



Heir of Blood and Moonlight

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Description: Seven immortals. One queen. A love to die for.

I'm the last of my kind—the last living female vampire. The only one left to save my race from extinction. No pressure, right?

For three decades, I've been on the run, living as a human librarian and hiding from the shifters who slaughtered my family when I was a kid. But now they've found me, and the only way to protect myself—and my son—is to claim my throne and unlock my magic, gifted to my ancestors by the moon goddess Selene. And to do that, I need to bind myself to seven consorts. Seven insanely hot, powerful, and irresistible immortal men.

There's Gavin, the bossy undead vampire who awakens desires I thought long dormant.

Bastian, the tattooed shifter who betrayed his own kind to protect me.

Ash, the huge, brooding warrior who sees the strength in me I'd forgotten.

And Javier, my childhood guardian who's always been more than just a protector.

But it's not all steamy nights and second chances. Enemies lurk in every shadow, threatening everything I hold dear. The ancient war between vampires and shifters could destroy us all, and the shifter king will stop at nothing to capture me.

I'm done running. Done hiding. I'll fight like hell to protect my newfound family—both my son and my consorts. I'm not just a librarian anymore. I'm not just a mom. I'm the last gods-damned vampire queen.

And it's time for me to reclaim my throne.

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Prologue

Once upon a time, back when the gods walked the earth, terrible demons found their way in from the shadow realm. They threatened to cover everything in darkness and despair. But don't worry, my shining girl, for this story has brave heroes too!

Three kind and powerful gods named Selene, Helios, and Eos saw the danger the demons posed. They joined hands and hearts to fight the vile demons. Selene was the gentle goddess of the moon, Helios the warm god of the sun, and Eos the hopeful goddess of the dawn. Together they were strong and wise.

To help them in the battle, each god shared some of their special magic with groups of humans they trusted most. Selene gifted magic to people who became like her, creating the vampires of the House of the Moon. They were fierce and graceful, and they could live forever, drawing power from blood and from moonlight. Helios gave power to warriors who could transform into mighty beasts, forming the House of the Sun. And lovely Eos blessed her chosen with command over nature's elements, and these witches made the House of the Stars.

The three magical houses and the gods fought the demons for a very long time. In the end, with the gods' guidance and their combined powers, they were victorious! The awful demons were pushed back into the shadow realm where they could no longer hurt the earth or its people. Everyone was so relieved. The gods thanked the magical warriors for their courage. Peace and happiness spread through the world again under the watch of the kind gods and the immortal guardians.

As time went on though, the shapeshifting warriors of the House of the Sun began to

forget their duty. When in their beast forms, they let the animal instincts take over too much, lashing out and damaging the land and other creatures. This made Selene and Eos very sad. They asked Helios to please help his chosen ones control themselves better. But proud Helios refused, not wanting to admit there was a problem.

With no other choice, Selene and Eos put their magic together and placed a spell on the House of the Sun warriors so they could only become animals under the light of the full moon. At all other times, they would be like normal humans, without special powers and able to get hurt like humans too.

This made Helios and his warriors very angry, because they felt Selene and Eos had betrayed them and taken away their gifts unfairly. Even though the reason was to stop the animal warriors from hurting others, they couldn't see past their wounded pride. So Helios and the House of the Sun pulled away from the other gods and houses, allowing bitterness and resentment to grow in their hearts.

The age of unity and peace had ended, and a new time of distrust between the houses began, with each thinking themselves better than the others. Selene, Eos and the Houses of Moon and Stars hoped Helios and his warriors would see the error of their ways. But the House of the Sun only plotted and dreamed of a day they could strike back against the other houses.

And so, my shining girl, while the demons were defeated and the earth saved, a new danger lurked, not from a distant shadow realm, but from the shadows growing within the hearts of the shifters. And one day, that darkness would gather and lash out, and the greatest battle of all would begin.

Blood, blood all around me, but not a drop to drink. At least, not a drop of the right kind of blood.

On the dance floor below, a mass of bodies—mortal bodies, filled with mortal blood—swayed and ground against each other to the heavy, pulsing beat of the music. I had been down on the main floor for all of two minutes, searching for my quote-unquote friends, before I had to get out of the throng. Glad to be free of it, I lurked alone on the balcony bordering the hallway to the bathrooms.

Some of the tension in my body eased as I gripped the balcony railing. Some. I couldn't shake the feeling that coming here had been a mistake. I was dying, after all. And not in the sense that we're all dying. I was slowly wasting away without the one thing I truly needed to survive: immortal blood. Undead vampire blood. Shifter blood. Witch blood. Any would do, yet all I had was a waning supply of a tincture made from the blood of an undead vamp, slowing my inevitable decline to a glacial pace. Maybe I should have just ended it instead of dragging out my excruciatingly pathetic death, but I was afraid.

Of what came after.

Of what didn't.

I wasn't willing to leave this world when there was still something here worth living for. One single thing.

Mood darkening, I scanned the club-goers below, searching for Lily and Mark. They were late. But then, they were always late for everything. Librarian meetings, lunch dates, lectures.... Honestly, I only had myself to blame for actually being on time. Or for showing up at all.

Ugh. I didn't like people enough to be here, wasting whatever time I had left surrounded by strangers. I could have been home with my book and a glass of wine, while Sombra purred on my lap. The huge black stray tomcat had quickly snuggled his way into my heart. Outside of my hushed interactions with Lily and Mark in the

library, Sombra was all the companionship I needed.

“I should just go,” I muttered under my breath. I pushed off the railing and headed for the stairs, descending quickly.

I was across the dance floor and almost to the exit when someone grabbed my arm. My heart lurched into my throat, and my muscles tensed automatically, my rusty fight response kicking in.

“Sophie!” Lily squealed, throwing her arms around my neck and pulling me in for a quick hug. “You weren’t about to bail, were you?” She released me and stepped backward, planting one hand on her plump hip and wagging a finger at me with the other. “You promised me two drinks.” She made a fist and planted that hand on her other hip. “Two!”

My shoulders slumped. She was right. I had promised. Again, I should have known better. A promise was a promise, and I wouldn’t break it just because I was uncomfortable. Besides, maybe if Lily and Mark saw just how lame I was in social settings, they would recognize me for the lost cause I was and leave me be.

I glanced down at the hand still gripping my arm, expecting to see Mark’s dark, slim fingers, but the skin wasn’t nearly dark enough and the hand itself was far too robust to belong to him. I craned my neck, following the attached arm to its owner, and was surprised to find Bastian Garcia, the new library intern, standing at my shoulder. Mark was there, too, his familiar tall, lanky form behind the intern.

Bastian didn’t just work with us down in Special Collections in the basement of UW’s Allen Library, but since his focus within his degree program was on locating and preserving rare books, he had been spending a fair amount of time with us.

Bastian was a conundrum. His drab, ill-fitting V-neck sweaters, neat side part, and

Clark Kent glasses did little to hide the fact that he was hot as hell—built like an MMA fighter, with copper skin and the bold features of a Roman god. It was almost like he googled “how to dress like a dweeb” and was putting in minimal effort to play the part. Lily had nicknamed him Telenovela because of his Latin good looks, and she frequently speculated that his glasses were fake, their only purpose to tone down his good looks.

Honestly, I would not have been surprised if our little three-person department ended up in a mandatory workplace harassment training session one of these days because of her.

That Bastian was here suggested Lily and Mark were adopting him, as well. Or maybe they were auditioning him as my replacement. It had taken them over two years to get me to go out on the town with them, but he had come along after barely two months.

Bastian released my arm and pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. “Hey, Sophie,” he said, flashing me a lopsided smile that brought out hints of dimples.

Something about the way he looked at me ignited a spark low in my belly, and heat crept up my chest and neck. Feeling flustered, I raised a hand to push my own glasses higher up, only to realize as I touched the bare bridge of my nose that I had swapped them for contacts. My cheeks burned with embarrassment.

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I wasn't like Lily. I didn't have curves for days, or lustrous flaxen hair, or captivating sapphire eyes. Everything about my appearance was drab, from my mouse-brown hair to my washed-out skin and dull gray eyes. I remembered thinking I was pretty when I was a teen. Back then, my eyes had held the changing colors of the sea, my hair had shimmered auburn in the sunlight, and my pale skin had seemed alight with an inner glow. It was when I had still been in possession of a seemingly endless supply of Javier's blood tincture—more than enough to take a daily dose, rather than stretching it to once a week as I was forced to do now that my supply had dwindled. Each time I extended time between doses, my inner light seemed to fade further, my impending death casting a larger shadow over my life.

“Hope you don't mind me crashing the party,” Bastian said. And the way he gazed at me, with more than a spark of interest, made me wonder if I hadn't faded quite so far into bland obscurity as I thought.

“Not at all,” I said, returning his smile and fanning myself. “Whew! It's hot in here.” I looked at Mark, nodding a hello, then focused on Lily. “I was just heading out for some fresh air.”

Lily narrowed her eyes, clearly weighing my sincerity, but then her hands slipped off her hips and she shrugged. Her lips spread into her trademark contagious grin. “All you'll find out there is rain.” She linked her arm with mine and pulled me toward the bar. “Why don't you boys go find us a table,” she told the guys, raising her voice to be heard over the din. “We'll get the first round.”

I glanced over my shoulder, my eyes locking with Bastian's unexpectedly fierce stare. His features softened almost immediately, but I hadn't imagined the intensity

that had been there only a moment ago.

A tug on my arm drew my attention back to Lily and the crowded bar. She shouldered her way through the thirsty patrons, dragging me behind her.

“What’ll it be?” a bearded bartender asked, scanning the people on either side of us before locking onto Lily. I couldn’t help but be impressed with how quickly she had snagged his attention. But then, it was hard not to notice bright, sunny Lily in any crowd.

Lily quickly ordered for our group—four Long Islands—and we each carried two as we carefully navigated the crowd. I wondered how rude it would be if I pawned my cocktail off on Mark or Bastian and went back to the bar to ask about their wine options. Life was too short to waste it on drinks I didn’t like. Especially my life.

“Do you see them?” Lily asked, standing on tiptoes and extending her neck in an attempt to look over the other club-goers. Flat-footed, I still had inches on her.

I scanned the crowded lounge area at the front of the club. Mark was easy enough to spot, standing head and shoulders above pretty much everyone else around, with his long, black braids wound into a thick knot at the base of his skull. Bastian, who was no shrimp, barely reached Mark’s chin beside him. They had snagged a section of the built-in counter that stretched along the length of the wall from the end of the bar to the windows.

“I see them,” I told Lily, nudging her arm with my elbow. When she looked at me, I pointed toward the guys with my chin. “Over there.”

“Thanks, tall friend,” Lily said, flashing me a dazzling smile before pushing her way through the crowd toward our waiting companions, navigating on trust alone. I followed two steps behind her.

Someone bumped my arm, and cool liquid splashed the front of my loose-fitting white blouse while ice cubes scattered on the sticky cement floor at my feet. I had worn white because it made my pasty complexion look a little less wan. Big mistake.

“Crap,” I muttered, glaring down at the mostly empty glass and the ugly brownish stain covering the front of my shirt. It looked like I had drunk too much and thrown up all over myself. Delightful. I huffed out a breath, gritted my teeth, and took a step to follow Lily.

A steady hand rested on my forearm. “I’m so sorry,” a man said, drawing my attention up to his face. “Let me replace your drink.”

The breath lodged in my throat. Holy shit, he was gorgeous. Drop-dead, panty-melting, steal-your-breath gorgeous.

The dark-haired stranger had chiseled features, with a strong nose, sensually curved lips, and black eyelashes that made his gray eyes stand out. He had an air of utter self-confidence that seemed pulled from another era, and there was something primal about him, a wicked magnetism that shushed my self-doubts and drew me in.

My irritation over the spilled drink evaporated in an instant, and acting with uncharacteristic boldness, I shifted closer to him. The corners of my mouth turned upward. “All right,” I said coyly. Okay, maybe I was aiming for coy, but it came out as more of a shout, as required by the blaring music.

The handsome stranger leaned in, lowering his head to remedy our notable height difference, and a lock of his sleek black hair fell forward across one eye. He tilted his head, bringing his face even closer to mine. “Let’s get you cleaned up first,” he said, his eyes remaining locked with mine.

Tingles cascaded over my skin, and I nodded, unable to look away, like his stare had

ensnared me.

The captivating stranger took the glasses from my hands and did something with them—I didn't know what because I couldn't look away from him—then took hold of my hand and pulled me through the club back toward the stairs to the second floor.

I felt like I was dreaming as we climbed the steps.

As we entered the restroom.

As the stranger told the woman reapplying her lipstick to get out.

As he checked the stalls.

As he locked the bathroom door.

As he stalked toward me.

I stood beside the paper towel dispenser, my back to the wall. My brain felt fuzzy, and I shook my head. Something about this wasn't right. I didn't do this kind of thing. I didn't abandon my friends or wander off with strange men, and I absolutely did not let strangers lock me in an enclosed space with them. I could practically hear Javier's voice shouting in my head: RUN!

I sidestepped around the stranger, my hands held out in front of me to fend him off. And I could fend him off. Javier had ensured I knew how to take care of myself should the day ever come that he wasn't around to look after me himself. It was a day that had come nearly two decades ago, leaving me on my own.

"Shhh," the stranger said, his gray eyes glowing silver. Holy shit. He was an immortal. Not just that, but an undead vampire—the first I had seen since Javier

disappeared. “I will not harm you.” When he spoke, he was careful to conceal his elongated canines, but I knew they were there.

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My concerns dissipated, and I relaxed, lowering my arms. Of course, he wouldn't hurt me. The undead cherished living vampires. Why was I getting so worked up?

The immortal's gaze raked over my face, then dropped lower, to my neck, where his eyes lingered. "You are exquisite," he murmured, dragging his stare up to my eyes. He brought his hand up to his mouth and slipped his thumb between his lush lips and sharp teeth. When he pulled his thumb out again, crimson blood beaded and welled on the pad.

I licked my lips, my salivary glands tingling as I fixated on that ruby droplet. Immortal blood. It called to me, clouding my mind further, and tunneling my focus. All of existence centered on that droplet of blood. Of life from the undead.

The vampire moved closer, blocking me in between the paper towel dispenser and wall, but I no longer had any desire to run. I had no clue why I had ever felt the need to flee. I couldn't look away from the stranger's blood.

"Open for me," he said, his other hand settling on the curve of my waist.

I whimpered, my lips parting. Never in my life had I wanted to do anything more than I wanted—no, needed—to obey this man. This immortal. I had no idea who he was or how he had found me. I didn't care.

His hand slid behind my back, and the front of our bodies pressed together as he raised his bleeding thumb to my mouth. He slid the pad of his thumb along my bottom lip, coating it in his blood.

My tongue darted out involuntarily, and the instant the tip made contact with his blood, I let out a low, throaty groan. My eyes drifted shut and the flavor of him exploded across my tongue, making me see stars against the backs of my eyelids. I had never tasted anything so rich, so decadent, so delicious. So oddly familiar. My hands flew up, gripping the stranger's wrist, and with no further coaxing, I sucked his thumb into my mouth.

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Good girl."

Every nerve ending in my body lit up. Every synapse in my brain fired. I felt like I had been sleepwalking through life for years, but I was finally—finally—awake.

Too soon, the flow of blood from the vampire's thumb waned. I sucked harder, wanting more.

"That's enough for now," he said, pulling his hand away from my mouth.

Eyes squeezed shut, I still clutched his wrist in a tight grip, my chest rising and falling with each heaving breath. "More, please," I begged, licking my lips. I couldn't open my eyes. Couldn't look at him. I was too embarrassed by the all-encompassing need I felt, not just for his blood, but for him.

The stranger leaned in until our breaths mingled. "Not yet," he said, his whispered words a caress. A promise.

His hand slid over my hip, his fingers dipping into the front pocket of my jeans. His lips brushed against mine, and the gentle kiss sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my core. It wound tighter and tighter within me, blossoming into a needy ache. I squeezed my thighs together, seeking to relieve the mounting tension, and groaned, practically panting.

“The first taste can elicit an intense response,” the stranger said, then purred against my mouth. “Go ahead. Touch yourself.”

I shoved my hand into the front of my jeans so fast and hard that the friction burned the skin on the back of my hand, but oh my god, I didn't care because release came the instant my fingertip made contact with my aching clit. I gasped, pressing my fingers into the wetness drenching my sex. My toes curled, and I closed my eyes as I rode an unexpectedly violent wave of ecstasy.

The climax seemed to stretch on for an eternity. As it faded, I released a shaky breath and enjoyed the waning pulses of pleasure. When I opened my eyes again, I was alone.

I dazedly peered around the restroom, looking for . . .

Had someone else been here?

How had I ended up in the restroom, and why was my hand stuffed down the front of my pants?

Brow furrowing, I shook my head and pulled my hand free. I pushed away from the wall and moved to the sink to wash my hands. I couldn't recall coming into the restroom. I glanced at the stalls. I must have just come out of one, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember.

While I lathered the soap, I looked at myself in the mirror over the sink, my focus immediately drawn to the brown liquor staining the front of my white blouse. The spilled drink. I had come in here to clean up. Right. Duh.

I grabbed a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and turned on the faucet to wet them. Staring at my reflection, I dabbed the stain on my shirt. “This is hopeless,”

I muttered, raising my eyes to meet my reflection's gaze.

I froze, pleasantly surprised by what I saw. My eyes appeared brighter than usual, closer to blue than gray, and my lips and cheeks were unexpectedly rosy. I felt like I was staring ten years into the past, to a time when I had enough of Javier's blood tincture to take it every other day. I smiled at my reflection, thinking maybe Lily was right and getting out and around people was good for me.

I looked down at my shirt and sighed, giving up on removing the stain. It was a lost cause. I glanced back up at my face. But maybe I wasn't.

2

I pulled the bathroom door open, still feeling slightly dazed, and almost ran headlong into Bastian.

"Oh!" I stopped so suddenly that the door smacked into my backside as it swung shut. "Hey," I said, stepping forward to let the door close all the way. "Do you need to—" I pointed over my shoulder with my thumb and sidestepped awkwardly, feeling like a complete idiot. It was the ladies' restroom, after all.

"No," Bastian said, his brows drawing together as he studied my face. "I came up here to check on you. I thought I saw—" He shook his head slightly. "Are you all right?"

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Surprise parted my lips, and I smiled quizzically. “I’m fine.” I shot a pointed look down at the stained front of my shirt. “I spilled a drink all over myself,” I said, rolling my eyes and shaking my head. “And now I look ridiculous.” I took a step toward the stairs. “I should just go home.”

Bastian thrust his arm out in front of me, his palm barely skimming my abdomen through the thin, damp fabric of myshirt. Tingles danced across my skin, and the sensation shot straight to my core.

“Don’t go.” His words were low, barely reaching my ears.

I gazed into his eyes, lured by the raw, rough edge of his voice. His irises were a warm hazel, with a golden starburst around his pupil like a sunflower.

Bastian’s lips curved into a lopsided grin as he lowered his arm, and the dimple on his right cheek made an appearance. “Please,” he added, his eyes going full-on sad puppy. “Don’t leave me alone with Lily and Mark.” He stuck out his full lower lip and whined, “Please . . .”

I huffed out a laugh. “What about my shirt?” I said, gripping the lower hem as I glanced down at the obvious stain. It looked like I had thrown up on myself and then tried to clean up.

“I think I can help with that,” Bastian said. My mouth fell open as he tugged his navy sweater off over his head. He handed it to me, the soft fabric still warm from his body heat. Then he pulled his white T-shirt off as well.

Now I was full-on gawking. Holy washboard abs, Batman. People like this didn't really exist. At least, not people who did anything besides working out. Certainly not library interns, who were essentially slave labor—overworked and drastically underpaid. And that was in addition to Bastian's Master's degree coursework, which I knew for a fact was hefty because I had gone through the same program a decade ago. Maybe he never slept. How the hell else could he possibly maintain a physique likethat?

"Here," Bastian said, pulling the sweater from my grasp and replacing it with his T-shirt. He tugged his sweater back on over his head. "Do you want to change in there, or . . .?"

My focus snapped up to Bastian's face as he covered all that smooth, copper skin and all those muscular ridges. "Or out here?" I squeaked, my cheeks on fire.

What was wrong with me? I was a grown-ass woman. I was thirty-four years old. Solidly in my mid-thirties. And it wasn't like I had spent those three and a half decades with my nose stuffed in a book. Maybe just the last two.

But I had lived—hard. I had lost everything. I had been through hell and survived by the skin of my teeth, fighting for everything I now had. So why was I acting like a naive teenager?

Bastian cleared his throat and averted his gaze, stepping to the side and reaching past me to push open the bathroom door. Right, so I could change my shirt in private.

Taking the hint, I retreated into the bathroom and waited for the door to swing shut behind me. I tucked Bastian's T-shirt between my knees and pulled my stained blouse off over my head. I had just tossed the soiled shirt into the garbage can when the bathroom door swung inward, admitting a pair of giggling young women swerving and leaning heavily on one another like they might not make it far without each

other's support. As they stumbled into the largest stall together, they hardly noticed me huddled against the wall, a T-shirt clutched to my chest over my bra.

I hastily yanked Bastian's T-shirt on over my head. It smelled good. Really good. Like pine needles and something sweet, like molasses. I inhaled deeply. Was that cologne, deodorant, or just his natural scent?

The shirt was too big, so I knotted it at my waist, hoping it looked fashionable rather than, well, like I'd borrowed a shirt that was too big for me from some guy. I assessed my reflection in the mirror over the sink, pleasantly surprised by how I looked. I didn't usually consider myself trendy. Okay, I never would have called myself trendy. But even I had to admit that at this moment, I looked hip as fuck. Did people still say that? Hip? Or as fuck?

It didn't matter because I felt good. I blew a kiss at the pretty lady in the mirror. And then I cringed because even I was embarrassed by my dorkiness.

Bastian was still waiting when I emerged from the restroom. He leaned back against the opposite wall, his hands tucked into the front pockets of his jeans, cool-kid style.

"How do I look?" I asked, striking the silly model-esque pose favored by young girls, one hand on my head, one on my hip.

Bastian's gaze roved over me, slow and lingering. And did I spot a spark of heat in his eyes when they returned to mine? "Beautiful, as always," he said, pushing off the wall.

I beamed at him, not even caring that he was most certainly blowing smoke up my ass. I absolutely did not always look beautiful. Tired, yes. Sad, definitely. Quiet, often. Nice, always. Those were my usual adjectives.

Not beautiful.

My mother, however, had been beautiful. More than. She had been absolutely stunning, inside and out. I didn't remember much about her, but I remembered how she looked as she uttered her final words to me.

"You will save us, my shining girl," she had said as she pushed me into Javier's arms, her eyes filled with desperation and heartache as tears streamed down her cheeks. "You will save us all. It is your destiny. But first, you must run."

Even in my memory, her words rang with enough residual power to tease my flight response. If I gave in, my heart would race, and the blood rushing through my limbs would strengthen my muscles to get away.

But I didn't want to give in. I didn't want to get away. I wanted to stay here with this man who was too young for me, and I wanted to let him call me beautiful, even if I knew it was a lie. I wanted to feel beautiful, just for one night.

After my wardrobe change, the night transformed from a situation I was desperate to escape to an experience I wished would last forever.

I drank, probably too much. I laughed so hard my belly hurt. And I danced until my feet ached. First, I danced only with Lily, then with a string of random people, letting my body move with theirs to the rhythm of the music. And then I danced with Bastian. There was only Bastian after that.

"I should get you home," Bastian said, helping me from the dance floor with an arm around my waist.

My legs were unsteady, and my head spun. "Yes, please," I slurred. I wrapped my arms around Bastian's middle and breathed him in. His enticing scent made my

mouth water. I legitimately wanted to sink my teeth into him. Drunk me didn't care that he was a mere mortal and that his blood would provide zero sustenance. But I managed to restrain myself.

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“How come you’re not drunk?” I pouted up at Bastian as he guided me to the club’s exit. “You drank more than me, and I’m, like, whew . . . feeling good. I feel like, well, like I’m not going to feel good tomorrow. But I feel good right now, and that’s what matters, right? Living in the present. I don’t do that enough.”

Bastian chuckled. “You’re a chatty drunk.”

He pulled open the door to the outside world and ushered me through, out into the cool night air. A misty rain kissed my heated skin, and hoots and shouts echoed throughout Pioneer Square.

“The rain feelsso good,” I said and sighed. “I wish I always felt like this.”

“Like what?” Bastian asked, pulling out his phone with the hand that wasn’t curved possessively around my rib cage.

I squeezed his sturdy body, molding myself against him. “Happy,” I confessed. I peered up at him. “And safe.”

Bastian’s features tensed with the shadow of some dark emotion. He blew out a breath, breaking eye contact with me to stare at the brick building across the street as he clenched and unclenched his jaw.

I continued to stare up at him, entranced by the sudden, impassioned change.

“I’m sorry this world is so fucked, Sophie,” Bastian finally said, like the words were being dragged out of him. “You should feel safe—always.” He shook his head and let

out a bitter, breathy laugh. “You will always be safe with me.” He refocused on me, his gaze burning with a promise so intense that the golden starburst around his pupils seemed to glow. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

I stared up at him, letting myself believe his words, just for tonight.

A car pulled up, and Bastian’s body tensed against me. “I think this is our ride,” he said. He leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead, and then he led me to the car. He opened the door, helping me into the backseat before sliding in beside me.

I rested my head on his shoulder, and his fingers twined with mine. He held my hand in both of his like it was a fragile thing that needed to be protected. I closed my eyes, giving in to the false sense of security.

If they found me, there was nothing Bastian or any other human could do about it. But I had made it this far on my own. I had survived long enough that I was more likely to waste away from a lack of proper sustenance once I ran out of Javier’s blood tincture than to be hunted down and executed.

“Stay with me?” I mumbled.

“Of course,” Bastian said, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the sensitive skin on the inside of my wrist.

Comforted by his presence, I drifted off to sleep.

3

I gasped awake at the sound of growling. My breaths came shallow and rapid, and my heart hammered, but the room was silent. Disturbed and disoriented, I looked around, surprised to discover I was in my bed. The rumble that had awakened me was merely

a remnant from a nightmare.

Quite reassuring, except I couldn't remember going to bed. Hadn't I fallen asleep in the back of a car? With Bastian?

Growling rumbled from the corner of my bedroom. My heart lurched into my throat, and panic froze my muscles.

Not a nightmare after all. Assassins from the House of the Sun. The shifters had found me, at last.

Breaking through the fear-induced paralysis, I sat up and scrambled backward on my bed.

A pair of yellow eyes glowed in the dense shadows in the corner, the rest of the shifter's form concealed by the cloak of darkness. The assassin prowled forward, revealing a lithe cougar's body, its tawny fur turned gray in the darkness. It leapt onto my bed, making the mattress dip.

I pressed myself back against the headboard and curled my legs as it stalked closer. "Please," I whispered, holding my hands up to guard my face.

The cougar growled again, so close now that its hot breath blasted into my skin.

"I don't know anything," I wept. "I have no power. I'm not a threat. You don't have to kill me."

The shifter opened its mouth and struck. But before its long, sharp teeth could sink into my upraised forearms, something slammed into it, knocking it off the bed.

Two growling creatures wrestled on the floor beside my bed: one feline, the other

wearing the form of a man dressed entirely in black. To move like that, faster than my eyes could track, it had to be an undead vampire. I had seen Javier move with such speed and strength. To my child's mind, he had been invincible.

The pair grappling on the floor fell still, and for several heartbeats, I was uncertain who had prevailed—the shifter assassin or the mysterious vampire who had saved me.

But it was the man who groaned and pushed himself up to his hands and knees. The cougar remained unmoving. So, the undead had won.

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I lowered my arms as my rescuer stood beside my bed, his chest rising and falling from the exertion of the fight. His eyes glowed silver in the darkness.

“My queen,” he said, his voice rough from the exertion. He bowed his head, but those luminous silver eyes remained locked on me.

I held out one hand to him, unable to stop myself. “Come here,” I said, my voice unexpectedly sultry. “I need you.”

A low, knowing laugh rumbled in his chest, and he eased down to sit on the edge of the bed, placing his hand in mine.

I pulled him closer, and he crawled onto the mattress. I parted my knees so he could position himself between my legs.

“Come here,” I repeated, raising my arms and sliding my hands over his shoulders. I drew him nearer still and traced my nose along the column of his throat. The subdued scent of his rich blood called to me.

His hands bracketed my waist and glided higher under my T-shirt to tease the underside of my breasts. His touch was pure pleasure, and our union would make me powerful.

An inferno blossomed in my core as I grazed my teeth over the pulsing line of his jugular vein. He tugged my sleep pants down, and I lifted my butt off the mattress so he could pull my pants and underwear lower. A moment later, I felt him, hot and hard, pressing into my slick entrance.

I shifted my hips and bit down on his neck at the same time. He thrust forward, filling me as my teeth broke through his skin and blood like the darkest, richest chocolate coated my tongue. I drank from him greedily, taking what I needed. His blood. His body. His life force. His power.

He was mine.

4

“Sophie.”

My eyes snapped open. I lay on my back in bed, my heart pounding but unable to move. There was a chill in the air, like I had left the window open, and goosebumps covered my skin.

I could still feel him, the vampire with the glowing silver eyes. My nerves buzzed with the ghost of his touch, my core throbbed with a needy ache, and my salivary glands tingled. I could taste him on my tongue, like chocolate and spices, sinfully rich and decadent.

“Sophie.”

I swallowed roughly. Someone was here with me. In my bed. Not the man—the vampire—because he wasn’t real. Because both he and the shifter assassin had been a dream.

But I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even turn my head to see who had said my name.

Deep down I knew. I recognized the voice. It belonged to my sister, Amaya. My sister, who I had watched die.

“Luna Sofia!”

That name. Nobody had called me by that name for decades. Not since Javier vanished.

I squeezed my eyelids shut, and tears leaked out from the corners of my eyes, trailing down my temples. I tried to ask the haunting specter of my sister what she wanted, but all that came out was a weak whine. I didn’t have enough control over my lips or tongue to form actual words.

“You’re in danger, Soph,” my dead sister said. “They’ve found you. You can’t stay here.” Her voice grew more urgent with each instruction. “Find Gavin, the vampire with the silver eyes. Only he can protect you now.”

I whimpered and wiggled my fingers, fighting the paralysis. I clenched my hands into fists and slowly, with great effort, turned my head atop the pillow.

My sister crouched beside me on the bed, luminous and ethereal. She was so young. Little more than a child. In my memory, she seemed so much older.

“Amaya?” I murmured.

She leaned in until her ghostly visage was mere inches from mine. “Find him, little sister. Find Gavin!”

A low growl rumbled from the foot of the bed, and my already racing heart stumbled, then beat even faster. For a moment, I thought it was the shifter. The assassin. But that had been a nightmare that turned into something far sweeter, while this was real.

With great effort, I raised my head enough to peer toward the end of the bed. A lithe feline form stalked painstakingly slowly up the mattress, following the length of my

legs. Sombra, my stray-turned-house-cat. The panic tightening my chest eased slightly at seeing him.

Sombra crept higher, his low growl shaking the bed. He hissed at my sister.

“Find him!” Amaya urged. And then she stuck her tongue out at the cat.

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Sombra swiped at her with one paw, his claws extended.

My sister's specter vanished.

The panic that had gripped me tight eased the rest of the way, and the temporary paralysis left my limbs. My heartbeat slowed, and my head cleared. Breathing hard, I rolled onto my side and stroked Sombra's sleek fur as the cat curled into the crook of my body.

Had the ghost of my sister really been here? Had Sombra seen her? Or was he just reacting to me, to my fear at seeing ghosts?

As the panic abated and reason returned, I thought the truth was far more mundane. Amaya was just a hallucination born of a bout of sleep paralysis, trapping me in the terrifying limbo between asleep and awake, where elements of my sleeping mind appeared in the real world. And Sombra hadn't actually swiped at Amaya but had been reacting to me.

It used to happen all the time. I would wake to the specter of Javier huddled in the corner of my room, his body brutally beaten and his spirit broken. The disturbing condition hadn't happened in years, but it was easy enough to recognize. The sensation was so uniquely terrifying, hardly the kind of thing anyone could forget.

I relaxed, letting Sombra's comforting purr lull me back to sleep. At least the dreams that filled the remainder of the night turned out to be much more pleasant.

The alarm on myphone woke me from a dream of having my body worshipped by no less than seven gorgeous, well-endowed, and highly skilled men. At least, I thought there were seven of them. And I thought they were all men. I honestly couldn't be certain.

I fumbled with my phone to silence the tranquil instrumental, then let it thunk onto the nightstand and lazily rolled onto my back. The needy ache of unfulfilled desire practically throbbed between my thighs. It had been one hell—or rather, oneheaven—of a dream.

Under the covers, I trailed my fingertips over my underwear, seeking the heat between my legs. The thin fabric was damp with arousal, and my swollen clit pulsed in response to the gentle touch.

I let my eyelids drift shut. My eyes felt dry and grainy, and the room appeared slightly blurred, thanks to drunk me forgetting to take out her contacts, but my intense state of arousal pushed the discomfort to the back of my mind. I traced the crease of mysex with the tip of my fingernail as I attempted to recall as much as possible from the dream. Drawing my bottom lip between my teeth, I inhaled shakily.

Bastian had been among my dream lovers. I remembered taking him into my mouth, so deep that tears streamed down my cheeks even as I dug my nails into his ass cheeks, urging him on. I recalled the feeling of his fingers tangling in my loose hair, angling my head back so he could stare into my eyes as he fucked my mouth.

The vampire from my earlier nightmare had been there as well. He had been beneath me, gripping my hips as I rode him, while another man cupped my breasts in rough hands as he thrust into my back entrance, which I had never before considered an entrance—but it sure as hell had been one in the dream.

A faint moan drifted from my lips as I rocked my hips and slowly circled my clit with

a fingertip. I was already on the brink of orgasm, and I wanted to savor my recollection of the dream a little longer.

I recalled pulling back from Bastian, gasping for air as his erection bobbed in front of my face. I imagined myself gripping his hard shaft in one hand while curling the fingers of my other around the neck of the man beneath me. In my mind, I gazed down at his face as I rode him, sinking into his luminous silver eyes.

Find the vampire with the silver eyes.

My blood chilled, my stomach giving an unpleasant lurch, and my fingers froze. I opened my eyes and shifted my hand to my thigh, digging my nails into my flesh as I recalled seeing my sister last night.

My dead sister. On my bed. Talking to me.

Amaya had been a sleep paralysis hallucination, just as I had experienced hundreds of times before. The condition started a few years before Javier disappeared, when I was twelve or thirteen. He explained then that sleep paralysis was a normal condition for a living vampire like me to experience during puberty. He even shared that the condition had plagued my mom before she came into her full powers and learned to control them. Even so, the late-night experiences were upsetting enough that Javier had tweaked the blood tincture I took in lieu of traditional feedings to help keep the condition under control.

But then, years later, when Javier was gone and I was alone, sleep paralysis plagued me once again. For a while there, it seemed like it happened every time I slept. But then, either because of reaching adulthood or having to ration the remaining tincture, it happened less and less. Until, eventually, I no longer woke in that terrifying, paralyzed state where I would see and hear all manner of horrors.

I closed my eyes again, attempting to draw the drifting fragments of the lurid dream back to the forefront of my mind. But all I saw were Amaya's ghostly visage and Javier's weary face, exactly as he had looked the last time I saw him.

Undead vampires weren't supposed to age, at least not in the physical sense. They were already settled into their second immortal lives. But I would have sworn Javier had aged in the decade we were on the run from the House of the Sun and their relentless shifter assassins. I could picture his handsome face clearly, despite the two decades that had passed since I last saw him, the deep worry lines creasing his dark brow and fanning out from the corners of his eyes. The twitch of his nostrils when he concealed laughter. The tensing at the edges of his mouth when he looked at me.

No fun time for me, then. Not with Javier haunting me from my memory.

Blowing out a resigned breath, I opened my eyes and hauled myself out of bed to get ready for the day.

"Good morning," I murmured to the aged photo of a swaddled newborn framed on my bedside. I touched the top of the frame, as I did every morning, and shuffled toward the bathroom.

I removed my contacts while sitting on the toilet, scenes of dancing with Bastian and riding in the backseat of a car together flashed through my mind. I had asked him to stay the night, and he had agreed, but he definitely wasn't in the apartment now.

I found the small silver Tree of Life medallion hanging on a chain around my neck, a token from yet another man who had abandoned me in this life, and gripped it tight with one hand. Had something else happened during one of the black spots in my memory of the previous night? Had I said or done something to drive him away? Or had I even ever asked him to stay? The end of the evening was so muddled with drink and dreams that I wasn't entirely sure which memories were real.

I shuffled to the sink, readied my toothbrush, and turned to lean back against the edge of the counter as I brushed my teeth. I spat into the sink and rinsed my toothbrush before turning the faucet to warm water to wash my face. I straightened, dried my face with a hand towel, then lowered the towel to assess the damage to my appearance from the night of excessive drinking. I didn't feel terrible, which shocked the hell out of me.

But my lack of a hangover wasn't nearly as shocking as my appearance. My face. My eyes.

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The dull gray of my irises had brightened to clear blue-green. My pale skin appeared more ivory than pasty, and a pretty pink flush colored my cheeks. No blush required. The dark half-moons that had been ever-present under my eyes for the past few years were gone. After the restless night of sleep, I didn't know how such a thing was possible. I should have looked awful.

I leaned in closer to the mirror, turning my head to one side and then to the other. "What is going on?" I muttered to my reflection, my eyes narrowing to thoughtful slits.

Was this some phase of development a living vampire goes through that Javier hadn't warned me about? He had been frustratingly tightlipped about everything relating to our species, especially anything having to do with the unique gifts and abilities that belonged to living vampires like me. He had wanted me to live as a human. He had said it was safer for me to blend in with the mortal world. To let the immortal world, the only world I had ever known, forget me. The only way for me to survive would be for me to disappear.

But Javier had been the one to disappear, leaving me to blend in alone on the streets. Whatever had happened to him, he finally succeeded in his mission to make me vanish. Nobody was more forgotten in Seattle than the homeless. I became invisible to those who hunted me. I became someone else. Someone new.

Luna Sofia Teresi Athanasiou, fourth in line to the Teresi throne and a potential High Queen of the House of the Moon, became Sophie Matthews, just a girl who lost her way, then found herself again somewhere far, far away from where she had started.

But now, as I looked at my reflection, it was as though I was glimpsing who I used to be. Who I could have become—if my world hadn't fallen apart nearly three decades ago when the House of the Sun massacred my family.

More than a little unsettled, I went through my usual makeup routine, which bridged the gap between the woman I had seen reflected in the mirror yesterday and the one reflected now. I picked up my glasses from the counter beside the sink, unfolded them, and put them on to hide further. My reflection blurred slightly, like the prescription was too strong and I didn't need them. But if Bastian could hide behind a pair of glasses, then so could I.

6

Several hours later, I was going through manuscript transfer requests in the cramped office I shared with Lily and Mark, tucked away in the back corner of the basement of the Allen Library on the UW campus. The space verged on claustrophobia-inducing when all three of us were crammed in, so I was grateful not to be sharing it with anyone else at the moment, if only for the extra breathing room.

Both Lily and Mark had called in sick. When I first saw the notice in our digital workspace, I had snickered, wondering if they had finally succumbed to the will-they-won't-they tension that surrounded them every time they were together. Even if they were only out “sick” with hangovers instead of morning-after snuggles, I had initially thought it served them right for dragging me out on a Thursday night.

Now, however, I was less amused. My glasses had given me a headache and now lay discarded on my desk, and I faced a mountain of transfer requests to sort through by the end of the day. Normally, the three of us could have knocked this out by lunch, but on my own and distracted by frequent flashbacks from my carnal dream, I was looking at a late night.

I stared at the current transfer request. A student from Western Washington University had written a letter to accompany their application, asking for the temporary transfer of some original journals to her school's library. Her argument was thoughtful and persuasive. At least, the first few sentences were. I had been rereading them for the last five minutes.

That damn dream . . .

Images of being taken by Bastian and those other men in every possible way—oftakingfrom them—kept surfacing in my mind. I could practically hear the throaty moans and groans, the gasps of pleasure, the rhythmic slap of flesh against flesh. Echoes of sensation ghosted over my skin, reaching deep inside me, teasing my nerve endings, and keeping me uncomfortably aroused. I had been like this for hours, crossing and uncrossing my legs and periodically clenching my thighs together, and the tension within me was only winding tighter. At this rate, I would never make it through the stack of transfer requests.

I blew out a frustrated breath and slammed my pen down on the desk. Inhaling deeply, I told myself that, for the sake of productivity, I needed to take the edge off, so to speak. For the fucking sake of productivity. I didn't want to fondle myself in my office; I needed to do it, or else I would be here all night.

Surrendering to my body's desires, I slumped down in my chair, laid my head back to rest on the top of the hard chairback, and closed my eyes. I unceremoniously unbuttoned my jeans and thrust my right hand into my underwear. The outer lips of my sex were wet and swollen, completely ready for anything my dream lovers would offer me.

The first contact between the tip of my middle finger and the extra-sensitive bundle of nerve endings at the top of my slit made me gasp. I felt like my clit had been electrified. Every stroke of my fingers sent little lightning bolts of pleasure into the

very core of my being, amplifying the relentless ache within me. I needed to be filled—fucked in every possible way. I couldn't remember ever having been so unbearably aroused.

Unconsciously, my left hand found its way under my blouse and up to my left breast. I pushed down the cup of my bra and pinched my nipple, roughly twisting and pulling at the erect nub. The jolts of sharp pleasure-pain made the gentle caress of my fingertips between my legs all the sweeter.

In my mind, my body was being worshipped, ravaged, and railed by Bastian and the rest of my dream lovers. I imagined Bastian was between my legs, rubbing the engorged head of his erection against my clit, then lower, teasing my opening. I simulated the action with two fingertips, and my back arched, a throaty moan escaping from my lips.

I had just thrust those two fingers inside myself, imagining it was Bastian entering me—a woeful stand-in for the girth I recalled from the dream—when someone knocked on the office door.

I froze, two fingers buried inside me. My eyes snapped open, and my entire body tensed, my heart pounding.

The door to the office creaked as it swung inward, and of all the possible people, Bastian slipped the upper half of his body into the room. I had just been imagining him filling me so completely with the big, beautiful dick his dream-self possessed, and now he was standing in the doorway to my office while I had my hand stuffed down my pants and stared at him with eyes opened wide in shock.

Ohfuuuuuck.

Seeing the real Bastian made my arousal spike, and my clit pulsed against my palm in

a mini-orgasm. I jerked my hand away from my breast and gripped the armrest of my chair. I couldn't believe I had been oblivious enough to finger myself in my office without even locking the damn door.

"Sophie," Bastian said, his widened eyes and parted lips telling me he was as surprised to find me in this state as I was to have been found. He cleared his throat. "I didn't mean to—"

Bastian's deep, rich voice prompted another pulse of ecstasy in my aching core, and I let out an involuntary groan.

My lusty sound seemed to trigger something in Bastian. He shivered, then blinked slowly, and when his eyelids raised, a primal, possessive promise lit his stare. He slipped the rest of the way into the office and shut the door, angling his back to me and turning the lock with a faint click.

7

Bastian stood with his back to me, his head bowed toward the door and his voice low. "I came here for—" He ran his fingers through his hair and turned to face me. His short, dark hair had a slight curl to it that looked enticingly roguish when unkempt. "Well, right now, I really don't give a fuck," he said.

He prowled across the room, shedding the last fragments of his familiar, somewhat bashful academic persona. Last night, I had only seen flashes of the confident, commanding man who now approached me. My gut told me he had been hiding before. Hiding all along. This was the real Bastian, raw and unfiltered.

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I held absolutely still; the prey caught in a predator's sight. The desk still hid my lower half from Bastian's view, but based on the dark desire burning in his eyes, he knew exactly where my unseen hand was and what I had been doing just a moment ago.

Bastian rounded the desk and stopped behind my chair. I would have sworn I could feel his body heat as he stood behind me, his aura of virile sexuality cocooning me.

"Mmm," he hummed, his voice deeper and rougher than before. "I thought so."

He placed his hands on my shoulders and leaned over the back of my chair, grazing his fingertips down my right arm. His touch was a gentle tease. Goosebumps formed on my skin, trailing after his fingers as his hand traveled over my elbow, down the length of my forearm, and over the back of my hand to delve into my underwear.

My mind finally caught up with what was happening. This was where we worked, and technically, I was Bastian's superior! Panic fluttered in my chest.

"Bastian," I said, his name a breathy whisper. "I don't think—" I cleared my throat. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Bastian leaned over the chairback and raised his other hand to my throat, gently holding me in place as he nuzzled aside the mahogany waves I had gathered back in a ponytail. He traced his nose along the edge of my jaw, breathing deeply.

"You smell like sex," he whispered, and need pulsed against my palm as his breath brushed my skin.

Bastian's hand slid lower, covering mine. He applied gradual pressure, slowly, gently grinding the heel of my palm against my swollen, sensitive clit. His fingertips glided over my knuckles and followed the line of my fingers to where they disappeared into my soaked core.

"You're so fucking wet," he groaned, teasing my entrance.

I sucked in a shivering breath when he sank two fingers inside me. His thicker fingers added to mine, stretching me blissfully. I rocked my hips against his hand as his forearm flexed, pushing his fingers deeper into me.

"Holy fuck," he groaned, withdrawing his fingers, then thrusting them back into me.

I moaned involuntarily, savoring the feel of Bastian stretching me. He curved his fingers over mine, seeking the secret place inside me that would drive me wild. His palm pressed against the back of my hand in a slow, rhythmic rocking motion, stimulating my swollen bud. He was creating tantalizing sensations that quickly built to staggering intensity.

I sucked in a shaky breath and held it, hovering on the brink of what promised to be a mind-shattering orgasm. And from the way Bastian carefully checked the press of his hand against mine and alternated between teasing the rim of my entrance and curving his fingers to rub the sweet spot deep inside me, he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

"Bastian, please," I gasped. I was already unraveling, and he'd barely been in the office for two minutes. What would it be like to actually be with him?

I was no virgin and certainly no saint. I had been in love once when I was sixteen and living on the street, but I hadn't been with anyone since then. Since Wes. Since what happened with the other boys. Since the baby . . .

I gripped my pendant and squeezed my eyes shut. I wouldn't think about that right now. I wouldn't think about any of that.

"Look at me." Bastian's words yanked my attention back to the here and now, to him and the delicious sensations he was drawing out of my body.

I opened my eyes and turned my face toward his.

Bastian's mouth hovered a hairsbreadth from mine. "Stay with me," he breathed, echoing my words of the previous night.

"I'm here," I whispered. I wanted to forget the past. And to stay here, in this moment, with Bastian . . . Hell, I needed to be here. To experience this.

Without warning, Bastian's hand stilled. "Do you want me to fuck you?" he asked, his voice a rough purr. When I said nothing, he added, "I can feel you hesitating. Tell me what you want, Sophie. I won't do anything you don't want me to do, and I hope you know I would never—never—hurt you."

Still reeling from the emotional whiplash of my past attempting to waylay my present, and clutching desperately onto the pulsing near-orgasm tightening my abdomen, I whimpered. It was the only response I could manage, given the circumstances.

Bastian removed his hand. "It's all right if you're not ready," he whispered and straightened behind me. "I'll be around when you are."

I watched him round my desk and head for the door. If I let him leave, I would probably finish myself off, thinking about him touching me. It would be boring and typical, and my body ached for something beyond that. I yearned to be filled. By him.

Hell, I had been imagining him fucking me mere minutes ago. Now, I had the chance to experience my fantasy in real life. Only a moron would turn this opportunity down.

“Wait,” I said as Bastian reached for the doorknob, my voice more than a little hoarse.

He paused with his hand resting on the knob, but he didn’t turn to face me. It was impossible not to admire the fit of his jeans over his trim hips and tight ass or the way his sweater, charcoal gray today, hugged his broad shoulders. My attraction to him was undeniable. Even before last night, before the club and the dancing and the dreams, I had wanted him.

I just hadn’t considered that he might want me too.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again and swallowed. “I . . .”

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“What do you want, Sophie?” Bastian asked, glancing over his shoulder.

I inhaled deeply, then forced the words out before I could stop myself. “I want you to fuck me, but—” I hesitated, then blurted, “Do you have a condom?”

Bastian’s dimple appeared with a wicked little twist of his lips, and he turned around. “Yeah,” he said. The bulge in the front of his jeans suggested my generous estimation of his size in my dream hadn’t been far off, and anticipation throbbed in my core.

He stalked forward and removed his glasses, setting them beside mine on the desk, then planted his hands on the surface and leaned in. “Take off your pants and sit that pretty ass right here,” he said, straightening and patting the edge of the desk.

Never one to enjoy being told what to do, I hesitated, but only for a second. I wanted him inside me so badly that it physically hurt.

Standing, I slipped my feet out of my sneakers and pushed my jeans over the curve of my hips and down my thighs. I pulled first my left leg free, then my right, and laid them over the arm of my chair. Tentatively, I rounded the desk to approach Bastian.

Our dynamic had completely shifted by the time I stopped in front of him. He wasn’t that much taller than me, maybe six feet to my five-nine, but he was throwing off such intense sexual energy that I felt dwarfed by his presence. He stepped backward, allowing me just enough space to slide in between his body and the desk.

I leaned back and gripped the edge, then hopped up to sit. I crossed my ankles and held my knees together, feeling suddenly shy in front of Bastian despite him having

just had his hand stuffed down the front of my pants. But this was the most any man had seen of me since . . .

Again, I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my face away. I wouldn't think about the past. I refused to ruin this with those wretched memories.

Bastian's gentle fingers curved around my jaw, and he angled my face back toward his. My eyelids fluttered open as he brushed away a tear that had broken free and was trailing down my cheek.

For a long moment, he just gazed down at me, like he was reading my past in my eyes. Like he sensed my heartbreak. My secret agony. I could only imagine how many red flags were going off in his mind. If she cries at the thought of being with you, run.

I sucked in a shaky breath and licked my lips, intending to apologize.

"Don't," Bastian said, his eyes searching mine, then dropping to my lips. "I'm the one who should say sorry for taking so damn long to do this."

"To do what?" I whispered.

He leaned in, closing the distance between us. The first touch of his lips against mine was careful, cautious, reassuring. He deepened the kiss, teasing my lips apart. Our breaths mingled, and his tongue delved into my mouth, coaxing mine out. He tasted like mint and vanilla, with just a hint of coffee, and the soft scratch of his faint stubble sent shivers cascading over my skin, from my neck down to my knees.

I opened my legs, and Bastian shifted closer. He traced the waistband of my underwear before slipping his hand back down the front and expertly finding my most sensitive of places. He rubbed my swollen clit with a gentle but relentless motion.

I was panting by the time he broke the kiss. He placed his other hand on my sternum and pushed me backward until I reclined on my elbows on the desk. For a long moment, I watched his hand move in my underwear because it was so fucking hot. But it felt even better than it looked, and I quickly surrendered to his skillful touch and let my elbows slide out so I could lie back on the desk.

“Oh my god,” I panted, arching my back and rocking my hips against Bastian’s hand. An explosive warmth was gathering in my belly. Building. Expanding. “I’m going to come, Bas. I’m going to come.”

“Do it,” he said, rubbing my clit harder and faster. I barely registered the clink of a belt buckle being unfastened or the feel of him pulling my underwear down over my hips.

I hissed in a sharp breath, and my insides erupted with pleasure at the exact moment Bastian gripped one of my thighs, guided my leg around his hips, and thrust the full length of his massive erection into me. Stars burst across my vision, and I cried out, my arms reaching and my hands grasping, knocking papers and desk supplies onto the floor as my inner muscles clenched and spasmed around his thickness. My nerve endings electrified, and pleasure spread out from the core of my being in cascading waves.

“Shhh,” Bastian murmured as he pulled out and slowly reentered me. He gripped my hips, his fingers digging into the soft flesh, and repeated the motion, thrusting back into me harder. “We don’t want . . . anyone to come. . . and check on you.” His words came out in breathy grunts, emphasizing each of his hard thrusts, and the rough sounds only escalated my pleasure.

I desperately hoped Carla, the intern who was manning the Special Collections help desk today, had her earbuds in. Otherwise, the rhythmic groan of the desk beneath me, not to mention the sounds I couldn’t seem to contain, would be a dead giveaway

as to what was happening in my small basement office.

Impossibly, the telltale pressure of an impending climax built deep within my core again. I couldn't believe it. I had easily just had the best orgasm of my life, and I was pretty sure I was about to come again.

"Don't stop, Bas," I moaned, clasping my hands around his wrists. "Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop . . ." The words flowed from me as my fingernails dug into his skin.

Bastian slowed his pace, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, locked my ankles over his firm ass, and rode him from below.

Bastian's grip on my hips tightened, and he pressed me down on the desk so he could control the pace. "Not yet," he gasped. "I want this to last. I've wanted you . . . needed to be inside you . . . to make you come . . . for so long."

His words made up for his slowed pace, and I teetered on the precipice of blissful oblivion. A throaty moan escaped from my lips. Bastian's steady rhythm faltered, and he rammed into me.

I was so close. So unbearably close.

Taking advantage of his momentary lapse in control, I raised my head off the desk and locked eyes with Bastian. The most animalistic lust I had ever seen filled his gaze.

"Fuck me," I ordered, my voice oddly resonant. "Make me come." I repeated the words over and over again, my head falling back and my voice turning more guttural as Bastian obeyed my desperate request and resumed the earlier pounding.

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Between one heartbeat and the next, the mounting pleasure snapped within me, and in a moment of absolute bliss, a second orgasm engulfed the world. My vision faded to white, and the relentless waves of pleasure became my entire existence. I gasped as my inner muscles spasmed and clenched around Bastian. He pumped into me two, three, four more times, each thrust more forceful than the last.

“Ohfuck,” he growled, losing his rhythm completely while he reached his release. He buried himself in me as deep as he could go and remained locked in that position for dozens of thundering heartbeats.

As the intensity of his orgasm eased, he let go of my hips and leaned over me on the desk, holding himself up with trembling arms. I relaxed my legs, and Bastian rested his forehead on my shoulder as we both drifted back down from the incredible high. He turned his head, kissing my collarbone, then my neck.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice filled with awe.

My breath hitched, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Wes used to say that, to thank me—after. Like I was doing him a favor, when all I was doing was showing him how much he meant to me. I couldn’t help but feel like I had just betrayed him. This was the first time in eighteen years. The first time since . . . since . . .

Thoughts of the past chilled me to the bone, and I shivered, goosebumps crawling over my skin.

“It’s okay, Soph.”

My next breath lodged in my throat, and my entire body stiffened. Bastian hadn't spoken those words. The voice had belonged to a dead man. A voice I hadn't heard in nearly two decades. Wes's voice.

"You did what you had to do to keep our boy safe," Wes said. "I was with you the whole time, Soph. The whole time. I'll always be with you, but it's time to let me go. Live, firefly. You have to let yourself live."

I grasped the pendant hanging from a chain around my neck, Wes's pendant, and wrapped my fingers around it, even as I refused to open my eyes. Refused to look toward the corner of the room. Refused to see if Wes was standing there, another ghostly silver specter like the hallucination of my sister had been the night before.

My breathing, which had slowed as Bastian and I rested after the intense coupling, picked up with a vengeance. Suddenly, I felt like I couldn't get any oxygen, like I was trying to catch my breath on the moon.

What if Amaya hadn't been a sleep paralysis hallucination? What if she had really been there? I knew next to nothing about the gifts of a living vampire. Only the females of my kind had powers during our first lives, as the male children of a living vampire were born human. For all I knew, seeing ghosts was one such gift, if such an ability could even be called a gift.

Bastian shifted above me, positioning his elbows by my shoulders and brushing the flyaway strands of hair that had escaped from my ponytail away from my face. The backs of his fingers gently caressed my cheeks and along my jaw. "Sophie?" he said, his voice as gentle as his touch. "Are you okay? Did I—" He hesitated. "Did I hurt you?"

My chin trembled, and I turned my face away from his inquisitive gaze, not to mention his tender touch. I hadn't cried more than a few silent tears in years, but here

I was in my office, half-naked, sexually sated, and about to have a full-on emotional breakdown.

Softly gripping my chin, Bastian turned my face back toward him. “Sophie? Please, say something.”

I shook my head as tears spilled from the corners of my eyes and streamed across my temples. “It has just been a really long time since—” My breath hitched, and my words caught in my throat. “I haven’t been with anyone since . . .” I trailed off with a tremulous breath.

Bastian lifted his hips off mine enough that his waning erection slipped free of my body. He moved one of his arms lower so he could ease his hand between our bodies. His thumb traced along the narrow ridge of the six-inch scar running horizontally across my lower abdomen.

“Since this?” he asked softly.

My eyelids flew open, and I was shocked to see the sympathy lighting Bastian’s features. I nodded, not yet trusting my voice.

Bastian withdrew his hand and settled himself back between my legs. His fingertips trailed up the side of my body under my shirt, and he curved his hand possessively around the side of my ribcage. The touch was more comforting than sexual, like he was reassuring me he was still here, that he wasn’t planning on going anywhere.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head, but then I blew out a breath. I could practically hear Wes telling me to finally let someone in, but this was different from a moment ago. This was a memory of his voice, whereas I would have sworn I had actually heard him earlier.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, risking a glance at the corner of the office where I had heard Wes.

Nobody was there. Of course not, because it hadn’t been real. It couldn’t have been.

I looked at Bastian and offered him a shaky smile. “Maybe,” I said. I glanced down at our half-clothed bodies, pressed together in the most intimate of ways, and heat suffused my neck and cheeks. “But, um, maybe not like this?”

A faint, rueful grin curved Bastian’s lips. He leaned in and kissed me sweetly, lingering to trace the curves and lines of my face with his gaze, then pushed up and stood. He picked up the box of tissues we had knocked onto the floor and pulled a few out to wipe the insides of my thighs. He used a few more tissues to clean himself before pulling up his underwear and jeans.

I pushed up onto my elbows as he crouched to retrieve my discarded underwear and gazed up at me. I could only imagine the picture I cast, sprawled on the desk, naked from the waist down and utterly disheveled. Based on the way Bastian’s eyes darkened with renewed desire, he liked what he saw. He shifted so he was close enough to guide the small garment over both of my feet and stood, dragging my underwear up my legs. I lifted my butt off the edge of the desk so he could pull them all the way up over my hips.

Bastian planted his hands on the desk on either side of my legs and leaned in, kissing me deeply before shifting his lips to my ear and whispering, “You should probably put your pants on.” His faint stubble tickled my cheek. “The longer you lay here, like this . . .” One of his hands slid under my shirt, his fingers forming to the curve of my waist, and a low satisfied growl rumbled in his chest, reigniting my desire.

Cheeks heating, I cleared my throat and sat up the rest of the way. Bastian stood, but he didn’t back away. The hand on my waist drifted lower, kneading my hip, and he

gazed down at me with such intensity that it made my breath hitch. It wasn't just desire or lust. It was something more. Something with substance beyond the physical.

I raised a hand to press against the side of his face and traced his lips with the pad of my thumb. I stared into those golden starbursts in his irises, watching his pupils slowly expand to swallow the lighter area.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice hushed.

The corner of Bastian’s mouth quirked. “For fucking you?” he asked, his eyes glittering. The way he said it, not to mention the way he seemed so sure he would do it again, made everything in my belly contract with remembered ecstasy. The things this man could do to me with only a few words and a heated look were astounding. He chuckled. “Trust me when I say it was my pleasure.”

“No,” I said, pulling my hand away from his face and lowering my gaze. I fiddled with his belt, guiding the end back through the buckle. “Not that I don’t appreciate that, as well.” I glanced up, meeting his eyes for a single heartbeat. “But for understanding,” I said, returning my attention to his belt. “Most guys would have run away at the first sign of tears.”

“Most guys are assholes,” Bastian said.

I finished with his belt and looked up at his face. “But not you.”

His dimple appeared as a small smile curved his lips. “I have my moments.”

I scooted forward, and Bastian backed up to let me stand. I found my jeans in a heap on the floor behind my desk and quickly slipped back into them, then retrieved my glasses and put them on as well, despite the way they blurred the world. A moment later, I relented and removed them again. For whatever reason, I no longer needed them. I wasn’t going to continue to punish myself with stubbornness just as the headache from wearing them earlier had eased.

“So, what’re you doing now?” Bastian asked.

Combing through my hair with my fingers, I glanced down at the splayed stack of transfer requests on the corner of my desk. “Oh, you know, just working through an endless pile of paperwork.”

“Coffee break?” Bastian suggested. When I hesitated, my stare lingering on the pile of transfer requests, he promised, “I’ll help you with this after.”

“Okay,” I said after a moment. “I’d like that.” I meant it. I wanted to know more about the library intern who had crashed through my heavily constructed barriers.

I slipped my sneakers back on and grabbed my purse from its usual spot atop the short bookcase behind my desk, settling the long shoulder strap crosswise across my body. “Did you have somewhere specific in mind?” I asked as I moved to join Bastian at the door.

“The coffee stand upstairs?” Bastian suggested.

Technically, the coffee stand was in the Suzzallo Library, but since the Allen Library had been connected to the older building when it was constructed, everyone who worked here considered them one and the same.

Bastian reached for the doorknob and pulled the door open, letting me pass through to the hall ahead of him. “Then we can come right back down here and get down to business.”

I eyed him sidelong, catching his double meaning. “I have to get through these transfer requests,” I said.

“I’ll behave,” Bastian said as he shut the door. “Promise.”

I studied him through narrowed eyes, weighing his sincerity, but there was no way the warmth that spread through my chest when I looked at him—and when he looked at me—would let me turn him away. Shaking my head and laughing under my breath, I turned and started down the hallway.

Bastian caught my hand as he fell in step beside me, threading his fingers between mine.

My heart skipped a beat, and I glanced down at our joined hands, fighting the instinct to pull away. I wasn't used to such casual intimacy. But his hand felt too good, too strong and sure, for me to let go.

So I offered him a slight smile, and we continued on our way.

8

"I'm not going topsey," Bastian said, his words slicing through the tension that thickened around us the longer we sat in silence across from one another at our tiny table in the Suzzallo coffee shop.

Sitting stiffly in my chair, I stared at the plastic lid on the coffee cup held captive in the circle of my fingers.

"But if you want to talk," he added. "I'm here."

I glanced at Bastian and flashed him a weak smile. "I don't want to shock you," I deflected.

His dimple appeared as his lips curved into a lopsided grin. "Impossible."

I sighed and relaxed back in my seat, focusing on my coffee cup as I slowly spun it

around and around on the table, using only my fingertips. “I was a teen mom,” I said, glancing at Bastian again, just a flick of my eyes, before returning my stare to the cup. “I was fifteen when I, um, well, some stuff happened, and I ended up alone and living on the street.”

My voice took on a hollow tone as I recalled things I had refused to think about for years.

“A group of kids took me in.” I took a deep breath, then corrected myself. “A group ofboystook me in.” Again, I glanced at Bastian. His darkening expression told me he picked up on the unsavory meaning behind my correction. “They didn’t force me, exactly,” I said, my focus returning to the cup. “I had a choice, and I chose the food, shelter, and relative security they offered in exchange for . . . well, you know.”

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I shifted my jaw to the side, considering my next words. After a deep inhale and exhale, I continued. “One of them was different from the others,” I said. “Wes. He stood up for me, and he was bigger and older than the other boys, meaner—to them, not to me—so they backed off.” The ghost of a smile touched my lips. “We fell in love. But we were dumb kids, so of course I ended up pregnant.” I paused, closing my eyes as I took a shaky breath.

When I opened my eyes again, I looked at Bastian, but my focus drifted beyond him to the wall. To the past. “Wes convinced me to keep it. The baby. We were going to get out of there, to build a new life.” My eyes stung as tears welled and my nostrils flared.

“A month before I was due, there was a fight over something stupid.” I shook my head, laughing bitterly. “I can’t even remember what anymore.” I swallowed the renewed swell of grief. “The others . . . They killed Wes and threw me out on my ass.” Another bitter laugh shook my chest. He was barely eighteen and just starting to turn his life around. Such a fucking waste.

“Like, literally threw me out the door at eight months pregnant,” I explained. “The fall did something to the placenta and sent me into premature labor, and I stumbled down the sidewalk until some kind stranger noticed the blood soaking my jeans and called 911.”

I blinked, sending tears cascading down my cheeks. “There were complications in labor, thus the c-section scar, but the baby was fine.” I smiled shakily. “A boy.” My chin trembled.

That had been a relief because a male child would be human, whereas a female would have been a living vampire. Only female vampires could be born, while any human could be transformed by a vampire queen into an undead vampire.

“A social worker explained my options to me, how I could keep him, but I was seventeen and all alone . . .” Not to mention being hunted by shifter assassins.

Unbidden, memories of his tiny face, his perfect little fingers and toes, and his first cries flooded my mind. I had only held him once, in those fleeting hours right after birth, before the social worker took him away, but I could still feel the weight of him against my chest, the softness of his skin against mine. The decision to give him up had been the hardest of my life, but I knew it had been the right one. With the House of the Sun hunting me, and Javier gone, I had no way to keep him safe. No way to give him the life he deserved. But that didn’t stop the ache in my heart, the constant longing to be a part of his world. To watch him grow, to hear his laughter, to see the man he would become. Blinking back tears, I pushed the thoughts aside and forced myself to return to the present. To Bastian.

“I wanted my baby to have a good life, a safe life,” I explained, “and I didn’t see how I could give that to him. So, the social worker helped me with the paperwork, and they took him away while I was left to recover in my hospital room.” Not the whole truth, but enough for Bastian to understand why I had reacted the way I had earlier.

I took a deep breath, finally refocusing on Bastian. “And I was too terrified of going through that again to ever, well, be with anyone . . . until now.”

“Fuck, Sophie,” Bastian said, leaning forward. He reached across the table, pulling my hands away from the paper coffee cup and grasping them tightly. “I’m so sorry you had to go through all that.” His eyes searched mine. “And I am deeply honored that you chose to be with me after so long.”

I averted my gaze to our joined hands. I didn't feel like I had chosen. I had needed. Bastian had felt too right. Like we were meant to be together. Like, somehow, the messy path of my life had led me to him for a reason. Not that I would ever share that notion with him.

"I've never told anyone about Wes and . . . all of that," I said, little more than a whisper. I felt like some of the suffocating weight had been lifted off my chest. "Thanks for listening, Bas."

He squeezed my hands. "Any time."

9

I couldn't help but think about Bastian as I loaded dirty clothes into the washer stacked on top of the dryer in the narrow laundry closet beside the fridge. He was just so yummy. And so thoughtful and kind. He definitely didn't seem like the friends-with-benefits type.

So, what did that mean? Were we a thing? We hadn't had the talk, but we were definitely more than mere colleagues or friends now, as my office walls could attest to, especially after our second, less frantic coupling yesterday evening. He had even walked me home, holding my hand and kissing me on the doorstep of my apartment and everything. It was all very couple-y.

And yet, he had declined my offer to come up. To stay with me. Apparently, he had a prior commitment, but he hadn't elaborated beyond that. And he hadn't responded to my text this morning. So, I spent the past twenty hours snuggling with my cat and second-guessing everything that had happened between Bastian and me while resisting the urge to text him every five minutes.

I paused before stuffing the jeans I had worn to the bar a couple of nights ago into the

washer, some inexplicable instinct driving me to check the pockets. It wasn't something I usually did. More than a few tubes of ChapStick had lost their lives in my washing machine. But the instinct proved valid when my fingertips brushed against the edge of a card tucked into one of the front pockets.

I fished out a business card from the pocket and frowned, studying it. A name—Gavin Lee—and a phone number had been printed on one side of the card. I flipped it over and sucked in a sharp breath when I saw the symbol printed on the other. The celestial seal—the combined sun, moon, and stars representing the three immortal houses, the House of the Sun, the House of the Moon, and the House of the Stars. Wasn't Gavin the name the hallucination of my sister had used? Gavin, the vampire with silver eyes?

Out of nowhere, a vision flashed through my mind. A memory.

I was in a public restroom with a tall stranger, as beautiful as he was mysterious. His eyes glowed silver as he fed me his blood from a puncture on his thumb, and I felt inexplicably revived.

“What the actual fuck?” I stared at the card, more of the resurfacing memory from the bar two nights ago replaying in vivid detail in my mind.

My heart thudded in my chest, each individual beat like the hammer of a drum as I processed the recollection.

The stranger was a vampire, obviously, and he had fed me his blood. That must have been why I had felt and looked so much healthier the past day and a half. I had been severely malnourished for years, Javier's tincture being my only source of immortal blood for the past two decades. As a living vampire, immortal blood was a dietary requirement for me. It was why my health and vibrancy had been waning increasingly as I rationed my dwindling supply of Javier's tincture.

The mysterious vampire had bent my mind to his will, something that should have been impossible. I didn't know much about a living vampire's gifts, but I knew we were supposed to be immune to mind control. My psychic weakness must have been another symptom caused by extreme malnourishment. The realization was surprising but not nearly as shocking as his ability to bend minds at all.

He wasn't just an undead vampire; he was a guardian, elevated beyond the base level of vampire hierarchy via a mysterious ritual called the Second Rite, the First Rite being the process of initial transformation from human to undead vampire. From mortal to immortal. Javier had been covered in the striking, glowing sigils that gave the guardians their increased powers, including varying levels of control over mortals' minds.

Though with Javier, I had only caught glimpses of his sigils a few times, glowing silver like they had been created out of pure moonlight. His sigils' appearance was usually our first clue that the blood tincture was too potent and needed to be tweaked. Javier and I had sought a fine balance, wanting to keep me healthy but also needing to suppress my otherness.

The only vampires more powerful than guardians were queens, mature living vampires. A queen's extreme power was balanced by her mortality. Though I was wholly ignorant of the specifics of a queen's gifts, I did technically fit into that category, weak and powerless as I was.

My need to hide among humans, to suppress my intrinsic powers so I appeared human, was the reason Javier had developed the blood tincture in the first place, rather than simply feeding me his own immortal blood, which would have been much simpler. However, in its raw state, his blood would have amplified my magic, making me a more obvious target. He had planned on awakening my powers and training me when I came of age at nineteen, but he had been long gone for years by then.

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Regardless of that massive snafu, his strategy to keep me hidden had worked. I hadn't encountered a single immortal since outrunning the shifter assassins from the House of the Sun, who had come for me after Javier disappeared. The same bastards who I could only assume had been responsible for his disappearance.

Until two nights ago. Until that encounter in the bar restroom. Until some vampire guardian named Gavin found me and fed me his blood before slipping his card into my pocket and vanishing.

"That's enough for now."

His voice whispered through my mind.

"Not yet."

His words had implied his intention to see me again. To feed me again.

My salivary glands tingled, and my mouth watered as I recalled the rich, seductive taste of his blood. Like dark chocolate with just the hint of some exotic spice. My core tightened as I recalled how it had impacted me the moment it touched my tongue. I craved him like I was starving. Like I was addicted to his blood.

I swallowed roughly, the card quaking in my trembling hand. Before I realized what I was doing, I had pulled my phone out of the side pocket of my leggings and dialed the number on the card. My thumb hovered over the call button as I recalled the vampire's eyes. His silver eyes.

Eyes I had seen in my dreams, in which he had filled me with both his body and his blood.

Another voice whispered through my mind. My sister's voice.

“Find Gavin, the vampire with silver eyes. Only he can protect you now.”

Again, I wondered if Amaya had really been there on my bed the other night. Now that I was aware of the fresh immortal blood in my system, it seemed even more likely. I honestly didn't know the details of my suppressed powers, but I didn't think seeing ghosts was outside the scope of reason.

If I had another taste of immortal blood, maybe I could unlock more of my powers. Or better yet, maybe this vampire could help me understand all that I could do. He obviously knew what I was. Vampires didn't go around force-feeding regular old humans their blood. It wouldn't do a damn thing for a human beyond grossing them out.

A shiver cascaded down my spine as, once again, I recalled the decadent taste of his blood. I licked my lips, parched with a thirst water could never sate.

More of Amaya's warnings whispered through my mind.

“They've found you. You can't stay here.”

If my sister had been real, if her ghost had actually appeared to me and spoken to me, then the House of the Sun had found me, and I was in extreme danger. I didn't have a choice. I had to reach out to this vampire.

I pressed my thumb to the phone's screen to make the call before I could chicken out, then tapped higher on the screen to turn on the speaker. It rang.

And rang.

And rang.

“This is Gavin Lee.” His voice was a silken baritone that sent a wash of goose bumps over my arms.

I inhaled a shuddering breath, and the words came tumbling out of me in a rush. “Hi, um, my name is Sophie. We met the other night at the Kraken. You gave me your card and, well, I think I need your help.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “I’m surprised to hear from you so soon,” he finally said, continuing before I could ask him why. “But you’re correct. You do need my help.” Again, he paused. “I am, however, curious as to why you think you need my help. Has something happened?”

“Besides you?” I blurted, the words riding out on a semi-hysterical laugh.

He chuckled. “Yes, besides me.”

“I—” I licked my lips, the explanations catching in my throat. But if the shifter assassins really had found me, there was no time for caution. “I saw my sister. My dead sister. She told me—” Again, I hesitated, waiting for him to laugh at me. Waiting for any sign from him that I was losing my mind.

“What did she tell you?” he asked, his voice hard, focused. Like he believed me.

My heart rate increased, and my chest felt tight. “That they’ve found me,” I said breathily.

“The House of the Sun,” he said, not a question.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

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“Fuck,” he growled. “Go into the bathroom, turn on the shower, and shut the door. Let me know when you’ve done that.”

Panic rising, I crossed the cramped living room to my bedroom door, then hurried into the attached bathroom. I started to shut the door but had to wait for Sombra to slink in before shutting it the rest of the way. My hand shook as I turned on the shower faucet, and the small bathroom filled with the sound of running water.

“Okay,” I said, putting the toilet lid down and sitting. I fumbled to switch the phone off speaker and held it up to my ear, hugging my middle with my other arm. “It’s done.”

Sombra leapt gracefully onto the edge of the tub and perched there like an obsidian gargoyle, watching me.

“Listen to me very carefully, Sophie,” Gavin said, enunciating each word. “You need to leave your apartment as soon as we end this call. Do not pack a bag. The shifters are likely surveilling your place at this very moment, and since we’re within the full-moon window, you’re in incredible danger.”

That meant the Sun assassins could shift into their other, deadlier forms. I may have been ignorant of many of the finer details of the way the immortal world worked, but I knew that much.

I gulped and nodded. But then I realized he couldn’t see me, so I forced out a hoarse, “Okay.”

“Do nothing differently than you would normally do if you were heading out to run some errands,” he added.

I clutched my side, my fingers digging in painfully through my T-shirt. “Will I be coming back?”

“Not for some time,” he said.

I glanced at Sombra. “I have a cat. I can’t just leave him.”

“Then you’ll put the cat in its carrier and act like you’re taking it to the vet,” he said evenly.

How was he so calm? My whole body was trembling, and I felt like my heart was going to hammer through my sternum.

“The shifters will follow you,” he went on. “But they should have no need to approach so long as they think nothing has changed. I’ll meet you in the parking lot of the veterinarian’s office. Once I’m with you, they’ll retreat to regroup, which will give us an opportunity to make you disappear.”

I nodded dumbly.

“Now, tell me what you’re going to do.”

10

I turned off the tub faucet and scooped up Sombra, carrying him out to the living room. He didn’t struggle as I put him in the extra-large cat carrier I had purchased a couple of months ago when I took him in for his first post-stray vet visit.

I had almost made it to my sedan when a man and a woman emerged from the door of a ground-floor apartment near my covered parking spot. They headed for a car a few stalls down from mine while I struggled to wedge the carrier into my compact's pint-sized backseat. It could fit—I had done it before—but it had taken some finessing. I wasn't currently in a finessing state of mind.

"Here," the woman said, jogging ahead of her companion. "Let me help you."

I smiled and shook my head. "Thanks, but I've got it." With a grunt, I shoved the carrier into the car.

And the woman kept coming.

Alarm bells went off in my head, but before I could do anything—before I could even shut the back door—the woman lunged forward. The air shimmered with magic around her, and in midair, she transformed into a huge red wolf.

I shrieked, stumbling backward into the side of the car parked beside mine.

Sombra's carrier exploded, sending pieces of shrapnel flying. The small metal-grate door slammed into my knee, causing a starburst of pain, and bits of razor-sharp plastic sliced through my jeans. But the pain was quickly overshadowed by my shock at seeing a giant fucking panther leap out of the backseat of my car.

I gaped as it crashed into the wolf shifter. "S—Sombra?"

Someone grabbed my arm, yanking me out from between the relative shelter of the cars. The wolf shifter's male companion. My initial shock faded, and Javier's training finally kicked in. I reflexively spun toward my attacker and punched him in the throat. When he released me to clutch his neck, I grabbed his shoulders and kned him as hard as I could in the groin. He dropped to the ground on all fours.

I spun away from him and raced back toward my car. The panther and wolf growled and snarled as they viciously wrestled on the walkway beyond the front bumper. I dove into the driver's seat of my sedan and pushed the ignition button.

The engine rumbled to life as the man I had taken down regained his feet. The air around him shimmered. He was shifting.

I put the car in reverse and slammed my foot on the gas. The tires squealed, then caught the pavement, and the sedan lurched backward. The rear bumper rammed into the Sun assassin mid-shift, and he vanished from sight, the car bouncing as the tires rolled over his body. It would take more than that to kill a shifter, but at least the injuries would stun him for long enough that I could get away before he transformed into his animal form and healed himself.

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I jerked the steering wheel to the right, then straightened it out, leaning across the center console to open the passenger side door as I pulled forward to line up the open car door with my now empty parking spot. “Sombra!” I shouted to the panther grappling with the red wolf.

The cat-turned-panther was a shifter, obviously, which meant he was my enemy, but he had saved my life. I couldn’t just leave him here to fight to the death when I was the reason he’d entered this fight in the first place.

“Get in!”

The giant black cat rolled with the wolf shifter, kicking her away with his muscular back legs just long enough for him to leap into the empty parking spot. His next stride brought him hurtling into my car, slamming me against the driver’s side door. I gunned the gas, the sudden forward momentum shutting the passenger door, and peeled out of the parking lot.

The panther shifter scrambled into the backseat, where he collapsed, breathing hard. My jeans were soaked with warm, wet blood, and he had left a glossy crimson smear across the center console. He was injured—badly, from the looks of it.

“Just shift,” I said, watching him in the rearview mirror as I sped down the street. He would be naked and starving in his human form, but at least his wounds would be healed.

The panther chuffed, and I had the oddest impression that he was arguing with me. At this rate, he would pass out, and then Gavin and I would have to haul an unconscious

panther out of my car, and that was assuming Gavin didn't kill him outright. I didn't know the vampire guardian well, or at all, but I had known a guardian, and Javier wouldn't have hesitated to tear the panther shifter's head off. Unlike getting run over by a car, that would kill him.

"Oh my goddess, just shift," I ordered, my voice resonating with the command.

The instant the words left my mouth, the air shimmered around the panther. That giant, black, furry body transformed into a muscled male form with bloodstained copper skin covered in intricate arcane tattoos. His large hand gripped the top of my seat back, and he hauled himself upright, giving me my first good look at his face.

"Bastian!" I gasped, my stare locked on the rearview mirror in horror.

His focus flicked forward. "Red light," he said.

I slammed on the brakes, gripping the steering wheel tight in both hands. The car skidded to a halt, but I didn't take my eyes off the rearview mirror and the reflection of the man in the back seat. Of the shifter I had been stupid enough to fall for.

We stared at one another in the mirror until the car behind me honked, alerting me that the traffic light had switched to green. Jaw clenched, I dragged my attention back to the road and pushed on the gas pedal.

"Soph—"

"Don't say a fucking word," I hissed, fuming as I shook my head. I glanced at him, just a flick of my eyes. "How could you?"

He inhaled and exhaled a controlled deep breath, but he didn't respond. Probably because I had told him not to speak.

“Answer me!” I snapped.

Bastian’s lips parted, and he sucked in a breath. “It was an accident,” he said, his voice rough.

I guffawed. “You fucked me by accident?”

“I fell in love with you by accident,” he threw back at me.

I opened my mouth, then shut it again, pressing my lips together as I focused on the road ahead instead of the way his confession made me feel. We drove in silence for minutes, but I finally broke it when we were a few turns away from the vet’s office.

I guided the car around a corner, then glanced at him in the mirror. “Were you sent to spy on me?”

Bastian exhaled heavily through his nose. “Yeah.”

“How screwed are you now?”

He let out a bitter laugh and shook his head. “All the way,” he said. “If they find me, I’m dead.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, considering my options. “Do you want me to pull over to let you out?”

“Nah.” Hands gripping the tops of both seatbacks, he leaned forward until his head was in line with the headrests. “I’m going to take my chances with the vamp,” he said. “If he doesn’t kill me outright, at least then I’ll be able to help him protect you.”

Ever so slowly, I shook my head. “You’re insane.” I could feel his gaze on the side of

my face.

“Maybe.” He reached forward, plucking my phone out of the cupholder. “You need to ditch this. They’ll use it to track you now that they know they can no longer rely on me.”

I frowned. “I thought the House of the Sun wasn’t good with tech.” At least, that was what Javier had told me. And Gavin hadn’t seemed concerned that my phone was tapped or bugged or whatever. He seemed more worried that any shifters nearby could listen in on our conversation with their heightened sense of hearing.

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“We’re not,” Bastian admitted. “But the humans we sometimes sub out to are.”

“Shit,” I said, slamming my palm against the steering wheel. “Shit, shit,shit!”

I didn’t really need my phone. I had memorized the only number that truly mattered to me long ago. But we were a few blocks from the rendezvous point. If the Sun assassins could track the phone this far, would they be able to find me?

I pressed the button on the door to lower the passenger side window, and Bastian flung the phone outside.

“You didn’t have tattoos before, when we . . . when you . . .” I cleared my throat and refocused on the road. “How did you hide them?”

“Shifter trick,” he said.

My brow furrowed, but I assumed this was one of the many,manythings I didn’t know about the immortal world.

“Could an undead vampire tell you’re a shifter when you’re in your house cat form?”

The corners of Bastian’s mouth tensed, and he nodded. “He’ll be able to smell my true nature.”

I pressed my lips together and flipped on the blinker, then turned into the parking lot of the Wallingford Veterinary Hospital. A quick scan of the dirty and older model cars present made it glaringly obvious which belonged to the vampire. I pulled in next to

the slate-gray Tesla and shut off my car.

After a deep breath, I pushed open my door and stepped out.

The vampire—Gavin—emerged as well, just as mesmerizingly beautiful as he had been at the bar and in my dreams. His stark gray stare shifted past me, locking on the naked man in the backseat of my car. “Is that a gift for me?”

“No,” I said, glancing at my car as Bastian opened the back door and slowly stepped out, hands raised. “He saved my life.” I shrugged one shoulder, exhausted by this situation. “It’s a long story. Please don’t kill him.”

Gavin clenched and unclenched his jaw, then shifted his focus to me. “Get in,” he said. “Both of you.”

11

I exchanged a nod with Bastian before turning to retrieve my purse from the floor of my car. I slipped into the passenger seat of the Tesla while Bastian eased into the back. Gavin settled in the driver’s seat, barely waiting until my door was shut to back out of the parking spot.

“What happened?” he asked as we sped down the street, heading in the general direction of downtown Seattle. The vampire eyed the shifter in the rearview mirror while flawlessly navigating the road.

“They knew,” I said, buckling my seatbelt. “Somehow, they knew I wasn’t just heading out for a trip to the vet.”

Gavin continued to stare at Bastian.

“It wasn’t me,” Bastian claimed. “I was in cat form. I didn’t have any way to communicate with them.”

“It wasn’t him,” I echoed. “He jumped between us when one of them—a wolf—attacked me.”

“A house cat fighting off a wolf,” Gavin commented dryly, his focus finally shifting to the street ahead. “Impressive.”

Bastian jutted his jaw forward, looking like he was debating speaking. “I wasn’t a house cat, then.”

“He was a panther,” I added, trying to be helpful.

Gavin’s stare snapped back to the rearview mirror. “You have multiple forms?”

Bastian nodded.

Gavin’s eyebrows rose. “You’re of the original line.” It wasn’t a question.

“Veris is my father,” Bastian admitted reluctantly.

I turned in my seat and gaped at Bastian. “King Veris is your dad?”

King Veris was the head of the House of the Sun and the asshole who had ordered the global strikes on all vampire queens two decades ago. He was the bastard responsible for the deaths of my mother and sister—and likely for Javier’s as well, though I never let myself think of him as dead. He had disappeared, and I would believe he was still out there, undead, until either I saw his lifeless body, or I died myself. And one day, I would kill King Veris for what he had done.

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Bastian nodded once.

“So, what—” I scoffed. “You’re a shifterprince?”

Snorting a laugh, Bastian shook his head. “I’m a bastard.”

“No arguments there,” I muttered.

Bastian settled a level look on me. “I mean it in the literal sense. My mother was one of Veris’s many mistresses. He has given me nothing and is nothing to me.”

“That’s not entirely true, is it?” Gavin commented. “You’re of his line. He gave you the ability to wear multiple forms and to shift outside of the full-moon window.”

Bastian snorted a laugh. “Which meant I was automatically sent to serve in the Sun Watch after my first shift,” Bastian said, implying he had been a part of Veris’s army since he was a kid. “No choice. Thanks, Dad.”

“You’ve defected now,” Gavin noted. “They’ll kill you on sight.”

“No shit,” Bastian said.

An uncomfortable silence clogged the interior of the car. For minutes, I tried and failed to think of something to say.

Gavin jerked the car over to the shoulder, parking but not turning off the engine. He unbuckled his seatbelt and twisted in his seat, extending an open hand to Bastian.

“Give me your wrist. I have to draw the counter-sigil on you so the wards don’t melt you.”

Horror twisted my features, and I looked from Gavin to Bastian. “Meltyou?” I mouthed, my brows rising.

Sighing, Bastian stretched out his arm toward the undead vampire. Gavin grabbed his wrist in one hand and, with his other, quickly nicked the tip of his pointer finger on one of his razor-sharp fangs. I licked my lips, instantly salivating at the sight of immortal blood. Gavin scrawled a complex symbol on the inside of Bastian’s wrist. If I were Bastian, I would not have been at all comfortable with the haste with which Gavin drew the symbol. I mean, this was to preventmelting, after all. But Bastian didn’t seem the least bit bothered.

Gavin let go of his wrist, faced forward once more, and pulled out onto the street, not bothering with his seatbelt. “You’ll remain under guard until Sophie is strong enough to force yourconfession,” Gavin told Bastian. “Once she has confirmed your loyalty, you’ll be welcome among us.”

“What if he has nothing to confess to?” I asked, looking from Gavin to Bastian and back, confused by Gavin’s wording.

“He’s referring to yourwill,a vamp’s mind control ability,” Bastian explained, seeming to pick up on my ignorance before Gavin could.

“I knowthat,” I snapped.

Undeterred, Bastian added, “And aconfessionis when a vamp uses theirwillto force another to speak the truth.”

I turned my attention back to Gavin. “Why can’t you just do it?” He had clearly used

his will on me back at the bar.

“I cannot,” Gavin said. “Only a queen can exert her will over another immortal.”

My eyebrows rose as understanding dawned. “How do I get strong enough to do it?”

I wanted to force his confession and confirm his loyalty ASAP. I may have trusted Gavin more than Bastian based on species alone, but we were still strangers to one another. Wherever I was headed from here, I wanted at least one person by my side who cared more about who I was than what I was.

“Immortal blood,” Gavin said, glancing at me sideways.

Bastian cleared his throat pointedly. “And . . .”

Gavin inhaled deeply through his nose, then released the breath. “Blood that’s laced with high levels of dopamine. Technically, it’s the magical properties lacing an immortal’s dopamine that fuels a queen’s powers.”

Snippets of my dreams from two nights ago flashed through my mind, first the one with only Gavin in my bed, and then the one with the seven god-like immortals worshipping my body, Gavin and Bastian included among them.

I licked my lips, and when I spoke, my voice was rough. “How do you lace blood with dopamine, exactly?” I asked, already suspecting the answer.

“Sex is the most efficient method,” Gavin said, watching me out of the corner of his eye.

“With—” I flushed, my chest, neck, and cheeks heating as arousal sparked deep within me. Could he tell? Could he sense my body’s reaction to the thought of being

with him? “With you?”

Gavin’s nostrils flared, and his grip on the steering wheel tightened. “It would seem you’re not entirely opposed to the idea.”

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My blush burned hotter at his confirmation that he could scent my arousal.

“Notjustwith him,” Bastian said. “A queen requires a harem to maintain her power. One immortal isn’t enough.”

“Aharem?” I repeated, twisting in my seat to gape at Bastian.

A wicked smile twisted Bastian’s lips. “You like that idea, don’t you, Soph,” he said, leaning forward until his mouth was a few inches from mine. “I can see it in your eyes. You’re imagining what it would be like to have seven immortals at your beck and call, waiting to fulfill your every desire.”

“Seven?” I whispered, again thinking back to the dream. “Is it always seven?”

Bastian’s amusement faded as he searched my eyes. “Why?”

“I had a dream,” I said, too stunned to hold back the truth. “About seven immortals.”

“When?” Gavin asked, luring my attention back to him. “The other night, after you tasted my blood?”

I gulped and nodded. “Why does that matter?”

“Prophecyis another of a queen’s powers,” he explained. “Was I there, in this dream?”

My cheeks were on fire, but I nodded shakily. “And . . .” I glanced at Bastian.

His eyes widened as understanding dawned. He smirked and settled back in his seat, looking utterly pleased with himself and not doing a damn thing to hide how my revelation of his apparent destiny to join my harem affected him. He was hard as a rock.

“A shifter as a queen’s consort,” Gavin murmured. “That hasn’t happened for centuries.”

“For nearly two millennia,” Bastian corrected. “Not since the curse.”

I didn’t know what they were talking about, and I was growing more confused by the second. “Damn you, Javier,” I grumbled, facing forward once more and crossing my arms over my chest. He should have explained more of our world to me, rather than keeping me in the dark. I silently fumed as I stared out at the towering buildings of downtown Seattle.

“What did you just say?” Gavin asked after a long moment of silence, his voice low and controlled.

“What?” I glanced at him, then shook my head dismissively. “It was nothing.”

“Javier,” Gavin said. “You said his name. Do you know him? Do you know where he is?”

I shook my head. “He raised me after . . .” I blinked several times, annoyed by the sudden sting of tears. Javier had raised me after the House of the Sun revolted and slaughtered all the vampire queens, my mother and sister among them. “But he’s gone now.”

“The Javier?” Bastian said. “The vamp slated to be the Prime Consort to the next High Queen?”

But Gavin overrode Bastian's questions with another. "What is your true name, Sophie?"

I sighed, sensing it was finally time to let go of my closest-held secret. I wasn't just some random living vampire who somehow fell through the cracks. I was the only living daughter of High Queen Diana, making me the rightful heir to the throne of the House of the Moon.

"My name is Luna Sofia Teresi Athanasiou," I finally admitted aloud. My voice was quiet, but it was as though those hushed words carried with them the weight of the world, and once I had spoken them aloud, I felt a million pounds lighter.

Until the silence within the car became suffocating.

It was Gavin who finally broke the silence. "Did you know?" he said, his voice razor sharp and carefully controlled. I glanced at him, about to ask him what he meant, but he was staring at Bastian in the rearview mirror. The question hadn't been for me.

"Did I know we'd found the last heir to the throne of the High Queen of the House of the Moon?" Bastian said, releasing a humorless laugh. "No, we didn't fucking know. We just thought she was one of the lesser vamp queens who escaped."

Gavin guided the car into an underground parking garage and pulled into a stall near the entrance, then shut off the engine.

I looked out the windshield, staring hard at the concrete wall in front of the car. I could feel both Gavin's and Bastian's weighty stares.

Again, it was Gavin who shattered the increasingly tense silence. "Luna—"

"Sophie," I corrected. "I haven't used my birth name since Javier . . . well, for

decades. It's not who I am anymore."

“Sophie,” Gavin amended. “May I bite you?”

I jerked my head to the side to look at him.

“If I bite you, I’ll be able to track you should we ever become separated,” he explained. “It would be quick, just long enough for me to take a bit of your blood and implant some of my saliva into your bloodstream.” When I said nothing, he added, “You’re too important to lose again.”

I searched his face, looking for any hint of duplicity. What did I have to lose, really? Life as a nobody? A slow, painful death from malnutrition? It wasn’t like I could ever return to my apartment or the library. Doing so would be suicide.

I pushed up my sleeve and unsnapped the leather cuff bracelet I wore to protect the extremely sensitive skin on the inside of my wrist—the long-term effects of Javier’s monthly bites. He left no physical scars, thanks to him always healing the bite wounds with his immortal blood, and the sensitivity had faded somewhat. I’d had the leather branded with the phases of the moon in homage to our immortal house.

I extended my arm toward Gavin, offering him my wrist. He traced the unblemished skin with the pad of his thumb, almostlike he could sense the invisible scars, then raised his gaze to meet mine. I was surprised by the depth of sorrow shadowing his eyes.

He didn’t look away as he raised my wrist to his lips. My chin trembled when his elongated, razor-sharp canines pierced my skin, not because of the sharp sting of pain, but because of the memories it dredged up to the surface of my mind of Javier

doing this same thing time and again.

It was over almost as soon as it started. Gavin bit his own thumb, then smeared the welling blood over the open wounds on my wrist, just as Javier had always done to stop the bleeding and hasten the healing. But then Gavin did something Javier had never done. He bit into his own wrist, far deeper than he had mine, and offered it to me.

The rich, tantalizing scent of Gavin's blood filled the car, far more so than when he had nicked his thumb to draw the sigil on Bastian, and I immediately started salivating. My heartbeat sped up, my every sense focusing completely on the two curved lines of crimson marring the tan skin of his wrist. Instinct took over. I couldn't have stopped myself from accepting the offered blood, even if I had wanted to.

I licked my lips and leaned forward, taking hold of his forearm and hand, and sealed my mouth over the open wounds.

The taste of his blood, like chocolate and spice, exploded across my tongue, and I moaned, instantly aroused. I closed my eyes, drawing more of Gavin's blood into me. My hips rocked, seeking. The flow of blood slowed, the cuts in Gavin's wrist closing. I bit down, greedily digging my teeth into the wounds to open them back up.

Gavin let out a pained groan in the seat beside me.

The sound was a shock to my senses, and I tore my mouth from his wrist and flung his arm away. "I'm so sorry!" I gasped, covering my mouth with one hand and staring at him in horror. "I don't know what came over me."

Except, the heat in Gavin's eyes making them glow like silver moonlight had nothing to do with pain. "Let's get upstairs," he said, his voice deeper and rougher than before. "The loft is guarded and warded. You'll be safe there until I can arrange

transport to the Moon Sanctuary.”

I nodded and swallowed my remaining embarrassment. A quick glance at Bastian’s face revealed nothing but his guarded expression. I averted my attention to my wringing hands, ashamed not only of how I had reacted to Gavin’s blood but that Bastian had seen it.

Gavin exited the car, then pulled the door to the back seat open. “Let’s go, shifter.”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them again and stepped out of the car.

12

Dazed and incredibly aroused by the immortal blood coursing through me, I spent the entire elevator ride up to the seventeenth floor staring in awe at Gavin. His blood was changing me. Or, rather, it was changing how I saw him. Intricate sigils now marked all of his visible skin—his hands, neck, and face glowing silver, like he was filled with moonlight and it was escaping through the markings. They glowed on the elevator walls as well, but I couldn’t tear my stare from him long enough to note more about them than that they were there.

A complex design in the shape of a crescent moon curved around the right side of his face, reaching from forehead to lower jaw. I studied the angles and swirls, completely mesmerized by their intricate beauty.

The elevator dinged, startling me out of my daze, and the doors slid open. Gavin left the elevator first, crossing a landing beyond, maybe twenty feet long, to the only other exit, a set of double doors, heavily warded with glowing sigils and guarded by a pair of mountainous vampires. They were nearly identical in size and attire, both wearing dark wash jeans, black combat boots, and black T-shirts that strained against

their muscular shoulders and chests. In coloring, however, they were complete opposites.

Where one had pale skin, ice-blue eyes, a full beard, and dirty blond hair shaved along the sides but long enough on top to be pulled back and secured in a knot at the crown of his head, the other was clean-shaven, with skin like the darkest bronze and eyes like obsidian. The visible patches of skin on both men displayed more of the glowing, moonlit sigils, just like Gavin. Just like Javier. Which meant they weren't just undead vampires, but guardians.

And I wasn't positive, but I thought I recognized both from my scandalous dream. At that thought, a renewed flush heated my skin.

I stood in the elevator with Bastian, taking a moment to gather my wits about me. I was so turned on, and Gavin and the two new vampires looked so delicious standing there at the far end of the landing, that I didn't trust myself not to do something embarrassing once I was close enough to touch them. Goddess, I wanted to act out the scenes from my dreams with them. Desperately.

The Viking-Oscar vampire's nostrils flared, and his attention snapped toward the elevator. Toward me. His pupils dilated until his eyes were nearly as dark as his companion's. I scanned down his body, noting the growing bulge in his jeans. A quick glance at Gavin and the other new vampire confirmed they were similarly impacted by the scent of my arousal.

My lips twisted into a pleased smirk, and I felt emboldened by their response to me. They watched me as I emerged from the elevator, Bastian trailing close behind me, utterly secure with himself despite his nudity. He wasn't merely following me. He was shadowing me. Guarding me.

"Find some clothing for the shifter. He is to be held and guarded but not harmed,"

Gavin told the pair of vampires at the door. “He is under the queen’s protection.”

Their focus shifted past me, to the man at my heels. When their focus returned to me, the queen, their stony expressions cracked, letting through hints of intrigue and curiosity.

I held my head a little higher, hoping a show of confidence might convince them my protection actually meant something. It was difficult to do while fighting off invasive visions of the darker of the two vampires feasting between my legs. He had definitely been in the dream. I was certain now.

My breaths came faster, and my belly tightened in anticipation. In memory. The closer I drew, the more clearly I could feel those big hands grasping my bare thighs and his tongue flicking over my aching clit.

“Sophie,” Gavin said, his voice a whip crack.

Only when Gavin said my name did I realize I had stopped in front of the darker vampire and was raising my hand, reaching for his face like I might stroke my fingers over his crescent sigil.

I pulled my hand away, blushing yet again. “Sorry,” I whispered, taking a step back and averting my gaze.

His paler companion pushed open the double doors, and Gavin crossed the threshold into the loft beyond.

I took one step, but before I could join him, the darker vampire caught my wrist. I glanced down at his hand, then up at his face.

He clenched and unclenched his jaw repeatedly, like he was barely controlling himself. Grip firm but gentle, he raised my hand toward his face, releasing me just shy of forcing contact. I completed the motion, brushing my fingertips over the side of his face, tracing the intricately swirling lines making up his crescent sigil. His eyelids drifted shut, and he leaned into my touch.

“What’s your name?” I asked, my voice breathy.

The vampire’s eyelids opened, his midnight eyes locking with mine. “Thane, my queen,” he said, his deep voice resonating with some secret, hidden part of me. He bowed his head. “May I serve you well.”

The corner of my mouth lifted as I thought back to the dream and how good his mouth had felt on me. "I'm sure you will," I said, skimming the pad of my thumb over his full lips.

His breath escaped in a long, slow sigh, and his hand settled on the curve of my hip.

"Thane!" Gavin barked.

The vampire's dark eyes widened, and his hand fell away from my hip.

"Sophie . . ." Gavin's restrained voice dragged my attention back toward him. "You are not yet ready to communewith multiple immortals. The power will overwhelm you. It will destroyyou." His voice had a raw edge as he approached slowly but purposely. "So far as we know, you are the last living vampire queen. You are our people's only hope to survive." He stopped so close to me that I had to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. "We cannot lose you again."

I swallowed roughly, sobered by his words. "I'm sorry," I said again, my cheeks heating for about the thousandth time. I shook my head and looked down at our shoes. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's my blood," Gavin explained. "You've been deprived for so long that your body doesn't know how to handle it. We have to ease you in. Build up your tolerance. When you can handle a full communionwith one immortal, then we can discuss adding members to your harem, but it will take time."

I nodded, still so confused about all of this and not fully understanding his meaning.

Gavin captured my hand and pulled me away from Thane and through the doorway, into a high-ceilinged, open-concept spacefilled with modern furniture and antiques that appeared both fragile and priceless. More sigils glowed on the walls, wards

protecting this space.

“Take the shifter to the blue room and hold him there,” Gavin told Thane. “Full lockdown protocol on the entire floor until we’re ready to move Sophie to the Moon Sanctuary.”

“Understood,” Thane said, turning his attention to Bastian, who still followed close behind me. He took hold of Bastian’s upper arm and pulled the shifter around me and deeper into the loft, toward a hallway off to the left of the vaulted living area.

Bastian followed without struggle, but he continued to look back at me until Thane dragged him around a corner and out of sight.

I turned my attention to Gavin. “You swear you won’t hurt him?”

His stare seared into me, more gray than luminous silver now. His sigils seemed duller, as well. “Not unless you order me to,” he said.

The initial, blissful high from his blood had worn off, and the reality of my situation was sinking in. My arousal waned, and dread knotted in my gut. My life as I had known it—as I had built it—was over.

I crossed the spacious living room, passing between an armchair and a couch and winding around a glass-topped coffee table to make my way toward the wall of windows overlooking Elliott Bay. The sun shone merrily in a cloudless sky, and the water’s smooth surface gleamed like polished labradorite. I hugged my middle, drowning in uncertainty.

I heard Gavin’s slow approach behind me, but more than that, Ifelthim drawing nearer. It was as though the exchange of blood down in the parking garage had linked us somehow.

“I assume Javier is the one who made this for you,” Gavin said, coming to stand beside me and holding his hand out, palm up. One of the tiny vials containing the blood tincture rested on his palm. He must have taken it from my purse.

I nodded.

“What happened to him?”

I shrugged and shook my head. “He took care of me, kept me hidden and safe. And then, one day, he was just gone.” I glanced at Gavin. “And I was alone.”

“When was this?”

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I returned to staring out the window, losing myself to the breathtaking view. “Almost twenty years ago.” I chewed on my lip, debating whether to ask for the one thing I needed. “I know you said we’re in lockdown, but I’d like to make a phone call.”

“That would be unwise,” Gavin said, his tone gentle. “The Sun assassins are likely watching anyone you might reach out to.”

I took a deep breath, debating revealing my final secret. But if I was going all in with this vampire, I would need to show him all my cards.

“I have to warn my son,” I said. The words hung in the air for long seconds.

Until, finally, Gavin spoke. “How old is he?”

“He’s seventeen, and he doesn’t know I’m his mother,” I said, my voice sounding hollow to my own ears. “I’ve been his tutor for the past three years. We meet twice a week.” I turned my face toward Gavin. “Bastian has been masquerading as my cat for three months, which means Sun has been watching me for at least that long. They’ll know Micah is important to me. He’s in danger, and I can’t—” My voice broke, an invisible fist clenching around my heart. “I have lost everyone I have ever loved. I will not survive losing him, too.”

Gavin inhaled deeply, releasing the breath slowly, his eyes searching mine. “I can have my people pick him up and bring him here, but what about his family?”

“They won’t be a problem,” I said, shaking my head. “He graduated from high school early and goes to UW now. He lives in the dorms and visits home maybe once a

month.” I suppressed a weak laugh. “To do laundry.”

“If we bring him here, you’ll have to reveal who you really are to him,” Gavin said. “Are you ready to do that?”

I nodded without hesitation. I had been ready for my son to truly know me since our first tutoring session, when we sat in the public library together to prep for his first round of AP tests.

Gavin nodded, a single dip and rise of his chin. “When and where is your next meeting with him supposed to be?”

“Tomorrow,” I said, raising one hand to chew on my thumbnail. “On campus, but I don’t want to wait that long.”

Again, Gavin nodded. “Is there anyone who could get a message to him today? Someone you don’t usually interact with?” Someone who wasn’t likely to be under surveillance by the shifters, he meant.

At least a dozen professors and graduate students came to mind. “Yeah,” I told him confidently. “I know just who to call.”

Janice, the grad student who TA’d for Micah’s History of Genetics course. She had taken him under her wing, and she and I chatted briefly about him the last time she visited Special Collections.

Gavin handed me his phone, and I found her office number in the faculty directory. Thankfully, Janice answered the first time I called. I made up a story about losing my phone and not having internet access, then asked her to pass a message on to Micah at this afternoon’s lecture about changing the location of our tutoring session to a spot downtown. This spot. Today.

Now, it was only a matter of waiting for him to show up.

Of waiting to see if he would.

13

Javier and I were deep in the woods on Tiger Mountain, about a mile away from the cabin we had holed up in after fleeing from the horrific massacre. I was eight, and he had fed me some of his pure, untreated blood for once instead of that bland tincture. The instant his blood touched my tongue, the world brightened. The colors, the sounds, even the feel of the crisp breeze against my skin—it was all more.

“Focus, Luna,” Javier said, his voice gentle but firm. “Reach out with your mind, feel the energy around you. The life force of the birds up above, the trees all around you, and the bugs beneath your feet.”

I closed my eyes, doing as he instructed. Or, at least, trying. At first, there was nothing, just the soft rustling of leaves in the breeze. But then, gradually, I sensed something else, a pulsing, vibrant force that seemed to sparkle all around me.

“I think—I think I feel it,” I whispered, opening my eyes to look at Javier. “It’s like everything is connected.”

He smiled, his dark eyes warm with pride. “That’s your power, Luna. Your connection to the world around you. It’s what makes you special, what will make you a great High Queen someday.”

I bit my lip, suddenly uncertain. “But what if—”

Javier held up one hand, his head cocking to the side. His nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed. He touched his straightened index finger to his lips, silently telling me to

remain quiet.

My heart hammered, and I was afraid to move. Afraid to breathe. Only one thing would cause such a reaction.

A heartbeat later, a trio of wolves stalked out from among overgrown ferns. Not wolves. Shifters. Assassins. They circled us, forming a triangle.

My entire body trembled, fear holding me captive, and warmth dripped down the insides of my legs.

Javier grasped my hand. “Close your eyes, Luna,” he said, his voice soft. Deadly.

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I squeezed my eyes shut, every breath shuddering through my body hard enough to make my teeth chatter.

Growls and snarls filled the woods, and the air shifted around me. Whatever energy I had tapped into earlier might as well never have existed for all I could feel now. There were only the horrific sounds of a fight between a single vampire guardian and three vicious shifters. The tearing and crunching and sloppy wet sounds made my stomach turn. There was only the tang of blood and the stench of viscera. There was only the silence. The awful silence.

“Luna,” Javier rasped, his hand gripping my shoulder. “Keep your eyes shut.” He scooped me up with an arm behind my knees and one curled around my shoulders. “It’s over.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding on to him like he was life itself as he carried me away. “Are we going home?” I asked, my voice thready.

“No,” he said. “We have to leave. To start over.”

“Again?” I whimpered.

Javier was quiet for a long time. “This time will be different. We’ll go to the city. It will be better there—safer. I promise.”

My head pounded as I stared out at the glittering water, memories playing out in my mind like a film reel. Javier was always so patient with me, so kind and gentle, fiercely protecting me from the immortal world as he guided me through the

intricacies of the mortal world. I missed him more than I could bear sometimes, and I wondered if I would ever feel that same sense of safety and belonging again that I had always felt around him.

I blinked, tears catching in my lashes, and glanced at the clock on the wall, a minimalist, numberless analog device affixed directly to the concrete wall above the fireplace. Micah's lecture didn't start for another hour. Time seemed to slow with each passing minute. I sighed. How many more moments from my past would I relive while I waited? It felt like my whole life could fit into this endless hour.

I recognized this feeling—the headache, not the time-slowness. It happened every time I stretched the time between doses of Javier's tincture further, which in this instance made little sense because I'd had raw immortal blood barely three hours ago. I should have been fine for another week, if not longer. The dimming glow of the ward sigils on the walls confirmed it. They were barely visible now. My magic was waning—fast.

“You're entering abloodfade,” Gavin said. “You need a communion.”

I turned away from the window partway to peer at him from across the room. He sat with his arms stretched out along the back of the couch and his knees spread wide. I crossed my arms over my chest and sucked in a breath to argue.

But before I could say anything, he added, “Your mature powers are awakening for the first time after being suppressed for far too long, and they're consuming the dopamine that is fueling them at a rapid rate. Your body cannot keep up, Sophie. Come here. Let me help you.”

I huffed out a laugh and turned to face him fully, my fingers gripping my sides under my arms. “I don't know what a communion is,” I admitted.

His lips spread into a devilish grin. “You’ll like it. I promise.”

I gulped, realizing what he meant. Sex. This communion he kept mentioning was sex—likely with a side helping of blood.

“I’m not having sex with you,” I said, ashamed by how uncertain I sounded. Like I was trying to convince myself. “I just met you.”

If I was being honest with myself though, I wanted that vampire to take me, just as he had in my dream. Just thinking about it made me instantly wet and ready. I wanted Gavin to thrust deep inside me while I sank my teeth into him, while I drank deeply of his blood. I wanted all he had to give me.

“Come here,” he said, patting the sofa cushion beside him. “We don’t even have to take off any clothing, and I swear I will stop the instant you tell me to. But if we don’t commune, you’re going to pass out, and I’m going to have to force-feed you, which will be much less pleasant for both of us.”

I blew out a breath and relaxed my arms, letting them hang limply at my sides. I trudged across the living room toward him, making my way around the coffee table to drop down beside him on the couch and curl my legs under me.

“Can I touch you?” he asked, his gaze skimming over me.

I licked my lips, only hesitating for a moment before nodding.

Gavin moved one hand to my shoulder, stroking the crook of my neck with his thumb. He licked his lips, and I wondered if he was imagining biting me there. I hoped so, because that was suddenly all I could think about. Desire pooled low in my belly, and I shifted my legs, self-conscious of the scents Gavin was likely picking up from my body.

A low, knowing growl rumbled in his chest, and he removed his other arm from the back of the couch and leaned closer. He placed his hand on my hip, his fingers digging in with tantalizing pressure. “Come here,” he said roughly, pulling me closer.

I raised up on my knees and lifted one leg to straddle both of his. He shifted lower on the couch, settling me against him so my aching core pressed directly against the hardness palpable through his trousers. He gripped my hips with both hands and rocked my pelvis, grinding my most sensitive places against his long, hard length.

“Oh,” I gasped, needing no further coaxing. My body’s instincts took over, guiding the rhythm of our movement. “Mmm . . .” I dropped my head, nuzzling Gavin’s neck.

He released my hips to unfasten the top few buttons of his shirt and tug his collar aside. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said, his voice rougher than before.

I was too needy. Too greedy. I couldn’t wait. I bit down, enjoying the sensation of Gavin’s skin resisting.

“Fuck,” Gavin groaned. Apparently, I wasn’t alone in my enjoyment. His hands returned to my hips, and he ground me against him harder and faster.

Finally, my teeth broke through the skin, and his hot, rich blood filled my mouth, carrying that tantalizing taste of chocolate and spice. For the briefest moment, a mere fraction of a second, I wondered if the distinct flavor was a characteristic of immortals or vampires, or if the chocolate and spice taste was unique to Gavin.

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But then I was shuddering with pleasure, and the sudden climax washed away all coherent thought. I rode the waves of bliss, each draw on Gavin's neck seeming to hit a reset button on the orgasm.

Without warning, Gavin released a harsh growl and gripped the fabric of my leggings stretched over my ass, jerking his hands apart. The pants tore down the middle, following the seam. Gavin yanked the crotch of my underwear aside and plunged at least two fingers inside me. Maybe three. Honestly, I couldn't tell, lost as I was to the pleasure racking my body.

He fucked me with his fingers as I continued to drink from him. I came again and again, or maybe it was one long orgasm. I didn't care, so long as it didn't stop.

"Fuck me," I rasped, breaking the seal on Gavin's neck just long enough to get the words out.

"You don't really want that."

"Fuck me, Gavin," I demanded.

Gavin's entire body went tense beneath me, like he was fighting against his own desire to do it, but still, he resisted. "You don't want that, Sophie," he said, his voice strained. "It's the blood. You're not thinking straight. Remember? You said—"

"Shut up," I hissed.

I reached one hand between our bodies, feeling the wetness staining the front of his

slacks from his own release, but I could also feel his erection, hard and ready for me. I unbuckled his belt and jerked his pants open, freeing that glorious cock. I pushed his hand away from between my legs and shifted forward, sinking onto him.

The pleasure, the fullness from having Gavin inside me while I drank his blood, was incredible. The waves of ecstasy compounded as I rode him. It didn't take him long to stop resisting. Once again, he gripped my hips, slamming me up and down that gloriously hard length.

The pleasure changed suddenly, reversing. Ecstasy no longer spread out in waves but narrowed to the place where we were joined, shrinking down and growing more intense each time we came together.

I broke away from Gavin's neck and sucked in a breath. My heartbeat slowed, and time stuttered.

Silver moonlight exploded out of me, and I gasped, completely overwhelmed by the force of the ecstasy radiating out from my core. Gavin gripped my hips and held me flush against him, throwing his head back and groaning out his pleasure. The sigils seared into his skin blazed to blinding brilliance in my otherworldly light.

As the pleasure faded, so did the light, and I collapsed against Gavin, both of us breathing hard and utterly spent.

Gavin slipped a hand under my shirt and skimmed his fingertips up and down along the length of my spine. "I always wondered what it would be like to communewith a queen."

"I'm your first?" I asked as I licked the few smears of blood that remained on his neck. I couldn't resist. It would have been a crime to waste it.

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?” he said lazily.

I pulled back so I could see his face, my brows bunched together. “What do you mean?”

Gavin narrowed his eyes and frowned. “Javier kept you in the dark about a lot of things, didn’t he?”

“He said he would explain everything when I came of age,” I said, my tone slightly defensive. “It’s not his fault that he was gone by then.”

Gavin sighed. “A successful communion between a queen and an immortal creates an unbreakable blood bond. When the queen’s mortal life ends, so does the immortal’s life.”

I looked at him, horrified. “You just gave up your immortality for me?”

Gavin chuckled and shook his head. “Regular communions will share an immortal’s longevity with their queen. She will live as long as the last remaining member of her harem. And if the queen deigns to share more of her blood with her immortals than is needed for a mere communion, their gifts will be enhanced, making them the strongest and most powerful of their kind.”

“But—” Again, I shook my head. “You don’t even know me. Why would you bind yourself to me in such a permanent way?”

But before Gavin could respond, his phone rang. He answered, listened for about fifteen seconds, then thanked whoever was on the other end and hung up.

His eyes locked with mine. “Micah is on his way here. He should arrive in a half hour.”

“I—” I opened my mouth, then closed it and shook my head, at a loss for words.

“Take a shower,” Gavin said, standing and setting me on my feet. My legs were more than a little wobbly. “Prepare yourself to see your son.”

He guided me toward the hallway where Thane had taken Bastian and opened a door to a luxurious bedroom. We passed through the room and entered the en suite bathroom.

Once I was in the enormous shower, Gavin headed for the door. “I’ll return in a moment with fresh clothes.”

I stood in the loft's entryway, staring at the double doors, Gavin at my side. He had replaced my clothes with upgraded versions of the same—leggings and a short-sleeved shirt—but the quality and fabrics were far superior. I fiddled with the hem of the plum-colored silk tunic, unused to wearing something so soft.

“All will be well,” Gavin murmured, his confident tone rolling through me.

I glanced at him. My focus dropped from his face to the new sigil that had appeared on his neck during our communion, centered on where I had bitten him and wrapping all the way around to form a collar. His existing sigils, with the phases of the moon at its core, seemed to have rearranged themselves around the complex design, with the full moon now positioned directly over the spot where my bite mark had vanished.

Gavin cocked his head to the side just a smidge, and his focus shifted to the doors, then back to me. “He’s here.”

My throat was suddenly parched, my heart hammering. I shook my head, slowly at first, then more vehemently. “I can’t do this,” I said, my voice breathy. All my earlier certainty evaporated. What if revealing the truth drove him away? “I can’t tell him.”

The doors opened inward, admitting first Thane, then Micah, my sweet, handsome, and very confused boy, dressed in his usual jeans and hooded sweatshirt. I could see some of myself in him, especially in his eyes, but his overall appearance, from his darker coloring to his bone structure, was all Wes.

Micah scanned the loft, then Gavin, and finally, his attention locked on me. “Sophie?” he asked, a quizzical wrinkle between his brows. He stopped in front of me. “What’s going on?”

Thane retreated into the landing, pulling the doors shut.

“I’ll give you a moment,” Gavin said, turning and walking into the living room.

Micah’s brow furrowed further. “Soph?”

I tried to smile, but the attempt mostly just resulted in twitching cheeks. “I will explain everything, but first you need to know—” I took a deep breath, my entire body trembling.

Micah’s features softened, and he looked so much like Wes at that moment that it hurt my heart. “You’re my mother—my birth mother,” he said. “I know.”

My lips parted, and I shook my head, at a complete loss for words. “You—but, how?”

Micah averted his stare to the floor, his expression turning sheepish. “About a year ago, you gave me your wallet to buy us coffee. I didn’t mean to snoop, but I found a photo of you as a teenager with some guy. You were super pregnant, and the guy looked just like me.” Micah shrugged one shoulder. “I took a pic with my phone, and the more I looked at it, the more I had to know. So, I borrowed some of your hair and had the DNA compared to mine.” He smiled gently, sweetly, and his eyebrows rose. “It was a match.”

I shook my head, searching for words. “But you didn’t say anything about it.” Because he was angry with me for giving him up? My chin trembled and tears welled. “I—I couldn’t—I didn’t want to do it,” I said, my voice wobbly. The tears spilled over. “I didn’t want to give you up, but I was so young, and Wes was gone,

and it wasn't safe, and—”

Micah stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m not mad,” he said, his tone soothing.

It was the first time he had ever hugged me. My baby, all grown up. Wes’s son. He was an excellent hugger, just like his dad had been, making me feel safe and loved and like he would never let me go. What remained of my composure crumbled. I wrapped my arms around him, gripping the back of his sweatshirt tightly as I fell to pieces against him.

“I love my parents,” Micah said. “I’ve had a great life.”

A sob tore out of my chest, and Micah’s arms tightened around me.

“But it’s even better now that I have you, too.”

I shook my head against his shoulder. “You might not feel that way after I tell you everything.”

“Like what?” Micah asked. “That you’re filthy rich? I mean, look at this place.”

I let out a quiet, shaky laugh. “It’s not mine.”

“Technically, it is yours,” Gavin corrected from the living room behind me.

I ignored the vampire, unable to handle that revelation right now, and pulled back enough that I could see Micah’s face. I scanned his features, memorizing them for fear that this would be the last time I ever saw him. There was a very good chance that he would run from me after what I was about to share with him.

“Come and sit,” I said, stepping away and guiding him to the couch. “And I’ll tell you my story.”

15

“Okay, wow,” Micah said, rubbing his hands over his clean-shaven face as he processed everything I had just dumped on him. He combed his fingers through his short, slightly unkempt dark brown curls and slumped back in his armchair.

I perched on the edge of the sofa, hunched forward, my elbows resting on my knees. Beside me, Gavin sat with his knees spread wide, one arm extended behind me along the top of the couch back.

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“So, you’re bothvampires,” Micah repeated back to me, his use of the v-word clearly uncertain. “But if you’re alivingvampire, does that mean thathe,” he glanced at Gavin, “is adeadvampire?” Micah’s brows bunched together, and he sat bolt upright. “Wait, amIa vampire?”

I shook my head but second-guessed myself and glanced at Gavin sidelong. I didn’t think so, but I didn’t exactly have the sturdiest knowledge base where my people were concerned.

Gavin shifted his head from left to right and back ever so slightly.

I returned my attention to Micah, feeling much more confident in my answer. “No, it doesn’t pass on to male children,” I explained. “And while Gavin technically died when a queen changed him into a vampire,undeadis the more appropriate term.”

“Andyou’rea vampire queen?” Micah clarified.

I nodded. “But not in the sense that I’m in charge of anything,” I added. “It’s just a term for living female vampires because we’re the only ones who can makenewvampires.”

“So, I’m not a vampire,” Micah said, processing out loud, “but you could turn me into one.” His focus flicked to Gavin. “But he couldn’t.”

“Yes, technically that’s correct, but I wouldn’t.” I raised my hands, holding them palm out toward Micah, and shook my head vehemently. “I won’t do that to you. I won’tchangeyou. At least, not until you’re fully grown.”

“But yes,” Gavin added. “She could change you, and as the child of a queen, you are marked by the goddess—as I was—which means you would be a powerful undead vampire.”

I looked at Gavin, my eyebrows hitching up my forehead. Did that mean his mother was a queen? Had she been killed during the Sun uprising? Or had she already transitioned from living to undead vampire by then?

Gavin clenched and unclenched his jaw, and I wondered if he was frustrated with himself for letting something so personal slip out.

“And because you might be the last vampire queen in existence,” Micah said, oblivious to this new tension, “the werewolves—”

“Shifters,” I corrected, looking at him once more. “Not just wolves. They can change into all kinds of creatures.”

“The shifters,” Micah said, adjusting his wording, “want to kill you.” He looked from me to Gavin and back. “But why?”

I shrugged, frowning. I honestly didn’t know.

Gavin exhaled a sigh. “Many thousands of years ago, the earth was under attack by demons from the shadow realm. Three of the gods—Selene, Helios, and Eos—banded together to fight the demon scourge.”

I angled my knees toward Gavin as I eagerly listened to a history I only vaguely recalled from my childhood. Javier had always been more focused on teaching me things that would help me stay alive now, like how to defend myself and how to integrate into the human world.

“Each of the three deities poured some of their magic into their chosen humans, creating three races of immortal warriors,” Gavin explained. He spoke to Micah, though I had the impression that this little history lesson was just as much for my benefit. “Selene created the vampires who make up the House of the Moon, Helios created the shifters who make up the House of the Sun, and Eos created the elementals—you would consider them witches—who make up the House of the Stars.”

Micah’s mouth fell open. “There are witches, too?”

Gavin held up a hand, silently telling Micah to save his questions until the end. “Together, the immortal houses beat back the invading demons, sealing them out of this realm, and for a time, peace returned to the earth. But as the millennia passed, the shifters gave in to their baser animal instincts and ravaged the lands. High Queen Mene and High Priestess Circe beseeched Selene and Eos to speak with Helios and rein in his creation. When he refused, Selene and Eos took matters into their own hands, merging their power to curse the House of the Sun, limiting the shifter’s ability to change to the three days surrounding the full moon and making them mortal in their human form.”

Gavin leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “Over the next two and a half millennia, the shifter population dwindled and their powers waned, while the House of the Moon and the House of the Stars only grew stronger. Then, twenty-five years ago, King Veris, the leader of the House of the Sun, demanded that High Queen Diana—Sophie’s mother—and High Priestess Cassandra remove the curse. Cassandra was open to the idea. Diana was not.”

I stared down at my hands, my fingers knotted together. My heart tumbled in my chest. This all could have been avoided if my mother had just agreed to attempt to lift the curse. There was no saying whether such a thing was even in her power. But she had refused, and now she was dead and I was alone.

Gavin sat back, resting one hand on my lower back as though he could sense my silent unraveling. “The House of the Sun retaliated with a coordinated attack on all the queens,” he continued. “Including High Queen Diana and her daughters, Amaya and Luna.”

Micah’s eyes flicked to me.

“Almost every queen was killed,” Gavin said. “First deaths and second deaths.” As Gavin spoke, his eyes locked with mine, and for a moment, I saw a flicker of something in their depths—a longing, a desperation. I could feel his conviction to protect me, no matter the cost. It was gone in an instant, replaced by his usual cool composure, but it left me wondering why he cared so deeply about me. Because of what I was, a vampire queen? Because of who I was, the Athanasiou heir? Or was there something more?

“Oh, gods,” I breathed, covering my mouth with one hand. From what I had learned during my communion with Gavin, I now understood that any immortals who shared a blood bond with the slain queens had perished as well. All our strongest, most powerful people, wiped out in a single day. I hadn’t known the true, awful toll the uprising had taken. I marveled at the restraint Gavin had shown with Bastian, the bastard son of the man responsible for the destruction of our people.

“A few of the queens were captured during the attacks, but most were slaughtered, including High Queen Diana’s eldest daughter, Amaya. We’re uncertain of the captured queens’ fates, but we’re not hopeful. And a few escaped, including Diana’s younger daughter, Luna.” Gavin’s focus shifted to me.

I narrowed my eyes, my thoughts lingering on the captured queens. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was the true reason Gavin hadn’t killed Bastian outright. Was Gavin hoping to interrogate the shifter for information on the captured queens? Or did I really hold that much sway over this mysterious vampire?

“But, why?” Micah asked. “Why kill all the queens?”

“Because only a queen can make more undead vampires,” Gavin explained, his attention remaining on me. With each word, the weight of my existence quadrupled.

“Their numbers were dwindling, and they wanted to even the playing field.”

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“Oh,” Micah said, looking a little shell-shocked. He looked at me. “So, you’re not just, like, a vampire queen. You’re the vampire queen.”

I shook my head, tearing my focus away from Gavin. I didn’t want this responsibility. I didn’t want the future of an entire species resting on my shoulders. “I’m nobody.”

“You are not,” Gavin snapped. “You are everything to our people. You are the only hope we have for a future. And you—” He turned his attention back to Micah. “There is a very small chance that if you were to father a child, and if that child were to be a girl, she might be a living vampire. Another queen.”

“Whoa,” Micah said, raising his hands defensively and shaking his head. “I’m not planning on having kids anytime soon.”

“The House of the Sun will not care about your plans,” Gavin told him. “So long as you live, you will be in danger.” Gavin looked at me. “I highly recommend you consider changing him as soon as you’re strong enough. It’s the only way they’ll stop hunting him.”

“But—” I shook my head, my brow furrowing as I searched Gavin’s piercing gray eyes. He wanted me to turn Micah into an undead vampire? “He’s only seventeen,” I protested.

Gavin’s features softened. “It will take years for you to reach your full power. Only when you’ve bound your seven, uh—” He cleared his throat, thankfully stopping himself before mentioning anything about harems. “Your seven attendants—only then will you be strong enough to initiate a successful First Rite and create new undead

vampires.”

“Hold up,” Micah cut in. “Don’t I get a say in whether I become a goddamnvampire?”

“Certainly,” Gavin said. “You could choose to die instead. Change or die. Those are your options.”

I rubbed my temples. My brain was starting to hurt. I avoided looking at the sigils on the walls or studying Gavin’s sigils too closely, afraid to find them dimming again, and instead blamed stress. It couldn’t possibly be another bloodfade. It hadn’t even been two hours since that last mind-blowing communion with Gavin.

“So, I can’t go home.” Micah shook his head and shifted his thousand-yard stare to the wall of windows and the stunning view of Elliott Bay beyond. The sun was dipping lower, reflecting off the surface of the water as it closed in on the horizon. “That’s what you’re saying, right? So long as I’m still alive, I can’t go home?”

I offered Micah an apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry. I never meant for any of this to reach you.” I stared down at my hands as I picked at my cuticles. “I should’ve just stayed out of your life.”

“No.” Micah’s sharp tone drew my attention back to him. He was shaking his head, his brows bunched together. “No, Sophie. Don’t say that.”

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” Gavin said. “The Sun assassins would have figured it out, eventually. At least, this way, you can protect him.”

My chin trembled, tears welling anew.

“It’ll be all right.” Micah leaned forward and reached for my hands. His touch was

strong and sure, steadying the tremors shaking my hands. “So, who is he to you?” Micah glanced at Gavin. “Your boyfriend?” There was a faint but noticeably sharp edge to his tone.

A quiet guffaw erupted from my chest. “No,” I said, shaking my head vehemently. “He’s my—” But my explanation cut off abruptly before I could tell my son that Gavin was the first member of my harem, and heat suffused my neck and cheeks.

“I’m her guard,” Gavin offered.

I glanced his way, flashing him a quick but grateful smile.

Micah released my hands and narrowed his eyes. “And the other guys?” He nodded the back of his head toward the loft’s front door. “Are they Sophie’s guards, too?”

“They are,” Gavin drawled.

I choked on a nervous laugh, knowing the two mountains of men posted on the other side of the door were destined to be far more than guards to me. My apparently prophetic dream from the other night pretty much guaranteed that.

Micah gripped his knees through his jeans. “And you’re all undead vampires.”

“We are.”

“I need a drink,” I said, popping up to my feet. I hustled into the kitchen and opened every cabinet around the aisle, disappointed when I found nothing but cookware. I moved on to the cabinets above the countertop.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Gavin stand and approach the sideboard tucked against the wall on the other side of the dining table. He opened a door in the middle

cupboard and pulled out a bottle of what appeared to be very expensive Scotch. I was more of a wine girl, but in my current state of near panic, I wouldn't be picky.

Glass clinked as Gavin withdrew a couple of short glasses and set them on top of the sideboard. He looked at Micah over his shoulder, his eyebrows raising as he held the bottle higher.

"No, thanks," Micah said with a shake of his head. "I don't drink."

I rounded the kitchen island as Gavin uncorked the bottle, and by the time I reached him, he was holding out my drink. I tossed back half of what he poured in a single gulp. "Holy shit," I said, exhaling a choking cough. It tasted like liquefied wood smoke and burned like fire going down. "That's awful."

Gavin poured some of the brown liquor into a glass for himself, the edge of his mouth tensing as he watched me down the rest of the Scotch.

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Eyes watering, I held out my glass for more. Gavin obliged, his expression unreadable. The glowing markings on his face and neck had faded until they were barely visible, and I was afraid of what that meant. My hand trembled as I raised the refilled glass to my lips, sipping this time. I carried my glass of Scotch back to the couch and sat, setting my drink on the edge of the coffee table.

“So, what now?” Micah asked.

I rubbed the back of my neck. The ache in my skull was getting worse. I could feel Gavin’s stare on the side of my face as he approached the sofa, and though I barely knew the man, I could easily guess what he was thinking. I was thinking it too.

As impossible as it seemed, I was entering another bloodfade, which meant I would need another communion. At this rate, I would never stop having sex, which sounded great in theory, but less awesome when one considered that I actually liked to do other things. Like wearing clothes and living my life.

A flush crept up my neck to my cheeks. How was a communion going to work with Micah in the loft? He would hear everything, and I would die of mortification.

“Now, you settle in while we wait for our transport to arrive,” Gavin said, but I was so caught up in my anxiety spiral that I had lost track of the conversation. He reclaimed his place beside me on the sofa. “You’ll come with us to the Moon Sanctuary, where you will be safe for the time being.”

“For how long?” Micah asked, but his wary tone told me he suspected the same answer as me.

“Until Sophie is strong enough to usher you into your second life,” Gavin told him.

Micah exploded out of his chair. “But you said that wouldn’t happen for years!” He paced alongside the coffee table, the reality of this fucked-up situation finally hitting home. “What about my parents and school?” He shook his head. “I can’t just leave.”

“You can,” Gavin countered. “You just don’t want to.”

“Micah,” I said, standing. “I’m sure we can—” I swayed on unsteady legs, the alcohol apparently having gone straight to my head. “We can find a way to—” I held out an arm to steady myself and blinked to dispel the dark spots dancing around the edges of my vision.

I felt Gavin’s firm grip on my elbow before I realized he was standing beside me.

“Sophie?” Micah rushed to me, taking hold of my hand and searching my face. “What’s wrong?” He looked at Gavin. “What’s happening to her?”

“She needs to feed,” Gavin told him.

Micah paled, horror twisting his youthful features. “Like, on blood?”

“Yes,” Gavin hissed. “Now move, so I can attend to her.”

Micah backpedaled out from the gap between the armchair and the coffee table, making room for Gavin to guide me past him.

“Can I do anything to help?” Micah asked.

“No!” I gasped, horrified at the thought.

“You cannot,” Gavin said, ushering me toward the hallway to the bedrooms. “Take this time to consider your options. We can discuss your future further when she’s sated.”

My head swam as I peered back at Micah, standing forlornly in the living room, watching us go. “I’m so sorry,” I mouthed.

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Gavin led me around the corner of the hallway and headed toward a closed door. He curled one arm around my ribcage to keep me on my feet while he deftly traced a barely visible sigil on the face of the door. He finished by pressing his palm flat against the wood panel, and the lock clicked.

“Why is this happening?” I asked Gavin as he pushed the door open and all but dragged me into a room with midnight blue walls and the same dark hardwood floor as the rest of the loft.

“Sophie?” Bastian said, and suddenly he was there in front of me, his fingers curled around my upper arms and his neck bowed to bring his face down to my level. “What happened?” His nostrils flared. “Is she drunk?”

“You found clothes,” I mumbled, surprised to see Bastian was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt.

“She needs to feed,” Gavin said. “She must have used up most of the power she absorbed during our communion when she bound me.”

Bastian’s mouth fell open, and his focus shifted past me and higher, to Gavin. “She bound you? Already? Isn’t that something you usually work up to?”

“It just happened,” Gavin said, his tone defensive. “Perhaps because I had taken a bit of her blood down in the garage, or . . .” He trailed off and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I believe that, in her current, depleted state, she now requires more than I can provide alone. I could ask Thane or Ash to assist, but since she already knows you . . .”

I squeezed my eyelids shut, then opened my eyes wide, trying, and failing, to follow their exchange.

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Bastian snapped his mouth shut and returned his focus to me. “Yeah, no, of course I’ll help.” He backed away, tugging his T-shirt off over his head. “Get her to the bed. She looks like she’s about to pass out.”

“Just don’t take any of her blood,” Gavin warned. My feet dragged as Gavin hauled me across the room. “She didn’t initiate the blood bond intentionally. It seems to be an automatic response for her with a reciprocal communion.”

“Understood,” Bastian said.

Gavin gently laid me down on my back on the bed, and my eyes drifted shut. I was so tired, and my head was pounding. All I wanted to do was to take the world’s longest nap.

“Stay with us, Sophie,” Gavin murmured.

Something warm and wet swept across my lips, and my tongue instinctively darted out. Chocolate and spices exploded in my mouth. Gavin’s blood.

My eyelids flew open, and a needy groan clawed its way up my throat, but Gavin was no longer there to sate my agonizing thirst. Instead, he stood beside the bed, hastily unfastening his belt. He tugged his shirt free from his slacks and jerked it open, popping off several of the buttons and sending them flying. One clinked against the lamp on the nightstand.

The bed dipped, and suddenly Bastian was there beside me. He dragged a long sharp nail—not a nail, a blackclaw—along the inside of his wrist, opening a short, deep cut.

Blood welled, some dripping onto the comforter, before he could get his wrist to my mouth.

Greedily, I sealed my lips around the wound, my fingers clutching his hand and forearm tightly. I sucked, hard, pulling his potent immortal blood into my mouth. He tasted like blackberries and pine. Like hiking through the woods on a late summer day, when the berries were overripe and dripping juice on the forest floor. I sucked harder, needing more of him inside me.

The headache faded with each swallow, quickly replaced by raging desire. My hips rocked, my body wanting him to fill me up in other ways. I stroked his forearm, imagining it was another part of him.

He let out a low, deep chuckle and gripped my wrist, pulling my hand away from his arm and directing it lower, to the hot, hard length of his erection. His cock twitched when I gripped it, stroking down his shaft from head to base. Bastian's lids lowered, his gaze heating.

The mattress dipped again, and hands that were not Bastian's slid along my thighs, gliding up from my knees toward my hips. Holy shit. Gavin was joining the party.

Still sucking on Bastian's wrist and stroking his shaft, I lifted my head to watch Gavin as he dragged my borrowed leggings and underwear down the length of my legs and tossed them aside. He was gloriously naked. His hands returned to my hips, his grip possessive.

I stared, mesmerized, as sigils burst to life all over his body, shining silver like moonlight. I could see them on the walls of the room now, too, illuminating the space. The sigil wrapping around Gavin's neck transfixed me, that intricate design formed from the phases of the moon. My sigil, marking him as mine.

Gavin kneeled between my legs, his eyes locking with mine. His irises glowed silver, and the corners of his mouth lifted as he bowed forward and lifted my ass off the bed. The first contact of his tongue gliding along my slit made me shudder. And when his lips closed around my throbbing clit, I gasped, tearing my mouth away from Bastian's wrist and gripping his shaft harder.

Bastian groaned, and I pulled him closer, turning my face toward his rigid cock. I opened my mouth wide and flattened my tongue, dragging it along the length of his shaft.

"Fuck," he growled when I took him into my mouth. He buried his fingers in my hair, pulling me closer, pushing himself deeper.

Gavin slid two fingers into my core, curling them expertly. He stoked my pleasure higher, coaxing me closer and closer to the edge. The agonizing ecstasy coiled tighter within me with every flick of his tongue. With every stroke of his fingers.

Bastian pulled out of my mouth and once again pressed his wrist to my lips. The instant his blood touched my tongue, sweetened by his own desire, that tantalizing pressure in my core broke, sending waves of pleasure cascading through me. My back bowed, my hips and shoulders rising off the bed. Gavin switched from flicking my clit to sucking the swollen bundle of nerves with a pulsing rhythm that synced with the waves of ecstasy pulsing out from the very center of my being.

Like before, when I had communed with Gavin in the living room, the immortal blood amplified my pleasure, extending my climax. Instead of waning, the pleasure built, each pull of blood earning a pulse of bliss, delighting my body.

The sigils blazed on Gavin's skin, burning brighter with each swallow of Bastian's blood. Gavin lifted his head and withdrew his fingers, finally letting the climax fade. I relaxed back onto the bed and released Bastian's wrist, feeling like I was floating on

the mattress.

The reprieve lasted only a moment, because Gavin's hands gripped my hips once more, lifting my ass off the bed, and the blunt head of his glorious cock nudged my slick entrance. I gasped, my back arching as he thrust his hips forward, filling me completely. He didn't give me a chance to adjust to his large size, but pounded into me straight away, a man possessed.

Bastian leaned over me, pressing his lips against mine. His mouth was greedy, his tongue coaxing my lips open and tangling with mine. One of his hands glided over my breasts, pinching and twisting my right nipple until I cried out from the sharp burst of pain. But as soon as he released my nipple, the pleasure from Gavin's unrelenting thrusts doubled, amplified by the pain.

Acting on instinct, I reached for Bastian's twitching erection. I craved more. I wanted, needed, to have him inside me, too. My fingers curled around his rigid cock, and I gripped it, hard.

"I want this," I said, breaking the kiss and squeezing his shaft.

Gavin pulled out of my swollen, greedy pussy, and I whimpered. "Get on your knees so I can fuck that pretty mouth," he ordered roughly.

Practically panting from the torrid lust coursing through my body, I scrambled onto my hands and knees and faced Gavin. He rose on his knees, his proud erection bobbing in front of my face, glistening with my wetness. He gripped the base with one hand, angling the tip toward my mouth, and tangled his other hand in my hair.

Behind me, Bastian swept a hand down the length of my spine, then dipped his fingers between my legs to stroke my slick sex and tease my throbbing clit. My mouth opened as I sucked in a breath, sinking into the delicious sensations.

Gavin took advantage of the moment, pressing forward. His velvety head glided past my lips, his salty pre-cum coating my tongue. I raised my hands to grip his ass and took him deep into my mouth. His grip tightened in my hair, angling my head backward, and I peered up at him to see him gazing down at me, his expression rapt, his silver eyes on fire.

Bastian pulled his hand away, and again, I whimpered, wriggling my ass.

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“Hang on, Soph,” he muttered. I heard the tearing of a wrapper and realized he must have been putting on a condom. Right, because while undead vampires were infertile, shifters didn’t suffer from the same affliction.

Gavin slid his other hand into my hair and dragged me off his cock. He lifted my face and bowed his body, crushing his lips against mine. His kiss tasted like chocolate and exotic spices, and I realized he must have purposely bitten his lip to draw blood for me. I ravaged his mouth, kissing him like a wild thing.

Behind me, Bastian rubbed the thick head of his cock over my aching sex, then eased into my needy core. I moaned, breaking the kiss. Oh gods, he was so thick, filling me completely. It felt so fucking good.

Gavin’s gaze scoured my face, his lips curving into a knowing smile as Bastian gripped my hips and pulled out, then thrust back into me, hard and fast enough that the fronts of his thighs slapped against the backs of mine.

I found Gavin’s straining erection and stroked it roughly in time with Bastian’s steady pounding.

Gavin’s smile widened into a wicked grin. He leaned forward, pressing a bruising kiss to my lips, then pulled away and used his tangled grip in my hair to guide my face back down toward his throbbing cock. Anticipation sent a jolt of pleasure to my core, already teasing the idea of what promised to be another epic orgasm.

I took Gavin into my mouth without hesitation, sucking greedily. He didn’t thrust his hips, but held his position, letting Bastian’s rhythm guide my mouth back and forth

onto his shaft. I took him as deep as I could with each forward thrust until tears welled and spilled over.

Gavin groaned, his grip on my hair tightening suddenly to hold me in place, and his body went rigid.

Behind me, Bastian slowed his pace.

I peered up at Gavin, tears staining my cheeks and saliva dribbling down my chin. He threw his head back and thrust his hips forward, spilling his pleasure down my throat. I drank him down, feeling the same rush of power as I received from his blood.

Slowly, Gavin pulled out of my mouth and once again lifted my face to his. He kissed me tenderly, worshipping my mouth as he helped me straighten up until my shoulder blades grazed Bastian's chest. Bastian slid one hand around to the front of my body, pressing his palm against my abdomen as Gavin's hands shifted forward from my hair to cradle my jaw.

The cooperation and tender contact between the two of them gave rise to an unexpected swell of emotion. I kind of knew Bastian. At least, I had thought I knew him before I learned he was a shifter. But I barely knew Gavin. And yet, I never wanted either immortal to let me go. In that moment, I trusted them both implicitly.

Gavin's fingers traced over my rib cage, then trailed down the centerline of my belly, tracing around Bastian's hand. He dragged one gentle fingertip around my needy clit, drawing delicate circles. His lips drifted over my jawline until the stubbled side of his face pressed flush against mine and the full moon at the center point of the bonding sigil I had left on his neck was mere inches from my mouth.

"You can do better than that, shifter," he said, his voice rough. "Fuck her, hard."

Bastian dug his fingers into my hips and rammed into me at the exact moment that Gavin pinched my clit.

I cried out, pleasure exploding from my core. My nails dug into Gavin's shoulders, and I sank my teeth into his neck, riding the glorious waves of ecstasy, made even more intense by the decadent blood flowing over my tongue.

"Harder, shifter," Gavin ordered hoarsely, stroking that pulsing bundle of nerves between his pinched thumb and forefinger.

I growled my agreement, arching my back and digging my teeth deeper into Gavin's neck.

"Harder!" Gavin urged him on.

Bastian slammed into me, the blinding pleasure from their dual onslaught whiting out my vision. The climax went on and on and on.

Until, finally, Bastian groaned and buried himself deep in my core and stayed there, his hips flush against my ass. He nuzzled the crook of my neck as he rode his own release.

Panting, I pulled away from Gavin's neck and leaned my head back on Bastian's shoulder as the mind-blowing orgasm faded to blissful aftershocks.

"Better?" Gavin asked, palming my sex and grazing his lips along the line of my collarbone.

Incapable of forming words, I let out a breathy laugh as both men grazed fingertips over my skin, coaxing a different kind of pleasure from my body. One borne of intimacy rather than carnal desire.

Bastian grazed his nose over the shell of my ear, then kissed a path along my jawline to my lips. He lingered there, the slow sweep of his tongue making me melt back against him.

Gavin's lips trailed up the column of my throat, and Bastian released my mouth, allowing me to accept Gavin's kiss.

I felt feather light, like I was floating, and my skin tingled everywhere they touched me. I sighed when Gavin, too, ended his kiss. His eyes still burned with that silver light, and his markings were still blindingly bright. I raised one hand, tracing the crescent sigil on the side of his face.

Bastian kissed my neck, then backed away and crawled to the edge of the bed. Admiringly, I watched him pad into the bathroom. How had I ever thought he was just a librarian? Everything about him screamed immortal. There was still no bonding sigil anywhere on his body, which I assumed meant he wasn't yet an official member of my harem.

I shivered, suddenly aware of the cool feel of Gavin's body in the absence of Bastian's heat.

"Ah," Gavin said, sitting back on his heels and letting his hands slip away from my body. "Apologies for the chill. I'm fairly depleted. I'll need to replenish myself soon."

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I stared at him, slowly understanding his meaning. Because he had given me so much blood, he now needed to go out and feed. On someone else. On a human. Only queens took nourishment from other immortals. All undead vampires fed on mortals.

Well, it just so happened that I was mortal.

I pulled my hair away from my shoulder and tilted my head to the side, offering him my neck.

A faint smile touched Gavin's lips, and he shook his head.

Heart sinking from the rejection, I shifted my legs out from under me and hugged my knees to my chest.

The skin around Gavin's eyes tightened, and his throat bobbed. He reached out and curled his fingers around my wrist, pulling my arm away from my legs. Deftly, he unfastened the cuff from my wrist, revealing my bite scars. "I would love nothing more than to take your blood," he said, grazing his teeth over the sensitive scar tissue.

His razor-sharp canine nicked my skin, slicing a tiny cut. A small bed of crimson welled, and he stared, transfixed. "But your body is still growing accustomed to having a ready supply of immortal blood. We must wait until your powers have fully awakened and you have stabilized." Apparently unable to resist, he licked away the bead of blood.

That single taste made the markings on his neck flare brighter than all the other sigils on his body. He made a low, rough noise, and my attention dropped to his growing

erection.

My eyes returning to Gavin's, I held my breath, hovering in a moment of indecision. But then I parted my knees and scooted forward until I straddled his lap. I sank onto him with a sigh, and he brushed the stray locks of hair out of my face as we moved together. His lips found mine, and his arms curled around my back, holding my body flush against his.

We moved in a slow, rocking grind, our kiss never breaking. Pleasure coiled tighter in my core, and warmth swelled in my chest. Connection. Attachment. Affection. How was it possible to feel so much for someone I had only just met?

It didn't take long for my pleasure to crest and break, ecstasy washing out from my core. I stiffened atop Gavin, and he held me close as I rode out the release. It faded quickly, for once, not fueled by the rush of actively feeding on an immortal's blood. I slumped against him, once again melting into his kiss.

Gavin broke away, still hard and sheathed within me. The fingers of one hand tangled in my hair, curving around the back of my head, and he kissed me more deeply as I continued to ride him. I could not get enough of this man. Of having him fill me. Of feeling his arms curled around me. Of feeling the power from his blood racing through my veins.

Another orgasm shuddered through my body, and when the pleasure waned, Gavin gripped my hips to stop me from rocking atop him. "If we continue like this, you'll be very sore, and then I won't be able to fuck you next time." The ghost of a smile touched his lips. "And that would be torture."

I pulled back, my brows bunching together. "But you didn't—" I cleared my throat, my cheeks flushing. "Um, finish."

His expression turned guarded. “I won’t be able to until I’ve fed.”

I tensed atop him. “Will it be a woman? Who you feed on, I mean.”

“That is my preference.”

I clenched and unclenched my jaw, trying—and failing—to swallow my surging jealousy. “Will you fuck her?” The harsh words were out before I could stop myself from asking.

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

Did that mean he usually did?

My eyes stung unexpectedly. I squeezed my eyelids shut, sending tears streaking down my cheeks. I didn’t want him to, but I felt like too much of a hypocrite to admit it out loud when I had just been with another man in front of Gavin.

Bastian’s soft footsteps heralded his approach, and the mattress dipped as he sat on the foot of the bed behind me.

“I should go,” Gavin said, tightening his grip on my hips to lift me off him.

Bastian’s arms curled around me from behind, his body a furnace compared to Gavin’s chill.

I watched Gavin gather his clothes and quickly dress. “Will you remain in here with the shifter?” he asked, guiding the sleeves of his shirt onto his arms. “At least until I return?” He started to button his shirt but stopped when he reached the first missing button and quickly unfastened the rest. “In case you crash again?”

I shook my head, thinking of Micah sitting alone in the living room. “Micah—oh gods,” I groaned, mortified as I thought of Micah hearing me communing with these two immortals. We certainly hadn’t been quiet. My cheeks blazed, and I covered my face with my hands.

“This room is warded to be soundproof,” Gavin murmured, suddenly standing at the foot of the bed. He pulled my hands away from my face with cool fingers and used a curled knuckle to nudge my chin higher. “I will not fuck her,” he promised, leaning in to press a kiss to my lips. There was a wicked gleam to his silver eyes when he pulled away, and the corner of his mouth rose. “But if I did, I would be thinking about you.” And with that, he turned and strode across the room.

He stopped at the door, one hand on the doorknob, and glanced at me over his shoulder. “I’ll let Thane and Ash know the shifter will be roaming the loft freely while I’m out.” His focus shifted to Bastian. “If you try anything, they will kill you.”

And then he opened the door and was gone, the door latch clicking shut behind him. Shut, but not locked.

“Well,” Bastian muttered, “he’s a regular ol’ ray of sunshine.”

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I managed a weak smile and craned my neck to see Bastian's face. "Thank you," I whispered. "I'm sorry if that was awkward."

He guffawed. "Are you kidding me?" He nuzzled my neck, his rough stubble tickling my sensitive flesh. "That was the single fucking hottest moment of my life."

"Right?" I said, laughing softly. I turned to face him. "I'm not even embarrassed about how into it I was, but I feel like I should be."

He lifted one hand, running the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. "You definitely shouldn't be, and holy fuck, this mouth." He shook his head, his lips spreading into a wondrous smile. "It's like the eighth fucking wonder of the world."

The blush heating my cheeks flamed hotter as he slipped the tip of his thumb past my lips.

"I was thinking about hopping in the shower," Bastian said, his amber eyes glittering mischievously. "Want to join me? Because if we sit here like this much longer . . ."

I bit his thumb, hard but not hard enough to break the skin.

His gaze darkened.

I pulled my mouth off him, kissing the tip of his thumb before scooting to the edge of the bed to stand. "Well?" I asked, glancing back at him as I crossed the room to the open bathroom door. "Are you coming?"

“I fucking hope so,” he murmured and stood to follow me.

17

The high faded far more quickly this time, though the effects of the communion remained. By the time I stepped into the steaming shower, I no longer felt dazed or floaty, but the sigils on the walls and windows were still visible. I studied them as I stood under the streaming water, my hair knotted atop my head to keep it dry. The sigils glowed with that same silvery light as the markings on Gavin’s body, only these were accented by faint streaks of color—crimson, violet, teal, and sapphire blue.

Bastian opened the glass shower door and stepped in, his heated gaze skimming over my body. I admired him in return, studying the intricate tattoos covering his muscular body, the designs flowing seamlessly over his copper skin. The black ink seemed like a natural part of him with how perfectly it wove over and around his anatomy.

I moved aside, giving him access to the water streaming from the broad showerhead, and grabbed the bar of soap from the inset soap dish in the tile wall. I quickly lathered the soap in my hands and offered the bar to Bastian.

Gavin had been right to stop the sexfest when he did. Without the amped-up lust, the soreness between my legs became all too apparent. The first touch of my fingers between my legs brought a wince. My swollen labia felt bruised and incredibly tender.

“No shower fun, then?” Bastian asked, his teasing tone belied by the concern shining in his amber eyes.

I shook my head, offering him an apologetic smile, even though the sight of him stroking soap suds over his growing erection sent a jolt of desire to my core. I wanted

him again. Even with the pain. But the knowledge that Micah was out in the living room, grappling with his new reality, doused my rebounding libido with ice water.

I reached past Bastian for the smaller, detachable showerhead, and used it to rinse myself. I hoped my awakening powers and my body's need for immortal blood stabilized soon, or I would be in a lot of pain.

Or maybe I could attempt to feed without sex? Not that I minded the sex—at all—but I had a feeling that having to excuse myself to get it on with one of my guys every few hours was going to get old, fast. And would I just constantly be sore? Sex with both Bastian and Gavin had been intense. What was it going to be like when seven partners were involved? I couldn't even fathom how that would work.

In the dream—or prophecy, or whatever it was—the group dynamic had felt so natural, but it had all been such a blur of lust that I couldn't recall the mechanics of it. I hadn't even seen all my partners, but I had known there were seven. I honestly wasn't even sure if they were all male. It was all so hazy. Gavin and Bastian had been there, as well as Thane and Ash, the two mountainous vampires guarding the loft. But I couldn't recall any specifics about the other three. Would I know them when I saw them, as I had known Thane and Ash?

My gaze lingered on Bastian's wrist, where I had taken his blood. The wound had already closed, though there was still a faint red line from the cut he had made. There was no silver marking curving around his wrist or anywhere else on his body. No bonding sigil. Nothing tying us together. Because I hadn't actually bitten him? Or because he hadn't taken my blood as well?

I had been dazed when Gavin first dragged me into Bastian's room, but I vaguely recalled Gavin saying something about our blood bond forming because he had taken my blood earlier. Did that mean a blood exchange was always involved? I knew so little about my powers.

Bastian moved closer, taking the shower head from my hand and replacing it on the wall. He turned back to me, raising one hand and brushing the pad of his thumb over my furrowed brow. “A lot has happened in the last few hours,” he said, his voice a gentle thrum. “How are you doing?”

My gaze raised to meet Bastian’s, and my chin trembled. I closed my eyes, drawing a slow, deep breath into my lungs and reining in my flailing worries. When I lifted my lids, I had better control over my emotions. My lips spread into a quavering smile, and I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ve been running away from all of this for so long, I think I convinced myself it wasn’t real.” I let out a weak laugh. “And now there’s no avoiding it. It’s real. And Micah is here, and he knows—”

“Wait,” Bastian said. “Micah’s here?”

My eyes opened wide at the familiarity in Bastian’s voice, then narrowed to suspicious slits as I backed away from him. He had been watching me for months, posing as a library intern by day, and as the stray cat I had taken in by night.

“Did you know?” I asked, enunciating each word clearly. I had opened up to him. Confided in him. I had shared heartbreaking pieces of my past with him like they were some big secret, and the thought that he may have already known made me feel like such an idiot.

Bastian became very still.

“Did you know Micah was my son before I told you about Wes and—” I swallowed my rising rage. “And everything that happened when I was on the street?”

Bastian clenched his jaw, the tendons in his neck tensing. “I suspected Micah’s relationship to you, but I didn’t know for sure, and I had no idea about the rest. About what happened to you on the street.”

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“Did you tell anyone your suspicions about Micah?” I asked, my voice razor-edged.

“No.”

I searched his stony expression, his wary eyes. “Why not?”

“Because by the time I started putting the pieces together about who Micah really was to you, I was already in love with you,” he said matter-of-factly. “I couldn’t betray you like that.”

“But you could invade my privacy by pretending to be my cat,” I said, hurtling the words at him like stones. “You could lie to me.”

“That was different,” he snapped. “I was already there. The damage was done.”

My chest heaved with anger. “You should have told me!” I practically shouted.

Bastian stepped closer. “I would have lost you!” he hissed. “I was born a bastard, so I guess this makes me a selfish one, but I’m just fine with that because I was there when you needed me. Because you’re still alive, and that is all that matters to me.”

My anger fizzled away as I searched his eyes, seeing only honesty. Only truth. It had been so long since I had felt like I could depend on another person that the idea of cracking the hard shell that had formed around my heart seemed impossible.

“I don’t know if I can be what you want me to be,” I admitted, tears welling suddenly. “I’m scared, Bas.” I choked on a sob. “I’m scared because if I let myself

love you, I know in my heart that I'll lose you. You'll leave me. Everyone leaves me."

His arms were suddenly around me, holding my slick body close to his. I clung to him, digging my nails into his back.

Bastian cradled my face in his hands and tilted my head back so he could claim a kiss. "I will never leave you by choice," he growled into my mouth.

I tore my lips away from his and leaned back enough that I could search his gaze. There was only one way to guarantee that. Only one way to ensure he was truly mine—forever.

I drew my bottom lip between my teeth, biting down until my canine punctured the flesh and the tang of blood touched my tongue. I lifted my chin, offering Bastian my bloodied lips.

He hesitated for a single heartbeat, and then his mouth was on mine.

Power welled within me as our tongues tangled. It surged out from my chest, a warm tingle that electrified the hairs all over my body and made my blood sing. Blood that was now inside Bastian, too. The power coiled, gaining strength and potency inside me.

We gasped as one, breaking apart as moonlight exploded from my skin. It surrounded us, washing over Bastian and sinking into him.

I stepped back, watching in awe as my moonlight slid under his skin, coalescing around his wrist in a sigil identical to the one encircling Gavin's neck.

And as the last of my moonlight faded, darkness tunneled my vision, my knees buckled, and the floor rushed up to meet me.

Bastian caught me, and then the darkness swallowed me whole.

18

I woke to the delicious taste of blackberries and pine coating my tongue and a wrist pressed against my mouth. Hot water rained down on me, and strong arms held me close against a solid, warm body.

I tried to lift my eyelids, but the blurry sliver of the world spun, so I squeezed them shut and instead focused on the intoxicating blood trickling into my mouth. Bastian's blood, I realized in a moment of coherency. I gripped his hand and forearm, pressing his wrist more firmly against my mouth, and sucked harder. With each pull of blood, the world steadied, and my awareness solidified.

As the dizziness receded, need throbbed between my legs, and I rocked my hips in an attempt to rub myself against the solid length of Bastian's thigh, which was flush against my bare ass.

"Not this time, Soph," Bastian murmured. "I don't want to hurt you more than I already have."

I whimpered, rubbing my rump against his thigh again, even as I continued to draw his blood into my mouth.

Bastian sighed, and his free hand slid along my inner thigh, moving closer to the place where I needed him. I rocked my hips eagerly.

At the first touch of his fingertip to my aching clit, I moaned and sucked harder on his wrist. He stroked me gently, making slow circles around that tender, swollen bundle of nerves. I could feel his hard erection pressed against my side, and I wedged my hand between our bodies to stroke him in return.

“Fuck,” he groaned, and I smiled against his wrist.

The pleasure built quickly within me, despite Bastian’s light touch between my legs. It crested suddenly, sending a blissful wash of tingling warmth spreading out from my core in waves that waxed and waned in time with my swallows. I shuddered on the floor of the shower, cradled against Bastian’s body, as the combination of his blood on my tongue and his relentlessly tender touch coaxed the orgasm on and on into infinity.

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Bastian groaned, and his body stiffened. He pulsed his release out onto my hand, then relaxed. But through it all, he continued to stroke me. To stoke my pleasure onward, keeping me drifting along over those gently cascading waves of the sweetest extended climax.

I pulled my mouth away from his wrist and opened my eyes, gazing up into his eyes, the golden sunbursts barely visible around his pupils. I tilted my face up toward his, offering him my lips. He finally ceased his stroking between my legs and bowed his neck to claim my kiss.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed, breaking the kiss and resting his forehead against mine. “I shouldn’t have done it, but apparently, I really am a selfish bastard.”

My brow furrowed, and as the haze of desire faded, clarity returned to my mind. I blinked and looked around, totally confused as to why, exactly, I was slumped on the shower floor, cradled between Bastian’s legs. “What happened?”

“You offered me the blood bond,” Bastian said, raising his head and leaning it back against the tiled shower wall.

Without his head to shield me, water sprayed on my face. I raised one hand to block the spray while I turned my face away from the showerhead. Memories flashed through my mind like still frames from a movie. Me, biting my own lip until I bled. Offering Bastian my kiss, and with it, an eternal bond. Bastian claiming my lips, accepting my bond.

Bastian reached out one arm, leaning forward slightly to turn off the water. “And like

an idiot, I accepted.”

My breath caught, and my stare locked onto the glowing silver bonding sigil encircling his wrist. It was just like Gavin’s with the phases of the moon. “You don’t want it?” I whispered, my heart sinking into my stomach.

“What? No, Soph—” Bastian pressed his fingers against the side of my jaw and angled my face toward his once more. “That’s not what I meant.” His eyes searched mine, his dark brows bunching together. “I bound my life to yours the second I attacked that wolf shifter. This—” He glanced at his wrist. “This just makes it official.”

“Then, what?” I shook my head.

“I shouldn’t have accepted the blood bondright now,” he said. “Gavin warned me. He warned me not to do it. He knew you weren’t ready. But I did it anyway because I’m selfish and I didn’t want to risk losing you, and—” Again, Bastian rested his head back against the shower wall. “Fuck, he’s going to kill me.”

“He won’t kill you,” I vowed. “I won’t let him.”

Bastian’s eyes shifted to the doorway, fear flaring in his eyes.

“What?” I searched his face. “What is it?”

“He’s back.” Bastian awkwardly rose to his feet, helping me up with him.

“Indeed I am,” Gavin said, darkening the doorway from the bedroom.

Gavin's eyes were bright, shimmering like quicksilver, and his presence felt more potent now that he'd had his fill of mortal blood. His gaze skimmed over me, latching onto the hand Bastian curled around my waist. Onto the silver sigil shimmering around Bastian's wrist. He clenched his jaw, then blinked, and his focus shifted up to my face.

"Micah is very concerned about you," Gavin said, his voice carefully controlled. "Perhaps you should dress and return to the living room to ease his worries."

My eyes opened wide, my lips parting. "Of course," I said, stepping away from Bastian and rushing out of the shower.

Gavin angled his body to the side to let me pass into the bedroom.

I paused in the doorway and peered up at him, but his focus was locked on Bastian, who hung back in the shower. A quiet rage filled his silver stare.

"Gavin . . ."

He clenched and unclenched his jaw, but he didn't tear his attention away from Bastian.

Acting on instinct, I raised my hand and traced the lines of the bonding sigil I had branded into his neck mere hours ago. The soft silver glow of the marking flared brighter at my touch. I curved my fingers around the side of his neck and stroked my thumb along the column of his throat.

"Look at me," I said, my voice quiet but oddly resonant.

Coerced by the power of my will, Gavin dragged his stare from Bastian and looked at me. The corners of his mouth tensed and then ticked higher. "You're growing

stronger.”

“Good.” I studied the sharp angles of his face—his high cheekbones, his bold nose, his sinful, proud lips—and wondered why some other queen hadn’t snatched him up before the Sun uprising. He was stunning and powerful, both as a vampire and as a man. His presence commanded attention, making him a natural leader. Perhaps he had been too young at the time of the attack to have already been claimed by a queen?

“Don’t hurt Bastian,” I told him, my voice still ringing with power. With my will. “The blood bond—it wasn’t his fault. It was mine.”

Gavin narrowed his eyes, his resistance to my command clear in the hard set of his features. But finally, he dipped his chin in assent.

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My lips curved, and I moved closer to him until my nipples just barely skimmed the soft cotton of his shirt. The fabric clung to my damp skin. “How was your meal?” I asked, watching his eyes darken with desire.

“Unsatisfying,” he muttered.

His pulse thrummed under my fingers, and I closed my eyes, feeling my heartbeat sync with his. I barely knew Gavin, and it thrilled me to be near him. He exuded might and dominance. Touching him was like holding a live wire and having no fear of being electrocuted. I felt exhilarated in his presence. Emboldened and alive in a way I had never felt before.

“You didn’t fuck her?” I asked, needing to know.

“I told you I wouldn’t,” Gavin grated out.

“Mmm . . . but did you want to fuck her?”

Gavin’s hands settled on my hips and glided around behind my back, pulling me flush against him. “Not even a little,” he admitted, his voice a low purr. “I wanted to fuck you.”

My belly fluttered at his words.

“I should fuck you,” he murmured, backing me up against the doorframe and slipping his leg between mine. He grazed his nose along my jawline. “Punish you for endangering yourself.”

It was all I could do not to rub myself against his leg. If he thought fucking me would be a punishment, he was about the least intuitive person ever. Maybe the punishment was him taunting me with the idea of him fucking me.

“But that will have to wait,” he said, turning his face toward Bastian, who stood statue-still in the shower. “Now that she’s gifted you the blood bond, shifter, I suppose we can trust you. You might as well get dressed and come out.” Gavin looked at me. “We’ll be leaving soon.”

My eyebrows rose. “For the Moon Sanctuary?”

I had no idea where it was or even what it was. The name was vaguely familiar, but I didn’t remember anything about the place from my childhood.

“Yes.” Gavin stepped away, releasing my hips, and retreated into the bedroom.

I followed him and glanced over my shoulder at the sound of quiet footsteps behind me. Bastian headed for his pile of discarded clothing on the floor at the foot of the bed, while I made my way toward my things lying on the floor along the right side. Gavin stood near the door to the hallway, his arms crossed over his chest and his glare aimed at Bastian. The exertion of my will over Gavin might have ensured he didn’t attempt to hurt Bastian, but Gavin certainly hadn’t forgiven him.

As I pulled on my underwear and then my leggings, I thought of Micah sitting out in the living room. What if I entered a bloodfaded while we were on the road? How would I feed my body’s needs while he was around? I bent over and picked up the silk tunic and just held it against my chest as I stared at the wall as though I could see through it and whatever lay beyond, all the way to Micah.

Was this my life now? Was I doomed to be a slave to my body’s needs? Was this what it meant to be a vampire queen?

“Soph?” Bastian said, resting a hand on my shoulder. “Are you all right?”

I turned and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Are you dizzy?” Gavin asked, his arms uncrossing as he stepped away from the door. His worried expression told me he feared I was entering yet another bloodfade.

I shook my head. “It’s not that,” I said. “I just—” I paused, organizing my troubled thoughts and feelings into words. “Will it always be like this?” I looked at Gavin, my brows bunching together.

“Like what?” Gavin asked, slowly crossing the room while Bastian sat beside me on the bed, curling an arm around my lower back and pressing a kiss to my bare shoulder. His rough stubble sent a wash of tingles cascading over my skin from the point of gentle contact.

“This need to feed every few hours,” I said and shook my head again. “I mean, shouldn’t the crashes be getting further apart, not more frequent?” I held out my tunic. “At this rate, what’s the point in even getting dressed if I’m just going to have to strip again in an hour?” I let out a despondent laugh. “And don’t you guys want to have a life beyond this?” I asked, sweeping my arm out and behind me to indicate the bed.

Bastian chuckled. “Is that a trick question?” He brushed his lips over my shoulder again. “Because I have zero issues spending every waking moment fucking you, Soph.”

I flushed, my neck and cheeks flaming.

“No, it shouldn’t be like this,” Gavin said, stopping in front of me. He cupped my chin in one hand and tilted my head back, angling my face up toward his. “Your body

is acting like you just lost one of your consorts, not like you just gained two new ones.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my brow furrowing.

Gavin inhaled and exhaled, his stare shifting to the window behind me. “When a queen loses a consort she has been with for a while, she goes through withdrawals. It comes on hard and fades over time. She goes into seclusion with her remaining consorts until the withdrawals pass and her body stabilizes. If she loses more than one consort or isn’t able to replace those she lost . . . the withdrawals can kill her.”

I shook my head. “But that can’t be happening to me. I haven’t lost a consort,” I said. “Until you two, I never even had a consort to lose.”

“No?” Gavin asked, refocusing on me. “Are you so sure? Can you think of no other immortal whose blood has sustained you?”

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My eyebrows rose. “You mean Javier?” I frowned. “But we never—” I shook my head for what felt like the hundredth time. “It wasn’t like this with him. I was just a kid. There were no communions, not like with you two.”

The corner of Gavin’s mouth tensed. “Communion are far more innocent when a queen is young, for obvious reasons,” Gavin explained. “They begin when a queen’s powers first awaken at the onset of puberty, but the sexual component is not introduced until a queen is of age and her mature powers burn through her dopamine stores at a faster rate. With an immature queen, a simple blood exchange is all that’s required.” He crouched, resting his elbows on his knees, and angled his head to the side, exposing his neck and the bonding sigil glowing silver on his olive skin. “Do you remember seeing anything like this on Javier?”

I stared at the sigil, studying the glowing phases of the moon and thinking back to the few times Javier’s sigils had been visible. “I don’t think so, but I rarely saw his sigils, and when I did, he was fully clothed, so it could have been hidden.”

Gavin narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, you rarely saw his sigils?”

I shrugged. “He tried to keep my powers suppressed,” I explained. “He believed the only way to hide me from the House of the Sun was to make me appear human. That’s why he created the blood tincture. It kept me alive, but it also suppressed my powers.”

“He must have removed the dopamine,” Gavin mused aloud, his gaze losing focus. “And possibly added a dopamine reuptake inhibitor.” He refocused on me. “We’ll analyze the tincture when we get to the Moon Sanctuary. That should give

ussomeanswers.”

Gavin stood and pulled the small, black travel case holding six vials of Javier’s blood tincture that I always carried in my purse out of his pants pocket. “Take a dose,” he said. “If it helps to stabilize you, then we’ll know you do—didshare a blood bond with Javier.”

I accepted the case and unzipped it with shaking hands. Javier and all his damn secrets. I freed a vial and unscrewed the cap, bringing it up to my lips. Gaze lingering on the intricate design of the crescent sigil curving along the side of Gavin’s face, I tilted the vial back, pouring the tasteless contents into my mouth. I closed my eyes and swallowed, and when I opened my eyes again, the silvery glow of Gavin’s sigils was already fading, and his eyes dimmed to gray instead of silver.

I watched his sigils slowly disappear until they were no longer visible, then raised one hand to trace my fingertips over the unmarked side of his face. “It’s gone,” I murmured, letting my hand fall away.

Gavin pressed his lips together. “Then we have another answer. He did include a DRI in the formula.” He took the empty vial from between my fingers and narrowed his eyes as he studied it. “If Javier could add the inhibitor, we should be able to remove it.” Gavin’s eyes met mine. “This should be the last time your powers are suppressed. Then we can use the remaining tincture to gradually wean you off Javier’s blood.”

I looked at the vial, all I had left of Javier. “Do you think—” I hesitated, afraid to voice the question. I had refused to believe he was dead for so long; the hope that he was out there somewhere was all that kept me going at times. “Could he still be alive?”

Gavin stared at Bastian. I looked at the shifter as well. If anyone in this loft knew Javier’s fate, he would.

Bastian shrugged one shoulder. "I wish I could tell you, Soph." He shook his head. "I just don't know."

Gavin took a backward step and angled his body away from me. He inhaled and exhaled, slow and controlled. "He could be alive," he finally admitted. "But if he is, he's a prisoner of the House of the Sun, and extracting him would be extremely dangerous."

I nodded slowly, having come to that same conclusion long ago. I looked at Gavin's neck, where the bonding sigil should have been visible, then at Bastian's wrist. "You both have your sigils. Do I get any marks like that?" I had never noticed anything like that on my body, but then, Javier had always been quick to suppress my powers whenever they became active.

"There is, but it's inside you," Gavin said, pressing his palm flat against his chest. Did he mean that their sigils were branded onto my heart? "When your powers are active, you can do a casting to project your consorts' sigils around you."

"A casting?" I asked, standing. Bastian's hand trailed down my hip, then fell away. "I don't even know what that is."

"It's what we call it when a queen focuses her powers to achieve a specific end," he said. "You'll learn."

"How?" I asked with a despondent laugh. "How will I learn when there are no more queens to teach me?"

"There are no more living queens," Gavin said, glancing at me sidelong. "But you have already admitted that when your powers are active, you can see the dead."

"But I haven't seen any ghosts here," I told him.

The corners of his mouth tensed with the hint of a smile. “Ah, but you’re surrounded by protective wards here. The spirits cannot enter this floor.” He scanned the walls, seeing things that were currently invisible to me. “All the High Queens have been laid to rest at the Moon Sanctuary. Their spirits will surely be able to assist you.”

“My mom?” I asked, taking a step toward him, hope rising within me. “Is she there?”

Gavin’s features tensed. “All High Queens, save for the last one,” he amended, sympathy shadowing his expression. “Veris had your mother’s body burned, her ashes scattered to the winds.” Gavin glanced past me to Bastian. “Veris lit the pyre himself. By the time he and his people departed, there was nothing left of her to move. There’s nothing to anchor her to that place.”

“Oh,” I said, my shoulders slumping and my gaze drifting down to his shoes. “Okay.” But then Gavin’s words registered, and my focus snapped back up to his face. “You were there—after.” My chin trembled.

I didn’t remember much from before, just spotty memories, but that night was as vivid as if it had happened only yesterday. Some people’s minds blocked their childhood trauma. I wasn’t so lucky.

With perfect clarity, I recalled hiding on the short ledge of the roof outside my bedroom window while Amaya, Javier, and a few other vampires attempted to fight off seven shifters. I remembered Amaya’s screams. I remembered the sound her body made when it hit the floor. I remembered the light reflecting off the merged pools of blood beneath her and the vampire and shifter bodies scattered around her when Javier retrieved me. I remembered her serene face. Her empty eyes.

“Did you see Amaya?” I asked, my voice small, like I had reverted to the little girl I was during that terrifying night.

Gavin was quiet for so long, I thought he might not answer. “I did,” he finally said.

“She was in my room,” I said, then added, “when she died.” I hugged my middle and closed my eyes, setting free a string of tears. “I hid while they killed her,” I said, admitting my greatest shame.

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I searched Gavin's eyes. "Why were you there?"

"The attack—"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Of all the locations that were attacked, why did you come to my home?" I took another step closer to Gavin. "You told Micah your mom was a queen, that your lineage makes you among the most powerful of our kind, so why didn't you have a queen of your own to protect that night?"

Gavin clenched and unclenched his jaw and looked away. "I was protecting my queen," he snapped. "Or, at least, I was attempting to."

"Not my mother," I thought aloud. "You're still alive. If you shared a blood bond with her, you would be dead."

"I had earned a place as Prime Consort to a queen, but she was young, and I had not yet communed with her," he said, his voice a hushed murmur.

"Amaya?" I asked.

Gavin shook his head. "That was to be Javier's role," Gavin said softly, one hand drifting up to his neck to run his fingertips over the invisible sigil. "I was always intended for you."

I sensed the truth in his words, and the rightness I felt around him made more sense.

"I should have been there," Gavin said. He turned to face me and bowed his head. "I

should have been there to protect you, but I wasn't, and everything I have done since has been to atone for that failure. And the other night, if I had realized it was you in that club, that you were my Luna, my queen—" He shook his head. "I never would have left you there. Never."

His gaze scoured my face, lingering on my eyes. "I can see it now. When you unleash your glow, you are unmistakable, but you were so changed then . . . so depleted." He released a bitter laugh under his breath. "I thought I had found a lesser queen." He shook his head again. "I certainly never suspected your powers were being chemically suppressed."

"I—" My voice stalled as I searched for something, anything, to say. Gavin wasn't the stranger I had believed him to be. He was always supposed to be mine.

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Gavin's focus shifted past me to where Bastian still sat on the edge of the bed. "We should get your shifter something to eat," Gavin said, his tone begrudging. "He looks like he's about to pass out."

I twisted to look at Bastian. His back was slumped, his gaze unfocused, and his copper skin appeared unusually pallid. My cheeks heated as I realized the reason—because he had fed me, twice. He was suffering from blood loss, and only then did I remember he had been injured during the fight with the wolf shifter. There had been a lot of blood in the car. Shifting had healed him, but it must have depleted his energy stores.

"Oh, Bas . . ." I quickly pulled my top on over my head, then gripped Bastian's forearm to help him up to his feet. He was shaking, and I wrapped an arm around his back to keep him steady.

“Does anything sound good?” I asked Bastian, then glanced at Gavin, recalling that Javier hadn’t needed food for sustenance. I feared there wouldn’t be much of anything ready-made in the fridge, though I knew from my booze hunt through the kitchen that the pantry was stocked. “What do we have?”

“Meat,” Bastian said, his voice weak. “I need protein.”

“I don’t know what’s in the fridge,” Gavin admitted. “Ash ordered groceries for you as soon as we knew you were coming here. I told him to get a bit of everything.” Gavin opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the hallway ahead of us, a cruel twist to his lips as he watched me help Bastian out of the room.

“Don’t worry,” I grumbled when the vampire made no move to help the shifter. “I got him.”

Gavin’s eyes narrowed, but his sneer remained.

“Sophie!” Micah said, rushing toward us from the floor-to-ceiling corner window in the living room as soon as we reached the mouth of the hallway. “You’re okay! What happened? Here—” He ducked under Bastian’s other arm and helped me half drag the bigger man into the living room.

We settled Bastian on the couch, and I shot an irritated glare in Gavin’s direction as he strode toward the front door. “Thanks, Micah,” I said, the two words more directed at Gavin than at my son.

Gavin glanced back at me over his shoulder, his expression seeming to say he was enjoying watching Bastian suffer. Considering I had commanded him not to hurt Bastian, I supposed not helping when Bastian was suffering was the next best thing for him.

I rolled my eyes and hurried into the kitchen.

“Does he need to feed, too?” Micah asked from where he stood by the couch and the starving shifter.

“Sort of,” I said as I opened the fridge door.

The fridge was stocked full of a bit of everything. I rummaged through the clear plastic food containers holding pretty much every kind of pasta salad in existence, but they contained little in the way of meat. I grabbed the small tubs of tuna and chicken salad, hoping Bastian didn't mind stuff mixed in with his meat, then pulled the three bags of fresh-sliced deli meat from the fridge drawer.

I set my finds on the counter beside the fridge, then pulled open the freezer drawer. “Jackpot,” I sang under my breath as I stared down into a treasure trove of frozen raw meat.

I pulled out a package of four enormous steaks and frowned, wondering if that was enough. Then I pulled out three of the one-pound squares of ground beef as well. I dumped the frozen packages of meat into the sink, plugged the drain, and turned the faucet on to thaw the meat faster. Then, finding the silverware drawer, I grabbed a spoon.

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“This is just your first course,” I told Bastian as I carried the bags of deli meat and containers of tuna and chicken salad over to the couch.

Micah backed out of the way to let me move closer to Bastian. I handed Bastian a bag of sliced roast beef and set everything else on the coffee table in front of him, then pulled the lid off the chicken salad and stuck the spoon into the mushy chicken mixture before setting the container down.

Bastian tore open the thin plastic bag and shoved an entire piece of roast beef into his mouth, barely chewing, before he swallowed and wolfed down another.

“Should I cook the steak?”

Bastian shook his head. “Not necessary,” he said before polishing off the last slice of roast beef. He ripped open the sliced turkey breast next.

“Okay,” I said, stepping back to stand beside Micah. “Well, it’s thawing in the sink.”

Bastian nodded. “Thanks,” he said between slices of turkey.

“So, vampires eat food?” Micah asked, his voice lowered.

“He’s not a vampire,” I told him, crossing my arms as I shifted my attention to the front door. It was shut, and I figured Gavin was speaking with the other two vampires, Thane and Ash, likely filling them in on Bastian’s new, official role as one of my consorts.

“Oh,” Micah said. “Oh. He was your food.”

My cheeks heated for about the thousandth time.

“So, he’s human?”

I shook my head. “He’s a shifter.”

“Wait, what?” Micah grabbed my arm, dragging my attention back to him. “I thought shifters were the enemy.” He looked incredulous. “Didn’t they kill, like, your entire family?”

“They did, but Bastian’s different,” I explained. “He’s a defector, and he’s another of my, um, guards—like Gavin.”

Micah studied the shifter who was currently inhaling slices of Black Forest ham, tilting his head to the side like he wasn’t quite sure what he was looking at.

The door opened, and Gavin strode in, Thane and Ash flanking him, the larger men looking like day and night personified. Though their expressions remained guarded, their dark stares in Bastian’s direction confirmed my suspicion that Gavin had filled them in on the newest member of my harem.

“As soon as the shifter’s ready, we’ll head out,” Gavin said, heading into the kitchen.

He peered down into the sink, then looked at Bastian. He found a large metal mixing bowl under the counter, then pulled the package of steaks out of the water and ripped open the plastic, plunking the mostly frozen steaks into the bowl.

“This will go faster if you shift,” Gavin said, adding the ground beef to the bowl. He carried the bowl into the living room and set it on the floor, feeding Bastian like he

was a dog. “Go on, then.” Gavin crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Bastian, still sitting on the couch. “Shift.”

“Gavin,” I said, my voice laced with warning. “Knock it off.”

He looked at me, his haughty sneer gone, suggesting this wasn’t about tormenting Bastian. “He’s one of us now,” Gavin said. “We need to know what we’re working with.”

“It’s fine, Soph,” Bastian said. “He’s right, anyway. They need to know what I can do. Otherwise, we won’t know how to work together to protect you.”

Bastian rounded the end of the coffee table and approached Gavin and the bowl of raw meat he had set on the floor, pulling off his T-shirt and tossing it onto a chairback, revealing the mesmerizing tattoos that covered his upper body.

“Uh, okay.” Micah turned to me as Bastian pushed his sweatpants down.

I glanced at Micah, flashing him the most awkward smile ever, like this was all perfectly normal, and returned my attention to the now completely naked shifter standing in the middle of the living room.

The air around Bastian shimmered, distorted by waves of magic, and in the blink of an eye, he transformed into a massive black panther.

“Holy shit,” Micah exclaimed, stumbling back a couple of steps and sinking into the armchair he had occupied earlier.

Bastian padded closer to the bowl Gavin had set on the floor and started tearing into the frozen meat with his three-inch fangs. In less than a minute, the bowl was empty, and Bastian sat on his haunches to clean his maw with paws nearly the size of my

face. How had this giant jungle cat ever fit into my car?

“What other forms do you have?” Gavin asked matter-of-factly.

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Bastian set down his paw and looked at Gavin. Again, the air shimmered around him, and in another blink, he shrank into the large, black tom cat I had adopted and named Sombra. I couldn't help but smile a little at seeing him like that. Another shimmer, and he turned into a raven. Another and he was a huge black bear. With one final shimmer, the beautiful, copper-skinned man I had once deluded myself into believing was human stood before us, gloriously nude. He looked strong and powerful, fully revived by the meal.

I rubbed the back of my neck and averted my gaze to the floor when really I wanted to keep ogling, but Micah was there behind me, and I felt incredibly uncomfortable with everything that was going on.

"I have a dragon and kraken shape as well. Those could prove useful," Bastian told Gavin.

"A dragon and a kraken," Micah breathed, and I wasn't far behind him in my disbelief.

Gavin looked past Bastian to the other two vampires. I followed his line of sight, noting that hints of appreciation softened their hard expressions. "Do either of you have any questions for the shifter?"

"How large is your dragon form?" Thane asked, his deep voice resonating pleasantly through my body.

"Large enough to carry Sophie, if that's what you're wondering," Bastian told him.

Thane nodded, his dark eyes shifting to focus on me. The cool detachment with which he had viewed Bastian melted away as he looked at me.

Sensing Ash's focus had turned to me as well, I looked at him. He pressed his closed fist to his heart and bowed his head. I had yet to hear him speak, but something about the way he gazed at me made me feel warm and tingly all over.

"Uh, Sophie?" Micah said, drawing my attention to him. "What exactly are the duties of a queen's guards?"

I choked out a laugh. Motion on the other side of the room drew my eye. Bastian was getting dressed.

"We guard our queen and attend to her every need," Gavin said, approaching.

"Oh," Micah said. His eyes opened wider as realization dawned. "Oh. Okay, gross." He glanced at me. "No offense."

"None taken," I said, my voice tight. "I would like to never talk about this again."

"Agreed," Micah said with a decisive nod.

"Sophie?" Gavin touched my elbow. "How are you feeling?"

I turned to face him. "Mortified," I grumbled.

He sighed. "Are you dizzy or weak?"

"Oh, um" I frowned, taking a quick assessment of how I felt physically. "I feel fine." I scanned his face, imagining I could see the crescent sigil. "No change," I added, letting him know I didn't have access to my powers.

“Good,” Gavin nodded. “Now that we know the problem, we can find a solution.” He looked past me to Thane. “Is everything in place for the trip?”

I glanced over my shoulder as Thane nodded. “The portalist arrived fifteen minutes ago,” he said in that deep, rumbling voice of his. “She should be finished soon.”

“How are we looking outside?” Gavin asked.

“No sign of shifters,” Thane said. “The street should be clear.”

Gavin turned, looking at Bastian. “You’re certain the Sun Watch doesn’t know about this location?”

“I didn’t know about it,” Bastian said, raising one shoulder. “So, I can only assume they don’t either.”

Gavin stared at him for a long moment, saying nothing. His gaze flicked toward me but quickly returned to Bastian. “Remember, you share a blood bond with Sophie now. If she dies, you die.” Gavin’s eyes narrowed. “But it doesn’t work the other way around. She can survive losing you.”

I sucked in a breath, Gavin’s implied threat hanging in the air. Did my command to not hurt Bastian still stand when my powers were suppressed, or did the suppression negate past expressions of my will?

“Are you sure?” I asked, moving closer to Gavin. He watched me out of the corner of his eye but continued to stare down Bastian. “Are you absolutely certain I’ll survive losing him, too? You said losing more than one consort at once could kill a queen.”

Gavin clenched his jaw.

I raised one hand and pressed my fingers against his chiseled cheek, turning his face toward me. His eyes locked with mine, his stare challenging. “Please, stop taunting him,” I said, fear and anxiety making my voice tremulous.

His throat bobbed. “I’m trying to keep you alive,” he said.

“I know.” I offered him a small smile. “And I appreciate that. I really do. I haven’t had much of a choice in anything in my life—ever—but I did choose to bond with Bastian, so please, just give him a chance.” I searched Gavin’s gray eyes, no longer silver or luminous now that my powers were suppressed, but striking nonetheless. “That’s all I ask.”

Gavin closed his eyes and dipped his chin in assent, then turned his face into my hand, brushing his lips over my palm.

“Thank you,” I whispered and pulled my hand away.

At the sound of a buzzing device, Thane pulled a phone from his back pocket and glanced at the screen. “The portal is active,” he rumbled. “We should go now.”

“Get your purse,” Gavin told me. He looked past me to Bastian, then down at Micah before returning his attention to me. “We’re leaving.”

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Gavin strode across the loft to the front door. I grabbed my purse off the coffee table and followed, Thane and Ash falling in step on either side of me. Micah hoisted his backpack off the floor and slipped his arms through the shoulder straps, trailing close behind us, while Bastian brought up the rear.

Pausing with his hand on the door handle, Gavin peered back at me, his expression

considering. “You have nosightright now?” He wasn’t asking about my mundane vision, but my ability to see those things visible only on the ethereal plane, like sigils and ghosts.

I stopped a few steps behind him and shook my head.

“I don’t like that,” he murmured, frowning. “You should be able to see while we’re en route.” His focus shifted to Thane on my right and then to Ash on my left before returning to me. “You should feed.”

Brow furrowing, I shook my head. “But I’m not—” Hungry? Thirsty? I wasn’t quite sure of the right word. “I feel fine,” I assured Gavin.

“You only think that because your access to your gifts has been blocked for so long,” Gavin said. He nodded toward the door. “When we step beyond the protection wards in this building, we’ll be exposed. Yoursight, when active, is far stronger than ours, and your sister has already proved she’s keeping watch over you. If she has another warning for you while we’re outside the wards, I want to make sure you can receive it.”

I swallowed roughly, both excited about and dreading the prospect of seeing Amaya’s ghost again. But it was the prospect of seeing another that made me nod. If Amaya was real, then Wes had to have been too. I could see him again. I could show him our son.

As soon as my chin dipped, Gavin took hold of my hand and pulled me toward the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

I glanced over my shoulder at the cluster of people waiting at the door. We were on our way out, and now they would have to wait for me to, what, have another impromptu blood orgy? Couldn’t a feeding ever just be a feeding?

“Gavin, I hardly think now is the time for—”

“This will only take a moment,” Gavin said. “Thane, you’re with us.”

I peeked over my shoulder again to see Thane behind me, his long strides eating up the distance between us until he was a dark, hulking shadow. Gavin didn’t intend for me to feed from himself but from Thane.

I suddenly felt overheated. The attraction between Thane and me was undeniable, and according to the prophetic dream from the other night, he was destined to become one of my consorts, but I hadn’t expected to be with him so soon. We had barely exchanged any words. I didn’t know the first thing about him.

Gavin led us into the large, luxurious hall bathroom, which was a striking clash of classic and modern styles, with a pale, marble tile floor and concrete countertops. He gestured to the doorway with a sweep of his hand.

I paused at the threshold, wondering if the bathroom was warded to be soundproof like the blue room. I really hoped so.

“Go on,” Gavin said, nodding to the doorway.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the bathroom. Thane followed, then Gavin, who shut the door with a faint click. The spacious bathroom suddenly felt cramped, and I backed toward the glass wall of the shower, my heart hammering. I licked my lips, my mouth already watering at the prospect of getting a taste of Thane, and a dull, desperate longing started between my legs.

Thane seemed too big for this space. The setting sun shone through the window behind me, the oranges and reds gleaming off his dark skin and turning his nearly black irises a burnished bronze.

Gavin crossed the space between us and held out a hand for me to take. I placed my hand in his, allowing him to pull me forward. Closer to him. Closer to Thane.

“Don’t be nervous,” Gavin murmured, likely feeling my hand tremble. “Blood only this time.” His words were both a relief and a disappointment.

My stare locked with Thane’s, and I planted myself directly in front of him. He leaned back against the edge of the counter, bringing him closer to my height. His chest rose and fell with breaths that were quicker than before. I offered him a slight, shaky smile, and his full lips curved with genuine warmth.

I stepped closer until my feet were between his. “Thanks for doing this,” I told him, feeling a little breathless.

Thane settled his large hands on my hips and bowed his head. “It’s my pleasure.” His thrumming voice resonated with something deep inside me.

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Behind me, Gavin moved in close. “Blood only,” he said, sliding one arm around my waist to press his hand against my abdomen while the other braced me across my chest, capturing my hands and locking them against my breasts.

I pushed against his restraining hold. “Gavin . . . ”

“Blood only,” he repeated, his voice low and unwavering.

Surrendering to his hold, I leaned back against him, craning my neck so I could see his face. “This isn’t necessary,” I told him. I wasn’t a rabid, sex-starved beast. “I do have some self-control.”

“Do you?” he murmured, his eyebrows rising. “You must have misplaced it this afternoon when you nearly killed yourself binding the shifter.”

Cheeks heating, I pressed my lips together and huffed out a breath through my nose. But I didn’t argue because he wasn’t wrong. I had known better than to bind Bastian, but I had done it, anyway. I glared at Gavin on principle, but I couldn’t hold on to the annoyance, not when I was so nervous and eager to taste Thane.

The insides of Thane’s legs pressed against the outsides of mine, his warmth seeping into me through his jeans, and his thumbs swept back and forth along the outer edges of my belly, a delicate tease through the silk of my tunic.

“Take what you need,” he said as he tilted his head to the side, offering me his neck.

I licked my lips and leaned in, Gavin’s restraining hold keeping me from reaching for

Thane or pressing the front of my body against his. My lips hovered a hair's breadth from the crook of Thane's neck, and his scent washed over me. He smelled rich and spicy but in a very different way from Gavin. I brushed my lips over his skin, feeling his pulse jump in response. His tension practically vibrated the air between us.

I bit down, gradually digging my teeth into his flesh, and he hissed in a breath and tightened his grip on my hips. The instant my teeth broke the skin, he let out a shivering sigh.

Thane's hot, thick blood exploded into my mouth. He tasted sweet and spicy, reminding me of the molasses cookies Javier used to make every year for the winter solstice. The first swallow electrified my senses, and sigils flared to life on the walls reflected in the mirror behind Thane. Desire raged through me, and I strained against Gavin's hold, seeking friction against my most intimate of places.

But Gavin's arms remained unyielding. The hand he pressed firmly against my lower abdomen only amplified the pulse of need throbbing between my legs, and with the way he had my arms pinned, I couldn't even touch myself to relieve the ache.

Gavin leaned in until his lips brushed the shell of my ear. "Not this time, Sophie," he whispered. "Consider this punishment for disregarding my warning."

Growling in frustration, I drank deeper.

Thane groaned and leaned his head forward, resting his forehead on my shoulder.

Each swallow pushed me closer to the edge. At this rate, I wouldn't need any contact at all to reach a physical release. A few more pulls of Thane's blood might just do the trick.

"That's enough," Gavin said, stepping back and dragging me with him.

My lips unsealed from Thane's shoulder with a wetpop, and I whimpered. I had been so close.

Thane's hands fell away from my hips, and he hung his head, his broad shoulders rising and falling with each quick, heavy breath. Blood seeped from the bite mark on his neck, staining the collar of his dark T-shirt, but the wound was already closing.

"Leave us," Gavin said, his voice quiet and authoritative.

Practically panting with need, I watched Thane pull a washcloth from those artfully rolled and stacked in the cubby under the counter, wet it with water from the faucet, and wipe the blood from his neck. He glanced at me, an inferno of desire blazing in his dark eyes.

"Next time," he said, his voice dripping with promise. He opened the door, stepped out into the hallway, and pulled the door shut, leaving me alone with Gavin.

My bound vampire stared at me in the mirror, his irises illuminated with silver moonlight. The hard length of his erection pressed into my lower back, and tension coiled his muscles, making his arms tremble. He was struggling against the urge to yank down my leggings, bend me over the counter, and fuck me. I knew it—not as a gut instinct, but something more, bleeding into me through our bond.

I rubbed my ass against Gavin, hoping to coax him into action.

His arms tightened around me, restricting my breath. "Do that again," he hissed, "and I will leave you to walk out of here in this state."

I froze, my entire body shivering with unfulfilled need.

Gavin bunched up the front of my tunic and dipped the tips of his fingers into the

waistline of my leggings. Shifting his other arm, he covered my mouth with his large hand, muffling the needy sounds clawing up my throat. His eyes locked with mine in the mirror's reflection. "Next time you will heed my warning," he murmured.

Whimpering, I nodded. In my present state, I would have agreed to anything to get him to shift his hand lower.

"Next time you endanger yourself so recklessly, I will personally ensure you don't come for a week," he promised, his breath hot against my ear. And then he shoved his hand deeper into my pants, his fingers gliding over my slick sex.

He pinched my swollen clit between two fingers, and I cried out against his palm, shattering as pleasure exploded from my core. My body spasmed under the onslaught of the crashing, agonizing waves of ecstasy. It didn't drag on, as it would have done were I actively drinking immortal blood, but for once, I was glad of the orgasm's brevity, sharp and violent as it was. Much more of that brutal pleasure, and I feared I would pass out.

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I sagged in Gavin's hold, and he shifted his hand back up to my belly.

He pulled his hand away from my mouth. "Can you stand on your own?" he asked, his voice gentler than before.

"I think so," I said between ragged breaths. My legs were shaky, but they felt steadier with each beat of my heart.

Gavin's hold loosened, and his hands trailed down my body before falling away. He stepped to the side and adjusted himself to reduce the obvious bulge in the front of his slacks before moving forward to wash his hands at the sink. His powerful body was wire tight with unspent need.

Realizing I may have overestimated my legs' steadiness, I leaned back against the wall as I straightened my leggings and tunic.

Gavin watched me in the reflection, both the crescent sigil curved along the side of his face and the bonding sigil wrapped around his neck glowing steadily. "If we didn't have somewhere to be . . ." His gaze roved over me. Blowing out a breath, he shut off the water and reached for the hand towel hanging on the wall. "But we do."

He dried his hands, then moved closer to wipe away the blood staining my lips and chin. Once I was cleaned up, he pulled the door open and stepped out into the hallway, where he waited for me.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped away from the wall and joined Gavin in the hallway.

Bastian stood at the mouth of the hallway, his hands clenched into tight fists. Thane and Ash waited by the front door, crescent sigils ablaze. Thane's composure had returned, making him appear the stoic warrior once again. Micah had retreated into the living room to stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Gavin strode past Bastian, the very edge of his shoulder skimming the shifter's.

"Hey," I said, stopping beside Bastian and resting a hand on his arm. "I'm fine."

He clenched and unclenched his jaw, gazing down at me with burning amber eyes. "I could feel you," he rasped. "Your hunger. Your desperation. Your pleasure. I could feel it all."

Eyes widening, I trailed my hand down his arm and traced the lines of the bonding sigil wrapped around his wrist. The silver light flared brighter at my touch.

"I didn't realize," I said, my voice hushed.

I glanced at Gavin, who now waited with Thane and Ash by the door, and thought of how I had known what he wanted to do to me in the bathroom, even if he hadn't allowed himself to give in to his desires. Had he been able to feel me in the same way when I had been alone with Bastian in the shower? Had he known of the danger I was in before he even returned to the loft? Had he felt the sweet pleasure Bastian coaxed from my body after?

Looked like we were bound together more tightly than I had realized.

Gavin's eyes met mine. "Whenever you're ready," he said coolly.

I nodded and looked at Micah, who had turned away from the window and was crossing the living room. We clustered near the vampires at the door.

“Wards were etched into the foundation and the steel beams framing this building, preventing shifters from entering,” Gavin explained, his hand gripping the doorknob and his head turned so he could eye Bastian sidelong. “Unless they bear a countersigil.” He looked at me. “But only this loft is warded thoroughly enough to repel ghosts. As soon as you cross this threshold, you will be able to see any ghosts who approach you.”

“But you can’t?” I asked.

He shook his head. “That is a gift exclusively held by queens,” he said. “Since no one else can detect the spirits, they make excellent scouts. If your sister or any others do appear, I would very much appreciate you sending them out to keep watch. We’re heading across the street to the basement of a neighboring building.”

I narrowed my eyes. “We’re not driving?”

He sliced his chin to the left and then to the right. “We’re traveling by portal,” he said. “That way, we’re only exposed for a few minutes, rather than hours.”

My eyebrows rose. “A portal?” I had only ever heard of the gateways elementals could create linking two distant places. “I’ve never seen one.”

“You have,” Gavin told me. “You just don’t remember.”

My brow furrowed at his implied mention of a shared past I couldn’t remember. “The wards prevent portals here?” I guessed.

Gavin nodded and turned the doorknob, but he didn’t open the door. “Unless you

have any more questions . . .” He looked pointedly at the door. When I shook my head, he pulled it open.

Thane and Ash passed through to the landing first, Ash striding ahead to push the button for the elevator while Thane hung back.

Gavin looked at me and nodded to the landing beyond. “Go on,” he said. “I’m right behind you.”

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I stepped closer to the doorway but hesitated on the threshold. There was a good chance I would find my sister out there. Or Wes. Or maybe even my mom. I tried to move forward, but another name whispered through my mind, and my muscles seized, tears welling in my eyes.

Javier.

What if I saw him out there? Then I would know for sure. I had convinced myself Javier was still alive, a prisoner to the House of the Sun. But if I saw his ghost, I would have to accept that he was dead.

Gavin moved closer to me, sliding his hand along the small of my back. “The ghosts can’t hurt you,” he said, his voice hushed.

I flashed him a sad smile. “You’re wrong,” I told him, a tear gliding down my cheek.

“Perhaps I am,” Gavin said, bowing his head slightly.

With a resigned sigh, I stepped through the doorway. I moved slowly, my breaths shallow and muscles humming with tension. Flanked by Thane and Gavin, I scanned the landing, but nobody appeared who hadn’t already been there.

When the elevator doors glided apart, Ash stepped into the enclosed space and pressed the button to hold the doors open. I joined him, Gavin and Thane following me into the elevator. We moved to the back to make room for Bastian and Micah.

It was a large elevator car, but the latent power exuding from Bastian and the three

vampires made it feel itty bitty. My skin tingled, the small hairs all over my body standing on end. I hadn't noticed the electric presence each immortal exuded in the spacious loft, but it was impossible to ignore when they surrounded me in such a tight space.

I reached for Micah's hand, needing to feel something normal. He glanced back at me, his eyebrows raised, and I wondered if he could feel it, too. The corners of his mouth tensed, and he gave my hand a squeeze.

The elevator slowed, then stopped, and I held my breath, waiting for the doors to slide open. They did so with awhoosh, revealing a lobby of marble and polished steel, empty save for four unfamiliar vampires spread out around the perimeter of the space, an even split of men and women.

"Anything?" Gavin asked from behind me, his breath tickling the wispy hairs that had escaped from my bun.

I shook my head. I had been expecting a horde of ghosts to ambush me, and I released my held breath in a relieved exhale at finding none.

"Good," he said, angling his body sideways to step past me and leave the elevator car. He paused to scan the lobby, then glanced over his shoulder at me. "It's a straight shot across the street. We're running out the doors, and we're not slowing until we get to the basement of the other building. Don't worry about the cars on the street. They'll stop. And if they don't, we'll make them." His focus shifted to Bastian. "Stick to her side. You're her worst-case-scenario escape plan."

Bastian stepped away from the elevator wall and closer to me, his fingers curling around my upper arm in a tight grip. "I understand."

I looked from Gavin to Bastian and back, swallowing a sudden jolt of fear. They were

talking about him shifting and flying me away—as a godsdamneddragon.

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Gavin turned and started across the lobby. Bastian and I followed, with Micah sticking close to my other side, and Thane and Ash flanking us. The other four vampire guardians in the lobby peeled away from the walls and jogged closer to join Thane and Ash in forming a protective barrier between the rest of the world and me.

Gavin picked up speed as he neared the glass double doors. He barreled into them, shoving them open and exploding out into the twilight city. Cars zoomed past, and a siren whined in the distance. Tires squealed and horns blared as Gavin ran into the street, but he had been right. The cars stopped for him.

We raced across the street after Gavin. My heart pounded, my blood whooshing in my ears. Bastian's hold on my arm was painfully tight, but I didn't mind because it was a reminder that he was there beside me.

The building on the far side of the street was brick and only a few stories tall. Gavin reached the double doors first, a female vampire close on his heels. They skidded to a stop on the far sidewalk, nearly slamming into the glass double doors, and yanked them open.

The rest of us rushed through the doorway, the immortals filling the building's lobby with their oversized presence. Two more vampires waited for us in the elevator alcove, arms extended into two of the four elevator cars to hold the doors open.

The few people milling in the generic seating areas arranged on either side of the lobby gawked at my escorts.

We stampeded across the lobby and poured into the two waiting elevator cars, my

original entourage joining me in the elevator on the left, while the other vampires filled the elevator on the right. I hugged Micah's arm, while Bastian maintained his iron hold on my elbow. Thane and Ash stood in the two front corners, Gavin between them, his feet set into a wide, defensive stance.

The doors glided shut. Amaya flickered into view in the gap a moment before they sealed closed. I blinked, and she was standing in front of me inside the elevator.

Gasping, I stumbled backward into the elevator wall, dragging Micah and Bastian with me.

Gavin spun around.

"They're here!" Amaya warned, her voice echoing eerily in the enclosed space.

The floor dropped as the elevator started its descent.

Amaya flickered out of sight, then reappeared closer to me, her transparent features frantic. "Two dozen shifters. They're heading for the stairs," she said, her words coming out in a rush. "Half have already shifted, and the rest have guns. You won't make it to the portal before they reach the basement." She glanced over her shoulder at Gavin. "Tell him," she urged, looking back at me. "Tell him now!"

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“They’re here,” I said, stumbling over the words. I tore my stare from Amaya to meet Gavin’s fierce silver eyes. “Two dozen shifters. They’re taking the stairs, and they have guns.”

Gavin’s eyes locked with Bastian’s, and a silent conversation seemed to pass between them. Finally, Gavin nodded, a single dip of his chin. “Follow me,” he said, his attention shifting back to me. The elevator dinged, and behind him, the doors whooshed apart.

We rushed out into a wide, industrial-looking hallway with aged brick walls and exposed pipes and immediately turned right. Gavin led us around two corners, then barreled through a heavy fire door into an expansive, blue-lit space filled with row after row of humming, blinking servers. He turned, heading around the perimeter of the server farm, and we followed.

The sound of another door banging open resounded through the room, and my heart lurched into my throat. Hushed voices and sneaking footsteps joined the electric hum.

“Hurry!” Amaya shouted, blinking into and out of sight in each aisle as I passed.

Bastian released my arm, and a moment later, a dark shadow leapt over my head. I ducked even as I ran, looking up to see a huge panther land silently on top of one of the server towers. Bastian leapt from row to row, his sleek black form guarding us from above.

I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to find eight vampires trailing behind me, but I only found Thane and Ash. Where were the others? Lurking atop the server towers

like Bastian? Or slinking down the aisles? I returned my attention to the way ahead as we neared the last row of servers.

Gavin rounded the corner first, Micah and I trailing a few steps behind. He slowed, extending an arm to hold us back.

I looked past Gavin, fear gripping my heart when I saw the four armed Sun warriors in human form stalking toward us behind a huge russet wolf that may very well have been the same woman who had shifted and attacked me in the parking lot of my apartment building.

About midway between us, some thirty feet away, a shadowy vortex swirled in the wall, streaks of midnight lightning flashing in its impossible depths. The portal.

Gavin stopped, one hand raised defensively in front of him. The shifters stopped as well, and for a tense moment, our two groups stared one another down.

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I held my breath, pulling Micah closer to me, dreadful anticipation making my muscles tremble. Micah's arm curved around my shoulders, clutching me against his side as though attempting to shield me from the threat ahead. But he was just a human. A mere mortal. There was nothing he would be able to do against bullets or shifter claws and teeth, except die.

At a whisper of movement above the servers, the armed shifters glanced upward.

Too late.

Bastian, in panther form, and two vampires dropped on top of them. Gunfire exploded in the enclosed space, bullets cutting through the walls and ceiling and

lodging in the servers, making the machines spark and flicker. Ash and Thane lunged in front of Micah and me, forming a protective barrier of immortal flesh.

Vampires weren't impervious to bullets, and gunshot wounds still hurt like hell, but bullets had to be solid silver to prevent immediate healing and to do any lasting damage. But not even a silver bullet to the brain would kill the weakest undeadvampire. Decapitation was the only sure method to end the life of an immortal vampire, a feat that was almost impossible when facing a powerful vampire guardian. The sigils on a guardian's skin, gifts from a vampire queen, enhanced the immortal's strength, senses, speed, and durability beyond those of standard undead vampires, sometimes going so far as to make their skin impervious.

Micah and I huddled together behind the wall formed by the two vampire guardians. Once the snarls and grunts of hand-to-hand combat replaced the crack of gunfire, I dared to peek around Thane's arm. Gavin was no longer with us, but somewhere ahead, lost in the blurring mass of violence. The vampires and shifters all moved too quickly for my eyes to track.

"Get her to the portal!" Gavin shouted, though I still couldn't make him out in the chaos.

My remaining protectors didn't waste any time following Gavin's order. Thane took hold of my arm and, grip firm, pulled me closer to the portal. Micah clung to my side, and Ash fell in on my other side.

We were mere steps away from the portal when a giant, tawny beast leapt down from atop the servers and landed on Micah, knocking him back and taking him down to the floor.

"NO!" I screamed, spinning around in time to see a cougar pin Micah to the concrete floor.

Micah cried out as the huge cat flexed its paws, digging its long, curved claws into his shoulders, but he fell still when the cougar opened its jaws wide mere inches from his face.

I tugged against Thane's grip, but the vampire refused to let go, though he stopped pulling me toward the portal.

A blur blew past us, rustling my silk shirt, and suddenly the cougar was gone. Ten feet away, Gavin grappled with the enormous cat. I stared wide-eyed as the vampire sank his teeth into the cougar's neck and bit down, then yanked backward, tearing out the shifter's throat. Blood gushed from the wound, and the shifter went limp. The injury wouldn't kill the shifter, but it would keep them out of the fight. So long as their heart was intact, a shifter could regenerate.

Gavin rolled to the side, dumping the limp shifter on the floor, and planted his knees in the growing puddle of blood before regaining his feet. Blood stained the lower half of his face and the front of his dark button-down shirt.

He looked exactly as he had in my dream of a cougar attacking me in my bedroom. Had that been some sort of vision or premonition?

"Get her to the portal!" Gavin commanded, then moved in another of those too-fast blurs, only becoming fully visible again when he stopped and crouched beside Micah.

Neck craned as Thane and Ash dragged me toward the portal, I watched Gavin scoop up Micah, cradling him like a much smaller child. Blood seeped from the puncture wounds on Micah's shoulders, leaving patches of crimson bleeding through his sweatshirt.

Energy sizzled over my skin, and suddenly all the air was pushed from my lungs as darkness swallowed the world. We were inside the portal, I realized, and it was as if,

for a moment, time stood still.

Gasping, I stumbled back into reality. The moon shone high overhead, and gleaming headstones jutted out of the ground all around me, scattered among pale marble statues and mausoleums that tugged at memories buried in the deepest recesses of my mind. The silence was deafening after the ear-splitting sounds of battle back in the server room.

Micah lurched through the portal a few seconds later. I threw my arms around him, holding him upright as he stumbled, and the two of us backed away from the swirling vortex of darkness filling the space beneath the arch of an intricate wrought-iron gate. Micah's breaths were harsh in the still night.

Thane and Ash took up defensive stances between us and the portal. Where was Gavin? He had been carrying Micah right behind me, but only Micah had come through. And what about Bastian? I pressed a hand to my chest, directly over my heart. Would I know if something happened to either of them? Would I be able to feel it through our bonds?

It was impossible to differentiate anything I might have been feeling from them through the tsunami of adrenaline raging within my veins. My muscles felt electrified, my senses hyperaware.

The portal crackled with black lightning, and two figures stumbled through. Both were vampires, a man and a woman, but neither was my vampire. They appeared haggard but faced the portal and took up defensive stances alongside Thane and Ash.

More of that black lightning streaked out from the dark vortex, and I held my breath. A moment later, Bastian leapt into the graveyard, still in his sleek black panther form, stumbling as he landed.

“Stand down!” Thane barked when the female vampire lunged at Bastian. “He belongs to the queen!”

The other vampire froze, then gradually eased backward to her starting position.

Bastian was here—injured but alive. I released the breath I had been holding, though tension continued to hum through me. He limped toward me, his face, chest, and paws soaked with blood.

“Shift,” I hissed. Returning to his human form would heal his injuries.

He chuffed and shook his enormous head, refusing. We both looked to the portal as it crackled, fresh bolts of black lightning scorching the earth.

Gavin and another, smaller figure flew out of the portal in an explosion of black lightning bolts, tumbling on the uneven ground. Gavin gracefully rolled to his feet, then crouched next to the person he had traveled with. It was a woman, but not one of the vampires. Had he brought a shifter through with him?

“Shut it down!” Gavin snarled, hauling the woman up to her feet. Her jeans were torn and bloodied, and the sleeve of her jacket hung by a few threads. She was an elemental, I realized. The portalist.

She hugged her arm to her middle, wincing at Gavin’s rough handling of her as he dragged her closer to the portal. “Now!”

Again, black lightning crackled out from the vortex. Someone else was coming

through.

A man emerged, covered in blood and shouting a battle cry. The lack of a crescent sigil on his face told me he was a shifter. He held his hand up, his fingers curled around something small and silver.

Another vampire came through close on his heels, but not close enough. “He has a grenade!” she shouted.

Thane hurtled forward, slamming into the shifter and tackling him backward into the portal just as another body hurled through from the other side. Yet another shifter. The other vampire dove onto the newcomer, wrestling him to the ground. Behind her, the grenade exploded in a flash of blinding light, but it was swallowed up by the dark vortex before it could reach us, right along with Thane and the Kamakazi shifter.

“NO!” Ash shouted, lurching forward, one arm outstretched. His cry echoed in my bones. In my soul. Gavin abandoned the elemental and intercepted the larger vampire before he could reach the portal, barring his way with an arm across his burly torso.

“Oh gods,” I breathed, covering my mouth with one hand.

Gavin glared at the elemental. “Shut it down, Marie. Now!”

The elemental, Marie apparently, took a stuttering breath and swept her hand around in a circular motion counter to that of the vortex.

The portal started to sizzle and shrink. In three heartbeats, it was as small as my fist. With a sucking whoosh, it vanished, leaving behind a mundane wrought-iron gate.

Gavin released Ash, and the larger man stepped forward, then dropped to his knees and bowed his blond head. My eyes stung at seeing this stoic warrior’s reaction. He

sucked in a breath, his broad shoulders rising, and released it in a hoarse cry.

I looked past Ash to the gate. Thane—he was gone. Was he dead? Could an undead vampire survive a grenade blast? He was a guardian, which had to help.

My chin trembled, and tears spilled over the brims of my eyelids. I barely noticed Bastian shifting back to his human form and moving in close beside me.

“Take the witch to the dungeon with the shifter,” Gavin said, grabbing Marie’s arm and dragging her toward the vampire standing beside the one now holding the shifter prisoner.

“It wasn’t me!” Marie shrieked. “I didn’t tell anyone!”

Gavin ignored her, instead speaking to the vampire now holding her. “Sophie will force her confession when she has recovered from this ordeal.” He looked at me, his gaze roving, searching me for injuries. He clenched his jaw and looked at the elemental. “If you speak the truth, your status will be elevated from prisoner to guest.” He glared at the shifter, silently promising him no such reprieve.

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Gavin watched the two vampires escort Marie and the shifter away, then turned his attention to Ash. He approached the kneeling warrior and placed a hand on the other man's broad shoulder. "You will lead the retrieval team." He gripped Ash's shoulder tightly. "Thane's sigils are strong. He can survive the blast."

Ash looked up at Gavin. "But can he survive what they will do to him after?" It was the first time I had heard him speak besides his heart-shattering cry, and his voice had a rich and unexpectedly smooth timbre.

Gavin was quiet for a long moment, and I sensed his mounting worry. "Gather your team now," he said and withdrew his hand. He headed for me, his steps slow, his gaze assessing. He appeared savage, the front of him bathed in blood and his eyes glowing silver. "Are you all right?" he asked, stopping in front of me.

I shook my head and finally lowered my trembling hand from my mouth. "I don't know," I said, my voice hushed. Shivering, I scanned the scene—Ash, the gate, the graveyard. Micah leaned against me, his arm a heavy weight across my shoulders as I supported him. "I don't know. I—" Again, I shook my head.

Gavin's features softened with understanding. "You're in shock." He looked at Micah. "And the boy needs medical attention. Let's get you both settled inside."

"Inside?" I asked, my brow furrowing.

Gavin gestured to something behind me, and I turned to look down the graveyard hillside toward a foreboding Gothic mansion, surrounded by overgrown moonlit grounds.

My breath caught. I recognized the mansion, the graveyard, the grounds. This place haunted my dreams. My worst nightmares.

Gavin's hand settled on my shoulder. "Welcome home."

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"Gavin," I said, hurrying after the vampire as he marched down the hillside, weaving purposely between grave markers. I gave a quick glance over my shoulder at the others.

Micah, Bastian, Ash, and a handful of vampire guardians I had yet to officially meet trailed behind us. Bastian walked gingerly across the sanctified burial grounds like he feared the deceased buried below might wake for a third life, if only to ravage the shifter who dared walk across their graves. He supported Micah, who winced with every step and seemed so shell-shocked after the violence and bloodshed that he neither noticed nor cared about Bastian's nudity.

"Gavin," I repeated.

Either Gavin was ignoring me, or he was so focused on something else that he truly hadn't heard me.

I jogged ahead to catch up with him and caught his elbow. "Gavin, wait," I said, halting his stride. "Just wait a second."

Gavin gave me a pointed look, tugged his arm free from my hold, and continued down the hill.

Frustration surged up within me, and my hands balled into fists. "Stop," I commanded, instinctively drawing on my will to imbue my voice with power.

Gavin stopped abruptly, his spine rigid. He clenched his jaw, tension making his muscles quiver, and he stared stubbornly down the hill toward the Gothic mansion in the valley below. The Moon Sanctuary, though I had once called this place home. Blood smears stained Gavin's face and clothing, and only the faintest rim of silver shone around his swollen pupils. Either he was still hopped up on adrenaline from the fight, or he was hungry. Maybe both.

"Release me," he practically growled through gritted teeth. "I must feed."

Again, I rested my hand on his arm. "You can feed on me. I'm right here."

Gavin closed his eyes, his expression turning pained, his breathing ragged. "Not when I'm like this," he said and finally looked at me. "The bloodlust..." He dragged in a breath. "I could hurt you."

The others streamed past us, but at that moment, I only had eyes for Gavin. "You wouldn't."

"Care to test that hypothesis?" His lips drew back, baring his elongated fangs. "Because I could dispel you of that notion in a matter of seconds." Gavin squeezed his eyelids shut, and his throat bobbed. "Tend to your son," he said, strain in his voice. "And I will tend to my hunger."

"Fine," I said, managing to make the single word only somewhat snippy. With a heavy exhale, I trailed my fingers down his forearm and captured his bloody hand, giving his sticky fingers a quick squeeze. "Come find me when you're done. We need to talk."

Gavin grunted his assent, but still, he refused to look at me.

I released his hand and stared after him as he continued down the hill, his stride fast

and determined. He passed Bastian and Micah first, who were hanging back at the tail end of the group ahead, Micah leaning heavily on Bastian.

I jogged to catch up to them. “I think I remember there being an infirmary on the ground floor,” I said, falling in step beside Micah. “If it’s still there, we should have you patched up in no time.”

“How do you know that?” Micah asked, his voice rough and weak. His pale complexion worried me, and I hoped the pallor was more from the pain than from blood loss.

“This was my home before . . .” I inhaled a steadying breath. “I don’t know what it is now. The Moon Sanctuary apparently, but I’m not sure what that means. A haven for my kind, I suppose.”

I glanced at Bastian. Surely the grounds were warded even more heavily than the loft to prevent shifters from entering, and he had required a countersigil to enter there. Perhaps the blood bond we shared allowed him passage.

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“It’s because I’m yours,” Bastian confirmed, seeming to read my mind. For all I knew, he may have actually done that very thing, drawing on the deeper connection forged by our bond. Though I certainly couldn’t pick any specific thoughts out of his mind.

“I can’t read your mind, Soph,” he said. “You’re just exceptionally expressive, and I’m good at reading people.” He shrugged. “All part of the job.”

As a spy for the House of the Sun, I thought bitterly. Right.

“The wards were crafted by a queen, and only another queen can overpower them. You gave me your blood. You marked me. I belong to you, and the wards recognized me as your property, making me welcome here.”

My brow furrowed. I was disturbed by all the language implying that I owned him, and I was mildly embarrassed that he knew so much more about this place and my people than I did. But as he had said a moment ago, it was all part of the job. And possession provided protection, something Bastian would be in desperate need of here.

“I’m going to run ahead and make sure we have everything we need to treat him.” My first aid experience was limited and rusty, a relic from my time with Javier. He hadn’t trusted human medicine, preferring the magic-laced tinctures, tonics, and salves perfected by immortal healers. Assuming the infirmary was still there, I hoped it was staffed by a healer. If it wasn’t, well, we would cross that bridge when we came to it.

I jogged ahead a few paces, then glanced back over my shoulder. “When you get to

the front door, the infirmary's the second doorway on your left. Can't miss it. I'll be waiting for you there." Facing forward again, I ran ahead.

My heart beat faster the closer I drew to the mansion, both from running and from returning to the place that haunted my worst nightmares. The house looked like something straight out of the mind of one of the Brontë sisters, with an overabundance of pointed arches, flying buttresses, and ornate embellishments decorating the stone exterior. Towering spires pierced the starry night sky from atop the steep roof, and a widow's walk graced the centermost roofline, bordered by pointed wrought-iron railing.

I barreled through the ornate front door and into the dark foyer. Carved mahogany paneling surrounded me, and moonlight filtered in through the stained glass skylight in the high ceiling above.

At first, the house seemed as abandoned in real life as it had been all these years in my mind. Hushed voices caught my ear, and I followed them to the second doorway on the left. A man and a woman, the glowing crescent sigils curving around one side of their faces elevating them to vampire guardians, stood off to the side of the infirmary, their heads bent together as they shared a whispered conversation.

I cleared my throat, my fingers blindly searching the wall to the right of the door frame for a light switch.

The vampires froze, their voices cutting off mid-word. "Apologies!" the woman said, rushing toward me and flipping the switch on the opposite side of the doorway. "We often forget to turn on the lights."

"Don't worry about it," I told her and hurried into the room. Javier had been the same way, his enhanced immortal senses making artificial lighting unnecessary for him to see clearly in all but the darkest spaces.

I scanned the infirmary, finding a tray of gleaming sterling steel surgical tools arranged beside an examination table. A few bags of blood, a small stoneware bowl filled with a gritty crimson poultice, and a trio of luminous potion bottles were arranged in a neat row on a nearby counter.

“We’re ready for your son, my lady,” the man said, finally stepping forward. “Is he not with you?”

The front door banged open.

“He’s here,” I said, rushing back into the foyer just as Bastian dragged Micah across the threshold. He was practically carrying Micah at this point.

“In here,” the female vampire said from behind me, not remotely concerned by Bastian’s nudity. “Come along.” She wrinkled her nose as Bastian passed, her delicate vampire nose apparently affronted by his shifter scent.

“He’s mine,” I said, a hint of warning in my voice as I fell back on the possessive, claiming verbiage others had been using.

“Of course,” the vampire said, bowing her head. Within the infirmary, her colleague was already helping Bastian situate a now unconscious Micah on the examination table.

Bastian stepped away from Micah, retreating to stand with me in the foyer. I fought the urge to go to Micah’s side. I would only be in the way. Shoulder to shoulder, Bastian and I watched as the pair of vampires worked in perfect unison, cutting off Micah’s sweatshirt and T-shirt, cleaning the fresh crimson and darker dried blood away to reveal the eight angry red puncture wounds where the cougar shifter’s claws had pierced deep into his shoulders along the line of his collarbones.

Bastian curved an arm around my back and pulled me against his side. I rested my head on his bare shoulder, incredibly grateful for his grounding presence. Simply being near him relaxed me, which was saying a lot, considering I was watching a pair of relative strangers stitch up my seriously wounded son.

“You were injured too,” I noted, craning my neck to peer up at Bastian’s face.

He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “I healed when I shifted.”

“But you must be starved,” I said. “Go find something to eat.”

“Mmm . . . I could eat you,” he murmured into my hair, causing a delicate flutter low in my belly.

I smacked his bare chest, making a point not to look down. “Food, Bas. Go find some food to eat. I’ll be fine here.”

“Soph . . .” He was clearly reluctant to leave me.

“Don’t make me use my will on you,” I warned. “You need meat, and my power is already fading. Commanding you to take care of yourself might be the thing to send me over the edge.”

“Do you need to feed?” Bastian asked, concern forming a crease between his brows.

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“Soon,” I admitted begrudgingly. “But not yet, and not from you.” At his wounded expression, I added, “I won’t take your blood when you’re weakened from a fight. Besides, I’d like to have the modified tincture first, so I can go more than an hour without, well, you know.”

“Fucking someone?” Bastian offered unhelpfully.

“Ugh,” I said, letting my head fall back and fake crying. “Yes.” I glanced at him sidelong and cringed. “No offense.”

He pressed his lips against my temple. “None taken.”

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Assured that Micah would be fine—though he would be asleep for the next eight to ten hours, courtesy of the mild sleeping draft the healers had given him—I left him to slumber through the worst of the pain as the poultice that covered his stitched wounds worked its magic. When he woke, his wounds would be little more than scars—tender, new scars, but a vast improvement over the inflamed, seeping wounds he had come into the infirmary with.

Bastian had been gone for about fifteen minutes, the healers having done quick work on Micah’s injuries, and I sensed him in the general direction of the kitchen at the back of the manor. I figured that meant Bastian had found some food. I considered joining him, but I wanted to speak with Gavin alone about searching for Javier, and I doubted I would get another opportunity for a while.

I left the infirmary and made my way up the three flights of stairs that comprised the main staircase to the second-floor gallery, my fingers trailing over a railing I hadn't touched in nearly three decades. And yet, it felt like just yesterday that I had last been here, climbing these steps.

I passed under the arched entrance to the west wing, and started down the long, residential hallway, following the vague, vicious sense that was Gavin in my mind. Traditionally, the royal quarters were in the east wing on the opposite side of the house, with the rooms in the west wing belonging to the High Queen's advisors. Closed doors to private suites intermittently broke up the intricate wood paneling and ornate furnishings lining the walls.

Lured onward by an awareness I didn't fully understand, I passed several doors, stopping at the third on the right. Gavin was in there. I knew it. I could feel him—his raging bloodlust, his rampant need, his struggle for control over his savage emotions.

Picking up on the faintest murmur of voices from within, I pressed my ear to the solid mahogany door.

“—can help you,” a woman said, practically begging. “Please, let me help you.”

“No,” Gavin growled. “Give me your wrist, Daisy, or I'll go find someone else interested in offering me blood without the strings.”

“You never minded the strings before,” the woman—Daisy, apparently—said, her voice teasing.

“Things have changed,” Gavin said.

“I know,” Daisy said, sounding defeated. “I know. I just thought it would be different for us. After serving you for all these years, I thought I was more than just a walking

blood bag to you.”

“Daisy . . .” Gavin’s voice was rough, and I could feel his conflicted emotions.

They were quiet for a moment, and I held my breath, my heart breaking for a woman I didn’t know, who I had yet to even see. She clearly had a strong attachment to Gavin. She had served him for years. As what, exactly? As a companion? A mistress? A life partner?

“I can feel you out there, Sophie,” Gavin called in my direction.

I jerked away from the door. Was he asking me to come in, or was he telling me to leave? He was so conflicted within himself, I couldn’t get a clear reading on his desires. I supposed there was only one way to find out.

Gritting my teeth, I reached for the doorknob and twisted, pushing the door open. If Gavin didn’t want me there, he could tell me to leave.

The room was furnished with simple, sturdy items—a couple of armchairs and end tables, a sofa and coffee table, some tall bookcases, and a dining table with chairs for four. The style was so different from the furnishings throughout the manor’s public spaces that it had to reflect Gavin’s personal taste. I found it suited me much better than the more ostentatious decor throughout the house.

Gavin sat in one of two tall wingback armchairs arranged in front of the ornate fireplace in the wall to the right, still dressed in his bloody, torn clothing from earlier. A beautiful, voluptuous woman with honey hair and pale skin knelt on the floor at his feet, clutching Gavin’s pants leg, the skirt of her violet silk dress pooled around her on the floor. Crimson blood dribbled from the bite mark in the crook of her neck, and dark lines streaked down her cheeks where her tears had made her mascara run. Apparently, this little tête-à-tête had been going on for a while.

I had caused this. Unintentionally, perhaps, but I was the reason this woman's life was being upended. She looked desperate, less a rejected woman than an addict looking for a fix. And her drug of choice was Gavin. I could hardly blame her for that.

I swallowed roughly and licked my lips. "Give her what she wants, Gavin," I told him, my voice breathy.

The idea of being there while he fed from another woman, while he took her body as he consumed her blood, sent a thrill of desire through me. Suddenly, it was all I could think about. Besides, Gavin had watched me with another man. It was only fair.

Daisy turned pleading, hope-filled eyes from me to Gavin. "Yes," she begged.

"Go on, Gavin," I said. "Give her what she wants."

Gavin narrowed his eyes at me. "Sophie . . ." My name was little more than a growl.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" I asked softly, a needy ache igniting in my core.

Gavin's nostrils flared, sensing my arousal. "No."

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His breaths came faster, his own desire rising to meet mine as he realized I was serious.

I didn't just want him to use this woman to sate his hunger; I wanted to watch him do it. I wanted to see what he was like when he was with someone he had chosen, rather than someone duty and obligation had chosen for him. I wanted to learn about his tastes from a woman who knew him intimately.

"Thank you," the woman whispered to me before turning her attention back to Gavin. Moving sensually, she crawled between his legs, her hands gliding up his thighs to his belt buckle. She had his belt unfastened and his fly open remarkably quickly. Gavin's impressive erection sprang free, and she wasted no time taking him into her mouth, moaning greedily.

Eyes locked with mine, Gavin tangled his fingers in her hair, coaxing her to take more of him in, to hold him for longer. Daisy groaned her approval and placed a hand on his abdomen, her fingers smearing the still drying blood staining his shirt as her hand, with nails lacquered deep indigo, glided up to his chest.

Tendons in his neck straining, Gavin withdrew one hand from Daisy's head and gripped her wrist, pulling it up to his mouth. She stiffened as he bit down, then relaxed as he sucked, pulling her blood into his mouth.

Feeling shaky and a little lightheaded from the sudden torrent of desire raging through my veins, I eased the door to the hallway shut and crossed the room to stand behind the vacant armchair. I leaned against the top of the chairback, gripping the corners of the leather upholstered wings.

Gavin took one more pull on Daisy's wrist, then released her arm and dragged her mouth off his cock. Grunting, he stood, gripping her upper arms to help her to her feet as well. Her expression was rapturous, her lips swollen and rosy, and her chin glistening with saliva. Gavin guided her to stand beside the chair, her back to him, and bent her over the armrest. He knotted her long, blonde hair around one fist, using his hold to force her to arch her back as he dragged her skirt up and over her round ass.

My gaze locked on the hand he trailed over her bared cheeks, and I shifted one trembling hand from the top of the chair to the waistband of my leggings. As Gavin's fingers disappeared between her legs, earning a gasp from the woman, I pushed my hand into my underwear and grazed a fingertip between my wet lips. I bit my bottom lip and released a shuddering breath, keeping my touch light as I circled my fingertip over my clit.

Eyes on me, Gavin dragged Daisy upright by her hair, and unceremoniously bit into the crook of her neck at the same moment as he thrust into her no doubt dripping pussy. My touch on my clit grew firmer and more demanding as he pounded into her, taking long, deep pulls on her neck.

"Fuck me," Daisy chanted, her eyes squeezed shut and her faced contorted with passion. "Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck . . ." Her words trailed off as her eyes rolled back into her head and her entire body convulsed.

The breath whooshed from my lungs as watching this stranger's pleasure shoved me over the edge into my own brutal climax. My mouth opened on a silent scream,

ecstasy glazing my senses.

Growling, Gavin pulled out of the still shuddering woman and lifted his head, releasing her neck. Fresh dribbles of blood smeared down his chin and leaked from his bite marks as he gently helped Daisy onto the armchair, where she stretched out with a leg draped over one of the chair's arms, trailing the fingers of one hand over her sex and smiling lazily.

Gavin bit into his thumb and rubbed some of his blood over the bite marks on her neck and wrist, then stalked toward me, his straining erection bobbing. "Grip the chair," he ordered roughly.

Insides still quivering from the recent release, I yanked my hand out of my pants and clutched the corners of the chairback. Gavin jerked my leggings and panties down, gripped my hips to bend me over more sharply, and plunged into my throbbing core.

I gasped as he rammed into me, one of his hands gliding down my belly and settling between my legs to tease my clit. The front of his hips slapped against my ass as he fucked me harder than I had ever been taken before, and I loved it.

The pleasure built within me, mounting higher and higher. I drowned in the sweet agony of drawing ever closer to release.

Suddenly Gavin's other hand was curved around my throat, and I was upright, his teeth biting into the side of my neck. A scream tore out of me as the orgasm ripped through my body. Gavin buried himself inside me and clutched my body against his, holding me so tightly it was as though he was attempting to use this moment of molten pleasure to fuse us together.

Just as the brutal waves of ecstasy softened and his waning erection slipped out of me, Gavin released my neck and shifted his hand higher, angling his wrist in front of

my mouth. Instinct took hold, and I didn't hesitate before sealing my lips over his salty skin and biting down. The instant his rich, spicy blood touched my tongue, a renewed wave of pleasure crashed through me.

I groaned, grinding myself against his skilled fingers, riding him as he coaxed my pleasure on and on and on.

Finally, when I could take no more, I released his wrist and sagged against the top of the chairback. My knees wobbled, and Gavin curled an arm around my chest. He withdrew his hand from between my legs, and a moment later, I felt a gentle caress over the bite marks on my neck, followed by a healing itch. He was rubbing his blood into the open wounds to heal them, just as he had done for Daisy.

Right. Daisy. The other woman in the room. I dragged my eyelids open to find Daisy with her hand between her legs, her eyes squeezed shut as she lost herself in her own pleasure once more.

Gavin shifted his attention to my clothing, pulling up my underwear and leggings until I was covered once more. I heard a zip, followed by the clinking of his belt, and then his arm was curved around my waist. He guided me on unsteady legs into the adjoining bedroom and shut the door before leading me to the bed.

I sat at the gentle pressure he exerted on my shoulders. He tilted my face upward with a crooked finger under my chin, and for a long moment, we gazed at one another without saying a word. Blood glazed his lips and was smeared down his chin, but I doubted I looked any less savage.

"I don't want to fuck anyone else," he finally said, tilting my chin upward. "Don't ask me to do it again."

"I won't," I said, the words catching in my throat so they came out as a whisper.

Apparently appeased by my response, Gavin slid the pad of his thumb up my chin and pushed the tip between my lips.

I opened my mouth, welcoming his thumb. His skin tasted salty and faintly musky from a combination of my arousal and Daisy's. I sucked on him until my cheeks hollowed.

Gavin grunted and pulled his thumb free with a wetpop. "I'm going to take Daisy back to her room and clean myself up," he said. "Wait here for me? We need to talk about our next moves."

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Unable to find my voice, I nodded. I had come here to talk to him, after all.

He stared down at me for a few more heartbeats, seeming on the verge of saying more, then turned and strode to the door.

I waited until the door latch clicked and I was alone in the luxurious bedroom, then flopped backward onto the bed, sinking into the plush comforter. I was so far over my head with this vampire and his power games. His need for dominance and control.

The only man I had ever known who came close to Gavin in sheer potency of presence was Javier, but I had been little more than a child when he was taken from my life, and he had never touched me in any way that was remotely sexual. I didn't know how to be with Gavin. This constant push and pull was exhausting, and I had the feeling it was only going to get worse the longer we knew one another.

A faint smile touched my lips. I had to admit, though; it made for fantastic sex.

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"Hey," I said, already standing before Bastian entered Gavin's bedroom. I had sensed him drawing nearer, awareness of where he was an increasingly apparent side effect of our bond.

Bastian paused in the doorway and scanned Gavin's personal space—the built-in bookshelves, the simple yet sturdy wood furnishings, the stark artwork, the massive four-poster bed—before his gaze settled on me. "You okay?" he asked, shutting the door and crossing the room to stand directly in front of me.

He raised one hand, grazing his knuckles down my cheek. “That felt intense.”

I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch, and let out a breathy laugh. “It’s always intense with him.”

“But not with me?”

Sighing, I opened my eyes. I suspected managing the physical side of my own personal harem wasn’t going to be the most complicated aspect of this arrangement. I currently only had two immortals bound to me—three if I counted Javier, but who knew if I would ever see him again—and I was already struggling to juggle the emotional entanglements. How was I going to handle seven immortals? How was I going to balance all their wants and needs? How was I going to make sure everyone received the level of attention deserved by such a grand commitment as a blood bond?

“No,” I told Bastian, standing on my toes to press my lips against his. Honesty and openness were probably a good place to start.

Bastian’s lips parted with the barest amount of coaxing, and our tongues tangled in a sensual, promising kiss.

I broke the kiss and looked into his eyes. “With you, it’s easy,” I said. “I don’t have to try when I’m with you. It just feels right.”

“Mmm . . .” Bastian’s arms settled around me, the tension leaving his amber eyes. “You know all the right things to say.”

I draped my arms over his shoulders, fingering the short, faintly curled hair at the nape of his neck. “I meant every word.” I pressed my lips to his, but this time the kiss was only a peck because I could feel Gavin approaching.

I looked at the door. “He’s coming.”

Bastian released me and sidestepped to stand behind me as I turned toward the door.

Gavin pushed the door open and stopped on the threshold, his hand still gripping the doorknob. His dark hair was damp, and he wore a robe that was too fancy to be called a bathrobe. There was a bathroom in every suite, so I figured he must have showered wherever Daisy roomed instead of coming back here to wash up. His robe was more like an old-fashioned dressing gown in slate-gray silk, with a black inner lining and a thin sash belt tied loosely around his waist to hold it shut. He eyed Bastian, then focused on me.

Now that they were both in the room with me, I sensed another who was tied to me, the feeling distant and indistinct compared to them. Was it Javier? I hadn’t felt him before, at least not while my powers had been muted.

“I can feel you when we’re apart,” I blurted to Gavin. “I knew you were coming in here before you came in.”

Gavin pressed his lips together and released the doorknob, leaving the door open. “It’s the blood bond,” he said, crossing to a door in the adjacent wall and opening it to reveal a walk-in closet.

“Right,” I said, pacing alongside the bed. “But it’s not just you and Bastian.” I raised one hand to chew on my thumbnail. “There’s another—I don’t know what to call it—but it’s weaker, farther away?” I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s hard to describe.” I stopped and faced Gavin. “Could it be Javier?”

My heart clenched at the possibility that he was alive. He had been more than just my guardian, more than just my friend. He had been my anchor, my safe haven in a world turned upside down. And now, with the possibility of his survival lingering in

the air, hope flickered in my chest.

“It’s possible,” Gavin said, entering the closet without turning on the light, but he still found the clothing items he desired easily enough. “Though, I think it’s more likely Thane you’re sensing.”

I nodded to myself. I had wanted it to be Javier, but Thane wasn’t a poor consolation prize. Ideally, we could rescue both.

Gavin emerged from the closet wearing only a pair of navy boxer briefs and carrying several hangers with his clothing choices by the hooks. He hung them on the bronze knob affixed to the inside of the closet door and carefully pulled a pair of tailored dark-gray slacks from one hanger. His abdominal and arm muscles bunched as he bent over to step into the pants.

I licked my lips, recalling how savagely he had taken me not even a half hour ago. My groin throbbed with remembered pleasure and renewed desire as I imagined how he must have looked while he fucked me. He had let go of all restraint, unleashing himself fully.

Gavin froze in the middle of buttoning his slacks. He clenched his jaw and looked at me without raising his head. I sensed his own desire rising to meet mine, and behind me, Bastian responded as well. Shit, shit,shit. . .

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I cleared my throat and silently recited subclasses of the Library of Congress Call Number classification system, starting with A.

AC: Collections, Series, Collected Works

AE: Encyclopedias

AG: Dictionaries and other general reference works

Few things were as unsexy as a mind-numbing classification system, and the recitation quickly did the trick in taming my libido.

“Sorry,” I breathed, grateful Gavin and Bastian could only sense the shape of my emotions and not actually see my lewd thoughts. “I—” I licked my lips. “You really think I can feel Thane?”

Gavin nodded once. “You should be able to sense him for a few weeks, with the link weakening until the last remnants of his blood leave your system completely.”

“Then he’s alive,” I said, relieved. “And if I can feel him, then I can help Ash findhim.”

Gavin laced a belt through the loops in his pants. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

“I should go with Ash and his team,” I said.

Bastian gripped my arm. “Soph—”

“Out of the question,” Gavin snapped.

“They might not be able to find him without me,” I said, yanking my arm free from Bastian’s hold. “If Ash wants my help, I’ll give it to him.”

Letting his belt hang open, Gavin removed a white button-down shirt from another hanger on the back of the door and guided the sleeves onto his arms. “Not with your powers crippled as they are, you’re not.”

“Then uncripple them,” I said, taking a step toward him. “You said you could fix the tincture in your labs, so do it.”

Gavin buttoned his shirt and tucked it into the waistband of his slacks with jerky motions. “You’re not going,” Gavin said, his voice ringing with all the power of his will as he stalked toward me. His will was potent, and I was aware of its influence, but it didn’t affect me anymore.

“Stop, Gavin,” I said, my own will resonating through my voice.

Gritting his teeth, Gavin halted mid-step, his entire body shaking as he fought the command.

I was the daughter of High Queen Diana, descended from High Queen Mene, who Selene had blessed with her favor. “You don’t command me,” I told him. “I command you.”

Gavin’s eyes narrowed with challenge, and we stared at one another for a long moment. “I already have people working on the tincture,” he said through gritted teeth. “At least wait until we have a clean sample. We need to test the efficacy of the clean tincture to make sure it stabilizes your powers.”

“Fine,” I said, just as eager to unshackle myself from my body’s unsustainable needs.

“And,” Gavin said, buckling his belt with excessive precision and control. “You will bind Ash before taking any action to track Thane.”

My eyes bulged, and my mouth fell open. “What?”

Gavin tucked the tail of his belt into a loop. “You need to be as strong as possible if you’re going to leave the safety of the Moon Sanctuary.”

I glared at him. He was baiting me, testing my resolve. But Thane had sacrificed himself to save us. To save me. If rescuing him required a sacrifice on my part, so be it. And it wasn’t like I was put off by the idea of bonding with Ash. I wasn’t sure I had exchanged a single word with the hulking Viking-esque vampire, but I was drawn to him, just as I was drawn to Thane.

“If the clean tincture works and your powers are stabilized, then you’ll carry out a full communion with all three of us, and then you can assist with the search for Thane.”

My jaw dropped yet again. “All three of you—at the same time?” Despite my lurid, possibly prophetic dream from the other night, I still wasn’t certain of the mechanics of communion—I didn’t know why they didn’t just call it an orgy, because that’s what it was, regardless of the blood exchange element—with three men, let alone a complete harem of seven.

Was it going to be a free-for-all on my holes? Would my immortals be beating each other up to get to me? There were only three holes after all. Did the slowpokes have to wait on the sidelines and watch? Or maybe they would form a line?

I stifled an inappropriate giggle.

Gavin clenched and unclenched his jaw in what I was quickly understanding to be a tick that displayed his annoyance for all to see. He inhaled deeply, blowing the breath out through his nose. “What is so funny? Because I assure you that you leaving the safety of Sanctuary on a manhunt is no laughing matter.”

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“I, um . . .” Again, I cleared my throat, my cheeks flaming. “I was just trying to figure out how it would work.” I peeked over my shoulder at Bastian, then returned my focus to Gavin. “With three of you.”

“Well,” Gavin said, the corners of his mouth tensing into a sly grin. “If you get your way, you won’t have to wait long to find out.”

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“You’re exhausted, Soph,” Bastian said from the bed. “Come lie down with me.” When I didn’t respond, he offered in a sing-song voice, “I’ll scratch your back until you fall asleep.”

I glanced at him, offering him a quick, closed-mouth smile. His loyalty astounded me. He had stayed by my side this whole time, a silent but supportive shadow while I checked on Micah, then wandered the house after. I returned my stare to the window. How surreal it was to be back where it all began. Where so much of it ended.

Everywhere I turned, old memories waited to bombard me. Things I had forgotten until now, like returning to this place, had unlocked them. Happy moments turned bittersweet by the gruesome ending to the chapter of my life that had been set here.

In my old room, there was a window seat just like the one I was currently curled up on in the guest suite Bastian had been assigned. I used to spend hours nestled in pillows and cozy blankets, alternating between scouring over my picturebooks and staring out the window, searching for evidence of the outside world I had only ever heard others talk about. I wished I could go back in time and shake that little girl

version of myself and tell her to enjoy the blissful calm, because soon enough, that fabled outside world would gobble her up.

“I’m afraid of what I’ll see when I close my eyes,” I admitted, my voice hushed.

Bastian didn’t respond immediately. “You mean the prophetic dreams?”

Sighing, I hugged my folded legs closer to my chest and rested my cheek on my knee, finally shifting all my attention to Bastian. “That, and the memories.”

“I wasn’t there—here—for the attack, but I’ve heard stories of how brutal it was,” Bastian said, sympathy softening his handsome features. “Veris lost many people that day too.” He spoke about the shifter king as if the vile man wasn’t his father. But then, I supposed there was more to fatherhood than a donation of sperm.

I scoffed, my lip curling into what was most certainly an ugly sneer. “Because we fought back?”

Bastian didn’t take the bait. “Because they left their packs,” he said. “Went rogue.”

My brow furrowed. I hadn’t known that, not that my ignorance was much of a surprise. I barely knew more about the immortal world than a human. But still, a rift in the House of the Sun seemed like a pretty damn important thing to me.

“The defectors laid low for a long time, living independently, but shifters can rarely resist the urge to pack up,” Bastian explained. “They call themselves the House of the Eclipse, ruled by a council rather than a monarch. Their numbers are still dwarfed by the House of the Sun, but Veris loses more and more people to them every year.”

I laughed under my breath. “I’m sure he loves that.”

“Yeah, not so much,” Bastian agreed. “He has the Sun Watch keeping an eye on them. If they grow too large, well . . .” Bastian released a low, bitter laugh. “I’m sure you can guess what he’ll do.”

My mouth fell open, and I shook my head. Such brutality was unthinkable. “He would slaughter his own people?”

“He no longer considers them his people,” Bastian countered.

At a loss for words, I simply stared at Bastian. He wasn’t only talking about his king; Veris was his father, the man whose DNA made up half of his own. What assumptions must people have made about Bastian his whole life, knowing his father’s vicious nature?

“That’s awful,” I finally managed to say, though the words were barely audible. I turned, and my feet slipped off the edge of the window seat, landing on the cool hardwood floor. “I’m so sorry, Bas,” I said, standing. I crossed to the bed and climbed onto the mattress, the oversized T-shirt I had swiped from the dresser in Bastian’s room after a quick shower bunching around my hips.

I wondered who had stocked the room with clothes for him or if the Moon Sanctuary was always filled with vacant rooms awaiting large, muscular men. But then, back at the loft, Gavin had proven himself to be overly prepared with a ready supply of clothing that was not only in my size but in my style. He was a good leader, easily and skillfully organized and effective at commanding the loyalty of those who followed him. There was much I could learn from him.

Bastian pulled back the covers to let me slide under, then wrapped an arm around me and tucked me in close against his side. His body heat soaked into my chilled skin, and I tucked my icy toes under his thigh.

“Gods, Soph, you’re freezing,” he exclaimed. But to his credit, rather than pull his leg away, he tucked my feet between his thighs, doubling the heat exposure.

“You are the opposite of your father,” I told him, splaying a hand on his bare chest and craning my neck to see his face. “You are noble and kind and gentle.”

Bastian snorted gently. “Did you forget about me lying to you and posing as your cat for months?”

My lips curved into a faint smile. “I loved Sombra,” I said, lowering my head to rest on Bastian’s shoulder. “I miss him.”

“I’m right here,” Bastian murmured, his voice a quiet rumble through his chest.

“I know,” I said, exhaling heavily. “But it’s not the same.”

Bastian held his breath for a long moment, his body tensing. “Do you want me to shift?”

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“No,” I said, shaking my head against him. My heart hammered in my chest as I considered my next words carefully. “I know Sombra’s not real—not my idea of him, anyway. It wouldn’t be the same as before. Besides . . .” I wrapped my arm around Bastian’s middle and pulled myself so close to him I was practically half on top of him. “I think I love you like this even more.”

He became very, verystill. After a few heartbeats, he finally exhaled and relaxed beneath me. He pressed a kiss to the top of my head and murmured, “I love you too, Sophie.”

31

I woke suddenly, my heart pounding and my breaths quick. Bastian’s bedroom was dark, and a glance up at the face of the shifter holding me like I was his own personal teddy bear told me he was fast asleep. My dreams had been a discomfiting mix of bodies writhing in either pleasure or pain. I had flitted from scenes of having my body worshipped by my seven immortals to long walks through a dank dungeon to brutal battles ending in fields of broken bodies, Gavin and Bastian among the dead.

I needed air and movement to clear my head and shake off the disturbing images.

Ever so carefully, I extricated myself from under Bastian’s heavy arm and scooted to the edge of the bed. The thin cotton of the T-shirt stuck to my clammy skin. Feeling gross, I stood and crossed to the door to the en suite bathroom, twisting my hair up into a messy top knot.

I took a quicker rinse in the shower than I had intended because I sensed Gavin

approaching almost as soon as I stepped into the steaming water. I hastily donned the full-length silk dressing gown I had left hanging on the hook on the back of the bathroom door after my previous shower, and feeling like the heroine in a gothic romance novel, I headed across the bedroom for the door to the hallway. Gavin was a few steps away, and I didn't want him to wake Bastian. The shifter's day had quite possibly been even more trying than mine.

"Hey," I said to Gavin, still tying the robe's belt as I eased the door shut. I pulled my hair free from its ridiculous-looking bun, hoping to look a little less like a slob around the always-put-together vampire.

Gavin looked impossibly elegant as he strolled up the hallway with his hands tucked into his front pockets, his sigils fainter than before. He stopped well within my personal bubble, standing closer to me than would have been comfortable had we not been all up in each other's business multiple times already that day. He wore the same impeccably tailored gray slacks and white button-down shirt from earlier, but the polished clothes did nothing to civilize him as he slowly scanned me from the feet up, no doubt noting the way the silk clung to my damp skin. Desire awakened within him, rousing my own.

"What's up?" I asked, leaning back against the door, my voice breathier than before. I glanced down at the front of his pants, noting the growing bulge. "Besides the obvious," I teased.

Gavin planted one hand beside my head on the door, the other remaining in his pocket. He loomed sexily, if such a thing was even possible. "I have something for you."

I angled my face up toward his and smiled sweetly. "Besides the obvious?"

He made a deep, rough noise that rumbled through his chest and made me clench my

thighs together. “You are insatiable.”

I frowned, pouting a little. “Maybe you just haven’t tried hard enough to sate me yet.”

He closed his eyes and drew in a shaky breath. “I still have much to do tonight, so if you would please show some restraint . . .”

Sighing, I slouched back against the door. “Fine,” I said, reining in my inner vixen. “What do you have for me?”

Gavin pulled his hand out of his trouser pocket and held it up, a vial of Javier’s blood tincture pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “Modified, as promised,” he said, nimbly unscrewing the cap with the pad of his thumb and tip of his finger. He brought the open vial to my lips. “Open for me.”

I did so without hesitation, eager to welcome at least some stability back into my life. I desperately needed to be able to go more than a few hours without requiring a communion with an immortal.

But this modified tincture wasn’t a permanent solution. I would only be unshackled from uncertainty once we either found Javier and made him an actual functioning member of my harem or when the blood bond I had been so oblivious of all these years finally broke with his death. I didn’t have much of the tincture left, thus my extreme rationing over the past few years, so it wasn’t like we had an indefinite time to find my Prime Consort.

The tincture dribbled over my tongue, faintly bitter but lacking the tang I had come to expect. The sigils on Gavin’s face and neck brightened a little, rather than fading, as had happened the last time I took the tincture in his presence.

I swallowed, and my lips spread into a broad grin. “It worked,” I laughed. “I still have

mysight.” The wards on the walls continued to glow silver, many accented by a colorful highlight. My brow furrowed, and I frowned slightly. “I haven’t seen any ghosts,” I mused. “Is that strange?”

Gavin shook his head and tucked the empty vial back into his pants pocket. “The residential wings are warded against them, all but the High Queen’s chambers,” he said. “For privacy.”

“Oh,” I said. “That makes sense.”

Gavin raised his hand again, settling it on my neck, where he stroked up and down seductively. “Would you do something for me?” he asked, so close his breath caressed my lips and chin.

“Maybe,” I said, my voice throatier than before.

The corner of Gavin’s mouth tensed, hinting at a smile. “Go to Ash,” he said. “Bind him.”

My eyes widened, and I leaned sideways to put a few inches of distance between us. “Now?”

Gavin nodded, a single dip of his chin. “It will be as good of a test of the efficacy of the clean tincture as we’re going to get, short of waiting days or even weeks to see how long it will tide you over.” After a moment, he added. “Thane may not have that long, and if you’re determined to help—”

“I am,” I said, nodding adamantly.

“Then you’ll go to him?” Gavin asked.

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My focus drifted to the opposite wall, and I considered my options. I only saw two: bind Ash, communewith the three immortals, and rescue Thane, or remain here and let Ash lead a team of immortals on a wild goose chase for Thane while I sat on my ass, feeling useless.

I locked eyes with Gavin. "I'll do it."

"Good," Gavin said, then inhaled and held the breath for a moment longer than was natural. "He may take some coaxing. He's been with Thane for nearly a century, and Thane's absence has left him, ah . . . unbalanced."

My brows bunched together. "Oh," I said, my eyes widening as I understood Gavin's meaning. I shook my head, feeling dense. "I didn't realize."

"It may ease your mind to know that Ash only ever beds a woman with Thane," Gavin provided. "So communion with him will likely only involve a blood exchange."

"Oh," I said again, starting to feel like a broken record. It was impossible to hide the pang of disappointment from my voice. Ash was the epitome of the strong, silent type, as reserved and stoic as could be. I would have been lying to myself if I claimed he didn't intrigue me, or that I hadn't thought about what it would be like to be with him. Especially after agreeing to the bargain with Gavin to bind Ash before going after Thane.

"As that is the case," Gavin said, "I don't think I should be there with you when you bind Ash. My presence will undoubtedly drag the interaction into something sexual, and I would not wish to force that upon him."

Nerves fluttered in my stomach. “I understand,” I said, the spike of anxiety tightening my voice. I took a deep breath, slowly releasing it through pursed lips.

Gavin’s focus dropped to my mouth, and he licked his lips. “I can escort you to him, however,” he offered and glanced down the hall. “Ash is in his suite, awaiting intel on Thane’s location.”

I followed Gavin’s line of sight, my eyebrows rising as I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “Is there some other way to find Thane besides me?”

Gavin hesitated for a moment before answering. “Not reliably, no. We all have GPS trackers embedded under our skin as well as a tracing sigil, but both have been excised from Thane, and our in-house elementals have been unable to target him by scrying.” Gavin sighed. “If not for your ability to sense him, I would assume he had perished in the explosion.” His gaze roved over my face. “Much as I hate to admit it, you are our best—and likely our only—chance of finding him.”

“No pressure,” I breathed.

“Come,” Gavin said, sliding his hand down from my neck, over my shoulder, and along my arm to capture my hand. He led me down the hallway, my nervousness ratcheting higher with each step. We stopped at a door three down from Bastian’s.

Gavin leaned in, pressing a kiss to my temple. “I’ll be up the hall in my quarters if you need me after.”

My cheeks flamed as I understood his meaning—Ash wasn’t likely to be interested in a side of sex with his blood exchange, but I most certainly was.

I nodded, averting my gaze to the floor. “Is it weird?” I asked, then shook my head and tried again. “I mean, is it normal for a queen to crave sex during a communion, or

am I, um . . .”

“It’s perfectly normal, or so I’ve been told,” Gavin said, and I looked at his face, searching for any hint of deceit. A faint smile curved his lips. “There is great honor in binding oneself to a queen, but honor is rarely what immortals think about when they imagine serving a queen.” He squeezed my hand, then let it go and nodded toward the door. “Go on.”

I took a step toward the door and placed my hand on the knob, but I didn’t turn it. “When will we, um . . .” I cleared my throat and peeked at Gavin over my shoulder, my blush returning. “When will we do the full communion?”

“Tomorrow morning,” he said. “After you’ve rested.”

I swallowed roughly and nodded. “Okay.” I inhaled deeply, then blew out the breath. “Okay.” And then I turned the doorknob before I could chicken out, pushed open the door, and stepped into Ash’s private rooms.

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A quick scan of the dark sitting room told me it was empty. I looked back at Gavin, still standing in the hallway.

“Go on,” he whispered, looking toward the doorway to the bedroom.

I eased the door shut and quietly crossed the room, my fingers gripping the silky fabric of the skirt of my dressing gown. Ash’s personal space was filled with warm oak and leather furnishings, and far more bookcases than Gavin’s sitting room. Enough books lined the walls to make this feel more like a small library than anything else, and I smiled to myself, pleasantly surprised by this side of the stoic warrior.

I stopped in the doorway to the bedroom. Ash sat at the foot of a bed that was larger even than a standard king. His head was drooped, his long, loose blond hair hanging to shield his face from view, portions turned reddish-pink from blood. He still wore the same dark jeans and fitted T-shirt from earlier, dried blood smeared on the exposed skin of his arms, neck, and face. A small, standing picture frame lay face down beside him on the comforter.

“Ash?” I said, my voice little more than a whisper.

His head shot up, and his ice-blue eyes locked on me. His features were guarded, his stare curious but wary.

My hands fisted in my robe. I stretched out my fingers, forcing myself to let go, and stood a little straighter. “I can sense Thane,” I told him, my voice steadier than I felt. I took a single step into the bedroom. “I want to help go after him, but . . .” My heart hammered, my voice catching in my throat. “I made a deal with Gavin. He wants me to be as strong as possible before leaving the safety of this place to look for Thane, so I need to bind another immortal.” I paused and cleared my throat. “He, ah . . . Well, he wants that immortal to be you.”

Ash was quiet for a long time. “What do you want?” he finally asked.

I opened my mouth, then shut it without responding. I hadn’t expected him to be concerned about what I wanted, not when Thane was in danger. Not when nobody else ever asked me about my desires. Not Gavin. Not Bastian. Not Javier. Not even Wes, what felt like a thousand years ago.

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“I don’t know,” I finally admitted, shrugging and letting my shoulders slump. My attention drifted down to the floor, lingering on the lines of a beautiful, faded Persian rug. “I don’t know anyone else.” My words were honest, if not exactly confidence-inspiring. “At least, not any other immortals.”

I felt tongue-tied by the simple courtesy of Ash’s question. This relative stranger. This hulking warrior. This thoughtful soul. No wonder Thane had been with him for so long.

“You, I think,” I said, amending my answer as I raised my eyes to lock with his. “You and Thane. You have something special, and I would be honored to be a part of that, however small, if you would let me. You don’t have to—we don’t have to, um, you know,” I rambled, my cheeks flaming. “It can just be blood, if you prefer.”

Ash stared at me for a long moment, weighing my words. I held my breath, awaiting his rejection.

Between one heartbeat and the next, something within him changed. He seemed to come back to life, right before my eyes, his head rising, his spine straightening, and his shoulders falling back. Here was the warrior who had guarded the loft, who had dragged me to safety through the portal.

Ash stood and approached me, his footfalls heavy on the creaking hardwood floor. The closer he drew, the smaller I felt. He raised his hand to his mouth and unceremoniously bit into the meaty heel of his hand, then stopped well within arm’s reach in front of me and offered me his bleeding hand.

My mouth watered as I inhaled the scent of him, spicy like Gavin and Thane, but with purer, sweeter notes. I gripped his thick wrist with both hands and licked my lips, already anticipating how he would taste. I reminded myself that this communion was blood only, but my groin pulsed in anticipation regardless.

I pressed my lips to the heel of Ash's palm and ran my tongue over the rapidly healing wound. The flavor of his blood exploded across my tastebuds, like cinnamon toast with a dash of salt added to the cinnamon and sugar mixture. I groaned and sucked on the wound, pulling what little fresh blood I could get before Ash healed completely.

But his skin did heal, and when there was no more blood to be had without biting down and creating fresh cuts, I unsealed my lips from Ash's palm and released his wrist. Breathing hard, I licked my lips, making sure I got every last drop or smear.

My pulse throbbed insistently between my legs, and I squeezed my thighs together, silently chanting, "Blood only. Blood only. Blood only."

Before I could fully shake the haze of lust created by tasting immortal blood, Ash moved behind me and wrapped one burly arm around my ribcage, leaving my arms free. I suppressed a moan, my heart suddenly racing at having his big, powerful body pressed against the back of mine.

He swept my hair out of the way and angled my head to one side, baring my neck to him. As his other arm joined the first around me, his embrace grew tighter, lifting me onto my toes. Bowing his head, he grazed his teeth over the crook of my neck, making my pulse jump.

My hands settled on his muscular forearms, gripping tight as my knees threatened to give out from just that teasing touch of his teeth.

“I’ve got you,” he breathed. And then he bit down, breaking the skin with a sharp sting and releasing my blood.

A sense of euphoria washed away the pain, leaving me gasping with pleasure. Power coiled within me, ecstasy mounting to the intense heights I had only experienced twice before, when I bound first Gavin, then Bastian. My vision glazed over with silver, and my back arched. The magic exploded out of me in a wash of moonlight, and waves of the purest, deepest pleasure rocked through me.

My knees gave out, but Ash held me tight against him as he languidly cleaned my bite wound with his tongue. His hard erection jutted into my backside, and I fought the urge to rub myself against him. The muted sting from his bite returned as my pleasure abated, quickly overtaken by the itch of healing. Ash must have bitten his lip to heal my wound.

Slowly, Ash relaxed his hold on me until my legs carried the brunt of my weight once more.

I took a step away from him on shaky legs, breaking free of his loose hold, and turned to face him. “Thank you,” I said, a little breathless.

Desire raged through my veins, making me feel overheated and hypersensitive. The silk robe suddenly felt like itchy wool, and I wanted it off my skin.

Blood only, I reminded myself. But, gods, Ash was a stunning creature. A gentle giant, with a touch that countered his appearance so extremely that I wondered, again, what it would be like to be with him.

I cleared my throat, barely keeping my rampant lust from taking over, and stared down at the floor. If I looked at him, I would lose control. I stepped to the side to head for the door. “I should go.”

Ash's arm shot out, and he caught my wrist. "Don't. Don't go."

I looked at his hand, my chest heaving with each breath.

"Unless you want to." Ash added roughly.

I followed the line of his muscular arm, that pale skin glowing with silver sigils, up to his face and took in his earnest, open expression. The heat in his gaze turned his irises a vibrant aquamarine. Desire throbbed deep inside me, aching for this vampire, not another.

I shook my head.

33

We stared at one another for a long moment, then Ash led me to the bed, his hold on my wrist loose enough for me to easily break, though I never even considered it. He sat on the edge of the mattress, splaying his knees wide. Heart thundering, I let him pull me closer between his legs.

He released my wrist and tugged on one dangling end of my robe's belted knot to untie it. The robe fell open, revealing a narrow strip of my body. I held my breath as Ash slipped his large hands into the gap and settled them on my waist. The pads of his thumbs grazed along the undersides of my breasts, and I released a shuddering breath.

"You're so soft," he murmured, his voice a low rumble. His gaze roved over me, taking a long, slow path down and back up my body, until finally reaching my face. "I don't want to hurt you."

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A slight smile curved my lips. “I’m tougher than I look,” I said, my voice thick with lust. I gripped the fabric of his T-shirt with both hands, and he released me, raising his arms so I could pull the shirt off over his head.

His hair fell around his shoulders, and I studied the mounds and ridges of thick muscle on his chest and torso, the skin covered in an almost unbroken pattern of glowing silver sigils acquired over his long second life. I searched for my sigil, finally finding it encircling his hand, the full moon centered on the heel of his palm, where he had bitten into his own flesh to feed me his blood.

I captured his wrist and pulled his hand up to my mouth so I could press a kiss to the mark that bound us together. Moonlight flared beneath his skin as soon as my lips touched the sigil.

Ash closed his eyes and hissed in a breath.

I drew back and lowered his hand, my brow furrowing. “Did that hurt?”

“No,” he whispered roughly, his palms settling on my hips. He pulled me closer, trailing kisses down my sternum and between my breasts as his fingers kneaded my hips. His trimmed beard tickled my sensitive skin, giving rise to goosebumps.

I buried my fingers in his blond mane, holding him close. Wanting more of him but not wanting to push him too far. My eyelids fluttered closed as his thumbs drifted between my legs, grazing over the outer lips of my sex, already slick with arousal. His light touch set my nerve endings on high alert, and my next breath was noticeably shaky.

“This is for me?” he asked, wonder in his voice as he smeared my wetness along the crease of my slit. I opened my eyes as he raised his head to see my face. His throat bobbed. “I don’t frighten you?”

I shook my head and placed my hands on his mountainous shoulders, needing the support as he delved a thumb between my lips and found my clit. He circled the swollen, needy bud with a featherlight touch as he withdrew his other hand from inside my robe and raised it to his lips, slipping two fingers into his mouth.

I released a breathy laugh, thinking he was wetting his fingers with saliva to ease entry into my core. “I don’t think you need to—” But the words died on my tongue when his fingers emerged from his mouth coated in blood.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he repeated, returning that hand to between my legs.

I glanced down at the front of his jeans, wondering what exactly he was hiding in there that had him so concerned about hurting me even as I automatically widened my stance, so the outsides of my feet were flush against the insides of his boots. With gentle pressure, he eased his crimson-stained fingers between my lips and teased the entrance to my aching core.

“Oh,” I gasped as he pushed his thick fingers inside me. “Oh gods . . .” The immortal blood seeped into my inner flesh, heightening my arousal and quadrupling the sensations. “That feels—” I sobbed a laugh as pleasure brought tears to my eyes. “Oh gods, that feels incredible.”

I reached down for his belt buckle. “I want more.” My trembling fingers fumbled with his buckle but eventually unfastened it. I yanked the top button on his jeans open and jerked down the zipper. “I want all of you.”

With a rough grunt, Ash raised his ass off the bed long enough that I could tug his

jeans and underwear down to his thighs. He sat back down on the edge of the mattress, and my jaw dropped, my eyes opening wide. He was impossibly large—at least as thick as my forearm and nearly as long. Holy hell, no wonder he was worried about hurting me. But in my current state, all I could think about was how good it would feel when that hard, thick length was buried deep inside me. Especially with his languid caresses between my legs and the immortal blood coating the inside of my vagina.

I dragged my attention back up to Ash's face and was momentarily stunned by his guarded expression and the wariness in his eyes. He seemed to be bracing himself for my rejection.

"I'm not going anywhere," I murmured, cradling his jaw in my hands and angling his face toward mine. I raised one leg, placing my knee beside his hip on the mattress, then climbed up onto his lap, settling my other knee on his other side.

Brows bunching together, like he couldn't quite believe I would go through with this, Ash withdrew his fingers from inside me. I raised up on my knees as he fisted his thick cock, rubbing the bulbous head back and forth over my slit, coating himself in my arousal. He brought his other hand up to his mouth and bit into the heel of his hand, directly over my sigil. Blood welled, and he smeared it over his palm with his fingers as he lowered it to coat his erection in crimson.

My insides throbbed in anticipation of stretching to fit his massive girth while riding the high from absorbing his immortal blood. I reached down between my legs and took hold of him, angling him just right. My body protested as he pushed into my entrance, a sharp pain making me wince even as pleasure washed it away. My inner muscles fluttered, and I rested my forehead against Ash's, panting from the tantalizing combination of alternating waves of pleasure and pain.

Our breaths mingled, and Ash's hands settled on my hips once more, one thumb

reaching down to the apex of my sex. I gasped as he stroked my clit, and my pleasure crested suddenly. Wave after wave of bliss radiated out from my core. The inner muscle contractions sucked him deeper inside me, and I slowly sank onto that immense cock, the blood coating each extra inch, amplifying the sensations within me even as the climax waned, promising greater pleasure to come.

Breathless with bliss, I brushed my lips against Ash's, a tentative, almost shy first kiss. As our bond solidified and I became more aware of him through our mystical connection, I realized he was the fragile one in this moment, despite his concerns about his physical size hurting me. Thane's absence made him vulnerable, combined with decades—possibly even centuries—of rejection based on things he couldn't control.

Raising up on my knees to ease off his immense length, I kissed him again. My tongue slipped out as I sank back down onto him, only the faintest echo of pain as he continued to stretch me. His lips parted, welcoming me in, and the blood coating his lips fanned my passion to burn even hotter for him.

Groaning, Ash wrapped his arms around me, holding me close, and turned with me, laying me on my back on the bed. Propped up on his elbows, he slowly dragged that long, hard cock out of me, thrusting back in with gentle force as he claimed my lips. There was no more pain; there was only exquisite pleasure and the sensation of being filled so completely. Of being stretched to my limits. It was a new kind of pleasure, and I never wanted it to end.

His extraordinary size transformed the ordinary position into something that was anything but. I had never felt such extreme sensations from such a restrained joining. It felt so good. It was almost,almost,too much.

But Ash needed more. Not just a release of the body, but something that transcended the physical—an emotional release. A release of the soul.

My kiss grew more demanding, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, hooking my ankles together and using that hold to leverage my hips against his with more force. I bit his lip, tasting the sinfully decadent cinnamon and sugar flavor of his blood.

Ash growled into my mouth and pushed harder into me, finally letting go. He crushed his lips against mine and more of his delicious blood coated my tongue as he thrust into me unrestrained. Pleasure coiled deep within me, winding tighter and tighter. I couldn't take much more. I was going to snap. To break. To explode.

I cried out as the orgasm ripped through me, pleasure painting my vision in starlight. Ash buried himself to the hilt inside me and reared back, releasing a hoarse roar. Beneath him, I coasted on the waves of ecstasy as my inner muscles pulsed around him.

As the orgasm waned, my legs relaxed, flopping down onto the bed, and Ash bowed his head to rest beside mine on the comforter. I fought to catch my breath as the sizzling pleasure faded to a gentle throbbing.

Ash lifted his hips, dragging out his softening but still substantial erection. The movement caused echoes of ecstasy to pulse out from my core, and I gasped.

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Ash's head shot up and he stiffened above me, concern transforming his bold features. "Did I hurt you?" he asked.

I grazed the fingertips of one hand down the side of his face, running them through the short, coarse hair of his beard. "Not in any way I didn't like," I told him.

His features smoothed out, his gaze searching mine. "You're not what I expected."

I let out a breathy laugh. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

Ash was quiet for so long that anxiety fluttered in my belly. Was he disappointed? Did he regret bonding with me? Or, at least, did he regret taking the next step with me?

"It's a thing that frightens me," he finally said, leaning down to press a tender kiss against my lips. I waited for him to say more, but his next words were completely unexpected. "We need to speak with Gavin."

Ash rolled off me and sat up, then stood, pulling his underwear and jeans up and quickly fastening his fly. Belt hanging open, he bent over to retrieve my robe from the floor. I hadn't even noticed when it fell from my body. I sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed, helping him guide the sleeves onto my arms.

"Why do we need to speak with Gavin?" I asked, dread knotting in my belly.

"Because he's been keeping something from you," Ash said. "And the time for secrets has passed."

“What’s Gavin hiding?” I asked Ash, standing from the bed and knotting the belt of my robe around my waist.

Gavin was keeping a secret from me? I wasn’t sure how such a thing was possible, what with bits of Gavin’s thoughts and emotions leaking across the bond we now shared. And based on Ash’s tone, Gavin hadn’t been hiding something small and trifling from me. This was abig, badsecret.

“A consort shouldn’t withhold anything from his queen,” Ash said, the muscles of his chest, shoulders, and arms bunching as he buckled his belt. “It’s not right.”

The confirmation dampened the lingering bliss from our joining, and my overwhelming awareness of the brand new bond faded until I could feel the others tethered to my heart as well. I became all too aware of the two men out in the hallway, hovering at the door to Ash’s sitting room. I had gone from feeling perpetually alone to drowning in people who cared about me, and it was all a little overwhelming.

“I need a minute,” I muttered, hurrying toward the cracked-open bathroom door.

Really, I needed about a decade before confronting Gavin about whatever he had been withholding from me, but a minute to clean myself up would have to do. I could hardly be poised and dignified in my demand for answers with the remnants of Ash’s and my passion seeping down my inner thighs.

For a long moment, I stood at the sink, staring into the mirror and attempting to reconcile my inner self-image with the woman reflected in the glass. But my reflection looked more like my mom than like me, with gleaming auburn waves, bright aquamarine eyes the color of a tropical sea, and alabaster skin that seemed to

shimmer with an ethereal incandescence. The woman reflected back at me had a wild, unrestrained beauty, like a volcano or a lightning storm. She wasn't me.

But she was who I should have been. Who had been hiding within me all along. I knew that, but it was going to take some getting used to.

Laughing under my breath—because, really, what else could I do?—I turned on the faucet. I splashed cold water on my face, then dried off with the hand towel hanging on the towel rack wall. Using the same hand towel, I wiped my inner thighs clean before tossing the soiled cloth into the hamper tucked under the counter.

Again gazing into the mirror, I combed my fingers through my tangled waves but could do nothing to tame the unruly mane. Thankfully, Ash kept a small ceramic dish filled with hair ties on the counter. I plucked one free and pulled my hair back, tying it in a low ponytail. Not even close to classy or sophisticated, but better than bedhead.

Feeling a little more dignified, I pulled open the bathroom door. And shrieked, stumbling back a step.

Ash stood at the threshold, his hands pressed flat against the wall on either side of the door frame like he was restraining himself from coming into the bathroom after me. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice a low rumble. "I didn't mean to startle you." He pushed himself backward until he no longer blocked the doorway. "Are you all right?"

I nodded and released a breathy laugh. "I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting you to be right there," I said, gesturing to the doorway in front of me.

Now that I had three active bonds—plus the tenuous, imperceptible connection to Javier and the blood link to Thane—it was becoming much harder to differentiate and interpret my inner awareness of my consorts. I had been so focused on Gavin and

Bastian waiting impatiently out in the hallway that I hadn't noticed Ash had nearly followed me into the bathroom.

"Gavin's out there," I said, hugging my middle and looking toward the sitting room and the hallway beyond.

"I know," Ash said. "I can hear him—and the shifter, if I'm not mistaken."

My eyebrows rose. "Can you feel them, too?" Did my bond with the others somehow connect them all to one another as well?

Ash shook his head. "Shifters' hearts beat faster than those of any other humanoid," he offered and extended a large hand toward me. "Give Gavin a chance to tell you himself. If he won't, I will."

Tentatively, I stepped forward and placed my hand in his.

Ash curled his fingers around mine, engulfing my hand completely, and pulled me closer to him. He settled his other hand on the crook of my neck, his thumb skimming up and down the column of my throat. "The fourth consort in a queen's harem is traditionally her vengeful blade, smiting all who have wronged her," he said, gazing down at me with fierce intensity. "I will gladly fulfill this role, unless you have another in mind for me."

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Unsure how to respond, I licked my lips and smiled weakly. “If smiting makes you happy, the role is all yours.” My brow furrowed, dread pooling in my gut as I considered what had prompted him to bring this up. “How bad is Gavin’s secret?”

Ash pressed his lips together, his expression turning foreboding. “I’ll let you decide that,” he said, pulling his hand away from my neck and turning toward the doorway, my hand still held tight in his.

My heart hammered as we left the bedroom and crossed the sitting room to the suite door. I could feel Gavin and Bastian out there, both concerned, but in very different ways. The low drone of their voices crossed the barrier of the door, though I couldn’t make out their words. Ash most certainly could.

Ash grunted quietly, displeased by whatever he heard out in the hallway, and released my hand and walked ahead, his long strides eating up the floor between us and the door. He gripped the handle and peered back at me, his eyebrows raised in question. Was I ready?

I pushed back my shoulders and smoothed down the front of my robe, and then I nodded for Ash to open the door.

“—not a child,” Bastian’s voice drifted into the sitting room. “She needs us to protect her, not control her.”

“I’m not trying to control her,” Gavin snapped. “I’m trying to keep her alive.”

In my mind, I had pictured Gavin and Bastian standing at the door, shoulder to

shoulder, ready to break down the door to get to me. That was how they felt. It was not at all how I found them.

Bastian leaned back against the opposite wall, his concern fading as soon as he saw me. A faint smirk curved his lips, almost like he was pleased I'd overheard this part of their discussion. He glanced sideways at Gavin, who appeared to have been pacing up and down the hallway and was currently stalking toward Ash's door.

"See, she's fine," Bastian said, gesturing toward me. He looked from me to Ash and back, no hint of jealousy in his expression or leaking across our bond. "Better than fine, from the looks of it."

I stepped out into the hallway, and Ash followed, a tangible shadow at my back.

"She is not fine," Ash countered.

I flashed Bastian a quick smile, then peeked over my shoulder to see Ash glowering at Gavin's approaching form.

"Tell her," Ash said.

Gavin stopped in front of us and narrowed his eyes. "It's not your place to—"

"I am her Fourth, and you have betrayed her," Ash growled. "It is exactly my place to ensure this wrong is righted."

Gavin clenched and unclenched his jaw.

"Tell her," Ash demanded. "Or I will."

Sighing, Gavin shifted his focus to me. "You were meant to be part of a trade," he

admitted, like the words were being dragged out of him. Jaw clenched, he looked from me to Ash and back. “With the Sun King.”

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My mouth fell open, a million things tumbling through my head, yet I was too stunned to speak.

Bastian pushed off the wall and moved closer.

“We were originally going to train you to break the curse,” Gavin explained. “Once you were powerful enough, we were going to trade you to the Sun King in exchange for any of our people he still holds prisoner.” He was trying to make it sound like it was no big deal, but I could sense his inner panic. “You were a bargaining chip. But that was before we knew who you were and thought you were just some random queen in hiding.”

My eyebrows rose, and I scoffed at the words bargaining chip. “And now?”

Gavin laughed under his breath and shook his head. “That plan disintegrated the moment you uttered Javier’s name and revealed your true identity. A future I had never envisioned for our people was suddenly possible. A new High Queen to lead us forward.” He stepped closer, his stare burning with earnest intensity. “With you at full power, we won’t need to make deals with Veris to free our people. We can take them back.” He raised one hand, curling his fingers into a tight fist. “And crush Veris.”

My brow furrowed as he spoke. I looked from him to Bastian, now at my side, then glanced over my shoulder at Ash before returning my focus to Gavin. Puzzle pieces inside my mind rearranged, fitting together into a new pattern to reflect my shifting understanding of the situation. I was irrelevant; my bloodline was what mattered.

“You wanted to use me,” I finally said, speaking slowly and choosing my words carefully. “You still do.”

“Sophie, I—”

I held up one hand, forestalling him. “Don’t,” I said, a hard edge to my voice. “I understand. Our people are dying, and I can change that.” I drew in a deep breath, releasing it shakily. “I need some time—alone—to think,” I said, turning my back to my three consorts and starting down the hallway.

“Let her go,” Ash said, the floor behind me creaking as I imagined the larger vampire stepping in front of Gavin to block his path. “Shifter . . .” There was a note of warning in Ash’s voice.

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Curiosity got the better of me, and I peeked over my shoulder.

Ash was blocking Gavin, as I had suspected, but he also held Bastian's arm in a firm grip, keeping the shifter from following me as well. "She wants to be alone," Ash said.

Bastian leaned in close. "Try to stop me," he said, a growl in his voice.

Rolling my eyes, I faced forward and picked up the pace, hurrying toward the grand staircase at the heart of the house. I jogged down the steps, and before I realized where I was heading, I had crossed the foyer and was entering the infirmary. My steps slowed as I approached Micah, stretched out on his back on the padded examination table, an IV tube feeding fluids and magic-laced medicine into his arm and a few cords connecting him to the monitors arranged beyond the head of his makeshift recovery bed.

One of the vampires who had doctored Micah when we first arrived sat in the corner of the room, reading a book. She looked up as I entered the room, then stood and set her open book on the counter.

"How is he?" I asked, approaching my unconscious son.

She carried her chair closer to the bed. "He's healing well," she said, setting the chair down and gesturing for me to sit.

I offered her a quick smile and eased down into the provided seat. "Thanks," I said, reaching out to grasp Micah's limp hand in both of mine. His skin was warm, and his

fingers reflexively curled around mine. “He’s the only family I have left.” I shook my head, my brow furrowing as I looked over Micah’s body at the vampire healer. “I’m so sorry. You saved my son’s life, and I never even asked you your name.”

She smiled. “Greta, my lady,” she said with a bobbed curtsy and a bow of her head. “And it has been my greatest honor to serve you.”

“Please,” I said, again shaking my head. Embarrassment at her deference pushed my focus down to my hands. “You don’t have to do that.”

Greta bowed her head again. “I’ll give you some privacy,” she said and swept from the room.

I watched Greta leave, then heard her muffled voice as she spoke with Bastian out in the foyer. Of course he had followed me down here. I turned back to Micah. At least my shifter seemed satisfied with waiting outside for the time being.

So much had changed in the past day. I was now the proud owner of a harem of four immortals, one of which had been missing for over two decades and was likely being held prisoner by the Sun King along with untold numbers of our people. How many queens were still alive, held captive by the House of the Sun for even longer than Javier? Gavin’s mother was a queen. I still didn’t know if she had survived the Sun uprising or been killed during the attacks, and that was assuming she had even still been alive at the time.

“I don’t know how to feel about him,” I confessed to Micah. “Sometimes, I feel like I’m the most important thing in the world to him—me, the woman, not the queen. But at other times, he seems so conflicted, almost resentful.” I let out a breathy laugh. “Which makes sense because he has spent the past thirty years working toward something, and now that I’m here, that all goes out the window.”

I exhaled heavily, rubbing the back of Micah's hand with my thumb. "They think I can be their savior, but I'm just me. I don't know the first thing about being a queen, let alone the High Queen. Maybe they should stick to the original plan and trade me to Veris for the rest of our people, find a queen who actually knows what she's doing."

"Don't be dumb, Soph." The deep voice echoed throughout the room.

I jumped in my seat, my heart suddenly beating double time. That voice—I knew that voice, and it certainly wasn't Bastian back in the foyer.

A shimmering mist appeared on the other side of Micah's recovery bed. It slowly coalesced into the foggy iridescent shape of a man, gaining more definition and recognizable features with each erratic beat of my heart.

I stood, releasing Micah's hand. "Wes?" I breathed, my heart lodged in my throat.

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He was easily recognizable now, looking the same as he had on the day he died down to his jeans and flannel button-down shirt, save for his opalescent transparency. The hint of a smile touched his handsome, ephemeral features. "I've been waiting for you to leave the warded area, but I didn't want to scare you," Wes said, less of an echo to his voice now that he had taken on a visible form.

I had the photo in my wallet, and memories, of course, but those had faded over time and my mental image of Wes had long since blurred around the edges. But seeing him now, not a day over eighteen, forced every memory and detail back into crisp, clear focus. I shook my head, at a complete loss for words. Maybe I should have expected to see him here, especially after his brief appearance in my office the other day, but I hadn't. The part of me that was from here, that belonged here, felt entirely

separate from the part of me that had lived out in the human world with Wes.

“Geesh, Soph,” Wes said, his lips twitching with the hint of a smile. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I barked a weak laugh and covered my mouth with one hand.

His expression grew serious. “I never left you, you know,” he said. “After it happened, I followed you to the hospital. You were never alone.”

My eyes stung as tears welled, and I sniffled. Again, I shook my head, my jaw working as I searched for words. “I wish I’d been able to see you,” I said, finally lowering my hand.

Wes smiled that hesitant grin that had stolen my heart all those years ago, softening his big tough-guy appearance. “Your sister explained everything to me—about what you are and why you couldn’t see me but should have been able to.”

“Amaya?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, laughing softly. “She’s around here somewhere. We’re practically BFFs. Her words, not mine.”

I snorted my amusement, picturing the two of them palling around together, like a mastiff hanging out with a Chihuahua. “You and Amaya are friends?”

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“It’s weird, I know,” Wes said. His focus shifted past me. “You have a lot of new friends.”

I turned my head, looking over my shoulder to see Bastian standing in the doorway. I could feel his confusion. He was probably wondering who the hell I was talking to now. I flashed him a tight smile, and he nodded once before backing away.

I turned back to Wes, wondering how much he knew about my relationship with Bastian and the others. “I don’t know what to say,” I admitted.

Wes’s lips curved. “You don’t have to say anything,” he said, walking around the foot of Micah’s recovery bed with smooth, gliding steps. “I just wanted you to know I was here.” His smile turned lopsided. “Oh, and to tell you to stop being dumb.”

I guffawed weakly. “Thanks.”

He stopped well within my reach, and I looked up into his heartbreakingly familiar features. He had always been big for his age. It was the reason the other boys left me alone when he warned them off me. But for some reason, I assumed I had built him up in my head, making him larger than life. He was no Ash, but he wouldn’t have looked out of place beside Bastian and Gavin.

Wes reached for me, raising a ghostly hand to my face, and I braced myself for the fresh heartbreak of his fingers passing through me.

I sucked in a breath when his cool fingertips touched my skin. A faint tingle tickled my nerve endings, like a gentle electric current charged his ghostly form. Our eyes

widened, our shocked expressions mirroring one another.

“I can touch you?” he asked, clearly not believing it himself.

“I—” I let out a sound that was part laugh, part cry. Tears spilled over the brims of my eyelids, streaming down my cheeks. “I didn’t know,” I said, the words wobbly and weak. “It seems like I don’t know anything about anything.”

Suddenly, Wes’s arms were around me, and I fell into his embrace. Ragged sobs racked my body, and my fingers clutched the back of his shirt.

“Holy shit,” Bastian said. “Is that aghost?”

I sniffled and pulled back enough that I could see Bastian standing in the doorway once more. Apparently my touch made Wes visible to others. “This is Wes,” I managed between heaving breaths. “Micah’s dad.”

“Holyshit,” Bastian repeated, his shock pouring across our bond.

“I feel like I already know you, man, but it’s nice to finally meet you,” Wes said, extending one translucent arm toward Bastian.

I watched with fascinated disbelief as Bastian stepped forward, closing the distance between us and the doorway, fullyexpecting his hand to pass through Wes’s. But it didn’t. Their palms slapped together, and my breath caught. It was like Wes was here, in the flesh. It was like he wasreallyhere. My chin trembled and fresh tears streaked down my cheeks.

“If you hurt her,” Wes added, “I’ll make your life a living hell.”

I choked on a laugh, or maybe it was a cry. A yawn cracked my jaw, and I hid it

behind a raised wrist.

Wes released Bastian's hand and peered down at me, his concern etched into his ghostly features. "You're running on fumes, Soph," Wes said. "You should get some rest. I've heard the chatter around the house. You've got a big day tomorrow." His eyebrows danced. "Your first rescue mission."

I recalled what I had to do to prepare for the mission to track down and rescue Thane—a communion with my three bound consorts who were here with me. My cheeks flamed, and I buried my face in the front of Wes's shirt. Did he know that part? My first foursome was mere hours away. How was I supposed to get any sleep knowing that was coming?

How much did Wes really know about the true nature of my relationship with these immortals? He said Amaya had explained what I was and what I could do, but did that include details about a queen and her harem? I wasn't sure how much he had seen of what happened between Bastian and me in my office, but I felt comforted by the knowledge that he hadn't witnessed any of the communion that had happened in the loft or upstairs in the warded residential wing. Ghosts weren't allowed to enter either of those places.

Wes buried his cool fingers in my hair and tilted my head back so my face was angled up toward his. "Go with Bastian," he said, leaning his forehead against mine. "I'll keep an eye on our boy."

"I want him to meet you," I said, my voice tremulous. "As soon as he's awake. Before I leave tomorrow, just in case—"

"Nothing's going to happen to you tomorrow," Wes said vehemently, "so don't even say it." He shifted his attention to Bastian. "Right? You won't let anything happen to her?"

“Never,” Bastian swore.

That old smile that had imprinted on my heart reappeared on Wes’s face. After a brief hesitation, he pressed his lips to mine, that cool tingle adding an edge to his sweet kiss. I melted against him, savoring the stolen embrace.

A quiet sob tore from my chest when he broke the kiss. I didn’t want to let him go again. Not ever again.

Wes skimmed his fingertips over my jaw as he stepped backward, and then his hand fell away.

“That is so fucking weird,” Bastian muttered, peering around like he was looking for someone else in the infirmary. It took me a moment to realize he could no longer see Wes. Something about my touch seemed to drag the ghost further into the land of the living, giving him a physical presence.

Stunned by everything that had just happened, I didn’t fight Bastian as he took my hand and pulled me out of the room. I craned my neck to see Wes’s shimmering, ghostly form for as long as possible. He held my stare until I moved out of view, leaving fractured pieces of my heart trailing behind me.

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Wes was here. He wasn't alive, but he was with me. And that was all that really mattered.

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I walk barefoot down a dank underground corridor, an incessant dripping punctuating my steps. The rough stone floor is damp beneath my feet. The odor of unwashed bodies marks the air, accented by the foul stench of old blood and fresh bodily waste.

Someone coughs, and my head swings to the right. Steel bars block a doorway. A prison cell. A woman stands at the bars, barely visible in the deep shadows, but I can tell she's dirty and emaciated.

She extends her skinny arm between the bars and points to the end of the corridor. "He bleeds for us," she says, her voice scratchy, like it hasn't been used in a very long time.

I want to stop and speak to her, to help her, but something pulls me onward. She watches me pass with haunted, knowing eyes.

The next cells are like echoes of the first. More gaunt women. Though they don't look any different from humans, my gut tells me they're queens. Each stands at the bars and points toward the end of the corridor. "He bleeds," they say, their voices forming an unsettling chorus. "He bleeds for us."

I follow their direction, my pace slowing as I reach the bars of the cell door at the end. A tiny square window high in the wall lets in silver moonlight, illuminating the

interior of this cell better than the others. A large man lies on a bedroll on the floor on the left side of the cell, curled on his side facing the rough stone wall. He wears jeans but no shirt, and the silver sigils covering his dark skin are marred by splotches of dried blood.

“Thane,” I whisper, but he doesn’t respond. He doesn’t even move. “Thane,” I say louder.

“Save your effort,” a man says, his voice rough and scratchy. He sits hunched in the far corner of the cell, untouched by the moonlight. Long, stringy dark hair hangs around his face, and his glowing sigils are barely visible through all the dried blood and grime on his skin. “Your friend has lost too much blood,” the prisoner says. “He won’t rouse for anything but an open vein.”

Suddenly, a dagger is in my hand. I press the edge of the blade to the inside of my forearm.

“I wouldn’t,” the prisoner says, standing. He’s thin, just as wasted as the women, but taller than I had expected. “Unless you want to die.”

Steps slow and feet dragging, the prisoner approaches the bars. He wears a dingy blanket around his shoulders like a cloak.

The moonlight finally touches his face, and my heart skips a beat. “Javier?” I drop the dagger and grip the bars, pulling myself as close to the interior of the cell as I can get.

He stops at the bars and reaches a hand through to caress the side of my face with the backs of his knuckles. “You can’t save us all.”

Liquid licks at my heels, and I look down to see dark, thick blood oozing around my feet. I spin around and look at the other cells. The women all lie on the floor, four

long cuts like claw marks running up the inside of their extended arms, their open veins pouring blood out onto the floor.

I startled awake, my eyelids snapping open as I sucked in a breath. My heart hammered, and a cold sweat dampened my skin. Beside me, Bastian lay with his back to me, soft snores marking each of his languid inhales. The first light of early dawn leaked in through the half-drawn curtains.

I sat up and pushed the covers off my clammy skin. The dream had been too real, like I had really been there in that dungeon. It had to be a prophecy. But what did it mean? Could I interpret it literally? Was Javier being held in the dungeon with Thane? Were all those queens there as well? Or was it more symbolic, simply telling me they were all prisoners of the House of the Sun, but not necessarily being held in the same place?

I scooted to the edge of the bed and stood, needing movement to help me think. I retrieved my robe, which lay draped across the corner of the bed, and slipped the silky fabric over my arms, then tied the belt with a loose knot around my waist.

With one last look at Bastian's slumbering form, I left the bedroom and crossed the sitting room to the door to the hallway. I didn't know the first thing about interpreting prophetic dreams. I needed the advice of someone who did.

I headed up the hallway toward the stairs at the heart of the house, but when I reached the landing, rather than descending to the foyer, I walked along the second-floor gallery toward the tall pair of double doors blocking entrance to the sealed-off east wing. A large, intricate circular sigil glowed in the center of the doors.

I stopped in front of the doors and tried the handle, but it refused to turn. Assuming the sigil was a locking ward, I pressed my hand to the center of the design. The mark glowed brighter around my fingers, and then the lines of the ward shifted, untwining

and pulling apart, until the once unified symbol formed two complex crescent moons, one on either door.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the handle to the right side door. It gave without resistance, and I pulled the door open, stepping into a hallway that had haunted my nightmares for three decades.

Weak predawn light filtered in through the stained glass window displaying the phases of the moon at the far end of the corridor. A single door broke up the left side wall, the High Queen's quarters, while the half-dozen doors on the right led to the remaining royal suites. I paused at the door to my old suite and traced the carvings in the wood with a wandering fingertip.

I couldn't help but feel the weight of my newfound responsibilities settling on my shoulders. I was the High Queen now, the last hope for my people. The fate of an entire species rested in my inexperienced hands, and that realization was terrifying.

For so long, I had been running from my past, from my true identity. I had convinced myself that I could live a normal life, blend in with the humans, and forget about the world I had left behind. But now, standing here in the place where it all began, I realized how foolish that notion had been.

My mother had sacrificed her life to give me a chance at survival, and Javier had risked everything to keep me safe. Now, it was my turn to step up, to embrace my powers and my role as a High Queen of the House of the Moon.

I pulled my hand back and moved farther down the hallway. A sigil similar to the one locking this wing glowed on the door to the High Queen's quarters. Another lock. I pressed my palm to the center of the design, and once again, the sigil glowed brighter before separating to form two crescent moons. There was the faintest sound of a lock clicking open.

Placing my hand on the doorknob, I twisted it and pushed the door open. The gray light of early morning poured in through the rectangular stained glass skylight, the only window in the sitting room. Sheets had been draped over the furnishings and bookcases, making the room feel like it was slumbering.

Doors on either side of the room led to hallways, which in turn, led to what I now knew were the private rooms belonging to the members of the High Queen's harem. Another door in the wall straight ahead, this one sealed with a trio of sigils more complex than those I had just broken, led to the High Queen's study, and through it, to her bedroom.

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I made a beeline for that door. The trio of sigils glowed brighter as I approached, then faded, leaving behind sear marks on the wood as they released the lock. That was a different type of locking ward. I leaned closer to the door, studying the spent sigils. Parts of the pattern reminded me of the bonding sigil I marked each of my immortals with when I claimed them, almost like this lock had been designed specifically for me, to automatically unlock in my presence. Had my mom done this?

Unlike in the sitting room, the furniture and shelves in the study were exposed. Open books and loose papers were strewn haphazardly across the desk, covered in a thick layer of dust. Every inch of wall was taken up by built-in bookcases, save for the opposite wall, which displayed a broad picture window overlooking the misty grounds, and the door in the center of the wall to my right, which led to the High Queen's bedroom.

Not wanting to waste time, I turned to the left and skimmed the titles on the spines of the books on the shelves.

“Sophie?”

I spun around to find Gavin standing in the open doorway. I had been so preoccupied by my mission that I hadn't sensed him following me. He wore his trousers and a button-down shirt as usual, though the top few buttons of his shirt were undone and his usually sleek hair was slightly mussed, falling forward down his forehead, making him appear less put together than usual.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, scanning the room as he stepped across the threshold. My anger from earlier flared, but he diffused it with a single statement.

“No one’s set foot in this room since the attack.”

The attack. Memories of that night flashed through my mind. Horrifying flickers. Nightmare fuel.

I cleared my throat and licked my lips, grabbing onto a safer topic. “Really?” I asked, recalling the strange triple sigil that had burned itself into the door as it released the lock.

“We tried everything to get in here, even breaking through the wall and climbing in through the window, but it was no use,” Gavin said as he crossed to the desk, skimming over the books and papers abandoned there. “Apparently, your mother set the ward sealing this room herself.” He turned toward me, his silver eyes glowing brighter than the dim predawn light. “It was her last act as High Queen.” He glanced at the doorway, his stare growing distant, like he was seeing the space at another time.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said. “I just walked toward the door, and the ward burned itself out.”

“It was waiting for you,” Gavin said, dragging his attention back to me. “Why did you come here?” The corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m assuming it wasn’t for a walk down memory lane.”

I shook my head and scanned the shelves stretching around the room. “I had a dream, a prophetic dream,” I said. “It was confusing, and I was hoping to find some guidance in here.”

“From the books?” Gavin asked. “Or from your mother?”

“All the above?” I said, sounding uncertain. My brow furrowed. “But there are no

ghosts in here.”

Gavin’s lips curved into a gentle smile. “Give them time. Your mother’s ward likely repelled them, and there may be some lingering residue that keeps them away for some time. They’ll find their way here eventually, but I don’t want you to get your hopes up. Your mother isn’t likely to be among them.”

Right, because Veris had burned her body and scattered the ashes, leaving her no physical anchor in this place. I thought of Wes downstairs in the infirmary, watching over Micah. He didn’t have an anchor here either. I touched the silver Tree of Life medallion. Wes had given it to me shortly after we discovered I was pregnant. It had been his mom’s, the only thing he had of hers, and was a promise that he would never leave me—that we would be a family. This pendant was what had convinced me to keep the baby. Of course, in the end, Wes hadn’t been able to keep his promise. Maybe he had latched onto the pendant instead of his body? Or maybe he had latched onto me?

The old, bitter memories made my eyes sting with fresh tears. I cleared my throat, pushing the heartbreak away. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to rely on the books, then,” I told Gavin as I looked around the study. “Any idea of where to find books on interpreting prophetic dreams?”

Then, as if by magic, a book landing on the hardwood floor drew our attention to the wall on the left.

Cautiously, I approached the book, cocking my head to the side as I crouched to study the worn cover. There was no title stamped into the crimson leather. I reached for the book, turning it over in my hands. The spine was blank as well, and the binding creaked as I opened the book. The first page was blank, but a single word had been written on the second in neat calligraphy, with tidy, precise flourishes: Prophecy.

My eyebrows rose, and I looked at Gavin, tilting the open book toward him so he could see the lone word as well. “Looks like at least one ghost has found its way here already.”

“So it would seem,” he said, frowning thoughtfully. He crossed the study, joining me, his eyes skimming over the spines on the nearby shelves, where the Prophecy book had been tucked away a moment ago. “These books all relate to a queen’s prophetic gifts.”

I nodded, grinning. I was eager to search for some clarity. “Should I look at any others?” I asked the air around us, unsure of the ghost’s location.

Goosebumps rose on my skin, and a noticeable chill entered the air. My next exhale came out as a visible puff of air. A moment later, three more books slid out partway from where they had been shelved.

“Thank you,” I whispered, shivering reflexively. The air warmed noticeably, making me think the ghost had moved away again. Gavin collected the books from the shelves, but I continued to scan the surrounding air, searching for some visible sign of the spirit. “Who are you?” I asked softly. “Can you show yourself?”

A glittering mist formed a half-dozen feet away, and my heartbeat quickened. But instead of coalescing into a humanoid form as Wes had done, the mist lingered for a few seconds before dissipating.

“The residual repellent from the ward must prevent the ghost from manifesting completely,” Gavin said. “We’re lucky she could focus her strength enough to show us the books.”

“She?” I said, looking at him under raised brows.

Gavin nodded, peering around like he just couldn't help himself from looking for our friendly ghost, either. "Only a queen would know what to look for in here."

I shrugged one shoulder and looked past him. "Thank you, whoever you are."

Gavin started toward the doorway, and I followed. We carried our small book haul back to his quarters in the west wing, where I settled at the compact dining table to do some much needed research while Gavin filled an electric kettle and plugged it in on the sideboard.

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“What did you see in the dream?” Gavin asked, scooping a small amount of black tea leaves from a tin and dropping them into a large ceramic teapot, then turning to face me. He leaned back against the edge of the sideboard and crossed his arms over his chest.

My brow furrowed as I recalled the prophetic dream, relaying what I could remember clearly. It hadn’t faded as quickly as a normal dream, but it wasn’t crystal clear, either, making me think it might be smart to keep a dream journal.

Steam rose from the kettle’s spout by the time I finished recounting the dream. “Basically, I want to figure out if Javier and all those women are really in the same place as Thane,” I said. “Are we rescuing one person or a bunch of people? I assume that ‘he bleeds for us’ means the queens have been feeding off Javier, and now Thane too, but what did Javier mean when he said I couldn’t save them all?”

“All good questions,” Gavin said, turning away to fill the prepared teapot with boiling water. Finished, he set the teapot on a trivet on the table along with a couple of matching ceramic mugs, then pulled out the chair opposite mine. He reached for one of the books and dragged it closer to his side. “I’ll help you look for answers.”

I smiled gratefully, my gaze lingering on Gavin as he opened the book and started to read. This was the first time we had done much of anything together that didn’t involve the shedding of clothing, and I was surprised to find that I liked to be around him like this. And then I thought about what we would be doing in a few hours, naked and with two other people, and my cheeks heated.

Gavin peered at me without raising his head from his book. “Do try to concentrate.”

He raised one eyebrow, the corners of his mouth tensing. “Unless you’re feeling peckish.”

My blush flamed hotter, and I cleared my throat, refocusing on my book. “I’m fine.” I couldn’t help but glance at him.

He was still watching me, dark anticipation in his stare.

I licked my lips. “For now.”

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“Well,” I said, sitting back in my chair and rubbing my tired eyes, not an inch closer to understanding the prophetic dream featuring Javier. “That was a huge waste of time.”

Gavin and I had skimmed through all the books selected by the ghost in the High Queen’s study, and while much of what I read was interesting and useful in a general sense—I now knew there was no “guide” to interpreting prophetic dreams and that the seer’s gut instinct was the most important factor when attempting to decode a dream—none of it made the dream’s meaning any clearer to me.

“Not entirely,” Gavin said, pushing back his chair at the opposite end of the table and standing. He started around the table, heading for me. “We know you won’t find the answers you seek in any book, but rather you must look within yourself.” He stopped beside my chair and held a hand out to me. “Come. I have an idea.”

I looked up at him, moving only my eyes, uncertain of his intentions. With him, I was beginning to suspect there was always an ulterior motive, usually a naughty one.

“I wish only to help quiet your mind so you might better listen to your gut,” Gavin

assured me.

Uncertain of what that meant, I placed my hand in his and scooted my chair backward before standing. Gavin curled his fingers around mine and stepped back, then turned, leading me toward the sofa arranged with two armchairs near the fireplace on the other side of the sitting room. I straightened my silk robe as best I could with one hand.

At Gavin's direction, I sat on the sofa, then stretched out on my back on the cushions. He lifted my legs by my ankles and folded his body gracefully to sit at the far end of the couch, settling my feet on his lap.

"Close your eyes," he said as he dragged his thumb along the arch of my foot.

I moaned, relaxing into the sofa and letting my eyelids drift shut. Gavin's expert touch proved his fingers were skilled at drawing pleasure from other places on my body than from between my legs. "That feels so good."

"Good," he said, sounding smug.

I cracked an eyelid open to peer at him discreetly. His look of deep concentration caught me off guard, and a giggle shook my chest.

Gavin froze, his thumb pressed into my heel, and he watched me warily.

"I'm sorry," I said, attempting to stifle my amusement. "You just looked so serious."

Gavin narrowed his eyes. "Apparently, a more direct action is required to suppress your thinking mind," he said, scooting closer to me until my knees crossed his lap. His hands glided up my calves, over my knees, and higher.

Guessing what he intended, I squeezed my thighs together. “I doubt that will help me understand the dream better.”

Gripping one knee, Gavin forced my legs open and wedged his elbow against my other knee to keep me from shutting them once more. My robe gaped, revealing my most intimate parts to him.

I instinctively clapped my hands over my groin.

Gavin tutted me. “How do you know this won’t help if you haven’t tried it?” he asked, his free hand settling on the uppermost portion of my inner thigh. He teased the sensitive flesh there, making my leg muscles quiver as his fingers drew ever closer to my own hands covering my sex.

My heart beat faster, my chest rising and falling with heavier breaths. “This isn’t quieting my mind,” I told him. If anything, it was drawing me more into my head, especially with my everything bared to him like this while he sat there fully clothed, not a drop of blood to fuel the mind-numbing lust I had quickly grown accustomed to. “Maybe if I had some blood—”

“No,” Gavin said, tracing the crease at the top of my inner thigh with a single fingertip. “Bloodlust will consume you. We need your head clear and your mind empty.”

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Tempted as I was to let this continue, I sat up fully and shifted one hand to grab his wrist, stilling his teasing fingers and locking eyes with him. “There is no lust for me without bloodlust,” I told him. “Not around you. Not anymore.”

Gavin clenched and unclenched his jaw, and I could almost see the inner battle playing out in his silver eyes. Sighing, he released his hold on my knee and let me close my legs. He stretched one arm across the back of the sofa and rested the other hand on my shin. Suddenly, his eyes lit with an idea.

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

He nudged my legs, and I shifted them off him, my feet landing on the floor. “Come,” he said, standing and again holding out a hand to me.

I placed my hand in his and let him pull me up to my feet once more.

“Three activities help me get out of my head enough for my subconscious mind to work through a tricky problem—walking, driving, and taking a shower,” he said, guiding me toward the door to his bedroom. “Driving away from the Sanctuary is out of the question, and walking the grounds in the middle of the night isn’t a good idea when you’re still unused to interacting with ghosts, but—” We entered his bedroom and headed for the bathroom. “I have a perfectly good shower right here, and you’re welcome to use it for as long as you like.”

I eyed him, unsure of his intent. “Alone?”

Smirking, Gavin gently pushed me ahead of him through the bathroom door, then

reached past me and grabbed the doorknob. “You’ll find an assortment of toiletries under the sink,” he said, nudging me further into the bathroom so he could pull the door shut. “Use whatever you like.” And then he closed the door, and I was alone.

After a moment of hesitation, I locked the door. He would have heard the clicking of the lock, of course, and nothing so puny would stop him if he really wanted to get through the door. But I wouldn’t be able to relax if I was constantly wondering if I would have company.

I peered around the bathroom, taking in the enormous shower and oversized tub on one side, the beautiful vanity of white wood and silver-veined white marble, and the high-tech toilet with built-in bidet tucked away in its own little pocket room off in the corner.

I opened the cabinet doors beneath the vanity sink and knelt to examine the offerings. A bevy of bottles were on display, all appearing luxurious and none displaying any branding I recognized. After sniffing everything, I picked the shampoo, conditioner, and body wash set that smelled the most relaxing, like lavender and vanilla, and selected a lavender-chamomile shower steamer.

As an afterthought, I plucked a sleek razor from a glass jar and carried my spoils to the shower. I had shaved the previous evening, but considering what I would face later this morning, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to go over my legs again. And while I was usually ashave once a week or less kind of gal, the last thing I wanted to be worried about during my first foursome was prickly legs.

I turned on the faucet and tossed the shower steamer onto the tiled shower floor, waiting for the water to heat and the blissful aroma of lavender to reach my nose. Finally, with a sigh that contained a thousand worries, I stepped into the shower.

“It worked!” I exclaimed, yanking the bathroom door open. I stood in the doorway, wearing only an oversized crimson towel wrapped around my body, my hair dripping past my shoulders. I had expected Gavin to be waiting for me in the bedroom, but a quick scan revealed that the room was empty.

The murmur of masculine voices drew me across the bedroom. The door to the sitting room had been pulled closed but not latched. I angled my ear to the crack and listened. Gavin was out there; Bastian was too. My heart lurched into my throat and I backed up a step when I heard Ash’s voice as well. Shit, shit, shit! They were all out there.

Was it time? Was this it? Was the great group communion about to begin?

Heart lodged in my throat, I scrambled into the bathroom and eased the door shut, leaning back against the slab of wood. I wasn’t ready for this. I was not ready to be with three stunning, well-endowed immortals at the same time.

A semi-hysterical laugh bubbled up from my chest. Who was I kidding? I would never be ready for this. But it was now or never, tangled, wet hair and all. I needed to just rip off the bandaid. Just go out there and get it over with already.

I took several deep breaths, working up the nerve to turn around and open the door.

But someone knocked on the door before I could open it, and I leapt across the bathroom, spinning around and backing into the counter, my fingers clutching my throat. My heart hammered, banging against my sternum like it was trying to break out of my chest.

“Soph?” Bastian called.

“Just a sec!” I blurted, my voice high and tight. I forced my fingers to unclench from

around my neck and lowered my hand, turning to face the mirror. My eyes were wide and wild, with too much white showing around my irises. Hands trembling, I combed my fingers through my wet hair, attempting to tame my suddenly savage appearance.

Just open the door, I silently told myself. Just go out there and get this over with. I had already had sex with each of them, and I'd had a threesome with Gavin and Bastian, so it wasn't like there would be any big surprises.

Which made me think of Ash and his big surprise, and I suppressed a snort of laughter, slapping my hand over my mouth to make sure I held it in.

But how would it work, me with three potent, virile men? Would it be a free-for-all, with the two vampires and the shifter falling on me like rabid beasts, attempting to claim their fair share, or would they take turns? I probably needed deodorant, right? Like, this was bound to get pretty active, wasn't it?

I scanned the tidy marble countertop, then peeked under the sink, but found no sticks, spray cans, tubes, or jars labeled deodorant. Baking soda was an ingredient used in natural deodorants, wasn't it? Maybe I could sneak past the waiting immortals and down to the kitchen, rifle through the pantry, and rub some baking soda on my pits.

The mental image of me flinging white power under my arms spurred another bout of hysterical laughter that refused to be contained. I muffled it as best as I could with both hands over my mouth. Tears welled from the combination of hysterics and nerves.

"Sophie?" Bastian called through the door. "Are you okay?" When I took too long to answer, the door handle turned, and I realized too late that I had forgotten to relock the door.

Panicked, I clutched the edge of the countertop and watched Bastian enter the

bathroom. He froze in the doorway, taking in my tear-filled eyes and trembling body.

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“It’s just nerves,” I whispered, my chest rising and falling with each too-fast breath.

Bastian scoffed and crossed the bathroom, eating up the space between us in two large strides. “You’re shaking like a leaf,” he said, wrapping his arms around me.

I tucked my face against the curve of his shoulder and inhaled his familiar woodsy scent. He rubbed slow, comforting circles over my back and nuzzled my neck.

I was vaguely aware of Gavin and Ash hanging back in the bedroom, but for the moment, I was perfectly happy to take the comfort Bastian offered. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on the gentle brush of Bastian’s lips and slightly prickly stubble over my neck, on his softly murmured reassurances. I gripped his shirt at his sides, pulling him closer. His lips moved from my neck to my jaw, and I angled my face toward his, letting him kiss me fully.

Bastian’s arms tightened around me as I opened my mouth to let him in, savoring his approving groan, then slackened, his hands settling on my hips. His fingers kneaded the swell of my ass, slowly inching the towel higher up my legs.

With a hoarse growl, he gripped my hips and lifted me, setting my ass on the counter and wedging himself between my legs. I hooked my ankles behind his thighs and pulled him closer, rubbing my needy center against the hard length of him pushing against his sweatpants. I wrapped my arms around his neck, twining my fingers through the soft, short curls at the nape of his neck, and moaned at the delicious, teasing sensation between my legs.

Suddenly, Bastian’s arms were around me again, and he lifted me off the counter. I

squeaked, holding on tight as he turned with me and carried me into the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed with me straddling his lap, and he let me take control of the kiss. But suddenly I wanted so much more than that.

Without breaking the kiss or even letting myself consider where this was leading, I reached down between our bodies and slid my hand into the waistband of his sweatpants, finding his hard length and pulling it free. His fingers dug into my hips, dragging me closer until my wet slit dragged across the bulging head of his cock.

I pushed his shoulders, wanting him to lie back on the bed so I could have my way with him. He complied, breaking the kiss and easing backward. I dug my nails into his shoulders and ground myself against him, not yet ready to give him what I knew he desperately wanted.

“Fuck, Sophie,” he moaned as I dragged my clit along his length, pleasuring myself even as I denied him. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

A second pair of hands brushed over my shoulders, then down my chest to unknot the towel. The thick terry cloth slipped off my body and fell away, and those new hands teased the undersides of my bare breasts as teeth glided over the crook of my neck.

I arched my back, tantalized by the promise of a bite. “Yes,” I hissed, angling my head further to the side, encouraging those teeth to dig in.

Gavin’s smooth chuckle cascaded over my skin a moment before he bit down, breaking the skin and freeing my blood. At that exact moment, Bastian angled the head of his cock against my needy entrance and filled my aching core with one hard thrust.

I gasped as the pleasure of being filled so suddenly merged with the thrill of the bite, awakening my darker hunger. Gavin released my neck almost as soon as his teeth dug

in, but the switch had been flipped. Bloodlust roared through my veins, amping up my sexual desires until I felt insatiable.

Ash stepped into my line of vision, standing beyond the far side of the bed, his eyes locked with mine as he stripped off his T-shirt, then set to work on his belt. I watched him as I rocked atop Bastian, craving the other immortal's hands on me as well. My earlier fear seemed ridiculous because, at that moment, I knew nothing would feel as right as being with my consorts—all of them at the same time.

Behind me, Gavin grazed his teeth up and down over my neck, teasing the bite wound and pausing every so often to lick up the leaking blood. His hand slid down my abdomen and dipped between my legs, his fingers expertly finding my clit.

“Mmm . . . yes,” I moaned, slowing my rocking hips to enjoy Gavin's circling fingers.

Ash's belt was unbuckled, and he quickly unfastened his pants, his stare roving over the scene before him. He kicked off his boots and pushed down his pants with one hand while he gripped his monster cock with the other. I licked my lips, recalling how that massive appendage had felt inside me, and I moved faster atop Bastian. Sensing my mounting climax, Gavin worked me harder, and the pleasure built higher and higher within me.

An orgasm ripped through me suddenly, my back bowing and my body shuddering. I closed my eyes, coasting along the blissful waves as Gavin and Bastian continued to play my body like expert musicians.

When the pleasure receded and Gavin moved his hand higher, to my belly, allowing semi-coherency to return to my lust-saturated mind, I opened my eyes to find Ash kneeling on the bed before me, at Bastian's shoulder, fully nude and pumping his hand along the length of his massive cock.

I grabbed for him greedily, replacing his hand with my own. His breath hissed through his teeth as I squeezed him, using my grip on him to pull him closer to me. He crawled forward and leaned in toward me, bringing his neck inches from my mouth, seeming to instinctively understand what I needed. His large hands settled on my ribcage, and he angled his thumbs upward over my breasts, flicking his thumbnails over my nipples.

Encouraged by the sharp caress, I grazed my teeth over Ash's neck, teasing only for a moment before digging in hard enough to break the skin. A deep groan rumbled through Ash's chest as I pulled his blood into me. My nerve endings electrified, his immortal blood heightening the senses of my mortal body. The pleasure of Bastian's cock filling me ratcheted up, ecstasy building within me once more.

Behind me, Gavin trailed a hand down my spine and grazed a fingertip lower, teasing between the cheeks of my ass. The sensation jolted through me, unexpectedly thrilling, and I pushed back against his finger as he focused his attention on a single point. I felt a warm wetness dripping down my crack, and the instant his fingertip, coated in the unexpected lubricant, pushed into my back hole and I felt the exponential heightening of sensations, I knew exactly what that wetness was: blood.

I tore my mouth away from Ash's shoulder as a second orgasm rocked my body. Gavin took advantage of my momentary bliss to add a second finger, stretching me. The waves of pleasure intensified, and I pushed back against him.

I whimpered when Bastian suddenly pulled out of me, sliding his body out from between my legs, but I couldn't do anything to stop him as I clutched onto Ash's shoulders, entranced as I was by the new sensations Gavin was drawing from my body. But suddenly, his fingers left me as well, and I felt empty without either of my immortals. I sagged against Ash, mourning the loss of feeling so deliciously full.

"Hold on, Sophie," Gavin said, and then I felt him nudging my back entrance with

something far thicker than a finger. More warm blood trickled down my crack, and I shuddered as sparklers of pleasure soaked into my skin. “Deep breaths,” he said, stroking gentle fingers along my spine. “Relax.”

“Fuck me, Gavin,” I panted, pressing back against him, and he slowly pushed into me. The pleasure of his immortal blood eased the pain of being stretched.

“Some help?” Gavin ground out.

Without hesitation, Ash crawled forward and rolled onto his back, angling his head directly between my legs. He dragged his tongue along my slit, then wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked.

“Fuck,” I moaned, my eyelids fluttering shut as Ash continued to suck my clit, flicking his tongue over the swollen bud.

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Flesh pressed against my lips. A wrist. Bastian's wrist, based on the woodsy scent. I immediately dug my teeth into his skin, releasing a gush of hot, sweet blood into my mouth, my taste buds exploding with rich blackberries and pine.

Apparently that was the distraction Gavin needed, because suddenly he was pushing deeper into me. He moved slowly, gently, giving my body time to adjust to this new intrusion. The immortal blood coating his cock soaked into my body, making me tingle and ache with sexual need in places I had never even considered erotic.

But I didn't want him to be slow and gentle. I wanted to be filled. Fucked. Devoured.

On his next careful withdrawal, when only his head was sheathed within me, I pushed backward against him, hard. Pleasure burst through my body, the sudden climax blotting out my vision with silver stars as I pulsed around Gavin's cock. Gavin clutched my hips tight, holding my ass flush against him. More of his hot, wet blood dripped down my crack.

Bastian's blood flowing down my throat ensured this orgasm would go on and on with minimal stimulation. It didn't stop when Ash pulled his head out from between my legs or when Gavin stood with me, buried to the hilt in my ass, his hands gripping the backs of my thighs. Eyes squeezed shut, I clutched onto Bastian's wrist and pulled more of his blood into me, riding the blissful waves.

But then another body moved in front of me, two larger hands replacing Gavin's on my thighs as a thick cock nudged my swollen, needy slit. My eyes snapped open as Ash thrust his blood-coated length into me. I stared into Ash's pale blue eyes, my breath stolen, my body pulsing with pleasure.

Sandwiched between these two immortals, their blood soaking into me from the core of my being while another immortal's blood filled my mouth, I hovered in a state of stunned euphoria. This was nirvana. The sole purpose of existing had to be to reach this state. To feel this blissfully good. I had never really considered sex a spiritual experience, but this was truly divine.

Lost to the bloodlust and bliss, I became a frenzied, greedy creature. I wanted more of each of them. I wanted all of them filling all of me. I couldn't get enough. I needed more—more of them, more immortals, more blood. More.

Grunting as Gavin and Ash thrust into me with savage synchronicity, I tore my mouth away from Bastian's wrist and craned my neck, seeking Gavin's throat. His blood was the only of my consorts' I had yet to take during this communion, and I craved his spiced chocolate taste. I knew, in my soul, that I wouldn't be satisfied until his blood flowed through me, too.

I struck like a predator, sinking my teeth into Gavin's flesh until his delicious blood filled my mouth.

"Fuck, that's hot," Bastian groaned.

I moaned, power swirling in my chest, like the blood from my immortals had formed a whirlwind around my heart. It swelled, fueled by my pleasure and by that of my consorts. Bigger and bigger, the whirlwind grew until I was full to bursting, not just in the core of my being, but at the root of my soul. The bliss escalated to a mind-shattering intensity, and it could no longer be contained.

With nowhere else to go, the power exploded out of me, overwhelming my senses with pure ecstasy unlike anything I had ever felt before. Gasping, I pulled my mouth away from Gavin's throat as intense spasms of euphoria racked my body.

Between one thudding heartbeat and the next, a brilliant, silver glow burst out of me, showering the bedroom in moonlight. Gavin let out a guttural groan and buried himself in me, clutching me close. Ash thrust his hips forward, slamming into me until I saw stars, and he collapsed against us.

“Fuck,” Bastian moaned, and I felt his stubbled cheek press against my hip.

I let my head loll to the side on Gavin’s shoulder to see that Bastian had dropped to his knees, his cock fisted in his hand, his release spurting across his thigh. Bastian dragged his lips across my hip, taking what piece of me he could get.

Slowly, gently, Ash lowered my legs to the floor, his spent erection sending aftershocks of ecstasy shooting through my body as it brushed over my overstimulated clit. I shuddered in Gavin’s hold, my legs trembling. Ash leaned forward, pressing his lips to my forehead.

“Go clean up and meet us in the sitting room,” Gavin murmured. And then he scooped me up, an arm under my knees, the other curled around my shoulders, and he carried me into the bathroom.

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My eyes drifted shut, and I rested my head on his shoulder, listening to the sound of running water and feeling the kiss of rising steam. He was filling the tub, I realized. Minutes later, he sank into the wickedly hot water, pulling me into the bathtub with him. He situated me so I was lying with my back to his chest, my hips nestled between his legs.

His lips brushed against my neck, over the open bite wounds that were now purely sore, no hint of pleasure. I whimpered at the shock of pain, but a moment later, a tingling warmth melted it away as his blood healed my wounds.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Gavin chuckled. “I should be the one thanking you,” he said, the low rumble of his voice vibrating against my back. “You were spectacular.”

My cheeks flamed. “I’ve never done that,” I confessed. “What you did to me, I mean. I’ve never . . .”

Gavin brushed his lips over my freshly healed skin, sending goosebumps cascading down my arms. “Did you like it?”

I huffed out a guffaw and craned my neck to meet his eyes. “You’re kidding, right?”

Gavin’s lips curved into a pure, sweet smile, and he pressed his mouth to mine in a brief, gentle kiss. Pulling away, he reached for a washcloth and plunged it through the velvety bubbles covering the surface of the water. “How do you feel?”

I turned my thoughts inward, focusing on the hum in my blood. “Electrified,” I admitted.

“Good,” he said as he ran the sudsy cloth down my arms and over my breasts, the contact against my nipples making my eyelashes flutter. He washed my belly and moved over my hips and down my thighs, moving inward as he made the return trip up my legs. I winced when he reached my sex. The immortal blood they had used as lubricant had protected my tender inner flesh, but my outer lips and clit were definitely sore.

With a low growl, Gavin raised one hand to his mouth. He bit into his wrist, then submerged the open wound under the bubbles, turning the bathwater a rosy pink and filling the room with the rich scent of his blood. “Give it a few minutes for the blood to soak in.”

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“You didn’t have to do that,” I told him. “I’m just a little sore. It’s fine.”

Gavin relaxed behind me, one hand draped across my middle, the other arm propped up on the side of the tub, but his death grip on the washcloth expressed how much he disagreed with my assessment of the situation. It was as though he took my every discomfort as a personal affront.

I rested my head back on his shoulder once more. “The shower worked,” I said, watching his profile out of the corner of my eye. “I understand the dream now.”

“And?” he asked, drawing slow circles around my navel with a lone fingertip.

“They’re all there in the same dungeon—Javier, Thane, and the queens—just like I saw in the dream,” I said. “I don’t know how I know it, but it just feels right.”

Gavin’s hand stilled. “And the part about not being able to save everyone?”

I sighed. “If we rescue Javier and Thane, the queens will starve,” I said. “The shifters are too proud to feed the queens their own blood. They’ve been using Javier to sustain their captives’ blood needs, and now they’re using Thane as well. That’s why he’s even still alive.”

Gavin blew out a breath, and his finger continued making lazy circuits around my belly button. “So we have to leave an undead behind to feed the queens, or we rescue every one of our people Veris is holding prisoner.”

“I promised Ash we would rescue Thane,” I murmured, my voice small, “but I can’t

leave Javier there, not when he's been held prisoner for so long." My chin trembled. "I don't know what to do. I can't choose one over the other."

Gavin was quiet for a long moment. "You won't have to."

I turned partway, sloshing soapy pink water against the sides of the tub. "You want to try breaking them all out of there?"

"Something like that," he said, his hand skimming lower on my belly until his fingers glided between my legs. "How do you feel now?" There was no hint of soreness as his fingertips skimmed the length of my lips, sliding back up to graze my clit.

"Fine," I said, the word coming out breathy. I made a tiny whimper when he delved that fingertip under the hood of my clit and touched that raw bundle of nerves.

"Still a little tender, I see," he said matter-of-factly.

He withdrew his hand and brought it up to his mouth once more, this time biting into the tip of his middle finger. His free hand ventured under the water, gliding down my belly to delve between my legs, one finger settling on either side of my clit. He pulled back on the hood, fully exposing my most sensitive of places, and reached between my legs with his other hand to press his bleeding finger against my unprotected clit.

I gasped, arching against him as his immortal blood seeped into raw, exposed nerves. "Holy shit," I said, suddenly shivering despite the warm water. I grabbed Gavin's wrist, but his arms were like iron bars, absolutely immovable.

"We have to make sure the blood soaks in," he murmured, stroking his bitten fingertip back and forth over my exposed clit.

I squeezed my eyelids shut, feeling the pleasure rapidly coiling tighter and tighter

within me.

“Just a little more,” he whispered, grazing his teeth over the sensitive, newly healed skin on my neck. “I won’t have anyone accusing me of neglecting my queen.”

“I’m going to come, Gavin,” I panted. “I’m going to come.”

He bit down on my neck, not enough to break the skin, but enough to remind me of the thrill I felt while he tasted my blood.

The pleasure snapped within me like a whip crack, and I groaned, my hips rising to press my clit more firmly against his fingertip. Waves of delicious ecstasy spread out from my core, not fueled by bloodlust or immortal blood, but pure and brief.

As the pleasure waned and Gavin withdrew his hands from between my legs, I melted back against him, my body going boneless. “That was unexpected,” I said, my tone wistful.

Gavin’s increasingly familiar chuckle vibrated through me, but it ended in a sigh. “We should get out and dry off,” he said. “The others are sure to be waiting.”

Resigning myself to the inevitable, I sat forward and let him stand and climb out of the tub first, then placed my hand in his and accepted his help in pulling me up to my feet.

Fun time was over. It was time to prepare for battle.

41

“We’ll portal in through the Forks gate,” Gavin said, leaning forward over the map on the coffee table in his sitting room. He pointed to the Washington town that had been

made famous by a fictional story about sparkling vampires.

Little did the people of Forks—or the rest of the world, for that matter—know that beautiful, immortal, blood-drinking creatures were real, and regardless of an undead vampire’s morals or ethics, these immortals absolutely could not survive on animal blood. Only mortal human blood—or a vampire queen’s blood—would keep an undead vampire alive.

“That one won’t work,” Bastian said, and I twisted in my seat to see the lone shifter in my harem standing behind my armchair, his forearms crossed over his broad chest. “We—they—know about the Forks gate. The Sun Watch monitors it. They’ll know the second we step out of the portal.”

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“Hmmm,” Gavin murmured, drawing my attention back to him and the map on the low table. He sat in the armchair at the opposite end of the coffee table, with Ash seated on the sofa arranged along the length of the table. Gavin stared at the pin stuck through the map and into the table, marking the location of the Sun Keep in the northern part of a massive rainforest on the Olympic peninsula.

According to Bastian, the Sun Keep was a mostly underground facility, which was why human hikers never stumbled across it, and apparently why Gavin and the rest of my people could not launch a successful assault on the stronghold.

“What about Sequim?” Ash suggested, pointing to the peninsula’s northern coast.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Bastian shaking his head.

“Aberdeen?” Gavin asked, and I was still looking at Bastian when he again shook his head.

“Olympia?” Ash said, only to receive another head shake. The names of a few more western Washington towns were offered, all met with a headshake.

“Then we’re looking at Eastern Washington or Oregon. That’s six hours in a car, minimum,” Gavin said, lifting his stare from the map to glance at me. “I don’t like the idea of having Sophie out in the open and unwarded for so long.”

“Well, if that’s our primary concern, why don’t we portal straight into the gate in the Sun Keep?” Bastian suggested.

I turned in my chair, pulling one leg up onto the seat.

“That’s suicide,” Ash grumbled.

“Assuming you’re still holding Silas alive, you can get the ward code for the gate from him,” Bastian said.

A dip of Gavin’s chin confirmed that Silas, whoever that was, was still alive.

“We’ll still have to deal with the guards at the gate,” Bastian continued, “but at least we won’t be incinerated by the ward when we pass through the portal.”

I frowned, considering his words. Silas had to be the shifter who had just made it through the portal to the Moon Sanctuary right before the magical gateway closed.

“Why would he give us the ward code?” I asked, looking from Bastian to Gavin to Ash, then back at Bastian. “Torture?”

“No, Soph,” Bastian said, uncrossing his arms and gripping the corners of my chairback, his lips curving into a slow, wolfish grin. “Silas will give up the ward code because you are going to make him.”

I blinked, then widened my eyes, my lips parting. “Oh,” I said, realizing what he meant. He was talking about me using my will on Silas. “I don’t know how.” I shook my head. “What if I can’t do it?”

“You can,” Bastian assured me. “You used your will on me.” He looked past me to Gavin. “And on him.”

“Yeah, but I was mad at you,” I countered, glancing at Gavin. “At both of you. It just sort of happened.”

“Well, then,” Bastian started. When I looked at him again, there was a wicked glint in his eyes. “I guess we’ll have to get you riled up.”

I scoffed, turning back toward Gavin and the map, planting both feet on the floor and crossing my arms over my chest. I hated being the linchpin in a plan. “And then what?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. “I’m assuming you have some way to incapacitate the guards once we’re through the portal?” Maybe we could toss grenades through ahead of us or something like that.

Gavin nodded once.

“Okay, so we get through the portal and into the Sun Keep, then we take out the guards,” I said. “What’s next?”

“There are four dungeons down in the deepest level of the keep, one at each cardinal direction and each only accessible from the top level,” Gavin explained, his focus shifting past me to confirm his intel with Bastian. “According to your shifter, the Sun Watch keeps all of their prisoners in one dungeon. They rotate which dungeon is in use every month for ward maintenance and as an added protection measure. The new dungeon is chosen at random. The rotation would have happened yesterday, which means Silas won’t know where the prisoners are being held.” He paused, letting that info sink in. “We need you to guide us to the correct dungeon.”

I opened my mouth to respond but closed it again without saying anything. I had demanded to be involved in the rescue mission after all. No backing out now.

“How many shifters are stationed in the keep at any given time?” Gavin asked Bastian.

“And are there families?” I asked, glancing back at Bastian. “Or is it just warriors?”

Bastian shrugged one shoulder. “Two hundred . . . ish. All warriors, no kids,” he said. “The gate is on level one—that’s the first underground level. Most of the Sun Watch will be stationed up there since the only way to the lower levels is through them. The next most occupied level is three—the barracks. It’s going to be hard to get through level one on the way in, but it’s going to be nearly impossible to get back to the gate on the way out.”

Gavin smirked. “We’re not portaling out.”

Bastian narrowed his eyes, angling his head to the side. “Then how . . .?”

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Gavin sat back in his chair, carefully placing his forearms on the armrests. “Why did they build the Sun Keep there? Why that location? And why underground?”

Tired of twisting around and craning my neck to follow the conversation, I stood and moved to stand closer to the fireplace so I could see all three of my immortals.

“Something about the minerals in the earth.” Bastian shook his head. “I don’t know all the details.”

“Manganese,” Gavin said. “It amplifies shifter power and reduces the effects of the curse.”

“They used to mine manganese around there,” Bastian said, nodding slowly like Gavin’s info dredged up some old knowledge. “Some of the tunnels run beneath the keep, but they’re flooded—on purpose—and rigged to flood the dungeons if needed. Mostly the Sun Watch just uses controlled flooding to clean the cells between rotations.” Bastian glanced at me, then down at the chair in front of him, his fingers digging into the padding as his shame rang loud and clear through our bond. “But they’ve been known to use the floodwaters to threaten or punish prisoners as well.”

Gavin let out a harrumph, looking like he wasn’t remotely surprised.

Bastian cleared his throat and straightened. “The old mine shafts are sealed and warded, both at the surface and down where they run under the dungeons.”

“The surface seals won’t be a problem,” Gavin said. “I hired a human mining company years ago to dig nearby. A few months back, they connected with the old

mine shafts and were able to map those out. Once we're out of the dungeon, we'll easily be able to find our way to the new tunnels and up to the surface, far away from anywhere the Sun Watch knows to look."

Bastian's brows rose as Gavin spoke. "Okay. But the only way into the tunnels would be through the flood hatches, and if you open those . . ." The dungeon will flood, hung unsaid in the room. "I don't know how to reseal the hatches," Bastian added, sounding defeated. "There must be a lever or . . ." Again, he shook his head.

"It shouldn't matter," Ash said. "Once we get everyone out of the dungeon, why not let the whole place flood? That'll keep the bastards distracted."

I raised my hand, and one by one, the immortals turned their attention to me. "So, are we bringing scuba gear?" I asked, voicing my main concern with the plan. The undead vampires breathed so infrequently they could hold their breath for hours, and Bastian could shift into a water creature. But I would drown. "Because I can't breathe underwater," I reminded them. "And neither can the other queens."

"We have a device for you," Gavin said. "A tankless breathing mask. You'll be fine until we reach the surface."

"But—" I stalled, shaking my head. "What if the queens can't swim? I mean, Javier was in rough shape in my dream, and the queens didn't look much better."

"Fresh immortal blood should give them the temporary boost they need to make it out." Gavin exchanged a look with Ash, who nodded, silently acquiescing to donate some of his precious immortal blood as well. Gavin returned his attention to me. "The queens won't be a problem."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Okay, but why don't we just go in that way?"

“The hatches can’t be opened from the outside,” Bastian explained. “You’d have to blow them up, but then you’d risk killing everyone in the dungeon above.”

My brow furrowed. “Oh, well then . . .” I licked my lips. “I guess you guys’ve thought of everything.” And here I had been hoping to delay with a few more hours of planning. I looked at each of them, settling on Gavin. “When do we leave?”

Gavin stood. “As soon as we get the ward code from Silas and prep the team.” He gestured toward the door to the hallway. “Whenever you’re ready, Sophie.”

Taking a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders. The time for talk was over. It was time to actually do something. My stomach twisted as I headed for the door, mentally preparing myself to use my powers of coercion on purpose for the first time ever.

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Our own dungeons weren’t much better than what I had seen of Javier and Thane’s accommodations in the dream. I wrinkled my nose in disgust as I followed Gavin and Ash through a heavily warded door on the mansion’s main level and my nostrils were accosted by the stench of unwashed bodies and old, dried blood. At least it didn’t stink like an outhouse. Perhaps we were humane enough to include toilets in our dungeon cells, unlike the House of the Sun who, if my dream was accurate, had gone the bucket route where waste management was concerned.

I attempted to put the rank odor out of my head and psych myself up for the task at hand. I wanted to find Javier and Thane more than anything. The Sun Watch was holding them prisoner, which really pissed me off. I held on to that anger. Fostered it. Felt the need to find them become all-consuming.

We descended a long staircase and entered a wide corridor lined on either side by cell doors. Bastian’s arm curved around my back, settling on my hip in gentle reassurance.

I offered him a distracted smile, and his fingers gave me a gentle squeeze.

We passed empty cell after empty cell until, finally, we reached one that was occupied. Even in the shadows, I recognized the shifter lying on the narrow cot from the encounter in the graveyard.

Gavin rapped his knuckles on the bars before fitting a large, old-fashioned iron key covered in tiny glowing markings into the lock, which also displayed a small, luminous silver sigil. “On your feet, shifter,” Gavin ordered, pulling the cell door open on creaking hinges.

Silas raised his head, his eyes reflective like a cat’s in the darkness as he scanned our group.

Ash stalked into the cell and grabbed Silas’s arm, hoisting the shifter up to his feet. He wrenched the smaller man’s arms behind his back, securing them in his iron grip.

Silas tugged against Ash’s hold for a few seconds but quickly seemed to realize that fighting the hulking vampire was futile. As the shifter settled down, he glared at each of us, though Bastian received most of his ire.

“Traitor!” Silas spat, curling his lip.

Bastian’s hand clenched and relaxed on my hip, and I sensed his conflicted emotions.

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I looked at Bastian fully, raising one hand to press my palm against his cheek and turn his attention toward me. I poured as much love and respect as I could through my gaze, hoping he could feel how much I appreciated him. How much I needed him.

Bastian closed his eyes and bowed his head, and I felt him relax beside me.

“She must have a magical cunt,” Silas said snidely. “I hope fucking her is worth the betrayal of your entire fucking people.”

Bastian stiffened, then took a step toward the cell door. His chest heaved, rage making his heart race.

Gavin sidestepped into the opening, blocking Bastian’s path to the other shifter. “Go wait upstairs,” Gavin ordered.

“That’s right, traitor,” Silas said, sneering. “Be a good dog and listen to your new master.”

Riled up by the other shifter’s words, Bastian pressed forward against Gavin, his expression murderous. “Let me through,” he growled.

I reached for Bastian, curling my fingers around his arm, just above his elbow. “Go upstairs, Bas,” I said, pissed off beyond reason at the way the other shifter had played on Bastian’s emotions.

His jaw clenched and unclenched, but he made no move to step down.

“We need him,” I whispered, a trace of my will making the hushed words echo throughout the dungeon. “Go upstairs.”

Bastian bowed his head, finally taking a backward step. He glared past Gavin at the other shifter for another few seconds, then turned and stalked up the corridor toward the stairs.

Gavin and I watched him go, my hands balling into tight fists. When Bastian was out of sight, I turned back to the cell, shimmering with anger. “Move, please,” I told Gavin, my hushed voice still echoing with power.

Jaw clenched, Gavin angled his body sideways, leaving me just enough room to pass.

I marched into the cell, pulled back my arm, and slapped the smug sneer off the shifter’s face. “He is a better man than you could ever hope to be,” I hissed as Ash forced Silas to stand up straight. “At least he can live with betraying his people because it was his choice. Because it was the right thing to do.” I tilted my head to the side, studying Silas’s wary expression. “I wonder how you’ll cope with what you’re about to do?”

Silas’s sneer returned, but there was fear in his eyes. “And what’s that?”

“You’re going to tell me the ward code to get through the portal gate into the Sun Keep,” I said sweetly.

He shook his head, his sneer melting away. “I would never do that.”

The power pulsed within me, wanting to get out. Wanting to make him confess the truth. “Tell me the ward code to get through the portal gate into the Sun Keep,” I repeated, my will ringing through my voice.

The shifter bared his teeth, more of a grimace than a threat. He resisted for pained seconds but finally cracked his jaw open. "I need my hands free to show you," he said, tugging against Ash's hold.

Gavin stepped in front of me, having silently entered the cell, and used his body as a physical shield between me and the shifter. "Go ahead," he told Ash with a single nod of his head.

Ash released the shifter, and Silas immediately clawed a fingernail down his own forearm. Blood welled in the deep cut, and my mouth watered, my bloodlust rising to the bait. With my will unleashed, I felt raw and exposed. I licked my lips and curled my fingers into tight fists, digging my nails into my palms. Now was definitely not the time to give in to my urges, but those urges were damn persistent.

Surprisingly, there was no sexual component to the dark hunger. I didn't want this immortal. I just wanted his blood. And I wanted it bad.

As Silas coated his finger in the welling blood and drew on the wall, my breaths came faster, my muscles trembling against my conscious restraint.

Gavin peered at me sidelong, a low growl rumbling in his chest. His bloodlust was rising to the call of mine. Suddenly, my desire transferred to him, and I was no longer interested in just blood. I wanted Gavin's blood and his body. I needed him. Now.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, tears welling as I fought the need to lunge at Gavin. "I don't think I can—" I drew in a shuddering breath, the air carrying the rich scent of immortal blood. "I need to—"

"Take her out," Ash said. "I can finish here."

Gavin grabbed my arm, his expression fierce, his eyes on fire with silver light. He

pushed me backward through the cell door, then across the way to the wall on the opposite side of the corridor. My back hit the wall, and Gavin released my arm, moving his hand to my neck to gently tilt my head to the side. He pressed the length of his body against mine and grazed his teeth over the crook of my neck, and I shivered at the delicious sensation.

“You need to learn control,” he said, the words laced with a growl. He dug his teeth into my flesh, careful not to break the skin, teasing a bite. “I look forward to teaching you.”

And then he pulled away from my neck and raised his arm, tearing into his own wrist. He pressed the open wound to my mouth, and I moaned as his chocolate and spices flavor glided over my tongue. This was what I wanted. What I needed.

Too soon, though, Gavin pulled his wrist away, replacing it with his mouth. His kiss was brutal and savage, and I loved it.

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I felt his hands tugging on the waistband of my jeans a moment before it loosened. He gripped either side of my unzipped fly and yanked his hands apart, using his vampire strength to viciously tear my jeans along the seam. With another yank, he shredded my underwear. A heartbeat later, his hands were gripping my thighs, lifting me and guiding my legs around his hips. The head of his hard length nudged my slick sex, and I dug my nails into his shoulders, urging him on.

I gasped into his mouth as he thrust into me, ramming my lower back against the wall with bruising intensity. The rough force was exactly what I needed, the harsh sensation drowning out the lackluster setting until every sense was filled with Gavin, with his taste and his scent and his sounds. With the feel of him taking me. Pressure and pleasure twisted in my core, building with brutal intensity, climbing to incredible heights.

As Gavin pounded into me, he broke the kiss and tilted his head to the side, offering me his neck. I struck without hesitation, digging my teeth into his flesh until the skin broke and more of his intoxicating blood gushed into my mouth. Blissful oblivion exploded from the core of my being, and I tore my mouth away from his neck, letting my head fall back against the wall as the pleasure carried me away.

Gavin's thrust grew shorter, and he lost his rhythm until, at last, he buried himself inside me and stayed there, groaning out his release.

Our ragged breaths merged, and Gavin rested his forehead against mine. "Apologies," he breathed, lowering my legs to the floor. He cleared his throat. Or maybe it was a weak chuckle. "You're going to need a change of clothes."

A breathy laugh escaped from my mouth, and I buried my face against his shoulder, my cheeks suddenly flaming. How was I going to get back up to the residential wing to swap out my pants? Talk about a walk of shame.

Gavin made a low, rough sound, and his body shifted as he craned his neck to peer back into the cell. “Move him to another cell,” Gavin said. “I don’t want him messing with the sigil.”

“Of course,” Ash agreed, a hint of strain in his voice. “I’ll wait for you here.”

How hard had it been for Ash to stand by while we gave in to our baser instincts? The man had an iron will. But then, this was all part of the mission to rescue someone he loved, and I supposed there was no greater motivation than that.

In one smooth motion, Gavin scooped me up like I weighed nothing at all and cradled me against his body as he carried me toward the stairs. I kept my face buried against his shoulder, perfectly happy to hide on the way up to change my clothes.

I refused to let my body’s needs control me again, even if giving in to those needs was immensely pleasurable. As Gavin carried me upstairs, I silently vowed to make learning how to control my bloodlust my number one priority. Gavin had said he would help me—teach me—and I fully intended to take him up on that offer.

I smiled against his shirt, absolutely certain these were lessons I would really, really enjoy learning.

43

Bastian and I sat at the kitchen island together, Bastian scarfing down the breakfast burritos on the plate in front of him like they were the last ones in the world, while I picked at mine. I knew I should eat. There was no telling what we would face in the

Sun Keep, and I would need my strength for the swim out, if for nothing else, but nerves twisted my stomach into knots and banished my appetite. I just hoped all the immortal blood I had taken in the last few hours would sustain me—because as far as my stomach was concerned, the breakfast burrito wasn't even food.

Gavin and Ash were gathering the small team of guardian vampires who would accompany us and making the final preparations for our rescue mission.

A shimmering mist appeared on the opposite side of the island, and I gave up all pretense of eating as I watched Wes coalesce into his semiopaque silver form. I sat up straighter, and beside me, Bastian lowered a half-eaten breakfast burrito onto his plate and peered around the kitchen.

"It's Wes," I murmured.

Bastian became very still, his attention locking onto the place where the ghost stood a few feet away despite the fact that he couldn't actually see Wes.

Once Wes's form had gained definition, he grinned at me. "Micah's waking up, Soph," he said excitedly. "I know you're about to leave, but I thought maybe you could introduce us before—"

"Of course!" I blurted, pushing my stool back and standing. I took three steps, stopping when I heard the scrape of Bastian's stool legs on the floor behind me. "You should stay here," I told him, turning partway to find Bastian starting to stand. "Finish eating. Micah's awake. I'm just going to see how he's doing." I smiled giddily and glanced at Wes, who was rounding the end of the island, then looked back at Bastian. "I'll be fine."

Only when Bastian eased back down onto his stool, his expression uneasy, did I turn away from him and continue out of the kitchen. Wes fell in step beside me, and his

hand found mine, our fingers lacing together like he hadn't died two decades ago. Like we were still those lost kids who found a home in each other.

A thrill rushed through me. Wes was really here. Dead, but not.

"That is so fucking weird," I heard Bastian murmur as Wes and I left the kitchen.

I glanced sideways at Wes as we entered the hallway to the front of the house. "Don't mind Bas," I told him. "He's just looking out for me."

"I know," Wes said, squeezing my hand. "You're brighter than you were before."

My eyebrows rose, and my lips twitched. "I'm assuming you don't mean that I suddenly got smarter?"

Wes shook his head, his lips curving into a crooked smile. "You have a glow, like an inner glow," he explained. "I couldn't see it until, well, you know, I died. It faded over the years until it was barely perceptible, but after you first met Gavin at the club, you shone brighter than I had ever seen you. But now . . ." He scanned me. "You're like the sun compared to a candle." Again, he shook his head. "It's the vampires, isn't it? Their blood?"

My cheeks burned, and I stared ahead, thinking about what exactly was responsible for my inner glow. "Immortal blood," I clarified, not looking at him. "So, Bas counts, too." I cleared my throat. "Exactly how much did my sister tell you about my, uh, needs?"

"Everything," Amaya chirped from my other side.

I jumped about a foot off the floor and scrambled sideways into the hallway wall, pulling my hand from Wes's in the process.

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My permanently pubescent sister giggled. “He knows all about the sex, the blood, and the rock and roll,” she said, punctuating the last with a series of lewd hip thrusts. The sight was both disturbing and comical, but mostly it was just mortifying.

I buried my face in my hands and huddled against the wall, hiding from both of them.

“Soph,” Wes said, his voice soft. “It’s what you are.” His fingers curled around my wrists, and he pulled my hands away from my face. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’m not mad or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. You’ve been fading—dying—for years, but now that you have what you need, it’s like you’re more alive than ever. How could I be bothered by that?” After a moment’s hesitation, he added, “I just wish there was a way for me to be a part of it, too.”

My blush flamed hotter at the thought, and I wished he wasn’t holding my wrists so I could hide again. “Me too,” I whispered, my heart hammering. Wes was technically immortal now, I supposed, but he didn’t have a physical body, which meant he didn’t have the blood I required. Much as I wanted him in my harem, it was impossible.

With a sigh, Wes released my wrists and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me in for one of his trademark bearhugs. His touch was charged, like a faint current ran through him, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. He kissed the top of my head, then replaced his lips with his cheek. “Let’s go see our boy,” he breathed.

Tears welled in my eyes. Our boy. Those words spoken in his voice were enough to undo me completely. I nodded, still wrapped up in his hold.

Wes pulled back, releasing me, and reclaimed my hand. Behind him, Amaya mimed

making out with the back of her hand. I rolled my eyes at her, and she giggled. And then, in a blink, she vanished.

I sniffled and wiped under my eyes. Wes and I walked the rest of the way in silence, and when we reached the foyer, I let go of his hand. "Let me talk to him first," I said, my voice hushed. "I don't want to give him a heart attack."

"Course," Wes said, hanging back even though it was unnecessary. Micah wouldn't be able to see Wes unless I was touching him.

I paused a few steps from the doorway to the infirmary, took a deep breath, then continued on.

Micah was propped up in his recovery bed while Greta, the vampire healer, stood at his bedside, measuring his blood pressure.

"Sophie," Micah said, glancing at the vampire beside him, then refocusing on me. "I didn't die." His lips curved into that boyish grin he had inherited from Wes. "I thought I was a goner for sure, but . . ."

Relief flooded me, and I smiled shakily, tears welling anew. "No, you didn't die," I agreed. "How's he doing?" I asked Greta.

She removed the blood pressure cuff with aripof velcro, her lips curving into a warm smile. "His vitals look great," she said. "Another few days of rest, and he'll be good as new." She placed the cuff on the counter, then started for the door. "I'll give you two a moment."

I nodded to Greta as she passed, then approached Micah's bed, only hesitating for a moment before gathering his hand in both of mine. "I'm so,so glad you're okay," I told him.

“Me too,” he said.

“Micah,” I started, the words feeling too thick for my throat. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Oh, yeah?” Micah glanced around the room, despite it seemingly being just the two of us.

I nodded and met his trusting stare. “Do you remember when we were in the elevator heading down to that basement and I saw my sister?”

“The ghost?” he clarified.

I nodded, licking my lips. “Well, it turns out she’s not the only ghost who’s been hanging around me.”

Micah’s brows rose. “Oh?”

“The, um, photo you found in my wallet . . .” My voice caught.

“Of you and your boyfriend when you were teenagers?”

I nodded. “Of me and your dad,” I said. “His name is Wes.” I glanced toward the doorway as Wes entered the room. “And he’s here,” I added, holding my hand out for Wes to take.

“Holy shit!” Micah exclaimed the moment Wes’s hand touched mine. Micah shifted on his bed so he could sit up straighter. “Holy shit,” he repeated, staring at Wes, who now stood beside me, holding my hand.

“I’ve been watching you,” Wes said, then cringed. “That sounded way less creepy in

my head.”

I gave his fingers a squeeze and offered him an encouraging nod and smile.

Wes cleared his throat. “What I meant was, I was there when you were born, and I watched over you as you grew up. Made sure the Mitchels treated you right.”

“They did,” Micah said. “Theydo.”

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Wes nodded. “I know.” His lips curved into a shaky smile. “And I’m—we’re so glad that you have a great family.” Wes’s chin trembled, his composure cracking. “If things had been different, if I hadn’t been so stupid and gotten myself killed, I think we could have been a great family too, but . . .” Wes bowed his head, choking on his words. His shoulders jumped with silent sobs.

I squeezed his hand tighter but kept my attention on Micah, who wasn’t looking much better than Wes, with tears streaming down his cheeks. “We never left you,” I said, my voice thick. “We couldn’t take care of you, but we loved you the best we could, considering.” I screwed up my face and took a shuddering breath. “I hope you know that.”

Micah let out a coughing sob and curled forward, burying his face in his hands. He had been so strong through all the insane revelations so far, but apparently this was the one that broke him. I dropped onto the edge of his bed and wrapped my arms around him, pulling him closer. A moment later, Wes did the same, embracing us both.

For most of my life, I had felt alone. I had lost everyone who mattered—my mom and sister, my guardian, my boyfriend, and my son. But suddenly, I was reclaiming those lost pieces of myself. Those lost people. Micah knew me. Amaya and Wes were with me. And there was a good chance that soon, I would have Javier back as well.

I held onto my family—my family—and silently thanked the goddess above for helping me find my way home.

I stood between Gavin and Bastian in the cemetery, Ash at my back, and watched the elemental murmur an incantation that would open a new portal in the Moon Sanctuary Gate. It was the same mundane-looking iron gate that had anchored the portal that had brought us here. Goddess, was that really only two days ago? I couldn't help but wonder what made this a mystical anchor point and not merely a regular old gate. Could any gate be used as such? Or was the very iron imbued with magical properties I couldn't see and didn't understand?

The elemental's incantation gradually rose from a murmur to a near shout. She extended her arms out in front of her, slowly moving her right arm in a clockwise, circular motion. The air in front of the gate grew fuzzy and distorted, and ever so slowly, a dark vortex formed, spinning relative to the motion of the elemental's hand. Streaks of dark energy shot out of the vortex like miniature black bolts of lightning. As the elemental's arm motions grew more exaggerated, the size of the vortex increased.

I glanced around at the waiting immortals. Along with Gavin and Ash, seven more vampires fanned out in our little patch of the ancient, sacred graveyard, all decked out in black tactical gear and armed with both ordinary and enchanted weapons. Bastian stood at my side, his barely contained tension seeming to agitate the air around him.

I peered over my shoulder. More had wanted to come, and those who hadn't been chosen for the rescue mission watched from the lawn down at the bottom of the hill, nearer to the mansion. Remotely, I wondered if the Sun Keep was the only immortal facility with extensive underground levels because, despite the Moon Sanctuary's size, I simply couldn't imagine how that many people could call this their home without having some of its own.

A crackle reached my ears, and the air suddenly felt charged with energy. I returned

my attention to the portal, which now seethed with a barely contained storm. I was supposed to voluntarily walk into that maelstrom? It was all I could do not to cower and retreat.

Bastian curved an arm around my waist, and Ash settled one large hand on my shoulder, my consorts apparently picking up on my unease.

My heart raced with a mixture of fear and anticipation. Somewhere on the other side of that portal, Javier, the man who had shaped my life in so many ways, who had loved me and protected me when I had no one else, was waiting for me. I had spent so long mourning his loss, so long believing I would never see him again. But now, with the chance to save him within my grasp, I felt a renewed sense of purpose coursing through my veins. I squared my shoulders, squashing my fear. I would find him, no matter the cost. I would bring him home.

The elemental lowered her arms and turned around, finding Gavin in the small crowd. “It’s done,” she said, her chin elevated.

“And the gate ward?” Gavin asked, his arms crossed over his chest, neither impressed nor intimidated by the open portal.

“I’ll enter the ward code right before you pass through,” she said. “They’ll sense it and will expect incoming travelers.” Her level stare told me she wasn’t the least bit cowed by Gavin’s domineering presence, and I wondered how long she had been working with, or for, the House of the Moon. “I’m assuming you have a plan to take care of whoever awaits you on the other side,” she said. Not a question exactly.

Gavin turned his head to look at another of the vampires, one whose name I didn’t know. Gavin nodded once at the other man. The vampire he had singled out stepped forward, along with two others, and all three approached the open portal. Each raised both hands and uncurled their fingers to reveal a subtly glowing orb about the size of

a golf ball on each of their palms, one orb red and one purple.

The elemental looked shaken, her unflappable expression faltering as she took three stumbling steps to the side. She quickly regained her composure, halting her retreat, and looked from the glowing orbs to me and back. “Hypnos gas?” Her eyes were wild, and she licked her lips. “She’s mortal. You’ll kill her,” she warned. “Just one breath of that, and she’ll be dead.”

Eyes widening, I looked from the frightened elemental to the stoic vampire. But before I could ask Gavin what she meant, he pulled what appeared to be a pair of svelte gas masks from a hook on his tactical vest and handed one to me, then held the other out to Bastian.

I accepted the mask automatically, but Bastian stared at his mask for several long seconds.

“It won’t kill the other shifters,” Gavin told Bastian.

Bastian begrudgingly took the mask. “But it’ll make them wish they were dead.”

Gavin shrugged one shoulder, unconcerned. “Not my problem.” Now that his hands were free, he reclaimed my mask and slipped it on over my head, carefully tightening the straps that wrapped around the back of my head. “How does it feel?” he asked me, giving the lower strap at the base of my skull a gentle tug, then resting his hand on the crook of my shoulder.

“Tight,” I told him. I could barely move my jaw to talk, and my peripheral vision had been cut down to basically nothing.

Gavin’s eyes locked with mine, and he nodded once. “Good,” he said. “Do not take this off until I say so.” He glanced at the elemental. “She spoke the truth. The

gaswillkill you.” His stare returned to mine. “Do you understand?”

I didn’t want to die, so yeah, I got it. I nodded.

Gavin brushed the pad of his thumb over his mark on my throat, almost like he was imagining kissing me there. “Stay with her,” he murmured, looking first at Ash, then at Bastian.

“Obviously,” Bastian said, his mask in place on his head. He took hold of my hand, threading his thicker fingers between mine.

“Until death,” Ash swore, shifting closer so the front of him was flush with the back of me. His large hands settled possessively on my hips. I was nervous enough that, for once, the contact was more comforting than exciting.

Gavin removed his hand from my shoulder and turned away from me, scanning the assembled vampires. “Deep breath and hold it,” he ordered.

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I felt Ash's chest rise against my shoulder blades as he filled his lungs. Apparently, this was the last breath they would all be taking for some time to avoid the effects of the gas. Since vampires didn't need to breathe more than a few times an hour, I figured it wouldn't be too hard for them.

Gavin stepped forward to stand in line with the trio holding those small, glowing orbs of death. "Enter the ward code," he said, looking at the elemental.

Eyeing Gavin and then the orbs, the elemental slowly approached the portal vortex. When she reached the storming surface, she reached out one hand and traced her fingers through the roiling darkness swiftly and deliberately. Tiny bolts of lightning flashed around her hand, and a glowing crimson design took shape, hovering in front of her in the vortex. Each sweep of her fingers added more to the sigil until it became something akin to an elaborate Celtic knot.

The sigil flared brighter suddenly, and the red faded to burning white. The witch lowered her hand and stepped back, then turned to face Gavin. "The gate ward is unlocked," she told him, fidgeting with her fingers and shooting nervous glances at the three vampires holding the small orbs.

"Thank you, Marie," he said. "You may go."

The elemental didn't hesitate for even a second. She hurried away, her furtive glances continuing until she was past us and making her way down the grave-lined hillside.

"Kenji," Gavin said, and one of the vampires waiting at the portal's threshold raised his hands, holding the glowing orbs out in front of him. Small streaks of lightning

reached for his hands.

Stepping forward, Kenji drew the red and purple orbs apart, then swiftly brought them together, like he was clapping his hands. The vortex swallowed him whole before the orbs made contact, shooting out larger bolts of lightning that struck and singed the ground.

“Carmen,” Gavin said, and the next vampire followed Kenji, again vanishing through the vortex the moment before she smashed her orbs together. “Jin,” Gavin said, and the last vampire waiting to deploy the deadly gas stepped through as well.

Gavin turned to the side and scanned first Bastian, Ash, and me, then the four remaining vampires who made up our team. They stood at attention, as still as the graveyard statues around them.

I held my breath, waiting for something to happen.

“Next wave,” Gavin ordered, jerking his chin toward the vortex.

The vampires came to life, lunging forward in a staggered line. One by one, they vanished through the vortex, until my consorts and I were left standing alone in the ancient graveyard.

Gavin gazed at me, his stare intense and lingering, leaving behind the residue of things unsaid. For a heartbeat, I thought he might declare his feelings for me. As impossible as it seemed, and though I barely knew the man, I could feel myself falling for him. Not instead of Bastian—or Wes, for that matter—but in addition to. It seemed there was plenty of room in my heart for each of them.

But then Gavin turned without saying a word and marched through the portal until all that remained of him was the lightning disturbance he created in the vortex.

“We’re up, Soph,” Bastian said, his voice slightly muffled by his gas mask. He pulled me forward with his grip on my hand as he, too, approached the portal. “When we reach the other side, try to ignore what you see and focus only on what you feel. We won’t be able to leave level one until you get a lock on Thane’s location.”

“No pressure,” I said.

Bastian gave my hand a squeeze, and Ash fell in step on my other side. “Take as long as you need,” the hulking vampire rumbled, the unspoken threat in his voice to destroy any shifters besides Bastian who came close to me loud and clear.

Tiny lightning bolts shot out of the vortex as we neared, latching onto various parts of our bodies. They tingled but didn’t burn as I had expected. The last time I passed through a portal, I hadn’t had much of a chance to dissect the experience. I had basically been thrown through the portal as we fled for our lives.

“Exhale,” Bastian said, pausing at the threshold and looking at me. “Push out as much air from your lungs as you can.”

Fear made my breaths shallow, and I blew out a quick puff of air that fogged up the lower half of my mask. At the same moment, Bastian tugged me forward, and darkness swallowed me whole.

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Time stopped as we hovered in that liminal space, at once everywhere and nowhere.

And then we were through, stepping back into reality, and I sucked in a breath. A sizzling gray fog clouded the immediate vicinity, limiting visibility to a couple of feet in any direction. I could see Bastian and Ash on either side of me, and that was about it. Men and women cried out all around us, shrieking and screaming and everything

in between, and my mind filled in the blind spaces with all manner of horrors. I wasn't sure whether it would have been more or less disturbing to actually be able to see.

A shadow lurched into view, a panicked shifter whimpering and frantic as he patted down his body like he was covered in invisible flames, and I huddled closer to Bastian. I spotted the sheer terror in the enemy shifter's widened eyes before Ash intercepted him, capturing his head and snapping his neck. The injury wouldn't kill the other immortal, but he would be out for some time. Considering how frightened the shifter had looked a moment earlier, I thought Ash's actions might actually have been a mercy.

"What was wrong with him?" I asked, watching the shifter's body fall limp to the floor.

Bastian curled an arm around my waist, holding me close. "The gas traps immortals in a waking nightmare," he explained.

I looked around, trying futilely to see through the thick, incandescent fog. Grunts and gasps accompanied the frightened sounds, likely Gavin and the other vampires taking out the shifters more permanently. Were they killing them? Were they taking the time to carve out their hearts, or were they simply cutting throats and breaking necks, injuries the shifters would eventually recover from?

I hoped the latter was the case. Yes, they were holding our people prisoner—Javier, Thane, and the other queens—but not by choice. They were operating under King Veris's orders, and I wasn't comfortable condemning these people to death simply because they were following orders. After all, Bastian had been following orders when he had spied on me for months, and now I loved him, absolutely and completely.

“Focus, Sophie,” Bastian said, his voice firm yet gentle. He shifted his arm higher, curling it around my shoulders. “Don’t worry about them. Ignore what’s going on out there. Where’s Javier? Where’s Thane?”

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I nodded, shoving past my conflicted emotions and taking a deep breath to steady myself. I closed my eyes and worked on blocking out the disturbing noises, focusing on the feeling of Bastian's arm around me and the weight of Ash's presence on my other side. I could sense Gavin nearby as well. He felt cold and calculating through our bond, so different from the impassioned man I had grown so close with over the past two days.

I reached out with my senses, focusing on what I could feel further out, beyond the fog. It was difficult with Bastian, Ash, and Gavin nearby, like their stronger bonds drowned out those that were weaker and further away. But if I looked past them, if I extended my senses, I could feel something.

Bastian's arm fell away as I slowly turned in place, aligning myself with what I was picking up on. I sensed hopelessness. It was like a flicker in the darkness, but it grew as I focused on it, transforming into a deep, suffocating despondency. I couldn't tell if it was coming from Javier or Thane—or both. I wasn't even sure if I would be able to sense Thane's emotions, since we didn't share a true blood bond. Regardless, if they were both down there, they were too close together to differentiate.

"There," I said, pointing toward the floor in front of me, no clue which direction I was facing. "They're down there."

Bastian nodded. "That's the east dungeon." He looked past me to Ash. "Do you want to tell Gavin, or . . ."

Ash cocked his head to the side, listening. A moment later, he nodded. "He heard," Ash said. "The others are falling back to our position."

A whisper of noise alerted me to the vampires surrounding us, though I couldn't see more than shadows in the toxic fog.

I blinked, and suddenly Gavin was standing in front of me. He scanned me with cold, gray eyes like he was searching for injuries, then turned his attention to Bastian. "Lead the way," Gavin said, angling his body to the side and sweeping his arm out for Bastian to take point. "We need to get moving before the shifters on the other levels realize we're here."

Bastian nodded and stepped forward, leading us in the general direction I had indicated, though the hopelessness was coming from far below us. Gavin fell in on my left, taking Bastian's place. We passed through a heavy door into a stairwell with cement walls and stairs, all reinforced by steel. The fog of the hypnos gas followed us in but quickly dissipated once we were all in the stairwell and the door was shut. The horrifying sounds muted to mere memory, and I exhaled a sigh of relief.

Stopping three stairs down, Bastian yanked off his mask and turned to look up at Gavin. "This stairwell is the only access point to the east dungeon."

"No other levels can access it?" Gavin asked. When Bastian shook his head, Gavin glanced at Jin, who stood behind us with the other vampires crowded onto the landing. "Triple ward the door."

"Done," Jin said, turning on his heel and wedging through the press of bodies to reach the door.

Gavin faced me and raised his hands to my mask, gripping the lower edge to pull it up.

My eyes widened, and panic flitted across my chest as my mouth and nose were suddenly exposed. I instinctively held my breath and scoured the floor for the deadly

fog, but there was no sign of it.

“It’s safe,” Gavin said, pulling my mask off all the way. He hooked the mask’s straps to a carabiner on my tactical vest. “By the time they get through the wards and open that door, the gas will be long gone.” He raised one hand again, and his fingers curled around the side of my neck, the pad of his thumb pulling down my lower lip. “Breathe, Sophie.”

I glanced at Bastian, who nodded, a gentle smile curving his lips. He clearly wasn’t locked in a waking nightmare, which meant the air in the stairwell was safe. Relenting, I pulled in a shaky breath—and nearly gagged. The stench of mortal waste and unwashed bodies filled the stairwell so thick I could practically taste it.

Bastian flashed me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Soph. I should have warned you.”

“It’s fine.” I cleared my throat and blinked rapidly. The stench was potent enough to make my eyes water.

Nobody spoke as we descended the stairs. The hum of the caged wall sconces grew louder and faded again as we approached and left each landing. The only other sounds were the beat of our footsteps on the concrete stairs as we hurried down and the sound of our harsh breaths—or maybe just my breaths, since everyone else seemed perfectly composed. The undead vampires hardly needed to breathe anyway.

As we neared the bottom of the stairs, Bastian raised one hand, signaling for us to stop on the last flight, and Gavin and I stood together on the last step. Bastian claimed a key ring holding old-fashioned iron keys from a hook on the wall, and I peered around him through the doorway beyond.

A long hallway lined with rusted metal doors stretched on into the shadows. The walls appeared to have been carved straight out of the bedrock, and the flickering

light from the intermittent electric sconces made everything between the shadows look washed-out and sickly. The stench was stronger down here, the air heavy and oppressive.

Déjà vu from my prophetic vision lent a dreamlike quality to the situation. I had been here before.

“The cells on either side hold queens,” I said with absolute certainty as I stepped down the final stair and continued onward, winding around Bastian and into the dungeon ahead of the others. But, at the moment, all I cared about was the barred cell door at the end of the long corridor. The one I couldn’t yet see but knew was there. The sense of absolute dread emanating from that cell, of failure, gripped my heart and knotted my gut.

Bastian caught my wrist, holding me back.

I peered at him over my shoulder, my brow furrowing. I had honestly forgotten anyone else was with me. That this wasn’t a dream and I wasn’t alone.

“Let her go,” Gavin murmured. “Can’t you feel it? The goddess is guiding her.”

Bastian released me, and I continued on, delving deeper into the dungeon. I could feel the stares of the other queens on either side of me, but not even their attention could pull my focus away from the cell at the end. From the man within. From Javier.

My heart hammered, not only audible, but palpable. Each step brought me closer to him. It had been so long. I had thought him dead. But now, I couldn’t deny the sense of him hidden in the shadows beyond the bars of his cell door. I supposed Thane was in there too, but Javier was everything.

With each step, the tension wound tighter within me. The need to reclaim what was

mine.

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As I neared the cell door, a glowing sigil appeared surrounding the lock, growing brighter the closer I drew. I stopped in front of the bars blocking my way and curled my fingers around the cool metal as I peered into the shadows.

Thane dozed on the cot on the left side of the cell, just as in my vision, and Javier melted into the shadows in the back right corner. I wouldn't even have known he was huddled there on the floor if I hadn't been able to feel him through our bond. Neither man moved at my approach, and I assumed they were exhausted by blood loss from feeding the queens. Either that, or they had been beaten into unconsciousness.

"Javier?" I called in a whisper. "Thane?"

There was no movement in the corner, but Thane jerked awake, raising his head to peer toward the cell door. One of his eyes widened, the only visible part of his shadowed features. He sat up slowly, carefully, like it took far more effort than it should have to do even that simple movement. When he stood, his face passed through a patch of sickly light. Parts of his face were bruised, and one eye was swollen completely shut. The shifters must have been starving him of mortal blood, or he would have healed already.

Bastian stepped forward on my left and crouched in front of the lock, holding up the keys one at a time and squinting as he painstakingly compared the sigils on each to the one on the cell door. I wondered why he didn't just try each key in the lock. At this rate, it would have been much faster.

"If I use the wrong one," he explained, glancing up at me, "it'll trigger the ward and the flood hatch will open."

Thane moved like an elderly man as he shuffled toward the cell door. “Sophie?” he rasped. “What are you—you shouldn’t be here.”

A huge pale hand gripped one of the bars directly above mine, and Ash’s bulky arm brushed against my shoulder. “We came for you,” Ash murmured, his voice a gentle rumble in the darkness.

Thane’s throat bobbed, and he peered over his shoulder at Javier, the movement making him wince.

It pained me to see the powerful vampire so weakened, and I uncurled the fingers of my left hand and extended my forearm into the cell. “Here, take some blood,” I said. “You’ll need your strength.”

Thane snapped his head around, his lips pulled back and his teeth bared like he was barely able to restrain himself from tearing into me. With a fierce grimace, he turned his face away again.

Ash reached through the bars and covered my hand with his, pushing my arm down so it no longer extended into the cell. He leaned closer until his lips nearly brushed my ear when he spoke. “He’s afraid he won’t be able to stop once he starts. Better to wait until we get this door open so I can restrain him while he feeds.”

“Oh,” I said, swallowing roughly. “I didn’t realize.” I gripped the bar once more, feeling awful for unintentionally taunting Thane with my blood. “I’m sorry.”

“Javier’s in bad shape,” Thane said, his voice rougher than before and his face still angled away. “They stopped restricting how much blood the queens can take from him.” Thane peered at me out of the corner of his good eye. “I think they’re hoping the queens will kill him.”

I pulled back, horrified. “Why?”

Thane bowed his head. “Because they have me now,” he admitted. “A fresh blood bag, and since I’m nowhere near as powerful as Javier . . .”

Hands on my shoulders told me Gavin was behind me. “You’re the lesser threat,” Gavin finished for him. “It makes sense. I would have done the same.”

“Got it!” Bastian exclaimed, flashing me a fierce grin when I glanced down at him. He fit the huge iron key into the lock and held his breath. The sigil flared, then faded to little more than the ghost of the mark.

Bastian exhaled heavily and turned the key. A muffled clang echoed down the long corridor, and Bastian dragged the cell door open.

Ash, Gavin, and I stepped back, allowing the door to open all the way, and then Ash stalked forward into the cell to embrace Thane.

“Get to work on the other cells,” Gavin told Bastian.

I followed Ash, eager to feed Thane so I could move on to Javier.

Ash moved to stand behind Thane and wrapped his arms around his beloved, pinning Thane’s arms to his side. “Go ahead, Sophie,” Ash said, nodding to me.

I raised one hand, extending my wrist toward Thane. He stretched out his neck, reaching for me as I stepped closer, closing the distance between his mouth and my wrist.

Thane didn’t hesitate. The instant my skin brushed his lips, he struck, digging his razor-sharp teeth into my flesh. I gasped, feeling nothing but pain, no hint of pleasure

or desire in his bite. Tears welled and spilled over the brims of my eyelids, and I released a shuddering breath as he ravaged my wrist.

“That’s enough,” Gavin hissed.

I tried to pull my arm back, but Thane dug in with his teeth. “He won’t let go,” I whimpered in pain.

Suddenly Gavin was there beside Thane and Ash, gripping Thane’s jaw and forcing his bite to release.

With a muffled sob, I snatched my hand away and hugged my gnawed arm against my chest.

Bastian curled an arm around my back protectively and pressed his lips against my temple. He took a deep inhale, breathing me in like he needed the comfort as much as I did after that mildly traumatizing scene.

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Gavin stalked closer to me, a waning thundercloud. He raised his wrist to his mouth and savagely tore into his own flesh. “Hold out your wrist, Sophie,” he said, his bloodstained lips appearing almost black in the dim light.

I did so, my hand quaking.

Gavin held his wrist over mine, letting his blood drip onto my throbbing wound. The first contact stung but was followed a heartbeat later by tingling relief. I watched in horrified fascination as more and more of Gavin’s blood filled my wound and my flesh knitted back together with impossible speed until, at last, all that remained was a pink scar smeared with blood.

“Thank you,” I breathed, looking from my healed wrist to his. His own wound was already closed up as well. I raised my gaze to Gavin’s face, meeting his burning silver eyes.

“My blood is yours,” he said with absolute conviction. He stepped closer, leaning in to press his lips against mine in a brief but thorough and delicious kiss. When he pulled away, I was utterly breathless. He looked toward the back corner of the cell. “I’m afraid you’re the only one who can help him now. I’ll be right behind you, just in case.”

I gulped, my heart a heavy drum beat, and turned toward the corner. The lump that was Javier didn’t move as I approached. My feet seemed heavier with each step, but finally I reached him.

“Javier?” My voice was barely a whisper.

He wore a tattered blanket wrapped around himself like a cloak, concealing every part of him. My mind manufactured a stench, but there was no increased foulness on my inhale aside from the odor of dried blood and a scent like incense that dredged up long-forgotten memories. Javier was an undead vampire, so his body didn't function like a mortal's—or even like a shifter's or an elemental's. He didn't eat food or sweat or pass waste in the familiar sense. His body didn't naturally do anything stinky, so he just smelled like himself.

I crouched and reached out, taking a guess at where his head was likely to be. Holding my breath, uncertain what I would find, I pulled the blanket away.

“Oh Javier,” I said when I finally saw his face, the air hissing out of my lungs.

His once handsome face was gray and gaunt, his eyelids shut and his cracked lips parted. He had always been clean-shaven when I knew him, but he now wore a full beard. According to my eyes, the man before me was not alive. But I could still feel him, in my heart, in my soul. His crippling fear and desperate hope. They clawed along the bond we shared, luring me ever closer. I just hoped that spark of life was enough and that he wasn't already too far gone.

I closed my eyes and bowed my head, fresh tears sneaking free and streaking down my cheeks. For a decade, he had been my whole world. He had been the only reason I survived the attack. The only reason I was still alive today. It shredded my heart to see him like this.

Sniffling, I drew the combat knife sheathed on my hip and gritted my teeth before dragging the blade across the heel of my palm. It used to drive me nuts when characters in the movies cut their hands to draw blood—couldn't they find a body part they used less frequently? But here I was doing that exact same thing. The bite of the blade was white hot, and I hissed in a breath. I quickly wiped the blade on my pants and re-sheathed it, careful to capture the welling blood in my cupped palm.

A low, keening moan filled the space between Javier and me, and it took me a moment to realize the sound was coming from him. Hope surged within me. There truly was life in him yet.

Raising my bleeding hand, I dropped my knees to the floor and leaned in. His nostrils flared as he breathed in the scent of my blood, and his lips pulled back, his dry tongue darting out, searching.

“Here,” I whispered, dipping a fingertip in the welled blood and coating his lips with the thick liquid.

His eyelashes fluttered as he tasted my blood. I would have sworn I heard my name in his exhale.

Encouraged, I reached out, curving my good hand around the back of his neck and gently tilting his head backward. I fit the side of my bleeding hand against his bottom lip and tilted it, slowly pouring the collected blood into his mouth. He swallowed once. Twice. Wincing, I pressed the cut to his open mouth to let the fresh blood seep into him directly.

His eyelids snapped open, and his eyes locked with mine, his irises burning like superheated metal. The first pull of blood from my open wound was pure agony, but the second seemed to be dragging blood from low in my abdomen. The third pull made me gasp as a needy ache settled unexpectedly in my core. This was a completely different experience than the brutal pain of a moment ago with Thane. Despite his deprived state, Javier was being incredibly gentle, careful to not even let his sharp teeth graze my wound. Because he was my consort and we shared a bond? Or did he simply have that much self-control?

My breaths came faster, desire suddenly raging within me. I squeezed my thighs together to ease the throbbing ache between my legs.

Javier tore his mouth away from my hand, his lips and chin coated with my blood. “Luna?” he rasped, his brow furrowing as he scoured my face, likely reconciling the woman I was with the girl he had known. His features appeared slightly less gaunt, and his deathly pallor had faded, leaving his skin closer to the light brown I recalled from my youth. “Did they capture you?”

Lowering my bleeding hand, I shook my head, forcing a shaky smile. “I came to rescue you.” I shrugged one shoulder, wincing as I pressed my other palm to the open wound to stave off the bleeding. “I owed you one.”

He laughed, but it devolved into a cough.

My smile turned limp. “Do you need more?” I asked, raising my hand.

“No,” he practically growled, and I drew back slightly. His features gentled. “If I take any more, I won’t stop with blood.”

“Oh,” I said, not fully understanding him. Finally, I realized he was talking about sex—with me—and my cheeks heated. Apparently, I hadn’t been the only one aroused by his drinking of my blood, and I assumed that was the long-neglected bond at work, pushing us toward a full communion.

“Sophie!” Gavin hissed from close behind me. I had been so focused on Javier that I completely forgot Gavin had followed me into the cell.

My head snapped around so I could see him.

“We’re out of time. The shifters are coming down. You need to get out of here now.” He crouched, reaching an arm into the corner behind Javier to help the other vampire up to his feet.

I stood and started toward the cell door, noting that only three of the other cells were open, with Bastian currently kneeling as he sought the matching key to the lock on a fourth cell door.

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“But what about the rest of them?” I asked, stopping just outside Javier’s cell and scanning the others. There had to be at least a dozen more locked cell doors. At least a dozen more queens.

“They’re not my priority,” Gavin said, handing Javier off to another vampire. “Bastian,” Gavin called out. “Leave it and get the hatch open.”

Bastian dropped the key ring without argument and stood, hurrying toward what appeared to be a large iron drain cover in the floor in the middle of the corridor.

Gavin gripped my elbow, dragging my attention back to him. “Sophie,” he said urgently, walking me further out of the cell. “This is not your fault.”

My brow furrowed, and I searched his face, his eyes, trying to understand his meaning. Slowly, I shook my head. “The queens . . .?”

“Someone has to stay behind to feed them,” he said, his expression solemn. “I will return to you,” he swore and leaned his forehead against mine. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, his breath warm on my skin. “I wish there was another way, that we had more time. I wish—” He growled his frustration and pressed his lips against mine in a desperate, searing kiss that felt like both a promise and a goodbye.

And then he was gone, the cell door slamming shut between us, and I was left with nothing but the taste of his lips and the shattered remains of my heart.

I stared at him through the bars, still not understanding what was happening. Why was he in the cell?

“Sophie!” Bastian shouted. “We’ve got to go. Now!”

“But—” I gestured to the locked cell door. To Gavin, who had just willingly made himself a prisoner.

“Now, Sophie,” Bastian urged, gripping my arm and tugging me away from the cell. Away from Gavin.

I felt numb, like I was moving through a fog as I was guided to the hole in the floor and helped to sit on the ledge, my feet dangling into the flooding tunnel under the dungeon. Apparently he had already opened the hatch. Someone fitted a mask over my face, Bastian, maybe, then pulled me into the hole and under the water. My movements were robotic as I swam through the narrow hatch and out into a larger tunnel.

Gavin . . . He was back in the dungeon. Back in the cell.

And we were leaving him behind.

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I stood under the stream in the shower in Bastian’s room, alone but for the suffocating company of my somber thoughts. Steam gathered around me, and the air felt as heavy as my heart when I drew it into my lungs.

Gavin was gone. Not gone gone, but gone enough that he left a gaping hole in my world. How had he become so essential to me in such a short period? He had turned my life upside down, reminding me of my true self. In so many ways, he had saved me. Even if I didn’t know him well, I trusted him, and more importantly, I respected him. In just a few days, he had proved his nobility to me time and again. He would always put our people first.

Instead of returning with me, Gavin chose to stay behind in that shifter dungeon with the other queens, to keep them alive. If he had left with me, they would've died, and that was unacceptable to him. It was as simple as that. And as much as it stung to know I wasn't always his priority, I understood and respected his decision. Hell, I likely would have agreed it was the right thing to do in that situation if he had only had the time to explain. But he hadn't had time, and now he was gone.

I could sense Bastian outside the bathroom, trying not to hover. It didn't really matter if he was in here with me physically or not, his thoughts were zeroed in on me, all hesitancy and concern, which meant he was with me nonetheless. Still, I appreciated the gesture. I had been alone for so long that solitude was how I coped.

I sensed Ash as well, one of the few bright spots in the darkness surrounding my heart. He was with Thane, in their room, taking care of the man he loved by helping him take blood from several mortals without maiming or killing them. The shifters had been keeping Thane in better shape than Javier, but he had still been tortured and was malnourished, which, as I had experienced firsthand, turned him rather savage and brutish while feeding.

And, of course, I sensed Javier. His dark, heavy emotions did little to lighten my heart, though his presence in the Moon Sanctuary was probably the only reason I wasn't huddled on the shower floor, sobbing. I had lost Gavin, but I had regained Javier. I could feel the long-neglected bond I shared with my first bound immortal, my Prime Consort, tugging on my heart, urging me to go to him. And yet, I continued to stand under the steaming stream of water, avoiding the impending interaction.

I didn't know what we were, Javier and me. When he vanished two decades ago, he had been my caretaker, my provider, my mentor, my teacher, my companion, and sometimes my friend. But I had been young, and he had been very careful to shield me both from the truth of our world and from the reality of my role in it. We were bound, but would he be able to see me as a woman, rather than as the girl he used to

know? Would he be able to look past our history to become a full, active consort in my harem? Would I? Or would we continue to linger in this confusing limbo?

Sighing, I lathered soap in my hands and rubbed them over my body. I had been in the shower, wallowing for long enough. Javier had already fed from several mortals, with no desire involved, based on what I sensed through the bond, and he was waiting for me. It was time to stop delaying the inevitable.

I finished washing, then rinsed and turned off the shower. I stared at my prune fingers, wondering just how long I had been standing under the water. My stomach rumbled. Long enough for hunger to make itself known. Looked like my lack of appetite from before the rescue mission was catching up to me.

I quickly dried, then wrapped the towel around myself and opened the bathroom door. Bastian sat on the edge of the hastily made bed, a tray like those used to bring breakfast in bed sitting on the comforter beside him, loaded up with a few sandwiches, some sliced fruit and cheese, and a carafe of coffee, based on the enticing aroma, along with a mini ceramic pitcher of what I assumed was milk and a tiny bowl of sugar. There was a second mini pitcher—the only item on the tray that baffled me.

I eyed the sandwiches, zeroing in on the line of promised deliciousness peeking out from between each pair of bread slices as I crossed to the dresser. “Peanut butter and honey?” I asked, my mouth already watering.

“Only the best for my lady,” Bastian said, a slight curve to his lips. There were some perks to him having spied on me as a cat for months. He knew all my guilty pleasures, the things I hid from the rest of the world. He knew what I liked to eat, to watch, to wear . . . even how I touched myself when I was alone. He had the secret playbook to pushing all of my buttons and scratching all of my itches, and I kind of loved it.

“You’re too good to me,” I told him. I pulled out some leggings, a flowy T-shirt, and a long, cozy cardigan. I chose undergarments for comfort—like that was anything new—and some fuzzy socks.

I dropped my towel, watching Bastian’s gaze roam over my curves. I sensed his rising desire, though he did an admirable job of feigning nonchalance. Once I was dressed, I sat on the edge of the mattress to pull on my socks.

“Do you want me to come with you?” he asked.

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My brows rose, and I tucked my feet under my legs to sit tailor style on the bed. “To see Javier?” I asked, reaching for a half of a sandwich. I took a bite, then set it back down on the plate, chewing while I poured coffee into a mug and added milk and one heaping spoonful of sugar. I finally peeked into the other mini pitcher, and my lips spread into a smile when I saw the thick, dark brown liquid within. “Chocolate syrup?” I asked, picking it up and pouring some into my mug.

“It’s a fancy brand,” Bastian admitted apologetically. Here was another of those little secrets he knew about me: I liked good old-fashioned Hershey’s syrup in my coffee, not the special extra dark chocolate syrups that were actually made for coffee.

I shrugged one shoulder, stirring my doctored mug. “I’m sure it will be perfect,” I told him. “Thank you.” I lifted the mug and breathed in the rich aroma before taking a sip. I closed my eyes while I savored the taste. “Yummy,” I told him, lifting my lids and reclaiming the sandwich half. I took another bite, holding my mug propped on my knee. “You should get some rest.” I glanced at the pillows, slightly askew at the head of the bed, and took another bite. “It’s been a long day.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said noncommittally. “I’ve never been a good napper.”

I sipped my coffee and peeked over my shoulder at the window. Golden rays of the sun streamed in, reminding me it was the middle of the day, despite the heavy exhaustion that made it feel like midnight to me.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked, returning my attention to Bastian while I continued to eat. “I always wondered. I remember traveling for a long time with Javier. After the attack. But I was so young, and I’d never been away from this place

before, so going anywhere felt like traveling a long way.”

“My best guess?” he said, his eyebrows raised.

I nodded, chewing.

“An island near Iceland,” he said. “We know the Moon Sanctuary is somewhere in Norden, but anything more specific is pure speculation.” He picked up a sandwich half and turned it around and around between his fingers. “Wherever it is, it’s concealed by strong wards, likely created by Selene herself. That’s what makes us think it’s an island. A random spot in the middle of the land that nobody could reach would be far more conspicuous. I have no clue how they managed to break through the wards and portal in here before.”

I frowned at hearing his use of *we* and *us*, a reminder of what Bastian had left behind to be with me. “I’m sorry you had to attack your own people,” I told him, finishing off my last bite. I picked up another half of a sandwich. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

He shrugged. “Once upon a time, all immortals considered ourselves to be one people, so technically, when the House of the Sun attacked the House of the Moon, we were also attacking our own people,” he justified.

I forced a smile, knowing he was reaching to make himself feel better. “Still, I’m sorry you had to do it.”

Bastian stared down at his uneaten sandwich half. “This war is wrong,” he said quietly. “Regardless of the curse, the fighting has to stop, or there won’t be anything left of either of our people.”

I nodded to myself. “Is there anything we can do to convince Veris to stand down?”

Bastian barked a laugh. “No,” he said, looking at me. “His reign is built on a platform

of hate. This won't end while he still breathes, but if you kill him, he'll become a martyr, only strengthening his cause. It's probably why the House of the Moon hasn't already assassinated him." Bastian exhaled heavily. "Honestly, the best thing for everyone would be an internal uprising. If he were overthrown by someone who valued peace over revenge—ashifter, not a vampire—and if enough of my people backed that usurper, then we might see some real change."

I sipped my coffee, eyeing Bastian with new appreciation. Of course, I had known there were some serious brains hiding behind all that bronze beauty, but he so often leaned into the college playboy role that it was easy to overlook his hidden depths.

"Someone like a prince who opposes everything his father stands for?" I ventured.

Bastian sat up straighter, his eyes opening wide. "I wasn't—" He shook his head. "I didn't mean me."

"It was just a thought," I said, taking another bite.

His brow furrowed, and he stared out the window, his pensive mood seeping into me through our bond.

I finished my sandwich in silence, then drained my coffee and set it on the tray. I inhaled deeply and held the breath in my lungs for a long moment, then released it as a sigh. "I should go," I said, scooting to the edge of the bed.

Bastian looked at me, but his focus was still split. "Can I walk you there?"

I shook my head, offering him an apologetic smile. I wanted a few minutes alone to gather my thoughts and bolster my nerves. Javier was a member of my harem, and regardless of how he saw me, he needed to accept what that meant for our relationship. I wasn't a little girl anymore. I was a queen—his queen—and I was determined to make him see me as such.

Bastian nodded to himself, like he had expected me to turn down his offer. “Will you come back here, after?”

I stood and turned to face him. “Of course,” I told him. “Always.” He had followed me here, given up everything for me. The least I could do in return was to not abandon him. I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “But . . . I don’t know how long this will take.”

“As long as it takes,” Bastian said, his lips curving into a gentle smile. “Good luck, Soph.”

I let out a breathy laugh. “Thanks.” And then I turned and headed for the door.

My heart hammered the closer I drew to Javier’s rooms. He had reclaimed his old suite in the royal wing, and my steps slowed as I approached his door. He would sense me out here, so there was no point in dallying other than to make a tense situation more so. I stopped in front of his door, took a deep breath, and raised my hand to knock.

The door opened before my knuckles touched the wood, and suddenly I was face to face with Javier. My eyes widened as I took him in. He looked good. Like the old him, with a faint hint of mustache and beard, and his dark hair trimmed until it was short but still long enough to show the loose curl. His crescent sigil glowed gently, curving around the left side of his face, and other, smaller sigils decorated his neck, dipping into the collar of his shirt. He wore lounge pants and a long-sleeved shirt, reminding me of our training sessions all those years ago.

Javier stepped back, pulling the door open further, and dipped his chin, silently inviting me into his space.

I crossed the threshold, stepping into the next phase of our relationship, uncertain what exactly that would look like. But there was one thing I knew for sure: I was

about to find out.

To be continued...