



# Vampire War (Vampire Bite #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Protector—that's what Lucas swore to be, but even he couldn't stop them.

One moment, our son was in my arms. The next, gone, kidnapped by enemies who wanted to see us shattered.

We tracked them through blood and shadows, only to face a new threat. The Shadow Bride stepped forward, her golden eyes locking onto Lucas.

The vampire prince is mine. But I had no time for jealousy. Our son was kidnaped, and nothing would stop us from getting him back.

We had a plan, a way to bring our son home and stop a new war before it began. But nothing went according to plan. Hands like steel dragged me away, and Lucas—my fated mate, my protector—was forced to choose between the child we created and the woman he loved.

I prayed he would come for me. I never considered what he'd become to do it.

Vampire War is book 3 of the Vampire Bite series but it can still be read as a standalone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

The morning was perfect, almost too perfect.

I was sitting curled up on the worn armchair, with a book resting open in my lap. Lucas was stretched out on the sofa, one arm draped lazily over the back. His other hand was holding a glass of whiskey. It was a rare indulgence of his.

“I could get used to this,” Lucas said.

I smiled, feeling that familiar shiver down my spine every time we were alone, every time I heard that low rumble in his voice.

“Don’t jinx it,” I warned him playfully.

He smirked, his dark eyes gleaming. “What’s life without a little risk?”

Before I could retort, the door burst open with a loud bang. My heart leapt, and the book slid from my lap.

“Mama! Papa!”

Aiden burst into the room like a tornado, his dark curls bouncing as he bounded toward us. He was barefoot and his shorts were slightly muddy as if he’d raced through the garden without a care in the world. That wouldn’t be a surprise.

“Can I go to Peter’s house?” he asked, his words tumbling over one another in

excitement. “Please, please, please! He just got a new puppy, and I have to see it!”

I sat up straighter, my heart already sinking. “Aiden, it’s getting late—”

“It’s not dark yet,” he interrupted, his dark, hazel eyes wide and pleading. “And Peter’s house is so close. I’ll be careful, I promise!”

I hesitated, glancing out the window. The sun hung low in the sky, painting everything in soft gold. It was safe.

Of course, it was safe. We’d made sure of that, but the idea of letting him wander, even for something so innocent, twisted my stomach in knots.

“I don’t know...” I began, my voice trailing off.

“Oh, let him go,” Lucas said, his tone light. “He’s just a kid, Annika. Let him be one.”

I turned to him, frowning. “And what if something happens? You know—”

“Nothing will happen,” he said, his calm, steady gaze meeting mine. “He knows the rules, and it’s not far. Peter’s parents are probably watching the path as we speak.”

“He’s eight,” I said, my voice sharper than I intended.

“Exactly,” Lucas countered, a faint smirk playing on his lips. “Not a baby anymore. We can’t keep him under lock and key forever.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. The argument bubbled up inside of me but it eventually faltered under his easy confidence. He always had a way of pulling the tension from me, but that didn’t mean I liked giving in.

“Mama,” Aiden said, his voice soft now and his hands clasped in front of him in a show of exaggerated innocence. “Please?”

I sighed, defeated. “Fine, but only for an hour, and you come straight home. No detours, no wandering, and if Peter’s parents say it’s time to leave, you don’t argue.”

“I won’t! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Before I could say anything else, he darted forward, pressing a quick, sticky kiss to my cheek. He turned to Lucas, offering him just a smile.

“Love you both!” he called, already halfway to the door.

“Aiden!” I said sharply. He froze, glancing over his shoulder with wide eyes.

“What?”

“Shoes,” I said.

He groaned dramatically, stomping over to grab them, shoving his dirty feet into the worn leather without bothering to undo the laces. Then he was gone, slamming the door behind him with a force that made the windows rattle.

The silence left in his wake was almost deafening.

Lucas chuckled, leaning back into the couch and pulling me with him. “He’s like a storm,” he said, his voice tinged with pride.

“He’s too much like you,” I muttered, shaking my head but unable to stop the small smile tugging at my lips.

“And yet, somehow, you manage to love us both,” he teased, his hand finding mine and lacing our fingers together. “Now, come here.”

I sat next to him, allowing his arms to embrace me. I always loved when he did that. I felt cherished and safe here, in his arms. But now, my heart was not with me. It left with Aiden as always, and I couldn't stop worrying, although I knew he was safe. In fact, there was no safer place on earth than our little town.

I had no idea when we fell asleep embraced like that, but when I opened my eyes, the warmth of the fire had faded into a faint glow.

I sat up so quickly that my head spun. “He's not back,” I elbowed Lucas awake.

He stirred, stretching lazily. It took him a moment to acknowledge what I said. “He's probably still at Peter's. You know how kids lose track of time.”

“But it's late,” I snapped, already on my feet. The darkness outside the window pressed against the glass, almost taunting me. “He promised he'd be back. I told him to come back.”

Lucas rose, his movements far too slow for the urgency pounding in my chest. “Annika, it's fine,” he said, brushing a hand over my arm. “He's with Peter but we'll go get him if it'll make you feel better.”

I didn't reply. Instead, I grabbed my coat and yanked it over my shoulders. Lucas followed me out the door, much calmer than I was. He said nothing as we walked the narrow path to Peter's cottage.

I had no idea why I was so worried. True, it was not like Aiden to be late. I'd drilled punctuality into him ever since he could walk, reminding him how important it was to do what we promised we would. But Lucas was right. He was just a child and

children had a tendency to forget themselves.

Every inch of ground beneath our feet set my nerves further on edge.

“He’s going to get an earful,” I muttered, more to myself than to Lucas. “Wandering off, making us worry. What was he thinking?”

“He’s eight, Annika,” Lucas said in a tone he knew I needed. “He was playing with his friend. Don’t turn this into something it’s not.”

“Something it’s not?” I whirled on him. “It’s dark, Lucas. He’s not back. And it’s not like him to just—” My voice broke, and I swallowed the rest of my words.

I had a million scenarios in my mind, and I didn’t want to give voice to a single one of them.

Lucas sighed, his hand brushing mine as if to steady me. “We’ll find him. He’s probably still laughing about that puppy.”

I nodded, but his words didn’t ease the cold knot in my stomach.

When Peter’s cottage came into view, I almost ran to the door. I rapped hard against the wood, my pulse even louder in my ears.

Reeba, Peter’s mother, answered, her smile bright and welcoming. That is, until she saw my face.

“Annika! Lucas!” she greeted, but then her brow furrowed. “Is everything all right?”

I forced a thin smile. “Is Aiden still here?”

Her expression flickered with surprise. “Oh, no, he left over an hour ago. I thought he’d be home by now. It’s only a ten-minute walk, isn’t it?”

The world tilted beneath me. My mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“An hour?” Lucas asked, his voice calm but with an edge of steel.

Reeba nodded, concern creeping into her voice. “He and Peter were playing for a while, but he said he didn’t want to be late. I assumed he’d go straight home.”

I felt like someone grabbed me by the throat and was squeezing tighter and tighter every time I exhaled. My knees threatened to give out.

“He hasn’t,” I said in a trembling voice. “He didn’t come home.”

Reeba’s face paled. “That’s... strange. I don’t know where he could have wandered off to. That doesn’t sound like him.”

“I’ll check the path,” Lucas said, already stepping back from the door. His voice was steady, but his movements were sharp and precise.

“I’m coming with you,” I said, the panic bubbling just beneath the surface.

“Annika—”

“I said I’m coming.”

Lucas didn’t argue. I barely heard Peter’s mother offering to help as we turned back toward the path. My mind raced, and every terrible possibility clawed at me, each one worse than the last.

He knows the way. He's careful. He promised.

Several of the townspeople joined the search when they heard what happened. I barely acknowledged them but the truth was, without them, we wouldn't be able to cover the grounds. The forest was endless. The path we'd walked countless times by daylight had turned into a nightmare of twisting shadows and suffocating silence. Every rustle of leaves, every crack of a branch, sent my heart racing with hope and dread.

"Aiden!" I called again, my voice raw, the name tearing from my throat. The only answer was the whisper of the wind through the trees.

Lanterns bobbed in the black night, Aiden's name echoing.

"He's out there," I kept saying, more to myself than anyone else. "He has to be."

The words felt hollow. With every passing moment, the certainty I clung to slipped further and further from my grasp.

The search stretched on, hours blending into what felt like days. My legs ached, my throat burned, and the chill of the night seeped into my bones. But I couldn't stop. I wouldn't stop. Not until—

"Annika."

Lucas's voice was low, but it cut through the noise around me. I turned to see him standing still.

"What?" I demanded, my voice sharp and desperate. "Why are you stopping?"

His eyes locking onto mine. "We've searched everywhere. We need to go back."



“No,” I said immediately, shaking my head. “No, we haven’t. There are places we haven’t looked yet. He’s out here, Lucas. We just need to—”

“Annika.” His voice softened, and it shattered something inside me.

The world seemed to tilt, the ground beneath me unsteady. I shook my head again, tears spilling freely now.

“No. He’s here. He’s close. I can feel it.”

Lucas stepped closer, his hands resting on my arms, grounding me. “We’ll keep looking,” he said quietly, but I could see the pain in his eyes. “But not like this. Not tonight. You need rest. You can’t help him like this.”

I pulled away from him angrily, the fire in my chest flaring against the cold grip of reality. But deep down, I knew he was right. I was exhausted, just like the rest of them, but worse yet, I was going mad.

Lucas and I walked back to the cottage in silence. The quiet was suffocating, each step heavier than the last. When the small house came into view, its warm glow felt wrong, as if it were mocking us.

Inside, the air was still. His little jacket hung neatly on the hook where he’d left it. The toy he’d forgotten that morning still sat on the table. Everything was as it had been, as if nothing had happened.

Except he wasn’t here.

I sank onto the sofa, the weight of it all crashing down on me. I couldn’t stop crying. Lucas stood in the doorway, his face a mask of barely contained grief. For a long moment, he didn’t move. Then he crossed the room and knelt in front of me, his

hands covering mine.

“We’ll find him,” he said.

I shook my head, unable to meet his gaze. “He’s gone, Lucas. He’s gone.”

He pulled me into his arms, his strength the only thing keeping me from collapsing entirely. His silence said what he couldn’t bring himself to say aloud.

Aiden was gone.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

I hadn't closed my eyes all night.

The cottage was silent, the kind of silence that clawed at my insides, that gnawed at the frayed edges of my soul. Aiden's absence had turned this place into a tomb. Cold. Empty. Lifeless.

Annika stirred beside me. I could hear her uneven breath as she woke up. I recognized the second reality crashed back into her. It was visible in the way her body tensed, the way her fingers tightened in the sheets. There were no soft murmurs, no sleepy stretches. Just devastation settling into her bones that Aiden was not with us.

I should have stopped this. I should have been faster. Stronger. Wiser. I should have protected them.

That guilt was a living thing inside me. I could feel it coiling around my ribs, squeezing until I couldn't breathe. I'd gone over every moment, trying to find the instant I failed. I had gotten careless. I thought we were safe.

Annika pushed the covers back and sat up. Her hair was tangled, her eyes hollow. She didn't look at me. She also didn't say anything. She just stood up and walked out of the room.

I followed.

The door to Aiden's room was open. Moonlight spilled through the arched window, illuminating what seemed to be an endless, empty space of longing.

Annika went to the chest of toys against the far wall and knelt beside it. Her hands trembled as she lifted the lid.

One by one, she took the toys out, placing them on the floor with careful, deliberate movements. A wooden horse. A stuffed wolf. A soldier carved from dark oak.

I clenched my jaw so hard I tasted blood.

She wasn't looking for anything. She was unraveling.

I stepped closer, but I didn't know what to say. What could I say? That we'd find him? That everything would be okay?

I already said that, and we were both starting to believe it less and less.

Annika picked up a small rattle and turned it over in her hands. Her breath hitched. She swallowed hard, pressing it against her chest.

Something inside me cracked.

I should be holding her, but I felt frozen, locked in my own torment. I was supposed to be her strength. Her protector. But I had failed her, failed our son.

Annika's fingers stilled in the chest. Her breath hitched, but I caught it.

She pulled something from the pile of toys, holding it in both hands. It wasn't one of Aiden's. I knew every last thing in that chest, we both did. Every stuffed animal, every wooden carving, every trinket I'd ever placed in his small hands. This didn't

belong.

I stepped closer. “What is that?”

Annika slowly turned it over, revealing a small, ancient-looking relic. A rune.

The stone was no larger than my palm, rough-edged and dark, like it had been chipped from something far older. A series of symbols had been carved into its surface, lines that twisted and intersected, forming a pattern that sent a strange unease crawling up my spine. They weren’t familiar. Not vampire, not witch, not any language I knew.

Annika ran her thumb over the engravings, and the air around us shifted. Just slightly. A whisper of something foreign, something wrong.

I reached out, my fingers brushing against the stone, and a sharp, electric jolt shot up my arm. I yanked my hand back with a curse.

Annika’s eyes snapped up to meet mine. “Did you feel that?”

I nodded, flexing my fingers. “Where the hell did this come from?”

Her gaze dropped back to the rune. “It was buried beneath Aiden’s things.”

The words landed like a blade to my gut. It didn’t belong here. It didn’t belong anywhere near our son.

Rowena would know what it was. If anyone could read its meaning, unravel whatever dark magic had woven itself into this stone, it was her.

“I’m taking this to Rowena,” I said. “She’ll know what it is.”

Annika looked up at me, her beautiful eyes blazing. “I’m coming with you.”

“No.” The word left my mouth too quickly. I ran a hand through my hair and forced myself to breathe. “I need you to stay here.”

Her eyes fired up. “Stay here? While my son is missing? While you go off to—” She exhaled sharply, gripping the rune tighter. “Lucas, don’t do this.”

“I’m doing what needs to be done,” I ground out. “Rowena is our only hope. You know that. If this rune is as dangerous as it feels, I won’t risk—”

“I don’t care about the risk.” She stood up as her shoulders squared and her chin lifted in that stubborn defiance that had both infuriated and captivated me since the moment we met. “I’m not waiting in this town, surrounded by sorrowful glances and drowning in fear while you go after answers alone. He is my son, too.”

Her voice cracked on the last word, and something inside me wavered.

Damn it.

I wanted to keep her safe, to keep her away from whatever darkness had already slithered into our home. But she wasn’t wrong. Sitting here, waiting, would kill her faster than anything we might face outside these walls.

I exhaled sharply, although I could have guessed it would end like this “Fine.” The word tasted bitter. “But you stay close to me, Annika. No matter what.”

She gave a single nod, but I didn’t miss the way her fingers trembled around the rune.

I didn’t miss the flicker of fear in her eyes.

Neither of us said what we were both thinking. Then again, we didn't need to think. We needed to act.

The ride to Rowena's cottage was swift. We knew the way well, and so did our horses, which tore through the first light of the morning like specters in the winds. The trees seemed to thicken as we approached, their skeletal branches reaching either for us or for something invisible riding behind us. A strange mist clung to the ground, swirling like restless spirits.

I dismounted before my horse had fully stopped and stalked toward the door. I knew Annika was right behind me without even turning around. Raising my fist, I pounded against the wood, and the frame rattled under the strength of my hand. The door creaked open before I could knock again.

Rowena stood there, as sorrow lined her face like an omen. Her eyes—those eerie, knowing eyes—locked onto mine, filled with something between dread and resignation.

"I had a dream," she murmured, almost as if talking to herself. "Something dreadful has happened."

Annika inhaled sharply beside me.

Rowena's gaze flickered to her, then back to me. "But I do not know what."

My gut twisted. She knew things before they happened. If she hadn't seen this, if even her sight was clouded...

I clenched my jaw. "We come seeking guidance."

She stepped aside, and we entered the dimly lit cottage. Candles burned low, their

flames dancing against the stone walls. Dried herbs hung from the ceiling, filling the air with the scent of sage and lavender, but even their presence couldn't banish the weight pressing against my chest.

Annika held the rune out to me, and I took it, walking straight to Rowena. Without a word, I placed it in her palm.

The second her fingers closed around it, her entire body stiffened. Her breath caught, and the candles flickered violently as if a sudden gust of wind had swept through the room.

Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came out. Only the widening of her eyes, the tightening of her fingers around the stone, told me she felt it too.

I took a step closer. "What is it, Rowena?"

She didn't answer right away. She only stared at the rune, shuddering.

Then, finally, in a voice barely above a whisper, she spoke. "This... is not of our world."

Annika moved closer. "What do you mean?"

Rowena's fingers tightened around the rune. I noticed her knuckles had turned white.

"I mean it does not belong to vampires, witches, or shifters. This magic is older. Stranger. It is something I have not touched in a long time." She finally looked up, tearing her gaze away from the mysterious object. "Where did you find it?"

"In Aiden's chest," I said, my voice rough. "Buried beneath his toys."



Rowena inhaled sharply, her brows knitting together. Her gaze flew to Annika, then back to me. “Someone left this for you to find... for Aiden to find.”

“Does this have something to do with Aurelius?” Annika trembled as she asked the question we were both afraid of.

“Maybe,” Rowena whispered. “Maybe not...”

Anger curled through me. “What do you mean maybe? What does it mean? Where is my son?” I demanded answers to the questions I couldn’t answer myself.

Rowena turned away, moving toward a heavy wooden table cluttered with books, vials, and ancient relics. She laid the rune down gently, as though afraid it might break... or break something else.

She hovered her hands over it, closing her eyes. A murmur of incantations slipped from her lips, words so old even I didn’t recognize them. The air shifted again, as if we were somewhere else entirely.

Then suddenly, the rune pulsed.

A deep, eerie glow seeped from its carved lines, a light that wasn’t quite red, wasn’t quite blue, but something between, something that didn’t feel natural at all. It pulsed once, twice, like a heartbeat.

Annika’s frightened hand gripped my arm.

Rowena’s eyes snapped open, and she stumbled back, gasping for air. She pressed a hand to her chest, as if steadying herself.

“This is a tether,” she said in a shaky voice. “A link between two places.”

My blood turned to ice.

“To where?” I demanded.

Rowena’s fingers trembled as she traced the rune’s surface. She swallowed hard.

“I do not know,” she admitted. “But wherever it is... Aiden is there.”

Annika’s grip on my arm tightened, her nails digging into my skin. I could feel her trembling, but her voice was steady when she spoke.

“Can you use it?” she asked, her gaze locked onto Rowena. “Can you trace the magic? Find where it leads?”

Rowena exhaled slowly, shaking her head. “It’s not that simple.” She motioned toward the rune, still pulsing with that unnatural glow. “This magic is foreign. Unstable. If I try to force it open, I could shatter the link completely—or worse, alert whoever created it.”

My fangs ached with the force of my fury. “I don’t care about the risk,” I snarled. “I care about my son.”

Rowena’s eye cut me like a blade. “And if pushing too hard gets him killed?”

The words were a slap, knocking the breath from my lungs. Annika flinched beside me, but she didn’t let go.

I forced myself to breathe, to think past the rage pounding in my skull. “Then what do we do?”

Rowena hesitated. “There may be a way,” she said cautiously. “I need time to unravel

its magic, to understand what kind of forces we're dealing with. If I rush this, I risk setting off a trap—one we might not be able to undo.”

Time. A luxury we didn't have.

Annika stepped forward, voice tight with desperation. “How long?”

Rowena hesitated. “A few days, at least.”

Too long.

But what choice did we have?

I clenched my fists and turned away, stalking toward the window. The night stretched endlessly beyond the glass. Aiden liked to look at the stars. Now, those same stars were nothing but cold, distant pinpricks of light. Somewhere out there, Aiden was alone. Afraid. Or worse.

I couldn't think like that.

Annika moved beside me, her hand brushing against mine. “We'll get him back,” she whispered.

I swallowed the knot of fear in my throat and turned back to Rowena. “Do whatever you have to,” I said. “Just find out what that damn thing is.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

We rode back home in silence. Lucas hadn't spoken since we left Rowena's cottage. I could feel the rage simmering beneath his skin, the unbearable guilt he carried like a second soul.

I understood it. I carried it, too.

I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat and turned my gaze toward the forest ahead. The brook wasn't far now. A place we used to stop, back when things seemed so good, and we felt as if we didn't have a care in the world.

"Lucas," I said softly. "Stop here."

His hands tightened on the reins. "Annika, we need to get back—"

"Please."

He let out a slow breath, then pulled his horse to a stop. I did the same, slipping down from the saddle before he could protest further. The brook whispered softly, as if telling tales of yore.

I walked forward, kneeling by the edge, dipping my fingers into the cold stream. It sent a shiver up my arm, but I welcomed it.

Lucas didn't move at first. But after a moment, I heard him dismount. He approached slowly, noiselessly.

I didn't look at him when I spoke. "We've barely touched each other."

Silence. Heavy, weighted.

Then, finally, "I don't know how." His voice was rough. "Not when I've failed you like this."

I turned my head, meeting his eyes. The shadows beneath them were deeper than I'd ever seen. My heart ached for him, for us.

"You haven't failed me, Lucas." My voice cracked. "You haven't failed Aiden."

His expression darkened. "I was supposed to protect him."

I stood, turning fully toward him. "And I was supposed to protect him too. But we didn't know, Lucas. We didn't see this coming." I reached for him, my fingers grazing his. "But we can't lose each other too."

He stared down at our hands. There was the faintest tremor in his fingers. Then, slowly, he closed the distance between us.

I pressed my palm to his chest, feeling the slow, steady beat of his heart. His breath hitched as I slid my arms around him, pressing my forehead to his shoulder.

For a moment, he was rigid, like he didn't trust himself to hold me.

Then he exhaled, and his arms came around me, pulling me tight against him.

I closed my eyes. "We'll find him."

His grip tightened. "We have to."

Lucas' arms tightened around me, his breath warm against my temple. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, he held me, but not out of desperation or fear. Simply because he needed to. Because we needed this.

I lifted my head, my lips barely grazing his jaw as I whispered his name. "Lucas..."

His hands slid to my face hesitantly, as if he wasn't sure he deserved this. But I wasn't letting him pull away. I wasn't letting the weight of guilt steal this moment from us.

I leaned in first, brushing my lips over his in the softest of touches. A breath. A promise.

He shuddered, and then he was kissing me.

Gently, at first. His lips moved over mine with aching slowness, his fingertips tracing my jaw as if relearning every inch of me. I melted into him with yearning in my breath. My hands grabbed his collar, desperate to feel more, to remind him that we were still us, even after everything.

And then something in him broke.

His mouth claimed mine harder, needier. His fingers tangled in my hair, tilting my head back as he deepened the kiss. He was pouring everything into it, his sorrow, his longing, his love. A quiet, shuddering sound escaped me as I pressed closer, molding myself against him.

I could taste the torment on his lips, the fear he wouldn't voice, the anger at himself for not being able to stop this nightmare before it began. But beneath all of it, there was us. The love that had never faded, even beneath the weight of war, loss, and now... this.

I kissed him harder, refusing to let the darkness take this from us, too.

I wanted him. No... I needed him.

My hands craved the surface of his skin which I knew too well. Every healed scar, every roughness of his body that was the result of his desire to protect those he loved. I knew it all. I needed his hands on me more than ever, to assure me that everything would be all right, because words alone were not enough.

He sensed my neediness, my longing. His hand clasped my neck roughly, keeping me in place. His tongue trailed down my neck, to the hollow of my ear. I moaned loudly, feeling a rush of heat between my legs.

“I need you, Lucas...” I managed to muster through my moans. But he knew that without words. He could see the fire of longing in my eyes. He could hear it in my hot breaths.

He locked his deep, dark eyes with mine. I shuddered at the depth.

Without breaking eye contact, he unbuttoned my jeans. I helped him with his, unable to stop kissing him. Within seconds, my legs were around his waist, as his strong arms kept me close to him, pinned against a tall, rough tree.

I could feel the tip of his throbbing cock pressing against me. A million little goosebumps rushed down my back in anticipation of feeling him inside of me. That sensation never ceased to amaze me. Even after all this time, I still desired him beyond words.

I cupped his face, forcing him to keep looking at me. He slid into me effortlessly, and pleasure hit me like a tidal wave. I gasped loudly, biting my lower lip as the first heatwave passed through my body.

He didn't stop. I knew that he wouldn't.

He fucked me like an animal, because in this moment, that was all that we were. Nothing but pure instinct, sheer desire, raw flesh.

"More, more..." I kept whispering through ragged breaths, keeping my legs locked around him.

Wet heat enveloped us both, and that sound... oh, that sound that I loved so much, that I couldn't get enough of.

I tried to be quiet, but it was close to impossible. My mind was a blank space of nothingness. I was a slave to pleasure, as his balls kept hitting against me, his cock slamming deep inside of me, filling me with delight.

My fingers were trembling as I gripped onto him, as a surge of electricity blew up at the end of my every limb the moment my pleasure peaked. My entire body tensed up, releasing everything, coating his cock in hot juices dripping out of me.

Without any warning, he pulled out of me, my insides still on fire and throbbing. He knelt before me, lifting one leg onto his back. His mouth was on my pussy, soaking up my juices, lapping every little drop that left me.

"Oh..." I moaned again as he sucked my clit into his mouth, bringing me to another climax momentarily.

This time, I almost lost my balance, but he was there, keeping me up. He was stroking his big cock with his other hand, while drinking in my essence, two fingers deep inside of me.

Not a moment later, he gasped loudly, spraying my knee with his hot seed. He was



still breathing heavily, licking my throbbing clit gently. It took us a while to calm down and move from that position.

When we looked at each other, we smiled.

“I love you,” I whispered something he knew well. But those were words ones I could never repeat too many times.

“I love you, too,” he smiled back. “Always.”

He got up and pressed a soft kiss on my forehead. I grazed his cock mischievously with my hand.

“Don’t tell me you want another round?” he teased.

“Maybe,” I replied mischievously. Then, I looked around and realized that we’d better head back. We’d managed to steal a few precious moments to ourselves, but reality came crashing back with the strength of a tsunami, destroying everything in its path.

“But it’d be better to head back,” I nodded, knowing that he would agree.

About half an hour later, as we entered the town, the usual bustle of late evening had dimmed. People still moved through the streets, their voices hushed, their eyes casting cautious glances our way.

I swallowed against the lump rising in my throat as we made our way to the barracks, where Callum would be waiting. The large wooden doors creaked as we pushed inside, the scent of firewood and steel greeting us.

Callum stood at the far end of the room, his arms crossed over his chest. At the sound

of our approach, he turned to face us.

Lucas didn't waste time. "Any news?"

Callum's jaw tightened. His silence was answer enough, but he still shook his head. "No sign of him. We've had patrols searching the outer forests, checking the roads, the riverbanks. Nothing."

Lucas swore under his breath, pacing once before turning back to Callum. "Keep searching. If anyone sees anything—"

"They'll report to me immediately," Callum finished with a nod.

I stepped closer, my voice quieter but firm. "What about tracks? Any signs of a struggle?"

"Nothing that makes sense," Callum admitted. "It's like he just... vanished."

A chill ran down my spine. I exchanged a glance with Lucas, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

The rune. The tether.

This wasn't a simple disappearance. Someone had taken Aiden. And they had used magic to do it.

Lucas ran a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. "Keep your men looking. We're running out of time."

Callum nodded, but his eyes flickered with something else. Concern, maybe even guilt. He had been at our side for years, a loyal friend, a soldier willing to fight and

bleed for us. And now, he was just as powerless as we were.

I placed a hand on his arm, offering the smallest reassurance I could manage. “Thank you, Callum.”

He nodded, not sure what else to say.

Lucas and I had barely stepped out into the cool night air when Callum’s voice stopped us.

“Wait.”

Both Lucas and I turned at the same time.

Callum seemed to hesitate, something that wasn’t his usual character trait.

“Spit it out,” Lucas said impatiently.

“There’s someone here,” he finally said. “Asking for you.” His gaze flickered between Lucas and me. “Said it was urgent.”

Lucas stiffened beside me. I couldn’t be quite sure of that, but something told me that he had a good idea who that someone might be. Still, he asked the question.

“Who?”

Callum hesitated again, then exhaled. “Kael.”

I swallowed hard, my pulse kicking up. Of all the people to show up now, why him? And what could he possibly want?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

Kael stood at the edge of the porch in front of our cottage, his silhouette carved against the dim glow of the lantern we'd left burning outside.

Annika hurried to him, her breath catching as she threw her arms around him. Kael let out a soft grunt of surprise before returning the embrace.

I approached them more slowly, watching the way she clung to him. I noticed how her fingers curled into the fabric of his cloak almost as if she were afraid that he might vanish again.

Memories of what we'd been through flooded my mind. It was something I couldn't forget, something none of us could ever forget.

When Annika pulled back, I could see tears in her eyes. I kept my approach steady even when he turned his gaze to me. His golden eyes were sharp as ever, unreadable.

"What?" he teased. "No hug?"

A smirk tugged at the corner of my mouth. "Next you'll say you want a kiss, too."

He huffed a quiet laugh, and for a moment, the weight of the past didn't feel so heavy.

I extended my hand, and Kael clasped it. A firm shake. Not quite warm, but not cold either. There was too much history between us for anything as simple as cordiality.

“I’ll admit,” I said, releasing him, “you picked a hell of a time to show up.”

His expression darkened, as the amusement slipped from his face like a thin veil. “I know.” His gaze flicked between me and Annika. “That’s why I’m here.”

Annika stiffened beside me. I felt the shift in her, the way her body tensed as she exchanged a glance with me.

I nodded toward the door. “Come inside.”

Kael didn’t hesitate, stepping past me and into the cottage. Annika followed, and I finally closed the door behind us, leaving the empty night behind.

Kael immediately headed for the chair, allowing his body to slump down onto it. He looked tired. Then again, we all did. The years had changed him in a way that made my chest tighten. Was that how we looked to others as well?

But when he looked at me, there was something familiar in his gaze.

“I went to Rowena for a healing potion,” he explained.

“What happened?” I asked.

Kael shrugged. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.” He exhaled, shaking his head. He looked even wearier now. “But she told me about the rune.”

“Then, you know,” Annika whispered.

He nodded. “I do.” He glanced over at me again. “I came as soon as I could.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you know what it is? What it means?”

Kael hesitated. That alone made my pulse quicken.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I’ve seen something like it before.”

“Where?” I demanded to know.

Kael met my gaze evenly. “During the war. In the north.”

A breath caught in my throat.

The north. It was the place where my father died. A war I was not strong enough to fight in back in those days.

And the mention of that war, brought back more memories. The ancient demon. The slumbering nightmare. The one we had buried in the ashes of our last battle, believing... no, hoping, that he would never rise again.

I clenched my jaw, forcing the name past my lips. “You think this has something to do with him?”

Kael’s golden eyes flickered with something unreadable. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But the rune... it looks like the ones his followers used.”

Annika sucked in a sharp breath beside me. I glanced at her, seeing the fear she tried so desperately to hide.

“Rowena said they were seals,” she whispered. “Bindings. Or... tethers.”

I didn’t like the way that word felt on my tongue now, knowing what Rowena had called it.

Annika rubbed her arms, as if trying to chase away a chill. “We locked him away. We sealed him. It shouldn’t be possible.”

Kael sighed. “The world isn’t what it was back then. Magic shifts, old wounds reopen. If someone—”

“If someone is trying to wake him again, they’re dead before they take their next breath,” I growled, able to feel fury curling in my chest like smoke.

Kael arched a brow but didn’t argue. He knew. He had been there. He had seen what Aurelius was capable of. The devastation, the carnage.

Annika, though... her fear was deeper than just starting another war.

She swallowed, her voice barely above a whisper. “If he is waking... this time, he won’t just come for me.” Her fingers curled into fists. “He’ll come for Aiden.”

The words hit me like a blade to the gut.

No.

I would burn this world to the ground before I let that happen.

I reached for her hand, gripping it tightly. She was trembling.

“It’s not him,” I said, forcing the words to be steady. “We don’t know that.”

Annika nodded, but her grip on me didn’t loosen.

Kael leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly. “Then we find out.” He met my gaze, serious and sharp. “Whatever this is, whatever’s coming, we end it before it might

reach him.”

Before it reaches Aiden.

A moment later, Kael pushed the chair back, the legs scraping against the wooden floor. “We should be out there searching, not sitting here talking about ghosts.”

He was right. But before I could answer, something small and dark slipped from his coat pocket, drifting to the floor between us.

Annika reached it first.

She bent, fingers closing around the fabric, but the moment she turned it over in her palm, her breath caught.

I knew that look. The way all the color drained from her face. The way her fingers trembled as she whispered words that felt like a blow. “This is Aiden’s.”

My stomach turned to stone.

Kael frowned, glancing down at the scrap in her hands. “What?”

“This—” She lifted it, voice unsteady. “This is from his shirt. The one he was wearing when he disappeared.”

For a heartbeat, none of us moved.

Then something snapped inside me.

I was on him before he even registered the movement.



Grabbing Kael by the front of his cloak, I slammed him back against the wall, hard enough to rattle the shelves. A candle flickered dangerously beside us. Wax spilt onto the wooden table.

“What the fuck is this doing in your pocket?” I snarled, fangs bared, my forearm pressed against his throat.

“I... I found it,” he managed to muster, nodding toward the fabric Annika was still clutching. “Not far from town...” He swallowed heavily, then he tried to cough.

Annika’s hand brought me back, pulling me out of the storm of rage.

“Lucas, please,” she whispered. “Let him talk.”

I was hesitant to let him go. But then I remembered how he had helped us. He was there for us when we needed help the most. Could it be that all this time, we trusted the enemy?

Slowly, I released my grip. I took two steps back, making sure to stand between him and Annika.

“Talk,” I snarled.

His hand reached his throat, rubbing it, but it probably did little to soothe the sting.

Good.

“I... I tried to track the scent,” he continued. “But I lost it. I’m no vampire, no shifter. I meant to bring it to you. But by the time I got here, everything with Rowena and the rune... I forgot. That’s the truth.”

I didn't answer right away. I was just watching him very carefully.

He had fought beside me. I had trusted him with my life back then. But trust was a fragile thing, and time had a way of breaking it apart.

Annika, however, was looking at him with something different in her eyes. There was doubt, yes, but also a desperate hope. She wanted to believe him.

Kael let out a humorless chuckle. "I swear to you, I'm on your side." He met my gaze directly. No hesitation, no wavering. "I would never hurt Aiden. You know that."

Damn him. Because a part of me did know it.

But there was still something wrong, something that had been gnawing at me for years.

I took a slow step forward, my voice quieter this time. "Then answer me this."

Kael straightened, his golden eyes sharp and focused on me.

I studied him, the way his muscles coiled, the way his expression gave nothing away.

"You're not a vampire," I said. "You're not a shifter."

He didn't move.

I narrowed my eyes. "Then what are you?"

Annika tensed beside me. There was fear in her eyes. I hated to be the cause of it, but I needed to know.

Kael hesitated, his jaw tightening.

For years, I had let this question sit in the back of my mind, unanswered. Because back then, it hadn't mattered. He had been an ally, a warrior. I never questioned how he fought the way he did, how he healed faster than a human but not like us.

But now, with my son missing, with old horrors creeping back into our world—I couldn't ignore it anymore.

Kael exhaled, tilting his head back slightly, as if weighing his words. Then, finally, he revealed his true identity.

“I am a Nephilim.”

Annika inhaled sharply, her fingers gripping the fabric so tightly her knuckles turned white.

I stared at him.

A Nephilim. Half-angel, half-human.

Ancient. Rare.

Dangerous.

It made sense. his strength, his speed, his ability to withstand magic better than most. But it also meant that there were secrets he had never told us, truths he had kept buried.

Annika was the first to speak. “You—” Her voice cracked. “You never told us.”

Kael's golden eyes darkened. "Would it have changed anything?"

I didn't answer. Because the truth was, I didn't know.

"Nephilim..." Annika echoed, as if she was seeing him for the first time. "You're part angel."

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "That's what they say."

I clenched my fists, my mind still trying to catch up with what this meant. The Nephilim were myths, whispers of an ancient bloodline long thought extinct. I had fought alongside Kael, bled beside him, and never once had he breathed a word of it.

"You lied to us." My voice came out low, dangerous.

His golden eyes flickered. "I didn't lie."

"You withheld the truth. That's the same damn thing." My mind was swirling as I spoke.

Kael held my gaze, unflinching. "It didn't matter before."

I let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "And now?"

His expression darkened, and when he spoke again, there was something colder in his voice. "Now it does. Now, it is the price of your trust in me."

I hated that he was right.

"I've never met a Nephilim," I said, watching him carefully. The underlying message was clear, but Annika chose to voice it.

“Are you the last?” she asked.

Kael let out a slow breath. “I don’t know.” His fingers curled into fists. “I’ve never met another one either.”

That admission struck me harder than I expected.

Never? Not in all these years? Not even during the war, when creatures of every kind had risen from the shadows?

I understood us never having met one, but him... one of his own kind? Strange.

Annika frowned. “But if you—”

“I keep it a secret for a reason.” Kael’s voice was low, almost a murmur to himself. A confession, maybe? “Nephilim were never meant to exist in large numbers. We were made to serve a purpose, to fight a war that wasn’t ours. And when that war ended...” His lips pressed into a thin line, making them invisible. “We were no longer needed.”

I understood what he wasn’t saying.

They were hunted.

Whether by those who had created them or by the monsters they were meant to destroy, it didn’t matter. They had been erased, wiped from existence until only he remained.

I studied him, searching for any sign of deceit, but there was nothing. Just an old, lingering weight in his expression, the kind of pain that settled deep in the bones, impossible to shake.

Annika took a small step forward. “Kael...”

His shoulders stiffened slightly, but he didn’t move away.

Kael was right. If we had known what he was before, that wouldn’t have changed anything. But now... I wasn’t so sure.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

Kael led the way.

His golden eyes were sharp, scanning the darkened forest ahead of us as if expecting something to emerge from the shadows. Maybe he saw something we didn't? The thought unsettled me.

Lucas rode beside me. He hadn't spoken much since Kael's revelation, and I knew that meant he was still wrestling with it. I was, too. Kael was a creature we all thought was extinct. On one hand, I could understand his need to keep his identity a secret. But on the other, I thought we'd all proven to be trustworthy to one another.

I tried not to think about that now.

The forest grew denser as we moved and the trees twisted in unnatural shapes, as their branches clawed at the sky. I didn't recognize this place, and that unsettled me more than I wanted to admit.

I urged my horse closer to Kael's. "How far?"

"Not much longer," was his reply.

Lucas' voice came from beside me. "This isn't on any of our maps."

Kael didn't glance back. "That's because no one charts cursed land."

A chill ran down my spine.

Lucas growled under his breath. “And you’re just telling us this now?”

Kael sighed, shaking his head. “Would you have come if I had?”

Lucas muttered a curse, but didn’t argue.

I exhaled slowly, gripping the reins tighter. “What kind of curse?”

Kael finally turned to face me. “The kind that keeps people out—or traps them in.”

I swallowed hard. That wasn’t exactly reassuring.

Lucas let out a frustrated breath. “And you found part of Aiden’s shirt here?”

Kael nodded, slowing his horse. “Just ahead.”

I followed his gaze, and my breath caught.

A clearing lay before us, with the earth jagged and uneven, as if the land itself had been wounded. The trees at the edge of the clearing were blackened, their bark split and cracked. Everything about this felt wrong.

And at the center of it all, beneath the twisted branches, the ground was disturbed, almost as if something had been dragged through the dirt.

I tightened my grip on the reins. I could barely breathe.

Lucas was already dismounting, then he stalked toward the disturbed earth. I slid down from my horse, moving quickly to his side.



Kael stood a few feet away, watching us carefully.

“This is where I found it.” His voice was quieter now, almost reluctant. “The fabric was caught on a thornbush, just over there.” He nodded toward the edge of the clearing.

I felt my stomach twist.

Lucas knelt, running his fingers through the dirt. His expression darkened. “Something was here.”

I swallowed against the rising dread.

Kael crossed his arms. “Not just something.” His gaze flickered to mine. “Someone.”

That was when Lucas went still.

I knew that look. I recognized the sharp narrowing of his eyes, the way his fingers curled into the dirt, his muscles tense with restrained power. He was searching for Aiden’s scent. He was reaching for the smallest trace of our son. I held my breath, praying to the gods that he would find something, anything.

But then his expression shifted.

A slow, dark realization settled over his features.

My heart stuttered. “Lucas?”

His nostrils flared as he inhaled again, his body going rigid. He wasn’t looking at me or Kael anymore. His gaze was fixed on the tree line, and the weight of his focus was heavy and unrelenting.

I stepped closer. “Did you—?”

“I can’t smell him.”

The words sent a spike of fear through my chest.

I turned to Kael, but even he looked troubled. Something assured me we shouldn’t be here.

Lucas clenched his fists. “His scent should be here.” His voice was a low growl, and frustration was leaking into every syllable. “But it’s gone. Like something took it.”

I sucked in a breath. That wasn’t possible.

“Can that happen?” I whispered. “Can a scent just... vanish?”

Lucas didn’t answer. He just kept staring at the trees.

Then, suddenly, he moved. He was pushing up from the ground, then turning in a slow, deliberate circle as he inhaled again. Deeper this time.

I could see it, the moment he realized something was wrong. Not just with Aiden’s missing scent, but with whatever else he was picking up in the air.

Lucas exhaled sharply through clenched teeth. “We shouldn’t be here.”

A cold shiver slid down my spine. “What do you mean?”

He turned to face me, his dark eyes burning with something unnatural.

“I mean, whatever was here, left this behind instead.”

Kael's posture stiffened. "Left what?"

"Blood magic."

Kael muttered a curse under his breath.

That was why Aiden's scent was gone. That was why the land felt wrong.

It wasn't just cursed. It had been tainted on purpose.

The first howl split the air. Lucas moved first, faster than I could blink. His fangs were bared as his body coiled with lethal intent. Kael was just as fast, reaching for the twin daggers strapped to his sides, which I'd noticed before, but hoped he wouldn't need to use. How wrong was I...

I turned, with my pulse hammering deep inside my ears. All I could hear was the pounding of my own heart. Then, the trees groaned. The brush rustled. And a moment later, they were upon us.

Shifters' hulking forms burst from the undergrowth, those half-men, half-beasts, with their eyes gleaming a light of savage hunger. The first lunged at me with its sharp, yellowed fangs.

I raised my hands, magic crackling to life at my fingertips.

Not this time.

Flames erupted from my palms, searing through the air and slamming into the shifter's chest. It let out a strangled snarl as it stumbled back. Its fur singed and blackened, but it wasn't enough to stop it.

I barely had time to move before another came from the side, swiping at me with massive claws. I threw myself backward, as I twisted my wrist. More fire crackled in response, lashing toward my attacker. The shifter dodged, but Lucas was already there.

He struck with a growl, his claws slicing deep into the beast's throat. A spray of crimson filled the air. The shifter gurgled, collapsing in a heap at my feet.

Lucas' head snapped toward me. "Stay close!"

I barely had time to nod before he was moving again, cutting through the next attacker with terrifying precision.

Kael fought beside him, his daggers flashing as he carved through fur and flesh. He was fast, inhumanly so. His movements were precise, calculated. For a moment, I was reminded of what he really was.

The Nephilim. A warrior bred for war.

But there were too many.

For every shifter we cut down, two more took its place. The air was thick with the scent of blood, and the ground was slick with it. My magic pulsed, raw and desperate, as I sent another blast of fire into the fray.

Then, pain.

A weight slammed into me from behind, knocking the breath from my lungs. Claws raked across my shoulder, tearing through fabric, straight into flesh. I screamed, fire surging outward in reflex. I barely managed to get my attacker off of me.

I hit the ground hard and pain splintered up my arm. My vision blurred, but when I looked up, the largest shifter loomed over me. His eyes were gleaming with more than just bloodlust and rage. Was it magic?

Lucas' roar cut through the chaos, and in the next instant, he was there. He slammed into the shifter with enough force to shake the earth. They crashed to the ground in a vicious tangle of limbs and claws, teeth snapping, blood spraying.

Kael was suddenly at my side, yanking me up with a firm grip.

"Annika," he said urgently, noticing my torn shoulder. "Can you still fight?"

I gritted my teeth, pushing the pain down. "Try and stop me."

He gave a sharp nod, then turned back to the battlefield, as his blades glinted under the moonlight.

Lucas was still locked in battle with the massive shifter. I saw their bodies as a blur of violence. My pulse thundered. If we didn't end this right now, we wouldn't last much longer.

I flexed my fingers, feeling the raw energy coil at my fingertips. My magic was draining too fast, but I had one more trick left.

I lifted my hand, murmuring the incantation under my breath. The air around us shifted, the temperature dropped as a gust of wind swirled through the clearing. Sparks crackled at my fingertips, and then—

I let go.

A burst of power erupted outward, sending a shockwave through the battlefield. The

remaining shifters recoiled. They snarled as the force knocked them off their feet.

It wasn't enough to kill them. But it gave us a chance.

Lucas didn't hesitate. He drove his claws into his opponent's chest, ripping through flesh and bone. The beast let out a choked howl before collapsing.

For a long moment, silence reigned, but it was interrupted by a blur of dark fur and muscle which moved impossibly fast. The massive shifter, one that Lucas had already tackled, was now leaping from the ground, his jaws snapping wide open. He crashed into Lucas, like a mountain.

"No!" My scream tore through the night.

Lucas grunted as they hit the dirt, the sheer weight of the beast pinning him down. Clawed hands locked onto his shoulders, forcing him down, and then, something dreadful happened.

Fangs sank into his throat.

A sickening, wet sound filled the air as the shifter bit deep, ripping through skin and flesh. Blood poured from Lucas' neck, staining the ground. He snarled and tried to shove the shifter beast away, but he was weakened.

Something inside me snapped. I knew he needed me.

Magic exploded from my body, as if every fiber of my being knew that I could lose him if I didn't do something. The earth seemed to tremble beneath me, and a force surged from my core.

The shifter hesitated for only a moment, but that was enough. Lucas took advantage

of his momentary confusion and ripped his arm free. He grabbed a branch which lay on the ground, pushing it through the shifter's chest, tearing through fur and flesh.

The shifter howled, rearing back, but Lucas wasn't done. He moved with deadly speed, rolling them over, pinning the monster beneath him this time. His movements were sharper and harder, and although blood streamed from his throat, he didn't stop.

I raised my hands, as magic burned at my fingertips, but I didn't need it.

With a brutal, final snarl, Lucas plunged his teeth into the shifter's chest—straight through muscle, straight to the heart.

The beast let out a strangled noise. Then, with a shuddering exhale, it went limp beneath him.

I was moving before I could think, stumbling to Lucas' side. He was still on his knees, but his hands were covered in blood. Some of it his, some of it not.

His name left my lips in a whisper. I reached out, pressing trembling fingers to his face, and tilting his head so I could see the wound on his throat. It was deep... too deep.

"Lucas—"

"I'm fine." He tried to push himself up, but he wavered.

Kael was beside us in an instant, his golden eyes flicking between us, then down to the shifter's lifeless body. "Well, that was reckless."

Lucas coughed, spitting blood onto the dirt. "You're welcome."

Kael sighed, muttering a curse before looking at me. “Can you heal him?”

I swallowed hard, shaking my head. My hands were still shaking, but I pressed them against Lucas’ throat, ignoring the warmth of his blood beneath my palms.

“The wound is too deep,” I managed to muster. “There is only one thing that can save him now.”

Lucas lifted his head, his eyes burrowing into mine. I could see the refusal in them.

“No,” he told me.

But the next moment, he dropped down, his head slamming against the ground.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

Darkness pulled at me.

It was thick, suffocating, curling around the edges of my mind like smoke. I could hear voices. Annika's, soft and desperate, calling me back. Kael's, sharp and clipped, speaking words I couldn't grasp.

But beneath it all, something else stirred. The monster inside me. It had been silent for too long. Too long.

I had ignored it, starved it, kept it chained in the depths of my being. I had convinced myself that I was stronger than the hunger, that I could control it. That I didn't need to feed.

I had been a fool.

The wound in my throat burned. I was weakening my body, making it sluggish. I could feel my own blood soaking my clothes, pooling beneath me. I wasn't healing. The wound was too deep. I wouldn't be able to survive. I knew that.

A deep growl echoed in the hollow space of my mind.

You're dying.

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to focus, to push against the voice.

No.

Feed.

No.

But I was slipping. I could feel it.

A tremor ran through my limbs, that primal, aching need rising like a tide I couldn't hold back. My fangs throbbed, my throat dried up. It was burning like hell. My instincts screamed at me.

Take, devour, feed, survive.

I gritted my teeth, trying to hold on, but the hunger was no longer a whisper. It was a roar. I felt my control cracking under the sheer power of the hunger. The monster inside me wanted out. It wanted blood, fresh and warm, pumping from a living body. It didn't care who. Didn't care how.

Annika.

The thought slammed into me like a dagger to the chest.

No. Not her. Never her.

I forced my eyes open, the world swimming in front of me. Blurred shapes, flickering light. I could hear her heartbeat. I could feel it, so steady, so strong.

Tempting.

I sucked in a shuddering breath, my vision tunneling. I needed to stop this. I needed

to control it.

But my body would not last without blood. I had pushed myself too far, ignored the hunger for too long. And now... I had no choice.

I swallowed hard, my voice broken. "Annika..."

She was beside me in an instant, her hands warm on my face. "I'm here," she whispered. "Lucas, I'm here."

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. Her scent was intoxicating, her magic a pulse of life beneath her skin. I wanted—

No.

I clenched my fists, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. "I... need to feed."

A pause. Then, softly, "I know."

I barely had the strength to lift my head, but when I did, our eyes met. There was no fear in hers. Just understanding.

And something else. Something devastatingly tender.

"Lucas," she whispered, her fingers brushing against my cheek, grounding me. "Drink."

She had already saved me once, had already given me her blood when I was on the edge of death. I had sworn to myself never again.

"I can't," I rasped. My voice was barely a sound, torn between pain and hunger. "I

won't ask this of you. Not again."

"You're not asking," she said simply.

I felt her shift closer. The warmth of her body, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat... it was all intoxicating, maddening. And then, she lifted her arm, pressing the delicate skin of her wrist to my lips.

I trembled. The scent of her blood, so pure, powerful and all mine, wrapped around me like silken chains.

I turned my head away, fists clenched. "Annika..."

She cupped my face, her thumb tracing over the corner of my mouth, where my fangs had already lengthened in anticipation. I was losing the fight. My body was screaming, the monster inside me clawing to be set free.

"Please," she whispered. "I don't want to lose you, Lucas."

I looked up at her then. And what I saw in her eyes... it was love. Unshaken. Unbreakable. And it shattered me.

That was when a choking sound left my throat, something between a growl and a plea. My restraint snapped.

I grabbed her wrist, my grip trembling, and pressed my lips against her skin. A final hesitation, it was my one last shred of control, and then I parted my lips, sinking my fangs in deep. Her blood hit my tongue like wildfire.

Rich, electric, filled with power. I groaned, my body tightening as warmth spread through my veins, pushing back the creeping numbness of death. My wounds began

to close, my strength returning with every pull of her essence.

She didn't flinch. Didn't pull away. She held me, letting me take what I needed, letting me live.

I drank slowly at first, trying but failing to be gentle. But the hunger was too much. The monster inside me was still clawing, still wanting more.

Her fingers curled into my hair. "Lucas..." she murmured.

That single whisper was enough to bring me back.

I forced myself to stop, to let go, my fangs slipping free from her skin. My breath was heavy and uneven, and my lips were stained with her blood.

I lifted my gaze to hers, my grip still tight around her wrist. Her face was pale, her lips parted, her pulse slightly weaker than before, but her eyes... they were still full of love.

"You're mine," I whispered back, overwhelmed.

A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Always."

Suddenly, Annika swayed gently. I could hear her shallow breathing and I managed to catch her before she could stumble. She wasn't as pale as I feared, but her heartbeat had softened. It grew weaker. Guilt pressed against my ribs like a vice.

"You shouldn't have done that," I said, but I knew better.

"I saved you," she said with that melodious voice of hers.

I hated myself for it. My hands tightened around her waist, in an effort to steady her, even though she tried to brush me off. She was always so stubborn, always so damn willing to bleed for me.

I exhaled sharply. “You need to go back to town. You’re weakened, Annika. It’s not safe for you out here.”

Her eyes flashed, and just like that, that tender moment between us had disappeared. “I’m not going anywhere and you know that damn well.”

My jaw clenched. “Annika—”

“I just need to catch my breath,” she interrupted me, as always. “My magic will restore me. Slowly, but it will.”

I studied her, my instincts warring with her conviction. The logical part of me knew she was right. Her magic had always been a force of its own, capable of replenishing her body in ways human blood never could. But another part of me, the part that had nearly lost her too many times before, refused to accept it.

She must have seen the hesitation in my eyes because she reached up, her fingers brushing my jaw gently. “I’ll be fine, Lucas.”

I exhaled through my nose, my fangs still aching, my body still burning from the taste of her. My strength had returned. I could feel it in the way my muscles no longer trembled, in the way my senses sharpened again. But hers...

I pressed my forehead to hers. “You push me to the edge, woman.”

A breath of laughter escaped her, but there was something softer beneath it. “And yet, you still love me.”

I did. And that was the problem.

I lifted my head, staring into her dark, unwavering eyes. “If you so much as stumble, I’m taking you right back.”

She smirked. “Deal.”

Kael cleared his throat. “If you two are done making up, we should keep moving.”

Annika rolled her eyes, stepping back from me, though I kept my hand on her waist just in case.

I watched her closely, waiting for any sign of true weakness. She swayed slightly, but managed to catch herself. Her magic would restore her. Slowly.

I kept my hand on Annika’s waist as we started moving again. My senses were still heightened, scanning the area for any lingering threats. The scent of blood, mine, the shifters’, and hers, still hung thick in the air, even though the fight was behind us. For now, at least.

We rode in silence, listening to the sound of the wind through the trees. My body still burned with lingering hunger, and my senses were sharper than ever before. Annika’s blood had restored me. She was sitting behind me, her arms wrapped around my waist. I could feel her heartbeat steadier now, pressed to my back.

She should have stayed behind, but of course, she didn’t.

Kael rode ahead, his dark cloak billowing behind him. He hadn’t spoken much since we continued. The shifters had left a trail, and they were leading us somewhere.

I leaned back slightly, just enough for her to hear me. “How do you feel?”

Her voice was softer than usual, but firm. “I told you, I just need time.”

I clenched my jaw. Time. As if time could undo what had already been done.

Kael suddenly pulled back on the reins, bringing his horse to a stop. I did the same, scanning the trees around us.

The scent was stronger here. We were close, but to what?

Kael gestured at us to dismount our horses and we did so. I helped Annika down, after which we led the horses into the cover of the dense trees.

Kael moved ahead, his steps eerily quiet for someone who wasn't a vampire. I followed, keeping Annika close behind me, with one hand on the hilt of my blade. The terrain sloped downward, leading to a clearing shrouded in mist. And beyond that, I could see something I shouldn't have missed.

A stronghold.

Almost invisible, hidden within the landscape itself. Its walls were made of ancient stone, so weathered and overgrown with moss and vines that it blended into the rocky cliffs behind it. The structure pulsed with something unnatural, a ripple of magic woven into its very foundation. If Kael hadn't pointed it out, I might have dismissed it as part of the land.

Kael crouched beside me, his eyes locked on the nearly imperceptible outline of a high archway. “There,” he murmured. “See it?”

I narrowed my gaze. Now that he had drawn my attention to it, I could feel it more than see it. I could see that faintest distortion in the air, like looking through rippling water.



Annika's breath hitched behind me. "That's not just an illusion."

She was right. This wasn't some simple shifter hideout. This was something else.

We watched in silence, waiting. If the shifters had come here, we needed to know why.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

“We need to get closer,” Kael whispered.

Before long, we moved through the trees, silent as shadows. My body was weak, my limbs heavier than they should have been, but I forced myself to keep up. Lucas was watching me. I felt his gaze every time I took a breath that was too shallow, every time my steps wavered ever so slightly. But I wouldn't be the reason we turned back.

The stronghold loomed ahead, a fortress of stone and shadow, nearly invisible against the cliffs. If Kael hadn't pointed it out, I wouldn't have seen it at all. Magic clung to it, thick and ancient, the kind that made the air hum against my skin.

I swallowed hard. What is this place?

We crouched behind the thick underbrush. Waiting, watching. There was no movement, no sound. Unease curled in my stomach.

Kael exhaled softly beside me. “Too quiet.”

Lucas nodded. “If they were here, they're either hiding or already gone.”

I looked back at the stronghold, trying to see past the illusion, past the twisting magic. It was old, much older than the war, older than any ruins I'd ever seen.

“We need to get closer,” Lucas said.

Kael was already moving before the words had fully left his mouth. I started to follow, but Lucas caught my wrist.

I turned to him, my heart hammering in my throat. His fingers tightened just slightly.

“You’re still weak,” he murmured, low enough that only I could hear.

I lifted my chin. “I can handle it.”

He didn’t argue. He only released me, his fingers lingering for a fraction of a second longer than necessary before he turned away.

We crept closer, each step slow and deliberate. The earth beneath us was damp, the air thick with the scent of moss and something metallic. I shuddered. Blood, maybe... though I couldn’t tell if it was old or new.

The entrance to the stronghold was just ahead. And still, nothing. No shifters. No guards. Just silence. Somehow, that was worse.

As we walked inside, I could sense the thickness of the air, grabbing me by the throat. It clung to my skin, heavy and ancient. The stone walls of the stronghold were worn smooth by time yet pulsing with an energy that made my magic stir uneasily beneath my skin. Shadows stretched unnaturally, and the dim torchlight was flickering against carvings I couldn’t quite make out. The place smelled of damp earth, old blood, and decay, as if death itself had settled here and never truly left.

My fingers grazed the stone as I moved forward, the surface unnervingly cold despite the stale heat of the air. My stomach twisted with a heavy thought.

This place was never meant to be found.

Lucas was beside me, silent and watchful. His body tensed, and his senses sharpened. He had his hand on his blade, ready to act if need be. Kael was just ahead, and I wondered if he had been here before.

“This isn’t just a hideout,” I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper. “This place is old.”

Lucas nodded. “And cursed.”

Kael’s fingers brushed against the markings on the walls. “These symbols... They’re not shifter-made.”

I swallowed hard, my magic reacting to the space around me. “No,” I whispered. “They’re not.”

A shiver ran down my spine. I recognized some of them. Not fully, not enough to understand, but enough to fear and enough to know that whatever this place had been built for, it was never meant to be a sanctuary. It was meant to be a prison.

Lucas caught my hesitation, reacting immediately. “What is it?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know. Not yet.”

Then, I saw it.

I could have missed it so easily. Just a small, tattered blanket. A blanket for a child. My child.

It lay crumpled in the corner of the damp stone cell. My breath caught as I reached for it, my hands shaking. The second I lifted it, the scent hit me. It was faint, but undeniable.

“Aiden...” I whispered, feeling a tidal wave of pain wash over me. My vision blurred and my entire body trembled as I clutched the blanket to my chest. “He was here...”

Lucas crouched beside me. “Annika?” His voice was low, wary.

I didn’t need to look at him to know his expression was carved from stone, his fury barely contained beneath the surface. But I couldn’t focus on that. I could only breathe in Aiden’s scent, desperate to hold on to the proof that he was alive.

“He was here,” I whispered, my voice on the verge of breaking “Not long ago.”

Kael shifted behind us. “Then we’re close.”

Lucas exhaled sharply, his fists clenching at his sides. “They didn’t kill him,” he muttered. “Which means they need him alive.”

A fresh wave of panic threatened to take hold, but I pushed it down. I wiped at my eyes, my grip tightening on the fabric.

I tore my gaze away from the small blanket, my heart pounding as I pushed to my feet. “Where are they?” My voice came out unsteady, but my grip on the fabric was iron-tight.

“Gone.” I knew Lucas was right. If anyone was here, they’d have attacked us by now.

Kael prowled toward the far wall. “They cleared out fast.”

The realization sent ice through my veins. They had known we were coming, so they had already moved Aiden before we ever set foot in this cursed place.

I turned in a slow circle, searching for something that could tell us where they had

gone. But the chamber was silent.

I took a step forward, and then the world beneath me gave way. I barely had time to gasp before the wooden floor cracked, and the rotting planks splintered under my weight. A single heartbeat later and I was falling.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. I hit the ground hard and fast.

The air was knocked from my lungs as I landed in a heap of dust and debris. For a moment, all I could do was lie there, gasping, with my heart pounding wildly in my chest.

Above me, Lucas' voice echoed in raw panic. "Annika!"

I coughed and almost retched, as the thick scent of mold and damp stone filled my nose. My arms trembled as I pushed myself upright, blinking rapidly to adjust to the dimness. The fall hadn't been far, but it had been unexpected. It left me completely shaken.

"I'm okay!" I remembered to shout back, knowing they both must be worried sick.

I could hear movement above, the scrape of boots against stone as Lucas and Kael searched for a way down. But I barely registered it, because the moment I looked around, I was overwhelmed by goosebumps.

The cellar was vast and cavernous, far larger than I expected. The walls were lined with rusted chains and shackles, some broken, some still bolted into the stone. Dark stains marred the ground, and though I didn't want to think about what they were, I knew.

This wasn't just a storage space. It was a prison.

A shiver ran down my spine. I tightened my grip on Aiden's blanket, forcing myself to focus. If the shifters had used this place to hold prisoners, then maybe there was something left behind. A clue, a trace of magic, anything that could help us find Aiden.

I staggered to my feet, my body still weak from earlier, but I ignored it. My magic stirred sluggishly inside me, sensing the lingering energy in this place.

Then, from the shadows, something moved.

I suffocated a gasp, forcing myself to breathe. I sensed another shift in the darkness. My stomach clenched. I reached for the dagger strapped to my thigh, and my fingers curled around the worn hilt.

More movement.

I snapped toward it, my magic surging as I braced for a fight. That was when a tiny blur of fur and claws darted into the dim light, revealing itself only for a moment, then scurried across the stone floor.

"A damn rat," I whispered to myself with relief.

My shoulders sagged as the tension drained from my muscles. I let go of the dagger, running a hand over my face.

Above me, I could hear the scuffle of boots against stone. Then, a loud thud.

"Annika?" Lucas called out to me.

A second later, he dropped into the cellar, landing effortlessly beside me. Kael followed far less gracefully, but with equal determination.

Lucas' eyes traversed every inch of me before asking, "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine. Just... startled."

Kael glanced around. "This place is vile." His fingers trailed over a rusted shackle bolted to the wall. "Whatever they did here... it wasn't meant to be found."

Lucas exhaled sharply, his body still tense just like mine. "We need to move. The shifters left in a hurry. Maybe there's something here they didn't have time to destroy."

I met his gaze. "Then let's find it."

The deeper we searched, the worse the feeling in my gut became. Lucas and Kael combed through the abandoned cellar, leaving no stone unturned. I did the same, running my fingers over the damp stone walls, searching for any markings, any traces of magic or blood sigils that might tell us what had happened here.

Then I saw it.

A rough wooden table pushed against the farthest wall was nearly hidden by the shadows. It was covered in scattered scrolls, brittle parchment curled at the edges, and a thick, leather-bound tome with a broken spine.

I stepped closer, my pulse quickening as I reached for the book. Dust and grime coated the cover, but beneath it, I could just barely make out the faded symbol burned into the leather. A rune... one I didn't recognize.

"Lucas," I called out.

He was beside me in an instant, Kael just behind him.



I flipped the book open, and realized that some of the pages were missing. Someone had torn them out, leaving behind the rest. I could still make out some of the writing. The ink had faded in places, but the meaning was clear. It wasn't a resurrection ritual. Not a summoning. It was a transformation.

Lucas stiffened beside me as we read the passage together. The ritual described was meant to turn a mortal into something more, something unnatural.

"Immortality," Kael muttered in shock.

My throat tightened. "They're not trying to awaken anyone this time," I whispered in disbelief. "They're trying to create someone new."

I could see Lucas' entire body tense up, his eyes surveying the text again, as if hoping that we misread it the first time.

"But who?" he finally asked. "Who are we fighting this time?"

I shook my head, unease settling deep in my bones.

Lucas turned another page, his movements sharp and almost desperate. The brittle parchment crackled under his fingers as his eyes scanned the text. I could feel the tension radiating from him, I could hear the way his breathing changed.

Kael leaned over the table. "Whoever they're trying to transform... they want them to be unstoppable."

I swallowed hard, my fingers gripping the edges of the book as I forced myself to focus on the words. Some of it was written in an old dialect, one I barely understood, but I could piece together enough to know this wasn't an ordinary spell.

“This is ancient magic,” I whispered. “Dark. Dangerous.” My gaze flicked to Lucas. I could feel my stomach twisting into a knot of nausea. “This isn’t something shifters would normally be capable of. They must have outside help.”

His expression darkened. “Rowena?”

I shook my head immediately. “No. She would never.”

Lucas exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. I could see the war raging inside him, the way the same questions were eating him up alive.

Who was behind this?

Why take Aiden?

And who was meant to undergo this transformation?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

“We need to get out of here,” I heard Kael say. “I don’t like being trapped underground. It feels like a damn tomb.”

“You’re right,” I nodded.

Annika was quiet, but I could feel her pulse hammering as she stared at the sigil. Her grip on the book was white-knuckled. She was trying to hold it together, but I knew her. I knew the way her mind worked, how she pieced things together faster than most.

I turned, looking for another way out. The way we’d come in was above us, but the boards were too rotted to climb back up. The stones lining the walls were uneven, some jutting out more than others, but I wasn’t about to waste time testing their strength.

“We find another way,” I said. “There’s always another way.”

Annika pulled herself together, nodding once before stepping toward the far end of the cellar. I followed her, Kael just behind.

There were no doors, no visible passages, nothing but stone and the rusted remains of old chains. We moved slowly, checking everything that might even resemble a way out, no matter how improbable.

“Over here!” Annika shouted.

I rushed over to her side. I pressed my palm where her hand rested a moment ago. There, the stone felt colder than the rest. Somehow too smooth.

“A hidden passage?” Kael wondered.

“Or a dead end,” I muttered.

Annika closed her eyes, breathing in deep. Her magic stirred, crackling against my skin as she focused. Then, just as I was about to tell her to step back, the stone shuddered. A deep, grinding sound echoed through the cellar as the wall shifted, revealing a narrow passageway beyond it.

I didn’t hesitate. I stepped forward, reaching for my blade. “Let’s go.”

Kael’s hand pressed against my chest, stopping me.

“I’ll go first,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “If something happens, then let it happen to me...” He paused there. At first, I didn’t trust his urging, but it was obviously done to protect Annika and me.

“Alright,” I agreed. “You, then Annika. I bring up the rear.”

Kael stepped into the passage, and his body was swallowed by the darkness almost immediately. Annika hesitated for half a second before following. Her head turned slightly as if she wanted to argue, but she didn’t.

I moved to follow, but the second my boot hit the threshold, the stone walls groaned. Before I could react, the passage slammed shut with a deafening boom. I barely had time to lurch forward before I was met with solid rock. My hands hit the stone. Angrily, I slammed my fist against it, but it was all in vain. It refused to budge.

“Annika!” I roared.

I tried to listen to her voice, but I couldn’t hear anything.

“Annika?” I tried again, though with much less enthusiasm.

I turned, glancing about the cellar. It seemed to me that the passage hadn't just collapsed. It had sealed itself, trapping me in it.

I pressed my forehead against the stone, gritting my teeth.

No, not trapped. Just delayed.

There was no door around me. At least, not ones that were visible to the naked eye. Besides, I’d had enough of this place. I needed to get out. And I was the only one who could get me out.

I didn’t wait. Instead, I moved. I was already in motion, my feet carrying me over the uneven floor slowly and with caution. My eyes were surveying every inch of the cellar for some sign of a way out. Nothing. Just stone and earth and the smell of old blood.

I dropped to one knee and pressed my hands into the stone, feeling the vibration beneath my fingers. The walls weren’t smooth. They had cracks, hidden passages. I already knew that. I also knew that not everyone could do what Annika did, so there had to be a more mortal way out of here. Something with little magic and a lot of physical work.

I opened my eyes wide and stared at the walls again. The only sound was the drip of water somewhere in the distance. Time had no meaning down here. It felt like I’d been walking in circles for hours, although I’m sure it had been mere minutes. Time

was a relative thing, especially when one felt trapped.

I turned back to the hole above. It taunted me, mocking me with its unreachable promise of freedom. But there was no way up.

The air was slowly becoming suffocating. I tried to remind myself that it was all in my mind, but the frustration was very hard to ignore. I closed my eyes, hoping that I might come up with something.

Then, it happened.

A shift in the air, so subtle at first I thought I was imagining it. A light breeze? No. The air grew heavier, swirling with an unseen force, as if something was stirring in the center of the room.

I opened my eyes wide, staring in disbelief at the sight before me. The dust around the center of the cellar began to swirl, gathering like a storm, a vortex pulling everything in its path. The floor vibrated beneath my feet, and a strange energy filled the space. It felt dark, but not threatening... yet.

My eyes narrowed, watching as the dust spun faster, until it became a tangible shape. Finally, it started to resemble a human form. It was as if the very air was alive, molding itself into something solid.

A woman.

I watched in stunned silence as the shape took form. Dark hair, cascading like a wave of midnight down her back. Her skin glowed faintly, like moonlight against the shadows. And her face... her face was a vision. Perfect. Beautiful, in every sense of the word.

She stood before me now, her eyes meeting mine. I couldn't tear my gaze away, not that I wanted to. Even with everything that had happened, something about her drew me in, pulling at something deep inside me.

But no. No, I wouldn't let her control me. I gritted my teeth and forced my thoughts to center. I had no idea what sorcery this was, but I refused to fall victim to it.

Her lips curled into a slight smile, almost like she knew what I was thinking. The corners of her mouth twitched, and though she said nothing, I could feel her eyes on me.

"Who are you?" The question slipped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

She didn't answer right away. I felt as if I were just imagining this. Maybe I was... I had to be.

But still, her eyes lingered on me, almost as if she was assessing me, taking in every detail of my face. There was a strange amusement in her expression, like she found something about me wildly interesting.

"You're not welcome here," I growled, though even I knew how weak it sounded. I didn't want to be taken in by whatever she was. Not when I had so much more pressing things to deal with.

Her eyes flashed with something, maybe amusement, before her smile widened, showing just a hint of fangs. "And yet, here I am."

I exhaled sharply, pushing myself off the wall. I had no reason to be intimidated, and yet, a part of me was. I wasn't sure what she was, some kind of manifestation? A trick? I didn't know, but I wasn't sticking around to find out.

“Leave.” The word was cold, hard. I wasn’t in the mood for games.

She tilted her head, the smile never leaving her face, and I could feel her power swirling around me. Everything about her was intoxicating, but I fought it. Annika’s face filled my thoughts, her memory anchoring me to our love.

The woman stepped closer, her eyes never leaving mine. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

“Then what the hell do you want?” I snapped.

“I am your true mate,” she said softly, her voice like honey, but underneath, it was laced with something far darker.

She took a step forward, and I could feel the air around her hum with power.

Her words lingered in my mind. True mate.

I’d already found my mate. The only one who mattered. Annika, our son, our town... they were all that mattered. Not some stranger who appeared out of nowhere, claiming to be what I’d already given my heart to.

“You’re lying,” I spat. I wanted to lash out, to tear the words out of her mouth, but I held myself back. Barely.

Her smile only widened, but there was a sharpness behind it now, a glint of something far darker than what her beauty suggested.

“I speak only the truth,” she purred. “And I can offer salvation. For your town. For your son. For everything you’ve ever cared about.”

My heart stuttered at the mention of him... Aiden. My blood, my everything. The



thought of losing him twisted like a knife in my gut.

“You took my son?” I demanded to know. It took all of my conscious effort not to grab her by the throat and squeeze the living daylight out of her.

Her gaze was cold now, detached. “One thing must be exchanged for another. It is only fair, Lucas.”

“Fair?” I laughed bitterly, the sound harsh in the empty cellar. I didn’t even ask her how she knew my name or who I was. That was irrelevant now, while fury surged through my veins. “You come here, claiming to be my mate, and you want me to trade something?”

I lunged toward her, my fangs descending, rage clouding my vision. I wanted to rip her apart for daring to mock me, for daring to use my son as leverage.

But she wasn’t there.

My hands closed on nothing but air. I stumbled, my feet sliding on the floor, but before I could even register what had happened, laughter echoed through the cellar. I spun around, furious, but she was gone. She was playing with me, like a cat with a mouse.

Instead, the air around me rippled, a wisp of smoke, and there she was, reforming out of the swirling dust like it was a part of her. She stood now behind me, her eyes glowing, and with that same inscrutable smile on her face.

“You think you can force me into submission?” she teased, her voice like a whisper at the back of my mind.

I snarled, my vision darkening with rage. “Give him back!”

Her smile didn't falter. "He is still safe. But to save him, to save everything you hold dear... something must be given."

My hands shook with the effort of holding back. I wanted to reach for her, rip her apart, but the calmness in her voice pushed me to the edge.

"You think this is a game?!" My chest heaved with the intensity of my fury. "You think you can come here and offer salvation while my son's life is on the line?"

She stepped closer, her face now inches from mine. "Everyone wants to be the master of their fate. And the only way to be that is to be offered a choice. That is what I am offering you, Lucas."

The words hung between us, heavy with meaning I couldn't quite grasp.

And then, her voice cut through the tension again. "You want to save your son, don't you? You want to save your town? Your people?"

The sharp sting of her words cut deeper than I expected. I wanted to snap, to lash out, but I swallowed the bitter taste of defeat. I couldn't do anything to her. Not from here.

"What do you want from me?" My voice was barely more than a growl.

She didn't answer immediately. Instead, her eyes softened for a moment, but I saw the truth in them: there was nothing gentle about her. She wasn't here for charity or to play hero. She was here to make a deal. A deal that would cost me.

One thing for another.

It didn't matter what it was. I wouldn't give her anything.

“I want you,” she said, her voice smooth as silk. “I want your consent. And then, I will give you everything you need. Your son’s life. Your town’s future.”

A part of me wanted to tear into her, make her pay for even suggesting it, but the other part, the part that cared about my son, about everything I’d been fighting for, whispered doubts into my mind.

But I wouldn’t be swayed.

“You won’t have it,” I spat. “You’ll never have it. I will never make a deal with the likes of you.”

She was still smiling. “I thought you might say that. Then again, I also thought you were smart. So, I will give you some time to think about your decision.”

“I don’t need—” I started, but she didn’t allow me to finish.

She vanished into the dust she emerged from, leaving only suffocating silence to consume me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

I stood at the edge of the hole, peering down into the darkness below. The wind carried the faintest scent of Lucas. Smoke, blood, and something wild. It was him. I knew it. He was down there, somewhere, trapped in that hellish cellar.

Beside me, Kael moved quickly, tying our shirts and pants together. It was the only thing we could come up with to lower into the hole and help Lucas out.

“Do you think he’ll be able to climb up this?” Kael asked.

I didn’t look at him as I nodded my head. “He has to.”

The rope was crude, the fabric fraying in places, but it was the only thing we had. Kael finished the knot and held it tight, testing its strength. I looked down, touching the makeshift rope. For a moment, Kael’s doubts overtook me. What if we weren’t able to pull Lucas up?

The thought of losing him again... it made my heart ache, a sharp, burning feeling that threatened to tear me apart.

“Annika,” Kael’s voice pulled me back to the present moment. “It’s time.”

I nodded, biting my lip to keep the tremor out of my voice. There was no more waiting. No more hesitation. I didn’t care about the risks, the dangers. Lucas was down there, and I wasn’t going to lose him.

“Lucas!” I shouted into the hole, my voice echoing in the cavernous space. My heart thudded in my chest, pounding in my ears. “Lucas, can you hear me?”

I waited, holding my breath, but only silence answered back.

I glanced at Kael, and without another word, he threw the rope into the hole. The fabric disappeared into the dark abyss, swallowed up by the shadows. I gripped the rope tight, pulling, hoping that there would actually be something to pull.

“Lucas?” Kael called out again.

Suddenly, there was a rustle down in the darkness.

“Lucas?” I breathed his name like a prayer.

“I’m here!” Finally, we heard him.

“Grab on,” Kael instructed. “Can you reach the rope?”

“I think so,” Lucas spoke from the darkness.

A moment later, the rope tightened.

“Pull,” Kael instructed, although he was doing most of the pulling, as I couldn’t stop the tremor in my hands.

Finally, Lucas’ face emerged from the shadows. As we were pulling him, he was also climbing up, desperately, using every bit of strength he had left. His hair, matted with dirt, hung loose around his face. His clothes were torn, but there was no mistaking the look in his eyes.

A deep, guttural sound escaped his throat as he made his way up the rope. His muscles straining with the effort. The sight of him, so raw, so alive, made everything else fade away.

When his hands reached the top, Kael reached down, pulling him the rest of the way, and I nearly fell forward, throwing myself at him.

“Lucas...” I whispered, relief flooding through me like a storm.

I didn’t care about the dirt or the blood. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him tight.

His arms circled around me, pulling me closer, but there was a tension in his touch. I pulled back slightly, meeting his gaze. His eyes were darker than usual, something stormy behind them.

“What happened?” I asked, trying to read him.

He didn’t speak right away. Instead, he just stared at me, as if seeing me for the first time. His jaw clenched, and for a moment, I thought he might push me away. But then, he exhaled slowly, and his hand came to rest gently on my cheek.

“I thought I lost you,” he managed to muster. His thumb brushed over my skin like he couldn’t believe I was real. “I thought I was... I was gone.”

We quickly left the place, with Lucas somehow seeming to lag behind. Once we were finally out and back in the forest, Kael suggested we stop for a moment. I welcomed the idea.

Lucas sat on the ground, with his back resting against a broken tree stump. The moonlight carved sharp angles into his face, highlighting the tension in his jaw.

Something had happened. But what?

I knelt beside him, touching his shoulder. He didn't react at first. He just stared at the dirt beneath his boots, as if lost in something I couldn't see.

"Lucas," I said softly, squeezing his arm. "Talk to me."

Kael was close by, and he could overhear us easily, but I didn't mind that.

Lucas exhaled loudly. "I saw something down there."

Kael stepped closer upon those words, barely able to hide the concern he was feeling. "What do you mean? Saw what?"

Lucas ran a hand through his hair, pulling at the strands in frustration. "I don't know if it was real," he admitted. "Magic, a hallucination... but she was there."

I stiffened, my fingers tightening on his arm. "She?"

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "A woman. She formed from dust. Smoke. Whatever the hell it was. She claimed—" He hesitated, his mouth twisting like the words tasted like poison. "She claimed to be my true mate."

I didn't know what to say to that. Fortunately, Kael did. "That's impossible."

Lucas finally looked at me then. "I know." His voice was raw. "I know it's a lie. I told her she was lying." He reached for me, his fingers brushing over my wrist, an unspoken believe me in the gesture.

The bond between us thrummed. I felt as if someone bore a hole in my skin and was now pulling my veins out, one by one.

“She said she could offer salvation,” he went on, his fingers curling against his knee like he was trying to suppress the fury in him. “That to save them, something had to be exchanged. One thing for another.” His voice deepened into a growl. “Like she was playing god. Like she had the right.”

A chill slid down my spine. Magic. Some twisted, ancient magic. It had to be.

Kael shifted uneasily. “And you’re sure she wasn’t just—”

Lucas shot him a glare. “I don’t know, Kael. I don’t even know if it was real.” His hands clenched. “But it felt real. I could hear her, smell her. I tried to grab her, but she was just smoke.”

I sucked in a slow breath, forcing myself to think. If it was magic, if something powerful enough had reached into that cellar and shown itself to him, then we were dealing with something far more dangerous than we had anticipated.

I touched his face gently, brushing away a streak of dirt on his cheek. He leaned into my touch, if only just for a second.

I didn’t like the way he looked, so haunted by what had happened. Lucas never second-guessed himself. He simply knew things, he trusted his instincts and followed them like an unshakable force. But now? He looked... unsettled.

Kael thought about it for a moment, rubbing the back of his neck. “It has to be a witch,” he said firmly. “Something ancient. Something with enough power to force visions like that.”

Lucas’s expression darkened. “She didn’t feel like a witch. She felt like something... I don’t know...”



Kael shrugged. "Powerful beings can feel like anything, depending on what magic they wield." His argument was logical, but still lacked conviction. "Regardless, if she could get inside your head like that, you need to be cautious."

Lucas let out a low, humorless laugh. "Cautious? She knew about my son, Kael. She knew about the town." He paused for a moment. "What good is caution against something that already has the upper hand?"

Kael didn't back down. "You don't let it have the upper hand. You fight it. You don't play into whatever game it's setting up."

Lucas just shook his head slightly, staring into the distance, his thoughts somewhere far away.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to shake the unease settling in my stomach. This wasn't just a trick of the mind. This was something real. Something that had touched Lucas in a way nothing else had before. And I hated it.

I hated that some thing had gotten to him when I wasn't there. I hated that it had whispered to him, played with his mind, tried to make him question himself. And, if I was being honest with myself, I hated that it had come to him in the form of a beautiful woman.

I clenched my jaw against the sharp pang in my chest. I trusted Lucas. I knew who he was, what we were to each other. But jealousy was a strange thing, creeping in even when it wasn't wanted.

I pushed it down as hard as I could.

"It was nothing," he murmured, only for me to hear. "She was nothing."

I nodded, exhaling slowly, pressing my fingers into my arms. “I know.”

But unfortunately, that didn’t mean she was gone.

“We need to go to Rowena,” Kael voiced his idea.

Lucas didn’t like it one bit. “No.”

Kael sighed, rubbing his temples. “We don’t have the shifters’ scent, Lucas. We don’t know which way to go. Unless you suddenly developed a sixth sense for tracking through magic, we’re wasting time wandering in the dark.”

I knew that Lucas didn’t want to turn back, and going to Rowena was exactly that. Instead of going forward to find our boy, we were turning back. I knew he saw it like that.

I tenderly placed a hand on his arm. “She might be our only chance,” I said softly. “If this woman, whoever or whatever she was, really is as powerful as you think, then we need answers. We need someone who understands magic. We need to see if she managed to find out about that rune.”

Lucas still didn’t say anything, so Kael pushed. “Rowena has dealt with things like this before and you know it.”

She had a way of seeing past what was in front of her, understanding things in a way most others couldn’t. If anyone could make sense of what Lucas had seen, it was her.

“Lucas,” I said gently. “We don’t have anything. No scent. No trail. Nothing.” I swallowed, keeping my voice steady. “Rowena is already helping us. She’s waiting for us. We should go back.”

His eyes flared at me. “And do what?” His voice was rough and bitter with disappointment. “Sit around and hope she finds something? Waste more time?”

“She’s the only one who might have answers,” Kael pressed. “Unless you suddenly have a better idea.”

Lucas stayed silent.

I knew what was happening. He didn’t want to stop. Didn’t want to admit that he felt powerless. That something had shaken him so deeply, he couldn’t even trust his own instincts right now.

“This isn’t giving up,” I whispered. “This is being smart.”

Then, finally, he exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “Fine,” he muttered. “We’ll go back.”

Relief washed through me, but I didn’t let it show. I just gave his hand a small squeeze before letting go.

Kael grinned, clapping Lucas on the shoulder. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

Lucas shot him a glare, but I caught the way his shoulders relaxed, if only just a little.

We turned back to our horses, retracing our steps toward Rowena.

Because, whether Lucas liked it or not, we had nowhere else to go.

Lucas

When we arrived, Rowena was standing in the doorway to her cottage with her arms crossed and an expressionless look on her old, worn-out face. She had been expecting us.

Of course, she had.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to come back,” she said, her tone dry but not unkind.

I exhaled sharply, rolling my shoulders. “We didn’t have a better option.”

Kael snorted. “Which means he finally admitted he was lost.”

Rowena’s gaze flicked to him, then to Annika, then back to me. She studied me the way she always did, like she was seeing something beneath the surface, something I didn’t want to acknowledge.

“We’ve known each other too long for you to waste time pretending, vampire prince,” she said simply. “Come inside.”

She turned without waiting for a response, the door creaking open as she stepped into the warm light of the cottage.

Annika touched my arm, just for a second. A silent reassurance. A reminder that I trusted Rowena... that we all did. I let out a slow breath and followed her in.

I stopped near the hearth, crossing my arms. Rowena soundlessly proceeded to unroll a brittle scroll across the wooden table. Annika was standing opposite her, with her hands pressed flat against the wood. Kael lingered in the corner, silent but observant.

Rowena traced the rune we had brought her with a gnarled finger. “Like I said, this rune is not a key, nor is it a simple binding mark. It is a tether to power, to bloodlines, to destinies that have yet to unfold.” She exhaled, rolling her shoulders as if shaking off the weight of the knowledge pressing down on her. “It came to me in my dreams last night. The rune showed me... him.”

“Aiden,” I said, feeling as if something was choking me.

Rowena nodded. “Your son isn’t just a hybrid of witch and vampire, Lucas. He is more.”

The words should have been impossible, but deep down, I felt them, even before she spoke them aloud.

“He is the bridge,” Rowena murmured. “The key that could either unite vampires and shifters... or destroy them both.”

The air around us was still. I could hear everyone’s breathing.

I stepped closer to Rowena, my body more tense than ever before. “Explain.”

Rowena met my eyes, unfazed by the edge in my voice. “Aiden is something that shouldn’t exist.” Her voice was calm, but the weight of her words landed like a death knell. “A child of two opposing forces, two bloodlines that were never meant to mix. Vampires and witches, one born of darkness, the other shaped by the elements. But somehow, he is both.”

I already knew this. We already knew this. But there was more. I could feel it, could see it in the way Rowena's lips pressed into a thin line, in the hesitation flickering behind her sharp eyes.

Annika spoke before I could. "You're not telling us everything."

Rowena sighed. "Because I don't know everything. But I do know this: Aiden's bloodline was never meant to end with him." She tapped the rune, the candlelight casting eerie shadows across the surface. "The shifters, and whoever is leading them... they know this too. And they are trying to claim him before he can claim his own fate."

A muscle ticked in my jaw. "Claim him how?"

Rowena's expression darkened. "The rune connects him to something. Someone. It is a tether, but not an unbreakable one." She turned to Annika, her voice quieter now. "Your son's fate is still in motion. And there are forces at work that want to decide it for him."

Annika swallowed, but she squared her shoulders. "They can't have him."

The finality in her voice was a blade drawn between us and the rest of the world.

Rowena gave a slow nod. "No. But that won't stop them from trying."

Kael finally spoke. "So if Aiden is meant to unite vampires and shifters, then why the hell are the shifters the ones hunting him?"

Rowena turned her gaze to him, a flicker of something grim in her eyes. "Because unity isn't what they want." She looked back at me. "Some will always choose war over peace. Control over balance. And if they can turn Aiden into something else,

something they can wield, then they will.”

“Then, all this is connected to Aurelius?” Annika asked. The name itself was a weight none of us had wanted to carry again.

Rowena sighed, rubbing her temples before nodding. “Yes,” she admitted. “It’s likely.”

Annika’s breath hitched beside me. I turned my head just enough to see her expression. Determined, but with an edge of something else. Fear.

Her voice was quieter when she spoke again. “Is my bond to him still there?”

Rowena’s hesitation was answer enough.

Annika shook her head, stepping back slightly. “No,” she whispered. “No, I severed it. I felt it break.”

Rowena exhaled. “You broke the hold he had on you,” she agreed. “But some bonds don’t shatter completely. Some linger, buried and dormant. Weak, but never gone.” She tapped the rune. “And if this is connected to Aiden, then it is also connected to him.”

I felt my breath turn sharp. No.

Annika swallowed hard, her shoulders stiffening. “If someone is trying to bring him back...” She closed her eyes for half a second before looking at Rowena again. “Do they want to use him? Or something worse?”

Rowena’s expression darkened. “It’s hard to say. But the fact that they have Aiden means they are either trying to awaken Aurelius again...” Her voice dropped lower.

“Or they want to take his power for themselves.”

A cold weight settled in my gut.

Annika pressed a hand to her chest, her breathing tight. “Then we don’t just have to find Aiden. We have to stop this before they succeed.”

“Lucas...” Annika turned to me. “Do you think she is trying to awaken him?”

“She?” Rowena echoed. “Tell me.”

I exhaled slowly. “I saw something. Or someone.”

Rowena stilled, her gaze locking onto mine with sudden sharpness. “Go on.”

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to say it. “In the cellar of an old fortress. I was trapped. And then she appeared, just like that, out of nowhere. A whirl of dust that took shape. A woman.”

Rowena’s expression didn’t change, but something flickered in her eyes. “Describe her.”

I did, keeping my voice even, detached. She was beautiful, yes, but there was something wrong about her. Like she was too perfect, too carefully made. Like she wasn’t real.

“She had long black hair, and she was very pale, almost as if she were made of moonlight. She claimed she was my true mate,” I finished, my voice tight. “She said she could save my son. My town. But—” My hands curled into fists. “That something had to be exchanged.”



Annika stiffened beside me. I didn't look at her.

Rowena didn't speak right away. She just studied me, her fingers lightly tapping against the table's worn surface. Then, finally, she asked, "And how did she make you feel?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Like I wanted to rip her apart."

Kael let out a quiet breath, shifting his weight.

Rowena nodded slightly, as if that told her something. "She wasn't real," I said before she could. "Or at least, not there in the way we are."

"No," Rowena agreed. "Not in the way we are."

A chill ran down my spine.

I knew Rowena well enough to recognize when she was holding something back.

"What was she?" I demanded.

Rowena met my gaze, her voice calm but unshakable. "Something very, very old."

"Something old?" I repeated in frustration. "You'll have to be more specific than that."

She exhaled, leaning back in her chair, fingers drumming lightly on the wooden table. "There are things older than vampires, Lucas. Older than the kind of magic I practice. You know this."

I clenched my jaw. "That doesn't answer my question."

Rowena gave me a measured look, then turned to the fire. The kettle had started to steam, but she didn't move to take it off the heat.

"She claimed to be your mate," she murmured. "And she knew things—about your son, your town. That means she's been watching you. Possibly for a long time."

Annika inhaled sharply. I felt her gaze on me, but I still didn't turn to meet it.

"She wasn't real," I said again, forcing the words out. "She was just... smoke. A trick."

"A trick that knew your deepest fears," Rowena said. "A trick that offered you exactly what you wanted."

My fingers twitched. She wasn't wrong.

Rowena finally stood, moving toward a shelf filled with books. They were old, frayed things that smelled of dust and time. She ran her fingers along their spines, muttering to herself. Then she pulled one free, flipping through pages with careful precision.

When she found what she was looking for, she set the book on the table and turned it toward me. I stepped closer.

The page was covered in inked symbols, old script, a language I barely recognized. But beneath them, there was an illustration, faded but still clear. A woman, her form shifting, half-smoke, half-solid. Eyes like black pits.

My stomach turned.

Rowena tapped the page with one finger. "If I had to guess," she said quietly, "I'd say you encountered something from before our time. A thing half-forgotten, lurking at

the edges of history.”

I stared down at the image.

“And it knows your name.”

Annika shifted beside me, her voice barely above a whisper. “What is it?”

Rowena exhaled. “A Shadow Bride.”

The words slithered through the air, heavy and cold. Kael cursed under his breath. Annika stiffened. I didn’t move, didn’t blink.

I had heard it before. Not from books. Not in whispered warnings from elders. But in the dark corners of childhood, when firelight flickered low and voices dropped to hushed tones.

The Shadow Bride.

I could almost hear my mother’s voice, low and full of mock menace, telling the story to frighten unruly children into obedience. Go to bed, or the Shadow Bride will come for you. Mind your manners, or she’ll whisper your name in the dark.

I had laughed then, too young to be afraid of something that wasn’t real.

But now...

Now, I wasn’t laughing.

I ran a hand down my face, forcing myself to remember. To really remember.

“She was a woman once,” I started the story exactly how my mother had told it to me all those years ago. “A mortal, long ago. A bride promised to a man who never loved her.” The words came slowly at first, then faster as the story pieced itself together in my mind. “Some say he betrayed her, left her at the altar. Others say he locked her away, let her wither to nothing while he took another.”

Rowena nodded slightly but didn’t interrupt.

I exhaled. “Either way, she died with her heart shattered. And when she rose again, she wasn’t human anymore.”

Annika shifted beside me, listening closely, her breath soft and steady.

I kept going. “She became something else. A spirit, a shadow. Some say she bargained for power. Others say she was the bargain, that her soul was so twisted by grief that there was nothing left but hunger.”

Kael muttered a curse. “And what does she want?”

I let out a hollow breath. “Love.”

Annika stiffened.

Rowena’s expression didn’t change. “Not just any love.”

“No,” I agreed, jaw tightening. “She offers you what your heart wants most. The thing you’d kill for. Die for.” I met Rowena’s gaze. “And in return, you love her.”

“Or at least,” Rowena said, voice even, “you try.”

I felt anger stir deep inside of me. Because that was the part no one ever told in the

children's stories, the part they left out. No one who accepted the Shadow Bride's bargain ever truly loved her. And so, she always took something in return.

I thought of my son. My town.

"She came to me," I said, voice sharp as a blade. "She chose me."

Rowena studied me carefully. "Then you must ask yourself why."

The answer was already sinking into my gut like poison. Because she knew what I wanted. She knew what I feared losing. And she had already decided what the price would be.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

“I wish there were more I could do,” Rowena murmured, a rare note of regret in her voice. “But this... this is only the beginning.”

Lucas nodded. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

Kael gave a half-hearted smirk. “Well, at least we’re not bored.”

Rowena didn’t smile. She looked at Lucas instead, her gaze heavy with something I couldn’t quite name. “Be careful, vampire prince.”

He was no longer the vampire prince and Rowena knew it well. But I had come to realize that it was a sort of an endearing name for him, that was how she was showing her affection for him.

I stepped forward, offering her a small, grateful smile. “Thank you. For everything.”

She tilted her head slightly, her expression softening. “Take care of each other.”

I squeezed her hand briefly before turning toward the darkness with the others.

The night was colder now, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and woodsmoke. The moon was only a sliver above us, barely enough to light our way.

Lucas walked ahead, his pace steady but his mind clearly elsewhere. I could feel it in the way he carried himself, in the tightness of his jaw, the way his hands flexed at his

sides.

He was still thinking about her. The Shadow Bride.

I hated the way it made me feel.

Not because I doubted him. Not because I thought, even for a second, that he wanted her. But because she had chosen him. Because something dark and ancient had reached for him, knowing exactly how to strike.

And that terrified me.

Kael nudged me lightly with his elbow as we walked. “You’re quiet.”

I forced a small smile. “Just thinking.”

He hummed. “Bad habit.”

Before I could say anything to that, the wind shifted suddenly. The trees around us stilled, as if the entire forest was holding its breath. Then, without warning, the leaves at our feet twisted into a whirlwind, spiraling upward in a silent storm of red and gold.

I stopped walking. My breath caught. And then, she stepped through the storm.

She didn’t materialize in the way Rowena’s magic did, nor did she arrive with the heavy presence of something solid. No, she unfolded from the darkness, her form shifting in and out of focus, like smoke barely held together in the shape of a woman.

Dark hair cascaded in soft waves down her back, flowing like ink through water. Her skin was smooth and pale, like untouched porcelain. She should have been beautiful.

She was beautiful, in that impossible, haunting way that only belonged to things not meant for this world.

But it was her eyes that made my stomach twist. Deep, endless, like staring into a void that knew your name. There was a hunger there, patient and certain. A quiet, insidious kind of possession.

She smiled, although just barely. Not in greeting, not in warmth, but in the way a predator might before striking.

Lucas went rigid beside me. I could feel his fury crackling in the air.

The Shadow Bride stood before us, her form shifting like candlelight, dark hair swaying though the air had stilled. Then, she spoke.

“Lucas...”

Her voice was like running water... soft, flowing, but with an undertow strong enough to drag you under. It was melodic, beautiful even, but there was something else beneath it. Something deadly.

She only said his name, yet it rippled through the air like a spell, curling around him like unseen fingers. A lover's whisper, a siren's call.

Lucas stiffened. I saw his hands flex, his jaw tighten. But he didn't answer.

She tilted her head, ignoring the rest of us as if we didn't exist. As if I didn't exist.

Anger burned in my chest. “Who are you?” I demanded, voice sharp.

Nothing. Not even a flicker of acknowledgment.



Kael took a step forward, his usual smirk absent. “You’re not very polite, are you?”

Still, she didn’t so much as glance at him. But when Lucas exhaled sharply, a sound more breath than voice, her lips curved slightly, as if he had said something to her and not just in defiance of her.

“You resist,” she murmured, and the sound of it sent a chill down my spine. “That is... charming.”

Lucas growled low in his throat. “I told you I’m done with you. What do you want now?”

Her dark eyes gleamed. “Only what was promised.”

I clenched my fists. “Nothing was promised.”

She didn’t so much as blink in my direction. I might as well have been a ghost. Rage bubbled beneath my skin, a cold, sharp thing. I wanted to claw at her, force her to look at me, to acknowledge me. But she only had eyes for Lucas. And that terrified me more than anything else.

“I demand you look at me!” The words tore out of my chest without me even being aware of them.

And finally, she turned to me. Slowly. Deliberately. And I wished that she hadn’t.

Because when her gaze met mine, it was like staring into something endless. Not darkness, not death, but something worse. A hunger that had no shape, no mercy. A void with a will of its own.

“Nothing was promised,” I repeated slowly, accentuating every word, hoping that she

couldn't see the fear eating at my very soul.

"You are wrong," she said, her voice still carrying that quiet, deadly melody. "All things are promised. Some with words. Some with longing. Some with blood."

The air in my lungs turned to ice.

Lucas took a step forward, the movement sharp, instinctive. Protective. "I never asked for you." His voice was a snarl, his fangs flashing in protective anger. "I never wanted you."

That devilish smile of hers deepened, slow and knowing.

"Want is a fickle thing," she murmured, reaching out as if to touch his face. Her fingers, long and elegant, pale as bone, stopped just short of his cheek. And then she let her hand fall. "It is need that binds."

My stomach twisted.

Kael scoffed, refusing to remain on the sidelines. "So that's it? You show up and claim some cosmic debt no one agreed to? Sounds desperate."

She didn't even spare him a glance.

Lucas's breath was harsh and measured. "What do you want from me?"

Her expression turned almost gentle.

"Your heart," she whispered. "Your love. Freely given."

A sharp, bitter laugh escaped me before I could stop it. "Then you came for the

wrong man.”

She finally looked at me again. Really looked and smiled.

“We shall see.”

Now, the wind was screaming around us, twisting leaves into frenzied spirals. The Shadow Bride stood before Lucas, her form flickering like a dying flame, something not quite real yet unbearably present.

“I will return your son, unharmed,” she finally said, her voice liquid silk, “if you leave her and bind yourself to me instead.”

Lucas didn’t flinch. Neither did he hesitate. “No.” His refusal was sharp and absolute.

The Shadow Bride stilled.

“No?” she echoed, as if the word was foreign and she didn’t understand what it meant.

Lucas stepped forward, rage crackling in every line of his body. “You think I’d trade my mate? That I’d abandon her for you?” His voice was low and dangerous. “I’d burn this world to ash before I let that happen.”

Something in the air shifted. It darkened. Her expression, once so calm and so patient, cracked now. The air around her vibrated, the ground beneath us trembling as if the earth itself recoiled from her fury.

“You would deny me?”

Her voice wasn’t soft now. It wasn’t melodic. It was raw and jagged like chards of

broken glass. It was a sound that didn't belong in this world. The trees around us groaned, their branches snapping under an unseen force. The wind lashed at my skin, biting like ice.

I grabbed Lucas's arm, instinct screaming at me to run, but he didn't move.

She took a step forward, and the ground shuddered.

"You do not understand, Lucas," she hissed, her beautiful face twisting into something monstrous writhing beneath her skin. "I do not offer. I claim!"

Lucas bared his fangs, his eyes dark with fury. "Then try."

The world exploded. The wind roared, the trees bent, and the night itself seemed to tear open as her rage filled the space around us. That was the moment I realized that she wasn't just furious... she was desperate.

I could feel the air around us crackling, charged with raw power as the Shadow Bride's fury twisted and writhed. It felt like the world was about to snap in two. Her voice had turned into a growl, guttural and violent, every word laced with hatred. The ground beneath us trembled, the trees around us groaning in protest.

And then, through the chaos, I heard Kael's voice.

"Step back!"

Lucas didn't question it, stepping back with me, putting distance between us and the roaring storm of the Shadow Bride's rage.

Kael raised his hands, his palms facing outward, and his voice low and commanding, rang through the air. "By the blood of the fallen, I command you, spirit of the void,

return to the darkness from which you came!”

The words were ancient, an incantation I could barely comprehend. The wind around us seemed to bow to his power, swirling in tight, controlled spirals, and the Shadow Bride staggered. Her maddened eyes, those black pits of endless voids, snapped toward Kael, and her face contorted with fury and confusion.

“You think you can banish me?” she hissed, her voice still melodic but with an edge of desperation, as if she hadn’t considered this, as if she hadn’t been expecting to fight a Nephilim.

Kael’s lips curled into something that was almost a smile, but there was nothing friendly about it. “You aren’t the first spirit I’ve put in its place.” His voice cut her. “And you won’t be the last.”

The magic of his ancient spell swirled around us, gathering in force. The Shadow Bride staggered back, her form starting to shimmer like a mirage, and we knew that the power of Kael’s words was tearing at her very essence.

For a moment, it was as though the entire world held its breath. And then, she screamed. The sound was deafening, a wail of anguish and rage that shook the very earth beneath us. But it wasn’t enough to stop Kael’s magic.

With a final, violent twist of air, she dissolved. The wind stopped. The night fell silent.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. But I slowly realized that she was gone... at least, for now.

Lucas’s shoulders sagged slightly, the tension in his frame easing, but his eyes never left the spot where the Shadow Bride had stood. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t

need to.

Kael inhaled deeply, allowing relief to wash over him. He seemed drained of power. After all, he had just banished an evil spirit. How else would he seem?

“She’s not gone for good,” he warned us. “She’ll find another way to come back for you, Lucas.”

I felt a shiver run down my spine. I didn’t want to think about that. Not right now.

But Kael was right. There was no way she would let this go.

The walk back to town was silent, but we all felt as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for something... for our next move.

I stayed close to Lucas, my hand brushing his as we walked, just to feel the warmth of him, just to know he was still here, still beside me. I didn’t ask if he was alright. I knew better than to question him when his thoughts were so far away.

Kael walked a few paces ahead of us, his long stride taking him easily through the darkness. There was something in his shoulders, something tight in the way he moved, but it wasn’t fear. It was something else.

I caught a glance of him, his eyes shadowed but steady. He was deep in thought, too, probably running through all the ways the Shadow Bride might return, all the things we hadn’t prepared for.

It was all too much.

When we reached the edge of the town, I finally broke the silence. “We need to rest.”

Lucas didn't respond immediately, but I felt him nod. His voice came low and exhausted. "We'll rest, and then we'll figure out what to do."

I had no intention of asking him how he planned on doing that. I didn't want to hear the uncertainty in his voice. I didn't want to face the truth that we didn't have any answers.

But we couldn't keep moving forward like this, driven by nothing but fear and anger. We all needed time to process, to think.

We needed sleep.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

I woke in darkness, but it wasn't the kind of darkness that comforted me. It was wrong. The room around me was my bedroom, but it was twisted, as if the walls themselves were closing in.

I tried to move, but my limbs were heavy. My mind screamed when I realized that I felt paralyzed. I couldn't breathe. The silence was deafening.

And then, I heard it.

It was only a whisper at first. Soft, melodious, like the gentle breeze brushing against my skin. But it wasn't the wind. It wasn't gentle. It was her.

"Lucas..."

Her voice, sweet and seductive, a melody so powerful it made my insides churn. It was all I could hear, all I could feel. Every other sound drowned in the pull of her presence. She was here.

I tried to push her away, to fight her grip on me, but it was like trying to escape the grip of the night itself. I couldn't move. There was nowhere to escape.

"You will never be free..."

Her words sank into me like poison, making my entire body tremble.



And then, a moment later, I was somewhere else. I wasn't in my cottage with Annika any longer. I was there, where I least wanted to be, back in that hellhole of a place... my past.

I could smell the blood. I could hear the screams. The stench of death filled the air like an iron taste in my mouth.

I looked down at my hands. They were drenched in blood. It was fresh, sticky, covering my fingers and my palms. I looked up and he was there. A man. A boy, really, just a boy, but his eyes... they were wide, empty, pleading.

A flash of recognition ripped through me. It was him. It was my childhood friend, the one I couldn't save, the one whose blood oozed through my fingers.

I couldn't move. My body refused to obey me, but my mind... my mind was awake, painfully so, forced to relive the moment over and over again. I heard him scream. I could see the shifter claw tear into his throat again and again. My own eyes were wide, staring at him in that final moment before... before all ended...

His mouth opened, but no words came out.

I rushed to him, just like I did that time, but I knew there was nothing I could do. I didn't know the horrors of war yet then. But I learned them quickly.

The blood poured from him, soaking the ground. The world around me spun, and all I could hear was the sound of my heart pounding, thudding in my ears like a drumbeat, louder than the cries of the shifters I had killed, louder than the agony that was storming inside of me.

"You are mine, Lucas..."

The whisper came again. Her voice.

The whisper again. Her voice.

I tried to block it out, but it was like it was inside my head now, burrowing under my skin, making everything feel like her. The shadows that had once been my refuge, my prison, were now hers.

I couldn't breathe.

“We are the same, you and I...”

The voice came again at me, coming from all sides.

And then, the room shifted again. This time, I was in a different place, a place much darker and colder. The smell of smoke and ash lingered in the air, like burnt offerings. I could hear laughter, mocking me. I could see faces blurred by time, lost to memory.

I was in a graveyard.

A thousand graves.

The ground was wet. Muddy. And I knew without asking. I had buried them. My family. The people I had once loved. People who had trusted me.

The ones I had failed.

And then I saw him again.

My son.

His small form, a shadow in the distance. I reached for him, but the ground swallowed my feet, pulling me deeper, faster, and I couldn't get to him.

"He is mine, Lucas..."

She was laughing. It was all I could hear. Her voice, echoing through the graveyard, the sound of rattling bones.

"I will take everything you hold dear. Your family. Your soul. Your very life..."

The words wrapped around me like chains, suffocating me, crushing me beneath their weight. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move.

She was right.

I was trapped in the darkness of my own making, and there was no escape.

There was no escape from her.

I woke then, suddenly, gasping for air, my heart thundering in my chest. I couldn't remember if I was still asleep or if I had just experienced something that would haunt me forever. I couldn't breathe, couldn't shake the images from my head.

The smell of blood lingered in my nostrils. The sound of her laughter still rang in my ears.

"Lucas?" A tender voice reached me. A loving voice.

She was there, kneeling beside me, her hands on my shoulders. The weight of her presence, the warmth of her fingers on my skin, that was enough to remind me where I was, and more importantly, who I was.

I didn't realize how badly I'd needed her until now.

"You're here," I rasped, my voice and my entire body broken.

"I'm here," she whispered, her eyes filled with worry. Her thumb brushed over my skin, trying to soothe the shaking I couldn't control. I reached for her without thinking, my hands trembling as I grabbed onto her. She let me pull her closer, like she understood.

"Annika, I... I couldn't escape it." The words felt like they came from someone else. "It was her... I saw them. All of them. My past. The people I killed, the ones I failed..."

Her fingers slid into my hair, gently pulling me back, making me look at her. Her gaze was soft, without any judgment.

"You don't have to carry that alone," she said, her voice calm and steady, the only thing that felt real in this nightmare.

I closed my eyes, trying to push the images away, but they clung to me. The blood. The bodies. My hands covered in their death. I had promised myself I wouldn't let the past define me, but it was always there, lurking in the shadows, waiting to pull me under when I wasn't strong enough to fight.

Annika didn't speak again. She just stayed there, her hand smoothing over my back, her presence the only thing holding me together.

I was so tired. So tired.

Her arms tightened around me, pulling me against her chest, and I let myself go. Just for a moment, I let go of everything. The past, the terror, the weight of the world

pressing down on me. I let myself just be.

I wrapped her body in mine, my hands keeping her close. Her eyes lifted to mine. How I wanted to drown in those depths. I kissed her throat slowly, savoring every single time my lips pressed against her fragrant skin.

She had been made for me, this magical woman. She had been made for loving, for bearing my children, for being mine her entire life. Her fingers slid through my hair, keeping me close.

My lips traveled to her ear, trailing the line of her jaw, then down her neck again. I wanted to kiss her a million times, and then a million times more. She moaned softly, and I loved how she trembled under my kisses, under my touch. I needed her now, more than ever and she knew it.

She adjusted herself in my lap, straddling me and I lowered the strap of her undershirt, revealing a creamy breast. My hand cupped it gently, as I lowered my lips to the pebbled nipple. She arched her back, pushing it harder into my mouth. She was urging me on, wanting more, just like me.

My tongue flicked over the tip, sucking it, playing with it. I wanted to feast on her creamy, pink flesh, just licking and tasting every bit of her, but I could rarely take it slow with her. This time, however, was different.

“You are so beautiful,” I murmured against her skin.

Her fingers in my hair gentled, still keeping me close to her, to her heart which was beating only for me.

Her hand lowered to my boxers. She could feel my cock straining against them already. Then, without looking away for even a second, she slid her panties to the

side.

“I want you inside of me,” she whispered back.

I wanted to be inside of her... no, I needed it. I wanted to bury myself deep inside and forget everything, if only for one blissful moment.

Her hand was on my stiff cock, guiding it into herself. I could feel her wet heat above me, drenched. I suffocated a gasp of pleasure as she released me from her grip and instead, cupped my face.

“Look at me,” she purred, as if I could do anything else.

She took me inside, deep, in one go. She was more wet, more wonderful than ever before. She started to rock on top of me, moaning softly, biting her lower lip, not taking her eyes off of me.

She was taking me right into her very heart, into her wet heat. I couldn't speak. There were no words to say. There was only pleasure to feel, as she was riding me. Her perky breasts moved in rhythm with her body, as her hair spilled down her back. She kept impaling herself onto me, taking me in deeper and deeper.

Every time she moved, I felt her juices dripping down my wet cock, welcoming me back in. She rubbed her swollen clit every time her hips bucked against my body.

A moment later, she slammed her mouth against mine, as her pussy throbbed around me, pulsating with ecstasy. I swallowed her moan into myself, as she slowed down the pace, calming herself, allowing the tidal wave of delight to subside. As her pussy clenched around my cock, tightening around it, I let go.

I held her tight, cumming inside of her, stifling a strangled cry. She held onto me for

dear life, as I always knew she would. I gave her my everything, just like I always did, just like I always would.

“I love you,” she whispered to me the only words that mattered.

“My heart is yours,” I replied, kissing her again, softly this time, keeping her close to me, refusing to let go.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

I had barely settled back against Lucas when the knock at the door came. It was fast, urgent, and it jolted me out of the fragile peace we had found in each other's arms.

I hesitated for only a moment before I stood up and made my way to the door. I swung it open, and I found Kael standing there. He didn't need to say anything. His eyes told me all I needed to know.

"Rowena," he said urgently. "She's had another vision."

I didn't know if I could bear more bad news. "What did she see?"

I stepped aside, allowing him to come inside. "A cave. She's certain it's where we need to go. She said it's the only way to stop what's coming. The only way to fight this."

My stomach turned. "A cave?"

The word felt wrong, as if it were a riddle wrapped in a dark mystery I didn't understand. A place that could hold answers or death.

Kael's gaze softened, but there was no denying the urgency in his voice. "We don't have much time. Her note told me it's deep in the forest. I'm not sure how far, but she said it will lead us to the answers."

I turned toward Lucas, finding him already standing. He had heard everything. I



could see the determination in his eyes. I didn't know what awaited us in that cave, what Rowena had seen. We were walking into the unknown again, and I wasn't sure if we'd make it out this time. But there was no choice now. There never had been.

"Let's go," Lucas said. That was all he needed to say for us to follow.

The further we ventured into the forest, the quieter it became. The usual sounds of rustling leaves and distant animal calls had faded away, and were now replaced by an eerie silence that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I could feel the weight of the trees around us, pressing in, suffocating, as if the entire forest was holding its breath.

Kael led the way. He moved with a purpose, following the clues Rowena had sent us from her vision, but there was something about him that assured me he was ready to fight in case of an emergency. I hated that we were constantly in that state.

Lucas stayed close behind me, but I could feel the tension in him, too. The shadows of the past still lingered. They haunted him relentlessly. He hadn't said much since we left our cottage, his thoughts clearly far away, tangled in the nightmare that had held him captive.

I wanted to ask him what he was thinking, to offer reassurance, but I knew better than to disturb him. There were some things he needed to process on his own. Besides, we both knew that we didn't have time to waste. Whatever Rowena had seen, it was urgent. Talk would have to wait.

After what felt like hours of navigating through the dense undergrowth, Kael suddenly stopped, his hand held out behind him to signal us. I nearly bumped into his back, but I caught myself just in time. We had reached the entrance.

The cave was hidden in the darkness, looming ahead of us. Kael didn't hesitate. He

stepped forward, parting the vines effortlessly as if they weren't there at all, and disappeared into the mouth of the cave. I swallowed hard, the tightness in my throat making it difficult to breathe.

Lucas gestured at me to go after Kael, and then he followed. The narrow path was uneven underfoot. The rocks were slick and jagged and I almost slipped several times. I could barely see anything ahead of me, despite the dim flow of Kael's flashlight.

"Stay close," Kael urged us. "Caves like this usually have a mind of their own. We don't want to get lost in here."

The further we went, the more oppressive the air became. It felt like the cave was closing in on us, the walls pressing tighter, and the darkness deepening with every step. I couldn't shake the feeling that something was waiting for us, something ancient and malevolent, hiding just out of reach.

And then, I heard it.

A faint whisper, barely audible, like the wind calling my name. But it wasn't the wind. It was something darker.

I stiffened, my heart pounding in my chest. "Did you hear that?"

Lucas' grip on my hand tightened. "I heard it, too."

Kael paused, his head turning sharply toward the sound, as his lantern swung in his hand. "Don't listen to it," he voiced his warning. "This place... it plays tricks on you. The cave feeds on fear."

I shivered at his words, but I didn't question him. I couldn't afford to. Whatever this

place was, it was ancient. It knew things, things it shouldn't. And it was calling us deeper.

I took a deep breath, willing myself not to listen to the voices in my head. Not to listen to the fear, the doubts, the voices trying to tear me apart. I had to focus on the here and now, on finding the answers we desperately needed.

We pressed on, following Kael's lead, and then, just as we rounded another bend in the path, we saw it. A chamber opened up before us, vast and cavernous. The walls were lined with ancient symbols, glowing faintly in the dark. At the center of the room, there was a stone pedestal, cracked and worn with age.

I suffocated a gasp, wondering how many mystical rites it had witnessed. Far too many.

I shivered, pulling my jacket tighter around me, but it didn't help against the chill that seemed to come from the very stones beneath my feet. My eyes flitted over the symbols again, trying to figure out their meaning, but my thoughts kept drifting back to the stone pedestal in the center of the room. It was cracked and worn with age, but there was something about it, something that drew me in, that made me want to step closer.

But before I could move, I heard Lucas' breath hitch behind me.

He had paused at the entrance of the chamber, his head turned slightly, nostrils flaring as though he were trying to catch something on the air. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could tell by the rigid set of his shoulders that something had caught his attention.

"Lucas?" I called quietly, but his gaze was already on the floor, scanning the ground and following some invisible trail. His jaw was clenched and his entire posture was tense, like a predator on the hunt.

He slowly exhaled. “Shifters,” he muttered. “I can smell them.”

I frowned, my heart skipping a beat. Shifters? In here?

“Are you sure?” Kael asked cautiously.

He was standing a few steps behind me, his hand resting on the hilt of his blade, and his eyes were darting around as if he were expecting an ambush.

Lucas didn’t answer right away. Instead, he began to move, as if drawn to something. His nose was still in the air, his movements sharp and precise, and I could see the intensity in his expression. I followed his gaze, but all I could see was the cold stone and the remnants of a long-forgotten power. There was nothing else.

But then Lucas’ body stiffened, and I could hear him inhale sharply.

“It’s faint,” he muttered, almost to himself. “It’s there, but it keeps slipping away.”

He shook his head in frustration, but his eyes were narrowed, focused on the ground beneath him, moving carefully over the stones. Then, he spoke the words which made my heart skip a beat.

“It’s him. Our son.”

I froze. “Are you sure?” I asked, my voice trembling slightly despite my best efforts to keep it steady. “Is it really him?”

Lucas didn’t look at me. He didn’t need to. He was already following the trail, his gaze tracking the faint, fading scent of our son.

“I’m sure,” he said, his voice sharp with urgency. “But it’s barely there. Like a

whisper in the wind. One minute I can smell it so clear. The next, it's gone. I need to grab onto it."

His words hung in the air, a heavy weight pressing down on my chest. The thought that our son might be somewhere in this place... somewhere close, but out of reach... It made everything in me twist with both hope and fear.

"Come on," Kael said. "We're not leaving without him."

We moved forward, cautiously, as Lucas continued to track the scent. He crouched down at the floor, his eyes scanning the cracks in the stone, his fingers brushing over the smooth surface. His brow furrowed as he followed the trail again, but the moment he thought he had a lock on it, it slipped further away, as if it were just out of his grasp.

I couldn't understand it. Why would his scent fade so quickly? Was someone moving him? Had he been here recently and left in a hurry?

I wanted to ask Lucas what he thought, but the frustration in his face told me he didn't know. None of us did. We were being led down a path with no clear destination, and the more we moved, the more I felt like we were walking in circles, chasing something that was just beyond our reach.

"Lucas..." I started, my voice soft, but my heart wasn't in it. It felt wrong to disturb him when he was so focused. But I needed to say it. "Are we going in circles?"

His head snapped up, his eyes meeting mine for a moment. He was angry. Confused. Afraid.

Then, a flash of regret was there before he turned away again. "I don't know. It feels like it. But I have to try. I have to find him."

The air thickened as we stepped into the next chamber. The cave had felt ancient before, but this room... this place was something else entirely. The stone walls stretched high above us, disappearing into shadows, and the space felt vast, yet suffocating all at once.

Then I saw them.

The drawings.

Etched into the rock, worn by time but still eerily clear, figures moved across the walls in a language older than words. My breath hitched as I stepped closer, my fingers trembling as I traced the jagged lines. They weren't just random carvings. They told a story.

At the center of the mural, two figures stood. A woman with long, flowing hair, dark as ink, her gown swirling around her feet like mist. She was unmistakable. The Shadow Bride.

But it was the figure beside her that made the blood drain from my face.

A man. Tall, broad-shouldered, his features carved with more care than the other. He was kneeling before her, their hands intertwined, bound together in a way that made my stomach twist. The shape of his face, the set of his jaw, the wildness in his stance... I knew him. It couldn't have been anyone else but him.

I stepped back, shaking my head. No. No, this wasn't possible.

"Lucas," I whispered, my entire body trembling.

His eyes locked onto the mural, and for the first time in a long time, I saw something in his expression I hadn't seen before.

“What the hell...” Kael muttered behind me. “That’s you, Lucas.”

Lucas said nothing. He looked at the woman, at the way she was drawn—commanding, victorious, as though she had already won. And then at himself, kneeling, offering his hand to her. Bound.

Bound.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” Lucas said finally, his voice sharper than I expected. Defensive. “It’s just some old story. Some trick.”

“Lucas...” I whispered, my fingers curling into my palm. “What if this isn’t just a story?”

His head snapped toward me. “Don’t,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “Don’t start thinking like that.”

But before I could share more of my thoughts with him, a tidal wave of shifters barged in through the main entrance to the hall, coming straight for us.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

Their scent hit me first.

Sweat. Fur. Blood.

Shifters.

I turned just as they came barreling through the entrance, their forms massive in the dim torchlight. The first one lunged. A wolf, shifting mid-air, extended his claws as his bones cracked and twisted. I was already moving. My body reacted before my mind had fully caught up.

I met him head-on, grabbing his throat mid-leap and slamming him into the stone wall with a sickening crunch. He yelped as he slumped to the floor, but I didn't have time to finish him. Another was on me in an instant.

I ducked as a clawed hand slashed through the air, missing my face by an inch. The bastard was fast, but I was faster. I twisted, catching his wrist, and wrenched it backward until I heard the pop of bone snapping. His scream was lost in the chaos.

Kael was a blur beside me, his blade flashing, cutting through flesh and fur with the precision of a trained killer. Blood sprayed against the cavern walls as he cut down another wolf that had dared to lunge for Annika.

Annika.



I turned, looking for her. She moved like fire, fluid and untouchable. Her trusty dagger was in her hand, and her strikes were fast and deliberate. A shifter lunged, and she sidestepped smoothly, dragging her blade across his ribs in one clean motion. He collapsed at her feet, howling in pain.

Pride and fury warred in my chest. She was strong. But she shouldn't have to do this. Not with me around.

I snarled, turning my focus back to the fight.

Another shifter charged me. It was a bear this time, bigger and meaner, his fangs baring as he roared. I let him come. At the last second, I ducked low, driving my shoulder into his ribs. He stumbled, and I used the opening to sink my fist into his gut, then brought my knee up into his face. Bone shattered beneath the impact, and he collapsed.

More were coming.

I wiped the blood from my mouth and let the monster inside me rise fully. My fangs lengthened, my vision sharpened, the scent of their sweat and fear intoxicating. My muscles tensed. Coiled, ready. If they wanted a fight, I'd give them one.

A beast came from my right. I twisted just as his jaws snapped for my throat, catching him mid-air and wrenching his head to the side. A sharp crack echoed through the chamber. He went limp.

Another came. Then another.

I tore through them, blood hot, body moving on instinct. They were strong, but I was stronger. Faster. Deadlier.

“Lucas!” Annika screamed my name through the chaos.

It wasn’t a cry of pain. It was a warning, a plea for help.

I turned, but I was too late. A shadow moved behind her. A blur of darkness wrapped around her, swallowing her whole. One second, Annika was there, her daggers raised, fire in her eyes. The next, she was gone.

Vanished.

“No—!”

I lunged, claws scraping against stone as I reached for the space where she had been, but there was nothing. No trace of her. No scent. No heat. Just empty air and the echo of my own ragged breath.

A howl rose above the chaos. A signal. A retreat.

The few shifters still standing hesitated, then turned and ran, disappearing into the darkness of the cave.

Kael cursed behind me, wiping the blood off his blade against his pants. “What the hell was that?”

I barely heard him. My mind was roaring, my pulse pounding like war drums in my ears. Annika was gone. Taken.

I forced myself to breathe, to think.

Shifters couldn’t do that. They fought with claws and teeth, brute force and bloodshed. This was something else. Something worse.

The Shadow Bride.

My rage turned ice cold. She had done this.

I turned sharply, scanning the cave, listening. Where had she taken her? Where was she hiding?

The silence mocked me.

I exhaled through clenched teeth, trying to grasp the situation. My body was still burning from the fight, my muscles aching from the battle we had just barely won, but none of that mattered.

Annika was gone. And I had let it happen.

Kael stepped up beside me. I felt his hand on my shoulder. “Lucas. We need to move. now.”

I didn’t look at him. I couldn’t. My hands were still clenched, shaking with rage, with failure.

She had been right in front of me. Right there.

And I had lost her.

I hurried past him toward the passageway that led us here. The cave twisted around us, an unholy labyrinth of stone and shadows. Every tunnel looked the same, every turn leading to more darkness. I felt as if it wasn’t just a cave, but actually a trap, meant to keep us here forever.

I forced myself to keep going, listening to the sound of Kael’s boots scuffing against

the uneven ground behind me.

“This place isn’t natural,” I heard him say.

“No shit,” I muttered, scanning the walls. There were no markings, no signs, just endless rock. “We’ve passed this same damn formation twice.”

Kael glanced back the way we came. “It’s shifting.”

I stilled. “What?”

“The tunnels,” he said. “They’re moving. We’re not just lost. We’re being led.”

A growl built in my throat. “By who?”

Kael gave me a sharp look. “You already know.”

Of course. Of course, she wouldn’t just take Annika and let us follow her trail. She wanted to keep us here, wandering and desperate.

It was working.

I slammed my fist into the stone wall, sending cracks splintering through the rock. “Damn it!”

Losing Annika was one thing. Wasting time while she was out there, alone and undergoing God knows what torture, was unbearable.

Kael was watching me carefully. “Losing your head won’t help.”

I shot him a glare, my body still humming with the need to do something. Anything.

“You don’t get it—”

“I do,” he cut in. “You think I don’t care? You think I don’t feel the same damn thing? But rage isn’t going to get her back.”

I turned away, my jaw locking. He wasn’t wrong. But that didn’t mean I could turn it off. The fury. The helplessness. The utter fear that I would never see her or Aiden again.

I swallowed it down. If this was a trap, there had to be a way out. If the cave was shifting, it was being controlled. And if it was being controlled...

“We need to break whatever spell is keeping it like this,” I said.

Kael nodded, already moving. “Then let’s find the source.”

We moved fast, keeping to the left every time the tunnel split. It was a gamble, but it was better than wandering in circles. The walls still felt like they were shifting, like something ancient was watching us, like it was amused by our struggle.

Suddenly, Kael stopped. He looked above him, then around. “We need to disrupt the flow of magic somehow.”

“You know how?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said, showing me his dagger. It still had blood on it. “Might not work, but it’s worth a shot.”

Without hesitation, he cut his palm, letting his blood drip onto the stone beneath us. His lips moved in a quiet incantation, words in a language older than either of us.

“Let’s hope that bitch didn’t count on you having a Nephilim by your side,” he grinned once the incantation was over. The effect wasn’t instant. We waited for what seemed to be a small eternity, when finally, the cave groaned. The walls trembled.

Then, ahead of us, a new path split open in the form of a crack in the stone, leading into darkness.

Kael exhaled. “That’s our way out.”

I didn’t hesitate. I surged forward, my instincts screaming that this was our chance. The tunnel was narrow and we were barely able to move, but that didn’t stop us. Not when we could sense something other than damp rock... fresh air.

“We’re close!” Kael shouted.

We pushed ahead, the ground sloping upward. The deeper we went, the colder the air became, until finally, there was light.

A sliver at first, then a break in the stone. I lunged for it, pushing through, and stumbled out onto damp earth, the scent of the forest hitting me like a slap to the face.

We were out.

I immediately turned to Kael. “You couldn’t have done that sooner? We could have been out half an hour ago!”

Every second wasted felt like another knife in my ribs.

Kael wiped the blood from his palm onto his shirt. “No. The spell was woven into the cave itself. If I’d tried before we found the weak point, it would’ve just shifted again and trapped us deeper.” He met my glare with calm patience, but there was steel

beneath it. “I wasn’t about to risk getting us lost in that thing permanently.”

I exhaled through my nose, forcing myself to think instead of react. He was right. I hated it, but he was right.

“She has Annika.” The words felt like acid on my tongue. “Every second we were stuck in there—”

“I know.”

For the first time, I saw it in his face. The same frustration. The same barely-contained rage. He was just better at hiding it.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to shake the lingering feeling of that damn cave pressing in on me. “Where do we go now?”

Kael glanced at the sky. “We need to track her. If the Shadow Bride wanted you to chase her, she’ll leave something behind.”

He was right. She wanted us to follow her. She wanted me to follow her.

The signs were subtle. Too subtle for a human, maybe even for a shifter. But not for me.

A trail of upturned leaves, a faint shimmer in the air where the wind bent unnaturally. The scent of something old and bitter, laced with the faintest trace of Annika.

It was enough.

“She’s leading us somewhere,” Kael muttered as he stared at the path ahead. “Could be a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap.” I was already moving. “But it’s the only way to get her back.”

Kael didn’t argue. He fell in step beside me, silent as we wove through the trees. The weight of magic around us suffocated us with its presence, warning us that we were in mortal danger. The deeper we went, the worse it got.

The forest twisted around us, the trees stretching taller, the shadows growing thicker. The moonlight barely reached through the canopy, leaving everything cast in a dull, eerie glow.

Then I saw it.

A dark shape ahead, like smoke curled into the form of a doorway.

Kael tensed. “This isn’t just a path. It’s a passage.”

I didn’t move. This wasn’t just some game. This wasn’t some trick meant to test my patience. This was war.

The scent of shifters thickened, curling around us like smoke. There were too many. Dozens at least. More even. And beyond them, her.

A Nephilim was strong. Kael could hold his own, maybe even tear through them for a while. But me? A vampire who refused to unleash what made me truly dangerous? I was nothing more than a blade with a dull edge.

And that wasn’t enough. Not this time.

Kael must’ve sensed the shift in me. “Lucas.” His voice was careful. “You know what this means.”



I did. The beast inside me wasn't something I let loose easily. It was raw and brutal. It had no mercy, no hesitation. It was pure instinct.

But Annika was out there, and I would burn this entire world down before I lost her.

I met Kael's gaze, steady and sure. "Do it."

His jaw tightened. "Once you start, you don't know if—"

"I know." My hands curled into fists, the hunger already scratching at the surface, begging to be set free. "I don't care."

A long pause. Then Kael exhaled sharply. "Alright."

He stepped back, giving me space.

I closed my eyes, let the hunger seep into my bones, let the restraints I'd kept locked tight for years snap.

And then—

I let go.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

I woke to cold stone against my skin.

My body ached, every muscle stiff from whatever magic had dragged me here. I tried to move, but a sharp pull at my ankle stopped me. I looked down and saw that I was chained.

I forced myself to breathe, to push back the panic clawing up my throat. My fingers traced the shackle, cold iron clamped tight around my skin. It wasn't just metal. There was something else woven into it, something that made my pulse drag and my limbs heavy.

Magic.

Of course.

I swallowed hard and forced my eyes to adjust to the dim light. The cell was small, carved into stone, with nothing but the chain and a rusted iron door. No windows. No way to tell where I was.

But I already knew. The Shadow Bride had taken me. And if she thought a locked door and a chain would keep me from fighting, she was dead wrong.

That was when the sound of oncoming footsteps echoed down the narrow corridor. The sound was sharp and slow, like a predator toying with its prey.

I stiffened at the sound, my every instinct telling me to stay still. My muscles tightened, with fear, with rage, but that damned chain kept my ankle tethered to the wall.

The door creaked open, and she appeared.

Her presence filled the small, suffocating cell with a chill, like death had walked into the room. Her appearance made my skin crawl. She didn't have to speak. Her very being pressed down on me, suffocating me with the weight of her power, of the threat she carried with each movement.

She was truly beautiful. Unnaturally so. Her skin was pale as porcelain, dark hair falling in waves around her shoulders, but there was something wrong with her beauty. Something twisted. Still, I could see why anyone would be attracted to her.

"Annika." Her voice was soft and melodic, like it could lull me into a false sense of security. But there was nothing kind about it. It was dark, dangerous, with an undertone of venom that made my insides twist. "You're quite the resilient little thing, aren't you?"

I gritted my teeth and pulled at the chain, the cold metal scraping against my skin. I refused to acknowledge the pain. "What do you want from me?" I tried to keep my voice steady, but it cracked. She made me feel small and weak, and I hated it.

She tilted her head, her smile slow and cruel, like she was savoring my fear. "I don't want anything, Annika. I already have what I need."

Her eyes gleamed in the dim light, and I realized just how much she enjoyed this, enjoyed watching me struggle, knowing she had the upper hand.

"Your mate will come for you, of course," she continued, as though we were talking

about the weather. “But it won’t be to save you.”

Her words sank into my chest like shards of ice. I refused to let her see the flicker of doubt in my eyes. I knew Lucas. I knew him better than anyone. He would come.

The Shadow Bride leaned in, her breath cold against my ear. “You’re his weakness. And I’ll tear that weakness from him until there’s nothing left but the monster I’ve always wanted.”

I jerked against the chain, pulling as hard as I could, but it was useless. “You don’t know him,” I spat through clenched teeth. “You’ll never break him.”

Her laugh was like a whisper of silk, cruel and dismissive. “You think I need to break him? No.” Her fingers brushed lightly against my cheek, her touch cold and unsettling. “I only need to bend him. And once I have him see things from my perspective, I’ll make him choose.”

I jerked away from her touch, the desperation rising in my chest. “You won’t win,” I said, my voice firmer this time. “Lucas will find me, and you’ll be sorry.”

She smiled again, the same slow, predatory smile that made my blood run cold. “We’ll see, Annika. We’ll see.”

She stepped back, and for a moment, I thought she was leaving. But then, her eyes glittered with something darker.

“You know, I really should thank you.”

I blinked as confusion clouded my mind. “Thank me?”

“For all your efforts,” she said with a tilt of her head. “You brought him to me. So

easily. All you had to do was love him, and now..." She trailed off, as if she were getting lost in her own reverie. "Now, he's mine for the taking."

"Never!" I shouted. "Whatever crazy plan you have will never work!"

She took a step closer, her eyes dark as voids. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you now. After all, there's no one to stop me.. It's simple, really. I will ascend. Become something... divine. A goddess, if you will. All I need are the right ingredients."

My heart skipped a beat. "What ingredients?"

Her eyes glinted with twisted pleasure. "Your son's blood. A perfect little sacrifice to unlock my full power."

I froze. My breath caught in my throat. "What? You—you'll kill him?"

She tilted her head as if considering it. "Kill him? No, that wasn't the plan. But I'll use him. That's all that matters. He is the key to my ascension. His blood will be the final piece."

I shook my head, horror clawing at my chest. "You're insane. Lucas will never let you touch him. He won't choose you. He'll never betray me for you."

The Shadow Bride's smile stretched wider, her voice growing darker. "Oh, but he will. You see, I'll offer him a deal. I'll save your precious son. I'll make sure he's safe and whole. All Lucas has to do is give you up. He'll choose me, Annika, because I'll give him exactly what he needs. The one thing that matters more than anything else to him. I'll offer him the life of his child, and all he has to do is choose to let you go."

I felt a chill crawl through my bones as her words sank in. My blood ran cold, and I could almost hear the walls closing in around me.

“No,” I whispered, my voice barely a sound. “He won’t choose you. He loves me. He’ll never...”

The Shadow Bride laughed, a laugh that rattled me to my core. “You think so? You think he’ll choose you, the mortal who can do nothing but be chained to a wall? The weakling who can’t protect herself, let alone her child? No, Annika. When the time comes, Lucas will do what’s necessary to save his son. He will make the choice that will guarantee his survival. And it won’t be you. Not when I offer him the chance to keep him alive. You’re just a means to an end. Your blood... your connection to Aurelius... it’s all I need. And in the end, it doesn’t matter which of you I use. All that matters is the bloodline.”

Her eyes gleamed with savage glee, and I could feel the walls of my resolve shattering, piece by piece. But I refused to let her see it. I refused to let her break me.

I could almost hear Lucas’s voice in my mind, feel his presence like a flicker of warmth in the darkness. I wouldn’t let her win. I wouldn’t let her take what was ours.

I looked up at her with defiance. “You’re wrong,” I said, my voice trembling with anger. “Lucas will never let you have Aiden. He will never choose you. I will fight. And I will find a way out of this.”

The Shadow Bride’s expression faltered for a moment, her smile twitching at the edges. “Oh, Annika, how charming. But in the end, you’ll see. You’ll all see. I don’t need to break you. I only need to show you that I already have everything I need.”

And with that, she turned and left. The door slammed shut behind her with a finality that echoed in my chest.

I leaned my head back against the cold stone wall, the chain around my ankle digging deeper into my skin with every shift I made. Exhaustion clawed at me. My eyelids fluttered with the temptation to close, to let sleep take me, but I refused. I couldn't give in. Not when the Shadow Bride had said those terrible words. Not when Lucas was out there somewhere, fighting to find me and Aiden, to save us. I couldn't be weak. Not now.

I clenched my fists at my sides, willing myself to stay alert. But the darkness seemed to press in closer. The hours dragged on, slow and relentless, until the silence itself felt like a cruel joke. It felt like I was suffocating. It was too quiet.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, but it only made the headache worse, like the pressure in my skull was closing in tighter.

Suddenly, the softest sound broke through the stillness. A footstep. Then another. I shuddered at the thought that it was her again, but it wasn't. She had sent her mindless beasts this time.

The door creaked open, and they poured inside, moving like shadows. I couldn't do much, but at least I knew that I wouldn't go down quietly.

With every ounce of strength I had left, I surged forward, trying to pull myself free of the chains, but my body was so weak. It was drained from the constant strain.

A heavy hand clamped down on my shoulder, pulling me back. Another grabbed my wrists, jerking me roughly to my feet. The chain grated against the stone floor.

I struggled, kicking and punching, thrashing as much as I could. But they were too strong. They overpowered me easily, dragging me toward the open door.

"You won't get away with this," I hissed between gasps.

One of them smirked, his fangs flashing in the dim light. “Don’t bother, little one. The Shadow Bride already has what she needs.” He reiterated it like a poem. It was almost funny.

They forced me forward, through the dim, winding halls. I wouldn’t show them fear. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. Eventually, the path twisted into a larger chamber. It was unlike anything I had seen so far. It was wide and open, with a great altar at its center, bathed in the eerie glow of blood-red flames. Symbols carved into the walls flickered with an ominous, malevolent light, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

A ritual chamber.

“Mama!” Aiden’s cry pierced my heart.

“Aiden!” I gasped, my breath catching in my throat as his terrified eyes locked onto mine. He was in the corner, tied to a chair. He was struggling, trying to make himself heard, his face a mixture of fear and relief.

The shifters that surrounded me, those foul beasts, had no idea what they were dealing with. They didn’t know the power I held, the fire that had been born the moment I first laid eyes on my son.

Without thinking, I tapped into the strength I had buried so deep for so long. My body surged with a force beyond anything I had known. My muscles screamed in protest as I ripped free from the shifters’ grip, the chains rattling violently, the shackles digging into my skin as I pushed them away with raw power.

With a scream of desperation, I bolted forward, my every movement fueled by love and fear. I couldn’t let them take him. Not when I was so close.



“Mama!” Aiden’s voice, so full of hope, rang out again, his body jerking against the ropes that bound him to the chair. I could almost feel his outstretched hand, reaching for me.

But before I could even take two steps toward him, the shifters closed in on me. One caught my wrist, yanking me back with a force that nearly broke my arm. Another grabbed my ankle, pulling me to the floor with a sickening thud.

I screamed, struggling against them, but it was no use. The Shadow Bride’s chilling laughter echoed throughout the chamber, filling every inch of space around me.

“Did you think it would be that easy?” she purred, stepping closer, her gaze never leaving me. “You’re a mother, Annika. That’s your fatal flaw. You’ll always run toward him. Always.”

Being a mother was not my fatal flaw. It was the best part of me, and she was yet to see that.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

We stepped through the passage. Immediately, the air gripped me by the throat. It pressed against me. Against us.

I could hear Kael's uneven breathing. He could probably hear mine. He was struggling. I could feel that as well. Something was twisting around him, draining the strength from him. The power... it wasn't normal. Nothing was normal here.

I let the beast loose. I had to. There was nothing else to do. The hunger was now ripping at my insides, pulling and snapping like wild dogs. I could feel it all. My body, my mind, my very soul was tearing at the seams. The power surged. I felt it.

But Kael... he was different here. He wasn't handling it. Not like me. I could hear it even stronger now in the way he was breathing, in the strain of his voice when he spoke.

"Can you feel it?" he asked. He was clawing at the air as if it were choking him. "It's draining me. I feel it stripping me of my power."

I gritted my teeth. "I know."

The fog swirled in front of us, thick and slow, like something alive, something waiting. I could taste it, the cold, the dampness, the wrongness. This place... this damn place. It was feeding on us, sucking the strength right out of our bones. And we were still moving forward, still following that damn scent.

Then I saw them. Figures in the mist. Moving like shadows. I could feel them before I saw them. I could taste their scent on the air, thick and sour. The rage in me burned brighter.

They weren't ready. They didn't know what was coming for them.

Kael stopped. "We're close. I can feel it."

"Don't care," I snapped. "Get ready. They'll be on us soon."

My fists clenched. The beast inside of me was raw, it wanted to tear through everything in its path. The fog thickened, clinging to my skin like sticky cobwebs. But I wasn't stopping. Not for anything. Not now. Not when she had Annika.

The figures were closer now. I could smell them. Hear them. They were closing in.

"Let's do this," I growled, the words barely human, barely mine.

The shifters came and the fog shifted with them. The first one lunged, but I was faster. My hands found his throat. I crushed it. Bones snapped like dry twigs, his body dropping before he even knew he was dead.

Another came from the side. I turned, slammed my elbow into his face, and felt the cartilage give way. He howled, but I was already on him, dragging him down, ripping through flesh. Blood sprayed hot across my skin.

The beast inside me roared in satisfaction.

More came. Their eyes glowed in the mist, low growls vibrating in their chests. I let them come.

One clawed at my side, but I barely felt it. Pain was nothing. I grabbed him by the shoulder, and slammed him into the rock wall. He hit hard, but I didn't let go. I lifted him, and threw him into another shifter charging at me. They collapsed in a tangled mess, and I was on them before they could scramble up.

Rip. Tear. End them.

Somewhere to my left, Kael fought, his blade flashing through the haze. He was fast, his blade precise. He didn't waste movement. He was cutting, dodging, cutting again. A shifter got too close, and his fist crashed into its skull, sending it sprawling. Another leapt at his back, but he turned just in time, driving his blade up, deep into its chest.

"Keep moving!" Kael called out to me. "We can't get stuck here!"

He was right. There were too many. They just kept coming. If we stayed, we'd be swallowed whole.

But my beast wanted this fight. Wanted to rip them apart, wanted to feel every bone snap, every scream cut short.

Another shifter charged. I ducked low, driving my claws into his gut and pulling. He fell in pieces.

More. More. I could keep going forever.

Then, I felt Kael's hand on my shoulder, yanking me back. "Lucas, enough!"

I snarled, turning on him. My breath came in ragged gasps. My vision was red. My muscles vibrated with the hunger for more. But Kael's grip was firm.

“They’ll keep coming,” he said. “We have to go.”

I looked past him. The fog shifted, revealing more shapes in the distance, more glowing eyes. He was right. If we stayed, we’d drown in bodies. I exhaled sharply, forcing the beast back just enough to move.

“Fine.” My voice was a growl.

We started to run. The fog was thick, still twisting and making everything around us shift and blur. Then, through all that mist, we saw it. Jagged stone against the night. Kael pointed at it.

“There! That’s where we need to go!”

I didn’t question him. I didn’t slow down. Although the beast in me wanted blood, it also wanted Annika. My son. I couldn’t lose them. Not to the Shadow Bride. Not to these damn shifters.

Snarls echoed through the mist. More of them were closing in.

A figure lunged at me from the side. I dodged, barely, feeling claws rake against my arm. My rage flared. I grabbed the bastard, and slammed him into the ground so hard the earth cracked beneath him. His breath left his body in a choked gasp, but I didn’t give him time to recover. I stomped down, hard, crushing his ribs, his lungs. He gurgled and went still.

Kael was still beside me, fighting his own battle. His blade flashed, cutting through another shifter who barely had time to react before his body hit the ground in two halves. Another came at him from behind, but he spun, slicing clean through the attacker’s throat.

We kept moving, the ruins growing closer.

Another set of shifters came from the left. I didn't stop. I barreled through them, tearing through the bloody chaos. One caught my shoulder with his teeth. I ripped him off, snapped his neck, and threw him aside.

"Lucas! Keep going!" Kael shouted.

I didn't need to be told twice. The ruins were just ahead. I could see an entrance. It was dark and gaping.

Safe? No.

But probably safer than out here.

We ran harder, pushing through the last of them, cutting down anything in our way. And then, I felt stone beneath my feet. We were inside the ruins.

I turned, panting. The shifters stopped at the threshold. They growled but didn't follow.

"Are they afraid?" I asked incredulously.

Kael frowned. "I don't think so." He paused for a moment. "I think they know that she is waiting for us inside and she doesn't need their help. She has her own power."

I took only one step deeper inside, when a claw dragged him back out into the fog. I turned around only to hear him grunting and twisting, but the shifter bastard had him in a chokehold, dragging him out of the ruins.

"Kael!" I shouted, ready to help, but as I did so, Kael's blade flashed, cutting into the

shifter's side.

I tensed, watching as another tackled him from behind. He staggered, caught between them, but he didn't fall. He continued to fight.

"Go, Lucas!" he shouted, slamming an elbow into one attacker's face. "You can't waste time!"

I bared my teeth, rage clawing at my chest. I wanted to tear through them, rip them apart until there was nothing left but blood and bone.

"I'm not leaving you!" I growled, already moving toward him.

He slammed his knee into a shifter's gut, spun, and drove his blade deep into the other's throat. They gurgled, but another shape was already circling him.

"You have to," he panted. "You know it."

I hesitated. My hands curled into fists. The beast inside me snarled to fight, to stay, to make sure Kael wasn't overwhelmed.

But he met my gaze with reassurance. "I'll be fine," he swore. "I'll come after you."

My jaw clenched so hard it hurt. Another figure loomed behind him.

Damn it.

Kael shoved one of the shifters off him and turned toward me. "Go!"

I turned and ran, but not because I wanted to, not because I couldn't fight. But because I had to.

Annika. My son.

That was all that mattered.

The stone corridors swallowed me whole. Darkness pressed in on me from all sides. Something ancient curled in the shadows, watching me. I could feel evil all around me.

Once again I found myself in a mess of endless corridors, towering archways and dead ends. Stone walls stretched high, jagged and broken with age, but there was no clear path I could follow. There was no logic.

I knew what this was. The Shadow Bride wanted me lost. She wanted me wandering, wasting time. Every second I spent trapped in this cursed maze was a second closer to her victory.

I forced myself to stop and breathe in. It was more difficult than I thought it would be. I shut my eyes, trying to filter out the scent of blood and stone and that damn rot clinging to every corner of these ruins. I reached deeper into myself, past the metallic tang of the shifters I had already cut down.

Still nothing.

“Damn it!” I shouted, and my voice came back to me in waves, repeating several times.

I tried again. Harder. More focused. I knew that everything depended on me now.

I swallowed heavily, trying to remember Annika and Aiden. I could see them with the eye of my mind. I could hear their laughter. I could feel the softness of Annika’s touch on my face.



Finally, there... faint, just a whisper of her.

I exhaled sharply, as I snapped my eyes open. I moved.

The maze twisted, tried to trick me, but I ignored the turns that felt wrong, the paths that pulled at my senses in ways they shouldn't. I followed only her.

The scent wavered, as if it was being pulled away from me, scattered by unseen hands.

The Shadow Bride is trying to keep me from Annika.

It wouldn't work.

Stone corridors stretched ahead, shifting but leading nowhere. I growled low, resisting the urge to slam my fists into the walls. The scent returned, even stronger now.

I started to run. I didn't care what tricks were waiting for me. I didn't care if the walls closed in, if the floor crumbled beneath me, or if the Shadow Bride herself emerged from the darkness with her cruel smile and her lies.

I would find my family. And I would tear apart anyone who stood in my way.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

“You’ll never get away with this!” I glared at the Shadow Bride.

I tried pulling against the chains binding my wrists, but it was useless. Metal bit into my skin, keeping me shackled to the wall. All around me, the air vibrated with the pulse of dark magic.

“You shouldn’t waste your breath,” she said, as her eerie, inhuman gaze settled on me. “You’ll need your strength soon.”

Across the room, Aiden sat tied to a chair, his wide eyes darting between the Shadow Bride and me. His breathing was ragged, but he was alive. That was all that mattered.

The shifters flanking the walls watched me with cold, unreadable eyes. They were armed and ready. Nothing could go wrong.

The Shadow Bride herself stood at the altar in the center of the room, a vision of cruel beauty. She moved like water, slow and deliberate, her hands trailing over the ceremonial blade resting before her.

She traced a finger along the ceremonial dagger, smiling to herself. “You see, I am so very tired of being just a legend. A whisper in the dark. A warning to children.” Her eyes darkened, her beauty sharpening into something monstrous. “I will ascend, Annika. I will become something more. A goddess. A force that no one can deny.”

She walked over to me slowly, in confident strides. The blade in her hand glinted in

the dim torchlight. My breath came sharply, but I refused to flinch. I didn't want to show her that I was afraid.

"Blood is power," she murmured, almost like an incantation. "And yours is oh, so precious."

I yanked the chains as she neared me, but they held firm, not letting me budge.

She tsked. "Now, now. Be still."

I clenched my jaw, but I didn't stay still. I fought, twisting and kicking at her as she reached for my wrist. The shifter guards were on me in an instant, their hands like iron vices, forcing my arm still.

"Good girl," the Shadow Bride purred.

I barely had a second to brace before she dragged the blade across my palm. The sting was sharp and clean, but I barely made a sound. I would not give her that satisfaction. Warm blood welled up, and dripped down my fingers.

She cupped my hand, watching the red pool in her palm like a prize. Then, with slow, almost reverent movements, she turned toward the wall.

A large symbol was carved into the stone. Some twisting lines I didn't recognize. She smeared my blood across it, dragging her fingers in careful strokes. The effect was immediate. The carvings pulsed, light blooming from the cracks like oil catching fire. The entire chamber trembled, almost as if in preparation of an earthquake.

The Shadow Bride inhaled deeply, eyes closing as if drinking in the magic. Her lips parted on a pleased sigh. "Yes," she whispered. "This will do." She turned back to me, that eerie, haunting beauty still intact. "But this isn't enough."

I curled my fists, ignoring the sting in my palm.

She stepped closer. “I could take more from you now... but I think it’s only fair that Lucas gets to choose.”

“You bitch,” I spat.

She only laughed, stepping back, admiring her glowing symbols like an artist admiring her masterpiece. “Let’s see just how much love really means when the choice is life or death.”

I yanked against my chains again, but they held fast.

The Shadow Bride’s fingers danced over the glowing symbols, tracing their curves as the light pulsed brighter, feeding on my blood. She looked almost peaceful, as her dark hair flowed around her like smoke.

Then her gaze shifted, slithering toward Aiden. He trembled, his small body bound to the chair and his eyes wide with fear.

A sick smile curled her lips. “Of course, it would be so much simpler to use his blood.”

Ice shot through my veins. “Stay away from him!”

Her laughter was soft, lilting, like the chime of distant bells. “Why shouldn’t I? He’s right here. Bound to Aurelius by blood. And so very... helpless.”

I saw red. “You’re a monster.”

She moved closer to Aiden, fingers trailing just above his head, as if she could

already feel his life's energy. "Perhaps. But I am also practical. Power is power, no matter where it comes from." Her eyes flicked back to me, gleaming with cruel amusement. "And his would do nicely."

I rattled my chains again. "Touch him and I swear, I'll—"

"You'll what?" she mocked. "Beg?"

All I could was snarl silently.

She turned back to Aiden, her voice softening in a way that made my skin crawl. "Or maybe I should be kind. End him quickly. Then you won't have to watch him suffer."

Aiden's face crumpled, tears streaking down his cheeks. "Mama..."

I choked back a sob. "Don't you dare."

The Shadow Bride's eyes gleamed. "You're right. It would be such a waste to end him now." She tilted her head, feigning thoughtfulness. "But then... it's not really about the power, is it?"

I frowned. "What?"

She smiled, soft and terrible. "I am more than just magic and rage, Annika. I am a woman as well."

I spat at her feet. "You don't have the right to call yourself that."

For the first time, her face hardened, and something wounded flashed in her eyes before vanishing again behind that same cold fury. Her voice dropped to a low, dangerous whisper. "Oh, but I was. Once."

She turned away, almost as if she were ashamed of her weak moment. “I was a woman before I became this... shadow.” Her fingers clenched at her sides. “Before he betrayed me. The one I trusted. The one I loved.”

Her words echoed in the chamber, filled with an ancient pain that made the air shiver. For a heartbeat, she almost looked human.

Then her gaze snapped back to me, once again cold and unyielding. “But that is why I still want it. Love. And that is why I will give Lucas a choice.” Her smile returned. “Because if he chooses me... then I win. I get everything I was denied.”

My stomach twisted. “You don’t understand love at all.”

She laughed, a hollow, brittle sound. “Perhaps not. But I understand power. And love is power, is it not?” Her eyes gleamed. “You see, I don’t need his heart. Just his choice. His loyalty. His submission.”

I shook my head, fury rising to burn away the fear. “You’ll never have it. He’d rather die than give himself to you.”

She leaned in, her voice intimate somehow. “We’ll see, won’t we? Because I have what he needs. I have his child. And men... men are so very easy to break when it comes to those they love.” Her gaze slid back to Aiden. “Maybe I should remind him of that.”

“Don’t touch him!” I raged again, but we both knew it was just an empty threat.

The Shadow Bride only smiled, serene and terrifying. “Why not? It would be easier. Simpler. But...” Her eyes grew distant, probably as she imagined a life much happier than this one. I could almost feel sorry for her if she weren’t holding my child captive and threatening his life.

“I am still a woman. I still want to be chosen. Desired.” She looked at me, her beauty sharp as a knife. “Even if I have to force him to want me.”

My lip curled. “He’ll never love you.”

Her smile faded, and something cold, bitter flashed in her gaze. “Love is a lie. But loyalty... that, I can take.” She traced her fingers over the glowing symbols again, the light flickering at her touch. “I will use your blood to bind him. And then... he will be mine.”

She turned, her silhouette framed by the flickering light, power swirling around her like smoke. “And you, Annika... you will watch him choose me. You will watch him betray you. Just like I was betrayed.”

That was when the main door burst open and my heart nearly stopped.

Lucas stood in the doorway, blood staining his shirt, dirt smeared across his face. His eyes were wild, glowing with that inhuman fury he kept buried deep inside. His chest heaved with ragged breaths, shoulders tense as if barely holding himself together.

Aiden’s voice broke the silence. “Dad!”

Lucas’s gaze snapped to him, and for a second, the anger melted away, replaced by a pain so raw it stole my breath. He took a step forward, his hand reaching out, fingers trembling. “Aiden...”

But then she moved. The Shadow Bride drifted to the center of the room, her body a swirl of dark mist and elegance. She looked untouched, flawless, her beauty a cruel contrast to the blood on Lucas’s skin. Her lips curled into a slow, wicked smile.

“Well,” she purred. “You made it. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t.”

“You.” Lucas’ voice was pure force.

She seemed amused by his anger, her head tilting to the side, dark hair cascading like a waterfall of ink. “Me,” she echoed, almost sweetly. “Did you miss me, Lucas?”

I wanted to scream at her, to claw at her perfect face, to rip that smug smile off her lips. But there was nothing I could do.

Lucas’s eyes flicked to me, widening as he took in the blood on my hands, the shackles around my ankles. His whole body shuddered. “Annika...”

My chest tightened. I tried to sound strong, but my voice betrayed me. “I’m fine. Just get Aiden. Get him out of here.”

The Shadow Bride laughed, the sound echoing off the ancient walls. “Oh, you’re not going anywhere.” She moved closer to Aiden, her fingers ghosting above his head, just like before. “None of you are.”

Lucas’ face twisted in fury. He moved so fast I barely saw him, a blur of motion as he lunged at her, teeth bared, eyes burning with that monstrous glow. But his hands simply passed through her body as if she were smoke. He stumbled, caught himself, then turned around to face her once more.

The Shadow Bride laughed again, her form shimmering as if made of mist. “Did you really think it would be that easy?” She drifted backward, her body solidifying again near the glowing symbols on the wall. She laid her palm on one, caressing it almost lovingly. “I am not some mortal foe you can kill with fangs and claws, Lucas.” Her eyes gleamed. “I am eternal.”

Lucas’ chest heaved, his fists clenched. “If you hurt them...”



Her gaze turned cruel. “Hurt them? Why would I do that?” She smiled, her teeth white and sharp. “I don’t want their pain. I want you.”

Lucas took a step back, his face hardening. “I’m not yours.”

She sighed, almost disappointed. “You could be. You should be. After all, you were promised to me.” She looked at me, her eyes cold as winter frost. “She stole you from me. But we can fix that.”

Lucas growled, low and feral. “You’re insane.”

She ignored him, her fingers still stroking the glowing symbols. “One thing in exchange for another. It’s only fair. You want your son back?” Her eyes locked on his, drinking in the sight of him. “Then give yourself to me. Break your ties with her. Bind yourself to me instead.”

My stomach dropped, fear flooding my veins. If that was the price... All that mattered was that Aiden was safe. Nothing else was important.

His head snapped toward me. I could see the pain in his eyes. “I won’t.” His voice was firm, but I heard the tremor underneath. “I won’t leave you. I won’t... I can’t.”

The Shadow Bride’s lips curled in satisfaction. “Oh, but you will.” Her fingers glided over the symbols again, and they pulsed brighter, the light reflecting in her eyes. “Because I have what you need. I have him.” Her gaze flicked to Aiden, and her smile grew wider. “And I will destroy him if you refuse me.”

Aiden whimpered, struggling against the ropes. “Dad... please...”

The Shadow Bride extended her hand, her fingers long and elegant, dripping with darkness. “Come to me, Lucas. And let them live.”

He didn't take a step forward. But he needed to.

"Lucas... it's alright," I whispered, looking down, then my gaze flared up at the woman who had taken everything away from me. "I give myself to you. My blood. Take it... just... let my son live..."

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Lucas

I knew Annika would eventually say that, but I didn't want it to come to that.

I gritted my teeth, every nerve in my being demanding that I tear the Shadow Bride apart. Her mere voice was poison, sinking her claws into my mind.

"You should be grateful, Lucas." Her tone was soft, almost gentle. "I'm giving you a choice. Most don't get that luxury."

I took a step forward to show her that I was not afraid of her. "I'm not sacrificing anyone." My voice came out like a growl. "Not Annika. Not Aiden. No one."

She sighed, a mockery of disappointment. "You're so stubborn. It's almost admirable." Her eyes flicked to me, cold and calculating. "But it's pointless. Someone has to be sacrificed. That's how this works."

"I don't give a damn how your twisted magic works. I'm not playing your game. I'm not sacrificing my mate or my son!"

Her lips curled into a cruel smile. "But you already are." She drifted closer, her body half-shadow, half-form, a swirl of darkness that flickered in and out of focus. "And you should be thanking me, really. I'm giving you a chance to be a hero. To save the one you love." Her eyes gleamed with a wicked light. "All you have to do is choose."

I felt my jaw clench so hard my teeth ached. "I won't."

Her smile widened. “Oh, Lucas... what kind of father are you?” Her voice was so soft, so deceptively gentle. “How could you even hesitate?” She turned her head, glancing at Aiden, tied up and helpless, eyes wide and terrified. “Isn’t the choice obvious?”

My vision blurred red. “You bitch!”

She ignored me, her gaze lingering on Aiden like he was nothing more than a tool, a pawn in her sick game. “What kind of a man are you, Lucas? What kind of a father?” Her voice dropped to a whisper, every word like a knife slicing through me. “Are you really going to let your child die just to save her?” Her eyes flicked to Annika, chained to the wall, blood dripping from her wrists. “What kind of man chooses his lover over his own flesh and blood?”

Rage exploded inside me, white-hot and uncontrollable. I moved before I could think, a blur of fury and hatred. I leaped at her, claws out, fangs bared, ready to rip her apart. But my hands passed through smoke again.

I stumbled, and almost fell, catching myself against the cold stone floor. I spun around, and she was standing there, completely unbothered. Amused, even.

“Oh, Lucas.” Her laughter was soft, echoing off the ancient walls. “You still don’t understand, do you?” She held out her hands, palms up, and her whole form flickered, like a flame caught in the wind. “You can’t touch me. Not in this realm.” Her smile was mocking. “I’m everywhere and nowhere. You can’t fight me.”

I took a step back, my mind racing, fury twisting into frustration. She wasn’t real. She wasn’t here. Just a shadow, a ghost. A monster made of mist and lies.

She watched me, her head tilted to the side, dark hair swirling like smoke. “I’ll give you one more chance, Lucas.” Her voice softened, that cruel mockery of kindness.

“Choose. Your son... or your mate.” Her eyes gleamed with cold delight. “I really don’t care which one. As long as I get the blood I need.”

“No!” The word ripped from my throat, but it was too late.

Annika’s voice was steady. “Take my blood.” Her eyes locked onto Aiden’s, filled with nothing but love. “I love you, baby,” she whispered through the tears.

Aiden’s scream shattered the chamber. “No! Mama, don’t—”

I lunged toward her, but something unseen held me back, an invisible force pressing against my chest like a crushing weight. “Annika, don’t do this!” My voice was pure desperation, pure rage.

The Shadow Bride simply sighed, shaking her head like a disappointed teacher. “See, Lucas? Some people understand sacrifice.” Then she lifted her hand, fingers twisting through the air like she was pulling unseen threads.

Annika gasped. Her body jerked against the chains as an invisible force wrenched her forward. A glowing, unnatural light spread across her palm, where the Bride had obviously cut her. The wound reopened with an eerie slowness, and then, the blood started pouring.

Not dripping. Pouring.

It gushed from her palm like a river, too much, too fast, cascading down her wrist, soaking her arm, staining the chains that held her.

Her breath hitched, sharp and pained. She squeezed her eyes shut, teeth clenched, trying not to cry out. But I saw the agony in every tremble of her body.

“No,” I growled, fighting against the unseen force pinning me in place. “No!”

The Shadow Bride tilted her head, eyes gleaming with something almost... satisfied. “So much struggle, Lucas,” she murmured. “So much fury. But it’s meaningless, isn’t it?” She glanced at Annika’s bleeding form. “The choice has been made.”

I roared, my body straining, the beast inside me snapping against the restraints. But the magic held me firm, like iron shackles I couldn’t break.

Annika’s breathing grew more labored, her skin paling by the second. I met her gaze. She was still so beautiful, still so full of fire, even as she bled for our son. And I couldn’t save her. The realization hit me like a blade to the gut.

The Shadow Bride smiled triumphantly. “Now... let’s begin.”

“Aiden, close your eyes!” I shouted, but my son’s terrified gaze stayed locked on his mother, chained to the wall, blood draining from her palm. His face was pale, streaked with tears. His small voice shattered me. “Dad... please... help Mama!”

I fought against the invisible force, my muscles burning, bones straining, but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even take a step closer. It was like being trapped in stone, with my every limb frozen.

Annika’s blood lifted into the air, defying gravity, separating into glistening droplets that shimmered with an unnatural light. They floated toward the walls, slipping into the ancient symbols carved into the stone. One by one, the symbols ignited, blazing crimson, lines of power crackling through the chamber like lightning.

The Shadow Bride stood in the center, atop a small pedestal that rose from the floor, her arms lifted high, head tilted back. Her dark hair whipped around her face, eyes burning with wicked glee. Power surged around her, twisting the air, distorting reality

itself.

She was ascending, becoming... whatever it is she had intended to become.

I couldn't let her.

With a snarl, I threw myself forward, pouring every ounce of strength, every shred of fury into my limbs. The beast inside me howled, thrashing to be free, to tear her apart. My vision blurred at the edges, and rage painted the world in all the hues of red. But the force held firm. I couldn't move.

"Mama!" Aiden sobbed, struggling against his bindings. "Mama, wake up! Mama, please!"

Annika's head hung low, her hair falling over her face. She looked so pale, so fragile. Her chest rose and fell in shallow, uneven breaths. Her blood kept flowing, droplets tearing from her skin to feed the symbols on the walls, to fuel the Bride's sick ritual.

I met her gaze. Her eyes fluttered open, hazy with pain but still full of fire. She looked at Aiden, her lips moving, forming words too quiet to hear. Her gaze shifted to me, her love blazing through the agony.

I was losing her.

The Shadow Bride's voice echoed through the chamber, a haunting, melodious chant that rattled my bones. The symbols blazed brighter, the walls trembling under the force of the magic. The ground beneath my feet cracked, splitting apart to reveal a searing light that rose toward her, surrounding her in a pillar of crimson fire.

She laughed, a sound of pure victory, head thrown back, arms outstretched. "Yes... Yes!" Her voice was ecstatic, her power swelling, expanding. "It's mine... it's all

mine!”

“No!” I roared, the beast inside me tearing at the seams. My fangs elongated, claws digging into my palms as I fought to reach her, to end her.

Aiden’s cries echoed around me. “Dad! Help! Mama... Mama’s dying!”

His words shattered me.

The Shadow Bride’s head snapped down, her gaze locking onto mine. “Your choice, Lucas. Her life for his. Isn’t that what a father would do?”

Her laughter echoed as the magic swirled around her, lifting her into the air. Slowly, her body started to shimmer more, becoming translucent, merging with the light.

At that exact moment, Kael stumbled into the chamber. I was shocked at the sight of him. His body was battered, blood streamed down his face. He was barely upright, leaning against the wall as if his legs might give out any second. But his eyes were wild, burning with urgency.

“Lucas!” he shouted, becoming aware of what was happening in just one glance. “You... You have one chance!”

My head snapped toward him. Annika’s blood still floated through the air, feeding those cursed symbols, draining her life away. The Shadow Bride’s laughter echoed around us. I wasn’t even sure if she noticed Kael’s presence.

Kael’s knees buckled, but he caught himself, clawing at the stone. “When she... when she ascends... she has to become of this realm. Just for a moment... one minute... for the final part of the incantation.” His voice wavered. “That’s when you strike. That’s when she’s vulnerable. Her magic... it won’t work on you then.”



I stared at him, my mind spinning. One minute. One chance.

But Annika... her blood was filling the symbols faster, her face growing paler by the second. There wasn't time.

Kael must've seen the panic in my eyes because he barked again. "She'll be mortal, Lucas! Flesh and blood. It's the only chance you'll get!"

The Shadow Bride's head whipped toward Kael, as fury twisted her beautiful face. Her lips curled, and she hissed. "You dare interfere?"

She flicked her wrist, and Kael was yanked off his feet, then slammed into the wall with a sickening crack. He crumpled to the ground, motionless.

"No!" I shouted, but I still couldn't move. The force that was binding me tightened even more.

She smiled again. "He should have stayed silent, but it doesn't matter anymore. Nothing can stop me now!"

Annika's eyes fluttered, her head lolling against the wall. Her skin was paper-white, her breaths shallow. She was slipping away. And it was all because of the woman standing in front of me, drenched in stolen power.

The beast inside me snarled, clawing at my chest, demanding blood. Demanding her blood.

The Bride turned away, her body lifting higher into the air, the glow from the symbols twining around her, pulling her upward. Her voice echoed through the chamber, chanting words older than time, magic crackling through the air. Her body started to flicker, becoming transparent, her spirit transcending this world.

Then she paused. I could see her form solidifying, her chest heaving as she took a deep, shuddering breath. For one heartbeat, she was real. She was mortal flesh.

I knew this was my chance, my only chance to save my family.

The force binding me shattered, crumbling away like dust. I stumbled forward, the sudden freedom sending me to my knees. But I didn't hesitate. I leapt, every muscle exploding with speed, with fury.

She saw me coming, eyes widening. But she was too late. Her body was here, tethered to the mortal realm, and as such, vulnerable.

I slammed into her, my claws tearing into her flesh. She screamed, the sound shattering the air, her power exploding outward, ripping at the chamber walls. But I held on, my fangs sinking into her throat, tasting her blood, her magic, her fear.

She was strong, thrashing against me, magic sparking around her like lightning. But she was mortal. Mortal.

And mortals could die.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:55 am*

Annika

My head lolled to the side, my vision swimming. Everything hurt. My arms, my legs, my heart. It was hard to breathe, every inhale shallow and sharp. A cold darkness seeped into my bones. I felt like I was dying.

I blinked, forcing my eyes to focus, the world a dizzying blur of light and shadow. There was movement, violent and swift. A snarl echoed through the chamber. I recognized it.

Lucas.

He was a storm, all fury and claws, tearing into the Shadow Bride with a vengeance I had never seen before. His body moved with terrifying speed, every muscle taut, his face twisted into something feral, something not human. His fangs glistened, dripping with her blood.

The Bride screamed, her voice shattering the air, but she was losing. Her body convulsed, the light dimming from her eyes, her beautiful face contorted with pain and fear. Lucas didn't stop. He ripped and tore, his claws shredding her, his rage a living, breathing monster.

I wanted to call out to him, but my body wouldn't listen. My limbs were heavy and numb.

“Annika...” A voice, close and urgent.

Someone's warm hands touched my wrists, lifting them, and suddenly the cold bite of metal was gone. My arms dropped, as if boneless, and I would've crumpled to the ground if those hands hadn't caught me.

"Kael..." My lips barely moved, my voice nothing but a whisper.

He pulled me against him, his grip gentle but firm. "I've got you. I've got you, Annika." His face was bloodied and bruised, and his hair was matted with more than just dirt. But his eyes were fierce.

I sagged against him, my head falling against his shoulder. "Aiden..."

"He's safe. I'll get him. Just... just stay with me, okay?" His voice cracked, his fingers tightening on my arms, as if he could keep me anchored just by holding on.

I tried to nod, but my head wouldn't move. My vision was slipping, the world going hazy at the edges.

Lucas's growl cut through the haze of my vision. My eyes fluttered open, and I saw him, all covered in blood, his body heaving, shoulders hunched, his eyes blazing with something dark.

The Shadow Bride's body hung limp and lifeless, her face frozen in a grotesque mask of agony. Lucas stood over her, his claws still extended, half-expecting that she might get up and attack him one last time.

He looked wild... untamed.

His eyes flicked to me, and for a heartbeat, I didn't recognize him. His gaze was sharp, glowing with a fierce, animal hunger. My heart stuttered, fear curling cold in my stomach.

Then, his face softened, changing slowly. The monster was receding, and he stumbled toward me, dropping to his knees at my side. “Annika... my Annika...” His hands cupped my face, his touch trembling. “I’m here. I’m here.”

His voice broke, and I felt something wet hit my cheek. Tears. His tears.

The darkness was pulling at me, dragging me under. But I held on, focusing on his face, on his voice, on his warmth.

Suddenly, he left, and darkness seemed to swallow me whole. But a moment later, little arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a hug. I felt a little heart thundering against my own. I didn’t need to open my eyes to know who it was.

“Aiden, sweetheart...” I managed to whisper, my lips brushing against his cheek.

“He’s safe,” Lucas choked out, his body trembling. “He’s safe. We’re all safe.”

The words comforted me, but I was still slipping away. The pain was becoming unbearable, although I had stopped bleeding profusely, I still felt weaker by each passing moment.

Kael’s voice cut through the haze. “Annika, listen to me. You have a choice.”

“What... a choice?” I asked, blinking heavily. “I thought it was over...”

I tried to focus on Kael’s face, while the walls behind him were still glowing with a hellish red light.

“That blood on the wall...” he said, as if able to read my mind, “that is Aurelius pulsing inside of you. The darkness that has plagued you since you found out that you two were bound together by blood. You still have a chance to turn this around.”

I shivered, feeling so dreadfully cold. “How?”

He glanced at the wall, the light reflecting in his eyes, his face grim. “The blood she took... it was meant to feed her power. But it also means it’s separated from you now. That darkness, that curse, it’s out of your body. But the wall is still feeding on it. If you do nothing, it’ll grow, fester, until it finds its way back to you... or to Aiden.”

I glanced over at Aiden, crouched by my side, with Lucas’ arms around him and me.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t let it touch him.”

Kael’s grip tightened. “You can cleanse it, Annika. You can purge Aurelius’ blood from both of you. But you need to give your clean blood. You need to infuse it into Aiden... and into yourself. It’s the only way to break the curse. To be free.”

My head spun around the idea. “Will... will it hurt him?”

“No.” Kael sounded absolutely certain. “Your blood will protect him. It’ll purify him. But you need to do it now, before the curse latches onto him forever.”

I looked at the wall again, at the sickly red light, at my blood twisting in unnatural patterns. It was my curse. My darkness. My burden.

But if I could get rid of it... if I could save Aiden from it...

I swallowed, my throat raw. “Is it... dangerous?”

Kael’s face softened at the truth. “Yes. You’re weak. And this will take everything you have left. But I believe in you. I always have.”

I felt tears sting my eyes, and a silent sob caught in my chest. “Lucas...”

“I’m here,” he whispered. “Don’t... you don’t have to do this... don’t leave me.”

“I won’t leave you,” I promised, although I wasn’t sure if it was something that could be promised at all. “But I have to do this. For Aiden, and for us. I’ll come back to you...”

He caressed my cheek tenderly. “You better. Because I’m coming after you if you don’t, even to the fiery depths of hell.”

“Let’s hope that’s not where I’ll end up,” I managed to muster, suppressing a painful chuckle. Then, I turned to Kael. “Tell me what to do.”

Kael wasted no time. He reached into his coat, pulling out his small dagger, its blade etched with sigils that pulsed faintly in the dim light. He looked at me.

“This has to be your choice, Annika,” he said softly. “Once we start, there’s no stopping.”

I swallowed hard, my fingers tightening around Lucas’ hand. My body screamed in exhaustion, but my heart knew there was no choice. I had to do this.

“I’m ready.” My voice was barely a whisper, but it held firm.

Kael pressed the dagger’s hilt into my palm. “Cut your other hand. Your clean blood needs to mix with what was taken. Then press it to Aiden’s heart. It will recognize the bond, the purity in you, and sever the darkness forever.”

I exhaled shakily, raising the dagger. My fingers trembled, but I didn’t hesitate. With a sharp breath, I dragged the blade across my palm, wincing as warm blood welled

up.

Lucas cursed. “Damn it, Annika—”

I turned to Aiden. His wide, frightened eyes locked onto mine. “Mama?”

“It’s going to be fine, baby,” I assured him as tears blurred my vision. “I promise.”

I pressed my bleeding palm to his chest. Aiden gasped, his little body going stiff. The moment our blood connected, the air around us shifted.

The red glow on the wall flickered. The symbols warped, the darkness within them writhing as if alive. A sharp wind ripped through the chamber, howling like a wounded beast.

And then the pain hit.

I choked on a scream as fire burned through my veins, searing me from the inside out. It wasn’t just my blood leaving. It was something else, something ancient and wrong, clawing at me, refusing to be purged. My body arched, agony crackling through my bones.

Aiden screamed. “Mama!”

Lucas roared my name, but Kael held him back. “Let her finish!”

I clenched my teeth, forcing myself to stay upright. I could feel it all: the curse, Aurelius’ darkness, ripping itself from me, fighting, trying to anchor itself back.

With every ounce of will I had left, I pushed back.



The darkness shrieked. My blood, the pure part of it, untouched by Aurelius, flooded through Aiden, washing over him in waves of light. The red glow shattered, the symbols on the wall splitting apart, fading into nothingness.

The chamber trembled. The ground cracked. The air shifted. And then, silence.

I collapsed forward, barely catching myself. My entire body felt ice cold, drained beyond comprehension. Aiden was breathing. He was safe. His small hands gripped mine. The warmth of his touch stood in stark contrast to my chill.

Lucas was beside me in an instant, pulling me into his arms, pressing desperate kisses to my hair. “You did it,” he whispered, barely speaking. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

I could barely hear him, and worst of all, I didn’t feel okay, but in time, I would. Without another word, Lucas lifted me as if I weighed nothing, and cradled me against his chest.

His grip was strong but careful, as if he thought I might break apart in his arms.

“I can walk, you know,” I murmured, though even as I said it, I knew it was a lie. My limbs felt like they weren’t my own, drained and trembling, barely able to keep their shape.

Lucas huffed. “No, you can’t.”

I wanted to argue, but I didn’t have the strength. Instead, I let out a small sigh and rested my head against his shoulder. Aiden clung to my hand, his small fingers curling tightly around mine. He had been so brave, too brave for someone so young. I squeezed back, needing him to feel that I was still here, still with him. On his other side, Kael held his other hand, his grip just as firm.

The air inside the ruins was still thick and heavy, with remnants of dark magic floating about, but it was fading now. The Shadow Bride's power was broken. The walls no longer pulsed with that sickening glow, no longer whispered with ancient hunger.

One step at a time, we moved toward the exit. The cold air from outside filtered in, carrying the scent of earth and rain. It was almost over.

Lucas' arms tightened around me as if he knew what I was thinking. That this wasn't truly the end. That there would always be something waiting in the dark, something hunting us.

The light from outside was blinding after the darkness of the ruins. I squinted, my vision struggling to adjust, but when it did, my heart froze.

Dozens of shifters were standing just beyond the entrance. Their forms were rigid, and their eyes were feral, as always. Lucas stopped. Kael stepped forward, using his body as a shield in front of Aiden. None of us spoke. Heck, we barely even breathed.

But the shifters, they... they didn't move either. They just stared at us.

A shudder ran through me. "Why aren't they attacking?" I whispered.

Lucas' chest rumbled beneath me as he exhaled slowly. "I don't know."

One of the shifters, a tall male with ragged hair and eyes that seemed almost human, stepped forward. I could feel Lucas ready himself for attack or defense, whatever would come first.

But the shifter only looked at me. Not at Lucas. Not at Kael. Just me. His nostrils flared, his head tilting as if he were trying to understand something.

Then, slowly, he bowed his head. The others followed, one by one, their heads dipping in silent acknowledgment.

“What...” I stammered, my mind unable to process what I was seeing. “What’s happening?”

The tall shifter lifted his head, his eyes meeting mine for a brief, electric moment. Then, with a sharp movement, he turned on his heel and walked away. The others parted, forming a path through their ranks, leaving the way open for us.

They were letting us go.

Lucas

The sun was sinking behind the rooftops when we walked back into town, its golden light casting long shadows that danced along the cobblestones. Everything looked the same, as if the world hadn't been on the brink of ending, as if we hadn't just crawled out of hell itself.

But the people... they were different. They were waiting for us.

The moment we rounded the corner, their faces turned, their eyes widened. Then, a rush of movement. Voices calling out. Cheers. Someone shouted Annika's name, and the rest joined in, their relief echoing off the walls.

I felt Annika stir in my arms, her eyes fluttering open. She tried to straighten, but I held her tighter. "Stay still. Just a little longer."

Her gaze softened, but she didn't argue. I smiled to myself, because that was a first.

The crowd surged forward, but one figure broke through first, faster than the rest. Callum. His face was pale, eyes wide with fear that melted into joy the second he saw us.

He skidded to a stop, his eyes raking over all of us, lingering on Annika, then Aiden. "You're... you're all back."

I let out a rough breath, one I didn't realize I'd been holding. "Yeah. We're back."

Callum's shoulders sagged, his relief palpable. He looked like he wanted to hug every one of us but was holding himself back. "I thought... we all thought..." His voice cracked. "You did it."

I looked down at Annika, then at Aiden who was still gripping her hand as if afraid to let go. "We did."

Callum's eyes glistened, and he swallowed hard. "Thank heavens." He hesitated for a second before his composure broke. He rushed forward, wrapping his arms around Aiden, pulling him close. "You scared the shit out of me, kid."

Aiden hugged him back, his small body trembling. "I missed you, Uncle Cal."

Callum laughed, a choked, wet sound. "Missed you too, you little rascal." He pulled back, swiping at his eyes, then turned to Annika, his expression turning fierce. "Don't you ever do that again. Any of you."

It was strange to see him so... emotional. But I guess it was normal that such ordeals changed us, hopefully for the better.

Annika smiled at his words. "No promises."

I felt the tension in my chest ease, that knot that had been there since the Shadow Bride first appeared finally loosening. We were home. We were safe.

I looked down at Annika, at the way she leaned into me, her body too weak to stand on her own. At Aiden, his eyes wide and haunted by things a child should never have seen. At Callum, whose relief was mixed with worry. The world was changing. For better or worse. And somehow, we were at the center of it all.

Several minutes later, we were surrounded and welcomed by the entire town, feeling

the warmth of their welcome and relief. Hands clapped against my shoulders, arms wrapped around Annika, fingers ruffled Aiden's hair. Laughter, tears, relief, I let it all wash over me. I absorbed it, but tried not to react. I was drained. We all were.

I only had enough energy to stand, to hold Annika close and to keep Aiden within reach.

The people were happy. Everyone was safe. That was all that mattered.

But I wanted to be inside my home, surrounded by my family.

That night, Aiden curled up in his own bed for the first time in what felt like forever.

Annika sat beside him, stroking his hair and humming softly the same lullaby she always used to sing when he was little. The melody was barely a whisper, but I could see the way it comforted him.

I stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, watching them. The soft glow of the lantern cast a golden light over them, flickering against the walls. I smiled noticing that it turned Annika's hair into molten gold. Aiden's small fingers curled around hers, clinging, even in sleep.

She didn't move, just kept watching him, her own breathing shallow.

"He's safe," I murmured.

Annika nodded, but I could see the exhaustion in her eyes. "I know." Her voice was quiet, but there was something else beneath it. A hesitation.

I pushed off the doorframe, stepping closer. "But?"

She sighed, her gaze never leaving Aiden's face. "I keep thinking... what if we had been too late? What if I—"

I crouched beside her, taking her free hand. "We weren't."

Her fingers tightened around mine. "But next time—"

"There won't be a next time," I cut her off.

She looked at me then, her eyes searching mine. I didn't know what she saw there, but slowly, she nodded. We sat like that, in silence for a long time, just watching over Aiden. Nothing else.

Finally, Annika exhaled and leaned down, pressing a kiss to Aiden's forehead. "Sleep well, my love."

Aiden mumbled something incoherent in his sleep, his grip finally loosening on her hand.

Annika stood, swaying slightly. I caught her waist before she could fall, steadying her against me.

"You need to sleep too," I murmured.

She wobbled the moment we stepped out of Aiden's room. Her knees buckled, and I caught her before she hit the floor.

"Lucas..." she murmured, trying to push me away. "I can walk."

"No, you can't." I scooped her up, ignoring her half-hearted protest. She was too weak to fight me, too exhausted to argue. Her head fell against my chest, her breath

warm through my shirt. She was so light, like a feather.

The darkness inside me roared, that beast clawing at my insides, wanting blood, vengeance. But there was no one left to kill. No one left to punish.

Only Annika, fragile in my arms.

I carried her to our room, laying her down as gently as I could. Her fingers curled into my shirt, not letting go. Her eyes fluttered open, the green in them dim.

“I’ll be right here,” I promised, brushing the hair from her face. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She relaxed, her hand slipping from my shirt, her head sinking into the pillow. But her eyes stayed on me, heavy-lidded and lingering. “I was so scared...” Her voice almost broke. “I thought... I thought I’d never see you again.”

My chest tightened, that familiar ache spreading through me. “I thought the same.” I paused for a moment, letting my gaze linger on her. “It’s over now. We’re safe.”

She stretched her arms out to me and hung them around my neck. Then, she pulled herself up on the bed. Gently, she pressed her lips to mine.

“I will always love you,” she whispered. “I love every part of you, with all your scars and demons...”

I smiled against her lips. “That is the most wonderful thing anyone ever said to me.”

“There are more things I would like to say to you,” she murmured seductively, as her hand slipped between our bodies, awakening my desire so easily, as she always did.



“Really?” I grinned. “Now? Aren’t you exhausted from this ordeal?”

She looked at me playfully. “What better way to get my blood going than this?”

I shook my head incredulously, but there was no way in hell I would refuse what she was offering.

“I know just the right thing,” I replied with equal playfulness and gently laid her on the bed.

“You do?” she asked, unable to stop smiling.

I spread her legs, admiring the view. She wasn’t wearing any panties underneath her nightgown.

“You were planning this all along, weren’t you?” I teased.

“Maybe,” she replied, and only one corner of her luscious lips curved into a smile.

Annika. Annika. Annika.

Her name had become a chant inside my mind, a melody to the steady beating of my heart.

I felt her lift her hips to me, offering herself to me. She had no idea what it did to me, and now, I had to be gentle. She knew exactly how to drive me mad with desire, to the very brink of insanity and then tenderly, guide me back to safety.

Her breasts heaved through the thin fabric of her nightgown. Her nipples peeked through, lifting then falling gently, as she breathed, as she waited for me.

My fingers traced invisible lines between her inner thighs, and she giggled.

“That tickles!” she managed to muster.

“Shhh,” I whispered, kissing her knee, then moving slowly upward. “You’ll wake up Aiden.”

“Mhm,” she pressed her hand to her own lips, promising to be quiet.

I licked her pussy just once, desperate to taste her. She moaned through her hand. Her eyes widened in pleasure immediately. I loved how wet she already was.

I slid my finger inside of her, then I gazed at her, her eyes filled with lust. I took her into my mouth, devouring her fragrant essence. I spread her legs even wider open. I wanted all of her.

I listened to the sound of her breathing, telling me how close she was. She grabbed her own breasts, squeezing them, barely able to control herself. I knew that feeling well. I was on the verge of exploding myself, exhausted and completely out of it, but I needed her desperately, just as much as she needed me.

I curled my finger at just the right angle, just the way she liked it, keeping her clit in my mouth, while my tongue flicked over her swollen bud. I wanted to grab my cock at that moment, but if I did, I would have exploded right then and there. And I wanted to be inside of her slick, wet heat. I couldn’t go a moment longer without it.

“Oh, Lucas...” she whispered, and that was when I tasted the delicious juice of her pleasure, dripping out of her. I kept sucking more and more, absorbing her pulsations, feeling her insides throb with my fingers.

When I lifted my gaze to meet hers, she looked dreamier than ever before. She

reached out for me, cupping my face and I gently adjusted myself between her still trembling thighs. I wanted to remember her as she was, like this, forever. I wanted to have this image imprinted into my memory for as long as I lived, because I had never been happier than I was at this very moment, holding her in my arms, knowing that finally, I was where I was always meant to be.

“Have you any idea how beautiful you are?” I couldn’t help but tell her, although I’m sure she knew this. “How much I want you? How much I love you?”

“Lucas...” she smiled sweetly, and it was the way she said my name. It sent a bolt of pleasure through me, it reminded me that there would never be anyone else for me... ever.

“Never stop saying my name,” I pleaded. “Never...”

She pulled me closer, kissing my lips which were still wet from her juices. She didn’t mind. And I loved that she didn’t mind. We were one, as we were, and we would never again be separated by anyone.

I was gentle as I claimed her. Our bodies moved in unison, together. We kept kissing each other passionately, touching each other’s faces and bodies, as if we were getting acquainted with each other for the very first time. And just like always, I fell in love with her over and over again.

We both came together, trembling in each other’s arms. But even then, we didn’t let go of each other. The room was quiet. All I could hear was the beating of my own heart.

I glanced at the windows. The moonlight was pouring in, casting silvery patterns across the sheets which were tangled around our legs.

I closed my eyes, my hand sliding up her spine, feeling the smooth line of her back and the gentle curve of her shoulder. She was warm, so warm, and she fit against me perfectly, like she was made to be here, in my arms.

I pulled her closer, lingering there as I breathed her in, the scent of her hair, her skin, her. She sighed, soft and content, her body melting against mine, trusting me to keep her safe, to keep her warm. And I would. I'd protect her with everything I had.

She nestled against me, her head finding its place beneath my chin, her hand resting over my heart. I wrapped my arms around her, my body curving around hers, shielding her, holding her close. She was mine. And I was hers. Always.

"Don't ever leave me," she whispered, so quietly I almost missed it.

My chest tightened, my arms locking around her. "Never," I vowed, my voice fierce, unwavering. "I'll never leave you. Not as long as I live."

She sighed, her body relaxing against mine, trusting me, believing me. And that trust, that faith, it shattered me. It made me want to be better, to be worthy of her.

I didn't sleep. I didn't dare close my eyes, not when she was here, safe in my arms, warm and beautiful and mine. I watched her, memorizing every line of her face, every curve, every breath, branding her into my soul.

She was everything. My light. My love. My salvation. And I'd fight the darkness itself to keep her safe.

I pressed another kiss to her hair, holding her close, my heart thundering in my chest as I whispered into the quiet night, "Mine. Always."

Annika

A year ago, this would've been impossible. Unthinkable.

I stood at the edge of the square, watching the crowd swell and move like a living, breathing thing. Humans and vampires, witches and shifters, all laughing, dancing, talking. Together.

The air was alive with music, bright and warm, weaving through the conversations and laughter. Children darted between legs, their faces painted with swirling colors, chasing each other with wooden swords and flower crowns. My heart felt too big for my chest.

I saw Aiden among them, his curls bouncing as he ran, his cheeks flushed, his laughter loud and carefree. For a moment, he disappeared behind a group of witches showing off little sparks of magic in their palms. But then he burst through, giggling with glee.

He was safe and happy.

A hand slipped around my waist, pulling me close. Lucas stood beside me, his face softer than I'd ever seen it. His eyes were also focused on our son. "He's such a good boy," he murmured with pride.

I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "He's going to be a great leader one day... like his father."

Lucas' arm tightened around me. "You did that. You made him who he is now. You showed him what true courage is."

I looked up at him. All I could see was love, gazing back at me. "We did it together."

His gaze fell to me, his eyes dark and deep, his lips curving into a smile that made my heart skip. "Together."

I reached up, brushing my fingers over his cheek. "Thank you for coming to get me," I whispered.

His smile faded, replaced by something fierce, something possessive. "I will always come for you... always."

He leaned down, as his lips brushed mine. That was all I needed to ground me in the here and now.

A shout of laughter broke us apart, and we turned to see Kael balancing three children on his shoulders, his wings half-visible, flickering with light. He looked ridiculous, a giant among them, but his face was alight with joy.

We watched for a while and then the children finally released Kael. Their shrieks of delight were still echoing through the square as they ran off to find new mischief. He stood there, rubbing his neck and looking slightly dazed. Slowly, his wings flickered out of sight and he looked just like the rest of us.

Then she appeared.

Althea. Her dark hair flowing behind her, her lavender dress brushing against her ankles as she approached him. Her eyes sparkled, and her smile was meant only for him.

She reached up, brushing a leaf from his hair, her fingers lingering just a second longer than necessary. Kael stilled, his lips frozen in a smile, gazing back at her.

I couldn't help but smile myself. "Would you look at that."

Lucas followed my gaze, then his brow furrowed in confusion. "What?"

I squeezed his arm. "They're in love."

He scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Kael? In love? I thought the Nephilim were asexual beings."

I laughed, leaning into him. "Look closer."

He did, his eyes narrowing as he watched them. Kael's posture softened and his wings fluttered back into view, all the while curling protectively behind him. Althea's laughter floated to us, light and musical, as her hand rested on his arm. There were a million little signs that not even a blind person could miss.

Lucas' shoulders dropped. "I'll be damned."

"They're perfect for each other."

Lucas let out a low chuckle. "Never thought I'd see the day. Kael settling down."

"He's staying." My voice was quiet, but the certainty of it was unshakable. "He's staying with us."

Lucas's gaze softened, his arm wrapping around me again, pulling me close. "Good." His voice was rough, filled with emotion he'd never admit to. "It's about time he found somewhere to belong."

I looked up at him, at the man who'd fought through darkness and despair to save his family, who'd faced the beast within himself and come out stronger. "We all did."

"Yeah. We did." He looked at me, and I had to admit that he never looked more dashing, more handsome, and more like himself than at that vulnerable moment. And I knew I had to seize that moment.

I exhaled slowly. "Lucas."

He glanced down at me, catching something in my voice. His grip on my waist tightened just slightly. "What is it?"

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. I wasn't sure why, when this was good. This was something we had fought for, bled for. And yet, my heart raced.

I placed his hand over my stomach. Beneath my dress, beneath his touch, new life thrived.

His whole body went still. "Annika..."

I smiled, nervous and excited all at once. "We're having another baby."

For a moment, he didn't move. It looked like he didn't breathe at all. Then, his fingers curled against my stomach gently, as if he was afraid he'd break me. His gaze snapped to mine, and in his eyes, I saw it... shock, awe, something deeper, something raw.

I barely had a second to react before he pulled me against him, burying his face in my hair.

"Another baby," he murmured.



“Mhm,” I nodded.

He pulled back, cupping my face with both hands, his thumbs tracing my cheekbones.

“Are you okay? Do you feel alright? You should be resting, Annika—”

I laughed, cutting him off with a kiss. “I’m fine. I promise.”

He let out a slow breath, his forehead resting against mine. “Aiden is going to be a big brother.”

I smiled. “And you’re going to be a father again.”

He let out a shaky chuckle. “Heaven help us.”

I smacked his chest lightly, and he caught my wrist, pressing a kiss to my palm. The same palm that had once bled for something dark and terrible. Now, it only held life, only held love.

He exhaled deeply, as if grounding himself in this moment. Then, he took my hand and placed it over his heart, pressing his own over mine.

“I will protect you,” he vowed. “All of you. Always.”

Before I could say anything to that, Aiden rushed over to us. I felt him before I saw him. I felt that little blur of energy barreling toward us through the crowd. I braced myself just in time as Aiden launched himself at my legs, his arms wrapping around me with all the force his small body could muster.

“Mama! Mama! Did you see? I beat Uncle Cal in the race! I ran so fast, like this—”

He pulled back, demonstrating his sprint with exaggerated movements, and all we could do was clap, sharing in his excitement.

I laughed, ruffling his unruly hair. “I saw! You were the fastest boy out there.”

His chest puffed up with pride. “I’m the fastest in the whole town!” He turned to Lucas. “Daddy, did you see?”

Lucas crouched down to his level. “I saw, buddy. You were incredible.”

Aiden beamed, practically glowing. Then, his nose scrunched up, and his gaze flicked between us. He must have figured something out, as kids always do. “Why are you two acting all mushy?”

I laughed, glancing at Lucas, who shook his head with a chuckle. “We’re not mushy,” I said, also kneeling down beside him. “We’re just... happy.”

Aiden’s eyes brightened. “Why?”

I took his little hands in mine, feeling their warmth, their life, the heartbeat of our future. “Because you’re going to be a big brother.”

His face went blank for a second, his mouth forming a little O. “Oh... a big brother?”

I nodded, my heart bursting as I watched realization dawn on his face. “There’s a baby growing right here,” I said, placing his hand over my belly. “Your little brother or sister.”

His eyes grew impossibly wide. “In there?” He looked up at Lucas. “Did you hear that, Daddy? A baby! In Mama’s tummy!”

Lucas grinned, his hand resting on my shoulder. “I heard. What do you think about that?”

Aiden was silent for a moment, and his face had taken on such an adult expression for

such a little face. Then, a slow, wide smile broke across his lips. “I’m gonna be the best big brother ever! I’ll teach my brother or sister how to run super fast, and how to draw, and how to catch frogs—”

He paused as his eyes sparkled. “Will they be fast like me?”

I laughed, brushing a stray curl from his forehead. “I bet they will. Especially if they learn from you.”

He beamed, his excitement bubbling over as he launched himself at me again, hugging me tight, his tiny arms wrapping around my neck. “I can’t wait, Mama! I’m going to be the bestest big brother in the whole world!”

Tears prickled at the corners of my eyes, and I hugged him back, holding him close. “I know you will,” I whispered in a trembling voice. “I know you will.”

I looked up at Lucas, who was watching us with an expression so full of love that it stole my breath away. Our eyes met, and in that moment, I knew. No shadow, no darkness could ever take this away from us.

We were together. We were safe. And our family was growing.

Lucas reached out, pulling us both into his arms. “I love you. Both of you.”

Aiden squirmed between us, laughing. “All three of us, Daddy! All three of us!”

Lucas laughed, his voice breaking just slightly. “Yeah. All three of us.”

And as the music played and the town celebrated around us, we held each other close, our hearts beating as one, our future bright and full of hope.

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