



Tamed by Her Vampire Protector (Doms of Darkness #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: **She thinks she wants her freedom, but one look and I knew she was mine.**

Trapped between the living and the undead, I drifted between two worlds, belonging to neither, with nothing to tie me down.

Until I met Meghan.

Alone in the world, her past causes her pain.

She wants to escape, but I know how to heal her wounds.

She is mine to claim. Mine to protect.

With the evil forces standing in our way, our moments together are precious. Stolen.

Will she accept her place as my mate?

Or are we out of time?

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Meghan

From the other side of the room, I heard the other captive girls giggling. Shoving the pillow over my ears, I tried to drown them out.

“Junmin is so dreamy.”

“I like Carson better. I could drown in those baby blue eyes.”

The pillow was no use. I could still hear them as they flipped through a magazine and oohed and ahed over how dreamy whatever insipid boy band member was mentioned in the pages.

How quickly things changed. When the vampires captured us from the humans who sold us out, the girls were scared and cowering in their own piss. It took less than a week for them to transform into a bunch of giggly teenage girls.

All it took was a couple magazines, some nice clothes, and some snacks from our vampire captors. The vampires would drop off a box of stuff for us every week after they went to the city to scavenge for supplies. Even though they brought us supplies, it didn't mean they were going to let us out of our dingy room that resembled a prison cell.

“Leo's even dreamier. He would fit right in with the rest of the band.”

They giggled again. This time, one of them let out an undignified snort as they laughed. I rolled my eyes. The way they swooned over the tall blond vampire who

guarded our room was even more vomit inducing than their obsession with some pop band that ceased to exist years ago.

I would bet every last piece of chocolate I had hidden under my mattress that Jun and Carson were already dead, turned into bloody human juice boxes for some gang of vamps. There was nothing much left from the before times after the vampires brought about permanent night and took over the world.

“Hey, Meghan, which member of Five-O do you think is the hottest?”

I groaned. “The one with a wart on his ass.”

“What?”

“Oh, leave her alone, you two. Meghan’s too sophisticated to care about Five-O,” said one of the other girls.

“What a bitch.”

“Hey, we should do a Five-O theme for Christmas this year.”

The giggling resumed as they resumed flipping through the magazine. Turning on my side, I stared at the concrete wall and ignored them. The metal of the bed frame dug into my hips through the flimsy mattress. I pulled the scratchy blanket over my shoulders and closed my eyes.

Though the girls tried to cheer the place up with some string lights and magazine cutouts taped to the walls, there was no denying that we were here to be servants for the vampires. Nothing more. We weren’t going to be pampered like the human women who chose to betray their own people and sleep with the vampires.

It didn't take very long for the vampires to put all of us to work once they captured us from the human men who betrayed us. We spent our days working in the kitchens, cleaning and cooking meals for the vampires' female consorts. We were also made to donate blood every week to help replenish the vampires' food supplies.

This strange group of vampires who captured us preferred to drink blood from a tap rather than fresh from a warm living body like most other vamps I've encountered. Perhaps the world was running out of humans, and they needed to squeeze every last drop out of us. Something like not slaughtering the goose while it was laying golden eggs for you.

While I didn't like being forced to donate blood, it meant that the vamps made sure we got to eat fresh meat and vegetables, whatever was leftover from cooking for the human consorts. We had to replenish our lost blood cells, after all. Still, it was real food, not whatever canned stuff and stale crackers we could scavenge from the remaining grocery stores that hadn't already been looted.

Before our capture, the last time I ate food that didn't come from a can was when I was backpacking across Europe. I met another girl on the trains and together, Amanda and I ate our way across Paris in the weeks before the vampires attacked. Those were some of the happiest weeks of my life. Whatever happened to Amanda after we were separated, I prayed that it was painless and that she didn't suffer too long. My chest ached for the best friend I only knew for a short while.

I closed my eyes, holding back the tears that threatened to leak out. Back when I was living with my parents in Michigan, I wanted nothing more than to escape and see the world. Now, there was nothing I wanted more than my mother's arms around me and the smell of her perfume.

I guess I shouldn't complain. The vampires here were nice enough, and one of their human consorts, Rose, stopped by regularly with treats and luxuries like fancy soaps

and clothes for us.

Compared to the humans who abused and sold us to the vamps, the bloodsuckers were practically saints. There was nothing more I wanted than to forget about those dark days in the human settlement. What was supposed to be a sanctuary from the vampires turned into a prison of nightmares. The men there ruled the compound like tyrants. The women there were raped and abused, then when they were empty husks of themselves, sold to the vampires as walking blood bags.

The men left me alone once I taught one of them a lesson he would never forget. I could still smell his sour, fetid breath in my face when he climbed on top of me. It was amazing how easily my teeth sank through human flesh. Without modern medicine to attach his lips, the asshole remained a drooling lipless freak. Good thing human women were worth so much on the market, or they would have killed me on the spot. I became known as the crazy bitch, and none of them dared to touch me after the lip incident.

Not surprisingly, the other girls didn't seem too displeased with the current arrangement. Of course, the sickly sweet calming potion the vampires forced us to drink every week may have had something to do with that. At first, I couldn't believe that they had witches in their group. The witches who were willing to work with the vampires should have been working with the covens to banish the monsters from existence. But in this dark new world, some people were willing to compromise on their morals in order to survive.

Nobody had to know that I dumped every bottle handed to me down the toilet. There was no way I was going to drink some mind control potion. I would rather die than turn into an obedient zombie servant for the blood suckers.

Keys jangled and the lock on our door turned. I rolled over and faced the door.

Leo, our jailer and keeper, stepped into the room. The light from the hallway gave his golden hair an ethereal glow. He reminded me of that blond elf from the Lord of the Rings movies. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was an angel descended from the heavens to save us. But I knew better. An evil vampire like him was anything but heaven sent.

He paused and looked down at us. The girls stopped giggling for once, but it was only to comb their fingers through their hair and push out their chests to show off their boobs. The simpering smiles and fluttering eyelashes they batted in his direction were enough to make me want to throw up.

"Hey, Leo. We've missed you," cooed the girl with brown hair that resembled a bird's nest.

He barely paid her any attention as he set down the box in his arms. I noticed that there were bottles of the calming potion included among the supplies. As usual, we were expected to drug ourselves into obedient little servants in exchange for the small luxuries he offered.

His eyes coasted over the others before landing on me. The intensity of his gaze was frightening. His icy blue eyes seemed to glow, but his lack of breathing gave nothing away about what he was thinking. What did he want from me?

"You. Come with me." Without another word or even a glance to see if I was going to follow his order, he turned and stepped out into the hall.

My heart skipped a beat. Did he know that I poured every bottle handed to me down the toilet? Was he going to punish me for my disobedience?

Stay calm, I repeated in my head. Vampires can smell fear, I reminded myself. There's no way he could possibly know. Not even the other girls knew that I faked

drinking each bottle and snuck it out of the room in my bra.

At my hesitation, one of the girls walked seductively over to him. “You don’t want her, Leo. Pick me instead.”

“No. You’re still needed in the kitchen. I only want Meghan. Come with me. Now.” The look on his face dared me to disobey.

While a part of me didn’t want him to think I was at his beck and call, I had to admit that despite my fear, I was curious. It didn’t seem like he was picking me for punishment. I wasn’t going to turn down an opportunity to escape the walls of our tiny room. I got up and glanced at the girls. The hatred in their eyes could have burned me alive. Too bad none of them were witches, I bet they would have set me ablaze if they had the ability.

I scurried out of the room. I was willing to take my chances with a vampire over a bunch of jealous, vengeful women.

As I stepped past the doorway, Leo reached over my head. My breath caught in my chest. Was he going to grab my hair and snap my neck? He leaned towards me until I could feel him let out a puff of air against the top of my head. I let out a small sigh of relief when he reached behind me to close the door.

“Don’t worry, I don’t bite.” His tongue peeked out, licking his bottom lip as he looked down at me like I was a perfectly cooked steak. “That is, unless you’re offering? I would never turn down a sip of O positive.”

“Nope! Definitely not.” My hand flew up to cover my neck, as if I could keep him from sinking his fangs in if he wanted to do so. I gulped. How did he know my blood type? Did vampires have some kind of blood type radar? I ignored how pink and lusciously full his lips looked as he teased it with his tongue.

He smirked before heading down the hall.

I practically had to jog to keep up with him. “Hey, wait a minute. I felt you breathing. I thought you were a vampire, the undead don’t breathe.”

We walked down the dingy corridor until we reached a set of rusty steel stairs. Going up, we made our way to a heavy steel door, which he unlocked and held open for me.

“Ladies first.”

Such impeccable manners, I thought as I stepped past him. In another life, he totally would have been my type. Too bad he was one of the bad guys, it would have made things so much easier if he was a jerk.

Leo closed the door behind us with a clang and locked it. “Well, some of the undead can breathe. I’m half human, too.” He continued walking.

To my relief, he slowed his pace to match mine, so I didn’t have to run after him. “Wait. How is that possible. You’re either undead or alive.” In my mind, there was no such thing as being both human and vampire. It was like good or evil, you either were one or you were the other. Nothing in between existed.

His lips quirked as he glanced down at me, as if he could read my thoughts. “Not everything in this world is black and white. The line between living and undead isn’t as defined as the living would like to think. My mother, Gisele, is a vampire, sister of the Master of our clan. My father was human, just like you.”

“So, how old are you anyway? I mean, not that you’re old looking or anything.” My cheeks heated, and I cringed even as the words slipped past my lips. Smooth, Meghan, real smooth.

“I’m not immortal, but half-breeds like me have a lifespan that’s multiple times as long as mortal humans. Let’s just say that I’m old enough to be your father.”

He sure didn’t look like it to me, none of my friends’ dads were hot like him. Not that I had a thing for daddy types. It must have been those vampire genes. Leo looked no older than twenty-five at most.

“And before you ask, because I know you will, I do drink blood, but I also like food, just like you. Unlike full-blooded vampires, I can go out into the sun. I sunburn quickly, like a pale redhead, but worse.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad, you’re like a regular person, but you get to stay young for decades.”

Leo scoffed. “Living for so long isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Right.” I guess it must suck to watch the world change and people die while you stayed the same. “I’m sorry. You said earlier that your father was human, so he must have passed away.”

Leo nodded. “He died last year while out on a mission for the clan. My father was getting too old for fieldwork, but telling him he couldn’t do something only made him more determined to prove that he could do it.”

As we made our way through the compound, I checked out our new surroundings. Unlike the dirty industrial quarters where I was being held captive with the girls, Leo was now leading us down a luxuriously decorated hallway with plush carpets and expensive paintings. The crystal lamps on the walls bathed the hall in a warm golden glow.

Suddenly, he stopped in front of a set of intricately carved wooden doors.

“We’re here.”

“What is this? I don’t get it.”

“You’ve been promoted.”

The fancy, expensive decor started to make sense. I was in the vampires’ living area.

My stomach dropped. This wasn’t good. I was in deep shit. My eyes darted in the direction we came from. There was no way I could outrun him.

I swallowed. “A vampire lives here, I’m assuming.”

“You would be correct. This is our Master’s bedroom.”

Oh, gods. I was about to be vamp chow. There was no other explanation. Leo just hand-delivered me to his boss like I was a takeaway order from a fast food joint. As if he sensed my rising panic, Leo placed a firm hand on the small of my back. A shiver ran up my spine. I wasn’t sure if the gesture was an attempt to calm me or to keep me from running for the hills.

He rapped his knuckles on the door. The seconds felt like hours as we waited. Finally, I heard footsteps approach from the other side before the door knob turned.

The door swung open.

The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. “You bitch!”

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Meghan

“I thought you were dead!”

Amanda was alive this whole time. I couldn’t believe it. The last time I saw my friend was when the vampires began their takeover in Paris. We tried to escape, but we only ended as far as the airport. Neither of us made it onto the plane back home.

For the first time since I had lost my best friend and everyone I had ever known, all the emotions I had kept bottled inside burst out. Tears flooded down my cheeks as I flung my arms around her.

We clung to each other tightly and cried for all we had lost.

“Me too,” she breathed out in between sniffles. We hugged so tightly that I thought we were never going to let each other go.

I wiped at the wetness on my cheeks.

“I tried looking for you in Paris, but the vampires kept coming...”

“That’s all in the past now. We’re both alive and safe.” Amanda smiled, blinking to clear the tears in her eyes.

I glanced over at Leo, who towered over us like a gargoyle, albeit a very sexy one. Were we safe? That was debatable.

There was so much I wanted to say and ask her, but it wouldn't be possible as long as we were being watched. It didn't seem like Amanda was here under coercion. She looked amazingly healthy and happy. Her chestnut brown hair was now down to her waist, and her crystal blue eyes shimmered with contentment. She wore a choker around her neck made with expensive looking black gems. I glanced down at her pregnancy bump and said the only thing that popped into my mind.

“Damn, girl, you’ve been busy while I was gone.”

Amanda looked down at her stomach and placed a protective hand on her belly. She smiled and rubbed the gemstones on her necklace with her other hand. “Yeah, you have no idea. The baby was kind of a surprise for me, too.”

Leo shuffled his feet and awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Since you two seem to know each other, I’m going to go back to work.” He nodded to Amanda. “Call me if you need anything.”

Though it remained unsaid, the implication was that he would help if Amanda needed help with controlling me. Just what had happened to my friend in the months we had been separated?

I scrunched up my face, even though Leo could only see the back of my head.

Amanda let out a chuckle and grabbed my hand. “Thank you, Leo. We’ll be alright.”

Having dismissed my undead shadow, she pulled me into her room before closing the door behind us.

Decadent did not even begin to describe our surroundings. Amanda’s room wasn’t just a bedroom. At one end of the room, there was a dressing area with wraparound

mirrors and an antique white and gold vanity covered in expensive looking perfume bottles and makeup. Attached to the dressing area was an open walk-in closet that had to be as big as a double garage. Next to the walk-in closet was an airy bathroom illuminated with day glow lights that made it look like daytime. Tropical plants surrounding the giant pool-like bathtub made the bathroom look like a jungle. In the center of the room stood a giant four-poster bed draped with gauzy silk curtains and piles of white silk pillows and sheets. The bed was so big, it looked like it could fit a party of eight. At the foot of the bed, by the fireplace, there was also a sitting area with a plush leather love seat and a fully stocked bar.

I walked around the room in a circle and let out a long whistle. “Geeze! Are you like the queen of this place, or something?”

I noticed a bowl of strawberries and flaky almond croissants on the coffee table. My mouth watered. I hadn’t had luxuries like fruit and pastries in ages.

Amanda noticed my gaze. “Help yourself. I was the same way when I first came to live with Alex.”

I bit into a juicy strawberry and relished the burst of flavor on my tongue before I grabbed another one.

“Or something,” said the blonde sitting on the bed. She snapped her gum and tossed her wavy long hair over her shoulder before she resumed tapping at a game on her tablet. Though she was tall and had long limbs like a model, her face was sweet and innocent, bare of makeup except for some light pink blush and lip gloss. By the sassy and annoyed way she spoke, I assumed she could only be Rose, the little sister Amanda always mentioned with fond annoyance when we were in Europe.

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Rose, that’s not true.”

I wondered how Amanda found her sister after all this time. Rose was in California at the time Amanda and I were split up in Paris.

“Of course, it is. You’re like, married to the big bad boss vampire of the place,” Rose shot back.

Suddenly, Amanda stood still and got a faraway look in her eyes. I waved a hand in front of her face and snapped my fingers, but she didn’t respond, not even to flinch. It was like she was in a trance.

“It’s no use trying to talk to her when she’s like this. She’s communicating with Alex through their mated bond,” Rose said disinterestedly.

“What’s that?” I asked Rose.

“We can talk to the vampires we are mated with telepathically. It happens after a vampire and a human have exchanged blood while, you know—” Rose waggled her eyebrows to indicate the unsaid.

“Oh, gross!” I winced. I did not need to think about my friend doing the nasty with the undead.

“Are you,” I struggled to get the word out, “mated to a vamp too?”

Rose nodded. “Dante’s the big surly lumberjack looking hottie. You’ll probably see him around some time. Anyway, Amanda’s mate is Alex, who’s the master vampire of this clan. He’s big and scary, but a total teddy bear when it comes to my sister, especially now since she’s expecting.”

“So, you guys are like mind readers?”

“Kind of, but not really. It’s not like we have open access to each other’s thoughts, but we do get a sense of our mate’s moods and emotions.”

Like a light had been switched on, Amanda blinked and came back to us like nothing had happened.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

Amanda nodded. “Alex was just wondering why I was so excited. He sensed my happiness through the bond.” She smiled serenely. “I told him that I’m just so happy that I have everything I ever wanted in life. I’ve found my long-lost sister and best friend, and I’m about to have my own family.”

A part of me was unsure how accurate Rose’s description of the master vampire was, but if he was good to Amanda, then that was all that mattered to me.

I put a croissant on a plate and went to sit down on the edge of the bed next to Rose. “I still can’t get over the fact that you’re pregnant and bonking an evil vampire.”

Amanda frowned. “Alex and the clan aren’t evil.”

I frowned. I didn’t understand what she was trying to say. “They’re vampires, Amanda. They feed on human blood, they killed off most of the world and brought about eternal darkness. How can they not be evil?”

“It’s not like they go out killing people. The Diamantis vamps only drink from bagged blood, usually.” Amanda’s hand rose up to touch her neck as she spoke.

Gross. I guess sex and feeding went together when you were fucking a vampire.

“Yeah, the vamps here are the good guys. They saved Amanda and me from the evil

witch's coven that tried to kill us, and they try to save as many humans as they can find from the other vampires," Rose said.

I thought about the cold, dingy concrete cell where the girls and I lived. "They don't seem like they're good guys. You do realize they force us to give blood every week and keep us locked in a jail cell when we aren't working."

Amanda frowned. "Is it really that bad? I'm going to ask Alex to give you better rooms and let the girls have some free time."

The door opened and a mousy looking woman with tea-colored hair peeked around the door before slipping in and closing the door behind her. She carried a tray of glass bottles with her.

"That's Lizzy. She's our resident witch who helps us locate and take down the big bad vampires."

Lizzy blushed. "Rose is exaggerating. I only dabble."

"You do more than dabble. You saved my life!"

Lizzy gave me a curious glance. "Aren't you one of the girls we saved from the human settlement last time?"

"Yeah. Meghan's my best friend from the before times. I thought I was never going to see her again," Amanda added.

"I take it you're the witch who brews those gross tasting calming potions?" I didn't know if the potions really tasted bad, they could taste like fruit punch for all I knew, since I never took them. Still, I couldn't believe that a witch would collaborate with a bunch of vampires. In my understanding of the world, all the covens hated the

vampires with a vengeance. Any witch I knew would rather kill themselves than work with a bloodsucker.

I bit into my croissant, the flaky crumbs and powdered sugar landing half on my chin and half on my plate. I brushed the bits stuck to my face as gracefully as I could manage.

Lizzy frowned. “You don’t like the flavor? I tried to make the potion taste like caramel. Maybe I need to make some tweaks.”

Amanda gave me an exasperated look. Busted. She knew I was lying even without being told. Even though we hadn’t known each other for a long time before we were split up, she knew me like she was my blood sister. “I’m sure the potions are fine, Lizzy. Meghan’s always had a sensitive palate.”

Lizzy didn’t seem convinced. “Are you sure? I can alter the formula to make it easier to take.”

“There’s no need. You’re busy enough as it is.” Amanda rushed to take the tray from her and set it on her coffee table. “Thank you for putting together the anti-nausea potions for me. It’s been a great help with the morning sickness.” She uncapped one of the vials and gulped it down like it was a shot of tequila. She grimaced and stuck her tongue out. “Blech. If you could only make this taste like caramel or cotton candy.”

Lizzy shrugged as she sat down on the love seat. “Sorry. The best I can do is add more peppermint to mask the flavor.”

Amanda sat down next to her. “Actually, we were talking about giving the girls some more freedom, maybe let them go to the rooftop garden or the library. We’re protected by our status as mates to high-ranking vampires, but the girls aren’t. While

forbidden from biting any humans, the newly turned grunt vampires aren't exactly known for their self-control around juicy walking sources of fresh blood. Is there an invisibility spell or something that could let them roam around without being seen by the vampire grunts?"

Lizzy scoffed. "Witchcraft isn't like what you see in the movies. It's not like there's an invisibility cloak you can throw over yourselves and disappear."

I slumped. "Well, that's a letdown. I thought witches could just say hocus-pocus and we would go poof."

"Not exactly. Let me think." Lizzy paused. "There is a potion to cloak your scent and the sound of your heartbeat. The potion doesn't last very long, and it won't make you invisible, so you'll still want to avoid the vamps if possible, but it can keep them from being able to tell that you're alive."

I sat up straight. "That's perfect. We only need a way to get from our room to the garden or library without being detected."

Amanda nodded. "It's risky, but it might work. There are so many newcomers to the clan that the lower ranking vampires won't know who's alive and who's undead."

"I need to go look up the recipe and gather the ingredients. It shouldn't take more than a day. From what I remember, it's an easy potion with common ingredients."

"Great. We'll meet up tomorrow in the library, and you can try the potion on Meghan," Amanda said with a grin at me.

"Why me?" I didn't relish being a test guinea pig for some unknown witch. What if she turned me into a frog or gave me purple warts?

“Well, the vampires aren’t going to pay attention to me or Lizzy or Rose, so it has to be you.”

“Right.” That made sense. “Hurrah for me.” At least I had the promise of freedom to look forward to.

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Meghan

I spent the rest of the day talking with Amanda, Rose, and Lizzy as they filled me in on what their lives were like after the Diamantis vampires claimed them as their human pets. Well, those weren't exactly the words they used to describe themselves.

My best friend even claimed that Alex rescued her, even though I thought it sounded like she was sold as a slave. However, the glow of happiness in Amanda's face was more than enough to make me bite my tongue and hold back the harsh words that wanted to spill out. It wasn't my place to judge her for trying to find a bit of happiness in this shitty world we found ourselves in.

Lizzy's story was just as strange. For the sister of one of the most powerful witches in the world to betray her coven for a vampire was hard for me to believe. From what I knew of the witches, they were determined to restore sunlight to the world and destroy every last vampire, even if it meant their own deaths. As she talked about her life here in the vampire clan with Grant, she seemed relieved to be free from the influence of her powerful sister. There was definitely a story there, but as nosy as I was, I bit my tongue.

Rose lived a life similar to mine after the vampires took over the world. Except, she was fortunate enough to avoid being betrayed by her fellow humans and sold as a slave. Still, the dark days she described of scrambling for supplies and fighting with rats for scraps of food were all too familiar to me. Though I knew she was mated to Dante, I still couldn't wrap my mind around the image of this tiny sweet angelic looking girl willingly binding herself to a vicious vampire warrior, which is how I've heard the others describe Dante. Dante, according to the gossip I've overheard, was

the master vampire's guard and enforcer.

Life here was as good as it was ever going to get for any of us. It wasn't like the sun was going to come back any time soon. That was as likely as the vampires voluntarily giving up their power and banishing themselves to the shadows. We were never going to be free to live life as it used to be. This was the new normal, and the best we could hope for was a life as a cherished human pet of a vampire. Even I had to admit that it beat living out on the streets and fighting for scraps of food until you were captured and sold as a slave.

A knock on the door interrupted our conversation.

"Just a minute!" Amanda got up gingerly. The weight of her heavily pregnant belly threw her off balance, so she shuffled over to the door in a waddling gait.

Leo nodded at her and bowed slightly as a show of respect to her position as the master vampire's consort. "Alex received your message. Meghan will take one of the remaining suites in this wing of the compound, and the other girls will be moved to a bigger room."

I looked at them in surprise. "I'm getting my own room?"

Leo nodded. "If Amanda trusts you, then the Master trusts her decision. The other girls are unknown factors, so we can't let them wander around freely so close to the Master's living quarters. I will provide them with furnishings and bedding to make them more comfortable."

"Thank you, Leo, I appreciate it, and I'm sure Meghan does too." Amanda shot a pointed look at Leo and then at me. "Actually, now that I think about it, Meghan should have a guard to escort her when she's out of her room and out in the compound, that is, until we work out all the kinks of the cloaking potion."

I cringed on the inside. I knew what she was trying to do. This was just like Amanda. Back when we were traveling around Europe, she would constantly try to set me up with friends of whichever boy she was having a fling with at the time. The last thing I wanted was to become a vampire's mistress like the other girls in this room. Even if said vampire looked like a elfin movie star with glacial blue eyes and luscious golden hair.

Nope. That was one line I was not going to cross.

There was no way I was going to sleep with the enemy. That's what the vampires were, even if they were housing and feeding us. This life was an illusion of normalcy masking the fact that we were being held captive in a silken cage.

I scanned Leo's face for a reaction to her suggestion, but he was as mysterious and impossible to read as ever. "I'm sure the last thing any of the girls needs is me hovering over them."

I didn't dare mention that the other girls would like nothing more than to be watched by Leo. "Yeah. Leo's probably too busy with important business to play babysitter. I'll be fine on my own. I'm sure the potion to mask my smell will work, and the vamps won't pay any attention to me."

"Don't be silly. You'll be vampire chow the moment a minion snaps and loses control." Leo frowned and paused for a moment. "There are some issues with the shipments from Greece that I have to take care of first, but it shouldn't take too long to wrap things up. I can't promise that I will be available all the time, but I can spare an hour or two if you need to come up to visit your friends."

Meghan beamed. "See, that's settled then." She gave me a hug and whispered in my ear, "I know you hate being watched, but just give him a chance, Meghan. He's a good guy."

I shot a look at Leo, who looked like he wanted the floor to swallow him whole as he pretended to not hear our conversation with his vampire hearing.

The walk back to the jail-like room I shared with the other captured girls was silent and awkward. The last thing I cared about was what any man thought of me, much less a half undead one. Yet, I had to admit that I missed the easy way we talked earlier in the day. Did I do something to upset him? Perhaps he resented being my chaperone. I was sure that Leo was busy enough due to his high ranking in the vampire clan.

“Listen, you don’t really have to follow me around. I’ll tell Amanda I changed my mind or something.”

“It’s not you. Things have been chaotic around here, and we’re having some problems with our business in Europe. If anything, you’ve been a welcome distraction.”

I blushed.

He paused and looked down at me as if he wasn’t sure if he should be confiding in me. “My mother has made some choices that she will soon regret.”

I’ve never even met the woman, much less know all the gossip around the compound, so I had no idea what his mother could have done, but it sounded serious and dire. “I’m sure whatever it is, it’s fixable.”

Leo shook his head. “There’s no coming back from this. In vampire law, the punishment for betraying your clan is death by beheading. She won’t dare show her face around here or contact me again, yet she won’t last long with the Aurelians either. A traitor never has the trust of either side.” The muscle in his jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. “She’s as good as dead either way.”

“I’m sorry.” I had no idea what to say. From what I heard about Leo, not only did he lose his father, but now his mother willingly chose to abandon him and defect to the enemy for whatever nefarious reasons.

“Well, we’re here.” He scuffed his feet. “Thanks for listening. I don’t know why, but you’re one of the few people around here I’m comfortable talking to.”

I looked around and was surprised to see that we were already outside the room I shared with the captive girls. Talking to Leo was so easy and natural that it seemed like the outside world didn’t exist. “I won’t tell anybody what you’ve told me today.” I was flattered that he decided to confide in me for whatever reason.

His shoulders visibly relaxed as he nodded. “I appreciate it. It’s not like I can talk about these things with the rest of the clan. Most vampires aren’t big on family or feelings.”

He unlocked the door, but stopped before he opened it. “Your room should be ready tomorrow. I’ll see what I can do about finding a better room for the girls in a couple of days. Don’t tell them you’ll be getting your own room.”

I laughed. “There’s no chance I’ll tell any of them anything of the sort.”

He nodded. “Once I wrap things up with Alex, we can go somewhere outside of the compounds. You must be getting cabin fever from being locked inside for so long.”

“Great.” I gave him a strained smile. What I really wanted was to stick to the original plan, to use the cloaking potion and go as I pleased. But even with the potion masking my human scent, I would still be limited to wandering around the vampire compound. What I really wanted was to go outside, maybe to the beach, and breathe in the salty sea air. What Leo was offering wasn’t the full freedom to do as I wanted and to go wherever I wanted, but it was a start.

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Meghan

The next day, I went down with the other captive girls to do our daily rounds in the kitchens. While the rest of the girls worked together to peel vegetables, I preferred to do the dishes alone. It gave me a chance to get away from the others and have a bit of privacy to myself, as the sink area was at the far end of the kitchen. My hands were elbow-deep in a sink of dishwater when I heard a hissing sound.

“Psst!”

I ignored it. It was probably one of the girls trying to play a prank on me. They made it no secret that I didn’t fit in with their little clique. Ever since Leo singled me out to bring me up to Amanda’s room, they’ve been even more hostile in singling me out.

“Psst!”

This time, something hard hit my back and bounced off. I turned around and looked for the source, but I only found a dinner roll lying on the ground. I glared at the other girls, but they were too engrossed in their gossip to pay attention to me. Plus, there was no way they could have thrown the piece of bread from across the room. I glanced around the room. There was only one place where a flying piece of bread could have come from. The half-open door leading to the hallway was empty, but I spotted a brief flash of golden blonde hair peeking out before it disappeared.

Could I escape without being spotted?

I glanced around the kitchen again, but the girls paid no attention to me. Wiping my

hands down on a dishrag, I casually picked up a stack of dishes and carried them over to the shelf next to the door. With a final glance out of the corner of my eyes to confirm the girls were too busy to notice me, I slipped out of the kitchen.

There was usually a vampire guard posted outside to keep an eye on us, but today we were unguarded. Something had happened among the vampires recently. Of course, we were never told anything, but the vampires seemed stressed and overworked. Their forces were too thin to have someone watch over us twenty-four hours a day. I didn't realize how much I needed it, but this little reprieve made it seem like life was almost normal. Our daily shift in the kitchen was the only time when we had a bit of freedom outside our little room.

"Psst! Over here, hurry." I followed the sound of the whisper around the corner at the end of the hallway. My heart thudded in my chest. Was this a trap or test to see if I was going to escape? I took a cautious step and peeked around the corner. To my surprise, it was Rose.

"What's the matter? Did something happen to Amanda?" My friend was so pregnant that it looked like she was going to pop at any moment. Something important must have happened for Rose to come find me and sneak me out of the kitchen.

Here eyes widened as she shook her head. "Oh gosh, no, nothing like that. My sister's fine, though she's about to serve the baby an eviction notice with the way it keeps kicking her in the bladder."

I let out a breath of relief. "Then what's going on?"

"Lizzy's finished brewing the cloaking potion."

"Oh? I thought we weren't doing that anymore, what with Leo being assigned to be my constant guardian."

Rose scrunched her nose. "I know the men mean well, but the chaperone situation is so old-fashioned, like we're in a Jane Austen novel or something. The only reason Dante doesn't shadow me all day long is because he's too busy being Alex's muscle." Her eyes softened. "I know this situation must be unbearable for you. If you had the potion, you could visit us without a guardian. Just promise me you won't do anything rash again."

She was referring to the escape attempt I made earlier in my captivity. I didn't need to be convinced not to do that again. The hunger in the vampire grunts' eyes when they grabbed me and almost sank their fangs into my neck was forever burned into my mind. I made a cross motion over my chest with my finger. "I promise. There's nothing left out there worth escaping to."

Rose's face softened, and her lips lifted into a smile. "Come on, Lizzy's in the library." She turned and started walking away from me. I guess that was my cue to follow along.

"Wait a minute, does Amanda know about this?" After Amanda's excitement at appointing Leo as my guardian, it seemed strange to me that she would agree to the original plan involving the cloaking potion.

"She's with Elspeth, one of the vampire healers. Elspeth used to be a midwife before she was turned. I still think it's weird to have a midwife whose birthing experience dates from when leeches were the latest medical discovery, but whatever, it's her baby."

"So she doesn't know," I interrupted Rose's rambling.

She glanced over her shoulder at me and pursed her lips before speaking. "She's too busy preparing for the baby to keep an eye on us all the time. It would be best if she didn't find out about what we were doing, the stress isn't good for the baby."

I caught what she was implying. Amanda couldn't know about any of this. As the consort of the master vampire of this clan, Amanda would have no choice but to tell Alex what was going on if our sneaking around could endanger the clan.

“All right, then. We should keep this between the three of us, for the sake of the baby, of course.”

Rose gave a terse nod.

I memorized the way to the library as we made our way down the twisting hallways. We arrived to Lizzy leaning over a steaming cauldron as she decanted a syrupy pink liquid into what looked like little perfume sample bottles lined up in a row in a wooden rack.

To say the library was huge was an understatement. It was like something out of a movie scene. Rows and rows of leather covered books lined the walls from floor to ceiling. A grand arched window overlooked what must have been the grounds around the compound, but it was impossible to tell what was outside since there was no light from the sun or moon. On the large wooden table where Lizzy was working, there was a plate of grapes and cheddar cheese cubes. I grabbed a bit of each and shoved them in my mouth. Even after weeks of living here and finally eating fresh food again, I still couldn't forget what it felt like to live off of scavenged scraps.

Rose grabbed a piece of cheese and walked over to a metal wire cage. She tore the piece of cheese in half and fed it through the bars of the cage. The gray rat inside ran over and twitched its nose, sniffing the morsel before it reached for the cheese.

Lizzy noticed the confused look on my face. “That's Mica. He used to be a wizard before he was turned into a vampire and then somehow turned himself into a rat with a spell. Nobody here knows how to turn him back, but apparently he's still immortal in rat form.”

I leaned down and peered into the cage. “Huh. Now I think I’ve heard of everything.” I tapped on the bars of the cage with a finger, and Mica stood up on his hind legs in response. His nose and whiskers twitched as he followed my scent. He was really cute, like any other pet rat. I wondered if he liked to be pet. I wiggled my finger, but before I could get to reach inside, Rose grabbed my wrist.

“He may look furry and cute, but he still has some vampire tendencies.” She snapped her mouth close with a toothy biting motion. “Even as a rat, Mica has trouble resisting the lure of warm human blood, something you don’t want to find out the hard way.” It was then that I noticed some small red puncture wounds on the side of Rose’s hand.

I shook my head. “If that rat mistook me for a walking filet mignon, the last thing I would be doing is feeding it cheesy nibbles.”

Rose shrugged. “It’s his nature, I mean, it’s not like he can understand right and wrong with that little rodent brain of his.” She dropped the last bit of cheese on the floor of the cage and wiped her hands on her jeans.

“He only bites when one of us tries to feed him. He ignores Grant and the other vampires,” Lizzy added.

Lizzy poured out the last of the potion and screwed the cap on. I picked up one of the tiny glass bottles. It fit neatly in the palm of my hand, and it was even small enough to sneak in my bra.

“I thought small separate phials would be easier for you to hide instead of one giant bottle,” said Lizzy. It was like she knew what I was thinking.

I held one of the glass phials up in the light. “I thought I was going to have to drink this. It looks like a bottle of perfume.”

Lizzy smiled. “That’s because it is, or rather, it’s an anti-perfume. Spray the potion onto yourself to mask your human smells from the other vampires. It makes you scentless, like the undead. Of course, they’ll still be able to hear your breath and your heartbeat, so you’ll need to remain calm and keep your distance from them. I’m going to research how to hide your other signs of being alive, but for now this potion should be enough to let you move around the compound undetected.”

I spritzed a bit on my wrist and, seeing that I didn’t turn purple or grow any spots, sprayed it all over myself.

I stood there for a bit, waiting for some tingling or something to happen, but nothing changed. It was all a bit anti-climactic. I held my arms out to the side and let them fall. “I don’t feel any different? How will we know it’s working?”

“We’ll need to test it with a vampire,” Lizzy said.

“The only vampires we can trust are Dante, Grant, and Leo, but we can’t let them know, or they’ll rat us out to Alex,” Rose added.

“Well, that makes the plan a bust.” My shoulders slumped.

I looked over at Mica, who was walking back and forth along the length of his cage. An idea popped into my head. It was stupid, but worth a try. “Wait a minute. Mica still craves blood like a vampire whenever he smells a human, right?”

“Yeah, what does that have to do with anything?” Rose replied.

I leaned over the cage and ran my hand along the bars. “If the potion works to mask my human scent, then I should be able to stick my hand in there without Mica sinking his little fangs into me.”

“That sounds completely insane enough to work,” said Lizzy.

“Here goes nothing.” I took a deep breath and tapped on the bars of the cage to get the rat’s attention. He ran over and sniffed at my finger, his nose and whiskers twitching. “Baited. Now, let’s see if he bites.” I slipped my pinky past the bars of the cage and teased Mica with it. He scurried around and under my finger, sniffing me closely, but in the end, decided that his water bottle was more interesting.

“I can’t believe it worked!”

I shot Lizzy a look in surprise.

She shrugged. “I mean, it’s not a complicated potion, but this is my first time brewing this type of potion.”

Jeez. I made a mental note not to ingest or take part in any more of Lizzy’s spells or potions. The last thing I needed was a clueless witch turning me into a gerbil or worse.

“Well, I’m going to put this potion through one final test.”

Rose startled. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Despite her bringing me here all cloak and dagger, she was suddenly getting cold feet.

“I’ll be careful. Cross my heart. I’m not going to sneak out or whatever. I only want to test the potion’s effectiveness. Hopefully I make it back to the kitchen in one piece.”

“Do you remember the way back?” Rose asked.

I nodded. “Yep. Two lefts, skip a hallway, take a right, go downstairs to the servants’ quarters, and then another right. Wish me luck.” I infused my voice with more confidence than I felt.

The journey back to the kitchens was disappointingly uneventful. Not that I wanted to run into a bloodsucker by any means, but a part of me wanted to see if I really did lack my usual delicious walking-burger aroma to the vamps.

As I turned around the last corner before reaching the servants’ quarters, I ran right into two young guys who looked to be my age at the end of the hall. No, not guys, vampires. Nowadays, without the sun, it wasn’t possible to tell humans and vampires apart by the pallor of their skin. A more reliable indicator was the absolute stillness that surrounded them due to them not breathing or having a heartbeat.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum gave me a quick glance up and down before moving to walk past me. I took a step and continued walking down the hall. One of them turned and took another look at me and paused.

“What are you doing here?” he asked me.

I stopped, but kept a distance between us. Somehow, I had a feeling that retreating or showing any sign of fear would give away my status. So far, it didn’t seem like they knew I was alive. I schooled my face into a cold and empty expression before I turned around to face them. “Emergency meeting. The Master is expecting us upstairs.”

Tweedledum scratched the back of his neck. “I didn’t know there was a meeting today.”

I had to think quickly. “Dante found some new information about the covens.” My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest. I slowed my breathing and hoped

the lies that rolled off my tongue sounded believable.

“Hmm,” Twedledee paused and looked at me again. He narrowed his eyes. “I haven’t seen you around before.”

“Uh, I just got here, from Paris.” I prayed they wouldn’t notice the sweat that was breaking out on my forehead.

“You’re lying to us.” He cocked his head to the side and gazed at my chest, which was rising and falling despite my best efforts.

I immediately stopped breathing and held my breath.

“Ticktock. Ticktock. I hear the beating heart of a lying mouse.” His lips curled back into a sneer. Letting out a feral snarl, his fangs dropped.

His hand shot out quicker than I could blink and wrapped around my throat. I reached up to grab at his hand by reflex, but it was like trying to pry apart a steel cuff. My eyes bulged out as I clawed at his hand. I had to get free before I passed out.

“Wait a minute,” said the other one, “the Master said we’re not allowed to drink from the humans.”

My captor snarled at his partner. “The Master spouts a lot of shit. He may have a fetish for the human cows, but as far as I’m concerned, they’re only good for one thing. It would have been better if a real vampire like Georgjie was our master.” He grabbed my hair with his other hand and wrenched my head to the side.

A whimper escaped my lips as searing pain exploded from my head. He leaned in until I could see the golden flecks in his demonic eyes. With one last snarl, he lunged for my exposed neck.

I squeezed my eyes shut. My last thought was that at least my death was going to be quick.

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Meghan

Suddenly, the painful prick of fangs digging into my neck vanished. Something jerked away the heavy weight of the vampire on top of my body. I fell free from his painful grasp around my neck. Staggering back, I gasped for air as stars exploded in my vision.

“Watch your mouth.” Leo shoved the vampire away from me and stood between us, guarding me from Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

Before I could catch my breath and figure out what was going on, there was a wretched scream as Leo twisted and ripped the vampire’s head off in one twisting motion, like he was plucking a grape. All that remained of the monster that tried to kill me was a black puddle of foul smelling ooze on the ground.

Leo looked down at the puddle with disgust before stepping aside and addressing the remaining lackey. “The punishment for treason against the Master is death. Is that clear?”

The vampire cowered and fell to his knees. He touched his forehead to Leo’s shoes. “Yes, sir.”

“And remember that any and all of the humans under our care are his property. Any liberties taken are also an insult against the Master.”

As much as I was thankful that Leo saved me, a part of me couldn’t help but bristle that he only killed the other vampire because I was the property of the Master.

According to the laws of vampire society, I was nothing outside of my status as chattel.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, for your kindness and understanding, sir.” The vampire trembled as he groveled at Leo’s feet.

Leo sighed and nudged him away with a slight kick like he was an annoying rat. “Get up and go back to the loading area. Until further notice, you are assigned to the docks. If I see your face in here again, I won’t be so understanding next time.”

The vampire lackey scrambled to his feet and scurried away after some more groveling and sniveling. As much as I hated him and his partner, I couldn’t help but feel pity for him as he ran away.

“Are you okay?” He reached out, as if he wanted to run his hands over my arms to check for damage, but held back with hesitation before he made contact. His words echoed in my mind again. He wasn’t really worried about me, the only thing he was worried about was the status of his master’s property.

I stared at my hands, which were tightly clenched around each other. I squeezed my right hand around the left, though it did nothing to control my shaking. “I’m just peachy.”

Leo frowned. Obviously, he didn’t believe me. If my hoarse voice cracking didn’t give away my fear, my entire body trembling like a leaf probably told him all he needed to know.

“Come on, let’s get you somewhere you can sit down before you collapse.” This time he reached for me, his hands rested on the small of my back as he supported me and ushered me away from the site of my attack. His touch was soothing, as if he had the power to draw away the panic and adrenaline rushing through my body.

For the first time in a long time, I was safe. I could relax. Too tired to analyze why Leo of all the vampires was the one who made me feel this way, I decided to just go with it. In such a cruel world, I had to learn to take whatever good and comfort came my way.

“I thought you would know better by now than to try to run off by yourself.”

I stiffened. My reputation for running away was going to follow me around forever. There was no way I could say anything about the cloaking potion without getting Rose and Lizzy in trouble. I had to think of something quickly.

“I wasn’t running away,” I said defensively. “We ran out of dish soap and there was nobody posted by the kitchen who I could ask for help.” I gave him a look, as he was the one who was usually posted nearby keeping an eye on us. “I wanted to find the supply room to get some, but ran into those two jerks before I could find it.”

He looked at me from the corner of his eyes, but did not say anything. I had no doubt that he saw right through my lie, though he didn’t call me out on it.

“Next time, wait until I get back. It’s not worth losing your life over some dirty dishes. Everyone knows the Master has ordered that humans remain off limits, but as you can see, vampires are not very good at following directions. Even under threat of death.”

We arrived back at the kitchens too soon. Stopping just outside the doorway, we could hear the other girls were still inside. Judging by their conversation, my absence was noticed.

“Where do you think she’s gone this time?”

“I think the bloodsuckers have eaten her by now. There’s no way she could have

gotten far.”

One of them scoffed. “I doubt even a starving vamp would want her. She’d probably give them heartburn.”

“Who cares. It would be better around here without the stuck-up bitch always glowering at us. Imagine all the extra room we’ll have now that we can take over her corner of the room.”

They giggled and started to talk about how they were going to split up the meager belongings I had hidden under my mattress.

Even though I wasn’t close to any of the girls, their words still stung. I had no idea they hated me so much. I could disappear and they really wouldn’t care.

“Let’s get you out of here.” Leo whispered. He reached for my hand and tugged, urging me to follow him.

“Where are we going?” I asked as I let him lead me away. We were walking toward an area of the building I had never been before.

“A place where no one can find us.”

We took a series of turns down dark twisted corridors and descended two sets of stairs until we finally arrived in a large underground garage. It was filled with expensive looking cars that would not have looked out of place zooming down the streets of Monte Carlo.

I was confused but intrigued.

I followed him as we made our way down the rows of cars until he stopped in front of

a teal Lamborghini that hugged the ground. The car looked like some kind of advanced alien's idea of what a car should look like. Leo touched his key fob, and the doors on both sides of the car lifted like a pair of wings.

Even the cynical voice in my head had to admit that was pretty awesome.

“Get in.”

I climbed into the car as gracefully as possible, which was difficult with how low the seats were. I hoped Leo didn't notice as I flopped into my seat with the grace of a drunken sea lion.

“Are you going to take me into the woods where nobody will find my body and axe murder me?” I joked as I buckled my seat belt.

Leo started the ignition and scoffed. “If I wanted to off you, I could do it right here, right now, no need for the woods.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. Jerk face.

He gave me a look full of meaning as he pulled the car out of the garage. “You have to promise to keep this a secret. Nobody can know about this place, not even Rose, Amanda, or Lizzy.”

I was as confused as much as I was on the edge of my seat with curiosity about where we were going. A joke was on the tip of my tongue, but the words died in my throat at the vulnerable look on Leo's face. He was trusting me with something important to him.

“I won't. Your secret is safe with me.”

He nodded, satisfied with my answer. “You’ll like it, I promise.”

I held onto my seatbelt with a white knuckled grip as we zoomed down the dark, empty streets of Los Angeles. The only things I could see were what was immediately in front of us and lit up by the headlights. With no other traffic on the roads, Leo pushed the racecar to its limits, going multiple times the speed limit posted on the road signs and sending me sliding across my seat with each sharp turn.

From what I remembered of the Los Angeles area, the Diamantis clan headquarters were somewhere near the downtown business and industrial area. We drove away from the urban core and soon we were flying down the freeway away from the city of angels. In the before times, we would have crawled along in gridlocked traffic, but today the entire road was ours.

Soon we took an off-ramp and turned down a couple local streets until we pulled into what looked like a typical suburban neighborhood. The houses were large, but in the before times, would have been cozy and welcoming unlike the soulless McMansions that filled most suburbs. It was the type of place that would not look out of place in a scene from a Hallmark Christmas movie special.

I pictured the type of people who used to live here. Happy families with perfectly well-behaved children and fluffy golden retrievers playing behind white picket fences and neatly trimmed hedges. Those poor people had no idea that their lives were going to end so suddenly. Almost all the homes were empty shells now, looted and vandalized soon after their inhabitants were killed.

It reminded me of my own home in Michigan. My parents most likely suffered the same fate as the people who used to live here. Regret filled me for having left them with so much remaining unsaid between us.

Leo kept driving until we reached what looked like a dead end, but it wasn’t. The

paved road turned into a dirt road, obscured by the dead branches of once overgrown shrubbery.

I winced as the branches scraped against the side of the car as he drove through. I guess it didn't really matter if the paintwork was scratched. Not much mattered these days.

Deeper and deeper we went down the bumpy dirt road until I thought my teeth were going to fall out of my mouth by how much they rattled in my head. Finally, I saw something in front of us lit up by the headlights. It was a house, though rundown shack might have been a more accurate description. It definitely looked out of place compared to the other neat and ornate houses in the neighborhood.

Leo drove the car until we were a good distance behind the house before he turned off the headlights and cut the engine.

"It's better to park back here. We're less likely to be spotted this way," Leo explained.

Right.

I reached for the handle on my door, but before I could open it and get out, Leo was already there and holding the door open for me. Even though I didn't need any help, I took his outstretched hand and accepted his help in getting out.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness without the light from the headlights. I examined the little house, and maybe I had been a bit harsh in my earlier judgment. The windows were boarded up, which gave it a creepy abandoned look. In the before times, I imagined that the garden would have been full of flowering shrubs and trees,

with chirping birds and butterflies fluttering about. It was actually kind of cute, like a grandmother's cottage in a fairy tale or something.

"This is my house," he replied.

"Really? I don't really see you as the cottage core type."

"You'd be surprised. That should teach you to never judge a book by its cover."

Leo made his way over to the back door and pulled out a flashlight. He turned it on and handed it to me. "Here, hold this for me."

I followed him with the flashlight. There wasn't much except for a large white propane tank and some broken flower pots on the ground. He walked over to a giant terra-cotta pot and then started turning over the rocks on the ground surrounding it.

"I stumbled upon this place while on patrol in the before times. The owner was an elderly lady who passed away without family. I waited, but nobody came to claim the house. So, I boarded it up and cleaned it up the best I could. It looks awful, but after the darkness came, the looters didn't even bother to come here. They all thought this place had been ransacked already, and the other houses looked like they had more expensive stuff to steal."

"Ha!" Leo held up a bronze metal key triumphantly. I followed him as he practically skipped in excitement to unlock the back door. It took a couple of minutes of jiggling and coaxing, but Leo eventually got the creaky door to open. The noise pierced the otherwise silent night like a gunshot.

He ushered me in and closed the door behind us, locking it even though I doubted that anybody knew we were here.

“You can never be too safe,” Leo replied as if reading my mind. “I’ve kept this place a secret, but someone could have followed us here.”

Leo rummaged through some drawers before he found a box of matches. With the strike of a match, he lit up half a dozen candles placed around the room. The flickering flames lit up the room with a golden, cozy glow.

I turned off the flashlight and examined our surroundings. We were in a simple room with a rustic kitchen and dining area on one side and a living area on the other side. A plush love seat sofa covered in thick fuzzy blankets and plump pillows sat in front of a stone fireplace. The pile of ash and streaks of black soot on the stone indicated that the fireplace was functional and had been well-used instead of just a decorative centerpiece.

Leo caught the direction of my gaze. “I know a warm fire would feel really good, but lighting one would send up a smoke signal and give away our location.”

I sat down on the sofa and shrugged. “This is already cozy enough for me. It’s so much more than I expected.” It was true. After living on survival mode in prison-like conditions for so long, a simple home with soft pillows and some privacy was like a slice of heaven.

Leo rummaged around the kitchen cupboards like he lived here all along. “I used to come here when I needed to get away from the vampire clan. All the cloak and dagger stuff and Machiavellian power plays get to be too much sometimes. Is gin okay?” He held up a half empty glass bottle like it was a trophy.

“Yeah. Whatever you’ve got is fine.”

The pop of the stopper coming out of the bottle sounded like a firecracker in the silent room. “Good, because that’s all there is. I hope you like it neat.” He came over with

two glasses and handed me one before he sat down next to me.

“At this point, I’m just glad I’m not drinking boiled swamp water,” I said wryly before I took a swig. The alcohol burned going down my throat, but the warmth spreading throughout my body was worth it. “This is so nice. I wish I could stay here forever. It reminds me of home, before everything went to shit.”

Leo sighed. “When I was younger, I used to dream of what life would be like if I was just a normal man. What it would be like to come home from work to snuggle with someone. We would clean up dirty dishes from the dining table after dinner, or settle down in front of the fire after putting the kids to sleep.”

He threw his head back and chugged the contents of his glass in one gulp. “It sounds so stupid, now. That life only existed on TV and for other people. It was never going to be mine. The darkness and violence will always be in my blood. My life is in service to my master.”

Never in my life did I think I would feel sorry for a vampire, but at this moment, Leo’s words filled me with sadness. He would never escape his life as part of the Diamantis clan. What torture it must be to live for an eternity without knowing a moment of peace.

Neither of us was ever going to know peace as long as the vampires ruled the world.

I don’t know what came over me, but the words spilled out of my mouth before I could doubt myself. “I know it’s not real, but what if for tonight we pretend. You’re just a normal boy and I’m just a girl enjoying a night at home after a long day.”

I held my breath as I waited for his answer. Was I making a fool of myself?

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Meghan

Leo blinked in surprise. “Really? You would be willing to do that?”

“I’m doing this for me, too. I think we both need a bit of normalcy, however short it may be.”

Leo looked at me with awe, like I had just made all his birthday and Christmas wishes come true at once. My cheeks grew warm under the intensity of his gaze. Clearing my throat, I got up and went over to the kitchen to see what I could find.

“Do you think the previous owner left any food behind?” I opened and shut the kitchen cupboards in an attempt to distract myself. I had to escape from the confusing emotions clouding my head. Don’t be stupid, I reminded myself. None of this was real. We were just two traumatized people grabbing onto the first bit of comfort we could find.

“I don’t know, I never really noticed. It’s not like I need to eat.” Leo said from behind me. I almost jumped out of my skin at how close he was suddenly. Even though he wished to be a human man, he was still moved with the supernatural speed and stealth of a vampire.

I was essentially trapped between Leo and the kitchen counter. “Then you can help me look.” My voice shook as I spoke. My body brushed against his as I slipped past him. I bit back the moan that threatened to come out as a delicious shiver ran through me.

We both made a racket, slamming cupboards and drawers as we searched for something that we could throw together into a meal.

“Aha!” I cried out as I found a dusty plastic wrapped pack of dried pasta and a jar of spaghetti sauce. Behind the jar, I spotted a container of powdered Parmesan cheese, the kind you would find in a shaker at cheap pizza shops. I gathered the found treasure in my arms and displayed them proudly on the counter.

Leo grinned as he held up the sauce pot and a jug of water he found under the sink. “Now we’re cooking.”

I twisted off the lid and gave the sauce a cautious sniff. Even though it had expired over a year ago, it was still red colored and there wasn’t anything fuzzy growing on the surface. I shrugged. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, and it wasn’t like I hadn’t already eaten worse things. There weren’t any spices in the cupboards, and I thought what a sad life the person who lived here must have lived.

To my surprise, the stove still worked. Apparently the propane tank I saw earlier wasn’t empty. Leo started boiling a pot of water and put another sauce pot on the stove to heat up the sauce. I examined him with curiosity. Vampires didn’t need to eat, so why did he move around the kitchen with such ease?

“Do you often cook?” I asked. Watching him as he stirred the sauce so it didn’t burn, I appreciated the flex of his shoulders as he worked.

“My mother hated any reminder of my father’s mortality, so I didn’t exactly grow up in a normal family. However, one thing my father insisted on was dinner time with just the two of us.” The water sputtered as it boiled. Leo dropped two handfuls of spaghetti in. “Even if I didn’t need to eat, I loved spending time helping my dad and sharing meals with him. These were some of the only happy memories I have of my family. As much as my mother loved my father, I don’t think she really ever wanted

to be a mother.”

Silently, I cursed at Leo’s mother for being such a cold bitch. What kind of damage did that she do to her own child?

Leo turned his head and gave me a sad smile. “There’s no need to pity me. I’ve had decades to think about these things. It’s not her fault, really. She cared for me in her own way, as much as the vampire inside of her would allow. My father was the best parent I could have asked for.”

Using a fork, Leo fished out a strand of spaghetti and held it out for me to try.

The pasta was perfectly cooked with just the right amount of bite. I flashed him a thumbs up. He drained the pasta using the saucepot lid to keep the pasta from falling into the sink.

I found two forks among a mess of mismatched silverware in a drawer, and two plates. Leo plated the pasta and drenched it with sauce before sprinkling a thick layer of cheese on top. “She was never the same after my father’s death. He was killed by some humans while out on a mission for Alex. It wasn’t Alex’s fault, but I know my mother blames him for my dad’s death.”

“I’m so sorry. I’m sure Alex will forgive her if she comes back.”

Leo shook his head. “You don’t understand. There’s no turning back after what she’s done. Let’s forget about all that stuff. Vampire business does not exist inside this house.” He grabbed both plates, and we headed back to the sofa to eat.

The pasta was not very flavorful or complex, but the conversation with Leo as we talked about our lives made this one of the best meals I could remember having. His eyes gleamed in the soft candlelight as he talked about the ridiculous vampire

customs he had to follow. I entertained him with stories of the stupid things Amanda and I did while we backpacked through Europe. It was so easy to fall into the fantasy that we were just a normal boy and girl having a romantic dinner at home after a long day. My heart ached for a version of our lives that was never going to be.

Since he cooked, I did the dishes as best as I could with the remaining water in the jug. After washing the dishes, I handed them to Leo to dry with a dishtowel.

“Can we stay here for the night? I don’t want to go back there yet.” Everything inside of me screamed that this was a bad idea, but it was just for tonight, I reasoned to myself. Tomorrow, we would forget about all this and go back to normal.

Leo sucked in an unneeded breath. “There’s only one bed.”

“So?” Faking confidence that I didn’t have, I shrugged and tossed my hair over my shoulder.

“Are you sure? Vampire and human relationships rarely end well.” Even though his words were softly spoken, he was crackling with energy like a live wire. Leo reminded me of a mountain lion, ready to pounce for the kill. I gulped as I realized that I was the prey. His body was tense as he held himself back for my sake.

It only made me want him more.

I rolled my eyes. “That hasn’t been a problem for the vampires in your clan.” I placed my hand on top of his. “I can see the humanity in you. You aren’t your mother.”

“Do you know what you’re asking? I won’t be able to stop myself once I’ve had a taste of you.”

“Yep. Got it. Can you shut up and kiss me?”

“I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t resist you.”

Despite my bravado, nothing could prepare me for the moment he wrapped his arms around me and pressed his lips against mine. His soft teasing touches soon became a hungry, demanding caress. My lips parted, his tongue slipping inside as he drank from my mouth like he was dying of thirst. Leo tasted clean and fresh, and soon, his cool flesh warmed with heat from mine.

Reluctantly, I pulled myself away due to my annoying mortal need for oxygen. My heart pounded as my breath came out in harsh pants. An intense wet heat made my core throb in time with the blood rushing through my body.

Again, our lips met. This time, Leo’s hands left no part of me untouched as we made our way to the bedroom. By the time the back of my legs hit the edge of the bed, we were fully unclothed. Never before had I felt so overcome with heat and desire. I was a wild thing, losing myself to the need to be claimed by this man.

“We will take our pleasure from each other in every way.” Leo settled in between my legs which fell open for him automatically. Not a bit of me was ashamed to bare my center to him, begging him to fill me.

Eager to feel him against me, I pressed my hips up against his, grinding my wet core against his hardness.

Leo let out a low growl. His fangs descended and with a rumble of need, he buried his head against my neck. I felt the prick of his fangs against my skin, nipping in a warning or perhaps a promise of more, but he took care not to break my skin.

How sweet. It only made me want him more. My hands wove into his hair, and I tugged him closer to me. What was wrong with me? Something dark part of me wanted him to penetrate me, not just with his cock, but with his fangs as well.

“You’re so sweet,” Leo whispered against my neck before he soothed my sore neck with his mouth and tongue. He pulled my hips to his, rubbing his thick length against my core, coating his cock with my slick juices. He parted my plump lips, but didn’t spear me in the way I needed him to.

“Please,” I whimpered. “Stop teasing me. I need you inside”

His eyes flashed gold as his clawed hands gripped my thighs. A low purr rumbled in his chest and with a grunt, he surged forward and thrust into me.

I cried out as he split me with his cock. He was so big. Leo touched me so deep inside as he rode me that I felt like I was going to pass out.

Nothing could have prepared me for how good it felt to be filled by this supernatural vampire.

“Leo, please.” It was all too much, but as much as I thought I couldn’t take any more of him, my muscles clenched and rippled around his girth. My body knew better and my core was greedy for whatever he gave me.

Leo lifted my legs until my knees were next to my head.

“Yes. That’s it. Take it,” he grunted as he pounded away.

My head tossed and turned. Nothing made sense except for my need for more of this. Reaching up, I braced my hands against the headboard, so I could hold myself in place for him.

“Good girl.”

The new position rubbed my clit in just the right way against his pubic bone. I

moaned as pleasure ripped through me. Gasping, I clung to him as I came undone and exploded into a million pieces.

With a shout, Leo shuddered and jerked into me. He filled me with his seed, coating my overheated channel with cooling wetness.

I lay limp, overcome with the pleasure he just wrung out of me. My core clenched around him, squeezing out the last drops of his cum as the aftershocks of my orgasm ran through me.

Leo rolled over and gathered me in his arms. I sighed and buried my head against his chest. The clean scent of him surrounded me in a welcoming cocoon. Draping a leg over his, I closed my eyes. Never had I believed it was possible to be so close to another person.

When I awoke, the room was deathly silent. With no need to breathe, Leo's chest was unnaturally still beneath my cheek.

One thing that wasn't still was the engorged rod that stood to attention and prodded at my thigh.

I moaned and rubbed my leg against him. For my action, I was rewarded with a trail of slick precum against my skin. My center ached in response. What was it about this vampire that filled me with such need?

I looked up to find Leo's eyes sparkling in amusement at my actions.

"How long have I been out?" I asked groggily. The last remaining fog of sleep cleared from my brain.

"Not too long." He caressed my cheek before he brushed his lips gently against mine.

“I like watching you sleep.”

My cheeks heated. No man had ever been this nice to me after sex. How long was this going to last once we stepped out of our little hideaway?

“Don’t be sad, beautiful.” Leo tipped my chin up toward him. He must have felt my body stiffen in his embrace.

I shook my head. “I’m not. I just don’t want this to end.”

“Who said it needed to?”

He didn’t understand. Once we were back out there, in the vampire compound, everything was going to go back to normal. He was a vampire and I was his captive.

As much as he may be okay with that, I wasn’t.

My vision blurred with unshed tears. How I wished we had met in another life. Instead of all this blood and death, we would spend our weekends picking out plants for the garden or washing dishes together. It was a life that was never going to be ours to keep.

I pushed the thought out of my mind and blinked back the wetness that threatened to spill down my cheeks. For now, nothing outside mattered.

I smiled at him. “You’re right. That’s for tomorrow. All I want right now is to taste you.”

“Take what you need. Every part of me is yours.”

I didn’t need any more encouragement. I straddled his torso and bent until I was face

to face with the tip of his weeping cock.

I licked my lips and blew a puff of air over his engorged flesh. His length twitched and jumped towards me in response.

“Tease,” Leo growled. He grabbed my hips with a firm grip and tugged until I was sitting on his face.

The first swirl of his tongue on my sensitive flesh sent shockwaves through me. Oh, goodness. His tongue worked furiously on me, sending me quickly towards the edge.

“Not fair!” I was supposed to be the one driving him out of his mind. Not to be outdone, I bent over and took him into my mouth, swallowing him to the root.

He let out a low growl and slapped my bottom. I let out a hum of pleasure and grinned. This powerful creature was putty under my hands and mouth.

My tongue traced each vein and ridge of his length. I did everything I could think of to drive him wild. Gripping his muscular thighs with my tiny hands, I held him in place as I worked him with my mouth.

Leo retaliated by doubling his efforts on my clit. The intensity was too much. My legs clenched around his head as I came. My womb pulsed as I rode out my orgasm on his face. His cock muffled my cries of pleasure, and soon he filled my mouth with a rush of cool seed. Despite my best efforts to swallow it all and not waste a drop, some of it dribbled down my chin.

I crawled off and collapsed next to him in a trembling heap.

“That was amazing,” I gasped.

Leo kissed my forehead. "I should be the one saying that."

Pride filled my chest at his praise. I wanted so much to please him.

And yet, when I looked down, his still member was still rigid and standing at attention.

"Didn't you—" I licked my lips and tasted the remnants of him. How was he still hard?

He let out a low chuckle. "Vampire stamina is one of the few perks of being half-undead. I will never have to recover like a mortal man."

Oh gods. My insides throbbed in anticipation. As much as I wanted him again, I was still sore from how deeply he fucked me. At this rate, Leo was going to kill me with his dick.

Leo must have sensed my hesitation and guessed what was wrong with me. He gave me a knowing masculine look as his chest puffed with pride.

I rolled my eyes. "Men!"

He laughed. "Come on, little one. I know the perfect workaround for your problem."

I was doubtful. What could he possibly do to ease the soreness between my folds? I followed his lead as he rolled over as he urged me onto my stomach.

Resting my head on my arms, I closed my eyes and relaxed while I waited for whatever he was going to do. I heard the creak of a drawer open and stuff being tossed around.

“I swore I saw a bottle here,” he uttered. The bed dipped once again as he kneeled beside me.

I gasped in surprise as the first drip of cold oil landed on the small of my back. “I’m sorry I can’t warm it up for you,” he whispered before placing a kiss on my shoulder.

“It’s fine.” And it was. He was making me hot enough to warm up the oil all by myself. The sweet scent of almonds surrounded us as my skin heated the oil. I felt the slickness drip down my crack and run between my butt cheeks.

Leo kneaded my sore muscles, massaging the oil all over my back and down my buttocks and thighs. He kneaded my ass for a long period of time before slowly spreading me. He rubbed the oil all over my sore folds before he worked up to my pucker. I let out a whimper as he circled the tight muscle with a greased finger. My nipples were so hard against the scratchy surface of the bedsheets. Pressing and massaging, but not entering me, he teased and loosened my back hole in preparation for what was to come.

“I’m going to take your ass tonight.” He kissed my neck once again and gave me a sharp nip. The love bit sent a shock through my body, rearing up I pressed my hips against his probing finger. All the previous soreness in my body melted away until only the intense heat and need for him remained.

“Please,” I begged. What a needy thing I had become, as I arched my back and presented my ass for him to take. Even more oil dripped down my crack, and then he pressed one, then two fingers into my ass.

“Oh gods,” I whimpered. My legs trembled as I struggled to catch a breath. He scissored his fingers as he worked them in and out of my tight sphincter. Even his fingers felt like it was too much. The stretch hurt, but it felt so good. As he worked me, I heard the squirt of more oil and then the wet sound of him stroking his oil

covered cock with his other hand.

I moaned in anticipation as he withdrew his fingers, and then he pressed the blunt tip of his cock against my pucker.

My muscles resisted as the thick head popped in and stretched my tight channel.

It was too much. Bracing myself on my arms, I took a deep breath. He began to thrust, working himself in bit by bit with each push.

“You will take all of me. We will fit together.”

I had my doubts as he stretched me to my limits, but I willed myself to relax. Bearing down against him, I opened myself and bounced tentatively on his length.

“That’s it,” he hissed. I grasped the bedsheets as he rocked into me. Together we worked until his entire rod was inside of me with his sack pressing flush against my folds.

“Good girl. I knew you could do it.”

I glowed under his praise as my chest filled with feminine pride.

Over and over again, he impaled me, filling me to my limit until the searing heat of him felt like it was going to split me into pieces.

Reaching under me, he rubbed my sensitive nub with the same intensity as his pounding thrusts.

“Leo,” I chanted as I flew closer to the edge. The Aching fullness was building up into a sweet pressure that was ready to explode in any moment.

The sharp nip at my neck sent me flying over the cliff . As his teeth sank in, I fell into the abyss and broke into a million particles of light.

Each sip of blood he pulled from my neck drew a matching twinge of pleasure directly from my womb. I was nothing but pleasure and sensation. I felt the gentle press of his wrist against my lips. Instinctively, I opened my mouth and lapped at the skin. The metallic tang of his blood was anything but repulsive as I would have expected.

“Mine!” he growled into my neck.

I drank from him as he drank from me. We were an endless cycle of pleasure and need. He reared into me once more before filling me to the brim with his spendings.

“Shh. Stop, Meghan.”

I cried out at the loss as he wrenched his wrist away and withdrew from my body.

“You have to stop before you take too much.” Leo gathered me in his arms and kissed the top of my head. I was as limp as a newborn kitten as I rested my cheek against his chest.

What was that? I couldn’t believe what had come over me and made me want to drink his blood like it was the most delicious wine.

“We are mated now,” he answered. “It is natural for you to desire my blood as I desire yours. Still, it isn’t wise to drink too much. Vampire blood can be intoxicating for humans.”

I sat up and looked at him. How did he read my thoughts? I did not say any of the words in my mind out loud.

“Oh my gods. You just read my mind, just like Amanda and Alex.”

Leo chuckled out loud. “Yes, as much as you can read mine. That’s one aspect of the mating bond,” he said silently in his mind.

I clung to him once again and traced a pattern on his chest. Suddenly, a sense of warmth and peace washed over me like the thickest blanket being wrapped over my body.

It was Leo’s love for me, I realized.

There had only ever been once source of constant in my life, and that was myself.

Until now.

Was I ready to change all that and let him into my heart?

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Meghan

The car was silent but filled with the noise of everything unsaid as Leo drove back to the compound

Though Leo kept stroking the back of my hand as he drove, his reassuring touch could not hide the telltale signs that he was closing himself off to me.

The closer we got to the vampire lair, the more the demonic part of him came out. The human man that I just shared a bed and played house with vanished in front of my eyes. By the time we pulled into the garage, I wasn't even sure if the previous hours of pleasure were a figment of my imagination. His eyes were as cool and glacial as the first time I met him.

Dante was waiting for us when we arrived. He glanced back and forth at Leo and me, but if he suspected something had happened, he didn't say anything.

“Alex called an emergency meeting. Just the A-team today.”

His gaze lingered on the fresh bite mark on my neck. Self-consciously, my hand flew up to cover the glaring mark of Leo's ownership.

“She should come too.”

I didn't understand what I had to do with anything, but they both started walking without seeing if I was going to follow. I scurried after them, afraid that I was going to become vampire chow again if I fell too far behind. I guess I was going to this

meeting too.

Alex was already in the meeting room along with Grant. To my surprise, Amanda, Rose, and Lizzy were also present.

The moment we walked into the room, it felt like all eyes were on us. Their gazes zeroed in like lasers on me, or I guess, specifically the mark on my neck marking me as Leo's mate.

I guess the cat was out of the bag now. Sweat beaded on my forehead under their scrutiny. Every instinct inside screamed at me to leave, but I couldn't make my feet move.

Sensing my discomfort, Amanda struggled up to her feet. She linked her arm with mine and gently led me over to where she and the other girls were sitting.

"We need to be here to know what our mates are planning. Just in case," she whispered in my ear.

In case something went wrong, and they didn't return home, she implied silently. The gravity of the situation sank in, and my knees buckled from under me. Thankfully, Lizzy had already slid a chair behind my knees. I sank down gratefully. The mere thought that I could lose Leo squeezed my heart painfully like a vise.

Dante looked around the room. "Where's Giselle? If we don't leave soon, we're not going to have enough time to extract the humans. We have to set out now or the Aurelians will get there before we do."

"There's no encampment," Grant said solemnly.

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked. "I thought you found a hideout of people who

were going to be captured and sold.”

“You made it all up,” Dante said as realization dawned. “This was a set-up to flush out the traitor.”

Alex nodded. “I have Giselle on video stealing the GPS unit in my office safe. By the time she arrives at the coordinates, it will already be too late for her and the Aurelians. The place has already been booby-trapped with explosives.”

Grant let out a bunch of curse words under his breath and kicked a metal garbage can across the room. “Our own sister. Fucking hell. It was her this whole time.”

My mind raced as I struggled to catch up to speed on what was happening, but from what I could figure out, Giselle, Leo’s mother, had betrayed the vampire clan. The odd occurrences these past weeks all made sense now. The multiple alarms going off around the compound at odd times. The unspoken tension between Alex and Leo. Why everybody seemed on edge all the time. Giselle had been stealing information from her own clan and passing it on to the Aurelians.

I shuddered. The Aurelians were truly evil. In comparison, the vampires in this room were saints.

Alex shot Leo a sideways glance. Even though Giselle was his and Grant’s sister, she was Leo’s mother. However lacking she may have been as a mom, her betrayal must have been like a knife to his gut.

Leo squared his jaw and his eyes hardened in response. “My mother made her bed the moment she sold out our clan. She is no longer my concern.” He turned to Alex and bowed at the waist. “You can depend on me to always act in the best interests of the Diamantis clan. This in no way affects my ability to serve you, Master.”

Alex placed a hand on Leo's shoulder. "Your loyalty has never been in doubt, Leo. If you need to, you can sit this one out."

Leo bowed even deeper. "I live to serve."

Alex nodded. "Very well."

"Do you think Giselle will come back?" Amanda asked.

"Our sister will not dare show her face around here again. The moment she turned on us, she put a kill order on herself," Grant replied.

"She's the Aurelians's problem now," Alex added. "Her time there is limited, too. They will never trust her. Once a traitor, always a traitor."

Grant stood up, and with a nod from Alex, started to speak. "While Giselle has the Aurelian forces running around on a wild goose chase, we have an opportunity to strike. Victor in Athens has sent word that there's been suspicious Aurelian activity in the Meteora area."

"Shit." Dante shook his head. "Is it really going to happen? We've all heard the old stories about the origins of vampires. The hell demons that escaped into our world and mated with humans to create our kind were supposed to be a legend."

Alex frowned. "Cederic is determined to test that theory. If he succeeds in opening the portal in Greece, the barrier between two worlds will cease to exist. He will unleash hell on Earth. The current darkness will look like paradise in comparison"

"He's insane. What could possibly come of this besides total chaos? These demons have no reason or desires besides violence and destruction," Leo added.

“Our only chance to save the world is to stop Cederic before he opens the portal.” Alex paced the room as he spoke. Anxiety rolled off of him in waves that even I could sense. I had the barest understanding of what was going on, but even I could tell that the entire planet was in deep shit if we didn’t stop this Cederic guy. I remembered Amanda mentioning him some time back when she filled me in on everything that went down after we were separated in Paris. Cederic was the master vampire of the Aurelian clan. They were the ones who captured her before Alex rescued her. From what Amanda told me about the Aurelian vamps and everything they were involved in, they were despicable and evil in every sense of the word.

Leo must have sensed the unease building inside of me. He gathered me close and kissed the top of my head. “Do not be afraid. We will triumph,” he whispered.

Will we? I wanted to ask, but the steady confidence in his answer made it hard not to trust him.

“And how are we going to do that?” Dante asked. “He controls all the other vampire clans, so long as he has the orb of Teneblas.”

“Exactly.” Alex stopped and turned to face the rest of us. “We have to strip him of his power. Without the orb, he loses control of the sun. He will be nothing but just another clan leader. The others will turn on him, and then we can take him out for good.”

“Pack your bags, Meghan.” Leo squeezed my shoulder. “Looks like we’re going to Greece.”

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Meghan

With no time to spare, the entire team boarded one of the Diamantis clan's private jets. We flew almost nonstop, landing in New York City to refuel before flying across the Atlantic Ocean directly to Athens. The Diamantis vampires had a base there, and Alex had already alerted the local forces to prepare for battle.

While the vampires discussed strategy, the rest of the girls and I tried to get as much rest as possible in the bedroom area. Well, that was the plan. In reality, we ended up filling the hours with gossip about our men.

"I can't believe you and Leo!" Amanda brushed my hair aside and examined the bite mark on my neck. The wound was still fresh and angry red, but it was already starting to scab over. She nodded in approval and gave me a sisterly hug. "I knew you two would hit it off. He's so kind, isn't he?"

I blushed. Despite our short friendship in the before times, she knew me better than anybody in my own family ever did. "He's a sweet little sugar plum," I whispered.

"I'll get you for that," Leo replied through our bond. "Stop spreading rumors. Nobody around here is going to respect me if you keep talking like that."

"Must be nice to have a king bed on your own private jet," Lizzy said with a sigh. She flopped on to the bed and spread her arms like she was making snow angels.

"Yeah, it is nice. Very nice." Amanda blushed as she spoke.

“Oh goddess, do I even want to know what’s happened on this bed?” Lizzy’s face screwed into a look of horror as realization dawned. She jumped off the bed like it was full of ants.

Rose laughed. “They’re all alone thousands of feet in the air where nobody can hear or see them scream. What did you think the Master was going to do with his mate, play Monopoly?”

I tuned them out as they each took turns bantering about their own mate’s sexual prowess. All this sex talk only made me miss Leo. I wondered where we were going to go from here. What exactly did it mean to be mated to a demi-vampire? When we got back to LA, would I still be getting my own room, or would I sleep in Leo’s bed from now on? I wondered what his place looked like.

Suddenly an image flashed in my mind of an enormous four-poster bed in the middle of an expensive looking modern room. The bed was covered in midnight blue silk sheets, and it looked like I would sink in and disappear among all the pillows. Then, another image. This time, I was naked on the bed, with my wrists and ankles tied to the bedposts with leather cuffs. I shivered at the wanton image of myself writhing in pleasure. Is this what I looked like from Leo’s point of view?

My cheeks grew warm. That answered my question then. Crossing my legs, I tried to find relief from the need building in my core. Soon. We would defeat this Cederic guy, go home, and then Leo and I would lose ourselves in each other.

My thoughts turned dark. If we were going to live long enough to get back to Los Angeles, whispered the traitorous voice in my head. We were going to take on a vampire cult led by a crazy vampire hellbent on ending the world. If he succeeded in opening the portal, then Leo and the others would have to battle bloodsucking creatures that were vicious enough to strike fear in the hearts of these vampires.

I shuddered. What could be scary enough to frighten a bunch of burly vamps?

Leo must have sensed my unease. A surge of comfort traveled through our bond and enveloped my mind. Immediately, my heart rate slowed, and it felt like Leo's arms were wrapped around me. "I'm okay," I reassured him through the bond. "Don't worry about me. Focus on kicking ass."

Never before had I been so protected, loved, and safe, even with all the uncertainty in my life. Was this what the others felt with their vampire mates? A flood of shame filled me at how judgmental I used to be of people who chose to become mated with vampires.

"Hello?" Rose appeared in front of me, waving her hand in my face. I blinked as the room came into focus again. The other women all gave me knowing looks. "It's pretty neat, isn't it? I couldn't stop talking with Dante when we first forged our bond."

"I think it's cute. You two are still in your honeymoon phase," Lizzy said with a teasing tone.

"Wait until you feel what his orgasm feels like through the bond," Amanda added in a low voice. She wiggled her eyebrows for extra effect.

The others laughed while my cheeks felt like they were on fire.

The plane's overhead speakers let out a melodic chime before the pilot's voice came over the air. "We are approaching Athens in fifteen minutes. Prepare for landing."

Saved by the bell, I thought. We went back out to the main area of the plane where the others were. Taking our seats, we fastened our seat-belts while the plane made an uneventful landing in a field.

As we came off of the plane, we were greeted by a fleet of armored cars. A dark-haired man with a goatee was already standing by the first car. His dark brown eyes were almost black, and they glistened like gems under the glare of the spotlights lining the airport runway. He greeted Alex and bowed formally, like Leo often did. The two men spoke in hushed voices before Alex gave the signal for the rest of us to follow and get into the cars.

Athens was just as destroyed as Paris and the rest of the world. We drove through the ruined city and soon arrived at the Diamantis compound.

Whatever Alex and the other vampire discussed during the drive must have satisfied Alex.

We arrived at the compound, a grand manor with imposing marble columns and ornate windows.

Alex addressed us from the front steps. “You’re all tired from the long flight. I need everybody well rested before the battle. Victor has someone tailing Cederic and his men. While they are still hiding out at their headquarters, we will rest while we can.”

All of us split up immediately with our mates and made our way to our rooms.

As soon as Leo closed the door behind us, I shoved his shoulder, pushing him against the door with a thud. Claiming his lips with a sudden ferocity, I tried to devour him, as if doing so could keep him with me.

“You need to come back tomorrow—” I started.

Leo gathered me in his arms. Looping my arms around his neck, he kissed the top of my head and stroked my hair. “Don’t fret. It’s a standard mission. Cederic’s forces are scattered and despite the orb, he is weak.”

“Promise me you’ll come back.”

“Everything will work out. You’ll see.”

Before I could say anything else, he covered my lips with his. I moaned in protest at our interrupted conversation, but there was no use pretending that I stood a chance against his passionate onslaught.

We made quick work of discarding our clothes and stumbling towards the bed. Soon, I was grasping at the back of his neck, my fingers tangled in his hair as he kissed his way down my body.

After we had claimed each other multiple times, we clung to each other in a mass of stated sticky limbs. Even though he had showed me his love physically, he still hadn’t promised me that he would come back to me alive and in one piece.

The next day, the Diamantis vampires headed out to battle with what looked like every weapon and explosive in their armory. The rest of the human women and I stayed behind and watched helplessly as our men marched out to war.

Anxiety filled the air. Even Amanda, who usually had a voracious appetite, had to be forced by Rose to eat for the sake of the baby. Hours seemed like days as we waited for their return. I wanted to reach out to Leo through the bond to see if he was okay, but that could distract him at a crucial moment.

Lizzy passed the time by fluttering around and making sure we all had an endless supply of tea flowing into our cups. I think it had something to do with her being a witch that made the act of brewing tea such a calming action for her. My hands shook with caffeine jitters as I brought my seventh cup of tea to my lips.

Suddenly, a vision of billowing smoke, fire, and destruction flashed in my mind. A

bunch of injured vampires were fleeing the scene, but they were not the focus of the vision. A blonde woman stared directly at me as she helped a man with white and black hair get up. She was as tall as Leo and had the same glacial blue eyes, though hers were dead inside and held none of the warmth and kindness of Leo's eyes. This must be Leo's mother. She looked like she was torn between coming closer or escaping with her companion. After a moment of hesitation, she turned her back on Leo and followed the rest of the fleeing vampires, disappearing into the thick black smoke.

The vision turned black and the bond between Leo and me snapped like a door slamming shut. Despite my mate's best efforts to sever the link between our minds, the pain of his mother's betrayal and abandonment radiated through the bond.

I came back to consciousness at the same time as Amanda. "Alex has the orb!" she declared. She paused again as she spoke to Alex yet again. "Cederic has escaped with some of the Aurelians, and Giselle is with them. The important thing is, we have the orb of Tenebras"

Finally, a bit of good news.

"What about the rest of the men?" Rose asked. She plucked at the hem of her shirt nervously.

Amanda closed her eyes for a moment as she spoke to Alex. "They are safe. All of them are safe. A bit worse for the wear, but alive."

When Alex, Grant, Dante, and Leo came back, all of the human women greeted them with a war hero's welcome. Grant was the most seriously injured, with a deep slash across his torso that looked like it was caused by a sword. Immediately, Lizzy set out to concoct a poultice and healing potion for her mate.

I ran my hands over Leo, examining him for any damage. There was none besides the rapidly swelling lump above his right eyebrow. I touched the wounded flesh with my fingertips.

“That’s going to bruise tomorrow,” I whispered.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s nothing that won’t heal in a day or two.” Leo gathered my hands in his and placed a kiss on my knuckles. “I told you everything was going to work out, didn’t I?”

Indeed, it did. All of our mates were back home, safe and sound with us, and the orb that controlled the sun was now in our hands.

For the first time in ages, I was hopeful for the future.

I bolted up in bed, scared awake out of a dreamless sleep by the screeching sound of alarms going off at full blare. Fumbling in the dark, I messed around with every button on my nightstand until I found the button for the lights.

“What’s going on?” I asked blearily. The fog of sleep made my brain feel mushy, and not much was making sense to me at the moment.

Leo pulled on his pajama pants and shirt in a hurry. “There’s been a breach in the compound.”

I sniffed the air. “Is something burning?”

“Fuck!” Leo lifted me in his arms and carried me as he rushed out of the room. Acrid black smoke filled the hallway. Grant was already guiding Lizzy, and we followed him as he led us out of the building. All around us, vampires rushed to and fro as they tried to put out the raging fire.

As soon as we got outside, I gasped for fresh air to clear out the burning sensation in my lungs. Rose and Lizzy were already outside.

“Stay together,” Leo said before he joined the firefighting efforts.

The three of us huddled together as we watched the fire grow. By some miracle, they were able to put out the fire, and it didn’t spread past the east wing of the building.

Leo came back outside first. He was covered in soot and his face was smudged in black. He smelled like a campfire. I ran over and threw my arms around his neck. “What happened?”

Leo returned my hug with a tight squeeze before setting me back on the ground. “Alex is sure it’s the Aurelians, they want to get the orb back.”

“Did they take it?” Lizzy asked.

Leo shook his head. “It’s safe in a location. Only Alex knows where it is.”

I let out a breath of relief. That orb was the ticket to ending this hellish world and life going back to normal. The vampires couldn’t find out, not even Leo. I planned on getting my hands on that orb and smashing it into a million pieces. As long as it was hidden somewhere close by, I had a chance.

Alex walked out of the smoldering building and came over to us. “Where’s Amanda?” He glanced at us and immediately froze.

“I thought she was with you?” Rose replied.

I looked around. Amid all the chaos, I didn’t notice Amanda was missing.

“No, she said she was going to visit you before going to bed.”

Rose shook her head. “She never came to my room.”

Alex let out a roar that made the ground shake with his fury. He got the faraway look in his eyes that indicated he was reaching out to her through the bond. He shook his head. “There’s nothing there. She must be unconscious.”

Immediately, the master vampire took charge and began barking out orders. “I want everybody to secure the perimeters. Search every square inch of the grounds. Leave nothing unturned. Look for clues, signs of a struggle, anything.” His eyes filled with bloodthirsty rage. “I will burn the world to the ground to get her back.”

“You might want to hold onto that thought,” Dante said as he ran over with Grant. “Look at this.”

He handed a torn off gold necklace studded with diamonds to Alex. It was covered in blood and there was strands of blonde hair wrapped around the clasp.

“I would recognize that necklace anywhere,” Leo said. “My father got that necklace for my mother for their fortieth anniversary.”

“Amanda must have ripped it from Giselle’s neck as they fought,” Grant added.

“Will she hurt Amanda?” I asked. I wasn’t familiar enough with Giselle to know what she was capable of doing, but everything I knew about this woman indicated she was ruthless.

Alex shook his head. “No. She’s crazy, but she’s not stupid. She’s going to use Amanda as a bargaining chip to get the orb.”

“You can’t possibly be thinking about going through with it,” Grant protested.

“I have no choice. I can’t lose Amanda or the baby.”

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Leo

“She’s going to be there, isn’t she?” My mother was chaotic, but predictable in her own way. I knew exactly where she was going to be waiting for us. I suspected that Alex knew as well.

Alex nodded. “Giselle would never pass up an opportunity to send a message or seek vengeance.” He removed another gun from the safe and loaded it with bullets soaked in holy water. “The place where her own mate died is the perfect place to hold Amanda hostage.” He handed the loaded weapon to me. “I have no doubt she’ll hurt Amanda even if we didn’t have the orb.”

I holstered the weapon. With two guns hidden under my jacket, a stake strapped to my ankle, and another knife strapped to my arm, I was ready for combat. “She won’t succeed. We’ll get them back safe and sound.”

Alex grabbed the side of his giant mahogany desk and shoved it several feet away. Reaching behind the nearest bookcase, he pulled out a hidden crowbar and began ripping out the floorboards that were under the desk.

His choice of a hiding place for the orb was a bit primitive, but I guess sometimes the simpler ways were best, as my mother failed to find the orb. Alex got down on his hands and knees and reached into the hole in the floor until his entire arm disappeared up to his shoulder. He reached around until, finally, he pulled out a nondescript black duffle bag.

“Is that it?” The tattered canvas bag looked like it contained a change of sweaty gym

clothes.

“See for yourself.” Alex unzipped the bag and pulled out a crystal orb the size of a grapefruit. It emitted a golden yellow glow as the magical forces inside swirled around like goldfish in a bowl.

I leaned down and examined it up close for myself. Amazing how such a tiny bit of glass contained the fate of the entire world.

With just Alex and myself on this mission, we moved swiftly. With all the breaches in our wards, Grant and Dante stayed behind to protect the headquarters and the women. It was unlikely, as I suspected my mother was acting on her own behalf, but this may turn out to be a trap to get us to leave the compound unguarded. We couldn’t take any chances.

The old warehouses near the docks of Piareus were long abandoned and looted even before the vampires took over. I looked up at the broken windows in the buildings that glared down at us like evil eyes. The ancient port city never recovered from the economic crisis at the beginning of the century, and the looming buildings were the perfect place for all sorts of unsavory activity and illegal business deals. Some of which, I had been a part of.

My boots crunched on broken glass and bits of broken pallet wood as we moved rapidly through the dark alleyways. It didn’t take long to reach our destination. The warehouse with the wooden doors covered in peeling green paint was forever etched in my memory.

“Wait,” I said, blocking Alex with my arm. “I’ll go first, in case it’s booby trapped.”

A woman’s pained scream tore through the silence in the air.

Alex's fangs descended. "No time!" He growled his battle cry and pulled out a gun from his jacket. "Amanda's in pain."

He shoved me aside and kicked open the doors. Before I could stop him, he rushed in and disappeared into the pitch black room.

I swore under my breath. The only thing in the world that could make my master lose control like that was his mate. Running after Alex, I unsheathed my own weapons as I tracked him by the sound of his pounding footsteps. We were walled in on both sides by aisles of pallets stacked up to the ceiling. It would have been so easy to become disoriented and lose my sense of direction.

Soon, I didn't need to follow Alex to know where to go. The muffled sounds of Amanda's sobs and uneven breathing was like a homing beacon. She was chained to a concrete pillar and gagged with a dirty rag. A thin stream of dried blood ran from her temple down her cheek. The top of her head was stained and matted with dried blood. Her left eye was already swollen and turning a sick shade of maroon.

"Stop right there." My mother aimed her gun at the side of Amanda's head, all while keeping her eyes trained on Alex.

She cocked the gun and steadied her aim at Amanda's head. "Where's the orb?"

Alex held up the black bag.

"Show it to me."

"Release her first," Alex replied.

My mother let out a piercing laugh. "You must think I'm stupid. I hold all the power here." She wrapped her free hand around Amanda's hair and yanked her head back.

Amanda let out a yelp. Her eyes filled with tears at the pain.

“Your little bitch and unborn bastard are in my hands. I say jump, and you say how high. The orb, Alex.”

Alex unzipped the bag and held up the orb for a moment before shoving it back in the bag. “Where’s Cederic and the rest of the Aurelians? I’m surprised they trust you with the orb.”

I immediately caught on to what Alex was trying to do. Not only was he goading her, but he was trying to distract her enough, so she made a fatal mistake in our favor.

“They don’t know, do they?” I asked. “You’re going to keep the orb for yourself.”

My mother gave me a chilling smile. “You were always a clever boy. Just like your father.”

This was my chance. “Please, Mom. Let Amanda go and come back with us. You know Papa wouldn’t want to see you like this.”

She snarled. “Go back to what? My life is over as it is. It was over the moment your father stepped foot into this cursed place. There’s nothing there for me.”

I shoved down the pang in my gut as she finally said it out loud. I never mattered to her at all. In a way, I understood her. My loyalty was to my master and clan, but above all, to Meghan. Yet, I could never imagine abandoning my future children like my mother abandoned me.

“You’re not the only one who’s lost a lot. Your hatred for our master and clan means I lost more than one parent that day.” I kept my eyes focused on my mother. As I spoke, Alex was getting ready to attack. Only the twitch of his fingers gave him

away.

He swung the bag with the orb in it, launching it straight at her hand, knocking the gun out of her grasp. The weapon skipped across the room like a stone skipping on a pond surface.

While my mother was distracted between going for the gun or grabbing the orb, Alex lunged at her and attacked.

I dived and seized the bag before she could get to it. Tucking the bag close to my chest, I shielded it as I rolled and landed on my feet next to Amanda. Keeping one eye on Alex and my mother as they battled, I worked at untying my master's mate.

It was difficult to concentrate with the sickening sound of punches landing on flesh and the boom of bodies being slammed into the pillars of the concrete building. Summoning ever last bit of my strength, I wrenched the chain links between my hands and pulled until the metal snapped.

From somewhere behind me, came the bang of a gun being fired. There was an anguished scream. And then silence. I gathered Amanda into my arms and used my body to shield her from the violence and gore.

"It's done," Alex said.

Amanda let out a sob and rushed into his waiting arms.

It was only then that I saw the black puddle of ooze behind Alex that used to be my mother.

Despite my sadness, I knew it had to end this way. I was thankful that Alex was the one to deal the final blow, instead of me. Alex and I shared a look over the top of

Amanda's head. As much as I could not forgive my mother's betrayal, I didn't know if I could have ended her life with my own hands.

"Are you okay?" Meghan asked through the bond.

I steeled my resolve. My control was slipping if she felt my pain through the bond.

"Everything's fine. We have the orb and Amanda is safe." I opened my mind and let her see what I was seeing. Alex kissed Amanda's forehead before resting his hands on her pregnant belly.

"We should get going." I gestured at Amanda's head wound. "You'll need to get that checked out by the medic."

Alex nodded. "Leo's right. All this stress cannot be good for you or the baby."

The relief we felt was short-lived, lasting only until we stepped out of the warehouse.

The sky was no longer ink black. An ominous purple glow lit up the sky as bolts of lightning came shooting down at a rapid pace. In the distance, heavy dark clouds swirled as if trying to come together around something descending from the heavens.

"Fuck!" If I had a heartbeat, it would have stopped right now.

"What is it?" Amanda asked as she stared at the sky with quiet wonder.

"The crazy bastard actually did it. He opened the gates of hell," Alex said.

We were right, in a sense. My mother was indeed a distraction. While we were busy fighting with her, Cederic had succeeded in opening the portal separating our world from the ancient demons.

The earth shook with the booming roar of a monstrous creature in the distance. Something resembling a snake-like dragon flew out of the clouds. These were the snakelike creatures that all vampires were descended from.

The giant demon was bigger than a hundred-floor skyscraper. It slithered through the sky like it was on the hunt, and we were its prey. Another followed it, and then another.

“There’s no time to waste. We have to get back to base camp and gather the forces.” Alex handed the bag with the orb over to me and swept Amanda off of her feet into his arms.

We broke every speed limit and barely managed to get back without wrapping our car around a tree. Inside, everybody in the clan, from the main team to the grunts rushed around as they armed themselves for battle. It was a fight for survival and the world as we knew it.

Alex assembled the troops. This time, even the rocket launchers and tanks we smuggled in through the black market were called into service. We were going to need every last weapon and man to take down one of these demons, given their size. I had the feeling that a gunshot wound was going to feel like a bug bite to them. That was, if the bullet managed to pierce their skin at all.

“We can take down one demon, and the next, but what then?” Grant asked.

I agreed with him. It was no use. The demons would just keep pouring out of the portal. “We have to find a way to close the portal.”

“How? That requires magic.”

Meghan looked at Lizzy, but Alex shook his head. “This is far too big of a job for just

one witch.”

“I have an idea.” Lizzy offered tentatively. “You won’t like it, though.”

“We don’t have a choice. I’m willing to try anything,” Alex said.

“We can team up with the local coven.”

Alex let out a growl in disgust. “Those damned witches!”

Lizzy flinched, but did not say anything. She knew all too well how tricky the covens could be. Her own sister was the leader of the coven that tried to kill Alex and even Amanda and Rose. This could end up being a deal with the devil.

Alex sighed. “Use your connections, Lizzy. I’m willing to make a deal.”

“Whatever it takes?” Lizzy asked.

“Whatever it takes. You have my word.”

Lizzy nodded. “I’ll do my best. The leader of the Greek coven is my cousin, I’m sure I can convince her to help us.”

“I’m going with you,” Grant said.

Lizzy looked like she was going to protest at the idea of a vampire following her to the meeting.

“No arguments, love. I’m not letting you go alone and defenseless.”

Lizzy nodded. Grant followed his mate and the two of them went to broker a deal

with the coven.

While we waited for Lizzy and Grant to return with word from the coven, the building shook like we were getting bombed in an active war zone.

At this rate of destruction, the demons were going to leave the Earth a scorched, barren land within the week. This couldn't go on for much longer. We had to make a deal with the witches to close that portal.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Lizzy and Grant returned. An elegant, statuesque woman with flowing black hair down to her waist followed behind them. Her emerald green satin robes brought out the green specks in her opal eyes. This must be the leader of the Greek coven. She was not a crone like most witches who earned the coven leader position. To my eye, she was at most in her mid-thirties.

“This is Cassandra, the leader of the coven here in Athens.” Lizzy stated.

Alex nodded at her in acknowledgement. There was too much mistrust on both sides for anything more.

Lizzy turned to Cassandra. “Alex is the master vampire of the Diamantis clan. He would like to propose a truce in exchange for your help in closing the portal.”

Cassandra scoffed. “I know what you want. You must think I am a blind fool to agree to any deal with your kind. Bloodsucker.” She spat out the last word like it was poison in her mouth.

“I understand your distrust,” Alex responded. “But surely, you can see that the current situation cannot go on for much longer. It is in both of our interests to defeat these creatures and close the doors between our worlds before they turn Earth into hell.”

“What difference does it make if everything is burned to ash? The last several years have already been hell for humankind thanks to you. This way, we can finally have peace in eternal rest.”

Alex let out an aggravated scowl. “Fucking witches. Then we will all burn together.” He swore as he turned away from Cassandra. He took no more than two steps before Amanda placed a gentle hand on his arm. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckles before placing his hand on her stomach.

Whatever she said to him through the bond worked. He sighed and came back to Cassandra. The anger that flowed through him earlier was replaced with resignation.

“Whatever you want. Name your price.”

Cassandra examined him with cool indifference. “My coven will help you close the portal if you agree to give us the orb so we can destroy it.”

“You can’t be serious,” Alex snarled. “We will have to go into hiding.”

“Exactly.” A cruel smile graced her face. “Your kind will disappear back into the shadows. The world will once again belong to the living. That is the price I demand.” She glanced at Amanda. “I assume you are willing to pay for the future of your child and mate. Are you not?”

Even as Alex fought with the decision, I already knew he was going to agree to the deal.

“I agree to your terms, on one condition.”

Cassandra quirked an eyebrow and waved her hand imperiously in a gesture for him to continue.

“You will wait until the portal is closed and the demons are defeated. My men will need time to find shelter before the sun comes out.”

"I accept your terms, vampire. Cassandra withdrew a sacred dagger hidden in her waistband and uttered an incantation before slicing her palm. She handed Alex the dagger and he repeated the same actions on himself.

“An agreement bound by blood. The first to break the contract will be condemned to eternal damnation.”

Alex repeated the same words before grabbing her hand. A pale blue glow surrounded their hands as the blood flowing from their wounds melded.

The blood oath was completed.

“We will need to hurry,” Cassandra said as she took charge.

Lizzy handed her some gauze and helped her bandage her wound.

“The spell requires blood from one who is alive and yet not living. This portal was opened by spilling of blood from unwilling victims. To close it will require the blood of the dead freely given through the living.”

I stepped forward. “I’ll do it.” There was nobody else in the room who fit the description except myself.

Cassandra nodded in approval. “You will need to bleed onto the portal when the time comes.”

“Wait a minute,” Meghan protested. “What will happen to Leo?”

The witch looked down on my mate with disdain on her face at being interrupted. “He will only need to give several drops. That will be enough to close the portal.”

I wanted to snap her neck for her disrespect towards Meghan, but for the fate of everybody on the planet, I held my temper in check. What happened after the portal was closed was another matter.

“It’s settled.” Alex took command of the room before the witch became overconfident. “My men will fight back the demons while Leo makes his way to the portal. When we give the signal, the coven will cast their spell and close the portal.”

“Very well. I will assemble the coven and wait for your signal. But first, the orb.” Cassandra held out her hand expectantly. Alex brought out the bag with the orb from its hiding place. After a moment of hesitation, he handed it to the witch.

“May the gods smile upon both of us. We will need it.” With those parting words, Cassandra exited the room with a dramatic swirl of her robes.

Alex immediately began briefing everybody on the strategy and where they were to be positioned.

Meghan grabbed my arm before I could head over to the group. I cupped her face in my hands and wiped the tears flowing down her cheeks. “Don’t cry. You heard the witch, it’s only a few drops of blood.”

“I don’t trust her. What if you fall into the portal and end up trapped in the hell dimension?” Her words came out choked as she sobbed.

I couldn’t stand by and do nothing, so I leaned down and kissed her lips as if I could sip away her pain. Again, and again, I kissed her gently until her tears stopped.

“I have to. For everybody on this forsaken planet. And for a future for both of us.”

“You have to promise to come back to me. I’ll have a plate of bad spaghetti waiting for you every night if you come home.”

“I promise.” With one last kiss on her lips, I prepared for battle.

The battle was less of a battle and more of a bloodbath. We started out strong, with guns blazing, but the hell creatures stomped through our forces like we were ants. Black puddles of what used to be my clan members stained the ground as they fought with the Aurelian vamps and the hell creatures their master released.

I paid the death and destruction no mind as I scrambled up the mountainside towards the cave entrance where the portal was hidden. As I scrambled over the loose rocks and boulders, the screams of Alex, Grant, and Dante from below urged me on. I had to get to that portal.

Finally, I made it to the cave. I approached the shimmering purple pool with caution. For an opening into a hell dimension, it was smaller and less impressive than I thought it would be. Roars came from within. Probably from some demon that was scrambling to get through. For now, though, nothing was coming through. This was my chance.

I reached into my back pocket and grabbed my knife. With a single decisive slash, I cut my palm open and squeezed until a steady stream of blood fell from my hand into the portal.

A thundering boom crashed through the sky. Beneath my feet, the ground shook. I almost fell over into the portal, but I caught myself on the stone lip surrounding it just in time.

Suddenly, a bright white light filled the cave. Searing pain ripped through me, like I was burning up from within. The pain shorted my senses until I was nothing. I was one with the light in the cave as I floated away into nothing.

Meghan

I grabbed Lizzy's hand tightly with my left hand and Rose's hand in my right as we formed a circle with the rest of the coven members. Even though I had never performed a spell in my life, the witches required every able body to join in on the spell as it was going to consume an incredible amount of power.

Amanda gave me a comforting smile from next to Rose as the witches began chanting. Despite not knowing any of the words to this spell, I felt the power rushing through me as they chanted.

Heat and flames licked at my skin, and every nerve inside of me jumped as their chants grew in intensity and speed. Finally, all that pent-up energy inside exploded out of us like a firecracker shooting up into the sky. A sharp, intense pain pierced my skull. The sound of their voices faded into a high-pitched ring, and the scene in front of my eyes became as white as snow. I wrenched my hands from Rose and Lizzy's and clutched my head. My knees gave out, and I fell to the floor. Tugging on the bond connecting me to Leo, I tried to reach him, but received only silence in return.

"It is done. Destroy it." Cassandra's faint voice pierced through the ringing in my ears. The last thing I heard was the sound of glass shattering as the orb was smashed onto the ground.

Slowly, early morning sunlight flooded in through the windows.

It was all over.

We had saved the day.

All around me, the humans rejoiced the return of daylight and their freedom from vampire bondage.

And yet, all I could do was curl up and weep. Leo accomplished his mission, but at what price?

“Come on. Let’s go home,” Amanda said in a soft voice usually reserved for animals, babies, and her pathetic crying friends. Several hands stroked my shoulders and helped me to my feet.

The girls and I gathered each other in a hug as we escaped the rowdy crowd. While the other humans were celebrating their freedom, we were mourning the loss of our lives as we knew it with our mates.

We staggered into the bright light of day for the first time in years. The sun was so overwhelming that I had to clench my eyes shut.

“He’s gone,” I uttered. It was like every last bit of hope in me had been destroyed. I didn’t need to ask the rest of them if they had heard from their mates. The fact that I was the only one crying told me all I needed to know. Their mates had responded when they called through their bond.

I tried again to contact Leo, but there was only silence.

“Wait a minute. Stop.” Amanda gripped my elbow. “They’ve found him. Leo’s alive.”

“What?” I choked out. A part of me couldn’t believe her words when I knew very well that the other half of my bond was missing.

Rose closed her eyes as she spoke to Dante through their bond. “There was a rock slide. Leo was buried under it, and they had to dig him out. He’s unconscious.”

So that’s why I couldn’t reach Leo.

“The sun will make it impossible for them to get out until nightfall, but they’re all okay,” Lizzy added.

My eyes watered again, this time from the joy that was overflowing from my heart. For the first time, I cursed the sun. How I wished it would go away, and the world was covered in darkness again.

We got back to the Diamantis base and waited anxiously for night. Together, we did the best we could to prepare for the return of our mates, gathering medical supplies, brewing healing potions, and waiting with the healers.

Dusk came and went. The sky outside was dark as ink before they finally returned home. Dante carried Leo on his back in a fireman’s carry, while Grant nursed a gaping wound on his chest and Alex limped as he favored his uninjured leg.

We all rushed into action, eager to do something to help our mates. After Dante placed Leo gently onto the nearest chaise, I couldn’t help running my hands over him, as if reassuring myself that he was real.

“Calm down, child. Let me look at him,” Elspeth said as she pushed me aside.

I moved out of the way reluctantly so that the healer could get to work. Biting my nails, I watched as she knelt down next to Leo and started waving a crystal over his body like a metal detector. After the crystal, she started massaging his head as if she was making bread.

Elspeth put the crystal away into her jacket pocket and stood up. “He is fine, physically. As the single conduit between the witches and the portal, the surge of power must have shorted his mind. He will need to rest.”

Elspeth’s answer was not very comforting.

“Will he wake up?”

“It will take time, but he will eventually heal.” Elspeth touched the back of my hand with her wrinkled hand. “Have faith in your mate. He will not desert you this easily.” Elspeth patted my hand once more before leaving to treat her next patient.

I sat on the edge of the chaise next to Leo and brushed his hair out of his face. “I can’t believe you did something so stupid. You made a promise and you better keep it, mister.”

That night, Dante helped me carry Leo up to our bed. Though he offered to help once again with bathing and dressing Leo, I knew Leo wouldn’t like his fellow clan member to see him in such a helpless state.

I did the best I could, wiping away the dirt and soot of battle with a damp washcloth and dressing him in a set of loose sweats and a t-shirt

With nothing more that I could do, I recalled Elspeth’s words. Despite my best efforts to stay awake in case Leo needed me, I fell asleep while clinging to his side.

My dreams were filled with an army of little Leos running around our legs while Leo and I did the crosswords over a cup of coffee. Then the vision shifted, and I was holding my newborn granddaughter in my arms while Leo doted on her. In my next vision, I was standing naked in front of a mirror. My hair was gray, my tits sagged to my elbows, and my face was lined and wrinkled. Leo came up from behind and

wrapped his arms around me before placing a kiss on my shoulder. He looked as handsome as always, and not a day over thirty years old.

I jolted awake at the shocking picture. Oh, gods. What kind of fool was I to think that we had a future. He was never going to want me when I turned old and decrepit, while he stayed the same. Against my will, my eyes filled with wetness once again. I cursed myself for crying so many times today.

“Don’t be stupid,” Leo whispered. His voice was raspy from disuse, but I heard him loud and clear.

I sat up immediately and reached over to the nightstand for the light switch. “What?”

“I said you’re being a dummy. I’ll still love you wrinkles, warts, and all.” He opened his eyes and looked at me through heavy eyelids. “I’ll even love you when you have to take out your dentures to give me a blowjob.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out at the picture he painted.

“That portal must have scrambled your brain.” I smacked his chest and leaned down to give him a kiss. “You’re such a pig, I can’t believe you just said that.”

“It’s true though.” Leo kissed my hand before placing it on his already hard cock. “If we want that little army of Meghans and Leos, we’ll have to start right now.”

And get started we did. Nine months later, our first son, Leonidas was born.

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More than a century in the future following the conclusion of the Doms of Darkness series, humans and vampires reach a stalemate after decades of warfare. Alex and

Amanda's son, Dominic, rules as the king of the Diamantis clan vampires.

Read Dominic and Lara's story in Blood Desire (Vampire Mafia Kings Book 1)

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Thank you for reading the Doms of Darkness series. I hope you loved the characters as much as I do.

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Fiona Bell will do anything to become a successful painter, even if it means working as a maid and practically being homeless. The last thing she needs is a distraction in the form of love. That is, until she finds herself trapped between two overbearing billionaires.

Alpha werewolves Huxley Cain and Derek Fox never expected to find a mate. That is until they meet her. From the moment they catch her sweet scent, they know she is the one to give them an heir.

They will stop at nothing to claim her.

She is theirs to protect.

Theirs to share in pleasure.

Theirs to claim together.

They will never let her go.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:39 pm

I stood on my tiptoes and reached up until I could reach the top of the display case with my feather duster. Balancing on my toes carefully, I avoided touching the spotless glass with my fingers as I ran the duster across the top.

The last thing I wanted was to leave fingerprint smudges on the glass that I would have to clean again. It was nearly four o'clock, and I was almost done cleaning the house. I had a rare two hours booked at my school's painting studio, and I was never going to make it across the city in time if I didn't leave before rush hour traffic.

My reflection in the glass stared back at me. I paused, frowning at what I saw. Dark circles haunted my eyes and my hair was tied in a messy ponytail. The only thing I had going for me was a healthy pink flush across my bare cheeks from my physically demanding job as a maid.

My T-shirt was stretched out from washing with holes along the edges. The faded letters U and M of my university covered the area over my breasts.

The shorts I wore were tight and barely covered my bottom because they were already a couple of years old. I guess I had a late growth spurt and outgrew them in the last year. They were one of the few things I managed to take with me when my father cut me off and kicked me out of the house.

I was far away from being the pretty little socialite my father liked to parade around in front of his rich friends at parties. The way he used to show me off like a piece of meat made it obvious that he wanted to marry me off to one of their sons as soon as possible. I tugged on the edges of my shorts as I recalled how uncomfortable I used to be as the men, both young and old, would leer at my curvy figure. There were other

rich people's sons and daughters at these parties, but I never really fit in with any of them. Every single party ended the same way, with me escaping as soon as possible and hiding out in the library or out near the kitchens with the servants.

I stabbed the furniture with force with the feather duster as I recalled the last argument I had with my dad.

For the crime of wanting to go to art school and wanting to be a painter instead of marrying his chosen protégé, the man I had looked up to my entire life cast me out to the streets.

“Selfish little whore, just like your mother.”

His parting words still stung even after all these years. At eighteen years old, I had been abandoned once again, just like my mother abandoned me shortly after my birth.

Blinking rapidly, I cleared away the tears that stung my eyes.

None of that mattered now. Not only did I survive on my own, but three years later, I was thriving. I was going to graduate from U of M this year. And I did it all by myself, paying my way through college by cleaning rich people's houses. The only thing I needed to worry about was finishing school and getting my paintings into an exhibit.

A loud gurgle came from my stomach, reminding me that I skipped lunch. Ugh. I had to grab takeout on the way too. I had to finish cleaning up and get out of here.

I put in my earbuds and turned up the volume. The pounding beat of the music in my ears set the perfect pace for cleaning the rest of the room quickly. I sang along and shook my hips as I began to vacuum the room.

The giant bed in the center of the room was the toughest part to clean. It had to be

wide enough for at least four people and the top of the mattress was strangely high, coming up to my tummy. I would need a step if I wanted to crawl up there.

My cheeks flushed as I suddenly realized why someone would need a bed like this. The bed was too high for someone as short as me, but it would be at groin height for a tall man. It was the perfect height for fucking. Not that I had any real-life experience with sex, but I had seen things online.

I shook my head and tried to get the perverted images out of my head. It was no business of mine what or who my boss did in his free time. It would be naive to think that a man with his wealth wouldn't have women throwing themselves onto his bed.

Thankfully, I had never met my boss, or else the images in my mind would have been even more awkward. I had no idea who my employer was or what he looked like. Even though I had worked for him for more than three years, my only point of contact was with his personal assistant.

The mansion I cleaned gave away no clues. Everything was obviously expensive, from the multistory floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city below, to the infinity pool on the roof.

Even with all the luxury, the home was cold and sterile, strangely empty of all personal touches. Except for the custom bed in the master bedroom, of course. It could have been yet another home featured in those magazine articles about the mega rich and famous.

Getting down on my knees, I used the hose attachment on the vacuum to reach deep under the bed. My favorite song began and I swayed my hips as I vacuumed to the throbbing beat in my ears.

All I needed to know was that he was loaded and paid well for a clean home.

It was better this way.

There was no awkward conversation or pretending to listen and feigning concern about how hard it was to be so rich and powerful.

This way I could get my work done as quickly as possible. Best of all, I didn't need to care about what I looked like as I crawled around on my knees and bopped along to my favorite songs.

Suddenly, the vacuum cleaner lost power.

I frowned. That was strange.

It was then that I noticed the shadow that fell over the side of the bed.

Make that two shadows.

I froze. My hands shook as I plucked the earbuds out of my ears.

“Don't stop on our account.”

The deep voice startled me. This was the first time I had ever run into another living person while cleaning this house. Now there were two strange men here. Suddenly, I remembered that I was on my knees with my ass in the air, and I was wearing a very short, very tight pair of shorts.

What must they think of me? My cheeks grew hot. I couldn't believe this was happening. This was not how I wanted to meet my boss and his guest.

I jumped to my feet. Eager to hide my barely covered ass, which was prominently on display, I spun around quickly.

To say the two men were gorgeous was an understatement. My breath caught in my throat as I admired their masculine features. Their slate colored suits molded to their muscles in all the right places. The one with dark hair carried an edge of danger to him, while the one with sandy blond hair quirked his lips in a sexy smirk. His eyes twinkled as he read my reactions like an open book.

Unfortunately, I was so focused on the twin sets of blue wolf-like eyes staring at me with hunger, that I failed to see where I was stepping. My foot caught on the edge of the fur rug next to the bed. I stumbled. As I fell, my arms flailed clumsily like a chicken flapping its wings in an attempt to regain my balance.

Tall, dark, and dangerous grabbed me, pulling me to his chest. I caught my breath and sighed at the warm, musky scent of the man holding me. To my surprise, the other man pinned me from behind, pressing the length of his hard body against my back.

Even as my heart hammered in my chest, I melted against the strong muscles cushioning me. In their overwhelming embrace, I was protected. I was safe.

I already thought they were huge from a distance. Now that they were up close, pressed against me, their size was almost beastly. Never in my life had I felt small or delicate like one of those waifish girls in the fashion magazines, but next to them, I was like a toy doll.

Their hands settled on my hips and waist. Heat spread from where their bodies touched mine, shooting straight to my core. I let out a whimper in desperate need. Despite my fear of their huge size, it all felt so right.

Never before had I ever felt this way. The sensations surging through my body were overwhelming and out of my control. There was nothing I could have done to stop the chain reaction I had to them.

I should have pushed them away. I should have screamed. They were too big. I

should have been scared. They were too close, invading my space. But my body was warm and pliable while they held me. My limbs felt sapped of strength.

I brought a hand up to the muscular chest in front of me and flexed my fingers. Something primal in me wanted to dig my nails into his muscles. Instead, I pushed my palms against him, but it was useless. Neither of them budged an inch. Stuck between their hard chests and strong thighs, it was like pushing against a brick wall while being pinned in place by a boulder behind me.

The man behind me leaned down and buried his nose in my hair. He took a long deep breath and exhaled. His breath tickled the hairs on the back of my neck. My inner muscles clenched in need at the sensation.

“She’s the one, Hux. She smells delicious.” His low voice sent shivers up my spine.

Hux. Mr.Dark’s name was Hux. It suited him.

“That’s because she’s ready for breeding.” Hux’s voice dripped with lust. He ran a thumb against my bottom lip. “A juicy, ripe peach that’s ready to be eaten. So plump and sweet, I can’t wait to take a taste.”

“No!” This wasn’t right. No matter what my traitorous body wanted, I couldn’t let my first time be a quick and dirty threesome with my boss. I squirmed out from between them and held my hand out as if I could will them to stay away. “There will be no tasting of anything or anyone,” I blurted. My voice cracked with panic as the words rushed out.

Hux barked out a deep laugh. “Our little rabbit’s a feisty one, Derek.” His eyes glinted with delight. “The chase is going to be so much fun.”

My eyes flew to the other man. Derek grinned. A flash of fang peeked out from between his lips. There was something beastly about him. I blinked quickly. My eyes

must have been playing tricks on me.

He ran his gaze up and down my body, stopping pointedly at my too-short shorts. His tongue ran across his bottom lip. I cursed at myself for choosing to wear them today. If I had remembered to do the laundry last weekend, I would have had clean clothes, then none of this would be happening.

I glanced between the two huge men to the door behind them. There was no way I could make it past them to my escape route.

I was trapped. A helpless rabbit ready to be ravaged by two savage beasts.