



Vampire Blood

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Description: I was meant to be a protector, but now my blood could destroy everything.

Peace was supposed to be our reward. Lucas and I built a life together in the town we saved, but whispers of shifter unrest shattered that calm. When Kael, a brooding shifter with a past as shadowy as his warnings, arrived begging for our help, I didn't want to believe him. Then I was kidnapped, ripped away by rogue shifters who whispered of prophecies and power coursing through my veins. Now I'm caught between my fated mate, whose protective instincts threaten to consume him, and Kael, whose motives I still can't trust. Together, we've uncovered a terrifying truth: my blood is the key to awakening an ancient vampire—a force capable of destroying everything. To prevent war, I must navigate centuries-old hatred between vampires and shifters while facing the impossible choices ahead.

Peace is a fragile thing. And I may be the one to break it.

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Chapter One

Annika

The warm glow of string lights crisscrossed the town square, casting a cozy vibe over the cobblestones. Kids were running around with sticky hands and glowing bracelets, while the smell of fresh-baked bread and grilled skewers hung in the air. It was exactly the kind of peaceful night we'd fought so hard to make possible.

Lucas stood next to me, one arm around my shoulders. His very presence grounded me, filled me with both hope and serenity. His touch was warm, steady, and yet, I could feel the tension radiating off him, as if something wasn't quite right.

"You're wound up," I teased, nudging him lightly. "This is a celebration, grumpy, remember? Try smiling."

"I am smiling," he said, the corner of his mouth tugging up in what barely counted as an attempt. His eyes, though, amber and piercing, kept scanning the square, sharp and alert. "Something's off."

I followed his gaze, taking in the scene. People were chatting, laughing, passing plates of food. The baker was handing out slices of cake like the hero he was. Even old Mr. Marlowe was out, tapping his cane in time with the band's acoustic set.

"Looks normal to me," I said, though a flicker of unease crawled up my spine. I knew better than to question his hunches.

“It’s not.” His grip on my shoulder tightened. His other hand, the one not on me, flexed like he was itching to grab something, or better yet, someone.

“Lucas,” I said softly, trying to cut through the tension. “Not everything’s a disaster waiting to happen. Relax. Eat some cake.”

He gave me a look. “Annika, I mean it.”

Before I could respond, his head snapped toward the edge of the square. The shadows near the alley stretched a little too far, darker than they should have been under the lights. Even I could see it now.

“Stay here,” he said, his voice low but firm.

“Wait—”

“Don’t argue with me,” he cut me off, his tone leaving no room for debate. Then he was gone, moving so fast through the crowd that he seemed to vanish.

I exhaled slowly, trying to brush off the icy feeling that crawled over me. The crowd was still buzzing, oblivious, but Lucas’ tension had infected me. Something wasn’t right, and now I couldn’t unsee it.

The string lights flickered for a split second, barely noticeable, but enough to set me on edge. It’s as if Nature itself conspired to reveal whatever was wrong.

“Annika!”

I spun toward the voice. It was one of the townspeople, a young mom clutching her toddler close. Her face was pale, her eyes darting like she was looking for an escape route.

“They... they’re here,” she whispered.

“What? Who’s here?” I asked, stepping toward her, but it was a question that needed no answer.

Before she could offer one, a low, guttural growl cut through the music, freezing everyone in place. The band stopped mid-song, their instruments hanging in the air.

The lights flickered again, and this time they didn’t come back on.

The shadows at the edge of the square moved.

No, not moved. Shifted.

They stretched and twisted, shapes forming as enormous wolves emerged, their eyes glowing amber and teeth gleaming in the dim light.

The first scream shattered the quiet, and the square erupted into chaos.

“Run!” someone shouted, but it was too late. The shifters were already tearing through the crowd, knocking over tables and sending people scrambling for safety.

I froze, my heart pounding. One of the wolves locked eyes with me, its snarl sending a ripple of fear through my body.

Lucas’ voice cut through the chaos as he appeared out of nowhere, his body slamming into the wolf before it could reach me. The two of them hit the ground in a blur of claws and fangs, Lucas’ strength overpowering the shifter as he tore it apart with brutal efficiency.

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Chaos erupted all around me, but my focus stayed locked on Lucas as he moved with deadly precision. His fangs flashed in the dim light as he tore through the shifter like it was made of paper, his hands a blur of violence.

I should've been running, finding shelter, or helping the townsfolk. But my feet felt rooted to the spot, my body frozen between fear and awe. He was magnificent in the most terrifying way, a creature of pure power unleashed.

“Annika!” he barked, snapping me out of my trance. “Move!”

Another shifter lunged toward him, a massive wolf with silver streaks in its fur. Lucas met it mid-air, his strength overwhelming as they crashed to the ground. The wolf snarled and clawed, but Lucas was faster, stronger. He ripped it apart before it could do more than snap at his arm.

But there were more. Too many.

I turned, finally finding my legs, and sprinted toward the nearest building. People were scattering, some hiding behind overturned tables, others screaming as the shifters closed in. A few of the town guards tried to fight, but they were outmatched. These weren't ordinary wolves... they were bigger, faster, and too coordinated to be a random attack.

“Annika!” Lucas' voice boomed again, closer this time. I whipped around just in time to see another shifter, one in its human form, with glowing amber eyes and claws extended, charging straight at me.

My heart seized. I stumbled back, my hands fumbling for the knife I kept tucked at my side.

Before I could even pull it free, Lucas was there. He moved so fast it was like a shadow passing over me. He grabbed the shifter by the throat and slammed it into the ground with enough force to crack the cobblestones. The sound of bones snapping made my stomach churn.

“Are you okay?” he demanded, his eyes blazing as he turned to me.

I nodded, though my heart was pounding so hard I could barely breathe. “I’m fine.”

“Stay close to me,” he ordered, his voice sharp and unyielding.

I wanted to argue, to tell him I could fight too, but the look on his face stopped me. His protective instincts were in overdrive, his fear for me buried beneath the feral rage he was unleashing on anything that came too close.

A low growl sounded behind him, and I barely had time to shout a warning before another wolf lunged. Lucas spun, catching the creature mid-air and slamming it down with a sickening crunch.

I gripped my knife tightly, scanning the square. The shifters weren’t just attacking. They were targeting specific people. And the way their eyes kept darting toward me sent ice down my spine.

“They’re after me,” I whispered, the realization hitting like a punch.

Lucas didn’t look at me, his focus locked on the next wave of attackers, but his voice was grim. “I know.”

That was when a low, guttural laugh cut through the chaos.

“Enough!”

The voice was deep and commanding, and it sent a chill racing down my spine. The shifters stopped mid-attack, their glowing eyes turning toward the source of the voice.

A figure stepped out of the shadows, tall and broad-shouldered, with an air of authority that made the air feel heavier. His amber eyes locked onto mine, and he smiled... a cold, calculating expression that sent every alarm in my body screaming.

“You must be Annika,” he said, his tone almost casual. “We’ve been looking for you.”

The figure’s gaze pinned me in place, cold and unyielding. Around us, the shifters stood still, their glowing eyes trained on me like predators waiting for a command.

My heart pounded as I instinctively stepped back, bumping into Lucas. His hand found my arm, steadying me, but his body was coiled tight, ready to spring.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt.

The figure tilted his head, amused. “I don’t think so. Your blood...” he inhaled deeply, his eyes flashing brighter, “it sings. You’re exactly who we’ve been searching for.”

Before I could process his words, he moved. One moment he was standing calmly, and the next he was a blur of speed. I barely had time to react before his hand was on my arm, yanking me away from Lucas with inhuman strength.

“Annika!” Lucas’ roar shook the air, but the figure didn’t flinch.

Panic flared as I struggled, kicking and clawing at the man holding me. His grip was iron, his claws digging into my skin as he dragged me toward the edge of the square.

“Let me go!” I shouted, twisting with everything I had.

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The shifters closed ranks around us, their massive forms blocking Lucas' path. He tore through them with a ferocity that made my breath catch, but they kept coming, slowing him down just enough.

The figure holding me leaned close, his breath hot against my ear. "Don't bother fighting," he hissed. "Your fate was sealed the moment you were born."

Fear coursed through me, but I refused to give in. I gripped the knife still in my hand and stabbed backward, sinking the blade into his arm.

He growled in pain, but his hold didn't loosen. Instead, he spun me around, gripping my throat with one massive hand. "Feisty," he sneered, lifting me off the ground. "But it won't save you."

I clawed at his hand, gasping for air, my vision blurring.

"Annika!" Lucas' voice was closer now, desperate and filled with rage.

The shifter barely had time to turn before Lucas hit him like a freight train. The force sent me flying, and I hit the ground hard, the impact jarring my entire body.

Through the haze of pain, I saw Lucas pin him to the ground, his fangs bared and his eyes blazing with fury.

"You don't touch her," Lucas snarled, his voice more animal than human.

The man laughed, even as Lucas' hand closed around his throat. "You can't protect

her forever, vampire. Her blood belongs to us.”

Lucas didn’t respond. He drove his fist into the man’s chest with brutal precision, silencing him mid-sentence.

The remaining shifters hesitated, their confidence shaken. Lucas rose slowly, his blood-soaked gaze locking onto them.

“Run,” he growled.

And they did.

The square fell silent except for the sound of my ragged breathing. Lucas was at my side in an instant, his hands gentle as he lifted me into his arms.

“You’re safe,” he whispered, though his voice trembled with barely contained fury. “I’ve got you.”

I clung to him, my body shaking as the adrenaline ebbed. But the man’s words echoed in my mind, chilling me to the very bone.

Her blood belongs to us.

Chapter Two

Lucas

The taste of shifter blood still lingered on my tongue, bitter and metallic, as I held Annika against me. Her heart thundered beneath her fragile ribs, a melody I had memorized but never ceased to crave. My hands curled around her shoulders. My fingers brushed her hair, her warmth grounding me in a way I detested needing.

I tightened my grip, daring the universe to try and steal her from me again.

Then I smelled him.

The air shifted, carrying the sharp tang of iron and a faint, smoky musk. My gaze snapped up. My eyes narrowed as a man stepped from the shadows. He was bloody, but I wondered whose blood it was. His presence was unnervingly calm. He was tall, lean, his face carved with an arrogant confidence I already hated.

“Beautiful night for bloodshed,” he said in a voice smooth as velvet. I wondered if that was, as always, false civility.

Annika tensed in my arms, and I moved instinctively, positioning myself between her and this stranger. My fangs ached to extend, to rip into him and erase the threat before it could take form.

“Who are you?” My voice was low, a growl simmering beneath my words.

He smirked, the kind of smile that spoke of both truths and lies. “My name won’t mean anything to you, but I will share it. I am Kael. What might mean something to you would be the fact that I have been watching you... both.”

Not the answer I wanted. My muscles coiled, ready to lunge.

“Wait,” Annika’s voice, soft but firm, stopped me cold. She stepped to my side, her hand on my arm, the touch both a plea and a command. “Lucas, let’s hear him out.”

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“Hear him out?” I hissed, incredulous. “He’s been watching us, Annika. That doesn’t exactly inspire trust.”

“I know,” she said, her gaze flicking to Kael, studying him with the kind of openness that made me want to lock her away, safe from the world’s treachery. “But if he meant us harm, wouldn’t he have attacked already?”

Logic. Damn her logic.

I exhaled, a sharp, irritated sound, and turned back to Kael. “If you so much as look at her wrong—”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Kael interrupted, his tone maddeningly casual. “Shall we move this conversation somewhere less... exposed?” His eyes flicked to the forest, where the remains of shifters lay in grotesque stillness.

Annika squeezed my arm, and though every instinct screamed to leave this man in the dirt, I relented.

For her. Always for her.

“Follow me,” I bit out, stalking toward the cottage with Annika close behind. Kael’s footsteps were too light, too measured, a predator’s grace that set my nerves on edge.

When we reached the cottage, the door creaked open, the familiar scent of pine and aged wood greeting us. Inside, I gestured for Kael to sit, but remained standing, my stance purposefully threatening.

“Nice place you got here,” he said, looking around.

I didn’t need to look around to know that.

The cottage was small but sturdy, a place built to endure. Like us. The walls were dark, made of rough-hewn logs that still smelled faintly of pine. Shadows clung to the corners, thick and heavy, but Annika had softened them.

Her touch was everywhere. Worn blankets draped over the arm of the sofa. Candles scattered across every surface, their wax melted down in uneven rivers. Flowers, half-wilted but stubbornly clinging to life, sat in jars on the windowsills. She said they made the place feel less like a tomb. I didn’t argue.

My presence was harder. Weapons lined the walls—blades polished to a sharp gleam, stakes carved from ash, and a crossbow I never let out of reach. The scent of leather and smoke lingered near the shelves, where my books rested in uneven stacks. Dark histories. Ancient wars. Blood and ruin bound between cracked spines. Annika teased me about them, but I caught her reading when she thought I wasn’t looking.

The bed in the corner was ours. The sheets were soft, and in the last year or so, I could truly say that we actually slept. Finally.

Her sweater hung over the chair, frayed at the edges where she worried it with her fingers. Beside it, my jacket, stained with blood that wouldn’t come out.

It wasn’t a home, not in the way Annika deserved. But it was ours. Built with clawed hands and guarded with teeth bared. A sanctuary carved out of darkness.

“I like how it is still hidden from the world of humans,” he continued, pulling me back to the present moment. “Are you using magic still to keep the entry closed?”

I had no intention of answering that question.

The truth was that yes, we could all come and go as we pleased. We could. The townspeople. But we kept our existence still hidden from almost everyone: humans, shifters, other vampires. We still didn't know how far the enemies web stretched. We had to be cautious. And that was why I couldn't trust this stranger who appeared out of nowhere.

Annika sat on the edge of the worn sofa, her hands clasped in her lap, her curiosity a palpable force. "Who are you really?" she asked, her voice steady.

Kael's gaze flicked between us, lingering on me as though testing the limits of my patience. "I'm here because the shifters are just the beginning," he said finally. "What's coming next makes them look like gnats."

My eyes narrowed. "And you know this... how?"

Kael leaned back in the chair, too casual for my liking. The fire crackled in the hearth, throwing jagged shadows across the walls. His gaze flicked to Annika, then back to me. I didn't like the way he looked at either of us.

"You're stalling," I said, arms crossed. The words came out sharp, edged with the threat I didn't bother hiding. "Start talking, or I'll bleed the truth out of you."

Kael's lips twitched. Almost a smile. "You don't scare me, Lucas."

So, he knew my name. Everyone here did. Only, he wasn't from our town.

I was across the room before Annika could stop me. My fist hit the wall beside his head, splinters raining down. He didn't flinch, but the flicker in his eyes told me he wasn't as fearless as he pretended.

“Try me,” I said, voice low.

“Lucas,” Annika’s voice broke through, calm but firm. She rested a hand on my arm. It was soft, grounding. I hated how easily she calmed the storm in me.

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Kael exhaled slowly. “Fine,” he said, brushing dust from his sleeve. “You want answers? Here they are.”

I stepped back but didn’t drop my guard. Annika sat at the edge of the sofa, leaning in, her curiosity sharp as ever.

Kael’s expression darkened. “The shifters? They’re pawns. Just muscle for something bigger. Something older.”

“Older?” Annika echoed, her voice soft.

Kael nodded. “An ancient vampire. One that’s been buried so long, most of our kind think it’s just a myth. But it’s real.”

My gut twisted. “Who?”

He hesitated, his gaze flicking to Annika before answering. “Aurelius.”

The name tasted like ash. It echoed in my memory, pulled from stories whispered in shadowed corners.

“That’s impossible,” I said, though I wasn’t sure if I believed it.

Kael shook his head. “It’s not. The shifters and the rogue vamps? They’re working together. Preparing. If they wake him...” He trailed off, but the silence was worse than words.

Annika's fingers curled into the blanket draped across her lap. "What happens if they wake him?"

Kael's eyes darkened. "Then we lose."

I didn't move. Didn't blink. The fire crackled, but the air felt cold.

"You're lying," I said. But the words lacked conviction.

Kael leaned forward. "You think I'd risk coming here if I was?" His voice dropped, steady but tense. "I didn't send those shifters to kill you. I came to help because I knew where they were headed." He looked down at his clothes. "Whose blood do you think this is?"

I hated him. Hated the calm certainty in his voice. Hated that it made sense.

Annika looked at me, her eyes wide but steady. "Lucas," she said softly, "if this is true—"

"We don't know it is," I snapped.

"They need her blood," Kael said, words that hung in the air like smoke, thick and choking.

Annika flinched, just barely, but I felt it. The faint tremor where her arm brushed mine. I wanted to pull her closer, shield her from the weight of those words. Instead, I stepped between her and Kael, my voice sharp enough to cut.

"Explain."

We tried our best to keep her magic hidden, but something like that was close to

impossible. Still, we tried.

Kael's expression didn't change. Calm, but not careless. He knew he was playing with fire. "Aurelius isn't just buried," he said. "He's bound. By blood magic."

I didn't speak. Couldn't. The words twisted in my chest like a knife.

They called him The Blood King.

Aurelius was the first of us—or so the story went. Born from shadow, shaped by hunger. Older than the stars and twice as cruel.

As children, we whispered his name in the dark, daring the shadows to answer. Parents warned us to behave, or Aurelius would rise from his grave and drink us dry. But the truth was worse than the stories.

Aurelius wasn't a monster lurking in the dark. He was the dark.

He ruled over vampires and mortals alike, his hunger endless, his power unmatched. It was said that he could command armies with a glance, make the skies weep blood, and shatter minds with a word. But it wasn't enough.

Power never was.

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Aurelius wanted dominion—not just over bodies, but over souls. He sought a magic older than even himself. Blood magic. Forbidden. Corrupt.

He fed on witches, draining them until he learned their secrets. Then he broke their covenants, tore through their sacred circles, and twisted their spells to his will. With every ritual, his strength grew—and so did his madness.

He bound mortals to him, stealing their will, bending them into shadows of themselves. It's said that entire villages vanished in a single night, swallowed by his hunger.

But power always comes with a price.

The witches fought back, forging a pact with the vampires who dared to rebel against him. Together, they turned his magic against him, weaving a spell of blood and shadow so strong it bound even Aurelius.

They dragged him to the depths of the earth, buried him in stone, and sealed him with blood—blood from the witch who cast the final spell. Her bloodline became the key to his prison.

Before they sealed the tomb, Aurelius swore vengeance.

“I will rise,” he said. “Your blood will call to me. And when it does, I will drink the world dry.”

Even bound, his whispers lingered. His name carried weight. Fear.

No one dared disturb his grave.

Until now.

Kael's voice interrupted my trip down memory lane.

"The spell requires a descendant of the one who bound him to break it," he explained.
"Annika's bloodline. Her blood."

"No." The word snapped out of me before I could stop it. "You're wrong."

Kael's eyes didn't waver. "You think I'd come here without proof?"

Kael reached into his coat, pulling out something wrapped in dark, weathered cloth. He set it carefully on the table between us, as if it might shatter. Or bite.

I didn't like the reverence in his movements. Or the weight of whatever lay beneath the fabric.

"Proof," Kael said, his voice quieter now. Almost careful.

I didn't move. Neither did Annika. The fire crackled, but the room felt even colder now.

Kael unwrapped the cloth. Slowly.

The object beneath was a dagger—old, but sharp enough to draw blood just by looking at it. Its hilt was silver, tarnished and etched with strange, twisting symbols. But the blade—dark and gleaming like obsidian—was what held my attention. It pulsed faintly, like something alive.

Annika shifted beside me. “What is that?”

Kael didn’t look up. “The blade used in the ritual that bound Aurelius.” He turned it so we could see the base of the hilt. There, set into the silver, was a red stone. No—not a stone.

A drop of blood. Preserved.

Chapter Three

Annika

I leaned in closer. “Whose blood?”

“The witch’s,” Kael said. “The one who sealed him. Your ancestor.”

I flinched, my hand gripping at Lucas’ sleeve, but my eyes never left the blade. It was... beckoning me.

“That doesn’t prove shit!” Lucas snapped.

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Kael met his glare. “It does.” He then pointed to the hilt, to where the symbols were curved into a strange, delicate pattern... one that looked all too familiar.

I swallowed heavily, my hand lifting slowly to my collarbone.

“Annika?” I heard Lucas’ voice, sharp.

Without thinking, I tugged the edge of my shirt down, revealing a faint, curling birthmark just below my collarbone. It was identical to the mark carved into the hilt.

“It’s not possible,” Lucas said.

Kael leaned back, letting the weight of it all sink in. “Do you see it now?”

I wasn’t sure who he was referring to. Not that it mattered.

Lucas stepped in front of me, keeping his body between mine and Kael’s, as if Kael was the enemy here.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lucas growled. “I won’t let them take her.”

Kael’s expression hardened. “You won’t have a choice if they get to her first.”

“I’m not running,” I said simply.

I felt Lucas grab my wrist. He was gentle, but firm. “Annika—”

“No,” I said with a steadier voice this time. My hand covered his. “I won’t hide while they hunt me. I won’t let them hurt anyone else.”

His eyes were drinking in mine.

“This isn’t bravery,” he said. “This is recklessness.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “But I won’t live in fear.”

I knew that Lucas wanted to argue, that he wanted to shake some sense into me. But he knew better than to even try.

Kael watched, arms crossed. “Odds aren’t good. You might die.”

I didn’t flinch. “Not today or any time soon.”

Kael didn’t say anything to that. Instead, he left the dagger on the table and glanced at the door, before his eyes met Lucas’ once again.

“I know I am an intruder,” he said. “But perhaps you might realize that I’m not the enemy here.”

Upon those words, he left the cottage, closing the door behind him.

I stared at the dagger resting on the table, its dark blade catching the dying light. My fingers itched to touch it, to prove it wasn’t real. But I didn’t. I couldn’t.

Lucas stood at the window, arms crossed, shoulders tense. He hadn’t moved since Kael left, but I felt the storm brewing in him. He was too still. Too quiet.

I didn’t know what scared me more—the dagger or the look in Lucas’s eyes.

“Say something,” I said finally. My voice sounded small in the silence.

His gaze stayed fixed on the trees outside. “You should have let me kill him.”

I exhaled, the sound half a laugh. “You always want to kill someone.”

“This time I’d be right.”

I didn’t answer. Maybe he was right. Kael wasn’t safe. I knew that the moment he stepped out of the shadows and into our lives. But I also knew he hadn’t lied.

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The mark on the dagger matched mine. Perfectly.

I reached up, tracing the shape under my collarbone. It tingled now, like it had been waiting to be noticed. A part of me wanted to deny it. I wanted to tear away the connection, to pretend it wasn't real. But I couldn't.

“Annika.”

I turned, and Lucas was closer than I expected, his dark eyes locked on me. “You can't let this change you.”

“It already has.”

His jaw tightened, but he didn't argue. He just stepped closer, and suddenly his hands were on my face, holding me like I might disappear.

“You're not going anywhere,” he told me. “You're staying here. With me.”

I wanted to promise him that. But the words stuck in my throat.

I pressed my hands against his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heart. “What if this isn't just about me?”

“It is about you.”

“No,” I said, louder this time. “If what Kael said is true, this isn't just about me. It's about all of us. All of them.” I gestured toward the window, to the forest and the town

beyond it. “We can’t just hide and hope it goes away.”

His grip tightened, but he didn’t speak.

“We need him,” I said softly.

Lucas flinched. “Kael?”

“He knows things we don’t. And you know it.”

His eyes burned into mine, sharp and unrelenting. But after a long, heavy moment, he stepped back.

“He stays,” Lucas said. “For now.”

Relief and dread tangled in my chest. I didn’t trust Kael either, but I trusted the truth. And it was staring at us from the table, sharp and undeniable.

Lucas turned away again, but his voice came at me low and dark. “If he so much as breathes wrong, I’ll kill him.”

I didn’t doubt that. I hung my arms around his neck, locking eyes with him. I loved it when he was possessive and protective. All I could think about now was having him inside of me.

In what seemed to be one motion, he pulled me closer, our lips almost touching. He could read my mind so easily. He was smiling, in that way I loved so much. But he didn’t say anything.

He swept me off the floor and I leaned into him, giggling. I always felt like a feather in his arms, light as air. He crossed the room in two easy strides, laying me down on

the sofa.

“Lucas...” I whispered his name. “I want you...”

He hovered over me, his eyes dark and deep, unfathomable. I grabbed him by the shirt, in an effort to pull him even closer, but he captured both my wrists with just one hand. He was grinning now.

My blood was pumping hard, my ears drumming with sheer desire. He knew what he was doing to me, and he liked it. In fact, we both liked it.

I straightened my back, my breasts straining against the thin fabric of my t-shirt. I knew he could see my pebbled nipples through it. I wanted him to see, to touch them. I wanted to feel his tongue playing with them.

I moaned loudly just thinking about his tongue on my body.

“Touch me...” I pleaded when I saw that he was waiting, biding his time.

His gaze traveled down my body. I spread my legs, my hand slowly caressing down my body. I knew that it wouldn't take him long. He always tried to control himself, but I knew how to break that focus, that control.

I lifted my t-shirt, showing him my breasts, licking fingers and playing with my nipple.

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“I need you, Lucas... Now...” I moaned again.

This time, he lowered his head, burying his nose in my neck. I could hear his hot breath. I could feel it spill onto my own body, eager to have his.

His lips latched onto my nipple, drawing it into the heat of his mouth. He suckled at it hard, adjusting himself on top of me. I closed my eyes, relishing the sound of his belt buckle clicking out of place.

He didn't wait for me to undress him. I didn't want him to wait any longer. He threw his shirt over his head, working his way out of his pants as well. A moment later, he was on top of me again, my breasts hitting the hard muscles of his chest as he lay on top of me.

I didn't want him to kiss me. I wanted him to fuck me mindlessly, breathlessly, until we both came undone.

He worshipped my breasts with his tongue, his hands working on the buttons of my pants, sliding them off of me. He didn't remove my panties. I knew what he wanted to do... just slide them to the side, that thin piece of fabric enflaming his imagination even more.

My entire body was already shaking. I wanted him to take me now.

He placed his hand between my thighs. He could feel how hot and wet I already was. But he didn't take me yet.

Crazed as I was for him, he wanted to torment me some more by pressing kisses over my hips, then tracing an invisible line inward. I grabbed a fistful of his hair, keeping him in place. I closed my eyes, biting my lower lip. He knew exactly how to bring me to the brink, then pull away and make me go there again.

He drew me into his mouth, the very essence of my pleasure, palpitating on his tongue. I couldn't fight my need any longer.

"Take me," I begged.

This time, he listened. He got on top of me, covering my entire body with his.

Without thinking, I wrapped my legs around him, drawing him close. I could feel the tip of his manhood pressing against my wet heat.

"Now?" he asked with that devilish grin.

"Now," I nodded breathlessly.

He dropped his forehead to mine, drawing his hips into me. He slid inside effortlessly, beautifully in one powerful stroke.

I moaned with pleasure. He groaned in turn.

Heaven. It was pure heaven.

He kept thrusting into me hard, just the way he knew I liked. His fingers gripped me, kept me in place, until my insides exploded all around him, pulsating around him.

"Argh, Annika..." he groaned softly, thrusting a few more times, then tightening as he came inside of me.

A moment later, he settled next to me, wrapping his arms around me. The room smelled like smoke and sweat and him. My head was on his chest, my fingers tracing lazy patterns on his skin.

He was quiet, his breathing steady. Protective, as always. But I knew he wasn't sleeping. Not really.

Neither was I.

I closed my eyes and listened to the slow thud of his heart. It didn't match mine. It never did. His beat slower, steadier—like he had all the time in the world, while mine raced, sharp and frantic. It had always been that way.

But tonight, it felt different.

Tonight, the world felt like it was tilting, like something was shifting beneath us. I could feel it in the weight of the air, in the way Lucas's grip tightened whenever I moved. Like he was afraid to let go.

I was afraid too.

I thought about the dagger—the way it pulsed like something alive. The way Kael's voice had stayed so calm while he told me my blood could wake a monster. I thought about the mark under my skin and the way Lucas looked at me when he saw it, like he was already bracing for a fight he couldn't win.

I hated that look.

I hated the fear that coiled low in my stomach, threatening to drown me. But more than that, I hated the thought of losing this. Us.

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I shifted, pressing closer to him, needing his warmth. His strength.

Lucas stirred, his arm tightening, his lips brushing my temple. “You’re thinking too loud,” he murmured, his voice low and rough.

I smiled faintly, but it didn’t last. “I can’t stop.”

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he tilted my chin, forcing me to look at him. His eyes were dark, steady, endless. “You’re not alone in this, Annika.”

“I know.”

“You don’t.” He brushed his thumb across my cheek, soft but unyielding. “Not yet. But you will.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to drown in his words, his touch, and forget everything outside this room. But the world didn’t stop turning just because we wanted it to.

“They’re coming,” I whispered.

“I’ll kill them.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“Yes, I can.”

His voice was hard, sharp, but I could feel the softness in the way he pulled me closer, the way he kissed me like it might be the last time.

And maybe it would be.

I didn't say it out loud, but he must have felt it, because his lips found mine again, fiercer this time. Desperate.

And for a little while, the fear faded.

But when the fire burned out completely and the darkness crept in, I was still awake. Still listening to his heartbeat. And still wondering if it would be enough.

Chapter Four

Lucas

The underground cell reeked of damp stone and old blood. Stale air pressed against my skin, heavy and cold, clinging like rot. The runes carved into the walls pulsed faintly, their glow dim but steady, holding the darkness at bay.

And him.

Damien sat in the corner, half in shadow. He looked smaller than I remembered, though I knew better. The runes didn't just bind his power—they drained it, starved it, until he was a hollow echo of what he used to be. But his eyes still burned, sharp and hungry, like they always had.

He smiled when I stepped closer. "You look tired, nephew." His voice was smooth, but there was rot beneath it. I didn't answer.

Damien pushed to his feet, slow and deliberate, letting the chains clink against the floor. They were silver-lined, laced with spells strong enough to hold him. Even so, I stayed out of reach.

“It’s been a year, Lucas.” He paced, restless, like a caged animal. “You’ve had your punishment. Your control. Your moral victory.” He stopped, turning to face me. “Now let me out.”

I leaned against the wall, arms crossed, keeping my expression flat. “No.”

His smile faded. “No?”

“No.”

The chains rattled as he yanked against them. “I haven’t fed in months! I haven’t even seen daylight—not that it matters down here.” He spread his arms wide, gesturing at the narrow cell. “What more do you want? I’ve been civil. Patient. Fair.”

“You don’t know what fair means.”

His eyes flashed. “And you do?”

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I clenched my jaw but didn't rise to the bait. That's what he wanted. Always pushing. Always testing.

Damien's voice softened, and then turned cold. "You're weak, Lucas. You can't even do what needs to be done."

I stepped closer, and he stilled. "You think I won't kill you?" I asked.

"No." He grinned, sharp and hungry. "I know you won't."

The words sank in, heavier than I wanted to admit.

"You're not like me," Damien went on. "You don't have the stomach for it. You'll keep me here, locked away, pretending it's enough. But it's not. One day, something worse than me will come, and you'll hesitate. And it'll cost you."

I stepped back before I did something I'd regret. "I don't need to kill you," I said. "I just need to keep you down here."

He laughed—a hollow, brittle sound. "Until when?"

"Until you are not a threat any longer."

"Then you may as well kill me now."

I turned away. I didn't want to see the hunger in his eyes. Or the truth.

“Lucas,” he called after me. “You can’t hold me forever.”

Then, I heard it. A scream. Sharp. Tearing through the stone like claws.

I turned away from Damien, running up the stairs. Another scream followed. It was closer this time. And then, a terrifying roar.

Shifters.

I didn’t think. I ran.

The iron door to the cell slammed shut behind me, Damien’s laughter echoing in the dark.

“Looks like your hesitation just caught up with you,” he called.

I didn’t stop. I cleared the last steps and burst into the corridor, boots slamming against the stone as I sprinted for the exit. My mind raced, but instincts took over.

Fight. Protect. Survive.

By the time I hit the surface, the night was alive with chaos.

Flames licked at the edges of the town. Shadows moved fast between the trees, snarling, shifting, tearing through anything in their path. Bodies lay scattered. Some were moving, some too still. The scent of blood coated the air.

“Annika!” I shouted.

I didn’t see her, but I felt her. It was that sharp pull in my chest, the bond that never let go. She was alive. She was fighting.

I pushed forward, cutting through the smoke.

A shifter lunged out of the shadows, a blur of fur and teeth. I sidestepped, slamming my fist into its ribs and hearing the crack of bone. It yelped, but I didn't give it time to recover. My blade was out before it hit the ground, slicing through its throat.

Another shape loomed. I turned, but it was Kael. Blood streaked his face, and his blade dripped red.

"They're after her," he said, breathless. "They're pushing toward the cottage!"

I didn't wait for more. I ran.

Shifters came at us in waves. Some in half-human forms, some fully turned. There were wolves, bears, twisted beasts built for war. I cut through them, steel flashing, fangs bared. The night burned around me, and the ground shook beneath the weight of the fight.

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But I didn't stop.

I reached the house just as Annika stepped out onto the porch, her hair wild, her eyes blazing. She had a dagger in one hand and blood smeared across the other.

My warrior princess.

She saw me, and relief flashed in her eyes. Then it was gone, replaced by something sharper. Fiercer.

"Behind you!" she shouted.

I turned as claws raked the air where my head had been. I dodged, twisting, and drove my blade up into the shifter's ribs. It snarled, hot breath on my face, but I shoved harder, cutting through flesh until it went limp.

Annika was already moving, slicing through another one before I reached her.

"We need to move!" I shouted.

I had no idea what happened... when... or how...

I was still fighting. Blades were flashing, blood slick on my hands. The air was filled with smoke and screams, but I barely heard them. My focus was on her. Always her.

A massive shape lunged at her, half man, half beast. Its arms were thick with muscle, its mouth full of teeth. She stabbed it, but another grabbed her from behind, twisting

the dagger from her hand. She kicked, fought, but they overwhelmed her.

“No!”

I ran harder, slashing through anything in my path. Blood sprayed, hot and sharp, but I didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

Then one of them—a wolf, half-shifted—threw her over its shoulder like she weighed nothing.

“Annika!” My voice cracked, raw and savage.

Her eyes locked on mine. Wide. Terrified. Then the wolf turned, disappearing into the trees.

I was almost there. Just steps away. But something slammed into me. A bear, massive and snarling. Its claws tore into my shoulder, ripping flesh, and the pain hit like fire. I shoved it off, drove my blade into its throat, but it cost me seconds. Precious, impossible seconds.

When I looked up again, she was... gone.

The forest swallowed her whole.

I ran. Didn’t think. Didn’t feel. Just ran. My vision blurred, red at the edges, but I chased the scent of her blood, her fear, through the trees.

Shapes moved around me. The shifters were retreating, the shadows shifting, but I didn’t stop to fight. They were scattering. Vanishing. Taking her with them.

“Annika!” I roared, the sound ripping through the night. Birds scattered, and the

forest stilled, like even the earth knew what I'd lost.

But she didn't answer.

The scent faded. It was too faint.

I fell to my knees, fists digging into the dirt. Blood smeared my palms. Hers. Mine. It didn't matter. My chest heaved, and I barely noticed the pain lacing my body.

I'd failed her.

Then, a hand landed on my shoulder, firm and steady.

I spun, fast and vicious, shoving Kael back before I even thought. "Don't touch me!" My voice came out raw, sharp enough to cut.

Kael didn't flinch. He staggered a step but didn't raise his hands, didn't fight. He just stood there, watching. Waiting.

I hated him for it.

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The world still smelled like blood and smoke, and the trees whispered with the echoes of her screams. I couldn't stand still. My pulse hammered in my ears, loud and punishing, drowning out reason.

"She's gone," I said, and the words burned. "They took her."

"I know."

I lunged at him before I could stop myself, grabbing his shirt and slamming him into the nearest tree. Bark cracked behind him, but he didn't fight back. Just let me pin him there.

"Then why are you standing here?" My voice broke. "Why are you wasting time?"

"Because someone has to keep you from getting yourself killed."

I shoved him again, but this time, he grabbed my wrist. "Stop."

The command in his voice hit like ice water. I pulled back, but the fight bled out of me as fast as it had come. I let go, stepping back, my chest heaving.

"I need to go," I said. The words spilled out before I could stop them. "I need to find her. Track them. Burn their whole damn camp to the ground if I have to."

"No," Kael's voice was steady and calm, but it hit like a punch in the gut.

My head snapped up. "No?"

“There’s a better way.”

I laughed, but it was a bitter, broken sound. “A better way? They took her. They could be killing her right now by draining her blood or whatever other hellish machination they have in mind. And you think we have time for a better way?”

“I’ll go.”

The words stopped me cold.

Kael straightened, brushing dirt from his clothes. “I’ll infiltrate their ranks. Get inside. Find her.”

I stared at him. “You think they’ll just let you in?”

“They don’t know me.” He shrugged. “Not like they know you. And they’re looking for her. Not me.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, I’m not sitting here while you—”

“Yes, you are.” His voice cut through mine, sharp and final. “You’re staying here. With your people. If they come back—and they will come back—you’re the only one who can stop them.”

“I don’t give a damn about this town!” The words tore out of me before I could stop them, because they were only half true. My voice echoed through the trees, but I didn’t care. “The only person I wanted to protect is gone.”

Kael stepped closer, his eyes hard. “And what do you think will happen if you leave? If you let this place burn?”

I clenched my fists, but he didn't stop.

"You'll come back to nothing. No home. No safe haven. Nothing for her to return to when we get her back."

"When?" My voice cracked. "You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

The word hung between us, heavy and certain. I wanted to tear it down, rip it apart, but part of me, some small, desperate part, clung to it.

Kael exhaled and stepped back, giving me space. "I'll find her," he said. "I swear it. But you need to hold the line here."

I didn't answer. Not right away. My nails bit into my palms, and my teeth ached with the effort to stay in control.

But finally, I nodded. Just once.

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“Fine.” My voice was low, bitter. “But if you fail—”

“I won’t.”

I didn’t believe him. Not entirely. But I had no choice.

Kael turned without another word, disappearing into the shadows. I stood there, staring after him, feeling the weight of my decision settle like stone in my chest.

I hated this. Hated him. Hated myself more.

But most of all, I hated that I wasn’t chasing after her.

Chapter Five

Annika

I woke to the smell of blood.

It clung to the air, thick and sour, curling in my throat. My head throbbed, and my wrists burned where the ropes had cut into my skin. When I tried to move, metal clinked. I looked down and saw chains.

Panic flared inside of me.

Breathe, I thought. In. Out. Focus.

A few moments later, with a slightly calmer mind, I looked around.

The cell was small, barely big enough to stand in. Stone walls. Rusted bars. The floor was dirt, damp and cold beneath me. Dim light seeped in through cracks in the wood above, but it wasn't enough to chase away the shadows.

I pulled at the chains, testing them. They glinted in the light.

"Silver," I whispered.

Lucas' skin would hiss at the contact. It probably wouldn't be enough to burn, but enough to weaken, to keep him still.

I saw him in my mind, the way he looked when I screamed his name. I could see the rage in his eyes, the desperation. But he hadn't reached me in time.

I swallowed hard and pushed the thought away. He would come for me. I knew that as surely as I knew my own name. But I couldn't wait. I couldn't just sit here and hope.

I forced myself to look around. The camp outside the cell was loud. There were voices shouting, metal scraping against stone. I heard snarls and growls, the sounds of shifters moving through the night. Somewhere farther off, there was laughter. Cruel and sharp.

I shifted, trying to see more through the bars.

The camp stretched beyond the cell. Fires were burning low, tents scattered between trees. Figures moved in and out of the shadows, but they weren't all shifters. Some were human. And others—

Vampires.

The sight of them sent a chill down my spine. They moved differently, slower, like predators who knew they didn't need to rush. Their eyes glinted red in the firelight. One of them passed close to the cell, and I froze, holding my breath until he was gone.

I didn't know how long I sat there motionless. Minutes? Hours?

But then, the door opened. I shifted forward, straining to see.

The man who entered wasn't a shifter. He wasn't a vampire, either. He was something else entirely. Tall. Pale. His hair was black as night, and his eyes—cold, empty—lingered on me as he approached.

“Well,” he said, voice smooth as silk. “You're awake.”

I didn't answer.

He smiled, but there was nothing warm about it. “Good. That will make this easier.”

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I leaned back, pressing my spine against the wall. “Who are you?”

His smile widened. “You don’t need to know that.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

His eyes glinted. “You should be.”

He crouched, resting his hands on his knees, and studied me like I was something fragile. Something he could break.

“You’re important, Annika.” My name on his lips felt wrong. “More than you realize.”

I forced myself to hold his gaze. “I’m nothing to you.”

He tilted his head. “Oh, but you are.” His fingers brushed the bars, and I flinched before I could stop myself. His smile sharpened.

“We’ve waited a long time for you.”

My stomach twisted. “Why?”

“Because,” he said, “you’re the key.” Upon those words, he gestured at me. “This won’t be pleasant, but I’m afraid it is necessary, to make sure.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

That was when three shifters appeared, and one of them started to unlock my cell. I pushed my back against the nearest wall, shaking my head.

“No!” I shouted, although I knew that wouldn’t do much good.

Two of them held me down, while I was kicking and screaming. Shifters, half-turned, their claws were digging into my arms. The third one gripped my hair, forcing my head back against the cold stone wall.

I thrashed, but it was useless. The chains rattled, biting into my wrists and ankles, pinning me like an animal.

“Let me go!” I screamed, but they didn’t even look at me.

The pale man, the one with the empty eyes, stood just outside the bars, calm. Unbothered. He didn’t blink as I fought.

“Hold her still,” he said.

They didn’t need to. The chains did the job for them.

I felt the prick of the needle before I saw it. Cold metal pressed against my skin, just below my collarbone, and then it slid in, smooth and precise.

I froze. My body locked up, every nerve screaming to move, to run, to fight, but I couldn’t. My breath came fast, too fast, and my vision blurred.

“It doesn’t hurt.” The man’s voice was smooth, almost soothing. “Not yet.”

Not yet.

I felt the pull almost instantly, the strange, soft tug beneath my skin as the needle drew my blood.

And he was right. It didn't hurt. But it was worse.

It felt wrong. Like something being stolen. Something vital. Something I would never get back.

"Stop," I said again, but my voice broke this time. "Please."

The man didn't react.

The blood filled the vial, dark and thick. Then another and another. The shifters held me tighter when I jerked, but the needle didn't move. The pale man just watched like it was all nothing.

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“We need to be sure,” he said once the job seemed done.

I couldn't move, although I tried. My fingers had the strength to twitch, useless against the cold stone floor, but the rest of me felt too heavy, too empty. They had taken too much.

I gritted my teeth and forced myself up, just enough to lean against the wall. My head spun, and black spots danced at the edges of my vision, but I didn't let myself fall again.

Not yet.

The cell was silent now. The shifters were gone. So was he. The pale man with the hollow eyes. But his words still lingered, curling around me like smoke.

They needed to be sure that my blood was what they thought it was. That I was who they thought I was.

I looked down at my arms. The veins beneath my skin felt too close. They were visible, even in the dim light. I pressed my wrists together, like I could hide the evidence, like I could force the truth away. But I couldn't, because it was true. It had to be.

Why else would they have taken me? Why else would they drain me until my vision blurred and my body shook? They didn't even need all of it. They needed just enough to test.

I swallowed hard, but my throat was dry. It scraped like sandpaper.

And what if they were right? What if my blood really could wake him?

Aurelius.

The monster buried in shadow, bound by magic so old even the vampires feared it. A shudder ran through me, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn't think about that. Not now. Then, it all went dark.

I had no idea how long I was out. Minutes, hours or days, they all blurred in the dark and the cold seemed to seep into my very bones.

At that moment, I heard it. A sound that brought me back from my nightmare to another nightmare, even worse. A soft scrape, the sound of metal against metal.

I jerked awake, my pulse spiking as the sound came again. I pushed myself up, vision swimming, and blinked toward the source. A figure loomed just outside the cell, half-hidden in shadows. It was hooded, silent.

A shifter.

The thought shot through me like ice. My pulse hammered, but I didn't look away, didn't even flinch at the sight of him.

"What do you want?"

The figure crouched, slipping something through the bars. It was a small bundle of bread and water.

I glared at it like it might lunge at me. "You think I'm stupid?" My voice cracked, but

I didn't care. "I'm not eating that."

The figure stilled, then leaned closer. "It's not poisoned."

The voice... there was something about it.

The hood shifted, and the figure looked back, scanning the camp. He was making sure we were alone. I tensed, ready for anything. Then, slowly, he reached up and pushed it back.

I gasped.

"Kael?"

He pressed a finger to his lips. "Keep your voice down."

My heart slammed against my ribs. "What—how—"

"Later." He pulled the hood back up, shadowing his face again. "We don't have time for this."

I stared at him, my mind racing. "You're with them?" My voice dropped to a whisper, boiling with disbelief.

"I'm inside their ranks," he said. "Just like I told Lucas I would be."

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I shook my head. “How? How did they—”

“They don’t know who I am.” His eyes burned beneath the hood, steady and sharp.

“They think I’m one of them. For now, that’s enough.”

For now.

The words settled heavy in my chest. I wanted to trust him. I... needed to. But, how could I?

I swallowed heavily. “Why are you here?”

“To help you.”

It felt like a lie, but what if it wasn’t?

He shifted closer, dropping his voice. “I’ll get you out of here, but I need time. They’re watching you too closely. I have to be careful.”

“Time?” My voice wavered. “I don’t have time.”

His eyes softened, just for a second. “You do. The awakening can only happen when the moon and the stars align just right. We have weeks before then.”

I wanted to believe him. But the chains around my wrists said otherwise.

I leaned in, desperate. “Where’s Lucas? Does he know I’m here?”

Kael hesitated.

My stomach sank. “Kael.”

“He doesn’t know yet,” he said quickly. “But he will. I’ll get word to him. He’s guarding the town. Keeping it safe.”

My heart twisted. Of course he was. Always the protector.

Kael reached through the bars, his hand brushing mine. “He’ll come for you, Annika. I’ll make sure of it. You just—”

The sound of footsteps interrupted him. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and my heart lurched in my chest.

He looked behind him, then vanished before I could say anything. I didn’t even have the time to process it. The only proof of his existence was the food he had brought. If it weren’t for that, I would have suspected it was all just a dream.

I was so hungry. I hadn’t realized how much until I saw it, the bread soft and warm, the water cool, sitting there in front of me like a cruel reminder of everything I’d lost.

I hesitated, glancing back toward the shadows, waiting for the footsteps to draw closer. My body, weak and trembling, seemed to fight against my mind.

My stomach growled, louder than the footsteps. I winced, clutching my side.

God, I was so hungry.

I reached for the bread, fingers trembling. The moment it touched my lips, I didn’t care anymore. I tore into it like it was my only salvation, inhaling it as if I hadn’t

eaten in days, maybe weeks. My body devoured it in seconds, the taste foreign but grounding.

The water followed, cool and soothing as it slid down my parched throat. I drank like I was dying of thirst, gasping for each breath between gulps.

It wasn't poisoned.

But it wasn't a kindness either.

I knew that. Kael had given me the food for a reason. He'd meant for me to be able to think clearly, to survive long enough to get out of here.

He'd said he would help me.

I had to believe him.

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But even as I tried to steady myself, I knew one thing with brutal certainty: I couldn't wait forever.

If I was going to get out of here, it would be because I did something about it.

Because Lucas would come. And because now, we had to trust a stranger.

Chapter Six

Lucas

Five days.

It had been five days since they took her from me, but it felt longer. The hours stretched and bent under the weight of every second I hadn't heard her voice. It had been five days since Kael disappeared into enemy territory.

Five days of silence. No word. No sign.

And it was driving me mad.

The cottage felt too small, the walls too close. The fire in the hearth crackled, but it didn't chase away the chill that had settled in my bones. Nothing could. Not while she was out there, all alone.

I paced, each step echoing off the stone floors. My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms. The longer I waited, the worse it got. My mind wouldn't

stop conjuring horrible images... Annika bleeding, broken, calling for me while I sat here doing nothing.

The door creaked open, and Callum stepped inside. His eyes swept over me, sharp but cautious, like he was bracing for a fight.

“You need to sit down,” he said.

I didn’t stop pacing. “I can’t.”

“You’ll tear this place apart if you keep at it.”

“Let it burn.”

His jaw tightened. “Lucas.”

I turned to him then, and whatever he saw in my face made him hesitate. I felt it too, that simmering rage barely leashed beneath the surface. It had been building for days, pressing harder with every moment Annika wasn’t in my arms.

“I can’t wait anymore.” My voice came out rough, low, barely controlled. “I should have gone myself. I should have—”

“Kael will come through.”

I shook my head. “You don’t know that.”

“You chose to trust him. So, trust him.”

“He’s been gone five days!” My voice snapped through the room, and Callum flinched. “Five days without a word, without proof he’s even alive.”

The silence after felt heavier than it should have. Callum didn't argue, probably because he knew I was right.

I ran a hand through my hair, pacing again. "I should've gone after her."

"You would've gotten yourself killed," Callum said quietly.

I stopped and stared at him. "And maybe that would've been better than this."

His eyes narrowed. "Don't."

"She's out there, Callum. Alone. Scared." My voice cracked, and I hated it. I hated how raw I felt. "And I can't feel her anymore."

Callum's expression softened, but it didn't help.

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I didn't want pity. I wanted blood.

"I have to go." I turned toward the door, but Callum stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

"You can't."

"Get out of my way."

"No."

My muscles tensed, sharp and ready to fight, but he didn't back down.

"She needs you alive, Lucas," he said. "Not charging into a trap because you can't control yourself."

"Don't—"

"She needs you to think."

I froze.

The words cut deeper than I expected because they weren't wrong.

I wanted to run, to tear through that camp and rip every shifter and vampire apart until I found her, until I had her safe in my arms. But that wasn't what she needed. It wasn't what she'd want.

I exhaled slowly, fighting back the urge to lash out. “And if Kael’s dead?”

Callum didn’t answer right away. When he did, his voice was low. “Then we’ll find another way.”

I forced myself to stand still, even as every muscle in my body screamed to move.

Callum was right. Charging in blind wouldn’t help Annika. It wouldn’t save her. But that didn’t make it easier to stay rooted in this damned room, waiting for a sign that she was still alive.

I turned away from him, fists clenched, trying to breathe through the storm in my chest. My thoughts circled back to Kael. Five days. Too long. What if he’d been caught? What if he’d betrayed us?

I tried not to think about that. The truth was we didn’t know if we could trust him, but we did. And now it was a decision I had to live with.

That was when a knock interrupted us. It came hard and fast, rattling at the door. Callum and I both spun toward it.

The door burst open, and one of the guards stepped inside, breathless. His eyes flicked between us, wide and uncertain.

“There’s a messenger,” he said. “At the gate. He says he has a message for you, Lucas.”

I was moving before the guard finished speaking, pushing past him and striding into the hall. Callum was at my side, matching my pace.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” the guard said, trailing behind us. “He wouldn’t give a name. Just said it was urgent.”

Urgent.

The word hit like ice in my veins, and I pushed faster. My boots echoed against the stone, each step sharp and deliberate.

We reached the courtyard in seconds. The guards were already there, forming a loose circle around a figure cloaked in black. The hood obscured his face, and he stood too still. Unnatural, even for a vampire.

“Who sent you?” I demanded.

The figure turned slowly, and when he raised his head, I caught the sharp gleam of fangs. A vampire. Not one of mine.

“I bring a message,” he said, voice flat, emotionless.

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My eyes narrowed. “From who?”

The vampire reached into his cloak, and half the guards drew their weapons.

He froze, then slowly pulled out a rolled scrap of parchment, sealed with dark wax. Blood red.

I didn’t move. I didn’t trust him.

But I took the parchment.

The wax broke easily under my thumb, and I unrolled the paper, scanning the jagged handwriting.

She’s alive. For now. But the bloodletting has begun. I don’t know how much time we have. Here’s the map with our location. K.

My vision went red.

Callum stepped closer, reading over my shoulder. His breath hitched. “It’s a trap.”

I crushed the paper in my fist. “I don’t care.”

“Lucas—”

I turned on him, barely holding myself together. “They have her, Callum. They’re draining her. I’m not sitting here while they bleed her dry.”

Callum didn't back down. "And if you go alone, you're walking straight into their hands. You'll die, and she'll still be lost."

Ignoring Callum, I turned to the messenger. "How I do I contact him?"

"You don't," he shrugged. "I was paid to deliver this message. I don't want to get involved in whatever this is." He lifted his hands in a sign of surrender, and a moment later, he stepped back into the shadows, adjusting his cloak.

I turned to Callum. "I'm going."

His expression hardened. "Lucas—"

"I have to."

"No, you don't!" He grabbed my arm, forcing me to stop. "You said it yourself—it's a trap. It has to be. They're baiting you."

"They have her."

"And if you die trying to get to her, then what?"

I shook him off, the heat in my chest rising fast. "Then I die trying."

"Don't be an idiot!"

I spun on him, the sharpness in his voice slicing through my control. "What would you do, Callum? Huh? If it was your mate? If you knew she was locked in a cell, bleeding out for their sick rituals, what would you do?"

He flinched. He didn't answer.

“Exactly,” I said, my voice low, shaking with the weight of it all. “You’d burn the world down to save her.”

Callum stared at me, jaw tight. “You’re not thinking clearly.”

“No,” I snapped. “I’m feeling clearly. And that’s the only thing keeping me from losing my damn mind right now.”

“Lucas—”

“I have to go.”

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The words came out sharp, final, and Callum stepped back like he felt the wall I'd just thrown between us.

I didn't want to shut him out. I didn't want to lose him, too. But this wasn't his fight. It wasn't his mate.

It was mine.

Without allowing him to say anything else, I turned around and headed back to my cottage. I needed to get my gear, to ready my horse. In less than half an hour, I was already on my way, galloping through the forest. Branches clawed at my cloak, and the damp earth sucked at the horse's hooves. The moonlight barely cut through the trees, leaving the path ahead shrouded in shadow. It didn't matter. I didn't need light to find my way.

After what seemed an eternity, I left the horse tied to a gnarled tree at the edge of a clearing, brushing its head before stepping away.

"I will be back for you, girl," I whispered.

She snorted softly, stamping her hooves as if she sensed what lay ahead. I felt it, too.

The pull. The sickness in the earth. The taint of blood and magic clinging to the air.

I moved quickly, each step deliberate and soundless. The closer I got, the quieter the world became. There were no birds, no insects. Just the wind curling through the trees like whispers.

Annika's scent still lingered. Faint but there. I gritted my teeth and pushed forward.

The terrain shifted. It was rockier, more uneven. The trees thinned, revealing jagged stones jutting out of the earth like broken bones. The ruins on the map Kael drew were just ahead.

I stopped, crouching low behind a boulder. My eyes swept the shadows, searching for movement. Nothing.

But they were here. I could feel it.

I ran my thumb along the edge of my blade, sharp and ready. My instincts screamed to keep moving, to tear through them until I found her.

Then, a twig snapped somewhere behind me. I froze, my every muscle locking in place.

The sound repeated, closer this time. It was careful, measured. Someone was moving through the trees. I was sure of it.

I drew my blade, sinking lower into the shadows. My heart was hammering inside my chest, but my hands were steady.

Another step, louder than before.

I shifted silently, slipping through the trees like smoke. My breath barely stirred the air. The scent hit me first. Earth, sweat, blood. But it wasn't Annika.

A shifter.

I moved before I could think. The blade flashed in the moonlight as I lunged,

slamming the figure to the ground. I could hear a grunt as my knee pressed into his chest, pinning him down. My sword hovered at his throat, ready to make a clean cut and end his miserable life.

Then...I saw his face.

“Kael?”

His eyes widened. “Lucas—wait!”

I yanked back before the blade could cut. My pulse roared in my ears as I stumbled off him. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Waiting for you,” he replied, still breathing heavily.

I allowed him to get up, his eyes staring at me blankly while his hands nursed his neck.

“I needed to talk to you,” he continued.

I frowned. “No time for talking. We need to act. Now.”

“We can’t,” he said without flinching.

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I took a step closer, my voice low, sharp. “You said she’s alive. You said they’re bleeding her. Testing her.” The words tasted like ash in my mouth. “And now you’re telling me I can’t save her?”

“Not alone.” Kael’s gaze didn’t waver, but there was something in it... regret, maybe. Or pity. I hated it.

“She doesn’t have time for us to sit here and plan, Kael!” My voice cracked. I didn’t care. “Every second I stand here, they’re draining her.”

“And every second you don’t listen is another step closer to getting her and yourself killed!” Kael snapped back.

I bared my fangs, the predator in me clawing for control. “You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

His words hit like ice, sharp and cutting.

Kael stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I’ve seen their numbers, Lucas. The camp is crawling with shifters and vampires. Not just rogues—trained fighters. Guards, watchers, scouts. They’re prepared for you.”

I shook my head. “You think I care about their numbers?”

“You should.”

“I don’t.”

Kael exhaled, frustrated. “Damn it, Lucas. She needs you alive.”

His words cut deeper than I expected. I looked away, my jaw tight.

“She’s too well-guarded,” Kael said, his voice softer now. “You can’t walk in there and take them all down. Not even with me at your side.”

I turned back to him, my hands trembling. “Then what the hell am I supposed to do?”

Kael’s eyes darkened. “We wait. For now.”

I shoved him back, fury roaring through me. “Wait? While they bleed her? While they prepare their damned ritual?”

He didn’t fight back. Just stood there, letting me burn.

“I can’t wait,” I said, my voice breaking. “I can’t—”

Kael grabbed my shoulder. Tight. Steady. “You can.”

I tried to shake him off, but his grip held firm.

“You have to,” he said. “Because this isn’t just about Annika anymore. If they finish this ritual... if they wake Aurelius... this world burns.”

I froze.

I hated him for saying it. Hated that he was right.

Annika was my world. But if Aurelius rose, there wouldn't be anything left to save. Not her. Not me. Not anyone.

"Go back and seek allies," he urged. "As soon as you can. As many as you can."

"But they'll kill her," I shook my head desperately.

"They won't," he assured me. "They need more blood than you can imagine for their wicked machinations. They bleed her every few days, then they let her rest."

"I'll kill them!" I roared, feeling rage take hold of me.

"And you will," he assured me, tightening his grip on my shoulder. "But only if you are smart."

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I stared at him, every instinct screaming to push past him and charge into that camp right now.

But I didn't.

Because I couldn't risk losing her.

Not yet.

Chapter Seven

Annika

I drifted through sleep and sleeplessness, weightless and untethered, as if the world had unraveled around me. Darkness stretched endlessly in every direction, pressing in like invisible chains. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, yet fear didn't touch me. Not at first.

A voice broke through the void. It was soft and lilting, carrying an ancient rhythm that stirred something deep inside of me.

"Blood binds. Blood frees."

The words pulled me forward, though my body didn't move. The world shifted instead, folding in on itself until shadows peeled away, revealing a clearing bathed in pale moonlight. Jagged stones jutted from the ground like broken teeth, and the earth beneath my feet felt scorched and hollowed out, as though it had witnessed something

it could never forget.

At the center of it all stood a woman.

I had never seen her before, yet I knew her. Not from memory, but from blood.

Tall and ethereal, her hair fell in wild waves, tangled with twigs and leaves, and her eyes burned silver in the moonlight. Power radiated from her, sharp and undeniable, and I felt it hum in my own veins as if answering a call I didn't fully understand.

The witch.

My ancestor.

The woman turned, her silver gaze pinning me in place.

"You are the key," she said, her voice carrying both strength and sorrow. "The bloodline endures."

I tried to speak, but my throat felt tight, my voice trapped somewhere inside of me.

The witch moved closer, her bare feet gliding soundlessly over the earth. Her robes drifted around her like smoke, shifting and curling in the still air.

"He stirs," the witch said, her expression darkening. "The chains weaken."

I shivered, my pulse quickening. I didn't need to ask who he was. I already knew.

"Aurelius."

The witch inclined her head, her face unreadable. "Bound by blood. Mine. And

now—yours.

I swallowed hard, the weight of those words pressing down on me. “How do I stop it?”

The witch’s gaze softened, but there was no comfort in it. “You don’t.”

The answer hit like a slap, and my chest tightened. “But—”

“You can only delay it,” the witch said. “Hold the chains. Strengthen them.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. I don’t even know how.”

“You will.” The witch raised her hand, fingers brushing my cheek. The touch burned, cold and sharp, as if her skin carried the chill of death itself.

Desperation clawed at my throat. “Tell me how!”

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The witch's eyes darkened, her voice lowering to a whisper. "Blood binds. Blood frees."

Before I could ask what it meant, the witch began to fade, her form dissolving into shadows.

"Wait!" I reached out, but my fingers grasped only air.

The clearing vanished, the moonlight snuffed out, and the darkness came rushing back.

I woke with a sharp gasp, the rough stone of the cell cold against my skin. Sweat dampened my forehead, and my pulse thudded like a war drum in my ears.

The dream clung to me, too vivid to ignore, too heavy to push away.

And though I was alone in the cell, the witch's voice lingered in my mind.

"Blood binds. Blood frees."

I sat with my back against the cold stone wall, my knees drawn to my chest. The dream still lingered, its weight pressing against my ribs, leaving my breath shallow and uneven.

The rattle of keys snapped me out of it.

I stiffened as the door creaked open, light spilling into the dark cell. My first instinct

was to shrink back, but then I saw the hooded figure step inside, shoulders hunched as if carrying more than just the weight of the cloak. I waited a moment, then I saw him.

“Kael,” I whispered.

He closed the door quickly, turning the lock behind him before pulling the hood down. His eyes darted to me, sharp and searching.

“How did you get the keys?” I asked, shocked.

“The shifter who was supposed to bring you food agreed to let me do it, but he’s waiting in front,” he explained quickly. “I said I wanted to see the witch whose blood will bring back the demon vampire.”

I frowned. “He bought that?”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. We only have a minute, then I have to go back.”

I didn’t want him to see me on the verge of crumbling. I didn’t want him to see how much I needed to see a friendly face, even if it was the face of a stranger I still wasn’t sure we could believe or not. But I was still grateful to have him here.

“And you... are you alright?” I heard him ask in a whisper.

I nodded, but the truth lodged in my throat. No, I wasn’t alright. I was drained, aching and haunted by a dream I couldn’t make sense of. But none of that mattered.

“Did you find him?” I asked with a cracked voice, and I swallowed hard, but it didn’t help much. In fact, it didn’t help any. “Lucas?”

He knelt beside me, setting down a bundle wrapped in cloth. He opened it, revealing a hunk of bread and a flask of water. “I met with him last night.”

Relief hit me like a flood, but it soon twisted into fear, as a million questions started to swarm inside my mind.

“Is he safe? Does he know where I am?”

Kael’s expression softened with understanding. “He’s safe. They are all safe, for now. We’re preparing to get you out of here.”

My breath hitched, hope surging through me even as doubt followed closely behind. “But... how? There are guards everywhere. I saw them.”

“I know,” he nodded, glancing at the door, lowering his voice. We both knew that we could be interrupted at any moment. If we were, it would be all over for both of us. “But they don’t know me. Not really. I’ve earned enough trust to move freely around here. And Lucas... he’s ready. He just needs to gather allies. He’ll be waiting when we make our move.”

I clutched the flask, my hands trembling. “When?”

“Soon.”

“That’s not an answer,” I said more angrily than I meant to. I didn’t want to stay here a moment longer. I wanted to go home, to Lucas.

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“It’s the only one I can give you,” he told me without any impatience. “They’re watching the camp more closely now. They’re preparing everything. We have to be even more careful.”

My stomach dropped. “The ritual.”

His eyes darkened. “Yes.”

I swallowed hard and looked down at the bread in my lap. My fingers tore at it absentmindedly, but my mind was already racing.

The dream. The witch. The chains are weakening.

“They are taking more and more of my blood,” I told him something he already knew.

I could see Kael’s jaw tighten. “Then, we’ll make sure they don’t get another drop.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to cling to the hope he brought with him, fragile as it was.

But then, he stood and pulled his hood back up, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that time was running out.

Kael paused at the door, glancing back at me. “Stay strong, Annika. Lucas won’t stop until you’re free.”

Then he was gone, and the cell felt even colder than before. I looked at the bread without any appetite, but I knew I had to eat. So, I forced myself.

The bread was dry, crumbling in my hands, and the water was lukewarm, but I swallowed it down anyway. Bite after bite. Sip after sip. It felt mechanical, like feeding a body that didn't belong to me anymore.

Kael said Lucas was coming. He said they had a plan.

But when?

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, my fingers trembling. The room felt smaller now, the walls pressing in, shadows pooling in the corners like they were alive, watching. I squeezed my eyes shut, but it didn't help.

The witch's voice echoed in my head. Blood binds. Blood frees.

My blood.

I pressed a hand against my chest, as if I could feel it there, pulsing beneath the skin, ancient and cursed. The same blood that had locked Aurelius away now threatened to free him, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Tears burned at the edges of my eyes. I bit my lip hard enough to taste copper.

I wouldn't cry.

Not here. Not in this place where the walls listened, and the air felt thick with malice.

But my breath hitched anyway, and the lump in my throat swelled until I couldn't swallow it down. My hands curled into fists in my lap, nails digging into my palms,

and I bowed my head, letting my hair fall forward to hide my face.

Lucas.

I didn't say it out loud, but the name echoed in my mind like a prayer.

Find me. Please.

I imagined his face, the sharp lines softened by shadows, the way his eyes burned when he looked at me, like I was something worth fighting for. Worth dying for.

I clung to that image like a lifeline, picturing him tearing through this place, unstoppable and furious, cutting down anyone who stood between us. I saw him breaking the bars of this cage, pulling me into his arms, whispering that it was over. That I was safe.

But the image splintered as quickly as it came, chased away by the memory of how they'd dragged me here. Helpless. Powerless.

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes, as if I could block it all out, the fear, the doubt, the ache that wouldn't go away.

I didn't want to die here.

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I didn't want to let them win.

Come for me, Lucas.

I sent the words out into the silence, hoping that somehow, he'd hear them, that somehow, he'd feel them.

I had to believe he would.

Because if I let myself believe anything else, I'd break.

Chapter Eight

Lucas

I stood before the cell, the iron bars colder than they should've been, my fingers grazing the surface. A part of me—no matter how much I tried to suppress it, still felt the pull of family, the twisted bond that tied me to the monster behind those bars.

I had to speak to him. There was no other choice.

I couldn't do this alone. I needed information about the clans, about the alliances forming between the shifters and the rogue vampires, and eventually about Aurelius—because I knew, deep down, that everything led back to him.

The door creaked open, and I stepped inside. The stale air in the underground cell was thick with the scent of earth and iron.

Damien was seated on the stone floor, leaning against the wall with his hands shackled in front of him. The runes that covered the cell glowed faintly, just enough to keep his power in check, but they wouldn't hold him forever. I knew that well.

He looked up at me, his lips curling into a smirk that made my blood run cold.

“Well, well. The prodigal nephew returns yet again,” he mocked, his voice as smooth as silk, but dripping with venom. “Come to beg for help, Lucas?”

I clenched my fists at my sides. “I'm not begging.”

“You look like you're begging,” he said, his eyes gleaming with amusement as he leaned forward, his shackles clinking. “What do you want, then? A word of advice from your dear old uncle? A bit of wisdom from a man who's seen it all?”

I ignored the bitterness in his tone, pushing past the anger that burned in my gut. I needed to focus. I had a goal.

“I need to know about the other vampire clans,” I said, my voice low, controlled. “I need to know which ones might be working with the shifters and which ones might help us stop Aurelius.”

Damien raised an eyebrow, clearly entertained. “You think I'd be interested in helping you stop anything? That's laughable, Lucas.”

I stepped closer to the bars, my gaze never leaving his. “You know more than anyone about the power struggles between the clans. I'm not asking you to be a hero, Damien. I just need information. Names. Locations. Anything that might give us an edge.”

He chuckled darkly, the sound sending a chill down my spine. “And why would I

give you that? After all, what's in it for me? You can't possibly think I'd help you just because you ask nicely."

I ground my teeth together, frustration clawing at my insides. "This isn't about you or me. It's about stopping Aurelius from rising again. We're both at risk."

His smile only widened, but there was no warmth in it. "Oh, I'm not at risk. Not anymore. I'm already dead to the world, Lucas. A ghost, if you will. And if Aurelius rises, well... isn't that just the natural order of things?"

I felt my control slipping. "You're a coward, Damien. All you care about is power. You'd rather see everything burn than lift a finger to stop it."

He chuckled again, louder this time, his eyes dark with malice. "It's you who's weak, Lucas. So eager to save everyone, to play the hero. You're too soft. You don't have what it takes to do what's necessary, to kill the threats before they become problems."

I felt my fists clench even tighter, the urge to snap his neck flooding my thoughts, but I resisted. It wouldn't help. Not now.

"I'm not like you," I said, my voice cold. "I won't kill just to make myself feel powerful. And I won't stoop to your level."

Damien's gaze turned sharp. "And that's your weakness, Lucas. You're too much like your father. Always thinking with your heart. You want to save people, but you'll never be strong enough to protect them. Not if you keep thinking like that."

His words hit harder than I wanted to admit. But I wouldn't let him see it.

"I don't need your help," I said, finally backing away from the bars, my chest tight with unspent rage. "I'll find another way. I'll stop Aurelius without you."

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Damien's laugh followed me as I turned to leave.

"You're a fool if you think that's possible."

I didn't dignify that with an answer. I stormed outside, breathing heavily. I turned, only to find Callum leaning against the far wall, his arms crossed over his chest. He'd been waiting. I didn't know how long he'd been there, but his presence was a familiar anchor, even if I hated to admit it.

"You're not going to get anything from him, you know," Callum said, his voice quiet but direct.

I met his gaze. "I didn't expect him to help. Not really. But I needed to hear it from his mouth. He's not going to change. And neither will I."

Callum's brow furrowed. "You're not really thinking of going after the other clans, are you?"

I shook my head, the weight of everything pressing harder now. "No, not yet. I need to know who we're dealing with first. The shifters... they're moving too fast. Too coordinated. And I need to know if they have backing. If there are more vampires involved. If they're planning to use Annika's blood to free Aurelius, then this is bigger than just us."

"I don't disagree with you." Callum's voice dropped lower, his eyes narrowing. "But going after those clans—it's madness. There's too much at stake. Damien knows things, sure, but he's playing his own game. Don't let him drag you into it."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration building. “I know that. I’m not stupid, Callum. But we don’t have time. Every day we wait is another day the enemy gets closer to succeeding.”

Callum pushed off the wall and stepped closer, his gaze steady but concerned. “What’s the plan then? Go hunting through every clan until we find something useful? You know that won’t work.”

I let out a harsh breath. “No, it won’t. But we can’t just sit here either. Annika’s in danger. Every second that passes, the chains around Aurelius weaken. She’s the key. And she’s being kept in that hellhole while we’re sitting here doing nothing.”

Callum was silent for a moment, and I could feel the weight of his scrutiny. He always seemed to know when I was holding something back. But this time, I couldn’t tell him everything. I couldn’t let him see the storm swirling inside me, the desperation that gnawed at my insides, threatening to tear me apart.

“Then what are you planning to do?” Callum asked, his voice low.

I met his gaze again, this time with more resolve. “I’ll go after her. Find where they’re keeping her. I know Kael’s infiltrating their ranks, and he’s getting close. If he can get her out, I’ll be there to meet her. But I’m not waiting any longer. I can’t.”

Callum exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face. “You’re insane.”

I didn’t flinch. “Maybe. But I’m done waiting for someone else to save her. I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ve lost too much already. I won’t lose her too.”

There was a long silence. Callum looked at me for a while, and in his eyes, I saw the same worry I’d been carrying. He knew what it would cost. He knew the risks. But there was something else there, something unspoken, a thread between us that didn’t

need words.

“You’re not alone in this, Lucas,” Callum said, his voice quieter now. “I’ll help you. But you need to think this through. Don’t throw yourself into this fight without a plan. You don’t have to do it alone.”

I nodded, but inside, I knew it wasn’t just about me anymore. Annika had become everything. Every choice, every action I took now, was for her.

“I’m going to find her,” I said, the words more of a promise than a plan. “And I’ll make sure nothing happens to her.”

“You’re not going alone, Lucas,” Callum said, his voice low, steady as his hand rested on my shoulder.

I shook my head, backing away from his touch. “I can’t risk anyone else. This is too dangerous. You don’t understand, if they catch us...”

I didn’t finish the sentence. I didn’t need to. The fear, the gnawing terror that clung to my every thought, was enough to say it all. But Callum’s response was quick, unwavering.

“I understand,” he said, his voice calm, but his eyes spoke volumes. “But you don’t get to decide for me. I’m not letting you walk into this alone.”

I felt a surge of frustration flood my chest. My hands curled into fists at my sides. “You don’t get it, Callum. Annika’s life is in the balance. I can’t afford to be distracted. I can’t afford to be weak.”

“I’m not asking for permission,” he said, his voice a low growl now. “I’m going with you. Whether you like it or not. You might think you’re saving her by going alone,

but you're only risking more. We're a team, Lucas. And I'm not going to stand by while you sacrifice yourself."

I stared at him for a long moment, the words swirling in my mind like a storm. There was no reasoning with him. Not now. Not when the fire burned so hot in his eyes.

Part of me wanted to argue, to push him away because I didn't want him to get hurt. But deep down, I knew Callum wouldn't let me go alone. He wouldn't let me risk it all. And I wasn't sure I could blame him. I would never let him go alone on such a suicide mission.

I wanted to tell him it was dangerous, that he was better off staying behind, that I couldn't watch anyone else die for my choices. But as much as I tried to deny it, the truth was that I wasn't the only one with skin in this fight.

So I did the only thing I could: I let out a deep breath and nodded.

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“Fine. But if anything happens to you—”

“I know,” he cut me off, a half-smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. “You’ll kill me. You’ve said that a hundred times already.”

I couldn’t help the slight smirk that tugged at my lips. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Callum’s smile faded just as quickly as it appeared. He knew the stakes, and we both knew that a fight like the one we were about to face would leave scars deeper than any physical wound.

“I’m serious, Lucas,” Callum said, his expression hardening. “Don’t go rushing in without thinking. This isn’t just about Annika anymore. We’re fighting something far bigger than we can handle on our own.”

I met his gaze again, my thoughts swirling, and then the weight of his words settled deep in my chest. Bigger than we can handle.

I exhaled slowly, my mind made up. “I know. But I’m not letting her go. I’ll do whatever it takes to get her back.”

Quickly, we saddled the horses in silence. As we started on our way, even the animals were restless, sensing the tension in the air. Callum moved with his usual efficiency, but his eyes kept drifting back to me. I could feel his gaze, but I didn’t meet it. My thoughts were too consumed by what lay ahead. They were too consumed by Annika and the damnable feeling that every step forward was one I might not come back from.

It was madness. I knew that well. But fear of losing her, of never holding her in my arms again, was far worse than any uncertainty the path before us could bring.

“We’ll find her,” Callum said, finally breaking the silence, as if reading my thoughts.

I nodded, though I didn’t share the same confidence. There was no guarantee. We were heading straight into enemy territory, into a camp filled with shifters and rogue vampires—both bloodthirsty and unpredictable. And with each mile we covered, I felt the pull of the darkness waiting for me in that place. I couldn’t let fear get in the way, but I wouldn’t let myself forget the danger. Not for one second.

“Let’s move,” I said after we dismounted our horses.

I met Callum’s gaze, and for a brief moment, we understood each other. This wasn’t just about Annika anymore. It was about us. About survival. About what we were willing to sacrifice for those we cared about.

We pressed on, the camp growing nearer. I could see the flickering of the firelight through the trees, the shadows of figures moving around the perimeter. I held my breath, trying to remain as quiet as possible. Every step felt too loud, every breath too noticeable.

As we drew closer, a feeling twisted my gut. It was a deep sense of wrongness that I couldn’t shake. I glanced at Callum, and I could see it in his eyes too. This wasn’t just a rescue mission anymore. This was something else. Something far more dangerous.

And there was no turning back.

Chapter Nine

Annika

The walls of my cell felt smaller tonight. The shadows stretched long and sharp, curling in the corners like they were alive, waiting. I paced the cramped space, my legs aching, but the movement kept my panic at bay... barely.

Then I heard it. The noise.

Distant shouts. Metal clanging. The unmistakable sound of a fight. My heart slammed against my ribs.

I pressed myself against the bars, straining to see down the corridor, but the angle was wrong. I couldn't make out anything beyond the dim torchlight flickering against the stone.

"Come on," I whispered, a desperate plea to no one.

Lucas.

The sound of hurried footsteps jerked me back, and then Kael appeared. Hooded, breathless. He shoved the door open and slipped inside, closing it behind him with a sharp click.

"Kael!" Relief and panic tangled in my voice. "What's happening? What was that noise?"

He didn't answer right away. He ripped back the hood, revealing his tense expression. His jaw was tight, eyes sharp and furious.

"I think Lucas is here," he said, voice low but brimming with anger.

My breath caught. "What?"

“I didn’t tell him, Annika.” He stepped closer, his voice almost a growl. “I told him to stay put. Told him to wait for the right moment, but he didn’t listen.”

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A mix of hope and terror flooded me. “He came for me.”

Kael ran a hand through his hair, his movements sharp, restless. “Yeah, well, now we have a bigger problem.”

I stared at him, trying to keep my voice steady. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean,” he hissed, stepping closer, “is that we’re completely outnumbered. If he’s out there, fighting his way in, there’s no way we’re getting out without being seen. No way we’re slipping through unnoticed.”

I gripped the bars behind me, my nails biting into the cold metal. “Then we have to figure something out.”

Kael let out a sharp breath, pacing now. He looked like a man ready to tear something apart. “Do you have any idea what happens if we’re caught? If they realize what I’ve done?”

I swallowed hard. “You didn’t have to help me, Kael.”

He stopped, pinning me with a look that made me freeze. “Don’t you dare.” His voice was low but fierce. “Don’t you dare act like this is your fault. I knew what I was risking when I came here. But if Lucas dies trying to save you because we weren’t ready—”

I cut him off, stepping closer. “He won’t die.”

Kael let out a bitter laugh. “You can’t know that.”

I refused to let the fear creeping up my spine take over. “He’s stronger than you think. Smarter, too.”

Kael’s expression softened, but only slightly. “Maybe. But strength and smarts won’t save us from numbers, Annika. You don’t see what I see. The guards. The patrols. The sheer scale of this camp.” He shook his head. “Sneaking out was already going to be close to impossible. Now? With a fight breaking out? It’s a death trap.”

I felt my resolve harden. “Then we’ll have to make it possible.”

Kael stared at me, his eyes searching mine for something, maybe a hint of fear, maybe weakness. But he wouldn’t find it.

His shoulders sagged slightly, though the tension in his body didn’t leave. “I’m not giving up either,” he said. “But I need you to understand what we’re up against. This won’t be easy, Annika. It won’t be clean.”

I nodded, even as the weight of his words settled deeper in my chest. “I don’t care. I just need to get out of here. I need to see Lucas.”

Kael paced the cramped cell, his footsteps sharp against the stone floor. He was thinking, calculating. I could see it in the tight line of his jaw, the way his eyes darted toward the door every few seconds.

Finally, he stopped and turned to me. “We can’t wait for Lucas to come to us.”

His words hit me like a slap. I stepped back, gripping the edge of the cot to steady myself. “What? No. He’s already here... I heard the fighting. He’ll find me.”

Kael shook his head, eyes sharp with frustration. “You don’t get it, Annika. This camp is too big, too chaotic. By the time he reaches this cell, if he even makes it this far, you’ll already be gone. Or worse.”

I swallowed hard, the weight of his words sinking in. “So what are you saying?”

His voice softened, just barely. “I’m saying we have to meet him halfway. We have to get out of here now... before it’s too late.”

The panic flared in my chest, but I shoved it down. “How? We’re surrounded. They’re everywhere.”

“That’s why we’ll slip through before the guards regroup,” he said, stepping closer. “They’ll be focused on the fight, distracted by the chaos Lucas is causing. It’s risky, but it’s our only shot.”

He glanced at the cot in the corner. “Make it seem as if you’re sleeping there. Shove the pillow under the cover. Make it look believable.”

I didn’t think it would help much, but I did as he asked. Worst case, it would buy us a minute or two. In situations such as this one, a whole minute could be the difference between life and death.

“There,” I said once I finished. “What’s the plan?”

Kael exhaled slowly, his gaze flicking toward the door. “We’ll slip out through the storage area at the end of this corridor. It’s less guarded, but it leads straight into the camp. Once we’re out, we keep to the shadows and head toward the eastern edge, where the tents thin out. That’s where Lucas is most likely to be coming from.”

I nodded, committing the path to memory. “And if we don’t find him there?”

“Then we keep moving until we do.”

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I clenched my fists, forcing down the doubt. “What about the guards? There’s no way we can fight them all if they see us.”

Kael lifted his hood again, shadowing his face. “We won’t fight unless we have to. I still have some trust here. If anyone stops us, I’ll handle it.”

Without another word, he handed me his coat. I quickly put it on, covering most of my head and face in the hood. Again, it might buy us just a minute or so, but it was another precious minute we desperately needed.

“Okay,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt. “Let’s do it.”

Kael nodded once, his sharp eyes meeting mine. “Stay close. Don’t make a sound unless I say so. And if I tell you to run—”

“I won’t leave you behind,” I snapped, cutting him off.

His expression darkened, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he moved to the door, pressing his ear to the wood. After a tense moment, he glanced back at me.

“Ready?”

I took a breath, steadying the wild beat of my heart. “Ready.”

He eased the door open, just enough to peer out. Then he gestured for me to follow. I slipped through the gap, the cold air of the corridor prickling my skin.

The hallway stretched out ahead of us, dark and narrow, the torchlight casting jagged shadows along the walls. My pulse pounded as we crept forward, each step slow and deliberate.

Kael led the way, his movements sure and silent. I kept close, my body tense, every creak of the floor and distant shout making my breath hitch.

Lucas, please be okay.

We reached the storage area without incident. Kael pressed himself against the wall, peeking around the corner before waving me forward.

“There,” he whispered, pointing toward the far end of the room, where crates were stacked high. A door stood partially open beyond them, leading out into the camp.

I swallowed hard, my nerves fraying as I stepped closer. This was it. The point of no return.

Kael glanced at me one last time. “Stay quiet. And stay sharp.”

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

We slipped through the door and into the night. The cold air hit me like a slap, but I didn’t stop. The camp sprawled ahead of us, alive with movement and noise. Shadows danced across the firelit paths, and figures moved in clusters, their voices sharp and urgent.

Kael tugged me down behind a stack of barrels, his breath warm against my ear. “We’ll stick to the edges. Keep low.”

I barely managed a nod. My heart hammered so loud I was sure someone would hear

it.

We crept forward, the sound of chaos echoing all around us. Every shadow felt like a threat. Every step felt like it could be our last.

But I kept moving.

Then, Kael tugged me into the shadows as we crept along the edge of the camp, the shouts and clash of weapons echoing behind us. My legs ached, and my pulse thundered, but I didn't stop. I couldn't.

Lucas was close. I felt it.

Kael suddenly froze, his arm snapping out to stop me. I nearly slammed into him, my breath catching as he peered around the corner of a tent.

I followed his gaze and saw them.

Lucas and Callum.

They were crouched behind a stack of crates near the camp's perimeter, their figures half-hidden by the flickering firelight. Lucas's dark cloak was streaked with dirt and blood, but it was him. My chest clenched so hard it hurt.

"Stay here," Kael hissed. He darted forward, moving so fast I barely saw him slip through the shadows toward them.

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I couldn't breathe as I watched Lucas spin, sword raised. Then, he lowered it when he saw Kael. They spoke quickly, sharp gestures and tense movements, and then Kael pointed toward me.

Lucas's head snapped up. His eyes locked on mine.

And suddenly, none of the noise or danger mattered.

He was there. Alive. Fighting for me.

I broke free from the shadows before Kael could stop me.

"Annika!" Lucas's voice cracked as I ran to him. He caught me just as my knees gave out, pulling me into his arms and holding me so tight it stole my breath.

I buried my face against his chest, gripping his cloak as though letting go would shatter me. His scent, all smoke and earth and something distinctly him, wrapped around me, grounding me even as my body shook.

"You're here," I whispered, the words trembling. "You came."

"Always," he said, his voice low, rough with emotion. He pulled back just enough to cup my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek. His eyes burned, fierce and desperate. "Are you hurt?"

"No." I shook my head quickly. "Just weak. They took some of my blood, but I'm okay."

A flicker of something dangerous passed through his eyes, but he swallowed it down, pressing a kiss to my forehead instead.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” he promised.

I clung to him for one more heartbeat, my lips brushing against his jaw. “You already have.”

“Not yet,” Kael snapped from behind us. “We don’t have time for this. We need to move.”

Lucas’s arms tightened around me for one last second before he let me go, his hand sliding down to grip mine. “Stay close,” he ordered.

I nodded, forcing my legs to move even though every step felt heavier than the last. Callum took the lead, Kael falling in behind us as we weaved through the camp.

It was chaos everywhere. Fires were burning, shifters barking orders, and the distant clash of steel. But no one was looking our way. Not yet.

We stuck to the shadows, slipping between tents and crates, my heart slamming harder with every step. Lucas’s hand stayed firm in mine, grounding me as we edged closer to the trees.

A shout rang out behind us.

We froze.

Kael cursed under his breath. “They’re searching the cells.”

“We’re almost there,” Callum hissed, pointing to the line of trees just ahead.

I felt Lucas tense beside me, his grip tightening. “Run.”

We bolted.

I stumbled, my legs trembling, but Lucas didn’t let me fall. He kept me upright, pushing me forward as the sounds of pursuit erupted behind us.

Branches whipped at my arms as we plunged into the woods. The shadows swallowed us whole, and still, we ran. My breath burned in my chest, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop, not when freedom was so close.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Kael slowed. “They’re not following,” he said, panting.

I sagged against Lucas, my body giving out as relief crashed over me. He caught me, lowering me gently to the ground and brushing the hair from my face.

“We did it,” I breathed, staring up at him.

His lips curved into the faintest smile. “We did.”

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And for one fragile moment, everything else, the danger, the fear... it all faded away.

Chapter Ten

Lucas

We stopped in a clearing deep in the woods, the moonlight cutting through the branches like shards of silver. Annika sagged against me, her breathing shallow, but she was alive. Safe... for now. That should've been enough.

But Kael wasn't done.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he snarled, rounding on me the moment we stopped moving. "You risked everything, all of us, for what? A chance?"

I stepped away from Annika and turned to face him, the heat rising fast in my chest. "I was thinking I wasn't going to sit on my hands any longer while they drained her dry!"

"You didn't think at all!" he snapped. "Charging in like that could've gotten her killed. Could've gotten all of us killed!"

"I wasn't alone," I shot back, my voice sharp. "I had Callum. And I had you—"

"Because I had to follow you!" His eyes burned as he stalked closer, his shoulders squared. "You didn't give me a choice, Lucas. I had a plan! We had a plan. But no, you had to throw that out the window because you couldn't control yourself for five

goddamn minutes!”

I felt the anger coil tighter in my gut. “I’m not going to apologize for saving her.”

“No one’s asking you to apologize for that!” Kael shouted. “But you’re supposed to lead. To think. Not run headlong into danger and drag the rest of us with you!”

“Don’t you dare lecture me about leadership.” My voice dropped lower, colder. “Not after you left her there. You haddays, Kael. Days to get her out, and what did you do? You waited. You watched. So don’t stand there and act like you’re the only one who cares what happens to her.”

Kael’s fists clenched at his sides, and for a moment, I thought he might throw a punch. Part of me wanted him to. The pressure in my chest begged for release, and a fight would’ve been easier than standing there, letting the weight of his words sink in.

“Stop it!” Annika’s voice cut through the tension like a blade.

We both turned to her. She stood a few steps away, her face pale but fierce, her eyes blazing even as her body swayed with exhaustion.

“This isn’t helping,” she said, her voice tight. “We’re out. We’re alive. And we need to stay that way.”

I took a breath, but the anger was still there, raw and burning. “Tell him that,” I muttered.

“Both of you,” she snapped. “We need to stick together, not tear each other apart.”

Kael stepped back, raking a hand through his hair. “You’re right,” he said, though his voice was stiff. “But we can’t keep making reckless moves like this. If we do, we’re

dead.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. Not without lashing out again.

Kael exhaled sharply and turned away, pacing the edge of the clearing. Annika sank down onto a fallen log, and I dropped beside her, my hands still trembling from the adrenaline.

Her fingers brushed mine, grounding me.

“You can’t keep doing this,” she said softly. “Throwing yourself into danger like that. It’s not just about you anymore.”

I met her eyes and saw the fear she was trying to hide. Not fear for herself, but for me.

“I couldn’t leave you there,” I said, my voice quieter now. “I won’t.”

Her fingers tightened around mine. “I know. But we need to be smarter.”

Kael stopped pacing and looked back at us, his expression unreadable. “We need to keep moving before they track us,” he said.

We rode into the town just before dawn, the first light breaking over the horizon and painting the sky in streaks of pale gold and gray. The gates groaned open, and the sight that met us made something tighten in my chest.

Everyone gathered at the entrance, their faces pale with worry and exhaustion. But as soon as they saw us, saw her, a ripple of relief broke through the crowd like a wave.

They cheered.

Annika stiffened beside me, still perched in the saddle, her fingers tightening around my arm. She wasn't used to this, being the center of attention. But it didn't matter to them. To them, she was hope. The woman they'd almost lost and the woman we'd fought to bring back.

I dismounted first, then turned to help her down. She wobbled the moment her feet touched the ground, but I was already there, catching her before she could fall.

The crowd surged closer, hands reaching out, voices overlapping.

"Thank heavens!"

"We thought you were dead!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Did they hurt you?"

Annika tried to answer, her voice soft and unsure, but the questions kept coming. I stepped in front of her, my body blocking hers as the noise grew louder.

"That's enough," I said sharply, my voice cutting through the chaos. "She's alive. She's safe. That's all you need to know right now."

The murmurs quieted, and one by one, they backed off. Some still stared, their eyes

lingering on her pale face, her torn dress, the shadows under her eyes. But no one pushed closer.

Callum dismounted behind me, his voice carrying over the crowd. “We need food and rest... and someone get the healer.”

Several people darted off at his words, and slowly, the crowd began to break apart, though the whispers lingered.

Annika leaned into me, her head resting briefly against my shoulder. “They’re staring,” she whispered.

“Let them.” My arm stayed tight around her waist, steadying her. “You’re here. That’s all that matters.”

Her fingers curled into the fabric of my cloak, but she didn’t say anything.

Kael dismounted last, his hood down, his expression as sharp as ever. He didn’t look at the crowd. Only at me. And I knew what he was thinking.

It’s not over.

I nodded subtly, already feeling the weight of it pressing down on me again. Annika was safe, for now, but the war wasn’t won. Not even close.

The healer arrived, an older woman with steady hands and a sharp eye. She ushered Annika away despite her protests, leaving me standing in the square as the crowd dispersed.

I felt the loss of her warmth immediately.

Callum stepped up beside me, his voice low. “You did it.”

I shook my head. “We did it.”

“And we’ll have to do it again,” Kael said, his tone flat as he joined us. “They’re not going to stop. Not until they have her—or until we end this.”

I exhaled slowly, the weight of his words sinking in.

“I know.” I nodded. “Get some rest, both of you.”

Without waiting for either Kael or Callum to reply, I found Annika and swept her into my arms and carried her into the cottage. She didn’t fight me, just leaned against me, her breath soft and warm against my neck. The door creaked as I pushed it open, the familiar scent of home enveloping us both.

I laid her down gently on the bed, brushing strands of hair from her face. She looked up at me with a weak smile, her lips cracked, her cheeks pale, but there was still fire in her eyes.

“I must look awful,” she said, her voice raspy but playful. “Filthy, bruised, and smelling like a shifter’s kennel.”

I huffed a breath, leaning down so our noses almost touched. “You look perfect.”

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She rolled her eyes, her smile widening just a little. “Liar. I’m dying for a bath.”

A laugh escaped me, sharp and unexpected, breaking through the tension that had coiled inside me for days. “You’re not dying.” I brushed my thumb over her cheek, softer this time. “But you are getting a bath.”

Her brows lifted. “In here?”

I smirked. “Don’t move.”

I left her there, slipping out the door before she could protest. It didn’t take long to find what I needed. Callum, still lingering near the gates, called for help, and within minutes, a tub was hauled inside the cottage. Heavy iron, wide enough to fit her comfortably.

The men set it near the fire while I fetched buckets of hot water, the heat steaming against the cool air. My muscles burned, but I didn’t stop until it was filled almost to the brim. The scent of herbs drifted through the room, lavender, mint, and chamomile. Soothing and sharp all at once.

Once we were alone again, Annika watched me from the bed, her lips parted, her gaze softening as I knelt beside the tub and tested the water.

“Perfect,” I said, then turned to her. “Come here.”

She pushed herself up slowly, wincing, but I was there before she could fall, scooping her up again.

“Lucas,” she protested weakly.

“Don’t argue,” I muttered, carrying her to the tub.

I set her down beside it, steadying her as she reached for the edge. She wobbled, but my hands stayed firm on her waist. She looked up at me, her eyes searching mine.

I knelt beside the tub, the heat from the water curling against my skin, but it was nothing compared to the warmth radiating from her. My fingers went to the edge of her dress, the fabric torn and stained, clinging to her skin like a reminder of what she’d been through. Gently, I lifted it, peeling it away inch by inch. She shivered, though whether from the cold or my touch, I couldn’t tell.

I paused, my gaze sweeping over her as the fabric slipped lower. I could see pale skin marred with faint bruises and scratches. Marks that shouldn’t have been there. Marks that made something inside me burn.

“You’re beautiful,” I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

Her lips parted, her breath catching, but she didn’t look away.

I pushed the dress the rest of the way down, letting it pool at her feet, leaving her bare in the firelight. My eyes traced the curve of her shoulders, the slope of her collarbone, the soft swell of her breasts. I wanted to memorize every inch of her, not just for how perfect she was but for the strength she carried. Even now, fragile but unbroken.

She crossed her arms, instinctively covering herself. I caught her wrists, pulling them gently away.

“Don’t,” I murmured. “Don’t hide from me.”

Her eyes searched mine, unsure, but then her arms fell to her sides, leaving her exposed. Vulnerable. But she wasn't afraid.

I reached out, trailing my fingers down her arm, over her bruises, as if my touch could erase them. She leaned into it, her skin warm beneath my hand. Her breath shuddered as I traced the lines of her ribs and the curve of her waist.

"You're staring," she whispered.

"I can't help it." My voice was low, raw. "You're perfect, Annika."

Chapter Eleven

Annika

"I thought I lost you," I heard him say again.

My eyes locked onto his. "You didn't."

"I won't... ever," he whispered.

I felt as if it were the first time in days I was able to breathe.

He took me by the hand and gently led me into the tub. The heat of the water wrapped around me, sinking into my skin, soothing the ache in my muscles. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, my body finally releasing the tension that had gripped it for days.

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Lucas knelt beside the tub, his sleeves rolled up, his hands steady as they trailed through the water. He was careful, gentle in a way that made my chest tighten.

His fingers brushed my shoulder, and I shivered despite the warmth.

“Too hot?” he asked, his voice low, rough in this quiet space.

I shook my head. “No. It’s perfect.”

He dipped a cloth into the water, wringing it out before trailing it over my arm. Slow, deliberate strokes, like he was afraid I might shatter under his touch.

“I’m not made of glass, you know,” I whispered.

He looked up, his dark eyes locking on mine. “You feel like it right now.”

I swallowed hard, the vulnerability in his gaze cutting through me. “But I’m not.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he focused on his task, sliding the cloth down my arm, over my wrist, and then dipping it back into the water.

The heat and his touch worked together, easing the soreness in my limbs. I leaned back, letting my head rest against the edge of the tub as he shifted closer, his hands moving to my shoulders.

His thumbs pressed gently into the knots there, and I sighed. The tension melted away

beneath his touch.

“Better?” he asked.

“Mmm...” It was all I could manage.

He kept going, his hands firm but careful as they moved lower, kneading the tightness from my muscles. Every brush of his skin against mine sent ripples of heat through me, but it wasn't just the water. It was him.

I opened my eyes, finding him watching me, his gaze unreadable.

“What?” I asked softly.

“Nothing.” He dipped the cloth into the water again, wringing it out before brushing it down my collarbone, the fabric dragging lightly over my skin. “Just... you.”

I blinked, unsure how to respond to that, but then he leaned closer, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

“I almost feel like this is a dream,” he murmured, the words barely a breath against my skin.

“It's not,” I whispered back, my fingers brushing over the rough edge of his unshaven beard. “I'm here. I'm safe... because of you.”

He didn't look convinced, but he nodded, his eyes dark and shadowed as he picked up the cloth again and kept working.

I let him.

Let him care for me, let him wash away the dirt and blood and fear. Let him pour his strength into me, even as the weight of the past few days sat heavy on both of us.

When he moved lower, his hands trailing down my arms and over my ribs, I caught his wrist.

“Lucas,” I whispered.

He paused, his eyes snapping to mine.

“I love you.”

The words hung there between us, raw and bare, and for a moment, he didn’t breathe. Then his hand turned, fingers lacing with mine beneath the water.

“I love you too,” he said, his voice breaking just slightly.

Overcome by emotion, he caressed my cheek. I placed my hand over his, the warmth of our bodies intertwining. Gently, I slid his hand down my breasts. His fingers lingered on my pebbled nipples, sending tiny little electric bolts through my body. I was exhausted and beat up, but his touch never failed to awaken me, to arouse me.

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I refused to look away even for a single moment. I could feel a gush of hot air emanate from him. He drew circles around my nipple. Usually, this would be the promise of undeniably raw sex, but we both knew I wasn't up for it tonight. There was no hunger in his eyes... only love.

He brought his head down to my collar bone, and a moment later, I felt his teeth on my skin. Gentle, gentler than he had ever been. But it wasn't a bite even. He was showing me that he was in perfect control of himself, that his usually ferocious hunger for me was subdued.

Then, he tenderly licked the spot, while his hand kept sliding down my belly. A smile of anticipation tugged at the corners of my lips. My thighs parted easily, as always. I could feel his fingertip moving back and forth gently, arousing me even more.

I wanted more. Always more.

But he was in no rush, which was unusual. We always craved each other. We made love, but it was needy, hungry. This time, he was tender with me, caressing every inch of my body reverently with his fingers, with his breath, with his eyes. I didn't think I ever loved him more than at this very moment.

His finger slid into me slowly, gently. I moaned, arching my back. I went for his hand without thinking, keeping it in place. I craved what he was offering, the pleasure that he always gave me.

He added another finger, penetrating me deeper, sliding in and out. My entire body tensed. With each of his thrusts, a small explosion of pleasure took hold of me, as

warm water surrounded my body. I could barely withstand the combination of his fingers, arched at just the right angle and his tongue on my collar bone.

I closed my eyes, parting my thighs even more, as much as the tub allowed, listening to the sound of splashing water, accompanying the movement of his hand, the sliding of his fingers. I completely let go, knowing that I was safe with him, that he loved me as much as I loved him.

Pleasure didn't come as a blast, as it usually did. This time, pleasure was a warm embrace, enveloping me from all sides, filling my mind with the ecstasy of a million little stars expanding through my mind's eye. My insides pulsed, absorbing the sensation, and Lucas knew not to move. He knew to remain close, there, present... mine.

When I opened my eyes, he was watching me. I smiled blissfully, feeling that familiar sleepiness take over. He smiled back, and we remained like that for what seemed like a small eternity.

The water clung to my skin as Lucas reached down, his strong arms lifting me out of the tub. The air felt colder now, and I shivered, curling closer to his chest as he carried me.

"It's all right," he murmured, his voice low and steady. "I've got you."

I let my head rest against his shoulder. My limbs felt heavy, my body too tired to hold itself up. I didn't even flinch when he set me down on the chair beside the fire, wrapping a thick towel around me.

He knelt in front of me, his hands moving carefully, drying my arms and shoulders first. The towel was soft, the heat from the fire warming it as he worked, but it was his touch that soothed me most.

Gentle. Reverent. As if I were something precious.

“You’re quiet,” he said softly, his dark eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“I think I forgot how to feel safe.” My voice barely rose above a whisper.

He stilled, his fingers brushing over my wrist. “You are safe. Here. With me.”

I wanted to believe him. And maybe I did. But the ache in my chest—the fear I hadn’t let myself fully feel—still lingered.

I didn’t say anything else. He didn’t push. Just kept moving the towel over my skin, down my legs, drying every inch of me with care.

When he finished, he stood and pulled one of his shirts from the trunk near the bed. It was too big, the fabric soft and worn. He slipped it over my head, guiding my arms through the sleeves before tugging it down.

It smelled like him.

The thought made my eyes burn, but I blinked quickly, not wanting to fall apart... not now when everything was seemingly alright.

“Come on.” He scooped me up again, as if I weighed nothing, and carried me to the bed.

The sheets were cool against my skin as he laid me down, pulling the blanket up to my shoulders. His hands lingered there for a moment, brushing over my hair, my cheek.

I wanted to stay awake, to keep feeling him close, but the exhaustion was too much.

My body sank into the mattress, the warmth of the fire lulling me deeper.

I felt his lips brush my forehead, and I barely managed to whisper, “Stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, his voice rough but certain.

That was the last thing I heard before sleep pulled me under, but it wasn’t long before I woke with a start.

The room was dark, lit only by the dying embers of the fire. Shadows stretched across the walls, long and twisted, but it wasn’t the darkness that made my heart race. It was the dream. The memory.

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I pressed a hand to my chest, trying to steady my breathing. My skin felt damp, and my pulse thudded in my ears. Beside me, Lucas slept soundly, his arm draped protectively over my waist. The rise and fall of his chest was slow and steady, grounding me. But it wasn't enough to silence the images still flickering in my mind.

The witch.

Her face was clearer now. Pale and sharp, framed by dark hair. Her eyes burned like embers, filled with power and desperation. I could still hear her voice, layered and echoing, as if it came from somewhere far away.

You are the key. My blood, my burden. Protect them.

I swallowed hard, the words curling around me, squeezing tight. I didn't understand them. I didn't understand her. But I knew what she meant. Her magic had sealed Aurelius away, binding him with blood and sacrifice.

And now, her blood... my blood... was the key to undoing it.

I shivered, pulling the blanket higher, but it didn't help.

I turned my head, looking at Lucas. Even in sleep, he looked strong, unshaken. Like nothing could touch him. But I'd seen the fear in his eyes earlier, no matter how hard he'd tried to hide it. He was terrified of losing me.

And I was terrified too.

I closed my eyes, but the witch's face was still there, her words ringing louder, clearer. Protect them.

What if I couldn't? What if I wasn't strong enough?

I bit my lip to keep the fear at bay, but my body trembled anyway. Lucas stirred beside me, his arm tightening as if he could sense it. I wanted to wake him, to feel his touch and hear him tell me everything would be okay.

But I didn't.

He needed rest, and I needed answers, answers I didn't have.

I stayed there, staring at the ceiling, my mind chasing thoughts I couldn't catch, until the fire finally died, and the room was swallowed by shadows.

Chapter Twelve

Lucas

I woke with a start, the warmth of Annika beside me gone. The bed was cool, the space where she had slept barely disturbed. A shiver ran down my spine. I didn't think, didn't hesitate. I threw the blanket aside and rushed to the door.

Annika?

The weight of her absence pressed against me. I wasn't sure what made me go outside. Maybe it was the instinct to search, to find her before my mind could spiral further. Maybe I just needed to move. I shoved the door open and stepped into the cool morning air. I crossed the yard, searching the familiar grounds for any sign of her.

“Lucas.”

I froze. The voice cut through the quiet, and I spun around to find Callum standing near the edge of the yard.

“She’s not in the house,” I said, the words rough, as if I hadn’t expected anyone else to speak.

Callum didn’t seem surprised. “I saw her. She’s with Kael. By the old well.”

A chill washed over me, something dark and uneasy coiling in my gut.

Kael.

I’d been wary of him from the start, but hearing he was with Annika now...

Without thinking, I started toward the well.

Callum’s voice stopped me. “She’s not a child, Lucas. She knows what she’s doing.”

I clenched my fists, frustration bubbling inside me. “She’s with him—alone.”

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Callum stepped closer, his eyes hard. “Kael’s not the one you need to worry about.”

I didn’t look back at Callum, even as I heard his steps trailing behind me.

I just had to get to her.

I reached the old well, my boots crunching against the gravel path, the sound louder than it should have been in the quiet morning. My heart thudded in my chest, a mix of concern and... something else. Something darker.

There they were, standing just a few feet away, barely visible through the brush. Annika and Kael.

They were talking, sitting close... too close.

She was mine, wasn’t she? The thought gnawed at me, the jealousy settling in my bones.

Kael, as always, looked so calm, so unbothered. He was saying something, his hand gesturing to the trees in a way that looked almost playful. But his eyes, those eyes... I couldn’t stop staring. They were too calculated, too sharp, like he was constantly sizing up the world. And in that moment, it felt like he was sizing up Annika too.

I clenched my jaw, my gaze narrowing. He was too damn close.

I didn’t trust him. Not even after everything. Not after he’d come through for us, not after he’d infiltrated the camp. There was something about him that rubbed me the

wrong way. Something I couldn't put into words.

I stayed there, hidden in the shadows, watching them. I told myself I wasn't going to make a scene. Annika wouldn't want me to. She'd be angry if I stormed over there, if I let jealousy get the better of me.

But the feeling was still there, gnawing at me, wrapping around my chest tighter with every second that passed. I hated how my emotions were so tangled, so raw.

I didn't want to be this person, the one who couldn't control himself, the one who acted on instinct without thinking of the consequences. Annika didn't deserve that. She didn't deserve me making things harder for her, making her feel suffocated.

So I stayed back, watching them. Kael, ever the calm one, gesturing with his hands, saying something to her. And Annika, with that smile of hers that always seemed to melt my insides.

I turned away slightly, leaning back against the trunk of a nearby tree, trying to get my bearings. My thoughts were scattered, my emotions all over the place.

That's when I heard it.

"Lucas." Callum had followed me. He sighed, shaking his head. "You're worried, but you don't need to be."

I breathed heavily, wordlessly.

He met my eyes, his expression serious, not a hint of doubt in his voice. "Annika loves you. You know that, right?"

I felt my breath catch in my throat. The words, so simple, so raw, hit me in a way I

didn't expect. I had spent so long convincing myself that I wasn't good enough for her, that she deserved better than someone like me. And yet, Callum was looking at me like he was certain of something I wasn't.

"I—" I couldn't finish the thought. I wasn't sure I even knew how to respond.

"Listen, you've fought for her," Callum continued, his voice softer now. "And you'll keep fighting. But you can't let doubt take over. She's not going anywhere. She's with you, and she always will be."

I looked back at Annika. She was still talking to Kael, but now, it felt different. Her posture, the way she tilted her head, the way she looked at him—everything felt like a warning. Something that had been creeping at the edge of my thoughts, something I hadn't wanted to admit.

But Callum's words resonated in a way that made it impossible to ignore.

I didn't want to be afraid of losing her. I didn't want to doubt what we had, what we'd fought for.

Still, it was hard to shake the fear that something might slip through my fingers, that despite everything, I wasn't enough for her.

But Callum was right.

Annika loved me. And that was something I needed to remember—especially now.

Callum's words were still echoing in my mind as I turned away from the trees and started walking back toward the town. I didn't have the luxury of lingering on feelings, not now, not with everything that was at stake. But a part of me, the part I usually kept buried, wanted to believe him.

I couldn't be weak. I couldn't be the kind of man who let his doubts control him. Annika deserved better than that, better than me faltering when I was supposed to be strong for her.

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We needed to take action. And for that, I needed information. Information that could only come from one person, the one I hated to deal with, the one who was locked beneath the earth in a cell meant for monsters.

“Callum,” I said, not looking back as I walked, my steps sure and purposeful. “We’re going back to the cell. I need answers. We’re not getting any closer to finding Aurelius or dealing with the rogue shifters without more help.”

Callum’s boots scuffed the dirt behind me as he caught up. “You sure about this?” he asked. “He’s not going to give you anything easily. And he’s still... dangerous.”

“I don’t care,” I muttered, my hand instinctively tightening around the hilt of the dagger at my side. “I’m not sitting around waiting for them to make the next move. We need to know what the other vampire clans are up to. Damien might be the only one who can tell us. I’ll get the information from him, one way or another.”

Callum didn’t respond right away, but I could feel his eyes on the back of my neck. He knew how much I hated dealing with Damien, how much I wanted to avoid him altogether. But sometimes, you had to put your emotions aside for the greater good.

“We’ll do it together,” Callum finally said. “But if he tries anything—”

“I know,” I snapped, cutting him off. “We handle it. We don’t back down.”

The tension felt heavier now, pressing down on me as we neared the place where I’d locked away my uncle. The air felt thicker here, as if even the earth itself could sense the weight of what was about to happen.

It didn't matter. I was prepared for whatever came next. The answers we needed were within that damned cell, and I wasn't leaving without them.

I didn't look at Callum as I gestured for him to open the door. He did so without question, the heavy metal creaking under the strain.

"Damien," I said, my voice steady, though my mind was anything but. "I'm here for answers. And you're going to give them to me. Now."

The silence from within was suffocating, but I didn't flinch. I knew that man too well. He'd try to make me doubt myself, try to twist the truth. But I wouldn't let him. Not this time.

"I'm listening," I said, pushing further into the darkness.

Damien's chuckle echoed from the darkness of the cell, the sound like nails scraping against a blackboard. I could feel his eyes on me, even though I couldn't see them clearly through the bars. His presence, like always, was suffocating, filling the space with a sense of malice and old grudges.

"How many times are we going to do this dance?" he asked with contempt, as if I were wasting his time.

I stood there, unmoving, my eyes adjusting to the dim light in the chamber. Callum was by my side, silent as always. His presence was a steady reminder that I wasn't alone in this. Still, this confrontation was mine to handle.

"I'm not here for games, Damien," I said in an ice-cold voice. "The rogue clans, Aurelius, the shifters—you know something. I'm not leaving here until I get some answers."

Damien's eyes narrowed, but the mockery didn't vanish. "Answers? You think I care about your little war, your human struggles? I have nothing to offer you."

I leaned in closer, my fists tightening on the cold iron bars, my voice low but forceful. "You do have something to offer, Damien. Information. And if you don't give it to me, I'll take you to the rogue vampires myself and leave you on their doorstep wrapped up like a fucking Christmas present."

His expression faltered for just a moment, just long enough for me to know I had hit a nerve. He quickly masked it, but the damage was done. I had him on edge.

"Do you really think I'm afraid of you, Lucas?" His smile twisted into something cruel. "You're no threat. Not to me. Not to anyone."

I wasn't interested in playing his game anymore. "Where are they hiding him?" I demanded, cutting through his words. "Aurelius. You know something, and you're going to tell me."

Damien let out a slow, deliberate sigh as if he were humoring a child. "You don't even know what you're up against, do you? Aurelius isn't some lowborn vampire, Lucas. He's an ancient, a relic from a time before your precious town ever existed."

I stepped closer, anger bubbling beneath my skin. "What do you mean? Tell me more."

Damien shifted in his cell, his eyes glinting with something dangerous. "You want to know? Fine. Aurelius was sealed away long ago, but he's not just some forgotten corpse. His power is tied to more than just blood. It's bound to the earth itself, to an ancient place. The shifters have been trying to unlock that power, to wake him from his prison for a long time."

“The place,” I said, my voice sharp. “Where is it?”

Damien’s eyes flickered with something like hesitation, but then he gave a small, almost imperceptible smile. “Now that’s the question, isn’t it? It’s not something you can just stumble upon, Lucas. The power of Aurelius is tied to an old site, hidden deep in the mountains. Few even know of its existence. But you—”

“Where?” I interrupted, pressing him harder. I needed him to give me something concrete.

Damien’s lips curled upward as if he enjoyed this more than he should have. “The old temple. The one buried beneath the earth, beneath the ruins of the city. The one no one remembers. My guess is that’s where they’ll attempt to awaken him.”

The words hit me like a hammer. My heart skipped a beat, the weight of what Damien was saying crashing down on me. The temple. The ruins. I had heard whispers, rumors from the older vampires, but I had never paid attention. No one had.

And now I knew why.

“Who is their leader?” I demanded to know.

Damien didn’t respond immediately. I saw him weigh the cost of giving up more, and I could almost feel the calculations running through his mind. But finally, he shrugged, a smug smile on his face. “You’re too young, too inexperienced to know him, to fight him.”

I wasn’t about to let him win this. Not now. Not after everything that had happened.

I turned to Callum, who had been standing in silence beside me, taking in everything. “We need to go there,” I said, my mind already working through the steps. “Now.”

Callum gave me a look that was half concern, half disbelief. “You sure about this? After all this? Going straight into their hands...”

“I don’t have a choice,” I said, the determination hardening my resolve.

I didn’t have time to explain. I was already walking away, moving toward the exit of the cell, my heart pounding. Every instinct in me screamed that this was the right choice, even if it meant stepping into a trap.

Chapter Thirteen

Annika

I couldn't tell if it was a dream or not. It had to be.

The forest stretched endlessly around me, shadows twisting and curling like living things. The moon hung low, its pale light barely piercing the thick canopy overhead. Each step I took seemed to echo, the sound swallowed by the hush of the night. My bare feet pressed into the damp earth, but I felt no cold, no pain. Only the steady pull drawing me deeper into the darkness.

I should've been afraid. The trees loomed, their branches clawing at the sky, and the air pressed heavy against my skin. But there was no fear. Only her.

She stood ahead, just beyond the reach of the moonlight.

The witch.

My ancestor.

The woman whose blood bound Aurelius and now ran through my veins.

She was cloaked in white, hair long and loose, falling in waves like shadows around her face. Her eyes glowed faintly, golden and piercing, and they never left mine. She didn't speak, but I felt her call, a whisper in my bones that beckoned me closer.

"Why are you showing yourself to me?" I asked, though my voice was barely a breath.

She didn't answer. Instead, she lifted a hand and gestured for me to follow.

The forest thickened as I moved toward her, the trees closing in until there was barely room to breathe. My pulse quickened, but still, I wasn't afraid. Her presence was a balm against the unease, an anchor in the dark. I trusted her, even as the night pressed

closer.

“You’re leading me somewhere,” I said, stepping over gnarled roots and tangled branches. “But why? What do you want from me?”

She stopped then, her feet barely seeming to touch the earth, and her eyes fixed on me with something that felt like sadness, or maybe regret.

“You already know,” she said, her voice echoing like the wind through the leaves.

I froze. It wasn’t just her voice. It was my own. Soft and distant, as if the words were coming from deep within me.

“Tell me,” I pleaded.

But she only reached out, her fingers grazing mine, and suddenly the forest was gone.

I stood at the edge of an ancient stone altar, the air thick with the scent of blood and earth. Chains wrapped around the carved stone, stained dark, and in the center lay a figure... shadowed, bound, but pulsing with something alive. Something wrong.

Aurelius.

“No,” I whispered, backing away. “This can’t happen.”

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But the witch was behind me now, her hands on my shoulders, grounding me. “It’s already begun,” she said. “You must be ready.”

I turned to face her, panic clawing up my throat. “How? I don’t know what to do! I’m not—”

“You are,” she cut in, her voice suddenly sharp. “You carry my blood. My power. You must face him.”

I shook my head, but she tightened her grip. “Wake up, Annika,” she said. “Before it’s too late.”

I woke with a gasp, the chill of the earth seeping into my bones. My palms pressed against rough stone, and as I pushed myself upright, the world around me came into focus.

Ruins.

Broken pillars jutted from the ground like jagged teeth, their edges worn smooth by time. The stone beneath me was cracked and uneven, covered in veins of moss and creeping ivy. Shadows pooled in the crevices, and the air was thick with damp earth and something older, something ancient.

I didn’t remember how I’d gotten here. Did my dream lead me here?

My legs ached, my hands were scraped raw, and dirt clung to my skin. But none of it mattered. My gaze was drawn ahead, to the center of the ruins, where a dark, gaping

hole waited.

The stairwell.

It spiraled down into the ground, carved from the same stone as the ruins, and it felt wrong. Too perfect. Too deliberate. The steps disappeared into blackness, the kind that seemed to swallow light and sound.

A shiver crawled up my spine.

No sane person would go down there. Everything about it screamed danger, whispered warnings that prickled at the edges of my thoughts. And yet, I couldn't move away.

I stepped closer, my breath catching as my feet found the edge of the first step. The air that drifted up was cold and damp, carrying the scent of earth and something metallic, sharp. My fingers brushed the stone wall, feeling the grooves carved into its surface. Symbols, runes I couldn't read but somehow recognized.

Blood magic.

It was the same power I'd felt in my dreams, the same pulse that had hummed through the witch's words. It called to me now, a whisper in my veins, urging me down.

I tried to resist. My body trembled, every instinct begging me to turn back. But my feet moved anyway, step by step, the darkness pulling me deeper.

The air thickened as I descended, pressing in around me like a living thing. The stairwell spiraled endlessly, the faint light from above swallowed by the dark. My fingers brushed the damp stone walls, steadying me as I moved deeper.

When the stairs ended, the passage narrowed. The walls pressed closer, and I had to duck in places where the ceiling dipped low. It was colder here, the kind of cold that settled in your bones and didn't let go.

The corridor twisted and turned, branching off into other paths, all of them shrouded in shadows. I hesitated at each fork, but something always drew me the right way, an invisible thread pulling me deeper into the maze.

Time lost meaning. My breaths echoed, too loud in the stillness, and my pulse became the only measure of the seconds passing.

Then I saw it.

A door, or what had once been a door. It was stone, covered in cracks and carved with runes, like the ones above. But this time, they glowed faintly, their edges tinged red, as if pulsing with the rhythm of a heartbeat. My heartbeat.

I pressed my palm against the center. The stone was cool, vibrating faintly under my touch.

The door groaned, the sound vibrating through my bones. Dust rained down as it shifted, splitting open just enough for me to slip through.

The chamber beyond swallowed me whole.

It wasn't large, but it felt vast. The walls curved inward, the ceiling domed, and in the center, a stone sarcophagus lay raised on a platform. Chains draped over it, thick, rusted links that gleamed faintly despite the dark.

I stepped closer, unable to stop myself.

The symbols carved into the sarcophagus matched the runes above, but these glowed brighter; they burned red and gold, as if alive. I reached out, my fingers trembling as they hovered above the surface.

Power thrummed against my skin.

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I jerked my hand back, my breath catching.

This was it. The source of my dreams. The place the witch had led me to.

The crypt.

“Annika!”

I froze at the sound of my name echoing through the crypt. It sliced through the heavy stillness like a knife. I recognized it immediately.

Panic flared hot in my chest. I stepped back from the sarcophagus, pulse racing as the faint glow of torchlight danced along the walls.

And then they were there.

Lucas burst through the doorway first, his eyes wild, searching and finding me. Relief flickered across his face before his gaze dropped to the sarcophagus, to the chains that rattled faintly, vibrating like strings pulled too tight.

“What the hell is this?” His voice was sharp, edged with fear and anger.

Kael followed, his eyes narrowing the second he saw the runes pulsing faintly along the stone surface. “Merciful heavens,” he muttered, stepping closer. “It’s him.”

Lucas was already at my side, his hand gripping my arm, grounding me. “What were you thinking?” he demanded, his voice low but trembling.

I couldn't answer. My eyes locked on the sarcophagus. The chains rattled again.

Something shifted.

The sound was subtle at first. It was a scrape of stone, like something brushing against the inside of the lid. Then the runes flared brighter, a deep crimson glow that cast flickering shadows across the walls.

Lucas shoved me behind him, his body tense, but it was Kael who stepped closer, swearing under his breath. "He's waking up."

"No," I whispered.

I looked down, and my breath caught.

The stone near the base of the sarcophagus was smeared dark.

Fresh blood. My blood.

It all clicked then. The pull that had drawn me here. The hum in my veins. The strange symbols etched into my mind, whispering to me even in sleep.

They had fed him.

I stumbled back, my legs trembling. "I didn't—I didn't mean to—"

Lucas shot Kael a sharp look. "Get her out of here."

"No," I said, stepping closer instead of away. My voice was steadier than I felt, but I couldn't let fear take over. Not now. "We can't just run. We have to stop this. Destroy him before it's too late."

Lucas turned to me, his eyes dark with fury and fear. “Annika, no. You don’t understand—”

“I do,” I snapped, cutting him off. My blood was still smeared on the stone, and I could feel its pull, a tether that connected me to the thing inside the sarcophagus. “My blood woke him. I won’t leave until we finish this.”

The chains rattled again, louder this time, the sound vibrating through the air. Lucas shoved me behind him, his stance braced like he was ready to fight.

Kael swore. “This isn’t a fight we can win, Annika. Not here.”

He was right. Every instinct screamed it. But I couldn’t leave—not yet. I shook my head. “We have to do something.”

Lucas’s jaw tightened, his hand flexing around the hilt of his dagger. “You want to destroy him? Fine. But we need a plan, not blind desperation.”

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I pointed at the sarcophagus. “We don’t have time for plans.”

The runes pulsed again, bathing the chamber in blood-red light. The chains groaned, pulled taut by an unseen force. Whatever was inside was pushing against its prison.

“The witch hasn’t told me what to do yet, how to prevent this from happening,” I shouted desperately. “I... I can’t understand what she is trying to tell me in my dreams.”

Kael turned to the runes. “If he had the strength to get out of there, he would have been out by now. That means they need more of your blood. And that also means we have some more time.”

“But how much?” Lucas asked. “We could already be too late.”

“No,” Kael shook his head. “There is a shaman we need to see. She will help Annika decipher the message she has been trying to receive through her dreams.”

Lucas and I exchanged a meaningful glance, then he nodded.

“Alright,” Lucas agreed. “We go there now.”

But a voice cut through our intention like a blade. “Well, perhaps you could stay a bit longer.”

Chapter Fourteen

Lucas

The air shifted, thickening with something sharp and electric. I felt it before I saw him. It was power, raw and untamed, pressing down like a weight. Then he stepped out of the shadows.

The shifter. Their leader.

He moved with an easy confidence, his steps deliberate, predatory. Dark hair fell just past his shoulders, and his eyes—too bright, too wild—locked on me with something between amusement and disdain.

“Well, well,” he drawled, lips curling into a smirk. “The vampire prince himself.” His gaze flicked to Annika, then back to me. “And his precious little human.”

I bared my fangs. “Whoever you are, you should’ve stayed hidden.”

He laughed. The sound grated against my nerves. “Hidden? No.” His eyes glinted. “I wanted you to come. I wanted you to see what weakness looks like.”

His pack fanned out behind him, forming a tight circle around us. Wolves and men, shifting and growling, their eyes gleaming in the dim light. The space felt smaller, the walls pressing in.

Annika shifted closer to me, and I felt her warmth against my side, grounding me. But the leader saw it. His grin widened.

“There it is,” he said. “Weakness.”

My claws ached to tear into him, to wipe that smug look off his face, but I didn’t move. Not yet.

“Your leash is showing, vampire prince,” he taunted, nodding toward Annika. “She’s made you soft. You’re too busy protecting her to be what you were meant to be. A predator.”

I took a step forward, forcing him to stop. “You think love makes me weak?” My voice came out low, edged with a growl. “Then you’re more foolish than I thought.”

He didn’t flinch. “No, I think it’s made you predictable.”

The pack closed in, the sound of claws scraping stone and low growls filling the air. My muscles tensed, ready to spring, but the leader didn’t move.

“Let her go,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “This doesn’t have to end with blood.”

“Oh, but it does.” His eyes gleamed. “That’s the point, isn’t it? Blood. Hers. Yours. All of it spilled for what’s coming.”

Annika stiffened beside me, but I couldn’t look at her.

I tightened my grip on my dagger. “Then let’s get to it.”

His grin stretched wider. “With pleasure.”

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The first shifter lunged, claws slashing through the air. I met him head-on, steel singing as my dagger tore through flesh. Blood sprayed, hot and sharp, but there was no time to revel in the kill. Another was already coming.

I spun, dodging the next strike, and drove my blade deep into the shifter's gut. He howled, collapsing, but more poured in, circling like wolves scenting weakness.

Annika fought beside me, a blade in her hands, small, but sharp. She was fast, ducking and twisting, her movements fierce and desperate. Kael was at her back, his strikes brutal and precise, cutting down anything that came too close.

But it wasn't enough.

They just kept coming.

Claws ripped through the air, catching my arm, tearing through flesh. I gritted my teeth, but the pain barely registered as I drove my dagger up, slicing through the shifter's throat. He dropped, but another took his place.

Annika cried out behind me, and I turned, heart seizing. She staggered, her blade knocked from her hand. A shifter loomed over her, teeth bared.

I didn't think. I just moved.

I threw myself at him, slamming into his side and driving him away from her. We hit the ground hard, rolling, but I came out on top, sinking my fangs into his throat.

Warm blood filled my mouth. I tore away, leaving him gasping. Dead.

“Annika!” I shouted, already pushing to my feet. She was back on her feet, Kael covering her as another wave hit. But we were too outnumbered.

Too slow.

A blow knocked me sideways. Claws raked down my back, and I hit the ground hard. The world spun, and for a moment, everything blurred. Claws, teeth, blood.

I pushed up, vision clearing just in time to see Kael go down, pinned beneath a massive shifter.

Then, something happened. Something... incredible.

The air shifted. It thickened. It rolled over me like a tide, heavy and electric, raising every hair on my body. My head snapped toward Annika.

She stood in the center of the chaos, her chest heaving, blood smeared across her skin. Her eyes—God, her eyes—burned with light. Not just rage or fear. Power.

I froze.

So did the shifters.

The leader turned to her, his grin faltering. "What—"

Annika lifted her hands, and the earth trembled. The runes carved into the ground began to glow, pulsing brighter and brighter until the light filled the cavern.

"No!" the leader roared, lunging toward her.

I moved to intercept, but I didn't need to.

A crack split the air, a crack as loud as thunder, and the shifter was thrown back, his body hitting the wall with a sickening crunch.

Annika didn't stop.

The light poured from her now, blinding and wild, wrapping around her like fire. The runes flared, and the shifters began to falter, stepping back, shielding their eyes.

I'd never seen her like this before.

She spoke then, her voice layered, echoing through the cavern. It wasn't her voice alone. It was older. Stronger.

"You will not take her."

Her words cracked like a whip, and the light erupted outward. It slammed into the shifters, sending them flying, pinning them to the ground. They writhed, howling, but they couldn't move.

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I staggered back, my instincts screaming at me to run, but I didn't. I couldn't.

Because it was Annika.

She turned to me, her eyes still glowing, her expression fierce and unyielding. For a moment, I didn't recognize her.

Then her gaze softened. Her lips parted. "Lucas."

The light faltered. She stumbled.

I was there before she fell, catching her, pulling her against me as the glow faded. Her body trembled, her breaths shallow, but she was alive.

The shifters were scattered, groaning or unconscious. This was our moment to run. I held Annika in front of me, her body limp against my chest. Her breathing was shallow, too shallow, and every uneven rise and fall of her shoulders sent another bolt of fear through me.

We rushed out of the crypt, back the way we came from, constantly looking back. I had no idea what it was that Annika did, but I knew that she had saved us.

As soon as we saw the gleam of pale moonlight, we headed to our horses. I gently placed her on mine.

"Follow me!" Kael instructed. I knew better than to argue.

Kael rode ahead, his horse cutting through the dense forest like it had been bred for this. He didn't look back, didn't slow, but I could feel his urgency in the way he rode. He was scared too.

I tightened my arms around Annika, pressing her closer, like that could keep her here, keep her safe. Her head lolled against me, strands of her hair sticking to her sweat-dampened skin.

"Stay with me," I murmured, my lips brushing her ear. "Just a little longer, Annika. Don't give up."

No response.

The horse beneath me shifted, its muscles straining as we cut through the forest. I forced my focus outward, scanning the shadows for any hint that we'd been followed. But nothing came. Only the steady drum of hooves and the whisper of wind through the trees.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that time was slipping away.

"She's burning up," I called out to Kael. My voice sounded raw, too sharp. "How much farther?"

"Not far," he shouted back. "A few more miles."

A few more miles felt like too much.

Annika shifted weakly, her fingers curling against my arm. The faint movement hit me harder than any blow I'd ever taken. Relief and terror tangled inside me. She was still fighting. But for how much longer?

“You’ll be okay,” I whispered, more to myself than to her. “You have to be okay.”

Kael urged his horse faster, and I followed, pushing my mount until its breaths came in ragged bursts. My own heartbeat thundered in my ears, drowning out everything else.

I didn’t know this shaman Kael spoke of. I didn’t know if they could save her. But I didn’t care.

I’d ride through hell itself if it meant keeping Annika alive.

Finally, we stopped at the mouth of a cave. The entrance yawned open like a wound in the earth, dark and uninviting. Its edges were jagged and slick with moss. I tightened my grip on Annika, feeling the faint rise and fall of her breath against me. It was too shallow, too fragile.

Kael slid off his horse, boots hitting the ground hard. He turned to face me, his expression sharp, lined with frustration. “This is it,” he said, gesturing toward the cave. “The shaman’s inside.”

I didn’t move. My instincts screamed at me to be careful. The cave felt wrong, like a place that devoured light and sound. And Kael, no matter what he’d done, was still an outsider.

“You’re sure?” My voice came out rough.

Kael’s jaw tightened. “If I haven’t proven myself trustworthy by now, Lucas, I never will.”

I stared at him, letting the weight of his words hang in the air. He didn’t look away. Didn’t flinch.

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I hated how much I wanted to believe him. Hated that he might actually deserve it.

Annika stirred in my arms, a faint sound escaping her lips. It wasn't a word, just a breath. A plea.

Damn it.

"Fine." I slid off the horse, keeping Annika close as I landed. Her weight felt heavier now, like her strength had seeped out entirely during the ride. My stomach knotted. I couldn't waste another second.

Kael stepped toward the cave entrance without another word. I followed, my boots crunching against dirt and stone.

The cave swallowed us quickly. Shadows pressed in from every side, thick and suffocating. The air was damp, heavy with the scent of earth and something faintly metallic... blood or magic, I couldn't tell which.

Kael led the way, his steps confident, but mine slowed the deeper we went. My eyes darted to every corner, searching for threats, for traps.

"Keep up," Kael muttered, not bothering to look back.

"Don't push me," I snapped. "Not when I've got everything to lose."

He paused at that, just for a second, before continuing forward. I didn't miss the tension in his shoulders.

Good. He should be tense.

Because if this was a trick, if this ended with Annika slipping away in my arms, then no force on earth would save him from me.

Then, a small dimly lit chamber opened up before us. There was a flickering fire, and standing in front of the flames was the shaman, with a look of expectance on her face.

She was a woman, older than me, with long, silver hair that seemed to shimmer even in the low light. Her robes were dark, draped elegantly over her form, the intricate symbols sewn into them pulsing with a faint glow. There was an air of quiet power about her, something ancient, something dangerous.

And, worst of all, something knowing.

She didn't flinch as we entered. Instead, she simply turned her eyes to Annika, resting weakly in my arms, and then back to me. Her gaze was piercing, like she'd known we would come, like she'd been waiting. She smiled upon seeing Annika in my arms.

“Ah, the witch child... just as I saw...”

Chapter Fifteen

Annika

I drifted in and out of the darkness, my body floating, weightless, as if I no longer belonged to it.

The cold stone pressed against my back, but it barely registered. I felt gentle hands lowering me onto something softer. A bed? No, it was rougher than that. A cot, maybe. My thoughts swam, sluggish and heavy, slipping through my grasp before I

could hold onto them.

Voices murmured around me. I couldn't make out the words, only the cadence. It was low, steady, rhythmic. A chant?

The scent of burning herbs filled the air, sharp and earthy, mingling with the faint tang of iron. My stomach twisted. The room spun.

I tried to open my eyes, but the weight of my eyelids pinned them shut. Heat bloomed on my skin, then vanished just as quickly, leaving me cold and hollow.

"Stay with me," a woman's voice said.

I wanted to answer, but my tongue felt thick, foreign in my mouth. I couldn't move. Couldn't speak.

The chanting grew louder, reverberating through my skull, rattling my bones. It pressed against me, heavy and suffocating, yet something in it called to me, pulling at the edges of my soul.

The woman's hands touched my forehead, burning hot. Light burst behind my eyelids, blinding and searing. I gasped... or maybe I didn't. I couldn't tell anymore what was real and what wasn't.

I felt myself sinking deeper, falling into something vast and endless. The light shifted, turning red, like blood. Like fire. And then I saw her.

The witch.

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She stood at the edge of my vision, wreathed in shadow, her dark hair wild around her face. Her eyes—my eyes—burned like embers, and her lips moved, though I couldn't hear what she said.

Her hand lifted, reaching toward me, beckoning.

That was when the darkness peeled away slowly, like fog lifting at dawn. My feet touched solid ground, or something that felt like it, and the world around me shifted, smoothing into focus.

I stood in a clearing bathed in silver light, surrounded by towering trees whose branches arched high above me, forming a natural cathedral. The air was thick, humming with energy, alive and ancient.

There, in the center of it all, stood the witch.

She was as I remembered her. Tall, ethereal, with dark hair falling like silk around her shoulders. Her eyes glowed faintly, ancient and knowing, but there was a weariness in them now, as if the weight of centuries had finally caught up to her.

In that moment, I knew her. I knew of her.

Niram. That was her name.

“You came,” she said softly, her voice echoing in the endless void around us.

“I didn't know I had a choice,” I whispered back. My voice felt too small, too fragile

here.

She smiled faintly, but it didn't reach her eyes. "No. You didn't."

I swallowed, stepping closer, though the space between us felt vast. "You helped me," I said. "Back in the crypt... That was you."

She inclined her head, but I could see the strain in her expression now. "I gave you what I could."

Her words felt heavy, final. I frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means I am no more." Her voice was calm, but the truth of it slammed into me like a stone. "That was the last of me... what little power I kept for the direst of moments."

I shook my head, panic clawing at my chest. "No, no, you're still here. You're talking to me now—"

"A shadow of what I was," she cut in gently. "An echo. Nothing more."

Her words left me cold. "Then what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to stop this?"

Her gaze softened. "You already know the answer."

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words died before I could speak. I did know. Somewhere deep inside, the answer had been waiting, growing stronger with every step I took toward this moment.

"Aurelius," I said, the name tasting bitter.

The witch nodded. “He stirs even now. The blood they took from you... it’s waking him. It’s only a matter of time.”

I felt my heart drop. “But I don’t know how to stop him.”

“You will,” she said, her voice steady despite the tremor of fading light around her. “You must.”

Her words felt more like a sentence than encouragement, but I forced myself to meet her gaze. “Tell me how.”

She stepped closer, and suddenly her hands were cupping mine. They were solid, warm, despite the fading glow of her form. “You are stronger than you believe, Annika. But power without resolve is meaningless. Remember that.”

I clenched my fingers around hers. “Don’t leave me,” I whispered.

Her smile softened. “I was never meant to stay.”

The light around her flickered, dimming, and I felt her slipping away.

“Wait!” I cried out, desperation clawing at my throat. “Please!”

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But she was already fading, her form dissolving into the shadows until there was nothing left.

And then I woke.

“Niram!” I shouted as I gasped, as the remnants of my dream vision hung onto me like cobwebs. My skin was damp, and my head spun as I tried to sit up.

A firm but gentle hand pressed against my shoulder, urging me to stay down.

“Easy,” a tender voice said.

I blinked and looked up to find a woman kneeling beside me. She was older, with silver-threaded hair woven into intricate braids, her face lined with age but striking in its sharpness. Her eyes were pale gray, almost translucent, and they pinned me in place as if she could see straight through me.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

She dipped her head slightly. “I am Rowena,” she said, her voice steady but not unkind. “And you need to rest.”

I flinched, glancing past her to where Lucas and Kael stood a few feet away. Lucas looked tense, his arms crossed and his jaw tight, his eyes fixed on me like he was afraid I’d disappear if he so much as blinked. Kael stood farther back, arms resting at his sides, though his expression was unreadable.

I tried to push myself up again. “No... I can’t rest. You don’t understand.”

Rowena frowned, her hand pressing more firmly against my shoulder. “You’re weak. You’ve lost too much blood. Whatever it is can wait.”

“No, it can’t!” My voice cracked, and I shook her off, sitting up fully this time despite the way my head spun.

Lucas was already moving, closing the distance between us in a flash. His hands caught my face, his eyes dark and searching. “Annika—what’s wrong? What happened?”

I gripped his wrists, trying to steady myself. “I saw her,” I said, the words rushing out of me. “The witch. My ancestor. She’s gone now, but before she disappeared, she told me that we don’t have much time.”

I stopped, forcing a breath. My pulse was racing, my chest tight. Rowena reached for me again, but I shook my head.

“We could see that ourselves,” Kael frowned with concern. “If he rises, we’re all dead.”

Rowena finally spoke again, her voice quieter this time. “Are you certain of this? Visions can be... deceptive.”

I met her eyes, my heart still pounding. “This wasn’t a vision. It was real. I could feel her and her power fading. She’s gone, but what she left behind...” I swallowed hard. “It’s on me now.”

Lucas’s grip shifted, his thumb brushing against my cheek. “We’ll stop this,” he said, but even as the words left his mouth, doubt flickered behind his eyes.

“No, you don’t get it,” I said, shaking my head. “We can’t just stop it. We have to destroy him before he rises. She told me—” I hesitated, the weight of her words still heavy in my chest. “She said I’m the only one who can do it.”

Rowena’s pale eyes narrowed. “The blood of the witch.”

I nodded.

Lucas stiffened, but his voice was steady when he spoke. “Then we fight.”

Kael didn’t look as convinced. “We don’t even know where to start. I mean, how do you kill the worst of the undead?”

Rowena finally rose, brushing her hands down the front of her robes. “I may be able to help with that.”

All eyes turned to her, but my chest still felt tight. Even with her help, even with Lucas and Kael by my side, the fear wouldn’t let me go.

I swallowed hard and pushed back the rising panic, focusing on Rowena. “What do you mean you can help?”

Her pale eyes flicked to mine, steady but unreadable. “There are spells. Wards. Old protections that may still hold power if we can find the right place to anchor them.”

Spells. Magic. Things that sounded more like myths than tools I could actually wield.

I shook my head. “That’s not enough. You don’t understand—he’s already waking. I saw it, felt it. He’s strong. Too strong for us to contain with words and symbols. If we don’t stop him before he rises fully—”

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Rowena stepped closer, cutting me off with a look. “Then we’ll make sure he never does.”

Her words hit me like a slap—sharp and final.

I opened my mouth to argue, but Lucas’s hand slid to my shoulder, grounding me. I glanced at him, at the fierce determination burning in his eyes, and my breath steadied just enough to speak.

“Tell me what we need to do,” I said.

Rowena nodded. “First, you need to rest. Your strength won’t hold if you push yourself any further.”

I started to protest, but Lucas squeezed my shoulder. “She’s right, Annika. You can’t fight like this.”

“But there’s no time—”

“Then we make time,” he cut in, his voice low but firm. “You’re not doing this alone.”

Rowena stepped closer again, her voice sharp with authority. She addressed Kael first. “You’ll come with me and help me prepare what I can. And you,” she said, turning to Lucas, “keep her safe.”

They both nodded, but I barely noticed. My focus had already shifted back to the

weight pressing against my chest and the impossible task looming ahead.

“I need the Aetheris bloom,” Rowena explained, extracting a dried, crumpled leaf from one of the jars on a small shelf. It didn’t look like much of anything.

I stared at the brittle piece of greenish-gray in her palm. It looked fragile and somehow ordinary, but Rowena’s eyes burned with something close to reverence as she spoke.

“When combined with the blood of a witch,” she continued, her voice low, “it becomes the most powerful binding spell I have ever encountered. A spell capable of sealing even the darkest forces.”

I barely heard her. My focus caught and tangled on the words a witch’s blood.

My blood.

I swallowed heavily. “You mean me.”

Rowena’s gaze sharpened, pinning me in place. “You already know I do.”

“This spell...” My voice wavered. “It takes blood. How much?”

Rowena hesitated, and that pause said more than I wanted to hear.

“Enough,” she finally said. “It will weaken you, yes... but it won’t kill you.”

Her words didn’t comfort me. Not when I saw the flicker of doubt in her eyes before she spoke them.

Lucas stepped closer, his voice sharp. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t,” Rowena snapped, turning on him. “We don’t have time for alternatives. Aurelius is stirring, do you understand what that means? If he wakes fully, nothing will stop him. Not you, not your strength, nothing. This is our only chance.”

She turned toward Kael, who had been quiet through most of this, his arms crossed as he watched us.

“You’ll come with me,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

Kael didn’t argue, just gave a sharp nod and stepped toward her.

I wanted to ask how long it would take, how much time we had left, but the words caught in my throat.

Instead, I looked at Lucas. He was already looking at me, his expression torn between anger and worry.

“We’ll be back before nightfall,” Rowena said.

Then she and Kael disappeared out of the mouth of the cave, leaving us alone with nothing but silence and the weight of what was coming.

Chapter Sixteen

Lucas

Annika stood there, staring after them, her arms wrapped tight around herself. She looked small like that... too small for the weight she carried, too fragile for what was coming.

But I knew better. She wasn't fragile. She was the strongest damn person I'd ever met.

Even so, I couldn't stop myself. I crossed the space between us and pulled her into my arms. She didn't resist. Just sank into me, her face pressing against my chest.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. I only held her, letting her trembling breaths even out against me. My hand traced lazy circles along her back, trying to soothe what I couldn't fix.

I brushed my thumb along her cheek, catching the tear that threatened to fall. "I hate this," I admitted. "I hate that you have to bleed for this. For them."

Her lips curved faintly. Not a smile. It was more like a sad acknowledgment.

"You'd do it, wouldn't you?"

I didn't answer. She already knew.

“You’d bleed yourself dry if it meant keeping me safe.” Her voice cracked, and my arms tightened around her.

“Yes,” I whispered. “And I’d burn the world down before I let it take you.”

Her breath hitched, and I bent my head, pressing my forehead against hers. Her skin was warm, her scent familiar. Grounding.

“I’m scared, Lucas,” she said.

It wasn’t something she admitted often, and it damn near broke me.

“I know,” I whispered. “I am too.”

She leaned up then, her lips brushing against mine, soft and hesitant. I kissed her back, pouring everything I couldn’t say into it, my fear, my desperation, my love.

I couldn’t stop myself.

The moment her lips brushed mine, something inside me snapped. The fear, the anger, the unbearable ache of nearly losing her, it all poured out, raw and unrestrained. I crushed her against me, my hands tangling in her hair, tilting her head back as I kissed her deeper.

She didn’t pull away. Didn’t hesitate. She melted into me, her fingers curling into my shirt like she needed me as much as I needed her. And God, I needed her.

Her lips parted, and I took advantage, tasting her, devouring her. She gasped softly against my mouth, and the sound unraveled me. My hands slid down, gripping her waist, desperate to feel every inch of her, to remind myself she was real, here, alive.

I pulled her closer, as if I could fuse us together, as if holding her like this would keep the world and all its horrors at bay.

Her hands moved to my face, cupping it as she kissed me back just as fiercely, her breath warm and shallow. She wasn't holding back either. Not this time.

I broke the kiss just long enough to look at her, my forehead pressed to hers, my chest heaving.

"Annika," I rasped, her name like a prayer on my lips.

Her eyes were wide, glassy, and she looked at me like I was the only thing keeping her standing. Maybe I was.

"I love you," she whispered, her voice trembling but sure.

My heart lurched, and I kissed her again, slower this time, savoring her. She tasted like hope and desperation and everything I couldn't put into words.

"I love you too," I breathed against her mouth. "More than anything."

I wanted her bad. I wanted her so much that it hurt my entire body. She had always been too much for me... too wonderful, too sexy, and far too innocent.

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Her beautiful eyes were open, staring at my lips, almost as if she herself wanted to devour me, while it was the other way around.

I gripped her more tightly, my hands around her body. When she kissed me again, I growled against her lips, but I kept control. My hand was on her neck, guiding her, holding her.

Then, her kiss took on a blazing heat, almost as if she were attacking me with the sheer strength of her yearning. It was hotter than I had seen her before, as she climbed onto me, her hands pressed to my chest, exploring the depths of my mouth with her tongue.

“I want you,” she murmured with that animalistic tone of voice I loved so much, when she was so crazy about me that she couldn’t wait a moment longer for me to claim her. It drove me mad.

She quickly took off her pants, working her way around mine as well. I still had no idea when she had gotten so good at taking our clothes off so quickly, but I knew I loved that. She liked it hard. She liked it fast. And that was how she wanted it now.

“I need you to fuck me, to forget about everything but the sensation of you filling me,” she whispered again right into my ear, and my cock was more than ready to make her wish come true.

“Fuck, Annika...” I groaned, the animal in me completely crazy.

She adjusted herself in my lap, grinding against me. She knew that could make me

cum in seconds. But I wanted to feel her slick, wet heat around me first. I had to.

I grabbed a fistful of her hair, licking her neck. She arched it, her eyes closed, allowing me clear access to her pale skin.

God, she was so fucking beautiful. And she was all mine.

The thought drove me even wilder than before.

She slid her panties to the side, her fingers fumbling with the thin strip of fabric that was still preventing me from claiming her. She grinned as she locked her gaze with mine.

“Impatient?” she asked devilishly.

“You have no idea,” I smiled back, trying to kiss her, but she playfully pulled away, allowing her fingers to graze my cock.

“I love it when you’re so hard for me,” she purred seductively, and I couldn’t get enough of her voice, of her skin, of her scent.

I pulled her close to me and sank my teeth gently into her neck, biting her but without drawing blood. With her, it was always a game.

Sinking her nails into my chest, she lowered herself only a little onto me, taking in only the tip. Heat exploded around me instantly. I gazed at her. Tempting me, she bit her lower lip.

Slowly, she started to swirl her hips, making circles, sinking more and more each time, until finally, she took all of me into herself. She arched her back, moving only her hips. I grabbed her breasts, still hiding under the thin fabric of her t-shirt. She

never wore a bra. And she made sure I knew that.

“Yes, fuck me...” I urged, and she listened.

“Look at me,” she ordered, grabbing me by the throat. I allowed her... as always.

She didn't take her eyes off of me even for a second. I loved seeing the fire in her eyes when she was being the dominant one, taking possession of me, instead of it being the other way around.

My cock threatened to explode and I knew I wouldn't last long. Not when we were both this hot.

“You feel so good,” I told her, our eyes promising everything to each other.

A tidal wave of pleasure washed over her a moment later. I always knew when she was close, but this time, it took us both by surprise. Her nails sunk into my skin even deeper, and she moaned louder than before, screamed almost, as pleasure took hold of her. She was still fucking me, taking all of me, until I followed her, releasing myself deeply into her.

Her forehead dipped to mine. She was still breathing heavily as I felt her juices leaking out of her, making us both soaking wet.

She kissed me gently, with just the tip of her lips. A butterfly kiss, as she liked to call it. A kiss of pleasure and satisfaction.

I smiled as she lowered herself next to me. I watched her chest rise then fall. We remained silent for a long time. Everything was silent, except for the soft rhythm of her breathing. Moonlight spilled through the small window, casting silver patterns across the bed. She lay beside me, her body curled slightly, one arm draped over my

chest as if she didn't want to let go even in sleep.

I couldn't stop looking at her.

Her hair was a mess against the pillow, wild and tangled, and her lips were still swollen from my kisses. She looked peaceful like this. She looked softer than the fierce, determined woman who had stood against shifters and vampires and powers far older than either of us.

But I knew the truth. She wasn't soft. Not really. She was strong, stronger than anyone gave her credit for, stronger than even she realized.

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And yet, in this moment, she looked fragile. Breakable.

I reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her face. She didn't stir, just let out a quiet sigh and burrowed closer.

My chest tightened.

I didn't deserve her. I knew that. I'd known it from the start. But I'd take every second she gave me and fight like hell to keep her safe.

Even now, the weight of what lay ahead pressed down on me. Aurelius. The blood rituals. The enemies circling closer. And Annika, tangled up in the middle of it all because of who she was... what she was.

I hated it. Hated that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't protect her from this.

But I'd try. I'd give everything.

I traced my fingers along her shoulder, over the faint scars that marred her skin. Proof of what she'd already survived. Proof of what she could endure.

My warrior. My mate.

She stirred slightly, her breath hitching before settling again. I pressed my lips to her temple, letting the warmth of her body seep into mine, grounding me.

I didn't know what the future held, but I knew this... whatever came next, I wouldn't

face it alone.

I had her. And I'd never let her go.

Chapter Seventeen

Annika

Rowena returned just as the first light of dawn bled across the sky, her shadow stretching long at the mouth of the cave. Kael was right behind her, his arms laden with bundles of leaves and roots that smelled sharp and earthy.

"It wasn't easy," Rowena said, setting down her satchel with a heavy thump. "But we found it."

I stood, my legs still shaky, but determination steadied me. Lucas was at my side in an instant, his hand brushing mine, grounding me.

Rowena knelt and began unpacking the ingredients, spreading them across the stone floor. The herb, which she called the Aetheris bloom, was darker than I expected, its leaves almost black with veins of crimson running through them.

Even just looking at it sent a shiver down my spine. It felt alive somehow, as if it pulsed faintly, in tune with my heartbeat.

"This is it?" I asked, swallowing hard.

Rowena didn't look up. "Yes. Combined with your blood, it will bind Aurelius. It won't kill him... not completely. That kind of power doesn't die so easily, but it will put him back to sleep. If we do this right, he won't rise again."

Her words settled over us like a heavy fog.

Kael crouched beside her, already pulling out tools like bowls, pestles, strips of cloth. His movements were sharp, focused, but his jaw was set, his expression grim.

“Let’s start,” Lucas said, his voice tight.

I lowered myself onto the floor, across from Rowena. She handed me a small knife. I noticed its blade was wickedly sharp, and I swallowed again.

“We need your blood to activate the herb,” she said softly. “But you must do it of your own accord. It doesn’t have the same power if someone else cuts you.”

My hands trembled. Lucas knelt beside me, placing his hand over mine. His touch was warm, steady.

“You can do this,” he murmured.

I nodded.

The blade sliced quickly across my palm, sharp and fast, and the sting made me gasp. Blood welled instantly, hot and red.

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Rowena held out the bowl, and I let the drops fall, darkening the Aetheris leaves as they hit. Something about the way the herb absorbed the blood felt wrong and unnatural, but I didn't pull away.

"More?" I asked, watching the blood drip into the bowl, but never filling it.

"Yes," Rowena nodded. "I know this must be unpleasant..."

I didn't say anything to that. It didn't hurt. At least not as much as I thought it would. It was merely, as she said, unpleasant.

I had no idea how long the blood kept dripping, but I knew that at one point, I started to feel lightheaded. I was grateful for the fact that I was seated. Otherwise, I fear I would have fainted.

"That's enough," Rowena finally said.

She began grinding the leaves, her hands sure and practiced, as Kael added powders and oils from his pack. The scent grew stronger, thicker. Those were herbs and earth, but also something sharp, metallic. Magic.

In the meantime, Lucas took my hand in his, his touch achingly gentle despite the tension humming through him. His thumb brushed just below the cut, careful not to press too hard. Still, even that slight contact sent a sting through my palm. I flinched, and his grip immediately loosened.

"Sorry," he murmured, his voice low, rough.

I shook my head. "It's fine."

But he didn't look convinced. His dark eyes stayed locked on the wound, his brows pulled tight. He reached for the cloth Rowena had left beside us, dipping it into a bowl of water.

I watched as he wrung it out, his hands steady even though I could feel the storm brewing inside him. It was in the tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw ticked.

"You don't have to fuss over me," I said softly.

He ignored me, pressing the damp cloth to my palm. The coolness dulled the sting, and I let out a shaky breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

His eyes flicked up to mine. "Let me take care of you. Just this once."

Just this once.

Like he didn't already do it constantly. Like every single look, every word, every time he stepped between me and danger wasn't him taking care of me. Protecting me.

I swallowed hard and nodded.

He worked quickly, cleaning the blood and dirt away, his movements precise but tender. The way he touched me, like I might break, but also like he knew I wouldn't, sent warmth spreading through my chest.

When he was done, he wrapped my hand in a strip of clean cloth, tying it off carefully. His fingers lingered, still holding mine long after the bandage was in place.

"I hate this," he said quietly, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“What?”

“That you keep getting hurt.” He looked up, and the rawness in his eyes nearly undid me. He didn’t care that we were alone. “That I can’t stop it.”

I squeezed his hand, ignoring the ache in my palm. “You can’t protect me from everything, Lucas.”

“I’ll die trying.”

His words hung heavy between us.

Suddenly, the bowl in Rowena’s hands began to glow faintly, a soft red pulse that mirrored the beating of my own heart.

“Good,” Rowena said, her voice low, reverent. “It’s working.”

Kael poured the mixture into a small vial, sealing it tightly. He held it up, his expression dark.

“This is it,” he said. “Our only shot.”

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I stared at the vial, at the faint red glow swirling within it.

It didn't look like much—just a small bottle of dark liquid. But I could feel its weight, its power, like it was alive and waiting.

I pressed my hand against the cut in my palm, blood still warm against my skin.

This was my blood. My power.

“You must listen carefully, Annika.” Rowena sat across from me, her sharp eyes locked onto mine, unblinking. “Aurelius is no ordinary monster. He was cunning even before he was bound, and time has only sharpened his hunger. He'll try to reach you, not just through force but through whispers.”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. “Whispers?”

Her lips thinned. “Promises. Lies dressed as truth.”

A chill crawled down my spine, and I rubbed my arms, suddenly feeling bare despite Lucas's cloak draped over my shoulders. “What kind of lies?”

“The kind that will tempt you.” She leaned closer, her voice dropping lower. “He'll offer you everything you want, power, safety, love. He'll speak as though he understands you, as though he's the only one who can. He'll make you feel seen, Annika, and it will be a lie.”

I shivered but forced myself to meet her gaze. “And what if he doesn't lie? What

if—?”

Rowena cut me off with a sharp shake of her head. “No. He will lie. That’s all he knows how to do.”

I tried to keep my voice steady. “What if he offers his servitude? His loyalty? If he swears to help us?”

Her eyes blazed. “Then he’s already begun.”

Her words sank like a stone in my gut.

“You don’t understand the depth of his hunger,” she continued. “He’ll twist your thoughts, plant doubts, make you question everything you know. And it won’t always feel like deception. That’s the danger of him. He’ll make you want to believe him.”

My fingers dug into the cloak, twisting the fabric. “How do I fight that?”

“You don’t listen,” she said firmly. “Not to his words. Not to his voice. If he speaks, you turn away. If he begs, you shut your ears. And if he pleads for mercy, you remember what he is.”

I wanted to believe I could do that. Wanted to believe I was strong enough to resist whatever poison Aurelius might try to pour into my mind. But doubt gnawed at the edges of my resolve.

Rowena must have seen it because she reached out, grasping my hands in hers. Her grip was warm, strong, and it steadied me.

“You are not weak, Annika,” she said. “You are his cage. His chains. His end. But only if you remember who you are.”

About an hour later, we stood at the mouth of the cave. The air was cool, and we were ready to go back home. My thoughts were still tangled in Rowena's warnings.

She stood before us, her dark eyes steady as she handed me a small leather pouch tied shut with twine. I held it carefully, as though it might shatter, though I knew it held power far stronger than its fragile appearance suggested.

"This is everything I can give you," Rowena said, her voice calm but heavy. "The binding mixture is ready. You know what must be done."

I nodded, swallowing past the tightness in my throat. "Thank you."

Her gaze softened. "Don't thank me yet. The path ahead is still shrouded in shadow."

Lucas shifted beside me, his hand brushing against mine as though grounding me. Kael stood a little apart, his expression guarded, but even he inclined his head in respect.

Rowena's sharp gaze landed on him. "Protect her."

"I will," Kael said without hesitation.

She turned to Lucas next. "And you... keep your head. Don't let your anger make you reckless."

His jaw tightened, but he nodded.

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Then she looked at me again, and her expression shifted into something gentler. “Remember what I told you, Annika. He’ll twist his words, but you must stay rooted in yours. Don’t waver.”

“I won’t.” My voice was steadier than I felt.

Rowena didn’t press further. Instead, she stepped back, her dark robes blending into the shadows of the cave entrance. “Go now. And may the spirits guard your steps.”

We turned away, walking down the narrow path that led back to the forest. My heart was pounding, and I gripped the pouch tightly, as though holding it could somehow hold back the fear rising in my chest.

The forest felt different now... quieter, heavier, like it was waiting.

We reached the horses and immediately rushed back home. But the weight of what was coming pressed down on me with every step.

I was right to be worried.

Smoke stung my eyes before we even crested the last hill. My heart lurched.

The town was burning.

Flames licked at rooftops, black smoke twisting into the sky like fingers clawing for the heavens. Screams carried on the wind, sharp, panicked cries that made my stomach churn. Shadows moved through the chaos, fast and brutal.

Shifters. Vampires. The enemy had come... for me.

“No,” I breathed, my legs already moving.

“Annika!” Lucas caught my arm, holding me back for half a second. His grip was firm but trembling. “Stay close to me.”

I nodded, though my pulse was a drumbeat of terror and fury.

Kael didn’t hesitate. He drew his blade and sprinted ahead, vanishing into the smoke. Lucas cursed under his breath and followed, his hand releasing me only when I matched his stride.

We crossed the distance fast, the sound of battle swallowing us whole. The streets were chaos. There were shifters in their monstrous forms tearing through homes, rogue vampires stalking between them like wolves among sheep. Bodies littered the ground, some human, some not. The smell of blood was thick, metallic and suffocating.

A shifter lunged at me, teeth bared. I barely had time to react before Lucas was there, cutting it down with savage efficiency. Blood splattered across the dirt, and he grabbed my wrist, yanking me behind him.

“Stay sharp!” he barked, his voice raw.

I didn’t need to be told twice. A vampire broke through the smoke, claws bared, eyes glowing red. This one was fast. I barely dodged in time, my knife slashing out more out of instinct than aim. It nicked his arm, and he hissed, retreating just enough for Lucas to step in front of me and drive his sword through the vampire’s chest.

“Are you hurt?” Lucas’s voice was sharp, but his eyes softened when they met mine.

“No. Keep going.”

We pressed forward, cutting through the chaos. Every corner we turned revealed more destruction. Homes were gutted, carts overturned, the streets slick with blood.

My stomach twisted, but there was no time to stop. No time to think.

Kael was fighting ahead of us, taking down a shifter twice his size with practiced precision. He glanced back and saw us, then jerked his head toward the square.

“The center!” he shouted. “They’re pushing everyone there!”

We ran, dodging flames and bodies. My breath burned in my lungs, but I didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

We reached the square, and what I saw stole my breath.

Dozens of townsfolk were gathered, forced to their knees by the enemy. Some were crying, others bleeding. Around them, the rogues and shifters prowled, snarling and snapping, keeping them caged.

Chapter Eighteen

Lucas

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The screams of the townspeople pierced through the chaos, but all I could focus on was Annika. Her eyes burned with defiance, and she gripped the dagger in her hand.

I hated the idea of pushing her away, hated myself for even suggesting it. But I had no choice.

“You have to hide,” I said, voice low but firm.

Her chin lifted, and fire flashed in her eyes. “No.”

“Annika—”

“I’m not leaving you!” She took a step closer, her free hand curling into my shirt.

“You can’t ask me to just stand back and do nothing.”

My heart clenched, but I didn’t have time for tenderness. Not now. I grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to meet my gaze.

“If they take you, it’s over,” I said, my voice hard. “Do you understand that? Aurelius will rise. Everything we’ve fought for, everything we’ve bled for, will be destroyed.”

Her lips parted, and for a second, I saw the fear flicker beneath her fury. She knew I was right, but she didn’t want to admit it. Neither did I.

“I won’t let them take you,” I said, softer this time. “But I can’t protect you and fight them at the same time. You’re the key to all of this, Annika. If you fall into their hands, we lose. Everyone loses.”

She swallowed hard, tears shining in her eyes, but she didn't look away. "Promise me," she whispered. "Promise me you'll come back."

I cupped her face, brushing my thumb over her cheek. "Always."

Her breath hitched, but she nodded. "Okay."

Relief warred with guilt as I let her go. "Kael!" I barked, and he was there in an instant. "Get her somewhere safe. Don't let her out of your sight."

Kael nodded, but I didn't miss the tightness in his jaw. He didn't like it any more than I did.

Annika lingered a moment longer, her hand brushing mine before Kael pulled her away. I watched her disappear into the smoke, my chest tightening with every step she took.

I moved slowly, stealthily. I knew that I couldn't take them head on. I had to be smart. I remembered Rowena's words.

Keep your head. Don't let your anger make you reckless.

I moved past lying bodies, past smoking houses. I took a few shifters out silently, without making any noise, but I knew better than to gloat. That was nothing. Just a drop in the sea.

That was when I found Callum pinned beneath the wreckage of a collapsed wall, blood streaked across his face and dirt caking his clothes. He was barely conscious, his chest rising and falling in shallow, uneven breaths.

"Callum!" I dropped to my knees, shoving debris aside with raw desperation.

His eyelids fluttered. “Lucas?” His voice was a rasp, weak but alive. Relief surged through me, but I didn’t let it slow my hands.

“I’ve got you,” I said, prying away the last chunk of stone trapping his legs. He gritted his teeth, hissing in pain as I worked.

His leg was twisted unnaturally, and crimson seeped through a tear in his pants. Damn it. He wouldn’t be walking out of here on his own.

“Stay with me,” I ordered, hooking my arms under his shoulders and hauling him upright. He groaned, but he didn’t fight me. Good. He still had fight in him.

“Should’ve let me die,” he muttered, his voice half-lost against my shoulder.

“Not a chance.” I adjusted my grip and started dragging him toward cover. “You’re too stubborn for that anyway.”

We staggered through the rubble-strewn street, the sounds of fighting echoing all around us. My muscles burned, but I didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

“Annika?” Callum croaked.

“She’s safe.” I didn’t know if that was true, but I needed him to believe it. Needed to believe it myself.

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He coughed. A wet, ugly sound. “You always—” He cut off with a grimace. “You always come back for me.”

“Yeah, well.” I glanced down at him, forcing a smirk despite the ice in my veins. “You make it hard not to.”

We reached a half-collapsed building, and I eased him down against the wall. His breathing was worse now, but his eyes stayed sharp, pinned on me.

“You’re not going back out there alone,” he said, the fire still burning behind his pain.

“You’re not in any position to stop me.”

He grabbed my wrist, his grip surprisingly strong. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

I pried his fingers loose, but I couldn’t meet his gaze. Because I knew I already had.

“I’ll be back,” I said, stepping away before he could argue.

And then I was gone, slipping back into the chaos.

The streets ran red. Smoke stung my eyes, and the cries of the wounded rang out like a death knell. I pushed forward, blade in hand, cutting through the chaos, but it wasn’t enough. It was never enough.

I spotted a group of townspeople cornered near the smithy. Three men and a woman

were shielding a child. The rogues circled them like wolves, snarling and snapping.

No time to think. I lunged.

The first one fell fast, my blade slicing across his throat, but the others turned on me in an instant. Claws and teeth flashed. I dodged, barely, feeling hot breath against my neck as I spun and drove my dagger into another's gut.

Blood sprayed, but there were too many. They kept coming.

“Run!” I roared at the townspeople. “Now!”

They hesitated for a breath before scrambling toward the alley. A shifter lunged after them. I threw myself in his path, slamming him to the ground. My knife found his heart, but not before another tackled me from behind.

Pain exploded in my ribs as I hit the ground hard. I rolled, grappling with the weight pinning me down, but claws raked across my arm, tearing deep. I roared, head-butting the bastard before throwing him off.

I staggered to my feet, chest heaving. The townspeople were gone. I could only hope that they were safe, but the rogues closed in.

I swung wildly, catching one across the jaw, but another barreled into me, knocking the blade from my hand.

I hit the ground again, this time with a knee pressed to my chest and claws digging into my throat.

“Look at you,” the shifter hissed, breath reeking of blood. “So noble. So pathetic.”

I thrashed, but his grip held. My vision blurred at the edges.

Annika's face flashed in my mind. Her eyes. Her smile. Her fire.

I let out a guttural snarl and pushed back with everything I had, throwing him off balance for just a second, but it wasn't enough.

I was dragged through the streets, blood caked in my hair, limbs weak and trembling, but my mind... my mind was sharp. Every step, every scrape against the rough stone, was agony. But it didn't matter. I couldn't afford to show weakness.

They threw me in front of their leader like I was nothing more than an animal. He stood tall, his presence suffocating. His smirk stretched across his face, a twisted thing full of malice.

"All hail the great Zaros!" Our enemies chanted until their leader lifted his hand and silence followed momentarily.

"You should be proud," he said, his voice a silk-lined razor. "You're about to witness the fall of your precious town, vampire prince. All of it, yours for the taking. And your sweet Annika..." He laughed, a cruel, echoing sound. "She won't be far behind. She's the key, after all."

I clenched my fists, fury bubbling up, but I held it back. I needed clarity. I needed to think.

"Don't get too cocky," I spat, blood dripping from the corner of my mouth. "You still haven't won."

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He tilted his head, stepping closer. “You think this is a fight you’re winning? I’ve already won, Lucas. All that’s left is the final touch.” His eyes gleamed, hungry and unblinking. “And Annika is the final touch.”

Something inside me snapped.

I lunged forward, but they kept me back, binding my arms tightly behind me. They wouldn’t let me move, but I didn’t care. I could still feel her. Her fire, her strength, her determination. And that was enough to make my blood boil, to keep me pushing against the inevitable.

“You will never have her,” I growled. “You can take this town, destroy everything you want, but you will never have her. She’s not yours.”

His eyes darkened. “You think so?” He stepped back, motioning to the chaos around us, the shifters securing the townspeople, the smell of burning homes. “It’s only a matter of time, Lucas. You’ll see. She’ll come to us. Just like the rest of you will. She has no choice. She’s one of us now.”

“Shut your mouth.” My words were barely more than a growl, but I was close. So close.

He only laughed. The sound twisted through the air like a curse.

“Time will prove me right.” He turned away, gesturing for the others to pull me up. “You’ll be in the square with the others. Watch as your town crumbles, your precious Annika falls and we all welcome the great Aurelius. It’s already decided.”

I struggled against their grip as they dragged me through the square, my heart pounding against my chest. I wasn't broken yet. I wouldn't be.

"But enough talk!" he shouted. "Take them!"

People huddled together as shifters and rogue vampires surrounded us all, dragging us through the streets.

"Where are you taking us?" I demanded to know, but Zaros had no intention of responding.

His words echoed in my head, taunting me.

It's already decided.

We were walking for a long time, when the ruins appeared. I knew then where we were.

They shoved me into the crypt, the cold stone walls pressing on every side. The damp air smelled like decay, like the weight of centuries of death. I could hear the others being thrown in behind me. Familiar voices, the soft cries of people who had once been safe in their homes were now reduced to captives in this forsaken place.

I didn't want to look, didn't want to see the fear in their eyes. But I had to. I had to know who was still alive.

I scanned the room, heart sinking as I spotted Callum, his face bruised but determined. He caught my eye, and for a moment, I saw the spark of recognition, the promise of something unbroken between us.

Zaros loomed over us, sneering. "I hope you all enjoy your last moments in the light.

Because once Aurelius rises, this will be nothing more than a distant memory. Your homes. Your families. Gone.”

I clenched my fists. “You don't know her. You don't know Annika. She won't let that happen.”

He stepped forward, towering over me. “You really believe that? You really think this little witch can stop it? She's weak, just like you.” His voice dripped with venom. “Aurelius will rise, and all of you will bow before him.”

I glared at him, the words bitter on my tongue. “Not if I stop you first.”

Zaros' laugh was cruel, and it echoed through the crypt, making the stone walls feel even more suffocating. “You're already too late.”

I didn't care what he said. I didn't care what he thought. I would do whatever it took.

I turned away from him, my mind racing. I needed to find Annika. I needed to protect her. And I needed to get us out of here, out of this damn crypt, before Aurelius rose.

But first, I had to survive. And that was something I was damned good at.

Chapter Nineteen

Annika

We ran through the trees, the shadows closing in around us. My breath came fast, shallow, but it wasn't from the exertion. It was guilt. A heavy, suffocating weight pressing against my chest with every step. I couldn't stop thinking about Lucas, about leaving him behind. About leaving all of them behind.

Branches scraped against my arms as we pushed deeper into the forest. Kael moved ahead of me, his steps quick and sure, but I stumbled. My thoughts kept pulling me back to the town, the screams, the fight. To Lucas being dragged away.

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I slowed, pressing a hand to my chest, trying to breathe. “Kael, I can’t—”

He whirled around, his face sharp with urgency. “You can.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice but not softening it. “You have to.”

Tears burned at the edges of my eyes, and I shook my head. “We left them. We left him. How can I live with that?”

Kael grabbed my shoulders, holding me steady. “Because you don’t have a choice, Annika. You’re the only thing keeping them from winning. Don’t you get that?” His voice softened, but his grip didn’t. “If they get you, it’s over. For all of us.”

I swallowed hard, forcing back the tears. He was right. I hated it, but he was right. My life wasn’t just mine anymore. It hadn’t been since the day I found out what I was.

But it didn’t make it any easier to leave Lucas.

“I just—” My voice cracked, and I hated how weak I sounded. “What if something happens to him?”

Kael’s expression flickered, but he didn’t let me see any doubt. “Lucas can handle himself. He’s strong, Annika. He’ll fight until his last breath if it means keeping you safe.”

I closed my eyes, trying to hold onto that thought. Lucas was strong. He was smart. And he wouldn’t give up. Neither could I.

Kael let go of my shoulders and took a step back. “We can’t stay here. It’s too exposed.” He glanced around before jerking his chin toward the dense thicket ahead. “There’s an old hunting cabin not far from here. We can hide there until we figure out our next move.”

I hesitated, my gaze trailing back toward the direction we’d come from. Smoke still hung in the air, faint but enough to remind me of the fires. The screams.

Lucas.

I forced myself to turn away.

“Let’s go,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt.

Kael didn’t waste time. He started moving again, and I followed, pushing aside the ache in my chest.

I had to believe this was the right choice. That leaving Lucas behind didn’t mean losing him forever.

Suddenly, pain ripped through me so fast and unexpected that I couldn’t even scream. My knees buckled, and I hit the ground hard, dirt and leaves scraping against my skin. The world tilted and spun, and then there was nothing but the burning, searing fire tearing through my veins.

I barely registered Kael’s voice shouting my name. His hands grabbed my shoulders, shaking me, but I couldn’t focus. My body convulsed, jerking uncontrollably, as if something inside me was trying to claw its way out.

“Annika! Annika!” Kael’s voice cracked, panicked. “Stay with me! Just—damn it, what’s happening? Annika, look at me!”

I couldn't. My eyes rolled back, and my vision blurred with flashes of red and gold light. It wasn't the forest anymore—it was something else. Something deeper, darker. Shapes shifted in my mind, shadows moving toward me. Voices whispered.

Come closer. Open the door. Set him free.

“No!” I choked out, my voice raw and broken. My hands clawed at the ground, dirt slipping between my fingers. The whispers grew louder, pressing against my skull, pounding in rhythm with the pain.

Kael's voice broke through, rough and desperate. “Annika, fight it! Whatever this is—don't let it win!”

I wanted to. God, I wanted to. But it felt endless, this pull inside me.

Kael's hands gripped my face, forcing me to look at him even as my body shook. “You're stronger than this! You are. Do you hear me? You can fight it!”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. “Kael—”

“Breathe,” he ordered. “Focus on me. Stay here.”

I tried. I clung to his voice, to his hands grounding me, to the heat of his skin against mine. Slowly, the tremors started to fade. The whispers receded, dragging themselves back into the dark corners of my mind. My breathing evened, but I was shaking... still shaking.

Kael didn't let go. He knelt beside me, his face pale and tight, his eyes locked on mine. “What the hell was that?”

I swallowed, my throat raw and aching. “I—I don't know.” My voice barely sounded

like my own.

Then, it all happened too fast.

One moment Kael was kneeling in front of me, tense and ready, his blade glinting in the dim light. The next, the shifters were on us. Dark shapes surged from the trees, snarling and snapping, eyes glowing with bloodlust.

Kael shoved me behind him. “Run!”

“No!” I screamed, but it was too late.

He met the first attacker head-on, driving his sword into its chest. Blood sprayed, but another shifter lunged, claws raking across Kael’s arm before he could twist away. He let out a guttural snarl, turning his blade in a deadly arc. Another body fell.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.

“Annika!” Kael’s voice snapped me out of it. “Go!”

I stumbled back, but the forest felt too small, too suffocating. Another shifter leapt toward Kael, and this time, he wasn’t fast enough. The creature’s claws sank into his side, dragging him down.

“No!” I cried, my voice breaking.

Kael roared, driving his knife into the shifter’s throat, but he was already bleeding... there was so much blood. He staggered, barely staying on his feet.

Another one circled behind him.

I couldn't watch. I couldn't just stand there.

Grabbing the closest rock I could find, I hurled it at the shifter's head. It wasn't much, but it distracted it long enough for Kael to slice through its ribs. He turned toward me, his face pale and streaked with sweat.

"You need to run, Annika!" His voice was raw, desperate.

"I'm not leaving you!"

The forest spun around me, my breath ragged as another shifter closed in. Kael moved, but this time, he faltered. The wound in his side slowed him, and the creature knocked him to the ground.

I screamed, lunging toward him, but hands... no, claws grabbed me from behind.

"Kael!"

He lifted his head, his eyes burning even as blood stained his lips. "Fight, Annika. Fight."

I didn't think.

Didn't plan.

I just moved.

My pulse roared in my ears as I yanked free from the shifter's claws, the sharp sting of torn skin barely registering through the surge of panic. Kael's cry echoed behind

me, raw and pained, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't let them take me.

The shifter lunged again, its breath hot against my neck. I spun, driving my elbow into its jaw. It reeled back, snarling, and I used the moment to grab a fallen branch. Not much of a weapon, but it would have to do.

"Come on," I hissed, planting my feet. My heart hammered so hard I thought it might burst.

It circled, muscles coiled, eyes gleaming with hunger. Then it struck.

I swung the branch with everything I had. Wood cracked against its ribs. It stumbled, but not enough. It came again, claws flashing, and I dodged... barely. My shoulder hit the ground hard, pain jolting through me, but I rolled, slamming the branch into its leg.

A howl. A snap. The branch broke in two.

I scrambled up, my body screaming, and ran.

Branches tore at my clothes. Roots tried to trip me. Behind me, snarls and pounding footsteps closed in.

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I pushed harder. Faster.

Kael's voice rang in my head. Fight, Annika. Fight.

Tears blurred my vision, but I kept going, the sound of pursuit fading as I pushed deeper into the forest. My legs burned, my lungs felt like fire, but I didn't stop.

Not until the trees closed around me, swallowing me in shadows. Only then did I collapse, gasping, shaking. My hands were stained with dirt and blood. My clothes were torn. But I was alive.

Barely.

And Kael—

I choked back a sob, pushing it down.

He survived, I kept telling myself silently, over and over again.

At that moment, a sharp, searing pain ripped through my chest again.

I fell to my knees, clutching at the ground as my vision blurred. My heart hammered like it was trying to escape, and heat burned through my veins. It was too hot, too wild, like fire licking under my skin.

The world tilted, shadows stretching unnaturally as if the trees leaned closer, their branches curling like claws. My breaths came in shallow, panicked bursts. I tried to

stand, but my legs refused to work.

Then I felt it.

Him.

Dark. Cold. Ancient.

Aurelius.

He was awake. I knew it. Felt him stirring, clawing his way out of the crypt. His presence scraped against my mind, sharp and endless, like nails on stone.

I saw him in flashes, broken images clawing into my thoughts. His pale, hollowed face. Eyes black as voids and burning red at their centers. Hands reaching, grasping, yearning.

And he was calling for me.

A scream built in my throat, but no sound came out. My body seized again, muscles locking, heart pounding so fast I thought it might shatter.

Not enough.

The thought hissed through my mind, in his voice, or maybe my own. He hadn't taken enough blood to be at full strength. But it didn't matter.

It was enough to break free.

Tears burned my eyes. I couldn't stop shaking, couldn't catch my breath. He was down there, waking, rising. And I was too far away to stop him.

My hands dug into the dirt, nails breaking as I tried to ground myself, tried to stop the panic.

“Get up,” I whispered. “Get up, Annika.”

But the terror wouldn't let me move. It pressed down on me, heavy and suffocating, as his presence grew stronger.

He was coming.

The weight of Aurelius's presence pressed down on me like a storm, suffocating and cold. But I forced myself to move. My legs were trembling, my body still weak, but I pushed through it. I had to.

I staggered forward, gripping the trees for balance as I climbed the hill. My breaths were ragged, sharp in the quiet dawn. My heart pounded so loudly it seemed to echo through the forest, but I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

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I didn't know how much time I had. Minutes? Seconds?

My mind screamed at me to turn back, to run the other way. But my feet kept moving, carrying me toward the crypt. Toward him.

I wiped sweat and dirt from my face, my fingers shaking as I climbed over rocks and tangled roots. The forest seemed darker now, the branches overhead twisting together, blocking out the light. It felt alive... watching, waiting.

Every nerve in my body screamed that this was wrong. That I wasn't ready.

But ready or not, it didn't matter.

I reached the edge of the ruins, my breath catching as I saw the broken stones and jagged pillars rising like bones from the earth. The entrance to the crypt loomed ahead, dark, gaping, and endless.

Fear clawed up my spine.

My fingers brushed the vial Rowena had given me, the concoction we'd made. It felt small and fragile in my grip, but it was all I had.

I pressed myself against the cold stone wall. The shadows cloaked me, but it didn't feel like enough, not with the shifters prowling through the ruins like predators.

I gripped the edge of the pillar, peeking around it. My pulse hammered in my ears as my eyes darted over the scene below.

They were everywhere.

Shifters in their half-shifted forms, hulking beasts with sharp claws and glowing eyes, moved between the captured townspeople. Some were bound, their wrists tied, faces streaked with dirt and fear. Others knelt, heads bowed, trembling.

My stomach twisted.

I searched frantically for Lucas. My gaze swept across the square, catching on every dark shape and movement, hoping to see him.

But he wasn't there.

Chapter Twenty

Lucas

The ground trembled beneath our feet. Dust and loose stones rattled, and the air grew thick, heavy and suffocating. I clenched my fists, my nails biting into my palms as my gaze locked on the crypt's sealed entrance.

It was opening.

The stone slab groaned as it shifted, ancient mechanisms grinding against each other in protest. Light didn't pour out. There was only darkness, seeping like smoke, curling along the cracks as if the shadows themselves were alive.

A ripple of unease spread through the crowd. Even the shifters, arrogant and bloodthirsty, stepped back. The townspeople trembled, eyes wide with terror. I felt their fear clawing at my own resolve, but I swallowed it down.

Zaros stood beside me, his lips curling into a dark smile. “You feel it, don’t you?” His voice was sharp, hungry. “Power unlike anything you've ever known.”

I ignored him, my eyes fixed on the crypt. The air crackled with energy. My skin prickled, my instincts screaming at me to run. But I stood my ground.

I had to.

With one last groan, the slab slid away completely, revealing the darkness inside. Silence fell... a suffocating, unnatural stillness.

And then he stepped out.

Aurelius.

Tall. Regal. Terrible.

His skin was pale as death, stretched taut over sharp cheekbones and hollowed eyes that burned with crimson fire. His hair, dark and sleek, framed a face that was both ageless and ancient, beautiful and monstrous.

He wore black robes that seemed to drink the light, flowing like smoke around his towering frame. Power radiated off him, heavy and suffocating.

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A slow, predatory smile curved his lips as his eyes swept the crowd. His gaze landed on me, and I felt it like ice in my veins.

“You,” he said, his voice a low purr that echoed unnaturally. “The descendant.”

I didn’t move. Couldn’t breathe.

Zaros bowed deeply beside me, his voice trembling with reverence. “Master Aurelius, we have freed you. I... have freed you. I made this possible.” He bowed even deeper, so low his forehead nearly touched the ground. “Together, we will rule. The world will kneel before us.”

A tense silence stretched, heavy as iron. No one moved. Not the shifters, not the vampires, not the terrified townspeople. My breath caught, every muscle in my body coiled tight, waiting for Aurelius to speak.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he turned to Zaros with slow, deliberate grace. His eyes burned like coals, and there was something in them, something ancient and cruel.

Zaros looked up, expectant. Eager.

It happened so fast, I barely saw it.

Aurelius’s hand shot out, wrapping around Zaros’ throat. The vampire leader’s eyes bulged, a strangled gasp escaping his lips. Aurelius lifted him like he weighed

nothing, like he was a toy, something fragile and meaningless.

“No,” Aurelius said, his voice smooth as silk and twice as deadly. “You are nothing.”

And then he threw him.

Zaros hit the stone wall with a sickening crack. Blood sprayed. His body crumpled to the ground, unmoving. Lifeless.

The silence that followed was louder than any scream.

I couldn't breathe. No one could.

Aurelius turned back to us, as if nothing had happened. His crimson eyes swept over the crowd, measuring, calculating.

“Let this be clear,” he said, his voice cutting through the air like a blade. “There is no ruler but me.”

My heart hammered in my chest. I felt the weight of his words, the finality of them. Whatever hope Zaros had clung to—that he could control this monster—was dead.

Just like him.

Aurelius stepped forward, his gaze sweeping over us like a predator sizing up prey. His presence filled the crypt, pressing against my chest, heavy and suffocating.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to stand tall, even as every instinct screamed at me to run. He wasn't just a vampire. He was something older. Darker. A force that shouldn't have been woken.

The townspeople shrank back, fear rippling through the crowd. Even the shifters, who moments ago stood proud and menacing, looked uneasy now.

But Aurelius barely seemed to notice them. His attention flickered past them, settling somewhere deeper, like he was looking through us.

“You.” His voice was sharp, slicing through the tension. It took me a heartbeat to realize he was looking at me.

I clenched my fists. “What about me?”

His lips curved, and it wasn’t a smile. It was something cold and hollow. “You’re the one who’s been meddling. Fighting so hard to stop me.”

I didn’t answer. My pulse roared in my ears.

Aurelius tilted his head. “And yet... I can taste it. The fear. You know you can’t win.”

I took a step closer, ignoring the weight of every eye on me. “You don’t know what I can do.”

His expression darkened. “I know enough.”

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He moved then, too fast. One moment he stood by Zaros' broken body, the next he was in front of me, inches away.

I didn't flinch. I couldn't show weakness.

"You reek of desperation," he murmured, eyes boring into mine. "And love." He spat the word like it disgusted him. "A weakness. One that will cost you everything."

I refused to let him see the way his words hit me. Refused to let him know that all I could think about was Annika. Was she safe? Did she make it out?

Aurelius leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper meant for me alone.

"I will find her," he said. "And when I do, you'll watch her bleed."

Rage flared, white-hot and blinding. My hand shot out before I could think, grabbing the dagger at my side and driving it toward his chest.

But he caught my wrist. Effortless. Like I was nothing.

He squeezed, and pain shot up my arm. I gritted my teeth, refusing to cry out.

"You have fire," Aurelius said, amused. "Good. It will make breaking you more enjoyable."

He shoved me back, and I staggered, barely keeping my footing.

The shifters circled closer, sensing blood.

I forced myself to stay upright. I glanced at the townspeople, then back at the monster.

“You don’t need them. They’re just pawns. They’re nothing to you. Let them go, and I’ll stay. You want me, right? Just let them walk free.”

Aurelius’ lips curled into a cruel smile, and his eyes flashed with a dark amusement. “Let them go?” His voice was low, mocking. “You really think I’m here for your townspeople, vampire prince? No, you’re wrong. They’re a means to an end. And you? You’re my prize. The one I’ve been waiting for. You, with your bloodline, your defiance... you’re exactly what I need to rule.”

My stomach twisted, my fists clenching. “I’m not your prize. And I’m not afraid of you.”

Aurelius chuckled darkly, stepping closer, his presence suffocating. “Afraid? Oh, I know you’re afraid. I can smell it. You’ve been fighting this, fighting me, for so long. But there’s nothing you can do now. Not when I have everything I need.” He gestured to the shifters, his followers, and then toward the people who trembled in the corners of the crypt.

He took another step forward, his face inches from mine. “You should have known, Lucas. You’ve always been a part of this. You’ve always been mine.”

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to stay composed. “I’m not yours. I’ll never be yours.”

Aurelius’ eyes flashed, his lips curling in an almost predatory smile. “That’s what they all say. And yet, here you are, surrounded by the very people who will suffer

because of you. Because of your stubbornness. Your love.” He sneered at the word. “You think I care about any of them? I care about power, Lucas. I care about what’s mine. And you—” He stepped closer, his gaze hard and final. “You will be mine.”

I refused to back down, my mind racing, trying to figure out how to turn this around, but nothing in that moment seemed to make sense. His hold on everything, on me, on my town, on Annika was suffocating. And yet, something inside me still refused to break. Something told me that if I kept fighting, kept pushing, there had to be a way to stop him.

“You’re wrong,” I muttered through clenched teeth. “I’ll stop you. I’ll stop everything you want.”

Aurelius tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. “You will try, Lucas. In fact, I will give you a chance to prove yourself right now. Let’s see if you’re truly as strong as you think you are.”

I barely had time to register his words before he was on me, his speed unnerving, almost supernatural. I threw a punch, my fist aiming for his jaw, but he dodged it effortlessly, a twisted smirk playing on his lips.

“You’re slow,” he taunted, and before I could react, his hand shot out, grabbing my arm and twisting it behind my back with an ease that sent a jolt of pain up my spine.

I gritted my teeth, trying to fight through the agony. “I’m not done yet.”

Aurelius chuckled darkly, the sound vibrating through my bones. He released my arm with a flick, pushing me away. I staggered back, trying to regain my footing, but he was already moving again, too fast for my eyes to track. It was like he knew my every move before I even thought of making it. I swung again, desperate to land a blow, but he sidestepped with a speed that left me swinging at air.

“How predictable,” he sneered. “You’re just like all the others, Lucas. You think you can win this fight with willpower alone. But power isn’t about strength. It’s about control. Something you will never have.”

I growled, feeling the frustration build in my chest. Each move I made, he anticipated, dodging with supernatural ease. I was so slow compared to him, my instincts sluggish, my reflexes nothing compared to his. My muscles screamed for relief, my heart racing as I tried to think of something, anything, to get ahead of him.

I lunged again, trying a different angle, but Aurelius was already behind me. His arm wrapped around my neck in a tight grip, choking off my breath. I could feel his power coursing through him, so much stronger than mine. He was toying with me, enjoying the struggle.

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“Is this really the best you can do, Lucas?” he mocked, his voice dripping with disdain. “You’re nothing. Weak.”

I gasped for air, trying to twist free, but it was like fighting against a wall. Every time I thought I had a chance, he would disappear, reappearing somewhere else in the blink of an eye. His movements were a blur, his strength unimaginable.

I was drowning in frustration, my vision clouding, my body growing heavier with each passing second.

Aurelius’s dark chuckle echoed through the crypt as he let go of me, his grip leaving a burning imprint around my throat. I staggered backward, gasping for air, my body still reeling from his strength. The weight of his words hung heavy in the air.

“Enough of this,” he sneered. “It’s time to end this charade.”

Without warning, he raised his hand, and a signal went out. The shifters, waiting in the shadows, surged forward, their snarls and growls filling the room as they charged at us.

Panic spread like wildfire through the crowd. The townspeople screamed, scattering in every direction, trying to avoid being caught by the oncoming assault. I had no time to process what was happening before the first wave of shifters was on us, claws outstretched, teeth bared.

“Protect the others!” I shouted to the few who were still standing.

Callum, standing nearby, lunged at the nearest shifter, his sword flashing as he engaged. I pulled my own weapon from its sheath, a sense of dread creeping in as I realized the odds stacked against us.

But there was no time to hesitate. The fight had already begun, and I had to act.

Chapter Twenty-One

Annika

I moved through the shadows, my heart hammering so loudly I was sure someone would hear it. The chaos of the attack still echoed faintly in the distance, but here, near the crypt, everything felt unnervingly quiet. Too quiet.

It was as if no shifters were there any longer. Just the yawning black entrance of the crypt, like a mouth waiting to swallow me whole.

I knew I had to be cautious. This didn't seem right. None of this seemed right.

I swallowed hard, forcing my legs to move even though my instincts screamed for me to run the other way.

My boots barely made a sound against the cracked stone floor as I slipped down the narrow steps, my pulse quickening with every step. The air grew colder, heavier, until it felt like I was walking straight into a tomb.

Which, I supposed, I was.

The sound of snarls and clashing steel grew louder the deeper I went. The flickering torchlight illuminated the twisted shapes of fighting bodies. I could see shifters lunging, blades flashing. And there, in the center of it all, was Lucas.

He was bleeding, surrounded, yet still fighting. His movements were quick, desperate, but it was clear he was being overwhelmed.

I stepped farther into the crypt, pressing myself against the wall to stay out of sight as I scanned the chaos. My heart clenched when I saw Callum, struggling against two shifters at once, barely holding his ground. The townspeople were trapped, herded into one corner, their terrified faces reflecting the dim light.

And then I saw him. Aurelius.

He stood like a dark god above it all, his presence suffocating. He barely moved, watching the bloodshed with amusement, his eyes gleaming like polished obsidian.

I gritted my teeth, my fingers curling into fists.

I had to do something.

But what?

Rowena's words echoed in my mind. He will try to deceive you. Do not trust him. Do not let him in.

I sucked in a breath. I couldn't let fear stop me. Not now.

I crept along the wall, keeping to the shadows as I edged closer. I needed to reach Lucas, needed to let him know I was here... but how?

A sharp cry split the air, and my head whipped toward it. Lucas stumbled, blood trailing down his arm, but he didn't stop fighting. My chest tightened. I wanted to scream his name, to run to him, but I bit my lip and stayed low.

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I wasn't ready yet. Not until I had a plan.

I pressed my back against the wall, trying to steady my breathing. Aurelius's gaze swept over the room, and for a horrible moment, I thought he saw me. But then his attention shifted, and he smirked at something Lucas had said.

I exhaled shakily. But no relief found me. I knew I had to stop the bloodshed.

I stepped out of the shadows without any plan, my heart slamming against my ribs as every head turned toward me. The fighting slowed, the chaos dulling as eyes locked onto me, some in shock, others in fear.

Aurelius' dark gaze pinned me in place, sharp and consuming. The air in the crypt seemed to thicken, pressing down on me as his lips curved into a slow, predatory smile.

"There you are." His voice was silk over steel, soft but unyielding. He took a step toward me, and my pulse spiked. "I was beginning to think you'd never come."

The room felt smaller, suffocating, but I stood my ground.

"Let them go," I said, forcing strength into my voice. "This fight ends now."

Aurelius tilted his head, his smile deepening. "Ends?" He laughed softly. "No, my dear. It's only just begun."

I flinched as his words wrapped around me, but I kept my chin high. "If it's me you

want, then take me. But let the others go.”

His eyes gleamed, hunger simmering beneath their surface. “Oh, I will take you,” he murmured, “but not as a prisoner.”

I froze.

He took another step closer, his presence suffocating. “Don’t you see?” His voice softened, coaxing. “You and I... we’re the same. Power flows in your veins, just as it does in mine. Together, we could remake this world.”

My breath caught. His words slithered into my mind, warm and tempting. The chaos around us faded, and for a moment, all I could see was him. His promise. His certainty.

He reached out a hand. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore, Annika.”

My name on his lips sent a shiver through me, and I hated how my body responded. How the smallest, most desperate part of me wanted to reach back.

No.

I clenched my fists.

“You’re lying,” I said, but the words sounded weak even to my own ears.

His smile softened, his expression almost gentle. “Am I?” He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “You’ve felt it, haven’t you? The power inside you... growing, calling out for more. I can give that to you. I can teach you to harness it. To rule, not cower.”

I swallowed hard, my mind spinning.

“Think of what we could do together, Annika,” he said. “Your blood, my strength... we would be unstoppable.”

The temptation hit me like a wave, my knees nearly buckling under its weight.

I could end this. I could stop the suffering, the pain. No more battles, no more fear.

All I had to do was say yes.

No.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Rowena’s words came back, sharp and clear.

He will try to deceive you. Do not trust him.

I opened my eyes and met his.

“No,” I said, this time steady. “I’ll never join you.”

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The softness in his face vanished, replaced by something darker. His lips curled back, and his eyes burned with fury.

“So be it,” he snarled.

A blast of power surged from him, like an invisible force slamming into me. I staggered back, barely managing to stay on my feet. My pulse pounded in my ears, but I didn’t look away. I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

Behind him, the chaos reignited. Shifters and rogue vampires swarmed the townspeople, their cries echoing through the crypt. I caught glimpses of Lucas, bloodied but still fighting, with his blade flashing as he cut down another attacker.

My chest ached at the sight of him. I needed to get to him, but Aurelius stepped closer, blocking my view.

“You’re strong,” Aurelius said, his voice a low purr. “But not strong enough.”

His words sent ice down my spine, but I refused to show fear. “You’re wrong.”

He laughed, sharp and mocking. “Am I? Then prove it.”

I braced myself as he lunged.

His speed was terrifying. One moment he stood several feet away; the next, he was right in front of me. I barely managed to dodge his grasp, stumbling to the side. My heart raced, but I forced myself to focus.

I wouldn't win this fight with strength. I had to use what I'd been given... what I was.

I reached for the magic inside me, the ancient power Rowena had helped me unlock. It stirred, sluggish and heavy, but I pushed harder.

Aurelius lunged again, and this time, I didn't run. I stood my ground and thrust my hands out.

A surge of energy exploded from my palms, slamming into his chest. He staggered back, a look of surprise flashing across his face.

I didn't give him time to recover. I called the magic again, pouring every ounce of strength into the attack. Light erupted from my hands, bright and searing, and Aurelius roared as it hit him.

But it wasn't enough.

He fought through it, stepping closer, his eyes blazing. I felt my strength waver, my knees trembling.

"Do you feel it yet?" he hissed. "How your power drains you? You can't win."

I gritted my teeth, pushing harder even as my vision blurred. "I won't stop."

He smirked. "You don't have to."

Before I could react, he raised his hand and suddenly, I couldn't move.

An invisible force pinned me in place, and my magic flickered out.

“No,” I gasped, struggling against the hold, but it was useless.

Aurelius stepped closer, his gaze devouring me. “You should’ve accepted my offer.”

Panic rose in my chest. I thrashed, but it was like being trapped in stone.

“Let her go!”

Lucas’s voice cut through the chaos.

Aurelius turned, and I caught a glimpse of Lucas as he charged.

“No!” I screamed, but it was too late.

Aurelius moved faster than I could see, and Lucas was suddenly on the ground, groaning in pain.

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Rage ignited inside me, and I reached for my power again. This time, it answered.

I didn't think. I let it take over, raw and untamed, surging out of me in a blinding wave of light.

Aurelius staggered back, his hold on me shattering.

I dropped to my knees, gasping for breath, but I didn't stop. I pushed the magic outward, surrounding him in light.

His screams filled the crypt as the magic wrapped around him, burning through his skin.

I felt it, the spell working, the mixture of Rowena's herb and my blood taking hold.

But it wasn't enough.

Not yet.

Tears blurred my vision, and my body trembled with the effort. "Stay down," I whispered through gritted teeth. "Stay down!"

Aurelius writhed against the magic, his roars shaking the walls—but slowly, he weakened.

And then he fell.

The magic bound him to the ground, his body limp and smoldering.

I collapsed, my strength completely gone. My breaths came in ragged gasps, and my vision swam.

Lucas was there in an instant, his arms around me. “Annika!”

I looked up at him, my body trembling. “He’s not dead,” I whispered. “Not yet.”

Lucas’s jaw clenched, and his grip tightened.

“Then we’ll finish this,” he said. “Together.”

We stood up, his hand gripping mine so tightly it almost hurt. But I needed it. I needed that anchor to keep me standing as the last threads of magic wove around Aurelius, sealing him within the crypt once more.

I opened the vial of blood I held on me, releasing it into the air. It intertwined with the light emanating from me, locking him in a cage of luminosity. The spell pulsed through the air, vibrating in my bones, and I could feel the weight of it locking into place. Final. Unbreakable.

Or so I prayed.

Aurelius’s screams echoed, raw and guttural, but they were weakening. The power we’d unleashed, Lucas’s strength and my blood-fueled magic, was more than even he could resist.

His eyes snapped to mine. That burning, terrible gaze pinned me, and I froze as his voice sliced through the air, rasping and cold.

“This isn’t over,” he said.

The words slithered inside me, coiling tight.

“You can’t stop what’s coming,” he hissed, his lips curling into a smile that sent ice down my spine. “You’re just the beginning, Annika. The key.”

The light flared brighter, cutting him off. His scream turned into a wordless howl, and then—silence.

I gasped, the sound loud in the sudden stillness. My knees buckled, and Lucas caught me before I hit the ground.

“It’s done,” he said, his voice rough, but I heard the relief in it.

I wanted to believe him.

But before I could say anything to that, it all went black.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lucas

“Annika?” I cried out, but she couldn’t hear me.

Her body hung limp in my arms, her breathing shallow and too damn faint. I pressed her closer, as if just by holding her tighter I could keep her here with me.

“Stay with me, Annika,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “Just stay with me.”

Her head lolled against my chest, unresponsive. My heart thundered in my ears, drowning out everything else. The shouts, the footsteps, the chaos around us. None of it mattered. Not anymore.

Even the shifters had dispersed, refusing to wage a war without anyone to lead them. I took that as a small victory. A small one, but not enough.

I knew what I had to do now. Only Rowena could help us.

I took Annika into my arms, rushing out of the crypt. Breathing heavily, my eyes scanned the area outside. There were a few horses tied to nearby trees. I mounted one quickly, gently placing Annika before me.

I rode hard and fast, faster than ever before. Annika’s limp body was cradled against my chest, her shallow breaths barely audible over the pounding of the horse’s hooves.

“Hold on,” I whispered, my voice breaking as I pressed my cheek against her hair. “Please, Annika. Hold on.”

Her skin was cold... too cold. And it only made the panic claw at my chest harder. I could feel her heartbeat, faint and uneven, as if it was struggling to keep going. Every beat was a reminder that I might not make it in time.

The forest blurred around us, shadows stretching long in the fading light. I pushed the horse faster, urging it forward despite its labored breaths. Sweat darkened its coat, but I couldn't stop.

My arms ached from holding her so tightly, but I refused to let go. Her head lolled against me, and for one terrifying second, I thought she'd stopped breathing.

“Annika!” I shouted, pulling the reins hard to stop the horse. My heart slammed against my ribs as I shifted her slightly, brushing her hair away from her face. Her lips were pale, her eyes shut, and she didn't stir.

“No,” I growled. “Not like this.”

I shook her gently, my hands trembling. “You're not giving up. Do you hear me? You're not!”

A faint breath ghosted against my fingers, and relief washed through me so fiercely my knees nearly gave out.

I didn't waste another second. I kicked the horse forward again, forcing it into a gallop as the cave finally came into view through the trees.

Rowena's torches burned at the entrance, flickering like a beacon in the dimming light.

“Help!” I shouted as I jumped off the horse, still holding Annika tightly. My boots hit the ground hard, and I stumbled but kept moving. “Rowena!”

The shaman appeared at the mouth of the cave, her eyes narrowing the moment she saw us. She didn’t hesitate.

“Bring her inside,” she commanded, already turning back toward the shadows.

I followed without question, my pulse roaring in my ears. Annika felt so small in my arms, so fragile.

Rowena’s cave felt smaller than I remembered. I laid Annika on the same cot as before. Rowena’s sharp eyes swept over her, and I didn’t miss the flicker of concern that passed through them before she masked it.

“What happened?” she demanded.

I told her everything—the crypt, Aurelius, the ritual, the screams. My voice broke more than once, but I pushed through. I told her how Annika had collapsed after sealing him away and how she hadn’t woken since.

Rowena listened without interruption, her hands working quickly to mix herbs and light incense, the sharp scent burning my nose. When I finished, she turned to face me, and I hated the grim look in her eyes.

“He’s latched onto her,” she said quietly, touching Annika’s pale cheek. “He’s refusing to be locked away. He’s clinging to her essence, feeding off the bond that was forged when she used her blood to seal him.”

I flinched, her words slicing through me like a blade. “Then break it. Whatever it takes, just... break it.”

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She hesitated, her gaze flicking to me before settling back on Annika.

“To truly sever the connection would mean killing her,” Rowena said, her voice low but steady.

“No.” The word burst out of me like a growl, raw and unrelenting. “Absolutely not.”

Rowena didn’t flinch. “If the tie remains, Aurelius will never be fully contained. He’ll keep pulling at her, feeding off her strength until there’s nothing left of her. She’ll be trapped in this state forever—neither alive nor dead.”

“No.” I shook my head, backing up a step even though every fiber of me screamed to protect Annika. “There has to be another way.”

“There might be.”

I froze, hope and fear tangling inside me. “What is it?”

“I can try to force him back into the crypt,” she said, but her voice was uncertain now. “I can strengthen the binding spell and close the door tighter. But it won’t kill him, Lucas. Aurelius can’t be killed.”

I didn’t care.

“Do it,” I said, stepping closer, my voice firm despite the dread clawing at my chest. “Whatever it takes... just bring her back. Please.”

I brushed Annika's hair from her beautiful face. She looked so peaceful, like she was only sleeping. I bent down, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Then, Rowena started.

I stood frozen, my fists clenched so tightly my nails dug into my palms. Smoke curled from the incense burning all around, making my eyes sting, but I could barely feel it.

Annika lay on the cot, too still, too pale. Her chest barely rose and fell, and with every passing second, the fragile thread of hope inside me frayed.

Rowena's hands hovered above her, trembling slightly as she chanted words in a language I didn't recognize. The air grew heavier, charged with something unnatural, and for a moment, I thought I could feel Aurelius, like a cold breath slithering down my spine.

Rowena's voice rose, her chant becoming sharper, louder. Her eyes fluttered shut as the energy built around her, but then—

Nothing.

Annika didn't stir.

Rowena's hands faltered, and the flicker of power that had been building suddenly collapsed. The tension in the air evaporated, and Rowena stumbled back, gripping the edge of the table for support.

"No," I growled, surging forward. "No, keep going! You can't stop!"

"It's not working!" Rowena snapped, her voice strained and raw. "He's too deep

inside her, Lucas. The bond is stronger than I thought.”

I grabbed her arm, forcing her to look at me. “Then try again.”

“Magic doesn’t work that way!” she hissed. “This isn’t some trick or spell I can repeat over and over. She’s fighting, but he’s winning.”

“No,” I said, my voice breaking. “You can’t let him take her.”

Rowena’s eyes softened, but it wasn’t enough to dull the sharp edge of panic slicing through me.

“She’s still here,” Rowena said, more gently this time. “But I need more time, and I don’t know how much she has left.”

Annika’s fingers twitched. It was faint, almost imperceptible, but I saw it.

“She’s fighting,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “She’s fighting him.”

Rowena stepped closer, her hands trembling as she reached for Annika again.

“She’ll need more than just me to pull her back,” Rowena said, her eyes locking onto mine. “She’ll need you.”

“Tell me what to do.”

I moved closer, resting my hands beside Annika’s head as Rowena began chanting again. The tension returned, pressing against me like the weight of a storm about to break.

I leaned down, my lips brushing Annika’s ear.

“Come back to me,” I whispered. “I need you, Annika. Don’t let him take you. Fight.”

Her breath hitched—just a tiny, shallow sound—but it was enough to make my heart lurch.

“Fight, Annika,” I said again, my voice stronger this time. “You can do this. I’m right here.”

Rowena’s chanting grew louder, and I held onto Annika’s hand, squeezing it as if that alone could keep her tethered to me. Her skin was cold, far too cold, but her fingers twitched faintly beneath mine. That flicker of movement was the only thing keeping me grounded.

Energy crackled in the air, and for a moment, it felt like something inside me snapped, like the bond that tethered Annika to Aurelius trembled, threatening to break.

Her body jerked.

Rowena gasped, but she didn't stop, her words turning almost frantic.

"Annika!" I shouted, gripping her hand tighter. Her eyelids fluttered, but they didn't open. "You can fight him. You're stronger than this, stronger than him!"

Her lips parted, and a soft, shuddering breath escaped, but her body sagged against the cot, limp again.

"I love you," I breathed. "I love you, Annika. And I'm not letting you go."

The moment the words left my mouth, something shifted.

A sudden surge of power erupted around us, so strong it knocked Rowena back a step. The torches flared, and Annika arched off the cot, her mouth opening in a silent cry.

"Annika!" I shouted, holding her down as the force rippled through her.

Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone.

She collapsed against the cot, her breath ragged but steady. Her fingers tightened around mine... weak, but there.

"Annika?" I whispered, my voice shaking.

Her eyes fluttered open, glassy and unfocused at first, but then they found mine.

"Lucas?" Her voice was barely above a whisper, but it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

Relief hit me so hard I almost couldn't breathe. "I'm here," I said, brushing the damp

strands of hair from her face. “I’m right here.”

I couldn’t stop looking at her. Even now, as she lay weak and trembling in my arms, she was the most breathtaking thing I’d ever seen.

Her head rested against my chest, her breathing soft but steady. It was a sound I had been terrified I’d never hear again. My fingers brushed through her hair, damp strands clinging to her temples. She leaned into my touch, and it shattered something inside me.

“You scared the hell out of me,” I whispered, my voice rough.

Her lips curved into the faintest smile, but her eyes didn’t open. “You’re always worried about me.”

“Because you never stop throwing yourself into danger,” I said, but there was no bite to my words. Only relief. Only love.

She shifted slightly, just enough to lift her gaze to mine. Her eyes were still glassy, still exhausted, but they held a light that hadn’t been there before. “I had to,” she murmured. “You know I had to.”

I swallowed hard. “I know.”

I cupped her face, my thumb brushing along her cheekbone. She closed her eyes and leaned into the touch, and my chest tightened.

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“You came back to me,” I said, barely more than a breath.

Her eyes opened again, shining with something that looked an awful lot like tears.

“I’ll always come back to you.”

I didn’t know who moved first. Maybe it was both of us. But before I could think, my lips were on hers, soft and slow, as if I was terrified she might shatter beneath my touch.

She didn’t.

Instead, her fingers curled into my shirt, pulling me closer, grounding me. And for the first time since this nightmare began, I felt like I could breathe.

When we finally broke apart, I rested my forehead against hers, holding her close.

But then, softly, almost as if she could sense it, Rowena’s voice broke the fragile moment.

“You can’t get lost in each other just yet.”

I groaned inwardly, but I knew she was right.

“You need to be cautious, Annika,” Rowena said, her voice calm but firm. “Aurelius may seem gone, but the bond between you two hasn’t been severed entirely. The power he left behind... it’s still there.”

I tightened my hold on Annika instinctively, though I knew Rowena wasn't saying anything I didn't already fear.

"You've already come close to losing control of it once," Rowena continued. "His power lingers. The darkness doesn't leave so easily."

Annika sat up a little, her brow furrowing. "What does that mean for me? For us?"

Rowena's gaze softened slightly, but there was still an edge to her words. "It means you have to be vigilant. He may not have the strength to rise again yet, but the bond is there. If you're not careful, if you let your guard down, you might find yourself drawn back to him... even if it's against your will."

My chest tightened at the thought, and I felt a surge of protectiveness, my jaw clenching.

"I won't let that happen," I said firmly, my voice low.

Annika gave me a tired but determined look. "I won't either," she replied quietly. "But I'll need time to figure out how to stop it for good."

Rowena nodded slowly, then stepped closer to us. "You will. But be careful. The bond between you and Aurelius is more dangerous than you realize. You have to be strong enough to resist it, or it will pull you back into his darkness."

I looked down at Annika, my hand resting lightly on her shoulder, a silent promise passing between us.

"I'll protect you," I whispered, more to myself than to her, but I knew she heard it. And I knew she believed me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Annika

The town was unrecognizable. The once bustling streets were now lined with broken buildings and charred remains, the air still heavy with the scent of smoke. People walked about with a look of devastation, some standing still, as though they couldn't comprehend what had happened. The silence hung heavy, broken only by the distant cries of those searching for their loved ones.

I felt a pang in my chest, a deep sadness for the people who had lost so much... homes, family, peace. This town had always felt like a place of warmth, a sanctuary for us, and now it was a ghost of what it used to be.

As we walked through the ruins, Lucas kept close to me, his hand brushing mine, grounding me in the chaos around us. He must have noticed the sadness in my expression, because he turned toward me, his eyes soft yet determined.

"Don't worry," he said gently, his voice steady. "We'll rebuild this, Annika. It's going to take time, but we'll do it. We're stronger than this."

I looked up at him, his words sinking in slowly. He was right. There was strength in the people here, in the ones who had survived. But the weight of what had happened felt like a crushing burden, one that I wasn't sure could be lifted so easily.

But then Lucas smiled at me, that warm, reassuring smile that I couldn't help but believe in. "We'll make it right. We'll rebuild everything, piece by piece."

I nodded, forcing a small smile, though I knew it wouldn't be easy. Still, his confidence gave me hope. We weren't alone in this. We had each other, and with that, maybe we could face anything.

“Together,” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

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As we walked through the town, the sound of voices reached us. My eyes fell on Callum, his broad shoulders set in a posture of quiet resolve, as he helped the townspeople clear the debris. As always, he was directing them with a calm yet unwavering authority.

The sight of him, moving among the survivors, brought a strange sense of relief. Despite everything that had happened, despite the chaos, there was still strength here. There were still people fighting to rebuild.

Lucas must have seen him at the same moment I did. Without a word, he quickened his pace, his hand tightening around mine as he led us toward Callum.

When Callum saw us, a brief flicker of something vulnerable crossed his face, but just as quickly, it was masked by his usual calm demeanor. His eyes lingered on Lucas for a moment, as though measuring him, and then, without a word, he pulled him into a tight hug.

It was brief, not overly emotional, but there was something in that hug, something unspoken. A silent acknowledgment of what they'd both endured, of the battles they had fought side by side.

"You're still standing," Callum said with a faint grin, clapping Lucas on the back. There was a lightness in his voice, but the weariness in his eyes told a different story.

Lucas gave a small, wry smile in return, though his eyes didn't lose the intensity that had been there since we'd returned.

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve survived,” he said, his voice steady but soft, almost as if trying to hold back a wave of emotion. He stepped back, his gaze meeting mine for a brief second, and in that moment, everything else faded.

Callum gave us a nod, then he turned back to the townspeople. “Let’s get everything sorted out. We’ll rebuild this.”

Lucas, despite the emotions that flickered behind his eyes, nodded. “Right. We’ll get it done,” he agreed, his voice strong again. His hand found mine once more, and for a moment, the world seemed a little less heavy.

As we moved through the wreckage, working alongside the others to restore some semblance of order, something caught my eye. It was a figure stumbling through the debris, looking far too worn out for anyone to have survived what had happened.

My heart skipped a beat, and before I could even process it fully, I was already rushing toward him.

It was Kael.

He was limping, his clothes torn and stained with blood. His face, normally so composed, was twisted in pain, but there was a quiet determination in his eyes as he made his way toward us.

I couldn’t stop myself. I reached him in a few long strides, my breath catching as I saw how badly he was hurt. I grabbed onto his arm to steady him, feeling the tremor in his muscles as he leaned on me for support.

“Kael!” I breathed out, my voice filled with worry. “You’re hurt!”

He gave me a pained smile, but his eyes were dimmer than usual, exhaustion heavy in

every line of his face. “Nothing I can't handle,” he said, though his voice lacked the usual sharpness.

Before I could say anything else, I felt a familiar presence behind me. It was Lucas.

He must have sensed my distress because his hand was on my shoulder, in a show of silent support. He wasn't angry anymore, not with Kael, and I could feel that weight lifting from between us as he gave Kael a long, meaningful look.

Kael turned to him then, his gaze firm despite his obvious wounds. “I'm sorry it took so long,” he said quietly, his voice rough, and Lucas just nodded, his lips thinning.

“You did what you could,” Lucas replied, his voice steady. “We all did.”

And then, in that moment, I realized how far we'd all come, how much Kael had done for us, for me. The bitterness Lucas had held in his heart for him had been replaced with something softer, something I hadn't expected. A quiet gratitude. And when I looked into his eyes, I saw the same recognition in him.

“Thank you, Kael,” Lucas said, his hand gently resting on Kael's shoulder. “For everything. For helping us, for protecting Annika. I don't know if we could've done it without you.”

He didn't speak immediately, but the tension in his face eased just a little, and I saw a flicker of something close to appreciation in his eyes. Finally, he nodded, his voice low and sincere.

“I did what needed to be done.”

Lucas placed a hand on Kael's other shoulder then, giving him a firm, reassuring squeeze. “We'll get you patched up. Come on, let's get you to our healer. We're not

leaving anyone behind.”

As we helped Kael into the healer’s cottage, I couldn’t help but notice the way he moved, somehow too stiff and labored. He was hurt, that much was clear, but there was something else there. A sadness in his eyes that I didn’t know how to read. It felt like he was slipping away, in more ways than one.

The healer was already at work, tending to his wounds. I watched her carefully, but my mind kept drifting to Kael, wondering what was going on in his head.

Lucas stood beside me, his shoulders tense, his eyes focused on Kael.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” His voice was low, hesitant. He didn’t want to push, but he needed to know. Me, too.

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Kael looked up at us, and despite his exhaustion, there was clarity in his gaze. “I appreciate everything. Really. But my path’s different. I have my own destiny to follow.”

I could feel the weight of his words, the finality in them. I didn’t know what to say. We had all come so far together, and now... now it felt like he was just slipping away.

“You don’t have to leave,” Lucas said quickly, the urgency in his voice impossible to hide. “You’ve done so much for us. You belong here.”

Kael shook his head, a faint smile on his lips. “I’ve done what I came to do.” He paused, meeting our eyes. “It’s time for me to go.”

I felt something tighten in my chest. I didn’t understand Kael fully, but I knew what he’d done for us. He had fought with us, protected us, and now, he was leaving. It somehow didn’t feel right.

“But we’ll miss you,” I said, my voice quieter than I intended. “You’ve been part of this. Part of us.”

Kael’s gaze softened, and I saw a flicker of emotion I hadn’t expected. “I’ll miss you both,” he said, his tone quiet but sincere. “But there’s more I need to do. People to find. Things to face.”

Lucas let out a long sigh, like he knew it was coming but didn’t want it to. “I get it,” he said, his voice softer now. “But don’t be a stranger, Kael. You always have a place

here.”

Kael nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I’ll remember that.”

As the healer finished bandaging his wounds, we gave Kael one last look. He was leaving, but I understood. He had helped us when we needed him most. And now, he had his own journey to follow.

I couldn’t stop him. It was his choice. All we could do was wish him well.

The healer finished patching him up and we sent him on his way. It felt strange, not knowing whether we would ever see him again. But we had to believe that our paths would cross, if it was meant to be.

That night, our cottage was barely standing, half of the walls torn down, the roof barely intact. Yet, it felt like the safest place in the world. We didn’t need the walls to feel at home, not anymore. Not with Lucas by my side.

He sat beside me on the bed, the dim light of the candle flickering between us. His eyes were tired, dark circles beneath them from the fight, the long days, the endless worry. But even in the dimness, I could see the warmth in his gaze as he looked at me. Like he was truly seeing me for the first time again, like we had both survived something impossible.

“You alright?” His voice was quiet and low, like he was afraid to disturb the silence that surrounded us.

I nodded, pulling the blanket up over my shoulders as I leaned back against the headboard. “I’m... I think I’m okay. Just a little tired.”

“Yeah,” he said, his lips curving up just slightly. “I can tell.”

There was something in the way he said it, something playful, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. His gaze lingered on me for a moment longer, and I could see the weight of everything we had just been through in the way he held himself. We hadn't spoken much since the fight, since Kael had left. But in this moment, with the world outside seeming distant and far away, we didn't need to.

I shifted closer to him, the cold of the room making me seek his warmth. He didn't hesitate, his arm wrapping around me, pulling me into his side. We didn't speak at first, just sat in the quiet together, his heart beating next to mine.

"You did good," he murmured after a while, his fingers lightly brushing through my hair. "We all did."

I smiled softly, my head resting against his chest.

"We're not done yet," I said, though the words didn't feel as heavy as they might have once. There was hope in my voice now, something I hadn't felt in a long time.

"I know," he whispered, kissing the top of my head. "But for tonight, we're okay."

"Are we?" I asked playfully, lifting an eyebrow.

He smirked. "Maybe... maybe not..."

I chuckled. That was enough of an invitation for him to pull me even closer and lock his lips with mine.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lucas

I felt as if, up to this moment, everything had been falling apart, but having her in my arms, safe and sound, was the only source of happiness for me. It never made more sense than it did now, as I looked into her eyes, I knew that she felt the same, that she would always feel the same.

That was the one constant in my life I could count on, one thing I could and should never doubt. I allowed that feeling to wash over me, to take hold of me completely.

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Her arms twined around my neck, like the most precious necklace. Her breasts crushed against my chest, and I could feel her heart beating against mine, in unison. I inhaled her scent through the kisses, and as always, she managed to banish every dark thought from the recesses of my mind.

She was so powerful, my Annika. So beautiful... and all mine.

She pulled away only for a moment, looking at me with hunger that matched mine. Sometimes, it seemed to me as if she could read my mind. Sometimes, I feared it, that she might see something in there she wouldn't like. But when I gazed into her eyes, all I could see was love, desire, and flames that I wanted to burn in.

I buried my face into her neck, inhaling the scent that was all her. I couldn't get enough of it, of her.

"You are glorious..." I murmured. "You are all I see, all I ever saw..."

I kissed her neck softly, only for her to slide her hand from the nape of my neck to my face, cupping it. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. I could see everything in her eyes.

The lust coursing through my veins was taking over. I took her again, claiming her with my mouth, with my tongue. Her lips reciprocated with equal fervor, both innocent and alluring at the same time. Our tongues danced together, as we poured all our wishes into each other.

She tasted like pure happiness, bubbly and effervescent. And I wanted to get drunk on

her.

Suddenly, she pulled away, getting down on her knees before me. The thought immediately emblazoned my mind, and even more than that. It awakened every dirty desire I ever had.

She didn't take her eyes off of me for even a second, as her hands rested on my knees, spreading them apart. Her fingers moved upward slowly, tantalizingly. I wanted to grab her hair, to feel that wet heat of her lips on my cock right then and there, but she wanted to take it slowly. So, I obeyed.

My cock felt tight and swollen already, needing her more than ever.

"Annika..." I groaned her name, and it sounded like the dirtiest thing ever.

As if on cue, her fingers grazed my bulge. She didn't wait to free me from my trousers. Instead, she undid the buttons, one by one, fast this time, almost as if she herself couldn't wait.

My cock sprang free and her fingers curled around it immediately. I hissed in delight as she stroked me from the base all the way to the tip. I was already leaking, and her finger gently wiped it off. Then, she sucked it with her luscious lips, smiling like the vixen that she was.

She lowered her head and took me all into her mouth. Wet heat enveloped me, as I felt the suction of her lips, of her tongue. She whirled it over my tip, playing with my cock. Then, with her fingers gripping at the base tightly, her tongue traveled up and down it, stroking and sucking at the same time.

I couldn't control myself. I grabbed her hair. I tried to be as gentle as she was with me. I kept listening to that sweet, wet sound that she was making with my cock in her

mouth, sucking me dry. The only thing that would occasionally break that rhythm were her little moans of pleasure.

“Mmmm...” she purred as she kept sucking.

I wanted to do everything to her. I wanted to kiss her, to lick her, to taste her, to bite her. I wanted to fuck her mindlessly, endlessly. I wanted to bury myself deep inside of her and claim her over and over again.

Just when I thought that she would drain me, she stopped, pulling me back from the edge of the abyss of pleasure. She knew exactly how to do that.

She released me from the sweet confines of her mouth, while I yearned for more. But I wanted to return the delectable favor.

We switched positions, and I laid her down, taking off her trousers and panties in one hasty pull. I slid my finger, parting her already wet folds. The thought of her being so wet from sucking me off drove me wild with desire. I sucked her clit into my mouth whole, dipping my tongue inside. She moaned loudly, arching her back and lifting her hips, offering herself to me. I slid my hands underneath her juicy buttocks, keeping her in place.

I was already on fire, desperate for release, but I wanted to prolong this moment. I wanted to torment her a little, just like she did me. I wanted us both as close to the edge as possible when I took her.

I kept sucking her off, tasting her sweet juices, drinking in the very essence that was her. My cock was throbbing, my insides in a fiery hell.

I had to have her. Now.

I positioned myself between her legs, locking my eyes with hers.

God, she was so beautiful. Just one look at her and I came undone.

I slid inside of her in one fast, hard thrust. That was all it took for me to be deep inside of her. My entire body covered hers, my mouth crashed against her mouth, as I kept thrusting again and again, unable to control myself.

Her tight, wet heat gripped me, holding onto me. I knew she was as close to exploding as I was. I slid my hand underneath her sweet cheeks, lifting her slightly, then slammed into her again. This time, she cried out loudly.

We didn't care that anyone might overhear us. We were celebrating in our own way. It was our moment.

I wasn't gentle, but neither was she, meeting me halfway throughout my thrusts.

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“More, more...” she breathed loudly, and I was happy to oblige.

I didn’t want to finish before her. My hand slid between her thighs, finding her clit, gently pinching it between my thumb and forefinger. She cried loudly again, and I kept strumming her harder, fucking her deeper, as our tongues danced to the music only we could hear.

As I felt her nails claw into my back, her strangled cry released against my lips, I knew she had cum. Her pussy clenched around my cock hard, keeping me in place. Her eyes, fathomless pools of love and devotion, stared at me, and I didn’t want to look away for even a moment. I wanted to see it all.

As her body slowly relaxed, I plunged into her again. Once, twice...

“Annika...” I growled, as I shot deep inside of her, allowing that heat to wash over me completely.

I slid by her side, still keeping my arms wrapped around her. I didn’t want to let her go. A small part of me still feared that she might disappear, that someone might try to steal her away from me, but I wouldn’t allow that.

Annika lay curled against me, her head resting just above my heart. The steady rise and fall of her breaths matched mine. I ran my fingers gently through her hair, letting the soft strands slip between them. She hummed quietly, leaning closer, and I tightened my hold on her.

“This town,” I said softly, “it’s going to be stronger than ever.”

She tilted her head, her eyes catching mine in the dim light. “Stronger?”

I nodded. “More resilient. More prepared. No one’s going to catch us off guard again.”

Her lips curved faintly, but there was a flicker of something else in her eyes. Worry, maybe, or exhaustion that hadn’t quite faded.

“And what if it isn’t enough?” she asked.

“Then we’ll make it enough,” I said, voice firm. “We’ll have stronger walls, better defenses. But more than that...” I paused, smoothing my hand down her back. “We’ll have each other. That’s what’s going to keep this place standing. Us.”

She exhaled softly, and the tension seemed to melt from her body as she pressed closer.

“I’ve been thinking,” I continued after a moment, keeping my voice low. “Once we rebuild the square, we’ll make it bigger. Add a fountain, maybe. String up lanterns. So when we have more celebrations, it’ll feel like a real fresh start.”

Her smile returned, small but genuine. “And the houses?”

“Stone foundations. Stronger frames. No more weak beams or walls that can be torn down.” I leaned down and kissed her hair.

“But I like our cottage as it is,” she smiled, glancing around, then back at me again.

“Then we’ll make it exactly as it was before,” I assured her. “Or add anything you want.”

“Shelves with more books?” she asked.

“Whatever you dream up, we’ll make it happen,” I nodded.

Annika shot up from the bed so fast I barely had time to blink. She looked wild with excitement, her eyes shining as she turned toward me.

“We definitely need more books,” she said seriously, but she was on the burst of chuckling.

“More books, of course,” I said with a smirk, relishing the sight of her so excited.

“Of course,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And jars for herbs. Better jars, matching ones this time. And more space for plants, inside and outside.”

I let her ramble, the sound of her voice filling the room. She was already waving her hands around, her ideas tumbling out faster than she could say them. I couldn’t stop grinning.

“And we need a proper pantry,” she continued, determined now. “With hooks and compartments so everything doesn’t get shoved into corners.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Shoved into corners? You mean like your current system for storage?”

She shot me a look but didn’t bother denying it. Instead, she leaned in closer, her voice dropping like she was about to share some secret plan.

“And a cat,” she said.

I blinked. “A cat?”

“Yes, a cat,” she repeated. “To keep the mice away.”

That was it. I couldn’t help myself. I laughed, loud and full, and fell back against the mattress, pulling her down with me. She let out a startled sound before dissolving into giggles, her hands pressed against my chest.

“A cat,” I said, still chuckling. “Shelves, herbs, jars, and a whole new pantry. Are we building a cottage or a fortress?”

“Both,” she declared, poking me in the ribs. “And it’s going to be perfect.”

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as her laughter softened. She fit against me like she always did, like she belonged there.

“I think it already is,” I murmured, brushing my lips against her hair.

She didn’t answer right away. Her breathing slowed, and I could feel the way her body relaxed against mine. But I knew her mind was still spinning with more plans, more ideas, more dreams for the life we were building.

And I wanted to build every single one of them with her.

Her fingers traced lightly over my chest, and she suddenly spoke. “And you?”

I swallowed, letting the warmth of her touch steady me. “I just want this. Right here.”

I tilted her chin up, meeting her gaze. “You and me, Annika. That’s all I’ll ever need.”

Her eyes softened, and she leaned up to kiss me. It was a slow and lingering kiss, filled with every unspoken promise we’d made to each other.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Annika

Several months had passed since everything had happened. The town was slowly being rebuilt, piece by piece, like a puzzle coming back together. There was still so much to do, but the sound of hammers and laughter in the distance made it feel like the world was starting to heal. The wounds were fading, even if the scars remained.

I stood by the window, staring out at the busy streets below. It was early morning, the sun still soft, casting golden light over everything. The air was fresh, cool with the promise of spring. Everything felt... right. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt this kind of peace, this kind of contentment.

As I watched the townspeople work below, I didn’t even hear him approach. But I knew it was him. I felt the weight of his presence behind me, his steady, comforting aura. His warmth seeped into the air around me.

“You’re up early,” Lucas said quietly, his voice a deep murmur.

I smiled, not turning to face him just yet. I was still taking in the view, letting it sink in. “Just thinking,” I murmured back.

His footsteps were light on the wooden floor, and soon I felt his hands gently settle on my shoulders, his fingers brushing against my skin. I leaned back into his touch,

the comfort of his presence settling into me like the morning sun.

“Thinking about what?” His breath was warm against my ear as he spoke, and I could hear the quiet curiosity in his voice.

I finally turned to look at him, his face illuminated by the soft light streaming through the window. His dark eyes met mine, and there was a tenderness there that made my heart skip a beat. He had been my rock through it all. Through the chaos, through the loss, through everything.

And now, standing here with him, it felt like we had found something worth fighting for. Something real.

“About how far we’ve come,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “How much we’ve rebuilt... together.”

Lucas’ lips curled into a soft smile, his thumb gently tracing my cheek. “We’re still rebuilding,” he said, his voice so full of warmth, so full of certainty. “But we’re stronger now. And we have each other.”

I nodded, my hand reaching up to rest on his chest. The steady beat of his heart was all I needed to remind me that we had made it through, that we had survived.

“I know,” I said, and this time, I was sure of it. “And we’ll keep going. Together.”

Lucas’ gaze softened, and he pulled me into his arms, holding me close. I rested my head on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against my ear. It was a small, simple moment, but it was everything.

“Together,” he repeated, his voice a vow.

I pulled back slightly, just enough to look up at him. There was one more thing on my mind, something that had been tugging at me for a while now.

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“I’ve been thinking,” I began, my voice soft. “I’d like to visit my mother again. To see her... to really talk to her, after everything that’s happened.”

Lucas paused, his gaze searching mine. I couldn’t quite place the emotion in his eyes, but it softened as he processed what I’d said. A part of me feared he might want to keep me here with him, that he might be reluctant to let me go, even if only for a short time. But instead, his voice was steady and full of support.

“Of course,” he said. “You should go. But... I don’t want you to go alone.”

I blinked in surprise, unsure if I heard him correctly. “What?”

His hand gently cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing over my skin as he looked at me with such sincerity. “I’ll go with you. I think... I think we both should go.”

“You want to go with me?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, a soft smile pulling at his lips. “I do. I’ve been too close to losing you, so I’m not letting you out of my sight any time soon.”

It sounded like a joke, but I knew that it wasn’t.

I smiled, feeling a sense of relief flood through me. “Thank you,” I whispered, the gratitude in my words more than just for his offer. It was for everything he had been to me.

“Anytime,” he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “We’ll go together,

whenever you're ready."

"Great," I said, a little apprehensively, wondering if this could be the right moment to tell him what I had been meaning to for a while now. But so many things had happened, preventing me from doing so. "Because uhm... there's something that I need to tell her, but before I tell her, I think you should know it first."

"What is it, my love?" he asked softly.

I took a deep breath, my fingers nervously brushing against my stomach. It was subtle, but the change was there, and it had been for some time now.

I couldn't hold back the smile that curled on my lips, the happiness bubbling up inside me like a flood. "I'm pregnant, Lucas."

The words left my mouth, and for a split second, everything froze. I saw his eyes widen in shock, then something else, something warm and utterly joyful.

"Pregnant?" His voice was hoarse, almost a whisper as he stepped toward me, his hand reaching out to gently touch my stomach. It was a soft, almost reverent gesture, as though he were trying to make sure this was real.

I nodded, my heart soaring as I watched him. I could see the joy spreading across his face, his smile growing wider, and I knew, in that moment, everything had shifted.

"I thought... I thought maybe I was imagining it, or it was just the stress of everything we've been through," I continued, the excitement building in my chest. "But the truth is, it's real. We're going to have a baby, Lucas."

His eyes shone with something unrecognizable. It was hope, love, a new kind of purpose. And then, without a second's hesitation, he pulled me into his arms, holding

me tightly against him.

“A baby,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. “Annika, this is... this is everything.”

I laughed softly, feeling the tears threaten to spill over, but they weren’t from sadness. No, they were from the sheer joy of this moment, the realization that something beautiful was starting. Together.

“Are you happy?” I asked, my voice trembling just slightly. I needed to hear it, needed to know that this would be just as magical for him as it was for me.

“I’m more than happy,” he said, pulling back to look at me with a look so full of love that it almost took my breath away. “I’m overjoyed, Annika. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier in my entire life.”

I smiled, feeling warmth spread through me, deep and true. This was it. This was our future, together. No matter what challenges we faced, we would face them as a family.

“You’re going to be an amazing father,” I whispered, resting my head against his chest.

“And you’re going to be an amazing mother,” he whispered back, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

We stayed wrapped in each other’s arms for a moment, letting the reality of the news sink in, both of us basking in the warmth of our happiness. But then, of course, Lucas’s mischievous grin slowly crept onto his face, and I knew he was already thinking of something to say.

“So,” he began, his voice teasing, “have you already thought of names? I mean, I was thinking we could name them after a great hero, someone like—”

I raised an eyebrow, already knowing where this was going. “Like who? A great warrior or a mighty ruler?”

He smirked, clearly amused by the idea he had in mind. “How about Lucian for a boy? Sounds strong, doesn’t it? The name of someone who commands attention.”

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I rolled my eyes, nudging him playfully. “You mean you want to name them after you, don’t you?”

“Why not?” he said, utterly shameless. “Lucian would be a perfect name for our son.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his confidence. “I suppose that wouldn’t be too bad. But I think we should consider something a little less... narcissistic.”

He chuckled, then pretended to think. “Alright, alright. What about... Annabelle, for a girl? It’s elegant, regal even. Definitely suits a little girl born from someone as amazing as you.”

My heart fluttered at the thought, but I couldn’t resist teasing him. “Annabelle? Is that your way of telling me I’m a princess?”

He winked, grinning wide. “You could say that. After all, I’m the king, and you’re the queen of my heart.”

I laughed, playfully shoving him away. “Stop it! We can’t name our child after royalty, Lucas. They’ll grow up with expectations of grandeur that they’ll never be able to meet.”

He leaned in closer, his grin softening into something more sincere. “Fair enough. So, what do you have in mind, then? I’m all ears.”

I thought for a moment, feeling the weight of the decision settle in. “Well, maybe... something simple. Strong, but simple. A name that will make them feel grounded,

like they belong.”

He tilted his head, his curiosity piqued. “Grounded, huh? You mean like something from nature? A name that feels... earthy?”

“Exactly,” I said, feeling my heart settle into the idea. “Maybe something like Aiden for a boy. It means fiery one. I like the idea of our son having the strength to face whatever life throws at him.”

Lucas’ expression softened as he considered it. “Aiden... I like it. Strong, fiery... but not too over the top. I can get behind that.”

I smiled, glad to see him on board. “And for a girl, maybe Lila. It means night, or dark beauty.”

He looked at me, eyes filled with admiration. “Lila... it’s perfect. A name that feels as beautiful and mysterious as you.”

I smiled, a warm blush spreading across my cheeks. “You always know how to flatter me.”

Lucas chuckled, then pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “I think we’ve got two good options now. Aiden or Lila... either way, they’ll be perfect. Just like you.”

I rested my head against his chest, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat soothing me, grounding me. I felt the life growing inside me, the weight of it both humbling and thrilling. Everything felt so right. Everything had led us here, and now, in this moment, I knew that this was where we were meant to be.

“I’m so happy,” I whispered, my voice soft, yet filled with all the emotion I couldn’t quite express. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

He held me tighter, his arms wrapping around me as if he were afraid to let go, even for a second. “Me too,” he murmured, his lips brushing against my hair. “I didn’t know it was possible to feel this complete.”

Lucas pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes, his expression tender, filled with the same deep affection that had carried us through everything. “I love you,” he said, his voice steady, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

I could hear him say it over and over again and never get tired of it. He made my heart so full, so peaceful, so beloved.

“I love you too,” I replied softly, my heart swelling with every word, threatening to burst at the seams. “More than you could ever know.”

He kissed me then, gentle and slow, as if savoring the peace we’d found. In that kiss, I could feel all the promises of our future, all the unspoken dreams and hopes we would build together.

As we pulled away, I looked out over the town. I couldn’t see the damage anymore. I couldn’t see the scars from the battles we’d fought. All I could see was a future. Our future. And in that moment, I knew that everything would be alright.

We would build it all again, brick by brick, together. And nothing, not even the darkness we had faced, could take that away.