simply near me?

"Yeah, I did that and hurt others I did intend to. But then I had to be careful that people didn't see what I'd really done or understand it really," Grayson explained. "I just wanted them to be, not afraid of me, but wary. I wanted everyone to stay away."

"If someone imaginative had discovered your gift they would have wanted to use it for their own ends," Ryder said more to himself than Grayson.

"There were a few times when someone nearly did. That's why I got out. There was no future on the streets. I had to claw my way out." Grayson's hand curled tightly around the glass again. "I thought that my life was okay. Better than before anyways. But..."

"But?"

Grayson was quiet for long moments. "I'm jealous of what you have."

"What?"

"You can use your powers and people clap." Grayson gave him a rather tremulous smile. "Lawson is a pig." Ryder grimaced at that. "But Demos is pretty damn cool.

And though I know you don't like them yet, I think Caemorn and Balthazar and Seeyr and all of them are interesting. I can't feel like a freak with you guys really. I mean I'm the most normal of all of you."

Ryder laughed. "Point taken! Yes, you fit in here very well."

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Grayson's smile though was fragile. "Yeah, I haven't felt that in a really long time. The last time I did was when I really didn't know what it was like to be other."

"You're not other here," Ryder said firmly.

"No, no, I'm not!" Grayson's laughter was relieved and shocked sounding. "No, I'm totally not. And it's amazing. But I don't trust it. I'm terrified of this. Of this belonging, of this possibility of not living in fear all the time..."

Ryder saw Grayson's shoulders lift and relax. Grayson had learned hard lessons from those on the street that were desperate or just cruel. He was seeing a way to let down his guard a little bit. To feel a part of something.

I shouldn't have come up. I should have just walked him to the door.

Ryder glanced back up. Grayson was smiling faintly again. "I don't intend to hurt you, Grayson."

"But you might?" Grayson's eyebrows lifted again.

"No. No, I won't." Ryder shook his head. He most definitely would not. He truly was here to keep Grayson safe. Yet he was also seeing that being alone with him, drinking wine, had nothing to do with that. "But I was not as clear with myself about my intentions for coming up here. Now that I do, in fact, know that the dorms are spelled against Vampires, the smart thing to do would be for me to return to the Weryn and ensure that Lawson leaves tomorrow."

“Yeah, yeah, I could see that. That would be smart. And I should get some sleep because today--is it still today?--has been incredibly long,” Grayson agreed with him.

Ryder’s shoulders slumped. “Yes, that would be best.”

“Except that I didn’t ask you up here only to have you leave,” Grayson said. “And I’m really, really not ready to just let go of you.”

Ryder’s gaze swung up to Grayson’s beautiful face, confused. “What are you saying?”

“I asked you up here because I can’t stop imagining what it would be like to kiss you,” Grayson said and swallowed.

“Kiss me?” Ryder’s eyes hooded.

“Yeah, kiss you. And I can picture how it would be to have you curled around me when I sleep.” Grayson smiled.

Ryder could picture that, too. The warmth of Grayson’s naked body pressed against his own. The smell of his blood and cum and sweat and... Ryder’s cock ached as much as his fangs.

“I wonder what it would be like not to have to hold back with someone. So if you wake up and I’m floating... Well, no big deal, right?” Grayson said with a twist of a grin. “I sort of thought you wanted that too. Maybe not the floating part.”

Ryder blinked slowly. “So you brought me up here to--”

“Ravish you. Yep, that’s about it,” Grayson told him and took another swallow of wine. “Even though it’s a bad idea. Every instinct I have is telling me I should find an

anonymous stranger to fuck and burn it out of my system--”

“Who?!” That came out almost like a snarl. Ryder had a feeling his eyes were glowing and his fangs were out. “Caemorn?!”

Grayson though did not look alarmed, but instead blinked. “Caemorn? Kaly? Uhm, he’s handsome, for sure.”

“You want him?” Ryder was suddenly pressed up against Grayson’s front as if to physically speak to him that he wanted no one else. Certainly not Kaly!

Grayson’s mouth quirked into a real smile. “No. He’s not my type. You’re my type. But I...”

“But what?” Ryder’s voice was softer now. There was not a threat from another.

“But I like you.”

It was Ryder’s turn to blink. “And this is a problem?”

“I don’t know. This place makes me want to take risks. Just let it all hang out and not care what the consequences are,” Grayson admitted. “I’ve never just let go. I’ve never wanted to.”

Ryder feathered one hand through Grayson’s hair. “If you wish me to go, all you need to do is say it. I will go.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Grayson said as he reached up and curled an arm around Ryder. “I’m afraid of... well, it doesn’t matter, because I want this more. So much more.” But then Grayson finished his glass and grabbed the neck of the bottle. “But if you must go off and be all noble and deal with your Vampire politics, I understand. I

will go finish this bottle of wine and jerk off in the--”

Grayson did not get to finish that sentence. Ryder had swooped in and covered that mouth with his own. The kiss was deep and wine-soaked. He chased the taste of the Spectre along Grayson’s palate. The wine had never tasted so good.

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His fangs were fully out when he broke away. Grayson was breathing hard. The whoosh and shush of his blood and the hammering of his heart was in Ryder's ears. He felt it thundering in his own chest. Echoing.

"It is actually very dangerous to sleep with a Vampire. We feed even when we're unconscious if we have a partner nearby," Ryder whispered, his forehead pressed against Grayson's.

"Oh."

Ryder grinned. "I'll just have to stay awake."

"Or you can sleep and feed from me. If you like." Grayson returned that grin.

Ryder shivered. "Dangerous."

"All of this is."

He looped an arm around Grayson's waist and the two of them headed towards Grayson's bedroom.

### RULES

Grayson took a slug of the wine and then kissed Ryder. He loved how the wine tasted as it passed between them. The rasp of fangs against his tongue as he chased the alcohol had his cock stiffening in his pants. He wasn't the other one in this relationship. They were both other and it was normal. He didn't have to hide and he

didn't want Ryder to hide either.

He grasped the front of Ryder's shirt and pulled the Vampire down the hallway to his room. Ryder laughed into their kiss, delighted, evidently, by his enthusiasm. But who could be less than enthusiastic with Ryder? He was perfect.

Grayson's free hand roamed over the hills and valleys of that massive chest. He slipped along Ryder's sides and over his powerful back. He dragged his fingernails down the planes of muscle, loving how they flexed and moved beneath his palm.

They were at the door to his bedroom and he blindly felt for the doorknob, but couldn't locate it. Yet he didn't want to break their kiss. The tongue and fangs and lips and heat and wine. It was so good. Ryder's right hand left Grayson's hip and suddenly there was a click and the door opened. Warm golden light spilled out of the inviting space. Ryder surprised him by pulling out of their kiss to look around. His silver eyes widened then he nodded.

"It's you," Ryder said.

Grayson tugged his Vampire inside and shut the door with his foot.

"Maybe. I don't know. I've never had someplace this nice," Grayson admitted. "Not even when I lived with my mom and stepdad."

Ryder's eyes flickered from the crackling fire to Grayson's face. Interest and concern was written large in those predator's eyes. Grayson put the bottle of wine down and started to undress. He didn't want to speak of the past. He wanted to forget it. Especially now. The past would have him freezing up--not because sex with a virtual stranger was dangerous--but because sex with someone he would see the next day and the next and who looked at him like that was the dangerous part.

“The rooms are supposed to reflect their owner’s taste,” Ryder said.

“These were meant for someone else, remember?” Grayson pointed out. “This must be Gregory’s taste.”

“I don’t think so.” Ryder’s gaze swept the room. “It feels like you.”

Grayson thought so too. He’d felt that way the moment he’d stepped inside. Even now, it felt incredibly comfortable and familiar to him. That was one reason he wasn’t experiencing the usual anxiety of being in a new place where he didn’t know the exits. He felt he did know where he was down to the very last inch. And he knew he was safe here. The Ever Dark would take care of him.

Grayson frowned at that last thought. Why would the Ever Dark--if it could think at all--care about him? Then again, why would all those Immortals take him under their wings as they had? They and this place felt like his.

But Grayson shook himself. These fancies were distracting him from what he wanted. Which was Ryder. Naked. Erect. And all his for the taking. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to top or bottom tonight. He knew he wanted to do both with Ryder and lots of other things, too, but even his boundless enthusiasm for the Vampire couldn’t obscure that he was tired. So he might only get a few of those delights before sleep claimed him.

“I want that shirt off.” Grayson nodded towards Ryder’s top. “I’ve been itching to get my hands on your chest.”

Ryder complied with an easy grace. It shouldn’t have been sexy for someone to simply just lift their arms and pull off a long sleeved shirt. But it was when Ryder did it. He ran a hand through his hair as static electricity had mussed it. Grayson stopped toeing off his boots to reach over himself and run his hand through the short sides.

Ryder's hair seemed softer to him somehow than normal human hair and blacker too, like a raven's wing, reminding him of the flock of birds he had shifted into earlier. So black it was almost blue. His fingers feathered through it and he wondered if there was something of every animal that Ryder could shift into about his body.

"Nice tats. Are those all the animals you can shift into?" Grayson asked as Ryder turned his head into Grayson's hand and kissed his palm.

"Yeah. Demos calls it my menagerie."

"Will you show me them all sometime?"

"The tattoos?"

"No." Grayson laughed. "Your other forms. I've seen the bear and the birds. But I want to see the others."

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“Perhaps.” Ryder smiled almost secretively. “Which one would you most like to see?”

Grayson’s eyes eagerly devoured all of the forms from a magnificent stag to a lion. “Maybe it’s boring, but... the wolf. I want to see you as a wolf.”

Ryder nodded as if this made sense to him. “Wolves are beautiful.”

“I bet you’re a beautiful wolf.”

“You’ll have to make your own determination.”

Ryder’s lips drifted down to the pulse point at the wrist and those silver eyes hooded as he rested his mouth there. Grayson stilled, suddenly very aware of his heartbeat, too. His breath caught when Ryder kissed his inner wrist. It was such a delicate spot. The veins were near the surface. A human could bleed out if those were damaged there. He swallowed deeply as Ryder brought his hand down between them, resting it against the center of his chest. Grayson flexed his fingers, wanting to touch, but Ryder held him easily where he was.

“Rules,” Ryder said and the word had Grayson frowning.

“No.”

“Yes.” Ryder smiled. “You need to agree to these or we stop right now.”

“Are you kidding? You want this as much as I do! Your cock is going to bust through

that zipper,” Grayson groaned.

Those leather pants showed off that large bulge quite nicely. Grayson wondered if he would get a chance to taste Ryder’s cum. Could a Vampire’s semen turn one into a Vampire? Or was it different in any way? Was it dead? He realized he had no idea. Maybe he could listen to what Ryder had to say for a little while.

“Keep undressing and we’ll talk as we do,” Grayson said and pointedly pulled his hand away from Ryder.

The Vampire though was not trying to hold on. If he had been, Grayson knew that only using his powers--and a lot of them--could he have broken away otherwise. That should have bothered him, but it didn’t. There was almost a thrill at being this close to a fire that could burn, but instead only gave warmth. Then again, he, too, could have ripped Ryder’s head off with a thought so maybe they were both playing with fire.

Ryder grinned and shook his head. But not in disagreement as he unlaced his boot as he said, “Do you want me to feed from you?”

Grayson--whose hands had been on his belt--froze and he blinked. “Oh, yeah! For sure. I want to experience that. Do I get to taste your blood?”

Ryder froze. “No, Grayson, there’s a great risk you could turn even if you weren’t wholly near death.”

“Oh, right.” Grayson was shocked at his own disappointment. “Totally makes sense. So no, that’s out then.”

Ryder still wasn’t moving. His expression was strange. Taut and twisted for a moment. Grayson half thought he might start putting his clothes back on and take off.

Desperate for that not to happen, Grayson said, “Cum. What about that? Can I suck you off?”

Silver eyes were focused once more on his face. “Yes. That’s... that’s relatively safe.”

“Relatively?” Grayson laughed.

“Nothing is completely safe with me or any Vampire, Grayson,” Ryder said almost coldly.

“I’m not some shrinking violet here,” Grayson pointed out as the belt slithered from the loops of his pants. He was not a belt person. Why had he agreed to a belt? This whole outfit was being pushed into the farthest corners of the closet, warm or not.

“I realize that. You might have some rules, too. But I’m not your food,” Ryder said bluntly.

Grayson blinked. “Okay, I see your point. But I can kiss a cow--in a platonic way--and not end up eating them.”

Ryder’s forehead scrunched up and then he was laughing. “Sorry! Just trying to imagine you kissing a cow!”

Grayson grinned and pulled the sweater and shirt off at the same time. He was blinded for a moment, only able to see the firelight flickering through the weft and weave of the material. Ryder helped him pull it completely off. Grayson quickly went to flatten his hair as he felt it standing on end. Nothing was more unsexy than staticky hair. But Ryder didn’t seem to feel that way. His silver eyes were glowing—literally glowing—in the soft firelight of the room. He tossed Grayson’s sweater and shirt over the back of the couch and then smoothed down Grayson’s floating hair.

“Ugh, I’m all messy,” Grayson groused.

“You’re beautiful,” Ryder murmured.

The Vampire cupped his face and they were kissing again. The faint remnants of wine were on Ryder’s tongue and another taste. It was hard to qualify. It was addictive though. Grayson surged up against him, searching for more. Ryder’s massive arms encircled him, crushing Grayson to him, and it was marvelous. Grayson’s feet actually left the ground a few inches. Ryder’s strength was amazing. That taste... that taste though was...

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Ryder was abruptly pulling away, holding him at arm's length, and breathing heavily.

“What's wrong?” Grayson demanded.

But Ryder shook his head as if to clear it and said, “Rules. Rules first.”

“Okay.”

Grayson's tongue tingled. But he didn't mention that. He didn't mention how that tingling spread either to the very tips of his fingers and toes and the top of his head. The urge to dive back in and demand more of that taste was almost overwhelming. But he shoved it down. He didn't force people. If they didn't want to be touched, he didn't touch them. If they wanted to stop, he stopped. Consent usually was the only power that others had over him. So he obeyed it.

“I find you...” Ryder licked his lips. “I'm very attracted to you.”

Grayson grinned. “I am to you as well. Good thing, huh?”

“Yes... and no.” Ryder scrubbed a hand over his beard. “I asked if you would let me feed from you, but perhaps I shouldn't. That might not be wise.”

Grayson studied the Vampire's face. Part of him wanted to howl that he wasn't afraid of Ryder, that he wanted to know the feeling of fangs at his throat, but, again, consent was important. Feeling in control was important for people. He had to give Ryder that.

He stepped closer. Ryder froze again. Grayson moved slowly enough that Ryder could use normal human speed to pull away as he cupped Ryder's cheek. When the Vampire turned his head into his palm once more and kissed it, letting his eyes slide shut, Grayson knew it was okay.

"You're afraid of losing control with me," Grayson guessed, even as he felt somewhat ridiculous saying that.

Ryder nodded, eyes still closed, mouth moving languidly against Grayson's skin. His cock ached from the erotic touch.

Why would he inspire such emotion in Ryder? The Vampire was old. Surely, he'd had sex with loads of humans. But maybe he didn't care if he drained them dry or not. And if that was the case then this was a bigger deal than Grayson had even considered. But, then again, he couldn't imagine Ryder killing people without cause. That wasn't in his nature. So there was something about Grayson, in particular, that made him feel this way.

"Okay, so what if I suck you off and then top you?" Grayson asked. "Will that help if I'm the one in control of what we do?"

Ryder's eyes opened to slits. "You want to top me?"

"Oh, hell, yes," Grayson said with an unapologetic grin. "All this strength you've got? So big. So bad. And to see you mewling like a kitten when I'm inside of you? God, I'm going to cum just thinking about it."

Ryder's chuckles tickled his skin. "You are a revelation."

"I try. But it's hard to surprise a guy that's nearly half a millennia old."

Another chuckle. “One would think it would be, but you’re full of surprises. I agree to your terms.”

“Good, because I really don’t think I can hold out much longer,” Grayson told him. “But we need lube and condoms--”

“Lubricant is in the bathroom. Second drawer from the left.” Ryder sniffed the air as he said this.

“You can smell the lubricant?” Grayson’s eyebrows lifted.

“Yes.” A flash of an impish smile.

“And the condoms? You can’t get diseased and--”

“Neither can you from me. Our cum doesn’t not contain enough of what changes humans to harm either,” Ryder said.

“Bareback. Wow. I’ve never... never done that.” Grayson blinked even as his cock pressed against the zipper.

“Do you not want to?”

“Oh, no, no, I do. I most certainly do. Just so many things haven’t been an option until now. With you.” Grayson swallowed. “Let me get that lube and you make yourself comfortable.”

Grayson was quickly turning and hurrying to the bathroom. He really thought he might cum if he kept looking at Ryder, feeling Ryder’s breath and lips against his skin, and talking about fucking bareback.

The bathroom was bigger than he remembered. There was what he would call mood lighting with strips of low, blue light that ran underneath the cabinets and around the outside of the mirror. It gave him more than enough light to find the lubricant in the drawer where Ryder had said it would be.

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Good man, Balthazar. Prepared for everything.

He grabbed the tube of lubricant and padded his way back out to the bedroom. He stopped dead when he saw Ryder lying on his back on the bed--completely nude--legs spread, right hand playing with his cock and left hand twisting his own nipple.

“You’re trying to kill me.” Grayson reached down and squeezed his own cock through his pants to stop from cumming.

Ryder laughed delightedly and crooked a finger for him to come near. “I want your mouth on me, Grayson, then your pretty cock in me.”

“You really are trying to kill me. Death by orgasm. What a way to go.” Grayson grabbed the wine bottle and took a large swig of it while Ryder grinned at him. As he put a knee on the bed, he paused though and said, “You want to stop, you just say and we stop. You don’t like something, you tell me. No questions asked. No disappointment. It’s all good.”

Ryder studied his face. “You understand what it is like to be dangerous to your partner.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement. Grayson nodded, unwilling to speak of his past adventures. How he’d lost control once and never again. Never, ever again.

But I can let go a little here. I can. Ryder is strong. He’s not going to be afraid of me.

“I’ll tell you. And you will do the same, yes?” Ryder asked.

Grayson nodded. "I'm open to most anything with you. I want to do everything with you."

He was surprised by how easily those statements rolled off of his lips. It wasn't that he was ashamed of his desires. It was the eagerness and the surety that he could open himself fully to them that surprised him.

Ryder just smiled and gave a nod.

The man has over 400 years of experience. He's probably seen and done everything. So I just need to give him a good time. And have one myself.

"Lube. I will prepare myself as I have a feeling you will need to be inside of me in a hurry." Ryder made grabby hands at the lubricant.

Grayson tossed it to him. Another swig of wine and then he was shimmying out of his pants. He cock ached as it hit the cooler air of the room. Ryder's eyes immediately went to it and there was a flare of silver light in them. But then he was spreading his thighs and reaching between them for his opening. Grayson's mouth was so dry. More wine. Much more wine.

Ryder slicked two fingers with the clear lubricant. He reached between his thighs, sliding his feet up, and sliding his pointer finger--slick with lube--over his anus. Those glistening fingers thrust inside of that pink ring of muscle. Grayson wobbled. He caught himself on the bed. Ryder grinned at him.

"You look a little out of control there," Ryder said.

His first finger wiggled inside of him up to the knuckle. In and out. Thrusting. Ryder moaned and let his head fall back on the mound of pillows. They would smell like him--like them--after tonight. Grayson would be able to turn his head and the scent of

Ryder would fill his nose.

It doesn't have to just be one night. It won't be just one night.

Ryder put a second finger inside himself. He pushed them all the way up to the root, groaning. His cheeks flushed and his pupils expanded.

A third finger and they were all moving in and out, stretching him. He spread those fingers wide and let out a hiss of pleasure-pain. Grayson imagined that it was his cock instead of those fingers inside of this powerful, amazing body. This Vampire's perfect form. He shivered and his cock jerked.

"Mouth. On me," Ryder demanded in a husky, deep voice.

He swallowed another mouthful of wine before he set the bottle aside. He clambored up onto the bed and covered that moaning mouth. He let the wine pass into Ryder's mouth. The Vampire sucked his tongue in as well. Then he was kissing down Ryder's chin and his throat. He kissed the soft skin of the hollow and let his tongue linger over the right nipple.

Grayson was looking for differences. Did a Vampire taste different? Yes. There was that hint of something more that he couldn't figure out. Did a Vampire's skin warm or did it stay cold? It warmed. Ryder was hot. Grayson's tongue danced along that heated, flushed skin. He kissed and licked down the hills and valleys of muscle in Ryder's stomach until he reached the beginnings of the treasure-trail of hair that led to his cock.

He felt that straining cock painting lines of precum over his bare stomach and chest as he moved. Grayson resisted the urge to run his fingers over the wet trail and lick his fingers clean. No, he wanted to taste Ryder first from the source.

Those dark, tight curls of air were perfumed with Ryder's male musk. Grayson pressed his nose against them and breathed in. Ryder. Unadulterated. Then he was at the base of Ryder's cock, which was as big as the rest of him.

Perfectly proportioned.

Grayson almost giggled. This monster of a cock made him almost wish he was bottoming this first time. It was long and thick and flushed dark purple. He'd need a hell of a lot more stretching before he could have accepted that member inside of him without pain. Even with plenty of stretching, it would still hurt a little bit. But that was all right. Pain and pleasure were twins during sex.

He licked the furry balls that were already tight against Ryder's body. He shivered again at the greater amount of that taste. Then he slowly followed the prominent vein on the back of Ryder's cock. The Vampire let out a hiss and a quick glance upwards showed those silver eyes were hooded and glowing.

Grayson mouthed the turgid member. The taste increased and he found himself licking it like it was a savory lollipop. When he reached the top, there was a pool of precum sitting in the slit. He lightly ran his tongue along that opening, scooping up the cream and swallowing it. His eyelids shut and he experienced a whole body shudder.

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Not the same as a human. But familiar. So familiar...

He opened his mouth without opening his eyes and sank down onto the head. He felt the spongy press of it against his tongue and palate. He closed his lips tight around it and sucked. Ryder's hips bucked, but a touch of Grayson's power held them down. He heard the Vampire growl and thrash.

Let go, Ryder. I can hold you.

Grayson curled one hand around the base of Ryder's cock. He would not be able to deep throat this. Not this time anyways. So he needed to give the whole of this beautiful cock attention at the same time. He moved up and down on the cock with his mouth, taking in a little more each time. As it was though, he could only get an inch or so below the cockhead before he had to pull up. He moved his hand up and down with his mouth, squeezing and massaging the length as he did so.

His other hand slipped between Ryder's thighs and found that slick opening. Two of his fingers thrust inside. Ryder let out a throaty moan and tried to lift those hips up, but Grayson controlled them. He felt the Vampire testing him, his strength, and he loved it.

I can hold you. It's okay. Let go.

Ryder's legs fell down on the bed. His heels drummed a tattoo of need against the comforter. His hands fisted in Grayson's hair. Large hands. Hands that could cover his entire skull and crush it. But they were light as feathers. Grayson sucked on Ryder's cock harder as he pulled off it with a pop.

His eyes opened and he looked up at Ryder who was staring down at him with those glowing, slitted silver eyes. Color had flooded his cheeks and chest. The firelight painted him in gold as well. He was mesmerizing. So strong. Yet his. Under his control while he was under Ryder's protection.

He went down on Ryder again, swallowing as much as he could, and then moving frantically up and down. His fingers twisted inside of Ryder, rubbing and moving. He knew Vampires did have prostates when Ryder bucked strong enough that Grayson almost lost control of him. But he held on.

He let Ryder arch when he felt that cock plump impossibly more in his mouth, making it so that only the head was inside of him. He suctioned his lips around the length even as he stroked Ryder and sent three fingers inside of the Vampire's body.

The first taste of Ryder's cum was a revelation. His mouth tingled. His throat tingled. His whole body tingled. For a moment, Grayson saw Nightvallen from above as if he were flying--as if he were one of the birds that Ryder could shift into--above the vast city. But no, he had no feathers. He was simply flying, using his gift to fly through the air like Superman. And then the flock surrounded him. The ravens so black they were almost blue with silver eyes were all around him. He and Ryder were flying together.

"I told you I could fly!" he heard a voice teasing and realized it was his, but it didn't sound like him at all.

The raven cawed!

Grayson laughed, but that brought him back to Earth as he nearly lost some of that delicious cream that he was swallowing. One last swallow and it was done. But he still ran his tongue over the spongy head, wanting to prolong things.

He and Ryder were in his bed. They weren't flying. His body did feel light though. So light. He didn't feel the bed beneath his knees. That was when he realized that they were both levitating about a foot off the bed. Ryder opened his eyes and turned his head to the side. There was no gasp. No scream. No demanding to know what was happening. Instead, he turned back to Grayson and gave a grin.

"If this is what you do when I cum," Ryder murmured, "I can't wait to see what happens when you do."

Grayson slowly pulled off that spent cock that was already hardening again. With a Cheshire-like grin, he said, "Let's find out."

## BODY LANGUAGE

Ryder's body hummed with pleasure. He was grinning so hard and wide his mouth almost hurt from it. The urge to laugh or moan was interchangeable. He and Grayson were literally hovering two feet from the surface of the bed and Grayson was now looking down as if he were a cat in a tree in need of rescue.

"We aren't going to have sex floating?" Ryder teased. "I've never done that."

Grayson let out a pleased chuckle. "When I lose control--and I intend to fully--we will drop like two bowling balls onto the floor."

"There's a bed under us," Ryder said with an eyebrow waggle.

"We'll bounce off that sucker and hit the deck. Trust me. I've done this before," Grayson said.

Ryder let out a choked laugh, picturing it in his head. When Grayson gave him a hard look, he stifled his amusement--partially--and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just

thinking about how that would look.”

“Well, you are the first person in it with me. Normally, I’m alone after an erotic dream. Most times erotic anyways.” Grayson frowned slightly. “I’ve never done this with another person.”

Ryder’s eyebrows rose. He shouldn’t have been surprised. Grayson had told him how careful he was with his powers being seen. If having sex usually triggered him, the young man would have been far less skilled than he clearly was. The sheer comfort with both of their bodies told him that Grayson enjoyed sex thoroughly and had explored it just as thoroughly. Yet he couldn’t help but feel a bit touched that he had caused Grayson to lose control like this. It was a first for both of them.

“I see. So we’re stuck?” Ryder couldn’t help that continued amusement.

Grayson’s brow furrowed. “I’ve never actually done a controlled landing, but it should be possible. I mean... theoretically.”

“Well, I’m pretty hardy and quick. So if you drop us I’ll keep us both from being hurt,” Ryder assured him.

“You haven’t ever had sex with an Ashyr, have you?” Never had them... do this?” Grayson asked, eyes searching his face with surprising alertness.

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Was Grayson jealous at the idea of other lovers with powers like his? But no, Grayson was hungry to understand his powers. Ryder felt foolish for a moment, but still... there might be something else behind those tawny eyes.

“No, I haven’t. The only Ashyr I know is called Dani and only tangentially through Demos,” Ryder answered.

“I bet you don’t have relationships outside of your Bloodline,” Grayson said.

His eyes were no longer on Ryder, but instead was studying the bed beneath them as if gauging the distance and psyching himself up.

“I’m with you,” Ryder found himself saying.

Grayson turned back to him. “What? Oh... yeah, but I’m not a Vampire so I don’t count.”

Ryder blinked. “That’s not... no, that’s how this works.”

“I meant a relationship-relationship,” Grayson said, using his usual bluntness that seemed to get through all of Ryder’s fuzzy thinking on situations. “You can’t have a real relationship with a human unless you’re planning to turn them. We don’t live long. We age. So you could only really love another Vampire, right?”

Ryder considered this. “There’s something to what you say. I’ve not had much time for romance--”

“You’ve lived almost 500 years.” Grayson lifted an eyebrow at him. “That’s not enough time?”

Ryder grimaced. “You’d be surprised how fast it goes when you no longer have a ticking clock. Years flow together then decades and then centuries.”

“Hmmm, well, am I right that you’ve never had any relationships outside of the Weryn then?” Grayson asked, once more looking everywhere but at him.

Ryder caught Grayson’s chin and sat up. It truly felt like there was someone holding him in place, keeping him from falling.

“Are you worried about what that means about us?” Ryder asked.

Grayson lifted an eyebrow. “Ah, no, because there is no us. This is just fun. I’m not a Vampire. I don’t want to be a Vampire so I won’t be around long enough for you to have time for a romance with me. After all, if 500 years wouldn’t be enough then I highly doubt however long I’ve got would be.”

Grayson appeared amused, but his statements did seem pointed. Ryder was surprised that they hurt him. Not because it wasn’t true. Vampires only had true romantic relationships with ones they wished to turn and other Vampires. Getting attached to a mortal was the height of foolishness. It was also dangerous.

“Vampires need to be careful,” Ryder said.

“Because you eat your lovers?” Grayson asked, still amused.

“No... yes, that’s part of it. But we have to be careful not to get too attached to anything that will not last,” Ryder explained.

Grayson frowned. "Why?"

"Because eternity can be a heavy burden sometimes. Loving a mortal--and not turning them--makes us feel the transitory nature of existence. It's... unnatural to us," Ryder strove to explain. "It can cause us to pine and that isn't good."

The frown cleared up and there was an almost look of pity on Grayson's face. "I get it. Though I imagine it's pretty hard on the human, too, who loves you, but ages, withers and dies while you stay the same. Fresh and energetic."

"I imagine it would be. Which is why I don't look for comfort, friendship or anything other than blood and sex outside of my own kind," Ryder explained.

"Right. Exactly. So we're both not looking for anything other than a good time from one another. A really fleeting good time," Grayson said.

Grayson's gaze was steady with no hurt in it, but nothing else in it either. It was as if he had shut the curtains and locked the doors. And Ryder felt a stab of guilt as if he had just lied. But he hadn't. It was the truth. This was very fun with Grayson. He enjoyed the young man. He was drawn to him, yes, but that was normal after what they had experienced. Grayson just made the protector in him come out, the alpha that wanted to keep those in his pack safe. Not that Grayson seemed to terribly need protection. The young man had saved Ryder and then himself. But still...

If only we had met under different circumstances! Ryder grimaced. Not here. Not at the school. Now Grayson is off limits, even if he isn't Ashyr which is insane. He doesn't even wish to be a Vampire!

But that too blank expression worried Ryder and hurt him, too. He truly wanted to be here and for them both to enjoy the time they did have together. They just couldn't imagine that it wasn't anything more than fleeting as Grayson had said.

Ryder though found himself saying, “I do not mean--”

Ryder did not get a chance to finish that sentence--and perhaps that was a lucky thing as he wasn't sure exactly what he was going to say, but it would have been something, anything, to have Grayson look at him with joy again--because they suddenly both crashed to earth. And just like Grayson had said, they bounced. Luckily, Ryder landed on his feet and grabbed Grayson, stopping the young man from hitting the ground.

“Whoa! Shit! I didn't realize it was going to just stop like that,” Grayson said and blinked a few times.

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Ryder set him down carefully on trembling legs. Grayson stood there, quietly, looking at the fire and not at him. It popped and cracked. The golden light it gave off painted Grayson's tawny skin. Ryder traced the light and shadows it cast on Grayson's shoulder with his fingertips.

"Perhaps you should speak to an Ashyr Vampire. Maybe they could help you learn to use your powers better," Ryder offered, even as inwardly he cringed at the idea.

Why? Shouldn't I wish this for him? Ryder challenged himself.

But he knew that once the Ashyr were involved that he would be barred from seeing Grayson. They would all think that Grayson was Ashyr reborn, come back to them. And no filthy Weryn would be allowed to soil their possible Immortal's skin with his lips and breath and cum. No, Grayson would be Courted by the most powerful of the Ashyr Vampires. Though Grayson said he did not wish to be a Vampire now, they would change his mind. Or they would make it happen.

Doesn't his being Ashyr explain why the other Immortals cluster around him? Yes, it does...

"I think Balthazar took the memory of that Ashyr Vampire away. Otherwise, I think they'd already be here," Grayson said with a shrug.

Ryder's breath skipped. "Ah? Yes, yes, you're probably right."

"They'd want to know what exactly I can do and maybe why. They'd probably be freaked out that a human can do this," Grayson said.

No, they would think they already know why. And they might be right...

Grayson turned around in his arms, smiling again, seemingly focused on him again. Those eyes were “open” but perhaps not as much as in the beginning of their coupling. But Grayson was smiling. His hands ran up and down Ryder’s chest, seeming to relish every inch of him.

“But I don’t care about them right now,” Grayson said, his voice a little low and breathy.

“Oh?” Ryder’s cock was already starting to harden again.

Stay here, his mind whispered treacherously. Stay with me.

Grayson’s still hard cock pressed against his thigh. “No. I’m just interested in you.”

And Ryder’s heart did not skip a beat then, or so he would tell himself later. He did not feel a sense of joy that was so piercing it almost hurt. No, that couldn’t have happened. This was just a light, fun time that he did not want to have stretch on forever like an endless road in the moonlight.

No.

No.

No.

Grayson’s arms slid up and around his neck. He had to get up onto his tiptoes to have his mouth reach Ryder’s without Ryder lowering his head. He pressed a soft kiss to Ryder’s lips. He pulled back, tilting his head to the side, still smiling, and leaning in to kiss him again. He licked his lips as if Ryder was a fine wine or a sweet he was

tasting and evaluating whether it was to his taste or not.

“You are so serious now, Ryder. I’m going to think that you’re offended that I don’t want to spend eternity with you,” Grayson murmured.

Ryder’s smile was a little rigid. “I couldn’t have you even if I wanted you... and you wanted me.”

Grayson frowned. “Oh? Oh. Right. No fledglings from the school. Even though I’m not really a student, I’m close enough, right?”

Ryder gave a curt nod. “Exactly.”

“This game of chicken you’ve got going with Balthazar, Caemorn and the others, do you really think it’s going to work?” Grayson looked like he didn’t think so.

“It must. It is not safe this way.”

“All right. I see you’re married to that idea. So... why are you upset?” Grayson asked.

“I’m not.” Clipped. Curt. Cold. Ryder grimaced. He was upset and he did and didn’t know why. “I’m... I’m not. Not in the way you think.”

“I only know you’re upset suddenly and it has to do with me or something I’ve said,” Grayson told him.

“No, you’re wonderful. You’re perfect.” Ryder paused. Is that what he meant to say? Yes... Grayson was perfect in all of this. He wasn’t being so perfect. “I just... I like you. And even though I’m saying what’s between us is fleeting, it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t matter.”

Grayson looked away. “Okay.”

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“It doesn’t have to matter to you. I just want you to know that it matters to me,” Ryder said and clenched his jaw.

What was he saying? What did he mean?

Grayson slowly looked back towards him. “We’re going to see one another tomorrow and the night after that and the night after that. Especially if we’re going after the Pact. And I’m supposed to keep all those hungry students away from you so... if we have fun together that’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Of course.”

“If we enjoy it and look forward to the next time that doesn’t mean anything but that we are having a good time,” Grayson said.

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“I’d like to enjoy you. I’d like to do this again. Loads of times actually. We won’t get a chance to do everything I want tonight.” Grayson flashed him a smile.

Ryder actually blushed. “No, nor I.”

“So we’re just going to enjoy this and not worry about anything then? We have this time and then when it ends, it ends. No harm. No foul.” Grayson’s expression though was so blank as to be disconcerting.

Was this what Grayson wanted? Or was this what Grayson thought he did? Or were

they both just saying what they thought the other wanted to hear or what they thought they felt but really didn't?

"I want more of this too. I want to... enjoy you as well," Ryder admitted.

Maybe this night would be all they got. After all, the Ashyr would discover Grayson's ability at sometime. Sooner rather than later. And if Grayson really was an Immortal reborn then... well, then Grayson himself would not be interested in anything more with him. He was a Weryn and his and the Ashyr's Bloodlines were not terribly friendly. Not that the Weryn were friendly with any Bloodline, but he and Demos had taken out one of the Ashyr's damaged War children. They'd had to do it. They hadn't been able to wait for backup or alert the Ashyr to deal with this Childe themselves. So they were not a favorite.

"Then we're good. You're not upset anymore?" Grayson added.

"No. I'm not upset."

"It was my fault for talking." Grayson grinned. "Talking during sex is a bad idea. Talking before sex usually is. And talking after is completely verboten so--"

"How do you get your partners into bed if you do not speak to them at least beforehand? Do you grunt and point? Make hand gestures? Thrust your pelvis in their direction?" Ryder asked, a smile threatening to break out and wash his upset away. Grayson had that effect.

He actually knew the answer to that question. When he was shifted and with others of the Weryn, they communicated by the slightest of movements, sounds and scents. But he was curious what Grayson would have to say.

"You'd be surprised what a few hip thrusts can communicate." Grayson waggled his

eyebrows. “Here, let me show you.”

Grayson pushed his groin against Ryder’s. His cock, hard and leaking and needy, pressed against Ryder’s hip and then between his thighs. Lust bloomed within him again as if it were hot embers that were fed fresh, dry wood. Grayson was utterly intriguing and--

“And what about this move? What does it communicate to you?” Grayson asked as he leaned to the side, exposing his neck to Ryder.

Ryder’s eyes fixed on the pulse point in Grayson’s swan-like throat. His fangs slid out and were fully extended. His heart sped up, joining in rhythm with Grayson’s. The young man’s heart rate increased as he did this.

“I want to fuck you and then you can feed from me. Or if you can do it at the same time...” Grayson smiled bewitchingly at him as he suddenly broke out of Ryder’s light embrace and sauntered to the bed.

Ryder tracked him with his whole body. Grayson’s heart rate increased again, knowing the predator was at the forefront, but he still smiled. He laid down on the bed, almost coquettishly and started to fondle his cock. The other arm slid under his head as he regarded Ryder just as hungrily.

“You’ve seen the other in me and accepted it,” Grayson said. His thumb trailed over the head of his cock and pulled the slit apart. He shivered as he did it. “I don’t want you to hide who you are either. I know you’re a Vampire, Ryder. I want you to be one with me.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Ryder got out in a thick voice around his fangs.

He was not hungry for food. He did not need to slake his thirst. He wouldn't have agreed to do this if he had been the least bit interested in blood. But the thought of Grayson's blood on his tongue--hot and sweet and inviting--had his stomach clenching and his mouth dry as dust.

"Probably not," Grayson admitted. "But I'm open to it."

"I would say you were foolish, but I want to taste your blood very much."

Ryder stalked over to the bed. If Grayson resisted him or showed any hint that he wanted this to stop, Ryder would stop. He was in control of the predator. The predator did not control him.

Grayson laid back on the bed, completely seemingly at ease. His eyes tracked Ryder's approach and his breath caught when Ryder pounced onto the bed. He'd used his Vampire speed so likely it had appeared to Grayson that he'd disappeared from beside the bed and reappeared straddling the young man.

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His hole ached to be filled almost as much as his fangs desired to thrust into willing flesh. Normally, he was the one topping when he fed, but this actually better, because there was an equality about it. And, besides, he had always been quite good at topping from the bottom.

He positioned himself above that hard, straining, leaking cock. He could feel the body head rising from Grayson's form. His eyes became slits and, as was always the case when hunting prey, he could see the veins and arteries underneath the skin. They seemed to rise to the surface. It was more like echo-location than actual seeing. His hearing became so acute and his eyesight so keen that the human body's tender spots were completely laid bare.

The throat.

The wrists.

The inner arms.

He slowly lowered himself onto Grayson's cock. The young man gasped as he led that lovely, pink-flushed head into his opening. He was slick enough that he slid down the whole length in one go. It bore down on Grayson's cock as soon as it was fully sheathed inside of him. His eyes slid fully closed and he breathed around the hard length. Grayson let out a moan that became a mewl of need as he released and bore down again and again.

The young man's hands were on his hips, urging them to move up and down. Grayson was not using his powers. That would have been the only way for the young

man to have the strength to move him. But the need in those frantic touches had him smiling. He opened his eyes once more.

Grayson's expression was one of abject pleading. Sweat had beaded on his upper lip and forehead as his arousal had grown from banked embers to a roaring fire. The young man clutched at his hips and keened.

Move.

Please.

Move.

I'm going to cum if you don't!

And I want to cum after feeling you move.

All of these words were unspoken. So Grayson was very capable of communicating without words.

Ryder began to slowly lift himself off of Grayson's cock. A slow, sensual slide. He shivered as the cock ran along his prostate and a hot, tingling sensation filled him. His hands though were steady as he moved them up Grayson's stomach, following the lovely lines of his chest. Grayson's stomach jumped at the touch even as the young man trembled with the effort of not cumming.

Ryder sank back down in one fluid movement and then was on the rise again. Grayson let out a gasp and clutched Ryder's hips so hard that his knuckles went white. Ryder's fingers kept moving up past the midpoint of Grayson's lovely chest, circling around the peaked nipples that could so easily be sucked on and made to bleed. Grayson's breath hitched in his throat and it was beautiful.

Those tingling strands of heat bloomed and then flooded Ryder. He could feel the arousal all the way to the tips of his fangs. He lifted his hips and inch then pushed down to the root of Grayson's cock again and again and again. Then he was rising so that the head of Grayson's lovely member was just about to slip out of his body and then he thrust himself down again so that Grayson's ball pressed against his ass. Heat and desire were like the flames of the firelight licking his body. He felt consumed by them.

His fingers now were at the hollow of Grayson's delicate throat. They dipped into that hollowed, followed its contours, tapped along its high ridges and then smoothed the deep valley. Grayson's eyes were hooded. His pupils were blown wide with desire. His lips were parted and that pink tongue swept out and licked those lips as if to welcome him.

Ryder leaned down and captured that mouth. He tasted Grayson on his tongue. He dragged a fang over it and blood--a thin stream--passed from Grayson's lips to his. He drank it down.

His whole body reacted to the taste. It was like tasting eternity. That's what he thought at that moment. Later he wouldn't understand what that meant. But at that moment he felt he had been waiting for this taste his whole life. Waiting to experience it again. And here it was. The oldest memory. The best memory. But the first time too.

For a moment, he wasn't in this bed with Grayson, but in another. Firelight painted the furs and pillows that were piled high beneath him and around him. Someone was curled on top of him. His right hand was running through their hair. They were humming.

"Aren't you glad that we did this?" a voice that he did not know and yearned for asked.

“I am. How could I not be?” His voice, yet not his voice, answered. “But it will cause trouble. The others will see it as a threat. Two of us together--”

“So we should just not love each other then? Because others might be threatened?” That beloved voice was angry and scared. Scared he would regret this.

“No, no, I said I was glad. I do not regret this. I never could. You are... the other half of me,” he admitted in that strange voice.

“Even though I can’t shift into a flock of birds or a wolf or a--”

“You’ve proved you are my match no matter what form I’m in,” he chuckled.

“We did fly together.” The beloved voice was pleased.

“Yes, we did. And we shall again.”

Ryder gasped and he was back in the moment. He had broken off the bloody kiss. He was staring down into Grayson’s face. The young man’s eyes opened and he looked confused. Why had Ryder stopped? He didn’t want it to stop!

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Ryder's hips had ground down on top of Grayson's cock. That beautiful organ was completely inside of him. Completely connected.

Not complete. Not yet.

He leaned down and kissed Grayson's lips once more. A hot, deep kiss full of desperation. But then he moved along Grayson's chin and jaw until he got to his throat.

And then he was biting down. His fangs were sinking into Grayson's flesh like twin knives into butter on a hot day. He wondered, just as he took that first sip, what he would see with a full mouthful of Grayson's blood. He wanted to see more, know more of this strange vision.

But this time, he only glimpsed the darkness behind his own eyelids. The blood filled his mouth and heated his throat and belly. But no further visions came. He would have felt disappointment if not for Grayson's arms winding around him, reminding him that this moment was what mattered, not some strange dream...

His ass clenched around that delightful cock. Grayson raked his nails down his back. Grayson's voice was in his ears as he felt the hot pump of cum flood his insides and his own cock spray its seed.

"Fly... we're flying," Grayson whispered.

Ryder's orgasm then swept him over the edge and he heard nothing more for some time other than the whoosh of Grayson's blood and the beating of his heart.

He came to when the young man sighed and his body went lax beneath him. Ryder's eyelids flew open and he realized he was still feeding. Terror like an ice pick stabbed his belly, but then, another part of him, though, It would be the excuse I need to turn him. If I've taken too much...

But he released Grayson's neck from his fangs and pulled back. He went to tap Grayson's cheeks to rouse him from, hopefully, a blissful orgasm and not from lack of blood. But Grayson's eyelids fluttered open of their own accord and he was smiling at Ryder. He reached up and ran the back of his hand along Ryder's cheek and into his beard.

"So... so amazing," Grayson said.

"Are you... are you all right? Did I take too much?" Ryder's body was rigid and yet trembling from the release.

He'd not orgasmed so hard in... he didn't know how long.

Grayson's eyes fully opened. They were clear and not hazy. "No, no, I'm fine. You took like two sips. That was it. Then you sort of... passed out."

Ryder blinked. "Did I? I... I was worried that I lost track of myself."

That sounded so odd. Had he passed out? He couldn't believe it! But Grayson seemed fine.

"No, you were perfect." Grayson studied him. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, I am. I just need some water. What about you?"

"Ah, sure."

Grayson reluctantly let him go and Ryder quickly got up. Both their bodies were sticky with sweat and cum. Grayson was still inside of him as he peeled himself off. He missed that connection between them. But he needed to orient himself. He felt so strange.

“That was... incredible, Grayson,” he assured the young man.

A brilliant smile. “You aren’t wrong. I feel like I could sleep for a week. As long as you are here.”

Ryder realized there was an unasked question in that. Would he stay? He’d told Grayson it was dangerous. And he’d just passed out after a--a vision or something? Could he risk sleeping beside this warm, alluring young man whose blood sang to him?

“I’ll be right back,” Ryder said.

He walked to the bathroom. Without much thought he washed himself off in the sink and cupped water in his hands to quench a thirst he didn’t have. Could he stay here? What had happened?

We did fly together.

Yes, we did. And we shall again.

With trembling hands, he filled a glass of water for Grayson then he turned the taps to make the water warm and wet a towel in it. He carried both back to the bedroom. He stopped at the foot of the bed. Grayson had created a nest for them. It was clear that he wanted Ryder to stay. He smiled awkwardly at Ryder.

“Are you okay?” Grayson asked again.

“Yes, I’m okay. I’m better than that.” And he wasn’t lying.

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He handed the water to Grayson while he used the towel to clean the young man's front off. Grayson laughed, telling him it tickled, but not batting his hands away. Then Grayson was sliding under the covers, leaving a space for him.

"Your blood was better than the wine," Ryder said.

Better than anything.

"Oh? That's good, right?" Grayson asked.

"Yes." And no. "But that just means I need to take extra special care. You did want to see me as a wolf, didn't you?"

Grayson's eyes widened. "You're going to--"

"Shift and sleep with you as a wolf so I don't..." drain you dry, "... snack on you."

"We mustn't have that. I'd want to be awake for that." Grayson touched the already healing fang marks on his neck.

"Indeed. So... would you like a furry companion in the bed or on the floor?" Ryder asked.

"In the bed! I bet you're fluffy." Grayson grinned.

"Yes, well, maybe a little." Ryder blushed. "Good night, Grayson."

“Ah, goodnight.” Grayson didn’t take his eyes off of him.

Ryder set down the towel and then he shifted into his wolf form. Grayson gasped and leaned forward. His eyes were huge. Ryder knew the form that he cut. He was a gray wolf with black and white markings. He was also huge. Bigger than a normal wolf by far. If he stood up on his hind legs he could place his front paws on Grayson’s shoulders and be eye to eye with the young man.

With a smile curling his lips, Grayson patted the bed beside him as if Ryder really were a wild animal he was trying to lure near. Ryder lightly jumped up onto the bed. Grayson’s mouth opened wide and then he surged towards Ryder and threw his arms around his wolf neck.

“Oh, my God! You’re amazing! You’re beautiful! Ryder... Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” Grayson asked.

His hands ran all along Ryder’s glossy coat. Grayson kissed his snout and his head between his flickering ears. The petting and the kissing was rather enjoyable. He had never let anyone do this. He settled down beside Grayson. The young man laid down too and pulled the covers over both of them. He put a protective paw around Grayson’s shoulders. Grayson buried his head into Ryder’s fur.

He felt the warm breaths from the young man even out as he fell into sleep. Ryder’s eyes took longer to slide shut. His mind was replaying the vision and then stopping on that moment where he had lost himself and hoped and feared he had taken too much blood from Grayson.

This is insane what I am doing.

Yet Ryder did not wish to stop or leave.

Finally, his eyes slid shut and he fell asleep and dreamed of flying with Grayson.