



# Never Run from an Immortal

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Rae Farren has always had a taste for blood. The blood of her enemies, if she's being specific, but Demesia has been crawling with degenerates for so long the line between friend and foe no longer exists.

War is on the horizon; the fragile existence between humans and the preternatural creatures they share their home with almost at breaking point. With neither time nor luck on her side, Rae jumps at an opportunity to strike a deal with the enemy, even though nothing good can come of their alliance.

Born a bastard Vampire, Aidan Vale has ruthlessly fought his way into his seat of power, but power always comes with a price. He's sampled most of what Demesia has to offer, but every drop has been like ash on his tongue since his magic was stolen from him, a secret that's becoming more and more difficult to hide from those who would try to rob him of his throne.

When a foul-mouthed thief offers a bargain with him, Aidan has nothing to lose by accepting. Rae could either be his redemption or his damnation, but refusing her might just be too great a risk.

As sparks fly and tempers flare, one thought alone drives him to see their deal through: know thy enemy.

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## Chapter one

Rae was fucked.

Three Vampires had just watched her swipe a wallet from one of their friends, and she had absolutely no intentions of becoming their blood bag tonight. Or any other night, for that matter.

Rush was a shithole most nights of the week, but even more so on a Thursday. Precisely why Rae usually tried to avoid it. The music was awful, the clientele even worse, and the interior like something fresh out of a Somniator's nightmare. Which, Rae supposed, as she took in the black crystal chandeliers high above her, the floor-to-ceiling canvases of models emerging from pools of blood, and the glassy-eyed humans, it probably was.

Beggars can't be choosers. Though in her case, Rae most certainly was not begging. Borrowing? Appropriating? Repurposing.

She bent over to adjust her boot, let the wallet fall discreetly to the floor, and fumbled with a lace that didn't need adjusting. She made sure the Vampires were getting a good look at her bare legs as she feigned surprise at her discovery and gasped a quiet, "Oh!" just for added flair. Rae scooped up the wallet, frowned with perfect innocence, and pretended to glance around the club for its owner.

"Excuse me," she said as sweetly as possible to the suit two seats away from her. "I think you dropped this." Too quiet for human ears, but she knew he'd heard her just fine with his superior Vampire hearing.

Suit's eyes were on her cleavage as she handed the wallet back, despite the human hanging off his arm, but Rae didn't wait for his response before she walked away. She slid the wad of cash she'd slipped from him into the waistband of her silk shorts and picked out her next mark amongst the crowd. Mostly Vampires and their doting humans filled the space, or in some cases, their slaves, though Rae hadn't been able to identify any tonight.

Of the four remaining types of Vampire, it wasn't the Somniators that concerned her most—the dream casters, the Vampires that could walk in people's dreams and turn them into nightmares. No, it was the Providents that had her most on edge, the ones that made stepping foot into Rush a risk to her safety every time she did it.

But that had never stopped Rae before.

She slid onto a stool at the bar, pulling her Personal Access Device from her bag and slipping the stolen cash inside at the same time in one practised movement. Vampires moved around her; the three who'd eyeballed her with the wallet still watched her closely somewhere to her right. Rae let them as she swiped through the contacts on her PAD, tapped her earpiece, and started a video call to her friend, Nimala.

A bright pink headscarf appeared on the screen a heartbeat later, Nim's burnt orange spiral curls escaping the edges, and Rae's bad mood immediately softened at the sight of her friend.

"Boss," Nim said cheerfully, a broad smile creasing the spattering of freckles that dusted her rosy cheeks.

Rae rolled her eyes as she adjusted the bangles at her wrists. The little Witch loved to call her that.

"How's the order coming along?" She raised a hand to the bartender—a human with

bite marks on her neck—and pointed at the glasses of rikoli belonging to the nearest Vampire, holding up two fingers with a smile.

“Almost done, boss,” Nim said brightly through the earpiece, though she’d put the PAD down on a bench to jump straight back into her work.

“It’s only a matter of time before you smash your screen again.” Rae raised an eyebrow, tilting her PAD to tap it against the bartender’s to pay. Her bangles jingled softly against each other, the blue liquid rippling in the glasses in time with the music. Goddess, she would rather be high than drink this swill the Vampires loved so dearly.

Nim glanced up at the camera from the piece of silver she was working on, her damaged amber eye haloing in the glow from the screen. “Got a cover on it this time, boss,” she said with a wink, the halo that rendered her blind in that eye disappearing and reappearing again. “Thinking of joining you in a bit.”

Rae took a sip of her drink and gave a coy smile to a Vampire who hadn’t taken his eyes off of her since she sat down. It wasn’t him she was interested in, but his Lord who sat two seats over, nursing a glass of visk.

“We talked about this.” Rae wanted her friend far away tonight, and if she was being honest, though it was in another part of town, the workshop wasn’t far enough. She’d gladly send Nim home to keep her safe if she could, but rather than raise the point again, Rae brought her glass to her lips and swallowed her unease with another mouthful of the delightful beverage.

A sigh from her friend. “You get all the fun.” Nim held up her work, a simple cuff, examining it for any blemishes under the bright lights of the workshop. Most people assumed they spelled the jewellery after fabricating it, like any human down at one of the markets might. But it was the making it, the process that was where the magic was

strongest, one that only a Witch would know precisely how to enchant in the creation of each piece.

“I’ll polish tomorrow, deal?” Rae offered, inspecting the cuff out of habit. She knew it was Nim’s least favourite task.

“Deal.” The Witch put the perfect silver specimen in the tub beside her before pulling another from the work pile, casting a not-so-subtle side-eye at the camera. “Reed said someone else went missing last night.”

Reed was Nim’s latest infatuation, a Fae male she’d met in the Eastern Quarter. She’d dropped a box of saw blades in the middle of the street and he’d helped her collect every last one. Hands brushing, eyelashes fluttering, and all that nonsense Nim loved to get swept away in.

“I heard.”

“Feels like everyone knows someone who’s gone.” Wasn’t that the truth. And it had left a lingering tremor of dread amongst the humans, fear spreading through every night; relief palpable come daylight when the Vampires remained behind closed doors. “You still think it’s our bloodsucking friends?” Nim asked, and Rae didn’t miss the hint of apprehension in her friend’s tone, pulling her overprotective and unhinged thoughts to the surface all over again.

A group of humans joined the three Vampires from earlier, and the bloodsuckers, as Nim had called them, lost interest in Rae. “That’s what I’m hoping to find out.”

“I’m an outstanding detective, you know. I’d be an exceptional asset to any faction. Maybe Aera will take me...”

Rae narrowed her eyes. “I do know, Nim; that’s specifically why I want you to stay

out of it.” Because you’re too good to get mixed up in all of this, Rae wanted to tell her. Too important. And because her sweet friend was oblivious to how dangerously she was mixed up in it already. “Stay out of trouble,” she added with a grin before ending the call.

The screen had barely gone black before a Vampire slid onto the stool beside her. Not a Provident, she knew from the absence of pressure against her mental shields, and though he wasn’t her preferred mark, he would do for the time being. She angled her body towards him, picked up her drink, and gestured at the second as shimmering blue eyes met her own.

## Page 2

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“You have good taste for a human,” the Vampire said smoothly, pulling the glass of rikoli towards him.

Goddess save her. The triple Goddess: Maiden, Mother, and Crone, because Rae needed all the help she could get with this one. It was the same every night. Every Vampire was just as predictable as the last, regarding humans as if they were simply the bottom of the food chain. For Vampires, that held a modicum of truth, but it was the way they treated humans like nothing that made Rae’s skin crawl; the way they used them, manipulated them, and then threw them away when they were bored. Even though it was humans who brought technology to Demesia and humans who elevated the city to capital status all those years ago.

Rae held his gaze through her lashes as she took a sip of her drink. He was what most humans might consider handsome—strong cheekbones and sharp features matched with his disarming blue eyes. The subtle points to his ears—a feature all Vampires shared—were each pierced with tiny loops from lobe to tip. He was a Gerentis if she had to guess, though she’d been caught out too many times to put money on it.

“Dance with me?” she asked, draining her glass and slipping off the stool, angling her body just enough to brush her breasts against the Vampire’s torso as she did so. It was all too easy.

She didn’t glance back as she stepped out into the crowd, snaking past writhing bodies and Vampires getting their fill of humans in the middle of the dance floor for all to see. Arms raised above her head, Rae swayed to the music, eyes closed until she felt his warmth.

“You smell good,” she murmured, turning to look at him over her shoulder as they danced. Every Vampire she’d ever met had an over-inflated ego. She had no doubt this one would be the same. He merely hummed his agreement, and Rae resisted the urge to pull her dagger from her boot and poke a few holes into him for good measure.

Patience, she told herself. At least the music was half decent tonight, and for once, she found herself letting the beat wash over her, let it block out the lights flickering over the sweat-slicked bodies dancing around them.

Rae didn’t ask Blue’s name. She knew he wasn’t interested in hers, but she’d be damned if she’d give him so much as a drop of her blood. As his arms came around her waist and his teeth grazed the exposed skin of her neck, she spun around to face him, one hand fisted in the front of his shirt as if she couldn’t get enough of his touch.

His gaze slid down to track the movement, a dazzling grin revealing two pointed canines. But Rae still had time. Vampires loved the chase. The hunt. By her estimation, she had another few minutes before he grew tired of waiting to taste her. She already knew he kept his money in his top left trouser pocket, but if she brushed his dick when she reached for it, she was at risk of bringing up that last drink all over his white shirt, so she gave herself a minute to mentally prepare.

“I haven’t seen you in here before,” her Vampire said as he moved with her.

Rae hummed as he had, feigning interest in his words. If it wasn’t for the half-decent song, she’d have already taken what she needed.

Movement at the far side of the crowd caught her attention. Her true mark was on the move, several others flanking him. A frown creased Rae’s brow, but she shut it down before her dance partner could notice. They were all Providents, and it was an effort not to let her body tense as she moved. The Providents were the mystics, the mind



readers, the telepaths. The Vampires who could speak through thoughts, could alter feelings, and conjure illusions of the mind to trick humans into trusting them. Supposedly some could heal, though Rae had never seen any evidence of such a thing. With powers like that, it was no wonder the Providents held the highest positions amongst the Vampires. Their Lord was no exception.

Nine followed him—no doubt his councillors—towards the staircase to the upper level that housed the VIP area, power rippling from all of them. The Vampire Lord was desperate, Rae knew; she'd been watching him for months. What she did at Rush was pocket change in comparison to the wealth he had access to. She didn't want to involve herself in the affairs of Vampires, but this meeting was the first opportunity she'd had to get close to him in weeks.

Blue had said something, Rae reminded herself, and Vampires didn't like to be ignored. "I hadn't worked up the courage until tonight," she finally told him, eyelashes fluttering as she smiled. He wouldn't recognise her, even though she'd stolen from him twice already this week. A few quickly murmured spells to change her hair, her eyes, a few different shades of makeup and a change of clothes were all it took to deceive a bloodsucker; most of them only ever looked at the vein in her neck anyway.

He noticed the Providents on the move a few seconds after she did. He wasn't important if he remained there with her, but he was still of use. All she needed was his money. Rae toyed with his shirt, fingers dipping closer to the waistband of his trousers, praying to the Goddess her gag reflex was on her side tonight.

She had no interest in sleeping with a Vampire. They were always assholes, so in love with their own reflection, walking around Demesia every night like they owned the place. Sometimes Rae prayed the Fae would just wipe the fuckers out and be done with it, but who was the lesser of the two evils? The feud between Vampires and Fae had gone on for so long that none were left who could remember a time of peace.

And when you lived amongst immortals, that was saying a lot.

Unlike the Vampires, the different types of Fae were a lot easier to spot. There were those that for the most part looked human, despite their finely pointed ears and their preternatural beauty marking them as other. There were the Shifters, the Sirens, the Wings, the Horns, and the Hooves, though none would stoop as low as to walk into Rush—it was the wrong part of the city for Fae. Though most aligned themselves with either the Royalist or Liberalist courts through lineage, many wished for no such association. Rae shared the sentiment.

That left the Witches and the humans, who were much harder to tell apart, and one great big fucking mess. The Witch king was reported to be dead, and good fucking riddance. He'd been nothing but a waste of space and had done little to help those the Vampires had taken, allegedly. It was no surprise Witches had become so secretive and cut off from the rest of the continent.

Blue began to get handsy, long, thin fingers roving over the swell of her ass like he was considering which part to sink his fangs into first. Rae knew it was probably a piss-poor attempt at fluffing his own ego after seeing the Providents moving through the club, a reminder that he would never be one of them and that at least the female in his arms was something he could control.

But not this one. Not tonight. Something was happening, and not the way Rae had hoped. The Vampire Lord was bound to be less accessible if he was preoccupied.

The music drifted into another track and Rae twisted out of her Vampire's arms like she was lost to it, swaying to the new beat and bumping into the human behind her a little harder than necessary.

“Watch it, bitch,” the girl muttered, words slurring together. The human's Vampire, predictably, was instantly in Blue's face, harsh words spoken too quietly for Rae to

hear. Not that she cared. She bit back her smirk as they snarled at each other like wild dogs fighting over a carcass.

Perfect. Let the beasties fight it out.

Rae slipped through the crowd, the Vampire's money already stashed away in her bag, her sights set on a far greater prize.

## Chapter two

Aidan despised Rush. It was everything that was wrong with his kind. From the disturbing choice of decoration the Somniators had chosen for the interior to the way Vampires from each of the houses played with their humans like children with bad table manners.

Though there were once five Vampire houses, only four remained. The Thaumases—the alterationists who could alter physical reality at their will—were long gone, and the story of how their greed got the better of them was often told to Vampire young as a cautionary tale. None of his ilk seemed to heed it, Aidan observed as he surveyed the club from his position at the bar.

A human served him a short glass of visk, the amber liquid calling to him as soon as she set it down on the smooth black surface of the bar. Aidan didn't touch it. He didn't pay for it either. Something he was still adjusting to.

He dragged his eyes over the clientele seated around him. Vampires, none he recognised, and their doting humans but no slaves. A few bar stools were occupied by unattached humans who at least attempted to hide their desperation like the female opposite him. She ordered two drinks as she spoke into her PAD, the glow of the screen lighting up her face. Full lips with dark red lipstick, eyes shadowed with kohl, her form-fitting clothes revealing every swell and curve of her body. An intentional

look, no doubt, to tempt any of the Vampires arriving alone to leave with her on their arm.

At almost two hundred years old, Aidan was yet to understand what humans saw in Vampires. Given his position, some might have considered that sentiment to be an issue. At least the human seemed to have a lick of sense; she'd shielded her mind sufficiently, and though it wouldn't take much pressing from him, the usual tedious thoughts about which Vampire she hoped paid her attention were of no interest to him.

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There was never anything worthwhile discovering if they were in Rush, he'd learnt; these weren't the kind of humans that were of any concern. Those were far from this quarter of Demesia, holed up in the south in the shadow of the mountains, no doubt working away at their schematics and whatever bullshit plans they were cooking up to give him yet another of his daily headaches.

Vampires were going missing just as frequently as humans and Fae, and his kind were far too proud to admit it. Coupled with the increased activity from the human factions—groups opposing the way Vampires ran things in the city—Aidan was certain they were involved. He just hadn't yet figured out how.

The human opposite shot a shy smile and violet eyes—a colouring Aidan suspected was a market-bought spell—at the Gerentis a few seats down. A lesser of his kind with barely any magic worth detecting, though he could just about taste the metallic tang of it in the air. Fire. Faint but there.

The Gerentis made his way over to the human as she finished her call, and Aidan's PAD vibrated in his pocket. More reports. Another dead Vampire tied back to Omnia, again. The newest of the human factions. His guests had just entered the club a floor below, the press of their combined power leaving an acid taste on his tongue.

At last, he threw back the glass of visk and let it burn away the unwelcome presence of his fellow Providents. Though he wished the title was all they had in common, Aidan was learning he was more like his Councillors than he cared to admit.

Music thumped, a slightly more tolerable beat than usual, and Aidan waited as the Providents came to him. These meetings were traditionally held at the Lord's manor,

but there wasn't a fucking chance in Hel that Aidan would allow them to set foot in his house. Not without his magic.

Not his Provident abilities—those remained unrivalled—no, his other ability. The one that had been gone for far too long. The empty space it should have occupied in his veins echoed with its absence day and night, taunting him, a secret he didn't know how much longer he could contain with what lay ahead.

Providents had fought each other for the Lord's position for centuries, and Aidan needed his missing magic to keep them all in check. To keep the council on his side for everything that was to come.

Nine figures approached, calculating eyes assessing him, all dressed in their finest attire, pressed and preened within an inch of their lives. Layers of bullshit, and Aidan had time for none of it. He'd put on a shirt for this, but he refused to come dressed to every meeting looking like one of them. More than nine families remained amongst the Providents, but the council represented what the house had always considered to be their elite. Aidan sneered at the thought.

"My lord," the Provident leading the group addressed him.

"Sysmus." He'd vied for Aidan's position more than once, yet he was the biggest ass-kisser of them all. If Aidan had held out a hand, as all the Vampire Lords that preceded him would have, Sysmus would have kissed the fucking ring on his finger.

Aidan didn't address the remaining eight, turning instead to lead the way to the VIP area. It was no place for a meeting with the councillors, but none of them complained. They'd all likely go and sample what the club had to offer after the meeting was over, some of them taking more than one human home with them for the night to sate their need for fucking just as much as feeding.

The moment Baelin, his Ascendant, prepared a more suitable location, Aidan would have the councillors meet him there instead, but secure venues were becoming increasingly difficult to find in Demesia.

He passed through the wards—all five of them, because he wasn't taking any chances—and waved over the humans who tested the drinks for the councillors.

“Let's cut to the chase,” Aidan said as he took his seat at the head of the table, about as much ceremony as he was willing to permit for the evening. His own drink he poured from a decanter of visk, untested, because he'd be able to detect any traces of tampering. The echoes of emotion left behind on the bottle, the glass, and the vibration of the liquid were all enough for him to go on. His Provident abilities had always put a mark on his back amongst his kind, and Aidan had the scars to show for it.

He swirled the amber liquid in his glass as he surveyed his councillors, knowing all too well which way this was about to go down. “You're all here because you want to know my plans for the Fae military presence on the southern border of Demesia.” Liberalists, though they were damned close to the Royalist's Court with only the mountain range that bordered the city between them. The Fae that resided in the city, mostly of Royalist descent, had long since abandoned their lineage, and now they were merely caught in the middle of everything; they didn't care about centuries-old feuds and just wanted to live their lives, though the Liberalists were trying their hardest to change that. “I'm here to tell you that they are not our only concern, and any proposals will need to take that into account.”

Nine voices erupted in protest.

Aidan raised a hand to silence them. Outside, a few of his bouncers were arguing with some drunk revellers, the tremor of their dispute ricocheting over his skin. Someone was trying to bring a gun into the club, trying their luck against the wards

that prevented anyone with a firearm from entering. Another human invention. The bouncers were handling it, and that was all he needed to know.

The other Providents hadn't noticed, but there was no surprise there. They were strong, but not strong enough to know what was going on beyond the five wards, let alone outside the club. A few of them were too weak to even reach the ground floor with their limited abilities.

Thadlia sat to his right. One leg crossed over the other, an expanse of copper skin on display, her skirt riding up her thigh a little more than it would have had she not subtly tried to slide it up before she sat down. Her mother was a Gerentis, a magic wielder, and Aidan had often wondered if Lia had inherited a little of the ability. Air, if he recalled correctly. Providents were incredibly close-lipped about inter-marrying, despite their Ascendants, something Lia's Provident father would have worked hard to make sure many forgot before he died. Fortunately, Aidan had an excellent memory.

He met each of his councillors' gazes in turn. "Humans have been trying to drive the Orders out of Demesia for months, and we can't ignore them any longer." An all-out war was coming between humans and Orders, but he knew better than to try and convince his council of that tonight.

Sysmus laughed dryly to his left. "My lord, you can't mean to tell us that the humans concern you more than the immortal Fae?"

Aidan shot him a glare, lips pressed together. The Provident's glass fell from his fingertips, smashing on the floor as he clutched at his throat.

"Do not twist my words, Sysmus," Aidan said flatly with no hint of effort at the pain he was inflicting on the Vampire beside him. "Perhaps the music is too loud for your ageing ears. I can repeat myself if necessary." Sysmus clawed at his throat, nails



drawing blood as he gasped for air. None of the other Providents moved to help him.

“Any strategy we agree on needs to be twofold, humans and Fae,” Aidan continued. “Any advances will be coordinated between the families, is that understood?” He released his hold on Sysmus, the Provident slumping forwards against the table, sucking in deep breaths, shoulders heaving. He nodded almost imperceptibly. Beside him, Lorsan shifted, his disagreement palpable. Aidan despised sloppy abilities.

“We risk the border forces amassing more troops by waiting,” Lorsan offered. The Vampire was one of the oldest amongst them, over five hundred if Aidan had to guess even though he didn’t look a day over thirty-five. He had never adjusted to the advancements in the past century or so, and Aidan could sense it was because Lorsan’s mind was struggling to keep up with it.

“They won’t attack the city with so many of their own within it. The Eastern Quarter is almost entirely Fae at this point, though it’s merely a power play. The Fae have been a problem for as long as any of us can remember, but the humans are resourceful, and my sources have been investigating a possible alliance between them.”

Thadlia scoffed. “Elred would never stoop so low.”

The Fae king was on his deathbed, but Aidan saw no use telling his councillors that particular piece of information. They’d hear for themselves soon enough. “Be that as it may, we’d be incredibly short-sighted to rule it out. I called you all here because I trust you to work together on this. Is my trust misplaced?”

An echo of, “No, my lord,” was murmured throughout the group. The fighting outside had abated, his bouncers seeming content with the outcome. Yet the night air—something about the way it pressed at their skin—Aidan couldn’t put his finger on it.

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“I’ll have my Ascendant speak with his Fae contact,” Sysmus offered. More ass-kissing. Aidan merely dipped his chin in acknowledgement, downed his glass of visk, and pushed away from the table. Better to cut the head off the snake before it could chase its way through the crowd.

“Councillors. Enjoy the rest of your evening.” He didn’t glance back as he passed through the wards, though he could hear every word of disagreement they muttered. Whether they thought he couldn’t hear them or simply didn’t care didn’t matter to Aidan. None of them were to be trusted, and letting Lia into his bed had been a colossal fucking mistake he was still paying for a decade later. Not that either of them had known then that they’d end up where they were now.

He made his way back towards the bar, already in need of another drink, calling out in his mind for his Ascendant, his second in command. Baelin. One of the last remaining Elymas, Vampires who could command animals and speak with them. And his oldest friend.

Over already? came Baelin’s reply in his thoughts.

Yes. Despite the Providents’ elitism, Ascendants often hailed from a different House—usually Gerentis—because self-preservation was high on the priority list, and a Gerentis was an extra line of defence. If the head of a family were to be taken out, their Ascendant would step in until a replacement made their interest known to the rest of the family. Although in Aidan’s case, there was no one else; Baelin was his next in line.

Aidan slid into a seat at the bar, raising two fingers to the waitress. A fresh puncture

wound glistened at her neck, and whoever had fed from her had left her too weak to work for Aidan's liking.

We really need to work on your communication skills, Baelin said, laughter lining his words.

The council is an outdated—

Outdated, tired, pointless exercise that we need to disperse as soon as possible? Already working on it.

And that was that. Conversations with Baelin had been the same for as long as Aidan could remember. He knocked back the first glass of visk, pulling the other to him as the human from earlier made her way back to the bar. She lifted herself onto the stool next to him, the scent of vanilla drifting from her. Without hesitation, she picked up his remaining glass of visk and drank the whole thing in one, not a hint of it burning her on the way down.

“You're the only fucking Vampire in here that doesn't drink that revolting shit,” the human said, angling her head to the half-empty glasses of rikoli scattered across the bar. “It's a wonder all of you don't permanently piss blue.” She'd already waved at the waitress for two more, pushing the silver bangles up her arms as she laid her hands flat against the bar.

“You have a filthy mouth, human.”

“Don't you want to know what else I can do with it?” she asked, holding his stare. Tie marks marred the pale skin where her bangles had been, and before he could comment on them, she said, “A kink of my boyfriend's. Likes to think he's creative.”

Aidan narrowed his eyes. There wasn't a shred of submissive nature to this human,

and he didn't believe for a second she'd willingly allow anyone to tie her up. Her blue hair was cut short, waves bouncing around her face, though he suspected that was all a spell, just like her eyes.

"Did you find what you were looking for tonight?" Aidan asked, taking a swig of the visk a heartbeat after the waitress brought them two new glasses.

"Not yet." The human glanced up at him through long eyelashes as she downed her second glass. If she wasn't passed out on the floor after the count of five, he might have once considered her interesting, but he had no interest in humans now unless they were part of the factions constantly trying to piss him off.

In truth, Aidan hated everyone, but the humans that frequented Rush were particularly loathsome, and he had no desire to take one to his bed; taking her vein wouldn't do anything for him either. No blood had sated his thirst since his magic had been stolen from him, every drop tasting of ash for longer than he cared to remember.

Something in the club changed before he could offer a response. Something only a Provident would have felt, and Aidan felt the ripple first. Reached out to meet it with his power a few seconds before the human launched herself over the bar towards the waitress, an explosion rattling the building's foundations. Patrons scattered as portions of the ceiling caved in; the human had grabbed the waitress not to attack but to protect, her arms encircling the girl and dragging them both to the floor.

Screams rent the air around him, Vampireandhuman, and Aidan realised his bouncers weren't riled up outside as they should have been.

They were dead.

Chapter three

“What the fuck?” the waitress screamed as Rae tackled her to the floor.

“Keep down, and keep quiet,” she hissed, already regretting that second glass of visk.

Another explosion rattled the ceiling, glasses and bottles falling from their shelves and smashing beside them. The waitress was already bleeding, shakes racking her body.

Perfect.

“On the count of three, we’re going to move, okay?” Rae murmured. Music still played from somewhere, a track of screams and shouts accompanying it. The waitress was too stunned to reply. “Three.” Rae pulled the girl to her feet, took in the chaos around them, and chose their exit. One side of the bar had half the VIP area on top of it, the other side, where the exit had been, collapsed in on itself. “Up,” she commanded, already pushing the waitress over the counter before the human had the chance to respond. Blood glistened on broken glass, and if the bar itself hadn’t been polished black and the club wasn’t so fucking dark, Rae was certain a smear of blood would have been visible across it.

She scrambled after the waitress, regretting her decision to wear shorts tonight as her bare knees pressed into splinters of debris. The waitress screamed as a blood-high Vampire yanked her towards him, but Rae pulled her dagger from her boot and slammed the fine point through the male’s throat just as his teeth came down on the waitress’s neck.

An ordinary silver blade would have only taken him out for a short while, but Rae knew better; she’d spelled her weapon so that wounds couldn’t clot and heal over, smithed the narrow blade herself and imbued it with magic as she worked the metal. The Vampire roared, dropped the waitress, and spun around to face Rae.

The Goddess must have had it in for her tonight. Blue. The Vampire whose money she still had tucked away in her bag.

“You,” he spat, his pointed canines glistening with blood.

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“Oh sweetie, I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Rae purred with a smile, already moving. Vampires never expected humans to be fast or to put up a fight. Though Rae wasn’t the best fighter, she was light on her feet and knew the power of a few well-timed moves.

She feigned reaching out to embrace him, but instead, slammed the blade into his heart. The Vampire sucked in a wet breath and an exhale of smoke followed it.

Oh. Shit.

A Gerentis. She’d forgotten. And a fire wielder. Of all the types he could have been.

A grin widened his mouth, canines bared, and Rae ducked, bringing her hands to her head for all the good it would do—because she’d lost her advantage of taking him by surprise—and waited for the blast of flames. That never came. Hot air brushed the hair on her arms, and the Vampire screamed.

Rae stumbled back onto her ass. He’d set himself on fire.

What the—

She didn’t allow herself time to think about it. Rae grabbed hold of the quivering human who’d watched, dumbstruck since the Vampire had attacked her, one hand pressed to the wound at her neck, and dragged her across the dance floor towards a side door. It wasn’t the best exit, but it would have to do.

Rae gave herself a mental high-five for opting to pair boots with her shorts as they

stepped over corpses—human and Vampire—her eyes darting left and right through the chaos as they made it closer to the door. Just a few more feet. The music had stopped but the lights were still low, the air thick with dust and smoke and blood and screams. There would be time to figure out what had happened later.

There was too much movement in the club for what should have only been its occupants trying to leave, but Rae made herself focus on her task. They reached the door, and she shoved the whimpering human inside, the pink bows on the young woman's sleeves unravelled and stained with blood. "Lock it behind you, follow the corridor to the end, and climb out the window. You can make it down to the street from there," Rae told her.

"How?" the girl asked, blood trickling down her hand and over the pink blouse, her eyes wide.

"You'll figure it out. Lock." Rae jerked her chin at the door before slamming it shut and spinning around to survey the club. A pair of silver eyes snagged hers, and Rae found herself staring at the fucking Vampire Lord himself, taking her in from her blood-stained knees to the spelled blade in her hand he'd no doubt just watched her stab one of his own with moments before.

Fuck. This night just kept getting better and better.

He smirked like he'd heard her. Asshole. Rae knew there was little chance of that—because she was nothing if not prepared—but the expression on her face would have been enough for a Provident as powerful as him. The most powerful.

His gaze moved to somewhere above her shoulder, and Rae followed it to a group of humans cowering in a booth. Perhaps she was foolish to believe his intentions to be genuine, but something told her that in that moment, they were. She nodded her thanks, already moving towards them, not bothering to question why the Vampire



Lord would give a shit about saving some humans when his own were lying dead and dying at his feet. Perhaps the rumours were true; he truly did hate everything, and this was just some part of whatever sick entertainment he'd cooked up for the evening.

The building shook, and the air hummed with magic. Broken wards and Providents, most likely, but Rae ignored it, focused on not falling flat on her ass as she made her way over to the humans. She almost tripped over a corpse, and unwilling to find out if it was human or Vampire, slid over a table to crouch low beside the group, all cowering and clinging to each other as the club turned to shit around them.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Rae said, sucking in a breath. Five pairs of eyes stared back at her, four women and a young man. All of them were wide-eyed and dishevelled, one with a large wound on their head that Rae didn’t like the look of. “There’s a door, right over there.” She waved a hand. “And you’re all going to take a deep breath, hold each other’s hands in a chain, and follow me to it. When we get there, you’re going to go inside, lock the door, and run. Okay?”

“Run where?” the young man asked.

Fuck me. What did these people want, an instruction manual? Rae wondered where, in their evolution, some of the humans had stopped giving a shit about self-preservation. “Just hold onto each other. Let’s go.”

She didn’t look back. There was too much movement. Too many bodies in the dark that Rae knew were not revellers and clientele. Fae, if she had to guess, despite the explosions. That was another item in the chew over it later pile.

She reached the door first, praying the club’s wards held, because if whoever had attacked it brought guns inside, it was game over for everyone. A quickly muttered spell under her breath and the lock opened for Rae to shove the five humans inside.

“Thank you,” the girl with the head wound breathed, a sob racking her words.

Rae gave a sombre nod. The wound was deep, but if the remaining four lived, that was something, at least.

“Run,” was all she told them, locking the door from the outside with another murmured spell and ignoring the ache at her temples.

“Those market spells are becoming much more sophisticated,” a deep voice said behind her. Rae sucked in a breath, turning to face its owner. He was dressed in black, a shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows and unbuttoned at the neck, black hair falling in waves across silver eyes, and a good head taller than her, as imposing and fierce as all the rumours said he was. The Vampire Lord had a female thrown over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing, her arms hanging down, unmoving. “Open it,” he commanded, and Rae felt the words ripple over her skin.

She cleared her throat and swallowed down the acid burn of his magic, the only notable effect it had on her, mercifully. “So you can hunt them down and feast on them? Absolutely not.”

Something flickered across the angular lines of his face for a moment, something that might have been surprise, but then his head tipped, and Rae knew he’d heard something that likely meant more trouble. “For her,” he said. “She won’t wake up for hours. The humans will be long gone.”

Rae considered him for a moment. Considered the female over his shoulder. Someone he cared for, if he wanted to lock her away from the group of Fae that were now getting closer, almost on the other side of the bar. Nothing showed on his face, no pleading, no impatience, nothing, as if he had all the time in the world to wait this decision out. But she needed to earn his trust, and this was as good a start as any. Rae nodded, unlocked the door and watched the Vampire Lord deposit the female

carefully within, her short skirt exposing a gaping wound in her thigh. The Lord took a step back, shutting the door, and glanced down at Rae expectantly, so close she could feel his warmth, could inhale his sandalwood and leather scent.

“You owe me for this,” she said, her hand already on the doorknob, her spell already on her tongue.

“Call it even for the Gerentis,” he said dryly, and it was Rae’s turn to be surprised, her gaze flicking up to meet his, diamond eyes already fixed on hers. The Gerentis hadn’t set himself on fire. It had been a Provident’s work. The Provident standing beside her.

## Page 6

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A woman screamed, and they both turned towards the sound. Rae could make out little in the darkness beyond a few feet in front of them, but she knew Vampire eyes could likely see everything.

“Aidan Vale, as I live and breathe,” a male voice called out from across the club. “And what’s this, your little human pet?”

Rae clicked her tongue and wiped her filthy blade on her torn shorts. Her favourite pair, ruined. “I’m no one’s fucking pet.”

Aidan let out a quiet puff of air beside her, in what she assumed was as close to a laugh as he was capable of. Rae didn’t shift her attention away from the Fae who took in the chaos around them, not a single black hair out of place on his head or his beard, both just as slick with oil as the other.

“I will never understand why humans favour such foul language. It’s very unbecoming.” The Fae stalked closer, and that was the moment Rae knew she was truly fucked. There was no way in Hel that the Vampire Lord would have allowed the Fae’s proximity if it weren’t for one of two reasons: either something was interfering with his abilities, or he was working with the Liberalist Fae.

Both were very, very bad options for her.

And that meant she had to make a quick decision about who to side with, because the wrong one meant she would certainly end up dead. And Nim would not be very pleased about that.

Neither would Rae, if she was being honest.

She tightened her grip on her blade, and at the same moment, Aidan shifted almost imperceptibly at her side, his fingers flexing as if he were aching for a fight. He hadn't said a word. Had barely even shown any signs of acknowledging someone had been speaking to him.

He moved so fast that Rae could barely track the movement, lunging for the Fae and landing a blow to the bastard's face as they slammed into the floor of the club. His blows were brutal, pounding into the Fae with his fists, no hint of his Provident abilities despite the bodies flooding into what remained of the club around them.

Rae narrowed her eyes. Someone had a syphon on him. A spell used by Witches to draw power from its source. Which meant she'd already chosen wrong. Goddess help me. She was already murmuring another spell as more bodies moved from the shadows and surrounded them, hands grappling at Aidan as he laid into the Fae, canines bared and bloodied.

Her spell was almost finished, the last few words bubbling up her throat as one of them shoved a large needle into the Vampire's back and his body bowed in response to whatever they'd injected him with.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Just a few more words and then—a rush of air was all the warning Rae had before a blow to the head took her out.

## Chapter four

"He lives," a familiar voice mused from somewhere in the dark.

Aidan tried to open his eyes, but both were so swollen he could only see his chest where his chin currently rested against it. His arms were chained above his head,

spelled metal judging by the fact he couldn't break them apart, his back pressed against a cold, damp wall. This night just got better and better.

He knew it was the human from the scent of her vanilla perfume, her sweat-slicked skin, the tang of blood that would have crusted on her wounds, and his canines fought to extend in response. Interesting. He had more restraint than most Vampires, but he would need to feed if he stood a chance of making it out of this situation quickly.

He pushed out with his Provident abilities to force the human to come closer, but they were gone. Something had happened back in Rush before he'd fought with Torrin. And whatever those bastard Fae had injected him with next still seemed to rattle around in his veins.

The human sighed, the air shifting as she moved closer of her own volition. "Well, I can see you're of absolutely no use to me." With that, the air shifted again, and Aidan knew she'd turned to leave.

"Wait."

"Why, so I can be your next meal? Your ticket out of here? I wasn't born yesterday. I know who you are. What you are." Her voice was full of vitriol; gone was the human who had fluttered her eyelashes at him at the bar, replaced with the one he'd watched stab the Gerentis like she did it every night of the week.

If it didn't hurt so fucking much, Aidan would have laughed. "Of course, because we're all the same, aren't we? Just like all humans are the same?"

She didn't answer him. Just silently assessed him. "You're Aidan Vale."

"In the flesh." A rattle of chains accompanied his words.

“Shame they had to ruin that pretty face of yours.”

Aidan let a puff of air pass his lips. “I’ll look as good as new in the morning, human.” Perhaps a little longer, given whatever they’d injected him with, not that it mattered. He’d been in far worse situations.

“I have a name, Vampire.”

He felt her take a step closer and tilted his head up, willing his eyes to open. “There’s power in a name.”

“There is, but I know yours. Seems only fair you know mine.” The air shifted as she came closer still, the scent of her washing over him. “Rae.”

Aidan forced his eyes to open, blinking at the blood and muck sealing them shut. “Just Rae?” he asked as her violet eyes held his. A few ringlets of blue fell across her face, a wound crusted near her eye, and her lip was split. She’d been chewing it in the dark, the wound open, a bead of fresh blood forming, and Aidan’s cock stirred at the sight of it before she licked it away. He needed to feed.

## Page 7

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“Farren,” Rae said after a beat of silence, eyes roving over his arms, his chest where his shirt hung open, and his stomach, making no attempt to hide her perusal.

“An old human name.”

“You’re rather well versed in humans for someone who hates them.”

A chuckle. A real one, as much as he could with his busted face. “Know thy enemy.”

Rae hummed as if she agreed with him, and Aidan’s sight cleared fully. He took in the emptiness of their dark cell, the old blood stains marring the floor, and the shackles above him. The human had recovered remarkably well from her grapple with the Vampire and her other activities at the club. And a scrap with the Fae, Aidan suspected, because she didn’t strike him as the type to go down without a fight. A dirty one.

She shifted her gaze to his, something in her expression stirring a memory, one that was of no use to him here.

“You heal fast for a human,” he observed.

A nod. “I’ve learnt a few spells to keep me going over the years, just like any human with half a brain has done in order to survive this Hel-hole.”

Aidan didn’t doubt that. Her hair and eyes were common spells available at Demesia’s markets for any human to obtain, but she’d used the spell on the door lock, and Aidan hadn’t seen anything of the sort since the Thaumases had changed iron into



gold.

Rae was cold, goosebumps pebbling her flesh in the frigid air, but she didn't complain. His eyes slid over the bare skin of her soft stomach where her shirt had torn, the swell of her hips, her long legs, scabs over her knees from hauling herself over the bar to protect the waitress.

"Like what you see?" she asked, head cocked to one side.

"There goes that mouth."

Rae smirked and tapped a finger to her chin. "They syphoned your Provident abilities. Injected you with something, a healthy dose of sedative by the looks of things."

She didn't ask why, though it was the obvious question; one he wanted answered too.

Andsyphoned—there was a word he hadn't heard in a while. Rumoured to be a Witch ability, though the Witches hadn't concerned themselves with Demesia in years. They held their own seat of power in Riguera, the Witch king's city far beyond the mountains, and it was rare to hear of one setting foot in the city after a failed alliance with the Fae a decade ago.

"So, the question is," Rae asked, a glint in her eyes, "what's in it for me?"

If she were to release him with that spell of hers that could open locks. The unspoken words hung in the air like she knew the power she held.

Aidan watched her closely. "Why wait for me to wake up if you can break out of here by yourself?"

Rae shrugged, folded her arms across her chest, and let her eyes rove over his bare torso again. “Curiosity. I wanted to know if they’d killed you.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“I’m not disappointed.”

Aidan arched an eyebrow.

“I’m relieved,” she admitted, her gaze sweeping over him. “If they can kill you, we’re all completely fucked. The fact that we’re having this conversation means I might actually see the remainder of the year through.”

“They,” Aidan said dryly. “It’s no surprise to me that Torrin has been working with humans. Knowledge is power, and Torrin craves it. I’ve been trying to convince my council of a possible alliance.” Between the Liberalist Fae led by that prick, Torrin, and a human faction, though Aidan hated that he didn’t know which.

Rae nodded as if the unprecedented coalition were obvious to her. “I take it that didn’t go down very well.”

“They laughed.”

“And how did that feel? Did it hurt?” She held a hand over her heart, her tone sweet as if she were talking to a child. The balls on her. “Here’s what I think,” Rae said, turning away from him again. “One,” she raised a finger, her attention fixed on the blood stains ahead of her as she paced, “You need me to get those shackles unlocked from whatever magic the Fae have sealed them with. And honestly, Vale, I have to say, I’m disappointed that it was all it took to keep you locked up.”

Aidan pressed his lips together.

“And two.” Another finger. “You murmur in your”—she waved a hand—“sleep? No. Delirium? Whatever that was. Anyway, you were talking about your magic. I can help you get it back.” She stopped pacing and shot him a half smile, as if she knew she had him by the balls.

Aidan rarely slept. His Provident abilities had made it difficult in his early years, though he had learnt to master them decades ago. It was the absence of his other magic that kept him awake, and as he watched the human’s grin stretch into a smile, he wondered if, inexplicably, she knew it. Impossible. Fifteen years he’d been without it and fifteen years he’d searched tirelessly for answers.

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“What’s in it for you?” he asked, because no one did anything for free in Demesia. Particularly not cocky little humans with an arsenal of spells and a vendetta against his kind.

“Two for two,” she said with a shrug. “There’s a target on my back now. I’ll need your money, your resources. Your”—another wave of her hand—“this.” She gestured to his body, her face impassive. “Your protection. To get me places I can’t.”

“Places?”

She raised a finger to silence him. “You said it yourself. Knowledge is power. We both want to get to the bottom of this. I stand to lose as much as you do.” She said it like she wasn’t one of thousands of humans in Demesia and he wasn’t the Vampire Lord. Like she gave zero fucks about either of those things. Aidan didn’t doubt it.

“And I’ll throw in a freebie,” the human went on, “because I’m feeling generous. I’ll keep your secret. About your Gerentis abilities. Or whatever the fuck it is you’re missing that you’ve kept from everyone.”

It didn’t matter what she knew. The minute he got his Provident abilities back, Aidan was going to drain every last drop of crimson coursing through her veins, then melt her fucking brain and be done with her, as he should have done the moment he saw her open that locked door back in Rush.

“We’ll shake on it once I’ve freed you, but a Vampire’s word is his vow, right?” Rae folded her arms, waiting. A Vampire’s word was binding, but a Provident’s went far deeper than a vow. Even with whatever the Fae had done to him to send his Provident

abilities to sleep, their agreement would settle into his skin, his bones, until it was done. If only she'd worded her arrangement better.

"We have an agreement, Farren," Aidan said with a dip of his chin.

Rae angled her head as if she were still making her decision. Whatever it was, she turned away from him, striding to a corner he couldn't see beyond.

"Where are you going?" he murmured, rattling his chains with irritation.

"To get you a snack," Rae huffed.

"What? You just said—"

"Oh, Vale." She spun around to look at him, one hand on her hip. "You're pretty but you're not very smart, are you? Be a good little Vampire and pretend you're still"—another hand waved in his direction—"delirious. Asleep. Just don't fuck this up."

And with that, she was gone around the corner where he couldn't see, but could hear every one of her quiet steps, her controlled breathing. She was resourceful, he'd give her that.

He listened to her talking to the guard. Flattering him. Seducing him. Rae wasted no time on pleasantries. The guard was human, and she had him wrapped around her little finger within moments.

Aidan smiled as metal whined against metal, the door to their cell creaking open. Fast breaths filled the air, followed by Rae murmuring to the guard through puffs of laughter. He let his head swing to his chest, eyes almost closed.

“Fuck me against the Vampire Lord,” she said on another rush of air. “Then you can tell all your friends how limp his dick was before you killed him.”

This. Fucking. Human.

Their footsteps rounded the corner, the guard’s wet kisses and grunts of approval coming closer. A soft body stepped back against Aidan’s, Rae’s round ass grinding into him. Her hair brushed his chin, and as the guard kissed her neck, she arched back further, looking up into Aidan’s eyes and winking at him.

Rae held his gaze, her fingers digging into the guard’s hair, the human’s head travelling lower. She moaned as the guard pawed at her breast, an over-exaggerated sound that almost had Aidan shaking his head at her theatrics. Rae pressed her body flush against his, not an inch of space between them, as if she knew how hard he’d be fighting the desire to drain her first, and at last, his canines elongated to their full length.

Before he’d even finished the thought, Rae’s body was gone, spinning the guard around and shoving the human into Aidan’s chest as if it were all part of the desire addled moment.

He didn’t hesitate. His gaze never left hers as he slammed his teeth into the guard’s neck, and she pressed an arm against the man’s torso to keep the human in place. The taste of ash coated Aidan’s tongue, the warm blood sliding down his throat, replenishing him. It didn’t matter how much he tried to recall how it had once tasted, the smoky, bitter taste was all that remained.

“Vile,” Rae said, shoving the drained guard to the floor and stepping over him. Aidan wasn’t sure who the comment was aimed at, but he didn’t care. She leaned up, hands reaching up to his cuffs, her chest pressed against his, close enough to share a breath, close enough that he could smell the guard’s scent mingled with hers. “Play nice,”

she whispered, her eyes darting to his blood-soaked mouth and back up again.

He watched her as she murmured her spell, watched the way her heartbeat pulsed in her neck, and his cock twitched against his trousers. He despised humans, and though fucking and feeding was instinct to any hot-blooded Vampire, Aidan had far more command over his baser desires than most of his kind. But he was a hot-blooded male, and he was wounded, and he couldn't fight his body's instinct to heal itself.

Rae's eyes flicked down to where their bodies pressed together, the corner of her mouth tugging upwards. "Easy there, tiger. You want your magic back, don't you?" The chains clicked open, and Rae stepped aside as Aidan staggered forwards.

She was rummaging through the guard's pockets, humming when she pulled out a ring of keys. "Asshole locked us in together."

"Seems to me like you have very little use for keys."

"I'm not an all-powerful Provident, Vale. There's a limit to my abilities, and if you want yours back, we need to preserve mine. You follow?"

If it wasn't so fucking grating, it would have been refreshing how she spoke to him like no one else had dared to for decades. Except for maybe Baelin, who would have most likely been losing his mind right now over the hours of silence.

Aidan took the keys from her, flicking his chin at the corpse between them. "If you found that unsettling, I suggest you look the other way until we're out of here."

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“My, my, Lord Vampire, I’m quivering with anticipation.” Rae rolled her eyes, stepped over the body, and made her way for the door without glancing back.

With a flash of irritation, Aidan followed.

### Chapter five

Rae rubbed at the bruises on her wrists as she watched Aidan unlock their cell. She’d lied about getting the marks from her boyfriend; she wasn’t the kind to tie herself down to anyone. The truth was, she’d got caught up the night before. Nothing she hadn’t been able to handle alone before she’d escaped. Tonight would be no different; she already had what she wanted. Earning Aidan’s trust had been all too easy, his desperation to find his missing magic clouding his judgement.

Ink swirled over the golden-brown skin of his sculpted chest, his arms, down his torso, and his abs... fuck, he had abs for days, before dipping into the waistband of his trousers. Some kind of ancient Vampire dialect, no doubt, but Rae admired the artistry of it, her fingers itching to sketch a design. She peeled her gaze away before he could notice her staring again. Wouldn’t want the bloodsucker getting the wrong idea. Though she’d jump at the opportunity to torture the bastard, she wouldn’t deny she’d enjoyed the solid feel of him behind her as she’d lured the guard into their cell. That much muscle should have been illegal.

Rae had made it a rule to steer clear of Vampires when it came to sex. They loved to feed as they fucked, and she’d managed to avoid any of them sinking their teeth into her during her nightly pilfering. Humans loved to gossip about how euphoric an experience it was to be fed on. Given the way they hung around Rush like they were



waiting for their next fix, Rae didn't doubt it.

But there was power in blood, much like the knowledge Aidan had spoken of, only a different kind. And she wasn't willing to give it up. Certainly not to the Vampire Lord. Great orgasms were reserved for her hand and her drawer of toys.

"Tragic," she muttered under her breath as Aidan slid the bolt soundlessly aside, pocketing the keys.

"What is?" He arched a brow at her, silver eyes assessing, like he was always planning his next three steps.

Rae held his stare. Even though he was beaten and bloody, that he'd been in a fight with the Goddess knew how many Fae back at Rush, she could still smell the sandalwood and leather scent that drifted from him. "All these morons believing they weren't about five minutes away from their deaths when they agreed to this alliance."

It was well known that the humans were divided. That living as they had for so long had incited many of them to push for change; not always the right kind. Multiple factions wanted to make Demesia their own, to drive the Orders out of the city and make it a sanctuary for humans, a space for them to thrive. Some might have even been justified in their wishes, but Rae agreed on one thing: they needed a safe space. Too many fell victim to the Vampires, to the Fae and were used as blood bags, playthings, slaves.

Daily life for most in Demesia wasn't living, it was survival, and she'd had firsthand experience at existing that way for longer than she cared to admit. It was precisely why she needed to earn Aidan's trust, no matter how much she hated that it had to be him.

"You can lose the spells if you need to keep stock of your preserves." Aidan ignored

her statement, flicking his chin at her hair.

She wasn't surprised he knew, but she wasn't about to show him her true eyes or hair. There were few left alive who knew what she truly looked like. Not even Nim. And though Rae knew she should have changed more about her identity on a regular basis, part of her loved the thrill—and the surprise—that it was all it took to trick people into looking the other way.

Besides, the best lies weren't the elaborate ones. Although they were fun. The greatest lies were the little, everyday things that could be wrapped up so neatly in a conversation you wouldn't even spot them. Like a change of hairstyle or any of the other array of small spells humans could pick up at the markets.

“Wait here,” Aidan murmured.

She followed him out into the cold corridor. A single light illuminated the passageway, another door at the end, an authorised personnel only sign above it. Even without the blood on his lips, Aidan's presence was brutal, powerful. Terrifying even.

But Rae knew a thing or two about fear, and about those who knew how to wield it like a blade.

He raised an eyebrow at her again, but when he saw her expression he followed her line of sight. More cells, and from the ones she could see, their occupants were silent. The air was heavy with their stench, even through the metal between them.

Rae was quiet as she moved past each one, leaning up onto her toes to look through the narrow grate on each door, harsh lights flickering over corpses. Her breath caught as she took it all in. “Vampires. Humans. Fae. This doesn't make any sense,” she said quietly, hands turning into fists against the metal as she surveyed each of the dead prisoners.

Vampires and Fae had always been at each other's throats, and though the Fae took humans as their pets too, they hadn't fed on them in decades. They didn't need them for any purpose other than entertainment. Rae's stomach flipped. A great fucking mess, all of it.

"Elred's handiwork?" she asked. The Fae king, a Royalist, though Rae knew he wouldn't be working with Torrin.

Aidan's attention was on the door at the end of the corridor, no doubt listening for whoever was beyond it. "No. My guess is Torrin is working alone in this."

"Alone? This has all the ingredients of a big fucking operation written all over it, wouldn't you say?"

Aidan merely flicked his chin in her direction, signalling her to get out of the way, Rae presumed. "The prisoner is awake, and he's asking for Torrin," he said in a tone Rae suspected was his attempt to mimic a guard.

She didn't hide her smirk. The door slid open, and she mirrored the Vampire's movement, pressing her back against the opposite wall. The guard was down in seconds, but Aidan didn't use his teeth this time, only his bare hands. He hadn't wiped the first guard's blood away from his mouth, and something told her he'd left it there to startle any of the weaker soldiers they were about to encounter.

Based on what they'd just witnessed in the cells, Rae was confident whoever approached them on their way out deserved whatever Aidan did to them.

"Let's get your secret sauce back, Vampire."

"After you, human."

Rae smiled as she stepped through the door, waving at the five Fae stationed outside it. Horns and Hooves, always used for grunt work, no guns holstered at their belts, because that would be madness in a prison—if that was what this was.

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Many Fae possessed magic, though not all. Only the older families, those descended from the royal lines had any kind of power worth being concerned about. And there were no Royalists in the city.

Rae clicked her tongue as they moved closer, one of them trying to glance around the door behind her for their friend. She took a step to the side and leaned against the grimy wall with her arms folded over her chest as the nearest guard stalked up to her. Grunts were usually stationed in this line of work for a reason. They didn't need a weapon; they were one.

But Rae had a grunt of her own. "Sorry about this," she said dryly, just as the door beside her slammed open and Aidan barrelled into the guard, taking him off his feet in one swift move.

Rae looked on as the other guards charged him—one, quite literally—horns coming dangerously close to Aidan's ribs. The Vampire Lord merely reached out, long fingers curling around a horn, and slammed the Fae into the wall.

That was two. The other three circled him, one with hooves like a horse's and stubby little horns protruding from his blond curls. "Taz, call for backup," he spluttered as Aidan's hand squeezed at the other's throat, landing a punch against another.

Taz, Rae presumed, staggered back, glancing back at the closed doors at the far end of the corridor as if he were calculating the distance between them and Aidan. An encased button hung on the wall a few steps back from him, and Rae realised a heartbeat too late what it was.

A horn flew through the air, impaling Taz in the chest, just as his hand came down on the button and an alarm sounded.

“Fuck,” she breathed.

Doors opened and more guards poured through them, both humans and Fae. Too many for Rae to count. She pushed off the wall, yanking the horn from the dead Fae’s chest to use as a weapon while Aidan made swift work of the nearest guards. He fought with the ferocity of a savage beast, but his movements were considered, precise.

She didn’t waste time watching, swinging the horn into the head of the human charging her. He staggered back and she snatched the switchblade from his hand, muttering a silent thanks to the Goddess that he had it as she slammed it into his stomach. Rae twisted the blade as she brought the horn down again, kicking the human away as a body crashed into her.

“Watch it,” Rae snapped, catching Aidan’s eye as she realised he’d flung a dead guard in her direction. She raised the dagger as another guard ran for her, ducking at the last moment to shove it into his kidney.

“My sincerest apologies, human,” the Vampire muttered, pulling his bloodied mouth up from the neck of a guard as the human slumped from his hold.

Rae stepped over bodies, snatching a chain from around the neck of a dead Fae, his head hanging at an awkward angle, but his veins untouched.

Good to see Aidan didn’t play with his food. There was a reason the Fae hated Vampires; for many years, they’d been the main course. It was well known that humans were only introduced to this world to balance the scales, and it was no wonder they’d had enough.

She didn't look over her shoulder to see if Aidan was finished. Instead, she made her way to the door on her right—the one with the hole matching the unusual cut of the key she'd snatched from the Fae and a restricted sign beside it—before shoving the key into the lock. She'd meant it when she'd told Aidan there was a limit to what she could do, and she'd learnt long ago to let others expend their resources before she did. The lock clicked and the door swung open, a dim glow from a series of monitors illuminating the face of a young Fae with bright green headphones resting over his head.

He startled when he noticed her, tearing his headphones away, eyes dipping to the bloodied blade in her hand. "Please," he stuttered, "I'm here because I have to be."

Rae stalked closer, vaguely aware of the stacks of metal shelving lining the walls, the ventilation ducting hugging the ceiling that had most certainly not been doing its job, unwilling to take her eyes off the Fae just yet. Moans and grunts rang out from his headphones, bodies writhing on the screen beside him. The alarm still blared, and judging by the shrieks of terror, Aidan was still occupied in the corridor where she'd left him.

"Prove it," Rae said, resting the tip of her finger on the hilt of her switchblade, balancing the sharp point on the Fae's knee. "Can you turn that alarm off?"

He nodded and swung around to the monitors, fingers poised over the keyboard, one hand his own, the other a prosthetic. Human-made, no doubt.

Rae looped an arm over his shoulder, leaned in, and held the dagger to his ribs. "Just the alarm."

Another nod.

"When you're not holed up in here watching porn, what are you doing?" She raised

an eyebrow at the bodies still writhing on one of the screens, two female humans and a Fae male. Some fantasies were universal. Her gaze slid over the other monitors, snippets of data and statistics on one, names and ages on another. The dead prisoners, Rae would bet a silver bar on it.

The alarm ceased, and the Fae swallowed thickly. “I, um, track the test subjects,” he stuttered, jerking his chin at the metal racks beside the door.

Rae moved away from the Fae, eyes roving over the metal cases on each rack, this one all black, the other, only red.

“Wait,” the Fae pleaded. Rae ignored him. Pulled down one of the cases, unclipping each clasp and humming as she surveyed the contents. Vials, all full of clear liquid.

“You’re trying to transfer magic,” she murmured. The only piece of the puzzle she couldn’t work out yet was that the syphon they’d put on Aidan back at Rush wasn’t a human invention. It wasn’t Fae either.

She pocketed a few of the vials, a body slamming into the wall of the open doorway, but she didn’t shift her gaze away from the Fae. His hooves scraped against the floor as he shifted in his chair, pushing his glasses up his nose with a finger. She stalked back over to him, noticed the crusted tissues on his desk, and rethought her decision to touch his keyboard.

An ID card was clipped to the top pocket of his shirt and Rae snatched it off, reading the name. “Ezekias Kypra. Do you know the Drunken Ram in the Eastern Quarter?” She pocketed the name card too. With the right contacts, it was easy to find out who anyone was with a photo in Demesia.

A nod.



“Meet me there tomorrow night, eight sharp, and I’ll make sure my colleague doesn’t  
gut you.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:02 am*

“Colleague?”

“My cell mate.”

The Fae paled.

“Someone put a syphon on him. Who?”

Ezekias swallowed. “Calder.”

“Show me.” Rae flicked her chin at the monitors, just as Aidan slipped into the room.

Ezekias began to shake, fingers slipping over keys. “Here.”

The screens changed, one with a split camera view of a lab and another with a blueprint of the facility. “Good boy,” Rae said, tapping his shoulder with the tip of her blade. “Have a glass of visk waiting for me, won’t you?”

Vale stalked closer.

“This one lives,” she said, patting a hand against his thick bicep.

She moved to the second rack, the one with red cases, swapping out two of the vials for the ones she’d taken from one of the black cases before fastening it again and sliding it under her arm. “After you, Vampire.”

Chapter six

Aidan followed the human deeper into the facility, leading them through doors like she knew the place intimately. Another empty corridor, with dark walls stained by water damage and exposed wires trailing above their heads connecting each harsh light. Since the alarm had ceased a few minutes before, no more guards had reached them, but Aidan knew that was about to change.

Rae had quietly explained they were looking for a prisoner, Calder, but they both knew Aidan had heard every damn word she'd shared with the Fae before they'd left him trembling in his chair.

"Been here before?" he muttered as Rae slipped through another doorway.

There were no signs, the walls bare save for the grime adorning them and the occasional vent and metal panel. "I saw the floor plan." She paused by a door, waiting for him to listen beyond it, he presumed.

He gave a nod to indicate the way was clear. "And memorised it?"

Rae moved the case from one arm to the other, the switchblade changing hands at the same time. "Are you surrounded by that many idiots you're surprised when someone remembers a handful of directions?"

"Most Vampires tend to be severely lacking in decent qualities," he told her.

A quiet huff of air. "Allin my experience. Present company included."

Another spark of irritation danced along his spine. He should end this now. Kill every last living thing in this damn place and leave. Though it would be satisfying, it wouldn't get him the answers he sought. And though Rae's deal had loopholes, their agreement was still of interest to him. Her knowledge was of interest to him. "Are you always so quick to judge?" he asked, but before she had a chance to reply,

movement ahead drew Aidan's attention and he raised a hand.

"Copy that," someone said quietly into an earpiece beyond the next corner, followed by the click of a safety lever.

"They're armed," he murmured. Rae nodded and leaned back against the wall like she was waiting outside a coffee shop in the Western Quarter instead of trying to escape with her life. Either she had faith in his desire to protect her, which was widely misplaced, or she had a death wish. Judging by the marks on her wrists he didn't for one minute believe a lover had given her, he was going with the latter.

Footsteps came closer, and Aidan waited, eyes fixed on Rae. She was playing silently with the switchblade, snapping it in and out, in and out. He snatched it from her fingers, turned as the guard rounded the corner, and with a flick of his wrist, it was flying through the air, hitting its target before the guard even had the chance to register what it was.

Aidan might have been without his Provident abilities, but those would have only sped this up. He was no stranger to weapons, and though guns were another human invention, he'd made sure he knew how to use them, training with various types in the range he'd had installed at his manor. It was as he'd told Rae: knowledge was power.

In a few short strides, he was crouching over the corpse, unhooking the earpiece and tossing it to Rae. He took the gun and handed her that too, waiting for her to secure the earpiece first. "Safety's off. Just point and shoot."

"I know how to use a gun, Vale."

He didn't ask how. It was widely known some humans had begun carrying them, but there were few places you could access in Demesia with a firearm, so keeping one

was difficult.

“Section B. They’re coming this way,” Rae said as conversation carried from the earpiece. She still held the case tucked under one arm, two hands around the grip of the gun, muzzle pointed up to the flickering lights above them. At least she wasn’t actively trying to shoot him. Yet.

They held their position at the corner, backs pressed against the wall. Though it wasn’t ideal, he’d hear anyone coming from either direction. Rae didn’t seem too concerned.

## Page 12

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“Three,” was all Aidan told her as he turned back, heading in the direction he’d heard footsteps approaching. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed Rae had her back to him, the gun aimed and ready, covering them from behind.

Stepping into the line of fire wasn’t ideal. It would take more than a few bullets to take him out. A well-aimed shot could see him out of action for several hours, but everything about this operation so far had been sloppy, and he highly doubted the approaching guards were well-trained.

The first of them came closer, and Aidan slammed the Fae’s hand against the wall. His weapon fell to the floor as Aidan’s fist connected with his face. The guard went down, and Aidan snatched up the gun, rounded the corner, and pulled the trigger, releasing a bullet into each of the two guards before they could get any rounds out.

Shots fired behind him, but Aidan didn’t have time to check on Rae. Three more guards rushed into the corridor, and he picked them off one by one. He dropped his weapon to replace it with another as more footsteps sounded up ahead. More humans, and Aidan pulled back to the bend in the corridor as he fired at them, some retreating the moment they set eyes on him. A wise decision, but they wouldn’t get far.

A bullet grazed his arm; the guard who’d been about to fire at him slumped to the floor. Aidan turned to see Rae, two hands on her weapon, the case still tucked under her arm, head cocked to one side like she was bored. Aidan pushed past her, taking in the bodies spread out before him.

Headshots, every single one.

He glanced at the wound on his arm and back to her. The human hadn't so much as broken a sweat.

Rae shrugged, the corner of her mouth twitching. "The case slipped." She grabbed a gun from the nearest corpse, checking the safety and the magazine before sliding it into the back of her waistband.

Aidan shook his head and gestured for her to lead the way. "Ladies first."

She swiped a wayward strand of hair from her face. "Age before beauty."

"How old are you, Farren?"

"For asking, Vale, you can guess."

He glanced down at her as they stood on either side of the door the guards had entered through. Her pale cheeks were flushed pink, but for the most part, the human almost seemed like she was enjoying herself. She held herself like a dancer, and though she'd spelled her eyes, there was something in them that told him Rae had seen more than most had in Demesia. "Twenty-seven." There was no sound from the next room, but he waited for her answer.

"Damn," Rae said under her breath. "Is that some weird Vampire trick I don't know about? Twenty-eight." She toed her boot against a metal grate on the floor. "You? Humans like to make up stories. The oldest I heard was eight hundred." The human grinned at him, her face lighting up, a blue curl falling over one of her eyes.

Aidan opened the door, glancing left and right. Metal gurneys, medical equipment, cabinets, the same filthy walls, no windows. Two doors on the opposite side of the room. "One hundred and eighty-seven. Which door?"

“A baby Vamp.” Rae blew out a breath. “Did not expect that. Left. He was in the next room if they haven’t moved him.”

“Friend of yours?”

“No one’s a friend in Demesia.”

Wasn’t that the truth. But that was good. It would make what came next a whole lot faster if she wasn’t begging for someone else’s life, a life he had no intention of sparing.

Aidan paused by the door Rae had indicated, one hand resting on the metal as he listened. Only one heartbeat sounded within and the door was locked. He jerked his chin at the door, waiting for Rae to unlock it with her spell.

“Not even a please?” Her lip was bleeding again, the harsh lights above them reflecting on the bead forming on her full bottom lip. As if she’d tracked his attention, she licked it away. For a second, he wondered what she looked like under all the eye makeup, what her true eye colour was, her hair, but he disregarded the thoughts just as quickly as they came.

“Let’s just get this over with,” he told her in a tone he usually reserved for his council members.

“I hope you’ll at least have the decency to thank me five minutes from now.” Rae shook her head, her hand over the lock, muttering the spell under her breath.

Aidan wondered if she knew how fragile the human mind was. How easily it could break. She’d led him to the Witch; he didn’t need her anymore, but then the door clicked open, and she stood aside to let him in first.



The single occupant shot to his feet the moment Aidan entered. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

“Calder?” Rae asked, slipping past Aidan into the prisoner’s room. He’d been afforded more comforts than most: a bed with blankets, a partitioned area for a toilet, a sink, and a narrow shelf of books above the bed. But the door had been locked, the room had no windows, and the air was stale. A prison was a prison.

Calder nodded, his lips pressed tightly together. The Witch ran a shaky hand through his blond curls, his eyes darting back and forth between them. Witches were the most secretive of the Orders; an imprisoned Witch had Torrin’s name all over it. Any opportunity to imitate the Vampires’ reign. Witches had abilities of their own that Vampires had been abusing for years; it was only a matter of time before the Fae did too.

“How does this work?” Aidan asked, circling Calder, his eyes on Rae.

“As far as I know, either he breaks the syphon willingly, or it breaks upon death.” Her attention was on Calder, eyes roving over the mess the Witch was in. His clothes were dishevelled and dirty, his face was gaunt, hair greasy. Something seemed to wash over Rae’s expression for a moment—sympathy, Aidan thought—but then she shut it down.

He stopped circling. “Will you give it freely?” he asked the Witch.

Calder swallowed. "I... I can't."

Aidan made a point of glancing around the room. "No one is holding a gun to your head, Witch."

"Please," Calder whispered. He clutched a hand to his chest, fingers tightening into his shirt.

Aidan's attention fell to the string of a necklace peeking out of Calder's tunic, the pendant under the Witch's fingers. It was said Witches could call power from objects, and though Aidan wanted to test that rumour, he was out of patience. His fingers closed around Calder's throat and the Witch gasped for breath, even as Rae screamed at Aidan to stop. The prisoner had made his decision. And he'd chosen wrong.

Rae yanked at Aidan's arm, but he only squeezed tighter. A second more, and the Witch stopped struggling, Aidan's Provident abilities slamming back into him with the ferocity of a breaking wave. He shoved the dead Witch away and flexed his powers over the facility, feeling out for every mind within it.

"You're everything they say you are," Rae breathed quietly beside him.

He turned to face her and took in her furrowed expression as she stared at Calder.

Aidan followed her gaze to the dead Witch at their feet, hand still clutched around the pendant at his chest. "He was complicit."

"I'm sure you don't need any more of my help to make your way out of here." Rae

threw him the case. “Come find me at Silver Star Customs when you know what those are and you’re ready to make good on your end of our bargain. Western Quarter.” She didn’t wait for his response, taking one last look at the dead Witch, and then slipped out of the door.

Find her, she’d said, because she knew how to get his missing magic back. Hisothermagic. Or so she claimed. Aidan considered invading her mind, taking everything he needed, and ending this right there and then, but she had got him this far, and ending her life now felt too much like something his uncle might have done.

Rae had taken out at least half a dozen Orders and humans since Rush, so why the life of a single Witch mattered to her, Aidan couldn’t be certain. He unlatched the case, opening it carefully. Four glass vials, two different colours that she’d carried through the entire facility so that they could get some answers. I’ll need your money, your resources... we both want to get to the bottom of this. I stand to lose as much as you do.

Aidan sealed the case, an unpleasant feeling in his chest. He reached out with his Provident abilities, clearing a path for Rae out of the facility, though he knew she didn’t need it. With a shake of his head, he tucked the case under his arm and made good on his earlier decision. First, he was going to get some answers, and then he was going to kill every last living thing in this damn place.

## Chapter seven

Silver Star Customs was busier than usual. It was no surprise; attacks in the city made humans panic buy, and Rae’s products weren’t just about the aesthetics, though she prided herself on how good each piece looked too.

“You look like shit, boss. Need a top-up?” Nim affectionately asked from the adjacent workbench.

A healing top-up, and the answer was always no. Rae wouldn't risk Nim draining herself. The Witch was many things, but she hadn't yet mastered her magic, and even if she had, Rae would have declined. Magic left a trace, and unmastered healing magic like Nim's had a blue aura, visible to some of the Orders, particularly the Provident bloodsuckers.

Though Rae often wondered if Nim offered just for a chance to flex her abilities, a chance to truly be herself within the walls of the workshop when she worked so hard to disguise who she was from anyone outside it, it wasn't worth the risk.

Witches were an incredibly rare sight in Demesia. Historically, they'd been coveted by Vampires for their abilities, and Rae had spent most of the day mulling over whether telling Aidan it had been a Witch's syphon that suppressed his Provident abilities was a mistake. The fact that the Witch had been a prisoner, just as they had been, was of no concern to the Vampire. That was the bigger mistake, believing for a moment the Vampire Lord might have spared him.

Rae sighed, slid her goggles onto her face, and snatched up her piercing saw. She'd taken a break from protective charms to make a wedding band, and she needed to concentrate. It wasn't just that the design was intricate, but that she needed her mind to be clear as she made it, on the off chance any of the previous night's events slipped into the fabrication. A cut in the silver, a piece of solder, a lick of flame. All moments the wrong kind of magic could seep in.

As the thought of Calder's demise lingered in her thoughts, the blade snagged on a fleck of silver and snapped it clean in two. Typical. Rae bit back a curse, set her saw down, and unclamped the ring. "Another day," she murmured quietly, brushing off the lemel onto the deerskin hanging beneath her bench.

Every scrap and fleck of metal filing was saved and collected into jars to trade for whatever silver they could get hold of. Prices were higher than ever, and it meant Rae

needed to increase her number of nightly visits to Rush. At least there was never a shortage of pockets to pick, though now she'd need to find a different hunting ground.

Time to polish instead; she owed it to Nim for covering the previous day's order. Goggles still firmly in place, necklace slung over her shoulder so it wouldn't get caught up in the machinery, and her mask secure over her face, Rae flicked on the polisher and settled into a stool. The familiar hum of the machine filled the space before the mop whirled to life, powered by a combination of hydro and biomass electricity from facilities on the west side of the river.

Nim set a mug of steaming tea and one of her drool-worthy elderberry cakes off to the side of Rae's bench, her choice of frosting matching Rae's strawberry pink hair. It had become one of her friend's favourite games to guess what colour hair she was going to settle on each day; she'd never once gotten it wrong. Where the Witch found the time to bake, Rae didn't know. The small daily gesture and the dozens of other tiny ways Nim brightened every morning made Rae even more protective over her friend than she had been when they'd first met. More determined to preserve the softness she saw in Nim that she had once possessed.

Being a Witch in Demesia was no easy thing. Being alone was something else entirely, and Rae had endured years of that. Years of fighting and clawing her way out of the dark, doing anything she could just to keep afloat, no matter what it cost her.

"What I don't understand," Nim mused behind her, licking a piece of frosting from her thumb, "is what anyone hopes to gain from this ramshackle alliance. It has to be Weyland, surely."

Weyland was responsible for the ISA, one of the human factions that sought to drive the Vampires out of Demesia, as if the feud between Vampires and Fae wasn't

already enough. Not that Rae complained too much; the factions were her biggest customers, her own included. Silver Star was a great source of pride for Rae, but it was a front for everything else she needed to do. Had to do.

The scales had tipped far too long ago, and it was time to right them.

Nim hummed along to a song playing through her PAD, an all-female Fae band she'd have sold her soul to see live, or so the Witch claimed. Her birthday was fast approaching, and Rae had snagged two tickets from a client in exchange for a few extra silver cuffs. A huge expense, but Nim had lamented for weeks about how quickly the tour had sold out and she couldn't go, decorating her cakes with little frosted images of the band members and sighing dramatically whenever she ate one.

"Weyland is a possibility," Rae murmured, bringing the red polishing compound to her mop to ease a piece onto the yarn as Nim's singing grew louder with the chorus. A box of unfinished cuffs sat to her right and Rae reached for the first, polishing methodically; top, sides, edges, repeat. Finer details around the settings she'd get into with her hand tools, but this part of the process was relatively quick.

Nim sucked in a breath, but Rae didn't lose her focus. "Called it! They're blaming Weyland for the attack on Rush." The music stopped, and the Witch slammed her PAD down onto the bench beside the polisher. Rae allowed her eyes to dart to the screen for a second before returning her attention to her piece of silver. Only once she was finished did she switch off the machine, depositing the polished cuff in the tray to her left and brushing her hands against her apron before picking up Nim's PAD to read the news report.

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Pictures of Rush mostly. Or what was left of it. And that was a problem for them, because there weren't many accessible locations in Demesia that housed an abundance of wealthy Vampires to fund their silver. Rae swiped through the images, scanning the report for any scraps of information she could use. She'd filled Nim in on everything that had transpired the night before, though she'd left out the details of the fate of the Witch, Calder, and her friend had listened carefully to every detail.

Nim chewed her lip as she leaned over Rae's shoulder, a gesture that reminded Rae too much of her younger brother, Seylan. A pang of nostalgia twisted in her chest as memories played on repeat. It was all for him: every stolen wad of cash, every piece of polished silver, and every move she made. Rae let that thought ground her.

"Reed's taking me to the docks tonight. I'll ask him what he knows," her friend said, reading the news report for a second time.

Rae tried not to frown. "I don't like him, Nim," she murmured, swiping through the last of the photos. Like wasn't strong enough a word. She thought of the Witch as though Nim were her little sister, and though she knew her overprotective streak was creeping too far into asshole territory, Rae wasn't about to let down another sibling, real or not.

Nim scoffed. "What's not to like? Have you seen him? He looks like he was chiselled from a slab of marble." She tapped her PAD, pulling up a picture of her and Reed together, Reed's attention fixed firmly on the Witch as Nim beamed at the camera.

Rae already knew what he looked like. Knew a number of things about him she probably shouldn't. Where he lived. Where he worked. How his only serious

relationship had been with a young man from the ISA faction who'd broken his heart. But it was the look on Reed's face Rae didn't like. That look spelled trouble. Like he hadn't decided whether to keep Nim as his pet or his plaything. That, or he really did love her. And a part of her—the selfish asshole part of her—worried that worse than that, they'd fall in love and he'd take Nim away from all this, and Rae would be left with no one.

“Statuesque,” Rae said with as bright a grin as she could manage.

Reed was a Shifter, and everything he wore showed off his muscled frame, hinting at what form he took when shifted. A lion, if Rae had to guess from his scruffy mop of light brown curls. He was a big guy; she'd met him once, despite Nim's constant requests for the three of them to go out together more. A formidable presence, though not as formidable as Aidan. Rae almost scoffed at the thought. He'd been a monster in every way the night before.

Nim hummed at her side. “He also said he's going to talk to his father to find out what's going on with the mines.”

It was no secret that silver was getting more difficult to source, but it was the reasoning that Rae wasn't buying. There was plenty of it. She suspected it was the transport back to Demesia that was the real issue. With so many Liberalist Fae camped out on the border at the base of the mountains, it wouldn't be long before they halted more goods entering the city. Luckily, the humans had created indoor greenhouses, underground, some eight levels deep, and even the meat substitutes they'd created from plant proteins were convincing enough if you weren't too fussy.

If it was the Fae blocking the supply of silver, the question was why? Why they wanted Demesia was obvious enough—not just because they coveted anything the Vampires had out of pride—but because of the magic thrumming through the heart of the city. Ley lines ran across the continent of Mazyr, converging in Demesia and



stretching across it like a spider's web.

The Liberalists had even begun to spread their propaganda to the Fae living in the city, and everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the scales tipped entirely. Rae rubbed at her temples, pulling her wayward thoughts back to the conversation.

“Just be careful with him, Nim,” she said softly, resuming her position at the polisher with another cuff. Asshole-mode averted.

“Yes, boss!”

Rae didn't need to turn around to know the Witch had saluted her.

This batch of cuffs needed to be finished by tonight. These ones afforded a small amount of protection from weak Provident abilities. Rae's most popular piece, in fact. Factions usually wore them under their uniform, curled around a bicep or forearm, some around an ankle, always hidden out of sight. Necklaces could be pulled off, piercings too. Rings could get hooked on something and ripping the skin off your finger was less than ideal. So Rae's most popular items were the cuffs, and between her and Nim, they turned out dozens of them a day, murmuring their market-bought spells, as Aidan had called them, into the metal as they worked.

It might have been enough to trick the Vampires, but once the Fae soldiers breached the city—and it was only a matter of time before they did—Rae's little trinkets wouldn't be enough to make a difference to the safety of a few humans.

The Fae had been poor rulers once, in a time when the Royalist court held more power than it had possessed in years, but the Vampires had made Demesia a cesspool since, and Aidan was the worst of them. Watching him tear through those humans and Fae... and the Witch. He was as much of a bastard as the rumours said he was, every whisper marking him as someone who had no regard for anything other than

himself. But that didn't matter to Rae. All that mattered was getting what she wanted. Needed. For Seylan.

The machine hummed before her as the mop spun, and Rae lightly touched a bar of polish to the wool before moving on to the next cuff. She had no intention of reuniting Aidan with his abilities, even though she knew precisely where to find them. By the time he found out, it would be of no consequence to her. It didn't matter if he suspected her—he was desperate. And she'd witnessed desperate men do stupid, foolish things too many times to count. Aidan would be no different. It had been the truth when she'd told him what she needed from him: His money. His resources. His protection. All of it essential to helping her achieve her goal.

She finished her cuff in quiet contemplation, sending Nim home early for the day to prep for her date, despite Rae's reservations. Nim's safety was always a concern, but Rae wouldn't allow herself to interfere with her friend's personal life, no matter how much she wanted to keep tabs on the little Witch. How much every intrusive thought screamed at her to do it anyway.

Rae loosed a stuttering breath. Her busy mind had always been an issue. So many thoughts layered over each other, always fighting for attention. Thankfully, there was plenty of time to kill before she met Ezekias at the Drunken Ram later, and an Aera representative was coming at seven to collect the day's work. So she let herself sink into the task, keeping her hands busy, her thoughts in one place. Arming humans with weapons was difficult, but charming them to the teeth was easy.

But as the day stretched on, the setting sun casting long shadows into her workshop, a quiet sense of dread started to leak into Rae's thoughts. The cases full of vials in the facility. The two she'd pocketed. Transferring magic was unheard of. Either the Fae were trying to drain Orders of their power or they were trying to harness it. Neither were options she wanted to see explored.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. Baxter, right on time as usual.

“There’s my ray of sunshine,” Baxter said with as much enthusiasm as he did every time he stopped by for a collection, one shoulder resting against the doorframe.

Rae took in his damp hair, the dark brown ends curling under his ears where he’d been letting it grow. She knew precisely what that hair felt like between her fingertips, and for one sleep-deprived moment, considered inviting him to the back room. Then he winked at her, and she remembered why that had been such a monumentally bad idea the last time.

Too in love with his looks, he’d probably just wet his hair before he’d left, hoping to catch Rae off-guard again. She’d always had a weakness for a certain kind of smile, but Bax, like most of the men she’d met in Demesia, had about as little to offer between the sheets as he did when he opened his mouth. Goddess knew how he’d secured his position as Tripp’s right-hand man. Or why he couldn’t send one of his lackeys to come and collect their order.

A frown creased his brow as his cerulean gaze swept over Rae. “You were there last night, weren’t you?” He reached out, knuckles grazing her cheek as she inched away from his touch. That was why he didn’t send a lackey. He likely thought he could get some information out of her, and maybe a free fuck if he was lucky. Asshole.

Not for the first time in the last twenty-four hours, Rae silently scolded herself for her life decisions.

“Early in the night. I was done long before everything went down.” She handed him his order, the ka-chingshe’d set up on her PAD to alert her whenever anyone made a payment chiming in the background as Bax tapped on his own device.

“You’re a shit liar.”

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“You’re a shit flirt. The wet hair? Totally transparent. Now get out of my workshop, I’ve got places to be.” She smiled at him, ushering him back to the door.

He paused mid-step and tilted his head to one side to consider her. “I can never tell if you’re just playing hard to get or if you truly mean it.”

Rae heard the hint of vulnerability in his voice, and though she sometimes wished she’d held onto a little of the softness she’d once possessed, Baxter’s ego could take the hit just this once. He’d be no doubt finding another woman to warm his bed as soon as his shift was over. Besides, she’d gotten what she needed from the exchange. Her money and the knowledge that he hadn’t been part of the attack on Rush.

“Good night, Bax.” Rae pushed gently on his chest, and he took the final step back, the door falling shut after him.

For a minute there, she’d almost given in to him. Something to take the edge off the anxiety that had settled under her skin, to quiet the too-loud thoughts, but her meeting at the Drunken Ram was a far more interesting prospect for the evening.

Rae made swift work of tidying up the shop for the night, dusting down the equipment and putting the tools back in their racks on the wall. Her gaze snagged on a picture of her and her mentor, Cillian. She’d been alone until he’d found her, taught her how to work with metal, how to bend it to her will with a few simple tools. Had shown her that some things were worth being patient for, no matter how much time it took, and she’d waited this long. She could be patient a little while longer.

She traced her fingers over her open sketchbook, small metal sculptures and pieces

laid out across the pages, wishing the world were different; that she could make the art she wanted to rather than the pieces she had to. That something she truly loved doing didn't have to be a front for something she needed.

With a heavy sigh, Rae flicked off the light, all thoughts turning to Ezekias and hoping to find some answers.

## Chapter eight

A wet nose nudged at Aidan's hand, prompting him to stub the remains of his smoke into the empty cup he was currently using as an ashtray where it rested on his stomach.

Quinn made a quiet noise halfway between a whimper and a bark, his way of saying, get the fuck up, now. Shiny, black eyes met his, surrounded by sleek black fur. Aidan gave the dog a scratch behind his ear, hauling himself to his feet.

Baelin had suggested rest, and though Aidan knew his Ascendant meant well, he'd opted instead to smoke himself into oblivion beside the pool. The quiet lapping of the water, the reflection rippling on the tiles overhead, the heat of the natatorium, and the way moonlight filtered in through the arched windows, all made it his favourite spot in a building he otherwise despised. It was the only one of his uncle's additions that Aidan hadn't torn down after he'd killed him.

In time, he wanted nothing more than to burn the fucking place to the ground. The Lord's manor was yet another piss-poor attempt at grandeur the Vampires had attempted to portray over the years. A farce. And though he didn't care for duty, the manor represented power to the others of his kind, so Aidan held onto it. For now.

Quinn pawed at the PAD on the floor beside him, and Aidan scooped it up, long fingers curling around the screen and swiping down the notification from Baelin.

Information about the human, Rae. He thumbed through the files: a variety of photos pulled from the security cameras at Rush, most of her robbing the same dumb fucking Vampires over and over with a slightly different disguise each time. Aidan chuckled. If they were dull enough to fall for it, they deserved to have their money taken as far as he was concerned.

One photo showed her standing outside a workshop, arms folded, a sign for Silver Star Customs beside her, just like she'd mentioned to him. In this image, her hair was pale pink with long waves framing her face and a pair of goggles resting on her head. She wore a thin grey vest full of holes that revealed a dark green bra underneath, and dust marks marred her faded shorts as if she'd swiped her hands across them before the photo was taken. A bright smile was plastered across her face, a shine in her eyes as if she were truly happy. No, not happy. Proud. The workshop meant something to her.

There was no information about her childhood, just a stint in the human juvenile correction facility in the Southern Quarter for theft when she was seventeen. Canned goods, according to the report. Why humans felt the need to imprison their young for stealing food, Aidan would never understand, but then Vampires had never faced food shortages like the humans had throughout the years. The dispute between Vampires and Fae had always caused supply problems for humans, and most of their technological advances had been borne out of necessity rather than indulgence.

The last few photos were of the night before in Rush, of Rae dancing with the Gerentis Aidan had burnt to ash. Seeing the way the male held her in the photos, the way he eyed her like nothing more than a walking bag of blood, he couldn't say he regretted the decision.

Most Vampires treated humans like a food source and nothing else. Most humans fawned over Vampires just to feel the high of being fed on. Though Aidan didn't need to feed as often as most of his kind, he still needed blood. His preference was

just that it was given willingly, whatever the source. It didn't matter what vein he took: human, Fae, other Vampires. Nothing sated him as it once had. Before his magic had been taken.

Quinn whined again, and Aidan finally pocketed the PAD, following Baelin's dog out of the natatorium and into the main halls of the house. As an Elymas, Baelin could communicate with animals, but Quinn was different; Quinn was his daemon. His fifth, because Vampires were bastards, and the previous four had been slaughtered in an attempt to strip Baelin of his power, one by each of his brothers.

Aidan knew all too well the kind of fighting amongst Vampire families that led to ruthless violence and murders; his family had been no exception, but he was all that remained of it now.

He passed a sprawling mural of winged warriors clad in fighting leathers, battling against Fae and Vampires. As the mural went on down the length of the corridor, the angels were pushed back against what looked like a ripple of water in the sky, a window to their world that they sealed shut when the Vampires and Fae drove them out. Or rather, the angels sealed the Fae and Vampires in, trapping them in this world to let them kill each other instead, until they discovered the humans the angels had left behind too. With each new brush stroke Aidan passed, the painting depicted the way the Orders turned on their prey. What a mess they'd made of the whole thing. All of them.

All the shutters were still down in this part of the house despite dusk having long since fallen. A security measure Baelin had insisted on since Aidan had released his uncle's in-house pet Witch. The manor was the most warded building in the city thanks to centuries of paranoid Vampires occupying it—his uncle had been no exception—and Aidan didn't need an ageing imprisoned Witch moping around pretending to maintain them.

The shutters certainly negated the task of drawing the curtains each day, though Aidan suspected his steward, Shaw, wouldn't have minded. The only member of his uncle's staff he'd permitted to stay. The new residents lived within the compound, tactical squads he and Baelin had handpicked. Only his First Unit was permitted use of the manor itself.

No lights illuminated the way through the dark corridors, but Aidan didn't need them. Quinn didn't either. There was movement outside the grounds, and before his PAD chimed, Aidan already knew who it was.

He pulled down the message on his PAD anyway.

Baelin: Thadlia's at the main gate.

Aidan sighed. Let her in, I'll be right down, he told his Ascendant, opting to reply the faster way. Aidan kept his mental shields in place at all times, which meant telepathic communication with others was always at his instigation, even with Baelin. Not because Aidan didn't trust his Ascendant, but because he didn't trust the other Providents who might manipulate Baelin's mind should anyone ever make a move against him. And Aidan despised wearing an earpiece, no matter how many times Baelin asked it of him.

Shaw opened the door just as Aidan followed Quinn down the main staircase into the reception area at the front of the manor. Shaw was a Somniator, handpicked by Aidan's uncle for his ability to aid sleep. Some Somniators didn't have a malicious bone in their body, and Shaw was one of them, but Aidan still didn't let him flex his abilities inside the manor, much to the Vampire's dismay.

Quinn growled, deep and low from his position at the foot of the stairs, and Aidan resisted the urge to grin at the daemon as his foot touched the soft carpet of the reception area. Baelin hated Thadlia, and Quinn had always seemed to share the



sentiment.

“Lia.” Aidan didn’t waste his breath on pleasantries. There was no hint of the injuries she’d sustained the night before, but she was restless. Though she was an adept Provident, little was secret from Aidan with the strength of his abilities. Lia’s trepidation danced along her skin, and she merely dipped her chin in reply.

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Baelin. Where was she before she arrived?

She came here directly from Sysmus according to her PAD data, Baelin replied.

Aidan could count on one hand the number of people he'd permitted to leave his manor with their hearts still beating, and depending on whatever words came out of Lia's mouth, he'd have to consider shortening that list.

She handed Shaw her coat, dismissing the steward without a word. Aidan didn't miss that she wore the same red dress she'd had on the first time he'd allowed her to set foot into his manor. That night had been a mistake. He hoped this one wasn't too.

Quinn growled as she took a step closer.

"Quinn, return to Baelin. Shaw, we'll be in my study. That'll be all."

Shaw bowed and took his leave. Quinn didn't so much as blink. Baelin's fucking daemon through and through.

Aidan turned away from the damn dog, leading Lia through another dark mahogany corridor to the room he used as his study. It was big enough to house a small family with sofas large enough to be beds. Lia had certainly put that theory to the test during her last visit. She ran a finger along the fabric as she passed, the sound like a whisper in the empty room. Aidan didn't turn to face her, didn't give her the attention he knew she craved. She was trying to hide her concern but was making a poor attempt of it. Whatever had happened with Sysmus had more than rattled her.

Aidan took his seat at the desk, the old worn leather far too soft to creak anymore underneath his weight, but the wood groaned in protest. He poured two glasses of visk, slid one across the large expanse of his empty desk towards Lia, and downed the other.

She was taking in the room, her eyes roving over the bookcases he'd fucked her against, the sofas, the window seat, all the places they'd continued their exploration of each other. She took her time, turning slowly, running a hand through her glossy black hair where she'd placed it over her shoulder, the ends brushing the plunging neckline of her dress. Her eyes slid to the glass of visk as she sat in the black chair opposite him, her red dress vibrant and bold against it. Her armour.

"You're going to have to speak the old-fashioned way, Lia." Because he could feel her futile attempts at trying to reach him, to bypass his mental shields.

She cleared her throat. "I want you to consider usevenafter this. After last night."

Aidan smirked as he poured himself another glass. Vampires and their traditions. A debt was owed; he'd ensured she was safe from what went down in Rush, and she was so eager to repay it after not even a full night had passed. Not because she was good—no, Lia's heart was tarnished long ago—but because no Vampire wanted to owe their Lord a favour. "I'll decide after I hear it."

"Sysmus called a council meeting."

"Without me." Aidan swirled the visk. "That didn't take him long." He'd inherited the council along with everything else, and when they weren't grovelling, they were conspiring to kill him.

"He's up to something." A frown. She reached for her visk, fingers tipped in red polish to match her dress pressing against the glass. "Not his usual shit against you."

Something else is going on.”

“And you think this—this half of nothing—makes us even?”

Lia swallowed the amber liquid in one, fear licking the air around her for a moment before she pulled it back in. “Some of the members of his family were behaving strangely. It felt—” Aidan waited. “Wrong. I don’t know what he’s doing to them, but it was unnatural.” She frowned at the glass, and still, Aidan waited. “The other council members were on edge too. They all noticed. Something big is happening, but he had an alibi for Rush; he wasn’t involved with the attack.”

“And you believe him?”

Lia raised an eyebrow. And there it was, the reminder of precisely why their night together had been a mistake. The Provident would fuck her way through the entire council if it got her whatever information she sought; Aidan had given her a few snippets just for the fun of letting her mess with the other council members. Let her think she got what she came for, so to speak. But it was clear, now, what she wanted: the protection being his would offer, because no Vampire touched what belonged to their Lord.

Another absurdly outdated tradition, but Aidan wasn’t the kind to share, so it suited him well enough. He’d never met anyone worth announcing as his Odalik, the term the Vampires used for it, nor had the desire to.

Vampires were petty, jealous, creatures, and mated couples were powerful. Powerful and rare. Some said it was a curse on their Order to have the ability to mate. Others said it was a blessing. But Vampires loved themselves above all else, and some bitter old sap desired what he couldn’t have and wanted to give himself an edge over his peers. So the concept of Odaliks was born. A chosen partner, but over time, in that antiquated way of all age-old traditions, Vampires began to afford Odaliks a certain

amount of respect, until eventually, they were treasured just as much as mates. Treasured, but not as powerful as a mated pair. Not a true substitute for finding one's mate.

“Just because you were with Sysmus when my club was attacked doesn't mean he wasn't involved. You're not naive enough to believe that.”

“He was afraid.” Lia's green eyes met his.

The other council members had always underestimated Lia. Aidan knew it was for no reason other than that she was female, but she was more powerful than all of them. She hid it well, because Lia was her father's daughter through and through. Cunning and ambitious and cruel. Aidan brushed against her mind, waiting for permission to see what she'd seen, out of respect for the night they'd shared together.

She let him in without hesitation, Lia's memories replaying in Aidan's thoughts as though they were his own. The moment she and Sysmus were together in the VIP bathroom at Rush, Lia's boredom as Sysmus thrust into her, the fear that leaked from the other Provident as the explosion rattled the walls. The way the bastard shoved her away from him and cowered behind the sink for safety. How even as a piece of the ceiling came down and trapped Lia in the bathroom, Sysmus took one look at her and fled. The memory cut off at the sight of him fleeing, when Lia lost consciousness.

Aidan rose, his gaze fixed on hers as he rounded the desk. She tilted her head to one side, lips pressing together as she waited. She thought he'd given in.

“If I were to be your Odalik, my lord, I would remain here, at the manor, of course,” she said behind him. Protected. Not that she truly needed protecting, which meant she had another motive. Lia always had another motive, some reason to get herself ahead, to secure an advantage, and it didn't take a Provident's abilities to know that she was just trying to use him for her own personal gain.

Shaw, see Thadlia out, Aidan called out to his steward as he reached the door.

She turned at the sound of it opening, a moment of confusion pulsing from her though she kept her features neutral.

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“I’ll consider your request, Lia. Both of them,” Aidan said flatly, holding the door open with one hand and sliding the other into a pocket. He needed a joint. Most Providents used their abilities for simple coercion, for making others bend to their will. Being able to hear everyone’s bullshit on full volume had Aidan turning to weed and visk to tune out the noise, but they were never very effective for long.

Lia cleared her throat and smoothed her dress as she made her way over, glancing up at him in the doorway through long lashes as she passed. “Thank you, my lord,” she murmured, her gaze fixed on his mouth.

Aidan hadn’t ever really bought into the notion of Hel the Vampires and some of the other Orders believed in. Most revered it and celebrated the idea of safe passage there in death every year. But he felt certain that when Lia died, she would end up there and fucking rule it like it was her birthright.

Baelin appeared at the same moment Shaw did, and with that, Lia knew she was dismissed. Barely a nod of acknowledgement passed between her and Aidan’s Ascendant as he entered the study.

“What was that about?” Baelin asked as he shut the door behind them. He was dressed in his tactical uniform as always, all black, short sleeves revealing scarred arms long healed over from wounds inflicted by his brothers. He wore his dark hair fastened in a knot, the sides of his head shaved, a style he favoured since he had so many scars that hindered the hair growth. Eyes the same honey shade as visk swept over Aidan’s face, no doubt assessing how many joints he’d smoked and glasses of visk he’d downed given the early hour.

Aidan sank into the sofa, fingers aching for either a smoke or another glass of visk despite Baelin's silent evaluation. He let his head fall back and stared at the ornate ceiling, vines and plants in fading plaster trawling across it. "Just some council bullshit," he finally said. "What did you find out?"

Humans were said to be smart, but Baelin was smarter, and Aidan had known it wouldn't take long for his Ascendant to figure out what was in those vials the human had swiped from the facility the night before. Demesia was a mess. The Orders and the humans just as bad as each other. Some days he wished he could just wipe the whole fucking board clean. Start over. But he had a plan, and he was sticking to it.

Baelin's PAD landed in Aidan's lap, and he read the test results with a frown. "You're sure about this?"

His Ascendant nodded. Whatever alarms had been triggered when he and Rae escaped the facility meant only guards remained; none of them had been able to tell him anything he didn't already know, but as he took in Baelin's data, a sick sense of dread coiling in his gut, the picture was all too clear.

"You didn't need her to escape," Baelin said, the weight of his gaze heavy on Aidan's face, even though he hadn't looked up. "Why let her help you at all?"

Aidan swiped through the files, his anger spiking at the last one. "I was bored."

A quiet chuckle rumbled from Baelin. "Chained up and bored. There is something seriously wrong with you."

Aidan couldn't argue with that. "She said she could get my magic back. I didn't have my Provident abilities at the time, but..." He chewed his lip. "Even if it was a lie, the fact she knew that much..." It was an issue. Rae was a loose thread, one he should have dealt with already.



Baelin levelled him with a look Aidan had seen far too many times before. “You need her because you’re out of options.”

“I’m out of fucking options.” And he couldn’t carry out the rest of his plan without his magic, because though his Provident abilities remained unrivalled, they were greatly diminished without his missing abilities. So, like it or not, he needed that fucking human. Aidan tapped on the PAD, pulled up the picture of Rae outside Silver Star Customs, and tossed it back to his Ascendant. “Time for a visit.”

## Chapter nine

The Drunken Ram was full to bursting.

Rae squeezed her way past the Fae crammed into the space, jostling more than a few drinks. Horns and Hooves, mostly, and a few Shifters too. Wings tended to be a little difficult to navigate in busy spaces, so by default, there were usually fewer of those, but she spotted a few on her way through the throng. The crowd was dressed largely in shades of green, and Rae muttered a curse under her breath as she realised it was a festival celebration for one of their gods.

She caught sight of Ezekias in one of the smaller booths at the back of the bar, hunched over an ale and tapping away at his PAD. Rae tucked a loose pink wave behind her ear, discreetly tugged her top down an inch, and plastered a bright smile on her face. She’d picked an outfit similar to what one of the girls had been wearing in his porn flick because she needed him distracted, if he wasn’t already after the night before.

The crappy dark blue fabric creaked as she sunk into the booth to sit opposite him, reaching for his ale and taking a hearty mouthful. “Nonice to see you? No compliments for my outfit?” No glass of visk like she’d definitely requested he have ready and waiting.

Ezekias shook his head. “I—I don’t even know your name.”

“Zeke. We both know you know my name. How old I am. Where I work.” Rae winked, sliding his glass back over to him.

The Fae swallowed. He looked as if he hadn’t slept at all. Smart move, given that Aidan would probably be tracking him. For a brief moment, she wondered what had made the bloodsucker spare him at all, but she was certain she was about to find out. Music pumped through the bar, and Rae took count of the handful of humans amongst the crowd out of habit.

She turned her attention back to the Fae before her. “Shall we start again?” She traced a finger around the rim of his glass and looked up at him through her lashes. “Good to see you, Zeke. Thanks for joining me.”

He glanced towards the bar—or the door. Probably both. “Rae. You look...” He swallowed, his gaze dipping to her cleavage. “Good.”

Rae narrowed her eyes. “We’ll need to work on that.” She slid around to his side of the booth, her arm brushing his. “Now. Order us another round and tell me about these tests, and I’ll make sure you’re hidden from Vale when you leave here.”

“Y-you can do that?”

Rae flagged a waiter with one hand, downed Zeke’s ale with the other, and pointed at the empty glass, holding up two fingers over the crowd. “Sweetie, I can do anything you want.” She let the comment settle over him, let those little cogs of his spur into motion as a female Horn brought a round of drinks to her friends in the next booth over, a mixture of Hooves and Shifters, a few of them whooping in delight.

The waiter returned with their drinks, a sweet-looking Shifter, shirt sleeves rolled up

and his fluffy brown hair falling to one side of his face. A bear maybe. Rae ordered two glasses of visk because the ales were for Zeke, and then she glanced at the Fae beside her, waiting for him to pay. He tapped his PAD against the waiter's without complaint, taking a deep swig of his beverage.

“Start from the beginning.” Rae pulled Zeke's name badge from under her bra strap and tucked it into his front pocket with a pat, knowing without needing to look up that he tracked her every move. The cord of a necklace peeked out of his shirt, the pendant sitting just over his heart. Something important then. “What tests are being carried out?”

Zeke swallowed again.

Rae's PAD chimed, and she made a scene of reading the notification discreetly, eyes widening as she took in the message. "Better hurry. Vale's asking me where I am." It wasn't Aidan. It was Nim, sending a selfie of her and Reed, Nim's eyes glassy with whatever they'd been indulging in. Weed if Rae had to guess. Reed had that look in his eyes as he stared down at her friend, that look that was far too telling. The lights from the fairground rides at the docks lit up their faces, Nim's smile as soft as Reed's.

The Fae shifted beside her. "They—" he started, but a quick glance about the room told Rae no one around them was paying any attention. Even if they were, she'd slipped another of her market charms around their booth anyway. Best to take precautions. She tapped her knee against his, offering him some reassurance. "They're taking a piece of every Vampire house and testing it on humans and Fae," he said quietly, fiddling with the tension in his prosthetic hand, fingers flexing open and closed.

Rae had guessed as much the minute she'd seen the vials. It surprised her, really, that some sick human hadn't come up with the idea sooner. A group of Hooves cheered at the bar, one of them hanging upside down on a stool and downing a bottle of something green. Nasty shit. Beside him, a Shifter choked, his friends laughing as he fell in a heap on the floor.

She'd forgotten what Friday nights at the Ram were like—another on the list of venues she tried to avoid. Not only were the clientele young and reckless, but none of them made the kind of money worth pickpocketing, and that meant they were of absolutely no use to her. She turned her attention back to Zeke. "What's the purpose

of the tests? What do they hope to achieve?”

“To create something better.” The Fae eyed his glass, a frown pinching his features.

“To tip the scales,” Rae murmured, watching the way he slumped over his ale.

Zeke nodded.

Rae thanked the waiter as he dropped off her drinks. “Another two in about”—a quick glance at Zeke—“twenty minutes?”

The male laughed, tapped her order into his PAD, and left them to it.

“Torrin?” she asked Zeke, eyeing her first glass of visk. Another nod. Goddess, he was a male of few words. “And which human faction?”

“The ISA, I think.”

In Support of All, the acronym stood for. Though Rae hadn’t exactly seen any evidence of that. Still, of the three human factions currently operating throughout the city, it didn’t surprise Rae that the ISA would be the ones to work with Torrin, the Fae with a greasy hair problem and an inclination to start fights with Vampire Lords. Nor was it a surprise to her that Torrin was stepping on Elred’s toes, since the murmurs suggesting the Fae king was close to meeting his end had become more frequent lately.

“Was Vale tested?” She thought of the way it had taken five Fae to take him down, the way he’d fought against whatever they’d injected into him with the savagery of a Fae in their animal form. A wild beast, far from the tamed Lord he’d been at her side in the moments before.

A shake of Zeke's head. "No. He was due to be."

"I saw him injected with something."

"Just a tranquiliser courtesy of Calder. The Witch he slaughtered."

Rae didn't let her disgust show. Calder could have been spared—should have—

"And the rest of the test vials?"

"Destroyed."

"Oh?"

Zeke's brown eyes slid to hers. "Also courtesy of your colleague."

So Aidan had some brain cells in his thick skull then. She'd considered asking him to destroy the facility but didn't want to muddy their agreement. Didn't want to give him any loopholes in what she knew was already a weak deal. She was just banking on his desperation for him to follow through.

Rae sipped at her visk in silence, contemplating in which direction the night should go. Zeke stole glances at her from time to time, but he didn't make any attempt at conversation, and that suited Rae just fine.

The Fae wasn't as young as she'd first thought the night before. Now, beside him in slightly better lighting, the scattering of freckles across his nose close enough to count, Rae could see he was nearer her age, perhaps even a little older. He ran the prosthetic hand through his tight red curls, the colour a shade darker than Nim's, and pushed his glasses up his nose as if it were a nervous habit. He was a little more skittish than his fellow Hooves, and Rae supposed it might have been charming had it

not been for the very vivid memory of his work-time entertainment choices and the crusted tissues scattered over his desk.

“Why did you meet me tonight?” she asked after finishing her visk.

Zeke blew out a breath and glanced around them again, beyond their booth. “Because what they’re doing is not what I signed up for. It’s sick. I hate Vampires as much as the next guy, but the effects the tests had on the subjects... it will haunt me for the rest of my life. Vale did me a favour smashing that place to shit. It gave me an excuse to get the fuck out of there.”

The truth, all of it. She didn’t need Aidan’s Provident abilities to know that. The Fae was terrified. “What about your data, all your files?”

“What about them?”

“Where do you keep your backup?”

“I don—”

Rae reached for her second glass. “Come on, Zeke.” She tipped it towards him in a salute. “We’ve watched porn together. We’re friends now, and friends don’t lie. You’re too smart not to have a backup. Too smart to keep it on your PAD.” She flicked her chin at his device on the table. “Where is it?”

His hand drifted to his chest, and Rae leaned into his space, slid her fingers into his shirt, and clasped them around the necklace she’d spotted earlier, easing him closer until she could smell the ale on his breath. His eyes drifted down to her mouth. “See,” Rae whispered, glancing up at him through her lashes. “Smart. Keep it safe. Now buy me another drink, the waiter’s forgotten about my twenty-minute rule.”

The waiter came and went, depositing more drinks with a swift apology for being late, and Rae peppered Zeke with questions about the ISA. Weyland, the human who led the faction, had always coveted power. Rae wondered if Bax knew, whether he’d known when he knocked on her door earlier that evening. They’d worked together in the past, Rae was certain of it.

Zeke seemed to relax after a few more drinks, words spilling from him a little more freely. How he’d got involved with Torrin, what he knew about the facility. Snippets of information Rae tucked away for another time. More messages from Nim lit up her PAD—updates on where Reed was taking her on their epic date, as she’d put it—when Rae realised two things: it was getting late, and she’d gotten every last bit of useful information she was going to get out of her latest drinking partner.

Zeke’s phone chimed, and he frowned at the screen. “I have to go.”



“Shame.” Another spell. This one, a quick illusion. He’d get home and realise there was never any message. Rae leaned in, pressed a hand to the side of his face, and kissed his cheek, her lips close to the corner of his mouth as she unfastened his necklace with nimble fingers, the Fae none the wiser. “Let’s do this again sometime.”

He sucked in a breath, nodded, and then slipped out of the booth on unsteady hooves, nodding again as if he’d decided something. Rae suppressed a chuckle.

“Good night, Rae.”

She waved once, casting her attention back to her PAD. Her last message to Nim had been left on read, asking her friend if she wanted company for the walk home. Rae tried to shove down the worry that mixed with the alcohol, trusting that the little Witch could take care of herself.

A wolf Shifter whistled as she left the Ram, but the night was otherwise quiet once the door slammed behind her. She reached for her PAD, fingers fumbling in her bag to find her earpiece, her attention fixed entirely on why she couldn’t find the fucking thing—which was why it registered a second too late. Movement, behind her. A hand fisting into her hair, an arm around her neck, slamming her back against a hard body. Rae thrust out an elbow, the heel of her boot connecting with a foot.

A male groaned behind her. “You stupid bitch.”

She didn’t turn around to look at him and instead launched into a sprint. Rae only made it a few steps before a body barrelled into her.

Fuck her luck. A bastard Horn, and he’d rammed her like fucking cattle.

The thought barely lasted a second. Rae lost her footing, all the air rushing out of her as she fell under his weight, the night going dark as her head collided with the

pavement.

## Chapter ten

Aidan took in Rae's workshop as she began to stir on the floor where he'd deposited her. Tools neatly placed on racks and benches with wooden pins and deerskins hanging underneath. Sketches hung on the walls alongside pictures of Rae and an older man in a few tattered frames, beside newer, unframed snaps of her and the young Witch Aidan knew she worked with. A patchwork of Rae's life, and her hair and eyes were different in every single photo.

He lit the joint he'd rolled earlier to mask the scent of Rae's blood, the small wounds she'd received when the Horn had knocked her into the pavement now crusted over. One thought from Aidan and the Fae had peeled himself off her and slammed his head into the nearest wall, over and over until he was dead. Aidan had already been leaving with Rae in his arms at that point.

Even unconscious, she had strong mental shields in place, and though he suspected it might be the jewellery she wore: bangles at her wrists, layers of necklaces, a silver clip over the bridge of her nose, he respected the effort she'd gone to. Most humans threw themselves at Vampires, and the ones that didn't, the ones that usually signed themselves up to one of the factions, never bothered to shield themselves despite knowing what they were up against.

If he'd gone sifting through her mind when she was out cold, there was a small chance she wouldn't wake up. And despite whatever rumours may have been spread about him, Aidan never took a life without reason. Despite everything, he was tired of so much bloodshed.

She shifted somewhere on the floor behind him, and he took another long drag of his joint to cover the scent drifting from her.

“Bastard Horns,” Rae grumbled.

He let his Provident senses reach out to her, press at the walls of her mind. Solid.

“Stay the fuck out of my head, Vampire.” She was on her feet with a groan, snatching the joint from his fingertips before taking a deep toke. “You were following me? That seems a little weird, even for you.”

Aidan chuckled dryly. “You’re welcome.” He held her gaze as his fingers wrapped around hers, prising the joint from her hand. This close, the scent of her blood was almost too strong to take. He should have fed before he left the manor.

She held firm for a moment, assessing him before releasing her hold. She’d swiped her pale pink hair over one shoulder, exposing the column of her throat like she was fucking baiting him, but the shadow of the rope marks at her wrists still lingered, and he wouldn’t give in to whatever bullshit game the human wanted to play. He took a step away, continuing his observation of the workshop to put some space between them.

The room was tidy, products out of sight in lock boxes, he assumed, but the sketches and photos on the walls were plenty to go by. Lia’s request turned over in his thoughts. Of what he needed from Rae; if she truly wanted what she said she’d needed from him. “What are you?” A jeweller. A thief. Her business was successful, her finances solid; she had no reason to steal that Aidan could see.

“Multi-talented.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the way she pressed a hand to her wounded head, words murmured under her breath. “I can see that. You know an awful lot of magic for a human. Are the markets improving that much?” He knew the answer; he wanted to hear it from her.

Rae ran a hand through her hair, and it changed from pink to pale turquoise, soft waves lengthening and falling to her waist. “That asshole ripped my shirt.” She glanced over her shoulder to where the Horn had torn the blue fabric as he’d slammed her into the pavement, then held out her hand for what remained of Aidan’s joint. “He taught me everything I know.” She jerked her chin at one of the pictures of her and the old man, blowing her smoke out across the picture until the faces were lost to it. The smallest hint of regret curled in the smoke, but it was gone almost as quickly as it came.

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The human took the end of the joint to the sink and ran it under the tap for a moment before chucking it into a bin under one of the workbenches. “Let’s hear it then.” She leaned back against the table, eyes the same colour as her hair, and he didn’t feel an inch of fear from her, only the way she let the weed wash over her, relax her, but then—there—a hint of adrenaline, though she pushed it down, folded it in and tucked it away so that he’d have to pry deeper to find it.

Aidan hated to admit it, but she had a better hold on her magic than most of the Gerentis he had to deal with. Which either made her an excellent student or a Witch. He slid his PAD from his back pocket and handed it to her, keeping his distance so that he didn’t have to get too close to her scent again.

She hummed as she swiped through the images. “No wonder Zeke wanted out.” Rae tossed the PAD back to him. “You weren’t tested, if you were wondering. Apparently, Vampire Lords are later on the roster.”

That was something, at least. Bringing together a piece of every Vampire house was disaster enough without throwing his half-breed blood into the mix. “I destroyed the remaining vials.”

“So I heard.”

Aidan mirrored her stance against the bench opposite and slid his hands into his pockets. She’d pulled back whatever spell she’d been using on her skin and light scars peppered her exposed legs in shorts similar to the ones she’d worn the night before, her feet in solid boots. Both practical choices, he assumed, that still made her look good enough to pickpocket unnoticed, appealing enough to distract her mark.

She didn't need it.

He considered his options. Hated that he was desperate. "We never shook on our deal."

"Don't need to. I know you're good for it. I'd be dead already if you weren't."

True. Which meant she felt like she had the control in this situation, and that didn't sit well with Aidan. What he was about to propose didn't sit well with him, either, but at least it meant he could keep a close eye on her. "Are you familiar with the term Odalik?"

Rae scoffed. "You heard what I said, Vampire. I'm no one's pet."

He didn't doubt that for a moment. "You and I know that, but you said you needed me to get places." He flicked his chin at the window, gesturing to the city beyond them. "No one else needs to know that." She said nothing, watching him, waiting. "You know the term. Do you know the history of how Odaliks came to be?"

"A little."

"Vampires rarely mate. Not nearly as frequently as Fae. Odaliks are revered among my kind." A mate was a death sentence for a Vampire. A secret so well guarded, a bargaining chip so powerful, none would dare to reveal the truth of such a union anyway. Odaliks were no secret, but they were protected. Though that wasn't entirely the truth. The Lord's Odalik would always be a target, regardless of what tradition dictated, but Aidan didn't see the need to tell her that.

"Imitation is the greatest form of flattery," Rae all but sneered. Anger flared from her, thick and hot, but she pulled it back just as quickly as he'd felt it. A moment of hesitation, and then, "So this is what you have to offer me? For me to become your

dotting wife whilst I search for your missing magic? As proposals go, Vale, it's subpar at best."

She was silent then, considering, and he knew he was losing her interest. That was something he couldn't risk.

"I can have some of this moved," he added, flicking a chin at the wall of tools, hoping it would sweeten the deal.

She was watching him carefully, and he could almost feel the speed of her thoughts, tiny flickers of feeling trickling through as if she were working through her options. Tempting as it was to press, to let his Provident powers loose, he didn't. He needed her mind whole, needed her sharp. Needed her to trust him, as much as it loathed him to acknowledge it.

"You really want your magic back, don't you?" she asked him.

"If you'd ever lost any, you wouldn't be asking that question." It wasn't a case of want. It was a need. If he was going to be able to follow through on his plans, if there was a possibility of putting an end to the testing, he'd need his power returned to him. For his sanity, he needed it.

Bangles jingled on Rae's wrist as she moved across the workshop, pulling a glass from a cupboard and filling it at the tap. The movement revealed the cuff sat around her bicep, and Aidan's brow furrowed as he focused on it.

In three strides he was beside her, fingers closed around the silver, the magic slithering over his skin. Not a Witch. "Which faction?"

She shook out of his grip, pulled a pointed file from the bench beside her, and spun it in her hand, the tip pressing against his throat. "I'm happy to go down trying,

Vampire. Are you?"

Aidan laughed. A true laugh, because he didn't doubt her for a heartbeat, the conviction rolling from her in waves. Of course she belonged to a faction. Her irritation for his kind was palpable, and when it came to faction members, the feeling was mutual. "Aera?" From the old human word for flight, the group's core desire was to elevate humans above the Orders, which was why he'd thought it might have been them behind the testing.

Rae scoffed. "Fuck no. Tripp's as much of a hot-headed asshole as you are."

Aidan glanced around the room again and took in the way Rae held the file like she might actually do some decent damage with it before he ripped her throat out. "Omnia." Ready for anything. The smallest of the factions, and the one that had caused him the most headaches lately.

A sigh from Rae, but she didn't loosen her grip on the file. "Busted." Not a hint of remorse in her tone.

"How long have you worked for them?"

"Worked for them?" A bitter laugh, and this time the sentiment wrapped around the words. "Omnia's mine, Vampire."

Aidan moved, knocking the file from her hand, and wrapped one of his around her throat, her skin warm and her pulse frantic beneath it. "I lost five Providents to Omnia just last week," he barked. All the more reason to have her in the manor, to have Baelin tap her PAD.

"Oops." She licked her lips, and Aidan tracked the movement. "Now can I get a glass of water or are you going to finish what you've started?" Fear and excitement



tumbled from her, her eyes reflecting the wildness he felt at her admission.  
Reflecting him, looking far too like his uncle.

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He released her from his hold, almost running a hand through his hair in frustration before remembering it was bound, and thinking about that decanter of visk in his study back at the manor. Rae was already one big fucking headache, and she was going to drag this out until she got whatever the fuck she wanted from him.

When he didn't move, she slipped past him, her arm brushing his as she reached up for a glass. She tilted her head up to look at him, an eyebrow raised. Another lick of rage tainted the air. At her predicament, no doubt. Aidan couldn't be certain. Her pulse spiked again, knuckles white where she spun a ring on her thumb, and Aidan stepped away to give her some space. To get her fucking vanilla perfume and the scent of her blood out of his lungs.

He hadn't been surprised by Thadlia's suggestion to become his Odalik, and though he could think of nothing worse than a human traipsing around the manor, he would endure it.

"Why?" she finally asked. "There's a huge imbalance of power out there." She waved a hand to the city beyond the workshop. "And you're contributing to it, lording around in your fucking manor like every one of your kind that came before you. Except you actually have some say in what goes on out there. Asking me to move in with you doesn't seem like the smartest option."

The temptation to just take what he wanted whispered at him, to walk out of the studio with answers, but something held him back. A feeling he couldn't place, and that alone was enough to stay his hand. Aidan shrugged. "Surely my reasons are obvious. The bigger question is why the leader of Omnia would even entertain such a suggestion."

“I told you. I need money to buy silver. To arm humans.” It wasn’t actually to arm them, but to protect them. “Why not just take what you want from me and be done with this?” she asked when he didn’t answer.

Aidan canted his head, taking her in. He should. Should take everything he wanted from her and leave her limp and lifeless on the floor for someone else to deal with—but he wasn’t his uncle. “You think I want a faction leader—one responsible for killing my kind—living under my roof?”

“You want me where you can watch me. Because that’s what you do, isn’t it? Just watch the world turn to shit around you.”

The Fae had been less than discreet in creating stories about him, delivered to citizens’ PADs with their daily updates. Most likely some of his fellow Vampires had also been the origin of a story or two. Aidan didn’t care; none of them were true. “I can also halt silver deliveries across the city.” He couldn’t, but it was a bluff worth attempting.

That caught her attention, but she hid her alarm at the prospect as well as every other feeling she held tight to her chest. “If you send out the announcement before we leave, I’ll agree,” Rae said finally.

Odalik announcements were part of the tradition, but it would secure her safety and offer her protection, which, considering what had happened to her the last three nights in a row, she sorely needed. It wouldn’t protect her from him, but she had her own bargaining chip for that. Something told him she wanted the same thing he did, an end to the nightmare Demesia had gotten itself into, and part of him wondered if she might be able to help him change it, even if Omnia belonged to her.

Baelin had called him a dreamer, but Aidan knew it was the true reason his Ascendant pledged his life for him. He called out to Baelin to give the instruction.

“Done.”

Rae’s PAD chimed with an alert, and she pulled it out of the bag he’d carried back with her. Her eyebrows rose as she took in the message Baelin would have blind-copied her in on, biting down on her full bottom lip. A twist of anticipation, and then relief was all that followed it. “Good. I need to make a call, then I’ll grab my things.”

You’re sure about this?Baelin asked.

Aidan didn’t like it any more than his Ascendant did.A little late for doubt, isn’t it?  
She heads up Omnia.

A pause. Aidan had considered waiting until he and Baelin were face to face before delivering that piece of information, but then Baelin said,I’m sorry. I should have looked deeper. I’ll do another sweep of her files.

He considered offering some reassurance, but Aidan had received little comfort in his life, so he didn’t know where to begin with offering it.Just make sure Quinn doesn’t eat her.

I don’t think it’s Quinn we have to be worried about.

Rae swore under her breath as she hung up the unanswered call on her PAD. “They must be having a good night,” she said, but there was no conviction to her words. She began shoving things into a bag: a hand saw, some files, a small blowtorch. Little boxes and trays of items rattled around. “I’m not sure I like the idea of Nim here alone.” She cast her gaze across the workshop and shook her head, worry leaking from her every pore.

Her Witch friend was a weakness, and Aidan tucked that fact away for another time.

“I’ll have my Ascendant install some better security; assign someone to her if it’ll put your mind at rest.” And it would serve him to keep tabs on anything that was important to her. “Why Silver Star?”

Rae paused at his words for a moment and nodded as if she was satisfied. “We work primarily in silver. I was playing around with Rae...” With a wave of a hand, she dropped another box into her bag. “The sun.” A shrug. “It’s dumb, but it stuck.”

There was more she wasn’t telling him, but he didn’t press her.

“Is it true you killed your uncle to claim your position?” A stack of sketchbooks went into the bag next, along with a leather apron and some safety equipment.

“Just because he raised me doesn’t mean I owed him anything.”

“I feel that,” Rae said, blowing out a breath. “I’d gut my mother in a heartbeat if she wasn’t dead already. Okay, we’re done here.”

“No clothes? No personal effects?”

“These are my personal effects.” A shake of her bag. “And you’re going to be doting on your Odalik with a new wardrobe, right?” She shot him a grin that said she was already enjoying this, but he felt her worry cutting through—for her friend, not for herself.

He took in her ripped shorts, the holes in her shirt, and imagined everything else she owned was as equally work-worn. She had a point.

Aidan shook his head, opened the door, and stood to one side. “After you, human.”

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Already regretting my decision, he told Baelin as he followed Rae out into the city, his Ascendant's quiet laughter the only response.

### Chapter eleven

“Everything is ready, my lord,” Shaw announced from just outside Aidan's study. A ceremony seemed like an entirely ridiculous idea given the circumstances, but as Baelin had put it, they needed to sell this to the council or Rae would be an even greater target.

He shrugged an arm into his jacket and ran a hand through damp hair, fingers raking through a few loose knots. His uncle had always tried to shove him into suits growing up, each time with the intention of making a spectacle of him. His uncle's bastard ward, the staff would whisper. Aidan didn't care. He didn't care for suits either. This black jacket and open shirt was the closest he'd ever come in the years since his uncle's death.

“Let's get this over with,” he told Quinn, the daemon dog stretching on his forelegs as if Vampire business was of absolutely no interest to him. Had it not been for Baelin, Aidan suspected it wouldn't be.

The study door swung open, his Ascendant's amber eyes shining with mischief. Aidan had rules about using his abilities on any member of his team without their consent, principles he'd created for himself after years of watching his uncle treat those around him like less than nothing. But moments like this had him wishing he hadn't.

“You’re going to have your hands full with this one,” Baelin said a little too gleefully, but Aidan didn’t bite. He wasn’t interested in his Ascendant’s opinion of Rae, though he knew Baelin wouldn’t hesitate in sharing it. “I like her,” he added as Quinn padded to his side, the dog’s head almost touching his hip.

Aidan didn’t need Baelin’s approval of his soon-to-be wife; the ceremony was likely just as meaningless to Rae as it was to him, but it would be easier this way. His Ascendant rarely kept his opinions to himself, but he rarely elaborated on them either, which had always made Aidan more inclined to believe them.

Baelin was many things, but his concision was something Aidan had always particularly enjoyed over the years. Too many Vampires loved the sound of their own voices and prattled endlessly with whatever nonsense opinions they had, but not Baelin.

Aidan thought of the five Providents Omnia had most recently taken down, and though none of them would be missed, the violence was only stoking the embers of a fire that could be too difficult to put out without significant losses on all sides. Without significant damage to the city. That was part of the reason why this made sense. So he could keep a close eye on Rae’s plans, to study her. Knowing his opponent was one of the only decent lessons his uncle had ever taught him.

They made their way down dark corridors, past the natatorium to the rarely used glasshouse at the rear of the manor. Many had questioned why the Lord’s manor had a room made entirely of glass given the dangers of sunlight for their kind, but Aidan had hidden there many times as a boy to watch the sunset over the manor gardens. He would slip into a shaft of dusky light when no one else was around to notice him, until his uncle ultimately had, and Aidan’s visits to the glasshouse had ended.

That particular lesson was one he took no joy in recalling. Even now he could smell the stench of his uncle’s blistering flesh, feel the force of knuckles meeting bone.

Another handful of scars had been added to Aidan's collection that day.

Barely a few hours had passed since Rae agreed to this farce, most of which she'd spent pacing her new room, a mix of trepidation, frustration, and doubt tumbling from her, settling over everything she touched. A gown had been delivered to the manor for her at Aidan's request, to maintain the pretence with the council, and because even he wasn't asshole enough to make her go through with a fake marriage dressed in the blood-stained clothes he'd picked her up in.

He followed Baelin into the glasshouse, string lights reflecting off the windows and illuminating every plant in a soft glow. Shaw's handiwork, Aidan knew. The Somniator had been desperate to throw a party for years, and Aidan almost felt guilty that this one was fake. A water feature concealed by fern fronds trickled melodically beside a wrought iron archway long since covered in ivy and flowers, marking the centre of the glasshouse and where Baelin took up his position. His Ascendant was officiating, First Unit and Shaw acting as witnesses. All of them, except for Shaw, knew the marriage was a sham; only Baelin knew the reason why.

In the manor grounds, units Two and Four remained on alert, just as a precaution. Aidan was taking no chances with Rae, and the moments leading up to their union were the ones anyone vying for his position were most likely to strike. Though the manor was so well warded, the grounds were virtually impenetrable. Still, Aidan saw no use in testing that theory tonight.

Orion, Beck, Roak, and Evander made up his First Unit, the first of the Vampires he and Baelin had handpicked when Aidan had taken his uncle's position. The brothers, Roak and Evander, stood beside Beck; Orion had been stationed outside Rae's room since she'd arrived. Aidan swept his gaze over the other three, but even the weakest of Providents would have been able to detect the desperation leaking from one of them. But then—not desperation. Hunger. And somehow the Vampire had felt that meant it was a good idea to be close to the human who was about thirty seconds from



walking into the glasshouse.

Possessiveness flared in Aidan, and he had half a mind to make an example of Beck. Of the four, he knew the Vampire least but had followed Baelin's recommendation to allow him onto the unit.

Roak, get Beck out of here. Now, Aidan commanded. There was no way in Hel he was going to allow a half-starved Vampire near the only shot he had at getting his magic back.

Silence fell over them all until Roak returned, shooting an apologetic look in Aidan's direction, though he was in no way responsible for his teammate.

"At ease, boys. It's a wedding, not a funeral. Unless you all know something I don't." Aidan turned at the sound of Rae's voice, his eyes falling to where her arm hooked through Orion's. She wore the gown he'd ordered for her, that strange possessive spark flaring in his chest again as the leader of his First Unit led her closer.

The floor-length gown, the colour of molten silver, hugged her curves and pooled around her feet like liquid. She'd left her hair loose, a shade of green so dark it was almost black, soft curls falling over her shoulders and tumbling down her back, her eyes the colour of the moss lining the pond beside them. Bracelets still adorned her wrists, the silver clip across the bridge of her nose, the cuff at her bicep. At least she had a head on her. There were at least twenty different Vampires on and around the compound each night, and she was smart enough to give herself a layer of protection.

Roak and Evander chuckled at her quip, silence falling over the glasshouse as Orion stepped up beside them. Shaw stood to one side, a PAD in his hands, snapping photos with fervour. For the council, Aidan had advised him, but the old Vampire seemed to be enjoying himself far too much.

Rae stood before him at the centre of the arch, hands clasped loosely at her front, her stance relaxed, twisting the ring at her thumb with a finger. Though she hid it well, to a Provident, her anger was palpable. Her disgust at what she was about to do. Aidan echoed the sentiment. But beneath Rae's ire, there was concern. Fear. Just a hint of it coating the air between them.

He could end this now. Take what he needed. Have Orion take her to one of the human hospitals afterwards, because little of her mind would be left once Aidan was finished with her. But he refused to become what he had loathed for so long.

"This is the part where you tell me how beautiful I look," Rae said as her gaze swept over him, assessing. Always assessing.

Aidan waited until her eyes met his. "You look beautiful," he told her, realising with a flash of irritation that he meant it.

Baelin cleared his throat beside them, and they both turned to face the Ascendant. "Our Order is fond of tradition, of repeating mindless tasks merely because some wrinkly elder told them it was a good idea." Beside Aidan, Rae arched an eyebrow. "But some traditions rise above all of that. And this one, no matter how false it may seem, has always been my favourite." Aidan glared at his Ascendant for his choice of words. Shaw was most likely recording this, and Baelin never missed an opportunity to poke fun at the council, yet the latter part of his statement had been the truth. Sentimental old fool. "This blessed union is an end and a beginning all wrapped into one. A time for promises, for declarations, for sacred vows to be exchanged between the two of you, and above all, upheld. Do you understand?"

Cut the theatrics, he told his Ascendant. Baelin merely smiled, waiting for Aidan's nod of affirmation before turning to Rae.

"Yes," she said firmly beside him. Her heartbeat picked up for a moment, but her

proximity to six vampires and her sheer determination must have slowed it, because Aidan barely had time to register the sound before it returned to normal.

Baelin instructed them to take each other's hands as he uttered words for them to repeat to each other. Then he handed over two chalices from the small table at his side, passing one to each of them. "Tradition dictates the new couple embark on their union by drinking the blood of our ancestors, to offer it to their partner in turn as a symbol of their service to each other," he explained as Rae's pupils dilated, fingers tightening around the stem of her chalice.

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So she'd never taken Vampire blood then. Her anger and fear warred with each other as she raised a cup to Aidan's mouth, her eyes on his as he drained it, and she handed it back to Baelin. Aidan brought his to her lips and watched the way her mouth parted, her fear so thick he wondered how she wasn't shaking from it. He couldn't help the brush of his Provident abilities against her cheek, the most barely there of touches, his eyes fixed on the column of her throat as she swallowed down the liquid.

Her eyes snapped to his as realisation sunk in. Not blood. Human wine. Because the thought of drugging anyone against their will made Aidan's skin crawl. He caught the dip of her chin as he handed Baelin the empty chalice. A silent thank you, he assumed, that it had only been wine.

Baelin took Rae's hand, wrapping a strip of crimson silk around her wrist before reaching for Aidan's, a barely there tremor from the human as their fingers entwined. "Bound by blood, by flesh, by duty." He took his time fastening the ribbon over their joined hands. "You belong to each other now."

Rae stared at the silk for a moment, a trace of a frown there and gone before shooting Aidan a dazzling smile. "Lucky you, Vampire."

### Chapter twelve

Rae paced the corridor for her fifth, maybe sixth lap. She'd circled the entire manor multiple times by this point checking for escape routes; she'd been trapped in the dark before and had no desire to repeat it. Everything was locked except for the natatorium, but she decided to leave that particular treat for her second night if she made it through the first. Swimming made her an easy target and she didn't need to

make it any easier right now for a Vampire to ambush her from the shadows.

She hadn't slept well for years, but she sincerely doubted she'd be sleeping at all for the foreseeable future. Not in a house of at least seven Vampires. The moment she'd arrived earlier with Aidan, she'd realised what a monumentally huge mistake this had been and how stupid she was to agree to be his Odalik. His wife.

In theory, it gave her everything she wanted. His finances, his resources, his protection, to a point. In reality, it was very, very stupid. Omnia was small, with less than a hundred recruits in total, and though she'd have no issues making them understand her position, it was going to be difficult to keep things from the Vampire Lord. Impossible, if she were being honest with herself, but impossible had never stopped her before.

In practice, it couldn't have been worse timing. The last thing she needed was to be locked inside a manor big enough to house ten families and with the Goddess knew how many Vampires walking the grounds, instead of out in the city, searching for Nim. Her PAD had started going to voicemail, and her boyfriend wasn't answering either. Though Rae wanted to believe the little Witch had just gone home with Reed for the night, something felt off.

A huge mural sprawled this corridor, Vampires and Fae fighting together for perhaps the only time in their history against the angels who had abandoned them. The painting did nothing to shy away from the brutality the humans had suffered at the hands of the immortals, nor did it represent their status as anything but inconsequential.

Rae untucked her sketchbook from the crook of her arm as she studied it, her pencil moving across the page in a piece that twined together. Already the manor felt suffocating. Felt too much like days and nights spent alone in years past. What she'd give for a drink to ease her nerves, to quiet her racing thoughts. Or a joint. But

breaking into any of the rooms on her first night in this house seemed unwise even for her, so sketching it would have to be.

Rae knew their agreement back in that cell had its weaknesses, but she was relying on the knowledge that Aidan would do anything to get his missing magic back, that he was truly desperate. And she'd been right, because that desperation had pushed him to take her in as his Odalik.

A floorboard creaked, one Rae had learnt to avoid after her first pass through the corridor, marking Aidan's presence before he came to a halt beside her, his subtle sandalwood and leather scent drifting from him. Rae didn't peel her attention away from her sketchbook, her pencil already working on something new. This time the feathered wings from the mural before them. "Bad dream?"

A puff of air from Aidan. "I don't sleep, Farren. I have no dreams of my own."

She looked up at him. "Liar." He wore the same clothes from the ceremony, but he'd ditched the jacket: black shirt sleeves rolled up revealing his tattooed forearms, hair ruffled as if he'd dragged a hand through the waves one too many times. Rae turned her attention back to the mural. "There's a single Witch in this painting." The female was almost entirely encased in a cage of roots and vines she'd no doubt created for herself, so small she was barely visible. As if she were an afterthought, a tiny speck in the vastness of the piece.

"Baelin will find her."

His Ascendant, the one who had officiated their 'union,' though neither he nor the other Vampires who'd been present were anywhere to be seen. Even though the morning sun had long since risen and they'd need to stay inside. Aidan had told her it would be seen as strange if he allowed them to remain in the manor for their first day together, and though it made sense, she hadn't let her guard down. It only confirmed

a suspicion she'd had for a while: there were Vampires watching him closely too.

She considered his words. Ran through options of where Nim might be, silently praying to the Goddess for her safe return. "And what if your kind have her?" she asked, unwilling to let her thoughts drift to the sight of those bodies in the cells from the night of the attack on Rush, to how easily it could be Nim. Might already be. Witches were immortal, just like the other Orders, but they had their weaknesses too. It was well known Vampires had often used them as pets, and some likely still did. Calder was evidence enough of that.

Instead, she focused her thoughts on something she was happy to give the Provident beside her. Hatred. Vitriol. Loathing so thick she hoped he could fucking taste it. The bastard bloodsuckers had fucked everything up for everyone in Demesia, over and over, and their Lord was no exception.

Aidan didn't react. She imagined he'd have had more than enough practice over the years. "We'll find her," was all he said. Rae didn't question how he knew Nim was a Witch. The less she shared with him, the better. His attention dropped to her sketchpad before he pulled a joint from his pocket, smoke filling the space between them as he lit it and took a drag. "Why do you hate Vampires?"

Rae glanced back at the mural with a frown. "A Vampire was the reason for everything I do. Everything I've done. The reason my mother treated me like vermin." He wouldn't have needed his Provident abilities to feel the truth pouring from her, and she didn't try to contain it as she slid her pencil into her hair and reached for the joint.

Aidan tracked her movements as she positioned it between her fingers and brought it to her lips, his eyes unmoving as he asked, "Why?"

"The details are irrelevant," Rae said on an exhale of smoke, handing back the joint.

“An answer for an answer. Why do you hate humans?”

He turned his attention to the mural and waved the hand that held the joint at the image. “Humans, Vampires... the rest of the Orders. It’s as if everyone has forgotten that there’s life outside of fighting. That Demesia... Mazyr... could be something wholly different without it.” He took a long drag, and then said, “Something better.”

“I knew you were lying when you said you don’t dream.” She watched the way he inspected the painting, studied his face, his posture for any signs of what he was feeling, but he gave nothing away.

“They trapped us in as punishment,” Aidan added, passing the joint back with a flick of his chin. “Left us here to rot.”

“With humans as your playthings, your never-ending supply of food and entertainment. How terrible that must have been for your kind.”

The Vampire hummed, pulling a silver box from his pocket, and flicked it open.

Rae didn’t hesitate to deposit the stub into it. “So, how about we stay out of each other’s way as much as possible until we both get what we want?” She pulled her pencil from her hair and turned her attention back to her sketchbook as she let the sensation of the weed slide along her bones, her thoughts a little easier to bear.

“I can feel every space you occupy in this house, Farren. Every door handle you’ve tested, every picture you’ve stopped to look at, every creaking floorboard you’ve avoided. There is no place you can be here that qualifies as staying out of my way.” A pause, and Rae resisted the urge to look up and see whatever expression was on his face. “But if a pre-requisite of getting my power back is giving you space whilst you’re here, then you’ll have it.”



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Rae swallowed. Willed her fingers not to tremble as she returned her pencil to the paper, focusing on the slide of the lead as Aidan's words rattled through her.

"Tradition dictates I take you to the council dinner tomorrow night." He'd taken a step away, she realised.

Her pencil stilled, and she willed her expression to neutral as she met his silver eyes. They hadn't discussed what would happen when their agreement came to an end, and she wasn't fool enough to believe he didn't already suspect her. "Am I to be on the menu?"

Aidan held her gaze, his eyes darkening as his hand slid into his pocket. "No one touches what's mine."

Rae's skin prickled. Nothing good could come from those words. They only served to cement what she already knew. One: this had been a monumental fuck up on her part. And two: she was going to need more of her spells. A lot more.

Aidan walked away without another word, the threat hanging heavy in the air even when he was long gone. He hadn't been lying when he said he wanted Demesia to be something better. Rae couldn't say how she knew he was telling the truth, only that she did, but she couldn't let that get in the way of what she was there to do, of what she'd worked so hard for.

Becoming the Vampire Lord's Odalik had been far too easy; his desperation would only be his downfall, and Rae allowed herself a small smile at that. Cillian would be laughing in his grave if the old bastard had actually been buried somewhere.

She would play her role. Accompany Aidan to whatever pointless events Vampire tradition dictated. There was very little Rae wasn't prepared to do when push came to shove. And when she was done, there would be no Vampire Lord. No manor. No council.

There would be nothing left but ash.

## Chapter thirteen

Aidan had been waiting for Rae for thirty minutes.

He considered, not for the first time, getting in his car and driving off without her. He leaned back against the sleek black bodywork, arms folded across his chest, and his gaze fixed on the carved wooden door at the entrance to the manor. A beep sounded from inside the vehicle, and Aidan slid his PAD from his suit pocket to read the message.

Two minutes, Rae had written. It had been five minutes, ten minutes ago.

Another beep from inside the vehicle, but Aidan had already returned the device to his pocket and opened the driver's door to turn off the connection between the car and the PAD. Another human invention, metal boxes with wheels and engines powered by biofuels grown in their greenhouses, only this one had been adapted by Baelin, and there was nothing else like it in Demesia.

The front door opened behind him, followed by Rae's quiet murmur of thanks to Shaw and the crunch of footsteps on the pebble driveway, her vanilla perfume already everywhere, even though they were outside.

"No time to fiddle around with your toys, Vale, we're going to be late," Rae said disapprovingly as he turned to face her, one eyebrow raised and a quirk at the corner

of her mouth. Fuck. She looked good, and despite what he'd told her the night before, his council members were absolutely going to be a problem with her dressed like that.

Her hair was as white as the snow-tipped mountains on the south edge of the city, waves falling over her shoulders and brushing her chest, bright blue eyes shimmering like rippling water. She wore a crimson gown that hugged her soft figure, a slit up one thigh, the hem not quite touching the floor. The neckline scooped low and the straps were so thin, Aidan wasn't sure how she'd put the thing on without tearing them. No sign of the heavy kohl she'd worn at Rush, no lipstick, just those long lashes and bright eyes, her face fresh, her rosy skin glowing. The silver clip sat over her nose, the thumb ring and bangles he'd never seen her without. All likely spelled. Every detail intentional, no doubt.

She'd asked if she was on the menu, and she'd come dressed as the main fucking course.

Aidan had already fed before he'd changed into his suit, no tie. This might have been a meal on paper, but he had no intention of eating anything, and he never went near his councillors unprepared. It appeared the same rule now applied to Rae.

"I was going for freshly fucked glow-up because I assume there's some element of can't touch, can't have to tonight's proceedings, based on what you explained last night," Rae said as her gaze flicked over his suit, one hand readjusting the bangles at her wrist.

Right. When he'd referred to her as his. A slip of the tongue, but to the other Vampires, that was precisely what being an Odalik meant. Aidan didn't linger on the first part of her statement, because he couldn't entertain those kinds of thoughts if he was going to get his magic back. Instead, he tested her mental shields as he opened the passenger door, waiting for her to get in.

“So that’s how it’s going to be, is it? Not a peep, just straight into my head because I was a few minutes late?” She eased past him, her body brushing against his, and held his gaze as she pulled the door shut.

A very big part of him wasn’t interested in how she felt, and Aidan hated that just for a second, an even bigger part of him, inexplicably, was. He slid into the driver’s seat and cast her a sideways glance as the engine roared to life. “If I wanted to punish you, we wouldn’t be talking.”

“Ah, so Odaliksareslaves. Wonderful.” She reached for the door handle, but Aidan leaned across her, resting his hand over hers.

“Odaliks are usually other Vampires.” He uncurled her fingers with his, reached for her seatbelt with his other hand, and fastened her in. “I need to know you can protect yourself against the others; I need you in one piece. If any of them can tamper with your mind, I lose my chance at getting what I want.”

Rae swallowed. His hand was still wrapped around her fingertips, and her skin was warm against his before he remembered himself.

“This evening will go a lot easier if you’ll let me in,” he added, moving back into his seat and resting his hands on the steering wheel.

“No.” The smallest flicker of fear flared from her before she shut it down.

Aidan ignored it. Bringing any weakness to her attention right now would probably have her exiting the car the moment it came to a stop. And at that thought, he locked the doors as the gates to the grounds opened.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a driver,” Rae said beside him, followed by a snap of her fingers. “Actually, I take it back. You’re a control freak. Why would you have a

driver?”

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He put his foot to the floor, the force of their acceleration throwing Rae back in her seat, a grin spreading across her face that he caught out of the corner of his eye. Aidan pressed down on the accelerator a little harder, fighting a smile.

“I don’t have a driver because I enjoy driving,” he told her. She was attempting to hide her elation, but it fell from her in waves, pressing against his skin. Aidan did his best to ignore it. “How did we meet? How long have we been seeing each other? How does a human become an Odalik? All questions we’re going to be asked tonight, and it’s going to be much, much easier if you let me in.”

A sigh. “Do you let people into your head, Vampire?”

“Only by invitation. I have to initiate contact.”

“Well, that’s not going to work, is it? What if I’m in trouble?” Rae placed a palm over her heart, the back of her other hand against her forehead, her voice light and teasing.

Aidan could compromise. If he couldn’t get into her head without permission, and it pained him to accept he couldn’t—not without shattering her mind; not without tearing every piece of charmed jewellery from her body first—he was confident none of his other Providents could. He threw the car into a corner without letting off the accelerator, and Rae reached for the handrail above her, her delight spiking higher.

“Fine. It goes both ways. I can live with that,” he admitted.

“You’re only nice when you want something, you know.”

He said nothing but peeled back the smallest sliver of his mind, a space just for Rae. He knew it was pointless. She wasn't going to agree, and all he could hope was that the other Providents didn't notice his real reason for making her his Odalik. None of them would question his desire for a walking feedbag because that was how most Vampires saw humans, and no doubt the reason Rae hated his kind.

She was watching the city whirl by, and he wondered if it was the first time she'd been in a car. They were a common sight in Demesia, but only owned by the very wealthy. Vampires, mostly, in the city, because the roads were better in Demesia than anywhere else in Mazyr, and she didn't seem like the type to willingly get into a vehicle with one of his kind. Which meant she truly did need what she'd asked for—money and protection. All for Omnia.

Aidan's fingers tightened on the steering wheel at the thought. He'd tasked Baelin and his team with Omnia as a priority, seeking out each member to take them down one by one as soon as he gave the command. Something told Aidan he was going to need all the leverage he could get with Rae. All of this had been too easy, but he hadn't figured out what she wanted yet, or what she truly stood to gain.

She was silent beside him, eyes on the city as it blurred outside the window, the streetlights casting flickering shadows over the exposed skin of her thigh. She was a means to an end, and there was only one way Aidan could see this ending. That he had to repeat that thought to himself as the slit of her dress slid higher, he chose to ignore.

Baelin had let the other council members know they were running late, but Aidan already knew as they neared the restaurant, his PAD buzzing relentlessly in his pocket, that it was Lia calling him and considered what he should tell Rae about the other Provident. Lia would no doubt try to cause a scene. Sysmus too.

Rae had said it was the ISA working with Torrin to carry out their tests, but Aidan

didn't believe it. She hadn't seemed to, either, and had only let a pulse of disappointment taint the air around her when they'd discussed it briefly earlier.

He pulled up outside Cosia, the soft lights illuminating Rae's face as she looked out over the docks.

"Pretend we're into each other, don't get eaten. Any other instructions for me?" She adjusted her silver bangles, and he wondered what spells she'd enchanted them with. They were different from the ones he'd seen her wearing before; most were very fine, some twisting, some were several pieces fused together, all her own creations, and he found himself admiring the artistry of them.

"Don't take those off," he said, flicking his chin at her wrist as she reached for the door and the lock flicked up beneath her touch.

"No problem, Vam—Vale."

"You might actually have to call me by my name tonight."

Rae made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. "Absolutely not. It'll be our cute couple's quirk. Farren and Vale. We sound like a bad detective duo." She clapped her hands together and shot him a smile, eyes sparkling. "You can make up the rest."

She didn't wait for his response, she was already leaving the vehicle, and Aidan swore under his breath as he exited the car to join her.

Cosia belonged to Sysmus. The grovelling bastard had practically begged for the dinner to be held there, Baelin had told Aidan earlier. Rae made an approving noise as she took in the venue, and he slid an arm around her waist and paused. "I might need to do more than just put an arm around you tonight."



“You old romantic, you.” She looked up at him and winked. “Are you asking for my consent?”

Aidan held her stare as he waited. The slightest blush crept into her cheeks, and she dipped her chin an almost imperceptible amount.

A steward opened the doors, but Aidan ignored them as he positioned Rae in front of him, his body flush against hers, one hand splaying possessively across her ribs. If they were going to sell this, he needed to treat her like a Vampire Odalik, and that meant putting her first in every part of the night ahead. He’d had her round ass pressed up against him back in the cell, but now the backs of her thick thighs pressed against his, her full figure soft and warm beneath his touch.

“That had better not be your dick, Vale,” she murmured over her shoulder, her chin tilting up so her gaze met his. The corner of her mouth quirked as if she were fighting back a smile, and her pulse ticked in her throat. He answered by wrapping her hair around his fist in silent warning, easing her head back an inch further. Rae didn’t resist, and he saw the challenge in her eyes, the opportunity to screw this up before they’d even set foot inside the venue.

The steward cleared her throat at the door.

“Just a little harmless role play,” Rae explained without taking her eyes off Aidan. “He lets me pretend I’m the one with all the power and then I let him fuck me senseless. Win-win.”

The steward paled as she disappeared through the doors, babbling over her intention to announce their arrival, and Aidan forced down his rising temper as Rae eased her hair from his fist, a smile tugging at her lips.

“What? That’s what they all want to hear, isn’t it? Now she’ll go and tell her

colleagues and they'll all tell their bosses, and your entire council will know in about three seconds how great our sex life is." She smoothed her hair but didn't step away from him, and he knew she was going to be pushing his buttons all fucking night.

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The doors swung open before Aidan could reply, Lia's PAD gripped tightly in her hand as her attention fell on Rae.

"My lord," the Provident said flatly, dipping into an awkward curtsy. Fuck.

"Thadlia," Aidan said, a quiet warning in his tone. "This is Rae Farren. My Odalik."

Lia rose, her attention fixed on Rae. "Blessings." She took a step closer, then hesitated. "I'll be just a moment; Sysmus and the others are waiting for you." A heartbeat too long passed before she added, "My lord."

Rae's shoulders rose and fell in a deep exhale where they pressed against his chest. "Let's get this over with." She didn't hesitate, just made her way up the stairs to the doors that swung open at her approach, and Aidan kept pace, close enough to still feel the heat from her body, wishing she'd let him into her fucking head so he could make sure she didn't fuck this up for the both of them.

As if she knew, Rae paused, reached back for his hand, and laced her fingers through his as she tilted her head up to say something. Aidan leaned in and Rae practically melted into him, her free hand reaching up to tug at his hair, her lips on his before he realised what she was doing.

"Play nice," she whispered against his mouth before she pulled away.

He was so fucked.

When Rae turned away from him and he licked the taste of her from his lips, canines

fighting to extend against his best intentions, three of his kind stood waiting.

A little gasp from Rae. “I’m so embarrassed, I didn’t see you all there,” the human said with more coyness than he thought her capable of uttering, the hand she’d laced through his squeezing his fingers once. Aidan felt the corner of his mouth twitch as he took in the other Vampires’ surprised faces.

“My lord,” Sysmus said at the head of the group.

“My Odalik addressed you.” Aidan tilted his head to one side, sliding his hand around Rae’s waist and lowering his mouth to her ear. “What shall I do with him?”

Sysmus paled, but Rae merely clicked her tongue. “You know violence before dinner ruins my appetite.” A pat of her hand against his. “Shall we?”

“I’ve had the staff prepare a little of everything for you, Miss Farren,” Sysmus explained as he led the way to their table. The venue was booked out exclusively for this. Candles and white draping blooms covered almost every surface. If Rae was impressed, she was hiding it well.

“YourVampirestaff?” she asked all too casually.

Sysmus choked on his words as he fought to explain. “They’re excellent cooks, trained with human chefs in the Southern Quarter.”

“I’m only teasing. Smells delicious.”

Lorsan and Kuron, Lorsan’s Ascendant, shared a look beside Sysmus, and Aidan resisted the urge to press a palm to his face. Instead, he made brief introductions as they passed an ice sculpture almost as tall as Rae, five sirens tangled together with arms and fins and mouths.

Sysmus had always had a penchant for needlessly extravagant displays of wealth, and this time, Aidan felt Rae's disapproval. Food shortages occurred sometimes amongst the humans, and an ice sculpture was a waste of money no matter what angle you looked at it from.

Mercifully, Lia was already at the table as they approached, which meant she'd left via the front door before entirely on purpose, as Aidan had suspected. At least she didn't intend to show him up further by returning to the table after he'd introduced Rae. The insult would have been too severe not to punish before the other council members.

Rae played along as he made brief introductions to some of the guests—over forty Vampires were in attendance—but she was gracious with each of his council members and their Ascendants, witty with some, eliciting a laugh from the table on more than one occasion as stewards and restaurant staff moved around them.

Baelin usually sat to his right, but tonight Aidan had opted to position his Ascendant on the other side of Rae as a buffer. Quinn sat at Baelin's elbow, just behind his and Rae's chairs, and Rae had let out a squeal of delight the moment she'd seen the beast. That had seemed to satisfy Baelin, and the pair of them were quickly laughing and murmuring between them as Aidan answered questions from his councillors.

If she leaves this table, he started to tell Baelin when Sysmus had been talking for far too long.

I know, I know. I won't let her out of my sight, but honestly, she's been the perfect Odalik. I imagine being sat at a table full of Providents with excellent hearing and excellent mental abilities might be a little alarming for the head of Omnia, but she's taking it in her stride.

Aidan shot his Ascendant a glance, but he met Rae's eyes instead. That's precisely the

part that concerns me.

Rae gave him another dazzling smile as she laughed at something Baelin had said, one hand sliding back to drop a piece of meat on the floor for Quinn. Barely thirty minutes into their meal and she had them both wrapped around her little finger. At least part of this night was going well.

Further down the table, Lia tapped a knife against her wine glass, her chair scraping across the floor as she rose to make a toast.

Shit. He took it back. Of course she wasn't going to let the evening pass without making a scene.

Aidan held his breath as the Provident began her speech.

Chapter fourteen

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:03 am*

Thadlia held Rae's stare with the same fervour she'd been downing the contents of her glass for the duration of the meal. The same zeal with which she tried to access Rae's mind, even as she spewed her empty words for the rest of the table to hear.

Rae had been more than prepared for each of the council members to attempt it at least once over the course of the night, despite what loyalty they all pledged to their Lord. But she'd felt nothing, until now, and realised that perhaps Thadlia was more powerful than the others. A little more cunning in her approach.

Rae had endured worse. And she could keep Aidan out, so the Provident who was somehow still blathering about the joy their union brought to the council was merely an irritation. Aidan seemed equally unimpressed, and Rae knew, because she was familiar with the feel of his magic now, that he'd been practically dancing around her thoughts since they'd set foot in Cosia to offer some sort of... protection, Rae supposed. So that his secrets were kept safe.

A smart move, but unnecessary.

Thadlia looked at Aidan as if she didn't know whether to fuck him or murder him. She probably intended to do both. Had tried both, already, no doubt. Rae couldn't say she blamed the female.

"To all you seek. Beatus vita." Thadlia ended her speech, and the other Vampires chimed in, glasses dutifully raised to their Lord. Blessed life.

Aidan rested his hand over Rae's, and she thought of how he'd unfurled her fingers from the door handle in the car earlier. How he'd leaned across to fasten her seatbelt,

and somehow had managed not to brush his body against hers despite how close they were, despite the size of him. How he'd pinned her with his silver gaze, the scent of him washing over her. How she'd let herself indulge, just for a second, in thinking he looked better in his suit than anyone had any right to.

Rae wasn't above admitting to herself that if she wasn't there for a job, she'd have told him to forgo the meal entirely. She watched him now as he silently raised her hand to his lips, diamond eyes flashing as he pressed a kiss to her knuckles before she remembered the others were watching them.

He could make them all believe anything he wanted, so this—this—was just to fuck with her. To remind her that he could take this all away in the blink of an eye.

But she was game.

“Tell me,” Rae murmured without breaking Aidan's gaze; no doubt the rest of the table was listening to her every word despite the volume of her voice. “Will you continue to take her to your bed?”

Aidan's fingers tightened a fraction on her hand as he lowered it back to the table, though she knew he could have crushed bone if he chose to. “Vampires are faithful to their Odaliks until death.”

The implication was loud and clear. Until her death, which could likely be imminent. Still, Rae didn't let it fluster her. “You honour me.” She eased her hand out from under his to cup it against the side of his face and leaned in close to murmur against his lips. “Until death.”

His gaze dipped to her mouth, but she pulled away to feed another scrap to Quinn, her new best friend and probably the only good thing to come from this whole shitshow.



Baelin stifled a grin beside her. “Rae and Bae,” he’d said when he’d introduced himself properly after the ceremony the night before. “We were made for each other.” That had earned a glare from Aidan, and Rae had decided she liked his Ascendant immediately.

For the most part, the conversation around the table had been dull, nothing of any use to her or Omnia, and Rae had been content to eat the food, which, as it turned out, was rather good, and chat quietly with Baelin as Aidan fenced questions from his council. All updates had been about the Fae presence at the border, and Aidan had seemed disinterested in all of it.

“The Witch king is dead, and the Fae king is on his death bed,” the ass-kissing Provident Aidan had introduced as Sysmus said over his glass of, well, blood, Rae presumed, though she’d made an effort not to peek too closely at anyone’s beverages. Aidan had nursed the same glass of visk for the whole meal so far and had even eaten a little of the food laid out for them, unlike the others. “We can capitalise on this time of uncertainty,” Sysmus added.

“Alethea has been missing for a decade, and Casius hasn’t stopped sulking since,” another of the council members interjected.

It was common knowledge the Witch princess had jilted the Fae prince ten years prior. An arranged marriage, as most political marriages were, and one which would have likely ended in misery.

“You’d sulk too if you were publicly humiliated, Lorsan,” Thadlia said over her glass.

The Witches had been far more secretive since the disappearance of their princess. There had once been talk of an alliance with the Vampires; the union between Witches and Fae was intended to be a bridge between the Orders, but the Witches had

closed off all communication after their princess went missing.

Rae thought of Aidan's words from the night before, how he'd seemed to believe that Demesia, even the continent, truly could be something better than what it was. Perhaps the Witches could have secured some kind of an alliance between the Orders as they'd intended. But Rae knew better. The Witch king had been a bastard, would never have intended to follow through on his promises, and Mazyr was better off without his lies.

The Witch prince, however...

There was a true opportunity for peace. For something better, as Aidan had put it, though she hadn't yet worked out what the Vampire Lord stood to gain from it and didn't doubt that there would be something in it for him. Everything Aidan had done had been to get him to his position, to secure his status.

"The younger sister would make an excellent queen," Thadlia added.

Rae was inclined to agree. Casius had been nothing but an overbearing prick when she'd met him, not that he would remember; he'd been so drunk he could barely stand. "Fae culture dictates it's the queen's firstborn child who inherits the throne. Casius is the rightful heir regardless of his ineptitude. Cheers to another long and painful reign by a male with more gold than sense." She downed the contents of her glass and excused herself to a few quiet chuckles from the table.

With the weight of so much attention on her, Aidan's included, she needed some air. The great room was becoming stuffy, the Vampires louder and louder as they knocked back more of their rikoli, the blue liquid constantly being refilled from decanters by the waiting staff.

Quinn padded along silently beside her as she ignored the passing glances from the

table, sinking her fingers into his fur in silent thanks as snippets of the conversation carried to her.

“Alethea can’t run forever,” Rae heard one of the bloodsuckers say as she neared the end of the great table. How little credit they gave the young Witch.

“Don’t be a fool,” another Vampire shot back. “She wouldn’t have lasted more than a year without her father’s protection.”

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The table broke into laughter as Rae neared a steward. “Is there somewhere I can get some fresh air? Somewhere quiet?”

The female smiled politely. “This way, please.”

All the talk of Witches and Fae, when there had still been no word from Nim or Reed. She was out there somewhere, and the thought of her in a cell, or worse, wasn’t something Rae could let herself dwell on tonight, choosing instead to believe Reed had whisked her away for a few days for more of his romantic nonsense. It was just the type of gesture Nim loved, the kind of spontaneous suggestion she was always babbling about as she worked.

Rae spun her thumb ring with her forefinger and willed herself not to worry. She’d opted to leave her PAD at the manor, reluctant to risk communicating with her recruits under Aidan’s watchful gaze, and besides, so far she had learnt absolutely nothing that was of use to her. None of the Vampires mentioned the testing that was going on across the city or the missing citizens, which meant they could be working against Aidan too. That came as no surprise to her either.

The steward opened a balcony door, and Rae stepped out into the night air with a quiet thank you, Quinn’s head passing her hip where he flanked her side. Beyond the balcony, lights from nearby buildings illuminated the docks, a few boats bobbing up and down against the current. Demesia had long, arid summers. Too long, in Rae’s opinion, but it meant the air was pleasant even when darkness had long since fallen over the city.

“I’m sorry I can’t give you five minutes of peace.”

She didn't need to turn around to know Baelin had followed her. Aidan had probably commanded it the moment she'd left the table. Rae held back a sigh as she turned to face him, though, in truth, she didn't mind. She could see why Aidan had chosen him for his Ascendant, and it told her just as much about Aidan's character as it did Baelin's. She clicked her tongue at his apology, rolled her eyes but shot him a grin. "I thought that might be the case. Can I borrow your PAD?"

Baelin gave Quinn a scratch on the head, his soft brown eyes darting up to meet Rae's. "There's been no sign of her, Rae."

Rae questioned whether she should tell him how important Nim was, tell him just how much the Witch meant to her. She held out her hand instead. "It'll make me feel better."

He slid a hand into his suit jacket, the PAD lighting up as he pulled it out, frowning at the message. Rae knew at once something was wrong; a lock of dark hair fell across Bae's eyes that he didn't bother to swipe away. "Fuck."

"What is it?"

"Stay here. I'll be right back." He didn't leave through the door, vaulting over the balcony wall instead without waiting for her response.

Rae leaned forwards just in time to see him land his manoeuvre, murmuring into an earpiece. Now that she was at the perimeter of the venue, she could feel the wards again, just as when she'd entered with Aidan earlier, but something about them had changed. She raised a tentative hand into the air in front of her just as Quinn growled, leaping up onto the balcony wall and following Baelin into the dark.

Even Rae knew better than to stand and wait out there alone. She reached for the pencil dagger strapped to her thigh as the balcony doors opened behind her, moving

the blade out of sight.

Kuron, Lorsan's Ascendant, flashed her a smile, canines extended to their full length. Rae didn't need a second warning. "Aidan asked that I remain with you until... well..."—a crash sounded from within the restaurant, shouts and cries following it, and the Provident arched a brow—"things quieten down."

He took a step closer, and Rae chanced a look over her shoulder to see if there was any way she could climb down to ground level. She'd never make the jump as Baelin had, certainly not in her current attire.

"We took bets, you know." Kuron stalked closer still, and Rae ran through her options. One, try to fumble some excuse about her feet hurting and remove her heels. Too slow and clumsy. Two, ask him to remove them, but the thought of him touching her made her want to gag. "On how long he's going to keep you alive."

Three, let him take the final step to put him within arm's reach, and hope she could stab him in a few choice places to give her a couple of seconds head start on throwing herself over the balcony. The fall would not land well. Fuck. Rae remembered to laugh as dryly as possible. "Who's to say I won't be the one to get bored first?"

Kuron closed the last of the distance between them, and Rae stepped into him, bringing the blade to his throat.

The scent of rikoli and blood hung heavy on his breath. "What would your lord think of you raising a blade to one of his councilmen?"

"He's not my lord, and last I checked, you're Lorsan's bitch."

Rae half expected Kuron to lunge, but something in his expression crumpled, canines receding into his mouth, his breathing growing heavy.

The balcony doors swung open and Aidan strode through, sliding an arm around Rae's waist and tucking her into his side, his hand blazing through the flimsy fabric of her dress. "My Odalik can do whatever she likes with her blade," he said far too casually. "I gave it to her."

Rae didn't lower her weapon. Didn't acknowledge Aidan's arrival or the way her heart hammered in her chest, but Aidan carefully rested a hand over hers, unfurled her fingers, and took the dagger, examining it closely, because he certainly hadn't given it to her. Kuron hadn't moved, a sheen of sweat coating his forehead and his skin paling as he watched them both.

"A gift," Aidan said darkly, "that she was to use however she saw fit. Perhaps you should demonstrate for us instead, so that she doesn't have to ruin her beautiful dress."

Kuron's hand shot out for the blade, palm upturned, fingers curling around the hilt as Aidan handed over the dagger.

Rae swallowed.

"Where shall we have him demonstrate, lux mea?" Light of mine. "With his tongue, for speaking to my Odalik with such obvious disdain? With a hand, for coming within touching distance of what's mine? Or somewhere lower? Something he's more likely to miss."

Kuron moved the blade like a puppet on a string, the tip slicing the skin beside his lip, trailing down his arm to his other hand, moving across to press against his groin. A pained groan escaped him as he pushed the dagger against his trousers, and Rae watched, frozen somewhere between fear and disgust as his hand shook, as if he were trying to fight against Aidan's hold on his mind.

“If only we had more time,” Aidan said dryly. Rae looked up to meet his gaze, half remembering he still had his arm around her as Kuron collapsed, the blade clanging to the floor.



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She had known what she was getting herself into when she agreed to be his Odalik. Had seen him kill the Witch with nothing more than his bare hands, but knowing what Aidan was capable of with both his physical and Provident skills against the other Orders was one thing. Experiencing him using his abilities on his own kind was something else entirely.

He frowned at her as he reached for the blade, wiping the bloodied tip on Kuron's suit and handing it back. "We need to leave." He glanced out into the darkness of the dock as if something had drawn his attention. "Now."

### Chapter fifteen

Rae was afraid. Of him. She'd only let it slip for a fraction of a second, but Aidan had felt it, and though he was no stranger to the feel of another's fear, Rae's was unwelcome. Unpleasant, though he had no reason for it to be otherwise.

He held her hand as he led the way back into the restaurant, because he suspected that was as much contact from him as she was willing to endure. Torrin and his soldiers were on their way, and Aidan needed to get her out of there.

Rae sucked in a breath as he called out to Baelin in his thoughts. No response. Aidan ignored the twist of apprehension for his Ascendant as he stepped around Lorsan's lifeless body. The old Provident had been working with Sysmus—Aidan had been certain the moment they'd arrived—and there was still no sign of Gades, Sysmus's Ascendant, Lorsan, and Kuron flanking him like dogs. They were fools for thinking they'd have enough protection in numbers. Protection from him.

He'd allowed Lorsan's wife to flee with the rest of the council, though Sysmus was nowhere to be seen. Most of the Ascendants had been Gerentis. One, a water wielder, and she'd used the ice sculptures to attack the other council members, to attack him, shattering the sculptures and honing them into weapons. Aidan had admired her creativity, but he hadn't allowed any of her ice picks to hit their marks. Though he'd taken no pleasure in killing her, she lay dead at their feet now too.

He knew what Rae would see and what she would assume. The quiet female who had barely uttered a word throughout the meal, dead by his hand, without reason. It would do him no favours in earning her trust, but he'd stopped a far greater fight from breaking out with that one death. Perhaps it was better to have her fear than her trust anyway.

She tried to pull her hand away the moment they passed the Gerentis, but Aidan held firm. "Don't," he warned her. "The alternative is that I carry you to my car."

Sysmus had warded Cosia. Aidan had felt it the moment they'd pulled up out front, but he had been so focused on protecting Rae from the council's probing attacks that he hadn't been paying close enough attention to the other Provident. Until Rae left the table, that is.

And he'd heard the bastard's intentions at the same moment he'd felt Baelin's alarm, the same moment his Ascendant had left Rae alone on the balcony. Rae yanked her hand from his and glared up at him, but Aidan didn't have time to argue with her, not with everything going on outside. He threw her over his shoulder, ignoring her protests and the abuse she hurled at him.

"Shut up, Farren," he murmured as he turned down the corridor towards the kitchen, focusing on the bodies moving around the building. The Vampires moving away, the Fae and the humans moving closer, the few tangled together in the middle.

“Unstrap my shoes, asshole,” Rae whispered, squirming to reach for them.

Gunshots sounded outside, and Rae stilled. Aidan reached into his jacket pocket and handed her his gun. One clip, but it would have to do.

“I’ve zero reservations about shooting you in the ass right now,” she mumbled as he unfastened her shoes, her skin soft beneath his touch, and set her back down on the carpeted floor. “Do that again and I’ll shoot you in the dick.” With swift precision, she slid a bangle from her wrist, looped the hem of her dress through it, and knotted it above her knees against her left thigh, the gun aimed at his crotch the entire time.

“Noted.”

“How many?” she asked, flicking her chin at the gun.

How many surrounding the building. “More than thirty.” Far more closing in on them, but he couldn’t reach them with his Provident abilities like he should have been able to.

“Can’t you do your thing?”

“The wards...” He hated to admit it, but something about them, they were making it difficult to track what was going on outside.

Rae sighed. “Second time this week I’m going to save your sorry ass, Vale. You owe me.” She pressed a hand to the wall beside her and winked. “Keep them busy for me.” Her eyes closed, one hand still holding the gun, and she began to murmur one of her spells.

Two humans entered the wards via the balcony they’d been standing on moments before, and Aidan made swift work of both of them. They were dead by the time both

sets of feet hit the wooden floorboards. Three more came through the glass roof above the dining area, and the foundations of the building began to shake as Rae's murmuring quickened, her eyes flicking open as a group of Horns smashed through the front doors. Aidan had them open fire on each other, taking a step closer to Rae as plates and glasses smashed beyond the doors to the kitchen.

They were sitting ducks in their current location, but at least there were no windows on either side of the corridor. The only door behind them led to the kitchen, within the wards, and Aidan could safely deal with anyone who entered them.

The building groaned, and Rae began to shake. Outside, Aidan knew they were surrounded, but the wards were still blocking him, their minds shielded by whatever magic had been laced into the wards. The building groaned again—no, Rae groaned, her head pressing against the wall, her chest heaving with her laboured breaths, and at the same moment the wards shattered, the shield protecting everyone outside the building dissolved to nothing.

Aidan reached for every Fae and human mind in possession of a gun and pulled, crushing the very essence of all of them with a single thought.

Rae swayed beside him, and with a curse, Aidan lifted her into his arms. "You can shoot me later, Farren."

"I'll hold you to that." She patted the gun where she'd angled it ahead of them, though he had no idea how she was still holding onto it. Whatever she'd just done, she'd almost knocked herself out cold in the process.

"What are you?" he asked for the second time since meeting her, shouldering the kitchen doors open and pausing once to cast his Provident abilities a little wider.

Rae choked on a laugh. "The biggest fucking headache you've ever had the pleasure

of experiencing.”

He glanced down at her in his arms. “I can see that.” Strands of hair clung to her face where sweat coated her skin, and without thinking, he brushed it away for her.

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“I guess I owed you one for Kuron,” she murmured, eyelashes fluttering as she fought to keep her eyes open.

“We both know you had it covered.” And if they’d had more time, he’d have done far more to Kuron than the state they’d left the fucker in. For what the bastard had intended to do to Rae.

Her quiet laugh vibrated against his chest as he made his way through the kitchens, calling out to his Ascendant.

Baelin.

I’m fine. Rae?

She’s alright. We’re on our way home. Alright was an overstatement. She was barely conscious in his arms, and he tried to convince himself the concern he felt was only for her knowledge of his missing magic.

I’ll have Orion move out. See you there.

A vehicle spun out of the parking area as he carried Rae towards his car, though the Vampires within it were of no concern to him. His car unlocked from its proximity to his PAD as he approached, another modification of Baelin’s and one he would have been stuck without since he’d handed the key to a steward soon after they’d arrived.

“How does it work?” Rae all but whispered as he lowered her into the passenger seat, pulling the seatbelt over her to fasten her in.

“What?” She’d barely moved, and he took his jacket off and laid it over her as she looked up at him and shivered, one hand still firmly around his gun, close enough she could shoot him clean through the chest if she wanted to. She tried to swipe more hair away with the other, but he caught her hand, easing the strands away for her and testing the temperature of her skin. Feverish.

“The whole letting you in my head thing. I don’t have Provident abilities. You can just pop into my thoughts, but I can’t pop into yours,” she said through a yawn, eyes closed.

He shut the passenger door and slid into the driver's seat, a quick glance in her direction as the engine started. “You’ll do the exact opposite to me.”

“And that is?”

“I can hear every thought of every human and Order within eight blocks from here if I let my shields down. You included, if you’ll let me in.” Aidan didn’t let his guard down the entire drive home, maintaining his speed as much as possible without rattling Rae around in her seat.

“So you’re saying I don’t need Provident abilities because you’ll just have permanent access to my thoughts if I allow it?” A huff of air. “I think we both know that’s never going to happen.”

“Opposites, remember? I’m opening up a space in something that usually keeps others out, you’re opening up a space to let me in.”

“That sounds like exactly the same thing.”

“So you understand then? It’s a space only we can occupy, and no one else. You don’t need Provident abilities because I’ll always be able to hear you when you want

me to.”

She was quiet for a moment and then, “Does the eight block rule apply?”

Aidan chuckled. “No. One on one, I can speak mind to mind much further distances.”

“How far?”

“Further than you’re ever going to be from me.”

She was silent after that, but he remained close to the perimeter of her thoughts the entire drive home, and if she felt him, she didn’t argue. Her mind seemed intact, and he still couldn’t get in, but he’d never seen anyone bring down a ward, let alone multiple, and of that magnitude.

Rae waved him off when he tried to help her from the car outside the manor, but she clung to his jacket as Shaw opened the door for them.

Not a word, Shaw, Aidan told him.

Of course not, my lord.

Rae paused at the foot of the stairs leading to the bedrooms, one hand clutching the rail, her exhaustion so thick he didn’t know how she was still standing.

“Are we going to have to break the no carrying rule again?” he asked quietly, his hand brushing hers on the rail as he took a step closer. Rae tilted her head up to look at him, and he tracked the way her tongue darted across her bottom lip.

“I’m still holding the gun,” she said with a small smile, though he knew she’d turned on the safety when they got in the car.



Aidan took it from her gently, and she let him, before turning away and heading up the stairs to her room, his jacket still around her shoulders. “Goodnight, Vale,” she murmured without looking back.

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“Goodnight, Farren.” Aidan waited at the foot of the stairs until he heard her bedroom door click shut, until her shower turned on and the door closed as she stepped inside.

He moved down the hall to his study, pouring himself a glass of visk and knocking it back in one before rolling up his shirt sleeves. He’d known the night would likely end this way, but it hadn’t been without its surprises.

Sysmus was a given, but Lorsan and Kuron... and Rae. He heard the shower shut off. The door closing as she stepped out. He hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d told her he could feel every space she occupied. He knew the moment she climbed into her bed, still wrapped in her towels, and he let out a breath as she settled into the pillows, sleepy but fine.

Aidan reached for the decanter, pouring himself another glass.

You looked good tonight, by the way, Rae’s voice said in the small space he’d made just for her.

Aidan smiled despite himself. So did you.

### Chapter sixteen

Rae hadn’t slept for long. She didn’t want to see Aidan on another exploratory wander through the manor, not with how things had gone down at Cosia. Not when he would have questions that she was too tired to answer.

She was stuck inside, but that hadn’t stopped her from giving orders to Omnia

recruits, and despite the questionable morality of it, asking them to follow up on Nim's whereabouts in the hopes that her friend was taking that romantic trip away somewhere with Reed. The heavy weight that had wedged itself under her ribs told her otherwise, and Rae needed a plan.

Confined to her room, she pulled a bench pin from her bag and clamped it to the dressing table, dragging the bedside lamp over and securing her leather underneath. Pulling out the drawer and pinning the edges of the skin to the underside of the table was far from ideal, but she'd worked in worse setups. She thought of the first time she'd explained the importance of catching every last scrap of metal to Nim as they worked, how even the fine filings could be melted again and turned into something usable.

"Lemel," Nim had repeated, the word used to describe the dust left behind after piercing the metal with a saw blade. Then Rae had shown her friend how to melt the scrap and repurpose it, just as Cillian had shown her.

"You're a good teacher, you know," the little Witch had informed her with a soft smile, and it had cracked something in Rae's carefully constructed armour that day to hear her friend's words, to see the way Nim's face lit up at everything she'd learnt. Witches were often reluctant to share their teachings, to pass their knowledge beyond their covens, something that had stilted their growth for many years, and it didn't just extend to magic. Nim would have felt that just as acutely as Rae did growing up.

She shoved the memory to the back of her thoughts. Given the hour, she opted for filing, a relatively quiet process. Aidan didn't sleep much, but Rae had no idea about Baelin and Shaw's sleep schedule, and the goddess knew who else was inside the manor. Evander and Roak seemed nice enough, but Orion said very little. There were likely at least half a dozen more Vampires within the compound at any given moment.

She worked her way down through her files before moving on to sandpaper, roughest to smoothest, working slowly at the silver cuff until it reached a mirror shine. It was a much faster process with the polisher, but Rae loved to slow it all down and go back to basics whenever sleep evaded her, needed to, to keep her thoughts from racing.

She was restless, her body aching from sitting on the hard stool, so she set her tools aside and paused by her door to listen for any signs of Orion before heading to the natatorium. Perhaps it was foolish to wander, but Rae wasn't going to miss her second night in a row with a chance for a late-night swim. Or early morning. Dawn probably wasn't far off.

Quinn sat waiting as she rounded the end of the corridor, and Rae huffed a quiet laugh as the dog yawned at her. "Did he make you wait here or do you just like me that much?" She scratched his head in greeting. "Don't tell me. Let me believe I have an adorable bodyguard."

He grumbled in response as he nudged her hand.

"Thought so," Rae murmured.

Further down the next corridor, she could hear Baelin talking quietly, but not with who. More Vampires, she suspected, which was just perfect for her. She'd known it wouldn't be easy living in the Lord's manor and had known the risks, but Aidan's willingness to let her into his home had been too good to pass up, his arrogance too grating. Her intel had told her the security usually remained outside the manor grounds, which meant whatever happened at Cosia had Aidan worried. She recalled the way he'd carried her to the car. How he'd offered to carry her to her room. Protecting his asset, she reminded herself.

"He mentioned the other facilities, but..." a voice Rae hadn't heard before said.

“Aidan got tired of waiting?” Baelin asked.

The silence told Rae everything she needed to know. She almost tipped a vase, Quinn’s nose nudging against her thigh as she righted it, as if the mutt was telling her to be careful. She stifled a laugh, but the thought of precisely what Aidan’s impatience might look like quickly dried up any traces of humour.

There was the matter of Zeke’s data that she couldn’t access, though not through lack of trying, and whether that might have saved someone from Aidan’s torture. Even Miller, her best tech operative, hadn’t been able to access it, but she still had other options to exhaust. Rae always had other options.

She pressed on to the natatorium before her thoughts grew too loud inside her skull, before she allowed any trace of guilt to surface. The doors were unlocked, which was just as well because she was far too drained for more spells. Warm air hit her as she made her way inside, holding a door open for Quinn to ease past.

Water reflected off the ceiling, though she couldn’t see it yet. Mosaic tiles in blues and greens lined the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. Lush plants overflowed from beds running along the wall just above her head. Ordinarily, she’d have opted to shake off some of her unease at her favourite bar in the Western Quarter, but Rae pulled off her shirt and let it fall to the floor behind her as she followed the curve of the tiled wall to an area with showers.

She peeled off her sweats and left them where they fell, the spray turning on automatically as soon as she entered the shower area. She’d pushed hard earlier, harder than she had in a while, and she still felt hollowed out, likely would for days unless she could tap a source.

The immortals outside the perimeter of the restaurant could have been the same ones responsible for Nim’s disappearance, and in that moment, Rae hadn’t cared what

suffering Aidan would inflict upon them, only that he did. That had meant bringing down the wards for him to reach their minds, to keep one of them alive for questioning.

Rae didn't let herself dwell on how someone capable of so much brutality had held her so carefully, touched her so gently, forcing herself instead to remember all the reasons she was in this predicament in the first place.

The same feeling that chased her, night and day, slid along her bones. She held her face to the water, willed it to wash the feeling away, but nothing would. She'd tried. Diving into her work. Visk. Weed. Sex. Nothing worked.

Quinn followed her as the spray ceased, padding along quietly beside her as she took in the pool. A ceiling painted like a starry sky stretched above it, tall arched windows on one side, the pool so large it curved in different directions, some parts leading into dark corners full of more lush foliage. For a house full of Vampires, the manor contained an unusually large number of unprotected windows. More of the Lord's arrogance, Rae suspected.

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A small waterfall flowed off a rock garden, and she hummed quietly to herself in approval as she dove into the warm water, breath held, exploring beneath the surface for every turn in the pool. Water had once been a punishment, but Rae had learned to turn it into a comfort. To remind herself that she wasn't just existing; she was alive. Nim had reminded her of that too. Had given her a reason to show up every day, even when her thoughts were too loud, too much, too messy.

A bark registered over the sound of the falls and Rae broke the surface to find Quinn at the edge of the pool beside her, dancing from one foot to another. "Relax," she told him, swiping water away from her eyes. "I can hold my breath for a little while longer than that."

"Should I ask why?" Baelin's voice echoed quietly through the natatorium.

The answer wasn't pleasant, and she didn't feel like a heart-to-heart tonight, as much as Baelin had put her at ease back in Cosia. In truth, he reminded her of Seylan, and hearing the Vampire crack jokes at Cosia to make her feel comfortable had made her homesick for the first time in as long as she could remember.

"I'm part Siren," Rae said with a mocking grin as Baelin rounded a mosaicked column, running a hand over Quinn's sleek head.

"A likely possibility, given what you did tonight." He crouched at the water's edge, one hand swirling in the water, watching the ripples he made. "There's no news about her yet," he said quietly.

Rae resisted the urge to swim closer, just to hear more information about her friend.

“Do you want what’s best for your lord, or do you truly care if she lives or dies?” she asked, treading water as she swam closer.

“Can’t it be both?” Baelin glanced up, a boyish smile on his face, and Rae decided to believe him. “He’s in here a lot, by the way. It’s kind of his safe space, but don’t tell him I told you that.” He waved a hand at the pool.

“Why are you telling me that?”

“Because he told you he’d give you space here, but I don’t see why you can’t both peacefully coexist until this arrangement reaches its conclusion.” Another of his boyish smirks.

Rae scoffed. “Until one of you tries to kill me, you mean?”

“I’m fairly certain that’s the opp—”

“Baelin.” There was no mistaking the command in Aidan’s tone. For someone who’d just tortured a prisoner, if Rae’s guess was correct, he looked surprisingly unruffled as he joined Baelin at the side of the pool. Then again, he could have gotten whatever information he needed without lifting so much as a finger. Dispatched a life without even breaking a sweat.

Baelin shook off his hand and pushed to his feet. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” A flick of his chin. “Quinn.”

The beast didn’t move.

“Traitor. Have it your way.” Baelin winked in Rae’s direction before he turned to Aidan. “Good morning, my lord.” And with that, he left them alone.



Aidan ignored his Ascendant. Ignored Rae and lay down beside the pool on a ledge that jutted out from one of the columns before lighting a joint. Quinn leapt up to sit beside him.

“Would you like me to arrange a lifeguard? Quinn’s a strong swimmer, though I don’t think he can hold his breath for... close to ten minutes, I believe you were down there for.”

Rae’s attention fell to the hand Aidan ran over Quinn’s coat and the tattoos on his forearms where he’d rolled his shirt up to the elbows. How quickly she’d forgotten he knew her every movement in this house. Her every breath. But Rae wouldn’t let him latch on to any emotions, tucking everything away as carefully as she could. Even now, with the small space she’d allowed for him in her mind, it was like she could feel him everywhere. In every breath that passed through her lungs, in every push of her hand against the water surrounding her.

He’d been kind to her earlier, but she wouldn’t let that cloud her judgement, not when he needed something from her. “Quinn’s his daemon?” she asked, dismissing his question. Rae knew a little about the Elymas Vampires, but Baelin was the first she’d met, rare as they were. Which made Quinn her first daemon. He seemed to spend more time with anyone other than Baelin, from what she’d observed since meeting him.

A hum of agreement from Aidan.

“Anything I should know?” Rae floated on her back, mimicking Aidan’s position, wishing she could have a drag on his joint because her swim certainly hadn’t been the quiet escape she’d hoped it would be.

“Other than the fact that he and the dog are basically one mind at this point? No.”

That answered every other question she'd had. Rae still preferred to hold onto her adorable bodyguard story. For now. She swam closer, settled onto the underwater bench that lined the edge of the pool, and reached out a hand for the joint. "Do you always have a joint or a glass of visk in your hand?"

Aidan didn't look down, just lowered the hand with the joint for her. He hadn't been lying when he said he could feel her then.

"You file metal at all hours of the day and night, make scratches with lead onto parchment. I have this."

"Valid," Rae said on an exhale. Rae had both those things too. Had whatever she could get her hands on in an attempt to silence the noise in her head.

Another hum.

She passed the joint back up to him. "You ate the food earlier."

Silence.

“The human food.”

A rumble of laughter, and Aidan pushed himself to a seated position to glance down at her. “That’s the part of the evening you want to discuss with me, Farren? What food I ate?”

She leaned her head back against the edge of the pool and closed her eyes, her body finally beginning to relax. “It was good food.”

“Weed and visk because it gives me some peace and quiet. Human food because I wanted to show the council members that you’re my equal in all things. I need them to believe this is real.”

Rae opened one eye to glance up at him. Real. He rested a hand on one knee, staring at what remained of the joint in his hands. A few strands of hair had fallen loose from the knot he’d fastened at the back of his head, and she tracked the way his throat bobbed when he swallowed, the way he ran his tongue over his lower lip, the way he dragged it between his teeth. For a moment she wondered what it would be like inside his head, what it would be like if she could hear everyone’s thoughts. Her own were torturous enough.

She considered whether she could give him what he wanted and still get what she needed in return. Unlikely. There were glimpses here and there of who Rae suspected he might be beyond all of the lord bullshit. It didn’t matter. Wouldn’t matter when all of this was over. He’d proved his arrogance when he’d let her into his home without so much as a second thought, and Rae clung to that as she said, “I’ll need some things. To pinpoint your magic.”

“Done. Are we going to discuss why you’re really here?” He was looking at her now, studying her just as she’d been studying him, his silver eyes bright in the darkness of the natatorium, the first few rays of sunlight casting him deeper into shadow, but he didn’t seem concerned with the encroaching light.

Rae said nothing. Her need to find Nim was as great as her need for everything else, and it would only be another weakness for him to exploit later. To exploither.

“Or what that was earlier?” He angled his head to one side, and she felt the press of his Provident abilities—gentle, as if he were on one side of a door asking permission to come in.

He knew. He had to know. And Rae was almost glad. She was so tired of running. But she kept the door firmly closed regardless.

“I’ve had a room set up for you down the hall from your bedroom,” he told her when she said nothing. “It’s missing a polishing machine, but I’ve arranged for one to be delivered in a few hours. Soundproofed so you don’t have to tiptoe around.”

Rae had to look away from him then; considered telling him about Zeke’s data. When her own team couldn’t access it, she’d given a partial copy to Bax and was willing to give him the day to see what he could come up with. They needed answers, and with how many were going missing, they were running out of time. She didn’t voice any of that; instead, she pulled herself out of the water to get some air. Aidan’s hand wrapped around her wrist immediately.

The weed hit her as she tracked the movement, the way his biceps strained against his shirt, the way his gaze turned predatory as it swept over her body, her wet underwear, and thoughts of other ways to silence the noise ran riot in her head.

“I told you not to take the bracelets off. Even here.” He’d moved so quickly, his body

towering over hers. “I can’t guarantee your safety.” His canines were just visible, and though Rae couldn’t help the way her tongue darted over her lips at the sight, she decided fuckingwithhim could be enough for tonight.

“From you?” She chuckled quietly, her skin pebbling where he turned her wrist, his hand sliding up her arm to her elbow. “What was it you said? If you wanted to punish me, we wouldn’t be talking.” Rae took a step closer, tilting her chin up to look at him. His scent and his warmth enveloped her, her attention darting between his eyes and those perilously sharp teeth, the sight sending a shiver of anticipation down her spine. She was seriously fucked in the head. “I’m starting to think you’re all bark and no bite, Vale,” she murmured. His eyes blazed as he watched her. “The water tarnishes the silver.”

“Then let it tarnish them,” he said, a roughness to his voice that hadn’t been there before, his thumb swiping once over her pebbled flesh.

It was an effort to tug her arm away from his grip with a shrug, but not because of his hold. “No harm will come to me here because you need me.”

“And what is it that you need, exactly?” He watched her every movement, unabashedly taking her in, his eyes molten and her mouth drying at his expression, the knowledge thatshehad that effect on him only heightening her earlier thoughts.

Rae stepped around him, trailing her fingers along his chest. Unable to help herself, she pulled a little of Aidan’s power, just enough to cover the bone-deep exhaustion she felt, the feel ofhimin her veins setting her heart racing. “I told you. I need your money. Your protection.”

“For Omnia.” His canines had extended fully now, and Rae knew she was pushing her luck, that there was no chance in Hel he hadn’t noticed what she’d just done.

It didn't stop her from wanting to run her tongue over those canines to see what he'd do, wanting to—A nod. "For Omnia."

"To do what?"

But Rae had already started walking away. Fucking with him was fun.

I can press harder, Farren, he said in the space she'd allowed just for him.

Be my guest, Vale. "Pulp your only shot at getting your magic back," she told him without looking back, though she could feel his eyes on her. I'm going to get breakfast. Looks like you need some too.

Water splashed as she made her way out of the natatorium, but Rae didn't look back, not even when the water stilled and she knew Aidan was still watching her.

## Chapter seventeen

Aidan had his suspicions about Rae, and truthfully, he was glad. If he was right, their goals were more than likely aligned, but the only way to know that for certain would be with time. And time was one thing they didn't have, the previous night's attack at Cosia reinforcing that fact.

He knew she'd been stealing from Vampires to buy silver. Silver she enchanted and used to equip Omnia and the other factions. Aidan thought of how she'd glared at him leaving his pool that morning. I'm starting to think you're all bark and no bite, Vale, Rae had said, standing in nothing but her fucking underwear, scars peppering her body where she'd released her spells—but not all of them, he'd thought. He'd wanted to ask her, even though it was none of his damn business, who had done that to her. Had wanted to claim her with his mouth if only just to raise her ire, to rekindle the spark in her the night had seemed to quell.

Then there was the way she'd brought down the wards at Cosia.

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She was no human. Fae or Witch, or perhaps even a half-breed, just as he was. Though no one, not even Baelin, knew that. When Aidan's uncle had threatened to expose the truth, Aidan had killed him for it before everything he'd worked for could be destroyed. His uncle's execution had earned him the council's fear but not their respect. Aidan had no need for that, however few of them remained after last night. They'd have retreated back to their families, shut themselves away from the daylight to plot and scheme.

A few cars ahead, someone wielded their horn at a delivery vehicle. Humans transported goods exclusively at night, a task Aidan had long since convinced himself was just to piss off his kind. The human he'd interrogated the night before had provided no new information, and Aidan had dispatched him before the man could empty his bladder all over the stone floor in the manor's basement.

He drove through the empty streets of the Western Quarter on his way to the Upper Third District, casting a wide net with his Provident abilities ahead of his meeting. Being caught out a third time in one week was a dent his ego could do without. The scent of roasted meat and spices drifted through the vehicle's filtration system, restaurants passing by in a blur that made the Quarter such a popular spot for Fae and humans alike. Even the occasional Vampire had been known to frequent the area as of late, if only to add more humans to their feeding cycle.

He turned down a small side street, approaching his destination. The Vampire he was meeting had a knack for being a sneak, but that was precisely why Aidan had chosen to meet with Cormac. Though it might be unconventional for a Vampire Lord to drive himself to meetings, something Aidan couldn't give a fuck about, he preferred controlling the location. Controlling as much as he could, because things out of his



control usually ended up spiralling into an even bigger problem. Like Rae.

Pulp your only shot at getting your magic back, she'd said, his grip tightening on the steering wheel at the thought. Because with how much she had everything locked down tight, how much she would fight it, it was a very real possibility. He shoved aside the discomfort that accompanied the thought, pulling up outside an unlit two-storey warehouse, and his PAD illuminated the dashboard with a message.

Welcome, my lord.

Aidan swiped it away. Cormac had cameras set up all over the place, precisely why Aidan had picked it. Baelin was watching from his monitors at the manor, and Orion and the team were nearby. Cormac might be able to provide answers, and Aidan wasn't above admitting he needed them.

Too many reports of missing persons, humans and Orders, were cropping up from all across the city, and Aidan needed to get a handle on the situation before it spiralled out of control. Though in truth, it had been out of control for months. Nim had been missing for several nights now, and he knew Rae understood the implications of that, whether or not she admitted it. If Nimala hadn't already been a test subject, there was a very high chance she was going to become one.

This area of the Upper Third was mercifully deserted so late at night, but Aidan could feel the First Unit's presence nearby, coupled with the hundred or so Vampires and humans inside the warehouse, even though most were underground. A lamp flickered overhead, the electric humming the only sound on the quiet street as Aidan stepped out of his car.

A security guard dressed in black opened a metal door on silent hinges, moving aside to let Aidan in. Cormac at least had the decency to be waiting for him top-side. Aidan dismissed the guard, making his way towards the waiting Vampire and his entourage

through a room with wooden crates stacked floor to ceiling and swinging lights flickering overhead. At a quick glance, it looked like any other warehouse holding goods.

Six Vampires, one human. Aidan knew he wouldn't like what he was about to see. Knew Cormac knew that too.

"What makes you mortal," Cormac's voice carried through the warehouse, "is that you think you have time. Whereas I know I do."

"I'm sure you can recall what it feels like to have time slip away from you," Aidan said as he rounded the last stack of crates and took in the sight of the half-naked human kneeling before Cormac.

The five other Vampires lowered their heads, some mumblingmy lordunder their breath. Cormac inclined his head, just enough of an acknowledgement not to be a slight. He wore his hair slicked back, the blond ends curling against skin so pale it was almost blue, pale green eyes glittering with indifference.

The human was shivering, despite how carefully she'd placed her hands in her lap, her head bowed as she listened to his little speech. Her bare knees pressed into the rough floorboards, goosebumps rising on every exposed inch of flesh. The black dress she wore was barely a scrap over her body. Cormac looped a lock of her auburn hair around his finger, the hungry look in his eyes one Aidan had seen on almost every other Vampire he'd ever met. Vampires were fascinated with humans, and even though Cormac had once been one himself, that hadn't seemed to quell the appeal.

Turned Vampires were a rarity in Demesia, and largely outcast by other Vampires, traditionally because of the nature of their creation. Aidan loathed tradition, but that didn't mean he liked Cormac.

With a single thought, he had the human rise without objection from anyone else, turn on unsteady feet, and leave the warehouse.

“Are you asking if I miss my mortal life, my lord?” Cormac asked as if no time had passed since Aidan’s statement, as if his plaything hadn’t just upped and left without a word.

Aidan shrugged. He had no interest in the answer. Cormac had been a human pet, turned by his master, Levice, until the opportunity had arisen for Cormac to end his master’s life. He knew all too well that what had made him mortal had nothing at all to do with time. Levice had loved the sound of his own voice, and even more than that, the sound of poetry, so it was no surprise that Cormac spewed the same garbage to his human pets too.

But what Aidan needed from Cormac wasn’t knowledge. It was his connections.

“I miss the dawn,” Cormac said, rubbing a thumb under his chin, though it seemed like a show just for the other Vampires. His fingers were laden with jewels, one in particular a design that struck Aidan as something Rae might have made. “And I miss the joy of a cheap, cold ale shared with friends as the sun set.”

More poetry, but it was those friends that Aidan was counting on. He could get into someone’s head and make them do his bidding, but he couldn’t take over an individual for long enough to have them meet and question another, not without exposing himself anyway.

“Speaking of friends. You’re still in touch with Weyland.” A statement, because Aidan already knew the answer. Could see from sifting through Cormac’s thoughts that he’d been meaning to get in touch with the ISA leader for some time now.

Cormac waved a hand, dismissing the group of Vampires, leaving them with only the

security guard who'd let Aidan in.

Report, he instructed Baelin. Aidan felt nothing untoward from the perimeter, no movement outside of a regular patrol from his First Unit, but there was something, a feeling in the air he couldn't place.

Everything looks fine, came his Ascendant's reply. I've got eyes on your car, eyes on that security guard, eyes on the fucking woodchips by your shoes.

Aidan resisted the urge to look around for the cameras and hold up a middle finger as Cormac decided which answer to settle on. Aidan already knew all of them; he wanted to see which Cormac chose.

"I've been trying to get hold of him."

The truth. Good start.

Cormac opened his mouth to say more, but Aidan raised a hand to stop him before the turned Vampire had the chance. "Before you opt for the lie." He urged the guard to remove his gun from its holster and raise it to Cormac with a flex of his Provident abilities.

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“My lord,” Cormac muttered, the last semblance of colour draining from his face as he took a step back.

The guard didn’t flinch as Aidan silently instructed him to move closer, to raise the barrel to Cormac’s temple. Another Provident’s hand might have trembled, might have attempted to push back against Aidan’s power, but this guard was a very weak Gerentis, with no hint of anything powerful enough within him to object. The safety clicked off the gun with another thought.

“Wait. My... friend is missing. I want to ask Weyland if...”

“If he has her?” Aidan finished for him. Not just a friend. Someone Cormac cared for deeply, which meant the little display with the human when Aidan arrived had been purely for show. For the other Vampires.

Cormac nodded.

Aidan released his hold on the guard and had him unload the gun, the rounds dropping to the floor with a clink before he replaced the weapon in its holster.

Scarlett was much more than a friend. His wife, yet—Cormac was flitting through thoughts now in a piss-poor attempt to hide them, though Aidan respected the attempt nonetheless. Futile, because he already had what he needed, and he hid his surprise as he met the Vampire’s eyes. “She’s your mate.”

“My lord,” Cormac whispered, his eyes darting to the guard beside him. He pulled a gun from the inside of his jacket, but Aidan knew it wasn’t meant for him. The bullet

hit its mark and the guard fell to the floor with a thump. “He was my best.” A glance at the weapon in his hand, and then back to Aidan. “Apologies, my lord.”

“How does a turned Vampire have a mate?” Aidan asked, despite already sifting through thoughts and memories for the answer. Scarlett was a Witch. Inter-Order relationships were not unheard of, and though mates between Orders were rare, it was known to happen on occasion. Whereas Fae and Vampire pairings usually ended in disaster, Witches had been known to mate with Fae, Vampires, and humans throughout history.

Though with how secretive they had become in the last decade, it was becoming unheard of. Unheard of, until now.

“We were mated before Levice turned me,” Cormac explained, though Aidan already knew. He let the Vampire explain regardless. “Scarlett helped me take down Levice.”

“Helped you ascend to your current position,” Aidan said flatly. He narrowed his eyes at Cormac. The Vampire would have known Aidan would learn all of this by coming here. “What do you want?”

“My lord?”

One-way conversations were incredibly tiresome. There was movement a few blocks away, and Aidan decided it was time to wrap this up. “Meet with Weyland, find out as much as you can about what he’s up to. You’ll be assigned new guards who will accompany you everywhere from now on. I’ve no idea what you thought you could gain by letting me know this piece of information, Cormac. I have no allegiance to the Witches after they turned my uncle away, and I certainly have no allegiance to you and your mate.”

“I let you see because you and I are the same, my lord.”

Aidan had the Vampire fall to his knees and levelled him with a glare. “Are we?”

To his credit, Cormac held Aidan’s gaze, the guard’s blood soaking his trousers as he said, “Both rejected by our kind, fighting to hold our positions. Despite what the council might think of you, I have always respected you.”

The truth. “Several council members died last night, and my last bargain saddled me with a human for an Odalik, so my patience is running rather thin.”

“A bargain weighed heavily in your favour, my lord, even if she is the head of Omnia.” Cormac the sneak. It was no surprise he knew who Rae was. “Too many have gone missing. Too many have been affected by whatever is happening in the city,” the Vampire added.

Aidan allowed Cormac to rise, to brush the dust from his trousers before he spoke. “Meet with Weyland as soon as possible. There’s a very high chance your mate is already dead.”

Cormac sucked in a breath. “I would have felt it.”

Also true. “Do you know what’s going on out there? To the ones who go missing?”

A shake of the Vampire’s head.

“They’re carrying out tests. Drawing magic from the Orders, injecting it into humans.”

“Wouldn’t that...”

“Kill the Orders?” Aidan nodded once.

Cormac pulled his PAD from his pocket, punching in numbers Baelin no doubt already had eyes on through his cameras if he hadn't tapped the PAD itself.

It was protection Cormac sought. For his mate. Though Aidan had never given the Vampire—any of the Vampires—reason to believe he would offer it. The movement a few blocks away had intensified; this meeting was over.

He checked in with Baelin as he turned to leave, calling out over his shoulder to Cormac. “Your new guard unit will be here shortly; I'll be expecting your report from meeting Weyland within three days.”

“Of course, my lord. And thank you.”



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The Vampire's voice carried through the warehouse, but Aidan was almost at the door. What's going on out there? he asked Baelin. There were wards in use, lots of them blocking his Provident abilities from casting as far as he'd have liked, which could only spell trouble. Whatever was going on, it wasn't in this district.

Orion has sent Second Unit to investigate.

Aidan didn't reply to Baelin as he got back in his car. Instead, he sent his instructions to Orion and the rest of his First Unit. We're going on a little hunt.

### Chapter eighteen

Rae wasn't willing to sit around a minute longer. Not when Nim was out there somewhere. Not when dozens more had gone missing, her reports had told her. Though she was certain Baelin had tapped her PAD, he wouldn't have noticed just yet that she'd spelled it to give him multiple different location readings. As far as he knew, she was currently in seven separate areas of the city.

Two more nights had passed without any word from Nim, and a permanent, sickening weight had settled in Rae's stomach. Two nights holed up in that manor like every other human pet she was so used to observing at Rush. Two nights and already she craved daylight; she didn't know how the Vampires could stand it. Though she'd barely slept since everything had gone down at Cosia, she'd been out as early as she could, eager to make use of her freedom before Aidan and the rest of his household could locate her.

The day had already slipped away, and despite the very pressing need to shut her eyes

for just a minute, if anything just to try and silence the pounding in her head, she'd already arranged to meet Baxter to see what he could make of Zeke's data. Nothing was her guess, and she was already silently rebuking herself for not giving it to Baelin, even though she had no reason to trust what he or Aidan would do with the information or that they'd even share it with her.

She tried Nim's number again, but it went straight to voicemail just as it had all of the other hundreds of times she'd called it. The weight that had settled under her ribs pushed against her lungs, her breaths painful. Rae made her way down a side street towards Silver Star as she tried Nim's boyfriend next, pausing in her tracks when it rang once before going to voicemail like the asshole had just hung up on her.

"Reed," Rae seethed as his voicemail picked up. "Where the fuck have you been? I've been going out of my mind worrying about Nim." Baxter waved at her from across the busy street, day workers eager to get home or to one of the Quarter's many restaurants and bars rushing past him. "Call me back, asshole." If Reed was fine, Nim was fine, Rae repeated to herself silently as she crossed the street, the weight pushing harder.

Bax rested his helmet on his bike, making no attempt to hide the way he looked her up and down. Goddess, what she'd give to erase having slept with him from her brain. Rae made no effort to conceal the package she handed him from her backpack: the cuffs she'd managed to finish in the early hours of the morning.

"Are you ever going to tell me what the real plan is with all of these?" He shoved the package into the bag strapped behind his seat, raising an eyebrow.

Rae waited for him to tap away at his PAD, waited for the ka-ching from hers to let her know he'd paid. "You're smart, Bax. I'm sure you can work it out."

He might work it out eventually, but it was already too late for that. Rae knew from

the number of cuffs she'd issued precisely how many members of the factions were wearing at least one of her pieces now and no longer needed to merely hope. She'd cast her net wide and spun her web so that it covered most of the city, exactly how she wanted it.

Rae's jewellery offered the humans a small layer of protection, but protecting them wasn't her only goal. The Fae wanted Demesia for the same reason she handed out her charmed jewellery like sweets, for the channels of magic running beneath their feet. And the Fae understood something the Vampires had long since forgotten: all magic was connected by those ley lines, spreading out in every direction beneath the city like a spider's web.

Rae was going to remove it. Nullify it. To douse every Order's ability to use any magic of their own, like throwing water over a fire. She intended to level the playing field, to give humans a fighting chance for once. Retribution for the lifetimes of being bottom of the food chain and to give her brother the head start he needed.

Bax raised an eyebrow, waiting for an answer he wasn't going to get. Not tonight anyway. She didn't need him for any of that, only for everything that came after levelling the Orders. Getting the factions to work together, to set up a council of their own, putting a voting system in place so that every human could have their voice heard. There was no such thing as a just ruler, there would always be unhappy citizens, but a coalition might just work, provided they could get the majority of the Vampires out of the city. Keep the Liberalist Fae out too.

Rae fumbled with her keys, hoping Bax would leave before she opened the workshop, but as she rested a hand on the doorknob, she knew at once that something was wrong. Baelin had mentioned a delay in setting up the new security system, and Rae had assured him she didn't need it. Perhaps she'd been too quick to jump to that conclusion.

“What is it?” Bax asked beside her, far too close for her liking.

“The wards are down.” She looked up at him, at the way his blue eyes searched hers, and wondered, not for the first time, if he was playing her. “How long have you been here?”

He glanced up and down the busy street, a few strands of hair falling across his eyes as he tracked a group of Hooves heading their way. “About ten minutes. Are you armed?”

Rae shook her head. She’d considered it when she’d left the manor earlier, but a gun wasn’t exactly easy to conceal, and she knew Bax didn’t mean the single dagger tucked into her boot. She’d considered asking her husband, but that meant seeking him out in the manor, and Rae hadn’t trusted herself to do that since their last meeting. The Hooves walked by without incident, a young group—students, Rae presumed, given they’d been coming from the direction of the university—but Bax still didn’t relax.

“I’ll go in first.” He eased her aside before she could object, turning the key and readying his gun. Fine, if he wanted to get himself killed, she wasn’t about to protest.

Rae clicked her tongue. “There’s no one here.”

Bax didn’t ask her how she knew. She kept her spell work to a minimum around him: had never unlocked a door without a key in his presence, and had never let him see her work on her jewellery. But she’d made no secret of the fact that she used spells; her changing appearance was enough evidence of that, enough of a cover that Bax never questioned her.

Glass cracked as he pushed the door open.

The workshop had been turned upside down, equipment strewn across the floor, the remnants of her work catching the fading sunlight. It could only have happened in the last few hours, and as she toed a piece of broken glass with her boot, she sifted through each of the contacts she'd told about Zeke's stolen data, wondering which asshole had betrayed her.

Rae knew without a doubt that Aidan had no need to pull something like this. He would, however, be the one to replace it all, if he wanted a shot at getting his missing abilities back.

Not for the first time since becoming his Odalik, she shoved aside the nagging feeling she'd been wrong about him. He'd killed Calder without question, but together, they'd just taken down most of the facility. He'd taken out some of the quieter Vampires back at Cosia, but Rae hadn't been inside to witness it, and he'd helped her when she was alone on the balcony with Kuron after keeping an eye on her the whole night. He was always watching her, studying her closely.

Rae sighed as she picked up a shattered picture of her and Cillian, shaking off the broken glass and hanging it up on the wall beside the others. He'd set her on this path. Convinced her that Demesia would be better off if the Vampires and Fae fighting over it had no access to their magic. Bolstered her plan whenever she'd come to him with a problem. And now he was gone too. She cleared her throat before the emotion could rise and righted a stool. "Any luck with the data?"

"Shouldn't we address the fact that your studio has been turned upside down whilst you're sleeping with the enemy?"

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Rae choked back a laugh. Leave it to Bax to be jealous. Her attention snagged on Nim's upturned toolbox, and she reached for it carefully, mindful of any saw blades that might have fallen loose. A few pieces of jewellery had tumbled out, including the ring Rae had made for Nim years ago, recently damaged. It was only a few months ago that her friend had tucked it inside her toolbox to reshape and polish but had never gotten around to it. The ring was spelled, and Rae found herself wishing she'd given Nim a piece imbued with a tracking spell too. Even though it would have crossed so many lines between them.

"No one's really buying this whole Vampire wife bullshit, are they?" Bax asked when she didn't reply.

Rae slid the ring into her pocket, closed the lid on the toolbox, and rested it on Nim's bench. "No one really cares who Vale's latest human pet is, just like no one cares about any of the other Vampires with pets." She considered the nature of their agreement, the words they'd uttered to each other in the glasshouse, how Aidan had set up a studio for her in his manor. How it had felt to draw magic from him.

"Except you're the first pet he's ever had, Rae." He slid his PAD across the bench. A photo of her and Aidan outside Cosia flashed up on the screen, their bodies pressed close together, Aidan's hand fisted in her hair as she held her chin up to him in defiance.

Rae remembered how he'd tucked her in front of him with such ease, the hungry look in his eyes as he'd stared down at her, the thrill it had sent down her spine, and knew she was long overdue for a date with her hand. Straight to Hel, Rae, she told herself. "Spying on me, Bax? Green isn't really your colour."

A shrug. “Looking out for you.”

Nobody did anything in Demesia for free. Rae handed back the PAD. “It’s got to be believable, right?” Bax was one of only a handful of people who could identify her. Even most of Omnia wouldn’t recognise her if they passed her on the street, and that was partly why becoming Aidan’s Odalik had been so easy. The other Vampires wouldn’t have had a clue she led Omnia; Bax certainly didn’t. He only thought she was a cadet following orders. What did it matter what the humans knew?

Whoever had broken in, they were looking for the data, that much was obvious. There was nothing else Rae had of value. Which meant Zeke had been compromised. Rae told herself he knew what he’d been getting himself into, that anything could have happened to him at any point prior to their meeting. Couldn’t it?

Baxter hauled a drill back onto the bench, and Rae frowned as she watched him, fixing her hair up into a tight bun with twofiles that had fallen from a toolbox. That thing was seriously fucking heavy—it had taken two fit delivery guys to carry it in—but before she could question him on it, her PAD chimed in her back pocket, and Rae’s eyebrows pinched together in a frown.

Meet at Hardwired. One hour. Reed. Hardwired was the supply store not far from where he’d first met Nim. Rae’s heart thudded in her chest. “Bax. I need a lift.”

“Nim?”

She nodded her response, shoving down the worry and anger. She’d asked Bax to keep an eye out for her friend the moment she’d gone missing. “Her boyfriend.”

“And this?” He waved a hand at the mess surrounding them.

“I’ve got a Vampire husband with deep pockets, remember?”

He shot her a look, but Rae was already heading out the door, all thoughts on Nim. She slid onto the back of Baxter's motorbike, shaking her head when he handed her his helmet along with the key to Silver Star. "I don't want anything covered in your sweat touching my skin, thank you."

"I don't remember any complaints last time," he said with a quirk of his lips.

Rae didn't bite, only pocketed the key. The sun had finally dipped behind the mountains, the Western Quarter illuminated in the soft glow that had first drawn Rae to it as the city lights flickered on one by one. Soon enough, the Vampires would be coming out to play. She glanced over her shoulder at the workshop, wondering if she should ask Baelin to hurry up with the new cameras, but that meant letting him know her exact location.

Instead, she shared a map pin to Bax's PAD as he started up the engine, sliding an arm around his waist, and trying not to think of the last night with him that had started this way.

"The data?" Rae shouted over the noise, over Bax's shoulder, wishing she'd taken him up on his offer of a helmet as her eyes streamed from the wind.

"Nothing," came Baxter's muffled reply.

They rode in silence as Bax navigated the streets, the bike cutting through busier spots to shorten their journey, and Rae suddenly wished she hadn't opted for aqua hair with lilac ends that morning.

"Stop here," she called out, tapping his shoulder. They were three streets away, just outside one of the Fae temples, but Rae wasn't taking any chances. She ran a hand over her hair, muttering a spell and changing the strands to a light brown before he'd unclipped his helmet and rested it across the handlebars.



He turned back to look at her, blue eyes flicking up to her hair and then back to her face. “Your natural colour?”

“I’ll never tell,” Rae said with a wink, shifting off the bike, but Bax grabbed her wrist.

“Wait,” he said softly, running a thumb over her pulse point. The other he traced lightly over her shoulder. “What if I told you there was more to all of this?”

“More what?” Rae asked, shrugging his hand from her shoulder, earning herself a few glances from the Fae descending the temple steps.

“Everything.”

Rae began to pull away, uninterested in whatever game he was playing tonight. “What are you talking about, Bax?”

He held firm and tugged her closer, wrapping his other arm around her waist. Where this was all coming from, she had no clue. She searched his eyes for any hint that he might be on something before he said, “Come with me. I’ll give you everything you ever dreamed of. More than he can give you.”

This was no drug. This was Bax. Rae pulled out of his embrace. “It isn’t real. You know that.”

“It looked real to me.”

She filed that understupid shit that’s come out of Bax’s mouth and chose to ignore it. Aidan had his reasons just as much as she did; being his Odalik only worked in their favour if it looked real, but the way Bax was looking at her, that was something she couldn’t ignore.

He reached out and touched her face, but she smacked him away, putting space between them. “I think you should go. I can handle this from here.”

“My offer stands if you change your mind. Be careful with him, Rae.” He didn’t start the engine, but he didn’t move from the bike either. Fine. If he wouldn’t leave, she would.

Rae took off without another word, waiting for the sound of the engine roaring to life behind her, but it never came. She’d already rounded the first corner when she finally heard it, casting aside Baxter’s strange behaviour to pick apart later.

The buildings changed to the metal-fronted hardware units, and incense clung to her clothes from passing the temple. Her skin prickled. The air was thick, and she knew if she could see the sky beyond the city lights, it would be heavy with clouds.

A storm was coming. Wonderful. Rae hated storms even more than she hated being Aidan’s Odalik, but if a little thunder meant getting her one step closer to finding Nim, she’d endure it.

Rae kept her footsteps light and even as she made her way to the meeting point to find Reed. She hadn't expected Baxter to accompany her—he knew she could look after herself—but even she could admit to herself as she walked down the narrow alleyway, it had been a mistake to come alone.

Her PAD buzzed in her pocket, but she didn't want to risk being distracted by it. The first crack of thunder rumbled in the distance as a figure stepped out of the shadows, and Rae hurried over as she realised it was Reed.

“Nim?” Rae asked, catching the Fae's weight as he stumbled. He didn't look injured, but that didn't mean anything. His clothes were crumpled and dirty, and he didn't make eye contact. Wouldn't. Fresh panic sliced through her as she helped the Fae to balance.

“Alive,” was all he managed to say, his voice thin and raspy.

Rae took in his empty gaze, the shallow rise and fall of his shoulders, the ashen tone to his usually sun-kissed skin. Shock or not, her patience was wearing thin. “Where is she? What happened?” Her PAD was buzzing like crazy now, message after message, but she didn't dare take her hands off Reed, not until she got some answers about her friend.

Dark green eyes finally snapped up to meet hers. “It all happened so fast.” He swallowed, eyes darting around at the next clap of thunder. “Need to get her out.” The Fae stumbled again, and this time Rae couldn't hold his weight as he fell to his knees.

“We,” she hissed, tugging at his shirt, desperation stealing her breath. “You're going to show me. Tell me where she is.”

“I...” Reed closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “You don't understand. What they're

doing down there... it's... unnatural.” He shuddered and dragged his hands through his hair as fat drops of rain began to fall around them. They needed to move, to get inside. Rae swallowed down the lump in her throat and willed the nausea washing over her to ease, silently working through options of where to take him. Thunder boomed again, and Reed flinched as if struck.

Rae was impatient but not unkind. “Why don’t we go somewhere and talk about this?” She had a good idea of what he’d seen, what he might have endured, memories of the cells she’d witnessed with Aidan flooding her thoughts. “Somewhere warm and dry.” At the back of her mind, in the space she’d allowed just for the Vampire Lord, she felt his presence, as if he were trying to get in. She couldn’t give him access to Reed, not like this—the Fae would be dead within seconds. So she kept Aidan locked out, opting to deal with him later. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“I can’t.” The Fae swallowed, his throat bobbing. “Nim... I can’t leave her. And the others...” His voice broke. “I need to warn my friends. Everyone.” Reed’s hair was already plastered to his face, unblinking eyes staring at the way the rain ran over his hands, puncture marks and bruises marring both of them.

Rae shivered. “We will,” she told him, her voice as soothing as she could manage despite the fear that had wrapped around her heart. “We’ll warn them all. Come on, come with me.”

Something flickered on the Fae’s chest as he shook his head. A red light. Rae didn’t hesitate—she slammed her weight into him, pulling him down in time to see a bullet impact the wet ground behind them. “Move!” She tugged him into the nearest doorway and murmured a spell to crack open the lock. “Can you speak when you shift?” The door swung open as more bullets hit the ground beside them with dull thuds. Reed snarled, snapping out of his stupor and pulling Rae through with him. She muttered another spell to seal the door shut, listening for movement on the other side and waiting for his response.

“A few words, the teeth get in the way,” Reed snapped as another bullet hit the door behind them. “I can’t shift in here anyway, there’s not enough space.”

“Then get talking and follow me.” Rae darted off through the building, knowing that where there was one human with a gun, there were no doubt more. “Tell me everything, now.”

Another door opened up into a room full of long, narrow machines stretching its length, fabric pooling at their base. This part of Second District was full of clothing factories, all human-designed. Rae could barely see over the machines, but that was good; if they stayed low, they could remain out of sight.

Reed said nothing, just kept close, listening for approaching footsteps, Rae presumed, but over the noise of the machines, he’d have little chance of that. He wore no jacket, his shirt already soaked through from the rain, patches of what she’d thought to be dirt before now unmistakable as blood. And Nim had been left behind. But there was no time to dwell on her friend’s circumstances. She unlocked another door, stepping into a room full of rows of sewing machines, stacks of waiting scraps of fabric piled beside each of them, the space dark and silent. Above, a metal walkway led to another level. Rae didn’t like any of it, but the only way out was through.

They made it halfway amongst the grid of machines before shots sunk into a stack of fabric beside them, a bullet grazing Rae’s arm. “Fuck,” she hissed, already murmuring another spell. The scraps of fabric and half-sewn garments beside each machine launched into the air, a flurry of material dancing about them like flapping birds as more bullets pinged off the machinery.

Another brush against her thoughts, her PAD buzzing furiously in her back pocket, but there was no time to stop and gaze at a screen; she needed to focus. Blood ran freely down her arm, and there was no doubt a crimson trail streaked the floor behind them. Reed seemed to notice at the same time she did, snatching a scrap of fabric

from the air and handing it to her as they made it to the next door. Rae murmured again, the flurry of garments becoming more frantic, but this time Reed shouldered the door open, pulling her through with him.

“Out is this way. I can smell the rain,” he said gruffly.

Thank the Goddess for that. Rae barely registered the final dark corridor Reed all but dragged her through, the door he slammed open out into the pouring rain, or the second he took to leap through it, one moment a male, the next a wild cat bigger than anything she’d ever seen. Not a lion, a sabre cat, with canines as long as her forearm and twice as thick as her fingers. He wasn’t exaggerating when he said they’d interfere with his speech.

A bullet sank into the doorframe beside her, and Rae remembered herself, darting out into the rain after him. He was an easy target, but he was also her only cover on this side of the warehouse. They’d come outside to what must have been a delivery entrance, a wide empty quad flanked by buildings, and they still needed a way out.

Rae didn’t possess advanced eyesight, and no amount of spells would make it so. A spear of lightning split the sky and illuminated two humans crouched behind crates, the scopes of their weapons flashing in the light as Rae ran. Reed had spotted them too, and the Fae wasted no time barrelling into them both, a roar escaping him as he flung them in the air.

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Rae didn't stop to watch. She needed cover. Needed to get them out of the quad. She hugged the perimeter of the factory, holding the soaking scrap of fabric to her bleeding arm, trying not to flinch as thunder cracked directly overhead. Through the rain, she could just make out the vehicle entrance backing out to the street, but she'd have to stick close to the building or risk being seen. There was no time to worry about Reed, though she didn't doubt his Fae form was far more impenetrable to bullets than she was.

Lightning struck one of the surrounding buildings, and Rae considered harnessing it, but she was far too exposed for that. She ducked for her dagger instead, a bullet clinking into the metal roller door above her head. Shit.

"Beggars can't be choosers," she muttered, pulling a little power from the lightning as she tossed her dagger, gritting her teeth against the pain of her wounded arm. The blade flew much further than it would have without magic, the force of it shuddering through her, but Rae didn't see it hit her mark, only the body as it tumbled from the rooftop and fell to the ground below. She darted for the gun that had fallen with the human, whirling with it in her hands as a voice cried out from above.

"I'm going to fucking gut you for that," someone yelled, rappelling onto the ground beside the lifeless human. Rae pulled back the trigger on her stolen weapon, but nothing happened, angling it to one side to take in the damage it had sustained in the fall. Double shit. She thrust the butt into the chin of her aggressor, landing a kick against his chest as he stumbled back, and she ran.

Another roar from Reed across the courtyard, but she couldn't chance checking on him. Car tyres screeched somewhere nearby, and Rae instantly regretted her decision

not to call for backup. “Reed!” she called out.

She made it to the vehicle entrance just as two humans opened fire on him, and Rae pulled the metal files from her hair, murmuring a spell as she hurled them, one after the other through the rain. The humans fell, and Reed tore into them both as a black car screeched to a stop beside her.

“Get in,” Aidan commanded, the passenger door already swung open.

“Reed,” Rae called out, rain plastering her hair to her face.

“He’ll follow. Get in the fucking car, Farren.”

She did as he asked, slamming the door shut and pivoting in her seat to make sure Reed trailed them. A tight breath escaped her as the Fae bounded after the car. “I didn’t get a chance to ask him—”

“I’ll find out,” Aidan cut in. “Just give me a minute.”

“Don’t hurt him,” Rae pleaded, her eyes still fixed on Reed’s form slipping away from them as Aidan increased their speed.

“I’m a little busy, human. Fasten your seatbelt.”

“What, can’t multi-task, bloodsucker?”

A quiet puff of air from Aidan was all the acknowledgement he gave. “How much did he tell you?”

“Nothing,” Rae said, finally turning back in her seat to face ahead as Aidan rounded a corner, and that was enough encouragement to fasten her seatbelt. An image of Nim



in one of those cells threatened to surface, but she shoved it away. “If you hurt him, Vale, we’re done here.”

“He’s safe. I’ve got Orion pursuing him. You’ve had them running circles for hours.”

Them, and him, with any luck. Rae didn’t try to hide the satisfaction she felt at that. Aidan hadn’t told her she couldn’t leave the manor, and there wasn’t a fucking chance she was going to stay holed up in that place night and day. But she’d ignored his calls, his attempts to reach her.

“I’ve no reservations about having you followed if you and I can’t reach some kind of agreement,” he said when she didn’t respond.

So he was angry then. Rae didn’t rise to it. Didn’t dare to, not when she was wounded, exhausted, and trapped in a moving car with him. “How did you find me?”

“You’re bleeding.” His grip tightened on the steering wheel, and Rae wondered, careful not to let any of her emotions leak through, when he’d last fed.

“It’s just a scratch. How did you find me?”

Aidan flicked his chin, his hair falling across his eyes. “Your blood, Farren.”

She’d been bleeding the first night they met at Rush, and when he’d found her outside the Drunken Ram, so he’d have been able to pinpoint the scent of her blood by now. Rae knew enough about Vampires to know that. Though it should have frightened her, she found an odd kind of comfort in it, some primal part of her lighting up at the thought. Goddess. She was fucking losing it.

Soaked through and freezing, Rae pressed her fingers to her temples, trying to massage away the ache. Without pulling a little power from her husband, she’d have to

patch herself up the old-fashioned way, because she wasn't about to risk attempting that when he was conscious for a second time.

Aidan didn't let up on the accelerator as he tore through the streets of Demesia, despite how hard the rain came down. "Helast saw Nim alive, but she was transferred to another unit, and he has no idea where. He thinks his father made a deal to get him out, but he isn't certain."

"What are the chances—" That she was still alive. Slim. Rae knew that, the corpses they'd both seen in the cells evidence enough.

"There's still a chance, and I'll take it," Aidan said quietly, and Rae clung to the thought.

If she hadn't been stubborn. If she'd given him the Goddess damned data, they might have found Nim already. Rae covered her emotions as carefully as she could, focusing on tying the soaking fabric around her arm where it still hadn't clotted over. Only a flesh wound, but it still needed closing up as soon as possible, and she was too fucking tired for another spell. "Reed?"

"He's shifted out of his Fae form. Orion will get him to the manor." Somehow, Aidan had already made it back, the gates closing behind them.

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Rae couldn't hide her surprise this time. "They're bringing him here?"

"It's the safest place in Demesia."

She met his silver eyes, knowing he was doing all of this out of desperation, but appreciating it anyway. Rae tried to focus her thoughts with little effect; they were a match for the storm going on around them as she opened the passenger door. All the spells had depleted her, but nothing she couldn't sleep off. No worse than what she'd slept off before anyway. "Thank you," she murmured before stepping out into the rain.

Thunder cracked, followed by a streak of lightning, and Rae couldn't hide her flinch as she made her way up the steps to the manor, certain Aidan was watching her. Two days. Two days she'd wasted being a stubborn asshole by not handing over Zeke's data. Two days and Nim could already be dead.

Rae still didn't trust her husband one bit, but it was time to ask for his help.

### Chapter twenty

Aidan watched Rae walk away, waiting for the rain and the wind to clear away the aroma of her blood from inside the car. She'd blocked him out tonight. It had been the scent of her bleeding he'd caught first on the air a few blocks away, then he'd settled into Reed's mind and knew precisely where to find them both.

He'd pulled into the courtyard just in time to watch her hurl two metal objects from her hair into the humans attacking Reed, metalsmithing tools if he had to guess, like

she'd done it a hundred times before. Knowing Rae, she probably had.

At the perimeter of the manor grounds, Aidan felt his First Unit's presence, Reed among them.

Good work tonight, he told his team as he checked in with Baelin, his eyes fixed on Reed as the Fae exited the First Unit's vehicle. Aidan hadn't told Rae all that he'd seen sifting through Reed's thoughts and memories, how badly Nim had been injured when Reed had last seen her. He needed her focused on the task they'd agreed upon, not distracted with her friend. Tonight had been evidence of that.

Beck was the first to approach, the Vampire's head snapping in the direction of Rae's room where Aidan could feel her rummaging around in her backpack.

"Eat first, report later," Aidan told him, slipping into the manor past a waiting Shaw. He would deal with Beck later. The last thing Aidan needed was a house full of hungry Vampires with Rae wounded. A few spots of crimson stained the stairs as he took them two at a time; no doubt Shaw would be scrubbing away at them in the next few minutes. He tapped his knuckles against Rae's door, but the only reply was a hiss and a slew of cursed grumbles. I can break it down, Farren.

The door swung open, though Rae stood beside the dresser on the opposite side of the room. More magic. Her wet hair still clung to her face, her neck, her chest. It was difficult to tell what colour she'd opted for today; right now it looked almost black against her skin. She held a needle in her hand, a small reel of thread in the other, her backpack discarded at her feet.

Aidan cleared his throat, shutting the door behind him and sliding the lock in place once more. Rae raised an eyebrow at him in question. "You're bleeding all over the carpet. Unwise in a house full of Vampires," he told her.

She rolled her eyes, shouldering her way into the bathroom without a word, and Aidan followed her in, biting back the questions he had for her, like what the Hell she thought she was doing blocking her location, blocking him out. She was trying to keep her emotions locked down tight, but the adrenaline of the night had caught up with her, her heartbeat a rapid flutter in her chest.

“Sit,” Aidan barked, flicking his chin at the sink.

Rae didn’t protest, sliding onto the basin as if there wasn’t an open gunshot wound bleeding freely down one arm.

“You don’t sit like a metalsmith,” Aidan remarked as he ran a towel under the cold tap. A barely-there laugh escaped him. “Thief. Faction leader.” He had no reason to comfort her, no reason other than her discomfort unsettled him. He cast the thought aside as he motioned for Rae to hold out her arm.

She hesitated for a moment, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth before she angled her body towards him. “I was a dancer in a past life. My father thought it would be an attractive quality in whatever marriage he eventually arranged for me.”

It was the first she’d spoken since leaving the car, and with her words, her composure slipped a little, the adrenaline giving way to exhaustion.

“Another role to add to your repertoire,” Aidan said with a smirk, though there was nothing light about a father wanting to sell off his daughter. Anger spiked through him at the thought. He took her wounded arm, carefully cleaning around the damaged skin and ignoring the burn in the back of his throat from the proximity to her blood. It wasn’t a deep wound; she’d been lucky, but deep enough she hadn’t healed it with a spell. A few stitches would be enough.

He felt her attention on him the entire time. A wise choice. Vampires were predators, and Rae would have been reminded of that daily. Demesia was a diverse city, but the Vampires had been running it for decades.

Her hair was still dripping, her skin icy cold where Aidan's fingers curled carefully around her bicep, and almost as soon as the thought occurred to him, she shivered. Rae didn't acknowledge it, and he wondered what he'd find if he could pull back her mental defences, what she'd be feeling underneath it all. It was quiet, with her, he realised, as he paused his work to wrap a clean towel around her shoulders. No thoughts and feelings assaulting him from every direction. Peaceful.

She nodded her thanks at the towel; Aidan told himself it was a practicality. If she was shivering, it would interfere with his sutures. He thought of how she'd hurled those metal tools at the humans again, his canines threatening to extend at the memory of it, but he swallowed down the burn in his throat. "I can't decide if you're an incredible liar or just an exceptional individual; whether you don't actually know how to get my abilities back, or you never had any intention of doing it." He knew what she was; he wanted her to say it. To hear her confirm she was a Witch, just like her little friend.

"Which do you think?" She'd settled on a deep blue for her eyes, until she changed them again, but there wasn't a hint of fear in them as Rae stared up at him, her face inches from his.

"I think the answer is probably a little of everything, Farren." Her heart hammered in her chest. It didn't matter how good she was at controlling her feelings, this, she couldn't hide from him. "Is Nim your sister?"

A flicker of something else fell from her before she covered it up. Regret, maybe. She broke his gaze, using the towel to dry her hair. "Did you know Witches can store magic in anything?" she asked quietly. "Objects, trees, people. A little bit like Calder

did, but on a much bigger scale. It's a very well-guarded secret."

"Why tell me then?"

Rae paused. "So you know that I'm not bullshitting you."

Aidan studied her face. The swell of her lips and the curve of her mouth. The way she watched him just as closely as he watched her, something he'd found himself doing more and more lately. And then he reminded himself why she was there. Of their agreement. "Because you need more money."

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She hissed at the first press of the needle into her flesh but remained silent for the first complete suture. Watching him still, he knew. To see if the blood would affect him, if she'd be able to get away if she needed to. She wouldn't.

"Silver is becoming harder and harder to source, and I need your money to buy it," she said at last, but there was concern laced with the words.

"To equip the humans with your enchanted trinkets."

"Those trinkets have reduced human deaths considerably over the last few years."

He knew she was right; the numbers spoke for themselves. "So you think Demesia could be something better too."

"Not whilst your kind run the city. Not whilst your war with the Fae takes out everything else in its wake." Another hiss. "Never run from an immortal. It's the first thing humans are taught when they join a faction, no matter which you join. It's the only thing we all agree on."

"Only you're not human." Aidan flicked his eyes up to hers, hating that he needed to rely so much on his other senses for her reaction.

She didn't seem bothered that he knew. If Aidan was right, she'd already suspected it. "Humans accepted me with open arms," Rae said, her brow pinching together for a moment. "Took me in when no one else would. All they ever gave me was opportunity after opportunity; all they'd ever been were playthings for your kind."



“Because we’re all the same.” He repeated his words from the first night they’d met. Just like all humans are the same, he’d mocked, and Rae had said nothing. “I’m surprised the members of Omnia accept a Witch for their leader.” Rae held his stare, and more pieces clicked into place. “They don’t know,” Aidan murmured. Another scrap of information to use against her.

“You’re stacking up a rather neat pile of chips there, aren’t you?” There was a hint of laughter to her voice as she said it, though no amusement accompanied her words.

“Deliver on our agreement, and I won’t need to use them.”

Anger, sharp and hot, blistered to the surface. “That’s her life you’re playing around with,” Rae seethed.

“Believe it or not, Farren, I value life. I visited a contact earlier to get us some more information; he’ll deliver his update soon.”

She blew out a breath, her anger diminishing with it. “I got an update too. Tried to. I met with Baxter; he’s Tripp’s right hand. Aera.”

“I know who he is.”

“Well, all he did was waste my time. Again.” Another pinch of her brow, but whatever she was going to say, it was gone.

Aidan finished the sutures in silence, keeping his opinions about Baxter to himself. When he’d tied off the thread, he brought the needle to his mouth, licking her blood from the metal, and it took everything in him not to wrap his hand around her throat for more. Gods, the taste of her. Blood had been like ash for longer than he cared to remember, but this, this had his heart racing, and he fought to keep his composure as Rae glared at him.

“Waste not,” he said with a shrug, discarding everything into the bin beside the sink, fighting the reaction his body was having to her like he was some blood-starved adolescent. The way his heart beat like a damned sledgehammer in his chest. No wonder his uncle had kept a Witch as a pet for all those years; they tasted like fucking starlight.

Rae inspected his work as he tidied everything away, the burn in his throat turning to an ache. “Thank you.” Gratitude accompanied the sentiment, and he knew she’d done it intentionally. Genuine, nothing disguised beneath it. She shivered again, and this time Aidan turned on the shower. That earned him a questioning look.

“Get in. Your skin is like ice,” he said with a jerk of his chin.

Rae didn’t move, and he could almost see the thoughts turning over themselves. Whether she was putting herself in a position she couldn’t get out of. Whether she already had. She cast a look over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror before catching his gaze, her fear spiking and levelling.

“I’ve had my fill today, Farren. I’ll help you with your shirt so we don’t have to redo the stitches, and then I’ll be on my way.”

She watched him for a fraction of a second longer, then slipped off the basin, discarding her damp towel and peeling her good arm out of her shirt. She nodded once, the only permission she gave him to step closer and help ease the bloodied garment over her wounded arm.

Aidan had already known she’d seen Baxter earlier, could still scent the human on her skin. Whatever they’d been doing, they’d been close. Baxter’s stench was all over Rae’s chest like they’d been pressed up against each other, but more than that, his Provident abilities allowed him to feel Baxter’s presence all over Rae, and though Aidan hated to admit it to himself, it irked him. He prised her wet shirt away

carefully, sliding the fabric up her raised arm, and she shivered again where he grazed her skin.

“He touched you here,” he said, knuckles hovering over her cheek but not touching, “and here,” he murmured, his thumb tracing her bare shoulder, stopping at the strap of her bralette. “And you didn’t like it.”

Rae swallowed, her eyes dipping low for a moment before flicking back up to meet his. “Bold of you to assume I like it when you touch me there.”

Her sharp inhale and her rapid heartbeat told him otherwise. He may not have been able to use his Provident abilities on her like he could with everyone else, but she didn’t hide her physical responses as well as she thought she did. Like the way her thighs squeezed together, the way the scent of her arousal had him wanting to taste her, to have it mix with the blood still coating his tongue.

Her attention was on his mouth again, her skin pebbling beneath his touch at her shoulder. Despite the nature of their arrangement, he wanted to push her up against the wall. Hear what sounds she made when he made her come. But he wouldn’t be able to resist sinking his teeth into her, and that would shatter what little trust they’d built. Would destroy whatever goodwill there was between them, whatever chance he stood of getting his magic back.

Aidan took a step back, his eyes on Rae’s mouth. A mouth that he would be thinking about later when he took his own shower in an attempt to shake her from his thoughts. “Goodnight, Witch.” He didn’t wait for a response, just left Rae alone to get warm, to sleep off what was left of the night.

He’d already taken one step into the hallway when he heard her.

Vale. Top drawer by the door.

I don't need to know where you keep your vibrator, Farren.

Just open it. There's a data module. If you find anything—

Aidan had already found the module. He tucked it into his pocket with a glance back in the direction of the shower. You'll be the first to know.

### Chapter twenty-one

Rae had been running her whole life. Though what she'd told Aidan had been the truth. Humans recruited into the factions were taught to never run from an immortal, to never draw their attention. The past week had been evidence enough of all the reasons why that was such a monumentally bad idea.

And it had been the truth when she'd told him humans were the only ones who'd accepted her. Then Nim had come along to her shop, looking for a job, and Rae had known at once she was a Witch. Had always had a gift for sensing it.

Maybe it was because she'd been missing her own family; maybe it was because Cillian hadn't long been buried, but the sight of Nim's awed face at the pieces that had been spread out across Rae's bench and the elation she'd made no attempt at hiding had been enough to remove the help wanted sign from the window.

There were barely any Witches in Demesia now. It was partly why she'd always been so protective of Nim. But more than that, Nim had become the sister she'd never had,

and in many ways, the Witch had reminded Rae of her little brother, Seylan. Though he wouldn't be little anymore.

The lights of the city blurred into one as they drove past, a different vehicle from usual, but still, Aidan drove. This one was larger, in the same style his First Unit used, two of their vehicles in front, two behind. They were on their way to one of the five testing facilities pulled from Zeke's data, and for the first time in her life, Rae had been glad for the presence of so many Vampires. She wouldn't send any members of Omnia into what would be almost certain slaughter; they were better suited to picking off Vampires one by one, as they had been since the faction's inception.

Rae didn't work Omnia the way the other factions did; her recruits wouldn't recognise each other if they passed in the street. It was safer that way. Most never dealt with her directly either or never knew she existed. Like Bax, many thought she was simply a cadet, and even Nim believed they made the jewellery for all the factions equally.

Aidan had said nothing since leaving the manor. Reed was still there somewhere, Rae had been told by Orion, the Vampire who led Aidan's First Unit. Though she hadn't been able to speak with the shifter yet, and something told her that was intentional on Aidan's part. He was keeping something from her, and she'd need to find a way to keep him busy if she was going to get some answers.

She tightened the holster at her thigh, her shirt scraping against her sutures with the movement. She thought about the way Aidan had stitched her up the night before. How she'd wanted to tug him into the shower with her, just for one very sex-deprived moment. How she'd touched herself thinking about him, hoping to chase away the stupid fucking thought with an orgasm instead. It hadn't worked.

"What are you thinking about?" Aidan asked, snapping her out of her fantasy. His

grip seemed to tighten on the steering wheel, long fingers curling around the leather.

Fuck, Rae. Get your shit together, she told herself. “Doesn’t that get annoying?”

“What?”

She turned her attention to him, but he kept his fixed on the road. “Knowing what everyone is thinking and feeling.”

“Not with you. You’ve got me locked out tight.”

“Hmm.” Not tight enough, it would seem, because of that knowing smirk he’d shot her. Asshole.

Her PAD buzzed, and Rae swiped down on a message from Baelin.

Schematics, the message read, followed by a blueprint of the facility. Is he still being a dick?

Rae huffed a quiet laugh before she shot a message back. Always. And then, because she couldn’t help herself, Why do you stay?

Baelin had stopped in to check on her not long before they’d left, Quinn at his side. To check she wasn’t about to try and flee, Rae suspected. He said he hadn’t spoken with Reed, and though Rae believed him, there had been something off about the Vampire, something that weighed on him.

He’d asked about her injuries. Rae had told him Aidan had patched her up and about how much of an asshole he’d been about her meeting Reed alone. The Ascendant had thrown his head back and laughed at that.

Dots appeared on the screen of her PAD as if Baelin was typing, and then stopped.

“What’s up with Baelin tonight?” Rae asked, concern surfacing before she shoved it down. He is not your friend, she reminded herself. Tried to remind herself of all the ways Vampires had treated humans as their blood bags, treated the other Orders as beneath them for years, that the Vampire beside her was the one with the power to change all of that.

Aidan shot her a glance. “It’s a difficult night for him. To say any more than that would be... unfair to Baelin.”

Rae studied him, wondering if everything she’d ever heard about him had been a lie. Vampires chose their Ascendants for their loyalty. For their strength. Because they were deemed the most worthy of holding things together for their family. But in the short time since knowing both of them, Rae sensed it was more than that. Some sort of bond that preceded Baelin being Aidan’s Ascendant, something that had brought them together in their past. She’d thought Baelin reminded her of Seylan when they’d met, but she realised now that perhaps Aidan saw him as a brother too.

He’s good, Rae, came Baelin’s belated reply. Better than any of them.

It wasn’t a threat. It wasn’t an endorsement of his skills. It was one friend, vouching for another, and something about the simplicity of that sent a knot of guilt to lodge in her throat. Rae coughed it away. She couldn’t afford to feel anything for any of them.

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“It’s empty,” Aidan breathed a heartbeat later.

“What?”

“The facility. The whole fucking site is empty.”

He went quiet, and she knew he was giving his instructions to the other Vampires.

“We’re getting closer,” he said. “No point leaving the cars so far away in this weather.”

Rain came down, thick and heavy, and Rae was inclined to agree. The original plan had been to take a service tunnel the humans used for their power lines to come up into the heart of the facility, but it was in an area of the First District too narrow for their vehicles.

Rae had received a report back from one of her operatives only a few hours before; the facility had been manned at that time. Which meant they’d cleared out before nightfall. She pulled up Omnia personnel files on her PAD, reading through the cadet’s details until her attention snagged on something. The operative’s sister had been missing for a week. Fuck. “They were tipped off,” she muttered.

“By who?”

“One of mine, I think.” Rae couldn’t bring herself to blame her cadet for that. The fault was hers for not screening him better. For being distracted.



Aidan was quiet, likely passing on the information again. Zeke's data had provided test subject names, with dozens of matches to missing person lists Rae had access to. But no information about who the data was going to; that was too much to hope for.

They stopped a block away from the facility beside an access point for the service tunnel, the metal door hanging wide open. Rae hadn't told her operative any of their plans, had only asked that he report back with any activity. She hoped whatever he'd given Torrin and the others had been enough for them to hand back his sister. That the girl was still alive when they did.

Baelin greeted her as they exited the cars, swiping rainwater from his eyes. "They'll sweep first," he explained, following Rae's gaze as she watched one of Aidan's units enter the service tunnel. Behind him, Aidan instructed his First Unit, the rain drowning out his words.

The air hummed, and Rae took a step closer to the tunnel, a shiver running down her spine. Something wasn't right. She pressed a hand to the outer wall, closing her eyes to feel for traces of magic. Aidan's abilities had been tampered with repeatedly in the last week; she wasn't going to rely on him.

Her eyes shot open, and Baelin's gaze locked on hers. "What is it?" he asked.

"Get them out!" she cried, just as an explosion rang out and Baelin slammed into her. A shrill sound sang in Rae's ears, and it took a moment for her to realise the Vampire was above her, his body pressing hers into the wet ground. "Baelin," she rasped, all the air knocked from her lungs.

For a too long second, he didn't move. Then he coughed, and Rae loosed a breath beneath him.

"What happened to staying out of trouble?" Aidan snapped as Baelin's weight shifted

off her. She rolled to her feet, eyes fixed on Aidan, on the way he pulled a glass vial from his inside jacket pocket, bit off the cork, and brought it to Baelin's lips, a thin line of crimson trickling onto his lower lip. Blood.

Are you hurt?he asked her without taking his eyes off his friend.

I'm fine.Though Rae didn't doubt he already knew the answer.Is he?

Another vial. Another cork spat into the dirt beside them, and had Rae not been spending so much time with him, she might have missed the look of concern that flashed so briefly across Aidan's face before he schooled it to neutrality.

This time Baelin reached for the vial, knocking back the contents and glancing over his shoulder. "I liked this shirt."

Sometimes the similarities between the two of you are alarming, Aidan said dryly in her thoughts.

Rae huffed a laugh, but the sound quickly withered away when she looked back at the entrance of the service tunnel, the black scorch marks around the door. No one was running in after the unit that had gone ahead, and that told Rae everything she needed to know. They were dead.

No survivors, Aidan told her, confirming her suspicions. She felt the hint of remorse in his tone, the frustration at nothaving sensed what was going on in the tunnel. Whatever advancements had been made with the test subjects, it was already messing with his Provident abilities far too much for Rae's liking. Trading one group of power-crazed autocrats for another would do Demesia no good at all.

Baelin grumbled something about the rain and reached for his PAD, inspecting the smashed screen where it had been in his back pocket. The back of his shirt was

singed in places, probably even the ends of his hair, if Rae had to guess.

“Let’s get you back to the manor,” she said to Baelin, forcing down the guilt that was crawling up her spine. He is not your friend, she reminded herself for a second time—but he’d saved her life, without hesitation.

Aidan pulled his Ascendant to his feet. “Orion will take him.” The First Unit was already moving around them, hands on weapons, eyes searching out into the dark.

“Ascendants always travel separately. It’s a safety thing,” Baelin explained when Rae began to protest.

It made sense. Travelling together meant one target, and both the Vampire Lord and his Ascendant could be taken out in one hit. Baelin shrugged away help as Evander offered him a hand.

“Thank you,” Rae told him, hoping he knew just how much she meant it.

He knows, Aidan told her.

“Stay out of my head, Vampire,” she snapped, but there was no bite to it. He opened the door to his truck for her to get in, and she caught the way he checked her over as he fastened her seatbelt, as if he were searching for injuries she’d already reassured him weren’t there before he shut the door after her.

Aidan didn’t get in, and Rae didn’t take her eyes off him as she watched him speak with another of his units, a hand to the shoulder of another Vampire as he murmured something. The Vampire nodded, and Aidan returned to the car, turning up the heat as the engine started.

“I’m sorry about your unit,” Rae said once he put the vehicle into reverse, the rain coming down harder. Four fewer Vampires for her cadets to deal with would have felt like an unprecedented success on any other day, but watching the way Aidan had spoken to the other Vampire like he’d been consoling him, even Rae wasn’t that much of a heartless bitch. Or at least she hoped. Maybe she was.

“They knew the risks.” There was no emotion in his voice, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw the way a muscle feathered in his jaw, the tension rolling from him.

“Even so.” The guilt coiled tighter, and she willed herself to keep her feelings neutral so close to Aidan. He’d broken off from the other vehicles; only one followed this time. Another safety precaution, Rae presumed. “I’ll hold a seeking ceremony later,” she told him. She’d conjure up some bullshit, make him believe whatever show she put on for him. Make it look like she truly was searching for his magic. She just needed to buy some time before he grew tired of their arrangement. Needed to keep

him on her side until Nim was safe, and almost getting his Ascendant killed wasn't exactly a mark in her favour.

Rae knew with each day that passed that it was less and less likely they'd find Nim, the memory of those cells and what had occupied them all she saw every time she closed her eyes. But she'd be damned if she was going to give up on her friend before she left. Omnia had their instructions. Rae was almost ready; she just had a few more pieces she needed to slide into place.

A flash of lightning lit up the dash, a dark shadow darting across the road in front of them as thunder boomed. She caught Aidan's frown, her fingers closing around her switchblade, just in case.

"Shit. Hold on," Aidan told her, the taste of his magic familiar on her tongue as the command washed over her.

Another flash and the car smashed into something, careening onto its side and rolling and rolling and rolling until Rae didn't know which way was up, until her vision darkened, and everything went black.

## Chapter twenty-two

"Farren."

The Witch didn't reply. "Farren." From his upside-down perspective, Aidan took in the shattered windscreen, the single bullet hole in line with his chest, and released his seatbelt, one arm bracing himself from falling on his head. He lowered himself to the ceiling with a grunt, his Provident abilities probing and pressing at Rae of their own accord as he slid closer. Nothing was broken, but she was bleeding from her head, her arm, her body hanging loose against her seatbelt.

He knew enough about human physiology that moving her might be a mistake, but Witch physiology? He knew even less. “Farren, I need your help here.” Her hair hung across her face, and without thinking, he brushed it away so she could see when she opened her eyes. He reached out to the safety car, to the Vampires who had been inside it. Dead. But there was a presence out in the rain, getting closer, and it had every one of Aidan’s senses screaming at him to move. He tried to call out with his Provident abilities to Baelin and the other units, but only silence answered him. Fuck.

Whatever was out there, he’d have to draw it away from Rae until she woke up. If she wakes up. He allowed himself a moment to listen to her heartbeat again before hauling himself out of the car, a harder task than he cared to admit. He was too damn big to fit through the shattered window with ease, his jacket snagging on the shattered glass and the wound in his chest protesting at the angle.

The rain still came down thick and fast, the water soaking into his trousers where his knees pressed against the ground. Whoever was out there, Aidan could feel them stoop down beside the upturned safety car. At first, he thought it was a Fae, but as he pulled himself to his feet and put distance between him and Rae, he could see the male.

Horns jutted from his head, claws extended from his fingertips, but there was something off about him, something a little too put together. As Aidan took another step closer and bloodshot eyes met his, he knew. It was one of them, a test subject, and his Provident abilities were useless against it.

Something was blocking his abilities. He clutched at his chest where the bullet had hit, the movement feeling sluggish. The test subject approached slowly, head tipped to one side in a way that reminded Aidan of the Vampires drugged up on xion, the potent narcotic they favoured over weed.

“You’re all they sent?” Aidan called out over the rain.

The male's shoulders moved in amusement, his mouth quirking up. "I'm all they needed to send."

Aidan was arrogant, but he wasn't stupid. He reached for the gun inside his jacket, flicking off the safety and pulling the trigger before the male could come any closer. The test subject held up a hand, and the three bullets Aidan had loosed simply fell to the ground at its feet. The only Order he'd ever known to have that ability had been Vampires... but the Thaumases, the Vampires who could alter physical reality to their will, had all been killed for their ability long ago.

He fired again, and this time the barrel twisted and crunched in his hand, the metal folding back on itself. Aidan cast the weapon away, not taking his eyes off the creature before him as his canines extended. Hands and teeth would have to be enough, though something told him this fucker had more than just Thaumase abilities.

As soon as the thought struck him, a wave of water snapped up like a rope, whipping in his direction, but Aidan dodged it easily. "You'll have to do better than that. Do you have a name?" He shook away a wave of drowsiness, his heart beating fast like he'd been the one to take the narcotic.

"So you can utter it when you die?" the male asked, but Aidan waited, undeterred. "Daire." Another whip of water and again Aidan dodged, using the opportunity to close the space between them.

"Tell me, Daire," Aidan asked, wiping rainwater out of his eyes, "did they ask for your permission before they did this to you? Or did they pin you down like an animal and take what they felt was theirs?" He swung for Daire on the last word, too aware of those razor-sharp claws when he was already wounded.

The male sidestepped, but too slowly, and Aidan's fist connected with Daire's jaw. "They didn't take anything," he spat. "They gave."

Daire lashed out, but Aidan caught his wrist, fingers bone-crushingly tight as he slammed them both into the ground. He had to keep away from those claws, had to keep the male, the hybrid, too occupied to use any augmented abilities, and with any luck, close enough to sink his teeth into him.

They grappled on the road, Daire's talons raking against Aidan's jacket, but he grabbed the thing by its horns and slammed its head back into the wet asphalt with a roar, his heart thumping against his chest. He wanted answers, but he wasn't going to risk his life getting them tonight.

Aidan's hands closed around the male's throat, teeth bared, but Daire threw him off, slamming him into the rear end of his car, his breath leaving him in a whoosh of air. The vehicle spun, Rae still inside it, metal scraping and whining against the wet asphalt. The split second Aidan spared trying to feel her heartbeat was a mistake. Daire crashed into him again, and this time Aidan sank his teeth deep into the male's shoulder until he connected with bone.

The creature bellowed, claws shredding the flesh at his side, but Aidan didn't let go. They collided again with the side of the car, and for the first time, Daire seemed to notice Rae, a grin splitting his face as he took in Aidan's reaction. "What do we have here?"



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Aidan didn't think, just grabbed a horn, smashing the male against the metal hard enough to impale him into it, but Daire simply laughed, peeling the side panel away like it was paper as he freed himself.

The thing lunged towards Rae's broken window, and Aidan moved for the hybrid at the same time, throwing his weight against the frame to shield Rae as best he could, hands wrapped around Daire's horns to hold the creature back, his Provident abilities still inactive.

A blade slammed into Daire's throat, dragging deep across the flesh, warm blood spilling over Aidan's chest as the hybrid struggled and then stilled. Aidan shoved it away, chest heaving as he looked up at Rae, still hanging from her seat like she gave zero shits about the whole situation.

"Next time, Vampire, I'm driving." She used the blade to cut her belt, hopping from her seat in a way that told him she'd been in this precise situation at least once before. He wheezed a quiet laugh, reaching a hand into his jacket for his vials of blood.

"Fuck," he muttered. The vials he'd given to Baelin.

Rae nudged him aside to pull herself out of the window, shoving her switchblade back into her boot. The wound on her forehead wasn't bleeding enough to be deep, but she tried to hide a wince when she stood. The Witch toed her boot against Daire's body, rolling him over to look at his face.

"Test subject?" she asked, her attention taking in the road around them, the upturned safety vehicle, the buildings at the far side of the road. She crouched beside Aidan,

glancing up to wait for his nod of confirmation as she pulled her PAD from her pocket and waved it at him. “Smashed during the explosion.” She cast it into the car. “You called your boys?”

“More of them will come,” Aidan spluttered, his hand pressed to his side as he flicked his chin at Daire’s lifeless body. Rae raised an eyebrow, slipped a hand into her jacket, pulled out a vial of blood, snapped off the cork, and handed it to him. She shook her head at his words, or maybe at the fact that he didn’t take the vial from her, Aidan wasn’t sure which.

“You think I’d agree to live with you without bringing more menu options?” she said dryly, wrapping his fingers around the vial and bringing it to his mouth. As he knocked back the contents, she slipped a hand into his jacket, her fingers covered in blood when she pulled out his PAD, completely destroyed from his tussle.

“What the fuck, Vale?” Rae breathed, discarding the PAD and pulling another vial from her jacket. This one Aidan took without hesitation, even though it tasted like shit.

“What is this, horse?”

Rae shrugged. “Squirrel. Maybe.” The smallest hint of a smirk tugged at her mouth, but there was concern there too. “That was all I had. Can you stand?”

Aidan nodded again. The blood would help him heal faster, but that first bullet he’d taken through the windshield was still lodged in his chest, the pain sharp, like it was scraping against something vital. They were almost the entire city away from the manor, and with no vehicle, no PAD, minimal Provident abilities with whatever was coursing through his veins and dawn fast approaching, this night was turning into a monumental fuck up.

The drain on his abilities... had it started with Daire or before? Aidan pressed a hand to his chest as if it might tell him what kind of bullet was lodged there. "The night we met. Did they take my blood?"

Rae shook her head. "They only got you with the sedative. A tranquiliser, Zeke called it. A lot of it."

A tranquiliser. Inside the bullet? There was only one way to find out. He followed Rae's line of sight to the upturned safety vehicle. "They're dead."

"First Unit?"

Aidan shook his head. "Sixth."

Something flickered in her expression that might have been regret, even though she'd shown nothing but disdain for his kind, Baelin the only exception. "How long until your teams start looking for you?"

He hadn't told her he'd dismissed Beck from First Unit, and she hadn't seemed to notice. He wasn't taking any chances on a Vampire that couldn't control his bloodlust around her. "They'll already be on their way, but we can't stay here." Daire was an asset, and whoever made him would come looking for him soon enough. Aidan only hoped his team didn't come at the same time they did.

The Witch glanced back down the road into the dark, and he knew she was weighing their options just as he had been. "It'll be dawn in a few hours."

"Then they'll follow protocol. When they can't find us here, they'll return to the manor until nightfall." He shifted his weight, the bullet scraping inside him, and he inhaled a ragged breath. "Enough talking. We need to get moving."

“This way.” Rae didn’t wait for him, and Aidan wondered if she knew how badly he was injured, or if she just wanted to get out of the rain. Her clothes were soaked through, her hair plastered to her face, and again he silently questioned what her natural shade was. How much of herself she changed with spells.

The blood she’d given him had been weak, and as he moved, his body trying to heal itself, the bullet lodged deeper. Sleep would be enough to expel whatever remained of the tranquiliser in his blood, but Rae would have to knock him out before that happened, and at this rate, he wasn’t certain he would wake.

He followed her through the dark in silence, the rain the only sound. He’d been trying to reach Baelin or anyone from First Unit to warn them to stay away. If more of those things were coming, they needed a strategy. Otherwise, they were walking into a massacre.

After a while of snaking through gaps between buildings and down dark alleyways, he felt the first stirrings in his Provident abilities. Not much movement in their proximity, but back the way they’d come, he could sense multiple bodies. Humans, mostly.

Baelin,he tried again.

Here.

Aidan’s chest twisted with relief.Whereverhereis, stay there.

You and Rae?Baelin asked.

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We'll be fine. Our PADs are gone, the car, and the safety vehicle.

Unit Six?

Aidan paused, considering his reply. Gone. Don't move until nightfall. I'll send instructions. Understood?

Of course, my lord.

He was about to object to the use of his title, but then—"You brought us to a rutok kennel?" He slid through the door Rae had wedged open for him, the feeling of a thousand tiny heartbeats washing over him.

The Witch shrugged. "It's unmanned. No one will find us here."

Aidan didn't have it in him to argue. Rutoks were considered vermin to Vampires, mostly because they multiplied like nobody's business, but also because what little blood they possessed provided absolutely no sustenance whatsoever. He knew some humans kept them as pets, probably just to piss the Vampires off.

Most rutoks were tiny, fluffy things, with pointed ears and multiple tails. Some had more dog-like features than others, though Aidan had never paid much attention to them. The kennels were all unmanned; some human-automated methods provided food and water. What happened to their waste, Aidan didn't particularly want to know, but the kennel didn't stink as he followed Rae down a dimly lit corridor, so at least there was that.

“Anyone follow us?” Rae asked, glancing over her shoulder at him. The rutoks on the other side of the wall chittered and huffed as if they were talking excitedly to each other. They probably were. He wondered what Baelin made of them, but he didn’t know how much longer he could stand.

He followed Rae through another door, dimly aware that she’d asked him a question. His vision spotted as she turned to face him, darkness pressing in at the edges of his vision.

Whatever words she said were muffled and far away as Aidan slid to the floor, the bullet lodging deeper.

## Chapter twenty-three

“Vale?”

“I need you to cut me open,” he rasped, willing his vision to clear. “Here.” Aidan was vaguely aware of Rae moving around him as he pressed a hand to his chest, each breath like his lungs were burning hot coals as the bullet pressed against his heart.

“Cutting out your heart is a little cold, even for me, Vampire.” Rae’s fingers closed over his, easing his hand out of the way.

He tried to laugh, but the sound was choked. “There’s a bullet lodged in my chest. I think it was full of whatever tranquiliser they used on me before.”

“Okay,” Rae said, ripping his wet shirt open. “How lodged?”

“Deep. The blood healed it over.”

“Shit,” she murmured on an exhale. “I can’t believe you’re asking me to fuck up this

beautiful ink.” The words were light, but he could feel her concern now that the tranquiliser was almost entirely gone from his system.

“Did you just call me beautiful, Witch?” With his back pressed against a wall, it was the only thing keeping him upright.

“The art is beautiful, smart ass.” She straddled his lap, her hand resting over his heart, and he knew she was doing it to distract him from what was coming, could feel the way she was fighting to cover up her concern. “Bite me, and I will cut out more than this bullet, understand?” Rae’s eyes met his, searching. Her pulse ticked in her throat, and against his better judgement, he let his gaze dip for a heartbeat before nodding.

Her hair had been blood red earlier, but now it was almost black from the rain. Without thinking, he lifted a piece stuck to her shoulder, twirling it between his fingers. “Why do you do this?”

“No one’s seen what I look like in years.” She pulled a blade from her jacket. Not the one she’d cut Daire’s throat with, but a longer, finer blade, handing it to him before shrugging out of the garment and bundling it up over his stomach. Her hips canted with the movement, and Aidan willed himself not to think about the warmth of her, of how soft she felt against him when he needed to feed. When he’d done nothing but crave the fucking taste of her blood since he’d licked it from that needle the night before. “Ready?”

“Do it.”

She didn’t meet his eyes again. With steady hands and steady breaths, Rae brought the tip of the blade to where he’d shown her, his head falling back against the wall at the first cut. It was familiar to him now, the sting of a knife, the pressure as it went deeper. Her movements were careful and precise, like she knew what she was doing.

Warm blood trickled down his chest, and Aidan let out a quiet hiss, his canines extending instinctively. His own blood meant the need to defend himself. “Anyone would think you’ve had practice at this, Farren,” he ground out.

A flicker of something from Rae—not fear—but something close as she glanced up and took in his sharp teeth. “Mhmm. You were right, it’s deep. This next part is going to hurt. A lot. You want to hold onto something?”

Aidan brought his hands to her full hips, squeezing gently as another lick of worry unfurled from her, but for him, not for her. A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth to reassure her, and her lips twitched in response.

“Not exactly what I meant, Vampire,” she murmured, raising an eyebrow at him, but he didn’t dare speak again as he felt the bullet press harder against his heart.

Rae put the knife to one side. Pressed a hand to the unmarred skin on his chest beside the open wound, her skin like ice against his. She searched his face for a moment, as if she were waiting for him to stop her before she brought her other hand above the wound and closed her eyes, matching her breathing to his.



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Aidan's fingers pressed a little tighter at her hips in anticipation. He took in the way her eyelashes fluttered, the soft curve of her nose, her lips, barely moving as she began her spell. He didn't trust himself to lower his gaze from her face with how much blood poured from his wound and every instinct screamed at him to feed. To take.

She'd already begun muttering when Aidan felt it—the bullet shifted. He let out an involuntary groan, eyes focused on Rae's mouth to stop him from digging his fingers into her harder. Her murmuring grew louder, Aidan's back arching against the pain, drawing Rae closer to him. His breaths came out short and sharp with each tug of her magic, her incantation getting louder, louder.

She was shaking, just like she had been back at Cosia, and Aidan wrapped his arms around her; it was all the support he could offer. Her breaths were ragged, every part of her trembling with effort. Just as he was about to tell her to stop, her eyes flashed open, a bright smile lighting her face as she continued her spell, a blue haze in the air around her. Rae was as breathless as he was, and fuck, if she wasn't the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

With one last pull on whatever magic she was using, Aidan felt the bullet reach the skin she'd cut open; he glanced down to see silver glinting at the centre of the wound.

"Eyes on me, Vampire," Rae told him, beads of sweat on her brow and a small quake in her voice. He could feel the relief pouring off her and reminded himself of their agreement, that she needed him to serve her purpose. Anything to stop him from thinking about the blood rushing to his cock, to everything else they could be doing with her seated like this, their chests heaving in time with each other's.

He hadn't realised she'd already pulled the bullet the rest of the way until she was holding it in her hand, glancing down at it. Aidan followed her gaze, watching as she turned it between her fingertips and then slipped it into her pocket, her hips moving again with the movement.

Exceptional didn't even come close. He fought the urge to rest his hand over her racing heart. To slide it up her throat and crush his mouth to those soft lips, to tear every scrap of clothing off her body.

"You can let go now, Vampire," she said with another smirk, swiping a piece of hair from her face.

Aidan's arms fell away, but he didn't take his eyes off her. Couldn't even if he tried. Rae cleared her throat, but he caught the desire leaking from her before she could shut him out, and he couldn't help the way the corner of his mouth curled up at how she tried to hide it. She eased off his lap, putting distance between them.

"How many rutoks would you need to eat to clear that up?" she asked, flicking her chin at the gaping wound in his chest.

For the first time since they arrived, Aidan took in the room they were in. Some sort of staff room for the maintenance team, and Rae was pulling open cupboards, casting containers over her shoulder as she searched for something. He was too busy watching the curve of her ass as she reached up to the top cupboards, the way—

"How many?" she repeated.

Aidan shrugged. "Fifty. Maybe more. They're worse than human junk food. Absolutely no nutritional value whatsoever."

"Damn it, Vale." Rae seemed to have found what she was looking for because she

ripped open a bag, pouring items out onto the counter. “I’m not killing fifty of them. Have you seen how cute they are?”

She soaked a rag slung over a cupboard door by the sink and walked back over to him, removing her blood-soaked jacket from his lap and handing him the fabric. Right, he was covered in blood. She’d picked up her blade from the floor beside him and made her way back over to the sink. A quick wipe against her trousers was all Rae gave the dagger before she cut deep into her palm, blood pouring into a mug she’d pulled from one of the cupboards when he wasn’t paying attention. Even from where he sat, the sweetness of her blood overwhelmed him. He’d only had a single drop the night before, and it had been the best fucking thing he’d tasted in as long as he could remember.

But he also recognised this for what it was, and somehow the disappointment was worse than his current predicament. “You don’t trust me,” he said, rubbing his thumb over his bottom lip as she held out the mug for him at arm’s length. Her eyes darted to his mouth, then back up again, but she didn’t step closer. Aidan took the offering, his fingers brushing hers for a moment.

“I don’t trust myself,” she murmured, twisting the ring at her thumb with a finger. “Think there’s a shower here?”

“Unlikely.” Aidan tried to keep all traces of humour from his voice. Laughing when she’d just saved his life didn’t seem like an appropriate way to show gratitude. He finished her blood in one eager swallow, fighting back the groan at the taste of it, the urge to sigh like a sated youth. The magic of his Order came alive with her Witch blood, his skin knitting itself back together, his body repairing itself.

He watched as Rae poured liquid over her hand with a hiss, wrapped a bandage around it, and tied it with her teeth. He didn’t trust himself to help her either. Not yet. “Are you—” he began, an ache in his voice he hoped she couldn’t hear.

She took the empty cup from him, discarding it on the counter. “Nothing’s broken, as far as I can tell, just sore. Using my magic that way healed me a little too.” There was something in her tone, a hint of something that she seemed to swallow down too quickly for him to discern. A scrap of fabric hung on the back of the door, and Rae lifted it off the hook with a glare. “An apron,” she said with a disapproving tone. “Couldn’t it have at least been a jacket?”

Aidan huffed a quiet laugh. “Sit.” He tapped the floor beside him. She was made of strong stuff, he’d seen enough to know that by now, but she’d been in a car accident, soaked through in the rain, and expelled a lot of magic to heal him, all in the past few hours. He could feel the exhaustion tumbling from her. Something told him she’d used him as a source to heal herself, but her body still needed rest.

Rae hesitated for only a moment before slumping down beside him, covering herself with the apron to keep warm. “Sleep. I’ll keep watch,” she said, staring straight ahead as if she were too wired to sleep. Whatever she was feeling besides her exhaustion, she’d locked it in tight.

“I don’t sleep. I don’t need to now anyway.” Because of her magic. Her blood. She’d needed to remove the bullet, but she hadn’t needed to give him her blood. He’d have healed. Much slower, granted, but he’d have healed.

Rae’s head fell back against the wall, but she still kept her gaze fixed ahead of her. “Fine. Then tell me what that was back there.”

Aidan sighed, rubbing a hand across his new scar. “A test subject. He called himself Daire.”

“Go back a step. The car?”

“Hmm. I got shot. Must have been a sniper because there was no one else besides

Daire. I think a bit of the tranquiliser released as it hit—I lost control for a second.”

Rae’s shoulders shook.

“What?”

She met his eyes, hers still bright with laughter. “That’s the worst apology I’ve ever heard.”

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“Apology for what?”

“I had to cut myself out of your car, Vale, after saving your ass.”

Aidan gestured to the bloody mess that was his torso, despite his best efforts to clean himself up. “I was a little busy.”

“All-powerful Vampire Lord, my ass,” she said on a huff of air, elbowing him lightly.

“Thank you,” he told her, holding her gaze.

Rae barely dipped her chin in acknowledgement, the tiniest hint of colour staining her cheeks. “Now tell me about Daire, the test subject.”

Aidan filled her in, all too aware of how much worse the situation could have been if the Fae and humans were further along with their testing. “Daire had Thaumases abilities, I’m certain of it.”

“How is that even possible? I thought the last of them were wiped out before I was born?”

So did he. “Either they found a store of blood... or there are Thaumases in hiding.” Aidan wondered if his uncle had known, if any of the council knew.

“Fuck,” was all Rae said, a rutok crying somewhere deep inside the kennel accompanying the sentiment. And then after a moment of silence, she asked, “Nim’s gone, isn’t she?”

He owed her the truth. He owed her a lot more than that, but he could give her the truth. Dark green eyes met his and he wished he had more information to give her. “She was wounded, but alive.”

Her relief was palpable, but there was sadness too. Regret. “You lost a lot of your team tonight. Baelin and the others?”

“They’re fine.”

Rae blew out a breath. “And now we just wait it out here?”

“No one’s getting close to this building unless I want them to now. Thanks to you.”

She relaxed a little at that but covered it up with a quiet chuckle. “Your thanks are almost as shit as your apologies, my lord.” The words were sharp, though Aidan felt her weariness; there was no hiding her exhaustion now.

“Get some rest,” he told her. Rae didn’t reply, and Aidan made a point of staring out the window opposite into the dark as her breaths slowed and deepened.

He owed his life to a Witch, and as morning broke, he realised he didn’t mind at all.

## Chapter twenty-four

Rae woke slowly. She was warm, Aidan’s firm body beneath her. Beneath her. Shit. She’d practically curled herself over his lap, his fingers splayed over her hip. He didn’t stir as she eased herself out of his hold and rolled back onto her heels to look at him.

A faint scar and a broken line in his tattoo were all that remained of his wound. She allowed herself a moment to gaze over the rest of his ink: lines of that strange foreign

text, rows and rows of it with finer, smaller symbols that before she'd mistaken for flourishes at the ends of letters. The night before she'd realised, sitting in his lap under the harsh lights of the break room, that his tattoos covered scars all across his torso and arms. Some of them painfully similar to her own. From his uncle, she would put money on it.

Aidan stirred but didn't wake. She should have left him. Could have. But she'd woken up inside that car, her world upside down, the Vampire Lord trying to keep Daire away from her, and bringing her dagger to the test subject's neck had been more instinct than a good business decision.

Goddess knew what she was thinking when she'd used her magic to pull the bullet out. Only it hadn't drained her in the way using that amount of magic usually would. The opposite, in fact; she felt stronger for it. She hadn't intended to pull from him, but Rae felt certain he knew.

Guilt twisted in her stomach for a heartbeat before she made her way for the door, needing to at least have a wall between them for a few minutes. To not think about the way he'd looked at her the night before, the way he'd held her to him, how all she'd wanted was to feel those hands over every inch of her.

Rutoks chittered and huffed beyond the wall to her right as she entered a corridor, knowing she'd eventually find an access door if she looked long enough. Some said the rutoks had magic once. Human children were still often gifted them as pets as a symbol of protection, but all they did was eat, shit, sleep, and breed until the new legislation had come in and the kennels had been built all across the city.

Some clever human had come up with the idea of turning their shit into biofuel, and the captured rutoks were permitted to live, magic or not. Rae didn't know what she believed; she just loved the idea of an army of adorable creatures charging down from the mountains at dawn.



With every step she took further away from Aidan, she half expected to feel him press against her mind, but he must have still been sleeping. Her thoughts drifted to the way he'd rubbed his thumb over his bottom lip after she'd risen from his lap, and all she'd been able to think about then was how it would feel over hers. Watching him drink her blood, the effect it had on him, knowing that some part of her did that to him. It was a rush she hadn't felt in a long, long time. Even now, heat flushed her cheeks, her chest, her belly, lower. Rae swallowed, shaking away the thought.

A green door with a warning sign longer than her arm at the end of the next corridor was the one she was looking for. She mumbled her spell, the lock clicking and the door swinging open, not knowing what to expect. If an army of feral rutoks chased her back to Aidan, at least he'd have breakfast.

She hadn't expected cages, wall to floor, and again she had to shake away the awful sight of lifeless bodies in the cells back at the facility. In her mind, the rutoks had been running about these facilities freely, deposited by some hole in the wall. They were clean creatures and only messed in their litter trays, which would have been emptied mechanically, Rae presumed, the same way everything else seemed to in the building. Each cage held a rutok, some hissing, some sleeping, some running back and forth across the tiny stretch of hatched wires. Water bottles and food dispensers connected to pipes ran along the ceiling, all fresh, all full. But no space. No direct sunlight; the windows were too high and too narrow for that.

If it wouldn't attract so much attention, she'd set them all free there and then, but Rae couldn't. She made her way further into the kennel, eyes drifting over sleeping rutoks, some old, some young, until she stopped at a cage holding two. A mother lying on her side, and an entirely white cub, curled up in the space under the mother's chin as it whimpered quietly.

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Rae took a step closer, and her heart stuttered. The mother was dead. She sucked in a breath and the little rutok's eyes shot open wide, huge ears darting up in alarm before slamming over his eyes as if he could make himself disappear.

"It's okay," Rae murmured softly. "I won't hurt you."

She opened the cage and let the door swing open. The cub lifted an ear, a round black eye looking up at her, then the other. "It's okay," she said again. She rested a hand at the edge of the cage but didn't reach out for it. This young, they looked like cute little fox cubs, but they had a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth, and Rae wasn't looking to lose any fingers. The sound of metal on metal pulled her attention, and she glanced over her shoulder to see some of the litter trays emptying in the cages opposite as a wet nose pressed against her thumb.

She turned back to the rutok, barely bigger than her hand, its five tails spiralling around each other almost larger than the rest of its body. It rolled onto its back, paws in the air, and made a small sound, then turned back, gently nudging its lifeless mother and whimpering.

"I know," Rae told it. "I'm sorry she's gone." She had nothing to offer it other than Aidan's manor, which was a great deal better than a cage, if only a larger one. "Want to get out of here?" she asked, taking a step back, but the rutok merely settled in against its mother once more, black eyes never leaving Rae.

Light glinted off the corner of the cage, and again Rae looked over a shoulder, taking in the way the sun shone through the high windows. Sunlight. Aidan. She made to leave, but the rutok huffed at her, not quite a bark, but something close. "I've got to

go. Last chance,” she told it. And with that, the rutok bounded over, scrambled up her arm, and settled into the crook of her neck.

Rae huffed a laugh as she reached for it, racing back out into the corridor and bursting into the break room only to find Aidan in the same position she’d left him, a slice of sunlight on his cheek and across his perfectly sculpted chest, causing him no harm whatsoever. “What the fuck?”

“Hello, Witch,” Aidan murmured, eyes fluttering open, unperturbed.

“Imagine my panic,” Rae said, her heart a heavy drum in her chest, the rutok’s five tails winding through her fingers where she cradled it in her hands, “when I realised the sun had rounded the building as it sets. Only to find you sunbathing like you’ve done it every fucking day of your life.”

Aidan raised a hand until it caught the light from the window opposite, turned his palm as if it was a surprise, and clicked his tongue. Then his eyes narrowed. “Is that ball of fluff supposed to be a rutok?”

“Don’t deflect, Vale. I want an answer.” There would be riots if this was made public, yet something told Rae he wouldn’t have let her see this, know this, by mistake.

Aidan merely shrugged. “I’m a half-breed.”

A choked laugh escaped Rae, the rutok clambering up her arm to the crook of her neck again as she rested against the counter, folding her arms across her chest. The Vampire Lord, a half-breed. Impurities in Vampire lines were not tolerated. Half-breeds were unheard of. But a Vampire that could walk in daylight... impossible. Not to mention the power he was giving her by handing over this information.

“Witch?” she asked, because it was the only question she could think of.

“Fae.” She hadn’t expected an answer, let alone an honest one.

He was watching her closely, but he wasn’t trying to get into her thoughts. Rae knew she was giving enough away—her surprise, her confusion; he must have been able to taste her shock in the air. “Who else knows? Baelin?”

“No one knows.”

Rae had to look away at that. Suddenly his gaze felt too heavy, too close. “Why are you telling me this?”

He stretched, muscles pulling taught before he uncurled to his feet, mirroring her stance on the wall opposite and fastening his hair into a knot. “To earn your trust. I’ve been trying to control the Vampires because I want to bring control to Demesia. Not because I want to control it.” It’s as if everyone has forgotten that there’s life outside of fighting, he’d said that first night in his manor.

“Something better,” Rae murmured.

He nodded.

“And because you want your magic back.”

Another nod. She’d get him back his magic. If she could time it right, she’d afford him one last night with it before she collapsed Demesia’s ley lines and nullified magic across the city. She owed him that much.

“Who did that to you?” Aidan asked, jerking his chin at the scars along her arm where the rutok played, tails spiralling around her wrist.

A male, she realised as he rolled and twisted, happy little noises escaping him now and then. “You first.” She held Aidan’s stare and made sure he saw the challenge in them. It would take more than one secret to earn her trust.

Aidan didn’t seem concerned. “I was too difficult a secret to conceal. My father was killed by the Fae for what he’d done, and my mother was forced to give me to my uncle for protection.”

There was so much wrong with that simple statement. “And instead he did that,” Rae said, jerking her chin as he had.

Aidan nodded. “Lessons, he called them,” taking in the scars along one arm. “Some took longer to learn than others, but as I got older, I understood he did it because he was afraid.”

“That you would be more powerful than him?”

“That I already was. He thought if he ruined me, I’d never realise my potential.” He dragged a hand through his hair, though it did little to tame it. “His poor judgement worked in my favour.” The thin beam of sunlight had slowly moved across his chest since their conversation began, and Rae realised he probably didn’t get much opportunity to enjoy it.

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She had never told anyone about her scars. Partly because she'd never cared to remember the painful details of how she'd received each of them, but partly because she knew she'd never have the opportunity of telling anyone whose face might light up with understanding rather than pity. "My mother ruined me and called it love," she said after a moment of silence where they both watched the rutok play. "My father chose to ignore what my mother did, and he called that love too."

"She did this?" The air stirred with his words, the last of the sunlight gone as it dipped too low in the city beyond, a shadow falling across the breakroom, across Aidan.

An empty cup sat on the counter, a teaspoon resting inside it, and Rae picked it up and inspected it, watching as the rutok snatched it away and wound it up between his tails like treasure. "Once, I stole a pudding, but the only thing I could find to eat it with in my haste was a teaspoon. I'd barely even finished the first mouthful before my mother found me. She pressed that spoon over my eye so hard I had burst blood vessels for weeks. It's when I first learnt to change my eye colour." The rutok dropped the spoon, the metal rattling against the counter and the creature flinched at the sound. Rae stroked its head in quiet reassurance. "Her punishments were varied. Sometimes just an iron from the fire. Sometimes a backhand so forceful it would send me to the floor."

Rae could feel the ghost of each strike, the burn of each press of the iron as she spoke. "Her favourite thing to do was grab a fistful of my hair and hold me face down in the fountain at the front of our home until I saw stars." It was why Rae had learnt to change her hair, why she'd learnt to hold her breath for so long, but she didn't need to explain that to Aidan for him to fill in the gaps.

“Was her death painful?”

Rae hummed a laugh. Trust him to remember her mother was dead. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there.” Dangerous territory. She’d already shared far too much of herself, too many pieces for him to use. He’d been honest with her, but not without motive. She couldn’t lose sight of that.

Even without telling him more, she knew she was giving too much away—her racing heart, her sweaty palms, the emotions tearing through her, hot and sharp. Anger, mostly. So much anger she could light the world on fire with it. Had tried to on more than one occasion. The beatings after that had always been the worst.

“Orion is outside,” he said quietly. Too quietly, and Rae refused to see the pity in his eyes, her attention fixed on the rutok. She focused on the soft fur, the way its little paws sparred with her thumb.

“Let’s go.” She scooped the creature off the counter, let him run up her arm and settle against her neck, claws digging into the fabric of her top.

“You are not bringing that ball of fluff into the manor,” Aidan said as he held the door open, waiting.

Rae was undeterred. “Why not? At least I know none of you are going to kill him.” Aidan couldn’t argue with that after admitting they were as good as junk food. “You still owe me, Vampire,” she reminded him as they made their way out of the kennels.

Darkness greeted them. Darkness and Orion, waiting beside a vehicle that Aidan would no doubt be driving.

Don’t I know it, the Vampire Lord’s voice rumbled in her thoughts.

## Chapter twenty-five

Failure wasn't an option for Aidan, yet two nights had passed since the colossal fuck up at the facility.

He'd given Rae space. She'd muttered something about looking for his magic as they'd made their way back into the manor that night, and if space was what she needed to locate it, he would give it to her. She was playing him, he was sure of it, but she knew something. Keeping her close was the best option he had, despite who she was. What she was. Vampires had tried to strike a deal with the Witches once; it hadn't ended well.

His hand ran over the scar on his chest as the other knocked back the remains of his glass of visk before he reached for the bottle to pour another. He could still taste Rae. Still feel the press of her body against his, the pull of her magic under his skin. A Vampire approached the front gates, alone; the cameras would pick up his arrival soon.

"Cormac is here," he told Baelin, seated opposite his Ascendant on the sofa in the study.

Baelin hummed his acknowledgement, eyes never leaving his PAD. He'd been tracking the movements of the remaining council members at Aidan's request; it was time to try and salvage the absolute shitshow his uncle had been so proud of. Aidan didn't care if every last one of them perished, but he needed information, and if things got out of hand, he needed numbers.

He downed the second glass of visk, his hand rubbing at his chest again as if he could brush away the sensation of Rae's magic. If getting under his skin had been her intention, she'd succeeded. Outside the study, Shaw had raised a hand to the door but was yet to knock. "Come in," Aidan told him.



The old steward stood aside for Cormac, then merely dipped his chin before leaving the three of them alone.

“Sit,” Aidan told the turned Vampire. He took in the way Cormac held himself, the way he crossed one leg over the other, a hand resting on his knee. A show of confidence the male believed, though not entirely. Aidan didn’t press against his mind; not yet. One-sided conversations were dull, and he needed his Ascendant to be able to do what he did best.

His gaze snagged on one of the rings on Cormac’s hand. One of Rae’s, Aidan was certain of it. “An interesting choice.”

“A gift,” Cormac offered.

From Scarlett. His mate. Aidan felt the Vampire’s reservation at even breathing her name in front of Baelin as he slid a glass of visk across the table. “Your secret is safe with my Ascendant.” He already had what he’d been looking for, didn’t see the need to embarrass Cormac by airing it. His mate had given it to him to keep him safe. Touching, but Vampires were proud, and any show of weakness, of acknowledging what the ring was for, would shatter any respect Cormac might have earned since killing his creator. The Vampire knocked back the liquid in one, unease leaking from every pore. Fear. Fear he might never see her again.

“Weyland proposed an exchange.” Cormac smoothed the fabric of his grey trousers over his knee. “Scarlett has no remarkable abilities. Her powers are... average, at best, for her kind. What she lacks in magic she more than makes up for—”

Aidan raised a hand to cut him off. He had no interest in what her other talents were, and unfortunately, he’d already seen a flash of Cormac’s memories to show him in great detail. “What does Weyland want in exchange?” he asked, his patience running thin.

The Vampire thumbed the rim of his glass, and for a moment Aidan thought he was going to lie to them. “He gave me a list.”

“A list of those with more interesting abilities.”

Cormac nodded.

“And you gave him your blood.”

Another nod. “A turned Vampire... he said it might stabilise their formula.”

Aidan’s eyes narrowed. Cormac wasn’t out of place around wealth and had likely been in all of Demesia’s most expensive establishments, but in the centre of Aidan’s study, which admittedly was three times larger than any study needed to be, he seemed small, helpless. Cormac was many things, but stupid wasn’t one of them. “And the list?”

The Vampire retrieved a piece of paper from his pocket, the slightest tremor in his hand as he flattened it to the dark wood before them. A quick scan of the contents told Aidan not only was he and almost his entire household on the list, but most of the council too. All the more reason to meet with them.

“Scarlett’s location?” Aidan already had it, but he wanted Cormac to say it. Compliance was much easier to work with than the alternative.

“A building in the Southern Quarter. One of the humans’ facilities for growing that muck they call food.”

Aidan and Baelin exchanged a glance. The chances of Nim being there too were high, but they needed a better plan this time, or they’d all be serving themselves up for testing. Aidan needed Rae to focus on the task at hand; this distraction had gone on long enough.

Cormac rambled on, and Aidan let him for Baelin’s sake while he sifted through the

Vampire's memories of the meeting. Weyland was an arrogant bastard, but Aidan suspected he wasn't the one pulling the strings on this. Then something snagged his interest—

“They want to make a new Order? That's what this is about?” He thought of Daire, and the idea of more of them out there in the city spelled nothing but trouble.

“They want to use it on themselves,” Cormac explained.

Baelin leaned forward at that, his PAD discarded on the table. “The humans? Or the Fae they're collaborating with?”

“Both, I think,” Cormac mused.

Aidan laughed humourlessly at the admission. Whatever Torrin had promised Weyland, he was a fool.

Shaw, Aidan called out to his steward. We're done here.

My lord. A heartbeat later, Shaw stood waiting at the entrance to the study, the scent of weed and human food drifting through the open doorway.

Cormac's face fell as he realised he was being dismissed. “Please,” he whispered.

“I'll do what I can, but understand the only reason I'm letting you walk out of here is because I need Weyland to believe you're gathering his list.”

Cormac nodded in understanding, though his objections were on the tip of his tongue, his thoughts a scrambled mess.

“I'll send instructions,” Aidan said, his attention fixed wholly on Rae and whatever

the fuck she was doing in her studio a floor above them.

“Yes, my lord. Of course.”

Aidan didn't even acknowledge Cormac as he left, Shaw closing the door behind him.

“She's cooking up there now too?” Baelin asked, handing over his PAD.

“Your guess is as good as mine. What's this?”

“Transcripts.”

Between Baxter and Rae. Aidan hid his irritation, reading the messages once. Twice. Anger tightened his jaw as his eyes skimmed the words a third time. “When?”

“This is from tonight, my lord.” Baelin's eyes dipped to Aidan's hand on his chest. “She could have left the bullet there.” The bullet Baelin had examined, traces of the tranquiliser Aidan had suspected it had been filled with still coating the shell.

“I'll keep that in mind.” He tossed the PAD back to his Ascendant, leaving his study without another word. Part of him regretted telling her the truth of his lineage. The other part, the part that had revelled in the warm glow of that slither of sunlight, that had so badly wanted to see Rae's reaction to the truth, didn't care at all. He'd been more than giving, and she'd shoved it back in his face, time and time again.

At the top of the staircase, the damn rutok Rae had brought back with them darted between Quinn's limbs, the daemon sitting stoically on its hind legs. Even the fucking dog had to suffer the Witch's antics.

Farren, he called out, trying to smooth over his anger before barging into her room.

No answer. Why can I smell baked potatoes drifting from your studio, Witch? Her studio. Like it had always existed in his home.

I needed a heat sink, came her tired reply. Like he tired her, just as much as he tired of her bullshit.

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He forced himself to knock on her door. “A heat sink?”

“I’m busy, Vampire.”

“With your potatoes?”

A sigh. “It’s open.”

She didn’t look up as he walked in, something she’d perfected now after a few days in the manor. Aidan knew the Witch went out of her way to do the opposite of what was expected of her as his Odalik, just to piss him off.

“The potato draws the heat away from any parts of the silver I don’t want to melt. See?” she explained as he made his way over to her workbench. She’d pushed her goggles up to her head, a mask pulled down to her neck, though he doubted she’d been using it given that her joint sat half-finished on the bench beside her. Her lilac hair was tied back, a few curls falling down her back, the cut of her vest low and exposing the back band of her lace bralette. A scrap of fabric that could barely be called a skirt had ridden high on her thighs, and in the back of his mind Aidan wondered at the safety of exposing so much skin around hot metal, but Rae didn’t seem to care.

His eyes lifted reluctantly to the scorched potato and the piece of metal wedged inside it. “Faction order?”

Rae stiffened, lighting her joint with the extended flame from her torch like she’d done it a hundred times before, and took a drag before handing it to him. “For Bax,”

she said on an exhale, pulling down her goggles and turning her back to him.

“A gift.” It wasn’t a question, and again the fucking scar she’d given him heated.

“The only piece of jewellery I’ve ever gifted was to Nim,” Rae said quietly. “This one is imbued with a tracking spell.”

“You don’t trust him either,” Aidan murmured. Rae merely dipped her chin as she continued her work with the torch, solderflowing onto the band of the ring before she set down her tools, picked up a pair of tweezers, and dropped the metal into a dish, a sizzle filling the empty quiet of the room. “Did you know Vampires have taken to wearing your jewellery?”

She snapped the goggles off at that. Tossed them onto the bench and stepped away from it. Displeasure rippled from her, perhaps even a little disgust. She didn’t know. Aidan handed the joint back, a temporary peace offering, and he realised more than anything he wanted to watch her bring it to her lips just for an excuse to stare at her mouth again.

“What do you want, Vale?” She was flustered, but not from the news about the Vampires wearing her jewellery, and the realisation made Aidan’s mouth turn up at the corner.

“Baelin has your PAD tapped.”

“Tell your Ascendant I hope he enjoyed Bax’s dick pics as much as I did.”

A sound halfway between a laugh and a grunt left him at that. “You wanted him to see.”

“You still underestimate me, even now.”



“Not even for a second,” he told her, letting a little of his sincerity brush against the bare skin of her shoulders.

“Don’t,” she warned him, a little of her exhilaration slipping out with the word. She’d leaned back against the bench and pulled her mask over her head to discard it behind her, the slip of fabric exposing more of her thigh as she did so.

He should have been pressing her for updates about his magic, demanding that she fulfil her end of their bargain, but his anger had simmered enough for him to remember to tread carefully. That if she wanted to disappear, to take away his only chance at getting his magic back, she could do so at any moment, so instead, he filled her in on the news Cormac had delivered as he watched her tidy up her workbench.

“You think Nim could be there? With Scarlett?” Rae asked when he’d brought her up to speed.

“It’s a possibility.”

She turned to face him, resting against the bench as she untied her hair and ran a hand through it. “But you don’t think we should go yet.”

Aidan’s silence was answer enough. “We go to the facility now, and we risk everyone involved. We were all on that list. Or we try to smooth things over with the council, bolster our numbers.”

“So you can get what you want.”

Irritation rose to the surface, and Aidan ground his jaw tight. “I promise you, the alternatives are not interested in Demesia, in Mazyr. Only what life can be like for Vampires.”

She studied him, a lock of hair falling over her shoulder that he wanted to wrap his fist around as she blew out a breath. “Fine. Council. But I’m coming with you.”

Aidan stepped into her space, his eyes searching hers. He’d tasted her blood, but it wasn’t enough. He wanted her mouth. Wanted those thick thighs wrapped around his head, his tongue buried deep inside her. “They’ll try to corner you again.” He didn’t know why he offered her the warning. To make her change her mind? Because she might expose him? In the back of his mind, he knew those were just excuses.

He still hadn’t figured out what it was she truly needed, what the purpose of this game was she’d been playing, but the longer it went on, the more he found he wanted to know the answer for all the wrong reasons.

Rae angled her head, assessing him. “Let them,” she murmured. “Look how well that worked out for them last time.”

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He couldn't decide if she was out of her damn mind or if she was that confident in her abilities. Probably a little of both, if she'd survived this long the way she had. Rae was a fighter through and through. More than that, she might have been one of the strongest individuals he'd ever met. "Malik and his wife Karina are vying for my position in Sysmus's absence; it could be worse than last time."

"Married Vampire aristocracy. They sound delightful." Not a hint of worry or hesitation fell from her, only her bristling sense of awareness at his proximity as she held his gaze. Her tightly coiled anticipation, colour staining her cheeks.

Aidan hummed his agreement, letting his gaze fall to her mouth for a moment, his attention wholly divided. The aristocracy was a fucking nightmare, he'd concede to that. "Most of them can't decide whether they want to fuck or strangle each other."

"Why not both?" Her tongue darted across her lips, her pulse picking up.

His palm found the scar over his chest again, and Rae tracked the movement. This craving went beyond hunger, beyond rational thought. "Regretting your choices?" he asked her.

She closed the space between them until she was an inch away, tilting her head back to look him in the eye, but the speed of her heartbeat gave her away. "When it comes to you, Vale? Always." She was playing him. His brain knew that, but his body had other ideas as every drop of blood within him rushed south. "I've got a lead on your missing magic," she told him quietly as she placed a hand over his scar, fingers splayed open and a pulse of her magic tumbling from her, mixed with a little of her lust.

It felt like another lie, but she'd pulled that bullet from his chest and he'd felt her worry, her relief. Right now, he could feel the desire coursing through her, could taste it in the air. "I'm done playing games, Witch," Aidan said, stepping into the last bit of space between them, half expecting her to push him away, but when he looked into her eyes, he saw a mirror of the hunger he felt, the need.

"Guess you'll have to kill me then, Vampire," Rae murmured. Her gaze dropped to his mouth, her fingers fisting into his shirt. "But you and me... we're no better than your married aristocrats."

His hand wrapped around her throat, her lips parting, breaths coming faster, faster. "Tell me you want this," he said roughly, fighting the pressure against his canines.

Rae leaned into his grip, her head held high as her fingers tightened in his shirt. She angled her head until her lips were close to his, her breath dancing over his skin. "Bite me, and I'll gut you."

Aidan didn't need to be told twice, his mouth coming down over hers.

## Chapter twenty-six

Aidan wasn't gentle. If he had been, Rae would have stopped this madness.

His kiss was bruising, punishing, lips devouring hers, tongue sweeping in, not a moment of it tentative or tender. It was exactly what she wanted, needed from him. To get this out of her system. That was what she told herself as he backed her up against the workbench, one hand fisting in her hair and yanking her head back so he could continue claiming her mouth. Everything about the way he moved, held her, kissed her, told her he knew exactly what she wanted.

For two days she'd avoided him, holing herself up in her studio. Two fucking days to

think of the way he'd looked at her at the rutok kennel. She didn't care, she told herself, if it was because of what he was. Only that she was tired of chasing her relief with her hand or her vibrator.

His eyes were molten silver, half-lidded and full of lust, of need as he pulled back to crush her hips against him, aching hard and thick against his trousers. Her hips moved with his, legs curling around him as he lifted her onto her bench. Rae fumbled with the buckle of his belt to free him, but Aidan caught her hands, pinning her wrists together with one of his. He slid her further back onto the workbench, tools falling and shattering across the floor.

"You'll be replacing that," she told him between breaths, his free hand like a brand along the bare skin of her thigh, tracing higher, higher.

A dark chuckle rumbled through him. "Maybe I should fuck that mouth of yours instead."

A retort rose up, but she had long since shredded through the last of her resolve, everything she felt dancing along her skin, and she was past the point of trying to keep it under wraps. Even if she'd been able to hide her lust, there was no hiding the scent of her desire from him, the liquid heat pooling between her thighs so close to where his fingers teased her flesh.

His hand cupped her wet centre, flipping her around and pinning her against the bench, an appraising sound rumbling in his chest where it pressed against her back, his other hand pulling her skirt up to her waist.

"Fuck, Farren," he breathed into her neck, fingers teasing for a second longer, the thick, hard length of him pressed up against her ass. He pulled back to roll her underwear down, hands tracing her thighs, his breath hot against her legs, and Rae shivered with anticipation.

His belt fell to the floor, the zip of his fly sliding down, and with one hand, Aidan pushed Rae flat against the bench. She panted breathlessly, every nerve ending alight as he pulled her ass high in the air, the hand that pressed her down caressing her spine, the tip of him brushing her entrance, and then he paused.

“Don’t go soft on me now, Vale,” Rae snapped, her body shivering beneath his featherlight touch.

He didn’t. There was no hesitation as he slammed himself in to the hilt, a hiss of air leaving them both as he pulled back and thrust again. Rae pushed against him as his hand fisted in her hair, arching her back towards him, his other hand at her throat, his hips never slowing.

Every sense, every nerve was overwhelmingly filled with him, his sandalwood and leather scent, his weight, his warmth, every deep thrust inside her, filling her almost to the point of pain as she panted against his grip, his own breaths short and sharp against the shell of her ear. She’d expected to feel the scrape of his canines against her flesh, swallowing down her disappointment when they never came.

Her eyes fluttered shut at the feel of him, the fullness, the ecstasy building and building inside her. She leaned away from him, bending further across the desk, biting back a cry at how the angle made him hit even deeper. Pleasure tightened every muscle, but Rae would be damned if she’d give him the satisfaction of making her fall apart around him so easily. “Is that all you’ve got?” she rasped against the desk, the force of his thrusts and the size of him lighting her up from the inside.

Aidan made a feral sound, pulling Rae up to her feet and turning her around to face him with one hand hooked around her waist, the other gripping under her knee to wrap her around him.

“Eyes on me, Witch,” he commanded before thrusting into her again.

His mouth was on hers, one hand slipping between them to touch her, fingers working her with just the right speed, just the right pressure—

“Fuck,” Rae breathed, her orgasm hitting her hard and fast, everything squeezing tighter around him as it shook through her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:03 am*

Beautiful, Aidan murmured in her thoughts, or he might have said it out loud, or maybe he didn't say it at all. Rae wasn't sure, her thoughts fractured and scattered, her heart hammering in her chest. His fingers slowed but didn't stop, his hips maintaining their rhythm until the aftershocks diminished and Rae half gasped, half whimpered into his mouth. For more or for him to stop, she didn't fucking know, only that she wanted to chase this feeling again and again. And only then did his thrusts quicken, his own release following, one hand tangling in her hair as he spilled into her, the other gripping her thigh tight enough to leave a bruise.

Rae's head fell against his heaving chest as she caught her breath, breathing him in for a moment as his grip softened and his own breathing slowed. Realisation swept over her far too quickly for Rae to smother it down, and as Aidan eased out of her, hands reaching to pull her skirt down, she pushed them away, smoothing the fabric herself.

"This changes nothing, Vampire," she said a little too breathlessly, her voice lacking the conviction she'd hoped for. Aidan merely hummed, his eyes roving over her face, a glimmer of softness in them gone so quickly she thought she might have mistaken it.

"Next time, you don't have to lure me up here by setting fire to my home," he said dryly as he fixed his own clothing, taking a step back as if he were giving her space. Rae didn't let herself latch onto the way his mouth tipped up at the corner, the way she wanted to kiss him again already.

"There won't be a next time," she told him, turning to take in the mess of tools that had fallen to the floor around them, locking down everything she felt so he wouldn't.



Aidan took a step closer, his breath dancing along her neck as he said, “Keep telling yourself that when you touch yourself in your room.” Rae’s eyes snapped to Aidan’s at that, willing herself not to remember what it had felt like to be pressed flat beneath his weight as she looked up at him over her shoulder. A knowing smile tugged at his mouth, his eyes darting to her lips and back up again. “Like I told you, Farren, I can feel every space you occupy in this house, everything you touch.”

She spun to face him, anger flaring at his words as she shoved at his chest. “Like I told you, Vampire.” Stay out of my fucking head.

Aidan chuckled. We leave in an hour.

Two hours and a very long, very cold shower later, Rae sat beside Aidan on the way to meet what was left of the council. The shower hadn’t been enough. She’d hoped sleeping with him once would be enough to get him out of her head, but she fought to keep a lid on her desire-addled thoughts.

Something told her they could fuck for days and she’d still want more. It had been hard and fast, just the right side of painful to chase the pleasure, but he’d made it her choice, her decision. She frowned at the memory of him gently easing her skirt down, and that was the only part of it she didn’t know how to deal with.

She wanted his anger, his irritation. It was easier to fight him than it was to like him. Safer. He’d showered too, the ends of his hair still wet, tight waves she wanted to drag her fingers through. Rae swallowed. “Witch magic is complicated,” she said, studying the line of his jaw and trying to remember every Goddess-damned reason why she hated his kind. Hated him.

His grip tightened on the wheel. Good. Let him believe it was a lie. Let him be angry. “Complicated,” he echoed, waiting for her to continue.

“It needs directions, paths to follow, places it can be pulled from. It’s like a web over everything, connecting everything and everyone together.” She waved a hand through the air as if she could see every invisible strand before her. “Some spells... they’re slower than others, more complex.”

She heard Cillian’s voice in her thoughts as she said the words, words he’d told her when he’d first started teaching her. Before she’d met him, she’d been taught to believe magic was separate from her, something to be called on, handled. Commanded.

But Rae’s lack of command had been the reason her mother had beaten her so many times; it had been half the reason she’d left. If she couldn’t control it, she was a danger, not just to herself, but to those around her. And whilst she’d had no love for her mother, Rae had been desperate to protect her younger brother from her ineptitude.

“So what you’re saying is, you need more time.” Aidan pulled up outside a warehouse that looked a lot like one of her suppliers’. Irritation tightened his words, a muscle feathering in his jaw as he turned to look at her.

“I’m doing everything I can,” she told him, holding her head high, daring him to argue with her when she knew how desperately he wanted his abilities back. “We want the same thing, Vale.” Not entirely. He wanted answers about the testing, but Nim meant nothing to him. Whether she lived or died wasn’t likely something he’d lose sleep over, but the Witch meant everything to her.

Aidan’s eyes darted to her mouth, and he shifted in his seat, a rumble of acknowledgement sounding from him. “Don’t wander off tonight. Cormac’s place is a maze down there.”

“Down?” Rae’s skin pebbled, a memory stealing her breath, but Aidan had already

left the car. He came around to her side, opened the door, and frowned down at her, waiting.

More memories threatened to push to the surface, to pin her to her seat, but then two more cars pulled up beside theirs and Rae cleared her throat. She took Aidan's outstretched hand, his fingers lacing through hers, and glanced up at him, her brow pinched in confusion.

Play nice, Witch. His lips twitched in an almost smile, but she could see the concern in his eyes as they flicked between hers.

Don't I always?

A flare of warmth followed her reply, but this time Rae didn't snap at him. This time she was grateful for his presence beside her, the weight of his hand in hers.

Lock it down, Farren, I'll be right beside you all night. His thumb rubbed against the back of her hand, fingers squeezing once.

She didn't answer him. He was right; she needed to smother her fear and push it down deep before the other Providents could sniff it out. Her mother's punishments were varied, rarely the same reprimand delivered twice in a row.

By far the worst Rae had endured, and the last, was when her mother had locked her in their basement for four days, soaking wet from another near drowning, freezing cold and afraid. No food or water. No air. No light. It was why she'd chosen to use the name Rae after she'd left. So that she could be her own light, a reminder that only she could pull herself out of the dark.

It had been the first time she'd opened a lock with a spell, the first time she'd understood what it meant to have control of her magic. What it meant for her.

“My lord.” Orion approached them, his stern face cast in the harsh lights from the building’s façade, his black uniform showing off his muscled physique. “Units Three and Five are surrounding us. Baelin’s cameras are feeding to your PADs,” the Vampire explained, smoky blue eyes darting between them both, talking to Rae with as much respect as he did Aidan.

They’d spoken very little, but she knew he’d been good to Baelin, to Reed, his high regard for Aidan obvious in his every movement. The Vampire Lord had surrounded himself with a tight circle of Vampires, and at first, Rae had thought it was an arrogant abuse of his position, a way to assert himself as the new Lord after murdering his uncle. But she realised now, perhaps even the night of the explosion at the facility, they weren’t with him because he commanded it. They were there because they chose to be.

“Good work,” Aidan said at her side. “Let’s get this over with.”

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Rae crushed her last tendrils of fear as she stepped into the warehouse, pulling strength from the way Aidan's body pressed close to hers and prepared herself for the descent into the dark.

### Chapter twenty-seven

Rae was afraid again, but not of him. At the thought of being underground, perhaps. Aidan wasn't certain. She'd covered up the fear as soon as he'd mentioned it, but the weight of it still lingered just enough for him to detect. She walked in front of him, as was customary with Odaliks, but he kept so close his chest almost brushed against her back with every step, close enough he kept a hand firmly on the silver silk at her hip. She'd worn a short slip of a dress, almost as short as the skirt she'd been wearing when he'd bunched it around her waist and taken her, and he was certain she was bare beneath it.

"My lord," Cormac said in greeting as they waited for the elevator that would lead them beneath the warehouse, Orion accompanying them.

"Cormac," Aidan ground out, his memories of the sounds Rae had made when he was inside her dispersing at the Vampire's voice. "My Odalik, Rae Farren."

Cormac held out a hand. A human greeting, waiting for Rae to take it.

"Nice ring," she said with a grin as her fingers closed around his.

A gift from his mate, Aidan told her, watching Cormac's reaction as Rae examined the silver. She wore more of her own creations than usual: bangles at her wrists, a

webbed necklace that covered the bare expanse of her chest and settled between her breasts where the fabric divided, the fine chain somehow looped into the silk. Across the bridge of her nose sat another fine silver bar, polished to a shine almost as bright as the pale blue of her eyes. She'd pulled her hair high on her head, soft coils of dark purple brushing against her neck, two pins holding her hair in place that Aidan was certain were very thin daggers.

Cormac merely spouted some excuse about his love for good craftsmanship, not realising he was flattering the creator of the piece his mate had gifted him. Rae smiled as the elevator doors slid open and complimented the Vampire on his choices before stepping inside the carriage, but her unease from earlier still lingered.

You're staring, Vampire, she said without glancing up at Aidan.

You realise you just complimented yourself?

He felt her laughter in his thoughts, though she remained silent beside him as the elevator descended. You would give yourself a pat on the back too if you managed to make that piece without melting it. It took five attempts to get right. Enchanted with one of my strongest protection spells. You'd have to cut the finger clean off his hand to inflict any other physical damage.

I'll remember that.

Orion grilled Cormac on security, questions Aidan knew they already had answers to. Orion knew it too, but he was thorough.

Rae shifted beside him as the elevator continued its descent. You forgot to mention earlier that Scarlett was his mate.

It wasn't relevant, he told her, resisting the urge to study her face again. She'd

smothered her feelings well, but he knew her tells now. The way she shifted her weight. The way she twisted the ring at her thumb with her finger.

I'd say it is, came Rae's reply. She's Fae?

A Witch.

Rae was silent, and this time Aidan looked down at her, blue eyes meeting his.

Cormac was turned, he explained. Scarlett wanted her mate protected.

Pretty but not smart. Words she'd said to him before, with just as much humour now even though he could only hear her in his thoughts. She'll have added to it. My spell. She'll have bolstered it with her own.

Humans are selling your creations for money. Doesn't that bother you?

Rae smoothed the collar of his jacket, ever the doting Odalik as she gazed up at him and winked. Not even a little.

That wasn't the answer he'd expected. The elevator slowed, the doors sliding open to a basement full of Vampires, and Aidan's arm instinctively slid around Rae's waist. Cormac's place was nothing like the warehouse above; it was dark, opulent, and excessive. The perfect meeting place for what remained of the council. Of the nine families, there were always Providents waiting in the shadows to step into a council position, and Baelin had already briefed Aidan on all the Vampires vying for the title.

All eyes turned to them as Cormac announced their arrival. Or more specifically, their attention turned to Rae. To her credit, she didn't balk under the stare of so many Vampires. Part of what made the Witches so secretive was that they were difficult to identify from humans despite their immortality. But secretive or not, Vampires were

so fixated on their feud with the Fae that seeking out Witches was the last thing on their mind. If Aidan were the kind to pray, he would have sent a silent thanks to one of the gods for that.

Malik and Karina were the first to approach, introducing themselves to Rae not out of respect, but to see what information they might leech from her. A silent insult to their lord, though Aidan didn't care. He didn't have time for council politics tonight. Rae's mental shields were the strongest he'd ever come across, and the only Vampire powerful enough to shatter them, and her mind along with it, was him. So she was safe from their probing, at least.

"You are as beautiful as the other council members described," Karina said to Rae, her amber eyes flitting between them. "You have excellent taste, my lord."

"Oh, he's not with me for my looks." Rae looked over her shoulder, and Aidan braced himself to get her out of there with whatever came out of her mouth next. "He's with me because I'm an easy lay, right, my lord?"

Aidan gripped her chin gently. "You possess many talents, lux mea," he told her. And he meant it. Every challenge she faced, she rose up to meet it. Every task she set herself to, she achieved. But Karina was right.

Oh, you haven't even seen the start of my talents, Rae said in his thoughts, her eyes on his. If this is the best the council can regurgitate after that snake Sysmus went into hiding, I think your position is safe for now.



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Aidan chuckled, releasing Rae's chin only to slide an arm around her waist. "Gather the others," he told Karina, dismissing her and her husband without taking his eyes away from the Witch at his side.

You're staring again, Vampire. Rae clapped her hands together. "Oh, visk! Cormac, you're a male after my heart. Thankyou." The Vampire handed her a glass of the amber liquid, and with a saccharine smile, Rae's accompanying dismissal of Karina and Malik was complete.

She was right in her assessment of them both; their family had always sought the lord's title but never succeeded.

Beside Rae, Cormac passed Aidan a glass. "Allow me to give you both a tour." He waited for Aidan's nod of approval before leading the way through the throng, stopping to allow council members and their Ascendants to approach. Of the nine families, there were four new council members and their accompanying Ascendants, some with their partners in tow.

Soft lighting and walls lined with crimson fabric surrounded them, floor-to-ceiling paintings of writhing bodies swallowed by shadows, and heavy gold chandeliers hung from the ceiling above. At first, Aidan had thought Cormac's taste was merely decadent, but the more time he spent in the turned Vampire's presence, he realised it was all part of the act. Cormac was a lamb among lions, and he knew it, so this image of opulence he'd created was merely armour.

Orion remained a few steps behind, curiosity tumbling from the other council members at Baelin's absence. Let them be curious, Aidan had told his Ascendant

before he'd left. It was more important that Baelin remained top side tonight, though Aidan found himself wishing he'd brought Quinn along to shadow Rae instead of leaving him at the manor to babysit the damn rutok.

They followed Cormac through the interconnecting rooms. Some held daybeds covered in dark fabric, one a large table overflowing with food that no one other than Rae would touch. Smaller rooms sat around the perimeter that Cormac offered no explanation for, but no Vampire needed. They were feeding rooms for those who wanted to take from the vein directly. Twelve humans in total, all of them high from being fed on, Aidan knew with a little flex of his abilities. A few empty rooms, all locked.

Rae was wound tighter than he'd ever seen her, and Aidan resisted the urge to pull her into one of the empty rooms just to give her a minute to get it together, but it would call too much attention to her. You good, Farren?

Never better. Let's get what we came for.

Cormac opened a door ahead of them. "Ah. Here we are. The main event." The Vampire's voice pulled Aidan's attention away from Rae, his arm falling from her waist as he flexed his Provident abilities over the male chained to the wall before them. Gades, Sysmus' Ascendant.

"Perhaps a little demonstration, my lord, of that unrivalled power. Something to whet our appetites," Cormac said dryly.

Aidan didn't give a fuck about putting on a show. He tore into Gades' mind with the full force of his Provident abilities, a silent plea on the Vampire's lips a heartbeat too slow for Aidan's attack. Images, names, answers, locations, Aidan searched through all of it, took all of it, Gades' eyes rolling into the back of his head, his body hanging limply against his chains and his chest rising slowly with laboured breaths.

If he hadn't been paying so much attention to Rae, Aidan would have reached Gades long before Cormac revealed his little party piece. Though Aidan knew Cormac hadn't been trying to show him up, the opposite in fact, the lack of action on Aidan's part would look like weakness to the council. He needed them on his side tonight, everything he'd just learned bolstering the fact.

It's Aera, he told Baelin. The human faction they'd disregarded. Find Tripp, now.

On it, Baelin replied.

Rae took a step back, Cormac offering her a hand, but Aidan couldn't let her distract him any longer. He let another fraction of his power roll off Gades, the Vampire's mind almost completely gone. He paused at Gades' memories of a young Vampire being injected in the arm, her body convulsing and writhing in pain, blood spilling from her nose before she died. Gades had stood by Sysmus' side and watched calmly, considering how it had gone no better than the five tests before. He deserved far worse than the fate Aidan was delivering him, but time wasn't on their side. With one more thought, Gades began choking as he believed his lungs to be failing, gasping for breath, his body flailing against the chains before he stilled.

"Gather the council," Aidan ground out his command to Cormac. "Now."

A few minutes later, twenty Vampires stood around the table of food, waiting. Thadlia was among them, but Aidan dismissed her attempts to reach out to him. He didn't want to give her any room for misinterpretation. Rae was still talking with Cormac, and Aidan needed to focus on the task at hand.

Though the council members were all Providents, their Ascendants were not, so Aidan spoke to the room. "I warned you all of this," he said with lethal quiet. He didn't need to elaborate on this; they would have all known by now about the other factions' involvement with the Liberalist Fae. "Sysmus and Gades were

working with Torrin and Aera. You have one week to amass as many Vampires as you can, at which point we will attack all remaining facilities and put an end to this. Information is being delivered to your PADs.”

Chimes and buzzes filled the room, some of the Vampires reaching into pockets to read the messages Baelin had sent them at Aidan’s instruction.

“They are coming for all of you, and your arrogance will see you dead if you do not act,” Aidan went on, his eyes falling over each of his council members in turn. “I’ve seen what they’re creating, and I assure you, we cannot match them. All we can hope for is that we’re not too late.”

“Too late for what?” Karina asked at Malik’s side.

“An army of those things taking out the entire city. There will be no Vampires, no Fae, no humans left. Only their creations will remain. Their hybrids.”

“That kind of power could serve us well,” Thadlia said on the far side of the table.

Aidan didn’t ask for permission, his Provident abilities slamming into all of them, showing them what he’d seen: the first facility with Rae, the test subject, and Gades’ memories. Some of the Vampires gasped. “That kind of power will destroy us all. One week. If you don’t show, you don’t have a seat at this council.”

A wave of, “Yes, my lord,” passed across the table, and with that, Aidan dismissed them.

Thadlia began to make her way to him through the crowd, but Aidan turned away, checking in with Baelin for a report.

Nothing yet, my lord, came his reply. Rae just got a message from Baxter.

And?

Forwarded it to you.

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Aidan pulled his PAD from his jacket and scrolled through the message. She doesn't have her PAD with her tonight.

I know, but she's smart.

She doesn't care if we see this. Have you figured out how she hid from you the other day?

I can't fight her magic with tech, Aidan, it's impossible.

Which means she wants us to ask her about it. She wants us to follow him. Aidan thought of the ring she'd made for Bax, wondering when she was going to give it to the human. He reached out for her, but she wasn't among the crowd. Shit. Amongst the music, the laughter, and the chatter of Vampires, Aidan felt it, felt her, and could have cursed himself for not thinking of it sooner. She'd told him at the rutok kennel about her mother's abuse, but he hadn't considered what else it could entail; he should have warned her before bringing her down there.

He had to find her before any of the other Providents latched onto her fear. Within the time it took him to realise it, Aidan had located which room Rae hid in, the feel of her on the door letting him know she'd sealed herself inside. Unlock the door, Farren, he told her, knowing he'd draw attention if he tried a door that was locked.

He slipped inside the second she opened it, securing the door behind him. No one would dare follow their lord into one of these rooms. Even in the dark, he knew Rae didn't look up. He flicked at a switch, and a soft glow flared to life above them. Still dim, but better than letting her sit in the dark.

Aidan held a finger to his lips as she looked up at him, her eyes wide. They'll hear, he told her, angling his head to the door. Rae barely nodded, twisting the ring at her thumb as she tried to smother her fear.

A warehouse full of Vampires, and she was afraid of herself.

## Chapter twenty-eight

Is this the part where I pretend to be awed by your command of the council? Rae leaned back against a table despite the sofa beside her, the words sharp but her fingers digging into the wood.

This room was primarily for feeding, but Aidan wasn't about to tell Rae that, though he felt certain she'd have already figured it out. The furnishings were just as lavish as the ones beyond it, the lighting just as soft. And if verbal sparring was what she needed, he would give it to her. He didn't answer her question. You want me to ask you about Baxter?

Her gaze had fallen back to the floor, her fear pulsing, pressing against his skin. Aidan closed the distance between them, fingers resting under her chin to tilt her head up to face him. He could try to force her to feel calm with his abilities, but knowing Rae, she'd fight it. Spit at him for the invasion. Tell me, he told her, his thumb rubbing lightly against her cheek.

Rae brought her hand over his scar again, magic pulsing between them before her palm rested there, as if she needed the touch to ground her. The soft light made her skin glow, the folds of her dress shimmering like she was a fallen star.

The break in. I think he was looking for the stolen vials. She swallowed. I gave him the data. Before I gave it to you and Bae.

An unfamiliar feeling curled through Aidan at her admission, but he ignored it. I wouldn't have trusted me either, he told her, the smile tugging at his mouth belying what he felt. It was a smart move, he would concede to that. He could have simply asked for the vials. He's your—

My nothing. A one-time fuck. Her fear was diminishing, giving way to something else equally as intense. Good. He would take her anger over her fear in a basement full of Vampires. He came into the studio with me, and I was too focused on Nim to think anything of it, but he lifted my rolling mill like it was nothing. He's human, Vale, he shouldn't have been able to do that.

Aidan's hand still cupped her face, hers still rested against his chest. He ignored the flicker of relief he felt at her admission, searching her eyes as he asked, He's a hybrid?

I think he might be. He asked me to leave with him that day. To leave you, even though he knew—

This isn't real? It was just as much to remind himself as it was a question.

A dip of Rae's chin, and Aidan let his hand fall from her face. Reached into his jacket for his PAD and brought up the messages Baelin had forwarded him.

For a moment, he'd let himself lose sight of why they were both in this predicament. You wanted us to see these. Why? Irritation bolstered the thought, and he knew she'd have felt it.

I want Bae to track him. Rae held the PAD in both hands, her brow pinching together as she read the messages for the first time, the ones that had arrived this evening. The glow of the screen lit up her features, the soft swell of her lips, the bar resting across the bridge of her nose. She handed back the PAD. Silver prices have been going crazy



the last few months. At first, I thought it had to do with the Liberalists stationed at the border. But you mentioned Daire stopped the bullets. The hybrid. I think they're using the silver, I think it's related to the testing. And I think Bax has been part of it from the beginning.

Anger tinged with a hint of disappointment rippled over her, both aimed at herself. She rested a hand over the silver chains at her chest, and Aidan tracked the movement.

Baxter knew you'd been struggling to buy silver? he asked her. The silver shortages, the hybrid's Thaumaturgy abilities, it could all have been part of Torrin's ploy to amass wealth and power. To govern the city. Take control.

A nod. He placed large orders for Aera regularly. I didn't think—

That it was Aera all along? Aidan took a step into her and eased her hand out of the way to inspect the silver chains, to take in the intricacy of her work, of the way it settled against her skin. Gades confirmed it. Baelin's already looking for Tripp. He traced each chain with a finger, between her breasts, lower, caught the way her thighs squeezed together and her breath hitched. Once hadn't been enough, and he knew she felt the same way, could hear the way her heart raced beneath his fingertips.

It's Bax he needs to look for. I think Tripp answers to Bax, not the other way around. More anger flared from her, only this time it wasn't twisted with disappointment, but something else. Something he wanted to elicit more of from her.

Does he know Omnia's yours? His other hand came to her waist, knuckles grazing over the bare skin at her back, and Rae leaned into his touch.

He thinks I'm a cadet.

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He underestimated you. Both of Aidan's arms wrapped around her, lifting her onto the table.

Mmhmm, came her reply, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. I'm sensing a pattern here in my life choices.

He knew what she'd meant. Tried to mean. That this was nothing. Another one-time thing. But Aidan saw the rise and fall of her chest, the way her nipples had hardened beneath her dress. The scent of her arousal filled his lungs, and he willed his canines not to extend at the taste of it.

A glass shattered on the other side of the door, followed by laughter from several voices, and Rae stilled in his arms as if she'd remembered where they were. Where she was.

Better they mistake your fear for excitement, he told her.

That was enough to snap her out of it. It's a wonder your head stays on your shoulders, my lord.

It was selfish, he knew. To want her, but he couldn't help himself. He brought a hand to her thigh and eased her dress higher. They know you're a weakness to be exploited, he began, but she shook him off, her hand clamping over his wrist.

Aidan's eyes flicked up to meet hers. I didn't mean you are weak. I meant it would be a weakness of mine.

Giving a shit about something isn't weakness. Her words were clipped in his thoughts, but she'd released his hand where it still rested on her thigh.

I think we both know this goes beyond me simply giving a shit. His other hand wrapped in her hair, exposing her neck to him, his nose grazing her skin up to her jaw. He knew it was more, much more, and the thought both terrified and thrilled him all at once. Possessiveness surged in his chest, the memory of how fucking beautifully she'd come on his cock earlier etched into his memory. He wanted to bury his tongue inside her, sink his teeth into her soft flesh and take from her vein. To have all of her as she unravelled around him.

"You assume too much," Rae whispered, her breath hot against his lips, her heart hammering in her chest.

Tell me I'm wrong. He searched her face, but there was no fear in her expression, no hesitation. Tell me to leave. Tell me you don't want this.

Her gaze remained on his mouth, her lips almost brushing his. Touch me.

Aidan kissed her roughly, readjusted her so she was sat at the very edge of the table, and got down on his knees. He held Rae's gaze as he lifted one leg over his shoulder, then the other, his hands running up her thighs, exploring slowly, exposing her to him fully.

He'd have liked to take his time. To have her writhing and unravelling beneath him, skin against skin. But that wasn't what she wanted. What she needed. She'd said earlier that the sex changed nothing between them, but he'd felt the vulnerability in those words just as acutely as he'd felt every one of her gasps and moans.

Here? he asked her. He licked the skin of her thigh, and she fisted a hand in his hair. Aidan chuckled at her silent request, more than happy to oblige. With a rough tug, he

yanked her onto his face, a yelp escaping Rae as his tongue slid home.

A groan escaped him at that first taste of her, his tongue dragging from the apex of her thighs to her opening, lapping into her and back up again. A string of noises escaped Rae as she grabbed his hair tighter, rocking her hips against his face and Aidan smiled darkly into her flesh. She tasted fucking divine, and the urge to feed on her was almost overwhelming. When his teeth had fully extended, he didn't trust himself to keep fucking her with his tongue, so he replaced it with two fingers instead, pumping in and out of her as he licked and teased at her bundle of nerves, working her faster and faster until she whispered his name.

Aidan couldn't resist his tongue sliding into her again, needing to taste her as she came apart around him, his thumb replacing his tongue as she shook against his face, his free hand gripping the curve of her ass. He licked her until her shaking eased, his cock thickening at the way she rasped his name again into the quiet of the room.

When her breaths slowed, he slid Rae's legs from his shoulders, adjusted her dress, and helped her shuffle back onto the table. She raised an eyebrow at the way he strained against his trousers and watched as he adjusted himself, his eyes on hers the whole time.

Rae didn't say anything, her cheeks flushed, her chest rising and falling, but it didn't matter. There was no fear left now, only lust. Her gaze fell to his mouth as he licked the taste of her from his lips, her eyes widening for a moment as if she'd just noticed his canines.

Aidan held out a hand to his Odalik. Let's go.

She hesitated for only a moment before resting her hand in his. No one would question their absence. These rooms would have been used for fucking just as much as they were for feeding, and the expectation was that the Vampire Lord partook in

both. The adrenaline that came from fear could easily be mistaken for excitement, and Aidan hoped anyone who'd noticed Rae's absence before his arrival hadn't been paying close enough attention to notice the difference.

"I need to make a pit stop," she told him quietly, pulling something from her hair as Aidan paused by the door. Cormac's ring. He's wearing a dud, she explained. I needed to check what modifications had been made.

Aidan laughed under his breath. Should I be checking my pockets too? He waited until the ring was folded away in her hand before tugging her with him through the door.

Magic is like a web, remember, Rae explained as they wove through the crowd, heads turning their way as they went.

You certainly know how to dent my pride, Farren.

But her fear was still firmly replaced with her lust, and possessiveness flared in him again with the knowledge that every Vampire surrounding them knew it.

Rae shot him a glance, a wide smile stretched across her mouth. "Afraid I'm going to upstage you, my lord?" she murmured.

The only thing Aidan felt certain of was how much he wanted to get her back to the manor and out of her dress. Keep running your mouth, Witch, he told her, letting his Provident abilities caress the skin between her breasts.

She sucked in a breath. "Cheat."

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They passed Thadlia, the female's eyes fixed on the way Aidan pressed Rae to his body, hands entwined where his arm encircled her waist, but he knew the other Provident wouldn't make a scene here.

Cormac found them first, Rae thanking him for the human food and complimenting him on the interior decoration. It was the only time Aidan released her hand, so she could hold Cormac's with both. Aidan let a little of his Provident abilities wash over the Vampire, not that he doubted any of Rae's skills.

More Vampires tried to catch their attention as they left, but Aidan wasn't interested. Orion walked on the other side of Rae as they returned to the elevator, only stepping back once the doors closed. She stepped out of Aidan's hold as if she'd realised she no longer needed it.

I'm sorry for taking you down there, he told her.

Rae kept her attention fixed on the doors as they ascended. The last thing I want from you is your pity, Vale.

He studied her face. What do you want from me?

"How long do we have?" she asked, tilting her face up to meet his, all traces of heat long gone from her eyes, anger simmering beneath the surface once more. How long until the coordinated attack on the facilities, the entire reason for their visit to Cormac's residence.

"A week."

The elevator completed its ascent, and the doors opened to the remainder of First Unit waiting to escort them from the warehouse back to their vehicle.

“I’ll get your magic back to you and be out of your life in a week then, as soon as I’ve got Nim somewhere safe,” Rae said as she slid into the passenger side of his car, fastening her seatbelt.

“Farren.” Aidan fired up the engine. Nim likely didn’t have a week, if she wasn’t dead already.

“Don’t say it. She’s out there.”

They drove in silence for a moment as he cast a wide net with his abilities, making sure no surprises awaited them. “Cormac was given a list. We’re all on it. Me, Baelin, every one of my units.”

He felt Rae’s eyes on him. “You’re worried,” the Witch said.

Aidan swallowed. “Baelin is...” More than his Ascendant. Baelin was like a brother. “Very few Elymas remain.”

More anger rolled from her. “Those Fae fuckers. You’re all as hot-headed as each other.”

“It’s only the Liberalist Fae, Farren, I know you’re not naive enough to believe it’s all of them. The Royalists aren’t like their counterparts.”

“Aren’t they? They were willing to let their prince marry a young girl he’d never met. How is that any better?”

Aidan couldn’t answer that. He’d fallen out with Elred, the Fae king, over it. Had

damn near fallen out with Casius over it too, but he'd never shared that information with anyone, and he'd already told Rae more than even Baelin knew.

"One week," Rae breathed, a heaviness to the words Aidan felt in the very centre of the scar over his chest.

One week to find Nim. One week until he got his magic back. And one week until Rae was out of his life. Aidan let her anger settle into his bones as they returned to the manor in silence.

## Chapter twenty-nine

Rae couldn't sleep for the second night in a row, her body clock all over the place. I think we both know this goes beyond me simply giving a shit. Aidan's words played on repeat as she tossed and turned. It wasn't the only memory playing on repeat. No, it was perfectly spliced between him bending her over her workbench and fucking her from behind, and how he'd practically feasted on her in Cormac's basement. Except he hadn't actually feasted, and Rae realised with a jolt that she was a little disappointed about that.

"You are seriously fucked in the head," she muttered to herself, throwing aside the covers to grab her vibrator from the bedside table. A joint would add to the vibe, but Rae settled back into the covers, closed her eyes, flicked on the vibrator, and tried to focus as she moved it over her centre, tried not to think about Aidan's canines sinking into her flesh, a shiver racing through her at the thought. But then—nothing. Out of battery. Fuck my life.

She was too wound up to work for it. A smoke and a swim were the only two things that would help, so she grabbed the joint she'd rolled earlier and made her way to the natatorium.



Everything was in place. Her cadets were all ready and waiting for the next order at the end of the week after the facility raids, and then it was time to neutralise every last drop of magic the Vampires and Fae residing in the city possessed.

Less than a week and she'd be out of the manor and out of Aidan's life for good. Too many times, Rae had almost given up the location of his magic. Too many times she'd almost given in, but she couldn't, or all of this would have been for nothing. She didn't dare let herself dwell on what finding Nim was going to look like when her thoughts were so fractured, her resolve so frayed.

Quinn and the rutok—Ru, Bae had named him—bounded along behind her as she padded down the stairs, but Rae needed some peace from the rutok's antics, shutting them both out of the natatorium with a quiet apology. Hiding everything from Aidan had been an exercise in mental acrobatics, and she felt worn thin from the effort of it all.

She'd finished her joint before she even made it to the showers and breathed a sigh of relief as the weed eased some of the tension in her shoulders. Getting through the rest of this week was going to be damn near impossible. Between her blind hope that Nim was still alive, trying to keep Aidan out, coordinating Omnia, and practicing reaching for all her enchanted pieces of silver, Rae wished she could dive under the surface of the water and remain there, just like the Sirens could.

A foolish wish, but she jumped in regardless. Underwater, the thoughts swirling around her brain were easier to control, to silence. Well, almost all of them. Even beneath the surface, her skin burned at the memory of Aidan's touch, her heart beatfaster at the way he'd filled her, at how he'd made her come apart around him with his tongue.

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She swam closer to the bottom, following the boundary of the pool three times before she needed to resurface, gasping for breath. Get it together, Rae. Pulling her hips onto the underwater bench along the perimeter, she leaned her head back to take in the star-painted ceiling, her eyes falling shut and her hand slipping into her underwear.

The click of a lighter had her hand stilling, eyes flicking open to a puff of smoke above her.

“Don’t stop on my account, Farren. Need a hand?”

Rae twisted to her side to see Aidan lying on his back on the ledge above, one arm under his head as he stared up at the ceiling. “In your dreams, Vale.” But she didn’t pull her hand away, too close to what she wanted to stop now.

“Tell me to leave,” he told her, but there was no command in his tone as he shifted, swinging his legs beneath him.

Rae couldn’t. Didn’t want him to go, and somewhere in the back of her mind, she screamed at herself for how stupid that was. How dangerous.

Aidan stepped off the ledge and crouched down beside the water, close enough Rae could feel the heat from him, two fingers swirling in the water, his heated gaze taking her in, a predatory expression that sent a thrill racing through her. He was only wearing swim shorts, and for the first time, she saw how his tattoos trailed down his muscled thighs too. “Then show me how you like to touch yourself.” Her breath hitched, fingers circling her flesh, holding his gaze, long past caring what the consequences were. His head tilted as he assessed her, eyes half-lidded and full of

lust. “I like that you’re the only one I can ask that of and be certain your actions are of your own accord.”

“Another assumption,” Rae all but gasped, back arching, the water lapping at her breasts. “You’re getting far too cocky, Vale.”

He dived in with barely a splash, resurfacing directly in front of her, wiping his hair back from his face before resting his hands on her hips and lifting her out of the water onto the side of the pool. “Then show me.” He rolled her underwear down, pulling her ankles free one at a time before resting them on his shoulders. “Show me,” he said roughly, water dripping from his eyelashes.

Rae obeyed. She wanted to touch him, to feel him, but she knew he was going to make her wait. So she moved her fingers slowly at first, small circles right where she needed them, teasing herself and him, relishing the way his eyes followed her every move with ravenous hunger.

No matter how much she tried to tell herself she hated him, she couldn’t deny the pull she felt towards him. But now wasn’t the time to dwell on that. Not when she was so close to the release she so desperately craved. Needed. A breathy moan escaped her, fingers moving faster, and Rae could have come just from the look on Aidan’s face.

Without warning his mouth was on her, hands lifting her onto his face, his tongue delving into her as sparks danced down her spine. Rae tangled her fingers into his hair, thighs clamping tight around his head as release shook through her, but Aidan held her firmly, his tongue not relenting until she stopped shaking around him, until she was a boneless mess in his arms.

He lowered her gently, turning them around so he was sitting on the underwater bench, Rae’s body sliding down against his. He tucked her knees on either side of his hips, the hard length of him pressing against his stomach between them as Rae’s

breathing slowed.

Feel better now?he asked her.

Rae tried to shrug dismissively, but her ragged breaths and rapid heartbeat gave her away.

Aidan's laugh rumbled through her where their bodies pressed together.Liar,he said in her thoughts. His teeth had extended, and Rae wanted nothing but to feel them on her skin, to have him inside her.

"I want this," she told him, hands running down his chest, the scar over his heart, his hard abs, lower. She palmed him over the top of his shorts and he thrust up into her hand, silver eyes never leaving her face. "And this," she murmured, before kissing him, her tongue sliding against his canines. She felt Aidan's sharp inhale and freed him from his shorts before wrapping a hand around his length to guide herself onto him. His eyes were like liquid silver as he filled her, one hand wrapping around the base of her throat as if he was pinning her to him.

"Gods, you feel fucking perfect," Aidan breathed, his cock pulsing inside her, the size of him stealing her breath.

Rae leaned into his grip, but whatever words she held on the tip of her tongue, in her thoughts, all eddied away from her as Aidan's other arm wrapped around her rear, and then they were moving. Her on him, him inside of her, they met each other thrust for thrust, hard and fast, Rae's fingers in his hair to pull his mouth against hers. He slammed into her harder, and Rae arched back at the way he filled her, his mouth coming down over the wet fabric of her bra and taking a nipple into his hot mouth, his canines just pressing through the fabric.

A murmur in the recess of her mind whispered at howrightthis felt, how he felt inside

her, around her, but she shut it down as Aidan's grip became just the right side of painful, the most sensitive part of her rubbing against him with the friction she so desperately needed. Coupled with his mouth on her breast, the hand at her throat, the savagery with which he fucked her, another orgasm tore through her, and Rae could do nothing but fall apart in his arms, her body coming alight with every second of it.

The hand that had been at her throat cupped the back of her head, but Aidan didn't slow his pace, eyes roving over her face, her mouth, and her neck the entire time. "So fucking beautiful," he murmured.

Bite me, she pleaded, long past caring how desperate it sounded. Aidan's eyes flared, and then his mouth was on hers again, the slide of Rae's tongue against his teeth tearing a sound from deep within his chest she felt reverberate everywhere they touched. He kissed her the same way he fucked her: roughly, wildly, exactly how she wanted him, but he was being careful too, Rae thought, not to nick her skin.

She pushed at his chest. "I don't want gentle, Vale," she said through ragged breaths. "Bite me."

He wrapped both arms around her in answer, hips never slowing as he looked down at her hands on him, at where their bodies joined beneath the water, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Do you ever stop fighting, Witch?

The words sliced through her, hit a wound so deep she'd long since tried to bandage over. All she'd ever known was fighting for herself. To escape. To stay alive. All of it, alone. Rae pushed off him, heaved herself out of the water, and pulled her underwear back on. Emotions threatened to spill to the surface, but she shoved everything down, smothered it, and willed it to smoulder into nothing, leaving only anger to bubble to the surface.

"Farren, wait," Aidan commanded, but there was a pleading edge to his tone. He was

pressing against her thoughts too, waiting for access, asking. She hated the softness in his voice, the kindness in his actions, hated herself for all of it. But she'd been lying for so long it was becoming difficult to separate truth from lie, and she couldn't stay here with him for a moment longer.

So Rae did what she did best and pushed him away. "Thanks for the ride," she called out without looking back, waving a hand at him dismissively and making her way out of the natatorium, shrugging on a robe and padding back to the safety of her studio.

Ru found her on the stairs, and this time she let him snake through her legs and scramble up her robe to settle around her neck, a contented little rumble coming from the mass of white fur. She locked the door behind her for all the good it would do. Ru bounced off her neck and onto a cabinet, so Rae used that as an opportunity to get cleaned up, to change into something more appropriate to sit and use an open flame with other than her underwear, though she'd done exactly that many times before.

She set to work on a tag for Ru, pushing all thoughts of Aidan from her mind, and the look on his face when she'd walked away. Rae dragged a hand through her wet hair. The bastard could rub one out for all she cared. He didn't get to bring feelings into this. They had an agreement.

"Fuck," she muttered at her bench pin, willing her hands not to shake.

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Halfway through marking out a piece of silver, she decided to make a tag for Quinn too. They were gifts. So they'd have a little piece of her with them when she was gone, but also because, selfishly, she wanted to be able to find them again.

The movements calmed her. The familiarity of the tools, the repetitive motions. She filed by hand because it soothed some of her anger. For Ru's tag, she'd pierced his name into the silver. Quinn's, she settled on simply engraving the letter Q, filling the recess with some black enamel. Dawn had long since come and gone by the time she was done, the pieces already imbued with magic and sitting on her workbench.

Rae had one more piece left to make, one she wasn't ready to work on just yet. As she tidied away her tools, she reminded herself what this was all for. Who. And how much her people stood to gain if she succeeded. It would all be over soon, and Rae thanked the Goddess for that, because being in one place for too long had started to stifle her. She'd always been a flight risk, another moniker in her mother's repertoire.

She paused by the door, questioning whether to get some sleep before she headed out into the city to tie up a few loose ends, but knew the faster she was out of the manor, in the daylight, the better chance she stood of getting everything done. Aidan wouldn't risk exposing himself to follow her.

More regret threatened to surface, but Rae swallowed it down. The sooner this was all over, the sooner she could join Seylan. Maybe Nim would want to come with her too. Start over. But Rae knew that was not the case. Knew Nim would never understand what she was trying to do. As she made her way into the city, a small part of her couldn't help but get stuck on the fact that for a while now, she hadn't understood either.

## Chapter thirty

It had taken every shred of self-control Aidan possessed not to run after Rae when she'd left the natatorium, but as the last few hours of night stretched on, he could feel her working out her feelings on her pieces of silver, and he wished he had. What she'd asked him to do... her words had played on repeat in his thoughts since.

She'd looked so fucking beautiful in his arms, cheeks stained pink, her lips swollen from kissing him, the sounds she'd made he wanted to hear again and again. His canines extended at the thought, and he had to down half a dozen bags of blood from one of his stores just to quell the worst of the hunger. Feeding from her would blur every remaining line between them, but it didn't stop him imagining it, imagining all the ways he wanted to take her again and again. A quiet part of him knew it went far beyond physical desire. When he'd found her down in Cormac's basement, her fear consuming her, all he'd known for certain was that he would do anything to snuff it out.

Sometime after dawn, he found Baelin at the far end of the manor in the main security room. The raid on the test facilities was still a few nights away, but this couldn't wait. It was a conversation he should have had with his Ascendant a long time ago.

"My lord," Baelin said in greeting as Aidan entered the room he spent most of his time in.

"Don't start with that bullshit," Aidan told him, slumping into the sofa pushed back along the far wall and pulling a pre-rolled joint out of his top pocket.

Baelin should have been sleeping, but like Aidan, the Vampire slept very little, something that had given them ample opportunity to have this discussion over the years, and few excuses not to. Aidan took a long, slow drag of his joint, taking in the



sight of the security room. Five screens—two vertical—keyboards, drives, and humming devices sat across an arced desk wrapping around Baelin's chair. The room would have been dark, but the screens illuminated everything, though there was very little to see. Baelin had nothing on the walls, no piles of junk lying around. Everything was tidied away in the cabinets along the wall opposite, and Aidan knew that though the desk looked like a messy tangle of wires and hardware, Baelin had his own order to it all.

One screen showed a top-down view of the city in black and green with small flashing dots; another ran lines of code, waiting for a prompt. Baelin turned to face him, and Aidan handed over the joint.

"Baxter's been difficult to track." His Ascendant took a drag before blowing out a puff of smoke, passing the joint back to Aidan.

"Rae just left." Aidan rubbed at the scar on his chest. She'd gone out into the city on foot, and like a damn fool, he'd almost gone after her. She'd be back for Nim. This time. Aidan already knew Quinn had gone out after her and would be keeping a close eye, reporting back to Baelin. He kept his attention on her regardless, on everyone she interacted with, everywhere she went.

"Quinn has eyes on her. She's meeting Omnia cadets." Baelin's eyes glazed a little, not from the weed, but as if he were seeing through Quinn's eyes, Aidan knew. With how few Elymas remained, Aidan had always understood what a privilege it was to be able to watch Baelin's connection with the daemon, to be permitted to witness it. A gift he had never taken lightly.

Aidan knew precisely who Rae was with. Knew Baelin knew that too. But he appreciated the update all the same. He gave the unit members stationed in the surrounding security rooms a silent command to take a walk, wishing he had a glass of visk for this conversation. He took another drag of the joint instead. "We need to

discuss my lineage.” No point evading it any longer.

His Ascendant waited. Aidan felt his friend’s relief, though he’d always made it a point never to pry on Baelin’s thoughts, never to press. When Baelin didn’t say anything, Aidan blew out a breath. Vampires were known for their fondness of tradition, and though Baelin had always seemed to loathe it as much as he had, Aidan still found himself hesitating.

“Quinn has an excellent sense of smell,” Baelin said when the silence stretched on, holding out a hand for the joint, “but a well-guarded Elymas secret is that daemons can sniff out other Orders.”

Aidan’s eyes flicked up to meet Baelin’s. “You knew all this time.” He couldn’t help the upward turn at the corner of his mouth. The words came slow at first, but he told his Ascendant all of it: about his Fae mother, his family. The secret his uncle had almost killed him for. The secret he had to protect until the time was right.

Baelin listened in silence, nodding thoughtfully. Aidan felt no disgust from his friend, no distaste. Only understanding, and a weight he hadn’t realised he’d been carrying lifted at the admission. He should have done this years ago, but if Aidan didn’t return from the facility raids, he needed his Ascendant to continue what he’d started. Too many lives depended on it now.

When he’d finished, Baelin silently made his way to the wall of cabinets and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of visk. He poured a double measure in each before handing Aidan a glass. Aidan raised an eyebrow at his friend and waited.

“To something better,” Baelin said, a hint of hope and pride unfurling from him.

Aidan chuckled, the tightness easing in his chest. “To something better.”

They discussed the schedule for the units, their rotation for the rest of the week and the facility raids in a few nights' time.

Aidan didn't need reports; they were always readily available to him with nothing more than a thought, but he respected his team, and he preferred to have them deliver the information to him this way. At first, they all suspected the same: that he was testing them somehow, testing their honesty and their integrity against what he could feel and understand if he simply slipped into their minds. It certainly always began that way, but it was never how it ended.

"Orion is pleased with Reed's integration so far," Baelin explained.

Aidan nodded. The Shifter was the first Fae to enter his ranks, but Reed had taken to it remarkably well, and the other Vampires, for the most part, had tolerated him. When the Fae had first thought to request it, Aidan had been keeping a close mental eye on him, not long after Rae had found him in the Second District. Within the span of less than one night, Aidan had been certain Reed would make a strong asset to his team, and with Beck's inability to control himself near Rae, it was a logical solution.

Hours passed, and still, the Witch hadn't returned. Aidan knew he should get some rest, but until Rae was back inside the manor, he couldn't. When the day had first begun, he'd cast a wide net around her, but as the day progressed and exhaustion set in, he found himself searching the minds of fewer and fewer citizens as Rae passed through the streets of Demesia.

"You knew about Rae then too," Aidan said after a while, tracking her progress towards Silver Star. Baelin must have known Rae was a Witch all along, likely before Aidan even had.

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His Ascendant nodded. “She’s been good for you.” He laughed dryly. “The council would lose their mind if they knew your Odalik was a Witch. It’s too perfect. A human wife, they’d never look twice. But a Witch? You’re halfway to achieving your goal.”

Rae was meant to be a means to an end, but not that end. Aidan rubbed at his chest again, wondering when and how he’d fucked this up so much. “I can’t get this damn feeling to shift.”

“I think they call it l—”

“I meant the bullet wound.”

“I know exactly what you meant.” Baelin’s amber eyes softened as they met his, and Aidan felt the small trickle of grief that fell from him, the emotion he was always so careful to keep locked tight.

Laramie had died during childbirth, the baby along with her, not long before he and Baelin had met. And though Baelin had only spoken about her a handful of times over the years, during days when they should have been sleeping, fuelled by visk and weed, he had never spoken of love, though it had poured from him with every word about his long dead Odalik. He looked at Aidan now with a look that gave no room for abnegation.

“You know as well as I do, my uncle beat all but the anger from me.” Aidan tried not to recall the worst of it and failed. He shifted his thoughts back to Rae, to the way she had his entire household wrapped around her finger. They adored her—it was

impossible not to, Shaw had said when Aidan had found him preparing a plate of potatoes for the Witch. “Rae barely tolerates me anyway; her hatred is so palpable I’m sure even you can feel it.”

“Hate is a lot like l—”

“Baelin.”

His Ascendant had the gall to grin at him. Aidan sighed. He and Rae had both spun so many lies. She was in her old studio, a sense of melancholy and nostalgia clinging to her, to everything she touched. Though Aidan knew she’d been lying to him, that she more than likely didn’t have a damn clue where his magic was, all he cared about was making sure she got back to the manor safely. With a certainty that had his scar burning, he knew Baelin was right.

“Quinn’s found something,” Baelin said, straightening. “You need to see this—”

Aidan didn’t hesitate. He stepped inside his Ascendant’s mind and oriented himself to see what Quinn saw, what the daemon was showing Baelin.

“A hybrid,” Aidan murmured. He couldn’t feel him, had been completely blind to his presence without Quinn’s eyes, but what he did feel was fear, sharp and strong. “Rae.” He pulled back from Baelin and Quinn, his focus solely on Rae. Someone was in her studio. Someone he couldn’t get a read on. Another test subject.

Rae?he called out to her, praying she wouldn’t shut him out.

I’m fine.She wasn’t. She wasn’t breathing. Aidan was on his feet, cursing the fucking daylight and every Vampire along with it.

“Just over an hour until nightfall,” Baelin said, tapping away at his computer.

I'm sending a car to the studio, Aidan told Rae, her relief palpable. He was on his feet, already out of the room on his way to the garage.

"You're going out there?" Baelin asked behind him.

"Don't try and tell me you wouldn't," Aidan said without turning back. "I need your eyes, Baelin." He didn't wait for his Ascendant's response as he broke into a run.

## Chapter thirty-one

Rae walked the city for hours. She checked in with a handful of her higher-ranking officers, the ones that recognised her as nothing more than a cadet. Everything was in place for Omnia to continue in her absence, including three newly appointed sergeants who would take the reins together. Their priority was no longer the Vampires but the hybrids. Whatever Torrin and Aera had created, Omnia's attention had shifted to that.

What happened after the hybrids were dealt with was out of Rae's hands now. Soon she'd be going home, and she hated to admit it, but she was going to miss the city. Somewhere along the way, Demesia had begun to feel like home.

A Fae family passed her, a mother with silver gossamer wings and her two children, a boy and a girl. The boy had horns, the girl, wings like her mother's and horns like her brother's, both sharing their mother's golden-brown skin. It was unusual to see Wings in the city, but many were simply stuck there, just trying to make a life for themselves as much as the humans were.

The little boy stumbled, lost his footing, and fell, quiet sobs erupting from him as he pushed himself back up to his feet, but it was his sister who looped her arm under his, not their mother. It was his sister who checked his knee, who released a flurry of fluorescent butterflies conjured from the palm of her hand to distract him from the

pain.

Rae's heart twisted at the sight as she turned a corner in the opposite direction. She'd spent so long on the path Cillian had set her down that she'd lost sight of everything. What about the Witches' magic? she'd asked him. Someone has to hold the key, he'd told her. Better it be you than one of them. And as the little boy's sobs followed her, Cillian's words felt too much like her mother's. His actions too painfully similar.

We're all the same, aren't we? Aidan had quipped when they'd been locked up together after the attack on Rush, and she was ashamed to admit she'd believed it. Being raised that way wasn't a justification; even Cillian's teachings had long since stopped being an excuse to hide behind. Rae had lived in the city long enough to have opened her eyes. Frequenting places the worst of the Vampires enjoyed in order to rob them, but they were precisely that, the worst. Every member of Aidan's household was nothing like the Vampires she'd spent countless nights stealing from.

Of the Providents... Aidan was the exception. What she'd seen of the other council members, none seemed to regard the lives of others as he did. Perhaps it was because of what he was, who he was, and Rae tried to snuff out the emotions that accompanied that, the way she understood all too well what his life might have looked like.

She thought of the Fae children and wondered if he had any half-siblings somewhere, if he knew them. If everything he did was for them just as everything she did was for her brother.

And what about Baelin? Orion? The rest of the units? Even Shaw. They were good, kind Vampires. Rae had spent enough time in the manor to know it. Even Reed, who she'd been so afraid would win Nim's heart and Rae would lose the only friend she had to a Fae. So fucking selfish.

With one hand pressed to the lock of her studio, she mumbled a spell to let herself in, the familiar smell hitting her, nostalgia already creeping into her heart. She was so fucking proud of this place. The metalsmithing could at least always be something she could call a success.



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She hooked a picture of her and Cillian off the wall, tracing a thumb across his face before smashing it against a workbench. Liar. His manipulation had been no different from her mother's. His words were just as poisonous, and she'd been a fool not to accept that bitter fact sooner. Hands in her hair, Rae mumbled a spell to change the colour, pacing back and forth to steady her breaths. If she could change her skin and step out of her body with a spell, she would.

Everything she'd believed. Everything she'd done. And Nim—sweet Nim, who had been like sunlight after years of darkness from the first day they'd met—she'd been caught up in the middle of all of it.

For Seylan. You're doing this for Seylan, she told herself over and over.

Bax's ring sat wrapped in her pocket, and she pulled its envelope free to set it on one of the workbenches as she fought to calm her breaths. If she was right, he'd be back, and tracking him might at least make up for some of it.

Rae took the stairs to her apartment two at a time, unlocking the door before she even reached it, her chest heaving with silent sobs. Aside from Nim, she'd closed herself off from the world. Let an old man's venomous beliefs become her own because she'd so desperately needed something to believe in. Something to hold onto when she couldn't hold onto herself. She sucked in another breath, threw open the window beside her bed to try and get some air. There was little chance of that in Demesia. Still, she left it open and let the sounds of the city soothe her as she made her way into the small kitchen.

Rae dragged her hands through her hair again, wondering what the fuck she was

going to say to Aidan to make this right. So many lies stacked on top of each other. Where would she even begin? How would she make him see the truth?

You can't. It was too late for that.

The wards over the door to the studio wavered, but no sound travelled up to her apartment. Rae held her breath as she listened for the tiniest of sounds. Someone was in the studio. With silent steps, she crept to the top of the stairs and paused.

Bax. He was talking into his earpiece, moving around the studio, searching.

"No sign of her," she heard him murmur.

Rae took a step back. He'd lied to her. And she would put money on it his reasons for lying were far worse than hers. She glanced at her kitchen, doubting her small paring knives would be much use against him if he truly was a hybrid, given how Aidan's fight with Daire had gone. There was nowhere to hide Bax wouldn't find her, but she could conceal herself. Sidestepping a groaning floorboard, she crawled under the bed, mouthing a spell as the stairs creaked under Bax's feet.

"Rae, it's Baxter," he called out, a lightness to his tone that told her he was trying to make it appear like this was just a friendly visit. She held her breath as his footsteps neared the bed, as he dropped to his knees and looked her right in the eyes, but he wouldn't see her. If she kept still, her spell would hold.

His sigh blew warm breath across her face, tickling her nose, but still, Rae didn't breathe as he stood and spoke into his earpiece again. "She isn't here." His feet moved to the window, his voice further away as if he were leaning out of it. "She must have bailed." A smack of his hand against the wooden frame. "She knows."

Rae still held her breath, her heart fluttering in her chest.

Rae?Aidan. Of course he fucking knew she was afraid. She couldn't hide anything from him anymore.

I'm fine,she told him, the words clipped as she tried to keep her focus on maintaining her spell, on holding her breath, on listening to Baxter move around.

I'm sending a car to the studio.Rae didn't question him.

“Forget what they're capable of.” Baxter laughed bitterly. “Send two. She's a devious little bitch. I can't have her running this time.” He took the stairs back down into the studio, mumbling something else into his earpiece Rae couldn't make out.

She still didn't move, didn't breathe. Not until she heard the roar of an engine, until the sound of the motorbike was long out of earshot. She let go of everything, gasping for breath, forehead pressed against the dusty floorboards beneath her bed as she steadied her breathing and her heart.

Aidan's presence still lingered in her mind. He didn't say anything, and neither did she, but she didn't push him out either.

A chitter at the window drew her attention, followed by a dull thud. Rae turned her head, only to be greeted by two huge black eyes and a ball of white fluff. “Ru,” she whispered. “What are you doing here?” A bark sounded from below.

You sent the damn dog after me?she asked Aidan, sliding out from under the bed.

We haven't been able to track Baxter today.

You just missed him.

I thought as much. You were right, he's one of them.

She wouldn't insult him by asking how he knew, but she should tell him what she'd heard. Rae hesitated as she sat on her bed, Ru climbing to her neck. Quinn padded up the stairs to sit before her. "Bae's eyes and ears, huh? Who's driving the car, a monkey?"

Baelin says he's giving Quinn driving lessons.

Rae chuckled. "If you wanted to see my bedroom, Bae, you could've just asked."

Quinn barked, and Rae laughed again, some of the adrenaline melting away.

The car is two minutes away.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:03 am*

Rae didn't answer. She had two minutes to pack up her life. With the rutok nuzzled around her neck and Quinn at her side, she glanced around her apartment one last time, grabbing a bag from the door.

He's sent two hybrids to find me, Vale.

One minute. Until the car arrived. It was still daylight for another hour, so Rae had no idea who he'd sent. It wouldn't be him; he couldn't risk being discovered.

She grabbed some of her favourite pieces of jewellery, the ones she was most proud of. Ran back down to the studio to pull a few sketches from their frames, a picture of her and Nim, a sketchbook full of designs, the concert tickets she'd bought for Nim's birthday, and took one last look at her studio as a car door closed outside. Bax had taken the envelope with his name on it. He had the ring, which meant she could track him.

Quinn nudged her hand, and she took that as a good sign as she opened the door.

"Reed." Rae made no attempt to hide the surprise in her voice as she pulled the door shut behind her and Quinn. She hadn't seen the Fae since he'd been at the manor, had tried, multiple times, but Aidan's Units always had his room surrounded.

"You're alright?" he asked her, his gaze sweeping up and down as if assessing her for damage. He wore an earpiece and a uniform startlingly like Aidan's Units wore, Rae realised, as he opened a car door to usher her inside. She didn't object: the vehicle obscured her from anyone or anything that might be watching from the street, and she wasn't about to get Reed mixed up with two hybrids if Bax had truly sent them to

track her down.

She merely nodded once as he shut the door, too busy trying to work out how he'd gotten caught up in all of this.

"He forced you to come?" Rae asked as Reed set off.

A huff of laughter, Reed's eyes meeting hers in the rearview mirror. "Is this a test?" he asked, his eyes darting to Quinn. To the audience they both knew was at the end of Quinn's connection: Baelin and Aidan. "I've nothing to hide from them. I owe your husband my life."

Rae said nothing, trying not to think about the kind of male she'd expected Aidan to be and the one he was, another misjudgement in what was becoming a startlingly long list. Another bad decision to throw in the fuck uppile with the others. Quinn curled up on the seat beside her, and Ru curled up in the space between the daemon's legs. They both wore their tags, and Rae's heart warmed a little that she'd be able to check up on them both when she was gone.

"You too, Rae," Reed went on when she didn't reply. "Thank you for helping me. For searching for Nim."

Still, she said nothing, swallowing down the lump in her throat, too many emotions turning over themselves. "This isn't the way to the manor." They'd turned towards the Southern Quarter, the opposite direction to the one they should have been heading. The architecture changed to the mismatched human style, but just as many Fae as humans walked the streets here, the borders between the different parts of the city becoming less and less defined.

"Boss's orders," Reed explained. "We're here, Baelin," he said, either into his headpiece or just for Quinn to hear, Rae wasn't sure. Both most likely. They turned

down a narrow street, wide enough only for the vehicle, and a metal shutter rolled open to their left. Reed pulled into the dark alongside another car, and before he'd even pulled to a stop, Aidan stepped out of it. Rae ignored the way her heart raced at the fact that he'd come into the city in the daylight. For her. No, for his magic, she reminded herself.

She opened her door before he could, leaving Quinn and Ru behind. "You just put a target on his back," Rae told him, trying to sound angry.

"He knew what he was signing up for," Aidan said coolly. Rae had suspected as much. He reached out to brush a finger along her hair, showing her the dust when he pulled back. "Under the bed? He fell for that?"

"Didn't trust me to return?" she asked, trying to hold onto that spark of anger despite how entirely correct his suspicions were, despite how much it had calmed her to know he was with her under that bed.

"Trust was never a prerequisite of our union." He took her bag from her shoulder, opened the passenger door for her to get in, and leaned across to fasten her seatbelt. "Thank you," she heard him say to Reed. Reed. Goddess. She'd all but forgotten he existed the moment she'd seen Aidan.

Dusk was only an hour away; she'd have made it back to the manor before then. The vehicles were made with glass that prevented the sunlight from harming the Vampires within them, but Rae knew he'd still risked a lot to come into the city.

"How did you hide from him?" Aidan asked when he got in the car and fired up the engine.

There was something hard in his tone. Suspicion, perhaps. "I hid under the bed, spelled myself so he wouldn't see me."

Aidan's grip tightened on the steering wheel as a different metal shutter opened on the opposite side of the building to the one Reed had entered. "You weren't breathing."

Not suspicion, panic, and it did something stupid to her heart. "It's a weak spell," she said, studying his profile, the way he'd fastened his hair into a knot, how the muscle in his jaw feathered where he clenched it tightly. "Even the slightest bit of movement can break it."

Silence fell between them as Aidan pulled up to the ascending shutter. "Since we're talking about breaking things," he said after a heartbeat. "You broke your own rule last night."

Rae turned away from him then, didn't want to see the disappointment on his face with what she knew was coming.

"You ran." He exited onto the street, sunlight hitting the car but the inside of the vehicle remained dark. She wondered if he missed it, the feel of the sun on his skin. Recalled how he'd closed his eyes against it back at the rutok kennels.

His words washed over her, settling into her skin, her bones. There were so many things she wanted to tell him. How she kept moving because the momentum was the only thing holding her together. So many things she couldn't say.

"Haven't you noticed, Vale?" Rae murmured after a while, a tiredness she knew she wouldn't be able to shake sinking into her bones. "Running is what I do best."

## Chapter thirty-two

They all should have been sleeping. With the next sunset, they'd all be leaving, heading out for the raids, but Rae knew the same thing that kept her awake kept them



awake too. That was how she'd found herself passing time with Baelin and the entirety of First Unit in one of the large lounges in the eastern wing of the manor, far away from the natatorium.

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“So, Evander, Roak, what’s it like working for this one?” Rae asked, flicking her chin in Orion’s direction. Seven of Aidan’s team members had died in the last week. Seven. Omnia had never targeted any of his team, but they’d killed Providents. Plenty of them. And though Rae felt certain from her extensive research that Demesia was better off without them, she was still responsible for the loss of their lives, and she wasn’t entirely without remorse.

Rae hadn’t seen Beck, the former fourth member of First Unit since the night she’d found Reed, but Reed seemed to fit right in with the others. Orion, stoic but kind, and Evander and Roak, the other two Vampires that had attended the ceremony in the glasshouse. Brothers, as far as Rae could tell, one slightly older than the other, with the same deep brown skin, the same pale grey eyes, and the same angular jaw. Whereas Evander had cropped black hair shaved at the sides, not unlike Baelin’s, Roak wore his slightly longer.

All the Vampires had been drinking visk and eating Rae’s snacks, much to her surprise. Whether they were always this discreet about feeding or they were simply doing it for her and Reed’s benefit, Rae wasn’t sure, but she appreciated it all the same.

“It’s a privilege to work in any capacity as part of this household.” Roak shifted on the sofa he occupied, his eyes never leaving the tiles in his hands. The game was dyshe, bone pieces with markings on either end that needed to be paired in a chain, and Rae was losing, very purposefully.

Evander barked a laugh on the opposite sofa. “Ass kisser.” He launched a sponge roll at his brother’s head. “He’s a hard taskmaster,” he told Rae, Orion silent to her right.

“But he taught us everything we know, and for that, we’re both eternally grateful.” He raised a glass to his commander and his brother. Even Reed followed suit. Again, Rae was struck by the kind of males Aidan had surrounded himself with, the family he’d made of them, and considered that perhaps she’d never truly understood what it meant to have a family at all until Nim came into her life.

Orion watched it all in that quiet way of his, but he didn’t join in the toast. Just dipped his chin in thanks. He smoothed a hand through his cropped black hair, the closest thing to relaxed she’d ever seen him. Rae suspected beneath that stoic exterior was a male who cared very much, but that his position dictated he never show it. She’d met many like him in her childhood. That he was the only one to join them in Cormac’s basement told Rae everything she needed to know about him.

Ru unravelled from around her neck and climbed into her lap, turning twice before settling down to sleep. Quinn had curled up beside her feet. As the others laughed at something Reed said, even Orion hiding a smirk, Rae had that quiet feeling of nostalgia creep up on her again. Like she was already gone from this place and missed it terribly.

But it was just as she’d told Aidan: running was what she did best.

Baelin revealed his winning hand, and a chorus of grumbles erupted from the others, jostling Rae from her thoughts. She gently deposited Ru in the curl of Quinn’s legs, pushing to her feet.

“What, you’re leaving?” Roak asked. “Let’s play one more round.” Without warning, he threw a small chocolate ball across the table into Evander’s open and waiting mouth.

Rae laughed. “I’m going for more snacks since you’re all doing such a great job of wasting mine.”

“Let Shaw bring them,” Evander said, pouring more visk for the table.

“It’s Shaw’s night off.” Spending the evening with his husband, he’d told Rae earlier. She was already climbing over the back of the sofa, reaching for the door. And besides, she’d wanted to tell them she’d never liked being waited on, though there had been enough of that in her childhood too. Truthfully, she just needed a minute alone. Their joyful conversation and laughter followed her back to the kitchen, carving up a little piece of her heart.

She opened the fridge, letting the cold air wash over her. Just a few more hours and they’d have Nim back. She hadn’t known Reed all that well before the Witch had gone missing, but she’d seen enough to know he was only sitting up with them because the alternative was sitting in bed alone and fretting about whether his girlfriend was still alive or not. Nim had to be. Rae told herself that over and over and over until she felt a presence brush at her thoughts.

Her fingers closed around a covered plate, and she elbowed the fridge shut before turning to face Aidan.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to startle you. Lest you drop your...” His eyes dipped to the plate in her hands.

Rae pulled the cover off. Rare steak, swimming in blood. Bastard. He’d known what it was. “I thought it was chicken.”

“Want me to make you something?” Aidan offered, his eyes roving over her face.

“You cook?”

“You underestimate me.”

“Never.” She recovered the plate and returned it to the fridge. “I’m not really hungry.” Instead, she pulled a silver tin from her pocket and set about rolling a joint.

“We should discuss the raid,” Aidan said, watching her carefully. His hair was wet, like he’d just come back from the pool, and Rae tried not to think about running her fingers through it, what his powerful body had felt like under hers.

She cleared her throat. “Bae and Orion have briefed me.”

“What we might find when we get in,” he added.

Rae felt his eyes on her tongue as she licked the paper shut. She met his silver gaze, anger flaring in her chest. “She’s alive, Vale.”

He moved around the kitchen island, pulling a lighter from his pocket and flicking the lid for her, the flame sparking to life. “Baxter, then. At least tell me you understand the risks.”

Rae leaned as close as she dared, one hand curling around his, not quite touching as she lit the joint, his scent enveloping her. She snapped the lighter shut and winked at him. “I can look after myself.”

“This isn’t a joke, Farren. You’ve seen what just one of those things can do.”

“Who’s joking? I’ve had no one looking out for me but me for the last ten years of my life, Vale. I don’t need you to start doing it now just because of some archaic Vampire bullshit. This isn’t real. You said it yourself.” Rae found herself needing the reminder, but the words sounded hollow even to her.

The door burst open, Ru tumbling through in a little ball of fluff. He straightened, five bushy tails weaving together before leaping onto the counter and then Rae’s

shoulders, nuzzling at her cheek.

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“You made it a tag?” Aidan asked.

“One for Ru, one for Quinn.” She passed Aidan the joint before stroking her fingers through the rutok’s soft fur. He’d be fully grown soon, but that still put him smaller than Quinn’s entire head. “Jealous of the pets, Vale?”

Aidan said nothing, a frown drawing his eyebrows together as he glared at Ru and the little silver tag she’d made.

The silver and the tests—they had to be connected, somehow, Rae felt certain of it. “Do you still think they got hold of some Thaumias blood?”

The Vampire Lord nodded.

“But what would they want with the silver?” She was asking herself as much as him. “I can’t help but think we’re missing a vital piece here.”

He was silent beside her, leaning back against the kitchen counter, taking a slow drag of the joint. “Fae have no use for silver outside of trinkets.”

“So, Aera has been the driving force behind this. Humans. Bax. That bastard knew the lengths I’d been going to to buy more silver for the studio. Why is he doing this?”

“Knowledge is power, but brute force, riches, those are the oldest forms of currency. He’s amassing all three.”

Another reminder of how monumentally Rae had fucked all of this up. For Seylan.

You're doing this for Seylan. Part of her knew she should reconsider, knew that everything Cillian had taught her had been wrong, but she couldn't quit now. Not when her brother needed her. Even if it meant losing everything she'd built in Demesia. Aidan's eyes met hers and Rae swallowed. Everything she could have had, but she couldn't entertain those kinds of thoughts.

She set Ru on the counter and watched him scurry away, presumably back to Quinn. A beat of silence passed, too many thoughts to keep track of spiralling into a headache at the base of her skull despite the weed. "Do you ever feel like everything is just slipping through your fingers?"

"All the time, Farren, all the time."

Of course he would understand. And that was the trouble. He understood far too much. Saw far too much, even when she tried to hide it all from him. This isn't real, she told herself again, as if it might snuff out the feelings she wasn't willing to face. Rae reached into her pocket for the final piece of silver she'd work on in a while, took Aidan's hand, and placed it in his palm.

"This is yours," he said, turning the ring in his fingers. Of course he knew. Even though she'd modified it.

"I made it bigger. It should fit your thumb." She watched as he slid it over the tip of his digit, then the knuckle, spinning it once with his finger the way she used to. Rae hadn't just made it bigger, it was wider, flatter, the inside engraved with a dozen spells. "It's a—"

"A gift," he said, his voice rough and his eyes softening. "And a fine one. Thank you." The warmth in those words. She couldn't bear it from him. Not after all that she'd done. All that she'd taken. All that she was about to do. "Stay," he said firmly, the word somewhere between a command and a plea. Withoutreaching for her, she



felt him press against her mind, like phantom hands caressing her thoughts.

“Stay out of my head,” Rae told him, a half command, half plea to match the one he’d given her. She wasn’t afraid of him, but she was afraid of this. This connection between them, coward that she was.

His hand flattened above her heart like a brand, the gesture somehow both possessive and tender at the same time. He sucked in a breath, and Rae braced herself for whatever he was going to say, whatever he was going to ask, steeling herself against the weight of it. But the smallest frown pinched at his brow, and he said, “I don’t need to hear your thoughts. I can hear your heart beating. I can feel your frantic pulse. Right. Here.”

And Goddess curse her, but she leaned right into that touch. Curled one hand into the wet ends of his hair and studied his face. “I’m supposed to hate you,” she murmured.

His eyes held hers, searching. Waiting, as if she might flee like a startled doe at any moment. Rae had never feared him—had always felt an overwhelming sense of safety in his presence. “I know.” Only he didn’t know the truth of it, or he would never have let her into his home. Would never have agreed to any of this.

Rae didn’t let herself lean into him any further. Couldn’t. Though she wanted nothing more than to kiss him, to feel his body pressed against hers, his strength. “Don’t ask me again,” she whispered, before slipping free of his embrace and returning to her room.

### Chapter thirty-three

Coarse rope dug into Aidan’s wrists as the transport jostled over a bump in the road. It has to look real, he’d reminded Baelin earlier as his Ascendant had fastened his bindings and slung a sack over his head.

His left knee pressed against Rae's, and Orion sat opposite them. Both of them were bound and blinded just as he was. There had been arguments over who would go in and how, mostly between Baelin and Rae. The Witch had made her case that Baelin could either take Aidan and Orion out with tranquilisers or she could conceal their power with spells and they could simply feign being unconscious. Despite everything, he trusted Rae. Baelin hadn't liked being left behind, but he knew when he took on the role of Ascendant what he was signing up for.

Aidan had turned through Cormac's thoughts over and over, looking for any suggestion of a loophole in his plan with Weyland, any hint of betrayal. Weyland had provided a list, and though Rae wasn't on it, it would be easy enough to convince him she'd been captured alongside her husband and his security detail. That the Vampire Lord would have to watch as his Odalik became a test subject. The thought made Aidan want to rip apart his bindings and tear through whoever they found at the facility, but there were going to be more test subjects there, more hybrids like Daire, and they needed to be strategic.

Rae murmured beside him as she worked on her spell. The three of them in exchange for Cormac's mate, Scarlett. Hardly a fair trade, but they needed to be taken in as prisoners for the rest of their plan to work. The raid relied heavily on having Vampires on the inside, and Aidan had never had any doubts that he'd be one of them.

His reservations rested with his council, the Vampires on the outside, waiting for his command to move in. If they chose tonight to usurp him, they were all fucked, but he could feel them all a few blocks away, vehicles spread out around them like a web. Up front, one of Cormac's males drove, the turned Vampire beside him. The remaining units had spread out but remained close, and Aidan let his Provident abilities cycle over all of them, watching, checking, and searching for any gaps in their plan.

No hint of rebellion, of dispute, but he knew all too well how quickly plans could change.

“Pity you don’t have a spell to conceal our weapons,” Orion murmured, the comment aimed at Rae. Aidan hated that he agreed. That was precisely why they had to go in first. Why the others were bringing the weapons with them. They all knew what they were walking into and understood the risk.

By now, Aidan had learnt to recognise the feel of the two hybrids who had been tracking Rae, their strange aura like a signature that felt familiar to him after days of observing them closely with his Provident abilities. He’d felt their presence when Cormac’s men had guided him into the back of the transport a block or so away, monitoring. Most likely reporting back to their superiors. To Torrin. To Baxter.

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“We’re almost there, my lord,” Cormac announced.

Aidan already knew, but he felt Rae tense beside him, her heartbeat quickening along with her murmuring.

Easy, Witch, he told her, letting a little of his abilities wash over her, calming her.

I’m a little busy, Vampire, she snapped, but her heartbeat steadied.

If you can pull magic from other sources the same way you can conceal it, I want you to do it. Understood? To pull from him, if she needed it, like he knew she had before.

Rae didn’t answer.

Farren. He needed to hear she wouldn’t put herself in danger, but the thought almost pulled a harsh laugh from his chest. Rae was a fucking magnet for danger.

Shut up and let me concentrate. We’re almost there and your power still feels like a fucking beacon.

He could feel the effects of her spell like a veil had been dropped over his magic, knew that whatever she’d been doing had been successful.

They’re coming, he told her, and Rae’s murmuring ceased as the vehicle slowed to a stop.

Aidan let his chin slump to his chest, feigning unconsciousness just as the doors flew

open.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” Rae seethed, air moving around them as someone yanked her from the vehicle. The sack was removed from her head, and she let Aidan in, let him see exactly what she could: the male that greeted Cormac and the two that pulled her from the vehicle.

The familiar signature of the hybrids stung Aidan’s senses, these three slightly different than the two quickly approaching them in another vehicle. Five of them, already, and Aidan could feel more nearby. Many, many more. He relayed everything to his units, but his attention remained on Rae. No matter how much he wanted to let his Provident powers loose over the hybrids, he couldn’t, not yet. They needed to get inside the facility, as deep as possible if they were to pull this off.

“What are you doing?” Rae asked as she watched the blond one, a Hoof, open a case. “They’ve already been administered twice their body weight in sedatives.”

The Hoof shrugged. “Can never be too careful.”

Rae tore her arm from the other hybrid’s grip, slamming her weight against the case, the contents smashing at their feet. “Oops.” The Hoof backhanded her across the face, and Rae’s warning came sharp and fast in Aidan’s thoughts. Don’t you fucking dare blow this, Vale. She spat at the Hoof’s feet. “That tickled.”

He was the first one of them Aidan would kill. The other two hybrids arrived, leading Rae, Cormac, and the driver away and into a warehouse, the mountain range looming over it. The blond Hoof dragged him out of the vehicle, and it took Aidan everything in him not to lash the bastard’s brain there and then. But he played along, his body slack, Orion’s falling against him as they were moved onto something with wheels, the flimsy thing shaking beneath their weight.

Aidan focused on Rae. On communicating everything to his units. On the two hybrids wheeling him and Orion into the facility, which, thanks to Rae, he knew to be a factory the humans used for building their larger machinery. Rods of metal sat floor to ceiling in towering stacks. Rae's gaze roamed over everything. For her benefit, as well as his, but every bit of information she gave him he passed back to his team.

He wasn't interested in Cormac's thoughts or his driver's, and he couldn't get a firm hold on the five hybrids, but that came as no surprise. Instead, he cast the net of his abilities further, deeper into the facility, feeling out the minds of everyone inside. Too many of them were afraid. Too many were close to death.

A door swung open and Rae's gaze snapped to Weyland, taking in his greying hair and the stubble shadowing his face. The whites of his eyes were tinged grey, a telltale sign of xion use. Rae's attention slid to the tremor in his left hand to confirm it.

"A human, Cormac," Weyland said, his tone bored as he circled Rae. "She was the best you could do?" Rich, given that he was probably one of the most worthless humans Aidan had ever encountered.

Someone tore the sack off his head, but he kept his eyes closed, continuing to watch everything from Rae's perspective.

"Not just any human," Cormac said with something like pride in his tone. "She's his Odalik."

The human stared; Aidan was already deep enough into his mind to know he didn't have the first clue about Vampire traditions. Why would he? Weyland's desires required only power, not knowledge.

Rae's sigh filled the silence. "I'm his wife, asshole."

It was the first time he'd heard her say it, a deep sense of pride stirring in his chest at the words, but he focused on Weyland. The human had never met Rae, though she'd followed him closely; her Omnia recruits had been tailing him for months. Aidan sifted through Weyland's mind for answers as quickly as possible, the human none the wiser.

"And this is Orion," Cormac continued, "commander of his First Unit, also on your list of names."

"Excellent," Weyland drawled, tucking his shaking hand under his other arm. "This night is improving rapidly."

"Scarlett?" Cormac breathed, panic flaring from him. Aidan calmed the Vampire's racing heart, but with his attention so divided, it didn't stop Cormac from taking a step closer to Weyland.

Three hybrids moved between them, but the human held out a hand. "What of her?"

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“The exchange,” Cormac pleaded.

A grin stretched across Weyland’s face and he had the audacity to chuckle as he patted Cormac’s shoulder. “Of course, of course. Zeyn, bring me the pretty blonde from last night.”

Shit. No good could come from that statement. Too many emotions for Aidan to name were rising inside of Cormac as the words settled over the Vampire. Don’t, Aidan told him. Just let them bring her to you and get the Hel out of here like we discussed.

Cormac conceded, his chest rising and falling in heavy breaths. One less concern, as Aidan continued to cycle through the others, dipping into more minds at once than he ever had before.

Zeyn pushed open the same door he’d left through moments before, his hand wrapped around Scarlett’s arm, and though Aidan only knew what the Witch looked like from Weyland’s mind, he felt the flare of recognition coursing through Rae.

You know her, he said to Rae. Not a question. A request for more information.

Focus, Vale. Do you feel that? She was looking around the warehouse, searching for something.

I’m a little stretched here, Farren.

A flicker of concern, then she shut it down. There’s something here like a ward.



Someone.No retort, only apprehension, and Aidan couldn't help the light caress across her lower back, like his hand was pressed there instead.

Beside them, Scarlett sobbed in Cormac's arms, and Aidan forced himself to pull some of his attention from Rae to what she was seeing.

"Your blood has been interesting," Weyland told the turned Vampire. "I'll call on you when we need more."

Cormac nodded but said nothing else as he wrapped an arm around his mate and led her to the exit, his driver tucked close to her other side, protecting her between them.

Rae's relief rattled through her.

"Take them down," Weyland ordered, a shiver rolling over Rae at his words, and though Aidan knew he should have been concentrating on making sure Cormac and Scarlett got away, he focused on Rae.

You good, Witch?Her fear rippled through her. Though she covered it well, she couldn't hide it from him.

It's one of them, Vale. Be careful.One of the hybrids that felt like a ward.

A metal shutter screeched open and Rae turned to the sound. An elevator. A hybrid with stumpy horns and a shaved head shoved her in, and she watched the cart as the others wheeled it towards her, all of them squeezing into the elevator together. Weyland remained behind.

The further they descended, the weaker Aidan's Provident abilities became, his connection with multiple minds snuffing out one by one.

Farren—

Too late. Aidan opened his eyes and hurled himself at the hybrid gripping Rae's arm, his fingers wrapped around the thing's throat, just as the elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

"Get your fucking hands off my wife," he snarled, fingers crushing the male's windpipe, but the creature was strong. Unnaturally so. Aidan pulled on his power, but nothing happened. He opted for hurling the hybrid out the open doors instead as the others yanked Orion to his feet and urged them all out of the elevator. His rage abated slightly when he swept his gaze over Rae, assessing her for injuries.

"You'll not be able to reach those Provident powers of yours, I'm afraid."

Torrin. The Fae rounded the corner towards them, a grin slashing his beard in two. "Syphon abilities," he said, by way of explanation. "Rather proud of that one. Took more than a few attempts to get right, but the fifth Witch seemed to do the trick. Though a sixth couldn't hurt." Slender fingers trailed up Rae's arm and she shook him off.

"Touch her again and I will tear you apart," Aidan ground out, his questions about how Torrin knew she was immortal stashed aside for later.

"Hmm. I hadn't believed the rumours, but you are rather fond of her. Perhaps this won't be such a difficult decision for you, after all," the Fae mused, smoothing down his beard where it framed his mouth with a finger and thumb.

Shit. Nothing good could come from that statement.

Torrin smirked. "Bring them in."

Four more hybrids circled them, and Aidan wasn't stupid enough to try and fight them off without a weapon. They were ushered through a dark corridor, lights flickering above. He didn't need his Provident abilities to know Rae was afraid, lost in a memory. With his hands still bound, he kept close, his arm pressed against hers as they were brought into a large room with gurneys scattered about and bloodstains over the floor.

Along the edges of the room, desks were littered with computers, medical paraphernalia, and needles. Humans sat before some of them, but none looked their way. Another door opened and Evander, Roak, and Reed were brought in, hands bound, no sign of their weapons. Their faces were grim, but they said nothing, likely because they didn't know Aidan had no access to his abilities down here. Torrin had to be taken out.

"Pick one," the Fae said, turning to face him. Not a Fae, Aidan silently corrected himself. One of them. A hybrid. And the hybrid was asking him to choose one of his team members.

Aidan held his stare. “No.”

“Very well.” A shrug from Torrin, hands behind his back as he circled Aidan and the others. He wore a general’s coat, polished silver buttons down the centre and shoulder scales pressed into sharp tips, no doubt in an attempt to make him seem bigger than he was. His once black hair was now dashed with flecks of white, and Aidan wondered how much of the testing had been purely for the Fae’s own personal needs.

“We’ve reached a point in our testing where the weaker of our Orders... some are more useful to us than others. Witches. Powerful Vampires. But for those with lesser abilities...” Torrin paused in front of Roak.

Evander pulled against his restraints, his unease at Torrin’s proximity to his brother palpable, but the hybrids held him back.

“All we need is a little drop of blood.” The hybrid’s hand shot out, a concealed dagger slashing across Roak’s throat. “And suddenly they become very useful.”

### Chapter thirty-four

Evander and Rae’s shouts cut through the ringing in Aidan’s ears. The scientists who had ignored them moments before moved in a flurry about the room as the hybrids held them all back, and Aidan could do nothing but watch as the bastards collected blood from Roak’s corpse, filling vial after vial of red liquid.

Roak was a Gerentis just as his brother was; though both possessed very weak water-

wielding abilities, it amounted to very little between the two of them. Aidan had never been interested in what powers anyone possessed. Those were not qualities he cared about when selecting members for his units. Roak was skilled with weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and unit tactics. And above all else, he was loyal. Had been. He had been all of those things, and now he lay at their feet, blood pooling around them.

“Now that I have your full attention,” Torrin said, a grin tugging at the side of the hybrid’s mouth Aidan swore to himself he would tear off with his bare hands, “I do hope we’ll have no more”—the hybrid glanced at Roak’s body—“missteps.”

Rae was shaking, lips moving but no sound was coming out, and Aidan didn’t dare draw any attention to whatever spell she was in the middle of creating, that he hoped she was creating, because the alternative was she was about to have another panic attack.

Fuck. The scientists moved, leaving Roak’s body behind. Nine hybrids, ten including Torrin, and five of them. Aidan looked between Reed, Evander, and Orion, hoping they could work out a silent plan between them. Reed could likely still shift, but he had been ordered not to until backup arrived. It would only get him killed, but the Fae was new to this, and Aidan recognised the determined look that lit up his face. “Don’t,” he told him. “Think of Nim.”

Aidan didn’t get a chance to see what expression settled over Reed’s face in response before they were ushered down another corridor past cells with half-dead occupants, and still, Rae continued her silent spell. They were being taken to a holding cell, no doubt, to await their turn for testing. He tried to keep close to Rae, but as the corridor narrowed to funnel them through single file, she slipped between the hybrids, two in front of her, two behind, and an unpleasant feeling slid under Aidan’s ribcage.

He was only a heartbeat away from throwing himself into the hybrid in front of him

when the Witch gasped and she called out, “I need a potato.”

“What?” Aidan snapped. Oh. A heat sink.

“Now.”

There was only one course of action; Aidan kicked the hybrid in front of him into Rae’s back as hard as he could, hoping it would slam the next one into her like dyshe tiles. Praying it was what she’d meant when she’d asked for a heat sink—that bodies would suffice—and that whatever spell she’d created would take the brunt of the force instead of her.

A burst of light blinded him, and Aidan raised a hand to shield his eyes as screams rent the air, and heat, a heat he hadn’t felt since...

“Farren!” he called out, the hybrid behind him rushing forwards to try and reach the others. He slammed it into the wall, canines tearing at any part of the thing he could sink his teeth into and ripping away chunks of flesh. Another tackled him, but with his hands bound, Aidan only had his body weight to knock it away. He threw his arms up to its head, thumbs pressing into the Horns’ eyes, and with a sharp twist, snapped its neck as a roar ricocheted off the walls. Reed.

Aidan made short work of biting through the bindings at his wrists and pulling aside charred hybrids to find Rae, his heart in his fucking mouth. Up ahead, Evander and Orion fought the remaining hybrids alongside Reed; three, including Torrin, were all that remained.

Scorch marks lined the corridor like an explosive had detonated, smoke drifting from burnt bodies. He hurled the two Hooves on top of her aside, loosing a breath as Rae made a gagging sound.

“Goddess, that is a stench I never want to breathe in again,” she wheezed as he slipped a hand into hers and pulled her to her feet. Two more hybrids lay dead and charred beside them as Aidan did a quick scan of her body. “I’m fine, Vampire. Don’t let Torrin get away.” She shoved at his chest, her eyes darting to his bloodied mouth before Aidan joined what remained of his First Unit.

The corridor had opened into an antechamber surrounding more cells, but there was no time to take in the details. He singled out Torrin; Evander and Orion circling him, leaving Reed to fight the remaining hybrid alone in his Fae form.

“Evander,” Aidan commanded. Light grey eyes met his. Aidan didn’t know if Reed could take on a hybrid alone, even if he was currently three times as large, but the Fae served another purpose: his frame was so huge he blocked the only exit, and Aidan needed to ensure Torrin wasn’t leaving this room. Evander moved, covering the Fae’s position.

Orion grappled with the hybrid, Torrin’s unnatural strength slamming him against a cell door. “Shall I kill your whole team? Your wife too?” Torrin asked Aidan over his shoulder, one hand squeezing Orion’s neck.

“I was top of your list,” Aidan replied, arms opened wide. “Come and get your prize.”

Orion fell as the hybrid released him, and Aidan moved. He lunged for Torrin at the same time Torrin moved for him, hands at each other’s throats, Aidan to get at Torrin’s vein, Torrin to keep Aidan away.

“You’re too late, Lord Vale.” The hybrid’s eyes gleamed, a ripple of something passing through them. “We’ve planned for every outcome. Every possibility. The reign of Vampires is over.”

“Thank fuck for that,” Aidan spat, taking Torrin by surprise and lunging for him again. Torrin moved at the last moment, slamming Aidan’s back into the wall. Reed’s roar echoed in the antechamber beyond as Aidan swung at Torrin with his fist, shifting the hybrid off him just enough for Aidan to slip out of his hold.

He reached for the hybrid’s collar to yank him back as Torrin’s body went slack in his grasp, blood running over his fingers from a gunshot wound. His Provident abilities slammed back into him at the same time Torrin’s body fell from his grip, and Aidan turned around to see Rae slumped in the doorway, a gun in her hand and a smirk on her face.

Took your time, he told her with a grin, taking in the way she held herself against the wall for support. His grin faded when he realised how exhausted she was, though she’d only push him away if he drew attention to the fact.



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You're welcome. Now hurry the fuck up and do your thing. She held up a hand as he took a step closer. "I'm fine." Fine was subjective. Her skin was pale and there was a tremble to her hands she was trying to hide, but there wasn't time to waste arguing with her. Reed and Evander had killed the remaining hybrid, and Orion moved to stand beside them as Reed shifted back into a male, all awaiting orders.

For Roak, Aidan told Evander. The Vampire gave him a nod as he reached out with his Provident abilities, feeling for the rest of his team, his council, and the humans within the facility, but before he could finish the thought, an explosion shook the walls, part of the antechamber collapsing behind them.

"This place just keeps on fucking giving," Rae muttered, pushing to her feet.

Aidan felt the new wave of hybrids before he saw them, but with nothing blocking his abilities, he took out every single one of them that approached their location, reaching out for the rest of his team who had been ordered to wait at the perimeter.

They were already inside.

He moved his attention to the humans of Aera next, his eyes fixed on Rae as she watched the others opening cells. The explosion, whatever it was that she'd created, had drained her, and she was doing a shit job of trying to hide it.

By the time the others were finished searching the cells, Aidan's task was finished; not a single human working for a faction had been left alive. The time for being merciful was over. He'd seen inside their minds, seen what they'd witnessed, and none had raised any objections to the treatment of the prisoners held within the

facility walls.

Only three survivors joined his First Unit from the cells; none of them were Nim, all of them weak, and despite herself, Raespoke to each of them, checking in with them, reassuring them. They'd prepared for survivors and had people waiting at the perimeter to take them to Cormac's warehouse, the top level converted into a temporary hospital at Aidan's request.

"The rest of the cells are back that way," Aidan told them all. Past Roak, and Aidan wasn't about to deny Evander the opportunity to retrieve his brother's corpse, even if being another Vampire down might cost them.

He stepped up to Rae, fingers curling under her chin to tilt her face up to his. Farren. Her eyes were glazed, her breaths short. Stop being a stubborn Witch. If you want to still be standing by the time we reach Nim, hurry up and take what you need. No response. I can always carry you. That solicited a huff of breath in response.

"You found her?" Rae asked quietly.

A nod of affirmation, and he silently cursed himself for not bringing it up sooner as he took in her face, her dilated pupils.

This might hurt a little. She pressed a hand over the scar she'd given him. Her lips moved but no sound came from her as she held his gaze. Heat flared through him from her touch, heat that bordered on painful, that felt too similar to—

"My lord?" Orion asked, concern etched across his features.

"Everything's fine." He looked down at Rae, frowning down at her hand where she'd removed it from his chest. The colour had returned to her cheeks; her breathing had steadied.

Something flickered across her face for a moment, but then she said, “Thanks for the top-up,” and gave him a wink before taking a sickly Fae female from Evander’s arms to allow him to go on ahead to his brother.

Though he was loathe to admit it, Aidan knew he had a limit too. With his mind in so many places with so many others, he knew a mistake was far too great a risk. As they made their way back to the room with Roak’s body, Aidan checked in with Baelin, making sure his Ascendant passed around commands so that he didn’t have to. There were more hybrids in the facility, and something was blocking him from their minds, but it wasn’t another syphon. Something different, like a ward, just as Rae had said.

The lab was a grim sight. The scientists that had taken Roak’s blood, some at their desks or halfway through whatever test they’d been performing all lay dead. Aera faction members, all of them.

The Fae female gasped between Aidan and Rae as she took in the sight, her attention falling to Evander where he’d covered his brother’s body. The time for words and remembrance would come later. Right now, they were running out of time. Vampire minds were snuffing out one after the other at the hands of the hybrids, and the scales were tipping against them.

With a few quick instructions, the three survivors remained with Evander, whilst Rae, Orion, and Reed joined Aidan, armed with whatever weapons they’d poached from the dead hybrids.

Malik and Karina were the first to find them, thanks to Aidan’s direction, followed by a few members of their House, but there was no time for pleasantries. Malik handed over an earpiece for Aidan, connected to Baelin, but Aidan was too busy for a chat with his Ascendant as he hooked the device to his ear.

“More hybrids, closing in on our position,” he told the group, leading the way.

“They’re blocking us,” Karina murmured behind him.

Another syphon?Rae asked.

Something else.

The Witch hesitated for a moment.Nim?

Still alive, Farren, but barely.He didn’t need to glance over his shoulder to know every emotion that flitted across her face; he felt every one of them. Anger, pain. Regret.

Show me. I’ll take Reed.

There wasn’t time to waste; Aidan showed her the way past scores of dead humans and did what he could to follow her and Reed’s path through the facility as he led the others towards the oncoming wave of hybrids. That was his first regret of the night.

A hybrid threw a smoke bomb, and chaos descended. More of the council and their teams had arrived, but fighting close combat was always going to be messy.

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Their bullets are full of a potent tranquiliser, he warned everyone. He fired into the smoke as he pressed on, his attention solely fixed on whatever hybrids were before him. When he'd emptied his weapon, he tossed it aside, leaning into his abilities and the strength of them when he focused solely on one task.

Three hybrids slipped past him, but the fourth, a Hoof, he met with his fist. He still couldn't get a grip on their minds, but he was getting reacquainted with the feel of them, the unnatural tinge that coated the air around their bodies. With his hands braced on the thing's shoulders, he lunged for its throat, tearing through flesh and letting it fall limp at his feet.

The rest were a blur after that. Aidan sank into the familiar feeling of fighting for his life: hands and teeth and fists and the force and speed of his body to guide him. He'd never been a graceful fighter, hadn't been afforded the privilege of being taught technique like the lords before him. Everything Aidan had learnt, he'd taught himself through sheer determination to stay alive, and after that, he'd studied, observed, practiced, and honed his skill until he could hold his own amongst the best of them. The savagery with which he'd been raised had never truly left him and he fought with that savagery now, all too aware that no matter how many hybrids he tore through, how many the Vampires behind him killed, more were coming.

"Baelin, report," Aidan barked into his earpiece as he snatched a knife from a Horn and sliced it across its throat, wiping at his bloodied mouth as he caught his breath.

"Baxter is on his way. Eight vehicles are following his. Time to get the fuck out of there, Aidan."

Rae was almost at Nim's location; with Reed's help, they'd been releasing prisoners as they moved, but their injuries were slowing them down. "Not until we release all the prisoners," he told his Ascendant. "Delay Baxter."

"With what?"

"You'll think of something."

Aidan hadn't expected the raid to go well, but they hadn't anticipated such high numbers of hybrids. Many Vampires lay dead behind him, and more would die yet. Malik's on his way with two of his units, he told Rae. Nim was barely alive; maybe even too frail to be moved. She's weak, Farren.

I'm almost there.

He'd yet to find whatever it was that felt like a ward—whoever it was—but with time running out, Aidan divided the remaining Vampires into two groups, one to clear a path out of the facility and one to assist with the survivors. He joined the group heading for the survivors, Rae's regret washing over him as she found Nim.

Everyone had their instructions; those that didn't have an earpiece, Aidan gave orders directly in their thoughts, his own feeling slow, sluggish.

"One block, I've stalled them for a few more minutes. Get out, now," Baelin said in his ear.

Reed held Nim in his arms; Rae braced a prisoner on either side of her body. Aidan relieved her of one, ushering them all through corridors, the other Vampires following with more survivors. The female beside him lost her footing, and he lifted her into his arms, his Provident abilities far weaker than he should have allowed them to be as he ensured the route they took was clear. His Vampires had done their job as

the cool night air reached them, hands reaching out to shuffle survivors into vehicles, tyres screeching as vans pulled away into the dark in different directions.

Evander already had the engine started on their transport, helping Reed into the van with Nim, and Rae following closely behind. Orion slid in behind them, and Aidan sat up front beside Evander, his door barely closed before Evander tore away from the facility.

A skull-splitting headache should have been enough to deter him, but Aidan forced himself to sweep the facility one final time, disappointment washing over him when his magic passed over the prisoners and Vampires that hadn't made it. Those who survived had all fled, and he clung to that as Baelin gave his report from the council and their teams.

Behind him, Rae's hands were pressed to Nim's chest, her whispered words frantic and her anguish leaking from her in waves.

Do it, he told her.

"You'll be alright," Reed whispered to Nim.

Aidan wished he could tell the Fae he was right. He ground his teeth together as Rae's hand clamped down on his shoulder, a jolt of pain shooting through his body as she pulled from him to try and save her friend.

But he knew it was too late.

Rae's murmuring grew louder, her voice breaking, sorrow pouring from her so thickly Aidan couldn't breathe. A sob escaped her, and he knew if he turned around he'd see tears streaming down her face, but he didn't want to break the connection between them; whatever she needed to take from him, he would give it.

Aidan's second regret of the night, and undoubtedly his greatest, was that he hadn't killed Nim himself the moment he'd stepped inside the facility.

## Chapter thirty-five

Nothing was working. Rae murmured every spell she could think of as she held Nim's hand, but as night turned into day, and the sun began to set again, she knew it was all just borrowed time.

Her friend was dying.

Reed hadn't left Nim's side since they'd brought her back to the manor, and it was the way he kept her hydrated with a wet cloth, gently brushing it against her mouth after pressing fresh droplets of water into her parted lips, that had squeezed at Rae's heart the most.

He'd removed Nim's headscarf, carefully wetting her hair and untangling each of her curls with his fingers, his thumb brushing her cheek, talking to her quietly, patiently. And still, Rae wouldn't stop murmuring her spells, the ache in her chest so sharp she could barely breathe.

Shaw had a doctor waiting when they'd returned from the facility, but he'd only told them all what they already knew: to make Nim comfortable for what little time she had left. Rae had wanted to scream at him. To argue. To beg. Reed had. But it was no use. There was nothing to be done. And yet, Rae had tried anyway. Some wounds couldn't be healed, and sickness had taken root in Nim's body days ago from whatever she'd been injected with at the facility.

Rae thought of the night of her twenty-first birthday, just a few days after Nim had walked into her studio for the first time. She'd gotten in a bar fight, thrown out into the street, and Nim had been outside, finishing up a call on her PAD. The Witch had



wanted to heal her there and then, right out in the fucking open, and Rae had felt a surge of protectiveness for her immediately.

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Witches had once been coveted in Demesia, snapped up by Vampires as little more than house pets to do their bidding. It had only cemented every feeling she'd ever had towards the bloodsuckers. And though it was her who had bled all over the street, she'd wanted, needed, to protect Nim when she'd failed to protect her own family, when she'd realised just how special Nim was.

Ru stretched his legs in her lap, turning in a circle before folding into a ball again. Quinn lay beside them, eyes open, watching. Whether it was at Baelin's request, or the daemon simply wanted to be with them all, Rae wasn't certain, but Baelin and Aidan had still checked in on Nim's progress throughout the day. Even Orion and Evander had, but Rae knew they were all just waiting for the inevitable, that Evander was distracting himself from his brother's death.

She stepped outside of the stuffy room for a moment to catch her breath, studying the mural that spanned the corridor, her gaze falling to the single Witch. Everything had changed since the night she'd first set eyes upon the painting, every decision she'd thought was right. For Seylan. Nullifying the Orders had always been Cillian's idea. And Rae had been fuelled by so much hatred she'd blindly gone along with it, convinced herself it was her penance. For Seylan.

When she reached the end of the mural, Rae sank to the floor. In truth, she didn't know whether to sit or stand. To scream or cry. One thing her body and brain agreed on was how exhausted she was. It had been a while since she'd pulled from Aidan for the second time... and both times it had felt... Goddess. Rae wasn't ready to think about it. Probably never would be.

With her head in her hands, she let her eyes fall shut, listening to the familiar sounds

of the manor. Baelin's voice carried from one of the rooms nearby; he was trying to make plans with Aidan, some meeting he'd arranged, but Rae couldn't focus. Ru nudged at her hands, and panic washed over her that she'd been gone from Nim's side for too long.

"She'd have liked him, you know," Reed said quietly as Rae sank back into her chair beside her friend.

She glanced over at where he sat on the other side of the bed and took in his dishevelled hair and the stubble along his jaw. "Hmm?"

"Aidan. Nim would have loved him for you."

Rae said nothing. She knew he was right. Could imagine all the questions Nim would have peppered her with. All the dumb innuendos she'd have made. How the halo in her eye would have shone with mischief. Rae cleared her throat. She'd give anything to hear a terrible joke from the little Witch's mouth right now, to see her beautiful, mismatched eyes.

"He's asked me to help him enlist more Fae. Royalists who'll want to fight, any living in the city who want to see change," Reed went on.

"And you'll do it?"

The Fae gave a dry laugh. "If you'd told me a week ago that Vampires were the best chance we have against these things, I'd have told you you were crazy." Reed straightened the sheet over Nim's chest, fingers stroking her cheek. "But they are. Heis." He jerked his chin towards the door.

Rae shoved everything down, down. Locked it in tight. Every last bit of regret, of dread. She wished she had a joint or a bottle of visk, but she knew there would be

plenty of time for both—after. Knew that it wouldn't be long now.

"I love her like she's my own sister," she said shakily, tucking a rogue curl behind Nim's ear. "She reminds me of everything good about..." She hadn't ever told Reed she was a Witch, though she suspected Nim had. She supposed he'd have guessed from what happened in the facility anyway. "Everything good about what I am. Whatweare." Quinn whined softly beside her. "I don't know how to be here without you reminding me," she whispered, her hand over one of Nim's.

Another little whine from Quinn, and Rae knew. "Goddess carry you," she murmured, a tear rolling down her cheek as she squeezed Nim's fingers.

The heart monitor beside Nim's bed flatlined, and Reed yanked the wires free to silence it. It was the most emotion he'd shown, but that little burst of anger told Rae everything. His other hand he kept wrapped around Nim's, his eyes never leaving her face. "I'd have sat at your side forever," he told her quietly, pressing a kiss to her lips.

This moment wasn't hers, Rae knew. She slipped out the door without a word, without another glance back at her friend, because she feared if she did it might break her. None of this was right. It shouldn't have been Nim in that bed, but Rae couldn't bring herself to turn back down the corridor and confirm what she already knew. Her friend was gone.

"The new Witch king passed this morning." Baelin's quiet voice carried through an open doorway ahead, and Rae almost lost her footing. "The young prince," he went on. "I've just received confirmation."

Rae didn't realise her feet were carrying her until she heard Ru's whimper through the door of the natatorium as it fell shut behind her. She was no longer in her body, floating somewhere outside of herself instead. She needed... she didn't know what she needed. To get out of her head. Her skin. To wipe the slate clean and start over, to

be nothing. Because this pain... she didn't know what to do with it. Didn't want to feel anything at all.

Items of clothing fell to the floor one by one until only her underwear remained. Rae didn't bother with the shower. She took the steps into the pool, not really seeing anything, fingers trailing the surface of the water as it reached her thighs. She wanted to think of Nim. Her brother. Of every good memory, every good moment. But all that came to her instead was every one of her mother's beatings. Every time she'd almost drowned. And all of them would never be penance enough for this.

With the steps behind her, Rae sucked in a breath, swimming down to the deepest part of the pool, and let herself sink to her knees at the bottom. Shadows flickered across the tile, the pool beyond her disappearing into darkness. The night of her twenty-first birthday replayed in her head again. Followed by her mother's beatings. Nim, complaining about polishing at the studio. Another near drowning. Nim, squealing with laughter when she'd healed a cut on Rae's hand for the first time. Rae pressed a hand to her chest, a bubble of air escaping her as a sob broke free, every tear she shed washing away into the pool.

Nim, before her, handing over a frosted cake when Rae had teased her about sharing. In the darkness, Rae reached out a hand, a haloed eye winking at her as the image of her friend faded, Rae's fingers closing around nothing but water. Her brother, just for one second, she let herself picture her brother.

She couldn't help it then. The way the pain seeped out of her. Just a little, at first, the water warming around her. A little more, and she knew steam would be rising above the surface of the pool. Rae wrapped her arms across her chest as if the action might control it, but it was too late. She scrunched her eyes shut to keep the light in, to hold onto it for as long as she could.

Farren. Aidan's voice was muffled, barely a murmur.

Too late, she wanted to tell him, but she was too far gone to the magic sizzling through her veins.

Farren, answer me, damn it.

The water bubbled around her, the light so blinding she could feel it in every part of her body. She only hoped the water would contain it. Contain her.

Rae, stop.

But there was never any stopping it once it began. Never had been. Rae held on to the image of her brother's face, as at last, she let go.

Chapter thirty-six

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:03 am*

Rae, stop.

Boiling. The fucking pool water was boiling, a ball of light so bright, so familiar. Just like his silver flame. Tearing off his shirt, Aidan jumped in after Rae, magic slamming against his skin, sharp and blistering.

Rae, he called to her again. He could see nothing but white light, but he didn't need to. He swam to where he felt her heart beat strongest, his arms encircling her in the water.

Make it stop, she pleaded, so weakly he barely heard her.

Aidan began to kick against the tile to break for the surface, but Rae tried to stop him, to pull from his embrace, eyes flicking open and looking up into his. Grey-blue eyes like a roiling storm that he knew were hers, and not some spell.

A ball of light, off flame, swirled around them at the bottom of the pool and Rae pressed a hand to her chest, pain tumbling from her so sharp Aidan felt it everywhere they touched.

Please. I can't. Even mind to mind, her words were like a choked gasp, as if whatever she was doing was burning her from the inside out.

I'm right here with you. Just tell me what to do. Aidan's fingers rested under her chin, magic and water swirling around them, power building and building so fast he was certain the pool wouldn't contain it. He pulled back on every instinct that told him to delve into Rae's mind and help her control her spell. With how strong she was and

how much she'd fight him, she might not survive it, no matter how much he wanted to help, no matter that he'd have done anything, given anything to ease her pain.

Rae's fingers clawed at his shoulder, hair swirling around her as Aidan began to struggle for breath. She might have been able to remain under water for unthinkable amounts of time, but he couldn't. Take it, please, Rae begged. I can't do this anymore. Her pain was like a knife twisting under his ribs, bones snapping, flesh tearing. I've broken something that can't be fixed, and I can't...she sobbed, eyes scrunching tight, Just take it.

Aidan didn't get a chance to answer. Rae's mouth was on his, her tongue parting the seam of his lips and breathing air into his lungs. Burning, hot air, but Aidan didn't push away. His arms wrapped around her tightly as he kissed her back, as he held her close. Nothing would make him let go.

Magic surged and swelled around them like they were the centre of a storm, pulling the water away until flame and light twisted and bent. Magic filled every space, danced across every place her body pressed against his, and he felt it then. The way his veins sang under the power. His power. The molten heat of his silver flame. His, and she was breathing it into him, pouring it into all the places that had mourned its absence for so long.

Aidan took it greedily. Every last drop that he'd gone without for so many years. Elation danced along his bones as the power rushed in. But as Rae made a pained sound deep in her chest, he felt her relief, her sorrow. Her anguish. Every emotion slammed into him with his magic, with her kiss, her breath. Memories followed them: fractured pieces of Rae's past, a female beating her, pressing an iron into her skin, kicking her down a set of steps, drowning her, drowning her, drowning her. The face of a young male Aidan was certain he recognised.

So much pain, but Rae didn't stop, so Aidan tested his magic, tugging as gently as he



could, experimenting, examining. The brightness around them diminished, the storm slowing, heat fading. Rae didn't pull away, and Aidan didn't break their kiss, even when the water rushed back in, bubbling away.

Rae hadn't been able to control it, but the more of it she poured back into him, it obeyed. It always had. Aidan relished the feeling of commanding his magic after so long without it, pulling it all back, owning every piece of it. As the water calmed, he felt the tremors wracking Rae's body, physical pain overtaking her emotions, coursing through her. Her kiss slowed and Aidan kicked them both to the surface, any damage the boiling water had caused healing with the return of his magic.

Rae shook in his arms, and as her mouth fell from his, her eyes were glassy, unseeing. Her head fell back, his panic freshly renewed.

"Rae." Aidan brushed the hair from her eyes, kicking for the steps with her limp in his arms. Baelin and Orion had made their way to the edge of the pool, a heartbeat away from diving in. Don't, he warned them. They had no magic that would keep them safe from the water temperature, or from Rae, and Aidan had no way of knowing if her own magic was unstable enough to follow.

He brushed against her thoughts, seeking, asking for permission to go deeper, but her memories played over and over, and Aidan couldn't risk waiting any longer. He reached into her mind and willed her to sleep.

Rae had burnt herself out. Burnt away every spell she'd been using, and there were many. Her natural hair, dark brown, now dry, fell below her shoulders in waves. The sight of her was like a punch to the gut. Aidan had seen a few of her scars before, but it hadn't even been half of them. She was covered in hundreds of small marks, burns, and large scars, some jagged, some Aidan couldn't fathom how anyone could give them to their worst enemy, let alone their own daughter. And on her back, a white tattoo spiralled from her spine and spanned across her shoulder blades, fine lines of

script in a dialect Aidan didn't recognise. Another spell, no doubt. One he suspected she'd gone to great lengths to conceal.

She'd slept throughout the night, and he'd sat by her bedside, his bed, the entire time. Waiting for her to wake, waiting for answers. Not long after dawn, she began to stir.

"Farren," he said quietly, fingers gripping the sides of his chair lest he do anything stupid.

Her eyes opened slowly, the colour more blue than grey in the dim light of the room as they met his. He couldn't help but press against her mind, checking, testing, making sure she hadn't been harmed from what she'd done to herself in the pool, what he'd had to do. He loosed a silent breath as he realised she was fine, whole, every part of her. Except for one thing. His magic.

All this time, it had been inside of her. And she'd fucking told him as much the night he'd stitched up her wound.

Did you know Witches can store magic in anything? Objects, trees, people. It's a very well-guarded secret. She'd played him all along.

Panic flared from her for a moment, but she covered it up quickly, pushing herself up in the sheets before realising she wore nothing, and damn him if he didn't want to peel that scrap of fabric off her despite everything. Despite all of this, he couldn't help but think about how beautiful she was without any spells in place to hide herself.

"Talk," Aidan commanded, still not trusting himself to move.

Chestnut hair fell over her shoulders as she pulled her knees, the sheet with them, to her chest. "Do you have siblings?" she asked quietly.

He'd only told Baelin, that night he'd driven into the city for Rae, but he'd never felt the need to hide anything from her. "A brother and a sister."

Surprise flickered across the Witch's face. "Older or younger?"

"Younger."

A tremble in her lower lip. Pain, raw and fresh, and it twisted something in him to see her like this.

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“So you understand then,” she said hoarsely. “My brother. Everything I did was for him.”

The face he’d seen, Aidan assumed. “And now?”

Rae frowned, and he knew she was fighting her sorrow, but for herself this time. “Now it’s over.”

“Because of Nim?”

Steel blue eyes flicked up to meet his. “Because I can’t do this anymore.”

Use him? Pretend? Manipulate everyone around her? Aidan’s patience was growing thin; if she’d been anyone else, he’d have sought the information he wanted without this preamble. He held her gaze, more anger bubbling up inside of him. She looked tired. Afraid. He hated it, but she had every reason to be. “The tattoo? What does it mean?”

She didn’t try to cover her fear as she glanced over her shoulder at her inked skin. “Did anyone else see it?”

Aidan hadn’t allowed anyone to enter his room whilst she’d been resting, not even the damned rutok, even though the others had all asked for updates. No one had seen what he knew she’d tried so hard to hide. He could only manage a shake of his head in response.

A car approached the gates, a visitor Aidan had little interest in entertaining right

now, but he rose from his chair anyway, if only to clear his head. Panic flared again, and he didn't know which he hated more, that she was afraid of him or that a stupid, stupid part of him wished she wasn't. "Stay here," he snapped, a sharpness to his tone he hadn't intended. "I have a visitor."

Rae chewed her lip. Dipped her chin, and it was an effort to tear his gaze away from her, to leave her there in his bed. As he opened the door, the rutok burst in and he didn't need to look back to know it had leapt into her arms, though her shaky exhale as it did had him swallowing against the tightness in his throat.

He passed Orion in the hallway. Aidan wanted someone outside his room at all times when he wasn't in it, and he wasn't taking any chances. The commander of his First Unit tipped his head in acknowledgement as Aidan made his way for the stairs.

"Maddock," Aidan said in greeting to the waiting Witch examining the bookshelves in his study.

"Vale." No pleasantries here, no bullshit. The Witch kept his hands behind his back and a sword strapped to his hip, and he had every thought and emotion locked down so tight Aidan couldn't find a hint of a way in. A wise move. He'd have made an excellent pet for the likes of his uncle.

Aidan poured two glasses of visk, handing one to his guest. "I take it you've accepted the position." With the new king dead, and his older sister still missing, Maddock was next in line as first cousin to the heir.

"Someone needs to put a stop to this monstrosity the Fae have created." There was no attempt to hide the disdain in his voice.

"Liberalist Fae and a few of the human factions," Aidan reminded him, "not the Royalists."

“Does it matter? The Royalists are allowing it to happen; they’re complicit.”

That was difficult to argue with, but the Fae king had been on his deathbed for some time, and court matters were delicate. Aidan leaned back against his desk, his Provident abilities reaching out to check on Rae. She was on her feet, out in the corridor above, arguing with Orion. “What brings you here, Maddock?”

“I’m looking for my cousin.” He searched the shelves as if he might find some evidence of the missing princess there, the red tattoo on his neck like a trail of blood in the low light.

“Worried she’s going to steal the throne out from under you?”

“She has something that belongs to me.” His magic, Aidan would put money on it. And then—fuck.

Not what, who. He’d been asking Rae the wrong fucking question all along. Ten years. I’ve had no one looking out for me but me for the last ten years of my life, she’d told him. Ten fucking years she’d been missing.

Vale, she pleaded in his thoughts. She was on the stairs, Orion’s hand around her arm, the rutok growling at him. From Orion’s thoughts, Aidan knew she’d been told who stood before him in his study.

Get her back in my room, Aidan ordered his commander.

He killed... the new king. Maddock did it, didn’t he? Rae asked, and Aidan dragged a hand down his face as the pieces came together. Her brother. The reason she’d all but fucking detonated in his pool.

“Whatever she took from you, she’s long gone,” Aidan told Maddock, his expression

bored as he downed the last of his visk.

“You proved rather useful in removing one heir; I thought you might help me remove the other.”

“I didn’t know you were going to kill him.” He’d been too caught up with Rae when the request had come from Cormac. From Scarlett.

“Is that remorse from the Vampire Lord?” Maddock arched a brow, a measure of disgust dancing across his features. “Seylan was useless, and Alethea murdered my sister in cold blood. She needs to pay for what she did.”

“Murdered? She’d have been a child when your cousin died.” A fuckingchild.

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“Then why did she run so quickly after the funeral?”

Running is what I do best, Rae had told him. The princess was only seventeen years old when she disappeared. Seventeen, and already covered in more scars than Aidan had amassed in almost two hundred years. “That’s not my concern. The hybrids are getting stronger, Maddock. Do I have your backing or not?”

The Witch made a show of looking bored, silence stretching out between them. “Perhaps I’ll leave it to the Royalists,” he said at last. “Find her, and I’ll consider it.”

“I’ve no interest in working with someone seeking retribution from a ghost. We’re done here.” He’d already called on Shaw, the steward eagerly approaching his study. The door opened just as Orion hauled Rae up the stairs, all but dragging her back to Aidan’s room.

Maddock shot Aidan a look of disdain, downing the contents of his glass before handing it to Shaw and leaving the study without a word.

Working with Maddock had always been an attempt to mend the rift with the Witches. The rift that he was, in part, to blame for, but this... Aidan’s fingers tightened around his glass. The information he’d provided Scarlett had been meant as an olive branch, a step towards mending what had been broken between Vampires and Witches over a decade prior, not fuel to murder their fucking king, not something to fuck things up further between him and Rae.

Aidan rolled a joint and pocketed it, waiting until Maddock’s driver pulled out of the compound before pouring himself another glass of visk. He drained the contents in



one, reaching for the bottle to pour himself a third, but grabbed a second glass instead, the bottle with his other hand. Something told him it wouldn't be nearly enough to get him through the conversation he was about to have.

It was time to talk with the princess.

## Chapter thirty-seven

Rae paced Aidan's room, fingers curling and flexing at her sides. She'd pulled on one of his shirts, the fabric barely hitting her thighs, but it had been the first thing she could find. Orion stood guard outside, and she knew there was no shaking him off. The Vampire was loyal, she'd give him that. Ru, not so much. The rutok had bolted at some point during their whispered argument on the stairs, most likely in search of Quinn.

With the shutters down over the windows, there was no way out of her predicament. Somewhere beneath her feet, her brother's murderer walked free, and Rae wanted nothing more than to wrap her hands around his throat and squeeze the air from his lungs. She should've known the bastard would try something like this, should've seen it coming all those years ago when her cousin had died. When Rae had killed her.

She dragged her hands through her hair, fighting back the tears pressing at the corners of her eyes. Seylan had been the promise of something new for the Witches. For Demesia too, Rae was certain of it. She hadn't seen him for ten years, but he'd always given her hope that she'd made the right decision. That leaving had been the only course of action. Now, every choice felt like a mistake, a thousand missteps stacked on top of each other with no clear path, no direction to take next, and her chest tightened with the weight of it all.

Rae felt Aidan's presence on the other side of the door before it opened, his power so great it was impossible to ignore. He shouldered the door shut, two glasses in his

hand and a bottle of visk in the other, pausing when he laid eyes on her.

“You let him leave?” Rae asked, already knowing her cousin was gone.

Aidan stalked past her, placed the glasses on the bedside table, and poured a double measure in each of them. “Sit.” His hair was unbound, dark waves falling across his eyes, a dark, notched shirt highlighting the contours of his muscles and a glimpse of the tattoo on his chest.

He handed her a glass, and Rae tried not to snatch it from him, forcing herself not to down the whole thing in one. She remained standing, just to piss him off.

“How long?” Aidan asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

“What?”

“How long since you stole my magic?”

Rae hid her scoff in her glass as she took a sip, focusing on the burn as it slid down her throat. “You’re the all-powerful Provident, Vale. You should know how long it’s been missing.” Still, his silver eyes remained on hers, and she knew he wasn’t going to let this go without a full explanation.

“Fifteen years,” he breathed.

She knew what he was getting at. Rae was only thirteen years old when his magic had been taken from him, the all-powerful Provident, as she’d put it.

“I didn’t steal it.” Despite herself, she downed the contents of her glass.

Silence dragged on as Aidan watched her, emptying his glass slowly before he placed

it on the dresser behind him. “You stole my magic from another Witch, presumably? Went into hiding. Came back here with a plan to what, destroy me? For what? Surely you knew I had an Ascendant?”

The visk fuelled her anger, driving her into his space. “I didn’t steal it.” She all but slammed her glass down next to his before tilting her chin up to glare at him, pressing a hand to her chest. “It was forced into me, against my will.”

A beat of silence and then, “By your mother.”

Rae hated the way he softened at that, had to turn away from the look she didn’t want to see in his eyes. She reached for her thumb ring before remembering she’d given it to him, glancing over her shoulder to see him toying with it instead. “By my mother. She knew it was only a matter of time before you took your uncle’s position. So she stole it from you, and put it in me.” Rae swallowed. Stared at her hands and willed them not to tremble, her voice not to break. “But I couldn’t control it. She tried...”

“To make you,” he said, his voice rough. “Fifteen years. And it was inside of you the entire time.”

Anger lined his words, and it flipped a switch in Rae. “I hated you for it,” she said, facing him again. “With every beating. Every time I almost drowned. I hated you.” Her chest heaved with the admission. It wasn’t just his silver flame. There had been something else right from the start that she hadn’t understood at first. Something, that once she did, she’d been far more afraid of facing.

“Emlyn died because I couldn’t control it. Maddock’s sister. She was—” Rae’s voice cracked, and she swallowed the lump in her throat. She wouldn’t give him the fucking satisfaction of her tears. “My best friend. And my people deserve better than a ruler who can’t control what they are.” They deserved Seylan. Rae leaned against the wall, mirroring Aidan’s stance, arms folded across her chest, his shirt riding up her

thigh, aware that the Vampire tracked her every movement. “My mother tried to drown me as punishment the day after the funeral, and when she couldn’t, she shoved me into our basement and left me there. It took me four days to escape, and once I did, I ran and never looked back.”

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His gaze burned into her. “And she let the world believe you fled because of the betrothal.”

Rae nodded. It was the story her mother had spun. That she’d jilted the Fae prince and bolted. It was that or admit their princess had murdered her own cousin, and her mother would rather let the world believe it had been because of Rae’s poor choices rather than her own failings. “I had no interest in marrying Casius, but I would have endured it. It might have prevented all of this.” Nim. Seylan. Maybe even the Liberalists joining forces with the factions. All of it like a game of dyshe, and she was the first piece.

“Your brother knew you had my magic?” Aidan asked. He handed her another glass of visk, and just as she wished for a joint to go with it, he pulled one from his pocket, lighting it with a silver ember from the tip of his finger.

Rae almost smiled at that, but the mention of her brother snuffed out any joy she felt at seeing Aidan’s trivial use of the magic she’d returned to him. “No one but my mother did. And she died a year after I left.” A fact he was well aware of.

“But you were here because of him,” he said as if he saw through all her layers of bullshit, and she wondered for a second if he’d already sought every answer for himself whilst she slept. “Forhim. Omnia was just a front.”

He handed over the joint and Rae nodded, eyes falling shut as she took a deep drag and pictured Seylan’s face. There was no use hiding the truth from Aidan now. “The silver,” she said on an exhale. “Every item I enchanted. It’s spread wide across Demesia. My magic is like a web over the whole city. I was going to nullify the

Orders for my brother so that he could start from an even footing.”

“To protect him,” Aidan mused as she passed him the joint. “Take out the competition, put us on the same level as the humans.” He clicked his fingers. “Just like that.”

When Cillian had first explained it to her, Rae had been hungry to prove herself. To do something good. To allow her brother to rule fairly in a world that seemed to be anything but when he possessed little magic and was a sweet, shy character that others would only abuse. “And now it’s over. And the competition is far worse than Vampires and Fae have ever been.” But they were borne of magic too. Torrin and the other hybrids all had an alarming amount of magic at their disposal.

Aidan seemed to consider that. “I was your mark. At Rush.” The night they’d ‘met,’ but she’d already been watching him for months, observing his patterns. “Did you orchestrate the attack too?” he asked coolly as he handed back the joint. To his credit, whatever anger he was feeling, and Rae was certain from the way his eyes had darkened and the tightness in his stance that he was alright with it, he kept it contained.

She shook her head. “I knew it was going to happen. I just needed to get close to you. I needed more money for silver; I needed to know if you were in on all of it, to know what you knew.”

“I would have helped you,” Aidan said quietly, the words clipped.

“You wouldn’t have looked twice at me, and we both know it.”

“Do not presume—”

“To know you? You’re absolutely right, Vale, I don’t know you at all. We’re

strangers to each other.” Even as the words fell from her lips, she knew they’d never truly been strangers at all.

“Strangers,” he repeated flatly. His anger was palpable. And he had every right. She’d used him, withheld his magic. Had almost taken everything from him.

“The tattoo?” he asked, downing the last of his visk. “More spells?” Rae brushed past him to the bathroom to run the tap over the end of the joint, discarding it in the bin beside the sink. She didn’t have an answer for him. The only other person that had known she’d had his magic was dead. The only person who knew about hers was dead now too. Besides, Aidan still had secrets, she was sure of it.

“So, now what?” He blocked the way back into the bedroom, his silver eyes as molten as the metal she was so used to melting with her torch, her skin heating as his gaze roamed over her bare legs.

“You got what you wanted,” she said, waving a hand dismissively to try and get past him, but Aidan didn’t budge, his scent and warmth wrapping around her.

He closed a hand around her wrist, the other tilting her chin up to look at him. “And you?” he asked, his tone far kinder than she deserved.

Rae swallowed. She couldn’t do this. Not now. She cleared her throat. Held her head high. “I got enough.”

The fingers that had touched her gently before slid to her throat, Aidan’s grip tightening. “You think I’m going to let you leave when you’ve just admitted you can take down every Vampire and Fae in the city?” The words were harsh, both a promise and a threat that seemed to linger between them, but his eyes fell to her mouth, his thumb grazing her throat.

And Goddess damn her, but Rae leaned into his touch. “It’s only a matter of time before Maddock discovers I’m here.” She gave a light shrug, if only to hide the shiver of anticipation that slid through her. “I know what you were trying to do, Vale. An alliance. It was a smart move.” Her attention dipped to his mouth, and she couldn’t help but rest a hand over the scar on his heart, a frown creasing her brow. It was his anger she needed. His resentment, his rage. All the feelings he had every right to over what she’d done, all of it because of him. “Don’t ask me to stay.”

Aidan didn’t say anything. Instead, he kissed her. It wasn’t a request or a plea. It was a confession, a declaration, a demand. It was hungry and wild and ravenous and furious and a mirror of everything she felt spiralling through her; Rae kissed him back just as greedily.

Resentment simmered in her veins, hot and molten, and she couldn’t have snuffed it out even if she tried.

Tell me to stop, Rae, he rasped in her thoughts.

Never. She pulled his shirt over her shoulders, fingers curling into his hair as he caught one of her nipples between his teeth, his tongue flicking over the tip.

Everything she’d endured. Every beating, every near drowning, every drop of pain had all been because of his magic inside of her. And Rae had hated him for it, loathed him for so long that wanting him like this, needing, only fuelled her wrath even more.

She bit down on his lip as she kissed him and Aidan groaned into her mouth, carrying her to his bed, her fingers already working his belt, one hand reaching for him, sliding down his cock as he lowered her to the mattress. Rae leaned forwards to take him into her mouth, Aidan’s hand fisting into her hair at the back of her head as she moved up and down his length.



“Fuuuck,” he breathed. “You’ll be the end of me, Farren.”

Her other hand slid between her legs, fingers working to ease the tension building there until Aidan’s hand came down over hers. This was what she needed. What she didn’t dare let herself examine too closely.

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With the hand fisted in her hair, he eased her off him, yanking her head back to angle her mouth up to meet his, canines grazing her lips. Rae whimpered into his mouth, his fingers working faster, so close to what she wanted, what she craved, every muscle in her body tightening, breaths quickening, and then—Aidan pulled his hand away. Shoved her back onto the bed. His shirt went first. Then his trousers. He crawled over her, hooded eyes taking her in from her head to her feet and back up again.

“Part of me thinks it’s a fucking crime no one else has seen how beautiful you truly are in years, but the other part,” he told her, threading his fingers through the strands of her hair and twirling a lock between finger and thumb, “the selfish, possessive asshole part of me revels in the fact that this is all for me.” He trailed his knuckles from her jaw down her throat, his hand resting over her heart. “I should have known you were a fucking queen the moment I met you.”

She should have snapped back, but her heart was doing that stupid thing again. That thing it had no business doing. Dangerous, dangerous territory. Because he was right. She could have changed her hair and eye colour before he returned to his room, but she’d wanted him to see her. Really see her. Even though she knew he already did. Knew that perhaps he was the only one to have ever truly seen her and not turn away.

Rae’s heart was like a caged bird in her chest—desire, excitement, anger, fear, all warring with each other, thick and all-consuming. Her body was alight from how close he’d brought her, aching, throbbing with the need for release.

The twitch of his lips let her know he felt it all, knew what she needed, what she sought as he came to rest over her, pressing himself over her wet core before pausing at her entrance. Something settled over his face for a moment, so quick and then it

was gone, and then he thrust into her, pinning her hands above her head, his mouth coming over one of her breasts.

Rae couldn't help her moan as he moved, rough and hard and punishing. She was too far gone, too close to—Aidan slowed, his thrusts turning shallow, so slow Rae wrapped her legs around his waist to push him into her. His laugh hummed against her breast, but he took his precious time going slow, building up their rhythm again as he explored her body with his tongue, her hands still pinned above her.

His teeth grazed her flesh as he moved faster, fingers pressing firmly into the softness of her skin as her muscles coiled tight, tighter, and then he slowed again. Slid his hands around her thighs to readjust her. Aidan leaned back to look down at where their bodies joined, his hand trailing over her soft stomach, between her breasts, and settling over her heart again. "Rae..." He breathed her name like a prayer falling from his lips, his expression more tender than she'd ever seen it. "Do you have any idea how much I've fucking craved this? How much I want—"

"Don't," she murmured. Because she couldn't—wouldn't—let herself lose the too-brittle lid she had on her emotions. Rae dug her heels into him with a needy groan, hips rising to meet his. She knew exactly what he was doing. Denying her what she wanted. Punishing her. And Goddess, it was torture of the best kind.

This time he moved a hand between them as his hips quickened, fingers moving circles over her centre, driving her crazy. The need for release was almost painful, but she knew he wouldn't let her have it, not yet, and she wondered if it was for the same stupid reason she didn't want to, because she wasn't ready for any part of this to be over.

Aidan's mouth trailed between her breasts, along her collarbone, up to her neck, his canines dragging against her skin; Rae's back bowed off the bed with how much her body needed what he was denying it. She wanted to come so badly, to feel his teeth

sink into her flesh. Needed to. Vale, please, she begged. His teeth grazed her throat, right against her pulse. "Aidan," she rasped.

The growl that came from him was nothing short of savage. He fisted her hair, her head pulled back, his teeth sinking into her throat, and Rae lost herself in him. In the strength of his thrusts, the way his fingers moved over her clit, the feeling of his mouth at her throat, the heat of his tongue, and the sting of his teeth as he drank from her vein.

Euphoric was the word humans used to describe how it felt to be fed on, but euphoric was far too inadequate to describe the way Aidan felt inside her, drinking from her, drawing out her pleasure, and pouring it back in all at once. Every part of her lit up, her body convulsing with the force of her orgasm, and Aidan's release quickly followed.

He held onto her until the haze began to clear and she registered the weight of his body again, one hand tangled in her hair, the other splayed over her heart, his mouth hot as he panted against her throat. He didn't move away until her trembling ceased.

His teeth eased from her flesh first, his hot tongue lapping over the wound as if he couldn't help himself, and a quiet voice in the back of Rae's mind knew that this was different than what the humans had described. That this was true torture, this thing between them. This need, this connection, no matter how much she wanted to hate him. Because how could she hate him if all she wanted was to have him do that to her again and again? To have him inside her, drinking from her, working every last bit of pleasure from her body until she was limp in his arms?

"Rae," he breathed again, dragging his eyes up to meet hers, molten silver staring back at her, every inch of bliss she felt reflected in his face. Too many words were on the tip of her tongue, too many feelings hammering against her chest, dangerously close to a male who could read every last one of them.

This was the true torture. The bond they shared. And this was why she couldn't stay. He opened his mouth to speak, but Rae cut him off, moving her hips, her breath catching when he twitched inside her, still achingly hard.

"Don't ask me, Aidan, please," she murmured against his mouth, hips rolling, already needing to chase the high before it slipped away.

He kissed her softly at first, and then exactly how she needed, tears pressing at the corners of her eyes as he gave in to whatever thought he seemed to be warring with. His hips moved in time with hers, and there was nothing measured or slow about the way they moved. No teasing. Her body was a question, and Aidan answered, giving her everything without hesitation.

## Chapter thirty-eight

Rae missed Nim's funeral. Witch tradition dictated that their body be burned as soon after death as possible, to ensure the soul didn't become too attached to the body instead of returning to the Goddess.

Reed had done the right thing: carried out every detail of the funeral rite, and for that, Rae was grateful. Still, she brought offerings as she made her way down to the pergola at the bottom of the manor gardens, where Nim's ashes rested in a silver urn Rae had engraved with her friend's name and dates, an amber stone set in the centre the same shade as the Witch's eyes.

The spot had been chosen because it faced the setting sun, another tradition Reed had upheld. Soft beams of light hit the pergola as Rae approached and she imagined Nim waiting there, face tilted towards what remained of the day, a sweet smile on her face, the same smile she'd given Rae so many times before.

Rae arranged her gifts beside Nim's urn. Honey for the Maiden, milk for the Mother,

wine for the Crone. A string of fresh flowers just for her friend that she looped over the pot. The fucking concert tickets she hadn't had the chance to give. And a promise that she would fix this, somehow. That she would make things right.

The facility raid hadn't entirely been a bust. Torrin was dead, and the tally of hybrid fatalities was high, but Baxter was still out there somewhere with the remaining hybrids, and that meant Demesia wasn't safe yet, not with how many of those things remained and whatever Bax had planned for them.

He'd been the one manipulating the silver prices all along as well as the base metals, and every resource needed for anything important. Because his hybrids possessed magic and had Thaumaturgy abilities, it was clear now that he intended to use them to take control of the city, and Rae refused to let that happen.

She knelt before her friend's urn, hands in her lap. Rae knew what she needed to do. What she'd been born to do. Even though every part of her rioted at the thought. What she wanted had never mattered. Couldn't matter. Not when so much was at stake.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you in time," Rae whispered, a tear slipping down her face. "That the last days of your life were—were spent in the dark. That you were scared and alone." She wiped at her face and tried to steady her breaths. "I hope you knew we were looking for you. That we did everything—" A choked gasp cut her words short as she heard the lie in them. She hadn't done enough. She'd failed her friend. Her only friend. And Nim had suffered for it. "I'm sorry," she breathed. "Maybe one day you'll forgive me. Maybe one day I'll forgive myself, but from now on, I want you to know that I'm going to do what's right. What I should have done, years ago. I want you to be proud of me, Nim. The way I was proud of you. Am proud of you."

Rae stayed until the sun sank below the horizon, until darkness fell and a hand rested on her shoulder. Reed.

“Time to go,” he told her softly and helped her rise on aching limbs, quiet as he led the way to the cars.

They were all headed to Cormac’s place to help with the survivors, to speak with the remaining council members, and to plan their next move against the hybrids. Rae had been eager to go, to help wherever she could before she left. There had been casualties, she’d been informed, prisoners like Nim who hadn’t been able to withstand the effects of the testing, and Rae couldn’t help but wonder if it was a mercy. Then she thought of Bax, of how normal he’d seemed despite being a hybrid. Her stomach dropped as she realised he might have always been, ever since she’d known him. And what if there were hybrids who didn’t buy into his bullshit? She was too tired to think about it anymore; her decision had already been made.

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A shadow caught Rae's eye as she followed Reed to the front of the manor. Quinn. "Keep Ru out of trouble while I'm gone," she told him quietly, scratching beside his ear and not letting herself meet the daemon's eyes, just in case Baelin was paying too close attention somewhere. Quinn whined, his rough tongue licking her chin.

Keep them all out of trouble, she wanted to tell him, but knew there was little chance of that. Rae's PAD buzzed in her pocket, and she swiped away a message from Scarlett, jumping into the front seat of a waiting vehicle beside Reed. Already she could feel Aidan's gaze on her as he slid into the driver's seat of his own vehicle. Rae couldn't risk letting anything slip around him; she doubted a few feet made any difference with how strong his mind was, but it helped her focus. She needed the distance. To hold on to her anger.

Evander and Orion took up their position in the vehicle behind as Reed left the manor grounds, the lights of the city flashing by. Even at night, Demesia was full of life. "We need a fourth," he said after a while. Someone to replace Roak, he meant. A new member of the First Unit. Rae shot him a sideways glance. "What? You'd be a great asset to the team, Rae."

"Something tells me Lord Vale wouldn't allow that."

Reed chuckled. "I think your husband would do just about anything for you."

It struck Rae, then, that she thought he might be right. Dangerous, dangerous territory. Aidan had seen her tattoo, seen her. How exposed she was; would have felt it, the connection between them, just as she did. Rae swallowed. Swallowed down every emotion; the memory of him above her, inside her, surrounding her. "You



know better than anyone our arrangement was a means to an end.”

“What end, exactly?” the Fae asked as they turned into the Central District. The buildings became more industrial with metal fascia instead of the prettier architecture of the First and Second Districts. Warehouses that stretched for entire blocks. Humans were smart, but their eye for aesthetics was sorely lacking.

Rae turned to Reed and winked. “A good wife never tells.”

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel, the air in the car suddenly thick.

“You were going to ask her?” Rae whispered. For a union. Marriage. The Fae nodded, and what remained of Rae’s heart crumpled in on itself. Nim would have been overjoyed. “Oh, Reed. I’m so sorry.”

He managed a smile, a small shrug of his huge shoulders. “I know it might seem fast to you, but I knew the moment I met her.” His voice thickened, and he cleared his throat. “I knew her. Had time with her. That will have to be enough.” Rae’s throat was painfully tight as she watched him. “But if I’m ever lucky enough to feel that again. This,” he said, placing a hand over his heart. “I won’t wait a second time. I won’t hesitate or second guess myself. I’ll be all in. I know she’d want that for me.”

Rae rested her hand over his as he pulled the car into park. “She would.”

“So you’ll think about it?” Reed asked, his tone light once more. Optimistic. “First Unit?”

Rae didn’t meet his gaze as she slipped out of the car, struggling to keep her tone light to match his. She couldn’t be the reason he lost any of the hope he clung to, and Goddess knew how he still did. “Sure.”

Cormac was already waiting for them, his mate beside him, Scarlett's expression brightening the moment she saw Rae, no doubt taking in her pale pink hair and her blue eyes. Rae had barely been able to hide her surprise when she'd seen the hybrids bring the Witch up top the night of the raid. It had been just over ten years since she'd laid eyes on her cousin's friend, but everything from Scarlett's perfectly styled blonde curls to her manicured nails was the same.

Despite how close she'd been to Emlyn, her cousin was afforded certain freedoms that Rae, as princess, never was. Emlyn didn't live in the palace. Could move through the Witch city of Riguera as she pleased. Make friends with whomever she wished, like her tutor's daughter, Scarlett.

Emlyn had always spoken fondly of Scarlett, and they'd met precisely twice: once before her cousin's death, and once the day of the funeral when her cousin Maddock had made a scene about his sister's demise.

Whatever happened, I know you'd never harm her intentionally, she'd told Rae. And Rae knew she'd meant it. But if she'd witnessed it, if she'd seen Emlyn's marred skin and smelt the stench of burning flesh, Rae knew the Witch would feel differently. She swallowed down the memory as Scarlett approached, hazel eyes meeting hers immediately.

"So good to see you, A—" the Witch began.

"Rae." Rae shoved a hand into the one Scarlett offered before the Witch could use her real name. They'd been communicating these last few days via encrypted messages, ones Rae had gone to great lengths to ensure Baelin hadn't discovered. "I'm so happy to see you're well."

Scarlett hesitated for a moment. "I... of course. Thank you. For everything."

Rae knew Aidan watched them, felt the press of his Provident abilities over every inch of her skin, praying he was feeling benevolent enough to not tear through Scarlett's shields. Rae had told him earlier she'd be remaining up top with Scarlett and the other survivors in the makeshift hospital whilst he went below to speak with the council, and Aidan hadn't argued with her.

They'd barely spoken since they'd left his room, but Rae preferred it that way. There was nothing left to say, and Aidan understood that. She couldn't bring herself to acknowledge what was between them—never had, no matter how much things had changed. However everything had changed. Not a minute had passed since he'd fed from her that she hadn't thought about it, thought about everything she knew it meant and couldn't face.

Rae hadn't been afforded the luxury of safety in the last ten years. It was exactly as she'd told him; she'd had no one looking out for her but herself. Until him. He'd made her feel safe for perhaps the first time in her life, and the thought made her chest ache.

Scarlett led her in one direction as Cormac ushered Aidan and the others towards the elevator to take them down to the lower level, to the rooms they'd used on their last visit there. Her last visit there, when she'd almost crumpled under the weight of her dread, and he'd found her, eased her fears in a way only he knew she needed. Not with tenderness. Never with gentleness. She couldn't bear his kindness, and he'd known it. He'd always known it. Had always known what she needed from the moment they met.

Rae couldn't help but glance over her shoulder, meeting Aidan's silver gaze just before the doors closed. She sucked in a breath at the sight of him and followed Scarlett towards the rows of beds, helping with spells wherever she could, talking to survivors and trying to snuff out the guilt every time she wished one of them was Nim.

They worked for hours, until Rae knew the council meeting below them would have long since dissolved into a dispute over what to do next. Two nurses came to relieve her and Scarlett, and Rae knew it was time. She reminded herself of all the reasons why she had to do this, why she had no other choice as she quietly followed Scarlett to the far end of the warehouse, to a corner where stacks of metal were still piled floor to ceiling. There wasn't a Vampire in sight, no survivors from the facility, no nursing staff. Only a narrow door that Rae knew as soon as she laid eyes on it was another elevator, one most likely used for service access judging from the size of it. She took measured breaths as Scarlett quietly opened the shutters and they both shuffled in, barely enough space for the two of them.

"I can explain your absence up here to the others until dawn, but any longer and Cormac will suspect me," the Witch explained.

Rae swallowed. She'd made her decision, chosen duty over desire. There was no backing out now. "Dawn is all I need. Thank you."

"I like the pink on you," Scarlett said with a sideways glance as she shut them in the tiny metal box. "It was always Emlyn's favourite." Her shoulders rose as she sucked in a deep breath. "I didn't know—"

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That the information she gave would lead to Maddock coming for Rae. That it would blow Rae's cover. But it didn't matter. It wasn't the Witch's responsibility; Rae would never have allowed anyone to cover for her before. That was why she knew this was the right thing to do, even though the guilt had already lodged itself firmly beneath her ribs. "I know I'm asking a lot from you. Lying to your mate." She almost choked on the word.

"When I told Aidan about Seylan—" Scarlett pressed her lips together, and Rae steeled herself for whatever was coming, for what information Aidan had been given and how he'd used it. "I didn't know they were conspiring to kill him. I'm—I'm so sorry."

The Witch lowered her gaze, but Rae willed her expression to remain neutral, to keep every bit of rage she was feeling under wraps so that Aidan couldn't feel it and reach out for her. Any hesitation she'd had about what she was about to do was obliterated by Scarlett's confession. "Consider us even."

Scarlett searched her eyes as she seemed to consider her answer, and for a moment Rae wondered if she'd find Aidan waiting for them when the elevator stopped. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Despite the Witch's confession, Rae had always liked her. In another life, perhaps they could have even been friends. In another life, everyone she loved would still be alive. The elevator descended, and Rae couldn't speak, the padded walls closing in on her. She was too busy focusing on her heartbeat, on steadying her breaths. On quieting her anger and fear. She thought of Ru, tails twirling through her fingers. Laughing with Nim. Playing hide and seek with her brother as a child. Aidan's mouth

on hers, though that last thought she tried to shove away. The elevator slowed and stopped. Scarlett pulled the metal doors open, leading the way.

A kernel of fear sparked in Rae's chest at the sight of the dark corridor, but she snuffed it out, spinning Nim's ring she'd fixed and modified on her thumb. She followed Scarlett through the maze of hallways until the Witch stopped at one with a salt line before it.

Rae reached for the door, the cold air beyond it slamming into her as it swung open. She stepped through, careful not to disturb the salt.

"Goddess guide you," Scarlett said softly.

Rae smiled, said her thanks, and slammed the door in the Witch's face, her hand over the lock as she murmured a spell. Scarlett had been instructed to do the same on the other side, followed by the spell Rae had used to conceal herself from Baxter back at her apartment. Only this time, with the strength of another Witch to bolster it, even a weak one, Rae would be able to move freely. Undetected.

The third spell, and the last, would keep her hidden from a Provident's eyes. Time was all she needed, and her magic combined with Scarlett's might just afford it. Cillian had been wrong about many things, but there had been some element of truth to his words when he'd said someone needed to hold the key. She couldn't let herself dwell on whether Aidan would understand that. Of all the wrongs she'd done in her life, she only hoped he'd realise this was her opportunity to right them.

The spells would only last a few hours, and Rae prayed Aidan would go easy on Scarlett when he discovered what the Witch had helped her to do.

Chapter thirty-nine

“Is your Odalik well, my lord?” Thadlia asked.

Aidan had barely stepped out of the elevator at Cormac’s place, making his way through the crowd of waiting Vampires. For the entirety of their descent, Cormac had been prattling away beside him and Aidan hadn’t heard a damned word.

He’d been too busy focusing on Rae moving about above them, too busy thinking about the look on her face as the elevator doors closed. Something that looked too much like an apology.

Your Odalik. His wife. But she was more than that. Something dormant in him had awoken when Rae had returned his magic, something that had roared to life when he’d fed from her. The taste of her still lingered. The feel of her body beneath him, around him. It had settled some primal part of him to have her like that. Only he didn’t. Have her. No matter how much he wanted to claim her, mark her, and all the other absurdly primitive thoughts that had run through his head since she’d left his bed. Despite her hard exterior, her strength, beneath it all, she was afraid. Afraid of... caring too much. Letting others care for her. It’s easier this way, Aidan could almost hear her say.

“She’s up top with the survivors,” Aidan said, not looking in Thadlia’s direction, “as I’m sure you’re well aware.”

He didn’t have time for Thadlia’s antics. Her Provident abilities were strong enough that she’d have felt Rae’s presence when they arrived if she was looking for it. It was enough to remind him he didn’t need to be watching Rae’s every move. Enough to squash out his own echoing thought of you know why, as Malik and Karina greeted him.

The memory of how beautiful she’d looked beneath him played on repeat, the way her hair had fanned out around her, her chest heaving, her heart racing beneath his

palm. How it had snapped something inside of him, something he should have fucking known sooner. Don't ask me to stay, she'd said. But he couldn't let her go. Not without exploring this thing between them. Not without hearing her side; that he suspected she knew.

New faces stood amongst old ones. There had been casualties at the raid, and as Vampires stepped up to introduce themselves, part of him understood why Rae had attempted what she had. Nullifying the Orders' magic would have certainly prevented years of this bullshit, but a different kind of fight was coming to them now.

Aidan addressed his council, starting with acknowledging their losses during the raid. All of the houses had lost someone. And though he hated his kind, he hoped the faces standing before him had a chance to prove him otherwise.

He'd considered telling them about his heritage, his silver flame, but decided against it. Now was not the time to divide them with his half-breed legacy. Many had respected his uncle, and change took time. Instead, he informed them about Aera's work with the Liberalist Fae. About Baxter and the hybrids, filling in gaps from what they hadn't been able to glean from the raid.

"Where did the Thaumias blood come from?" Malik asked.

"We don't know. Only that they're going to use it to pull the strings in the city. To stop the flow of resources, to push up prices and make things very difficult for those of us that remain," Aidan explained. Rae had tried to track Baxter with the ring he'd taken from Silver Star, but she hadn't been successful. Baelin hadn't been either.

Questions erupted from the council members, and Aidan answered them all as best he could, even the ones that grated on his last nerve—Vampires and their posturing—but he needed numbers, needed an army, if it came to it.



It was almost dawn when they'd finished. Half the council, the members eager to show their dedication to their new roles, had been pitching ideas, and given the amount of changes in the last few weeks, Aidan had permitted it.

He'd told them all as much as he was willing to share, but of Maddock's visit, he'd said nothing. Anything that would jeopardise what he'd built with the Royalist Fae wasn't open for discussion. Anything that would jeopardise Rae's safety wasn't either, and it was only a matter of time before Maddock discovered her in Demesia. Before he discovered where she'd been spending her time.

The Royalists had been considering an alliance with the Witches for years, despite Rae's disappearance, but if word broke out that Maddock had any part in removing Seylan from the throne, it would all grind to a halt. If they knew Aidan's part in it... he would accept whatever consequences fell upon him. But Rae... if she knew the truth? Whatever fragile thing they held between them would crumble. The thought was like poison settling in his veins.

He reached out for the Witch, expecting to feel her amongst the survivors, but she wasn't with them. Rae, he called out, brushing Thadlia aside and making his way for the elevator. The Vampire had tried to speak with him all night, but Aidan wasn't interested.

No answer from Rae.

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“Baelin.” He reached out to his Ascendant next, cursing whatever it was in Cormac’s basement interfering with the earpieces when no answer came, and ignored the first flare of panic spreading beneath his ribs. Baelin, he tried again, this time with his Provident abilities, pulling his PAD from his pocket as Orion stepped into the elevator beside him. Where is she? he asked his Ascendant.

The climb seemed to take three times longer than usual, every second stretching on for far too long. Rae. Aidan found her—like she was buried under hundreds of wards, but still, he felt her. Below ground. At least a dozen blocks away or more, on the move. Apprehension clawed at him. What are you up to, Witch?

No answer, and then—Trying to fix what’s broken, Vampire, came her reply, so quietly he barely heard it.

The scar over his heart ached, and Aidan tightened his grip on his PAD as he waited for Baelin’s reply. Some things are better left that way, he told Rae.

I can’t locate her, Baelin’s message read.

I’ve found her, Aidan told him.

No reply from Rae, and that kernel of apprehension gave way to uneasiness. To concern. He dragged a hand through his hair, earning him a sideways glance from Orion. The elevator groaned as it slowed. The doors opened and Reed already stood waiting for them, another earpiece in his hands. Aidan took it, giving him and Orion silent, clipped commands to find her, trying to keep a lid on his unease. Dawn was approaching, and he couldn’t risk Orion out in the morning sunlight.

Wherever Rae was, she was already far away, and he didn't know whether to laugh at her astuteness or tear through the first fucking thing he came into contact with. Her signature felt faint, but then—Aidan paused, reaching for the minds of those around him and feeling a vibration in his magic that had no right being there.

“There are reports of disruption across the city,” Baelin said in his ear as Scarlett caught his eye.

Aidan reached further, to the city beyond, understanding smacking him square in the face when he felt nothing, the realisation that he could have prevented this—could have at least fucking tried to—slashing through him.

“The roads are gridlocked; it's chaos out there,” Baelin went on.

Scarlett gave a tight smile, and Aidan knew she was in on it. Wherever Rae was. But—chaos?

“What is? I've got a basement full of Vampires waiting to get the fuck out of here, Baelin.” Cormac's place wasn't big enough for a garage, and in order not to draw too much attention to the location, the council and their Ascendants' vehicles were parked halfway across the district.

“Rutoks,” Baelin told him as Aidan stepped out into what remained of the night, hundreds of tiny creatures racing past the doorway. “Every damn rutok kennel has been emptied. They're all over the city.”

Aidan couldn't help the laugh that escaped him, adding to the hysteria building in his chest. “One last fuck you.”

“What?”

“Rae,” Aidan murmured, watching the freed animals clambering over cars. He twisted the ring over his thumb as he took in the sight. The Witch had a flair for being creative, and this stunt was no exception. Transport across the entire city would have ground to a halt. “She’s gone,” he tacked on, a roughness to his voice that hadn’t been there before.

“I don’t—” Baelin stammered, and Aidan knew his Ascendant was searching screens, tapping Rae’s PAD, a dozen different tasks at once.

“The service tunnels,” Aidan said as he made his way to his car, frowning when he realised he couldn’t feel the rutoks scurrying around him, couldn’t feel Orion inside the warehouse, or any of the others. “Isn’t this meant to be your area of expertise?”

“You know damned well there’s too many of them for me to control. Reed can follow you,” Baelin said in his earpiece when he must have heard Aidan’s car door slam shut. The Fae was the only team member who could follow safely.

Aidan’s fingers tightened over the steering wheel as he braced himself for what he should have known was coming, and he was a damned fool for hoping she’d change her mind. A damned fool for not asking her to stay. “She’s gone, Baelin.” It would take all day to get out of the city, and by then she’d be too far away for him to track her. Even now, her signature was weak.

“What are you up to, Rae?” he muttered as three rutoks tumbled over his windscreen. To fix what’s broken, she’d said. Returning to her people? To her position as heir? To her betrothal? The thought had him wanting to snuff out every Vampire in Cormac’s basement just to silence the crescendo building in his head. He stepped out of the car, slamming the door harder than necessary, his heart in his fucking throat. “Baelin, I need a motorbike.”

He took a single step towards the warehouse before a surge of magic hit him, the scar

over his chest aching so acutely it stole his breath. He staggered back against the car, the silence in his head louder than anything he'd ever experienced. Rae. Her spell. Just as jarring and unsettling as it had been fifteen years before when her mother had torn his magic from him.

Like a web over the whole city, Rae had said. Aidan's hand fisted in his shirt at the absence of it, the echo of pain where it should have been as he almost choked at the sensation, one hand reaching out to brace himself against his car. And this time it wasn't just his Fae magic, his silver flame, but his Provident abilities too. She'd taken all of it. His bones felt hollow and empty, each breath like shards of glass across his lungs.

"What was that?" Baelin asked in his earpiece, his voice laced with pain.

Aidan swallowed down the acid taste coating his tongue. "She's taken out the entire city." He shouldn't have been surprised, but disappointment sliced through him regardless. "Her magic. It's everywhere," he murmured. "She's nullified every Order across Demesia." So he couldn't follow her; so she could buy herself time to flee.

Without his Provident abilities, Aidan was blind. She'd caused a disruption big enough to grind the city to a halt without harming a single citizen, freed the damned rutoks at the same time, all so she could evade him. Anger sparked through him, anger and concern all for the damned Witch, and a dozen other things he'd been too fucking stupid to name, twisting in his gut.

But if her spell had also worked on the hybrids, that changed things. Provided Aidan with an opportunity and gave the city an advantage in this war its citizens had no say in becoming a part of. And if there was any chance Rae's spell could be traced back to her, she'd just put a target on her back. A giant one.

"Fuck," Aidan breathed, slamming his fist against the roof of his car hard enough to

leave a dent as Reed rounded his own vehicle to join him. Had she just removed his ability to shift too? What about those who were in their Fae form when her spell hit?

“Why would she do this?” Reed asked, a hand pressed to his chest. It had affected him too. Affected every gods-damned Order in the city.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:03 am*

“Do what, Aidan?” Baelin snapped in his ear. “Tell me Rae hasn’t done what I think she has?” His Ascendant’s voice grew distant as if he’d pulled his earpiece out, his tone laced with panic as he called out for Quinn.

A Vampire was the reason for everything I do. Everything I’ve done. The reason my mother treated me like vermin, she’d told Aidan that first day in the manor as husband and wife.

Because she’s afraid, he wanted to tell the Fae beside him. Because she’d suffered. Because she’s trying to fight back, to give us an even footing. Because she’s Rae. But Aidan didn’t say any of that as he dragged both hands through his hair, glaring at the fucking rutoks as they skittered over everything. Baelin cursed in his earpiece as his Ascendant spoke to Quinn and received no response.

The scar over his heart burned, the tightness spreading across his chest, but he knew this time it had nothing to do with the loss of his magic. “Fuck,” Aidan barked again, already calculating distances and possible locations she could be heading. A million different scenarios ran through his head at what she was going to do next. And there were a hundred different places she could be hiding, Orders that would trace this back to her, hunt her down. Baxter amongst them.

Aidan slammed his fist against the car again at the thought. It didn’t matter. He’d kill every last one of them who laid a finger on her. Tear apart the whole damn city if he had to.

She’d run. His wife.

His mate.

His.

And Aidan was going to find her.