



Pretty When They Collide

(Pretty When She Dies 0.50)

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Category: Paranormal, Vampires, Fantasy, Horror

Description: Cassandra is a dhamphir-the offspring of a vampire and mortal woman-and a thief of occult relics.

Aimee is a full-blood witch that is bound to a powerful vampire who traffics in the slavery of supernatural beings.

Both are powerful, lonely, and trapped in the dangerous world of the vampires.

When Cassandra steals a relic from Aimee's vampire master, he targets her as his next acquisition. What he doesn't realize is that a chance encounter between Cassandra and Aimee ignited a spark between them that they cannot deny.

To survive, the women must find a way to band together and fight against the ruthless evil that conspires to enslave them forever.

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Part One:

Las Vegas

Chapter 1:

Masks, Lies, and Games

Cassandra wished the vampire would just shut up and take her to his suite already. The Vegas casino was noisy, smoky, and crammed with tourists pouring change into the penny slot machines. She needed to get the vampire away from the crowds and into a more secluded place so she could snatch the relic she had been hired to steal and kill him.

Besides, her feet were aching in her stiletto heels and the sleek red dress covering her lean, athletic body was starting to creep upward. Though she was dying to yank the sparkly material down over her muscular thighs, the vapid party girl she was portraying would do no such thing. To add to her discomfort, the vampire was a leg man. The cool, almost papery feel of his hand on her leg indicated that he needed to feed soon, and she hoped he would consider her the perfect meal. She squirmed a bit, hoping her mark would interpret her movement as arousal and not discomfort.

“You’re a good luck charm! Look! I just won again!” The vampire grinned, his hand sliding higher to just under the hem of her dress.

Faking an enthusiastic smile, she clapped her hands with glee. “Wow! You’re going to be rich, Asher!”

Laughing, the vampire caressed her thigh. The sensation made her skin crawl, but Cassandra kept a flirty smile on her face while she watched him shove more quarters into the slot machine. Her mark resembled a certain fictional vampire on a popular television show, but she could see his true face hidden beneath the vampire glamour. As the daughter of a vampire and a mortal, she had many of the powers of the vampire and not as many limitations. Because she was a dhamphir, Cassandra possessed the ability to see through vampire illusions. It was disconcerting being able to see the ruddy, pockmarked face of the vampire beneath the handsome visage he projected. The lush blond hair shimmered over his own colorless thin fringe that ringed a huge bald spot, and his eyes were not a piercing blue, but instead a muddy brown. Cassandra had to concentrate on not allowing the double image to throw her off her game. Anyone passing by them would see a beautiful young couple with gleaming blond hair and perfect bodies that were obviously in lust with each other.

The image was a complete lie.

It amused Cassandra.

Twirling a lock of her fake hair, she snuggled against the vampire as he watched the spinning numbers and images of the slot machine while she furtively observed the vampire's human guards keeping watch on not only the casino, but also her ass. Which, of course, is what she had planned. A distracted guard was exactly what she wanted.

"See! I won again! You are a good luck charm, Britney!" The vampire pressed a kiss to her cheek. His lips were so cold. "My sweet blond goddess."

She giggled vapidly.

Whereas she could see through the vampire's glamour, he could not see through hers. Cassandra's broker had secured a high quality witch spell for her. In the last two

years not one vampire had been able to see through the false countenance until it was too late. The glamour spell Cassandra was wearing gave her the appearance of a young woman with long blond hair and the type of carefully sculpted and plumped up face favored by Hollywood D-listers and porn stars. To support the illusion of long hair, she wore clip-on extensions in her chin-length chestnut brown hair. The glamour hid her unusual eyes that altered color depending on her mood, a gift from her supernatural origins. A push-up bra managed to make her small breasts look voluminous. Of course, she also had a few extra items she would need later tucked into the lining of the lingerie.

Everything about her appearance was tailored to draw the attention of Leonard Klein, a former pharmacist who now went by the name Asher. Leonard served a powerful vampire out of Los Angeles who sold occult relics. Cassandra's broker had dispatched her to grab the latest relic that Leonard was transporting to a client. His death was an added bonus as far as Cassandra was concerned. Leonard loved to leave pretty blond bodies in his wake. He had been a serial killer in his mortal life, but had never been caught. Whenever she was dealing with the criminal denizens of the supernatural world, she liked to know exactly who she was dealing with, for she had no compunctions about eliminating some of the more deadly monsters.

Leonard's hand inched ever higher on her leg, but she had to refrain from her instinct to punch him in the face. Instead, she leaned closer to him, her arms draped around his neck. "Asher, I'm bored now. You won all that money. Let's go upstairs and celebrate."

It wasn't the smile on his fake handsome face, but the sneer on his real face that made it difficult for Cassandra to maintain her playful, pouty expression.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Britney." His hand slid under the hem of the dress.

Cassandra playfully twirled away from him, extending her hand in invitation. "Let's

go!”

He immediately took her hand and kissed it. “I have a feeling you’re insatiable,” Leonard said, his true face flushing with dark desire.

Flashing a wide grin, Cassandra said truthfully, “You have no idea.” She had deliberately not fed so that she would not only appear human to vampires, but also not register in their preternatural instincts as anything other than mortal. Being a dhamphir meant being able to subsist both on food and blood, but without it, just like a vampire, she was greatly weakened.

A pack of weary travelers wandered past them on their way to the check-in desk. The Stratosphere was on the far end of the strip, away from the newer, flashier casinos, but it was still a big draw with its gleaming white tower and observation deck. There was a no-man’s land between the older casino and the newer ones. Construction sites lined the boulevard and sported huge signs announcing new casinos with even more exciting attractions. Cassandra suspected that Leonard had deliberately picked the casino with the lower priced hotel rooms that would draw single young women of a certain economic status while providing a great dumping ground for their bodies just a short distance away.

Leonard looped one arm around her neck, dragging her against him. She could feel his power pushing on her mind, trying to force impressions of a hard, muscled body into her thoughts so she wouldn’t feel his doughy flesh and skinny frame. She pretended it worked, staring up at him rapturously. It was difficult to walk with his arm holding her against him, forcing her off balance, but she managed to keep from tripping in her red high heels with their shiny silver stilettos.

“I’m so glad I found you, Britney. I really thought I’d have a boring time in Vegas waiting for my flight out tomorrow night. But when I saw you at the bar, I just knew you were special.”

The vampire pushed lustful thoughts at her, trying to arouse her. Instead, he w

as making her a bit sick to her stomach. Everything about him from his nature to his voice was making her want to bash his face with her fists. Even his fake name, Asher, sounded like some terrible name from a paranormal romance novel. Her ex-girlfriend had always read the sorts of books with covers of the main character's tramp stamp in clear view as she struck a pose in a leather outfit that would make Catwoman blush. Of course, her ex had also teased Cassandra greatly about her resembling the heroines in those novels. Cassandra had been both annoyed and slightly amused. She had never even told her ex about her true nature, or her side job. That her ex could see her as a kick ass supernatural heroine was somewhat of a compliment, though unnerving. Cassandra worked hard to look anything other than what she truly was when dealing with the monsters.

It was a very long walk to the elevators. Teetering on her high heels, Cassandra was relieved that Leonard's guards strode in front of them, clearing a path through the throng of revelers. A group of young women stared openly at Leonard, trying to ascertain if he was really the celebrity they suspected him to be. His disguise was a good indication that Leonard was not that clever in the end. It drew far too much attention. From the way the young women were behaving, it was clear that they would have made perfect victims for the vampire. Cassandra liked to think she was saving them from a terrible fate.

The banks of elevators had a horde of people gathered in front of them, clutching drinks or dragging luggage. The elevators only led up to certain blocks of floors, and Leonard's guards wedged their way through the throng, managing to open a space before one of the elevators designated for the floor where Leonard's suite was located. The two men looked remarkably alike with their shaved heads and expensive suits, though one was Hispanic and the other black. They had the same meaty face, square shoulders, and barrel chests.

“Asher, why do you have guards? Are you famous?” Cassandra asked, her fingers dancing over the collar of his blue silk shirt.

“I’m not famous. I just look like my famous cousin,” he lied boldly. “The guards are for my business. I’m important in my field of work. I deal in industry secrets.”

“Ooooh,” Cassandra said, exaggerating the word.

“I’m in computers,” Leonard continued to lie.

“Wow. Like that Apple guy?”

“Exactly.” Leonard smacked her ass playfully. “Just like him.”

Cassandra made a mental note of all the things she would like to do to Leonard when they were alone. None of which were particularly nice.

The elevator dinged open and they had to wait for the people packed inside to shuffle out. Leonard quickly steered her inside and the guards blocked the doors immediately. When a few tourists tried to push their way past the big men, they were shoved out. The doors closed and the elevator started its long climb. Leonard took advantage of the ride, nuzzling her neck, nipping her ear, and running his hands over her body. Cassandra endured it, giggled, and pretended to enjoy it.

Two years of modeling in Paris when she was a teenager had taught her just how lecherous men in positions of power could be and how they sometimes regarded beautiful women to be a perk of their status. Leonard was definitely one of those types. It had only taken her a few minutes to draw his attention and for him to assume she was his for the night.

When the doors opened, Cassandra giggled and playfully pushed him away. The

faces of the cluster of people gathered in the corridor depicted a gamut of expressions from disgusted to intrigued. Leonard guided Cassandra past them, preening proudly beneath his glamour. Cassandra had to fight not to roll her eyes.

“Do you want to know something funny? I’m just staying here one day, so I didn’t get one of the bigger suites, but I did get the Romance Suite. Isn’t that perfect? It has a huge garden tub,” Leonard said, guiding her along the long corridor.

“Oh, wow! I love those! It’s like a little swimming pool!” Cassandra wondered if she could sound any dumber and decided to give it a whirl. “But why do they call it a garden tub if it doesn’t even have a garden? It just doesn’t make sense!”

“You’re exactly right! It doesn’t make sense,” Leonard agreed. “You’re such a smart girl.”

Cassandra smiled at him, thinking how he was such a dead man.

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At the door to the suite, Leonard made quite a show of pulling out the keycard and swiping it. The guards lingered in the corridor, back to back, studying the opposite ends of it.

“We’re going to have such a good time, my little Britney,” Leonard whispered, licking her lips.

“You have no idea, Asher!” Cassandra answered, twirling her fake extensions again.

One of the guards moved toward the door and Cassandra placed her hand on his arm. “Oh, no, no. I don’t do group things.”

“Stay outside, Ramon. It’ll be okay.” Leonard winked and pushed the door open.

“I’m here to guard the package, not you,” Ramon answered tersely.

Flustered, Leonard yanked Cassandra inside, anxious to shut the door. “Well, everything is safe in here.”

“I’m supposed to guard the package until delivery,” Ramon responded. “I’m coming in.”

“I think I broke a nail,” Cassandra wailed, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible.

“You’re still beautiful,” Leonard assured her, while trying to keep Ramon outside. His hand pressed against the other man’s chest, he said, “I promise you, Ramon, it

will be just fine. This is the only way into the room.”

“Let him get laid,” the other guard interjected. “Shit, man, I’d like to get me some of that, so don’t cock block like an asshole.”

Ramon hesitated, then finally acquiesced. “Fine, but I need to check the suite first.”

“Well, hurry,” Leonard ordered imperiously. “Time is of the essence.”

“Whatever,” Ramon grumbled, brushing past them into the suite.

Cassandra made a big show of filing one of her red acrylic nails while the burly guard examined every possible hiding space in the room. While he searched, Cassandra furtively scanned the room, memorizing the layout. Finally satisfied, Ramon sauntered to the door.

“Remember, the boss arrives soon. So whatever you’re going to do, make it fast.” Ramon gave Cassandra a contemptuous look.

She winked at him. Ramon frowned.

With a triumphant smile, Leonard slammed the door in the guard’s face.

In one swift motion, Cassandra lifted one foot, grabbed the heel, hit the concealed button releasing the stiletto from her shoe, and punched it through Leonard’s heart. The silver in the heel instantly paralyzed him and he toppled into her arms, his glamour vanishing.

“Good boy,” she whispered in his ear. “We don’t need any noise.” Tossing him onto the bed, Cassandra straddled him and rested her elbows on his chest, staring into his terrified brown eyes. His pockmarked skin drained of color when he caught sight of

her teeth sharpening into fangs. “I’m so glad you finally got me alone. I’ve been starving all night. And I really hate foreplay, so why don’t we get down to it?”

The paralyzed vampire’s eyes widened in fear. Unable to call out, move, or fight back, he was as helpless as any of his previous victims. That thought made Cassandra’s smile grow into a terrible grin seconds before she sank her sharp teeth into his cold flesh and drank his undead blood.

Chapter 2:

The Beautiful Prisoner

The bright lights of Vegas reflected off the darkened windows of the limousine as it rolled along the boulevard. It was close to ten in the evening and the sidewalks and walkways were packed with tourists. Some were dressed in their flashiest outfits, while others were in shorts and t-shirts. Children skipped alongside their bedazzled parents while elderly couples strolled hand in hand admiring the exploding volcano nearby. It was a wild, bright paradise that promised anything a person could desire.

Yet, the excitement of the revelers left Aimee cold. She knew what lurked in the shadows and hid behind the sparkling veneer. It wa

s difficult not to feel morose when she knew that some of the enthralled people visiting Vegas would never leave it alive.

“I can’t imagine what this place will be like in another hundred years,” the man beside her said thoughtfully. “Of course, I’ll be around to find out and if you play your cards right, so will you.” Lifting Aimee’s hand to his cool lips, he pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

“I may outlive you, you know. No one knows how long a witch’s lifespan actually

is,” Aimee answered in a dark tone.

“That’s right. Your kind usually ends up dead at a very young age by nefarious means. You’d best try to avoid that.” His voice was smooth as silk, but there was a subtle threat there.

Dressed fashionably in an Armani tuxedo, his black hair immaculately coiffed, his goatee sculpted to perfection, and his black eyes hidden behind red-tinted glasses, her lover and master exuded the elegant sophistication cultivated only by centuries of living at the top of the food chain. Francois, now Frank, had been an aristocrat long ago and he still carried himself like he was a marquis.

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Aimee shifted, the embroidered silk of her dress rustling around her. Frank had wanted her to wear her bronze-colored hair in a chignon, but she had rebuffed him and it was brushed smooth to her waist. She liked it long and unfettered. The dress was to his liking, not hers. It was an Atelier Versace slinky dress in robin's egg blue that was heavily embroidered and sported sexy fissures in the fabric that revealed her peaches and cream flesh. A diamond bracelet sparkled on one wrist and little ones glittered in her ears. She hated diamonds, but he insisted on showing his wealth off to his potential clients. The dark energy that emanated out of the diamonds made her queasy. It was if they were tainted with the violence, pain and death that surrounded their journey from the depths of the earth to the setting of a glittering piece of jewelry.

The limousine glided beneath the awe-inspiring portico to The Venetian. The many lanes were filled with cars offloading passengers and luggage. Many of the newcomers craned their heads to gaze up at the murals painted on the ceiling framed by gilded molding.

“Gaudy Americans. You have to love it,” Frank said with a charming grin.

Aimee rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come now, my pouty witch. What's with the gloomy look? Look at all the pretty things you're wearing.”

Aimee didn't even respond. She'd rather be wearing a flowing skirt, filmy blouse, and boots. Whenever he dressed her in expensive clothes and jewels she felt like his possession and not a real person. But then again, lately she felt like she didn't even

know who the real version of herself was anymore. The only things that she was certain of were that she was a powerful witch and dreadfully unhappy.

The door opened and she was helped out by one of the porters. He was rudely dismissed by the guard who had slid out of the front seat. Other guards exited the black SUV that had tailed them all the way to the casino from the airport. Frank sauntered around the back of the limousine, adjusting his lapels and bow tie, smiling rakishly at some young women ogling him.

“Keep track of those lovely young things,” he said to one of the guards.

The man nodded and melded into the crowd of people.

Aimee closed her eyes for a second, composing herself. She didn’t want to think about what might happen to the clutch of chattering girls that were blatantly giving Frank come-hither looks.

Tucking his hand under her elbow, Frank urged Aimee through the front doors into the massive lobby of The Venetian. The arched ceiling covered in murals, the intricate pillars, and gleaming marble floors were luxurious and did an excellent job of mimicking the opulence of the architecture of the Northern Italian city. To Aimee’s amusement, she heard some Italians talking excitedly to one another as they snapped photos.

Striding down the corridor, Frank carried himself like the aristocrat he had once been. He was immensely charming and good-looking. At one point in her life, she couldn’t look at him without feeling like she was the luckiest woman in the world. Now she had to force herself not to recoil from his touch. The high heels she wore perfectly matched her dress, but were so tall she had to clutch his arm to keep her balance. She longed for one of her many pairs of boots. The thought of wearing her cowboy boots with the designer gown made her smirk with wicked mirth.

“There’s that beautiful smile, my little witch,” Frank said, misreading her expression. “I love it when you smile.”

“There hasn’t been much to smile about,” she answered truthfully.

“You’re homesick. I understand that. We’ll be home soon.”

Aimee sighed, knowing that Frank would never understand the true reason for her unhappiness.

“Now, remember: this is a new client, Aimee, so I may need you to do a little showing off. Nothing flashy. We’re meeting in public. Just a little something-something to make him take notice that I do not do any false advertising.”

“I think I can manage,” Aimee answered, touching her small clutch with one hand. Inside were three protein bars. Magic drained her significantly and protein helped build her back up. She had tried carbohydrates and sugar, but the crash that followed drained her again.

“Smart girl. Always thinking ahead.” He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek, the blue stone in his ring very cold against her skin. She shivered at the touch. The ring had a very deep, dangerous enchantment in it, but Frank wasn’t afraid of anything.

Maneuvering through the casino, Frank’s guards escorted them to one of the swanky lounges. Aimee reinforced her mental shields. Sometimes people could detect that she was something more than human and she wanted to make sure that she looked like nothing more than Frank’s arm candy. Aimee was aware of the many eyes following them as they strolled through the opulent casino. She often wondered why Frank didn’t tone it down when in public, but then she’d remember how much he loved an audience. In some ways he was a showman at heart.

“Arnost has a lot of connections in Eastern Europe. A partnership of sorts between us would be incredibly beneficial, so let’s try to not be a sulky witch.” Frank stopped, wrapped an arm around her, and leaned toward her. His black eyes were penetrating behind his red-tinted glasses. “I know I’ve been working you pretty hard lately, but you’re my special girl. A rare jewel of greatest regard. You know that, right?” His most charming smile graced his sensuous lips. He gave her waist a little squeeze. “Let me see that little snarky smile again.”

Aimee lifted her eyes in exasperation, but slid a false grin onto her lips.

“Ah, there it is.” Frank’s fingers traced the edge of her chin. “You’re so beautiful when you smile.”

“You’re a flatterer,” Aimee said dismissively.

“True, but I’m a sincere flatterer.” Frank kissed her cheek, then resumed his trek to the lounge.

The guards kept a discreet distance, but Aimee was annoyed by their presence. They were not only with Frank to protect him, but also to keep her from potentially fleeing. The vampire who claimed ownership of her was well aware of her recent discontent and what she was capable of doing when pushed. He also knew she was bound by blood to him and could not leave him if she tried. Yet, he was cautious when it came to his possessions and the guards were insurance against possibly losing her.

The lounge had low lighting and discreet booths. The conversations were low murmurs around her and the scent of alcohol wafting through the air mingled with cigarette smoke, perfumes, colognes, and sweat. Though Aimee never considered herself a raving beauty, the eyes of many of the men and a few of the women followed her, and she became acutely aware of the patches of her bare skin visible through the thin fabric of her dress. Her face flushed when she realized Frank had

probably made her wear the dress not only to show off her physique, but also to add to her discomfort. He loved toying with her.

“Arnost, so good to see you!”

Frank enthusiastically greeted the gloomy-looking man with dusky skin, gray eyes, and dark hair cut into a shaggy yet stylish hairdo. Dressed in a fine suit and silk burgundy shirt without a tie, Arnost didn’t rise to his feet, but merely flicked his fingers toward the other side of the booth. Beside Arnost, a sallow-looking man with pale blue eyes watched Aimee thoughtfully. A swift scan revealed he was a human infused with vampire blood. For a second she had feared he was a black witch, but though he had the potential, it appeared to be unrealized.

“You’re a little early,” Arnost noted with satisfaction. His accent wasn’t very heavy, but it held a hint of menace.

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“I like showing my clients that I appreciate their time,” Frank answered smoothly. He slid into the booth after Aimee.

The guards took their positions nearby, watching Arnost’s guards that were trying hard to look like mere tourists and failing.

Arnost rubbed his chin lightly, scrutinizing Frank. “You’re not much different from the last time I saw you. Still putting on airs, still arrogant, still far too pretty. Someone should have messed up your face a little more before you died.”

Frank mockingly frowned. “I admit to being far too pretty, but arrogant? Is it arrogant to be confident in my own gloriousness?”

“You’re still a little shit, I see.” Arnost shook his head, smirking.

“Not so little if you’re coming to me for your particular needs,” Frank said, his jovial tone taking on a cutting edge.

“Fucking Nazis nearly wiped them out. The Black Forest was once crawling with the furry bastards.” Arnost swallowed his drink in one gulp and motioned to the waiter for another. “They’re even more difficult to come by in our area since the Bosnian War. We lost quite a few packs in the conflict.”

“Werewolf blood does have that nice little kick, doesn’t it? And the aftereffects, heightened senses, additional strength, are worth the trouble it takes to capture them and keep them chained, huh?

” Frank crossed his legs and smiled coyly. “It’s a difficult addiction to kick.”

“My she-bitch died last month,” Arnost said gloomily. He stared into his empty drink, slapping the glass back and forth between his hands.

“My condolences,” Frank said glibly. “I’m sure she died...gruesomely.”

“Suicide. They don’t do well away from their pack. Which is why I’m looking for not just a female, but an alpha to be at her side. I’ll have to maim him, of course, but it may keep her alive longer.” Arnost set the glass aside. “The furry shits are better at hiding now. None of my European sources can find where they relocated.”

Aimee rubbed her arm, feeling chilled to the bone. She hated how easily the men spoke of living, sentient creatures that could easily fit into human society as mere commodities. But this was who Frank really was. It had taken years for her to gain his trust enough to invite her into his dark world. She had thought he was some sort of king of the vampires. Instead, he had revealed that he was a dealer of monster slavery. For a while she had believed that the supernatural creatures he had caught and sold weren’t much more than beasts. Then last year she had seen a teenage werecat sobbing for her mother while she was dragged away in silver chains by the vampire who had bought her. In that moment she realized how greatly she had erred in her estimation of Frank and his business. It was the first and only time she had accompanied Frank in turning over an acquisition.

“A pair is going to cost you, but I can see what I can do,” Frank answered.

The people at the table fell silent when the waiter arrived with a fresh drink and Frank ordered one for himself.

Arnost studied Frank thoughtfully. “You really think you can provide what my European connections could not?”

“I am a man of many surprises,” Frank answered confidently.

Arnost shook his head. “I think you’re full of shit. I cannot believe I flew into this shithole city to meet with the man who used to procure human freaks for the courts of Europe. You always were a glorified ringmaster of your own circus.”

“Yet, you need me,” Frank said, his gaze darkening dangerously. “You must be dying for another drink of warm werewolf blood.”

Arnost snorted, shrugged, and settled back into his seat. The man beside him was very still, taking on a more menacing demeanor. Aimee remained with her hands folded on the table, her head lowered.

“I’m desperate. I will admit to that. I deal with beautiful human commodities for wealthy, perverse individuals. It’s a dangerous game. Yet you claim to be able to find some of the rarest, most violent creatures that have ever roamed the earth.”

“You’ve heard of my reputation.” Frank lifted a shoulder dismissively.

“Reputations can be paid for,” Arnost pointed out.

“I can find your werewolves, Arnost. I can procure them. All I ask is for a small stipend to begin the process.”

“I would not call your stipend small by any definition of the word. How do I know you won’t be a conniving little bitch like you have been in the past and abscond with my money? No one even knows where your home is.”

“I’m really not a full disclosure kind of guy.” Frank flashed his charming smile. “Let me ask you, what is the rarest creature on the face of this earth?”

Arnost looked exasperated, but said, “A phasmagnus.”

“Those are extinct. I’m talking about a creature rumored to still exist.”

“A full-blooded witch,” Arnost answered, shrugging.

“Exactly. Not the little half-breed ones that usually end up playing with demons and black magic, but a full-blooded witch.”

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“What is your point?”

“Have you ever met one?”

Arnost’s eyes shifted to Aimee, doubt filling them. “No. No one has.”

“That’s where you are wrong.” Frank waited for the waiter to set his glass of wine before him and slipped him a sizable bill before dismissing him.

“You’re going to have your little girl do a parlor trick?” Arnost and his companion laughed in mocking tones.

“Not really. Aimee, do you mind?”

Looking up, Aimee flexed her hands. Her power flowed out of her, white, hot and bright. She felt it wrap around Arnost and she pulled it tight. Through the surge of her power, she felt his ribs popping, splintering, and stabbing into his organs. She only did enough damage that he could heal immediately before releasing him.

Arnost’s face flushed red and his forehead beaded with bits of blood that his companion quickly dabbed with a handkerchief. As Arnost healed, he stared at Aimee with awe, fear, and desire. “How much for her?” he finally managed to say.

“Not for sale,” Frank said and took a sip of his wine. “But if I can find a full-blood witch what can I do for you?”

Arnost gave his companion a curt nod. “Transfer the stipend.”

The man quickly pulled out his cellphone and made a call.

“I’ll be in touch,” Frank said, sipping his wine, then sliding out of the booth. “Oh, Aimee, do that one final thing.”

Reluctantly, Aimee opened her purse and drew out the spell she had previously created. Crushing the dried bundle in her hand, she flung it in the faces of Arnost and his man. Coughing, the Serbian vampire looked at her in terror.

“That’s just a precaution. You speak of my witch and you’ll wish you never had,” Frank said with a smile. Taking her clean hand, Frank drew Aimee to her feet. Without another word, he escorted her out of the lounge, their guards following in their wake.

“Which spell did you make this time?” Frank asked curiously.

“He speaks of me and he’ll bleed out of every orifice for three days straight and feel like he is dying,” Aimee answered.

Frank laughed with delight. “You’re so wonderful.”

Aimee couldn’t help but smile. It was one of her favorite spells. She had tried it out on one of Frank’s most despicable men. It had felt like justice.

“I’m so glad my little bond keeps you from doing anything like that to me. Because I know you would do it in a heartbeat, wouldn’t you?”

Aimee gave him her most innocent look.

Frank winked at her. “I thought so.”

Guiding her to the entrance to The Venetian, Frank had a bit more spark in his step. He was in a good mood now that he had a new client.

“Where to now?” Aimee was hoping they’d just head home. She longed to dawdle in her garden. They’d been traveling for over a month. Partly to shop for new clothing, furniture, and other luxuries, but also to secure a few magical relics for Aimee to use.

“The Stratosphere.”

“How many times do you have to go up to the observation deck?” Aimee gave him a plaintive look. “Can’t we just go home?”

“No, no. I am meeting a courier there. I managed to snag something I’ve been after for years. Just a quick exchange and we’ll be on our way home.” Frank handed her his kerchief. “You might want to wipe off that spell before we get into the limousine.”

Aimee wanted to resist, but the compulsion of the blood bond she had with Frank forced her to obey.

“That’s my sweet witch,” Frank said approvingly. “I don’t know why I worry so much about you. I know you’d never leave me, would you?” His kiss was searing against her lips. “My little witch. No one will ever steal you away from me,” he whispered as he guided her out of the lobby and into the night.

Chapter 3:

Escapes and Encounters

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Cassandra gulped down one last drought of cold vampire blood before licking the wound closed. Giddy with the power surging through her, she relished the feel of the blood expanding her nature, pushing her beyond the boundaries of mere humanity. It felt as if she had been deflated of life and now she was restored. Sliding off Leonard, she ran her tongue over her lips, feeling her sharp teeth raking it. This was the most disturbing part of her nature. She could live the life of an everyday mortal young woman, but once she fed, she

felt far removed from her humanity. The power inside her sang with the need to destroy. It was the nature of the vampire-human hybrids to kill their vampire fathers and feed on their mortal mothers.

Closing her eyes, she fought through the need to kill and crush the vampire on the bed behind her and tried to recapture her humanity. She concentrated on her mother, her friends -- even her ex-girlfriend. The thought of them anchored her and when she opened her eyes again she was focused on her true purpose.

“Leonard,” she said in her normal voice.

The vampire opened his eyes slowly. His skin looked as delicate and thin as old parchment.

“Yes, I know who you are,” she said, seeing the question in his gaze. “Where is the relic?”

His glassy brown eyes blinked in terror.

“Yeah. I want the relic. Just give it to me and I’ll be on my way.”

There was defiance in his eyes she hadn’t expected.

“Oh, so whoever this bad guy or gal that you are delivering it to isn’t one to be fucked with, huh?”

It was amazing how much emotion and information eyes could exude when someone was reliant on them as their only form of communication.

“Well, Leonard, I’m not one to be fucked with either. So who would you rather take your chances with? Someone who isn’t here yet, or the pissed off dhamphir sitting at the end of your bed?” Cassandra yanked the heel off her other shoe and flicked out the blade hidden within it. “I realize that certain baddies are scary in theory, but I always think the baddie sitting right next to you with a very sharp silver knife in their hand is the one you should be more worried about, don’t you?”

The vampire’s eyes were the only thing he could move though he was obviously straining to break free of the paralysis brought on by the silver driven through his heart. She watched him struggle for about a moment before tucking the tip of her blade under his chin.

“Oh, Leonard, time’s up. I want you to pay careful attention. I’m going to prop your scrawny ass up on this bed and I’m going to move around this suite and you’re going to blink your eyes when I get close to where you hid the relic. Understand?”

The insolence in his eyes continued.

“Fine. We’ll do it the hard way,” Cassandra said with a sigh. Shoving the dagger up through his chin, she speared his face, shattering teeth and his cheekbone. Bloody tears flooded his eyes. “If I had angled that blade just a little differently you would be

missing a nice chunk of your brain.”

In spite of his fear, Leonard’s expression was clear. He was not about to capitulate. Annoyed, Cassandra withdrew her blade from his pale flesh and cleaned it on his shirt before tucking it into her garter. She flicked off what was left of her shoes, and walked barefoot across the floor while fishing thin gloves out of her bra. She tugged them on and set her hands on her hips. The suite wasn’t that big and she quickly located his luggage. Pawing through it, she found nothing.

Scott, her broker, had been quite clear that the relic was an ugly lump of wood that no one would prescribe any worth to at a glance. It was what was hidden inside the petrified wood that was the big prize. Studying the suite, Cass pulled at the red dress with one hand. She was going to be very happy to get out of it.

Prowling around the suite, she opened drawers, checked behind curtains, and rummaged around in the cushions of the chairs and sofa. Her time was ticking away. If Scott was correct, the exchange was supposed to happen tonight.

“If I was a creepy guy with delusions of grandeur where would I hide a rare relic?” she muttered under her breath. Running her hands through her hair and feeling the clips to her extensions, Cassandra watched the vampire thoughtfully. “Of course.”

Cassandra walked over to the bed, lifted the corner of the mattress easily with one hand, and was rewarded with the sight of a hunk of rounded wood with strange carvings in the dark surface resting in the center of the bed. Leonard tumbled off the slanted mattress and onto the floor, making too much noise for comfort. Snatching up the relic, she watched the door, waiting to see if the guards burst in. She lowered the mattress and tiptoed to where Leonard lay face down on the floor. Gripping his shoulder, she rolled him over. The silver stiletto caught on the carpet and slid out of his chest.

Instantly, Leonard's hands closed on her throat, his long fangs sliding out to press against his bottom lip. They fell over, grappling with each other. Leonard growled wordlessly as he sought to throttle her into unconsciousness. She managed to get the heel of her hand under his wounded chin and shoved upward. The fingers pressing into her throat didn't relent, but she was infused with enough vampire blood that the lack of oxygen was not yet affecting her. It was obvious that Leonard had no idea how to deal with her kind. The vampire struggled to straddle her body and get leverage to choke her, but she kept twisting, knocking him off balance. Out of the corner of her eye she caught the glint of the bloody stiletto heel and lashed out to grab it.

Leonard saw the flash of movement and his eyes shot to the weapon clutched in her hand.

"You should have called for help," she said, punching the stiletto into his temple.

The vampire toppled over, his face locked in an expression of disbelief. After the number of women he had tortured and murdered, Cassandra felt satisfied that she had been the end of him. Grabbing the razor sharp knife from her garter, she flicked it open while grabbing his thin hair in one hand. One brutal swipe and his head came free of his body. She carried it to the bathroom and flung it into the garden tub.

Cassandra used the edge of her dress to turn on the water and wash off her face and gloved hands. Once clean, she reclaimed the relic from where she had dropped it. She had been incredibly overconfident, and it could have gone a lot worse than it had. Luckily, Leonard had been too arrogant to call for help. Otherwise she would have had to deal with the guards who were likely infused with vampire blood.

Picking up her shoes, she reattached the heels and reluctantly put them back on. Next she yanked a small linen bag out of her bra and dropped the relic into it. She hung the bag over her neck and tucked it into her dress. A quick check on Leonard's parts

revealed that he was swiftly decomposing into muddy sludge.

She had known from the moment she had taken the job that she would have to do something she hated doing. Sometimes being a dhamphir was a little too disturbing when it came to some of her more odd abilities. Yet she needed to be discreet and avoid the client that Leonard was meeting with shortly. Scott had been very clear that she was not to engage the client. She suspected it was someone that Scott occasionally worked for.

The air vent wasn't too high up the wall and she pulled out her small tool kit from her bra. Being nearly flat-chested had its advantages sometimes when it came to storage space. She removed the vent and held the cover in one hand. With inhuman dexterity, she swung her body upward and thrust her feet into the opening. Instantly her body began to contract to fit into the narrow space. Whereas some vampires could turn into a mist, her body was able to collapse to allow her passage through tight spots. The old legends called dhamphirs boneless, and that's exactly what it felt like. Her hips and rib cage squished inward, the relic an uncomfortable pressure against her skin, as she wedged her body into the vent. She kept one hand on the cover and wiggled her body until she was firmly inside the narrow shaft. Carefully, she tugged the cover into place and secured it with bits of putty from her tool kit.

Pushing with her hands, she slid herself through the air duct until she reached the vent that opened to the small storage area the maids used while cleaning the rooms. She had earlier removed the screws and easily popped it out. Gripping the edges of the opening, she unfurled her body from the vent in a snake-like motion. Immediately her bones and muscles shifted back into place and she dropped to the floor.

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Once she returned the cover to the vent, she found the small bag she had hidden behind the towels and linen earlier in the day when she had solidified her extraction plan. She was relieved to peel off the gloves, and yank off the red dress, bra, and high heels. Replacing them with slim black jeans, a white tank top, and a black cropped thin-leather jacket, she hurriedly tugged on her low heeled boots and tied the laces. The rooms had already been cleaned for the day, but she needed to move fast if she was to avoid trouble. There was the distinct possibility of the guards finding Leonard soon.

The hair clips gave her a little trouble, but she finally got the extensions out and ran her fingers through her wavy hair. To destroy the glamour all she had to do was remove the enchanted earrings she was wearing. She rolled up her clothes and shoved everything into the bag. She then took apart the shoes to make sure they fit, before finally adding the baseball sized relic to the bag. Securing the straps, she tossed it over her shoulder and took a peek out of the storage room door. The hallway was empty.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for the worst and hoped for the best before sauntering through the hallway. She had to pass Leonard's room to reach the elevators, which meant walking past the guards. Even though she knew the glamour was gone, it was still a nerve-wracking moment when she strolled past them. Ramon glanced at her appreciatively while the other guard ignored her completely.

She couldn't help but smile at Ramon. At least he wasn't into vapid slutty women.

The area around the elevators was surprisingly devoid of people. She pressed the button and impatiently waited. Hotel elevators always took forever to make the

journey to the selected floor. So many people were getting on and off it was amazing it ever reached its destination.

Combing her fingers through her hair, she fidgeted. She had taken longer than she planned and she didn't want to be around for the discovery of Leonard's body and the missing relic. Taking her cellphone out the pocket of her bag, she checked the time. If Scott's information was correct, she was definitely cutting it close. Hopefully, the client wouldn't be early.

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a very handsome man with gleaming black hair dressed in a tuxedo and red-tinted glasses. He flashed a charming smile in her direction and she instantly knew he was a vampire. Fearfully, she took a step to the si

de, hoping he wouldn't sense her true nature. After his initial smile he barely acknowledged her as he stepped into the corridor. Desperate to get into the elevator and away from him, Cassandra darted into the car and crashed into the woman following in the vampire's wake, knocking them both off balance. Instinctively, they both grabbed onto each other.

The moment Cassandra's hands closed on the woman's forearms, she felt a jolt of power sizzle through her body. The other woman's pink lips parted in surprise.

"I'm sorry," Cassandra muttered. "I didn't mean to bump into you."

"It's okay," the beautiful blond answered, her blue eyes sparkling beneath the gold fringe of her eyelashes.

Circling each other, the woman in the slinky evening gown ended up in the hallway and Cassandra found herself standing in the elevator. With surprise, Cassandra realized she was still holding onto the other woman. The woman's fingertips traced along Cassandra's fingers just seconds before two big men brushed past Cassandra

from within the elevator, jostling them apart. Cassandra pressed her back to the wall of the elevator, her breath caught in her throat. Fear still coursed through her veins, but her attention was focused on the face of the young woman watching her as the elevator doors slid shut.

Raising her hand, Cassandra stared at it. She could still feel the woman's touch burning along her nerve endings. Whatever the other woman was, she was pure power. Resting her hand on her chest, Cassandra slowly exhaled.

"What the hell was that?" she wondered.

Remembering to hit the button to the lobby, she punched it with a trembling hand. As the car slid downward, Cassandra's thoughts didn't rest on her successful endeavor, but the face of the woman with the long bronze hair.

Chapter 4:

The Touch of the Unknown

Aimee knew the second the stranger touched her that her world had changed forever. Within a few scant seconds, she memorized the woman's narrow face with its strong nose, full lips, and hazel cat-eyes framed by thick chestnut waves that fell to a dimpled chin in a fashionable shag. The touch of the woman's hands upon her bare arms elicited deep feelings of desire inside of Aimee that shocked, but also pleased her. A mystical power sparked between them, igniting bits of herself Aimee had long feared were dead.

Reluctantly, she released the woman as the guards shoved them apart. When the door shut separating them, Aimee wanted to fling her body against it. She belonged on the other side of the elevator doors and knew it to the core of her being.

Shaken, she stared at her dazed reflection in the burnished surface of the elevator. Frank's touch on her arm startled her and she almost shrugged him off.

"Come along, witchy girl," Frank said, sounding annoyed.

"Just fixing my hair," she lied and made a fuss of tucking her hair back from her face.

"Now you worry about your appearance. We're just picking up something from a courier, not meeting with a client." Frank dragged her along behind him, his fingers biting cruelly into her skin.

Aimee hurried, trying to keep up with him. Frank was being his normal mercurial self, but she felt a pulse of paranoia. What if he had noticed her reaction to the other woman? She wasn't even sure what she would tell him if he asked her what she had experienced. Aimee wished she could find a quiet place far away from Frank so she could process what had just occurred.

The long hall was empty except for two men. They were casually chatting outside of a room, but Aimee knew instinctively that they were guards. The dark power of a vampire infused both of them.

"Sir," one of them said, noting Frank's approach.

"Good evening, Ramon. Is Leonard ready for us?"

"He's having dinner right now," Ramon said swiftly.

Frank made a point of checking his watch. "By my estimation, I am just on time."

"Yes, sir," Ramon said nervously. He quickly rapped on the door. "Mr. Klein, your guest is here."

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Frank's thumb rubbed the back of Aimee's hand gently, but she could feel the tension in his body. He was anxious to procure whatever the courier was delivering. It peaked her curiosity. Their home was filled with many rare artifacts due to Frank's collecting addiction. He had a deep need to possess the rare and hard to find. If he believed something was one of a kind, it became even more of a compulsion to collect it. Aimee did not fool herself into believing that Frank loved her for her personality or looks. It was because she was a full-blood witch and, therefore, just one more piece in his collection.

There was no answer from the other side of the door. Frank again checked his watch and scowled. "This isn't acceptable."

Ramon again rapped his knuckles against the door and raised his voice as he called out, "Mr. Klein, your guest is here."

Aimee watched as Frank's face began to flush with frustration. It was not a good sign.

Again, there was no answer.

Pointing at the face of his watch, Frank said to the flustered guards, "I don't have the time for this. I'm on a schedule and I won't tolerate delays. Open that door."

Ramon and the other guard exchanged looks, then Ramon nodded. "Do it, Tyson."

Tiny beads of sweat dotted the black man's brow as he pulled out a keycard and slipped it into the lock. The light above the handle flashed green and Tyson cracked

the door open. “Mr. Klein, your guest is here. Mr. Klein?”

“This is ridiculous.” Frank reached past the guard and shoved the door open.

Aimee recoiled from the sight of the moldering remains of a vampire on the floor on the far side of the suite.

“And this is definitely unacceptable.” Frank appeared personally offended by the scene before him.

Ramon and Tyson quickly drew weapons and cautiously stepped into the suite. Frank waved an irritated hand at his own guards. One of his men followed while the other two remained in the hall to watch over the vampire and the witch.

Aimee reached into her small evening bag and pulled out a protection spell. The dry bundle felt warm and reassuring against her skin. Frank craned his head to look into the suite, impatient with the whole process of searching it.

“It’s clear,” Frank’s guard said. “No one is in here.”

Stomping into the suite, Frank scanned the room. “Where is my package?”

“It doesn’t appear to be here,” Tyson confessed.

Aimee was escorted inside by Frank’s guards. The door shut with a sharp click. She drifted over to a chair and sat on the edge of the seat. Frank was in a volatile mood and she knew things could deteriorate very quickly.

“Really? My package that I paid for isn’t here? And you two yahoos were out in the hall doing what while my package disappeared and the courier ended up as much garden mulch?” Frank kicked the pile of decomposing vampire. “One of you has to

explain this to me.”

“There was a woman with him, but she’s not here now,” Ramon said immediately.

“A woman?” Frank arched both eyebrows. “Ah, yes. You said he was having his dinner. So, what was she? Some sort of magical invisible woman?”

“No, no. She was just a stupid bimbo,” Tyson said.

“Not so stupid if the courier is dead and the relic is gone, huh?” Frank poked Tyson’s chest with one finger, knocking him back a few feet. “What did this bimbo look like?”

“Blond, lots of makeup, lots of plastic surgery. Red dress. High heels.” Ramon shrugged. “She looked like a thousand other girls with dreams of being a movie star. I just don’t get how she got out of the room. The windows are sealed shut and there is only one door in.”

Aimee felt Frank’s eyes settle on her and she looked up at him.

“Well, my little witch? How did she get out? Because I think we’re all on the same page that she is behind the theft of my package and the murder of the courier, am I right?”

Ramon and Tyson reluctantly nodded.

Aimee scrutinized the suite from her chair. She felt like shrug

ging, but knew that would not go over very well with Frank. Standing, she strolled over to the closet, then the bathroom, holding her palm an inch over the surfaces. “I don’t feel a spell of any kind.” She turned to find Frank right behind her. His vampire

stealth annoyed her.

“So then what? Are they spelled?” Frank pointed at the two very nervous guards.

Aimee strolled over to the two men and raised her hands. Closing her eyes, she flexed her power. It trickled over the men, tasting their aura, and dipping into their minds. Dropping her hands, she shook her head. “They’re not spelled and they’re not lying.”

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“I really hate mysteries, did you know that?” Frank glared at Aimee.

“What do you want me to do?” Aimee asked, anger in her voice.

“Figure it out!” Frank barked at her. “Is my relic really stolen, or is it here?”

Closing her eyes, Aimee exhaled, her liquid gold power filling the space around her. It searched out other magicks, but found nothing. “It’s not here. There isn’t a spell either.”

“So I have sealed windows, one entry, guards who aren’t lying, a missing relic I paid a shit-ton of money for, and an invisible woman!” Frank’s rage was a black fire on her skin and she shrank away from him. “How the hell did our bimbo get out of here? Did she turn into a mouse and crawl through a hole in the wall? Or maybe into a bug and went under the crack in the door?”

“Or through the air vent,” Tyson suggested, partially jokingly.

Frank glared up at the vent. “No one could fit through there. Unless they were a vampire and turned to mist and that would have to be a powerful, old vampire.”

“She wasn’t a vampire,” Ramon said confidently.

“She was just a human girl,” Tyson agreed.

“That somehow fit through an air vent that a cat couldn’t—” Frank stopped in mid-sentence and became frighteningly still.

Aimee took a timid step away from him. It was dangerous when he acted this way. Violence usually followed.

“Fuck me.” Frank stared up at the vent in awe. “Fuck me.” Leaping onto the wall, he clung to it and ripped the cover off the vent. Flinging it to the floor before dropping down, he grinned triumphantly. “We have a winner. Tyson, you don’t die tonight.”

Ramon squatted and touched something on the cover. “That’s putty. But there is no way anyone could fit through that.”

Frank looked absolutely gleeful which made Aimee even more nervous. “No, no. Someone can. My boneless brethren, the dhamphir, could easily fit through there.”

“Dhamphir?” Ramon appeared mystified.

“The vampire killers,” Tyson answered. “They’re offspring of vampires and humans.”

“Extremely rare,” Frank said as he wrapped his arm around Ramon’s shoulders. “Very, very rare. And now I want one. This one. The one who stole from me. If you want to live, I suggest you figure out where our dear little bimchette dhamphir crawled out of the air ducts.”

“Yes, sir.” Ramon headed toward the door, Tyson in his wake.

“Ivan, call the cleaners,” Frank said to one of his personal guards. “We need this suite cleaned up immediately.”

Aimee stared at the cover to the vent at her feet. She had felt something powerful and mystical when she had touched the mysterious woman. It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. Though the woman in the elevator had not fit the description of

the bimbo that Tyson and Ramon had described, Aimee knew without a doubt that she was the one who had ended the vampire's life and taken Frank's relic. The thought made her smile.

"I want a dhamphir of my own," Frank said, startling her. He nuzzled her cheek. "My very own little dhamphir would endlessly amuse me."

"Wouldn't she just try to end you?"

"That's what silver and your spells are for. Of course, I could just sell her to the highest bidder to make sure she didn't do me in like stupid Leonard here."

Aimee tilted her chin upward to stare into his handsome, but cruel face. "You're a sick bastard."

"Compliments will get you everywhere with me." Frank stroked her jaw lightly, his dark eyes staring into hers. "My sweet little witch, so full of secrets."

Not answering, Aimee diverted her gaze.

Whispering in her ear, he said, "Keep your secrets. I get to keep you."

The door to the suite reopened and Ramon hurried inside followed by Tyson. "There's a storage room two doors up. It made the most sense she'd come out there. We found this." A long length of blond hair hung from his fingers.

"She cut off her hair?" Frank looked mystified.

"No." Aimee plucked the extension from Ramon's grip. "It's something women wear to make their hair look fuller, or longer."

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“So it’s not her real hair?” Frank frowned.

“No, but a bit of her real hair is caught in it,” Ramon pointed out.

Aimee threw him an annoyed look. She had hoped to hide that. A few strands of chestnut brown hair clung to the clip. Now she was convinced that the woman entering the elevator was the mysterious dhamphir.

“Looks like you get to do a tracking spell after all,” Frank said with a wide grin.

“I don’t have the ingredients here,” Aimee answered, her stomach clenching.

“I’m not in a rush. Capturing a dhamphir is going to take some cunning and a lot of planning. But first we need to find out where our little dhamphir likes to hang her duplicitous little hat.” With an extra spark in his step, Frank walked toward the door. “I may have lost one relic, but I have a feeling that I may just get it and a nice little added bonus in my hands very soon.”

Aimee carefully stored the extension in her evening bag. She felt sickened at the thought of Frank capturing the woman with the mesmerizing eyes, yet she had a feeling that it would not be as easy as Frank was imagining.

Chapter 5:

Departure

Cassandra made a quick stop to collect her overnight bag from the out of the way

motel she had stayed at for just one night. Though she was certain no one had followed her cab from The Stratosphere, she still felt uneasy. Maybe it was because her hand was still tingling where the blond woman had touched her. As the taxi drove away, she hurried up the outside stairwell to the second floor, her heightened senses revealing nothing out of the ordinary.

Rubbing her hand against her jeans, she worried that maybe the woman had cast a spell on her. Yet, the sensation didn't feel malevolent, but pleasant. Plus, her mind kept lingering on the sparkle in the woman's eyes, the shimmer of her hair, and her slightly parted pink lips.

"She was just a girl. Shake it off, Cass," Cassandra muttered to herself, unlocking her room. She had been avoiding the dating pool since her break up with her ex, but if she was this flustered over a brief meeting with a beautiful blond then maybe it was time to dive back in.

The cellphone in her jacket buzzed. She slid it out, checked the message, and was glad she was running on time. Her broker had just arrived and was waiting for her. Snagging her already packed overnight case and the messenger bag she used as a purse, she scanned the hotel room one last time to make sure she was leaving nothing behind. Though she had meticulously planned every step of her job, she still felt a bit thrown off by her brief interaction with the vampire and his companion.

Satisfied, she hurried outside, down the stairs, and slipped into the backseat of a boring green sedan with tinted windows. The car and the man in the back seat waiting for her were inconspicuous, which was exactly what Scott wanted. In his late fifties, Scott was a regular-looking guy with faded blond hair, a nice but not remarkable face, bland brown eyes, and a soft-spoken demeanor.

"Good to see you," Scott said as she opened the door and tossed her overnight case and messenger bag onto the floor and climbed in.

“Thanks for the lift,” she said, just in case anyone was listening. She pulled on her seatbelt and slouched on the leather seat, trying to get comfortable.

In the front seat was Scott’s usual guard duo, George and Tracy. George, in his thirties, burly and blonde, posed as his son. The redheaded Tracy in her late twenties pretended to be married to George. It was a good cover for when the three of them traveled. Or at least that is what Cassandra assumed. Maybe they really were all related to one another. She could never be sure. In the past she had seen George take down a vampire without barely breaking a sweat and Tracy was a sharpshooter according to Scott.

In reality, she didn’t know Scott very well. He had discovered her talents by accident when she had been modeling in Paris. Angered by a businessman’s attempt to force himself on a modeling friend, Cassandra had broken into his hotel room and beat him soundly. Scott had spotted her exiting the room and followed her. After a few weeks of observing her, Scott had approached her about working for him. Her beauty, preternatural strength, and dhamphir abilities were assets she could utilize if she worked for him. Cassandra still wasn’t certain how Scott had determined she was a dhamphir. He always smiled mysteriously whenever she asked and never gave a direct answer.

Plopping the bag with her disguise, the glamour spell, and relic onto the seat between them, Cassandra gave him a brief smile. “Ta da.”

Carefully opening the bag while George drove out of the parking lot, Scott drew out the cloth bag containing the relic and took a peek. “Excellent. Well done. Perfect as always.”

With a grin, Cassandra inclined her head. “Thank you, Scott.”

Scott tucked the relic into the bag and handed it to Tracy in the front seat. The guard

tucked it under her legs and returned to surveying the darkened back streets of Las Vegas.

“Any trouble?” Scott asked. He lounged comfortably, arm propped on the back of the seat, and gazed at her.

Cassandra shook her head, then hesitated. “Well, not exactly.”

“You killed Leonard, right?”

“Yeah. Totally. He got what he deserved. That’s not the problem. I think his client arrived just as

I was leaving. I had already dropped the glamour and was at the elevators when this vampire arrived on the floor with this really...” she widened her eyes, struggling for a description. “Well, the woman with him was something I’ve never encountered before.”

“You have me intrigued. Go on,” Scott urged.

“Well, she was drop dead gorgeous for one thing,” Cassandra said rakishly.

Scott refrained from rolling his eyes. “Remind me on your performance evaluation to say that you are easily distracted by pretty young things.”

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“She was so my type, but that’s not the point. We ended up bumping into each other and I briefly touched her. When I did, I felt like a current of energy on my skin. Actually, I think I still feel it.” She held up her hand, waving her fingers.

“Maybe a protection spell?” Scott took her hand, leaned over it and examined it thoughtfully.

Cassandra wasn’t certain Scott was human. He seemed to see or sense things that even she couldn’t. “I don’t know. I kind of felt like it was her. Like she was something...other.”

“No spell. A slight energy burn though.” Scott scowled. “Intriguing.”

“Any idea what she might have been?”

Scott stroked his chin thoughtfully with his long fingers, then shook his head. “None whatsoever. Fascinating though.”

Cassandra had the distinct feeling that Scott was keeping something from her. There wasn’t much she could do about it though. Scott was her broker and didn’t have to divulge anything if it wasn’t going to interfere with the job she performed for him.

“Care to tell me why it’s fascinating?” Cassandra asked, folding her arms over her chest and slumping in the backseat. The blood she had ingested had been used up when she had compressed her body to pass through the air duct. Now she was tired and ready for the plane ride home.

“Well, I’ve heard rumors of some unusual creatures being spotted in Vegas tonight.” Scott lifted his smartphone. “All sorts of unusual chatter among my regulars.”

“Not me. I was totally careful,” Cassandra said quickly and a bit defensively.

“Cassandra, I am well aware of your abilities and you performed admirably tonight.” Scott gave her an approving smile. “You’re one of my best. You have always delivered everything I’ve requested and on time. Which reminds me. I must transfer your payment to your account.”

“Awesome. I got bills to pay.” Cassandra pulled out her phone and pulled up her bank account.

The light from the screen illuminated Scott’s glasses and hid his eyes as he made the transfer. Cassandra felt as though something was off, yet she couldn’t discern why. The whole night was feeling really odd. When the money hit her account, she smiled with satisfaction, logged out, and shoved her phone in her pocket.

“What do you do with all the money I pay you?” Scott wondered aloud.

“Whores and booze,” Cassandra joked.

With the exasperated shake of his head, Scott said, “You are something else.”

“I get the job done,” Cassandra reminded him.

“And that is all that matters,” Scott added. “I like loyalty and efficiency.”

Again, Cassandra sensed something was off. “Okay, Scott, what is it? What’s freaking you out?”

Folding his hands together in his lap, Scott stared out at the cars sliding past them on the way to the strip from the airport. "I'm just wondering about the vampire you saw. It bothers me that you could've been caught. We've been working a long time together and this is the closest you have ever come to detection."

"But I wasn't," Cassandra pointed out. "That vampire breezed right past me."

"The woman touched you and left an energy burn on you. It could have turned out differently if she was a black witch." Scott sighed. "It's a little worrisome."

"Hey, Scott, I'm fine. They didn't catch me. You have the relic. Everything is fine." Cassandra didn't like him expressing her exact same worries. She wanted to just shove them aside and forget about her possible close call.

"You're the best at what you do. You're irreplaceable. What would I do without you?" Scott finally returned his attention to her, his expression sorrowful.

"Well, don't start crying over me yet. I'm here. All is good."

"We're coming up on the passenger drop off," George called out from the front seat.

McCarren International Airport loomed straight ahead. Cassandra draped her messenger bag over her shoulder and gripped the handle of the overnight case. She wasn't fond of security checks, or long waits at airports, but she was ready to put Las Vegas behind her.

All the lanes were crammed with vehicles dropping off passengers. People hurried along the crosswalks, dragging kids and luggage behind them. Even at this late hour the airport was a hive of activity.

Cassandra glanced over at her broker and wondered if he saw her as just an asset to

his illicit business selling stolen occult relics, or if he was sincerely worried about her. Scott gave her a slight smile, but she had no idea how to read it. Everything about him, his car, and his guards was designed to be unremarkable and forgettable. Yet, she suspected she had seen a spark of real concern in his eyes. It was strangely comforting.

“I’ll be in touch,” Scott said, holding out his hand.

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Jostling her bags, she shook it awkwardly. “I’ll be waiting.”

The guards didn’t even look in her direction, so she slid out of the car without saying goodbye to them. They rarely spoke in her presence anyway.

Hurrying into the airport, again Cassandra felt a shiver of unease sidle down her spine. Looking around nervously, she studied the many faces surrounding her. No one seemed to be paying any particular attention to her. A few men glanced in her direction, but in the appreciative way she was used to.

Something was wrong. She felt it to the marrow of her bones, but she couldn’t put her finger on what was digging at her. Heading toward security, she tried to ignore the wild lights of the flashing slot machines and the endless noise.

It wasn’t until she was on the plane a few hours later, high above the desert, that she finally relaxed. With Las Vegas falling swiftly behind her, she felt safe again. It had been an unsettling job, and she was anxious to return home and put the whole strange trip behind her.

Tucking her earbuds into her ears, she closed her eyes and slowly exhaled. Her fingers lightly caressing her still tingling hand, she tried not to think of the woman with the mesmerizing blue eyes and long hair.

Chapter 6:

Witch Battle

Aimee was amused at Frank's utter disdain of the flip-flops she was wearing under the hem of her very expensive evening gown. The second they had climbed into the limousine she had shed the high heels he'd forced her to wear. He probably hated the big floppy silk daisy that decorated the strap, too. That thought, coupled with the relief the shoes brought to her aching feet, made her smile.

The traffic to the airport was heavy despite the late hour, so Aimee spent the slow-paced trip admiring the sparkling strip. She had never been to Vegas before and it fascinated her. She was particularly enthralled by the Luxor's pyramid and the sprawling beauty of The Venetian. Frank always had an agenda, so prowling around like tourists had been out of the question even though it would have been fun to explore the city at a more leisurely pace. She had considered cajoling Frank into an extended holiday, but the vampire's paranoia about being in one location for too long made the plea a pointless endeavor. During the course of their extended travels, they had been attacked more than once by Frank's enemies, so his fear really wasn't without merit. Still, she would have loved to walk along the strip and watch the fake exploding volcano with a crowd of people instead of just catching a glimpse of it from afar.

Yet, if she was honest with herself, she knew she wouldn't enjoy spending time in Vegas with Frank. The time since she had admired him was long past. What she truly desired was her independence. T

o be on her own, away from Frank, away from his guards, and free to do as she pleased was the cry of her heart. Yet, she knew the chances of that happening were very slight. She was bonded by blood to Frank and he would never allow her to escape.

Beside her, Frank texted furiously. Frown lines tugged at the flesh between his eyebrows and his dark eyes glowered behind his red-tinted glasses. She was rather glad she didn't know what had him so upset, though if she had to guess, she

suspected it had to do with the possible dhamphir that had robbed him.

Aimee's fingers traced over her evening bag. The clip-on extension was tucked inside. The few strands of chestnut brown hair clinging to the small clip had instantly made her think of the sultry-eyed woman she had seen at the elevator. The mere thought of the stranger created feelings within her she wasn't even sure how to process. She was used to magic existing within her life, but what she had felt the instant she had touched the woman's hand was entirely different from anything she had ever felt before.

"Utterly ridiculous," Frank muttered angrily next to her.

Glancing toward him, she studied the strong lines of his profile. He was handsome and possessed the vampire allure, but she no longer felt the pull she once had long ago when she had been young, foolish, and desperate for a fairytale ending to her difficult life. At one point she had thought of Frank as the prince that was saving her from the evils of the world, but now she saw he was one of the evils of the world and that she had to save herself.

"You're staring at me, you know I don't like that. Unless you intend to finally tell me what the fuck is your problem of late," Frank said shortly.

"I was thinking how handsome you are," Aimee said, but did not divulge her other thoughts.

Preening under her gaze, Frank obviously sensed the truthfulness of her words. The angry cast to his features dissipated as he said, "Well, yes, I am. And you're lovely tonight."

"Thank you," Aimee answered, before directing her attention outside.

The limousine slid through the gate that led to the private hangers. Frank's jet sat like a white swan spreading its wings on the tarmac. They wouldn't be home by sunrise, but the jet was specifically designed to carry Frank about without fear of the sun.

"You know what I despise about these trips?" Frank's words were clipped short by his irritation.

"No, what?" Aimee asked.

"It reminds me how many enemies I have," Frank answered, staring out the window.

Aimee became aware of the four figures moving out of the darkness toward the limousine seconds before Frank grabbed her and tumbled to the floor of the car.

The black magic spell hit like a tidal wave, washing over the vehicle and sending it spinning on its wheels. Aimee's protection spell held, but the black magic tore at it like a savage beast. The putrid acidity of the magic made her cringe, but she poured her white power into her personal shields and snagged her magic bag from the overnight case she had left on the floor.

"My guards? The pilot?" Frank cowered next to the seat, listening to the savage clawing of the spell ripping at the car.

Aimee closed her eyes, cast out a quick net of her power, then shook her head. "Dead. All of them. Suffocation spell."

"Glenn can fly it," Frank said briskly, motioning to one of the guards in the front seat. "What about the second car?"

Directing the net behind the limousine, she found the SUV with the four guards within. Her protection spell held there, too, but the guards were panicking. The black

magic spell was feeding off their fear and would break through that vehicle more speedily.

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“The black witch got them, too. They’re freaking out, but should be safe for a few more minutes unless one of them opens a door.” Aimee took a quick peek out the window. The four attackers were shrouded in thick misty cocoons that hid their bodies and faces. The shadowy miasma cackled with dark power. The obfuscation spell masked the black witch. The other three people could be humans, ghouls, or demons. Aimee fought the sliver of fear that tried to wrap around her mind. Fear would work against her, feed the spell, and make it harder to do her job.

“They’re not firing at us, so that’s a good sign,” Aimee said.

“Bullet proofing stopped their last assassination attempt,” Frank pointed out. “They’re not going to try that again.”

“Which of your many enemies is trying to kill you this time?” Sifting through her magic bag, Aimee wished that Frank wasn’t such an asshole. Most of the spells she had carefully prepared before they had departed on their trip had been used already.

Frank shrugged. “Does it matter? Just get rid of the black witch, so we can get out of here.”

Jerking out three protection spells, she handed one to Frank before scrambling to where the divider was lowering. Glenn and Ivan, Frank’s favorite escort guards, knew the drill. Aimee shoved the spell bags at the two men.

“Crush them if the spell gets through. They’ll hold for a few minutes,” she said.

“We can try to cover you,” Glenn offered, his pistol in his hand.

“You won’t survive stepping out of the car. You’re human. I’m not.” Aimee checked on the four people waiting for the black magic spell to eat through the car’s defenses so they could start their final attack. “I can take them.”

Crushing the last spell and tucking it into her cleavage, she inhaled deeply. The fragrance of sage and rosemary rushed through her sinuses, clearing her head. She might expend every last bit of her power, but she could handle the four things outside the car. The black magic spell was lethal to humans, but basic. It was a good sign that she wasn’t dealing with a black magic witch/demon hybrid. Otherwise, things could get tricky.

Crawling over Frank, she gave him a stern look.

“Stay down,” she ordered.

“Kill them,” Frank answered. “Just fucking kill them.”

Aimee shoved the back door open and ducked into the cool desert air to crouch behind the car, out of the sight of the black witch. The black magic attempted to slither into the car, but the protection spell she had crushed kept it at bay while she slammed the door shut, cutting it off. It flailed at her, an icy tentacle trying to grip her wrist, but the protection spell held and it jerked away in pain.

The wind caught her hair, whipping it around her shoulders. She dug into her bag and pulled out her last two spells.

“Stupid Frank,” she muttered.

The blood bond between them compelled her to protect him at all costs even though a part of her screamed to be free. If Frank died, she could run away and create a life for herself far away from vampires, black magic witches, and other monsters. Yet the

bond that tied her to him twisted inside of her, forcing her to defend him. The thought of him dying terrified and thrilled her at the same time.

“Dammit.”

Again she cast out a net of her power and sensed that the four assassins were on the move. They were attempting to circle the car and surprise her.

Aimee’s lips spread into a ruthless smile. She crushed the first spell and tossed it into the air. It soundlessly exploded into a huge bubble, encapsulating the limousine, jet and attackers. It was a glamour spell. It captured the scene at the second it activated and reflected that image back at the world, hiding what was truly going on within its radius. Juggling the second spell, Aimee waited for the four people to draw just a little closer.

The first one was just rounding the front end of the limousine when Aimee hurled the spell into the air. It burst in a flash of hot white light. The four beings screamed, instantly blinded.

Aimee sprang to her feet and rushed the first attacker. Without any more spells, she had to pull on her internal well of power. She would have to act fast before she was drained.

Flinging one hand at the attacker, she cast out a ball of concentrated magic. It hit the shadowy casing surrounding the attacker and burst into flame. In a split second it ate through the spell and engulfed the being inside. An ear-splitting wail filled the air, echoing around Aimee when it hit the barrier spell. The creature fell to the ground, burning to ashes in seconds.

A vampire.

The black magic witch was still alive.

Limbs burning with the heat of her magic, Aimee sped around the front of the car and caught the second attacker just as it was about to toss another spell. Hurling an orb of energy at it, she willed the magic to expand and encompass the attacker. The sparkling white magic wrapped around the figure, dissolving the obfuscating spell.

Aimee hesitated, realizing it was a demon. Tethered to the black magic witch, it was corporeal, and therefore vulnerable, but it would be difficult to abolish. Again Aimee cursed the stupid dress and the fancy jewelry she had been forced to wear. Her amulets would be a great help right now, but she was without them.

The demon was a humanoid shape made of darkness that seemed to suck in the light around it, creating an aura of grasping blackness along its form. Glowing red eyes rested on Aimee seconds before it attacked. Long, spindly fingers tipped with obsidian claws slashed at the witch as the demon flew at her. Ducking under its attack, Aimee tripped over her long dress and fell onto the tarmac. Twisting around, she swung her arm out, sending an arc of white light at the demon. Though the creature dove to one side to avoid the attack, the dagger of light struck its side. Oozing yellow ichor flowed from the wound and the smell of rotten eggs wafted on the desert wind.

Pushing herself up with her hands, Aimee sent a wave of magic at another attacker trying to sneak up behind her. It smashed into the shrouded entity, flinging the attacker into the side of the limousine. Shrieking in agony, the assailant writhed in the tentacle of the black magic spell.

“Human,” Aimee breathed, then sent another bolt at the demon.

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The inky blot in the shape of a human bolted to one side, avoiding the magical barrage while the suffocating human thrashed against the car. The heavy body armor rang against the metal and glass. Aimee ignored the dying mortal and concentrated

on avoiding the demon's next attack. It darted at her, slashing with its claws. She cast another wave of magic at it, the diamonds in her bracelet flashing in the headlights of the SUV idling behind the limousine.

"Of course," she whispered.

A black magic spell hurtled into her and knocked her off her feet. Her flip-flops skittered across the asphalt and vanished under the car. The spell slid over her skin like icy water. It tried to sink through her protection spell, but was thwarted when Aimee pumped more power into her shield. She was draining herself too fast and she knew it. Whip-like tendrils of black magic lashed at her face and chest. The purple and black magic again tried to burrow into her protection spell. Aimee worried that the demon was about to spring and she had no idea where the black magic witch was hiding. Gripping the aggressive spell in both hands, she jerked it away from her body, holding the squirming mass in a tight grip. Again, she cursed Frank's ridiculous fashion standards. She had a bracelet with just the amulet for this type of aggressive spell. Instead she had to take a big risk in order to save all of them.

Rolling onto her knees, Aimee observed the demon retreating to the other side of the car. The dark magic spell viciously attacking the limousine was almost through her protection spell. The witch and demon had distracted her in order to get closer to Frank. Now she was about to make things even worse.

“Dammit!”

Encapsulating the writhing tendrils in a thin sheen of white magic, she hurled the black magic spell at the limousine. It splashed into the other spell, its tentacles whipping out to grip onto the bigger mass before sinking into it. Even bigger and stronger than before, the black magic spell jerked at the limousine like a predator ripping into flesh.

“You’re stupider than I thought,” a male voice called out, amused.

Ripping the diamond bracelet off her wrist, Aimee whispered under her breath. The demon added its power to the assaulting spell. Another blast of black magic hurtled towards her. She leaped out of the way and sent a countering wave in the general direction of the attack.

“Blood calls to death!” she shouted, and hurled the diamond bracelet at the car.

The demon’s glowing red eyes gleamed brightly just as the diamond bracelet clipped the car and bounced into its face. It howled in agony as the banishment spell Aimee had infused the bracelet with gripped it and dragged it into the depths of the sparkling diamonds, entrapping it. The reek of sulfur filled the air as the black magic spell ripping at the limousine vanished instantly. Somewhere nearby a man screamed in pain and terror.

“That’s the problem with black magic witches,” Aimee called out. “Once the demon you’ve made a deal with is vanquished, you’re a powerless piece of shit.”

Retreating footsteps pounded into the darkness. The doors to the limousine banged open and the two guards pursued the fleeing black witch. Aimee smiled triumphantly, swaying slightly on her feet. The adrenaline surge was the only thing keeping her standing. Weakened by the heavy expenditure of her magic, Aimee limped toward the

car.

Frank slid out of the backseat, his cellphone clutched in one hand. “Why didn’t you kill the witch?”

“Fuck you, Frank,” Aimee answered.

She was dimly aware of the vampire catching her when she fainted.

Part Two:

Home

Chapter 7:

Memories Lost

Snagging the mail out of the battered mailbox, Cassandra headed up the walkway to her mother’s small house tucked behind towering cedar trees on a quiet street in a small town in Texas. The light spring breeze brushed through the branches, ruffling leaves and shifting the sunlight that dappled the flagstones. The colorful oleanders bordering the porch needed to be cut back, and Cassandra used her overnight bag to shove the pretty flowers aside.

Behind the screen door she could see the flicker of the TV and heard the voices of the morning talk show hosts chatting with the latest Hollywood rising star. The clink of dishes and the rushing sound of water indicated that breakfast was over and cleanup was underway. Knocking on the screen door, Cassandra quickly scanned her mother’s mail. It was a relief to see she hadn’t gone on any shopping network sprees.

The shadowy form of her mother hurried down the short hall from the kitchen and

into the gloomy living room. Cassandra smiled at her mother through the mesh as Galina fumbled with the lock.

“Hey, Mom,” Cassandra said.

“I’m so glad you’re home!” Galina exclaimed breathlessly. Pulling the door open, she wrapped Cassandra in her arms.

Kissing her mother’s cheek, Cassandra snuggled against her. The scent of jasmine and baby powder filled her nostrils and she inhaled deeply. It was a comforting fragrance, and one she always associated with her mother. “Like I promised, I’m back safe and sound.”

Drawing back, Galina studied her thoughtfully. “Something happened?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Cassandra answered with a reassuring smile.

Cassandra knew she strongly resembled her mother, but she didn’t think she was nearly as beautiful. Galina’s blue-green eyes flecked with gold were heavily fringed with dark lashes and her lush chestnut brown hair fell in silky waves to her mid-back. Where Cassandra had a much stronger nose, Galina’s was delicate, but they shared the same lush mouth and Slavic complexion. Being a dhamphir gave Cassandra a much younger appearance than her thirty-five years, while Galina looked like a youthful early forty-year-old and not her actual sixty-five years of age. Her mother’s years as a blood minion to vampires had kept her preternaturally youthful, but regular infusions of Cassandra’s blood maintained it. People always thought they were sisters, not mother and daughter.

“You’re lying,” Galina said, her eyes narrowing.

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“No, really. Everything is fine,” Cassandra promised.

She brushed past her mother and into the darkened living room. Her mother’s years living with vampires had instilled her with a healthy dislike of sunlight. The house was always dimly lit and the trees were rarely cut back. Cassandra wasn’t too fond of sunlight either. Her last girlfriend had always insisted on having the curtains open to let the sunlight stream in through the windows. Cassandra should have realized the relationship was doomed.

“I had such terrible nightmares,” her mother said, her voice wavering. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she sank onto the overstuffed pillows decorating the shabby-chic couch.

Cassandra tossed her bag on the floor and settled beside her mother. The look of confusion that often graced Galina’s features settled over her face. Another aftereffect from spending so much time with vampires was that her mother’s mind was quite fragile. Dr. Summerfield, the man who had helped Galina escape Austin and hide from Cassandra’s father, had explained that the vampires had often wiped her memories of their atrocities to keep her compliant and the end result was that it was difficult for her to retain memories or deal with unexpected events. Medicine didn’t help, but structure did. Galina lived quietly in the small house Cassandra had bought her and had a housekeeper who came to help her three times a week.

“You were gone for so long,” Galina said, her bottom lip trembling.

“I was gone for two days,” Cassandra reminded her.

“Did Felicity go with you?”

“Felicity broke up with me a month ago,” Cassandra answered. She gently took her mother’s hand and squeezed it. “Remember?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Galina’s voice was doubtful, but she didn’t argue. “She didn’t like your traveling?”

“She didn’t like me.” Cassandra shrugged, but the sting was still there. Felicity had left her for a woman she had met online. She supposed it was for the best. Felicity had been a very jealous and suspicious girlfriend. Cassandra couldn’t blame Felicity for being upset with her. Cassandra did keep secrets. They just weren’t the secrets Felicity thought they were. “She said I was keeping things from her and that she didn’t like being cheated on. So she cheated on me and moved to Phoenix.

”

Shaking her head, Galina stared at the notepad on the coffee table that she usually kept close at hand. Picking it up, she pulled the pen she kept tucked into the spiral and made some notes. “I need to remember that I do not like Felicity.”

Giggling, Cassandra lightly stroked her mother’s hair. She loved her so much, but she often felt their roles were reversed. It had been that way since she had been a child. Dr. Summerfield, a vampire hunter and paranormal investigator, had arranged for Galina to have full-time help when Cassandra was a child because Galina would simply forget to do simple things like feed her daughter. When Cassandra had become old enough, she had started watching over her mother. She didn’t mind it though. Her mother was everything to her.

Galina finished her notes and underlined a few words, her brow scrunched. “I also put down a reminder that you were only gone for two days. I don’t know why I got so

worried.”

“Because you’re my mother.” Cassandra nudged her with her elbow before leaning her head on her mother’s shoulder.

“I was dreaming about your father and he was trying to find you,” Galina said, changing the subject abruptly.

“He doesn’t know about me,” Cassandra reminded her. “And he’s far away in Austin. Dr. Summerfield told me just last week that Cian’s dating some cute little blond human girl now and trying very hard to be human.”

Galina’s eyes filled with tears and she tugged at the sash of her bathrobe. “He’s forgotten me.”

“Mom,” Cassandra said in a gentle voice. “It’s just thirty years ago since he killed the cabal and sent you away. That’s like a blink of an eye for a vampire. I’m sure he remembers you.” Silently cursing herself for her insensitivity, she embraced her mother. “He loved you. He sent you away to keep you safe.”

“But now he’s dating someone else.” Galina covered her face with her hands.

“Mom, you were with him a very long time ago.” Cassandra struggled to think of a way to comfort her mother. Galina was still madly in love with Cian Lynch, Cassandra’s vampire father. She would probably love him until her last breath. A few times Galina had attempted to go to Austin to find Cian, but had been stopped in time. Vampire fathers killed their dhamphir offspring and it was the only solid argument that kept Galina from risking everything to find the vampire.

“It was a very long time ago. Look at you, all grown up and looking so much like him.”

“I look like you,” Cassandra said gently. She had no idea what her father looked like and wasn’t sure she wanted to. Dr. Summerfield and her mother both claimed she looked like her father, but when she looked in the mirror she saw her mother’s genes stamped into her features.

“You do look like me,” Galina said with delight. “But much more beautiful.”

“Oh, no! You’re much more beautiful than I will ever be!” Cassandra kissed her mother’s cheek and snuggled into her side. She felt her mother tense and peered into her face. “Mom?”

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it?” Galina rubbed her brow. “You’re keeping something from me.”

“Mom, it was a simple job. Nothing dangerous.”

“I should have taken Cian’s money. Then you wouldn’t have to do these things.”

“Mom, it’s fine. I’m fine.” Gripping her mother’s hand tightly, she said, “I’ll always be fine. I’m too smart and too much of a bad ass to not be okay.”

“You sound like him when you talk like that,” Galina said with a pout.

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“The only weird thing about the trip was this girl I saw.”

“You met a girl?” Her mother looked keenly interested.

“I literally ran into a girl. When she touched me I felt...” Cassandra stared at her hand. “I felt magic.”

“Did you get her number?”

“Not that kind of magic. Real magic. Or at least I think it was.”

Galina cocked her head, her expression thoughtful. “So you didn’t get her number?”

“It’s not like that,” Cassandra said swiftly. “It was just odd. To feel that.”

Narrowing her eyes, Galina studied her daughter intently. “You liked her.”

“Mom! I don’t even think we spoke to each other!”

“You have this little glow though,” Galina insisted. “I can see it.”

Biting her bottom lip, Cassandra stared at the hand that the mysterious woman had touched. Though the sensation was faint now, she could still feel the slight tingle. “Honestly, Mom, I’m not sure what to think about what happened. It’s not like I’m ever going to see her again.” To her surprise, her words elicited a small pang of regret inside her.

Galina picked up her notepad and started a new notation. “Oh, maybe you will. If it is meant to be, it will work out. Maybe you will get a chance at the love I never had.”

“Mom, don’t say things like that,” Cassandra protested.

“No, no. I mean it. Maybe you’ll have good luck to even out all my bad luck.” Galina smiled at Cassandra lovingly. “A mother can hope, can’t she?”

“Of course.” Cassandra knew better than to argue with her mother. Besides she didn’t want to upset her. A certain spark had come to life in her mother’s eyes when Cassandra had mentioned magic. It had been a long time since she had seen her mother look so enthralled.

“Besides, a little magic might be exactly what you need.” Galina made stars around several words and underlined them. “I like magic. I wish I had some. I would wave my hand and make your life perfect.”

“Mom, it’s perfect. Right now, right here, it’s perfect.” Cassandra scooted down on the sofa and laid her head on her mother’s lap. Her mother’s gentle touch was soothing as Galina stroked her daughter’s hair. “As long as you’re happy, everything is fine.”

“Oh, I don’t like Felicity?” her mother said reading her latest notation, sounding mystified. “Why is that?”

Cassandra closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “She cheated on me.”

“Oh! I need to write that down.”

Listening to the scratch of the pen against paper, Cassandra pressed her still tingling hand against her chest and sighed.

Chapter 8:

No Safe Havens

The warmth of the sun was slowly becoming an uncomfortable heat against her bare shoulders, but Aimee ignored her discomfort. Pulling another weed, she glanced toward the modern adobe multi-level house to make certain that none of the guards were spying on her. She hated when Frank sent his goons to watch her, especially when she was in the garden. It was the one place in the sprawling West Texas estate that she could claim as her very own. Frank was unable to enter due to the vervain she had planted along the edges. The vampire was under the impression the entire garden had an adverse effect on him and had no idea she had deliberately planted a barrier to keep him out.

The hot desert sun glinted off the mirrored surface of the windows and she adjusted her sunglasses to keep out the glare. The triangular sun shade stretching overhead gave her some respite, but allowed enough light to keep her plants healthy. Sweat trickled down her nose and she twitched it, since rubbing her nose with a grimy glove was not the best idea.

Dressed in her usual attire of a tank top and a flowing skirt, Aimee knelt in the soft earth tending to her plants. Her long trip abroad had allowed the weeds to get a foothold. Even though she had left detailed directions for Frank's staff, she supposed she should take comfort in the fact they had at least remembered to water it in her absence. Her delicate rosemary plants were tucked along the wall and out of direct sunlight and looked a bit ragged. Rosemary was one of the most important ingredients in her spells and she felt like kicking a few shins every time she looked at the weary plants.

Body aching and still feeling weak after her battle in Vegas, she refrained from using her powers to check on the guards. Frank had poured protein drinks down her throat

and a dose of his own blood in the aftermath of her victory over the black witch, but her energy reserves weren't bouncing back like they once had.

Magic was energy. True witches could control energy and manipulate it to their bidding. Aimee used the energies of plants and other organic material to do her will. The right combination could pack a powerful punch. Yet it was her own energy reserves that she had to use as a catalyst to get the ball rolling. There were rituals she could use to revive herself, but Frank's tight leash on her via his blood tie kept her from ever being at full power. Vampire blood was false life and it robbed her of the ability to reach her full magic ability. Maybe that was what Frank wanted. She knew he feared that she would one day find a way to break his power over her. At one point he had been arrogant enough to believe that she loved him enough to be loyal, but Aimee was certain he now knew the truth.

If she ever got the chance, she would escape.

An especially vicious little weed refused to give its hold up on the earth and she tugged harder. She respected its tenacity, but she wasn't about to let it choke the life out of her sage. Digging at the gnarled roots, she couldn't help but compare the weed to Frank. Frank's roots were deep in the soil of her life and he was choking the life out of her.

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Checking her watch, she saw that her little tracking spell would be ready soon. The dhamphir was Frank's next target, that much was clear. Aimee didn't know a lot about dhamphirs, but she had one of Frank's researchers working on remedying that fact. When the vampire had finally fallen asleep, she had carefully unwound the strands of chestnut colored hair from the clips of the extension and stored them in a small cotton bag. She had straightaway mixed the tracking spell upon returning to the estate.

A long shadow fell over her. Aimee immediately twisted about, and saw Ivan, one of Frank's most trusted guards, standing over her.

"What is it?" she asked, squinting behind her tinted glasses.

"He's awake and he wants you."

Sighing, Aimee set her tools in the bucket caddy beside her. Tugging off her gloves, she tucked them into one of the side pockets. Ivan leaned over and claimed the bucket caddy, and gestured sharply with his head.

"He wants you now. I'll put this up."

Frank had to be in a truly bad mood if Ivan was willing to clean up after her. She pulled off her gardening hat and glasses and handed those to Ivan.

"Thanks,"

she said, then strode through her garden toward the sliding glass door that glinted in

the sunlight.

The door slid open when she drew near and the cool, stale, air-conditioned air flowed out, brushing over her heated skin. With a shiver, she stepped into the dimness beyond the door.

Another guard slid the door shut, cutting off the heat of the day, then slid the heavy thermal curtain over the glass, banishing the daylight. Candles and lamps lit the interior of the house. The wide rooms with high ceilings felt cavernous, but were crammed with antiques. Frank was an avid collector and she was annoyed at how easily he could fill a room with his countless acquisitions. When they had first moved into the much bigger house on the massive estate in West Texas, she had loved the airy feel of the rooms. Now they felt as stale and heavy as their previous home in Louisiana.

Aimee was sweaty and grimy and considered cleaning up before entering Frank's bedroom, but then thought better of it. If he was demanding to see her immediately, he could put up with her being grungy. She hated when he wakened in the afternoon hours. It was rare for a vampire to be able to do so, and Frank used this rare gift to his advantage. He loved to wake up early and scheme.

Frank's bedroom was black and red, filled with heavy antiques from his home country of France, and always smelled of incense and blood. Still in his black silk pajamas, Frank was greedily sipping from the wrist of one of his blood minions. The young woman's eyes were closed in rapture, and beneath her silk teddy, her body was trembling with pleasure.

Aimee turned away so she wouldn't have to witness the woman's erect nipples pressing against the fine silk of her garment and her hands moving between her thighs. Instead of watching, she occupied herself by surveying the vast array of cologne Frank had arranged on his bureau. He was obsessed with smelling like

anything other than death. There were a few new bottles and she once again contemplated the possibility of slipping a spell into one of them.

A reluctant moan and slap on the rump indicated the feeding was over. Aimee returned her gaze to Frank as the blood minion scurried out of the room. Aimee no longer learned their names. She'd tried befriending the few who had been living with Frank when she had first become his companion, but those blood minions had either died, or been sold to other vampires. Frank kept them sequestered in a small guest house off the main one, so it was easy to deliberately ignore them. Also, it was disquieting how they always looked remarkably alike. Frank definitely had a type. They were all dark haired, blue eyed, and pale.

"Good afternoon, sunshine," Frank said, nestling against the bank of red silk pillows resting against the ornate headboard. He picked up a tumbler filled with ice and scotch and sipped it. "How's my surly witch?"

"Sweaty," Aimee answered.

"Yuck." Frank gestured toward the bathroom. "Take a shower. I can't stand the smell of sweat and dirt. It makes me think of peasants. And you, my witch, are not a peasant." Dismissing her with the flick of his hand, he immediately started working on his iPad.

With reluctance, Aimee followed his command. The bathroom was all black tile and stainless steel fixtures. The only color was the blood red towels. Aimee stood amidst the cold sterility of the room and wished she could just scream until the walls cracked and broke apart around her. Even as her insubordinate thoughts boiled up within her, the blood tie to Frank smothered them. There was always a tipping point where her rebellious thoughts gave birth to torrential rage which immediately triggered the blood bond, stifling her. Taking deep breaths, she fought through the numbness.

Wiping a tear away, Aimee undressed. She hated that even her mind was tethered to Frank. It was a struggle to keep herself from drowning under his constant attempts to completely subjugate her. If not for her witch nature, he'd have her completely in his thrall.

The shower refreshed her mind as it cleansed her body. For most of the decade she had been with Frank, she had not fought against his supernatural influence over her. Once she had realized the monster he truly was, she'd struggled to balance her emotions and thoughts so as not to activate the blood bond. Now she was fairly adept at maintaining her calm, but tonight she was aggravated by emotions she had never experienced before.

Once out of the shower, she donned one of Frank's robes and returned to his bedroom. He was on his phone and typing furiously on his iPad at the same time. Spotting her, he waved her over to the bed.

"No, no, you don't get it, Scott. I want her on the job as soon as possible. I'm not a patient man. Once I have my eyes set on something, I want it immediately. Not in a fucking week, or two, or a month. Now!" Crossing his arms over his chest, Frank listened with a furious expression on his face while the broker on the other end spoke. "That's acceptable. Now make it happen." Clicking off the call, Frank studied Aimee where she sat perched on the end of the bed. "Why is everyone in this world a fucking incompetent except for you? I ask you to do something, it's done. No worries. Last night you wiped the floor with those assassins. But anyone else..." Frank flung the phone to the opposite side of the bed.

"Still trying to acquire the dhamphir, I see."

"I want her. Not just because she ripped me off, but because of her rarity. Do you understand, my witch, just how rare a dhamphir is?" Frank's dark eyes flashed dangerously. "I tried to make one, you know. Years ago. This one vampire in Italy

had a son by a mortal. He was a twisted little fiend. The son, I mean. Well, the vampire father was, too, but that's not my point. The dhamphir could venture out in the daylight and wield his father's will like an avenging angel...or demon. Everyone wanted one. The vampire women were barren, but the vampire men were fucking every mortal woman in sight just about."

Aimee stifled a shiver. "So what happened?"

"Well, no one got any of those wenches pregnant and the dhamphir sliced off his father's head and vanished." Frank sighed. "And that was the end of that little fad."

"So if you actually manage to capture this dhamphir, what will you do with her?"

Frank crawled across the bed to Aimee's side and wrapped one wet lock of her long hair around his hand. "Maybe keep her. I could forcibly bond her to me. Chain her up, feed her my blood until she's loyal. Maybe she could be my new companion."

Frank's eyes were dark and searching. Aimee rested her hand against his cheek and leaned toward him. "No, you won't."

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“Bah!” Frank pulled her closer by her hair. “Why do I want you so? Why do I dread the thought of you not being at my side, when at the same time I wonder if I shouldn’t just kill you?”

“Because I’m power, Frank,” Aimee answered.

Nuzzling her neck, Frank grumbled in French.

Tilting her head away from him, she closed her eyes and struggled not to clench her hands into fists. His sharp teeth raked over her throat, but didn’t break the skin.

“Maybe it’s because you’re unattainable. I own you, but I can always tell in the depths of your eyes that you’re not really mine. Even when you were completely smitten with me, you were never truly mine.” Frank’s voice was thick with passion, lust, and anger. His hands slid under the robe, caressing her. “My ill-tempered little witch, why won’t you be mine?”

Though he was touching her in all the places he knew would arouse her, Aimee felt disconnected from her own body’s response. He was right. She had never truly been his. Even at the height of their decade-long relationship when she had been enthralled with his every word and gesture, she had never truly opened up her heart and soul to him. Frank was her first love, her first relationship, the first person to ever arouse her and make love to her, and yet she couldn’t remember ever feeling truly connected to him. She had never felt a spark like she had experienced in that brief moment in the elevator with the mysterious woman.

“Maybe I’m a lesbian,” Aimee said, turning her head to face him. Surprisingly, the

words came out more as truth than a jest to rile him. That realization was both a thrill and shoc

k.

Frank laughed against his her lips. “Right. Good one. No lesbian ever sucked cock as good as you do.”

“Fuck you, Frank,” Aimee snapped, her anger flashing through her like a hot flame. As quickly as it hit, the blood bond struck, turning her to ice, making her numb.

“If you insist.” Frank shifted onto his knees, scooped her up in his arms and tossed her partially robed body onto the center of the bed. Crawling up between her legs, the black silk of his pajamas whispered over her thighs. “Let’s talk about the dhamphir. You bumped into her when we got out of the elevator. What did you feel with your witchy radar?”

Aimee felt her breath leave her at the memory. Her fingers tingled at the thought of the dhamphir’s touch. “I felt something I can’t describe.”

“And yet you said nothing,” Frank said, his anger once more just below the surface. “I just realized that. You touched the dhamphir and said nothing.” He was shifting around, trying to undress himself.

“No, I didn’t, because she didn’t feel like a threat to you,” Aimee answered somewhat truthfully. She lay beneath him, unyielding and detached from his efforts to seduce her.

Staring deep into her eyes, Frank’s power sank into her, seeking the truth. The seconds ticked away. At last Frank said, “I sense that’s actually an honest answer.”

Aimee was grateful that Frank couldn't read her thoughts, but only sense her emotions.

Finishing stripping off his pajamas, Frank ran his palms lightly over her arms, drawing them up over her head to pin them in place. "So, can you deal with her? Find a way to subdue her? Make her our little slave?"

"I have a researcher getting me the information," Aimee answered coolly. "I'll have an answer for you soon."

"She'll be here by the end of the week. You have to be ready for her, do you understand?"

"I do."

"That's my lovely little witch. Always doing what I want. Now, about that fucking..."

Frank's kiss tasted like liquor and copper. His touch was rough and cold. Though her body responded to his lovemaking expertise, Aimee had never felt so removed from the act of sex. It was as if she was an observer, watching from a great distance. Though Frank brought her to an orgasm rather quickly, it gave her no real satisfaction. When he rolled off her, she felt unsatisfied and rather disheartened.

Striding nude into his bathroom, Frank waved his cellphone over his head. "Call the researcher, my witch. Get it done."

Crawling off his bed, Aimee drew the discarded robe over her nudity. The thought of the dhamphir coming to their home both thrilled and terrified her. She'd lock herself in her room tonight with the excuse she had to start preparing for the dhamphir's arrival, but Frank wasn't the only one with the ability to weave elaborate plans.

With a slight smile on her lips, she hurried out of his room.

Chapter 9:

The Dream

Cassandra tossed her bags onto her couch when she finally arrived at her apartment after spending the day with her mother. It was a small and cozy place, one of several apartments that an old Victorian had been split into. Cassandra occupied the rear apartment on the second floor that she entered via an outside staircase. The tall pecan trees provided ample shade that kept the apartment dark and cool even when the sun was shining and the windows were open.

Rubbing her stomach, she surveyed her drink options in her refrigerator. Cassandra wondered how old the milk was and checked the date. It seemed to be in the realm of safe drinking, so she snagged it and poured herself a big glass. Her mother had cooked a fantastic meal, but she still felt pangs of hunger. It wasn't for actual food, but blood. Cassandra didn't need blood to live, but she needed it to use her dhamphir abilities. Since she only used them when on jobs, her blood intake was fairly low. For at least twenty-four hours after a job she was ravenous and suffered withdrawal. She always felt like she was going back on the wagon after a job.

Gulping the milk, she hoped her system would believe it was satisfied long enough for her to get some sleep. Finished with her drink, she flopped onto the couch and turned on her secondary cellphone. She considered it her 'civilian' cellphone that she used in her regular life as a part-time waitress at the local diner.

“Let’s see what calls I need to ignore,” she muttered.

There were several messages from her co-workers asking for her to cover their shifts due to some flu bug going around town and a message trying to get her to donate to some politician that would never in a million years support her right to marry, so she deleted all those.

“Erase, erase, erase, and definitely erase.”

The last one gave her pause the second she heard the voice.

“Cass, it’s me. I know that we didn’t part on the best of terms, but things aren’t working out for me here. It’s not a good scene. I can’t go into details. I know you’re mad at me, but I still love—”

“Fuck you, Felicity, and erase.”

Tossing the phone onto the coffee table, Cassandra slumped over on her side and closed her eyes. Anger ate her and she slammed her fist into the sofa cushions a few times. After all that Felicity had done, her ex was so damn sure Cassandra would take her back. Tears flowed and Cassandra wiped them away. It was hard not to feel hurt and angry all over again at the memory of Felicity’s betrayal, but it also upset her that for a brief second she had considered taking her back. It was hard dating in the small town where she lived, but she didn’t like being away from her mother for long periods of time.

It had been very difficult when she had lived in Paris as a model and had to deal with

daily phone calls from her mother's caretaker. Galina had never really understood where Cassandra was during that time. Cassandra had sent her dozens of postcards and photos of Paris, and though Galina had decorated her bulletin board in her kitchen with them, she could never remember why Cassandra wasn't at home. It was then that Cassandra swore she would never be away from her mother for very long. In doing so, she had significantly cut down on her dating pool.

The apartment felt intensely empty. She could hear the muffled voices of her neighbors arguing, but she felt detached from the world they existed in. Maybe she was just fooling herself. She lived in the shadows of the world pretending to be normal. Though she was popular at the restaurant and people tended to like her, she was always aware of the distance that was between them. Even her ex-girlfriends had felt the gap between Cassandra and them even though she tried very hard to share her life with them. Often her exes attributed the disconnect between them to Cassandra's mysterious side job working security. When Felicity had left in a tidal wave of rage and indignation, one of her last angry slings in Cassandra's direction was to shout, "I don't even know you! You're a shadow!"

Cassandra hated to admit it, but she was lonely. Though Felicity had hurt her terribly, she missed her ex banging around in the kitchen making dinner, chatting about her job at the bank, or her latest reality TV show obsession, or their times snuggling on the couch watching movies.

Darkness filled the apartment, save for the kitchen where she had left the light on. Staring through the doorway at the gleaming white and black tiles under the bright light, Cassandra sighed. It was way too symbolic of her life. While she lay in darkness on the sofa, the light seemed far away and unobtainable.

Plus, she didn't want to get up and turn it off.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes, swearing she would just rest her eyes for a bit. Within

seconds, sleep claimed her.

The bell over the door jingled, drawing her gaze upwards. Cassandra paused in the doorway of the ice cream parlor, confused, disoriented, and a little unnerved.

The shop's decor was mostly pink and white with flashes of bright red. The booths were red leather and sat like sentinels on either side of white tables edged in pink. The white wrought-iron chairs and tables decorated with fancy curlicues and flourishes scattered along the white-tiled floor gave the setting a little flavor. A young man in a white apron and little cap waited behind a counter for her to order.

Her boot heels ringing against the floor, Cassandra slowly approached the long counter. An array of brightly-colored ice cream filled the display behind the highly polished glass. Tucking one hand into her jean pocket, she felt for her slim wallet, relieved when she felt the soft leather.

“What will you be having today?” the man said in a thick West Texan accent. He lifted an ice cream scoop, the metal flashing in the bright light pouring through the white curtains covering the windows.

“Uh...” Cassandra bit her lip. There were so many flavors to choose from that it was a little overwhelming.

“Get the peppermint. It's wickedly good,” a voice said beside her.

Turning, Cassandra sharply drew in her breath.

The woman from Vegas stood beside of her. Clad in a long, olive handkerchief skirt and tan crochet halter top adorned with polished stones that revealed slim shoulders and a taut stomach, the bronze-haired woman smiled warmly.

“Seriously, the peppermint is the best. Though, the mint-chocolate chip is a close second.” Leaning against the counter, the woman said, “Could I have a scoop of both in a cup?”

“Sure thing!” The man in the apron immediately began chiseling the thick sweet creamy goodness into rounded servings.

Cassandra couldn’t stop staring at the other woman. Golden lashes framed pretty blue eyes and there was a faint smattering of freckles on her nose. Cassandra was a sucker for freckles.

Returning her gaze to Cassandra, the woman smiled. “What are you going to get?”

“Okay, now I know I’m hungry and hard up,” Cassandra muttered.

Lifting an eyebrow, the woman said, “Oh?”

Though she recognized she was in a dream, Cassandra nonetheless ran a hand over her hair to make sure it was tidy before straightening her thin leather cropped jacket. “Uh, yeah. I’m dreaming about the hot chick I saw in Vegas and ice cream, so horny and hungry.”

“Hot chick? Horny?” Another eyebrow rose.

“I’m so glad this is just a dream, because I’m usually way smoother than this,” Cassandra quipped with a wink.

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With an amused smile, the other woman said, “Oh, I see. So I’m the hot chick from Vegas, huh?”

Leaning against the counter, arms folded over her breasts, Cassandra nodded. “Totally. Though I made you more of a hippie chick in my dream. I wonder why?”

Appearing flattered and even more amused, the woman said, “Maybe because I’m a witch.”

“That’s it!” Cassandra raised her hand and flexed her fingers. “That magical buzz you left on my hand. I made you into a witch in my imagination.”

“Uh huh. Sure.”

Cassandra felt her knees going weak when the woman gave her a sultry sidelong look while she reached for her cup of ice cream.

“Going to get any ice cream? It’s calorie free since we’re--you’re dreaming.”

Cassandra shrugged. “Sure. Chocolate. Two scoops and syrup.”

“Sure thing, ma’am!” The over-enthusiastic ice cream scooper went back to work, chipping away at the creamy chocolate in the bin.

“Not adventurous I see. You stick with the basics.”

“Are you teasing me?” Cassandra smirked.

“Uh huh.” The other woman licked some ice cream off her pink plastic spoon.

“So, woman of my dreams, what name shall I give you?”

“Aimee.”

“Aimee?” Cassandra mulled this over. She had never dated a girl with that name, nor had it ever registered as one of her favorite names. “I wonder why I picked that one.”

“Oh, you didn’t. My mother did.”

Cassandra scrunched up her brow. “Uh, sure.” She claimed her cup of ice cream dripping in chocolate sauce.

Aimee spooned some green ice cream into her mouth, smiling mysteriously.

“I have to say, I don’t usually dream so vividly about eating ice cream,” Cassandra said after a hesitant beat in their conversation. “The hot woman totally fits my usual M.O., but the rest of this...”

Walking to a booth, her long skirt swirling around her battered cowboy boots, Aimee beckoned for Cassandra to follow. “Join me?”

Taking the benches on either side of one of the tables, they set their treats on the gleaming white table. Cassandra slumped in her seat and stared openly at the gorgeous woman across from her.

“And if this is a sex dream, it’s really off to a slow start,” Cassandra muttered while jabbing at the firm lump of ice cream.

“Sex dream?” Aimee laughed. “Oh, no. It’s not a sex dream. It’s a magic dream.”

Cassandra pouted a little. “I could use a good sex dream.”

Flipping her long, shimmering bronze hair over one shoulder before leaning her elbows on the table, Aimee gazed thoughtfully at Cassandra. “Really?”

With a loud laugh, Cassandra shook her head. “Okay, I’m feeling embarrassed in a dream. My own dream. Gawd, I need to just wake up, eat something, and finger bang to Lana Del Rey.”

Aimee’s hand lashed out and she gripped Cassandra’s forearm tightly. “Don’t wake up. Please.” Her delicate features were drawn into a mask of desperation. “It took a lot of power to make this dream happen. I don’t know if I can do it again. I didn’t have that much of your hair to both track you and cast the dream spell.”

In small graduations, Cassandra’s mind fit all the pieces together. “No, no. Can’t be.”

Aimee smirked, released her arm, and started stabbing at her ice cream with her spoon. “Uh huh.”

Gulping, Cassandra shook her head. “No way.”

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“Way. You left one little hair clip behind. I managed to get a few strands off of it. That’s how I managed to locate you and then perform this dream spell. It’s not very easy to do with such a small bit of foci, but I managed. Usually the setting for the dream would be created by memories from your mind so you would be more comfortable, but since the spell is a little on the weak side I placed us in my favorite ice cream shop in the town near where I live,” Aimee explained.

“No, no...” Cassandra shook her head adamantly, despite the fact she was actually starting to believe the woman across from her.

“My name really is Aimee, and I really am a witch. A real witch. Full-blooded. I saw you at The Stratosphere when Frank, my bastard vampire master, and I were on our way to get a relic you stole.”

“My brain could easily fill that into my dream,” Cassandra protested. “I had a rough moment, felt a little lonely, so I’m dreaming about the beautiful woman I saw in Vegas.”

Tilting her head to one side, Aimee grinned. “You think I’m beautiful?”

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “Duh. You’re totally my type.”

“So you definitely like women,” Aimee said, nodding to herself. With a keen look in her eyes, she said, “That makes sense.”

“This dream isn’t making any sense.”

Aimee spooned some ice cream into her mouth and continued to thoughtfully scrutinize Cassandra.

Pushing her dish aside, Cassandra leaned over the table, staring into the mesmerizing blue eyes. "If you're not part of my dream, prove it."

Aimee licked her spoon.

The mere sight sent shivers through Cassandra. "Are you sure this isn't a sex dream?"

Lightly touching Cassandra's hand, Aimee shook her head.

Cassandra felt the same tantalizing energy flow between them.

"I'm a witch. You're a dhamphir," Aimee said in a soft, yet urgent voice. "You stole something from Frank, my vampire master, and now he wants you. He's already dealing with a broker to bring you to where we live. He's setting a trap. I'm fairly sure that you're going to be commissioned to acquire something from Frank to lure you here. Frank has instructed me to create spells that will trap you. He wants to make you his minion."

"Frank? A vampire named Frank?" Cassandra snorted. "Kinda lame."

"His original name is Francois. He's French."

Cassandra stared at their touching hands, a knot slowly forming in her gut. "This can't be real."

"It is."

"So, when this job comes down, I'm not supposed to go, huh?"

“No, I want you to come here.” Tears shimmered in the other woman’s eyes. “I want to be free. I want to escape here. I want to be free of Frank. If you come here, you can help me escape him.”

Cassandra swallowed the lump in her throat. “Okay, so let’s say this is real. Why would you trust me to rescue you? You don’t even know my name.”

“Because of this.” Aimee lifted their hands. “When I touched you I felt safe. Instantly. Maybe it makes no sense, but I somehow knew you were important. Didn’t you feel something?”

With a nod, Cassandra admitted it to herself and Aimee. She had felt something she didn’t understand. “Maybe that’s why I’m dreaming all this.”

“No, this dream is because of the spell. Please, believe me.” Aimee’s fingers were trembling.

“Fine, Aimee, it’s real. What am I supposed to do? Come in with guns blazing?” Cassandra laid her other hand over their entwined fingers. “I’m a thief, not Rambo.”

Biting her lower lip, Aimee hesitated, then said, “Just come. I’ll have spells ready to help us escape.”

“Why don’t you do it on your own?”

“I can’t,” Aimee whispered. “I’m bonded to Frank.”

“So what will me being there change?”

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Lowering her eyes, the witch appeared to struggle with what to say next. Finally, she gazed at Cassandra through her lashes and whispered, “Your blood. It can break the bond. I’ve been studyi

ng up on your kind and that’s one of the effects of your blood. It destroys the vampire bond.”

“Oh.” Cassandra wasn’t too sure what to think of that development, but it was difficult for her to see the other woman in so much distress. It was obvious from the pained expression on Aimee’s face and her trembling hands that she was incredibly unhappy and afraid.

“Please, come,” Aimee whispered.

Withdrawing her hands, Cassandra stared at the chocolate ice cream melting in the bowl. “My name is Cassandra, Aimee.”

Tears flecking her lashes, Aimee smiled. “Cassandra. I like it.”

“I can’t promise you anything,” Cassandra said at last. “I’m not even sure any of this is real. And... I may be good in a fight, but taking on a vampire in his own haven is not something I’ve done before.”

“I understand.” Aimee pressed her lips together, nodding.

“Aimee,” Cassandra whispered, reaching out to grip her hand.

Tucking her hands out of sight on her lap, Aimee stared out the window. “Frank always says that I live in my own bubble. That he can never quite touch me. I’ve never reached out to anyone for help before.” With a soft sob, Aimee shook her head. “And I shouldn’t have now.” She slid out of the booth, her long skirt whispering over the vinyl.

Cassandra scrambled after her, but the witch moved so swiftly the door to the cafe slammed shut before she could reach her.

The strains of a PJ Harvey song woke Cassandra. Gasping, groggy, and disoriented, she flailed about until she found the cellphone.

“Hello,” she grunted.

“Cassandra, how is my favorite girl?” Scott’s voice asked.

“Okay. What’s up?” Rubbing her face, she slid up into a sitting position.

“I have a new job for you. A very lucrative one.”

A chill slid down Cassandra’s spine.

“Oh?”

“Yes, it’s in West Texas outside of Marfa. Not that far from home for you.”

“Scott, you’ve obviously never been to Texas. I’m in East Texas. That’s over a day drive for me.”

“Oh. Well, anyway. It’s the procurement of a Chinese artifact. Our client would like it returned to his home country.”

“Is this a norm or a super?”

“Supernatural. The person possessing the relic is a vampire named Frank.”

Cassandra swallowed. “Frank?”

“Yes. Frank.”

“Kind of a stupid name for a vampire,” she said, the déjà vu hitting her hard.

“His name is really Francois,” Scott answered. “He’s French.”

“French, huh?” Wincing, she ran her fingers through her hair. The dream had been real. Shit.

“Yes, originally. What does it matter?”

“What’s the danger level on this?”

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“Minor. He’s a low level vampire with no supernatural guards. You’ll be able to get in and out of his place relatively easily. He’s going to be out of town this weekend.”

Closing her eyes, Cassandra pondered Aimee’s plea. “That’s really short notice.”

“Make it work, Cassandra,” Scott said, his voice even, but full of steel. “You won’t regret taking this job. You’ll be exceedingly well paid.”

“So the client is Chinese, huh? Did you talk to him?”

“I talked to his people. You know how it is. No direct contact.”

Pressing her tingling hand to her cheek, Cassandra took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. So Frank was using a dummy contact to set the trap. That made sense. She didn’t want to think of Aimee’s desperate plea, but it echoed in her soul. “Okay. Email me the deets.”

“Excellent.” Scott hung up.

Holding the cellphone against her breasts, Cassandra sighed. “Shit. Why do pretty women always get me in trouble?”

Chapter 10:

Hope

The darkness greeted Aimee when she awakened. The heaviness of the gloom felt

smothering, and threatening. Unnerved, she quickly turned on the lamp next to her bed. Light flooded the room and filled her with relief. She was alone.

It had been risky casting the spell while Frank was awake, but she had been desperate. A lie about having a headache had excused her from Frank's planning session. He'd been so engrossed in plotting the capture of the dhamphir--Cassandra--that he had barely acknowledged Aimee's departure.

It had most likely all been for naught. Aimee realized that truth now. She was trapped in Frank's power and no one was going to save her. Why would a complete stranger come to rescue her? Even if that stranger was obviously attracted to her?

Despite her disappointment, Aimee felt her face flush at the memory of Cassandra's attention. It had been both flattering and unsettling. Though she was used to men being attracted to her, Aimee never felt any sort of reciprocal feelings. Her bond to Frank kept her from being drawn to anyone else but him. Or at least that is what she had believed until now.

"Great," she mumbled, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Not only was she disappointed that Cassandra would most likely not risk herself to come save her, Aimee felt a surprisingly sharp stab of regret that she would not see her again. The truth could not be denied. Aimee was very attracted to Cassandra in a way she had never been drawn to anyone else. That revelation was shocking, yet freeing. For years she had thought there was something wrong with her because she could never quite connect with Frank even though he had been her first and only lover. She had definitely been infatuated with him, but it had never felt like she expected love to feel. It was only in the last year or so that she had admitted to herself she had never loved Frank at all. The touch of Cassandra's hand had electrified her in a way that Frank's never had.

Pressing her fingers to her lips, she could still feel the tingling sensation of their mingled powers. More tears slid from her eyes and Aimee brushed them away. So not only was she a member of a nearly-extinct race and enslaved by a vampire, she was also most likely a lesbian who was falling for a woman she would never see again.

The bedroom door slammed open without any warning. Frank stood in the doorway dressed immaculately in black trousers, a wine-colored silk shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and matching tinted glasses.

“Get up. I need you. Now.”

Rolling into a sitting position, Aimee shoved her feet into her flip-flops and sat perched on the end of the bed. “What now?”

“I just got confirmation that the dhamphir is coming. I need you to get your ass out here, look over our plans, and tell me what spells you can cast to help capture her.”

Stomach fluttering, Aimee pivoted around. “She is?”

“Yes, she is. C’mon, my little witch. We have much to do. I don’t want to lose this one.” Frank gestured at her impatiently.

Rising slowly, Aimee struggled to contain her emotions. Elation mingled with fear and gave birth to vibrant hope.

“Were you crying?” Frank asked shortly. He despised tears, considering them a sign of weakness.

“Migraines hurt, Frank,” Aimee curtly replied.

When she was close enough, he gripped her head between his hands, startling her and

making her freeze in place. The fingers that could so easily crush her skull slid through her hair, pressing lightly. It took her a few seconds to realize he was rubbing the pressure points on her scalp, trying to alleviate her pain.

“Does this feel better?” he asked impatiently, yet his voice was laced with actual concern.

She nodded mutely. Tucking her hands behind her back, she tried to hide their trembling.

Frank drew her close, kissing her forehead, his hands sliding over her back. “God, I love you so much. Do you know that?”

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“I’m your favorite possession, I know,” Aimee answered, unnerved. It was as if he sensed her affections might be directed at another and was trying to lay claim to her.

“I don’t want you to worry about the dhamphir. I’ve decided to keep her. It will take some time and a lot of work to bond her to me completely, but it’ll be worth it. I can ditch brokers and use her to gather all my lovely relics. And you don’t have to worry about me fucking her. I got a little more information on her. It seems she would be a lot more interested in fucking you.”

Aimee tensed as Frank’s hands stilled on her body. There was no way he could know about the dream. Or was there?

Frank’s voice was a dangerous purr in her ear. “Maybe, my naughty little witch, she can play with you while I watch.”

“Spoken like a true perv, Frank,” she snapped.

“Ah, so you weren’t serious about going lesbian?” Laughing, he released her and stepped into the hallway. “Getting my hopes up and then crushing them?”

Rolling her eyes, Aimee brushed past him. “You’re an asshole, Frank.”

Snagging her arm, Frank pulled her about. His lips were cold against hers as he lavished a long, passionate kiss upon her mouth. It took all her willpower not to jerk away.

“You’ll always be my special, favorite girl,” he whispered against her lips.

Aimee forced a smile, tilting her head slightly to one side. Beyond Frank she saw a towering figure with rippling muscles beneath a black t-shirt speaking with Ivan, the head of security. “Who’s that?”

“That’s Michael. He’s going to help prepare my security for the dhamphir.” Frank lifted an eyebrow at her. “Did he catch your eye?”

“Only because he’s not your regular goon,” Aimee answered, sensing Frank’s jealousy.

Michael glanced their way, flashing a grin that was far too charming on his very handsome face. His thick curly black hair, dark eyes, and powerful physique were the stuff of bodice rippers. “I’m not a regular goon. I’m a special goon.” Sauntering over, he held out his huge hand. “Michael De Luca.”

“Aimee,” she answered, watching her hand disappear under his fingers. His skin was very warm and it unnerved her for some reason.

Releasing her, Michael stood next to Frank, dwarfing the Frenchman. “I’m looking forward to working with you. Frank says you’re a kick ass witch with a lot of tricks up y

our sleeve. Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

Warily, Aimee nodded. “So to speak.”

Placing a hand on Michael’s bicep, Frank grinned. “And she’s all mine.”

“Then you’re a lucky man,” Michael decided, winking at Aimee.

Bristling a bit, Frank said to Aimee, “Michael is the best. I’ve been trying to woo him

into my lair for years.”

His grin broadening, a light blush touched Michael’s cheeks. “When you say things like that I feel all fluttery.”

“He’s also a wise ass, which I love. It’s an attractive trait in men, not smart-mouthed witches.” Frank smirked mirthlessly. “Michael is one of the best hunters out there.”

“Then shouldn’t you be afraid of him?” Aimee asked pointedly.

“I don’t hunt the people who employ me,” Michael assured her with another wink.

Unnerved, Aimee nodded briefly. The man was charming, handsome, and incredibly attractive, but something about him made her very nervous.

“Are you actually worried about me?” Frank asked Aimee, his voice edged dangerously with sarcasm.

“Of course,” she lied.

Frank stared at her for a long moment, “That was a lie.”

Michael sensed the growing tension and turned to Frank. “So, why don’t we go over our plans one more time before we start implementation?”

“Yes! Let’s get to it,” Frank said rubbing his hands together, his white teeth gleaming behind his cocky smile. “Time to get to work to catch me a dhamphir.”

Chapter 11:

Ruminations and Revelations

Cassandra let herself into her mother's home after stopping by the restaurant to take care of her schedule. Buzzing from the blood she had sipped from the throat of a co-worker, her body felt like it was vibrating with the power. So much for being on the blood wagon. She had fed out of necessity. In order to head out to West Texas to rescue Aimee, she needed more time off for work. The only way to persuade the restaurant manager to alter the schedule and not fire her ass was to thrall her. Cassandra didn't like forcing others to do her will, but she had no choice.

Galina was in her small sewing room, bent over the machine Cassandra had bought her for Christmas. Much to Galina's delight it was a high end model that could do a lot of fancy stitching.

"Hey, Mom," Cassandra said, leaning her hip against the sewing table.

"I made you a blouse!" Galina exclaimed, holding up some pink fabric. It looked like a little girl's top. Almost instantly, her mother's face fell. "Oh, I made it too small."

A pattern for a child's blouse and skirt was carefully laid out on the big table Galina used to cut the fabric.

"It's okay, Mom. We'll donate it to Goodwill or the church. It's really pretty. I would have loved it when I was a kid," Cassandra lied. She was very happy her mother hadn't taken up sewing until after she was eighteen and out of the house. She

shuddered to think of the outfits her mother would have made her wear.

“I keep forgetting that you’re all grown up.” Galina bit her bottom lip, snatched up her notebook, and scoured through the pages.

“Ah, that’s your problem,” Cassandra said, leaning over and carefully extracting a photograph from the worn pages. “This goes in the front of the book.”

It was a cute photo of Galina clutching a gangly-limbed little girl who was missing a few teeth and sporting a horrible Mary Lou Retton haircut. Cassandra took the notebook from her mother’s hand and placed the picture at the front of the notebook on a page that described the photo and the date it was taken on.

“Oh,” Galina said, frowning.

Cassandra flipped through the notebook and found the most recent photo of them. It had been taken at Christmas. Though Galina looked exactly like she had in the first photo, Cassandra was glad to see her old haircut and missing teeth were a thing of the past. “See, this is me now. I’ll put this in the back of the notebook.” Cassandra clipped it to the latest entries and handed the notebook back.

Instantly, Galina’s face lit up. “That’s right! You’re all grown up!” Pressing the notebook to her chest, Galina smiled. “You’re so pretty. You look like your father.”

“I look like you,” Cassandra answered, gently tucking a stray strand of her mother’s hair behind one ear. “Everyone says so.”

“Is Felicity here?” Galina looked over her shoulder. “Oh, wait.” The notebook had several colorful tabs sticking out of the pages and Galina turned to a specific one labeled with a Sharpie pen. She read it, then said with excitement. “I remember! I don’t like Felicity because she cheated on you!”

“That’s right, Mom.” The pain that would have stung at such a comment before was surprisingly missing. Cassandra rubbed her hands together nervously, not really sure if she was ready to accept why that was the case. She was still reeling from the dream and Scott’s phone call. The beauty of the witch’s eyes and her plea haunted her.

“Are you staying for dinner? I have a chicken roasting. Well, not me. Teresa is roasting it, but when the timer goes off I have to get it out because she already went home for the night.”

“Actually, I think I’ll crash here for tonight if that’s okay. I need to do a little research and I miss my mom.”

“I miss you, too! All the time!” Her mother clasped her hands together joyfully. “I’m going to make us a wonderful dinner!”

The beauty of her mother’s smile never failed to touch Cassandra’s heart. The simplicity of her mother’s mind was heartbreaking, but lovely. Galina’s motherly love was the power that had kept Cassandra from falling into despair and following a dark path.

After dinner, Cassandra escaped into her mother’s second bedroom that was set up as a small office with a desk, bookshelves, and a futon. Powering up the big desktop computer, Cassandra collapsed into the swivel chair and rubbed her face. She had to be crazy to do what she was planning all because of a pretty girl and a weird dream. With a weary sigh, she logged in, pulled up Skype, then entered her password. Tugging on her lip as she waited for the program to fully load, she sat with her feet tucked on the edge of the chair. Being long, lean and a dhamphir, it was easy to fit onto the very small office chair. The way she was perched probably made her look inhuman. The vampire powers singing in her blood agreed.

Scrolling down, she found the name she was looking for and initiated the call. Dr.

Summerfield always kept Skype open behind his other windows while he worked and if he didn't answer right away, he would call back within a matter of minutes either from his computer or phone.

When Jeff Summerfield's face popped onto the screen, Cassandra was a little surprised. "Hey, Boy Wonder. What's up?"

Shoveling cereal into his mouth, Jeff chewed vigorously. "Starving. Just got home from the book store." His thick eyelashes hid his pretty eyes as he averted them. Unruly brown hair fell over his brow, badly needing a trim, and he wore a faded t-shirt emblazoned with the Batman symbol. He vividly reminded her of the little boy she used to run around with playing games and getting into mischief with at summer camp.

"Still playing Giles?" She loved to tease him and giggled despite the seriousness of her situation. Jeff and Cassandra shared a secret that made him a bumbling nervous wreck around her, which amused her to no end. She supposed they should one day talk out what had happened, but she rather enjoyed his awkwardness. Maybe it was mean of her, but she couldn't help it.

"Uh, so sick of that joke. I think I hate Buffy now." Jeff rolled his eyes and wiped a drop of milk from his lips.

"Ha, I don't believe that for a second. You have a soft spot for blondes. I've seen how you get all googly-eyed around them."

"Notice my eyes rolling sarcastically," Jeff said, then dramatically did so.

"So is your dad around? I need to talk to him. It's urgent."

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“Gonna join the gang finally?” Jeff asked, arching an eyebrow.

“I’ll let your dad and his

cronies hunt the monsters.”

Jeff shrugged nonchalantly. “We could use you.”

“Ah, he dragged you in, huh?”

“It’s kind of my legacy. Getting your leg torn off by a vampire when you’re a kid kinda makes you want to get rid of the baddies.”

Cassandra felt a little disappointed that Jeff was entering his father’s dangerous world, but at the same time couldn’t blame him. She had beat up more than one kid for making fun of his prosthetic leg when they had been at camp or on vacation. The vampire who had ripped it off was now dead, but she could understand how Jeff would want to make sure no one else suffered his fate.

“I’m just not on board with the whole killing the monsters thing. You know, since I’m a monster.”

“You’re a good monster though,” Jeff insisted.

She shrugged in response. With the blood of an innocent human singing through her veins it was hard not to feel a little like a bad guy. “So, can I talk to your dad?”

“Sure, sure.” Jeff swiveled around in the chair and yelled for his dad.

Cassandra could see one of the professor’s many cats walking across the bookcases in the background. The Summerfields’ Victorian was a little on the shabby side, but she always liked the library that the professor used as a study.

Twisting back around, Jeff said, “So what are you up to then? If you’re not joining up?”

“I’m going to go save a damsel in distress,” Cassandra responded truthfully.

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

Jeff shook his head, amused. “You and the women.”

“You’re just all mopey because I get all the girls,” Cassandra teased.

Chewing more cereal, Jeff shrugged, blushing. “Well, yeah. You have that whole bad girl vibe going on and I’m the dweeb, you girlfriend stealer.”

“Oh my gawd, will you ever let me live that down? I did not mean to steal your girlfriend at camp that year! When will you drop it?”

Leaning toward the webcam, Jeff glowered playfully and said, “Never!”

Cassandra stuck out her tongue.

“Jeff, scoot on out of my chair,” a deep voice with a very thick Texan accent ordered.

“See you later, Wonder Woman,” Jeff said, then moved off-screen.

Dr. Summerfield’s bulging tummy hidden by his wrinkled white shirt came into view, then he settled into the chair his son had abandoned. He looked the same as she remembered him; nice open face, a receding hairline of snow white hair, and large-rimmed glasses tucked over his piercing blue eyes. “Cassandra,” he drawled. “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing your pretty face?”

“Hey, Doc. I need your help on something,” she answered. Seeing the professor made her miss him all the more. His role in her life had been that of a kindly, supportive uncle. Throughout her childhood he had made certain that she and her mother were well-provided for and safe from the dangerous world of Cassandra’s father.

“Is this for one of your jobs?” The professor frowned. He did not approve of her side profession.

“Actually, it is.” She quickly gave him the lowdown, explaining everything she had encountered since the night in Vegas.

“A full-blooded witch is what you’re talking about,” Dr. Summerfield said, his brow slightly furrowing. “Those are rare.”

“She told me it’s a trap, but she’s bonded to the vampire. So if she’s enslaved to him, is she luring me in? Lying? For him?” Cassandra chewed on her bottom lip worriedly. Her gut told her that Aimee was being truthful, but Cassandra knew she was a sucker for a beautiful face. Felicity was a prime example of that.

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“Give me one moment.” The professor vacated his chair and the sounds of him puttering around his library sizzled through the computer speakers.

Gnawing on her thumbnail, Cassandra waited anxiously. Her emotions were a tangled mix. Obviously, if she went to West Texas she would be going into a trap, but she couldn't ignore Aimee's plea if it was sincere.

Huffing a little, Dr. Summerfield settled into his creaky chair with a very old-looking book clasped in his veiny hands. “Okay, according to this account, vampires have been attempting to enslave witches for thousands of years, but have found it very difficult to actually accomplish for an extended period of time. There have been multiple attempted purges of the full-blood witches. Vampires fear them because they cannot control them.”

“So Aimee is not enslaved to the vampire?” Cassandra frowned at the thought. The woman's distress had felt genuine in the dream, but then again, it had been just a dream.

“Well, she might be. Vampires apparently can enslave a witch, but it's not on the same level they can enslave a human. Once a vampire feeds a human its blood a few times, that human will do anything for the vampire. The human feels an intense, passionate love for the vampire.” Dr. Summerfield read a few more passages, turning a page. “Witches, though, are not fully captivated. Though the bond forces them to obey, they don't ever feel the euphoric love the humans do. Therefore, witches were known to find ways around the blood bond to betray their vampire masters and destroy them.”

“Such as contacting a dhamphir in a dream and asking her to go help you kill your vampire master.” Cassandra rubbed her face vigorously and groaned. “So she’s legit, and I’m really doing this.”

Dr. Summerfield set the book down and rested his hands on it. It bothered Cassandra to see how his fingers trembled. He had suffered a minor stroke a few months back and Jeff was worried about him. Cassandra could understand why. If anything happened to her mother, she didn’t know how she could handle it.

“Cassandra, I don’t like asking you to go into dangerous situations, but if this Aimee is a real, true full-blood witch, you must save her and bring her to me. A witch is very rare and should be protected.”

“So it’s not enough that she’s an innocent woman being forced into slavery by a man?” Cassandra asked sarcastically.

With a weary sigh, the old man shook his head. “Cassandra, please. You know what I’m saying. Aimee is a rarity. The vampires did a very good job eliminating the race. The black witches have only a smidgen of their abilities and that’s why they turn to demons for power. Aimee could be a great force for good in this world if she were free of this vampire. The Assembly could use her.”

“I get that,” Cassandra answered. “But she’s also a young woman who is being forced into slavery. That’s enough reason for me to want to go save her and not turn her over to your cronies.”

“Cassandra,” Dr. Summerfield leaned in toward the webcam, “I have told you before that there are dark forces gathering. The Assembly has been hearing murmurings of something dire percolating in the world of the supernatural.”

“You make it sound like the vampire hunters think the baddies are making coffee.”

Cassandra shrugged. "I'm not joining any of your secret societies, vampire hunting groups, or the mysterious Assembly. I'm just trying to live my life and provide for my mother."

Dr. Summerfield sighed, rubbing his forehead lightly. "You give me such headaches."

"Look, I'll go save Aimee. But once she's free of this bozo, she can do what she wants. It's her life."

"It would be safer for her if she came here," Dr. Summerfield protested.

"I don't know that."

"Throughout your childhood I made sure you were safe."

"And now I take care of myself and my mom." Cassandra folded her arms over her knees and glared over them. "Look, I knew contacting you would possibly dredge up the whole 'Cassandra, you should be a vampire hunter' argument, but I don't have the need to go kill daddy over and over again like other dhamphirs. Haven't you driven it into my head my whole life how my father sent my mother away so she would be safe? That it was a noble thing to do?"

"Your father is a good man," Dr. Summerfield said a tad defensively. "I consider him a friend."

"And yet you keep me a big ol' secret."

"Because it's the right thing to do." Dr. Summerfield sounded weary. "I do what I feel is right."

“Exactly. And I have to do what I feel is right. I love you, you know that. But I’m not going to turn Aimee over to you or your cronies.”

“Will you at least tell her about me and my work and give her the option?”

With a sharp exhalation, Cassandra lifted a shoulder.

“What does that mean?” Dr. Summerfield smiled.

“Sure. I’ll tell her.”

“Thank you. And you really should consider joining the Assembly.”

“Uh huh. Whatevs.”

The old man sighed. “Ah, Cassandra. As stubborn as your father.”

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“So you say.” Cassandra wished she could go back in time to the days when she and Jeff got into all sorts of terrible trouble while Dr. Summerfield looked on with affection. It had been a much better time in their relationship. She hated their usual argument about her joining his top secret vampire hunting society. “Anyway, I need to know one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Can dhamphir blood break a vampire bond?”

Dr. Summerfield’s face blanched. “Yes. Yes, it can. One of the many reasons why vampires want your kind dead.”

“Other than our tendency to kill our daddies?”

He nodded.

“Well, that settles it. I guess I’m going to go rescue a beautiful witch from a nasty old vampire and help her break the bond.”

“Be careful, Cassandra. The vampire has laid a trap and may exert more influence over the witch than we know.”

With a wide smile, Cassandra answered. “Well, I guess I’ll find out one way or the other.”

Amusement filling his voice, Dr. Summerfield teasingly said, “She must be very

beautiful.”

“Oh, she’s totally hot. Smokin’! But even if she looked like Jabba the Hutt, I would rescue her. No woman should be enslaved against her will.” Cassandra shuddered at the thought.

“Yes, but there is a certain twinkle in your eyes that you reserve for the women who catch you

r eye.”

“Oh, she caught both of them,” Cassandra admitted.

Wearing the expression of a concerned older uncle, he said, “Be careful, Cassandra. Be very, very careful. Sometimes, the knight in shining armor gets eaten by the dragon.”

“Oh, I’m not a knight in shining armor,” Cassandra corrected him. “I’m the ninja sneaking up the back stairs.”

Chapter 12:

Entangled Further

The rich scent of incense filled the room as it slithered from the sticks burning near the cauldron. Aimee kneeled before the fireplace Frank had installed just for her. It was just big enough to fit her cauldron and light a low fire beneath its dark, bulky shape. At her side, the elements for her spells were laid out on a swatch of white cotton. The fragrance of the herbs mingled with the incense, giving the room a rich atmosphere.

Magic crackled along her skin while the crystals set around her in a circle glowed softly. Despite the growing warmth in the room, Aimee felt the breeze of her magic fluttering her hair and cooling her skin.

Aimee had been mixing all day and already a small cluster of spells sat in a big white ceramic bowl near the circle. Some were made entirely of dried herbs and were wrapped with white cotton thread. Others were liquid, and sloshed around in small stoppered vials. Seven empty cotton drawstring bags sat piled ready for the most powerful of her concoctions.

Drawing in a deep breath, Aimee held the air in her lungs, pulling her stomach in and holding her spine straight. Gradually, she exhaled, eyes closed, concentrating on the energies shimmering around her.

A smile upon her lips, she started to add ingredients to the white soapstone mortar resting on the hearth. Fingers tingling, she ground the herbs with the pestle, gently twisting her wrist as she infused her magic into the concoction.

The bedroom door slammed open, startling her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Frank recoil as the incense hit him.

“Frank, I’m busy! You’re ruining this spell!” she yelled. The energy around her spiraled into chaos and she felt the spell dissipate. “Dammit. You did ruin it.”

“I don’t care. Get out here,” Frank ordered. “You’ve been in there all day according to Ivan. Now I want you out here with me.”

“I thought you wanted the spells ready for the dhamphir,” Aimee retorted.

Setting his hands on the door jamb, Frank glowered at her. “You know, you’ve been getting a little cocky lately.”

Licking her lips, Aimee tried to still the sudden panic swelling within her. “I just need to concentrate,” she said in a softer tone. “Interruptions ruin spells.”

Studying her, Frank shifted on his feet, resting a shoulder on the door, and folded his arms over his chest. It was a dangerous pose for him. It meant he was calculating something in his head. “Get out here.”

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“My circle is formed. Let me finish.”

“What are you making? I can’t enter.” Frank held out a hand, then winced.

“It’s the herbs to repel the dhamphir.”

“Well, they’re repelling me and I don’t like it.”

“Frank, you know that the herbs I use aren’t always vampire-friendly.”

“I should burn that damn garden. I can’t even go out on the patio.” Frank was testy and growing increasingly agitated.

Aimee stilled herself, sitting quietly before her hearth, her head bowed. She hoped she looked submissive. With a sigh, she picked up two of the crystals, opening the circle.

“Get out here,” Frank ordered yet again.

Reeling in her power, Aimee shifted her weight so she could cover her spell ingredients with white cloths.

Frank snapped his fingers at her.

“I have to take care of my ingredients, Frank!”

“There’s that mouth again. Flapping at me, irritating me. Defying me!”

“I’m doing what you want!” Aimee shouted at him, losing her temper. Instantly, she knew she had made a mistake.

The vampire attempted to step into the room, but when thwarted by the spells Aimee had created, he motioned irritably to someone in the hallway. With a haughty expression, Frank stepped away from the doorway, straightening his jacket cuffs while Ivan barreled into the room. Aimee was sorely tempted to close the circle and defy Frank, but she knew it wouldn’t stop him. A circle could hold out interfering spiritual entities and even a physical assault, but it wouldn’t hold against a firearm. She’d witnessed Ivan shoot one of the blood minions in the leg for being in the house without a summons.

The mere fact she could contemplate such an act without it instantly being smothered by the bond to Frank startled her. She was breaking free of his influence and he knew it. Fear ripped through her as Ivan reached down and dragged her to her feet.

“Frank, I was obeying you,” she whimpered.

Ivan pulled her out of the remains of the circle, upturning some of the crystals. Fingers digging into her upper arm, Ivan shoved her toward Frank. The temptation to turn and blast the guard through the wall was nearly irresistible.

Snagging her around the waist, Frank ushered her down the long hallway. Her bare feet pattered against the cold stone tiles and her simple white dress fluttered around her ankles.

“I should have realized that you were slipping away,” Frank said in a terse voice. “I’m used to your little quirks, but the defiance in your eyes that usually turns me on has been turned up a few notches.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she lied.

Frank whirled her about and shoved her against the wall. Holding her in place with one hand pressed against her throat, he gazed at her through the red tinted lenses of his glasses. "It drives me crazy that I never feel I can totally possess you. I realize you're a witch and it's always been tricky with your kind." Tightening his grip, Frank cocked his head to one side. "I admit I rather enjoy the fact that I feel like I'm always stalking you and you, my feisty prey, are just beyond my claws. But this..." He jabbed his finger toward her eyes, making her wince and clench them shut. "...this defiance just won't do."

"I was doing what you wanted. Making the spells to catch the dhamphir," Aimee whispered.

Frank released her throat, but his hand closed on her wrist in a tight grip. Dragging her toward his bedroom, he shook his head. "Maybe you were, but I don't have your heart, your mind."

"Frank..." Aimee wailed, his sharp nails drawing blood.

The vampire entered his bathroom and turned on the water in the enormous black garden tub.

"Frank, please..." Aimee raised her free hand, summoning her magic. If she was breaking free of his influence maybe she could...

The water rushed into the tub, churning and foaming.

Feeling muddled and a little sick, Aimee lowered her hand. She couldn't attack Frank. Hurt him. Destroy him. His blood was tangled up in her soul. "Frank," she whispered.

Directing attention to her, Frank smirked. "Ah, maybe I still do have you."

“Frank, please. I obey you,” she said, pleading.

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The blow across her cheek sent her to her knees.

“You were going to do something to me just now, weren’t you? What were you going to do, Aimee?” Frank’s fingers tangled in her long bronze hair.

“Your blood makes me sick,” she wailed. “Don’t please.”

“You reek of magic and those awful herbs,” Frank grumbled. Checking the water level, he seemed satisfied. Using her hair as a leash, he hauled her to her feet, then shoved her into the tub.

The water was icy cold. The shock of it engulfing her body stunned her for a moment, then the water filled her nose and mouth when Frank shoved her beneath the surface before she could take a breath. Submerged, she struggled against Frank while he held her down. Lungs burning, she clawed at his arm. Just as her vision began to spot, he pulled her head out of the water.

Gulping in great breaths of air, Aimee flailed, trying to gain traction on the slick porcelain with her hand

s and feet.

Still gripping a handful of her hair, Frank poured shampoo, body wash, and scented oils over her head. “I’ll get rid of that awful stench.”

“Frank, please, stop!” she gasped, her lips trembling against her chattering teeth.

“You make me do this. You know that, don’t you? You completely manipulate me until I have no recourse!” Frank hurled a bottle of shampoo across the room. It exploded on impact, globs of ivory-colored soap spattering over the red and black tiles. “Everything was going just fine, then I see that look in your eye and I realized you’re fucking with me.”

This time Aimee sensed him tensing the muscles in his arm and held her breath. The water swirled through her hair, obscuring her vision as she listened to the amplified sound of her heart thumping in her chest as the water closed over her.

Again Frank waited until she nearly lost consciousness before yanking her out of the icy grip of the water.

“You make me do this!” Frank shouted at her. Bloody tears drifted down his cheeks. “All I want to do is love you, but you get this little attitude and I know, I just know, that you’re up to no fucking good.”

“I was just making the spells,” Aimee sobbed miserably.

“No, you were hiding from me. Since we got back from Vegas you’ve been closing me off. I thought I was imagining it. You have your peculiarities, but I see your defiance. Why do you think your kind ends up dead so young?” Frank snarled and plunged her under again.

This time, he held Aimee under until she could no longer hold her breath. The edges of her vision began to tunnel awhile her lungs burned for oxygen and her muddled brain fought back. Her magic welled up inside of her, building in intensity. The need to survive fought against the blood bond. Tearing at his wrist with her nails, the water began to turn pink as drops of his vampire blood fell into the water.

Aimee thrashed about in the freezing water desperate for air. The need to breathe was

overwhelming. Her lips parted and she dragged water into her lungs.

It was then her magic overcame the blood bond and erupted out of her. The icy pink water exploded out of the tub in a great wave, knocking Frank onto his back, and sloshing against the ceiling before raining over the bathroom.

Retching, Aimee rolled onto her side, bracing herself against the bottom of the tub. Tremors ran through her body as her ravaged lungs expelled the last of the water. Gurgling, she tried to get to her knees and rested her hand on the edge to pull herself up.

Frank knocked her onto her back and landed on top of her. His glasses were gone and his eyes were like red fire. Pinning her, he stared into her face, his quivering cold fingers pressed against her cheek.

Teeth chattering, her hands braced against his arms, Aimee averted her eyes from his scrutinizing stare. What little of the water remained in the tub sloshed around them.

“The thing that really gets to me,” Frank whispered, his lips brushing hers, “is how much I love you. It drives me nuts. I’ve loved you since I found you. Do you remember how I sought you out? Made you mine? How did I find you, Aimee?”

Aimee didn’t want to cry, but she was. The bond was twisting inside her head, making it difficult to think. Her near drowning had weakened her physically and her magic was slowly rebuilding.

“Answer me, Aimee.”

Frank rarely used her name and the sound of it on his tongue sent shivers through her body.

“You heard about a girl who could move things with her mind living on the streets in El Paso,” Aimee answered in a trembling voice.

“That’s right. And I found you, didn’t I? I knew what I wanted and I found you. I saved you from living on the streets. I didn’t take you home to that freaky religious compound you escaped from, but brought you to my beautiful house.” Slowly, his fingers raked through her sodden hair, pushing it back from her face. “I gave you everything a girl could want, didn’t I?”

Nodding, Aimee whimpered, “Yes.”

Frank’s kiss was tender, but that made it all the worse for her. “And I made love to you, gave you my blood, made you mine. I even fell in love with you.” He slowly inhaled the scent of her hair. “That nasty smell is all gone now.”

“Frank, I’m sorry.”

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“I know, Aimee. I know.” Frank kissed her cheek, his hand tangled in her long hair. “I know you feel sorry when you force me to be this way with you. If you would just obey me, love me, submit to me of your own free will—”

The tone of his voice deepened with his rage and Aimee cried out in terror.

“--I wouldn't have to do this!”

The sharp fangs of the vampire tore into her throat, Frank's lips moving against her damp skin to draw in her blood in great gulps. The pain sliced into her, making her twist under him, trying to break free. Crying and screaming, she tried to push him off her. Though he had the ability to make his bite sensual and erotic, Frank obviously wanted her to feel every rent of her flesh and her blood gushing into his hungry mouth. The agony was so great, she felt as though she could not take it another second. Burying her fingers in his dark hair, she tried to pull him off, but he would not relent. He wanted her to suffer, and suffer she did.

At last Frank finished feeding and licked the wound he had inflicted upon her, compelling it to heal. As his tongue worked against the ragged edges of his bite, she whimpered. At last, he drew back, his face stained red from just under his cheekbones to his chin. Blood rivulets trailed down his neck as he grinned at her.

“Now, your turn. If you won't love me by choice, you will love me by force.”

Slashing his wrist, Frank straddled her. Forcing her mouth open with one hand, he held his bleeding wound over her lips. The blood, cold and bitter, surged into her mouth, choking her.

“Swallow,” he commanded.

Aimee tried not to. She attempted to spit it out.

Angered, Frank shoved the gashed flesh against her mouth, pressing down until she gagged, her lips spread wide around the width of his wrist. His blood poured into her throat.

Weeping, she felt the dark power of the vampire blood slithering through her like the roots of a weed, choking her magic, her will, and her mind. Overwhelmed, frightened, and increasingly confused, Aimee fought to cling to her own soul and strength. The vampire bond tightened around her like a straitjacket, crippling her in its darkness.

Just when she felt she would drown in his power, she felt her fingers tingling. It wasn't the cold, the water, or the loss of blood, but the traces of Cassandra's power that still lingered after her dream. Focusing on the sensation, Aimee fought through the strangling power of the vampire to that one tiny bit of hope. In her mind's eye, she remembered Cassandra's mysterious, compelling smile, and the warmth of her hand. She was still clinging to it when Frank's power smothered her and plunged her into darkness as his lips covered hers.

Part Three:

The Witch and the Dhamphir

Chapter 13 :

Arrival

West Texas was hot as hell.

Even with the rental car air conditioner cranked up all the way, the sun spilling through the windshield felt like it was baking Cassandra alive. She had flung a lightweight denim jacket over her arms to keep the sun from giving her an actual burn. Clad in jeans, cowboy boots, and cowboy hat, Cassandra looked like any other Texan girl, except for her t-shirt bearing the Superman logo. It was mid-afternoon, so she was going to have to bear the sun for a bit longer.

A quick check of the dashboard clock assured her that she was on time. Scott had booked her a motel in Marfa, Texas and she wanted to check-in before grabbing something--and someone--to eat.

The landscape was beige and gold along the road. Dirt swirled through dry brush in little whirlwinds. In the distance the craggy mountains were a dark purple backdrop beneath a pale blue sky empty of clouds. The drive from the Midland-Odessa airport had been uneventful and she was going to make it to Marfa in just under three hours. The heat shimmered over Highway 17 as the rental car Scott had arranged for her sped toward the very small town rising out of the desert. With every mile, her stomach twisted into an even tighter knot. Cassandra had never been so anxious in her life. All her previous jobs had been varying degrees of dangerous, but she had been responsible only for her own survival. Now Aimee's fate rested in her hands.

At last the desert gave way to the small human enclave. Marfa was a quaint town that was an artist haven. As a Texan, Cass had always known about the town, but had never visited. She was impressed with the beauty of the old buildings and the grandeur of the 19th century pink stucco courthouse. A tall white tower adorned with Lady Justice loomed over the rest of the building that looked like something from Europe or the Addams Family with a dash of West Texas flavor.

The town was so small it didn't take long for her to find the place where she would be temporarily staying. The Thunderbird Motel looked like something out of the fifties or sixties. Her destination was a two-story motel with outside door entry. The exterior

was blue stucco and a fancy new sign was perched aloft the wall.

Spotting a Dairy Queen sign down the road, Cassandra opted to grab food. Within a half hour, she was eating the second of the three hamburgers she had bought while perched on the bed of the hotel room. Scott had already made arrangements for her and left a bag inside with everything she needed for the job. Now she was studying on her laptop all the information he had provided on a flash drive tucked into the bag. The room was surprisingly modern and comfortable, much to her relief, but she wouldn't be staying long. If things went according to plan, she wouldn't even sleep in the bed.

"Everything has been provided for you," Scott's voice narrated the video she was watching. "Schematics of the house, the location of the relic, and the security codes. All came at a high price, but the relic is incredibly rare and your cut, as we discussed, will be very lucrative."

Cassandra winced when the relic came on screen. It was fairly hideous. Chewing on her thumbnail, she squirmed as a disquieting thought occurred to her. What if Scott actually knew this was all an elaborate trap set by Frank? She immediately dismissed the notion. Scott made a lot of money because of her work and she sincerely doubted he would toss her away. He had seemed

genuinely concerned that she had almost been caught in Vegas. Maybe he didn't consider her to be a friend, but he did consider her to be an asset.

Based on all the information Scott had gathered for her, the job was relatively easy. Drive to an area a half mile outside the complex, leap over the perimeter fence, make her way to the main house, scale the outside, slip in through a balcony doorway, disarm the security system, snatch the artifact from the shelf in Frank's office, and leave the same way she had entered. But when she added in Aimee's information, she saw very quickly that the path she needed to take through the house was perfect for

an ambush. It was a long hallway with no openings except for at the two ends.

Studying the layout of the house and the guard posts, she didn't see another feasible way into the house. Like most vampire lairs, there were only two primary entrances and both were heavily guarded.

Again she took inventory of the bag Scott had left for her and checked the weapons. Silver daggers, dart guns, and a stake. The darts injected a strong sedative the second they hit their target. Guns were very loud and too messy.

Flopping back on the bed, she stared up at the ceiling and sighed. "Fuck!" It was going to be rough, but she knew she could do it. She'd have to feed from at least five people to get enough blood in her system, but if she went in at full power, she could do some serious damage. Frank was a lower level vampire, so she was fairly sure she could take him.

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Closing the lid of her laptop with one hand, she reached for her half-eaten burger with the other. She'd finish eating human food, then find herself actual human food.

"Time to kick some ass, save the girl, and ride into the sunrise," she said. "I can do this."

The rental car melded seamlessly into the darkness dwelling at the base of an outcropping of bedrock. Satisfied that it wouldn't be detected, Cassandra once more did a quick inventory of all her weapons. Clad in black body armor and heavy duty combat boots, she looked like something out of a science fiction movie. The Kevlar body armor was top of the line and so expensive that Scott made her return it after each job. She was just relieved it wasn't bulky and allowed her a full range of movement.

Taking in a deep breath, she slowly exhaled. The blood she had consumed was boiling in her veins, imbuing her with the powers of her father. The vampiric aspect of her nature was coiled tight within her by her sheer willpower. It hissed at her to hunt and feed. She felt inhuman, outside of her mortality. All she had to do was release her tight control.

"Here we go," she whispered, opening her eyes that burned with red fires.

Leaping ten feet up onto the bedrock shelf, she felt the rules of nature unshackle her. She landed easily and perched briefly, scanning the desert before her. In the distance she could see the lights illuminating the perimeter of the vampire's estate.

It was time.

Like a sledgehammer disintegrating a glass window, her vampire nature shattered her human side. Instantly, she felt her joints popping, her muscles strengthening, and her senses sharpening. With a wild, gleeful grin, she launched herself into the air and landed already in a full sprint. The wind whistled in her ears, giving her body slight resistance as it sliced through the night. Faster than any human ever and matching vampire speed, Cassandra raced across the desert, her boot heels leaving plumes of dirt in her wake.

The fence encircling the estate rose before her, topped with barbwire. Cassandra didn't even try to climb it, she half-leaped, half-flew over it. Landing hard, she rolled, then was up on her feet immediately. The carefully-sculpted and tended rock garden didn't even slow her down as she jumped over boulders, cacti, and flowering desert foliage.

She sensed more than saw the first guard. One second she was skirting a Joshua tree, the next second she was slamming her forearm into the throat of the startled man, sending him to the ground gasping for air. Snagging his firearm from his hand, she flung it away and bounded toward the multi-level adobe home before her.

Not even slightly winded, she raced along a walkway straight toward the outside wall. Like the schematic had revealed, most of the windows were either bricked over or heavily barred. The balcony was easy to spot with its wrought-iron railing and red-tile accents. Cassandra jumped, landed on the wall, and scaled it like a spider. The Spider-Man trick drained quite a bit of her power, but she was aiming for swiftness and the element of surprise. Grabbing the rail, she flung her body over it and landed just outside the balcony windows. Pulling out the small device Scott had included in the bag he had left her, she activated it and watched it remotely hack into the security system. Tapping in the code, she saw a small red light on the wall beyond the balcony door wink off.

So far, so good.

Whipping the door open, she mentally ran the layout of the house through her mind. Heart thundering in her chest, she raced down the hall and hopped down the staircase, landing to landing, arriving on the bottom floor. The long hallway that bisected the house and led to Frank's study lay before her. Dim lights illuminated her path, the glossy black marble floor dappled with warm light. The layout of the house had been a lie though. Doorways opened off the hallway, perfect for a trap.

Cassandra had never deliberately entered an ambush before and her pulse was racing. Drawing her dart gun, she surged forward.

The dhamphir had just cleared the first two doors when they were flung open and heavily armored men burst out. Swiveling on one foot, she kicked one man in the throat, knocking him back into the room and into the men behind him. As the assailant from the opposite room attempted to Taser her, she dropped to the floor and shot him in the soft underside of his chin. The dart slammed into his flesh and he cried out in pain, but to her surprise he did not go down.

For a moment, confusion gripped her as the man she had sedated snatched the dart out of his skin and flung it away. Behind him, another man moved to fire his Taser at her.

"Fuck!" Cassandra screamed, realizing the darts were faulty. Hurling the dart gun at the man aiming at her, she burned even more of her power as she rolled onto her hands and knees and kicked out, knocking the first assailant back. A grunt and a cry of pain informed her she had hit both her marks.

Scrambling to her feet, she only had a split second to see her next accoster aiming at her. Grabbing him by the wrist, she pivoted toward his body, slamming her elbow into his Adam's apple, before swinging him into two more guards trying to get a bead on her. Panic gripped her and she fought for control.

Pumping more of her blood power into her limbs, she snatched one of the men who had previously attacked her and used him as a battering ram against the others coming for her. A scuff on the marble informed her that more guards were filling the hallway behind her.

The first Taser barb to catch her hooked onto her Kevlar, and the jolt merely drew her attention. Smashing her fist into the face of the guard who had hit her, she saw his blood splatter against her knuckles and spray the air. Her tongue lashed out between her lips, and the sacred vitae rained onto it. Instantly, she felt back in control as the world slowed around her and her inhuman speed accelerated.

Cassandra laughed with joy.

These were the moments when she knew her soul teetered on the brink of darkness. Moving among the insanely slow humans trying to fight her, she kicked, punched, and even bit her way through them. Snatching one man around the neck with her arm, she pierced his throat with her fangs, while using the momentum of her action to kick into the air and send two guards flying. Her feet landed against the wall and the world flipped sideways.

Grinning, she ran along the wall, knocking the mortals off their feet. She snagged the vest of one of the guards and hurtled him into the ceiling, spinning around to catch another one with a sharp jab to his nose. Blood, moans, and cries of pain filled the air.

Cassandra launched herself into the air, flipping her body so she landed on the floor just behind the downed men and looked toward the end of the hall, waiting for more. All around her echoed the soft moa

ns of pain from the unconscious guards.

“Come out!” she called out. “I know you’re there. Fight me!”

A solitary figure stepped into the hallway from a side door. Clad in a flowing white dress, Aimee stood in silence, her head tilted to the side to regard Cassandra.

Taking in a deep breath, Cassandra felt the world return to normal around her. Swiftly leap-frogging over the guard's bodies, she moved toward Aimee. Maybe Frank really wasn't here and they could get out now that the guards were gone. She was almost to Aimee when she saw something in the other woman's fingers.

Turning around to fully gaze at Cassandra, Aimee lifted her hand. Tucked into it was a small cotton bag.

Cassandra stopped in her tracks, her lips parting in surprise and apprehension. "Aim—"

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The witch hurled the bag directly at Cassandra's chest. It exploded on impact, filling the air with a spicy smelling, milky-white powder. In that second, Cassandra understood what was happening. Coughing violently, she stared into Aimee's eyes, her heart thundering in her ears, questions filling her mind.

Cassandra collapsed to the floor and was still.

Chapter 14 :

Prisoner

Aimee stared at the woman at her feet in silence. Breath coming in tight, anxious hitches, the witch felt both relieved and terrible about the act she had just committed.

"Make sure the spell worked," Frank ordered from behind her. "Aimee, do it."

Michael loomed over his shoulder, a tranquilizer gun at the ready.

"She's down. Isn't that what you wanted?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Check her," Frank said, gesturing briskly.

Looking up the long corridor, Aimee could see the power of the dhamphir laid out before her. All ten of the men who had attacked Cassandra were either out cold or just coming to. They were battered, bleeding, and most likely had a few broken bones. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she kneeled before the fallen dhamphir.

The remnants of the spell's ingredients powdered the sleek black armor and dusted Cassandra's face and tresses. Gently, Aimee swept Cassandra's hair back from her face and laid a hand gently on her neck. She could feel the strong, rapid heartbeat of the dhamphir.

"Did it work?" Frank asked testily from the room.

"Yes. It worked. The spell did its job," Aimee answered.

Michael stepped into the hallway, leaned down, and rolled Cassandra onto her back. Pressing the tranquilizer gun to her chest, he tapped it a few times. Cassandra remained unmoving. "She's out," he confirmed.

Finally leaving the doorway, Frank stared at his latest acquisition. "My, my, she is pretty. I'm going to enjoy breaking her. Cuff her."

Michael squatted over Cassandra, laid his weapon aside, and unhooked the silver shackles hanging from his belt. "I have to say, Aimee, you're a badass witch."

The cold hands of the vampire settled on Aimee's shoulders as he pressed his body against her. "That's my girl. Doing her job. Obeying me." Frank kissed her cheek, nuzzling it gently. "You want to obey me, don't you Aimee?"

A part of her soul was screaming in defiance, but on the surface of her mind all she felt was numb. Frank's blood had twisted her will, making her want to obey him, to please him, to be with him, but its tendrils had not fully encompassed her. A sliver of rebellion burned inside, but it was like a tiny rowboat caught in a hurricane.

"Aimee?"

"Yes, of course," she answered in a voice devoid of inflection.

Flipping Cassandra onto her stomach, Michael secured her hands behind her back, then hoisted her off the floor. "I'll get her into the holding room."

"I still don't like that I can't go in there," Frank groused.

"The spells that repulse a dhamphir are also going to work on a vampire," Aimee reminded him. "Others can feed her your blood."

"It takes the joy out of it," Frank sniffed.

Carrying Cassandra down the hallway, Michael shook his head. "C'mon, Frank. You got yourself a genuine dhamphir. You saw what she did to your men. She's a tough one."

Frank completely disregarded the guards slowly rising to their feet behind him. "Maybe they're just imbeciles who have no idea how to fight like real men." He cast a scornful look in their direction.

"I should go and make sure the spells are all active and that she's secure," Aimee suggested.

Giving her a dismissive shrug, Frank gestured after Michael. "Fine, fine. Go do that. I have to yell at some idiots. I need you to come around in like thirty minutes. I'll give you some of my blood to give to her. I want to start binding her to me immediately."

Aimee nodded, her stomach twisting in knots.

"I wonder how long it will take to get her completely in my thrall," Frank sighed. "She better not be another one like you."

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“I’m sorry for upsetting you, Frank,” Aimee said in a hushed tone, her head lowered.

“You see, that seems sincere. It feels sincere. And I like it.” Frank kissed the top of her head. “Now, go check on my prize.”

Following in Michael’s wake, Aimee flinched when Frank started to scream at his guards. It made her shudder in fear. The last time she had heard him so angry, he had been drowning her.

Hurrying up a narrow staircase to the second floor, she took several deep breaths to steady her nerves. She had done what she had to do. She had no choice. It was Frank’s fault she had been forced to do what she had done, but it didn’t make her feel any better about luring Cassandra into Frank’s trap.

The panic room that was being used as a cell to hold Cassandra was a short distance from her and Frank’s bedrooms. The product of Frank’s paranoia, it was completely secure. No one could breach it once the door closed unless they had the code and knew the location of the exterior control panel which was set under a tile in the hallway. The thick steel door stood open and she could hear Michael moving around inside. The door was camouflaged and could blend completely into the hallway. It amused Aimee to see that on the table attached to the faux wall the lamp perched on it was still lit. Frank always thought of everything.

Peeking inside, she spotted Michael securing Cassandra into place with a fresh set of silver shackles that were bolted to the ceiling. The dhamphir’s body hung limp in his arms as he checked the locks.

Hearing her soft footstep behind him, Michael tossed her a quick look over his shoulder. “Still out,” he said to Aimee.

“I see. Frank sent me to check the holding spells.”

Michael shrugged, stepping away from Cassandra. She dangled from the shackles, her head down with her hair obscuring her face. “I better check downstairs and make sure Frank doesn’t end up killing the guards. He has a temper.”

Nodding, Aimee silently agreed.

“You do good work,” Michael said, obviously impressed. “It’s not easy to take down a dhamphir. I can see why the vampires killed off most of your kind.”

Folding her arms over her chest and hugging herself, Aimee stared at the handsome man warily.

Taking a small step toward her, he lowered his voice. “I know Frank’s rough on you. You don’t deserve it.” His very warm fingers lightly skimmed her cheek, his eyes searching her face thoughtfully.

“What do I deserve?” Aimee asked, flinching from his touch.

“Better,” Michael said with a charmingly seductive smile. Without another word, he strode out of the room, leaving her alone with the dhamphir.

Aimee hurried over to the controls and activated the door. It silently slid shut and locked.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Cassandra asked irritably.

Aimee whirled around, flustered. “I think he was hitting on me!”

“I meant the fake spell,” Cassandra answered, stretching out her long body.

“Oh! I wasn’t sure you would catch on! I was so relieved when you did!”

“Well, when the spell did nothing, I figured it was a ruse.” Cassandra shrugged. “And if it was a dud, I figured I could buy myself some time by faking it.”

“I knew you were smart enough to catch on. There wasn’t any way to warn you.”

Flexing her hands, Cassandra winced. “Well, what’s the plan now?”

“I have a spell that I need to activate and drink.” Aimee squatted next to one of the spell bags and drew out a small vial. The second it was in her hand, the bond began to twist inside of her, compelling her to smash it.

Cassandra yanked on the shackles, hissing in pain. “I hate fucking silver. Ugh. It’s like kryptonite. Mind getting me out of these?”

“Give me a second.” Aimee fretted. The blood bond was fighting her viciously. Tears sprung into her eyes as she stood and paced, trying to resist the urge to break the spell and flee to Frank’s side.

“Uh, Aimee, I would really like to not be chained up.”

“I know. Give me a sec, okay?” Aimee snapped. Her vision narrowed and her heart sped up. The bond was crushing her will, eating at her resolve.

“Aimee,” Cassandra said in her husky tones. “Look at me.”

Lifting her head, Aimee stared at the woman before her. The very sight of her brought tears to her eyes. In the dhamphir's beautiful eyes, she saw her salvation and hope.

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“Is it the bond to Frank?” Cassandra asked in a gentle, yet straightforward tone.

Aimee nodded mutely, gripping the vial in her hand so tightly she was afraid it would crack.

Cassandra winced, then bit her lip thoughtfully. “Okay, this sucks.”

“He-he.... forced... me... to drink last night,” Aimee stuttered. Visions of Frank filled her mind, both tantalizing and terrifying.

“Shit. That asshole.” Cassandra shook her head. “But you’re a witch, not human. Can’t you fight it?”

“It’s fucking with me. I was able to throw the fake spell because...because...he said to throw it. He didn’t know it w

as fake.”

“What did he tell you when you came to see me?” Cassandra asked in a careful tone.

“He said... I said that I had to check on the spells. He said to do it.” Aimee paced before the door, pulling at her hair with her free hand. She felt like her insides were liquefying inside of her. If she went to Frank, she knew the torment would stop.

“What’s in your hand?”

“A spell...” Aimee held it out slowly. The purple liquid sloshed around inside the

vial.

“And you need to check on it, right?” Cassandra tilted her head and gave her a hopeful smile.

“Yes!” Aimee took a step forward, her mind resting on that thought. The pain lessened. “I’m obeying him by checking the spell.”

“To make sure it works, right?”

“Yes!”

“So...you’re obeying him.”

“Yes! Yes, I am!” Relief flooded her, irrational and wonderful. She was obeying Frank. He wanted her to check the spells. She clung to that thought in her mind as she hurried to Cassandra.

Staring into Aimee’s eyes, Cassandra smiled tenderly. “So... how do we make sure it works?”

“I have to put your blood into it and then I drink it.” Aimee tried not to think any further than the superficial thought that she was checking the spell’s effectiveness.

Cassandra sighed softly, raising her eyes to the shackles holding her wrists over her head. “I don’t suppose checking on the spell includes releasing me?”

Pain twisted through her mind and body at the mere thought. Adamantly shaking her head, Aimee whispered, “No.”

“Okay. So you need some of my blood. Got a knife? That asshole took my weapons.”

“I forgot one,” Aimee said warily. “And...” She averted her eyes nervously. “You have to drink my blood. First.”

Cassandra craned her head and tried to lower her head toward Aimee’s throat.

Rising to her toes, Aimee realized swiftly it wasn’t going to happen. The angle was all wrong due to Cassandra’s imprisonment. “My wrist I guess?”

“How much blood do you need me to drink?” Cassandra’s eyes were a bright red, but somehow still beautiful.

“Very little. A few drops. We just have to exchange blood,” Aimee answered nervously.

Her red lips parting into a grin, Cassandra gave her a jaunty look. “Okay, then let’s start with mine.” She dragged her tongue over her sharp fangs slowly, slicing it. A drop of blood instantly welled on its surface. Sticking out her tongue, a droplet dangled tantalizingly from the tip.

Aimee quickly unstopped the vial and held it up to catch three precious drops in it. As each one mixed with the liquid, the spell grew stronger, beginning to glow a soft lavender haze. The witch carefully replaced the top before shaking the vial, mixing the contents completely. The white glow made her laugh with delight. “It’s working!”

“So you drink that and see if the spell works, right?”

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“But you need to drink my blood...”

“Step closer.”

Aimee hesitated, unsure of what the dhamphir wanted. “You can drink from my wrist.”

“Let’s make this simple and as painless as possible.”

Warily, Aimee stepped closer. “Okay. How?”

Cassandra kissed Aimee, her lips both exquisitely soft and yet demanding. The cackling sensation of their powers meeting sizzled over Aimee’s body, making her gasp with pleasure. The dhamphir’s sharp teeth caught Aimee’s bottom lip, neatly puncturing it causing blood to well. Unlike Frank, Cassandra spared Aimee pain, infusing her vampire bite with pleasure. Clasp the vial to her breast, Aimee shivered as Cassandra took three quick swipes of blood with her tongue. When Cassandra drew back, Aimee felt disoriented and a little lost.

“Drink the spell,” Cassandra urged Aimee. “See if it’s working.”

Every cell in her body was tingling. Aimee stared at the vial through a haze of magic, hope, and searing arousal. Cassandra’s kiss had set her afire and she knew once she drank the potion, nothing would ever be the same again. Twisting off the stopper, she gulped down the concoction.

Aimee fell to her knees, a tortured, agonized scream ripping from her throat. Boiling

blood rushed through her body, burning through the numbness that Frank's bond had inflicted upon her. Feeling as though her body was being torn apart, Aimee clawed at the floor as streams of black blood flowed from her mouth.

"Aimee! Aimee!" Cassandra cried out, rattling the chains that held her secure.

The thick ichor burned her throat and choked her. Deep inside her chest, she felt something dark and hideous break free and burn away as the spell rid her of the last of Frank's power. Vomiting up bile flecked with ashes, Aimee raised shaking hands to her face.

"I think it's over," she whispered in awe. She no longer felt the insidious infection of the blood bond to the vampire. Unshackled from his power, she felt strangely buoyant. The heaviness of Frank's darkness was gone. Looking up, she saw Cassandra staring down at her with great concern. "It's broken."

A wide, relieved grin broke out on Cassandra's face. "Awesome!"

Aimee wiped her mouth on the hem of her dress, a shaky laugh escaping her lips. "Oh, my goddess! It's gone!"

"That's great! Now, uh, mind getting me down?" Cassandra looked up at her wrists suspended over her head. The silver was chafing her flesh.

"Yeah, yeah!" Aimee scrambled to her feet and carefully avoided the puddle of black goo on the floor. It made her nauseous just looking at it.

"Have a key?" Cassandra asked.

"Don't need one," Aimee answered.

She flicked her hands and the shackles fell free.

Widening her eyes, Cassandra said, “Wow.”

Aimee let out a surprisingly girlish giggle. “Okay, let’s get out of here.” She twirled about on her toes and headed toward the door to unlock it.

“Wait!” Cassandra called out.

Turning about, Aimee gave her a mystified look. “We need to go. Now. While Frank is busy yelling at the guards and not paying attention to us.”

Striding toward her, the tall, sleek woman nodded. “I agree. But we have a problem. I burned all the blood I consumed earlier getting in here.”

Gingerly touching her neck where Frank had cruelly bitten her the night before, Aimee couldn’t help but flinch. “Oh.”

“You’re a witch. Your blood is powerful. I’ll only need a few mouthfuls. I swear I won’t hurt you.” Cassandra’s big boots deftly avoided the black blood on the floor as she drew close to Aimee.

Free of the blood bond, Aimee’s own abilities were untethered and the world around her was vibrant with energy and color. It was intoxicating to feel so vividly alive after living with Frank’s death in her veins for so long. The light shimmered in the thick waves of Cassandra’s chestnut waves as she pulled her hair back into a nubby ponytail and secured it with a thick black rubber band she yanked off her wrist. With her cat-eyes, lush mouth, and strong, narrow nose, Cassandra was the most beautiful woman Aimee had ever seen.

“Aimee?” Cassandra waved her hand in front of her face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just so...” Aimee floundered. Smiling happily, she laughed with embarrassment. “I’m just overwhelmed.”

Cassandra gently reached out and lifted Aimee’s hand from where she had it pressed to her neck. Again, the mingling of their auras sent wonderful waves of pleasure through the witch. Though Frank had healed the bite on her throat to some degree, it was still an ugly, scabbed-over wound. Cassandra flinched. “I won’t do this to you. If you let me drink, I can fight better. Faster. Stronger.”

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Teeth pulling on her bottom lip, Aimee fidgeted. She believed Cassandra, but after breaking free of Frank she was afraid of someone else initiating such an intimate act with her. Yet, if she wanted to get out of the house and not end up Frank's slave again, she had to do this. Nodding, she clenched her hands at her sides and waited.

The dhamphir gently turned Aimee's head, exposing the unmarred side of her neck. "I will be very careful."

Aimee closed her eyes when Cassandra bent her head to her throat. Trembling with both fear and expectation, she waited.

Chapter Fifteen:

Revelations

Cassandra could see the fear in Aimee's eyes and in her posture. It had been difficult to see the confident woman who had appeared in her dreams struggle for control of her own mind. It was evident from the moment she stepped into the room that the witch was under the thrall of the vampire and fighting it. Now that Aimee was free, it was just as obvious she was still haunted by the vampire who had imprisoned her for so long.

"I'll be very careful," Cassandra vowed in a gentle tone. She fought with her own hunger to keep her movements slow and non-threatening. After expending so much of her power invading the house, taking down the guards, then being bound by silver, she was weak and a little shaky.

Though she didn't want to admit it considering the circumstances, she was terribly drawn to the witch. Every touch they shared only drew her deeper into the rabbit hole she was quickly tumbling down. Blaming her attraction to blondes for her reaction to Aimee was just a way to fool herself. There was something undeniable brewing between her and the witch. It was powerful and beyond anything she had experienced before, but she didn't dare give in to it. She was here to rescue Aimee, then make sure the witch was able to choose the life she wanted to live, the Assembly be damned.

Tenderly smoothing Aimee's bronze-colored hair from the curve of her neck, Cassandra took a deep breath before sinking her fangs into the woman's delicate skin. Immediately, she pushed her own energy into the witch, willing her to feel only pleasure and not pain. Blood, full of life and magic, flooded her mouth, shocking her system with its power. The first swallow poured into her like fire, burning through every inch of her. The second was like swallowing the sun, glowing with power and light. The third was like cool rushing water, filling her mind with images of blooming green things.

In her arms, Aimee trembled, but one hand lifted to rest against Cassandra's shoulder.

The darkness of her dhamphir nature rose, urging her to keep drinking, then claim the witch, but Cassandra fought her instincts. Even through her body armor, she could feel how soft and delicate the other woman was and it stirred in her the deep need to protect Aimee at all costs. Even from her own bite and touch.

Surprised to find herself shaking, Cassandra withdrew her fangs. Her fingers tangled in Aimee's hair, she tenderly licked the small punctures closed with her tongue, healing them.

With a soft sigh, Aimee sank against Cassandra, her other hand rising to rest on the dhamphir's other shoulder. "It didn't hurt at all."

Inhaling the sweet scent of Aimee's hair, Cassandra embraced the woman, holding her gently. "It's okay now," she whispered in a breathy voice. Aimee's blood fed power into Cassandra's limbs. This time, the darkness the dhamphir fought against after feeding did not bare its fangs. Instead, she felt as though she was filled with the wondrous magic of the night sky.

"Thank you for coming for me," Aimee said, her voice rough with emotion as she gently drew away from Cassandra. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

Shielding her heart with a cocky shrug, Cassandra winked. "Aww, c'mon. After that dream about all that tasty ice cream, how could I not come? You recommended the mint chocolate chip, right?"

The smile that graced Aimee's face pleased Cassandra. "Definitely."

Cassandra was startled when Aimee started tugging her heavily embroidered white dress over her head. "Um, whoa, wait..."

Aimee yanked it off and rolled her eyes at Cassandra. "You're not that irresistible." Underneath she was wearing a tank top and black stretchy skinny jeans that were rolled up to her knees. Leaning over, she rolled the hems down to her ankles. "I had to wear the dress so Frank wouldn't get suspicious. I have a bag ready in my room, which is just a door down from this one. I just need a few seconds to grab it and my sneakers." As she spoke, the witch began tearing open the spell bags that were set around the room. Fishing out amulets and smaller bags, Aimee gave Cassandra the impression that she was gearing up for battle, which she probably was.

"Do you have a better way out of here than how I came in?"

"There's a balcony past the game room that looks over my garden. We can drop down, scale the wall, and run for it. You did bring a car, right?"

“Absolutely.” Cassandra picked up one of the bags, flinched, and tossed it to Aimee. “What the fuck is in that?”

“Vervain. Vampires can’t get near the stuff. According to my research, it’ll make you feel a bit...uh...disoriented.”

“It makes me want to hurl,” Cassandra answered, wrinkling her nose at the stench.

Aimee gathered the last of what she wanted from the bags and headed toward the door. “I planted other potions inside the bags to help us get out.”

“You had this all figured out,” Cassandra said, impressed.

“Except for Frank forcing me to drink his blood and re-enforcing the bond last night. I didn’t see that coming. It made today...difficult.” Aimee tucked the bags into the waistband of her jeans and started to tap in the code to open the door.

“You’re free of him now. And once we’re out of here, he’ll never fuck with you again.” Cassandra fought the desire to take the woman in her arms and soothe her. She had to keep focused on the task at hand. Already her body was vibrating with power, ready to fight, and flee.

“I’ll never let anyone do that to me again.” Aimee said, her voice steely. She watched the display on the control panel, then wrenched the door open. Scooting across the hall, she entered a room, but didn’t flip on the light. “Wait in the hall. Keep an eye out. I won’t be but a sec.”

Cassandra cautiously stepped into the hallway. Her eyes quickly scanned for any potential weapons. There were none. Inside the darkened bedroom, she could hear Aimee scurrying about.

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Seconds later, Michael came around the corner his tranquilizer gun slung over one shoulder. He stopped in mid-stride, staring at Cassandra in disbelief.

“Surprise,” she said starting toward him. He was a big guy, but she was certain she could take him down.

“Stop!” he ordered, holding out one hand. “I’m on your side. Scott sent me.”

Hesitating, Cassandra narrowed her eyes. “What?”

“I’m the inside guy. Scott thought this whole set up was a bit fishy and got me in. I’m the one who provided the codes and schematics.”

“So why didn’t you steal the relic?” Cassandra asked suspiciously.

Reaching slowly into a small pouch on his utility belt, Michael said, “Let me show you.”

Aimee stepped out of her bedroom wearing a tapestry bag looped across her chest and came up behind Cassandra, pressing the hilt of a dagger into her hand. “Don’t trust him.”

Cassandra fell into a fighting stance, ready to attack.

“Let me show you, okay? How else would I know about Scott?” Michael looked exasperated. “Scott suspected there was something up, okay?”

“Drop the gun on the floor, then show me,” Cassandra ordered. She was uneasy with the entire situation. After her dart gun failure, she wasn’t even sure she could trust Scott or anyone working for him. It could have just been a fluke, but the whole situation just reeked.

Michael’s hand hesitated, then moved instead to unsling the tranquilizer gun from his broad shoulder. “Fine.” Using the strap, he lowered the gun to the floor.

“Kick it over,” Aimee directed.

Shaking his head, Michael obeyed. “You’re wasting time. I have an exit strategy and you’re blowing precious seconds.”

Plucking the gun off the ground, Aimee stood behind Cassandra.

“Show me the relic and then I’ll consider going with you,” Cassandra said in a firm voice.

With very slow, deliberate motions, Michael flipped open the pouch and slowly extracted the exact same relic Cassandra had been sent to snatch. “Satisfied?”

“No, but we’ll follow you. No funny business.” Cassandra motioned for him to lead.

“Scott said you’d be a suspicious bitch,” Michael grumbled.

“Stop talking and move.” Cassandra held the sharp ceremonial dagger in her hand, ready to attack.

“I don’t trust him,” Aimee whispered.

“Me neither,” Cassandra whispered back.

The tall handsome man moved down the hall to the corner. “We’ll head across the second floor to the game room and exit from the balcony.”

Aimee and Cassandra exchanged glances. Cassandra shrugged. “Fine.”

“It’s clear,” Michael said, then hurried along the other hallway.

Cassandra was impressed when Aimee covered the stairway as they scurried past it, then took up the rear guard. On the floor below, Frank’s voice ranted loudly. Michael led them swiftly through the dimly-lit corridor and into a massive room that was filled with large TVs, a billiard table, various gambling tables, and old arcade machines. It reeked of stale cigar smoke and something cloying and chemical.

The sound of a tranquilizer gun sent Cassandra spinning about, dagger held defensively. Aimee staggered into her arms, surprising Cassandra. The witch slumped forward seconds before a dart punched into Cassandra’s neck, sending her reeling. As she fell backward, clutching Aimee with one arm, she realized they had been ambushed.

Two men slipped into the room from the hallway just seconds before shouts and gunfire erupted downstairs.

The room swung around Cassandra and she staggered against the billiard table. Her limbs were going numb and her vision was tunneling. The dagger fell from her slack fingers and she tried not to lose her grip on Aimee.

Picking up the tranquilizer gun he had relinquished earlier, Michael smirked at the two women. “I wasn’t expecting the witch to side with you, but I’m glad I carried around this piece of crap anyway.” Michael

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fished the relic out its pouch and tossed it to the floor. “Scott said you wouldn’t be easy to catch. I think I’ll declare him wrong. He didn’t realize you’d be trying to save the damsel in distress.”

Aimee’s fingers tugged at Cassandra’s gloved hand. Her eyes were closed, but her lips were moving slightly. Cassandra’s keen hearing couldn’t make out the words. They sounded like gibberish.

More men entered the room. Cassandra fought against the dart, burning blood to keep herself conscious. Her eyes started to droop, but she kept pushing through the haze with her powers.

“Arnost, I told you, piece of cake. The witch and the dhamphir for your little menagerie,” Michael said, greeting a man with a brooding face and dark hair.

“You did well, Michael,” the man said with a distinctive Eastern European accent. “Not only did you get me a witch, but a very lovely new dhamphir. I haven’t owned one in so long.”

The soft, warm fingers of the witch wrapped around Cassandra’s bare fingers as the glove dropped to the floor. Aimee was a dead weight in her arms, but Cassandra could still hear the faintest whisper from her lips.

“Fuck you,” Cassandra slurred, trying to cover Aimee’s voice. “You assholes. This whole... thing... a setup.”

With a magnetic grin and a shrug, Michael said, “Oh, come now, Cass. Don’t be so

bitter. We're both in the acquisitions game. You get relics. I get supernatural toys for very rich people. I was after that lovely little witch in your arms when I took on this security job, but when I found out from Scott that Frank wanted you, I just had to let Arnost know about that little deal."

"I'm going..." Cassandra struggled with her numb tongue.

"Yeah, you're gonna what?" Michael smirked.

The dart fell out of her neck and onto the floor.

"How long before she goes out?" Arnost asked briskly, clearly annoyed by the fact that she was still standing.

"I'll shoot her again," another man offered.

"No, no. I like her this way. All helpless and desperate," Michael said, brushing them off. "She can barely stand."

A cold liquid began to trickle from the puncture wound in her neck. Cassandra started to lift her hand to brush it away, but then realized what was happening. She could feel Aimee's magic building, her fingers trembling in Cassandra's. Even as her head grew clearer, Cassandra deliberately slumped against the billiard table. Let the assholes think they had her in their power for the moment. It would give her the element of surprise.

"She's almost out," Michael continued. "Look at her struggling."

Arnost and the other men chuckled.

A man with beady eyes and a very sallow complexion drew closer, his dart gun aimed

at Cassandra. “I want to fuck her.”

Arnost shrugged. “After I break her. I’m not interested in her fuckin’ pussy. I want her powers. I want her loyalty. It’s the witch I plan to fuck without mercy for that little spell she cast on me.”

“Blood bonding both of them is going to be a bitch,” Frank’s angry voice said. He was shoved into the room by more armed guards wearing very different body armor from his men. “The witch is especially a pain in the ass.” His face was bruised, bleeding, and his shirt was pockmarked with bullet holes.

The crackling sensation of their combined power played along Cassandra’s hand. The sedative was racing out of the puncture, moistening her skin, while her thoughts were becoming increasingly lucid. She could feel her strength returning. It was now a matter of seconds.

“So this is a fuckin’ double-cross,” Frank spat, glowering at Michael.

Aimee slumped to the floor at Cassandra’s feet, her fingers slipping free of her grip. Cassandra let her go, trusting her completely. She made a big show of trying to stand up straight, but fell instead over the billiard table and out of the sight of the kidnappers.

“Frank, you stupid little shit, didn’t I tell you I don’t like being fucked with?” Arnost said dismissively. “Someone get the dhamphir.”

“That’s my dhamphir and my witch and this is my house,” Frank snarled.

Cassandra lay on the floor, waiting.

“And look who’s in chains,” Arnost snorted. “And who is going to fuck your witch

tonight?”

As Frank and Arnost continued to trade insults, Cassandra focused on the approaching footsteps. The man reeked of cigarettes and harsh cologne. Eyes closed, she concentrated on the sound of his footfalls and his growing scent. When he was only a few feet away, she rolled to her feet in a flash, seized the tranquilizer gun in his hands, jerked and twisted it about, liberating it from his hands. He only got out a sharp gasp before she slammed the butt of the weapon into his face, knocking him out.

The popping of dart guns going off filled the air and Cassandra spun away into cover behind an arcade game to avoid the fire. But she needn't have to. When she peeked out, she saw all the darts suspended in air and the surprised expressions of Arnost's men.

“My witch is about to kick your ass,” Frank said with confidence.

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Slowly, Aimee rose to her feet, her long hair shimmering in the light. “I’m not your witch, Frank. And no one is fucking me tonight,” she said in a low voice. “Or Cass.”

The darts flipped around in the air, aiming at the guards at various points in the room.

“Michael!” Arnost shouted. “Stop her!”

Cassandra sprinted forward, jumped onto the billiard table, then launched herself at Michael just as Aimee released the darts. Some of the guards tried to dive out of the way, others swatted at them futilely with their weapons. Most of the darts appeared to hit their targets and men all over the room fell. Cassandra attempted to kick Michael in the head on her downward arc, but he lashed out, smacking her out of the air and into the wall. She landed hard, but rolled to her feet, lifting the tranquilizer gun. Drawing a bead on Michael, she tried to squeeze off a dart, but he was faster than anticipated and kicked the weapon out of her hand.

For a split second she worried about Aimee, but then a guard went sailing past her, crashed through the sliding glass door, and disappeared into the night. Relieved, Cassandra ducked under Michael’s attack, came up behind him, punched her elbow into his back, and sent him stumbling. Whipping about to finish him off, she was shocked to find him raising his weapon to shoot her.

“It’s been fun,” he said, squeezing the trigger.

The gun flew out of his hand, the dart hitting the wall.

“Thanks, Aimee!” Cassandra called out. “I can handle this asshole from here.”

A roar filled the room as a powerful wind tore through the shattered doorway and became a raging funnel, sucking the weapons from the hands of the attackers.

Grinning, Cassandra punched Michael in the face, knocking him off his feet. Turning to help Aimee, she saw the witch levitated off the ground, arms outstretched within the heart of the small tornado.

“Wow!” she said with admiration.

Then someone hit her from behind and sent her crashing through a window and into the night air.

Chapter 16:

Vampires Versus Witch

The tentacles of Aimee’s power lashed out, doing her will, sending Arnost’s men scrambling. There were a dozen men in the room, all of them infused with Arnost’s blood. Seven were unconscious, but the others were still dangerous. They moved quickly, with preternatural swiftness, trying to encircle her and wrestle her from the air. Their dart guns were somewhere out in the desert now, so they resorted to drawing blades. Though her eyes were closed, Aimee could sense their intent before they even moved. Each time one dared to lash out at her, Aimee sent a wave of magic, knocking them across the room.

“Don’t kill the witch!” Arnost ordered.

Nearby, Cassandra held her own, fighting Michael until he tried to shoot her. Aimee ripped the weapon from his hands and flung it away with her magic. His surprised expression was immensely satisfying.

The witch felt herself weakening, but s

he had used as much power as she dared to disarm their enemies of their dart guns. She and Cassandra couldn't afford to be hit again. Aimee had barely managed to stay conscious enough to work her magic to extract the sedative. She was rapidly using up her power and would soon need to recharge.

Another window exploded and Aimee barely caught sight of Cassandra vanishing into the darkness outside the house. Michael fearlessly dove through the window after her. It was a two-story fall, but he didn't seem to care.

"No!" Aimee shouted.

Landing on the floor, she ran toward the window, magically slapping away anyone trying to attack her with waves of energy. Reaching the broken opening, she looked down to see Cassandra and Michael in combat in the garden below.

The sharp bark of actual gunfire startled her. Twisting about, the acrid stench of a fired gun filled her nostrils as it mingled with the scent of blood. Ivan stood over Frank, pistol in hand, shooting at Arnost and his men. Two tried to rush Ivan, but he fired with eerie precision, the back of their heads bursting like melons. Behind Frank, another one of his faithful guards named Glenn was unshackling him.

Aimee shrank back against the window, pondering her options. She had only her spells and the tapestry bag around her neck that she had hidden her most precious possession in. Her power began to wane; she had to conserve it.

As the final echo of the last gunshot fired faded, Ivan reloaded and aimed at Aimee. "You're done now."

"Enough of the bullshit, Aimee!" Frank roared at her.

“I’m not staying here!” Aimee shouted at him. “I’m not your slave!” Raising her hand, a ball of energy formed.

Ivan fired, the bullet barely missing her and pounding into the wall behind her. “I’ll shoot you, Aimee.”

“Get over here, Aimee. Now!” Frank ordered impatiently. “Don’t make Ivan shoot you. Not that I’m not opposed to crippling you at this point.”

The room was quiet enough to hear the moans of the wounded men and the firefight on the floor below. Between Aimee’s magic and Ivan’s gun, all of Arnost’s men upstairs were incapacitated or dead. Aimee had lost track of Arnost in the battle and wasn’t sure where he lay in the room.

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Finally, she let the orb dissipate. Slipping her arms behind her back, she fingered the spells tucked into her waistband. “I’ll come willingly. Please, don’t shoot.” Her head lowered, Aimee slowly walked past the fallen bodies toward Frank and his two men.

“I want this fucking mess cleaned up. I want a bullet in Michael’s head and I want my fucking dhamphir chained up in so much silver she won’t be able to fucking move!” Frank’s face was flushed red with rage.

“The backup team is sweeping through the downstairs. We’ll have it under control shortly,” Ivan said briskly.

“I should have listened to you about Michael,” Frank huffed. “This was all a gawdamn fucking setup to snatch my dhamphir and witch.”

Aimee drew closer to Frank, her fingers inching toward an incineration spell. She gingerly stepped over another body.

Rolling to his feet, Arnost grabbed Aimee about the waist, jerked her back against his body, and held her as a shield before him.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Frank exclaimed. “You left him alive, idiot!”

Ivan scrambled to draw a bead on Arnost. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, you will, moron!” Frank huffed with disgust.

Aimee groaned with irritation. Her hands were pinned against Arnost’s stomach. She

had almost been close enough to Frank to set the bastard on fire when he had snagged her.

“Frank, I’ll be leaving now with my witch,” Arnost said firmly. Stumbling backward toward the broken sliding glass door, the Serbian vampire dragged Aimee with him. Ivan tracked them, the pistol never wavering. Outside, Aimee could hear Cassandra and Michael still battling.

“Kill Arnost, and get me Aimee!” Furious, Frank kicked one of the dead men. Frank’s eyes blazed red. “Shoot him, Ivan!”

Arnost tugged Aimee closer. He reeked of the coppery smell of blood and she realized he was wounded.

Though she should’ve been afraid, she wasn’t. The power inside her was waiting for her command and if she could get her hands free, she had plenty of spells. The gun didn’t frighten her and neither did any of the men in the room. Gaze fastened on Frank, she realized that she only feared him.

Using the last of her power, she narrowed her eyes and sent Frank crashing into Ivan. They both tumbled to the ground, Ivan’s weapon discharging. The bullet slammed harmlessly through the ceiling above Aimee’s head. Startled, Arnost relinquished his hold on her enough for her to get one hand free. Glenn was already drawing his gun when Aimee sent a bolt of energy at him. With a shout, he dodged through the doorway and out of view.

Arnost grabbed Aimee’s arm, twisting it behind her before she could grab a spell. Shoving her forward, his lips were cold against her ear. “Don’t try that with me, witch. I’ll rip out your fucking throat.”

A wry smile flitted across Aimee’s lips, but she hid it with her long hair by dropping

her head. Arnost was an irritation, but she needed him for just a few more seconds. Pretending to be afraid, she cowered.

They were almost to the door when Ivan rolled over, trying to take aim again, but Arnost struck the pistol from his hand, then viciously kicked him in the head, crushing his skull.

Frank, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen.

Glenn dared to fill the doorway again with his hulking body. Instantly, Arnost whipped Aimee around, placing her between him and the guard.

“Aimee, I don’t want to hurt you,” Glenn said in an urgent voice. “I’m after Arnost.”

“It’s okay, Glenn. I’m going to kill him for you.”

Arnost jerked Aimee’s arm upward, causing her to cry out in pain. To Aimee’s surprise, he flung her at Glenn. The guard ducked, darted around her, and tried to fire at the vampire, but Arnost was already on the move. Recovered from his wounds, Arnost was a blur. Glenn was blood infused, but the vampire easily snatched him off the ground and drove him head first into the wall. The sickening crunch of his neck breaking echoed in the cavernous room.

Grinning, blood flecked on his lips, Arnost regarded Aimee with a predatory zeal. “You can’t stop me. I’m too fast for you.”

Aimee blinked and he was on her. Grabbing her long hair, he twirled her about, shoving her out of the room. Gruffly manhandling her down the hallway, Arnost swore in Serbian as he fished his cellphone out of his pocket and made a call. “Where the fuck are you? What kind of fucking backup are you?” he shouted into the phone.

Since he was foolish enough to drag her by her hair, Aimee plucked a spell off her waistband and pivoted into him. Pressing the small bag against his heart, she sent a spark of her power into it to activate it. Instantly, it burrowed through his shirt and into his chest.

Startled, Arnost's eyes widened.

"I said I'd kill you," she said with a smile.

Arnost took a swipe at her, but it was too late. The spell burst alive inside him, fire exploding out of his mouth as the inferno consumed him from within. Aimee ripped her hair out of his hand as it turned to ashes and ran past his disintegrating body into the game room, tugging more spells out of her waist band.

"Frank, you asshole, where are you?" she shouted angrily. "Come out!" She cursed herself for not noticing when he had slipped away.

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It was then that she heard Cassandra scream and all thoughts of Frank were vanquished as she ran for the balcony.

Chapter 17:

Final Battle

Twisting in mid-air, and avoiding the sun shade over the garden, Cassandra managed to land on her feet. The hard landing jarred every bone and muscle in her body. She had set down on the soft soil of the garden, ruining a few of Aimee's herbs.

"Oops," she muttered, surprised by the guilt she felt for destroying the witch's hard work.

Lifting her head, she coiled her body, ready to leap onto the house and scale up the side to rejoin the battle. Instead, she briefly glimpsed a dark shape crashing through the sun shade a second before Michael collided into her, painfully tackling her to the ground and smashing the air out of her lungs. Gasping for breath, Cassandra punched him in the face, and kicked him off her.

They both rolled onto all fours, facing each other. Michael's grin was absolutely feral as Cassandra struggled for breath.

"So far, I'm really disappointed in you. I heard all these tall tales about your kind and yet you seem to be just a big old stupid girl," he teased.

"I was just about to say the same thing about you," Cassandra wheezed.

Anticipating his next attack, she lunged out of his attempted tackle and tucked into a rollover. Coming up on her feet, she instantly kicked out, striking his shin as he rose to his feet, and then hitting him across the face.

Wiping blood from his nose, Michael narrowed his eyes. “Better.”

Though she saw his fist coming, she couldn’t move fast enough to completely avoid the blow and he caught her side, sending her spinning. Quickly recovering, she ducked under his follow-up throw. Popping back up and facing him, she lifted her leg, snapping out her foot, striking the middle of his chest, shoving him backward. Michael moved to block her and she switched legs, revolving so her next kick was aimed at his chin. The impact resounded through her as his head snapped back.

“So, what are you, big boy?” Cassandra asked in a mocking tone. “You sure aren’t human.”

“Let’s see if you can guess.”

With a predatory growl, Michael charged at her, arms swinging. Cassandra found herself backing up quickly, blocking the swipes with her forearms and hands. The bruising impact of his attacks registered in the back of her mind, but she was concentrating too hard on his next move to pay it much heed. Dropping to the ground, she crushed more plants under her body as she swept his feet out from under him with her leg.

Landing with a grunt, Michael laughed joyfully. “Now this is getting fun.”

Gunshots erupted in the house, drawing Cassandra’s attention away from Michael as fear gripped her. “Aimee,” she breathed, rising.

Obviously b

believing her to be distracted, Michael jumped up and struck out at her face. She caught his arm, and unleashed multiple sidekicks into his gut. He grabbed her shoulders and flung her to the ground.

With a chortle, he gazed down at her. “So what am I?”

“Fuck!” Cassandra exclaimed.

Very sharp canine teeth filled his mouth and his eyes were golden yellow. “Surprise.”

“Canis!” The word was a hiss of distaste.

“Such a racist comment,” Michael growled, amused.

Crab-walking away from him on her hands and feet, Cassandra felt a pang of despair as she realized the situation had just worsened. “What are you? A fucking werewolf?”

Stalking her, Michael shook his head. “Anubis.”

“You mean a jackal. You’re no god,” she said in a mocking voice. Twisting about, she clambered to her feet and dropped into a fighting stance.

Michael shrugged. “You’ll be on your knees before me soon enough, god or no god.”

The bruises he had inflicted upon her were beginning to hurt, but she didn’t dare to use the last of her power to heal. She wasn’t a fighter, she was a thief. Though she could hold her own, she had never truly trained to be the vampire hunter Dr. Summerfield declared she had been born to be. Suddenly, she wished she had trained and learned to harness all her abilities so she would know how to rid herself of the jackal before her. Pummeling him into unconscious was not going to be easy and she would most likely take a thrashing while at it. Plus, she wasn’t feeling particularly up

to strength at the moment.

“Oh, fuck it,” she groaned, and attacked.

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Blow for blow, kick for kick, she managed to match the other supernatural creature. Long claws had erupted from his fingertips, but they were ineffectual against her body armor until he managed to drag them across her bare hand. She screamed.

Michael licked her blood from his claw. “Delicious. I want another taste.”

“That’s the only one you get, asshole!”

Instead of waiting for him to move, she attacked. As they fought, Michael forced her closer and closer to the outer edges of Aimee’s garden. Increasingly dizzy, Cassandra had trouble landing her blows. Michael hammered her with his fists, knees, and feet. Falling back, she stumbled, her legs suddenly giving out on her. Landing in a spray of tall lavender flowers, Cassandra flailed as the world tilted around her. Disoriented, she struggled to get up, but Michael landed on her.

“Ah, did you fall into the nasty vervain?” Michael chuckled, his mouth elongating into a pointed snout edged with long fangs. Darting his head forward, he tried to bite her throat.

Cassandra managed to get her hand up between his maw and her neck just in time. The sharp teeth ripped through her flesh, eliciting a scream of agony. Pressing the palm of her other hand against his forehead, she tried to push him away, but he bit down harder. Bones cracked and blood spilled from her hand.

There was a flutter of movement behind Michael’s head. A second later, the blade of a ceremonial dagger flashed under Michael’s chin. Hot steaming blood poured out of his slit throat as his jaws released his hold on Cassandra.

“We’re done with you,” Aimee’s voice said coldly. She stood just behind him, clutching the dagger she had earlier given to Cassandra. She must have recovered it from the floor of the game room.

Michael thrashed about, trying to staunch the bleeding with his hands.

Aimee extended her hand to Cassandra. “C’m on.”

Head swimming, Cassandra managed to grip the witch’s hand while cradling her injured hand to her chest. Aimee hauled Cassandra to her feet, then pulled her away from the vervain. Instantly, Cassandra began to feel much better.

Glancing toward Michael, Aimee said, “He’s going to heal.”

“We’ll be gone by the time that happens.”

“You need to heal now.” Aimee looked at Michael significantly.

Inside the house, the sounds of battle continued, but at a slower pace. Either Frank’s men were whittling down the last of Arnost’s people, or vice versa. Soon the victor of the battle would be looking for them.

Cassandra motioned to Michael. “Can you get him for me?”

Lips set in a grim line, Aimee held out her hand, then sharply drew it back toward her. Michael’s body was dragged facedown through the remains of the garden to their feet. Seizing his head by his hair, Cassandra pulled it back and drove her sharp teeth into his sweaty skin. She gave him no pleasure, letting him feel every agonizing moment of her feeding. He gurgled, clawing at the ground. The loss of blood had weakened him, but she knew he would heal very soon. The power of his blood unfurled inside of her, hot, primal, and hungry. Struggling to contain it as it mingled

with her dark nature, she instantly hated that she had fed from him. The darkness inside her was howling with pleasure and she felt it filling her, quashing her humanity.

And then the softest touch rested on her cheek and the darkness fled. Instead, she felt the peace and quiet of the night fill her. Aimee's white magic was a light inside of her, glowing as softly as the tranquil moon. Releasing Michael, Cassandra rose and turned toward Aimee.

With sweet gentleness, Aimee kept her hand pressed to Cassandra's flushed cheek. "You're not a monster," she said in a soft voice.

Nodding, unable to speak for fear of the emotion that might choke her, Cassandra willed her hand to heal.

"We need to go," Aimee said at last, her hand dropping to her side.

"That fucker, Frank, did you get him?" Cassandra asked, following Aimee to the wall.

Aimee shook her head. "I got Arnost, but Frank vanished." Pain and anger filled her voice and were etched into her brow.

Taking hold of Aimee's arm, Cassandra bent toward her. Staring into her eyes, she said, "He will never hurt you again. I swear it."

A small smile pressed itself to Aimee's lips.

"Outside!" a voice called out from the interior of the house. "They're outside! I see them."

Aimee grabbed Cassandra's hand. "Time to fly."

A small yelp escaped Cassandra's lips as they were flung off the ground and onto the high wall. They landed on the narrow edge and Aimee whirled about and tossed several spells into the garden below. Purplish-blue flames erupted. Michael collapsed with a groan, but did not burn.

"It's not real fire. It's the manifestation of the spell. It'll knock all of them out for a few hours," Aimee explained.

Cassandra grinned. "You do think of everything."

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“I try,” Aimee admitted with a shy smile. “Now follow me.”

They rushed along the top of the wall to a walkway that cut past the main house to the large garage nearby. Aimee quickly punched in the security code and they slipped inside. The lights flicked on to reveal a bank of sports cars, a limousine, and a collection of motorcycles.

“You pick,” Aimee said.

Cassandra stared at the pegboard where all the keys dangled. She snagged a set with a Harley logo on it.

“I had a feeling you’d pick that,” Aimee said, her laughter a balm to Cassandra’s anxious mind.

Aimee activated the garage door while Cassandra found the correct motorcycle and climbed onboard the gleaming red and chrome beauty. Aimee ran back and slid onto the seat behind Cassandra. Her lean arms wrapped around Cassandra’s waist and her body pressed lightly against the dhamphir’s back.

Cassandra gunned the engine and kicked up the stand. The big bike rumbling under her, she rode it out of the garage and along the long drive. She didn’t bother with the lights, but rode straight toward the gated entrance using her keen vision to guide her. Aimee leaned into her so she could reach around and hit the button on a small device attached to the handlebars. The gates opened smoothly onto the road beyond.

Maintaining a tight hold on Cassandra, Aimee rested her chin on the dhamphir’s

shoulder. “Are we going to the rental car?” Aimee asked in her ear.

“No, we can’t trust it,” Cassa

ndra answered.

“So where are we going?”

“How do you like Prada?” Cassandra asked, tilting her head so she could catch a glimpse of Aimee’s face.

Their attention was drawn away by the sound of Frank’s helicopter lifting off from the helipad at the far end of the estate. Its lights shone like small white and red stars against the desert sky.

“He escaped,” Aimee sighed.

“So did you.”

“Yeah,” Aimee answered, her voice filled with wonder. “I did.”

Cassandra pressed on the gas and the two women fled into the night.

Chapter 18:

Free to Decide

In the early morning hours, the desert was at its coldest and Aimee shivered in Cassandra’s denim jacket. She watched Cassandra fuss with her messenger bag. It was the only thing she had grabbed from their very quick stop at the motel. It had been a gamble to recover Cassandra’s personal belongings, but with Frank’s men

knocked out until dawn they had decided to risk it. Cassandra had worried that her broker, Scott, may have sent another team after her, but they had not encountered anyone.

Clad in jeans, boots, and a form-fitting Superman t-shirt, Cassandra looked beautiful with her hair falling gently around her chin. Straddling the motorcycle as she riffled through her personal belongings, she looked nervous. “Found it!” She yanked out a cellphone. “This is my personal one, so it should be safe.”

Cassandra had left everything her broker had given her for the job in a heap on the hotel room floor. She didn’t want to risk him tracking her through the items. She had explained to Aimee that she had always kept her exact location a secret from Scott and never told him the false name she lived her normal life under.

Aimee smiled. “I told you that you had it.”

“I was about to fucking freak out if I left it in the rental car,” Cassandra grunted. She began typing away on the screen.

The cold wind didn’t seem to affect the dhamphir, but it had Aimee shivering. They were miles out of Marfa and hiding behind the fake Prada Store that had been erected as an art display. The ivory facade was beginning to show wear and tear from the elements, but it was still in reasonable shape. There was no way to get into the building without tripping the alarm, and it wasn’t an actual store anyway. The shoes on display really were Prada, but there was only one shoe of each style. As far as Aimee knew, no one ever changed the shoes to the latest Prada collection.

“Fucking A!” Cassandra grinned. “My backup plan is in effect, so no worries.”

“Backup plan?” Aimee cocked her head. “You had a backup plan?”

“Well, yeah. I knew I was coming to save you and not get that damn relic, so I started to get nervous. It’s one thing for me to put my ass on the line, but I didn’t want to risk yours more than I had to.” Cassandra shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I was starting to doubt Scott, but I did contact an old friend of mine who is part of an organization that fights the big bad monsters of the world. I asked for him to send someone to pick us up. I didn’t want us to leave with the rental car and take the route I took coming in. I just got word that they’re almost to the rendezvous point. Which is here.”

Aimee shifted on her feet, adjusting her tapestry bag, the beads dangling from the bottom jingling. It felt so strange to be far away from Frank and the cocoon he had trapped her in. The world felt vast and a little frightening. “And then what?”

Cassandra shrugged her shoulders. “We go to El Paso, grab some food, then head to Dallas. We can get you a flight out of DFW to any place you want to go. I have some extra money squirreled away. It’s on me.”

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Lowering her eyes, Aimee stared at the gravel under her feet. The setting moon was huge and bright in the sky and she felt like she could see every little individual stone. “I don’t know where to go.”

“Do you have family?” Cassandra’s voice was concerned.

Aimee shook her head. “Not really. My family took refuge in a very religious group to hide from our enemies and disguise our bloodline. At some point my family bought into the rhetoric. They’re all kinds of crazy because they believe that to be a witch is evil. And yet that is what we are by birth.” She lifted a shoulder. “I ran away at seventeen and Frank found me. That was ten years ago.”

The other woman’s lips parted slightly, then she looked away. “I, uh, well... okay. My friend, Dr. Summerfield, is part of that organization I was talking about. The Assembly. He told me he would take you in. Apparently, there are some dire predictions going on about something big happening soon. They could use your help.”

Licking her lips, Aimee pondered the offer. “Are you part of the group? Will you be there?”

Sliding off the motorcycle, Cassandra strolled to Aimee’s side, arms folded across her breasts. “Honestly, I’m seriously thinking about it. I don’t have a broker anymore and things got bad tonight. If you hadn’t been there I may have... you know.”

Ducking her head with sudden shyness, Aimee grinned. “We’re a good team.”

“Yeah, we are,” Cassandra agreed, her eyes twinkling, but she seemed unsettled.

“Maybe we could join together?” Aimee suggested. Despite her attempt to not stare at Cassandra and study her every little gesture and expression, Aimee found herself doing just that. She found herself desperately wanting the other woman to show that she wanted Aimee to remain in her life.

The dhamphir’s eyes were a warm hazel in the moonlight. Aimee loved how they seemed to change color with her mood.

Cassandra again lifted her shoulders. “Maybe we could.”

With a sigh, Aimee raised her eyes to the sky.

“What is it?”

How could she tell Cassandra how much her heart yearned to be at her side? She barely knew the dhamphir, but she wanted to know everything about her. Maybe she didn’t know the fine little details of her life, but Aimee knew that she understood Cassandra’s heart and soul in a way she never dreamed was possible with another person. Cassandra was like Aimee: full of power that she didn’t fully understand and yearning to know what it meant apart from the darkness of the vampire world.

“Cass,” Aimee started as she met Cassandra’s curious gaze and tried not to falter

“Yeah?”

“All I wanted for years was to be free. To escape Frank.”

“And now you are!” Cassandra grinned at her, tucking her hands into her jean’s pockets.

“I never even thought of where exactly I would go or what I would do. I just wanted to be free of him.” Aimee stepped toward Cassandra. “And now that I am free and I can choose where I will go and what I will do...”

Arching an eyebrow, Cassandra said encouragingly, “Yeah?”

Taking Cassandra’s face between her hands, Aimee kissed her tenderly. Instantly, their powers mingled, skipping across her skin with tantalizing heat. The soft warmth of Cassandra’s lips chased away the world around them. Their lips parted for a second only to be joined again in a deeper, sweeter, more passionate kiss. The pain, fear, and violence from earlier in the night were forgotten as Aimee sank against Cassandra’s lean, yet soft body.

Brushing her hands over Aimee’s long hair, Cassandra nuzzled the side of her mouth.

“I want to be where you are,” Aimee whispered, tears in her eyes. “I belong where you are.”

“I know,” Cassandra answered in a husky voice. “I think I’ve known since the dream. And it’s fucking insane.”

Staring into eyes now the color of the bluest sea, Aimee smiled lovingly. “I believe in magic, destiny, and love.”

Cassandra laughed lightly. “Well, a few days ago I didn’t, but now I believe in you. And you’re all those things, aren’t you? Magic, my destiny, and my love.”

Aimee bobbed her head. “Yeah, I am.”

Again, Cassandra’s hands skimmed over Aimee’s hair, her eyes scrutinizing Aimee’s face. “I’m a little scared.”

“I know. But it’s okay,” Aimee assured her. “I didn’t even know I liked girls until you, so this is a whole new ballgame for me!”

Throwing back her head, Cassandra laughed. “Well, I can teach you all the rules and then how to break them.”

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Her fingers tracing Cassandra's lips, Aimee smiled softly. This is where she belonged and she knew it with every fiber of her being.

Headlights interrupted their moment and they stepped apart. A big van pulled up next to the motorcycle, killing the headlights. Aimee started to panic, but Cassandra let out a squeal of delight and darted around the front of the vehicle. The driver's door flew open and a big guy with dark blond hair and a scruffy goatee leaped out and met her with a big hug.

"Benchley!" Cassandra exclaimed. "Jeff didn't tell me it was you coming to get us!"

"Hey, sexy, I'm here to rescue you!" Benchley snuggled Cassandra warmly. "Are you straight yet?"

"Nope. Still queer. In fact, this is Aimee, my new... uh..." Cassandra looked panicked all at once.

Aimee joined them, extending her hand. "I'm her new girlfriend."

Cassandra grinned widely. "Yep. Girlfriend."

"You always get the hottest chicks! No fair!" Benchley was obviously teasing, which set Aimee at ease.

"Cass!" A groggy female voice called out, then the back door slid open. Rubbing her eyes, a petite young woman with a boyish haircut stumbled out.

“Alexia!” Cassandra joyfully hugged her, too. “Hey, sweetie, what’s up?”

“My annoying big brother told me that you needed us,” Alexia answered, yawning. She gave Aimee a short wave. “Hey, I’m Alexia.”

“I’m Aimee,” Aimee answered, feeling strangely at home.

“So everyone get in the van before the nasties come looking for us and let’s get the hell outta here,” Benchley said, motioning to the open doorway.

Grabbing her messenger bag, Cassandra gave the motorcycle one last, lingering look.

Slipping her hand into Cassandra’s, Aimee nudged her with her shoulder. “We could steal it.”

“Nah. We don’t need a reminder of that tool,” Cassandra grouched, her face darkening at the mention of Frank.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Aimee answered.

Alexia climbed into the passenger seat, leaving the back seat to Aimee and Cass. Once inside, Cassandra slammed the door shut and settled in beside Aimee.

“So, El Paso, then Dallas?” Benchley asked.

“Actually, I think it’s time for me to make a visit to Dr. Summerfield. So, Austin instead.” Cassandra clasped Aimee’s hand tightly. “We’re joining up.”

“Bad ass!” Alexia said, clapping her hands.

“Kick ass,” Benchley agreed, pulling the van out of the parking lot. “That’s awesome

news.”

“Besides, I may need his help if my old broker, Scott, comes sniffing around. I’ve tried to keep my personal life on the down-low, but I’m worried about him possibly trying to find me.”

“And there’s a certain asshole vampire who likes to enslave innocent supernaturals as sex slaves that I’d like to see gone from the face of the planet,” Aimee added.

Cassandra gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I’ll help you take him down.”

“I volunteer, too!” Alexia twisted around in the passenger seat. “I read up on him after your call to the Doc. That Francois guy is fucking twisted.”

“I go where the hot women go,” Benchley declared. “So lead on fearless hot leader.”

As Benchley and his sister fell into excited conversation about the possibility of killing Frank, Cassandra leaned toward Aimee. “I’m sorry you lost everything when you left.”

Aimee touched the gypsy-style tapestry bag. “Not everything. I managed to hold onto this. It’s incredibly important.”

Looking curious, Cassandra studied the purse. “It’s kinda cute.”

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“No, no. Not the purse, silly. What’s inside.” Aimee tugged it off and gently opened it. Reaching inside, she withdrew a tattered book, so old it was held together with cotton string. “It’s my family’s book of shadows. This is why I ran away from them. It called to me once I turned sixteen. It invaded my dreams, called me in my waking hours, and showed me exactly where it was. I believe it’s one of a kind, possessing spells and potions that are long forgotten. Every time I open it I find a new one. It’s ancient and powerful. So powerful it masked itself from Frank. He never knew I had it.”

“Wow.” Cassandra’s fingers hovered over the book, but she didn’t quite touch it.

“If we’re going to be good guys and fight the bad guys, I think this will help,” Aimee said, then stowed it away.

Scooting closer, Cassandra held Aimee’s hands. Aimee met her thoughtful gaze with her own. “Aimee, if you want to go and try to have a normal life—”

“No.” Aimee’s tone was firm. “I belong here. I feel it. I’m home. Don’t you want me?”

The twinkle in her eyes and rogue quality to Cassandra’s grin said it all. “In the worst way.”

“Then stop trying to make me reconsider.” Aimee brushed her fingertips over Cassandra’s cheek. “I know what I want.”

Cassandra grasped her hand and pressed a long, passionate kiss to her palm. “I do,

too.”

Aimee’s heart lifted at Cassandra’s words. Snuggling together, they watched the sun slowly begin to rise as the van raced toward El Paso.

Epilogue

Cassandra drove up to her mother’s house and parked in the speckled shadows beneath the tall tree that loomed over the street. The drive from Austin had been uneventful, much to her relief.

She still feared Scott more than Frank. Scott had resources and was clever in obtaining what his clients desired. Frank was powerful, but not nearly as clever as he thought he was. When she had left behind the cellphone and laptop she had used to keep in contact with Scott, she had effectively cut off her communication with him, but she was still nervous.

Beside her, Aimee applied a little lip gloss to her lips and checked her hair in the mirror on the back of the windshield visor.

“You’re already pretty,” Cassandra teased her.

“It doesn’t hurt to look presentable,” Aimee answered, rolling her eyes. Clad in a colorful summer dress and flip-flops they had picked up in Austin, she looked amazing.

Cassandra, meanwhile, was in her regular jeans, boots, and a form-fitting t-shirt with Wonder Woman on it. She flipped down her visor, checked her hair in the mirror and shrugged. It looked good and what little makeup she wore hadn’t smeared. “Fabulous and done.”

Aimee again rolled her eyes. "Of course."

"Mascara and lip balm, babe. That's all this perfect face needs."

"Hard to believe you were a model in Paris," Aimee teased.

"I can strut with the best of them. Besides, all that makeup at the shows is probably what made me hate the stuff." Cassandra struck one of her sultry poses. "See! I've still got it."

"Oh, work it, babe!"

Cassandra playfully shifted around in her seat, striking all the old modeling positions.

Aimee giggled, a delightful sound.

In the two weeks they had spent together, Cassandra hadn't doubted for a second that they were meant to be. They fit together effortlessly and the more they learned about each other, the more firmly cemented their relationship became. Cassandra couldn't deny that something more powerful than both of them had brought them into each other's lives.

"So, ready to meet my mom?" Cassandra asked.

"Absolutely!" Aimee popped her door open and stepped out.

Cassandra followed quickly, taking Aimee's hand before guiding her up the walkway to the house. "Now, remember, she gets a little muddled. I told her all about you, but chances are she won't have a clue who you are."

"I understand. I won't be freaked out," Aimee assured her.

Tucking her arm around Aimee's waist, Cassandra gave her a slight squeeze. "I know that, but I just feel I should—"

The screen door banged open and Galina stepped out onto the porch. Throwing out her arms toward Aimee, she let out a cry of delight. "She's so beautiful! She's so perfect! I can see the magic all around her!"

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Aimee stepped toward Galina, reaching out to her. “I’m so pleased to—”

Galina cut her off with a warm embrace. “I’m so happy you’re finally here, Aimee. Cassandra has needed you for so long.”

Watching the two most important women in her life, Cassandra felt a lump in her throat. Galina held Aimee tightly to her, eyes closed in rapturous happiness. Opening her eyes, she reached out to her daughter, beckoning her into the embrace.

With a smile, Cassandra joined them.