



Vampire Protection

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: The princess and her vampire.

In a world where supernaturals lurk in the shadows, a human bodyguard is not enough.

That's why my father hired a hunter to be my protector.

Adrian Blackthorne fits every vampire cliché.

He's unnaturally handsome and deeply intense like only the undead can be.

He's also a pain in my butt, curtailing my every step.

But when tragedy strikes and my sister is murdered before my wedding, it's Adrian I turn to.

He's the only one I trust to help me discover what happened to my sister.

The more time we spend together, the harder it is to keep my hands off him.

I know my father wants me to marry my childhood friend.

But my body and heart long for Adrian.

My heart is certain that he's my fated mate.

But is our love enough to overcome the encroaching darkness?

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Chapter One

Lilith

“I knew we shouldn’t have come here...” Cassandra murmured, as the eerie silence settled over the cemetery, broken only by the sound of our shallow breath.

“Shhh!” I urged, pressing my entire palm over my sister’s mouth, in an effort to prevent her from not only speaking, but also breathing too heavily. It was too dangerous. We could be found out at any moment.

We huddled close together, the presence of the one reassuring the other, while our eyes darted anxiously between the tombstones. This was far from over. We both knew that much. Daybreak was still hours away, and I wasn’t sure how much longer we could hide here undetected.

I felt as if my heart would jump right out of my chest. It was a stupid idea. I could see that much now. What the heck were we even doing at the cemetery in the middle of the night? Obviously, looking for trouble, and as always, those who search, they usually find what they’re looking for. Only, I found more than I bargained for. I only wanted to see if the stories were true, if vampires were truly so ravenous, so ruthless, so utterly devoid of any morals, as our father used to tell us. Now, it seemed that curiosity would be the end of us.

Although Cassandra was the older sister of the two of us, it was usually me who was the ringleader. That was the case now as well, as we hoped that we managed to hide from the two vampires who were running after us, thirsty for our blood.

“Do you think they can smell us?” Cassandra asked, her voice trembling in the darkness, with the only light being a thin flicker of moon dust that barely illuminated anything.

I was sure they could. Father had told me of their skills, and this was just one of many. That was why we rubbed ourselves with mud as soon as we stepped into the woods, which we had to go through to reach the abandoned cemetery that was strictly off limits. I knew that Father would be furious if he knew that we were not in our warm, safe beds. But I would cross that bridge when I got to it... if I got to it. For the time being, our focus was on staying alive.

“Just be quiet, Cass,” I urged, gripping at my sister’s thin, willowy upper arm.

We could not have been more different from each other. While Cassandra was tall, lean, slightly pale, with dark chestnut eyes and chocolate hair cut into a bob, I always had that princess look with my long, flowing blonde hair and sky-blue eyes, nestled in a face that had the most pinchable cheeks. That was what our mother always used to say, and the thought always comforted me. Lord knew that now, I needed comfort more than ever.

At that moment, we heard footsteps coming in our direction. We didn’t dare move or lift our heads above the tombstone to see who it was.

“Lil?” Cassandra turned to me, her eyes wide with fear.

“Shhh,” I whispered again, beckoning her silently not to make a single sound.

Maybe the mud did the trick, and the vampires couldn’t sense us, but they could certainly hear us talking. I listened intently. The sound of the footsteps was becoming more and more prominent. I knew that whoever was approaching, knew that we were there. I remembered that Father said vampires could smell fear, almost like an animal

could do the same. I tried to calm myself down, but my body was betraying me. Every droplet of sweat that beaded on my pale forehead revealed my apprehension.

Unexpectedly, grunts were heard. We exchanged a meaningful glance, then at the same time, we both lifted our heads above the tombstone to see what was happening. There were three figures in the shadows. I immediately recognized the two. They were the same vampires who almost attacked us and had us on the run. They were pale, with skin as translucent as water. The third figure was new.

He was dressed in a sleek, black suit that only seemed to accentuate his tall, athletic frame. Everything about him demanded attention and obedience. I could immediately tell that he was a vampire as well. He lunged into action without thinking twice. He moved with the precision of a predator, striking down the two vampires like they were two straws. His moves were an awe-inspiring amalgamation of elegance and brutality, and it was evident that his skills were the result of centuries' worth of perfecting them.

As the second vampire fell to the ground, the mysterious figure bent over him, snapping his neck. The sound, just a small crack, exploded in the silence that reigned. He then got up, locking his eyes with me. I tried to read the expression in them, something I always thought I was good at, but this person was an enigma. He was unlike anyone I had ever met before.

"I know you're there," he said in a voice that sent shivers down my spine, but I didn't know if it was fear or something else.

Gripping at my sister's hand, I pulled us both up. I knew there was nowhere left to run. He probably killed those vampires so he could feast on us alone, without interruption.

"If you want this blood, you'll have to earn your dinner," I snarled at him, stepping in

front of my sister, always being the braver of the two.

He seemed surprised to hear that, then he frowned. “If I did that, I wouldn’t get paid.”

I tilted my head confusedly. “Paid?” I echoed, needing a moment to process what I just heard. “Did someone pay you to hurt us?”

“On the contrary,” he replied, taking a step closer to us. “Someone paid me to keep you safe.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice trembling. None of this was making any sense. First I thought he was just another vampire, now it was turning out that there was more to his presence in the cemetery at the same time as us.

“Let’s get you back home, and you can have your father explain everything,” he frowned. “I don’t get paid to talk. I get paid to keep you from harm, which honestly isn’t that easy when you willingly put yourself in harm’s way like this.”

“My father hired you?” I decided to ignore the last statement, focusing instead on the current state of affairs, which I knew nothing about.

“Like I said, I’d rather let him explain,” he said, gesturing at us to go.

“But... you’re a vampire,” Cassandra suddenly interfered, looking at the bodies on the ground.

“Yes,” he said simply. “Just like them, which means that they won’t be taking a nap for much longer. So, get a move on.”

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This time, he wasn't waiting for us to reply. He started walking away, towards the exit from the cemetery and didn't even turn around to see if we were following him or not. Cassandra and I glanced at each other, then ran after him.

"Wait, wait!" I shouted. "So, you are our bodyguard?"

"Yours," he corrected me, staring ahead of him, as he skillfully avoided rotten tombstones and tree roots that had grown out of their designated place.

"Mine?" I reverberated, as my gaze turned somber.

"Why would anyone want to hurt Lilith?" Cassandra wondered, running to me to keep up. "I'm the older sister."

"The marriage," the man spoke.

"What about the marriage?" I demanded, as my mind spun with the weight of what I had just found out.

The man didn't stop. He continued to walk, until I rushed after him, grabbing him by the hand. He turned around swiftly, and within a single second, slid out of my hand, so that now, I was in his grip, instead of the other way around.

"I wouldn't recommend grabbing a vampire from behind," he growled through clenched teeth.

"Then why don't you reply when I ask you something?" I snarled back.

His eyes burned in the darkness. I had never seen anything like it, akin to a fire I was eager to warm my hands on, but at the same time, I knew if I got too close to it, I would get badly burned.

“I know you’re used to people doing your bidding, but I won’t,” he hissed back, nearing me so close that I could almost feel his warm breath on my lips. “I’m here to keep you from getting yourself killed. That’s all. For any explanations, ask daddy.”

My cheeks burned a crimson red at the daddy reference, as I had never been a daddy’s girl. That was Cassandra. The sweet, tender, kind, unable to say no, Cassandra. As for myself, I’ve always had a feisty note, like my mother, which was something our father didn’t appreciate all that much.

“Can we go now, or do you want to wait for those guys to wake up and take a few sips from you?” he asked, without a hint of apology in his voice.

Pride swelled up inside of me, demanding retribution, but I knew better than to argue with him. Still, I didn’t want to reply. I shook his hands off of myself, passed him by and headed with a long stride back to the castle.

I refused to look behind, my eyes flickering in the darkness. I also refused to acknowledge that his touch sent a jolt of electricity through my veins, as if there was a connection between us forged in a world I knew nothing about yet.

Silently, we found our way out of the cemetery, leaving the ghosts of the past behind. But the real question was what our future was about to bring.

Chapter Two

Adrian

“I don’t need a bodyguard, I’m not a baby!” Lilith shouted, her cheeks flaring a fiery red.

I wisely decided not to get involved, at least not any more than I already am.

“No one is saying you’re a baby, don’t be absurd!” Lilith’s father replied exasperatedly. I could understand why he’d feel like that. I had spent just a few hours in Lilith’s company, and she can be quite bothersome, with all of her questions.

Lilith’s father possessed an air of authority and wisdom that emanated from his every pore. Despite the passage of time, his regal bearing remained intact, and his features carried the etchings of age gracefully. His eyes, deep and piercing, held the weight of countless experiences and an unyielding resolve. They mirrored the depths of his knowledge and the compassion that guided his decisions.

“Then why are you treating me like one?” she demanded.

I frowned at her sheer disrespect. Her lineage, as the daughter of a powerful vampire, brought with it both privilege and peril. Was it possible that she wasn’t aware of this?

Besides, she had already proven that she needed a bodyguard. Otherwise, who knows what would have happened back at the cemetery if I hadn’t been there. But I didn’t mention any of this. I felt like it wasn’t my place. After all, I was here to keep her safe and get paid for that. Nothing else. Any troubles inside the family were theirs to sort out on their own.

Fortunately, her father, aware of the lurking dangers and the malevolent forces that sought to exploit their family’s power, held a different perspective. He saw the shadows that encroached upon their existence, threatening to shatter their fragile peace. I could tell that he was a wise man from the first time I spoke with him. Lilith required protection, just like her older sister did. But Lilith’s upcoming marriage,

made her an even bigger target, as there were those who did not look favorably on this union.

I remained in the corner, watching the sight unravel before my eyes. I'd been following Lilith for four days now. This was the first time that I showed myself to her. The first time I saw her, I was struck by her beauty. It was that delicate balance of striking and captivating, her features a harmonious blend of femininity and radiant allure. With a figure that embraced curves and softness, Lilith exuded a natural allure that drew gazes and admiration. Her curves, celebrated in every graceful movement, spoke of soft femininity. She carried herself with a quiet elegance, her poise reflecting an inner strength that belied her shy nature.

I had to immediately draw the line so I would cease to see her as a beautiful woman, and instead focus on her as simply a job that I would get paid for. It was easier like that.

“Having a bodyguard shows everyone that I live in fear,” Lilith pointed out. “I don’t want that.”

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Her father, usually a stern and serious man, was now not a king, but merely a concerned father. “Lilith,” he spoke softly, his tone laden with unwavering paternal instinct, “protection is not a matter of fear. The world around us a treacherous place, filled with beings who would do anything to exploit our vulnerabilities and seek to harm us.”

I raised an eyebrow, thinking that he would scold her for sneaking out in the middle of the night, but he didn’t mention that. Both I and the king watched as Lilith crossed her hands in a mixture of frustration and determination. “Why do only I have a bodyguard and not Cassandra?”

“Adrian is here to protect you both,” the king clarified. “Although, because of your wedding, it is necessary to keep a closer eye on you. Fortunately for me, you and your sister spend almost every waking moment together.”

Lilith scoffed again. She didn’t like this one bit. She sent me a glaring look, then her eyes locked again with her father’s. I had to admit that this was slightly amusing. I’ve never had a job where someone didn’t want my protection. The scenario here was that protection was obviously a necessity, but spoiled princesses liked to have things their way.

The king walked over to Lilith, cupping her chin. “You and your sister are my greatest treasures. This is not a question of me not trusting you or Cassandra. It’s quite the opposite. I have seen the darkness that lurks in the hearts of our kind, and also...” Here he paused, sending a troubled look my way. I returned it, knowing exactly what he meant. “The other kind. I cannot bear the thought of you or your sister falling victim to someone’s evil machinations. Please believe me that I am

merely trying to safeguard your future.”

I watched Lilith, to see whether her father’s tenderhearted speech would change her mind. For a moment, her defiance wavered, a flicker of vulnerability creeping into her eyes. She resembled the sort of child who always yearned for their parents’ approval. However, there comes a time in every child’s life to desire independence. Perhaps that time had come for her as well?

I glanced over at the king. He had a wise strategy. He knew that arguing with his daughter, trying to convince her of something would not work. So, he went about it differently. He played the emotions card, where all he was trying to do was protect her and keep her safe, knowing full well that she wouldn’t have an argument against this.

I watched as her nostrils flared up, trying to come up with something, but of course, there was nothing left for her but to agree.

“I understand your intentions, Father,” she finally relented. “I have to say that I don’t like it. I don’t think I need a bodyguard. And now at the cemetery, we would have been able to escape the vampires easily.”

Easily? I almost laughed loudly. I found them trembling like two mice, hiding away from those two halfwits. Truth be told, those vampires were so starved for blood that they were barely keeping themselves on their feet. Lilith might be right. Now that I thought of it, I should have kept them squirming a little while longer, just to see whether she would have really been able to handle herself in that situation. She was the ringleader, of course. Her sister was only along for the ride. That much was obvious to everyone, to their father especially.

At that moment, the king glanced over in my direction. “That isn’t what I was told.”

Her nostrils flared up at me. Her cheeks blushed a deep red. Her eyes were staring me down with the words how dare you tell him the truth?

Her stare was so annoying that I almost chuckled out loud, something I rarely do, especially when on the clock. I swallowed this desire to do so, and merely nodded. There was nothing else left to add.

“Please do not argue with me on this one, child,” her father told her, and in that word child, he showed her exactly where she stood.

“Fine,” she managed to squeeze through clenched teeth, then grabbed her sister by the hand and together, they stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

The king sighed heavily, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers. I could see the exasperation in his entire body. It was true. The king was growing old. After all, that was why he was marrying off Lilith to one of his closest friends’ son. I couldn’t figure out why Lilith and not Cassandra, the older one, but I knew better than to ask something that was none of my business.

“Having girls is a curse, you know,” he told me, once he managed to regain some semblance of composure.

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied with a dismissive shrug.

My opinion had always been pretty straightforward, especially when it came to children. I never had any great desire for my own. But even if I did, I would take that job very seriously, because when you have kids, you make sure they grow up into good people, not spoiled pieces of shit. Again, I wisely held that back.

He looked at me as if he was trying to figure out whether I was telling the truth or not. I held his stare easily. He wasn’t the first employer who tried to shake me into

some sort of revelation on my part. That of course, wouldn't happen. I've learned to keep my own life to myself, by separating business and pleasure. This was business, and I planned on keeping it that way, especially with the money the king was paying. And if I get to kill a few feral vampires, even better.

"Why don't you go and rest?" the king suggested with a wave of his hand. "The girls had quite a night. I doubt they'll give you much trouble for the next ten hours or so."

"If it's alright with you, Your Highness, I would like to keep guard in front of her bedroom all the same," I clarified. "After all, you don't pay me to sleep."

He smiled at this. "I knew you were the right man for the job."

Man.

This was where a part of me wanted to correct him, but the king didn't need any correction. He knew exactly what I was. I was like those two creatures in the cemetery. The only difference between us was that I managed to get quite a decent supply of the new and improved liquid meat our doctors had come up with. By mixing cattle blood, which is the closest to human blood, with shellfish which are high in nutrients, a vampire mixture was created, that allowed for this hunger to remain dormant for as long as an entire month.

Of course, one could always get tempted even while under the influence of this mixture, which was usually ingested in the upgraded pill form. Before, it was a shot, but that was difficult to transport. So, as always, it is a question of controlling one's urges, something I had become very adept at, and it had only proven to be more beneficial for my reputation as a bodyguard.

As for the sun's rays, it was just a matter of adjustment. Those vampires who grew up in the mountains, sleeping during the day and hunting during the night remained

affected by it. The rest of us, who had grown up away from other members of their species, with human parents who had taken them in and took care of them, little by little, adjusted themselves and their skin to the effect of the sun.

I could still remember the burns on my back when I spent a little too much time in the sun, and my mother wasn't there to bring me back in. That smell of burnt skin. That noise of crackling which is only audible to vampires. Then, my mother's tender arms realizing what was happening. Then, the fish smell of the ointment she would rub on me.

Memories were something I tended to push aside from my mind. I didn't need that distraction, but sometimes, they managed to worm their way back inside.

"If you don't need me for anything else, Your Highness, I shall take my leave," I told him respectfully, not because his human royal title meant anything to me, but simply because he was my employer for the time being, and that in itself demanded respect.

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“No, no,” he shook his head, and a minute later, I was in front of Lilith’s door.

I could hear voices coming from inside. She was there with her sister. That meant that they weren’t sleeping. With the two of them, there was no sleeping, no time off, even for a single moment. I hated being hired to babysit two spoiled brats who neglected all common sense and lunged into the mouth of danger just because it seemed like fun. I reminded myself how much her father was paying me, and it made it all better.

At that moment, I heard footsteps coming down the hallway. I looked up and saw him. Lilith’s future husband.

Physically, he was barely someone to notice. He was tall and lean, but without that strong, muscular build. The same could be applied to his facial features. There was no chiseled jawline, but rather, softer contours. The few times I’d seen him he was always wearing a suit, in that classic and refined look, exuding an air of sophistication and looking down upon those who weren’t on his level.

Needless to say, our two styles differed greatly, with my casual and rugged style, I stood in stark contrast to him. Not that I had any intention or desire to blend in here. I was here to do a job, and I damned well planned on doing it, whether or not some wannabes would make it harder for me.

He passed me by with a nod, which I returned out of mere respect for Lilith’s father, as it was his home. Luke didn’t knock, yet another manner he was lacking, but I didn’t say anything.

He opened the door, then closed it behind him, as the echo lingered in the hallway

that stretched throughout the entire house.

Chapter Three

Lilith

“You went to the cemetery!?” Luke exclaimed, his eyes wide with disbelief. “Have you lost your freaking mind, Lilith?”

I rolled my eyes at him, because as always, there was no talking to him, just like there was no talking to Father.

“If you’re going to give me that speech, you can go away,” I frowned. “Father has already given it to us both.”

This time, Luke turned to Cassandra, who was seated in a small armchair, with our kitty Penelope in her arms, purring softly.

“Why would you let her do this?” Luke demanded, pacing about the room like a caged tiger. Only, it didn’t suit him. I’d never imagine him as a wild animal of any kind. He just didn’t have that quality about him.

“I don’t need anyone’s permission to do anything,” I grunted heavily, getting up from the sofa and walking over to the window.

As I gazed out the window, my eyes fixated on the distant horizon, where the vast expanse of the world unfolded before me. The view stirred within me a deep longing for freedom and adventure, beckoning me to explore beyond the confines of my familiar surroundings.

The open sky stretched out like a canvas, painted with hues of blue and golden

sunlight. It whispered tales of uncharted territories, of hidden wonders awaiting discovery. The wind carried a melody that whispered of distant lands, foreign cultures, and untold stories waiting to be written.

That was what I yearned for. A life outside the confines of this castle, where everything had to be programmed, just because I was the king's daughter. I'd never felt truly myself, but always someone's daughter, and now, someone's future wife, although that was the last thing I wanted to do. But Father had assured me that I would not be able to find anyone better than Luke.

In a way, he was right. With this thought in mind, I turned to Luke and gazed at him. I'd known him since we were children. We played together. We scraped our knees together. We shared secrets together. But that was exactly it. We had become friends. We never thought we would be partners in any other way.

Then, we were told that for the good of our kingdom, I had to marry him. A part of me felt relieved that I would be married to my best friend. But another part of me, the one that longed for adventure and love beyond any human comprehension screamed against this. Slowly, I managed to suffocate that voice and now we were here, counting the days until the wedding.

"Lilith," Luke suddenly approached me and took my hands into his. Then, he brought them to his lips, kissing them tenderly. This wasn't what we used to do. I felt like little by little, he was trying to transform our relationship, while we agreed that we would not push anything, that we would just let things stay as they were and if something changed, then we would see where it might get us.

Before he could continue, I pulled my hands away from his as if his touch scorched me. He pretended not to notice.

"You could have been hurt," he told me.

I sighed heavily. “No. Because I have a bodyguard.”

“I know,” he admitted, scratching the back of his head.

“Wait... what?” I frowned, tilting my head a little. “You knew about this?”

“Well... sort of,” he shrugged.

“What do you mean sort of?” I demanded of him. “Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew you would react like this,” he explained. “And to tell you honestly, knowing how... adventurous you are, I agreed with your father that it was for the best.”

I looked at him incredulously. “I remember a time when you were just as adventurous as me.”

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“We were kids, Lilith, come on,” he scoffed. “We’re adults now and we need to act like it. You can’t just disappear in the middle of the night. You know better than that.”

“Obviously, I don’t,” I pouted.

“It’s not because of you, Lil,” Cassandra suddenly interfered, and we all looked in her direction, waiting to see what else she would say. “You know it’s the vampires. And the situation has gotten much worse in the past couple of years.”

I didn’t say anything to that, but the truth was that she was right.

“Cass, we can’t be helpless damsels in distress all our lives,” I reminded her boldly. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be that. I don’t want to be daddy’s little princess.”

“But... what’s so wrong about that?” Cassandra asked somehow sadly, and I realized that I’d offended her without meaning to.

“Cass,” I said softly, walking over to her. She refused to look up at me, instead focusing on the sleeping kitten in her lap. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it?” she wondered, finally looking up at me. “Not everyone wants adventure. I like being safe. I like being comfortable. And I was very frightened last night. I, for one, am grateful for your bodyguard who saved us.”

As always, Cassandra knew how to disarm me. I didn’t know what to say to that.

“You’re right,” I did what I always did when I wanted to end a conversation. I would agree even when I didn’t mean it, just so the conversation wouldn’t go on. But this time, I felt like a simple agreeing wouldn’t suffice.

Instead of saying it was alright, as she usually did, she got up, the kitten still in her arms. “I’ll go to my room. I’m a little tired.”

“Cass, come on,” I quickly told her. “Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not like anything,” she turned to me to reply. “I’m just tired. It’s been a long night.”

She cut me off with her gaze. It was the first time I’d seen her like that, and I knew that it was better not to say anything that we both might regret later on. I watched as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

I sighed upon being left alone with Luke.

“She’s right, you know?” he said, breaking the silence which felt more comfortable than the sound of his voice. In fact, I started to feel that the more time passed, the less I liked to hang out with him. This forced marriage was becoming more and more real with each passing day, and I started to like it less and less.

However, I couldn’t say anything, especially not to Father. I’d already agreed to everything. The wedding date was set. Truth be told, the preparations were still ongoing, but everything would be ready for the due date. Nothing could change. Everything had to go according to plan. Father was counting on me. I couldn’t let him down.

“I really don’t want to talk about this right now,” I frowned.

“I’m not your enemy here, Lil,” Luke reminded me.

“I know,” I inhaled deeply, raking my fingers through my hair. “I just feel like I don’t have control of my own life and I don’t like it one bit.”

“Of course, you do,” he assured me, walking over to me and taking my hands into his once more. This time, I allowed it. “You and I are getting married. I know it might feel weird at first, but we can make it work. I promise. We’ve been friends for such a long time. I doubt there is anything we can’t agree on.”

If I thought about it for a moment, I had to agree that he was right. I knew him and he knew me better than anyone else, except maybe Cass. He would know what I needed and when I needed it. So, what if our marriage wouldn’t be romantic? Who wanted romance in their life?

I did.

I wanted it all. I wanted romance. I wanted adventure. I wanted to be in control and out of control at the same time, if such a thing was even possible. Nonetheless, I wanted to try it and see what that would feel like.

“Maybe you’re right,” I sighed heavily, still not completely convinced, but I wanted him to believe that I was on the way there. Because this was something I needed to sort out on my own, without anyone’s interference.

“We all want the best for you,” he continued. “Cass, your father, me. But we can’t do what is best for you if you keep disappearing in the middle of the night, taking your sister with you.”

Sometimes I wished that Cass and I were like other sisters. Usually, the older sister was the one setting all the rules. With us, it’d always been the other way around. She

was the shy introverted one, while I was the one causing mischief. Father said it was our mother's trait, which was a little too accentuated in me. I'd always been especially proud of that.

"Just promise me you won't put yourself in danger like that again," he urged me.

It was a promise I knew I wouldn't be able to give, even to my father if he had asked for it. But he knew better than that.

I inhaled deeply, staring Luke right in the eyes. I smiled. "I won't."

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I wouldn't put myself in danger like that again. That was the part I gave my promise to. The rest of the sentence was open for interpretation, because I knew that I needed to find out more about this other world, about the world my bodyguard belonged to.

My heart fluttered at the thought of him for some reason. Was it his commanding presence or the way he protected us so fearlessly? I tried to banish whatever that was from my mind. He was a vampire, and he didn't belong in our world. That was the only one reason why I was shocked that Father hired someone like that to protect Cass and me. But if my father trusted him, that meant that he was worthy of trust.

Still, there was something about him, something that both thrilled me and frightened me at the same time. I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to know to what extent he was connected to the vampire world, and how he kept control over that part of his being, that he could function so easily amongst humans.

Everything about that man was mysterious, and I loved a good mystery. That of course meant only one thing. I needed to go out that evening as well, knowing full well that he would follow me. But this time, Cass wouldn't be with us and that would make all the difference.

Chapter Four

Adrian

That evening, we were all seated in the great dining hall. The dinner table was lavishly decorated with all sorts of delicious food, most of which the common folk didn't even get to try, let alone have as their usual dinner.

I never liked joining these dinners with employers, mostly because I never felt a part of them, but at the same time, they insisted on this, thinking that it made me feel more comfortable. The truth couldn't have been more different.

Tonight was no exception. Everyone was silent, probably still under the impression of what happened the previous night. All that could be heard was the clinking of the knives and forks against the fine china. The flickering of the candlelight cast an ethereal glow, adding an air of mystery, which I was sure the younger daughter appreciated more than anyone else.

I noticed her glancing in my direction several times since we started eating. I didn't look back at her. But I did notice it with the corner of my eye. Maybe she had forgotten that I was a vampire and as such, details like that didn't get past me?

Her father, the king, seemed to savor each delectable bite. All the food had been carefully prepared to tantalize the taste buds and satisfy the palate of the king, the princesses and the younger princess' future husband.

The feast began with a selection of appetizers, served on delicate porcelain plates. A platter of smoked salmon, adorned with dill and accompanied by slices of freshly baked baguettes offered a burst of savory flavors. This was followed by roasted lamb cooked to perfection, presented with a fragrant herb crust, served alongside a medley of roasted vegetables, including caramelized carrots, tender asparagus and buttery baby potatoes. To complement the lamb, there was also a wild mushroom risotto.

Accompanying the main course, there was a selection of fine wines carefully selected to enhance the flavor of the meal. To conclude the dinner, a selection of decadent desserts awaited the guests. A tower of profiteroles, filled with luscious vanilla cream and drizzled with warm chocolate sauce, provided a sweet indulgence. Alongside them, delicate fruit tarts showcased the vibrant colors and flavors of seasonal fruits, nestled in a buttery pastry shell.

As I ate sparingly, I couldn't help but think how many hungry mouths would have been fed by this plethora of food, which was more than enough for four people. I wondered if the food went to waste after dinner.

As I was wondering that, I didn't realize that the king had been talking for a while now.

"Once, there was a time when humans and vampires coexisted in a fragile harmony," the king began, his voice carrying a hint of nostalgia. "As our friend here will tell you," he gestured at me with his fork, "they've always been considered immortal beings, blessed with strength and captivating allure. But their insatiable thirst for human blood led to unrest and conflict."

He paused, his gaze shifting from one princess to the other, ensuring their attention was firmly captured. "A century ago, a war broke out between our two races. Humans, fearing the vampires' insidious influence, sought to protect themselves and preserve our way of life. It was a time of darkness, where bloodshed stained the land and tragedies befell both sides."

Everyone present seemed to be listening in awe, although I suspected they'd heard this story more than once, just like I had. Only, we probably heard different versions of the same story. But I knew better than to interject with anything and correct the king's version. Then, he decided to pull me into the conversation.

"Adrian probably remembers as much as I do of these old, ancient tales," the king continued to speak.

"I'm not that old," I frowned, but they all thought it was a joke. I let them think that.

"Do you still live as long as before?" Cassandra's question took me off guard. I didn't expect that she would be the one taking part in this conversation.

“No,” I shook my head. “Everything changed, depending on where you grew up.”

“What do you mean?” It was Lilith’s turn to join the conversation.

I turned my gaze to her. She welcomed it with an inquisitive expression.

“I grew up in civilization, with human parents,” I explained, and as always, the utter look of shock didn’t escape my notice. I expected someone to ask more, but they remained quiet, so I took that as an opportunity to quickly end my monologue. “Others grew up in the wilderness. I’m sure you all know of the serum that we use, which fights off the hunger and helps us keep it under control.”

“But you still feel that need?” Cassandra asked again, a slight hint of fear in her voice.

I knew what she was referring to. Was she and everyone around her in danger of me going berserk and mauling them all?

“Not in the way of those two feral vampires at the cemetery,” I tried to reassure her, but I wasn’t sure I managed to do it.

Luckily, the king interfered at this point. “You see, vampires, much like humans, are a diverse group. Some adhere to the law and seek to peacefully coexist, while others may still succumb to their primal instincts. That is why vigilance is necessary, for the darkness within can never be fully extinguished. However, there are those who strive to forge a different path, to rise above their bloodlust and live alongside us in harmony.”

I expected them to ask more questions, but the king quickly changed the topic and now they were discussing the wedding. I couldn’t help but notice that everyone seemed excited about it. That is, everyone but Lilith, who was supposed to be the

ecstatic one. She spoke the least, choosing to focus on her food instead, while her father and her future husband discussed the details.

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As always, I kept out of it, as her father, a mix of excitement and pride, spoke of the grandeur and splendor that would accompany the ceremony. He envisioned a celebration befitting their royal lineage, filled with regal traditions and opulent festivities. His words carried a sense of joy and anticipation, his gestures illustrating the grand vision he had for his daughter's special day.

Lilith's future husband was also caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment, adding his own ideas and suggestions. He spoke of the plethora of guests who would be attending, of the arrangements, and the exquisite details that would make an already special occasion even more memorable. His voice resonated with delight, as he shared his vision of the union of their two families and the beginning of their life together.

I observed their interaction keenly. My eyes had been trained to detect even the subtlest of hints in someone's eyes and facial expression, and I instantly caught the flicker of hesitation that crossed Lilith's face. Her eyes, though polite and attentive, held a glimmer of wistfulness. It was as if her thoughts had wandered off somewhere else, contemplating the weight of the impending commitment and the notion that her life would never be the same after that day.

After what seemed to be a small eternity, the dinner ended, and everyone retired to their rooms. Mine was located right next to Lilith's, and from the first day of me being here, I kept leaving my door open, so I could hear hers. She hadn't noticed me before, because I tried to keep myself out of sight for as long as I could. That allowed me to watch her uninterrupted, to see the kind of person she was and in turn, to know what the best approach would be with her.

I believed that this evening, she would remain in her room. I believed it even when I heard her door open. I straightened in bed and headed out into the hallway. She was still tiptoeing away from her room, when I voiced myself.

“Another nightly adventure?” I asked, and almost gasped upon seeing her.

She looked like a being that did not belong to this world. The soft fabric draped gracefully around her curvy form, catching the ethereal glow that spilled through the windows, creating a halo of radiance around her.

As she stopped moving along the polished floor, the moonlight played upon her features, highlighting her delicate beauty. Her golden tresses cascaded down her shoulders, glimmering like strands of spun silver in the moon’s gentle embrace.

Get it together, man, I told myself silently.

I had no idea why I was so mesmerized by this woman. It had to be my exhaustion, and it being the middle of the night. And that form of her body, wrapped in that thin satin nightgown. No man would be able to resist her. No man or vampire.

“No,” she frowned. “I’m just going downstairs for a glass of water.”

Alright. A plausible enough excuse. Then, I looked at her feet and she was wearing light ballerina shoes. In other words, shoes for outside. Not for inside.

She immediately noticed I was looking at her feet and she tried to hide one behind the other. “I couldn’t find my slippers,” she offered this explanation.

“Of course,” I nodded.

I didn’t believe her. I didn’t think she’d learned a lesson. I should have let her sweat

it out a little more in the cemetery, but I felt bad for the two girls crouching behind that tombstone. I could hear their heartbeats even from afar. Cassandra was more frightened than her sister, but Lilith was close behind.

Even after that, she was still contemplating going out into the darkness again, outside the confines of her father's castle, which was the safest place on earth for her. I couldn't understand women like this. What was she missing so desperately that she wanted to risk her life for it?

"Should I prove it to you?" she asked, looking at me defiantly. "Come downstairs with me and you'll see that water is all I want."

"I'll stay here," I told her. "I am your bodyguard, but that doesn't mean that I get to follow you around, leaving you no privacy whatsoever."

She seemed stunned by my response. Her eyes widened, as the shadows around her danced along the intricate carvings and the ornate tapestries on the wall.

"Well..." she started, but she didn't know how to finish, which was sort of amusing. "In that case, I will uhm... go down... for water. Yes."

"You do that," I nodded, as she took one step back, then another.

As she did so, she passed by an open window and the gentle breeze that flowed through it carried the faint scent of night blooming flowers, intertwining with Lilith's delicate presence.

I didn't watch her go down the stairs. I went back to my room and listened. A few minutes later, she returned. I didn't go out to check. She didn't peek into my room to show me that she was telling the truth. I heard the sound of her door closing, but even then, I didn't fall asleep. At least, not at first.

Besides, I never slept soundly. It had been like that since I lost my mother, since I knew that no one would watch over me while I slept, so I had to keep one eye open at all times. That meant that deep sleep was not an option.

Chapter Five

Lilith

It was a good thing that I left my coat downstairs by the door. But the shoes were a mistake. That was why I had to wait until the middle of the night to try and get out again. This time, I wouldn't venture all the way to the cemetery. I learned my lesson... at least up until a certain point. Not as well as to stay inside during dark.

This time, however, I would stay close to home. The lake was my destination. Even the vampires knew that it was one scream away from the castle, and they didn't dare come close to it. That was at least what I believed and what I was told.

I needed some time alone, to clear my head. I felt that ever since this sham betrothal and the upcoming marriage to Luke, I hadn't been myself. I started to feel like I was slowly losing myself in this mess and I hated what it was doing to me.

Maybe spending some time alone, in the darkness, without anyone there to judge me, would do me some good. I might remember that I was doing this for the good of the entire kingdom. I couldn't be selfish. That was what I kept repeating over and over again. As the princess, I had privileges, but I also had a duty to my father, to the kingdom.

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These were my thoughts as I silently slipped through the moonlit hallways, trying to make as little noise as possible. My heart was pounding with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, as I ventured out into the night. My relentless desire for freedom and solitude drew me towards the shimmering allure of the lake.

I always felt at ease here. That feeling of serenity washed over me instantly, as the moon cast its radiant glow upon the path before me. The night air whispered through the trees, carrying the sweet scent of nature's secrets, while the distant chirping of crickets created a soothing melody that harmonized with the rhythm of my own heartbeat.

I remembered swimming here with Cass during lazy afternoons, when we didn't have a single care in the world. We would lie in the grass, looking up at the sky, talking about our hopes and dreams, wondering what our lives would be like when we grew up. I surely didn't imagine that I would have to marry Luke of all people.

I inhaled deeply as I stopped right by the banks, making sure not to get too close to the water. The night air was cool and there was a gentle breeze rustling through the surrounding trees. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, I still felt safe. I was close enough to home, that even if something did jump out at me from the nearby woods, I would probably be able to run back to the castle fast enough and reach safety.

I scoffed suddenly, remembering my bodyguard. My brows knit at the idea of needing him. I could understand my father's concern, but he could have understood me as well. I wasn't his little girl anymore, although he would like us both to be. In a way, Cass had always been more docile, more easily controlled. Maybe that was why

he decided to marry me off first and not her. She would do whatever he asked of her. We all knew that. This was my father's way of keeping us both under control, only in different ways.

At that moment, there was some rustling behind me. I turned around, my heart beating all the way in my throat. I quickly looked down, noticing a large rock, which I immediately picked up. Squeezing at it frightfully, my eyes darted in the direction where the noise was heard. I thought about calling out but changed my mind.

Moments felt like hours. Was it possible that a vampire dared to tread so deeply into human territory? This was unheard of. Yet, there was someone here with me. Someone who obviously didn't want to have their presence known just yet.

"Show yourself!" I finally shout, deciding to prove to whoever or whatever it was that I wasn't afraid.

Another moment passed, then another. My eyes had already adjusted to the darkness. I would notice if someone jumped out of the thick shrubbery and trees. Finally, more rustling was heard, and a familiar silhouette came out into the moonlight. His face held a hint of exasperation mixed with undeniable fascination.

"Again?" That was the only thing he asked. "At least you didn't go too far this time."

I frowned, scolding myself silently for being so bad at sneaking out of the castle.

"Are you always so serious?" I suddenly asked, wanting to see what he was like when someone pushed his buttons and annoyed him. I didn't know why I was finding such a thrill in challenging his protective instincts.

"Yes," he replied simply.

I tilted my head at him. There was something about meeting him in the middle of the night, just the two of us. His rugged features seemed to take on an ethereal allure in the moonlight. The soft glow illuminated his chiseled jawline, accentuating his strong countenance. His tousled dark hair seemed to catch the moonbeams, as they cascaded effortlessly, framing his face and drawing even more attention to his eyes.

“Why couldn’t I have gotten a bodyguard who remembered what it meant to be adventurous? To take bold risks because only bold risks were truly worthy of the prize that would follow?”

I sighed, turning away from him and staring at the lake.

“You make my job unnecessarily difficult,” I heard him say.

I turned to him again, suppressing a chuckle. Our eyes locked, and a spark of mischief danced between us. I took a step closer to him.

“You play with danger every single day,” I told him. “Have you been doing it for so long that you completely forgot all about the thrill?”

He fought to maintain composure. I could see that much.

“You have no idea what real danger is,” he revealed.

“Exactly!” I exclaimed without meaning to. Then, I exhaled with deep effort, although no relief came of this. I shook my head, trying to find the right words that seemed to have found an outlet right here, right now. “I feel like I haven’t lived at all, and now, when it is my time to do what I want with my life, I have been stripped of that choice.”

I didn’t mean to say any of this. It just slipped out. But it didn’t matter. Not like this

man here... no, this vampire, cared about what I had to say. He was paid to stay by my side and keep me safe.

“You don’t know what you are saying,” he tried to correct me, as I expected he would. It was like hearing my father speak through him. “You have a family, and you have an obligation to them. Love isn’t just good times. It is also being there and doing something you don’t like. In your case, it is...”

He didn’t finish it, so I did. “The wedding.”

For a while, we were both quiet. It was as if that very word held too much weight and we wanted it gone. I knew I did.

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled. It brought us back to the present moment.

“Sometimes, I feel like the night beckons to me,” I murmured, more to myself, but I didn’t care if he was listening, too. “I’ve always found something magical in these moonlit hours.”

Now, we were both staring into the distance, into the moon’s reflection on the calm surface of the lake.

“I know you can’t leave me here alone,” I told him. “But I’m grateful for the fact that you’re not dragging me back to the castle.”

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The truth was, I actually meant those words. I thought Father hired him to keep me confined to the castle, which was something Father wanted to do. I was sure of it. However, it seemed that my bodyguard did have a mind of his own and he was using it. I liked that. I still didn't like being followed wherever I went, but at least I wasn't kept on a leash.

"I'm here to keep you safe," I heard him say, his voice deep and dark, just like the night around us. "As long as you are safe, you could be anywhere."

I turned to him, unable to resist smiling. "I'm not sure Father would agree with that."

He shrugged indifferently. "The job was to keep you safe. I have no plans of telling him how to rule his kingdom, and I don't expect to be told how to do my job."

I liked this even more. Maybe this wasn't just some mindless vampire desperate for money hired by the king to be his daughter's bodyguard. This was actually what I thought initially.

Staring at him, I felt the magnetic pull between us. It was something electric, surging through my entire body.

"We are safe here," I assured him.

He shook his head. "You may think that, but being who you are, danger always lurks in the shadows, where you least expect it. Remember that."

I couldn't resist commenting on this. Slowly, I took another step towards him. I

thought he would pull away, or demand that we go back to the castle, but instead, he stared me down, his gaze intensified.

“Well, you are a vampire,” I remind him of something he surely didn’t need to be reminded of. “Are you a danger to me?”

I could see that look in his eyes. Caught between duty and sheer desire, he hesitated to speak. I’d crossed the line. I knew that. And yet, I didn’t want to go back. We had this stolen moment to ourselves. There was no one around. Whatever happened here, it would remain our little secret. In his eyes, I could see a reflection of my own longing.

“Do you think I’m a danger to you?” he answered my question with another question.

I knew that I’d never met anyone like him. And it was all pure chance, pure luck. Very soon, he would be out of my life, and I would regret not seizing this chance to kiss him. I knew he wanted it as much as me.

In a bold and impulsive move, my longing for being loved, being held, being kissed overwhelmed me. I couldn’t resist this magnetic pull any longer. In that moment, under the bewitching moonlight, I closed the gap that was between us and pressed my lips against his.

Time seemed to stand still as our kiss unfurled, a blend of deep passion and tenderness. Our lips and tongues danced in sync, each brush and caress conveying a depth of desire we didn’t dare to express any other way. The world around us faded into oblivion. This stolen moment had become ours. Unforgettable and as such, it would last forever.

My fingers raked through his curls, as he adjusted his face so he could kiss me more deeply, more passionately. The gentle rustling of the leaves in the background

seemed to harmonize with the intense beating of my heart.

We both surrendered to this power immediately. His hands locked around my waist, pulling me closer. The boundaries that had been there up until this moment, vanished completely. Our tongues danced together to the sound of music only we could hear. A million stars exploded in front of my closed eyes, as I completely got lost. There was no right or wrong. There was no past or future. Just this very moment, and it belonged to us.

Slowly, I felt him lowering me to the grass. It tickled my bare calves. I smiled against his lips pressed to mine. His hands gripped hard at me, unwilling to let go. I didn't want him to. I wanted this moment to last forever.

His hand slid up, cupping my breast. I moaned softly, as heat unfurled between my thighs. Desire exploded somewhere deep inside of me and I knew I wanted this more than anything else.

When he finally pulled his lips away from mine, he was breathing heavily, his eyes watery and deep. His lips were parted, slightly moist, glistening. His hand was still on my breast, pressing at it possessively. His other hand was holding the hem of my nightgown.

"Should I stop?" he asked, still breathless, his voice the memory of a million lives lived together all coming back at once.

"No," I smiled back at him, crashing my lips against his even harder this time, to show him that I wanted this as much as he did.

Chapter Six

Adrian

This was wrong.

We were not supposed to be doing this.

Yet, I couldn't stop myself. Not after I heard her moan against my lips as she kissed me with the ferocity of a wild animal.

I hadn't been with a woman in what seemed to be an eternity, and before Lilith kissed me, I didn't think I needed a woman in my life. They were just unnecessary trouble, of which I had more than enough already. But her kiss awakened something inside of me, that slumbering animal, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to stop myself. That was why I had to ask her, and once she assured me she wanted this as much as I did, that was when the avalanche of desire overpowered us both.

I felt like tearing that thin satin nightgown off of her, right after I slid her jacket down her arms. But I had to be gentle. I couldn't fuck her like a feral wildebeest, although that was exactly what I wanted, because that was what she had awakened in me.

I continued to kiss her, deep down hoping that nothing would interrupt us. My hand slid underneath her nightgown, pulling down her panties, which she shook off of her legs with ease, as she gripped at my cheeks with both hands, ravenous for my kisses. This only intensified my desire, if such a thing was even possible.

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I revealed her pretty, pink pussy touching it with my fingers, separating her wet folds. I pulled away from her. She gasped, yearning for more. There was that same feral desire in her eyes. I couldn't believe we were doing this. I didn't sign up for this. And yet, nothing in the world would have stopped me right now.

I went down on her, gripping her hips and settling her right onto my mouth.

“Oh!” she gasped, pressing her hand to her lips.

I lifted my gaze to meet hers. I had never seen anything more carnal in my life, than this woman, with her legs spread out in front of me, waiting eagerly to be licked.

Her pussy lips were the softest things I had ever touched with my tongue. I spread them wide, sliding it inside of her. Her moans were only making me more ravenous for her. She felt so wet, as she gripped my hair, pulling me closer, rocking her hips back and forth.

Wanting more, she started to grind against my tongue and mouth, and I knew I would fuck her in a moment. I wanted her soaking wet for me before that. But holding onto this little semblance of control. I slowly slid one finger inside of her, joining the efforts of my tongue on her clit.

I could already feel the tip of my cock dripping wet for her, aching to slam into her and fuck her brains out. I added another finger, hitting that perfect spot inside of her. She stifled another loud moan with her hand. I continued to suck on her clit, making those sweet, slurping noises.

Fucking hell, she was so delicious.

Another few sucks as two of my fingers slid into her, and she came. Her juices oozed onto my tongue, coating my mouth and my chin. Hungrily, I licked everywhere and the thought of slamming my cock into this wet heat was driving me insane with desire. Her entire body convulsed, clenching at my hair. This time, she moaned loudly, and the sound exploded all around us, but we didn't care. The universe would not allow us to be interrupted in this blissful moment.

I pulled myself up, watching her glistening pussy in the moonlight. Her smile was mischievous and shy at the same time. I had no idea how she managed to do that, but it was mesmerizing.

I slid two fingers inside of her. She was still so wet. I used her juices as lube, when I wrapped my hand around my cock. I wanted to taste her again, but the yearning to feel her heat was unbearable. She was so swollen, so needy. Everything about her was beyond magical. I rubbed her clit with my free hand, jerking myself off. She was watching me, not taking her eyes off of mine. The sight made it difficult for me not to cum right then and there.

At that moment, she used her hands to spread open her pussy lips for me. Pretty, pink. Irresistible. It awakened the animal inside of me, not the one yearning for blood, but the one yearning for pleasure. She played with herself, her eyes inviting me inside.

"I need to feel you," she whispered, and something told me that she wasn't used to saying such things, even in the heat of the moment. But this time, she had to. I knew that feeling, when you couldn't hold back, even if your life depended on it.

I gritted my teeth, just watching her lying on the grass and slowly, I placed the tip of my cock between her pussy lips. The sensation was beyond any description in words. Her fingers caressed my cock, only adding to the thrill. My tip was now pressing

against her clit. Cum was beading from me and I knew that it would start to spill over. I wouldn't be able to control myself. This was beyond anything I could imagine, when I left the castle a mere hour ago.

For a moment, I remembered why I was here, but that thought was quickly erased by all the pleasure I was feeling. My heartbeat was now in my cock, pulsating heavily, aching for release.

"I need to feel you, too," I told her, my voice down to a deep whisper.

She started to roll her hips, and every time she would lift them, my cock slid more and more into her. I groaned loudly at the sensation that was washing over my body and all of my senses.

I gripped my cock harder, as I allowed the tip to slide into her wet heat. The sensation of her wet folds caressing me as I went inside of her was amazing. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around me, locking me in place. I knew exactly what she wanted. Desire got the better of me. I clashed my lips against hers, sucking on her tongue, feeling her pussy clench around my cock. I could feel her enormous heat, washing over me. It took all of my conscious effort not to cum.

I needed to slow down the pace. Breathing heavily, I pulled away, staring at her straight in the eyes. Her pussy was so tight, I had to do it slowly.

"That feels so good..." she told me, with that same mischievous gleam in her eyes. Looking so angelic and telling me how much she liked how I was fucking her drove me over the edge.

My cock swelled even more inside of her, my balls tight with cum. No woman had ever driven me this mad, so quickly. Hastening the pace, I grabbed her breast, feeling how perfectly round and firm it was. I didn't want to kiss her right now. I wanted to

look at her. I wanted to inhale her scent. I wanted to feel how silky soft her skin was.

Following my lead, as my cock slid deeper and deeper inside of her, her hands started to explore the crevices of my back. As moonlight spilled over her face, I couldn't help but think how perfect she was. Every single inch of her was pure perfection. That pale skin. Those heavenly curves. Those angelic curls. Those piercing blue eyes. Those slightly swollen, rose bud lips.

Now, I had my cock fully inside of her, feeling her pussy clench even harder around it now. Her body was begging for me to keep fucking her, and I gave her exactly what she wanted, what we both wanted. I lowered my head, pushing my tongue into her mouth and my cock into her.

Animalistic lust seared me in two, and there was no common sense left. I knew that I needed to stop this. This would only complicate things. There were a million reasons why we should have been back at the castle, both of us safely in our own rooms. But she was touching me. Her hands felt like the sweetest caress, as she massaged my chest, bucking her hips against me, creating even more friction. I throbbed with need, with sheer desire.

Volcanic pressure built up inside of me. I kept fucking her mindless, and we were already nearing our limits. I slammed into her, and she released a moan every time I landed deep into her. The delight, the pleasure, that look in her eyes was beyond incredible. I had never had a woman look at me like this, and it made me feel like a fucking god.

"I want you to come again," I told her, the words animalistic and deep as they left my throat. In fact, it was more like the growl of a wild animal than speech, but she understood me.

Her breasts bounced as I kept fucking her; when she came again, her entire body

clenched, shivering. Her back arched, her nails dug into my skin, and that only made my own yearning even stronger. I followed her immediately. Fortunately, I had a single ounce of common sense left in me to pull out and spray my cum on her thigh.

A moment later, I pulled my pants up in a moment of shared vulnerability and awkwardness. I expected her to say something, but instead, she got up as well and walked over to the lake. There, she knelt down and washed her thigh in the shallow water. She lingered there, as silence settled between us, reminding us that the moment had passed, and we had to go back to real life.

She looked up at the starry night. The intensity of this encounter left us both lost in our own thoughts. But one was certain. This was a mistake. A mistake that could not happen again.

I tried not to look at her, grappling with my own conflicting emotions. I couldn't deny that there was obviously a powerful physical attraction between us. There was an undeniable connection between us. Our bodies had recognized it the moment we were left alone, and a lack of common sense brought us to this point. But the reality of our situation began to sink in quickly, casting a shadow of uncertainty over our future.

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This would make things uncomfortable and awkward. And that would make my job more difficult. We had to clarify everything and find a way to navigate out of this delicate moment.

Finally, she returned to me, and my words formed with reluctant honesty.

“Lilith, I...” I started, finding it difficult to say it right now, mere moments after it all happened. But it was better than to let it take on a form that was not allowed. “I apologize for crossing the line.”

Her expression faltered for a moment, then she smiled, albeit awkwardly, which made her even more irresistible. “I kissed you, remember?”

“True, but I should have stopped it,” I told her, deciding to take full responsibility for this.

I didn’t even dare to think what might happen if her father found out about this. Then again, she had as much to lose as me if she told this to anyone. Something assured me we could keep this a secret, just between us. There was too much at stake.

“We will just forget that this happened,” I finally told her, sounding confident and determined.

“You mean pretend?” She questioned my words.

“Call it what you will,” I told her. “But it is of the utmost importance we never mention this to anyone.”

For a moment, I thought she looked hurt and disappointed. That was better than to have her infatuated by me.

“Don’t worry,” she said as confidently as me. “We shall maintain the established boundaries.”

“Yes,” I nodded quickly. I wanted to say something else, but she had already passed me and headed back to the castle. Her steps seemed to be filled with unspoken hurt, but I knew she was entitled to that.

I had apologized. I reestablished the boundaries. But it was my fucking mistake and I had to make it alright again somehow.

Chapter Seven

Lilith

“You had sex with your bodyguard!?” Cassandra exclaimed loudly, her eyes a silent witness to her shock.

I frowned, knitting my eyebrows. “Try louder. I don’t think everyone in the castle heard you.”

Instinctively, we both turned to the door of the library. This had always been our most favorite room in the entire castle. Seeing that I couldn’t contain the turmoil within me, I thought this would be the perfect place to share with Cass what happened. I knew I said I would keep it a secret, but with sisters, there were no secrets. This went without saying. It was Adrian’s own fault for not assuming this in the first place.

Besides, I needed to address this situation. I couldn’t keep it all to myself, because

then, I would start thinking about a million things, confusing myself even more. No. I needed Cass for this, if I wanted to put all of this behind me.

To be quite honest, I didn't even know what I wanted. It was something new. It was something exciting. It was something forbidden. It was something completely foreign to me. That was what made me do it. It was as simple as that.

"It was a mistake," I shrugged, trying to make it into less than it actually was, for my own sake. "He said so himself."

"He said so?" she echoed, wondering.

"Mhm," I nodded. "But if he hadn't said it first, I would have, so it's fine."

Great job, Lil. Very convincing.

Cass didn't say anything, but I knew she was thinking the same thing. Still, I appreciated her keeping this to herself. I wanted to hear the truth she had to share with me, but at the same time, I did not. I wanted to believe that such adventures were alright, if no one got hurt. In our case, that was exactly what happened. We didn't owe an explanation to anyone. Some might say I owed it to Luke, but again... we were not in a relationship. I made that perfectly clear. And our marriage would not make it magically so.

"So, we'll just both forget about it," I added quickly. "Pretend that it never happened."

Cass didn't sound very convinced. "Is that possible?"

"Of course," I scoffed. "Why wouldn't it be?"

“I don’t know,” she said cautiously. “I’ve never been in such a situation. I wouldn’t know.”

Neither have I, I thought to myself. But there was no point in stating it out loud. I needed to keep assuring both myself and Cass that it was really nothing. Just something that happened in the moment, something that didn’t mean anything.

Anything?

I felt a little pang somewhere deep down. Luckily, it was deep down, so I managed to banish that thought. I was on a path here, and I couldn't deviate from it. Especially not because of a bodyguard who would probably be long gone by the end of the year, completely forgetting all about me. I had to admit that I didn't like this very much, but I attributed it to the fact that I was a woman. What woman liked the idea of sleeping with someone, and not being memorable to that same man? It was all a matter of ego, nothing else.

"Well, I know," I assured my sister. "We won't allow that to affect our roles and where we stand. I will marry Luke as it was agreed, and this changes nothing."

"But... don't you feel like you've... uhm... well, cheated on Luke?" Cass was careful when choosing her words.

"Cheated?" I frowned. "Not really. I mean, you know that we aren't in a romantic relationship. We're just friends, who happen to be... forced to marry each other by their fathers, for the good of the kingdom. They can tell me who I will marry, but they sure as hell can't tell me who I love."

"You said love," Cass pointed out.

"So?" I shrugged.

"Are you in love with the bodyguard?" Cass wondered, sounding slightly shocked.

“What?” I gasped. “No. No!”

In love? God forbid!

I didn’t even know him. How could I possibly be in love with someone I didn’t know? It was ridiculous. It was preposterous. And yet, my heart was in a state of commotion. I reminded myself that it was just post-sex confusion. I was still under the impression of how wonderful it was, how he knew exactly how to kiss me and where to touch me.

Goosebumps immediately ran up and down my body, as I remembered the previous night. I even blushed a little. Luckily, Cass didn’t ask why.

Instead, Cass chuckled a little. “Good. Because that would complicate things so much.”

“Don’t be silly,” I waved my hand at her dismissively. “It was... I don’t know. I can’t even explain what it was. It was totally unlike me.”

“I know,” she agreed. “I mean, you’ve never done anything like that before.”

“I guess that is partly why I did it,” I admitted, getting up from the sofa and walking through shelves filled with old books and scrolls. I liked the smell of old books. They always soothed me, and I was glad I chose this place to share this with her. The hushed ambiance around us adding a sense of contemplation. The rest of the castle seemed to be in too much of a commotion.

“I feel like I won’t be able to do anything after I get married and it is freaking me out,” I confessed.

“Lil, it is normal to have reservations and fears about such a significant life change,”

Cass told me wisely, her gaze unwavering as she listened attentively.

I took a deep breath. Since we'd already started talking about this, I might as well continue. "I fear that in marriage, I will lose myself. I will lose access to all the things I love and enjoy doing, and my life will become something completely different, something I don't want to have. I fear that the responsibilities and expectations that come with being married will consume my identity. I don't want to be defined just by the role I'm expected to fulfil."

Cass nodded, her voice soft but reassuring as always. "I know what you mean. I think marriage shouldn't be a sacrifice of one's individuality, but a partnership that allows both sides to grow and support each other. You don't think that will be possible with Luke? After all, you've been best friends for such a long time."

I shook my head. "I always thought I would marry for love."

"I know," Cass smiled. "Remember how we envisioned what our future husbands would look like?"

"You wanted Darcy!" I teased her, remembering how much she used to love Jane Austen.

"And you wanted to marry Dorian Gray!" she teased me back.

"What?" I playfully defended my insane choice. "He was described as very handsome and very intelligent."

"And very much in love with himself," she added, to which we both chuckled cheerfully.

"Oh yeah, I knew there was something that didn't make him the best choice for a

husband,” I added jokingly.

It felt good to laugh, especially after the confusing event from the previous night, which wouldn't allow me to sleep at all. I hadn't seen him since then, but I knew he was around. After all, that was what Father was paying him for.

I tried not to think about him at all, but it was impossible. I needed Cass to assure me again that I was doing the right thing, and that feeling confused was to be expected. But before I could start that conversation again, the door suddenly opened.

“Ah, you're both here,” Luke said, giving us a sideways glance, as if there was something he didn't catch at first sight. “Is something going on?”

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Before Cass could look in my direction, I quickly responded. “What would be going on? We’re just here, about to have some coffee.”

He wondered for a moment before continuing. “It just looks like I interrupted something.”

“No,” I assured him, scolding myself that I had forgotten he was my best friend, and you could rarely hide something from your best friend.

But the truth was, I was slowly starting to feel awkward in his company. I couldn’t share secretive things with him any longer, and he was starting to notice. I was sure of it. He just hadn’t mentioned it yet. And now, of course, he was right. He could sense that something had happened, because he could see it in my eyes.

“Did you tell the servants to bring the coffee?” he wondered.

“Not yet,” Cass interfered. “I’ll go do that right away.”

I gave her a silent frown, which was supposed to mean that she didn’t need to go. But she ignored me, and quickly closed the door to the library, leaving us alone.

“Lil?” he asked again, walking over to me. I expected him to take me by the hand, but he didn’t. A part of me was grateful for that.

“Yes?”

“There seems to be something on your mind,” he told me.

“No,” I shook my head with a dismissive shrug. “I just didn’t sleep very well.”

“You didn’t go out again, did you?” He sounded like Father.

“No,” I repeated. I didn’t feel that I needed to explain myself to him. Yet, on the other hand, he was going to be my husband. Just not in the very exact sense of the word. “I didn’t,” I add, confident that he wouldn’t find out.

“You have to be careful, Lil,” he urged in a concerned manner. “I’ve heard that someone spotted vampires on our territory last night.”

The thought didn’t worry me at all. I was with Adrian. He would have kept me safe.

Luke eyed me somehow weirdly, but he didn’t say anything. Or maybe, he wanted to, but changed his mind at the last minute. The truth was, I didn’t want to discuss anything with him, least of all this. I needed some time on my own, some peace and quiet, but lately, it seemed that Luke was constantly here at the castle. He had been helping Father with some paperwork regarding one of his businesses, and that provided him with a constant excuse to be here.

At first, I was alright with that. His presence did not affect me in a way I didn’t like. But now, it was starting to become too much. I felt like I couldn’t have a moment to myself, and as a solitary introvert, it was something I craved.

“I’ll be fine,” I assured him. “Father hired that bodyguard and he’s been following me everywhere.”

He frowned, and I expected him to say something negative, but before he could do that, the door opened and Cass entered with one of the servants, carrying a silver tray with three dainty cups of steaming hot coffee.

Chapter Eight

Adrian

“There was something you wanted to talk to me about?” the king asked, seated at his regal, mahogany desk, as I entered his study and closed the door behind me.

This was the room where he hired me. Although, I knew I would get the job. I hadn’t been working for the FBI in a while. Somehow, being constantly on the border between the two species, humans and vampires, had gotten to be exhausting. I needed a break.

That break meant becoming a recluse somewhere high up in the mountains and forgetting about the rest of the world. It was easy to pick up provisions once a week at a nearby village, populated by humans. They didn’t ask too many questions, and that was what made that exchange almost pleasant. Then, I got a call from my old boss at the FBI. He explained the situation.

The king, Theodore Cuaran of Shirkuh, had a daughter who needed a bodyguard. I remembered my first reaction being a resounding no. I had no intention of returning only to be some royal brat’s babysitter. But my boss said it would be a personal favor to him. I owed him one. I knew the time would come for him to collect that favor, but at the same time, I had no idea that he would use it like this.

So, I found myself in this study for the first time, wondering if there was a chance of me somehow blowing this, and then just shrugging before my boss, saying I was here, but it just wasn’t a good match. But I knew better than that. I owed him a favor, and if this was my way of repaying it, so be it.

The king’s study was adorned with rich, mahogany bookshelves, lined meticulously with leather-bound tomes and scrolls, reflecting the vast knowledge and wisdom that

these pages contained within. That first night, a soft lamplight cast a warm glow, illuminating the room.

The king's elongated desk stood as the centerpiece of the study, covered in neatly arranged papers and documents. Intricate carvings adorned its edges, showcasing the artistry and craftsmanship of the kingdom's finest woodcutters. Behind the desk, an exquisite painting of a regal scene hung on the wall, a reminder of the king's role as the leader of the realm.

"Yes, there is, Your Highness," I addressed him respectfully.

In turn, he placed aside the document he held in his hands up until a moment ago. Now, his attention was focused solely on me.

“What is it?” he asked again.

I only realized now that I didn’t even think about what I would offer as a reason for wanting to quit this job. I’d never been in this situation before. I took a deep breath, trying to come up with the right words.

“I cannot continue to work for you any longer,” I told him simply.

I crossed the line.

I had sex with your daughter, the very person I was supposed to keep safe from such harmful situations, and by doing this, I put her in even more danger.

That was what I should have said, but of course, I didn’t. These words remained confined inside my mind, lingering forever.

The king’s brow furrowed in surprise, his eyes reflecting a hint of concern. He leaned forward across the desk, his voice filled with a mix of curiosity and urgency.

“Why?” he asked, equally simply, leaning back into his chair, as if he had regained a small part of control over the situation, which was an unknown up until a moment ago.

I hesitated. Again, how could I explain to him what happened?

I crossed the line I was never supposed to cross, and now, I felt more guilty than ever. I felt that I would not be able to do my job properly. If something happened to Lilith,

her blood would be on my hands. I couldn't let that happen. Not when her father could hire someone else, someone whose cock would stay inside his pants, who would be able to focus on the job at hand.

I didn't know what made me slip up so badly. It had never happened before. Not a single time, and there had been tempting situations. Not once did I succumb to them. This time, however, was different, and I didn't know why. The only reasonable explanation was that I was attracted to her without admitting it even to myself. That again, made my position as her bodyguard a dangerous one, for us both.

"Your Highness," I hesitated for a moment, aware of the weight my following words would have. I met the king's gaze, my voice steady as I spoke. "There are personal matters that have arisen. Urgent matters that require my attention. That means I need to reassess my priorities and devote my efforts elsewhere."

We had been taught this tactic at the FBI. Say a lot of words but don't really say anything meaningful. Many people would usually fall for this tactic. I should have known that the king wouldn't be one of them.

"That is just a lot of words," he pointed out. "I didn't hear the actual reason why you would leave, when your commitment and expertise are invaluable to the safety of my daughter."

I cleared my throat a little. I knew that if I said my reasons were private, that would make me appear very unprofessional. I couldn't do that to my boss. That in turn would make us both look bad. I had always prized myself on finishing the job no matter what. Even if I was on the verge of dying, I would still pull through just for the successful completion of a job. Everyone who knew me knew that about me. This would be the first time I would leave an active job, and without a good excuse at that. The thought pissed me off immensely. Mostly so, because I put myself in this shitty situation.

Yes, she kissed me, but like I said, I could have pushed her away. I should have pushed her away and none of this would have happened.

“I know this makes me look very unprofessional,” I said, not really sure how to explain any of this. My resolve started to waver. My deep sense of commitment to my job won over.

“It does,” the king nodded gravely. “And I was told you were not that sort of a man. I myself did not see you as such when you first stood before me in this very room.”

“I know,” I nodded, feeling ashamed of how I wanted to run away at the first sight of a problem. That wasn’t who I was.

“Adrian, you are not just a bodyguard,” I heard him say. “You have no idea how much trust I have laid in you. You have become a pillar of strength for me, looking after what I hold most dear, my two daughters. The stability and safety you provide for them are invaluable to my own well-being. I ask you to think about something now, if you will.”

“Of course,” I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“Think carefully about the impact your absence would have,” he clarified. A moment later, he said words I could not ignore. “I urge you to reconsider.”

His gaze softened, and inside of me, a decision was made. My loyalty and dedication reignited. I could understand the weight of the king’s words and the significance of my role. I knew he would not be able to find anyone else. At least, not as quickly, and definitely not as good as me.

He needed me. Lilith needed me.

Maybe that second one was more important. I couldn't tell. All I knew was that I agreed with him, and I wanted to assure him that he could count on me.

"You are right, Your Highness," I told him with a nod. "I apologize for the confusion caused. My commitment is to your daughters' safety and the kingdom itself. My personal affairs will be resolved in a different way. I will remain dutiful and stay on, as we agreed."

Relief seemed to wash over the king's face upon hearing my words, gratitude shining in those old, wise eyes. He got up from his chair, walking around the desk and approached me. Then, he extended his hand towards me, a gesture of trust and appreciation.

"I am very grateful for your decision," he said. "Your loyalty and dedication have not gone unnoticed."

"Thank you, Your Highness," I shook his hand back, and at that moment, a sense of newfound purpose settled inside of me. "I will not let you down."

I felt as if our bond as a monarch and a protector was reaffirmed, and he could fully trust that I would do what he had hired me to.

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“I know you won’t,” he smiled in that way only someone who had lived many years filled with wisdom could smile. “Now, is that all?”

“Yes,” I smiled back, nodding. “I won’t keep you any longer.”

He settled back into his chair, and that was where I left him when I closed the door behind me. A sense of relief washed over me. I was determined to see this mission to a successful end, like all the others.

However, as the weight of this commitment settled upon me, I couldn’t help but worry about the impact this would have on Lilith and our... relationship. We obviously shared a connection that went beyond our professional obligations, and I couldn’t deny how attracted I was to her.

Thoughts of her consumed my mind, as I walked through the hallways of the castle. I knew that Lilith was in the library with her sister. I had heard them there on my way to the king’s study. They were laughing about something. I wasn’t eavesdropping. It was merely impossible not to overhear the joyful chuckle of two girls who were enjoying themselves.

This was a delicate balance that I needed to maintain. I vowed to myself that I would not let what had happened overshadow my dedication to duty. I needed to keep Lilith safe, even if that meant keeping her safe from herself. I would push aside any memory of the night by the lake. This was essential to maintain a professional distance and focus solely on my duty to protect her. After all, that was why I was here.

Chapter Nine

Lilith

I couldn't participate in this conversation. So, I allowed Cass to discuss the wedding plans with Luke. I just couldn't shake the feeling of unease that settled inside of me.

Thoughts raced through my mind, questioning everything, whether I was truly ready for this lifelong commitment. I always imagined my wedding day as a joyous occasion, filled with love and anticipation. However, in this moment, all I could feel was a deep sense of unease.

"... flower arrangements have been designed already," I heard Cass say. "Lil's favorites."

"Sunflowers?" Luke asked, but they all knew he was right. Sunflowers had always been my favorite flowers and I couldn't imagine such an occasion without them. However, now it seemed that I couldn't imagine such an occasion at all, flowers or not.

I glanced at him, his smile and enthusiasm evident as he listened to my sister's words. I felt bad. He seemed genuinely excited about our future together, and that only made things worse.

"Are you alright?" Luke asked, noticing my distant gaze. I could hear the concern in his voice, so I forced a smile, in an effort to mask my inner turmoil.

"I'm just a bit overwhelmed," I said with a shrug. "And with not having slept well last night, I feel like my eyelids are way too heavy."

"Drink your coffee," he suggested. I had almost forgotten all about it. It was standing

still on the silver tray, where the servant girl had left it. Luke and Cass had already drunk theirs. Mine had probably gotten cold by this point. “It should perk you right up,” he smiled.

“Sure,” I smiled back, leaning to reach for it.

I took a sip, and luckily, it was still lukewarm. It seemed bland, without much taste. I wasn’t sure if that was actually the coffee or me being without any energy to feel anything.

He lowered his head on my shoulder, as he always did, but again, it didn’t feel like before. Everything had changed and our usual things had become a burden to me, marred with that awkward sensation.

“I keep telling you, Lil,” he said. “Nothing will change. We will still be the best friends that we’ve always been. I want you to be comfortable every step of the way. So, if you don’t feel like talking about it, we won’t. Until the very day of the wedding, if you feel like it.”

I felt even worse after these words. I knew I should feel lucky to have someone like that, who actually cared about my feelings. I also knew that I didn’t have any enemies here. We were all friends. Family even. And I could tell these people everything, without any fear of being judged.

However, there was one thing I couldn’t tell Luke. Not now that we were about to get married. He wouldn’t understand. That was why I could only share what happened with Cass.

“Thank you,” I smiled at him happily. “I’m really grateful for both of you.”

“How could we do anything other than love you?” Luke patted my hand softly with

his.

Then suddenly, his cheerful expression transformed into a look of discomfort. He winced, then clutched his stomach, causing both me and Cass to shift our focus to him.

“Luke, are you alright?” I asked.

Luke didn’t say anything at first. Instead, he took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, bent forward, his hands pressing on his stomach. “No... not really...”

“Does your stomach hurt?” I asked again, watching as his face twisted into a grimace of pain. This sent me into a state of panic.

He struggled to speak, his face pale and contorted with agony. “I think I’m gonna vomit...”

I looked around, pointing at a wide brimmed vase in the corner. “Cass! Grab that and bring it over!”

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Cass did exactly what I told her, in time for Luke to vomit into it. When he was done, he struggled through labored breaths, and I knew that something was terribly wrong.

I wrapped my arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer to me. He was burning up, the back of his neck already sweating profusely.

“Cass, go and get the castle doctor,” I urged her.

I didn’t need to tell her twice. She rushed over to the door and disappeared moments later. We could hear her hurried footsteps echoing through the hallway.

“Just stay awake, Luke,” I told him, noticing that his eyelids were becoming droopy. I had no idea what was wrong with him, but I knew that I couldn’t let him fall asleep. “You’ll be fine. Just stay awake, OK?”

He managed a weak nod and an even weaker smile, his eyes reflecting both gratitude and fear. “Thank you for being here, Lil.”

“Don’t be silly, Luke,” I gripped his shoulder reassuringly. “Where else would I be?”

Once again, guilt clenched around my heart. This man loved me. I could tell as much. I tried to ignore all those subtle signs he used to show me that, for him, I was more than a friend. But I didn’t feel the same way and I doubted I ever would. So, it was easier to just ignore this. Now, knowing that I had done something behind his back, something that would hurt him immensely if he found out about it, made me feel like the worst person in the world.

I tried not to think about it at the moment. This was neither the time nor the place for that. We needed to find out why Luke was feeling so bad. I sat by his side anxiously, as we awaited the arrival of the castle doctor. I wanted to talk to Luke, to keep assuring him that everything would be alright, but something prevented me from doing it.

Luke leaned his head on my shoulder again. He closed his eyes. His breathing was still shallow. He would frown occasionally, his hands still pressed to his stomach. I could see little droplets of sweat beading on his forehead. There was a sickly sour smell about him, and that made me very concerned.

Finally, the heavy doors swung open and the castle doctor, Doctor Zalkind, emerged from the darkness of the hallway behind him, with Cass following closely behind.

Doctor Zalkind had been our castle doctor for over thirty years now. As always, he entered dressed in flowing robes of rich burgundy, adorned with intricate patterns symbolizing his expertise. According to Father, he was the embodiment of ancient wisdom and modern medical knowledge, as he had studied abroad and then returned here to serve the king.

I remembered watching him as a kid, as even then, there were lines of wisdom etched across his face, as if he had never been a young man, but only less old. Those very same lines were a testament to countless hours spent studying, observing and treating a myriad of various ailments.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice a melodic baritone, which carried authority, yet possessed that soothing quality that instantly comforted those in need.

“I don’t know,” I was the first one to reply, as I stood up. The moment I did that, Luke’s body slumped down onto the sofa. He was barely breathing. “We were just having coffee and then, this happened.”

Doctor Zalkind glanced at the coffees. “Did everyone drink it?”

“Yes,” both Cass and I said at the same time.

He put down his black leather bag and began a meticulous examination. As always, he was very careful. His every move was deliberate, as if he were unraveling a complex mystery, which was actually what it was. We had no idea what had caused it, and our concern was multiplying by the minute. With each examination, the doctor seemed to nod to himself, hopefully piecing together the puzzle of Luke’s current condition, in search of those vital clues that would be the final revelation.

“Stick out your tongue, please,” Doctor Zalkind asked of Luke, who immediately did as he was told.

I almost gasped, because his tongue was swollen and of a purplish hue. It hadn’t been like that a moment ago.

With a grave tone, the doctor finally delivered his diagnosis. “I’m sorry to say that Mr. Hemlock has been poisoned.”

“Poisoned!?” I exclaimed, gasping in shock. Cass was so stunned that she wasn’t able to say anything.

“Yes,” the doctor nodded calmly, as it was expected of him. “You mentioned the coffees.”

It was then that Cass and I exchanged wide-eyed glances, our hearts sinking with a mixture of shock and disbelief. We also drank that same coffee.

“But we feel fine,” Cass shook her head incredulously. “He drank it at the same time. If we had been poisoned as well, wouldn’t the poison already have showed itself?”

“Yes, it would have,” Doctor Zalkind nodded. He then got up and pointed at Cass’ cup. “Is this his?”

“No, that’s mine,” Cass corrected him. “This one is his.”

“I will need to take it with me. I need to do some tests,” he explained. “For the time being, you need to follow my advice closely, if we are to have young Mr. Hemlock get over this without any repercussions.”

Both Cass and I nodded at the same time. Doctor Zalkind then proceeded to outline the urgent steps which were required to address the poisoning.

“We must act swiftly and decisively to counteract the poison coursing through Mr. Hemlock’s system. First, we have to administer a targeted antidote intravenously. Simultaneously, we will initiate supportive therapies to aid his recovery. This includes providing intravenous fluids to maintain hydration and support vital organ function. During this time, it is of the utmost importance that he remains here at the castle, where we can closely observe his vital signs, including his heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen levels.”

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I nodded to all this, when suddenly, the door burst open, and Father entered. His eyes were wide with shock seeing Luke unconscious and Doctor Zalkind there.

“What is happening?” he asked.

I rushed over to him. “I’ll explain everything, Father. Doctor Zalkind needs to help Luke. It looks like he’s been poisoned.”

“Poisoned! In my own castle!?” My father seemed as incredulous about this as we all were. But this was not the moment to get lost in shock. The most important thing was to help Luke.

We put him into one of the guestrooms, and there, the doctor brought everything that was needed, as he had an entire ambulance with all its necessities in one of the rooms on the lower floor. With Father being of ailing health lately, this was a necessity. Now, it turned out that it was a stroke of good luck for Luke as well. By the time Luke seemed to be stable, we were exhausted from concern and fear.

“You may all rest for the evening,” Doctor Zalkind told us once we left what was now Luke’s room, closing the door behind us. “He will sleep.”

“Will he be alright?” I asked, afraid of what the answer might be.

Doctor Zalkind hesitated for a moment. I knew he would never give me reassurances unless he was absolutely certain of what he was saying. He was simply that sort of a man.

“Time will tell, Your Highness,” he said respectfully. “Mr. Hemlock was fortunate that you were around and that I was called so quickly. The antidote was given almost immediately, so hopefully, it managed to neutralize the poison and impend its further spread within his body.”

“I hope so,” I murmured to myself, feeling horribly guilty about everything, almost as if I myself had poisoned him. I don’t know why. It was probably the guilty conscience speaking out of me.

Doctor Zalkind said his goodbyes and both Cass and I retired for the evening. It was a day that bore heavily upon us both. I realized only then, when I was tucked in bed, that I hadn’t seen Adrian. But not seeing him didn’t mean that he wasn’t around. A part of me wanted to run out into the night again, if for nothing else than to see him again, but I knew better. I was dead tired from everything that had happened, and I needed to sleep.

As soon as I closed my eyes, sleep took over, but it was a restless night. It was as if even in my unconscious state, I could sense that something was changing, that there was an ominous shadow lurking above the castle, threatening us all, biding its time to reveal itself.

Chapter Ten

Adrian

The news of Luke’s poisoning sent shockwaves throughout the castle, igniting a wave of commotion and urgency among everyone, especially the king. Everyone was told to be extra vigilant, because no one knew who did it or why. It just made no sense. Why would someone poison, probably with the intention to kill, the princess’ future husband?

“The guards are patrolling the castle grounds with increased vigilance,” the king told me, as we once again, found ourselves in his study. That seemed to be the place where he was most at ease to speak about uncomfortable things, and this surely was one of the most uncomfortable ones.

“That is good,” I nodded.

“They’ve been ordered to report any suspicious activity that could pose even a small threat,” he continued. “I am not taking any chances.”

“As you shouldn’t, Your Highness,” I agreed.

It had been only two days since the unfortunate event, and the servants seemed to move more swiftly, attending to their duties with added urgency. Even they seemed to understand the gravity of the situation and acted accordingly. The atmosphere was wrought with concern and a shared determination not to let that happen again.

I had to admit that I had never seen an entire castle come together like that. The castle staff, normally absorbed in their assigned tasks, now worked together as a unified force, supporting one another and lending a helping hand wherever it was needed.

The same could have been applied to the doctor. He redoubled his efforts, his commitment evident in the way he checked up on Luke every couple of hours presenting tireless dedication.

Yet, despite all of these efforts, one question still remained.

“The possibility of the vampires being involved in Luke’s poisoning cannot be ignored,” the king said in a hushed tone.

I looked at him straight in the eyes and he returned the gaze. There was not a single

hint of suspicion. He trusted me with his daughter's life, and the fact that someone managed to infiltrate the castle did not make me a suspect in his eyes. I appreciated this. A lesser king would immediately point the finger of blame at the first possible suspect. But not him. He was far too intelligent for that.

"I honestly don't see who else it could have been," I agreed.

The king's expression darkened, his brow furrowing with a mix of worry and determination. "Their thirst for power and our centuries-old conflict makes them our prime suspect. I fear that Constantine had something to do with this."

Constantine was a vampire leader who had risen to power in the last decade. He managed to do it slowly, without making it too obvious. However, little by little, vampire clans were starting to come together, united in one thing: their hatred for humans, namely King Theodore.

"It is more than possible," I nodded.

I only met Constantine once, and we weren't on the same side. That was when I realized how truly dangerous he was because of one single thing: he was not afraid to die. A man, or in this case a vampire, who was unafraid to die was the most dangerous opponent, because you had nothing he feared, nothing that would force him to back down.

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I also knew one important thing about Constantine. He knew everything there was to know about poisons and how they worked.

“Vampires possess ancient knowledge about poisons and have the ability to strike in secrecy. This is probably just the start of their effort to disrupt the stability of your reign or to undermine your alliance with the Hemlocks.”

The king nodded, his mind obviously racing with the implications. It was obvious to us both that a thorough investigation was necessary to uncover the truth and bring the responsible party to justice.

“We must approach this matter with the utmost care,” he told me, his voice exasperated, but filled with resolve. “The safety of us all depends on it.”

“If Your Highness allows me a few men to take with me, we could scour the castle for any evidence of vampire involvement, such as concealed traces of their presence, or even a hidden lair in the woods.”

The king’s eyes widened in shock. “Do you think they would dare venture so deeply into our territory to be right in front of our noses?”

“It is possible,” I confirmed something he already knew. “Let’s just hope that no one in the castle is working for them.”

That idea would be devastating for him. I knew that everyone in his castle had been in his employment for at least five years. That meant that only those worthy of his loyalty were allowed to work for him, and a full background check was done on

every single one of his employees, including me. Now, if it was really true that someone inside the castle betrayed him, this man would probably take it as a personal insult.

“I hope that is not the case,” he said a little naively, but I decided to keep that to myself. “Also, I think that your suggestion about an investigation is good. You can go talk to the main guards and take as many men as you need. Additionally, we must reach out to our allies within the vampire community who are committed to peace and cooperation. They could provide valuable insight in identifying any rogues among their kind.”

He paused after that, but there was nothing else left to say. We both understood the delicate nature of the situation. This incident threatened to strain the already fragile human-vampire bonds.

With determination etched on his face, the king concluded. “We shall proceed with caution and wisdom. We will not allow this incident to bring us down. It will serve as a reminder that we need to be more vigilant in our pursuit of the truth.”

He didn’t need to say anything more. I knew that he meant me as well. I needed to keep a closer eye on Lilith as well. She was my focus.

I couldn’t help but think whether she was the real target. Or perhaps, her sister? I still couldn’t quite understand what anyone would gain with Luke’s death. He wasn’t an important factor in the human-vampire relations. His death wouldn’t change anything. That was why I couldn’t help but think that he drank that coffee by accident, that it was meant for someone else, and the cups simply got mixed up somehow.

“Could you please go bring Lilith to me?” the king’s voice brought me back to the present moment.

“Of course,” I bowed quickly once, and found my way out of the study.

I knew where to find her. She would be in the place where she had spent the past two days. Luke’s room.

That idea didn’t sit right, but at the same time, I couldn’t say anything. He was her husband to be. It was only to be expected of her to stay by his side and tend to him. Yet, something inside of me wanted to wring his neck because of this, especially when I would see her dabbing his forehead with a wet cloth, keeping the fever at bay.

I stopped in front of Luke’s room, clenching my fists. I knocked hard without thinking.

“Yes?” I heard Lilith’s voice from inside.

I opened the door and immediately saw Lilith sitting by Luke’s side, tending to him with unwavering care and devotion. She gently wiped his forehead with a damp cloth, which made me grind my teeth. Much to my annoyance, the room, filled with an air of tenderness and concern, smelled of solace in the times of heavy uncertainty.

“Lilith,” I called out her name, and only then did her eyes lock with mine curiously, as if wondering what could be so important for me to interrupt them. “Your father requires your immediate presence.”

As soon as these words left my lips, I couldn’t help but feel another pang of envy. I had no idea where all of this was coming from. The sight of her caring for Luke, her untiring dedication evident in every touch and word, only heightened my own desires and frustrations.

“What is it about?” she wondered, getting up and putting the cloth on a small bedside table.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged.

She didn’t ask for more clarification. Instead, she turned to Luke and smiled at him. “I’ll be back as soon as I see what Father needs me for.”

“Alright,” Luke said weakly.

Only then did I glance at him. He was still sickly pale, as his body was still fighting to recover from the poisoning. I couldn’t help but think how fortunate he was. The dosage must not have been lethal, otherwise no amount of urgent help would have made any difference.

Something just didn’t feel right, only I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. There was a tangible threat inside the castle, and I knew that I couldn’t take my eyes off of Lilith even for a single second. The king had told me to watch over both of his daughters when they were together, but apart, Lilith was my priority.

So, as soon as she walked out of the room, I followed her. She walked slowly, noiselessly, the carpet underneath her feet absorbing the sound. I caught up with her quickly and now we were walking side by side.

There was a palpable awkwardness barring us off from each other. The weight of recent events, most importantly Luke’s poisoning, seemed to cast a shadow over our interaction, of which there had been very little in the past two days.

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Her eyes were fixated straight ahead of her, her face bearing traces of fear and concern. The unsettling event had shaken her to the core. I could see that now. Surprisingly, I wanted to jump at the opportunity to show her that she could find solace in my presence, because that was why I was here. My desire to protect her was overpowering.

Still, we navigated through the hallways side by side, our steps synchronized but it seemed that both our minds wrestled with hidden truths.

“I haven’t seen much of you today and yesterday,” I heard her say suddenly, without even turning to me as she spoke.

The sound of her voice did something to me, something I refused to acknowledge.

“I’m around,” I replied curtly.

“I know,” she added, “it’s just... I feel better knowing you are here. I mean, around.”

She sounded slightly awkward, as if she didn’t quite know how to express herself, as if there was a line she was afraid of crossing. She obviously longed for reassurance. That much was obvious. And that, I could easily provide.

“Do you want to see me at all times?” I asked her.

She still didn’t turn to face me, as we continued to walk, as if looking each other in the eyes would somehow disrupt the fragile balance we managed to keep up until this point.

“Yes,” she said, without even thinking. Then, she quickly added, for clarification. “I mean, you are my bodyguard, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” It was my turn to say this.

“I know you’re here now,” she continued. “So, you don’t have to lurk behind some corner in the hallway or something silly like that.”

“Alright,” I said only that, feeling that anything else would be unnecessary.

Besides, we had reached the door to her father’s study. She reached for the doorknob, finally turning to me. I could see more of that fear in her eyes. More than ever, I wanted to wrap my arms around her and silently assure her that she was safe, that I would lay down my life for her.

But I didn’t do that. I watched her slip into her father’s study, where I remained in front of the door, with the sound of my own beating heart, hammering loudly without any sign of stopping any time soon.

Chapter Eleven

Lilith

It had been three days since Luke got poisoned. Little by little, he was starting to feel better. He was still as pale as a sheet, and he could barely eat anything, but Doctor Zalkind assured us that things were looking up.

This was good news. The bad news was that Father had forbidden us to leave the castle on any pretext. We could go to the garden and that was all. No lake. No woods. Nothing. I was frustrated to say the least.

That morning, Cass and I were sitting in her room, on a plush sofa, and I think we could both feel my restless energy fill the confines of this room. I sighed deeply, my voice tinged with disappointment. “I can’t stand being inside all day long. I feel like the world is passing us by, and we’re stuck here, unable to go anywhere.”

To be quite honest, I had no idea where it seemed to be more dangerous, inside the castle or outside of it. We thought that this castle was the safest place on earth for us, that nothing and no one could harm us here, but what happened to Luke proved otherwise. Danger managed to sneak in past these walls and now, I felt like anything could happen at any moment.

At first, fear gripped me like never before. I thought that Luke being poisoned was a mistake, that it was meant for either me or Cass. But then Doctor Zalkind told us that he found poison in Luke’s sweetener. No one in the entire castle used it but him. We all preferred regular sugar with our tea or coffee. So, I doubted that whoever had planned this, didn’t know about Luke’s sugar preference. That left just one logical conclusion, which was that he was the intended target.

But even that didn’t make much sense. Why target Luke? Why poison him? What did the vampires have to gain by that?

“I can see that you’ve been restless, Lil,” I heard Cass say and her words brought me back to the present moment. “But safety is in numbers.”

“And all our food and drinks have to be pre-tasted,” I frown.

“Well, of course they do, after what happened,” she reminded me, although no reminder was necessary.

My eyes searched Cass’ face for solace, my frustration tempered by my sister’s wisdom. “I know,” I sighed heavily. “I just feel even worse now, being locked up in

here, like a prisoner.”

“I’m sure Father doesn’t want you to feel that way,” Cass reached out, gently placing her hand on my shoulder, offering me a grounding touch. As always, it worked. “And I understand how you feel. At least, I try to. You and I have always been so different, looking at the world with different eyes. You are drawn to be outside, while I find solace within these walls, in the stability and protection that this castle provides. There is beauty and discovery within these walls as well, if we allow ourselves to see it.”

I thought about it for a moment. She was right. Her gentle words made me feel better, as my frustration gave way to a glimmer of hope that this wouldn’t last too long, and eventually, everything would be as it was before.

“You’re right,” I smiled at her. “I never thought about it. I thought there was nothing in this castle that I didn’t know, but we could find old books, we could search all the hidden corners we’ve forgotten as adults, and we can just cherish the time we spend together.”

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Cass smiled back. She wasn't expecting me to say this, and honestly, I also didn't know where all this came from. Maybe I suddenly realized that constantly whining was also not the way to go about this. I couldn't change this situation, so I should adjust to it. It wasn't going to last forever.

"Exactly," Cass beamed at my words. "The world outside will be waiting for us when it is safe to venture outside again. Don't doubt that. But for the time being, we can find adventures of our own, inside."

At this moment, the weight of confinement lifted slightly, but enough for me to feel better, as I accepted Cass' perspective, something that rarely happened. She was usually the one who followed me, but this time, it was the other way around. And it felt new. It felt great. Although that longing to be outside remained within me, I found comfort in the knowledge that it wouldn't last forever and spending time with Cass was always fun.

We spent the rest of the day in the library and the attic, opening forgotten boxes and just like she said, finding treasures. But that night, I couldn't fall asleep. Something wouldn't let me. My window was open, and I felt that I could constantly hear noises I didn't recognize. Instead of being afraid, they were drawing me to them, to come outside.

I knew it wasn't a good idea, but I couldn't prevent myself. After all, it was just the garden. I wouldn't venture further than that. I would be mere steps away from the castle. I could call for help if I needed to.

At the same time, I knew that even if I didn't see him, Adrian would be there. That

thought alone made me feel protected and safe. That was all I needed to finally tilt the scales to one side. I grabbed my robe and tied the rope around my waist. Slowly, I tiptoed outside, and just as I was descending the staircase, I heard him. I doubt that he was even trying to remain quiet as he followed me.

I turned around to face him. Just from the way he was looking at me, I could figure out what he was thinking.

“You’re not planning on going outside, are you?” he asked me.

“I was kinda hoping that you’d catch me already outside,” I admitted.

“You know the rules,” he reminded me.

“I do,” I frowned. “But I feel stuck in this place. I need to go out, even just for a moment.”

“That’s going against the king’s order,” he told me again.

I descended the remaining few flights of stairs, and he did the same. Now, we were standing facing each other. He looked even more handsome for some reason.

“I just want to go out for a few minutes into the garden,” I explained. “I won’t stay long. I feel like I’m going to suffocate inside.”

He didn’t seem all that convinced, and to be quite honest, I had very little inclination to convince him. But I wanted him to know why I was so desperate to go out.

“The last time we had to be locked up like this was when vampires attacked my mom,” I clarified. “She was in bed, and all I could remember was how bad she looked. She was almost drained of all of her blood and Doctor Zalkind was doing

everything in his power to save her. Unfortunately, he didn't manage to do that. And we were all forced to remain inside these walls, watching my mother wither away until she was gone."

I didn't want to talk about this at all. That was why I didn't mention this to Cass, although I'm sure she remembered this time well, being the older one. Enough bad things had already happened. I didn't want to stir up the past and make everything even worse. But right now, I couldn't hold my tongue.

He didn't say anything at first. I thought silence was his way of telling me that I didn't convince him. Just as I was about to pass him by and climb back up the stairs, he grabbed me by the elbow. I felt as if an electric bolt shot right through me. That deep yearning awakened instantly as his gaze pierced right through me.

"Lilith," he said my name as if it were a prayer and the only thing in this world that could save him. It made goosebumps run up and down my entire body.

It was a foolish thing to even contemplate, but I'm sure he could see the desire in my eyes to go out, if only for a few precious moments. I felt that without this, I would burst into a fit of tears. I didn't want that to happen.

"Just the garden?" he asked. I nodded, swallowing heavily. "Five minutes," he added.

"Five minutes," I nodded again gratefully.

We walked in silence, almost as if in a procession. Neither of us dared to say anything, probably out of fear that we might wake someone in the house, someone who would prevent us from reaching our destination. I had to admit that I didn't think I would convince him. In a way, I wasn't even trying to. I just wanted him to know why it was so important for me to go out.

As soon as we stepped into the garden, moonlight filtered through the branches of nearby trees, casting a silver sheen over the whole place. The flowers seemed to come alive, their petals reflecting the soft glow. I walked among them, reaching to touch their delicate forms, feeling a sense of wonder coursing through my veins.

I marveled at the flowers as if I was seeing them for the first time. The lush greenery around us formed a tapestry of life, vibrant and untamed. How different everything was out there, as fireflies danced in the darkness, their tiny lights twinkling like stars, adding to the enchantment of the night.

I lifted my gaze towards the night sky, where a canopy of stars stretched out above us. The vastness of the universe seemed to unfold before our very eyes, igniting a sense of insignificance and grandeur at the same time. I felt a soothing connection to something much greater than myself, a part of a cosmic symphony playing out in the night.

“I feel bad,” I suddenly said, without meaning to.

When I looked down, I noticed he had been staring at me the entire time.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because of everything,” I said with a sigh. “Because of... us... then, Luke.”

He shrugged. “We agreed not to mention it again.”

I didn’t like how he said it, but I had to admit that he was right. We did agree to put it behind us. It was obviously just me dwelling on it, and I hated that I just revealed that right now.

“You didn’t poison Luke,” he added with a grave look on his face.

I realized only now that I hadn’t seen him laughing. Come to think of it, I might have only seen him smile once or twice. Maybe not even that much. But never laughing. Curiosity gripped me and I wondered what he looked like caught up in a fit of laughter he couldn’t prevent. Did it make him even more handsome? Probably.

“I didn’t,” I acknowledged. “But I felt like it is karma.”

“Karma?” he frowned.

“Yeah, you know, the universe’s way of evening things out?” I tried to explain in my own words, but I feared I didn’t do a very good job of it.

“Wouldn’t that make him the one who did something wrong?” he mused.

“Yeah, but...” I started, but he was right. The universe wouldn’t do something bad to him to even out for something I did. It didn’t make any sense. “That’s true, but that still doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“You are the only one responsible for how you feel,” he told me wisely, words I

appreciated more than he could ever know. “You can’t be responsible for how other’s feel either.”

I nodded. This was the sort of wisdom I needed right now, and I didn’t even know it. I needed to keep repeating that to myself over and over again. Just as I turned to him, wanting to thank him for those words, when a sudden rustling of the bushes made us both turn around at the same time, with our hearts beating inside our throats.

Chapter Twelve

Adrian

I could smell something was off even before the two figures emerged from the bushes, their eyes gleaming with otherworldly hunger.

Vampires.

I immediately sheltered Lilith with my body, sure that I would be able to take them both. She pressed her hands onto my back. For her, just like for me, the garden had instantly turned into a battleground of survival. I allowed my instinct to kick in, spreading my arms around us, in an effort to create some distance between us and the vampires.

One vampire rushed to the side and lunged at Lilith, his fangs bared. The other one was ready to attack me. They had a clever strategy, to strike us from two sides. Lilith seemed to be driven by a sudden surge of adrenaline which shot from her very eyes and managed to evade her attacker’s initial strike, which allowed me to turn to him and strike him with my fist. He fell down to the ground, but I knew I didn’t strike him hard enough to stay down.

This gave me enough time to focus on the vampire who targeted me. I ducked and

dodged, searching for a way to turn the tables on him, as I had the two of us to defend. A broken piece of a garden statue caught my eye, and I pointed at it. Lilith understood immediately. She rushed for it, while I kept the vampire on his feet occupied. A moment later, she returned, handing me the makeshift stake.

I knew if we were to protect ourselves, we had to kill them this time. Last time, at the cemetery, we left them alive. We showed weakness. But not now.

Focused and determined, I lunged forward, aiming a precise strike at the vampire's heart. He didn't even know what hit him, as the makeshift stake found its mark, piercing through the creature's chest. A moment of anguish flashed across the vampire's face, before he crumbled to ash, dissolving into the wind. There was nothing left of him, not even a single trace. It was as if he had never existed.

The second vampire was coming round, and before I could do anything, Lilith rushed over to him and kicked him in the stomach, rendering him powerless.

"Now, Adrian," she told me, pointing at him.

I jumped onto the vampire, who was lying on his stomach, turning him onto his back, slamming the stake into his heart. There was that same pain in his eyes, that same knowledge that death had finally caught up with him. A few moments later, that was all. I felt as if it lasted for hours, our fight, but in reality, we were lucky to have been able to beat them so quickly.

That could only mean one thing, that these were not warrior vampires. These were like those two at the cemetery, just wanderers who dared to tread onto forbidden grounds, in hopes of finding some careless wanderers. Unfortunately for them, they stumbled onto us.

Still breathing heavily, we stood amidst the aftermath of the brief, but intense battle. I

looked around, there was not a single trace of the struggle that took place here. The night was tranquil once again, as if nothing had happened. Nature didn't care about any of us. All she cared about was prolongation of life in general. For her, the individual was not of much relevance.

At first, heavy silence settled between us. I was watching Lilith with the corner of my eye. She was blinking heavily, somehow looking incredulous at what had just happened. Finally, she was the first one to break the silence.

“What are they doing so close to the castle?” she wondered, her voice down to a whisper, as she was still looking around, half-expecting more vampires to jump out of the bushes.

“These are not Constantine's army,” I pointed out. “They're just some lone wanderers, hoping for scraps.”

“In the king's garden?” she almost gasped loudly.

I shrugged. “Hunger is a helluva thing. It makes you do things you usually wouldn't do and go places where you usually wouldn't go.”

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Her next question surprised me. “Has that ever happened to you?”

“Me?” I echoed.

“Mhm,” she nodded, turned to me, watching me with an expression of deep curiosity.

“No,” I denied it. “I’ve never felt such hunger. Mine has always been kept under control, thanks to my human parents.”

“Is that why you believe in the peace between humans and vampires?” she asked again. I wasn’t expecting to have this conversation right now, but I didn’t want to make it seem as if I had something to hide.

“I don’t,” I answered. “I honestly don’t know if such a thing is even possible. The only thing that is possible is peace among most of us. Because I do believe most of us want to live in peace, without fear. But as long as there are vampires like Constantine to instigate this hatred, there will be wars and attacks on both sides, because when there is an attack, there is defense, and there is also retribution.”

“Eye for an eye?” she asked.

“Will leave the whole world blind,” I nodded. “But we will only realize this when it becomes completely dark.”

She didn’t say anything to that. She seemed to ponder the weight of my words, as I did as well. Now, we were facing an dilemma. Should we tell the king? I knew we should. But at the same time, it was my fault that we were out here in the first place.

Admitting that might make him trust me less, when the truth was that I was now more adamant than ever to keep Lilith safe. I had proved it twice already.

But at the same time, this was a direct disobeying of the king's order. One of us would get in trouble if we told him. Or both of us. She seemed to be able to read my mind because her next question was exactly that.

“Do we tell Father this?” Her voice was soft and melodious. There was no more fear in it. Maybe now she was finally certain that I would keep her safe no matter what, even at the expense of my own life.

I didn't even know it before, but the thought of something happening to Lilith threw me in a pit of rage. I would maul anyone responsible for plucking even a single hair on her body. I would set fire on villages and cities alike. I would take as many lives as necessary to avenge her. And yet, I couldn't say any of this aloud. Maybe that didn't matter. Maybe hearing it aloud wasn't important.

“I think we should,” I told her, my morals winning over. She didn't seem to like that.

“I'll tell him it was all my fault,” she said calmly.

“No,” I shake my head.

“But it is,” she answered stubbornly. “Why would you get in trouble for something I did?”

That question resonated in me. The first time I showed myself to her at the cemetery, she didn't care about who would get into trouble for something she did. Now, she was proving exactly the opposite of that. I could sense the burden of guilt in her, something I didn't think she was capable of feeling.

“We have to tell him what happened,” I instruct. “Exactly what happened.”

I was also tempted to keep it a secret, all the more so because there was no evidence. But someone could have seen us from the castle. And lying to the king would not be a good thing.

“I want to be there when you tell him,” she said determinedly, and something told me that she would not take no for an answer.

“Alright,” I nodded. “You may join me tomorrow morning.”

Just as she was about to head back inside, I couldn’t prevent myself from saying. “I know how that feels.”

She stopped mid-step and turned around with a puzzling look in her eyes.

“About your mom,” I continued. “Everything changed after she died.”

She walked back to me, curiosity in her every movement. I looked at her, wondering how many more things I didn’t know about her, and how many more I wanted to know. Because everyone carried their own hidden truth. I wanted to learn hers.

“What happened?” she asked tenderly.

My expression softened. I opened this can of worms, and although it was difficult to talk about it, I knew that my mother would have loved Lilith. They shared the same passion for life, the same stubbornness, the same fire.

“She was the best mother a child could ever want,” I told her with a sigh. “They couldn’t have children of their own, so when they found me abandoned by the side of the road one morning on their way to the mountains, I was fortunate enough that they

took me along with them. My father was a police officer, so it was easy to check the records for missing children. Of course, he didn't find anything. They were left with two choices, keep me or let the state take care of me, which I think you'll agree is something no one wants for any child." I paused a little, then continued. Talking about this proved to be more difficult than I thought it would be.

"They provided me with everything a child could ever want, and one day, they found out the truth," I told her. This was my least favorite memory, but it was crucial for her understanding the depth of my parents' love and devotion to a small vampire child. "They caught me sucking blood out of the neighbor's parrot, which had mistakenly flown over to our backyard. Luckily, mom got home before anyone else could see me with my mouth all bloodied. I remember her taking me into her arms, I was only five at the time. I didn't even know what was happening, whether I had done something wrong. She never made it seem like that. She took me to the bathroom and gave me a bath. Then, a few days later, the pills and the special drinks started. She always told me it was vitamins for a growing boy. I liked when she said it." I smiled at this memory. It was bittersweet.

"I think your mother and my mother would have been best friends if they had known each other," she smiled back at me, looking at me in a way she had never done before. This made me bold enough to continue this story, which was baring me more than ever before, leaving me vulnerable.

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“Then one night, she just didn’t come home,” I continued, the pain clutching my heart like razor sharp needles, digging right into the very flesh.

“What happened?” Lilith gasped, pressing her hand to her lips.

My lips clenched, tightening, before releasing the sound of the explanation. “It was a hit and run. Some drunken idiot didn’t see her crossing the street and... he hit her full on. She had no chance.”

“Oh, no...” she whispered sadly.

“They said she didn’t suffer,” I added. “Silver lining. But my father was devastated. Gave himself to alcohol shortly after and drank himself to death ten years later. I don’t think you can even call those ten years living. He was actually surviving. He just couldn’t imagine his life without her, it was as simple as that. Some people are lost without their other half and are as good as dead. Now, they are resting together peacefully, I hope.”

Lilith squeezed my hand gently, her empathy palpable. “I’m so sorry, Adrian. That must have been a devastating loss for everyone involved. I think they would be proud to see the man... well, the vampire you grew up into.”

I smiled at her correction. Again, she smiled back, beaming.

“That is why I agreed to come out into the garden,” I clarified why the need for this long monologue. “Because of your mother.”

Her eyes glistened with a surge of tears. I wanted to caress her cheek, to tell her that everything would be alright. But I was afraid where that might lead. So, I pulled my hand away from hers.

“Tomorrow morning, we tell your father everything,” I repeated, just so she’d know this confession didn’t change anything. In fact, it actually fortified my desire to come clean, so we could be even more vigilant than before.

“Tomorrow morning,” she nodded. “Shall we?”

She headed back towards the castle, and I did the same, wondering what the next day would bring.

Chapter Thirteen

Lilith

“You disobeyed me?” Father thundered the moment Adrian and I came clean about what happened. “Lilith, for goodness’ sake...” He paced about his study, pressing his fingers at the bridge of his nose. “I swear you’ll be the death of me.”

“It is my fault, Your Highness,” Adrian interferred again, although I told him not to. “I should have prevented her from going on.”

“The hell you should have,” I frowned, wanting to make it perfectly clear to everyone that us being outside last night was my fault and no one else’s. “He tried to do it, but he realized that I would sneak out the moment he turned his back on me. That was why he agreed, and we went out together. It was good that he did that, because he killed both of those vampires who attacked us.”

Father listened intently until I stopped speaking. He turned his back to us and gazed

out of the window. “A long time ago, this was a land of peace,” he told us. “Now, it seems that everywhere we turn, there is danger. Life itself has become dangerous.”

We didn’t say anything to that, because it seemed as if he was talking to himself. Then, he turned around to face us once more. “You are not to leave each other’s side,” he ordered. “Is that understood?”

I nodded, realizing that there would be no arguing with him. I had no idea how we would navigate breathing down each other’s backs, but obviously, we would have to make it work. Adrian nodded silently as well, and then with one wave of my father’s hand, we were dismissed.

We closed the door to his study, then without another word exchanged, I headed to Luke’s room. Adrian of course followed. When we stopped in front of it, I turned to him.

“Do you think it would be OK if I went in there alone?” I asked, pausing for a moment. “There is something I wanted to talk to Luke about.”

Adrian looked at me. I expected him to question this, to remind me of what my father had just said, but instead he nodded.

“I will be in front of the door,” he told me.

“Thank you,” I patted his shoulder, unable to prevent myself from doing it.

Then, I entered Luke’s room. He was lying on the bed, with the window closed. The room felt stuffy, suffocating somehow, just like our entire relationship, whatever we wanted to call it.

“Lilith!” he beamed upon seeing me, propping himself up in the bed, so that he was

now seated.

I smiled at him, walking over to open the window, then returned to his side and sat next to him on the bed. My mind started to swirl with conflicting thoughts. The recent events—the poisoning and the attacks—had cast a dark shadow over everything. I knew that this was the right moment to discuss something that bore heavily on my mind.

I took a deep breath, my voice slightly trembling. “Luke, I’ve been thinking, maybe it would be better to consider canceling the wedding. With everything that has happened around here, I worry about everyone’s safety and the potential risks that might arise if we continue with this.”

There was an expression of shock on Luke’s face. He obviously wasn’t expecting it, but a moment later, a determined glint flickered in his eyes. “Lil, I understand your concerns. I really do. And I also appreciate your worry for everyone’s well-being. After all, it’s just one of the things that makes you... well, you.” He smiled upon those words, and I had to smile back. “But we can’t let them win. And that is what we will be doing if we cancel the wedding. Maybe that is exactly what they want.”

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My heart sank at his response, although I could have predicted that this would be his reaction. “Luke, it’s not just that.” I tried again, although with much less conviction than the first time. “It is about love and protection, too. I care deeply about you, and I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you because you are marrying me.”

I made sure not to tell him that I loved him, because I was afraid he might understand it in the wrong way. It’s not like we hadn’t said those words before, but before, we knew what they meant. We had always been friends, with that line being clearly visible. Then, our fathers took it upon themselves to arrange our marriage and suddenly, everything changed, even our relationship. Now, I couldn’t tell my best friend how much I loved him, because I was afraid that he would think this love had changed into something different.

Luke reached out, his hand caressing my cheek. His gaze was filled with tenderness and once again, that same sense of guilty conscience washed over me. He cared about me more than I cared about him, and in a completely different way. I was becoming convinced of that now. And I also knew that by marrying him, this would rise to the surface at some point. He would tell me how he truly felt about me, and I would have to tell him that I didn’t feel the same way about him. His heart would be broken, and we would both never be the same, yet stuck in a marriage of convenience, that was convenient for everyone else but us. The thought frightened me more than I was willing to admit.

“Nothing will happen to us,” he smiled at me reassuringly. “What happened to me was just a warning. A warning that we weren’t vigilant enough, but now we know better. We know that such a thing will not happen again, as long as we stay strong together.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I told him, not because I actually felt that way, but because I could see that this was a pointless conversation.

I probably shouldn’t even have suggested it without speaking to my father first, but even if I did speak to him first, I knew what he would say as well. He would share Luke’s point of view. He would tell me to think about it, that it wasn’t worth canceling everything, that we would be additionally careful about everything, as we already had been. So, there was truly no point.

“You know I am,” he said tenderly, taking my hand into his. “We’ll get through this together, Lil. I promise you.”

I nodded, although I didn’t sound all that convincing. At that moment, there was some commotion outside the door, but it remained closed. We both glanced in that direction.

“What was that?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Adrian is in front of the door, keeping watch.”

“He’s here?” he asked, sounding disgruntled.

“Of course,” I replied. “Father has told him that he is not to leave my side for a single moment.”

Luke pouted, then turned away from me, letting go of my hand. “I don’t trust him.”

“Adrian?” I echoed, forcing him to face me again. “Why?”

“I just don’t,” he claimed, sounding even more irritated by this point.

“Father has chosen him,” I reminded him. “If Father trusts him, that means we all trust him.”

“But he is a vampire, Lilith,” he told me, staring at me straight into the eyes.

“He’s not like other vampires,” I jumped quickly to defend him. Too quickly, it seemed, because Luke picked up on it immediately.

“They’re all the same at the end of the day, Lilith,” he tried to convince me. “Just like we humans are all the same. We can try and deny it, but the truth is indisputable.”

I didn’t believe that. I was getting to know Adrian, and everything pointed in the opposite direction. We had so much in common, it turned out. He could understand my pain regarding the loss of my mother. Luke, with both of his parents still alive and well, could never. It was a pain he could never comprehend, but while Adrian was talking about what happened to his human parents, I could tell he understood. I could tell that he had been hurt in exactly the same way, and our hearts were the same like that.

But Luke could never understand. Maybe he was starting to see Adrian as a competitor. In a way, he was. He had stolen most of my thoughts. Even when I didn’t want to think about him, my mind always seemed to wander back to him, no matter what I did to prevent it. There was something about his moodiness, his mysterious life that I wanted to know more of.

“I’m comforted by the fact that as soon as we’re married, he will be gone,” Luke concluded, much to my dissatisfaction.

I hadn’t even thought about that. But he was right. The moment we were married, we wouldn’t live here anymore. Father had already bought a manor house for us, which had been renovated and remodeled, so that we would be able to move in there

immediately after the wedding.

The more I thought about it, the more I knew that I didn't want that. I still wasn't sure whether it was because of Adrian or if he was simply the catalyst to all of these emotions inside of me, awakening more and more of my need to rebel against those who wished to live my life instead of me.

I knew where my obligations were, but at the same time, I didn't feel like that required me to sacrifice my happiness. The two ideas clashed inside of me, creating a torrent of conflicting emotions, and I was leaning more and more towards my own happiness and less to the kingdom and my obligations as a princess.

But even with this, I still wasn't ready to speak to my father about it. Neither was I willing to discuss it with Luke further. He had shown me where he stood. That was enough for me to know everything.

"Let's just focus on you getting better first," I smiled, forcing myself to take him by the hand and squeeze it gently.

He smiled back, reassured by this gesture. "Everything will be alright, Lil. You'll see."

I inhaled deeply, nodding. "I'm sure it will," I agreed, mostly for the sake of agreeing. But it was painfully obvious that we didn't see eye to eye about this.

"I'll leave you to rest now," I told him, getting up.

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“What will you do?” he asked, somehow apprehensively. Was he wondering if I would be left alone with Adrian?

“I’ll go see what Cass is up to,” I shrugged. “We spent the afternoon in the attic yesterday.” The memory made me smile. I actually had more fun than I thought I would. Once again, Cass’ reasoning won me over.

“The attic?” he frowned. “Why would you spend the whole afternoon there?”

“For fun,” I explained, my cheerfulness returning at the thought of having another fun afternoon with Cass. This time, however, Adrian would be joining us, as per my father’s orders. That realization made me feel almost giddy. It was difficult to stifle that feeling. A part of me didn’t even want to, but I didn’t want to seem all that ecstatic in front of Luke, because then I would have to explain myself.

“Well, enjoy yourselves,” he told me with a still slightly awkward smile, but at least he wasn’t asking any more questions.

“We’ll come check on you a bit later,” I waved as I opened the door and let myself out.

As I thought, Adrian was there, leaning out through the window opposite the door. He turned around when he heard the door.

“Where to now?” he asked.

I inhaled with a smile. “The attic.”

Chapter Fourteen

Adrian

“Well, she won’t be joining us,” Lilith told me after she exited her sister’s room, several minutes later. “She says she’s got a bit of a headache and she wants to lie down a little.”

“Do you still want to go?” I asked. I couldn’t see the appeal in spending hours in a stuffy, dusty, cobweb infested attic.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Is that OK?”

I shrugged. “It’s your call.”

During the day, we could go out into the garden, but it seemed that she preferred nighttime for that. Or maybe it was the fact that it was forbidden which appealed to her so much. Whatever the reason, she didn’t want to go outside now. Instead, she wanted to go to the attic.

“Well, you have to be there with me,” she reminded me of something I already knew. “I don’t want to force you to do something you don’t want to do.”

I appreciated it, but I didn’t say it out loud. It was better to remain distant from her. I already shared the story of my parents, which was crossing the line of professionalism. I wasn’t supposed to have done that. But there was no use in crying over spilt milk. From here on, we had to remain on professional terms, without getting closer. I felt that spending the afternoon up in the attic, where one could find old, personal stuff was exactly the opposite of what I wanted to achieve here. But telling her no was something I couldn’t do and that wasn’t good.

“My job is to follow you where you go,” I reminded her as well. “So... lead the way.” I gestured at her with my hand.

She smiled, heading for the west wing of the castle. We walked silently, passing by several rushed servants. The entire castle was still in a high alert state, especially after we shared with the king that we were attacked last night.

Finally, we reached the entrance to the attic. We proceeded to lower the ladder, and she climbed first, then I followed. The quiet solitude of the attic felt comforting.

It was a repository of memories, a sanctuary for relics of bygone eras. Aged trunks, their leather weathered and cracked, lined the walls, holding secrets within their worn exteriors. The scent of aged paper and antique wood permeated the air, evoking a sense of nostalgia and stories untold. Dust particles danced in the streams of sunlight. Yellowed books stood upon sagging shelves, their spines cracked and pages tinged with age.

A collection of forgotten objects adorned the attic's nooks and crannies. Antique furniture, adorned with intricate carvings, whispered stories of gatherings and cherished moments. Vintage toys lay scattered across a weathered rocking chair, remnants of childhoods long gone. The attic's only inhabitants—moth-eaten stuffed animals and dusty porcelain dolls—presided over their kingdom of memories, their glassy eyes seemingly filled with longing.

Windows, adorned with tattered lace curtains, offered glimpses of the world beyond the attic's confines. Ivy tendrils climbed the glass, a testament to nature's relentless desire to reclaim the forgotten spaces of human existence. Time seemed suspended here, the walls around us resonating with the whispers of generations past. It was a place of silent musing, of comfort. It was a shelter. I could see now why she wanted to come back here.

I stood in the corner quietly, observing Lilith as she traversed this place, her delicate fingers lightly brushing against the forgotten artifacts. I could sense her curiosity, her yearning for something yet unknown, driving her to explore this place, when she could not explore the outside world.

Her steps were soft and deliberate, as if each movement held the weight of anticipation. She seemed to walk without touching the ground, her green dress trailing behind her. It hugged her curves perfectly, as she swayed through the curtain of dusty particles in the air. She examined the aged trunks, running her fingers along their weathered edges, as if seeking a clue to unravel a long-forgotten mystery.

At that moment, I longed to be that trunk, to feel her fingers on my body, and my own fingers on hers. Desire overtook me so suddenly, so unexpectedly that I was barely able to catch my breath. If I kissed her here, no one would hear us, no one would interrupt us. But I didn't dare do anything. We already crossed the line once. We couldn't afford another mistake. It might lead to disaster.

So, I just watched silently, as the sunlight caressed her face, casting a warm glow upon her features, accentuating the beauty of her eyes. Her gaze shifted from one object to another, her touch tracing the contours of antique furniture and lingering on faded photographs of people I doubted even she recognized. Each encounter seemed to evoke a subtle spark within her, a connection to the past that stirred her spirit.

At that moment, she gazed out of the dusty window, her voice filled with contemplation and wonder. "Isn't life strange?" she asked aloud, and I wasn't sure if she was asking me, or merely thinking to herself.

"Strange how?" I asked for clarification, although I could venture a good guess where she was heading with this.

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“Well, there is everything,” she turned to me now as she spoke. “There is joy and sorrow. There is love and loss. Sometimes, it feels overwhelming, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” I had to agree.

“I can’t even imagine what it must be like to exist on the thin margin between the two worlds,” she added.

“What two worlds?” I asked.

“Mine and yours,” she explained, her eyes softening with understanding.

I didn’t want to delve into this. I didn’t want to have any personal discussions, but she was drawing me in. Her eyes begged me to speak to her, to understand her, and I had to give in. No woman had ever thrilled me so much, and at the same time, frightened me with her beauty, her mind and her passion for life.

I knew that she belonged to someone else. I stole her for that one precious moment, when she belonged to me. But we were back to reality now. We had to abide by the rules that surrounded us. And that meant we needed to pretend that nothing happened.

“You get used to it,” I finally gave an answer to her question.

“Do you really?” she asked again, tilting her head a little, as if to take a better look at me.

Her question caught me off guard. I wasn’t expecting it. “Sometimes it’s easier,

sometimes less,” I replied.

“You know, I also feel like I’m between somehow,” she revealed with a sigh.

“What do you mean?”

Her steps grew slower as she neared me, her expression tinged with vulnerability. She spoke as if she had been burdened by this for a very long time.

“Being the princess isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be,” she smiled a little awkwardly, but that was only to mask the discomfort that came with revealing something as personal as this. “There are so many expectations, responsibilities that I can’t escape. I’m bound by the obligations to my kingdom, which are preventing me from living my life the way I truly want to. It’s suffocating at times, and it feels like I can’t be fully anything. Notfully myself, not fully a princess, because the other side is always pulling me, threatening to tear me in two.”

I was surprised how accurately she had described this state of mind. “I know that feeling. But that’s just it. It’s not only a feeling but also a burden.”

She nodded. “I never asked for this role. I was born into it, just like you were born a vampire, but a human family found you. Fate decided that for us. We had no choice in it. Sometimes, I feel trapped, like my own desires and dreams are overshadowed by what is expected of me. I want to be free, to live a life that is truly my own.”

I could understand every single word of that. The complexities of her life were almost like my own, with the same limitations, the same incapability of leading your own life the way you wanted it to be.

“Even this marriage...” she started, but she didn’t finish.

I waited for her to continue, but there was only silence. Whatever it was she wanted to say, she had changed her mind about it.

“What about this marriage?” I echoed.

I wanted to know. Curiosity was eating me up alive. I didn’t even know what I wanted her to say.

“Nothing,” she waved her hand dismissively.

I wanted to hear her say that this marriage wasn’t what she wanted, but no such words came from her.

“I suppose everyone has those premarital jitters,” she smiled nervously, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Then suddenly, she seemed to find something of interest. She bent down and picked up something from the lowest row on a wall mounted shelf.

It was a music box. That much was obvious from the moment she opened it with trembling hands and delicate gears sprang to life. The first notes began to play, and I could see a tearroll down her face. The soft melody continued to play even when I approached her and wrapped my arms around her. That was the only thing I wanted to do right now.

There was no more sense of right or wrong. There was only what I wanted to do, as the music enveloped the attic, filling the space with a bittersweet melody that seemed to transcend time and space. Lilith pressed her head to my shoulder. She didn’t sob. She barely moved. But I could feel her tears through my shirt, moistening it. I didn’t mind. All I cared about was having her in my arms in this tender moment.

As the final notes faded into the air, she closed the music box with a sense of

reverence. She lifted her head and looked up at me. Unable to resist the temptation to do so, I gently wiped a leftover tear from her cheek.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice down to a whisper. “This music box... it is a precious piece of my past. It belonged to my mother. It always rested on her vanity table. She would play it for us whenever we asked her to, explaining that it used to belong to her own mother. I think I needed this reminder of who I am and where I come from.”

I swallowed heavily, as she gazed into my eyes. Our bodies were still pressed together, hearts beating fast. An invisible force drew me closer to her, and I couldn't stop myself. Our lips met, gently at first. There was a faint taste of saltiness on hers. It was a tender moment, where we allowed the other to find solace. It was as if this moment transcended the physical realm, our destinies forever intertwined, no matter what happened afterwards.

I didn't want to let go. I also didn't want this to lead anywhere. There was no raw passion, no animal magnetism like the previous time. This was much deeper, much more intimate, and that frightened me.

“Lil?”

Her sister’s voice coming from downstairs broke the magic of the moment, and we immediately pulled apart. Still, we remained locked in a gaze that held unspoken promises, which we dared not say out loud. I nodded, and she smiled.

“We’re up here!” she shouted, her voice reverberating throughout the attic, when the door opened, releasing a stream of light, and the ladder slid downward.

“I couldn’t resist coming up here with you,” Cassandra said as soon as she climbed up. She looked at us both, then wondered aloud. “Am I interrupting something?”

Chapter Fifteen

Lilith

“So, I did interrupt something!” Cass exclaimed loudly that evening, when we were getting ready for bed. I was combing her hair, as she was seated at our mother’s vanity table, our eyes locked from the reflection in the mirror.

Father had instructed us both to sleep together, for safety, with Adrian still sleeping in the room next door. He was not supposed to leave my side during the day, but it would be highly inappropriate for him to sleep in the same room as us, so the second-best option was for him to sleep in the same room as before, with his door open, so he could hear us calling for help if need be.

“Well, yeah,” I said, not sure whether I should tell her, but I couldn’t keep this to

myself, especially after I'd already told her about us having slept together. "We just kissed. But..."

"But?" Cass' eyes gleamed.

"But it was different somehow," I admitted, my heart fluttering with uncertainty. This kiss had left me in a whirlwind of emotions, and I needed to tell her everything. "It stirred something within me, something that I can't ignore. I... I think I'm falling for him, and I don't know what to do."

Cass listened intently, her eyes shining with understanding and curiosity. She reached out to hold my hand, offering her support, just like I knew she would.

"I know you must feel very conflicted," she said tenderly, seemingly pondering about the whole thing. "I know you wouldn't say this unless this truly meant something for you. Honestly, I thought you slept with him just because you wanted to experience something adventurous, which I completely understand. You are to get married very soon, and this must feel strange and frightening. But now, it seems to me that it isn't just a fling, and that maybe, just maybe you two are both developing emotions for each other."

I inhaled deeply, raking my fingers through my hair nervously. "I never expected to feel this way. I know what my obligations are to Father, to Luke, to the kingdom, but—"

"What about your obligations to yourself?" Cass interrupted me exactly with the question that had been giving me such a headache all this time.

"Father expects me to go through with this marriage, although I've told him that I will never be able to look at Luke as anything other than a friend," I explained.

Cass thought about it for a moment, then continued. “Honestly, I always thought that as the older sister, I would bear that burden. But it seemed that you and Luke were... well, a better suited couple?”

She said it in a way that left me wondering how she truly felt about all this. But I didn’t want to question her about anything, unless she herself was willing to start talking.

“Do you want to marry Luke?” she asked me directly.

Immediately, I felt the weight of all the choices that were laid out before me. I could see the long-term consequences that were bound to follow. I could see everything that could go wrong, all the people that would be hurt, directly or indirectly by my refusal to go along with this marriage. On the other hand, there was me and Adrian. And I wasn’t even sure how he felt about me. Maybe this was just a bit of an amusement to him. He never struck me as that sort of a person, but sometimes, your impressions of someone were not true.

“No,” I finally told her how I truly felt.

To my surprise, she smiled at this. “That is great news!”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She cleared her throat a little before continuing. “Well, I meant it is great that you know how you feel. Because... well, what you’re going through is confusing, and I’m glad to hear that you don’t want to marry him.”

“Now, it is me who’s confused,” I admitted. “Why would that be great news when there’s nothing I can do to change it?”

“You could talk to Luke about it, and—”

“I’ve already tried speaking to him, telling him that maybe this wasn’t a good idea. I didn’t mention Adrian, of course.”

Cass’ eyes widened in shock at hearing this. “What did he say to that?”

“He tried to convince me to keep things as they are,” I told her. “I agreed, but... I’m still thinking, trying to decide what to do.”

“I’m sure he is doing the same thing,” she assured me. “Ending things so abruptly would probably be a shock to everyone, especially Father. It could be that Luke feels the same way but is trying to find the right way to end everything.”

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“I don’t know,” I sighed heavily. “All I know is that I have to make a decision, but I’m afraid of the consequences. I am afraid of saying no to Father, when I have already agreed to all this. Backing out on this marriage means offending Luke’s family, and all the connections we would be creating would be non-existent then. Or even worse, by refusing to marry Luke now, I might be creating enemies for our kingdom, which we definitely don’t need. On the other hand, if I do marry him, I fear that I might be unhappy for the rest of my life, because I know that I can’t love him as a man. I love him as a friend, but that is all. And I will be expected to provide an heir for the family line. I... I can’t imagine sleeping with him, Cass. I just can’t.”

Cass leaned closer to me, wrapping her arms around me. “Don’t worry, Lil. We’ll find a way to sort out this mess. I promise you.”

“How can you promise me that?” I asked, fighting back the tears.

“Because you never know what waits for you just around the corner,” she told me with a mysterious smile. “See, just like me. I had no idea that I would find a kindred spirit without needing to venture too far away.”

I felt stunned as I absorbed the revelation that Cass had a secret boyfriend. At first, I felt as if the ability to speak had been stolen from me. All I could do was gasp silently, while she kept looking at me with that same look of mischievousness and mystery.

“How long has this been going on?” I demanded to know, once the power of speech had been magically returned to me. “And more importantly, why haven’t you told me?”

Cass was still smiling, although the tone of her voice was apologetic now. “This is something I’ve kept hidden for a while now, but please understand that there is a very good reason for it. I promise that, in due time, I will share everything with you. It is just not the right moment yet.”

I couldn’t understand any of this. I told her about having sex with Adrian almost the moment it happened. And now that we kissed again, I ran to her for advice, only to find out that she had a secret of her own, which she decided to divulge only now and only partly, leaving the most important piece of the puzzle still an enigma. This didn’t sound like her at all. Was she so in love with this mystery man?

Man...

The word exploded inside my mind. Maybe that was why she didn’t mention him, because he wasn’t a man at all, but rather a vampire? Was she in love with a vampire? If that was true, which I couldn’t see how, where on earth did she meet him, when she spent most of her time inside the castle?

I didn’t like the sound of this. I didn’t like it at all. My brows furrowed with a blend of confusion and intrigue. “Cass, you know you can trust me. We’ve always been not only sisters, but also best friends. Why the secrecy?”

Cass smiled at me reassuringly, her eyes filled with warmth and affection. It was impossible to be upset with her for anything.

“You know that your support means the world to me, my dearest sister. But there are... well, some circumstances surrounding my situation that need to be worked through. I need a little more time to ensure that everything is truly as I think it is before I share this news with anyone.”

She had never been this mysterious about anything before. That was how I knew that

this was very important to her. My expression softened immediately.

“I want you to be happy, Cass,” I agreed, much to her delight. “If you feel that this secrecy is necessary for you now, I’ll respect that. Just remember that I am here for you whenever you decide you’re ready to share this with me.”

Cass nodded appreciatively, a mix of relief and gratitude evident on her face. “Thank you. Your understanding means more to me than you can imagine. Rest assured, when the time is right, I will share everything with you. Until then, just please be by my side, no matter what.”

“Always,” I smiled back, squeezing her hand. “There is nothing you could do that would push me away. Always remember that.”

With these words, we fell into each other’s arms. As I embraced her, that same inflamed curiosity gnawed at me. The identity of Cass’ boyfriend was something I was adamant to find out, sooner rather than later. However, at the same time, I knew that with Cass, it was about patience and trust. She never kept anything from me, and I doubted that she would keep this from me much longer. Everything would be revealed at one point, but until then, I wanted her to know that she could trust me.

“You know,” she suddenly said, pulling away from me. “I think that somehow, some way, things will be alright in the end. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Your old, wise bones?” I teased her, and it felt so good to be carefree once again, even for one precious moment.

“Joke all you want,” she said playfully, “but you’ll see.”

I sighed, still with that amusement in me. “I wish I could be as positive as you.”

“You can,” she assured me. “Just stop being so serious about everything. You seem to think that the weight of the world is upon your back, but it’s not, Lil. The world won’t come crumbling down if you tell Father that you changed your mind about marrying Luke. Who knows, maybe there is another option out there.”

“What other option?” I wondered what she was talking about.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “I just know that when a door closes, a window is always left open. You just can’t see it yet, because you are too focused banging on the door.”

I chuckled. “You always had nice metaphors.”

“I like to paint a picture,” she laughed. “But seriously. If you think that Adrian might be your chance at true love, don’t waste it.”

I shook my head. “I haven’t even mentioned love.”

“You didn’t have to,” she gushed. “I can see it in your eyes when you talk about him. You can’t hide it.”

“Seriously?” I rolled my eyes helplessly. “Is it that bad?”

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She laughed again, with much more glee than before. “It’s worse than you think.”

“Oh, crap!”

My comment made us both laugh loudly, as the room echoed with the sound. Maybe she was right. At that moment, I didn’t care. All I cared about was enjoying the present moment with my sister. As for the future, I would cross that bridge when I got to it.

Chapter Sixteen

Adrian

“What is it you require of me?” I asked, the next time I found myself in the king’s study. It was still early in the evening, but most of the castle had already retired to their rooms, which was why I was surprised when he called for me at this hour.

His stern expression only seemed to tighten, his voice ringing with concern. “I have contacts in a nearby village, a small community of vampires who have been loyal allies to our kingdom. I believe they may have knowledge that might shed some light on what has been going on around here. It would be best to seek their guidance.”

“You wish me to go to them?” I needed clarification.

“Yes,” he nodded simply.

“But what about Lilith?” I wondered.

The king walked over to me, placing a hand on my shoulder, which served two purposes. It conveyed not only the trust he placed in me, but also the weight of my responsibility towards not only him and Lilith, but also his kingdom.

“Adrian, you have become an integral part of our plans. Your unique capabilities and perspective have been of great value to us. While I do not like the fact of sending you away, I fear there is no one whose presence in that village would not raise suspicion, if caught or seen by other vampires who might also be present there. It has to be you.”

He walked back to his desk and extracted a small envelope from the drawer. There, right in the middle, the red wax carried his royal seal.

“Take this letter. It will serve as a symbol of our alliance, and it will ensure a warm welcome from our vampire allies. Seek their guidance. See what they know. Strengthen us for the challenges that lie ahead. My trust rests upon your shoulders.”

I accepted the letter, folding it and then, concealing it in my pocket, for safekeeping. It seemed that I was being sent on a new mission, away from Lilith.

“Take one of the horses from the stables,” he continued. “The village is only a two-hour horseback ride, if you head east, in the direction of the mountain. You can’t miss it. There, you will ask for Florian. He is their leader, and a long-time friend of mine. If they know anything, Florian will let you know. But make sure you don’t lose that letter. Without it, you cannot prove your alliance with me.”

The envelope in my pocket felt heavier than anything else I had ever carried. I nodded in agreement. “As you wish, Your Highness. I will go forth and see what they know.”

“I expect you back by the morn,” the king pointed out. “I hope you will have good

news to bring back.”

“I will be here,” I confirmed, strangely emboldened by this new mission I’d been given.

About half an hour later, I was already prepared for the journey ahead. I mounted a sturdy looking horse, feeling the rhythmic movement beneath me as we set off towards the village. The wind whispered through the trees, carrying a sense of anticipation and uncertainty.

The journey took me through dense forests and winding paths, as the horse’ hooves thudded against the earth. My thoughts raced far ahead of me. All I could see was Lilith’s smile. I hoped that she would be alright, but the king must have taken care of that already.

The landscape unfolded before me, a patchwork of vibrant colors and hidden mysteries that awaited me at the village. Towering trees loomed on both sides, their branches reaching out like skeletal fingers. Sunlight dappled the forest floor, while the shadows danced around me, beckoning me to join them. There was tension in the air as the path led me to the village.

There, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. Eyes followed my every move, curiosity mingled with caution. The villagers all seemed to be minding their own business on the surface, but they moved with an eerie grace, their very movements hinting at their otherworldly nature.

I slowly made my way to the village center, where the buildings were already cloaked in darkness. Only the flickering lamplight cast eerie shadows on the cobblestone streets, which only seemed to heightened my sense of unease.

I didn’t like coming to new places alone, without any backup. Vampire or not, we

were a mistrustful sort, and for a good reason. Right there, in the village square, I noticed a shadowy figure lingering, without really doing anything in particular. For a moment, I thought the figure was staring right at me. I knew that approaching him directly would be the right way to go.

I descended from my horse and tied it to a nearby tree. This proved to them that I had no desire to do anything that would require a hasty getaway. At least, I hoped that was the message I left. I walked confidently, still with all those eyes on me. I heard a few whispers, brought on by the wind. I didn't even bother to try and decipher them. That didn't matter right now.

As soon as I approached the figure, he lowered his hood. His eyes were of different colors, one was a striking blue, as clear as the summer sky, while the other seemed to be pitch black. I wondered if the blue one was blind.

"I come seeking Florian," I said with a voice that conveyed urgency and determination. I pushed my apprehension all the way down to my heels.

The vampire regarded me with those piercing eyes, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "What do you seek?" he asked me.

"That is for Florian's ears alone," I refused to divulge anything more.

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He seemed to hesitate for a moment, then his nostrils flared. I could always tell when another vampire was sniffing out the terrain, and that was exactly what he was doing now. He was trying to see whether I was one of them or some very stupid human who thought it was a good idea to stumble into a vampire village in the middle of the night.

“Follow me,” he finally said, and I did exactly as I was told.

He led me through a labyrinthine network of small alleyways, as the sound of our footsteps echoed ominously. He was taking me deeper into the very heart of the village, and again, as we were passing by, it seemed that the newcomer had caught everyone’s attention. My senses heightened, aware that every turn held the potential for betrayal or revelation. I couldn’t lower my guard even for a single second.

Ultimately, we arrived at a secluded house. My guide went in first. He didn’t even turn around to see whether I was following him. The wooden door groaned as it swung open, allowing me inside. Shadows danced across the walls, giving the room an air of clandestine meetings and hidden agendas. This was where all the secrets of the village and beyond were being spilled. I was sure I was in the right place. But whether I would get the right information, the information I had come for, was still left to be seen.

“Do you come seeking secrets or sharing them?” A voice spoke from somewhere behind me, making me instantly jittery. I tried to calm my racing heart down.

I turned to him without responding. As soon as I saw him, I knew that was the man I was looking for. His presence commanded attention. With his enigmatic aura, he

exuded an air of mystery, as his eyes glinted with countless untold stories. Our gazes locked. I could immediately see a tinge of skepticism.

“You are a very brave... creature,” Florian said, his deep dark eyes glistening, as the light from dozens of candles spilled all around us. His eyes were the very proof of the depths of his knowledge. His very presence radiated an unsettling charm, and I knew that he didn’t trust me. Just because there seemed to be only the three of us here, I knew that within seconds, more of them would appear, if he thought I was a threat.

I took a step towards him, my hand reaching into my pocket.

“Careful!” He pointed his index finger at me, and at that moment, I felt a cold blade pressed to my throat. My guide was already behind me, ready to slit my throat on Florian’s command.

I swallowed heavily, trying to control my Adam’s apple, but it still grazed against the blade of the knife.

“I have a letter from King Theodore,” I said.

Florian immediately reacted to the king’s name. He nodded, and the blade was removed, although I knew it wasn’t far away. I took out the letter and held it out to Florian. He took it without any words. He inspected the seal first. Once he was satisfied with it, he tore the envelope open and skimmed through the words inside.

The atmosphere immediately shifted. His features softened, suspicion giving way to a glimmer of understanding. The lines of tension eased from his face. The entire room seemed to unwind as he nodded.

“The king’s seal,” he told me. “You have my attention, stranger.”

“The king sends me asking for advice and help,” I told him.

Florian’s gaze bore into me, his voice a mere whisper in the dimly lit room. “You come at a precarious time. There is a scheme to overthrow the king, but the details remain shrouded in darkness. I’ve heard rumors. I’ve caught whispers in the night, but I cannot claim to know much. Otherwise, I would have already spoken to the king about it.”

My heart quickened with a mix of concern and determination. The weight of the kingdom’s stability rested on the king himself. Of course, the king was already aware that there was something happening. There was a conspiracy afoot. That much was evident.

“Any information you have, no matter how small, could be crucial,” I urged. “Lives are at stake.”

Florian’s eyes flickered with a mix of uncertainty and intrigue. The darkness seemed to coil around him, emphasizing his enigmatic presence. He paused for a moment, contemplating his words, before speaking again.

“I’ve heard whispers of hidden alliances, shadowy figures with their own agendas. But to unravel this intricate web, we need more than whispers. We need names, connections, proof.”

“Where do I get these?” I asked, determined to go to the ends of the world to protect Lilith, and with her, the entire kingdom.

“There is a witch, rumored to possess knowledge that could shed light on the conspiracy,” he told me. “She sees things others cannot. She dwells deep inside the Frozen Forest up in the mountains. Her cottage is secluded and elusive. If anyone has answers the king is looking for, it is her.”

I thought about it for a moment. “Evangeline?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

I’d heard tales of her abilities, but I also knew that she refused to talk to just anyone.

“Finding her, or speaking to her for that matter, won’t be an easy task, for sure,” I pointed out.

He agreed immediately. “Locating her will be a challenge. She hides her presence well, protected by her magic and a network of loyal followers. But fear not. I can help you there.” He reached around his neck and took off a chain that revealed a moon pendant. “Here,” he told me, urging me to take the necklace. “She is a Moon Witch, just like my mother was. And there are only about twenty of these necklaces left in existence. They possess a rare power, one that is useless to anyone but a witch. I kept it as a memento from my mother, but if it will help King Theodore, I will gladly part with it.”

I nodded, fueled by the newfound direction. “The king will be very grateful, I’m sure.”

He smiled. “As was I when he saved my life. There is no need for his gratitude. He is my brother, always.”

Listening to someone like Florian speak about a human in this way surprised me. I had met many humans and vampires who considered each other friends, but rarely were they so close. It gave me hope that maybe, just maybe, we could all coexist together.

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“But be careful,” he advised. “The darkness you seek to unravel runs deep. If Constantine is involved in this, as I fear he is, your path is treacherous. Trust few, question everything and always stay one step ahead.”

I nodded gratefully, thanking him. As I left the house, I felt ready to face the unknown, not just for the king and the kingdom, but for her.

Chapter Seventeen

Lilith

“Why on earth are you asking me that now?” Father wondered, with a raised eyebrow, as we sat in his study, at his mahogany desk. As a child, I was always in awe of how humongous it was, how looming Father was seated at it. But now, it was just a desk, and my father, just a man, with his own fears, doubts and suspicions that made him painfully human.

There were many reasons behind my question, but the most important one was of course him. I wanted to know everything there was to know about vampires. But I didn’t want to be told for the millionth time that they were dangerous, bloodsucking creatures of the night. I wanted to know about the vampires in between, the ones who wanted to fight for the same peace as us.

But I couldn’t very well tell my father this. How could I admit to him that I had fallen in love with my bodyguard, who was a vampire?

Cass is right, I thought to myself with a frown. But even that didn’t matter now.

“Well, look around, Father,” I gestured around his study with my arms, but he knew exactly what I was referring to. “It is obvious that we’re all in danger, and the more we know about our enemies, the better.”

Father regarded me, his gaze filled with both admiration and caution. “It is important to note that not all of them are our enemies,” he pointed out.

“That is exactly why I need clarification. I yearn to understand this world that we’re not a part of.”

“That is a dangerous wish, Lilith,” he urged. “But I suppose I should have known that this day would come. That is why I’ve tried to tell you a part of it, the part that would advise you to err on the side of caution. Hopefully, I’ve managed to do that.”

“You have,” I confirmed. “And Adrian has told me a little bit about vampires like him.”

“He has?” he asked, apprehension etched all over his face.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I just... find it so incredible that they have coexisted with our realm, and I’ve been kept almost unaware of their existence, until now, that is.”

Father’s gaze softened as he spoke. “Your dear mother and I agreed that the world of vampires was not something we wanted to expose you to. It was not necessary. It would only raise questions and concerns. But now, you are a grown up, about to leave the nest and forge a life of your own. I suppose it is only natural that you want to know more about the world around you, especially that world.”

“Tell me more, Father,” I pleaded.

He inhaled, leaning deeply into his leather chair. “Well, you already know a lot about

it. Vampires possess incredible strength, heightened senses, and a longevity that surpasses mortal life. They operate within an intricate network of alliances, affecting our kingdom in ways we cannot comprehend. As for your unawareness, it was a choice made to protect you from the complexities and temptations of their world. We wanted you to grow and understand our realm fully before delving into theirs.”

He was right. This was all already familiar to me. I was hoping to find out more, especially about vampires like Adrian, but I didn’t want to be too transparent.

“I understand why you wanted to keep this knowledge a secret from me and Cass, Father. I really do. But now, as events unfold, I believe it is time for both me and Cass to learn all there is to know about this world and the knowledge it holds. That is the only way we can keep our kingdom safe, once you are... well, too feeble to do it on your own.”

I feared that I somehow insulted him with the truth, but he smiled instead. “It is comforting to know that I will be leaving the kingdom in the hands of two capable young women. I want you to know that I admire your courage and your thirst for knowledge.”

“Thank you, Father,” I gushed, feeling overwhelmed by a sudden onslaught of emotion that washed over me. “I also—” I started, but I wasn’t allowed to continue, because there was a loud knock on the door.

“Yes?” Father called out, and immediately the door opened to welcome Adrian.

I had been wondering where he was, since I peeked into his room the previous night, and he wasn’t there. Instead, two guards were placed in front of the room I shared with Cass, and they watched over us. For a moment, I feared that Father had fired Adrian, but I immediately convinced myself that such a thing wasn’t possible. I fell asleep with that fear, and it was partly that fear which drove me to his study early in

the morning. Now, Adrian was here and finally, all was right with the world.

“Your Highness,” Adrian spoke, bowing respectfully before my father.

Father turned to me. “Will you excuse us, Lilith? There are matters that require Adrian’s confidential report.”

His tone was firm, but I still spoke back. I wanted to find out where Adrian went and why. Whatever it was he had to share with Father, it was important. I wanted to be a part of this conversation that would determine what our plan for the future would be.

“Father, please,” I urged. “I implore you to let me stay. I am involved in all of this, whether you like it or not. It is better for me to be informed of everything than kept in the dark, as I’ve been so far.”

Father hesitated, his gaze shifting between me and Adrian, who refused to say anything. It took Father a moment of consideration, after which he nodded and sighed heavily.

“Very well, Lilith,” he told me. “Your presence will be allowed, but remember, the weight of the decisions we make rests upon us all,” he conceded, his tone both stern and understanding at the same time.

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I smiled at him in a silent expression of gratitude, waiting for Adrian to reveal his findings. Once he was certain that it was his turn, Adrian took a deep breath, only adding to the gravity of the moment. He recounted what had happened when he went to the vampire village, how his conversation with Florian went and how he was directed to go and see the witch, Evangeline.

“I was told that our path lies with Evangeline the witch,” he concluded. Just from the way he said her name, I knew that she was important.

“I know of her,” Father mused, gripping at his beard as he got lost in thought. “But she is a very elusive creature. I don’t know any human who has managed to gain audience with her, even if they did manage to locate her.”

“That is why you shouldn’t send a human to her,” Adrian pointed out. We all knew where this was heading. “I will go.”

Before Father could say anything to that, I interjected. “I will go with him.”

Both Father and Adrian turned to me, stunned by my words.

“You will do no such thing!” Father thundered as soon as the words settled in.

Adrian didn’t say anything, but from the look on his face, I could tell that he was of the same belief.

“I could help,” I said.

It was then that Adrian shook his head. “She doesn’t trust humans. Actually, she doesn’t trust anyone, whatever they are, but humans are her least favorite. Taking you with me would only diminish the chances of finding out what we need to know.”

From that perspective, he was right. But the thought of him going alone frightened me. What if something happened to him? What if he was ambushed? What if he was hurt, or even worse, dying? What if he never returned from this quest?

There were so many questions swarming inside my mind, questions which I dared not say out loud, because I knew he was right. It was best for him to go alone, and yet, every fiber of my being screamed against it.

“Lilith, it is out of the question,” Father said again, as if to solidify the decision he had already made.

“Your father is right,” Adrian nodded. “It is not safe.”

I knew they were right, but it was difficult to agree. My silence spoke enough, so the two of them continued, arranging this journey which was to take place as soon as the following morning. I remained with them, listening intently to everything. After their conversation seemed to have been brought to an end, both Adrian and I were dismissed. Once in the hallway, he turned to me, as if sensing the turmoil inside of me.

“Everything will be fine,” he told me in a way as if he wasn’t used to saying such things.

To be quite honest, I never took him for the guy who would comfort others. No. He was the one who acted when no one else wanted to act, therefore saving everyone. That was what I felt he was doing right now.

“Is she dangerous?” I asked.

“The witch?” he echoed. I just nodded. “It’s not the witch who is dangerous, but rather the journey there. And she might not even want to speak to me. But she will when I show her this.”

He extracted something from his pocket and showed it to me. It was a necklace with a moon pendant.

“She is a Moon Witch,” he explained. “I was given this by Florian, your father’s vampire ally, and I was told that this would be my ticket to her. This is how she will know that I am a friend.”

I still wasn’t convinced. I wanted him to stay here in the castle and do the job that he was hired for, which was to keep me safe. Not start a journey that would lead him away from the castle, and ultimately, away from me. Only, I couldn’t say any of this out loud. So, I just nodded.

“I’ll be back, don’t worry,” he added. “I’ve never left a job half-finished. I will see to it that your wedding day goes uninterrupted.”

My heart was beating inside my throat, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe. I wanted to tell him everything right then and there. I felt like I owed it to him, to myself, and I didn’t care about any of the repercussions that might follow. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Instead, I nodded again, as if I had been stripped of the ability to speak.

“I will go to the library,” I told him. “I need some peace and quiet. You don’t have to follow me.”

The truth was I wanted to be alone.

“I will sit with you,” he said. “In peace and quiet. I could use some myself.”

His words made my heart flutter with unsaid hope. We walked to the library silently, without any further words being exchanged. There, we both settled into a secluded corner, surrounded by shelves laden with books. Silence draped over us like a comfortable veil, our minds lost in the labyrinth of our own thoughts.

We sat side by side, each immersed in our own contemplation, yet acutely aware of the presence of the other, just like I knew I would acutely feel his absence when he left the following morning.

Chapter Eighteen

Adrian

I mounted my trusted steed, the tension coiling within me as I prepared for the daring ride ahead. The wind whispered through my hair, carrying with it a sense of urgency and purpose. With a resolute heart, I urged the horse forward, setting off towards the witch's cottage nestled high in the rugged mountains.

The path unfurled before us, a labyrinth of winding trails and treacherous terrain. Yet, with each stride of the horse, my determination grew stronger, propelling me forward through the challenges that lay in wait. The rhythmic pounding of hooves against the earth echoed the pounding in my chest, a fierce determination pushing me ever closer to my goal, which was to find the witch and see what she knew. She was the only one who was able to provide me with the right information to keep Lilith safe, which was all that mattered.

As we ascended higher into the mountains, the air grew cooler, invigorating my senses. The scent of pine mingled with the adrenaline that surged through my veins, heightening my awareness of the task that awaited me. The panoramic view of majestic peaks and sprawling valleys served as a constant reminder of the formidable power of nature and the magnitude of the mission at hand.

Finally, the witch's secluded cottage came into view. Perched on the edge of a precipice, it stood as a bastion of mystery and ancient wisdom. The smoke that billowed from the chimney carried with it the fragrance of herbs and enchantments, a potent blend that filled me with a sense of anticipation.

I knew I had to be careful. There was danger everywhere I turned. I couldn't let my guard down, even for a single second, especially here.

I dismounted my steed, my footsteps measured as I approached the wooden door. With a steady hand, I rapped my knuckles against the timeworn surface, the sound reverberating through the silence of the mountains. A moment later, the door creaked open, revealing a visage weathered by time and the secrets of her craft.

The witch's eyes, sharp and penetrating, met mine, as if she had already glimpsed the purpose that brought me to her threshold. Her voice, like a whisper carried by the wind, cut through the stillness.

"You have exactly three seconds to state your business here," she told me in a raspy voice.

"I seek your guidance," I told her with as much reverence as I could muster. "Florian sends me on behalf of King Theodore."

"The human king?" she frowned, as if she just ate something disgusting. "I have no business with humans."

She started to close the door, but I slid my boot between the door and the doorway, blocking her from closing it. I knew this was a risky move, but if those doors closed on me, I knew there would be no chance of having them opened again. Her shocked gaze bore into me, as if she could read the very depths of my soul.

"Please, let me show you something," I urged, not wanting to shove my hand into my pocket too swiftly, for fear of her thinking I might be drawing out a weapon.

She didn't say anything to that. And the door remained as it was, with my boot in between. I took this as a good sign.

I reached into my pocket slowly, my fingers closing around the pendant. The necklace glimmered in the dim light, its silver surface reflecting the truth I carried with me.

“A sign of Florian’s trust,” I spoke, my voice steady, as I revealed the pendant, allowing it to dangle from my fingertips.

The witch's eyes flickered with recognition, her skepticism giving way to a cautious curiosity. She leaned forward, her gaze fixed upon the pendant, examining the intricate details that adorned its surface. The moon, a symbol of power and mystique, held within it the essence of Florian’s influence.

With a slow nod, the witch acknowledged the proof I presented. “Very well,” she conceded, her voice laced with newfound trust. “You carry Florian’s mark, whose mother was a Moon Witch, like me, and for that, you shall be granted entry.”

She opened the door, but first, stood in the doorway. “But don’t think this gives you the right to think that I am your servant now. You have merely been granted audience with me. Nothing more. I will hear you out, but I am in no obligation to help you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

At that moment, the path to her hut was finally opened to me, when she stepped to the side. I entered, and immediately, a world of ancient knowledge and hidden enchantments awaited within. I stepped forward, gratitude swelling within my chest for Florian’s foresight in providing me with this token of trust. Otherwise, I would not have entered this sacred place.

As I crossed the threshold, the witch’s presence enveloped me like a cloak of intrigue and ancient wisdom. The air crackled with anticipation, the scent of mystical herbs

mingling with the promise of revelations yet to come. I had earned her trust, but the true tests lay ahead, as we delved deeper into the secrets that held the key to the vampires' plan.

“What is it you seek of me?” she asked, once we were both seated by the crackling fire.

“I seek your knowledge of Constantine's plan to overthrow King Theodore and harm his daughters. How does he intend to achieve this?”

The witch regarded me with a piercing gaze, her eyes gleaming with ancient wisdom. She remained silent for a moment, seemingly weighing her decision, before finally speaking, her voice laced with an air of mystery.

“Knowledge is a delicate gift, and its revelation comes at a price,” she replied cryptically. “Yet, your pendant, a symbol of trust, convinces me of your sincerity. I shall share what I know.”

My heart was beating wildly. I couldn't believe that this was happening. Not in a million years did I think that I would be here, seated by the side of Evangeline the Witch, hearing what she had to say, and having the privilege of her company.

“Constantine is cautious and determined,” she started. “That makes for a very dangerous enemy, because he is not a hasty man. Because of his patience, he has cultivated a network of discontent, sowing seeds of doubt and strife among the people and vampires alike, so he could bring them together under his own rule. There are even humans who have become his allies, just like there are vampires who have allied with King Theodore.”

Upon those words, she looked at me. I knew she was referring to me, I just didn't know if that was an insult or a compliment. From what I could gather, Evangeline

wasn't on anyone's side. She was on her own side.

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“When he strikes, he strikes deep,” she continued. “He will attack from the inside. He always has someone he can rely on. So be mindful of those around you.”

My mind raced, absorbing every detail, as I listened intently to the witch’s words. I knew that understanding the breadth of Constantine’s plan was crucial if we were to counter his insidious designs and protect the kingdom.

“You must act swiftly,” the witch advised, her voice carrying a note of urgency. “Unravel the threads of Constantine’s web, expose the alliances he has forged, and unite those who still stand loyal to King Theodore. Only then can you thwart his treacherous plot.”

“Are there any words of wisdom you can give me, to show me the direction in which I am to be headed?” I asked, hopeful that she might give me something more than what I already knew.

“I will lend you my wisdom and my spells,” she assured me. “But first, I must consult with the spirits of Nature. They see all. They know all. Once I have done that, I will have more for you, and I will be able to help you forge a shield of light against Constantine’s ambitions.”

I smiled, nodding. That sounded promising, although I was hoping that I would return to the king with something more tangible. I supposed that this would have to do for the time being. Fortunately, her cottage wasn’t too far away, so I would be back by the end of the day. Obviously, I would need to return again soon, to see what she had found out in the meantime.

“Thank you,” I said, grateful for everything, knowing that I could have been greeted with a door slammed in my face, which would have forced me to return to the king with empty hands.

“Come back in several days,” she told me. “I will have something for you.”

“I will do so,” I nodded, as I stood up, bowing my head respectfully.

She didn’t walk me to the door. Not that I expected anything like that. As I mounted my horse, Constantine’s plot to overthrow King Theodore had not taken clarity, as I hoped it would. But I had found hope and a new ally. A very powerful one at that.

As I headed back to the castle, it was slowly beginning to darken. Suddenly, a shiver traced its way down my spine, the air thick with the unspoken tension that lurked in the shadows. Every rustle of leaves and snap of twigs underneath my horse’s hooves echoed with a sinister undertone. I knew that this was vampire territory, I just wasn’t sure whether these were the peace-abiding vampires, or the ones Constantine had under his reign. To be honest, I didn’t want to stick around and find out.

I quickened the horse’s pace, as a chilling breeze started to whisper through the trees. The night was looming above me. It seemed to conspire against me, the very darkness itself closing in, threatening to engulf me whole. Yet, a flicker of determination burned within me, fueling my resolve to return to the castle because I knew that Lilith was waiting for me.

My thoughts raced, navigating the labyrinth of possibilities and potential traps that lay in wait. Each shadow that danced along the path seemed to conceal a lurking danger, every creak and groan of the night filled me with a heightened sense of peril. I felt as if I was being watched from the shadows of the night, and no matter how quickly my horse was galloping, I wouldn’t be able to escape them.

The tension mounted with every step, an invisible thread of danger tugging at my senses. A twig snapped in the distance, and my heart skipped a beat. Was it a mere trick of the night, or a sign that my presence had been detected?

Fear could do that to you. It liked to play tricks on your mind, especially in the dark, especially when you knew that you might be followed. I had no idea how long it took me to get back to the castle, but I felt enormous relief as I saw the castle gates in the distance. Approaching them, I cast a cautious glance over my shoulder, still painfully aware of the fact that danger could be lurking in the shadows. The thrill of the unknown, of the unseen coursed through my veins, mingling with a sense of purpose and protection. I knew that the coming days would put my skills to the test, challenging me to navigate a treacherous landscape.

But I would welcome all those challenges. I had to.

I stepped through the gates, ready to face any trials that awaited. I had a job to do. Not only that. I had someone important to protect, even though she belonged to someone else.

Chapter Nineteen

Lilith

It was the night of his return. I saw his horse from my window. But it was already too late to come out and greet him. We all had dinner already and retired to our rooms. I pressed my ear against the door and listened to the sound of oncoming footsteps. I heard them, then they died in the adjacent room, as usual.

I couldn't sleep. It was yet another night when sleep refused to grace me with its presence, but that was nothing new. I decided that I didn't want to toss and turn any longer. Instead, I would go onto the terrace of the eastern wing, away from everyone.

Maybe some fresh air would help me with my confusing thoughts.

I tiptoed through the hallway, not daring to turn around and see whether Adrian was following me. Not knowing for sure meant I could hope that he would be there, as he should have been. I quickly reached the small, secluded terrace.

I had forgotten how lovely it was. It was bathed in the enchanting glow of moonlight, almost as if it did not belong to this world. I stood there, with my eyes closed, feeling the chilly night breeze on my cheeks. It was easy to get lost in the labyrinth of my own thoughts. The weight of my obligations and the longing for a different life pressed upon me, leaving an ache deep within my soul. It was in that moment, amidst the hushed whispers of the night, that I felt an undeniable urge to share my burden with Adrian.

“Adrian...” I called out his name softly. His name felt almost like a prayer. “Please, come out.”

One second passed, and nothing happened. Another passed, and then another. Maybe he really wasn’t there?

At that moment, he emerged from the shadows, and immediately, that flutter in my chest awakened. He approached me with cautious tenderness, strangely mindful of the stillness that surrounded us both. There was something different about him, the way he looked at me, without saying anything.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” he said. “It seemed to me like you wanted a solitary moment.”

I smiled. “It seems that solitary moments are hard to come by in this castle.” It was a wistful smile.

“Just a little more,” he continued. “And you’ll be living a different life. A married life. You won’t be in this castle anymore, and I guess that will solve everything.”

“That will solve nothing,” I was quick to shake my head at this. I inhaled deeply, feeling that this was the night for confessions. “You know, I thought my life would be different. I imagined freedom and adventure, a life where I could choose my own path. But instead, I find myself bound by responsibilities and expectations that are suffocating my dreams.”

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He didn't say anything to that. Instead, he just approached me, and leaned against the railing of the terrace, staring into the darkened distance.

"I always thought that Cass would need to fulfill this role," I said, feeling guilty, but unable to prevent myself from saying this. "She is the older sister. But it turns out that it's my responsibility."

"Seems to me that it's just better for everyone this way," he said.

"For everyone, but me," I corrected him, as we seemed to stare at the same invisible spot in the distance. I turned to him. "You know, I envy you."

"You do?" he smiled. "Why?"

"Because you have no obligations to anyone," I pointed out. "Other than to your employer, of course."

"You're forgetting the other side of the coin," he said.

"Which is?"

"No obligations means no family, no one to care for or who cares for you," he reminded me.

I frowned, but I had to admit that he was right. "OK, you got me there."

"And the king seems like a nice guy," he added. "I'm sure you could talk to him

about anything.”

“Yeah, it does seem that way, doesn’t it?” I mused, looking down.

Suddenly, a wave of dizziness washed over me. My vision blurred, and before I knew it, I found myself leaning dangerously close to the edge, downward. Panic gripped at me, but in that moment, I felt Adrian’s strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me back from the railing.

Time seemed to freeze as our breaths mingled, our hearts beating in tandem. The rush of adrenaline coursed through my veins, mingling with the vulnerability and the unspoken desires that simmered between us. With our bodies pressed against each other, I felt the heat of his presence seep into my skin, creating an electric current that connected us in ways words could never express.

“Are you alright?” he asked, our eyes stuck to each other.

All I managed to do was nod. I had no idea what happened or how I almost lost consciousness. Maybe it was the stress or the weight of it all. I didn’t know. All I knew was that now, I was in Adrian’s arms, and nothing else mattered.

He looked at me in a way that assured me he understood everything. It was that profound understanding which transcended the barriers of uncertainty. It revealed all the unspoken longing inside both of us. Without a word, our lips met in a fervent and passionate kiss, a fusion of pent-up emotions and the realization that neither of us wanted to be anywhere else but here.

It didn’t matter that we were outside. It didn’t matter that someone might stumble on us and see us kissing. None of it mattered. The world around us faded into insignificance as we surrendered to the intoxicating power of that kiss. It was a moment that defied logic, defied the rules that bound us, and embraced the

undeniable connection that pulsed between our souls.

Before we could even pull apart, we stumbled back into the darkened hallway, where he pushed me against the wall. I could sense the animal inside of him. He had been keeping it under control for such a long time. Now, he couldn't do it any longer. I knew that feeling well, because I felt the same.

The eastern wing was the most secluded part of the whole castle, mostly because it needed to be renovated. Father always told us not to come here, but the forbidden places were usually the most tempting. Now, the solitude and darkness of the hallway worked in our favor.

Before I could do anything, Adrian dropped down to his knees, lifting my nightgown and pulling down my panties. He placed one of my thighs on his powerful shoulders for support, spreading my other leg apart. That was when his tongue slipped into me, without any warning, and all I could do was bite my lip in ecstasy at this unexpected turn of events.

Instead of taking it slowly, he kept thrusting his tongue inside of me, as I lifted my arms above my head, closing my eyes and enjoying the moment. It felt like I was floating, this feeling of sheer delight as his tongue lapped at my pussy lips. As if able to read my mind, he then started to suck my clit, nibbling on it gently, which only seemed to enhance the thrill.

I lowered my hands to his hair and grabbed it, thrusting my hips, grinding my pussy more and more against his lips. I couldn't stop myself even if I wanted to. I knew that we shouldn't be doing this. At least, not here where anyone could see us if they chose to go to the eastern wing in the middle of the night. But this didn't feel wrong. If anything, it felt as if a long-forgotten wish had finally come true and all we could do was welcome it.

His raging tongue was driving me crazy, devouring me. It took all of my conscious effort not to moan loudly. I knew that my echo would reverberate throughout the castle. I couldn't let that happen.

At that moment, he slid a finger into me, continuing to suck my clit, and this was when I couldn't hold it in any longer. A powerful orgasm whipped through me, my entire body trembling. But he didn't stop there. He continued to finger fuck me, slowly, creating that sound of wet friction, which was driving me even more crazy.

When he decided that it was enough, he got up, pulled me up into his arms and pressed me against the wall. I used the tips of my fingers to wipe his wet mouth, but he shook his head.

"I want you on my tongue," he told me in a whisper.

His hands were squeezing my hips, as he stared me down. "Take it out," he told me.

He didn't need to say it twice. He said it in such a commanding tone, which made it even hotter. I did as he told me immediately, my fingers fumbling with his zipper, as I felt his stone hard cock press against his pants, dying to come out. All the while, he kept his gaze on mine. Neither of us looked away even for a single second. The air was charged with raw passion.

His grip tightened as he spread my legs wider with his hips, pressing his bare cock against my wet, throbbing pussy. My heart started to beat faster than ever before. The first time wasn't like this. There was so much need and yearning now. Neither of us could control it any longer.

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He dug his fingers into my flesh, keeping me close, pressed against the wall. He thrust forward, into me, sliding in effortlessly. His cock filled me to the brim in one go, as pleasure surged through every part of my being. He started to rock back and forth slowly at first, only building up the tempo, with our foreheads pressed together.

“Fuck, you feel so good...” He murmured against my lips, and his deep voice did something to me.

“I love how you fuck me...” I responded, and at first, it felt like it wasn’t me at all, like it wasn’t my voice. But it was. And I did love what he was doing to me, how he was fucking me. I loved everything about it. I never wanted it to end.

My legs were in the air, shaking, as he kept pounding into me, my mouth perpetually open, only to feel the licks of his own tongue graze them, leaving them wet and swollen. The friction of his belly against my pussy, the wet slapping of his balls every time he lunged deeply into me made my mind oblivious to anything else around us.

He kept fucking me through another orgasm, as my hands clutched at his shoulders, as I bit my lower lip, still trying to keep as quiet as possible. But all I could feel was this enormous pleasure, when he pulled out there was sticky cream sliding down my thigh.

We were both breathing heavily, our hands still on each other, refusing to let go. I thought he would quickly pull away from me, like the last time, but he didn’t. Instead, he pressed his lips against mine, kissing me softly, tenderly, unlike before. I didn’t know what to make of it.

As the intensity of the kiss still lingered in the air around us, I felt a rush of certainty. In that stolen moment, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my heart belonged to him. I had no idea if he shared this sentiment, but I knew that I had to tell him. I wanted to reveal everything, including the truth about Luke and that we weren't in love, that it was an arranged marriage which I didn't want to go through with anymore.

“Adrian, I—” I started, but he didn't let me finish.

He shook his head, urging me to be quiet. “We'll talk about this tomorrow.”

His jaw tightened as he turned around and walked down the darkened hallway, disappearing in it. I was alone. I rushed after him. The door to his room was open. I could see his shadow moving, but I dared not follow him in.

Tomorrow, he said.

Chapter Twenty

Adrian

You are a fucking moron.

Even worse than that.

A fucking moron who makes the same mistake twice!

But scolding myself didn't do much. In fact, it didn't do anything, because the memory of Lilith's pussy on my lips still lingered in my mind, and I doubted that it would leave me any time soon. It was as if every fiber in my being consciously refused to allow me to forget this.

Not only that, but I felt like the more I tried to keep my distance from her, the more fate worked on putting us together in situations where we couldn't control ourselves, just like we couldn't do it last night.

Those were the thoughts swarming inside my mind as I stood in front of the door to her room. It was closed. My hand was raised, poised to knock, but I hesitated. I couldn't remember the last time I felt this way. Maybe never.

Every fiber of my being ached, torn between the overwhelming desire to hold her close and the conviction that pushing her away was the only way to protect her. It was an agonizing decision that cut deep into my soul, but I knew deep down it was the right one.

The moments we had shared were filled with an intensity I had never experienced before. With every stolen glance, every gentle touch, our connection grew stronger, and so did the depth of my love for her. But love alone wasn't enough to ensure her safety, not in the treacherous world we found ourselves in.

Deciding not to think about it any longer, but just to act on reason, I knocked. A few moments passed, until the door finally pushed open, and Lilith's radiant face greeted me. Unlike me, she didn't seem like she had a problem sleeping last night.

"May I come in?" I asked.

"Of course," she smiled, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear as she did so.

I entered and she closed the door behind me. I inhaled deeply, wanting to become a different version of myself, a version that did not care about her at all. I wanted to be as I usually was, distant and aloof. I tried to exemplify a coldness that I didn't feel, and it was the most difficult thing to do. Of course, it was just an act, a façade I had to wear in order to shield her from the storm of emotions that was brewing inside of

me.

“Lilith, we need to talk,” I said curtly, and the moment I spoke those words, the smile on her face was gone.

“It’s about last night,” she said instead of me. “It was a mistake, right?”

“Yes,” I nodded, raking my fingers through my hair. “I mean, how could it be anything other than that?”

Confusion flickered across her face. I hated myself for doing this. I kept telling her that what we were doing was a mistake, and yet it was a mistake we kept repeating.

“You can’t deny that there is something between us,” she told me much more calmly than I expected her to be. I was expecting her to react like any other woman would, but that wasn’t her.

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“I’m not saying that.” I could agree with her that much. “But just because there is something between us, that doesn’t mean we should act on it.”

A pang of guilt shot through me, but I steeled myself against it. “Like I said, it was a mistake, one we would pay for dearly if it were to become known.”

Again, I expected her to swear me to secrecy about all this, but she did no such thing. Almost as if she didn’t care at all whether Luke found out, or her father.

“Are you ashamed of what happened?” she asked me defiantly, her nostrils flaring as she spoke.

“What?” I frowned. “No, of course not. It’s not that at all.”

“Then what is it?” she demanded to know, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Your marriage, Lilith,” I pointed out the obvious, since she wanted me to. “You will be another man’s wife very soon. I am a scoundrel for doing what I’ve done. This is all my fault.”

“No,” she shook her head. I expected her to cry, to be all emotional, but there was none of that. Instead, I was facing a strong woman, whose boldness and defiance surprised me. “Don’t speak to me as if I was a child. I already have someone who does that to me, and that is my father. I expected you to see me for who I am.”

“I do see you for who you are,” I exclaimed, trying to keep my voice down, but that was impossible. “I see all of you, and that is the problem. I get the feeling that no one

else but me sees the real you, and I can't pull away from you. That was why I couldn't resist. That is also why I have to remain professional with you until the end of my employment here."

"And then what?" Strangely, this was the first time I heard fear in her voice. It wasn't when I told her that us sleeping together was a mistake. It was now, reminding her that my time here was limited.

"Then I leave you alone to live your life," I said, a surge of pain coursing through my chest, making it increasingly more difficult for me to breathe.

I could barely say this aloud. The thought of never seeing her again was something I hadn't thought about at all. But I knew that this would be the right thing to do. She had a path she had been placed on, whether by her own will or someone else's. What I thought about that didn't matter.

I never had to make this choice before. Love battled against duty. Desire battled against sacrifice. The choice before me was an impossible one, but the solution was clear as daylight.

Every fiber of my being yearned to hold her in my arms and to ask her to be mine forever, to surrender to the intoxicating bliss that we shared. The tenderness of her touch, the sparkle in her eyes had ignited something in me, something I thought was long forgotten. Now, that fire burned brighter with each passing moment. I cared about her deeply. That much was undeniable. I dared not think about love, because that would have been too painful.

"What if I don't want you to leave me alone?" she suddenly asked, bringing me back to the present moment.

"What do you mean?"

“Exactly that,” she said, without much clarification.

She started to pace about the room, cracking her knuckles. That was the only sound that echoed in the room. I waited for her to stop, which she finally did, standing by the window. I was curious to hear what she had to say, but she seemed to be debating with herself whether she should continue with this or not, which only made me even more curious.

Still, I didn’t want to push her into anything. I waited until she seemed ready to share whatever it was she had intended to. As I was watching her, it seemed that her inner turmoil mirrored my own. Mine was my constant companion, and I knew it would continue to be that for the rest of my time here. I was torn between going and staying. But there was no reason to stay, and so many reasons to go.

“There are things you don’t know about me,” she suddenly said, sounding mysterious.

“What things?” I lifted my brow in surprise.

I thought I knew everything there was to know about her. After all, this was crucial. Her father had told me what she was like. Even her sister had joined in this conversation, something that was kept a secret from Lilith, and together, they painted a picture of Lilith as she truly was.

But now, she was telling me that there was something about her life in the present that I didn’t know. That was possible, but I doubted it was something that mattered, something that changed anything.

I approached her, and now, we were standing facing each other. We were so close that I could smell the scent of her skin, and I knew it was something that would linger forever in my mind. But I had to focus on the present moment right now. My heart

was still heavy with my decision, as I waited to hear her out, to hear what it was I didn't know about her.

I could see the determination in her eyes. Instantly, it assured me that it was something important. At least, it was something she herself considered important and that was good enough for me.

“Whatever it is, Lilith, you can talk to me,” I assured her, growing concerned now.

All sorts of wild ideas appeared in my mind. Was she sick? Was there a secret plan I didn't know about? Was something happening behind my back? Still, I kept these questions to myself, deciding to give her the chance to speak when she felt confident enough to do so. Although my heart was beating wildly in anticipation.

I took her by the hands and held them in mine. It would have been so easy to pull her closer, to lock my arms around her and kiss her again. But that would be another mistake, which we couldn't repeat. This had to stop. But not before she told me what she had to say.

“It is about my engagement,” she finally said. “Luke and I—”

But before she could utter another word, a sudden knock on the door shattered the moment. We both turned our attention to the door, a flicker of disappointment crossing Lilith's face. Without any warning, the door opened, and Luke's surprised face greeted us both. He cleared his throat before speaking.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Lilith

“Of course not,” I said, deciding against what I wanted to do a mere moment ago, which was to tell Adrian the whole truth. As I spoke those words, Adrian released my hands from his, taking a respectful step back.

“If that is all...” he told me, to which I just nodded.

I could sense that he didn’t want to be here. That was understandable. It comforted me to know that he was a good person. He was the kind of person who couldn’t look another man in the eye after what he had done to him. But I was as guilty as he was, if not even more. I owed Luke my loyalty, not Adrian.

But this was not the time nor the place for that conversation. We would have to finish it another time. I knew that he would be in front of the door or at least in his room. He had to be around me, no matter how difficult that was for him right now.

“I could have sworn that you were in the middle of something,” Luke said, bringing me back to the present moment, still staring at the door, which closed a moment ago. “Weren’t you holding hands just now?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I mean, we were, but it was because I remembered how we were attacked that night in the garden, and I guess I was overwhelmed by everything,

so he approached me and held my hands. He was just being polite.”

Luke’s brows furrowed slightly, curiosity evident in his eyes. He nodded, seemingly content with my response. I could still sense the lingering questions he wanted to ask, and which he probably would ask at some point.

I was lying to him, and I was a terrible liar. I felt my cheeks get all red. My palms were becoming clammy. I had that desperate urge to look away, but I forced myself to stare at him straight in the eyes. Hopefully, that would prove that I was telling him the truth. In a way, I was. I was overwhelmed by everything and Adrian did try to console me by taking me by the hands. From a different perspective, I wasn’t lying. But those were nothing but weak excuses.

I should have come clean right now. This was my chance. I should have told Adrian that I was madly in love with him, as I was, and I should have told Luke that our marriage would never have worked, that we both agreed because we didn’t know any better. But now we do.

Still, the moment was gone, and I knew that I had to wait again. I had to maintain this delicate balance, this tightrope walk between honesty and love. I had to wait until the timing seemed right again. However, I knew that when the moment arrived, I would need to summon the courage to reveal everything. There would be no holding back.

I reminded myself that Luke was my best friend. It seemed to me that in the midst of this chaos, I had forgotten this very important fact. Our bond was precious to me. I wanted him in my life as a friend, even after this. I wanted a sense of normalcy to return, allowing us to temporarily set aside the weighty matters that lingered beneath the surface, the stuff that neither of us wanted to talk about.

“You know, I came here to share some good news with you,” he suddenly told me.

“You did?” I echoed. “What are they?”

“The good doc has told me that I am well on my way to a full recovery,” he revealed, and this news brought a surge of relief and joy.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” I smiled, walking over to him and giving him a hug. We lingered like that for a few moments, then we both released each other from our grip. “I’ve been so worried about you.”

“I know,” he nodded. “But I kept telling you I was alright. It was nice to have you pamper me so much, to be honest.”

“Well, you’re fine now, no more pampering,” I teased, and he chuckled in response.

“But I’m still worried,” I said, returning to my grave state of mind. “We still don’t know how that happened.”

“I’ve spoken with your father and the doctor, and the doctor assured me it was my sweetener. They found traces of the same poison in there as well.”

“So, you were the target?” I mused. “But that really doesn’t make any sense.”

He shrugged. “There’s no point in questioning anything. All I know is that any of us could be the next target, so we have to be really vigilant.”

“How do we do this when we don’t know who’s the traitor in the castle?” I reminded him.

“Your father said that it was possible the sweetener was poisoned outside of the castle,” he revealed. “A fresh batch was ordered recently, just for me, and I suppose it was quite possible that an outsider did it.”

This made me relieved. “If that is really so, then I’m very glad.”

“So was your father,” he agreed.

“That is because he trusts every single servant in this castle,” I pointed out. “They are all loyal men and women, who have been with us for years. Just thinking that one of them could betray us is painful.”

“I know,” he replied. “More guards have also been appointed, and there have been no new suspicious activities anywhere in the castle or around it.”

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“Really?” I exclaimed, unable to hide my joy. “That is really good news.”

“Exactly,” he smiled. “That is why both your father and I are absolutely convinced that there is no need to stall the wedding. Everything should go according to plan. Your father is very excited about everything, I must add.”

I smiled a little nervously, which I tried my best to hide. Everyone seemed excited about this, but me. As Luke and I delved into discussions about the upcoming wedding preparations, my mind occasionally drifted to thoughts of Adrian. It was a constant battle to stay present, to focus on the tasks at hand, while the lingering memories of our shared moments tugged at my heart.

Luke’s enthusiasm for the wedding arrangements was evident, and I couldn’t help but be grateful for his genuine excitement. He shared his ideas for the venue, the decorations, and the guest list, each detail carefully planned to create a memorable occasion. I listened attentively, offering my input when necessary, but my mind couldn’t help but wander.

As Luke spoke about the joyous celebration that awaited us, flashes of moments with Adrian danced through my thoughts. The stolen kisses, the intimate conversations, the electrifying connection we shared. It was a whirlwind of emotions, a bittersweet tapestry woven within the confines of my heart.

“Lil?” he suddenly called out to me, and I realized that I hadn’t been listening to anything he just said.

“Sorry,” I smiled apologetically. “I got lost in my own thoughts.”

“Is everything alright?” he asked. “I mean, between us?”

“Of course,” I nodded. “Why would you ask that?”

He looked at me as if he was trying to see through me, but the veil was too thick.

“I don’t know,” he said sincerely. “I feel like we’re not what we used to be before.”

“What do you mean by that?” I kept asking questions for a very simple reason and that was that I myself had no answers to give him.

“I mean that we don’t talk like we used to,” he tried to explain something I already knew, so listening to him was painful.

As Luke attempted to draw closer to me, I found myself instinctively maintaining a distance. It was an internal struggle, a battle between my loyalty to him and the conflicting emotions that swirled within me. Though his intentions were pure and his affection genuine, I couldn’t help but hold back, guarding my heart like a fortress.

I offered a gentle smile, attempting to bridge the gap between us, but there was a hesitance in my actions. The lingering presence of Adrian, like a phantom whisper, continued to haunt my thoughts. His touch, his gaze, the intoxicating moments we had shared lingered within me, making it difficult to explain any of this to Luke.

How could I tell him that my heart now belonged to another man, a man whose lips I had tasted, a man whose presence I felt inside of me, and I couldn’t stop yearning for more? How could I tell him any of this when I knew that he was starting to develop feelings for me, feelings that weren’t there before?

I saw the disappointment flicker in Luke’s eyes, a subtle indication that he sensed my reservations. He wanted to bridge the emotional gap between us, to deepen our

connection, but my reluctance created an invisible barrier. I knew it hurt him, and that knowledge only intensified the commotion within me.

I struggled to find the words to explain, to articulate the turmoil that swirled within my heart. I didn't want to hurt him, but I couldn't deny the truth of my feelings, just like I couldn't deny the fact that I couldn't get Adrian out of my mind, even for a single second. He was always there, always present.

"It has nothing to do with you," I finally told him.

It comforted me to realize that this was actually true. It was all me. My emotions had changed. I had changed. He was still the sweet, kind man he had always been. My best friend.

"Who does it have to do with then?" he asked for more clarification.

"Me," I said truthfully. "And this commotion with the vampires, not knowing what is going on. It's all taking a toll on me."

"It's all going to be alright," he told me with a smile. "If you need some time alone, to yourself... you know, without me bothering you, just let me know, OK?"

"Thank you," I smiled. "I appreciate that. Sometimes, I do need that."

"We all need that sometimes," he agreed. "There is nothing wrong with that. But I'm afraid you can't be alone. It seems your new best friend is with you everywhere."

"My new best friend?" I raised an eyebrow.

"The bodyguard," he reminded me.

“Oh,” I voiced, not really sure what else to say. “Yeah. Well... that is his job.”

“We enjoy some of our jobs more than others,” he said mysteriously, walking over to me and giving me a peck on the cheek. “I know you trust him, Lil. But... he is a vampire. He is not like us, and he will never be like us. Don’t forget that.”

I didn’t really know what he meant by that, but I didn’t have the time to ask him about it, because he turned around and headed for the door. A moment later, I was left alone, with my own whirlwind of emotions and thoughts.

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Did he know that something was happening with Adrian? I was sure that he couldn't have seen anything. But maybe he had sensed it. Was that why he said that?

I couldn't tell. All I knew was that for now, I had to keep him at arm's length, offering my friendship and support, while I learned how to navigate the maze of my own emotions and find the right way to tell everyone the truth. The more time passed by, the more certain I was that I would not be able to go through with this wedding.

I would not be happy with Luke. I knew that now. Before meeting Adrian, I could have deceived myself into thinking that I would have my best friend as a partner. But for a loving marriage, that wasn't enough. There had to be more. I knew that now. I knew who I wanted as my partner, even if he was doing his best to push me away.

I walked over to the window and opened it. I inhaled the fresh air deeply, closing my eyes. I knew that the road ahead would be treacherous. Who knew what else would happen, what the new day would bring? I certainly didn't. But I was determined to find clarity in this mess, to reconcile the conflicting desires inside of me and to do what my heart told me was the right thing. And when the time came, I hoped that Luke would understand why I did this.

The mind had no control or supremacy over the heart. I could not decide who it belonged to.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Adrian

Several days had passed, and I found myself riding along the same path towards the witch's cottage. I hadn't spoken privately to Lilith again after that conversation. I somehow managed it so that we were never alone, and that kept us at a safe distance. I hoped that was how it would remain until the end of my employment here, after which I would disappear from her life. Although she would never disappear from mine. But that was my own cross to bear.

As I made my way back to the witch's cottage, a surge of determination coursed through my veins. The knowledge I had obtained, the urgency to seek guidance and assistance, propelled me forward through the darkened woods. But little did I know that danger lurked in the shadows, waiting to strike.

Suddenly, the stillness of the night shattered as a group of vampires emerged from the depths of the forest. Their eyes glowed with a predatory hunger, their fangs glistening under the moonlight. Panic threatened to engulf me, but I refused to yield to fear. My horse, on the other hand, was not as lucky. It propelled itself on its hind legs, threatening to throw me off. I somehow managed to calm it down, jumping off in the last moment.

The vampires attacked without any warning, their hissing permeating the silence of the woods. I fought with every ounce of strength and skill in me, because I was outnumbered. I knew if I showed weakness or if I fell down, I was done for. The air crackled with tension as they lunged at me. I used my blade to cut one of them and wound him severely. Blood sprouted allaround as he fell to the ground. I didn't check whether he was still breathing, because I had no time.

Adrenaline surged through my veins, heightening my senses and sharpening my focus. The acrid scent of blood mingled with the earthy aroma of the forest, a grim reminder of the dangerous dance I found myself in. My heart thundered in my chest, each beat urging me to keep fighting, to survive. Every move became a calculated gamble, each strike fueled by determination and the weight of my purpose. Lilith

depended on me, secrets needed unraveling, and failure was not an option. I fought with a fervor that burned within me, a fire that refused to be extinguished.

The battle felt like an eternity, every second stretching out indefinitely. I evaded blows, bites and scratches, dealing punches and blows of my own. Their predatory instincts, however, were no match for my own. With each blow dealt, I felt a surge of satisfaction mingled with the sting of my injuries. The odds gradually shifted in my favor, as one by one they fell down, their bodies crumpled to the ground.

When it was all finished, I could barely believe it. I was still breathing heavily, looking around. The aftermath was obvious. I was the one standing. My body ached, battered and bruised, but the taste of victory swirled through my veins.

At that moment, I felt a sharp pain on my left side. I looked down and realized that my shirt was all bloody and torn. When I took a closer look, I saw that there was a deep gash. One of the vampires had claw-like nails, which he used to try and attack me. One of his attacks was quite successful. It didn't hurt... yet. I knew it would later. I had to clean the wound, so it wouldn't get infected. But I had nothing to use now.

I whistled loudly, and to my surprise, the horse returned from somewhere in the woods where it was hiding.

"Good boy," I whispered, patting him on the muzzle.

I took a small water bottle which was attached to the saddle and poured it on the wound. I still felt nothing, probably because of the adrenaline still surging through my veins. Once it died down, I would definitely feel the sting. I allowed myself a moment to catch my breath, then I mounted the horse and continued my journey.

Reaching the familiar threshold of the witch's cottage, I knocked with a mixture of

relief and urgency. For a few moments, there was no reply. I thought maybe she went out to gather herbs or something, but then, the door creaked open. Those searing blue eyes surveyed me, the surprise evident without any words.

“I was attacked by a group of vampires on the way here,” I said without being asked.

Her gaze met mine, a knowing understanding etched into her features. Wordlessly, she gestured for me to enter, beckoning me into the sanctuary of her humble home. I stepped inside, the scent of herbs and ancient wisdom enveloping me like a comforting embrace.

She guided me to a worn wooden chair, her movements deliberate and measured. With a gentle touch, she examined the wounds I had acquired during the fight. Her fingers worked with a skill honed over years of experience, cleansing the cuts and tending to my injuries.

Neither of us spoke. There was no need to speak. I felt like she could see exactly what had happened simply by looking at my body and listening to the sound of my breathing. There was a calming energy that radiated from her, an aura of ancient wisdom that offered solace when you needed it the most.

I had no idea how long all of this lasted, just like I couldn't have told her how long I had been fighting the vampires. Time seemed to stand still, although I was moving with lightning speed. She was doing the same now. When she finally completed her ministrations, she pulled away. My wound was now cleansed, with some mud covering most of the gash. Strangely enough, there was no pain either.

“I will give you an ointment that will help with the healing process,” she told me. “But for now, just sit still. Let the skin calm down on its own. And drink this.” She handed me a steaming cup, which I took into my hands gratefully.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “For everything.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she corrected me. “There is grave danger ahead, and I’m not sure if I can do anything to help you.”

“Do you have any news to share with me?” I asked.

She nodded, taking a seat opposite me. “The Spirits of Nature have spoken to me. The daughters of the king are in grave danger. A dark force seeks to harm them, to use their lives as a pawn in a wicked game.”

The revelation struck me like a thunderbolt. I had to protect Lilith, and now it seemed that both sisters needed my help.

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“What should I do?” I asked, my voice laced with determination, regardless of what could happen to me. The weight of responsibility settled upon my shoulders, and I knew that I had to keep safe those who were dear to me.

“The one about to get married,” she continued. “Do not take your eyes off of her even for a single moment. She is the one the dark forces want.”

“You mean Constantine?” I asked, almost certain that he was behind this.

“There is someone who is desperate to prove themselves worthy to Constantine,” she revealed something I didn’t know. “And they will do anything to gain his approval. Anything.”

The witch’s gaze held mine, her voice steady as she revealed the dangerous path that lay ahead. I listened intently, absorbing every single word she was saying, so I could not only report back to the king, but also take it to heart and be ready to protect Lilith.

“Who is that?” I asked, but I doubted she could be that specific.

Just like I predicted, she just shook her head. “I couldn’t see. But maybe that is for the better. Do not trust anyone but yourself. Question everything and everyone.”

I nodded. The gravity of the situation became clearer. I realized that the battle I had fought against the vampires was merely a glimpse into the larger web of deceit and danger that lurked within the kingdom. It was a battle for power, with Lilith and her sister unconsciously caught in the crossfire.

I got up, feeling that it was time for me to leave. She placed her old, withered hand on my shoulder. “Mark my words. Do not take your eyes off of her even for a single second, because that is enough for something dreadful to happen.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “The castle is closed tightly. No one goes in or out. The guards are set up everywhere. The castle is now the safest place on earth for them.”

She shook her head. “If you truly believe that, then you have not seen the face of real evil. I have. And I know that you cannot hide from it, even in the depths of Hell itself. It will follow you everywhere. It will not stop. So, you should not stop either.”

I nodded again, with even more conviction. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“If you need me again, you know where to find me,” she said, pulling her hand away suddenly, almost as if my skin scorched her.

She didn’t walk out of the cottage to wave me goodbye. Not that I expected her to. As I spurred my horse into a gallop, the wind whipped against my face, carrying with it a sense of urgency and determination. The revelation of the danger befalling the daughters of the king propelled me forward, my heart pounding with each beat, driving me to return to the castle as quickly as possible.

With every passing mile, the urgency intensified. The beauty of the landscape blurred into a mere backdrop as I focused solely on the path ahead. My senses were heightened, attuned to any sign of trouble or treachery that might lie in wait. I knew that I could easily be attacked again, so I had to remain vigilant. With this injury, I would be no match for another group of vampires.

As I rode, memories of my time with Lilith flooded my mind, each moment etched with an intensity that only fueled my resolve to protect her. Even though she belonged to another man, my purpose was evident. I needed to be by her side. I

needed to be her protector.

As I approached the familiar surroundings of the castle, a mixture of anticipation and trepidation coursed through my veins. The grandeur of the fortress that had once seemed awe-inspiring now paled in comparison to the weight of responsibility that rested on my shoulders.

I dismounted from my horse, my movements swift and purposeful. With each step towards the castle gates, determination surged within me, pushing aside any traces of weariness or doubt. The time for action had come, and I knew what my duty was.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lilith

It was one of those fun dinners when everyone seemed to be in a good mood. It was almost as if the veil of darkness that had been hanging over the castle had been lifted, if only for a short period of time, so we could all remember what it was like to laugh freely and talk about something other than the fact that we were all in mortal danger.

Even Father was back in his usual, jovial mood, and I couldn't help but stare in awe and tenderness as I listened to the playful banter between him and some of the castle staff, as they were serving the food. It was a rare moment when we could all relax and actually enjoy each other's company, without the burden of all the events that had preceded this evening.

Cass, her enthusiasm contagious, shared our adventures up in the attic with everyone. Questions followed, and even Father seemed to have forgotten that we actually had an attic, with so many forgotten treasures that were just waiting to be unearthed.

Amidst these cheerful stories, even Adrian, who was usually serious, softened by the

warmth of the company, and upon being asked, he shared stories of his travels and adventures beyond the castle walls. We all listened, mesmerized by his words.

While his last recounting was still ongoing, I looked around at all the smiling faces around me. I felt grateful for moments like these, where all I could think about was the people I cared for. I stopped being a princess, and I was just myself, surrounded by people who were also free to be themselves, if only for this one precious moment. It seemed that the laughter, the genuine smiles, and the shared stories created a bond that strengthened the ties between us all.

The evening continued, desserts were served, and the conversations continued to flow effortlessly. It seemed that no one wanted to retire. Everyone wanted to stay here and prolong this moment indefinitely. The conversations ranged from delightful reminiscences to playful teasing, and through it all, every single voice was heard and valued. I couldn't remember the last time when we had this at the castle.

When we finally retired to our bedrooms, Cass lingered in the doorway. I looked at her strangely. "Why don't you sleep in my room tonight?" I asked. "We had such a fun time. I feel like back when we were little girls and we used to stay up all night, just talking about anything that popped to mind."

Cass smiled, but it was not a smile of agreement. "I'd love to, but I think I'll still go to my room," she said softly.

I returned her smile. "Of course, Cass. I understand. We all need our space sometimes."

Cass' smile widened, as she approached me and took me by the hand. "You are always so understanding. I do need some time to collect my thoughts."

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She said this in a way that made me worried. “Is everything alright?”

I immediately remembered her secret boyfriend, whom she hadn’t mentioned since then. I also didn’t want to start that conversation, because I felt if it was something she wanted to share with me, she would have done so. Still, the idea of who it was kept eating me up alive. We hadn’t had a visitor at the castle in what felt like ages, but we did receive mail. I noticed that she got a few letters, so I assumed that it was someone with whom she was still in contact, if not face to face, then at least through writing letters.

At first, I thought it might have been someone from the castle staff, maybe a dashing servant who managed to charm Cass with his wit and kindness. Or maybe one of the guards, with their protective allure and chivalry. I knew that Cass would easily fall for one of them.

My imagination conjured up various scenarios, each more amusing and unexpected than the last. I tried to come up with a name of a man who might fit, who didn’t belong to the castle. Before all of this started, we had organized numerous feasts and gatherings here at the castle. Maybe someone from a neighboring kingdom caught her eye, a charming nobleman or a diplomat?

“Everything is more than alright,” she suddenly said, bringing me back from my musings. “I’m just hoping that tonight I will manage to sort some things out, and for that, I need to be on my own.”

“I understand that,” I repeated the same words. “There is no need to explain anything, Cass. Just tell me... is it about your secret boyfriend?”

She smiled, and that was all I needed to know. In the midst of all my speculations, my heart filled with happiness for Cass. I knew how special and loving she was, and the idea that someone had captured Cass's heart in such a secretive manner made me happy and hopeful, not just for her, but for us all.

"It is," she nodded. "But I still cannot tell you who he is."

"That is fine," I assured her. "You must have a good reason for it. And I want you to know that I will support your choices and decisions no matter who this man... or vampire... or whatever else he might be."

Cass chuckled at this, and I joined in. I felt closer to her than ever, despite this huge secret that she was keeping from me.

"After all, love is such a precious gift, Cass. I want nothing more than for you to experience the joy of being loved and cherished."

"You mean like you have with the bodyguard?" Cass teased.

My eyes widened in shock at her words. I immediately glanced at the door. Luckily, it was closed.

"How about you say that a little louder?" I pretended to be upset, but in reality I wasn't. "I don't think everyone heard you."

"Don't you think it's high time you came clean?" she wondered.

"About?" I wondered.

She sighed, shaking her head. "First, you have to admit it to yourself. Only then can you tell Father and everyone else."

This is where I stopped pretending. “I know. It’s just... I don’t know what to do about my own mess of emotions.”

“Emotions are never a mess,” Cass spoke wisely. “We choose to make them into a mess. While all we need to do is just listen to our heart. It knows what it wants. It knows what needs to be done. But we are afraid. This fear is keeping us frozen in time, paralyzed, and this is the root of all this confusion.”

I tilted my head a little, teasing her. “Have you been reading some of Father’s philosophy books?”

“A little,” she admitted with a sweet chuckle. “But I’m also madly in love, and more or less, in the same predicament as you.”

“You mean, there is someone else?” I gasped.

“Yes,” she nodded, then quickly added. “I mean, we haven’t done anything. We’ve just talked, and... we realized the depth of our emotions for each other. But unfortunately, we couldn’t do anything. Now, in light of some new developments, we’re hoping that we might end up together.”

“I am rooting for you, Cass, with all my heart,” I told her, as she looked all starry-eyed.

“Your words mean more to me than you could ever imagine,” she said, a tear glistening in her eyes.

“Oh, don’t cry,” I urged. “You’ll make me cry, too.”

We both laughed, then hugged each other tightly.

“I just want you to be happy,” I told her, fully settled on this one certainty.

“I hope to come to you in the morning with the truth,” Cass said, much to my delight.

“I look forward to that then,” I smiled, watching her.

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She turned around, opened the door and let herself out. Her footsteps echoed through the hallway, as her room was close, but we were still separated by the hallway. Just as I was about to close the door, I saw Adrian was standing to my right side, leaning against the door. There was a cigarette hanging from the corner of his lips. But strangely, it was not lit.

I walked out, amused. "I didn't know you smoked." I stopped right in front of him, as my heart slid all the way down into my heels, making me lose balance. Fortunately, I regained it quickly.

"I don't," he replied, taking out the cigarette. "I stopped ages ago. But I miss the feeling of doing something when I'm not doing anything."

"What?" I chuckled. "Doing something when you're not doing anything?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "I know it doesn't make any sense, but yeah."

"Force of habit?"

"That, too," he nodded. "But it's mostly when stress takes over."

"Are you stressed?" I asked, concern etched in my voice.

He didn't say anything at first. He looked around. I knew that he wanted to make sure we were alone, but we were in a hallway, and it wasn't that late at all. This was neither the time nor the place to have the conversation which I'd been dying to have. A part of me was glad that he was stressed. That meant that he was thinking about it

almost as much as I was. Maybe he was even thinking in the same direction. I dared not hope for that yet, not until I knew more. But for that, we needed privacy. Not the open-ended hallway, where even the walls had ears.

“Lack of sleep mostly,” he revealed.

“You don’t sleep well?” I asked again.

“I’ve trained myself to have a very light sleep. Anything and everything wakes me up. That is the only way I can do my job well. And here, I barely sleep at all. Your safety is of the utmost importance.”

“You mean mine and Cass’?”

He hesitated before replying.

“Is there something I should know?” I pushed him.

He was reluctant to speak, but I think he knew me well enough by now to know that I wouldn’t let this go. So, he told me.

“When I spoke to the witch last night, she told me that your life is in danger more than anyone else’s,” he spoke slowly accentuating every word. “She told me not to take my eyes off of you for a single second.”

“Otherwise, something terrible might happen?” I finished his thought. He just nodded to this.

I thought about it for a moment, then smiled. “Well, that’s good. At least you know who you need to focus on. I’m glad to hear that, to be honest.”

“How could you be glad to hear you’re the target?” he wondered, incredulously.

“Because that means those I love are safe,” I explained. “Cass and Father are the most important people in the world for me. They and...” I started, but I couldn’t finish.

“Luke, of course,” he finished in a way he believed I wanted to finish, but that was not nearly true. I cared more about him than Luke. Much more.

“Luke,” I said, trying to evade a direct answer. By echoing what he said, I felt like I didn’t agree or disagree. Besides, Luke was the last person I wanted to talk about right now.

“Don’t worry,” he told me, his voice down to a whisper. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

There was something about the way he said it, a deeply set longing which didn’t escape my attention.

“Knowing you are here, makes me feel safer,” I replied, trying not to cross that boundary.

He nodded, pocketing the cigarette, which was in his hand the whole time, then entering his room, the door to which remained open. I did the same with mine. I left the door ajar. I didn’t know if that was an invitation or just a need to know that I could be by his side in three steps if I woke up in the middle of the night.

I got ready for bed and covered myself. I closed my eyes, but sleep did not come. My mind was too awake for my body to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Adrian

“Aargh!”

A blood-curdling scream pierced the night. Most frightening of all, it belonged to a woman.

My senses snapped into full alert, as I jumped up from the bed, and instantly, I was on my feet. My heart was beating loudly, booming inside my head. I grabbed my pants and quickly dressed myself, my hands trembling with a sense of urgency.

I rushed out of my room, only to see Lilith standing in the doorway, her eyes wide with fear.

“What was that?” she asked, trembling.

“I don’t know,” I replied, still hearing the echo of that scream. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “It wasn’t me.”

At that moment, we both turned to the staircase, which was still engulfed in darkness.

“Turn on the lights!” I shouted, and she did as I bid her immediately.

The entire place lit up instantly. We both rushed to the staircase, my heart pounding louder than my footsteps. What we both saw at the same time made us paralyzed.

“Cass!?” Lilith screamed her sister’s name so loudly that I thought the entire place would collapse from the strength of her pain. “Cass!” she shouted again, lifting her

nightgown and running down the stairs.

I quickly followed after her. A moment later, I heard oncoming footsteps, but I didn't look up to see who it was. It didn't matter. Lilith knelt down next to the motionless body of her sister, as she gently cradled Cassandra's head in her hands.

"Don't move her," I urged. "She might have broken something."

She didn't say anything to that. Instead, she grabbed her sister's hand and pressed her fingers to feel her pulse. She dropped Cassandra's hand, shaking her head.

"No, no... it can't be..." she kept repeating over and over again.

I bent down next to her, pressing my fingers to her neck. There was no pulse.

"Quickly, call for the doctor!" I shouted to a few of the servants who had silently gathered around us, gasping in disbelief at the lifeless form of Lilith's sister, sprawled out at the bottom of the stairs, with her long flowing hair and eyes that would never open on their own again.

"Cass?" Lilith suddenly started to speak, bending over her sister, cupping her face with her hands. "Cass, please stop with this nonsense. Wake up, OK? Just... wake up, it's me, Lil. Don't scare me like this."

Her voice was weak, trembling with shock and disbelief. She had to be removed from here, especially when the doctor arrived. I noticed Luke in the corner, his eyes wide and his mouth agape.

"Luke!" I shouted to him, gesturing at him to come over. "Take Lilith to her room."

He seemed as if he didn't hear me at first, but a moment later, he nodded. He came

over to Lilith and wrapped his arms around her.

“Come on, Lil,” he whispered tenderly into her ear. A part of me was jealous. I wanted to be the one to comfort her in such a terrible tragic moment, but I knew that it wasn’t my place to do so. I had to remain here, especially because the king hadn’t arrived yet. I feared what he would say when he saw that his daughter was dead. What could he say other than drop down to his knees, crying? Because he was a father first and a king second. That was the impression I had of him.

“No, no,” Lilith shook her head, her eyes red and swollen from the tears she was trying to keep at bay. “I have to stay here. I have to wake up Cass. She fell and she is hurt. I have to be here. I have to.”

“I know, sweetie,” Luke spoke gently, pulling her closer to him. She allowed him. He got her up and made her look at him instead of at Cass’ body.

I watched as Lilith struggled to process the reality before her, and my heart clenched at the pain this was causing her. Time seemed to slow down, as Luke finally managed to get her back up the stairs, as she kept repeating that Cass fell and she wasn’t feeling very well.

“Make some room,” I suddenly heard Doctor Zalkind’s voice, as he fought his way through a swarm of servants, more of whom had gathered, creating a circle around Cass and me.

He arrived swiftly, his face a mask of concern and grief as he knelt by Cassandra’s lifeless form. His experienced eyes assessed her first. I was sure that he could tell immediately. Still, he knelt down, pressing his trembling fingers onto her neck. Then, he checked her eyes. It was clear that there was nothing he could do. The room fell into a heavy silence momentarily. Up until then, I could hear occasional whispers, but now, there was nothing.

“I’m sorry,” he lifted his head to me. “She’s gone.”

A collective gasp filled the hallway, followed by wails of grief from all the servants. I looked somewhere behind Doctor Zalkind, and I realized that the king was standing there. He hadn’t even seen Cassandra yet.

I jumped up, trying to hide her body from his sight.

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“Your Highness, I really advise against—”

He didn’t wait for me to finish. He pushed me aside and headed towards Cass. His eyes filled with disbelief and anguish as he beheld his beloved daughter, so full of life just moments before, now forever stilled in death.

“No, no, it can’t be true,” he whispered, his voice breaking with grief. “Cassandra, my dear sweet child...”

The weight of the loss was too much to bear, and he crumpled to his knees beside her, his shoulders shaking with sobs. The air in the hallway was heavy with sorrow, and those who had gathered could feel the king’s heartache reverberate through the castle walls.

I watched him as his hands shook, reaching out to touch Cassandra’s still form, his fingertips brushing against her skin. Like any beloved and brave king, he had seen battles and faced dangers, but nothing could ever prepare a man for such a profound loss.

He was no longer a king. He was a father, who had lost a child. His heart-wrenching cries echoed throughout the hallway. The mighty king was now a broken man, grappling with unimaginable pain. Everyone stood in silence, watching him. Our hearts were all heavy with sorrow. His grief was a palpable presence, casting a dark shadow over everyone present. And yet, even in the hour of his deepest sorrow, he remained regal, his presence commanding, but his pain was unmistakable.

At that moment, the doctor approached the king and placed his hand on his shoulder.

It calmed the king down a bit as he lifted his gaze.

“We should take her to her room,” Doctor Zalkind suggested. “I would like to examine her.”

“No, no, no,” the king shook his head, tears streaming down his face. “I will not let you cut up my child for whatever reason.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing, Your Majesty,” Doctor Zalkind spoke kindly and with much respect. “But we need to see what caused her...”

Death.

That was the word he wanted to use, but he couldn’t. To be quite honest, I don’t know if I would use it either. Seeing this broken man like this, we all knew that the word would bring him even more pain and sorrow.

“I just want to do a basic examination, so we have an idea of what happened,” Doctor Zalkind kept on speaking with much respect, and it was obvious from this that he and the king had seen many things together over the years. One would even say that they were friends.

The king finally got up. It seemed to me that in the last couple of minutes, his physical form had shrunk, as if a vital part of his body was missing now, without any hope of ever returning again.

He patted the doctor on the shoulder. “I know you will take good care of her. I just... I...”

“I know,” the doctor nodded. I thought that he too would start crying at any moment, but he managed to control himself.

“Adrian?” the king turned to me, his voice having aged as well as his eyes. “Can you please take Cassandra up to her room and put her on the bed?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” I nodded immediately.

It seemed as if he wanted to say something else, but then, he almost dropped to the ground, his legs unable to carry the weight of his body any longer.

“Take him to sit down and bring him some water,” Doctor Zalkind urged one of the servants, who immediately rushed over and did as they were told. Then, he turned to me and nodded.

I looked down at Cassandra’s body. She looked so small, so delicate. I was afraid that if I didn’t take her properly, I mightbreak her. I was afraid of doing something to her, of hurting her even more by being careless.

With a heavy heart and a deep sense of responsibility, I gently lifted Cassandra's lifeless body into my arms. She felt so light, almost weightless, as if she had become a fragile ethereal presence. My steps were slow and deliberate, carrying her back to the sanctuary of her room.

Upon reaching her room, I carefully laid Cassandra on her bed, making sure she was resting peacefully. I stepped back, allowing the gravity of the moment to sink in. She looked as if she was merely sleeping, as if she would wake up at any moment and laugh at us, telling us it was just a joke. But nothing would ever be the same.

Cassandra had always been kind and warm-hearted, treating everyone with genuine care and affection. She had an uncanny ability to bring joy to any gathering, and her presence had brightened even the darkest days. I couldn’t even imagine what it was like to have someone like that in your life and then lose them like this.

At that moment, doctor Zalkind came into the room and closed the door behind him. He looked solemn, his eyes heavy with sorrow. He was carrying his black leather bag with him this time. I stepped away from the bed, all the way to the wall.

“Is that all?” I asked, thinking that he would probably want to be alone while doing this, but his answer surprised me.

“Stay,” he urged. “I... I don’t want to do this alone. And I can’t ask the king or his daughter to be here while I do this.”

I nodded sympathetically. He inhaled deeply, then started the examination. He was careful and respectful, not to lift her nightgown too high up, although I was sure that at some point, he would need to inspect her entire body. But maybe the king would not allow that either.

After a few minutes, he pulled away, pushing his glasses further up his nose. “I don’t see any visible wounds or indications of foul play,” he told me.

I frowned. “So, she fell?”

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“After speaking with the king, I will conduct a thorough examination to ascertain whether that is really the cause, if he allows it, of course,” he added. “But from what I can see now, yes. Everything points to this being a tragic accident.”

I thought about it for a moment. The possibility of a fall was plausible. It was dark in the hallway and the staircase was winding. But this was someone who had descended and ascended those very same stairs a million times in her life. Was it really possible that she lost her footing and fell?

I didn’t know what to think. When I exchanged glances with the doctor, I knew that the same doubts lingered in his mind as well. We were all afraid that there was malicious intent behind Cassandra’s death, we were just too cautious to say it out loud this soon.

“I will go and speak to the king,” Doctor Zalkind said, taking off his gloves and putting them back into his leather bag. His gaze lingered on Cassandra’s lifeless form, knowing well that her absence would be profound and the emptiness it would leave would affect everyone at the castle.

He inhaled deeply, quickly wiping away a tear with his sleeve, which was the only unprofessional gesture he allowed himself.

“Please, lock up this room for the time being,” he urged, giving me the key. “No one is to come here and disturb her. I shall come back after speaking with the king and see what our next step is.”

“Understood,” I nodded.

He turned around and walked out of the room, without saying anything else. I was left alone, wondering what the truth was. I knew that I couldn't dismiss the possibility of this being a murder masked as an accident. It was all too convenient. But if it was truly murder, who was it?

There was more to the story than met the eye and I knew that now, I needed to protect Lilith more than ever.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lilith

I didn't even realize when Luke brought me back to my room. The door was closed. The window was open. But I didn't feel anything. I was breathing merely because my lungs required it and my body did it unconsciously. I couldn't taste anything. I couldn't smell anything. When Luke took me by the hand to try and comfort me, I didn't feel anything. My body was dead, numb to any physical sensations.

In the corner, on a small coffee table, I saw two cups of steaming hot tea. Luke got up and brought a cup over, handing it to me.

"Drink something, Lil," he urged softly. "It'll do you good."

My eyes widened in disbelief. My sister was dead, and he was bringing me fucking tea!?

My teeth clenched. Without even knowing what I was doing, I pushed the cup out of his hands. The scorching hot liquid spilled over my hand, while the cup fell onto the carpet, breaking into a million pieces. That was exactly how I felt. My heart just broke into a million pieces, and I knew I would never be able to put it together again, not when I had a vital piece missing. My hand, still numb from grief, showed no

signs of pain despite the searing heat of the spilt tea.

Luke immediately rushed for a cloth, pouring some cold water from a jug, and rushed back to me. He took my hand gently and pressed the cloth onto the burnt flesh. I still didn't feel anything. Not cold, not hot. It was almost as if it wasn't my body any longer. It was nobody's.

Luke's concerned eyes remained fixed on me. I could see what he wanted to do. He wanted to alleviate my pain, which somehow enraged me even more. I didn't want to make this pain go away. I wanted it inside of me, because that was the only thing I had left of my sister.

"Lilith, please be careful," he urged, his voice gentle. "You hurt yourself."

I looked down at my hand, the redness and blistering becoming evident, but I remained indifferent to the physical sensation. The emotional pain was far more consuming, eclipsing any physical discomfort I was feeling.

"It doesn't matter," I whispered, my voice choking with emotion. "Nothing matters now."

He was not sitting beside me anymore. He was kneeling, reaching out to touch my uninjured hand. "Lilith, I know this is incredibly difficult for you. Losing Cass... I can't even imagine how that feels. But I know that we will all miss her. It is a pain we all share. You don't have to face this pain alone. Let me be here for you."

I didn't want him to be here for me. I wanted to be alone. I wanted this pain to wash over me. I wanted to remember my sister and I wanted to live in that memory forever.

"I want to be alone," I told him, pulling my hand away from his.

“I understand,” he whispered. “Take all the time you need. I’ll be here, if you need me.”

I just nodded, without looking at him. I listened to the sound of his footsteps, then the door being closed. The silence felt oppressive. But I didn’t want him here. I couldn’t say why. I didn’t want my best friend here, next to me, after I just lost my sister. I felt like there was no more light to guide me through dark nights, no beacon of hope. I wanted to get used to the darkness. I wanted to embrace it and not fear it anymore, because I’d lost what I loved the most. There was nothing else to be afraid of, nothing else to lose.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. I frowned, thinking it was Luke again. So, I didn’t say anything. I was hoping that he would think I fell asleep or something. Saying even one word felt like a burden I didn’t want to add to the ones I was already carrying. Another knock assured me that I would not be left alone. But I refused to speak.

Then, the door opened. My brows knitted as I lifted my gaze.

“I told you I wanted to be alone,” I snarled, but to my surprise, it wasn’t Luke. It was Adrian.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just wanted to see if you needed anything.”

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I looked down at my hands which rested in my lap. I didn't invite him in, nor did I tell him to go away. He made his own choice. The door closed and curiosity got the best of me. I lifted my gaze again. There he was, standing in the middle of the room. He looked at the broken cup, then at my hand.

Wordlessly, he picked up the wet cloth and came to sit by my side. He gently took my hand into his. This time, I felt his touch. It was even hotter than the tea, but the blisters were nonexistent in my mind still. He slowly pressed the wet cloth onto my wound.

"Does this hurt?" he asked. I shook my head. "Did you do this on purpose?"

I didn't reply to this. But I think he knew.

"Anger and pain usually go together," he pointed out. "But they unfortunately don't cancel each other out, as you can see for yourself."

I didn't say anything to that either. There was nothing to say. I just wanted to sit in silence, allowing a strange sense of comfort to wash over me. I didn't feel it when Luke was here, but it was here now. I closed my eyes, and at that moment, tears started to stream down my cheeks. I finally allowed myself to express the overwhelming grief that had been pent up inside of me from the moment I saw Cass' lifeless body at the bottom of the stairs.

"It hurts so much," I said loudly, not expecting any reply. "I feel like I've been broken into a million pieces, and they are scattered all around. I feel like I will never find all the pieces again."

He didn't even try to offer empty words of comfort. He knew, just like I did, that no words could ever heal the wound I carried. Instead, he just listened, allowing it all to just leak out of me.

"Cass liked to play pirates," I suddenly said, my thoughts completely irrational, but I didn't even try to stop the words from flowing. "She liked to explore the gardens. She had an infectious laughter, which annoyed me sometimes."

I smiled at this. The notion struck me like lightning out of a clear blue sky.

"My older sister," I echoed. "She loved the stars. On clear nights, we used to sneak out to the rooftop and stargaze. She was always afraid that Father would catch us doing it. Once he did, and I took the blame for it, saying I convinced her to go with me, while it was actually the other way around. But he believed me, because I was usually the ringleader."

This thought saddened me.

"I won't be anyone's ringleader anymore," I whispered, looking down at my hands, which rested in his. "I can't believe she is gone. This all feels like a horrible nightmare and I'm expecting to wake up any moment."

At that moment, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me onto his chest. It was an awkward embrace, as if neither of us was used to something like that, but suddenly, a floodgate of emotions broke loose inside of me. He held me gently, offering a safe haven for my emotions, not demanding an explanation or an apology.

I thought I didn't need anyone. I thought that I wanted to go through this alone, but he just proved me wrong. The truth was I didn't want just anyone. I wanted him.

I wanted to allow myself to lean on him. I let go of the walls I built around my heart,

embracing the vulnerability of the moment. I didn't want to pretend that I was strong, when I wasn't. I was grieving. I was in pain. I didn't want to hide any of this.

I felt that with him, I could be who I truly was. I didn't need to put on a brave face. After all, he already knew so much about me. And now, embracing me tenderly, I felt as if he had accepted my pain, my tears, my grief without any judgment, and in this acceptance, I could sense a small measure of comfort.

This was the moment when I stopped talking. I pressed my head to his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating. That was all I wanted to listen to. We remained in each other's arms for what felt like an eternity, as if time itself had stopped in that moment of shared sorrow. I could never open up like this to Luke. I could never feel this way about him. And I knew that I had to tell him that. He deserved someone who would love him unconditionally. As for my heart, it belonged to someone else.

When we finally pulled away from each other, our eyes locked. I knew that mine were red and puffy from crying. But I didn't care.

"Never be afraid or ashamed of how you feel," he told me.

"Even if my feelings threaten to destroy everything?" I asked.

"Even then," he assured me.

I knew that this wasn't the time to mention anything. I just wanted to thank him for being there, when he got up.

"I'll go see your father," he told me.

I wondered if I said something wrong or maybe hinted at something. He was at the door when I called out to him.

“Adrian, wait!”

He paused for a moment, his back still turned to me. I quickly stood up, my heart racing as I approached him.

“I didn’t want to burden you with my pain,” I began, feeling that my voice was laced with vulnerability, but I couldn’t help it. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I told you. It’s alright,” he added, reaching out to brush a tear away from my cheek. “I just thought it might be best to give you some space to process everything that just happened, and I’m sure your father will come to see you any moment. Grief is never easy, and it is always better to grieve with loved ones who understand your pain.”

“Oh... well, thank you for that,” I said, feeling both relieved and confused. “I don’t even know what to say to Father...”

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“You are all he has left now,” he told me. “Speak from the heart. Join in this pain and remember your sister for who she was when she was with you two.”

These words made me tremble again and I felt another onslaught of tears coming on. I blinked heavily keeping them at bay. He leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. There was so much love and tenderness in that kiss, I felt as if I were enveloped in an aura of warmth. I was still overpowered by the pain, but I found solace in knowing that I had people who cared deeply about me. In this knowledge, I knew I would find the courage to face the empty days that lay ahead of me, one step at a time, with the memory of my sister guiding me through the darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Adrian

As I entered the king’s study the following morning, I was taken aback by the sight that met my eyes. King Theodore, whom I had always known to be composed and dignified, looked weary and worn. The weight of grief and sorrow seemed to have aged him, and I could see the toll it had taken on him.

His usually impeccable appearance was slightly disheveled, his clothing lacking the usual regal splendor. His silver hair, normally meticulously styled, appeared ruffled, as if he had been running his hands through it in frustration. The lines on his forehead were deeper, evidence of the burdens he carried as the father of one dead child.

The king’s eyes, once filled with authority and resolve, now held a weariness that tugged at my heart. I could see the pain and sadness reflected in his gaze, the weight

of loss heavy upon his soul. As I approached, he looked up from his desk, and I saw a flash of sadness in his eyes before he quickly masked it with his usual composure.

“Adrian,” he greeted me, his voice tinged with a mixture of fatigue and determination.

“Your Highness,” I replied respectfully, trying my best to offer a reassuring presence despite the somber atmosphere. “You called for me?”

“Indeed,” he nodded with a heavy sigh. “I’ve spoken with Zalkind, and he tells me that he is almost absolutely certain that Cassandra fell down the stairs.”

Mentioning his daughter’s name immediately made his composure waver, and a hint of vulnerability seeped through. I could see the pain in his eyes. He didn’t even try to mask it now.

“He told me the same thing yesterday,” I nodded.

He paused for a moment, then he continued. “In light of everything that has happened before this... do you think it is possible that this was nothing more than a tragic accident?”

I wanted to be given a moment to think about it, to find the right words to form my response, but he wouldn’t have it.

“Don’t think about it,” he warned. “I want an honest answer. One does not need to think long for an honest answer.”

“It is possible,” I said, obliging him. “But it is also possible that someone might have masked it as an accident and that maybe, in the dark, someone could have mistaken her for Lilith.”

This idea petrified me, that I could have woken up in the middle of the night to find Lilith dead at the bottom of the stairs.

“Those were my thoughts as well,” he mused. “That someone wanted to prevent this marriage at all costs, even daring to enter my castle and do something so horrible.”

I nodded solemnly, offering him a sympathetic gaze. “Only, I doubt anyone would pass through the guards.”

“There are more than enough of them scattered throughout the premises,” he agreed. “Not a mouse could have passed unseen.”

“Then, someone inside the castle?” I wondered.

“Could be,” he replied. “I see no other explanation.”

He looked at me in a way that somehow made me want to prove my loyalty to him. “With all due respect, Your Highness, I know that I am the last addition to the staff inside the castle and if you believe that I am—”

He waved his hand dismissively, frowning. “I have no time nor will for such ridiculous talks. We’ve discussed this already. If Jericho trusts you, so do I.” He was referring to my boss by his first name, something not many were given the privilege to do. This proved that the king and my boss were very close.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” I nodded, grateful that I did not need to explain myself or my presence here.

Something told me, if Luke was here, he would demand that of me. But he was not the one who made the rules here. He was just the man who would marry the woman I loved. Nothing more, nothing less. The thought made my nostrils flare up, so I tried

to calm myself down.

“I don’t know anymore,” he said helplessly, raking his fingers through his hair. “I believed that we managed to make the castle a safe place, but I see now that we failed. I failed.”

“You didn’t fail, Your Highness,” I said, but the moment I did that, our gazes locked, and I knew that he didn’t need empty words of comfort. The guilt of losing his daughter would be something he would carry with him for the rest of his life.

“I cannot allow that to happen to Lilith,” he told me. “Not after the witch has warned us that she would be the target. That is why I believe that Cassandra might have been mistaken for her last night and pushed down the stairs. It is of course something we cannot prove. And I don’t intend on keeping Lilith here long enough to find out if there will be another such... accident.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he was aiming at, so I allowed him to continue, while listening intently to him.

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“I wish there was a place we could take her, to keep her safe,” he mused.

I thought about it for a moment, then it dawned on me. “How about we take her to Evangeline?”

“The witch?” he asked.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I don’t know how she would feel about it, but she has already expressed her desire to help us by offering insight. Maybe she wouldn’t mind helping us in other ways as well, such as offering shelter to Lilith.”

“And you,” he added.

“Me?” I echoed.

“Of course,” he nodded gravely. “You don’t think I will let her go alone, do you?”

“Well, no, but...” I faltered. “I thought you would want to send her there with her fiancée.”

He inhaled deeply. “I doubt he would be able to protect her if the situation required it of him.”

“Then why not send guards with them?” I suggested, feeling that this would put me right in between Lilith and her future husband, exactly the opposite of what I was trying to do.

With everything that had happened, my emotions for her were the least important thing. But they were still there, still omnipresent and I was finding it increasingly difficult to deal with them, especially when I was by her side. Back in her room, I couldn't resist embracing her, comforting her and that kiss on the forehead held all my love for her. I knew that I had crossed the line, and I would keep crossing it every time the opportunity presented itself for the simple reason that I loved her. There was no denying it. I loved a woman who was about to become someone else's wife. I never thought I would find myself in such a ridiculous situation. I thought I knew better, but obviously, I didn't.

"No, no," the king shook his head. "The witch won't trust them. It has to be you. And Lilith. Just the two of you. Luke will stay here in the castle with me. We shall spread a rumor that Lilith is stricken with grief, and that is why she refuses to leave her room. Not even the servants will know the truth. It is of the utmost importance that everyone thinks Lilith is still here, while actually she's not. That is the only way to keep her safe."

"I understand," I nodded. His plan made sense. Lilith's safety was the most important thing, especially now. "When are we to go?"

"Tonight," he told me gravely, in a voice that wouldn't allow any backtalk. "You will travel with horses. That will make you less conspicuous. Once you're there, you will explain everything to the witch, and hopefully, she will agree to this plan."

"I hope so, too," I agreed.

"Just remember not to mention this to anyone," the king concluded. "The only people who will know of this will be the four of us. Me, you, Lilith and Luke."

"I understand," I echoed.

“Go and get ready,” he urged. “I shall summon Lilith and Luke and share the plan with them.”

I bowed respectfully and left his study. My mind buzzed with thoughts of the plan we just discussed. It seemed like the safest course of action, given the grave danger that Constantine and his clans posed. Evangeline had knowledge and abilities that could protect Lilith, and her cottage would be a sanctuary for us, as no vampires would dare trespass on her property.

I knew that keeping Lilith safe was paramount, and the idea of staying hidden at the witch’s cottage offered a glimmer of hope in these dark times. But as the weight of responsibility settled on my shoulders, doubts began to creep into my mind.

Would it truly be enough to keep Lilith safe? Could we really evade Constantine’s grasp for an extended period? What if they discovered our whereabouts and launched an attack on the witch’s cottage, despite their fear of her retribution? My mind played out numerous scenarios, each one more harrowing than the last.

But I also knew that we couldn't stay idle. The danger was real, and we needed to act swiftly to protect Lilith and the kingdom. The witch was our best chance at finding information about Constantine’s plans and ensuring Lilith’s safety.

As I walked through the hallways of the castle, my thoughts kept returning to Lilith. Her grief over Cassandra’s death had brought us closer, and I felt a deep sense of responsibility to shield her from further harm. I knew I couldn’t let my emotions cloud my judgment, but it was challenging to separate my personal feelings from the mission at hand.

I went to my room and started to pack. As I carefully placed essential supplies into a bag, my thoughts drifted to the perilous road that lay ahead. I knew we couldn’t afford to be careless. Every decision we made could have dire consequences.

Constantine was a cunning adversary, and I couldn't underestimate the dangers that awaited us. The worst part was that we didn't even know how deep his plans were and what he was ready to do to get what he wanted, which was King Theodore's crown. There was already one casualty. I couldn't allow there to be more.

Glancing at the moon pendant that hung around my neck, a memento of my bond with Florian, I felt a mix of gratitude and concern. The pendant was the key to gaining the witch's trust, but it also meant that we were venturing into unknown territory, with no guarantees of safety.

Lilith's words echoed in my mind. Her trust in me was unwavering, and I couldn't let her down. I had to be strong for her, to protect her with everything I had. When I stumbled into this job, I had no idea that it would change everything. Yet, here I was, ready to risk everything, for a woman who would never be mine.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was that she would be alive and well. Most importantly, she would be safe. That was enough.

I tried to focus on the rest of my stuff, of which there was very little. I made it a habit to travel light, especially for occasions such as this one. I looked around the room, wondering if I would ever return here again. My heart clenched at the possibility of a negative answer. Fate had a strange way of arranging your life in a way you would never have expected it. This was what had happened here. I arrived, thinking it would be like any other job, thinking it would be my last job. In many ways, it was. But I never expected it to be the beginning of something like this.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lilith

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“That is absolutely out of the question!” Luke shouted, as the three of us found ourselves in my father’s study. Father had just revealed to us the new plan, which was for me and Adrian to go to the witch’s cottage and stay there until the wedding, or until it was safe for me to come back.

I didn’t get the chance to say anything at first, because Luke exploded the moment Father shared the news with us.

“I don’t think you are seeing the bigger picture here, Luke,” Father tried to calm him down, which I applauded.

As the king, he could have just issued this as an order and Luke wouldn’t have been able to say anything. But he didn’t. Father had always been mindful of those around him and hated issuing orders. He preferred to come together with people, and agree on something, rather than make it seem as if he was having his own way. That was just one of the reasons why everyone respected him and considered him a kind and just ruler.

“Don’t I get any say in this?” Luke asked, clearing his throat a little. I thought that this was the moment where he realized that he was dangerously close to crossing the boundary and making it seem as if he were being disrespectful to the king.

“Lilith’s safety is our primary concern now,” Father reminded us all, although I doubted any of us needed a reminder for this.

Cass’ body was buried mere hours ago in the family crypt. The pain felt like an open wound, and I doubted it would heal for a long time. The worst part was that this

wasn't the end. On the contrary, this felt like the beginning of something horrific, and we could sense it in the air, crackling around us, like a foreboding.

"I could go with her," Luke insisted. "I could keep her safe."

Father paused, careful to choose his words. "I do not doubt your fighting prowess, but I do doubt that you would be granted entry into the witch's cottage."

"I could say that you sent me," Luke urged.

Father shook his head. "It's not that easy. My word means nothing to the witch. The only reason Adrian gained access to her knowledge and help was because of Florian. The witch keeps to herself. It doesn't matter if someone is a human, a vampire, a werewolf or whatever species one belongs to. She has withdrawn from the world. We were fortunate that Florian's mother belonged to the same witch order as her, and she wanted to pay homage to Florian's mother because of a necklace. Now, she connects that necklace to Adrian, and I doubt that she would open her doors to you even if you were to wear that same necklace."

This made a lot of sense, but Luke was still frowning. I couldn't understand why. Then, it hit me. He was jealous that I would be leaving the castle with Adrian. Now, I was certain that his feelings were real. They were much bigger than I had initially thought. Otherwise, I doubt he would react like this.

"Lilith is to leave tonight," Father said, turning to me. "I have already told Adrian to pack, so you should go ahead and do the same."

"Yes, Father," I nodded, not saying anything else. I headed for the door, when he called out to me. I turned around, puzzled. "Aren't you going to fight me on this one?"

I shook my head, shrugging. “Why would I?”

He smiled for the first time since Cass had gone. I couldn’t even imagine how much effort that must have taken him. “Thank you.”

“For what?” I wondered, lingering.

“For understanding the urgency of this,” he clarified, then walked up to me. He cupped my face in his hands. They were cold and clammy.

I remember, when I was a little girl, he could fit my entire face in his hands. But now, he seemed to have diminished, shrunk somehow, as if most of his life force had been sucked out of him. When they were closing the crypt with Cass’ body in it, for a moment, I thought that he would run back inside and demand to be buried along with her.

“I already lost one daughter,” he told me, his voice on the verge of breaking. He was looking at me with tears in his eyes. I had never seen him like this, a broken man, a mere shadow of who he once was. I almost broke down into tears myself, but I stayed strong, for him, for Cass, for myself. “I cannot lose the other one as well.”

“You won’t lose me, Father,” I replied, my voice faltering, as I fell into his arms.

At that moment, his regal façade had crumbled, and he stood before me with a vulnerability that I had rarely seen in him. His once proud shoulders were now slumped, and the weight of sorrow etched lines on his tired face.

It was an embrace filled with both love and sadness, a tender moment that spoke of our never-ending bond. I closed my eyes, allowing the unspoken words to pass between us, words of love, loss and promise. Father’s grip tightened, as if he was trying to hold onto me just a little longer, wishing to shield me from the harsh world

that had somehow managed to creep its way into the confines of our castle, the place we had always called our home.

“I will miss you, my dear,” he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion.

This was where I couldn’t hold my tears any longer. I spoke through the tears. “I will come back before you know it, Father.”

He nodded, caressing my cheek. A few moments later, he let go of me, and I left his study. I rushed to my room, closing the door, and just as I was calming myself down a little, the door burst open. It was Luke.

“A closed door means you need to knock,” I told him, annoyed that he would intrude upon my private space like this. It showed an utter lack of respect, just like he showed the same towards my father when we were in his study. I didn’t like that.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I wasn’t thinking.”

I didn’t say anything to that, I just kept on packing, grabbing just the basic essentials and stuffing them into a backpack. He watched me do it silently, until I finally lifted my gaze to him.

“Did you want something?” I asked, still annoyed.

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“I don’t trust him,” he said through his teeth.

“Who?” I frowned.

“The vampire,” he replied. I figured he refused to say his name on purpose although he very well knew it.

“Why not?” I asked, continuing to pack.

Luke kept shaking his head. “Something doesn’t add up.”

I was on the verge of tears again, because of Father, because of Cass.

“I trust Father’s judgment,” I told him boldly, refusing to bow down to his will or pamper his emotions any longer. “I also trust Adrian.” I made sure to accentuate his name. “He’s saved me more than once before.”

“Maybe it was all staged so you would think he saved you, so you and more importantly, the king would trust him,” he pointed out.

I inhaled deeply. “Possibly.” I didn’t want to agree, but what he was saying could have been true. I had no way of knowing. “But still. Father said Adrian came highly recommended. He is a man... a vampire of his word.”

“A vampire, nonetheless,” Luke wouldn’t let me forget that.

“Some vampires are more human than some humans I know,” I snarled back, having

had enough of him attacking Adrian for no other reason than mere jealousy.

He looked at me, ready to snap himself, but then, he spoke calmly, trying to diffuse the situation.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, raking his fingers through his hair nervously. “I’m just worried about what might happen. Just look what happened to...”

“I know what happened to my sister,” I managed to muster. “I’ve also seen what it has done to my father. If he thinks I will be safer with the witch than here, then that is where I need to be, with whomever he thinks I need to go with.”

“Of course,” Luke nodded apologetically. “I’m sorry I acted like this. I’m just... nervous and scared.”

He turned away from me, and for a moment, I thought he was crying. I felt bad. We were all affected by what had happened. Putting myself in his shoes, I could imagine that he would be worried about me.

I walked over to him and placed my hand on his shoulder. This made him turn around. His eyes were slightly reddened and swollen. But he wasn’t crying.

“I’m sorry, too,” I said. “I’m filled with rage and fear, and these two mixed together are the worst emotional combination I’ve ever felt. I honestly don’t know what is the best course of action here. I’m afraid. I’m petrified, to tell you honestly. But I know that if Cass wasn’t safe here, I’m not safe here either.”

“You’re right,” he nodded.

I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him. He hugged me back, and we both stayed like that for a while.

“I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you,” he confessed. “I love you so much.”

I looked at him sorrowfully, not knowing what to say to that. “You mean a lot to me, Luke. You know that. Hopefully, when I get back, we will talk about... us. And we’ll see what will happen.”

His eyes widened in shock, in surprise, but he didn’t ask for clarification. In a way, I figured he understood everything.

“Alright,” that was all he managed to muster. “Do you need help packing?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you,” I shook my head. “I’ll grab just the basics. I hope not to have to stay there too long, honestly.”

“Me, too,” he smiled sadly, as he turned around and lingered in the doorway. He waved goodbye, then closed the door behind him.

I quickly packed the rest of my stuff and headed for the stables. I remembered that Adrian traveled on horseback last time, and I figured we’d do the same again. Just as I thought, he was already there. He looked restless, just like me. Even the horses could feel it.

“Ready?” he asked.

I shrugged. “As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

He offered me a weak smile, his best effort. I appreciated it. He got his horse out and I walked over to mine. I smiled, petting her muzzle.

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“I haven’t ridden you in ages, girl,” I whispered to her, bringing our noses together. She neighed softly in response. “You have to help me remember how to do this, OK?”

She didn’t say anything to this. She didn’t have to. A couple of minutes later, both Adrian and I were galloping away from the castle. Darkness was slowly descending, and the world around us seemed to blur into a rush of colors and sounds. The night enveloped us shortly after, and the moon cast a silvery glow over the winding forest path we were riding through. The rhythmic beat of the horses’ hooves reverberated through the silent woods, accompanied by the soft rustling of leaves in the breeze.

My heart pounded in my chest as I clung desperately to the reigns, my hair flowing like a sparkling river behind me. I would occasionally turn to Adrian, his determined expression cutting through the darkness around us, leading the way. The shadows flickered from every corner, the branches like demon claws threatening to grab us. I tried to banish those thoughts from my mind, as I looked on ahead of me.

I couldn’t help but think of father as well, and the heaviness pressed on me, leaving him behind in such dire times. But I knew this was for the good of everyone. Without me even noticing it, the thoughts of my father were replaced by the gravity of the situation. Seeking refuge with the witch was a dangerous mission, but I trusted Adrian to guide us safely through the night.

The forest seemed to come alive around us, the nocturnal creatures of the night stirring in the underbrush. A lone owl hooted from a nearby branch, its haunting call adding an eerie touch to the atmosphere that was already black enough. But neither of us faltered. We pressed on, fighting the fear that threatened to consume us.

As the trees began to thin, I finally caught sight of the witch's humble home. It was a small, secluded cottage, its walls adorned with intricate symbols and charms. I figured it was for protection. A faint light emanated from within, beckoning mysteriously.

Even the horses had slowed down to a gentle trot, as if sensing the presence of magic in the air. We dismounted our horses, our footsteps soft on the path leading to the entrance of the cottage. My heart clenched with a mix of anticipation and uncertainty. Sensing my unrest, Adrian turned to me and took me by the hand. Our gazes locked.

"It'll be fine," he said, with a smile.

I smiled back, nodding.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Adrian

The truth was, I had no idea how the witch would react. We hadn't spoken of this, of me bringing Lilith here. But if she were as wise as everyone claimed her to be, she would know that this was our last resort, and she would not turn us away.

Those were my thoughts as I stood with Lilith's hand in mine, knocking on the door to the witch's cottage. My heart was beating inside my throat. I knew we could be turned away from here, and if we were, I didn't know where we would go. I prayed that she would see the urgency in our plea and grant us shelter.

A moment later, the door opened just a little. That knowing eye peered from inside, seeing me, then Lilith.

"Is she the one?" she asked, without opening the door further.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

She hesitated. Then, she finally bid us to come in. We rushed inside, as the warm glow of the candlelight spilled all around us. The cottage interior was warm and cozy. I watched as Lilith stood in awe at all the mystical artefacts and books, which seemed to create an atmosphere brimming with ancient energy.

The witch closed the door behind us, her eyes deep and mysterious as the night sky that we left behind us. I turned to her, expecting her to speak, but instead, her gaze was fixated on Lilith. There was a knowing twinkle in her gaze, as if she knew everything that had happened without us telling her a single word of it.

“Welcome,” she said, her voice soft but resolute. “You are safe here.”

Lilith walked over to her respectfully. “Thank you for welcoming us. We are grateful for your kindness and protection.”

The witch smiled. Obviously, good manners were the key to winning her over. She turned to me. “It’s been a while since I met such a well-mannered princess. A human princess, at that.”

“You are very kind,” Lilith replied courteously.

“Might I offer you two some refreshments?” Evangeline asked. “I have some tea of my own making. It is perfect for weary travelers.”

“Yes, please,” Lilith said. I merely nodded.

“Make yourselves comfortable while I brew the tea,” Evangeline suggested, and we proceeded to sit around a wooden table. Lilith seemed a little apprehensive, but she was curiously glancing all around. Evangeline moved slowly around the small

kitchen area, her skilled hands selecting an assortment of dried herbs and flowers from glass jars, which stood on a shelf in front of her.

No one spoke for the time being, as the aroma of herbs filled the room, evoking a sense of tranquility. Lilith's eyes were darting from one object on the wall to another. Everything interested her. I remembered being like this the first time I arrived here as well. But now, I was watching Evangeline. Her body was small, but nimble, as she drew the knowledge from her mind, placing ingredients into a teapot. The tea leaves released their essence into the water, creating a fragrant infusion that seemed to resonate with the ancient magic that permeated the cottage. With gentle care, the witch poured the tea into two small cups, and a soft steam wafted upwards, carrying with it a promise of solace. Slowly, she brought the tray over to us and placed it on the table.

"Here you go," she said. "Sip it slowly. Let the magic of nature embrace your soul. It will help you find peace in these troubling times."

The tea looked steaming hot, but Lilith took the cup and brought it to her lips, blowing gently. Moments later, she took a careful sip.

"It is wonderful," Lilith said, her voice hushed, like everything else in this cottage, almost as if speaking too loudly might break the magic of the moment. "Thank you so much."

"You are both guests in my humble abode," Evangeline told us. "It is my pleasure to offer what little comfort I can."

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Following Lilith's example, I did the same. We continued to sip the tea, tired from the ordeals that we tried to leave back at the castle, but that was impossible. The pain Lilith carried in her heart would follow her wherever she went. There was no escaping it.

"How did you start learning about potions and magic?" Lilith suddenly asked, obviously intrigued by the array of magical herbs and potions that were on display in the cottage.

Evangeline's eyes softened, and a faint smile graced her lips. "It feels like centuries ago," she began, her voice carrying the weight of countless memories. "I was just a young girl when I first discovered my affinity for the mystical arts. You know, you humans think that all witches can do powerful magic, but that isn't so."

"It's not?" Lilith echoed, intrigued. I had to admit that I was curious about this as well.

"No," Evangeline shook her head. "We all have that capability in us, but in different amounts. And it also depends on how talented we are, how willing to work at this and get better. Just like you humans. You are also born destined for numerous talents and skills, but sometimes, you don't work at it hard enough and raw talent isn't enough. Work has to follow. Lots of it."

"That makes a lot of sense," Lilith agreed.

Evangeline smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way. As for me, I grew up in a small village, surrounded by the beauty of nature. My grandmother, a wise witch in her

own right, taught me the secrets of herbs and the healing properties they possessed.”

I watched Lilith as she listened intently, captivated by the story. I had to admit that I was drawn in as well. I’d never heard the story of a witch’s life, especially from a witch like Evangeline.

“As I grew older, I yearned for knowledge beyond what I had learned from my grandmother,” she continued. “So, I searched for ancient books and listened to other wise beings who were willing to share their wisdom with me.”

“That sounds so amazing,” Lilith gushed.

Evangeline was amused. “It was,” she agreed. “And the best part is that I am still on that journey of discovery as well as self-discovery. I keep delving into ancient texts.” She stopped, gesturing around her at the shelves which were filled with books. “I keep learning new things and intricacies of each herb and how it changes its effect when combined with another. It is all about cautious exploration of the delicate balance of nature’s magic.”

Her gaze seemed to wander beyond the confines of her cottage, as if she was truly reliving those early moments of exploration and awakening.

“It was the same with potions,” Evangeline continued. “As time passed, my knowledge grew, and I was naturally directed into the study of potions. Each of them holds its own unique magic, with the power to heal, protect, harm or even change the course of someone’s fate.”

Lilith gasped loudly. “Are they really that powerful?”

“Indeed,” Evangeline nodded. “That is why this knowledge can be very dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“It must be so wonderful to devote your life to something you love so passionately,” Lilith commented.

“Most certainly,” Evangeline confirmed.

She continued with more stories and anecdotes about her past, about her childhood, and her trials and tribulations with magic, concluding with the fact that through every challenge, she emerged wiser for the experience. At that point, Lilith started to yawn.

“It has been a long journey for you two,” Evangeline pointed out. “There is a bed in the backroom. You are free to rest.”

“Thank you,” Lilith said, standing up. “I didn’t even know I was this tired. Thank you again.”

“Don’t mention it,” Evangeline said.

We both followed Lilith with our gaze, until she disappeared through a small door, closing it behind her. As I found myself alone with Evangeline, I knew she would want clarifications on why we were knocking on her door in the middle of the night.

“Have you discovered anything new?” I asked, hopeful that she would have more information regarding Constantine and his plot.

“I’ve spoken with the Spirits of Nature,” she revealed. “All they have told me is that you need to be wary of what you seek and who you seek it from, for it may reveal more than you bargained for.”

She said a lot without really saying anything. I was probably expected to read between the lines, but I couldn’t do that right now. I needed clear instructions, tangible information I could rely on and plan our next move.

“What about the death of Lilith’s sister?” I asked.

“I’ve seen a death at the castle,” she confirmed. “I just wasn’t certain who it was. Accidents can be more than what they seem. There may be unseen forces at play, weaving a tapestry of fate that even I cannot fully comprehend.”

Again, her words left me with more questions than answers, but I knew that the answers I was looking for were intertwined with time as well as destiny. I could feel the weight of the responsibilities I now carried, and I knew that I had to unearth more. From the looks of it, Evangeline spoke too cryptically, and I doubted that her Spirits of Nature could reveal how exactly Constantine was plotting against the king.

There were still so many questions left unanswered. How was Luke poisoned? And did Cassandra really fall down, or did someone push her? This one would be difficult to prove without a confession.

As we continued our conversation, I couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe, Evangeline was being not only cryptic but evasive as well. Maybe she knew more than she was willing to divulge, but she didn’t want to frighten either me or Lilith with this knowledge.

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Nonetheless, I was grateful for everything she had been doing for us. Her presence was like a beacon of hope in the impending darkness. As the night deepened and we delved more deeply into our conversation, which remained equally puzzling, I still managed to find strength and determination that this was the place where Lilith would be safe. Evangeline would not let anyone come near her.

I got up and bid her good night, after she showed me where I could sleep. I thought that I wouldn't be able to, but the moment my head laid on the pillow and I closed my eyes, sleep took over. I felt completely knocked out, sleeping for hours, without stirring. I was certain that was because of the fact that we were truly safe here, safer than anywhere else in the whole world.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lilith

When I opened my eyes, it was still dark. I couldn't believe it. Was it possible that I had slept through the entire day and woke up when it was dark once again?

Maybe that didn't matter. What mattered was that I woke up refreshed. My body thanked me for this rest. I only wished that my mind and heart were in the same state of relaxation. I got up and walked through the cottage. Adrian was asleep on a small couch in the corner, which was made into a comfortable-looking bed. The witch was nowhere to be seen.

I decided to go out for some fresh air. In front of the witch's cottage, a dense forest stretched out, enshrouded in the obscurity of the night. The moon's silvery rays fell

upon the tree branches, casting ethereal patterns on the forest floor. The air was filled with the scent of damp earth and pine. A gentle breeze blew through my hair. I closed my eyes, allowing it to caress my face.

The woods seemed to hold secrets of its own, whispering ancient tales to those who dared to listen. Shadows danced playfully among the trees, weaving a tapestry of darkness and light. The rustling leaves seemed to murmur softly, a lullaby to the nocturnal creatures that called this place their home.

But despite the dark beauty that reigned around me, my heart weighed heavy with sorrow. My emotions seemed to mirror the somber atmosphere that surrounded me. The loss of my sister still lingered like a haunting specter, filling my entire being with profound sadness. I couldn't stop thinking about her alone in the crypt, sleeping forever more.

I inhaled deeply, allowing the sorrow to wash over me. A sense of utter isolation took over, and everything from the distant calls of owls and the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze, only seemed to enhance this sensation of loneliness. I was but a small speck of nothingness in this vast expanse of nature, small and vulnerable, like a fragile leaf. I hoped I could be carried away by the wind, far away, where all my troubles would cease to exist. But I knew such a thing wasn't possible.

The feeling was too heavy to bear. My eyes glistened with unshed tears. I didn't think I had anymore, but they kept coming. They seemed to mirror the shimmering moonlight above me. Each tree looked as if it was somehow magically turned to face me, standing as a silent witness to my grief. I felt as if they were telling me of all the other creatures they had seen crying under the weight of a heavy burden. Their ancient wisdom was vast. Only they knew that Nature went on. Nature did not dwell on what was happening now. It had a future to think about, while we, the small and insignificant were so invested in the here and now, because our future was indefinite.

I missed everyone so much. I missed Cass' laughter. I missed that familiar warmth of my father's hug. I missed that feeling of knowing that everything would be alright, because right now, I felt exactly the opposite. My grief felt like a heavy burden that was weighing me down.

With a heavy sigh, I turned my gaze back to the witch's cottage. I had to dig deep down to find the strength to go on without Cass, but I had to. I hoped that the enigmatic woman we came to would be able to offer some guidance and solace. But for now, I had to grieve. I felt as if the woods themselves listened, offering a quiet sanctuary for my sorrow.

At that moment, by the dim light of the moon, Adrian emerged from the cottage and approached me with tender concern in his eyes.

"How are you?" he asked, then scoffed. "What a stupid question."

I almost smiled at this. His very presence was enough to make me a little bit better.

"I don't know how I am, honestly," I admitted. "I'm sad. I'm angry. I'm afraid. I'm burdened by guilt. Just name any negative emotion, and I'm sure it's in me somewhere."

He lifted his gaze to me. "Those are a lot of negative emotions for one mind."

I shrugged. "I like to overachieve."

I couldn't believe that this time, I actually smiled. He smiled back.

"But I feel mostly sad," I admitted, looking down at my feet. "I can't help but feel guilty about Cass' death. I feel as if I've failed her somehow."

“It is easy to get lost in self-blame,” he said with a sigh. “Trust me, I know. And losing someone you love is never easy. In fact, it is the most difficult thing you could think of. But you can’t blame yourself for what happened. Sometimes, fate plays a hand that we can’t control.”

I looked at him. “You’re speaking like the witch now.”

He grinned. “Maybe it’s rubbing off on me.”

“You’d make a good warlock,” I pointed out, enjoying this slight digression from what we’d just been talking about.

“You think so?” he wondered.

“I’m sure of it,” I nodded. “You already sound like her. Just start dressing a little more... magical.”

“Magical?” he chuckled. “I don’t think so.”

He was now standing next to me, both of us staring into the woods. We lingered in that silence for a few moments, then I continued, because guilt lingered like a shadow in my heart.

“I can’t shake the feeling that I could have done something to prevent it.”

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He didn't say anything to that. Instead, he turned to me and wrapped his arms around me, soundlessly. As he held me, his warmth seeped into my very soul, reminding me that I didn't have to face this pain alone. I clung to him desperately, burying my face into his chest, inhaling his scent. There was nothing erotic about this. It was just two people, coming together in their hour of pain, trying to provide solace for each other.

Then, as if a bolt of lightning struck, I remembered something. I pulled away from him, with a look of shock on my face.

"What is it?" he asked, looking concerned.

"I didn't mention this before because I didn't think it mattered," I spoke out loud, not sure if I was talking to myself or him, but I continued, nonetheless. "Also, I promised Cass that I would keep her secret."

"What secret?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

"She told me about a secret boyfriend she had," I revealed.

His brow furrowed in concern. "A secret boyfriend? Do you know who he is?"

I shook my head. "No. She never mentioned his name or gave any hints about him. She was always so secretive about him, and now... we'll never know who he was."

A mix of emotions washed over me, guilt for not being there for her, regret for not knowing more, and curiosity about the person who had held a special place in my sister's heart. It pained me that I hadn't been a better confidante for her, that she had

carried this secret alone.

“That’s not necessarily true,” he interrupted my train of thought.

“What do you mean?” I asked, hopeful that he might have some plan.

He thought about it for a moment, then continued. “All women keep some mementoes of their boyfriends. If he was very important to your sister, I’m sure that there may be something in her room that could reveal the man’s identity.”

“Do you really think so?” My eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s a long shot,” he shrugged. “But it’s the only shot we have. And remember, even if we do find out who it is, maybe it’s not important at all. Maybe it’s someone irrelevant, who has nothing to do with everything that has been happening at the castle.”

“I know,” I nodded. “But I still want to know. Odds are that he doesn’t know what happened to Cass. Father hasn’t revealed it yet to the kingdom, that Cass is dead. He wanted to do it at a later point.”

“I see,” Adrian mused. “In that case, I think I should go back and see if there is anything in her room.”

“I’ll come with you,” I told him.

“No,” he shook his head at me. “You have to stay here. We can’t risk going back. We might get attacked on the way or even at the castle. We don’t know anything at this point, other than the fact that you are safe here. Evangeline’s magic will keep you safe.”

“But what if you get attacked on the way back?” I asked, not even daring to imagine what could happen.

He smiled, cupping my chin. “I can take care of myself. I know how important this is to you. I will be back. Trust me.”

At that moment, we heard footsteps coming from somewhere behind us. We turned around at the same time. It was Evangeline, coming back from the woods with a wicker basket in her hands. She moved slowly, as if every step was a difficult effort.

“Am I interrupting anything?” she wondered apologetically.

“No, of course not,” he replied immediately. “We were just discussing something. I need to go back to the castle because—”

“I forgot something very important,” I cut him off.

I didn’t know why, but for some reason, I didn’t want to mention Cass’ secret boyfriend to the witch. Although she probably knew about him. But something told me to be quiet.

She looked at me, almost as if she could see right through me, but I didn’t falter.

“Is that something worth the trip back?” she wondered.

“It is,” I said without hesitation.

“I’ll travel immediately,” Adrian informed us both. “I will return as soon as possible.”

I expected the witch to say something else, but she didn’t. She merely nodded,

walking past us and entering the cottage. Adrian waited for her to go in, then he turned to me.

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“Why didn’t you tell her about Cassandra’s secret boyfriend?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“I don’t think it’s wise to keep stuff hidden from the same person who’s trying to help us,” he pointed out.

“I know,” I nodded. “I know that. But... I can’t explain it. And besides, maybe it’s nothing. But I want to be sure it’s nothing before we tell anyone.”

“Alright,” he agreed.

“Thank you for trusting me,” I told him. “Really... I don’t know what I would do without you. I mean, without you here, with me, protecting me.” I added the last part as quickly as I could. I didn’t want him to think that this was a love confession, because it almost sounded like that. It was merely gratitude. At least, that was what I was trying to convince myself of.

“This is not just a job for me anymore,” he replied, a little hesitantly. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Of course, it does,” I jumped, clutching at his words, because they were finally what I was so desperate to hear. “Tell me, please. Because... there is something I want to tell you as well.”

He looked at me, weirded out a little, but he managed to regain composure.

“It seems we both have something to share with each other,” he said. “But not now. Riding back to the castle is more important. When I come back, then we’ll talk.”

“Alright,” I agreed, then without being able to resist the temptation, I leaned over and kissed him on the lips. It was a chaste kiss, a kiss of promise and beckoning to come back soon. I could only hope that he was able to read it all from it.

“I’ll be back soon,” he told me, caressing my cheek.

I watched him mount his horse and gallop into the woods. My heart fluttered out of love, out of fear for him. I couldn’t wait to have him back, hopefully with specific information that might bring us closer to what was truly happening not only inside the castle, but also around it.

Chapter Thirty

Adrian

I hoped that I wouldn’t run into anyone at the castle, which was a long shot. The servants were still busily working. The wedding day was a mere week away. There was a sense of joy but also trepidation in the air, and everyone felt it.

I descended my horse and rushed to the castle, climbing the stairs. The memory of Cassandra’s lifeless body at the bottom flooded my mind. I tried not to think about it, but that was difficult. As I finally reached the door to her room, a sense of melancholy washed over me, knowing that I was about to intrude upon a dead person’s private space. It just didn’t feel right. I knew that if the king saw me, he would banish me from the castle. But I also understood the importance of uncovering any clues that might shed light on the identity of her secret boyfriend. Even if it wasn’t important, I had to return to Lilith with something specific.

Taking a deep breath, I gently pushed the door open. The room felt as if it held echoes of her spirit, and I stepped inside with a mix of reverence and determination. Every object in the room seemed to hold a piece of her essence, and I felt a pang of sorrow realizing that I would never see her again. She was a kind soul, one that did not deserve the end she received.

I started my search methodically, starting with her desk, where I assumed she would have kept her journals. I opened all of the drawers, and the final one yielded the desired result. It was a dainty purple notebook, which had no lock and key. Anyone could open it. That was how trusting she was.

With a trembling hand, I scanned through the pages, hoping to find any mention of her secret beau. But it seemed that Cass had been meticulous in keeping this part of her life hidden, leaving no trace of her feelings within the pages of her journal.

Next, I moved to her bookshelf, examining the titles of the novels she loved. Perhaps she had hidden a letter or a memento between the pages. Yet, as I pulled out each book, I found nothing that hinted at the existence of her secret love.

Feeling a sense of urgency, I turned to her closet, where her clothes and personal belongings were neatly arranged. I felt even worse, as if I was desecrating a holy space. But I couldn't stop now. Lilith was counting on me. I pushed away these thoughts and continued. The scent of her perfume lingered in the air, and it brought back memories of her laughter and warmth. But even as I searched through her clothes, I found nothing that could offer any clue.

As time passed, my frustration grew, and I felt a sense of defeat. It seemed that every corner of her room held no answers, and I feared that her secret would remain hidden forever.

As I continued my search in Cassandra's room, my eyes caught a glimmer of

something unusual near her bed – a loose floorboard. Curiosity piqued, I knelt down and carefully pried the board open. To my surprise, a small wooden box was hidden beneath it, as if waiting to be discovered.

Gently lifting the box, I felt a rush of anticipation. Could this be what I had been searching for? Slowly, I opened the lid, and my heart skipped a beat as I beheld a treasure trove of mementos within.

The box was filled with tokens of memories – faded photographs capturing moments of laughter and joy, dried flowers that held the essence of cherished walks together, and small trinkets that bore the imprint of shared experiences. I took one of the photographs. It was the three of them, Cassandra, Luke and Lilith. They were all laughing, looking so much alive.

As I sifted through the contents, a folded piece of parchment caught my eye. My hands trembled slightly as I unfolded it, and there, in elegant script, were words of love and affection addressed to Cass. It was a heartfelt letter from her secret boyfriend, pouring out his feelings and emotions with tenderness and sincerity. It was signed L.

As I looked through the mementos in the box, a sense of realization washed over me. The photographs, the dried flowers, the trinkets – they all painted a picture of a love that had been kept hidden from everyone, including me. And as the pieces fell into place, I couldn't deny the truth any longer – Cassandra's secret boyfriend was Luke.

My heart sank, and I felt a wave of conflicting emotions. On one hand, I was happy to have found the answers I had been seeking, but on the other, the revelation brought a heavy weight of sorrow and confusion. How could Luke have kept such a secret from everyone at the castle?

As the truth settled in, I realized the implications of this discovery. Not only had

Cassandra kept her relationship with Luke hidden, but Luke had also been hiding this truth from Lilith. It felt like a betrayal, and yet, I understood the complexity of their situation.

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As I stood there, holding the box of mementos that spoke of a love that had been concealed from us all, I knew that this revelation would change everything. I couldn't help but wonder if their love had played a role in the events leading up to Cassandra's tragic fall.

Feeling a mix of anger, hurt, and confusion, I couldn't find the right words to express my emotions. My heart ached for Lilith, who had been through so much already, and now she would have to bear the weight of this new revelation. But first, I wanted to speak to Luke and tell him that his secret was out. I wanted to demand an explanation before Lilith herself had the chance to do so. I wanted to pound him into nothingness for causing pain to Lilith in any way.

With the weight of the revelation still heavy on my heart, I rushed out of the room, my mind racing with a myriad of emotions. I needed to find Luke, to confront him, to understand why he could do something so terrible. But as I scoured the corridors of the castle, he was nowhere to be found.

"Have you seen Luke?" I asked a passing servant, my voice louder than I meant it to be. But I didn't care whether the king would see me here or not. The most important thing was finding Luke and demanding an explanation.

The servant shook his head. "I saw him leave the castle grounds this morning. He seemed preoccupied."

A sinking feeling gnawed at me. Luke had left the castle, but for what reason? The king urged him to stay on. Was Luke trying to avoid something, or someone? Was he afraid that the truth would finally come to surface, as it did?

My mind was flooded with questions. How long had this been going on? Why did he do this behind Lilith's back? Did he truly love Cassandra or was it something far more sinister, was it just a fleeting affair, something irrelevant to pass the time with?

I rushed out into the garden, continuing my search for Luke. I couldn't help but feel conflicted. A part of me wanted to rush back to Lilith immediately, but another part wanted to stay on and find out firsthand why Luke did all this. I wanted to keep the truth hidden from Lilith, because I knew that it would cause her even more heartache, after everything she had been through. But I knew that I couldn't save her from this. She needed to know.

I retraced my steps, thinking of places Luke might have gone. The gardens, the stables, and even the village flashed through my mind. I searched the garden and the stables. He wasn't there. The village was too far away. I didn't have enough time to go there. I promised Lilith I would return as soon as possible. Riding to the village would have taken another day.

"Adrian!?" I heard the king's voice, just as I was about to mount my horse and gallop back to the witch's cottage. I was hoping to return unseen by the king, but that ship had sailed. "What are you doing here? Where is Lilith!?"

I turned to the king, bowing respectfully. "I know this looks bad, Your Highness, but, please, let me explain."

"You shall explain right now!" he exclaimed, trembling with rage. "Why aren't you looking after my daughter, making sure that she is safe?"

"She is safe, I assure you," I urged. "She is with the witch. I had to come back... for something."

He lifted his eyebrow. "For what?"

I knew that Lilith would probably want to tell her father everything, but I was torn here. I knew that the king demanded the truth of me, and nothing less would suffice. I also knew that I couldn't come up with a plausible lie on the spot. I didn't have that skill in me. I had always prided myself on my honesty. This time, it would be my downfall. So, be it.

"I'll tell you everything," I said inhaling deeply.

I told him in as few words as I could, explaining that I had returned to search Cassandra's room for evidence of her secret boyfriend. Then, I revealed who he was.

"Luke!?" the king exclaimed, looking as if he was about to pass out. He pressed his hand to his heart, breathing heavily. "Luke was..." he started, but he couldn't finish. It was too much.

"It looks so, yes," I nodded, sorrowful that I had to be the bearer of bad news. "I was about to go back to the witch's hut and tell Lilith everything. I tried finding Luke before that, to... give him a piece of my mind, but I was told he left early this morning."

"He did?" the king asked, sounding shocked. "This is my castle, and I have absolutely no idea what goes on inside these walls!"

I couldn't even imagine how helpless he must have felt at this point, to find out something so heartbreaking.

"Go back to Lilith," he told me. "Let me take care of Luke. When he comes back, he will have a lot of explaining to do."

I nodded gratefully, mounting my horse and lifting my hand to wave goodbye. He didn't respond. I left him with the commotion of his own thoughts, wondering how he

would welcome Luke back. I sure as hell didn't want to be in that man's place.

My journey back seemed somehow longer than on the way here. It probably had a lot to do with my own thoughts, bearing heavily on my mind. I had no idea how I would tell Lilith all of this. But then, I remembered something. She wouldn't want to marry someone who betrayed her.

No, no. I spoke to myself silently. I couldn't take advantage of someone in such a state and tell her that I loved her, when her mind would probably be all over the place. But I could be there for her. I could be the support she needed. I could be her shoulder to cry on. I could be whatever it was she needed at this moment, and maybe, just maybe, we could find our way to each other somehow, through this haze.

Chapter Thirty-One

Lilith

"You know, I've met your father a long time ago," Evangeline surprised me with her words, as we were seated at her wooden table, I was leafing through one of her books and she was separating the dried leaves off of a twig and putting them into a glass jar to her right.

"You have?" I wondered, lifting my gaze from the book and focusing it on her.

"Oh, yes, yes," she nodded several times, as if in an effort to further convince me of the veracity of this claim. "A long time ago. I'm not sure if he even remembers it."

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“I don’t think he does,” I admit. “At least, when we spoke of you, he didn’t say that he’s met you.”

“I can imagine that to be so,” she smiled, still focused on the task at hand. She looked somehow pleased with herself, as if she had been waiting for a long time to say this but was waiting for the right moment to do so. “But kings rarely remember the little people they harmed on the way to climbing up the throne and conquering dominions.”

“Harmed?” I asked, surprised. “Did Father harm you in any way?”

“Oh, not me,” she shook her head. “But his army did attack the village I lived in, a long time ago, and in that battle, my grandmother died.”

“Oh, my goodness,” I gasped, pressing my hand to my lips. “I... I don’t know what to say... I am so sorry. I’m sure that Father didn’t mean to.”

She frowned, stopping her fingers. “What do you mean, he didn’t mean to?”

“Well, if the village surrendered, there wouldn’t be any casualties,” I explained. “That is at least, what he tells me.”

For a moment, I thought my words had offended her, but she smiled instead. “There is no right or wrong side in a war. They are both wrong. Those who attack shouldn’t be attacking. Those who defend themselves shouldn’t be put in a situation to have to defend themselves in the first place. But that is all water under the bridge, my dear.” She continued with her picking, placing bare twigs on one pile and the dried-up

leaves in the jar.

Somehow, I wasn't that assured by her words. From the way she was speaking, I didn't get the feeling that it truly was all water under the bridge. I glanced at the door.

"Waiting for your friend?" she asked, immediately noticing my gaze.

"Yes," I nodded, trying to hide my fear, which was slowly rising like the oncoming tide. "He should have been here by now."

"I'm sure he is fine," she spoke, not looking up at me, but instead intently focused on her efforts.

"Yes, me, too," I nodded.

A sense of unease settled upon me. The witch, with her piercing gaze and ancient wisdom, seemed to know more than she let on. And with this story of Father, I knew that there was a specific reason why she was mentioning it now, and not before.

"He seems very good at being able to take care of himself," she spoke up again, this time, her eyes seemed to pierce right through me, delving into the very depths of my soul. Her gaze left me feeling vulnerable and exposed. I tried to hide this sensation as much as I could, but hiding anything from a witch was almost impossible. She on the other hand, seemed amused by my restlessness.

"You must miss your sister very much," I heard her say observing me intently. Her eyes sent shivers down my spine. It was as if she could read my thoughts and she was trying to make me admit something.

"I do," I nodded. "Do you miss your grandmother?" I surprised even myself with this question, but it was obvious that this otherworldly aura of grief surrounding the

deaths of two very dear people was all around us. The atmosphere in the cottage felt stifling.

I hoped that Adrian would return very quickly. I hadn't even noticed that he had become my anchor, the one who understood the turmoil inside of me and finally, the one who could comfort me. I knew that when we returned, I would tell Luke everything. I would tell Father everything as well. I would admit my feelings to Adrian, and if fate would have it, we would live our lives with a happily ever after that we both deserved. I didn't care anymore about my duties and obligations. Not now that Cass was gone. Her death reminded me how fickle life was, that we should grab it with both hands and demand our own happiness, instead of bowing down to the wishes and needs of others. I wanted to live my own life and I wanted to live it with Adrian, if, of course, he would have me. But that was a bridge I would cross soon.

The witch didn't reply at first. She just stopped picking at the twig. That was the only indication that she had actually heard my question. The soft crackling of the fireplace seemed to enhance the silence that hung in the air like a noose. My senses were on high alert as I waited for her answer.

"Every single day," she nodded wistfully, without any malice. "They say time heals all wounds, but that isn't true. It doesn't hurt any less. It is just that more painful things are added to you, so your pain is divided, but there is still the same amount of it. I lost many dear people, but her death has affected me the most."

My unease grew with her words, as I tried to sympathize, but at the same time, I wasn't sure if she was telling me all this for some hidden, sinister reason, or if it was really just a coincidence that we were alone, and this was the time to mention that she knew my father in such an unpleasant way.

As the minutes dragged on, my unease grew, and I found myself fidgeting with the

hem of my dress. I wanted to be back at the castle, in the familiarity of its halls, away from the unsettling air of the witch's cottage. Finally, we heard a horse neigh outside. My eyes opened wide. She noticed it immediately.

"Ah, your friend must be back," she spoke, looking at the door, without any intention of getting up to open it.

I remembered then that when we arrived, her door wasn't closed. She didn't unlock it. She merely opened it. That must have been very brave of her not to do that. Or was it that everyone was so afraid of her, they didn't dare come here with any intention of hurting her or stealing from her? I couldn't tell which one of the two was true. It didn't matter now. All that mattered was that Adrian had returned.

My heart was beating wildly now, expecting the door to open and to hear whether Adrian had any luck in discovering anything. To be quite honest, all I wanted right now was for him to be here, so I wouldn't be alone with the witch, who was looking at me one moment, and at the door the next, almost as if she expected something monumental to happen, something I yet knew nothing of.

Suddenly, the door burst open. But it wasn't Adrian.

"Luke!?" I gasped, seeing him here.

There was something wrong. Terribly wrong.

I got up from my chair and walked over to him. "Did something happen to Father? Or to Adrian? Why are you here? Why aren't you at the castle?" I demanded to know, bombarding him with a million questions. I totally forgot one crucial fact and that was that he couldn't have known where the witch's cottage was. He had never been here... or so I thought.

“They’re fine,” he assured me in a tone of voice that gave me the chills. He looked somewhere behind me, at the witch.

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Seconds passed as slowly as hours. I had no idea what was happening, as I waited for one of them to clarify his presence here. Finally, the witch spoke up.

“You’re early,” she told him, and at that moment, something inside of me broke.

I took a step back, as a chilling realization began to dawn on me. The pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, revealing a sinister truth that I hadn’t even dared to consider before. Luke, the man I once considered my best friend, was working with the witch in a conspiracy that was obviously against the kingdom, against my father and eventually, against me.

The room seemed to close in around me as the weight of this revelation settled upon my shoulders. My heart pounded in my chest, and fear gripped me like icy fingers. I couldn’t comprehend how someone I trusted could betray me in such a profound way.

The witch’s gaze felt more menacing than ever, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that she had orchestrated this meeting to confront me with the harsh reality of Luke’s treachery. Her piercing eyes seemed to hold a knowing glint, as if she had anticipated this moment all along.

I cast a wary glance at Luke, who stood there with an unsettling calmness. His familiar face now seemed shrouded in darkness, and I struggled to reconcile the friend I once knew with the traitor who had been hiding in plain sight.

“What is the meaning of this!?” I managed to stammer, my voice betraying the fear that coursed through my veins like poison.

“Lil,” Luke said, taking a step closer to me.

“Stay back!” I shouted, pointing a trembling finger at him, although I knew very well that I was outnumbered. This was enemy territory. How mistaken we were to think that I would be safe here.

Silently, I beckoned Adrian to return as quickly as possible, before something dreadful happened. But he could have been miles away still, having no idea what was unraveling here.

The witch’s lips curled into a knowing smile, confirming my worst fears. “Oh, my dear,” she purred maliciously. “Luke has been serving my purposes all along. A pawn in a much larger game.”

The room seemed to spin around me, and I struggled to find my footing in this web of deceit. I couldn’t understand why Luke had turned against me, why he had chosen the witch’s side over our friendship. What did she offer him to turn his back on everyone who loved him?

Anger surged within me, mingling with the fear that had taken root in my heart. I couldn’t allow the witch’s machinations to prevail, nor could I forgive Luke for his betrayal. I probably couldn’t win this war, but I knew that I wouldn’t go down without a fight. I was my father’s daughter. I was a warrior who had her sister’s death to avenge. That was yet another explanation I wanted to demand of them, but the witch spoke hastily.

“Tie her up,” she gestured at me. “Then, we shall wait for the other one to come back.”

I shook my head at Luke, who started to approach me. “Don’t you dare come near me!” I snarled, realizing that I was backing up against a wall. There was nowhere else

left to go. But I was damned if I would allow him to lay a single finger on me.

“Lilith, please,” he spoke calmly, without any remorse. I hated him so much at that moment. I wanted to grab him by the neck and squeeze, but I knew that I wouldn’t achieve anything like that.

My mind raced, trying to come up with a plan. Maybe if I allowed him to tie me up and used an old skill while he was doing it? That could work. I could inhale deeply, allow him to tie me up, then exhale, which would have made the ropes looser, maybe allowing me to wiggle out of them. It was a long shot, but I had no better option.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he spoke almost tenderly.

Angrily, I spat in his face. “Fuck you!” I shouted. “Do what you must!”

He hesitated and at that moment, the door burst open.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Adrian

I heard commotion the moment I descended my horse and barged into the door of the cottage. It was good that I did that, because the moment I entered, I saw Luke there, about to hurt Lilith.

“Don’t move!” I shouted at him. He obeyed.

We were all standing at a safe distance from each other now, but we knew that half of us weren’t on the same side.

“Adrian!” Lilith shouted at me, rushing over to my side. I stepped in front of her,

sheltering her with my body.

As we stood there in the witch's cottage, this was the last place where I thought all the revelation would take place. I believed this was the safest place on earth for her, and yet, Luke was here. He had found her somehow. The weight of the truth hung heavily in the air. I spoke to Lilith without taking my eyes off of Luke and the witch. Something told me that it was best to keep them both at bay.

"I found the letters in Cassandra's room," I told Lilith, not taking my eyes off of those two. "Luke is the one. Luke was Cassandra's secret boyfriend."

Lilith's eyes widened in shock, and I could see the questions and pain swirling within them. In that moment, I wished I could shield her from the truth, spare her from this heartache. But the truth had to come out, as painful as it was.

"Luke?" Lilith's voice tugged at my heartstrings, as I felt the weight of the revelation pressing upon us all. Luke's eyes were downcast, his guilt evident in the way he avoided Lilith's gaze. The witch, ever the enigmatic presence, observed the scene with a knowing, somehow satisfied expression, as if she had anticipated this turn of events.

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Luke didn't say anything. Lilith, however, demanded answers of him. "How long!?" she asked. "How long have you been hiding this from me?"

"Trust me, Lilith, I never meant for it to go this far," he said, but those words meant nothing.

The witch remained silent, her inscrutable expression hinting at the depth of her own involvement in this intricate scheme. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to her than met the eye, and that she had orchestrated this meeting for her own mysterious purposes.

"You were toying with my sister's emotions?" Lilith demanded to know. At one point, she was shouting, at another, her voice was down to a barely audible whisper, almost as if two sides of her personality were fighting for supremacy, and she didn't know whether to cry or to breathe fire.

"No, no," Luke shook his head, but again, that meant nothing. His actions spoke louder than his words ever could. "It's not like that. I had to."

"You had to what?" Lilith scoffed angrily. I could see all the hurt and pain in her eyes and it made me want to kill him. At the same time, it made me rage with jealousy, because I could see how much he meant to her. "To sleep with my sister? To tell her you loved her? To do what, Luke!?"

"Enough!" the witch suddenly shouted so loudly that it felt as if thunder roared right between the confines of this very cottage.

Lilith hid behind me, and I stepped in front of her, ready to die for her.

“I’ve had enough of these sappy stories,” the witch said exasperatedly. “None of that matters. The only thing that matters is that you are all here. And I can finally do what I intended to do when I started with this whole thing.”

“What do you plan on doing?” I asked, realizing that she and Luke were in this together. One look was enough. No words were necessary.

Obviously, they were in cahoots the whole time, working together. I couldn’t imagine anyone betraying their own family in such a way. There was a special place in hell for people like Luke. I was sure of that.

The witch looked at me with an evil grin. I had no idea how I didn’t notice it before. Everything about her seemed malicious now. How could we have been so blind to everything? We came here for protection, and it turned out that we were lured here like lambs to the slaughter.

I slid my arm behind me, feeling Lilith’s waist. I wanted to reassure her that I would do my best to protect her, to keep her safe and alive, even if that meant dying myself. I was more than prepared to give my life so that she could live.

“I plan on taking sweet Lilith’s head to Constantine, of course,” the witch laughed so wickedly that it made my blood turn cold.

“Over my dead body!” I squeezed angrily through clenched teeth, to which she laughed even more.

“Why, gladly!” she exclaimed loudly. “I’ve been itching for some action. Nothing has been happening lately. It seems that everyone is too afraid to come to me. I guess with good reason!” She continued to laugh, as I tried to come up with a plan to save

Lilith.

I knew that we needed to keep her talking for as long as possible. That would buy us some time. Maybe something would pop up, or maybe I would be able to come up with something in the meantime. But she had to talk, to focus on her own story and not on us.

“It’s because of my father, isn’t it?” Lilith suddenly asked her, as if able to read my mind.

Good girl, I thought to myself. She figured it out.

At the mention of the king, the witch’s face didn’t seem so optimistic regarding her victory. She seemed as if there was a cloud over her head about to erupt into a full-blown storm.

“That smug arrogant bastard!” the witch shouted, and I had no idea what she was talking about. “Sending soldiers to slaughter an entire village, just because they wouldn’t succumb to his will! He deserves an even worse fate, which is what I vowed to deal him!”

Slowly, I was starting to put two and two together. Obviously, she had some unresolved business with the king, something stemming from her past. Now, she wanted revenge.

“I could have killed him so easily, numerous times. But that would have been too easy. I wanted him to suffer, like I did. Even worse! I wanted to take both of his girls away from him,” the witch continued. “That is the worst pain for a parent, taking away his children. Nothing could ever compare with that. I was there when the older one died. It was I!”

“You... monster!” Lilith screamed, pushing me aside and wanting to claw the witch’s eyes out, but I stopped her in time, before she could approach her.

We didn’t stand a chance against them like this. No. We needed a plan. A good plan. The witch could use her magic against us, which I was sure she was planning on doing. She was merely toying with us. The real deal was just around the corner.

“No,” the witch shook her head. “It wasn’t me who was the monster. It was your cruel father who didn’t care about the innocent people who would die at the hands of his soldiers. All he cared about was expanding his kingdom. Why did he need to do that anyway?”

I didn’t know any of this, and from the look on Lilith’s face, I could tell she didn’t know anything about this either.

“I have been waiting for this moment for years,” Evangeline continued, relishing the chance to tell her story.

I looked around, trying to see what we could use to defend ourselves, but there was nothing that resembled a weapon. To be honest, I had no idea what kind of a weapon we would need against her magic. Nothing human would work.

“I offered Luke the chance to become a powerful king, but for that to happen, the old king needed to be overthrown first!”

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“Luke... how could you?” Lilith was on the verge of tears now. It took all of my conscious effort not to wring his neck right then and there.

But the witch didn’t allow anyone else to speak but her. “Constantine would make him a king no one has ever seen before,” the witch explained. “He has given us that promise! I would get my revenge and Constantine would make me his royal advisor, just like my grandmother was to the vampire ruler before him!”

So, it was all about revenge. Constantine was only indirectly involved. He let others do his dirty work, and it seemed that they were more than willing to do so.

“What did you do to my sister?” Lilith demanded to know. She refused to be silenced. I admired her for the courage to stand up to someone like Evangeline and demand answers. Not many would have the courage to do so.

“Why, it was an accident, my dear!” Evangeline chuckled maliciously, enjoying herself. “It is very easy to trip in the dark, you know.”

Lilith’s eyes flung to Luke. “Did you let her into the castle?”

Luke didn’t say anything. I couldn’t imagine a more spineless creature than this one, and yet, it appeared that he was the cause of all of this tragedy.

“I will kill you both!” Lilith screamed furiously, with my hands still on her waist, keeping her subdued. Attacking so angrily would do no good. Evangeline needed to attack us first, to attack me first. I needed to make myself her first target.

“You’d better take me down first,” I growled at Evangeline, forcing her to focus on me. “Otherwise, I will kill you both myself.”

This time, the witch didn’t chuckle. She didn’t find it all that amusing because she knew I posed a real threat. I wasn’t just a human. I was a vampire.

“Constantine said I am not to kill a vampire,” she pointed out, gritting her teeth, angry at this sudden turn of events. But then, she seemed to remember something. “But he didn’t say anything about hurting one.”

She aimed her hands at me and started chanting. Suddenly, there was a whirl wind around us. Lilith’s hair swirled in circles, as I turned to her.

“Run!” I ordered, pointing at the door which was just a few steps away from her.

“No!” she shouted back through the storm of items that were being picked up from the floor and taken off the walls, swirling all together threateningly. “I’m not leaving you!”

“Run, damnit!” I shouted even louder, pushing her towards the door, knowing that all of this might fall onto our heads and kill us both.

This time, she listened to me. She rushed out of the door.

“Get her!” Evangeline shouted at Luke, who obeyed immediately, running towards the door as well. Just as I was about to lunge at him, to prevent him from rushing outside, a shower of glass jars fell on my head, breaking into a millionpieces. A headache boomed inside my mind, mixing with the witch’s laughter.

I fell to the ground, touching my head. Blood was trickling down my temples. My vision was becoming blurry. She came over to me, and grabbed my hair, lifting my

face off the floor.

“You’re a pathetic weakling!” she hissed at me, slamming my face back onto the floor. A surge of pain shot through my head, and I tried my best to keep myself awake and conscious. Lilith’s life depended on it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Lilith

I didn’t want to leave Adrian. I wanted to stay by his side, but I trusted him.

My heart was pounding loudly in my chest as I ran through the dense woods, the sound of my footfalls echoing in my ears. Each breath felt heavy, filling my lungs, making my entire body feel like a boulder. I didn’t turn around, but I knew that Luke was behind me.

“Lilith!” he shouted after me. His voice felt like a lasso he was trying to use to lure me back in, but I knew better than to trust him again. “Lil, stop!”

The revelation of his betrayal had left me feeling raw and vulnerable. It left me fearful for my life. How could he have done something like that? How could he have looked me in the eyes and taken advantage of Cass in such a way? My mind was a whirlwind of emotions – hurt, anger, confusion. I couldn’t fathom how my best friend could have deceived me like that.

As the branches of the trees brushed against my face, I pushed myself to keep running, trying to put distance between us. The woods that had once been a place of solace and comfort now felt like a labyrinth of tangled emotions, all pulling me in different directions.

My heart ached as I thought about how Luke had been a constant presence in my life, someone I had leaned on in times of sorrow, and yet he had chosen to betray that trust. I couldn't help but wonder what led him down this path. What had to happen in someone's head to turn his back on everyone and everything he held dear? Was the desire for power truly that great?

I stumbled over a root, but the pain in my body paled in comparison to the pain in my heart. Tears blurred my vision as I continued to run, trying to escape the web of deceit that had ensnared me. The rustling of leaves behind me made me push myself even harder, the fear of confronting Luke adding fuel to my desperate escape. I didn't know where I was going. I only knew that I needed to be far away from him.

As I ran, I felt a mixture of anger and betrayal, but beneath it all was a deep sense of loss. It wasn't just the loss of a friendship, but the loss of the person I thought Luke was – the person I had confided in, relied on, and cared for deeply. I lost not only my sister, but my best friend as well. Now, I was left with Adrian and my father. They were the only two people in my life I could rely on.

As I continued running through the woods, my body and mind exhausted from the emotional turmoil, my foot caught a hidden root, and I stumbled forward, unable to regain my balance. My heart raced, fear and desperation consuming me as I tried to steady myself.

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I fell to my knees, the ground unforgiving beneath me, and pain shot through my body. My hands grazed against the rough forest floor as I desperately tried to push myself back up. Tears blurred my vision, and my breaths came out in ragged gasps.

I looked behind me. I still couldn't see Luke, but I knew he was close. I knew that he would reach me within moments. Yet, I couldn't stand up. I was exhausted.

I heard footsteps behind me. My mind raced. I could feel droplets of sweat trickling down my forehead. I tried to wipe them with my hand. When I looked up, Luke had arrived and Evangeline was by his side, just appearing out of thin air. She was grinning wickedly. I knew what that meant. Adrian was not there. She must have done something to him back at the cottage.

Still stumbling, I managed to get up, although my ankle screamed silently with pain. It took all of my conscious effort to keep my balance. But I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of kicking me while I was down. I wanted to show them that I would fight until there wasn't a single breath left in my body.

"One down," the witch cackled. "One to go."

"This one won't go down easily," I threatened her, feeling my fingers curl into a fist.

I glanced at Luke. I didn't even know why. I knew he wouldn't help me. Then again, it wasn't a glance asking for help, but rather, it was a glance asking for clarification. A part of me still doubted the veracity of everything. I knew this man. I knew who he was. I knew who I grew up with. How could this be that same man? It was impossible. And yet, reality struck me like a ton of bricks.

“Since you’ve amused me greatly, you can choose the way you go,” Evangeline spoke, as if doing me a favor.

“You mean choose the way I die?” I ask, frowning.

“Yes, my dear,” she cackled again. “See? You cannot say I’m not courteous and generous.”

“You are anything but,” I snarled. “Do whatever you want but know that I won’t take it. I will fight you until there is a single ounce of strength left in me.”

“Oh, I expect you to,” she nodded, lifting her hands into the air, just like she did back at the cottage.

The air seemed charged with an eerie energy, and the rustling of leaves and the howling wind felt like a haunting chorus. Nature itself seemed to be responding to the witch's presence, amplifying her dark powers.

Even Luke took a step back away from her, while I tightened my grip on myself, trying to steady my nerves. The witch’s figure was enshrouded in mist now, and the sinister aura that surrounded her made my blood turn cold. The strength of her magic was palpable. She closed her eyes, keeping her arms outstretched to her sides, as she muttered incantations under her breath. The wind seemed to bow to her will, strengthening with every word she spoke. It was as if nature itself aided her in weaving this web of darkness that was to become my undoing.

I had no idea what to do. I was no match for this woman. But I refused to back down. Too much was at stake. If I died, I would do so knowing that I stood up to the forces of evil, the same forces that took my sister away from me.

The wind howled louder and louder. Panic threatened to consume me as the witch’s

spell seemed to grow stronger. My hair flew up into the air, like a cobweb. The witch opened her eyes. They were glowing a bright green. It was a frightening sight.

At that moment, she extended her arms toward a nearby tree. With a chilling whisper, she began to channel her malevolent energy into the ancient oak. The ground underneath me trembled. The air crackled with the intensity of her spell, almost as if it was on fire. The wind howled, gripping at the branches. My eyes widened in terror as I watched the tree's roots lift from the ground, its branches trembling. The evil magic enveloped the entire tree, twisting and contorting it with a cruel intent. It was as if the very essence of nature was being violated, giving itself to the witch, becoming a puppet to the master of her malevolence.

With a gut-wrenching tear, the tree was ripped from the earth, its roots now bare and exposed, dangling like severed limbs. The immense weight of the tree seemed inconsequential to her as she lifted it with ease, brandishing it as a weapon.

I knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to throw that tree onto me. I frantically looked around for anything I could use as a weapon. She was too far away from me to attack her, but I could throw something at her. This might buy me enough time to get close to her. But there was nothing I could use.

I knew that time was of the essence. I had to do something. Now. Otherwise, it would be too late.

Seconds seeped through my fingers like fine grains of sand, never to return. The hour of my reckoning had come. Strangely, I stopped being afraid. I had been hurt too much to be afraid of anything anymore. What else could they do to me that they hadn't already? I gritted my teeth, my fingers curled into fists.

"Bring it on, you old hag!" I shouted against the wind, which hit me forcefully, lifting my hair even more up, so that now I looked like Medusa, threatening anyone who

dared to look at my face.

The witch seemed to like this. She laughed wickedly. And just as she was about to throw the tree in my direction, I saw a large rock fly right towards her and hit her straight in the shoulder.

“Argh!” she screamed, her arms falling down to her sides.

Immediately, the tree fell with a loud noise. A flutter of wings was heard in the distance.

I looked to my side. “Adrian!” I shouted, relief washing over me. He looked haggard and covered in blood. “Are you alright?”

He cleared his throat, standing in front of me, spitting to the side. He proceeded to wipe the corner of his bloodied mouth with the sleeve of his shirt.

“I will be when we deal with these two,” he told me, without taking his eyes off of them. His body was now sheltering mine.

The witch looked at us both angrily, rubbing her shoulder. “Do you think a rock will save you?” she hissed.

“No,” Adrian replied, shaking his head. “That was just the beginning.”

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I could see he was holding another rock, an even bigger one. that wasn't much of a defense, but it was all we had. We were obviously no match for the witch, and Luke would be of no help to us.

"Just stay behind me, OK?" Adrian urged. "I won't let anything happen to you, Lilith."

"I know," I nodded, placing my hand softly on his shoulder.

"Oh, isn't that sweet?" the witch mocked us. "Constantine told me I was not to kill a vampire, but this will not be a killing. This will be self-defense!"

Her hands suddenly clawed up, aiming for us both. I could see little crackles of lightning sparkle from them, as if she were made of electricity. Her incantations started again, and I knew this time, she was conjuring up something deadly. She was done playing games.

"I've had enough of your meddling!" she screamed at Adrian, aiming her hands at him. I knew that I had to do something. I couldn't let him die protecting me. This was not his fight. He was here solely because of me, because of my father. He believed he needed to protect me, but it was the other way around.

Using all the strength in me, I pushed him away with both my hands. Not expecting this, he stumbled to the ground, and the electric bolt struck me straight to the heart. I fell to my knees, feeling every single part of my body become detached, as if it wasn't mine any longer.

I tried to say Adrian's name, but I had no voice. I stumbled onto the ground, and everything went dark.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Adrian

"Lilith, no!" I shouted, crawling over to her, cradling her head in my arms. My gaze turned to the witch, threatening to extinguish her. "What have you done!?"

The witch didn't dignify me with a reply. She didn't need to. I got up, watching her try to conjure up something again, but she had no time for that. I was running faster than I ever thought was possible, even for a vampire. My muscles tensed up, tightening, turning my fists into killing machines.

I lunged at her, and we both dropped to the ground. I knew that I had to be careful, because Luke was still there. He could decide to attack me at any moment, but instead, he cowered behind a tree, just watching the whole scene that unfurled before his eyes. I decided to take care of him later. First, I had to incapacitate the witch. She was the greatest source of danger here.

The witch didn't stand a chance. After I dealt her several blows, she was unconscious, lying on the forest floor. The wind had calmed down. The branches stopped moved. The tree she had torn out of the ground laid a bit to the side, a silent witness to her wrath.

I looked at my bloodied fists. My hands were trembling. I didn't know if I stopped in time. I looked down at her body. I couldn't even tell if she was breathing anymore. It didn't matter. Like she herself said, it was self-defense. But it was still part of the job that I hated the most.

At that moment, I heard some rustling. I looked over where Luke was, and I couldn't find him. My mind was on high alert as I looked around, only to find him crawling over to Lilith. He managed to get there without me looking, and he was leaning over her face, telling her something.

Rage gripped at me, and I completely lost it. Like a mad bear, I ran there on all fours, grabbing him by the shirt and lifting him off of her, throwing him as far away from her as I could. Luke's body fell with a loud thud noise, almost like a bag of bones being thrown.

"Get away from her!" I snarled, looming over him like a wild animal about to rip his throat apart, and he knew it. He looked at me with so much fear in his eyes, I thought his soul might escape his body at that very moment. He shook his head, his eyes wide and petrified.

"What were you doing to her!?" I demanded to know, my nostrils flaring up as I bared my teeth. The human part in me was gone. All that was left was the animal, the vampire and he was out to kill... to protect.

"N-nothing, nothing!" Luke managed to muster, as he tried to protect himself from me with his hands, which I forcefully pushed away, pinning him down.

"This is all your fucking fault!" I shouted at him, allowing him to see my teeth, my weapon of choice that I would use to end his life right now.

"I know, I know!" he shouted trying to be louder than me. I had to admit that I wasn't expecting him to say that, or the next thing he said. "I deserve to die! This is all my fault!"

For a moment, I got confused, not sure what to do. I had to take Lilith back to the cottage, to see if there was anything we could use to try and wake her up. When I

reached her, I could still feel a faint pulse, which meant she was still alive, she was still with me. And I refused to let her go.

But at the same time, I knew I had to tread carefully. Luke was still alive. The witch was incapacitated. One down, one more to go, like she said. Only, it backfired.

“I won’t grant you that wish,” I said, letting go of him, much to his shock.

I got up and took a step back away from him. Trembling on uneasy legs, he stood up as well. He was rubbing his arms, his shoulders slumped forward, waiting to see what fate he would be dealt.

“You don’t deserve to die here, from my hand,” I told him, disgusted by everything he had done. “Dying by my hand is an honor. You are not worthy. Instead, your king will decide your fate.”

His eyes widened in shock. He wasn’t expecting that. He shook his head several times quickly. I could imagine why.

“No, please... no,” he bawled. “I... I can’t look at him in the eyes...”

“You should have thought of that before,” I snarled, angry that this coward was the cause of so much tragedy, so much suffering. And the worst part was that it wasn’t over yet.

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I glanced over at Lilith. Sorrow washed over me. I had to find a way to help her, but I didn't know how. I turned to Luke.

"You will take us back to the cottage," I ordered him. "We'll ride back to the castle from there. If you try anything, I will make you regret it. Do not test me."

He nodded, swallowing heavily. I walked backwards to Lilith, not taking my eyes off of him for even a single second. I pressed my fingers to her neck. The pulse was there. I could barely feel it, but it was there, nonetheless. That made me hopeful that not everything was lost.

She saved me and now I had to save her. A feeling of tenderness washed over me as I bent down. She looked so peaceful, like an angel. I vowed to myself that I would never let anything like this happen to her again. I would dedicate my life to keeping her safe and happy, if only she would have me, if only she would forgive me for this mistake of not having protected her the way I was supposed to.

At that moment, the wind intensified. All the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I knew that wasn't a good sign. When I turned around I could see that the witch was back on her feet, gathering momentum. Her arms were outstretched. Her grey hair was wild around her head, like a million tentacles threatening to suffocate you if they got close to you. I tried to move, but I realized that she had enchanted me into immobility. I knew witches could do that, but they needed time to muster that spell. That meant she had been conscious for a while now, and I was too focused on Luke, instead of assuring that she was rendered powerless. This was my mistake.

My body felt as if it were frozen. I couldn't move a single limb. I couldn't speak. I

couldn't even blink. All I could do was think and watch what was happening around me, without any chance of being an active participant in any of it.

The same electricity crackled from out of her fingers. I knew she would aim them at me. I knew she wanted me dead. I glanced at Lilith with the corner of my eye, silently begging her for forgiveness. I watched in horror as she aimed her fingers at me, her eyes wild with rage.

I tried my best to try and move. I focused all of my conscious efforts on it. Suddenly, I could blink. It wasn't much but it was something. All I had to do was move a bit to the side, away from the direction of her power. But it was too late. Electricity crackled in the air, and I could see it coming straight for me, as time seemed to stand still.

But then, something unexpected happened. Luke lunged in front of me, becoming my shield. All the magic dispersed against his chest, creating a scorched looking wound. He fell to the ground heavily.

I fought against the enchantment with all my might. But I couldn't do anything. The witch gathered more power and struck again. Once again, fate decided to intervene. The lightning bolt bounced off of the moon pendant which hung around my neck, changing direction. It headed back exactly where it came from.

"No! No!" the witch shouted, but it was too late. She was completely disintegrated into a pile of dust.

At that very moment, I was released from her wicked enchantment, and I fell to my knees. Luke was lying down, blood trickling from his mouth. He coughed heavily, pressing his hand to his chest. When he removed it, it looked as if he had grabbed a pile of charcoal. There was an acrid smell in the air, and I knew it was emanating from him.

I took off my shirt, crumpled it and pressed it to his wound, but I knew it wouldn't serve any purpose. He wasn't bleeding. He had been burnt from the inside. His heart would slowly stop beating. It was just a matter of time.

"Why?" I asked, incredulous that he would save me, after everything that had happened.

"The witch..." he coughed as he spoke, his teeth turning a bloody red. "She lied to me... she said... they won't die... like me, with the poison... but she... she lied... I... I didn't mean for this... to happen..."

All of these words were too much for him. But he still continued to speak, because he knew that he would not get another chance to do so. So, I allowed him to speak at his own pace, not interrupting him.

"I loved... Cass... Lil and I... the marriage was arranged... my father refused to go back on it... he said I needed to prove myself... I... I didn't see another way... I am so, so sorry..."

Arranged marriage.

The words rang inside my mind like the sound of church bells. I instantly remembered that Lilith wanted to tell me something. Was this what she meant?

"The witch..." he growled. "There is... an infusion in her... cottage... it cures everything... a small, blue vial... find it... for Lilith..."

My heart flared up at this new information. I had to go there immediately and bring Lilith with me. But I couldn't leave a dying man alone.

"Please... tell her I'm sorry..." he begged through his last breath.

I wanted to tell him that he should do that himself, but there was very little chance of that happening. I didn't want to lie to a dying man.

"I will," I nodded instead. "I will tell her."

He gripped at my hand strongly, that last, dying effort. His eyes suddenly turned a paler shade of blue, as if someone had pulled an invisible cover over them. I hesitated, then closed his eyes for the last time. I knew that I shouldn't leave him and the witch's body here, where just anyone could stumble onto them. But I would worry about that later. Right now, I had to take care of Lilith.

I rushed over to her and lifted her in my arms. She felt so light, like a little bird with a broken wing.

"Stay with me, darling," I whispered to her, as I looked around, trying to find my way back to the cottage. I had no idea where to turn to.

Then, I noticed a bloody branch. I must have passed through there. Hope burned brightly inside of me. My own blood will lead me back. It will be our path.

Confidently, I rushed through the underbrush as quickly as I could. Luke might have been the one who started this entire mess. He was too weak to resist the call of power. He thought he was doing the right thing, but exactly because he was so weak, he was also easily manipulated by the witch.

Still, with his last dying breath he saved me. Not only me, but he also saved Lilith as well. Maybe that would be enough for him to be forgiven in the next life. But that was none of my concern.

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I fought my way through the thick bushes and shrubbery, until I finally found the cottage. Now, I needed to find that vial.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Lilith

“Cass?”

I couldn't believe it was her. It was, and yet... it couldn't have been. She was wearing her favorite green dress, the one she refused to get out of when she was just a girl of nine. That would have made me six years old then.

I looked down at my own body, and sure enough, it was the body of a six-year-old girl, with her little chubby fingers and bare feet. I couldn't believe this. I rubbed my eyes thoroughly, but when I opened them again, the same sight awaited me.

Cass and I were playing in the castle gardens. The sun bathed everything in a golden glow, and the scent of flowers permeated the air. I remembered this moment well. It was one of those special moments, etched in my memory forever. It was a time of joy, carefree laughter and boundless imagination.

I moved my feet and instantly, I could feel the soft grass beneath my feet. The sun warmed my skin with its rays. Cass ran over to me, joy personified. She giggled, taking me by the hand, her laughter echoing through the air.

I had no idea what this place was or how I got here, but I knew that I didn't want to

leave. Not yet. Not until I'd hugged her enough times and listened to her voice.

"Let's pretend we are exploring an enchanted forest!" she exclaimed, just like she did years ago, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

I nodded eagerly, playing along with her idea, just like I did before. "Yes! And we'll have magical creatures as our friends, and they'll..." I said, realizing that I forgot my exact words.

Cass waited patiently, her smile warming my heart. I felt like crying both with joy and sorrow. Then, I remembered.

"They'll grant us wishes!" I exclaimed.

"Three for you and three for me!" Cass added, as the conversation flowed exactly like it did so many years ago.

We danced between the trees, weaving tales of fantastic creatures and grand adventures. The world around us transformed into a realm of magic and wonder. With each step we took, we ventured deeper and deeper into an enchanted forest.

I watched Cass skip cheerfully, remembering that this was the moment for the flowers. And as if I were watching a movie, Cass stopped exactly when I thought she would. Her eyes were fixated on a patch of wildflowers.

"Look, Lil!" she gasped, her eyes wide with wonder. "These flowers are very special. They can grant wishes!"

I giggled, enchanted by her enthusiasm. "Really?" I spoke, confident that I was remembering every single word. It was all coming back to me. "Let's make a wish then!" I said, crouching down beside her.

Closing our eyes, we whispered our deepest desires into the petals of the wildflowers, hoping that they would come true. Back then, I wished for everything to stay like this forever. So, I made the same wish, with that equal childish longing and belief.

When I opened my eyes, Cass was looking at me. She was smiling, but it was a wise, knowing smile which looked strange on a child of nine.

“You have to make another wish,” she told me, much to my shock.

That wasn’t how it went. I remembered it differently. We continued to play, the sun began to set, and we sat on a grassy knoll, our hands intertwined, watching the colors of the sky change with the fading light. Father would have been calling for us to come in any moment.

“Why?” I turned to her, my voice on the verge of breaking. “I want things to stay like this.”

She smiled. “They can’t. It wouldn’t be life then. It has to change. And you have to change with it.”

“But... can’t I stay here, with you?” I asked, torn between going back and staying here with her, as we were now.

“No, Lil,” she shook her head. “I’m not staying here either.”

“Where are you going?” I gasped.

“To see mom,” she replied, pointing upward with her index finger. “And you must go back. Father needs you. And Adrian.”

“But what about—” I started, but I wasn’t allowed to finish.

I felt like a huge vacuum pulled me out of the serenity of this moment, expelling me into darkness, where I floated. I could see a million stars, sparkling all around me. They looked so close, but when I reached to touch one of them, I realized they were miles and miles away.

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“Lil?” I heard Adrian’s voice exploding all around me. I blinked heavily. The bright light blinded me. I had to close my eyes. I felt like I was still floating, then I was lowered onto a soft, comfortable bed. When I finally opened my eyes again, I recognized the witch’s cottage. I jerked to get up, but Adrian’s hand pushed me back down.

“Don’t get up,” he told me tenderly. “You need to rest.”

I looked around. “Why are we here?”

He inhaled deeply. “It’s a long story... but first, how do you feel?”

I thought about it for a moment or two. “I’m fine... I think.”

“Are you in any pain?” he asked, looking at me with a concerned expression on his face.

“No,” I shook my head. “I feel fine. I’m just...”

“Just what?” he jumped.

“I had the strangest dream,” I revealed. “Cass and I were little girls... I dreamt something that really happened, but it was different in my dream. Cass knew everything that happened.”

He hesitated before replying. “Are you sure it was a dream?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well...” he paused before continuing, as if he was trying to find the right words. “I don’t know what happened exactly, but it seemed to me that you stopped breathing for a few moments.”

I gasped. “You mean... I was dead!?”

He nodded. “I gave you this potion to drink, because Luke told me—”

“You listened to Luke!?” she exclaimed incredulously. “But he betrayed us!”

“I know,” he clarified. “But he saved me. And by telling me about this potion, he saved you as well.”

I couldn’t believe that. “But.. he was with the witch. He was helping her.”

“He was,” Adrian confirmed. “But he repented at the last minute, and he paid for it with his life. He died so we could live.”

I swallowed heavily, feeling the weight of this realization wash over me.

“He said he was very sorry, that he loved your sister. He said that the witch tricked him, that she told him no one would get hurt...”

He kept telling me everything, until there was nothing else to say. I listened intently, incredulous at everything that had happened, that we were both alive.

“Did he tell you that we—”

“He did,” he interrupted me. “He told me that yours was an arranged marriage.”

“That was what I wanted to tell you all along, because I saw you felt bad, thinking we were doing something behind Luke’s back,” I continued.

“I did feel bad,” he confessed, taking my hand into his. “But I also couldn’t keep away from you, no matter how hard I tried. And trust me, I really tried.”

“I know,” I smiled. “You... you don’t have to do that any longer.”

“Lilith...” he began softly, his voice tinged with emotion. “I can’t keep it from you any longer. I don’t want to keep it from you any longer. I love you. I’ve loved you from the first moment I saw you at the cemetery.”

“You saved me,” I reminded him with a smile.

“You said you could have handled yourself without me,” he teased.

“You knew the truth,” I blushed.

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“And you know it now as well.”

His words hung in the air, and my heart skipped a beat. In that moment, the world around us seemed to fade, leaving only him and me in a bubble of vulnerability and truth.

A torrent of emotions surged within me. It was as if all the unspoken feelings and hidden desires had finally found their voice. Adrian had been there with me through the darkness and the light, standing by my side when I needed him the most. And in return, I had found solace, understanding, and a connection unlike any other.

“I love you, too,” I whispered, my voice trembling with thrill and excitement, but also fear.

His eyes sparkled with an intensity that mirrored my own emotions. There was a newfound closeness between us, a deepening of our bond that transcended the trials we had faced. In that moment, I knew that the connection between us was not just a fleeting infatuation; it was a love that had grown through shared experiences, understanding, and the desire to protect one another. We had found our way to each other, and now, we would never let go. Never.

“Do you think you feel well enough to travel back home?” he asked.

I frowned. “Honestly? I don’t want to stay here a moment longer than I need to.”

“I was thinking exactly the same thing,” he smiled, helping me up from the bed.

I still felt a little dizzy, but I stood my ground.

“I think one of the horses got lost,” he told me. “We’ll have to send someone to come and find him. But one is still here. We can both ride it back to the castle. Seeing the condition you are in, I think that is the safest option.”

I smiled at him. “I agree.”

Minutes later, we were riding back to the castle. The world around us seemed to take on a new glow. The moonlight danced on the gentle waves of the nearby river, and the soft rustling of leaves in the forest created a soothing melody. My heart was still reeling from the confession of love shared between us, and the air was charged with an undeniable sense of closeness.

I leaned into Adrian’s body, wrapping my arms around him, keeping him close. There was comfort in the silence that enveloped us. No words were necessary to convey the depth of our emotions. We relished each other’s presence, unable to be grounded by anything around us. I felt like we were floating.

He would occasionally turn to me. There was something unearthly about him at that moment, an air of strength and vulnerability that captivated me more than ever. His eyes were once looking at me with such guarded reserve, but now, there was a softness that spoke of the love we had both discovered within ourselves.

As the castle came into view, I felt a mix of anticipation and trepidation. Our return meant facing the reality of the world we had left behind, of responsibilities and challenges that awaited us. But for now, I wanted to hold on to the blissful cocoon we had created, where love and understanding thrived.

I wondered if Father would understand what had happened, if he would approve of our love. We dismounted our horse and walked side by side towards the castle's grand

entrance. The familiar sights and sounds surrounded us, but everything felt different. The castle, once a place of duty and obligation, now held the promise of love and shared dreams.

Father would understand. I was certain he would.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Adrian

As we approached the castle's grand entrance, my heart raced with anticipation. I knew that the biggest reveal was done. We professed our love for each other, and we were lucky enough to have the other one feel the same way. But now, there was something left, something very important. We needed to face the king and reveal our feelings to him as well. It was a necessary step, but at the same time, it brought forth a mixture of nervousness and excitement. I hoped that the king would understand everything, that he would accept our love as it was, without any conditions.

When we stepped into the castle, the atmosphere seemed charged with a sense of joy and relief. The king's guards looked at us with knowing smiles, and I sensed that our secret was not as concealed as we had thought. Nevertheless, I held Lilith's hand firmly in mine, drawing strength from the connection between us.

As we approached the king's study, I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. I had faced countless battles and challenges but standing before the king in this moment felt like the most important test of my life.

We exchanged a meaningful glance. "Are you ready?" I asked.

"You bet," she smiled back at me.

Together, we knocked on the door to the king's study.

"Come in!" he shouted from within.

We opened the door. His face lit up as we entered. "Lilith! Adrian! You're back," he said joyfully upon seeing us. His voice was filled with warmth and genuine happiness.

He immediately got up from his seat and rushed over to us. He embraced Lilith as if he hadn't seen her in years, pulling her close to himself. I gave them a few moments. Then, he released her from his grip, and he shook my hand.

"I don't even know where to start asking my questions," he said, as his gaze shifted between us. For a moment, I thought he might have already sensed the truth. But I wanted to tell him everything first, and then, reveal the real reason why we were standing before him now.

Together, Lilith and I told him the whole story, making sure not to omit a single detail. We wanted him to understand that although Luke was the instigator of everything, he was also the reason why we both survived. He sacrificed himself, and for that, he deserved less of a punishment wherever it was he ended up.

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When we finished telling our story, the king was visibly shaken. He had his hand pressed to his chest, breathing heavily.

“Are you alright, Father?” Lilith rushed to his side, helping him into an armchair that rested by the open window. “Let me pour you a glass of water.”

She grabbed a nearby pitcher that rested on a small coffee table and proceeded to pour him a glass of water, which he took gratefully, drinking thirstily. He exhaled deeply, as if that burden was still on his back, and he doubted that he would ever be able to get rid of it.

“So, it was Luke’s fault that Cassandra is no longer with us?” he whispered.

“Yes, but he was also deceived,” Lilith tried to explain. “He lost himself in the witch’s machinations and he was not strong enough to come back to the surface again.”

The king shook his head again, lost in his own thoughts. We gave him a few moments to compose himself. Then, he continued.

“It is a tragedy what happened to us,” he said sadly. “But I know that your sister wouldn’t want us to grieve. She would want us to come together and remember that we are still here, together.”

“I know she is in a better place, Father,” Lilith assured him. “She is with Mother, and they will be waiting for us there.”

Upon hearing those words, his eyes sparkled. “I do believe that, my dear, with all my heart.” He smiled at us both. “And it is so good to have you both back safe and sound.”

“Your Majesty is most kind,” I replied, my voice steady despite the nervous flutter in my stomach. I knew that I wanted this more than anything else, but at the same time, I wanted to be worthy of Lilith’s hand in the eyes of her father.

The king then turned his attention to Lilith, and I noticed a fondness in his eyes as he spoke. “You’ve been through quite an ordeal, my dear. I am glad that someone like Adrian was by your side.”

I felt a rush of relief at the king’s words, sensing that he approved of my presence in Lilith’s life. Still, I knew that the most challenging part was yet to come—revealing the true nature of our relationship.

“Your Majesty,” I began, my heart pounding, “there is something we need to tell you.”

Both Lilith and the king turned to me, and I felt the weight of their gazes. I took a deep breath, knowing that there was no turning back now.

“Lilith and I have grown close during our time together,” I continued, my voice steady. “And our feelings for each other have deepened beyond friendship. Your daughter and I have fallen in love.”

There was a moment of silence, and I held my breath, waiting for the king’s response. His expression softened, and I saw a mixture of surprise and understanding in his eyes.

“I see,” he said, his tone measured. “Love can be a powerful, unexpected force, one

that defies all expectations. If you both have found happiness in each other, then you shouldn't let anyone stand in your way, not even this old fool who has forgotten what young love was supposed to be like."

A surge of relief washed over me, and I glanced at Lilith, whose eyes were filled with gratitude and joy. We had been given the king's blessing, and it meant more to us than we could express.

"Thank you, Father!" Lilith jumped at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. The king laughed, for the first time since losing his older daughter.

"You both have my blessing," he said out loud. "Besides, we have the whole place ready for a wedding anyway. How about we do it when it was planned?"

Lilith and I exchanged a glance. I could see a flicker of concern in her eyes.

"Are you sure you would be alright with that, Father?" she asked cautiously, because it was a touchy subject. After all, so many things had happened. Maybe he needed some more time to grieve, before celebrating.

"I will never forget what your mother, may she rest in peace, told me a few days before she died," he spoke wistfully, but happily. "She told me not to forget that life goes on. It doesn't stop. When something wonderful happens, when something horrible happens, it just keeps on going and so should we. We shouldn't linger too much on anything, because we will miss the moments that are coming. They might pass us by, because we were too busy lingering in the past, focusing on emotions we didn't want to let go. I doubt that Cassandra would want us to grieve too long, to be sad. She would want us to remember her as she was, joyful and kind. She would want us to celebrate life as she saw it. And that is what we will do by honoring the date of your wedding."

“I like the sound of that, Father,” Lilith exclaimed.

There was still so much pain within these walls, but something assured me that together, we would handle it somehow.

“I’m glad,” the king smiled. “But now, maybe you’d like to rest a little.”

As soon as he mentioned that, I realized how exhausted I truly was. I was in desperate need of rest, and I was sure that Lilith felt the same way.

“And tomorrow morning, there is something I would like to show you, Lilith,” he turned to his daughter.

“What is it?” she asked.

He smiled tenderly. “It’ll have to wait. You don’t want to ruin the surprise, do you?”

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“No,” she smiled back, walking over to him and kissing him on the cheek.

As we left the king’s study, Lilith and I shared a moment of quiet celebration. The weight of keeping our love a secret was lifted, and we could now face the future together, openly and honestly.

Walking hand in hand, we stepped into the castle’s courtyard, feeling a sense of freedom and happiness that we had never known before. Our love had overcome the obstacles in its path, and with the king’s blessing, we were ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

“I cannot believe that we are actually here,” she whispered, as we strolled, like an old married couple who had lived through an entire lifetime together. Sometimes, it actually felt like that. “I can’t believe that all of this is happening. I thought I would marry Luke and you would disappear. I was so afraid that I would never see you again.”

I made her stop and cupped her face with my hands. “You will never have to be afraid of that. I will never leave you. Never.”

She looked at me, those eyes piercing straight into my very soul. But now, there was nothing in there that I wanted to hide from her. I was an open book before her, and that was how I would remain for the rest of our lives together.

She stepped on her toes, kissing me chastely on the lips. She wrapped her arms around my neck. She smiled as she did so. It was the sweetest thing ever.

I knew now, just like I knew before, that I would cherish and protect her with all my heart. Together, we would face whatever life threw before us. We would draw strength from our love. We would be each other's support in the darkest of times. We would embrace the future together, hand in hand.

"What do you think Father will show me?" she wondered, like a little child.

I chuckled. "Seriously, you don't want to ruin the surprise, do you?"

Her eyes widened. "You know what it is?"

"No," I shook my head. "But I can tell that it is going to be something very special. Let him have this moment. He loves you so much, Lilith."

"I know," she nodded sadly. "I wish I could help him somehow."

"Your happiness is helping him," I explained. "That is what every parent wants from their child. Just to be happy. Nothing else."

"I am so very happy, next to you," she looked at me with utter devotion in her eyes, and I couldn't help but wonder how on earth I got so lucky to have someone like her love me the way she did.

Some things were just better left not being questioned. Fate had decided it would be this way. And I was one damn lucky vampire.

At that moment, she yawned. "I don't think I can stay awake much longer," she told me.

"You don't have to," I nodded. "Let's get you to bed. Then, when you wake up tomorrow, the rest of our lives together can start."

“I can’t wait,” she gushed, as we returned to the castle, hand in hand, united in a love that weathered every storm that was thrown in its direction.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Lilith

“Where are you taking me, Father?” I asked curiously, as we rushed through the elongated hallways of the castle, in a direction where I didn’t usually go.

This old castle was filled with unused rooms, which Cass and I as girls were told to steer clear of, for our own safety. Most of them were empty, devoid of any furniture and covered in cobwebs in all four corners. The paint on the walls of some rooms was chipped, the floorboards loose. Plans for renovations were existing, but somehow, they had never been put to work. That was why I was surprised to see him lead me in exactly that direction, where I thought there was nothing to see but dust and spiders.

“Just a little bit more, my dear,” he urged me to be quiet, as he led me by the hand.

Finally, we stopped in front of a closed door. He pushed it open, and it creaked under the strain of his hands. When we entered, there was nothing but a huge, old dresser. He stood by my side with a somber expression, and I could feel the weight of his emotions as he gazed at the ornate wooden piece. I recognized it immediately. How could I not?

“Go ahead,” he said softly. “Open it.”

My heart swelled with a bittersweet mix of emotions as I stepped closer to the dresser. The intricate carvings and the faint scent of aged wood filled my senses, transporting me back to memories of my childhood spent in this very room. This was where my mother’s presence had lingered, her essence somehow imprinted on the

walls and the cherished belongings she had left behind.

I opened the doors with care, revealing the delicate lace and silk of a wedding gown. It was a vision of timeless beauty, a gown truly fit for a princess, and I couldn't help but be captivated by its elegance. I trembled as I held it in my hands.

"It was your mother's wish that her daughter's wear this gown on their wedding day," he said, a note of sadness tinging his voice.

I knew that he was thinking about Cass. She was the older daughter. She was supposed to have been getting married first. Everything was supposed to be different, better. But it wasn't. We were left behind, picking up the pieces of our broken dreams. At the same time, life went on. We still had ours to live, and we had to do it, if for nothing else, then for the memory of those who were no longer with us. I knew that when I wore this dress, both Cass and Mother would be looking down upon me, their hearts swelling with pride.

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I felt a lump form in my throat, but this time, it was not from uncertainty or fear. Instead, it was a swell of honor and gratitude. To wear my mother's gown on my special day felt like a beautiful tribute to her memory, a way to connect with her even though she was no longer physically with us.

"Father," I replied, my voice soft yet resolute, "I would be honored to wear my mother's gown. It holds so much meaning, and it feels like a way to have her presence with me on my wedding day."

He smiled warmly, his eyes glistening with emotion. "You've grown into a remarkable woman, Lilith, and I know your mother would be so proud of you."

I was doing my best trying to hold back the tears, but that was an impossible feat. I could feel them streaming down my face, as my father walked over to me and embraced me.

"Be happy, my dear sweet child," he whispered right into my ear.

"I love you, Father," I whispered back, trembling in his arms.

It took us both a few moments to compose ourselves, then we could go on. I took the dress with me, my heart filled with a sense of purpose and joy. Walking through the castle's hallways, I felt a newfound connection to my mother, even though I had barely remembered her. It was as if her spirit was guiding me, encouraging me to embrace tradition while also forging my own path.

In Adrian's arms, I found comfort and support, and I knew that he would stand by my

side as we walked this journey together. Our love was a force that transcended time and tradition, and I knew that in wearing my mother's gown, I was not just honoring the past, but also celebrating the future we would create together.

Exactly three days later, I was standing in my room, gazing at the reflection of myself in the mirror. I could hardly believe that this gorgeous, mesmerizing woman was me. As I stood before the mirror, I couldn't believe my eyes. The wedding gown that once belonged to my mother now graced my figure, and the sight left me breathless. The delicate lace and intricate details accentuated my womanly curves, making me feel like a vision of beauty and grace.

I gently ran my fingers along the soft fabric, feeling its rich texture against my skin. The gown seemed to embrace me, as if it had been waiting all these years to be worn again. It fit perfectly, like it was meant for me. I smiled as I noticed the gown's long sleeves that gently covered my arms. They added a touch of elegance to the overall look, and I imagined myself gliding through the ceremony with a sense of grace and poise.

As I turned, the gown swirled around me, creating a magical moment that left me feeling like I was living in a fairytale. The beautiful honey-colored waves of my hair cascaded down my shoulders, adding to the enchanting aura that surrounded me. I couldn't help but notice my curves, and for the first time, I embraced them with pride. The gown hugged my waist in a way that made me feel confident and beautiful. It was a reminder that beauty came in many forms, and I felt a sense of empowerment knowing that I could be my true self on my wedding day.

In this gown, I saw not just a bride but a woman who had grown, who had experienced love and loss, and who had found happiness in the arms of her beloved. My heart swelled with gratitude for the journey that had brought me here. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw more than just a reflection. I saw a woman who was ready to embark on a new chapter of her life with the man she loved. The gown was

not just a symbol of tradition, but a representation of the love and commitment Adrian and I shared.

At that moment, just as I was daydreaming, the door burst open, and Adrian showed himself. His eyes widened in awe at seeing me like this. The way he stared at me, hungry and in love at the same time, made me feel a jolt of excitement.

“Lil...” he said my name in a way he’d never said it before.

I frowned playfully. “You just brought us bad luck, you know.”

A playful smile tugged at his lips as I teased. “You mean, it’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding?”

“Exactly,” I pointed out playfully. “Now, go away and pretend like you didn’t see me.”

“Impossible,” he shook his head. “Have you seen the way you look?”

“I have,” I smiled. “I look nice.”

“Nice doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he corrected me, pulling me closer to him, so I could feel his masculine scent rubbing onto me. “You are a goddess. Besides, I don’t believe in superstitions. Nothing could ever keep me away from you, especially not a silly old tradition.”

As he stared right into my eyes, my heart was full of love for this man... this vampire who had come exactly at a time when I needed him the most and he changed everything. His unwavering presence had been a guiding light, showing me that there was hope even in the darkest of times.

“I can’t believe I get to marry you,” he said, his eyes filled with sincerity and love. “There was a time I didn’t believe that this would ever be possible. And yet, here we are.”

“I also can’t believe that I get to marry you,” I replied, unable to stop this avalanche of words and emotions. “You’ve brought so much happiness into my life, Adrian. Before you, I was ready to just relinquish control of my life, of my happiness to someone else, and I know that would have been such a wretched life. Now, with you by my side, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.”

His hand reached for mine, and as our fingers intertwined, I felt a sense of completeness and belonging. With him by my side, I knew that no matter what challenges lay ahead, we would face them together.

As the moments passed, we stood there, immersed in each other’s gaze, silently communicating a love that needed no words. In that intimate space, surrounded by memories of my mother and the anticipation of our future together, I knew that this was where I was meant to be. With Adrian, I had found my home, my anchor, and my heart’s desire. As we stood there, the outside world faded away, leaving only the two of us and the promise of our love.

“What do you say we get going?” he suggested.

“Yeah, I think that would be the best,” I chuckled. “They’re all waiting for us.”

“Maybe they could wait a little longer?” he asked mischievously, as he kissed me passionately on the lips. I laughed against his kiss, because he was tickling me around my waist.

“What... are you... doing?” I managed to ask him through chuckles and laughs.

He continued to do it for a few moments longer, then he stopped, looking at me.

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“This is how I want to remember you always,” he told me. “Blushing cheeks. Laughing. That love in your eyes. I want to see that always.”

“You will, my love,” I promised, as he took my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it tenderly.

I gazed back at him, feeling that heavy weight lift off my back. There was still so much healing left to be done, but I knew that in his heart, I found comfort and strength, which would continue to guide me in our life together. No matter what happened, we were bound by a love that was pure, passionate and never-ending. With him, I had found everything I ever wanted, without even knowing what exactly that something was.

Our love story was just beginning, and it would be a tale of love, triumph and a future filled with endless possibilities.

Epilogue— One Year Later

Adrian

I had to rush back. It was of the utmost importance that I do so. I promised. I had to be there. Lilith needed me there.

My horse galloped at the speed of light. The pounding of hooves echoed in my ears, drumming like mad. My mind was consumed by thoughts of urgency. The wind whipped through my hair, and I leaned forward, urging the horse to go faster. Every second felt like an eternity. Lilith was waiting for me. I couldn't let her down. I had

to go away, but I promised I would be back by nightfall.

As the castle's towers came into view, I pushed my horse even harder, determined to reach Lilith as quickly as possible. Time seemed to stand still, and I prayed that I wasn't too late.

Finally, the castle gates loomed before me, and with a swift motion, I dismounted from my steed. Without pausing, I sprinted through the castle grounds, passing by servants who nodded in my direction, smiling mysteriously. I was breathing heavily, my breaths coming in sharp gasps that cut through my lungs. But none of that mattered.

My legs carried me through the hallways, my mind racing with uncertainty and determination. I needed to find Lilith and ensure her safety. The castle felt like a labyrinth, but I pushed forward, determined not to let anything stand in my way. Finally, I reached Lilith's room, my heart pounding in my throat. I knocked, and without waiting for a response, I burst through the door.

"Lil!" I called out to her, lying on the bed in a pale white nightgown, her face of the same color. She looked exhausted. And yet, it seemed that it was far from over. On the contrary, it was only the beginning. I thanked my lucky stars for making it on time, just as I promised her I would be.

I rushed over to her side, taking her by the hand. "Does it hurt?" I asked tenderly.

"Not yet," she shook her head. She tried to smile, but it was a weak effort. Still, I appreciated it. "I mean, it's bearable."

I squeezed her hand in mine. I felt the warmth of her touch, the strength of her grip, and I knew I had to be her rock. She needed me, and I almost didn't make it on time. I didn't want to miss this for anything in the world. This was the most important

moment in a man's life. In a vampire's life. In the life of anyone who shared this kind of love with his partner. It didn't matter what sort of a creature we were.

"I'm right here, Lil," I whispered, leaning in and kissing her sweaty forehead. "Just like I promised I would be. You are not alone. I will be with you every step of the way."

Her grip tightened, as she bit her lower lip, trying to stifle the pain. I sat by her side, my heart aching for her, but also filled with overwhelming love and admiration for her strength. Two servants who had been well versed in the skill of laboring children were already there, having prepared everything. I could see clean towels, sheets, hot water. Everything was ready, including the happy parents. I couldn't wait to see whether we would have a little boy or a girl. After all, it didn't matter. I would be happy with either.

The following hours passed quickly for me, but I figured much less quickly for Lilith. With every breath she took, I could see determination in her eyes, the unwavering resolve to bring new life into this world, into our world. I wiped her forehead with a damp cloth. I kept telling her what a great job she was doing. I helped her breathe as she was taught to do. I told her that she was facing this immense challenge with grace and bravery. That made her smile even through the contractions.

"You're doing wonderful, my love," I murmured. "Just keep breathing through it, OK?"

She nodded, unable to say anything, but she heard me. She knew I was there, by her side, and that was enough. I kept holding her hand tightly, reminding her that she was not alone.

"We're in this together," I kept reminding her over and over again.

At first, the pain came gradually. I could see it on her face. She could breathe through it. But at one point, it was becoming unbearable. She would twist and turn. She would grit her teeth, refusing to shout and scream, although the servants who were there tending to her, told her it was perfectly normal to do so if she felt the need.

But she didn't. She tried to keep her pain to herself. She tried to bring it to an end as quickly as possible, but it had to go slowly. It had to be painful. It was simply how those things were. I felt horrible that I wasn't able to help her in any way other than to hold her hand. I wanted to take all of her pain away, but I couldn't.

I watched as she bit her lower lip, closing her eyes. I watched as she squeezed the bed sheets, her entire body pushing. Her face would become red, then blue, then purple with all the strain. She would have a few moments of peace, then it would come back all over again, even more painful. But that was a good sign, the servants said. It meant that the baby would be coming very soon.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't wait for it. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops that I would become a father at any moment, with the woman I loved more than life itself. Seconds stretched into minutes, minutes into hours. I kept kissing Lilith's sweaty forehead and doing what she wanted me to do. She would grip at me, keeping me close.

And then, the first cries of our newborn baby filled the air. Lilith's face lit up with joy and relief. My heart swelled with emotion as I witnessed the miracle of birth right before my very eyes. I'd seen many things in my life, but nothing as beautiful, as pure, as tender as this.

"You did it, my love," I whispered, my voice choked with emotion as I kissed her lovingly. "You were incredible."

Our eyes met and in that moment, we shared a bond that was deeper than any words

could ever express. Lilith had brought our child into the world. She was holding her in her arms, as the baby cooed softly. Lilith looked up at me, her eyes swelling with tears.

“Meet your daughter, Adrian,” she said.

I gazed at this little creature, who was pure perfection in every way. In this tiny, fragile life, I saw a future filled with hope and endless possibilities. I didn’t dare take her into my arms. She looked so small, so delicate. I was afraid that I would hurt her somehow.

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“Don’t be afraid,” Lilith immediately sensed my apprehension. She adjusted herself on the pillow, urging me to sit down next to her. I did as she bid, then she placed our baby in my arms.

I smiled at her, her little eyes looking at me curiously. I expected her to be crying, but she wasn’t. She was perfectly calm. I wanted to touch her little hand with mine, but instead, her little fingers tightened around my index fingers. She was holding on tight.

“I think she likes you,” Lilith teased.

“The feeling is mutual,” I replied, without taking my eyes off of her.

“You know, we haven’t decided on her name,” Lilith pointed out. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“Actually,” I looked at her this time. “I do. How about we name her Cassandra?”

Lilith choked at first. She didn’t know what to say. She pressed her hand to her chest, unable to control this swirl of emotions inside of her.

“Cass... after my sister,” she whispered, as if she didn’t have enough strength to use her regular voice.

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat as well. “Yes. After your sister,” I affirmed, gently brushing my thumb against our baby’s tiny fingers. “I thought it would be a way to honor her memory and keep her spirit alive.”

Lilith's emotions seemed to overwhelm her, and she wrapped her arms around our daughter, holding her close. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Thank you for this beautiful gift."

I couldn't help but smile through my own tears. Holding our daughter, the image of Lilith's sister, I knew that this name was a perfect tribute. It would forever connect our little girl to her aunt, to the family she had never known.

As I looked at Lilith, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for this woman I loved. She had faced so much pain and loss, yet here she was, bringing new life into the world with such strength and grace. My heart swelled with love and pride for her, and I knew that together, we would cherish and protect this precious gift we had been blessed with.

"I love you," I murmured, leaning in to kiss her forehead. "And I love our little Cassandra. We are blessed with such a beautiful family."

Tears were now streaming down Lilith's cheeks, but her smile shone through them, like a beacon of hope. "We are," she replied. "Thank you for keeping your promise and being here with me, Adrian. I... I don't think I would have been able to do this without you."

"You would have," I smiled. "You are much stronger than you think. But you don't have to do anything without me, because I will always be here. Always."

That night, we put Cassandra to sleep together. We couldn't stop staring at her as she lay in her crib. Lilith started to sing a lullaby, a song that could soothe even a wildebeest, and little Cass fell asleep quickly. We knew that this was our cue to leave, but we couldn't. We wanted to stay there and watch her the entire night.

"She is perfect," I whispered, my voice filled with awe.

“She really is,” Lilith agreed. “Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined a daughter so sweet, so delicate, so loving.”

I couldn’t agree more. It was as if our love had taken form in this tiny, beautiful creature, and I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility to protect and care for her.

As I gazed at Cassandra, I couldn’t help but reflect on the journey that had led us here. From the moment we met, our lives had been intertwined, and now, with the addition of our daughter, it felt like everything had fallen into place.

As we stood there, enveloped in the soft glow of the nursery, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the love and happiness that now filled our lives. We had been through trials and challenges, but they had only strengthened our bond and brought us closer together.

I knew that as parents, we would face new challenges and difficulties, as well as joys. But in this quiet moment, watching our baby blissfully asleep, I knew that we would be able to guide little Cass through every challenge. Our love would be her light.

As I wrapped my arms around Lilith, we shared a knowing smile. Our hearts were full, and in the presence of our daughter, our love had found its greatest expression. From this moment on, we would cherish every precious second, savoring the joy of parenthood, and creating a lifetime of memories filled with love, laughter, and the boundless wonder of our little Cass.
