



# Three Bites

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**Category:** Romance, Crime And Mafia, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Trapped in a deal with a mafia boss, I didn't think it would take three vampires to save me.

Working as a maid in a crime lord's mansion is a thankless and dangerous job but I have to keep going even when the boss' son delights in tormenting me. When one of his evil pranks goes too far, I gain three unexpected protectors.

How much are they willing to pay to keep me? Can I trust in their sudden devotion? And why do they have such a strong reaction to my blood?

I have time to learn all about those three strange men because they are not leaving me alone for even a minute until the deal for me is completed. Sunny Theo, intimidating Matthias, and clever Tristan... with them so close, I can't help but imagine what would happen if I invited them even closer.

A Why Choose Mafia Vampire Romance with spice, part of a series where the heroine doesn't have to choose and gets her Happily Ever After with all three of her admirers. Can be read as a standalone book as each book focused on a different group.

**Total Pages (Source):** 62

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

My life irrevocably changed nearly a year ago, after my father died and my brother inherited his company. The company and massive debt to the mafia, that is. Since then, I Have been made to stay at the Sunset Manor of the Cornello Family as a servant, ostensibly to help with paying off the debt... but I knew my real role was collateral: a hostage to keep my brother and his company under the mafia's thumb.

Remember, if this deal falls apart because of your clumsiness, I will add the contract's worth to your brother's debt, the mocking voice of Young Master Carl echoed in my mind as I took small steps forward to bring a tray laden with tea to the conference room.

The mafia's leader, Jonas Cornello, was meeting with the boss of the illustrious Sanguine group. The whole Mansion was abuzz with gossip about those negotiations. Apparently, the Cornellos have been very interested in getting their hands on a certain nightclub, which would allow them to extend their influence over New York's shady deals.

This was an important meeting that could make or break an alliance.

Too bad it wasn't important enough for Carl to stop playing his games with me.

My hip twinged from the bruise the heir to the Cornello family left the last time I pissed him off but I kept my posture straight. My movements were as fluid as I could make them while I carried the full (too full, that bastard Carl did it on purpose) cups of hot tea to the long table where the mafia boss, his son, and their three equally

dangerous Sanguine guests awaited.

One step after the other. Breathe, Victoria, breathe, I told myself.

I nearly made it to my destination but I was doomed from the start.

Carl's kick targeting my ankle made me wobble and the only thing I could do was change the direction the cups fell, saving the guest from the watery carnage and taking the brunt of the damage on myself, as I fell back.

The delicate ceramic cups shattered around me and I prepared myself for the scalding sensation but, after a second of shock, I realized the tea was only lukewarm and not piping hot as it should be; an unexpected blessing from Carl preparing his trap in advance. But it was a small consolation, seeing as not only was Carl going to add to my never-ending debt, but my 'clumsiness' was bound to garner the fury of the Big Boss as well.

Trembling, I lifted my head but Jonas Cornello wasn't even looking at me. Instead, his curious gaze studied his guests. The older men representing the Sanguine, a group with a lot of money and even more influence in New York, looked regal and powerful. Behind him stood a titan of a man, muscular and intimidating, and a young blond man with a piercing blue gaze.

And all three were staring at me.

There was hunger in their eyes. Red eyes. Ugh, wonderful. I must have hit my head on top of everything. My situation was dire enough without hallucinations.

"Oh, Victoria, what am I to do with you," came the hated, fake-worried voice of Carl. "Please, forgive her, she is always so clumsy."

He reached a hand out for me and I flinched. I was sure he would use the excuse of pulling me to my feet to press more bruises into my arm but his hand never made contact with my trembling form.

“Do not touch her,” came a growly voice of one of the guests, the tall and broad man with short black hair.

My eyes widened as I saw Carl was the one getting bruises now, as the stranger’s hand tightened around his wrist to the point of pain.

“H-hey! What are you doing? Let me go, Matthias!” the spoiled man-child spluttered.

Matthias listened to his request... by shoving him back onto the chair, where the second Sanguine guest, a smiling blond man, pressed him down by his shoulders when Carl tried to get up. That smile had a diamond-sharp edge to it.

“You’re bleeding,” Matthias gritted out but I had a feeling the anger in his voice wasn’t directed at me.

Maybe he had spotted Carl’s underhanded method of getting me in trouble? When Matthias was the one to extend a hand to help me stand up, I took it.

His two companions swarmed around me, making sure I would not step on the broken ceramic pieces. Matthias took out a handkerchief and cleaned the blood welling from my cut finger. I couldn’t help but notice how his breath trembled as he did so. Was he afraid of blood? His eyes were fixated on the red droplets with such an intensity it was a bit unnerving.

“I will call the staff to deal with this mess but I think moving to a different location is wise,” the mafia leader, Jonas, spoke levelly. “Carl, please leave us.”

“What?!” The young man stared at his sire in betrayal. “Aren’t you going to punish her? And that brute dared to lay his hands on me!”

“Are you so fragile you can’t handle a bruise?” Matthias bared his pointy teeth.

“Enough,” Jonas said. “From the both of you. Carl, out.”

The heir to the mafia scowled but rose from his seat. I stepped away from his path but still got a dark stare promising retribution for the humiliation that wasn’t my doing.

The wet, cold clothes clung to me and I shivered.

“Sir, am I dismissed?” I asked quietly.

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Jonas stood up, gearing up to lead the party to another room. He tilted his head at me as if he wasn't sure what to make of me.

"No, you are not. You have just become an important part of this negotiation," he said.

What? What did that mean?! I didn't want to get tangled into even more mafia business! I was sure it wasn't my expertise they wanted at the negotiation table. Without my brother I was a nobody to them, just a woman not worth anything.

For some reason, the three strange men thought otherwise.

The older man, who had to be the leader of the Sanguine, Tristan, if the way the other two stood at his back creating a united front said anything, objected to my treatment.

"Let Miss Victoria change and take care of her wounds and I will consider the matter of letting you take over the Persimmon nightclub," he said coldly.

Jonas stepped closer, grinning.

"I will do you one better: agree to at least shared custody of the club and I will let one of you accompany Victoria while she is in my employment."

That was ridiculous. Nobody would cede the rights to their business for me, least of all a man I met just today.

"Deal."

## Chapter Two

My head whipped to the Sanguine's leader, my eyes wide. The two men shook on it. The deal was really going down. Because of... me?

"I will keep her company," Matthias volunteered, still looking like he wanted to tear someone apart. I didn't want anyone dogging my steps. Would I be safe with a man with such obvious anger issues? If it had to happen I would prefer anyone else than this intimidating behemoth. When Tristan shook his head at Matthias' proposition I let the air I was holding out.

"No. Theo, you will be the one to accompany Miss Victoria," the leader decided, motioning to the slender, affable blond man. When Matthias bristled Tristan placed a warning hand on the back of the man's thick neck.

"Why him and not me?" Matthias still protested but the steam seemed to go out at him at the grounding gesture.

"I suspect we may need someone more level-headed to handle this situation. Besides, I thought you would want to have a say in the negotiations, hmm?" That angle seemed to work as Matthias straightened and looked at Jonas like he was prey he just got permission to hunt.

"I will take good care of her," Theo nodded with determination. "I'm leaving the rest in your hands. Miss Victoria? Would you lead the way?"

I was quick to leave that room.

Only when we were several corridors away did I quickly look around, opened a janitor's closet, and pulled Theo inside. The door closed behind us, leaving us in near-perfect darkness.

“What was that?” I hissed in a whisper. “What’s going on?!”

“Please do not be alarmed, Miss Victoria,” Theo soothed. “We simply saw you were treated unfairly and could not abide by that.”

Ah, so Carl wasn’t as subtle as he thought. But I still called bullshit.

“There’s more to it than that,” I said with confidence I didn’t feel.

Theo was silent for a time, then his quiet voice filled the room.

“You are right. But I can’t tell you anything until I know where we stand with the negotiations.”

“Are you going to use me as a bargaining chip?” I said bitterly. “I am not his to sell. Jonas doesn’t own me.”

I pushed out of the closet before Theo could point out that, with my brother’s debt, it wasn’t exactly true.

Swiftly, I made my way to the servant’s quarters with Theo at my heels. Only the mansion’s workers were permitted here but, in theory, Jonas gave his permission for Theo to ‘accompany me’ so I glared the butler we passed in the corridor into submission and he only huffed, not making a scene. Not wanting to tempt my newfound luck, I got to my room as quickly as possible and allowed myself to breathe only when the door was closed and locked behind me.

Too bad I was locked inside with a stranger.

“I’m going to shower,” I said after I pulled a fresh uniform from my wardrobe. I could tackle this insanity after I wasn’t shivering from the cold.

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“Of course! I will make some tea... ah, or maybe something else,” Theo changed the trajectory after seeing me twitch at the mere mention of tea.

I let the blessedly warm water wash my fears away, if only for a few moments. I emerged from the bathroom freshly dressed and with a firm decision to roll with the punches until I was in a better position to affect my future in any way.

The sad reality was that the only agency I had at the moment lay in telling my brother everything was alright during our weekly calls and not letting him see the bruises. Protesting against this strange arrangement wasn't a question of confronting Theo, or even Tristan, but Jonas. I couldn't afford to go against the mafia boss who held my and my brother's lives in his hands. I was used to lying, to putting a cheerful mask on, so I greeted Theo with a smile and thanked him for the prepared coffee.

“You didn't bandage your finger,” Theo said, not even looking at me.

“It's nothing,” I waved a dismissive hand.

“I would feel better knowing the cut has been taken care of properly. Please, allow me?”

“Fine,” I sighed. “The first aid kit is under the sink.”

Theo cradled my hand with infinite gentleness as he dabbed disinfectant onto the wound. Disturbed again, the cut left a small spattering of blood on the cotton pad. Theo's hand froze for a moment and his lips parted before he shook his head and finished the process, leaving me with a small band-aid around my finger.

When he finished, the blond carried the mess to the trashcan and tried to act inconspicuous but I still noticed that he pocketed the stained cotton pad. It reminded me of the bloody handkerchief Matthias kept. What the fuck? Once was a coincidence but twice was a pattern. What did those men want with my blood?

Maybe... maybe they required it for testing? Was their reaction because they recognized my face and thought I was related to someone they knew? It was the only thing that made sense. And that meant this farce would soon be over; while my bastard of a mafia loan-taking father was likely to cheat on my mother, I was pretty sure she had remained faithful to him. And the family resemblance was too strong for me to be a bastard, even if I wanted no connection to the man who had landed me in this whole indentured servitude mess.

I allowed myself a moment of rest while I sipped my coffee, but after the cup was empty I took a deep breath in and stood up.

“Where are we going?” Theo perked up. It was weird that he wanted to shadow me but what was I going to do? Tell Jonas’ guest to leave me alone and bring the wrath of not one but two mafia bosses upon myself?

“Back to work,” I said simply. “I can’t sit around and do nothing.”

Not if I didn’t want my debt to pile up instead of going down.

I had laundry duty scheduled for after the meeting but I didn’t think that was the best choice when I had a tail. The other servants knew the Young Master’s attitude towards me and often — both of their own incentive and at Carl’s urging — gave me the hardest or most humiliating jobs. It resulted in my share of laundry consisting of the most undesirable elements, like soiled or bloody clothing. Cleaning the still-fresh blood knowing it likely came not from the mafioso but their prey, often innocent people involuntarily mixed in this dark business like me and my brother, made me

nauseous on the best day.

No, the literal and metaphorical dirty laundry would have to keep for now.

“I will do some sweeping,” I decided and marched to the northern wing of the estate.

Theo followed my steps doggedly and stood over me like a bodyguard while I did my work, which garnered me curious and incredulous stares from passersby. Finally, I seized the moment when we were alone and turned to the blond man.

“Can’t you act normal? This isn’t helping!”

“And what would ‘acting normal’ entail?” Theo blinked at me.

“I dunno. If you have to be around act like one of the Young Masters. You know, push into my space, get in the way of my tasks, talk down at me, and throw around thinly veiled innuendo. This way the staff will think I just got another stalker and leave me alone.”

Theo’s eyes darkened until I could swear there was a glimpse of red in them.

“Is that what usually happens? Are the Young Masters of this house bothering you like that?”

“Oh no, that’s usually the visiting ones. The Cornello’s have only one Young Master and he is...”

I shut my mouth before I could say ‘much worse’ but the way the usually innocent-looking blond snarled told me he could read between the lines.

He didn’t take all my suggestions to heart but he did start talking.

About anything and everything.

“...did you know snails can have up to 25 thousand teeth? But sea slugs are even more fascinating! They have such amazing colors that look like... like fireworks! My favorite is the Orange-clubbed sea slug. It's white with orange-tipped stalks...”

The enthusiastic spill of information was so different from the usual self-important drivel I was subjected to when one of the guests decided to hang around me that I couldn't help but smile. I didn't have the heart to tell Theo that this type of being talked at failed to make me less conspicuous — the blond looked more like an eager golden retriever puppy wagging his tail and waiting for pats than a wolf cornering a little sheep like me.

“What's your favorite type of slug?” Theo asked as if he really wanted to know the answer.

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“I don’t know enough about slugs to have a favorite,” I shrugged.

Theo gasped as if it was an offense to humanity itself.

“Then I will have to introduce you to all the wonderful species! Let’s see, there are a few good aquariums with a sea slug exhibit...”

My heart clenched at him making plans for the future with me in the picture. It hurt to know they wouldn’t come to pass. That the fun adventure with this sunny man was out of reach.

I moved from one task to another, waiting for the other shoe to drop. My bad luck, the very personification of it, found me the minute Theo excused himself to the bathroom.

“Look what we have here,” Carl taunted, cornering me against the wall with his arms. “What will you do now, without that dog pissing around you to mark his territory?”

“Are you calling yourself a dog? Because you came sniffing around me as well,” I gritted out.

Carl bared his teeth at me.

“Don’t think that just because those three bastards want to fuck you I will let you talk back, bitch.”

But... he did. I tilted my head, taking in his clenched fists and the lack of violence

that would usually already follow.

“What, is daddy pulling on your leash and not letting you hurt me?” I taunted. Carl slammed his hand against the wall and my eyes widened. “He is!”

“Shut the fuck up! The moment this deal inevitably falls apart I will make your life hell,” his hand lowered to my waist and he ignored my flinch as he let his fingers trail over my body. “You were always beneath me and I didn’t want to catch something from a slut like you, but I will make a sacrifice and fuck you like the bitch you are. Until you are crying, until you know your place.”

The urge to try to break his wrist was becoming hard to resist but I knew he was untouchable.

At least by me.

His wrist didn’t snap but his shoulder popped out of its socket as Theo wrenched the offending hand behind Carl’s back.

“Argh! It hurts! You... you broke my arm!” Carl staggered away from the unassuming blond.

“Only dislocated it,” Theo said pleasantly. “And I will do more if you don’t keep your hands to yourself.”

Carl blanched, his face cycling between the white of fear and the blotchy red of outrage.

“My father...!”

“Will no doubt be keen to hear how you are sabotaging what may very well be the

best deal of his life,” Theo cut in with a smile.

The heir to the mafia fortune spluttered but didn’t have a retort to that. He clutched at his hurting arm and stumbled away with his tail between his legs. It was a glorious sight, even if I knew I was going to pay for seeing him like this later.

“Are you alright?” Theo asked gently.

“Better, now that he is gone,” I gave a half-answer. “My shift is nearly done. Let’s just go. Carl is banned from the servant’s wing by the orders of his father so he shouldn’t bother us there.”

“What did he do to get banned?” Theo asked. His nose scrunched up as if the mere mention of Carl left a bad smell behind.

“Harassed the female staff so much we had such high new hire turnover even the big boss took notice,” I shared. “But when we are outside of the safe zone, working... well, you saw for yourself.”

“Is he still making so much trouble for everyone?”

“Nah, I’m just special,” I smiled grimly. “I talked back when I first arrived here and since then he made me his favorite whipping boy.”

Theo looked like he wanted to say something stupid like ‘I’m sorry’ or even worse ‘I will keep you safe’ so I hurried my steps and stopped only when I reached my door.

“I assume I will see you tomorrow?” I shot over my shoulder as I opened the door. “I’m starting work at 6 am and—”

I stumbled backward when I turned and found Theo a step inside my room instead of

waiting outside. He swiftly caught my elbow and helped me straighten up but he also subtly herded me away from the door, closed it behind himself, and turned the lock.

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I swallowed and took a step back, then another.

Theo stayed in place and laced his hands behind his back. He looked regretful but determined.

“Please, do not be alarmed, Miss Victoria, but I’m not going to leave you alone until the deal is finished.”

“Wasn’t the deal to accompany me during the work hours?” I asked, frustrated at the only place in the Sunset Mansion where I felt safe being invaded like this.

“No, Mister Cornello said ‘while she is in my employment’,” Theo corrected.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than, what, watch me sleep?” My shift started in the afternoon, so by now it was time to go to sleep.

“I’m here to assure your safety and that could never be a waste of my time,” Theo said earnestly.

“And you need to sleep in the same room to protect me?” I looked towards the ceiling, cursing whatever god was responsible for this farce. Is that you, Loki, you old trickster?

“The alternative is me spending the night guarding your door from outside. Say a word and I will do so,” Theo said seriously.

“Very well,” I called his bluff with my chin up high.

To my surprise, he nodded and left my room.

“Goodnight, Miss Victoria. Sweet dreams,” Theo said softly as the door closed behind him.

I went to sleep but a vision of a faithful guard dog protecting my door wouldn’t leave my mind. I tossed and turned until I finally got up with a groan. Cracking the door open revealed Theo was sitting next to the entrance, his eyes alert and wide open. I couldn’t let his cute butt freeze off in this cold and drafty corridor...

When he raised an innocent eyebrow at me Theo looked like one of those golden retrievers waving their tails as they waited to perform a trick for a treat.

“Get in,” I gave a defeated sigh and the blond man sprang to his feet with a grin. Weaponized cuteness truly wasn’t a joke. Those puppy eyes were lethal.

When the door closed with a definite click I stepped up to the bed and threw a pillow at Theo. He caught it from the air, robbing me of the pleasure of seeing the pillow hit him in the face.

“This is all you are getting,” I grunted out. “I don’t have any spare blankets but maybe we can scrounge something up tomorrow. Have fun with the floor.”

“Thank you!” the man called out brightly as I curled up in my bed.

## Chapter Three

Tristan

“You felt it too, didn’t you?!” Matthias gripped my shoulders the moment we were behind the closed doors of my room.

He was on tenterhooks since the moment the run-of-the-mill negotiations took such an unexpected turn. And so was I, but I masked that much better than Matthias as I engaged the head of the Cornello family in verbal sparring. The mafia boss and I circled around each other trying to navigate the suddenly changed circumstances.

I came here for a business deal but I could gain so much more.

“Yes, I felt it too. And so did Theo,” I confirmed, letting emotion swell in my voice. “She... Victoria is perfect. Her blood calls to me. She is made for us.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Tell us, that something like this was in the cards? Was possible for vampires?”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “I have heard stories about blood which smells and tastes like ambrosia and legends about fated matches between vampires and humans... but I thought those stories were fairytales. There are so many myths about vampires and you know from personal experience most of those are absolute hogwash. I have never met a vampire who claimed to experience anything like we did with Victoria.”

“Fated match... I like the sound of it,” Matthias grinned. “But even if it is fate... let’s help it along.”

We looked at each other, completely in agreement. Hell or Heaven, we were going to do everything we could to make Victoria ours.

This felt like the last puzzle that was missing in my life. A reward from the Gods. A blessing.

Maybe someone up there had decided that after the life I had I deserved to finally taste happiness.

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### Chapter Four

Hundreds of years earlier

The lulling hills of Ireland were a comfort once upon a time. Now, whenever I saw them, all I felt was dread. No matter how far I ran I always ended up here, called by a bond I could not break. And oh, how hard I had tried.

When Adalbert turned me after ambushing me in an alley, laughing when he granted me death and then undeath, I refused to follow him. Shaken and bloodied, I went back to my family. A mistake I regret to this day, even if I couldn't have known that as I was a newly turned vampire the urge to feed would take over my mind, my body, my hands. My grip pressed bruises into my daughter's arm as I sank my teeth into her neck. My wife's screams brought me back to myself too late. There was no other choice but to run. The last image of me my wife and children saw was that of a monster.

Adalbert, as I learned my Sire was called, smiled at me benevolently when I found him and begged him on my knees to show me how to die or how to live without hurting others.

"But Tristan, your life belongs to me now," he tutted. "You aren't allowed to die without my say-so. But don't worry, I will give you a new purpose in life. You just have to serve me and everything is going to be all right."

I quickly learned serving him included hurting others. I would love to say I was a brave hero who resisted evil but Adalbert had a weapon worse than the supernatural

bond between us, through which he could bend my mind to his whims.

“You know, I heard your daughter is getting married this year,” Tristan mentioned offhandedly when I refused an order. “Holmstorm village, such a little, quiet place.... Maybe I should visit. Relax a little.”

My blood froze in my veins. I knew what kind of perversions Adalbert considered relaxing. I would do anything to keep him from my family.

And so I did.

The status quo of me being a lackey, then the right hand of Adalbert, continued for nearly thirty years. Then, one fateful day, I got a missive from a traveling merchant who I had paid to keep an eye on my family. A plague visited Holmstorm. Black Death. Hundreds died because of the sickness. Dozens more were dead because people tried to contain the spread by burning houses with whole families inside.

When I saw the burned husk of my family home I couldn't help but laugh at the incredible irony of regular people being crueler than an evil vampire lord. I laughed until I cried, until I was on my knees and shaking with grief and rage. That day I decided to kill Adalbert, the person responsible for me missing thirty years of life with my family. Whatever it took, I was going to end him.

The first time Adalbert plucked the plan out of my mind before I could even implement it.

“What's this? Has my puppy grown enough to bite?” Adalbert asked with glee. He didn't punish me and the paranoia of waiting for a hammer that did not fall was excruciating.

Months later I made another attempt, which failed spectacularly. That time my Sire

brought me to a small village, similar to what Holmstorm was before it was ravaged by the plague.

He slaughtered everyone there and made me watch.

I ran. As far as I could. Countries away, putting seas, hills, and forests between us. If I couldn't kill him I didn't want to stay and be an instrument of his crimes. Life as a lone vampire, without the support of Adalbert's connections and the established web of willing blood donors I had back in Ireland, was tough but, for the first time in years, I started to feel like I could really live again. I traveled, discovering new cultures, learning new languages, working any trade I could. I wasn't happy but I was content.

Until I felt the Call.

Adalbert was pulling at our vampiric bond, calling me back to Ireland, back to his side, back under his boot. No amount of resistance was enough. When I tried to go the other way my mind blanked and I woke up on the deck of a ship carrying me back home.

Thus, our game of cat and mouse began.

It amused Adalbert to see me wriggle on the hook so he left me go when I ran but he reeled me back in every time.

Once, I launched myself at him with a sword. His eyes flared red and he took control of my body through our bond. The sharp blade intended for him pierced my own flesh. Adalbert could have easily killed me but he told me to skewer my leg instead. He wasn't so merciful as to give me the release of death.

That cruelty was his undoing because I discovered immense pain was enough to

disrupt the bond, even if only for a second, when he told me to pull the blade out and stab myself again and he had to repeat himself for the order to take effect. From that overwhelming pain my next plan was born.

I waited until the next big summit; every ten years or so Adalbert Called every poor wretch he made into a vamp to himself. This year there were twenty-one of us. Everyone was different but no matter if it was a scrawny teenage sailor, a noble lady, or a weaponsmith built like a brick house, we had one thing connecting us: shared hatred for our Sire.

Inevitably, one of us sparked Adalbert's ire. The old vampire made me administer the punishment to the cowering merchant, who had been under Adalbert's control for over two centuries.

I had a lethally sharp sword in hand, the blade of which had been enriched with silver carvings. It was Adalbert's favorite little toy because even the smallest cut caused immense pain to a vampire, due to the silver which was one of our weaknesses.

Adalbert stood just behind me, urging me to put the sword into the fire to make the punishment even more painful. I did as I was told and watched the blade turn red hot.

Then I swung to strike.

Adalbert's eyes flared red.

The connection between our souls twanged a discordant note but the order to obey him didn't take hold of my mind. It was lost in the agony of me cutting my own hand off.

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The surprise at my self-mutilation and the vampiric bond failing was enough for my next strike to find Adalbert's heart. Silver and heat spilled into the vampire's body like poison. I forced my Sire to the ground and pinned him there like a butterfly as the stolen blood left his body.

My teeth found his neck and I drank as he trashed. He fought. He fought to his last breath. His wicked claws rendered strips of my flesh from my back but, in the end, I gave him the mercy he had always denied me.

The mercy of death.

Power surged inside of me. My head spun as, at last, I understood what it was to be a True Vampire. Even now my body was starting to heal, the cut off hand expelling the traces of silver first before it started healing in earnest. With my previous body such a wound would take decades to heal. But as a True Vampire I felt I was going to have a new functioning hand in just a couple of weeks if not days.

"Brothers and sisters, you are free," I managed to choke out to the other vampires surrounding us. My supernatural siblings from the same Sire... I wanted the best for them.

I expected a happy ending.

But not everyone was satisfied with just freedom. The first attack nearly took my head off. I was weak, wounded, and I didn't know how to use the full potential of a True Vampire. I was a power upgrade just begging to be taken, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to become the top of the food chain.

“I’m not going to be enslaved again! Not by you, not by anyone!” Lady Amestra growled after her attack. If I was Adalbert’s right hand she was his left. The petite woman was all deadly skill in an aristocratic package and she had immense control over her vampiric powers.

“You don’t deserve to be a True Vampire, you monster,” the merchant I was about to torture said and joined the fray.

The world went hazy as I used speed I never had before to avoid another strike. Nausea rose in my throat. I had multiple bleeding wounds, only one working hand, and two people attacking me. Soon my movements were filled with desperation as I fought for my life.

Avoid, survive, disarm.

It wasn’t enough.

Dodge, survive, attack, kill.

KILL.

The power of the True Vampire rose in me like a fire from within as I understood I had to take the offensive to survive. I attacked. For a second I thought that wouldn’t work when I saw Amestra’s claws nearing my throat... but her strike was stopped by the other vampires. My kin came to save me! As the second most powerful in our group, Amestra wasn’t going to go down easily. Even with the help of the other Lesser Vampires, the victory came at a steep price, as several of my brothers and sisters fell, their heads severed or their hearts pierced. With the last of my strength I delivered the final blow, ending Amestra’s life.

My muddy mind was dimly aware there was something else to pay attention to... a

second attacker? I found the merchant kneeling several feet from me. He was yanking at his hair and his eyes flickered with red. I realized I had seen him in the fight. Attacking Amestra along with the others.

With mounting dread I looked at the vampires surrounding me. Their eyes were red and they stood in place, motionless, their faces blank. I had seen those expressionless masks before. When Adalbert took control over someone.

But there was no Adalbert to control them anymore. Only me.

I made them fight for me and die for me.

They weren't free.

And I was a monster.

## Chapter Five

### Victoria

At first, I tossed and turned, too aware of another presence in the room, but Theo set his sleeping place as far as possible from me. He tried to be silent and unobtrusive from the spot where he was curled up on the floor with only a pillow as company. In the end, I managed to fall asleep.

Theo's presence didn't really register to my instincts as danger and I wondered why that was. Maybe Theo protecting me from Carl put him into the category of an ally in my subconscious brain.

In the morning, I smacked at the blaring alarm and rose up all disgruntled. It was a trial, being a night owl when you got a 6 AM shift. But today a surprise was waiting

for me.

I blinked my bleary eyes at the sight of a blond angel in my tiny kitchen.

Theo tried to stay as silent as possible while he prepared breakfast but his hips were swaying a little and he was bouncing on his feet when he switched tasks, as if he was moving to a music soundtrack in his head. It was adorable.

“You can sing if you want,” I said, still not moving from the bed. I needed at least five minutes of acclimating to the cruel state of awakeness to be even marginally useful.

“You’re awake!” Theo chirped with a smile. “I will make coffee then. You look like you need it.” I only grunted, too sleepy to wonder if he just insulted me. “Are you sure you don’t mind me singing? I have been told my impromptu musical performances can be... a lot.”

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“It’s fine,” I mumbled into the pillow. “Having someone in my space is nice. My brother...” I stopped, wondering if I should share something so private with this stranger, but Theo’s coaxing smile made me melt. “My brother likes singing too. Mostly in the shower. And he is horrible at it, so don’t worry, my ears can take it.”

With my approval in place, Theo returned to preparing breakfast and this time he added his voice to the mix. I closed my eyes, letting the enthusiastic performance echo around me. It was a comfort I had lost access to months ago. It felt like years of being deprived of this. The familiarity made my heart clench but there was one stark difference.

Theo’s singing voice was amazing.

Another point to add to the angel theory, I mused with amusement.

I managed to drag myself out of bed when the smell of fresh coffee reached me and I inhaled the prepared breakfast with gusto. It wasn’t anything fancy, just sandwiches as there was hardly anything in my fridge, but the trouble Theo went through for me still made me warm. It was nice to have a normal conversation with someone, without any knives hiding behind the words.

When I got ready for work a knock on the door surprised me. Usually, everyone left me alone, not wanting to tempt fate and have my bad luck rub onto them, so I wasn’t expecting anyone.

Theo made for the door like an over eager guard dog about to start barking but I crossed his path and silently quelled him with a look until he reluctantly slinked back

to where he wouldn't be visible from the door. If, by some miracle, no one spotted him entering my quarters yesterday or Theo sitting by my door, then I wanted to keep my privacy a bit longer.

When the door opened I saw my plan to be inconspicuous was moot, as the rest of the Sanguine party stood there, looking at me intently.

"Come in," I said with a sigh.

Matthias shouldered his way in while the leader, Tristan, followed him at a more sedate pace.

"Good Morning, Miss—"

"Are you alright? Do I have to break that bastard's hands?" the heavily muscled man cut Tristan off, his harsh tone making me tense up.

"No need. I already did that," Theo said with a smirk. "Well, dislocated his shoulder, but potato, potahto!"

Was the brash Matthias' stare full of... envy? Was he jealous he couldn't exact violence upon Carl? The glaring was unnecessary!

The leader sighed.

"Boys, we are here to reassure Miss Victoria, not make her even more worried. Please forgive me for the late introduction. My name is Tristan Almanstar. You already know Theo, and this is Matthias."

The older man spotted my discomfort at the rising tension and rectified the situation. It seemed this Tristan Almanstar was a true leader and had the respect of his peers as

Matthias huffed, looking away to break the staring contest, while Theo gave an apologetic smile.

“How are the negotiations going?” Theo asked.

Tristan tried to keep his expression impassive but by the tightening around his mouth I could tell he wasn’t pleased.

“It seems the talks are going to take longer than anticipated. It may be a week or more before we will come to an agreement.”

“From what I have heard through the grapevine, you were invited to discuss the fate of the Persimmon club and it was supposed to be a quick matter,” I dared to speak. “Did... did whatever you want with me complicate the talks so much?”

“Yes, you have changed everything.”

The slow unfurling smile on Tristan’s lips held me utterly captivated. He said those words as if I was the best thing to ever happen to him. Which couldn’t be true: I made trouble for them, complicated things, changed the situation. I refused to believe that was a good thing.

“What are you negotiating for? What do you want from me?” I asked helplessly.

“We will take you away from here,” Matthias growled. His form towered over me as he leaned closer.

“We want to keep you safe,” Theo murmured, his hand reaching to brush against mine.

“Will you let us make you ours?” Tristan asked.

I was surrounded by three powerful, rich, and beautiful men who wanted to whisk me away from danger like a princess. There was only one answer I could give.

“No.”

Chapter Six

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The shock in the room was palpable. Had any woman ever dared to oppose those three? Were they the kind of men who were not going to take no for an answer? I needed to know.

“Victoria...” Theo moved even closer, his face full of hurt.

No. Ofpity.

“If I wanted to escape from here don’t you think I would do so by now?” I asked harshly. “I’m not chained up like some princess in a tower. I could have taken the chance to run. But running is not enough because this isn’t only about me.”

Tristan’s eyes sharpened with alertness.

“Explain. Please.”

“I’m just a pawn in a bigger game. A hostage, kept to ensure my brother’s compliance. Until he is free of the debt, of the mafia, of any deals they pushed his company into... I won’t be free even if I change an owner,” I couldn’t help but bare my teeth like a cornered animal.

“I see,” Tristan said, his face blank.

He made a motion towards the door with his head and the two other men followed him outside.

When the door closed shut after them I staggered to a chair and collapsed into it.

Of course, the additional complications weren't worth it. It was one thing to buy a woman from a slaver like she was a piece of meat. It was another to deal with her family, some guy they weren't interested in, as well. They didn't care about my brother and didn't want to be involved in this situation. This was exactly the result I expected.

Why did it hurt then?

Seeing a ray of sunshine and then being cast back into darkness was much crueler than never letting me see the light of hope.

I let the tears stream down my face. In a few minutes I was going to pull myself together, as always, but I gave myself the luxury of vulnerability for just this moment.

I didn't notice the door quietly open.

"You're crying?!" I startled at Matthias's voice. It was full of panic. "Oh gods, we made you cry..." The big, terrifying man folded to his knees in front of me. "Please, don't cry..."

The last tear fell down with my surprised blink. I was completely thrown out of my spiraling dark thoughts by the sight of the brash, dangerous man on his knees, pleading.

"Tell me what I can do to make it better."

Matthias's tone was harsh but his words were... weresweet.

Gingerly, I reached my hand out and put it on the kneeling man's head, letting the always-mussed strands of his hair run through my fingers.

He was here. He didn't leave.

"You already made it better," I shared shyly.

He looked up at me as if I hung the moon and stars in the sky. And he pushed into my hand, encouraging me to pet him.

"You are getting me today cuz Tristan decided we needed a 'subtler approach' in the talks and Theo is better at that," Matthias huffed disapprovingly. "Can you believe they told me not to punch Carl in the face when I see him? Hypocrites. Theo can dislocate his shoulder but I can't punch him even a little bit? Unfair."

"He has such a punchable face, doesn't he?" I laughed. "I would love to sack him one day. But if I can't have that I will settle for not having to see his ugly mug."

As I found out later, Matthias took my words to heart.

While I was in the middle of doing the laundry which I tried to avoid the day before, Matthias' hands covered my eyes.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my whole body tense.

"Don't look. You said you didn't want to see Carl's ugly mug so I'm only helping you," he explained. I could hear the mean grin he had to be sporting.

"Ugly?!" Carl sputtered. "How dare you, you little—"

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“Little? I am much, much bigger than you, Carl. You know, I think you are quite pretty,” Matthias purred. “The things I could do with that girly face—”

My ears painted me a picture even if my eyes were covered. Something crashed to the floor and hurried retreating footsteps told me Carl had run away when confronted with being, for once, on the other end of unwanted flirting.

When Matthias’s hands fell away I turned to him with a beaming smile.

“That was brilliant.”

He preened under the attention.

“Couldn’t punch him with my fists so I punched him with my words,” he said proudly. “It’s like me and Theo changed places: he dealt physical damage and I did mental damage!”

“Oh, are those your game stats?” I teased. “What’s Tristan’s damage then?”

Matthias grew pensive for a moment.

“Elemental damage,” he decided. “Tristan is like a force of nature. He can be a terrifying hurricane, a blazing fire, a raging storm... But he can also be a gentle, refreshing breeze, water in the desert, or a fire you can warm yourself with.”

“He is important to you.”

“Let’s just say you aren’t the first person he tried to save,” he gave me a crooked smile.

“Did he save you with the powers that brought destruction or the ones that brought life?” I asked.

“Both. Sometimes for life to have a chance to flourish the blazing fire has to happen first. He destroyed me. And it was the best thing that had ever happened to me.”

I didn’t know what to do with such raw honesty. Words failed me so I offered comfort through touch. My fingers looked tiny against the back of his big hand. We shared the silence between us and it rang more profound than any words.

## Chapter Seven

### Tristan

By the next meeting with Jonas I was better prepared. Theo had compiled all the available information on Victoria, her brother William Clement, and the company he was the head of. In that time, I had contacted members of the Sanguine to get me information that wasn’t so readily available and assigned a tail to William. I wasn’t taking chances that anything was going to happen to him. He was important to Victoria so he was important to me.

A few calls and I had a better measure of Jonas as well. I had agreed to the initial meeting with him because, frankly, I didn’t care about the fate of the Persimmon Club and Jonas seemed to be the highest bidder. The nightclub, which once upon a time was the apple of my eye, started to be a burden in recent years due to the local police taking too much interest in it, which made me switch the Sanguine’s less legal dealings to a different place. As a completely above-the-board business, the Persimmon Club was just barely making a profit so I decided to at least hear Jonas

out.

With the introduction of Victoria, the negotiations became infinitely more complicated. The meeting on the first day came to a close fairly quickly when it became obvious Jonas wasn't going to accept a low offer for what I wanted. In the face of that, I requested to postpone the negotiations until the next day to give us a chance to prepare a suitable offer. So here I was, with the ever-reliable Theo at my side, discussing not a mere sale of a single club but what amounted to a partnership between our organizations.

Every time the prodigal son of Jonas wasn't in the room with us I worried about Carl getting his hands on Victoria but my worries were soothed by the thought of Matthias keeping watch over her. He had made himself into a protector and he took his role seriously.

Matthias always said I was his savior but sometimes I thought he was the one to save me. Before I met him I was only dispassionately drifting through life, observing the time passing by with the eye of an outsider. Matthias made me want to step into the moment and live.

It was amusing I found the difference between being unalive and merely undead in the middle of the Second World War.

After painstakingly cutting the bond of every vampire bound to me, enduring the backlash that felt like cutting myself open, I had traveled the world for hundreds of years. I never found a home during that time but I found solace in the ever-shifting landscapes and the flow of human life around me. It was in my second year of exploring the astoundingly beautiful fauna and flora of North Africa when the words of a big conflict that was spreading all over the world reached my ears. Second World War. The humans were trying to kill each other en masse. Again. And this time Libya, the country I had planned to stay in for a few more years, had become one of

the important theaters of war.

I could have moved to another country and run away from this conflict, if not for a wrench thrown into my plans: over the past two years I had tried to ingratiate myself with the local supernatural community and my hard work finally paid off. I had gained permission to spend time among the various cat-shifter tribes and I had talks in progress with the fennec foxes. I wasn't going to waste that, war or no war.

That's how two years later I found myself in the middle of an abandoned camp. The fennec foxes worried about the front coming closer to their homes and asked me to scout the situation for them. I frowned at the devastation from the bombing sprawling around what once was an oasis.

From the tents and pieces of abandoned equipment, I could see this place had been an Italian camp. The English army didn't spare anything or anyone with their airstrikes.

My eyes darkened at the destroyed homes the camp had been set around and the now polluted water source, the precious life-giving water, the gold of the desert, now mixed with oil and half-burned debris. No matter who won it was always the local population who lost.

I had thought everyone who had been living here had left because of the polluted water, lack of shelter, and the toxic fumes from the still burning remnants, but my vampiric hearing had picked up a faint heartbeat.

And then the scent of fresh blood.

My nose led me to one of the collapsed homes. The whole construction caved in onto itself, burying the people there. I used my vampiric strength to shift the debris away from the spot where I felt the fragile signs of life.

A pair of brown eyes drowning in pain greeted me.

I froze for a moment, realizing the trapped young man was conscious and that if I wanted to get him out quickly there was no hiding my supernatural strength. Gritting my teeth I got back to work, hoping the poor sod was delirious enough, after spending at least a day under rubble, that he would chalk my prowess up to a hallucination.

Piece by piece, I freed his body. He was lucky the big pieces didn't crush him completely but he was far from being unscathed by the experience. I winced when I noticed his hands were tied together and connected to one of the fallen beams. A prisoner, then. The dusty uniform confirmed the young man belonged to the English army. As I gingerly pulled him out and his pained groans echoed around us I spotted a bloodied hand peeking out of the wreckage but with my enhanced senses I knew there was only one survivor here.

I assessed the wounds. Cleaned and bandaged what I could. It quickly became obvious to me that the young boy didn't have much of a chance without proper medical assistance. I had a feeling a field hospital the English army had somewhere around here wasn't going to be enough.

The young man clutched at my arm as I fed him water.

He needed urgent care. A proper hospital... or healing magic.

"Goddamit," I swore, cursing my heart for thawing at the most inconvenient moment.

Still, I transported the boy, who looked no more than sixteen, to my car and brought him back with me to the fennec fox shifters.

“You have broken our contract,” the matriarch of the shifters looked at me with narrowed eyes as I held the fragile body in my arms in front of the gathering of elders.

“I know,” I said, bowing my head. I did promise not to reveal their location to any humans. “I will pay my due but, please, help him.”

The Elders shared looks; from displeasure, to pity, and even reluctant admiration. I had been a great asset to them during this war time and, while they were known to hold their grudges, they paid equal attention to settling their debts.

“We shall heal the boy,” the Matriarch agreed. “But once he is well enough he will leave and you with him, never to return.”

I felt a brief pang at losing this community, but this wasn't home, never home. I could move on.

I bowed my head again and accepted the judgment.

The boy was put into a healing sleep and woke up three days later.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“You... speak English...” the boy said weakly, visibly relieved he could understand me. I knew the healer who had fetched me when the boy awoke spoke only Afrikaans so this reaction was understandable. “You... saved me.”

“I got you out from under the rubble, yes. Though it's the doctors here who really

saved you. I'm Tristan. What's your name, young man?"

"Matthias, sir," the young soldier said. "I... were there others? Where you found me?"

I nodded, then as hope swelled in those warm brown eyes I shook my head and watched how the light dimmed as Matthias understood there were no other survivors.

"Those bastards!" he spat with venom, his hands curling tight.

"The Italians took a big blow..." I tried to soothe.

Matthias made a sound between a sob and a laugh.

"No, no, that's not it... I know the Italians who captured me got their asses kicked. I could hear them screaming and scrambling around... the bombs falling on our heads..." He swallowed hard. "The bombs... My squad spotted the advance of the Italian forces and reported they were there before we got captured. The army brass knew we were there. At the camp. Whatever Sergeant, or Major, or fucking General gave the order to blitz this place to kingdom come knew we were there, kept prisoner. And they didn't care. They didn't care."

After centuries of keeping myself on the fringe and not letting myself wallow in human emotions, whether happy or sad, I didn't know how to comfort this pitiful creature in front of me. But if not me then who else?

I reached out a hand and laid it on the shaking shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Matthias dried his tears with an angry gesture. "Unlike my countrymen, you didn't fail me. My own country killed my squad mates and nearly killed me," His

expression changed to one of resolution. “No, not nearly. They did kill me. They expected me to die for them? Let’s make their expectations come true. I’m not going back. I’m not going back to this war. Don’t make me.”

He looked at me as if I had any say in this matter. With desperation and hope for guidance. With trust.

I really tried not to care about him. To cut our ties once he was healthy enough and we had to leave the fennecs’ hospitality. But the young man was stubborn like a dog with a bone and he stuck to my side no matter how hard I tried to shake him.

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“You aren’t human, are you?” Matthias asked one day when we were sitting in my cabin. I gave in and paid for his ticket after he had secretly followed me onto the ship, was discovered as a stowaway, and nearly thrown overboard.

“What makes you think that?” I asked wearily. Did I slip up? Getting away to source blood was getting harder with the young man dogging my footsteps but I thought I masked my actions well enough.

“One, I remember bits from how you rescued me.” Matthias counted on his fingers. “I was buried under a whole ass house and you got me out single-handedly, without any tools to help you. Two, you tend to disappear in very shady places and you act suspiciously... And three...” Here he gave me such a dry I felt like I was back in the desert. “...when I was convalescing, a fennec cub got into my room and changed into a human baby.”

I groaned out loud. Of course. As usually no outsiders were allowed at the fennec compound the shifters didn’t have air-tight secrecy procedures like their feline counterparts. I should have expected that during the weeks Matthias spent there he would have learned about their abilities.

“I’m not a fennec fox,” I said.

“Then what are you? Who are you?” Matthias asked, his eyes bright and focused all on me.

I told him.

I told Matthias I was a vampire and he immediately asked to become one.

My refusal to turn him was firm but I already knew then, from the moment I decided to tell him the truth, that we were irrevocably connected.

In the end, we made a deal. I wanted Matthias to experience life, to grow both his body and his mind, to have a chance to be human before he threw that away.

“I want to protect and to be strong,” he told me. “I’m never going to have a silver-quick mind like yours, Tristan, but I can hone my body.”

We traveled and Matthias trained and learned fighting styles from different cultures. He molded his body and mind into exactly what he wanted.

I killed him and brought him back to life when he was twenty-nine.

When the bond between us flared to life I was afraid. Was it going to feel like a noose around Matthias’ neck the way the bond with my Sire felt? Or like the discordant, vile threads that once connected me to Adalbert’s victims, which I inherited when I took my Sire’s power?

When Matthias opened his red eyes the bond between us sang. The joy and exhilaration at the thrum of it between us sent me to my knees. It felt right.

Like finding home after hundreds of years of exile.

## Chapter Eight

Victoria

“Hey, isn’t it time for lunch?” Matthias stretched and I had to look away from the

tantalizing glimpse of his jacked midriff as his shirt rose up.

“I have to finish here. You can go eat something,” I said, focusing on getting a stubborn red stain, which could be ketchup or could be blood, out of a military style jacket.

“Um. No? I can’t? I’m not leaving you even for a moment. Theo left you to go to the bathroom and look what happened. C’mon, let’s get some chow.”

“Look, it’s not so simple. I’m a persona non grata in the staff dining room, so the chance for me to get my hands on the lunches the kitchen prepares is slim. Usually, I can get some leftovers if I go straight to the kitchen about two hours after lunch.”

Matthias looked horrified then thunderously angry.

“Those fuckers are starving you? I will punch their faces in.”

I grabbed his arm to keep him in place.

“Wait! No punching, remember?”

“Tristan only said to not punch Carl, everyone else is fair game!”

“That won’t help with anything. Just... don’t,” I said. My fingers pressed around his arm until I could feel the steely muscles under the skin.

His fists clenched in impotent rage.

“But I don’t know what else to do! It’s not fair!”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:38 am*

“Life is never fair,” I said with a sigh.

“I will make it fair for you,” Matthias promised. “If fists aren’t the answer that only means I can’t solve this. But I’m not alone. And neither are you.”

He pulled out his phone and started furiously typing.

Once I was sure he wasn’t going to storm off I returned to my work but I couldn’t help but throw curious glances at the man who was texting back and forth with someone.

The mystery unraveled when Tristan came knocking on the door to the laundry room.

“Miss Victoria, if you would be so kind as to accompany me to a late lunch?” he asked with a smile.

I looked at Matthias and raised my eyebrows.

“He will take care of you,” the man said as he straightened to his full intimidating height. “Tristan, I will be back in half an hour, an hour tops.”

“Take your time,” Tristan said. “You have a very important mission.”

With a last firm nod, Matthias stalked off and left us alone.

I was pretty sure lunch with the ‘honored guest’ was only going to gain me more scornful looks from the staff but as the offer has already been made I straightened out

my work space then joined Tristan.

He led me to a secluded spot in the garden where a table for two was already waiting. The steaming dishes made my mouthwater. It has been a long time since I had the chance to eat anything smelling so heavenly.

Not going to look a gifted horse in the mouth, I took my place at the beautiful wrought metal garden table and dug in.

“Where did you lose Theo?” I asked, once I satisfied myself with a few bites.

“He was planning to join me for the between-the-talks lunch but now Matthias has co-opted him for his task,” Tristan explained.

My appetite soured. I was the reason the sunshine personified couldn’t eat this delicious meal? Was I stealing it from him? And Matthias had to go hungry to guard me as well...

“We should save some food for them,” I motioned at the side dishes a bit frantically. The main plate with the delicious meat in a creamy sauce and sauteed vegetables was already ruined by my appetite but surely the side dishes could be put aside.

“Don’t worry, Miss Victoria,” Tristan waved his hand. “I’m sure they will get a bite to eat on the way. And if they are still famished they can just order more food to our rooms.”

Oh. Of course, they could do that. My brain just automatically went into survival mode, presenting me with the worst that could happen to someone in my position. But they were Jonas’ personal guests.

I let myself relax and enjoy the meal.

The other positive side of the lunch was the chance to get to know Tristan better. As much as I appreciated Theo's bright youthfulness and Matthias's protectiveness, I always had a bit of an eye for older men. Back in the days when my father was alive, it was a game to shoot looks from under my eyelashes at older gentlemen when I had to attend socialite events. I liked flirting with men who were polite but who had an undercurrent of danger around them. I had a feeling there was enticing darkness, hiding just under the stoic surface, and that Tristan wouldn't hesitate to fulfill some of my more wicked fantasies if I asked him to.

"How do you find the Sunset Mansion?" I asked and made sure to take the next bite off the fork as sexily as I could.

"It's beautiful, of course, but can I tell you a secret?" Tristan leaned towards me conspiratorially. "Mine is better. Here, the architectural artistry of days begone is treated like a museum and not a living space."

"It's all for show," I snorted. "The living quarters of the family are completely modernized. You step from a Victorian-style corridor into a room that could be a penthouse at the top of some New York tower."

"It's possible to mix the old and new but you need to know what you are doing. And the Cornello family, even if they have roots in Europe, is very much new money here. They often fall into the fallacy of 'if it costs more it's better'," Tristan commented. "I, on the other hand, know that sometimes it's the dubiously cheap things that bring you joy."

"Yeah? Like what?" I asked cheekily.

"Let's see... A few years ago, Theo fell in love with a particularly ugly stick-and-peel wallpaper and decided to plaster it all over our state-of-the-art fridge."

I had to cover my mouth to smother my laugh at the vision.

“What kind of design was it?”

“Hexagons. A sci-fi inspired pattern with a silver foil finish,” Tristan looked heavenwards in his exasperation. “And a few days later Matthias decided that since we were modifying the fridge he was going to get some magnets. Now the fridge is infested with dozens of tiny magnetic vegetables and other frequent shopping items. We put the magnets on designated hexagons to indicate if the product is in the fridge or if we have to buy it.”

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“And how about you? Did you add your personal touch to the fridge?” I waved my fork in the air, wanting to know more about the man sitting across from me.

He looked pleased that I asked.

“I did. I bought one of those black chalkboards, cut it into a hexagon shape, and fitted it to the central hexagon on the fridge,” he shared.

“Aw, are you writing little affirmations there? Live, laugh, love, and all that?” I teased. “Or are you using it for something practical, like a to-do list?”

“I may have been the creator of the Black Hexagon but, since its inception, I have lost any power over how it’s used. It was supposed to work as a quick way to share practical information and reminders but right now it’s being used for the 5th iteration of the meme war.”

I nearly spat the drink I just took a sip of. After swallowing with difficulty, I wheezed out: “Meme war? Are you joking?!”

“Of course not. I am very demure, very mindful,” Tristan deadpanned, using a meme I knew to drive the point home. “Unfortunately, I have been the victim of those wars and I learned all those memes through indecent exposure.”

I shook my head with amusement. By learning those little weird details I felt like I gained more knowledge of the three men in a few minutes than I would usually get after hours of polite, boring, normal conversation.

“What will you add to the fridge?”

Tristan’s question, and its implications, stunned me.

He wasn’t asking me what I would do but what I was going to do. As if he was certain I was going to end up in their home, with them, sharing their space. Being allowed to change it. Being acknowledged. Being asked to express myself.

“I think I would like to steal three of the hexagons for myself, put your names on them, and buy some golden stars magnets. And when one of you deserves it, you are going to get a gold star,” I said slowly,

Tristan’s eyes looked hungry at the mention of a physical manifestation of my approval.

“Be careful with that,” his voice rumbled and for the first time I could see how a dangerous elemental power could fit him. I shivered. “We are quite competitive and each one of us would want to get all the stars. Everything you could give.”

“You... you can always work together to get them,” I choked out.

The slow smile bloomed on his face and showed his sharp fangs.

“It will be our pleasure.”

I couldn’t get the image of the three men working hard to please me out of my head for the rest of the meal. I imagined Matthias kneeling at my feet again but this time between my legs, holding them open to eat me out. Theo kissing my lips with sweetness and enthusiasm. Tristan seated in an antique armchair with a glass of wine in his hand, watching, directing the others. Me, climbing into his lap at his order...

The atmosphere between us was charged but Tristan was content to let it simmer, adding fuel to the fire in small doses: a brush of fingers here, a heated look there, until I thought my cheeks were going to be permanently stained with a blush.

The arrival of Theo and Matthias saved me from combustion.

“All taken care of?” Tristan asked.

“Yeah, we left the bags in Miss Victoria’s room,” Theo said happily.

“You didn’t have the key,” I squinted suspiciously at the pair.

“I didn’t need one,” Matthias said smugly.

For a moment I couldn’t breathe at the thought of my last stand, the space I could pretend to be safe in, being invaded whenever he wanted to come into my room. I wouldn’t be able to stop him. He could do whatever he wanted—

I took a deep breath and forced myself to see Matthias as someone who stuck silly vegetable magnets to the fridge and participated in meme wars and not the killer machine he obviously was. It helped a bit, but I couldn’t help but still be wary.

Reluctantly, I eyed the position of the sun in the sky and decided it was time to get back to work and say my goodbyes to Theo and Tristan. The pair had to return to squaring off with Jonas over the negotiations table so I was once again left with Matthias trailing after me.

“Do you want me to help you with that?” Matthias asked, eyeing the remaining stacks of dirty clothes dubiously. A mansion of this size produced a lot of laundry.

“Do you even know how to wash clothes?” I raised a questioning eyebrow. Wasn’t he

a rich boy?

“Hey, I was in the army! I’m not one of those modern kids who wouldn’t know a chore if it bit them in the ass,” Matthias scowled but then added. “...though we mostly used basic cleaning methods and not all this fancy stuff you have here. But I know hot water and soap should be enough for fresh blood.” He nodded towards one of the piles.

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Huh. There should not be any bloodied items there, I had a separate pile for those that needed hand washing... But as I searched among the materials I indeed found a bloodied white shirt. How did I miss it? And more importantly, how did Matthias know it was there when it was under other clothing items? Did he... smell the blood?

“Thanks for the offer but I will do this myself,” I insisted. “I don’t need to give Jonas and Carl more ideas to screw me over. I’m sure they would use it against me, if they saw you taking care of my work.”

“If you’re sure,” Matthias said with obvious reluctance.

He planted himself on a chair near the entrance and at first he kept an alert posture, as if he was at an army observation post with enemies about to attack, but over time he lost his rigidness and his foot started tapping against the floor. A few minutes later he jumped from his seat and landed in a crouch before he started doing squats, then katas from some kind of martial arts.

He had to be bored out of his mind.

“You have your phone on you?” I asked after he sat back in his chair an hour later.

I was angling for some music but I got something even better.

“Yup. Hey, maybe I could read to you!” the brute of a man said, making me feel a bit bad for judging the book by the cover and assuming he wouldn’t be someone filling his free time with reading.

“Alright. That sounds fun,” I agreed eagerly. “What do you have there?”

“I’m in the middle of this long saga but I had been planning to read this one collection of short stories... let me find it... here it is! Hope you like dragons.”

We shared a smile.

“I love dragons. Bring it on!”

## Chapter Nine

After a whole day of hard work, I was usually completely out of energy but the delicious late lunch revitalized me enough for me to not go straight to my bed for a power nap. Hmm, what could I do with that energy? Games or movies weren’t an option because my room was kept utilitarian and I was forbidden access to phones or anything with an internet connection. I was permitted only a supervised call to my brother once a week; a measure for the sake of keeping both of us in line and certainly not for my comfort. I was still musing about what to do with the rest of my day when we reached my room.

My eyes widened after I opened the door.

The counter of my tiny kitchen was full of various products. Stacks of cans and other non-perishable goods lined all the surfaces.

“I would prefer fresh produce but your fridge is too small for that so I had to compromise and get all this stuff,” Matthias waved at the canned beans, tomatoes, pineapples, peaches... you could make a proper dinner plus a fruit salad from what I was seeing.

My steps led me to the fridge and, as I suspected, it was filled to the brim. Meat,

some of the vegetables and fruit you couldn't find in a canned form, eggs, milk, cottage cheese... Somehow, the nail in the coffin for me was when I spotted the mint and parsley plants on the windowsill.

"This, this was your important mission?" I said and my voice cracked. "Getting food for me?"

"Well, getting food for us if it makes it better," Matthias raised a brow. "I'm going to prepare enough to last for the next few days so we won't have the lunch problem again. I will just carry two lunchboxes with us, problem solved."

He pointed at the two brightly colored plastic lunch containers. One sported little frogs while the other one was peppered with glittery stars.

"This one's mine," I tapped the froggy one instead of the girly stars, looking at Matthias challengingly.

"Good!" he replied with unexpected smugness. "I hate frogs."

"Then why did you buy that design?"

"I sent Theo to pick the lunch boxes out while I chose the produce. The little bastard chose the frogs to piss me off. He said it was his payment for making him an errand boy."

"Ah, so he didn't want to help with shopping for me..." I bit my lip.

"No! No. He just likes to take every opportunity he can to annoy me. And, ah, to be honest..." Matthias rubbed the back of his neck. "I think he did it to distract himself. He has certain issues when it comes to... how the learned folks say it... food insecurity, that's the phrase. When he learned how you are treated here..."

I winced internally. The poor state of my fridge could be taken as me being just before my grocery run, so Theo didn't have any reason to suspect anything when he prepared breakfast for us that first day. My food rations consisted of only the cheapest ingredients or things the other servants planned to throw away, and I sometimes had to deal with only one meal to get me through the day. The luxury of coffee cost me working for twelve hours a day for a week. Taking other servants' shifts was one of the only currencies available to me, as my whole salary was being taken to pay my brother's debt.

"Did Theo... have to go hungry?" I asked quietly.

Matthias ran his hand through his hair, turning it into an irredeemable mess.

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“When I found him he was in a pretty bad situation. Even now, when he is as healthy as he can be, he is still slim and small because the years when his father used starvation as a punishment had stunted his growth.”

“I’m sorry that happened to him,” I said as my heart clenched for the blond who seemed to always wear a smile. “But I’m glad Theo had found the two of you.”

“Well, I did what I could but it was Tristan who had saved him...” Matthias blushed.

“But you continue to do what you can, don’t you?”

“I try,” he shrugged but I saw him smile before he crunched down to stuff some of the cans into a cupboard.

It seemed Tristan was quite skilled at this saving business... maybe there was a chance for this to end without tears after all.

“Are we going to cook?” I asked, poking his side.

“Yes? I mean, I can do it. You can just sit pretty and enjoy your well-earned rest!” Matthias backpedaled.

“I think I would rather cook with you. Unless you are one of those people who start hissing at others after they claim the kitchen as their territory?” I asked with amusement.

The big man opened a cutlery drawer and took out a spatula just to point it

threateningly at me.

“Follow my orders and I won’t have to be.”

“Alright, alright!” I laughed. “Tell me what to do, chef.”

Surprisingly, we quickly found the rhythm to working together. When we brushed against each other in the close confines of the kitchen it felt almost like a dance.

And then, it became a literal dance when I felt comfortable enough to ask Matthias to play music on his phone. A playlist full of pop songs was just what I needed.

The kitchen filled with mirth and laughter as we created dishes for the next week. At one point Matthias presented his hand with a grin and when I took it he twirled me around as if I wore a beautiful flowing dress and not sensible jeans and a worn t-shirt I changed into. I could almost taste the feeling of dancing with him like this under the open sky, with the wind in my hair and sunlight on my skin.

When the lunches were done and packed into the fridge we enjoyed a treat of fresh raspberries. I had a feeling Matthias liked how my lips looked when they were reddened with the fruit juices. He certainly had trouble looking away from them.

The rest of the evening was quiet and pleasant. When it was time for bed Matthias took the first turn in the bathroom, changing into a set of fresh night clothes he grabbed from his room while he ran his errand. When it was my turn I finished my evening ablutions quickly only to freeze at the foot of the bed in my pajamas.

“You bought me food but didn’t think about buying yourself an air mattress?! Or a blanket?” I looked at Matthias with disbelief.

“It wasn’t a priority,” Matthias shrugged. “You were.”

I groaned and wordlessly screamed into my hands. This man was infuriating. How dare he put my comfort over his own? It made me feel thankful, warm, and guilty. Maybe I should offer...?

“What... what if I let you sleep in my bed... sleep! Only sleep!”

The burly man tilted his head, his expression serious.

“I would welcome it. If it would make you feel more comfortable I can just curl up at your feet.”

“Like a dog?!” I blurted out.

“That’s what I am for tonight, aren’t I? A guard dog.”

“You are more than that!” I protested. “Besides, Dad always said I shouldn’t allow dogs on the furniture...”

“The guy who got you in this mess with his debts?”

“Right. Yeah. Fuck that guy,” I sighed, making a decision on the fly. “Come on, we can both fit on the bed. And no ‘at your feet’ business! That doesn’t sound like it would be comfortable for either of us. You are massive.”

“Thanks, I have worked hard for this body,” Matthias winked, showing off his ridiculously steely bicep.

To be honest, my bed was too small to completely avoid contact but the big guy gave me as much space as possible and kept his hands to himself. Without my customary cat nap during the day my exhaustion finally caught up to me and I let myself drift into sleep, actively choosing to believe the wall of muscle behind me was there to

protect me and not to hurt me at my most vulnerable.

### Chapter Ten

Tristan

Earlier that day

By the third day of the talks, the Persimmon Club and the business side of the deal weren't enough to satisfy the greedy mafioso. We weren't talking only about money anymore. Jonas wanted power, influence, resources.

Secrets.

"I know what you are," he told me after we were done discussing boring details of a possible joint business venture and he sent his son away.

I stared at him coldly. Of course, I suspected he already knew. Otherwise, he would have assumed our interest in Victoria was just a passing fancy and not anything deeper. But by knowing we were vampires and witnessing our reactions Jonas came to the correct conclusion there was more to our interest. Some kind of supernatural connection between us and Victoria, that he could use to gain the upper hand in the negotiations.

"And while what you are offering is... interesting... it's going to take a while to iron out the terms under which I'm willing to part with the lovely Miss Victoria," Jonas leaned back in his chair, his posture and words signaling he had all the time in the world.

I grit my teeth, trying to keep my composure. I wanted Victoria safe and mine NOW.

“Surely, you would like to be done with this as soon as possible?” Theo said seriously. “After all, time is money and I had heard your last venture in the west of the city could use some... investment.”

Jonas’ brow twitched almost imperceptibly at the mention of his failed power grab from the yakuza. My informants told me the Cornellos were trying to insert themselves into already existing power structures and thus were making quite a lot of enemies.

When I moved to the States in the late 50’s I knew better than to get into the middle of turf wars. Instead, I created legitimate businesses and only years later I ventured into more shady deals when I saw an opportunity that didn’t disturb the existing power structure but added to it. Plainly speaking, no one had a good handle on the supernatural part of the business and that’s where I came in. I made a name for myself as a broker between humans and werewolves, vampires, kitsune, and other creatures, and later expanded my services until I was considered one of the valuable players in the organized crime world.

So far our discussion with Jonas dealt with the human part of my businesses. I had hoped to avoid discussing the supernatural with the man. There were rules to being in the know. If he asked me to be his sponsor into our secret society it would be a much bigger ask than just sharing business.

“Yes, I think I’m going to focus my efforts elsewhere,” Jonas said dryly. “My son didn’t quite handle his mission as well as I hoped... Which only highlighted that my family needs a stronghand to lead it. And who better than me?” He leaned forward and I saw hunger in his eyes as he looked at my gray hair paired with a perfectly healthy, strong, hundreds of years old body. “Here’s the deal: make me a vampire and you can take your precious Victoria home today.”

Theo stiffened at my side. He was aware how much siring a new vampire meant to me. Jonas knew enough about vampires to recognize I was one but he didn't know how exactly the bond between a Lesser Vampire and his Sire worked. How much power I would have over him.

"No," I said harshly, my throat dry. "No. Never. I'm not going to turn you."

Jonas' eyes flashed with anger and displeasure.

"That's your choice. But if you keep what I want from me... I will keep what you want from you. Consider your options carefully."

He stood up and left the room with a sneer.

I couldn't do it. Not even for Victoria.

I promised myself I would never turn anyone if I couldn't keep them safe and happy in their new life. Keep them close. Take responsibility for their actions. With Jonas I knew turning him could end only in one of the two ways: me killing him or him killing me to become a True Vampire.

No, I was going to find another way to convince Jonas to willingly part with Victoria.

And if that didn't work...

My eyes strayed to Theo. He was frowning. I didn't like to see him frown. Taking Victoria by force would be unpleasant not only for Jonas but everyone else involved, including the woman in question and my charges, but I didn't want to be too late like I was with Theo. Not again. I couldn't fail like that.

Never again.

## Chapter Eleven

Matthias

Fifty years ago

I couldn't stand another minute of this party. All that brown-nosing and acting like a herd of peacocks was giving me an ick. It didn't help that I was too large, too strong, too brutish for their dainty sensibilities. All the upper-class socialities were the same no matter which country we were in, though over the last years, I had grown used to the peculiar brand of snobbery the proud-and-loud Americans displayed.

Tristan dragged us here to have a one-on-one conversation with some posh woman on behalf of the kitsune and he didn't need me at his side, just in the general vicinity, in case there was trouble and he needed to call me, so I didn't feel any guilt over secluding myself on the other side of the mansion the party was in. This wing was blessedly empty of high society people and only the working gals and guys sometimes scurried past. They saw my large form and even with the monkey suit draped over my frame they knew I was closer to them than to the aristocrats and oil tycoons so they left me alone.

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It wasn't the first time I found myself on a balcony to escape the sneers and the mind-numbingly boring conversations but it was the first time I saw a balcony so long. It spanned almost the whole side of the building, without being separated into smaller areas. An utterly ridiculous and impractical concept. What, did they try to make a catwalk? Alright, this tomcat could walk and stretch out his legs!

I strode leisurely, peeking into the windows I passed. Most people were sensible enough to draw the curtains, so I only saw shadows dancing on the drapes, but one room with an open window showed me the serving staff bustling around. They were too busy to pay attention to me so I slipped past with no problems. I walked to the end of the balcony but flinched when I looked at the last window.

It was not only open but there was a man sitting right there by the window. And by the look of his perfectly coiffed blond hair and the top-notch suit (I hated that I could tell the difference now) he wasn't a worker but one of the rich folks.

"Sorry man, I won't bother you," I lifted my hands in a no harm gesture and took a hasty step back.

The blond man didn't react. He just sat there, perfectly still, his hands laid demurely on his knees. He didn't even track me with his eyes. Miffed, I studied his profile. Was he even breathing? Upon inspection: yes, he was. I could see the slow rise and fall of his chest.

I should have left him in peace but something bothered me about this scene. His eyes looked so empty.

Tristan once told me that my instincts were sharp and I should follow them. He probably didn't have jumping through a window into a stranger's room in mind, but eh, details.

My hunch that something was deeply fucked up here was confirmed as correct when the young man, who looked no more than twenty-one, didn't look at me even when my boots hit the floor of the room. Even if he was blind he would have felt the disruption...

"Hey, are you alright?" I crouched down in front of him, to be in his line of sight.

No response.

Shit, was he drugged? Or in one of those states of shock I saw during the war?

"Wait... aren't you the one who played the piano for the guests? Mr. Feliciano's son..." I wrecked my brain for the name. "Theodore, right?"

That got me a twitch of an eye and a barely there curling of fingers.

"I'm going to get someone for you, alright?" I said, extremely worried. "Maybe your dad?"

"No!" the shout escaped the young man's lips unbidden, his eyes wide with fear. He moved out of his position for only a second before his hands were placed on his knees again, his gaze aimed straight ahead. "Don't tell him," Theodore whispered. "I'm not supposed to move."

Uh... what? This was some fucked up game? Or a punishment? Over the years I had seen parents beat their kids black and blue but the 'elites' liked to pretend everything was perfect behind closed doors and leaving physical evidence, like bruises, was seen

as unseemly and rarely done. But this was on another level. A creative cruelty that made me sick.

“Hey, no one is here but me,” I said gently. “You can move. I promise I won’t tell.”

But Theodore shook his head then went back to keeping absolutely still as if he was just a thing and not a living man.

I closed the curtains to lower the chance of being caught then took a seat on the floor.

“Then how about I keep you company?”

Theodore was still and silent.

Talking someone’s ear off wasn’t one of my strengths but, for this guy, I tried. I mused about the recent media war on tobacco and how I disliked its taste and smell myself, then told Theodore how I couldn’t go through our neighborhood without petting at least three dogs. I could swear I saw him relax a bit at the mention of animals so I followed up with describing all the animals I met during my travels with Tristan, from wild zebras and lions to domesticated camels and goats, and even a pet chinchilla a very peculiar merchant carried on his shoulder everywhere.

I lost track of how long I spoke but triumph swelled in me as I saw Theodore progressively relax. He let himself slump a little first, then his eyes closed. One of his fingers slid back and forth over his hand. He still wouldn’t speak to me but he lost that terrifying rigidity.

It snapped back in place when we heard steps outside the door.

“Go, you have to go,” Theodore croaked out in a terrified whisper.

I sprang to my feet and a second later I was out through the window. I plastered myself to the wall outside and crouched down.

The door opened and a voice I recognized as Mr. Feliciano, Theodore's father and the host of this party, filled the room.

"Theodore, my boy. Were you good today?" the man asked jovially.

"Yes, father," the young man responded quietly.

"Ah, and here I thought I would give you a chance to come clean. I can see you have moved. The curtains are in a different position," the man's voice turned cold as ice. Fuck, that was my fault. "You will learn, boy."

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I had to listen as Theodore was dragged away, deeper into the house, and I could only imagine what was going to be done to him for his perceived infraction.

Guilt churned in my body but what could I do? It's not like I could storm through a millionaire's house and steal his son.

But the matter wouldn't leave my mind even after we left the mansion behind.

"I think investing in construction materials could be a good opportunity," I said to Tristan a few days later, trying to be casual.

He shot me a surprised look. Usually, I avoided the economic part of the business like fire.

"Sure, we can do that," Tristan nodded.

"Wait, just like that?" I blinked at him. "You would invest in a new venture just because I said so?" I had a whole speech prepared to convince him and it turns out I didn't need it?

"Matthias, it's your money as well," Tristan said with exasperated fondness. "I always welcome your suggestions on what to do with it. But I admit it would help to know why you have this sudden interest in construction materials?"

"Just... I had a conversation with Mr. Feliciano's son about them? I would be interested in learning more. So, I thought you could talk with Mr. Feliciano about investing in his company..."

Tristan's gaze pierced me until I was sweating. I didn't want to tell him about Theodore until I had a better measure of the situation. A grown man wasn't a puppy I could just bring home.

"Very well, I will see what I can do," Tristan agreed and I nearly sagged with relief.

Mr. Feliciano was a busy man, so it took a while for Tristan to insert himself into his schedule, but a month later there was another party we had been invited to.

As before, Theodore gave a beautiful performance, this time on a violin instead of a piano, and Mr. Feliciano boasted eagerly about his son's musical talent. When the man and his son took to the floor to schmooze I observed from afar. Theodore smiled and laughed and praised and listened with wide-eyed interest. He was a picture of a perfect socialite.

I knew it was a mask when I approached him and his smile faltered only for a second before it was back in full, the wide stretch of his lips masking fear as his father patted his back proudly when Tristan mentioned how lovely the violin concerto was.

Using the fact Feliciano was drawn into a business conversation with Tristan, I gave the excuse of being hungry and dragged Theodore to the hors d'oeuvre table with me.

I grabbed the first little morsel I saw and gestured for Theodore to do the same.

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry," the blond man responded with that fake smile. Maybe I would have believed him if his stomach hadn't made a gurgling noise at that moment.

"Here, try this, it looks good," I scooped up a little tartlet and pushed it at him.

His eyes flared with want. It was more than a mere hunger of someone who was

slightly famished. He was starving.

Still, he put his hands together, one over the other, the position mirroring the pose he was bade to hold the last time we met, and shook his head.

Blue eyes flickered to the side for just a moment but it was enough for me to know Theodore was worried about his father's reaction. Something clicked in my mind then.

"You won't eat because you can't," I said. "He forbade you from eating."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Theodore said with that fake smile. His eyes begged for me to drop it.

I laughed as if he told a joke and threw a friendly arm over his shoulder, positioning us with our backs to the crowds so that no one could tell what we were talking about.

"Listen, I can help you," I hissed in a furious whisper. "If you need to run, I know some guys, all right?"

"No, you don't understand," Theodore responded, his voice frantic. "Running only makes things worse. Leave... leave me alone."

He shrugged off my arm and waved to a group of young ladies, power-walking in their direction and calling out greetings. I was pretty sure forcing my presence and causing a scene wasn't going to help the matter so I stayed away and hoped I could catch him alone when he left the party. But, at the end of the evening, he was escorted out by his father and when I tried to follow them I was stopped when I reached the family wing.

Defeated, I skulked back to Tristan.

Tristan

“It’s not really about construction materials,” Matthias blurted out when I was driving us home.

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Ah, so he finally was going to explain his newest fixation.

“Is it maybe about a certain young man?” I asked.

“How did you— Nevermind, I wasn’t subtle, was I?” Matthias slumped in his seat.

“Tristan, something is very, very wrong in that household.”

I listened to Matthias explain what he discovered and, in light of the new information, I had to re-contextualize several comments Mr. Feliciano had made about his son when he was speaking with me.

“Theodore never makes mistakes,” Feliciano said about the flawless violin performance. “I trained it out of him.”

“Oh yes, I picked out my son’s suit. Isn’t it lovely? My dear late wife loved to dress him up so I’m continuing the tradition,” Feliciano laughed.

“College? Theodore doesn’t need it,” Feliciano waved a careless hand. “He will stay here and help me with the company. Right, son?”

Now I was glad I decided to ask those questions about the young man after I saw Matthias pull him to the side.

“Are you sure you want to involve yourself in this?” I asked seriously. At Matthias’ determined nod I shot him a reassuring smile. “Then it’s good I know Feliciano is going abroad for the next month. If he doesn’t take Theodore with him we can try to get in contact. And if he does...”

We discussed plans through the two hours long drive and I only hoped Matthias wasn't going to get too attached. I could spare money and time and use my contacts to get Theodore out of trouble but we could not keep him. Doubly so, because of our vampiric status and the secrecy surrounding it.

Soon, I learned Feliciano did take Theodore with him to Turkey. We decided to focus on gathering information about the millionaire and his son. Feliciano's stays abroad and the rumors of his connections to the party that stood in opposition to Turkey's current ruling power looked like a promising venue for blackmail.

As it turned out, I wasn't the only one thinking so.

"Arrested?" Matthias asked with disbelief. "He was arrested there?"

"Apparently, he was being a pain in the ass of a local politician. I don't know if the charges are real or made up but my contact says they are going to keep him at least for a week or two to teach him a lesson," I explained what I have learned.

"And Theodore? Was he arrested too?"

"No. And Feliciano refuses to say where he is," I put a stack of paper on the table. "My contact faxed me the transcript of the interrogation. I had to pay through the nose for it, so let's hope it will prove helpful and we can use the situation to our advantage."

Matthias grabbed a few pages of the transcript, eager to be able to do something, and I started reading the rest.

My blood froze as I found what I was looking for.

"Matthias," I called and we studied the conversation between two police officers and

Alfredo Feliciano together.

AF: You should let me go. My son won't survive without me.

PO1: Ha! Did you hear that Luis? My son is useless like that too. Kids those days.

PO2: But his kid isn't a kid. He is twenty-one. He can take care of himself. And he can be tried as an adult too, so if you care for him better work with us and tell us...

What followed was more pages of the interrogation going in circles as Feliciano refused to cooperate but I was stuck on that first line.

My son won't survive without me.

"He wasn't joking or using a hyperbole, was he?" Matthias asked with the quietness of a volcano about to explode.

"I fear so as well," I nodded.

We had to find Theodore.

I poured everything I had into the search. Used both human and supernatural contacts to find every last scrap of information. Feliciano owned several buildings in Turkey and was connected to even more. We made our way to Turkey as quickly as possible but getting there took nearly a whole day.

Finally, after three days of searching, we found Theodore.

And we were too late.

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The house was set on a small property in the middle of nowhere. You could have missed that anybody was there if not for the smell.

We followed our noses and the faint, so faint, beat of a heart and it led us to a large wall to ceiling wardrobe. I pushed the sliding door open with trembling fingers.

My son won't survive without me, echoed in my mind as I looked at the doll in front of me.

A sheet of plastic separated me from the man we searched for. A man who was kept in the standard position of a Barbie doll, standing with his arms at his sides, kept still by rings of cuffs bolted to the cheerful yellow wall. Theodore's ankles, wrists, neck... he was pinned. And around him clothes and accessories were presented as if it was the trendiest new set for a doll, all neatly packaged in a box.

Matthias tore the plastic partition down with a furious shout and cupped Theodore's face. I let the frantic babble of assurance fly over me as I assessed the damage.

At some point Theodore realized no one was coming for him and started struggling. The blood around the cuffs and his bruised neck could attest to that. After over three, or maybe four, days without food and water, forced into the same position he looked...

He looked like he was dying.

I found a way to free Theodore. It was as simple as pushing a button on the outside of the wardrobe. The cuffs retreated into the wall and Matthias supported the fragile

body as we took him down and laid him on the bed. Theodore was unconscious. A quick assessment proved my worst fears: organ failure has started. When a seizure wrecked the young body I wasn't even surprised.

"He's not going to survive this," Matthias said through tears. "I have failed him. I have failed. He's going to die."

"Yes," I confirmed softly. We both could hear his heart missing beats, slowing down. "He's going to die. But maybe it doesn't have to be the end."

Hope bloomed on Matthias' tear-streaked face.

"Please, please, Tristan, please," he begged me. Silly man. He didn't have to. No matter how much I protested I had a feeling Theodore was going to join us, one way or the other, from the start.

"I want you to have a future. To have a choice if you want to truly live or die for good," I said to the unresponsive blond man as I took a knife to my own wrist and watched as my blood dripped into Theodore's mouth as his heart stopped. "Please, don't hate me for this," I murmured as red eyes snapped open and a cry of agony ripped from Theodore's throat.

Matthias cradled the emaciated body as it contorted under the change, familiar with the gruesome process from his own willing shift into a vampire. It wasn't pretty or pleasant but after several hours of this torture Theodore went unconscious once more, and this time I knew he was going to survive.

Theo

I liked talking to people.

You would think that would be something I knew before I died but no, I had learned that about myself only after I became a vampire at the age of twenty-one.

Only then could I talk to others because I wanted to and not because it was an elaborate performance that was going to be harshly judged. Only then did I stop being a doll.

It all started with my mother. She adored dressing me up and I loved spending time with her. We had little fashion shows and I left my hair to grow long just so that she could play with my hair. Sitting together and creating increasingly silly stories about wizards, robots, and dragons while she brushed or braided my hair was one of my fondest memories. My father looked at us playing dress-up fondly and even brought miniature traditional costumes for me to wear from every country he visited for business. He loved my mother with all his heart.

My mother died when I was eight and my father's heart broke.

"Take care of our beautiful doll," she said with a trembling smile before she breathed her last.

Those last words broke my father's mind.

After that, he didn't have the heart to care for a son but he could care for a doll.

At first he did what mother did: dressed me up and tried to help me with my hair, even if he didn't know how to style it he was willing to learn. But, one day, I came back from a playdate with local kids, which was overseen by my nanny, with dirty clothes and scraped knees.

Father freaked out.

“You are a doll, Theodore. You have to stay pristine,” he said, patting my hair.

I wasn’t permitted to play with other kids since that day.

When the school year finished I didn’t go back to school. Instead, I got homeschooling and private tutors. Father systematically isolated me from anyone I knew and prevented me from creating new friendships. At least I could speak to the house staff and my tutors. Some of them were nice. Sometimes too nice.

Miss Angela, who was responsible for teaching me French, fretted over how I was treated.

“What your father is doing is wrong,” she said. “I’m going to help you.”

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She reported father to the police.

The officers came and talked to father. They didn't even look at me. Miss Angela left our house in cuffs, arrested for false accusations and wasting the police's time.

After that, no one in the house was allowed to speak to me, outside of necessary tasks or my scheduled lessons.

I felt so lonely it was a relief when father started taking me with him to parties, showing off his heir to the other millionaires, rising entrepreneurs, and famous people. The relief lasted only until I learned my every mistake was going to be severely punished.

My fingers fumbling the piano keys got me a day without food. An old money matron commenting on how sad I looked resulted in father cutting power to my room, which prevented me from seeking solace in reading books under the light of a lamp. The one time I cried...

I didn't want to remember the time I cried. I never did it again.

Slowly but steadily, father chipped away my humanity and replaced it with behaviors he wanted to see. One day, I looked in the mirror and realized I didn't see myself there, just a product of my father's imagination. The cut of my now short hair was ordered by him, the clothes a set he chose and put on me that morning, even the book I was holding was one he had told me to read.

I realized there was going to be nothing left of me if I didn't escape when I was

sixteen.

I ran. When a squad of men came for me they were exceedingly gentle as they pressed a chloroform-covered rag to my nose.

“No bruises! Don’t grip him so tightly or we won’t get the premium for perfect condition,” I heard one of them hiss.

Perfect condition. As if I was a collector’s item.

Afterward, I woke up in The Box for the first time.

“Dolls don’t run,” father said from behind the sheer plastic of my display cage as I shook with fear when I realized I was pinned to the wall. In the two days since my running away he had remodeled my room, changing one side into a Barbie-like display box. “You will learn how to be a good doll, but for now I’m going to put you away.”

He left the room. And he left me in silence and darkness.

I think something broke in me at that moment because afterwards I was too scared to run and I did the only thing I could to survive.

I became a perfect doll.

Until Tristan and Matthias allowed me to feel human again.

Chapter Twelve

Victoria

The next day I was tasked with a mind-numbingly boring job of dusting. At least I could move from room to room, which provided some stimulation, but what wouldn't I give to be outside instead of in those stuffy rooms.

To make matters worse, Matthias suddenly straightened and looked towards the closed door of the room I was currently cleaning. If he really was a guard dog his ears would be standing at attention.

"That bastard Carl is outside."

"Really?" I tried to listen for the hated voice. "I can't hear anything."

"My hearing is quite good," Matthias shot me a grin. "He is quite a way down the corridor yet, but I believe he is searching for you. Do you think he will try to lay his hands on you again?"

"I don't think so. Not with you here. Theo did a number on him and, well, you are... much more intimidating," I said apologetically.

"I don't mind being scary if it helps me protect the people I care about."

Was I really one of those people?

"I think he may try something different though," I cautioned. "He won't get physical but I have a feeling he will try to use his position over me instead. It had happened before, when he assigned me tasks to either humiliate me or tire me out. And let's not forget about the setup when he requested me to bring tea to your meeting..."

"He is the lowest of scums," Matthias said in disgust. "Maybe we can barricade ourselves in here, how about that? That weakling won't get in if I hold the door closed."

“That would just be delaying the inevitable. But I have an idea...” My eyes sparkled with mischief as I explained my plan to Matthias.

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“...that’s why I don’t like them,” I finished, my voice trembling a little.

“Those foul beasts!” Matthias thundered. “You are right, those big teeth and their beady eyes... horses are terrifying. It’s a good thing you don’t have to work with them.”

“Yes, it would be horrible if I had to...”

The door banged open to reveal a smugly smiling Carl.

“Victoria, my dear,” he said with cloying sweetness. “I’m glad to see you. Here I thought you had been avoiding me, but that couldn’t possibly be true, right?”

“Of course not... sir,” I said with a blank face.

“Hey, we are busy here. What do you want?” Matthias interjected, using his reputation as a brute to just shove the false pleasantries aside.

Carl glared at the man but didn’t dare to say anything. He just ignored him and turned back to me.

“I wanted to find you because I have a task for you. You will attend to my horse.”

“No, I can’t—”

“Nonsense! It’s a great privilege,” Carl stressed with glee. “I will leave you to it.”

With a grin on his face, he sauntered out of the door.

We made our way to the stables as quickly as possible. The moment I saw Clementine, the beautiful chestnut mare Carl took a liking to, I pressed my head to her neck.

“Good girl,” I cooed, petting the mare who happily huffed into my hair.

“Your ruse worked like a charm,” Matthias beamed at me. “Let’s see if I can find an apple for this beauty. Score! Here’s one!” He extended his hand with a red apple towards Clementine and she gobbled it up.

Not only were we out of the house, but we could spend the whole day with the animals we loved. Maybe even make a picnic out of our packed lunch. This day was turning out to be awesome.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Tristan

The next meeting with Jonas started with the man asking if I would turn him. When my answer didn’t change the mafia boss scowled but kept his composure better than yesterday. Instead of leaving in a huff, he tried to use the perceived snub as another item on the scales of our negotiations, trying to strengthen his position and gain concessions from me.

I gave him the Persimmon club.

That put the talks back on track but I was pretty sure Jonas wasn’t going to leave the matter of becoming a vampire so easily. I counted on it. I had already put a trap in place.

A bit of digging had shown that Jonas regularly spent his evenings outside of his home, in New York's clubs, so I asked a vampire colleague who owed me a favor to dangle some bait in front of the mafia boss' face. I couldn't wait to see my plan come to fruition but, for now, I had to keep negotiating and stall for time. That was what Theo was perfect for.

"As for foreign trade... we have quite a few contacts in Asia," Theo pulled out neat sheets of information to cross-reference. "We are willing to exchange some of them for your contacts in Europe."

"Are those contacts for legal trading?" Jonas leaned forward with interest. "Or for smuggling?"

"Legal. Smuggling en masse, such as counterfeit items or drugs, is not our specialty. But if you want to talk about specialized cases where a single item or person has to be smuggled in and out of the country..."

I let Theo explain the minutiae of what we were willing to trade for. It pained me that his meticulous attention to detail was seared into him by his cruel family but he took the skills that were forced into him and made them his own.

I was proud of how far he had come. Even though Matthias was the older one it was Theo who had effortlessly slid into the position of my right hand. Learning how to live with trauma was a slow process but Theo was strong and we were patient. About seven years after being changed into a vampire Theo stood in front of me, trembling but resolute, and informed me he was going to enroll in a university. Not only that, but he wanted to truly experience the life of a student, of a young man, and decided to live in the dorms. It was incredible, watching him blossom into himself, make friends, party, and study something his father would disapprove of: to be a marine biologist. Years later, after achieving his degree, Theo stood in front of me once more and this time he asked to be made a part of our business.

Theo's decision to leave his love for the sea creatures as a hobby and to forgo a career in the field blindsided Matthias but I was somehow expecting it. Theo wanted to prove to himself that he could be independent and do whatever he wanted and, when he succeeded, I felt it was only a matter of time before the youngman let himself settle into the soothing rhythm of our bond and stay close.

We were a team. Forged by choice and destiny. I felt like adding Victoria into the mix made the bond between us even more unbreakable. I needed her. Wanted her so much.

I couldn't wait for the trap to close around Jonas, letting me move forward with my plan.

### Chapter Fourteen

Victoria

My days settled into a bizarre routine.

Having a stranger accompany me 24/7 should be harder to get acclimated to but I was used to rolling with the punches. Adapt and overcome, that was my motto. For example, when I woke up with my head on a firm pec on the fifth day of this bizarre adventure, I let myself enjoy it for a few minutes before I freaked out.

Matthias let me pretend we didn't find ourselves in a compromising position as long as I didn't acknowledge he was totally awake for those few minutes as well.

We still fell asleep separately but, inevitably, we woke up tangled together. It couldn't be helped. Matthias's skin was so cool! It was like a balm on my overheating skin, a warding charm against the warm summer nights, and I scooted closer on pure instinct.

The fifth and sixth days slinked by and, while Theo and Tristan visited when they could, they were busy remotely managing the Sanguine and negotiating the deal. Most days it was only me and Matthias.

Well, and the shadow of Carl stalking after me, but we learned how to either avoid him or channel his ire to our benefit.

At the end of one of my shifts, Tristan came by to pull Matthias aside for a private

conversation. They went outside and spoke in hushed tones but they didn't account for how their words carried through the open window to the room I was cleaning.

I didn't intend to eavesdrop but my head whipped around when I heard a certain very worrying word.

"...you can't keep going like this, Matthias. I know you are hungry. You joined me and Theo straight after dealing with that werewolf gang and you didn't have the opportunity to feed since then," Tristan was saying.

"So what? I can keep going." A peak out the window showed me Matthias stubbornly crossing his arms over his chest.

Matthias was hungry? What was this about? I personally saw him inhale a good portion of our lunch. A lunch we prepared together. Maybe he needed a specialized diet? Something for all of those muscles? Oh god, were there medical reasons? Was playing bodyguard for me hurting him?

Speechless, I turned to Theo, who was left to keep an eye on me, and gesticulated wildly in the direction of the two men.

Theo grimaced.

"It's not my place to say what this is about. BUT," Theo interjected seeing my lips opening in a protest. "I think you should talk to Matthias about the issue. Tell him..." Theo hesitated but then his gaze grew steely. "...that he is allowed to share his secret with you."

Before I could press him for more he made a strategic retreat just as Matthias came back inside. Theo left with Tristan and a heavy silence settled between me and Matthias. Thanking all the stars I was at the end of my shift, I took care of the last

needed cleaning to get back to my room as quickly as possible.

As soon as the door closed behind us I advanced on Matthias.

“Whoa!” he yelped as I sandwiched his face between my hands and observed him closely. He seemed even paler than when we first met. His skin was cold. And his eyes... was it possible for the irises to change color? I swear his eye color was darker but now it looked like amber with hints of red.

Determined, I sneaked a hand under his shirt but what I felt were the fat and muscle I expected to find and not signs of an illness.

“Not that I’m not enjoying this, but what gives?” Matthias asked.

I pulled my hands away as if I was burned.

“Ah, sorry. I was a bit too focused...” I said with a blush.

“Focused on what?” the man asked with a roguish grin. “Feeling how sculpted my abs are? You should grab a hold of my pecs. Those are to die for.”

“I heard you and Tristan talking,” I blurted out.

His eyes widened and he took a step back before he tried to play at nonchalance.

“Yeah? Don’t pay attention to what he was saying. It was a load of bullshit.”

“Look me in the eye and tell me you are fine,” I demanded.

He did and growled, “I am fine.”

“Now do that without lying,” I snarled at him.

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We were locked in a staring contest and as I held his gaze I was certain his eyes got redder.

“I’m fine... for now,” he said through clenched teeth.

I felt lost. All I could do was beseech him to trust me.

“Tell me what you need.”

His eyes zeroed in on my neck, irises filling with red the color of blood. Blood...

“I... I can’t,” Matthias said as if the denial was hurting him and pressed his forehead to mine.

I laid my hand over his chest. His heart wasn’t beating.

“Theo said to tell you: you can share your secret with me,” I said gently. “But would it be easier if I said the words?”

Matthias pulled his head away but I didn’t let him go far. My hands wrapped around his neck to ensure he wouldn’t run. He looked scared. Terrified. But also... hopeful.

“You are a vampire, aren’t you?” I said, feeling the thrill of finally uttering those crazy words. “And what you need is my blood.”

“Your blood is what I want,” Matthias leaned towards my neck and took a deep, shuddering breath in. “It sings to me, with its sweetness. But as for need... I can get it

elsewhere. You don't have to be scared of me."

The declaration elicited many feelings in me and fear was only a small portion of them. It felt almost like a spice added to make a meal better.

"I don't want you to get it elsewhere," I said vehemently. Jealousy. Possessiveness. Lust. Those were feelings that filled me in this moment. "You quenched my hunger, and I want to quench yours."

The red eyes blinked slowly as he took me in, noting the reactions of my body with his sharpened senses. My wildly beating heart, the blown pupils, the way my hand shook just a little from excitement... they all told him a story. I was an open book and he was taking his time reading me.

Could he sense how wet I was getting?

"Hmm, I don't know, maybe I should make you eat some juicy, fat steaks with red vegetables to get more iron in your diet, before I take a bite," he said, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Is that so? You want to fatten me up like a lamb for slaughter?"

"Not exactly fatten you up but a good diet is certainly beneficial. It means I can take more and return to your taste faster," Matthias lowered his head to my neck and I tilted my head to give him more access. His lips brushed against my neck as he spoke. "I don't know if, after a week without proper meals, I can feed on you safely..."

"But you can still have a taste, right?" I asked with sudden desperation. "Just a little..."

“There’s nothing I want more, little bird,” Matthias groaned. His tongue darted out to lap at my neck where my pulse beat a staccato rhythm.

“Bite me then,” I pleaded.

His mouth opened to reveal long fangs and his expression was almost dazed. I thought he would sink those teeth into the pale column of my throat but he shook his head like a dog and some clarity returned to his gaze.

“Not the neck,” he said hoarsely. “I won’t be able to stop myself if I bite there. Give me your hand.”

The vampire took my offered hand and pulled me to the couch. I ended up astride his lap.

“This will hurt just for a moment,” was all the warning I got before lethally sharp fangs raked over the inside of my wrist.

The pain was sharp but the sting quickly turned into a different sensation as Matthias ran his tongue over the bleeding wound. It felt as if what he was doing connected straight to my pussy. I opened my legs wider, pushing against his sculpted body only to find... he was completely flaccid. But before I could worry if vampires were capable of having the kind of sex I wanted I felt the cock beneath me stir to life.

His whole body warmed. A flush appeared on Matthias’ face as he licked at the dripping blood. I was the one bringing him to life, letting him experience the joy of blood stirring in his lower parts to result in an erection. He was halfway there and hemuffled a moan into my red-streaked skin, cleaning every trace of the life-giving substance with his tongue.

And then he stopped.

“That’s enough. Thank you, sweetness. You taste exquisite,” he pulled back with effort, until his head hit the back of the couch. He stared at the ceiling, flushed and dazed. I had a feeling he was trying to resist the temptation by not looking at me.

A look at my wrist showed me the wound was already closing. The vampire saliva had healing properties. Matthias didn’t take much of my blood, but he had a point that I wasn’t in the best shape, so I didn’t push him to take more.

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“Is the blood you took enough to let you...?” My hand trailed down between us but the vampire caught it and brought it to his lips for a kiss.

“No. I would need a bigger dose for that... or more frequent small doses,” he sighed but then grinned. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t have some fun with you. I don’t need to use my cock to make you scream, baby.”

I squeaked as he stood up with me; either his trained body or his vampiric strength let him carry me as if I weighed nothing. He laid me on the bed like a meal, then peeled the pantyhose off my legs. My underwear followed in quick succession but he left the maid costume, which Carl insisted I wear as my uniform, on, merely pushing the short skirt up before he dove down.

It should be scary to have those sharp teeth so close to my most vulnerable parts but I felt only exhilaration. When I felt his fingers pry my folds open to make space for his tongue, my spine bowed into an arc and I threw my head back with a moan.

“Yes, make all those pretty sounds for me,” Matthias encouraged and then made following his order absurdly easy as he licked a long stripe up my cunt then focused on my clit with a ferocity of a starving animal.

He was the definition of messy. When I gathered enough strength to look at him between my legs, his chin was covered with my juices and his own saliva. Matthias looked incredibly pleased with himself when he felt my eyes on him and met my gaze.

“You taste sweet, Victoria, but you know what I like even more than your taste?” He

slid his nose over my soaked thighs and took a deep breath in. “Your scent. It’s driving me crazy. I know how aroused you are. I will always know, even if you want to hide it. And right now you are soaking wet. Tell me how much you want it.”

“Stop talking!” I groaned. My fingers tried to grab his hair but the strands were too short for me to find much purchase.

Matthias laughed and the puffs of air against my sensitive flesh made me shiver. Okay, maybe I could string a few words together. I had to, because not having that wicked mouth on me was torture.

“I want you. So much. Make me breathless, make me feel g-good,” I gasped out.

“Say my name and I will,” he growled.

“Matthias—ah!”

My thighs squeezed around his head as he pushed his tongue into me, fucking my pussy until I saw stars. My body jolted into an orgasm as if struck by lightning. Matthias slurped the wetness of arousal right out of me, not stopping until my limp limbs were once more clutching at him in a desperate search for more stimulation. He pushed me right to the edge so easily that I wondered if his supernatural powers gave him more ways to read my body than just scenting my arousal. Was it my wildly beating heart that told him I was nearly there? Whatever it was, Matthias used his big fingers to circle my clit and I was gone, shattered into a million pieces by bliss.

I collapsed onto the bed, breaths sharp and my gaze unable to focus on the ceiling above me. The next thing I registered, as my pussy pulsed with the last waves of pleasure, was Matthias hovering right over me, our faces so close... I licked my lips, ready for our first kiss.

“Ah, sorry, you probably don’t want to kiss me after I...”

I pulled Matthias to me, not hesitating to add tongue to the kiss. It quickly grew filthy. Filthier. The filthiest. Once invited in, Matthias charged into the kiss as if it were a battle. Our tongues tangled, the slick slide a perfect medium to push my moans into. Soon, I submitted to his dominance, dizzy with it, reeling with how perfect this felt. The aftertaste of my own orgasm and my blood tingled on my tongue.

When we pulled apart, Matthias pressed his forehead against mine and we just breathed together for a moment, enjoying the closeness of each other.

My eyes closed on their own volition and I had to catch myself when I started listing forward.

“Ready to go to sleep? I see I tired you out,” Matthias said smugly.

“You did,” I mumbled.

“Do you want to clean up? I can change the sheets...” Matthias offered.

“Fuck it,” I snorted. “I’m not letting you go even for a moment. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“You are still dressed,” Matthias pointed out unhelpfully.

At my noise of objection he buried a laugh in my hair before he slowly coaxed me out of my maid’s dress, then took off his own clothes. He decided cleaning me up or changing the sheets was still too hard because he bundled me under the covers and pressed against my back. Calling us a big and little spoon wasn’t enough to describe how I was positively drowning in his arms. He was more of a ladle than a spoon. Big,

muscular arms circled around me and, for the first time in too long, I felt safe. Cherished. Kept.

I let myself drift into dreamless sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

The next day I had to scramble to work because both of us forgot to set up an alarm and, even though my mind swam with questions about fucking vampires, I hesitated to ask them out in the open where anyone could overhear.

But my frequent looks and how lost in thought I was did not go unnoticed. When the time for lunch came, Matthias gave a sigh of relief when Tristan showed up to invite me to dine with him again.

“He’s good at explaining this stuff and I’m not,” the big guy said gruffly.

He stole a quick kiss and left with purposeful strides, likely determined to use the short time he didn’t have to guard me for his own schemes. Probably getting more food. I expected a lot of iron-rich meals in my future.

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This time Tristan didn't take me to the garden for lunch. No, I found myself following him to his guest quarters. I winced at the looks I got from the staff in our path. A mix of curiosity, worry, and jealousy. So far, Matthias was enough of a deterrent for them to keep away and not ask questions but I could bet that was going to change after this spectacle.

What was done was done. I decided to let myself forget about the gossip for a while after the door separated us neatly from the outside world.

The meal was already prepared, colorful dishes waiting on the table. I took my seat while Tristan went around the room... putting pieces of paper on walls? I squinted at one of the rectangular strips and saw what looked like Japanese writing across it.

Tristan noticed my staring and waved the paper at me then stuck the last one to the wall.

"It's a talisman to keep people from eavesdropping. I have swept the room for any electronic devices as well, so we should be free to talk."

"Does it mean magic exists?" I asked immediately, my mind whirling with possibilities.

"Yes and no. What you would call magic is a part of some supernatural creatures' ancestry. The talismans were prepared for us by a Kitsune, a fox spirit. While that's one of her talents I would not be able to produce talismans and neither would regular humans, unless they had at least some of the talisman-inclined creature ancestry in their veins."

“Here goes my hope of becoming a witch,” I mock-sighed.

“You are enchanting enough without magic at your fingertips, my dear,” Tristan responded so earnestly it made me blush.

“How about you? Is being so... handsome and captivating a part of being a vampire?” I asked, my heart beating wildly at finally acknowledging the elephant in the room.

“You flatter me, Victoria,” Tristan chuckled. “This body and its charm are organically grown... but, I admit, centuries of practice made both easier to use to get what I want.” He stepped behind my chair and leaned to whisper in my ear. “And trust me, you will know when I use my vampiric powers on you.”

My breath hitched.

“You have some, then. Powers, that is?” I asked.

“Enhanced strength, speed, healing abilities...” Tristan walked to the seat in front of me and sprawled in it, counting on his fingers. “Seeing in the dark, fangs, and claws when we need them, resistance to many kinds of damage, including certain magics... that’s what most vampires get.”

“Most?” I prompted, hungrier for the information than for the food in front of me.

“Those are characteristics of what some call a Lesser Vampire. Matthias and Theo are ones. I, on the other hand, have been called a True Vampire.”

“What’s the difference?” I squinted at him. “Can you turn into a bat?”

“Ha! I wish!” Tristan groaned. “I once made a fool of myself when I met another

vampire and asked her how to shapeshift. She looked at me like I was crazy and told me that's a human myth."

"You didn't know what you could do?" A giggle tried to burst out of me at the absurdity of the situation but I smothered it in time for my mind to comprehend how fucked up it had to be to not know what your own body could do. "...that's rough, buddy."

"Indeed. Let's just say my Sire, the man who had turned me, wasn't a very nice person. 'Forgetting' to teach me the ins and outs of vampiric powers was the least of his crimes," Tristan's gaze grew distant. "That's why I killed him and, with that deed, I gained the power of the True Vampire."

Here he was, admitting to murder in front of me. It should scare me, make me want to be away from such a violent man. But Tristan radiated calm and a hint of sadness. That wasn't the expression of a rampaging killer. I choose to believe he did it for the good of others or to protect himself.

I couldn't fault him for killing his abuser when it was what I wanted to do as well.

"Wait," something niggled at the back of my mind. "Does that mean Theo and Matthias would have to kill you to become True Vampires?"

"That would be the simplest way to do this, yes," Tristan didn't look bothered by the question. He cut a piece of juicy mushroom while he talked. "Though there are certain bloody rituals that can achieve the same result, and there have been cases of Lesser Vampires snapping the bond with their Sire and becoming True Vampires themselves, but such occurrences pertain to beings who are thousands of years old."

It was hard to wrap my head around the concept of living for hundreds of years, least of all thousands. Holy cow. Was that the age Tristan, Matthias, and Theo were going

to reach as well?

“Aren’t you worried they will want to cut the bond?” I asked.

“No,” Tristan said with surety. “They chose me once and, what is more important, they keep choosing me. The bond can be a curse but, for us, it’s a blessing.”

“What exactly does this bond do?”

Tristan was silent for a while.

“I think you should hear that part from Matthias and Theo. How about we dig in for now? As much as I loathe it, we both will have to get back to work soon.”

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I didn't push, both because he was right and I should eat while I could and because I was already planning to grill the two other vampires. We spent the lunch mostly in silence but it wasn't a heavy oppressive thing; no, with Tristan I could relax and enjoy my meal until the time came to part.

When Matthias came to pick me up, Tristan slid a couple of talismans into my pocket.

"It's better to keep those heavy conversations on the down low. Theo and Matthias know how to activate those."

The same day, just like I had feared, I was cornered in the one place where Matthias didn't hover over my shoulder: the female bathroom. Esther, a twitchy mouse of a woman, followed me in and approached cautiously when I was washing my hands.

"Are they hurting you?" she asked, so dead quiet I barely heard her standing two feet from her.

"If they were, there wouldn't be much you could do to stop that," I sent her a sad smile. "You are barely in a better situation than me, Esther."

Her brows furrowed in impotent anger.

"At least I can give you the tea. Do you need it?"

She was referring to a Plan B in herb form, a concoction that fortunately saved many a girl in this household from having Carl's bastards.

My gaze softened.

“No, I don’t. They aren’t hurting me, really. They have been good to me,” I said, knowing she wasn’t going to believe me.

“If you say so,” she said skeptically. “Be careful. Take care.”

“You too, Esther.”

I gave her a hug before we parted ways. She was one of the bright spots in this hellish household. Just a little mouse trying to survive in a world of cats.

“So, how good is your hearing?” I murmured under my breath when I emerged from the bathroom to see Matthias leaning on the wall with his arms crossed. “Heard all of that?”

“The good news is: I can’t make you pregnant,” Matthias grinned at me.

My mouth opened in an O of surprise.

“Uh, does that go for all of you?” I asked awkwardly, feeling how hot my cheeks were getting.

“Would you like for all three of us to try very hard to knock you up? Fill you with our cum until you are overflowing? It could be a fun game—” the bastard purred and I had to put my hand on his mouth to shut him up.

“We’re in public!” I hissed.

He gently pried my hand off then asked lowly, “Is that your only protest?”

I swallowed, pushing down my sudden arousal.

“I want you to invite Theo to my room after I’m done with work,” I said, then added at his raised brows: “Not like that! Get your mind out of the gutter. I just have a few follow-up questions.”

Matthias sighed.

“I suppose it was stupid of me to think I could get out of this conversation by throwing Tristan at you. Very well, at least Theo will be there to keep me from completely screwing up.”

He refused to expand on that last statement while I finished work and only after we were in my room and activated the talismans did he cross his arms and explain while not looking at me.

“There was a girl about sixty years ago who I wanted to court. I botched the whole vampire explanation so much she tried to kill me. Her folks and neighbors thought she went crazy and I basically ruined not only my chances with her but her whole life. That’s why I don’t want to be the one to answer your questions about this.”

Feeling like ‘I’m sorry’ wasn’t enough I stood on my tiptoes and patted his head gently. He melted under my touch and when Theo arrived he found me perched on my bed, Matthias sitting between my legs with his back to me, as I ran my hands through his short hair.

“Aw, you two look so cute like this!” Theo beamed.

“Don’t ‘cute’ me, you rascal. Vic wants to have The Talk,” Matthias scowled.

“...like birds and bees?”

“Obviously not! Like vampires!”

“Geez, calm down, I was only trying to make the atmosphere a bit lighter,” Theo lifted his hands in surrender then took hold of a chair and sat on it backward, his head pillowed on his arms laying on the back of the chair. “So, where do we start?”

“Tristan explained some things but he was reluctant to talk about the bond? Can you shed some light on that?”

“Ah,” Theo and Matthias exchanged a meaningful look. “I see. To put it bluntly, vampirism can be passed to another person who is fed True Vampire’s blood. The change has to be willed by the True Vampire so it’s not something that can occur accidentally. However, intent, or even willingness, is not necessary on the part of the person being changed.”

Cold danced down my spine. But surely Tristan changed them with their permission?

“As such,” Theo continued. “Some of the people turned by True Vampires have been their victims, forced into a life after death they didn’t want and into servitude for their Sire. The True Vampires could keep their control by providing access to blood, information about our kind, connections to people in the know, and places where you wouldn’t be burned on a stake if you showed red eyes...”

“Or they could brainwash you into doing their bidding,” Matthias butted in.

“Matthias, I’m trying to be subtle here! It’s a process!” Theo scowled.

“Well, you said you were going to be blunt! Dancing around the truth is not being blunt!”

“Brainwashing?” I asked. If I looked like how I felt I had to be pale as a ghost.

“Shit,” Theo cursed. “You see... ah...”

“Just tell her,” Matthias said, his voice defeated. He curled away from me.

“A Sire’s bond to their Spawn means they can telepathically communicate with them, find them anywhere, summon them, and they can... force their actions,” Theo said quietly.

“Please, tell me Tristan never forced you to do anything with his powers,” I pleaded.

Theo’s lips thinned.

It was Matthias who answered.

“That would be a lie.” It felt like my whole world was crumbling, the carefully constructed view of the oldest vampire shattering apart. No wonder he didn’t want to tell me he made slaves out of the two younger men in front of me. But then Matthias continued. “He did use his powers on me and I’m grateful for that.”

I reached for him until he turned to face me and looked at me. I needed to see his face, his expression, for this.

“I was a soldier and Tristan saved me in the middle of a war. He didn’t want a brat of merely sixteen to hang around him but I gave him no choice. I pestered him until he

took me under his wing and I left the country with him. He bestowed the gift upon me when I was twenty-nine and I decided my body was in the shape I wanted to keep forever. You know, I worked hard for all those muscles, I was strong and proud of it. But the change made me even stronger and it didn't take away my nightmares like I had hoped it would. It was a bad combination and one day..." He closed his eyes but I knew it wasn't to avoid me but to avoid something inside of himself. "One day I found myself with my hands around the throat of a poor maid who had startled me. I was so deep in my mind, in the grip of what I know nowadays is called PTSD, I would have killed her if not for Tristan forcing me to let her go."

"He helped you," I said, my fear vanishing like the monster under the bed when you turn on the light.

"Yes, and every time he used his ability on me it was for good reason," Matthias confirmed.

It was hard to look away from him, from the downturned corners of his mouth but I needed to hear it from Theo as well.

"He forced me to move when we were in danger and I froze because I spotted someone in a suit identical to what my father had made me wear," Theo revealed, his expression serious. "And there was the whole thing with the sirens... he ordered us both to not listen to them and the mental block gave us a chance to fight against their magic."

"It's... a comfort, knowing he can do that," Matthias revealed. "That there's always someone who can find me, reach me no matter where I go, a bond deep in my soul I can touch when I'm lonely."

"We have chosen each other and we chose Tristan as our leader. Let the poor man take all the responsibility of making big decisions while we play around," Theo

grinned, his somber mood disappearing under a smile.

“You two are a handful, aren’t you?” I said affectionately.

“We are menaces,” Theo puffed out his chest in a comedic display of pride. “And you will soon learn what that means. I have a few hours to spare before I have to go back to scheming with Tristan and I brought games.”

He pulled out a board game from the bag he carried and I watched unholy glee appear in Matthias’s eyes.

“I’m going to destroy you,” Matthias said, his tone a growl with an undertone of excitement.

“Dream on,” the sunshine personified said haughtily.

“Excuse me? If we are playing board games, I’m going to be the one to kick your ass,” I declared with my hands on my hips.

We narrowed our eyes at each other, all three of us seizing our opponents up.

“How about a bet,” I said.

### Chapter Sixteen

It turned out we were pretty evenly matched in most games and the competitive spirit meant no one folded willingly but, in the end, Theo triumphed. I took second place which kept me safe from the bet, and Matthias lost.

He wasn’t happy when the blond chose his prize. Theo demanded that tomorrow, after I finished my work, Matthias was to spend the day away from me. The older vampire was furious. There was a terse word exchange that put me on edge, after which Theo pulled me to the side.

“I know it’s underhanded but it’s for his own good,” he explained. “At first, we didn’t have access to proper food here, like we have at home, just, ah, some refrigerated options that don’t help that much, but now I have scouted the area and we have other venues. Matthias still refuses to go replenish himself because he would have to be absent from your side for at least a few hours to visit the hospital we made a deal with or cruise for willing blood donors in one of the supernatural clubs.”

“Feeding from me wasn’t enough?” I asked.

“It helped a lot. But it’s a strain on your body, especially if you aren’t on the right diet,” Theo frowned. “It’s better to not rely on your blood for everyday maintenance of our bodies and to keep it for emergency or for... ahem... entertainment use.”

I flushed, remembering fresh blood was vital for an erection to happen for a vampire. I supposed what Theo was saying made sense; if even continuous feeding of one vampire would be taxing on my body I didn’t have a chance in hell if all three of them wanted to make me their main source of blood.

“I will talk to him,” I promised.

Theo left with a firm nod and I let Matthias do several sets of exercises in the middle of the room, as he tried to channel his anger into motion, before I approached him.

“You chose Tristan as your leader because you believe he will make the right decisions for you,” I stated quietly. “Tell me then: would he approve of you taking time off from guarding me to take care of yourself?”

“You know he would,” Matthias said, sulking. “But I just found you. I never want to leave your side again.”

That was... terrifying in the sweetest of ways.

“Hey, Theo won’t let anything happen to me. I will be here when you get back,” I promised. “I don’t have a phone but how about you text or call Theo and I will respond? Will that help?”

Matthias finally turned to me, his stiff shoulders slumping.

“Yes, it will help. Please,” he said.

That night he held me particularly tightly and his glare scared away anyone who dared to come close to me during my work time, but when Theo approached us he closed his hands into fists and darted off, as if he knew he had to tear himself from me or he would stay attached forever.

“Well, that went well,” Theo commented and we shared amused smiles.

We made our way back to my room.

“What’s the plan? Do you want to do anything specific or just hang?” I waved at my pretty bare room that didn’t offer many entertainment options.

Theo was opening his mouth to answer when a chirp from his phone interrupted him.

“Apparently what we are doing is answering Matthias’s texts,” he sighed, as he shot off a quick response. “Does he really have to interrupt my date before it even begins?”

“Is it a date?” I asked nonchalantly.

“It is if I give you this,” Theo said smugly and pushed a box of chocolates at me.

Strawberry chocolates. As in: real strawberries covered in chocolate.

“Damn, you don’t play fair,” I whistled.

“Only the best for you,” Theo promised. “Does it mean you will give me a chance?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:38 am*

“I suppose so,” I gave a theatrical put-upon sigh. “The chocolates can come. And so can you.” I gestured for him to follow me to the couch.

“Wanna watch some movies?” Theo dimpled at me, after he threw himself on the couch with childish enthusiasm, bouncing on the cushion. He held up the laptop he brought with him and raised an expectant eyebrow.

“That depends upon what your taste in movies is,” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Well, currently I’m deliberating between a funny show about gay pirates, or a devastating show about a future where corporations own your soul.”

I blinked at him then smiled.

“I think we will get along just fine.”

We had a good time watching both of the shows on Theo’s laptop and snacking on delicious chocolate strawberries – evenif sometimes we were interrupted by a call or a text from Matthias – until darkness fell outside the window.

“I had a good time today,” Theo said. “But it’s getting late and you probably need to go to sleep to get up fresh and early tomorrow... Can I get a kiss before I have to go sleep on the floor?” He made huge puppy eyes at me and I had to laugh.

“One, tomorrow is Sunday, and it’s the one day out of the week I don’t have to work... well, unless I’m taking someone else’s shift for some favors... but this Sunday I’m free. Second, didn’t Matthias tell you he has been sleeping in my bed since day

one?”

Theo gasped in outrage.

“That bastard! He let me believe he was sleeping on the floor like I had to!”

“Third, yes, you can have a kiss.”

The outrage left Theo immediately as he focused on a more important feeling of my lips on his.

At first, the kiss was sweet, a mere press against each other, but it quickly turned into the heat of open mouths, and then the slickness of tongue twinning around each other. Before I even realized, my hands wandered to roam over Theo’s body and he pulled away from me with a groan.

“Maybe I should sleep on the floor... if you let me in your bed I don’t know if I can stop myself...”

“Am I so irresistible?” I asked. Maybe exposing my neck was a bit mean but I wanted more of that devilish red to seep into Theo’s bright eyes.

“You have no idea, Victoria,” Theo leaned closer, his nostrils flaring as if he was hypnotized by the display. “The moment we smelled your blood we knew you were ours. Our soulmate, our future, our everything.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I pushed Theo back, my fingers digging into his shoulders. “You... what?! There’s actually a reason you fixated on me so hard? I’m... your mate?”

“Oh,” Theo blinked at me. “I thought Tristan or Matthias had told you already... Uh,

surprise? We have a magical bond?”

“You have a magical bond, I don’t feel anything,” I said sternly only to wince at the way Theo’s expression crumbled. Okay, so maybe, just maybe, they had my attention from the moment I saw them but... magic?! I just accepted that I, as a person with no supernatural creature inheritance, could not do anything magical only to learn I was magical? Or... cursed? Affecting the vampires in some strange way? “How does it feel to you?” I asked Theo.

“You... your blood, when we first met, smelled like a beautiful meadow full of blooming flowers. Like almonds in honey. Irresistible, tailor-made for me. In my whole life, I have never smelled anything so perfect. And then I saw how distressed you were and I wanted to kill that vile man. And not only him, his father too. He wasn’t worthy of even looking at you,” Theo said and, at some point, his words slurred just a little. I realized his fangs had dropped, the terrifying visage of a vampire out in the open, complete with red eyes and a thundering expression on his face.

“That only tells me that I’m catnip to vampires,” I said helplessly. “Not that you are my soulmate.”

“Can you... trust me?” Theo placed his hand on his unbeating heart and looked at me so earnestly. “I have never felt so sure of anything in my life as I am of the fact that you are my soulmate.”

“I can’t just blindly trust in this,” I said. “But I can give you a chance to prove it to me.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Oof!” The air was knocked from my lungs as Theo threw himself at me, ensnaring me in a tight hug and peppering my face with kisses.

Just like that, we were back on the trajectory we left as the kisses turned less innocent.

“If my blood smells so good to you... do you want a taste?” I whispered in Theo’s ear, making him shiver.

“Yes! I... yes...” the poor man seemed to be lost for words.

“You can taste me. But promise me something.”

“Anything!”

“Promise me you will actually fuck me. I can feel you already rising. Will just a bit of my blood be enough to make it work? Matthias had some trouble on that front,” I shared.

“Ha! Matthias did that to himself with his stubbornness. I’m well-fed on medical blood. If all you want is for me to be up to the task I probably don’t even need your blood...” Theo paused to look at the pulsing vein in my neck and swallowed convulsively. “But I really, really want to taste it.”

It was heady being wanted so much. Theo was practically salivating at the thought of having me but he was still waiting for my permission like a good boy.

“Where do you want to bite me? Here?” I ran my fingertips over the side of my neck. “Or somewhere else?”

“The neck is... too much of a temptation if I’m only to take a little,” Theo admitted, flushing with embarrassment at his lack of willpower. “But there are other options... your wrist...” I shivered as he pressed a toothy kiss to the inside of my wrist. “Your thighs...” he dipped his hands between my legs, caressing the inside of my thigh so close to where I was getting wet from his touches. “Your breasts...”

My quick inhale shuddered into a moan as Theo’s hand found its way under my shirt. His slender hand cupped one of my breasts. I had forgone my bra when I changed out of my work clothes, preferring not to be trapped in it all day, and now I was reaping the reward as the vampire’s fingers found naked skin.

“Yes! That! The last one. I want that!” I said in a rush.

I tried to pull my shirt off in one motion but it was Theo’s turn to tease as he caught the fabric and ensured the shirt was rucked up torturously slowly, brushing against my nipples as they hardened into little peaks in anticipation. I didn’t fight him as he left the bundled-up shirt on me; both of us were more interested in my revealed cleavage and what could be done to it.

First, Theo tasted me with his tongue, leaving wet tracks behind, making me shiver at the sensation of his saliva cooling on my skin. He circled the rosy areolas with his tongue and kissed my nipples, then added his fingers to the mix, caressing, pinching, scratching, until I was lost in the sensation. My eyes fell closed and my mouth opened in a continuous O of pleasure. The vampire made sure I was an oversensitive mess, every inch of my boobs throbbing for more, nerve endings like fireworks just waiting to be set off, then he looked at me from under his pretty lashes.

“Victoria, look at me.”

Only when I met his gaze he opened his mouth wide, letting me see the light glinting off his fangs before he bit down.

I arched under his hands with a cry. The feeling of his fangs sinking into the sensitive side of my breast was too much for a second before it became just right.

“Oh... that’s...” I didn’t have words for the sensation. Matthias used his sharp fangs to open my skin but he didn’t bite into my wrist, only lapping at the flowing blood. Theo went a step further by actually biting me. The sharp pinch was... interesting. A wave of heat spread through my body from that point and the pain only underscored the pleasure.

Theo pulled off me sooner than I wanted and I made a short sound of loss when his

fangs left me. The vampire lapped at the one drop of blood that followed the curve of my breast then lavished attention on the wound until it was completely closed, not a sign of two fangs piercing my skin left behind.

That was a shame, I wanted to have marks to remember him by. Maybe I could ask him or Matthias or Tristan to leave some other kinds of marks on me one day...

“What do I taste like?” I asked breathlessly.

“Like dreams... and sunshine, and being together under a warm blanket on a cold night, and—” Theo said, his voice starting slow but gaining speed as he started listing a hundred examples of things I did not expect.

I was stunned by the never-ending list. How could I taste like the sea after a storm? The brightness of sunflower’s petals?

Those weren’t things you could taste.

But they were emotions, blissful moments of happiness, and each one of them rendered my heart open, because I wanted to be all that to Theo.

When he mentioned chocolate-covered strawberries from earlier in the night as one of those happy moments I broke.

I pulled him into a kiss. He squeaked in surprise and, as his fangs were still out and I wasn’t careful enough, I nicked my tongue on one of the sharp points. The additional taste of my blood in the kiss made Theo lose all inhibitions. He kissed me as if he wanted to meld into one with me. His tongue explored every inch of me, lips sliding against mine in a filthy dance. His hands found purchase on my breasts, kneading the soft flesh and sending even more sparks of pleasure down my spine.

“Fuck me, please,” I gasped out when I finally had to tear myself away from him or risk suffocating. The vampire didn’t need to breathe but I sure did!

Theo just nodded and went to work, tearing at my clothes. It was satisfying that I could turn him into a bumbling mess or make him speechless. In no time I was extracted out of my lower garments, though neither of us bothered with getting rid of the shirt bunching around my armpits.

The fresh blood did what it was supposed to do and Theo stood tall and proud, his cock slender and almost pretty. I knew it was going to feel so good inside of me.

“Victoria?”

“Yes, Theo?”

“I’m going to fuck your brains out.”

I didn’t have time to gasp at the filthy declaration delivered with an innocent smile as Theo’s cock slammed into me.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:38 am*

Like water brought to the boiling point, the earlier teasing turned into the vampire putting all his pent-up horniness to good use. He was touching me everywhere he could, inside and outside. Hands wormed under my back to trace my spine while my front was attacked by insistent kisses, nips of teeth, lips sucking hickeys into every bit of skin Theo could reach.

I responded in kind, reaching back, running my hands through his blond hair, biting his ear, dragging my nails down his back making him shudder and buck into me. My pussy throbbed at the frenzy of Theo's thrusts and welcomed his cock with the heat and wetness of my arousal. I was glad Matthias talked dirty about breeding me because thanks to that I knew Theo couldn't make me pregnant and I could properly enjoy this moment.

"Fill me up," I goaded. "I want to feel you come inside of me."

"You first, beautiful. I want to watch you lose yourself," Theo panted out.

Well, we were at an impasse because I wanted to watch him too.

"Together," I groaned out and pulled at his hips, encouraging Theo to fuck me even harder. "Let's come together."

Theo bit his lip, his eyes filled with dark desperation as if just those words made him scramble for control to not come on the spot. He didn't have to wait long though; I felt my own orgasm approaching like a freight train.

"Now!" I keened and let myself go.

Keeping my eyes open to watch how Theo's rhythm stuttered as he let out a sharp cry was hard. I was submerged in the bliss of my own climax but I stubbornly kept my blown pupils trained on my lover's slack-jawed expression of bliss.

Both of us being a mess and clinging to each other for dear life felt so intimate. I wanted to remember this moment forever.

We lay entwined with each other for a long time before we went to clean ourselves up.

When we got back to bed I herded Theo under the blanket, wrapping myself around him before I closed my eyes.

You taste like falling asleep together, was one of the things Theo said during his half-crazed monologue.

My new resolution was to make all the dreamy, happy moments he mentioned a reality.

## Chapter Seventeen

I woke up to the feeling of Theo pressed against my back and to the sight of Matthias sleeping next to my bed.

Wait, what?!

"Shh, let him sleep a little longer," Theo whispered. "The fool snuck in at midnight. I should have been clearer in my wording and not leave him room to interpret 'leaving for a day' to end at midnight."

"I'm only surprised he didn't wrestle you off the bed," I snorted.

“Oh, he would have tried if that wouldn’t have woken you up,” Theo winked at me. “You know, I have a big bed at home, it could fit all of us in... if that’s what you wanted.”

I turned to him fully.

“For sleeping? Or for... other purposes?” I asked.

“Anything you want,” Theo promised.

The vision of all three vampires servicing me was too much and I shot off the bed.

“I need to prepare for work!”

I made my hurried way to the bathroom, knowing I would be tempted to indulge in a round of morning sex if I stayed. I wasn’t quite ready to navigate having both Theo and Matthias’s ardor directed at me so early in the day.

As the door closed, I heard Matthias’s disgruntled muttering. I hoped he would forgive me for waking him up. A quick shower later I felt more ready to face the day.

“I have an important task today,” Theo said when we were saying our goodbyes before leaving my room. “Wish me luck.” I did with a sweet kiss on his cheek. “I’m leaving you in good hands,” Theo nodded to Matthias before the doors closed behind him.

The silence left in his wake was a bit awkward.

“So, what do you do on your one free day?” Matthias asked gruffly. “Whatcanyou do?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:38 am*

“Well, I can’t leave the mansion... but, as you are a guest and not a guard like you love to pretend, you should be allowed in the entertainment areas,” I mused, my finger tapping at my lips. “I have never used the indoor pool they have here but I sure had to clean it. Do you think we could go there?”

“I didn’t exactly bring swimming trunks on this business trip,” Matthias arched his brow at me. “But I can always swim naked.”

“No,” I said immediately.

“Going prudish on me now, Victoria?” He grinned. “Have you never bathed together with a naked man?”

“That’s irrelevant,” I scoffed. “What’s important is that I’m not going to let other people see you naked. In fact, maybe the swimming idea is a miss... your naked torso and those trunk-like legs would mean people inevitably trying to spy on us to catch a glimpse.”

“You’re jealous,” Matthias said with glee. “Of some imaginary peeping toms?”

“People here love to stick their noses in other people’s business. The gossip is a currency.” One that I had made frequent use of myself, I didn’t add.

“Alright, I can see how that would be a problem with a big, public pool... isn’t there somewhere more private? Like a jacuzzi or something?”

“Only in the best guest rooms... don’t you have one?” I narrowed my eyes at the man.

“Ha! No, that would be too simple. But now that I think about it, Tristan mentioned his rooms were better than mine...”

“Oh, I didn’t check out the bathroom while I was there... hmm, let me think... Yes, that room should have a jacuzzi! Can we ask Tristan to let us use it?” I beamed, excited at the possibility of a long, luxurious soak. There were a lot of things I missed from my privileged upbringing but creature comforts like a bathtub were the largest part of it.

“No way,” Matthias huffed. “I want to have you only to myself for a while longer, and we can’t just ask for the key and kick him out of his room... but he is away for the moment, so what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Let’s break into his room.”

“You hooligan!” I slapped his arm playfully. “You are a bad influence on me because I think between my knowledge of the manor and your lockpicking skills we can make it work.”

The plan was created and put in motion. Soon, we found ourselves inside Tristan’s apartment, giggling against each other as we stumbled inside. Only when my eyes spotted the documents on the table did I think about what a breach of privacy this was.

I winced and clutched at Matthias’ hand.

“Tristan won’t be mad, will he?” I asked in a thin voice.

“Exasperated maybe, but no, not mad, don’t worry, beautiful,” Matthias pushed my hair aside to uncover my lowered face, the gesture painfully gentle. “He will be pleased to, ah, provide for you even in this manner. I always thought he picked me and Theo up not because he was lonely — the man likes his silence and solitude after all — but because he felt the need to be helpful, to share his wealth and knowledge.

And material possessions.”

“So, he will gladly share his fancy jacuzzi?” My mouth quirked up at the explanation. Each tidbit I learned about the group of vampires was another piece of the bigger puzzle I wanted to see completed one day.

“You betcha!”

Matthias sent me into the impressive bathroom with the mission to fill the jacuzzi up and find ‘the sprinkles on top’ to add to the water; by which he meant bath bombs, oils, scents, and such. I managed to locate a citrusy bath product and poured it into the water while Matthias emerged victorious from raiding the fridge for snacks.

“Champagne, miss?” he said in a stuffy voice as he offered me a flute full of white bubbling liquid.

“I’m not on the clock for once so hell yeah!” I unceremoniously shucked my clothes off and stepped into the jacuzzi, seating myself with a blissful sigh before I extended my hand for the champagne.

Matthias gave it to me and joined me a while later in the nude, a plate of cookies balanced on his palm.

We started at opposite sides, only our legs tangling together from time to time, as we enjoyed the hot water and the bubble jets of the jacuzzi, but, eventually, Matthias tempted me to his side with the cookies. A truly underhanded move.

“I’m keeping all the champagne to myself,” I teased, after noticing there was only one flute of the sparkling drink.

“That’s alright, I will satisfy myself with just a taste.”

He grabbed my hair and possessed my lips in a thorough kiss, making me nearly drop the glass. As we separated I noticed Matthias had less of a problem staying hard than before. It wastempting to offer to do something about it, now that he had taken his friends' advice and got a regular supply of blood from elsewhere, but two things were stopping me. One, it would be hard not to offer my blood again, whether it was needed or not, and I probably shouldn't share it so often. And two, my face flamed at the possibility of Tristan returning and catching us in the middle of the act, so I steered us away from sexy thoughts and firmly back to relaxing in a non-horny way.

Good thing I did because half an hour later we heard a jingle of keys in the door.

Our wide eyes met each other and I sprang out of the bath. Shit, I left my clothes on the floor and they were all damp now! I snatched a big, white, fluffy towel and wrapped it around myself.

Matthias barely used his towel to dry himself before he stuffed his probably still-wet body in his clothes. He threw a look at me clutching the towel around myself and gave me a quick kiss before he opened the door to the bathroom wide, not one to avoid confrontation.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:39 am*

I thought he was going to be my shield but no, the bastard had thrown me under the bus.

“I got a gift for you, Tristan,” Matthias winked and booked it out of the room when the older vampire was busy staring at me. “I will be back in half an hour! Have fun!”

“Matthias, you bastard!” I fumed, but when the door closed behind him all the boisterousness left me.

I took a step back into the hot air of the bathroom, feeling unsure of myself. Matthias assured me Tristan wouldn’t be mad at the breach of privacy but that dog also left me to face the blues alone, so I couldn’t trust his assessment.

“I see both Theo and Matthias had managed to get you out of your clothes,” Tristan murmured into the stillness. I flinched. “But I would like to offer you the opposite; would you let me dress you, Victoria?”

Blinking, I cast a dubious look at the pile of my damp clothes.

“That won’t be a problem. I have procured something better for you. It was supposed to be a gift for later, but there’s no time like the present,” Tristan presented a gentlemanly hand to me, his upturned palm waiting. “Will you let me show you your gift?”

Tristan did everything he could to appear non-threatening. He didn’t block my path to the exit or hurry me up, just waited for me to come to him as if I were a stray cat he wanted to befriend. The neutral expression and the soft tone of his voice helped as

well.

My fingers alit gently on his palm and he led me towards his bedroom, not caring how I was leaving wet footprints on the carpet.

“Forgive me for the presentation,” Tristan said as he opened his closet and pulled out a beautiful dress. “It came in a big, beautiful box with all the additions... but I have a reason why I took it all out.”

He laid the magnificent dress and accessories for it on the bed. Matching shoes, jewelry, hair decorations... The silky, flowing fabric of midnight blue hues draped into a beautiful dress. A gradient of lighter color at the lower edges and the darkened color rising to the top created an utterly captivating combination.

“For... me?” I asked, not quite believing Tristan went to so much trouble just for the girl he met a few days ago. But I wasn’t just plain old me to them, was I? Theo told me they considered me theirsoulmate. Of course they would want something, someone they considered theirs, to look beautiful. Was this going to be my role? Eye candy? Would they scorn the simple and comfortable pants I liked to wear?

“I know it’s a bit much to wear here and now... I wanted to present this dress to you when we were ready to leave here and you had a cause to celebrate,” Tristan said, his hand going to the back of his head in an embarrassed gesture. “But I think it’s better than wearing those soggy clothes? I can throw them in the dryer and they should be ready to wear again when Matthias comes for you. Or, if you prefer, I can lend you something of mine...”

His explanation reassured me a little: it was one thing to wear a designer dress to an upscale restaurant, or whatever celebration they had planned, and another thing to be expected to pose as a beautiful pet all the time. I enjoyed putting on makeup and turning myself into a goddess when the occasion called for it.

“Yes, that would be good. The dryer, that is,” I said awkwardly.

Tristan nodded and immediately put his money where his mouth was and went to load in my clothes, not expecting me to do the household labor.

He did it so quickly I was still deliberating undoing my towel cocoon when he returned.

“Please, let me help you get dry?” he offered.

Tired of shielding myself from an attack that kept not coming I turned my back to him and opened the towel, letting him take it from my outstretched hands. He pressed the fluffy fabric against my skin, first gently, then with brisk efficiency as he toweled all my limbs, then got on one knee to dry my feet with worshipful attention. Once he got up, he cradled my breasts through the fabric. Even though he touched me only as much as was needed to dry my body it was enough to make my nipples pebble into little peaks, which couldn’t have escaped Tristan’s notice. And yet, he finished his task without straying, then transferred his attention to the dress.

“Ah,” he stopped in his tracks and it took me only a second to realize what was the issue both of us forgot about.

My old pair of underwear was currently being dried.

“It may be presumptuous of me, Victoria...” Tristan started slowly. “...but I do have another gift I had planned to keep for a while... until you were more comfortable with me.”

“Show me,” I demanded.

“Very well,” Tristan opened one of the drawers and pulled out a small box with a

splendid red bow. The black packaging with golden lettering spoke of a bespoke product hiding inside.

I had a feeling I knew what it was.

My tongue flicked out to moisten my lips as I reached to undo the ribbon. It fell to the side smoothly and, under the lid of the box, I found...

Underwear.

Beautiful, sexy, outrageouslingerie.

The sight was enough to make even Tristan flush. The red color climbed high on his aristocratic cheekbones as he held his hands behind his back in a nonchalant pose.

The dress, while tremendously beautiful, wasn't anything I hadn't worn before as a young lady of a rich house. But I had never allowed myself to wear something this... this...decadent, as this lingerie.

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The blue silk of the bra and panties was decorated with what looked like little sapphires, glinting, mesmerizing speckles of blue which underlined the beauty of the garment. Delicate lace shot through the fabric, leaving exquisite patterns in its wake. And the crowning gem in the collection was the pantyhose with a sky-blue garter belt.

I wanted to wear it. To feel that silkiness over my skin. Under Tristan's fingers.

I let the towel I was still wearing drop to the floor, unabashed in my nakedness in the face of such a wicked gift.

"Put your gifts on me. All of them," I entreated, my words not quite an order and not quite a plea.

Tristan reached for the bra first, his hands holding it as if it were an offering to a goddess as he put it on me. The cups cradled my bosom perfectly as he closed the fastenings. Then the panties were carefully drawn up my legs until they laid flush with my bottom, exposing as much as they were hiding.

Maybe putting the pantyhose on would be easier with me sitting, but we were locked in a tableau in the middle of the room and Tristan chose to kneel and let me support myself on his shoulders as he rolled the pantyhose up my legs and secured it to the garter belt with little clasps.

After the last clasp was in place he pulled back and seemed stunned by the sight.

"You are a vision, Victoria," he whispered reverently.

“So are you, on your knees,” I responded.

“That’s a man’s place in front of his Queen,” he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I looked over at the marvelous dress.

“Make me beautiful, my valiant servant,” I said.

“You are already beautiful,” Tristan argued. “But I can add a backdrop to make your beauty shine. That’s all this dress is.”

I knew I wasn’t plain but the three vampires seemed to be delusional about how pretty I was. The worst part? I liked that. It made something warm flare in my chest and stay with me for hours after one of the three men praised me.

The dress with its many layers was one of those costumes you could hardly put on alone but, with Tristan acting as my butler, the rich material ensconced me with barely a wrinkle to the pristine fabric. Dexterous hands tightened the fastenings at the back of the dress and looped the ends into a pretty bow. I gathered my hair into a bun and secured it with a blue ribbon, adding a flower pin to hold it in place.

My transformation into a butterfly was complete.

I spun, letting the dress flare. In Tristan’s eyes, in how they were shining with fervor of admiration, I saw the reflection of my own allure and I could almost understand how he saw me. How in his eyes I was the one who was the fairytale creature.

“Do you like it?” Tristan asked. “The outfit?”

“The lingerie?” I shot back cheekily. “Yes, I love it. Now, what would you like as

thanks for such a wonderful gift?”

“No thanks are needed,” he insisted. “It’s my privilege to be allowed to gift you happiness, in whichever form I can give it.”

“Still, I want you to ask for what you want.” I placed my hand on his chest, destroying the distance between us. I wanted to be closer. He only had to ask and I would let him explore how the lingerie fit my body.

“Is that so? Then please grant this silly old man his wish. Victoria, will you dance with me?”

That was all he was asking for? Truly a silly old man. A gentleman, a rare breed on the brink of extinction. What he meant by dancing was probably the kind of stuffy ballroom dancing I was subjected to as an upper-class socialite. I wasn’t a fan of that, to say it mildly.

“Sure, if you give me your phone and I can pick the music,” I said with a smirk.

Tristan did so without a peep of protest. When the first notes of a famous pop song started playing, I expected the older man to be thrown off his game. He surprised me by immediately jumping into action, mirroring my moves, complementing them, adding his own spins for us to integrate into the dance routine.

He was... he was really matching my freak!

After the song was over and we stopped, grinning breathlessly at each other, I reached for the phone and this time I pulled up some old-style swing.

“Darling, I was there when this dance style was first invented. Let me show you some moves.”

And, holy cow, did Tristan have moves. He responded to my steps as if he was reading my mind, and when he took my hand to lead and twirl me until I was pressed against his body or flawlessly performed the move where I slid between his legs, I felt so full of life, of energy, I could burst.

“Well, I see the old fox did get you panting, just not in the way I thought he would,” Matthias intruded after the song, his form leaning nonchalantly against the door.

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I immediately went to smack him on the head. He didn't even try to avoid the swipe, taking his due.

"You look stunning, Vic," Matthias said with sincerity that disarmed me.

"Yeah, the dress is very pretty," I agreed.

"I wasn't talking about the dress. I mean, yes, it's amazing, but I was talking about your smile. You like dancing? We can go clubbing someday."

I loved the intimacy of dancing behind closed doors but showing off on the dance floor sounded like fun as well. As long as it wasn't a gala where I had to dance with Carl wannabees, I was in.

"I will hold you to that," I nodded resolutely.

"Now that Matthias is here, I'm afraid I have to go," Tristan sent me an apologetic look. "I have made Jonas wait long enough."

"You are making the boss wait for you?!" I yelped. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"You were more important," Tristan shrugged. "Besides, I need to keep him on his left foot. A bit of unpredictability helps with negotiations. We are so close to finishing this, Victoria... Soon," he promised me.

"Soon," I responded, entranced by his fiery gaze. All that determination just for me.

Tristan threw Matthias the keys and a look.

“Lock the door when you are done and I will swing by Victoria’s room when I’m finished.”

When the older vampire left, Matthias turned to me with a shit-eating grin.

“Look, we got the key and didn’t even have to steal it! And here you are, dressed so beautifully... You know, we could desecrate Tristan’s bedroom...” Matthias suggested, his voice low and intent as he put a hand on my waist.

“We could,” I said, leaning on my tiptoes until my lips were nearly brushing his. “You could take this dress off and see the lingerie underneath.”

“Fuck,” Matthias swore and reached for the back of my head to pull me into the kiss.

His mouth was left hanging open as I ducked under his arm and planted my hands on my hips.

“We could have had that but you ran like a coward and left me to face Tristan alone! No lingerie for you!”

“But... but!” Matthias whined, not finding a real argument but wanting to protest anyway. He crossed his arms with a sulking expression. “Who said that just because I’m big and beefy I can’t be a coward... Though, I didn’t leave because I feared Tristan’s wrath. I left because I knew he was going to get all mushy on you. And I thought it would do you good... to see how caring he could be. I don’t want you to be scared of him.”

“That’s sweet of you,” I said, placing a hand on his arm. He looked at me hopefully. “Nope, still no sex.”

“Not even a peek?” Matthias practically begged.

“...I will let you see the suspenders if you unlace my back. I have somewhere to be in half an hour and I need to be in my normal clothes for that.”

“Deal!” Matthias said quickly as if he was worried I would take the offer back. “Wait, where do you have to go? I thought you weren’t working today?”

“The only concession my brother was able to negotiate when they took me as insurance for him paying our father’s debts was that I am allowed to speak to him every Sunday,” I said quietly.

“Oh, shit,” Matthias said to himself. “Here. I can give you my phone, you can call your brother, just, please, don’t be sad.”

He offered his phone readily but I shook my head.

“I don’t want to give Carl and his father any excuses. I’m only allowed to talk to him through the phone I’m given. I’m pretty sure it has recording spyware on it but we can deal with that. I want him to see I’m well, that’s all.”

Matthias’s hand tightened on the phone so much I was worried the screen would crack.

“We won’t keep you from your brother like those bastards. I promise,” Matthias said.

I smiled at his fierce protectiveness. Then I bent down to catch the edge of my dress and lifted it slowly, successfully distracting Matthias from the topic at hand.

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He licked his suddenly longer fangs. His eyes were blown as he tracked my hand. The fabric bunched to reveal just a glimpse of the crown jewel of the pantyhose; the lacy top that the suspenders were clipped to. After that tease, I let the fabric fall with a dramatic whoosh.

“If you want to see more... earn it first,” I said and turned my back to Matthias, revealing the ribbon tying the back of the dress.

He reached for me eagerly. His big hands were tested against the small fastenings but he managed to undo the double bow Tristan put in and loosen the rest of the ribbons.

“That’s enough,” I said, clutching the dress to my breasts. “Can you take my clothes out of the dryer?”

I followed Matthias into the bathroom and made sure to be artfully poised on one of the counters when he turned around. He nearly dropped my clothes at the sight of my dress raked up to above the line of my pantyhose. I dragged my hand up just a little, showing a hint of blue of my underwear.

Matthias fell to his knees in front of me and I slowly placed my foot on his shoulder and dragged it in a caress down his arm.

“Please let me, please—” Matthias begged, his hands shaking as he reached for me. He wanted to push his head between my legs so badly. I knew he would please me for hours until I could come no more if I only let him.

I pushed him away with my foot.

“No. Now give me my clothes and get out,” I said.

Matthias whined.

He truly looked like a beaten dog but I stood firm in my conviction even as I watched him deposit the clothes in my hands and skulk away with his tail between his legs. This was the sort of power I longed for; a power to say no and be listened to. It made me feel safe.

But I also liked playing with the big man. Sometimes the delayed pleasure tasted that much sweeter. If the vampires were truly going to keep me, there would be ample opportunities to reward Matthias for his patience.

I dressed in my plain clothes quickly and took care of the dress, trying not to wrinkle it too much. I left it in Tristan’s room for now, then made my way to the place appointed for the talks with my brother. Matthias followed at my heels.

Cindy greeted me with her familiar neutral expression and deposited a phone in my hand. When I opened the door to the room Matthias made to follow me in.

“Excuse me, you can’t go in there—” Cindy said in her monotone voice.

“Eh? Will you try to stop me?” Matthias loomed over the poor woman.

“Matthias, stand down, it’s alright,” I calmed him down with a hand on his arm. “It’s part of the deal. I speak to my brother alone. There’s no one in this room, see? Now, stay at the door. On this side,” I pointed to where he and Cindy stood. “I will be out in an hour.”

Matthias frowned but stayed in place when I closed the door. A thump informed me the massive vampire leaned his back against the wood, blocking the path and making

eavesdropping easier for himself. The joys of dealing with supernatural creatures. Privacy? What privacy? Fortunately, I didn't expect to find that here, as I knew I was likely being spied on by the Cornello family.

Exactly at two o'clock, the phone buzzed and I eagerly accepted the video call.

"Brother," I greeted, and felt like a weight had been lifted from my heart.

"Sis. It's good to see you, as always."

My eyes scanned Will intently. He looked tired but that was on par with what I expected; me being a hostage here not only gave him metaphorical gray hairs but also took away his support. He relied on me in both business and personal life and suddenly I was gone. Sure, I probably got the short end of the stick, but sometimes I still felt guilty about leaving him to fight for the company all alone, even if I didn't have a say in my stay here.

"What kind of shows have you been watching lately?" I asked. "You know I have to live vicariously through you. Tell me about something fun."

Will launched into a retelling of his newest sci-fi obsession and I listened eagerly, making myself comfortable on the couch in the small room. We both loved fiction in all its forms and our grandmother had cultivated our love for storytelling by sharing her stories with us. This was our tradition, to talk about inconsequential matters first. We did it to have that easy connection where we could laugh together for at least a while, and in the hopes that whoever listened to the conversation would grow bored. Only when our time together was nearing the end did we switch to the heavier topics and we tried to mask the transition with the storytelling references.

"You know, there is that one book where I'm not quite sure what to make of the characters... There's this meerkat who looks cute and acts friendly and tries to help

everyone... but surely that's too good to be true," Will said and I had to force myself not to react too visibly. A cute meerkat. That sounded like one of Grandma's stories. It sounded like our code.

"Well, it's sometimes hard to judge without knowing the person," I said carefully. "Does the meerkat have any friends? Any... companions? What does the company they keep say about them?"

"Well, he certainly doesn't like frogs," Will snorted. The various bad guys in the children's stories of our youth were often used by us in place of the Cornello family. "And there's this... thoroughbred, elegant cat hanging around the meerkat. They seem to be pretty close but the cat is definitely calling the shots. And, you know, it's one of those fancy cats, with lustrous black fur, so I don't know if it isn't a bad omen."

A friendly meerkat. An elegant black cat.

My breath caught for a moment. Theo and Tristan had made contact with my brother.

"You know better than to think black cats are bad luck," I chided. "In fact... I think this cat may turn out to be lucky for y... for the people in the story," I stopped myself from saying 'you' at the last moment but it seemed Will still got my message loud and clear.

“And the meerkat?”

“Not every smile is a mask,” I said.

“Hm. Thank you for offering a new perspective. I’m looking forward to seeing how this story progresses,” Will responded with a smile that tried to hide how monumental what I just did was.

I told him to trust Tristan and Theo.

My fingers clutched at the phone as I hoped I wasn’t going to regret my decision.

### Chapter Eighteen

Tristan

On the morning of the ninth day of our stay at Cornello’s Sunset Manor Theo and I made a trip to the local hospital. I had made a deal to supply blood not only for my party of three but to other vampires in the area as well, widening the network of suppliers I already had in place. As always, the information spread quickly among my kind, and the hospital enjoyed the influx of money that came from catering to our unusual appetites. The cut I got for setting this up would be enough to consider this side venture a success but today the hospital played an additional part in my plan.

“Reena!” Theo enthused, approaching the lone figure in the room. We have been led here by the hospital staff to wait for the freshest possible supply of blood.

“Theo, my dear,” Reena purred, after doing the routine of air kisses with Theo. “We haven’t seen each other in too long. You must come to party with me again. And you, Tristan, you can’t just keep him doing business,” she said the last word with disgust. “Such a social butterfly needs to spread his wings and fly.”

My lips quirked at the vampire in front of me. If anyone was a social butterfly it was her. She loved to be in the middle of things and that sometimes landed her in hot water, which is how I got a favor to use with her.

“I assure you, Theo is getting proper enrichment,” I said, sitting on one of the ugly plastic chairs.

“Improper too,” Theo winked. “But that’s not why we are here. How did it go at the club?”

A slow smile spread on Reena’s face.

“I managed to feed Jonas the info I was a vampire quite early in the evening. At first, I thought he wouldn’t take the bait but when my scandalous affair was dangled in front of him he couldn’t resist the upper hand,” Reena said, pleased like a cat who just got cream.

“That’s what he is blackmailing you for? An affair?” Theo asked with a raised brow. “But doesn’t your Sire have an open relationship with you?”

“You know that but Jonas doesn’t,” Reena pointed out. “He only had the word of the people in the club and, when he asked around, he got a very clear answer that Elijah was going to be pissed if he knew what I was doing.” Her eyes twinkled. “It’s always best to put a drop of truth in a lie so I went and fucked one of Elijah’s exes. He is going to be so mad. I can’t wait for the spanking.”

I snorted at how she beamed. Glutton for punishment, that one.

“So, Jonas really did it? Blackmailed you to be introduced to your Sire to pursue his dreams of becoming a vampire?”

Reena nodded.

Just as I thought, Jonas couldn't get the idea of 'immortality' and cutting his daft son out of the line of succession out of his mind. It was easy to make him commit one of the gravest crimes in the supernatural community: blackmailing one of us to get to our secrets.

The hospital attendant came into the room with three fresh bags of blood. When she left I raised my bag in a toast and the other two followed before we drank to the job well done.

With that hasty move, Jonas sealed his fate, setting the supernatural community against him.

Victoria wasn't going to be safe, even if I paid off her brother's debt — that was one of the things I realized when I learned the whole scope of her situation. Mere money would work if we didn't put a spotlight on her with our wide eyes, hungry stares, and protective stances. When Jonas saw our reactions it became a game with higher stakes than just paying the debt.

Observing Carl and Jonas at those first meetings clued me in Victoria wasn't going to be safe even after the deal with Jonas was completed. First, there was Carl and his seething obsession, which posed a real danger to Victoria. Secondly, aligning myself with Jonas and his way of doing business made it impossible not to get involved in abhorrent dealings by association. Sooner or later Victoria would learn about that and hate me. Hate us.

Yes, the Sanguine were considered part of organized crime as well but compared to what the Cornello's did... my stomach roiled at some of the things Jonas mentioned during our talks. Hard drugs, human trafficking, forced prostitution...

I wanted that man and his hellspawn gone. Only then was Victoria going to be truly safe. But taking on a whole mafia full of trained killers when I had only a small, specialized contingent of loyal workers wasn't going to be easy. Thus, I took the route of deception and laid the groundwork that was going to allow me to turn on Jonas after we got Victoria out and gained some allies.

But for that to work I had one more important step to take before tomorrow, when the contract with Jonas was going to be sealed.

Will Clement got up slowly when Theo and I entered the room. Our first meeting wasn't the most... optimal... because for all his faults Jonas wasn't stupid and when Victoria became central to his interests he put a tail on her brother. That resulted in a need for a carefully arranged situation to get the stalker's eyes off of Will for five minutes while he was in transit to a business meeting. With no prior contact with the man and such a limited time window, I acted swiftly and mercilessly to get us the needed privacy to talk.

Will didn't appreciate being dragged into a dark alley by two strangers.

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But he didn't scream for help after Theo started talking about Victoria and how we wanted to aid her. We couldn't get into the nitty-gritty details then, but I made sure Will knew our intentions and how to reach me to arrange a proper meeting.

I knew about the weekly communication between him and his sister and, just as I hoped, Will had reached out after talking to Victoria, and here we were. In a hotel room, after one of my precious Sanguine who specialized in diverting attention with their Naga abilities ensured neither Will nor Theo and I were followed here.

"She told me to trust you," Will said, even as his sweaty palms betrayed how nervous he was.

A sense of triumph and affection shot through me. Victoria had faith in us. I was going to cradle that trust in my hands and hold it as delicately as I could.

"You should trust us, for her sake," Theo nodded resolutely. "We have to get her out of there. The things they are doing to her..."

A pained expression shot through Will's face as his eyes closed for a tormented second.

"I suspected..." he said hoarsely. "Victoria couldn't always completely hide the bruises... Tell me, tell me what those bastards are doing to her. And then..." his mouth settled into a grim line. "...tell me how we are going to make them pay."

Victoria

The push came to shove only a day later.

Theo popped up in the garden, where I was watering the plants while Matthias hid under the shade of an awning. From what the vampires told me the sunshine didn't bother them in small doses but sunbathing was still inadvisable.

"It's time," Theo said, for once serious, no trace of his usual smile visible.

I followed after the two men, my fingers picking at the edge of my t-shirt nervously. They brought me to the room where it all started. At the conference table Jonas and Tristan faced each other. I should have focused on them but my gaze darted to Carl, standing to the side. His arms were crossed and a scowl was prominent on his face. He was in a bad mood. I knew what Carl in a bad mood meant. My feet froze. A firm hand on the small of my back and a cold but gentle grip on my wrist brought me back to myself. I sent a feeble smile Matthias's way and stepped forward.

They were going to keep me safe.

"Here she is, one Victoria Clement delivered," Jonas waved an uncaring hand at me. "A finishing touch to add to our deal. Now, your signature, if you please."

The mafia don slid the paper, already signed by Jonas from what I could see, toward Tristan.

"I still think we should keep her," Carl protested. "You are making a mistake, father."

The mafia leader stood up, drawing himself up to his full height, and looked at his son with what looked like disgust.

“I expect better from you than to make business decisions with your dick, son,” he said coldly. “Miss Clement, please accept my apology for the treatment my son subjected you to. After all, we will be seeing each other again, now that the Cornello family and the Sanguine are working closely together, and I wouldn’t want any bad blood between us.”

“O-of course,” I stuttered out even though I was pretty sure I was going to do everything in my power to never meet Carl or Jonas again.

“It’s done,” Tristan said as he finished the last check of the contract and signed his name with a flourish.

The two men shook hands.

Carl stared at me and when I looked back at him he silently mouthed at me.

“You are mine.”

I leaned into Matthias’ side just to see his eyes fill with impotent rage.

“Now, we still have some details to discuss,” Jonas smiled, proud of the deal he just made.

“Theo, please stay, Matthias, take Victoria home. We will join you as soon as we can,” Tristan ordered.

I turned without a word and left the room. Matthias followed after me like a loyal dog. Only when I was out in the corridor did I let myself lean on a wall and hyperventilate a little.

“Victoria? Vic?” Matthias asked worriedly, his hands hovering near me but not

touching.

“I’m alright,” I said, once I centered myself.

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“If you say so... do you want to swing by your room to pick up your things?”

I shook my head.

“Alright, I will text Theo to arrange sending everything over later.”

I just wanted to be out of here as soon as possible. Matthias had to see it in my eyes because he walked briskly towards where the garage was. The car he led me towards looked solid but quite thoroughly used. It was obvious Matthias put functionality over grand posturing via shiny coats of paint, but I had a suspicion the sleek black car next to the battered Dodge belonged to Tristan.

Soon, I found myself on the road and watched in the mirror as the Sunset Manor of the Cornello Mafia vanished behind me. Only when the building wasn't visible anymore did I let myself relax. The relief slammed into me and I practically melted into the seat.

“It will take a few hours to get home. Rest,” Matthias said.

And there it was. That word again. Home. As if it wasn't only Tristan's, or Matthias', or Theo's home but mine as well.

I couldn't be that lucky.

The steady rhythm of the road and the quiet music from the radio mixed with my emotional exhaustion and I fell asleep.

I awoke to Matthias opening the door on my side.

“We are here,” he said, presenting the view with a dramatic hand gesture. “Welcome to the Russet Manor.”

My eyes followed his hand and my eyes widened at the building in front of me.

Scrambling out, suddenly excited at the sight, I took everything in. Maybe subconsciously I had expected to see a black castle with dark clouds gathering around the towers and thunder striking in the distance, but that vision couldn't be farther from the truth. The vampire mansion looked bright, the cream and white tones giving it a cheerful lightness. The effect was only compounded as Matthias pushed the beautiful wrought iron door with glass panels open and I saw how the big windows let in sunlight, making the interior as warm as the outside facade.

The design inside was streamlined, with geometrical patterns a prominent feature. What was this style called? Art Nouveau? No, this style was decorative in a different way. Ah! Art Deco!

The best thing about it was that it was very distinctive from the Victorian opulence Jonas tried to show in his Mansion only for it to look gaudy.

“Give me a tour!” I whirled on Matthias.

“Don't you want to eat something first? Sit down?” Matthias asked.

“Nope! Tour! Now!”

Seeing my enthusiasm Matthias laughed and led me through the Mansion, narrating as he went. We went floor by floor and I was fascinated by the little glimpses I got. Then I got to my room.

“It’s yours,” Matthias gestured me inside the big room.

Too big.

It was a whole suite and there was too much space. I could live here but it didn’t speak to me. The room was already furnished, a beautiful four poster bed in the bedroom, art pieces on the walls, a rug with a geometric pattern on the floor... it has been prepared for me. Chosen for me. I would have accepted it any other day but not today.

Today was about me being free.

“Can I choose a different room?”

Matthias startled, his brows shooting up into his hairline.

“I suppose so? Do you want to?”

“Yes,” I said and led us to a smaller room. I peeked inside there a few minutes ago and I was immediately captivated by the beautiful decorative window which was a prominent feature on one of the walls.

There, depicted in the bold lines of stained glass, was a rising sun, its rays shooting in an angular pattern. The yellow of the sun was bold but the artist chose to keep the sunlight as mostly see-through white with a few bold lines of yellow shooting through.

I loved it.

“I want to stay here,” I said quietly, not knowing if I was talking only about the room, or this new home as a whole.

“Whatever you want,” Matthias reassured me.

I looked over at him slowly.

“You may come to regret those words.”

### Chapter Twenty

“Why are you covered in gold paint?” Tristan asked Matthias warily. The muscular vampire was wearing a wife-beater that showed off his physique and, yes, the gold streaks on his arms.

“Because I gave Vic the stars!” Matthias said proudly. “Is that the package from the courier? Sweet.”

Matthias took the box from Theo’s unresisting hands and skipped back inside the Manor with it.

The two vampires looked to me for an explanation.

“Just come to my room and see,” I turned and said over my shoulder.

“Um, that’s not the way to your room?” Theo questioned as we went left instead of right on the upper floor.

“It is now.”

I opened the door to my chosen room and it was total chaos.

Matthias was standing on a ladder, reaching towards the ceiling, now decorated with a myriad of golden stars, and adding even more stars to it, this time tiny fluorescent ones from the box that had just been delivered. Behind him, on two mismatched cabinets, lay the curtains we had taken down and hadn't yet replaced. Half of the furniture was pushed away from one side of the room where I decided to put a wide stripe of decorative wallpaper on the wall. The fight with the wallpaper glue was real but we won in the end.

"I see you are doing some redecorating," Tristan said, his lips twitching up at the corners.

"Is it... alright?" I asked, biting my lip. Maybe in my feverish wish for change, for making this space mine, I went a bit too far?

"Of course it is," Theo piped up. "We want you to customize your living space!"

I relaxed, seeing Tristan nod as well.

"What can we do to help?" Tristan asked.

"Ah... you don't have to..." I said, embarrassed I was pulling all of them into my bullshit.

"Nonsense," Tristan dismissed my protests gently. "Do you need help moving some of that furniture?"

"I was actually going to search for a different desk when you came..."

Theo lit up and started jumping excitedly.

“I have one you will love! It has pockets!”

As I quickly found out what Theo meant was that the old, massive desk had a plethora of secret drawers, locked compartments, and intriguing mechanisms. It barely fit through the doorway but the vampires somehow managed to squeeze it in, and it took the place of pride in the room where I promptly walled it in with bookcases, creating a small office space in a corner.

I was allowed to roam the Mansion and take back whatever took my fancy back to my room. A stained glass lamp here, a chair with six legs there. I collected items like a magpie. Over the hundreds of years the group of vampires had managed to gather quite an eclectic collection so roaming around the various rooms and storage closets was quite fascinating.

The only place they steered me away from was the basement but I just shrugged and accepted it, too busy with exploring the other areas.

“I thought you may like this,” Tristan said, presenting me with a beautiful quilt. It comprised of colorful squares, solid colors mixing with patterned ones. The underside was lined with a cool, silk-like fabric which made it perfect for the warm weather.

“Did you make it yourself?” I asked, admiring the craftsmanship.

“Ah. No. My own attempts didn’t quite yield this quality,” Tristan said, shifting a little.

“Can I see the one you did?”

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Even though the oldest vampire was embarrassed he still pulled his own quilt from the storage. The stitching wasn't as masterful as the previous work and some of the squares looked a little wobbly but I still clutched the quilt to my chest.

"Mine," I said, daring Tristan to argue.

"Yes," the vampire said. "I'm yours and all my possessions are as well."

My cheeks flared with heat at the shameless declaration.

Hours later my energy was flagging and we decided to call it a day.

For the first time in days I was left to sleep alone.

"I can't sleep... and the room smells like paint and wallpaper glue."

"Of course it does," Tristan responded to my sheepish admission with bemusement. "Then you can always use the room that was originally meant to be yours for tonight."

"It's too spacious," I mumbled, hiding my face in his arm.

"Then the couch is an option. Or any of the guest rooms. Or..." I looked up at him, hanging onto his words. "Or you can accompany me in slumber. I have been told that my mattress is to die for."

"You know how to entice," I tried to joke. The truth was, in just a few days of having

a constant ‘bodyguard’ with me, even in bed, I had somehow gotten used to having someone cuddle me to sleep. Expected it. Looked forward to it. Missed it. “I have to see if those claims are true.”

I made a high-pitched squeak as Tristan suddenly picked me up.

“No time like the present,” he said as he carried me to his bed.

The mattress was truly heavenly. As was the feeling of his arms around me.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Will tried to play it cool when he entered the room.

“Victoria,” he just gave me a warm smile.

I wasn’t having it. My body collided with his in an octopus-like hug. Once he had me in his arms he clutched back at me desperately, matching my own fervor.

“I missed you, sis. I missed you so much,” he said into my hair, his voice strained as if he was trying to hold back tears.

“I missed you too. But it’s going to be alright now,” I babbled at the speed of sound.

“Tristan, Theo, and Matthias paid your debts to the mafia and you can be free now.”

My brother’s body in my arms stiffened.

“Victoria... they didn’t pay off the debt. I did. After they bought more than half of my company.”

The whisper struck me like a knife. Somehow, I had imagined the vampires finding

the way to nullify the debt or them throwing money at Will, no strings attached. But if they owned the majority of the company now...

It meant my brother exchanged one master for another.

And so did I.

I closed my eyes and pressed my face into my brother's shoulder in despair. This wasn't the fairytale ending from one of my grandmother's stories where the monsters saved the princess like I had thought.

Still, it was better than what I had before, right? Even if the thought of using sex or feelings to manipulate the three vampires I came to care about made me nauseous. But I was going to do whatever it took to ensure my own survival and my brother's prosperity.

There was a sound of a polite throat clearing behind us. We separated reluctantly and Tristan gestured to the table in the middle of the room.

"Take a seat. We have a lot to discuss."

I tried to take a seat next to Will so that we would be a united front against the vampires but I was ushered to the other side, made to sit between Tristan and Theo while Matthias hovered at my back.

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“There’s going to be an important change in your company. A new majority shareholder,” Tristan addressed Will who looked pale at the news. They... sold us out?

“Who?” Will asked tightly.

Tristan nodded in my direction and I automatically looked over my shoulder, expecting someone new to enter the room. There was no one there except for Matthias.

Then it hit me.

“Me?” I whispered at the same time as Will sprang to his feet.

“You’re giving your shares to Victoria?!”

Tristan pushed an elegant black folder towards me. My hands shook slightly as I opened it and flipped through the pages inside. It was a contract. A legitimate agreement to give me the shares they bought.

They cared. This wasn’t an illusion. A trap. A mistake.

I should have believed them.

With that thought in mind, I took a deep breath in and spoke.

“I will agree to this but only if the contract is amended,” I said firmly.

“Victoria!” Will hissed, his eyes wide at the thought of me antagonizing the three men who were about to decide our future.

“What’s your demand?” Tristan asked simply, his silver eyes focused on me and only me.

“Those papers say I would get the 60% of the company’s stocks which would make me the majority shareholder. I want my brother to have the majority of the stocks instead,” I said, tapping at the contract.

“Ha! I told you so!” Theo said smugly and pulled a second contract out of nowhere. “Your brother currently has only 30%, with various individuals sharing the leftover 10%, so here’s a contract that will give him a bonus 21% and leave 39% to you.”

“You... expected this?” Will asked weakly.

“We had a bet going,” Matthias said then huffed. “I still think you should give all of it to your brother, Vic. Who wants to deal with all the taxes, and shareholder meetings, and paperwork? Ugh.”

“It seems Theo won that bet, so I know what his guess was but what was yours?” I asked Tristan.

“Well, I thought you would keep the majority shares because it would give you more control and thus peace of mind. And it seemed backward to me that the company went only to your brother and not to you both after your father’s death,” Tristan explained.

“He just wanted you to be a total girlboss and step on him,” the vampire behind me commented.

“Matthias!” Tristan spluttered.

“I will happily leave the company to my brother,” I said. “After all, if I’m too busy girlbossing I won’t have enough time for the three of you...”

“Oh god, you four are really fucking,” Will blurted and then looked horrified at himself.

“You always told me to aim high in my romantic pursuits,” I said smugly. “I think I finally found someone, someones, deserving me.”

My right hand tangled in Tristan’s tie, while the left alighted on Theo’s arm. I tilted my head just a little, until Matthias took the hint and placed a kiss in my hair.

“Uh. You look pretty powerful and terrifying, sis. Keep that up,” Will said, finally understanding what I myself comprehended just a minute ago.

I was the most powerful person in the room because the three vampires would do anything for me.

## Chapter Twenty-two

That evening, when Will went home with a new contract in tow after spending the afternoon with me and dining with all of us, I corralled the vampires into my bedroom.

I let myself get lost in their kisses and soft touches before I dared to utter my deepest desire.

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“How far are you willing to go for me?” I asked.

“To the ends of the Earth and further,” Matthias said, a wild beast kneeling at my feet.

“Command us, love,” Theo whispered in my ear,

I let myself imagine what I truly wanted, no holds barred.

“Destroy Jonas, destroy Carl. Destroy their whole organization. I want to watch them burn,” I snarled.

Tristan laughed. It was a laugh full of joy.

“We were only waiting for you to ask, my Queen.”

“They hurt you,” Matthias growled. “We were never going to let them live.”

“The negotiations took so long not only because Jonas was trying to milk us for all he could but because we were preparing for this moment,” Theo said smugly and kissed my neck.

“Tell me,” I gasped out. “Tell me how you are going to destroy them and fuck me.”

“Remember the Persimmon Nightclub? We let them negotiate full ownership of it and made it seem like it was a huge loss for us...” Tristan started explaining while his sharp claws cut my shirt to ribbons. Matthias took hold of the fabric and ripped it

apart, making me gasp. "...but the truth is the club started to be too popular for our needs. In consequence of that the cops started sniffing around too much and we had to keep everything squeaky clean. No dirty deals, no drugs, no paid fun, no space for supernatural creatures."

"All the things Jonas' people immediately started doing when they got their paws on the club, those idiots," Matthias snorted, looking up at me. His hands were busy playing with my tits that were still trapped in my bra.

"So, now we just have to send a few tips to the police and they will bring hell on Jonas' people," Theo continued, his hands undoing the clasp of my bra swiftly.

"Won't they just... ah... buy those cops?" I asked as Tristan started peeling me out of my trousers.

"Not if we buy them first," was the smug reply from the vampire leader. "We already reached out to our contacts in the police and struck a deal that they will bring every case possible against the new owners of the club and in exchange we will keep the Persimmon club as it was before when we get it back: a legit, profitable business and not a front for under the table dealings. The cops don't care about crime everywhere; they only care about not having to deal with it in their precinct."

By the time the older man finished speaking, I was completely naked. Following the words was hard when I was stretched between the three of them, caressed with so many hands, seen to so attentively, but this one example told me what I wanted to know: they knew what they were doing. Carl was going to burn in hell of my own making. I would ask for other details later but for now...

"He will regret ever touching me," I said with venom. Then, with no less heat but with a completely different meaning, I addressed my three lovers. "Bite me. Show me I'm yours."

To no one's surprise, Matthias was the first one to sink his teeth into me. I cried out as he bit into my sensitive inner thigh, making my pussy throb with arousal. Theo was next. He kissed my hand before I felt the sharpness of his pointed canines in my wrist. The pain spiked before it blossomed into the slowly unfurling heat that was becoming more familiar and more addictive with each day. That left only one.

Tristan reached a hand to caress my throat from behind. The slender fingers slowly, oh so slowly, moved to my chin, turning my head to make me expose my neck and the thundering pulse there. The anticipation was killing me. The slow stretch of the pale column of my throat was a tease for all of us.

I wanted, no, I needed all three of them in me in this incredible, exquisite, unique way. I tried to speak but only a whimper left my lips.

That was still enough.

Tristan bit into my neck and joined all of us in a spiral of ecstasy. I gave my blood willingly, intoxicated by the effects their feeding always had on me. I still wasn't sure if it was a chemical reaction or something more esoteric, like magic, but my sensitivity was cranked up until I felt more like an animal than a human, and could only wordlessly beg for more with moans and whimpers.

I was suspended in this state of bliss for what felt like hours even though logically I knew it was only a few minutes. My lovers were careful not to drain me completely; even with a potion prepared to help replenish my blood, made with the best medical ingredients and a pinch of magic, waiting for me on the table, there were limits to what we could do.

Good, I thought dazedly as the vampires finished their feeding and licked at my wounds to make the skin knit together. If they took more I would have fallen apart just from being sucked dry.

As it was, the sensation still pushed me right to the edge. By the smirk on Matthias's face, he knew how close I was. I expected Matthias to unceremoniously spread my legs and shove inside, filling me with his cock, but Tristan had a different plan in mind.

"You are going to take all of us today, beautiful," he told me. "Let's start with the smallest of us and then spread you open on a bigger and bigger prize, hmm?"

The groan I gave was positively filthy. Tristan effortlessly taking charge of the situation was a dream come true.

"You know what? I don't even mind having the smallest dick," Theo said resolutely then smiled, the brilliance of that smile almost too bright to stand. "Because that means I can go first."

He hefted me onto the floor until I was kneeling on the carpet, his slender form in contrast with the effortless strength he exhibited. My upper body was pressed into the bed by Matthias's heavy palm while Tristan chose to keep eye contact with me and watch hungrily as my eyes filled with the haze of arousal, my mouth opened in a cry when Theo pushed in.

He may be the smallest of the group but he knew how to move just right. Theo sank into me easily and made a few experimental thrusts to gauge my reactions. Thanks to his careful consideration he noticed how I liked it when he made the press inside nice and slow but yanked his hips harshly when he pulled back. That made for a maddening pace, resulting in me clutching the sheets when he was finally sheathed inside, only for that feeling of fullness to be wrenched away. My body translated this torture into absolute bliss. I was so close to the edge I could taste it on my tongue.

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“Nice and slow, that’s it,” Theo murmured behind me. “You are gripping me so sweetly. It’s just like a hug. I love hugs.”

I tried to hide my burning face in the sheets but Tristan took objection to it.

“Don’t try to hide from us, kitten,” he warned, his fist clenched in my hair. “We will always find you.”

“Then tell, ah, t-tell Theo not to say such embarrassing things!” I protested.

“Oh boy, now you have done it,” Matthias sighed.

Before I could ask what he meant I had my answer as Theo took my words as a challenge and started talking. Or rather spewing nonsense.

“My beautiful love muffin, pumpkin, sugarplum, honeycakes, buttercup, you can’t deny that a thread of fate binds us. We are soulmates, my love for you is so potent even Aphrodite is jealous. As she should be, because the legendary golden apple for the most beautiful woman would surely belong to you.”

He pressed those words into my skin between soft kisses bestowed upon my back. They were absolutely ridiculous! Over the top! Insane!

To my great shame, I still came when he murmured them to me.

And he was. Still. Talking.

“Will you let me fill you with my seed, my goddess?”

“Yes... yes, yes! Do it!” I groaned, my words slurring as the waves of my orgasm turned into pulsing between my legs, as if my pussy wouldn’t be satisfied without milking the cock which gave me so much pleasure.

Finally, Theo’s rhythm faltered from his studious pace and he pounded into me with a series of increasingly high-pitched gasps. It was his turn to lose it. I wanted to put that nail in the coffin and seeing as words worked on me...

“Fill me up, until I’m brimming with it,” I said. “Show me how much you love me.”

Theo bit a curse and spilled into me, hopeless to stop the orgasm that made him grind into me in small, aborted thrusts. He never pulled too far away, as if he didn’t want even a drop of his seed to escape.

Satisfied, I closed my eyes and imagined I could feel the warmth of his cum inside of me.

Still panting, the blond vampire pulled out of me. I made a short sound of dissent before I remembered what me being empty foreshadowed.

My eyes snapped open to meet Tristan’s red gaze. The leader, the Sire, the man who freed me, had better control over his vampiric side than the other two, so I knew with certainty that the fiery eyes, prominent sharp fangs, and sharp claws made an appearance on purpose. There was an aura of danger about him, a subconscious warning an animal would feel when meeting a predator. My hair stood on end as his lips curled into a wicked smile.

“Theodore has treated you like a gentleman should, all sweet words and gentle touches...” Tristan wound the hand in my hair tighter and pulled me up by it. “...but

we both know sometimes gentleness and praise is the opposite of what you want. Isn't that right, Victoria?"

The oldest vampire moved, stepping behind me and pulling me with him until I teetered precariously on my knees, as he pulled me back until my spine was bent and I was looking up at him with my head pulled as far back as possible. The muscles of my abdomen quivered trying to keep me from falling over, the forced position immediately flooding my body with adrenaline.

"You are the plan guy here," I breathed out, swallowing with difficulty. "Show me what else besides gentleness is there to experience. Give it to me."

His hand shoved me forward as he let go of my hair. I caught myself against the edge of the bed with my hands.

"Follow," Tristan ordered, stepping towards the door. When I made to stand up he made a chastising sound with his tongue that made shame and something else burn hotly in my body. "Crawl."

My hands trembled as I made that first move towards conscious debasement and placed my palms, then my forearms on the floor, hesitating for only a second before I started to crawl towards the suited back.

"Holy shit, what a sight," Matthias commented from the side. I faltered for a moment before I gritted my teeth and focused all of my attention on keeping pace with Tristan's leisurely walk.

He led me to a place just a few rooms down from mine, to what was known as the reading room. It was a small library (as opposed to the massive one on the third level of the mansion) and the room was designed for the perfect reading experience. There were reading nooks by the windows and in the alcoves, an electric fireplace shedding

merry light, an assortment of pillows and different sitting arrangements...

And in the middle of the room was The Chair.

It was one of those antique monstrosities, all handmade, beautifully patterned, sturdy but soft. Tristan had to have caught me looking at it too intensely, as I let my imagination run wild, because he took a seat in it like a king and pointed between his legs.

“Show me what those whorish lips of yours can do, Victoria.”

Maybe if it was another day I would protest that I wasn't a whore, but today I was still tingling from my last orgasm and the thought of doing anything to jeopardize a chance of having that beautiful long cock between my lips was painful. Why protest when he was offering me exactly what I wanted and the debasing word sparked a fire inside of me?

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I crawled between his spread legs and reached with my hands towards his zipper but I stopped inches away from my prize as something occurred to me. My gaze lifted to search Tristan's face.

"You are learning, pet," the arch of his brow spoke of approval. "No hands. Use your mouth."

I licked my lips then got to my tasks, pushing my face into Tristan's groin to undo the top button with my teeth. Surprisingly it gave me less resistance than the zipper I had to deal with next. The metal took a few tries to grab securely enough to pull the zipper down over the already prominent bulge in the older man's pants.

I furrowed my brows, determined to get it right, and was finally rewarded with the zipper reaching the lowest point. I nuzzled into the revealed bulge, breathing in the heady scent of arousal.

"You just can't wait to have it, can you?" Tristan asked. "Let's see how my cock looks when it's spreading those sinful lips."

He pulled his cock out of his silky black boxers and I had to close my mouth to not let the saliva escape. The long, graceful erection with veins throbbing with stolen blood was utterly perfect. A heavenly sight. Or maybe a hellish one, as it made the fire in my groin flare into a fiery tornado. Unsure if I could use my hands for this, I reached out with my tongue, giving a testing lick to snatch the drop of precum gathering at the top.

Once the taste spread over my tongue I groaned and dove in for more.

“Your lips were made for this. For cocksucking,” Tristan said, his voice breathy as I enveloped him with my hot mouth. “Nexttime you should wear red lipstick so that you can smear it all over my cock.”

I whimpered at the image he was creating and doubled my efforts, taking him deeper until the head of his long cock was reaching into my throat.

“For now, I will satisfy myself with another way to make your lips all red.”

A hand in my hair followed the declaration and, from one second to the next, I found my throat being viciously fucked. Tristan used a mix of pulling on my hair and lifting his hips off the armchair to invade my mouth so relentlessly he practically fucked the gag reflex out of me. All I could do was grip desperately at the rich upholstery and keep myself open.

When he pulled me back after a few minutes of this unrelenting pace I was drooling, my eyes hazy, and glistening, the tears in the corners of my eyes a natural physical reaction to being so thoroughly used.

He wasn't done. Far from it.

“As much as I would like to make you choke on my cum, fill your belly with it until it would be the only thing you could think about when you are hungry, I want to fill your pussy more,” those red eyes looked hard, sharp as a diamond. “Climb up, sweetheart.”

The hand around his cock left no guesses as to what he meant.

I tried to get up from my knees and found two sets of hands helping me. Matthias and Theo were here, watching, and now they were positioning me in Tristan's lap, putting me on his cock.

Fuck, that was too hot.

A keen made it past my now thoroughly fucked and reddened lips, as the lengthy cock pressed between my folds and found my pussy. I sank down onto it easily, still wet not only from my own peak but slick with Theo's cum. I could feel it dripping down my thighs and I felt a little thrill at making Tristan's elegant clothes dirty.

Immediately, I used all of my energy to bounce on that amazing cock, letting my moans spill freely from my lips. Soon, my thighs started burning and I felt myself slowing down.

And Tristan was nowhere close to coming.

In fact, when I opened my eyes he looked bored. He lifted a brow at me, nothing more than his breaths coming a little faster to indicate that he was being ridden.

Embarrassed anger sparked deep in me and I did the only thing I could think of to make the aloof vampire react.

I bit his neck.

My teeth barely grazed the pale column of flesh before I was violently pulled back, my hair once more a leash around Tristan's fist.

I got what I wanted.

Tristan wasn't playing at being unaffected anymore. His eyes were shining with terrifying light, power rolling off him in waves. My pussy throbbed around his cock and I felt it jerk inside of me in response.

"Are you ready to fuck me properly?" I asked breathlessly.

“Be careful not to bite more than you can chew, little bird,” Tristan said. His voice was so low and rough it caused a shiver to go down my spine.

Slowly, deliberately, he set one, then two hands on my ass, letting the moment of anticipation stretch into infinity.

Then he pulled me up as if I weighed nothing, until only the head of his throbbing cock remained inside of me.

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“Ready?” Tristan asked. I nodded fervently only for him to give me a wicked grin. “No, you are not.”

I wasn’t.

Tristan dropped me down then moved me up with speed and strength that could only come from being a supernatural being. The force behind his thrusts was staggering and made me clutch at him and cry out repeatedly. It felt like I didn’t even have time to breathe, as the air was pushed out of my lungs each time I was dropped onto his cock.

My orgasm felt like a punch to the gut.

It didn’t even have time to crest before Tristan was wringing another one out of me. His vicious precision and single-mindedness were terrifying. And it was exactly what I had asked for: to have all his focus on me. To be shown the alternative to gentleness.

Tristan came deep in me, his head thrown back and a snarl of pleasure that looked almost like pain on his face. It made me wonder if he was keeping his orgasm at bay all this time through his powers just so he could play with me for longer.

Ruin me better.

I writhed in his lap, gaining a punched-out sound and another spurt of cum before Tristan opened his eyes and pierced me with his gaze.

“Are you enjoying having the cum of two different men inside of you?” he said, letting his voice carry so that I knew Matthias and Theo heard it as well. “Don’t be afraid of the truth, sweetheart.”

“It will be cum of three men soon,” I said cheekily, despite the blush on my face. “Right, Matthias?”

As if he was just waiting for his clue, Matthias gathered me off Tristan’s lap and laid me down in one of the reading spaces I was very fond of: It was a nook filled with fluffy cushions and soft blankets. Gauzy curtains and fairy lights added to the charm of the space. I had wondered if this nook was always here but the clues pointed to one conclusion: it was made with me in mind. Just another gift left for me in the mansion by those wonderful men who didn’t even want credit for their thoughtfulness.

And now, it was time to make more positive memories of the little nook.

“Just lie down and let me do all the work,” Matthias said seriously.

“Oh? You want me to be a pillow princess?” I asked.

“Didn’t we establish that you are our Queen? But yes, I want you to relax and enjoy yourself. Tell me what I can do for you, beautiful.”

“Kiss me,” I blurted out. The previous experiences of the night were wonderful but suddenly I wanted nothing more but to feel that visceral connection between us represented in a soft press of lips.

Matthias gave me just what I wanted and more. His kisses were full of reverence, as if being able to merely touch my lips was a gift even greater than his second life. He bracketed my body, making sure not to put his weight on me. One of his hands dared to reach for a strand of my hair to play with. I was his whole world and it was

intoxicating.

“Make love to me,” I said, then covered my face with my hands, trying to hide behind them. How was this, this, more embarrassing than asking Tristan to fuck me? But the embarrassment was worth it when Matthias gently pried my hands apart and I saw his smile.

“I want nothing more,” Matthias said fervently. “Just... let me take care of you. Trust me.”

I did.

It showed in how I went limp under his guiding hands, letting him arrange me however he wanted until I was splayed on my side with his strong chest behind me. He lifted one of my legs, his big hand secure above my thigh as he sank into me gently.

Even after everything that had been done to me today, taking it from the back from Theo and the wild ride that was Tristan, taking Matthias was still on a different level. His thickcock pushed between my folds and into my cum-slicked pussy, stretching me, pressing against all those points that brought me pleasure at the same time.

It could have been overwhelming but the gentle pace and the kisses Matthias peppered over my shoulders made it into an infinitely more pleasurable slow descent into bliss.

“This mole over here, at the back of your neck... I want to kiss it every day before we go to sleep,” Matthias whispered just for me. His hips rocked into me unhurriedly. “And the way your breasts move when I push into you... it’s like everything about you is designed to make me crazy. I had to wait decades to meet you... but you were worth the wait.”

Like this, with Matthias's love shown through words and actions, I let the world around me slow to almost a dream-like state. The fairy lights and the sheer curtains moving in the wind of the open window only elevated the feelings inside of me. The lovemaking I was subjected to seemed like something too good to be true, just a fantasy. But Matthias's voice and the heat of his cock inside of me were too real to ignore. His fervent declarations too meaningful to not believe in them.

I shuddered into an orgasm in his arms and when he came in me with a long groan, my name on his lips...

With all three men I cherished inside of me I felt complete.

## Chapter Twenty-three

A week after I gained my freedom we were preparing for a dinner out. I was excited to finally wear the dress Tristan bought me and I had spent two hours getting my hair and makeup just perfect. Even so, I was the first one ready and when it was a minute past the time we agreed to gather at the door to the Russet Manor and Theo wasn't there yet, I ran to get him. Tistan and Matthias followed after me with amusement.

I knocked on the door and at Theo's invitation threw it open.

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“Just a moment,” Theo said distractedly. “I’m deciding if I want the blue tie or the green and silver one...”

I scanned the two ties lying on the bed with interest and skipped up to them.

“This one!” I said, grabbing the pretty green and silver tie. “Let me put it on you...”

“Vic, don’t—”

“It’s not a good idea—”

Tristan and Matthias’ voices rang out simultaneously as I took a step towards Theo and, instead of his normal smile, I saw fear on his face.

I froze as Theo stumbled back, away from me, his breathing fast and unsteady.

“What...?” I asked in confusion, concern growing in my mind as Theo’s back hit his wardrobe and he slid to the floor.

“Matthias, please escort Victoria out,” Tristan said calmly.

“Oh shit, yeah,” Matthias said and tugged at my elbow.

I was lost but I let myself be led out.

“Is Theo all right?” I asked once Matthias sat me down in the kitchen and proceeded to make tea.

“He has not been all right for a long time,” Matthias said mournfully. “It’s better now, so much better than years ago, but he still has his triggers.”

“The tie...?” I asked, looking at the fabric I was still clutching in my hand. But even as I asked the question I knew that wasn’t the answer. Theo was calm when he was choosing between the two ties so that alone wasn’t enough to trigger such a reaction. I knew it was likely something connected to Theo’s father being an abusive piece of shit but I didn’t know all the details about that situation.

“He hates anyone choosing what he should wear,” Matthias explained. “And actually trying to put clothes on him gets you the reaction you saw.”

“Oh,” I said quietly. “I didn’t mean to...”

“We know,” Tristan’s voice piped up from the doorway and I snapped my head up. “Theo knows that too.”

“Shouldn’t you be with him? Will he be all right all alone?” I blurted out, my fingers digging into the soft fabric of the tie in a nervous gesture.

“He asked for some space. And for me to explain things to you.”

Tristan sat next to me and, with a mug of hot tea Matthias prepared in my hands, I listened to Theo’s story. My heart broke, then the pieces were stomped on and ground to dust. The youngest vampire had suffered so much. I wanted to scoop him up and bundle him up until he was soft and cozy, cuddling in bed with me.

No, I corrected myself in my mind, I want to invite him into that cozy nest, to give him a choice because he needs that, to have his independence respected, more than softness.

The next day, when Theo and I saw each other at breakfast, I was opening my mouth to apologize but Theo spoke first.

“I’m sorry we missed our dinner date because of me.”

“What?” I blinked at him. “No, Theo, that wasn’t your fault! I don’t care about the dinner, your well-being is more important.”

He slumped in his chair, a picture of misery.

“I’m just tired of inconveniencing others, inconveniencing myself, with this bullshit. I hate that, even now, when my bastard of a father is six feet under, he still affects my life so much,” Theo said. I didn’t know what to say to make it better so I just made a soft noise, to signal I was listening. “You know, once upon a time being dressed by someone who loved me was a wonderful experience. Why do I have to lose this forever?” He raised his eyes to mine. “I want you to dress me, or for me to dress you, and not be scared of that.”

He wanted to reclaim what was taken from him by force. My mouth opened to utter an idea I suddenly had but I closed my lips, worried it wasn’t the right thing to say.

“What? You have something to say?” Theo asked. His voice sounded exhausted.

“Ah... it’s probably not a good idea...” I hesitated.

Theo’s eyes flared.

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“I’m not fragile, Victoria. Tell me,” he said sternly.

“You did try therapy, right?” I asked. Theo nodded.

“It helped a lot but there are things I can’t just get over,” Theo shrugged.

“Therapy often has a conventional approach... what if I told you I had some ideas for a less conventional method? Would you be willing to try them?”

I was nervous because I didn’t want to make things worse and this was a big gamble but Theo looked intrigued at my proposition. He straightened in his seat, his eyes alert, now that he was offered a new road that wasn’t wallowing in self-pity.

“Let’s do it,” he said with a smile.

### Chapter Twenty-four

The online shops are a wonderful thing. You can get anything and get it shipped to you the very next day. I made my selection carefully and bought not one outfit but several, in the hopes of my plans for Theo going well. Now that I was out from under Jonas’ thumb, I could pay for all of that myself but, at one point in my stay at Russet Manor, Tristan pulled me aside and presented me with a credit card in his name.

“I know you have your own money, especially with the new shares in the company... but I would like you to use my card when shopping,” Tristan said. His cheeks had a slight dusting of pink. Ah, so that’s how it was.

“Yeah? You want me to buy myself some pretty things?” I purred, caressing the credit card with my fingers. “Be your little sugar baby?”

“Theo and Matthias use my card as well!” Tristan protested.

“Yeah, because you like to provide and it makes you happy to see them use your money. But I think when I use this card happiness isn’t going to be the only thing you will experience, hmm?”

Tristan swallowed hard. His tongue darted out to moisten his lips as his eyes darkened at my teasing.

“Why don’t you try it and find out?”

Remembering that conversation, I added a few things for myself and sent three electronic receipts to Tristan’s email. Two of those were for beautiful but classy ruby earrings and a very special necklace. The other one... I grinned to myself, imagining Tristan's expression at the sight of my surprise.

Two days later, I dressed in a sharp suit, put on the ruby earrings that were just delivered, and made the trip to attend my first company meeting as a big shareholder. I asked to borrow Matthias and it turned out to be a brilliant idea; the imposing man following behind me made a few of the men already waiting in the conference room swallow their comments when they saw me with my shadow.

When everyone — the board of directors, the shareholders, and the specialists invited to present their reports — had gathered, Will started the meeting. He made an announcement about the current share percentages and introduced me as the new shareholder.

The board of directors greeted me with reactions from enthusiasm to cold

professionalism. Most of them remembered me from my previous work in the company and even those who didn't like me had learned to respect me.

The shareholders, however...

After the standard summary of the company's profits, various initiatives, and challenges, it came time for more detailed reports and proposed changes. When it was time for me to present my idea I could feel the sneering stares of the two of the shareholders boring into my back.

"Achieving business efficiency means maximizing resources, reducing costs, and increasing productivity. I would like to propose ways to improve the last metric. As we can see on the graph here..."

"Excuse me, but aren't you just a shareholder?" One of the men who was a shareholder himself lifted his arm. His words didn't sound like a vicious jab but polite confusion wasn't much better. Especially when the two men who seemed to have a problem with me immediately followed the line of questioning.

"Yeah, what credentials do you have to present this?" A balding man fumed. Ah. It had to be Johnson, the eternal pain in my brother's ass.

"Funny. You didn't pose this question to the man who presented before me," I said, holding his gaze as he fumed.

"You aren't answering because you don't have any qualifications, do you?" A man who looked no older than me asked snidely. "Honestly, Mister Clement, giving your sister nearly half of the company as a handout and now making her present research that isn't hers? This isn't a good look."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Will tensing, ready to intervene, and

Matthias gritting his teeth as I quelled his urge to slug the man with a look. I could handle this myself. But before I could speak a laugh filled the room and I heard a quieter chuckle follow.

I transferred my gaze to the two men who I didn't expect to backstab me. One of them was a long-time shareholder who I knew personally, Luis, and the other was someone who I met for the first time but who I had assumed to not be a dickhead from the way he looked interested when I started to speak.

"Is something funny?" I asked tersely.

"Hilarious, actually," Luis said. "It shows who here had read the reports available to shareholders." He turned to address the two dissidents. "If you read the deep-dive statistics from two years ago you would know Miss Clement's name. She has coordinated many of the improvement efforts in this company and has worked with our Big Data department as an expert in the field."

"Well, I got shares just this year, so I couldn't know that!" the young man protested stubbornly.

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“You could,” the man who had chuckled rolled his eyes. “I’m a new shareholder too, but I did my research before I invested, Mister Boyle.”

“Ah, so it seems that the only person who got a handout from a rich family member without having qualifications is you,” I said sweetly to Boyle.

“You...!”

I clapped my hands together, gathering the attention back to me.

“As that’s settled let’s return to the matter at hand. The graph here shows...”

I continued my presentation without being disturbed. They were all going to learn to take me seriously. With how few shares were left to those outside of my family’s influence, we didn’t have to really listen to the rest of the shareholders and Will could force any resolution he wanted, but it was a good form to not alienate rich business people. I already had allies and the others could be persuaded when they saw how well the company was prospecting and how much money we were making for them. Between me and Will I was confident in the company’s future.

The way Matthias watched me hungrily as I took charge of the room was a nice bonus.

When the meeting was done I hurried Matthias outside.

“I want your cock between my lips,” I get on tiptoes to whisper the dirty words into his ear. “Come on.”

I took his big hand in my small one and pulled him toward the closest bathroom. When I pushed him into a stall Matthias swore and quickly pulled his business jacket off, dropping it to the floor while he took a seat on the closed toilet. My knees were thankful for his forward thinking as I sank down between his legs.

“Talk to me,” I demanded as I opened his trousers and pulled his rising cock out.

He wasn’t fully hard yet but I knew he was going to get there. I paid close attention to all the vampires getting the sustenance they needed for optimal functioning and I was sure we could do this without opening the fine wine that was my lifeblood.

“Ah, Victoria. You are a sight. A dream come true. Mmm, yes, sweetheart, lick like that. It was, ah, hard to control myself there, when all those idiots tried to stand in your way.”

I pulled my lips off his cock with a wet pop.

“Are you disappointed you didn’t need to show off your strength?” I asked, looking up at him.

“No. Watching you put those men in their place was much hotter,” Matthias grinned. “Though watching you punch someone in the dick could be even better. A man can dream.”

“No, thank you, that could destroy my nails,” I snorted. “You know, girlbossing is awesome but also tiring. Now, I just want to relax. Make me forget anything besides you exists.”

“You want to live for my cock?” Matthias growled. “Open up then.”

My spit-slicked lips fell open. The vampire fed me his thick cock until I was straining

to take it all. It got even wider in the middle and I always had trouble making myself open enough to get past that point. But Matthias massaged my jaw with his thumb, coaxing me to accept more of him.

“That’s it. Look at you, working so hard to take me down. Nnn, fuck, your lips are positively sinful. Now, I’m going to push and you are going to take me all the way down.”

I moaned around his cock in approval then had to master myself when he rocked back and forward, getting past the thickest point. Once the true girth was behind my teeth the rest slid into my mouth easily. A bit too easily, as the thrust pressed straight into my throat. My gag reflex threatened to undo me but I pushed it down, my fingernails biting into my hand as I tried to concentrate on a different sensation.

“None of that,” Matthias said as he pulled back, leaving only the head lying on my tongue. “No hurting yourself, precious.”

Ah, my fingernail bit too hard into my skin and it left a scratch on my skin. Conceding his point I transferred my hands to his thighs. I could dig in with my fingers all I wanted there and Matthias only gave me a moan of appreciation at the tiny pinpricks of pain.

Then he truly started to fuck my mouth. Just like I wanted the world fell away and all the troubles with it. I only had to be warmth and suction. Wetness and uncontrolled noises. I had a thought that if anyone entered the toilet now I was too far gone to stop. Nothing was going to come between me and the satisfaction of wringing every drop of cum out of Matthias’s huge dick.

“God, Vic, Vic, fuck, I’m so close, ah—!” I dug my fingers into his thighs when he tried to pull back and he spilled straight down my throat. So deep I didn’t even taste the saltiness of his spend. But I knew it was in me and it was all I wanted. All I

needed.

I pulled off his cock with a satisfied rumble and laid my head on his knee.

“Do you want your turn now, baby?” Matthias asked with a languid smile of a well-satisfied man.

“No, thank you. Don’t worry about me, I have plans for later.”

“Do those plans have something do to with the new earrings?” Matthias thumbed the tiny rubies decorating my ears. “You keep touching them.”

“Am I that obvious?” I blushed, touching the earrings again on instinct. “They are a gift from Tristan.”

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“I see,” Matthias helped me get to my feet and in the small space of the stall we were so very close, pressed together. “Have fun. And Vic? Tell me all about it later.”

I made my way to Tristan’s office the moment we were back home. He was sitting behind his big oak desk and comparing notes but the moment I walked in the door all that razor-sharp attention settled on me. I made sure my high heels clicked on the hardwood floor as I made my way closer.

“Do you like your investment?” I said, tilting my head just right to expose my neck.

The ruby earrings were pretty but it was really the necklace that was the crown jewel here.

The shocked breath Tristan took at the sight of the bloody necklace circling my neck was immensely satisfying. Tristan’s eyes took in the four rows of white pearls and fixated hungrily on the part at the front where the pearls were stained crimson and rubies dripped down in strings of red in imitation of blood dripping from my neck.

The vampire half stood from his seat, made feral by my provocation.

“Come here,” his voice had a quality to it, a certain pull, as if he was resisting using his powers on me and losing the battle, as his wits were scattered around him.

My steps led me to the desk and I leaned over it. The moment I was close enough Tristan reached out a hand to caress the necklace, then followed his fingers with his mouth, his tongue flicking out to lick at the bloody pearls. It wasn’t real blood but Tristan still groaned.

I had a feeling he was in awe of how beautiful I looked, adorned with the bloody necklace. Tristan was almost hypnotized, spellbound by my choice of jewelry.

Affecting him like this was glorious. I shivered with anticipation at what he was going to do to me for this stunt.

“Enchanting. Victoria, are you trying to drive me mad? If so, you had succeeded,” Tristan pressed two fingers under the choker, making it even tighter. "But those pretty earrings and the necklace weren't the only things you bought for yourself. Show me the other one," Tristan demanded.

"Say please and maybe I will," I purred.

His eyes flashed.

"You know, I don't need your purchase," Tristan said, unbothered by my taunt. "Because I have a whole chest of toys I can use on you. If you are a good girl maybe someday I will show you what's waiting for you in there."

Fuck, he had me.

I set the box I took with me on the table in front of Tristan, but he didn't reach for it.

“I said: show me,” he said with steely expectation in his tone.

My sharp breath in reverberated through the room. Under his fiery gaze, I opened the box and pulled out the toy. A big, purple cock. A ribbed, vibrating dildo.

“I see you couldn't resist taking a peek. Did you use it, darling? Were you a naughty girl?” Tristan asked, noticing the dildo was already cleaned and the batteries were put in.

I shook my head.

“I just wanted to look at it.”

“Did you imagine riding it during your business meeting?”

I shook my head again but the way I licked my lips had to reveal I was skimming the truth because Tristan raised his elegant eyebrow at me.

“Not during the meeting. But after,” I admitted with a blush. “I sucked Matthias off in the company’s bathroom.”

“Hmm, I can’t decide if that was you being a naughty girl or a good girl,” Tristan grinned. “How about you try out this toy while I think on it?”

“You aren’t going to...?” I said with embarrassed yearning but then I noticed his hand reached for the remote and my eyes blew wide.

Oh yes, if he wanted a show I was going to give him one.

I could have moved this to the bedroom but why bother when Tristan’s office had such a big desk just perfect to sprawl on?

The tight business suit that clung to me like a second skin suddenly felt too small and I shed it quickly, eager to show what was underneath.

“Oh, Victoria, you have dressed like this to the company meeting?” Tristan asked, his voice getting lower at the sight of my lingerie. The intense red color of it was like a flag waved at a bull. The color matched the bloody rubies of my necklace perfectly. Tristan’s right hand clenched on the sidebar of his chair when I got onto his desk and swung my legs over the edge, bracketing him between them.

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He had a perfect view of my lacy panties and bra as I reached for the dildo and slid it over my body, directing his gaze from my neck, over my breasts and taut stomach, then down, down, down, until I was rocking against the purple monstrosity through the red fabric.

“It made me feel, ah! More confident in myself. All those men looking at me and not knowing what lay underneath my pristine clothes.”

“Such a wicked kitten,” Tristan said with approval. “Now, I want my other purchase to be put to good use. Put it in, sweetheart.”

I yelped as the dildo in my hands came to life, vibrating just for a moment, sending shocks through my pussy, before it went still once more.

Feeling that vibrating inside of me was going to destroy me. I wanted that. I wanted it now, so I pulled the skimpy lingerie to the side and revealed my wet pussy. My arousal churned in me from the moment I was back at the Russet Mansion and decided to visit Tristan and I was already dripping. Even so, the first press of the purple cock between my folds, slipping inside of me, took my breath away. The rigid solidity of the silicone toy was different from a real cock but, in this instance, mixed with the inhumane ridges spiraling along the purple surface, it only added to my enjoyment. The flared head slid in with a pop and I looked between my legs to observe with anticipation as the first ridge approached my entrance. It was only a small bump but when it repeated twice, thrice, five times, the sensation magnified. The ridges stimulated all the sensitive areas not only at the start but also when the dildo pressed inside, reaching deep, until there was no more space left in me.

I whimpered when I pushed on the base and the fake cock didn't budge.

Before I could pull it out Tristan spoke.

"You are a delightful sight, Victoria. But I can make your expression even better."

My legs spasmed when Tristan turned the vibrator on again. I hoped that open-mouthed breathless shout was the expression he wanted to see because that was what he got. My mouth opened around my moans as the vibrations found my very core, creating a feedback of lust-bliss-pleasure from deep inside of me. Breath shuddered out of me in a shaky exhale as pulling the cock out proved to be even more intense than putting it in. The ridges caught before popping out one by one, providing a novel sensation of my opening being stretched then closing around the girth of the dildo before the experience repeated in a maddeningly quick succession. I got lost in the rhythm of push and pull until Tristan called me back to Earth.

"That's it, look at you, squirming on top of my desk. You know, Victoria, I have made my decision. You have been both a good girl and a naughty one. As your reward, I will let you come. But for your punishment... it will be on the highest setting."

The new strength of the vibrations slammed into me without mercy. My body arched into a bow and only Tristan's hands on my legs kept me from falling off the desk. I squirmed, writhed, not knowing if I wanted the invading vibrating cock out or for it to never stop. Sweat dripped down my brow as my noises started to sound less human when the intense sensation turned me into a mindless beast as I chased my orgasm. I was only half aware of Tristan cooing sweet nothings as he stood up, towering over me, claiming control over me both with his body and the tiny instrument of doom that controlled how I was wrecked.

I couldn't last long against such an onslaught, especially when Tristan took hold of

the base of the purple dildo and slammed it inside of me, driving the vibrating head in as far as it would go.

“Mmm... mngh!” I whimpered and shuddered, squeezing around the devilish dildo as I came. Tristan gentled me through my climax, turning the maddening vibrations off and rocking the cock slowly in and out until I gasped like a fish out of water when my orgasm turned to oversensitivity.

I slumped back against the desk, a hand over my eyes as I panted after Tristan pulled the dildo out and set it to the side. My mind swam in endorphins and the exertion of being strung tight like a bow and played like a violin so I noticed Tristan was up to something only when we returned back to his seat with a smile that spelled mischief.

When he helped me get off the desk I followed his lead only to be turned around and pressed against the polished woodensurface. Then I saw it. Tristan’s phone trained on me with a video call to Theo already connecting.

I froze, as Theo blinked at the sight that greeted him, his mouth open. He quickly looked to both sides and scurried somewhere more private but he didn’t drop the call.

“Victoria wanted to show you her new jewelry,” Tristan said smugly.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Theo groaned, his face red. “How am I supposed to concentrate at work after this sight? That necklace... Victoria, I want to rip it off and watch all those pearls scatter before I bite into your neck, recreating that bloody waterfall.”

Tristan touched the necklace possessively, making the rubies glint in the light of the office as they dangled enticingly, trailing down my neck. “This necklace is too pretty to destroy. Now, Theo, you should be grateful. Victoria looks particularly splendid today so I didn’t want you to miss out.”

The bastard was using Theo as an extension of his power over me. It didn't get me hot. Not at all. Nope. The stirrings of a new heat in my belly were completely unrelated.

“How was the trip? Did the client give you any trouble?” Tristan asked just as I heard the sound of a zipper being lowered.

“Just a bit. He had some choice words about how our Sanguine handled the situation but I persuaded him to...”

Were they really going to talk business while Tristan fucked me?

As a thick, hot length pressed into me, making me groan, I discovered the answer was yes. The words over my head quickly became an incomprehensible jumble of syllables as Tristan set a hard rhythm from the get-go, pulling staccato moans from my throat. The surface of the desk under my hands was slippery and I could hardly find purchase to brace against the strength of Tristan's thrusts so my position, bracing on my hands, changed to supporting myself on my elbows, and later just laying on the desk, dazed.

There was something wicked about being the centerpiece of this situation and yet being so thoroughly ignored. Tristan led the conversation through Sanguine matters and Theo played along, even if his hungry eyes couldn't pretend to be unaffected by the live feed he was watching.

After a day of having to be a tough bitch, a perfect businesswoman with no room for error, it was freeing to let myself just be used.

Business? What business? Theo and Tristan and Matthias had all of that under control.

I could finally relax.

My body went boneless against the desk and I let Tristan's thrusts rock me back and forth as all my resistance, all my pretense, was gone.

In their place satisfaction and peace bloomed. While my previous orgasm was a violent thing that shook me to my core, this climax was like slipping into the warm water of a bath, letting myself be enveloped by soothing heat. I made a sleepy sound of contentment as my body shuddered and Tristan followed me into completion. He kept his thrusts steady and gentle, rocking into me as if he didn't want to disturb the languid state I found.

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I looked at Theo. His lips were moving and he was no longer speaking about business but heaping praise upon me.

“Theo, come home, I want you here,” I said and closed my eyes.

“I will be there tomorrow, sunshine.”

I scrunched my brows.

“Isn’t sunshine bad for you? Don’t wanna be sunshine...” I mumbled.

“Sweetcakes, then,” Theo laughed.

Cakes were good. Something the vampires didn’t need but wanted anyway. Something like me. I nodded in approval while Tristan pulled out of me then scooped me in his arms. I curled into him and I was asleep even before he set me down on his bed.

### Chapter Twenty-five

Theo

While all three of us tried not to act completely nocturnal we preferred to get up around noon so it was pretty normal to find Victoria already up before us. I staggered into the kitchen to find Vic fiddling nervously with the fresh fruits in the bowl on the table. At least she let me drown myself in sweet, sweet coffee before she pushed the wrapped gift towards me.

“For you. Remember you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to!” She stood up and leaned forward, bracing herself on the table and the white, bold letters spelling ‘MATE’ on the solid blue backdrop of her t-shirt caught my attention. “I will leave you to it! Bye!”

She was gone before I could even react. I poked the innocent package with a fork but when that, predictably, didn’t reveal any answers, I swallowed thickly and reached for the bow. Just as I thought, it was something connected to the ‘less conventional methods’ Vic wanted to try. The moment I saw fabric I had to swallow nausea but I pushed through. Somehow, her choice of leaving me alone with the package, giving me a space to think, helped with this.

With one fast motion, I opened the packaging completely and revealed what was inside.

A t-shirt.

With the word ‘SOUL’ on the front. The fabric was the same blue Victoria wore. My hand froze when the realization struck me.

Soul. Mate.

Soulmate.

It wasn’t just a t-shirt. It was a couple’s shirt and even more than that: it was Victoria’s first acknowledgment we were indeed soulmates. A concept she refused to believe just a week ago.

How could I not wear it, when it was a physical manifestation of the bond between us?

Taking off the shirt I wore was the easiest part but when I reached for the new one my hands shook. Soulmate, I chanted in my head. Soulmate. She wants us to be connected. She is giving me something Matthias and Tristan would love but this is for me. Just for me.

When the blue fabric slid over my head I had to give myself fifteen minutes to just breathe but when I stood up after that and made my way to find Victoria there was a thrum of exhilaration in my chest.

I found Vic in the reading room, cozied up with a book. When she saw me in the shirt she gasped and pulled me into a bone-crushing hug. Then she positioned herself to my left and beamed.

“Soul, mate. Soulmate!” She pointed between the words as if I could miss that. “Do you like it?”

To my surprise, I found out... I did.

Victoria beamed at my nod.

“Should we show our matching shirts to the boys?” she asked and I balked.

I shook my head. I wasn’t ready to be shown to anyone, even Tristan and Theo.

“That’s alright,” Victoria cooed. “Let’s keep this between us, then. Hey, have you read this book? Because I have to tell you, you are missing out if you haven’t. It’s a biography of Atatürk and it’s hilarious.”

It was easy to let myself be distracted by Victoria describing her newest read and to settle with her in one of the reading nooks.

The first step in my unconventional therapy was a success.

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Over the next few days, Victoria presented me with more matching shirts. My favorite was the one that spelled ‘Nothing Sense We’re’ on mine and ‘Makes When Apart’ on Victoria's. The sentence only made sense when we stood side by side and you could read ‘Nothing makes sense when we’re apart’ across the two t-shirts. Though I had a soft spot for the pair that proclaimed ‘I come in peace’ on my t-shirt and ‘I’m peace’ on Victoria’s, because we made those words come true that day.

As I got used to the new tradition we made strides in different ways. First, Victoria left the shirt with me and scampered off but gradually I allowed her to be present when I changed. I still had a problem with allowing her to put it on me.

“Maybe this needs yet another approach,” Victoria hummed thoughtfully. “I think one of the problems is that the t-shirts remind you of the clothes you were made to wear. Despite the fun phrases they are just too normal. We need to put you in something crazy. Are you in?”

The light in Victoria’s eyes was positively unholy.

“I’m going to regret this...” I muttered under my breath even as I agreed.

### Chapter Twenty-six

Tristan

“Victoria vouched for you, Esther, so I’m willing to offer you a job here,” I said to the mousy woman sitting in front of me.

After much thought, I had decided that approaching the case of getting her out of Sunset Manor in the most straightforward way had the biggest chance of success and, indeed, Jonas agreed to part with one of his servants when I mentioned Victoria liked her and I implied Vic would be better predisposed towards Jonas after this favor.

“With Victoria here we could use another set of hands around the Russet Manor. But working here requires utter discretion. If that’s not something you can offer we can help you find a position elsewhere.”

Esther had her hands folded in front of her demurely and she didn’t look straight at me.

“If you don’t become as bad as the Cornellos I won’t have a reason to spy on you and sell your secrets,” she said with quiet courage, not shying from the fact she had sold out her previous employer. I liked her attitude.

“Fair enough,” I nodded. “You would like to work here, then?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

“There’s one more thing you have to know before you make your decision.” There wasn’t really a right way to reveal this so I just said what I had to. “The men you saw around Victoria, Theo, and Matthias, as well as I... we are vampires.”

I expected to see shock, laughter, outrage, doubt... anything but relief.

“Bless the stars,” Esther said. “I thought you were supernatural but I wasn’t certain. I’m a mouse shifter myself.”

“Well, that certainly makes things easier,” I gave her a smile. “I will prepare a contract and we can look it over tomorrow but for now...” My eyes caught

unexpected movement in the garden. “What in the blazes is that?!”

Esther squeaked and we both watched with astonishment as two T-Rexes chased each other through the garden, waving their tiny arms at each other in a catfight when they came together.

“Miss Esther... please, excuse me...” I said, still collecting my jaw from the floor because, as Matthias was out, those people in T-Rex costumes had to be Victoria and Theo.

“I will see you tomorrow, sir,” Esther said and slipped out of the room, a giggle escaping her only when she was a corridor away.

As Esther knew what I was I didn’t bother using the stairs and just jumped out of the third-story window, landing outside between two bushes. I couldn’t miss a second of this marvelous sight.

I found Victoria and Theo rolling in the grass, laughing madly.

“Need a hand up?” I asked.

“Probably!” Victoria said cheerfully.

“No! He needs to get down! Attaaack!” Theo screamed, lunging himself at my ankles. Victoria joined in with her own battle cry.

With my strength, I could stand there and be an immovable object but it was much funnier to let them overpower me. The suit could be cleaned but the experience of Victoria putting her T-Rex foot on me and posing like a proud hunter could not be replicated.

Victoria and Theo gloated for a few minutes but later decided to drag me to the garden table to talk. The two were exhausted after their dinosaur shenanigans. I tried to not burst out laughing at the two T-Rexes perched on the dainty garden chairs.

“Matthias is going to be so jealous he didn’t get to see that,” I commented instead.

“I wanted to take a photo but Theo refused,” Victoria pouted.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:39 am*

“I agreed to enough insanity today, I don’t need it to be documented,” Theo waved a warning tiny T-Rex hand at Victoria.

“What brought this on?” I had to ask.

My two companions shared a look.

“Victoria had been trying to help me with some of my triggers,” Theo said quietly but then the corner of his mouth quirked up. “And her current approach is to make the costumes she puts me in as ridiculous as possible. I hate to admit it, but it seems to be working. I can’t imagine my father ever putting me in a T-Rex costume so I can recontextualize this into a new experience.”

“I’m glad you found some peace,” I said. “And it seems you two are having fun doing this.”

“Couples that T-Rex together stay together,” Victoria boinked her big dinosaur head against Theo’s who tried to pet her with his stubby T-Rex arms. “Anyway, aren’t you a bit early? I thought you would get back from the Cornellos in the evening?”

“I excused myself earlier than planned because I had a guest to bring home.”

“No way,” Victoria’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“Yes, darling. One Esther is safe in our Manor. And I think she is going to fit with us better than anticipated as she is a mouse shifter,” I revealed.

Vic's mouth fell in an O of surprise before she covered her face with her hands.

"All those times I called her a mouse to her face... and you are telling me I was right? She is a literal mouse? Wait, her having many siblings makes sense now... Mice are known for having a lot of children, right?"

"Hmm, is she supporting those siblings of hers financially? That would explain why staying in a stable, well-paying job was so important to her, even with the Cornellos being horrible employers," Theo pointed out.

"Even if she doesn't she will probably want to visit her siblings frequently... I will see how we can incorporate regular family visits into her schedule," I mused.

"I will talk to her and see what she wants," Victoria said eagerly then hesitated, looking at Theo.

"Go," Theo snorted. "Tristan will help me get out of the costume."

Victoria took a sharp breath in, recognizing that Theo was challenging himself, taking another step in his road of self-healing, by allowing a man to help him with this.

Respecting Theo's decision, Victoria waddled in her dino getup to the house.

"Let's do it here," Theo shot me a nervous smile. "No one ever undressed me in the garden so maybe it won't be this bad."

I tried to be careful but fast when I peeled Tristan out of the ridiculous costume. It went better than expected, maybe on account of Theo still having his everyday clothes underneath.

"It's working," Theo said to himself, then repeated to me. "It's working! I can't

believe Victoria just showed up and made my life so much better. Tristan, I love her so much. How can I show her how much I love her? I need her to understand.”

“I think she already does. But as far as grand gestures go how about this...”

## Chapter Twenty-seven

### Victoria

I was excited for today. Theo was taking me on the promised aquarium date. And it was going to be our first foray outside in our matching t-shirts! I went with a tongue-in-check pair this time so when Theo picked me up for our date from my room his t-shirt proclaimed ‘I don’t do matching shirts’ while mine said ‘But I do!’.

“This is for you, Vic,” Theo said and offered me... a bouquet?

The tiny flowers were made out of shells and they were put in what looked like a mini-sized styrofoam cup decorated with marker drawings made by a toddler.

“Thank you...? I get the shells, but what’s with the cup?” I asked, miffed.

“This is the ultimate treasure of every marine biologist. You can’t belong to our club if you don’t have at least one of those. Or ten. Or a few hundred like Steve. Anyway, the point is, this cup started as a standard-sized, plain white styrofoam cup but I decorated it and then sent it so deep underwater it was compressed by the pressure and it became tiny! It’s the closest to magic a marine biologist can do and I want to share this with you.”

I took the cup gingerly, fearing it would be fragile after such a procedure but it was holding up good enough to fulfill its role of an impromptu vase. Turning it around I admired the various marker squiggles, sunbursts, waves, flowers, sea shells... I could

tell Theo had fun drawing this.

“Thank you. I will cherish this,” I said and put the vase on the shelf next to my desk, where I could frequently admire it. Cut flowers were beautiful in their quickly waning beauty but getting a gift that was going to last was even better.

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We drove to the aquarium and Theo immediately pulled me towards the sea slug exhibit. At first, I was skeptical about those sea creatures being as awesome as Theo described — after all, I have seen regular slugs and I was not impressed — but then I saw the sea bunny.

“This one,” I pointed to the long white shape which from afar looked like it was peppered with dark spots. Upon closer inspection, the sea slug sported tiny protrusions all over its body, which made it look almost fluffy. And, even more importantly, it had bunny ears! The two black shapes on the sea slug’s head gave it its name and they looked so cute I had to coo at it through the glass. “This one is my favorite sea slug!”

“Yes!” Theo pumped his fist up and down in victory. “By the time I’m finished with you, you will have a favorite out of every type of sea creature. Next, let me introduce you to sea pancakes, otherwise known as manta rays.”

We admired the manta rays, and then crayfish, and seals, and sea cucumbers, and then sea urchins which wore tiny 3D printed hats. I had an amazing time letting Theo introduce me to this world he knew so much about.

I noticed Theo growing nervous when we neared the end of the last exhibition.

“Do you want to go home?” I asked.

“No! No, that’s not... Vic, I have one more thing to show you. A surprise.”

Theo led me to a side of the aquarium where only special visitors were permitted. To

my surprise, we met Matthias and Tristan there, in front of an enormous tank filled with gallons of water.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked.

“Bearing witness,” Tristan said seriously while Matthias snorted and gave him an elbow to the side.

“Talk for yourself. I’m here to take awful photos,” Matthias said, lifting up his phone.

“Photos of what?” I frowned at the tank which was empty except for the water.

“Of us,” Theo said. “Victoria, you had helped me so much in those past two weeks. I want to return the favor, so this is my turn to choose a matching outfit for us. I dunno about me, but I’m sure you will make a wonderful mermaid.”

He opened a door to a side room where I saw a pair of mermaid tails. Or would it be a merman tail if one was meant for Theo? I was too busy screaming in my mind to care about terminology.

“I can be a mermaid? A real-life freaking mermaid?!” I exploded once I couldn’t contain my glee inside.

“Well, I hope not a real mermaid,” Matthias shuddered. “Those shifters can be nasty when they want to be. And trust me, they don’t look anywhere near as pretty as the fairytale mermaids.”

I recalled something about Tristan using his powers to keep the two other vampires from succumbing to a siren’s call...

“Do they look monstrous...? Wait, no, you know what, I don’t care how unrealistic

this is. I'm a fairytale mermaid princess today. The prettiest of them all. Let's do this!"

"Yeah, let's..." Theo looked nervous but he straightened up, his hands balled into fists. "This is my ultimate test. Victoria, I wish to dress you up as a mermaid with my own hands. Will you let me, please?"

I melted at the formal request. He tried to ensure I didn't feel like he was made to feel even for a second.

"I would love that," I said, taking his hands in mine.

"That's all well and good but how the hell do you even get this on?" Matthias tilted his head like a confused dog as he poked at the shiny, colorful surface of the long tail.

"Pay attention, because it's not easy! I had to show up to a training session before the seal shifters agreed to help me with arranging this. And after I'm done with Vic you will have to help me. First, I need to lube Vic up..."

Putting on the silicone tail was truly a bizarre experience. Once I shucked all my clothes, except the panties, off and put on the provided mermaid top on, Theo pulled out a bottle of lube and made my legs all slippery. The tail was laid over a yoga mat and I had to wriggle inside of it, first one foot then the other. Theo was too occupied with helping me squeeze in to panic so the whole process went smoothly and I was encased in the silicone rendition of a rainbow-colored shiny tail in no time.

Then it was Theo's turn and, well, he started to freak out. And all I could do was just lie there like a fish.

Nope. I had to help somehow.

“Under the seaaa...” I started to sing the Little Mermaid song

Silliness was the theme of those little experiments and the reminder worked just like I hoped it would. Theo’s voice was a bit wobbly as he joined me but he let the vampires finish putting him into the tail.

“Ready?” A voice from up top called and I startled, realizing we weren’t alone. “Then please use the lift and join me.”

The man was dressed as a lifeguard. It made sense; diving with a tail without any precautions would be dangerous. Matthias and Tristan ignored the wheelchairs the man pointed to and scooped us both into their arms. Soon we were at the top of the big aquarium, at the lifeguard’s side. He explained the rules to us and we were made to practice: first in a shallow pool, just to get the motion of the tail down, then in the big tank, though we had to use proper diving equipment. With oxygen provided to my lungs and goggles protecting my eyes I could concentrate on mastering the movements.

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It was amazing to swim like a fish and twirl around Theo, sharing playful touches as we let ourselves have fun. But the main point of the program was the photo session. Matthias has captured a few photos with his phone but he couldn't keep a candle to a professional underwater photographer Theo hired.

"I think this is enough people gawking at me for one day but I want you to have the whole experience," Theo said once we were taking a breather out of the water.

What he meant by that turned out to be not only the photographer but a whole team of people. I was put in waterproof makeup, my hair was decorated with a pearly crown and colorful strings of beads, my body dabbled with a shimmering powder. The plain top I was made to wear was turned into a sea-themed work of art. Add to that a gauzy fabric glinting with tiny gems that was attached to my wrists and I was ready.

For the photos, I had to dive in without the oxygen and hold my breath. It was nerve-wracking but above all, absolutely exhilarating. I felt like a real creature of legend, a beautiful mermaid who didn't need to bring sailors to their doom with her voice when her beauty was enough for anyone to be entranced. I was the princess of the sea. The fabric floated behind me with shimmering silver and my long hair spread in a halo around my face, the rays of light dancing on my body.

I was beautiful.

And the professional photos told the story of my ethereal beauty, letting me remember this day forever.

But my favorite photo was the one captured by Matthias when I surfaced from the

tank and pulled Theo down to catch his lips in a kiss.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

After I talked with Esther the first day she was in the Russet Mansion, three things became known to me:

Esther was up to 15 siblings and quite a lot of cousins.

She was indeed supporting them with all the money she could send.

She had not seen her family in three years.

I was speechless for a good thirty seconds after I learned that.

“You are going to see them now,” I said the moment I could speak. “A week of paid vacation. That will be your start of working for us.”

Esther protested but I insisted and now that the mouse shifter was back I could see from the wide smile on her face that it was a good decision.

When I asked about her trip Esther immediately pulled out her phone and showed me hundreds of photos and videos. There were so many kids of different ages. So many kids. My head would explode if I had to deal with as much shrieking as I heard in the videos. I could do a few kids, but so many? Ugh.

But Esther looked radiant among the horde of munchkins and that gave me an idea.

“What do people in the supernatural community do with their kids?” I mused to Matthias while I observed his training routine. He tried to coax me to exercise along with him, or even learn martial arts, but I was enjoying being able to laze around and

not spend hours upon hours doing manual labor.

“Obviously, we eat them,” Matthias rolled his eyes.

“No, I mean, are there, like, supernatural kindergartens?” I asked, poking his knee with my foot as he did reps with barbells.

“Most of the supernatural communities keep to themselves so not really. The ones that have social structures, like werewolves with their packs, often have a ‘it takes a village to raise a kid’ mentality so they may have a designed minder to keep watch while the kids play, but the communities are usually too small to have what could be considered a proper kindergarten. And the less social supernatural creatures usually care for the kids alone until their offspring have enough of a handle on their abilities to not reveal themselves in front of a nanny,” Matthias said. He was training without a t-shirt and the sight was very distracting but I made myself pay attention to the words.

“That must be hard,” I mused.

“It is. And a pain in the ass for our organization because when one of the Sanguine from the less social group decides to have kids we lose an agent for a few years,” Matthias grumbled.

After that conversation, I spoke on the topic with Theo and Tristan as well and I had a brilliant idea. Sure, Esther could work for us and do menial labor like cleaning and cooking but what if she become a proper member of the Sanguine? An asset to the organization, with a very specific set of skills like every other member I met or have heard about.

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A Special Agent Babysitter.

“Huh. That... could be really useful,” Tristan admitted when I told him my idea. “And not only for freeing the Sanguine members who can’t go out into the field because of their toddlers. If Esther gains the trust of the community and learns how to handle kids with special supernatural needs... people would be willing to pay for that. With money or with favors. But I have one concern...”

“What is it?” I asked, crossing my fingers for this to work out.

“She is prey. A little mouse. And while adults can keep a handle on their instincts, kids are ruled by them. It’s likely she would have a problem dealing with predator species. And that’s almost all of the shifters.”

I imagined Esther handling a lion cub and my eager smile dropped. Shit. He was right.

“Maybe it won’t be that much of a problem if she stays human,” Tristan smiled at me apologetically. “If Esther would be amenable to try the idea out in a controlled environment I could invite one of the Sanguine to come here with her kid. Leila has a three-year-old tiger cub.”

I talked about it with Esther and two days later Leila visited us with her kid. We set up a safe play space in one of the spare rooms and added a table and chairs for us to observe from. After the introductions, Leila set the cub down on the plush mat of the room in front of Esther.

The kid crawled towards her curiously and sniffed the extended arm. I could see when the scent of prey hit him. The toddler froze and then tried to bite the hand.

It was over.

Or so I thought, but Esther took her hand away quickly, then in one smooth motion grabbed the back of the kid's neck. Whatdid you know? Scruffing worked even when the tiger shifter was in human form! After Esther let go the kid didn't try to bite her again and he approached the mouse shifter with respectful weariness.

"Well, color me surprised," Leila said with amusement. "I think this is going to work. Miss Esther showed my son he is lower than her in the hierarchy and it seems that is more important than her being a mouse."

The test was a success!

"Are you going to pursue this?" I asked Esther when Leila was getting ready to leave and I got to hold the cub, who tired himself out and shifted into his cat form, for a few minutes. He was so cute!

"I think so. Yes. Cleaning isn't a bad job but, no offense, if I could get paid to spend time with kids it would be my dream come true," Esther said shyly. She observed me with the cub intently. "Do you want kids, Victoria?"

"One day... maybe just one. Or two," I nodded to myself. "I like kids but they can be overwhelming and a big responsibility. I think I will concentrate on myself for now. On reclaiming the time I lost to the Cornellos."

I caught the vampires sneaking glances at me and Esther quietly discussed pregnancy, breastfeeding, and other joys and pitfalls of parenthood with me.

When we were left alone, only the four of us, Matthias was the first to start the conversation.

“You know we can’t give you kids,” he blurted out. He looked sad, while Theo was nervous, and Tristan grim.

“Can’t you?” I snorted at their downtrodden expressions. Such drama queens. “I don’t need your DNA to have a kid. Sperm banks and donors exist.”

The jealousy rose in the room almost like a tangible cloud.

“You are mine,” Matthias growled.

“Ours,” Theo said with a stubborn set to his mouth. “No one else’s.”

“If you want to experience pregnancy... If you really want that... Another source would be the only way,” Tristan said, trying to stay level-headed about this, but red was spilling into his eyes and I knew he was fighting with his possessive vampiric instincts. “I want you to have everything you want,” he said and he sounded so pained I had to put him out of his misery.

“I don’t care about nurturing a life in my belly. From all I had heard pregnancy sucks so I have no problem with missing that step,” I met each of the vampires' gazes with a smile. “If we ever want a kid we can adopt.”

“Oh thank god,” Theo wheezed out in a rush, deflating.

“You stirred us up on purpose,” Matthias pointed an accusing finger at me.

“So what if I did?” I grinned. “Are you going to spank me?”

They did.

We tabled the conversation about kids for later because the day I had been waiting for was finally coming.

The day of my revenge.

### Chapter Twenty-nine

The revenge wasn't as swift as I would have liked but it was inevitable. The vampires undermined the Cornello Family in every way they could while leaving red herrings suggesting the disruptions were caused by other organizations. That led to Jonas quickly pissing a lot of powerful people off when he demanded answers or tried to retaliate. In short, he lacked proper contacts, experience, and subtlety to rule over what he had gotten in the deal. The supernatural community stood firmly against Jonas when his blackmailing of a vampire was revealed, the other organized crime families circled around the Cornellos like sharks waiting for the blood to be spilled, and the human law enforcers made the mafia's life a nightmare.

I added my five cents to the mess by creating a detailed list of the Cornello Family workers, members, and guests, jotting down everything I could remember. A spurned cook could easily put poison in the mafioso's meals. A guest who had cheated on his wife with a stable boy could be blackmailed. A beaten, shivering young girl could be saved, even if the vampires didn't have any immediate use for her. A little mouse of a woman could be a spy.

It was only a month down the line that Jonas started suspecting that his troubles could have something to do with Tristan and Company but by then it was already too late; his organization was already in shambles, his reputation in tatters. All that was left was to put the ailing animal down.

The day of the final showdown I watched the cameras positioned around the Manor and had to smile to myself. Of course, Carl acted on the information that I was here all alone and came for me, not realizing it was an invitation.

A trap.

When he and his goons clambered upstairs to the big reception room, I turned to face them.

“Here you are,” Carl laughed at seeing me dressed in a long white dress, my hair loose. A picture of innocence. “I don’t know how you did this, but I’m sure it’s somehow all your fault.” He pointed a gun at me. “Time to say goodbye, bitch.”

He pulled the trigger.

In the blink of an eye, a muscular body was in front of me, taking the bullet for me.

Carl’s eyes widened but his smirk grew wide when he saw the person he hit point blank in the chest was Matthias. Only for his smirk to freeze when Matthias acted like nothing happened, as he stepped towards the heir to the Cornello mafia, a predator zeroing in on his prey.

Carl twitched as screams started behind his back but he didn’t dare take his eyes off the death personified coming for him. Not when it grew teeth and flashed red eyes and barely bled from a chest wound.

With shaking hands, Carl tried to shoot again but his aim was affected by his terror and the bullets only grazed the advancing behemoth.

“Stay... stay away from me!” Carl shouted while the cries of pain of his minions turned into death rattles.

Matthias just backhanded him so hard he hit the wall six feet behind him. I idly picked up Carl’s gun from the floor.

The poor mafioso brought a gun to a supernatural fight. He expected to fight men, not monsters who could slaughter dozens of his underlings in minutes.

Theo and Tristan appeared in the doorway; the younger vampire was splattered with blood while Tristan looked as if his suit just came from dry cleaning. I had no doubt he killed the same amount if not more of Carl's men as Theo, but Tristan found getting dirty so gauche, so plebeian. With prey so easy, he could prioritize avoiding ruining his clothes with blood.

Tristan strode up to me and grabbed a chair on the way. He set it in front of me and at his gesture the two other vampires dragged Carl and dropped him into the chair.

"Y-you can't do this, my father—" Carl stammered out.

"Your father is likely already biting the dust," Tristan interrupted nonchalantly. "We sent our men and some interested third parties to take care of him. A lot of people practically jumped at the chance to get rid of him."

The young heir blanched and his eyes started roving around in search of an escape. Only to land and stay on me.

"You are unworthy of looking at her," Matthias snarled. His beefy hand covered the man's eyes while the other fisted his hair as Carl thrashed in panic.

"Shall we begin with gouging his eyes out, my dear?" Tristan asked pleasantly.

I let out a hum, enjoying how Carl froze and then doubled his efforts to get free. With all three vampires securing him in place he wasn't going anywhere.

"No," I decided. "I want him to see everything. And as we are talking about seeing... Carl, you once said that seeing your dick would change me forever. Let's see it then."

Take it out,” I said to Matthias, nodding at our hostage’s crotch.

Carl laughed; the sound was tinged with hysteria.

“I always knew you were a slut who couldn’t help herself—”

“Take it out,” I continued. “And then cut it off.”

Matthias grinned as if Christmas had come early and did as I ordered.

Red really went well with the white of my dress. The blood splatters were so artistic. And they were much more interesting than Carl’s dick.

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“It looks kinda pathetic,” I commented, ignoring how Carl’s screaming turned into whimpers as he went into shock. “But I know several women who would be pleased to see it in this form. Do you think I can preserve it? And then send it to one of them?”

“Throw a ‘this dick is no more’ party and invite them all!” Theo piped up with his sunshine smile, while his fingers dug into Carl’s shoulders, trapping him.

“I will get a jar and some formaldehyde for you,” Tristan said and swept out of the room.

“Good lord, the basement,” Matthias looked at the ceiling with a sigh of great suffering.

“What’s in the basement?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“When Dracula became popular Tristan had a classic vampire phase,” Theo explained, a dimple appearing on his face as he tried to suppress laughter.

“He got too into it,” Matthias scowled. “There’s a frigging coffin with red velvet in the basement. And a cape. And jars with specimens. It’s embarrassing. It’s— wait, Victoria, get that look off your face. We are not cosplaying Dracula.”

I blinked at him innocently.

“You are not cosplaying Dracula. I’m sure Tristan will be into it. Right, Tristan?”

“Do you believe in destiny? That even the powers of time can be altered for a single purpose? That the luckiest man who walks on this earth is the one who finds... true love?” Tristan proclaimed, the quote from Bram Stoker’s Dracula a ready answer to my question.

I just had to kiss him.

He brought me joy, and hope, and a jar filled with formaldehyde to keep my tormentor’s dick in. Faced with that, how could I not believe in true love?

Epilogue

5 years later

My phone played the notes of ‘I’m Not A Vampire’ by Falling in Reverse.

“Hi, Tristan. What’s up?” I asked, glad for a breather. I finally caved in and agreed to let Matthias train me (‘At least some self-defense, Vic!’) and I was regretting my choice as sweat poured down my back.

“Good afternoon. Are you still considering getting a cat?” Tristan asked.

“Yes? Why?” I asked.

“I can get you a cat,” Tristan said then coughed. “But, um, I need to know the answer to a second question. Do you want a baby?”

My brain screeched to a halt. We have talked about this, having kids, in the most loose of terms. There was no agreement, no expectations, no plans. But maybe there was an opportunity. Did Tristan find a kid for us to adopt?

But wait, wasn't he talking about a cat?!

A baby... a cat... a baby cat...

A cat baby?!

"You have a cat-shifter baby!" I yelled into the phone. "Don't you?!"

"We have a cat-shifter baby," Tristan corrected. "If you want."

A baby that was going to attack me with a double dose of cuteness. A baby that was going to be a challenge to raise as none of us was a shifter. A baby that needed me. Tristan wouldn't blindside me with this otherwise.

"Yes," I said and my voice cracked. "Yes, I want a baby."

Just a day later I cradled a six months old baby in my arms. The boy had small black tufts of hair on his little head and I wondered if all of his kind had this coloring. After all, he was a puma shifter.

"His mother died unexpectedly. If he was another kind of shifter, like for example a lion, he would be taken in by the extended family or raised in a group. But pumas don't have structures like that and I couldn't bear the thought of little Oscar ending in the human system or being passed from one supernatural group to another," Tristan explained quietly, his finger caressing one chubby cheek as Oscar tried to latch onto his hand without success.

A year earlier, in the quiet darkness of the night, as we hid under the covers, Tristan told me about the two kids he had hundreds of years ago, about the family he had lost, so I knew how monumental it was that he wanted to try again. He trusted me to build something lasting with him, a future that wouldn't go up in flames.

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“A baby,” Matthias said from the side. His voice held so much astonishment as if he saw an alien and not a tiny human. When I extended the bundle towards him he took a panicked step back. “He is the size of my hand. What if I drop him? What if I squeezetoo hard? Please tell me he is more sturdy than a regular human baby. You know, like a cat. You can bowl a cat!”

“Donotbowl our baby,” I said sternly, pressing Oscar back to my chest.

“Our baby,” Theo whispered. He looked like he was going to cry. That wouldn’t do. I wanted to welcome the newest addition to our family with positive vibes.

“Come here. All of you,” I said. “Give me and Oscar a hug.”

The three vampires gathered around me and careful arms settled around me and my baby.

“Our baby!” Theo laughed and Matthias dared to smooth the curls of black on Oscar’s head with infinite gentleness. “We need to snatch Esther back from whomever she is babysitting for because, boy, we are going to need her help.”

We all shared smiles, the joy eclipsing any apprehension we had. I knew the next decade was going to be full of chaos, and challenges, and love.

So much love.

After all, there were four of us to give it to the little boy in my arms.