



Vampires & Bikers

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Falling for the vampire enemy.

To pay off my family's debt, I'm forced to work at a shifter MC club.

Where I catch the eye of a mean shifter.

As if I needed another complication, a vampire starts snooping around.

Lord Luc D'Essay isn't meant to be here.

Vampires and shifters don't mix.

I should hate him.

But it's hard not to be attracted to his strong features and his loyalty.

Love has never been an option, but maybe Luc and I can help each other.

Maybe he could be my ticket out of this life.

But the more I help him with his murder investigation, the more I catch feelings.

I want to share my secrets with Luc.

I want to feel his cool lips on my thrumming pulse.

Falling for Luc could very well cost me my life.

But for him, I'm willing to take the risk.

Vampires Bikers is a standalone Vampire Romance with a HEA and NO cheating!

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Ruby

Opportunity does not always come knocking.

Sometimes, it comes striding in with expensive boots and hypnotic blue eyes that follow you as you try to serve drinks in a strip club filled with all kinds of shifty characters. I felt his eyes on me and tried to ignore him. When I finally decided to meet his glance, I felt a shiver of shock running down my spine.

A vampire in the club!

How had he managed to get into this place without being torn limb from limb?

The Diablos was a well-known shifter club and MC meeting place, run by the extremely dangerous Tomás and his pack of wolves. This was shifter territory and vampires knew to keep away. The vampire might have been smarter but this place was crowded and even if only half of the clients jumped him, he wouldn't make it out alive. There had been talk of a war coming between the shifters and the vampires and tensions between them were higher than ever.

The vampire kept to the back of the room, his head turned down.

Yet, I could feel him pulling me towards him. I forced myself to do my job, fetching drinks, giving out change, wiping spills from the floor.

There was a strange energy in the club that night.

Something was off, wrong.

The customers were edgy and aggressive, Tomás and his crew kept to one end of the club, staring out at the dancing girls without even seeing them. I could see the tension in his body language, the throbbing vein in his neck, the rigid posture. When he was like this, it was better to steer clear of him. One wrong word could set him off and I had seen him backhand one of the other waitresses once. She had fallen against a table, knocked her head and hadn't been seen at the club since.

I could see that it was going to be one of those nights where I just prayed to make it through the shift. Hopefully, the vampire would have left by then, and most of the customers would settle down.

No such luck, of course.

Half-way through the evening, some guy grabbed me around the waist, pulling me close.

"Don't you look good?" he leered at me.

"Good enough to eat, I bet." I tried to push him away, nicely, first. This is what we'd been told to do.

"How about I take a little nibble?" he came closer, his beer breath in my face as he grabbed my ass and tried to kiss me.

"Get off!" I said firmly, and when he did not respond, I elbowed him in the solar plexus with my elbow. I knew exactly where to direct all my energy and he went down like a ton of bricks. Unfortunately, he took my shirt with him. He had grabbed hold of it and as he fell, it tore off my body. I wasn't wearing a bra, as per the rules, and cheers went round the club as I stood, suddenly topless.

My instinct was to immediately cover myself, but I knew how pointless this was. All around me were naked women, dancing on the stage. I couldn't show any weakness, I had to pretend this was nothing. The bouncers came to keep the men from jumping me right there and I leaned down, grabbed my top from the drunken fool's hands and put it back on, tying the ends together in an attempt to fix the tear. Guys were cheering all around me and I had to get out of the throng before someone else grabbed me. I ducked away to the side, checking that my breasts were firmly covered again.

"That was nicely done," I heard someone say. "I would say you could be up on the stage among the dancers, with assets like those but they're not for public consumption, right?"

Even before I looked up, I knew it was the vampire.

It was his voice.

So sexy and seductive, cultured in a way that set him apart from the others in the club, most of whom could not speak in complete sentences.

"What are you doing here?" I hissed at him, under my breath.

I didn't want to risk anyone overhearing us talk. If I was caught even just talking to a vampire, it would mean certain death.

"My name is Luc D'Essay. I am a general in King Vlas's army."

The Vampire King. This was not just any vampire, I realized. This guy was someone important.

"I need your help," Luc said, taking my elbow and steering me to a quiet corner of

the club.

“My help?” I thought he was insane. I was a lowly server in a strip club, right at the bottom of the hierarchy here.

He nodded his head in the direction where Tomás was sitting.

“I need you to tell him to go outside, alone. I need to talk to him.”

I shook my head.

“No way.”

“A war is coming,” the vampire said, his voice low. “Someone has killed a senior advisor to King Vlas.”

He came closer.

“Have you heard anything about this?” there was more urgency in his voice now.

I shook my head. I wondered if this was why the atmosphere in the club was so off.

“Matteo Lombardi. You may have heard of him? I must find out who killed him and why.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about and could only stare at him. How on earth would I know anything about this?

“Tell your boss whatever you need to get him out there, I will make it worth your while.”

“I can’t just go up to him like that! Not when he’s... like that!” I looked past him to where Tomás was sitting.

“I will make it worth your while,” the vampire said again, emphasizing each word.

“No,” I said again. “I’m not dying tonight.”

“How much? Hundred dollars?”

“Five hundred,” I said, without thinking. It was more than I would make in weeks but I knew he’d have it. Vampires always had money. With that kind of money in my pocket, my plan to get out of the club and pay off the family debt to Tomás got a massive boost.

He looked at me, a calculating glance that I could feel in a tingle between my legs. He was so attractive, so incredibly handsome. I was trying my best not to show my attraction to him, showing only hostility and rudeness, but I could feel my facade slipping. I wanted to hate him. This man was not my friend. Vampires fed on people, this guy could kill me but I needed the money.

“Ok, then, leave it,” I said, my voice shaky as I turned to walk away.

“Five hundred it is,” the vampire said, “but do it now.”

His hand moved quickly, tucking the money inside my shirt. I felt the back of his hand against my breast, my nipple hardening as he pressed ever so slightly against it. It was the softest caress I had ever felt. I ached for more. Then his hand was gone.

My mouth was dry.

I turned away and pulled the money out to check.

It was all there.

I took a deep breath and walked back to the bar first to compose myself and think up a plan. I didn't have much time and I had to be sure of what to do.

One wrong move and that could be it for me.

Five hundred dollars meant nothing if I was dead.

I swallowed and turned around, marching up to the dais where Tomás was sitting on a leather couch. He was drumming his fingers on the armrest, every muscle tense like a coil waiting to be sprung.

I had to be so, so careful.

I stopped at the step going up to the raised platform that belonged to the top dog. One of his bodyguards came towards me.

"I have a message for the boss from Grace."

Tomás heard me and turned his dark eyes towards me.

"What?"

I knew he liked Grace, one of the strippers who was not on duty that night. We were friends, and she'd told me that he often asked for her, demanding private dances and anything else he felt like. All of us knew better than to say no to him.

"Grace?" His eyes narrowed. He motioned to his bodyguard to let me come closer.

"She's outside in the car park," I spoke quickly. "She asked me to call you. She wants

to talk to you.” I took a quick breath. “Something’s happened, she’s upset.”

“Why?” he barked, his breath foul.

“I don’t know.”

It was better not to say too much so I shrugged and pulled a face. Either he’d buy it or he wouldn’t. For a moment, it could go either way. He stared into my face long enough for me to think he was probably going to headbutt me or something. His eyes were vacant, as if he was on something and he was definitely unpredictable, but he seemed to buy it as he jumped up and marched out of the club.

I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

It was up to the vampire now but I knew I should get out of there. If Tomás came back I didn’t want to be around until I had gotten my story straight. I told the barman that I felt sick and was going home and got out of the club as fast as I could.

I didn’t check if they were out front and if the vampire had managed to get Tomás alone as he’d wanted. My job was done. I had the money I needed.

I went out the back, checking the lay of the land and once the coast was clear, quickly made my way home.

I didn’t want to think of the vampire’s touch on my breast or the way he’d spoken to me. The thought of him made my pulse race and I knew that this was the whole point of how he’d spoken to me. He’d wanted me to feel this way; desired, wanted.

This was the feeling I had to fight.

It could get me killed.

But I couldn't help feeling that I would see him again.

That I wanted to see him again.

That I wanted him to touch me again.

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Luc

I was not expecting this.

These feelings. These very disturbing impulses.

Yet, the moment I saw Ruby in that disgusting club everything changed. I didn't know this yet, but my life was about to be blown apart. At that point, I cared only about finding out who had killed my best friend, Matteo. He had last been seen in an area that was shifter territory. I had no idea what he was doing here or why. I had been told this was the hub of the local shifter and MC club activity. When one of my men reported that he had died here, I refused to believe it. They told me they'd found his remains, burnt. Still, I wouldn't listen to them. Until they brought me the Lombardi belt buckle, which he had worn for as long as I'd known him.

It was his family crest, intricately carved, centuries old. It had been given to him by his father, whose own father had given it to him. The Lombardi were a proud Second Families house, similar to my own.

We had been as close as brothers, more than friends.

I could not believe he was gone.

Killing Matteo would not have been easy. He was one of the strongest and fastest vampires I'd ever known. He'd grown more powerful over the centuries as well. Eventually becoming one of the king's most trusted soldiers.

I had to find out what had happened to him. Our men, who had gone out looking for him, concluded that he must have been surprised by a party of shifters, but I knew there had to be more than that. Matteo would have been able to finish off a regular pack of wolves.

“Let it go,” King Vlas, our ruler, told me. “We have more important things to focus on.”

But I had to know who had killed Matteo. I needed to avenge him. I told Vlas that it might be linked to a bigger plot, some development that we were unaware of. There had always been tensions between the vampires and the shifters, but the power balance had shifted since almost three quarters of the vampire community were killed by a virus fifty years ago. The shifters, on the other hand, had more than doubled in numbers. It had made them bold and ambitious, keen to take us on and take over our interests, which, of course, were considerable. Matteo had warned me that the shifters were planning something and wanted to get rid of us, an escalation in the conflict that was always brewing between vampires and shifters, but Vlas thought them too unsophisticated to organize such an attack.

What if Matteo was right?

I hid in the shadows for days and studied the lay of the land at Diablos. It didn't look like much from the front, a squat two-story building with a dirt yard for bikes and cars but at night, the place was buzzing with a frenetic energy that was unpredictable. There were many people going in and the property extended out back into several outbuildings. The main building housed the stage for the strippers and the drinking area. Strippers danced for the pleasure of rather foul, poorly behaved and uneducated customers who did little to hide their base animal natures, but there were very many of them, more than I wanted to take on by myself.

I needed to talk to their leader, Tomás, but I had no idea how to get him outside,

alone. He was always surrounded by a posse of bodyguards and did not leave the club.

Finally, I went in, put on a hat I picked up from a table and pulled it down low over my head. Nobody paid attention to me and as long as no one saw my eyes, I could get away with it for a while. The noise was deafening. Men were shouting, yelling to one another and the women on stage. Some kind of modern rock music blasted from speakers mounted against the roof. I admired the dancers, several of whom had skill and some measure of physical beauty and wondered idly how they dealt with these customers. A couple of big men stood around, keeping an eye on the punters, but I wondered if it was enough. I sank down on a chair in the corner and tried to get a sense of where Tomás and his henchmen were. The waitresses caught my eye, dressed in sexy outfits, no doubt to stimulate the clientele into buying more liquor and drugs. Not that they seemed to need the encouragement.

One of the waitresses captured my interest.

Right away, I could see she was cut from a different cloth. She was finer, superior in every way. She moved gracefully, even when carrying a tray loaded with drinks, anticipating men walking in front of her. Her beauty was rare and unusual, and the energy she exuded was intoxicating. There was more to her, I thought, she did not belong in a place like this. I saw some oaf harassing her and she dealt with him with an ease that seemed to belie her age. She couldn't have been more than twenty, twenty-five?

Who was this girl-woman?

She had noticed me looking at her, of course. She stared back at me and our gazes locked, but she broke it off, surprisingly strong willed. I watched as she brought the idiot down with a well-aimed blow and was rewarded with a view of her magnificent breasts, as her top was torn off by the man trying in vain to defend himself. I could

see how she took hold of herself, stood tall in the throng of men trying to get their hands on her, how she calmly bent down to fix her shirt and got out of the crowd.

I needed to meet this girl.

Perhaps she could help me with Tomás.

I had no specific plan until I found myself next to her, talking to her.

Up close, she was even more beautiful than I had realized. Her eyes, large and grey, were mesmerizing, and she had dark hair framing a delicate face. She was wasted here, I thought. I could get her out, she could help me with Tomás . That was my thinking, I mean, I didn't think too much about where I'd take her or how things would go from there. I definitely meant to get to know her and those breasts a bit better.

First, however, I needed to focus on the job at hand.

I was not one of these idiots, who turned into beasts at the slightest whim, losing all control to their baser nature. I had a finely tuned mind, a brain that worked on a higher frequency, fed by superior blood products.

I had to find out what had happened to Matteo and the girl would help me.

It didn't take me long to figure out that she was driven by money and smart enough to know that I had it. I convinced her to get the club boss outside and then briefly, I touched her to get my imprint on her. I used the ruse of giving her the money, tucking it into her shirt, but I stroked her skin as I did that and felt the firm, pulsing warmth of living skin.

It was incredible, what that, the lightest of touches could do. It may have felt like a

moment, but time was so pliable, so relative. If you'd been around long enough, you learned to manipulate it, make it stretch or shrink, as you wished. You could go back in time, if you wished, even into the future, if you dared. I would make that moment last, play it over in my mind and use it as a calling card to visit her.

It was an invitation that I could tell she had accepted, whether she knew it or not. There was an immediate response from her body as she reacted to my touch. Her body yearned for it and our attraction was sparked. Our beings had recognized each other, something that I knew by now was rare in any lifetime.

Even though she disappeared soon after I spoke to her, I knew I'd find her. I paused to ask a fellow waitress what the girl's name was.

Ruby.

Of course.

The blood red gem. How fitting that was.

But first, I had to talk to Tomás.

I waited outside, and saw him come out, calling for someone. I had but a moment to grab hold of him and pull him into the shadows, a knife against his throat.

"Did you attack the vampire, Matteo Lombardi?" I demanded to know.

"Who are you?" his voice was raspy, I could feel his heartbeat racing.

I swung him around and stared into his eyes, bending his will to get the answers I craved.

“Matteo Lombardi was found in the woods off the swampland, near here. He was burnt, by shifters. Did you order this?”

The man was subdued now.

“Not us,” he said, his voice dreamy, “but I heard about it.”

“From whom?”

“Sunny.”

“Sunny?”

“Sunny the Snake.”

The door outside the club slammed and I felt rather than heard the men shifting into their animal selves. The air changed, became supercharged. I could hear sniffing and snarling. Wolves. I needed to go. I dropped Tomás and shot into the air, blending into the shadows before they could find me. The effects of my charm would mean that he’d forget who he’d spoken to and about what, but he might remember the girl. I needed to ensure that she was safe.

I moved among the trees and once I knew I was safe, I trained my thinking on her.

Ruby.

She wasn’t far.

I focused on the feel of her skin, let it call to me.

It led me through dirty streets lined by ramshackle houses and boarded-up shops with

broken windows. This might have been a sweet little town once, but not anymore. There were no shops or businesses, just boarded up buildings with broken windows, a dumping ground now for lost souls, broken people. There was trash everywhere. I knew things were bad outside the cities but this was one of the worst towns I'd ever seen. It was outlaw country where the shifters ruled. I couldn't imagine a beautiful woman like Ruby living in a foul place like this.

I was pulled towards a small house next to a vacant lot.

She was here, I could feel it.

Ruby.

It was meant to be.

I knocked on her door, only once.

She knew I was coming.

The agony of anticipating her opening the door was the most exquisite torture.

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Ruby

There is a knock on the door.

It is a soft rap rather than someone pounding on the wood.

I know who it is, of course.

I freeze on the spot, unable to move. My thoughts are racing and all I can think of is that he's here. The vampire is here.

He will know that I am inside the house, that I'm deciding what to do but he doesn't knock again, he's waiting for me to answer the door. I don't know what will happen if I open the door, or maybe I do, maybe I want it to happen. I felt it in his eyes, the way he looked at me. The way he wanted me.

I try to banish these ideas from my head.

This can't happen, it would be a disaster.

I know this for a fact.

I was born in this shithole of a shifter town, a place that everyone leaves the moment they can but we couldn't leave. With a sick mom and a father who got sent to prison before he could pay Tomás back for drugs he had lost, the debt got transferred to me, the only child of a man everyone called Cat, for obvious reasons, I guess. My father's alter ego is a bobcat, fierce, but no match for the wolves in these packs. They are

huge and ferocious.

Tomás gave me a job in his club, taking half my wages and telling me if I even think of sneaking away one night, he'd take his rage out on my mother. My poor mom, sick with complications of diabetes and struggling to stay alive after everything that's happened to her. I can't let that happen.

I've worked at the strip club for almost five years now, hating every minute, trying to find a way out. Allowing one of the bikers to come around sometimes, for protection. Danny has always had the hots for me. He has managed to work himself up at the club as part of the protection. He rides out with the pack as a captain of one of the groups. He is known as an enforcer, which means he is not scared of violence or handing out justice. His idea of justice, of course, which usually has nothing just about it at all. It doesn't help that he has a short temper and is easily riled, especially when he has been drinking, which is most days.

I've tried to break up with him, many times.

But he keeps coming back and it does help to have him around as it keeps other characters away.

But maybe this vampire can help me get away.

The voice whispers to me, in the back of my mind, telling me that vampires are stronger than shifters. Richer. Perhaps this one can help me. It is a dangerous thought and I know that but the world we live in is ruled by the strong. Survival of the fittest. Or smartest. Probably, the richest.

Even though shifters are bad, everyone says vampires are worse. My mom warned me about them, these predators who look so charming and smell so good, right up until they bury their fangs in your neck. They're not human, they don't feel anything

but not all vampires are like that, I think. They're not allowed to attack people anymore. I know it happens, from time-to-time but it's not common anymore and they're so attractive, at least this one is. Not to mention they're cleaner. Shifters are known for owning weapons, not toothbrushes.

I move closer to the door. I can see a shape outside. My hand is on the door handle. I close my eyes briefly, take a deep breath and steady my breathing.

I open the door.

Of course it is him. Those blue eyes of his shining like lasers, burning into my soul.

"Ruby."

He says my name like it's a spell or something.

I nod, not trusting myself to say anything.

"You need to invite me in," he says with a gentle smile.

"Do I?" I ask stupidly, knowing that I have to do this, but buying a bit more time for myself.

"Unless you want me to stay out here, where anyone can see?"

Oh, shit, I think. Danny. He might come over, I can't have him seeing the vampire at my front door.

"Yes, yes, come in," I say quickly and shut the door behind him.

"You live here?" the vampire asks in a soft voice, looking around the living room. I

see it through his eyes, the ratty couch with the stained upholstery, the fraying carpet and the torn curtains.

“This is my life,” I say, and shrug.

“But it’s not really, is it?” he moves closer and I try to avoid his eyes, which seem to stare into my soul. I break the train of my thoughts, which are full of him. This is the way to stop the power he has over me. I turn away and force myself to say, “I’d offer you something to drink but you don’t want that, right? I am having a beer, though,” I say with a nervous chuckle.

He comes with me into the kitchen, where a cooler box serves as a fridge.

“No power?” he asks, looking around the kitchen.

“No power lines around here anymore.” He must be from the city, where authorities have kept up infrastructure like roads and electricity plants. Out here, we fend for ourselves. We are even more isolated than most. Shifters rule, running illegal bars and strip joints, making money off selling drugs and sex and anything else people are willing to pay for.

I swallow some of the beer and it feels good.

“You got what you needed from Tomás?”

He nods. “Thanks for your help.”

He pauses, “I hope I didn’t cause trouble for you at work?”

I nod, sit down at the kitchen table.

“I called my friend Grace and offered her some of the money in exchange for telling him that she came to the club but left when she saw a vampire was there.”

He nods. “Then I owe you money for that, right?”

“If you want.”

He took out some notes, put them down on the table.

I wasn't going to say no to that.

He turned away to look out the window and I took a moment to look at him properly. He is tall and strongly built, but it's the blonde hair and the tanned skin that make him look so handsome. Coupled with those incredible eyes, he is irresistible.

Almost.

I am sure I could resist him if I wanted to.

The problem is, I don't really want to.

“So, tell me, why are you here,” I challenge him.

“I wanted to see you, make sure you're fine,” he says, turning to look at me.

I look down.

“As you can see, I'm fine.”

I swallow, “You can go now.”

A moment passes. “Do you want me to? I will if you tell me to.”

He knows I don’t want him to go.

“I don’t want to want you,” I say, still looking down at the cracked linoleum. “I don’t want to be another notch on your belt, or whatever.”

I can hear my voice catching.

“I know you can make me want you. Please stop doing...whatever it is you’re doing.”

I feel him taking a step away.

“Ruby. I’m not doing anything. I promise.”

“I’m not a fool!” I jump up, take another step back. “This is what you do... you vampires! You... turn on the stage lights and sprinkle your fairy dust or whatever and we become putty in your hands!”

I can feel tears of anger in my eyes.

“I don’t want to leave but I will if you want me to,” his voice is so soft I can barely hear him. I realize he is walking out of the kitchen.

I close my eyes.

“No,” I whisper. “Come back.”

I don’t hear him come back into the room, but suddenly he is there, next to my chair and I slide into his arms with a sigh, unable to resist any longer. His skin is rough, his beard is scratchy but his mouth, oh my God, it is an oasis of delight. Warm and

velvety, he kisses me with such tenderness, I feel desire stirring inside of me like I've never felt it before.

I stagger back into the kitchen cabinets and he lifts me up onto the counter, kissing me deeper, with more passion, his tongue probing and twisting, exploring my mouth so artfully. My insides twist with longing as I put my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

He draws away slightly, "Are you sure?"

I nod, quickly, "Yes, yes."

"Ruby?"

My God, I have never met any man so polite and courteous about a screw.

"Fuck me, for God's sakes, just fuck me!" I can't help myself, my desire is turning into a physical need and an ache for him. I pull off my jeans and help him undo his pants, eager to get my hands on him right now. I don't know how much longer we have and there is no time to waste. When I reach into his pants, he shudders with desire and I can feel the throbbing want of him. I jump back on the counter, pulling him into me, my thighs opening, welcoming him inside of me. I am so wet and the sensation of pleasure is overwhelming as waves of joy build immediately, drowning out all thought.

He caresses my breasts, kissing them, as I wrap my legs around him.

"More, harder," I moan as he thrusts, kissing me hungrily, his mouth harder now, his tongue reaching deeper into my mouth as his cock drives harder and harder until we explode in rapturous bliss, coming together.

“Oh, my God,” I say and hold him close in a tight embrace, the waves of ecstasy gently recede but lock us together in a cocoon of bliss. He collapses against me and my arms instinctively close around him, holding him close.

It was so quick and fast, almost over before I knew what was happening.

I feel him straightening up and looking at me.

“You okay?”

I nod. “But you have to get going. Danny could come by any moment.”

“Danny?”

I try to think how to explain what Danny is. “He is... someone in my life, I guess.”

“You have a boyfriend?”

“I wouldn’t call him that but, yes, he would probably put it that way.”

“Can’t I be your boyfriend?” He is smiling when he says the words, but I can tell he is only half-joking.

I bite my lip. “You’re a vampire and this is a shifter town, hell, a shifter capital. I don’t have a death wish.”

He pulls me close and kisses me again, slowly, with such feeling that I feel all my resolve melting.

“There are worse things than being dead,” the vampire says, looking into my eyes with those magnificent eyes of his. I feel myself drowning in the vast blue expanse of

them, like the ocean with its hidden depths and mysteries.

“Not for me,” I say, my voice breaking, as I push him out the back door.

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Luc

I stick around for a bit after leaving Ruby's. The town fascinates me with its lowlifes and the buzz of criminal activity. Ruby is such a precious jewel, in the middle of all this filth. I have to be careful though, I know that news will have spread by now of a vampire being in town, which means they will come hunting for me. I can't afford that. Rather regretfully, I leave Ruby's street, determined to come back, of course.

There is no way that I will be able to stay away after what just happened.

Thinking about our urgent coupling in her kitchen makes me hard again, wanting her even more but I want to take my time with her, explore her body, find out where her pleasure lies. I want more time with her, to get to know her better. A quick fling will not satisfy me but I will have to be careful with all these shifters about.

I make my way back to the club where the bikers have started gathering, revving their engines. They're clearly heading out somewhere. A group of men are standing apart, looking at the bikers and I can feel them getting ready for action. I stand back, downwind, keeping out of sight. I wait for them to go off and disperse before finding one of the bodyguards going round the back to find his bike.

I jump him and subdue him, pushing him up against the wall.

"Where do I find Sunny the Snake?"

The man's eyes are bulging in his head, he looks terrified. I don't want to loosen my grip and give him the opportunity to shift. I open my mouth, show him my fangs and

watch him quiver in terror.

“Talk or die. Your choice.”

The man is stammering now, “Sunny. The boss. Over at the ranch. At Sunside Swamp. That way,” he jerks his head east.

“How far?”

He blubbers, “I don’t know. 100 miles or so?”

I drop him in a shivering heap on the floor. I had no interest in killing him or sampling his blood, contaminated as it would be by alcohol and drugs. I only ingest the purest and highest grade of synthetic blood. The virus had shown us that vampires were vulnerable too.

I take the man’s bike and head off in the direction he pointed, swiping his jacket and boots to complete the picture. No one would mistake me for a biker but I need to blend in as much as possible. I don’t want to be in shifter country for longer than I have to. I only want to get answers about Matteo’s death, but Ruby has complicated things.

As I leave the club, and look ahead, I allow myself to think of her body, her willowy beauty. She had been surprisingly resistant to my attempts to seduce her, fighting me more than I had expected. There had been many women in my life, countless, really, but a few have stood out.

Not recently, however.

My closest relationships were right after I changed. Those had been the happiest years of my life. I’d had a wife, a family, my own castle and lands to look after. I’d

been wealthy, bequeathed several estates by the then-king, Vlas's predecessor. However, I lost so much when my wife and children were killed. I had a son left but he died from the virus. After that, I was careful when it came to relationships. I stayed away from commitments or responsibilities. It was easier that way. The D'Essay ancestral home was still there. I had caretakers and visited every now and then but I never stayed long, too many memories. I was a general in Vlas's army now, helping him stay in power. Matteo and I had been brothers in this cause, protecting our way of life and our kin. Without him, I felt a little unmoored.

But Ruby was drawing me towards her in a way that was new.

I couldn't remember any woman having quite this effect on me.

I thought of Carmen, a vampire from Old Europe, whom I had married after my first wife died, a long time ago. It was an arrangement, made to join ancient families and solidify the D'Essay power in the Shadow Land. When we separated, she took our children with her but the virus killed all of them too. Then, briefly, I had been involved with a human witch, Alexandra. She was powerful and exotic, but dangerous too. She was an advisor to the Human Council and had her own agenda but it had never been like this with her. What I had experienced with Ruby, when I was inside of her, that was something quite different. I longed to feel it again.

I decided I would see her again, no matter what.

I'd find a way to outsmart the stupid dogs and get her out of that dump. I entertained a fantasy of taking her to the city where vampires were protected and safe. Where there was the finest food and luxury, where she could buy and wear whatever she liked. She would be indulged and treated like the princess she was.

My thoughts surprised me.

I could not remember the last time a woman had preoccupied me like this.

Be careful, I told myself.

You need to find Matteo's killer.

The landscape was changing, it was becoming more forested. The air was warmer too, more humid. It was uncomfortable for me, vampires preferred cooler climates. One of the advantages of being as old as I was, was that I had found some tolerance for daylight. Not glaring sunlight, but I could be out during the day, as long as it wasn't too bright or hot.

I could see the sky lightening up in the east, auguring the arrival of a new day.

Some cars passed me by, men staring at me hard as they slowed down to pass me, then speeding up again and continuing. I knew being out here alone was not good. I was drawing attention to myself.

Fortunately, Sunside Swamp was not hard to find.

There was a sign with a few bullet holes a few miles down the road.

The road dipped and then a few houses and shops emerged, in considerably better condition than Buzzard Creek, which was not that far away. I spotted shops with window displays and the main road was tarred too. I saw a hotel just off the main road and decided to check in and get a room, do a little digging for info on this spot. Where was all this wealth coming from?

Once I had a basic room on the top floor, I locked the door and draw the curtains. I down a few vials of my emergency blood supply and lie down on the bed. I call my team in the capital. Tick is a computer nerd and a hacker who has come in handy

many times before. I recruited her and turned her, when I learned that she was dying from one of the many human diseases. The promise of eternal life was hard to resist. Now, she is an important part of my team, on the intelligence side.

She picked up straight away.

“Where are you?” She sounded annoyed.

“I’ve been following leads on Matteo’s death but it’s taking longer than I’d hoped.”

“His Royal Highness is not impressed.”

“What else is new,” I snort. “I told him this needs doing first.”

“He wants you to help schmooze the Hattari deal,” she says.

“He told you that?”

She snorts. “As if, I just... happened to see it.”

“Where?”

“Personal email. To Harris.”

Jon Paul Harris is King Vlas’s chief advisor and we don’t always agree. I am more hands-on and he is the knife-in-the-back type.

“Careful Tick,” I tell her.

“Yeah, yeah,” the kid says. I bet she’s rolling her eyes.

Tick monitors internal comms and also runs several bots across various Internet sites to ensure we stay on top of the chatter out there. There is no vampire intelligence agency as such, but I try to stay on top of things. We keep it under the radar though. Even among our own, we never know who is really on our side. You trust no one.

“I want you to look into a town called Sunside Swamp and an individual called Sunny, who may be some kind of drug lord down here. He is connected to the shifter MC club Diablos.”

“On it,” she says.

I lie back and let my thoughts run over the events of the past day. What I have seen in the South has changed my views on the Southern territories, areas that have always been predominantly shifter areas. They used to be under developed, sleepy areas where not much was happening outside of fishing and drinking. Sunside Swamp was affluent and organized. Things were happening here but, what exactly I wasn't sure, and why did I have the feeling that it was not good news for us?

While I waited for Tick to report back, I thought again of Ruby and the fear in her eyes when she spoke of her boyfriend. There was no love lost there but she was obviously afraid of him. I needed more information on her too.

I sent Tick a message:

Get me info on Ruby Winton from Buzzard Creek too. Anything you can find.

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Ruby

Not long after Luc leaves, Danny barges into the house.

“What the fuck is that smell!”

I look up, shamefaced, “Sorry, I forgot a pan on the burner, fell asleep and burnt the eggs!”

“Jesus, Ruby, you’ll burn the house down!”

He opens the door and windows for some fresh air and stands outside. The smell is bad but I had to do something to mask the eau d’ vampire that was definitely hanging about the house. Danny had a very keen sense of smell, like most shifters and Luc had been here for some time. I figured the smell of scorched food would mask the vampire smell and I was right.

I fetched him a beer and we sat outside on the porch steps.

“I can’t stay long,” Danny said. “We’ve got a vampire to hunt!” I saw the excitement shine in his eyes.

“A vampire?”

“Yeah! He was at the club, you didn’t see him?”

I had to be careful with Danny, if he found out I was lying to him, there would be hell

to pay.

“No, I left early,” I said. “One of the customers grabbed me and I knocked my head. Felt a bit dizzy after that.”

“You okay?” he asked.

I had to remind myself that Danny probably did care about me, in his own way but he was only nice to me when it suited him, when he felt I was doing my part, acting the way a good girlfriend should. I didn’t want to think of the times he’d slapped me for mouthing off to him, as he put it. Back-chatting was not allowed in the strict hierarchy of pack wolves that he belonged to. As a female member of his pack, I was even lower in the pecking order, basically at the bottom.

He frowned. “Luiz said he saw you talking to him.”

“Who?” I played dumb.

“The vampire!” He slammed the bottle onto the ground next to him.

“Well, he’s mistaken. I’d remember that.”

“He said you told the boss Grace wanted to see him.” His voice was becoming more menacing. I felt a cold sliver of fear running down my spine. Danny didn’t need much to set him off.

“Yeah, she called me, said she needed to talk to Tomás outside.” I lowered my voice as if I was scared someone could hear me.

“Why?”.

I shrugged.

Danny was chewing this over.

“She told us when she got to the club, she saw the vampire and got out of there. You sure you didn’t see him?” He was leaning in close to me and I could see he was raring for a fight. The vampire had gotten him completely riled up.

“He’s onto us, we can’t let him get away! He must be around here somewhere. The guys have gone out to track him,” he said, taking a big swig of beer and belching loudly. “I’ve got to join ‘em.”

I didn’t want to think about Luc’s mouth and how lovely his kiss had been. What did Danny mean that he was onto them? I didn’t want to ask him and arouse his suspicions. I thought Luc would be far away by now and probably safe.

Danny’s phone rings and he has a quick conversation with one of the gang members.

“I have to go, seems the bloodsucker has left town!”

He jumped up, “You lock the doors now, ye hear?”

He rushed off, jumped on the bike and roared down the street. I could hear the bike engines from all over town as they headed off to some meeting point.

I thought about how often this sort of thing had happened when my dad was still at home, part of his own gang. He’d been working for Tomás on the distribution line. He’d take the drugs and drive them to various sellers. After he got back from work, he’d go down to the club, have drinks with the guys at the bar. Sometimes, at night, they’d go out into the swamp and woods, on patrols, as they called it. They never really found anything but this had changed over the years. Even though the drug trade

became bigger, somehow, people were poorer. The money was not coming our way, clearly. My father sometimes mentioned that the fat cats were getting fatter but it wasn't clear who these fat cats were. They weren't us, that's for sure.

I found out later that many years after he started driving the trucks, he began taking little bags of the drugs and selling them on the side. It was his way of trying to make more money. Nobody noticed and nobody would have until he started taking too much and was caught. Tomás handed him over to the local sheriff and my father was tried and convicted on various drug counts by the end of that month. Tomás told me he hadn't killed him because my father had always been loyal to him. Also, he wanted me to pay him back the debt my dad owed. He made up some idiotic number. Ten thousand dollars. I didn't believe for a second that my dad had taken that much. There was no way I could pay back that kind of money.

I was stuck here. Forever.

I could feel myself weighed down by these words, a rebellious part of me wanting to say there had to be a way out, but how? I couldn't leave my mother behind. I would never forgive myself if they hurt her and Tomás would.

I felt despair and misery fall over me.

"Hey girl," I heard someone say.

I looked up and Grace stood in front of me. "Why are you sittin' in the cold?"

I smiled and got up, giving her a hug.

I noticed that she was all dressed up.

"You going somewhere?"

She lowered her voice. "I'm leaving town. Tonight, right now."

"What? Because of me? And what happened tonight?"

I felt guilt flooding me.

"No, no, I'd been planning to go for some time." All of us had some plan of getting out of Buzzard Creek. Grace was prettier than most of us, she had also been here the shortest. She'd come to town with her boyfriend but he was killed in a fight outside the club one night. She was offered a spot on the stage and with no other way to make money, she said yes. She had a cute body on her, large blue eyes and long blonde hair.

"I've been saving money for a while. I got my sister's husband to come fetch me tonight. I just need to pay him."

I took out half of the money Luc had given me.

"Take it, it's yours, you deserve it. I'm so sorry for dragging you into this."

Grace smiled, "It's all right. You had to do it! It was a vampire, Jesus! He could've killed you! Fuck this town! I've had it. First the shifters and now vampires!"

I bit my lip. I couldn't tell Grace that it wasn't like that; that Luc had not been cruel to me, that he hadn't forced or threatened me. I couldn't admit that I had put her at risk to make a few bucks. It was better for me this way, but it made me feel like shit.

We hear more bikes roaring down the street.

"The guys are going insane tonight, they're talking about burning down the forest!" Grace shakes her head.

“Danny said something about the vampire being onto them...do you know what he meant?”

Grace spent a lot of time in private rooms with Tomás and heard more of the business dealings. I tried not to know too much of what was going on behind the scenes but I wanted to know now.

“There is a war coming,” Grace said knowingly. “Tomás and the others are planning all kinds of things. They think they can beat the vampires.” She shook her head, obviously thinking the idea was mad. “That’s why I want to get out. You should too. My cousin lives in Toledo, it’s far from the shifters and the vampires. It’s normal out there and it’s safe. You should come too.”

She grabbed my hands and squeezed them.

“I can’t,” I said. “My mom and dad are here.”

I had heard that Toledo was nice, near the sea. Even though they also had little in the way of jobs, it was at least better than here.

I told Grace I’d walk with her to the place where she was meeting her cousin. It wasn’t far, just down the road. I put on my coat and we linked our arms as we walked.

We were jumpy, getting scared every time we heard a sound behind us.

“You don’t think that vampire is still in town, do you?” Grace asked me, her voice shaking.

“No, I don’t,” I said quietly.

I couldn't tell her that I wished he was still around, somewhere, watching me. It seemed crazy, but I felt safe with Luc, and having him around. I knew he didn't mean me harm. I didn't know how I knew that, but the way he had touched me, looked at me; I knew that he wasn't a monster. I'd heard it said that they were the undead, but Luc was warm and soft. When he held me, it had not felt like death was holding me. It was quite the opposite, he had felt like the very essence of life.

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Luc

I was resting in the hotel room, waiting for Tick to get back to me when my senses were alerted to danger approaching. I jumped up from the bed and stood in the room, ready, listening closely. I couldn't hear anything but I knew trouble was coming.

I thought of the lay of the hotel, what I remembered from checking in. There were two stories and I was on the upper one, in the corner. There were stairs, no elevators. I checked my window, which had a narrow balcony. There was no other way, I had to leave this way even though it was the middle of the day and the sun was fierce. I was slower this time of the day, less agile and not as strong, but I could function.

There was no time to waste.

I opened the window and scanned the street outside but nothing appeared amiss. I didn't have a moment to wonder if I was overreacting as I could now hear running in the corridor outside my room. The door was about to burst open with an unknown number of men who would be armed.

I swung myself out onto the balcony and leapt across to the neighboring balcony and the one next to that until I had reached the edge of the building. There was a building a few feet down and I jumped out onto the roof and up into a nearby tree. The foliage was dense and I was able to hide myself in there. I could hear voices calling out in agitation from the top floor of the hotel. They were asking how I could get away so quickly, where I had gotten off to. I didn't have much time to get away. I didn't like taking to the air in the middle of the day when I could be spotted more easily but I had little choice now. I dropped to the ground and took off as quickly as I could.

As I put some distance between myself and Sunside Swamp, I wondered how I had been found out. I had blanked the clerk who had checked me in that morning and hadn't noticed anyone else. But someone had seen me and known what I was. This was worrying in itself. The most noticeable feature of our kind was our eyes. They were often said to be hypnotic or magnetic, emitting a powerful energy that made it easy for us to bend others to our will but I had found that as long as I kept my eyes hidden or avoided eye contact, I could often slip undetected through the world. I had a pair of sunglasses on me at all times, just for this.

Of course, there were some who claimed they could smell vampires, that we had a very particular smell. Shifters with wolf personas and some of the other predators could have a keen sense of smell. In humans, it was more instinctual. They had the fear that all prey had, the desire for protection and fleeing.

I slowed down once I was out of the marshes and in the deep forest. Surrounded by trees and shrubs, the light was more dappled here and I felt more comfortable. I checked my phone, which had been beeping, indicating a message.

It was from Tick.

Need to see you asap .

I took that to mean that she didn't trust the phone lines to give me the information she had. It must be important. I felt a twinge of regret that I would not be able to check in on Ruby before I left. I had hoped to see her again soon.

I quickly typed a message.

Dearest Ruby, how are you? I have been thinking of you.

I waited for a moment to check that the message had been delivered. I thought about

her and wished I had a few hours to pop in and see her but Tick's message meant I had to get back to the Capital. I couldn't linger here in the badlands anymore.

The Capital was situated in the far north. It was a city of glass and steel, almost rebuilt entirely after the catastrophic fallout from the nuclear disaster that nearly wiped out humanity at the turn of the century. The humans had rebuilt, with the help of our community. Vlas's castle was situated in the mountains on the outskirts of the city, an ancient fortress that had withstood many wars over the centuries. Perched on rocks and overlooking the city, it had become known as Vampire Castle in the local vernacular. It was almost impossible to penetrate the fortress. There were several perimeters with steel reinforced doors manned by guards around the clock. Vlas almost never left the castle and when he did, it was by private helicopter or jet.

I arrived at the castle just before nightfall and took a moment to take in the sight of the city, sparkling with lights and lit up skyways intersecting the sky. Drones, unmanned vehicles and flying cars navigated the spaces between buildings. There couldn't have been a bigger contrast to the places I had just been to.

I entered the castle on the western side, through a side door that opened to a modern office space. It would be impossible to imagine that this was what it looked like from the outside but this was where Vlas presided over most of our official business, under the trade name VCOM. Tick was situated in a private office on another floor, which was my domain. I found her tapping away furiously at her keyboard. She looked up when she heard me come in, visibly relieved to see me.

“Jesus, could you have taken longer?”

Tick looked like a real hacker, with her punky hair and tattoos. Rings, studs and piercings adorned every part of her skin but I had long ago become used to what she

looked like. Tick's brain was her biggest asset and she knew how to use it better than most.

"What have you got?"

I could see it was big and I felt apprehension at the thought of it.

"Matteo was right," she said, in a low voice. I pulled up a chair so we were close together and could talk without being overheard. "The shifters are moving against us and, yeah, it's happened before, but not like this. Look at this," she said.

She opened files on her computer and talked me through it. Her initial investigation into Tomás Farad and Sunside Swamp had not produced much. There was an increase in revenue but not on the scale that would send out red flags but when she looked into Sunny the Snake, that was when things got interesting.

"Sunny is a nickname. Real name is Sun Li Choo. Not exactly a shifter. Belongs to the genus of Changeling."

She brought up a picture of a man with fine features and a reptilian glint in his eye.

"Changeling? Haven't heard of them for a while."

Changelings, like shifters, were able to take on an animal form, but their nature was essentially human. They used the changed form as an extra skin but still had their human consciousness and intelligence. Unlike shifters, who usually did not know what their animal selves got up to, changelings could decide which form to take and were able to do so whenever they wished. They were masters of control and manipulation.

"He likes to be a snake," Tick said. "Not just any snake, but a Water Snake. He's

been breeding vast colonies of them.”

She paused, as if to let that sink in.

It took me a moment, then I had it.

“The marshes?”

She nodded. “He is almost impossible to detect as he moves in the water around Sunside Swamp, where there are millions of miles around. He has shifters here, of various aquatic species, and they have been multiplying. Crocodiles, alligators, other snakes.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to get my head around it.

“Look here,” she said, zooming in on a satellite of Sunside Swamp. The marshes and wetlands to the south of the place were vast and remote. She scrolled over them to give me an idea of the size. Then she zoomed in on small dots, maximizing the view until clear images appeared. These were holes in the ground, big enough for animals to slide into.

“What are those?”

She looked at me. “Gates to an underground lair?”

“How many are out there?”

She shrugged.

“Get everyone on this, now! Do heat mapping, send in drones, get me numbers. We need to know if these are juveniles or how many adults we’re dealing with!”

She nodded.

“I have to brief Vlas,” I said, getting up.

“He’s in a foul mood,” Tick warned me. “There are problems with the oil deal, remember? He wants you to sort it out.”

There was too much going on. I didn’t like it. Why were there problems with the oil deal?? It was a simple contract renewal, surely?

I found Vlas on the terrace, overlooking the city.

I reported on the last couple of days and he was in a strange, meditative mood, listening to me without interruption. He appeared tired and distracted and not that worried about the increased shifter activity.

He said, “The shifters have launched several attacks in Yel-al. We have defeated them, but I suspect these were to distract us. I have heard about this Snake. I’d like more information...”

Before I could speak, there was a knock on the door and Harris rushed in.

“Your Highness!” He looked flustered. He barely seemed to register that I was in the room. “Two of our plants in the Harrati sea have been bombed and destroyed! The men working there were killed. Survivors say bombs were dropped from the air. Gas reserves have been damaged, we are gathering estimates.”

“From the air? They have planes?”

Harris shook his head. I had never seen him look so upset before. “Nothing has been confirmed. Shifters have never had access to this kind of technology before. We need

more information!”

“My team is on it,” I said.

Vlas looked at me. “We need to close the cities, tighten access and control air space.”

I nodded. “I will convene a war room, alert the council.”

Vlas came closer. “Look into the Harrati business, Luc. It’s important.” His face had an unhealthy pallor but I had no time for this.

I rushed off to organize an emergency meeting of the most influential advisors and counselors. It appeared that we were about to go to war and needed a coordinated response.

This would require all the families to send fighters and resources.

I informed the head of our forces, Captain Curranos, to ready all troops and call on our reserves. When I asked him what our capacity was, I was shocked to hear only a few thousand. We needed more vampires.

We couldn’t simply seize humans and turn them, and they were too volatile anyway when young and we needed experienced soldiers.

I keenly felt the loss of Matteo. He would have known what to do and how to approach this situation. I felt certain that Sunny the Snake was behind Matteo’s murder. He must have discovered their plan to gain power somehow. All of this happened while I was away, stuck on Ice Island, trying to resolve a dispute between warring families.

I called Tick. “I need more information about those tunnels, urgently. We need to

destroy them.”

My phone pinged.

But it wasn't a message from Ruby.

I had sent more messages during the day, but none of them had been read.

I didn't like that.

Why wasn't she reading her messages? I thought of her face when she had mentioned this, Danny, character. She didn't like him, and she was afraid of him. She didn't want him to find us.

Perhaps I needed to pay him a visit.

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Ruby

The fight I have with Danny is a turning point for me.

He comes back from Sunside Swamp in a foul mood because they didn't find Luc. He comes into the house ranting and raving, wanting to know if I knew where Grace was and when I say I don't, he accuses me of lying. He grabs my phone, wanting to check my messages and when I take it from him, he throws it against the wall, breaking it.

"Why did you do that?" I ask him, furious.

"You're lying to me!" He screams at me and starts throwing chairs around. When I try to stop him, he shoves me out of the way and that's when I've had enough.

"Get out!" I yell at him, "and don't come back!"

His eyes widen but I start pushing him out the door, locking it before he can come back in.

"Ruby! Ruby" he shouts, banging on the door.

"If you break down that door I swear I will stab you!" I yell back, and in that moment, I mean it.

A few hours later, I find out about the war breaking out between the shifters and the vampires. Shelley, a friend of mine comes by from the club saying all hell has broken loose with all the bikers being called to duty. It was all anyone was talking about and

fear was running high that ordinary people would get caught in the crossfire.

“Are we safe?” Shelley asks me, worried. “Maybe Grace had the right idea.” She looks around, nervous, worried that someone might overhear her. “What if the vampires come here and kill all of us?”

“I don’t know that we are the ones they want,” I say, trying to be reassuring but the thought of a war makes me nervous too. I almost think about not showing up for work that night, but I don’t want any more trouble with Tomás.

A bloody brawl happens that night at the club. It starts outside, with some of the shifters attacking another gang. Everyone rushes outside when they hear shots being fired and suddenly one group is chased off into the night by a pack of wolves. We can hear the most terrible snarling and growling, then a few shouts and screams and the wolves come striding calmly back, disappearing around the side of the building. These are Tomás’s guards, and nobody dares to mess with them.

As I go home after my shift, I feel my fears mounting at the thought of the danger this war will bring. I worry about my mother in hospital and I wish I could reach her. I’d borrowed Shelley’s phone earlier to call her and let her know that I’d call her as soon as I had a new phone.

“What happened to your phone?” she asked me.

“It... ah... nothing really. It just broke,” I said.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure, sure,” I lied.

There was silence on the line. “If there really is a war, I want you to go somewhere

safe, don't stay here for me, please," she said. "I don't want you to die, sweetheart."

"I'm not leaving you," I say quickly.

My mother is in a hospital in Burton, the city closest to Buzzard Creek.

"I know what they're like," she said quietly. "The shifters. It's going to be dangerous for you there, you should leave, get out of the way. Let these animals kill each other."

"Only if you'll let me move you to another hospital," I said. "I'll find a place that has a kidney unit, that can help you."

"Ruby..."

I interrupted her, "I'm not leaving you, okay? Let me make some calls!"

The other hospitals are too expensive. I know I don't have that kind of money. The little I've saved up so far would last for a few weeks and what then? My mother needed round the clock care.

I was deep in thought when I arrived home that night. As I reached the house, I stopped for a moment and looked around. I could feel something in the air. Someone. Even though I couldn't see him, I could feel Luc was there. It was madness, coming here at a time like this. I couldn't believe he'd do that but at the same time, my heart started beating faster.

I went into the house and did not switch on the light, going to the back door instead and opening it. I didn't hear him come in but the next moment, he was there.

I looked up and he'd closed the door behind him, just standing there, looking at me.

He didn't speak and I didn't want to talk.

Instead, I went to my bedroom, knowing he would be right behind me.

I took off my clothes, dropped them in a heap on the floor and stepped onto my bed, lying back, waiting for him.

He followed me into my room and stood at the end of the bed just looking at me. He didn't say a word. Slowly he took off his clothes and lay down next to me. His fingertips lightly trailed my body, caressing my skin. I felt shivers of anticipation as his hands moved over my body. His eyes, burning intensely, stared into mine as his fingers trailed my skin, tracing every muscle, every tendon in my body. I couldn't help myself as a small moan escaped from my mouth. His hand moved down, over my belly and towards my legs, sliding between my thighs. I tried to lie still, not to move, but it was becoming increasingly difficult as I felt my desire stir and build. I could feel his fingers entering me, gently caressing me. I leaned back and felt the slippery wetness of my body, wanting more. All of the pent up worry and stress of the day disappeared as I could feel only want and desire.

He leaned in to kiss me, hungrily, and he moved closer. I could feel his erect penis pressing against me and eagerly turned my body towards him, but he moved away, to prolong the pleasure. I caught a small smile on his lips. What was he up to? I wondered as he kissed my ear, then my neck, his tongue licking its way across my skin, all the way down my body until finally, he spread my legs and expertly found my clitoris, licking it and sucking as my body exploded with desire. I had never felt anything like this. I had no control over what was happening to me, could only feel myself arching my back, wanting more, moaning in the most delicious agony as I tried to get more of him inside of me, to get closer to this incredible source of pleasure. What was he doing to me? I couldn't believe the sensations that were coursing through my body, it was like he had more than one tongue, more than one way of pleasuring me. I was going to come, I could feel it, it was like I had no way of

stopping the mounting urgency in my body.

He seemed to know exactly how I was feeling. Right before I was going to climax, he paused and slid between my legs, over my body, slick with sweat. In the half-light of my room, I could see his muscled chest, the strong arms coming towards me. I wanted him to kiss me, to taste his sweetness and have all of him inside of me as we locked together, our bodies becoming one.

He was teasing me, I knew this and I didn't want to say anything as he slowly made his way up my body, pressing into my skin. I felt his mouth on my breast and I felt the slightest tingle as something sharp grazed my nipple.

I didn't care if he bit me though, I was in the throes of desire. I could have died right there and it would all have been worthwhile. I was too far gone to care about anything but what I was feeling right now. It was the most exquisite sexual experience I had ever had.

He moved up my body, kissing my neck and finally his cock was between my thighs. I lifted my hips and locked my legs behind his back pulling him towards me, inside of me and we fell into a whirlpool of emotion and sexual energy that overwhelmed all thought and other sensation. I screamed as I came, in joy and utter delight and the release was incredible. Our bodies locked in a single motion, our limbs molded together as the waves of pleasure rocked us both, together, a moment that seemed to last forever.

Eventually, he untangled himself from me, sliding onto the bed next to me.

"Don't go," I whispered.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, his hand on my cheek as he leaned over to kiss me, so softly.

I smiled at him. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I was in the neighborhood?”

I had to laugh.

“You wouldn’t answer my texts,” he said.

Of course, my phone. I was about to explain, when I heard growling and barking at the door. My blood ran cold and Luc and I jumped out of the bed as two wolves came charging into the house launching themselves at Luc. He moved too fast for me to follow, all I could see were whirling shapes, moving together, violent movements and cries of pain. Then I saw the animals slammed together, their skulls smashed with enormous force as they crumpled onto the floor. I saw the bodies transforming back to human form, in the recognizable form of two guards from the club.

“You need to get out of here,” I said to Luc, panic in my voice. “They will be coming here, looking for you.”

“Come with me,” he said, reaching for me. “I will protect you!”

“Not now, but maybe, later,” I said. “Go quickly before they see you!”

We heard the sounds of motorbike engines revving and coming closer. I heard paws outside, in the dirt, scratching. I needed to find a way to protect myself and my family, if I could.

Luc melted into the shadows.

“I’ll be back, soon,” he promised and then he was gone, giving me very little time to figure out what to tell the shifters when they found me. I was afraid, very afraid.

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Luc

I go straight back to the capital and contact Alexandra, asking to see her. She agrees to meet me at the Moonlight Garden outside of the city. I am glad she is not making things awkward because our relationship had not ended well and we did not part on good terms. Some harsh words had been exchanged and she was a proud woman who did not tolerate being treated badly.

She stood at one of the fountains, a tall, slim shape in a shimmering silver robe. She was extremely attractive, with delicate features and slanted eyes, her dark hair reaching to her waist. However, the look she gave me was cold and hostile. I knew I didn't have much time with her.

“Thank you for meeting me, I know this is a difficult time.”

Alexandra was now the chief Hattari counsel to the rulers of the city. She represented the al-Hattari tribe, who occupied the Western Territory. Even though it was an area of mostly mountains and inhospitable land, it included the coast and several miles of sea in the South, where rich gas reserves existed. VCOM ran huge exploration and extraction enterprises there. We were about to open a new plant there as well.

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“VCOM is having problems with the Hattari deal, do you know anything about it?”

A small smile twitched her lips.

“Are you asking me for information? I thought that was your department?”

She was not going to make it easy for me.

“I was under the impression we were renewing the contract, opening a new plant. Now I’m told the Harrati government has received a new proposal from a rival organization offering better terms. Do you know anything about this?”

Alexandra turned away from me.

“Marran-Da is exploring her options. You can’t blame her. VCOM have been underpaying for years.”

She was referring to the Hattari queen, a woman who, in the past, had preferred a traditional lifestyle closer to the ancient ways of the Hattari.

“What does that mean?” I asked her. “Exploring her options?” When she wouldn’t answer, I pressed on. “Do you know who the other bidding party is? Could they be sympathetic to the shifters?”

Her shoulders tensed and that was all I needed to know.

“Damn it! Alexandra! You could have warned me!”

“Why would I?” she shot back, her tone cold as ice. “You were always so arrogant, so all-knowing.” Her voice became mocking. “Vampires have been around longer than any other species! Remember your words? Telling me how powerful you were, how much more superior to anyone else! Your superior intellect!” she spat the words at me. “And now you have to ask me for help! A mere mortal. Oh, how, ironic!”

She was right, but I could not admit it. “I am trying to remedy the situation,” I began, shaking my head.

“Matteo didn’t find it that difficult,” she said, her voice taunting me.

“Matteo? What do you mean?”

She gave a step closer to me. “He was coming to meet me, the night he was killed. I was waiting for him at the lodge where I was brokering a meeting with Marran-Da but he never showed up. They got to him right outside the lodge.”

“Who? The shifters?”

She laughed, mocking me. “Of course not.”

“I was told shifters killed him. My men reported his death to me, they said the body was torn apart. They brought me his belt buckle!”

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. “I saw his body before the flames destroyed everything. He had been killed by a silver spear in the heart. Then his head was severed before he was set alight.”

She waved a hand and conjured up an image of the scene. I could see Matteo lying in the grass, his eyes staring unseeing. She was right, there was a silver dagger in his heart. It had a decorated handle, which was not handed over to me as evidence but the bigger problem was that this was a vampire dagger. I recognized it. It meant that Matteo had been killed by one of our own. I didn’t doubt that Alexandra was telling me the truth. Even though I knew she hated me, she had taken a vow of Truth. I was reeling from the information she had shared with me.

“Did he tell you anything?” I asked her.

She paused. “He was worried about the increase in shifter activity and thought there might be a link between one of their leaders and the al-Hattari. He said he talked to you about it but you thought he was being paranoid.”

She was right, but I didn’t want to hear how I had let my friend down.

I ran a hand over my hair, trying to make sense of what I’d just heard.

Alexandra flicked her wrist again and a new image came up, of Marran-Da at some kind of event. There were a number of people around her, but closest to her, was an extremely tall and thin man. His hair was slicked back with a distinctly reptilian air about him.

“Sunny The Snake,” I said with a sinking feeling, noting how close he was standing to Marran-Da, with an arm draped visibly around her waist. “Is this the man she is thinking of marrying?”

Alexandra shook her head. “Nothing has been decided.”

But she didn’t finish her sentence.

“Matteo wanted to find out what Vlas could do to secure the deal for VCOM. I thought he had a good chance,” she shrugged. “Then he was killed.”

She gave me a cool look. “There are some who say the time of the vampire has passed. Your numbers are small. Too many of your families are old and weary. Do you think you have it in you to win this fight? Yet another war?”

I knew what she meant. Many of the royal vampire houses had seen too many wars and didn’t want to become involved in yet another fight. Some lived in castles in distant lands, presiding over their own villages. They felt that shifters could take over

areas where they had no involvement. The South was not important to them, but this was where the oil was. We had taken our eye off it and as a result, the shifters were moving in.

I had heard that some of the older vampire families had sent word they wouldn't send fighters to the royal army, which was treason. Our numbers were low but losing was not an option and certainly not to shifters. I would fight them to the end.

I briefly thought of Ruby, lying in her arms last night when the wolves attacked. I had easily defeated them, more than a match for both of them. It was a mistake to think of Ruby, though, Alexandra saw her in me, right away.

"There is someone else now," she said slowly. "A woman?"

I nodded, there was no point lying to her.

"I sensed the change in you," she says. "I wondered what it was... now I see it, the softening, the human in you awakening."

I shook my head, refusing to accept it.

"It could be the making of you," she said, lightly.

I stepped forward, changing the topic. "Alexandra, what are the rulers saying? Are they still with us?"

She inclined her head. "They are divided. Some of the younger members are more open to the charms of a new elite, offering them money and land. I have heard of parties, of lavish gifts..."

Vampires were notoriously exclusive, we'd always been accused of not letting

anyone in. I had warned Vlas that the world was changing and that we couldn't keep everyone else out but he wouldn't listen.

"I must go," Alexandra said suddenly.

I nodded. "Thank you, for seeing me. You didn't have to come here."

She paused. "I don't want things to be awkward between us," she said.

"I appreciate that."

She looked at me strangely.

"You are different," she said. "This girl must be something."

I didn't know what to say to that. I didn't like the idea that my relationship with Ruby was weakening me in any way. I knew she was in my thoughts, but it had not occurred to me that in doing so, I was being distracted from my duties.

I couldn't lose my focus on protecting my kind and my king. Even worse, Alexandra had suggested that I had ignored Matteo's concerns, perhaps that I could've prevented his death. I felt anger rising in me and I knew I had to control it. Alexandra wanted to get a rise out of me, it was her way of showing me she was still in control.

"Oh, one last thing," Alexandra said, turning back. "In consulting with the spheres, I have tried to see how this war will go, but it is unclear. All I can see is that there will be destruction and that many will die." She waves her hand and I see a world filled with thick smoke and devastating flames.

"It means the outcome is not yet decided."

Then she was gone.

The war would be worse than I feared, but all was not lost yet. There was a way to win it, but I had to find it. I thought of what she said about Matteo's death. He had been betrayed, by one of us. It had to be someone in power, in a senior position. In whose interest could this murder be?

I thought of the silver dagger I had seen. That had not been just any weapon, but an expensive blade. Perhaps royal? Overpowering Matteo meant either numbers or a vampire of superior strength and there were not many like this left.

As I made my way back to the Castle, I thought of Ruby and wondered how she was getting on in Buzzard Creek. I would have liked to go back to check on her, but my focus had to be on the Capital.

I thought of Matteo and how I had not been there for him in the end. He had wanted to talk to me and I had been too busy and kept blowing him off. Whenever he told me about his concerns about the shifters, I told him he was seeing ghosts. Furry ghosts, with bad breath, but these ghosts had come back to haunt me, in the worst way.

There could be no happiness for me until I knew who had killed him and why.

I owed him that.

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Ruby

I had been with Shelley all afternoon, sitting in her backyard, drinking beer and talking about what was happening around us. Shelley was leaving the next day, she was convinced that the vampires would come to town and kill all of us while trying to get to the shifters.

She'd heard that our men were being trained to fight in armies in the east and north. None of the men we knew were particularly good at working with others in a team. They were good fighters, but they weren't organized.

Inside, we could hear her family packing. She was living with her sister and two nieces. Both her brothers were in the motorbike gang working for Tomás. The whole town was working for him. All of us would be seen as being on the side of the shifters.

"My grandma told me what it's like when the vampires come," she said in a low voice. "It's a feeling you get. You don't see anything, but suddenly, you become cold all over. It's like...you freeze, you're unable to move. It's terrible," she said.

"Then you hear this, like, screeching noise. It cuts into your soul, she says, filling you with a kind of terror you can't believe. When you do see them, it's like a black cloud and that's all you see before they rip into you, tear you to pieces."

Shelley's grandmother had survived a vampire attack on her family when she was a child by hiding in a basement. Her entire family had been killed and she had fled to a neighboring town, but she'd never lost her hatred of vampires.

I thought of Luc and how sweet he'd been to me but when the guards attacked him, he had become something else. Something quite dangerous and lethal. I couldn't deny that I had felt frightened then, that a part of me had been afraid of him.

"You should come with us," she said, leaning closer to me. "Don't stay here."

"I need to move my mom first," I said, biting my lip. "I can't leave her."

I left Shelley's later in the afternoon and walked slowly back to my little house. I had lived here all my life but I wouldn't miss it. I had longed to be free of this place for so long. I was about to go into my house when Danny called my name and I turned around.

"Where've you been!" he asked, walking up to me and grabbing my arm.

"You're hurting me," I said, twisting free and walking into the house.

He came after me and my heart skipped a beat. He seemed unhinged, out of control. His eyes were blood-shot and he looked even more unkempt than usual. I could see he hadn't slept in days. He told me they'd been out in the Swamp, hunting vampires and that patrols had been set up around the towns, to protect women and children.

"I'm taking you to Carol up at the ranch," he said. "Pack your things."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not going."

Danny lived on a small farm outside town with his parents and brothers. I had been there before and hadn't liked what I'd seen. The men, sitting outside around a fire, drinking while the women kept away as much as possible, cowering and subservient.

"I am not asking!" Danny said, glaring at me. "Pack your things!"

“No!” I knew better than to talk to Danny like this, but I couldn’t help myself. Still, I hadn’t expected him to snap the way he did. He moved so quickly, grabbing me by my hair, yanking my head back.

“You stupid bitch!” he sneered at me. “You think I don’t know about you and the vampire?”

I could barely speak, pain was radiating across my scalp.

“What?”

“You opening your legs for that...fucking monster!” he screamed at me, spit flying into my face. “Don’t even try to deny it! I can smell him everywhere!”

He threw me in a corner. “Now, pack your bags!”

I got to my feet and carefully made my way into my room, pretending to pack things while really looking for any kind of weapon to defend myself. I knew if I let Danny take me to the ranch I’d never make it back alive. He’d probably lock me up in one of the cages as punishment. I’d seen those cages they had on the property. Sometimes they kept animals there they had found or captured. I had seen them put people in there, boys they caught stealing. Once, a girl whom they’d accused of sleeping with someone other than her partner. She’d been kept in the cage for days I think, outside, without any blankets. I was sure this was what Danny had in mind for me.

I couldn’t allow him to take me.

But he was strong and mad and I could see he’d been drinking too, you could smell it on him. I would have to move quickly and be sure that I was able to incapacitate him enough to get away. Locking a door would not be enough, he could break that down easily.

“Come on, hurry up!” he came into the room, casting a wild eye around. “You don’t need anything else, we have to go,” he said, pulling on my arm and trying to drag me out of the room.

“I’m not going,” I said in a firm voice.

“What?”

He came towards me and shoved me against the wall, pushing me with his body. I could feel him harden against my body. I turned my head away.

“I don’t want to leave my house,” I managed.

“You waitin’ for him here?” he asked, taunting me now. “Is he coming for you again?”

His voice was low and mean. “You want some more vamp action, is that it?”

His shoulder pushed into me, pinning me against the wall, while his other hand grabbed my breast then pushed between my legs. “He touch you, make you come, baby?” His voice was nasty now. “You want me to fuck you like him, because I can you know. I can be all cold and dead. Treat you like the shit you are.”

I kept myself completely still, refusing to respond to him. Sex with Danny had always been rough. It was about power and control for him, he wanted to dominate me and feel me submit to him. It had been so different with Luc, I couldn’t even compare it, it didn’t feel like the same act. Pleasure and joy had never been part of my relationship with Danny. With Luc it had been wonderful, for the first time in my life.

He shifted his weight, trying to get his pants off and in that moment, I had some room to move and I acted fast. I was smaller than him and used the top of my head to head

butt him, knocking into his jaw with as much force as I could muster.

It was a technique my dad had taught me many years ago, a few self-defense moves for when I needed them. Danny staggered back and fell to his knees. I pushed past him and ran out of the house and down the street. I didn't know where I was going and I knew I would have to come up with a plan, fast. Danny would recover quickly and he would be enraged, I didn't have much time. If he caught me now, he would tie me up and take me to the ranch and I would not be able to escape again.

I turned off into a side street and looked for a good hiding place. There were some empty shops and closed-down business buildings that I ran to, trying the doors until I found one that opened. It was empty inside, some abandoned office. I ran through it and found a door on the other side with a staircase and I went up, all the way to the roof.

I could hear the door opening downstairs.

I heard him calling, "Ruby!"

My heart sank. It was Danny. He had already found me.

"You know you can't hide, right?" His voice echoed through the empty space. I could hear him coming closer.

I tried to open the door to the roof but it was locked or jammed, I yanked harder, willing the door to open but it remained shut.

"You know I have your smell in my blood..." Danny was saying. "I can track you anywhere, find you wherever you go. You can never get away from me. Never."

I sank onto the floor with my back against the door.

I couldn't see a way out of this and Danny was coming closer. I didn't want him to catch me. I'd rather die than let him take me out to the ranch and lock me up in a cage like a fox.

"There you are, darling," I heard him say. He stepped onto the stairwell, a trail of blood running down his face.

"Why did you run from me? Don't you know that I want what's best for you?"

I didn't answer. This wasn't really a conversation, after all. He didn't care what I thought or what I wanted. He wanted to own me, possess me. My wishes and desires had nothing to do with him.

I closed my eyes and heard him coming up the stairs.

I had one last course of options.

In my pocket, I had a small pair of scissors that I'd grabbed before I left the house. They were for sewing and had belonged to my mother, but if I could jam it into the right place, I could do a lot of damage. I knew that I would die fighting.

Suddenly there was a rush of air and the sound of wings or something in the stairwell. I opened my eyes and saw a shape attack Danny. I couldn't make out limbs or anything recognizable. It moved too quickly. I heard Danny scream and I knew he was in trouble.

Then I realized that it was Luc attacking Danny and killing him.

I also knew that if I had to choose between Luc and Danny, I would not choose the man who had been about to force himself on me back at the house, who had hurt me, talked down to me, treated me as less than him.

I would choose Luc.

Luc

I was in a strange mood after my meeting with Alexandra.

I could think of little but finding out the truth about what had happened to Matteo.

Who had killed him and why?

I went looking for the man who had informed me of Matteo's death. He was a young officer, Captain Dennington, and he was in charge of a patrol unit. At his quarters I was informed that he had gone out to a club with some friends.

I'd heard of the club called Red Velvet but had never been there. It was popular with vampires, and all kinds of drugs and services were offered that weren't exactly legal. All sorts of people could be found there as well.

There was pulsating music and strobe lighting, bodies dancing on stages and various blood drugs were sold as well. I made my way across the floor to a group of young men that I recognized, they told me Dennington was in the back with a woman. I opened a few doors until I found him, locked in a steamy embrace with a woman. His fangs were exposed and he was about to sink them into her as they had sex, an act known as double feeding in certain circles. It produced greater pleasure and was a sought-after vampire activity. For women, it carried certain risks as vampires sometimes lost control or became over eager. Many women died in the act.

Dennington had a glazed look in his eyes.

I moved across the room and ripped him from the woman flinging him against the wall.

He stumbled and regained his balance.

I watched as his eyes cleared and he regained his composure.

In an overly polite tone I asked, “Shall we have a word outside?”

He knew who I was and nodded, nervously.

We went out into the street and into an alley at the side of the club.

I continued in the same tone, “I have had a very bad day, Dennington. In fact, I have had a terrible year. The last hundred years, to be honest, have been awful. I would love to take all of this out on you, vent my frustration and make you my punching bag. One wrong word from you, and I will rip you apart into so many pieces no one will be able to identify you. You read me?”

He blinked.

“Tell me what happened the night you found Matteo Lombardi’s body. Who sent you to find him?”

He stammered. “The... the call came from the royal office. Harris, I think. Asked me to find him, said he was missing. We tracked him... we were told he was going to the lodge and we went there looking for him.”

“Who told you he was going to the lodge?”

He looked around agitated. “I can’t remember, someone from Harris’s office, a

female, called, Par...no...Clarissa?"

"How did she know where he was?"

He shrugged. "I don't know! We followed the information and we found him as I told you."

"What about the dagger?" I wanted to know.

"What dagger?"

Dennington claimed there was no dagger and that when they came on the site, the flames had already gone out, the body had been burnt. There was no dagger, but he found the belt buckle and picked it up to show me.

"Why did you say shifters killed him?"

He looked around wildly.

"I didn't... I mean, it wasn't me. One of the guys said it must have been shifters. I said, no, it was too clean but we had no other explanation, so we went with it, I guess."

He looked uncomfortable.

I stepped closer. "What else?"

He swallowed. "When we arrived in the Capital, the woman Clarissa called me again. She asked me if I'd found Matteo, if he was dead. It was almost like she wanted me to confirm it."

I frowned, trying to figure it out.

“When I said yes, she asked if it looked like shifters did it? I said I didn’t know, and she said, it must’ve been. She asked if I’d seen shifter activity in the area, I mean, we’d come across some shifters along the way but they had nothing to do with it. She said it must’ve been them and we were to say we thought it was.”

“You just accepted that?”

He licked his lips. “No, well, yes. It was the way she said it, like it would be better for me to go with this story. There was no reason not to, so I did.”

“Who is this Clarissa?” I’d never heard of her.

He swallowed. “She is with the queen, one of her party.”

Taheera.

I let Dennington go and went back to the Castle. Things were becoming very complicated indeed. I didn’t know what to make of this. The fact that someone from the royal household took a special interest in Matteo’s death was worrying. I knew Taheera was not a woman to be trifled with. I had to be careful with my inquiries.

I went back to my office and had Trick inform me of any updates. She showed me satellite pictures of the swamp. Some of the pictures had been enlarged.

“What am I looking at?” I asked her, irritably.

“Yeah, I’m sorry the pictures aren’t that clear. We had to zoom in quite a lot,” she apologized. “You see those black dots?” she pointed at a few on the picture. “Those appear to be newly spawned frogs. But bigger, much bigger.”

She pointed at other flecks. “They seem to change into men and disappear into the lake. There are thousands of them.”

“Frog men?”

“Something like that,” she nodded.

“And the lake is full of them?” I could see why she was worried.

“Can’t we just nuke the lake?”

She shook her head. “The water belongs to the Hattaris, they use it for fishing as well as irrigation and it is an important part of the landscape. We need to be careful or we stand to damage our relationship with them permanently.”

This was not good news.

I was heading out to a War Council meeting when I suddenly felt an agonizing sensation, like someone was twisting something in my non-existent gut.

Ruby.

She was in trouble.

I could feel it, she was being threatened and was in serious danger.

I dropped everything and rushed outside, channeling all my energy in getting to her as quickly as possible. I couldn’t delay a second. Time was important here, if I risked even one conversation, I might be too late.

The intensity of her emotions were like a magnet, pulling me towards her. I could feel

her pain and her fear. It directed me to the town, to her house and then down the street until I located her in a building and saw the beast coming towards her. I was on top of him in a second and I did not let up until I knew he was dead.

When I looked up, I saw her sitting on the floor, tears in her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “That... was Danny.”

She got up and came down the stairs, looking at the pitiful remains on the floor.

“I had this, you know.” Her voice was small but firm.

“You did? Didn’t feel that way,” I said.

It was a mistake because her eyes flashed in anger.

“I had this!” she said and showed me a pair of decorative scissors.

“What were you going to do with that?” I asked with a laugh. “Cut a little thread?”

“No! I was going to plunge it in his eye!”

“You know how to do that?” I asked, with a bit of respect.

“Of course, it won’t be the first time I did it either!” she snapped at me.

I was surprised at her reaction, I had expected a word of thanks at the very least. A steamy kiss was really what I was hoping for but that was clearly the last thing on her mind.

She pushed past me down the stairs. “You’ll have to get out of here before his buddies find you.”

“You can’t stay here,” I said and she impatiently replied, “I know but I have some things that need doing.”

“Ruby,” I started but she interrupted me. “Thanks for saving me and everything, but I had this, okay? I didn’t need rescuing. Now, get out of here before they find you!”

My senses were already picking up activity outside the building.

“Ruby...”

“Just go!”

She had taken a gun from Danny’s jacket and fired at the door lock at the top of the stairs, opening the way for us onto the roof. It was a low building and there were skips down one of the sides. She took a look and jumped onto one of them. I barely had time to see that she was okay before she was taking off.

Ruby

I had to leave town.

Fast.

Any way I thought about it, there was no way I could stay here. As soon as Danny's body was found, I would be the first suspect. His family would know that he came to fetch me, that he was taking me back to the ranch. If there was any sign of vampire involvement, that would mean even bigger trouble for me. Conspiring with the enemy on top of killing one of our own.

It meant certain death.

I had to get my money first. Everything I had saved up over the past few months, plus what Luc had given me for that night I had to trick Tomás. It was a fair amount, enough to have my mom moved to a facility out of shifter territory. I needed to get to her as soon as possible and arrange for the transfer.

First, I had to get home and find my money. This was going to be tricky. I knew there would probably be people watching the house and I took the long way back, deciding it would probably be best not to use either the front or back door. Instead, I snuck into the side where the bathroom mirror faced the wall. The window was always open and I knew I could slip in. I had entered and left the house many times this way as a teenager.

This was different, though. I couldn't make a noise and took off my shoes in case. I

carefully pulled myself up to the window and pushed my way in, watching where I put my feet inside. I held my breath and listened. I could hear people talking in the living room. They didn't sound upset, which meant they were looking for Danny but hadn't found him yet. I carefully climbed down from the window. At the back of the bath, I loosened the tiles and found my hiding spot with the bags of money. I stuffed them into my shirt, replacing the tiles and making my way up to the window as quickly as possible. On my way out, I caught my foot on the handle and a loud clanging noise sounded up.

"What was that?" I heard a voice say. It was Becky, Danny's sister. I held my breath as I heard her walk into the bathroom. She looked around and called out, "Nothing here. Anyway, as I was saying..."

I slipped on my shoes and snuck out the back again.

I needed a car to get me out of town and I thought Mrs. Anderson from two houses down was my best bet. I snuck onto her porch, risking being seen but there was no other way.

I knocked a few times and then the old lady opened the door.

"Whaddaya want?" she asked through the small opening of the door. She wasn't taking any chances.

"I need to ask a favor. Please, can I come in?"

The old lady narrowed her eyes, then relented. "Ah, well, all right."

She closed the door behind us and glared at me.

"Well, what is it?"

I asked if I could borrow her car to get to Burton, where my mom was in the hospital.

“Why do you look like you’re running scared? What have you done?” she demanded to know.

I bit my lip. “There’s been an accident. Danny got hurt. They’ll be coming for me, I’ve got to get out of here and get to my mom.”

The old lady considered, “I always liked your mom. She was nice to me. Not a lot of people here are.”

She gave me a look. “What happened to Danny then? Never took to that boy, I’ll tell you.”

I sighed. “He wanted to take me to the ranch, but I didn’t want to go.”

She nodded. “They don’t like us saying no, do they?”

I shook my head.

“And the stories of the vampire? That true? Him coming to see you?”

Of course word had gotten round of a vampire visiting a certain house in Buzzard Creek. But I was surprised to hear that this gossip had even reached her ears.

I looked down, embarrassed, not sure what to say.

“None of my business, sweetheart,” the old lady chuckled. “But I had some fun with fangbanging in my day.”

“Mrs. Anderson!” I was shocked. She had always seemed like such a mild-mannered

old lady to me.

“Oh, I was young once too, you know!” she winked at me. She fetched her keys and gave them to me. “You get out of here, darlin’,” she said.

“Can’t I take you somewhere too?” I asked. “Things are probably going to get a whole lot worse soon and it won’t be safe for you here?”

“I’ll be all right, don’t you worry,” she said, pointing to her shotgun propped up against the wall. “You go get your momma and take her somewhere safe.”

I gave her a hug and thanked her, promising I’d get the car back to her somehow.

Then I drove out of Buzzard Creek without looking back.

Burton was about two hours away and the whole time I watched the road, worried about every car passing me. I thought about Luc and regretted the way I’d acted with him. Why had I been so mad at him for saving me? He was only trying to help. Somehow, I had blamed him for me seeming so helpless, for needing him to save me.

Was I really going to slam those scissors in Danny’s eye? Probably not. Despite everything, I had some complicated feelings for Danny. I knew he’d loved me, in his own, damaged way. It was seeing Luc laughing at me like that, that had set me off.

My mother had always said my temper would make life tough for me. Luc probably wouldn’t want to see me again.

Oh well. It was probably for the best this way. It was absurd, being with a vampire. They were other-worldly creatures, not a part of the living world. I loved my beer, my snacks, sitting in the sun on a hot day... dipping my feet in the river down at the creek. Simple pleasures.

When I was a child, my mother and I would go berry picking in the summer. We'd come home and cook blueberry jam, make pies, cordials, and stain our lips blue. We'd laugh at each other's blue teeth until the tears ran down our faces. That was before she got sick and my dad went to prison.

Before all that.

And now, this war.

By the time I drove into Burton, I felt that what I'd had with Luc, was a few nights of other-worldly joy. The best sex of my life. I didn't even know it could be that good but, to be fair, it probably was that great because it wasn't supposed to be. We weren't meant to be together, the bloodsucker and the human girl. It didn't make sense. He knew it too, that is why he was laughing at me, acting like such a child with my stupid boyfriend. He was probably having fun with me too, for all I knew he was hoping for a quickie on the stairwell for old times' sake before going on to torch the town to get rid of the shifters.

I told myself to stop thinking about him, I had to be responsible now.

I was going to think about places where I could take my mother, where I could get away from this war. The hospital was in the middle of the city and I found parking and made my way into the ward where my mother was occupying a bed right by the door.

She looked up when I came in the door and her eyes widened with pleasure, "Ruby!"

I hadn't seen her in many months as it had been difficult to stop by without transport.

I leaned in for a hug. I felt her thin frame and noted the dark rings under her eyes.

“How are you feeling?” I pulled up a chair and sat down as close as possible to her, holding her hand.

“Bit tired today,” she admitted. “What are you doing here?”

I told her about the war, that there was trouble in town with Danny and a vampire. I was vague with the details, but she got the gist of what I was saying.

“You’re involved with this vampire?” she asked, her tone sharp. “I don’t like that. Shifters are bad, but vampires are worse. You can’t trust them.”

I nodded. “I know. It’s over now.” I wondered if, by saying the words, that would make it true. Did it work that way? Did I really want it to?

I told her I’d spoken to a nurse about moving her to another hospital. They would make some calls to find out if a bed was available. I would have to pay for the transfer and ambulance but if there was a bed, she would be able to continue her treatment there.

“But I like it here,” she said, troubled. “I know the nurses, everyone...” her voice trailed away. “Won’t it be much more expensive?”

“We can’t stay here,” I said. “Tomás will come looking for me. You won’t be safe. I can’t let anything happen to you.” My voice broke and she smiled faintly.

I spent the night at the hospital, sleeping in the chair next to my mother’s bed. It felt good being there with her. When she was awake, she asked me about the war and what I knew about Tomás involvement. She told me of the letters she and my father had exchanged. It sounded like they were getting along better now than ever before.

In the morning, I spoke to a doctor who said my mother could be moved to a hospital

near the capital. There was a fee involved and it was more than I'd hoped to pay. All my savings would go into the hospital transfer, I had no idea how I would pay for her stay and treatment at the new hospital after she'd transferred.

Still, it felt good to think about life away from Buzzard Creek.

I couldn't help thinking that even though I had no idea how I was going to get money or what I would do next, things were going to get better for me and my family. I had gotten away from that shithole.

Things were finally looking up.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

Luc

Humans are weak.

Vulnerable.

Their physical abilities are limited, their intellectual range is narrow. In every way, they are inferior to vampires.

All but one.

They have life.

And we need their blood, we crave it and we lust after it the same way we lust after their soft flesh, their warm bodies, the aroma of their bodies when they sweat.

Since human blood is regulated, vampires are not allowed to feed on people, not officially. Unofficially, blood donors, feeders and more nefarious activities thrive on the black market. Most vampires buy blood products, synthetic blood that has been boosted with various taste enhancers as well as drugs to boost performance or induce all kinds of sensory experiences but human blood is still the best.

Occasionally, there are reports of humans that were abducted and killed and as per our agreement with the authorities, we must hunt these vampires down and execute them.

Most of us remember being human, the families we had but our memories fade as we

become older, they become like childhood dreams, something to be embarrassed about, not to be mentioned in public, certainly not around others like us. Vampire families go back centuries and the politics involved in the alliances and wars between us are complicated and intricate. Our wealth is vast and hidden, tied up in property and investments, land and companies.

We have always been part of the ruling elite, either behind the scenes or in a more visible role depending on public sensitivity but we have always been a part of the top tier. When the tide of favor turns against us, we retreat and wait it out. It always changes, that is one of the rules of humanity that is cast in stone. Not for us, though.

Little changes for us over time.

Horses give way to cars.

Cars give way to planes.

We adapt, but we don't change.

Or perhaps, we do.

I hadn't noticed it in myself over the past few weeks, ever since meeting Ruby, but then Alexandra had commented on it. She'd made jokes, off-hand comments that came across light-hearted, but I knew it was more than that. Alexandra knew me. She had found a weakness and I couldn't trust her.

She would never forgive me for leaving her and ending our relationship.

She did not want me to be happy.

Happiness, though, what was that? Surely another childhood dream, belonging to

human life, something long gone for me.

Only, I'd been happy with Ruby.

Lying in bed with her, making love to her, I had been able to escape from the confines of my existence, the burden of memory, the many years that I'd been alive. Bonds forged over so many years with those in my community and I loved them, deeply, but they were also a burden.

With Ruby, there was none of this heaviness.

Our interactions were light and sweet, I could almost taste this sweetness. When we had sex the first time, I'd allowed myself a drop of her blood. She had permitted it, feeling the sharpness against her skin, she had not hesitated, trusting me and that single drop had exploded in my system, it was a sensation I could become addicted to. I also enjoyed her personality, her conversation. I liked to be with her, around her. There was none of the awkwardness I'd experienced with so many other women.

I had no idea what she expected of me or if she expected anything at all. Usually at some point with other women, there had to be a talk about relationships and commitment. This wasn't the case with Ruby. I knew she wanted to be with me when I saw her, but she never asked to see me again or if I'd call her. Her life was chaotic and she was clearly used to figuring out things on her own. I found myself wanting to help her though. It annoyed me that she seemed so loath to accept it.

When I got the sense of distress from her, I left everything to get to her as quickly as possible. I dealt with her attacker and was surprised by her reaction, which was not as grateful as I thought it would be. She seemed annoyed by my response and even upset at the sight of the dead shifter. When she told me to leave, I did.

But the conversation between us had not been as before.

It caught me by surprise.

As I fled bloody Buzzard Creek with all the trouble it had, I thought to myself that this was perhaps the perfect ending to what had so far, been the perfect hookup. Even though Ruby was a wonderful girl and I enjoyed myself thoroughly with her, her relationship with the shifters was problematic. I thought she'd want to be free of them, but it didn't seem to be the case now. She kept pulling me into that hellhole where I was at risk of injuring myself.

In addition, did she now blame me for killing a filthy dog?

Please.

Making matters worse, jumping to her aid was interfering with my finding out who had killed Matteo. I was finally beginning to get some answers and I needed my wits about me to pursue this matter. Things were far more complicated than I'd realized. I was beginning to think the answers lay in the royal family and this would take my investigation into a very dangerous direction.

When I'd tried to find the Clarissa who had spoken to Captain Dennington, I was told there was no such person at the Castle. I spoke to the staff member in charge of the royal family and she curtly informed me that she didn't know what I was talking about. Then, out of the blue, Queen Taheera appeared.

"What are you doing here, Lord D'Essay?" she asked in a frosty voice.

"Shouldn't you be fighting our war?"

I told her I was still looking into Matteo's death.

"Shifters were responsible, we already know this," she said, waving her hand to

dismiss me.”

“No, it seems that is incorrect,” I said. She fixed a sharp gaze on me. She was an attractive woman, but I knew what lay behind her looks. She was ambitious and vicious at the same time, it could be a lethal combination.

“Matteo’s dead,” she said slowly, as if I needed reminding. “You need to worry about the living. Including yourself,” she said, before walking off briskly.

It was a threat, clearly.

I was mulling over her words, when a figure stepped out of the shadows.

“You need to be careful,” I heard someone say. I turned to see Prince Dano, the king’s son from a previous marriage. Even though his body resembled a young man of 17, he was much older now, closer to 70. He had not approved of the marriage to Thaheera and therefore did not live with the king anymore. He had been banished from the Castle, spending most of his time managing other properties.

“Prince Dano,” I greeted him as per our protocol, with a nod of the head.

He acknowledged the greeting and stepped closer. “I’ve come to see my father. I was wondering, have you noticed his strange behavior?”

“The king?”

Prince Dano looked at me. “He has not left the top floor in months. He is always at the lookout, staring at the city.”

“Surely, he’s attending the War Council meetings?”

He shook his head. "Harris is representing him, supposedly carrying out his wishes."

"Supposedly?"

Prince Dano carefully chose his words. "I don't think my father really knows what is going on. He trusts Harris and his wife to take the right course of action but I fear his mind is failing."

Such words were treason and Dano knew it.

He stepped back quickly into the shadows before I could ask any more questions. "Watch your back," he said and disappeared. His words threw me and I didn't quite know what to make of them. Was he warning me or was this some kind of subtle threat?

He seemed to suggest that Vlas was no longer in charge of the decision-making. It was true that he had seemed vague and a bit preoccupied when I'd seen him the last couple of times, but it was his temperament too. He was never a man of action, more of a thoughtful, considered leader.

I had spent so much time away, solving disputes and serving as an acting commissioner for the many issues in our world. I had not seen him much of late, and our conversations had been brief.

I recalled accusing Matteo of being paranoid. He'd told me about concerns he'd had. I always shut down these conversations. Perhaps he was aware of some nefarious business regarding the king.

I wondered what Dano had been suggesting. I didn't like the sound of it. Plots against the king were not unusual, even in his own family. I wondered if Dano was thinking of taking over, arguing that the king was weak and unable to fight a war.

Matteo could have found out something about this, perhaps he needed to be eliminated. Of course, the best time to stage a coup was when all of us were engaged in war, our focus elsewhere.

This would allow the enemy within to pounce.

I looked around the corridor where the temperature had suddenly dropped. I felt the rush of air from an open window and walked over to close it. There were dark clouds coming over the mountains and I felt certain that behind the bad weather, more evil was lurking. This war was bringing darkness to our shores and I didn't like it.

Ruby

I wouldn't let myself think of anything else until I received confirmation that my mother's hospital transfer was secure. I had them change her name on the form, pretending that it was a mistake. Lottie Winton may have been admitted three years ago, but Charlotte Lucas was being taken to the medical center in the Capital. It took almost all of my savings to pay for the ambulance and put down money for the new hospital.

Then I said goodbye to her.

"I'll come see you as soon as I can," I promised.

I hadn't told her that I was going to see my father but she'd guessed somehow.

"Please don't go," she begged me.

"I'll be careful," I promised her.

"Someone will see you," she said, tears in her eyes.

"I'll wear this!" I said, putting on a blonde wig I'd found in town. I thought it suited me. My mother thought I was being silly. "They know your smell, come on, you know this!"

"I'll wear perfume," I insisted. "I have to let him know we're leaving!"

“He will figure it out,” my mother said. “He knows more of what’s going on than you think!”

I knew she worried about me but I had to see my father.

Our relationship had never been simple.

As a little girl, I had adored him. It was once I became older and understood what his role was in Tomás’s enterprise and in the MC gang, I began to stand up to him. We started clashing regularly. He told me that I needed to know my place in the pack and when I refused to agree, he threatened to throw me out. I was living with a friend when he was arrested and sent to prison. I didn’t go to see him and refused to talk to him on the phone.

He’d probably mellowed a bit over the years. I knew my father did what he had to do to survive, the decisions he’d made had been for us. They may have been bad decisions according to me, but what did I know of his life back then?

It had been four days since I left town and when I drove back now, I could sense the tension all over. The houses had their curtains drawn and there were no kids playing in the street or riding their bikes. The place was quiet and tense, waiting for something bad to happen.

I parked the car in Mrs. Anderson’s driveway.

I walked to her back door and noticed it had been forced open.

I walked in, calling her name out softly. There was a noise in the kitchen and this is where I found her, on the floor, with her throat slit. There was an awful amount of blood. She was not dead, though, not yet.

“Go,” she whispered to me. “They know you’re coming. They’re waiting for you. Take the car. Go now. Take the money...in the tin.” She was pointing to a tin of flour on the kitchen counter. I opened it and found a plastic bag with money inside. Lots of money.

I didn’t want to leave her but perhaps she had been hanging on to life long enough for me to come here because she gave her last breath not long after talking to me.

Tears were running down my face. They had probably tried to get information from her. It was all my fault. I knelt down and squeezed her hand. “Thank you,” I whispered, then I left without looking next door, at the house that I’d grown up in.

That part of my life was over now.

I had to get out of town as quickly as possible.

At least I got to keep the car and I was grateful for that.

Taking the back roads, I kept my eyes glued to the road, checking the mirror every few minutes to ensure I wasn’t being followed. I’d taken Mrs. Anderson’s shotgun and whenever I needed reassuring, I glanced at it on the back seat.

It wouldn’t be enough to save me if I was attacked by a pack of wolves but it could help fight off one or two men or create an opportunity for escape.

I drove to the correctional facility where my father was held, on the other side of the county in Wellington. Then, I made sure to park the car in the town center and took a bus to the prison, wearing the wig and some clothes I’d picked off a clothes line.

I signed into the prisoner visiting logbook and asked to see my father.

I was taken to a secure room with chairs and tables and waited for my father to arrive. It was a long wait.

He didn't recognize me, looking around the room, trying to spot his visitor. I lifted my hand and waved. He walked closer towards me but I could see he didn't know who I was. This pleased me, the disguise was obviously working.

"It's me, Ruby," I said, when he got close.

"Rubes?" I was not prepared for his response. Tears flooded his eyes as he grabbed me and held me close, almost crushing me in his embrace. The guards told him to let me go and pulled me away roughly when he would not stop hugging me.

We sat down.

He looked different, older and thinner.

"How are you?" I asked.

He was grinning, "Well, well! Look at you!"

I touched the wig self-consciously. "I was trying my hand at a bit of disguise."

"It worked, Rubes! Never woulda taken you for a blonde!"

I smiled. It was good to see him, although the years had taken their toll.

I told my dad of what was going on, with the shifters and the vampires being at war and how I'd refused to go to the ranch with Danny, that there had been a fight and that he was dead.

My father's smile disappeared.

He hung his head, disappointed.

"Shit, Rubes, that's bad."

I hadn't even told him about Luc.

"You shouldn't have come here," he then said in a low voice. "There are shifters everywhere, they'll find you."

"I wanted to tell you that I've moved mom somewhere safe," I said, ignoring him "and I'm going to go find a job near her. When it's safe, I'll let you know where it is."

"They won't let you go," my father said, in a flat voice. "You know they won't. Not if Danny's dead. They'll blame you and you know what they say."

I nodded. "Blood wants blood."

If I was held responsible for his death, then I would have to give my life to atone for the loss of his.

"There is something else," I said, taking a breath. I told him of my involvement with Luc, not that we slept together but that I'd helped him.

My father's reaction was one of shock.

He jumped up, trembling and for a moment I thought he was going to ask to go back to his cell but then he sat down, leaned forward and hissed at me, "What the fuck did you do that for??"

“Vampires are the worst scum, they’re our enemy, you know that!”

I shook my head.

“They’re your enemy, not mine.”

“We’re the same, Rubes!”

But I wouldn’t hear it. “No, we’re not! I am not part of the gang, not one of the shifters! I stayed to pay off your debt but no more. I am done with that! Time to start living my life!”

My dad looked at me with pain in his eyes. “Who helped you when the car hit you when you were six years old?”

It had been my father’s pack of riders who had taken me to the hospital and made sure I saw the doctors. “Who made sure we had the money to get your mama admitted to the hospital when she needed treatment and I was in here?”

“I know, Daddy, but…”

He interrupted me, “Ruby, you know you can’t get out.”

His words were like stones, weighing me down. “You are one of us, there is no leaving town, no going anywhere.”

“I’ve already moved mom, I’ve left town!” I said, trying to convince him but he shook his head. “There are shifters everywhere, this place is full of them,” he looked around. “You don’t think they know you’re here already?”

His voice broke. “If they think you helped this vampire in any way at all, even if he

forced you, that would not be forgiven. They'll kill you, honey, and all of us too. You have to go back and beg forgiveness."

"No." I said, getting up. "I love you, but no. I am not going to be some bitch scrambling in the dirt for a scrap of food. I'm going to have a life. I am going to get out."

My dad shook his head and grabbed my hand.

"Remember what I taught you," he said, as I tore my hand free and rushed out of the visiting room. I was overcome with emotion, with the shock of seeing my father and the impact of his words. I left the facility and waited for the bus to take me to town, walking to where I'd left the car in the car park.

As I walked to Mrs. Anderson's car, I felt someone following me. I looked back and saw two men catching up to me. When I turned back, there were men coming at me from all sides. It was too late to run but I tried anyway, making a break for it across the field, but they were faster than I was. Someone jumped on top of me, pinning me to the ground, yanking my arms back and tying them up. A hood was pushed down over my head and I was grabbed by my arm. Nobody spoke a word as I was bundled into the boot of a car, shoved roughly into the back and locked in.

My mother was right. I should not have gone to see my father.

But it was too late now.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

Luc

The War Room is in the dungeon of the Castle.

It has been fitted with steel doors and various security settings are in place. Big screens track our activity and movements. They indicate the latest skirmishes and show fatalities, and there are photographs where possible.

I have attended most of the meetings and have noticed that our forces seem to be in all the wrong places. We should be scoring more victories, instead, we are recording losses. Various attacks have been launched on our operations at sea and we have suffered significant damages.

As I listen to the reports from various commandos and armies in the field, it occurs to me that we appear to be on the back foot. After the meeting, I walk over to Harris and ask to have a word. He seems displeased to be pulled aside like this.

“I want to have a word with you...” I watch him closely, “...about the king.”

I catch the glance he casts at me, instantly.

There is fear and apprehension in his eyes and I realize that Prince Dano was talking the truth. What I need to establish now is whose side Harris is on.

“Let’s talk in my office,” he says and steps out of the room.

The thing about Harris is that he is slippery and tricky to read. He is so quiet and

watchful, and I have never really trusted him completely. He is not from any of the big families and I've never been able to establish where his link with Vlas stems from.

When we get into his office, the door closes behind me and I am confronted by a stark, clinical room dominated by a large view of the garden. It is unexpectedly green and luscious, the window is framed by roses and creeping ivy, reminding me of the gardens of long ago. Unexpectedly, I feel a tug of nostalgia for times gone by and I realize that Harris and I may have more in common than I think.

"Let's hear it," he says, a guarded look in his eye.

I decide to play open cards with him and tell him I'm worried about the king after a conversation with Prince Dano.

"I wanted to know your take on his health. Does he seem fine to you?"

"As fine as can be expected under the circumstances. We are at war and we are losing."

Even though he may be right, I don't like hearing him say it.

"And that is the only reason?"

"I don't see what you are getting at, Lord D'Essay," he says, stiffly.

I look outside the window again. I notice the fountain and the statues. It is such a peaceful view and I feast my eyes upon it.

"I was hoping we could speak freely," I said.

“Have we not always been frank with each other?” he asked lightly.

“No,” I turned to look him in the eye. “I don’t think we have.”

“And we should change this, now?”

“I guess it depends on whether you think our survival depends on it or not.”

I can see him trying to come up with a response.

“I am loyal to Vlas,” I say. “I always have been. Do you doubt it?”

“I do not,” he says, with conviction, “but...”

“You think he is fine?”

Harris does not respond right away. He walks over to where I am standing at the window and points at one of the roses.

“Beautiful, right?”

I nod.

“The thorns are poisonous though. They come from Ferraro. A gift from the family. I had the gardeners plant it here to remind me that beauty can be treacherous and deceitful, to never trust what I want or like.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what he was talking about. I had a feeling that he was trying to tell me that even though he loved the king, he thought he was no longer leading us the way we should. I wasn’t sure he was backing the son, however, or anyone else. He was keeping things from me, that much I was sure of.

“You have been a loyal servant,” he finally said. “I think you should continue being that,” he turned away and it seemed this was his final word.

“If not, you’ll get rid of me as you did with Matteo?”

It was a shot in the dark and I saw his shoulders stiffen. He had not expected that.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said with a little smile around his bloodless lips.

I nodded and turn to leave.

“As long as you fight for us, you will be fine,” he said as I neared the door.

I paused and looked back.

His sentence seemed laden with meaning and sub text. Was he asking for loyalty to him? I wasn’t sure that I could do that.

After our meeting, I tried to see the king but I was informed he was not available. I asked if I could wait but the guard merely shook his head. I asked if Prince Dano was still around and he told me that he was not at the Castle and had not been for some time. Too many secrets, too many lies.

I wanted to check in with my team and was headed to my offices when my senses were alerted and I checked over my shoulder. I stepped back just in time. I heard the dart coming past me, only a hair’s width from my chest. It hit the wall beside me instead of finding my chest and my heart, as had been the intention.

I swung around and scanned the corridor trying to find the culprit but there was no sign of movement, no single sound to be heard. It was as if the poisoned dart had come out of nowhere. I grabbed it from the wall and put it in my pocket, then

streaked to my office where I could lock the door.

“What’s wrong?” Tick asked as soon as I flew into the room, locking doors and closing windows. I put the dart on her desk and she put on gloves as I explained what had happened. Gagarin, another member of my team stared at me aghast.

“But, an assassination attempt...in the Castle? Who would be so blatant?”

Only someone at the very top.

“I am getting out of here,” I told them. “Talk to me on secure lines only.” I gave them some codes to use. “We have to be careful here. If anyone asks, you are working on attack plans, nothing else.”

As soon as he stepped away, I told Tick, “This is priority. I need to know who sent it.”

She held it up. “It is pure silver and poisoned too. Someone really wants you dead.”

I was about to leave when I got a message from Vlas to meet him in his quarters. It was risky, but I didn’t delay. I couldn’t believe the dart had come from him and decided to take the shortest route, through the dark night up to his window.

He was waiting for me in the dark.

“Ah, Luc, you came,” he said. His tone was weary.

“Of course, I always come when you need me.”

“Do you?” he sounded far away... “I suppose you do.”

“You sound uncertain,” I said. “What can I do to put your mind at ease?” I was using the old language, where courtesy and politeness was important.

The king sat down with a deep sigh.

“We are losing the war,” he said.

“We can turn it around, I’m sure,” I started. “All we need to do is to neutralize their...”

“No,” he said. “Not us, me. I should have been more... clear. I am losing my power.”

I fell silent.

“I don’t know when it started, but... I am weakened, my thoughts....my mind..” He sounded dazed. I couldn’t help wonder if he had been given something. I wanted to suggest that he leave the tower but I didn’t want to risk being accused of being against him.

“I don’t have long, I think,” he said, his tone wavering, “but I think you, you, you should...”

He didn’t finish his sentence. His eyelids fluttered and he fell back. Horrified, I rushed to his side but I couldn’t rouse him. There was no sign of an injury or a weapon. Perhaps he had simply fainted? I didn’t want to be found alone on the balcony with him in this state. I jumped into the night to blend into the shadows.

As I dropped into the darkness, I heard another word follow his last....as if he was able to say it now.....flee. He said he thought I should flee.

The king was warning me that I was in danger and that he was unable to protect me.

Who could be more powerful than him? His son? His wife? Harris? Too many possibilities.

I blended into the night, my senses keenly attuned to my surroundings. I wanted to plan my next move when an agonizing pain made me wince.

Ruby.

Something had happened to her. She was in pain.

But I didn't know where she was.

Something was blocking my connection with her.

She was somewhere where I couldn't reach her.

I doubled over in pain. I couldn't think of anything else.

Ruby

Something is wrong.

When I wake up, I can see only darkness and quickly realize my hands are tied. There is a hood over my head, something thick. The air is stuffy and smells musty.

Don't think about that.

Whoever had taken me had thrown me in a car and driven off with me. I tried to pay attention to the road, keep track of time but it was impossible. I only know we drove for a long time. We stopped and I could hear talking outside but nobody talked to me.

Finally, the boot was opened.

"Come on!" Someone yelled at me but my legs were cramping from lying in the boot so long. I couldn't move. I felt a punch in my side and doubled over with pain.

There was a burst of laughter.

"At least she's still alive."

They picked me up and hauled me somewhere dark and cold and threw me on the floor. I don't know how long I was down there for. I must have fallen asleep. There were dreams, horrible nightmares in which men screamed at me, beat me and left me for dead. I couldn't be entirely sure that they were dreams. I didn't know when I'd eaten last. I was so thirsty. So thirsty. I thought of water, of apple juice, of a cold beer

on my patio at the end of the day. I thought of ice cream, cool and creamy, melting in my mouth.

I think I cried.

Then I heard footsteps, I was picked up and put in a chair, my hood pulled off.

For the first time, I could see where I was. It was a chamber of some sort, basic, like in a basement. The air smelled of wet soil and the floor was rough stone. A figure came towards me, small and thin, with gleaming wet eyes. He was repulsive.

He stood in front of me, licking his lips like he was looking forward to what he was about to do.

I closed my eyes and braced myself.

“Look at me!” he commanded. When I didn’t open my eyes quickly enough, he slapped me across the face. It stung and I could feel my cheek burning.

“When I talk to you, you look at me, you hear?”

I nodded and looked at him.

“You’re going to tell us everything about the vampire scum you’ve been fucking,” he said to me.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

The violence seemed to come out of nowhere. My head was yanked back by my hair as one punch after another connected with my body. The pain was overwhelming, I tried to distance myself from it but it was impossible. I buckled over and fell from the

chair, there was a kick to my back which was excruciating. I heard screams in the room and realized they were mine.

“Had enough yet?” the small man with the rat eyes appeared in front of me. I could barely see him, blood was running into my eyes. I couldn’t wipe my face because of my tied arms. I was crying, ugly sobs, begging them to stop hurting me.

He motioned to another man to put me back into the chair. This must have been the one assaulting me. He was huge and silent but there was an aggressive air around him.

I huddled into the chair feeling my body ache and burn. There was a sharp pain in my ribs and it hurt to breathe.

“Ready to talk yet? The vampire, tell us everything about him.”

There was a blow to my head and I fell over in my chair.

Mercifully, everything went dark.

I didn’t wake up for quite a while. When I did, there was pain all around me. My thoughts were messy, confused. All I knew, was that I was in danger. I was going to die here. I needed to give them what they wanted. Luc could take care of himself. I didn’t want to betray him but I couldn’t die here.

I couldn’t do that to my mother.

Who would look after her?

She was waiting for me to call, to come to her, I couldn’t let her down.

I thought of my father, how he had begged me not to turn on the shifters and that is what I'd done.

My mouth was so dry. I probed around my mouth and tasted only blood. I longed for water, cool, sweet water.

My father had told me of the many kinds of shape shifters. The dogs and the wolves were the best, he said. Worst were the reptiles, who had no emotions, couldn't feel anything. Some were seers, taking the shape of birds, able to fly the entire sky of our world in a day and see whatever needed to be seen. There were rodents and insects, it was incredible how many different forms some shifters could take. The changelings were rare but powerful, able to keep their human intelligence while taking on animal form. If all the shape shifters in the world united, they would be more powerful than any vampire army, my father had said. Then he laughed as if to say, as if they could ever agree on anything.

But maybe that had happened.

Perhaps our clan from Buzzard Creek had joined with the lot from Sunside Swamp. I'd heard of the compound there, the weird workings of the leader they called Sunny the Snake. Even Tomás had been careful not to offend him.

I lost consciousness and woke up again later.

I was still alone.

There was a bottle of water but I couldn't open it. I tried to move my body but it caused me such pain, I could barely move. I tried turning myself around to reach for the water but I couldn't grasp it. I started crying with frustration and desperation.

I didn't want to die here.

Eventually the door opened and Rat Man came in. He stood in front of me, looking at me.

“You want the water? All you have to do is ask.”

He picked the bottle up, opened it and held it to my mouth.

The water splashed into my face and I gulped it eagerly.

“There you go,” he said, in a friendly voice I didn’t trust for a minute.

“It doesn’t have to be this hard,” he said.

He put me back on the chair and stood back.

“Are you ready to talk?”

I nodded.

“Wonderful!” He smiled broadly, revealing small teeth, pointy and yellow.

I swallowed hard.

He fetched a chair and sat down opposite me.

“Tell me about the vampire.”

I nodded again, “Luc.”

My voice was thick. I struggled to speak as my mouth hurt, my lips were swollen and painful.

“His full name,” Rat Man demanded to know.

“Don’t know,” I shook my head and he came forward threateningly.

“You fucked him without knowing his full name? What kind of a slut are you?”

“Don’t know his full name,” I repeated. “He wanted to talk to Tomás about a dead friend.”

“His dead friend? Who?”

I thought long and hard, but I couldn’t recall his name. Had Luc mentioned the name to me? I couldn’t recall. Rat Man didn’t believe me. I got another slap for that. I didn’t lift my head back up again after that. I felt that maybe death would not be so bad.

Rat Man went away. I heard the door close and I didn’t care.

I thought of my mother, of growing up with my parents in the small house behind the shop. It wasn’t all bad, my childhood, there were moments where we laughed and had fun, before my mom got sick.

Suddenly I remembered one time when I was about eight years old. I’d gone playing in the forest with my friend Charlie. We explored some caves and lost track of time, not realizing that our parents were fraught with worry when it became dark and we weren’t back yet but the real issue was that our parents couldn’t find us, the best trackers were not able to find our scent. When we emerged and made our way home, our families were frantic and then overjoyed at our return. When I told them where we were, the adults fell silent, exchanging strange looks. Charlie was taken home and my parents put me in the bath but I heard them talking in their room.

I snuck out to listen at the door and I heard my father telling my mother that we must have gotten into the tunnels. She asked, what tunnels and he became evasive. She pressured him to tell her and he said he wasn't allowed to talk about it. None of them were. It turned out all the members of his biking clan had been working on the tunnels. It was a vast connected underground network and nobody knew how long it extended for but work on the tunnels had been going on for years. When someone was down there, their scent was buried and their energy was blocked.

I knew then, with certainty, that this was where I was.

I was in the tunnels.

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Luc

I left the capital and headed south, far south.

I wanted to get out of the Capital and didn't feel safe at the Castle. I wasn't sure who to trust anymore.

Before I left, I gave an order to call up the underwater diving squad that we used to have in the army. For some reason, it had been disbanded. They used to provide security at the energy plants. We called them the Sharks. They were highly efficient and excellent warriors underwater. I called Captain Dennington and gave him the order to organize them into teams. The Sharks were to patrol the remaining plants and search for any insurgents or vessels and destroy them on sight. I didn't get approval for my plan from any of the war generals.

I acted on my own as I no longer knew who was pulling the strings or in charge.

My loyalty lay to my kind, though, and our assets needed protecting.

Before I left, I had Tick check on the king. She said the word at the Castle was that he had fallen ill but he was all right.

Then I turned my attention to Ruby.

I couldn't ignore the effect her disappearance was having on me.

I felt an almost physical pain at my core. She was clearly in mortal danger and being

threatened physically. It frustrated me that I couldn't find her. I arrived in Buzzard Creek in the early morning and approached her house. She wasn't there, I could tell right away. I had a quick look around and saw that she had probably left the place in a hurry. There were unwashed plates in the sink, food in the fridge.

I had someone at the Castle trace her phone calls and map her location. I saw that the last location her phone had been active in was a place called Wellington, best known as a correctional facility for Section 2 criminals. It didn't take me long to find out that her father was being held there and that he was currently being treated in the medical ward after he had been seriously injured following an attack.

I travelled to Wellington and did a quick survey of the facility and the guards. Then I waited for the guard in her father's ward to come off duty. I followed him back home and as he got out of his car, pulled him aside and did a number on him.

I showed him Ruby's picture and asked about her father.

In the typical monotone, he said. "We were asked to look out for her and call if we see her."

So they were waiting for Ruby. They knew she would come to see her father.

"Call who?"

"I don't know, I wasn't given the number."

"Who has the number?"

"Alphonse."

I asked where I could get hold of Alphonse and was told he was working the night

shift. I headed back to the prison and waited for the man matching that description.

I thought about what the guard had told me.

Why were the shifters looking for Ruby?

What did she know?

I had a sneaky suspicion that it had something to do with me but she didn't have any information about me. She could give them my mobile number at best, but I had replaced my mobile after the attempt on my life the day before.

They could have killed her as punishment for the death of the shifter. The only reason they were keeping her alive was because she had value to them somehow.

It made me sick, thinking of what they could be doing to her and that I was unable to help her.

Finally, Alphonse came through the gates with some friends of his. I called out to him and he came towards me.

When he was close enough, I dropped my voice and fixed my stare on him.

“What is the number you called when you saw Ruby Winton?”

He listed the number in a monotone.

His friends called out to him that they were leaving and I quickly released him, making sure he remembered nothing about our conversation.

Then I called it in to my team at the Castle.

“Find me a name and an address,” I said, holding the line.

“It’s a burner,” I was told, “not registered to anyone.”

Shit.

“But I can tell you this,” my tech friend said. “A call was made to this number, which bounced off towers close to Sunside Swamp.”

There it was again.

Sunny the Snake kept popping up in my life.

I asked for an update about what was happening and was transferred to Tick.

She sounded excited. “The Sharks scored a massive victory last night! They spotted a couple of missiles and eliminated them, going after the vessels from which they were fired and blowing them up.”

“Excellent.” I was pleased my plan had worked.

Her voice dropped. “I hear there was some confusion last night in the War Room when the news came. Nobody knew who had given the order.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear that.

I didn’t care either.

“How is the king?”

Tick’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“I’m not sure, I will keep you posted.”

I asked for precise co-ordinates of Sunny the Snake’s compound.

Tick sent it to my phone. “You can’t go in there alone,” she warned. “We know that he has an army of guards there and they are all armed. There is some underground activity too but we can’t get any information on how extensive it is. You won’t be able to move around freely and will be unable to use many of your powers. Let me find out more first.”

I knew she was right.

I wouldn’t be able to defend myself properly in that kind of a setting.

It was incredibly frustrating, as I knew this was where Ruby was probably held but according to our initial mapping, the underground network could span thousands of square kilometers. I couldn’t go in there without knowing exactly where she was.

I could get lost and I most certainly could be killed.

I spent the afternoon in the forest bordering the swamp. There were thick pockets of trees behind Buzzard Creek, stretching all the way towards the mangrove swamps. It was hot and humid here and uncomfortable for me.

Planning my next move was complicated.

I needed to get back to the capital but I couldn’t leave Ruby.

Not now, when I knew she needed me and that I was probably the reason why she had gotten into trouble in the first place.

I was thinking of asking for help from Alexandra when my phone rang.

It was a number from the Castle.

“Yes?”

“Luc?”

“What do you want?” I had already recognized Harris’s voice.

“Did you organize the Sharks attack on the underwater enemy movement?”

“So what if I did?”

There was a moment of silence.

“That was good thinking on your part,” he finally said. “Did you discuss the plan with anyone?”

“Why would I?” I remarked drily. “Last time I was at the Castle someone tried to kill me.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” he said.

I gave a snort of derision. “Please. I’m putting the phone down.”

“Wait!” he said quickly. “Okay, I knew about the attempt but it wasn’t me.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said flatly.

“I know,” he sounded tired all of a sudden. “I understand that.”

“You lied to me the last time we spoke,” I said.

“Yes,” Harris says. “I did, I admit it but I didn’t know if I could trust you. I didn’t know whose side you were on.”

“That’s rich coming from you! I have always been loyal to the king!”

“Yes, but what does that mean exactly? Does that loyalty extend to the queen?”

I didn’t know what he was asking me.

Then he said, “You were close to her once, I believe?”

“That was a long time ago,” I finally said.

I didn’t know that he knew about that. Harris was even more connected and better informed than I’d realized. Years before Vlas was crowned our king, Taheera and I had spent one night together. I was younger then, more of a party animal and a player. She was an attractive woman and she had come on to me. I went with it, turned on by the way she was pursuing me but the experience became unpleasant. She liked to dominate and became quite violent with me. I played along to a point but when she started hitting me, inflicting pain, I told her to stop. She then promised to tone it down but her fangs were out and she wanted my blood. I had pushed her away and she’d never forgiven me for that. I had avoided her since then.

When I heard Vlas was thinking of marrying her, I had tried to warn him, but she was from one of the oldest vampire families and their union solidified Vlas’s power. She was ambitious, though, and I didn’t like that.

I had tried to talk to Matteo about it, but he had changed the subject. “She’s our queen,” he had said stiffly and I didn’t push it. He was extremely loyal to the royal

house.

Whenever I met her after that, she pretended not to know me.

It was like she'd never seen me before.

But I knew better.

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Ruby

They come to me in the dark.

I don't know them.

Their voices are unfamiliar to me. They talk to me, pick me up, put me in the chair and ask me questions. I have stopped answering them. They hit me, punch me, smack me. There is blood running down my face and at some point, I spit out a tooth but they have lost the power to hurt me.

I don't feel anything anymore.

Instead, I go back to the past, revisit my memories.

I think of how Grace and I would drink at the club, after our shift, exhausted from many hours of working. We would drink shooters and get drunk and silly, sing songs and compare notes of the evening. That was our thing, the silly competitions. Who had the worst shift or the worst job. Sometimes, it was who had the worst date ever or the worst sex ever.

It was usually split fairly evenly between us.

The thing about Grace was, she hadn't given up yet. Even though she had to dance at a club and had to endure drunk customers harassing her, grabbing her and sometimes even trying to force her to have sex with them, she always managed to look on the bright side. She'd say she would get out someday, that we were both going to get

married and raise our babies together. The thought of which always made me laugh out loud. I was never going to have children. Why not? Grace wanted to know, she said she wanted a whole messy house of at least four to five children.

But I knew how hard it was to have children, how many things could go wrong. My mother had lost many babies and they never knew why. I was the only child carried to term and for years, she had carefully watched over me, scared that something would happen to me. Especially in a place like Buzzard Creek, where life was cheap and accidents seemed to happen more than elsewhere.

The bond between us had been close from the start.

“You are special,” my mother would tell me every night when she put me to bed. “You are my Ruby, a jewel of priceless value, the most precious of any gem.”

My father loved me too, but he was more distant. I knew that my health and happiness was of paramount importance to my mother. If something happened to me, I don’t think she would survive.

When I was bullied in school, I didn’t tell her. I didn’t know how she’d react if I told her Tammy Sullivan kept shoving me into the dirt, stealing my lunch every day and calling me a little bitch. The school I went to was outside of town, there weren’t that many shifters. Tammy was one of the HH or higher humans, whose DNA had been enhanced and improved. The higher humans were taller, smarter and often, more attractive. Most lived in the Capital but there were some in the rest of the country. They tended to look down on the shifter families as being trash.

I endured Tammy’s bullying for a while but when it started escalating, I decided I needed to fight back. I took a knife from our kitchen and one morning, when I walked to school and found my way blocked by Tammy and two of her friends, I knew what to do. When she told me to hand over my lunch, I refused. When she came closer,

warning me to do as she said, I pulled out the knife and warned her to get back. She laughed at me and I never reacted well when anyone did that.

I threw the knife at her, not really taking aim, but it found purchase in her shoulder. She fell down, screaming. I pulled the knife out and ran to school, throwing the weapon away. When I was called in by the teachers and asked about the incident, I denied it, saying Tammy was trying to get me into trouble. They didn't believe me but there was no proof. I'd warned Tammy's friends that my father's shifter friends would come for them if they talked.

That was the end of my bullying.

But there was nothing I could do in my present situation.

I couldn't fight back in any way. They had the upper hand and they knew it. I only had my mind to hide away in and I found that it had more hidden chambers than I'd thought. Beautiful places I had forgotten about.

I thought of the river trips we'd taken in the air boat when I was younger, out in the swamps, passing the mangrove forests and the birds out there, flapping their wings. We'd felt so free back then, young and strong. I loved being out in nature like that, away from the town. It felt like we could do anything, go anywhere.

I tried to remember my friends' names, they were kids from school. There was a Frankie and Mungo. What had become of them? Frankie had gone away, I think to the army. But Mungo? He'd always been a free spirit, didn't like to follow the rules and didn't exactly respect authority. He didn't finish school and I hadn't thought of him in years.

I thought about the food my mom cooked for us when I was young, the songs she sang, the stories she told me and when that didn't work, I slept. I didn't know how

much time had passed. If days had come and gone. All of that stopped mattering to me.

Then, there was a change.

A light was switched on and some men came in with a table, a table cloth and some chairs.

Food was brought in and put on plates. There was beer, two bottles, opened and placed at each setting. I was helped into one of the chairs at the table.

Someone came in and sat across from me.

“Jesus, Ruby, what have they done to you?”

I recognized the voice, but didn’t know who it was.

I tried to look up but my eyes were swollen shut and my neck wouldn’t move.

“Here, have some chicken.” A plate was pushed towards me but I didn’t want food.

I turned my head a bit and saw that it was Tomás.

I must have reacted somehow because he smiled.

“They asked me to come see you, see if I could get through to you? Apparently they couldn’t get you to talk.” He laughed, “I told them, you’re one of my girls, you’re tough!”

Fuck you, I thought. I’m not one of your girls but I didn’t say anything.

He drank from his beer and looked at me with beady eyes.

For the first time, he didn't look that dangerous to me. He was closer to me now than he had ever been before. I wondered why I had been so scared of him. He wasn't that tall, or that strong. After all that I'd been through, what could he do to me now?

He leaned closer. "They're going to kill you, Ruby. I guess you've figured that out and you don't care, which is fine, but what about your mother?"

I looked at him, wondering if he was bluffing.

"Charlotte Lucas? Aka Lottie Winton?"

I could feel my stomach turning. How had they found my mother?

It was as if he had read my mind.

"We know everything, Ruby," he said, quietly to me. "We know how you've been helping the vampire to get rid of our people, your own people."

I wanted to tell him that wasn't true. That the shifters had attacked us, that I was only defending myself, that Luc had merely been fighting back, but it hurt too much to open my mouth to speak.

"This vampire is not just another vampire," Tomás went on, speaking conversationally while eating, as if we were on a date or having a friendly lunch. The kind of lunch where your partner was covered in dried blood and couldn't sit up properly. I wondered if he'd had many of these sorts of meetings. He did seem very comfortable doing this.

"This guy is important. He is connected and he knows stuff about us." Tomás

laughed.

“Not that it will help him at all! This time, we have the numbers and we have the advantage. There are not enough of them compared to us. We’re gonna wipe them all out! Imagine! A world without vampires!” he slapped the table, then grew serious.

“We want to catch him, alive preferably, to get information. You’re going to help us do it.”

I started shaking my head, trying to protest that I didn’t know anything.

“Shh... shh...” Tomás said. Then he showed me a picture of an attractive dark-haired woman.

“This is Sister Lola Hunter. She works over at Montrose, where your mom is. Nice lady. Of course, she cares more about her kids than her patients.”

He showed me another photograph, of two children, looking scared, in the back of a car.

“She will give your mother a fatal dose of insulin if we say the word. We are keeping her children until we know you are cooperating. So, it’s not only your mom’s life at stake here, but also those of Sister Hunter’s children.”

He shrugged and came closer, his voice becoming more menacing.

“It’s all up to you, Ruby. Down here, the vampire can’t find you but we’ll take you up, above ground, where he can find you. Then we’ll find him, trap him. All you have to do, is to get him to come to you.”

“How?” My voice was cracked, dry.

Tomás gave a nasty laugh. “Oh, when he feels you’re in trouble, he’ll come. Vampires like to bind their victims to them that way. You fuck ‘em, you belong to them,” he sneered.

I thought of Danny and how he had treated me like I had belonged to him. Like I was his property, shoes he could throw across a room if the mood took him. Luc had never behaved that way towards me. We had been equals and he had been respectful and decent with me. More decent than any man I’d ever known.

But I couldn’t let them hurt my mother.

I nodded. “I’ll do it,” I said. I was surprised to see tears dripping onto the table.

I didn’t think I had tears left.

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Luc

I stop outside a large property in the heart of the Capital.

This is the address that Harris gave me, asking me to meet him here.

I look again but it is the right place.

There is a bell, I press it and after a while the gate is buzzed open.

There is a paved way with fountains and a well-maintained garden with beautiful shrubs and roses. It looks like a private residence.

The door is opened by a handsome man with a floppy blonde fringe and blue eyes. He extends a genteel hand.

“Luc, welcome,” he smiles charmingly. “I’m Michael. Jon Paul will be back any second, he’s gone to fetch some wine. He says the evening calls for it,” he winks at me.

He opens the door to a foyer with a stunning marble floor and large paintings on the wall. Ferns in gleaming copper pots line the walls. Antique furniture and hand-woven carpets adorn the floors.

“What a beautiful home,” I say and mean it.

“Thank you, it’s mostly my doing, even if I say so myself.”

Michael is obviously Jon Paul's partner. A young girl comes down to ask him about a sleepover and they have a brief discussion. When she leaves, he rolls his eyes. "Kids!"

"You have more than one?"

He laughs, "Two more, twin boys!"

I didn't realize that Harris had invited me to his house. It is obviously a show of good faith. He wouldn't have done that if his plan was to kill me.

"Crazy, right?" Harris says, coming in from behind us.

"Luc, glad you could make it," he says with a tight smile.

The wine he has brought is blood-based, a product that is extremely expensive but highly rated, especially in some circles.

"Let's go out to the patio," he says, taking me through an elegant sitting room and out onto a veranda bordering a green garden with lush plants. I take a seat and when Michael comes round with the wine, I take the glass.

"I wasn't expecting this," I admit when Harris looks at me and raises his glass.

"I know, I'm sorry things... got the way they did. I wanted to clear the air, I guess."

I nod. "I always felt we weren't exactly on the same side when it came to empire business."

He nodded. "There's that. I used to feel that your way was... too direct, too confrontational? I prefer diplomacy and peace."

I took a sip of the wine. It was excellent.

“Do you remember the Halaila incident?”

It comes to me eventually, a rebellion on an island by a rogue tribe of vampires who refused to stop hunting humans for prey. I had eventually suggested we torch the island and get rid of all of them. The plan was approved and carried out.

“I knew people on Halaila,” Harris said quietly.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

It made sense now, why he was always pushing back.

“I tend to be over-protective when it comes to friends,” he added. “My own family was wiped out during the virus. All I have left is Michael and the kids. They mean the world to me,” he said.

“Of course,” I said, but I didn’t really understand where this conversation was going. Vlas had brought on Harris as an advisor shortly after he became king and he’d always seemed to be second-guessing me. We were usually at odds about decisions but this invitation seemed to be an olive branch of sorts.

I waited for Harris to get to the point and eventually, he did.

“I wasn’t responsible for the assassination attempt the other day,” he said, “but I know who was behind it.”

“The prince?”

He shot me a quick look. “Which prince...? No, it was Alexandra.”

I wasn't expecting that. "What?"

"She had been to see the king and was on her way down. I was watching the CCTV footage and saw her leave. I have it for you, if you like."

He had the footage saved on his mobile. He handed it to me. I could see myself talking to Prince Dano and then walking away, the shudder as the dart missed me and Alexandra coming out behind a wall draping and rushing off.

My mind was whirling.

"But, why?"

"I've been trying to figure it out. She is with the Hattari, plotting against us," Harris said. "Simple. You are on your way to figuring out who killed Matteo and she wanted to remove you. Plus, she hates you."

"Yes, well," I said, dryly. "There is that but she didn't kill Matteo."

"Are you sure? She was at the same lodge, pretending to help our cause when we now know she never had any intention of backing us. She supports the shifters."

I mulled this over and told him of the vision she'd shown me.

Harris nodded. "Those can't be manipulated, you're right but how do you explain it?"

"Maybe she is working with a vampire, someone who wants to get rid of the king. Take over."

Harris put down his glass. His face grew grave.

“That is a possibility I really would not like to consider.”

“It may be the most viable one,” I said. “I mean, what is going on with the king? Would you tell me? He collapsed the last time I saw him?”

Harris put down his glass. “He is sick,” he finally admitted. “He was exposed to poison a few years back and we never totally managed to stop the spread. We always knew it would get to him, but he has entered the final stages. He is not expected to last much longer.”

“I had no idea!” I exclaimed. “Why was it kept a secret?”

“We are at war,” Harris shrugged, “We can’t let this get out now. The last thing we need now is a power struggle within our house, we need to stand together. It was his decision, only family knew.”

“And you,” I said. He shrugged.

His words made sense.

“And Taheera?”

He picked up his glass and drained it. “I’m trying to keep her in check,” he said, “but it is proving harder than I thought. She is ambitious, but I have no proof yet that she is involved in anything treasonous.”

“You think she’d want to take his place?” I pondered the thought. She was unpopular though and despite her ambition and intelligence, she had a reputation as a party princess more interested in cocktail parties than governing. “What about the sons? Dano and Vermont?”

Harris shook his head. “The king favors Vermont and it is possible that Dano resents him for it, but enough to kill his own father? I don’t see it.”

I didn’t either.

“Who poisoned Vlas?” I asked him. He shrugged. “It was at a wedding somewhere outside the capital. We had an extensive investigation at the time but we got nowhere.”

“Whose wedding?”

“Prince Dano and Princess Asia.”

I remembered it. A lavish reception and ceremony on a private retreat. There had been drugs and dancing and various blood stimulants. I had attended it with Alexandra, it was when our relationship was at its best. I tried to remember all the people who attended but nothing jumped out.

“At the time, I wondered if Asia’s family had anything to do with it. The Castellanos are a bunch of psychopaths, really but we couldn’t find any evidence they were involved.”

Thinking about Alexandra made me think of the footage I’d just seen.

“Why did you show me the CCTV footage?” I ask.

Harris gave a tired smile. “I guess it’s an olive branch? I do think we are on the same side. We may have different methods, but... your plan with the Sharks was inspired. It was a major coup for us. At least our facilities are safe now.”

“But...?” I could see he was leading up to something.

“The battle is not only in the South. Armies of shifters seem to jump up out of nowhere and when they are on the brink of being defeated, they seem to disappear.”

I told him about my suspicion of the tunnels and how we were trying to get more information. Harris sat up, renewed energy in his eyes.

“Let’s bomb the tunnels!”

I laughed. “Who is being aggressive now?”

“I know, but that is where they are breeding, right?”

“The problem is that the only entry to the tunnels appears to be in Sunside Swamp, on the property belonging to Sunny the Snake. We can’t get anywhere near it without being detected.”

Harris fell silent.

I also didn’t want to tell him that I thought Ruby was down in the tunnels and that I couldn’t risk anything happening to her.

Harris started talking about ways of smoking them out, getting soldiers into the tunnels and pumping gas. I told him that the swamp was a vital resource for humans who needed the fish and water, that was diverted into rivers for agriculture. If we polluted or destroyed the swamp ecosystem, humans would feel it in their food production. It could pollute the water, damage infrastructure. That would bring more conflict with the humans.

“You’re right,” Harris said, musingly. “This has to be thought out carefully.”

“What do you know of Sunny the Snake?” I asked him.

“Not much, to be honest. Always thought he was fairly low-level scum but it seems he has aspirations to make more of himself. He has been seen in the Capital, with the movers and the shakers.”

“And the al-Hattari,” I added and saw Harris nod.

So, he knew.

“If he is the leader of this rebellion, we need to focus our efforts on him,” I said.

Harris nodded.

There was a moment of silence. I thought of Matteo and how he had been killed close to Alexandra and only months later, I had survived an assassination attempt and again, Alexandra was close by. Had she been trying to get me off course by pointing at vampires when there was no evidence of it?

There was a link somewhere in all of this, a part of the picture that I wasn't seeing. Whoever had killed Matteo was after me too and I had a feeling it wasn't Alexandra.

I got up and thanked Harris and Michael for the drink and the invitation to their home.

We shook hands and I had the feeling that while Harris and I were more on the same page now, we were still not completely in sync.

There was something about him that I was missing.

I decided that warranted a closer look.

As I left his house, a sharp pain shot through my chest.

Ruby.

She was closer, all of a sudden, within reach.

Our link had been restored.

I had to get to her.

Ruby

It feels like I have been underground for weeks, months even.

I realize it has only been days when Rat Man brings me coffee and sandwiches and tells me what has happened in the war since I've been taken.

"We're gonna win this war," he says to me, his tiny eyes gleaming. "Already, we've made gains on several fronts, hitting them where it hurts them the most, their pockets."

I try to eat something but my mouth is too painful. I break small bits of food off and put it in my mouth, sucking on it.

"People think them bloodsuckers care about blood only, but that ain't it at all. They want money, all of it. They live for hundreds of years and in the banks their money grows, off the backs of us humans."

I can feel his hatred.

I have never heard Luc talk about money or his possessions. He once referred in passing to his family land but I have no idea what it looks like, or what kind of house he has there. He has talked of the flowers only and the hills, the way the wind blows when there is a storm coming. When he talks about it, he grows sad and it puts him in a melancholic frame of mind. It has made me see how much he has lost. The longer he has lived, the more he has lost, in terms of people he has loved and lives he has seen pass him by. But cars, money, planes? It isn't important to him at all.

Not that I'd dream of saying anything like that to Rat Man.

"They think we are weak and dumb, but we will show them!"

Once the coffee has cooled, I gingerly sip from the cup. It burns my lips and I wince. I crave the taste but it hurts to swallow, everything hurts. But I know I need my strength. The thought of getting out of here fuels me to try to drink some more and eat the bread even though I'd rather not.

The moment I am above ground, Luc will come to rescue me and who knows how many shifters will descend upon him. Their plan is to capture him, torture him. I have heard them talking, they will deprive him of blood and burn him with fire. I've told them he is weakest during the day and their plan is to bring me up in the early afternoon, when the sun is at its brightest. They don't know that Luc is able to handle the heat of the sun on account of his age and experience. He is exceptionally strong, even for a vampire, a fact he once shared plainly with me, not bragging, just stating the obvious.

But even he would not be able to defeat the shifters when they jump him in the forest. I said I would not try to help him but I have to do what I can. I can't lead him into his death.

After breakfast, they take me to a rudimentary bathroom where there is a bucket and some bottled water. A piece of a mirror shows me what I look like. I am shocked at my appearance, my face all mottled with bruises, swollen and cut up. My hair is matted with dry blood and there is a cut on my cheek that will leave a scar.

I have never been vain about my appearance but I have been aware that some things came my way because some thought me attractive. Boys gave me attention, men helped me out. Would Luc have been interested in me if my hair was thin and my bum was wide? Well, it wasn't but looking at myself in the mirror, I see a broken girl.

Ugly. Perhaps I will never be pretty again.

I close my eyes and turn away.

Nobody would want me like this.

But I think of my mother and the poor nurse, who is scared to death of what will happen to her children and I know I have to go through with it.

I wash my face as best I can and wince every time I touch it. My ribs hurt, my arm is throbbing painfully and I wish I could climb into my bed at home, pull my lovely duvet over my head and sink into the deepest sleep.

Perhaps never wake up.

There is banging on the door.

“Come on out!”

I limp to the door and step back when I see a crowd of men waiting for me.

“Shit, he’s gonna come back for this?” Someone jeers at the back. They all start laughing, taunting me. “Don’t you wanna put on some make up?” Someone calls out to me.

One of the men takes my arm. “Ignore them,” he says curtly. The corridor is narrow and dark. It looks like it has been dug with shovels. Makeshift lights hang from the top. We walk for a while, then we stop. There is a metal ladder in the wall and I’m told to climb. It takes a while because I’m weak and my left side won’t move well. Something’s wrong with my leg, it hurts every time I lift it.

When I get to the top, there is a trapdoor and it is opened from the outside. A hand stretches towards me, I take it and I'm pulled out into the daylight. I can't believe it, I'm standing in the forest. When they close the door and cover it with shrubbery, I can't see where it is at all.

"Ok, men, take your positions," comes the call from the leader of the pack. They fall back to hide behind the trees. I sense there are even more hidden out of sight.

The leader turns to me, a little apologetic. "I have to hurt you, sorry. He feels your pain, they say."

"Please don't," I beg him. I don't think I can take it anymore.

"I won't hit you again," he says and pulls out a knife.

He comes closer and moves so quickly that I have no time to prepare myself. He cuts my upper arm, from the shoulder down, I feel the blade slice through my skin and scream out in pain.

I can't help myself, falling to my knees. Nobody comes to help me, they all stand there watching me, writhing in pain, bleeding into the grass, dying for all they care. I'd never hated shifters as much as I did then. Mercifully, I blacked out right there and the pain stopped.

But someone came to wake me up, shaking my other arm.

"Don't sleep, bitch, your time will come but for now, you gotta be awake."

The pain in my arm is dull now but I can feel it.

With my good arm, I feel around my neck for the silver chain my father gave me for

my eighteenth birthday. When I feel it is intact, I breathe a sigh of relief.

Time passes and then I feel Luc coming closer.

They sense it too and without a word being said or any signal being given, the forest around me grows alive with growling and snarls. Most of the men have changed into wolves, huge beasts and frightening jowls. I look up at the sky, parts of which I can see through the trees but he doesn't come from there.

Instead, there is a tree close to me and I hear him whispering to me.

“Ruby!”

I pull the necklace from my neck as the wolves jump from the bushes, ready to pounce on Luc. I put the dog whistle in my mouth and blow as loudly as I can, not sure what to expect. Almost immediately, the wolves start howling, but others are still coming. I can feel my strength fading away and I close my eyes as darkness mercifully returns.

When I wake up again, I am somewhere soft.

In a bed.

I blink a few times and try to make sense of it. There is a lot of pain though, my arm hurts.

I try to sit up.

“Lie back,” Luc says. “Rest.”

His voice soothes me and I lie down again.

“Where am I?”

“You’re safe. How do you feel?”

“Fantastic,” I say. “Never better.”

“You look it,” he says and smiles at me.

His smile makes me feel warm and safe.

“We got away then?”

“That dog whistle of yours is a magic weapon,” he jokes.

It hurts to talk and I close my eyes again.

“Here,” Luc says, “Drink this. Some painkillers.”

I swallow the pills gratefully. “My mother...” I say.

“Already on it,” he says. “Rest now.”

I lean back.

As I sink into sleep, I mumble to him, “Stay, don’t go.”

I hear him say, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” I think I say.

He comes to sit next to me on the bed and carefully, I nestle into him.

Then I fall into the deepest sleep.

Luc

I suspected that the shifters were using Ruby as a trap. That is why I didn't go into the forest without a plan and a bag full of weapons. Even so, I had not expected a hundred wolves to jump at me. If it had not been for Ruby's dog whistle, I would not have made it out of there alive. We would both have been killed.

As I lifted Ruby up into my arms, I felt two wolves attacking me from behind. I managed to shake them off, but their teeth had sunk into my back, ripping out chunks of flesh. I couldn't get very far in this state, I needed medical attention.

There was a vamp-friendly hotel near McAlister and I called the owner, an old friend of mine called Louis. He gave me the top floor and sent up meds for Ruby and some Extra for me. Extra was a blood product with medication and accelerated healing properties. I could hear Ruby muttering about her mother and knew she was worried about her. I called Dennington and asked him to move her mother to a safe location. Ruby told me the name her mother had been checked in under as well as the name of the facility.

I was shocked at the sight of her.

Ruby looked like she had been in a gruesome car accident. It was hard to believe that her own people had beaten her up like this. She would have scars, perhaps even permanent injuries as a result of the torture she'd been subjected to. I hated that this was done to her because of me.

If I hadn't come into her life, this would never have happened.

I owed it to her to take care of her and her mother, regardless of what happened between us. She couldn't go back to her home and would have to begin a new life, one way or another.

I lay down next to her and rested, waiting for my medication to kick in as well. My back was aching and in the mirror, I could see that I would need a doctor so I called Louis and asked him to send someone up.

The doctor was a white-haired vampire with kind, brown eyes.

"Both of you look like you barely got out alive," he commented.

"Shifters," I said and he met my eyes, shaking his head.

"This war is bad for us," he said and it wasn't the first time I'd heard this. In the past, we were always confident of victory, but for the first time, it wasn't certain.

He examined Ruby first, applying disinfectant to her cuts and bruises.

"It looks like she cracked a rib," he said. "She needs plenty of rest."

The stab wound in her arm required stitches but she didn't even wake up when he inserted the needle into her skin.

When she was safely tucked in bed, I took off my shirt and he looked at my back. I winced when he doused me in antiseptic.

"They got you all right," he said. "You need to rest too. You are not invincible."

After he left, I lay down next to Ruby and closed my eyes.

My thoughts started drifting and while I didn't exactly fall asleep, I started thinking of events that had happened many years ago.

There was one conversation that came back to me. Me and Matteo had been on a mountain patrol, looking for some errant vampires said to have become drunk on contaminated blood who were terrorizing a village. We were taking a break, resting at a scenic viewpoint quite high up in the mountains. We were teasing each other, joking around. Matteo said he knew what my weakness was and when I challenged him, he said, "Beautiful women."

I scoffed at him. "Who doesn't like a beautiful woman?"

He shrugged. "Me, for instance."

"You don't like a beautiful girl?" I challenged him.

He sat up and shrugged. "Not like you do."

"And how do I like them?" I asked him.

"You don't see past the face," he said.

That remark annoyed me. "And you do?"

"I think so. There has to be more."

"Like what? Money?"

He scoffed. "No, like character, purpose, a mission."

I remember thinking he was mad. "Where do you find a woman who is beautiful, has

character as well as purpose and a mission?!”

“It is possible.”

The way he said it made me think he had found someone like that.

“Who is she?” I asked him but he suddenly got up and walked away.

He never referred to it again.

Now I wondered who Matteo’s mystery lady was. Oddly enough, I thought of Alexandra. I wouldn’t put it past her to try her luck with him. She was beautiful and she had character. Would she become involved with him to spite me? Would she go so far as to kill him to get back at me?

It was a harrowing thought.

I remembered our conversation and realized that the oath she had sworn to tell the truth only held for certain circumstances. If she felt she needed to lie to me, to be true to her cause or mission, I believe she would have.

I wasn’t well enough to travel so I called Louis and asked if he could drop by with some Extra. A few minutes later, he was at the door. I took him to the living room of our suite and we put our feet up, downing a few of the sachets.

“You look like you could use the real stuff,” Louis remarked.

He gave me a knowing look.

“Do you have any?” I asked him. Real blood had become scarce since the outbreak of the war. The shifters had bombed one of our major suppliers and since then, the price

of real blood had gone sky high.

He pulled out a few vials and handed me two.

“I’m going to leave for the capital,” he said after a while. “If this part of the world is going to fall, I need to get out of here. I’ll get some people to run the place for me.”

“You think the South is going to fall?”

“You don’t?”

I had not spoken to anyone at the Castle in over a day. Louis informed me that major losses had been incurred on our side. There was a common belief that the vampires should retreat to the capital and hand over the South to the shifters. They would not try to enter the capital where our numbers were big and our influence was strong.

“I’ve heard of more shifters getting influence in the capital and getting closer to the ruling council.”

“You seem to be very well informed,” I said and Louis laughed slyly.

“Let’s just say I have friends in high places.”

It seemed to me he knew more than I did.

“I had an affair with a Secretary,” he admitted. “We see each other now and then, she tells me things.”

“Like what?”

“For instance, the tide is turning against the vampires. They have perceived as too

controlling. Shifters are more human after all, not a natural enemy,” he shrugged.

It was not unlike what Alexandra had told me. I had not paid it much attention, which seemed to be an error on my part. Smoothing things over with the human authority had always been Vlas’s role, but if he had been ill and absent, it may have been possible for a snake to slither into that space and poison them against us.

I felt like I needed to warn Harris.

I wasn’t quite ready to travel back to the capital yet. I wanted to spend time with Ruby, make sure that she recovered.

After Louis left, I listened to my messages from Tick, informing me of the latest events. She confirmed most of what Louis had already told me, that there was a turning point in the war against us. The attacks on blood stores and blood supplies was worrying. Already there was fear among the humans that hungry vampires would turn to hunting for blood again.

“I’ve heard there is talk of standing with shifters against the vampires.”

There was fear in her voice.

This was bad.

I tried to get hold of Harris but he didn’t answer his phone.

However, I felt like my place was here, with Ruby now.

I thought of what the doctor had said about me being able to die.

For the first time in many, many years, I was enjoying being alive.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:57 am

Ruby

I wake up and sit up in a bed, twice the size of mine at home.

I recall something about coming here after being kidnapped by the shifters. Luc saved me, brought me here and gave me something for the pain. I inspect my body, see the stitches on my arms and the bruising. I must have received medical care but I can't remember it.

Then I remember what the shifters did to me and I close my eyes briefly. Rat Man's face appears in front of me and I quickly open my eyes.

I've never been to a hotel room before, not something I would admit readily. My life has been rather unimpressive so far. No grand trips, no big holidays. But I've survived this attack and that feels big.

I sit up, notice the bottle of water and gratefully drink all of it.

I wonder where Luc is, the room is empty.

I try to figure out how long I've been here and recall waking up at times, seeing him here, lying on the bed next to me. I try to get out of bed, walking carefully, wincing with pain. As long as I don't move, I feel okay but every movement brings a range of sensations, all of them unpleasant. The bathroom is lovely, with deep, fluffy towels and soap scented with lavender. I wash my face and flinch when I see myself in the mirror. I look terrible, my face is purple and blue, with some bruises turning yellow.

I step into the shower, open the faucet and let the water wash over me until I feel less dirty, though not clean. Somehow, I doubt I will ever feel clean again.

When I get out into the room, Luc is waiting for me.

“How are you feeling?” he asks me.

“Better. Hungry.”

He smiles, “That’s good, I’ll call down for some food, what do you feel like?”

I shrug. “Eggs? Bread?”

He calls the order to the kitchen and within minutes, a porter brings several plates of food.

“How long have I been sleeping?” I ask Luc.

“Three days now,” he says, and tells me about the doctor’s visit.

“Jesus. Three days,” I can’t believe I’ve slept this long.

I suddenly sit up. “My mother! I have to find her, make sure she’s okay!”

Luc nods. “I’ve had her moved to another facility in the capital.”

Anxious, I ask, “So, she’s okay?”

Luc nods and I relax.

“When do you have to leave?” I ask him.

“Tired of me already?” he asks with a smile.

“No.... but there is a war on and don’t you have things to do?”

His face becomes serious. “Everything seems to be falling apart. There are so many places I need to be, people I should talk to. At the same time, I don’t know, I feel like it shouldn’t all be my responsibility.”

I’m not sure what he is talking about exactly but I can see he is worried, upset.

I get up and walk over to him, sitting down on his lap, carefully.

It’s the closest I have been to him since we slept together at my house. It feels like months ago but it isn’t even that long. But so much has happened and I’m not sure where we stand with each other. He has stuck around this long to make sure I’m okay, but I can’t tell why. Perhaps he is being chivalrous, or something.

Being this close to him feels intoxicating.

I put my hand on his chest and notice a muscle tightening in his face. I immediately pull back.

“No, no,” he catches my hand and pulls me closer.

“It’s not that.” He tells me he was injured by the wolves and is also recovering.

He pulls me closer to him and against his chest.

“This feels good,” he says. “The best medicine.”

I love the sound of his voice, so deep and melodious. I put my hand on his chest again

and stroke the skin, gently. I become aware of a hardness underneath me, in his groin area.

“Do you think... we could?” I ask him with a little smile.

“I don’t know!” he grins. “What do you think?”

“What if we are really careful?”

I kiss him softly and feel his mouth eagerly close over mine as he puts both arms around me. I feel the hotel robe fall from my shoulders and try to pull it back, to cover me.

“No, don’t,” he says hoarsely.

“But, look at me,” I say, embarrassed about the scratches and cuts, the discolored skin.

“You are more beautiful to me than ever before,” he says, kissing my shoulder softly where the wound begins.

We kiss slowly, carefully, I adjust my position so that I am facing him, my knees on either side of him. He touches my breasts, holding them tenderly, lifting them towards his face, licking my nipples, sucking on them, sending tingling pleasure down my body. My chest is sensitive around my rib area and even though I want to move, the pain is keeping me immobilized. It is agony being with him this way, but I want him so much, I can’t stop.

“Are you okay?” he whispers to me.

I nod. “Are you?”

He nods and I begin to move on top of him. I open my legs wider and shift my weight so that my pussy is on top of his pants. I start to rock gently, slowly, rubbing my clitoris against him as he squeezes my bum, pushing me on top of him. I lift myself delicately and pull his cock out. It is hard and fully erect. I gasp when I guide it into me, shifting my weight to take all of him into me. The pain in my body subsides, I don't feel any of the soreness anymore, none of the bruising, I just feel the pleasure building inside of me. I want to control it, to keep it building slowly to ensure we don't hurt ourselves.

I move my pelvis and my hips and find that this does not hurt, so I move even more, feeling him sliding inside of me, hot and wet. I am moaning now and I can hear myself as I see his eyes becoming unfocused with desire and longing.

Our rocking is picking up speed and intensity as he pushes me up and down on top of him, leaning back to reach deeper and harder. I pull him up and whisper to him, "Bite me."

I don't know why but I know I want him to. I know it makes it better for him and it also does something for me. The first time he did it, I felt a sharp pain, but the pain turned into an intense pleasure unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"I want it," I said. "I want it."

He let his fangs come out and it wasn't scary at all.

I closed my eyes and gave him my neck. I felt him come closer, kissing my neck, his tongue circling and sucking and I didn't feel his teeth piercing me at all. Rather, it was like the sucking became harder and more pressured and the rhythm coincided with our coupling, he was sucking on my neck while I was sucking him inside of me, squeezing and holding him as he held me by my neck.

I felt no pain, no discomfort, nothing but the most exquisite physical pleasure as our bodies melted together and became one.

Afterwards, he stroked my back. "You okay?" he whispered.

I smiled. "Better than okay."

I moved onto his lap again and he held me close.

"I wish I never had to get up again," I said and he laughed.

"I could hold you like this forever," he said.

His face became serious and I saw him looking at my neck. There was a trickle of blood running down my skin. I touched it and looked at it. His fangs had been retracted now but thinking of them made my skin tingle.

"I liked it," I said. "When you tasted my blood. It made us closer, somehow, made the sex better."

He nodded. "It's dangerous, though."

"Because you could lose control?"

He nodded. "It's so intoxicating, you want more and more. If you are not careful you take too much."

I shivered. "Has that ever happened to you?"

He shook his head.

“We need humans to trust us, to work with us. That can never happen if they fear us. This is why FOH is forbidden.”

“Feeding on Humans,” I say.

Again, he nods.

“I wouldn’t mind you feeding on me, I think. As long as you didn’t take too much,” I say.

“And how much is too much?” he asks lightly and I shrug playfully.

“You should be scared of me,” he says, darkly. “I am a monster after all.”

“Not to me,” I say quickly. Thanks to him, I had been able to get out of Buzzard Creek. He had been good to me, kind to me, but I could see he was in a dark mood.

I got up, put my robe on and turned to walk away.

“Don’t go,” he said in a tired voice. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

He sounded so agonized that I went back to him.

“I wish we could just hang out here for a few days,” I said. “Get better and rest before deciding what to do next. Where to go next.”

He looked at me with those intense blue eyes but I didn’t look away, holding his gaze.

“We could pretend there is no war, no outside world. Just sleep and make love and maybe sometimes, shower.”

He smiled. "It does sound lovely," he said.

"I think you need to recover too," I said.

I held out a hand to him. "Let's recover together." He took my hand and smiled, the smile I had come to love, but I would never admit that to anyone. I led him to the bed and we got under the covers, pulling the sheets over our heads so that we seemed to be in our own little world.

Luc

We spent another two days hiding away at Louis's hotel. It was wonderful, just the two of us, lying in bed, making love and getting better. When she slept, I rested, staying away from my phone, purposefully.

I couldn't save all of the vampires or win the war on my own. There were so many different players, each with their own agenda. My mission was to find out who had killed Matteo and I was at my wits end trying to solve this.

I was beginning to accept the possibility that we may not win the war with the shifters. If that was the case, I would go back to my land in the North. I'd been thinking of taking Ruby there, to show her the fields and the horses. When I'd told her about the bees and the honey produced on the farm, her eyes had lit up with excitement. The starbursts and wild lilies were flowering now and the caretaker had sent me pictures of them. I'd showed them to her.

"It's a different kind of life there. Slow," I said.

"No dancing on tables or strippers with poles?" Ruby teasingly asked me.

"Do you think you could cope with that?" I asked her, pulling her close to me. We were lying in bed, with the shutters drawn. Our fifth day of being together. I'd never been this happy.

"Oh, I might struggle initially," she grinned, "but in time, I might. With practice."

She lay quietly in my arms for a while, then she said. "I think I want to go see my mother."

I had been expecting this.

Phone reception had been spotty and we had only been able to reach the hospital on occasion. A nurse had reassured us that Ruby's mother was doing well. They had started a new kind of medication, which was only available in the capital and she was responding well but I could see Ruby was worried. Our time away from the world was coming to an end. I felt a pang of regret at the thought.

"I probably need to go to the Capital anyway," I said with a sigh.

"Are you up for the travel? I will get us a car. It will be more comfortable that way?"

She nodded. She was looking much better. The swelling in her face had gone down and the bruises had faded a bit. Her bruised rib was still bothering her, but being in bed and having slow, gentle sex, seemed to have a magical healing effect on her.

While she got ready to leave, I checked in with Tick at the Castle.

"Where have you been?" she hissed at me. "Things have gone mad here! I've been trying to get hold of you! I thought something must have happened!"

I explained about being injured and spending a few days recovering.

"Well, you haven't missed much," she said sarcastically. "Just... it seems we've lost the war. There is talk of a peace agreement. Shifters keep the South and we keep the capital."

"What about the energy plants?" I asked.

“Exactly, that is part of the negotiations. I don’t know but they have wiped out our blood supplies. They ambushed our forces coming from Hersina.”

“How? The Hersina vampires are ferocious!” I couldn’t believe my ears.

“I don’t know. I heard they only sent a small force. They didn’t want to back the king.”

I put down the phone, struggling to come to terms with this news. The old houses were withdrawing support from Vlas, as if they wanted him to lose. To back a new winner? I felt I was onto something here, even bigger than the war. Perhaps Matteo had become caught up in a struggle for power. Wrong place, wrong time?

I called Harris and this time he answered. I asked him if the news was true about the war.

His voice was grave. “I will tell you this in confidence. The king has no appetite to rule anymore. He has been in bed this whole past week. I’ve been trying to convince the rulers in the Capital that the vampires will not attack humans if our blood supplies run out. Right now, we have to protect our supplies and production plants to ensure we keep the humans on our side.”

“And if we lose the gas works?”

“I know,” his voice was grave. “We will take a hit, but it’s not our only source of income. We have the mines in the north and big reserves in the banks. It may be our best option now. Where have you been, anyway? I could use your help with the negotiations. General Almera has been handling it, but he doesn’t have the best bedside manner with the humans.”

I knew what he was talking about. The president of the council was a wizard from the

old country. He was wise and experienced and we'd always had a good working relationship. I told Harris I'd represent the vampires at the peace talks.

"You sound different?" he asked me, and I detected a note of concern in his voice. "I've heard talk about you and a girl?" I wasn't surprised that he'd heard about Ruby.

"I'm all right..." I said. "It's this war, it has taken a toll on me. The business with Alexandra, Matteo... it was good to have time to think. The girl has nothing to do with it."

It wasn't true, though. I knew it too.

Now that I had tasted love, had wrapped myself in it and felt its power, healing and protectiveness, I didn't want to give it up. I knew it was worth holding on to.

"As long as you still have some fight in you," Harris said. "We need to be firm on the North. That and the capital remains ours. We must be able to access the South too. We will need to form agreements on that."

I wasn't looking forward to these negotiations.

We set out for the Capital soon after that and arrived at the hospital in the late afternoon.

I asked for the doctor and asked to be taken to see Ruby's mother. She had been booked in under the name Sadie Thompson. Dennington had assured me that he'd shared the name with no-one else.

Ruby was excited, she couldn't wait to see her mother.

When we reached the ward, she rushed inside. Her mother had been allocated a

private room. She was lying on the bed, her eyes closed. Ruby stopped at the bed and turned to me, horrified.

“This isn’t my mother!”

“What?”

Her eyes went wide with terror as she turned back to the bed. “It’s not my mom! I don’t know who this is?! Where is my mother?!”

I called Dennington and he assured me that he had personally escorted Charlotte Lucas in the ambulance on the hospital transfer but he didn’t know what she looked like. Ruby had been ill, I had not asked her for a photograph.

“Where is my mother?!” Ruby cried out. “What’s happened to her?”

Dennington apologized, he stammered, “I can’t understand it! I asked for the nurses to take me to her, when I found her, I asked her if she was Ruby’s mother and she said yes! I am so sorry.”

“This is unacceptable!” I struggled to control my anger. “How is this possible? You will go to the hospital right away and find out what the mix up is. We need to find Ruby’s mother as soon as possible!”

Ruby interrupted me, “We need to go there, right now!”

I had promised Harris I would head up with the negotiating team later in the day, but Ruby needed me, I had to find her mother.

Captain Dennington promised to come fetch Ruby and take her to the hospital where she had been before. “Bring a couple of men, in case,” I said, lowering my voice.

“We don’t know what we’ll find there. She may have been kidnapped.”

Ruby was pacing up and down. I could see she was distraught. She feared the shifters had taken her mother, perhaps had even killed her.

“She’s not strong, Luc, she won’t survive being in the tunnels like I was,” she whispered.

She was crying now, shaking all over. I took her in my arms. “I will find out what happened, I promise you.”

She pulled away and I saw doubt in her eyes.

“Are you coming with me?”

“I will meet you and Dennington later. I have to go to the peace talks.”

“I see,” Ruby said, turning away from me, a hardness in her eyes.

“I have to do this, Ruby,” I said but she wouldn’t meet my eyes.

I felt like I was losing her. Everything we had been through, the wonderful days at the hotel, all seemed to disappear like the afternoon fog.

“Do what you have to do,” she said in a flat voice, walking away from me.

“Ruby, wait!” I called out to her but she wouldn’t turn around.

I couldn’t let her walk away from me like that.

I went after her.

“Ruby!”

She turned around, her face wet with tears.

“I think they got her, Luc. They told me they would. I can’t believe that I was lying in bed with you, having sex and thinking only of myself while they tortured and killed her.”

“You don’t know that, don’t jump to conclusions,” I urged her.

“We got away. I tricked them! Of course they are going to punish her to get to me!” she was crying again and I tried to take her in my arms to comfort her.

But she broke away from me.

“I need to get to my mother!” she said, running away.

“I will come as soon as I can!” I called after her but I didn’t know if she heard me.

Ruby

Captain Dennington fetched me in a big, black car with blacked out windows. There were four more cars like this behind me, filled with men. We were in the first car, just the two of us.

“I’m really sorry about this,” he said to me as we drove off. “I will find your mother.”

I didn’t know what to say.

I looked out of the window, feeling numb.

“There was no sign at the hospital that anything was wrong,” he went on. “Her chart had her name on it and I was told she was a dark-haired woman of about 45. When I asked her name, she said Charlotte.” He sounded sincere.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. I blamed myself. I should have gone to check on her as soon as I’d gotten away from the shifters or that first morning, when I woke up and felt like I could walk two feet without collapsing. Instead, I was screwing a vampire, having fun in a hotel room like I was on some kind of holiday.

I felt horribly guilty and was filled with remorse. If something had happened to my mother, I would never forgive myself. I knew that.

A part of me kept hoping that she had managed to get away, that someone had helped her.

Luc had given me a phone but I switched it off. I couldn't even look at it now.

I understood that he had important work to do, that he had taken off enough time to be with me and that his people needed him but this was important to me. I felt like he had made a choice and he had chosen them.

I knew I was being unfair, but I didn't care.

I didn't care about his stupid war.

I only cared about my mother.

Captain Dennington respected my privacy and we didn't talk for the rest of the trip south. A few hours later, in the late afternoon, we arrived at the hospital. I saw his guards fan out and he went into the hospital to speak to the people in charge. I pushed past him and went to the ward my mother had been in. There were four beds, all of them occupied. Not one of them was my mother. I found a nurse, someone I hadn't seen before and asked about my mother. She fetched the file and repeated what I already knew; that my mother had been transferred to another facility at the capital.

I asked the other women in the ward if they knew my mother. Only one of them did, an older woman who said she remembered my mother leaving that day.

"Tell me exactly how she left. With doctors, nurses? Who came to fetch her?"

The old lady couldn't remember.

"But did she look like she wanted to go? Or was she taken against her will?"

"Against her will?" the old lady was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

This was hopeless.

I walked out to the nurse's station and saw one of the male nurses that I had met before.

"Excuse me!" I ran to him. "Do you remember my mother? Lottie Winton? She was a patient here a few days ago?"

He took a step back. "Yes... she was transferred, though, right?"

He had wide shoulders and friendly eyes; I remembered him as being caring towards my mother.

"That's just it. It wasn't her! They transferred someone else!"

"Who?"

"I don't know! But the woman they say is my mother, is definitely not her!"

I could feel tears rising behind my eyes again. The situation was impossible. How was I ever going to find my mom?

I felt the nurse touch my arm. "Come with me," he said in a low voice. He fetched a file and took me around the corner.

"Look," he showed me the names and dates in the file. I could see who was in the ward that day. All of them had been discharged.

"I'm sorry," he said and walked away.

I spotted Captain Dennington at the bottom of the corridor and walked up to him.

In a low voice, he said to me, “I have looked at CCTV footage from the day your mother was transferred. A few hours before I arrived, two men entered your mother’s ward. They were visitors. I want you to see if you recognize them.”

He opened his laptop and accessed the film footage. He had images of them checking in at the hospital. My heart sank. I recognized them from the tunnels. Two of the guards.

I nodded and sank to the floor.

“We’ll find them!” He said and called his men over their comms.

But I knew it was too late. My mother was dead. That was the only possible explanation.

Tears were streaming down my face and I felt my entire world collapsing.

I walked out of the hospital and down the street, not caring where I went. I had no idea where I was going. I didn’t care about anyone or anything at this point. I wanted the shifters to grab me and kill me. It was what I deserved.

I heard a car come up behind me but I ignored it.

It stopped next to me in the road.

“Ruby!”

I turned to look at it. It was the nurse from the hospital. He was looking agitated.

“Get in! Quickly!”

I didn't think twice, I opened the door and got in next to him as he sped away.

"My name's Dixon, by the way," he said as he checked the rearview mirror anxiously.

"I just want to shake off the bloodsuckers." He looked at me. "Do you have anything they can use to track you?"

I took out my phone and threw it out the window.

He was taking turns quickly and speeding down a residential area.

"What is going on? Where are you taking me?" I asked him.

He licked his lips and said, "Hang on," as he pulled into a driveway under a garage roof.

"Come on!" he urged me. "Get out."

I did as he told me and watched him close the gate to the street. The car was now completely hidden from the road.

"This is my parents' house," he said as he opened a side door going into a kitchen.

"Come on, I'll make you some coffee and explain everything."

I sat down at a coffee table and Dixon told me how he had taken my mom outside for a walk when they saw the shifters arrive at the hospital.

"She knew something was dodgy about them. She sent me inside to find out who they'd come to visit. When she heard they were asking about her, she immediately

knew something was wrong. She told me she had to get away immediately and I brought her here.”

“So they went to her room and found her bed, what, empty?”

He nodded. “They told the men that I’d taken her out for a walk, but by the time they came outside, we’d already left. I switched her chart with one of the other patients.” He looked shame-faced. “I knew it would cause a bit of consternation, but I wanted to buy your mom some time. I didn’t know they were going to come to transfer her!”

“But that lady said her name was Charlotte Lucas!”

He grinned. “She was high on meds. She would’ve said her name was Minnie Mouse too!”

“And my mom? Where is she?”

He looked at me. “I don’t know.”

“What? Didn’t she tell you where she was going?”

He shrugged, “She asked for some clothes and money and said it was better that I didn’t know. She said you might come looking for her and that I should tell you that you know where she’d go.”

“She said that?”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Isn’t it dangerous for her to be out of the hospital? I mean, I thought she needed treatment?”

“Her condition had stabilized, she was actually coming up for a discharge. As long as she doesn’t get any infections and takes it easy, she will be fine.”

I was stunned.

“She said you were in trouble, with vampires and shifters.”

I bit my lip and nodded. “They’re going to come looking for me and for you. Did she say how she was going to get out of here? By bus or taxi?”

He shook his head. “She said she’d pay me back, and that was it, she just walked out of here.”

I thought about what he said.

It made sense. I knew my mother hated vampires and that she wouldn’t trust any of them coming to look for her. I had a better chance of finding her without Captain Dennington and his team.

“You’d better get back to the hospital,” I said, “before people notice you’re missing.”

He walked me out of the house. “Good luck!” he called out to me.

“Thanks for helping my mom and me!” I said and he waved.

“Humans have got to stand together now!”

Luc

Harris asked me to come to the Castle to meet him.

“You will be safe,” he said.

“No assassination attempts?” I asked him, only half-joking.

“We have upped security. No unscheduled visitors, only top command.”

I met him in his office and noticed that he was looking stressed.

When I commented on it, he gave a dry laugh.

“I can see those days off have been good for you.” He was having a go at me, for being able to step away from the war. The implication was that he couldn’t. I let it go.

“What’s the situation?”

He ran his fingers through his hair.

“There are complaints of vampire attacks on humans all over the area. Outside the Capital and inside.”

“In the Capital?” That had not happened for many years.

He nodded. “Some of it is malicious gossip, but I have asked for reports and it does

check out. The humans are concerned. Understandably.”

“Turning against us?”

He nodded. “I think they may want us to leave the Capital. Go into some kind of coalition government with the shifters.”

I shook my head. “No, we can’t leave the Capital! We have been here for centuries! It is our home as much as theirs!”

“If the shifters and the humans combine forces we will have an escalation of the war to such an extent that we risk destroying everything,” Harris said. “Vlas won’t have it. He’s said to make peace at all costs. Reduce tension with the humans. Protect our blood stores.”

“How is he?”

Harris pointed to the door. “See for yourself?”

We went up the staircase to the private residence. I noted the upped security everywhere. Guards at every corner, glaring at me. They loved their king, I remembered that, Vlas was popular throughout the empire.

But when I entered the royal bedchamber, it was clear that he did not have long to go.

As we came in, Taheera and some others left, keeping their heads turned away, their voices low.

His eyes were closed, his skin even paler than usual.

“Your highness?”

His eyelids fluttered. “Ah, Luc. You’re here. Good.” The effort to speak seemed to cost him a great deal. “I don’t have long. We must talk... succession.” I glanced at Harris who gave a small nod of the head. “My son, Vermont. What do you think?”

Vermont was Vlas’s biological child with a human mother. He had turned in puberty, on his own wishes, joining the royal army. He’d been posted in the North. I didn’t know much about him but I’d heard that he got on well with humans and had a good reputation with them.

“Or... you?”

I thought I hadn’t heard him properly.

“Me? No!”

I glanced at Harris who looked away. Had he known about this?

“After this war, I’m leaving the capital,” I said. It was a thought that had been brewing in my head over the last few days. I didn’t want to be a part of all of this anymore. I wanted to go back to my land. I wanted to take Ruby there.

Vlas nodded.

Harris said, “So, then Vermont?”

Vlas muttered, “War... must... stop.” He said, each word costing him so much energy.

I knew that a dying king would weaken our cause and could turn the vampire houses against us. They believed in strength over everything.

Vlas grabbed my hand. “You... good friend.”

I felt something like sadness at seeing him fade like this.

Harris and I made our way back down in silence.

On the bottom floor, I paused.

“We may need to plan a final push against the shifters. Wipe them out with a weapon of mass destruction.”

Harris’s eyes narrowed. “You warned of consequences before?.”

I shrugged. “What will the repercussions be? Fines? Come on.”

Harris seemed to consider it.

“Ask Saufin.”

Getting hold of the old wizard was not as easy as one might think. I knew this. You needed an in, someone to make an appointment. It used to be Alexandra for me but I didn’t want to use her now.

I went into the heart of the Capital, the seat of government. Again, I marveled at how the humans scuttled about, like ants, so busy, busy, busy. It was as if they were scared to stop, to breathe, to notice that they were alive. Saufin had an office here but he was almost never there, preferring to do most of his work from his temple, situated on a hill outside of the city. There was a walled gate with a guard and I informed him that I had urgent business with the wizard.

“He is in meetings all day,” I was informed. I switched my eyes on and easily got

past him but once inside, the park was huge, green fields and trees that stretched for miles. I knew there was a wooden temple near a river, a deceptively simple structure without any ornamentation. Saufin was known for humility and tranquility. He was wise and knowledgeable. Not a great friend of shifters or vampires, but he did believe in peace. I zoomed in over the estate, spotting various guards and trained eyes noting my arrival but I had urgent business of the state with him.

I found the wooden house between the trees easily enough. I sensed armed men coming towards me and held up my arms, calling out loudly, “I come in peace. An urgent message from King Vlas the First.”

One of the men came up to me, pressed a rifle against my chest.

“Identify yourself!”

“Lord Luc D’Essay, counsel and general to King Vlas the First.”

A voice floated up to us. “It’s all right, Mitch, I’ll take it from here.”

“With all due respect, my Lord, we don’t know his intentions!” the masked guard objected. “I think if he wanted to kill us, we’d already be dead,” the wizard remarked with a chuckle.

He was a small man, with long grey hair and a wispy beard. He perpetually had a smile on his face as if he was in on a joke no-one else understood.

“Walk with me,” he said to me and turned to walk down a wooden walkway leading to the river below. As we came closer, the water gurgled pleasantly. It was a lovely setting, I could understand why he’d want to talk here.

“Troubling times, no?” he said to me and I nodded.

“The king wants peace,” I said.

“I hear he is dying,” Saufin said, looking at me.

“It’s true,” There was no point lying to the old man. “He is willing to negotiate, but I fear the tide is turning against us in the Capital.”

Saufin nodded. “There is fear, and where there is fear, the door opens to darkness.”

“And you? Where do you stand?”

“I am but an emissary of the people,” he said, quietly. “I do as they command.”

“What if they choose to align with shifters?”

“Perhaps they already have?”

He confirmed my worst fears. “My counsel is to destroy them in one fell swoop. They have damaged our relations with you by damaging the blood stores. I would not consider this unless I felt I had to but their actions have prompted it.”

Saufin looked at me, considering. “This act may tip the scales,” he warned. “You have lost favor already...”

“We could make gifts of reparation, give land, properties?”

The old man stopped walking. “The Straits?”

He was talking about our seaside operations, the gas and oil in the Hattari waters. Taking these over would significantly boost their coffers. Of course, we could always take it back later, buy them out when these generations had gone.

“We’d be willing to offer them up.”

He nodded. “Very well, thank you for informing me of your plans.”

“We want to repair our relationship with humanity,” I said. “We have always relied on your good will as you have on ours.”

“Indeed, as much as the prey can rely on the predator,” Saufin said, casting a wary eye on me.

He disappeared among the trees, leaving me to ponder his words.

I walked back slowly, enjoying the tranquility of the water and the trees. When my mobile rang, I was jolted back into reality.

I saw it was Dennington.

“Yes?”

“She’s gone,” he said, sounding stressed.

“Who is gone?” But I knew what he was going to say.

“Ruby! She gave us the slip at the hospital and we can’t find her. She must have thrown away the mobile!”

“What about the mother?”

“No trace of her. There were shifters at the hospital but there is no proof of her leaving with them.”

I ended the call. This was bad. Very bad. I couldn't lose Ruby but I knew if something had happened to her mother, it would be over for Ruby and me. She would never forgive herself.

I was torn between going back to the Castle and organizing a final push on the shifters and trying to find Ruby's mother. There was also the concern that the mother had been kidnapped and was being held in the tunnels. I didn't want them to be unintended victims of our attack.

I had to find Ruby and her mother before the swamps were torched.

Ruby

I walked the streets aimlessly, trying to solve the puzzle of where my mother would have gone. She had given me the clue and yet I had no idea what she was talking about. She'd grown up in a town near Buzzard Creek, a place that she had always said she would never want to return to. She hadn't really had much time or means to travel, there were no holidays that her parents had taken her on as a child.

The only thing I felt fairly sure of, was that it would be somewhere in the South. Not home though, she wouldn't risk going back there.

I looked up and saw that I had made my way back to the hospital, without realizing that was where I was heading. My eye swept the parking lot and I saw two huge bikes at the end. I wandered over, checking for the owners but there was no one in sight. These were big machines, fine beasts and I knew they'd belong to some shifter or other.

I didn't feel bad stealing one. The shifters owed me for everything they'd put me through and I wasn't even talking about the kidnappings and the pain and suffering I'd been through. My shoulder and ribs still hurt every time I tried to lift or turn or pretty much breathe.

Fortunately, I'd learnt how to hotwire a bike almost before I could tie my shoelaces. For the kids of bikers and shifters, it was almost a rite of passage. My dad would take me out into the street and time me as I got the wires out, crossed them and started the bikes. When I beat my last best score, I'd get some candy.

I tied my hair back. I didn't know how much time I had, I chose the bike that would handle easiest and made quick work of getting it to start. I gritted my teeth, then tightly grabbing the handlebars and swinging myself over, started the bike. It came on right away and I moved off slowly.

I'd been on Danny's bike many times and I didn't mind the big and powerful machines. I decided to head south and figure out my route along the way. I was so relieved that my mother was alive and had managed to get away before the shifters had found her. The feeling was so overpowering that it drowned out everything else.

My feelings for Luc.

My worry about the shifters finding us or me.

I just wanted to see her, to find her, to hug her and make sure she was all right.

I thought of the last time I'd see her in the hospital, how she'd said she'd wait for me but where? That was the trick question. As I left town, I noticed car wrecks by the side of the road, sites of accidents and shootings. The war had come here and it was probably dangerous for me to be on the road but I had no choice. I had to find my mother.

Then, suddenly, it came to me. A song she used to sing to me when I was a little girl. It was about the sun and beach and how much fun it was to have ice cream when it was hot. Whenever I was feeling down or ill, she'd sing the song to me and pull funny faces until I smiled. She would ask me what ice cream flavors I liked and distract me with silly talk like this.

After one of her spells, when she'd been admitted to the hospital, I'd sung the song for her. Lying in bed next to her, I sang to her about the fun we were going to have at this mystery place. She asked me where it was and I named the only places I knew on

the coast, Lolla and Britney Peak and Cape Falls.

“Oh,” she said in a thin voice. “I’ve heard of Cape Falls. It’s real quiet there and at night you hear the waves rolling and turning.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go,” I said.

Could that be what she’d meant?

Cape Falls was past the swamp though, the path there led through the worst of the war. Would she really risk going that close to our enemies? My mother was brave though, I knew she wouldn’t let herself be deterred by the possibility of being detected.

I decided to give it a go. I had a full tank of fuel and the bike was strong. After a few hours though, my arm was beginning to throb painfully and I had to take a break. I pulled off to the side of the road, fully aware of the dangers of doing this but I needed to rest.

I pulled the bike into the undergrowth and hid it from the road. Then I crawled underneath some bushes and closed my eyes, falling asleep instantly. I woke up in the middle of the night and listened carefully before I pushed my bike out and got it started again. It wasn’t as easy as in the daylight and my arm was still stiff. Still, I kept going. Cars and bikes passed me, some of them tried to flag me down and I even drove through a road block, slowing down as if to stop, then revving up at the last minute. I heard shots and ducked down low over the handlebars. I was stopping for no one.

By dawn, I saw the sign to turn off to the coast. To the right, were the swamps but I wanted Cape Falls, a town so magical that songs had been written about it. I drove past a city and started worrying that I had missed the turnoff, but then I saw the sign

for Cape Falls. By mid-morning, I'd arrived in the sleepy town.

I parked the bike down at the jetty, where a few boats were moored. It was low key and quiet, not many houses or shops. It seemed like a holiday destination and I wondered if word of the war had even reached this place. It was so beautiful here. The water was the most incredible blue, with small waves heading for a golden beach that stretched out for miles. There was an ice cream shop and I walked over, buying myself a cone and staring at the horizon.

"Mesmerizing isn't it?" someone said next to me.

I turned and there was my mother, in a big sun hat and huge sunglasses, beaming at me.

"Mom!" I dropped my ice cream and hugged her tightly.

"You're here, you're really here!"

"Where else was I gonna go? Let's get you another ice cream."

"How long have you been here? Where are you staying? How are you feeling?"

She laughed. "So many questions!" Then she hugged me again.

"I'm so glad you're here, I knew you'd find me."

Then she frowned. "What happened to you, your face?"

"I'll tell you later," I said.

We walked back, both of us getting ice cream this time and she took me to her small

hotel near the beach. She said she'd been staying there for the last couple of days, basically hanging out at the beach and waiting for me.

"I knew you'd come," she said.

She looked well but I could see dark circles under her eyes.

In her hotel room, we sat on her bed and I told her everything. About Luc and the shifters, about being kidnapped and beaten up and Luc rescuing me again. I bit my lip and told her about the hotel room.

"So that's why it took you so long to get here!" my mother laughed knowingly.

"I'm so sorry! I feel terrible!"

But she shook her head. "You had to get better, I mean look at you!" I pulled up my shirt, and showed her the bruising on my ribs, my stitched up arm.

She frowned and insisted on getting some ointments.

"I'm better mom, really," I insisted. "We can't stay here though."

"Why not?"

"It's too close to the swamps, to the shifters," I said.

"But that is the best place to be, right under their noses. Hiding in plain sight." I could see she liked this idea.

"We'll stand out here, I think we need to blend in more, a busier place like a city, maybe?"

“I’m sick, sweetie, I don’t have to lie about that. We tell people I’ve come for the climate, for the cleaner air.”

I didn’t want to argue with my mother. Besides, Cape Falls was gorgeous, with all the subtropical vegetation and the blue skies. If this was what my mother wanted, then I could do it. I knew we’d need money soon and I would have to come up with a way to earn some.

“There are some cafés on the beachfront which seem to be in business,” my mom said. “Maybe you could ask about waitressing there?”

“Any shifters around?”

“Haven’t seen any bikers, if that’s what you’re asking.”

We fell silent then, both of us thinking about whether we’d come far enough.

“I think maybe we dye our hair?” my mother said and we went to the nearest drug store, getting bleach and blonde dye. I decided to cut my hair to change my look even more.

“You look gorgeous,” my mom said. “Like a real beach babe. Now we just need to work on your tan!”

That night, after a few beers, she asked me though, “This vampire, is it over though?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly.

“You have feelings for him?” she asked, her tone disgusted.

“I do,” I admitted.

“Ruby!”

“He saved me, twice and he was good to me...”

“Only to get you into bed!”

“I wanted to sleep with him, still do, to be honest,” I admitted to her. She was shocked.

“He’s a vampire, a bloodsucker! What if he wants to drink your blood!”

“What if he does?” I asked her. “As long as he doesn’t kill me, I don’t really mind.”

I could see she didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’ve never been with anyone like him,” I said, “He treats me with respect and kindness, talks to me like an equal and makes love to me like I’m the last woman on earth and did I mention he’s incredibly handsome and rich?”

“Well, if you’re going to put it that way,” my mom said with a laugh.

“Nobody’s perfect, you know?” I said. “But he’d never hurt me, I know that. The only man I can say that about.”

She shook her head but I could see she was thinking about what I’d said.

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Luc

I was standing outside the Castle, staring up into the mountains.

“So, is this where you’re hiding now?” Tick was teasing me, but I was in no mood for jokes.

She grew serious. “Everything is in place. They are assembling the weapon and it will be transported to the air base. ETA 24 hours until lift off.”

There was a moment of silence between us, heavy with things unsaid; the implications of how these actions would affect us were enormous.

All I knew was that I had 24 hours to find Ruby or she would die. I was sure she was somewhere in the South, most of which would be turned radioactive in one day.

“I have to leave for a few hours,” I said, not looking at Tick. “I will be back for the launch.”

“You can’t leave now!” her voice was panicky.

“Everything is in place,” I said reassuringly.

“But... but,” her eyes grew wide and I had to speak firmly to her.

“I need to find Ruby, Tick. She is down there, I have to get her out of danger.”

“What if you don’t make it back in time? It’s too dangerous!”

I nodded. “Then so be it.”

She stared at me, open-mouthed. “No, you can’t be serious! You can’t go, we need you!”

“I appreciate that you don’t get it,” I said, looking at the dark sky over the mountains again, “but my work here is done. I’ve arranged everything, systems are in place. Now it will all go according to plan and if it doesn’t, you or Harris or any of the very competent generals can sort it out.”

She was blinking furiously.

“I have to try to find her.”

I couldn’t tell Tick that the thought of being without Ruby was inconceivable. Living in a world without her, knowing that I didn’t do everything in my power to try and save her? I was responsible for upending her life like this, for putting her mother in danger. It was my responsibility to look after her now but more than that, I loved her and didn’t want to live in a world if she wasn’t in it. It was as simple as that.

Tick hung her head. “Just answer your phone, please,” she begged me.

“I will,” I said and smiled at her. “I promise you, everything is in place.”

She didn’t look convinced and quite unexpectedly, I put my arm around her shoulder and gave it a clumsy squeeze.

“Come on, kid. Shoulders back. You can do this.”

“Fuck you, of course I can,” she came back, visibly bucked up.

I was glad to see it. I didn’t want to have to worry about her falling apart while I ventured into the lion’s den down south.

I winked at her and launched myself into the air, heading down south as fast as I could. The big problem was that I didn’t know exactly where to go. It was frustrating, but for some reason, my connection to Ruby was not as it was before. I didn’t know exactly where she was, I could feel her but it was fuzzy, an almost dull ache but when I tried to follow the sensation, it seemed to move away. She was somewhere in the South but figuring out where was proving to be difficult.

My first location was near Buzzard Creek. We had launched an attack on the town and there were houses on fire and car wrecks lining the street. I checked her house, which had not been damaged, but which clearly was unoccupied. It seemed she was even further South. I didn’t want to go too close to Sunny’s compound as it increased my exposure to shifters.

I had spent the previous evening at the peace talks organized by the Human Council and had seen very quickly that the humans had switched allegiance. The shifters had sent a negotiating team led by a slick character with an oily voice who demanded that vampires relinquish not only all property and assets in the South but also pay the shifters reparations for all kinds of perceived damages.

It was preposterous.

The human delegation seemed to think this was reasonable, which it clearly wasn’t.

I told them I would take the offer to the king, but I had no intention of doing that. I called Harris and told him we had to move fast to attack the shifter stronghold in the south. I told him what Saufin had told me and he agreed.

“Let’s nuke ‘em.”

But I had to try to get to Ruby.

Beyond the swamps, I arrived at a small town on the outskirts of a river. It was close to the coast and uncomfortably hot. The sun was beating down and I would have preferred to get out of there as soon as possible but I could feel Ruby was close by. I still couldn’t get a clear fix on where she was, but I was definitely closer. I wished I had an idea of where she was. We didn’t have much time. She’d obviously gotten rid of her phone and I had no other way of tracking her.

I looked at a map of the area, noted a number of coastal towns and figured she must be somewhere there but I didn’t have the time to go to all of them. I needed to find a way to narrow the options.

Then I got a call from Dennington, saying he’d had a lucky break. One of his men had found an aide at the hospital who said Ruby’s mother had asked about buses going to Cape Falls.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Not only was Ruby’s mother still alive and well, but now I knew where Ruby was.

I had not a second to waste.

Within the hour, I stood outside a white-washed hotel close to the sea. I knew Ruby was inside. I could feel it. I could feel her. The sun had started to set and it was cooler now, the air positively mild. It was quite a sweet town, I had to admit, if you went for that sort of thing. Quaint houses, fishing boats, restaurants and a promenade. Sea gulls, the sound of the waves. Romantic, in a way.

I was thinking about how to approach Ruby when I saw her and her mother leaving the hotel. I followed them down to the pier. They bought ice cream from the man at the stand and I came as close as I dared. It was still the South, I didn't want a scene.

Ruby must have felt me because she turned around and looked right at me.

"Luc!"

She ran towards me and hugged me, awkwardly holding the ice cream. I had not expected such a warm response from her, but my arms instantly closed around her in a warm embrace.

"You're safe," I said. "And you're blonde! I like it!"

She touched her hair self-consciously.

"Is your mom here too?"

"Yes! I found her!" an elated Ruby said. "Come and meet her!"

I picked up a much less friendly vibe from Charlotte Lucas, but she shook my hand and said, "I hear you've gotten Ruby out of quite a few scrapes. Thank you for that. Will you join us for dinner?"

I told them that we would have to get out of Cape Falls right away.

I kept my voice low as I didn't want my words overheard.

"We're not going anywhere," Mrs. Lucas said with narrowed eyes. "We just got here."

“What do you mean?” Ruby asked me, ignoring her mother.

“I can’t tell you all the details but it’s not safe here.”

Ruby faced her mother but her mother turned away.

“Tell your friend, we thank him for his concern, but we are fine on our own.”

I held back, thinking how I was going to convince her but Ruby was ahead of me.

“No, mom. If he says we need to go, we must.”

I could see the surprise in her mother’s eyes.

“Ruby, listen to me,” her mother urged her. “I am your mother... and he is...”

“I trust him, completely,” Ruby said, interrupting her mother. “If he says we need to leave, then we do.”

She turned to me without waiting for an answer from her mother.

“We’ll go,” she said to me.

“I have a helicopter landing in an hour, it will take us to the capital. I have organized accommodations for you,” I said.

“No!” Charlotte Lucas said. “I’m not going with you!”

“Mother!” Ruby cried out but Charlotte Lucas shook her head emphatically.

“He may have charmed you, Ruby, but I am not fooled that easily.”

She glared at me.

“I am sorry you feel that way Mrs. Lucas but I do understand. You don’t know me and you have made assumptions about my kind. I get that but it’s not safe here. I know the war is coming here, soon.”

“I will take my chances, thank you,” she said coolly, walking away.

“Make her change her mind,” Ruby said to me, grabbing my arm.

“Are you sure? It will only make her hate me more.”

Ruby pulled a face. “At least she’ll be alive.”

I knew she was right.

Ruby

We arrived in the Capital after dark.

I was tired from the long trip and the excitement of seeing Luc again, but as we approached the city, my breath was taken away by the spectacular sight of all the lights and activity of the city. I had heard that the Capital was a magical place but this was more than I had expected. I was blown away by the modern buildings and cars, the walkways in the air, the drones and driverless cars buzzing through the sky.

It was like a different world, and unlike anything I'd ever seen before. We couldn't talk much while we were in the air, the noise of the helicopter drowned everything out. My mother was asleep most of the way, an auto-hypnotic suggestion by Luc.

As soon as we landed, Luc took us to a car that was waiting for us. We drove to a hotel outside of the capital. Luc told me it was where most of the mortals lived and that we could feel completely safe here. The hotel was an old-fashioned one, a grand old house converted into luxury suites. Luc roused my mother and she seemed confused at first but I told her we had arrived at our destination.

"Where are we?" she asked, somewhat groggy, but got out of the car and followed us inside.

Luc hung back as I explained to her that we were going to spend a few days at the hotel to rest and get our strength back.

"Why did we leave Cape Falls again?"

“It was about to be attacked by vampires,” I said, looking nervously at Luc, who pulled a face. I had figured this much out in the helicopter, he hadn’t said anything to me. A porter came to show us to our rooms, Luc had reserved two rooms for us. He waited for me to check into my room, then knocked discreetly on the door.

“Have dinner with your mother, then I will see you later?”

I pulled him close and kissed him. “Promise?”

A sexy grin spread across his face. “Oh, you can count on it.”

I couldn’t wait to see him later but first I had to have dinner with my mother who was very fuzzy on the details of how we had gotten here. Finally, I gave in and told her the truth.

“You were being difficult, so Luc hypnotized you to get you here.”

“What?!” she was outraged.

“You were going to get us killed,” I said.

She stared at me open-mouthed. “Has he hypnotized you too?”

We ordered wine and delicious steaks and I refused to let my mother’s doubts about Luc affect my happiness.

“I love him, mother. You can rage about it all you like but he loves me too and whether you like it or not, he saved your life tonight.”

She stared at me, shocked.

“He’s a vampire, Ruby. Do you know what that means?”

“I think I know more about it than you do,” I said to her.

She blinked, surprised at my tone, but I wanted her to face facts.

“He didn’t have to come down there to get us, but he did. Risking his own life to save us. I know you hate vampires, but I hate broccoli and I know sometimes you have to stomach it.”

“What?”

I had to laugh. “Ok, so bad example but Luc is good for me, is what I’m saying and I want you to see that. If you can’t, keep your opinion to yourself.”

“But what about your life? Your future?”

I shrugged. “I am just happy we got out of Buzzard Creek. Aren’t you?”

My mother had to concede this. “Of course. I thought...well, we were stuck there forever.”

I leaned forward and touched her hand. “If you want, we could go down to Cape Falls after the war is over?”

She sighed. “Are the wars ever over?”

“I think this one might be.”

She thought about it. “Let’s talk later, I’m feeling a bit tired.”

I'd noticed that and I thought the excitement of the past few days had worn her out. I walked her to her room and bid her good night. Then I took a shower and got into bed and waited for Luc, completely naked.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke up at some point in the night as he came into the room and slid into bed next to me.

"I thought you'd never come," I muttered as he moved in to kiss me. The room was quiet except for the faint rustle of the curtains in the night breeze. The moonlight cut through the darkness, casting pale light across Luc's face. He pulled back and I could see the steady intensity in his gaze, making my pulse quicken. Luc tilted my chin up and kissed me again. It was slow at first, deliberate. His lips pressed against mine with a kind of restraint that didn't last long. Soon, the kiss deepened, and I felt myself overcome by feelings of love and tenderness. I wanted to be closer to him, to feel every inch of him.

His hands moved over my body with increasing purpose. My own fingers ran over his chest, tracing the lines of muscle under his skin. Luc kissed along my neck, his lips lingering just below my ear before moving lower. I felt a tightening in my groin as his hands ran over my back. I arched into him as his hands slid down my sides, pulling me closer.

It was tender and loving and we didn't speak, there was only the sound of our breathing and the rustle of the sheets as we moved together. We fit together easily, our bodies finding a rhythm that felt natural. When he entered me I shuddered in delight, pulling him deeper into me, wanting to melt into him. I clung to him as we climaxed, never wanting to let go of him.

When it was over, we lay tangled in silence. Luc's arm was draped over my waist as I rested my head against his chest. His breathing was steady now, and I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into this perfect moment. There was no need to speak; our

bodies had said everything there was to say.

I must have fallen asleep again because a short while later, I woke up as Luc was getting out of bed.

“You’re leaving?”

“I must...I’ll be back soon,” he promised.

I sat up in the bed.

“Where are you going?”

He pulled on his shirt and I could see him contemplating what to tell me.

“I want to know,” I said.

“Ok,” he said, telling me how they were dropping a bomb on the Sunside Swamp in a few hours and he wanted to be present at the launch. It would end the war and bring peace.

His words sunk in and I realized that many people I had known would be killed. Perhaps everyone I’d ever known. I thought about friends that I’d had, people I’d met who I’d been friendly with. Not everyone was abusive or horrible. I thought about Shelley and hoped she’d make it, wondered where Grace was and if she would survive.

I swallowed hard.

“You okay?”

I nodded but I wasn't really.

Luc sat next to me on the bed and put his hand on my cheek.

"I know this is hard to hear and believe me, this is not what I wanted to do. We were willing to make peace with the shifters but they weren't interested in an agreement. The only way to bring an end to the violence is by forcing them to their knees."

"Shifters aren't exactly known for their logical thinking," I said sadly.

"Our aim is to take out the underground network they've been using."

"The tunnels," I said and thought of the room they'd kept me in. I was glad they would be destroyed.

"Yes, the tunnels but it is hard to know how the fallout will be in the surrounding area."

"So Cape Falls might be okay?"

"It could," he admitted, "but I didn't want to take that chance."

"Thank you," I said. "I don't know if I thanked you yet for coming to find me."

He grinned. "Of course, and I'm glad your mother is okay, I really am."

I pulled a face. "Of course, I don't know if she'll ever come around to the fact that I fell in love with a vampire though."

It took me a moment to realize what I'd said.

Luc noticed it right away though. I saw the look in his eye, waiting for me to take it back, but I didn't.

"I love you too," he said, his voice thick with emotion. He kissed me and I wanted that kiss to last forever but he had to go. I let him go.

There was a war standing between us and I wanted it to be over as soon as possible. I was impatient for the rest of my life to begin.

Luc

In the early morning, we watched on screens as the missiles were launched from their newly-constructed launch pads. The mood in the War Room was grave, but there was an undercurrent of anticipation. We saw the missiles take off and disappear into the air, streaks of smoke and fire.

Then the screens switched to satellite footage of the swamps. Only water and trees were visible, it looked like there was no human or animal activity at all. One screen showed what we believed to be the compound of Sunny the Snake. A nuclear missile was heading there. We wanted to take no chances and take out the entire hub of activity there. We suspected underground tunnels and wanted to destroy those too.

Within minutes, we saw explosions bloom on the screen, smoke filling the air. I tensed as I waited for it all to clear, to get a sense of the damage. Reports started coming in of massive casualties as well as fire to buildings and structures. We could see people coming out of holes and collapsing on the ground. Where there had been houses and buildings before, there was now a huge crater and mounds of dirt.

“Zoom in on that,” Harris told one of the controllers and we all saw the camera blow up the scenes of destruction. There were bodies lying everywhere. Some were human and others looked reptilian, like crocodiles and massive lizards.

“Sir! Look!” We turned our attention to another screen where we could see what looked like thousands of creatures coming from the water, writhing in pain and falling to the ground.

“What are those? Frogs?” I asked. Nobody seemed to know but they kept coming, one wave after another.

I walked to my office, where Tick and Gagarin and the others were following the action on their screens too.

“Looks good, right?” Tick grinned at me.

A mood of elation was spreading through the Castle but for some reason, I didn’t want to be a part of it. I went up to King Vlas’s quarters and found them empty. There was no sign of the queen or any of the servants, not even of the guards.

This was strange.

I pushed open the door of the bedroom and saw the king lying in his bed. He was unattended, and quite alone.

“Vlas?” I asked, hearing muttering coming from the bed. “You need anything?”

As I came closer, I was shocked to see his deterioration. He had sunken cheeks and almost no hair left. I couldn’t imagine what had caused such a rapid wasting away. I looked around and found a container with what appeared to be blood product and offered it to him. He drank it greedily and sank into his pillows. After a while, he opened his eyes.

“Ah, Luc,” he said, recognizing me. Then he closed his eyes.

I thought of how I’d come into his service. Almost 200 years ago, I’d had a family and children of my own. I lived on my land in the North and when war broke out between the First and Second Families, I fought on the side of the Second Families. While I was away, fighting with Vlas, some from the enemy camp came to my land

and murdered my wife and children. They were left for me to find, their bodies ripped apart and broken.

I was devastated. I burnt the house down and it took me decades to rebuild it but I could never quite bring myself to live there again. I saw images of Francesca and the girls everywhere. I decided to go away as far as possible and found a place in the West. I travelled a lot, had an apartment in the Capital and when Vlas asked me to help him rule, I agreed. For years, I'd been by his side, helping him advance our cause.

Matteo had been my closest friend and our trips on patrol or on assignment for the king were some of my happiest times. The war might be over, but until I had found his killer, I couldn't move on.

"You were always loyal to me," Vlas said. "Right to the end. Not Matteo."

"Matteo?"

He shook his head. "Not loyal."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Matteo had always been devoted to the king.

"Matteo loved you."

"Not me. Her." I could see the effort it took him to say the words.

"Who?" I didn't know what he was talking about.

"The queen."

He looked at me. "You didn't know about him and Taheera?"

His words struck me, I felt their force almost like a physical blow. Matteo and the queen? Surely not. Then I remembered how angry he got when I had criticized her. I remembered how he had reacted when he found out about me and Taheera, our one night stand. I knew he hadn't approved but he had been angry then. Now I knew why. I wish I had known, though. Our friendship had been so important to me.

"You had him killed?" I asked. I almost couldn't believe it.

"Not... me...", Vlas said.

"Who did it then?" I asked.

His eyes moved from my face and I realized we were no longer alone in the room.

"It's time to let Matteo go," a woman said behind me. It was Taheera, her red hair flowing like flames around her. She was dressed to go out.

"He was useful, for a while," she said. "Then he became... clingy. Needy. You know? Not like you..." she winked at me and came closer, trailing a hand across my cheek. I slapped her hand away. She laughed. "He knew I'd be a good ruler and make our empire strong again. Fearless, the way we used to be."

"But why did Matteo have to die?"

She shrugged. "He wanted us to get married. Blah-blah-blah. Once Vlas had gone. As if he was a suitable match for me," she laughed. "When I said no, he got angry and threatened to tell Vlas about us. I couldn't allow that."

"But the king knew about you!"

"I didn't know that at the time," she said, shrugging, like it was a small oversight. She

was thoroughly evil. I thought of Matteo talking about a woman's character. Taheera seemed entirely selfish and arrogant, without a shred of compassion or integrity. How could he not have seen it? She must have seen the look of horror on my face.

"Oh, please. He wasn't that wonderful. He wasn't even that great a fighter. It was so easy to kill him. I walked right up to him and put a dagger into his heart."

I could almost feel the pain of betrayal on behalf of my friend. He'd remained true to her to the end and she had stabbed him in the heart.

"The king won't last much longer, then I will take the throne."

"No," I said, my voice a growl. "You will not."

Her hand flew out and I felt a force of energy propel me against the wall.

"Away," she commanded me, with a power I had not known she had. She was holding me against the wall and was beginning to chant words of some magical origin. She was casting a spell on me. It took all of my power to break out of her power, to rip free of the magic that was holding me.

At that moment, a terrible cold descended over the room. It became instantly dark, darker than night, the way black magic transformed a space. From his bed, Vlas rose, a strange shape in the dark, filled with a fierce energy.

He lifted his hands and balls of fire shot from them, striking his wife and engulfing her in fire. Instantly, the darkness vanished. Vlas fell onto the bed and Taheera sank to her knees, trying to stamp out the flames on her clothing. Then her hair caught fire and her screams ripped through the room. It was terrifying.

When I looked at Vlas, I could see the king was no more. The effort of stopping his

wife one last time, had been too much for him.

The door to the chamber opened and Harris came in. He looked at Vlas and Taheera, who was writhing on the floor.

“What the hell...?”

I shook my head, unable to explain. It was too much.

“I just had a call from the Human Council,” he said, a gleam in his eye. “The shifters have surrendered. They are ready to talk peace.”

I nodded. “Good.”

“Can you lead our delegation?”

I shook my head. “How about Vermont does that? Good way for him to start his training for the top job, don’t you think?”

“But...?”

I pointed at the bed. “The king has passed. The queen is gone. It is time for a new king to step up.” Besides, I had better things to do.

I didn’t feel like telling him that my work here was done. I wanted to go to Ruby and her mother, I wanted to tell them about my land and I wanted to show Ruby all about the birds and the bees.

I was tired of war and fighting. The betrayal and the murder, all the backstabbing. I had found out who had killed Matteo and suddenly, I had no energy for any politics anymore. I knew that I had been tired of it all for some time, but when Matteo was

murdered, I felt responsible for finding out who had killed him and I wanted to avenge his death. Bring the perpetrator to justice or kill him. Whichever was easiest.

I had not expected to find out that his lover had killed him. This man who had given everything for the kingdom, who had never married but apparently, had fallen in love with a woman who got rid of him when he lost his use for her.

I was done with the Capital.

I wanted nothing more to do with it. I was finally ready to go back to my estate, to fill the house again with love and happiness. I could see Ruby there, wandering the halls, decorating the rooms to her taste, changing the wallpaper and the drapes. She could do whatever she wanted.

I wanted to be with her. Nothing else mattered.

Ruby

I got up for breakfast and knocked on my mother's door. We had agreed the night before that she would wake me in the morning and we would go down together to get something to eat but she had never called me. I knocked again.

"Mom?" I went inside and found her in bed, sitting up.

"You okay?"

She gave a tired smile.

"I think I may need to go to the hospital again."

"Are you feeling sick again?" I rushed to the bed and felt her forehead but she didn't have a fever.

"I've been feeling a bit weak. It started yesterday, but you know, it's been a busy couple of days."

"We'll find you a hospital here," I said. "I'll call today and..."

She nodded and smiled. "It's fine. Listen here, sweetheart, come here," she said, pulling me closer to her.

"I want you to be happy and if that means being with this Luc, then I am fine with it."

“You are?” I asked.

She smiled. “I can see you are going to be with him with or without my blessing.”

I could feel myself blushing. “Probably but I would prefer your blessing.”

“Then you have it.”

I gave her a hug and felt tears running down my face.

“Our time in Cape Falls was just the best ever,” she said, stroking my face. “I’ll never forget it.”

“Me neither.”

My mom asked me what I planned on doing next and I told her that I might go to see Luc’s estate. He’d told me so much about it and I was curious to see the hills and the flowers. “And the honey bees!”

“Honey bees?”

“Apparently the honey bees know the beekeepers on the farm. If they don’t like someone, they swarm around them and chase them away.”

“Amazing,” my mom grinned.

“Right? Such small creatures, but so powerful.”

“You used to love honey as a child,” my mother said. “You’d eat spoonfuls at a time but it was so expensive. We had to ration you!”

I remembered it vaguely, asking for honey as a present one year around my birthday.

“Luc says the honey up north is especially sweet,” I said in a dreamy voice. “There are certain flowers up there that produce a honey that is creamy and light and it’s highly sought after.

“Sounds delicious,” my mother said.

“Maybe I’ll become a beekeeper,” I said with a grin.

“I can actually see that!” she laughed.

When she fell asleep, I made some calls to find out which hospital could take her. I knew Luc would help with the finances and asked for an ambulance to come and fetch her later in the day. I didn’t want her to slip into a coma and asked the hotel doctor to look in on her.

I went down to get us something to eat and heard people talking about the missile attacks down south. People were saying the war was over, that things could go back to normal. Some people said they were glad the shifters had not won. “I’ve never been a dog person, you know?” one woman said to another as they got out of the lift.

At reception, I asked if the news was true.

The girl shrugged. “I heard the vamps pay double if you donate blood now. Supplies are low and we don’t want them coming after us!” she gave a nervous giggle.

I asked for coffee and eggs to be sent up to my mother’s room.

As I stepped out of the elevator, I saw Luc standing at my hotel door waiting for me.

I couldn't get over how handsome he was and how incredibly lucky I felt that he had fallen for me. I couldn't believe he could love me. I felt like a giggly teenager when I thought about it.

Luc was a catch by anyone's definition and I'd caught him!

But as I got closer to him, I could see the slump in his shoulders, the weary lines on his face.

"You all right?" I asked, concerned.

"I am now that I am here with you," he said, taking me into his arms and kissing me.

We went into the room and he collapsed on the bed.

He told me the latest news and I wondered how much of the south had been destroyed, if there was anything left of Buzzard Creek. Then I wondered if I cared.

"What would you like to do now?" he asked. "I mean, after this?" he pointed around the room.

I shrugged. "It feels like I'm on holiday now. I think I'd like to get my mom settled into a hospital here but then, really, anything."

He smiled at me. "How would you feel about visiting the North?"

I sat up, excited. "Sounds wonderful! I've never been there!"

"It's cold," he warned me. "Not like here and definitely not like in the South! It rains and many mornings, there is a wet fog that clings to you until mid-afternoon."

It sounded like another world I wanted to explore.

“Don’t you need to stay here, to help with the peace process and so on?”

He shook his head. “I need a break from all of this.” He paused. “I found out who killed Matteo.”

“Who?”

“It was the queen. Taheera. She’d been having an affair with him but she was using him and then he became a liability.”

“You did say she was a bitch,” I said.

He laughed. “She is a bitch, but Matteo liked strong women and she is probably the strongest woman I’ve ever met, or had ever met.”

“What do you mean?” He told me how Vlas had summoned up the last of his energy to kill her. I was shocked to hear that both the king and queen were dead.

“I thought you loved the king.”

“Well, love is a strong word but I was fond of him, I thought he was a good king.”

“Who will be king now?” I asked and he pulled up his shoulders.

“I don’t really care.”

“What?!” I had to laugh. He had been so single-mindedly purposeful ever since I met him. It was hard to believe he could walk away from it now.

“I only care about you. About us.”

His voice was so serious, his eyes a luminous blue.

“Me too,” I said and I meant it.

“We can finally be together,” I said and crawled over to him, snuggling in next to him.

“Nothing would make me happier,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Except for maybe one thing...”

I laughed as I felt his hand slide down my neck and over my breast.

“And what would that one thing be, I wonder?”

We made love and afterwards, we lay in bed, talking.

I asked him what it was like to be a vampire, what the life was like and he was thoughtful, slow in answering.

“It has been the only life I’ve ever known. My memories of being human are so vague,” he conceded. “It feels like another time.”

“I see.”

“But I will say this, it has been lonely. That changed when I met you, though. That is why I don’t want to waste any time. I want us to get married and move to Mount Essay.”

“Then let’s do it,” I said, the words out of my mouth before I even realized what I

was saying.

“I’m serious,” he said.

“Me too,” I countered.

“We can have a little boy and maybe a girl, and then I’ll join you, become one of you.”

“I don’t know if I want that life for you,” he said with a frown.

“It will make travel to see my mother a lot easier if I can just pop over there and back in a few minutes’ time,” I joked.

“She won’t like it either,” he said, still resisting.

“She’ll get used to the idea,” I said, knowing that I was right.

I wanted children first though, I had a picture in my mind of the two little ones, with Luc’s blonde hair and my mother’s sense of justice. I liked it.

“Here,” Luc said, placing a ribbon around my ring finger. “This will be your engagement ring until we find you a proper ring.”

“I love it!” I said.

Later, we went to see my mother in the hospital. Her doctor said she was looking much better. She had been given medication and her blood sugar levels were improving. The doctor told us that she was a good candidate for a new kind of experiential treatment and he wanted her to sign up for it.

I was about to go to her when Luc told me to go on alone, that he would see me later.

I was disappointed because I wanted to tell her about the engagement but he convinced me to wait a day.

“Let’s not upset her on her first day in hospital,” he said which put a bit of a dampener on my mood.

I went inside and sat by my mother’s side, discussing the new treatment the doctor was suggesting. My mother was open to it.

“He says it may heal me completely. I can’t even imagine not being sick anymore.”

“That would be fantastic,” I said.

“I know!”

I had dinner with her and sat with her a little while longer.

She fell asleep and I lay on the bed next to her and must have fallen asleep too.

When I opened my eyes, there were two men standing in the hospital room. One of them was Luc and the other was my father.

“Dad?”

My mother woke up too and both of us struggled to believe our eyes. “Cat?”

He had a grey beard and his clothes hung loosely on him, but it was him.

“This guy came to bust me out,” he said, nudging Luc.

“You broke him out of prison?” I gasped.

Luc scoffed. “Please! He’d served his sentence, they were just keeping him there. The warden admitted as much to me.”

I found this hard to believe. I wondered if he had used his special powers of convincing on the warden. Not that it mattered. I agreed with him. My father had served his time.

“While I was there, I asked him for his daughter’s hand in marriage.”

“What? We still do that?” I asked surprised.

“We do where I come from,” Luc said.

“And what did he say?” I asked.

My dad grinned. “I asked him what sort of prospects he had. I was rather satisfied with his answer.”

“So you gave your blessing?”

He nodded with a grin. “I did indeed.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “To a vampire?”

He shrugged. “Seems like you can teach an old dog new tricks,” he said.

All of us had to laugh at that.

Luc

Shortly before the wedding, I was called to the Capital by the new king, Vermont. I contemplated not going, but out of respect for his father, I made the trip to the Castle. He greeted me outside, waiting for me as I arrived.

It looked well on him, the new role. He was young and inexperienced, but there was a wary attitude about him that I liked. He was not naïve and he was not walking into the royal bedroom with stars in his eyes. He knew it would be a difficult job.

“Thanks for coming to see me,” he said.

“Your highness,” I bowed my head slightly.

He smiled. “Nah, we don’t have to do that.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Let’s walk,” he said and we took a tour of the gardens, which I had never fully seen in all my years of being at the Castle.

“I wanted to ask you to become my Special Advisor.”

I started shaking my head but he held up a hand.

“You know, my father spoke to me about a year ago. About succession. He said he was dying and he wanted me to be king. I said I didn’t want it, told him to offer it to

Dano. He said the best leaders were those who didn't want it. That is why they should do it. They understand what is involved. That it's not about the power and the money."

I nodded. Then he said, "He told me Taheera was sleeping with Matteo"

"So he knew all along, and you did too?"

He nodded. "He was worried about her. He thought she was the one poisoning him. Power hungry, already loving the status she had. She was alienating some of the families in her attempts to consolidate her power but she was so divisive. That is why they wouldn't back us in the war," he paused. "I know I must bring all of us together again. Unite us."

He added, "But I need help. Your help."

I shook my head.

"And I trust you," he went on. "I don't trust a lot of people here and I respect that you are starting a new life in the North but be a Special Advisor. Please. Every now and then, come walk with me, advise me."

How could I say no to this request?

"On one condition," I said. "You come to my wedding."

Vermont gave a wide grin. "Are you kidding? I'd be honored."

It was going to be the wedding of the century.

Not that I'd intended that.

But we were all ready for a big party after that bloody war. We had almost annihilated the shifters in the South. The ecological and environmental damage to the swamps was devastating, but we had paid reparations to the Human Council, allowing all of us to move past it. Sunny the Snake had been confirmed dead along with hundreds of thousands of little reptile shifters.

Ugly business. We had restored our blood banks, mended fences with the humans. Vermont was good at mixing with the mortals, going to gala events and laughing at lame jokes. He was better at it than his father had been.

When we started planning the wedding, the guest list ballooned. New people kept cropping up. I had to get guards and up security. Money wasn't a concern and I simply couldn't say no to Ruby. I didn't want to. She flew her parents up, found friends I'd never even heard of, and invited half of the Castle. Strippers from her old club were coming to mix with the new king of the vampires.

It wasn't going to be any kind of wedding that I'd ever been to.

But I loved how much fun Ruby was bringing into the cold North. She'd loved Mount Essay from the moment we arrived. The whole moody moor thing was right up her alley. The old house, cold and damp as it was, seemed to change overnight. She had the walls painted yellow and the effect was transformative. The bees she liked most of all, visiting them every day. After two weeks, she announced she was moving in.

Having her there was incredible. I had worried that it would feel strange or disrespectful to Francesca and my first family. But so much time had passed and my feelings for Ruby were stronger than ever. Stronger than anything I'd ever felt before.

We set up the wedding ceremony outside on the lawn, with a red carpet and roses lining the way. Guests were sitting and standing, spread out over the grass. It was cool and overcast but at least it wasn't raining. Ruby came out in a blood red dress and all the guests started clapping their hands and whistling as soon as they saw her.

It was an homage to her name and her new future life as a vampire.

She was pregnant but it was still too early to see anything. Her dress was figure hugging and tight, hugging her exquisite breasts and spreading out behind her. It was elegant and simple, much like Ruby herself. After the ceremony we went to the banquet hall where some of the ex-strippers did a celebratory dance on a specially erected platform. Ruby got on stage with them and they drank shooters and danced to rock music.

It wasn't your typical, formal wedding.

I thought of the first time I'd seen Ruby, holding her own in that sleazy club and here she was, just as comfortable in a huge country house, still being herself, never pretending to be anything else.

I proposed a toast to my new wife and everyone raised their glasses but the highlight of the day was Cat, Ruby's dad, who toasted the two of us.

"If anyone had told me thirty years ago that I would be making a toast at my daughter's wedding to a vampire, I would have told them, no way. No way in hell. But I have come a long way. I have learnt that there is more to most of us than meets the eye and for someone who isn't supposed to have one, Luc has a lot of heart."

Ruby was crying tears of joy at this point.

I went over to her father to thank him for the speech.

"Ah, just make her happy, you know? It's not as easy as it looks," he said. "I thought I was doing it and look what happened."

He was looking over at Charlotte, who was sitting next to Ruby. Charlotte had been released from the hospital after her successful completion of the new treatment

protocol. Things were looking good but it was still too early to say. However, the two of them had moved to a town similar to Cape Falls and were running an ice cream stand near the pier.

I slipped out for a bit and stood on the grass outside, looking at the moonlight when Alexandra appeared by my side. She had been on the guest list, invited by Ruby, who felt ex-girlfriends deserved a place at the wedding too.

“Never thought I’d see you getting hitched,” she said. “Congratulations.”

There was no sarcasm in her tone.

“Thanks for coming.”

She shrugged. “I didn’t get you a gift, in case you’re wondering.”

I laughed out loud. She was still the same Alexandra.

“For a while, I thought you were trying to kill me,” I said.

“I certainly felt like it,” she chuckled.

She acknowledged that I was right. “Taheera asked me to get it. In case you hadn’t died, she wanted me to kill you. Finish you off.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Of course not,” her tone softened a bit.

“I was keeping an eye on her but acting for the Hattari. You knew my loyalty lay with them but we never wanted to act against the vampires. I never thought she’d go that far.”

“Did you see her at the lodge?”

She shook her head. “But I knew she was there. I recognized the dagger. She came back to get it when the body had burnt.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was told not to get involved,” she said, having the decency to look guilty, “but I nudged you in the right direction,” Alexandra said, “and you got there in the end, didn’t you? Tell me, how did you figure it out?”

“It was Vlas,” I said. “He said I was a real friend, not like Matteo.”

“That was Taheera’s biggest mistake, underestimating Vlas,” said Alexandra. “He’d loved her, and tolerated her infidelities, even her ambition, for years; but in the end he couldn’t allow her to take the throne. It would’ve been bad for everyone.”

“To be honest, I don’t know what he saw in her,” I said.

“You have much better taste in women,” I suddenly heard Ruby say behind me.

“Amen to that,” Alexandra said with a smile. “Congratulations to both of you. I hope you will be very happy.”

Then she left us.

Once it was the two of us alone at the house, Ruby asked me, “Tired of the wedding already?”

“Of the wedding, yes, of the wife, never.”

She kissed me and I lifted her up in my arms, kissing her back, deeply.

“Take me to bed, Lord D’Essay,” she said to me in an affected posh voice.

“Gladly, Lady D’Essay,” I said with a bow of the head, whisking her off straight into our bedroom. As I lay her down on the bed, she whispered to me, “I can’t wait to get out of this dress. Will you help me?”

I was only too happy to oblige.
