



Finn (Vampire Vows #1)

Author: *Fel Fern*

Category: Romance

Description: Falling for a vampire was never part of the plan...

Finn grew up idolizing Gabriel, the hunter who taught him everything he knows. But when Gabriel vanished without a trace, Finn's world was turned upside down. Now, the Guild has sent Finn to kill the man who once meant everything to him. Torn between loyalty to his family and the love he can't deny, Finn faces an impossible choice: betray the Guild or destroy the only person who's ever truly understood him.

Gabriel never wanted this life, but betrayal and bloodshed left him no choice. Once a hunter, now something far darker, he's spent years running from his past. Finn's sudden reappearance stirs emotions he thought he'd buried forever. Protecting Finn means putting himself in danger, but losing him isn't an option. Not again.

As enemies close in and their bond is tested at every turn, Finn struggles to reconcile the man Gabriel was with the monster he's become. In a deadly game of hunters and hunted, love may be their only chance of survival or the ultimate price they pay.

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CHAPTER ONE

FINN

I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins as I crept up the stairs, keeping my gun pressed close to my chest.

The house was shrouded in darkness, and my human eyes could barely make out the steps in front of me.

Shifters might have been born for this, but I was just a hunter who'd learned to make do.

The stairs creaked under my weight, but I kept my steps light. One mistake could cost me everything.

I'd just turned eighteen, and the average hunter didn't live past their forties.

I wanted those years—hell, I wanted to make it to retirement. And, if I was honest, maybe a quiet life in the country with Gabriel.

But thoughts of him had no place here, and I couldn't afford the distraction. I shook my head, forcing myself back into focus.

The door to the target's bedroom loomed just ahead. I took a breath and double-checked my ammo.

Silver rounds, deadly enough for most monsters, and tonight's target was a shifter. Nothing I hadn't handled before.

As I moved in, Jake, another trainee and perpetual show-off, stormed past me. My jaw clenched.

Our squad leader had assigned me to the second floor, but Jake had clearly blown through his area and decided he needed to grab the spotlight here, too.

Rather than argue, I held my tongue and let him go first, hoping his recklessness wouldn't get us both killed.

Jake kicked open the door, not even bothering with stealth, and immediately started firing.

I rushed in, gun raised, but the target, a man named Tom Higgins, was still alive, though barely.

Blood soaked the sheets and the wall behind the bed. Higgins sat, wide-eyed and pale, staring at the carnage.

Jake's revolver was still trained on him, but Higgins was already moving, scrambling off the bed like a drunken man.

My hand shook, finger poised over the trigger, but I couldn't pull it. I hated it when they looked like this, like us.

I expected Higgins to try to dart past me, maybe even attack, given his shifter strength.

But instead, he fell to his knees right in front of me. His hands gripped my shirt, and

he looked up at me with terrified, pleading eyes.

"Don't let him kill me," he begged, voice a raspy whisper.

The scent of his fear filled the room, and I hesitated, my palms clammy against the gun.

I'd been taught that supernaturals didn't have souls. That they were monsters wrapped in human skin.

But Higgins looked so human, his eyes filled with terror like any other man fighting for his life.

My heart pounded in my chest, and I lowered my gun just a fraction.

"What the hell are you waiting for, Peterson?" Jake barked. "End this."

"I... I can't," I whispered.

Higgins's face twisted, and for a split second, I thought he smiled.

I blinked, and his face seemed different. His teeth seemed sharper, and his eyes glowed a sickly yellow in the dark.

Horror jolted through me as Higgins's lips parted, revealing fangs.

His muscles tensed, and before I could react, he lunged at me, his face and body contorting mid-leap.

Just as he was inches from tearing my throat out, Jake fired, and Higgins's head snapped back as the bullet tore through his skull.

I stumbled backward, my heart pounding as the ringing in my ears faded, replaced by the heavy, almost sinister quiet that followed.

The body in front of me slumped, half-shifted, the face and hands covered in coarse, dark hair, while the mouth gaped open, showcasing his vicious fangs.

Blood splattered across the wall, still dripping in thick, slow rivulets down the wallpaper.

I couldn't tear my gaze from Higgins, from the vacant, yellow-tinged eyes staring into nothing.

He'd looked so...human, desperate. But there, twisted in death, he looked like a true monster.

It was the kind of horror that clung to you, the sort that curled in your stomach, settling into an uncomfortable, lasting nausea.

"Better get used to it, Peterson," Jake muttered, wiping a stray fleck of blood off his face with his sleeve.

He sounded annoyed, but beneath that, I could hear the gloating in his voice. "This isn't a game," Jake reminded me.

I swallowed hard, shoving down the disgust and adrenaline that had me feeling sick and shaky.

I'd been trained for this moment, drilled on the art of quick, cold execution since I was barely old enough to even hold a weapon.

My brothers and my cousin, they'd both made it look so easy, so matter-of-fact.

And here I was, barely holding it together, not because I was afraid, but because...because I'd hesitated.

Jake sneered, his eyes narrowing. "You don't have what it takes, do you?" He stepped closer, his voice a mocking whisper. "Look at you, hands shaking. What were you even planning to do, talk him to death?"

I clenched my fists, gripping my gun tight. He was right, and I hated it.

If Jake hadn't been here, Higgins would've ripped me apart. No, he'd trusted me to spare him.

And I hadn't been able to move, hadn't even been able to decide.

Our squad leader's voice crackled over the comms, sharp and demanding. "Report in. Is the target neutralized?"

Jake pressed his earpiece, flashing me a grin as he answered. "Confirmed. Target down."

I didn't even bother responding, the weight of the entire night pressing down on me.

We were all taught that hunters lived short, dangerous lives, and for the first time, that cold truth hit me hard.

I felt like I was staring down a path I wasn't ready to walk, but one I couldn't turn back from.

Jake gave me a look, something between pity and superiority, and I felt the anger bubbling up again.

“Let’s go,” he said, turning for the stairs.

I followed in silence, gun clutched tight against my chest, my every instinct screaming to get out of that house.

The dead weight of what had happened, of what I’d just seen, clung to me as I stepped into the hallway, every shadow and creak making me jump.

Even though I’d seen Higgins go down, the room around me felt charged, like something lingered in the air, restless and waiting.

As we reached the landing, the floor creaked beneath us, loud in the heavy quiet of the house.

Jake froze, his head snapping toward the doorway leading to the bathroom.

“What is it?” I whispered, keeping my voice low.

Jake’s hand was already on his gun. “Thought I heard something.”

But before I could even process what he meant, a figure lunged from the shadows.

It was another shifter, a woman with wild eyes and a snarl that revealed teeth that seemed too sharp, too unnatural for her otherwise delicate features.

I barely had a chance to raise my weapon before she crashed into Jake, her hands clawing for his throat.

The hallway exploded into chaos. Jake fought back, his gun falling to the floor as he struggled under her crushing grip.

Her eyes flicked to me, a crazed glint in her gaze that sent a chill down my spine.

I aimed, trying to find a shot, but they were moving too fast, limbs tangled in a deadly struggle.

“Shoot her!” Jake yelled, his voice strained as he fought to keep her fangs from sinking into his neck.

My finger hovered on the trigger, but the fear clawed up my throat, making it hard to breathe.

It felt like every doubt and fear I’d tried to bury came roaring back, freezing me in place.

“Finn!” Jake’s shout snapped me out of it, and I steadied myself, aiming at the shifter’s side.

I pulled the trigger, the gun kicking back hard in my grip.

The bullet hit its mark, the silver burning through her flesh as she screamed, a horrific, guttural sound that sent shivers down my spine.

She slumped, her body going limp as she slid off Jake, collapsing into a heap on the floor.

Jake staggered to his feet, breathing hard, his eyes blazing as he glared at me.

“You almost let me die, you idiot!” He looked half-ready to hit me, his fists clenched tight.

I wanted to say something, to explain the split-second of hesitation, but I knew he

wouldn't understand.

Hunters didn't hesitate. They didn't feel. They simply did what was necessary, no matter how brutal.

But even now, staring at the bodies sprawled on the floor, I wasn't sure if I could be like Jake, cold and efficient, unbothered by the lives we were taking.

Our squad leader's voice came through the earpiece again. "Status report?"

Jake took a shuddering breath, giving me one last hard look before he replied, "Secondary hostile down. Exiting the premises."

The silence that followed was thick and uncomfortable, and I knew what he wasn't saying.

Tonight, I'd been weak. Tonight, I'd nearly gotten us both killed.

We left the house, stepping out into the cold night air. I'd hesitated, let my emotions get the better of me, and it had nearly cost us everything.

I didn't know if I could keep doing this, living with the constant threat, the unrelenting violence, the fear clawing at me every second.

Higgins' face and his fear, it lingered in my mind. Sure, he tricked me in the end, but his performance felt real.

Deep down, he was genuinely terrified. Were monsters truly soulless?

And as we drove away, leaving the bloody, silent house behind us, I realized that question might haunt me forever.

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CHAPTER TWO

FINN

The firing range was quiet, just as I'd hoped. I'd woken at dawn, figuring no one would be around this early.

Good. I needed space. Time to sort through my mistakes, think over everything that had gone wrong.

After last night's mission, Jake hadn't wasted a second telling the squad leader exactly how I'd screwed up.

And, of course, our squad leader hadn't held back either, his brash voice still echoing in my head: "Peterson, you're a liability! You'll never amount to anything with that soft heart of yours."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and now, standing here, I couldn't shake the sting of them.

I adjusted my stance, gun pressed tight in my grip, and glared at the target downrange. It was a human-shaped silhouette with crosshairs over the vital spots: head, heart, center mass.

My breathing was erratic, chest tight with anger and frustration as I aimed.

The shots echoed, one after the other, sharp and relentless, but none hit where they

were supposed to.

My bullets scattered wildly. Not a single one struck a vital spot.

Useless, like Jake said. I wished I could be more like my brothers, or like my cousin.

They never missed. They had the Guild's respect; they weren't the family failure.

I emptied the clip, only realizing I'd run out when the gun clicked uselessly.

With a sigh, I took off my earmuffs and set the gun down, trying to release the tension knotting my shoulders.

"Thought I'd find you here," came a voice that sent a chill down my spine and made my pulse kick.

Gabriel. Strong, steady, and beautiful in that way I couldn't quite explain.

He was leaning against the wall at the back, arms crossed over his broad chest. How long had he been watching me?

I swallowed, my eyes tracing over him, lingering on the strands of golden hair that had fallen across his forehead.

Most hunters kept their hair short, Gabriel included, but once, offhandedly, I'd told him I liked seeing him with longer hair.

He'd let it grow a bit since, and every time I saw it, I felt a warmth spread in my chest, though I was sure it wasn't because of me.

"So... you heard?" I asked, a little wary.

Gabriel pushed off the wall and nodded, coming closer, and I could feel my cheeks heat up. I looked away.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I muttered.

“Wouldn’t I?” he replied, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down my spine.

He closed the distance between us, and suddenly, he was standing just a breath away.

It was like the air shifted, thickening around us. I couldn’t quite pinpoint when my feelings for him had started.

But lately, just being near him made it hard to breathe.

“You’ve never failed,” I said.

Gabriel, he was the perfect hunter. The very definition of a human weapon.

His record was flawless, with more kills than any other hunter in the Guild.

If it weren’t for Guild politics, he’d probably be leading his own squad.

Instead, the current squad leaders were all handpicked by the Elders, and unsurprisingly, they were all family or close allies.

Everyone knew Gabriel’s mother had been a skilled hunter, but his father... rumors whispered he wasn’t entirely human.

It was why Gabriel was faster, stronger. But I thought it was just jealousy talking.

Gabriel’s gaze softened, and he watched me, quiet and patient.

He never lost his temper, even when I messed up. That patience was what drew me to him most, maybe.

His presence was solid, grounding, making me want to share everything with him.

“What really happened, Finn?” he asked, and I looked down, still hesitant.

Without a word, I grabbed a fresh box of ammo, letting the silence stretch as I loaded my gun.

Gabriel said nothing, just watching me with that quiet intensity that seemed to unravel something inside me.

“I screwed up,” I said finally, after firing a few rounds.

I was so lost in the memory of last night that I didn’t notice him move closer until I felt his warm, solid presence at my back.

He was guiding my hands, adjusting my grip on the gun, his fingers strong but gentle over mine.

My heart raced as his chest brushed against my back. I squeezed the trigger, and the shot hit dead center, right in the target’s head.

My shoulders slumped, tension spilling out of me in a shuddering breath.

“For a moment,” I whispered, “Higgins looked so painfully human. The report said he was dangerous, but when he was begging for his life... I don’t think he was acting. Just a scared man. It felt wrong.”

Gabriel was silent, but when he spoke, his voice held a surprising softness.

“The intel the guild feeds us isn’t always accurate,” he said.

I looked over at him, startled by the words, meeting his eyes—a striking shade between blue and green, full of something I couldn’t name.

“What do you mean?” I whispered.

He gave me that smile, the one that always felt like he was on the edge of sharing some deep secret.

“The Guild... bending the truth isn’t surprising. You must have sensed it before,” he said, his gaze intense.

I glanced around, but the firing range was still empty, and for some reason, I felt like I was hearing something forbidden.

“That’s treason,” I whispered.

Gabriel tipped my chin up with two fingers, and I felt my heart stutter.

His touch was gentle, his face just inches from mine, and I felt drawn to him, helpless under the weight of his gaze.

“Finn,” he murmured, voice low. “I’ve always known you’re different. Special. Don’t let them brainwash you. Never doubt yourself.”

My mind spun, barely registering the words. All I could think about was how close he was, the warmth radiating from him.

All the frustration, anger, and tension faded, replaced by something I could barely keep down any longer.

Taking a breath, I decided to risk it all.

In one swift move, I leaned up, closing the last inch between us, and kissed him.

The kiss was tentative at first, but when his hand slipped around the back of my neck, pulling me closer, the world around us melted away.

The reality of what I'd done hit me a few seconds after our kiss, and I pulled away, my face heating up.

"Sorry, that wasn't—" I stammered, completely flustered, unsure how to even begin explaining myself.

But Gabriel just put a finger to my lips, his gaze steady and calm.

Then, to my shock, he smiled. A real smile, soft and warm, and I realized with a start that I'd never actually seen him smile before.

"Don't be sorry," he murmured. "I'm not."

The words melted something inside me, and for a moment, everything was perfect, until I heard voices approaching.

Instinctively, I stepped back, pulling away from him, and Gabriel's brows knit in a faint frown before he, too, straightened up.

The fleeting closeness between us was gone, swallowed by the tense air around us.

Two hunters entered the range, their chatter bouncing off the walls. I stiffened as I realized one of them was Asher.

His gaze fell on us, and immediately, his expression soured, dark eyes narrowing as he stalked over.

“I’ll see you around, Finn,” Gabriel said, his voice lower but with a glint of something almost mischievous in his blue-green eyes.

He gave a nod to Asher, “Asher,” before turning to leave.

Asher’s scowl deepened as he watched Gabriel’s back retreat, and he turned back to me.

“What did he want?” My brother’s tone was sharp, a question wrapped in accusation.

“He was just... concerned,” I said, my voice a bit more sour than I intended.

After having my head bitten off by the squad leader, Asher had given me a similar lecture, and I was exhausted.

“Well, unless it’s training, you should stay away from him,” Asher said, his expression stern, gaze fierce.

I scoffed, feeling something inside me snap.

Asher had always had something to say about Gabriel, always warning me off him, but he’d never given me a real reason.

“Why is that?” I asked, the frustration thick in my voice.

“Because he’s bad news,” Asher said firmly. “And you deserve better, Finn.”

But he’s the one I want, I didn’t say.

Eventually, my silence wore him down, and he left, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

CHAPTER THREE

FINN

FIVE YEARS LATER

My tiny room felt even smaller than usual that night, the walls pressing in on me like a cell.

I'd outgrown the shared quarters of trainee life, but the so-called "upgrade" of a single room still didn't feel like much of a reward.

The narrow cot, scarred wooden desk, and the single small window high up on the wall weren't exactly anything to be excited about.

It didn't matter; I'd lived with less. But tonight, everything felt suffocating.

Dropping to the floor, I started a set of pushups, counting out reps in a whisper, trying to exhaust myself into a dreamless sleep.

Tomorrow, the Elders would assign me my final mission. The one that would prove I'd earned the rank of senior hunter.

My stomach twisted at the thought, nerves snaking through me no matter how many pushups I ground out.

After the hundredth rep, I flopped back onto my bed, breath heaving, but still, I

couldn't relax.

I found myself thinking about Gabriel.

The memory of his last kiss burned into me, a moment stolen just before his final mission five years ago.

The Elders had said it was a success, that his team had taken down the vampire nest in the mountains.

Half of his team didn't make it, including Gabriel, but I'd always doubted their explanation.

Their reports had been clinical, dismissive, like Gabriel had just been a disposable piece on a chessboard.

I'd tried to dig deeper, to find out the truth of how he'd really died.

My brothers, Asher and Donovan, had told me to drop it, said I needed to move on and focus on my training.

Still, Gabriel was gone, and the hole he left felt as deep as ever, especially tonight.

I could almost see his lopsided smile, feel the light press of his fingers brushing my cheek. My throat closed up.

Shutting my eyes, I fought the tight ache in my chest, then forced myself to turn and stare up at the ceiling.

I counted every single dot and crack until it grew bright enough outside to count the first hint of light seeping through the window.

Resigned to my sleeplessness, I finally threw on some clothes and headed to the cafeteria.

There, I grabbed a bowl of oatmeal, some fruit, and a coffee.

But my stomach knotted the moment I tried to eat, so I ended up pushing the food away, sipping the coffee in small, nervous sips that didn't settle me at all.

I couldn't shake the feeling that the Elders would have something special, or worse, something sinister waiting for me.

I nearly choked on a gulp of coffee when Asher and Donovan appeared, sliding into the seats across from me.

Donovan grinned, his usual cocky smirk in place.

"Nervous, little brother?" he teased, elbowing me.

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep." I forced a smile, trying to appreciate their attempt at support or whatever this was supposed to be.

But the truth was, I wished it was Gabriel or even my cousin Blake sitting here, grinning at me, maybe making fun of me for being nervous.

But Blake was gone, and Gabriel... Well, I could only dream he'd still be here.

"You've worked your butt off for this moment for years," Asher said, his voice low but steady. "Don't screw it up."

I laughed bitterly. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Finishing my coffee, I left them at the table and went to join the other junior hunters gathered outside the Elders' hall, waiting for our names to be called.

One by one, names were summoned, and I watched as they went in, anticipation and dread pooling in my gut.

Finally, my name echoed down the hall, and I found myself facing Elder Marcus and Elder Anastasia.

I sat down, feeling like I was being called into the principal's office.

Elder Anastasia gave me a smile, thin and tight-lipped, her dark eyes almost reptilian.

"Finn, it's good to see you," she said, the false sweetness in her voice sending a chill down my spine.

"Thank you," I said, keeping my tone as polite as possible. "I'm looking forward to my assignment."

"Are you now?" She flashed another of those smiles, the kind that made you want to take a step back.

Marcus slid a thick file across the desk toward me. I picked it up, feeling the weight of their eyes, and opened it.

I flipped open the file, hoping for some sort of useful information.

But there was hardly anything: a sparse description of my target, no name. Just an alias, a contact to speak with, and coordinates to a location.

The lack of any details gnawed at me, but I knew better than to question them too

closely.

I studied the text, the words blurring for a moment as my mind tried to catch up with what they were actually assigning me.

According to the file, this target was a member of the Craven Hill Nest. Just reading the name made my blood run cold.

It was the third largest vampire nest in the country and it was infamous even among seasoned hunters.

From the little intel I'd managed to gather over the years, Craven Hill was ruled by an ancient vampire queen with a vast network of powerful allies, both supernatural and human.

The nest's members were rumored to have deep political and economic ties.

And now, they were sending me, a lone junior hunter fresh from training, into one of the most dangerous vampire nests in the country?

My heart beat harder as I tried to make sense of it.

I'd expected them to send me after a rogue shifter or maybe a single vampire operating on their own, something manageable for a hunter still earning his stripes.

But this? A powerful vampire in Craven Hill?

I couldn't shake the feeling that the Elders were either testing me in the most brutal way possible or setting me up for something I wasn't supposed to survive.

The mission felt both reckless and insulting. The Elders knew this.

They knew that if I didn't plan meticulously, if I didn't outthink every possible outcome, my death was all but guaranteed.

I felt a faint heat simmering under my skin. Was it anger, fear? Maybe both.

This wasn't typical, I thought, grinding my teeth, but I wasn't surprised.

Unlike Asher and Donovan, the Elders had never been fond of me.

"A vampire, huh?" I tried to keep my voice neutral as I glanced back up, but they were both watching me, expressions unreadable.

"Yes," Elder Marcus said, his voice as hollow and unfeeling as his gaze. "We consider this target an immediate threat that needs to be eliminated."

"An immediate threat?" I echoed, feigning a confidence I didn't quite feel.

"Yes," Anastasia interjected, her gaze slithering over me with unsettling intensity. "We wouldn't be assigning this mission if we didn't believe you capable. But we'll need complete commitment to see this done. Do you understand?"

I fought the urge to grit my teeth. "Of course," I said evenly.

"Good." She tilted her head, that smile flashing again. "Your success will be watched with great interest, Finn. After all, we've invested considerable resources into your training. We expect results."

I nodded, forcing myself not to break eye contact. "I'll make the preparations."

But as I turned to leave, a question burned in my mind. I hesitated. "Why is there so little information in the file? If it's a high-priority target?"

Elder Marcus's face tightened, his lips pressing into a thin line.

"We are not here to explain ourselves to junior hunters, Finn. Or are you implying you're unfit for this mission?" Elder Marcus asked.

"No," I said quickly. "I just wanted to be prepared, is all."

"Focus on execution, not curiosity," he replied, dismissive and final.

I clenched my jaw, nodding tightly, and left.

Their words echoed in my head as I walked back down the hall, fists balled at my sides.

This mission felt wrong, like a trap. And I couldn't help the sharp pang in my chest that came with it.

Gabriel had been given an assignment just like this, one that felt off, but he hadn't questioned it.

He'd trusted the Elders, and it had cost him his life.

Outside, I leaned against the wall and drew in a breath, struggling to steady myself.

Gabriel's face swam before my eyes again, the way he'd looked at me the last time I saw him, that faintly teasing smile before he brushed a kiss against my lips.

"Don't let them break you," he'd whispered, fingers trailing along my cheek. "Keep that fire in you, Finn."

I squeezed my eyes shut. How was I supposed to keep that fire alive if it was doused

every time I tried to get closer to the truth?

“Hey,” Asher’s voice cut through my thoughts, and I opened my eyes to see him standing beside me, arms crossed.

“What did they say?” he asked, his face drawn and serious.

“Something’s not right,” I replied, trying to keep the bitterness out of my tone. “They didn’t even give me the name of my target. Just an alias, the name of my contact, a location, and my target’s a member of the Craven Hill Nest.”

Asher furrowed his brows, his gaze narrowing as he tried to make sense of it. He placed a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm.

“I should speak with them,” he said, sounding resolute. “Maybe there’s been a mistake. Or you’ve been given insufficient information.”

“No, I can handle this,” I blurted, almost instinctively.

For all of Asher’s faults, I knew he just wanted to protect me. But I had to do this myself.

I continued, “But... Asher... something feels really off. You know what happened to Gabriel. He trusted them, and look where it got him.”

Asher’s face hardened, and he dropped his hand, his jaw clenched. “Don’t bring Gabriel into this.”

“How can I not?” I hissed, unable to contain the anger and hurt that had been bubbling under the surface for years. “You and Donovan told me to forget about him, to move on, but I can’t. Gabriel didn’t die for nothing, Asher. He died because?—”

“Enough,” he cut in sharply, his voice cold. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Finn. Gabriel’s gone, and nothing you say or do will change that.”

I took a step back, his words stinging more than I wanted to admit.

Gabriel was more than a memory to me. He was the one person who had believed in me.

And the truth was, I didn’t want to forget about him. Not ever.

“Fine,” I said, swallowing hard, pushing down the ache in my chest.

If Asher couldn’t understand, then I didn’t need him to. This was my final mission, my life. Whatever was left of it.

Asher ran a hand over his face, looking away for a moment as if gathering his thoughts.

“Look, just let me speak to the Elders,” he began, softer this time. “I’ll see if there’s any way to get more details on your target or a team to back you up. I don’t like this any more than you do.”

“You don’t get it,” I said quietly. “For the past five years, I’ve been working my ass off to make sure you and Donovan don’t have to fight my battles for me anymore.”

I turned toward the door, trying to put some distance between us before I said something I’d regret.

“Finn,” Asher called after me, his voice catching slightly.

I stopped, still facing the door, but didn’t turn around. I was too close to losing my

composure to look at him.

“If you do this,” he said, his voice now almost pleading, “just... just make sure you come back. Whatever you think of the Elders, whatever you think you know about Gabriel... you and Donovan are the only family I have left that I can protect.”

I let his words sink in, feeling the weight of his concern but knowing it was too late.

Gabriel’s death had changed me irrevocably, and Asher’s desire to shield me couldn’t touch the part of me that had already resolved to see this mission through.

“Don’t worry,” I said, voice steady as I fought the tightness in my chest. “I’ve got this.”

Then, without looking back, I stepped out, leaving Asher in the silence of the hallway.

CHAPTER FOUR

GABRIEL

Monsters don't dream, or at least, we're not supposed to. However, I've always been an anomaly. Back then, and now.

My mind took me back to the past I've deliberately tried to forget, because remembering him hurts. And tonight, I dream.

I'm back in the early morning of the last day I was alive.

It was nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary. I'd invited Finn to have breakfast with me, outside the Guild House.

No one liked the overgrown, neglected garden out back, with its eerie quietness and faint, unshakable scent of decay.

It clung to the damp air and tangled in the roots of wild roses, reaching around gravestones scattered in haphazard rows.

Most found it creepy, including Finn, but it was one of the only places I'd ever felt at home.

The others called it the garden, but it was more of a burial ground, a resting place for hunters who'd given everything.

When I was a child, I'd wander among the graves and the roses, always more comfortable with the dead than the living.

I led Finn there, a makeshift picnic breakfast stashed in a basket with supplies scrounged up from the cafeteria.

He raised an eyebrow at me, a bit skeptical but still intrigued.

I watched his eyes widen with interest as I unfurled a worn checkered blanket over the wild grass and sprawling roots of an ancient oak.

I'd spent countless afternoons under that tree, resting my back against its massive trunk, hidden from the world.

"Gabriel... is this... a date?" he asked hesitantly, biting his lower lip, which drew my attention more than it should have.

I wanted to kiss him badly, but I held back. I had my reasons. Finn being close to me was dangerous. Being with him was a mistake, or so I kept telling myself.

Just another reason in a growing list of regrets.

"We're just having breakfast," I said, keeping my voice even.

His face fell, and I cursed myself internally.

Even after all my attempts to train him to keep his emotions guarded, Finn wore his heart on his sleeve, although he could never hide it from me.

"But after this assignment..." I said, softening my tone. "Maybe we can have dinner. There's a new steakhouse in town."

He looked up at me, his blue eyes searching mine, and then his mouth curved into a grin.

Warmth seeped into his expression, and the sight made my pulse quicken in a way I never wanted him to know.

“So, what do you have for me?” Finn asked, not waiting for my answer as he reached for the basket.

“Rude,” I said, failing to mask the fondness in my voice.

“I’m hungry,” Finn complained, rifling through the contents with unabashed curiosity.

Then, the morning light hit his face just right, catching on his dark messy hair and illuminating that smile.

It was one of those smiles that was somehow both tentative and full of warmth. It was the last time I’d see it.

In my dream, I wanted to reach for him, to make that moment last longer, to let him know how much he meant to me, even though I’d held back a thousand times before.

But I knew what came next. I always did.

“Finn,” I started, struggling with words that I could never quite manage to say aloud, not back then. “There’s... something I should tell you.”

His eyes lit up with interest. “What is it?”

Instead, I laughed it off, deflecting the moment like I always did.

“Nothing. Just... take it easy out there.”

“Easy?” he teased. “Coming from you?”

I shook my head.

He always had that way of turning my own words against me, with a smirk that made me feel... more alive than I should have allowed.

His laughter echoed in the dream, mingling with the soft rustle of leaves, as if the garden itself held our secret.

But even in the dream, I knew what happened next. I knew I’d never make it back from the mission that evening.

I always pictured Finn waiting for me in my room, heart wide open. He was a trusting soul who never truly belonged in the violent world we were raised in.

A knock at my door jolted me awake, ripping me from the remnants of that beautiful dream, leaving me both heartbroken and exposed.

I had always been a light sleeper, a skill that proved useful now that I lived among monsters.

My master might have considered me his favorite for now, but I knew how easily that could change.

In this place, loyalty was fickle, and survival depended on vigilance.

The knocking became more insistent, thudding into my skull with an urgency that warned me not to delay.

I dragged myself out of bed, rubbing sleep from my eyes, and opened the door.

Gael's face greeted me, his lips curling into a sinister smile, fangs gleaming as he lunged.

I was still half-entranced by my dream of another time, another place, and I hadn't expected the ambush.

His cold, powerful hands wrapped around my neck, forcing me back onto the floor, his weight crushing down on my chest.

As undead, we didn't need to breathe, but our necks were still vulnerable.

Beric, our master and sire, allowed us to tear each other apart as long as it didn't end in death.

The chill of Gael's grip was a brutal reminder of my place in the hierarchy, of the jealous, ruthless rivalries that made this place feel like a warzone.

I shook off the last haze of sleep and slammed my knee into his ribs.

The force broke his grip, and he snarled, but he wasn't done.

Gael had nursed a grudge ever since Beric had taken me to the Queen's court a fortnight ago. It was a coveted position he'd held for over a century before I'd arrived.

And Gael, for all his centuries of experience, had grown entitled to that privilege.

I met his eyes, brimming with anger and dark determination, and for the first time since my transformation, I didn't hold back.

In my former life, restraint had been second nature, but here, amongst monsters, there was no need.

Here, power was everything.

Gael and I went at each other like feral animals, exchanging blows that would have left mortals mangled and broken, but only left us bleeding and furious.

Eventually, with the taste of copper in my mouth and the satisfying scent of his blood on my hands, he spat a curse and finally rolled off me.

We lay sprawled on the cold floor, glaring at each other, chests heaving. His gaze held nothing but hatred and venom.

I knew without a doubt that he wouldn't stop until he saw me as ashes, six feet under.

Then again, maybe that was just the way things worked here. Peace was a luxury none of us could afford.

Gael spit out blood and sneered, his voice thick with distaste. "The master wants to see you in his quarters."

I took a deep breath, clamping down on the need to throw some clever retort his way. "I see."

He didn't leave immediately, lingering to see if I'd rise to his bait. When I stayed silent, he curled his lip in disgust and stalked off.

The wounds I'd inflicted on him were already knitting together, bruises fading as his body restored itself.

Gael had the kind of beauty mortals might swoon over, with his high cheekbones and icy stare.

But I'd come to see him as something cold and sharp. He was beautiful only from a distance, like a blade.

Before I went to Beric, I cleaned myself up and changed into fresh clothes. My sire placed an almost religious importance on appearances.

"We might be monsters, angel, but we have manners," he'd once told me with that voice of his.

Satisfied I looked presentable, I left my quarters and started the trek to Beric's chambers on the second floor.

The house itself was vast, more like a manor than a home, surrounded by hundreds of forested acres that concealed it from prying human eyes.

Beric was Queen Arabella's second, after all, and his estate reflected his rank.

As I walked through the silent halls, I caught sight of Cora and Justin, two new human "indentures" brought into the nest to manage daytime affairs.

Cora gave me a shy smile, lashes lowered. Justin, the bolder of the two siblings, offered a respectful "Good evening."

I returned the greeting with a nod, ignoring the curious look in his eyes.

Unlike Gael and the others, I didn't see the humans as mere blood banks.

They were essential to our survival, maintaining the facade and handling the logistics

of our lives.

Maybe it was a remnant of my humanity, or maybe it was the way Justin's eyes reminded me of someone I'd tried hard to forget.

Someone who had once given me a reason to live. But I couldn't let myself dwell on that now. I had a meeting with Beric.

I finally reached his quarters without further interruption and knocked, waiting until his voice summoned me inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

GABRIEL

The door creaked open to reveal an ostentatious, over-the-top room. The walls were draped in velvet and a chandelier casting a dim, ghostly light.

Beric was seated in an armchair that looked more like a throne.

He gestured for me to approach, his eyes gleaming with the quiet malice of a predator who'd already decided on his prey.

"Gabriel," he greeted, his voice a smooth purr that belied the razor-sharp glint in his eyes. "It seems you've had a... lively start of the evening with Gael."

I inclined my head, choosing my words carefully.

"He was eager for some exercise," I answered.

Beric's mouth quirked in amusement, though his gaze remained cold.

"Eager, yes, and perhaps just a touch resentful. Though, I can't fault him for that. You've taken quite the shine to our queen's court, haven't you?"

He said it with a practiced casualness, but I knew better.

"I serve at your pleasure," I said, keeping my tone neutral.

I could feel the weight of his gaze, as if he were peeling back layers of my skin to see the motives beneath.

Beric leaned forward, his fingers steeped under his chin.

“Tell me, Gabriel... do you miss it?” His voice was a silken trap, pulling at something I’d tried to bury.

“Miss what?” I asked, but my voice had betrayed me, wavering ever so slightly.

He could sense it, my weakness. My hunger for a life I’d once known, a life with a heartbeat.

“The world of the living,” he answered, almost tenderly, his gaze probing. “You were so... emotional when you first arrived here. How are you finding it now?”

“Emotional” was not a word I’d have chosen.

To ensure his fledglings’ unwavering loyalty, Beric would break us down until we were nothing, and only when he deemed us fully shattered would he rebuild us.

I didn’t miss our time in his dungeons one bit.

I kept my face blank, but the memories were clawing their way to the surface, memories of warmth and sunlight, of a boy who had trusted me despite the darkness within me.

Memories of Finn.

“It’s fading,” I lied, hoping he’d let it drop. “That life feels... distant now.”

Beric's gaze lingered, searching for cracks. After a moment, he leaned back, satisfied. For now.

"Good," he said. "Sentimentality is a disease among our kind. Remember that."

"Can I do something for you, Master?" I asked.

The way Beric's eyes gleamed at the title said everything. He loved it when I called him that, loved the power it represented.

The old me would have cringed at the thought, might have been consumed with shame, but pride was a luxury I'd discarded long ago.

To survive in this new world, I would use any weapon, any tactic, to keep Beric's favor. Even if it meant swallowing every last piece of myself.

For what? a dark voice within me murmured. What reason do you keep living? But I silenced it, as I always did.

"There's trouble brewing tonight at Gage's club. I want you and Bram to keep the peace," Beric said, his tone dismissive, but I was aware he was watching me intently.

I met his stare, keeping my expression neutral.

"Understood. I'll inform Bram, and we'll head to the club immediately," I replied.

"Don't fail me, angel ," he said, lingering on the nickname with a smug satisfaction.

I hated the pet name.

He knew that. I kept my face blank, pretending the name was no more than a word,

but Beric could sense even the faintest shift in me.

He always did. I forced my body to stay relaxed, but inside, tension coiled like a spring.

The last thing I needed was a reminder of just how much Beric enjoyed twisting me up inside, just how closely he watched for every little crack.

Beric would snap me in two if he ever sensed that I might break free, but he'd do it so slowly, so carefully, that it would feel like I was crumbling by my own hand.

I offered him one more nod and turned to leave, hiding the resentment and hatred boiling just beneath my skin.

As I left his quarters, I pulled my shoulders back, readying myself for the task ahead.

Gage King, the local werelion alpha, was powerful and ruthless, ruling over the city's most dominant shifter group.

His pard was allied with the Craven Hill nest, but that alliance was often as turbulent as it was beneficial.

Tensions simmered under the surface, and Beric sent me to keep the peace with Gage almost as if he relished the idea of throwing me to the lions.

I headed down the hall to find Bram, who would be my partner tonight.

The vampiric enforcer was as cold and silent as a shadow, as deadly as he was unyielding.

In this place, he was as close to an ally as I could get, though "ally" was a stretch.

Bram had been at Beric's side far longer than I had, had seen his fair share of ambitious fledglings come and go. He'd probably disposed of most of the failures himself.

When I entered his quarters, he glanced up, his ice-gray eyes flicking over me.

"Beric's orders," I said, keeping my voice even. "Potential trouble at Gage's club tonight. He wants us there to manage it."

Bram studied me for a beat, his face expressionless.

"More babysitting," he said dryly, though there was a glint of approval. "Let's hope the cats play nice."

"Let's hope," I echoed, though we both knew that was unlikely.

The city streets were quiet as we set off, darkness clinging to every corner. I kept my senses sharp, my eyes scanning every shadow.

Even as I focused on the path ahead, that question gnawed at me, the one I'd pushed away earlier.

What was I holding onto? What was left of the old Gabriel that still kept me tethered to this existence?

Every once in a while, in moments like these, I let my guard slip just enough to remember.

I saw a flash of Finn's face, that boyish grin that had once been so full of trust.

I hadn't seen him in years, hadn't been that version of myself in years.

I wondered if Finn would even recognize me now. If he knew the things I had done in Beric's name, the blood I'd spilled.

Beric had turned me into something Finn would never understand, and that thought haunted me more than the monsters around me ever could.

I forced myself to focus as we arrived at Gage's club, an upscale, glass-walled monstrosity on the edge of downtown.

Shifters crowded inside, the scent of their raw energy and barely suppressed aggression thick in the air.

A part of me bristled at the scent of blood and sweat, but I pushed it down, scanning the crowd for any sign of unrest.

Bram was silent beside me, a chilling presence that somehow settled my nerves. At least he was predictable.

Then I saw Gage himself, a towering figure with piercing amber eyes that fixed on us the moment we entered.

He moved through the crowd like a predator, his gaze zeroing in on us.

Despite the human guise, there was an unmistakable animal edge to him.

As he approached, his smirk was enough to tell me he was expecting us.

"Gabriel, Bram," he said smoothly, eyes glinting with amusement. "I heard Beric was sending some of his favorites."

"Just here to keep the peace," I said coolly, meeting his gaze without a hint of the

unease that had coiled in my stomach.

Gage's eyes flicked between Bram and me, lingering just long enough to remind us we were in his territory.

"Is that so?" Gage's voice was all feigned innocence, but his gaze was calculating, sharp as a blade. "Well, my boys are always peaceful."

Gage chuckled, clearly enjoying himself.

His words sounded friendly, but the tension in the room spiked, the energy tightening around us like a noose.

When neither Bram nor I responded, Gage shrugged with a sly grin, hands slipping into the pockets of his tailored jacket.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," he drawled, his tone mocking and almost lazy. "I have business to attend to."

He looked between us one last time, a silent reminder of whose territory we stood in, before melting back into the crowd.

Bram and I exchanged a glance, silent communication passing between us.

He tilted his head toward the left side of the room, indicating he'd start there.

We both knew these crowds were notorious for stirring up trouble, and it was easier to control the situation if we split up and swept each side of the floor.

I gave him a curt nod, and he moved off, cutting a straight, efficient line through the masses, his presence as cold as a knife's edge.

I, on the other hand, worked my way through more slowly, scanning faces, noting anyone who seemed particularly volatile.

My path drew occasional glances, too many of which lingered with something suggestive.

Offers came my way. Whispered propositions that hung in the air, fingers trailing across my arm or grazing against my shoulder.

But I turned them all down with polite nods or carefully worded rejections.

I'd learned long ago that the best way to navigate situations like this was to keep a soft touch, keep them entertained without giving in to anything.

After all, here I was still Beric's creature. If I wanted to survive, that would have to be enough.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him. Or at least, I thought I did.

Time stilled as my gaze zeroed in on a figure standing across the room.

He was half-hidden in shadow, but I'd know that posture, that face.

Finn. It couldn't be, and yet...

My mind flashed back to another time, years ago now, when I'd last seen him.

The Finn I knew had been raw and open, that unguarded smile that he wore so easily. A smile that had once been just for me.

The memory stirred a painful longing in me, a hunger that wouldn't ever really go

away.

I'd buried it as best I could, buried it beneath the layers of who Beric had forced me to become.

But here, in this moment, the memories surged back, and I found myself moving through the crowd as if in a trance, ignoring everything else around me.

I pushed past shifters and vampires alike, barely noticing their looks or complaints.

The crowd shifted around me, lights flashing, shadows deepening, and that's when I lost sight of him.

I stopped dead, scanning the sea of faces, but Finn was gone.

Or maybe he'd never been there at all.

It could have been a trick of the mind, a stray memory twisted into something solid by an undead heart that wanted to believe.

But I couldn't shake it. Even as I stood there, scanning the room, a hollow ache spread through me. Finn would never be here.

I took a deep, unnecessary breath, steadying myself.

Whatever piece of me still longed for Finn, for that life, was just that, a piece.

It didn't rule me, not anymore. Beric had made sure of that.

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CHAPTER SIX

FINN

The moment I stepped into The Claw and Fang, a pulse of wariness surged through me, settling low in my gut.

I kept my face neutral, tried to look like I belonged, but tension coiled within me.

The club was packed, crowded with supernaturals of every variety, with a few scattered humans dotting the shadows.

Neon lights flickered overhead, casting strange colors across the walls, and the relentless beat of the bass seemed to vibrate in my bones.

I did my best to avoid the flow of patrons moving around me, keeping my head down.

Even then, I felt like I stood out. Like a spark in a room full of shadows. Too bright, too... vulnerable.

I'd already sent a message to Scar, my contact, to let him know I'd arrived.

When no response came, I pulled out my phone and typed again: I'm here .

A second of hesitation, then I added, Gray jacket, black jeans, in case he needed help finding me in the crowd.

I tucked my phone away and took a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

Then, I caught the scent. Earthy, animalistic, wild.

I barely had time to process it before a hulking, red-haired man broke away from the crowd, making a direct line for me.

His gaze was sharp, and a jagged scar cut across his face, marking him unmistakably.

My hand inched toward the knife at my belt, a reflex I didn't even think about.

The weapon was slim comfort in a place like this, but instinct had me reaching for it all the same.

Was this a trap?

For a fleeting second, I wondered if the Elders had set me up, arranging my death in the most inconspicuous way possible.

My heart raced, and I could feel a cold sweat breaking out along my brow.

The Guild had a way of removing hunters who crossed lines, a merciless efficiency that left no room for error or escape.

The man leaned in close, his breath brushing against my ear. "You the hunter from the Guild?"

The words sent a chill down my spine, but I forced myself to answer calmly. "I am. You're Scar?" I asked.

"That's me." Scar gave a grin, flashing sharp, gleaming teeth under the club's

flashing lights. “I need you to come with me.”

My stomach dropped, but I forced myself to keep my voice steady. “For what?”

“Relax, little hunter,” he said, his grin widening, every bit the predator sizing up prey. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

The way he moved was almost unnervingly smooth, each step catlike, and suddenly I understood. Werelion.

The Claw and Fang was owned by Gage King, leader of the local lion pard and one of the vampires’ biggest allies.

I’d read about him in my research on Craven Hill, but it didn’t help the unease that clung to me like a second skin.

We were supposed to protect humans. That was the core tenet that had been drilled into us since our training days.

Yet here I was, caught in a contract that seemed to betray everything we stood for.

Why had the Guild accepted a contract with the werelions?

Gage King and his pard had blood on their hands, just like the vampires they claimed to be at odds with.

Accepting a job from them felt like a betrayal of our mission.

Had we really crossed that line?

Had the Guild sunk so low that they would align themselves with the very monsters

we killed for a living?

I kept my hand on the knife hilt, even though I knew that using it would probably turn the whole pard against me.

One wrong move, and I'd be fighting my way out of here.

"Lead the way," I said, keeping my voice cool.

"Good." Scar gave me a nod, then turned, motioning for me to follow. "Keep close."

He led me through the crowd with ease, parting the sea of people effortlessly.

We reached a door marked Private , and I followed him up a narrow, darkened staircase.

With each step, the sounds of the club below faded, replaced by the low hum of quiet conversations and the creak of floorboards.

At the top, plush VIP rooms lined the hallway. Scar stopped in front of one and ushered me inside, closing the door behind us.

The room felt insulated from the chaos below. It had plush couches, a sleek bar, and a large glass window overlooking the crowded dance floor.

I could see everything from here, yet no one could see me.

Scar poured himself a shot of whiskey, glancing my way.

"Want anything?" Sear asked.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes on him. “No, I’m good.”

“Let’s get down to it,” I said, my tone sharper than I intended.

“Direct. I like that.” He gestured to the couch. “Sit.”

I sat, but my body stayed tense, muscles coiled and ready.

Scar took a seat across from me, swirling his drink as if this were a friendly meeting, but his eyes never lost their predatory glint.

“My boss wants a particular bloodsucker dead,” he said, his voice low. “One who goes by the name ‘Angel.’”

I gave a curt nod. “Why? What’s he done?”

Scar’s eyes gleamed, a sly smile tugging at his lips.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? Our relationship with the Nest isn’t what it used to be. Angel is Beric’s new favorite toy. You know who Beric is, right?”

I felt my pulse spike. Of course I knew.

Beric was Queen Arabella’s second-in-command. He was a powerful vampire in the Craven Hill Nest, the most dominant supernatural group in the city.

The lions were their biggest allies, so what had happened to put them at odds?

This job didn’t feel right. The Guild didn’t typically involve itself in supernatural politics.

“Why Angel?” I pressed. “If your problem is with Beric, wouldn’t it make more sense to go after him?”

Scar chuckled. “You think it’s that easy? Beric’s untouchable. Always has been. But Angel?”

Scar leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Take him out of the picture, and we weaken Beric’s power structure. Angel’s dangerous and ambitious.”

His words twisted something inside me, like a blade digging deeper.

I just needed to finish the job and get out. But something wasn’t adding up.

“So that’s it?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. “I kill this… Angel, and we’re all good?”

“That’s all you need to know.” Scar downed his drink, his eyes gleaming over the rim of his glass. “His real name’s Gabriel. That’s what he went by before he got turned.”

The name hit me like a fist to the gut. My heart stumbled, then started racing, each beat harder than the last.

“What… did you just say?” I asked.

Scar gave me an impatient look. “Gabriel. This fledgling you’re supposed to take out? His name was Gabriel.”

My mind blanked, my chest tightening with a pain so sharp it stole my breath. Gabriel. The one person I’d never fully let go.

The one I’d mourned, blamed myself for losing, tortured myself over. And now, the

Guild had sent me here to kill him?

“Are you sure?” My voice was a whisper, barely audible over the thudding in my ears.

Scar rolled his eyes, irritation flickering across his face.

“Are you slow or something? Do we need to ask the Guild for a replacement?” Scar demanded.

I forced myself to breathe, to shove down the panic clawing its way up my throat. Gabriel wasn’t an uncommon name, I told myself.

There could be dozens of vampires named Gabriel in this city alone. But I couldn’t silence the doubt gnawing at me.

If this really was my Gabriel... the Guild would want him dead.

They’d erase every trace of his past life, silence any rumors that one of their former hunters had been turned and was now mingling with vampires.

Scar watched me, his eyes narrowing.

“If you’re hesitating, you can walk away now. I’m sure your Guild will send someone else,” Scar said.

The challenge in his gaze burned, but I forced myself to meet it.

“I’m not walking away,” I blurted.

“Good.” Scar gave a nod of approval, but I could barely register it through the storm

inside me.

I tried to steady myself, clinging to the image of the job as just another target.

But the thought of hunting Gabriel, of coming face-to-face with him only to end it...

“Stay focused, little hunter. That’s the only advice I’ve got.” Scar’s voice was almost amused.

But I could hardly hear him anymore, my mind spinning.

He poured himself another drink as if it were any other night, any other mission, while my world felt like it was unraveling.

I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the questioning look Scar shot me.

“If that’s all, I’ll get going. I have preparations to make,” I said.

He gave me a casual wave. “Watch yourself. Beric doesn’t take kindly to anyone threatening his favorite,” Scar said.

I nodded, not trusting myself to respond, and turned to leave. I wove back through the club, each step feeling heavier than the last.

By the time I stepped out into the night air, I could barely breathe.

The city lights blurred as memories clawed their way to the surface, each one sharper, more painful than the last.

I had to know. Had to see him.

Because if Gabriel was truly alive, how could I bring myself to kill the only person I'd ever truly loved?

My mind was still a jumble of confusion, when I heard a soft, breathy moan drifting from a nearby alley.

The sound jolted me, cutting through the storm of emotions. Was someone hurt?

I pulled my knife from its sheath, gripping it tight as I moved toward the source of the noise, every nerve on edge.

As I turned the corner, I spotted two figures entwined in the shadows.

One man was holding the other, cradling him close, the movement gentle but oddly... possessive.

My cheeks burned when I realized I might've just interrupted something I had no business seeing.

But then, with a faint shudder, the man in the embrace slumped to the ground, his head tilting back, revealing two tiny red marks on his neck.

My stomach dropped. Vampire.

The other figure shifted, turning slightly, and that's when I caught sight of his face.

Familiar features, sharper than before but unmistakable. Blue-green eyes met mine, their confusion flashing quickly to shock.

His gaze pinned me where I stood, and in that moment, I felt like the ground was yanked out from under me.

“Gabriel,” I whispered, barely aware that the word had escaped my lips.

It was him. The same Gabriel I’d once held, loved, mourned. The one I’d thought was lost to me forever.

And here he was, standing right in front of me, every bit as real as he’d been in my memories. But he was changed in ways I could hardly comprehend.

I stumbled back, gripping my knife tighter, my heart pounding like a war drum in my chest.

The Elders had really sent me here to kill this vampire. To kill him.

The weight of it crashed over me like a tidal wave, nearly stealing the breath from my lungs.

Gabriel's expression shifted, morphing from shock to something darker, a wary recognition mingling with a spark of something else, something dangerous.

His lips parted, and I watched as he took a cautious step forward, his eyes flickering over me, scanning my face as if searching for answers.

“Finn?” His voice was low, almost a whisper, yet it cut through the night like a knife.

Hearing him say my name sent a shiver down my spine, stirring memories that were at once comforting and painful.

My whole body tensed, the blade in my hand feeling like dead weight.

I’d come here to finish a job, but now... now I didn’t know if I could. I didn’t know if I wanted to.

“Gabriel,” I repeated, as if saying it aloud would make it all make sense. “They... they told me you were dead.”

His face softened, if only for a second, and I caught a glimpse of the Gabriel I’d once known.

“I was,” he murmured, a hollow note threading his voice. “In a way, I suppose I still am.”

The silence hung between us, thick and heavy, as if we were standing on either side of a chasm.

Gabriel glanced down, his jaw tightening as he seemed to wrestle with whatever emotions were clawing at him.

“This can’t be real,” I whispered, shaking my head, anger and disbelief warring within me. “They sent me here to kill someone they called Angel. They didn’t tell me it was... you.”

Gabriel’s expression twisted with something unreadable, a flicker of bitterness maybe, or regret.

“That’s what Beric likes to call me.” Gabriel tilted his head, lips curving into a faint smile that held no warmth. “Guess I must have really pissed the Elders off if they’re sending you after me.”

“Don’t joke about this.” My voice cracked, the edge of desperation bleeding through. “You don’t understand what this means. The Elders... they’ll kill us both if they know I’m hesitating. If they knew you were even still...”

Alive. The word felt wrong, even though he was standing there, looking every bit like

the man I'd loved, the man I still?—

He took another step forward, eyes softening as he met my gaze.

“Finn... I didn't choose this. I was as good as dead when Beric found me. I'm not a monster by choice,” Gabriel said.

I felt myself wavering, the knife trembling in my grip as I fought against the instinct to reach out to him, to take his hand, to hold onto some part of him.

But the job was screaming in the back of my mind, drowning out everything else with a single, merciless truth.

I was supposed to kill him .

“I can't...” My voice broke, and I looked away, trying to gather myself. “I can't do this, Gabriel. I mourned you, for crying out loud. Now they want me to finish the job?”

He closed the distance between us, close enough now that I could feel the chill of his presence, even as his gaze softened.

“Then don't.” His voice was quiet, almost pleading. “Walk away, Finn. Pretend you didn't see me.”

“Walk away?” I shook my head, incredulous. “If I go back empty-handed, they'll know something went wrong. They'll keep sending hunters until you're dead for good.”

Gabriel's eyes held mine, a battle of emotions raging behind that blue-green intensity.

He reached out slowly, his hand ghosting near mine as if asking for permission to bridge the gap.

I didn't pull away when his cold fingers brushed mine.

"Then let them come," he said, his voice fierce, something feral and wild flickering in his eyes. "I'll get rid of all of them."

I closed my eyes, fighting against the flood of emotions breaking through the walls I'd tried so hard to keep up.

Reluctantly, I pulled away from his touch and ran, leaving him behind like the coward I was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GABRIEL

The moment Finn disappeared around the corner, I stood there, frozen. I didn't trust myself to move.

Didn't trust myself to feel the spike of emotion that seeing him had brought to the surface. Finn, here. In this city, in my world.

I had forced myself to accept that he was just a memory, a part of my old life that I would never be able to reach again.

But there he was, flesh and blood and so painfully alive.

A low groan snapped me out of my daze, and I looked down to see Ricky slumped on the ground, leaning against the cold, damp wall.

"Who was that?" he mumbled, his eyes struggling to focus, the slight sway of his body betraying how much he'd had to drink.

"Just someone passing through," I said quickly, giving him a hand and helping him to his feet.

Ricky was a regular, volunteering himself as a blood source for my hunger.

For him, it was part thrill, part addiction, and I was certain he'd be back again. That

was the pull we vampires had over them.

“Come on,” I said, offering a steadying arm as he swayed unsteadily. “Let’s get you a cab.”

“Nah,” he said with a playful, tipsy grin. “Unless you’re offering to give me your Blood Mark?”

The familiar ache settled in my chest, hollow and heavy.

Being blood marked by a vampire was like a shifter’s mating mark. It was permanent and binding.

The recipient would live as long as their vampire partner did, tied together for eternity.

Ricky didn’t understand what he was asking for, not really.

And even if he did, it didn’t matter. I had no intention of giving my mark to anyone.

Ever since I’d woken up as this... thing, it was as if the parts of me that felt real had gone silent.

Or maybe I’d just shut them down, letting myself grow numb to the world.

But seeing Finn had cracked something open, reminding me of a life I’d thought was lost forever.

“Ricky,” I said with a sigh. “You’ve had enough. Go home and sleep it off.”

He scoffed. “You’re not my dad, you know.”

Pulling away from my support, he took a shaky step toward the club entrance.

“Someone else in there’s bound to be interested,” Ricky said.

I let him go, watching as he disappeared back into the crowd of dancers and drinkers inside.

People like him who were drawn to the darkness, to the thrill of being bitten were no different from addicts chasing their next high.

I’d tried reasoning with him, had warned him more than once that his so-called thrill-seeking would eventually get him killed.

But he never listened.

It was then that a prickle of awareness spread down my spine. A dark, predatory presence stirred at the edge of my senses.

I slid a hand to my hip and felt the cool handle of my old hunting knife, silver blade glinting faintly under the dim alley light.

I couldn’t be too careful around here.

Silver didn’t work against everything, but it could slow down a lot of things that lurked in Craven Hill’s shadows.

A figure emerged from the shadows, footsteps soundless on the wet pavement.

Despite his size and height, Bram moved with a hunter’s grace.

“Easy,” he said, raising his hands in a mock gesture of surrender. “No need to get

defensive.”

I relaxed, but only a little.

“Why are you here, Bram?” I asked, not letting my guard down completely.

Bram scanned the alley, his gaze sharp and probing. He possessed senses nearly as keen as a shifter’s.

I couldn’t be sure, but I had the uneasy feeling that he’d picked up on something lingering in the air. A familiar scent I was desperate to keep hidden.

“You let your food go again,” he said, his tone laced with a hint of disapproval.

He meant Ricky, I thought.

“I’m careful,” I said, crossing my arms. “Leaving bodies in Gage’s territory isn’t exactly wise.”

Bram’s gaze grew colder, his eyes gleaming in the dim light.

“We’re predators at the top of the food chain. Showing mercy is just another word for showing weakness. And the weak, in our world, are culled,” Bram reminded me.

I felt my muscles tense, readying to strike if necessary. “Is that a threat?”

“Just a word of caution.” Bram’s voice softened, almost fond. “I actually like you. You’re competent. Beric hasn’t been this entertained by a new recruit in a long time. But others might see your mercy as a flaw—and use it against you.”

I knew who he meant. “Gael?”

Bram didn't confirm or deny it, but the flicker of acknowledgment in his eyes was enough.

Gael had already marked me as a threat, or a loose end.

"One of Gage's enforcers has informed me we're no longer needed here tonight," Bram said casually, his expression unreadable. "I'll be returning to the nest."

"Go ahead," I replied, keeping my voice steady. "I still need to eat."

Bram gave a brief, approving nod. "Happy hunting. Just remember to be back before sunrise."

I held my breath, waiting until his presence finally faded from my senses.

The tightness in my chest eased, and I exhaled, the tension leaving my shoulders.

Home, Bram had said, as though that place full of death and shadows was a home.

But I'd never felt at home in the Guild, either.

I'd always been something of an outsider, half human and half... something else, something wild.

In the Guild, I had learned early to stay vigilant, to watch my back. But here, with Beric's vampires, I found myself treading even more carefully.

I took a steadying breath, grounding myself. Finn's scent lingered faintly in the air. Tracking him would be simple.

He couldn't have gotten far, and I had always been a good tracker, even before Beric

turned me.

I followed the scent trail through the winding alleys, slipping through the shadows with silent footsteps.

The city was alive with the sounds of nightlife, laughter and music echoing faintly as I moved deeper into the maze of streets and alleys.

Finn's scent was getting stronger, sharper.

When I finally spotted him, he was standing at the mouth of a narrow alley, his shoulders tense as he glanced over his shoulder.

He had heard me coming. Finn had always been sharp, but he had never been hunted by me before.

He didn't realize how quickly I could close the distance, how silently I could move.

Finn suddenly spun, his hands locked tight around the grip of a revolver pointed directly at my heart.

I recognized the unmistakable gleam of silver bullets in the chamber.

They wouldn't kill me, not like they would a shifter, but they'd hurt like hell.

"Don't do this," Finn said, his voice trembling just enough to betray the silent plea beneath it.

"Finn, we need to talk," I said, raising my hands slowly. "Put the gun down?—"

Before I could finish, he fired. The shot rang out, echoing off the alley walls.

I saw the bullet coming, tracing its trajectory and twisting out of its path just in time.

The shot went wide, and I could see the frustration and hurt flicker in his eyes.

He tried again, the gun cracking in the silence, but he missed once more.

In two quick strides, I closed the distance between us, tearing the gun from his grip and tossing it to the ground.

For a second, I thought he might stop.

I hoped that losing his weapon might remind him that I didn't want to hurt him. But I'd underestimated him.

With a glint of determination, Finn whipped out a knife, a flash of silver catching the dim alley light.

He was faster than I remembered, his movements sharp and practiced, the product of hours of training.

Finn lunged, and I only had time to dodge, twisting out of the way as he sliced past me.

I countered with a step to the side, but he pivoted, and his blade skimmed dangerously close to my skin.

We moved in a rhythm that felt agonizingly familiar. Dodging, parrying, striking.

It was just like old times in the Guild, our training sessions, but with a deadly edge that hadn't been there before.

I could see his frustration, the tight lines of determination etched in his face. He was relentless, his movements fierce and focused.

But I couldn't bring myself to hurt him.

Every time I sensed an opening, I pulled back, easing off instead of pressing forward.

Memories flooded through me: the hours we'd spent sparring.

The way he'd always thrown himself fully into every session. Finn never backed down, even if it meant taking a hit.

And here he was now, not holding back against me. Not even a little.

He swung the knife again, a clean, controlled motion.

I barely evaded it, feeling the sting as the blade skimmed the side of my cheek.

Blood trickled down, but I ignored it, moving in closer until I finally saw my moment.

With a quick twist, I caught his wrist, twisting the knife from his grip and sending it clattering to the ground.

My other hand pressed him against the alley wall, pinning him there with my weight.

His chest rose and fell in heavy breaths, his face inches from mine, his eyes a storm of emotions. Anger, hurt, betrayal.

But then something shifted. In his gaze, the anger softened, turning to something that took my breath away.

Before I could even process it, he leaned forward, his lips capturing mine in a tentative, trembling kiss.

The touch was light at first, like he was testing the waters, like he didn't quite believe he was doing this.

But the spark ignited something inside me that I thought had long since died. I kissed him back, the world falling away in that moment.

His hesitation melted as our kiss deepened, no longer soft but filled with years of longing and all the words we'd left unspoken.

My hands, which had held him in place just moments before, moved gently to his face, my fingers sliding into his hair as I let myself get lost in the feel of him.

For those precious few seconds, we weren't hunter and monster; we were just Gabriel and Finn, caught in a moment that felt achingly right.

His hands moved to my shoulders, gripping tight, grounding himself as if afraid I might vanish.

Every inch of my body seemed to come alive, every sense heightened by the proximity of him, the feel of his lips, the warmth of his skin.

He tasted like memories, like the life we could have had if the world had been different.

And I knew, in that kiss, I'd never truly let him go.

I was the one who pulled back first, breaking the kiss as a thousand instincts screamed at me to take caution.

We were in Craven Hill.

There were always eyes and ears around here, and I didn't want this fragile, unexpected connection to be anyone's ammunition.

"Finn," I murmured, searching his face, still trying to catch my breath. "We can't stay here. Let's go somewhere?—"

The words died on my lips as a sharp, searing pain bloomed in my chest. I stumbled back, a gasp escaping me.

I looked down, disbelieving, at the dagger embedded in my chest.

Finn's hand was still wrapped around the hilt, his face twisted in an agony that mirrored the pain surging through my body.

Time slowed. I could barely process what had just happened, my mind reeling as I struggled to stay upright.

Finn's hand trembled as he released the dagger, taking a step back, horror flashing in his eyes.

He looked torn apart, like he'd ripped a piece of his own heart out by stabbing me.

"Gabriel," he whispered, his voice thick with guilt and fear. "I'm so sorry."

His eyes met mine, and I could see everything in them. The conflict, the torment, the grief.

The pain was overwhelming, but the ache in my chest went beyond the physical wound.

Finn, my Finn, had just plunged a dagger into my heart.

But it wasn't him I blamed.

It was the world we'd been forced into, the roles that fate had cast us in, making us enemies when all we'd ever wanted was to be something else.

"Finn..." My voice cracked, barely above a whisper.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINN

Gabriel's body crumpled to the floor, and I stared, my chest heaving with every breath as the reality of what I'd done sank in.

My hand felt slick with the blood coating the knife, crimson dripping onto the ground.

I'd done it. I'd completed the mission the Elders had sent me on.

A breath of relief fought to break free, but it was crushed beneath the weight of the horror clawing its way through me.

My heart felt split in two. Part of me reminded myself, firmly, that he wasn't Gabriel anymore.

Not really. He was a vampire, just another monster to eliminate, another target in a long line of them.

But that look in his eyes... the shock, the betrayal. It had felt human. Almost too human.

I hadn't expected that.

Clapping echoed off the walls of the alley, sharp and mocking.

I spun, my body automatically snapping into a defensive stance, knife still gripped tight.

“Bravo, little hunter,” came a drawling voice from the shadows. Scar stepped into view, his expression smug.

“Didn’t think you had it in you,” Scar added.

I swallowed, steadying my breathing, forcing myself to stay calm.

Dang it. I hadn’t even sensed him approaching, which told me how out of it I really was.

I couldn’t tell how long he’d been there, watching, waiting. My heart raced, adrenaline still burning through me.

“How much did you hear?” I demanded, keeping my tone steady, though my pulse was hammering.

Scar shrugged, his grin widening.

“Enough. But don’t worry,” he said, his voice dripping with mock concern. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Somehow, I don’t find that reassuring,” I replied, the words tight in my throat.

The urge to run tingled in my limbs, but I knew better than to turn my back on him.

He was a predator through and through, and right now, I was the prey in his sights.

Scar took a step closer, his eyes gleaming with cruel amusement.

“Do you really think your ex-boyfriend is the first hunter who’s been turned and then hunted by his own people?” he said with a sneer.

His words cut deeper than I wanted to admit, stirring something raw in me.

My heart twisted painfully, bile rising in my throat as the truth started to settle.

This was just a job to the Elders. Gabriel was just another “asset” they’d discarded, and I’d been the one chosen to end him.

I felt sick, the weight of the knife in my hand turning unbearable. Why hadn’t I questioned it?

Why had I taken it without a second thought? I hated myself for it.

Every fiber of me wanted to hurl the knife into the shadows and turn my back on everything.

“Well, the job’s done,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

I clenched my jaw, staring past Scar, refusing to look back at Gabriel’s lifeless body.

I couldn’t bear to see him lying there like that, couldn’t stand the weight of what I’d just done.

“I’m heading back to headquarters,” I said.

I stepped forward, intending to brush past Scar, but his hand shot out, fingers clamping around my arm like a steel trap.

I froze, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.

Every instinct screamed danger as I looked into his eyes, which had shifted, turning the same gleaming yellow of his lion form.

A bead of sweat trickled down the back of my neck, my skin tingling with a sudden, all-consuming fear.

“What’s the rush, little hunter?” he asked, his tone light, almost playful.

But there was nothing friendly about it, and I didn’t trust it for a second.

He leaned in close, the smell of blood and sweat filling the air.

“This is a cause for celebration. Why don’t you let me buy you a drink?” Scar added.

“Thanks, but I need to head back,” I said firmly, forcing a smile as I tried to pull my arm from his grasp.

His fingers tightened, and my stomach twisted with the sudden realization that something was very, very wrong.

Scar’s face twisted into a mockery of a smile, something predatory gleaming in his gaze.

“You know,” he murmured, almost casually, “I was going to treat you nice before sending you to join your boyfriend in the underworld.”

My blood went cold. I clenched my fists, trying to keep my voice steady.

“We have a contract,” I said, my words tight. “I completed the objective.”

“Gage told me no loose strings,” he interrupted, his voice turning hard as iron. “We’ll

tell your Elders you finished the job but died in the process. How does that sound?”

Before I could react, he lashed out, claws emerging from his fingers as he swiped toward me.

I barely ducked in time, the sound of his claws slicing through the air sharp and vicious.

My exhaustion from fighting Gabriel weighed on me, slowing me down just enough to put me at a disadvantage.

Scar grinned, sensing it, and closed in.

I managed to dodge his next strike, slipping to the side and swinging the knife toward his ribs.

But he was faster, twisting out of the way, his claws slicing down my arm in a swift, brutal motion.

Pain flared up my arm, but I gritted my teeth, refusing to let him see weakness.

“You’re not looking too good, little hunter,” he taunted, his eyes gleaming. “Did fighting your precious vampire take it out of you?”

I ignored him, focusing on each breath, each beat of my heart.

My knife flicked out again, and I managed to graze his shoulder, drawing a thin line of blood.

He laughed, seeming more amused than angry, and lunged at me with renewed ferocity.

His claws ripped across my chest, tearing through fabric and skin, and I stumbled back, gasping at the sting.

Every instinct screamed at me to keep fighting, but my limbs were heavy, my movements sluggish from exhaustion.

Scar moved with predatory ease, circling me, each step calculated and controlled.

I threw a punch, but he sidestepped, grabbing my arm and twisting it painfully behind my back.

A hiss of pain slipped through my teeth, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream.

He forced me to my knees, his grip ironclad as he leaned close, his breath hot on my ear.

“This could’ve been so much easier for you,” he whispered. “You should’ve known better than to trust anyone in this game. Especially not a monster.”

Rage flared in me, hot and desperate, and I slammed my head back, catching him in the jaw.

He snarled, momentarily stunned, and I used the opening to break free, scrambling to my feet.

Blood dripped down my arm, my chest, each cut and bruise screaming with pain.

I couldn’t keep this up. I was barely standing as it was.

But I refused to die here. Not like this.

I took a steadying breath, meeting his gaze. My hand tightened around the knife, every nerve in my body on high alert.

Scar smirked, as if amused that I still thought I could win.

I lunged, feinting left before striking right. He blocked, but I managed to twist out of his grip, slashing at his side.

He hissed as the blade bit into his skin, but the satisfaction was short-lived.

He countered, claws flashing, and I stumbled as his fist connected with my ribs, pain radiating through me like wildfire.

“You’re pathetic, you know that?” Scar growled, his voice filled with contempt. “Just another weak little human.”

I staggered, struggling to catch my breath, but I refused to back down. I tightened my grip on the knife, forcing myself to stand tall.

“Better than a coward, who has trouble finishing off one weak little human,” I shot back, voice laced with defiance.

His eyes narrowed, his face twisting with anger.

In a blur of movement, he was on me, his claws sinking into my shoulder, forcing me against the alley wall.

I gasped, pain exploding in every nerve, but I met his gaze, refusing to look away.

“Bye, Finn,” Scar snarled, his claws sinking deeper into my shoulder. The pressure was unrelenting, each second bringing fresh waves of pain. “It was nice knowing

you.”

My strength was fading fast, my vision tunneling until everything but Scar’s sneering face was just a blur.

This was really it, wasn’t it? My end. Part of me resisted the thought, defied it, but the reality was clawing me down.

Despair bubbled up, bitter and sharp, filling every corner of my chest.

Images of my brothers flashed through my mind. I hadn’t said goodbye. They’d never know what really happened to me.

Gabriel’s face drifted into my thoughts, too, dredging up a fresh wave of grief. He hadn’t deserved to die the way he did.

Maybe, if I’d had more courage... maybe if I’d tried to talk to him, tried to find some other way. No. It was too late for regrets now.

Scar’s grip tightened, and I steeled myself, bracing for the inevitable.

Then, out of nowhere, a dark blur struck him, tearing him away from me with a savage snarl.

I collapsed to the ground, barely able to register what was happening, just the growls, the sounds of flesh tearing, the clash of claws and fangs.

Through my bleary vision, I caught glimpses of the brutal struggle: Scar’s snarling face twisted in pain, the shadow of another figure moving with lethal precision.

Gabriel.

He fought like a storm unleashed, his movements a deadly blur.

Scar landed a few blows, but Gabriel was relentless, pressing him back with each attack, his eyes burning with fury.

Scar barely had time to react before Gabriel lunged forward, his fangs sinking into Scar's throat.

I watched, frozen, as Scar choked, his hands scrabbling weakly at Gabriel's shoulders, but it was no use.

Gabriel held him in an unbreakable grip, the intensity in his eyes so fierce it made my pulse race.

Finally, Scar's body went limp, his eyes rolling back as Gabriel released him, letting him crumple to the ground.

Gabriel stepped back, breathing heavily, his gaze fixated on Scar's unmoving form before he turned his attention to me.

I stared at him, stunned, my mind reeling. He was... alive.

"You're..." I choked, barely able to form the words.

My gaze drifted to his chest, where I'd driven the knife only hours before.

The wound was gone, completely healed, not even a scar remaining.

"Sorry it took some time." Gabriel's voice was rough. "I had to direct all my energy to healing that wound in my chest."

He gave a wry smile, then added, “you missed my heart by half an inch, by the way.”

I blinked, the weight of his words finally breaking through my shock. Half an inch.

That close to losing him for good. Was he... making a joke? After everything?

Something in me snapped.

Relief crashed through me, fierce and overwhelming, and I moved without thinking, throwing myself forward.

I collided with him, clutching him tightly, barely able to believe he was solid, real, warm beneath my hands.

Gabriel’s arms wrapped around me without hesitation, holding me as I pressed my face against his shoulder.

The tension that had been building, the grief, the regret, the fear. It all shattered.

The next thing I knew, I was crying, the tears coming fast and unstoppable.

“I’m so sorry,” I choked out, the words spilling out over and over. “I’m so, so sorry, Gabriel.”

He hushed me softly, his hands moving in slow, soothing circles over my back. “Finn, it’s okay. It’s okay...”

But it wasn’t okay. I could still see that moment so clearly. The shock in his eyes when I’d stabbed him, the hurt.

The pain twisted inside me again, raw and jagged, and I clung to him tighter, half-

expecting him to vanish if I let go.

“Finn,” he whispered, and I felt him tilt my chin up, his thumb brushing gently over my cheek, wiping away a stray tear.

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze, and found him watching me with a depth of emotion that made my heart lurch.

His face softened, his expression tender, and for a moment, I felt like we were the only two people in the world.

Just Gabriel and me, nothing else.

Before I could think, his lips were on mine.

The kiss started soft, tentative, as if he was testing the waters, uncertain if I’d pull away. But I didn’t.

Instead, I leaned into him, desperate, needing the contact, the reassurance that he was here, alive.

He responded, his hold tightening, and the kiss deepened, losing any hesitancy as he claimed my mouth fully.

The world around us faded, the alley, the blood on the ground, the shadows.

All of it melted away, leaving only the warmth of his mouth, the way his hand tangled in my hair, pulling me closer.

My heart pounded as the kiss grew fierce, the months of separation, the grief, the longing, all pouring out in a flood of heat and need.

For the first time, there was no line dividing us, no hunter and monster. Just us. Gabriel and Finn.

He pulled back slightly, his lips brushing mine as he caught his breath, but I couldn't bring myself to let go, pressing my forehead to his.

His hand slipped to my jaw, his thumb tracing gentle, soothing circles there.

He stared at me, his gaze intense, filled with emotions I could barely begin to decipher.

"I thought I lost you," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I thought... I'd killed you."

"You almost did," he replied, and despite the words, there was a hint of amusement in his tone.

A fresh wave of emotion surged through me.

I pressed my face into his shoulder again, overwhelmed by the simple truth in his words.

He'd survived, somehow, against the odds, and now he was here, holding me like I was the only thing that mattered.

I didn't know what the future held, didn't know how we'd move forward from here, but for now, I let myself savor the moment.

After a long moment, Gabriel gently eased me back, his expression sobering. He glanced around the alley, his senses clearly on alert.

"We need to get out of here," he said.

I nodded, though the thought of breaking the fragile moment between us made my heart ache. But he was right.

We were both in danger here, and lingering in the open wasn't an option.

Gabriel kept his arm around me as we moved, a silent reassurance that he wasn't going anywhere.

I leaned into him, feeling the strength of his presence, grounding me, steadying the rush of emotions still swirling inside me.

We slipped through the shadows, moving quickly and quietly.

But every so often, Gabriel would glance at me, as if he were making sure I was real and wouldn't just disappear on him.

CHAPTER NINE

GABRIEL/ FINN

GABRIEL

I led Finn down a narrow alleyway and into a quieter, dingier part of town.

The kind of place where people didn't ask questions and turned a blind eye to strangers, a place where predators could pass unnoticed.

"Where are we going?" Finn finally asked, his voice low, strained.

He sounded more vulnerable than I'd ever heard him, which only made me want to keep him close, shield him from whatever came after us.

"To a safe house," I said, quickening my steps. "It's... temporary. And not exactly five-star accommodations."

Finn's brow lifted, and I could see him eyeing the worn-out buildings we passed, some with broken windows, others with graffiti coating their crumbling facades.

He looked unconvinced, but he kept following, not voicing the question that must have been on his mind: Why here? And why should he trust me?

That fragile trust I'd fought to rebuild felt precarious, but he kept moving alongside me, his footsteps quiet and steady.

After several blocks, we reached a nondescript building, the door blending almost too well into the chipped and faded wall.

I unlocked it, glancing back, half-expecting Finn to turn and run.

But he was right there, his gaze flicking up to meet mine with a mixture of wariness and... something else.

The apartment itself was as bad as expected. Barely any furniture. A single window covered by old, frayed blinds.

A mattress on the floor, a chair in one corner, and a sink that looked like it might never have been cleaned.

Finn took it all in with a grimace.

“A safe house, huh?” he said, eyebrows raised in doubt.

“It’s safe enough,” I replied, shrugging. “Not exactly paradise, but it’ll keep you off the radar for the night. I have to head back, handle Scar’s... situation before anyone else does.”

He looked back at the door, uncertainty flashing across his face.

“And... what happens then?” Finn asked

“Then, we’ll figure it out.” I took a step back, reaching for my phone. “Here.” I held out my number. “Just... in case.”

He took the phone slowly, typing in his own number with an unreadable expression.

When he handed it back, he kept his gaze down, the usual confidence dulled.

“Don’t keep me waiting too long, okay?” he said quietly, and before I could respond, he tugged the hem of my shirt.

I turned, my chest tightening as I looked down at him. He wound his fingers tentatively through mine.

I couldn’t stop myself from pulling him into an embrace.

His arms slipped around my back, and his shoulders sagged, almost like he was melting into me, finding some kind of solace in our closeness.

He didn’t feel like an enemy right now. In his hold, I felt... human, something I hadn’t truly felt in so long.

I ran a hand through his hair, fingers brushing the back of his neck as he sighed, his breath warm against my skin.

“I need to contact the Elders,” he murmured.

“What will you tell them?” I asked.

Every muscle in my body tightened, wary of his answer.

“Not the truth,” he replied, looking up at me with a faint, almost bitter smile. “What do you take me for?”

His eyes searched mine, and for a brief second, I glimpsed the inner turmoil there, the conflict warring inside him.

“Thank you... for lying to them,” I said.

A hint of darkness flickered in his gaze, his mouth twisting into a grim smile. “They make it easy.”

Our faces were so close that I could feel his breath, warm and steady.

His eyes locked onto mine, and I couldn’t resist leaning down, pressing my lips gently to his.

He returned the kiss, hesitantly at first, but then he deepened it, wrapping his arms around me like he’d never let go.

For those precious moments, the danger, the violence. All of it fell away. It was just us.

Then he pulled back, eyes glistening.

"Wait," Finn said, glancing at me with a troubled look. "The Elders will probably want proof. I need to take a picture of your chest—of where I... you know, stabbed you."

I held back a grimace, then smirked. “I’ll do you one better.”

I lay down on the floor, closing my eyes and letting my body go still, mimicking the lifelessness he needed them to see.

Finn shifted awkwardly, his gaze lingering a little too long before he raised his phone and snapped a few photos.

The flash lit up the dim room, and after a moment, I sat back up, brushing the dust

from my clothes.

There was a silence between us, thick with the weight of all the things left unsaid.

I wanted to tell Finn everything. How I'd ended up in this state, the truths he didn't know, the choices I never wanted to make.

But the words lodged in my throat.

"Go," Finn finally said. "We'll talk again."

I nodded, unwilling to let him see the fear in my own eyes. The fear that this might be the last time. But there was no point dwelling on it.

I had to clean up my mess, and if I didn't make it back to the nest soon, someone might go looking for me..

Scar's body was still sprawled on the grimy pavement where I'd left him, his lifeless eyes staring up into nothingness.

The anger and disgust I felt flared to life as I knelt beside him, quickly assessing the scene.

Lady Luck seemed to be on my side tonight; no one had stumbled upon him yet.

I worked fast, hiding the evidence, erasing all traces of the fight.

With Scar's body concealed in a nearby dumpster, I checked my phone, half-hoping for a message from Finn.

But there was nothing. I pocketed the phone and headed back toward Beric's estate as

the sun began to set.

When I reached the mansion, the shadows cast across the grounds were long, stretching toward the horizon like fingers of darkness.

Most of the vampires were already retreating to their rooms, preparing for the night ahead.

I slipped through the hallways, keeping my head down, hoping to reach my quarters without running into anyone.

But, as usual, luck wasn't on my side.

"Gabriel."

I froze, slowly turning to find Beric himself standing just a few feet away, his eyes gleaming with interest as he looked me over.

"Arriving late?" he asked.

I forced myself to meet his gaze, calm and collected.

"Apologies," I said smoothly. "Had some trouble."

Beric's gaze sharpened as he inspected me, his keen eyes taking in the scuffs and dried blood I hadn't quite managed to scrub off.

He frowned. "Trouble? The lions?" Beric asked.

"No," I replied. "My food gave me quite the chase.."

He studied me for a long moment, his eyes narrowing as if he could see right through me.

But finally, a smile spread across his face. It was a smile that chilled me to my core.

“I see,” he murmured. “Good.”

He gave a short, approving nod. “At least you handled it.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, keeping my tone neutral, my head slightly bowed.

“Get some rest, angel,” Beric said.

“You as well, master,” I replied.

He turned and vanished down the hall, leaving me standing there, fighting the urge to breathe a sigh of relief.

I’d narrowly dodged a bullet. For now.

Once I was alone, I slipped into my room, shutting the door behind me. My hand shook slightly as I leaned against it.

The truth of what I’d just done, lying to Beric, keeping Finn’s presence a secret, it pressed down on me.

I wondered how long I could keep up this balancing act.

I crossed the room, flopping down onto the bed, exhaustion washing over me.

But as my mind drifted, it wasn’t the violence or the danger that lingered.

It was the memory of Finn, his body pressed against mine, his lips on my own.

And in that fleeting moment, I allowed myself to believe, even just for a second that maybe there was hope for us, however impossible it seemed.

FINN

I moved from one room to the next, searching the dingy apartment for a spot with enough signal to make the call.

Finally, by the cracked window, I managed to get three bars.

I cast a glance around, half-expecting someone, maybe one of Gabriel's nest mates or another supernatural on Beric's payroll, to burst through the door at any second.

But no one came. It was just me, alone with the secrets and the lie I was about to tell.

Finally, the call connected, and Elder Marcus's voice crackled through the receiver, cold and detached. "Report."

"The job's done," I said, my voice rasping from the strain of the night.

"Details, Finn," he demanded, and I could practically feel his icy gaze through the line.

I took a steadying breath, forcing a bitterness into my tone that I hoped sounded convincing.

"It was... unexpected," I began, letting a shaky edge slip into my voice.

"Finding out who my target really was. You might have warned me," I added,

keeping my voice low and bitter.

The Elders needed to believe I was just a resentful, obedient soldier who'd followed through.

Marcus was silent for a beat, then responded with a disinterested murmur. "It was a need-to-know basis, Finn. And you didn't need to know."

I clenched my fist, fighting to keep my tone steady.

"It was a long, drawn-out fight," I continued, letting my voice waver just enough. "But I did it." I paused, catching my breath, keeping the line tense, and then added, "I'm sending you the photos now."

With a deep breath, I texted the photos to Marcus.

The line went silent as he reviewed the photos, and I could almost picture his calculating gaze as he scanned the images of Gabriel lying "dead."

I had photographed him at an angle that concealed his healed wounds, carefully focusing instead on the bloodstains covering his clothes.

"Finn," Elder Marcus's voice returned, now almost approving. "I must admit, we didn't think you had it in you. You've made the Guild proud."

The words should have felt like validation. They didn't.

I was a different person now, standing in a grimy apartment, having done the unthinkable to keep the person I once thought I'd lost safe from them.

Hearing Marcus praise me for it made me feel... empty.

“I would head back right away,” I lied, letting a tinge of strain slip into my voice, “but I was injured in the fight.”

It was true, my shoulder was injured.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:17 pm

Marcus paused, then asked, “Do you require extraction?”

The question almost made me laugh. A hollow, bitter feeling rising in my chest.

Before I’d left, they’d practically thrown me out like I was nothing more than disposable cannon fodder.

Now, because I’d “killed” Gabriel, they were suddenly concerned? The irony almost choked me.

“Negative,” I replied stiffly. “The supernatural residents here might notice the presence of another hunter. Better to keep things low-key. I’ll make my way back on my own in a few days.”

“Very well,” he said, his voice as detached as ever. “Don’t make us wait too long, Finn.”

The line clicked dead, and I felt the tension drain from my body in a rush, like I’d been holding my breath underwater for too long.

I explored the apartment, found some first-aid supplies in the bathroom, and tended to my shoulder.

To my surprise, the wound wasn’t as deep as I’d expected.

With that task done, I collapsed onto the bed, the springs creaking beneath me.

The sheets smelled faintly of bleach. They were surprisingly clean, all things considered.

I closed my eyes, feeling exhaustion seep through every inch of my body.

The events of the night flooded back to me, relentless, dragging me through a whirling storm of emotions I could barely name, let alone process.

“He’s alive,” I whispered, curling onto my side as if the words themselves could somehow anchor me. “We both are.”

It still didn’t feel real.

That terrible moment when I’d stabbed Gabriel in the chest, thinking it was the only way to end things, to fulfill my mission and keep him from being hunted down... and then seeing him spring back, still alive, to save me from Scar.

It was all too surreal, like a nightmare where you suddenly wake up, safe but shaken.

I pressed a hand to my chest, where I could still feel the remnants of the panic and grief that had nearly drowned me.

The relief had been so overwhelming that it hurt, but I hadn’t had time to process any of it.

Gabriel had pulled me to my feet, and then we’d fled, both of us silent, moving through the city’s shadows.

Now, alone in this dingy apartment, my mind finally caught up to my heart.

It felt like I was being torn in two.

Gabriel wasn't just some monster... he was still Gabriel, even if he was changed.

Seeing the way he'd looked at me, touched me, hearing his voice again, it was all proof that the Gabriel I knew was still in there.

That the boy who trained me, laughed with, cared about more than I'd ever dared admit to myself... he wasn't entirely gone.

And yet, the reality was brutal. There was no future for us.

My duty to the Guild, to the Elders, they'd been drilled into me my whole life.

A hunter and a vampire couldn't be together. It was dangerous, reckless, impossible.

The logical part of me knew that, but my heart and damn my heart, it refused to listen.

A sharp pang ran through me, thinking of the Guild, the place that had raised me, trained me, and now used me.

I thought of Marcus's cold, calculating voice, and the way they'd thrown me at Gabriel like I was nothing more than a tool.

The resentment bubbled up, almost choking me.

I'd spent my life following their orders, believing in their cause, believing that I was doing something good, something righteous.

And now, it felt like I'd been betrayed by my own purpose. The ache in my chest spread, making my whole body feel leaden.

I wanted to be with Gabriel, more than anything, but I'd already betrayed him once.

How could he trust me? I had no right to expect anything from him, not after what I'd done.

I thought back to the look he'd given me before he'd left, the mixture of hope and pain that had simmered in his gaze.

Could he really forgive me?

With a weary sigh, I rolled onto my back and stared at the cracked ceiling.

Maybe we could survive this. Maybe, somehow, there was a way out of this mess. But it wouldn't be easy.

The Guild wouldn't forgive my failure so easily, and if Beric's nest found out about us, they'd come after us too.

Every way I looked at it, we were trapped, bound by the choices we'd made and the lives we'd once led.

But for now, we were alive.

We'd bought ourselves a sliver of time, a fragile chance to escape this world of endless blood and shadow.

"Gabriel," I whispered.

The room felt empty without him, too big, too cold, like everything around me was just a hollow shell.

I closed my eyes, letting my mind drift back to the feel of his arms around me, to the safety I'd felt, even if only for a brief moment.

I'd never wanted this life, not like this.

Not a life where duty forced me to kill the only person who'd ever made me feel like there was more to the world than just the endless hunt.

Not a life where I couldn't even have one person to call my own.

A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it, and I let it fall. It was too late to keep the emotions at bay now.

I'd lost control, and everything was spilling over. Every regret, every bit of guilt, every ounce of yearning that had been locked away.

All for Gabriel.

I clutched my phone like a lifeline, hoping he'd call, hoping he'd tell me he was okay, hoping there was a way for us to make it through this alive.

CHAPTER TEN

GABRIEL

The first thing that crossed my mind as I woke from my slumber was Finn.

My gut twisted at the thought that maybe he'd decided to leave, to head back to the Guild, where he'd be safe, where he'd belong... away from me.

But I quickly shook off the worry.

Finn wouldn't do that, not after what we'd been through last night. I knew him better than that, or at least I thought I did.

I forced myself up and headed to the bathroom, letting the cold water clear my head.

Tonight was risky. Beric had his private audience with Queen Arabella, which meant he'd likely be out of sight for the evening.

If I was careful, I could slip away, see Finn, and make sure he was all right.

After I dressed and ran a hand through my damp hair, I left my room and strode down the corridor, not bothering to mask the urgency in my steps.

I nearly barreled into Justin, who was vacuuming just outside my door.

He muttered an apology, but I waved it off, my mind elsewhere.

The whole house was still, the heavy shadows cast by the setting sun slipping through the windows.

I took the chance to dart out through the kitchen's back door.

But as I neared the garden gate, intending to take the quickest path to the street, I froze.

Gael was standing by the gate, chatting with Theo. His eyes flicked to me immediately, a lazy smile spreading across his face.

"What's the rush, Gabriel?" Gael asked, his voice light but his gaze anything but.

"None of your business," I said evenly.

After all, I wasn't exactly under house arrest. I was free to go into the city on Beric's errand whenever I pleased. Within limits, of course.

I just didn't need Gael poking his nose where it didn't belong.

I was almost past them when Gael spoke again. "Heard an interesting rumor last night," he drawled. "Seems a helpful little blood donor saw you with an old friend."

The words struck like a blade. I froze, keeping my back to him for a heartbeat too long. That blood donor could only be Ricky.

He liked hanging around the nest, especially with Gael, and was always eager to sell a story for the right price.

I hadn't sensed Gael at the club last night, but maybe Ricky had thought my "friend" was worth mentioning.

Keeping my expression calm, I turned back.

“Ricky must be mistaken,” I said with a shrug, trying to play it off. “You can’t trust a drunk and an addict. A stranger stumbled across me while I was feeding, that’s all.”

Theo laughed, nodding in agreement. “Gabriel’s right. Humans like that can’t be trusted.”

But Gael didn’t look convinced. His gaze narrowed, a flicker of suspicion shadowing his face.

I felt his eyes rake over me, trying to catch a tell, anything that would confirm his suspicions.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, forcing a relaxed tone, “I need to feed.”

“Oh, and our food here at home isn’t good enough for you anymore?” Gael’s mocking smile sent a chill down my spine.

“Can’t blame him for wanting to try new cuisine,” Theo added with a smirk.

I took their distraction as an opportunity to slip out through the garden gate and into the street.

A pulse of relief washed over me, but I couldn’t ignore the gnawing tension in my gut. Gael wasn’t one to let things go easily.

If he had any suspicion about Finn, he’d find a way to drag it to the surface.

I hurried down the street, pausing only to check my phone. A few texts from Finn blinked back at me, asking if I’d be there soon.

I texted back that I was on my way, but first, I needed to be cautious.

Gael wouldn't give up so easily. I'd need to throw off any scent he might try to follow.

I ducked into a few nest-owned establishments, lingering just long enough to blend in.

I even fed briefly on a volunteer at one of the clubs, creating an alibi in case anyone questioned my whereabouts.

Finally, I slipped into a late-night burger joint, ordering a greasy takeout bag that was really for Finn.

By the time I finally reached the safe house, the city lights were bright in the evening dark, casting a fractured glow over the dingy apartment complex.

I slipped inside and made my way to Finn's door, feeling a knot of tension ease as I finally reached him.

As soon as I stepped inside, Finn looked up from his spot at the table, his eyes narrowing in mock irritation.

"That took forever," he grumbled.

I held up the takeout bag.

"Had to cover my tracks in case Gael, this vampire that doesn't like me, decided to tail me. He's suspicious," I warned, though I couldn't hide the small smile at his impatience. "Here, I brought you something."

Finn's irritation melted instantly.

He practically snatched the bag from my hands, immediately reaching in to pull out the first thing his hands found. A double cheeseburger.

He tore into it, hardly bothering to look at what he was eating.

I took a seat across from him, watching in silence, almost transfixed by the normalcy of it all.

There was something endearing, almost grounding, in watching him eat. In a life as volatile as ours, a moment like this felt... right.

Finn paused, catching me staring.

"What?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Something on my face?"

I shook my head, a small smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth.

"I just like watching you eat. Makes me feel human again," I told him.

He rolled his eyes, but there was a softness in his gaze.

"Oh, right." He took another bite, chewing thoughtfully before he glanced up at me.

"Do you miss it?" he asked quietly. "Eating real food?"

"A little," I admitted, "but now I can live vicariously through you."

Finn snorted, rolling his eyes, but there was a flicker of something else there.

Something vulnerable, hidden beneath the usual sarcasm.

The air between us was thick, filled with things neither of us dared to say out loud.

His presence had shaken something loose in me. A part of myself I thought I'd lost the night I'd turned.

A part that remembered warmth, comfort... love.

Before I knew it, I reached across the table, my hand hovering inches from his.

I could see the surprise flash in his eyes, but he didn't pull away.

Slowly, he turned his hand over, letting our fingers wind together, tentative but steady.

He was looking at me now, his eyes full of questions, his grip on my hand tightening.

I felt a flicker of fear that he might slip away, that this fragile connection would shatter if I held on too tightly.

I gave his hand a squeeze, pulling him to his feet.

His breath hitched as I stepped closer, his face inches from mine, our hands still linked between us.

"Finn," I murmured. "I don't know what's going to happen next. The smartest thing to do is tell you to forget me, forget all this ever happened, but I'm selfish."

His gaze softened, his lips parting, and I could feel his pulse quicken.

"I don't want to forget either," he whispered, his words barely a breath.

Before either of us could say anything else, I leaned in, plundered his mouth.

Our kiss deepened, and I felt the world shrink down to the sensation of Finn's lips against mine, his breath warm, his heartbeat erratic beneath my touch.

For a moment, it was like nothing else existed. No Guild, no nest, no danger. Just us.

He pulled back slightly, his eyes locked on mine, and there was a softness there, a vulnerability that I rarely saw from him.

The edges of his mouth quirked up in a shy, almost nervous smile.

His fingers still clung to my shirt, as if he were afraid that letting go might make me disappear.

"Gabriel..." he murmured, voice barely a whisper.

My name on his lips was enough to undo me.

I reached up, brushing a thumb over his cheek, tracing the line of his jaw, unable to believe he was here with me, after everything.

We both undressed in a hurry.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GABRIEL

Slowly, I guided him back, the mattress creaking as he settled onto it, his gaze never breaking from mine.

The room was dim, the flicker of streetlights outside casting faint shadows across his face, softening his features.

He was beautiful like this. He looked unguarded, all the hard edges gone, leaving just the person beneath, raw and open.

He held his breath, his lips parting, his eyes full of unspoken things, a mix of anticipation and hesitation.

Slowly, I leaned down, brushing my mouth along his jawline, savoring every inch, every shiver that ran through him.

His hands slid up my arms, pulling me closer, needing me near.

As I pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth, he whispered, “Gabriel, it’s been a while for me.” He looked away, cheeks flushed.

I smiled, brushing a reassuring kiss to his temple.

“You don’t have to worry,” I whispered. “We don’t have to rush. Unless you’re

having second thoughts?”

Finn’s fingers tightened against my shoulder, grounding himself.

“No. I want you. I want this,” Finn said.

“We’ll take it slow,” I promised, voice soft as I cupped his face, drawing him back to me.

He nodded, his breath steadying as he looked at me, the fear and uncertainty in his gaze fading to something softer, warmer.

I moved closer, his warmth bleeding into me, his hands tracing my back, his touch tentative but growing bolder with each passing second.

His lips parted as I leaned in again, and I kissed him, slow and lingering.

I left more kisses down the line of his body, sucked on his flat nipples until he cried out.

I moved lower, down his ribs, his stomach.

He moaned when I kissed the tip of his thickening prick. My own dick was hard as steel, but I wasn’t done exploring.

Closing my mouth around his shaft, I took him down my throat. Finn groaned above me, spearing his fingers through my hair.

I bobbed my head up and down, then realized I didn’t want him to come just yet. I pulled away.

“Take me, Gabriel,” he whispered.

“One moment,” I told him.

I reached for my jeans, took the condom from my wallet along with a tube of lube. Then I resumed position.

After opening the condom wrapper and putting it on, I hefted his legs over my shoulders.

I then applied a generous amount inside Finn’s opening. Then I slid, one, two digits in him, widening him for my access.

“Gabriel, please!”

Finn’s plea got me moving. I entered him, slow and steady, not wanting to hurt him.

Finally, I was balls deep in him and Finn let out a sigh.

I began moving in and out of him, settling on a rhythm which suited us both. My balls tightened against my body.

Each time our bodies joined it felt like a piece of my soul drifted to touch his.

Soon enough, I reduced us both to panting and needy animals. I lowered my face and took Finn’s mouth, savouring the taste of him.

I switched the angle of my thrusts and judging by Finn’s gasp and the way he arched his back, I found his sweet spot.

I kept aiming for it, wanting to see him come undone before me.

At my next push, Finn climaxed, screaming out my name. It sounded like music to my ears.

Several thrusts later, I followed and the world fell away from my line of sight.

I pulled out from Finn, disposed of the condom and found a clean towel to wipe us clean. With that task done, I lay beside him.

I propped up on one arm, tracing the line of his collarbone, watching him breathe.

I memorized the way his chest rose and fell. Each steady breath was a reminder of the warmth and life still beating in him.

So pure, so undeniably real.

I loved the way his eyes softened whenever they met mine, the way his lips curved slightly at the corners when he caught me staring.

Those small, quiet moments between us, when nothing else mattered except us were special.

But then, my gaze fell to the tender spot between his shoulder and neck. The soft, inviting curve of his skin.

The pulse beneath it called to me, the blood flowing just beneath the surface, pulsing with life, with energy.

The familiar hunger clawed at my insides, stronger now that I was so close to him, so close to the one thing I wanted but couldn't allow myself to take.

The pull was undeniable.

I could feel the shift in my body, the way my fangs lengthened, the way my skin prickled with the urge to sink into him.

To drink and forget everything else. I had to pull back. I needed to pull back.

I inhaled deeply, trying to steady myself, but Finn's presence was intoxicating.

Every inch of him was a temptation I couldn't escape.

I opened my mouth to speak, to excuse myself and walk away, but before I could say anything, Finn's hand shot out, grabbing my arm.

His touch was soft, almost tentative, but the way he looked at me, so gentle and so understanding, sent a jolt through my chest.

His shy smile made my heart stutter, and I suddenly realized that he knew exactly what I needed, even before I did.

"Go ahead," he whispered.

His eyes held a kind of quiet invitation, a trust that made the hunger inside me surge all over again.

"Finn..." My voice cracked, uncertain.

The thought of his blood on my tongue, the taste of him, both thrilled and terrified me.

But Finn only reached up, his fingers brushing against my face, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

His touch was electric, and I couldn't stop the shiver that ran down my spine.

I didn't need to say anything more. Finn didn't give me a chance to hesitate.

His fingers slid into my hair, his hand gently cradling the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

The movement was slow, deliberate, but there was an urgency in the way he moved, in the way his breath quickened as I leaned in.

And in that moment, I gave in.

I lowered my lips to the soft skin of his neck, inhaling deeply before I sank my fangs into him.

The taste of his blood was like nothing I had ever experienced. It was rich, warm, and utterly intoxicating.

The hunger inside me roared to life, and I drank, slowly at first, savoring the sweet rush of life that filled me.

Finn didn't pull away. He didn't flinch.

Instead, his grip tightened in my hair, urging me on, his breath coming in soft, breathless gasps.

I could feel the heat of him, the pulse of his heart, beating faster as I drank, but there was no fear in him, no disgust.

I had expected him to pull away at any moment, to push me off with revulsion, but he didn't.

He let me feed from him, his body melting into mine, his fingers threaded through my hair like he was holding me in place.

It was like he was offering himself to me, trusting me in a way I couldn't fully comprehend.

The more I drank, the more my mind began to cloud with the heat of it, with the sensation of him beneath me, around me, in a way that felt too good, too right.

And yet, there was nothing wrong in this. Nothing at all.

Finn's heartbeat pounded in my ears, his blood running through my veins, feeding me, filling the emptiness I'd carried for so long.

I finally pulled away, my breath ragged, my body aching from the intensity of it.

Finn's eyes were heavy-lidded, a dazed smile playing on his lips.

His skin was flushed, the mark of my bite still visible on his neck, but he didn't look scared. He looked... content.

I brushed my thumb across the mark I had left, a faint trace of blood smudged on my skin.

"You're sure about this?" I asked, my voice rough, almost too low to hear.

I had to make sure.

I needed to know that he wasn't just allowing this because he thought it was what I wanted, what I needed.

That it was truly what he wanted too.

Finn's smile grew, that familiar warmth filling his eyes.

"I trust you," he said simply, his voice soft but steady. "I want this. With you."

I didn't know what to say to that. There was no eloquent response, no perfect words I could give him.

I had nothing left to offer but my heart, and that was his for the taking.

But I still had so many questions, still so much fear, lingering in the background.

What did this mean for us? For him? What future could we have?

But in this moment, none of that mattered. All that mattered was the way he was looking at me, trusting me, loving me. There was no hesitation, no fear in his eyes.

And maybe that was enough. Maybe it would have to be.

I kissed him softly, my lips lingering on his, tasting the last traces of the blood he'd freely given.

He kissed me back, just as softly, his hands resting on my chest as if he were grounding me, reminding me that I wasn't alone.

For once, I didn't feel like a monster.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FINN/ ASHER

FINN

I took a deep breath and asked Gabriel, “Will you tell me how it happened?”

The soft lighting in the room made Gabriel’s face look even more striking, but his expression was shadowed, haunted by memories he hadn’t wanted to relive.

His eyes held mine, steady, but with a trace of vulnerability that I’d rarely seen.

Gabriel’s lips pressed together for a moment, but he nodded.

“It was supposed to be a straightforward mission,” he began, his voice low and filled with a bitterness that cut through me. “My team and I were sent to a nest in the mountains. The intel said it was small, only six vampires.”

He paused, and I could sense the hesitation. I shifted closer, willing him to continue.

“We went in prepared for six,” he said, sound matter-of-fact. “But the reports were wrong. There were at least a dozen vampires waiting for us, maybe more. They had set traps. We fought like hell. But it wasn’t enough.”

He exhaled a shaky breath, his gaze hardening as he relived it.

“Three of my teammates died within minutes. I... I was gravely injured,” Gabriel said.

A chill ran down my spine as he spoke. I could picture it. The ambush, the desperation, the betrayal that followed.

“We’d all sworn to stay together, but the survivors... they abandoned me.” His jaw tightened. “Left me there to die.”

My hand reached out instinctively, covering his. “Gabriel...”

“The worst part wasn’t the physical pain,” he continued, a hollow look in his eyes. “It was the betrayal. After all we’d been through, they left me for dead.”

He laughed bitterly, and it was a sound that twisted my heart.

“And that’s when Beric arrived. He came to investigate the attack on the nest.” Gabriel’s tone grew colder. “Turned out, that nest was an ally of Beric’s.”

I could sense Gabriel’s pain, but there was something else simmering underneath. Rage, perhaps, or a wound so deep it had never healed.

“Then he changed you?” I asked.

“He found it amusing to turn me, an ex-hunter, into one of his own. ‘A collector,’ he calls himself. He couldn’t resist the irony of having a former hunter in his nest.” Gabriel’s eyes flashed, and I could see the raw anger there.

Gabriel continued, “He knew I had no choice. He didn’t ask. He just... made it happen.”

I could only stare at him, trying to take it all in. The gravity of his past hit me with a weight I hadn't expected.

He was trapped in a nightmare, a life he never asked for.

"So... you've just followed orders, done what he's told you," I said. "Is that why you're... well, Scar mentioned that you're currently Beric's favorite."

Gabriel's mouth twisted in a wry, bitter smile.

"Favorite is putting it kindly. More like his most useful weapon. I followed orders because... I'm good at killing. That's all I've ever been good at," Gabriel said.

The intensity of his gaze was almost too much.

He reached out, his fingers tracing along my hand, lingering there as if grounding himself.

"Enough about me," he murmured. "How did you get tangled up in this mess, Finn?"

I took a deep breath, but his gentle touch made it easier to speak.

"The Guild assigned me to take you out," I admitted. "At first, I didn't even know it was you. They just gave me an alias. Scar was my informant."

I hesitated, glancing away. "He led me right to you."

Gabriel absorbed this in silence, his gaze turning thoughtful, faraway.

I watched him carefully, wondering what he was thinking, desperate for him to say something, anything.

Finally, I couldn't stand it.

"What are you thinking?" I whispered, needing him to pull me back from the unknown.

A shadow crossed his face. "I was thinking... that if they'd sent another hunter who wasn't you, I might've just let him finish the job," he admitted.

I felt a sharp pang in my chest. "Don't say that."

My hand moved on its own, reaching up to cup his cheek, grounding him back here with me.

His skin was cool under my touch, and it reminded me just how much had changed about him and how much hadn't.

His eyes softened, his hand lifting to cover mine, pressing it gently to his face.

Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment, nuzzling into my palm, as if he could find solace there.

"I feel like I've been sleepwalking for years, just an empty vessel carrying out orders," he admitted quietly. "But then... you showed up. And somehow, I felt alive again. If a vampire can feel alive."

Heat crept up my face, my heart pounding.

His words were raw, vulnerable, like he was peeling away the walls he'd spent so long building. And he was doing it for me.

My fingers traced along his cheek, my voice coming out soft, barely above a whisper.

“For a long time I refused to believe you were dead, Gabriel.” I bit my lip, “Finding out you’re alive and that I was sent to kill you...it was a shock.”

The space between us seemed to disappear.

His fingers slid to the back of my neck, pulling me closer until our breaths mingled, our eyes locked.

There was so much unspoken between us, a thousand things that needed to be said, yet the words were lost, overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of the moment.

“Finn,” he murmured, his gaze dropping to my lips.

My heart fluttered, my pulse quickening as he moved closer, his breath brushing over my skin.

I leaned into him, closing the gap between us, and our mouths met, soft at first, tentative, as if testing the waters.

But the intensity built quickly, the kiss deepening, his hands holding me like I was something precious.

I let my hands roam up his chest. The kiss turned slow, lingering, as if neither of us wanted to break the spell.

When we finally parted, his forehead rested against mine, his hands still tangled in my hair.

“I don’t know where this is going,” he whispered, his voice raw, his gaze searching mine. “But I can’t let you walk away. Not now. Not after everything.”

My own voice was shaky, thick with emotion.

“Then don’t,” I murmured. “We’ll figure it out, Gabriel. We’ll find a way.”

It was easy enough to say the words, but to make it a reality? That was another matter entirely.

I didn’t know what lay ahead for us, or how we’d survive the Guild or Beric.

But at the same time, there was something undeniable, something that burned beneath the fear and even hope.

I watched Gabriel’s face, his expression softening as he gazed back at me, his fingers tracing idle circles along my shoulder, as though he needed the contact as much as I did.

How could we possibly make this work?

“Do you really think we can?” I asked, barely above a whisper.

I wasn’t sure if I was asking him or myself, but I needed him to believe it. I needed him to tell me it wasn’t all some fleeting dream.

Gabriel’s hand slipped to my chin, tilting my face up to meet his eyes. His gaze was intense, steady.

“We have to try,” he said. “But one thing’s certain. We need to leave the city soon.”

ASHER

Asher’s muscles coiled tight as he circled the training floor.

He watched each student closely as they grappled and struck at each other.

The training hall was bright, with walls lined with mirrors and mats covering every inch of the floor to soften inevitable falls.

Sweat glistened on the trainees' brows, and Asher could see their muscles straining as they pushed themselves through his rigorous exercises.

Every strike, every block, every dodge, they were all meticulous, drilled into them by Asher himself.

They knew better than to make mistakes when he was watching. But today, even his own precision felt off.

His mind was elsewhere, back on the worries and unanswered questions he had about Finn.

The door swung open, and one of the Guild messengers, a young man with an unreadable expression, slipped in quietly.

The messenger waited by the door, but his presence was like a pin in Asher's side, his expression all but screaming urgency.

Asher's blood ran cold. He didn't need to ask to know this had something to do with Finn.

He motioned for the class to pause, their stances frozen mid-kick and mid-punch.

"Continue without me," he told them.

He met the messenger's gaze, searching for any hint of good news in his eyes, but the

man simply turned and led him through the halls without a word.

“Is this about Finn?” Asher demanded as they walked.

But the messenger only gave a slight shake of his head. Typical, he thought bitterly.

Finn was supposed to be home by now, and the silence was maddening.

He and Donovan had discussed the issue late last night. They both knew how dangerous Craven Hill could be.

He told Donovan about the last conversation he had with Finn.

There were blanks. Important details the Elders had kept hidden from Finn when they assigned him that mission.

Donovan had insisted on being patient, but Asher had been ready to go search for his brother then and there.

They’d fought and ended up disagreeing.

It took everything in him to school his expression into a mask of indifference as he reached Elder Marcus’s office.

His pulse hammered in his ears as he knocked.

“Enter,” came Marcus’s cold, measured voice.

Asher stepped inside, feeling every muscle in his body tense at the sight of Marcus’s impassive expression.

“Take a seat, Asher,” Marcus said, his voice as empty as the eyes that watched Asher take his seat.

But Asher couldn’t hold back anymore.

He leaned forward, barely sitting before the words tumbled out. “Is this about Finn? Where is he? Is he alright?”

“Calm down, Asher.” Marcus’s tone was dismissive, but it did little to quell the simmering rage just beneath Asher’s calm exterior.

Normally, he was the embodiment of restraint. A quality that had gotten him far in his training, that had helped him protect his brothers.

But now, he wanted nothing more than to shake answers out of Marcus, to make him understand that this wasn’t just another assignment.

Marcus leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers as he regarded Asher.

“Finn successfully completed his mission,” he said slowly, each word chosen with cold precision. “But he’s run into some...complications. He can’t get out of Craven Hill just yet.”

“Complications?” Asher repeated, barely keeping his voice steady.

Finn had been expected to return today, but he’d heard nothing. There were only so many reasons why that would be the case.

“What exactly do you mean by complications?” he demanded, his worry intensifying with every passing second.

Marcus's eyes narrowed, though his tone stayed as calm and indifferent as ever.

"Finn was supposed to report to us today," he said slowly. "But from what we gather, he may be in greater danger than he previously indicated."

Asher was on the edge of his seat, a storm of anger and fear building inside him.

His jaw clenched as he waited, wondering if Marcus was about to dismiss Finn as a lost cause.

He braced himself, mentally preparing for the cold, clinical statement that would end Finn's future with the Guild, that would toss him aside like so many others before him.

But Marcus surprised him.

"That's why we've decided to send you to retrieve him."

Shock rippled through Asher, his mask slipping for just a moment. The Guild wasn't known for second chances.

They discarded weak hunters when they outlived their usefulness, a lesson Asher had learned young, and one he'd thought Finn was now facing firsthand.

But here Marcus was, telling him to go after his brother, to bring him back.

And the Guild rarely, if ever, gave orders they didn't intend to see carried out. Maybe Finn had done something remarkable.

"I'll leave right away," he said, his voice low, too raw with anger and relief to say anything else.

He forced himself to hold back a flood of bitter words, to keep his fury at Marcus and the Guild from spilling over.

If he let his rage loose now, it could jeopardize everything.

“You know,” Marcus said, watching him with a detached, almost curious look, “I once thought Finn was the weakest of you three, but your brother has impressed us.”

Asher was already by the door, trying to keep his emotions in check.

Marcus’s words felt like barbed wire, twisting in his chest, threatening to tear through his thin facade of calm.

He knew Marcus was baiting him, but he couldn’t resist.

He turned, fixing Marcus with a cold stare. “Impressed you how?” he asked. “What exactly did you send him out to do?”

“Kill the man he loved,” Marcus answered without a hint of remorse, as if he’d just commented on the weather.

The words landed with a sickening weight, making Asher’s stomach twist.

A chill crawled down his spine, mingling with the growing fury that burned hotter with every heartbeat.

Finn had only ever loved one man his entire life. Gabriel.

Asher had assumed Gabriel was dead, like everyone else, but Marcus was implying he wasn’t.

Had Gabriel been turned into a monster, and they sent Finn to eliminate him?

Asher felt a surge of protectiveness so fierce it nearly overwhelmed him.

If he'd known what the Guild was asking, he would have fought tooth and nail to keep Finn from that fate, to shield him from the twisted games the Elders played.

He bit back any further words, knowing they'd only feed Marcus's smug satisfaction.

Instead, he offered a curt bow of his head, excused himself, and left the room.

But the moment he was out of sight, his fists clenched, his nails digging into his palms as he forced his breathing to slow.

Finn... The Guild had sent him to kill Gabriel, and still, he'd survived.

Against the odds, his little brother had made it through, and now it was his turn to make sure Finn got home safely.

But he couldn't allow himself to think of the pain Finn had been forced to endure or the ways it might have changed him.

He had to focus, had to be ready for anything if he wanted to bring Finn back from Craven Hill.

His steps were brisk as he headed toward his quarters, already mentally running through a list of supplies he'd need for the mission.

He couldn't afford any mistakes. Not when Finn's life was at stake.

The image of Finn, determined, reckless and brave, was seared into his mind as he

readied himself.

Yet as he packed, a fierce thought kept gnawing at him. They'd almost discarded Finn, but it wouldn't be that easy.

Hell would freeze over before he'd let the Guild claim another life from his family.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FINN

The waiting was unbearable. I paced the cramped apartment, my thoughts racing as if they had their own pulse.

Gabriel had messaged me hours ago, and I could practically feel every second stretching longer than the last.

I checked my disposable cellphone for what had to be the hundredth time, rereading his message: We leave tonight. I'll grab supplies and meet you back there soon. Stay put. The lions have found Scar's body.

I stared out the window, the flickering streetlights and looming shadows making the already sketchy neighborhood feel even more sinister.

Every rustle, every faint footfall on the cracked pavement below had my heart lurching into my throat.

It didn't help that I was already on edge, guilt gnawing at me from every angle.

I'd left the Guild behind, betrayed everything I'd been trained for. Everything I was supposed to believe in.

Part of me wondered if I'd regret this in the end, if Gabriel and I even stood a chance. But then...no.

Maybe we didn't know what would come next, but for now, we had each other. That was enough.

Finally, I heard footsteps outside the door, silent, almost predatory. For a second, my heart stopped, and my body went tense.

But then the door creaked open, and Gabriel slipped in, his tall frame almost a shadow in the dim light.

Without thinking, I moved forward and hugged him tightly.

He hesitated, then his arms wrapped around me, warm and steady, grounding me.

"Hey," he murmured, pulling back enough to meet my gaze. "You okay?"

"Just been thinking about a lot of things," I admitted, looking down, still gripping his arm as if he might disappear if I let go.

Gabriel's gaze softened. "I get it. But it'll be okay."

He lifted the bag slung over his shoulder.

"Got the supplies. Managed to get us a second-hand truck too. It's parked out back. Once we hit the highway, we'll swap out the plates," Gabriel said.

A rush of relief washed over me, but I knew better than to let my guard down just yet. We had to get out of here first. No mistakes.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. "Let's go, then."

We moved through the darkened apartment, Gabriel leading, his senses sharper than

mine even though I was no slouch in that department.

As we slipped down the creaky staircase to the back exit, a prickling feeling ran down my spine, making me slow my steps.

Gabriel stopped too, his head tilting slightly as he stilled.

Then he whispered, “Someone’s close.”

My heart pounded. “Do you think they followed you?”

“Maybe,” he muttered. “I took the long way, hit a few places before I came here, but Gael’s relentless when he’s set on something.”

We exchanged a look, and that was all it took. Gabriel’s face shifted into something determined and sharp.

He gestured for me to stay close, every movement fluid and cautious as he slipped out into the alley behind the building.

The city felt like it was holding its breath. The alley’s shadows seemed deeper, darker.

I could sense him, the familiar oppressive energy that could only belong to Gael.

He was out there, somewhere nearby, prowling like a wolf on the scent. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

We crept along, and as we rounded the corner, Gabriel tensed.

I followed his line of sight to the street corner about twenty yards ahead where

someone, a vampire stood, his back partially turned, scanning the area.

The streetlamp above him cast an eerie glow over his figure, highlighting his relaxed stance. This was probably Gael.

Gabriel's jaw clenched, "We need to make a break for it, but not until he moves," Gabriel said.

"How long do you think we have?" I asked, trying to keep the shake out of my voice.

"Depends on how fast we can stay out of his line of sight," Gabriel muttered. "Stay close. The truck's three blocks down."

We moved slowly, ducking behind dumpsters and crates whenever Gael shifted.

At one point, he turned around so quickly I barely had time to press myself against the wall, holding my breath as he scanned the alley just feet from us.

His cold, calculating gaze swept over our hiding spot, and I could feel Gabriel tense beside me, ready to pounce if he had to.

A few agonizing moments passed before Gael finally turned away and continued down the street.

Gabriel shot me a look, his fingers tapping a silent countdown on his thigh. Three...two...one. We bolted.

Silent as shadows, we sprinted across the street and ducked into another alley, putting a solid row of buildings between us and Gael.

My heart pounded in my ears, and my lungs burned, but I didn't dare stop.

We kept moving, Gabriel leading us through the maze of backstreets like he knew them by heart.

I stole glances over my shoulder, half-expecting to see Gael's silhouette closing in on us, but the street remained eerily empty.

Finally, we reached the street where Gabriel had parked the truck.

The beat-up vehicle sat waiting at the curb, its paint chipped and rusting, a perfect nondescript getaway car. Gabriel tossed me the keys.

"Get in. Drive," Gabriel said.

I slid into the driver's seat, gripping the wheel as he hopped into the passenger side.

The engine roared to life, loud in the quiet of the night.

I risked a glance at Gabriel as we peeled out of the alley and onto the main road, heading toward the freeway.

"Think we lost him?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Not yet," Gabriel replied, his eyes sharp as he scanned the rearview mirror. "He's relentless."

I focused on the road, weaving through side streets and keeping an eye on the mirror.

Part of me felt exhilarated, almost thrilled by the danger.

But that thrill was dampened by the ache in my chest, the guilt and fear twisting together.

I'd given up my life for this, betrayed the Guild, and now we were running.

But then Gabriel's hand rested on my shoulder, grounding me, reminding me of what was really at stake here.

Not the Guild's rules, not my past, but him. Us.

"Take the next exit," he said, his voice calm but urgent.

I nodded, and we veered off the main road, the city lights fading as we merged onto a dark, winding road.

Finally, the tension seemed to ease, and I allowed myself to breathe a little more freely.

Gabriel leaned back, his eyes still scanning the surroundings.

"We'll need to stop somewhere secluded before morning. Somewhere they wouldn't think to look," Gabriel said.

"We'll find it," I said, my own resolve hardening. "We're not stopping until we do."

We drove in silence for a while, both of us too tense to speak. The road stretched out before us, dark and endless.

The city lights had finally faded in the distance, and a new quiet had settled over us.

It was only broken by the hum of the engine and the occasional rush of wind through the half-cracked windows.

I kept my hands steady on the wheel, focusing on every turn, every shadow that

moved across the empty highway.

When I risked a glance at Gabriel, he was looking out the window, his face barely lit by the glow of the dashboard.

I could see the tension slowly draining from his expression, though his shoulders still held that stiffness, like he was ready to spring into action if he had to.

Eventually, we spotted an old gas station on the side of the road, its lights flickering weakly in the dark.

We hadn't seen any sign of Gael or anyone else trailing us for a while, and I knew we both needed a break.

I pulled off the highway, driving around to the back where a line of thick trees provided some cover.

As soon as the engine cut, silence washed over us like a heavy wave. I exhaled, my shoulders relaxing for the first time in hours.

Gabriel didn't move at first. He just stared at his hands for a long moment, then turned to look at me.

His eyes were deep and dark, holding a weight I couldn't quite read.

But then he smiled, just a small, weary lift of his lips, and I felt my own heartbeat slow.

"We did it," he murmured, almost as if he didn't believe it himself. "We got out."

I nodded, feeling the reality of what we'd just done sink in. "Yeah. We really did."

He let out a shaky breath, running a hand through his hair.

I wanted to reach out and touch him, to let him know he wasn't alone in this.

But for a moment, I couldn't move, my body still wired with the adrenaline of the escape.

It was like I'd been holding my breath for days, waiting for something to go wrong.

And yet...nothing had. We were finally free. Without thinking, I shifted in my seat, my hand moving to rest on his.

His fingers curled around mine, and he looked at me, his expression softening.

"Finn," he said, his voice low, almost reverent. "I can't believe you did this for me."

"I did it for us," I whispered, barely trusting my voice.

The fear, the worry, it was all still there, but there was something else too.

Something that felt like hope, fragile and flickering, but there.

"I can't just forget you after finding out you're still alive," I said.

The words hung between us, thick with all the things we'd never said.

Gabriel's thumb brushed over my knuckles, a gentle, grounding touch that made me feel like he was pouring all his strength into that single point of contact.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

The silence wasn't empty, though. It was filled with everything we'd been through, everything we were still afraid of.

But it was our silence, something we shared, and that made it feel...almost sacred.

Then, suddenly, he shifted, leaning closer, his face inches from mine.

I could feel the heat of him, his breath mixing with mine in the small space between us.

My pulse raced, but I didn't pull back. I couldn't.

There was something magnetic in his gaze, something that held me there, that made the world fall away until it was just us.

"Finn," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "I... I thought I'd never see you again. Seeing you again, here, like this..." He swallowed, his hand tightening around mine. "It's a miracle."

My heart pounded, and without thinking, I reached up, my hand trembling as I brushed a strand of hair back from his face.

His eyes fluttered closed for a brief second, his face leaning into my touch, and the vulnerability in that small movement made something inside me ache.

"I'm here," I said.

He opened his eyes, and for the first time, I saw them shine with something beyond anger, beyond pain.

It was like all his walls had crumbled, leaving him open and raw.

My hand slipped down to his cheek.

Gabriel turned his head just enough to press his lips to my palm, a soft, tender kiss that left a tingling warmth spreading up my arm.

I didn't know how long we stayed like that.

It felt like we were caught in a moment outside of time, savoring a peace we hadn't known in so long.

After a while, he let out a shaky breath, breaking the stillness.

"It's not going to be easy," he murmured, his gaze never leaving mine. "They won't stop looking for us. You know that, right?"

I nodded, my fingers still tracing along his jaw. "I know. But it's worth it. You're worth it, Gabriel," I told him.

A flash of emotion crossed his face, something between relief and disbelief.

He leaned in closer, until our foreheads touched, his hands cradling my face as if I were something precious, something breakable.

It made my chest ache.

"Thank you," he whispered. "For sticking with me. For believing in us."

I closed my eyes, letting myself feel the warmth of him, the steadiness of his touch.

"I'll always stay," I whispered back. "No matter what."

For a moment, everything felt right.

The danger and the fear, it all faded, replaced by a quiet certainty that we'd made the right choice, no matter what came next.

Eventually, he pulled back, his hands lingering on my shoulders before slipping away.

The air between us felt charged, electric, but neither of us moved, savoring the quiet intimacy of the moment.

I could still feel the ghost of his touch, the warmth of his breath against my skin.

Gabriel's gaze softened, and he gave me a small, genuine smile.

"Let's stretch our legs for a little bit," Gabriel suggested.

"That would be good," I told him.

We climbed out of the truck, stretching our legs in the quiet of the gas station's shadowed lot.

The cool night air was refreshing, and I took a deep breath, feeling a strange sense of freedom I hadn't felt in years.

For once, the world felt like it was ours, open and wide.

For just a moment, I let myself imagine a future where we could live like this, together and free.

But I knew better than to hope too much.

We still had a long road ahead, and the shadow of the Guild and of Gael, still lingered behind us, waiting for a chance to pull us back.

“We should get moving. Before Gael catches our scent again,” Gabriel said after a while.

“Yeah,” I agreed, returning to the truck.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GABRIEL

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I noticed was the dim glow of daylight filtering through the black-out curtains around me.

I was in the car. The rumble of the engine and the steady vibration of the road beneath me was a soothing reminder that we were still on the run.

I glanced over, and there he was: Finn, at the wheel, fighting to keep his eyes open, his grip tight as he pushed through fatigue.

Most vampires would panic waking up in a moving vehicle, but for me, it was almost peaceful.

I wasn't in Beric's house. I wasn't under his oppressive gaze or trapped within the walls that suffocated me.

I was here, with Finn, out in the world. We were free or at least as free as we could be while constantly looking over our shoulders.

"Anything happen while I slept?" I asked, my voice still thick with sleep.

Finn gave me a tired smile. "Nothing. We're good, I think."

He covered a yawn with one hand, blinking hard to keep himself focused on the road.

Guilt gnawed at me as I took in his red-rimmed eyes.

He'd probably been driving since morning. Over the past three days, we'd barely any breaks.

Just a few stops for gas and a quick stretch.

Every time, we'd been both looking over our shoulders, ready to jump back in the car at the first sign of trouble.

"We should switch places," I suggested. "You'll fall asleep at the wheel if you keep going like this."

Finn nodded slowly. He stopped the car and we traded places.

"The backseat's more comfortable," I suggested.

"I think I want to stay up a little longer. Keep you company for a little while longer," Finn said.

I smiled at that. Even with the danger, Finn still found moments to be thoughtful.

I drove, content just to sit with him in that shared silence. Eventually, I spotted a gas station in front of us.

"Can we make a quick stop?" Finn asked.

"Sure," I answered. "We're almost out of gas anyway."

I pulled into the nearly empty gas station.

“I’ll grab some food and drinks,” Finn said, opening the door. “Stretch my legs, maybe. Be right back.”

I nodded, watching him as he got out and stretched, his footsteps echoing against the cracked concrete.

The only other soul around was the attendant, who was busy texting to pay attention to the single car on his lot.

I slumped back in my seat, closing my eyes again, sinking back into the momentary peace.

But something about the stillness unsettled me. I sat up, my instincts prickling with a familiar unease.

My gut twisted with a feeling I knew better than to ignore.

Ignoring the fatigue in my limbs, I slipped out of the car and followed the path Finn had taken to the back of the gas station.

And that’s when I saw him.

Gael stood there, his back turned to me, but I knew that stance too well. My chest tightened, and every muscle in my body tensed.

He’d found us. It was only a matter of time.

Still, it was a blow seeing him here, in the flesh, in this quiet, empty corner of the world.

As if he’d sensed my arrival, Gael turned slowly, a smirk curving his lips.

“Gabriel,” he said smugly, eying me up and down. “You look terrible.”

I clenched my fists, forcing myself to calm down.

“Gael,” I said. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

He let out a dark chuckle, stepping closer, his mocking gaze fixed on mine.

“Didn’t you? I admit, you and your human led me on a merry little chase,” Gael said.

A flash of anger burned through me, but I swallowed it down.

“If Beric sent you, you’re wasting your time. I’m not coming back,” I told him.

Gael laughed. “You really think you can walk away from us?”

He stepped in even closer, but I firmly stood my ground. Finn was still in the men’s room.

“We all belong to Beric, Gabriel. You should know that by now,” Gael reminded me.

I gritted my teeth. “Beric doesn’t own me. Walk away and pretend you didn’t see me.”

Gael scoffed. “And let go of an opportunity like this? If I drag you back to Craven Hill, I’ll be Beric’s favourite again. I can’t believe you’ll just throw everything away. And for what? Some human? Pathetic.”

Before I could even react, Gael lunged.

His hand shot out, lightning fast, and I barely dodged it in time, slamming into the

rough concrete wall.

Pain jolted up my shoulder, but I pushed past it, twisting out of his grasp.

We grappled against the wall, each of us vying for the upper hand, our movements sharp and brutal in the dim light.

Gael's hand found its way around my throat.

While I no longer needed to breathe, he could still break the fragile bones in my neck.

"I always knew you were weak," he hissed, his grip unyielding. "Beric's favorite assassin, yes, but weak at the core. And this only proves it."

Bones creaked, but I fought against the panic. With a surge of strength, I raised my knee, slamming it into his side.

His hold faltered just enough for me to break free, and I staggered back, rubbing my neck, fighting to regain my breath.

"You don't know anything about me," I managed to spit out, my voice hoarse but filled with defiance.

"Oh, I know plenty." Gael wiped a trickle of blood from his lip, his eyes darkening.

Gael continued, "I know a former hunter like you can never be trusted. I have to admit, you played the part of obedient killer well, but sooner or later, you were bound to blow your cover."

"I did what I had to do to survive," I told him. "But I've found something better now."

Gael sneered. “Better?”

He gestured in the direction Finn had gone, a glint of disgust in his eyes.

“This human? You think he’ll stay by your side once he finally realizes what you really are?” Gael asked.

Rage boiled inside me, raw and uncontrollable.

In Beric’s house, I’d always reeled in my temper, kept it tightly leashed, because one wrong step could mean the end. But here?

Here, with Gael’s taunts cutting deep, there was no reason to be careful.

I felt the urge to let the anger flow, to show him just how dangerous I could be.

Yet maybe some part of me recognized the truth in what he was saying, and that only fueled my fury.

What if Finn woke up one day, only to realize that everything he’d sacrificed, betraying the Guild, leaving behind his only family, all of it had been for nothing?

What if he saw me for what I was, a monster, and knew he’d made the biggest mistake of his life?

The thought clawed at me, every bitter word Gael spat forcing me to face my deepest fears. I gave into my rage.

I closed the gap between us, my fist flying forward with a speed I’d always held back, landing squarely on his jaw.

He stumbled back, but didn't back down, his expression twisted with a feral fury.

"You want to do this the hard way?" he growled, his voice laced with venom.

"Fine by me."

And we clashed again, each blow more brutal than the last.

Gael fought to cripple, to punish, to make me regret every choice I'd made to defy Beric, to defy him.

But I fought back just as fiercely, each hit a reminder of everything I was leaving behind.

Everything I was willing to give up for Finn and for the chance to live free.

He snarled, lunging at me with renewed aggression, his fists aiming to break me.

"You're Beric's property," he spat, eyes blazing with a twisted loyalty. "He owns you. Always will."

"Not anymore," I grunted, dodging a vicious swipe and countering with a sharp kick to his ribs. "I'm done with him. With all of you."

We grappled, our movements a deadly dance, each of us driven by fury and desperation.

Gael twisted, trying to throw me to the ground, but I held my ground, digging deep, finding a strength I didn't know I had.

I broke free, managing to pin him against the wall.

For a tense, breathless moment, our eyes met. Beneath the fury in his gaze, I saw something else. A flicker of disbelief, of... regret.

“I thought you were smarter than this, Gabriel,” he whispered, voice tight with something almost like pity. “I hated you sure, but I admired you as well. I thought you understood what it takes to survive.”

My grip tightened, and I leaned in close, my voice barely a whisper.

“Surviving isn’t enough for me anymore,” I said.

With one last shove, I pushed him back and stepped away, chest heaving, my fists clenched and still trembling.

Gael staggered, but he didn’t retaliate. He wiped the blood from his mouth, his eyes dark with fury.

“Gabriel!” Finn’s voice snapped me out of my rage.

He burst out of the men’s room, his eyes wide and frantic, and tossed something my way. A silver knife.

I caught it by the handle, feeling its weight, its cold, sharp promise.

Gael’s gaze narrowed, his eyes darting between the blade in my hand and the second knife Finn now held, poised and ready to strike if needed.

Finish it, a dark voice whispered inside me. Gael would never stop coming after us.

He’d hunt us to the ends of the earth if Beric demanded it, if only to prove himself in his twisted loyalty.

And yet...as I looked at him, part of me felt an unexpected pang of pity.

I couldn't deny that in some ways, he and I weren't so different.

Gael was bitter and broken, consumed by his anger and desperation to survive.

If more time had passed, if I hadn't had Finn to pull me out of Beric's world, would I have ended up just like Gael, who was petty, bitter and hollow?

My grip on the knife tightened, my resolve wavering. Just as I was about to make a decision, the screech of tires broke the tension.

A car skidded to a stop in front of Gael, its headlights slicing through the night, illuminating our standoff in stark, cold light.

Of course, Gael wasn't alone, I thought in irritation.

"This isn't over," he said. "You may have gotten away tonight, but Beric won't let you go. And next time... there won't be any mercy."

Gael slipped into the car. I gritted my teeth, steadying myself.

And that's when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned, and Finn standing there, his face filled with fear and worry.

"You good?" he asked.

I nodded, though my body still thrummed with adrenaline.

"Let's get out of here, before he returns with reinforcements," I said.

Without another word, we slipped back into the car, leaving the gas station and Gael behind us.

I started the engine and we pulled back onto the empty road.

My mind replayed Gael's words, like venom sinking deep under my skin.

Finn was the only piece of my old life, my true life, that I'd managed to hold onto.

He was the one reminder of who I used to be even after everything Beric had stripped away. But what if Gael was right?

What if Finn would one day wake up and look at me, and instead of love in his eyes, I'd find regret?

"You really okay?" Finn asked.

I managed a nod, not trusting myself to speak yet.

Finn had given me the one thing I thought I'd never feel again: the hope of a life beyond Beric, beyond blood and violence.

And I wanted that life with him so fiercely it ached.

I had dragged Finn into this mess, asking him to turn his back on everything he'd known and trust me.

It was a selfish choice, and yet I'd made it, driven by the hope that we could be each other's salvation. But was that even fair to him?

"Gabriel?" Finn's voice interrupted the spiral of my thoughts.

I stopped the car and turned to look at him. Finn looked concerned.

“What happened back there? What’s your relationship with Gael?” Finn asked.

I took a few seconds, searching for the right words.

“Gael hated my guts the moment Beric turned me. He used to be Beric’s old favorite,” I said. “But he also knows exactly how to push my buttons.”

“What exactly did he say to you?” Finn demanded.

“He thinks you’ll regret being with me,” I finally admitted.

Honesty was the foundation of any relationship and I never ever wanted to lie to Finn.

I wondered what he was thinking, if there was any hesitation or doubt hiding in his heart.

Finally, he reached over, his hand slipping into mine, his fingers lacing through mine.

“Then he doesn’t know me at all,” Finn said, his voice full of quiet confidence.

He gave my hand a squeeze. Finn continued, “I’m here because I chose this, Gabriel. No one forced me to. I know what I left behind. And I know why I left it behind.”

I looked at him, something loosening in my chest at his words, at the conviction in his voice. But the fear lingered.

“You say that now, but what about in a month? A year? When we’re still hiding, still on the run?” I swallowed, fighting to keep my voice steady.

Finally, I continued, “Finn, I’m...I’m not sure I can give you the life you deserve. And Gael, he’s always there to remind me of what I am, what I’ll always be. A monster who traded one cage for another.”

Finn turned to me, his gaze sharp, full of defiance.

“That’s not who you are to me, Gabriel. I know who you really are. And I’m not going to run away because things get hard.” His hand tightened around mine.

I wanted to believe him, but the fear was rooted deep, coiled around my heart like a vice.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FINN

The car jolted to a stop, and I stirred awake, blinking groggily.

“Why did we stop?” I mumbled, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

The dark stretch of road outside the windshield was eerily quiet, bathed only in the faint glow of the moon.

Gabriel glanced over at me, his expression tight.

“The engine died on us,” he said simply. “I’ll call for a service.”

“Great,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair.

I didn’t bother masking the irritation in my voice. This felt like one more thing piling on top of an already precarious situation.

I stretched and climbed out of the car, needing some air.

The chilly night breeze hit me, waking me up further. Gabriel followed a moment later, shutting the car door softly behind him.

“No reception,” he announced, his voice heavy with frustration.

I frowned, turning to him. “None at all?”

He shook his head. “Not even a single bar. But I remember passing a convenience store a few minutes ago. I’ll walk back and see if I can borrow their phone.”

“I’ll do it,” I said quickly, already stepping away from the car. “I could use the exercise anyway.”

Gabriel’s brow furrowed in doubt, and he folded his arms across his chest.

“Finn, it’s not safe for you to go alone. We don’t know who?—”

“I’ll be fine,” I interrupted, forcing a smile and brushing a hand against his arm. “You stay here and keep trying for a signal. Maybe something will pop up while I’m gone.”

Gabriel’s lips pressed into a thin line, clearly unhappy with my suggestion. “Finn...”

I leaned in and kissed him, a soft reassurance, hoping it would ease his worry.

“I’ll be fine,” I repeated, my voice firmer this time.

He let out a resigned sigh but didn’t argue further.

“Be quick,” he said, his tone tinged with reluctance. “And don’t let your guard down.”

I nodded, turning toward the road. My feet crunched on the gravel shoulder as I walked, the car’s dim headlights fading behind me.

The night was unnervingly quiet, the only sound my footsteps and the occasional rustling of leaves in the wind.

I kept to the edge of the road, glancing back every so often.

I hadn't told Gabriel, but lately, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being followed.

At first, I thought it was Gael. He had every reason to come after us. But something didn't add up.

If it was him, why hadn't he made a move?

Gabriel had said Gael wouldn't hesitate to kill him, yet here we were, still running, still alive.

Maybe I was just paranoid. The constant driving and the lack of was all catching up to me.

Even when Gabriel and I took turns behind the wheel, there was no real rest.

The fear of what might be lurking around the next corner kept me on edge.

When we'd first started this journey, I'd tried to romanticize it, imagining it as some kind of adventurous road trip.

But that illusion had crumbled quickly. This wasn't a vacation. It was survival.

And deep down, I knew we couldn't keep doing this forever. Something had to give.

The convenience store came into view, its flickering neon sign casting an eerie glow over the empty parking lot.

There was only one vehicle parked outside. A black truck. It looked new, but the

sight of it gave me pause.

The state plates matched, but something about it felt... off.

I shook my head, dismissing the thought as paranoia. I was running on fumes, after all.

My mind was probably conjuring shadows where there were none. Pushing the door open, I stepped inside.

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, and an elderly man stood behind the counter, flipping through a magazine.

He barely glanced up as I approached.

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Our car broke down a little ways up the road. Can I borrow your phone?”

The man looked up, squinting at me for a moment before nodding. He slid an old landline phone across the counter.

“Thanks,” I muttered, dialing the number Gabriel had written down earlier for emergencies.

The line rang once, twice, before connecting. I relayed the details of our situation, keeping my answers short and to the point.

As I hung up, a door in the corner of the store creaked open. The one with a bathroom sign hanging crookedly above it.

I turned instinctively, and my blood ran cold.

“Asher,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He froze in the doorway but he didn’t look as shocked as I was.

For a moment, neither of us moved, the air between us heavy with unspoken tension.

My heart pounded in my chest, so loud I was sure he could hear it.

“Finn,” he said. “I finally found you.”

I didn’t know what to say. My throat felt dry, my mind racing with a thousand thoughts but unable to settle on any of them.

What was he doing here? How had he found me? And more importantly... what was he planning to do now that he had?

“Asher, I?—”

He cut me off, stepping closer. “What the hell are you doing here?” His tone wasn’t angry, but there was a dangerous undertone, a barely restrained fury simmering beneath the surface.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I managed, trying to keep my voice steady, though I knew I was failing.

“The Guild said you couldn’t get out of Craven Hill. I searched all over the city for you,” Asher said.

There was silent accusation in his voice. Asher was concerned about me? Of course he was, he was my brother.

Still, the mention of the Guild sent a cold shiver down my spine.

Dang it. I really thought it would take them longer to find me, to find us.

“So they sent you to find me?” I asked, my voice steadier than I felt. “How did you even know to look for me here?”

“They did, but after I reported that I couldn’t find you in Craven Hill, they told me to return.” Asher’s tone was sharp, almost offended. “I disobeyed orders and continued searching for you.”

His gaze swept over me and I wondered what he saw.

“I know, Finn.” His voice was heavy with something between resignation and sorrow.

I stiffened. “What exactly do you know?” I asked carefully, though my mind was already racing.

This was bad. Out of all the hunters in the Guild, it had to be my brother standing here.

Facing Asher wasn’t just difficult because he was family, but because he was so good at what he did.

Unlike me, Asher wasn’t conflicted about the job. He was a natural. Asher was skilled, dedicated, and relentless.

Somehow, I had to lose him. But before I made any move, I needed to figure out just how much he’d pieced together.

“About you and Gabriel,” he said bluntly, and I felt the air rush out of my lungs. “I know he was your target, and you were sent to kill him. Somehow, you convinced the Elders that you succeeded. And now, you’re on the run with him.”

I braced myself for an explosion of anger, but Asher didn’t lash out.

He didn’t yell or accuse me like I’d expected. Instead, he just looked at me, sad and disappointed.

And somehow, that was worse. I wanted to shake him, to tell him to let it all out, but I didn’t.

Silence felt like the safest choice, so I said nothing.

I turned to the old man behind the counter, who had been watching the exchange with a mix of curiosity and wariness.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, handing back the phone before heading for the door.

Unsurprisingly, Asher followed me.

“Hey!” he called, grabbing my shoulder and forcing me to face him. His grip was firm, but not painful. “We’re not done talking.”

I pulled away, but he didn’t back off.

“Finn, screw all of this,” Asher said, his voice dropping low, almost pleading. “Let’s just go home. Forget Gabriel. Forget everything that happened. We’ll figure out a way to lie to the Elders, convince them you’ve—”

“I’m not going back,” I cut him off, my voice hard.

Asher's jaw tightened, and for a moment, he looked ready to argue.

But then his expression softened, just enough to show the cracks in his armor.

Beneath the frustration and anger, I saw something else. Worry.

"Finn," he said, his voice quieter now, tinged with desperation. "Has he already brainwashed you? Is that it? Are you so far gone that you can't even see what you've done? The danger you're in?"

His words hit me like a slap, but before I could respond, he added, "The vampire I followed to track you, Gael, he's dangerous. He's one of Beric's enforcers. Do you even understand what that means?"

The mention of Gael sent a chill down my spine, but I refused to let it show.

I swallowed hard, my mind catching on the bigger picture. He followed Gael.

That's how Asher had managed to find us. Of course. My brother was an excellent tracker.

If anyone could keep up with someone like Gael, it was him.

Still, hearing the concern in his voice made my resolve waver.

After our parents had died, Asher had taken it upon himself to look after Donovan and me, even when we didn't want it.

And now, standing outside this dingy convenience store, I could see that he wasn't just angry. He was scared.

But he didn't understand. He couldn't.

"Gabriel didn't brainwash me," I said firmly, my voice soft but unshakable. "I know exactly what I've done."

"Do you?" Asher snapped, his frustration breaking through.

"Yes," I whispered, holding his gaze. "And I'd do it all over again if I had the chance."

Asher's eyes darkened, his expression unreadable.

"Gabriel," he said bitterly. "It was always about him."

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. The silence was suffocating.

Finally, Asher let out a heavy sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"You're going to get yourself killed, Finn," he said, his voice low and tired. "And for what? For a monster who?"

"Stop," I interrupted, my voice firm. "You don't know him. You don't know what he's been through. He's not a monster damn it."

Asher's jaw clenched, but he didn't argue.

Instead, he took a step back, his eyes searching mine like he was trying to figure out if there was any way to change my mind.

"You're not giving me much of a choice here," he said finally, his voice heavy with resignation.

I didn't respond. I couldn't. Because as much as I hated it, I knew he was right. There was no easy way out of this, no clean break.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FINN

The fight erupted without warning.

Asher lunged, quick and unrelenting, his expression carved from stone.

I stepped back just in time to avoid his first strike, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I knew this was inevitable, but part of me couldn't quite believe it. I was fighting my big brother.

The one who taught me how to throw my first punch, who patched me up after I'd skinned my knee a dozen times growing up.

Now, he was coming at me with the same precision and force he used to train Guild recruits, and there was no holding back.

"Asher, stop!" I shouted, dodging another blow.

His only response was a grim look, his mouth set in a hard line. Asher didn't speak, didn't try to reason with me.

He'd decided what needed to be done, and he was carrying it out with a cold, unflinching resolve.

I ducked as he swung again, his movements sharp and calculated.

For a moment, I thought he was intent on killing me, but then I noticed the glint of something in his fist.

Not a blade or a weapon. At least, not in the conventional sense.

A syringe. The realization hit like a punch to the gut.

He wasn't trying to kill me; he was trying to incapacitate me and drag me back to the Guild.

"Asher, stop. Let's talk about this!" I pleaded, ducking another swing and twisting out of reach.

"Enough talking, Finn," he said grimly.

His words only stoked the fire in my chest.

My own brother thought I was too far gone to be trusted with my own choices. That I needed to be saved.

Anger bubbled up, but I forced myself to focus on the fight.

I couldn't let my emotions get the better of me. Not when Asher was fighting like his life depended on it.

He came at me again, faster this time, his movements smooth and relentless.

I barely managed to block his strikes, my arms already aching from the effort.

Asher was better than me; he always had been. Faster, stronger, more disciplined.

Fighting him felt like trying to take down a mountain with a toothpick.

But I wasn't about to let him win.

I ducked and weaved, trying to find an opening, but Asher didn't give me any.

He pressed forward, his strikes growing more aggressive.

Asher wasn't just trying to subdue me anymore. He was trying to wear me down, and it was working.

I stumbled back, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Asher saw the opening and lunged, the syringe glinting in the faint light.

I twisted out of the way at the last second, my shoulder slamming into the side of the truck. Pain flared, but I pushed it aside.

"Asher, I don't want to do this!" I shouted, hoping, praying, that some part of him would listen.

"Neither do I," he said, his voice quieter now, but no less determined. "But I won't let you throw away your life, Finn. Not like this."

His words stung, sharper than any blow he'd landed so far. But there was no time to dwell on it.

Asher came at me again, the syringe aimed for my neck. I ducked low and swept my leg out, trying to knock him off balance.

He stumbled but recovered quickly, his grip on the syringe tightening.

He didn't hesitate as he came at me again, his movements a blur of calculated strikes.

I fought back with everything I had, but I could feel myself faltering. My heart wasn't in this fight. Not like his was.

Asher was fighting to save me, to bring me back to the life he thought I belonged to. And me?

I was fighting to keep my freedom, to hold on to the life I was trying to build with Gabriel.

But deep down, I knew I wasn't giving it my all. Because this was Asher. My brother.

He fainted left, then lunged right, catching me off guard.

The syringe came dangerously close to my arm, and I barely managed to twist out of the way in time.

"Asher, please," I said, my voice breaking.

"No, Finn," he said, his voice hard as steel. "You don't get to throw everything away for him. Not for a vampire."

His words cut deep, but I pushed the pain aside. I couldn't let him win. Not this time.

Asher lunged again, and this time I was ready.

I ducked under his swing and tackled him to the ground, the impact knocking the breath out of both of us.

The syringe clattered to the pavement, and we both froze for a split second before scrambling for it.

Asher's hand closed around my wrist, trying to pull me away, but I pushed back with everything I had.

My fingers grazed the syringe, and I lunged forward, grabbing it just as Asher tried to pull me away.

Without thinking, I turned and jabbed the needle into his neck.

"Asher!" I gasped, my voice filled with a mix of panic and regret.

He froze, his eyes widening in shock.

For a moment, neither of us moved. Then his grip on my arm loosened, and he slumped against me, his body going limp.

I caught him before he hit the ground, lowering him gently onto the pavement.

My hands trembled as I checked his pulse, relief flooding through me when I found it steady.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my voice shaking. "I'm so sorry."

I dragged him to the truck, every step feeling like a betrayal.

His body was heavy, his breathing slow and even. The dosage must have been strong, stronger than I'd anticipated.

By the time he woke up, Gabriel and I would be long gone.

Hundreds of miles away, hopefully far enough that Asher wouldn't be able to track us again.

But as I hurried back to Gabriel, I couldn't shake the weight pressing down on my chest.

I'd won the fight, but it didn't feel like a victory. It felt like I'd lost something I could never get back.

By the time I returned to Gabriel, he was leaning casually against the car, chatting with the tow truck operator. A man named Todd, according to his shirt patch.

Our car was already hooked to the back of Todd's truck, ready to be hauled away.

The moment Gabriel saw me, though, his easy demeanor shifted.

His sharp eyes scanned my face, and I could see the tension flood his features.

Whatever Todd had been saying was left unfinished as Gabriel murmured something to him and crossed the short distance between us.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" Gabriel asked, his voice low and urgent.

I shook my head quickly, unable to speak. Not yet.

My mind was still racing, caught between guilt and frustration. Thankfully, Gabriel didn't press me.

Todd called over, offering us a ride to the nearest town while our car was being worked on.

Gabriel nodded, murmuring his thanks before gently guiding me toward the truck.

Seated in the back, I leaned against the door, trying to ground myself in the rhythm of the road as Todd drove.

Gabriel sat next to me, his posture stiff with concern.

He kept sneaking me worried glances, his fingers brushing against mine as though to remind me he was there.

I eventually gave in and reached for his hand, squeezing it lightly.

He squeezed back, his touch reassuring despite the questions I could see in his eyes.

Todd dropped us off at the town's small diner, the only place open at this hour.

He assured us the car would be ready in a few hours and wished us luck.

Gabriel thanked him again, his voice calm despite the storm brewing beneath the surface.

Inside the diner, we slid into a booth in the back, away from the scattered patrons.

A flickering light above us cast the room in an uneven glow, and the air-conditioning hummed louder than it needed to.

The icy chill made me shiver, and before I could say anything, Gabriel shrugged off his jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

"You're freezing," he murmured.

I managed a faint smile in thanks, clutching the jacket tighter around me.

When the waitress brought two steaming cups of coffee, I took a sip too quickly, burning the tip of my tongue.

I winced, setting the cup down.

Gabriel, ever patient, just watched me, his hands wrapped around his own mug, although I knew he didn't intend to drink it.

He wasn't rushing me, wasn't demanding answers.

Gabriel knew I'd tell him when I was ready. That quiet understanding gave me the courage to finally break the silence.

"I bumped into Asher at the convenience store," I said, my voice barely audible over the hum of the diner.

Gabriel's brow furrowed, and I could see the questions forming, but he stayed quiet, letting me continue.

"Apparently, after the Elders told him I couldn't leave Craven Hill, he went looking for me on his own. When he couldn't find me, he followed Gael to track me down," I said.

For a brief moment, Gabriel looked impressed, a flicker of respect crossing his face at Asher's persistence.

But then his expression darkened, the weight of what I was saying sinking in.

"What happened after you talked?" he asked, his voice carefully even.

I let out a bitter laugh, shaking my head.

“Talk? It didn’t take long for him to try and knock me out. He had a syringe. He planned to drag me back to the Guild,” I angrily said.

Gabriel’s eyes widened, horror flashing across his face. He reached across the table and took my hands in his, rubbing them gently.

His comforting touch eased some of the tension in my chest.

“Somehow, I got the better of him,” I continued, my voice breaking slightly. “I knocked him out instead. Left him by his truck. He’ll wake up in a few hours.”

Gabriel squeezed my hands, his thumbs tracing soothing circles over my knuckles.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said softly. “I wondered if I should have checked on you, but then Todd arrived...”

“You showing up would’ve made things worse,” I said, my voice firm. “Asher would’ve lost it if he saw you. It was better this way. I handled it.”

Gabriel nodded slowly. “You’re right. But... things are getting more complicated, aren’t they?”

I recognized the look on his face instantly, and my heart clenched.

That distant, conflicted expression—Gabriel was having second thoughts. Not just about our plan, but about us.

The realization hit me like a punch to the gut, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. How could he?

After everything we'd been through, after the sacrifices we'd made and the dangers we'd faced together, how dare he stand there and question it all?

Did he think this was easy for me? That I hadn't torn myself apart making this choice, knowing what I'd lose?

My family, my old life for him. And now, here he was, looking at me like I was just some foolish kid chasing an impossible dream.

It felt like a betrayal, sharp and cruel, cutting deeper than I thought possible.

I tightened my grip on his hands, as if holding him tighter would keep him from saying what I knew was coming.

"Gabriel," I warned, my voice low. "Don't even think about suggesting we part ways."

He gave me a pained look, his expression filled with a mix of regret and resignation.

"Maybe your brother's right, Finn. It's not too late for you to go back to your old life. I know how to disappear. It would be like I was really?—"

"Dead?" I interrupted, my voice rising.

The word felt like a slap, and anger flared inside me, hot and uncontrollable. I yanked my hands away from his.

"Finn—" he began, but I cut him off.

"Don't. Don't even say it." I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

After everything we'd been through, after all the sacrifices I'd made, he was ready to throw it all away?

"I'm just saying?—"

"I know what you're saying!" I snapped, my voice shaking with anger and hurt.

I continued, "You think this is all a mistake. That I'm better off without you. Well, guess what, Gabriel? I don't care what you think. I made my choice, and I'm not going back."

Gabriel flinched, his expression twisting with guilt, but I wasn't done.

"You don't get to decide what's best for me. Not Asher, not the Guild, and not you. I chose you. And if you can't accept that..." My voice broke, and I swallowed hard, trying to steady myself. "Then maybe you don't trust me as much as I thought you did."

Silence fell between us, heavy and suffocating.

Gabriel's face was a mixture of pain and indecision, and I couldn't stand to look at it any longer.

I downed the rest of my coffee in one bitter gulp and stood abruptly.

"Finn," Gabriel said softly, reaching for me, but I stepped back.

"I need some air. Don't follow me," I said, my voice flat.

Without waiting for a response, I slipped out of the booth and walked out of the diner, the bell above the door jingling behind me.

The cool night air hit my face, but it did nothing to ease the storm raging inside me.

I paced along the sidewalk, trying to calm my breathing, trying to untangle the mess of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

I wasn't just angry. I was hurt. Hurt that Gabriel didn't believe in me, in us.

After everything we'd been through, I thought we were stronger than this.

But maybe I was wrong.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GABRIEL

I've made plenty of mistakes in my life, but this felt like the worst one.

Why couldn't I keep my thoughts to myself? I had seen the flicker of hurt in Finn's eyes the moment I spoke.

He was trying so hard to hold everything together, to push forward despite everything we'd been through.

Here I was, tossing doubt into the mix like some clumsy fool who didn't know better.

My words had been selfish, driven by fear and guilt rather than reason.

What was wrong with me? I should've known better. I did know better.

But the pressure of everything, the danger stalking us, the weight of our choices, and the consequences we couldn't outrun, had cracked something in me.

I had let it slip, that tiny kernel of doubt I didn't even know I'd been carrying.

And now, Finn was walking away from me, his shoulders tense and his steps brisk.

He hadn't said much, just a curt "I need some air," but the way his voice had wavered told me everything I needed to know.

I'd hurt him, and if I didn't fix this soon, I might lose the one person who loved and cared about me.

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration bubbling beneath my skin.

Apologies didn't come easy to me. They never had, but this wasn't just anyone. This was Finn.

If I couldn't set aside my pride and own up to my mistakes for him, then I didn't deserve him in the first place.

I followed him, keeping a careful distance.

Finn's emotions were always written across his face for anyone who cared enough to look, and right now, he was hurting.

But I couldn't leave him alone in this state, not when the world was as dangerous as it was, not when Gael or Asher could be lurking nearby.

The town was quiet, its streets nearly empty. Finn walked quickly, his hands shoved into his pockets, his shoulders tight with tension.

The sight of him like this, radiating hurt and anger, twisted something deep inside me.

Eventually, he stopped at a run-down motel on the outskirts of town.

The neon "VACANCY" sign flickered weakly, casting a dull red glow over the cracked asphalt of the parking lot.

I hung back as Finn entered the reception area, watching through the window as he

exchanged words with the clerk.

Moments later, he stepped out with a key in his hand.

Finn made his way to a room on the first floor, his steps slowing as he approached the door.

Finn paused in front of it, gripping the key tightly but not using it. His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath.

“You’re there, aren’t you?” he said, not turning around. “I... don’t want to stay mad at you, but you make it so easy.”

My chest tightened. I stepped out of the shadows.

“Finn,” I began, my voice low, unsure.

He turned to face me, crossing his arms over his chest.

His eyes burned with emotion. Anger, hurt, and something softer beneath it all.

“I’m sorry,” I said, stepping closer.

I considered my next words with care before speaking again.

“I let my personal fears get to me. The truth is, I don’t ever want to leave you. You chose me over your family, over the Guild. That’s not something I take lightly. I just... I only hope I can be worthy of that choice.”

Finn’s expression softened, though the tension in his posture didn’t ease entirely.

“Gabriel, did you think I made all those choices on a whim? That I’d just wake up one day and regret everything? You don’t get it, Gabriel. I don’t want to be anywhere you’re not,” Finn said.

His words hit me like a punch to the chest.

For a moment, I couldn’t find a response, the weight of his feelings crashing over me.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, my voice raw. “I regret making you feel like I ever doubted that. I just... I never want to hold you back. You deserve more than what I can give you, Finn. But I swear I’ll do everything I can to be better. For you.”

Finn’s jaw tightened, and then he surged forward, his hands gripping the collar of my shirt as he kissed me.

It wasn’t soft or tentative; it was full of heat and frustration and longing.

I returned it without hesitation, pulling him closer, losing myself in the fire between us.

When he finally pulled back, his breathing was uneven, his cheeks flushed.

“You’re such an idiot,” he muttered, his lips quirking up in a wry smile.

“I know,” I agreed, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. “But can you forgive me anyway?”

Finn rolled his eyes, but the faint smile stayed.

He turned, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. Grabbing my hand, he pulled me inside.

The room was small and bare, with a single bed, a worn armchair, and a flickering TV mounted to the wall.

Finn didn't seem to care about the surroundings as he shut the door behind us.

"I hate fighting with you," he admitted, his voice quieter now.

"I hate it, too," I said, cupping his face in my hands.

Finn's arms slid around my waist, holding me close.

For a moment, we just stood there, the tension from earlier melting away, replaced by a warmth that spread between us.

"Don't ever suggest leaving again," he murmured against my shoulder.

"I won't," I promised, pressing a kiss to his temple. "You're stuck with me."

"Good," Finn said, pulling back just enough to look at me. His eyes were bright, his earlier anger gone. "Because I'm not going anywhere. No matter what happens."

I kissed him again, softer this time, savoring the taste of his lips and the steady thrum of his heartbeat against mine.

Finn responded with equal passion.

When I pulled away, Finn was panting, his lips still swollen from the kiss.

He rested his forehead against mine, his breaths uneven and warm against my skin.

His hands settled firmly on my shoulders, gripping me like I might vanish if he let go.

There was an intensity in the way he touched me, a silent desperation that spoke louder than words.

It was as if he needed the reassurance, the solidness of me beneath his hands, to convince himself I was still here. That we were still us.

His fingers tightened slightly, not enough to hurt, but enough to ground both of us in the moment.

The tension in his body gradually ebbed, though the weight of everything unsaid lingered between us.

His forehead pressed against mine with a tenderness that felt almost fragile, as if this simple touch was holding together the frayed edges of his resolve.

Finn finally pulled away. He sat on the bed and under the dim light, I noticed the dark circles under his eyes and how pale he was.

He looked utterly worn down, his exhaustion mirroring mine.

I leaned against the wall, watching him in silence. He didn't speak, and I didn't push him to.

Instead, I let the quiet fill the space between us, giving him time to gather his thoughts.

Finally, Finn exhaled a shaky breath and looked at me, his blue eyes glassy.

"Gabriel," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "Do you ever think about how all of this is going to end?"

The question hit me harder than I expected, like a blow I hadn't braced for.

I crossed the room and sat beside him on the bed, close enough for our knees to touch.

"Sometimes," I admitted. "But I try not to dwell on it. I want to focus on the now, on what I need to do in the present."

He nodded slowly, but his gaze dropped to his hands, clasped tightly in his lap.

"I just... I don't know if I'm strong enough for this. For all of it. Asher's an unnecessary complication. I know my brother. He won't stop until he returns home with me," Fin said.

I didn't miss the vulnerability in his voice.

Finn seemed so sure of himself earlier, but now I realized he was barely holding himself together.

Without thinking, I reached out and took his hand in mine, threading our fingers together.

"Finn, I know it feels impossible right now, but we'll get through this," I told him.

He looked up at me and a faint smile appeared on his lips.

"You've always been so reliable. I'm just worried that along the way, I'll screw something up. Make a mistake that would cost both of us," Finn said.

I squeezed his hand, my thumb brushing over the rough calluses on his palm.

“Mistakes are unavoidable. We’ll both probably make them together and move on,” I said.

For a moment, he just stared at me, his lips parted as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

Then he leaned forward, kissed me softly on the mouth.

“You always know exactly what to say,” he murmured, his breath warm against my skin.

“Not always,” I said with a small smile. “But I mean every word.”

We stayed like that for a while, finding comfort in the closeness.

Then Finn pulled back slightly, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity I couldn’t read.

“Gabriel,” he said, his voice steady now, “I want your blood mark.”

The words hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning. Uncertainly flared inside me.

I searched his face, looking for any hesitation, any sign that he didn’t fully understand what he was asking.

“Finn,” I said carefully, “you know what that means, right? A vampire’s blood mark is permanent. There’s no undoing it.”

“I know,” he said, his gaze unwavering. “I don’t care. I want this. I want you . Forever.”

The conviction in his voice sent a rush of emotions through me. Love, fear, hope, and a deep, aching need to protect him.

I cupped his face in my hands, my thumbs brushing over his cheekbones.

“Are you sure?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything,” he replied.

For a moment, I couldn’t speak. The weight of his trust, his love, was overwhelming.

But then I nodded, my decision made. If this was what he wanted, what we wanted, then I wouldn’t deny him.

“Okay,” I said softly.

Finn’s breath hitched, and his hands gripped my wrists, holding me close.

I shifted, guiding him to lie back on the bed.

He looked up at me, his eyes shining with anticipation and something deeper. An unshakable belief in us.

I leaned down, pressing a slow, lingering kiss to his lips. His hands slid up to tangle in my hair, pulling me closer.

The world outside the room faded away, leaving only the two of us, tangled together in this moment.

I broke the kiss and moved to his neck, pressing soft kisses along the curve of his throat.

His pulse fluttered beneath my lips, quick and steady.

“This might sting,” I murmured against his skin.

“I trust you,” he whispered.

His words sent a jolt through me, and I sank my fangs into his neck, just above his collarbone.

Finn gasped, his body arching beneath mine, but he didn’t pull away.

I felt the rush of his blood, warm and electric, and then the bond snapped into place like a thread pulling taut between us.

It was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. It was a deep, unshakable connection that went beyond words or thoughts.

I could feel him, his emotions swirling with mine, his love and trust wrapping around me like a shield.

When I pulled back, I licked away the lingering droplets of blood.

Finn’s breathing was uneven,, but he smiled up at me, his hand reaching up to touch the mark.

“Is it done?” he asked, voice hopeful.

I smiled, leaning down to kiss him again. “It’s done,” I said. “You’re mine now. And I’m yours.”

Finn’s smile widened, and he pulled me down into his arms.

“I love you,” he said, the words clear and certain.

“I love you too,” I replied without hesitation.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GABRIEL

The motel room was silent except for the low hum of the heater struggling to fend off the night's chill.

Finn lay beside me, his breathing soft but uneven, as if even in sleep, his body refused to fully relax.

I reached out, brushing my fingers through his hair in slow, deliberate strokes, hoping to offer him some comfort.

I wasn't far from sleep myself, the weight of exhaustion pulling me under. But just as my eyes closed, I heard it.

A faint sound, barely more than a whisper, outside the door.

My senses snapped to attention, adrenaline flushing away the drowsiness in an instant.

My eyes shot to the door, now just a dark outline in the dim room.

For a second, I told myself it was nothing. A creak of old floorboards. The wind pressing against the thin motel walls.

But then I heard it again.

Footsteps.

Slow. Deliberate.

My stomach twisted into a knot as my pulse quickened.

I turned my head toward the window, catching the faintest movement. A shadow slipping past the weak glow of the streetlamp outside.

“Finn,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

My hand tightened on his shoulder, shaking him gently but urgently.

He stirred, blinking groggily at first. But the moment he registered the look on my face, his expression sharpened.

“What is it?” Finn asked.

I tilted my head toward the door. “Someone’s out there.”

Finn froze, his body going rigid. I could see his mind racing, the same questions swirling through both of our heads.

Was it Gael? Asher?

Finn sat up slowly, his movements deliberate and quiet.

He reached for the knife he kept under his pillow, the blade catching the faint light as he gripped it tightly.

I rose beside him, my senses straining to catch any hint of movement or sound. The

footsteps stopped.

We exchanged a tense glance, neither of us daring to speak.

Then came the knock.

Three sharp raps against the door, each one reverberating through the stillness like a gunshot.

My heart thundered in my chest as I stepped forward instinctively, shielding Finn with my body.

Whoever was on the other side, they'd have to go through me first.

"Gabriel..." Finn's voice was low, laced with both fear and resolve.

He shifted closer to me, his knife ready.

I held up a hand, signaling for him to stay back.

My throat felt tight, my body caught between the urge to fight and the need to protect him.

Another shadow passed by the window, pausing briefly before disappearing from sight again.

Whoever was out there wasn't alone.

The realization hit me like a blow, my mind spinning with possibilities.

Were we surrounded? Trapped? Or was this some kind of twisted game to rattle us

before they struck?

My fists clenched at my sides, every instinct screaming to act, to do something, but recklessness could get us killed.

The knock came again, slower this time, more deliberate.

“Gabriel,” Finn said again, his voice steadier now. “If this is it...”

I turned to him, cutting him off with a sharp look.

“It’s not.” My voice was firm, more confident than I felt. “We’re getting out of this. Together.”

Another pause. The tension in the room was suffocating, each second stretching into an eternity.

The door handle turned with an eerie slowness, and my entire body tensed.

Every instinct told me to move, to act, but I stayed rooted to the spot, waiting for the exact moment to strike.

The door creaked open, revealing Gael standing in the doorway. In his hand, the unmistakable gleam of a knife caught my eye.

He stepped inside with measured confidence, his lips curling into a smirk that chilled me to the bone.

"Gael," I said, keeping my voice steady, my hands flexing at my sides. “Can’t say I’m pleased to see you again. ”

He tilted his head, his smirk widening into a cruel grin.

"I am. I can't wait to present your corpse to Beric. Did you really think you could hide forever?" Gael asked.

Finn stood behind me, his knife clenched in his fist, his breathing shallow but controlled.

I could feel the tension radiating off him, but I needed to keep him calm.

Gael took another step forward, twirling the knife lazily in his hand.

"And you," he said, his gaze flicking to Finn. "You've caused quite the stir, little hunter. Beric wants you dead as well."

"Touch him," I said, my voice low and dangerous, "and you won't leave this room alive."

Gael's laugh was sharp and mocking. "Bold words for someone who's outnumbered," he said.

Before I could process his meaning, the window behind us shattered.

Glass exploded inward, showering the room in jagged shards.

I spun around just in time to see another vampire vaulting through the opening, his eyes locked on Finn.

"Finn, move!" I shouted, but the vampire was fast.

Finn ducked and rolled to the side as the vampire lunged, his knife swiping through

the air where Finn had been a moment before.

I launched myself at the attacker, slamming him into the wall.

The impact cracked the plaster, but the vampire only snarled and shoved me back with unnatural strength.

Gael took the opportunity to rush Finn, his knife slashing in a deadly arc.

Finn parried with his own blade, the clash of metal ringing out as they grappled.

“Finn!” I called, but I couldn’t get to him.

The second vampire was on me again, his knife aiming for my throat.

The room was chaos. A cacophony of snarls, metal, and shattering furniture.

Finn and Gael circled each other, their blades dancing dangerously close.

Gael’s smirk hadn’t faltered; he was toying with Finn, testing him, waiting for a mistake.

I didn’t have time to watch them. My opponent lunged at me again, his speed blurring as he closed the distance.

I dodged to the side, grabbed a broken chair leg, and drove it toward his chest.

He twisted at the last second, and the makeshift stake glanced off his ribs.

The vampire snarled, baring fangs, and swung at me with his knife.

I ducked, grabbing his arm and using his momentum to throw him across the room.

He crashed into the dresser, splintering it into pieces, but he was on his feet in seconds, his eyes blazing with fury.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Finn trip over the edge of the bed.

Gael pounced, his knife flashing, but Finn managed to roll away just in time.

“Finn, get out of here!” I yelled.

“No!” he shouted back, his voice defiant. “I’m not leaving you!”

The vampire I was fighting rushed me again, forcing me to focus.

He came at me with everything he had—knife, fangs, brute strength.

But I’d been doing this for too long, and he was predictable.

When he lunged for my throat, I sidestepped and grabbed the back of his neck, driving him face-first into the ground.

Before he could recover, I grabbed the broken chair leg again and rammed it through his chest.

He let out a strangled cry, his body convulsing as the wood pierced his heart. Then he went still, his body sliding to the floor.

I turned just in time to see Finn block another of Gael’s strikes, his knife skidding across the blade.

Gael was relentless, pressing Finn backward until his back hit the wall.

“Enough!” I roared, charging at Gael.

He spun at the last second, catching my arm with his knife. Pain flared, hot and sharp, but I ignored it.

I grabbed his wrist, forcing the knife away from Finn, and slammed my forehead into his face.

He staggered back, blood streaming from his nose, but his grin remained intact.

“You’re wasting your time, Gabriel,” he hissed, his voice dripping with malice. “You can’t protect him forever.”

“Watch me,” I growled, stepping between him and Finn.

Gael wiped the blood from his nose, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light.

“Let’s see how long you can keep up that act,” Gael said.

Before I could react, Finn threw something small and metallic onto the floor. A smoke bomb.

Thick, acrid smoke filled the room, blinding and choking us.

“Gabriel, let’s go!” Finn shouted, grabbing my arm and dragging me toward the door.

We stumbled into the hallway, coughing and blinking through the haze.

The smoke bomb had bought us time, but I knew Gael wouldn’t let us go that easily.

“Run!” I urged Finn, and we bolted for the motel’s back exit.

The night air hit us like a slap, cold and biting against our skin. We didn’t stop, sprinting toward the tree line beyond the parking lot.

The woods were dark, the towering trees casting long shadows that seemed to swallow us whole.

I could hear Finn’s ragged breathing beside me, and behind us, the unmistakable sound of pursuit.

I could hear a second set of footsteps and silently cursed. Gael had another vampire with him.

“They’re coming!” Finn gasped.

“I know,” I said, my voice tight. “Keep moving!”

We wove through the trees, dodging branches and leaping over roots.

Gael and his ally were faster, but we had the advantage of knowing how to fight smart.

“This way!” I said, pulling Finn toward a denser part of the forest.

The vampire behind us let out a furious snarl, and I could hear his footsteps closing in.

I turned sharply, grabbing a fallen branch and swinging it with all my strength.

It caught him across the chest, knocking him off balance.

“Go, Finn!” I shouted, but he hesitated.

“I’m not leaving you!” he snapped.

“Finn, now!” We didn’t know how many vampires Gael brought with him. I didn’t like our odds.

He finally obeyed, running deeper into the woods. I turned back to the vampire, who was already recovering.

This one I knew. Jasper wasn’t like the vampire I killed earlier. He was bigger, stronger, older.

I waited for him to lunge, then sidestepped and drove my elbow into his spine.

He howled in pain but twisted, grabbing me by the throat and slamming me into a tree.

Stars exploded in my vision, but I clawed at his arm, driving my knee into his stomach.

Jasper stumbled back and reached for a knife in his belt.

I didn’t waste a second. I grabbed a rock from the ground and smashed it into his head.

He went down hard, and I didn’t give him the chance to get back up.

I grabbed his knife and drove it through his heart. Jasper didn’t get up again. I turned, my chest heaving, and sprinted after Finn.

But when I reached the clearing, my blood ran cold. Gael stood there, his knife pressed to Finn's throat.

"Take another step," he said, his voice calm and deadly, "and I'll paint the ground with his blood."

I stilled. Gael laughed, then his eyes locked onto the mark on Finn's neck.

"You fool," he sneered, his voice dripping with triumph. "You actually did it. You gave your little hunter your mark. You made this far too easy, Gabriel. Once I end him, that mark will do the rest. You'll die right alongside him."

I gritted my teeth, the weight of my mistake crashing down on me. No, marking Finn as mine wasn't a mistake.

I tightened my grip on the stolen knife, the hilt digging into my palm.

Finn's gaze flicked to mine, wide with fear but fierce with defiance. His silent plea screamed at me: Don't do anything reckless.

Gael saw the tension in my stance and smirked.

"Oh, come on now. Put that down before you hurt yourself," he said, his tone mocking.

The knife in his hand pressed a fraction deeper against Finn's throat, just enough to draw a thin line of crimson.

"Stop!" I snarled, my voice raw with desperation.

My vision tunneled, focused entirely on Finn. I couldn't lose him. Not like this, not to

Gael.

Finn shook his head minutely, his lips forming the faintest whisper. “Don’t.”

But what choice did I have? Gael had all the power, and he knew it.

I ground my teeth, my fingers aching with how tightly I gripped the knife.

Slowly, painfully, I lowered my hand and set the blade on the ground.

“There’s a good boy,” Gael taunted, his grin widening as he relaxed his stance slightly, though the knife remained at Finn’s throat. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

My mind raced, every instinct screaming for a way out, a weakness in his hold, a distraction. Anything.

Finn’s eyes met mine again, and in them, I saw not fear for himself, but for me. That look broke something inside me.

Gael turned his attention back to Finn. “You know, I expected more fight out of you, little hunter. But maybe that’s what happens when you let a vampire claim you—you get soft.”

Finn’s jaw tightened, his anger simmering beneath the surface.

“You talk too much,” Finn bit out, defiance burning in his tone despite the blade against his skin.

Gael’s smirk faltered for a split second, and I heard a whistle from behind me. Another’s hunter warning.

I forced myself to speak, keeping my voice steady and calm, despite the rage boiling inside me.

“Gael,” I said, taking a cautious step forward.

His eyes snapped to me, and the knife pressed harder against Finn’s throat. I froze, holding up my hands.

“Let him go, and we’ll settle this. Just you and me,” I told him. Finn shot me a questioning look.

Gael scoffed, shaking his head. “And deprive myself of the satisfaction of watching you crumble? I don’t think so, Gabriel. No, I think I’ll finish him first, and then?—”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FINN

Gael didn't finish his words. Gabriel ducked just as a shot rang out, splitting the night with a deafening crack.

The sound echoed in my ears, and for a heartbeat, everything seemed frozen.

Then I felt the sudden slackening of Gael's grip as he stumbled backward, a look of stunned disbelief on his face.

The bullet had hit him square in the chest.

Another shot followed before I could fully register what was happening, the force knocking Gael to the ground.

His body jerked once, then went still.

My breath came in shallow, rapid bursts as I twisted to look behind me, toward the direction of the shot.

A figure emerged from the shadows, shotgun in hand. Asher.

My stomach clenched, a mix of relief and dread churning inside me. Gabriel swore next to me.

Asher's shotgun shifted, no longer aimed at Gael's unmoving form. Instead, Asher swung the barrel directly toward Gabriel.

My breath caught in my throat, my heart hammering so loud it drowned out everything else.

For a fleeting, terrifying second, I was certain my brother would pull the trigger without a moment's hesitation.

That all the sacrifices we'd made, all the risks we'd taken, had been for nothing.

Asher's eyes were hard and unwavering. There wasn't even a flicker of doubt in his expression, no hesitation that hinted at mercy.

It was the look of a hunter, the same one he'd worn every time he stared down a supernatural creature, prepared to end their existence without a shred of regret.

But this wasn't just any vampire. It was Gabriel. The man I'd chosen. The man I loved.

"No!" The word tore from my throat, raw and desperate, before I could think of anything else to say.

My body moved on instinct, stepping fully in front of Gabriel, shielding him with my own.

My arms spread wide as if I could somehow make myself an impenetrable barrier.

"Finn, don't." Gabriel's voice was low, a growl of warning.

I ignored him, keeping my focus on Asher.

“Let me handle this,” I told Gabriel over my shoulder, my voice steadier than I felt.

Asher stopped a few feet away, his expression hard as stone.

“Finn, I’m not warning you again. Step aside,” Asher said.

“I’m not going back with you,” I said firmly, my heart pounding like a drum in my chest. “I told you, I made my choice.”

Asher’s jaw tightened, his hands gripping the shotgun so hard his knuckles turned white.

“Finn, you can’t be this stupid. There’s no future for you and that vampire,” Asher said.

The words were like a slap, his tone dripping with contempt as he spat the last two words.

My blood boiled, a mix of anger and frustration bubbling to the surface.

Gabriel stood tense behind me, silent but radiating restrained fury.

“I’m not leaving him,” I said.

My voice wavered, but I held my ground.

Asher’s gaze flickered between me and Gabriel, his expression a storm of emotions—confusion, hurt, anger.

“This isn’t you, Finn. You’re better than this. You’re one of us. Don’t throw everything away for... for him,” Asher said.

I wanted to yell, to scream that he didn't understand.

Instead, I reached up and yanked down the collar of my jacket and shirt, exposing the mark Gabriel had given me.

"I already made my choice," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Asher's eyes locked onto the mark, his entire body going still. His lips parted, but no words came out.

His grip on the shotgun wavered, the barrel dipping slightly.

"You bastard," he finally whispered, his voice shaking with fury as his glare shifted to Gabriel. "How dare you."

Gabriel mercifully said nothing.

"I begged him for it," I cut in, my voice rising. "This wasn't his decision. It was mine. I asked for it, Asher."

"That can't be true." His voice cracked, and for a moment, I saw something break in his eyes.

He didn't want to believe it, but the truth was right in front of him, undeniable.

Gabriel chose that moment to act. In a blur of motion, too fast for the human eye to follow, he closed the distance between us.

Before Asher could react, Gabriel wrenched the shotgun from his hands, emptied it of its shells, and tossed it aside with ease.

In the next instant, he was back at my side, his presence solid and comforting.

“Asher, enough,” I said, my voice trembling. “I’m not asking you to understand. I’m asking you to let me go.”

Asher’s shoulders sagged slightly, the fight draining out of him.

He stood there, staring at me as if he didn’t recognize the person in front of him.

“You’re really doing this,” he said quietly. It wasn’t a question.

I nodded. A heavy silence fell between us. I wondered what thoughts crossed my brother’s mind at that moment.

Was he replaying the years we grew up together?

Did he see me as the same kid who once followed him around, desperate for his approval?

Or was he only seeing a stranger now. A traitor who had turned his back on everything we’d once believed in?

The hard set of his jaw gave nothing away, but the flicker of hesitation in his eyes betrayed him. Was it doubt? Pain? Regret?

Maybe it was all of those things, tangled together in a way even Asher couldn’t fully untangle.

I knew him well enough to recognize when he was trying to mask his emotions, but for once, I couldn’t read him entirely.

I wanted to ask him, to demand answers.

Did he hate me for what I'd done? Would he ever forgive me? Or was this the moment he decided to cut me from his life completely?

The ache in my chest grew sharper with each second that passed in silence.

The Asher I knew, the one who had always tried to be there for me, even when he was too harsh or too stubborn, was someone I couldn't imagine my life without.

But the man standing before me now, cold and unyielding, felt like a stranger. Would he really be able to let go of this? Of me?

The thought twisted in my gut like a blade.

I'd chosen this path knowing it would cost me, but standing here now, facing the fallout, the weight of that choice felt unbearable.

Could Asher walk away from this and pretend I didn't exist? Could I?

I knew my brother. He wasn't the kind of person who let things go easily, and he definitely wasn't the type to forgive betrayal.

But this was different. I wasn't just some colleague who'd broken protocol or a stranger who'd crossed him.

I was his brother. His family.

But was that bond strong enough to survive this?

His lips pressed into a thin line, his shoulders rigid as if he were bracing himself

against some unseen force.

Finally, Asher stepped back, his hands dropping to his sides.

“I’ll lie for you. I’ll tell the Elders you died,” he said, his voice low and resigned. “This one time. But after this, you’re on your own. You hear me? Don’t come back.”

The finality in his tone hit like a punch to the gut, but I nodded.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Asher didn’t respond. He turned his gaze to Gabriel, his eyes narrowing.

The two of them locked stares, a silent exchange that bristled with tension.

Gabriel’s expression was guarded, but there was something unspoken in his look. Perhaps a trace of respect for Asher’s skill, or maybe just an acknowledgment of the choice Asher had made to let us go.

Asher’s lips pressed into a thin line. Without another word, he turned and walked away, his figure disappearing into the shadows.

The moment he was gone, the adrenaline that had been keeping me upright drained from my body.

My legs wobbled, and I felt Gabriel’s steadying hand on my arm.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice soft but edged with concern.

“No,” I admitted, my voice barely audible. “But I will be.”

Gabriel pulled me into his arms, holding me tightly.

“It’ll be okay, Finn,” Gabriel murmured. “We’ll be okay.”

As much as the pain of parting with Asher tore at me, Gabriel’s embrace reminded me why I’d made my choice.

This was where I belonged.

“I know,” I whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GAEL/ ASHER

GAEL

Gael gritted his teeth as Bram hauled him up the stone steps to Beric's estate.

The heavy oak doors loomed ahead, and with every step closer, his dread deepened.

His chest still ached where the silver bullets had punched through him, a phantom burn that lingered despite his rapid healing.

The humiliation stung worse than the wounds, though. Gael hated himself for it, for playing dead.

He'd fallen to the ground like a coward, clutching at the pain, while that smug hunter probably smiled in smug satisfaction.

The memory of it churned in his gut, his fists clenching as Bram shoved the doors open.

"Move," Bram growled, his tone impatient.

Gael stumbled inside, dragging himself upright as much as his battered body allowed.

Beric's office was at the end of the long, silent corridor.

The estate was eerily quiet tonight, the usual murmur of voices and footsteps absent.

It felt like the walls themselves were holding their breath.

He dreaded this moment more than he'd ever admit. Facing Beric after a failure was always dangerous, but this... This was worse.

When Bram pushed the office door open, Gael was immediately greeted by the oppressive weight of Beric's presence.

His sire sat behind his massive desk, bathed in the golden glow of the lamp.

His hands were steepled in front of him, his expression unreadable.

Gael hesitated at the threshold, his stomach twisting.

"Enter," Beric said, his voice like ice.

Gael stepped inside, swallowing hard.

He felt Bram's presence lingering in the doorway, and silently seethed. Bram was probably soaking this all up. His failure.

Beric didn't look up, his cold gaze fixed on a sheet of paper on his desk.

The silence stretched, thick and suffocating. Gael shifted his weight, willing himself not to fidget.

Finally, Beric's eyes lifted, pinning Gael in place. "Report."

Gael straightened, biting back the wince that threatened to betray him.

He couldn't hide anything from Beric. So he told him everything.

"I had them but a new player turned up. A Guild hunter named Asher intervened," he began, his voice steady despite the humiliation clawing at him. "He shot me with silver. Twice."

Beric raised a brow, the faintest flicker of disappointment crossing his face.

"I... I played dead," Gael admitted, the words sour on his tongue. "It was the only way to avoid death."

Beric's expression didn't change, but the weight of his scrutiny bore down on Gael like a physical force.

"They escaped," Gael continued, forcing the words out. "Gabriel and his lover. Together."

The silence that followed was deafening. Beric leaned back in his chair, his fingers tapping once against the desk.

Gael hated that sound, hated the cold calculation in Beric's eyes.

"You played dead," Beric repeated, his tone devoid of emotion.

Gael's jaw tightened. "It was the only way."

"The only way," Beric echoed softly, his gaze sharpening.

For a moment, Gael's emotions threatened to betray him.

He thought of Gabriel, of the way he'd stood by that human, defiant even as the odds

stacked against them.

There was a part of Gael, a small, hidden part, that couldn't help but admire it.

But then there was Asher. The memory of the hunter's smug face, the way he'd humiliated Gael, made his blood boil.

He hated him with every fiber of his being. That human had no right to walk away victorious.

"I failed," Gael admitted, his voice low.

Beric's eyes narrowed, his fingers steepling once more. "Yes. You did."

The finality of those words hit Gael like a physical blow. His hands clenched at his sides, his mind racing.

"I can fix this," he said quickly, desperation leaking into his tone. "Give me another chance."

Beric said nothing, his cold gaze piercing through Gael.

"Please," Gael added, his pride crumbling under the weight of Beric's silence.

Finally, Beric leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. His expression was unreadable, but his voice was sharp as a blade.

"You've humiliated yourself and me with this failure. Tell me, Gael, why should I give you another chance?" Beric asked.

Gael's throat tightened, but he forced himself to meet Beric's gaze.

“Because I won’t let them win. Not Gabriel. Not that hunter. I’ll bring both their heads to you,” Gael said.

Beric’s lips curved into a faint, cruel smile. “And how do you plan to do that, when you’ve already proven yourself incapable?”

Gael’s pride flared, his desperation giving way to anger.

“Because I’ll learn from this. I won’t underestimate them again. Gabriel and that hunter humiliated me, but I’ll turn that humiliation into strength. I swear it,” Gael promised.

Beric leaned back, his expression thoughtful. The silence stretched, suffocating and endless, before he finally spoke.

“Very well,” he said. “One more chance, Gael. Do not waste it.”

Relief flooded Gael’s chest, but it was quickly tempered by the weight of Beric’s warning. He nodded, his jaw tight.

“I won’t,” Gael said.

Beric’s cold smile returned. “See that you don’t.”

Gael turned to leave, his body tense and his mind racing.

As he stepped into the corridor, Bram gave him a questioning look, but Gael ignored it.

The memory of Asher’s face burned in his mind, fueling the fire in his chest. He wouldn’t let it end like this. He couldn’t.

This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

ASHER

The training grounds were quieter than usual.

Asher stood near the edge, leaning against the sturdy railing as he watched the younger recruits sparring below.

The clang of swords and the occasional barked orders from the trainers filled the air, but it all felt distant, like white noise muffled by the weight in his chest.

Finn was gone.

No matter how many missions he took, how many targets he eliminated, that fact lingered like a raw wound.

His brother had made his choice, and in doing so, he'd severed ties not just with the Guild, but with him.

A pang of anger flared up, sharp and bitter.

He'd tried to save Finn, to bring him back to reason, but Gabriel had sunk his claws too deep. Damn that vampire.

A voice interrupted his thoughts. "Asher, I knew I'd find you here."

Asher turned his head to see Donovan, standing with his arms crossed.

There was a faint edge of frustration in his brother's voice, but mostly it was curiosity.

“Just thinking,” Asher muttered.

“You’ve been doing a lot of that lately.” Donovan stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Some of the other senior hunters are starting to wonder if your head’s in the game.”

Asher shot him a sharp look, his jaw tightening. “My head’s fine.”

“Is it? Because our little brother just ran off with a vampire, and now you’re standing here like a ghost.”

Of course, he told Donovan about Finn. Donovan also had a right to know, but he was starting to regret his decision.

Still, Donovan’s words hit harder than they should have, and Asher bit back a retort.

Instead, he pushed off the railing and strode past Donovan.

“I’m fine,” he repeated, though his tone left no room for argument.

He didn’t stop walking until he reached the Guild’s archive room.

The scent of old paper and leather-bound volumes greeted him as he pushed the door open.

The flickering light of a single lamp cast long shadows on the shelves, but Asher didn’t bother turning on more lights.

He liked the dimness. It matched his mood.

He approached the desk where he’d left his research scattered across its surface.

His hands moved automatically, sifting through reports and files, each one meticulously detailing vampires from Beric's nest.

But it was one name that kept drawing his attention.

Gael.

Asher stared at the grainy photo clipped to one of the reports.

The vampire's beautiful features and sharp eyes seemed to glare back at him, even in black and white.

Gael the Reaper, they called him. A monster known for leaving bodies behind in his wake. Always clean, precise, and brutal.

And somehow, he'd survived.

Asher clenched his fists at the memory of the woods. He'd gone back, intending to clean up the mess Finn had left behind.

To his disbelief, Gael's body had been gone, the ground where he'd fallen marked only by faint traces of blood.

He'd checked for tracks, but the rain had washed most of them away. Still, he knew. That bastard's alive.

The thought sent a chill down his spine, but it also stoked the fire in his gut.

Gael wasn't just a vampire; he was one of Beric's top enforcers. He wouldn't take defeat lying down.

Asher pulled another report closer, scanning the text. Gael was known for his pride and his ruthlessness.

That was the danger.

He'd been humiliated, shot down by a human and left in the dirt.

Asher had made himself a target the moment he pulled that trigger. But that didn't scare him.

Bring it on, he thought, his lips curling into a grim smile.

The door creaked open behind him, and Asher didn't look up as Donovan stepped inside.

"You're still at this?" Donovan asked, his tone skeptical.

"Just tying up loose ends," Asher replied without looking away from the papers.

Donovan sighed and pulled out a chair, sitting across from him. "You're obsessing over this Gael too much"

"Because he's dangerous," Asher pointed out.

"They're all dangerous, Asher. That's the job," Donovan said.

Asher finally looked up, his eyes narrowing. "This isn't just another job. This one's personal."

Donovan studied him for a moment, then leaned back in his chair. "You're worried about Finn," Donovan observed.

“I’m not worried,” Asher said sharply, though the lie tasted bitter.

Donovan raised a brow but didn’t push the point.

“Fine. Let’s say Gael is alive. What do you plan to do about it?” Donovan asked.

Asher’s grip tightened on the edge of the table.

“I’ll handle it like I always do,” Asher told him.

“You sure you’re not just looking for a fight?” Donovan asked, sounding amused for some reason.

Asher glared at him. “If I was, you think I’d still be sitting here?”

Donovan’s expression softened slightly, though his tone remained firm.

“Just be careful, Asher. This thing with Finn... I know it’s eating at you, but don’t let it blind you. The Guild’s already questioning your loyalty,” Donovan said.

“They can question me all they want,” Asher muttered.

Donovan sighed, standing up.

“You’re a good hunter, brother. Don’t waste that on something reckless,” Donovan reminded him.

Asher didn’t respond as Donovan left, the door clicking shut behind him.

He stared down at the reports again, his mind racing. Donovan didn’t get it.

Finn might have chosen his path, but that didn't mean Asher would stop protecting him.

Even if it meant taking out every last threat that dared come near him.

And Gael?

Gael wasn't just a threat. He was a storm waiting to break, and Asher had no intention of being caught off guard.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:18 pm

SIX MONTHS LATER

The rhythmic hum of the ship's engines echoed beneath my feet as I leaned against the balcony railing.

I stared out at the endless expanse of ocean.

The moonlight shimmered across the waves, casting a glow that made the water look like liquid silver.

For the first time in what felt like forever, there was no immediate danger looming over us.

No monsters in the dark. Just the open sea and the promise of tomorrow.

I took a deep breath, the salty breeze filling my lungs. It should have felt liberating, this escape from everything I'd ever known.

But instead, my thoughts were tangled, a mix of relief and regret.

The Guild was behind me now. So was the home I'd grown up in, the people I'd once called family, and even Asher.

The thought of my brother caused an ache deep in my chest. He'd let me go, but I knew it wasn't easy for him.

And it wasn't easy for me to leave him behind, knowing we were on opposite sides

now.

But then there was Gabriel.

Fate, or whatever cruel twist of destiny had brought us back together, had led me to make the hardest and easiest choice of my life.

I looked down at the faint scar on my neck, Gabriel's mark, and traced it absentmindedly with my fingers.

That mark was a constant reminder of the bond we shared. Permanent. Unbreakable.

I wasn't naive. I knew what lay ahead wasn't going to be smooth sailing—pun intended.

Beric's nest wouldn't let us go so easily, and the Guild wouldn't forget about me.

But for now, at least for tonight, I allowed myself the fragile hope that we could find peace.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

I turned at the sound of Gabriel's voice. He stepped onto the balcony, his silhouette outlined by the golden light from our cabin.

He was barefoot, his shirt unbuttoned at the collar, looking more at ease than I'd ever seen him.

"The stars," he added, gesturing toward the clear night sky. "They're all out tonight."

I looked up. He was right. The sky was a canvas of pinpricks, a scattering of light that

seemed to stretch forever.

It was the kind of view that made you feel small but also infinite, like anything was possible.

“They’re amazing,” I said, my voice soft.

Gabriel joined me at the railing, standing close enough that our shoulders brushed.

The warmth of him was comforting, grounding me in a way I couldn’t explain.

“You’re thinking about Asher,” he said, not a question but a quiet observation.

I nodded. “I can’t help it. I know he’ll be okay, but still... I hate leaving him behind like that,” I said.

Gabriel was silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

“It’s not easy letting go of the past,” he said finally. “But sometimes, it’s the only way to move forward. And Finn, you deserve to move forward. To have a life that’s yours.”

His words hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning. I turned to look at him, and my breath caught.

There was something in his expression, something raw and unguarded that I wasn’t used to seeing.

“Do you really believe that?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I do,” he said, his gaze locking with mine.

I felt my throat tighten. Without thinking, I reached out, my fingers brushing against his.

He didn't hesitate, taking my hand in his and lacing our fingers together.

Gabriel smiled, a small, genuine curve of his lips that made my chest ache in the best way.

He lifted our joined hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles that sent a shiver down my spine.

"We'll make it work," he said, his voice full of quiet determination. "I promise."

The moment felt fragile, like glass, and I didn't want to break it.

But I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Do you think we'll ever really be free? From the Guild? From Beric's nest?"

Gabriel's eyes darkened, the shadows of his past flickering across his face.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I do know that we're stronger together than apart. And as long as we're together, we'll figure it out," he said.

The certainty in his voice made me believe him, even if just for a moment.

I stepped closer, my free hand resting on his chest.

"Thank you," he said, his voice barely audible over the sound of the waves.

"For what?" I asked.

“For not giving up on me. On us,” he told me.

I softened, and cupped his face in my hands, my thumbs brushing against his cheeks.

“Gabriel, there’s nothing in this world that could make me give up on you,” I told him.

Before Gabriel could respond, I leaned in for a kiss which soon turned rough with want.

I melted into him, my hands sliding up to his shoulders as the world around us seemed to fade away.

The ocean, the stars, the past. It all disappeared, leaving just the two of us.

SOME TIME LATER

The cobblestone streets of the small European town felt like a different world.

It was quiet here, a kind of quiet that settled into your bones and made you feel like maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay.

I watched Gabriel ahead of me, carrying a bag of groceries from the supermarket, the moon light catching in his hair.

For a moment, I allowed myself to just take it in: the simplicity, the normalcy. It was everything I didn’t know I needed.

We’d been in this town for a few months now, far enough from the chaos of our old lives to breathe without looking over our shoulders every second.

We'd found a small, nondescript flat above a bakery that always smelled like fresh bread.

Gabriel had taken a job as a night guard, and I'd found work helping out at a local coffee shop. It was simple, and it was good.

Gabriel slowed as we reached the steps to our flat, turning to me with a faint smile. "You're quiet today."

"Just thinking," I said, taking the bag from him so he could unlock the door.

"Dangerous habit," he teased, but there was warmth in his voice.

Once inside, we set the groceries on the small kitchen counter.

The flat wasn't much, just a few rooms and a view of the church steeple in the town square, but it felt like home in a way no place ever had.

"Want some tea?" Gabriel asked, already filling the kettle.

"Sure." I leaned against the counter, watching him move around the kitchen.

There was a calmness to him here that I'd never seen before, a kind of ease that made me ache for the struggles he'd endured to get to this point.

As the tea steeped, Gabriel turned to me, his expression thoughtful.

"You've been carrying something all day. Spill it," Gabriel said.

I hesitated, then decided there was no point in holding back. "Do you ever think about them?"

“Them?” Gabriel asked.

“The people we left behind. Beric’s nest. Beric himself.”

Gabriel leaned against the counter, crossing his arms.

“Sometimes, I do think about Beric. Our... strange relationship. How I ended up being his favorite,” he admitted. “But I don’t miss the nest or that world at all.”

His honesty caught me off guard, and before I could stop myself, I asked, “What was it like? When you first turned?”

He exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair.

“Hell,” he said simply. “I didn’t know who to trust. I hated myself for what I’d become, for what I had to do to survive. Most days, I thought it would’ve been better if Beric had just let me die. But then... you came along.”

“Me?” I asked, startled.

“Seeing you again kept me grounded,” Gabriel said. “Made me want to live again, even though I’d become a monster.”

I swallowed hard, his words settling heavily in my chest.

“Seeing you at Scar’s club... that was a massive shock,” I said, my voice quieter now.

“When I found out you’d died on a mission, I refused to believe it at first. But as the months went by...” I trailed off, the memories still raw despite all the time that had passed.

I continued, "Asher helped me through it, you know. He was the one who convinced me to let you go. To stop holding on, because it was only hurting me."

Gabriel reached out, his hand covering mine on the counter. His touch was warm, steady, grounding me in the moment.

"I'm sorry, Finn," Gabriel said, his voice filled with quiet regret. "Sorry you had to go through that."

"You didn't have a choice," I said, meeting his gaze. "And you came back to me. That's what matters."

He studied me for a moment, his thumb brushing against my knuckles. "Do you miss them? Your family?"

I nodded, the admission pulling at something deep inside me.

"Yeah. Even Donovan, though we weren't close like me and Asher." I hesitated, then added, "But I don't regret choosing you, Gabriel. Not for a second."

His grip tightened, and for a moment, we just stood there, the weight of everything we'd been through pressing down on us.

But there was solace in it too, a shared understanding that went beyond words.

Gabriel broke the silence, his voice soft. "I don't deserve you, Finn," he said.

I shook my head. "Don't say that. You're everything to me, Gabriel. You always have been."

He pulled me into his arms then, holding me tightly.

Much later, we found ourselves on the small balcony outside our bedroom.

The stars were scattered across the sky, brighter than I'd ever seen them.

Gabriel sat beside me, his arm draped over my shoulders, and I leaned into him, content in a way I hadn't thought possible.

"Do you think we'll stay here?" I asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

"For now," Gabriel said. "But who knows? Maybe one day we'll find somewhere even better. Maybe we'll get a bigger place for ourselves?"

I turned to look at him, his profile illuminated by the moonlight.

"I don't care where we are," I said. "As long as I'm with you."

He smiled, a rare, unguarded smile that made my heart feel like it was too big for my chest.

"I love you, Finn," he said quietly.

"I love you too," I said, kissing him softly on the mouth.

THE END

Want more like this? Turn the page to read a preview of Asher.

Chapter One

ASHER

The taxi smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and leather, its worn upholstery creaking beneath me as I shifted in my seat.

The driver didn't ask questions. Good.

I wasn't in the mood to explain why I was heading to a dingy apartment on the outskirts of Ravensshade, a sleepy European town in the middle of the night.

The cab bumped along uneven cobblestones, making me grit my teeth.

I tapped my fingers against my knee, my mind locked on one thing: Gabriel. And Finn.

My brother and the vampire who had stolen him away.

I paid the driver in cash, stepping out into the chilly air, my coat flaring briefly behind me.

The apartment building loomed ahead, its paint peeling and its windows darkened except for a few faint glimmers of light.

A perfect hiding place.

The back stairs were narrow and reeked of mildew, my boots echoing faintly as I ascended. Fourth floor.

The plan repeated itself in my mind like a mantra. Subdue the vampire. Get Finn.

Knock him out if I had to, because reasoning with him had already failed.

The image of his face the last time I'd seen him, so resolute and stubborn, flashed through my mind.

He wouldn't listen to me. Not when it came to Gabriel.

I tightened my grip on the gun in my hand, its silver bullets loaded and ready.

The corridors were silent, the kind of stillness that felt unnatural, oppressive. My pulse quickened as I neared the apartment door.

When I reached it, I didn't hesitate. My hand closed over the doorknob, ready to burst in if it was locked. But it wasn't.

The knob turned easily, the door swinging open with a faint creak.

That unease hit me instantly, like the snap of a rubber band. I stepped inside, my senses on high alert.

The lights were on, casting a faint yellow glow over the small living space.

It was tidy but not pristine. A coffee cup and plate sat on the table near the window, a blanket draped over the back of the couch.

Signs of recent habitation. But no one was here.

The apartment was too quiet, too still. My jaw clenched as I moved further inside, scanning every corner.

The air was faintly tinged with the scent of coffee and something sweet. Finn must have been here recently.

I approached the table, eyes narrowing at the half-empty cup. They'd left in a hurry. My mind raced.

Did Gabriel sense I was closing in? Did he grab Finn and vanish like the slippery predator he was?

My frustration boiled over, my chest tightening with the weight of failure. Again.

With a growl, I swept the coffee cup off the table. It shattered against the floor, fragments scattering.

The sound echoed in the emptiness of the room, and for a moment, I just stood there, my breaths coming hard and fast.

Then I saw it.

A letter sat on the coffee table, stark against the wood. My name was scrawled across the front in Finn's unmistakable handwriting.

I hesitated before picking it up, my pulse roaring in my ears. Slowly, I unfolded the paper, my eyes scanning the words.

Asher,

I know you won't understand. Maybe you never will. But this is my choice. I love him.

Gabriel isn't the monster you think he is. He saved me—more times than you'll ever know.

Please stop looking for us. I know it's not in your nature to quit, but this isn't your fight anymore. I'm happy, Asher. Truly happy.

I hope one day you can forgive me for leaving like this.

-Finn

My grip tightened on the paper, the edges crumpling beneath my fingers.

My little brother's words were like a punch to the gut, each one driving home the reality I refused to accept.

Happy? How could he be happy, living with a predator who could drain his life away in an instant?

I paced the room, the letter trembling in my hand. My mind raced, trying to piece together my next move.

They were still close. I could feel it. The unwashed dishes, the faint trace of Finn's cologne lingering in the air.

Gabriel might have outmaneuvered me for now, but he couldn't keep running forever.

I stuffed the letter into my pocket and looked around, my eyes landing on the blanket draped over the couch. Finn's, probably.

I grabbed it without thinking, the fabric soft in my hands.

My anger faltered for a moment, replaced by something heavier, something harder to

ignore.

I couldn't protect him. Not from himself.

The thought sat heavy in my chest as I made my way to the window.

The street below was empty, the mist curling around the streetlamps like ghostly tendrils.

Somewhere out there, Finn was with Gabriel. The vampire who'd stolen my brother from me.

And yet...

No. I couldn't afford doubt. Gabriel was dangerous. That much I knew. I had to find them, to save Finn before it was too late.

Even if he hated me for it.

I turned away from the window, my resolve hardening. The Guild didn't know I was tracking them.

They thought I was just taking an overdue vacation break.

To the Elders, Finn and Gabriel were already dead. Casualties of a chaotic confrontation.

I'd told them Gael, one of the vampires from Gabriel's nest, had ambushed us, and in the crossfire, both Finn and Gabriel had lost their lives.

It was a clean, believable lie, and the Elders bought it without hesitation. But Donovan didn't.

My other brother knew me too well.

He saw right through my story. Donovan knew how much I cared about Finn, how losing him wasn't something I could simply accept.

"Let him go, Asher," Donovan had told me, his voice heavy with the weight of his own grief. "He made his choice and he chose that vampire over us."

But Donovan didn't understand. He couldn't.

After our parents died on a mission, I'd sworn to myself that I'd keep what was left of us together.

That promise had carried me through every battle, every close call. It wasn't just duty. It was survival.

Family was all we had left, and I wasn't about to let that slip through my fingers. Not without a fight.

Donovan's words still echoed in my head as I stood in the empty apartment, the faint scent of coffee and Finn's cologne lingering in the air.

It wasn't just about protecting Finn anymore. It was about proving to myself that I hadn't already failed.

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration and determination warring within me.

Somewhere out there, Finn was with Gabriel, convinced he was safe. Convinced he was happy.

But Gabriel was a vampire. A predator.

No matter how much Finn thought he understood him, it didn't change what Gabriel was or what he was capable of.

I clenched my fists, the edges of Finn's letter digging into my palm through my pocket.

He'd asked me to stop looking, to let him go. But I couldn't.

Because if I did, who would protect him? So, no. I wasn't giving up. Not yet.

Maybe they left clues here that I could use to track their next destination.

The apartment was a dead end.

Of course, it was. Gabriel and Finn were both trained hunters. They knew how to leave no trace, no loose threads.

It was as if they'd evaporated, leaving nothing behind but the faint scent of coffee and lingering frustration in the air.

I searched every corner, pulling open drawers, flipping through the trash, even checking under the bed.

Nothing. No receipts, no scribbled notes, not even a stray hairbrush.

They'd scrubbed the place clean, as any good hunter would.

Frustration churned in my chest as I stood in the middle of the now-sterile space.

My gut told me they'd been here for months, judging by the wear on the furniture, the faint imprint of their lives in the details the eye might miss, but they'd left no clues as to where they'd gone.

I clenched my fists, trying to calm the storm in my mind. Thinking of Gabriel keeping Finn under his thumb made my skin crawl.

I needed answers.

I headed out into the night, letting the cold air snap at my face and clear my head. Usually, the nearest bar was a good place to start.

People talked. They let things slip.

If Finn and Gabriel had been here for any length of time, someone in this town had interacted with them.

Reception on my phone was crap, but I managed to locate the closest bar.

It wasn't far. A ten-minute walk through the quiet streets of the small town.

I reached a shabby-looking place with a faded sign that read The Rusty Tap.

Stepping inside, the first thing I noticed was the prickling sensation along the back of my neck, like a predator was watching me.

The air was thick with the mingling scents of sweat, cheap booze, and something distinctly other. Supernaturals.

I scanned the room quickly, assessing.

Humans and supernaturals mingled here, but there was an uneasy balance to it, like the air before a storm.

I didn't belong here. Finn, with his natural charm and ability to blend in anywhere, might've been able to navigate this space.

Donovan and I? Not so much. We stuck out like sore thumbs, always too rigid, too obvious.

A few patrons eyed me warily as I made my way to the bar. Their gazes lingered too long, their suspicion palpable.

I ignored them, sliding onto a stool and signaling the bartender.

The man behind the counter was broad-shouldered with the heavy build of a brawler.

His scent gave him away before his body language did. Werewolf.

It was faint beneath the overwhelming smells of alcohol and greasy food, but unmistakable.

“Beer,” I said.

He set the glass in front of me without a word, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied me.

I nursed the drink for half an hour, observing the room and trying to decide my next move.

The tension in the air never quite eased, but I couldn’t leave without trying.

“My brother and his friend came to this town a few months ago,” I said finally, keeping my tone casual. “I was hoping someone might’ve seen them.”

The bartender’s gaze sharpened, though his expression remained neutral. “Lots of people come and go.”

I described Finn and Gabriel, keeping my voice steady, though the mere mention of

Gabriel's name made my jaw clench.

The bartender shrugged, wiping a glass with a practiced nonchalance. "Don't know anyone of that description."

Liar.

I wanted to press him, to demand answers, but the faint, unfriendly smile tugging at his lips stopped me.

"Your kind isn't welcome here," he said softly, a warning laced in every syllable.

I felt eyes on me again, the weight of the room's attention settling heavily on my shoulders.

The patrons weren't just wary. They were ready to act if I gave them a reason.

"Look," I said, raising my hands in a placating gesture. "I just want a drink. And I really just want to know my brother's safe. That's all."

The bartender's expression flickered for a moment, the faintest crack in his guarded demeanor.

Maybe it was the sincerity in my voice, or maybe he had a soft spot for family.

"They used to come here sometimes," he admitted reluctantly, leaning closer. "The guy you described...he liked the jukebox. Always picked the same song."

"What song?" I asked, my voice low.

The bartender's lips quirked in the barest hint of a smirk. "Some American country song." He straightened, his tone hardening again. "That's all you're getting. Don't

make trouble.”

I nodded, swallowing my frustration. It wasn’t much, but it was a lead.

As I turned to leave, my eyes caught on a figure in the far corner of the bar.

Gael.

The vampire was leaning against the wall, his body relaxed but his gaze sharp as he charmed a human male at his side.

His dark eyes glinted with amusement, his smile easy, but there was an edge to his demeanor that set my teeth on edge.

Memories of our last encounter surged to the surface. Silver bullets, blood, the rage in his eyes as he collapsed.

I’d left him for dead. Apparently, not dead enough.

Gael’s gaze slid toward me, and for a moment, our eyes locked. His smile faltered, replaced by a look of cold recognition.

The human beside him said something, but he didn’t respond, his attention fully on me.

The room seemed to shrink, the air thickening with tension.

My hand twitched instinctively toward my concealed weapon, but I stopped myself. Not here. Not now.

Gael’s lips curved into a slow, mocking smile, as if daring me to make the first move.

I forced myself to look away, grabbing my drink and finishing it in one long gulp before slamming the glass down on the counter.

This wasn't over.

The game had just changed. Finn and Gabriel might've been my mission, but now I had a new target.

Gael wasn't just alive. He was watching me. Waiting.

And I'd be ready because if I didn't get to him first, he'd gladly do the honors himself.