



# Sleeping With the Vampire

**Author:** *Nikki Grey*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Falling for the enemy vampire.

As a bounty hunter, I lead a dangerous life.  
Which gets a lot more dangerous when a vampire king hires me.  
Lucca Fallon D'Valleira is a blond, deadly god.  
I want to refuse the monster's assignment.  
But I can't, for Lucca promises to help me find out who killed my father.  
I'll do anything to get justice.  
At first, I'm good at keeping my distance from Lucca.  
But the more I learn about him, the more attracted I become to him.  
I can't help but wonder what it'd feel like to press my lips against his.  
To give myself to him fully.  
My first can't be a vampire.  
I must fight this.  
But it's too late.  
I'm falling hard and start to envision Lucca as the one I could marry.

When push comes to shove will Lucca choose a mortal, or will he discard me?

**Total Pages (Source):** 73

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

## Chapter 1

Izzy

I sense the danger before I see it.

It is the shift in the breeze, the way the air is suddenly filled with movement at the edge of the old graveyard where I have come to visit my father's last resting place. It is a good place to think, and usually, peaceful.

But now, something – or someone – is coming for me.

I can feel there are eyes on me, drawing me out.

Without having to think about it, my posture changes to one of readiness. My knees soften, ready to jump or lunge out of the way, my hand sliding into my pocket for my dagger with the reinforced silver blade. I have various weapons, but the small dagger with the sharp blade is my favorite. I have trained with it since I was a little girl. Despite my mother's fears, I have become a bounty hunter like my father before me and I can only hope to one day be as good at it as he was. Despite my size, or perhaps because of it, I have a high success rate. I am often underestimated. No-one thinks the pretty girl with the innocent blue eyes is capable of bringing big men into submission. But I can move fast, and I have unusual strength from being half-Guard, from my father's side, a line of descendants of the Northern men, hard and tough folk, accustomed to a life of fighting.

I watch the far end of the graveyard where the trees are dense and dark and I see the

shadows part for a tall man coming towards me. As he comes closer, I sense it is a vampire, from the athletic stride and the magnetic aura that surrounds him. I am immediately on edge. My father's hatred of them has been bred into me, and I loathe them just as he did. It helps that I also inherited the Guard's resistance to their charms, the pull that they exert over their prey. It is one of the reasons why I have been particularly good at hunting them.

As he comes closer, I notice his clothing, the fine cut of his jacket and the exquisite shirt underneath. His bearing is almost regal. He is unusually tall and yet of a slim build and I realize that this must be King Lucca Fallon, the head of the prominent d'Valleira family. He is known to have a certain allure, with his blonde hair the color of untarnished gold. He is said to be reclusive and is not often seen away from his home, a refuge deep in the Grey Mountains. I wonder where his guards are, the warriors who'd usually accompany him. He is alone and this strikes me as odd. His approach across the open churchyard is not accidental, he wants me to see him coming towards me openly. It is meant to reassure me, but it doesn't work.

When he is a few yards away, he stops.

"Greetings, Miss Izzy Bonnici, I hope you don't mind me dropping in on you like this, intruding on private time with your father."

So courteous, so charming. I don't fall for it for a second. I don't respond but tighten the grip on my blade, which he must sense.

"I come in peace, I wish only to talk." He looks around, "For me, graveyards are a second home. I couldn't resist coming here."

"Being dead, I can see why," I can't help but say.

A small smile plays around his lips.

“Well, I know some who rest here as well. When you have been around a while, you tend to... lose people,” his voice softens. He points towards some of the graves.

“I remember many of these men, good men.”

I bite my lip. “There are many Guards here, friends of my father’s.”

He is bloody good-looking, I will give him that, looking much younger than his around three hundred years, with blue eyes that sear through me like electric currents. There is a stillness about him that could have been menacing but doesn’t come across that way. I’ve had dealings with his eldest son, Ragnar. He recently stole one of my targets, taking the thief I was about to take to the Executive Council. I’d been tracking him for weeks when the vile Ragnar took advantage of me resting for the night to nab the mark. I blame myself for not noticing that Ragnar was tracking me, and for not taking in the thief as soon as I had located him, giving the opportunity to Ragnar to swoop in and take my bounty.

“I have a proposition for you,” the king says.

I snort. “I am not interested in any proposition from you or your family.” Ragnar’s wicked behavior is still fresh in my mind.

But I need to be careful. I can’t provoke him. He is old and much stronger than me. My biggest fighting advantage is the element of surprise and I don’t have that now. I don’t wish to die quite yet.

The king nods, and does not seem fazed.

He comes closer and I feel my heart beating faster.

“I heard about what Ragnar did, to be honest, that is what drew me to you. You see, I

have a matter of urgency and secrecy and I need someone with a very special set of skills to look into it. The fact that you know Ragnar and have had dealings with him counts in your favor as you will know what to expect.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

The king takes a moment.

“My wife, the queen Tanata, was killed months ago. The Council investigated but ruled it an accident. I know it was no accident,” his voice becomes hard. “I have reason to believe there are some who are plotting against me. I have to be careful who I approach with this, as it is risky and the person needs to be discreet.”

“I am not that person,” I say quickly, and he nods, as if he was expecting this response.

“I am prepared to offer you some information about the death of your father in return for your help.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

I can't believe what I am hearing. My father, an experienced bounty hunter, was killed years ago in an attack that also claimed the life of my younger brother and caused permanent injuries to my mother. We never found out who ordered or executed the attack, but I had always suspected that it was a vampire. My father liked hunting vampires, he called them vermin, said all of them needed to be exterminated.

"You know who killed him?!" I demand to know.

"I have some information that might help you," he says carefully.

"How do I know that you are not just trying to trick me?"

He smiles, sending shivers down my spine. "Ah, Izzy, so distrustful."

"But I understand, of course." He sighs. "I will give you another bit of information, which you can check, if you are satisfied, it will show you my good intentions. I will tell you the rest once you have concluded the case."

"What information?" I demand.

"Your father came to see me on his last assignment."

"He did?" This is news to me. I couldn't imagine my father asking a vampire for advice on a job.

"He was ill, and he knew he didn't have much time left, he wanted to consult me on a matter that was... delicate."

“My father wasn’t sick!” I respond, sure that I would’ve known if he was. In the back of my mind, though, I wonder if I would have. My father was never easy to read, a man of few words.

Lucca nods. “He’d been exposed to amber water, as you know, it is highly toxic. He was keeping it from you and your mother, but the effects were beginning to take hold. I could see it in him and he admitted as much to me.”

Before I can deal with the thought that my father was dying before the event that actually killed him, something else happens.

King Lucca is suddenly beside me, his hand against my breast, protectively standing in front of me as his coat swirls around me. I find his proximity intoxicating, despite my ability to resist his charms. He appears unaware of me as he is facing the west of the graveyard.

“I think my royal guards are here,” he whispers. “I wanted to come alone as this matter needs to be dealt with... privately. I came early, but I knew they would find me eventually.”

The air fills with birds, black birds, like crows, but bigger and more threatening. They swoop through the air, screeching. Lucca holds up a hand and says something in a loud voice, a command that expands in the air, dispersing the crows and they vanish as if they’d never been there in the first place.

“I must go,” he says softly, stepping away from me. “I have so many enemies now, more than ever before. I had hoped... it would be less. But...” He seems tired, wiping his face.

It strikes me as a calculated move, designed to make me feel sympathy for him. It does not work.

“Send word to me as soon as you have decided. Use this phone,” he says, handing me a mobile device, before disappearing into the shadows.

My heart is still beating fast as I try to make sense of what just happened. But the graveyard is tranquil now again, no hint of birds or vampires.

I feel my body relax and I turn back to face my father’s grave.

I try to conjure up his face again, to access his presence but it is impossible now. The vampires have disturbed the atmosphere, and my mind is filled with information that I hardly know how to process. The fact that he had come onto holy ground says a lot about his personal power, as well as his arrogance. Ordinary vampires would not have been able to do it but it seemed not to affect him at all.

Also, his family is notorious and known widely. They had survived for many centuries, waged countless battles and always emerged victorious, usually due to some evil acts or activities. I recall my father saying that the vampire’s instinct for survival was eclipsed only by an insatiable hunger for power.

The Executive Council, our highest authority, consisted of five individuals who were meant to represent the many different beings and ways of living. It ruled over our lands and had done so for the last hundred years, bringing a kind of peace to a world that was torn apart by violence and war before.

My father believed in the Council and I did too, but I knew there were stories about some strange decisions and questionable outcomes. But was this not always the way with the highest level of government? Didn’t the people distrust those who made and kept the peace? Was there not always a cost involved?

I didn’t want to second-guess the Council. I also wanted nothing to do with the vampire king and his family. But I was intrigued by his story and compelled to find

out if he spoke the truth about my father. Where he had touched me, my skin was tingling, almost burning. I have kept my distance from men, have never been in a relationship and I have not been touched by anyone. Being a virgin has been my choice, a way of keeping my body and mind clear.

But King Lucca is a threat.

I responded to him in a way that I had never done with another vampire.

I didn't like that and couldn't understand it, I had always been immune to their charms. It was a sign I needed to keep away from him. Perhaps he had found a way past my resistance, I didn't like that.

Not at all.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

I would not play his game.

But first I had to find out if what he said was true.

### Chapter 2

#### Lucca

I am unable to relax until I see the turrets of Grey Castle appearing above the mist. The stone walls rise out from the forest, dark and forbidding. It has been the stronghold of my family for a hundred and fifty years and is supposed to intimidate and frighten.

There is a gate at the bottom of the valley, with a large iron door that is guarded at all times. Even should anyone overpower the security here, it would take them several minutes to reach the castle itself. My rooms, at the top of the eastern turret, look out over the valley and the road. I like to see everything. My favorite place is the Eyrie, a look-out from which I can see most of the castle grounds, giving me a good view of who is coming and going.

As soon as I am within the stone walls, I have two bottles of warm blood, at exactly the right temperature and feel my spirits revive and my energy levels rise. I was feeling a bit tired but I didn't want to risk drinking just any blood. Our product is among the best and I enjoy the premium offering, which is the freshest and the strongest.

“You must be careful,” a voice comes from the window.

I turn and spot my Seer, in the shadows. She has entered through a side door and must have been waiting for me. Completely blind and older than I am, she is one of my most trusted counselors, able to see into the past as well as the future. Visions come to her but she cannot control it, cannot see more than she is given access to. This makes it difficult to interpret what she sees. Still, her counsel is invaluable and I have come to depend on her.

“I see great tension coming in the family,” she says in a low voice.

What else is new, I wonder to myself. There has always been fierce competition between my sons, who have each become powerful in their own right and demand respect for their roles in the family and the business.

She continues, “There will be death.”

I sit upright, taking note. “Whose death? Mine?”

“No,” the voice wavers and I realize her vision’s limitations. “But it is someone close.”

One of the sons perhaps, I think.

I wonder about this, what the implications are of her vision. She is telling me to reconsider investigating Tanata’s death, to stop my obsession with finding her killer. This has been the Seer’s advice to me before, but I can’t do that, mostly because I am convinced that whoever killed her, was really looking for me.

“The human girl is dangerous,” she says.

“In what way?” I ask.

She seems unsure. "I... it's... not clear. But... when she comes into the family... she brings a dynamic...it upsets everyone."

This is exactly what I want though.

I thought of my three sons, Ragnar, who was so arrogant and supercilious, Layrr who was too impatient and impetuous and even Sunil, who preferred to live in the city and be away from the castle. One of them would take over the business from me one day, perhaps become king and I knew each of them thought they deserved it more than the others.

The family's fortune has become vast over the past few decades, mostly because of our involvement in the Syndicate, the top vampire families working together to run the blood bank, where humans willingly sell their blood. It is then treated, bottled and distributed. Following the Great War between humans and vampires, one of the stipulations was that unfettered hunting of humans be prohibited. This also ensured that there would always be a steady blood supply as well as provided income to humans. It gave us an uneasy peace in our world. Even though the rules were sometimes broken, mostly, vampires adhered to them.

"Will there be answers?" I ask, leaning forward.

"Perhaps not the ones you seek," the Seer says. "This particular... I only see the family torn apart, your powers scattered. That is as much as I see now."

She bows and takes her leave.

Her words disturb me, but I have no intention of changing my mind.

I take out my phone and check if she has called.

Nothing yet.

I lean back and allow myself the luxury of replaying our meeting.

Isabella “Izzy” Bonnici.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

I was not quite prepared for how she would be in person. Ragnar had described her physical beauty as well as her strength, it was clear he had admired her as a bounty hunter and had pitted himself against her. He had avoided a fight with her, instead snatching her bounty more as a challenge to her than anything else.

So I knew she was a good candidate.

But she was so much more than that.

She was special.

Apart from her great beauty, she had a strength of character and virtue that pointed at a maturity way older than her years. She had insight and temperance, the capacity for self-control. She did not fear me, even though she was wary, and alert, which I admired. But there was something else.

Izzy was an original.

This was probably the quality I valued most in anyone. It was so rare and precious. After over two hundred years of meeting so many people, I had rarely encountered an original being. Most were variations of each other. People looked like each other, acted in similar ways, wanted the same things. Power, success, money. But not Izzy. She didn't want any of that, I could see it. I would have liked to talk to her about what she wanted for herself, apart from finding her father's killer. I found myself wondering about who she really was.

I had never met anyone like Izzy before. So sure of herself, so fearless and yet at the

same time, humble and unaffected.

I thought of the women in my life, the very small number I had let in. The last, Tanata, had been by my side for eighty years and even though there was not much love between us, ours was a partnership that had been strategically beneficial and made our family stronger.

It had taken me a long time to reach the kind of position I had in the world now. I had not always been a king, had not always been able to command men.

Now, I had everything to lose.

It was a terrible feeling.

The phone rang.

It was Izzy.

“You were right,” she said, her voice rather flat. “My father was dying. I had no idea but it has been confirmed.”

She did not tell me how she found out.

“You will take my assignment then?” I asked, reminding myself to be gentle with her, not to be too direct. With them, you had to be more subtle, I had learnt.

“I am thinking about it,” she said.

“But you will?” I pushed.

“I don’t know, I have a bad feeling about it,” she added.

“I remember those,” I said rather drily and she laughed. It was a charming sound and I found myself wanting to hear more of it.

“I am only considering it because you said you had information about my father’s death,” she reminded me.

“And I do,” I agreed. “I think that we have someone of interest in common.”

“Who?”

“Michael MoZa. On the Council. ”

She said, slowly, “I know his name, of course.”

“He has been in his position for many decades and despite his age, is very powerful. When your father came to see me five years ago, it was to ask me about him.”

“About MoZa?”

“Indeed. He had a feeling that he was involved in the case he was working on. The bounty he was hunting, something felt off to him. As if the man was being framed.”

“Why did he come to you?”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

It was a good question, I had to give her that.

“Someone must have told him that I did not see eye to eye with MoZa.” That was putting it mildly. As Chairman of the Council, MoZa had a lot of authority. But I had grown in stature and MoZa was trying to curtail my powers. He used his position to manipulate people behind the scenes. He was a dangerous enemy.

“Who was my father hunting?”

“It was one of us, going by the name of Chakrat. Very old and evil. He’d been accused of going on a killing spree in the Wildlands. There were numerous witnesses but your father could not track him down. He suspected someone was helping him from inside the Council.”

“MoZa?”

“Your father couldn’t be sure.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him to stay away from Chakrat. If he had MoZa’s backing, it would be fatal to try to bring him in.”

She mused, “Sometimes having a bounty out is enough, it does not have to be fulfilled. The council shows willingness to pursue justice but does not always push for it to be fulfilled.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m guessing, my father wouldn’t hear of it?”

I sighed. “He was honorable, wouldn’t hear of MoZa being anything but a faithful servant of the council.

“Do you think he was responsible for having my father killed?”

“I don’t know. But I suspect that he is involved in my wife’s death as well. That is too much of a coincidence.”

“I need some time to process this information and do some research,” she said. “I looked at the file, by the way, and your wife’s death was ruled accidental. What makes you so sure that it was not accidental?”

“We were leaving a dinner party,” I said slowly. “We were outside, I was talking to some people, she was walking towards a maze in the garden. I heard her scream. I was by her side within seconds. A stake had been driven through her. There was a wooden trellis and one of the pillars had come loose, fallen down. The report into her death said she must have tripped, pushed against the trellis, forced one of the poles to come undone, and fall on her, piercing her.”

“You don’t believe this?”

“Who would?” I said drily. “And besides, there was the angle of the spike,” I said. “It had not entered her from above, but from the side. It was driven through her with some force.” I paused. “There was damage to the hedge, it looked like someone was standing on the other side of the bush when they attacked. It was quite dense.”

“Who was at this dinner party?”

“I will give you their names but they are friends. Mostly. Our kind.”

“Vampires?” she asked

I confirmed.

“You think you were the target, why?”

“I was the one who wanted to see the maze. When we were standing outside, I said I wanted to walk over there and have a look. Tanata started walking but a message arrived on my phone and I checked it. I stopped walking and she walked on. I think someone was waiting for me to walk past and had not seen it was her. It only took a moment, that spike coming out of the hedge, killing her.”

“Did you go into the maze to look for the attacker?”

“I did, there was no-one.”

I had acted very quickly, moving through the air fired by fury. If there had been anyone there, I would have found them. But they had already fled.

“I did find something though,” I said. “Boot prints. Plenty of them, from a man. Someone had been there, cutting the twine around the poles. It wasn’t an accident. I told the investigator, he said it could have been from anyone walking the maze.”

She said, “I see.”

I snorted. “He didn’t want to investigate. that much was clear. Vampire hater.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

“What was his name?”

“Captain Morsey. Charles Morsey.”

“I will look into him,” she said.

“Sunil, my youngest son has already done that. He found that several big payments were made into Morsey’s accountsshortly after he finished the report. He is trying to find out who made the payments.”

“So if I get him to confess he was pressured into saying it was an accident...?”

“Then we’re done,” I said.

But I knew it wouldn’t be as simple as that.

I couldn’t have her solving the case that quickly.

I needed to have Izzy in my life for much longer, much, much longer.

### Chapter 3

Izzy

I find Costello in his workshop at the end of town.

The big man is squeezed in under the hood of a car, twisting away at a piston or

something.

He nods at me, “Get you a beer?”

He goes off to a little fridge at the corner of the workshop. He’s not much to look at in his greasy vest, the bulging triceps covered in tattoos. With his shaved head and thick neck, he is obviously not the sort of person anyone would want to mess with. He was my father’s best friend and after his death, became a kind of mentor to me. I knew he would know if my father had been ill.

He used to be a fellow Guard and bounty hunter. He quit some time ago, deciding to spend his days tinkering around with cars and trucks. He was the first person I wanted to see after my meeting with the vampire king.

“I need to ask you something,” I said after a few sips of beer.

“Go on.”

“Do you know anything about my father being sick, before he died?”

His eyes narrowed.

“Who told you that?” he asked, wiping his hands on an oily rag, considering his answer.

“Little birdie.”

“Does the birdie have fangs?” he asked and laughed.

I smiled and he corroborated what Lucca had told me. “He didn’t want you and your mother to spend his last days fussing over him. But, yeah, time was running out and

that was why he wanted his last job to be a good one. A nice juicy payout for you guys once he was gone.”

“This Chakrat?”

Costello’s face tightened. “Piece of shit!” he spat onto the workshop floor. “I told him not to try and get him on his own. Too dangerous. Piece of filth has been around for centuries. And your dad, well, he wasn’t at his best anymore.”

“I was told someone on the Council might be protecting him, keeping him from being caught?”

Costello shrugged. “Dunno about that.”

I paused. “Do you think Chakrat was behind my father’s death?”

He shrugged

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

“There was some weird shit happening around the time he died. He’d gone off to talk to Lady Cat about this whole business... that was the last time I saw him.”

I sat up straight. “Lady Cat?”

Lady Catherine was the owner of a popular night club nearby. She was connected to all kinds of beings in our world and her club was a popular meeting place. “Your father said she was a friend,” Costello shrugged. “I never trusted her, but he said she was a good source.”

“Why did you never tell me he’d gone to see her?” I asked and Costello said he didn’t think it was important. I knew I had to go see her, though. If she had information on my father’s death, I had to know. I had no intention of looking into the vampire king’s council connection. I wanted to stay as far away from him as possible.

“You need to be careful,” Costello called after me.

“Lady C’s is a hangout for vampires and all sorts.”

I laughed. “I know!”

He shook his head and said he didn’t like it.

Lady C’s was in the middle of nowhere, between small towns where nothing ever happened. The club, though, frequently saw scenes of violence and as there were never any witnesses or camera footage, what happened there usually stayed there. It was not the kind of place where someone like me went unarmed.

Especially at night.

I tied away my hair, put a baseball cap and a big jacket on to camouflage my appearance somewhat and drove to the club, waiting outside until it was late enough to go in and look for the owner.

I saw her right away, a striking older woman with bright red hair. She was the familiar of a vampire who was sometimes seen at the club, one of those whom my dad said wasn't as bad as the others. This did not mean that he thought of him as good, though. He didn't trust any vampire.

I walked up to her and touched her arm. "Lady Cat?"

"Yes?" Up close, I could see that she had aged over the past five years.

"I was wondering if I could have a word?"

She looked at me and I could tell she didn't recognize me.

"I'm Izzy, Bo's daughter."

She blinked and I could see the news rattled her. "Come with me," she said, pulling my arm and directing me to a room behind the bar. Once we were inside, she closed the door behind me.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at me. It was a private room rather than an office, with velvet chairs and sofas and mirrored tables. The lighting was low and rather sleazy, I could imagine what went on here.

"I wanted to ask you about the last time my father came to see you."

“It was so long ago...” she said.

I cut her off. “Did he talk to you about Chakrat?”

She looked over her shoulder, quickly. “Don’t say his name!” she whispered.

“Why not? Is he here?”

Vampires had extremely keen hearing.

“No,” her voice dropped. “But he has friends all over.”

“Was my father here before he was killed?”

She nodded reluctantly. “I liked your father. He was a good man. I told him to stay away from him.”

“Chakrat?”

She shook her head but didn’t want to say anything else. I twisted her arm behind her back, painfully. “Tell me!” I insisted.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

“Okay, okay!” I let her go and she mumbled “bitch” under her breath. I let it go.

“It was bigger than him, I told him to walk away but he wouldn’t. Couldn’t, I guess. Typical man,” she rolled her eyes. I didn’t like how she talked about my father. He wasn’t a typical man. In my eyes, he was a hero.

“Bigger than him?” I didn’t understand. Was Lucca right about the council being involved?

“The blood,” she whispered. “They call it the product? The bottles sold by the Syndicate? There were rumors that some of the vampires were getting high on particular brands.”

“Getting high? What do you mean?” I asked.

“If people who donated the blood were high at the time, the blood would contain the drug and this affected the vampires in similar ways as for the humans. Gave them not only a buzz, but even a feeling of being alive again. Very addictive. That is what I heard.”

“Sounds like someone could be making good money off it,” I said.

“You’d better believe it.”

“Who is behind it?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“If I wanted to get some of this blood around here? Who would I talk to?”

She looked at me. “Some clan I don’t know well. They call them the Owls, they have these big eyes,” she shivered. “But they don’t play by the rules.”

“Where can I find them?”

“You shouldn’t mess with them,” she warned me.

But I wouldn’t be deterred that easily.

For the first time in five years, I had some real leads about my father’s death. As I left the club, my thoughts were distracted, trying to process what Lady Cat had told me about the blood drug, Chakrat and the last time she’d seen my father. She’d confirmed that he had looked unwell.

I should have paid closer attention to my surroundings, especially in a place like that, but I was thinking about my father and how I hadn’t seen him a few weeks before his death. I wished I’d had more time with him.

By the time I heard the rush of air that meant something was flying towards me, it was almost too late. My instincts kicked in and I did a double flip without even thinking about it. A dark shadow slid past me. I barely had time to slip out my dagger and get ready. There was no light outside and I couldn’t see a thing. I heard it though, lurking in the shadows and knew I was at a disadvantage. The door opened and some people came out. Light spilled onto the parking lot as I felt the attack come towards me from the side. I was ready with my knife, slicing into the body just before the contact came. But two others were suddenly on top of me. One of them grabbed me by the throat, incapacitating me completely. I couldn’t breathe. Kicking feebly, I wished I had been paying more attention.

There was a flash of light and the hands fell away from my throat. There was screeching in the air and dull thuds as the bodies hit the ground. “Leave!” a command that cut through the night like lightning.

They shrunk away and disappeared into the night.

It was King Lucca, standing next to me. He was holding me up or I’d have been crumpled on the floor in a heap.

“Are you all right?”

I nodded, not wanting to speak. Where the hands had closed over my throat, I felt a searing pain.

“Close your eyes,” he said in a soothing voice. “I will get you some help.”

I felt darkness close in over me and I didn’t fight it. Even though I hated vampires, I had felt relief when I saw it was him, I knew I could trust him. It was a strange feeling but the moment I realized it was him, I had known that I would be okay. Clearly, I was delusional, under some insane spell.

That was the only way in which I could explain what happened afterwards too.

Because when I woke up, I was lying in a strange bed on soft sheets. I opened my eyes and saw King Lucca standing at the window. He noticed that I had woken up and came over to the bed.

“How are you feeling?” He sounded so solicitous, as if he really cared.

“Better. Where am I?” I managed to say.

“You’re safe.” He sat down on the bed next to me, touching my hand.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

“What were you doing at that club? Didn’t you know how dangerous it was?”

“I did,” I admitted and shrugged. Talking was painful.

I was aware of his finger caressing my wrist. His touch did not feel cold at all, or perhaps the sensation he caused was warm.

“I thought I was too late,” he said in a low voice.

I looked at him, questioningly.

“The vampires that attacked you, the Owls?” he said. “Vicious, deadly”.

“I’d never even heard of them until tonight,” I admitted.

Then, as it occurred to me, I asked, “Why were you there?”

The corner of his mouth twitched into a small smile. “I was making sure you were all right.”

“You were following me?!” I wanted to be outraged, but in truth, I wasn’t really. If he hadn’t been there, I would have died.

“Well, I had a feeling you might go after Chakrat.”

It was embarrassing to be that transparent.

“I’m glad you were there.”

He looked at me and I felt naked under his mesmerizing stare. I had never experienced anything like it, the magnetism of his eyes, the lust and the desire I saw there. I felt myself responding, becoming aware of my body under the sheets as it seemed to want to move towards him. This had never happened to me before. No man had ever had this effect on me. It had been easy to keep myself pure, unsullied, trained only on my mission and work.

But this was something else.

Faced with this incredible desire I felt myself losing control over my thoughts, my feelings, my self-control. I wanted him, I could feel it. He’d saved my life and I no longer feared him as I should have. Was this the reason why? He looked at me as if he wanted to know if I was thinking what he was, feeling what he was.

“Izzy,” he said, his voice soft, caressing me, seducing me.

“No,” I whispered, trying to command every ounce of resistance that I could. But there was no point, there was no way I could resist him. I wanted him the way I had never wanted anyone else. I closed my eyes and felt his hand slide up my arms and to my face. I opened my eyes and saw that he was right beside me, cupping my face. His eyes were an incredible color, the lightest blue, and seemed almost incandescent. When his lips touched mine, they were soft and gentle, kissing me with such delicious sweetness that I felt myself melting. I wanted more, more of him. My body seemed to catch fire, it was as if I had woken up, there was a stirring inside of me, between my legs. I felt myself moving towards him, my arms pulling him down on top of me.

“Izzy,” he murmured in my ear, his voice becoming music playing for me only.

I no longer cared if this was wrong, if I shouldn't do it. All I knew was that I wanted to have sex with him. Now. I had never wanted anyone this much before. Our bodies locked together, a dance of skin against skin, my nipples hardening into tight pebbles soothed only by his cool tongue. His teeth, so sharp, sent shivers of desire through me as they touched the delicate skin.

"Please," I begged him, moaning.

I couldn't wait for him to enter me, to fuck me, to have me any which way he wanted me. I couldn't pay attention to anything but that wonderful feeling, the fire that seemed to emanate from him and his magnificent cock, racing through my blood until I exploded with delight.

## Chapter 4

### Lucca

People think vampires have no emotions. That we are monsters without any feelings. But that is not entirely true.

What is certainly the case, is that certain emotions become blunted over time. When you have lived a long time, for example, centuries, some things tend to become blunted and worn down. You've just seen it all too many times before. The power plays, the little dramas, the pointless fights and arguments. The only thing that matters is power. And money. So, two things. It provides security, ensures longevity. First to go, is the sense of humor, then sympathy and empathy, if there was any to begin with. Friends and lovers turn to enemies so quickly, often before you have time to appreciate them. If you've been betrayed before, cheated and lied to, then well, it makes sense not to trust those things, or people.

But money does not lie.

Power does not betray, although those who have it, most certainly and always do. They can be trusted least of all. The powerful will do anything to keep it. Anything.

It had been a long, long, long time since I'd felt anything for someone else. It was admiration and respect.

Izzy had caught me off guard.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

Her energy was pure and elemental.

I knew I wanted her but I could see that she would not be easily won over. But I had not foreseen her clash with the Owls and that I would have to step in to save her. It had occurred to me, seconds after our phone call, that she might not be up for the trap I'd set her. I'd known she would go after Chakrat and had been prepared to help her when she confronted him. But I realized too late that she would check with her mentor first. I had not taken into account her sense of duty and diligence. She'd visited that foul grease monkey and asked him for advice. I had no way of listening in to their conversation as it took place in the middle of the day, in the brightest of sunlight. As if to spite me, it was the sunniest of days.

I had to wait until the light faded before I paid Costello a visit, whispered a few words in his ears and mesmerized him into telling me where Izzy had gone. I couldn't believe it when he said Lady Cat's club, an absolute vampire nest. I had got over there as quickly as I could and I was almost too late.

I felt the most intense emotions I had in decades at the sight of her in their claws, seeing her so helpless and in need of saving was an exquisite pain that became the most overpowering desire. I knew I had to restrain myself but when she woke from her stupor, I knew she felt it too.

It had to happen.

Our joining transcended time and flesh and spirit; went beyond the dimensions of our world, such as it was, and I had to draw blood. Only the smallest amount, the tips of my fangs piercing her skin as she cried out in ecstasy, the sensation driving her

climax even higher.

I had bound her to me.

Even though that had not been my intention.

As the night drew to a close, I knew I had to withdraw to safe quarters. I needed to replenish my energy but I didn't want to leave her.

Izzy was in a strange state of mind, which I understood of course.

I had brought her to a hotel I knew and trusted, the Roussard, which had once belonged to a good friend of mine and therefore contained many good memories. It was now run by another friend, someone I trusted and I ordered room service for Izzy. Coffee, black the way she liked it, and cookies.

When it arrived, I took the tray to her in bed. Her dark hair fell across her face and I could not see her eyes.

I gave her space, which I knew she needed now. She had been a virgin and I had deflowered her. I had an idea what it would mean to her. The exquisite pleasure it had brought me and the pain that she would now feel at the loss of it.

"You bit me," she suddenly said, staring at me, her voice filled with anger.

I was taken aback by her fury.

Where was the innocent maiden, mourning her lost petal?

"You fucker!" she snarled, jumping out of bed and throwing me off balance and onto the ottoman. "You knew I was a virgin!"

“Izzy,” I said softly, “Calm down.”

“Do not tell me to calm down!” She hissed at me, but then stepped back and took a deep breath.

“That was not supposed to happen!”

I looked at the coffee and cookies which had fallen off the tray when she leapt into the air. She paid it no attention but I knew the coffee would leave a nasty stain on the carpet, which was quite old and expensive.

“You tricked me!” She stared at me accusingly.

“I know it may seem that way to you, but I assure you that what happened between us last night was not planned.”

She was standing in front of me, naked, and it was quite impossible to take my eyes off her. Her body was perfect in every way and even though she was of a small build, her muscles were toned and strong. Not an ounce of fat on her body and her breasts were full with nipples the color of strawberries about to ripen. I could feel my mouth water for her all over again.

This was another first for me.

I couldn’t remember the last time that any woman had stirred this kind of lust in me.

But it was clear that she was not sharing my frame of mind. She whipped her hair away and looked for the bite marks I had made on the back of her shoulder. Seeing the tiny pricks on her skin filled me with regret.

“I am sorry about that, I fear, I was unable to help myself.”

“Bastard! Motherfucker!” she really did use the foulest language, I thought to myself, rather amused.

“Does this mean I’m supposed to be your slave or something?”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:04 am*

“Or something?” I laughed. “No, it doesn’t work like that. I didn’t taste that much of your blood, it was only a drop at the most. It connects us, if anything, but I think the connection was already there.”

She turned to look at me, an intense stare.

“You knew I was going to be there, you were waiting for me at the club,” she challenged me.

“I did,” I admitted.

“You put me in harm’s way! I could have died!”

“I was there to ensure that didn’t happen! I was worried about you, I didn’t want you to get hurt. But I knew your first priority would be to find out who had killed your father.”

She sat down heavily on the bed, gave a deep sigh.

“I can’t believe my first time was with a vampire.”

She sounded so desolate.

“It was rather good, wasn’t it?” I was trying to make light of the situation. “Well, it was for me.”

“I have to go,” she suddenly said, grabbing her clothes and putting everything on

hastily. “I have things to do,” she gave me a murderous look that was utterly adorable.

“This didn’t happen and it doesn’t mean anything!” she snapped at me again before storming out of the hotel room and slamming the door behind her.

Her scent filled the air and I breathed it in. On the bedsheets were a few drops of blood, proof of her ruined virginity. I understood her anger at the loss of self-control and the way her body had responded to me. But I was the stronger of the two of us, there really was no way she could have resisted me, even if she was able to resist vampires. I was surprised though that she was so strong in her resistance of me this morning. I had thought she would be more emotional and fragile, this had been my experience with other women and especially virgins.

But not Izzy.

Even the bit of blood she had shed, had not affected her.

Her blood was tough, it had elements of steel in it, rock and iron. She might have been human but the genetic inheritance from her parents had molded her into something quite formidable.

Izzy would never be any man’s shadow, she would not be meek and mild. She was a fighter and she would resist me at every turn. An unpleasant thought occurred to me, that she might fight me even more now that we had been together. I thought of the taste of her, the sweetness of her pussy as I pushed my tongue inside of her, the delight when she’d moaned and begged me for more.

Had she already forgotten that?

It piqued me, I must admit.

I could not imagine that she would be able to push me out of her mind so quickly. Yet, she seemed determined to do that.

I closed the windows and pulled the drapes.

I could feel the sun coming up and summoned up my last energy to melt into the quickening air to hasten my way home. I would give Izzy some space and time to process what had happened between us, and then I would make her see that she was mine and that we belonged together.

It was clear to me that she was meant for me. Even if this was not exactly clear to her, yet.

The castle was deserted when I arrived back home. My sons and their underlings had withdrawn from the light and the stone staircases and halls were dark and silent. The servants had shuttered the doors and windows.

I had a few more minutes to myself and relished the quiet.

I drained a few bottles of blood and felt my spirits revive. It had been a wonderful evening and I could not remember the last time I had felt this energized, dare I say it, this alive?

There was a soft knock on the door.

The Seer shuffled in and cleared her throat.

“Your Highness?”

“Yes?”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

I was impatient to withdraw and not in the mood for her gloomy visions. They tended to be so negative these days. I was feeling more positive, more optimistic.

“It can wait,” she murmured, starting to back away.

“No, no!” I called her back, impatiently. “What is it?”

“The girl, the bounty hunter? The blood of the Guard is stronger in her. Even though her looks resemble the Beauty of the mother, it is the blood of the father that courses through her veins.”

I thought about that.

“That is why you feel so revitalized.”

“Only two drops of her blood?”

“It is enough,” she confirmed. “If you were to drain her...” she didn’t finish her sentence but I knew she didn’t have to. “That is why she will push you away now, fighting for her survival. It is built into her, and you have become both lover and enemy in one night.”

“Thank you, Cassandra,” I said dismissing her.

I didn’t want to hear any more of her witch’s tales. I would bring Izzy round one way or another. I knew her character was strong and upright but she had never been with a man before and what I had showed her had been no ordinary rite of passage. It had

been a night of the highest pleasure, a dance of bodies and minds, an intoxication of elemental beings merging in the spirit world. This was not something she could turn away from.

I had been around long enough to know a few things, and this was one of them.

What had happened between us was not ordinary or commonplace.

It happened once in a lifetime, even a very long lifetime.

## Chapter 5

Izzy

I find my mother in her glasshouse, tending to her orchids. This is where she spends most of her time, surrounded by these gigantic blooms with their delicate stems and wondrous flowers. As a Beauty, she was always drawn to the natural world, to plants and animals, with great healing powers and ability to coax growth out of even the hardiest seed.

She has lost so much weight over the years, her hair almost white now to make her appear far older than she actually is. This came after the attack in which my father and brother were killed, leaving her with injuries from which she would never recover. A healer said there had been an incurable tear inside her head, through which her life essence was leaking. It sounded kooky, but as time went on, I could see it happening. She was dying slowly. My mother said this was another way of describing the process of life, but in her case, it was faster. There was less of her every day, but this was a good day.

She smiled at me and there was light in her eyes.

“Izzy,” she reached out a cool hand and touched my wrist. “How are you?”

“Oh, you know,” I sighed and then said, “Just lost my virginity to a vampire, but apart from that, nothing new.”

She laughed at that. “Wonderful! I had sex with a vampire once, it was quite exhausting! Their appetite for pleasure is so vast!”

I had to laugh too. Part of being a Beauty was being non-judgmental and uncritical, so I had always been able to talk to my mother about anything.

“Did Father know about that?” I asked thinking about his loathing of vampires.

She chuckled. “There is a place for all of us in the new world.”

I wondered if she was right.

It was hard for me to come to terms with the fact that I had slept with Lucca. I had waited for so long and then to give up my virginity to someone like him, felt wrong somehow. I couldn’t get over the idea that vampires were evil, loathsome creatures.

“Was it good?” my mother asked and I blushed, because it had been. I’d heard of some friends who’d had painful experiences their first time, but mine had been fantastic in every way.

“They have had a long time to perfect their technique, usually, and it is one of the few pleasures they still have,” my mother mused.

“So, you wouldn’t mind it if I saw a vampire?”

I could see the energy fading from her face, it came suddenly, almost like a cloud

shifting before the sun. Our conversation had been too much for her, I feared.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“You... you...” her voice became soft, almost inaudible. She seemed to lose her train of thought. Her hands dropped in her lap and became immobile. It was as if she’d fallen asleep even though her eyes were still open.

I stood up, kissed her head and went outside. I knew my presence alone was tiring for her.

She had told me a long time ago that the part of me that was Guard was stronger than the part that was Beauty. She said even as a little girl, I was too feisty and willful, that these were not characteristics of her kind. She’d told me then that I would find it hard to find a man able to match my strength and ability, that they would be drawn to my looks and that I would find their adoration annoying. She’d suggested another Guard perhaps, but I found them too rough, too simple. I’d never even been attracted to anyone, had never wanted anyone to kiss me.

When I thought of the way that I had responded to Lucca the night before, I could barely deal with how easily I had capitulated, given in. I felt sure of the fact that he had somehow bewitched me, hypnotized me into lowering my defenses. I wanted to ask my mother about the bite marks and what that meant, but I had missed my chance to ask her.

I thought of an old friend, Alsha, who had trained to be a guard with me, but had then fallen in love. She fell pregnant right away and got married, moving away to a cottage in the woods. I later found out her husband was a shapeshifter, belonging to a clan of wolves known for their adherence to the old ways. I had not seen her again, finding her choices difficult to understand at the time.

But I wanted to talk to someone about what was happening to me and Alsha seemed to be the person I wanted to see most. I found the way to her house, asking for directions along the way and finally managed to locate the cabin in the woods. It was in an isolated area outside of town, but there was a clearing and the wooden house had been built there, surrounded by wildflowers. It looked charming and peaceful. I got out and walked to the front door, but stopped when I heard the laughter of children. I turned and saw a grown woman walking towards me. There were two little girls with her and it was their voices I had heard.

It was Alsha and when she saw me, she stopped in her tracks. Then, she seemed to recognize me.

“Izzy?”

“Sorry for dropping in like this,” I said, feeling a bit awkward all of a sudden. I could see the shock on Alsha’s face and had a feeling our last meeting might have been even more confrontational than I had remembered.

She recovered quickly though, “Girls, this is my old friend Izzy!” Then to me she said, “Come in, I’ll make us some tea.”

“Your girls are beautiful,” I said, and it was true. With their long, curly hair and rosy cheeks, they seemed the picture of health. Both were wearing simple cotton dresses, and were barefoot. Alsha too, seemed well. She was wearing a dress too, her hair was very long and wild but it suited her.

We went inside, into what was a big open space divided into a living area and a kitchen, with two rooms on the other side of a narrow passage. It was furnished simply but comfortably, messy with toys and clothes and the hallmarks of everyday life.

“Diran is out,” Alsha said, “So, we can talk. Girls, go play in your room please?”

I marveled at how obedient they were, they both simply went into their rooms without complaint.

“You seem happy,” I said.

“I am,” she gave a big smile and put on the kettle. “You thought I was making a big mistake remember? Giving up the excitement of life as a bounty hunter for this?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was a bit harsh, I think.”

Alsha grinned. “I think you said I was throwing my life away? Becoming some dog’s bitch?”

“Shit, that’s awful,” I admitted. “Sorry about that.” But he’d kept secrets from me too.

She shook her head to show me she didn’t hold it against me.

“I got it, you were always about the extremes. You didn’t think I could be a wife and a mother as well as a bounty hunter, and you were right. I wanted to have a family, to live here with Diran.”

“And, how is it going?” I wanted to know.

Her voice softened. “I love it.”

I nodded.

“So, why are you really here?” she asked.

“I can’t just drop in on an old friend without wanting something?”

She gave me a knowing look. “Not you, Izzy.”

I knew she was right, but that didn’t mean I liked it. I wanted to be the kind of person who was a good friend. But perhaps I was too much like my father, fond of my own company.

“How was it getting used to Diran’s... you know? The other side?”

She smiled knowingly. “It was strange, at first. You know, how he used to go out by himself, at night, stay out for hours. He never wanted me to see him change and I respected that. But there would be times when he’d disappear for days, then come home and sleep for hours. He would be exhausted, thin, covered in scratches.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

She said, “He told me he loved being a wolf, that this was who he was, but he wanted to be a man too. To be with me, to have a family.”

She shrugged, “There are two sides to him, I had to accept that. But it is easier said than done.”

“But did you?”

She nodded. “Sometimes, it’s hard. I don’t know what he gets up to when he is a wolf and he doesn’t either. His mind is animal then, not human. I saw him once, in the forest... I had gone looking for him because one of the girls was sick and for a moment, I thought he was going to attack me...”

“But he didn’t?”

She shook her head. “No...But there was a moment, when I wasn’t so sure...”

The door opened and Diran came in. He was a tall, powerfully built man with a shaggy beard and warm, brown eyes.

Alsha introduced us and he shook my hand.

“Good grip,” he said, looking me in the eye.

I had not met him before, but I liked him.

“I’ve come to ask Alsha’s advice about being with someone... a bit different.”

His eyes widened. “Oh,” he said. “A shifter?”

“No...”

Seeing me hesitate, he said, “I’m going to wash up, give you girls time to catch up.”

I waited until he was gone, then I said, “It’s a vampire.”

Alsha’s face went white.

“A vampire,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

She blinked a few times, then fetched our tea, it was strong and sweet and gave us something else to focus on for a few minutes.

“The wolves and the vampires are natural enemies,” she said, casting a nervous glance in the direction of her room, where Diran had gone off to. “In fact, the vampires are enemies to most.”

I nodded.

“What about you,” I asked. “What do you think about them?”

“It’s not about what I think,” she said, gently taking my hand. “It’s about what you think and feel. Do you like him? Is he good to you? Can you trust him?”

“I don’t know,” I said, honestly. “I was raised to hate them and it’s hard for me to change that view. I feel so conflicted...”

“Who is he?” Diran had appeared behind us, his voice was loud and hard.

Alsha got up, tried to calm her husband down. “Hang on...”

“No! I demand to know his name!”

He had a temper and he was strong but I could take him down in a fight. Wolves were instinctual but not particularly clever fighters.

“It’s better if I go,” I said, quietly to Alsha. “Thanks for the tea.”

I looked him in the eye, dared him to make a move towards me, but he decided to back down and I left. Alsha came running after me.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Wait!” she said. When she caught up with me, she said, “Not all vampires are bad. I know there are many who have sworn off killing people, drinking blood from the blood banks.”

I nodded. “Lucca is one of those.”

Alsha stared at me. “King Lucca? Of D’Valleira?”

“You know him?”

“I have heard of his family, I mean, it is one of the big vampire families. You don’t just date and dump someone like that.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable.

“Isn’t he like... a thousand years old?” she asked.

“He doesn’t look that old,” I said. Alsha stared at me and then burst out laughing, and I couldn’t help but join in.

“So, he’s a good-looking old vampire then?”

“Very!”

But I didn’t want to think about that.

I pulled my shirt down over my shoulder. “He did give me that, though.”

I showed her my bite mark, which was still red.

“Do you think he’s marked me now?”

She grinned at me, naughtily. “Diran once bit me when we were having sex, he broke my finger by accident!”

“No way!”

She shook her head and laughed. “I think it means there is a connection between you now. Once he has tasted your blood and your blood has met his, there is a link, like a bond, a sensitivity.”

“But how do you feel?” Alsha asked. “Are you drawn to him, do you want to be with him?”

“No,” I said slowly. “But I don’t fear him. I don’t think he’d hurt me. No, I’m sure he wouldn’t.”

She nodded.

“Give yourself time, I think. This is a lot to process. Bo’s daughter, with a vampire!”

She was right. It was unfathomable.

## Chapter 6

### Lucca

I rest for a few hours, then go down to the outer ward. I like to be around the castle at this time of day. There is a changing of the servants, the routines switching from day

to night. There are not only our kind here, but an army of men as well, who have been bound to me by right of blood. I need them to drive the trucks out with the blood product for our distribution.

With an organization like this, we cannot afford to be running at night only. It has to be a twenty-four seven arrangement, completely modern and part of the times. My tolerance for light is high and if there is sufficient cloud cover on overcast days, I can even be outside.

I like to watch them loading the trucks, checking the routes and signing in the drivers. Usually, it is a well-oiled operation running smoothly.

But not today.

I see men standing around, muttering to themselves, shaking their heads. There is shouting and swearing and by five o'clock some of the crates and shipments still haven't been loaded. I look for my general, a man called Marlon, who has been in charge of the operations for the past twenty years.

“General!”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

He comes running over, keeping his head respectfully low.

“Sire,” he acknowledges me.

“What is going on?”

He glances up at me quickly, uncertainly.

“There seems to be a problem,” I press on, impatiently.

“It’s the changed route... Sire, the drivers weren’t informed until this morning. And we can’t take that route, there are reports that it isn’t safe.”

“When was the route changed?” I demand to know.

Marlon’s face remains impassive. “I was only informed this morning, Sire.”

“By whom?”

“Prince Layrr.”

“He is here?”

Layrr doesn’t usually involve himself in the day-to-day running of the business and I seek him out, finding him in what we call the warehouse, one of the outhouses. I see him staring at maps and consulting with some of the drivers about alternative roads.

“What is going on here?” I demand to know.

I see him do a double-take when he sees me in the door. He is not happy to see me here and barely hides it.

“Father! I was not expecting you,” he says, bowing his head. Then he tells me about another attack on one of our convoys. He had only heard of it last night and had been trying to find out how the bandits had found the secret new route, which had been known to only a few individuals. “We have a leak, but I don’t know where it is,” he says, darkly.

“This is our fourth loss in a month?” I had known about one of the ambushes, but not that there had been three others since then. “What has this cost us?”

Layrr will not meet my eyes. “Close to a million.”

The shock of it almost takes my breath away.

“Why was I not informed?” my voice is cold and low.

“You were so busy trying to find out what happened to Tanata,” Layrr’s voice rises. “I couldn’t get hold of you so I’ve been taking decisions!”

“Where is Ragnar?” I ask about my other son.

“He is off on one of his missions,” he says, dismissing him. “We’ve been unable to catch any of these bandits, it’s almost impossible to know what is going on.”

“Not impossible at all,” comes a voice from the other end of the warehouse. It is Ragnar, striding towards us, his voice cool. “Some of our men have survived the attacks, they told us they saw vampires.”

“They could have been mistaken or fooled,” says Layrr, barely hiding his contempt for his brother. “Anything could cause those injuries,” he says dismissively.

“What do you think?” I ask Ragnar, who smiles at his brother.

“I think we need to take the trucks out ourselves, try and catch these fuckers red-handed.”

Layrr interrupts him, “We have doubled the convoy size! We can’t afford to move the operation to night time only! We will not meet the supply!”

Layrr’s temper bothers me. He needs to have a cool head when dealing with a crisis.

I call Marlon over. “What is your take on this?” I ask him in a low voice, as we walk away from the brothers.

“Someone is trying to cash in on our operation,” he says.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “But they’re organized and they know what they’re doing. I have asked some of the men who survived and the attacks are brutal and swift.”

“Our kind?”

Marlon nods, not meeting my eyes.

“Father,” I hear Layrr behind me. “I am tracking the last shipment that was taken. Those bottles were fitted with markers to try and see where they pop up. I sent spies out to look for them.”

“And?”

“They are cropping up in the Citadel.”

The Citadel is under the control of Tempesto, a vampire with a seat on the Council. He has been in this position since the formation of the Council and was elected by all of us. I can’t imagine that he is part of this.

“We need more information,” I say.

“I can go,” says Ragnar. “I think we need to take a firm stand here.”

Layrr sniggers. “Fat lot of good you’ll do, going around beating everyone up. You will hear what you want to hear.”

Ragnar has a reputation as a blunt tool, effective in its own way but Layrr is more of an operator, more smooth. At least, he used to be. What I saw today gives me pause.

“I think this is a job for Sunil,” I say, and see Layrr close his eyes for a moment.

I am unpleasantly reminded of the bitterness between all of my sons, and how it caused my second eldest son to leave the castle permanently. Layrr and Ragnar are, of course, closer, even though they hate each other with a passion. My first wife, Queen Simonis, tried to foster a sense of brotherhood. That is partly why I married her. She was an ideal partner in building an empire. She was a vampire princess, from a highly respected family. Sunil was the last to join our family, I had rescued him from an orgy gone wrong in the badlands many years ago, the young man was about to bleed to death, when something about him made me decide to save him, to take him in, give him a better life, a name and a family. He has always been grateful, the least manipulative of the sons, closer to me. But this in itself has made him hateful to his brothers, who have never known another life than this and see the family and the business as their birthright.

Their way is the ruthless, old-fashioned way. Submitting to the agreements of the peace accord did not come naturally to them. Sunil, on the other hand, prefers diplomacy and negotiation, he shies away from killing, which has helped his career in the Citadel, where he represents our family interests and he serves in various capacities.

There was no time to waste.

I needed to get word to Sunil.

“Father,” Layrr called out to me.

“I need... to warn you... about Sunil.”

“Not now!” I said, furiously shaking off his arm. “I don’t have time for this ridiculous sibling rivalry!”

“No! That’s not it!”

But I walked away from Layrr, wouldn’t hear what he had to say.

I went back into the castle, into the library. Filled with heavy bookshelves covering entire walls, and books dating back centuries, this had always been a place to think and strategize. I sank into one of the deep armchairs, suddenly wondering about Izzy and how she was.

I wanted to check in on her but she needed time to come to terms with what had happened. There was no doubt in my mind that eventually, she would be more accepting of a relationship between us, but it would take a while. She was human after all, even if she was different and special, she had to get used to the idea. Unlike me, she had not spent years walking the wilderness alone, knowing how incredibly rare it was to find someone who really saw you for who you were, and accepted you.

She would be someone I could talk to, someone I could trust. This was what I needed right now, to talk through the situation that was in front of me. I needed the voice of reason. My sons had their own agendas and my advisers also had their own views. They would be thinking of the business, the family company, but not necessarily the family.

The only one who cared about the Fallon D’Valleira name, was me. It had been founded by me, years ago, when I roamed the countryside, at first alone, then with my small band of followers. I had to be ruthless back then, to stake my claim. Then we were at war and nobody walked free, all of us looking over our shoulders. The big vampire clans ruled with absolute might and were wiping out the humans. The mortals fought back, but they were losing the battle. There were too many vampires,

growing too strong and their thirst for blood was expanding too, we were going to wipe out our source. Some families had started keeping humans as slaves in their lairs, feeding off them but keeping them alive. It was an inhumane strategy and the humans gradually became weaker and sick, dying after some time.

I joined the tribe of warrior vampires led by Zendan the Great. I rose in the ranks and became his right-hand man, leading us into battle to defeat some of the great vampire houses and help to end the Great War. I married his daughter Simonis, set up my own family and kingdom in the West. After years of negotiating with the mortals, we founded the ideas of blood banks with a syndicate of three top vampire families. Initially, I was part of Zendan's family but within a few years, I bought his family share and became one of the premier business partners. I supported Tempesto in his campaign for a Council seat and he was a second partner in the Syndicate. Back then, I thought it was prudent to stand with those who supported the new world order, who wanted to be a part of the peace process.

But Tempesto in time, showed hidden agendas. He wanted control for himself. He let me rule the West, not interfering at first but over the years, I noticed him taking more of the lands that were under my rule. I saw him change the distribution centers for the product, fought him on the price fixing. I saw how others were bowing down to him, like the Lusuth Clan, who had remained in the North, but had never accepted their loss of the power following the end of the Great War. John Lusuth had been defeated by Zendan in one of the great battles towards the end of the war that cleared the way for peace. His son, Bernard had taken his place and I had always feared him taking revenge on me.

Simonis had always urged me to get rid of him, had said he would never accept that I had killed his father and taken power from their family. But I was tired of the bloodshed and was enjoying the quiet after the war, setting up my kingdom in the West, ruling over the lands. She accused me of becoming weak and it had caused strain between us. At the time of her death, she had been in the Citadel with Sunil.

Despite the tension between us, she had understood what was at stake and how to manage the politics of the post-war world. She knew if we wanted to remain prominent we had to play by the rules, bend them if necessary, but not break them.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

Until now.

Izzy could be someone like that as well.

If she wanted to.

This was an important point to consider. There was a chance that she would not accept this. I didn't want to consider it. But she was stubborn and hard-headed, part of what made her a good bounty hunter. The refusal to see reason, to consider risks. She would rush in and ask questions later.

I feared that this could bring danger to her.

The women in my life had all come to bad ends.

I could not let anything happen to Izzy.

I sent out a crow to watch out for her, to be my eyes and report back. She would not like this and I instructed the crow to keep out of sight at all times. Only to report back if there was a sign of imminent danger.

I needed to keep her safe.

Chapter 7

Izzy

Costello insists on coming with me to the Citadel.

He says he has “some business” there, but I strongly suspect he is only coming as some kind of protection. He knows I want to poke around in Council affairs and this worries him. He told me that he was beginning to think my father’s death was part of a much larger, more complicated puzzle involving politics at a higher level. He knows better than to try to warn me off, which is why he has come along for the ride.

The Citadel is situated in the highest part of the capital, a fortress that once housed the supreme leaders of the land. It is now home to the Council.

But the Citadel is filled with all sorts of people and creatures, as it is the seat of power, there are always ploys and plans afoot for some to increase their position and strengthen their hand, to plot against their enemies or seek alliances with others. My father hated coming here, saying it was a nest of vipers.

I remembered my first visit at the age of ten, how I was overwhelmed by the large numbers of people in the street, the noise that seemed to come from everywhere. Cars and trucks were prohibited from entering the Citadel and these were parked outside in the streets of the Capital. Stone steps and thick walls separated the two and it felt like entering another time and place. Women with heavily painted faces and exotic dresses peered from windows and doorways, shadowy figures whispered from alleys about new drugs and guesthouses that would make all our dreams come true.

Like my father, Costello hurried past all of these to get to our lodgings, two rooms at an inn that my father had liked because he knew the owner. It was owned by a retired soldier and his wife who could be trusted not to announce our arrival to the whole world. In the Citadel, information was the most valuable currency.

Costello called the soldier, captain, and after he showed us to our rooms, giving us the keys and mentioning a few places to eat, he came closer and said in a low voice,

“You watch yourselves, all right? Things are afoot in the land.”

I came forward, “What do you mean?”

He looked at me and narrowed his eyes, “This is no place for a little lady,” he said with a snigger. “With all due respect.”

I moved quickly, giving him no time to respond, pushing him against the wall, hard. The idea was not to hurt him but to send a message that he would immediately understand.

“I am not a ‘little lady’,” I said, spitting out the words.

I took my hand off his chest, and he swallowed nervously.

“My apologies,” he said quickly.

I put a hand on his arm to keep him from rushing off as he was intending to do.

“What do you mean with ‘things are afoot?’”

He looked over to Costello, as if to check how much he should say.

“There is talk of a coup on the Council. Tensions have been simmering for a while, there have been incidents and I fear it is threatening to boil over.”

I looked over at Costello who did not like this news either. Whenever there was talk of violence, humans bore the brunt of it, for some reason. We were always made to suffer the consequences of actions taken at higher levels.

“Who?” Costello asked.

“They call him the Servant,” the captain said, uneasily. “He is a medium but he has risen in their world.”

“There is a medium on the Council,” I said.

“That’s right, but she has lost the loyalty of her people. The Servant is apparently promising the rise of the Witches.”

Costello coughed and as I turned to look at him, the captain slipped from my grasp and rushed from the room.

“This is bad,” Costello said. “If what he says is true, then another war might be coming.”

I understood what he meant. After the forces that emerged victorious after the Great War came to agree on the terms of peace, it was decided that the door to the underworld be kept closed. This was done by the medium on the council, Lare, who represented the supernatural world of faeries and daemons. She ensured the walls between our and their world remained impenetrable. There were stories that during the final days of the war, demons had been sent in to help certain parties, but they were uncontrollable and caused huge destruction. Closing the portal and ensuring that the last demon was destroyed, had been the job of the demon hunters, former guards and one of them, Dominic, served on the Council as well. Dominic knew my father and this was the man I was trying to find now.

Costello wanted to come with me, he feared that finding Dominic would lead us down some dark alleys. We had arranged a meeting with another Guard and as we made our way to the meeting place, I thought of Lucca and how I would have liked to talk to him. It was a thought that popped into my head quite unexpectedly, wondering what he would make of what was happening.

I knew his family's fortune was made during and after the war, he might stand to lose a lot if the Council was shuffled and the balance of power was disturbed. His family was in alliance with the humans, they were thought of as reformed vampires. They needed people and in return, the vampires promised to help protect them from the other, less controllable supernatural beings.

Costello was worried. I knew he wanted to get back to his workshop and his cars. He didn't like politics and dealing with people who lied for a living. Like my father, his belief was that the Citadel was made up of two-faced and duplicitous beings who only cared about themselves and their positions. I assured him we would leave as soon as I'd spoken to Dominic.

Our destination was a house at the end of the Citadel. We had to take some steep steps and climb down to almost on top of the wall to reach this place. There was a huge door with an iron knocker. As soon as we lifted it and brought it down, a tremendous gong reverberated inside. The door was opened and we heard a voice inviting us inside. We went in and it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"Come, friends," I heard a warm voice say. There was a room next to the entrance hall, in which a big fire was roaring in the fireplace. A man came towards us with a big smile, giving Costello a bear hug and after a moment's hesitation, the man with the beard and laughing blue eyes, gave me a hug too.

"Ah, Bo's daughter, Izzy! If you aren't the spitting image!"

There were two dogs with wagging tails sniffing our feet. I eyed them warily but they seemed to be ordinary dogs, pets.

“Don’t worry about these mugs,” Joe said, winking at me. “They’re friendly. Here, have some wine.”

He handed us glasses with red wine and I pretended to take a sip. I needed my wits about me. I listened to Joe and Costello talk about people they knew and how things had changed over the past few years. I looked at the room with its deep couches and carpets. It had been a grand reception area once, I thought, but the rug was frayed and the upholstery on the sofas was torn and dirty. It may have been the house of a prominent family once, but things had changed for the worse.

Joe was a jovial guy and seemed glad to catch up with Costello. As soon as there was a lull in their conversation, I jumped in, impatient for answers.

“Could you get us a meeting with Dominic?” I asked.

The smile disappeared from Joe’s face. “Why would you want to do that?” he asked, carefully.

“I am looking into a few things,” I said, but I could see that if I wanted to get through to him, I would have to trust him more.

“I have been contracted to investigate the death of Queen Tanata. It seems connected to my father’s murder five years ago. I received a tip that it may have something to do with what is going on at the Council, possibly to MoZa.”

Joe stared at me. He looked like he wanted to say something, but stopped himself. He turned to Costello. “You knew about this?”

Costello shrugged.

Joe got up and walked over to me, dropping his voice really low.

“Don’t say his name like that!” he hissed. “The walls have ears!”

“Even here?”

“Everywhere!”

There was movement at the door and we all turned around. A bear of a man, huge and imposing entered the room. Even though I’d never seen him before, I knew this was Dominic. He had the look of a man who feared nothing and no-one. He walked straight up to me and said to me.

“Looking for me?”

I knew he’d heard what I had just said. I had a feeling I didn’t have much time to get to the truth.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Could MoZa have wanted my father dead?”

Dominic had dark, burning eyes that seemed to burn into me. I held his gaze and I was relieved when he finally looked away, over at Costello. His manner seemed to change and he walked over to greet him.

“Old friend, how are you?”

Costello shook his hand and Dominic slapped his back before turning back to face me.

“You have courage coming here like this,” he said.

I swallowed, “My father used to say that you were the only straight arrow on the Council. You never wanted the position, he said, that was the best way of knowing that someone was suited for power.”

Dominic looked down. “Your father was a good man,” he said softly. “I had a lot of time for him.”

“Will you help me find his killer?” I asked, imploring him.

He took his time to answer. The light caught his face and I saw deep lines across his forehead and cheeks.

“Your father was looking for Chakrat, correct?” he finally asked. “But everyone knew he was protected. Chakrat works for Tempesto.”

“Could he have had my father killed? Thing is... it seemed personal. He or they, wanted to take out my father’s whole family. My mother survived, barely, but everyone else but me died.”

“You think it was personal?”

“I think... my father could have handled one vampire,” I said. “Someone wanted to make sure he didn’t come back from that.”

Dominic folded his arms and stared into the fire.

“Tempesto has changed,” he said. “We fear he has been using the drug blood, it has made him paranoid and suspicious.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have heard rumors that some of the product contains blood of different drug users, when it is consumed, it gives the same kind of high. If taken too much, it has the same effect as on humans. It can produce hallucinations, psychosis.”

I considered this.

Dominic went on. “The product is a money spinner, it goes at a higher rate, of course, it is sought-after. We have been trying to shut it down but keep coming up to a dead end. We believe Tempesto is consolidating his power on the Council and he may be part of this drug trade. We don’t have proof yet. But it has increased tension with MoZa, the Council Chairman. Tempesto has become cruel, vindictive. Anyone who stands against him, disappears or dies in an accident.”

“Can’t MoZa act against him?”

Dominic looked at me hard. “MoZa is getting old. He seems reluctant to take on the harder challenges.”

“What does all of this have to do with the Servant?”

His head whipped up. “What do you know about him?!”

“It’s true then?”

Dominic was quiet for a long time. When he finally spoke, he said, “Things are changing, you’re right. The peace may end soon.” He kept his voice low and Costello and Joe came to join us at the fire.

“Tempesto has been so focused on building his empire that he has neglected to keep his eye on some of those under his rule. Vampires high on drug blood have been attacking villages in the south, killing people. But he blocks us when we try to stop them. MoZa tried initially, he issued the bounty on Chakrat but then your father died. After that, nobody wanted to touch Chakrat.”

“The vampires want to take over the Council,” Joe stated.

Dominic nodded. “Some, not all. Those that are not in favor, are supporting the Servant. But the vampires are divided too. They don’t stand together. Tempesto got rid of Queen Tanata by accident, he wanted to remove Lucca, of Fallon D’Valleira. That family is his biggest opponent.”

There, I thought, I had Lucca’s answer. He had been right all along.

“The other councilors have become less influential too. The Councilor Lare is weakening and she has lost the support of the people. It looks like the Servant will be pushed to take her seat.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“How will that change things?” I asked.

“There will be war again,” Dominic said, gravely. “The Supernaturals are unstable, uncontrollable. If we let them in, they will go after everyone. They like chaos, thrive on instability. It will be a dark day for mortal beings.”

I shuddered, thinking of the horror stories my parents told me of those times, when humans lived in caves in the mountains, too fearful to come out.

I asked him, “What happened exactly, the night Queen Tanata died? How did Tempesto get rid of her?”

Dominic looked at me, pointedly, as if to see whether he could trust me.

“He had someone working for him. Someone on the inside, we think.”

That was all I managed to get from him before he left.

## Chapter 8

### Lucca

The Citadel has not changed much over the years.

It is still the same beast it always was, hungry and horny and looking for fresh prey.

Either you take it head-on, or you keep out of its way.

I prefer to keep hidden for now.

I decide to drop in on Sunil without any warning. I want to see his face when he opens the door and finds me there.

Sunil's house is a grand, old mansion close to the city center.

Queen Simonis had bought it as she liked to come to the capital, to see her friends, many of whom lived here. She'd liked the parties and the intrigue that surrounded those on the Council. Even then, I disliked the drama and preferred to stay at Grey Castle. After her death, Sunil took over the house and ran the administrative side of business from here. He dealt with councilors and new markets.

Sunil was sophisticated and cultured. He had grown up in the capital, gone to school here and learnt different languages. He liked art and music, and kept up with the advances in human technology. His house contained both elements of the old and the new world. It didn't have the damp of my castle.

"Father! What a surprise!"

There was a dinner party at his house. I could see people seated around the table, drinking wine and laughing. He came out to see me and took me to a private room downstairs, the study.

He seemed genuinely pleased to see me, and yet I was not completely convinced.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?"

I told him what had been happening out West, and that I was concerned.

"Yes," he nodded. "I've heard it too."

He paused and fetched us some refreshments.

His product tasted slightly different, he told me he'd added some flavoring. I didn't like it and put it down, pushing it away.

"What is going on with the Council?" I asked.

"My sources tell me there is something happening behind the scenes at the Council, but I don't know exactly what. I've been trying to establish what, but I want to be careful. I have no wish to die yet," he said with a dry laugh.

The Council had been effective for so long and I did not want to stir up problems.

"Dominic is growing old," said Sunil. "His influence has weakened and this has caused the power battle between MoZa and Tempesto to flare up. They are openly challenging each other at hearings now, I've been told."

"We cannot have another war," I warned.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“I don’t know if it will come to that,” Sunil objected. “I think we have come too far.”

I thought of Simonis, who had believed that war was a natural state, the only state of being. When all were openly at each other’s necks, not pretending to be getting along and working together. Kill or be killed, she liked to say. It was not a very savory idea, but Simonis was practical and efficient. Until the day she died in a horrible attack at the house of Councilor Lare. It was said a group of demons had been released to try to take out the councilor as a warning. Everyone was torn to pieces, but Lare had managed to escape. It was a brutal attack for which I demanded retribution. The demons were captured and extinguished. Lare had apologized to me in person and I’d accepted her apology.

“Where is Tempesto now?” I asked Sunil.

“He has a compound outside the capital,” he said. “I’ve heard it is quite big, with fortifications.”

“Have we been able to get inside information on him?”

“His security is too tight,” Sunil shook his head. “I have befriended someone on his inner circle but I have not been able to learn much.”

“Get someone to monitor his compound and see who comes and goes. Make a note of his visitors.”

“Yes, Father. Will you be staying?”

I had the sense that Sunil didn't want this and I wondered why. I knew his tastes were a bit exotic, but I had no wish to hold him back. If he wanted to fuck rent boys, that was his business.

"I intend going out tonight, but I will be back tomorrow if that is all right with you? I want to spend perhaps another night in the Citadel."

The crow had given me the location of Izzy in the Citadel and I took care to camouflage my appearance as I went out into the streets. I left my royal guards at Sunil's house, slipping out the back.

I had received a message from her a short while ago.

It was terse, saying only We need to talk.

But the fact that she had contacted me was significant. It meant that she was ready to see me and was open to further contact. I was delighted at the thought of meeting up with her. Even though I had seen her only days ago, it felt too long.

The crow had followed Izzy and her friend to a shabby place at the edge of the Citadel. This was apparently where they were staying. I waited for her outside, knowing she was on her way back from the meeting she'd had earlier.

I felt her approaching before I saw her.

I could feel it in my body, yearning for her, wanting her. We had shared blood now and she would feel it too. I hung back in the shadows when I saw them approach. When they reached the inn, she spoke to the big man who went indoors, alone.

Then she turned to look for me.

“Over here,” I called to her.

She came to the side alley and I pulled her towards me, kissing her before I could stop myself. She pulled away after a moment, catching her breath.

“A bit presumptuous!” she said.

“I’ve missed you,” I said, unapologetically.

“Where can we talk?” she asked. I took her to a hotel I’d booked into earlier. It was in the Capital but I knew the owners and they’d given me the top floor. I wanted to get out of the Citadel where there were too many eyes on me.

The suite consisted of several interconnected rooms, with low couches and a fire pit and bar with food set out. I encouraged Izzy to try some while I discreetly drank some bottles of product set aside for me. I didn’t think Izzy was quite ready to see me guzzle human blood openly. But I wanted to get my energy levels up. Her reaction to my kiss had been very promising and I was looking forward to a night of uninterrupted pleasure. This was what I needed to take my mind off the intrigue and business problems.

“This place is amazing,” Izzy said, going out onto the balcony and staring out over the capital with its sea of lights. “It must cost a fortune?”

I just shrugged. There was no point telling her that money meant nothing to me. I had so much of it now, Sunil managed most of it in various investments, but it kept growing and growing. I had more money than I could ever think of spending.

She went back inside, looking at the food without much interest.

“Not hungry?” I asked, coming up behind her.

I felt her body against mine and she went still.

“I knew you were there, even before I could see you,” she said then. “Just now, in the street? Is that because of the blood... my blood?”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

There was no way of making it easier for her.

“Yes,” I said.

“Does it mean anything else, like, can you read my mind or make me do anything you want me to?”

“I wish!” I said with a laugh.

She turned to face me. “What do you mean?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t you think if I could have my way, you would be naked right now, and we would be in bed and I would be making love to you in all of the many, many ways I’ve been dreaming of?”

“Oh, really?” She was pretending to resist me, I could tell.

I loved the way she was playing with me, toying with me.

She asked, “You don’t want to hear what I have found out tonight? Don’t think I didn’t notice that crow flying behind me the whole time.”

“Of course, I want to know,” I said. “But more than that, I want to be with you.”

I caught her hand, and pulled her towards me.

“Please say that you want this too.”

“I don’t know what I want,” she said, pulling away from me.

“You don’t have to make a decision, then,” I said, being very conciliatory. “But how about I show you some of the things I can do?”

When she didn’t say anything right away, I added, “Just for a while, let’s forget about it all and just enjoy each other?”

“It has been a long day,” she conceded. “I could do with a bit of relaxing.”

I picked her up and lay her down in the bed, slowly removing her clothing. The leather jacket and the tight jeans, the boots with intricate laces. Underneath, she was wearing a tight T-shirt and small panties. I ran my finger under the elastic as I leaned in to kiss her, her lips parting as I pressed my mouth against her. She was so warm, so full of life, it was absolutely intoxicating to be with her. My finger ran over her belly underneath the panties and I edged slowly over her pubic area, slipping inside of her where it was all wetness and warmth. She moaned gently and arched her back, twisting her athletic legs around my back and squeezing me hard.

I laughed and took off my clothes, pushing her legs back onto the bed. She lay still, expectantly, staring at me, her beautiful eyes glued to mine. I ran my tongue over her thighs, parted her legs gently and then kissed her inside, my tongue prodding and licking. She was ready for me, pulsating with an energy that was driving me wild. I opened her wider, tilted her pelvis to me as I drank from her, the juices flowing towards me like dew drops from the most exquisite flower.

She was moaning and groaning, I nibbled lightly, flicking her clitoris with my tongue and feeling the nub of pleasure pulsate with desire, quickening to my touch. She was so aroused, so ready for me, I wanted to tease her, to make her wait as she had kept me waiting.

But, she then moved so quickly, I had to laugh in delight as she slid over me, pinning me down on the bed and straddling me, taking my cock inside of her as she started to ride me, grinding me into the bed. She was taking her pleasure, not waiting for me to satisfy her. I watched her, her gorgeous breasts with rock hard nipples rising over me, the creamy skin without a blemish, the way the muscles contracted with every rocking movement. She was simply incredible and as the energy mounted between us, I stared into her eyes, willing her to look at me as we came together, bonded in that instant, and forever.

We had sex again, then once more, each time in a different position as she was willing to explore and try out new things. I was only too happy to oblige, manipulating her young body and delighting in her suppleness.

When she was finally spent, a few hours before dawn, she told me what she'd learnt that night. She was ravenous now, standing in front of the buffet of food, stuffing her face with cheese and grapes and little savory pieces that looked very tasty.

Most of what she said did not surprise me. I watched her eating, finding it adorable. Until she told me of The Servant.

That made me sit upright.

“Oh, do I have your attention now?” She asked, sarcastically.

She didn't understand though, the implications of what she'd said. The situation had progressed far more than I'd realized if we were already at this point. I got out of bed and got dressed in a flash.

“I must go,” I said.

Izzy's face dropped. “I'm sorry, my love, but this calls for immediate action. I will

see you soon, I promise.”

I kissed her quickly and made my way back to Sunil’s house as fast as I could. The news about Tempesto being behind Tanata’s death confirmed what I had suspected. But my satisfaction at learning the truth was eclipsed by concern about what I had just learned.

## Chapter 9

Izzy

I left the hotel and took a car back to the Citadel.

But I didn't go straight back to our rooms.

I gave the driver the address of a well-known club and had him drop me off there. I was looking for a member of vampire royalty called Princess Alexandra. She was considered vampire aristocracy and more importantly, she was a guest at the wedding where Lucca and Queen Tamara had been married. Earlier, the captain had said he had seen her in town and I had made a mental note. I'd been wanting to talk to her.

The club was full of people, bright lights and pumping music. The energy was slightly frenetic and my antennae was going haywire, there were simply too many vampires here. I could feel their eyes on me, their lust for my blood. In a place like this, humans disappeared all the time into dark rooms where their blood was traded, taken and often, sacrificed.

"What is a pretty lady like you doing here?" a tall man, with icy eyes asked. He was dressed in a silk shirt with a beautiful coat slung casually over his shoulders.

"I am looking for the Lady Alexandra," I said. "I need to have a word with her, on behalf of King Lucca."

I saw his eyes narrow as he considered my words. I knew the weight of mentioning Lucca's name and it seemed to work.

“Come with me,” he said, taking my hand and leading me through the crowd and up the stairs into a private lounge area.

“I wouldn’t stay too long, if I were you,” he said with a wink before pointing out a willowy beauty at one of the tables. She was sprawling languidly in a chair, long limbs arranged elegantly while casually holding a cigarette.

I introduced myself and asked if I could ask her about the wedding.

“Oh, that night...” the lady drawled. “I was so drunk, I can’t remember a thing.”

“You remember Queen Tanata died?”

She licked her lips and seemed to compose herself a bit. “Yes, of course. I liked Tanata, always had. Felt a bit sorry for her, getting involved with that family.”

“Why?” I asked.

Princess Alexandra frowned. “Those sons are just so... intense. Not much fun, I think. Tan was young, like me, she liked parties. Lucca’s not so much into that scene.”

“Do you remember seeing anything or anyone unusual that night?”

She thought a bit. “I saw Layrr. That was weird. I mean, he wasn’t invited. We were standing outside and I called out to him.”

“I thought you said you didn’t like him,” I said, trying to figure the lady out.

“I said he was intense, not that I didn’t like him,” she gave a naughty laugh. “Sometimes that can be fun, right? I guess it’s Ragnar I don’t like. Bit of a prick.”

I agreed with her there.

“And Sunil’s a wanker. Too decadent, he’d even fuck animals, I think,” she said.

“But Layrr... he’s a bad boy,” she chuckled. “I like bad boys.”

“Okay,” I said. “So you saw Layrr and called him over. Then what?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t hear me, just walked away, into that garden thing. The maze.”

The implication of what she said struck her.

“Wait! You don’t think...”

“What do you think?” I asked her. “Could he have done something like that?”

“I didn’t say he was a killer! I didn’t see him kill anyone!”

She seemed shaken up by the idea. “I just wanted to check a few things,” I said reassuringly. “Thank you for your help.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Don’t tell anyone what I said,” she said, sounding scared.

“I won’t,” I said. But I had to wonder why she would be so fearful just telling me what she’d seen.

I went back to our rooms, by which time, dawn was already breaking. I was tired, it had been an exhausting night, but as I was about to go in, I noticed a big, black car standing in the streets. The lights were on and the engine was idling. It seemed to be waiting for something.

Or someone.

As I watched, the window came down and a female voice called out to me.

“Miss Bonnici?”

I carefully walked closer.

The door opened and the voice again came from inside. “Could I speak to you for a moment?”

I hesitated.

“It is perfectly safe, I assure you.”

Something about the voice reassured me and I came closer, peering into the dark interior before getting in. I saw the profile of a woman in the back. She was tall and

expensively clothed. Her hair was short and white and the face was remarkable and noble. She was elderly, yet an aura of beauty and nobility surrounded her.

I immediately knew this was Councilor Lare. I also realized that she was a Beauty, which I had been unaware of until now.

As soon as I got into the car, the door closed behind me. I sat down on the seat across from the councilor, noting that the partition between the driver and us was up and shut solid. We had complete privacy.

“Thank you for meeting me like this, I understand that you must be apprehensive,” she said in a melodious voice.

“It is an honor for me to meet you,” I said. “I have heard so much about you.”

“Indeed,” she said, with a short laugh. “As I have heard about you.”

I wondered what she meant.

“Dominic told me about your meeting. I thought maybe I could help you.”

“Help me? How?” I was intrigued.

She folded her long, slim hands in her lap and gazed out the window.

“My time here is coming to an end,” she then said, in a faraway voice. “I have only served on the Council for ten years, but it has felt like so much more. I have lost count of the attempts on my life or the times I’ve been outvoted or manipulated.”

“Sounds terrible,” I said.

She sighed. “It is the life of a councilor, I’m afraid. Having to rule, to make the decisions that affect all under us, is no mean feat. And not everyone is happy with the outcomes. Someone always feels slighted or hard-done-by.”

She took a breath. “I am a medium but I also happen to be a Beauty, as you no doubt know. That is why I was selected for the position. As you know, a Beauty is not only attractive and pleasant to deal with and a good communicator, but we also absorb negativity and have the ability to transform negative forces into positive energy.”

“Not all of us,” I interjected. My own abilities in this particular area were sorely lacking.

She laughed, a musical sound that was lovely to hear.

“If you wanted to, though, you could develop that part of your character. It could come in handy.”

My mother had tried, I remember, but I had always preferred to be with my father, preferring his world of action and exercise to my mother’s greenhouse with the orchids and the ferns, the sound of dripping water, which always made me drowsy.

“You said you could help me?”

She smiled at my impatience. “You have great potential, Isabella,” she said. I didn’t like her using my full name. “Being both Guard and Beauty makes you strong as well as kind, you can make the peace and keep it.” She paused. “But you will have to choose soon, and I fear you don’t know what it is you’re choosing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

I frowned.

“A life of great power awaits you, but there will be sacrifice if you pursue it.”

I wasn't quite sure what she meant. “It is your destiny, but you could walk away from it. Avoid the pain, the cost to you.”

“I'm not big on walking away,” I said.

She smiled. “That is what I thought.”

“Your influence with King Lucca is fortuitous. He will be required to step up now, to right the imbalance in the Council. But it will come at a cost to him too.”

I had enough of all this fortune telling. She put a hand on my arm, to restrain me and get my attention.

“One more thing. Your father was killed by the vampire Chakrat.”

I gasped. “You know this?”

She nodded. “Your father had been looking for him for some time, he had tried to take him in before but he had failed. It was Chakrat who threw the amber water at him. He has become an important figure in Tempesto's organization and your father was a big fly in his ointment. He wanted to get rid of him. That is why he brought in other vampires to launch an attack on your home, take out the whole family. He didn't know you weren't there. But as soon as he finds out, he will come for you.”

“I look forward to it,” I said darkly.

Lare shook her head. “Don’t underestimate him. Chakrat is ancient, stronger than any vampire you will ever meet. He is centuries old and one of the most evil entities I have ever met.” Her voice was ominous. “If Tempesto succeeds in gaining control of the Council, he will put the Servant in my position and they will bring out the demons to help them defeat any enemies that remain. With Chakrat and the Servant to help him, Tempesto will be undefeatable.”

“You want me to kill Chakrat,” I said.

She nodded. “But you will have to be prepared for him. Your father was weakened, you will have to succeed where he failed.”

I nodded.

“You cannot let Chakrat come too close to you, he will be able to penetrate all your natural defenses and you will be vulnerable to him. He is masterful at camouflage and moves freely even during the day.”

“He must have weaknesses?”

She paused. “He does not like fire. Fire balls will not kill him, but they will slow him down enough for you to deliver the fatal blow.”

She reached into a bag and took out a heavy, glass ball.

“You rub it against your skin until it is warm enough to burn your skin and then you throw it with as much power as you can, it will catch fire and cause maximum damage.” She slipped the ball into a magnetic pouch and gave it to me.

I thanked her and opened the door to leave.

“One more thing,” she said and I turned back to look at her.

“Your father saw the world in black and white. There was no gray. He was inflexible. But, you are not like him, even though you want to be. You see more colors, you see how they interplay and complement each other. This is your gift. Embrace it. It will help you.”

She left me then, standing alone in the street as daylight came.

Life was beginning to stir in the houses around me. I could hear televisions switch on and pipes humming with the water for showers. Children’s voices, dogs barking and cars driving off. I turned to our rooms and went inside where Costello was waiting for me.

I didn’t want to think about what she had said about me being different from my father. I didn’t like that at all.

## Chapter 10

Lucca

I leave the capital right away.

From the car I call Sunil.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Where are you?” I ask.

I hear music and voices in the back and can barely make out his voice.

“At a club. The Tower,” he shouts.

“I think you should stay at the house,” I say. “Things are happening, they may be moving against us.”

“What?”

He can’t hear me over the music and I put down the phone, furious. How could he be partying at a time like this? It seemed foolish and irresponsible, and I worried that he was not as careful as I thought he was.

I have called Ragnar and Layrr but both their phones have been turned off. Something is happening back home. Marlon had sent me a message the previous night, saying that the latest shipment of product would be accompanied by a small army to protect it. But this is the last I’ve heard from anyone out west.

I have always kept out of politics but I can’t ignore what is happening now. This could be the end of my family and everything I have worked so hard for. But leaving Izzy behind is causing me something close to physical pain. After the night we just had, it feels wrong to abandon her in the Capital. I know now that she also feels the attraction and the connection between us and despite the turmoil that it brings her, she does not want to resist it. I am almost sure that our missions are in alignment and that her father’s killer is linked to whoever has been targeting me.

As the Grey Mountains rise before us, I feel myself calming down and my resolve steadying. In the capital I may not have felt entirely safe, but here was my turf, I was in charge. My first stop was the Eyrie, where my second-in-command, Finn, was waiting for me.

“What is going on with the signal?” I asked him, irritably. “I have been unable to get hold of anyone?”

Finn nodded slowly. “There has been a disruption of the signal. It is unclear if it is deliberate.”

“Where are my sons?”

“They went with the convoy of shipment. I sent crows with them. They reported back that there was an attempted ambush but our men fought them off. They gave chase and are in hiding somewhere around Mill Creek.”

I stood at the window and gave his words some thought. Mill Creek was a dangerous area, very inhospitable ground and not ideal for a battle.

“Do we know who they are?”

“It is unclear who they are affiliated to, but they are strong and fearless, our kind.”

“As we thought.”

Finn said slowly, “There are rumors of drugs, of incredible strength and regeneration.”

“Regeneration?” I asked, incredulous.

“These vampires must be burned or they come back to life.”

I thought of what I'd heard in the capital about tainted blood. I wondered if some of them were taking the drugged blood intentionally, to increase their strength and fighting ability.

“Ragnar says they will wait for night-time to hit them.”

“I will join them, send word to Lord Ferney that I want him and his men at the castle as soon as possible.”

I could see he didn't like the thought of me getting involved but this was time for a show of strength.

“What do you hear of Elspeth?”

Elspeth headed the family of Een, the third partner in the Syndicate. His face was grave. “They have also been losing product shipments and people. They have reported it to the Council but nothing has been done.”

“What about the main center?” This was the main blood bank and situated outside the capital.

“According to my sources, no problems. Business is booming.”

“Tempesto,” I muttered, darkly.

“Sire, you must feed, especially if you plan to go out later.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Send the message to Lord Ferney, right away! We leave at sunset!”

My mobile was still not working and I couldn't contact Izzy.

I thought about what she had told me the previous evening. It made me think about the last weeks of the Great War, when it seemed like the entire world was going up in smoke. Millions of humans had been killed and what remained of them hid in caves under the mountains, trying to keep out demons and vampires. Vampires fought against each other while growing weaker as blood supply was running out and it became more precious. Strange alliances formed between werewolves and faeries, elves and brogs, to try and ensure the survival of their species.

I did not want to return to those days of anarchy and chaos. We had worked so hard to establish this peace and my family had flourished, but it seemed our success was a threat.

In the late afternoon, Lord Ferney from the nearby Fort Ferney arrived with his army of men. Jock had been one of the men from my original army and when I arrived in the West and was proclaimed king, I awarded him some land on the far end of the valley. He was in charge of some blood outlets and also guarded the roads to the north. We sometimes had incursions from roaming tribes and these had to be cut down before they infiltrated our lands.

“Jock!” I was relieved to see my old friend with a good number of fighters.

“Lucca, good to see you,” his face was grave as we walked towards the guardhouse.

“I was glad to get your call for help,” he said. “I think we may have a problem on our hands.”

Jock told me there had been a number of refugees coming in from the north. The stories seemed to be the same, of looting and pillaging and roaming bandits setting fire to villages as well as the cities.

“But the news from Ginnerlong is really what worries me,” he said.

Ginnerlong was the main city in the north. It fell under council rule but had no local leader. “A fair number of vampires have been killed,” Jock said.

“How is that possible?”

“There was a shipment of toxic blood last month. Apparently hundreds of them of them collapsed and died.”

“Toxic blood?” I had never heard of it.

Jock’s voice dropped even lower. “It was tested. The blood contained radionuclides. High doses of radioactivity.”

“Who supplied it?” I immediately wanted to know.

“I don’t know. Not you, not from the Capital either. It may have been intercepted.”

“Why didn’t you contact me immediately?” I wanted to know.

“I’ve tried calling you but I’ve been struggling to get through. The signal is so messed up lately. I came by last week but you weren’t in. I’ve left messages!”

This was true. I had seen the messages and had not gotten back to him. The developments with Izzy had taken up so much of my time and attention, I had lost focus on other things. Before that, I had been obsessed with finding Tanata's killer. Jock's problems had seemed unimportant. Now, I could see that I had made a mistake. Whatever was happening in the north was key to understanding what was happening in the rest of the land.

"Who is in charge of Ginnerlong now?" I asked.

"The Council have sent someone to keep the order and have posted Guards all over to prevent more violence. But the refugees don't like him. They fear him. He is called the Servant. His guards have dogs that are exceptionally violent and cruel. They rip people's throats out and leave them to die on the streets."

"He is called the Servant?"

Here it was again, mention of a person I knew only in the darkest sense.

"Do you know him?" Jock asked, seeing my concern.

"As far as I know, he is loyal to the underworld, a medium and a wizard. Not a friend of our cause."

A man arrived with news that there had been reports of fighting near Mill Creek.

We had to get there, fast.

In the early evening as the last of the light was dying, we got into trucks and cars and drove down to find Ragnar and Layrr, who were waiting at a farm near the creek. They were armed with all kinds of weapons as well as fire sticks, to burn the bodies. Ragnar was excited, thrilled at the prospect of the looming clash but Layrr seemed

troubled. I asked him why and he said the thugs who had fought back had seemed completely unprepared to fight. But despite their lack of skill and weapons, they were ferocious, with an energy that must have come from another source.

We split up in to three different groups and approached the creek from all sides. There was a clearing beside the river where there were some ruins and we thought the men were hiding here. When Ragnar's group arrived at the ruins, however, there was nobody there. Laver's men found nothing on their way to the same destination. I started to get a bad feeling, perhaps this was a trap.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

Our men stayed up on the hill, checking the surrounding grounds for activity and that was when I saw the plume of smoke coming from far over the mountains. I called to Jock, “What do you think that is?” and pointed it out to him.

“Some kind of rocket launch?”

I immediately called to the others to evacuate and get away from Mill Creek. We tried to get out of there as fast as we could and just in time, because the next moment there was a high-pitched whistling noise as a missile plunged into the creek and exploded.

A few people were injured but not seriously and it was clear that we had been led into the creek in the hope that we would be sitting ducks and able to be wiped out by a single strike.

We withdrew to higher ground and Ragnar sent one of his men over to let us know that they had spotted some cars leaving a nearby area. They were setting out after them. Jock and his men set off to join him.

I decided to return to the castle to strategize and think over the new information Jock had given me. It seemed something had been afoot for a while and I had not been paying attention. As we returned to our cars, a convoy of sleek electric cars arrived, blocking our return.

I watched as one of the cars, several from the front stopped. A man got out, with long, sleek black hair and an unnaturally white face. I knew at once, it was the Servant.

“King Lucca!” he greeted me, like an old friend.

I suddenly realized that this was the point of the entire conflict, it was to draw me out and put me in a vulnerable position. Finn had warned against me coming here but I would not listen.

“You are, the Servant,” I said, counting the number of men he had with him.

“Indeed, that is me,” he said, with false modesty, bowing from the waist. He was smiling widely but it was not friendly.

“I have been sent to restore order to the north and, indeed, now also in the West.”

“What do you mean?”

“The scourge behind the poisoned blood of course,” he said, his voice filling with concern. “I am acting on behalf of the Council, taking control of these lands...”

Before he could say another word, I summoned my army of crows to descend onto the convoy. Birds came diving down from the sky, screeching and screaming, flapping their wings and breaking up the groups of soldiers surrounding The Servant. The sky became dark as the crows blocked out the remainder of the light and I used the cover of darkness to get away as bullets rained down on us all of a sudden.

“Get back, get back!” I shouted to my men and those of us able to, took flight, heading back to the castle as quickly as possible.

Once I was safely within the walls of the castle, I paused to take stock of the situation, feeling suddenly unwell.

“Sire?” It was Finn, coming out to meet me.

“Are Layrr and Ragnar back yet?” He shook his head.

“What about Jock?”

“No, Lord Ferney is not here. But you, my lord, you... have been inured!”

I looked down and saw that I, indeed, had been shot. I saw dark blood and the dizziness made sense.

“Arm... the walls...” I said. “Get the...men back,” I managed before falling against Finn who immediately called for help to get me up to my rooms.

## Chapter 11

### Izzy

As soon as I heard about the attack on the Grey Castle, I needed to check on Lucca. We were in our rooms, having a simple breakfast of coffee and fresh bread with lashings of homemade butter. We’d been planning to go home today. Costello had found the parts he wanted for some or other car he was working on and I had been all over the Citadel, talking to people and gathering information. I was pretty sure I knew what was going on now. I had been sending messages to Lucca but none seemed to be getting through to him.

It was weird.

Then, this morning, the captain came in and told us of some sort of network outage in the outlying parts of the lands. “No radio or mobile coverage, seems the whole place is down.”

Costello and I looked at each other, basically thinking the same thing, something was

wrong. Then the captain said, “I heard of an attack in the West.”

I sat up, “The West?”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Grey Lands,” he nodded. “There is fighting all over the place, sounds bad. Some of the men on the product delivery told me this morning. All supply lines are down. The price of blood will go up.”

He leaned in. “The vampires are going to go to war again, we’d better keep our heads down, go into hiding if we must. The wife has already gone down to the basement, she won’t come out, she says.”

He winked at Costello. “Good news for me, I reckon!”

But this is not good news for me.

“I have to go there, see if he’s okay,” I said.

Costello was not happy to hear that but I’d told him what was going on with Lucca and I and he understood.

“If you’re right,” he said. “And the vampires are at war, then humans should stay out of it. You’ll get hurt,” he said to me.

“Are you insane, you want to go there now?” the captain said.

“You’ll never get through anyway,” he added.

But it was daytime and I knew that it would be quiet now. I’d contract a plane and put it on Lucca’s account.

“I’d come with you,” Costello said, “But...”

“No, it’s fine, really. I’m okay with this. This is my responsibility now,” I said.

As soon as breakfast was over, I said goodbye to Costello and headed over to Lucca’s son’s house in the Citadel. I had heard about Sunil the previous day and I was surprised that Lucca was so fond of him. Word on the street was that he was corrupt and in league with wrong people on the Council.

The sun was up but it was not yet out in full force. I was hoping to talk to Sunil, but when I got to the house, no-one would open the door. I figured some servants might be around, but nothing. I eventually found an open window and let myself in. The place was beautifully furnished, very tastefully and I recalled that Lucca said his first wife had decorated it. I peered into doors, went down the stairs and along a beautifully carpeted hallway until I found what had to be Sunil’s study. I started rifling through papers, trying to look for something incriminating, when I heard voices upstairs.

I softly walked out the door and into the hallway.

I could hear someone talking upstairs on the phone, snatches of the conversation floated down the stairs. I made my way up the stairs as far as I dared.

“Injured? Is he dead?”

I didn’t know who he was talking about, but I had an idea. There was an urgency in his voice that made it clear.

“....my brothers? No... I don’t think so.”

He ended the call and I feared he would be coming down the stairs, heading for his

study. I went into an adjoining room, some kind of storage room and heard him on the phone again.

I only managed to catch a few words.

It was enough to turn my blood cold.

I made my way out of the house as quietly as possible but when I got to the top floor, I walked into an old crone with a tray of product, heading down to the study. She was as surprised to see me as I was to see her. Before she could do anything, I pushed her out of the way and ran for the window, slamming the door behind me. As soon as I was outside, I quickly crawled in under a car and not a moment too soon as the front door opened and Sunil peered out.

The sun was stronger though, he didn't want to risk coming out, but he scanned the street for movement. After the door closed, I waited a while before sliding out and running crouched among the crowds of people until I was sure that I had managed to get away. There was no way I could get one of Lucca's planes now. Sunil would find out and put a stop to that. He would know that I was onto him.

I checked my mobile phone and tried calling Lucca, but couldn't get through.

In the end, I went to the capital, found the fastest car I could nick and headed West. I found the way to Grey Castle easily enough, with the road leading up to a rampart at the foot of the mountain.

It was an impressive sight to behold, Grey Castle with its blackened turrets rising into the sky. It seemed formidable and impenetrable. I stopped outside a huge iron gate and I had to get out and call for guards to let me in. I followed the winding road up to the entrance of the building, parking to one side. It was after midday but the sun was strong and I didn't think there would be too much activity around here.

I got out of the car and walked up the steps, knocking on the door.

After a long time, it was opened by an old lady with long white hair.

“Good afternoon,” she said, in a friendly voice.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

I told her I was here to see Lucca but would wait until he could see me later. In the meantime, I wanted to know how he was.

“Oh, he is much better. May I offer you some refreshment?”

I accepted even though the woman seemed odd somehow. I couldn't put my finger on it.

“Some tea or cordial perhaps? We have a very good water from the mountains,” she said.

“Anything, really.”

Now that I was here, I could feel him somewhere in the castle.

It was an odd sensation, this pull from inside the building. It was like he was calling me, drawing me to him. I wanted to go to him, but I wasn't sure that this was entirely the right thing to do. What if he wasn't well and I caught him in a vulnerable position? He'd be resting and I could wait. The fact that it felt like he was calling me didn't mean that was what was happening. I could be imagining it, being worried, the way I was.

At least he seemed better.

The old lady was back before I had realized it. She moved very quietly, I had barely heard her. It was disquieting. She was obviously not a vampire, being able to move around in the light of day without it affecting her in the slightest, but there

was something else. Perhaps she was a witch of some sort? Lucca had told me about his closest confidantes and he said he trusted them implicitly.

“Here, have some tea,” she said, pouring me a cup of something that smelled bitter. She handed it to me and I put down the cup.

“Have the tea,” she insisted and her voice sounded less friendly now.

My instincts kicked in and I jumped out of the chair as she lunged the cup at me, trying to throw it at me. The contents of the cup spilled onto the chair, burning a hole into the upholstery.

What the fuck!

I moved out of the way, lightning fast, grabbing my dagger and throwing it at her. But for an old lady, she moved like the wind. My knife flew through the air and hit the wall.

“You don’t belong here!” the witch shouted at me.

I was shocked by the venom in her voice.

“This is not your fight!”

She came flying through the air towards me and I stepped out of the way at the last minute, grabbing her arm and twisting it behind her back, but she nimbly turned around and scratched my face.

“Ow!” I yelled as I punched her in the stomach, expecting her to fall, but she recovered remarkably quickly as if I’d barely touched her. She threw the saucer at me and I dodged it, lunging forwards with my small silver dagger and stabbing her in the

side.

She staggered back.

In that moment, a great sword pierced the air and pinned her against the wall, killing her instantly.

I turned to the door and saw Lucca standing there, holding his bandaged side.

“Izzy! Are you okay?”

I looked at him. “What happened to you? I came as quickly as I heard!”

He shook his head, there was clearly too much to tell.

“Come upstairs,” he said.

He glanced at the dead witch and shook his head.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “She had always been so loyal to me. I would never have expected this. But then...lately...” he shook his head.

It was hard going up the stairs, but Lucca said his injury wasn’t serious, that he just needed to rest.

“I’m sorry if I interrupted,” I said.

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“I felt you,” he said, with a tender smile. “I knew you were here. It didn’t make sense but I had to check. Then, as I came down, I saw what was happening.”

“I’m glad you came when you did, but I had it under control,” I said, standing straight.

“Yes, I saw that,” he chuckled.

We reached the top landing and rested for a bit before continuing to his rooms. The castle was bare and basic, it lacked the luxury of the city housing, but it was imposing nevertheless.

The view from the top was magnificent.

“My sons, Ragnar and Layrr, are resting now. They came back last night, exhausted after chasing around a group of bandits. But they were not the real enemy,” he said, pausing.

“It is The Servant. He is taking over, or wants to. He is telling people that I have been selling tainted blood. I think it is the Council’s way of weakening my power.”

I nodded. “What do you make of him?” I asked.

Lucca said, “There is a malevolence about him. He definitely wants me dead and will keep trying until he succeeds.”

His words gave me the shivers.

“What about the old woman?” I asked.

Lucca seemed saddened by her betrayal. “She had many visions of you, and all of them seemed negative. She was trying to warn me off you, but I wouldn’t have it. I didn’t realize that it had more to do with her own wishes.”

I was silent.

He said, “Since I’ve met you, I’ve been getting the answers I’ve been craving for so long. I have been turning to her less and less. I don’t know, maybe she was jealous?”

“Or maybe she is with those who are trying to overthrow you?”

I knew I had to tell Lucca what I had overheard in the house in the capital.

“I think one of your sons is plotting against you.”

“Who?! Ragnar?”

I shook my head. “I am not completely certain.”

He stared at me and then jumped up, ignoring his wound, “You can’t come to me with this and not have proof.”

I bit my lip. I knew he was right.

“I heard someone say that ‘until he is dead, there is no point going further’.”

Lucca said, “But that could mean anyone, even the Servant!”

“Your family name is not spoken of favorably in the Citadel,” I said. “There is a

feeling that you are somehow involved in the bad things that are happening. The toxic blood, the ambushes.”

The atmosphere between us changed. Lucca was looking at me with distrust. “Those are lies, you know it.”

“But it is coming from somewhere,” I insisted.

I got up, slowly.

“There is something else,” I said. I didn’t want to continue, but I had come this far and this had been the job he had contracted me for from the beginning.

“I spoke to someone who was at the dinner, the night Tanata was killed.” I took a deep breath. “They saw Layrr going into the maze shortly before the attack.”

“Layrr? He wasn’t there that night! What are you talking about?”

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“This guest was surprised to see him. She wanted to talk to him, but he seemed very focused and didn’t hear her calling.”

Lucca’s eyes narrowed and I could see the anger building in him.

“It seemed like information I should share with you,” I said.

“I’ll leave you to rest and get better,” I said, quickly turning around and walking down the stairs. I was shocked by the tears that I felt prickling behind my eye lids. As I got to the bottom of the stairwell, I nearly bumped into Ragnar and Layrr.

“I remember you! Nice to see you again. Izzy, right?” Ragnar asked laconically with a smile.

I nodded.

“You’ve been to see Father?” The other one, presumably Layrr asked. He was shorter, stockier, his face tense. Ragnar was an asshole but I was fairly sure he was the honest kind of asshole.

I left without saying goodbye, keen to get out of vampire country before dark.

## Chapter 12

Lucca

The secondary infection is unexpected.

One minute we are standing at the top of the castle, discussing what our next move should be, when I feel unsteady. I had only been partially wounded the day before, it had not been a very serious injury and after a few hours, I was walking around again.

But this was different.

“Are you all right?” Finn asked.

I leaned against the wall for support, and took a moment to respond. I felt very strange all of a sudden, nauseous, my head swimming.

“Come, sit down,” he said.

“We must... we need to...” I couldn’t find the words, my head was thick. I felt my sons lay me down and call for the healer to come quickly. As for what came next, they told me later what happened, as I, at this point lost consciousness.

It was established that some of the bullet had broken off and had not been removed when they had cleaned the wound. The shards had not entered the blood stream right away, but when they did, the damage was instantaneous as they were laced with silver.

This poisoned my entire system, attacking my already weakened body. A younger man would not have survived but I had already been given a fair amount of vampire blood and now received more infusions to help me fight the infection.

The healer told my sons I had a fifty percent chance of survival, which were not odds they were comfortable with, understandably. At this point, I was delirious, having vivid dreams that seemed extremely real and were deeply disturbing. At times, I would be lucid, briefly, and notice them in the room. I kept asking for Sunil, but he was not there.

“Where is he?” I apparently asked.

They shook their heads, they didn’t know.

The theory was that it was difficult to travel from the Capital to the west of the country, the roads were dangerous. But Izzy had come right away, without any trouble, she had been able to navigate the treacherous ways and come to the castle to check if I was all right. I dreamed of Izzy, the way she had been before we had become intimate, bonded by blood.

The way she was when I met her, fierce and independent. How strong she had seemed, so wise and mature for her years. I had drawn her into this drama of my life, and now she was inextricably linked to violence and chaos that had become our world. She had left the castle and I had no idea where she was. I had sent no protection with her, no crow to watch her.

I’d been so angry that she would point the finger at my sons with such flimsy evidence to support her theories. For a brief moment, I had even suspected her of being in league with those plotting to overthrow me. It was a moment of madness, brought on by a feverish mind, a weakened system. When my head was clear, I knew there was no way Izzy was involved in anything like that. She was completely pure and trustworthy, I had no reason to doubt her at all.

But Sunil, he had explaining to do.

During one of the first dreams I had, Zendan the Great appeared to me, the way he had been years ago. I had never said goodbye to him, he had been killed in one of the big battles of the Great War. In many ways, he had been a father to me. At that point, I had no family of my own and he had taken me under his wing, called me his son. He had been in favor of me marrying his daughter and strengthening his house.

Then the war turned as darkness poured from the underworld, and we saw how humans were being exterminated, how vampires were turning against each other. We had a conversation at his stronghold, on the island Valleira. He said to me that we needed to align ourselves with the best forces, we needed to bring an end to the war before the demons and the brogs overran our earth. They would destroy themselves in the end, but not before they had destroyed us.

Without human blood, vampires would struggle to survive, we would feed off each other and eventually die too. The balance needed to be restored. Zendan sent me off to negotiate with the other vampire families, to see if we could establish an allied front to negotiate with the humans, who at that point had some weapons and a few strongholds in place. It was while I was away, that Valleira was attacked and Zendan's force was wiped out. When news of his demise reached the other houses, it speeded up the peace process as all of us saw the end approaching.

Now, Zendan came to me, his face ragged and worn, as it was towards the end of the war.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“You must stop this,” he said to me. “This is on you. Only you know what to do.”

“But who is it, I can’t see my enemy?” I answered. “Is it Tempesto or the Servant? Is someone else behind it? I have a feeling there is someone else here. Perhaps MoZa? And what of Chakrat?”

“You know who it is,” said Zendan, angrily. “You have been blind! Smug in your tower, a little king with a little crown, you have looked away while they stole your power from you!”

In the dream, his voice shook with fury, he grabbed me and threw me against the wall. I didn’t fight back. Zendan had always been stronger than me, even in my dreams.

“Do you want to live or do you want to die!” he screamed at me as darkness came in great waves and provided relief from his rage.

In another dream, Simonis sat next to me on the day bed. It seemed so real, as if it was really happening. Her blond hair twisted in braids around her head, her beautiful violet eyes as enchanting as ever.

I put out a hand to touch her and I could feel her arm, like she was with me.

“Are you here?” I asked. “Are you really here?”

She didn’t answer, but stood up, walked around.

“You don’t have time for reminiscing like an old man,” she said. “You must act now. It will all be taken away from you, all of this. It will be gone.”

I didn’t know if the dreams were manifestations of my own fears, my subconscious trying to spur me into action, but they shook me up. When I woke up, I felt myself shaking, wondering why they would come from the spirit world to berate me. Of course, I didn’t have anyone able to talk to me like that now. Izzy was probably the only one who had dared to speak openly to me and I had put an end to that.

In the early morning, my most disturbing dream was of my mother, my real mother. I found myself in the small peat house we had then, my father outside, covering our wood supply. It was raining outside and cold. My brothers and sisters were sitting in front of the fire. My mother sat in a chair, doing some sort of needlework, mending clothes probably. We were poor and life was dreary.

I must have been around eight years old then and was supposed to look after my younger brother and sister. But I wasn’t paying attention, playing instead with some sticks I had picked up. My brother took one of the sticks and stabbed it at my sister, playfully, but hurting her. She had an ugly scratch on her face and started bawling, my mother blamed me. She looked at me, her eyes blazing. “I asked you to do one thing, just one thing! Go outside! Now!”

She chased me into the cold, wet rain. I remember hearing my sister cry and thinking it was my fault, wanting to go back inside and warm myself at the fire. But I had been banished into the night. Within the year, they would all be dead, only I would survive. It would be decades of me, alone in the wilderness, roaming the land. I never belonged anywhere, never could find a place where I felt safe. It was not a stretch for me to remember that time, always with a chill in my bones.

I had tried to create warmth with my own family, setting up an empire in the Grey Mountains, but it wasn’t enough, it had not changed a thing.

When I woke up at the end of the second night, the fever had broken and I felt able to sit up.

Ragnar was in the room, keeping watch.

“How’re you feeling?”

He offered me some product, which I drank.

“Where is Layrr?” I asked.

He told me Layrr had gone to check on the blood bank. They had reports that our people had been removed and that it was taken over by others, it wasn’t clear who.

“This is all part of the same destabilization attack,” I said.

I asked after the mobile signal and Sunil.

“It’s still down, we are not able to call anyone in the Capital or Citadel.” He paused.

“But we sent crows to find Sunil.”

“And?”

Ragnar’s face darkened. “He’s gone, we can’t find him.”

“You can’t find him?”

“The housekeeper says he has not been there in days.”

“Could something have happened to him?”

Ragnar didn't know. "We've sent someone to track him down, a shifter, able to blend in. Reports from the Citadel are patchy. But it seems like the Council has been overthrown."

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“What?”

“Lare has been killed. MoZa is missing and Tempesto is at his compound. No one dares to go in or has been seen leaving it. It looks like he is the one in power now.”

“And the Servant?”

Ragnar shook his head. “I don’t know. Jock said he left the West after the skirmish.”

“And what is happening at Fort Ferney?”

“More refugees are streaming from the North. They are in camps outside the walls. They say it is chaos in Ginnerlong. There have been storms too, snow and ice. Those that aren’t locking themselves in their homes, are fleeing.”

“Where is Finn?”

Ragnar went to fetch my old counselor.

He came in, looking anxious and tired. “Oh, it is good to see you much revived!” He said, rushing to my bedside. “I have been so worried. Times are dark, Sire. The news from the Citadel is not good.”

He cast a sidelong glance at Ragnar, which I interpreted as a wish for privacy. I sent my eldest son off to check on the men and do a round-up of how many I had ready and able to fight.

As soon as we were alone, Finn gave me the information he had.

“There has been a coup on the Council. But it is not clear who is in power. Some say Tempesto, some say the Servant is about take Lare’s seat. But he must be voted in, even if it is a formality. There is unrest in the capital and there have been outbreaks in the Citadel. Demons.”

“What about the demon hunters?”

Finn shrugged, “We don’t have as many as in the old days. We have kept them behind locked doors for so long, but they are getting in now, they are a problem.”

“Do we have a new Seer?” I asked.

“There is a kid, he had been brought to us some time ago. He has some ability but it is raw.”

I thought of my old Seer and wondered how much of what she saw was true. How much of it had been what she wanted me to see?

“Bring him in.”

Finn went out and after a while, brought in a shy boy with long hair.

“How old are you?” I asked

“Sixteen,” he said, in a soft voice.

“Speak up, boy,” I said, but not unkindly. Finn said his parents had tried to sell him after learning of his ability, fearing it was witchcraft. He had arrived at the castle and was taken in by some of the castle staff, who had heard of his ability and thought it

may be of use.

“What is your name?” I asked him.

“Robert,” he said. I asked him if he was treated well, if he was comfortable where he was staying. He nodded.

“All right, Robbie,” I said slowly. “Do your visions come when you want them to or do they come unbidden?”

“I have no control over it, my lord,” he said unhappily. “Sometimes, it’s like I have many dreams in a day, then sometimes, weeks go by and, nothing.”

He lifted his arms in despair.

Finn rolled his eyes, clearly thinking the boy was no good.

“You must not try to force it,” I said. “Let them come of their own accord.”

He nodded.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Have you had any visions....dreams...lately? Like the last couple of days?”

He nodded. “There is one, it is...bad. Awful.”

I sat up.

“Tell me,” I commanded him.

“It’s always the same. It’s dark and there is a storm. Lightning, very close by and it’s frightening. Then this man appears and he grows bigger and he is covered in blood and he is laughing, and his laugh grows bigger and louder until I can’t take it anymore.”

I nodded. “Is there anything else?”

“A girl...” he said slowly.

“Sometimes, there is a girl. Sort of, in the back, just standing there.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

He shrugged helplessly. “She’s pretty, very pretty?”

Finn took the boy by the arm, started pushing him out of the room. “That’s enough,” he said. “The king must rest.”

“No,” I interrupted. “That was very good, Robbie, really.”

Then I said, “I am promoting him to the house. See to it that he gets a room nearby. And anything he wants to eat, have you been yearning for something?”

Robbie’s eyes lit up. “Well, not for food, Sire, but for my sister.”

“Oh? What about her?”

“She was in Ginnerlong. But I haven’t heard from her in so long. If I could maybe get a message to her? Find her.”

I told Finn to get it done.

Then I needed time to think.

Alone.

## Chapter 13

*Izzy*

I woke up early, feeling refreshed and energized. I must have slept for fourteen hours in the same bed where I had grown up. Our home, a simple clay and adobe hut had been rebuilt after the attack in which my father and brother were killed. Then men working on it had built extra rooms and a court yard, where my mother had put big pots with flowers.

My father told me they had chosen to stay in the desert as it was too hot and sunny for vampires and the climate was so harsh that most people stayed away. Even though it wasn’t the first choice for my mother either, she had planted some trees and watered them from one of the wells that had been dug around our property.

She made it home.

Even after everything that had happened here, it was still the place where I felt safest. After everything that had happened over the past few days, it felt surreal to wake up here, to hear the silence and know that in this part of the world, at least, all was well.

For now.

I got up and went looking for my mother, finding her outside, sitting under a tree, her eyes closed. She wore a big white dress, her hair was loose and wild and there seemed to be so much peace around her.

She opened her eyes and smiled at me.

“Rested?” I nodded.

“There is food in the ice box,” she said.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“How long are you staying?” she asked. I shrugged.

“Not long, I think,” There was sadness in her voice.

I wanted to hold on to her for as long as I could.

“Tell me about Dad?” I asked her.

She smiled again and said, “Come, I’ll make us tea.”

We went into the house and she poured us some iced tea, sweetened with cactus flower. We sat on cushions near the open door, where a draft provided cool air.

“Your father hated people,” my mother said and laughed. “He said they were too noisy, too needy, too stupid.”

I remembered that. He was so impatient. When he wasn’t working, he was fixing things around the house, building things, working. A man of action.

“His family was killed in the Great War. He grew up an orphan. When I met him, he was looking after the horses on the farm where we lived. The moment I saw him, I knew we were meant to be together.”

“How did you know?” I asked her.

She was quiet, deep in thought. “I couldn’t stop looking at him. He was still only a boy, but he had a presence about him. He wasn’t silly, like the other boys on the

farm. The farmer grew medicinal herbs, which were used for medicine. There were fields of lavender. In summer, we would harvest them. Then all of us would smell of lavender.”

I knew this story already, but I loved listening to it.

“My father was the manager on the farm and we had our own house and land. He wanted me to marry well but I had already lost my heart to your father.”

Her voice faded away. I knew that my father eventually left to become a soldier. Then he went on to become a bounty hunter. Many years later he came looking for my mother. She was the only one of her sisters still living at home. She had refused to leave, saying she was waiting for my father.

“I want to go to him, he’s waiting for me,” she said, her voice filled with longing.

“Not yet,” I begged her. “Stay for me, I need you.”

She closed her eyes, a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Yes,” she said. She got up and went to fetch something. She handed me a small glass bottle. “This is a special potion I have made for you.”

I looked at the vial with the clear liquid.

“It is essence of the Elkana flower. It grows deep in the desert, and once every ten years, it produces a single flower. Its nectar is the sweetest thing you will ever smell,” she sighed deeply. “When you pick the petals, they must be unblemished and young and boiled in clean, distilled water. I used the water from a new well, coming deep from inside the mountains. I made it stronger than usual, left it in the dark for longer.”

She folded my hand around the bottle. “Keep it safe, a few drops will heal almost any injury.”

I gave her a hug, feeling her thin bones in my arms.

“Thank you,” I felt tears in my eyes because it seemed she would not be around much longer. I didn’t know how much time I had.

“Your father was so proud of you, he said you were going to be a great bounty hunter.”

I snorted. “I have made so many mistakes already.”

“That doesn’t mean you aren’t a great bounty hunter,” she said. “It means you made mistakes. He did too.”

“Not many,” I retorted, quickly.

She shook her head. “Many, he made many mistakes.”

I wanted to defend him, but she put a cool hand on my arm.

“You adored him, and that’s wonderful, but...” She shook her head. “Not everything he did was right, not everything he believed was good.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

We didn't talk anymore and later in the day, I went to town to look in on Costello. He was sitting at a table, oiling some parts and wanted to hear everything that I had learnt at Grey Castle. When I told him about my conversation with Lucca, he frowned, then shook his head.

"News from the Capital is bad," he said. "There is talk of a revolt. People have been coming here to get to safety."

I had seen tents outside of our town, Costello told me that they were building shelters in the mountains. "I've been seeing vampires at night," he said, darkly. "But we've had no attacks."

"You think it will come?"

He nodded. "There is a shortage of product. That means they will come looking for food. People are collecting silver, they're getting stakes ready."

"Really?"

"I've heard one of the blood banks was blown up near the city, so people can't donate anymore. So people are losing money too. This is bad for everyone."

I fell quiet.

"What about the demons, what Dominic said about the Council?"

Costello told me of a conversation he'd had with his friend Joe, the next day.

“He said word on the street was that the war was already here.”

We were quiet for a while and didn't speak. He fetched us some beer and we listened to the music on the radio. It was hard to think that elsewhere, people were fleeing for their lives, being attacked and killed.

“You'd better lock your door at night,” Costello warned. “Don't be inviting any strangers in. You don't see people around at night on the street at the moment.”

I went past the graveyard on my way home. I found my father's headstone and stood for a while, composing myself. Then I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, emptying my mind as I tried to establish a connection with him. I had almost given up hope when his face floated towards me, lit up by sunshine.

“Father!” I was so happy to see him.

But he was angry with me, I could tell.

“What are you doing with vampires!” he said. “They are scum, they are killers!”

I shook my head, not wanting to argue with my father.

“They are all the same, all of them. Sooner or later, they kill us, they feed on us!”

Tears were running down my face.

“Promise me you will stop seeing him!”

I nodded but didn't say the words. I didn't know if I would see Lucca again. Our last conversation had been so fraught, he had been so angry with me. I had not expected him to be so harsh, so brutal.

Stupid, I know.

Of course, he would take his son's side over me, choosing not to believe me. I was just a girl, someone he liked and had slept with. But I wasn't family. And I knew how important family was, if you were actually biologically related or not. Once a family tie was established, the bond went beyond blood. The name was like a spell, it was cast upon you and nothing could tear you apart.

I stopped by the store on the way back.

But the shelves were empty, I could find no bread or eggs. Even the fridges were bare.

I went up to the counter, where a listless woman barely greeted me.

"What's with the empty shelves?" I asked.

"There's been no milk delivery," she said, shrugging. "Cows have been dying, all around the countryside."

"What?"

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

Behind me, a man with a basket full of canned food said, “Been happening all over the county. Chickens stopped laying eggs, many dying. People say there’s something in the river water, they’re only watering from their own taps.”

“What’s going on?”

The man was unshaven with a long, unkempt beard. “End of times, I reckon. Time to head for the hills. Before the vampires come,” he said darkly.

“They said there was a delivery coming from Springfield later,” the shop girl said, disinterestedly. “There will be fruit on it, probably, eggs, I think.”

“Springfield is southeast,” the man mumbled, pushing past me to pay for his goods. “May be safer out there. I have a cousin somewhere there. Should maybe take the wife out there.”

He suddenly dumped his basket filled with goods on the floor and rushed out to his truck, taking off with screaming tires.

“Seein’ that all the time now,” the girl drawled.

I went back to get the last few bags of flour and sugar, thinking if nothing else, I could bake some bread. My mother had a few chickens around the yard and there had been eggs in the henhouse that morning.

“You’re not scared?”

She looked at me and there was something in her eyes that filled me with dread.

“Nah-ah,” she shrugged. “I like change,” she said in a dreamy voice. “Things need to change around here.”

I noticed she was very skinny, like someone who perhaps didn’t worry too much about food anyway. Her pupils were big and I realized she was high, barely aware of what was going on around her.

But I was worried.

We were far from the capital and the Grey Mountains but if a war were to break out, it would affect us too. I thought of my mother and worried about her on her own. I called one of my mother’s friends, who was living alone in town and asked if she’d come out to stay with my mother for a bit.

The woman, Frieda, had two dogs that would at least bark and scare off intruders.

“I’m glad you called,” Frieda said. “I guess you’ve been hearing the rumors too? My neighbors have said they’re going to stay over in the hills for a bit. But I don’t know about that.”

Frieda said she knew of another family that might also be looking for a safe place to stay. A young family with a baby. I told her there would be space at our house. My mother wouldn’t mind, I knew. She’d stay in her greenhouse, tending to her orchids as whatever foul winds blew overhead.

But I was feeling very uneasy.

Despite myself, I worried about Lucca and whether he would be safe in the castle. He didn’t want to face the truth and I hoped it wouldn’t be the end of him. Even though I

couldn't admit it to anyone, I cared about him.

More than I had cared about anyone before.

## Chapter 14

### Lucca

My recovery took longer than I would have liked.

I am able to get up for a few hours, but then I become tired and have to lie down and rest. I am taking all sorts of potions and even though I'm improving, the progress is slow. It is infuriating as I can feel how things are happening behind the scenes. I want to go up to the Citadel, but it is too dangerous now.

Finn reports back that Sunil has gone into hiding. His shapeshifter crow has been to the house but nobody has been there in days. The city is in turmoil and rumors of imminent war are all anyone talks about.

Layrr bursts into the room and announces that our blood bank has been blown up.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"The entire facility was destroyed yesterday morning. The official story is a gas leak but it was timed very carefully for right after the last truck left and there was no supply. The fresh donations had already been transported to the manufacturing plant."

"So, it was a calculated move to hurt us?" I am thinking out loud.

"And they killed our people on the scene," says Layrr. "They've effectively shut us down."

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“We need to increase security at our other blood banks,” I say, even as I realize this means we will be spread too thin. I can’t have men everywhere.

Finn says, “There are reports of blood shortages in the north. Vampires near Ginnerlong have attacked people out of desperation. There have been multiple mortalities.”

This is terrible news.

If humans think vampires are out to get them again, there will be widespread panic.

“We need to get product out there, maybe redirect from Port Johnson?”

Layrr says, “We can’t use the main roads, we have come under attack repeatedly on those routes.”

“I know what the problem is, come up with a solution!” I am raising my voice even though I know that Layrr is not the problem. I need to find out who is pulling the strings behind all of this.

I keep thinking of the boy’s vision of the laughing man and again try to call Sunil. In the late afternoon, I finally get hold of him.

“Father! Are you all right?”

The connection is poor but we are able to communicate at least.

“I am outside the capital in some town, trying to keep a low profile. Everything is shambles at the moment,” he says. “There is a reshuffle happening on the Council, nobody knows what will happen.”

“Why are you in hiding?” I ask.

“This is the time to tread carefully,” Sunil says. “There are odd accidents and explosions, unexplained deaths, and so on... the situation is very....fluid.”

Sunil sounded vague.

I was getting a bad feeling.

“You know Lord Elgin of the Caledon family? He was killed along with his wife and family. There was a fire, which destroyed the street. The whole road!”

I remember Elgin, a big fellow with a hearty laugh. Simonis often had him and his family over for parties. I wondered what he was doing in the Citadel why anyone wanted to remove him.

“Where are you staying, Sunil?” I ask.

“In the countryside, with some friends of mine,” he says, sounding distracted. I swear I can hear peacocks crying out in the distance.

“Who are you staying with?” I demand to know and I put him on the spot.

“Hugo Montpellier, if you must know,” Sunil says, clearly annoyed.

“Who?”

Sunil says defensively. “He works for MoZa and is the Secretary of Home Affairs.”

I take a moment to process this. I had no idea that Sunil was close to people in MoZa’s ministry.

“Where is MoZa now?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Sunil says.

“For someone who lives in the Citadel, you know very little,” I remark sarcastically.

“Nothing is cast in stone at the moment,” Sunil says finally. “But one thing... all this instability... traced to the Council.”

The connection is bad and I have to call him back.

“What is happening on the Council?!”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

Sunil takes a moment. “Some councilors are being shafted.”

“Who is doing the shafting?” This is vital information for me as it could explain what is happening out here as well.

“MoZa and Tempesto.” Sunil speaks in a low voice as if he does not want to be overheard.

“Where is Dominic?” He had always been sympathetic to my position.

“He has had some sort of accident,” says Sunil. “He is not here at the moment. There was an emergency meeting of the Council in the week and he was not there.”

Things are beginning to fall into place.

“And the Servant? Who is he and who is backing him?”

Sunil is silent.

I ask him again.

“He has been put forward as a replacement for Lare.” Sunil finally says. “People are too scared to speak against him. But as long as Tempesto is there, it will be fine for us. He will keep him under control.”

“I told you to get rid of Tempesto!” I hissed.

“I know, Father, but this isn’t the time! The vampires must stand together otherwise we will be divided and it will be easier to fight us then!”

“No,” I say.

“Tempesto is key to all of this.”

After the call, I close my eyes and will myself to calm down. I tell myself that there is no point becoming emotional. I need to make decisions that are reasonable and logical.

I summon Ragnar and wait for my oldest son to arrive.

When he walks in, I have a long, hard look at him. Ragnar has always worn his hair long and it is untidy now, he has clearly been travelling. He seems tired too. But in Ragnar, this brings out a kind of ferocity that I need now. The old Viking blood that kicks in when it is needed the most.

“I have a job for you,” I say.

“Anything.”

I smile a little. “You may want to think twice.”

His eyebrows lift questioningly.

“This calls for a bit of finesse. But I can’t send in just anyone and it has to be done carefully.”

Ragnar comes closer, his eyes are glinting.

“It is time to deal with Tempesto. I have asked Sunil to do it but he has been unable to. Says the bastard is huddled in his compound and he can’t get to him.”

“Sunil would say that,” Ragnar says, pulling a face. “Coward.”

“But before I move on Tempesto, we may need to get rid of the Servant. Those two are the biggest threat to us. We don’t have much time. You need to get to the capital and find out where Dominic is and what this situation means for us. I would go but I’m not well enough yet.”

“You up for this, son?” I ask, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Of course!”

“Be careful!”

I watch him leave and then call Robbie.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

The boy comes at once and stands quietly beside me. I am learning how to prompt him and his visions have been getting more informative, more specific.

“What do you see in the Citadel at the moment?”

Robbie closes his eyes.

Then he says, “Fire, unrest. People dying, afraid, hiding. The clouds are red and filled with flames. Darkness is coming.”

I tell him to leave and pace in my tower room, thinking.

Then I tell Layrr to send me two royal guards, to keep the castle under strict guard.

“Where are you going?” He asks me and I hear the concern in his voice.

“There is someone I have to see,” I say.

He does not look happy.

“We don’t have much time,” I say.

I have the reinforced car brought round and give my orders to the driver.

It is time I to head for the Swamps.

I have to see the fifth councilor, Eleanor Harris, called Mrs. Harris by everyone.

Mrs. Harris is a matriarch, in charge of a large family of working class people in a part of the country that is called the Swamp Lands. It is an unpleasant area, in my opinion, hot and humid, covered in soupy, mosquito-infested waters where gators and all sort of nasty creatures lurk. People here are often overlooked and under-appreciated, much to their own disadvantage.

I arrive in the Swamp Lands in the late afternoon, head straight to the main residence, which is not much more than a collection of shack buildings on a jetty overlooking a big swamp.

I send a royal guard to announce my arrival and keep my eyes open. I am not entirely sure how I will be received. The guard comes back and informs me I should go in, alone.

The old lady comes out to greet me.

She is half my size, dressed like a kind of peasant, her hair, grey and frizzy, stands out like a halo around her head. The eyes are wary and wise, though.

I greet her, “Mrs. Harris, thank you for receiving me.”

“We don’t get a lot of vampires around here,” she says carefully.

I nod.

The history of the Swamp Lands most famously centers around the final days of the Great War. A vampire general with some of his fighters attacked the area, thinking they would feed on the people here, win over the territory in a quick strike that would strengthen the position of the older vampires who were not aligned with our lot.

They were very much mistaken. As they swooped in over the Swamp Lands, the story

goes, the waters of the marshes rose and rose. Giant gators leaped into the air, grabbing vampires from the air, snapping them in half, dragging them into the water. It was all over within seconds.

The news had stunned the old guard.

When peace negotiations came, the resistance mounted by the Swamp Lands was noted and it was unanimously decided to offer the region a seat on the Council. Mrs. Harris has held it ever since. She must be ninety years old, but she looks as spry and strong as she did back then.

Understandably, she and her people, are not fans of the vampires.

“I suppose I cannot offer you some refreshment?” she says with a dry smile.

“Oh, I can have a drop of your firewater,” I say.

We walk out onto the deck, where a man starts as soon as he sees me. I would guess he is one of the sons.

“What’s this filth doin’ here!”

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Now, now, Elias,” Mrs. Harris calms him down. “King Lucca is our guest. Get us some firewater, will you?”

He goes off, in a huff, comes back with a tray and small glasses filled with golden liquid.

We sit down on uncomfortable wire chairs that face the vast wetland. The white branches of dead trees poke from the water, which appears malignant to me. I think of what lurks under the surface of the water.

“To what do I owe this honor?” she asks me.

“I will come to the point,” I say, no reason to beat around the bush. “These are dark days for us all and the news from the Capital is worrying.”

She nods carefully, giving nothing away.

“I fear that the Council is compromised,” I say carefully. “I was hoping you could inform me as to what is happening there.”

She looks at me, craftily. “But you have a son in the Citadel, don’t you? I see him all the time, in and out of offices, up and down the stairs, talking to people behind corners.”

“Sunil? Yes, he has not been helpful,” I say, darkly. “I understand you have children too? Some are... disappointing? Wouldn’t you say?”

She leans forward and then gives a big cackling laugh, slapping her knee.

“Why, that is a good one! Disappointing, indeed!”

She chuckles and then falls silent.

“They’re moving against me, aren’t they?” I say quietly. “They are attacking my lands, destroying my blood banks, spreading rumors about me. A few days ago, some men brazenly shot at me, nearly killing me.”

She looks up at me, her eyes cloudy.

“Some men?”

“The Servant.”

She nods, her face serious.

“Two weeks ago, the Council received a motion that you were suspected of treason against the authority of the Council. That your vampires are indiscriminately attacking the people of Ginnerlong and that you need to be suppressed.”

“Who brought the motion?” I ask.

“Tempesto.”

Of course, I think.

“MoZa backed him, but Dominic and Lare would not. I declined to vote.”

“Why?”

She pauses. "I had a notion there was somethin' goin' on there. Something shady. I was right. The following week, Dominic got sick, some kind of heart trouble and Lare had adreadful accident. I received word that the Servant is to take her place. An emergency meeting of the Council was arranged but I decided not to attend."

She looks out over the water. "It is not safe in the Citadel now."

"Tempesto is seizing control," I say. "He must be stopped."

She nodded. "MoZa is not well. He is old, has become Tempesto's puppet. He barely speaks these days. My old friend, is gone." Her voice is sad.

"If we don't stop Tempesto, it will be the end of peace for our world. Darkness will be upon us again. It will be worst for humans."

She considers. "We will be safe down here," she motions over the water. "We have our protection."

"Against the demons too?"

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

She looks at me sharply and I know I've got her.

"All I want is your support, to take down Tempesto and the Servant, restore order to the Council."

"And then what? Who will take Tempesto's place? You?"

I had been expecting this question. "I don't want it," I say. "I have never wanted that kind of power. Being King of the West has been enough for me."

"You have become wealthy, though, and a threat," she says. "You will not allow them to manufacture their drug blood, fix the price, control the market."

"I want peace," I say. "I lived through a war once, you did too... I don't want to see it again. The Council seat can go to one of my sons, perhaps Lord Ferney?"

She nods and is silent for a long time. In the distance, a bird cries out and there is a splash on the water. When I look in the direction of the commotion, the water settles and is smooth again. No sign of what caused the disturbance.

"I will back you," she finally says. "But you will have to join the Council. No-one else. I don't trust your sons. And neither should you," she said, fixing her brown eyes on me. When I look into them, I feel the pull of the bog, the danger lurking underneath. The strength of this tiny woman amazes me.

I nod and shake her hand, with a slightly uneasy feeling.

I want to get out of there as quickly as I can.

## Chapter 15

Izzy

The night is crisp and cold, the temperature dropping as soon as the sun is down. The various people staying with us go back to their rooms, lock their doors. All of us are feeling unsettled, worried.

I find my mother in her greenhouse, fussing with her plants. They are dying, she fears there is something in the air. Even our groundwater appears to be changing. My mother does not look well, her skin is blotchy, her eyes are swollen, bleary. She wasn't at dinner, which we all had together and I want to check that she is okay.

"I don't want food now," she says in a soft voice, her long fingers stroking the petals of a plant. "That is not what we need."

She turns away from me and I go outside, into the freezing night air.

My phone rings and it is Costello.

"I had a call from Joe," he says. "He is taking Dominic out of the Citadel, somewhere safe."

"What happened?"

"A package was delivered, some kind of nerve bomb. When Dominic opened it, this vapor released. He stepped away but not in time. Joe says he is paralyzed, blind. The medics don't know what to do, they've never seen anything like it."

“No way,” I say, shocked.

“Joe says they want to get rid of anyone who is against the new powers. He is not making a lot of sense right now, but he’s scared. He said he didn’t want to come here because it won’t be safe for long.”

“Are you serious?”

“Uh-huh. Says they’re getting armies up to control things out West, and then they’re coming for the rest of us.”

I wonder what that means. But I can’t sit around anymore, waiting for whatever shit is coming our way to hit us. I need to be doing something, anything.

“Who is behind this?”

“Fuckin’ vampires,” Costello says. “They’re comin’ for us. Again!”

“Not Lucca,” I say quickly. “It’s not him.”

“They’re all the same, Iz, you should know that.”

“No,” I say quickly. “They tried to kill him too, remember?”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“When it comes to war, we have to stand together. Us against them, that is the only way.”

But we don’t stand a chance, I think. The vampires in the Citadel are evil and powerful. I think of what Lare told me.

“I can’t sit here, doing nothing,” I say. “I’m going to go after Chakrat.”

“What about your mother?” Costello asks.

“There are others here, she isn’t alone.”

“Chakrat is too much for you,” he says, but he sounds defeated. “I’d come with you but I think he will swat me like a fly.”

“Not a fly! A big bug maybe,” I joke feebly.

Costello promises to come by to check on my mother and I am about to go and get ready when I feel the familiar sensation. I turn around and look out over the open plains of the desert, the empty road.

Lucca is out there, I can feel it, he is coming.

I pull the jersey around me and wait.

I don’t know where he is coming from, but I can feel it.

My heart starts beating faster, there is a quickening in my pulse. When I turn to go to my room, I see him standing outside on the patio.

I go towards him and walk into his arms. Feeling his embrace on the cold night warms me, the heat between us engulfs me.

“How are you?” I ask, pulling away, concerned.

I check his face, but he looks better than when I last saw him.

“Getting there,” he smiles at me. “I’m an old man, you see, no longer young.”

“Bullshit!” I respond. “You’re a beast!”

There is a moment of silence. He pulls me closer, kisses me and for a few seconds, the world stops, I feel myself falling into him, into our world which exists outside of the one I inhabit with my family, my people here. There is no talking, no reason there, just an energy and a force field that is fed by the two of us, a current that pulses through our bodies.

His kiss is intense, fierce, I feel his arms around me, strong, pulling me in deeper and there is no pulling away now. It rises between us, this incredible desire and he pushes me against the wall of my bedroom, ripping open my clothes to get to my body. The look in his eyes is of naked desire, and it arouses me in ways I cannot even begin to understand. He peels my clothes off of me and I stand naked in the freezing air, not feeling a thing. His hands are all over me, caressing and stroking, pinching and squeezing, bringing me to life and causing sensations I have never felt before in my life.

He lifts me up and I fold my legs around his hips as his cock enters me, thrusting with an intensity that excites me. With every thrust, I am shoved against the wall, the

power of his body seems to shake the room.

I can feel my body respond to him, to his power, wanting more of it. I feel myself offering my body to him and I sense the change in him, a different energy as the fangs come out and the teeth pierce my skin. It is an exquisite moment of pleasure, and it is as if more than our bodies are coming together, my blood is flowing and in some strange moment of madness, I see blood from one of his wounds, which has opened during our passion, the blood running down his chest. I lick it and the taste of his blood burns my tongue. My world explodes then. There are no words to describe the sensations coursing through my body and he collapses on top of me, the two of us sliding to the ground, spent.

I don't tell him anything about my plans as he starts telling me about what is happening in the world, how he fears there are plots to get rid of him. He wants to act but he wants to be sure, he is unwilling to instigate the conflict.

"But you were attacked, right? Your supply trucks have been under attack for months? Shouldn't you strike back?"

"I don't know where to strike," he says, his face grim.

He tells me about his meeting with the fifth councilor and sending Ragnar to the capitol.

"And Sunil? Where is he?" I ask even though I knew I shouldn't.

He pulls away, his face closes off.

"He's in the Capital," he says.

"I see," I say.

“What?” he says and I should have let it go. But this is not my character.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Doesn’t it strike you as strange that you are being attacked from all sides, without being able to find out who it is? It is someone close to you, and they’re being protected.”

“Don’t!” he raises a hand to shut me up. But I don’t do well with people telling me what to do, I never have.

“Or what?” I challenge him.

He turns to me, his gaze fierce and aggressive. I feel an incredibly hostile energy coming towards me and I refuse to look away, finding myself shaking to the bone.

“You asked me to find out who killed your wife and I have! Now, you’re behaving like every other man I’ve ever met who hasn’t wanted to face the truth!”

He stares at me and his face changes from the sexy, handsome man I know, into something else, something dangerous. The very air around him seems to quiver with a destructive force that scares me. For the first time, I think he might actually hurt me. His anger is too much.

“Get out,” I snarl. “Go away!”

He lashes out, as if to punch a wall in anger, the mere force of the movement is enough to smash the wall and it crumples into a heap of dust.

“Lucca! Stop!”

My shout seems to have brought him back from wherever he was.

“Izzy,” he says, stunned. “I’m...I’m sorry...”

“No,” I say, firmly. “Leave, we’re done here. I have to be somewhere anyway.”

“Where are you going?” he asks, coming closer but I step away.

“None of your business. We’re done, I’ve completed the assignment, given you your proof, so I’ll be happy to receive my payment.”

“Wait, Izzy,” he calls out to me, his voice apologetic now but I’m not having any of it.

I nod at him, curtly, coldly and politely. “I bid you goodnight,” and with that I bow to him and turn away.

My heart is beating fast but I will not be spoken to in that way.

I don’t care who he thinks he is or how excellent he is in bed. The one thing I will never accept, is a man who tries to push me around. Fucking vampire king or not.

If that is the way he wants it, he can forget about it.

Right now.

As I will be doing.

I have much more important things to focus on.

As soon as he leaves, I gather my things and set off right away.

I had called around earlier in the day, trying to find out where Chakrat was and it wasn't even that difficult to find him. Seems the fucker is out in the open now, helping to wreak mayhem in the West. A source told me of some house outside Ginnerlong and I travel all night to reach it. I want to hit it in the daylight, when he is weakest.

But I am not prepared for what I find as soon as I reach the mountains east of the West Mountains. The clouds are heavy with smoke, you can smell it in the air, the chaos and the destruction everywhere. The war is already here, you can tell. Cars block the road and burnt-out wrecks are scattered everywhere.

It is impossible to travel by road. In one of the smaller towns, I manage to find someone willing to sell me a horse, a crazy beast that will take me across the pass.

"You're insane to go in there now," says the horse's owner. "There are vampires all over the place, they're basically feeding on the people openly now. They'll kill you."

"Let them come," I say grimly as I saddle the horse and get on it. The horse, a stallion going by the name of Strider, is nervous and bucks and kicks and I have to pull the reins tight and talk to it in a soothing voice. Then I dig in my heels and we fly through the night, taking back roads through the forest. I have memorized the map to get to the manor house outside Ginnerlong and a few miles away, I come to a huge blaze in the middle of the road. The horse refuses to continue and as I try to get the horse under control, I feel something fly towards me. Slashing towards it with a blade and catching the body as it is upon me. There is another coming at me and a third comes at me as well and I respond instinctively, throwing blades and slashing necks quickly, without thinking about it too much. I am so fast on my feet, more agile than ever before. It is Lucca's blood, I realize, giving me more speed and dexterity.

When I leave the scene at the burning house, there are four dead vampires around me and the horse has bolted. I start running in a northern direction, with only one thing in

my mind. Or one person. One vampire.

The one responsible for killing my father, for ruining my family and now, helping others to ruin the world. I will not sit by and wait for that to happen. If I die while this happens, so be it, but I am not cut out for sitting passively, waiting for shit to come my way. My mother is already leaving, I have no desire to be here if my entire family's gone. What do I have to live for then anyway? My Guard's promise of protecting the weak is not enough to keep me going.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

When I near the estate, I find a low stone wall, which I easily scale and then I slow down, trying to scout the area. The day is breaking and I want to wait for the light before I enter the house. I find a good place to hide and sit it out for a few hours, until the sun is high and it is fairly bright outside. Then I approach the house slowly. It is a big mansion, in ruin. One side of the house is a pile of rocks and the windows have been boarded up. There is no sign of movement, no sense that anyone is about the place. I walk round the back and get my knives ready, to be ready at the smallest movement. The house inside is a mess, broken furniture and tables turned over. It looks like a huge fight took place here. I walk through a large entrance hall into a kind of dining room where plates and rotting food have attracted buzzing flies. There is a staircase that looks like something was thrown off it, perhaps a sofa. Wood has been ripped off and it looks unsafe.

I carefully tread around the broken steps, feel my way to the upper floors. I know he's here, I can feel it. On the top landing, I scan the hallways, decide where the bedrooms are and carefully open the doors. In the first, there is only darkness when I open the door. The door creaks softly and I hold my breath, listening to hear if I've attracted attention. There is someone lying on the bed. I scan the rest of the room quickly and pounce without making a sound, aiming for the neck and slashing quickly, severing the head.

I turn around and go to the next bedroom where someone is sleeping in a huge chair by the window. From the long hair and the fancy clothes, I gather it is someone a little more important than my previous victim. As I get closer, the body sits up and the eyes open, suddenly alert, a hand grabs my arm and I have to act quickly, plunging the silver-tipped dagger straight into the heart.

The body slumps back.

I stand back and take a breath, when I hear a voice behind me.

“Looking for me?”

I turn around quickly, but still not fast enough. Before I know what is happening, my hands are tied behind my back and I am pulled into the room by my hair, thrown on the bed, my feet tied to the railing at the bottom, my hands to the top. In front of me, a man crouches, laughing.

“Izzy, right? I have been waiting for you...”

“Chakrat,” I say.

“So lovely to meet you, at last! Have you come alone?” He perks up. “Hardly seems wise, does it?”

I struggle against the rope but I find myself unable to move.

He laughs again.

“I am hoping to see your lover soon. I’m sure he will come running to your side, aren’t you?”

I shake my head and grit my teeth. “He won’t come.”

Chakrat laughs again. “Oh, but he will my sweet. He will smell your distress and come running like the old fool he is.”

He bares his teeth. “Then I will cut him down and that will be that.” He crosses his

arms with a satisfied smile.

## Chapter 16

Lucca

As I'm leaving Izzy's, I think of an incident a few weeks ago, when my old Seer saw Izzy for the first time. I had asked her for help in finding someone who could investigate Tanata's death. I wanted someone who was independent and objective, not part of the Citadel crowd, but at the same time, someone who would be discreet, who could be trusted. Even then, I knew it was a delicate job.

"It sounds like a job for a woman," she'd mused.

Then she went into her trance and I left her to it for a while, wondering if a woman would be able to do it. My experience of women had taught me that they were good thinkers and diplomats and quite capable at solving complicated mysteries, but at the same time, I did need someone with physical strength as well. I knew it would involve fighting and sticky situations, and I didn't know many women able to handle those as well.

Then I remembered Ragnar boasting how he'd beaten the female bounty hunter recently and asked him her name.

Isabella Bonnici. Izzy.

When I told the Seer her name, she had been quiet for a long time. Finally, she said, "She could do it, but if you use her, you will have a lot more on your hands."

I got impatient with the old woman and asked her what she meant.

“She can’t be controlled,” she said slowly. “A wild horse that can’t be broken in.”

At the time, this had only intrigued me.

Later, after I’d hired Izzy, Finn had tried to advise me to change my mind.

“I don’t know about her,” he had said carefully. “Are you sure you want to involve her in this?”

When I pressed him about his concern, he admitted, “I fear you will become involved with her. The witch has foreseen this.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“And?” Again, I didn’t see what business it was of his.

“She is not like the others,” Finn spoke each word cautiously and didn’t say any more.

I got his meaning, then. I didn’t like to be questioned or spoken back to. Perhaps becoming king had made this worse. I was in charge and my word was law. I was used to people listening to me, following my lead.

Izzy followed her own head.

She was used to doing her own thing and it had not even occurred to me that she would try to defy me the way she had. I had lost my temper, which was something that happened occasionally. Still, I had not expected her to react the way she had. Standing up to me like that, chasing me away like a dog.

I didn’t like that.

Despite everything we had shared, the wonderful passion in bed, she did not respect me the way she should. After all, I was more powerful, stronger in every way. I had lived longer, seen more, understood things more deeply. I knew she had fire in her, a desire to walk a different path and I liked that, I would support that.

But she was young, she needed to learn a few things. She overestimated herself and what she could achieve in life. She had not yet learned how to talk to people, how to play them, gently, to coax music out of the most difficult instrument.

I thought of how she had pushed me on Layrr and felt my anger rise again.

She had no idea what I had been facing the last few decades and how I needed my family to support me in the delicate power balance I had been managing. Even if Layrr was compromised, I needed to think about how to deal with it.

I felt Izzy had forced my hand and I didn't like that, I resented her for it. She had overstepped her position, taken things too far. I thought she was smarter than that and I was disappointed in her.

We arrived in the village of Carsonne in the early hours of the morning. The house of Hugo Montpellier was on the outskirts, on a road leading into thick woodland. It was hidden from the road by a huge tree-lined avenue. It was a magnificent old place, built by Hugo's grandfather, once a prominent landowner. His son had been an advisor to MoZa many years ago and his son had gone into politics as well. I knew Hugo as a pretty boy, an on-off romantic interest of Sunil's, but I didn't know it had become this permanent. I had respected his private life thus far.

I had the car drive up to the front of the house and got out, making no attempt to hide my arrival.

Daylight was coming and I could feel the rising heat in the air burning my skin, especially around the wounds that were still healing. I was not yet at my former strength and needed to take care.

The door was opened by a house servant who took me and the royal guard to a sitting room. Moments later, a flustered Hugo came in, doing up his shirt and clearly waking up.

"Where is Sunil?" I demanded to know right away.

“I... ah... I ...” he stammered, eyes wide.

“I know he’s here.”

“No... that’s not true,” Hugo shook his head, but I stared him down and he fell silent, biting his lip, looking shifty. Could this really be the kind of man my son had chosen to be with? I couldn’t see it. I had to fight the urge to knock him to the ground, pathetic weasel.

“Go get him please,” I said, turning away in disgust.

Moments later, Sunil appeared in the doorway.

“Father,” he said, not looking surprised at all to see me. He was fully dressed, not a hair out of place.

“We need to talk,” I said.

“Come,” he said, “I know a place.”

He took me upstairs to an elegant bedroom, which led to a private suite, probably the rooms of Hugo’s grandmother once. There were doors opening onto a balcony and Sunil closed these now for privacy.

“Why are you here, Father? It’s not safe!”

“I need you to tell me what is going on, Sunil, do you understand me?” My tone was angry and firm. “No more fucking me around. What are you doing here?”

Sunil’s head dropped, he appeared to be considering his response.

I looked at his handsome face, the smooth skin of his face, the almond-shaped eyes and remembered how much Simonis had loved him. Part of my affection for him had been because of his mother. Had I overlooked weaknesses out of fondness for her? I wasn't sure anymore.

Sunil took a deep breath and came closer, speaking softly.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“I have been using Hugo to get closer to Tempesto. He is one of MoZa’s secretaries and attends all the Council meetings. I have... befriended him and in return, been able to get access to their offices.”

This was interesting. Sunil went on in a low voice, “I have been poisoning MoZa’s tea with Perpicca for the past few weeks, unsuccessfully, as I’m sure you know.”

Perpicca was toxic to vampires. Even the smallest amount of powder was known to kill. But not Tempesto, it seemed.

“It has been so difficult to get access to him, but on three occasions, I managed to doctor his tea. Once, he didn’t drink all of it. But I checked, he definitely drained the cup on the other two times. But he seems unaffected.”

“How is this possible?” I asked.

“I think he has been taking so much tainted blood, from humans high on cocaine and methamphetamine. He has been acting erratically, aggressively, it may be overriding the Perpicca.”

“But why are you hiding here?”

Sunil shook his head. “MoZa has become paranoid. He is convinced assassins are out to kill him. He trusts no one. He fired Hugo last week and told him if he saw him again in the Citadel, he would be arrested. I am too much connected to him now, it is better for me here.”

“Is that all it is?”

He knew what I was asking.

“Father, please, don’t insult me. I would never... Hugo is...” he pulled a face, shook his head. I believed him.

“There is something else,” I said. I told him about Izzy looking into Tanata’s death, finding out Layrr had been there.

“Why would he kill Tanata? Why?”

This was what had confounded me as well.

“We didn’t like her, taking Mother’s place. But to try to kill her? That is insane.”

Sunil was quiet. “But why are you paying this girl to look into all of this? What could she possibly understand about ourworld, our kind? She is a mortal, a young one at that. She doesn’t understand the complexities of our world.”

Sunil paused. “I don’t like Layrr, as you know. But he is not a killer.”

I found myself agreeing with him, wanting to believe him.

We heard some kind of commotion outside.

It sounded like cars speeding up to the house, helicopters landing outside.

“What’s happening?” Sunil rushed up to the window, pulling open the curtains.

Sunlight flooded in and I felt it burn my skin.

I retreated to the back of the room.

“There are men with guns! SWAT teams, looks like, they’re surrounding the house!”

Sunil stared at me, horrified.

“We’ve got to get out of here!”

## Chapter 17

Izzy

Last night, after he captured me, Chakrat played with me, like a cat would with a mouse.

“You need to be scared,” he said. “Lucca won’t come otherwise.” He slapped me, punched me, kicked me around, almost listlessly, like he wasn’t really interested. I tried groaning in pain, shrieking once as he threw me against the wall. It wasn’t my best acting and he cottoned on.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“My, my,” he said, coming closer, an evil glint in his eye. “Don’t tell me you’ve been having me on? Not enough pain for you?”

It was like being close to a snake, something reptilian. His eyes were cold and dark, glittering with malice. His hair was black too, slicked back and he wore a kind of coat that hid his shape. But the way he moved, was incredibly fast and agile. I’d never seen moves like that. He was faster than me and stronger. I would never be able to beat him.

He grabbed me by the throat and started choking me, lifting me off my feet.

I fought back, kicking and trying to get away from him, but it was useless.

“Did you... kill my father...?”

His grip loosened a bit. “Your father?”

Was it possible that he didn’t know who I was?

“A bounty hunter. Bo Bonnici. Five years ago. He was killed in our house, along with my little brother. My mother almost died. She is a Beauty.”

He let me go and I fell on the ground, coughing.

“That was your father? Interesting,” he said and appeared deep in thought.

“I didn’t know there was a daughter.”

He crouched in front of me.

“You look like her, yes, I see that now.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “He was in the way, he wouldn’t listen.”

“To whom?”

“Enough!” he said, getting up.

“Time is running out. I need you to get Lucca here.”

He took out a knife with a long blade.

“I think I’ll cut that pretty little face of yours,” he said, laughing darkly as he came closer. He put the tip of the knife on my cheek and slowly pressed it deeper until I could feel him drawing blood. I bit down, gritting my teeth but then he pulled back.

“Nah...I think I need more.”

Without warning, he plunged the knife into my stomach, deep. I felt an explosion of pain and gasped.

“That should do it,” he grinned happily.

“Feeling the pain now?” he asked me, a voice dripping with sarcasm. “You should be. You’ll be dead within hours.”

He left then and I tried to calm down, to slow my breathing and stop myself from

going into shock. Where he had stabbed me, there was a dark stain of blood, spreading fast. I managed to untie myself and took some bedding and pressed it on the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. The pain was intense and I could barely focus on anything beside it. There was no point trying to confront Chakrat now, I could barely stand never mind fight him.

My only hope was to get out of here.

I tried to sit up in the bed and almost blacked out from the pain.

I searched the pockets of my jacket for the potion my mother had given me. It seemed like the right occasion for it. I managed to get the little bottle out, pulling the stopper out with my teeth. There was so little fluid in there, I couldn't imagine it doing any good, but I poured the entire contents of it over the wound. Immediately, I felt a searing heat that made me cry out in pain. I didn't want to attract attention to myself and risk Chakrat finding out I had untied myself. But I had no control over my reaction, the pain was unbearable and I was fighting to stay conscious, gripping the bed rail and trying not to scream.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and lost consciousness.

I don't know how many hours I was unconscious but I felt stronger. I looked down and it seemed like the bleeding wasn't as bad as earlier. I managed to get up and tore off some of the curtains, pressing the fabric onto the wound, tying it around my chest.

I could walk with difficulty.

Slowly, very slowly, I made my way to the door. I tried to remember the lay of the house, how I could get out as quickly as possible. I felt for my remaining knife, the silver dagger and suddenly remembered the fireball. With one hand holding my hand protectively over my stomach wound and the other rubbing the glass ball against my thigh, I edged my way out of the room and down the hallway.

My senses were heightened, aware of every movement in the house. At the top of the stairs I waited a while, but the house was deserted. I only wanted to get out of there but walking was proving to be harder than I'd thought. Each step I took sent shooting pain through my body and I was sweating profusely from the effort of dragging my body down the stairs.

On the landing, I looked around and tried to orient myself. It seemed different in the light of day, with several corridors leading off into rooms. I finally found the corridor to the back door and had my hand on the doorknob when I heard movement behind me.

“Leaving so soon?” Chakrat’s voice came at me and I swung around, throwing the fireball as I turned. There was no time to take aim and for one terrible moment I thought I had not pulled my arm back enough but he was coming at me and the fireball connected with him, exploding into flames. The force of the impact sent him flying through the air. I shuffled closer and took careful aim with my dagger, sinking it into his heart and pulling it out with a little twist.

I watched the surprise die in his eyes and with great satisfaction saw his body go up

in flames. I had succeeded in killing Chakrat, my biggest goal in life, I couldn't wait to tell my mother. I turned around towards the door and saw three vampires standing there. They had only just arrived. I could see them looking at Chakrat's burning body on the ground and me standing there, clutching my stomach. The blood must have been appealing because the one in front moved fast, very fast.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" he said, breathing into my face as I plunged my knife in his chest. But there were two others and I had no weapons or strength left. I was on my knees, trying not to think about how I had actually managed to kill Chakrat, but was going to die anyway.

"Hey, bloodsuckers! Over here!" a voice came from the other side of the hall. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size!"

I looked up and saw Costello come striding into the hall. The vampires turned to face him and I saw him throwing knives, striking down two in mid-air. Another came up behind him and I saw a blade penetrate his shoulder, with Costello stumbling and falling down. I summoned all my power to grab my silver dagger out of the body of the closest vampire and tried to get to the vampire standing over Costello. He turned his back on me and I had a clean shot, sinking the knife into his chest. The vampire fell back but was only temporarily disabled, I hobbled over to check on Costello but he was still breathing.

"Come," I said, "We have got to get out of here!"

I looked over my shoulder, worried that more vampires would be crawling out of the woodwork.

"I... can't...go on...without me," Costello said, there was blood trickling from his mouth.

“No! I’m not leaving without you!” I said, trying to pull his arm, but lacking the strength. Tears were running down my cheeks now and I didn’t care. Costello had come all this way to help me and I surely would’ve died if he hadn’t. But I had no doubt that if we didn’t leave now, we would not survive this place.

“Please, come!” I begged him but he could barely keep his eyes open.

Behind me the door banged and I looked around, expecting to see the next lot of vampires streaming in.

But I couldn’t anymore.

I could feel my legs giving way as I dropped to the floor next to Costello. The big man lay with his eyes closed and I tried talking to him.

“Stay with me,” I said. “Costello? Stay with me!”

But he didn’t move and a tiredness came over me.

I was unaware of the men that came into the house after that, coming in to check on me and Costello, picking us up and carrying us out of there. At some point, I must have woken up because I sat up and saw the house going up in flames. The heat from the fire reached us where we were lying on stretchers outside on the grass.

Glowing embers flew into the sky as the fire rushed through the rooms, the curtains billowing out the windows, looking like wings of gold.

For a long time then, I didn’t feel anything, didn’t know of anything. The darkness that I was plunged into was deep and soothing, like an ocean of tranquility. I didn’t want to wake up from that. I felt at peace and completely calm, floating on a giant ocean of stillness.

Someone was calling my name, “Izzy, Izzy!”

But I was too tired to pay attention. The voice was growing fainter and finally disappeared. I was glad. The silence felt good. It reminded me of a holiday that we had taken as a family. Micah was still with us, my parents had taken us to a cabin on the edge of a lake. We would go swimming in the water, which was freezing and Micah and my father would try fishing in the day.

I would sit on the jetty, watching the trees and listening to the wolves, howling at night. My mother came to sit with me and she looked so much younger then, she’d laughed and joked around with me, teasing my father about his inability to catch any fish. He later told me that there were no fish in the lake, the point had not been to catch anything, but to do something with Micah. It didn’t matter if they caught anything or not. I remembered being happy, completely at peace. None of the restlessness, the rebelliousness that came later in my life.

I liked being back there, at the lake, and the quiet stillness.

I didn’t want to come back to the world.

My brother’s sweet little face, him cut down so young. I wanted to be with him, to see my father and have nothing to do with the world anymore.

## Chapter 18

Lucca

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

A door was broken down and then we heard the sound of boots running into the house. There was gunfire, automatic weapons and the voices of men shouting out commands. The door to our room was opened and a swarm of men poured in, they trained their weapons on us and were about to fire. Sunil raised his hands and stared at them, intently, using his powers of mind control. They dropped their guns and stood staring at him, their eyes glassy.

He picked up one of their machine guns and was about to fire at them but I said, “No.”

“What?”

I pointed at their uniforms.

“These are Council forces, they are acting on Council orders. We need to find out who sent them.”

We bound the men and locked them in the room, then went looking for the rest of the men. We found them scattered throughout the house. They had killed everyone they could find, Hugo and his wife were lying on the ground in their living room. Another man and some servants were found in the kitchen.

We subdued the soldiers and locked them up in the room at the top.

“Who is your leader?” I commanded them and all the men looked at an older man.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Captain Wilkes,” he said in the monotone that reveals the mind has been subdued.

We took the captain to the study and I quizzed him there.

“What are you doing here?”

“We received orders from the Council to neutralize the house.”

“Does that mean kill everyone inside?”

He nodded.

“You were looking for men, not vampires?”

“Humans,” he confirmed.

Sunil was standing behind me, arms crossed, a big frown on his face.

“They didn’t know you were here,” I said.

“Or they didn’t care,” Sunil said.

“Who signed the order?” I asked.

The captain said, “It was given to me by General Ost.”

“General Ost heads up the military, under MoZa,” said Sunil. “Perhaps there was an emergency motion to remove enemies. Something like that. Usually, the full Council has to vote, but at times of crisis, the Chairman can sign off on procedures.”

To me, Sunil said, “He must have become suspicious of Hugo.”

To me, this was a sign that Tempesto was consolidating his position.

I went outside and called Ragnar.

He was in the Citadel now and I was finally able to talk him as the mobile signal here was strong. I told him of the attack.

“It is eerie here,” Ragnar said. “No-one is outside, everyone is indoors waiting for something. There is a sense that something big is coming, but nobody knows when or why. The Capital is being guarded by the military, tanks and soldiers are patrolling the streets and keeping order. But there is fear everywhere.”

Ragnar told me he was staying with Lord Wilmer Ashworth, a vampire who had been an adviser to Tempesto in the early years before losing favor. He was sympathetic to our family and I counted him as a friend.

“Ash says Tempesto is insane. Basically. He has been drugging himself and is obsessed with taking over control of the Council. He has gotten rid of everyone who is against him.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“We must stop him,” I said.

“Agreed,” said Ragnar. “But how? He never leaves the compound, and it is under heavy guard.”

“What about MoZa?”

“Ash says MoZa’s mind has gone. He is like a child. He can’t dress himself, doesn’t know which day it is. His daughter is helping him, acting like a go-between. He is not fit to rule, but who will remove him? The Council must vote on it and for all practical purposes, there is no Council.”

“What about the Servant?”

“The talk in the Citadel is that he is out West, taking control of Ginnerlong and the Grey Mountains. We will come under proper attack soon. You must warn Lord Farney and find reinforcements.”

“Will they use demons?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Ragnar said, “There is something else. Ash says Tempesto wants to close the blood banks, return the world to the way it was.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Apparently this way of living is unnatural for vampires. He says we are growing weak, we are meant to rule the world, not be controlled by humans.”

“Sounds a bit like your philosophy, doesn’t it?” I said.

“Yeah, but...” Ragnar paused. “Ash says there is talk of people developing stronger weapons, in the Capital they may be exploring ways of bringing down vampires, wiping them out.

“What kind of weapons?” I asked with a feeling of foreboding.

“I am not sure,” said Ragnar. “Possibly small tactical nuclear weapons.”

“This may be the end, for all of us.”

“I know,” Ragnar said, sounding grave.

“You need to get out of there,” I told Ragnar.

I had the feeling our time was running out.

There was no time to talk to Ragnar about Sunil or the accusations made about Layrr. This was bigger than the murder of Tanata.

I was trying to think of my next course of action when a sharp pain shot through my chest.

Izzy.

She was in danger, under threat somehow. I could feel my body pulling me towards her, compelling me to help her. Where was she? What was going on?

I thought of our last meeting and the way she had told me to leave. There could be no mistaking her intentions.

I couldn't rule out that she might not even want my help. My sense of Izzy was that she was proud and stubborn, she would stick to her guns no matter what. But the tightness in my chest was telling me a different story. She was in physical danger, great physical danger.

I closed my eyes and tried to hone in on the feeling, get a sense of how serious it was.

"Father! We need to leave," Sunil came towards me. Clouds had filled the sky, blocking out the sun, allowing us to wander freely outside. It would soon be dark.

"I need to go," I told him. "There is somewhere I need to be."

Sunil looked at me strangely.

"The Taergon family is not far from here," I told him. "Tim and Nareen. They were friends of your mother's. Meet me there."

He nodded.

“Good idea,” he said.

I went over to one of the helicopters on the lawn. One of my royal guards was sitting inside.

“You know how to fly one of these?” I asked him.

“How difficult can it be?” he grinned at me.

Then I flew out to help Izzy. She was in the West and I had no idea what she was doing there, so close to my home and where so much conflict was happening.

Then, suddenly, I knew.

She’d gone to confront Chakrat.

I should’ve known. For her, this entire mission was about avenging her father. Once she knew who was responsible for his death, she would set about finishing him off.

I gritted my teeth as the helicopter stalled, my guard figuring out his controls. We were flying into enemy territory and I wasn’t quite strong enough to deal with hordes of drugged up vampires.

But I had to help Izzy. We were bonded now, through blood.

As we headed through thick clouds and turbulent weather, the pilot gripping the controls and looking stressed, I tried to focus on other things.

Izzy.

The way she had changed my life. When the Seer had grabbed her and I pulled her off, in those few moments before I ended her, the witch had whispered, “She will be the end of your family.”

Her words had shaken me and I had immediately pushed them away.

But now, they came back to me, along with the other warnings of how I’d mellowed with age, had become less bloodthirsty and ruthless. I knew it was seen as a sign of weakness, that I was losing my edge. The Seer was of the old creatures, who believed in the superiority of the supernatural. She had not liked the terms of the peace accord reached after the Great War and she was not the only one.

I had seen the look in Sunil’s eyes this morning when I told him not to kill the soldiers.

He had been surprised by my call to save their lives. The truth was that I didn’t want to kill them. He had felt nothing, merely wanting to dispose of them even though they weren’t a threat. They mattered less to him than insects. But I saw people, with families, with daughters, like Izzy.

Being with her had brought back the memory of feelings, of emotions. I liked it. But I would never admit it to anyone of course.

This was the worst possible time to have feelings for anyone, let alone a mortal. The people I was responsible for expected me to be fearless and strong, they wanted action. Especially if there was a suggestion of madness in the Council. I remembered

Mrs. Harris's words of having me on the Council. It made me uncomfortable, that level of power and I didn't want to be pulled into the affairs of governance. But I couldn't stand by and let Tempesto continue down this crazy road he had chosen. Either he would succeed or the mortals would stop him. I couldn't imagine which was worse.

My conversation with Ragnar had confirmed something I had been suspecting for a long time, however, that we had underestimated the mortals. I needed to find Dominic to find out how we could open a channel of communication in the Capital, to show them that another way was possible.

A nuclear war would be a disaster.

For everyone.

The pilot leaned over towards me and shouted, "Which direction?"

In front of us, I could see the western lands. To the right, the Grey Mountains rose and ahead of us, was the city of Ginnerlong, covered by heavy clouds and smoke.

"That way," I pointed south-west of the city, to a small village, where I could feel the strongest pull. As we dipped and decreased altitude, some older houses came into view, some of which seemed familiar.

"More towards the woods," I yelled and the helicopter rose again to clear some trees.

A big manor house came into view and my heart started beating faster, this was it.

Izzy was here.

But I needed to be careful.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

I didn't want to go too close, there was a chance they'd already have heard our approach.

"Land over there," I said, pointing to a clearing some distance away.

"Be careful," I said, before getting out of the helicopter and running for cover in some trees nearby.

The afternoon light was failing and I felt stronger, more vital.

I would have to feed soon, but for now, I was all right.

I ran up to the house and heard the sounds of fighting inside.

I pushed open the door and saw vampires swarming in the air, without a second thought, I pulled my whip from my belt and unfurled it through the air, watching it curl round the bodies and bring them down, screeching. I took out my sword and quickly decapitated them.

Izzy was lying on the ground, motionless. I checked on her and felt her pulse. It was weak but she was alive.

Next to her, was her father's friend. I could see he was dead.

I picked Izzy up, carefully, and carried her outside, marveling at how light she felt in my arms. She needed medical attention as soon as possible.

I carried her to the helicopter and instructed the pilot to take her home, immediately.

## Chapter 19

Izzy

A voice is calling me from far away.

“Izzy, Izzy.”

I try to open my eyes but it is as if I am deep underwater, the water is holding me back. It is dark and lovely here, I don't want to go to the voice, don't want to open my eyes. The voice is becoming louder now, more insistent and I again make an effort to wake up.

“There you are,” I hear the soft voice of my mother, feel her hand on my arm.

“Mother,” I say and feel a rush of love when I see her face.

“Where are we?”

I can barely make out her face in the low light. The air is cool, almost clammy and I have the feeling we are somewhere far from home. In the mountains possibly, the shelter the people were talking about building.

“Let me see,” a woman says, pushing past my mother to get to me.

“How're you feeling?” she asks and I recognize the doctor from town.

“Better,” I said, even though I felt pretty awful.

“That stomach wound could have killed you, should have killed you,” she said, looking at me gravely. “There was damage to tissue and organs and fortunately there was some kind of barrier, preventing further blood loss. But I had to operate, and I think I managed to repair most of the damage. We will have to watch you carefully, for a while there will be no eating or drinking as we give your stomach time to recover.”

I noticed the IV drip in my arm.

“There is always a risk of infection in these cases. I had to remove some of the small intestine so we need to watch you. What happened?”

“A vampire stabbed me. Don’t worry, I killed him,” I said in response to the look of horror on her face.

“No wonder it looked like it did in there,” she said, her face serious. “Their weapons are designed to cause maximum damage. You are lucky to be alive.”

“She’s tough,” my mother said, with a wan smile.

“How did I get here?” I asked as soon as the doctor had left.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“About three days ago, I was at the house, packing a few last things before coming up here when a car pulled up. A strange man said he had you in the back and that you needed a doctor as quickly as possible. We drove you to town, where you spent a night in the hospital. The doctor operated there. We brought you here yesterday.”

I was trying to process the fact that I had spent three days unconscious.

“Who brought me?”

My mother whispered, “Someone from King Lucca’s guard. He said they had rescued you from some vampire’s nest.”

“Costello?”

She shook her head, sadly. “He didn’t make it.”

I felt my chest constrict.

“He came to help me, he saved me,” I said, choking up. I fought back the tears. I wasn’t going to cry like a little baby.

“I can’t believe he died there.”

“He loved you, he was looking out for you. It was the best way to go,” she said. “You almost died too,” my mother reminded me. “If Lucca hadn’t brought you here, you would have died for sure.”

I didn't say anything straight away. I had no memory of Lucca being there or helping me.

"He could've taken you to his place, but he brought you here. That was ...considerate. To bring you home. He knew you would be taken care of properly here. Among your own people."

I swallowed hard.

"What is this place?"

My mother closed her eyes. "A kind of bomb shelter. This place has been up here for years, in case we need it. The people from town have spent the past few days rigging it up with generators and bringing water. Everyone in town has been evacuated.

I couldn't believe it. I tried to sit upright, but intense stomach pain wouldn't allow it. I could barely breath as the spasms twisted through my chest.

"What about your orchids?" I asked.

My mother looked away. "I rigged a water supply," she said, her voice small. "But they don't need that much water. They are hardier than we think." But her voice sounded soft, the words melting away.

She lay down next to me on a thin mattress. I saw that we had a little corner of what appeared to be a cave. there was a crude ledge carved into rock, onto which beds were made. There were crates and boxes filled with food.

I wanted to ask her more questions but I could see she was asleep and didn't want to bother her. I lay back and watched people walking past, carrying bottles of water and supplies, making their own little camping areas. I could not believe it had come to

this, the world was changing in front of my eyes.

I thought of Lucca and our last meeting, the fight we'd had.

In spite of that, he had come to save me. The bond between us was stronger than I'd realized.

"Hey," someone said. I looked up and recognized Joe, the man we met in the Citadel.

"Glad to see you survived."

He sat down next to me, kept his head down. "Word is, you took out Chakrat."

I nodded. "That is a victory for us." He nodded and made a fist of victory, shaking it.

"Where is Dominic?" I asked.

Joe shook his head. "He's safe, for now. But nobody must know where he is."

"Is he okay?"

Joe looked at me strangely. I told him what I knew and he nodded slowly.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“We need to be ready. Shelters like these will protect us.”

“From what?” I wanted to know but he wouldn’t tell me.

I got a bad feeling.

He must have seen the look on my face because he smiled at me, and like that, he was back, the friendly guy from the house.

“It’s going to be okay, don’t you worry.”

“But Tempesto, he seems...”

Joe winked at me. “The bloodsuckers are not going to be an issue pretty soon, trust me.”

“What do you...” but he interrupted me, “I can’t say anymore, I should get going.”

He gave my arm an awkward squeeze and got up and left.

A few hours later, I tried to get up, shuffle around a bit. I couldn’t believe how weak I was.

I had some broth, which helped to make me feel stronger. My mother was still asleep and I walked through the underground shelter, finding the way out. Nobody paid me any attention as I slowly felt my way out of there.

Outside, the air felt different.

Hot and dry, but there was something abrasive. A sand storm. I turned and looked and saw it happening far away. I had always liked being able to see across the desert plains, the open and clean landscape. I wanted to know what was going on and I wanted to know if Lucca was okay.

I couldn't help it, I had a feeling Joe was talking about fighting vampires. That worried me. I knew there was a bad faction but they were not all bad. Lucca wasn't like Chakrat and Tempesto, the vampires who hated humans and saw us as inferior. Lucca had told me that many vampires had little memory of their own life as mortal beings. To them, it faded away as a dream. He told me how he held on to his memories mostly to remind himself of his former humanity. I knew Lucca would do anything to avoid conflict and a return to war.

But what about his sons?

I wasn't so sure about them. The little I had seen of them had convinced me that they were ambitious and eager for more power. Layrr seemed especially keen to take over the business while Ragnar cared about nobody but himself. I wasn't sure about Sunil. Luca loved all of them, though. I feared it would be his undoing.

Their avarice was bigger than their love for him.

"Izzy?"

A strange woman stood next to me.

"Yes?"

"I have someone on the line for you," she held out a mobile phone.

I took the phone.

“Izzy?” It was Lucca. “Are you all right? I’ve been worried.”

“I am. Thank you for coming to get me,” the words didn’t come easily, speaking them felt like having stones in my mouth.

“I wanted to stay but I had things to do and I thought you would be safest with your people.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Battle lines had been drawn between us. He belonged to one world and I belonged in another. I didn’t know what to say to him.

“Are you safe, where you are now?” he asked me.

“I am,” I said. “Where are you?”

“I am with some Elders.” He paused. “I have been thinking about what you said, I wanted to thank you,”

“I know it’s hard,” I said.

“Maybe... it won’t matter,” he said.

“No,” I said. “The truth will always matter.”

I wanted to be with him but I couldn’t see it happening.

I had to pick a side. It was obvious to me that I belonged with my people, my family. I thought of my mother and slowly made my way back inside, where I found her sitting on the bed with another little potion bottle in her hands.

“Here,” she said, holding it out to me. “This will help more than any medicine.”

I told her how the last one had burnt and she nodded. “It was killing the infection, all the evil on that blade.” She paused. “Perhaps, it had been the same knife that killed your father.”

We were both silent after that.

“You cut out the rot,” she said, smiling at me. “Now you can go on with your life.”

“What do you mean?” I asked confused.

“This is not your life,” she said, pointing at the people huddled in small groups.

“Your life is bigger than this, your purpose lies elsewhere.”

“Where?”

She shook her head and wouldn't say anymore.

“I'm not going to be here much longer, Iz. Don't spend your days mourning the dead. Live your life. I have seen your future. It doesn't end here for you.”

Her words affected me deeply.

I didn't know what to say.

## Chapter 20

### Lucca

The military strikes are swift and precise. One hour before dawn, several drones fly over Tempesto's compound outside the capital. They are destroyed by his security, but not before submitting vital images that tell the military authorities in buildings far away exactly what they want to hear; that he is there with his top aides.

They send more drones carrying bombs and these are strategically dropped on the 190-acre area, obliterating the entire area in a matter of seconds. At the same time, a missile is fired into MoZa's house, killing him and his daughter, the few servants he still had tending to him.

I hear about all of this at Fort Ferney, where Jock and I are in the middle of dealing with an influx of refugees and hordes of hungry vampires. We managed to keep them at bay with flame throwers, but after a while, I inform Jock that we have to take them down. I can see he is uncomfortable with this but we have no choice. If word gets out that we let refugees die in their thousands, abandoning them to vampires, our days will be numbered too. Feeding off live humans is strictly prohibited and these

vampires will do anything for a feed. I secured extra blood product for them and have had it trucked in overnight, offering it to vampires arriving at Fort Ferney, but they have repeatedly tried to attack the bailey where the thousands of humans are being kept for now.

We have guards on the walls of the fortress but as the vampires spot the people cowering and whimpering, it only increases their bloodlust and we are minutes away from them overpowering the guards to get to the humans.

I give the order for the flamethrowers to be directed at anything or anyone entering the space over the courtyard and within the hour we have fifty dead vampires. It brings me no pleasure to see their remains carted off, and I stand on the battlement looking out over the valley when I get a call from an unknown number.

“Get out of Ginnerlong. Take cover.”

The line goes dead.

I look for Jock and find him on the other side, organizing the defenses.

I tell him of the call I received.

Jock points at a new group of refugees that arrived earlier. “These people say Ginnerlong is deserted. Only vampires remaining,” he looks at me, his face grave. “And demons.”

“Demons?”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“They talk of creatures breaking into houses, killing indiscriminately, feeding on whatever they can find.

There is a small group of men standing behind me. They look terrified, like they were walking for days.

I pull Jock aside, ask him if we can somehow get the refugees under cover.

“We can try to get them underground. There will be room for a few hundred in the walls and there is the passage to the mountains, the old mine.”

I tell Jock to start moving people as soon as possible while I instruct the guards to keep repelling vampires until the people have left, then to take cover themselves. I make my way over to Castle Grey, closing the gates, locking the windows and calling my sons and the castle staff to the library at the back of the castle.

Sunil arrived at the castle two days earlier, and Ragnar came the day before. Both said their sources warned that it wasn't safe for vampires anymore in the Capital. I have managed to set up satellite phones as the mobile phones are still down and have been calling everyone I still know and trust for information, but on all accounts, reports are bleak.

My last call is to Ash in the Citadel and he is the one who tells me about the strikes.

“Tempesto is dead, all the main vampires in the city have been destroyed. The mortals moved fast, apparently they have had this technology for years, saving it up, in case something like this happened.” Ash's voice is muted. “I have been waiting for

them but so far, no one has come here.”

“You are not in hiding?” I ask.

He laughs with little humor. “No, dear boy, I have been here for too long already. I don’t want to fight anymore. If my time has come, then so be it.”

I understand what he means. After years of violence and death, my appetite for combat is low too.

“Who is in charge?”

I think of the call I got earlier, warning me to get out of Ginnerlong.

“Dominic has been giving the orders from the capital.”

“I thought he was ill?”

Ash chuckles, “Classic misdirection. Apparently, not ill at all. More like, super organized and making a fool of Tempesto.”

I am relaying this information to the others when we feel a shake in the ground.

“What was that?” Sunil jumps up from the chair where he was sitting. “Did you feel that?”

“We all felt that,” I tell him to calm down while I’m thinking.

“They are hunting down vampires,” Ragnar says darkly. “We need to arm ourselves, stand together.” Layrr agrees and I hear them counting numbers, trying to find allies for their own army.

“No,” I say to them. “We will not be forming an army.”

“But, Father! They are coming for us!”

“Not yet.”

“We know Lord Elgin has been killed, many vampires in the Citadel have been wiped out. Ginny’s club was destroyed!” Sunil starts naming everyone he knows who has died recently. His hair, usually so neatly combed back, is wild and unkempt. He is scared, I can tell.

“Those were all allies of Tempesto,” I point out. “It is widely known that he was acting against us, that we were not in league with him.”

“Don’t be a fool!” Layrr says, losing his temper “This will bring up the old fear of vampires! They won’t distinguish between good and bad vampires! We must act now!”

“You will not talk to me like that!” I say, my voice booming. “I will not tolerate this disrespect!”

They all fall silent.

“We will be fine, as long as we stay put and lie low for a while.”

“No,” Layrr mutters.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

Everyone looks at him. He pulls back his shoulders, looks me straight in the eye and repeats the word, “No.”

I look at him. “What did you say?”

But he does not back down. “I will not stand around and wait to be attacked. I have been in contact with our kind out east and south. There are many of us who want to fight back.”

“Who do you want to fight?” I say, my voice even. “Where is the enemy?”

“The... people, humans, of course!” Layrr says, his temper rising. “They took out Tempesto, didn’t you hear? Flattened his entire home, wiping out not only family but his advisers and councilors.”

“They were corrupt. It was necessary,” my eyes narrow. “Why are you so concerned with his fate? You were not perhaps scheming with him?”

The atmosphere in the room changes and I realize that I inadvertently spoke the truth. Izzy was right. Layrr had been helping Tempesto, undermining me. I didn’t want to see it, but he was working against me, weakening my position.”

I sit down heavily in an armchair, suddenly exhausted. My son’s betrayal is too much to bear.

“What did he promise you?” I ask, staring at Layrr.

“No, Father! I didn’t... I mean... I haven’t!” Layrr protests his innocence.

“Ah, give it up,” Ragnar interjects, coming closer. “You were in on it from the beginning.”

“You too?” I stare at my oldest son, but he shakes his head. “Nah... they wanted to pull me in, but I said no.... They said it was time we made our kind strong again, let everyone see we were superior, enough with vilifying us!”

“But it’s the law,” I said.

“Their law, not ours,” Layrr says now, his eyes wild. “You are so eager to accept their ways, their rules. You’ve gone soft, become old!”

“And Tanata?” I ask. “Why did she have to die?”

Sunil gets up and runs out but Layrr stays, faces me.

“She was going to warn you,” he admits, unable to look me in the eye. “She found out about what was going on. I had to stop her.”

I can’t believe it. My two sons, scheming together with my arch enemy for power and money. I hear the door open and the two of them leaving. Only Ragnar remains.

“Father,” he says, his voice subdued. “Remember after Mother was killed in the club? Sunil wanted revenge but you told him to let the Council handle it?”

“Yes?” I recalled the investigation, which resulted in a hunt for the demon, who was eventually captured and destroyed. But it had been brought into the Citadel somehow, someone had opened the door for them from the spirit world. It was thought to be a wizard from the old world, instructed by someone at the Council. There was talk that

MoZa was possibly involved.

“Sunil asked me to find the wizard who orchestrated the attack. He never forgave you for not allowing him to have justice on the killers of Queen Simonis. He believed it was a strategic hit on some senior vampire figures, to keep them from returning to power.”

I thought about that. Simonis had always been a respected figure, her father’s name carried a lot of power. She’d spent years in the Citadel, building her influence and I had let her be. Perhaps, I should have taken a bigger interest.

“Sunil was working with Layrr?” I asked.

Ragnar nodded. “Sunil managed the relationship with Tempesto in the capital. They were convinced that your time was up, that you would be replaced and they wanted to be on the winning side.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!” I demanded to know.

Ragnar shrugged, “You wouldn’t have believed me.

I was stunned. “What do you mean?”

“Sunil was always your favorite and Layrr was the one managing the business, the son you relied on. I was what, the black sheep? The unreliable one? You would have said I was jealous, making up stories.”

Perhaps he was right.

“Let them leave,” Ragnar said. “They won’t succeed. They need to see for themselves that they are wrong, that the world is not what they imagine.”

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“You don’t agree with them? That we have to fight back?”

Ragnar laughed and shook his head. “If the mortals have nukes, they will put up a good fight, that may not go in our favor.”

I called the young Seer.

“Tell me what you see,” I said, leaning back and closing my eyes.

He was quiet for a while. Then he said, “There is a horse in a clearing. It is big and black and very strong. Clouds fill the sky and there is lightning which comes and strikes a tree nearby, there is a fire and the whole tree is in flames. The fire spreads to other trees and the grass, it becomes a bush fire and it is coming towards the horse. But it just stands there,” he says.

“The horse does not run away?” I ask him.

The boy shakes his head. “I don’t know what it means,” he says.

“I do,” I say, quietly.

## Chapter 21

Izzy

We stay in the shelter for a few days.

One morning, the news of the military strikes reach us and there is victorious cheering and clapping throughout the caves. We have been asked to remain here for a while longer, to ensure that it is entirely safe for us to go back out. Apparently, some rogue forces need to be subdued and this is taking time.

I focus on my own recovery and try not to think of anything else.

On the fourth morning, my mother does not wake up. She had been quiet, not getting out of bed the day before. When I asked her if she was not feeling well, she'd said she wanted to sleep, closing her eyes and not opening them the rest of the day. At night, I had tried to feed her some broth and she had looked at me with tired eyes, saying,

"It's time, Iz."

I hugged her and told her I loved her and she said she loved me too. I lay with her a while, checking her pulse and it was there, though faint.

But in the morning, I could see she had gone.

Her loss affected me profoundly. Everyone was gone now. My entire family, even Costello. I had not realized how much my mother had rooted me to the world and without her, I felt completely lost.

I asked some men to carry my mother's body down to our house, I wanted to bury her there. She was so light, one man was able to do it on his own. A few of our friends came to help dig the grave. I chose a spot in the greenhouse, thinking that she could rest among the orchids. I was pleased to see that they had managed to survive without my mother's care and thought of what she always liked to say, that we are hardier than we know.

After the burial, some of her friends stayed around, but I kept to myself. I couldn't

interact with anyone. I stayed in the greenhouse and didn't go back to the shelter, even though a few people tried to convince me to go back.

The next morning, I went back to the house, swept out the dust and made a fire for coffee. There was a knock on the door and when I opened it, it was Joe.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

I offered to make him some coffee too and we went outside, to sit on the bench. It was still early and not that hot. He filled me in on news from the capital and the Citadel.

"What do you hear from the West?" I asked.

He smiled. "You mean the Fallon D'Valleira family?"

I nodded.

"They are safe. For now."

"What does that mean?"

Joe looked at me. "I don't know how much you know..." he seemed to consider what to tell me and then with a sigh, decided it didn't matter.

"There has been a vampire uprising in the east. Some families upset by the action taken against Tempesto. They refuse to accept that he had become corrupt and had become a threat to peace. The capital is deploying force to bring it under control."

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“They aren’t trying to eradicate all vampires?” I asked, because this had been a topic I had heard discussed frequently and with much eagerness by people in the shelter. Humans were tired of living in fear, they felt we would always be in danger of falling prey to vampires. If all of them were gone, the world would undoubtedly be a better place for us.”

“We couldn’t even if we tried,” Joe smiled. “There are too many of them. And besides, they are powerful, they have wealth. We need to work with them, bring them under our control.”

I nodded.

He said, “Lucca is part of the new order, but there are some in his family who are fighting back.”

“His sons,” I said. “I’m guessing, Layrr?”

“And Sunil,” said Joe. “They have joined a faction of vampires called the Ancient Ones. They have retreated to an icy plateau that is inaccessible by our forces.” He paused, “We could nuke ‘em but there is some hesitancy around causing that much damage to the environment. Not to mention, the civilians that are injured and killed as a result.”

“What is the alternative?”

“We wait them out. They will come out sooner or later.”

Joe paused. “Someone should talk to Lucca. Tell him there is a spot for him on the Council. Tempesto’s position. Helping to restore order, build bridges between their kind and ours. Restore the peace.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Someone? You mean me?”

Joe laughed. “Of course? Who better? He will listen to you.”

I wasn’t so sure.

“But he will have to agree to Layrr’s execution. That will be the stipulation.”

“Where is he now?” I asked.

“As far as I know, he is at the castle. While we were launching the attack on the compound, he was at Fort Ferney, fighting off vampires trying to attack the refugees. It was a sensitive situation but he acted with honor. Protecting the defenseless. This is what we are looking for in a councilor.”

I nodded.

“I’ll go see him.”

I didn’t have anywhere else to go anyway.

“Mobile networks will soon be restored,” Joe said, asking me to call him after I’d met with Lucca. “Do you need a ride?” I shook my head and waited for him to go.

Then I packed my things and walked down to Costello’s workshop. It didn’t look like much, an old building with a greasy floor and broken cars. In the back, his rooms were bare and contained little of interest. It didn’t look like much of a life, but I had

loved him, and I was sad for him. I called one of his workers, told him to keep coming in and taking care of business until we had the time to decide about the future.

He had left everything to me in his will, including his motorbike collection. I picked one of the biggest metal beasts, snapped a helmet on and drove out of town.

But first, I stopped at the graveyard.

I slowly made my way to my father's headstone.

Then I took off the helmet, placing it carefully on the ground.

I closed my eyes and cleared my head, waiting for the image of my father to appear. It took longer than it usually did, as if he was further away and harder to reach.

But finally, he did appear and he was smiling.

"Your mother is here," he said.

"I know," I said, feeling tears pricking my eyelids. "Listen, Father, I want you to know that I'm going."

"To see him?" I couldn't place his tone.

"Yes."

“Why?”

“Just to have a conversation.”

“Vampires are the enemy,” he said.

“Not all of them,” I amended. He didn’t say anything to that and I realized that it was probably as close as he would come to accepting my decision to see Lucca.

“I need to move on,” I said and I could see he was nodding. But his face was fading away.

When I walked out of the graveyard, my face was wet with tears.

The trip west was a bit of a blur. The roads were dangerous, filled with car wrecks and even bodies. As I entered the western territories, there was more signs of carnage, houses burnt down and entire villages, deserted. I saw mangled bodies of people everywhere. Many of them had slashed necks or bloody wounds and bore the tell-tale signs of vampire attacks.

When I reached the castle gates, nobody would open for me. No guards seemed to be at the gates. The property was large and walled all round. I tried to find a way of getting in. Finally, I hid the bike in the bushes and simply scaled the wall. My stomach wound was still sensitive so I had to be careful. I didn’t want to go busting my stitches, but I had to get into the castle. Once I reached the top of the wall, getting down was easier. I had barely started walking up the road, when the gates opened behind me and a sexy sports car stopped next to me.

“Give you a ride?” Ragnar called to me through the open window.

“Sure,” I got in, furious that I had climbed a wall in vain. If I had waited five minutes, he could have opened the gate for me.

“Coming to see Father?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I’m glad,” he said.

I looked at him, surprised.

“He’s been very down lately,” Ragnar admitted. “He hasn’t taken Layrr and Sunil’s betrayal well. I tried to warn him, but, he can’t accept it.”

“I always had you down as the worst son,” I said with a smile, still unwilling to let go of how he stole my bounty before.

“That is what I want people to think,” he said with a laugh.

“On a serious note, though, what do you think their plan is?”

We had stopped outside the castle. Ragnar turned the ignition off and sat back in the driver’s seat.

“They won’t give up without a fight,” he said. “Sunil will, he has no stomach for violence. But Layrr has come too far. He can’t back down now.”

“Yeah, I think you are right.”

Ragnar shook his head. “I think they are kidding themselves. The military will blow them up too. But Layrr says death is better than living like this,” he pointed at the castle.

“You don’t agree?”

“Are you kidding?! We are royalty here, living the life!”

I told him about Joe’s proposition and Ragnar immediately said he thought it was a great idea. “My father should always have been on the Council, he believes in it, totally.”

“But he will have to give up Layrr.”

Ragnar shook his head. “I don’t know if he can.”

“I know.”

“If anyone asked me what my dad cared about, I would say it was family. I mean, this is literally all he is ever talking about. Our family, our name, our legacy. And what is this, except him, and us, his sons? But the fact that Layrr killed Tanata and conspired with Tempesto? He can’t get his head around it.”

We walked into the castle.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

It appeared deserted. I couldn't help noticing that it seemed no one had been tidying inside or cleaning up.

Ragnar said most of the staff was at Fort Ferney, helping the refugees. He was trying to take stock of what was happening at the blood banks, get supply out to those who needed it. There was a big demand and Jock had gotten some refugees to make donations, but a proper station needed to be set up as well as mobile clinics for processing and packaging.

I waited for him to go see his father first, to talk about a few things. After he came down, I slowly made my way up the stairs. Lucca was in his room, in his favorite corner in the Eyrie. He seemed very alone and at the sight of him, I felt my heart constrict. He was deep in thought and didn't notice my arrival.

I walked up to him, put my arms around him and felt him startle.

"Izzy! When did you get here?" His joy at seeing me was real.

I smiled, "Ragnar gave me a ride," I said.

He leaned down to kiss me, a long, tender kiss that I didn't want to end.

"I tried calling you a few times but couldn't get a connection," he said.

"I know," I said, "after the first attack, all mobile networks went down for hours."

"Then, things went to shit around here," he said, his voice low and sad.

“I heard,” I said. His arms pulled me back in for an embrace.

“I’m not sure how to go on,” he finally admitted.

I pulled back a bit, looked up into his handsome face.

“I’ve got some ideas,” I said, and was pleased to see interest pique in his eyes.

The king was not dead, yet.

## Chapter 22

### Lucca

I think back to how I met Layrr, so many years ago. It was right after the end of the Great War, when the world was still trying to rebuild and recover. There was so much destruction and devastation and I had been tasked with helping the Western Territories to get back on their feet.

This also meant dealing with violent groups that occasionally surfaced and who were in breach of the peace agreement. Out west, in the high mountains, there were enclaves where vampires had gone into hiding and sometimes we received word that a group was tormenting a village. I had gone out with a few men to investigate one such complaint and found a small settlement up in the mountains that had been completely vandalized. Women and children had been attacked in their homes, drained of their blood. The men were cut down in battle, most of them were dead.

But I found one young man, Layrr, still breathing. As I walked past, he called out to me, begged me to let him live, to help me. I took whatever pity I had left and gave him some of my blood, turning him into one of us. He was keen to leave the village, to seek revenge for those that had murdered his kind. He became a strong fighter and

in time, I adopted him as my son.

Layrr was quiet and tough, unlike Ragnar who liked to fool around. He was not like Sunil, who had early on showed interests in the parties and socializing, like Simonis. Layrr was more like me, perhaps I was flattered by his love for me, his wanting to accompany me everywhere, learning the ropes and what it meant to run a kingdom.

Once we became responsible for the blood banks in the west, he took over command for them and the business grew and expanded. Apart from the Capital, our blood banks were the biggest and the most productive, we paid the best and our product was held to a high standard. We became even wealthier and the family grew in power.

“I don’t know where it started to go wrong,” I admitted to Izzy. “I became aware of his anger at some point, the way he was clashing with Ragnar and others. I thought it was normal sibling rivalry. But he was experimenting with the drug blood on the side. He knew I wouldn’t approve of it.”

Izzy was quiet, letting me work through everything on my own. I appreciated that. I was so happy to have her there, a part of me had thought it was over between us, that she would never accept who I was. I knew we had to address what had happened between us, the fight at her house a few weeks back, but I sensed that it wasn’t the time now.

She seemed a bit subdued, less prickly somehow. It could have been the death of her mother or the stomach wound that had nearly been the death of her. I could see it still bothered her in the way she walked.

“Then Marlon came to talk to me this morning, told me about the women.”

I sighed. “I’d always wondered why Layrr didn’t take a partner, why he didn’t find someone. Ragnar had friends, if you want to call it that, even Sunil was never alone,

but Layrr was always on his own.”

I told her how Marlon had found me in the Eyrie, looking very uncomfortable. I told him to spit it out.

“I should have come to you, Sire,” he had said. “But I had no proof and I knew how much you loved that kid.”

“But?”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“I suspect he started taking some of that drug blood, you know. On some of our trips to our own banks, there would be vans from the Capital and Prince Layrr would tell me that he’d take care of it. Sometimes, we’d be there for a few days and he’d go off on his own, barely talking to anyone and getting into fights with anyone who challenged him.”

“Marlon told me that Layrr watched the women coming in to donate blood and sometimes commented on them. This started to worry Marlon, especially when the girls would go missing soon after. Their friends or family would report them missing and state the last place they visited, as being the blood bank.”

“One evening, one of his men opened one of the empty vans and found a girl inside, tied up, but still alive. She was covered in bite marks, not enough to kill her, but he was using her to drink from, keeping her as a slave. The man let the girl go after swearing her to silence and came to Marlon, telling him the whole story.”

“The next morning, that man was dead. Marlon went to Tanata, to tell her about it. We were in the Capital at the time and she told him she would tell me about it. The next thing he heard, she was dead.”

“So, you think Layrr killed Tanata to keep her quiet?” Izzy asked.

“I would like to think that Layrr wouldn’t want to kill me, but now, I can’t even be sure of that. I think Tempesto put pressure on him to kill me and he was trying to find a way to do it. First, he had to get rid of Tanata, she was in the way.”

I stared out at the valley, the mist that clung to the trees and the woods.

“I don’t know if I can do it, Izzy,” I told her. “I know it has to be done, but he’s my son. I’d always thought he would take over all of this one day. I would rather... it was someone else.”

“I understand,” she said.

She came up to me and embraced me. I felt such tenderness for her then, and stroked her face.

“You’ve forgiven me?”

“For what?”

“Yelling at you, that night at your house.”

She smiled. “You did save my life, again.”

“I won’t do it again,” I said. “I promise.”

“Does the promise of a vampire mean anything?” she asked me, lifting an eyebrow teasingly.

“It does, when it comes from me,” I said.

She stroked my cheek. “I know that,” she said.

“Will you stay here, with me?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said and I pulled her close. “For a while.”

I said, “I am going to give you some extra protection.”

From a little wooden box, I took out a silver cross, on a chain.

“Wear this, no vampire will come near you.”

“What is it?”

“I had it made for you,” I said. “A gift.”

The necklace would repel any vampire who came too close to her. It would take a very determined and ferocious vampire to withstand the magic that was contained in the necklace.

“I want you to feel as safe as possible here,” I said.

I put the necklace on her and she tucked it under her clothes. I felt its power straight away. It was nauseating.

“Maybe... don’t wear it around me,” I said and she took it off laughing.

“I thought the vampire king would be strong enough to withstand it!”

“So did I!”

It felt good to laugh, to hold her in my arms and feel her body against mine. I wanted it to stay like this but I knew it couldn't.

Finn was hovering at the door, and we parted, reluctantly.

“Apologies, Sire, but... Lord Ferney is here to see you.”

I said to Izzy, “Why don't you go down to the kitchen and get some food? There will be something there for you.” As she left, I called out to her, “Wear the necklace!”

Jock came in, looking weary.

“They're up at Loughlin's Vale,” he said. “I received a call last night from one of our scouts.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Around thirty of them.”

“Get your best fighters,” I said. “We're leaving right away.”

Jock paused. “I don't think you should go. You're not strong enough yet.”

“What would that look like?” I asked. “If I can't even face my own son? It will be bloody, this battle. I need to show that I am up for it.”

“Are you?” Jock’s voice was low.

“Of course.”

But I wasn’t sure at all.

Ragnar joined us. He watched Jock leave.

“Do you think Sunil is with them?”

Ragnar shook his head. “He’s gone back to the Capital. Sunil isn’t a fighter, he is a schemer, looking out for himself.”

“How involved was he in all of this, do you think?”

Ragnar shrugged. “I don’t think he wanted to betray you, for him it was about rising to power in the Citadel. He liked being the go-between. But he told me Tempesto was becoming unpredictable, I think he saw the writing on the wall.”

“And Layrr and the girls.”

Ragnar looked away. “I knew. I warned him to stop it, that it would get him in trouble. He ignored me.”

“Did you know about the drug blood?”

“Anyone could see it was changing him.”

“I didn’t!”

Ragnar chose his words carefully. “You were hardly home the last few weeks. Even

before, you were busy negotiating that deal, the property development in Ginnerlong?”

I remembered that. Progress was slow, there were issues with the land and building regulations, I kept having to deal with the authorities.

“Then when the queen was killed, it was like you could only deal with one thing, your focus was off. Layrr saw the gap, taking more chances. He took more of the stuff, he was becoming impossible.”

I had missed all of this.

I went down the stairs to prepare for our mission. In the kitchen, I heard laughing and voices chatting. It was Izzy, talking to some of the castle staff. I saw Robbie and his sister were there, sitting at a bench, close together, joking.

“You didn’t,” the girl teased him.

“I did!” They were laughing and the cook put a plate of something on the table and all of them dove into it, breaking off chunks of what looked like a kind of bread.

I remembered this kind of interaction from before, long ago. Even over the last few years, there had been times when I’d been able to sit comfortably with people, share good times and laugh. But this kind of ease, belonged to the world of the mortals.

If you wanted that, you needed a mortal.

I needed Izzy.

I came into the kitchen and all of the people around the table jumped up and fell silent.

Izzy looked at me.

“You ready to go?” she asked me, coming out to say goodbye.

“I am.”

She looked at me. “I’m coming with you.”

“No way!” but she silenced me, shaking the necklace in my face, which made me take a few steps back, it was that disgusting to me.

“I’m a bounty hunter, remember? This is what I do.”

“Just keep that...thing... away from me,” I said, pinching my nose.

She laughed and I smiled to myself.

## Chapter 23

Izzy

Loughlin’s Vale is a ski resort further west of Castle Grey.

I’d heard of it but never been there. It was five-star luxury and to reach it, you had to come by private plane or helicopter, but we couldn’t use these as we needed the element of surprise. We flew to a few miles of the destination and from afar, I could see the lights in the mountains, from the hotel and the chalets. There wouldn’t be much skiing happening now, as it was autumn and the season wasn’t officially open yet.

We landed at a clearing in the woods, two helicopters for our men.

Ragnar and another guy went off to get the lay of the land.

We waited for them to report back and I noticed, somewhat amused, that most of the group kept a very wide distance between me and them. The necklace clearly worked.

Within the hour, Ragnar was back.

“They’re there,” he said, slightly out of breath. “There are only a few people there, no guests as far as I can tell, only hotel employees. They’re drinking up a storm.”

“Did you recognize anyone?” Lucca asked.

He was tense, I could see it in the way he stood upright, his shoulders pulled together.

“Apart from Layrr, I saw Vin and Morris,” he said. “As well as the Poccano Twins, and the Eagen clan.”

“Dawn Eagen too?” I didn’t know who these people were, but Lucca did. Before we left for the resort, there was a quick meeting.

“We want to avoid a bloodbath, if possible, I want to bring Layrr before the Council so he can face justice there. So that is our aim.”

Jock handed out reinforced cables to tie up any vampires and our group took off for the resort. Ragnar took me as Lucca was still too weak and we needed to move fast. It was a bit of a blur for me, the ride through the trees but it was exhilarating.

“Can you take off...whatever it is that stinks like that?” Ragnar begged me.

“No,” I said.

“I can barely see where I’m going!” he complained.

“I don’t trust you,” I said, sourly, even though it wasn’t really true. I had come to like Ragnar and keeping up the pretense of dislike was a bit of a game for me as well as him. I had a feeling we could become friends one day.

We regrouped at the helipad behind the main hotel building and moved down towards the lights. Lucca and Ragnar were in front with Jock and the strongest fighters. I hung back with some of the younger men. As soon as we were inside, we slowly spread through the building. I could hear fighting in the main lobby, but I avoided that area.

I could feel the vampire energy emanate from a lower floor, where I suspected there would be a lounge area and bar. I made my way there, followed by two others. My senses were heightened and I felt the vampires approach before I could see them. There was a flapping sound and I crouched down, rolling away as a body hit the floor. I threw daggers at it, stunning a woman who looked at me in shock. I pulled my knives out, wiped them quickly and snapped the cables around her wrists and ankles and checked that the rest of my group were ready to proceed.

My abdomen was still tender and I didn’t want to risk opening the wound again. We moved down the corridor as we heard running feet coming towards us. We took up position on each side of the corridor and as the men came running past us, we took them down. Other men had reinforced short swords, designed to inflict the maximum damage. We struggled to force the wounded vampires into submission. They were angry, and one of them clawed at a young guy in our group, managing to pull him in.

Before I knew it, he had his fangs in him and it was over.

He grinned at me, blood dripping from his mouth and I plunged a knife into his heart, slipping it up under the sternum, ending that life quickly once and for all.

My surviving team-mate pulled me away, "Come," he said, "There are more coming." He was right, they were flying towards us and I closed my eyes, to better hear them approaching. I was ready with my daggers, but one of them managed to grab hold of me in passing, throwing me across the hotel lobby. I landed with a thud against the wall, feeling the impact reverberate throughout my body. Instinctively, my hand flew to my middle. I turned my head and saw a group of vampires approaching. I had enough time to pull out a few grenades, remove a pin and throw them at the group, causing a huge explosion that was on target.

We made our way back to the hotel lobby, stepping over bodies.

I found Ragnar and Jock, who told me that Layrr was not there, they suspected him of being in one of the hotel rooms.

A woman, tied up and sitting in a chair looked at me and said, "Ah, you must be the infamous Izzy."

Ragnar told me this was Dawn Eagan, one of the leaders of the rebels. "I'm taking her in," he said to me, pointedly. "Is there a bounty on her?" I asked with a smile, competitive to the end, and he grinned, "I'm sure it will be a good one."

"I'm going to look for Lucca," I said.

"Be careful," Ragnar said.

I got a hotel master key to gain access to the bedrooms, which were located upstairs. I

went up the stairs. It was quiet in the empty corridors. I opened the door and listened for sounds of movement, but there were none. I opened the rooms and scanned for movement, but they were empty, ready for guests who might never come. From one of the room balconies, I saw a pool area below, with a patio, where I saw someone who looked like Layrr.

I ran out, down the stairs and to the pool area.

When I opened the door, there was no one there but I sensed I was not alone. Lucca came towards me from the door. He was limping slightly.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He nodded impatiently, “Fine, fine.”

He told me he had followed Layrr here, but he’d escaped.

“He’s very fast, faster than before. I think he’s high.”

Lucca stepped outside to look for Layrr but I stayed in the pool area, walking to the other side. I wanted to look in the cloakrooms and before I knew what was happening, Layrr slammed into me from the bathroom. He attacked me with such force that I flew back, into the pool, which was steaming hot. The impact of the blow hit me full frontal and I went under the water, holding my breath. I was aware of the fact that he’d hit me in the stomach, but the main thrust of his blow had been slightly off target to the left. Still, I was bleeding, and I could see the blood spread through the water.

When I looked up, I could see him standing at the edge of the pool, looking in. I held my breath a little longer, feeling for the spear gun that I had taken from the gym in passing. I had lost my last dagger in the last attack but the spear gun had seemed like

a good idea. It was probably used for ice fishing or some other sport. I was glad I had it now.

I pulled it out, armed it and shot an arrow from under the water and saw Layrr fall back. I surfaced and pulled myself out of the water. Layrr was lying on the ground, stunned, the arrow piercing his shoulder and pinning him to the ground.

“You got him!” Lucca came running towards us as Layrr raised a gun, aimed it at me.

“Stop right there” Layrr commanded him. “Or she gets it.”

Both of us stopped moving, I lifted my hands in the air.

Behind Layrr, Sunil emerged from the bathroom, rushing towards his injured brother.

“Sunil! You’re here too?!” Lucca sounded shocked.

“I’m sorry, Father,” he whimpered.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

He pulled the arrow from Layrr's shoulder and his brother cried out in pain.

"The bitch spear gunned me, can you believe it," Layrr shouted, crazy with pain.

"For that, you've gotta die, bitch!" he fired the gun at me but I saw it coming and moved out the way before his finger pulled the trigger. When I looked up, I saw that Lucca had fired his own weapon at Layrr, who was lying against the wall, stunned.

"No!" Lucca snarled at him, his face contorted with anger.

"It's over, Layrr."

He snapped cables on him and I went after Sunil, finding him cowering in the bathroom.

"I never wanted anything like this to happen!" he cried. "It was all going to be so glorious. An age of vampires, like never before!"

"Music and parties and mortals on platters for your enjoyment?" I asked sarcastically, pulling the cables extra tight.

I stood up and felt dizzy for a moment, when I looked down, I saw my entire stomach was drenched in blood. I stumbled back onto a bench and sat down.

"Vampire blood can heal you, you know," Sunil said, a cunning look on his face.

"But you have to be careful, too much and you become one of us."

I heard the others arriving, ready to take Layrr and the captured vampires out to the helicopters. Lucca came to check on me, “That looks bad.” His face was worried.

I nodded. “I think my wound opened up again,” I said.

He waited until we were alone, then he said in a low voice. “I’m going to give you some of my blood, Izzy.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Just enough to help you heal. Otherwise... you might not make it. There has been a lot of blood loss.”

I smiled sadly at him, “Maybe this is my time.”

“No!” Lucca cried out. “I couldn’t bear it!”

“We couldn’t be together anyway,” I said, sadly.

“Why not?!” Lucca cried out. “Who said that?! Why do you think the witch tried to kill you? She saw you in the castle, taking her place in my life. She couldn’t handle it. But that is what I want, more than anything!”

“Just a bit then,” I gave in, moved by his feelings for me.

I leaned back, feeling him coming closer. He cut himself and held his arm to my mouth. I tasted the warm, strange fluid and felt my lips close around the cut, sucking from its own accord. I wanted this, my body wanted this.

“You should stop,” I heard Lucca’s voice from far away. “That’s enough.”

But to my own surprise, I didn't want to stop.

## Chapter 24

### Lucca

In the days that followed Loughlin Vale, our world changed shape again. I was only aware of this from a distance, taking little interest in it. Sunil and Layrr were taken to the Capital for trial and I was informed that the Council had met for another vote on its new structure. My name was put forward for Tempesto's seat and I was unanimously selected.

Dominic travelled all the way to Castle Grey to inform me that I had been appointed Third Councilor. It was a highly prestigious position, I would be among the foremost leaders, with real power and resources to back up our decisions. Changes I had been dreaming of making for years, would finally not be an issue.

But all of this felt unimportant.

Not while Izzy was on the cusp of death.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

She had returned from the last fight in a feverish daze and this had only worsened in the night that followed. Her temperature was too high, she was delirious and confused and none of the medicines administered seem to work. I flew in doctors from the Capital who did their best but it seemed that there was little they could do. When Layrr had attacked her at the swimming pool, he had stabbed her with his rapier, laced with deadly toxins and she was fighting those toxins. The only thing that could help her now, was more of my blood, or of my kind but it would turn her into one of us.

Apart from me, her most constant companion was Elisha, Robbie's sister. The girl was quaint and a bit odd, with huge eyes and wispy blonde hair, but like her brother, she appeared to have special powers, in her case it was healing. She brought Izzy broth to drink and wet cloths and stayed with her through the night.

One evening, as I came to look in on Izzy, I overheard them talking.

"My brother was here," I heard Izzy say in a shaking voice. "He was angry, he said I'd taken his toy. I said I would never and he accused me of lying. He said I was always lying, breaking promises," her voice broke, I could hear she was close to tears.

"It wasn't really him," said Elisha in a soothing voice. "It was the poison talking. It is taking over your blood, feeding you darkness," she said.

"I feel so weak," Izzy's voice was shaking. "I have never felt like this before."

"You need to fight it," said Elisha. "Or it will defeat you."

“I don’t think I can,” Izzy whispered. “I don’t want to fight anymore.”

There was silence then and when I came in, I saw that Izzy had fallen asleep again.

“I thought she was better this morning,” said Elisha, before going down to fetch more water.

I sat down next to Izzy and took her hand. She felt cold to the touch, like she was dying already. Her eyelids fluttered open.

“You’re here,” she said, a faint smile on her lips.

“I won’t go away until you are healthy again,” I said.

“And if I don’t recover?”

I didn’t want to think about that. “You will, you just need to rest.”

She gripped my hand. “You don’t believe that, not really.”

“I need you, Izzy,” I said. “I don’t know if I can face what is coming without you.”

“You are the king, Lucca, of course you can.”

“No,” I said, and I knew it was true. “I don’t care about all that. All I care about is you getting better, you being here with me. I will hand the business over to Ragnar and we can move to a place outside the Capital, get a little farm, grow orchids whatever.”

“Leave the castle?” she asked. “Grow orchids?!” She laughed and started coughing.

“We can build a new castle,” I said. “One for us. Where you will be happy and safe. I don’t care about anything else, Izzy, just you getting better. I love you.”

She smiled at me, tears in her eyes. “I love you too.”

“I want us to be together, to start this new chapter together.”

“Then give me your blood,” she said.

I was quiet for a moment. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I have so much of it in me already. And it was something my mother always said. About change and being open to change. To be open to death, is to be open to life. Growing is about cutting off what is dead to encourage life. You will be giving me new life.”

She paused. “Without it, I will die. I feel it all around me. When I close my eyes, it comes for me, stealing the sweetness from everything. I am not ready to go, though. I knew something new was waiting for me somewhere, but I didn’t know where. This is it. This is my next chapter. Helping you make the world a safer place.”

“Isn’t that the Guard motto?”

Izzy laughed, “Yes! So maybe I’m not changing that much after all!”

It was so good to hear her laugh again.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Do it,” she said, her voice serious, determined. “Do it now.”

I lay down next to her and took her in my arms. I was shocked to feel her bones and see how much weight she'd lost over the past few days. Her frame was almost skeletal. She did not have much life left in her. The poison was eating away at her. I could feel my anger at Layrr rising again and had to push it away. There was no place for anger now.

This was Izzy's gift to me. Love and forgiveness, a way to move forward and not live in the past anymore.

I had to feed her quite a lot of my blood. Then, we had to wait and see how strong Layrr's poison was and if my blood could fight off the dark magic. Her body would die but her spirit would live. This could bring on more fever and illness. I hoped she was strong enough.

It was a long night.

Elisha sat at Izzy's bedside with me.

She told me how happy she was at the castle, how grateful she was to be given this chance at a new life with Robbie. She had started a school for some of the refugee children. I thought that when we rebuilt Ginnerlong, there would be a place for her there. The city had been flattened by a nuclear strike in an attempt to kill the Servant and his demons. A fair amount of vampires and some mortals were killed as well. There were no guarantees that the Servant had perished though. A part of me feared that he had slipped into the spirit world to survive and would surface again another

day.

In the darkest part of the night, I wondered about Layrr and where I had gone wrong with him, I blamed myself for not seeing his unhappiness. I had been a bad father and I had been a bad husband to Tanata, not being there when she was attacked.

How could I counsel others when I couldn't even look after my own family? All that grandstanding about family and legacy? It had been about show and pride. I got up, needing to get some air. I saw that Elisha had fallen asleep and thought how innocent she looked.

As I was about to leave the room, Izzy opened her eyes. "Lucca?"

I turned and saw her looking at me, her eyes clear, the fever gone.

I went to her, asked anxiously. "How do you feel?"

She smiled. "Wonderful, I feel wonderful."

She looked much better, there was a glow to her that showed she had beaten the poison. She pushed down the bedsheets and we saw that the bleeding had stopped. She lifted the bandages and exclaimed, "Look! The wound is healing!"

I could see that this was indeed the case.

"You have saved me, again!" She threw her arms around me and I marveled at the strength in them.

"No," I said. "It may sound cheesy but it was you who saved me. With you, I see hope for the future."

She smiled tenderly at me, “Then, we have saved each other.”

I kissed her sweet lips and she kissed me back, passionately. Our kiss deepened and I found myself holding her tightly, never wanting to let her go. There was fire in the kiss and it stirred emotions in me that I didn’t realize I had. We made love tenderly, consummating our love. She moaned and I stopped moving.

“You okay?” I asked, worried that I was hurting her.

“Oh, God, don’t stop, please don’t stop,” she said, laughingly pulling me deeper into her and crying out as she climaxed. For us, time would never be an issue again, we would be bound together for all time now. It was time to make an honest queen of her.

I faced her and said, “Izzy Bonnici, bounty hunter and former vampire hater, will you do me the honor of marrying me, becoming my wife?”

She blinked and smiled. “Yes, Lucca Fallon D’Valleira, vampire king and closet romantic, I will. But first, I think, you will have to close that window, it feels like daylight is coming.”

She wasn’t strong enough for daylight yet.

I got up to close the shutters and saw the sun rise in the east, sending bright light into the valley.

A new day was breaking for us and I went towards it, happily.

## Epilogue

I felt different and yet not different at all.

It was hard to explain.

On the day of my wedding and crowning I rose late in the day as the light was fading and Elisha brought me the special gown I would be wearing.

## Page 72

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:06 am*

“I can’t remember the last time I wore a dress,” I said, pained. “It feels...weird,” I admitted.

“Come on!” she laughed. “This dress is SO you!”

I supposed she was right.

This was not the traditional coronation or wedding gown. It was black leather and lace with a corset pulled tight around my chest.

Still, it was a dress.

“My mother wore dresses,” I said. “She always tried to get me into these cute feminine numbers that I could barely walk in.”

Elisha laughed and I laughed with her.

The wedding was taking place at Castle Grey and all the most prominent people had been invited. Security was tight and Lucca had insisted on keeping numbers down to control the situation.

But a councilor getting married was a big deal and required certain ceremony. The castle had been done up with fairy lights and candles and it looked very romantic. My feelings towards it had changed somewhat over recent weeks. I no longer thought of it as cold and impenetrable, to me, it now seemed like a fortress and a stronghold, a place where I would always be safe.

Lucca had insisted on finding us a house near the Capital, a grand old place with rolling lawns and trees but I found myself enjoying the silence at the castle. Like Lucca, I liked being in the highest rooms, and looking out over the valley, over the rolling green hills that would soon be mine too. I had been given my own rooms at the top, and these also had wide views of the mountains.

I was coming to get to know my new life, to feel my new powers. One of the changes I was aware of, was that I wasn't as restless as before. I had found a kind of peace that I had never known possible. Perhaps because I had finally found the home I had been looking for ever since my own was destroyed when Chakrat killed my father. Perhaps I accepted my new life in a way that wasn't even possible with my old one because I had chosen this one.

After I got dressed, Elisha came to do my hair and fix my make-up.

She tried to apply blush and put down her brushes, laughing. "You look beautiful the way you are, I don't think you need any make-up!"

Lucca arrived in the doorway and Elisha slipped out.

"I couldn't agree more," he said, his eyes filled with love. "You look ravishing."

I scolded him gently, "You aren't supposed to see me on our wedding day! It is bad luck!"

Lucca smile at me, looking dashing in a beautiful wedding coat and a silk shirt. He came up to me, kissing my cheek.

"I think our streak of bad luck is over, don't you?"

I clasped his hand tightly and nodded. "Yes, I do."

We looked out over the courtyard, where cars were gathering as guests arrived for the ceremony. There was a festive atmosphere in the air and Lucca took my arm in his as we walked down the stairs to the garden, where a red carpet had been rolled across the courtyard from the castle to the grounds.

Chairs had been placed around and there was a bower of flowers where we said our vows. Afterwards, Finn arrived with Lucca's senior counsel and Ragnar, carrying the crown on a velvet cushion.

"Queen Izzy," he murmured as he reached me. "Doesn't sound quite right, does it?" I nudged him with my elbow, suppressing a smile. Part of me agreed with him. Then the crown was placed on my head and a few murmured words of ritual meant that what had once belonged to Simonis and Tanata, was now mine.

It didn't feel strange at all, the crown nestled comfortably into my hair. I barely noticed it.

At the reception afterwards, I saw Dominic and Joe in the crowd and made my way over to them. They congratulated me and Joe winked mischievously at me.

"Didn't I say I thought there was a new role for you?"

I smiled at him. "Yeah, I recall that you did."

"I think this will do nicely," he said and grinned.

"We need you at the Capital," Dominic started seriously. "There is talk of some of the unhappiness with new regulations and they are strict of course, but necessary..."

Lucca arrived and interrupted, "I hope you are not bothering my new queen with matters of business?"

Dominic laughed and hung his head in mock shame.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:06 am*

“It’s okay,” I said, smiling at Lucca. “There is much to be done. I am happy to help where I can.”

“Yes,” said my new husband and king of my heart. “But first you must help me cut the cake.”

I laughed and felt such happiness when he took my hand and led me to the big wedding cake for the mortals.

Then Lucca raised a glass of champagne and proposed a toast.

“I would like to propose a toast to my new wife and queen, Izzy. Things have changed. Our world has changed, and hopefully for the better. But more importantly, my world has changed. Castle Grey welcomes Queen Izzy and that is definitely for the better!”

There was loud cheering as all of the guests clapped hands and celebrated his words.

My eyes were drawn to the back of the crowd where I made out a group of people. Something about the way they were standing, together and yet apart from the others, drew my attention. The man was tall and broad-shouldered and the woman next to him, her hair reminded me of... Then I realized, it was them, my family. They were here on this happy day. I could feel my eyes fill with tears and blinked them away quickly because their outline was beginning to fade and I wanted to see them for as long as possible. I could feel their goodwill and their good wishes for me, and in a way it was a goodbye too. There could be no going forward without it, that much I knew. I wanted to look ahead and think of the future. The past was over. My younger

brother waved and I could make out his sweet smile as his features slowly dissolved in the candlelight. I could let them go now, and be at peace too.

“Everything okay?” Lucca asked me softly, his voice filled with concern.

“I’ve never been better,” I said and kissed him, with all my heart, body and soul.

\*\*\*\*\*