



# Hunter

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Dark

**Description:** Half-vampire and half-shifter. The one definitive belief panther-shifter Hunter and the other immortals understood about shifters and vampires; vampire venom is deadly to shifters and vice versa. But Hunter never worried about testing the theory because he never wondered if he had a mate, even after a few of his family had found their own. As he and two others stumble upon and eliminate several rogue shifters, part of a larger group determined to kill each of the assassins, Hunter also stumbles upon the one woman destined to be his. There's only one problem. She's part vampire.

All alone in the world. Despite everything, Neri made a life for herself after she escaped from a facility using her as a test subject. She has no past, no family, and no connections to the world as far as she can remember. She stays to herself and finds a routine, telling herself she isn't lonely. But everything changes when she spots Hunter and her first true memory revealed. He was there the day someone injected her with an experimental drug and changed into this cold being. As Neri and Hunter navigate their newfound relationship, their journey becomes even more complicated when they learn Neri's venom is deadly to shifters. But with help from the other immortals, Hunter and Neri reveal her past and realize the extent of the threat Dark Company has been dealing with for years.

But can their relationship survive with so much stacked against them?

**Total Pages (Source):** 83

## CHAPTER ONE

### HUNTER

Hunter trudged through waist deep powder, grumbling about the situation he was in and cursing whatever deity who made it snow four days into September. He was used to all weather, and the cold wasn't the issue; it was the fucking drudgery of miles and miles of hiking through the stuff as he babysat Drew that grated on his nerves.

It wasn't as though he begrudged Jade her happiness at finding her brother after all these years, but they realized after Ghost had hired him as an assassin, the man never grew up. He pranked all of them although they threatened bodily harm if he didn't stop. They would never kill him. But Hunter was thinking about breaking his jaw for the fact the crunch as his fist connected would satisfy for half a second before he healed.

"You can't begrudge me a little fun. I've been looking for Jade all these years."

That excuse lasted for about fifteen minutes and other than Jade and her mate Noah, the others avoided Drew as much as possible.

Hunter blinked and his gaze darted toward the left when a movement caught his attention. Less than a second later, he bit back a smile when Kane took a header in the snow, sending up a puff of white into the air as he slammed down face first on the ground.

When ginger hair, brighter than Jade's, popped up and wiped the snow off his

shoulders several feet from where Kane lay, Hunter cut off his laugh by clearing his throat and sending a disappointed look toward the ginger.

Hunter and Kane didn't have training duty, but after Drew tried to learn with Ax, Thomas and Isaac, Gunnar, and Reaper and Ara, Ghost had foisted Drew onto Kai. Hunter expected him to be dead by the end of the day.

Kai was the most patient of the assassins and after two days of unrelenting training, he had given up on Drew and walked away without another word. Hunter hadn't been there, but Drew still flinched whenever they mentioned Kai's name. Kai had a similar reaction to the man, snarling whenever he came near.

Jade and Noah refused train him. Jade would never endanger her brother, even to teach him the basic of hand-to-hand combat or even tracking. They would end up catching up on all the years they missed from each other's lives. Noah, not wanting to do anything to hurt Jade, steered clear of Drew.

Hunter didn't mind the tiger shifter, for about ten minutes at a time. He knew the sooner he and Kane trained him to Ghost's standards, the sooner he'd be away from him.

Kane bent his arms to get up off the ground when all three of them sensed movement toward the west. They all stopped and opened their senses for a clue who was heading toward their position.

Hunter scented the shifters, multiple, converging fast.

I'm guessing three. Not bothering to cover the noise of their steps. I'll be on point.

Hunter cut through the snow with Kane on his right and Drew on his left. As he caught sight of his black glove and cursed. They were in their black tactical gear.

Hunter chose it because Drew needed to get used to moving around with his weapons and ammunition, as most of his assignments would be raids and combat situations instead of stealth, which most of them specialized in.

They hadn't planned on running into any trouble so close to the mountain where most of the assassins claimed land and built homes of their own. Ghost had moved his base of operation to Snowfall from Denver and claimed his own piece of land close to all the assassins.

These shifters should have realized they headed into dangerous territory. But if they were from Anzû's group, they didn't have enough sense or training to avoid a fight.

Keep one alive. We need intel. Drew?

Drew, without taking his eyes from the target's position beyond the pines and evergreens, nodded once.

Hunter knew the kid had skin in the game because of Jade and the threat to her earlier that year. A warrior replaced his normal laid back and teasing personality.

Knowing Kane was always ready for a fight, Hunter turned his attention toward the tree line as three shifters stumbled through before two more followed. They stopped in their tracks and their eyes widened as they took in three immortals, all decked out in black.

Hunter wondered for a split second if they would run, making the assassins chase them through the fucking mountains. A growl escaped his throat and the new additions seemed surprised by them and the hostility coming from him.

The shifter in front gave a war cry before all five of them charged.

“Someone’s seen too many fucking movies. Who the fuck warns the enemy before you attack?”

Kane growled. “That motherfucker will die first.”

Hunter laughed but Drew’s lip raised and he roared a split second before he shifted into his tiger form and launched himself at the man closest to him. It was a sight to behold. There, in the mountains of Colorado, a tiger, twice the size of a normal cat, running through the snow at full speed toward a shifter who squeaked at the incoming onslaught.

Drew landed on the surprised shifter’s chest and rode the momentum all the way to the cold, hard ground. Drew removed the shifter’s head by opening his jaw wide and clamping down on the other shifter’s vulnerable neck. He spit it out and batted the decapitated head away from the shifter’s body and glanced around to see what his other prey was up to.

A small shifter who looked to be a teenager, leapt at Hunter and grunted when Hunter caught him around the throat squeezed.

“Ew, he’s a fucking vampire. Let’s do the world a fucking favor.”

## Page 2

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Kane laughed and moved so fast, the largest shifter of the pack had no chance to react. The blond vampire jumped onto his shoulders and twisted his head off, tossing it over to Drew, who slapped it away, growling when he spotted blood coating his chest from Kane's kill.

The vampire sighed as he tracked the other shifter run toward the trees to make his escape. He chased him, waiting until he was back in the clearing before he split the shifter in half, discarding the bottom, before he removed the head and tossing it through the trees.

Drew, keep him alive.

Hunter threw the shifter at the surprised ginger, who had to shift back. He stood naked in the clearing, a shifter positioned in front of him, and a bright blush on his cheeks.

"You're a fucking asshole, Hunter. If you haven't noticed, I'm fucking naked."

"And who's fault is that? If you stayed in human form to kill, then you'd be fine. Instead of thinking things through, you barreled into the fight by shifting into your tiger. Now, deal with the consequences."

Hunter turned fight with the last two shifters. He leapt between the dumbasses who stuck around for their deaths. They snarled at him, reaching for him as soon as he landed, which he dodged.

"Who do you work for?"

“Fuck off—”

The guy froze the moment Hunter locked eyes with him. The other, thinking he had the jump on him, moved behind Hunter to pin his arms to his side. Without missing a beat, Hunter slammed his head back and heard the satisfying crack of the shifter’s nose breaking. Another snarl and the first shifter jumped onto Hunter’s shoulders, baring his teeth, ready to clamp onto Hunter’s throat and rip it out.

His hand shot out and wrapped around the shifter’s throat. With a tight squeeze around his neck, Hunter brought him face-to-face.

“Hey, no fucking biting,” Hunter growled.

Hunter hauled back and aimed for the jaw. He punched the other shifter hard enough for him to drop to the ground and lay there as he groaned at the pain. He turned his attention to the other who’s bleeding had slowed, but not stopped and instead of righting his nose, it was still off-kilter. For such a break, it should have healed within seconds. Instead a minute later, the injury was fresh. He made a note to tell Liv when he saw her next.

“Do you work for a company by the name of Nightfall?”

“I won’t tell you shit.”

Before Hunter could punch the fucker in the face or growl at the shifter, he sensed movement toward the west. He gripped the shifter’s throat tighter as he choked on his words, something about being a weak poser and turned his gaze west.

A gorgeous woman, dressed in a long-sleeved hoodie and worn jeans with white snow boots that matched the color of her hair stared at him with wide eyes. There was something familiar about her. Something tugged at his chest until he passed the

shifter over to Kane and stepped forward.

“I need to...”

“Yeah, man. I know.” Kane laughed as he tugged the shifter under his arm and squeezed when he spoke.

Ignoring the scene behind him, he walked toward the woman, who had yet to move from the position she was in when she spotted them. After a few steps, Hunter froze when he scented her fear and he could see her body quaking as she stared at him.

In a quiet, non-threatening voice, Hunter spoke. “I would never hurt you, angel. I promise.”

His eyes caught inconsistencies that battled with his understanding of shifters and vampires. He wanted to rush over and comfort her while the overwhelming sensations screamed at him. She was important to him; she was his.

But his need for her warred with his knowledge that their relationship would be impossible when his bright green eyes landed on her silver ones. Familiar silver ones.

He had a half second of hesitation before he realized she called to him and those instincts were never wrong.

“I’m Hunter. I only want to talk to you.”

Her eyes darted over his shoulder to the scene playing out behind him. “The men; Kane, the tall blond, and Drew, the annoying ginger who’s naked, are my friends. Those other shifters are trying to kill us.”

Relief washed over him when Drew, aware of the delicate situation, stayed silent at



the insult. Maybe because he called him a friend in the same category as Kane.

His words, instead of reassuring her, had her eyes widen as her pupils became blown. She clenched her fists against her chest. But his concern turned into worry when she dropped to her knees. Unable to keep his distance from her any longer, he rushed to her side and kneeled in front of her to match her stance. He didn't touch her, afraid she would freak out if he did.

“I will never hurt you and will protect you with my life. I promise you with all I am.”

“Black... black... guns. Uniforms. I know them from somewhere. Where?” She kept mumbling the same words over-and-over.

## Page 3

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Hunter almost shivered from her deep, scratchy voice, as though her throat became raw from screaming and never healed.

“Angel, you need to breathe. Listen to my breathing... in and out. In and out.”

Hunter met her eyes and all his instincts screamed that his attraction, his need for her shouldn't have existed. He couldn't help think all he understood about immortals was wrong. But he couldn't concentrate on that, he needed her to calm down first.

After several minutes, her breathing evened out and Hunter felt the tension in his chest relax. She glanced up at that moment and he became captivated by her beautiful silver gaze.

He pushed his words out of his tight throat. “Are you okay?”

She nodded but he could see she was shaking.

Unable to refuse her comfort, he ran his fingers through her long, loose strands. Hunter thought she was beautiful; flawless skin, clear silver eyes, curvy body he wanted to explore for hours, and he craved her addictive scent. While he recognized it as part shifter, there was also something sweeter, and not all vampire.

She allowed his perusal as she performed her own over his uniform, the exposed skin on his neck, up his face and into his eyes.

“You don't have to fear me. You're safe.” Hunter reiterated his promise and cupped her face.

Hunter's vision blackened around the edges and a second later, he plunged into a darkness. He didn't understand when he heard her quiet voice.

"I'm not so sure about that."

The next minute, Hunter sensed his surroundings changed. He blinked his eyes, getting used to the darkness after the bright, blinding light of the snow. He still found himself on his knees and as he moved his fingers searching for the woman who had been right in front of him, he found she wasn't there any longer.

Hunter closed his eyes and listened to his surroundings.

There was a low hum from a computer fan somewhere in the room and there was breathing, deep, as if the person was asleep. Before he could investigate further, a desk lamp clicked on and his eyes moved toward the arrogant looking man seated, cross-legged, on an uncomfortable metal chair. He had a smug look on his face and Hunter wanted to break his face.

Hunter pulled his gaze from the man and took a quick glance around and to him, something about it seemed familiar. The sterile coldness, the clear glass that looked out into the hall, the white formica tiles on the floor. Sterile and clean. The place gave him the creeps.

When he turned his gaze to the man in the lab coat, his gaze wasn't on Hunter but on a woman laying on the exam table he hadn't seen until that moment.

Hunter took a deep breath, trying to examine the scents in the room and looking for a familiar one, but there was nothing. He should have scented the sterile environment, the blue liquid on the counter along with wooden sticks and cotton balls, but there was nothing.

He growled in frustration but neither the older gray-haired doctor, nor the woman strapped down with her mouth covered to muffle sound, reacted to the sound escaping from his throat.

Without another thought, he lunged for the doctor but he passed through the figure.

Okay, I'm not here. Can't scent, can't touch.

Hunter turned toward the table and sucked in a deep breath as the familiar features of the woman in the mountains came into focus. Her face looked gaunt, but it was the dark brown hair and matching eyes that took him by surprise because she looked familiar. Her body looked starved and despite the bruising on her limbs and the dark circles under her eyes; she looked back at the doctor in defiance.

Hunter jolted when the man spoke.

“So, Nerissa... it appears you're an utter failure as a shifter.” His eyes glanced down as if he were ashamed by her lack of abilities. “But you are a prime candidate for an experimental drug my colleagues and I have been working on.”

Her gaze narrowed as he continued to speak and he noted her body shook with the continuous growl that emitted from her throat.

“You had such promise. Oh, well.”

As if waiting for that statement, a nurse walked in and handed a syringe to the man. “Here you go, Dr. Stevens.”

There was something about her tone that set Hunter's teeth on edge. He noted her long dark brown hair braided down her back, almost reaching her butt and olive skin that didn't look healthy. But when he looked into her eyes, he shivered at the anger

directed at Nerissa on the table.

His gaze moved toward the syringe and he felt his heart stop. The liquid was silvery, like liquid mercury mixed with a milky white substance he was familiar with. Again, Hunter darted forward and tried to slap the syringe out of his hand and roared when his hand passed through without resistance.

Hunter froze in fear, something he hadn't felt in years, maybe never, as it rushed through him and he turned to see Nerissa struggle with all her effort to break the restraints.

“No. No. No, no, no, no.”

## Page 4

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Dr. Steven's dismissed the nurse with a wave of his hand and he didn't see the glare of hatred directed at him, before she sauntered out the door without looking back. When the door click closed, he leaned over Nerissa with a wicked smile on his ugly face.

Hunter rolled his eyes when the man continued speaking. He loved to hear himself talk.

"Do you know what this is, Nerissa? No? We'll it's a mutated cancer drug that will attack your cells added to vampire venom."

Dr. Steven's paused for effect, but continued after a moment.

"Did you know a shifter will die if infected by vampire venom? But I'm sure any pain the venom causes will take a backseat to the drug running through your system. You'll want to kill me and anyone you can get your hands on. You won't be able to control your rage, and before long, you'll end up killing yourself."

Hunter's body thrummed with anger. But the more he roared and paced, the more the surrounding images became distorted and blurry. He forced himself to relax and with horror; he stood still as he watched Dr. Steven's take a perverse pleasure in sticking the needle into her vein and pushing poison into her system.

A tear dropped onto his hand, and then another. He wiped at them, but the more he tried, the more poured from his eyes. But he gasped in shock when Nerissa threw her head back and screamed the moment the concoction hit her bloodstream.

He couldn't believe his eyes when the liquid became visible in her veins as it spread throughout her body. Her skin crackled and grew whiter. As if they dropped her body into a vat of liquid nitrogen. When the doctor moved to touch her, he flinched back as if something burned him. She was freezing from the inside, out.

Soon, her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell, limp, on the table. He almost screamed until he caught the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. The world faded around the edges, but before the room disappeared, a loud explosion from outside the room shook the computer and jostled Nerissa on the table. She jolted back into consciousness and the room came back into focus.

Nerissa turned and looked toward her left, to where he was standing, but her eyes didn't see him. As Hunter turned, his eyes widened as he caught his own form, dressed in black fatigues, pause by the window outside of the room. His past self pressed his hand to the glass and closed his eyes.

The memories of that exact moment slammed into focus. They were there to rescue the trapped immortals. It was the first time Reaper met Ara. Hunter realized that he sensed something in the room and despite his instincts screaming to check why, he let Ax drag him in the same direction the others had gone.

He wanted to yell out, to kick the shit out of Ax for dragging him away from the room. Fuck, he wanted to punch himself for walking away. A sudden thought had him turning, hoping Nerissa didn't see him, but when he glanced at her, his heart tightened as she stared right through him and her eyes tracked him as he and Ax walked out of sight.

Fuck. That's why she freaked out at the tactical gear.

She spotted him and the others on the worst day of her life, and they left her there.

He understood he was in her memory. His urge to apologize would have to wait until they were back in the real world.

Hunter somewhat relaxed when he realized his physical body was with Nerissa in the real world where he saw her alive and healthy. But in this moment, he wanted to take her pain away.

Moving his gaze back to the injection point, not even a minute since the drug's introduction, he watched how her body reacted to the poison spreading through her. There was a mist coming from her skin, similar to dry ice as the deadly cocktail passed through her veins.

When he had cupped her face back in the real world, he thought her skin was cold because of the weather. Now he knew better.

His mouth dropped open, and he goggled as her hair turned white and her eyes drained of color. A split second later, silver filled her irises and brightened. The glow from the injection faded and only then did Nerissa relax back onto the table with a sigh.

Her eyes searched the room and confusion rushed through him when she smiled. Not understanding her reaction, he took a quick glance around and Dr. Steven's had disappeared. Nerissa tested the bonds and with a small tug, she broke the arm restraints and when she sat up; she did the same with the leather straps around her legs.

As she stepped off the table, Hunter blinked as the room grew fuzzy. When he opened his eyes, he was back in the mountains, kneeling in front of Nerissa in the snow.

"I didn't know I could draw you into my memory. I hate thinking about it, even four



years after it happened.”

“Nerissa... that’s a—”

“No. Neri. It’s only Neri.”

Her voice seemed weak and when he looked into her eyes, the tears he found there almost broke him.

“I’m so sorry for passing by and not finding you in the room when I had the chance. Instead of following my instincts, I allowed you to go through everything alone.”

Neri shook her head before she said, “I don’t understand.”

“I’m a black panther shifter and you, Neri, are my destined mate.”

Her beautiful eyes widened a split second before they rolled back and she fell against his chest, limp.

Well, fuck. That information could have waited until she knew me better.

## Page 5

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“What happened?” Kane asked.

Hunter lifted Neri’s cool body into his arms and cradled her against his chest. He turned to see Kane and Drew looking at him with concern, their eyes darting to Neri and then back to him.

“She drew me into her memory of her creation. She’s a shifter, but Dr. Stevens injected her with the bioweapon mixed with vampire venom, both of which should have killed her. Her skin is cold to the touch, her hair and eyes changed color. Although her smell is both, the shifter scent stands out more.”

“Oh, that’s why. I was wondering why she didn’t smell like you or me.”

“Touch her hand. She’s much cooler than you are.”

Both Drew and Kane reached for her hands and their eyes widened as they felt the temperature difference.

“What does this mean? I mean...”

Hunter’s thoughts clouded as he couldn’t come up with an explanation as he stared at the woman who was the center of his life. “I have no clue, but we should head back and have Liv check her out to see if she’s healthy.”

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### CHAPTER TWO

#### NERI

Neri wondered why the scents surrounding her were different and despite her mind going into panic mode, she tried to catch her breath.

Calm the fuck down, Neri. You are fine. You are not vulnerable anymore. If you need to, you can fight.

As she repeated the words in her head, she calmed herself enough to think.

Every morning she woke to brewed coffee and the distinctive scents of the varieties of wood she worked with during the previous day. They always kept her calm whenever she awoke from the inevitable dreams.

But now, the scents were unfamiliar. And because she had, by choice, kept her interactions with others at a minimum, she couldn't distinguish scents whether they were human or immortal.

She inhaled and when she still didn't identify them; she used her other senses. There were footsteps, several strides, but they weren't an immediate danger to her so she ignored them and tried to tell if anyone was in the room with her.

Neri heard fabric brush together and then scented the panther shifter. Dr. Stevens' was right; she was a failure as a shifter if she couldn't detect someone in the same room as her.

But something inside her chest tingled knowing he, Hunter, was near. She wasn't sure she believed him when he called her his mate, but there was a lot about immortals she didn't understand. And because she didn't sense a threat, she opened her eyes.

Silver eyes similar to the ones she saw in the mirror every morning widened in front of her face and Neri's body flooded with danger warnings. Before she realized she had moved, she found her back pressed in the corner of a room. A fucking glass room. Her eyes darted around, looking for an exit.

"Where did she... Oh?"

When her eyes glanced back to where she had been, she blinked as she took in the smallest woman she'd ever seen. She had to be around five foot even, but her curly brown hair that surrounded her seemed bigger than her actual body.

The woman didn't seem to take offense that Neri had disappeared after opening her eyes because she held her hands out, palms up, as if she wanted to reassure her she wasn't a danger.

I've never seen so many curls on anyone before. And they looked so soft.

Neri shook her head at such inane thoughts that kept circling around how tiny this woman was. The smile looked genuine and Neri relaxed, until someone walked into her peripheral view and she jolted backward, almost hitting her head on the glass behind her.

She blinked again and Hunter came into view. His hand prevented her from smacking her head against the thick glass. And that brought thoughts of her being trapped and scared they might use her for another fucking science experiment. She freaked out again.

Hunter's mouth turned down in confusion and before he opened his mouth to speak, she beat him to it.

"Let me the fuck out of here. Now," she growled.

Neri was hyperventilating. She hated being trapped, even in a house. It's why she had built her house and her workshop with huge bay windows that allowed her to gaze out onto the mountainside whenever she needed to breathe.

For a long time, years even, she wasn't able to sleep inside. Every time she smelled the damp earth or heard the birds in the trees, she understood she was free. But now, she was in a glass enclosure with no exit, and all her senses flooded her body, telling her to get out.

Hunter moved to touch her, and she slapped his hand away. "If you don't open a door in the next five seconds, I will destroy everything in this room. Everything."

The door hissed open. Without waiting, she darted past the others who were standing around and up the stairs and out the first door that looked like it led outside. She had passed them so fast she didn't see their faces. Before she blinked, she found herself outside.

She might be a failure at everything else, but she was fast.

Neri stopped by a tall pine and placed her hand on the rough bark, allowing the bark to dig into her skin and ground herself. She took deep breaths, trying to get her heartbeat back to a normal rhythm and her breathing to slow. She centered herself enough to regain her senses, and after a few minutes, she breathed without taking big, gulping breaths.

Every time panic flooded her system without warning, her thoughts and reason

scattered and her body forgot everything but flight. She had tried meditation and immersion therapy, but there were so many unknowns in life she hadn't been able to tame her first reaction.

When her mind calmed, she blinked open her eyes and froze as she took in the huge mansion in front of her eyes, but it was the group of men and women in front of her that made her freeze.

Hunter stepped toward her, and she relaxed a fraction. But at the first sign of attack, she would run without Hunter.

Despite her recurring thoughts, something about Hunter called to her. Neri leaned toward him and breathed him in. After a few moments; she lay her head on his solid chest.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to feel trapped in Liv's lab."

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Neri shook her head, dismissing his apology. “Even after four years, everything logical flees. I panic and run although part of me knows there isn’t any danger. The weird thing is, adrenaline floods my body because of danger, but my thoughts seize and I can’t push rational thoughts to the forefront.”

Hunter chuckled. “You’re fucking fast, too. I’ve never seen another immortal move that fast. If you hadn’t stopped when you did, I wouldn’t have caught you.”

“It’s the one thing I can do.”

“No!”

Hunter’s declaration had her looking into his eyes for an explanation.

“Just like every human is different, so is every immortal. Because you can’t shift, or whatever bullshit Dr. Stevens filled your head with, doesn’t come into play. He experimented on you for money and prestige, and trust me, he didn’t care whether you shifted. And when I catch up to him, I will rip his limbs off one by one until he dies.”

Neri smiled. She burrowed deeper into Hunter’s chest, sighing as his arms wrapped around her.

“How were you able to get into my memory?”

“I don’t understand it, but I’m sure you pulled me in. It’s new and none of the others had ever heard of it, but it’s because we’re mates.”

“You said before, but what does that mean?”

“The simple explanation is that we belong together. You are essential to my life.”

Something about his words rang true and did a lot to reassure her she’d made the right decision to trust him.

“I will not pressure you into a relationship, but I want to learn everything I can about you and tell you about me, so you can make up your own mind.”

Although his words rang as truthful, Neri noticed he still had the same look he did when he first looked her in the eyes. Confusion, yet tenderness.

“Why do you sound unsure? You look like you want to run away from me but touch me at the same time.”

“Shifters and vampires, or at least from the legends we rely on, can’t become mates.”

Neri’s brow drew down. She was a shifter. Although she never shifted before. She also never craved blood, she ate regular food, and never survived without coffee, so she didn’t understand his belief she was a vampire.

“I’m not sure I am. I don’t drink blood, I don’t even crave a rare steak.”

Instead of answering her, he looked behind his shoulder and Neri remembered their audience she’d forgotten about the moment Hunter came into focus.

“Kai, Liv, Thomas, Isaac, Kane, Seth, and Aubrey, can you step forward?”

Neri sensed movement, but Hunter spoke. She fixed her attention on him.



“Liv is an immunologist. I spoke to her while you slept in the lab and we’ve concluded you are the first shifter vampire hybrid in existence.”

“How?”

“Dr. Stevens and Dr. Ames created a bioweapon based on Liv’s cancer research. She based her research on cell manipulation. That bioweapon, the milky substance in the syringe, caused rage in another immortal. Which explains why he restrained you when he administered it. But it was the vampire venom I worried about. From what we all understood, once vampire venom enters a shifter’s bloodstream, and vice versa, the venom should have been deadly.”

Neri grew more confused at his words. He expected her to die, although he’d been in her memory, and she hadn’t. And the way the others looked, they didn’t understand why she hadn’t either.

“I watched as the transformation as it took place and it looked almost as painful as regular transitions between mates.

“It surprised me because the venom looked as though it mixed with the bioweapon in a way that froze your blood and allowed the venom to make its way into your body and somehow mutated your cells enough it accepted the intrusion.”

Neri remembered every moment. “Burning is all I remember. I wasn’t cold, it was as if my blood was on fire.”

“That’s what it was like for me, but I was burning up.” A beautiful brunette who stood with her back against a massive man said.

“That’s Ara. She’s a wolf shifter along with her mate, Reaper.”

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“Same here.” Another woman with curly brown hair and piercing multicolored eyes said.

“That’s Frost. Her husband, Xander, is the white-haired man next to her.”

By that time, the other vampires were standing behind Hunter.

“You’ve met Liv—”

Neri stiffened when the tiny vampire wrapped her arms around Neri. It surprised her when she hugged Liv back. She was a warm bundle of energy and she smiled at Neri.

“Hi.”

Liv laughed and then reached her arm behind her. The most deadly looking man Neri had ever seen stepped up and all her instincts screamed at her to run. “This is my husband, Kai. He would never hurt you. I promise.”

Still wary and keeping her body in place, she nodded at Kai. He returned the gesture, and it helped Neri relax when he wrapped an arm around Liv’s waist and pulled her close.

The next were Thomas and Isaac, Kane, and then Seth and Aubrey, the sweetest couple out of them all.

As she met each of the vampires, she realized that none of them had white hair like hers. She noticed Xander did, but he was a shifter, and another, quiet man had the

same shock of hair as she did. But since he stood back, she assumed he was a shifter.

After Seth and Aubrey hugged her in welcome, she realized their body temperature was warmer than hers. They weren't hot to the touch, like the shifters, but they were warmer than she was.

"Why am I so cold compared to everyone else?"

Liv cleared her throat and Neri turned her attention toward her.

"Once you left Standard, did you go into a homicidal rage anytime during the months and years after? Have you tried to kill any humans?"

Neri laughed. She doubled over and held her stomach as the innocuous question came from an innocent-looking vampire who she would describe as bubbly.

"Fuck, no. I avoided everyone."

"Have you ever craved blood? Do you even have fangs?"

Neri shook her head and opened her mouth, pulling back her lips for inspection. Liv, who must have trusted her, pulled one of her lips back to view her teeth and hummed.

"Well, that's interesting. You don't have fangs and your skin is cool to the touch, which doesn't happen to any of the others. You don't drink blood, but you also can't shift..."

Neri shrugged. "Pretty much."

"What about before the men captured you at Standard? Do you remember a successful shift?"

“I have no recollection of my past besides the memory I showed Hunter when I was on the table.”

Neri flinched back when she heard gasps around her. Her heart beat calmed when her back pressed against Hunter’s chest. She scented him and it was becoming as familiar as his touch. It was if he imprinted on her. So it was more touch than anything else that kept her grounded. She relaxed back when he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Being this close to Hunter, a rumble passed through her, taking her by surprise. It was almost as though he was purring, or his panther was.

“Are you purring?”

Hunter huffed out a laugh. “I’m happy and so is the panther.”

“Neri?” Liv pulled her attention away from Hunter. “Have you ever run into another shifter or vampire after your transition?”

“No.”

A beautiful auburn-haired woman, leaning back against a giant blond man, spoke next. “What did you do after you escaped?”

Neri flinched as she thought about the first few months by herself. She needed to survive, but saying anything in front of this group of immortals was embarrassing.

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“You don’t have to answer Jade.”

Neri shook her head. “No, it’s fine.” She knew it would be without knowing how.

“For the first couple of weeks, I observed people in town at a distance. I learned about money and stores, cars, homes, well, everything. I have to admit, I stole food and a change of clothes during that time. About a month after I escaped, I found an abandoned farmhouse and barn. I wanted to make sure no one was coming back for the property, so I checked to see anyone had a claim. It was a foreclosure, and the bank thought it a lost cause, so they didn’t even have the land on its books, so I found out the city owned it.”

Neri glanced around and she had their attention. She continued, even though she tried not to panic around so many at one time.

“The barn contained tools and woodworking equipment. I needed to keep busy and make money, so I checked out several books on how to use the machines and I found I had a talent for it and fixing things around the place. Whatever I didn’t know, like plumbing in the old place or electrical issues, I went to the library. But there were never many people around.”

“What did you fix?” Jade asked.

“Well, I didn’t have the money to do anything, so I figured I would create furniture from the wood surrounding the property and sold the pieces online. There is a market for original designs, so after I sold a table and two rocking chairs, I had enough money to put into the farmhouse and the barn.

“I purchased the plot of land with little fuss and I paid back everyone I stole from, without telling them it was me. The first thing I fixed was the plumbing throughout the entire farmhouse. I figured that I would need to reinforce the structure, so I moved onto the outside. I have to admit I put a lot of windows surrounding the house and the barn before I fixed up the rotting boards on both buildings.”

She didn't know if the way she had got the land and the buildings stunned or disgusted them. To shake the dread settling in her stomach, she continued.

“I took about a year to learn everything I needed to start a successful online business, to set up a supplier for the materials, and purchase a used truck to take the shipments into town. Other than the occasional run into town to mail out the pieces, I stay to myself.”

Liv cleared her throat.

“Oh, and I searched for Dr. Stevens and even went back to Standard to see if there was anyone else, but they abandoned that division and destroyed the records. I don't think Stevens is even his last name.”

Jade's brows drew down. She glanced at the bright red haired man at the corner of the group, the one who had been with Hunter when she ran into them, before looking back at her.

“Have you tried to find out about your past? Before Standard?”

“I did, at the library. When that was fruitless, I hired a two PI's on each coast and they found no one missing in the States or the world matching my description.”

“It could be the same asshole that cleared evidence of Ara's past? But he's dead, and I never found out how he made that happen,” Xander said.

A huge honey blond man sauntered toward her and Hunter and for a reason she couldn't contemplate, set her teeth on edge.

"He could have hired himself a hacker that isn't dead."

The man winked at her and she snarled at the outright flirting coming from the man. It didn't make him pause, so she spoke.

"If you come any closer, I'll rip your fucking balls off."

Neri, used to being alone, was becoming overwhelmed by the bodies pressing in on her. The words came out harsher than they otherwise would have. But if she had one more person come closer, she would run. The only reason she hadn't fled was Hunter's hold on her.

"It's been a long day. I'll take Neri home so we can talk." Hunter stated.

Liv bit her lip at Hunter's statement and Neri, sensing she wanted to ask something, reached for her arm. "What is it?"

"I hate to ask?"

"It's fine. The worst thing that could happen is I say no." Neri smiled at the woman she realized she liked after their short acquaintance.

"Can I draw your blood to study sometime?"

"Oh, yeah. I don't have to do it down in your glass prison, do I?"

Liv laughed and the tinkling sound had Neri smiling. "Wherever you're most comfortable. Hunter will let me know when you're ready and I'll come see you."

“Okay.”

Although she should have expected it, Liv pulled her in for another hug.



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“It was nice to meet all of you.” Neri, while overwhelmed, choked out the words.

There was a chorus of goodbyes as Hunter walked them to an expensive-looking SUV and help her into the passenger side. When he slid into the driver’s side, she couldn’t help glancing at him, taking him in.

“I figured you would want to go home after the overwhelming afternoon. I know I invited myself, but is okay we head to your place?”

“No, I don’t mind you coming to see where I live. Thank you.”

Hunter huffed out a laugh. “At the best of times, the group can be too much and if you aren’t used to them, even more so. And it was funny as hell when you threatened to rip Axel’s balls off. You took him by surprise.”

“I don’t think it was him as much as the day. Today I’ve been around more people than the entire four years on my own. You’ll find I’m as different as they come.”

“I would say unique and beautiful.”

Neri blinked at him and searched Hunter’s face for the truth, and when he turned to catch her gaze, she could see nothing but the truth.

“You are beautiful, and brilliant, resourceful, and fast as all get out.” Hunter chuckled.

“I don’t know what I look like. I haven’t bothered purchasing a mirror. It seemed

unimportant while I was trying to survive.”

In her world, she never thought about beauty much. She took a moment and gazed at Hunter’s long tanned arm draped over the steering wheel, over his wide shoulders, down to his taut stomach and chest defined in the tight black tee he wore. Along with his piercing green eyes, she thought Hunter was spectacular. If something attracted him to her and her quirks, then she was lucky they’d met.

“Thank you.”

“It’s the truth.”

Neri, now safe with Hunter, closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. She tried to figure out a reason she felt this pull toward Hunter. She wanted to touch him and thinking he might have read her mind, not that it would have surprised her anymore today, laced their fingers together.

Her normal reaction would be fear and self-preservation, but with Hunter, she could relax for the first time since she could remember. Knowing she would never solve it without spending time with the panther shifter, opened her eyes and pointed out the road that led to her place.

“The dirt road isn’t smooth, but I make it okay with my forty-year-old pickup.”

“Was it in good condition when you bought it?”

Neri laughed. “No. There was rust in the tire wells and one fender, all of it I replaced. I had to reupholster the seats and purchase a new battery, starter, alternator, and spark plugs, but everything else worked. It’s a tough little truck and I love it.”

Hunter searched her face. Then he shook his head as if to clear it. “When you’re not

building furniture, fixing up your house and barn, or fixing your truck, what do you do?”

For reasons unknown to her, Neri warmed at the thought Hunter wanted to get to know her.

“I read. Anything I can check out of the library or download and read on my laptop. I love fiction, biographies, how-to manuals, anything as long as I can learn about the world and how it works.”

She clenched her teeth as the road jostled them back and forth and she cringed at the sound of metal scraping against a rock. Before she could suggest they walk the rest of the way, Hunter powered through and soon they parked in front of her house.

Neri watched Hunter’s gaze as he looked over at her barn, where she built the furniture she sold and drifted over to her home. His eyes were wide as he held his breath. Curious, she looked over her land with fresh eyes, but all she sensed was peace and home.

“The barn was already a sound structure. But I found after I escaped I needed to see outside, to be close as I could get to the wilderness which is why I installed the sliding doors that open an entire side of the barn.”

“Can you show me your work?” Hunter asked.

She smiled and nodded.

Neri opened the door and hopped out of the SUV, waiting at the front until Hunter came around the hood. He surprised her again by holding his hand out, this time allowing her to make the first move. Without hesitation, she slid her fingers between his and pressed their palms together.

It wasn't until she showed Hunter her designs she realized how lonely and closed off she had become. Everything instinct inside her screamed at her to get closer to Hunter, and not only because he said she was his mate. She wanted to know everything about the man, his panther, and his life.

With her mind made up to go with her instincts, she walked toward the one space she felt safest with the man who was becoming integral to her life.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### HUNTER

It took a lot to impress Hunter this far into his immortality. But the dark green structures that composed of Neri's house and workshop fascinated him. He realized she hadn't been kidding when she noticed the amount windows she had installed in both the barn and the farmhouse.

In the barn, the top third of the building was all glass, while the house had traditional sash windows painted in bright white, contrasting with the green of the house. There were a variety of bushes, potted plants and flowers, and tall pines insulating the area. As though the world outside was separate from this magical one he entered.

Neri scent surrounded the area. He detected lemongrass, orange, and a slight hint of oak and he relaxed for the first time since he spotted her.

He didn't care she was part vampire. The more he learned about her and became immersed in her world, the less it mattered.

Hunter smiled when Neri didn't hesitate to take his hand. But it faltered as he remembered how fast she'd been when she ran out of Liv's laboratory and outside. If she hadn't stopped... he didn't let himself wonder further. But she'd stopped. Allowed him to touch her, to hold her close.

Whenever another immortal had found their mate, Hunter didn't understand when they spoke of needing to be close to them. Aware of their physical presence and their

emotional well-being. Hunter, not mated yet, had never understood and hadn't wanted to. But he understood now, all too well, and inside was a swirl of happiness and fear.

Fear someone would take her away from him right after he'd found her, on top of the fear she would reject him. And fear he could kill her if he tried to mark her as his mate.

Would she want that? Would her bite be deadly? I would rather risk myself than her.

As he was deep in thought, Neri pulled him toward the barn that doubled as her workshop. The barn doors weren't typical and when Neri walked to a side panel and swiped her finger along an access pad, it exposed a number panel.

She entered a sixteen digit code, no sounds coming from the box as she pressed the buttons. When she pressed a green button, Hunter heard hydraulics kick in and the two steel, not wooden, doors slid open.

The entire structure looked wooden from the outside, but it wasn't until you stepped inside and glanced up that it revealed steel beams running through the place. There were thick windows near the ceiling surrounding the entire building, flooding the open space with plenty of light and when he glanced around, he could see the south side of the barn contained supplies; stacks of wood in various sizes, nails, screws, hinges categorized below a tool wall that contained some Hunter couldn't identify. There were machines and although the smell of wood and sawdust was prevalent, the area was tidy.

His gaze found the area with finished tables, chairs, and stools already finished. Without realizing his actions, he pressed his palm against the cool surface and ran his hand over the varnished wood.

She created each piece with different varieties of wood, blending them together to make every piece distinct.

“They are beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

Hunter glanced up. “Are each one of them already sold?”

“I don’t start an order until it’s placed and paid for.” Neri paused and glanced at him. “You never told me what you did for a living. Is okay to ask you?”

Hunter took her hand and squeezed. “Why don’t we sit down and I’ll tell you everything.”

“Let’s go up to the house and I can get us something to drink.” Neri, without letting go of his hand, led the way out of the barn, taking time to close the doors and set the alarm, before she started toward the house.

The structure was even more beautiful than he’d imagined. There were plants and flowers in hanging baskets scattered around the windows, and pots filled with greenery in almost every corner of the huge bottom floor. She painted each wall a different bright, vibrant color that complimented the wooden furniture placed throughout the room.

Hunter moved his gaze toward the kitchen and noted the modern appliances, a huge refrigerator, ovens, two farmhouse sinks, and a walk-in pantry.

“It fits you.”

Neri gave him a smile that made his heart beat faster. She pointed to the dining room

table. “What would you like to drink? I have coffee, tea, and soda.”

Hunter asked for a soda and she poured herself an iced tea before she joined him at the table.

“Well, I suppose I should start from the beginning. I was born in 1921 in California. There wasn’t anything spectacular about my upbringing or my parents. But by 1940, I grew restless in with my life and wanted to travel. My parents wanted me to get married and have kids, but I wasn’t ready. I visited Arches National Park in Utah and several smaller parks between California and Colorado. But someone attacked me one night after I pitched a tent in Rocky Mountain National Park.”

Neri’s eyes widened and her breathing came in pants. “Do you remember your transition?”

“Yeah, everything about it. The worst pain I experienced was when their teeth punctured my jugular vein. They tore through the sinew in my neck. I’m sure I’m being dramatic, but it felt like it, anyway. During the transition, all I thought about was the pain from the bite and I wondered if I would die.”

“Do you know who did it?”



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Hunter shook his head. “They attacked me when I was facing the tent, but then again, most of the shifters and vampires who transitioned wouldn’t recognize the face of their attacker. Ara, Liv, Seth, Frost, and Noah were all turned by their mate. Well, Noah was first bitten by Drew, Jade’s brother, and to prevent him from dying because his venom didn’t take, Jade bit him again. He pulled through because of Jade’s quick thinking.”

“Did they experience the pain of the transition like you had?”

“Yeah. Three days of torture for their mates. Since you don’t remember, they describe it as having the worst flu symptoms imaginable. Bones ache accompanied by a high fever controlled by cold, damp towels. The pain explodes throughout, even from a light brush against their skin. But being near their mates helped as they kept their skin cool with wet towels and cold baths.”

Neri shivered and her eyes became hard. “Why would they go through with it if it hurts so much?”

“Immortals, while we live forever, have found it rare to find their mates. If they are lucky enough to recognize their mate and commit, the one destined for them has been human. Frost was the exception; born half shifter and half human. To stay together, they will go through whatever pain they need to to be with the one person meant for them.” Hunter believed his words, now he found his mate.

“How do you know? I’m not human, but an immortal and a hybrid at that. You and every other immortal understands my venom is deadly to you. I think... well you made a mistake.”

Hunter shook his head. “I felt you before I spotted you in the trees. My body, well, my panther recognized you and every instinct inside me screamed ‘she’s mine.’ But there one true way we can tell.”

He watched Neri during his explanation and noted her silver eyes were wide and her pulse sped up, leaning forward to absorb his words. Hunter looked into her eyes and without hesitation, spoke to her.

Like this.

Her brows drew down in confusion. “What, you said like this, I don’t—” Neri’s eyes widened and she sucked in a breath. “In my head, you spoke in my head.”

Immortals can learn to mind link with others who aren’t their mates. But it takes a lot of effort and training. I can mind link to the other assassins because we’ve been working together for decades. But with mates, human and as it seems immortal alike, communication is easy.

Neri glanced down at the glass in her hand, the ice leaving condensation as the drink sat untouched as they spoke. She ran one finger down the beads until the moisture pooled on the table. She glanced up and captured his gaze in her own.

Can you... hear me?

Hunter nodded. “Yes, as clear as day.”

Fucking cool! She beamed at him.

He laughed at her enthusiasm and hoped it would translate into her trusting him. But as her eyes moved from his and onto his black tactical gear, he knew she remembered back to when he should have rescued her.

“Why are you dressed like that?” Her head nodded toward his chest, but her hands never left the glass she clutched onto.

Unable to stay away, he reached for her hands, holding his palms up on the table and was almost surprised when she moved them into his. He loved how her cool skin, still the same temperature after several minutes of him warming her hands, pressed into his overheated ones.

“The other man with the shock white hair who didn’t speak today, he’s a white wolf shifter named Ghost. He founded Dark Company in 1920. We, those who Ghost employ, are all immortals and we’re hired assassins under government contract.”

Hunter didn’t let go of her as he searched her face for her reaction. She swallowed, uncomfortable by this news, but she didn’t run away. He wanted to rush in and explain, but he waited for Neri to think over the implications before he answered questions she may have in her own time. One good sign was she didn’t pull away, but she dropped her head. He knew her a little by now to realize she did that when she thought things through.

“Were all of you, the assassins, there when I woke?”

“Not all of my family are assassins. Liv works in her lab, trying to figure out how immortality differs so much from human DNA and how it’s even possible. She is also trying to figure out how Ara has enhanced telekinesis and healing powers, both of which she had when she was human but increased tenfold since her transition.”

Hunter paused when Neri’s brows bunched. When she gave him a small nod of acceptance, he continued.

“Since Frost is half shifter and half human, Liv is researching the probabilities of the occurrence and after Frost transitioned to full shifter, how pregnancy became a viable

option when no other immortal can conceive. I'm surprised she didn't rush down to her lab to grab a syringe and draw your blood outside today. She's brilliant, but her need to research how you've become a half shifter and half vampire will consume her."

"Is that healthy?" Neri asked.

Hunter shook his head. "But Kai is there to remind her there's more to life than work."

"So...Frost isn't an assassin?"

"Frost was never interested in becoming one either. She takes care of Silas, her son, who seems to grow in power every day. He'll want to meet you. He's curious about the world and has powers of his own. You'll see when you're introduced. And Seth and Aubrey aren't assassins. They are working to figure out what they want to do by taking college courses and spending time with one another."

Hunter took a breath for Neri to process all of this information.

"Reaper's mate, Ara, and Jade's mate, Noah, became assassins to work with their mates and keep them safe."

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“Do I...”

Hunter shook his head. “It’s a choice. If you wanted me to quit, I would. But the assassins are my family and I don’t want to cut ties with them.”

Even as Hunter spoke about his family, Neri was shaking her head. “No, I would never judge you or your family for their decisions. But it explains how all of them reacted when I explained my past, or the parts I remember, anyway. I know you and the others aren’t indiscriminate murderers. This is what you do, not who you are.”

Hunter relaxed at her words.

“Ghost has had one point of contact since he started Dark Company and all orders come from that person. When the contact retires, they assign a successor. It’s worked for a hundred years. We still verify every target with a thorough background check and surveillance. So yes, all those we eliminated are threats to natural security or worse.”

“Do you shift to kill?”

“Most of the time, unless we’re outdoors and have a long way to trek in the mountains or somewhere remote, we don’t shift. We dress in tactical gear or try to blend in, making sure the target is alone and there will be no chance of collateral damage.”

Neri became lost in thought as his eyes traced the shape of her cheeks, down to her chin, her throat, and back up to her eyes. Hunter knew then he couldn’t care less

about her vampire side, she was his.

“Why were you and the others there?”

He cleared his throat before he began, worried about her reaction.

“Liv worked at Standard. She got her Ph.D. in immunology, but she worked on cancer research. Her sister, Molly, died of leukemia at seventeen and Liv worked for years to find a cure. One night, she stumbled onto a sample of the bioweapon made from her perverted cancer research. They recorded a scientist injecting a shifter with the bioweapon and Liv found it along with the formula.”

He paused as he recalled the images and sounds he wanted to forget. “It caused rage, and he killed the unlucky scientists. After, his rage didn’t subside, he killed himself. She smuggled proof out of Standard, after destroying their bioweapon, but after today we know not all of it was.”

Hunter remembered what Neri had gone through. Her screams echoing in his mind, but she squeezed his hand. He shook himself out of the memory and glanced up. She gave him a small smile, giving him the strength to continue.

“Liv found Kai and passed on the information. Ghost ordered Kai to protect her and he balked. At the time he denied to himself and to Liv that she was his mate. She worked on an antidote until she succeeded. But before she administered it, Kane kidnapped her. He was a pawn blackmailed by Dr. Ames who held his mate and wife hostage. We learned when we rescued Liv that he’d kill Kane’s mate. Kai turned her when the doctors told him she was brain dead after Dr. Ames tortured her for hours.”

Hunter squeezed Neri’s hand, happy she hadn’t pulled away.

“We were at Standard because Liv believed they were holding more immortals as test

subjects. That was when Reaper found Ara. And I walked past you instead of saving you.”

“Hunter, no. I believe everything happens for a reason. We’re here now. It meant those years were for something else, for both of us. We are immortal and we have forever.”

His heart leapt in his chest and he stumbled over his next words. “I like the sound of that. Are you... willing to get to know me and see where this leads?”

“I would like that.”

“There’s more I need to tell you, but I don’t want you to change your mind about us. You might be in danger because of our profession.”

Neri lifted a brow but waited.

“When Xander found Frost early last year, there was a shifter, Anzû, who wanted Frost as his mate. Not only that, he wanted to take over Dark Company and kill all of us to get it. Frost killed him when he threatened her son. It’s become clear they have a new leader and several factions of shifters willing to kill us for power. The shifters we killed in the clearing yesterday were part of that group.”

Taking him by surprise, Neri shrugged. “With any life there is a danger. While I’ve avoided everyone for the past four years by choice, I’ve also been lonely. I would rather be your mate and a friend to the others than to be alone. It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Can I kiss you?”

He smiled as her eyes widened and her gaze dropped to his lips.

“I’ve... I don’t...”

His hand cupped her cheek, and she trailed off. “We don’t have to if—”

He stopped talking and his breathing stuttered when she darted forward and pressed their lips together. Her tentative movements had him groaning into her mouth when he opened for her tongue. He grew lightheaded as his cock swelled to throbbing within seconds.

Hunter tilted his head and licked her bottom lip, loving the gasp of pleasure that parted her lips, giving him access to her mouth. Instead of delving inside, he suckled her bottom lip, licking the sensitive skin just behind the soft curve of her lip. She shivered and moaned, giving Hunter permission and he deepened the kiss.

Her arousal teased his nose and along with the beat of her pulse against his skin as she held onto him had him swaying with desire. His hands grasped her hips to hold her in place, not wanting to scare her if she pressed against him and found his erection.



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But he should have predicted Neri would explore him further and not hold back.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and slid forward until her scorching heat brushed against his cock, drawing a long, low moan from deep inside his chest.

“Nothing has ever felt as good as you pressed against me.”

As if his words egged her on, she rolled her hips, pressing and rubbing against his clothed cock, making him jump in his rough polyester tactical pants as a fierce rush of pleasure passed through him.

“Hunter!”

He brought their mouths together, each devouring the other, until she tensed in his arms. He scented her orgasm before she ripped her mouth away from his, throwing her head back and screaming his name.

Hunter soon followed as her hips continued to move back and forth as her orgasm overwhelmed her. He clutched her close, bringing his face to press against her neck near her collarbone, and for a fleeting moment, he wanted to mark her as his. He clamped his mouth shut but continued to inhale against the soft skin of her neck, scenting his mate.

Until he learned what would happen to her, he couldn't mark her as his. Yet.

“Is it too forward of me to ask you if I could stay with you tonight?”

Neri chuckled. “I don’t want to let you out of my sight now I’ve found you. Or you’ve found me.”

Hunter hugged her close and savored her sigh. He pulled back and gazed at her when she cleared her throat, obviously a nervous gesture.

“Why don’t you shower? Just drop your clothes outside the door and I’ll wash them before I take one myself.”

“I guess we’re not at the walk around naked in front of each other stage,” he teased.

Neri blushed and Hunter loved the stain spreading on her cheeks. He brushed a kiss against her lips.

“I was kidding. There’s no rush and no pressure.”

He stood and set her on her feet before he kissed the tip of her nose. She smiled at him and he forced his eyes away from his mate. He turned toward the hallway and headed toward the bathroom. Before he crossed the threshold, he pulled his tee over his head and dropped it on the ground.

“Holy shit,” Neri whispered.

Hunter turned around, unable to stop himself, and caught her gaze before he gave her a small wink. His actions caused the blush that erupted on her cheeks.

“You can touch me anytime, even if you want to experiment. I promise I won’t do anything you don’t want to do. So when you’re ready, we’ll explore the physical side to our relationship.”

Neri smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving me hope for the first time in my life, knowing I won’t be alone for the rest of my existence.”

“Trust me. It’s the same way for me, angel.”

He heard Neri’s breathing rush out in a huff at his endearment. To protect her from the desire rushing through him, he stepped into the room and with one last smile, shut the door and blocked her from his view. He took a few minutes to calm his body, his need, before he shucked the rest of his clothes and deposited them outside without flashing more skin.

Hunter started the shower and stepped under the hot spray, relaxing as the water sluiced over his already heated skin.

He found his mate.

His smile widened. He’d never, not once since his transition, pictured a mate or wondered whether he would find her. The odds were against him.

Until now, he hadn’t realized there was a warmth that pulsed beneath his skin and that part yearned for his mate. He’d found her and the pulsing had calmed into a contentment he’d never felt before. And he would protect her with all he was and everything he had.

With that last thought rattling around his mind, he hurried through his shower because his destiny was right outside the door.

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### NERI

After her escape, Neri had never enjoyed the touch of others, even a casual brush of shoulders as they passed in the aisles of a store. And she sure as shit had never slept next to anyone before. Despite all of her instincts, she found herself relaxed when Hunter, his fresh scent washing over her, slid into the bed clad only in his boxer briefs. She had used the shower in the guest room before she changed into a long-sleeved shirt and pink and black flannel pajamas, but as her gaze traveled over his muscled chest, she tugged at the hem of her shirt in a nervous gesture, aware of her desire for him.

Wow, he's beautiful.

Neri's cheeks heated, but that didn't stop her gaze from tracing over every inch of his olive skin and sculpted muscles as he moved. Hunter, who called to her in ways she had yet to understand, was the most gorgeous man she'd ever come across. But it was his protectiveness and his assuredness that allowed her to conclude she was his mate.

As he lay down, she relaxed back on her pillow and a flash of memory came to the forefront. Instead of forcing it away, she concentrated on it.

Fear flooded her as she watched a little girl; her long brown hair tied up in pigtails, dash off as if someone was chasing her. Neri caught sight of the dread etched on the girl's face and she searched for the person chasing her. Before she caught a glimpse, the memory faded.

Without realizing, Neri had leapt out of bed and stood next to it, her back ramrod straight and her fist clenched at her sides. Hands gripped her shoulders and as she came back to awareness, she blinked and looked up at Hunter, who had concern etched on his face.

Neri swallowed and then cleared her throat before she explained what she had seen and sensed.

“I promise, we and the other assassins will help investigate your past and we’ll find out what happened to her.”

With his words, something inside Neri relaxed. Hunter would do everything he could to help her.

Hunter searched her face and Neri watched his gaze study the dark circles under her eyes from years of fitful sleep, always dotted with nightmares so she hadn’t slept an entire night straight through.

“Let’s sleep and we’ll search tomorrow.”

With heavy steps, Neri walked toward the bed and dropped next to Hunter after he pulled down the covers. As she moved to lay her head on her pillow, Hunter maneuvered her to lay her head on his chest as he wrapped her close in his arms.

Neri burrowed closer to his warmth as it infused into her cold skin. She hummed as she clung to him. He let out a breath, and she remembered, too late, that her skin was cold to the touch and she tried to pull back. Hunter stopped her movements by opening his hand on her back.

“I like your cool skin on mine. We shifters run hot. It’s half the reason we live in the mountains.”

Hunter cupped her cheek and continued.

“You are perfect the way you are.”

“Odd, you mean. A freak.”

“No, no angel, you are not a freak. Each immortal is different, each with rare abilities and skill sets. There is nothing wrong with being you.”

She grew quiet as she mulled over Hunter’s words.

Although she had limited interactions and conversations with other people and trusted none, she trusted Hunter.

“Even though I remember nothing from before my transition, I can sense when I’m in danger. When it happens, I find myself in another place before I can blink.

“I never allowed myself to get close to anyone. I have that sense that even in the life I had before I found myself imprisoned, I shut myself off and I have no clue what normal behavior is. But the doctor said I was disposable, and I found no evidence anyone ever wanted me to bother enough to search for me, so I couldn’t help conclude he was right.”

Hunter’s expression grew sad as he stroked his hand up and down her arm, warming her skin.

“Immortality is a second chance in life. Some remember their past and some don’t but all that matters is we found each other. So now you have a mate and by default, a nosy, loud, and deadly family who protects their own and will butt into our lives any chance they get, but they mean well. And we’ll find the answers you need. But know this...”

Neri, who had been staring into Hunter's eyes and watching them spark with emotion as he spoke, blinked away tears that threatened to spill over. "What?"

"Nothing we find will change things between us. You are mine and I, my angel, belong to you."

Overwhelmed by strange emotions that flooded through her, she took a moment to calm her emotions enough to speak. As she opened her mouth to respond, there were several loud clanks in succession.

Something had tripped her motion sensors.

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The ten different pairs of flood lights surrounding her house and her workshop were illuminating the grounds.

Neri blinked and was out of the bed in the next second, opening the lid of her laptop and pressing the spacebar to wake it up. Once she logged in, she clicked open the surveillance system and moved from one camera to the other until she stopped at a group of men clustered around the front of her house. She counted fifteen men, all dressed head to toe in black.

With her eyes focused on the screen to see if there were any others around, she heard Hunter pulling on his clothes. She followed the group around the side of the house as they searched for a vulnerability in her security.

“Good luck, motherfuckers,” Neri sneered.

Her eyes moved from the screen when Hunter clicked the magazine out of his Glock, checking to see if it was full, before he slammed the magazine back in place and cocked the gun. He reached for her clothing and threw the garments toward her.

She caught them with ease and slid on a hoodie and a new pair of jeans, but when she looked up, she noticed the heat in his eyes. He shook his head to clear whatever thoughts were whirling around in his head. After she dressed, he pulled out a sleek black cell from his pocket and glanced up to catch her gaze.

“Do you remember how to get to Kai and Liv’s house?”

She nodded.



“Go there. I’ll call for reinforcements and when it’s over, I’ll come and get you.”

Everything deep inside Neri screamed at her to stay. But reason kicked in at the last second. Hunter worried for her safety and his focus needed to be in the fight.

So when she heard the click and someone spoke, she nodded.

Before she gathered her thoughts completely, she stood in the next to a copse of pine trees in the dark. When she glanced to the right, she noticed Reaper and Kai, somehow remembering their names with the panic of the situation flashing through her mind.

“Fuck.Fuck!”

Neri hated herself in that moment. She had left Hunter vulnerable and alone.

Reaper jumped and glanced at her. “Where the fuck did you come from?”

She growled at him. “Questions later, but first, I need a weapon.”

“Okay,” Kai said and pressed end.

Reaper must have noticed her expression because he reached behind him and pulled out a blade. He held it out for her and she wrapped her left hand around the thick rubber handle.

“It’s a tactical knife, nine and three-quarter inches long.”

She nodded her thanks, not understanding what he said. “Are you two coming?”

“Yes,” Both answered at the same time.

Without knowing how she pulled it off, she sheathed the knife and shoved it in her back pocket before she reached for both Kai and Reaper's forearms. She closed her eyes and pictured the woods near her house, far enough away they would be hard to spot.

When she blinked her eyes open, she found herself, Kai, and Reaper a hundred yards from her home and they heard sounds of fighting behind the house, near her workshop. Without saying a word, she advanced toward where she knew Hunter would be.

She scanned the area. Four shifters were already dead, and she unsheathed Reaper's knife and removed each of their heads with precision. As she glanced up, she noticed Hunter standing there, feet balanced apart with his hands behind his back, as he waited for the three shifters advancing on his position.

Were the others dead or were they laying a trap?

Fury. Pulsing, red hot fury surged through her and she ran without a conscious decision to do so and jumped on the back of the first unsuspecting shifter. She pressed the knife to the right side of his neck underneath his ear and with heavy pressure; she cut his neck from ear to ear. Then she pressed her fingers into the gaping wound and ripped the shifter's head from his body.

That was easy.

She pushed off the now decapitated body and found the next shifter in her sights. This one was a fighter as he shifted his stance and waved her on with a hand. Without knowing what she was doing, she walked closer, and he punched her in the face.

She snarled as he made contact and her head snapped back.

There was no pain, only violent rage. The snarl turned into a vicious growl as she stared at the shifter. The next moment, a bitter liquid flooded her mouth. She jerked in surprise. When she flicked her tongue to investigate the taste, it ran over one sharp fang and then the other.

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She launched herself at the shifter who had the nerve to strike her and sunk her teeth into his neck. The flow from her teeth sent a surge of triumph through her and she hung on as the shifter screamed and thrashed to get away from her. She ripped her teeth from his neck and leapt off the shifter, landing with ease several feet away.

Neri glanced around, searching for the next threat, only to see all the shifters dead and decapitated around her. When she found Hunter, she almost flinched back because he, along with Kai and Reaper, were staring at her with an unreadable expression.

She noticed blood on Hunter's cheek and darted forward. "Are you hurt?"

Hunter, with a stunned look on his face, shook his head and mumbled, "Not mine."

"Holy shit," Reaper said.

Neri jumped at Reaper's deep exclamation. She turned to him and noticed his mouth was open in surprise.

"We can send Neri and Ara on assignments from now on, because damn if I'm not obsolete," Kai said.

She shook her head, but Hunter explained.

"Neri has no desire to become an assassin."

"Why not?" Reaper asked.

“I like creating pieces with my own hands that are useful and I don’t want to kill, even with cause. Seeing these shifters attacking Hunter... well, it was necessary.”

Kai cleared his throat. “Speaking of which, how did they track you here? Unless they had someone outside my house waiting to follow you.”

“Yeah, they could have attacked us at Kai’s. They’ve shown from past actions they have no problem attacking us where we live. But since they waited until you two were alone, they want Neri,” Reaper said.

She shook her head, disbelieving. “Why would they be after me?”

The three men glanced down at the shifter she’d bitten and when she followed their gazes, she gasped and jumped back, slamming against Hunter’s hard body.

Her gaze drifted to the dead shifter’s body. To her, it seemed as if the blood had burned in his veins before they had sunken into his skin. There were deep rivers of black carved on the surface, up to his neck, and looking grotesque over his cheeks and forehead. His mouth opened in a silent scream and she shivered and glanced away.

“Someone knows you’re a vampire shifter hybrid and they want to take advantage of that knowledge.”

“Until tonight, I had no clue I had fangs. There was a bitter taste of venom on my tongue and I jumped on him. But if I have vampire venom and I’m a shifter, why am I not dead like him? And why would I be helpful to them?”

The lonely hole that had grown over the years in her chest seemed to expand at the silence.

Hunter moved closer to her, but she stepped away, holding her hands up and shaking her head.

“You should fear me. Look what I did to him, he’s a shifter.”

“I already had that internal debate for a split second but trust me, Neri, I’m not scared of you.”

Neri’s chest throbbed in pain at his words. “What do you mean an internal debate?”

“No, it’s not what you think.” He stepped forward and cupped her face.

“Listen, you are not alone and I don’t care you are half vampire. You are still my mate and I’m not going anywhere. Liv will draw your blood and we will research until we find the answers, but this changes nothing between us. I’ll prove to you you will never have to be alone again. And I hope to erase that painful look on your face forever,” Hunter said.

Kai cleared his throat. She tore her eyes away from Hunter to look at him. “We don’t care about your past, but we will do everything we can to find out about your life before you found yourself at Standard. It’s about time we found out about the players behind the scenes of that fucking place. You are family now, Neri, and we protect our own.”

Reaper nodded in agreement.

“Thank you.”

Both men nodded before they disappeared through the trees, leaving her alone with Hunter. He reached for her hand and led her inside, securing the house, before they walked over to the couch and sat.

“We have regenerative healing along with enhanced strength, speed, and stealth but it’s only within the past few years that the concept of mates became a reality and some have abilities and strengths beyond the norm. And Frost, while an immortal, is the only one who can get pregnant. Silas is special in his own way, the first child born from two immortals.

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“But we never tested the fact shifters and vampires can’t mate. We know vampires have silver eyes. Your features are distinct, so is your scent. After being in your memory and getting to know you, I don’t care you’re a vampire.”

Hunter’s words rang truthful, and he wouldn’t lie to her, even if it hurt her. But she had thousands of questions running through her head, but one stood out.

“What if I bite you, injected you with my venom?”

Neri held her breath as she waited for Hunter’s answer. There was a pain, maybe something more, spreading through her chest.

“After years of observation, fate does not make mistakes. Kai was the first to find Liv. Until we learned from experience, there was one person made for us and us for them, it was a theory.”

Hunter squeezed her hand and warmth rushed through her.

“Kai fought his feelings for Liv, to the point he almost lost her. Reaper knew Ara was his the moment he laid eyes on her, but she disappeared from Standard during the rescue. She admitted her need for Reaper, but all her instincts told her to run and she followed them. Seth was young and human when he met Aubrey in class and although she hesitated to change him because her transition was horrid and she didn’t want to hurt him, he didn’t care as long as he could be with her forever. Xander, he is the exception to all of us. While we, including me, believed we weren’t as lucky as the others to have a mate of our own, Xander wanted a mate and never stopped hoping he would find his. Jade was like me, not actively looking for her mate, but



knew Noah was hers the moment they met.

“All the mates were brilliant in their own way, but Frost was born half shifter and half human. When she transitioned, her body kept the human ability to bear children. When they had Silas, something wondrous happened to change everything we believed, because Silas is special. He shifted within a few months of his birth, he can mind link with everyone, and he’s strong. When you meet him, you’ll see.”

Hunter took her by surprise by leaning forward and kissing her. Without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and lost herself in the new and exciting sensation of Hunter’s mouth on hers. As they broke the kiss, their breathing choppy, Hunter held her close. She relaxed against when he ran his fingers through her long hair, letting go of the tension that racked her body since the alarm.

“There is no rhyme or reason for how or why we meet our mates when we do, but all I know is that the reasons don’t matter because I found you. Every cell in my being tells me you are mine. I want to protect you. And despite knowing your half vampire, the fact doesn’t make me hesitate to touch you, it makes me proud you are my mate. Every other thing we will maneuver through together by trial and error, but I think that’s typical of most relationships.”

Neri, despite Hunter’s words cracking the shell of fear, the image of the shifter dying from her venom wouldn’t budge from her thoughts. She must have sent the image through their mind link because his hold tightened, bringing her out of her spiraling thoughts.

“Death is an aspect of my world that hasn’t bothered me for a long time. But that will not happen to us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Both shifter and vampires inject venom into their mates to start the transition and we mark our mates with a bite on their neck where the shoulder meets the collarbone. There is a way for you to mark me and me to mark you without introducing our venom.”

Hunter paused and Neri bit her bottom lip, waiting.

“Do you feel our connection?”

“Yes,” she breathed out. “I want to touch you, hold you close, and I’ve never felt such pure rage when I saw those shifters surrounding you, trying to hurt you. Lying in bed, in your arms for that short while... well, I’ve never felt so relaxed and happy.”

His intense green eyes searched her face before he nodded. She knew he would understand.

“That is why I sent you to Kai and the others. It’s too painful to think someone is out to get you, but I get murderous when I realize I brought them to your doorstep.”

Neri shook her head. “It was only a matter of time. I was searching for them first, and I would rather know why they are after me and face the problem head on than wait around to see what they have planned for me.”

“I’m tired of this shit, so yeah, I agree with you.”

They grew quiet for a while, lost in their own thoughts. The impact of finding her mate, of having someone with her for the rest of her life, brought a small smile to her lips.

“There is no rule book, but you and me, we are in this together from now on. You are

my mate and I am yours. Answers to all of our questions will come in time.”

Neri trusted Hunter and wanted everything to work out between them.

Without hesitation, she whispered, “Okay.”

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### HUNTER

Despite the second relaxing shower to wash off the blood and sweat from their fight and laying in bed listening to Neri's soft breathing as she slept in his arms, Hunter couldn't shake the rage at the shifters coming after her, invading the space where she built a life for herself. Every time he closed his eyes, he pictured the shifters advancing on him, searching the area and trying to scent her nearby.

Why are they after her?

He tried to understand their advantage if they kidnapped Neri, knowing she's half vampire. They made their disgust obvious whenever they fought the assassins, zeroing in on Kai, Kane, Thomas, and Isaac and doing their utmost to stay out of their path whenever they fought. The vampires had never contemplated biting the shifters they fought against because of the unknown effects if they ingested shifter blood and they never left themselves vulnerable to attack. The assassins were anything but stupid.

Did they want to study her? Dissect her? Why?

Neri, to any immortal who was to look at her, would realize she was a vampire. Her silver eyes were as distinct as Liv or Kai's and after tonight, there was no doubt she had vampire venom. But she ate human food, had no craving for blood, and she had no aversion to the sun, which wouldn't be obvious unless you watched her. Hunter remembered Kai telling him it took several decades before he stood in the sun and

even now, two hundred and thirty-three years later, he avoided it most of the time.

The obvious conclusion; someone ordered them to find her. It would have been easy to track Kane, Drew, Neri, and himself back to Kai and Liv's after their earlier fight. They needed only to wait several hours until Neri emerged from the house to follow the two of them back to her place. Again, which led to questions about why they wanted a vampire, wanted Neri.

Unless they understand something we don't. How?

Xander had found nothing on Anzû's old crew and why he wanted Frost. A connection between the former scientists at Standard and the shifters loyal to Anzû was tentative. But it was all they had.

Hunter had thrown himself into the fight because they were there to harm Neri. He knew how to fight and kill, but when he watched her walk around the side of the house, his heart stopped.

For a moment, he'd missed the fierce determination etched on her face as she dove headfirst into the fight. Although everything inside him screamed for him to defend her, to protect her, he watched in awe as she flew onto the first shifter's back and dispatched with him and his head within seconds.

Without taking his eyes off Neri as she went after another, he turned some of his attention to the fifth shifter of the group. With two well-placed stabs to the heart, he then removed his head as he watched Neri sink her teeth into the shifter she was fighting. He held his breath as the shifter screamed and dropped onto the ground, still writhing in pain until he took his last breath.

Neri's abilities hadn't surprised Hunter. When she ran from the house, his enhanced sight caught a blur of silver hair as she darted up the stairs and outside as he followed.

Although Liv checked and Neri confirmed she had no fangs, he knew what an immortal could accomplish when someone threatened their mate.

And he knew she must have accepted him as her mate to protect him with such fierce determination. Her concern for him after the fight warmed his heart, and he was proud of her. She defended herself with ease. But it didn't make him any less protective of her. He wasn't so much stunned by her actions, but that she'd come back at all.

Earlier in the shower, Neri explained how she found herself right next to Kai and Reaper when she thought about Kai's house. Thinking she had to get back to him, she somehow brought both men back with her to the fight.

Hunter relaxed as he replayed their conversation until her mouth pressed against his. He reached to cup the back of her head and tilted his head to deepen the kiss, loving the sweetness of her mouth.

He blinked when, with ease, she climbed over his legs and straddled his thighs, all without breaking the kiss. A deep, grumbling moan escaped his chest when her tongue licked at his lips, teasing. His hands wandered up her thighs to her hips, giving them a brief squeeze before he snuck them underneath the white tee she wore to bed. Her silky skin heavenly under his rough hands.

Neri smiled against his lips, nipping at the corners as her hands traveled over his stomach with slow, deliberate movements. He shivered as she teased his lips. The scrape of her teeth as she captured his lower lip in between them shocked pleasure to his cock. But when he watched as she rubbed her thumbs against both of his nipples, he bucked up and his hard cock throbbed against her heat.

Unashamed, he moaned into her mouth as their kisses became more desperate and demanding. He had kept his almost constant state of arousal hidden for most of the

day and night, not wanting to scare Neri or pressure her into more than she was ready for. But as his cock thrust against her hips as she pressed down, a low, deep growl erupted from deep in her throat.

Earlier, he experienced her desire as she rode herself on his clothed cock, but the sensation through the thin material of her panties and his boxer briefs intensified his desire for her. With a low growl, he gripped her hips and held them away from his straining cock as they broke the kiss. He captured her gaze.

“Neri?”

Her eyes shuttered closed but what concerned him was her mouth turned down and her bottom lip quivered as if she would cry.

“You don’t... want—”

“Yes, I want you. I want you more than I can put into words, but I want to know you desire me and not as a reaction to seeing me fighting and bloody.”

“What do you mean?”

Hunter brushed a kiss to her lips before he explained. “Mates are protective of one another and seeing them in danger sends every emotion into overdrive. The one way to rid yourself of that increased emotion and need to see your mate safe is through physical release. Sex or fighting.”

Neri blinked and sat up to rest her weight against his thighs. She opened her hands and rested the palms on his stomach. Then she ran her hands along his skin, sending delicious shivers through him, as she thought about his words. After a long moment, she shook her head but made no move to get off him.

“No, I took out my rage on the two of those who attacked you and while I was angry enough to kill the rest, there was no need. To be honest, I worried you would see me in a different light after I bit and killed that shifter, but since you assured me we’re mates and we’re fine, well... I want you.”

She shrugged, but her nonchalant statement had every emotion Hunter fought to repress flare to life.



“Oh, thank fuck.”

She left him breathless as she smiled at him, her entire face lighting up, making her shine.

His hand skimmed up her hip until he reached her waist. Hunter savored the soft skin fluttering under his roughened fingers.

As she shivered above him, she captured his gaze and he watched, mesmerized. With reluctance, he pulled his gaze away from the swirling pools of mercury and dropped to her hands as she reached for the hem of her shirt. Without pause, she lifted it up and over her head, flinging it somewhere behind her.

As much as he wanted to memorize every inch of skin she revealed, he moved his gaze back to hers and reveled in the emotions shining through.

“Beautiful.”

Her smile lit up her eyes and made her even more breathtaking. He chuckled when he surprised a squeak out of her as he lifted his torso off the bed and pressed his lips to hers. Desire and curiosity swirled through him and he clutched her hips and held her in place as his eyes darted down. He sucked in a breath at her beauty.

Her pale skin flushed with the softest pink he'd ever seen starting at her breasts and moving up her neck. But it was the rosy pink buds that called to him at that moment. He leaned forward and licked a swath against her right nipple, tasting her for the first time, and unable to keep a growl from erupting from his throat.

Neri jerked once but as he glanced up, her eyes shuttered closed at the sensation. When he drew the wet nub into his mouth and scraped his teeth against the sensitive tip, she moaned at the sensation and her hands gripped his shoulders. She tilted her head back and arched her chest closer to his mouth.

“Hunter, more.”

Without hesitation, he suckled before he flicked his tongue over the entire nipple, rolling it over his tongue, making him salivate. He caught the scent of lilacs and something more earthy, something he couldn't describe, but was growing addicted to it.

“I never thought it would be like this. More... more pressure, more everything. Touch me, Hunter.”

He growled as he scented of her arousal and moaned against her skin as her hips jerked, seeking friction against his clothed cock. As the tip of his cock brushed against her wet, hot heat, he bit down harder than he meant to. He gasped when she threw her head back and screamed his name as she came in her panties.

Hunter, needing to taste her essence, flipped her onto her back and waiting until her body calmed down from her orgasm. His body hovered over her, resting on his forearms placed next to her shoulders, and smiled when she blinked her clouded eyes open.

Her brows drew down before she realized their change in position.

He shivered as his gaze roamed over her gorgeous curvy body. A beautiful pink hue made her ivory skin glow and being this close to her, he determined the color contrasted with the pretty peach blush on her cheeks and neck. Hunter ran his hands down her shoulders and caressed her arms, loving the downy softness but he wanted a

taste.

Hunter's mouth pressed against the silky skin of her stomach and had to close his eyes as her scent became thick and cloying, driving him insane. Without thinking it through, he reached for the hem of her delicate-looking panties and ripped them off her body with a light tug.

"Hunter?"

His eyes snapped open and his gaze roamed over her face. From her reactions to him, she was inexperienced with men and something swelled in his chest. He would be the first one to touch her.

"I want to put my mouth on you and lick you until you come on my tongue and in my mouth."

Neri's hips bucked and a fresh wave of arousal struck his senses and without embarrassment, he inhaled.

"Yes... I want... want that, what you said."

His head dipped and instead of introducing Neri to the new sensual experience, he sucked her clit into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue, and savored Neri's shout of pleasure as her thighs squeezed his head. He pulled off when she bucked her hips and gripped the sheets to the point he heard a rip in the fabric.

He slid his hands past the curve of her perfect bottom and settled them against her lower back, holding her hips up. His lips pressed against her own as he licked her, tasting her for the first time. The sweetness of her arousal exploded in his mouth and as his tongue lapped up each drop of essence she released before his lips latched onto her clit and he teased it with his tongue. His mouth and tongue moved in a rhythm

that soon had Neri panting and moaning his name.

Hunter ignored his body's need to take what he wanted and slide his cock inside her. He groaned against her pussy as he imagined her wet, tight heat surrounding him until he shattered and released deep inside her.

Despite all of his instincts screaming to take her hard and fast, he lowered her hips onto the bed. As Neri let out a huff in protest, Hunter slid one finger down from her clit, loving the sound of her gasping breath, and slid it against her swollen flesh until he reached her entrance and pushed inside.

He compelled himself to stop after an inch. Neri moaned and rolled her hips, pushing him further inside, until she gripped his finger and the wet heat surrounded his digit. He gasped when she squeezed him tighter, but he stilled his movements, giving her a moment to get used to him being inside.

“Move.”

Her command pulled him out of his self-imposed stupor and he slid his finger until the tip was inside and when he heard her whimper, he moved. For the next several minutes, he watched her face for any discomfort, but became mesmerized by the pleasure radiating from the flush of her skin. She threw her head back against the pillows and moans erupted from her throat.

He leaned forward and flicked his tongue over her clit, sucking it into his mouth, before he added another finger. After several minutes, he added a third, watching her for discomfort. He shivered when she breathed out his name, but he groaned when her body clenched down on his fingers, soaking them with her release as her body quaked. He took in every expression, every moan and plea, and when her eyes opened after several minutes, he knew what she needed.

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With gentle movements, he removed himself from Neri and gave her one last lick, resulting in the deep shudder that passed through her body. He slid up, his chest touching every inch of her hips, stomach, and chest until he captured her lips. Instead of the frantic kisses of before, they explored each other as he savored the taste of her mouth and her release.

Her body was warmer than it had minutes before and he savored her strength as she looped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him down until he lay on top of her. She deepened the kiss, and he lost all train of thought.

He registered as her legs wrapped around his waist and the pressure as she squeezed them around his hips, pushing them closer together. Hunter's hips surged forward when Neri cupped his ass and raised her own hips, seeking him out. It surprised him when he found her so slick the tip of his cock slid inside her.

Hunter's eyes flew open, and he searched for any signs of discomfort. A low moan escaped her throat as she tightened her hold on him. Her hips undulated, taking more and more of his cock with each movement, until she huffed out in frustration. Neri's silver eyes pierced something inside him.

Unable to deny her anything, he pushed inside inch by glorious inch, not taking his eyes off her. He'd never felt the complete and utter sense of perfection in any part of his life. But at this moment moving inside her as her muscles pulsed around him, it was as close as Hunter would ever come. She clamped down on his cock, drawing a low groan from deep in his throat.

"I'm so glad you found me, so happy I'm your mate," Neri said.

He kissed Neri then as his heart swelled with pride and relief at her words. Although he'd never sought a mate, hell the truth was he hadn't even gotten laid in decades, but being with Neri was what he needed in his life without him knowing.

“So am I, angel.”

He surprised her by raising his hips, loving the way she clung to him, wanting to keep him inside. He drew a moan that shivered over his body as his cock sank down into her.

“I won't break, Hunter. Please.”

He had forgotten for a moment she wasn't human. She was immortal like him. Although he would never hurt her, loving her like they both needed snapped his control. He leaned down, her beautiful breasts pressed against his chest, and he captured her mouth in a scorching kiss.

The moment she banded her arms around his shoulders, his movements began. He gasped at the grip she had around his cock, he savored it as he pulled back. But this time instead of easing back into her, he drove his hips forward and back, his thrusts causing her to gasp and then moan into his mouth.

“Angel?”

“Yes, yes.”

He savored the closeness between them as his movements continued, he slid his forearms underneath her shoulders and propped her up. He captured her lips, addicted to her as she kissed him back. When her tongue swept inside his mouth and she clawed at his back, a growl erupted from his throat.

“You’re so fucking hot, Hunter. More, harder,” Neri panted.

His hands gripped her shoulders and with a swift movement, he surged backward until his knees were bent and his ass sat on his calves, bringing Neri with him. Her body rested against one arm, his cock still deep inside her, as his other wrapped around her waist. The bliss on Neri’s face was his undoing as he sank deeper inside her at this angle.

“Ready?”

A little snarl erupted from her throat and without delaying, he dropped his hips onto the bed as he lifted her in his arms. Using gravity and his hold on her, his hips surged up as he pulled her back down on his cock, sinking deeper and deeper with each thrust.

For the first time in his existence as an immortal, all cognitive reasoning dropped away, and he found his baser self. His panther purred when pleasure unlike anything he’d ever known surged through his body. He centered on her scent and he surged forward to lick the sheen from her neck, moving down to her chest as he swallowed her hard nub and flicked it with his tongue.

She clung to him and pride swelled in his chest. He pleased his mate. The woman made for him and him alone. He moved to the other nipple and using instinct alone, scraped his fang against her taut, soft skin and drew a deep groan from her.

“Neri, angel...”

“Fuck, that’s good. More.”

This time when he scraped his fang against her skin, he drew her blood. Without thinking it through, he wrapped his lips around her and sucked, groaning and surging

his cock up and piercing her again and again as he savored her on his tongue. It was sweeter than he expected and he craved more.

His movements didn't stop. He relished in the sound of her moans and gasps of pleasure. Each time her breath caught in her throat or she moaned his name, he lost himself in the sensations. He buried his face against her neck, inhaling the concentrated scent of her arousal, and as she tightened around him, he sensed his teeth extend.

“Hunter?”

Neri blinked her eyes open and drew her swollen bottom lip in between her teeth. “I’m... I don’t know what this is. It’s so good and I don’t want it to stop, but... I can’t. I need—”

His mouth cut her off with a kiss as his movement increased. He reached between them and flicked her clit with his thumb. Once, and then again, and without warning, she clamped down on his cock as a rush of wetness covered him as she screamed his name.

Breathless from her orgasm, her body shivering in his arms, he held her as his mouth sought the space between her neck and her shoulder. He scraped one fang along her skin, not enough to puncture but to tease.

Her back arched as she gyrated her hips on his, seeking more of him, but paused at the sharpness of his teeth running over her skin. “Yes, do it.”



*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Despite everything unknown between them, his pleasure-filled brain and his shivering body had taken over and without a thought to what he was about to do, he licked the spot on her neck where he wanted to mark her and bit down. The venom released into her body as she roared, her arms tightened around him as his bite prolonged her orgasm, leaving her gasping for breath.

Her second release triggered his own. Without pulling his teeth from her shoulder, he wrapped both arms around her back, his hands opening to hold her close, as he released deep inside her. The pulse of his orgasm so distinct there was nothing but Neri surrounding him. Everything else fell away.

For several minutes, sound became indistinct and his eyes stayed closed. When he caught his breath and his body stopped shaking from the intense orgasm, he blinked open his eyes.

Neri lay in his arms. Somehow he'd removed his teeth from her neck without hurting her and moved them both under the covers.

Neri arched and stretched, reminding him of a cat laying in the sun and basking in the warmth.

“How are you?”

Neri froze and blinked up at him. “Was it not good for you?”

Hunter answered without hesitation. “Being with you, making love to you was everything. But it was your first time, and I was checking to see if I hurt you.”

She smiled up at him and laid her head back down on his shoulder. He threaded their legs together and pulled her closer, his arms wrapped around her without an inch of room between them.

“Perfect. A little tired, but I think that’s because I don’t stay up this late.” Neri yawned.

“Sleep then, angel. I’ll take care of you.”

Her lips turn up in a smile as she pressed her face against his neck. “Okay. Night, Hunter.”

“Goodnight, Neri.”

Hunter listened to her breathing, noting the moment she fell into a deep sleep. He couldn’t help the smile on his face as Neri cuddled closer. Her skin warm and her breaths on his exposed skin reminded him he’d found his mate. He relaxed back onto the pillow and knowing the house was secure, closed his eyes and drifted off.

Before he was ready, sunlight flooded the room, and he although he wasn’t exhausted, he could use more sleep. As he yawned, he sensed it was mid-morning. They’d slept longer than he’d planned.

He savored holding Neri against him, but as she moaned against his neck, his body jerked awake and he glanced down to see her sleeping. There was no sign of distress, but as every moment from the night before flooded back into clarity and awakened his sated mind, his eyes widened as he searched for the spot on her neck he knew was there.

Holy fuck, I bit her and marked her as my mate.

### CHAPTER SIX

#### NERI

“Stop moving,” Neri moaned.

She lay on Hunter’s warm chest, one arm holding her close, as she refused to open her eyes.

Most days she needed less than six hours sleep to function. It was nice being an immortal. But after the fight and the sex last night, her body shivered at thought, every part of Neri’s body craved more rest. But Hunter wouldn’t cooperate, moving onto his side and displacing her from her pillow.

“Are you okay?”

She moved her finger up to her mouth. “Shh. More sleep.”

Hunter chuckled, and the sound shivered over her body. Instead of opening her eyes and finding out what he found so amusing, she reached for the comforter and pulled it over her head, blocking out the sunlight and dampening the sounds. Since Hunter wouldn’t be helpful in her quest for more sleep, she reached for her pillow and shoved it underneath her head, grumbling aloud without using actual words. She relaxed her body and waited for sleep to take over.

“I bit you last night.”

Hunter's statement was so deadpan Neri had no reaction to his statement. Some awareness must have filtered through her fuzzy, sleepy thoughts because in the next moment she took stock of her body. There was a pleasant tenderness around her hips and she bit her lip to prevent the gasp of pleasure when she recalled how Hunter drove deep inside her, drawing out her pleasure until her orgasm erupted throughout her body.

She shivered at the remembered sensation of Hunter's tongue on her shoulder, but the bite held so much pleasure in the action she released when he sank his teeth into her. Her mind tried to bring the sensations of his bite to the forefront, but it evoked the swell of her orgasm and nothing else.

"So do I," she purred.

Neri almost laughed at how ridiculous she sounded. She'd never made that sound in all her years, but one night with all the bliss Hunter drew from her as his hard body pressed against hers was enough to do it again when he ran his hand along her side.

"How are you?"

The concern in Hunter's voice had her blinking open her eyes and pulling down the comforter before searching his gaze. There was a pinched look around his eyes and his mouth pressed into a straight line, making him look fierce and concerned at the same time.

"Why are you worried? As you can see, other than the lack of sleep, I'm wonderful. Are you saying you didn't like it?"

"No!" Realizing he shouted, Hunter started again. "Last night was the best night of my life. But the bite, I claimed you without asking you and knowing you're half vampire. I could have killed you with my venom."

Neri's brows drew down, and she pressed a hand over the spot on her neck, sucking in a breath when she brushed her hand against the spot where Hunter had bitten down. Without thinking about her nude body, she left the bed and walked toward the bathroom and slapped the light on. Something deep inside her craved to see Hunter's mark looked like on her skin.

When she stepped in front of the mirror, her hand refused to budge from where it had settled. She watched with wide eyes as Hunter, naked and with a small smile on his face, stepped behind her and placed his left arm around her waist, opening his hand on her stomach. A surge of rightness calmed the riotous questions in her head and her stomach settled as she met his eyes in the mirror.

He smiled before he lifted his right hand and with easy movements, pulled her hand away from her neck. She sucked in a deep breath at the clear indentions where his fangs had pierced her neck, loving the look of the dark red spots on her pale skin. Knowing her reaction to touching the area, she leaned toward the mirror and studied the marks. She realized they healed overnight. There was no sign of blood or bruising around the area. Only smooth skin and a sensation that went straight to her core.

Neri turned in his arms and smiled. "Well, I guess we're mates now."

Hunter sucked in a sharp breath and the smile fell from his face.

"Aren't you worried? I bit you. Are you sick, or in pain?"

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "No, I'm fine. You seem freaked out about this? It was over six hours ago. Do you think my body would reject your venom?"

He shook his head. "We have to get this checked out. We have to go see Liv and see if there is anything I might have done to put you in danger."

Although she sensed worry coming off Hunter in waves, there was also need, for her. She ignored the worry to take advantage of the latter. So with a smile, she reached for his hand and pulled him into the wide, boxy shower and closed the opaque glass door behind her.

“What are we doing?”

Despite his question, the tone of Hunter’s voice made her clench her core and her nipples hardened. At the moment, she wanted Hunter inside her and would bargain him for it. She was fine, more than fine, but she understood Hunter needed reassurance she was healthy and happy. He would get that after.

“Let’s make love in the shower. Then, we can head to Kai and Liv’s so she can draw my blood and list everything different about me compared to everyone else. But for now, we’re naked, why shouldn’t I take advantage of having your hands on me while you lift me up against the wall and fuck me until I come.”

A low growl escaped his throat, and she sensed her words, while over the top, hit the mark. He backed her into the shower without his gaze leaving hers. He reached to shut the door behind him before he flipped on the faucet and pulled her away from the cold spray and pressed her against his warm body until the water heated.

“You’ll kill me.”

She smiled at him and shook her head. “Why would I do that?”

Without answering her, he leaned down and kissed her. All thoughts scattered and Neri concentrated on Hunter’s touch for the next few hours, letting go of all her worries.

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Neri hadn’t realized how late in the day it had become until she glanced over her shoulder to the west to see the sun in line with the tops of the pines scattering the property. She heard the birds chirping in the trees and a stream running close to where they stood, but there was no sound of traffic or other noise pollution.

Kai answered the door before Hunter knocked. He smiled at them and without knowing why, her cheeks heated at the insinuation in his smile.

“Hey,” Hunter said.

“Liv was expecting you earlier, but I figured since you two had such a late night...”  
Kai trailed off.

Neri leaned forward and growled. “Do you want to find yourself on top of the tallest building in Denver in a blink?”

The amusement from Kai’s face disappeared, and he straightened. “Can you do that?”

“No clue. Do you want to find out?”

“I do,” Liv cut in.

It was Neri’s turn to stand up straight. She hadn’t meant to threaten Kai in front of Liv and she wouldn’t have followed through with it.

Neri turned to Liv the tiny vampire and again, every instinct in her body stood at attention, wanting to protect the curly haired woman. Neri managed a tight smile.

“I didn’t—”

Liv’s tinkling laugh made Neri smile at her, a genuine one this time. “I’m only joking. But I heard about what happened last night and I’m glad you were there.”

Neri blushed when she remembered how she killed the shifter and wondered what the others thought about her. Hunter wouldn’t change his mind, but she had no clue about the others.

“Why did you drive a truck here?”

Liv’s question diverted her thoughts. “Oh, yeah, um... Hunter told me how close all of you are to each other and while you and the other vampires don’t eat, the shifter’s do. But everyone needs a dinner table, and I made this a year ago and I’m proud of it and thought you might like...”

Hunter pulled her close when her voice trailed away.

“What Neri is trying to say is she brought you a dining room table she designed and created herself. It can sit twenty people. She also included an extension if you needed more room.”



Kai wrapped his arm around Liv's waist and instead of insulting her, which Neri worried she had, Liv beamed at her as she bounced on the balls of her feet, excited. "I can't wait to see it."

Neri nodded toward the door and instead of only Kai and Liv, everyone followed them. When they reached the back of her extended cab pickup, she pulled off the tarp to reveal the chunky oak dining table gleaming in the sun.

"I thought about leaving it rustic, but I opted for a polyurethane finish on the top to stop moisture from warping the wood and to prevent dents and scratches from everyday use and left the rest unvarnished. The pedestal bases are sturdy enough to support the extensions and if you want chairs, I have plenty of light oak in the workshop for them."

Neri watched Liv for her reaction and when tears welled in her eyes, Neri's instinct screamed at her to step forward and hug her. Instead, she found a face full of curly hair and a vampire wrapped around her who smelled of lovely lemongrass and green apple.

Despite her earlier nervousness, Neri laughed as Liv pulled back, wiping her eyes. "I hope you like it."

"I love it," Liv turned to Kai and the way he looked at his mate had Neri turning away, as not to intrude. "Thank you, Neri."

And with Liv's words, Hunter, Kane, and Drew who she remembered meeting only the day before, sauntered up to the bed of her truck, lifted the table, and moved it toward the door and inside the house. Liv reached for her hand and squeezed once before she tugged for Neri to follow.

From what she remembered of the house as she ran through with her mind in panic

mode didn't do the place justice. Scattered around were couches and chairs in rustic colors, browns and beiges, but they seemed comfortable. The space was open with colossal windows that viewed the mountains and pines surrounding the property. The dark wood paneling and the rustic feel of the place, along with the modern kitchen and the beautiful staircase leading upstairs, made the house feel welcoming.

Hunter and the others set up the table where Liv indicated she wanted it, and when Neri opened her mouth to thank them, a little voice inside her head stopped her cold.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Hello.

Neri blinked and before her stood a baby with brilliant white hair and the most intriguing green eyes sparkled with blue that reminded her of the pictures she'd viewed online from NASA of nebulas. When she tore her gaze away from his beautiful eyes, she found a tiny little man with pale skin and a smile of welcome. Neri sank down to sit crossed-legged in front of him.

Um, hello. I'm Neri and you must be Silas.

He beamed at her and stepped forward, reached a hand out to her face. Silas paused for a moment, but Neri smiled at him, encouraging him to do whatever he wished, and he continued his movements until his hand cupped her face.

The room grew silent around her, but she didn't pay attention to anyone but Silas. Although she sensed a toughness and protectiveness in the little man, there was a joy, a pure joy surrounding him and being absorbed by everyone in the room.

I'm glad Hunter found his mate. I'm hoping every one of my family gets to find their mate. You're unique, like me. You have the same white hair and although your eyes are silver like Uncle Kai, Kane, Thomas, Seth, Isaac and Aunt Liv.

Yeah, I remember being told I was a shifter, but they injected me with something that turned me into a vampire, too.

Can I see your memory?

“No, no Silas, you shouldn’t see that,” Hunter cut it.

Neri blinked up at her mate. “You can hear our conversation?”

“Yeah, but none of the others can. I don’t think?”

The three of them glanced around the room and everyone was staring at her and baby Silas. The little man didn’t like her attention focused elsewhere and took her by surprise when he climbed into her lap and leaned back on her left arm. She cradled him, not wanting to hurt him before she glanced up and searched for his parents.

“I wanted you to know I would never hurt him.”

Xander chuckled and Frost shook her head, her beautiful eyes, similar to her son’s shining with mirth.

“Silas has a sixth sense about people. He can sense those who want to harm him and even if you tried, he can shield himself. Plus, he’s very strong in his leopard form and he can shift faster than any other shifter here. We’re not worried, honey.”

Neri glanced down to see Silas smiling at her.

Can I see your shield and how you shift? I’ve never been able to shift.

I will, but I want to show you my room at home. Do you think we can go over there using your power?

Hunter laughed at her surprise. “Nothing stays secret long in this family.”

“What did Silas want?” Jade asked.

She glanced up at found the beautiful auburn-haired woman sitting close to her and Silas. Instead of being startled she was sitting so close, Neri smiled.

Leaning forward, Neri asked, “This is a rude question, but is your hair natural?”

Jade threw her head back and laughed. Her arms wrapped around her stomach before she hunched forward and laid her head on Neri’s shoulder. Without moving, Neri leaned toward her and sniffed, inhaling the subtle scent of vanilla with a hint of fruit... peaches. She blinked when Jade answered.

“Yeah, I tried black for a while but this is my natural color.” Jade leaned forward and whispered, “Noah likes this better.”

Neri’s eyes glanced up and spotted Jade’s mate, a big man standing behind her with his arms crossed over his chest and his feet shoulder length apart, as if he were waiting for a fight. Something said military to Neri, but she moved her eyes back to Jade.

“I like auburn. It frames your face and makes your freckles stand out.”

“I used to hate them, but now...” Jade shook her head as she cupped her cheeks.

Neri!

The entire group flinched as Silas demanded her attention.

Sorry, little man. This life is new and I want to meet everyone in Hunter’s life, but I didn’t mean to ignore you. Sure, I can take you to your room so you can show me, but I have to ask your parents if it’s okay.

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Mommy, daddy, can I show Neri my room?

The group chuckled because again, he opened their communications with everyone in the room.

“Sure, little man. We’ll head there now.”

Instead of waiting for his parents, Silas pushed an image of his room into Neri’s head.

Now, Neri.

Hunter, can you tell Xander and Frost where we went?

Another chuckle, this one from Hunter as he nodded.

Hold on little man. Here we go.

Wait! I want Jade to go to.

Neri smiled and as she secured Silas closer to her chest with one arm wrapped around his tiny body, she reached for Jade and wrapped one hand around her forearm. The beautiful woman must have known Silas had wanted her to come so with a tiny smile and a nod, Neri blinked them out of Kai and Liv’s house and into a bright room.

Neri loosened her arms around Silas’s body and searched his face for any sign of trauma or pain. Instead, he smiled at her and scrambled out of her lap.

Jade made a squeak and Neri searched her face or body for any damage, finding her intact and whole.

“You okay?” Neri asked.

Jade’s gaze found Silas over by a wall of bookshelves, filled with books of all sizes. He became absorbed with his objective, scanning the shelves and pulling out a book. Jade turned back to her.

“That was fucking weird.” Jade threw her head back and laughed at her own observation.

“Any motion sickness?”

“No, I’m fine. I know how long it takes to drive from Kai’s to here. And running his faster. But you got us here in a split second and my brain, although I’m used to weird immortal stuff, hasn’t caught up yet.”

Silas giggled before he careened into Neri’s arms, wrapping his arms around her neck and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. She was growing to love the smell of his citrus-vanilla scent and the petal soft skin as he pressed his face against her neck.

“You can’t help but love him.”

Neri nodded and smiled as she rubbed Silas’s back.

She took a glance around the room, noting they painted all four walls a different primary color. Instead of a crib, Silas slept in a bed shorter than a twin with stuffed animals dotted near the pillows and in one corner of the room. There were pictures of every one of Silas’s family, holding him, propped on the bookcases or placed on the wall.

“I love your room, little man. So much color.”

Silas smiled at her. Mommy and daddy call me little man, too?

Does it bother you because I can call you Silas if you prefer?

No, I like it.

Good. I like it, too.

Silas scrambled back over to his bookshelves and Neri stood up to follow. She scanned the titles on the shelves and while there were books for toddlers; she noticed most of them were for middle grade or young adult.

“Which one is your favorite?”

Instead of answering, he shook his head and scanned all of his books. Then he shook his head again before he spoke.

I don't have a favorite. I love all of them even if they make me sad or mad.



*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Jade laughed and so did Neri.

There was a shuffle downstairs before someone slammed the door. As someone started up the stairs, a translucent barrier shot up around the room, protecting all three in Silas's room.

“Wow, that's something,” Neri muttered.

“It's okay, baby. It's just your Uncle Noah. I told him where I was going, but he must not have liked me disappearing on the spot.”

Silas dropped the barrier and Neri caught Silas as Noah rushed through the door and straight to Jade. He pulled her into his arms and Neri turned her and the little man back to the bookshelf.

“What are you reading now?”

Daddy and I finished reading the Harry Potter series, and it was amazing, but mommy wanted me to read regular books for kids around my age, so she bought all the Little Golden books. Each story makes me smile and they teach me about sharing and being nice to others. Last night, we finished The Pokey Little Puppy and The Little Red Hen. I think the hen was my favorite. She didn't care about what other's thought of her and did what she wanted. I like that.

Neri laughed. “Me too, little man.”

Silas reached for the book and placed it in Neri's hands. Although she'd gone through

it before, she stiffened as an old memory assailed her the moment she glanced at the cover of the book.

Come on, Nerissa. Just read it. You know I can't.

Neri rolled her eyes at the small girl's insistence. She could read by herself, but whenever she was with Neri, she wouldn't try, saying she liked her voice. Neri tugged a pigtail and opened the book.

One summer day the Little Red Hen—

Nerissa, Zahava can read on her own. You need to stop your babying or she will never get adopted. Both of you, do your chores and then clean your room. I won't tell you twice.

With that, the woman who was the administrator of the orphanage walked away, her chunky shoes clomping on the wooden floor and Neri shivered, happy her anger didn't involve punishment this time.

That woman is a bitch. If she keeps treating us like that, she'll be sorry.

Zahava's voice, so cold and unemotional, caused another shiver to pass over her.

"Neri, angel?"

Neri blinked and noticed her surroundings with a jerk. She glanced down to see Silas's look of concern.

"I'm sorry, little man. Another memory from my past and I couldn't get out."

"What did you see?"

The unfamiliar voice had her head jolting up. She groaned aloud when she found Kai, Liv, Reaper, Ara, Seth, Aubrey, Drew, Jade, Noah, Gunnar, Xander, Frost, Ghost, Kane, Thomas, Isaac, and the tall blonde man she threatened at standing in Silas's room staring at her. Ghost gave her a small smile, and she knew the question came from him.

With so many staring at her, she bit her bottom lip as a sign of nerves. Then, Hunter moved into view and she blew out a breath, relaxing.

"I grew up in an orphanage. The memory was from when I was around ten years old. I was reading to a girl about six. She was in my first memory running away from someone unknown and she looked scared. Her name is Zahava. But the first memory makes no sense..."

"Why, angel?"

Neri covered Silas's ears with her palms before she spoke. His giggle made her smile.

"Zahava is a manipulative bitch."

She uncovered his ears and smiled down at him. Neri surprised herself when she bent down and gave Silas an impromptu kiss of the forehead and wrapped her arms around him before she continued.

"If she was running away, it was a ploy to get something she wanted or pressuring someone into going along with her plan. Everyone in the orphanage thought she was a perfect child, but I watched how she acted around the other kids and adults and she's nothing but devious. She's a psychopath.

"She scared the kids younger than her to give her whatever they had of value and if they didn't comply, she would hurt them. Whenever someone told on her, the

teachers and staff never believed them. One time I had to step in when she tried to drown a boy in the bathtub because he threw up on her shoes.”

Neri rubbed her forehead as she sensed more memories lingering in the background but refusing to come to the forefront.

“I don’t know why I remembered little things about Zahava or why even, but I sense it’s connected to who is after Dark Company.”

Silas squeezed Neri, and she hugged him back. When Hunter wrapped her arms around her, she knew they needed to find the threat and eliminate them. This group was Hunter’s family and if she could only admit to herself, they were becoming important to her.

She vowed she would kill everyone who threatened the immortals in this room. Even if she sacrificed her life in return.

Such a small price to pay.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### HUNTER

Hunter flinched as the needle pierced Neri's skin. He swallowed twice to keep from throwing up at the sight. Unable to deal with the needle or the blood filling up the first vial and then the second, he squeezed his eyes closed and took a deep, cleansing breath.

Liv, worried about Neri's reaction to her lab despite the glass walls and ceiling, scurried downstairs when they all arrived back to grab the syringe and vials to draw Neri's blood.

Ghost believed it was necessary to solve the mystery of Neri's background and the reason her memories involved the same girl she grew up with in the orphanage.

It didn't mean I had to like it.

"Hunter? You okay? I can't flash to you right now if you pass out."

Instead of growling aloud, he sent one through their mind link. When he opened his eyes and continued the sound, she almost jerked but caught herself, holding still as he could hear the liquid fill the glass.

"I'm... fine."

Liv watched as the second vial filled before she uncorked it from the needle still

sticking out of Neri's arm. Hunter sucked in a breath and blew it out when Liv pressed a cotton ball against Neri's skin, pulling out the needle, before holding the piece of white fluff there for a moment. When Liv pulled the cotton back, there wasn't a trace of Neri's blood on it.

"There, all done Hunter," Liv giggled, "Do you want to help me analyze?"

Hunter shook his head before Liv finished the question. He didn't want to leave Neri. Both shrugged as Liv gave them a wave before she raced downstairs, curious what she would find. Hunter didn't care what Liv found as long as Neri was healthy. Nothing else mattered.

As he moved closer, intending to wrap her in his arms, he was beat out by a flash of white fur on a tiny body. Neri spotted Silas before Hunter and her arms were outstretched ready to catch the tiniest of the snow leopards and pressed him close to her chest as he nuzzled into her neck.

Neri! My new favorite vampire-shifter hybrid, how do you feel?

I'm the only vampire-shifter hybrid little man.

Yeah, that's true. It's why you smell so good.

Her chuckle made Hunter smile. Even before he'd gotten to know Neri in her own space, he understood how serious she was about every aspect of her life. The way she organized her life, her schedule, and keeping her word were more important than anything else so it shouldn't surprise him the unknown threat worried her more than the thought of someone after her.

What do I smell like?

Huh... Well, like the earth after the first rain of spring and lilacs in full bloom.

Neri blinked and glanced at Hunter, who nodded at Silas's description.

What about me?Silas's curiosity pulsed out of him.

Well, bergamot, like your dad and vanilla, like Jade.

What's berg... bergamot?

Well, it's orange and lime, like citrus. It's sweet, little man.

What's Hunter's scent?

Neri glanced up and smiled at him, making his heart beat harder in his chest.

Hunter is earthy with pine and lemon.

She integrated into his family with ease and although she'd spent most of her time with Silas and Jade; she spoke with the other assassins, bringing the conversation about them and their past. Although Drew was a jokester, he took a while to get comfortable with people, so he sat at the kitchen table on a tablet, and like clockwork glanced up and gazed around the room before settling down to read.

Thomas and Isaac hung back. Curious about Neri, but those two were the most patient immortals he'd ever met. Plus, Neri's time with Silas made sense to them because everyone spent as much time with Silas as they could get.

Jade sat next to Neri, close enough their thighs were touching.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

“What are you two talking about?” Jade asked.

“Our scents and how I’m different from the other shifters and vampires.”

Before Jade answered, Silas let out a bone-cracking yawn along with a small howl and shifted back to his toddler form. Neri, unused to how shifters work blinked down at him. Her eyes widened when she realized he was naked. Frost giggled and Neri blinked owlishly at her before glancing at Silas’s relaxed face. With another small yawn, he blinked his eyes closed.

Frost swaddled him in a light blue blanket and before she lifted Silas into her arms.

Neri leaned closer.

“Goodnight, little man. Sleep well and I’ll see you tomorrow,” Neri whispered before she kissed Silas on the forehead with a soft brush of her lips.

Night, Neri. You’re one of my favorite people in the world.

“And you’re one of mine, little man.”

Hunter cleared his throat, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall at the sweet scene between his mate and the youngest of their family. Frost sniffed and wiped away her own as she cuddled Silas closer. Xander stood and put the laptop aside before he leaned forward and kissed his son. They were in their own world for a moment before Frost turned and made her way with Silas upstairs to their room.



The room grew quiet. The others watched the scene between Neri and Silas as Hunter broadcast their conversation from the beginning to them.

“So...” Axel’s voice boomed around the room.

“Leave it to the least tactful of us to ruin the moment,” Gunnar mumbled.

Kai rolled his eyes and Reaper chuckled.

“Is Neri short for something?” Axel asked.

Neri turned toward the giant blond shifter with a passive look on her face. “Yes, but I don’t prefer my full name. The creepy scientist who injected me with something he thought would kill me liked to call me Nerissa. So you can see why I might not enjoy that name. And now let me ask you a question?”

“Okay?” Axel elongated the one word, not knowing what was coming.

“Do you always flirt with your friend’s mates?”

Axel nodded without hesitation. “I have to get my entertainment somewhere. And you would think these idiots would know their mates would never cheat on them. And yet each time, they threaten me with death. Go figure.”

Neri tilted her head back and laughed. Her hand came to rest on Axel’s arm and while Hunter knew Axel was right, he still growled when Neri squeezed before she leaned her head against the lion shifter’s shoulder. Her laughter tapered off.

“Brilliant.”

Reaper, Kai, Xander, Noah, and even Seth all growled their displeasure.

“Not brilliant, Neri,” Kai said.

Although he sounded huffy, he didn’t sound angry and Hunter relaxed.

Hunter heard the clicking of fingers on a keyboard and remembered Xander had started his search as soon as they returned from Silas showing Neri his room. As he drifted over to see what the snow leopard had found, he spotted out of the corner of his eye Seth and Aubrey moving closer to Neri.

“We met yesterday, but I’m Aubrey.”

“And I’m Seth, her mate.”

Neri smiled at them and Hunter’s heart kicked in his chest.

“So... you, you’re a vampire but you don’t crave blood?” Aubrey asked.

“Not even a little. I eat my steaks medium well, liver is gross, and despite that I love food. I haven’t been around many people but I don’t react to blood. Can I ask you some questions?”

“Please. We’re an open book,” Seth said.

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“Do you... when you feed, do you kill people?” Neri blushed.

Aubrey reached out and squeezed Neri’s forearm before she explained.

“Oh, sweetie, no, mates can feed from each other. Before I met Seth, my human best friend, Cole, brought me bags of donated blood from the hospital where he worked. But some vampires have taken from humans when they don’t have mates, but they don’t kill them.”

Aubrey paused and leaned forward.

“To humans our saliva had a numbing agent and the venom acts as an aphrodisiac, so it could lead to deeper feelings. Vampires can alter memories, but they don’t take blood unless the human is willing.”

Neri nodded, before something struck her. “So, Cole, he knows about both of you? Isn’t that dangerous?”

Aubrey told Neri how Cole had saved her after he’d found her covered in blood after her transition. Neri, shocked by Aubrey’s story, reached for her free hand and held it as she told her how Cole sacrificed for years and kept her fed, and by the end Neri nodded.

“I’m glad he’s in your life,” Neri whispered.

“So am I. And his husband Simon is a sweetheart and they are perfect together. I’m sure you’ll meet them.”

The three other vampires approached and joined in on the conversation. They introduced themselves and Neri smiled as they shook her hand. Kane took a seat next to Seth, and they joked back and forth until Seth laughed and butted his shoulder against Kane's. She smiled as the two joked together.

Hunter turned his attention as Thomas and Isaac, attached at the hip as far back as Hunter remembered, as they smiled at Neri and sat on the loveseat in front of her.

Thomas was tall and lean with a black hair and preferred to wear black or dark blue at all times. Isaac was more laid back, his hair dark brown, but his face was softer although his body was bulkier than his counterpart. Hunter remembered Ghost telling him they walked into his office together asking for a job and he hired them on the spot. Hunter still had no clue where they lived, and they appeared whenever they wanted.

Neri looked back and forth between Thomas and Isaac, studying them as they moved closer to each other. If he hadn't known they had a mind link, he assumed they communicated by searching each other's gazes. As Neri continued to watch, Hunter took the time to observe too.

Their movements were fluid, even when they sat. They had to know they were being watched by at least two, but instead of turning their attention to Neri, they continued on for a few minutes. Their forearms brushed, and they angled their bodies toward each other, and Hunter spotted the reason she had the fleeting thought they were a couple.

When they turned their attention to Neri, her shoulders relaxed.

"Were you turned at the same time?"

Thomas smiled. "No, a vampire turned me in 1850. I was twenty-six and like most of

the immortals I don't know who bit me."

"There is little I remember of my life before I turned, but Xander found my birth certificate from 1933. In 1963 at thirty, I turned. I remember everything about the transition and when I woke up, Thomas was there. He'd come upon me after my transition started and we've stuck together ever since," Isaac said.

Seth laughed and elbowed Kane. "Tell Neri how you became an assassin."

Kane snarled at the kid but shook his head. He had a smile on his face.

"I threatened to kill Seth if Liv, who was still human mind you, didn't come with me. So, we locked Seth in the lab downstairs and I took Liv to the man who had my mate imprisoned." Kane said it so matter-of-factly, confusion and anger flashed in Neri's eyes.

"You kidnapped... the tiniest woman on the planet and..."

"Hey!"

"The doctor who created the bioweapon tortured her." Kane flinched.

Hunter moved to Neri and placed his hands on her shoulders, prepared to hold her down in the chair. Her head whipped back and forth between Seth and Kane, who sat close together and who'd been joking with each other minutes before.

Neri snarled but made no move to lunge at Kane, which surprised Kane. He blew out a breath and looked down at his hands clenched on his lap.

"I'm not proud of what I did and I couldn't hurt her the way the doctor wanted me to, but I didn't protect her either. She knocked me out with a sedative and I woke up to

this group around me. But they understood and told me the scientist had killed my mate, Annabelle.”

Liv gasped. “You never told us her name.” She walked over to Kane and tried to wrap her arms around him, giving up when she realized it was futile and patted him on the back.

“I’m sorry—”

“Nope, no,no. No apologies. Kai changed me and we’re married. We have a family, and we’re happy. An unusual family, but a family nonetheless and you’re as much a part as I am. You shouldneverhave been in that position.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Neri leaned forward and gripped Kane's hands. "I'm sorry you lost Annabelle, Kane. I can never imagine what you went through."

He squeezed back, but they all jerked when Xander shouted in excitement.

Daddy!

Xander flinched and glanced upstairs, talking to his son. He smiled as they finished the conversation and turned back to the group and focused on Neri. Hunter, without thinking, lifted Neri into his arms and settled back on the chair with her curled on his lap.

"Your name is Nerissa, or Neri, Elias, no middle name listed. You have a birth certificate but there are no names other than yours. It lists your birthdate as September 11, 1996 born at Snowfall Memorial Hospital and a month after your birth, two firemen discovered you alone wrapped in a blanket on their doorstep. Soon after, the state placed in a group home until you were eleven. After you went to a foster home where you lived with your foster mother until you were eighteen. Her name was—"

"Thalia Costa," Neri mumbled.

"Yeah," Xander paused.

Neri nodded, indicating she was ready for more.

"After you graduated high school, you took online college classes starting in early

2014.”

“I remember... I wanted to stay home because a doctor diagnosed Thalia with breast cancer and I wanted to take care of her. She loved me the moment I stepped into her home and despite everything in my being telling me not to trust her, I loved her too.”

Hunter hugged her, unable to do anything to take the pain away. And she was shaking with it. Everything in him wanted to rage, but he pressed his lips to her hair and hugged her.

“According to what I found, you aced almost three years of online classes. But in March 2016, there was an initial report taken by the Snowfall police. Thalia reported you missing after you told her you were making a quick run to the store early that morning. She worried all day and by that evening, you hadn’t come back and you weren’t answering your cell. Although the police took the initial report, no one investigated until three days later, when Thalia visited the police station again and filed a formal report,” Xander said.

Neri opened her mind to him and he closed his eyes. She played through her memories of her time with Thalia. The older woman was single, but he spotted the love in Thalia’s eyes whenever she looked at Neri and Hunter knew he had a smile on his face. Soon, Neri’s memories of Thalia became fuzzy and then black.

“You don’t remember that day?” Hunter asked.

She wiped at her eyes and shook her head. Her brows drew down, and she tried to concentrate, but Hunter knew forcing memories wasn’t what Neri needed.

“Hey, angel, it’s okay. Xander has more information and your memories will come in time.”



Nodding her understanding, she blinked her eyes open and glanced at Xander. “What happened to Thalia?”

“Her chemo was a success. In the police report, she told the police finding you made her strong and until the day they told her you were dead, she believed you were somewhere out there in the world. She still calls the detective assigned to your case each week for an update. He noted on your file it keeps Thalia healthy, trying to find you,” Xander sounded impressed.

“Good. I’ll visit her, as soon as I come up with an excuse.”

Hunter shook his head. “I don’t think you have to. She wants to see you. Tell her the truth about you. She’s your family.”

The others in the room agreed with him and after Neri smiled at them and squeezed Hunter’s hand, she turned back to Xander.

“Did the police find any evidence of what happened?”

“No. They found your car abandoned a mile from the store. Your purse, keys, and cell were missing, never found. They searched surveillance of the store but there was nothing on the video. No one followed you in or out of the store and your purchases were in the trunk. No witnesses and despite assurances from Thalia you didn’t run away, they took a year to list you as a possible kidnap victim. Wait.”

Xander’s fingers flew over the keyboard and he checked something he’d thought of and Hunter held his breath as the snow leopard’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Well, fuck. They found your car across the street from Standard and although they had high-tech surveillance over every inch of the complex, the police stated the system was under maintenance at the same time you disappeared so no footage.”

Liv scoffed and with a snarl, spoke. “Un-fucking-believable.”

Everyone in the room froze before they turned to look at her.

“I’ve never heard you use the word fuck before,” Hunter said.

“Think about it. They kidnapped Neri six months after I fled with the information on the bioweapon. At the end of that same month I left, you rescued Ara along with the shifters and vampire from Standard.”

Reaper scoffed. Hunter and the others chuckled because Ara evaded him for a month after she escaped from Standard on her own.

“Don’t you realize what that means?” Liv snapped.

At their confused glances at each other, she continued. “Neri wasn’t a shifter at the time of her disappearance and we rescued all the immortals held captive, so who turned her?”

Ah, fuck.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### NERI

Neri glanced around the room when whatever Liv said registered with each of them. From what they were saying, there was no shifter around to bite her, so they had no clue how she had transitioned. As she thought back to her time at Standard, nothing but the memory she shared with Hunter would surface.

Her right arm flinched as a phantom pain pierced the crook of her elbow and she pressed two fingers down until the sensation disappeared.

While the others were talking, Xander motioned her over and she sat on the couch next to him. As soon as she settled, he turned the screen toward her. At first, she wondered why he was showing her a black screen. The image was pixilated but there was a light shining in the lower left-hand corner. Then she realized it wasn't a picture, but the start of a video clip.

“What did you find?”

“Kai's camera picked up movement after you and Hunter entered the house. Reaper mentioned someone followed you to your house from here, so I searched the video footage and found this.”

Neri nodded, not taking her eyes off the screen. Xander pressed the space bar the silent black-and-white camera moved from right to left and back again, scanning the area. As it panned left again, Neri caught the sight of someone stepping out from

behind a tree. A leg only at first, but Neri squinted and leaned forward when a woman came into view.

“Do you recognize her?”

“No, not yet. Does she get closer?”

“Yeah, wait a minute.”

The first obvious clue she wasn't an immortal was her walk. She shuffled from behind the tree before she pressed her back against the bark, her head whipping back and forth as her long dark hair shimmered with each movement, before she bent her knees and waddled forward. She must have realized how stupid she looked because in the next second, she stood up and brushed away the imaginary lint on her pants.

The woman balled her fists next to her thighs and stomped forward, heading toward the side of the house leading to the front door. The stride was familiar, but it wasn't until she flipped her hair away from her face and scowled that Neri recognized her.

“Zahava,” Neri sucked in a breath when she realized who she was. “Hunter, do you remember seeing her?”

Hunter moved closer and glanced down at the paused image of Zahava glancing over her shoulder. He recognized her and jerked back. Then he started pacing the floor.

She flinched at every curse she heard flowing out of his mouth and worried about his anger as his fists clenched and unclenched at his side as the length of his stride increased with every step.

“What? What's going on?” Axel asked.

Neri swallowed as a bolt of fear ran down her spine. But when she noticed the concern in every face as they flanked Hunter, Xander, and herself on the couch, she had two feelings back-to-back. Fear that these people she's come to care for in such a short time were in danger and the second, pride because they were dangerous to anyone who crossed them.

"In the flashback I had when I first met Hunter, the one I pulled him into, Zahava was the nurse who gave Dr. Steven's the syringe filled with vampire venom and the bioweapon."

Hunter cursed again. "I remember glancing at her and recognizing the clear hatred etched on her face when she stared at Neri on the table before the injection, but I brushed it off, thinking she hated all immortals."

Xander's fingers flew over the keyboard and after a few minutes, he sat back on the couch. "Huh."

Hunter froze and glared at Xander. Neri almost laughed aloud but Hunter's waves of displeasure about the situation washed over her and she bit her lip and waited to see what Xander had to say.

"She used her real first name to apply for the job at Standard. Zahava Wolfe started as a nurse in the biological ward at Standard in July 2015."

"Wolfe, Wolfe, why does that sound familiar?" Ghost asked.

"It's wordplay, wolf shifter, but that makes no sense. She has no shifter traits and if she's human and four years younger than Neri, she's aged badly. There are wrinkles around her eyes and mouth and there is a smattering of gray hair around her temples," Ara observed.

“Why would she be after me? She went to a foster home two months before I did. Orphanages were closing and placing kids with foster parents. Since she was younger, they found her a home first.”

Frost squeezed Neri’s shoulder. “Not every placement works. There have been horror stories about kids being abused and neglected from families who only want government help. She’s targeting you for some unknown reason, but no one looks at someone with utter disdain without a reason, no matter how twisted or fabricated.”

Ghost snapped his fingers capturing everyone’s attention. “When Anzû applied for the position at Dark Company, he listed his last name on the application as Wolfe with a ‘e’”

Neri leaned over and watched Xander open and close screens as he typed in the black screens filled with white or green type, each of them foreign to her. She surfed the internet and setup a website which she had to learn for her to sell her pieces around the world, but Xander’s skills surpassed anything she’d known.

Xander stopped his frantic searching at a site that looked to her as pure code. A growl escaped from his throat as he glanced toward the stairs to where his son slept. Neri knew he held his rage at whatever he found because he didn’t want to wake his son again. Instead, he fisted his hands next to his thighs on the couch as he took deep breaths for a solid five minutes before he calmed enough to open his eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

“We will destroy this bitch and everyone associated with her and Anzû.”

Frost moved closer to Xander. He reached for her, holding her close and breathing her in. The moment reminded Neri that despite how deadly the immortals were; they were also vulnerable because of those they loved. Vulnerable, yes, but as she was learning with Hunter she had a mate and a family who knew love was stronger than any evil that existed. Including those who wanted to destroy them.

Hunter, sensing Neri’s swirling thoughts, lifted her and cuddled her in his lap. She nuzzled her face against his neck, taking comfort for a moment.

Sensing Xander’s anger and fear, everyone had circled the couch, sitting on the floor or any available seat as they stared at Xander with wide eyes, yet a determined look on each of their faces.

“In the county records, I found a marriage certificate dated the same month Zahava started at Standard,” Xander sucked in another deep breath before he said, “She married Anzû.”

“That makes no sense. If she married him why did he want me?” Frost asked.

Axel scoffed. “Anzû wasn’t stable. I remember how he looked when he walked out of the trees to confront us the same night he died. He had a crazed look in his eyes, and for an immortal shifter, he looked unhealthy. His cheeks and eyes sunken and sallow, his skin jaundiced, and since immortals can never get sick, what was he suffering from that made him look like that?”

“So this Zahava, is after me for killing her husband?” Frost asked.

Hunter shook his head. “I think she’s after every one of us. For the longest time, we though Anzû and whoever took over Nightfall after his death wanted to destroy Dark Company for control. But now the pieces are falling into place.”

“What do you mean?” Kai asked.

“Zahava was in control all along.”

Hunter’s matter-of-fact statement sent a shiver through Neri.

Axel shook his head, but Ghost seemed to contemplate what Hunter said, his interest peaked. Jade and Noah sat still and Neri wondered at the look on Jade’s face. Kane snarled and both Thomas and Isaac sat back with an air of nonchalance, but she could see they listened intently to Hunter’s words. Seth and Aubrey were looking around the room, gauging how the others reacted to Hunter’s matter-of-fact statement. And Kai, Liv, Reaper, Ara, Xander, and Frost searched Hunter’s face as he continued with his theory.

“Xander, can you check to see where Zahava worked at Standard and her supervisor’s name?”

Within moments, Xander’s eyes widened and his head shot up. “First, she worked for Dr. Ames in microbiology for a year. Then she was reassigned to Dr. Stevens, who is a biomedical engineer, after Dr. Ames disappeared.”

Xander continued to search something he didn’t explain, humming under his breath, and soon found what he wanted. “She doesn’t have a special degree. She earned an associate’s degree in nursing at the local community college and she’s a licensed practical nurse. They found out she lied on her resume. She listed RN and not LPN,



but by that time, she stopped coming to work.”

“Yeah, I remember even at a young age, Zahava would do only what was necessary,” Neri snarled.

“Everything from Liv throwing a wrench in their plans, to Ara escaping Standard, and Jade and Noah finding their supposed base of operations earlier this year, Zahava orchestrated it. She married Anzû and worked at Standard a year before Liv even discovered the bioweapon. The dead shifter didn’t seem like a big picture guy. His focus when he fought us was Frost, for no other reason than he wanted her and she became his obsession.

“But Zahava... she worked with the two scientists who created a bioweapon and turned Neri; she made sure she was close-by during Neri’s injection. Despite being human, she’s the leader of a group of shifters and if she’s as smart as I believe she is, she kept herself out of sight for a distinct advantage. We still need answers, but it’s more than we had last year.”

Neri knew it made sense. Although she hadn’t been with Hunter’s family since the beginning, she knew Zahava. For a long time when they were growing up in the orphanage, Neri dreaded being in the vicinity of Zahava. But she placated the girl because she’d seen the mean streak that came along with defiance.

“Where are we going to find what we need?” Gunnar asked.

Another phantom pain pierced her arm, and she jerked it close to her chest. Her other hand pressing down on the spot. Instead of panicking, she knew there was an answer somewhere inside her memory so she relaxed her mind and closed her eyes, searching for why the pain was affecting her. As soon as her shoulder’s relaxed and she leaned against Hunter, another memory assailed her.

Fear coursed through Neri, her body strapped down. The purplish-blue scrubs she wore did nothing to keep the chill from the metal table from soaking through her bones and causing her to shiver. She needed to get her mind off being cold, so she listened for any foreign sounds before she took in the room. The sky blue walls with the one-way mirror on one side, painted a neutral color to ease the mind of whoever they kept. But to Neri, she only sensed dread.

With slow, deliberate movements, she moved her head around the room and the first thing her gaze landed on was one computer on a wheeled stand. It wasn't on and there were no labels or distinguishing logos anywhere so she moved on.

Her eyes focused on a sink with a long-necked spout that reminded her of a doctor's office. Around the sink, sat clear circular jars with metal lids filled with cotton balls, swabs, and tongue depressors. On the shelf above, there were purple gloves in both medium and large sizes and a closed cabinet above the shelf.

She pulled her gaze from the nondescript sink, she noticed a sharps disposal container close to the table where she lay. She sucked in a breath when she realized one syringe lay inside. At that moment, she jerked her head up and searched her arms for an injection site and almost cried when she spotted a bead of blood. On her right arm.

She forgot the drop of blood the moment searing pain ripped through her body, setting her blood on fire. Her mouth opened to scream as pain consumed her. But before she could relive the moment, someone cupped her face. She heard her name being shouted at a distance.

“Neri, angel. You're okay, you're safe.”

Without opening her eyes, she growled. “No, I don't think I am fine.”

A ripple started at her feet. It wasn't painful but something inside her told her to relax

her body and take deep breaths.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

“What do you mean?” Hunter asked.

There was a rip of fabric as the denim of her jeans ripped at the bottom near her feet. She glanced down and stared at a shocking area of white fur where her feet should be. But when Hunter sucked in a breath and his eyes widened in shock, Neri shook her head.

“Now’s not the time to freak out, panther.”

Even to her ears, the words weren’t as clear as she wanted to make them. At the last word, she realized it came out as a growl. Before she blinked in surprise, she found herself with four feet planted on the carpet of Liv’s living room and the tingle stopped. As she opened her mouth to speak, her tongue brushed against a gigantic tooth and she stumbled backward, landing on her ass with a huff.

What the absolute fuck is this, Hunter?

Angel, do you feel okay?

Neri took a deep breath, and she inhaled every scent in the room at once. Vanilla, apple, pine, citrus, cedar, and more she didn’t have time to identify.

Okay, inhaling is a bad idea.

Hunter laughed. She looked up and tried to glare. Instead, she gasped when she spotted how tall she’d grown. She understood on some level she was sitting on the floor, but there was no way her head should be even with Hunter’s waist.

Closing her eyes, she didn't inhale this time. But she readied her mind for whatever she would find when she reopened her eyes. Fuck it!

Like ripping off a bandaid, she opened her eyes and glanced down to see furry white arms and four huge white paws. She noticed pale pink pads underneath her two huge back paws. Not believing she had shifted into a...

What am I?

You're a white panther.

Huh, that explains the fur.

Hunter, not helpful again, laughed. When she opened her mouth to chastise him, a growl, low and deep, escaped instead. The result was the same; Hunter sobered.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Beautiful, we talked about this."

"No, Reaper, it's been four years, and it still takes me ten minutes to shift. Neri wasn't even aware she could and there she is, a gorgeous white panther."

Gorgeous? Thank you.

Everyone in the room froze. Aware of the change in the room, Neri stood and cocked her head to the side and concentrated on listening to any changes outside to see why they were on alert.

What?

Can you hear me?

Axel?

“Holy fuck, yeah she can hear me.”

Okay, I’ll only say this once and if Hunter laughs one more time... I don’t know, but I’ll think of something. What the ever living fuck is going on?

Liv moved closer but Neri spotted her hesitation. In order not to scare her, she planted her ass back on the ground. Not that it helped, her head was even with Liv’s chest.

I didn’t mean to scare you.

“Oh, no sweetie, you didn’t. I noticed you grabbed your arm before your eyes glazed over and I’m wondering if you knew why?”

Neri closed her eyes and remembered back over the conversation. When she opened them, Liv was smiling at her.

“You have exquisite gray eyes flecked with bright blue when you shift.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Thank you. She shook her head before she answered Liv's question. When you said there were no more shifters at Standard who could have bitten me, something pricked my arm. Before my eyes "glazed over" I felt the pain again and knew my body was trying to tell me something. To find out what, I relaxed my mind and had another memory.

She filled them in on what happened.

The way I became a half vampire is the way I became a shifter. I remember the discarded syringe but not the injection on my arm. My memory faded when my transition started and I suppose my body continued with the shift because of muscle memory... maybe?

"That explains how Neri became a shifter and then later, a vampire. They took the venom from those captured and used Neri as a guinea pig. I have the captured immortals' blood from their hospital stay and I'll compare them to Neri's blood sample. But it still doesn't explain how you can shift. I don't think it can happen because of a memory..." Liv trailed off as she glanced at Hunter.

Neri moved her head from Liv to Hunter, wondering why Liv was looking at him with suspicion. When the small vampire cocked her hip and glared at him, Hunter caved.

Hunter's voice was so low. "I claimed her last night."

Unable to smile in her panther form, she huffed instead, drawing everyone's attention away from Hunter.

Why is everyone freaking out? Hunter explained all about mates and claiming and I wanted him to. We belong to each other and I couldn't be happier.

Neri didn't understand. They stood there, shocked at Hunter's actions. All the immortals who had mates had claimed them in the same way. Neri had a mark on her shoulder and whenever she brushed it with her fingers or her hair swung against it, it reminded her Hunter wanted her.

Instead of calming the situation, Neri's words inflamed it. Liv slugged Hunter in the arm and after, shook her hand as if the punch hurt her. She continued to glare at him. Kai snarled and paced back and forth. Axel rolled his eyes and hopped over the couch and headed toward the kitchen. Thomas and Isaac sat as still as statues with matching looks of horror etched on their gorgeous faces. Drew looked over at his sister and laughed. Seth pulled Aubrey into his arms and was rubbing her back in soothing circles. Reaper and Ara moved closer to Neri as their eyes moved over her. Xander pulled Frost onto his lap and buried his face against her hair, breathing her in. Noah did the same with Jade. Even Gunnar, Ghost, and Kane looked sick.

"They think you could have killed her, idiot," Axel called from the kitchen.

Neri shook her head, but since it had grown to four times the size of her normal one, the movement was minimal.

No, no mates can't hurt each other. You said so.

"Yeah, but he watched as you bit a shifter and injected venom into his bloodstream. And yet, after watching him die, he bit you without knowing what it would do to you," Liv snarled.

I'm fine, see fine. I feel like I'm wearing an extra five hundred pounds I'm unprepared for, but I'm great.



At that moment, Neri sensed her body shifting back to her human form. Again taken by surprise and before she could blink, she lay on the floor of the living room, naked as the day she was born.

“Well.... fuck.”

Hunter reached for the blanket draped over the back of the couch and wrapped it around her before he lifted her into his arms and buried his face against her neck.

“I’m so, so sorry.” The sound of Hunter’s tortured voice tore at her heart.

She cupped his cheek and lifted his head so his gaze met hers. “Do you regret I’m your mate?”

“No, what? I love you’re my mate.”

“Then stop acting as though you hurt me. From what you’ve told me, finding a mate is like trial and error, but we’re destined. Kai and Liv learned vampire mates can feed from each other. Ara has fantastic abilities that go above and beyond what any other immortal can do. Xander and Frost created a beautiful baby boy who’s potential is still unknown. And despite others dictating what is natural or right, there is a group of immortals, both shifter and vampire in this room that are family. Family isn’t blood, it’s what you have created together and although none of you could have predicted your lives would end up like this, you’re here and you’re happy. Life is what you make it.”

Silence met Neri’s statement and for a moment, she’d forgotten they weren’t alone in the big mansion with a room full of shifters and vampires hanging on every word of their private conversation. But Neri didn’t mind. She wanted interfering older brothers and funny, loving older sisters and with this group, she got it in spades.

For reassurance, she kissed Hunter. The short, intense kiss stole her breath and made her body tingle in anticipation, but before the others could tell how much she enjoyed kissing her mate, she pulled back, breathless.

“I’m sorry, Hunter. I overreacted. Neri’s fine and you know your mate better than anyone. I shouldn’t have interfered,” Liv said.

Neri reached for her and despite she was naked underneath the blanket surrounding her, she pulled Liv into a hug with Hunter.

“You’re a sweetheart, Liv,” Neri said and kissed her on the cheek.

“And I’m sorry for worrying all of you. That wasn’t my intention. I bit Neri because my instincts drove me to. If the panther wasn’t so adamant, I… no, I would have. But I am sorry for worrying you.”

“Okay, hands off my mate and the rest of us are sorry, too.” Kai pulled Liv up from the chair and wrapped his arms around her from behind.

Axel laughed from the kitchen before he walked in and claimed the seat he vacated minutes before. “I’m not. Unlike all of you, I didn’t freak out. She’s healthy and stronger than the rest of us combined. Well, except for Ara, she’s a powerhouse. Our instincts have never led us astray so why deny them.”

Everyone, including Neri, stared at Axel in silence with their mouths hanging open. A few minutes later, it was Reaper who spoke first.

“When the fuck did you become so wise?”

Neri giggled when Axel caught her gaze and winked.

“I’m always wise, but I figure it’s about time I grow up and stopped annoying all of you.”

The assassins searched each other’s gazes as Axel and Neri laughed. Neri reached out and snagged Axel’s hand, pulling him close and giving him a hug.

“I’ll love being part of this family.”

### CHAPTER NINE

#### NERI

When Neri woke from a deep sleep and she's aware of Hunter's arms surrounding her. One wrapped around her waist with his hand splayed over her stomach and the other beneath her neck, holding her close. As her groggy mind sharpened, she smiled, savoring the warmth radiating from her mate.

She pressed her back against his chest and smiled into his wrist. With a deep inhale, she scented the earthy pine that clung to his skin and centered her. After last night she needed it.

Neri had joked around with Axel for a while after the tension in the room had dissipated. She had no desire to persecute Hunter for something his instincts and his panther had begged him to do. But as they spoke about her transition and how she'd become a shifter and then a hybrid, she glimpsed something in Ara's eyes, especially after the way Reaper had comforted her.

She pulled herself from Hunter's hold with a brief explanation and a nod from him. Neri then stood and walked over to Ara.

"Hey, do you want to maybe... talk in the kitchen?" she asked.

Ara nodded and with a kiss on the top of her head from Reaper, they moved away from the group. Neri, groaned as she adjusted her blanket. The stark realization of being naked underneath almost caused her to run home for a second, but she spotted

the torture in Ara's eyes and wanted to help.

They sat at the kitchen table and Neri had no clue how to start the conversation. Never a people person, she blurted out what she thought.

"I've never been a sunshine and flowers kind of person who has positive encouragement to give. I mean, fuck that. But I have learned over the years being alone with your thoughts and your fears is worse. For the first several years on my own, people; men, women, children, it didn't matter, frightened me whenever I was close. I'm stronger and faster, but there's something so disabling in your mind when something happened to you, yet you can't get past it."

Ara nodded. "I love my life. But I remember..."

Neri leaned forward and clutched Ara's hand in hers and before she became too lost in thoughts, she squeezed.

"The reason I'm not freaking out about all of this information is because I already suspected, deep down inside somewhere. From what Hunter told me, you watched the immortals being tortured. And that was before they set their sights on you. It would fuck with anyone's mind, witnessing and experiencing what you have."

"But how do I get over it?" Ara asked.

Neri squeezed tighter.

"You talk about it. You rage when you need to. Scream, cry, throw things, break things, but talk about it. You remember those you lost and you talk about them so they live on. If you keep it inside, the assholes have power over you. But if you talk about it, they have nothing.

“You are a strong woman, Ara. I see the way the others look at you, how in awe of you they are. There’s respect for your abilities but there is also love for who you are as a person. Any of them, including me, would love to be the one you open up to and there is no shame in it. Before I met Hunter, and you, and the rest of your family out there, I would have kept my thoughts to myself. Instead, I’m talking about the things I’ve gone through and it’s been freeing.”

Ara grew quiet and for a moment, Neri believed she pushed too far. But when Ara squeezed her hand and lifted her head, she caught her gaze and nodded once.

“You’re right. Although I still miss Solomon, he’s the gigantic lion shifter who killed himself after they injected him with the bioweapon, Felix, Patrick, and Michael have a chance at a new life.”

Neri sensed Ara’s guilt. “Solomon’s death wasn’t your fault and there’s no way you could have prevented it.”

“Logic tells me that, hell Reaper tells me whenever I get lost in the past, but I’m not sure my heart knows it.”

“Was Solomon a selfish person?”

That shocked Ara. Her mouth dropped open, and she shook her head.

“Would he be proud of the life you’re living now?”

And with her last question, Ara burst out in tears. It was harsh, but Ara needed to hear it. Before Neri pulled Ara into her arms and held her, Reaper appeared in the room and lifted Ara into his arms.

Neri watched as Ara wrapped her arms and legs around Reaper and buried her face

against his neck. The sobbing tore at her heart, and she glanced up to face an angry Reaper. Instead, his face twisted in concern for his mate. Neri stood, unable not to do anything, and rubbed Ara's back until her breathing evened out and she clung to Reaper, her energy waning.

"I'm here for you, Ara, if you ever need to talk. And I'll try to work on my tact for next time."

Ara laughed through her tears and when she turned around and searched Neri's face, Neri smiled back.

"Thank you, Neri."

"Anytime, honey. And I mean that."

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Reaper had nodded at her before turning to the others who were quiet. “We’re going home, we’ll see you tomorrow.”

In a flash, Reaper and Ara disappeared and before Neri could blink, Hunter stood in front of her. He wiped the tears from her cheeks. She hadn’t even noticed she’d been crying, but her heart hurt for Ara. When Hunter smiled at her, she fell into his arms and shivered.

“I hated making her cry. Her thoughts haunted her and if she dwelled on it, well, it causes damage.”

Hunter’s words came out as a whisper. “I had no clue she thought about Solomon all these years later, but one look from you, and you brought the truth to the surface. And you’re right, angel, everyone needs to talk about what’s bothering them. It’s toxic to keep it inside.”

Neri sighed. Guilt weight on her. She needed to keep an eye on Ara.

Hunter lifted her head and kissed her. It wasn’t one full of passion but one of loving acceptance and care. By the time he pulled away, her body sagged against his in exhaustion.

“Ready to head home and go to bed?”

Neri nodded and smiled when Hunter reached for her and threaded their fingers together. They walked into the living room and remembering, almost too late she was still naked, her hand gripped on the blanket that slipped.



“Got it there, gray eyes?” Axel asked.

She smiled at her new friend and nodded. “Just tired. We’re headed back to my house.”

“I remember where you live,” Kai said.

Neri turned to Hunter. “Ready?”

Hunter nodded and with one final wave, Neri gripped his bicep with both her hands and flashed them both home. She sighed, happy to see her bed right in front of her.

“I would shower, but I’m way too tired.” Neri slid under the covers before she glanced up to see Hunter smiling at her. “Lose the clothes, panther. Time to sleep.”

She didn’t even remember when their positions had shifted to Hunter holding her. Neri smiled when she thought about the term ‘small spoon’ and snuggled back into Hunter.

“How did you sleep?” Hunter asked, his voice deep and rough from sleep.

She turned in his arms and smiled at being able to wake up next to her mate, being able to touch him whenever she wanted. She traced her fingers along his eyebrows and down his cheeks, loving the warmth infusing her fingers.

“I don’t remember. I haven’t slept this well as far back as I could remember. Maybe since I lived at Thalia’s. How about you?”

He smiled and captured her lips with his own. The kiss started slow, but the moment his tongue touched her bottom lip, all thoughts fled. She moaned as she opened for him, loving when his arms wrapped around her, spanning his hands over the small of her

back. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she sensed movement, but it wasn't until the kiss ended because they needed to breathe when she realized she lay on top of Hunter, naked.

“Have I shocked you, angel?”

Neri blinked at him, unable to register the question he'd asked. She was too busy cataloging how the hair on his legs was softer than she expected. He was so much taller than her, so the top of her feet slid up and down his shins, skin against skin. Her hips pressed against his taut stomach and she shivered against him. But it was her breasts against the hot skin of his chest that drew a moan from her throat.

“Um... what?”

Hunter threw his head back and laughed, exposing his neck and causing her mouth to water. Without knowing it, her fingers moved toward her own mark on her neck and when she brushed against it, her breath caught in her throat.

She must have moaned because Hunter's expression sobered and he spotted her hand near his mark.

“What's it like?”

Neri swallowed. But unable to hold back the truth from her mate, she told him.

“It's like a shock cascading over your body. But instead of being painful, it's energizing, and then there's the throbbing, which makes my nipples hard, and I crave your touch as my pussy becomes drenched, waiting for you to enter me.”

“Fuck.”

Neri scrambled on top of Hunter's body until she sat on his thighs, her hands splaying over his stomach. "Can I touch you?"

"Angel, you don't even have to ask."

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She froze for a moment as thoughts swirled in her brain, wondering where she should start. Although they'd had sex, she hadn't pleased him with her mouth and her hands.

"It's all about doing what feels good. If you don't like something, let me know and we'll stop. But listen to your instincts and don't let your thoughts get in the way."

Neri blew out a relieved breath before she tilted forward and captured his lips with hers and lost herself in their kiss. In the short time she'd known Hunter, kissing both centered her and drove her crazy with need. Her pulse pounded as blood rushed through her body, making her skin sensitive and when he gripped her hips and pulled her closer to devour her mouth, she almost came.

With reluctance, she broke the kiss and moved her mouth down his jawline and pressed her lips against his neck just below his ear. His moan passed through her and she shuddered with need. Her movements came to a stop as she opened her mouth and almost begged him to take her, but this was about him. She wanted to give him pleasure.

Her mouth moved over his throat and near the indent of his neck and shoulder. She sucked the skin into her mouth and grunted when Hunter's hips shot up, searching for relief. Neri scraped her teeth along his collarbone and this time, he clutched her close and moaned her name.

"I never knew."

Neri's eyes shot to his face. "Knew what, love?"

“A simple touch, a simple kiss is as erotic as making love with you.”

Her lips smiled against his pectoral and instead of answering, she explored. Kissing and nipping his skin as her mouth traveled toward his nipple. She loved it when he suckled her and wanted to know if it was as intense for him.

“Oh,fuck.”

A giggle escaped as she received her answer, but soon turned into a moan as Hunter wiggled beneath her and she moved to his other nipple, flicking her tongue against the hardened nub, savoring the salty taste on his skin. She was growing addicted to him, not only his body but everything that entailed Hunter. His caring nature and how he accepted her as his mate. She realized how much he loved the people in his life and she hoped to be one someday.

Shaking her head to quell her thoughts, she moved lower before she moaned against Hunter’s stomach. Her tongue traced each defined muscle, loving how he sucked in his stomach and clenched his fists at his sides as she explored every inch of him.

Although she had a love/hate relationship at times with being an immortal, being able to remember Hunter’s skin against her own and how he reacted to her explorations, seared in her memory forever.

“You’re killing me, angel.”

Neri smiled, moving her mouth to trace over his hipbones and the cut that led to his cock, her final destination. She didn’t care if he entered her. She wanted to watch him lose control.

“What—”

She wrapped her hand around the base of his cock she savored the warmth radiating from him. She settled the rest of her body to lie on the bed in between his legs but a sudden worry entered her mind when he jerked in her grip and she glanced up.

“Am I too cold?”

Hunter froze and his head shot up off the pillow to stare at her, his eyes wide with realization.

“Since I claimed you, your skin hasn’t been cold to the touch. Or I’m used to it by now, I can’t tell. But no, you’re perfect.”

He choked on the last word when Neri, unable to stay away from tasting him, swallowed the head of his cock and swirled her tongue around the base of the head, savoring the liquid that burst on her tongue.

Focused on the task at hand, Hunter’s gasps and the stuttered partial exclamations erupting from his throat were secondary to memorizing the veins on the underside of his cock as she swallowed more of him.

Her tongue never stopped moving, flicking back and forth on the slit whenever she pulled up and tracing each inch of velvety skin when she swallowed him down. When she noticed Hunter’s body vibrating below her, she blinked back into reality and glanced up, her mouth stretched open on his cock.

She pulled off and searched Hunter’s face before she asked, “Am I doing this wrong?”

A choked laugh had Neri’s brows drawing down in confusion. Then he dropped his forearm over his eyes.

“Your mouth should be illegal, angel. I never expected you to do that. You surprised me when you did. But it was the sensations of your tongue and your mouth on my cock... I almost lost control in less than a minute. That would have been embarrassing.”

Neri shook her head. “No, it means you enjoyed it enough to come.”

His arm moved away from his eyes before he glanced down to capture her gaze. “I don’t know what I did in this life or the one previous, but I thank whatever deity above for the simple fact they brought you into my life. You, Neri, are perfect for me and I hope I’m the same for you.”

“You are, Hunter. I feel it in every fiber of my being. But, where was I before you interrupted?”

Without waiting for an answer, she swallowed him down and although unable, she tried to smile around his huge cock in her mouth.

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Soon, she became lost in her movements and the sounds she drew from Hunter. Her rhythm didn't break when Hunter's breathing became erratic or when his hips tried to move up and he forced himself back down, pressing both fists on his hips. But she wanted to experience everything, so when she pulled off this time, she made a demand.

“Hunter, stop being so controlled.”

This time she took him whole and when the head was near the base of her throat. His gasp thrilled her, but it wasn't until she swallowed, the muscles constricting against the glans, that he came down her throat.

“Holy ever living fuck.Neri!”

She didn't bother to hold his hips, but his muscles locked down and other than the jerk of his cock in her mouth, his body was stiff.

He was earthy and salty, a little bitter, but all Hunter and she savored his unique flavor as his cock continued to throb, swelling and retracting, in her mouth. Not wanting to hurt him, she pulled back without too much stimulation. But when she reached the tip, she pressed a small kiss to the skin.

Hunter panted on the bed, trying to catch his breath as he came down from his high, and it was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen. His skin had a bright sheen that made the dark olive color stand out. His chest heaved up and down and she noticed his nipples were still hard, straining up toward the ceiling.



Neri reached between her legs and found her clit with her fingers, moving her eyes over his flushed and slicked skin. Without moving her eyes away, her fingers slid down, and she gasped at the wetness coating her fingers. She needed to come. And she didn't think she had time for Hunter to recover.

Again, her fingers moved over her clit, soaked in wetness and silky against her skin. After several strokes, she was close to coming, so close, when Hunter's voice broke the sensual fog.

"What are you doing down there, angel?"

His deep voice, combined with the feel of her fingers, triggered her orgasm. She flopped onto her back on the bed, unaware of how she looked or the jumble of words spewing from her mouth and rode the wave of pleasure. At that moment, she understood how intense her orgasm became the more her fingers kept up the movements and she wanted this intense orgasm to continue for as long as possible.

That is fuckinghot!

Can't... talk.

Not knowing if minutes passed or days, Neri's body relaxed allowing her spine to come in contact with the bed as her chest heaved with the staccato rhythm of her heavy breaths. Her eyes stayed closed until Hunter's hand moved up her stomach and chest before he laid a finger in her bottom lip and pulled it from in between her teeth. She hadn't remembered biting it.

His lips pressed against her own and she hummed. Her lips tingled, but so did her entire body. But with Hunter near, there was a buzz of electricity that gave life to her spent body and she wanted Hunter inside her.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Hunter groaned into her mouth. “You are trying to kill me.”

Neri shook her head and laughed at the banter back and forth. “Nah, why would I do that. If I couldn’t suck your cock again and have you shoot down my throat, I could never to live with myself.”

Her words had the exacting affect she wanted. She smiled as Hunter hovered over her, resting his weight on his forearms, with a fierce look on his face.

“Down a few more inches, love, and you’ll be inside me.”

Her smile turned into a gasp when dropped his weight onto her and reached for her hips, surging inside her in the next second. A loud moan escaped as her pussy gripped Hunter’s cock, still pulsing from her orgasm, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her thighs tightened and her arms circled his shoulders when he lifted her off the bed and leaned back on his haunches.

Their faces were mere inches apart. She’d never seen such a fierce look, but his bright green eyes flashed with love and need. She cupped his face, and she kissed him, trying to deepen their connection. But he moved and she could only hold on.

He drove his hips forward and because of her position straddling his thighs, his cock brushed the one area that tore a scream from her throat. She wanted to beg for more, for everything, but the words struck in her throat as he dropped his hips and pulled several inches out of her. A whimper was all she could manage. Before he was almost all the way out, he drove back inside.

Hunter!

He kept up his relentless thrusts, holding her tight against his body. The first time had been incredible, but this was something on another level. Her head dropped onto his shoulder and the muscles of his neck corded. On instinct, she leaned forward and scraped her teeth along the band of muscle most prominent and groaned along with Hunter when his hips stuttered and he changed the angle of his hips.

“Bite me, angel. I need you to claim me.”

Neri stiffened in Hunter’s arms and images of the shifter she’d killed the other night flashed in her mind. And if she claimed him, would her bite be deadly? If there were a probability, which there was, a gigantic one, she refused to put his life in danger.

“It’s okay,” Hunter murmured.

“No, it’s not. I was about to bite you, to inject you with venom, because I wanted to claim you as mine. But then the image of the dead shifter flashed, and I... can’t. I can’t do that to you. Even if you hate me and don’t want to have anything to do with me from now on, I—”

“Angel, no. Neri, listen.”

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Hunter waited until Neri pulled back and met his gaze. He wiped the tears from her face and kissed her, a brush of his lips against hers, before he gave her a small smile.

“I can never hate you. And I wanted you to bite me because I claimed you, but that’s reckless.”

Neri shook her head. “Instincts, remember. Your instincts knew it was okay but mine, until Liv tells me my bite and venom won’t hurt you, I can’t put you in danger. I also think because I was half-shifter, your venom wouldn’t hurt me like mine can hurt you.”

Hunter wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. She blew out a relieved breath as he laid his head on her chest. But soon the warmth coming from his body and the realization he was still hard and aching inside her precipitated her hips shifting forward.

“Do you—”

Before he could finish the question, she lifted her hips and dropped back down, driving his cock deeper and deeper with each plunge downward. The next few feverish minutes were all about the feel of Hunter inside her and the heat that flared underneath her skin as his hands caressed her. Before she even realized her orgasm was on the precipice, her muscles clamped down on Hunter’s cock, holding him inside as she threw her head back and screamed through her release.

As the throbbing subsided, she sucked in a deep breath and moaned when Hunter’s release shot inside her. She clamped down on him, milking him until his head

dropped forehead and his arms tightened around her back. Unable to hold themselves up any longer, they dropped onto their pillows, facing one another and Neri couldn't help the smile bursting through.

"Happy?" Hunter asked, breathless.

"I'm with you, so yes. More than I ever believed I could be."

They grew silent, but Neri didn't take her eyes off Hunter. He had the same problem. But it wasn't until a chill shivered over her before they moved.

"Shower first and then breakfast?" Hunter asked.

She was thinking about a nap first, but her stomach rumbled at that moment and her cheeks grew hot. Hunter chuckled and before she had time to feel embarrassed, he lifted her into his arms and moved toward the bathroom. The shower filled the room with steam and she moaned the moment the hot water poured over her body.

They made quick work of the shower and when Hunter shut it off; he glanced up and caught her gaze.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

Hunter smiled. "I think we should see Thalia today. She needs to know you're safe."

"How do we find her?"

"Xander sent me a text last night with her address. What do you say?"

Neri's hand flew up to her throat, and she nodded. She'd missed Thalia and she was thrilled she was healthy, but another part of her didn't want to intrude on her life. But

Hunter had a point.

“Okay.” Her voice was small.

Hunter kissed her forehead. “We’re in this together. This way you’ll know how she feels.”

“Thank you.”

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you, angel. Now I found you, I’m never letting you go.”

As Neri stared into Hunter’s gaze, she knew his words were both the truth and a vow. She made the same one, including that she would love him for the rest of her existence.

### CHAPTER TEN

#### HUNTER

The nerves coming for Neri had been palpable on the drive down the mountain and he wondered if she might hyperventilate as they turned onto the street where Thalia lived. Her eyes widened as she took in the aspen and pine that dotted neighborhood with ranch-style houses. They were ordinary and yet inviting. Despite the snow earlier in the month, the colder weather hadn't set in, so the grass was still a lush green from the warmer than average summer that year.

Hunter pictured Neri's life here. Her fighting Thalia as she tried to wake Neri for school, running errands for her mother, laughing and enjoying life.

"You'll be okay. If the situations were reversed, you would want answers?"

Neri blew out a sigh and nodded. "Yeah. But four years is a long time."

Hunter squeezed her hand and opened his mouth to encourage her without pushing her before she was ready when the front door opened. Neri froze, and he snapped his mouth closed.

Both of their eyes moved toward the front door and he flinched at the loud squeak of the screen door opening.

I'll take care of that.

They were both silent as who he assumed was Thalia stepped out onto the porch.

Thalia Costa surprised him. He expected someone in their fifties or older, but Thalia looked to be no older than thirty. He sensed her eyes on him and when he met her gaze, waves of confusion hit him. Not fear, only confusion.

Because of his size, when he wasn't working, he tried to blend into the background. For this visit, he dressed in a simple gray long-sleeved shirt and worn jeans with tennis shoes. But at over six foot and built, he looked like a threat no matter what he wore.

To distract Thalia away from him, he glanced down at Neri at his side.

He sucked in a breath. Neri had tears flowing down her cheeks and while everything in his being wanted to wrap her up and protect her from this moment, she needed to confront her past, for both women's sakes. The tears turned into a choked sob at Thalia's next question.

“Moró korítsi?”

Hunter, confused by the obvious question in her words, turned to Neri who nodded.

“Yes, mamá, it's me.”

Not understanding the flurry of emotions on Thalia's face and in her dark chocolate eyes, Hunter jumped, although he would deny it to anyone who asked, when Thalia screamed in delight and launched herself at Neri.

His mate allowed Thalia to run full force into her arms. With the gentle ease, in the same way she held Silas whenever he jumped into her arms, she wrapped them around Thalia as the woman cried.



The sobs tore at his heart, but it was the way Thalia gripped Neri's shirt with one hand and her hip with the other, as if Neri would disappear and all of this was a bad dream, had him swallowing down the lump that formed in his throat. He understood in a way he never had before he met Neri. The constant worry of someone after her, wanting to hurt her or kill her.

But his life, the darkness and death, the blood and the fear, never should have crossed paths with these two women. They lived their lives ignorant of the dangers lurking not ten miles from where they stood, and yet, Neri, pulled into this nightmare, became part of his life, part of him.

He understood in that moment what he hadn't standing outside in the periphery as he watched his fellow assassins find who destiny deemed them worthy to find. Mates, the one's you loved with your entire being, not only your heart, and protected with your life, are the end all, be all of your existence. And because of who Neri was to him and would continue to be for eternity, he understood Thalia's grief in striking clarity.

Hunter hovered near the two women. He didn't want to intrude in their reunion, but knowing emotions drained every ounce of energy once the tears stopped flowing, he took one step closer to be there when either of them needed him.

Standing stock still, some time passed before Thalia lifted her head and cupped Neri's cheeks, wiping away the tears with such love etched on her face. Neri smiled, which turned into a laugh, when Thalia beamed at her, her heartbreak soothed for the time being.

"Where have you been, moró korítsi? And your hair and your beautiful brown eyes."

"Um, it's a long story," Neri hedged.

Hunter shook his head. “You should tell her the truth. She’s family.”

They had gone back and forth as they ate breakfast that morning and gotten dressed. Hunter understood that some humans couldn’t handle a secret such as immortals, but Thalia was her family. That made Thalia his family.

Thalia turned her curious gaze back on him. Although she couldn’t read his mind, something about her warned him about the danger of crossing her.

“And who are you?”

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Without hesitation, he replied, “I’m Hunter, I’m Neri’s immortal mate. I’m an immortal shifter if you wanted to be specific. I shift into a black panther.”

Instead of wondering what he meant, Thalia nodded her head once and turned back to Neri. “Let’s go inside and I’ll make tea. We can talk and catch up.”

“We would like that,” Neri said.

Thalia nodded and led them inside her house. The walls in the living room were a beautiful blue-green color that matched the creme chairs, sofa, and love seat, all splashed with blues and greens. But Thalia led them into the kitchen with a wooden table. A familiar wooden table.

“You bought one of my tables and the matching chairs to go along with it.”

Thalia laughed. “I bought this at Lancaster Furniture down on Snow Lane. I had a good feeling about the pieces once I saw them and I had to have them.” She directed them to take a seat and moved to the stove, flicking on the burner for the kettle.

They settled next to each other, facing Thalia, and Hunter wondered how long it would take before she asked her questions.

“Where have you been, moró korítsi? Oh, I’m sorry. I’d given myself at least fifteen minutes before I interrogated you, but you’re here and I can’t...”

“You have every right, mamá. I never intended to leave.”

“What... what do you mean?”

Neri glanced at Hunter and he gave her an encouraging smile, squeezing her hand resting on the table.

“From what we’ve learned over the past few days, someone kidnapped me in front of Standard Biotech on the way home from the store. Xander found they kept me there for a few weeks until I escaped. My memory is very sketchy. I remembered a girl from the orphanage when I was ten and after Xander told me about a foster mother, I remembered you. I remembered our life here. But nothing about the time they held me.”

Thalia jumped when the kettle whistled and poured the water into three teacups with the bags already inside. Neri hopped up and carried the tray to the table before her and Thalia sat.

“What did they do to you?”

Neri swallowed and reached for Thalia’s hands. “We think a scientist there, Dr. Stevens, injected me with shifter venom and I transitioned into a shifter who, as I remember from my memory, couldn’t shift. So instead of killing me or letting me go, and this is from what I remember, injected me with a combination bioweapon and vampire venom. Instead of killing me, my body accepted the injection so I’m a hybrid, half shifter and half vampire.”

She continued, telling Thalia all about how she’d met him and explained about his family, the assassins and what they’d discovered as she replayed the events from the past couple of days.

From the expressions on Thalia’s face, she understood the harsh realities of life and didn’t seem fazed at all by immortals; shifters and vampires alike. The love that

shone in her eyes was the same look Xander and Frost, or any of the immortals, had whenever they spotted Silas. It promised unwavering support and love, with no explanation needed.

“Dr. Stevens... why does that name sound familiar?” Thalia asked.

“Older man, long face with cold eyes, and long, lanky legs?” Hunter described.

Recognition lit up Thalia’s eyes. “Yes, he came by here saying his car broke down and asked to use the phone. But he told me he worked at the hospital, but there are three. As he was dialing, his eyes kept darting around the house, searching for something. I forgot about the entire incident after he left, but then you disappeared three weeks later. Oh, Neri, I’m so sorry.”

“No, mamá, you didn’t know what he wanted. We still don’t. But I’m healthy. Do you want to come live with me, in case he comes back?”

Thalia shook her head. “No, moró, he won’t come back. I read in the paper about a year after you disappeared he died in a car accident. I remember seeing the picture and thinking he must have had more car trouble, and that’s what killed him. Now, I’m not so sure. And besides, I’m never leaving my house. We built a life here, and for me, it’ll always be here. But...”

She trailed off and Hunter glanced at Neri, a spark of something mischievous flashing in her eyes. And within seconds, Neri finished her sentence.

“You want to meet my new immortal family? I would love that. Do you have time now?”

Thalia’s eyes widened and her look implied she would refuse.

“They would love to meet you, so would baby Silas. He’s only a year and seven months old, but he’s brilliant,” Hunter said.

After that, Thalia agreed. They piled into the SUV and headed for Kai’s. He called to give him a heads up. Not that they needed one.

“Yeah.”

“Neri’s mom is coming to meet everyone.”

Kai didn’t say goodbye and hung up on Hunter, which made him laugh.

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When they arrived, the entire group were standing outside, trying to look nonchalant and failing.

“This is... all of them?”

Hunter nodded. “Yeah, this is our family. They mean well, but if you feel overwhelmed, let me know and I’ll take you back home. This is Kai and Liv’s place, they are vampires. Hand me your cell and I’ll put all the numbers and addresses in your phone.”

Thalia nodded, passing the phone to him, as she opened the back door and stepped out. As they had done with Neri, Liv was the first to welcome Thalia and invite her into the house before the rest followed. Hunter exited the driver’s side and rushed to open the door for Neri, leaning down and pressing a kiss to her lips.

Neri sighed, yet when she pulled away, she had a smile on her face. She needed to talk, so he waited next to her as she leaned back against the hood of the SUV. His smile grew when Neri burrowed herself against his side and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I found my mother again, and she doesn’t hate me.” Neri’s voice filled with wonder.

“Angel, I’m sure no one can hate you.”

Neri lifted her head to protest, but Hunter cut her off. “Okay, scratch that, any sane person, because Zahava isnotsane.”

“But I hurt her.”

Hunter pulled Neri close and lifted her chin until she looked him in the eye.

“Pain reminds us of what we have to lose and makes us stronger when we make it through. You’re alive and healthy and Thalia’s thrilled. The past four years couldn’t matter less to her. She didn’t blink an eye when you told her you’re an immortal because that doesn’t matter to her. I doubt it will ever matter to her,” Hunter said.

Neri nodded and Hunter smiled, receiving a smile back. They walked into the house hand-in-hand and stopped inside the entrance to see the assassins gathered around the living room, all staring at Thalia, who was bouncing Silas up and down on her leg as he laughed in delight.

“When Neri was twelve, she decided she was old enough to run away because she didn’t trust the fact she had a home, a forever home with me. The year she stayed with me, we had so many silent face-off’s. They came whenever I asked her to do something for me like set the table for dinner, or make her bed, or pick the towels up from the bathroom floor. I believed she thought if she was too quiet, or stubborn, or contradictory I would give up on her. But Neri was the first child I wanted to keep from the moment I saw her.

“So when she walked out the front door, I grabbed my purse and my coat and followed her. About a mile away from the house, she turned in a huff and stomped her foot down and asked me why I was following her. I knew she struggled with her past. Every kid in the system faces abuse. Sometimes it’s emotional, other times physical. But there was such determination in her brown eyes I knew she would be okay even if she didn’t live with me. But I fell in love with her and already saw her as my daughter, so I told her we were family. So that meant where ever she goes, I go,” Thalia said.



Hunter noticed the rapt attention of the group of assassins in the room as Thalia told the story, but he realized why she stopped when both Liv and Jade wiped the tears from their eyes.

Thalia held Silas up in front of her and blew raspberries on his stomach, laughing with delight when he squealed and wriggled in her arms. When she brought him close and tucked him against her side after he gasped for breath. Silas then leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you. That was fun,” Silas said.

Neri gasped, never having heard Silas speak aloud before, but Thalia laughed and kissed him back.

“You are perfect, moró, just perfect.”

“What does... that mean?” Silas asked.

“Moró?”

Silas nodded.

“It means baby in Greek. I call my Neri moró korítsi or baby girl.”

Hunter spoke up, wanting her to finish her story. “Did Neri go back home with you?”

Thalia laughed and pressed another kiss to Silas’s cheek.

“She did not. She stood there as the sun sank down in the horizon and the crickets chirped as night descended, thinking. I knew logic wouldn’t convince her because her emotions were so raw, even after a year of living with me. So I told her—”

“Trust comes in time and I would have to stick around long enough to earn yours,” Neri finished.

“And you did, Neri. Each day after that, you took nothing for granted. You even stayed with me after I got sick. After that day, your strength and thoughts of you pushed me through the rest of chemo. It also helped when I badgered Detective Cortez about your case. Which reminds me, should I tell him I found you?”

“Do you trust him?” Kai asked.

“Kai, right?”

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When the stunned vampire nodded, she continued.

“I wouldn’t have anyone I didn’t trust working on Neri’s case. He investigated Dr. Stevens, but he found no one by that name worked at any of the hospitals. I don’t think we even thought about Standard Biotech because the information Dr. Stevens gave me when he knocked on my door.”

“You wouldn’t have found him, anyway. Standard has a way of erasing information they don’t want leaked,” Xander said.

“Yeah, I think you should tell him I’m alive and well. We don’t have to tell him about the immortals, unless you want to, mamá?”

Thalia blushed and Hunter’s gaze shot to Neri, who had a sly smile, and Hunter understood.

“Xander? Can you do a background on Detective Cortez?”

Xander nodded, and he pulled his laptop close before his fingers flew over the keyboard.

“I trust her judgment,” Neri said.

Hunter chuckled. “Oh, I do too. I would never cross your mother because she’s too smart to put up with bullshit, but it never hurts to check.”

“Detective Tajo Cortez, born October 25, 1985. He started as a beat cop when he was

twenty-one after he graduated from the University of Denver where he majored in criminology. He worked his way through the Snowfall Police Department through vice and missing persons before being assigned to homicide as a detective. He never married, has a perfect credit score, owns his own house, and has a chocolate labrador named Lucy, who turned two last month. His partner is Jack O'Connor. His record is clean."

"Well, thank you Mr. Snoopy pants." Thalia sighed as she looked around the room, her gaze affectionate.

Xander winked at Thalia.

"Anything for family."

"Well, well, isn't this a lovely scene?"

The new voice, one Hunter hadn't heard before, quieted the room. He stepped closer to Neri, Thalia, and Silas when spotted Neri's gaze move to the top stairs. Standing there was the same woman who had hidden in the trees his first night with his mate.

The assassins, relaxed a second before, all moved to strategic positions around the first floor. But when Jade and Noah moved toward the stairs, a cold, high-pitched laugh stopped them in their tracks.

"Nuh uh, Jade. I know you want to kill me for sending you and your hunky mate on a wild goose chase and feeding you false information about your past, but we were having a little fun. Weren't we? I wouldn't want one of my shifters to kill you."

"I'd like to see them try, human." Jade growled every word.

Instead of instigating anything, the crazy bitch threw her head back and laughed. The

sound cut off abruptly, freaking him out before she snapped her head back, glaring at Jade.

“Holy fuck, this woman is off her rocker.” Axel mumbled under his breath.

Neri turned and glared at the lion shifter before she faced Zahava, not wanting to turn her back on the enemy. “You thought I was fucking with you.”

“No, but there’s normal crazy and then there’s bat-shit crazy. She’s bat-shit crazy.”

“You look at my mate like that one more time, I’ll rip off your fucking head and feed it to one of your pets,” Noah threatened.

Instead of answering Noah, Zahava searched the room and landed on Frost. Xander moved the moment Zahava’s voice echoed through Kai’s house, but now he stepped in front of Frost and looked ready to launch himself at the enemy. And no one in the house believed anything else.

“Well, well, the freak who killed my mate.”

“Was he? Your mate I mean. Because from what I can see, he didn’t claim you. There are no visible marks and you’re still human. Were you the best he could do because he couldn’t have me? That’s just sad.”

Frost’s mocking voice almost had him cracking a smile. But he spotted movement and heard footsteps in the upstairs bedroom and he bounced on the balls of his feet, ready to kill them. Instead of an army, six shifters appeared from a bedroom and flanked their leader.

There’s something wrong with them. All of their eyes are the same color, a dull hazel color and their skin is sallow.

What does that mean?Neri's voice sounded strong, but confused.

They've been fucking with genetics. When I worked there, there was a genetics department. Maybe that's how she can create so many shifters that survive the transition. She has someone working with her with that knowledge, maybe a scientist from Standard.

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“Are you even paying attention?”

“Nope. Now if you wouldn’t mind fucking off and taking your lackeys with you. We were in the middle of something,” Neri snarled.

“No, you’re going to fucking listen!”

“Would you stop screeching!”

The room went still and silent. All eyes were on Neri.

“For fuck’s sake, you’re inside, use your indoor voice, Zahava. How many times have I reminded you of that? You’re a fucking adult, act like it.”

At her stunned silence, Neri’s brows drew down in concentration.

Axel, Gunnar, Ghost, and Hunter, move closer. When I nod, grab my arm. Ara and Jade, can you protect Silas and Thalia?

Both women made a microscopic movement in agreement as the three other men crowded closer to her.

We’re going up there and take them out. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of this bullshit.

Got it.

Yep, let's do this.

Gunnar and Ghost responded, and she knew Hunter was already with her. Neri moved her gaze to Axel to see him smiling at her.

Anything for you, gray eyes.

Before they could execute their plan, Zahava snapped her fingers and all six shifters closed in on her position. One of them grabbed Zahava and before Hunter blinked, they disappeared.

“Now!”

They flashed up to the second floor landing and separated to search each room. Hunter opened the closet doors, looked underneath the bed, searched through the wardrobe in the corner, and checking the locks on the windows, finding nothing. He walked out into the hallway and Hunter knew he had the same disappointed look that mirrored theirs. But Ghost nodded as he walked out of the room on the corner.

“There is a ladder door in this room leading to the attic. There's a hinged roof window. It's not alarmed and you can jump onto the tall evergreen next to the house.”

“Another fucking vulnerability in my security system, great,” Kai growled.

“Everyone safe?” Ghost asked.

“Yeah, I locked down the house and turned on the perimeter alarms. I'll add another alarm to the window and then place motion sensors on the room and on each balcony. It would be great if we can find that fucking woman and kill her and everyone associated with her, soon,” Kai grunted before he walked away.



“Now what?” Neri asked.

Ghost growled. “We plan. We gather as much information as possible, find their location, find out what they want, and destroy them.”

Hunter agreed.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### NERI

For the past hour, Neri helped the others as they covered each inch of Kai's house as they checked the functionality of the cameras, the motion sensors, and the perimeter alarms. She flashed to each sensor, remembering their placement after she almost tripped over them, twice. The first time when she ran from the house. The second, the night of Hunter's attack.

To make sure they worked, she walked past them before Silas, who sat in the control center filled with monitors and lights, most of which Neri had no clue what they showed, told her the sensor was working. Silas's thoughts were the only one who could reach her miles out from the house.

She finished her last sensor and smiled when Hunter appeared from behind a tree and into view.

"Alarms working?" she asked.

"Yep. I hid more and rearranged the trip alarms so they'd have to search for them if they come back. I pushed others further out for a quicker alert."

Neri chewed her bottom lip and Hunter wrapped his arms around her waist.

"What's wrong?"

“I... brought her here. She wants to destroy us and she stayed in the shadows, happy to fuck with things behind the scenes, until you found me. The way she looked at us, with such hatred... I don't understand.”

Hunter kissed her forehead.

“Angel, you'll never understand the motivations of people. I'll give you she's a good strategist, messing with things while staying hidden from us takes talent, but she's exposed. We suspect her motivations, well two at least. One, she wants revenge and two, she wants power and money. Those two things come with taking over Dark Company, which has been her main goal for years. And there were modifications to the shifter's genetic code.

“Answers will come in time, but we shouldn't worry about when she'll come after us. We'll take care of the problem when we learn more or she attacks. Either way, we have time to kill before dinner so what do you say, we shift and go for a run around the mountains?”

Neri blew out a breath, relieved Hunter understood her need to relieve her nervous energy, but she never thought to ask him to shift. But because he brought it up, she jumped up and down on the balls of her feet clapping her hands as she gave him a huge smile.

“Can I see you shift?”

Her eyes grew wide when Hunter purred.

“Please?”

Hunter nodded and closed his eyes.

Neri remembered the weird tingling throughout her body as her body shifted on instinct. She forced herself not to blink as Hunter transformed from his human form.

With no expectations, excitement sizzled through her as her gaze roamed over the panther in front of her. He was gorgeous. There was no other color than black anywhere on his body, but she found she was wrong the minute Hunter opened his eyes and the familiar piercing green made her smile.

“You... wow. Wow.”

Her hand drifted from her side and when her fingers slid through the fur around his neck, she relaxed her shoulders and sighed. The fur grew silkier the further it was from the root, but when she bent her fingers and inched around Hunter’s neck, his head burrowed against her stomach and purred in contentment.

That’s so good.

She laughed. Instead of moving her hand away, her left hand joined in and soon she became mesmerized by his fur as she scratched forward, moving toward the crown of his head. For several minutes, she lost herself in the rhythm and enjoyed the sound of Hunter’s purrs as they grew louder. Her mouth opened in protest as he lifted his head, but as he stepped back, his body shook out his fur in waves as she watched.

Ready to go for a run?

“Um... I don’t remember how I changed before.”

Close your eyes and relax.

Neri did as he asked.

Picture your form, the white fur, the pink pads on your feet.

Before he finished, Neri sensed a tingle, this time on the top of her head. It didn't spread throughout her body so when she blinked her eyes open; she expected half of her to be a panther and the other half human. But her enhanced eyesight proved her wrong. She had transformed even faster than she had before.

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Holy shit that was fast.

Hunter huffed and as she glanced up and into the familiar green eyes that stood out against his black fur.

I'm not surprised. You seem to excel at everything you try.

Neri was glad her blush wouldn't show in this form as she took her first steps as a panther. Her front paw was huge, and she almost tripped over herself as the momentum of her body carried her forward before she righted herself. Her gaze dropped down, and she stood mesmerized by her toes.

Soon, she had the hang of walking on four legs, but she turned around to see what her tail looked like and face planted into some dead pine needles covering the ground. Embarrassed, she closed her eyes and imagined standing on all fours back where Hunter stood and flashed to his side.

I'm not laughing at you.

Why don't I believe you?

Hunter relented. Okay, a chuckle might have escaped but in this form, it sounds like a huff. I didn't have to share that tidbit with you, but I wanted to be honest.

Neri pressed her forehead against his shoulder. I appreciate it. Wanna try this again and I'll not become distracted by my feet or my tail again?

This time, she heard Hunter's laughter reverberate in her head as his panther huffed and huffed.

You're good for me, angel. I don't remember ever laughing so much in my entire life.

He seemed to sober at his words.

You make me happy, Neri. And I will do everything in my power to make you happy, too.

Unable to stop her emotions, tears filled her eyes at his words and she dropped onto the ground with a splash.

Are you kidding? Hunter, you've given me the world. You found me and claimed me as your mate; you introduced me to your wonderful, interfering, and loving family, and you... pushed me to reconnect with my mother. But despite all that, being with you and sharing this time with you, is what makes me happy. Everything else is icing on the cake.

She tried to stop the tears from falling. But as she lifted her arm to wipe them away, she almost knocked herself out as the huge paw smacked her on the muzzle. A whine left her throat, a small reason was because of how frustrating she found this form, but more because over the last few days, she's been more emotional than in her entire life and she was off kilter. Neri admitted all of it when Hunter asked her what was wrong.

Angel, before yesterday, you didn't realize it was possible to shift. Give yourself time. I remember I hated shifting because I was like Ara when I became a shifter. I took close to an hour the first time, and while it hadn't hurt, it was uncomfortable, stuck in limbo for minutes at a time. It was ten years before I shifted in seconds.

Oh,oh,that's why Ara's frustrated? I didn't understand their conversation.

Hunter huffed. Like I said, every immortal is extraordinary. They have their own talents and ways of doing things. Sometimes I go months without shifting because there isn't a need. Other times, like when Silas wants to run around the mountain, I shift every day. Ara will get used to it, she's only been a shifter for four years.

She understood the truth, but guilt at shifting flooded through her.

Neri!

She moved around and searched through the trees for Silas. When a flash of fur came into the clearing, headed right toward her, she relaxed her muscles and prepared herself for the onslaught. She must have closed her eyes because when the collision didn't happen, she slid open one eye to find Silas sitting in front of her, blinking at her, looking innocent.

Hey, little man.

Silas purred. Hi, Neri! You're white, like me.

The three of them froze when the sound of someone running through the trees, breaking branches and crunching the hard earth with each step.

Who's there?

Is Silas with you?

Yeah, Xander he's right under me.

Xander blew out a breath and stopped running as he reached the clearing. His brows drew down, and he gave his son a glare. Silas whimpered and Neri moved her head down to glance at him, but her big fat head only got in the way. She ended up tilting



her head to the side until she spotted Silas cowering under her.

Sorry, daddy. I was excited to see Neri shift when I heard her and Uncle Hunter talking and I wanted to see. I should have asked you.

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The fierce look on Xander's face relaxed and one side of his mouth quirked up. He caught himself and shook his head.

"Oh, I know you won't do it again, because you're the one who'll have to tell mommy what you did."

Silas's flinch was visible because he was so much smaller than she was. He didn't have to emphasize his movements as much.

As she studied Xander's face, she had a hunch Frost would forgive her son as easily as her mate had.

Okay.Silas sounded resolved.Can I run around with Aunt Neri and Uncle Hunter first? And then we'll come straight home and I'll confess to mommy. Oh, and I forgot Uncle Hunter, Auntie Liv said to tell you she finished the blood analysis.

Xander nodded. "Okay, little man. But when you're done, it's nap time."

Silas hopped into Xander's arms and nuzzled his dad. At that moment, Neri experienced a twinge of sadness because she couldn't be a mother. But she remembered she had more now than ever before and she was lucky. Watching Silas and Xander together made her heart melt, and she turned to Hunter, happy to see how soft his eyes were as he watched the loving moment between father and son.

Thanks for watching him.Xander lowered his arms and Silas jumped from them with ease.

We're happy to. Hunter moved forward and nuzzled his head against Silas's.

With a wave, Xander disappeared back toward Kai's place. Neri turned to see Silas leap at Hunter, who flipped onto his back as Silas landed on his chest. There was a growl coming from Silas's throat as he nipped at Hunter. Hunter pretended to nip back, but he retracted his fangs and he covered the rest of his teeth with his thin lips. To Neri, it appeared these two played like this often and they enjoyed it a great deal.

Soon, both were on their feet.

Ready to run?

Neri flinched, well she would have if her body cooperated, instead she answered. I suppose so, but if I trip over my feet and you laugh... I'll... I'll figure something out.

Silas shook his small head. We won't laugh at you, Aunt Neri.

Again, her heart melted at Silas's words. Okay. Well, let's try it then.

Instead of thinking about the fundamentals of walking, Neri started forward. Delighted when her bigger body moved along with no issues. Happy she could walk without hinderance, Neri picked up the pace and ran. She settled into a rhythm until all she heard was the thump-thump, thump-thump of her feet as she gazed around at the mountains and the sky while taking deep breaths of crisp mountain air.

Neri, wait for us.

Silas's voice cut through her introspection and she stopped on a dime. She tripped over her feet but stayed upright and chuckled as Hunter and Silas flew past her. She moved again and lined up next the two as they ran up the mountain. On the ground, there was a light dusting of snow and she noticed the cold against her paws. Since she

still ran cool, she figured it was her vampire part that didn't mind the cold.

Not paying attention to the time, once they made it up one slope, and then another, Silas paused and his muzzle opened wide and he let out a huge yawn.

Ready to head back, angel?

Yeah. How about I flash us home so we can get dressed and then we'll take Silas home for a nap.

Hunter agreed and Neri changed back to her human form and cuddled Silas close to her chest, noticing his eyes were closed and his breathing became deep and even. She reached for Hunter and before she latched onto his fur; he shifted back and wrapped his arm around her waist and nodded.

In a blink, they were in her bedroom. She handed Silas to Hunter, making sure not to look anywhere besides Hunter's face and dressed. After, she took Silas into her arms.

"Can you show me an image of your bedroom?"

A picture with a huge king-sized bed covered with a plush comforter filled her mind. The space was huge with the bed taking the middle of the room. Nodding, she reached for Hunter and a second later; they were standing in Hunter's bedroom.

"That'll be so handy. Whenever we're..." he paused and looked at Silas, taking the time to cover his ears before he continued, "horny, we can just pop home."

Neri's shoulders shook as she watched Hunter disappear into the walk-in closet and rummaged around. Not a minute later, he walked out in a dark blue henley and jeans that looked comfortable. He sat on the end of the bed and pulled on his socks before he slipped into a pair of worn tennis shoes.

As he stood, he smiled at her and she realized she would never tire of looking at Hunter or being with him. A surge of happiness swelled in her chest.

Huh. This is love.

Hunter pressed a hand against his chest and searched her face. “What was that?” Hunter reached for Silas and lay him on the bed, gathering the pillows near the headboard and surround the little snow leopard as he moved to his left side and continued to sleep.

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Neri walked close when he turned back to her and stood on her tip-toes and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“I realized at this moment I love you. I fell in love with you.”

Hunter stood there, stunned. His arms dropped to his side and both his mouth and eyes were wide.

Neri wondered if she might have broken him by admitting her feelings so soon after they met. But before she backtracked and retracted her declaration, he cupped her face and kissed her. She sighed into the kiss and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, moving close to the heat of his body.

Kissing Hunter drew a variety of responses from her. First was total sexual awareness. Then knowing he would protect her, no matter the circumstance. And when he held her like this, she believed he loved her. But this time, she forgot to think, she could only feel. The moment she moaned into his mouth, he broke the kiss and glanced at the bed.

At least one of us still has our wits.

His soft laugh made her smile.

“I love you, too, angel. From the moment I saw you.”

Neri beamed at him. As she leaned toward him for another kiss, Silas’s soft snore brought them both back to reality. Hunter’s arms tightened around her waist and Neri

squeezed his shoulders, but the moment they glanced down at baby Silas, they knew they needed to get him home.

“We ran for how long?”

Hunter glanced at the clock. “About three hours. Let’s get this little one home and see what Liv found. Then, it’ll be you and me.”

Neri nodded and smiled as Hunter stole another kiss. She lifted Silas and cuddled him close to her chest as Hunter wrapped her in his arms and pressed his face against her neck.

“Okay, ready.”

This time, she didn’t have to picture where she was going. Kai’s house was almost as familiar as her own. As they popped in, the loud voices quieted as they turned toward the newcomers. Before the noise level rose again, Neri pressed a finger to her mouth before she glanced down at Silas, who was still sleeping.

Frost walked forward and smiled as she took Silas in her arms.

“I should have invited Silas to go running with us and asked your first. Please don’t be too hard on him,” Neri begged.

Instead of being angry, Frost chuckled. “He’s not in trouble. Xander sometimes forgets that we can sense him, no matter how far away he is, and panics. I don’t blame him, I do the same thing from time to time. Besides, he told me where he was going before he left. Although it was a fleeting thought about you, I realized where he’d be.”

Neri nodded and bent down to kiss Silas on his forehead. And without thinking too

much about it, she hugged Frost.

“Thank you for trusting me with your son.”

Frost hugged her back. “I’m glad you two found each other. Now, off to bed with this little one. I’m sure he’ll be ready to go again tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it.”

Hunter came up to her from behind and hugged her close, setting his chin on the top of her head. They watched their progress until Frost disappeared through the door of their bedroom before they turned back to the rest of the room.

“So... how did it go?” Axel asked.

Neri blushed. She didn’t mean to, but her cheeks heated just the same.

“I might have tripped over my own feet and became so mesmerized with my tail my face almost struck the ground.”

The room erupted in laughter and surprising herself; she growled. The laughter increased, and she sat on the couch, huffing and crossing her arms. She fought a smile that wanted to break through, but it wasn’t until Gunnar rolled close to her on the floor, clutching his stomach, that she kicked out and laughed.

“I’ll remember this,” she warned.

Her mom dropped next to her on the couch and Neri laid her head on her shoulder. She smiled when Thalia kissed her on the head.

“Sorry for leaving you for so long. Once I started running, I didn’t want to stop. We



came home when Silas fell asleep in my arms.”

Thalia chuckled. “You had fun, I’m glad. I was teaching Jade and Noah how to make pastitso and then we made a cheesecake.”

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“Oh, pastitso, did you save us some?”

Thalia scoffed. “There’s plenty for you and Hunter and seconds for everyone else.”

Neri hopped up and headed toward the kitchen. “Love, you’ll want to try this. Pasta with meat and béchamel sauce.”

Hunter fell into step with her and when Neri opened the fridge, her face hurt from smiling. “I haven’t had this in years. I can’t believe I forgot about pastitso.”

She cut a large piece for both and warmed them in the microwave. When she set Hunter’s plate on the table, she waited to see how he would like it.

“Fuck me, so good.”

Neri chuckled but took a bite of her own warmed food. She closed her eyes and moaned.

It’s like I remember.

They took their plates back to the living room and Neri returned to her seat and smiled when Hunter perched on the arm of the couch and continued to eat. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was until she smelled Thalia’s cooking. Happy she reunited with her mother, Neri leaned toward Thalia and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thank you, mamá.”

“Anytime, moró”

“Oh, you’re back. Good.”

She blinked away the tears and turned to Liv when she took a seat in front of her on the coffee table. Her eyes sparked with excitement and she bounced her leg up and down as her gaze darted from immortal to immortal, waiting for the rest to gather around them. Whatever Liv found would be one more answer in the mystery of who they were as immortals, but Neri continued to savor the food she remembered from the best part of her childhood.

“Your blood was very informative.”

“How so?” Hunter asked.

Liv danced with the thrill of a new finding.

“Well, vampire venom when mixed with the bioweapon they created assimilated while in the syringe. Instead of causing the venom to weaken or being killed off when introduced to the bioweapon, the bioweapon caused stabilization.

“So when the combined solution entered her bloodstream, it recognized and bonded with her shifter cells and they all settled into a symbiosis.”

She paused with her fork halfway to her mouth as her eyes darted around. The immortals were trying to process this information, but they needed more.

“How did you learn it ‘assimilated’ with the vampire venom?”

Liv bit her lip and glanced at Kai. The look that passed between them made no sense to Neri, but after a minute, Kai nodded, she continued.

“When I first developed the antidote, I tested both the bioweapon and the cure on shifter blood. I asked Kai, and he refused. Thomas and Isaac weren’t there, Seth wasn’t a vampire, and I hadn’t met Kane. So I had no way to test the blood of a vampire. Until now,” Liv said.

“Who’s blood did you test?” Hunter asked.

“Every single one of us. Kai, Seth, Aubrey, Thomas, Isaac, Kane, and myself. And I had to create a small amount of the bioweapon, but as you shifters are now immune, there isn’t any threat.”

“Wouldn’t being vaccinated offset any affects you find?”

“I drew our blood as a control. Seth, Aubrey, and Kane hadn’t been...”

Liv glanced up and flinched when Seth smiled at her.

“I’m so sorry about that.”

Seth kissed Liv’s forehead before he stepped back. “We’re fine, Liv, don’t worry about it.”

“What did you find?” Aubrey asked.

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“Oh, oh, yeah, well we needn’t have worried. I introduced the bioweapon in several scenarios to our blood and our venom and the results were the same every time. The bioweapon bonded with our blood as it had with our venom and created the same state of symbiosis.”

Neri shook her head. “But if I’m able to kill a shifter with my vampire venom and I’m able to shift... does that mean my vampire side and my shifter side work together?”

“It seems so.”

“But we don’t know. What if I bit Hunter and instead of shifter venom, there’s still a possibility I will kill him with vampire venom?”

Liv patted her hand as Neri reached out and placed the plate on the table. The food churning in her stomach at the news eliminated any hunger.

“Sweetie, Hunter wouldn’t have been able to claim you if your vampire side and your shifter side weren’t compatible. Dr. Stevens, while understanding the bioweapon killed all immortals because I’m sure he watched the test on Solomon, didn’t test it on Michael, the vampire they held captive. I also believe from all the tests we ran that immortals have the same basic genetic makeup, which is why I never tested the bioweapon on our vampire blood. They happened upon a loophole and instead of killing you, they made you stronger.”

“What else have you found?” Hunter asked.

Neri searched Hunter's gaze, and he was excited about what Liv revealed next.

"I found out which shifter's venom they used for your transition."

"Who?"

"Neri's DNA shares 22% in relation with Felix, the puma rescued the night Reaper met Ara. This is the reason you couldn't shift. It was enough venom in your bloodstream for your transition, but not enough for the characteristics of a full-fledged shifter. I believe when Hunter claimed you, the venom he released into your system strengthened your shifter DNA and now she is a half shifter, half vampire."

Their room grew silent as they took in the news. She couldn't see what her panther form looked like, but she guessed it was like Hunter's. As she pondered this, she glanced up and Hunter nodded.

"Yes, you look like me with the rounded ears and wide nose."

"Which leads to the question, is this how Zahava is building her army? The shifter's weren't healthy. Do you remember anything about your time after your transition, Neri?"

"The first one, no, I can only recall the injection. When Hunter described the pain of transition from human to immortal, it's not something I would forget. But if a memory surfaces, I'll let tell you."

Something she didn't want to tell Hunter or Liv, she hoped her memory failed her. Some memories are best left buried.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

#### HUNTER

Hunter blinked open his eyes when he heard the sizzle of bacon from the kitchen downstairs. He stretched, arching his naked body in between Neri's soft sheets as his shoulders popped, before he lay back and contemplated more sleep. Last night was their first night in a bed since Zahava's visit, too exhausted to do anything but sleep.

It had been a busy four days for he and Neri as Ghost sent them to track Zahava's scent. Neri commented the human's scent had changed little since she grew into adulthood and became determined to find the woman and eliminate the threat. Ghost hadn't hesitated, knowing Neri could defend herself or come get the rest of them in a blink if needed.

The scent lead to Downtown Snowfall before it disappeared. Zahava wouldn't be the leader of an unknown shifter group for so long if she wasn't an expert at deception and hiding her tracks. As Neri tracked Zahava, Hunter categorized the shifter's scents under her direction. Although he differentiated the individual animals they shifted into; it's hard to miss a lion, a puma, and two mountain lions. But in the background lingered their human's scents.

Even when the assassins shifted, their human's scents stayed with them. The animals they shifted into had their own distinct essence, but when Neri shifted, he identified lilac and the natural scents she carried with her.

"What do I smell like to you, when I'm in my panther form?" Hunter asked.

Neri's brows drew down, and she turned her attention from the indistinct office building they stood in front of off Treetop Drive in the heart of downtown.

Although Zahava's scent had long since disappeared, something brought Neri back to the unfamiliar fourteen story red brick building which looked abandoned from the outside.

"A weird question," Neri shook her head and turned her attention back to the building before answering, "but to be honest, when you shift, your pine scent comes through. The citrus, lemon-lime scent becomes muted. But when you're human, the citrus scent comes through before the pine."

"Huh."

"Why do you ask?"

"What was dominant scent from Zahava's shifters when they were at Kai and Liv's?"

"I scented animals, their other forms."

Neri paused, her hands clenched at her hips. Her mouth pursed as she tried to recall their run-in's with the other group.

Hunter sucked in a surprised breath as Neri's memories, including touch and smell, replayed at the forefront of his mind. The memory was as clear to him as if he experienced the moment personally. Instead of dwelling too much on how Neri could do this, he reviewed each incident Neri had with the shifters since they'd met.

In the clearing where he first spotted her, the wind dissipated her scent. Both sniffed, turning their head from side to side to see if they picked out something, anything, but all he caught was the crisp air and pine trees. There was a quick blink before they



were onto her second memory.

Outside Neri's house, he listened to the fight going on between the five shifters and himself. He noted Reaper and Kai were flanking her position and he scented both men before she darted forward to throw herself into the fight. As she jumped onto the shoulders of the first one, he tried to scent the shifters. Blood, he scented blood. But as he studied the shifters who were attacking him, their skin was the same sickly, gaunt flesh. An observation he missed the first time.

He took a moment to concentrate on their movements. Their training in hand-to-hand combat had improved since the last fight over a year ago, but they couldn't predict his movements before he struck. As Neri drew closer, instead of going back to the muscle memory of their training, they panicked and flung their arms out, hoping to hit him or the others.

He recognized nothing from scent alone, but he made a note to bring a body back for Liv to study after the next run-in with them.

In another blink, they stood in Liv and Kai's living room, looking up at Zahava and her shifters.

Yep, Axel was right. She is bat-shit crazy.

Hunter chuckled but when Zahava stiffened at Neri's disdainful words telling her to use her indoor voice, he concentrated on the scene in front of him and scented the room. While he scented his family, there was an obvious wild animal scent present in the room. When they leapt up to the second floor, the scent became cloying and there was nothing human that came through.

Huh, it's like a wet cat and dog. Nothing other than that.

He blinked several times, getting used to the bright sunshine after Neri's memory.

“Well, you're stronger as a shifter.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I thought about you experiencing the memory with me and soon after, I sensed you in my head. So cool.”

“It was jarring at first, but to see what you've seen without my senses being cut off is helpful.”

Hunter took a moment to think about all the differences between the shifters who transitioned through a venomous bite and Zahava's shifters.

“I hate to ask this, but can you take me into your memory before they injected you with venom and the bioweapon?”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Neri nodded and soon after he blinked, he stood in the sterile, hated room at Standard.

What do I smell like?

He leaned closer to Neri strapped to the table, he inhaled and the familiar lilac and earthy tones hit his senses and sent a relieved shiver over his body.

The same as you do now. We're done here, angel.

Neri turned her gaze to him as soon as they left her mind. There was relief painted on her face.

"I'm not like them. Thank the gods. So, if I know shifter venom injected transitioned me from human to failed shifter and then to half vampire, it must have been something different from what they are using now. I remember Jade mentioning Noah's friend had died because the transition overwhelmed his body. She said a lot of humans died during the transition. Do you think, like me, they inject venom into humans, but somehow the venom became tainted, and that's why they aren't human any longer?"

Hunter pulled Neri close and kissed the top of her head. "I don't know, but until we have a sample of their blood or bring a body to Liv for dissection, there's no use worrying about it. Until then, let's head home, get food and some sleep before we report into Ghost and see what everyone else found."

Neri nodded against his chest. "Let's go."

Not used to teleportation, he braced himself in time to land in Neri's bedroom. They stripped out of their clothes and burrowed under the covers. He pulled Neri close and when she sighed, her breath washing over his chest, then he allowed himself to close his eyes and drift off to sleep.

"Love, breakfast," Neri called from downstairs.

He jolted awake, lost in his thoughts and warm from the blankets covering him, he'd almost fallen asleep again. With reluctance, he rolled out of bed and searched for a pair of sweats and a tee, happy to find them hanging on the arm of a chair in the corner.

His stomach grumbled as he walked into the kitchen, but as he spotted Neri leaning against the counter in a long-sleeved tee and loose yoga pants grasping a cup of coffee in both hands, he made a beeline to her and kissed her forehead.

"What are you thinking about?"

She shook her head. "I hoped we could report back we found the sniveling little bitch and killed her."

"It's like a puzzle. We get pieces, see where they fit, and hope the entire picture emerges. We'll never understand her motivations, but with one more piece of the puzzle, we'll recognize her objectives and for the first time in four years, get ahead of her and take her and her crew out. Until then, we wait."

Neri's shoulders relaxed, and she turned toward the stove to plate up breakfast. He grabbed the plates from her and set them on the table. She poured him a cup of coffee and along with her own, joined him at the table.

"I'll give Xander the information about the building and see if it connects with

Zahava somehow.”

With that, she picked up her fork and ate. Hunter, following suit, taking a bite and moaning over fluffy scrambled eggs and spicy potatoes.

“If you do that again, we’ll forget about breakfast and head upstairs.” She choked out, her breathing uneven.

Without answering, they both ate in silence. Hunter’s eyes never left Neri’s face and bit back a groan when her eyes kept dropping to his mouth before licking her lips and taking another bite. Breakfast had never been so torturous in all his existence. By the time they finished eating, his cock was as hard as a rock. Driven by her scent arousal and the pink tinge of a blush on her cheeks, neck, and chest.

“Dishes later?” She asked.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Hunter growled.

He reached for her and spanned his hands around her waist and lifted her into his arms. “Bed, now.”

Her hands cupped his face and when she leaned down to touch their lips together, she teleported them and they landed on the bed with Hunter on his back.

“That’s handy. I don’t suppose you can get rid of our clothes as fast?”

“Hmm.”

Neri’s hands gripped his clothing and within a millisecond, he stood there naked. He glanced around and smiled when he found them in the exact spot they were in when he woke. Before Neri could do the same to her own clothing, Hunter shook his head.

“Let me. I need to taste you again, all over.”

He flipped her onto her back and captured both of her hands in one of his lifting her arms above her head and trapping them there. He licked a swath over his mark and sucked in a breath when she bucked up, caressing his cock with a light touch.

“I need you, love. Need you inside me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

He used one hand to skim over the thin layer of shirt, savoring Neri's heat as she wriggled underneath him. Soon, he reached the hem and slid his hand underneath, pressing the palm down on her stomach and splaying his fingers. Her breathing sped up and when he slid his hand up toward her breasts to find them uncovered, he growled.

His teeth nipped at her ear before his tongue flicked the lobe, drawing a harsh breath from Neri. He continued, scraping his elongated fangs down the side of her neck before nipping at his mark. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than Neri to mark him as hers, but this time he wouldn't push for more than she was ready for.

"I love your hands on me."

Neri sucked in another breath when his forefinger and thumb pinched at her swollen nipple. Unable to deal with the barrier of clothing in between them any longer, he released the hold on her wrists and snagged the tee by the neckline. With one tug, the shirt ripped in two and he pushed it out of the way.

His mouth found the other nipple, the one not being tweaked by his fingers, and suckled at it. Her taste bloomed in his mouth. He couldn't get enough of her sweetness.

"Hunter, fuck, I need more. I need you inside me."

"And I need you wet, angel."

She scoffed. "You've had me wet since you walked into the kitchen, rumpled from

sleep. I wanted to strip you out of your sweats and climb you, wrapping my legs your waist. And then I would drop on your cock and make you take me against the kitchen wall.”

“Fuck, fuck. Okay.”

With a wicked smile, Neri reached between them and vanished her sweats. When the barrier disappeared, Hunter reached between them and flicked his thumb against her clit, sucking in a deep breath at her wetness coating his thumb. Sliding the digit further down toward her entrance, he laved his thumb in her desire for him before he lifted it to his mouth and licked her essence.

He needed to see her desire for him. With careful movements, he turned them both on their sides and had Neri face him. He draped her leg over his hips and wrapped his right arm underneath her body, keeping her close.

“I’ll take you like this.”

Need and desire flashed in her beautiful silver eyes and no longer able to stay away, he captured her mouth in a searing kiss. Instead of the frenzy driving them wild in the kitchen, Neri relaxed in his arms as her tongue explored his mouth, tasting him. He shivered as her free hand roamed over his back, his hips, each inch of skin sizzling with a desire for her, his mate.

“I love you, angel.”

Neri jerked from the unexpected declaration from him, but after a second, a beautiful smile replaced the shock and she brushed a kiss against his lips.

“I love you, too, Hunter.”



His heart swelled. Never in his entire existence had he been this happy. He had found his mate; his beautiful, talented, funny, and sexy-as-sin mate and she loved him back.

The constant whirring of thoughts in his head ceased at her declaration and he needed to show Neri how much he loved her. He wrapped her close in his arms and watched as her pupils dilated when he slid inside her. Her eyes fluttered closed at his first thrust. But almost as if she didn't want to miss anything after their declaration, she forced her eyes open and captured his gaze.

Lovemaking had never been this sensual. Their bodies were in sync; when he moved, she moved. Hands were everywhere, scalding hot yet comforting, and he wanted more, wanted everything.

“Hunter, it's almost too much.”

He cupped her cheek and kissed her. He swallowed her moans and her gasps, loving the bite of her nails on his back and hips.

Her teeth scraped against his neck as she leaned forward. She followed them with a swipe of her tongue and moaning when she sampled his blood. This time, when she touched his neck, she nipped him, drawing a moan from deep in his throat.

“I know, angel.”

Time lost all meaning. Everything in his existence faded away until it was him and Neri, loving each other.

Unable to deny either of them pleasure, his left hand wrapped under her hip and he drove her closer each time he thrust into her. Blackness edged into his vision as his orgasm tingled in his balls.

“Not going to last much longer, Neri. I need you to come, come on my cock.”

Neri threw her head back and screamed as his words pushed her over the edge.

He gasped, savoring her tight wetness and gasped when her muscles locked down on his cock, keeping him deep inside. Her mouth found his and unable to get enough of her, sipped at her lips until she pulled away.

“Come inside me, Hunter. I need it.”

“Oh, fuck.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

A shiver ran down his spine and when it reached his lower back, the first pulse of his orgasm started with a vengeance. He knew he was about to come hard, but startled when Neri exposed her teeth and bit down on his neck, her fangs piercing his skin.

“Holyfuck!”

His hips jerked forward while his hands grasped Neri’s. He pulled her until his cock pressed deep inside and came harder than he ever had in his life. Despite knowing it shouldn’t have been possible, he traced Neri’s venom running through his veins. Half expecting it to be cold, he gasped in surprise as warmth spread through him, causing his extended orgasm until he fell onto the bed, exhausted and spent.

A small pang of disappointment ran through his chest when Neri removed her fangs from his neck. As he tried to catch his breath and open his eyes to Neri to see was okay, blackness pulled him under.

A few minutes later, he forced his eyes open and blinked at a worried Neri hovering over him.

“What’s wrong,” he wheezed.

Neri huffed out a laugh. “I thought I killed you for a second.”

He tried to shake his head from side to side when a searing flash of heat rushed through him. His head ached and so did the rest of his body.

“Well, shit. I’m going through my transition again.”

“What—”

Everything faded away as pain, the pain he remembered from his transition close to a century ago, seared through his body. But this pain differed from what he remembered. Instead of the bone deep ache or the headache being the worst of his pain, this time, it was a searing heat that ran through his veins. And this time, his mind was clear. He could pinpoint where the pain had started and where it was traveling.

It moved from his head to his neck, down to his chest, but his arms hurt the worst and the pain lasted the longest in his hands. It continued through his arms and centered on his hips, moving down his thighs, then his calves, and to his feet. The last of the burning sensation disappeared from his toes, over his arch, before leaving from his heels.

He opened his eyes, blowing out a relieved breath when he spotted a worried Neri kneeling next to him. But when he saw the look on her face, he sat up and reached for her.

“Sorry if I worried you. How long was I out?”

“Two minutes.”

His heart broke as he watched a tear escape and make its way down her cheek.

“No, angel. I’m okay. It was a transition, but it was mild compared to my first transition.”

He sucked in a breath when her fingers reached out and touched her mark. As she caressed it, his cock swelled, and he moaned. A long, low, dirty moan.

“Hunter?”

Without waiting a second longer, he moved with a speed he lacked before and laid Neri down on the bed, face first as he draped his body over her.

“Can I take you like this?”

She moaned and opened her legs, allowing his hips to shift in between her stretched thighs. He thrust inside her, wrapping his arms around her chest and burrowing against her neck, inhaling her scent as he drove into her like a madman.

“Yes, harder, love.”

His panther growled as each thrust caused her to whimper and beg for more. He took her, losing himself in the sensations, until she threw her head back and screamed his name as her orgasm washed over him. His teeth elongated and he bit down on his mark, releasing inside her when his bite made her thrash underneath him.

The energy he saved up from a good night’s sleep drained as he rolled to his side and pulled Neri onto his chest. His eyes blinked closed, almost letting exhaustion take over, when Neri sucked in a breath.

“I’m yours now.”

“And I am yours, angel.”

He took a deep breath and loved her scent as it surrounded him.

She snuggled in closer before she huffed out a breath and leaned back to search his face. “We’ll meet up with the others and share the intel we have. It’s noon and Ghost expected us to be at Kai’s about an hour ago.”

“I don’t think I can move.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

Neri chuckled, which soon turned into a full-blown laugh and he watched her. Her face lit up with so much happiness he found he wanted her to be that happy all the time. And to do that, they had to eliminate Zahava, her crew, and every other threat to his mate and their family.

“You are beautiful, angel. I’m glad I found you and you’re in my life.”

“I love you, Hunter. You gave me a family; my new one and my old one where before I had loneliness and isolation.”

Hunter opened his mouth to tell her they had responsibilities, but she beat him to it.

“And I know, I know, we have to protect our family. Shower, then we’ll get dressed and head out.”

Neri’s bathroom flashed in Hunter’s mind and when he blinked, he held Neri against his body, but they were standing in the shower.

“Did... did you do that?” He asked.

Neri laughed and shook her head. Her hand slapped over her mouth, but her eyes lit up with humor as she searched his face.

“Nope, you did,” she answered.

“Well, that’s new.”

Which made Neri laugh harder. Whatever happened to him had given him the same ability as Neri and that meant Liv would prod him.

“Fuck.”

Neri sobered, and he shook his head.

“Liv will stick me with a needle and draw blood. I fucking hate needles.”



### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### NERI

Liv snarled at Hunter the third time he jerked away from her, trying to draw a sample of his blood to compare to Neri's. Instead of gritting his teeth through the procedure, he refused to let Liv near him.

“For fuck's sake, Hunter. I haven't even pulled out the needle yet. I'm checking for a viable vein to draw from. So, stop moving before I strap you down and take it from you.”

It took a while for Neri to agree to go downstairs with Liv and Hunter in what she considered a glass dungeon, but the look of fear on Hunter's face when she offered to stay with the other assassins in the living room had her changing her mind.

But now she was here, there was no claustrophobic feeling, only amusement as Hunter balked at getting his blood drawn. She should have been a supportive mate, but Neri giggled with every flinch Hunter made, although Liv was nowhere near him with anything sharp.

The back and forth had been going on for about twenty minutes until Liv growled at him. But at Liv's words, he got a determined look in his eye. He was about to use his new teleportation powers, delaying the inevitable, so she shook her head to get his attention.

“I'll come after you and hold you down for Liv. It's not that bad, love. And if you

concentrate on me instead of Liv, then it'll be over and you won't feel a thing."

Hunter frowned. "A fucking sharp metal object will pierce my skin. How is it not going to hurt?"

Neri cupped his face and placed a gentle kiss to his lips. "You're making a big deal out of nothing. Have you ever had someone draw blood from you before?"

Somehow, he crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his bottom lip out in a pout, looking both ferocious and cute. Although she didn't mention the last part of that thought aloud.

"No, but I've seen medical shows..."

"Which is nothing like the real thing. Ara, who had her veins collapse on her because she had so much blood drawn from her never complained, even when she was human. Now, hold out your arm before I make you," Liv ended in a growl.

Neri leaned in and whispered in Hunter's ear. "If you do this for me, the next time we're naked in the shower, I'll drop on my knees and suck your cock until you explode down my throat. I'll be so wet and ready for you I'll beg you to fuck me against the wall."

He shivered at her words and dropped his arms at his sides in shock. A blush exploded on his cheeks as he swallowed. It took a few moments to form words, and when he managed, they were gruff and choked. "You'd... do that for me, anyway."

She shrugged and gave him a beaming smile. "Yeah, that's true. But Liv finished drawing your blood, and you never noticed."

His spine stiffened, and he glanced down to find his arm half-bent and Liv holding a

cotton ball against his skin. When he moved his gaze to Liv, she held up two vials of his blood and shook them with a smirk.

“Works every time.”

Her smile turned into a frown when Hunter huffed. Neri turned back to her mate in time to see his eyes roll in the back of his head and his huge six-foot-two frame swayed from side-to-side, preparing to topple over. Her hands clamped down on his shoulders as his body sagged forward, loving the fact she had the strength to hold him upright with ease.

“I wouldn’t have gone with shaking the blood in his face, but he was looking green long before that so I can’t fault you for bragging. I thought you sampled all the immortals’ blood to use with the antidote?” Neri asked.

Liv shook her head. “I asked Kai first but... well, we had a falling out. That’s why I never tested vampire blood against the bioweapon before. I asked Hunter, but he refused. Jade and Reaper volunteered, so I used their blood. I focused on eliminating the bioweapon I didn’t stop to think about the variants.”

Neri kept one hand on Hunter’s back, who groaned and buried his face against her neck not conscious yet, and reached her other hand out to squeeze Liv’s.

“It’s not your fault Liv. From what I gathered from the others, even if you had surmised a reason immortals exist, you still have to research each one of us and answer why we have the abilities and strengths we do. Which sounds near impossible.

“And from what Hunter told me, you are a brilliant immunologist but answers can be scarce. Such as Ara’s healing abilities and telekinesis, why Noah is a tiger instead of a fox, or the reason Frost can get pregnant, and why Silas has such powers. Like in

life, some things are impossible to answer, although we try to find reasons for them. I'm sure answers will come in time, but don't beat yourself up. You would do anything to protect your family."

Liv surged forward, but when Hunter's large form didn't move from where he settled against Neri, she wrapped her arm around Neri's waist and squeezed.

"Thank you, Neri. Now, let's see what his blood shows."

Hunter groaned at the word blood and slumped against her again. Neri ran her fingers through Hunter's hair, comforting him as he recovered from his shock.

Neri's gaze took in Liv's lab for the first time. There were many machines; some creme colored and small, some black with numerous buttons, so she stood back touching nothing. But there was a steady hum of sound coming from them that was soothing to her. She watched in awe as Liv turned on a machine which churned Hunter's blood before she put a drop on a slide and slid it under a microscope.

Across the room, a machine made a whirring sound and beeped every so often, but Liv paid it no attention as she studied the sample in front of her.

By this time, Hunter's breathing had deepened. She scoffed when she realized he fell asleep. She nudged his face up and shook him until he opened his eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

“Did... you fall asleep on me?”

“Well, someone woke me early in this morning after four days of little to no sleep. I took advantage of the situation yes because you’re warm and comfortable. Can you blame me?”

Hunter blinked several times before he stepped off the chair and stretched his arms above his head. After a minute, he looked awake. He leaned down and kissed Neri.

“No, I can’t,” she agreed.

Xander chose that moment to interrupt before she suggested they pop home for an hour.

“What did you find?”

Both turned to Xander, who brought his laptop and set it on a free table near the door, taking a seat and letting his fingers fly over the keyboard.

Silas bounced in a moment later and when he leapt into her arms, she was ready for him. She cuddled him close and took a deep breath, loving the baby smell.

Hey, little man. How have you been?

I’ve missed you.

I missed you too, little man. Have you grown?

Silas laughed. I get that question all the time. I don't think so.

Neri caught Xander nodding his head at her question while continuing to type away.

"Oh, Xander? Can you check out the address 1212 Treetop Drive and see who owns the red brick building and what it's used for? We lost Zahava's scent around there, but there's something about the building I can't put my finger on. It gives me the creeps and I don't want to go in there unless I have to."

"Sure thing."

The rest of the assassins trailed into Liv's lab, some taking a seat on two couches set in the back. Axel hopped up on a free table and messed with his cell while Ghost sat on a stool in front of Neri with a frown on his face.

"She doesn't exist. I checked if there was any movement at the Crested Butte ranch and the sheriff reported the place burned down soon after we left."

"No one adopted Zahava. She moved foster homes often for a range of excuses. She refused to listen to rules and did whatever she wanted until the foster families refused to take her. Because of this, the state emancipated her at seventeen," Xander said.

He glanced at Neri and then at Ghost.

"And?" Ghost asked.

"After Anzû's death in October of last year, Zahava applied and received a business license for the company Nightfall, specializing in security."

Ghost rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Let me guess, specializing in surveillance and intelligence. Which means they get illegal information and sell it to the highest

bidder.”

“But they also sell information to the government. They are on NSA and CIA’s payroll.”

“She has someone skilled in hacking and programming working for her or forced to work for her,” Gunnar said.

“Dr. Ames, the man Ara killed, Anzû, Dr. Stevens. Now we have confirmation of a connection,” Reaper growled.

“And Zahava has controlled everything from behind the scenes, until now. We must assume she’s after Neri for a reason we have yet to figure out and it’s tied to her plans on taking over Dark Company. If an intelligence agency contracts Nightfall, we might be in more trouble than we thought,” Ghost sounded disgusted.

As the group mumbled, Neri sensed a jolt up her spine and a woman’s scream echoed in her ears. She stiffened trying to match the sound to someone she knew.

Help! Moró, help me!

“Fuck, Thalia’s in trouble.”

Reaper moved, reaching behind his back before he thrust his hand toward her, holding out a familiar nylon rectangle. She reached for it, shoving it in the back of her jeans, before she nodded her thanks.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:12 pm*

“Call us if you need us,” Axel said.

She reached for Hunter at the same time he clamped his hand down on her forearm and she teleported them to Thalia’s front door. The moment they popped in, a chair scuffed against the wooden floor in the kitchen and murmurs sounded around the house.

What’s the plan, angel?

Fuck a plan, Hunter. That fucking bitch has my mother. I’m going to fucking kill her.

Neri ripped open the front door and noticed two shifters lounging on her mother’s couch as if they owned the place. They leapt up, not hearing Neri and Hunter drop on the front stoop or moving to open the door. She pulled the knife out. By the time the shifters advanced, she was ready.

She killed the first with ease. A little surprised how his head detached from his shoulders with little force, she blinked, searching for a trap. But when she found nothing, she then glanced down at the head in her hand. She threw it through the open front door and onto the lawn before she back flipped off the now dead shifter and onto the shoulders of the second.

Hunter’s hand surrounded the second man’s neck. Neri’s weight provided leverage for Hunter to rip the shifter’s head clean off his body before he threw it in the same direction the first one had taken.

“Kitchen.”



They walked side-by-side into her favorite room and Neri's heart dropped. Zahava held a knife up to Thalia's neck. She also thought Thalia was a threat because Zahava wrapped a rope around her torso and the chair tying her arms at her sides and trapping her.

"What do you want, Zahava?"

Instead of answering Neri's question, Zahava's eyes kept flicking toward Hunter, accessing him in a way Neri didn't understand. Not sexual, because of the hardness in her brown eyes, but a puzzle piece she couldn't fit until that moment.

"Who is this?"

"None of your fucking business."

Zahava pressed the knife harder against Thalia's neck and this time, Neri spotted a speck of blood that welled from the tip of her knife digging in. Rage rushed through her and for a moment, and she wanted to kill. But knowing Thalia's life was in danger, she knew she couldn't be rash, although her panther brain fought against reason.

"This will get you nowhere. Why are you here?"

The question triggered Zahava's anger, and she directed it back toward Neri.

"You left me," she screamed.

Neri blinked at the accusation. She was twelve when she met Thalia and before that, none of the foster homes she stayed in made her feel safe. The families who had taken her in didn't hide the fact they saw her stay in their home as a paycheck. As long as she stayed out of the way and didn't eat much, they ignored her. But they and

many others grew tired of her and within weeks, she moved on to the next home. Neri had been lucky Thalia decided she wanted Neri for good.

“I didn’t leave you. The orphanage shut down, and we were all sent to different foster homes. I had no control over where I went, much less where you went. Why would you think I left you?”

Zahava twitched before she shook her head, refusing to believe what she was saying. She paced, which allowed Neri to teleport to Thalia and cut the ropes holding her mother. “When I signal you, inch out the back door.”

Thalia nodded and Neri teleported back to Hunter’s side.

“No, no, I told you I wanted to go with you.”

“Yes, but I remember the director of the orphanage explained to you we couldn’t go to the same home because there’s no relation between us.”

“You should have fought for me?”

Neri noticed the more Zahava spoke, the more she edged toward the door to the living room. Neri knew this wouldn’t end well for her old roommate and she would kill her before she made it through the doorway.

“How, I was eleven? The administrator scared the shit out of me and every time I spoke, she told me to shut up.”

Neri glanced at Thalia and noticed her eyes focused on her. As Zahava glanced at Hunter again, Neri jerked her head to the left, indicating to her mother she should leave. With silent steps, Thalia pushed open the back screen door and stepped out, closing it behind her. Once she was outside, Neri managed not to sigh aloud.

The hardness in Zahava's eyes returned as she pinned Neri with a withering look. "Do you have any idea what happened in those homes. They used me and threw me away and yet you were nowhere. You weren't there to protect me from those older boys who raped me while the foster parents ignored everything going on in their house."

Her words stunned Neri. Her body stood still in shock as tears pricked her eyes for the woman in front of her, for the innocent child who hurt in the worst ways possible.

A large part of her knew something must have happened to Zahava to make her hate them. But no matter what she said to placate Zahava, her anger overruled rational thought. And knowing what happened to her in the foster homes they sent her to, her heart ached for the child she had been. But she had chosen this life; where she killed and wanted power and revenge for some perceived slight.

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The longer she stayed silent, the angrier Zahava became. But as fast as it built, the anger disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“But I can’t blame you for everything. I learned over the years how to manipulate people to get what I want. If you hadn’t left me alone, then I never would have learned to go after what I want in life without consequences.”

Neri ignored her blame. “Then you met your husband, and you fell in love—”

“No, I didn’t love him. He was a means to an end. He was my first introduction to immortals, and I realized the power I could have by controlling him and the shifters who do my bidding. I succeeded because of my hard work and brilliant plans. But that asshole obsessed over the dark-haired woman and got himself killed. I had control over Nightfall by that time, manipulating the rest of the shifters, and they followed me.”

“So you want to kill me...”

Hunter growled at her words but didn’t move from his position on her right side, his hand brushing against hers now and then.

“... And then what?”

“I’ll kill every one of your new friends until Ghost remains, and then I will force him to give me control of Dark Company.”

“The contract will end with Ghost’s death. He can’t transfer it to anyone, human or

immortal, so the contract between the government and Dark Company will be severed,” Hunter said.

Neri said, “And you’re not a shifter or an immortal. How are you going to kill the assassins with a group of subpar shifters who have no enhanced abilities including speed and hearing? We took out your two shifters in the living room.”

Zahava glared. Instead of answering, she tilted her head to the side and listened.

Neri heard running footsteps outside. Only when they arrived in the yard did Zahava hear them, too.

“Damian!” Zahava shouted.

In a flash, a huge black haired shifter close to seven foot tall, appeared behind Zahava and wrapped his arms around her.

“And now I know all I need to. Thanks, Neri. Be seeing you soon.”

And with that threat, they disappeared.

Shit, Thalia is outside and in sight of those assholes. Let’s go!

Hunter led the way outside and when they arrived in the front yard, they came face-to-face with seven shifters.

“Snowfall Police. What is going on here?”

Neri flicked her eyes over to two men who stood at the gate. There stood one dark olive skinned man with black hair, piercing chocolate eyes, and fit, who looked to be in his thirties. He wore a blue windbreaker with Snowfall PD on the corner pocket

with worn jeans and thick, black combat boots. The other man, blond, over six foot and dressed like his partner.

Fuck. That's the detective who helped mom find me.

"Tajo?" Thalia's voice came from around the side of the house.

A growl erupted from one shifter and Neri snarled louder in return.

"Leave my mother alone or I'll cut your balls off and shove them down your fucking throat."

"Neri?" Detective Cortez asked.

"Yeah, that's me. Thanks for being there for my mom while I was missing."

"Um, yeah. No problem. Do you mind explaining what's going on here?"

Neri glanced at her mother and Thalia gave her a nod, letting her know she could trust these two men.

"Well, Detective Cortez and Detective O'Connor. These gentlemen work for a woman who has been trying to kill my mate and his family for over four years. They are shifters, which means they can turn into an animal, so is my mate, Hunter right next to me. I'm half shifter and half vampire and I'm about to rip apart these seven shifters for threatening my mother."

Silence grew between the odd group gathered in the front yard. Neri stood with the knife Reaper had given her in her hand, ready to use it. Hunter stood tall, his arms crossed in front of his chest, but his nonchalant appearance not giving away the simmering fury she could sense pulsing through his body. Thalia had edged toward

the two detectives and stood inside the fence next to them. While the two new arrivals held their guns pointed at the seven threats, their mouths agape, their senses were alert and scanning the area.

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“Thalia told me to trust you. Is that the case, Detective Cortez?”

“Yes, you can trust us.”

“Then don’t fucking shoot me or my mate.”

Now, love.

I’ve got the three on the right.

Got it. Stay safe.

Neri and Hunter attacked the shifters before they went after the three humans. Neri flashed in front of the first surprised shifter.

“Fuck, you’re like that freak Damian. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Her lip raised, and she snarled. “I’ll enjoy killing you.”

She leapt on his back. Without hesitation, she flooded her fangs with vampire venom, almost gagging on the bitter flavor stinging her taste buds. She bit down and released the venom into his system for a half a second before she back flipped off him.

Hunter ripped the head off one, punting the head into the woods behind the house, before he turned to the other two. With ease, he wrapped one hand around the next shifter’s throat and crushed his neck with a squeeze. And with another jerk, the head detached, and he threw it toward the first one.



Neri heard movement behind her as two shifter's closed in on her. She flashed behind them and while they searched for her; she dispatched with both of their heads using Reaper's knife.

"I have to get me one of these."

"Two more, angel, and then we can talk about combat knives and which one you'd like."

"I'd prefer if the lot of them fucked off and died because this is getting old. And I'm not changing my mind on becoming a fucking assassin."

The two other shifter's froze at her statement. "You're not with them." He pointed at shifter.

"Oh, I'm not an assassin for Dark Company. I build furniture for a living. But you're threatening my mate and his family, who I see as mine now," Neri paused before she snarled, "And you fucked with the wrong family."

Neri bound over the shifter's head, bringing her hand down in time to decapitate the surprised shifter. She landed behind the body and turned in time to see Hunter grip the last shifter's head with one hand, the other gripping his torso and ripping the head clean off.

"I'm never getting that scene out of my fucking mind. And I thought I've seen some gruesome shit," Detective O'Connor stated.

"Trust me, they were a threat," Hunter said.

"We believe you, but fuck."

Thalia slapped Cortez's shoulder.

"Language."

He snorted. "She used the same word."

Her mother sighed. "Yes, but after twenty-four years, there's no hope for her."

"Gee, thanks mom." But Neri grew serious. Zahava had come after her mother and she needed to get her somewhere safe.

"I can take her home with me," Cortez pulled her from her thoughts.

"This is my home."

Neri started toward Thalia, but looked down cringing at the blood. "Mom, she knows where you live. Until we figure out how to kill her and her friends, your safer with Detective Cortez and O'Connor."

"Please call me Tajo."

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“And I’m Jack, none of this detective shit.”

She nodded. “Got it,” she turned to her mother, “Mom, promise me you’ll go with them. I don’t want her to come back and kill you.”

Neri blinked at her mom, the tears about to spill were real. And when Thalia sighed, she knew she’d won.

“Call out if you need me and I’ll come to you.”

“Fine, moró korítsi. I love you that’s the only reason I’m going. But let me know from time to time how you’re doing, okay?”

“I will. I love you, mamá.”

“We’ll help her gather her clothes for the next week. Here’s my card and if you need any help, please don’t hesitate,” Tajo said.

Neri nodded. “Thank you both for understanding. Thalia knows how to get a hold of me if she needs help.”

She watched them go into Thalia’s house and she turned to Hunter.

“What do we do with the bodies?”

“I already called for a clean-up. We have a cleanup team. The same thing happened at your place.”

“Huh, I never thought about it since that night. Ready to go back?”

“Yeah, but we have to bring a body for Liv to dissect.”

Neri smiled and jogged around the house and toward the shed in the back. She wrapped the closest dead shifter in the tarp she found and tied it together with a rope, preventing any leaking of blood. Neri grabbed Hunter’s hand and with a wicked grin and pictured Kai’s living room. They landed next to the couch while the dead shifter landed on the coffee table.

“I think I could use a nap,” Hunter said. His lip tilted up in a smirk.

Neri yawned.

“Good idea.”

And with that, Hunter reached for her to flash them back home. But before they left, she heard Kai’s distinct snarl.

“Neri!”

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

#### HUNTER

Although Hunter's suggestion about a nap had been a joke, Neri had shrugged out of her clothes and had almost fallen asleep a few minutes after they flashed into their bedroom. They both enjoyed the joke she played on Kai, but when he teleported them home, her body sagged from exhaustion.

Tired from their run in with Zahava's minions and worry for her mother, Hunter savored the chance to take care of Neri. He removed their clothing, flinching in disgust as he noticed all the blood, both dried and viscous over both of their shirts and jeans. Without looking at them, he threw them into a trash bag to dispose of later, ignoring Neri's chuckle at his reaction.

Since they'd met, he'd spent most of his time at Neri's place and he grew comfortable enough to make himself at home. He caught Neri smiling whenever he dropped on her couch or made his way upstairs to her bedroom as if he owned the place.

He'd found the pictures she took before she remodeled and the difference was stark. All of her kitchen appliances were new, and she had created and installed the cabinets in the kitchen and bathroom herself. Despite building the couch, the coffee table, and dining room tables and chairs, she bought several of the leather reclining chairs scattered throughout the main floor. On top of all she created herself, it was the built-in and filled floor-to-ceiling bookcases that made it feel like home.

"I have the materials for three more bookcases in the bedroom and two for the dining

room, but I haven't gotten around to it."

In the bathroom, she built and replaced the cabinets for the sink and the storage armoire with dark wood and in the shower; she used lodge stone and hearth tiles matching the wood. The shower could fit at least twenty, with built-in benches and along with three ceiling showers, one main shower head, and six body sprays.

As he switched on the water, the cascading sound caused Neri's eyelids to droop and she leaned against him. Guilt swamped him. He should have realized sooner she was running on fumes, after their unsuccessful tracking expedition and then another thought crowded his mind, adding to the feeling.

Today was Neri's birthday. She turned twenty-five.

Fuck!

His mind raced as plans for celebrating the day solidified in his head. He would recruit the others to organize a part and get Thalia, Tajo, and Jack to agree to come at the last minute. Humans needed more time to adjust than immortals, so he planned on stopping by to see Neri's mother first.

Neri pressed against him, and he scrubbed their bodies and washed their hair, before he shut off the water and reaching for the fluffy towels on the heated rack. He dried them in record time and pulled down the sheets. Hunter hesitated before he lay her down and rushed toward the dresser, grabbing a pair of panties, pants and a long-sleeved tee for Neri to sleep in. He dressed her in record time and covered her. She didn't even stir when he kissed her on the forehead.

Not wanting her to freak out if she woke up and found him gone, he wrote a quick note and placed in on the nightstand. He set the alarm and checked the windows before he locked the door and stepped outside, ready to run to Kai's and borrow a car.

Then he remembered, he could teleport. He found an old listing for Tajo's address and flipped through images of the inside, planting a picture in his mind. He closed his eyes and felt a pull and blinked open his eyes when he heard a gasp.

Tajo stood in the doorway of his kitchen with his gun pointed at Hunter's head, one hand behind him as he held Thalia back from his sudden appearance.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I'm still getting used to this teleportation thing."

Hunter held his hands up to show he wasn't a threat, but it still took Tajo a few moments before he holstered his gun and allowed Thalia to pass into the kitchen.

"Is Neri okay?" Thalia asked.

"Yeah, she's sleeping now after the fight and being up four days on a scouting mission. But I forgot until a few minutes ago, it's her birthday and I want to celebrate it. Do you think if I got everything together in an hour, you can come to her party?"

"Party? Will there be cake?" Jack asked.

Mental note, cake.

"Yes, Hunter. We'll come and help decorate. What else do you need us to do?"

"No clue, to be honest. It's been decades or more since any of us celebrated a birthday, but Neri's stressed with everything going on and I want her to relax and enjoy herself without worrying for once. What else should I get?"

For the next fifteen minutes, the three of them discussed decorations, the cake, which Thalia agreed to decorate if Hunter found one and brought it to her. With a promise not to forget anything on the list and a plan set to teleport them to Kai's house when it

was time, Hunter popped out to talk to the rest of the family.

Hunter had a good laugh when Ax jumped at his arrival, taking the time to bend over, grabbing his stomach as he lost his breath laughing so hard. Ax punched him in the shoulder, but Liv arrived with a chastising look and he sobered.

“A body on my coffee table, Hunter?”

He shrugged, not about to tell her it was Neri’s idea. Instead, he remembered the reason he was there. “I forgot that today is Neri’s birthday. Thalia will decorate a cake and she’ll come over to help with the decorations along with Tajo and Jack, but is it okay to throw a party here?”

Liv’s expression softened. “Yes, but we need buy presents. I can go into Snowfall and see what I can find.”

“We have a caterer. They were great at Cole’s wedding.” Seth said and Aubrey pulled out a phone, already dialing.



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“We’ll go with you into town. I’m thinking we should hit several clothing stores and then she’ll need shoes and snow boots. Oh, I have an idea where to go,” Jade said.

Axel cleared his throat. “I’m thinking woodworking tools. There’s a shop on the outskirts of town and I’m sure they are still open.”

Kane, Reaper, and Ara opted to go with Axel.

“I’ll get her a gift card to the lumberyard,” Gunnar said.

Ghost, Thomas, and Isaac agreed with that idea.

Everyone had gathered around, throwing out ideas and the excitement on their faces made him smile.

“Okay, Hunter, you need to get the decorations. There is a party store in town. You need to get as many decorations as you can find. We’ll make it special,” Liv added.

With everyone having their sights on a what they needed to do, they disbanded.

Hunter thought about the party store he’d passed several times in and out of town and pictured himself behind the store, knowing there wasn’t any customer parking there. He smiled when he glanced around, noting the sun setting in the west but no sign anyone had seen him.

He cleared out the birthday decorations in both blue and green, getting a strange look from the teenager working at the register. Hunter chuckled at her reaction. He

distracted her by asking for the closest baker and she spoke about Cakes on Main as she rang up his purchases. After fifteen minutes, she scanned and gave him his total. He paid cash, grabbing several bags, before he headed out with a wave.

Hunter found the shop and purchased a huge sheet cake with confetti sprinkles baked inside and plain white frosting decorating the top. He grabbed a blue and a green icing tube for Thalia to use, throwing in some candy roses for good measure.

As he stepped outside, a bright glittering sign caught his attention from down the street. For a moment, he debated with himself, knowing marriage was a serious topic for discussion, not when he was trying to set up and execute a birthday party. But something about the store called to him and he always listened to his instincts. Also, he'd known the moment he spotted her in that clearing his heart belonged to her.

Other than Reaper and Ara, the others who had found their mates got married on top of the claiming. In the fleeting moments where he allowed himself to imagine finding his mate, he satisfied himself knowing claiming her would be like marriage, so he didn't need the ceremony when his mark signified the same to him.

But standing inside the bright store and peering down at the engagement and wedding rings, he wanted more with Neri. He wanted to be her husband.

"Can I help you?"

Hunter jerked his gaze up to find a man in his early twenties staring at him with wide eyes and a secret smile.

"Um, yes. Hi, I'm Hunter. I'm looking for, well, I'm asking my... girlfriend, to marry me, but I have no clue what to get. Can you help me?"

Something flashed in the young man's gaze, but he shook it off and gave Hunter a

dazzling smile. “Sure. I’m Charlie. Are you looking for something flashy or more subdued?”

“She works with her hands, she designs and creates her own wooden furniture, so nothing that would be dangerous around machinery.”

“I see. I’m thinking a wedding band instead of a wedding set. Something like these here.”

Hunter glanced at the tray Charlie removed from the glass display and set in front of him. His eyes moved from one to the next before they landed a strange and beautiful design. It looked perfect for Neri.

“What about this one?”

“Oh, this will hold up. This band is titanium, but they sandblasted the metal, which gives it the rough texture you see. The ring is flat and rounded at the edges, so the ring won’t snag. The ring sleeve is Brazilian tulipwood, coming from the rosewood family. There is a one millimeter insert of tulipwood on the inside edge of the band to give the ring a distinct look,” Charlie said as he held up the ring.

Careful when he reached for the ring, he took it between his finger and thumb for a closer inspection. Similar to his first reaction at seeing the ring, the moment he touched it, it confirmed his assessment.

“I’ll take it.”

Charlie retrieved a ring in Neri’s size from the back of the store. When he boxed it up and accepted cash for the purchase, he smiled at Hunter.

“Congratulations.”

He chuckled. “She hasn’t said yes yet.”

“I can tell she will.”

“How?”

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“You showed no hesitation once you spotted the ring, you memorized her ring size, and you haven’t stopped smiling and talking about her since you walked in here. All signs point to yes.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

Hunter shook the man’s hand, leaving a two hundred dollars in his palm as a tip, and walked out of the store with his future set in his mind and the ring box in his pocket.

He walked toward the same spot he arrived at and tensed when he sensed he someone close. Instead of stopping at his destination, he continued walking through the back parking lot and through a copse of trees that led up the mountain. Hunter listened for the telltale sound of the cracking of the branches or the snapping of dried out pine needles on the ground, but heard nothing.

When he passed a group of quaking aspen trees, the trunks hid him from view and he paused behind them, disappearing from view. He set the cake down on a nearby rock formation and eased the remaining bags on the ground. When he stood, he then closed his eyes and tried to sense who was tracking him and the direction they might come from.

After a few minutes, there was no shift in scents in the wind or no sounds that were foreign, so his body relaxed from its hyperaware state. He stood and reached for the bags and the cake from where he placed them as he freed his hands preparing to ambush his stalker and scanned the area once more. With no movement, he pictured Kai’s living room and soon stood next to Gunnar.

“What the fuck!” Gunnar grunted.

“Sorry man, I should have thought about landing at the front door, but someone was watching me and I didn’t think about it.”

“What do you mean?” Kai’s voice turned cold.

“I was shopping for Neri’s birthday present and when I walked toward the spot behind the party store to teleport back here, I sensed eyes on me. I went into the woods, but whoever it was, didn’t follow me in. Oh, Ax, can you put the cake in the refrigerator?”

Ax nodded and drooled over the cake on the way to the kitchen.

“Don’t fucking eat any of it, lion, I’ll fucking know,” Hunter threatened.

“Who do you think it was?” Ghost asked, pulling his attention back to the rest.

“Zahava’s seven foot tall boy toy, Damian. He has the same powers Neri and I do.”

It had been a few hours since their confrontation with Zahava, so he explained what happened when they ran into Damian and the shifters there to kill them and Thalia.

Not surprised Neri and Thalia trusted the two detectives, the group grew angry because it was next to impossible to find any information on the woman or the organization.

“Well, fuck,” Noah said.

Liv rushed in and grabbed the bags off the floor. “Enough about that tonight. We’re celebrating Neri’s birthday and I for one can’t wait. Hunter, why don’t you get her

mother and her friends and we can start the setup.”

He nodded and flashed out of the room and landed in Tajo’s kitchen, startling Jack this time.

“Stop fucking doing that.”

He shrugged. “It’s handy. Are you three ready to go?”

“Shouldn’t we drive?” Tajo asked.

“Nah, I got it and I’ll bring you back after. Or you can pack a bag, Kai and Liv have plenty of room and we all stay there most of the time, anyway.”

“Sounds good. I want to spend time with my moró.”

Thalia and the others grabbed their stuff in record time. With each of them holding onto Hunter’s arms, within a second, the four of them landed back in Kai’s living room.

Hunter grabbed their bags. “Hey Liv, where can these three stay?”

“Upstairs. The last three rooms on the south side are empty.”

“Liv, this is Detective Cortez or Tajo. And Detective O’Connor.”

“It’s Jack. Nice to meet you.” After he shook Liv’s hand, he stepped back and took in the room. And like everyone who met the assassins, when they were in a group they shocked people, and Jack was no exception. “Holy crap, you... well, let’s leave it at holy crap.”

The others laughed and Hunter strode upstairs as Jack and Tajo introduced themselves to the assassins. He placed their bags in separate, empty rooms before joining everyone downstairs to decorate.



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Between Liv and Thalia, they had streamers, banners declaring ‘happy birthday’ and ‘birthday girl’ around the living room and kitchen within minutes.

He rigged the confetti cannons, ready to fire when Neri walked through the door and the party hats were sitting on the coffee table.

When Liv had unpacked the pointed hats, each assassin, Seth and Aubrey, and the detectives stared at the hats in horror before turning their glares at Hunter.

“I’m not wearing one of those,” Kane pouted.

“Me either,” Gunnar seconded.

“Yep, I’m too old for this shit,” Tajo grumbled.

Hunter growled, flashing his teeth. “You will wear a hat, you will eat cake, and you will do everything to make this the best birthday Neri has ever had. If you don’t, I will make sure each of you suffer in the most painful ways I can find and you’ll never know it’s coming. Got it?”

“Got it,” a chorus of replies answered.

Jade bounced in and secured one on her head, grabbing one for Noah and handing it to him. Grumbling, he put the hat on and Jade rewarded him with a kiss.

Xander, Frost, and Silas walked in as Ax donned a hat and Silas squealed when he spotted it.

What's going on? Silas glanced around and when he read the banners, he smiled. Who's birthday?

"It's Neri's little man," Xander responded.

Where is she?

"She's tired after the day she had, but I'll wake her up and bring her here."

"Why are you talking to the baby like he understands you?" Tajo asked.

"Because I do. Hi, I'm Silas and you are?"

Tajo's mouth dropped open and Jack kept punching Tajo in the arm as he stared at Silas. Silas was a smidge under sixteen months and looked it.

"I'm... well, I'm..."

Jade stepped in and pointed out the two men. "Detective Cortez, who prefers Tajo and Detective O'Connor, or Jack. They are your grandma Thalia's friends and they helped to search for Neri when she was missing."

"Oh, it's nice to meet you. Thank you for trying to find Neri. She's my favorite shifter vampire hybrid." Silas said with a serious face.

Hunter laughed and kissed Silas on the cheek. Silas giggled before he kissed Hunter back.

Thalia bustled in from the kitchen with a smear of green frosting on her cheek and reached for Hunter's hand. "Give me an hour, moró agóri, and then bring Neri here for her party."

“That won’t be a problem. She’s exhausted and didn’t stir when I left so—”

“She takes awhile to wake. Wave a cup of coffee under her nose. But she better be here on time, okay, moró agóri?” Thalia pinched his cheek and without waiting for his answer, headed back toward the kitchen.

“I’ll have her here.”

Hunter teleported into the kitchen and flipped on the lights. It had grown dark since he’d left. He paused at the foot of the stairs and listened, but he heard no movement from upstairs.

He set the coffee to brew, blowing out a sigh when the machine took under a minute, and poured two cups before he carried them upstairs. With slow movements, he shouldered open the door and bit back a laugh when Neri spread across the king bed like a starfish, face down on the pillow. Her breathing was deep and even and when the door clicked closed after he shut it with his foot, she didn’t stir.

“Neri, angel, I have coffee.”

Again, nothing.

Hunter set his cup aside and moved to the side of the bed closest to her face. He wafted the brew toward her and chuckled when her nose twitched. For the next several seconds, he tried to tempt her with the coffee, but soon her breathing evened out as she fell back to sleep.

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“Okay, angel. We have a house full of people waiting for us. We have to get you ready.”

He shook her shoulder and froze when she growled at him.

“Stop it, panther, or you’ll lose that hand.”

His head tilted to the side as his eyes scanned her face and sighed when he found her eyes closed.

“I know you’re tired angel, trust me, we have all night and all day tomorrow to sleep. But your mom is at Liv and Kai’s introducing Tajo and Jack to the group of assassins. Thalia demanded I have you there in,” he looked at the clock, “forty-five minutes for dinner or else she’ll cut off my balls.”

She blinked open her beautiful silver eyes and squinted for a moment, getting used to the dim light from the hallway, before she focused on his face.

“Yeah, I can see her doing that. Okay.” Neri slithered closer to the side of the bed. She huffed as she swung her legs to drape off the edge before placing her elbows on her knees, holding her head between her hands.

He moved the coffee in front of her and she reached for it with one hand, the other still cupping her head. Despite the scorching liquid, she took a sip and then tipped it back enough to gulp the entire cup.

“More.”

Hunter handed her the second cup, and she didn't even wait before downing that one too.

He vowed to himself he would take better care of Neri from now on. Zahava and Damian were a priority, but not if it hurt Neri.

She stood and stretched her arms behind her back, standing on her tiptoes until she heard the distinct crack of her back as she worked out the kinks. With more grace than Hunter believed, Neri strode toward the bathroom and straight to the shower. Waiting for the hot water, she rubbed her eyes similar to how Silas did when he was ready for bed and stepped in.

After she washed and dried her hair, she turned to him and smiled. "I'm sorry I threatened your sexy-as-sin body with harm."

Hunter opened the door and kissed her. "I know you're tired. But we'll have a good time tonight, I promise."

"The two cups of coffee helped. Is there more?"

He nodded. "In the kitchen."

Neri shut off the water and after a few moments, stepped out with a towel wrapped around her body. She placed a warm hand on his chest and lifted herself on her toes to kiss him.

"Thanks for letting me sleep."

Unable to stay away from her, he pulled her close and devoured her mouth, needed to taste her. Before he pushed them, he broke the kiss and captured her gaze as his chest heaved.

“I love you, angel.”

She smiled at him, dropped her towel, and sashayed her way over to the closet. Hunter bit his lip to prevent the groan from slipping out as his gaze dropped to her perfect ass, the curve of her waist, and her beautiful long silver hair as it brushed against her back. The heel of his hand pressed down on his already hard cock, groaning as the cold zipper pressed against his hot, hard skin as he tried to control his reaction to her wicked smile and gorgeous body.

“And I love you, too, panther.”

He closed his eyes as Neri rooted around in her closet for the clothes she would wear. He inhaled, taking deep breaths, and controlled his need for his mate by the time she walked out in well-worn jeans, a beautiful pearl white chunky sweater and her running shoes.

She left her hair down, framing her beautiful face, and when she noticed him standing in the same spot, she laughed.

“Ready?”

“Yeah, angel. I’ll try to control myself.”

Neri winked at him. “Only until after the party.”

And with that she hugged him close, laying her head on his chest, and teleported them in the middle of Liv’s living room, unaware of what he had planned.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### HUNTER

“Surprise!”

Neri, who had her face buried against his chest, jerked in his arms before she held him tighter.

“What... what’s going on?”

Neri shook against him and for a long minute, he wondered if throwing a surprise party for Neri was the right thing.

“Um... we’ll it’s your birthday, and I wanted to throw you a party with everyone and surprise you. Are you... did you not want one?”

She shook her head before she paused for a moment. She sucked in a deep breath and released her hold on Hunter. With deliberate movements, she turned around, and she sucked in a breath as she took in the decorations and the confetti everywhere before her eyes landed on the group crowded around them.

Tears welled up in her eyes and Hunter opened his mouth to apologize and figure out how to make it up to her, but then he watched as the corner of her mouth lifted. Soon the other side followed and by the time she took in all the decorations and the confetti everywhere; on the floor, the tables, the chairs and couches, she was laughing.

Neri moved a hand to cup her neck as she turned back to Hunter.

“You did this... for me?” She choked on the last word.

He brought her closer and pressed a kiss to her lips. “I wanted you to forget about everything and have a good time. I hate the thought of you being alone for the last four years, not knowing when your birthday was or anything about your past. But I’m here... we’re here and we want to celebrate with you.”

“Thank you, love.”

“I would do anything for you, angel. Anything.”

Thalia stopped by Neri’s side and pulled her into a hug. “Oh, moró, happy birthday.”

“Thanks, mamá.” She leaned down closer to Thalia’s ear, “I’m so glad I found you again.”

“Me, too.”

At that, the floodgates opened and Axel was the first to pull her into a huge hug. “Happy birthday, gray eyes. What’s it like to besoold now? Almost geriatric.”

“Fuck you, lion. And it’s good. Wait, how old am I?”

“You’re twenty-five,” Xander provided before he side hugged her.

“Oh, no, a quarter century old. Do you need help walking?” Ax laughed at his own joke.

A huff escaped his throat as she punched him in the side, but smiled back at her when



she laughed. Seth and Aubrey hugged her laughing when Neri giggled at their excitement. Thomas and Isaac gave her a serene smile as they took turns hugging her, wishing her many more happy birthday's before they drifted off to a corner and started a private conversation.

Silas jumped into Neri's arms and she gasped in surprise.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed, little man?"

He beamed at her and kissed her cheek. "Mommy let me sleep longer for my nap so I could stay up late. I didn't want to miss your birthday."

"Thank you."

As she carried Silas around, Xander and Frost hugged her, and Kane picked them both up and squeezed before setting them down on the floor. Ara squeezed Neri's hand, giving her a smile. Hunter noticed her eyes seemed less haunted than they had before her talk with Neri and when he glanced at Reaper, he even had a small smile on his face and the tension around his eyes and mouth had lessened.

"Okay, so I might have gone overboard when Noah and I went shopping and if there's something you don't like; the colors, the style, well, I'll take them back, but I hope I picked out something you like," Jade said.

"Oh, you didn't have to get me anything."

Jade shook her head, sending her auburn locks flying back and forth.

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Noah laughed and pulled Jade into his arms, leaning his chin against the top of her head. “She might have had sugar before you two got here.”

“It’s time to eat,” Thalia said.

The spread looked wonderful.

Appetizers including bacon wrapped jalapeño’s with cream cheese, a gigantic charcuterie platter with meat, bread, cheeses, fruit, dips, chips, tiny pickles, and olives, and a variety of vegetables. He’s amazed to see the caterer had cooked two prime ribs, enough to feed everyone in the room with leftovers, along with Yorkshire pudding, horseradish and Au jus and several side dishes in the time allotted.

“Let me know how much I owe you for the spread,” Hunter elbowed Seth.

“We wanted to do it for Neri, so you don’t owe us anything. Cole kept talking about this company, worried he wouldn’t get enough work since they are starting out. This way I get to keep Aubrey and Cole happy, too.” Seth said.

“Thanks, kid.” He hugged Seth and Aubrey before he joined Neri at the table she’d made.

Hunter smiled at the group. Despite the problems they had over the years, they stuck together through the good times and had become closer because of the bad. He turned his gaze to Neri, who was feeding Silas small bites of her prime rib, while talking to Frost and Ara. The smile on her face made it all worthwhile.

After they had eaten their fill, Hunter signaled it was time to open the presents. Nerves assailed him as he remembered the black box in his pocket. But a noise from the kitchen distracted him.

Liv clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. "Which reminds me, time to blow out the candles and make a wish."

Thalia walked out of the kitchen with the sheet cake decorated and twenty-five birthday candles lit on top. As she walked toward the dining room, Tajo and Jack followed behind, and Thalia smiled at Neri. As they opened their mouths, looking as though they were about to sing, Neri gasped.

"Nope. No singing, that's just embarrassing."

"But... it's tradition." Liv looked so heartbroken that Neri caved. Liv's bottom lip stuck out and quivered, her eyes threatening tears.

"I despise crying more. Okay, but sing fast." Neri pulled Liv in for a hug and laughed when Liv's teary eyed expression disappeared.

As the 'Happy Birthday' song chorused through the house, Hunter didn't look away from Neri's face. Although she hated the attention and all the fuss being about her, she viewed the people singing, laughing, and celebrating her day with such love it brought a smile to Hunter's face.

The song ended and Kai, surprising them, pulled Neri into a hug. "Happy birthday, Neri."

"Thanks, Kai. And sorry... about the... body."

"Well, at least you wrapped it in a tarp." Kai's dry statement made him laugh.

“Make a wish, moró.”

Neri closed her eyes and for a few seconds, concentrated on her wish. When she opened her eyes, a small smile tilted up her mouth, and she leaned forward. With ease, she blew out all the candles and laughed at the cheers that spread through the room.

Hunter watched the wonder written on Neri’s face as she cut the cake and handed out slices for everyone. She fit into their lives with ease, and he didn’t want to live without her.

Then his thoughts about marriage, proposing to Neri too soon, and thinking about the date of the wedding and where they would hold it and who they would get to officiate the ceremony. All of this before he asked her.

Pulled from his thoughts when Jade still on her sugar high, bounced over holding several huge boxes and stuffed bags, he grabbed her empty plate, gathering several others scattered around, and headed toward the kitchen to throw them away.

He sat next to Neri, or as close as he managed with the gifts piled around her, and watched as the rest encouraged her to open her presents.

“Which one first?” Neri asked.

Over the next few minutes, Jade placed presents on her lap and they all watched as Neri opened them. She slid her finger underneath the tape and with ease and pried the flaps of the wrapping paper open. She flattened out the paper and laid it on the now empty dining room table before she looked at her gift.

“While we have all night, if you open every present like that, we’ll be here all night and most of tomorrow,” Drew grumbled.

Neri met Drew's eyes and reached for another present without looking at the one she first opened. And with a smile, unwrapped the present with slow, deliberate movements without moving her gaze from Drew's.

After several minutes, Drew huffed and walked away.

"Neri, queen of sass," Aubrey laughed.

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She winked and looked around. “Where’s Silas?”

I’m here.

“Do you want to help me with the wrapping?”

Instead of answering her, Silas giggled and leapt onto her lap, snuggling to get into a comfortable position.

“Let’s see what we have here?” Neri held up a pearl white parka. “Wow, it’s so beautiful. Thanks Jade and Noah.”

“Oh, honey, there’s more. Several chipped in, but I picked everything out.”

Over the next half an hour, Silas ripped open the wrapping paper with glee and Neri thanked everyone for their gifts. She laughed at Silas’s glee whenever he tore through the paper, scattering it everywhere, before he awed over her gifts. Soon, Silas blinked as his body sagged with sleep and Xander lifted him from Neri’s arms.

Wait.

Xander glanced at his son and nodded. He lowered Silas to face Neri.

Happy birthday, Neri. Thanks for letting me open your presents. Silas gave Neri a kiss on the cheek.

I’m glad your parents let you stay up past bedtime. Love you, little man.

Love you, too.

As Xander lifted him to his shoulder, Silas' breaths were deep and even. He eased up the stairs, taking care not to jostle a tired Silas, before everyone turned back to the birthday girl.

"A few more to go." Thalia said.

Kai sidled over to him. What did you get?

Hunter took a deep breath, needing his advice. Can we go outside?

The older vampire nodded and Hunter followed him through the kitchen and onto the back balcony. He leaned against the railing, his gaze moving over the Snowfall city skyline.

"How did you know you wanted to marry Liv?"

"The same way I knew the first time I spotted her she was my mate. And yet despite every instinct screaming at me to claim her, I lied to myself, and then her, and almost lost her. Watching her in the hospital, her frail human body failing her, I felt selfish for wanting to turn her and guilty for putting her in that bed. But I wanted her as mine, forever.

"Marriage, while we never talked about it, seemed a logical step because I wanted to show her my commitment. She forgave me... after she awoke as a vampire. I needed to prove to her I wanted her. As my wife, my mate, and my life partner. I regretted nothing since I decided Liv was mine and I was hers."

They grew silent as they both remembered the good days and the bad of the last four years. The knowledge he felt the same way about Neri as Kai about Liv, solidified his

plans. His hand slid into his pocket and he fingered the box.

“I plan on asking Neri to marry me.”

“And you already bought the ring?”

Hunter nodded.

Kai slapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t make my mistake. You know Neri is the one woman destined for you and although we have all the time in the world, some things shouldn’t wait.”

And with those parting words, Kai walked back inside.

Hunter stayed outside a few minutes longer, preparing himself for walking back inside, getting down on one knee and proposing in front of their family. He chastised himself for not asking Thalia for Neri’s hand, but his instincts told him he had to propose tonight.

As he turned back toward the door, he sucked in a breath as Damian teleported in front of him, blocking the door. There is an evil smile on the asshole’s face and Hunter shifted his feet, ready for a fight.

“What do you want?”

His smile grew wider, but he didn’t say a word.



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“Does Zahava command you not to?”

Again, no words but he tilted his head to the right and continued to stare at Hunter as though he were a specimen in a jar. Taking his time, he then moved his head to the other side and stared.

He clenched his hands into fists, ready to beat this man to death, when he felt the first pinch in his neck. Jerking his hand up, he ran his fingers over the dart sticking out of his neck.

“What the fuck?”

Hunter yanked it out and pushed down the panic when the area around the dart had already numbed.

Help!

“If you’re trying to call for the other’s you can’t,” Zahava said.

His eyes turned toward the steps leading down to the back of the property and growled at the woman smiling at him with glee.

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I created something like a force field that jams cell and electronic signals and mutes the mind link, so no one will hear you.”

“What do you want?”

Another smile. “Why, to dissect you and figure out why you are so much stronger than my own shifters. But don’t worry, it will take several weeks before I kill you off, so you’ll have plenty of time to think about all those days, months, years, and decades you could have had with Neri before you die.”

Hunter forced himself to concentrate on Kai’s living room, but his brain grew fuzzy and he another pinch, this time in his shoulder, made his thoughts scatter.

Fine, I’ll fight.

Hunter lunged for Damian, who flashed away before he reached him. It brought him closer to the back door, and he ran for it when another fucking dart hit him in the chest, right above his heart. Damian flashed in front of him and Hunter wrapped his hand around his throat. With great effort, Hunter crushed his throat and smiled when Damian’s mouth gaped open and closed several times.

Zahava pulled Damian away from Hunter and with three animal tranquilizers running through his system, Hunter dropped to the ground.

Hunter patted his pocket, the one that held the ring, and found it missing. He surged to his feet and glanced around, his brain fuzzy and his vision blurred. He heard Zahava and Damian, but he spotted the ring and made a dash for it and scooped it up. His free hand wrapped around the doorknob and as he turned it, a hard blow from somewhere behind and he dropped to his knees. The ring box dropped to the ground, and he whimpered at the sight.

Neri, I’m sorry I couldn’t give you a future. I love you, angel.

A hard strike hit him in the head and he felt nothing.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NERI

I love you, angel.

Neri froze on the way to the kitchen, her hands full of torn and colorful wrapping paper. Hunter spoke to her. Axel ran into the back of her and laughed, but when he walked around her and glanced at her face, his smile turned into a frown.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hunter’s in trouble.”

Kai shut off the water in the sink and turned toward her with a hand towel, wiping his hands dry. “I left him on the back porch about ten minutes ago. He was fine.”

Neri didn’t wait for the end of his statement. She shoved the armful of paper in the trashcan and ran to the back door, too shocked to teleport there. When she tried to open the door, something on the other side prevented the door from being opened from the inside. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

The wind blew, bringing the cold wind from the late fall evening and a sense of dread. She forced open her eyes, she whipped her head around the area. There was no Hunter.

She tilted her head to the side as her eye caught something near the door. As she

walked closer, she spotted the twisted and mangled black box blocking the door from opening. With a shaky hand, she reached for it and yanked it loose from being wedged, flinching it when it splintered wood at the bottom of the door.

I'll replace that.

With a gentle touch, she cupped the box in her hands as tears welled in her eyes. Without opening it, her instincts told her what lay inside and it broke her heart.

Hunter! Hunter, are you near? Answer me!

In her own mind, she sounded panicked. No matter how she tried to clear her head and figure out her next step, her mind kept repeating the same pleas again and again.

The door swung open from the inside and she got out of the way in time so it missed her by inches. People poured onto the porch and the moment they spotted the look her face, they became all business and searched. Gunnar, Jade, and Noah hopped off the tall balcony and searched for footprints in a sweeping motion until they disappeared through the trees.

“Did anyone alert to something in the last ten minutes?” Ghost asked.

The assassins who weren't tracking shook their heads.

“Murmurs from the living room when Kai and Hunter spoke on the porch, but after Kai shut the door, there was nothing. If there was a confrontation, how did we miss it?” Axel asked.

Liv darted from her place at the door toward the corner of the balcony and bent down to examine something she found. When she reached for it, Kai bristled and Xander let out a huff.

“What it is?”

She held it with her thumb and forefinger, Liv examined it for a moment before she sniffed it. “A powerful horse or bear tranquilizer, by the smell and the size of the dart. It’s familiar to the one that struck Frost before the fight with Anzû.”

“Would...” Neri’s voice broke, and she cleared her throat before she continued, “is that enough to knock out Hunter?”

The tiny vampire shook her head. “No. Because of his size and Hunter’s enhanced healing, it would have taken at least three, maybe more.”

“Damian and Zahava. They didn’t set off the perimeter alarms, and they start at one hundred feet from the house. Also, there are sensors on the bottom of the steps of the deck. So Damian must have teleported onto the balcony after some long-distance surveillance and brought Zahava with him,” Kai said.

Dread flowed through her body with numbing ease as she realized the danger Hunter was in. Zahava’s capable of many things; torture and murder, but after their confrontation at Thalia’s house, she understood what Hunter meant to her and the evil woman wouldn’t hesitate to use the information to her advantage.

Images flashed in her head as different scenarios played out in her mind. Hunter injected with whatever new concoction Zahava’s doctors and scientist had come up with in the four years since Liv destroyed the bioweapon. Then she wondered why physical pain she would put him through if he refused to cooperate and give her whatever she demanded. Which Neri couldn’t even fathom what that might be.

Why didn’t they take her?

If they killed her, at least Hunter would live.

Neri focused on the situation.

“How do we find him?” Her voice wavered.

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“We first have to figure out the silence behind the successful kidnapping.”

“She... must have something that blocks a mind link or all sound in a certain radius,” Gunnar said.

The news stunned them, not believing it possible.

“If they have cell phone jammers and wifi jammers, it’s possible. I’ve heard about a company developing a noise-blocking sound field by placing a device on a flat surface, such as a window, and the vibrations eliminate all sound in a certain area. It’s possible they’ve constructed something similar,” Xander said.

“For argument’s sake, let’s say they have a noise-blocking jammer and Damian passed our alarms, why didn’t Hunter run or alert us?” Ghost asked.

Liv held up the dart. “If they injected him before they confronted him, waited for the tranquilizer to take effect, or shot him with multiple darts, they would have to stall for only a few minutes, incapacitating Hunter.”

“What do they want with him?” Neri asked, her voice small.

No one answered the question, at least not right away. They exchanged looks and by their pained expressions, the answers were horrific. There were scenarios they had witnessed over the years and decades they have been government assassins. Hunter never shared those stories with her.

Time with Hunter. I need time with him. I want forever.

Hunter needed her. She would not sit back and watch as that psychopath tortured and killed him. They would find Zahava and kill her. She placed the damaged box in her back pocket and turned to face everyone.

“We need to find him. Xander, have you found anything about Nightfall’s corporate offices?”

He shook his head. “No, the address given on the business license is one in Denver, but when you map the address online, it’s an abandoned brick building scheduled for demolition in a month. First contact goes to secure email address on a spoofing IP found on an indistinct website. It stores no data on the site. No names or phone numbers listed. After their investigation, the client signs a detailed non-disclosure agreement and contract, only then they establish a secure email address and in person communication is severed.”

Something about Xander’s findings triggered something in her brain. Brick building.

“Oh, fuck. That building on Treetop Drive, did you find out anything about it?” Neri asked.

Xander’s brow drew down as he thought about her request. He snapped his fingers and went to his laptop.

“Yeah, I did. It’s not a business. It’s listed as a residential apartment building but there are no tenants listed. They’ve never had a paying tenant and as far as the inspector states on his notes for the building, they are fixing the building floor-by-floor but have no plans to rent out the units. The listed owner... Wellfuck!”

Neri waited for the answer, despite fear shivering down her spine.

“Z. and A. Wolfe.”



She thought back to the place drew her during their search for Zahava's scent. The building was less than a mile from Standard. Around the area, there were a lot of small startup business renting out the ground floors to professionals, such as lawyers and dentists, and rented the upper floors of the building to people who wanted to live in a prime location in Downtown Snowfall.

While the place hadn't looked decrepit, it looked worn. It wasn't new enough to warrant scrutiny from business owners looking to rent out space and not downtrodden enough for the city to get involved in a cleanup effort. And with the cracks in the sidewalk and the front door and all the visible windows blacked out, it didn't shout welcome. It was the perfect building for someone who ran a secretive organization and since there was so much going on around the building; it was hiding in plain sight.

"She runs her operation out of that building. We lost Zahava's scent there and something drew me back to the building, although I couldn't sense anything from inside. The sound field surrounds the building."

Kane cleared his throat. "If they have modern tech not even on the market and can hide an entire building from prying eyes and ears, how are we supposed to get in? They barricaded the building and by the time we get through, if we get through, they'll kill Hunter and leave."

She flinched at Kane's scenario, but focused on the plan instead of her fears.

"Neri can get us in," Axel said.

Shocked, she stiffened her spine and glared at Axel. "I can't. I have to picture the place in my mind before I can teleport there."

Liv gasped. "What if you can teleport to a person, by thinking of them?"

“It’s what I was thinking. You didn’t have to picture Silas’s room, he pushed the image into your head and you went on faith. I think if you concentrate on Hunter, you can find him.” Kai said.

“I need to be sure.”

“Aubrey, honey. Can you go home and we’ll see if Neri can find you there?”

With determination, the young vampire ran out the front door, the click of it closing behind her loud to Neri’s ears.

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Seth walked over and squeezed her hand. “You can do this. You’ll get Hunter back.”

Neri blinked back the tears and squeezed back. “Thank you, Seth.”

For several silent minutes, they waited for word from Aubrey. Neri closed her eyes and concentrated on the beautiful woman; her reddish-brown locks down to the pretty freckles on her smooth pale skin and kept her image in the forefront of her mind.

“Okay, Neri. Aubrey is ready for you,” Seth said.

Instead of answering, she nodded and with the image on the forefront of her mind as she closed her eyes; she teleported out.

“You did it!” Aubrey excitement at Neri’s success made her lips tip up.

She accepted Aubrey’s hug and without closing her eyes and holding onto Aubrey; she teleported them both back to Kai’s house to round up the group and invade Zahava’s secret building.

“Ready?” Ghost asked.

Neri glanced around and almost all of them had changed from their casual clothes to the black tactical gear typical of raids. Strapped with knives, pistols, and automatic weapons, they had enough ammunition to decimate every shifter in that building.

Reaper walked up to her, and she smiled as he gave her a knife, the same one she used two other times whenever she needed to fight.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“We’ll get him back and we’ll kill them all. It’s the least they deserve.” And Reaper gave her a rare smile and squeezed her shoulder.

Ghost cleared his throat and the entire room fell deadly silent and turned to the boss.

“This is a rescue and kill mission. They have come after us time and time again, always with the element of surprise. But now we have the advantage. The shifters are not as strong or as fast as we are, but they know the lay of the land and we don’t. So, don’t leave your partner’s sight. If you need to chase after them, do so with your partner. Reaper is with Ara, Kai and Gunnar, Axel and Kane, Jade and Noah, Thomas and Isaac, and Xander and Neri are with me. Questions?”

“As long as we get to kill these fuckers, no questions from me,” Axel said.

“Neri, are you ready?” Ghost asked.

She nodded, once. She sheathed her knife and slid it in the back of her jeans before she held out her arms.

Neri!

Frozen when Silas call her, she looked up in time to see Silas jump at her.

You okay, little man?

Silas shook his head. Hunter’s hurt. All I see is black but his body is in pain, around his stomach and back. He’s being poked, like needles. Some are worse. You know he hates needles.

I know, little man. We'll get him back. Go see your mom and we'll be back soon.

Neri kissed his cheek and almost cried after Frost, her face etched in concern, reached out and squeezed her hand before she pulled Silas to her chest and hugged him close. She had to close her eyes when Xander kissed Frost and Silas, her heart breaking.

Liv hugged her. "You'll do whatever it takes to get him back. And he'll be fine."

Unable to speak through the tightness in her throat, Neri nodded and turned back to the others. Without speaking, she held her arms out and took a deep breath when twelve hands grasped her arm. She didn't have to close her eyes this time; Hunter's image etched in her mind.

Hunter, we're coming.

One second, they were in Kai's cozy living room and the next, isopropyl alcohol and bleach were prominent. But Neri's eyes focused on the slumped figure in front of her.

Hunter's head hung in front of him and he wasn't conscious. For a long moment, she watched his chest as it moved up and down in incremental movements, which showed he was alive. As her gaze moved down to his chest and stomach, bared from the waist up, there were areas of muscle gouged out of him.

Red. Pure anger, nothing she'd ever felt before surged through her, but before she let out a roar of outrage and fury, Axel put a hand over her mouth and wrapped an arm around her waist, yanking her back into his body.

"It won't do any good to alert them to our presence, gray eyes. They are on the floor above and with the machines whirring around us is medical equipment, breaking down Hunter's blood and DNA, we're masked. But we need to be smart," Axel whispered.

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Taking deep breaths, Neri nodded. Her body drooped against Axel's and tried to get herself back under control.

"Ara, can you heal Hunter?" Ghost asked.

Ara gave a quick nod and walked toward Hunter. She kneeled in front of him and Neri gasped as she watched the talented shifter's hands glowed a pure white light. Neri wanted to absorb Hunter's pain as Ara put her hands onto his chest and he grunted at the touch. She didn't interfere.

With wide eyes, Neri watched as the light flowed through Ara's hands and into Hunter's chest, moving toward the cuts and gouges on Hunter's chest and stomach. As the wounds glowed, bringing them into stark contrast, Hunter jerked against the ties strapping him down to the bolted chair where he sat.

Neri moved closer and cupped Hunter's face in her hands. She held him still as Ara continued to heal him and watched as she gave a thanks to whatever deity had given Ara the healing powers she had. As the light faded, Hunter stiffened in his chair.

"Hunter, love, it's us. You'll fine."

"They pumped him full of tranquilizer. I've cleared it from his system so he should come to any moment," Ara said.

"Thank you, Ara. Thank you," Neri said.

Ara stood and rubbed her back before moving to stand near Reaper, who had his gaze

on the stairwell. Neri noticed the others placed themselves around the room, investigating the equipment and searching for any documentation they stumbled upon.

“Gather everything you can fit in your packs,” Ghost directed.

There was a fluttering of paper, computers being unplugged and stored, and drawers being opened and closed, but Neri focused on Hunter, who blinked open his eyes.

“Hey there.”

Neri, with sly movements, unsheathed her knife when Hunter pulled at his binds, and cut them off with a quick flick of the blade. She pocketed it before he focused his gaze on her.

“Angel, you’re here. Am I dead?”

“No, love, you’re fine. Zahava and Damian came after you and drugged you with too many doses of tranquilizers. Ara removed it from your system. Do you think you can stand?”

Hunter gasped and his hands slapped his bare skin on his chest and stomach, right over where Ara had healed his wounds.

“Are you feeling any residual pain?”

He glanced up, confused. “What? Oh, that... I thought that was a dream. Someone strapped me down and carved me up, taking chunks out of me. Fuck, I’d take a needle any day.”

“I’ll tell Liv.” Neri gave him a small smile.

Hunter reached for her and kissed her breathless. His hands gripped onto her shirt and only then did she notice he was shaking.

“It’s okay, love. How do you feel?”

A tear slipped from his eye and slid down his cheek. Neri’s breath caught on a sob and she wrapped her arms around Hunter and held him tight.

“I thought I would never see you again. I...”

“It’s always you and me, together. We’ll kill this bitch and her little sidekick and get rid of them once and for all.”

Hunter nodded and stood, a look of determination on his face, until he glanced around the room to find every assassin searching through the room, gathering important items they found.

“How the fuck?”

“Neri’s powerful. She pictured you andpop,” Axel said.

Jade and Noah walked back into the makeshift lab where they kept Hunter.

“They gutted the first ten floors. No movement and no one has been living here at all. The two floors below us look like residences, ten per floor, so twenty apartments total. There is no movement from the apartment but we sense movement upstairs. From the stairwell, there is a secured steel door on this floor and the one above it with a touchscreen electronic deadbolt that will be impossible to bypass.”

“Well, we won’t need to go through the door.”



They turned to Neri and smiled at her.

“Ready for a fight angel?”

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

#### HUNTER

Fury bristled against his skin and it brought his panther to the forefront. He wanted to shift, but he needed to analyze the layout of the top floor, the players including the number of shifters who would fight, and the possible dangers before he shifted.

Neri gave him a quick kiss before she stood back-to-back with him, the others organizing themselves around her. They all hand their hands on her shoulder or arm.

Ready?

Yes.Everyone replied.

She landed them right in front of Zahava, who gasped in surprise. “Holy shit, how—”

“Who gives a shit how?”

Neri’s hand shot out and clutched Zahava’s throat, pulling the smaller woman closer. She growled at the bane of her existence, showing off her fangs. Although they were impressive, along with Neri’s furious face, Zahava scowled at her.

Without warning, Neri head butted Zahava and broke her nose. The evil bitch screeched like a wounded animal as she ignored the blood gushing from her face. She raised her hands to claw Neri, but his mate held her arm out, keeping the other woman’s hands away from her face.

Damian teleported in behind Zahava and blinked her away from Neri. His mate disappeared in the next moment and appeared across the room where Damian stood in front of Zahava trying to staunch the flow of blood. The shifter mix flashed out of the way as Neri landed and she followed them. After several times, Damian and Zahava disappeared again, but Neri didn't move to follow.

What's wrong, angel?

I... I can't sense her anymore. I'm trying to teleport to where she is, but something is blocking me.

Neri turned to see a flood of shifters run into the room. Ghost was the first to make contact, and he decapitated the first one he'd come across with a swipe of his combat knife. Another leapt on his back, but he stabbed him in the heart and flung him to his feet, where Ghost cut off his head. He turned to take on two more when a loud cry drew Hunter's gaze from his boss.

Axel shifted into his lion form and the shouts of dismay came from those shifters around him. Being as big as he was in animal form, he bit the head off several shifters and spit them out after they dropped to the ground, dead. He jumped and landed on another one's chest and tilted his huge head to the side as the man begged for his life.

Why do these fuckers always think pleading for their lives will work after they attack first?

Jade laughed as Noah held a shifter in front of him, his arms braced underneath the shifter's armpits and his hands laced behind the whimpering man's head.

I have no clue, but this is getting old. I miss the days where we killed despicable humans who think human trafficking or drug running is a valid career path. Jade back flipped and with ease, detached the shifter's head from the body.

Noah dropped the body onto the floor and turned to rip another shifter's throat out before detaching his head from his body.

In the next few minutes, they dispatched many of the shifters who fought.

Neri had ignored the fight going on around her as Hunter guarded her from a possible attack. Hunter justified he should let the others have their fun, but it was because he didn't want to let his mate out of his sight. Being away from her, even for however long he had been, had given him a healthy sense of fear he'd never felt in all his years as an assassin. He had no clue if it would dissipate, but for now, he couldn't leave her side.

Drugged and taken away from her, he thought it would be the end of his existence. Luck was on his side, the overabundance of tranquilizer in his system had made every moment since he left Kai's porch, a complete blank. But from the horror portrayed on her face, they had hurt him, maybe experimented on him from the phantom pain he sensed on his chest and stomach.

Hunter, his gaze returned to Neri, watched her concentrate on Zahava and Damian's location. He reached for her hand and linked their fingers together, so if she disappeared, he'd be with her.

Holy shit, look at this. Gunnar sounded freaked.

He turned and glanced at Gunnar and then at the floor, following the grey wolf's gaze. His eyes widened and heard the assassins and the other shifters alike let out gasps of horror when they spotted a man, mid-shift, stuck in a deformed pose, somewhere between human and animal. At first, Hunter couldn't identify what type of animal he was trying to shift into, but his eyes roamed toward the elongated neck and found the spots of a cheetah. The way his head and neck were bent horrified him. The flesh was bleeding where the fur sprouted.

When the failed shifter let out a miserable whimper, Gunnar pulled out his Glock 17 and shot him several times in the head, putting the poor soul out of his misery.

Reaper stepped forward and cut the dead cheetah shifter's head off and looked around, trying to find the person responsible. It's a fucking abomination. We need to find the scientist working on this and stop them.

Axel, with his gun in his hand, opened the door closest to him, finding it dark. He flicked on the light and searched the room, but finding nothing, closed the door and moved onto the next one. Kane, Xander, and Noah followed Ax's lead and when Kane opened his door, a squeal of fear echoed throughout the cavernous room.

Kane reached for the man, decked out in a lab coat, wearing a button-down shirt, tie, and slacks, flailed as the blond vampire lifted him off his feet.

"Who are you?"

“Dr. Alexis.”

“And those people?”

Hunter glared at the four other scientists in the room, all decked out in lab coats, and all at a separate workstation with experiments bubbling away around them.

“They kidnapped us from Standard and put to work here four years ago. We can’t leave the building and we have to work on developing a better serum to make her shifter’s stronger and faster. Less likely to die in a fight,” Dr. Alexis said.

A young woman, no older than twenty-five, stepped forward. “Is she out there?”

“No, she disappeared. I’m trying to locate her,” Neri said.

“We’ve been sabotaging the serum, diluting it in different ways, so the shifters can’t shift. They aren’t as strong as they should be. They also die within one to two years of being injected.”

“What’s your name?” Ghost asked.

“I’m Dr. Joanna Gaines. I worked in immunology for Standard. Dr. James Alexis worked in biomedical. And these three, Dr. Sam Logan, Dr. Angel Martinez, and Dr. Sylvia Moore all work in research.”

Hunter noted their skin was pale and all of them looked gaunt and unhealthy.

“Did you know Dr. Olivia Sabin?” Kai asked.

“Yes, she disappeared. There was a company wide alert stating she developed a bioweapon, and it killed hundreds, but I never believed them.”

Ghost stepped forward. “Liv is Kai’s mate. Kai turned her into a vampire after Dr. Ames kidnapped her and tortured her, trying to get the bioweapon back from her.”

Dr. Martinez growled. “I hated that fucking man. All he wanted was to steal our research and take credit for our work. I could see him developing a bioweapon.”

“Yeah, well, Liv turned the tables and injected the bioweapon into him. He... well, disintegrated,” Kai said.

Hunter shivered at the memory.

“Good,” the three researchers said in unison.

“I’m glad Dr. Sabin is okay,” Dr. Gaines said.

“Is there anyone else on this floor?” Gunnar asked.

Dr. Gaines shook her head. “No, it’s us, that tall guy who never talks and the woman. She hates the shifters and they avoid her wrath. But she will call them when she has a plan and they act as her distraction. As far as we’ve figured, they live two floors below the lab. The numbers have dwindled over the past few weeks and with these shifters dead, I’m guessing they’ll go out hunting for humans again soon.”

Ghost growled. “How do they get the humans to experiment on?”

Dr. Moore stepped forward. “They are homeless men from Denver. She doesn’t take

women, I don't know why, but she gets Damian to kidnap them and no one ever reports them missing."

"Do you guys inject—"

"No! We don't go near them, plus Zahava likes to do it herself. She gets a sick pleasure doing it."

Neri scoffed. "Figures."

"Hunter, we need to get these scientists to safety. Can you take them to Kai's and pop back here?"

Everything inside him wanted to rebel against leaving Neri for even a moment, but Ghost was in charge and he knew he couldn't refuse. He turned to Neri, who smiled at him and walked closer.

She pressed her lips to the shell of his ear and said, "When you need to come back, picture me in your mind and you'll teleport to where I am. It's easier than it looks."

"Okay, gather around," Hunter commanded.

The five doctors walked forward, unaffected they were moving closer to immortal assassins. Hunter held out his arms. "Grab hold and don't let go."



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They all complied and the moment they had a hold, he teleported them into the living room and next to Liv, who jumped.

“Dr. Sabin?”

“Oh, Hunter, thank the heavens you’re okay. Dr. Gaines. Um, this will sound weird but what are you doing here?”

Hunter cleared his throat. “Zahava and Damian kidnapped them from Standard over four years ago. I have to go back, we haven’t killed them yet. In the meantime, can you get them some food and a place to sleep? You guys don’t look healthy.”

“No offense taken. Thanks for getting us out of there,” Dr. Alexis said.

“I’ll care for them. Bring everyone back.” Liv’s voice wobbled, always concerned for her family when they were on a mission.

Hunter hugged her. “I will.”

He closed his eyes, picturing his mate, he popped out and smiled when he felt Neri’s hands on his biceps.

“I can sense her again. I think they went into a room and masked their sound as they regrouped. They don’t have many shifters left, not enough to distract us at any rate,” Neri said.

“Since the shifters won’t be a problem, we need to concentrate on Zahava and

Damian. Damian will keep her out of our reach, so we have to find a weakness in the immortal and take advantage of that. Neri, you have Zahava. We can't keep her alive, although she's still human."

Axel scoffed. "How do you know they haven't ditched us and headed out of state?"

"Because she took a long time to build what she sees as her empire. She hid the building in plain sight and she even kept five people hostage for four years in the same place. There's no way she'll give up what progress she thinks she's made because of us," Neri said.

"You're right there, Nerissa," Zahava sneered.

Damian stood near the doorway, his face blank and his arms crossed over his chest. Zahava stood in front of him, holding out a gun and trained it on Hunter's head.

"Holding a gun to another's mate is the best way to die a painful death," Ara growled.

The crazy bitch fired at him and he teleported in time to miss being shot. When he teleported back in, she had turned the gun on the rest of the group who had ducked out of the way. The shots were ricocheting off the metal cabinets, the tiled floor, and the steel doors surrounding the room, but no bullets hit their intended target.

Neri let out a roar, more intimidating than anything that had come from Axel in his lion form, and stalked forward.

Zahava's eyes widened, and she slid the empty magazine out of the 9mm handgun and slammed back a fresh one. She lifted the gun and pointed it at Neri, pulling the trigger and shooting her in the shoulder.

As if it were happening in slow motion, blood splattered the pristine white room

when the bullet went through her and blasted through her skin and tissue, exiting near her shoulder blade. But Neri never wavered from her forward momentum, but when Zahava huffed out irritation at not killing her, raised the gun again.

Neri disappeared and reappeared in front of Zahava. Her right hand clamped onto the wrist of the hand holding the gun and squeezed the two bones until a loud crack echoed throughout the quiet, tense room. Extreme pain replaced the sneer on Zahava's face. Neri held onto her wrist, kept her gaze locked on the woman who sank to her knees, writhing in pain.

Hunter chose that moment to appear behind Damian. But before he leapt up and put a chokehold on the fucking giant, Damian disappeared. Axel roared when Damian landed on him. Ax's reaction was immediate. A loud ripping of his clothing made Hunter pause, and he turned and watched as Ax shifted into his lion form.

"That's the fucking worst idea ever, Ax. You're too fucking huge for this room and you'll destroy everything," Gunnar shouted, but paused before he continued, "Never mind. Wreck the place."

Ax flipped onto his stomach and swiped at Damian, snagging a claw on his side and ripped open his skin, dripping blood onto the floor.

Instead of disappearing again, Damian held out a knife and held it in his right hand. He drove it down, ready to plunge it into Ax's chest after the lion's latest swipe missed, but Ara appeared from his left and shouldered him off Ax and straight into a steel door that caved in with the impact. When he stood, he left a splatter of blood behind and disappeared.

Zahava still writhed under Neri's hold as Hunter and the rest kept their eyes open for Damian's form. Neri jerked on Zahava's wrist a second before Damian appeared behind her. He reached for Zahava, but Neri switched hands, holding the screaming

woman with her left one, as her right arm swung around.

He noticed her nails had turned into claws and when she struck Damian in the same spot as his previous wound, her nails dug in. Neri clenched her hand into a fist and when she ripped her arm back, she took a chunk of Damian with her. He sank to his knees, clutching at his bigger wound.

“That motherfucker, is for touching my mate.”

As Neri’s focus was on Damian, Zahava struggled to pick up the gun.

Can I kill Damian angel or do you want both?

No, by all means, he’s all yours.

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Hunter concentrated on his panther and shifted easily into the large cat. He rolled his shoulders and stretched out his back legs, waiting for Damian to recover from his latest blow before Hunter pounced.

His eyes focused on Neri, who pulled Zahava to her feet. One hand held the broken wrist while her dominant hand held the gun, Zahava's gun to her forehead. Her hand was steady.

"How much pain can you take, Zahava?"

"Fuck you!" The woman screamed.

"Well, that's not very nice, Zahava. So if you want to talk about something else, we'll list all the fucking crimes you have committed since you met Anzû, shall we?"

A sneer was the answer she received.

"So, you helped Dr. Steven's turn me into a shifter and then a vampire, taking satisfaction from the pain you put me through. All for the sake of taking over Dark Company, but for a reason we have yet to fathom.

"You were probably behind the torture of Liv, Kane's mate being killed, and Ara, along with the other immortal's being kidnapped and used as fucking science experiments. You sent someone to kill Reaper and Ara, twice after she escaped. And then, your mate went after Frost and Xander, threatened Silas, which I should kill you for that alone, and sent Jade and Noah on a wild goose chase after you killed Noah's best friend. Then, you fucking bitch, planned to kill my mate after you experimented

on him. Was there anything else I forgot?"

Neri glanced around the room, but the assassins shook their heads, all of them glaring at the whimpering, yet defiant human standing tall.

"And yet, I don't understand why you haven't become an immortal yourself."

Zahava spit at Neri, who dodged it and jerked her broken wrist. A howl escaped Zahava, and she moved to sink down onto the ground again, but Neri's hold prevented her action.

"You, you lot are fucking disgusting. Freaks of nature. Why the fuck would I want to be like you?" Zahava jeered.

"You married a shifter. You create shifters in your lab. To what end?"

"Power and money. What else would I fucking do it for? I want that fucking contract from the government."

Neri's brows drew down, as though she didn't understand the reasoning.

Hunter glanced at Damian who looked shocked at the vitriol spewing from his boss's mouth. The huge immortal sank down against the door and sighed, almost as if he'd given up the fight. But Hunter didn't relax. Hunter sat back on his haunches and kept an eye on him.

"We already explained why that would never work. But you took him anyway."

"Because they are the key to a successful shifter. They're not tainted. They can shift and live forever. But my shifters, well they all dead now, have all been failures. I needed him to see what I was missing. If his blood didn't hold the answers, I needed

him to make a new group of shifters I could control.”

Neri shook her head, disgusted. “That’s not how it works. No matter how you get the venom, the likelihood the human would survive the transition is slim.”

Another scoff. “But you did.”

Kai stepped up. “There is no rhyme or reason to why some humans survive and some don’t.”

“Damian did.”

The grunt from the defeated man had Neri scowling. “You did the same thing with him? Injected him with shifter venom and then vampire venom along with the bioweapon.”

“No, the opposite this time. It’s why he’s stronger, but Anzû hated vampires—”

“Yeah, we got it.” Kai said.

Hunter, we can’t kill him. He’s a pawn, like everyone else in her sick world.

I know, angel. Ara, can you heal Damian?

Hunter made sure everyone had heard his request of Ara, so when they all nodded in agreement, the red wolf shifter stepped toward Damian and knelt beside him. In voices too quiet for Zahava to hear, Ara explained her powers to Damian and asked him if she could heal him. With reluctance, he nodded.

Neri shook her head at Zahava, pulling the human’s attention away from her once loyal lackey as Ara started the healing process.

“You’ve done nothing but fail for years. Why would you keep going?”



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“I wanted to find you. Find you and kill you.”

“And you couldn’t find me, so you went after them?”

“They were a bonus. Anzû already had the idea to kill every shifter and vampire, especially after his precious woman met her mate.” Zahava pointed at Xander who stood there with his fists clenched at his sides. “But that fucking man never had a plan. I was the planner. The confrontation was spontaneous and then he got himself killed. Every turn, some stupid man failed me and I had to change my plans. But the moment I spotted you with the rest, I knew it was my chance.”

Something about her tone of voice caused him to shiver. “Did you kill Dr. Stevens?”

Her eyes, brown eyes that held no emotion, jerked up to meet his. “He let her go, allowed Nerissa to escape. He deserved to die for that. Draining the brake lines and a curvy road took care of him.”

Zahava was a true psychopath. Hunter had met a few in his line of work, but there was no banter with them. He had no clue how to deal with one other than put a bullet in their head. But this woman took things far beyond the crimes of those who were on listed on the government contracts. Despite her need for power or money, revenge and the thrill of killing were her ultimate goals. She never flinched when her shifters died because she knew there were more. Even Damian, her saving grace more than once, was disposable.

“Damian?”

Ara placed her finger up to her mouth and shook her head. The light faded from Damian's wounds and his skin flooded with color.

"Where did he go?"

"That's the difference between them and you. They would do anything, even die, for their family. But you, you only think about yourself, care about yourself. So you demand loyalty, but you get nothing because you give nothing.

"I hated every moment of my time spent in the orphanage. Not because there wasn't much food to eat, or the blankets were scratchy and didn't fend off the cold. No, it was because I hated every moment with you. You demanded instead of asked. You bullied others to do what you wanted, and I'm sure that hasn't changed. But I have a family, a mother, and a mate. And after all these years, you still have nothing," Neri said, her tone flat and unemotional.

An inhuman screech erupted from Zahava's throat and she ripped her broken wrist from Neri's hold and lunged for the gun. She wrapped both hands around the frame and jerked, trying to take the gun from Neri's grasp. Instead, Zahava's finger slipped down to the trigger, and the gun fired with the barrel pointing at her torso.

The boom was loud in the contained room and made him flinch. But Hunter worried for Neri when her eyes widened as she stared at the woman in front of her. Zahava jerked forward as the bullet struck her chest and a second or two later, blood bloomed on her white shirt as it seeped out of the wound. The dark red sickly and spreading fast.

Zahava slumped to the side and Neri laid her on the floor as her eyes fluttered closed and she took her last breath. No one, not even Damian moved to help her. They had come into the confrontation knowing they would have to eliminate her, but she'd done it herself.

Neri stood and closed her eyes.

Are you okay, angel?

Yeah, I... well, I don't have her death on my conscience since she pulled the trigger herself, but I expected... not this.

She took a deep breath and blew it out, and when she opened her eyes and found him standing in front of him, she smiled.

Hey.

Hi, angel.

Is it over?

Hunter glanced back toward Damian, who spotted his hard stare and held his hands up, shaking his head.

He turned back to Neri. Yeah, it's over.

Good. Then you can marry me. Neri reached behind her and pulled out the box he'd dropped.

He shifted back and blew a sigh of relief when he noticed the ring was still intact. He dropped onto one knee, still naked.

"Neri, will you marry me?"

"Yes."

He slid the ring on her finger before Neri dropped into his lap. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him breathless.

After tonight, he would never hesitate ever again.

“Let’s go home,” she whispered.

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He nodded and lifted her into his arms, holding her tight.

“Hey, what about us?” Axel complained.

He turned them toward their friends to see them grinning. Ax clapped when they noticed the ring and the rest followed. Leave it to the naked lion shifter to whistle and clap the loudest.

“Damian isn’t a threat any longer. He’ll take you back to Kai’s house.”

Ghost smiled. “Congratulations, both of you, and thanks for saving us, Neri.”

She shrugged. “Anything for family.”

And with a laugh, she teleported them home.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

#### NERI

Neri glanced at herself in the mirror in the bedroom she and Hunter share at Kai's house, taking in the beautiful white sleeved corset wedding dress etched in silver lace and emerald green accents that matched Hunter's eyes.

She had never worn a dress before, much less an elegant one made with lace and satin, but as she twirled around to see the intricate design in the back, Neri could live in the dress.

Jade, Liv, Frost, Thalia, and Aubrey had dragged her and Ara to every wedding dress store in Denver and Snowfall. She had the dress she loved saved on her laptop since the day after Hunter's proposal. But she laughed at each grumble or curse Ara had given whenever they had to stop at 'just one more' store. And when she found the exact wedding dress in a small bridal store on the outskirts of downtown Snowfall, and Liv had made a beeline right to it.

"Oh, this is beautiful."

Neri stood still as Liv handed Frost the wedding dress to hold up against her clothed body.

"It's perfect," Thalia gasped.

She had seen Aubrey's perfect white and peach sleeveless dress and Liv's simple, yet

elegant pure white one, and knew this dress matched her as much as their dresses complimented them. After a whirlwind fitting session and a few minor adjustments, Neri took the dress home that day. But they had to wait another two months for the actual ceremony.

Hunter had wanted to get married at the courthouse the day after her birthday. But with the fight and Zahava's death, Neri wanted a new date to start their life. So, they decided on November thirteenth.

Friday the thirteenth.

Neri knew under most circumstances the date was unlucky. But to her, she'd gone through the impossible by becoming the first shifter vampire hybrid, met her mate after years of being alone, and found her mother because of her new immortal family.

Life had changed for the better since she met Hunter in the clearing that first day. She couldn't deny how fast she fell for him, but after talking to the others, the assassins didn't hesitate to commit in once they found the one person destined for them.

Neri loved Hunter, and he loved her.

Since Zahava's death, the constant unknown stopped plaguing them. Her shifters died from sickness from the subpar serums or at the assassin's hands. Ghost and the others had searched the remaining floors where the shifters lived, and the ones who hadn't fought, killed themselves. They were obsolete.

After Liv's autopsy of the shifter Neri had gifted her, she found the transitions succeed and were less likely to kill with the diluted injections. The scientist created a way for humans to survive a transition without a mate.

Similar to Neri's transition, the shifter venom was strong enough to strengthen the

cells and mutate them, but soon the serum broke down healthy cells until the body, about a year after the transition, killed them.

Hunter had raged when he learned that Dr. Steven's saved her life by mixing the bioweapon and the vampire venom. Although the combination was beneficial, it was luck it hadn't killed her.

"If I introduced the bioweapon and vampire venom to any shifter, they become a hybrid."

Liv's statement was met with silence, until Axel stood up.

"No, thank you. We'll let gray eyes be the only one." And with a wave, he was out the door.

The rest of the assassin felt the same way.

But the most surprising part of the entire situation was Damian. They found out that Zahava had his tongue cut out as a vindictive measure when he didn't locate Neri and kidnap her within the first year of her escape.

To control Damian, she used techniques she learned throughout the years to brainwash him. She targeted him as a loner, offered friendship and then separated him from his life. Zahava made affection or praise conditional on how successful he completed his tasks. But the time she met Anzû, she controlled Damian with fear and isolation. Anzû hated Damian and could punish him whenever he displeased Zahava. He was so relieved when Anzû died that he stuck with Zahava.

"Have you ever killed anyone?" Ghost asked.

Damian shook his head. He wrote out she liked to kill and she assigned him



surveillance and being her personal transport.

After that confession, Ghost told him he was free to go, but he didn't have a place. Knowing firsthand how Zahava was, Neri wondered if she could do something. She pulled Hunter aside.

“What do you think about Damian working with both of us at the workshop? He can get supplies and I can show him how to design and build furniture.”

Hunter didn't even hesitate. “Yeah, I'm fine with it.”

Neri kissed Hunter and smiled against his lips. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Hunter asked.

“Being you and loving me.”

She asked Damian if she wanted to work with her and when he agreed, Hunter offered Damian his house. “I live with Neri and the house would be empty. This way, you have your own home.”

In response, Damian wrapped his long arms them and squeezed.

The same day, they moved Hunter’s clothing and belongings to Neri’s and left the furniture, along with a new dining room table Neri built along with six dining room chairs. Damian settled into his house and worked with Neri, picking up woodworking skills with ease.

The assassins, along with Neri, Seth, and Aubrey all learned sign language. Damian knew the basics, and he honed his skills as the rest of them soon picked up enough to have simple conversations. They learned new words and phrases every day.

There was a tap on the door and Neri turned to find Thalia standing in the doorway, the smile wide on her face as she took in her hair swept up in an elegant braid and down the princess dress.

“Oh, moró, you are so beautiful.”

“Thank you, mamá. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Neri smiled. “So when are you and Tajo going to get married?”

A blush on her cheeks was all the answer she needed. “And we must find Jack a girlfriend.”

“I’m too old for a girlfriend,” Jack grumbled.

“A boyfriend then?” Neri wiggled her eyebrows.

“If it weren’t your wedding day…” Jack walked in with Tajo.

“You know I love you, Jack. If you weren’t family, I wouldn’t tease.”

Kai cleared his throat. “At least she didn’t leave you a dead body on your coffee table.”

Neri beamed at the vampire. Kai would walk her down the aisle because Tajo wanted to walk Thalia.

Thalia kissed her on the cheek and squeezed her hand. “I love you, moró korítsi.”

“I love you, too mamá. See you after the ceremony.”

She watched them walk out and turned to Kai. “Why am I so nervous? This is what I want and now butterflies are dancing in my stomach.”

Kai leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “It’s because you haven’t seen Hunter yet today. Once you do, everything will settle into place.” He held out his arm, and she placed her hand on his elbow.

“Thanks, Kai.”

He kissed her cheek. “Anything for you and Hunter.”

Neri didn’t remember much about the walk down the stairs or into the back courtyard covered in fluffy snow giving it a fairytale feel. Silas waved at her as she waved back, blowing him a kiss. But everything came to focus the moment she spotted Hunter in his black tuxedo adorned with a silver tie, pocket square, and vest. He looked spectacular.

But it was his smile that had her heart kicking in her chest. He beamed at her as Kai transferred her hold from him to Hunter’s hands and kissed her cheek.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur. She said the words ‘I do’ after Hunter squeezed her hands and before she knew it, they were pronounced husband and wife. Hugs and congratulations made her face hurt from smiling so much and before she knew it, it was their first dance.

“For a minute, I thought you would change your mind,” Hunter said.

She shook her head and laughed when Hunter dipped her and pulled her back up. “No, love. I was nervous before the ceremony and Kai was right, after I saw you, I calmed. But then there was only you and me, and I couldn’t take my eyes off you. All sounds ceased.”

Hunter kissed her, leaving her breathless.

“I love you, Neri. I will always do everything in my power to make you happy.”

She kissed him back, and when her lips touched his, she said, “I love you, too, panther. For the rest of our existence.”